

A Review of *Revolutions of the Heart: Literary, Cultural & Spiritual*

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REVOLUTIONS OF THE HEART: LITERARY, CULTURAL & SPIRITUAL

By Yahia Lababidi

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Yahia Lababidi's *Revolutions of the Heart*—his collection of essays, poems, short stories, interviews, and aphorisms—is a coming-out story, but not the kind you might expect. He writes “to come out” as a literary artist with mystical sensibilities in a modern world whose imagination on mysticism often extends no further than quackery at worst or nonsense at best (163). Lababidi does not identify as sexually queer: he is married to a woman. Yet Lababidi shows that coming out as someone attracted to mystical thought is possibly queerer than coming out as gay. The mystic might be someone whose primary love affair is not with a person but with the soul, the divine, or God. Mystics, Lababidi writes, are “lusting for that contact and the immediacy” with the holy, with which they experience “meshing” and “union” (163). This erotic merging with the divine, Lababidi explains, is the “*love that dare not speak its name*” (83). Just as queer subjects often sense they may be queer entering their teens, Lababidi explains his mystical sensibilities emerged as a teenager. His first love affair was not with a person but with inner life as a reader: his “first love” was “for Letters,” Lababidi writes; “people tend[ed] to come second” (3). As Sven Birkerts writes in the preface, “Finding a way to talk openly about the soul or revelations of beauty is very difficult,” almost taboo (xiii). Lababidi’s book forges this way, and thus is a vanguard of what might be called mystic pride.

Public conversations about mysticism are rare because there are few “out” mystics in our public life together. While many of us can name present-day LGBTQ+ influencers (presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg, Chicago mayor Lori Lightfoot, comedian Ellen Degeneres, producer Ru Paul), fewer of us can identify

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mystics who are household names. But Lababidi shows that the mystical life is bustling with company—on the page in the form of books across geographies and time. Lababidi is a generous writer, inviting a multitude of voices to his festival of introspection. Lababidi’s sentences are a version of pulling up chairs for writers who influenced his mystical orientation, from Oscar Wilde to Franz Kafka, Friedrich Nietzsche, Artur Rimbaud, Rainer Maria Rilke, Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī (also known as Rumi), and Ahmad Al-Ghazali. One of the book’s greatest pleasures is the way it expanded my reading list, introducing me to new writers and books, including Moroccan novelist Tahar Ben Jelloun’s *By Fire* and Syrian novelist Osama Alomar’s *The Teeth of the Comb*. Lababidi’s writing voice is at home when honoring beauty’s treasures of art, poetry, and spirit. At this time in history when violence—what Lababidi calls a “failure of imagination” and “an emotional cliché”—is broadcast nearly 24-7, Lababidi’s focus on “revelations about beauty” redirect our attention toward our essences as creatures of beauty-making (51, 212). This book creates space for these conversations to unfold, as expressed in the interview section toward the end of the volume, in which Lababidi sits with other writers and editors to discuss the vocation of a writer, someone who reminds readers of their inborn “ancient wisdom” (181).

These intimate conversations bring to the fore one of the book’s greatest gifts: its reverence for the small, whether short essay, poem, or aphorism. The aphorism is Lababidi’s special love. An aphorism is “what is worth quoting with the soul’s dialogue with itself” and reads like “micro-poetry”; aphorism “belong[s] to the tradition of wisdom literature,” which has a long history in the Middle East and Egypt, where Lababidi was born and spent most of his youth (201, 200). Lababidi’s aphorisms infuse a world into one line, much like Emily Dickinson’s poetics. Similarly to the ways Dickinson fits a cosmology into a single line, Lababidi’s aphorisms are journeys taking readers from planet A to star B and galaxy C: “Eye contact: how souls catch fire”; “Take two opposites, connect the dots, and you have a straight line”; “Self-image: self-deception” (195, 207, 209). In pausing with the small, Lababidi opens universes otherwise overlooked. While the aphorism is a long-reverenced genre in Arab literature and culture, it enjoys a less robust following in North America. Lababidi’s attention to the tiny is a welcome relief in North American culture where a mania to occupy as much a space as possible—whether on the news or social media—is the rule of the day. Lababidi’s quietly powerful aphorisms invite us to pause, like the mystic does, and taste the divine close at hand. The holy waits patiently in a phrase.

Lababidi’s writing grips the reader when he engages his natural mystical tendencies and sees beauty and oneness where others tend to see threat and

separateness. Lababidi includes a number of essays on the Egyptian Revolution or Arab Spring, a historical event “not merely overthrowing an old regime, but ushering in new ways of thinking and being” (96). Lababidi’s writing on the revolution is most impactful when it leaves the uprising for hidden moments in the nooks and crannies news cameras do not find. When he takes us down alleyways and side streets, Lababidi’s writing resembles Rumi’s teachings, inviting us to free our imaginations from tired political categories of good versus bad and see another way. Rumi famously writes, “Beyond ideas of right and wrong, there is a field. I’ll meet you there.” Lababidi explores this field in an imaginary interview with the city of Cairo in a piece called “The City and Its Writer.” Lababidi guides us through a tour of bustling Cairo and gives us “an artist’s story” of the city today, pointing out what “goes unnoticed by most”: “the innocent joy we take in dancing”; the “wit and verse” that are “always sport”; “house parties, where literary life thrives,” uprising or not (179, 174-76). Lababidi’s short story “Encounter” is perhaps the most moving piece on the revolution though it never mentions uprising. An “I,” a wayward self, meets a “longed-for-self” who represents inborn dignity forgotten (241). I imagine the two selves symbolizing two Egypts: a magisterial Egypt waiting patiently for the present-day, tumultuous Egypt to return to its birthright of ancient wisdom. Lababidi has a rare gift for offering mystical perspectives on the revolution. I would’ve liked to have seen him place greater trust in those gifts, that is, leave the uprising *à la* Rumi and write more pieces resembling “Encounter” and “The City and Its Writer.” Lababidi aches to leave the battleground, too, for he shares toward the end of the volume that he is “wary of tackling politics, directly, and commenting on every twist and turn in the news” (198).

Leaving the political battlefield is difficult, because writers with mystical sensibilities feel pressure to keep their mystical insights quieter than their political discourse if they want their work to be accepted or even published. Some thinkers accuse mystical writers of apathy or irresponsibility if they do not engage politics in legible storylines of protagonists and antagonists. Lababidi seems to make this charge as well, stating, “I think it unconscionable for the artist to fiddle while Rome burns” (185). Some mystical artists might respond that it is unconscionable *not* to fiddle while Rome burns. Mystics see directly into the divinity of all humans—tyrants and victims alike—a vision equipping mystical writers to leave tired political storylines of good versus bad and trace the thoughts of God, who, like the sky, takes no sides, and instead covers and unites everything and everyone, like the narrators of “Encounter” and “The City and Its Writer.” Lababidi uses the language of soaring above the battlefield to describe mystical perspective: “Religion might be the runway and the mystic has taken off, . . . intensifying what it means to wing it on your own.

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. . . Once you decide the open sky is your home, then it becomes trickier to find somewhere to perch and make your nest” (164). Lababidi’s essays on Egypt show he is torn: one foot stands on the political battlefield, wanting to “perch” and be on the right side in a revolution. The other foot ventures out of the mystical closet toward “sky.” I would urge writers with mystical sensibilities to loosen their perch on the political battleground and utilize their gifts to follow “the higher law of beauty” with confidence (168). From this detached but radically loving perspective, mystics leave the conflagration of good-versus-bad and kindle a different radiance: everyone-is-innocent, including so-called enemies. The public aches for stories of healing like “Encounter,” a song tuned to tenderness even for the villain. Mystical writers are fiddlers equipped to play this music.

Brevity is Lababidi’s gift in the form of aphorism. The essays, too, are short, but often too short, leaving readers not quite ready to leave the rich conversations Lababidi’s exquisite writing has started. One area that deserves more attention is the spiritual and mystical writing of women. The book is highly masculine, quoting male poets and mystics robustly, from Rumi to Nietzsche and Soren Kierkegaard. Lababidi mentions Susan Sontag as an influence on his work, as well as includes short essays on Irish singer Sinéad O’Connor and Kuwaiti visual artist Shurooq Amin. His primary love, though, is for essayists and poets, and he devotes an essay to two women spiritual and mystical writers: presidential candidate and writer Marianne Williamson, and writer, psychologist, and poet Helen Schucman. Yet he dismisses both women’s work, calling their writing “distorted theology” without quoting Williamson and downplaying Schucman as a “helpless scribe” (28, 27). Instead of engaging with these women’s voluminous work directly, Lababidi turns to “time-honored and respected spiritual and philosophical traditions” championed by men (27-28). He robustly quotes men’s ideas about these women’s writing, choosing to quote one of these women only once, and dismissively, in a short quotation from Schucman’s *A Course in Miracles*. It is certainly fine to disagree with Williamson’s and Schucman’s ideas. But to discredit the women’s writing as a “hoax” and brush their work off as “self-help talk” unwittingly betrays Lababidi’s call, later, to “leave room for [others] to participate” (29, 172). In disparaging these women’s versions of mysticism, Lababidi unintentionally furthers the shame surrounding mysticism that perhaps can make it so “difficult” for our culture, collectively, to “talk openly about the soul.”

Inviting women spiritual writers and mystics into the conversation might lend particular insight to the relationship between mind and spirit that fascinates Lababidi. He finds mind at odds with spirit, explaining that he is “fed up with the

mind”; “I’m less enamored of the mind, its tyranny and seductions. . . . Displacing my fascination with the life of the mind,” he continues, “is a deep respect for the life of the spirit” (191). Adding a feminine, even feminist perspective to Lababidi’s overwhelmingly male—and arguably masculinist—discussion of mind and spirit might offer different, less oppositional approaches. Schucman’s work, coming from what might be called a Christian midrashic tradition, finds that mind and spirit mesh. “Hold to the Thought the Christ has placed in you,” Schucman writes; “Accept Christ’s Thought, and let it be your own” (*The Gifts of God*, 19). Poet and scholar Mohja Kahf, writing from an Islamic tradition, collapses divisions between mind and spirit like Schucman does. The “holiest of holies has been placed,” Kahf writes, “in the mihrab of your mind” (*Hagar Poems*, 95). Including more women’s voices, especially from the Sufi tradition Lababidi reveres, such as Rabi’a al-‘Adawiyya, Mahsati Ganjavi, and Jahan Khatun, might offer spiritual insights, if not to agree with, at least to engage. These women’s writing, especially Schucman’s, might model ways for Lababidi to infuse his interest in politics with mystical perspectives of nearly incomprehensible care, forgiveness, and innocence for those on any and all sides of a political situation.

Lababidi’s wish to widen participation in mystical conversations is one of the volume’s most urgent contributions. The volume shares frank and refreshing insights with budding writers and anyone called to create beauty. In a brilliant analogy in the essay “So, You Published a Book—Now What?,” Lababidi compares writing a book to parenting: “Think of publishing as parenting. Do your responsibilities end with having a baby? No, they begin” (122). He describes the new life that begins upon book publication: tours, signings, and promotion across all possible mediums (internet, print, radio, podcasts, friends, family). “Accept empty chairs” at readings and book promotions, “overlook the yawning, texting” (122). He also advises writers to “approach an author who works in the same genre”; “begin networking, and try to do so with elegance and grace” (123). For mystical writers in and out of the closet with few visible role models, Lababidi’s advice to forge community is invaluable. His corpus launches something remarkable: a vocabulary that beckons mystics, prodding them to trust their voices and come out of the closet, too. I encourage readers everywhere to study and enjoy Lababidi’s past, present, and future work, for his books serve as public squares and parks in which he invites us to gather in mystic pride. Spread the word. Invite friends.

Works Cited

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