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The Inner Landscape

In 1912, the poet Giuseppe Ungaretti leaves his native town, Alexandria, and reaches France. From there, some years later, he will move to his parents’ land: Italy. The memory of that erratic life is kept in his poetry. In his first collection, *Il porto sepolto* (*The Buried Port*, 1917), some verses recall this voyage across the Mediterranean: “e il mare è cenerino/trema dolce inquieto/come un piccione” (“and the sea is ashen/trembling gentle restless/like a pigeon”). The title of the poem is *Levante* (*Levant*). Ungaretti’s Levant is not the land that he’s leaving behind, and that somewhere else he names “il mio paese d’Affrica” (“my African land”), nor the coast where he will ashore. The Levant is a space inbetween, only temporary hosted by the sea, non-national, neither nostalgic. It is the time in which Ungaretti is moving from a country to another, from the past to the future, carrying with himself his poetic voice. Not by chance, the poem is set on a ship (a vehicle moving in a space that does not correspond exactly to a national entity) there: “a prua un giovane è solo/a poppa emigranti soriani ballano” (“at the prow a youth stands alone/at the stern Syrian emigrants dance”). In the following verses, Ungaretti gives also some elements of the world that he has left behind: “di sabato sera a quest’ora/ebrei/laggiù/portano via i loro morti/nell’imbuto di chiocciola” (“Saturday nights at this time/Jews/over there/carrying away their dead/in the spiral funnel”). That “over there” is the colonial Alexandriadescibed by Lawrence Durrel, Kavafis, Fausta Cialente, Jacques Hassoun, Izhaq Gormezano Goren, André Acyman, that will begin to fade and disappear after the end of the Second World War. From then the space will loose his real connotation to become an evocative and charming memory of a lost world that the European and non European literature would try to recreate in his supposed splendor. In this case, the Levant begins in Alexandria from where Ungaretti sails. The city is already a space inbetween:
Alexandrie était une ville intime. Intuitivement je la percevais comme une sorte de no man’s land, plutôt comme un territoire à part, situé entre deux continents: l’Égypte et l’Europe.

[...] La ville était un éternel présent, une mémoire courte, limitée à deux générations au plus. Étrange Alexandrie, sortie du néant d’une splendeur oublié, enjambant les siècles pour ressusciter dans la modernité du XIX siècle.

The ‘Levant’: an old word with a new meaning

Beginning from the late middle Ages the word Levant was used to designate, in the maritime and trade field, the Oriental cost of mare nostrum: Egypt, Syria, Turkey, and Greece. The Levant, as a real space, was generally identified with a part of the Mediterranean. During the modern era, the Levantines were Europeanizing people generally involved in commerce with the North Mediterranean (i.e. Italy and France), speaking many languages, cosmopolites citizen of the colonial world. At the beginning of the XX century, during a journey to Egypt a French journalist gives this account of the Levantines: “Sujets égyptiens, ni arabes ni musulmans, les levantins forment une partie de la population très distincte, transition nécessaire et bien ménagée entre l’indigène et l’européen”. In European languages, until two decades ago, the adjective Levantine, had also a negative connotation. Browsing any dictionary of Italian the first meaning of the word informs us that: a “levantino” is a person who lives in the Levant. But the second meaning reveals another nuance: cunning and cheating. This meaning, with a sense of continuity, transmigrates also in other non European languages, as Hebrew.

During the last decades, the growing academic interest about the Mediterranean as a space of multiple connections and cultural symbiosis allowed a reorientation and a redefinition of the Levant’s history and, as a consequence a shift in the meaning of the correlate adjective. Ammiel Alcalay, in his After Jews and Arabs. Remaking Levantine culture explores one aspect of the Levantine history: “the relationships between Jews and Arabs on the literary, cultural, historical, social and politics planes”. These cultural interaction acts on a wider scene that doesn’t coincide exactly with the Islamic, Jewish or Romance culture, but “refers back it roots, connections and conflicts with Persia, Byzantium, the remnants of the Hellenic world and the ancient near East. Prospective as well, it survives to inquisition to go forward ad feed Europe”. In order to achieve this goal, Ammiel Alcalay suggests a periodization, the chronological phases proposed consisting of the biblical/rabbinic (or “premodern”); the Levantine (or “modern”); the Enlightenment (or “neomodern”); and the New Levantine (or “postmodern”). Alcalay argues also that: “These categories cannot be conceived as inclusive or rigid, defining strict and essential characteristics. They must be conceived, rather, as relation scanners, places on maps to refer to for orientation”. The question this work poses is: if in the cultural framework of the (modern) Levantine world a literary category could emerge and which elements this category would include. As a way to explore such a possibility, I will provide some examples taken from Hebrew and Italian literature, following the proposition suggested by Alcalay:

While an old Levantine world whose Jewish and Arab presence is accounted for and considered in relation to Europe still remains largely unexplored, a new Levant – more discrete and fragmented but still aware of the possibilities of its space – is in the making. It is within the gap of these two worlds that, along the margins of the many struggles fought to reorder its constellations that the texts of Jabès and Derrida emerge.
In the writing of his Book (with this word I intend to designate his entire oeuvre) Édmond Jabès – born in the modern Levantine world (the colonial Egypt) - fragments a genre deriving from the biblical/rabbinic ‘premodern’ tradition (the responsa or teshuvot)\(^\text{12}\). But by doing that, he produces a ‘New Levantine’ (postmodern) text in which he recreates an always changing space, a space in becoming: the desert, whose narrative and poetic function has a concrete and real origin\(^\text{13}\). This space is similar to the Levant of Ungaretti: it is not only a place, but also a time during which the past appears in the present, remembering to the Poet that an eternal exile is occurring:

Ce matin, entre la rue Monge et la Mouffe, j'ai laissé le désert, après la rue des Patriarches et la rue de l'Épée de Bois, où s'élève ma demeure, envahir mon quartier. Le Nil n'était pas distant (...) C'est là que je veux abandonner mon livre\(^\text{14}\).

In the desert the form of the dunes are at all times shifting as the structure of Jabès’ Book. To this mobile elements, never fixed or permanent, safeguard of the Book is committed: “Le désert est le gardien du livre”\(^\text{15}\).

The Levant: a prism reflecting the Mediterranean ‘multiple modernities’?

In an article entitled Mediterranean History and the History of the Mediterranean, Yaacov Shavit remarks the impossibility to assign common features to the literary works produced in the Mediterranean area:

The claim that literary works written in the Mediterranean world have a common character ignores not only the variety and diversity of this world as a ‘natural region’, but also the absence of any real link between the works and the natural environment [...] It would be much more correct to argue that as a human historical phenomenon, the Mediterranean is a singular instance of multiplicity and diversity existing in one framework and maintaining, over thousands of years, reciprocal relations, integration and acculturation, without either the multiplicity being impaired.\(^\text{16}\)

In order to designate the historical complexity and cultural richness of the Mediterranean region, a stereotyped, over-used image is generally invoked: the mosaic. Although the image of the Byzantine art of putting together stones of different colours has an intrinsic efficacy, we must remember that the figure appearing from the mosaic is flat, mono-dimensional, and depthless.

In the second half of the twentieth century, an Egyptian born Israeli writer, Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff\(^\text{17}\), proposed a fascinating definition in which the millennial stratification of the Mediterranean basin emerges in all his prismatic essence:

The Levant is a land of ancient civilisation, which cannot sharply differentiate from the Mediterranean world, and is not synonymous with Islam, even if a majority of his inhabitants are Moslems. The Levant has a character and history of his own. It is called “Near” or “Middle” East in relationship with Europe, not to itself. Here, indeed, Europe and Asia have encroached on one another, time and time again, leaving their mark in crumbling monuments and in the shadowy memories of Levant’s peoples. Ancient Egypt, ancient Israel and ancient Greece, Chaldea and Assyria, Ur and Babylon, Tyre, Sidon and Carthage, Constantinople, Alexandria and Jerusalem are all dimensions of the Levant. So are Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which clashed in a dramatic confrontation, giving rise to world civilizations, fracturing into stubborn local subcultures and the multi-layered identities of the Levant’s peoples. It is not exclusively western or eastern, Christian, Jewish or
Moslem. Because of its diversity, the Levant has been compared to a mosaic to a mosaic – bits of stone of different colours assembled into a flat picture. To me it is more like a prism whose various facets are joined by the sharp edge of differences, but each of which, according to its position in time-space continuum, reflects or refracts light. Indeed, the concept of light is contained in the word Levant and in the word mizra, and perhaps the time has come for the Levant to revaluate itself by its own light, rather than see itself through Europe’s sight, as something quaintly exotic, tired, sick and almost lifeless.

Kahanoff, an intellectual ahead of her time, uses the term “Levant” without any negative connotation as a reference to a geographical space, with real (and not exclusively symbolic) cultural parameters. Influenced by Camus and other Western intellectuals, and by her cultural experience in Paris and the U.S., she ended up proposing the “Levantine” synthesis as an alternative and hybrid cultural identity, bearing a potential to reconcile most different issues – such as (broadly conceived) Middle-Eastern culture, Hebrew religious and non-religious cultural elements, rationalism, a European idea of progress, and Western philosophy. In 1978 Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff published Mi-mizrah shemesh (Sun from the East) – a collection of essays, articles, and short stories, originally written in English and translated into Hebrew by Aharon Amir (Israeli intellectual and founder of the literary magazine Keshet). A multilayered collection – it is virtually impossible to do justice to its richness and complexity in the brief space of these pages – it includes a literary report of the writer’s journey to Paris: Yoman zarfati (Parisian Journal), reflections upon her stay in the U.S. at the outbreak of World War II: America shel, (My America), a chapter discussing the image of Europe in the context of colonial Egypt: Europah mi-rahoq (Europe from afar), and several short stories on her Cairo childhood. In Kahanoff’s collection, the “Levant” epitomizes a cultural option, which in Israel, at the time of the publication, represented an alternative to the hegemonic idea of culture. But Kahanoff’s text also captures the context in which the author grew up and developed her concept of the “Levant”. Like many other young Jews of the colonial period, Kahanoff attended the French School in Cairo. Her family hired several British governesses directly summoned from London. Her knowledge of (basic) spoken Arabic, her strong self-consciousness, and her lively disposition sharpened her focus, putting her into the condition to intensely perceive the extraordinary potential of a multicultural (or plural) environment. All her essays and literary writing (eventually collected in Mi-mizrah shemesh) developed out of such a composite experience. Far from being only a fresco of the condition of the Jewish community in colonial Egypt, Jacqueline Kahanoff’s essays provide us some extremely important information:

We wanted to break out of narrow minority framework into which we were born, to strive toward something universal (…) Our parent were pro-British as a matter of business and security and we were nationalist as a matter of principle (…) Revolution and Marxism seemed the only way to reach a future that would include both our European mentors and the Arab masses (…) The Arabs and other colonized peoples were cultural hybrids by chance, while we, the Levantine, were unavoidably so, as if by vocation and destiny.

In this passage, as in many others of her essay, the author expresses a typical sentiment originated by the ideological metanarrative of modernity: the aspiration to universality, the commitment to work for the progress, the idea of a future (a sort of messianic future) when equality will rule. The words of J.S. Kahanoff testimony how modern movements (or modern ideas) functioned in non western societies and how contemporary world is a
“story of continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs”  

In the essay *Multiple Modernities*, published in 2000, Eisenstadt suggests that: 

Ongoing reconstructions of multiple institutional and ideological patterns are carried forward by specific social actors in close connection with social, political and intellectual activists, and also by social movements pursuing many different programs of modernity, holding very different views on what makes societies modern.

Taking into consideration Kahanoff’s writings in the light of this passage, we notice that what she says about her ‘levantine’ origin coincides exactly with what Eisenstadt theorized many years later in philosophical terms. In the passage quoted above, in a few lines, we discover the multilayered character of the local Jewish community. Kahanoff writes: “We were nationalist; revolution and Marxism seemed the only way to attain a future”. Elsewhere she further specifies “We were aggressive and feminist”, thus adding another key dimension of modernity to the first three (nationalism, revolution, Marxism). What name does she give to the varied quintessence (and representation) of her reality? She calls it ‘Levantinism’ (she claims that she and her fellows belonged all to a “Levantine generation”), showing the positive meaning of the word, the positive side of a word that, according to the European sense, has always been considered in a negative light. In *Mi-mizrah shemesh* Kahanoff declares what it means to be ‘Levantine’:

I am a typical Levantine in the sense that I put at the same degree what I have received from my Eastern background and what I later had in heredity from Western culture. In this reciprocal fecundity, that is Israel they call “Levantinism”, I see enrichment and not impoverishment. And maybe from this perspective I can try to define the complex and intricate conflict between the two big communities composing the State of Israel.

If we consider it from this point of view, more than being the remaining trace of an historical image where East and West encroached or a space of trade, between Europe and Middle East, the Levant is a way, a form of reception of modernity, also in its literary manners of representation. It appears as mode of blending several modernities and, sometimes, a mix of contradictory operating metanarratives.

The stories contained in *Mi-mizrah shemesh* display several elements bearing a close connection to the essays – such as hints to the writer’s cosmopolitan education and to the multicultural, heterogeneous reality surrounding her and reflect, as prismatic, a Levantine identity:

During my childhood, I thought it was fairly normal that people could understand each other and look alike, in spite of the fact that they spoke different languages and were known by different names – they were Greeks, Moslems, Syrians, Jews, Christians, Arabs, Italians, Tunisians, and Armenians.

Starting from the examples offered in Kahanoff’s collection, where a relevant tie exists between the multiple context and the prose expressing it, we can enquire if it is possible to speak about ‘Levantine literature’ and on which qualities this category is based.

Who are Levantine writers? The writers coming from the Levant world? The writers who describe it? Their descendents telling the ancestor’s stories? Could the necessity to establish a Levantine category be another way of organizing the great amount of colonial literary material to which our present time is tied and in which European culture is – broadly speaking – involved?

Without expecting to give sure and precise answers to those questions, we will try to recognise, in the following paragraph, some characteristics of Levantine prose.
The Levant: a literary category of forgotten and rescued memories?

Gil Hochberg suggests that the Levant is above all a space of literary creation, of meeting between writers, of dialogue and cultural collaborations that erases national and linguistic separations between East and West, a crossing between the existing political maps. This idea corresponds, in some sense, to what Kahanoff expressed in her first collection of stories, *Jacob's Ladder*:

To those of us who were born in the communities of the Orient, the names of places that where once familiar - Baghdad, Damascus, Cairo, Tunis, Algiers – are now the faraway places in that mythical geography of hearts and minds where distances do not correspond to those on maps.

I will assume that one of the first helpful indications to recognize, and categorize, Levantine prose is the definition used by the writers themselves. Kahanoff specifies to be Levantine and all her prose is designed to render the compound context of her origin. From this starting point, we can assume that the case of Kahanoff bears elements of a literary Levantinism based on an initial definition and on the reconstruction throughout the text of a lost (modern) world whose many elements converge in defining the identity of the author and of the other Levantines.

In the same decade, the Sixties, in which Kahanoff begun to write her articles for the journal *Keshet*, an Italian woman writer, Fausta Cialente, who had long lived in Egypt during the colonial era, published a novel entitled *Ballata levantina* (*Levantine Ballade*). The connotation that Fausta Cialente gives to her ‘ballata’ comes into view first from the title and appears with more evidence in the narration. The novel is set in Egypt, mainly in Alexandria (and in Cairo for the last section), where Daniela, the protagonist, lives. She is an orphan raised by her grandmother, Francesca an Italian mistress who had a child – Daniela’s mother - with a wealthy man of the Alexandrian Jewish community. The time of the narration spans from the Twenties until the end of World War II, when the protagonist discovers sexuality and pursues her autonomy and her independence as a woman in a contradictory and ambiguous context made up of tradition and modernity. Daniela is of Levantine birth: her native town is Alexandria, she commands several languages, and she has obtained a European education in an Arab land. She participates in the cosmopolitan milieux of foreigners who live in Egypt, those circles composed by “le grandi famiglie greche ed ebree, la crema della società levantina.” The young heroine is also defined as Levantine by the author herself. In the final part, when she is kissing her Italian lover, who is about to leave Cairo, the writer specifies: “Ogni tanto, nel raggio sbiadito di un fanale, avevano potuto vedere la ragazza levantina che si rizzava in punta di piedi per farsi baciare dal suo ragazzo.” The point of view is that of “sentinelle indiane o sudanesi, con neri, lustri visi” that peer in the obscurity. Apparently, both (the sentinels and the two young lovers) are the others, foreigners and/or migrants in the colonial Egypt. But, in reality, they are both protagonist of that compound Levantine world where people, as suggested by Kahanoff, could understand each other in spite of they speak different languages.

Daniela, the Levantine, at the same time she feels a strange belonging to the land in which she is born and a confused idea of which is her homeland. When she does her first travel abroad, in Italy at the age of eighteen, she perceives to be the other:
Non ero abituata a veder bottegai che non fossero levantini, e ai milanesi trovavo una forma civile e ironica, che mi metteva soggezione. Entravo nelle botteghe, ascoltavo la cadenza dialettale della nonna. Mi piaceva che mi trattassero da forestiera, allungavo il discorso per sentirmi dire: “Già, lei non è di qui. Ma è italiana? Dall’accento, non pare”, e questo un po’ mi umiliava [...]. Le cameriere della pensione e le due vecchie signorine che la dirigevan, mormoravano con s’impatia alle mie spalle, per dire, come quei bottegai, che un’aria “proprio proprio italiana” non l’avevo [...].

Leer crescuita e vissuta “lontana dalla patria” aveva forse inciso sui miei sentimenti, mi dicevo; non li sentivo pieni e compatti come avrebbe dovuto essere, e timorosa che ciò si vedesse, rispondevo con estrema cautela, sorvegliandomi.

21 It is interesting to remark that Fausta Cialente was not born in Egypt. She arrived there with her husband, so we can say that she was Levantine by adoption. In the edition of Ballata levantina published in 2003, Paolo Terni, the grandchild of Fausta Cialente, writes in the afterwords that “in fondo non le si perdonava del tutto di non essere nata in Egitto, e quindi di non avere, in qualche misura, ‘le carte in regola per riferirne’”16. Shaping a protagonist that the reader could regard as Levantine by rights, Fausta Cialente finds the way to reconcile her sense of belonging to a land where she lived for more than twenty years and at the same time, to justify a formless devotion to her real homeland - for which she has been a foreigner for a long time. The necessity to ‘invent’ an identity, or the necessity to label a complex identity, is also present in Kahanoff’s essay, and we can argue that maybe this element is inextricably connected to the difficulty for Levantine writers to define themselves through certain and accepted classifications (‘Italian’, ‘Egyptian’, ‘French’ etc.):

I remember a summer when we were sojournig at a hotel in Alexandria, by the sea. There were many English officers and their wives and a certain lady asked me what was I. I didn’t know what to answer. I knew I was not Egyptian, as the Arabs are, but I also knew that it was a motive of great shame for a person not to know who she was. I remembered my old grandparents, so I said I was Persian: I thought in fact that Baghdad was the same city from which all the nice carpets came. Later my mother chided me because I had not said the truth, and told me that when I was asked such a question I should answer that I was European. I suffered, because I perceived that it was an even bigger lie.17.

22 Ballata levantina ends with the mysterious decease of the young Daniela who disappears near the Nile as if she were swallowed by the waves of the mythological river. But her death, far from representing an existential failure, it stands for the end of an era and of a world. Daniela dies in 1941: few years later, after the war, no much will remain of the cosmopolite life of foreigners in the colonial Egypt. In the Nile, her voice and her literary memories seem to be swallowed as well, like some of other Levantine writers. According to Ammiel Alcalay, this possibility of loss and disappearance marks the history of the Levantine female narrative: “Just how many woman writers there were in the modern/Levantine world is difficult to say. Quite a few are already known. Others seem to have been absorbed into the oeuvres of their more famous (male) relatives”18.

23 Fausta Cialente and Jacqueline Kahanoff share, from this point of view, a similar destiny. Their prose, or the memory of their différence as regards to the country in which their books are published, has long been ignored. With regard to Kahanoff, Nissim Calderon notes that her books “have remained on libraries shelves. Only a few have read them. None has written about them or has used them theoretically”.19 The revaluation of her works is due to another woman writer, Ronit Matalon - born in Israel to a Levantine family of Jews from Egypt – and occurred when the post-Zionist phase of Israel begun to
integrate into the national and cultural discourse the plural expression of diaspora memories and of all the edoth ('communities') composing the Israeli society. In the case of Fausta Cialente, her books have been re-published in the 2003 and in the 2004, that is in a time when the country is facing an always increasing immigration – also from Arab and Mediterranean countries - with the consequent necessity to manage cultural diversities and ethnic mix. In this sense, the oeuvre, and the life, of Fausta Cialente is a memory of the diverse and forgotten Italian migration in Middle East whose account is always overwhelmed by the foremost and famous history of Italian emigration to U.S.A, North Europe, Canada and Australia. The Cialente's novels testimony also, as depicted in Mi-mizrah shemesh, a past of spontaneous sharing and natural plurality where ethnic and religious diversities were the spirit of the Levantine generations. The writer and psychoanalyst Jacques Hassoun, born in Alexandria and died in Paris, telling the history of Jews from Egypt, can not avoid evocating the Levantine linguistic osmosis, the natural scenario of his memory:

Lorsque j’aurai à évoquer des mots hébraïques ou tout simplement évoquer telle ou telle autre cérémonie c’est le souvenir de cette langue homophonique à l’arabe qui formera la toile de fond de cet écrit. Ici l’écriture se soutiendra d’une tradition orale, d’une parole, d’un chant, inséparable de l’environnement arabo-islamo-égyptien.

Shulamit Hareven and the Levant as literary choice

In 2003, the Israeli writer Shulamit Hareven, published her autobiography: Yamim rabim (Many Days). The book contains a piece entitled Ani levantinit (I am Levantine) already appeared in 1985 on the newspaper Ha-mishmar and read by the author ten years later during an event commemorating Jacqueline Kahanoff.

In her short essay, Hareven specifies, beginning from the title, the mark chosen to define herself. Born in Warsaw in 1930 and emigrated to Palestine when she was a child, the writer perceives a strong contrast between her western birthplace and the adoptive Mediterranean land, between the real origin and the mental space (the inner landscape), between Europe and Levant, between dark and light: “I was born in Europe and it is like all the days there passed in darkness [...] until I have seen for the first time the bright light pouring over the stone enclosures on the mountain”. In the eyes of the writer, Europe and the Mediterranean are geographical and conceptual antipodes, opposites that cannot touch nor comprehend each other. In the Levant “the food of the soul” is eaten, it is there that the “gods walk barefoot”, that men and women “have a third eye and a sixth sense”. On the contrary, in Europe, people only have “two eyes” and sometimes not even those. Like Cyclopes, they eat tasteless food and “walk wearing shoes”. Converging on the negative perspective on Europe is also a certain Israeli and Zionist feeling that rejected the Diaspora past privileging the reality of the young State that offered to the immigrants the possibility to be ‘new Jews’, to be the strong pioneers of their future. But, at the same time, the author wants to keep distance from her present time: “I am Levantine, because life in the claustrophobia of the present bores me” . Hareven’s Levant seems in a certain way a little distant from the one postulated by Kahanoff, for whom it represented a balance and a symbiosis of cultures and in which differences, instead of getting sharper, complemented each other – they were the sharp edges refracting the light of diversities. Moreover, it is revealing that the definition adopted by Shulamit Hareven, even if deeply marked by visual and geographical aspects, and by the related stereotypes as well, passes
through a literary device. The writer claims: “I am Levantine because I write Levantine books”\(^4\). In 1972, Hareven published *Ir yamim rabim* (*City of Many Days*)\(^5\), a novel set in Jerusalem whose protagonist, Sara Amarillo, is born in a Sephardi family. In the novel the city is represented in all its full complexity of diverse peoples, languages (Ladino, French, Arabic, German, English) and religions (Islam, Christianity, Judaism) keeping together. Yael S. Feldman notes that the speech of the characters “brings to life a world of great fluidity, a polyphonic macrocosm in which cultural differences are mutually worked out and individual idiosyncrasies are accepted”.\(^{51}\)

The eco of this composite world - that became an image of the spirit for Hareven and the background of the adoptive homeland for Cialente - also resounds in the Jabès’ *Book*. There a sort of nostalgic reminiscence and the existential awareness of an impossible return fuse into the uncontrollable flow of the questions:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Je garde, du pays que j'ai quitté, le souvenir d'un lit où j'ai couché, rêvé, aimé.} \\
\text{Je mourrai sans doute au pays du conquérant, mais si, par chance,} \\
\text{je revenais dans ma patrie, pourrais-je y dormir encore, y rêver, y aimer?}^{52}
\end{align*}
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**NOTES**

2. *Ibid.*, p. 7. Literal translations of the verses and narrative passages in Italian are given as a help to the reader through the text.
7. For the meaning in Hebrew see Avraham Even Shoshan, *Ha-millon ha-hadash*, Yerushalayim, Qiryat sefer, 1974.
17. Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff (1917-1979) was born in Cairo, the daughter of a wealthy family of Tunisian and Iraqi descent. As the Second World War burst, she moved to the U.S., where she studied, worked, and began to write (in English). At the beginning of the Fifties she went back to Egypt – which she eventually left again for Paris. After a few years in France, she moved to Israel, where she lived ever since. As an English-language writer, Kahanoff always remained on the margins of the Israeli literary world. For the biographical information about Kahanoff see Ammiel Alcalay, Keys to The Garden. New Israeli Writing, San Francisco, City Light Book, 1996, p. 18.
18. This passage is contained in the preface of the original manuscript written in English, but not in the Hebrew version. The quotation is from the book by Ammiel Alcalay who obtained the possibility to cite it by the literary executor of Kahanoff. Ammiel Alcalay, op. cit., pp. 71-73.
23. Ibid., p. 2.
26. Ibid., p. 48. My emphasis.
27. Eisenstadt postulates: “The appropriation by non-Western societies of specific themes and institutional patterns of the original western modern civilization societies entailed the continuous selection, reinterpretation, and reformulation of these imported ideas. These brought about continual innovation, with new cultural and political programs emerging, exhibiting novel ideologies and institutional patterns. The cultural and institutional programs that unfolded in these societies were characterized particularly by a tension between conception of themselves as a part of the modern world and ambivalent attitudes toward modernity in general and toward the West in particular”. Shmuel Eisenstadt, op. cit., p. 15.
30. This passage is contained in Jacob’s Ladder, the first’s Kahanoff stories collection, published in 1951. The present citation it is taken from the book of Ammiel Alcalay. See Ammiel Alcalay, op. cit., p. 23.
31. Fausta Cialente (1898-1994) was born in Cagliari, but lived and grew up in Trieste, the town she elected as her own. In 1920 she married the composer Enrico Terni, from the Jewish community of Trieste, and followed him in Alexandria where they lived until 1947. Fausta Cialente begun to publish her works in the Thirties and in 1976 she was awarded the prestigious “Premio Strega” for her Le Quattro ragazze di Wieselberger (“The Four Wieselberger’s childs”). After that she has been quickly forgotten in the Italian literary scene. In the foreword to Ballata levantina, Franco Cordelli argues that this fact, the rapid oblivion of Fausta Cialente, was due to her distance from Italian literary milieu: “d’esser vissuta come un non scrittore, di affetti normali, gli affetti di una famiglia […] non già dunque degli affetti scaturiti dal suo lavoro, dalla sua opera” (“to her having lived as a non-writer, by the common affections, the affections of a family […] not by the affections deriving from her work then, from her oeuvre”). Franco Cordelli, Ballata levantina (Preface), Milano, Baldini e Castaldi, 2003, p. 8.

32. Ibid., p. 145: “the important Greek and Hebrew families, the top of the Levantine society”. My emphasis.

33. Ibid., p. 366: “From time to time, in the fading light of a street-lamp, they could see the Levantine girl standing on tiptoes to be kissed by her boyfriend”. My emphasis.

34. Ibid., p. 365: “Indian or Sudanese sentinels with black, shiny faces”. My emphasis.

35. Ibid., p. 175: “I was not used to see shop-owners that were not Levantines, and the Milanese with their civil and ironic manners made me feel uneasy. I went into the shops, listened to my grandmum dialect accent. I liked to be treated as a foreigner, I kept the conversation going so to hear them say: ‘Of course, you’re not of this parts. But, are you Italian? I don’t think so, judging by the accent’, and this was a bit humiliating […] The waitresses at the pension and the tow old spinsters that run it, murmured in sympathy behind my back, saying, as those shop-owners, that I didn’t quite have a ‘really Italian air’ […] Having grown up and lived ‘far from the homeland’ had probably influenced my feeling, I thought; I didn’t feel them as full and compact as they ought to be, and being afraid that this could be detected, I answered with extreme caution, guarding myself”. My emphasis.

36. Ibid., p. 375. “After all, it was never completely forgiven to her the fact of not being born in Egypt and then of not being entitled, to some extent, ‘to talk about it’”.


41. During the last years, the historical memory of the Italian emigrants in the Mediterranean basin has slowly started to emerge. In 2001 Il Buma, by Giovanni Massa, has been released in Italian cinemas. The director has chosen as the subject of his first short film the story of a Hebrew-Italian family preparing to leave Alexandria in 1967. ‘Buma’ is an Arab word meaning ‘howl’. This animal, a good omen in many Mediterranean cultures, is a prophetic voice that tells to one of the characters his future and that of his family. Marcello Bivona in Ritorno a Tunisi (“Return to Tunisia”, 1997) recalls the memories of the Sicilian-Tunisians constituting a considerable part of the Italian community in Tunis.

42. Also the Jews who arrived in Italy after the disintegration of colonial world wrote their memories in Italian. On this issue see: Raniero Spelmann, “Ebrei ottomani, scrittori italiani. L’apporto di scrittori immigrati in Italia dai paesi dell’ex impero ottomano”, EJOS, vol. 7, n° 2, 2005, pp. 1-32.


44. Shulamit Hareven, Yamim rabim autobiographyiah, Tel Aviv, Babel, 2002.
The Levant: a Trans-Mediterranean Literary Category? The article investigates the possibility of identifying a "Levantine prose" in modern Mediterranean literature. To this aim two women writers are mainly taken into consideration: the Italian Fausta Cialente and the Israeli Cairo-born Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff. Their prose not only provides a description of a multifaceted context, but also, in the case of Kahanoff, allows us to explore the effects of modernity - in its wider meaning - in non western societies.

Le Levant : une catégorie littéraire transméditerranéenne ? L'article explore la possibilité de retracer dans le scénario de l’histoire méditerranéenne moderne une « prose levantine ». Dans cette étude, les œuvres de deux femmes écrivains sont principalement prises en considération: celles de Fausta Cialente, italienne, et de Jacqueline Kahanoff, israélienne née au Caire. La prose de ces deux auteurs ne fournit pas uniquement une description de ce contexte aux multiples facettes, mais montre aussi, comme dans le cas de Kahanoff, l’effet de la modernité, au sens le plus large du terme, dans les sociétés non occidentales.

El Levante: ¿una categoría literaria transmediterránea? El artículo explora la posibilidad de definir una “prosa levantina” en el escenario de la historia moderna del mediterráneo. En este estudio, las obras de dos escritoras son especialmente tomadas en consideración: la de Fausta Cialente, italiana, y de Jacqueline Kahannof, israelita nacida en el Cairo. La prosa de estas dos autoras otorga por una parte una descripción del contexto mediterráneo con sus múltiples facetas; por otra, mayormente en la obra de Kahannof, el efecto de la modernidad (en su sentido más vasto) en las sociedades no occidentales.

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