"Metaphor in Selected Poems by Yahia Lababidi"

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Abstract

This study examines the extensive use of metaphor in the poetry collection entitled *Balancing Acts* (2016) by Yahia Lababidi (1973), Egyptian Lebanese American poet, philosopher and aphorist . Lababidi's use of metaphors seems to be the key to his poetry. In *Balancing Acts*, the poet's obsession with Egypt is revealed. Besides, his poems express the dilemma of an immigrant poet experiencing a split identity, homesickness, a conflict between self-expression and self-suppression, and the struggle between an ideal, spiritual existence and the reality of life in the US.

While referring to Lakoff's and Johnson's definition of conceptual metaphor, this study will also allude to Martin Gannon's notion of cultural metaphor, Michael Kimmel's views about metaphor clusters, Zoltan Kövecses' emotion concepts (2014), as well as Edward Buzila's evaluation of the power of metaphor. Significantly, Lababidi's use of metaphor will be analyzed in terms of Tina Krennmayr's "bottom-up approach" in such a way as to focus on Lababidi's cultural and universal metaphors in his attempt to reach out to his fellow humans.

Keywords: Yahia Lababidi – poetry – metaphor –poet's predicament

الإستعارة في قصائد مختارة للشاعر يحيى اللبابيدي

ملخص

يتناول هذا البحث الاستخدام المكثف للشاعر يحيى اللبابيدي (١٩٧٣-) للاستعارة من خلال تحليل بعض قصائد ديوانه ((أفعال التوازن)) (٢٠١٦) ؛ فالاستعارة تشكل مفتاحا هاما من مفاتيح تفسير قصائده الشعرية التي يعبر فيها الشاعر المصري اللبناني الأمريكي عن ارتباطه الروحاني العميق بالوطن الأم – مصر- وشعوره بالصراع بين هويته العربية من ناحية وحياته في الولايات المتحدة من ناحية أخرى. كما يعبر عن معاناة الفنان سعيا نحو تحقيق الذات كشاعر وفيلسوف يعيش في مجتمع شديد التباين مع ثقافته العربية والإسلامية.

ويشير البحث إلى دراسة ((ليكوف وجونسون)) عن الاستعارة المفاهيمية؛ كما يحلل أنواع الاستعارة من خلال عدة دراسات وتعريفات أخرى لها مما يلقي الضوء على براعة الشاعر يحيى اللبابيدي في استخدام الاستعارة في قصائده المعبرة والتي- وإن كان لها خصوصية ثقافية وحضارية- إلا أنها تسعى لبناء جسور من التفاهم والتعايش الإنساني بين كل البشر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: يحيى اللبابيدي – الشعر – الاستعارة – معاناة الشاعر

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Introduction

Metaphor is a seminal aspect of the study of verse in general and figurative language in particular. Recent theoretical studies on metaphors and their role in producing meaning, represent what amounts to a paradigm shift in the definition and use of metaphor. They mark a shift from treating metaphor as a New Critical tool in textual analysis to employing it as a life experience tool that enables people to understand themselves and the world around them. The study of metaphor is particularly pertinent to the poetry of Yahia Lababidi (1973), Egyptian, Lebanese, American poet, aphorist and philosopher. His themes are extensively robed in metaphor. In fact, Lababidi's metaphors are the keys to his poetry. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), "our conceptual system is largely metaphorical…the way we think, what we experience and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor". A basic definition of metaphor provided in this major work is that it is "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another". (5) Seeking to provide an alternative account of human experience and understanding rather than objective truth, Lakoff and Johnson question the notion that metaphor is just a matter of using extraordinary language or a device for mere poetic imagination. In fact, they assert that "metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language, but in thought and action". (3) In addition, in his *Contemporary Theory of Metaphor* (1993), Lakoff maintains that metaphor is "fundamentally conceptual, not linguistic in nature". Metaphorical language is just the "surface manifestation of

conceptual metaphor". An interesting, relevant statement by Eduard Buzila is that linguistic expressions and metaphorical concepts are "two sides of the same coin: the metaphor". ("The Power of Metaphor" 27) Thus, as metaphors are part and parcel of our conceptual system, "we typically conceptualize the less clearly delineated in terms of the more clearly delineated". (59) As for poetic metaphor, it could be regarded as "an extension of our everyday conventional system of metaphorical thought". (*Contemporary Theory of Metaphor* 40) Thus, Lakoff states that metaphor is not a mere figure of speech "but a mode of thought, defined by a systematic mapping from a source to a target domain". (9)

This paper attempts to examine Lababidi's extensive use of metaphor in the poetry of Yahia Lababidi whose verse is copiously laden with metaphor. In fact, Lababidi's use of metaphors seems to be the key to his poetry. The paper focuses on Lababidi's prolific use of metaphor in selected poems about Egypt in his collection entitled *Balancing Acts* (2016). In this volume, a number of poems express the poet's emotional attachment to his homeland, Egypt. Besides, so many emotion concepts are expressed in his poems about the plight of a transplanted artist trying to survive in foreign soil. Problems related to the questions of a split identity, homesickness, self-expression and self-suppression, together with the conflict between an ideal, spiritual existence and the experience of having to cope with the reality of life in the US: are among the many universal themes that figure in Lababidi's verse.

While taking into account Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) and Lakoff's *The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor* (1993), this study will also partake of Martin Gannon's "The Cultural Metaphoric Method" (2009), Michael Kimmel's "Why We Mix Metaphors and Mix Them Well" (2010), Zoltan Kövecses' "Conceptualizing Emotions" (2014), and Edward Buzila's "The Power of Metaphor". However, the above-mentioned theoretical studies will be used in this paper in so far as they illuminate Lababidi's artistic prowess by examining his ingenious use of

metaphors and metaphor clusters. This feature will be discussed as a vehicle for voicing Lababidi's profound contemplation of his unique experience as an Arab, Muslim, American artist living and prospering in a turbulent society in which he is emotionally inseparable from his Arab culture and traditions. It is to be noted that our approach to Lababidi's use of metaphor partakes of Tina Krennmayr's (2013) "bottom-up approach", in such a way as to capture the most cultural, metaphorical formulations, rather than point out a "specific selection of conceptual metaphors and their corresponding expressions". (12) This approach involves the identification of concepts involved in the metaphorical mapping, leading to the identification of source and target domains representative of the analogies, thus taking conceptual metaphors to new horizons. As such, the paper is an attempt to show the extent to which Lababidi's innovative use of metaphorical devices goes beyond established conceptual metaphors. It is worth noting that the absence of any critical analyses other than the researcher's is largely due to the fact that his poetry has hardly been analyzed, whereas his aphorisms have had a considerable degree of attention. By underlining Lababidi's metaphors, this study strives to highlight the culture-specific and universal nature of his verse, as he seeks to perpetually construct bridges, not just between his two identities, but more significantly, among all humanity at large.

Revisiting the Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Scores of critical and theoretical works were devoted to the question of metaphor not just as a figurative expression of an idea, but as central to human understanding and experience. I have chosen to single out a few of these works that seem most relevant to my reading of Lababidi's poetic project. These include Lakoff and Johnson, Martin J. Gannon, Eduard Buzila, Zoltan Kövecses, Michael Kimmel and Tina Krennmayr respectively.

In the preface to their seminal work entitled *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), Lakoff and Johnson draw the reader's attention to the traditional neglect of metaphor whereas it should be "of central

concern, perhaps the key to giving an adequate account of understanding". (ix) In fact, philosophers of the Empiricist tradition like Hobbes and Locke held a derogative view of metaphor. Hobbes "finds metaphors absurd and misleadingly emotional; reasoning upon them is wandering amongst innumerable absurdities; and their end, contention and sedition, or contempt". (Lakoff and Johnson 190) Conversely, Charles Cantalupo (1988) significantly points out that while in Hobbes's early work he "makes little significant use of metaphorical language…he moves from a style that employs no metaphors or metaphorical devices to one that is remarkable for its metaphorical density". (24) Besides, Locke holds that

> All the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence has invented…insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions and thereby mislead the judgment;…and therefore…they are certainly,…,wholly to be avoided; …a great fault, either of the language or person that makes use of them…men love to deceive and be deceived. (190, 191)

However, in his article entitled "Locke and Metaphor Reconsidered" (1998), S. H. Clark, mentions Locke's "presumed hostility…towards the realm of the aesthetic". (Clark 55) He comments on Locke's "apparent renunciation of, yet paradoxical dependence upon metaphor" in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689). Thus, even those philosophers that denounced metaphorical language inevitably used it in their arguments. On the other hand, needless to say, Lakoff and Johnson remind the reader that Romantics like Wordsworth and Coleridge "exalted imagination as a more humane means of achieving a higher truth, with emotion as a natural guide to self-understanding". (192)

   Among the kinds of metaphor mentioned by Lakoff and Johnson are 'orientational' metaphors that organize "a whole system of concepts with respect to one another". (14) There are also 'container' metaphors in which we "project our own in-out orientation onto other physical objects that are bounded by surfaces". (29) Other kinds include cultural, experiential metaphors

which our grounded in cultural experience, and 'ontological' metaphors, among several others. Ontological metaphors" are of particular interest to this paper. Defined as "ways of viewing events, activities, emotions, ideas, etc…as entities and substances", (25) this particular kind of metaphor is one that figures extensively in Yahia Lababidi's verse, as will be seen in the analysis below.

Significantly, Lakoff Lakoff and Johnson opt for an experientialist synthesis between reason and imagination. In their view,

> Reason…involves categorization, entailment, and inference…Imagination… involves seeing one kind of thing in terms of another kind of thing - …metaphorical thought. Metaphor is thus *imaginative rationality* Since the categories of our everyday thought are largely metaphorical and our everyday reasoning involves metaphorical entailments and inferences, ordinary rationality is therefore imaginative by its very nature…[Thus even] the products of the poetic imagination are 'partially rational in nature'. (193)

On the other hand, it is important to keep in mind that metaphorical structuring is only partial. (13) Significantly, a writer tends to highlight certain features of an object which are centrally important to his/her culture (67), as all metaphors are "grounded in our physical and cultural experience". On the other hand, metaphor is not just a matter of language. In fact, in Lakoff's view, the most important kind of similarities created by metaphor is the "experiential" one, rather than the objective one. (153) One not only defines one's reality in terms of metaphor but also "proceed[s] to act on the basis of the metaphors". (158) Thus, we understand our experiences in terms of objects and substances. We treat parts of our experience as distinct entities of a uniform kind, then start alluding to them, classifying them, and reasoning about them. These physical objects may have certain natural parts, but we may "impose on them other parts by virtue of our perceptions, interactions with them, or our uses for them". (25)

Relevant to Lababidi's verse, personification is a device viewed by Lakoff and Johnson as the most obvious ontological metaphor "where the physical object is further specified as being a person". (36) Personifications are thus "extensions of ontological metaphors and …allow us to make sense of phenomena in the world in human terms…that we can understand on the basis of our own motivations, goals, actions, and characteristics". (34)

An important statement that helps view Lababidi's experience between two worlds is that metaphors have a basis in our physical and cultural experience. In Lakoff and Johnson's words, "no metaphor can ever be comprehended or even adequately represented independently of its experiential basis". (14) Emphasizing the relevance of cultural and physical experience in the use of metaphors and, occasionally, coining new ones, Lakoff and Johnson state that all direct physical experience has to be evaluated "within a vast background of cultural presuppositions…Cultural assumptions, values, and attitudes are not a conceptual overlay which we may or may not place upon experience as we choose". (57) Thus, "all experience is cultural through and through…we experience our world in such a way that our culture is already present in the very experience itself". Indeed, this feature is evident in Lababidi's verse, as will be demonstrated later. Besides, referring to "natural kinds of experience", Lakoff and Johnson hold that they are products of our bodies, our mental capacities, and our emotional makeup. They are also a result of our interactions with our physical environment, as well as our interplay with others within our culture. In Lababidi's case, of course, an essential part of the poet's experience is his interaction with American culture. Alluding to metaphors as parts of our natural experience, they add that metaphor plays an essential role in characterizing the structure of the experience "whose dimensions emerge naturally from our activity in the world. The kind of conceptual system we have is a product of the kind of being we are and the way we interact with our physical and cultural environment". (119)

In this context, in *Metaphors We Live By*, "the experiential myth" converges and departs from the opposing myths of subjectivism, which insists on the total freedom of the imagination and that of objectivism's obsession with absolute truth. (229) According to the experiential myth, man is part of his environment, not separate from it, and is in constant interaction with his physical environment and with others around him. Hence, the significance of metaphorical imagination in communicating meaning and shared human understanding find expression in the following lines that are worth citing in full:

> Metaphorical imagination is a crucial skill in creating rapport and in communicating the
>
> > nature of unshared experience. This skill consists of the ability to bend your world view and adjust the way you categorize your experience…meaning is almost never communicated…where one person transmits a fixed, clear proposition to another by means of expressions in a common language where both parties have all the relevant common knowledge, assumptions, values, etc…meaning is negotiated: you slowly figure out what you have in common", [thus creating] a shared vision. (231, 232)

Significantly, relevant to Lababidi's use of metaphor is the notion that metaphor can help us in our attempt at understanding ourselves. This self-understanding arises from our interaction with our physical, cultural and interpersonal surroundings. "Just as in mutual understanding we constantly search out commonalities of experience… so in self-understanding we are always searching for what unifies our own diverse experiences in order to give coherence to our lives". (232) Seeking out personal metaphors helps highlight and unify our own past, our present pursuits, as well as our dreams, aspirations and goals in life. Therefore, we search for relevant personal metaphors that might aid us in our struggle to make sense of our lives. (233) Thus, we develop an "experiential flexibility" and engage in an endless process of contemplating our lives through new alternative metaphors. As our

cultural or personal metaphors are rooted in rituals, ritual "forms an indispensable part of the experiential basis for our cultural metaphorical systems. (234) Hence, there can be no sound view of oneself without a spontaneously surfacing ritual. The role of personal rituals is thus to form systems that might be cogent with our personalities, our view of the world, ourselves and our system of personal metaphors, as well as metonymies. In his *Contemporary Theory of Metaphor* (1993), Lakoff, describing metaphorical mappings grounded in body, everyday experience and knowledge, reminds us that some metaphorical mappings "seem universal, others widespread, some seem culture-specific". (40) In fact, Yahia Lababidi's poems about Egypt, Cairo, Ramadan and the desert, embody a "culture-specific" use of metaphor, whereas other verse about the artist's struggle and that of the self-exiled immigrant touches upon universally relevant issues.

Building upon the work of Lakoff, in his study entitled "The Cultural Metaphoric Method: Description, Analysis, and Critique" (2009), Martin J. Gannon distinguishes between the "etic", or cultural-general approach, and the "emic", or cultural-specific one. The former he defines as "the degree to which the individual sees himself as part of a group and makes decisions accordingly, even to the extent that he will subordinate his own needs and desires to group values and norms". On the other hand, Gannon explains that advocates of the emic approach "attempt to move beyond general descriptions or profiles of each ethnic or national culture or national society into a more in-depth understanding of it through cultural metaphors" (276) Besides, Gannon defines cultural metaphor as "any activity, phenomenon or institution with which all or most members of an ethnic or national culture or even a cluster of similar cultures located close to one another…identify closely and to which they react emotionally and intellectually". Highlighting the significance of the cultural metaphoric method, Gannon prefers it to what he describes as "the bi-polar method" as it provides a more profound understanding of a specific culture, taking intra-cultural differences into consideration. (282) Therefore, he regards a cultural

metaphor as a mere "first step in attempting to understand a specific culture". In addition, Gannon refers to Osland and Osland (2005/2006) who hold that "expats who begin to see the host culture in terms of paradoxes are more effective". (Cited in Gannon 283) Though they still accept the basic cultural stereotype, they strive to modify it on the basis of their own experiences. Stereotypes can be accurate or inaccurate, or a combination of both. (282, 283) In his interviews, Lababidi the Arab, Muslim immigrant seeks to avoid inaccurate stereotyping, while portraying common human plights through his work. Thus, Gannon values the study of cultural metaphors especially in view of modern globalization "in which the fates of nations are increasingly linked together". (285)

Like Gannon, Eduard Buzila (2019) (2019) takes Lakoff and Johnson as his starting point while referring to the classical views on metaphors. He goes as far back as Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and *Poetics* and the latter's "Substitution and Comparison Theory of Metaphor". Buzila shows how in Chapter 21 of his *Poetics,* Aristotle defines metaphor as "giving the thing a name that belongs to something else; the transference being either from genus to species or from species to genus, or from species to species, on ground of analogy". (9) As in Greek the word for transfer is "metapherein", "meta" meaning over, and "pherein" meaning to carry, metaphor therefore means that "we take an idea from one domain and 'transfer' or 'carry it over' to another one". (11) Buzila quotes Aristotle's praise of metaphor, simile and other figurative devices as follows: "It is a great thing indeed to make a proper use of these poetical forms …But the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learnt from others; and it is also a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarities in dissimilars". (13)

In this context, it is important to keep in mind James E. Mahon's conclusion reached through his analysis of Aristotle's *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*. Mahon contests the common view that Aristotle "undervalued metaphor and believed it to be merely an ornamental

extra in language…that he was ridiculously elitist with respect to metaphor". (69) He comments on Aristotle's praise of "the ability to coin new metaphors which are pleasing and informative- the ability…to coin *good* new metaphors- is the greatest kind of creative ability a tragedian or epic poet can have. This kind of creative ability is a rare skill which cannot be taught". (73) The issue here is, therefore, not merely whether the writer is able to coin a new metaphor, but, more importantly, whether this coinage is a masterful, effective one. There is no doubt that Lababidi's utilization of metaphor is predominantly "new" as well as powerful.

In this context, Buzila highlights I.A. Richard's criticism of Aristotle's elitist account of metaphor through his interaction theory. According to Richards, "we all live, and speak, only through our eye for resemblances". Besides, using metaphor can be taught by others and is "not an exceptional use of language but the omnipresent principle of all its free action". (Cited in Buzila 16). Like Shelley, Richards believes that language "is vitally metaphorical". Significantly, Richards defines his view of metaphor as interaction by describing "two thoughts of different things active together and supported by a single word, or phrase, whose meaning is resultant of their interaction". (17) Besides, Richards regards metaphor as the interaction between "tenor" (the idea conveyed by the literal meanings of the word used metaphorically) and the vehicle (the image conveying the meaning). Thus, metaphor is equivalent to the co-presence of the tenor and the vehicle, creating a new meaning which cannot be attained without their interaction; "a meaning of more varied powers than can be ascribed to either". (18) Besides surveying the views of critics such as Aristotle, Richards, Lakoff and Johnson, Buzila disagrees with Lakoff' and Johnson in his belief that only our sensuous perceptions are expressed metaphorically. They, on the other hand, hold that metaphors are not limited to our senses but that metaphorical concepts structure our thoughts as well. (25)

In a more recent theoretical work on metaphor, Zoltan Kövecses offers a different perspective. In his seminal study entitled "Conceptualizing Emotions. A Revised Cognitive Linguistic Perspective" (2014), Kövecses explains that emotion concepts are "largely metaphorical and metonymic in nature…several of the conceptual metaphors and metonymies are tightly connected". (15) Besides, relating emotions to physical experience, Kövecses states that "many of our emotion concepts have a bodily basis, i.e. that they are embodied…our emotion concepts can be seen to have a frame-like structure". Referring to the metaphoric and metonymic character of emotion concepts, Kövecses holds that "emotion concepts are largely metaphorically and metonymically constituted and defined". (16) Besides, he identifies four ingredients of which emotion concepts are composed; namely, conceptual metaphors, conceptual metonymies, related concepts, and cognitive models". Kövecses further classifies conceptual metonymies into two types: "CAUSE OF EMOTION FOR THE EMOTIONS, and EFFECT OF EMOTION FOR THE EMOTION" (17), the second one being more common than the first, such as describing body heat for anger. Besides, while Lakoff and Johnson "explicitly deny the possibility that primary metaphors arise from metonymies", Kövecses rightly holds that "conceptual metaphors and metonymies can be tightly connected such that the metaphors are based on the metonymies". (19) Thus, "emotion concepts…are largely constituted by metaphors and metonymies and not literal concepts". (18) Establishing a direct link between metaphor and metonymy, Kövecses states that "an initial frame (e.g. of sadness, anger)…becomes the metaphorical target [that] gives rise to the source in the metaphor through the prior existence of a metonymy". (20) In addition, he relates behavior to emotions, as "behavioral responses function as metonymies in emotion concepts". (19)

It is thus clear from the above review of the recent work done on conceptual metaphors that the question of metaphor and its relevance is by no means an outdated issue. The growing interest in

the topic attests to the view that the days when the meaning of "metaphor" was confined to being a poetic device are gone. Instead, "we live by" metaphors, to use Lakoff and Johnson's own words; hence their relation to our daily experience.

Yahia Lababidi's Use of Metaphor in Selected Poems About Egypt

Since scholarly work on Lababidi is almost non-existent in Egyptian academia, a look at the poet's biography would be quite in order. An Egyptian, Lebanese, American writer, Yahia Lababidi (born 1973) is a prominent poet, aphorist and philosopher whose work has received considerable attention in the United States and elsewhere. Among his well-known works is a collection of literary and cultural essays entitled *Trial by Ink: From Nietzsche to Belly Dancing*. Besides, he published three poetry collections such as *Balancing Acts: New & Selected Poems* (1993-2015), *Barely There* and *Fever Dreams*. Lababidi's work has been translated into several languages, some of which are Arabic, Slovak, Italian, Dutch, Swedish and Turkish. Besides, his aphorisms have appeared in *Geary's Guide to the World's Great Aphorists*. Lababidi's rich cultural background is highlighted by Hilary Diak who holds that "his works evoke the spirit of poets that remain today part of the cultural heritage of many nations". Named after his Lebanese paternal grandfather who was a celebrated poet and musician, Yahia Lababidi was brought up in the literary salon of his parents who hosted poets, artists and thinkers. (Diak) An avid reader of Baudelaire, he paraphrased the latter's poetry. He regarded Gibran as an early influence. Besides, he was a great admirer of Hesse, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Eliot, Wilde, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Rilke and Rumi, as well as Sufi mystics.

The poems analyzed in this study are an embodiment of the overwhelming presence of ontological, experiential, emotional metaphorical formulations which are at once culture-specific and universally valid. These undoubtedly reflect the creative imagination of the immigrant with a double identity; Arab and

American, who supplants himself from Egyptian soil and puts down roots in a new, cultural milieu. The often astonishing source domains of his metaphors seem to surpass the established patterns of habitual conceptual metaphors. Lababidi achieves this with an Egyptian touch of black comedy.

At first glance, one cannot help noticing the poet's dedication of the volume to his homeland, Egypt: "For Egypt the real and imaginary Home I carry in my heart". Immediately one observes the multiple metaphors of Egypt (the target domain being concretized as the poet's home (the source domain), the conceptual metaphor home being carried in the heart, and the heart as a container metaphor which is large enough to caress the poet's homeland. Indeed, in his poem entitled "Egypt" (2013), the poet employs several examples of experiential metaphor and personification (which Lakoff considers an extension of metaphor). These arise from his profound emotion concept of homesickness:

> You are the <u>deep fissure in my sleep</u>,
> That <u>hard reality</u> underneath
> A <u>stack of soft-cushioning illusions</u>
> Self-exiled, even after all these years
> <u>I remain your</u> ever-adoring <u>captive</u>
>
> (emphasis mine)

In these lines, living in the US significantly becomes a self-imposed exile, and Egypt becomes a goddess in whose worship the poet is forever captivated. Besides, after the second Egyptian upheaval following 2011, Lababidi portrays Egypt's flight to freedom, causing seismic turbulence felt at a distance, as that of a giant bird experiencing a mythological metamorphosis:

> I register as <u>inner tremors</u>
> -across oceans and continents-
> <u>the flap of your giant wing</u>, struggling
> to be free and know I shall not rest until
> your glorious <u>metamorphosis</u> is complete. (133)

In this poem, a traditional image metaphor is employed in portraying Egypt as the Greek mythological Phoenix, reborn, arising from the ashes of its predecessor. Besides, the last three lines embody what Lakoff terms as an entailment metaphor. The image of the Phoenix entails images of flying, flapping its powerful wings, and being reborn.

Another potent poem which encapsulates the poet's imagination being haunted by his homeland is "Cairo" (2011). Striving to obliterate the guilt of departing from the homeland, the speaker attempts to "bury" Cairo's "face", to push it aside "the new road", i.e. the new life he has chosen. Yet, he keeps revisiting his "crime scene" to remind himself constantly of the glory of this half-hidden face, revealed by the rain, "awash with emotion". Portraying the poet's state of dividedness and confused memories of his homeland, he strives to remember Cairo's puzzling, "inscrutable" features. Finally, he is frantically overcome by a powerful urge to unearth the half-obliterated face he has been so desperately trying to bury. He feels overwhelmed by a desire to revive this memory," frantic, and faithful, like a dog". Kövecses' opinion that metaphors often stem from metonymies is certainly relevant when one examines the following lines:

> An eye, perhaps tender or
> a pale, becalmed cheek
> a mouth tight with reproach or
> lips pursed in a deathless smile

<div align="center">(11)</div>

In an interesting study about metaphor clusters, Michael Kimmel (2010) wonders at a writer's or speaker's ability "to array different metaphors in a complex way and ensure that they create and indeed strengthen an argument by their well-crafted interaction". ("Why We Mix Metaphors" 98) This certainly applies to the above-mentioned poems where Lababidi's metaphors and personifications proceed in a smooth fusion which helps create a coherence and

logical development of the image metaphors evident in his verse. Referring to "metaphor clusters", Kimmel holds that they fulfill multiple functions. Besides the fact that they can be more effective, they're "attention-grabbing" and create greater relevance. In fact, he cites Cameron and Stelma (2004) who view metaphor clusters as sites of "intensive interactional work linked to the overall purpose of the discourse". Likewise, Lababidi's progression of metaphors within a single poem helps his metaphor clusters "connect and dynamize discourse". While Kimmel regards adjacent metaphors as "binding principles ", he states that they "may involve the imagery and entailments of a conceptual metaphor", or through "conjunctive devices that help create a complex 'speech plan'". (99) Describing coherent metaphors as opposed to mixed metaphors, Kimmel further explains that coherent metaphors "either share some source domain ontology, some target domain ontology, or both. If not, they may be counted as mixed metaphor". (101) There can be no doubt that Lababidi's metaphors in this instance are coherent. In an analysis that is certainly true of the poem about Cairo, Kimmel elaborates that "metaphors enrich each other conceptually…when two metaphorical expressions emanate from the same conceptual metaphor and express two inherently necessary aspects of it". (106) Besides, Lababidi's verse embodies what Kimmel views as "tightly integrated metaphor clusters" which "let us imagine a causal or temporal progression in a single microworld". In a statement that echoes Lakoff's description of an entailment metaphor, Kimmel concludes, "We may think of a metaphor cluster in such a way that a given conceptual metaphor temporarily 'flashes up in the cognitive unconscious when the first metaphorical expression is processed…In some cases this activation…influences the selection of the subsequent metaphor(s)". (113)

On the other hand, Yahia Lababidi's metaphors and personifications in "Solitude and the Proximity to Infinite Things", are an embodiment of Gannon's definition (2009) of cultural metaphor. In this poem, the poet's solitude in his self-imposed exile

makes his imagination soar across continents and oceans to musings about the monuments of death in the lonely, merciless Egyptian desert. One cannot help admiring the progression of metaphor clusters packed with tactile, auditory and visual images; perhaps a live, harsh projection of the poet's emotional 'Waste Land':

> The Desert is a cemetery
> Picking its teeth with bones
> …
> Mourning its myriad souls
> It murmurs threnodies while
> Winds scatter desert lament.

The desert plants are "hostile growths/ defensive and aggressive". They are "martyrs to their desert mother". So victimized are they by the dry desert that they are wearing "crowns of thorns". Echoing the aridity of Eliot's "Waste Land", the trees are "tortured". They seem to "break desert skin", their dehydrated branches are "bloodless veins", and the impoverished, dry blades of grass disconcertedly "shuffle from side to side rigidly". This state of /Death- in- Life and Life-in-Death" can actually be seen and heard by travellers. Paradoxically and metaphorically, in this barren wilderness, stillness can be seen and silence heard. Also personified, the Desert and the Sun are exchanging stares, "pitiless" and "unblinking". They both share "secrets/ of terrible, Eternal matters". Thus, the poem is packed with metaphors and personifications. Emphasizing the ambiguous, uncanny nature of the desert and its clime, the poem ends with a desperate statement personifying it, "The desert has its dark jokes/ over which it smiles alone, / Mirage is the word for desert humor". (23)

Among those secrets are the hidden treasures of Ancient Egyptian wisdom, mentioned in the poem entitled "Desert Revisited". There, "where eye and mind are free/ to meditate perfection/ there, begin to uncover/ buried in dust and disinterest/ the immutable letter/ (first of the alphabet) *Alif"*. (25) Here, one notices the personification and metonymy in the eye and mind

meditating, as well as the metaphorical concretization of "disinterest" as a burial place. Moreover, in his "Mountain Meditation", the poet seems to express his awe at the "imperishable memory of the desert/ craniums exposed, crumbling horribly/ a rocky backbone desert vertebrae/ spinal scales of a sleeping monster". (21) Desert mountains are portrayed as "sleepy monsters" with rocky "backbones and vertebrae". They are also personified as secretive sages, "School of inscrutable sphinxes/ master storytellers sworn to secrecy/ mute, pitiless, invincible/ majestic grace and menace". Thus, though they are full of secrets of past grandeur, the mountains are unwilling to divulge their secrets. They stand majestically tall and awe-inspiring.

In "Ancestors", the poet's veneration of tradition, or "roots" in Eliot's words, is evident in his personification of words: "Words seldom stand alone/ like us, they are encircled/ by spirits of their ancestors". (149) In this short poem, words are fortified and backed by the spirits of their forefathers. Another poem which is in keeping with Lakoff's and Johnson's notion of structural metaphors being" built into the conceptual system of the culture" (64) is "Ramadan". Here the images are grounded in the poet's physical and cultural experience. The Muslim month of fasting is metaphorically and paradoxically depicted as the "month of quiet strength and loud weaknesses". The poet is insinuating at the weakness of the human spirit, struggling to endure physical deprivation, yet aspiring towards noble "transfiguration". Fasting teaches man patience and emerges as a means of transcending shallow desires, reaching the depths of the sea of faith, instead of just "wading" into the shallow waters. (158) In addition, in his poem entitled "Protection", Lababidi reminds himself of the importance of maintaining his faith as a safeguard against the evils and misery of alienation in a sad world. Revelation metaphorically acquires a sweetness which keeps the "lips wet", and nourishes the thirsting soul:

> To guard yourself
> against the evils

of this sad world,
keep your lips wet
with the sweet taste
of revelation.   (162)

Metaphor and the Poet's Predicament

In his poem "Unentitled", Yehia Lababidi's struggle embodies the universal, philosophical quest for self-knowledge and clear identity. Here, the poet deplores his inability to find the "key" to his mysterious self. The self is depicted metaphorically as a dark, high-walled castle with "high gates". When not denied access to this ominous place, the poet ventures in, but stumbles blindly; "groping and hoping" to find his way, he knocks his head "against false ceilings" and trips on "traps". In a horror scene, unable to recognize his true self, he writes, "I forgot to remember/ then start at the sight of my reflection/ bumping into myselves". (60) Furthermore, in "The Encounter, Yahia Lababidi portrays his divided self as two distinct entities having a calm, emotional dialogue. Regretting that he has parted with his true self, the poet apologizes to it. His "longed-for-self" returns the apology, "with a sense of infinite kindness and pity". He is so kind that his tenderness makes the poet cry. The 'true self' reproaches the poet for avoiding "him" and touchingly says, "I missed you...and feared you'd forgotten me". He declared that if he didn't visit the poet now, they might never meet again in this life. Concluding his visit, the poet's estranged but true self says, "There's no need to speak, return to sleep. But when you / rise, try to remember me. And to keep awake". (159) In this pathetic poem encapsulating the poet's internal struggle between his two "selves", we find a touching example of Lakoff's and Johnson's ontological metaphor as a way "of viewing events, activities, emotions, ideas, etc…as entities and substances", (25)

In the above-mentioned volume, several poems masterfully express the split self of the poet, torn between two identities as Arab-American. Other poems record the poet's inner conflict between self-expression and silence, and the occasional ordeal of

being caught in a web of rejection. In his poem "Moment", the poet's mind assumes the guise of a crowded "corridor", where "inner processes and conversations" take the shape of "elephants and mice", huge, significant contemplations, as well as trivial thoughts. In the "corridor" of the mind, "the air is dense". The poet's mind is jammed with "spirits and ghosts", perhaps of past memories or reveries. These "swarm" like bees around his soul, as he strives to achieve some clarity of thought. His musings are likened to a ruffling curtain which might catch a breath of air and dance like a ballerina. Seeking new inspiration, "a shifting palette of light", the poet endeavors to overhear the hidden voices of his "inner processes and conversations". (31) This poem embodies many entailments of seemingly established conceptual metaphors like the mind being compared to a dark corridor. However, Lababidi's metaphorical innovation is remarkable. It is common to find mice in a corridor, but the depiction of thoughts as elephants certainly conveys the heavy burden he carries in his mind. The same image of the voices of "inner processes and conversations" is present in "Source". Here the poet describes the incessant "noise" within his congested mind. Likening his troublesome thoughts to inward "noise and chaos", Lababidi desperately writes:

> Ear plugs and eye mask
> are useless sleep aids
> when noise and chaos
> are on the inside.

<div align="center">(167)</div>

In the same manner, the poet expresses his extreme vulnerability in the poem entitled "Taut":

> Taut
> between the real
> and the Ideal,
> rejecting the one
> rejected by the Other.
> rack of extremes,

the slightest touch
and I reverberate
awful music.

(17)

In this short, delightful poem the poet's oscillation between the real world which he mostly rejects, and the ideal one which seems to deny him peace, the poet's nerves are, as it were, likened to a shaky shelf,. It is delineated as a "rack of extremes" which easily collapses upon "the slightest touch", producing such psychological decline as is likened to "awful music". Here the visual structure of the poem significantly resembles a stack of objects.   Another poem in which the poet is caught between the real and the ideal is "Misread Signs". In this instance, Lababidi calls the poet a "False prophet", singing a song that is "no less sweet for being counterfeit". He is paradoxically a "short-sighted visionary". Besides, he is a "poor bird" full of "ill-timed enthusiasm". Moreover, the poet's hymn is totally "misplaced". He has mistaken reality; "a common streetlamp" for the ideal; "the miracle of a rising sun".

The metaphor employing "stack" or "pile" as the source domain used to describe the target domain of the poet's being in "Taut" is also evident in the poem "Stale Ale". In this poem Lababidi equates himself to his art by reiterating the realization, "I'm only a pile of words/ atop a stack of bones/ stock piling ink-pressions". The poet is desperately "amassing devastating adjectives". He feels supported by a shaky foundation of "bounced reality checks". Here, the poet uses a pun which could mean that his poetry may be rejected by a market that would not accept his "bounced checks". Or, his idealism could be dependent on an idealistic, unfounded hope. Yet, he refuses to despair completely. Hope becomes a bubble that rises to the surface of the perilous sea. It is "the window we turn to/ when the living room turns on us". Needless to say, here we have a common, conceptual metaphor of the window of hope, but it is coupled with an original personification in which the inanimate room "turns on" the speaker, forcing him to escape. Yet, the poet

instinctively and inevitably goes back to his old habits which "hardly die/ once bitten, twice sly". It is at this point that the poet reaches the conclusion that poetry is his identity. He doesn't own himself. Instead, he is possessed by his own creativity:

> Mustn't mistake myself
> For one who <u>owns himself</u>
> <u>I am only a pile of words</u>

<div align="center">(114)</div>

Revolving around the same plight as "Stale Ale" is "Poet Try", which brings to mind Sir Philip Sidney's Sonnet 1 entitled "Loving in truth". In Sidney's sonnet, the poet struggles to find appropriate words and images to express his love. After enduring pain that is compared to those of childbirth, the poet, pregnant with ideas yet unable to verbalize them, reaches the resolution to the conflict at the end of his sonnet. He hears the Muse's voice telling him, "Fool! Look in thy heart and write". Similarly, in "Poet Try", Lababidi encourages himself to stop being victimized by "heartless" ideas in front of which he is "cowering" in fear, and the cold, "hearthless ideal". He portrays himself metaphorically as "spiritual asthmatic", seeking to send forth a "prophesy" to the world. He is "word weary" (and perhaps also world weary), trying to manipulate (loosen) meaning through elusive words. Amidst this disgusting ordeal of "writhing writing and growing pains", the poet addresses himself, begging himself to let his longing "sing itself" naturally, revive his hopes and help him endure his own wisdom's gentle self-mockery. (44)

On the other hand, in poems like "Notebook" and "Since", the poet's use of metaphor highlights the artist's conflict between self-expression and silence. In "Notebook", thoughts are personified as timid characters, hesitating to venture out of their "cave", terrified of a sudden "ambush" by enemies. (19) One cannot help regarding this as a cultural, image metaphor of the cave, echoing the Qur'anic story of the cave dwellers, afraid of venturing outside their safe refuge into a world populated by dangerous enemies. Further foregrounding the poet's alienation in the American literary

"bustling marketplace", he is conflicted between silence, and voicing his talent; both being metaphorically depicted as lost objects. Ironically, self-expression does not mean actually having a "Voice". The poet is a pedlar, hopelessly trying to sell his "Eternal" merchandize. His rebellious "irrepressible song springs up" but is tragically "strangled, unsung". (20) Though the metaphor of the artist selling an unwanted kind of merchandize seems to reflect a universally acclaimed conceptual metaphor, the violence of the act of "strangling" the "victimized" song is remarkable in its portrayal of the poet's plight. In this context, Lababidi's poem "Rejections" touches on the same pathetic note:

> Rejections I receive, regularly
> from the best and rest of them:
> …
> Thank you for your submission,
> sorry, we cannot make an offer.
> …
> Still I continue to draw and send forth
> quivering arrows from this aching bow
> …
> Citing Nietzsche's modest abundance
> "an artist does not know what is finest in their garden"
>
> As I arrange yet another bouquet
> always, with Baudelaire, in search of the *New*.
>
> (37)   (emphasis mine)

In this representative poem, the poet perseveres in his attempts at bringing his work to the light. His heart becomes an "aching bow" shooting uncertain, "quivering arrows", or poems. Lababidi portrays his poems as flower bouquets which he attempts to arrange in a fresh, original mastery. It is interesting that the combative, dynamic image of arrows being shot from the poet's bow is immediately followed by the sweet, fragrant, delightful metaphorical presentation of poems as flowers. On the other hand, these lines clearly reflect

Baudelaire's intent of transforming evil into good in his *Fleurs du mal*. (1857)

   In "I ran", the poet delineates his predicament by likening his pain to an unavoidable, overprotective, authoritative parent:

> I ran hard and far
> to <u>outdistance my pain</u>
> But, when I got lost
> <u>my pain found me</u>—
> <u>caressed me</u>,
> wordlessly
> and <u>carried me Home</u>.

<div align="center">(174)</div>

In this poem, pain is a constant companion to the poet. It will not part with him. Instead, they are destined to be partners for life, no matter how hard the poet tries to shirk it. Besides, in "Undertow", the poet longs for his familiar home, with all its negative aspects. He is like "Tagore's caged bird" which, though free, is "disoriented by freedom and longing for the safety of bars". The poet seems to be racing with his past, incapable of outdistancing it. Instead, it turns out to be an "unappeasable presence". He feels a deep void as "hollows ache". The present turns out to be an illusion; a "desperate fiction of the moment". In these moments of homelessness and alienation, the heart curls up, seeking womb-like warmth in dreams, only to wake up to the painful realization that "there is no stepping back into the same river twice, or homecoming for the Homeless". (15) The self-exiled poet again expresses his dream of reunion with his homeland in his poem "Homecoming". Using the analogy of an unanchored boat, his mind is "without moorings, spiritually adrift". He is suffering from an "inamicable split" in his splintered personality". Buried "between the covers of book and bed", the poet is an "invalid physician", nursing his daydreams and seeking to spare his life by "telling tall tales like Shehrezade". Words are his "only playmates". Seeking to elevate the world, he is actually reducing it "to Myth or Metaphor". He longs to elude his reality,

only to discover to his shock that he is standing on "the precipice of an abyss". This abyss is nothing but the faith that all this process is just "an apprenticeship for the great promise: Homecoming". (46) Thus, Yahia Lababidi reiterates the note of homesickness and dividedness. Indeed, he carries his home in his heart in all situations.

Conclusion

In view of this analysis of Yahia Lababidi's poems selected from his *Balancing Acts* collection, it becomes evident that his metaphor clusters are not mere mental processes of substitution and comparison, but rather interactions among various intellectual, emotional, cultural and universal concepts. His poems are so packed with metaphor, metonymy, personification, with an occasional simile, in a way that metaphorical concepts structure his thought and feeling. Though his emotion concepts may have a bodily basis, they are saturated with spiritual musing and universal contemplation which could not possibly be conveyed by mere literal concepts. These meditations are coupled with behavioral responses such as conflict between evasion and surrender, assertiveness and silence, hope and despair, past and present, Egyptian and American cultural identity, among other spiritual, emotional and mental preoccupations. While reaching out to the "other", Lababidi's metaphors communicate meaning, feeling and shared human understanding even when expressing unshared experience. However, his verse, densely robed in metaphorical imagery, does not stop at reaching out to the "other" through powerful emotion. More significantly, it is an attempt to dive inwards in quest for what unifies his own diverse experiences in order to give coherence to his life. His personal metaphors surpass the established conceptual metaphors regarded by many to be the habitual mental practice of the layman. The poet aims at projecting and, hopefully unifying, his own past memories, his present pursuits and dreams, as well as his future aspirations as a poet. In fact, he believes a poet's mission is to light a beacon of hope for all humanity. Through his poetry, Yahia Lababidi

thus performs a remedial "balancing act" which might heal his divided soul, as well as those of others undergoing similar conflicts. In a relevant statement cited in Fairobserver Culture News, Lababidi says, "As an immigrant and a Muslim, I'm increasingly concerned with how to ease souls in these troubled times we live in. Mostly, poetry is the best answer that I have". His poem entitled "The Light-Keepers" is evidence of his intentions. It is reminiscent of Shelley's notion of the poet-prophet, prophesying hope for better days. Moreover, in his poem "Never Retreating", which borrows its basic metaphor from the painful pandemic of Covid 19, the poet is a soldier or a doctor, fighting on the frontline, ready to sacrifice himself for the safety of his fellowmen: "a poet stands/ trusting on front-lines/ ready for martyrdom/ risking infection/ with the virus of their age". Finally, Yahia Lababidi's recent poem "The Light Keepers", written in 2019, is one that truly captures the artist's genuine trust in his mission and hope for a brighter future. Using the "lighthouse" as a basic metaphor, he writesr:

> Hope is a lighthouse
> (or at least, a lamppost)
> someone must keep vigil
> to illumine this possibility
> In the dark, a poet will climb
> narrow, unsteady stairs
> to gaze, past crashing waves
> and sing us new horizons
> Others, less far-sighted, might
> be deceived by the encroaching night
> mistake the black for lasting, but
> not those entrusted with trimming wicks
> Their tasks are more pressing—
> winding clockworks, replenishing oil—
> there is no time for despair
> when tending to the Light.

Truly, as Mahon states in reference to Aristotle's glorification of metaphor as a mark of genius, "to coin *good* new metaphors- is the greatest kind of creative ability a tragedian or epic poet can have. This kind of creative ability is a rare skill which cannot be taught". Indeed, this "rare skill" is clearly encapsulated in Yahia Lababidi's art.

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