

# Conversation with Daniel-Henri Pageaux: Charif Majdalani

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*Charif Majdalani, born in 1960, is Head of the Department of French Literature at the Université Saint-Joseph of Beirut. He is the author to date of four novels, all published by the Editions du Seuil: Histoire de la Grande Maison (2005); Caravansérail (2007); Nos si brèves années de gloire (2011), and Le Dernier seigneur de Marsad (2013). Without being able to call them a tetralogy, they constitute a fresco or an epic of Lebanon since the end of the nineteenth century until the years of trial and war, seen through the tumultuous destinies of families and clans. Critics have highlighted a dazzling quality in the writing, alternating between Baroque and lyricism.*

Daniel-Henri Pageaux: How do you conceive and conduct the novelistic experience?

Charif Majdalani: Fictional writing arises in me out of a dual fascination, that which I experience when thinking about the march of time and the mutations of history, and that procured in me by the pure contemplation of our living on earth, and of the beauty and sheen of everyday experience. That is no doubt why I keep describing families in their peaceful daily routines as well as in their confrontation with History and with the metamorphoses and changes which affect them and transform them. I try to do all that in the most natural way possible, since the fictional experience is intimately intermingled with that of real life. The novel is just an ordering of events at the same time as a questioning of the whole immense catalogue of spectacles, narratives, and life scenes endlessly being stored away, and which constitute the very stuff of our existence.

What research are you currently involved with as an academic?

I am working essentially on the contemporary period and its links to poetry. My most recent interests have been directed to the writing of panegyric. I have studied the resurgence of a form of Pindarism in the poetry of Claudel (in the *Cinq Grandes Odes* obviously), then in the texts of Saint-John Perse and other poets, like Walt Whitman. I have sought then to shift the analyses towards novelistic texts where certain characteristics of the poetic and lyrical encomium are strongly present, such as in the *Invention du Monde* of Olivier Rolin, for example. Simultaneously, I have tried to find something more ‘Anacreontic’ in the so-called poetry of lyrical renewal, in J. C. Pinson or in James Sacré, and the transcending in these poets of the pure *mediocritas* of Horace towards

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something in which daily life and our residence on earth offers moments of stunning beauty and opens up to a broader experience of our humanity. Then I have in the same way tried to see if (and how) all this could also be found in the novel of today.

How do you live the inter-cultural dialogue? Does that have a meaning for you?

‘Inter-cultural dialogue’ is an expression that I find too consensual, I prefer to speak about ‘mixtures’, cross-fertilization, or plural identities. Obviously that is one of my great passions. I moreover wrote about that ten years ago in a playful little essay entitled *Petit traité des mélanges* and subtitled *Du métissage culutrel considéré comme un des beaux-arts*. It was actually my first book, published in Beirut. In it I made something like an alphabetic compendium of all the domains in which acculturation, then the cross-fertilization which results from it, can express itself – in customs, in languages, in religions, in cuisines, in architecture, and also in the names we give to places and landscapes. I also did a historical survey of the eras when acculturation was strong, its high points, its low points, and its forgotten marvels. But having said that, we should not forget that the mingling of peoples and cultures and the plural identities which derive from this are rarely the product of peaceful exchange and dialogue. They arise when subject individuals and groups are forced to adapt to dominant cultures, essentially for reasons of survival. This leads to adjustments, to the abandonment of certain cultural characteristics to the benefit of others, and more often to a readjustment of certain modes of life and customs. These processes emerge finally into new syntheses, to the creation of novel cultural solutions and can, over time, arrive at manifestations of genuine linguistic, religious and behavioural fusion. History is punctuated with these types of happenings, which became generalized over the twentieth century when colonization and the phenomena of migrations, then the opening up of the world to itself, have led to a very extensive incidence of cultural assimilation, where the whole of the peoples of the planet have found themselves obliged to adjust their own cultures to safeguard them in the face of their contact with those of the West. People are today confronted on all sides by otherness and the almost obligatory plurality of their ways of living. And if the world is passing today through one of the dark phases of its history, characterized by the violent resurgence of demands based around identity, that is no more than an apparent paradox, so probable is it that it is in the difficulties associated with managing individually and collectively these pluralities that can be found the origins of the forces urging withdrawal into unique identities and the brutality of their demands. However it may be, and to come back to your question, all this arouses a passionate interest in me, no doubt because I myself am the product of a historical process of cultural blending. I am relatively content to identify with those who are customarily referred to as Christian Arabs, a label which is explosive in itself, so much does it associate two terms which seem more than ever to be antagonistic, since the word ‘Arab’ refers in the minds of the majority of people to the notion of Islam. The Christian Arabs are the result of a process of cultural cross-fertilization which began with the adoption by the Eastern Christians of Arabic language in their daily life and then in their liturgies, and led ultimately to their role as leaders of the Arab renaissance itself from the end of the nineteenth century, when they were the vector for the westernization of the societies of the Middle East and the opening up of these to modernity. But that perhaps is also one of the reasons for the determination to annihilate the Christian Arabs, as is happening today. Having said that, my passion for the phenomena of cultural mixity is not with me the result of any feeling of belonging to a culturally diverse group, but out of a genuinely aesthetic interest. If acculturation never really comes about with happiness of heart, but through cultural confrontation and the necessity to survive, it always ultimately ends up, in the fullness of time, in magnificent results, whether in the customs of daily life, in the evolution of cuisine, in the language, in architecture where it can become an object of real contemplation. In my book, unfortunately today more or less unlocatable, I made a playful and admiring inventory of such a process.

What place does the model of the generational novel have in your personal aesthetic and ideological perspective?

In my books, the families are always linked to a place, whether a house, a city district, or even a country. My first work, *Histoire de la grande maison*, which is in some way the trunk out of which all the rest have grown, was written under power of texts like *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, those great narratives of foundation and genealogy. The establishment of a family line and that of a property, the greatness of a name and its decline in the face of events and the passage of time are, moreover, themes which I have not completely finished exploring. They serve also to tell of a world (that of Lebanon before the civil war) and its march towards its twilight, as well allowing me to set up individual life journeys or to re-read the history of my land from a different perspective than that which the national image-creation and official historiography take. As an aside, some critics, among whom is my friend Dominique Viart, have considered my first novel, due to its form and certain of its narrative biases, as a 'filiation narrative', on the model of novelists like Pierre Michon. That suits me perfectly, because Pierre Michon's *Vies minuscules* has been for me an essential reading which has certainly suffused my own work of retracing family memories, through snatches of recalled detail, uncertainties, questionings. This restitution of the past will have equally assisted me in showing how mythologies are constructed, how ignorance of the past and consequent conjectures, pretences, and re-inventions end up in the construction of legends, whether family ones or collective and national ones.

What thoughts would you like to put forward concerning what is called 'francophonie', both on the linguistic and cultural sides? In your opinion, what link might there be between the two?

A culture's language could well appear to be one of its most important constituent elements, since it is the vehicle by which its very being is expressed. Well, it is in fact not as significant as that, or in any case, it is much less of a constituent element than two other major aspects to which peoples seem much more attached, religion and culinary traditions. When groups migrate across time or space, they retain with jealous determination their religious and their culinary customs, but they readily give up their language, easily adopting others. Minorities acquire that of the majority groups, immigrants that of their country of reception. That is ample proof that languages do not reflect nations' souls, nor their supposed character, they are simply instruments which each human group can appropriate and fashion in its image. And each individual as well, especially of course writers and poets. That particular aspect is a problematic which clearly constantly applies in my case, since I am frequently asked how I manage to express the world which is mine with a language which is not. Well, there are two absurdities there. The first is the one I have just raised, that is, the ridiculous fixed idea that a language is made only by and for a particular culture or nation. The other absurdity is when people refuse to accept that French is in fact my maternal language, since it was literally the language of my mother, the one in which I read my first books, even all my books. The chance events of History have contrived that there are Lebanese, and not just a few, who acquired the use of the French language before, or better than, they did Arabic. That is neither the result of colonialization, nor a utilitarian choice linked to emigration, it is a fact brought about and justified by the very old relationships that certain Lebanese communities have maintained with Europe. In this sense, French forms part of the plural history of Lebanon and the Lebanese cultural identity, and hence of my own. In consequence, my relationship with that language is exactly the same as that maintained with it by any French writer. No author ever writes with his or her maternal language, the one they received from school or their parents. You only truly become a writer, I believe, when you impose on the language you have inherited your own personality, your own imprint, your own style, when you twist and turn and rework it to make it something new, when you appropriate it absolutely for yourself. If you accept that, then you can understand my double

despair as a ‘Francophone’ writer: I must constantly prove on the one hand that I can write about my own universe in French, and on the other that that French is not ‘the’ French but ‘my’ French, my personal language, as for any writer, and that all this has nothing to do with my cultural identity but with my individual identity.

How do you interpret the triple title of this issue: ‘Pathways, Borders, and Cross-fertilization’?

There is a difference between the first two ideas and the third. ‘Pathways’ and ‘borders’ have a geographical connotation; they reflect the notions of contact or recoil from contact, of a link with another culture or nation, or its rupture, of a movement towards the other or its prevention, of the distinct existence of two entities which move towards each other or turn away from each other. The third notion, cross-fertilization, if considered from the point of view of the history of cultures, arises out of something more fundamental, of the nature of a synthesis, something which blends and fuses the terms. It is that which, in an individual or the group, no longer allows distinction to be made between that aspect which is brought by the one and that by the other. Quite obviously, for the blending of two or more cultures, and beforehand, the long process of acculturation which leads up to it, to take place, you must have geographic contacts and links, you also need a sharing of the territory to foster the establishment of such relationships and enable various interconnections to come about, which constitute the first steps in the slow process of mutual acculturation, then of synthesis and fertilization. If this connecting process does not take place, we end up with societies which share the same territories and live more or less in tacit acceptance of each other without mixing very much, or by mixing with as little risk as possible. Obviously, full cultural blending is a risk for any society, but it is a fascinating risk, especially for minorities or individuals and transplanted or migrant communities. Except, clearly, when it happens that majority groups, confronted by this same risk through their contact with minorities, react by refusing any cross-fertilization of cultures, as if such mixing was not worth attempting or threatened their own cultural integrity. That is where you get the quite classic onset of extreme nationalism, or worse, of religious exclusivism whose dream is always to appropriate territories for itself, refusing any geographical sharing. That can take an extreme turn when nationalist discourses, or the more violent of the religious exclusivisms and their obsession with religious or cultural purity, move from the geographical dimension into that of history. The uniformization that such nationalisms and exclusivisms preach abolishes the physical existence of the other on the same territory, and also ends up by excluding that other from history. Nationalism and religious exclusivism will not admit a common past with groups other than their own. They live constantly in the immediate reference to a fantasized era of origins, which origins are always necessarily imagined as being pure and without admixture of other influences. That ends up denying the existence of all that which, between the mythical time and the present, could have ‘taken place’ on the common territory, that is, denying whatever history has carried down in the way of the mixing of communities, links between them, interconnections. The obsession for purity thus ends in cleansing not only the geographical space but also historical time.

Translated from the French by Colin Anderson