



Source: Phillip Coorey and agencies, 'Howard vows to stick with coalition partners in Iraq', *Sydney Morning Herald* online, 30/10/06.

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You know, we were talking the other day, some of us, about Jalal Toufic's visit to Sydney and I've been reading some more of his work since then. He writes a great footnote. By which I mean, long and interesting, highly suggestive, the kind of footnote that opens up a whole new way of thinking about what he's been saying in the body of the text. There's a really wonderful one in his book on Edgar Allen Poe's story, 'The Oval Portrait'. I'm going to recount it verbatim, so that you can hear the sinuous sound of his thinking in the length of his sentences. And his incredible clarity. And a certain dark humour. And because, as all insomniacs know, it's calming to have someone read to you for just a little while.

'I could envision a contemporary version of *The Thousand and One Nights* without the frame story at the beginning and where we would be dealing not with the relationship between an insomniac and a storyteller, but with that between a Buñuelean compulsive dream narrator and a psychoanalyst, the king nightly threatening Shahrazâd, now a psychoanalyst, with "the Absolute Master," death, were she to refuse to listen to his dreams of the previous night and to try to interpret them, the analysis revealing first the trauma of his betrayal by his wife, and then, after hundreds of narrated dreams as well as free associations to them, the more basic trauma whose symptom was his infertility (this symptom itself played a part in his betrayal by his wife)—with the result that the king ends up having one or more children. Such a Shahrazâd would be a subject supposed to know not because she has "perused the books, annals and legends of preceding kings, and the stories, examples and instances of bygone men and things," "collected a thousand books of histories relating to antique races and departed rulers," "perused the works of the poets and knew them by heart," and "studied philosophy and the sciences, arts and accomplishments," but because she has assumed successfully the position of the psychoanalyst.'

So that's what Toufic says. In fact it's not by chance that Toufic should be talking about psychoanalysis in a footnote, because after all, the book he's written is actually a dream interpretation, and he's the analyst—or one of them—thrust suddenly into the position of having to respond because he is supposed to know what it all might mean, this dream he's been asked to interpret.

Didn't I tell you? Toufic's piece on Poe is a response to a video given to him by Lina Saneh, a Lebanese artist. Apparently, she appears in her own video, narrating a complicated dream. She's after different responses to use in making an artwork, so she also gives the video to her mother, to a psychoanalyst and to what is called, in inverted commas, a 'political writer' (I wonder why this qualification). But anyway...

Saneh dreams she's been taken by her sister, Vivian, to an

empty town whose inhabitants have all been killed by the governor. But everything has been left just as it was, so that it seems as though the people who lived would come back at any minute. The dreamer goes into a gallery to look at some paintings when suddenly a woman veiled in black appears and asks her if she wants something. The dreamer realises right away that this is a ghost and as she points to a picture on the wall the figure in it changes strangely and then the ghost is gone. The dreamer realises it is time to go, because you have to leave the city before night, when the inhabitants return as ghosts. She and her friends are too late: as they leave the city they are swept up in the crowd of revenants, and then the tourists around them start to change into ghosts as well...

It's a fantastic dream. I've left out some of the details, but you get the picture...or perhaps not. Probably I'm misrepresenting Saneh's dream and Toufic's response here. Anyway, Poe's story about a dying man reading about a painting of a woman who was killed by the process of sitting for it turns out to hold the clue to the dream. I'm not going to fill in all the details, because you should go and read the book yourself. Suffice it to say that mortality turns out to be at the heart of the matter.

So, I was thinking about writing today as I was scanning the archive last night and I was thinking, here we all are then, us writers, telling stories to each other and anyone else who cares to listen through the medium of Scheherazade. It's a bit like watching Andre Breton's 'shadow mouth', producing the 'voice from elsewhere', the voice of dreams and automatic writing. Once it starts it's hard to stop, this voice. And there's poor Scheherazade, who can only speak through us, in our words—but without her speaking, no one would hear us. She's our muse. We wouldn't be doing this without her. We wouldn't have this window in time—as contradictory and confusing as our tangle of voices and the hesitations and stutters and silences they catch in the nets and networks of their criss-cross comings and goings over the days must be.

Then again, do things in a story always have to stick together in some kind of lumpish order? There's an ecology of stories and story-telling, a mutual interdependence. What goes around, comes around. It's almost halfway through the session and soon our time will be up. Meanwhile Scheherazade will be starting to wonder, How am I to get out of the painting?, even as she offers herself—and us—the interpretation Toufic says we dreamers all want to hear. 'You aren't awake yet (who is it then that's awake?)—Dream on!'

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Anna Gibbs (and reference to Jalal Toufic, *Reading, Rewriting Poe's 'The Oval Portrait'—In Your Dreams*, Beirut: Ashkal Alwan, 2006).