



English Translation of Selected Letters of Badr Shakir al-Sayyab

George Nicolas El-Hage Ph.D.

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Throughout the better part of his brief life (1926-1964), Sayyab was haunted with the idea of death, the afterlife, mortality and immortality. At the end of his earthly journey, Badr made peace with himself, and thereby reconciled the two seemingly contradictory aspects of “Life” and “Death.” He conquered death by humanizing it, mastering his fear of it, and by surrendering to his fate as the ultimate rest for an ailing and constantly deteriorating body. Although never an existentialist, Sayyab, at one point, entertained the idea of embracing “Existentialism,” surmising that it might have the philosophical answer to his existential problem: how far and how high will he be able to carry the rock of Sisyphus? How long will his battle with destiny last and who will prevail? Sayyab was immensely in love with life, yet his poetry and personal letters ironically convey a different message and are colored with the dark clouds of dejection, frustration, loneliness, exile and poverty. These selected letters in English translation shed new light on the catastrophic life of this tragic hero and highlight important aspects of his otherwise, private moments and inner thoughts that he shared with a few elite friends that he had in Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, Iraq and England such as Adunis, Khalil Hawi, Youssef al-Khal, Suhail Idris, Albert Adeeb, and Ali al-Sabti. This is the story of Badr Shakir al-Sayyab in his own words without embellishment. In translating these letters, I tried to be as faithful as possible to the original Arabic text and to the meaning that I believe the poet intended. These letters are organized in chronological order and provide us with a clear image of the development and maturity of Badr both as a human being and a poet. I sincerely hope that the translation of these selected letters into English will present new material useful for Sayyab’s students and scholars.

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