

Epistemography of the Modern Arab Subject: Al-Mu'allim Butrus Al-Bustani's *Khutbah Fi Adab-Al'Arab*¹

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This article is a close textual analysis of Butrus al-Bustani's *Khutbah Fi Adab-Al'Arab* ("Lecture on the Culture of the Arabs," 1859), now an almost forgotten cultural critique.² In *Khutbah*, he advances an etiology of subjective presence which relies on a willful and desiring Arab subject who masters knowledge, institutes cultural infrastructure and realizes cultural success (*najah*), progress (*taqaddum*), and civilization (*tamad-dun*). Key to this formula for native progress is knowledge (*'ulum* and *ma'arif*) which endows cultural success and designates subjective presence. Consequently, the ability to recognize the value of knowledge and possess the will to master it distinguishes the decrepit from the progressive Arab subject.

I will argue that Bustani's paradigm of subjective presence and success represents a discourse that rests on an *a priori* lack inherent to the Arab society and subjectivity. This lack prevents reform because European presence figures as the subjective ideal for cultural success.

The Beginning

According to the brief colophon, *Khutbah Fi Adab-Al'Arab* was presented in abbreviated form to "a well-attended assembly of Westerners (*afranj*) and Arab sons in Beirut" on the 15th of February, 1859.³ We can safely assume that this gathering was *al-Jam'iyah al-Suriyah lil-funun wal-'ulum* ("Syrian Society of the Arts and Sciences"). *Khutbah* was Bustani's most comprehensive work on Arab identity, history, and cultural achievements to date and as such deserves close scrutiny.

Khutbah is divided into three sections: 1) The State of Knowledge (*'ulum*) among the Arabs before the advent of Islam; 2) The State of Knowledge among the Arabs after the advent of Islam; and 3) The State of Knowledge in These Days. These three sections, are prefaced by an interesting introduction. This introduction lays out Bustani's method of inquiry by presenting a series of propositions which presents an epistemology where "knowledge" (*'ulum* and *ma'arif*)⁴, the conditions and techniques of its acquisition, maintenance and advancement, are the universal elements requisite to progress (*taqaddum*),

civilization (*tamaddun*) and reform (*islah*). Bustani writes in the introduction that the infusion of modern and classical, foreign and indigenous, sciences, technology, and humanist knowledge is the solution to the nineteenth century cultural backwardness of the Arabs:

Knowledge (*al-ma'arif*) is the foundation of the mastery of agriculture, industry, and commerce, and the mother to inventions and discoveries, and the source (*yanbu*) to prosperity and strength, and the source to comfort and preservation of health and the pillar to the order of the social conditions, and the realization of political organization, and knowledge of the law and administration, and the means to raise reason (*al-'aql*), the health of governing, the refinement of character, the improvement of customs, and the pursuit of religious educations, and the discover of illnesses and their causes, and order of business and its management and so forth.⁵

“Knowledge” is explicitly the catalyst for subjective, social, cultural, economic, and political regeneration. Moreover, “knowledge” is not naturally inherent within society or the subject and “not inherited like property and wealth. Rather it demands personal effort (*ijtihad shakhsi*) . . . knowledge, like visitors, establishes itself only with he who welcomes it.” Knowledge is a matter of will for the Arab subject because knowledge requires the subject’s desire (*raghbah*) and effort (*juhud* and *ijtihad*). Yet, while its pursuit and cultivations is an individual endeavor (*ijtihad shakhsi*), the acquisition and maintenance of knowledge is also a social and national enterprise:

It is necessary for the intellect to have supporting means, exterior to itself, to acquire knowledge. Among the best of these means are moving and travelling from place to place and the study of books. Also, the existence of instruments without which it is impossible for the senses to perceive what is sought is necessary, and the motivations which make the intellect attentive and desirous for the exemplary behavior and enthusiasm that is naturally intrinsic to human kind. It is obvious that freedom of thought (*hurriyat al-fikr*) is among the most important requirements for the recognition of truths and obtaining knowledge (*'ulum*).⁶

Pivotal in Bustani’s theory of reform is the centrality of certain social and cultural infrastructure that accommodate and encourage learning. These aids anticipate and facilitate the accumulation and circulation of knowledge, and consequently, the reformation of native culture.

In *Khutbah*’s introduction, Bustani’s diagnosis of and prescriptions for the *a priori* ills of nineteenth century Arab society resemble what would become the dominant discourse of the Arab renaissance (*al-nahdah al-'arabiyah*). Acknowledging this does not somehow diminish Bustani’s insights or originality. To the contrary, we recognize that

Khutbah concurs epistemologically, if not always ideologically or discursively, with the works of R.R. Tahtawi (1801–73) and Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi (d. 1890).⁷

Allegorical Failure

The second section of *Khutbah*, entitled “The State of Knowledge (*‘ulum*) among the Arabs after the appearance of Islam,” begins with an anecdote regarding the burning of the renowned library of Alexandria. Bustani contends that ‘Amr bin al-‘As at the command of the Caliph ‘Umar bin al-Khatab destroyed four hundred thousand books, originating from Egypt, Greece, and India, because “they differed from the Book of God.” Bustani states that during “the early days of Islam” (*sadr al-Islam*) and the Umayyad dynasty, the Arabs “were not concerned with anything regarding knowledge (*‘ulum*), nor did they acknowledge the worth of books save the Quran.”⁸ The allegory denotes that “ignorance,” topologically represented by the blind faith in religious books, has the destructive potential to wipe out learning and prevent cultural progress. Additionally, it connotes that contemporary and historical Arab failure is rooted in this very ignorance, in the inability to understand the vastness and diversity of knowledge, and in the failure to recognize the value of foreign knowledge.

Using the example of the library of Alexandria to open this discussion on the state of knowledge displays the importance of a particular notion of “ignorance” as a theme that enframes the theory of cultural progress in *Khutbah*. For Bustani, ignorance is powerful and abated only through the will to seek, borrow, and maintain knowledge. Like the European countries (*al-buldan al-afranjiyah*), the “dark age” (*al-jil al-muzlim*) fell upon the Arabs in the fourteenth century when their rulers and notables no longer were willing to pursue and maintain the knowledge that made them great. As Bustani states,

The desire (*raghbah*) of Arab kings and notables for knowledge (*‘ilm*) ceased. The motives for inquiry which broke down impeded the effort (*sa‘y*) in knowledge’s acquisition. Knowledge’s literary works were studied until many among them were lost and neither a trace nor vestige remained of them. The commodities of knowledge found no market, and time (*dahr*) annihilated knowledge’s proprietors. Ignorance overpowered the people in a great assault until they came to think that the acquisition of knowledge (*‘ulum*) is a corrupt affair and a vain endeavor.⁹

Bustani’s theory of cultural vitality posits that ignorance has the propensity to be internalized, affecting the desires and perceptions of subjects profoundly. The notables’ lack of will has a causal effect where learning and knowledge are devalued because the means of production and distribution have deteriorated. In fact, the commodities them-

selves are seen to have detrimental moral effects. If we return then to the library of Alexandria, we see that its contents are not only worthless but perceived as morally corrupting because, it is implied, it contains secular, non-Quranic knowledge. The pre- and post-Abbasid Arab, allegorically referring to the nineteenth century Arab rulers, does not desire and, therefore, lacks the ability to *recognize* secular knowledge as a sign of cultural, social, and political presence, or what Bustani throughout his works identifies as progress (*taqaddum*) and civilization (*tamaddun*). Bustani poses an imaginary Other who disregards cultural artifacts and intellectual prosthetics. But also, this Other, whether he is modern, pre- or post-Abbasid, *misrecognizes*, according to Bustani, knowledge as a source of moral depravity.¹⁰ The misrecognition of knowledge as evil actively prevents the subject's entrance into the cultural and intellectual marketplace, a market that bestows value to subjectivity.

Past Presence, The topos of Abbasid success:

The leitmotifs of desire (*raghbah*) and effort (*ijtihad*, or *sa'y*) present an Arab subject who must master knowledge for his personal and cultural welfare. Bustani proposes that a cultured Arab society is not only predicated on subjects who desire progress but who are willing to borrow from and interact with a larger, even global, cultural market. The "historical cases" to which he appeals to make his point demonstrate "the arrival of our ancestors to the highest level of knowledge." These venerable ancestors are thus posited as the subjective ideal on which the model Arab subject is based because they possess the desire for knowledge along with the will to pursue and master it.¹¹ Bustani states that the determination (*'azm*) of his predecessors resulted in a cultural apex, "the golden age," where intellectuals and accompanying cultural infrastructure, notably schools and libraries, flourished.

Bustani states that the Abbasids, in contrast to their Umayyad predecessors, established "the golden age of Arab knowledge" (*jil al-'ulum al-'arabiyah al-dhahabi*).¹² He provides another historical allegory, this one involving the second caliph of the Abbasid dynasty, Jafar al-Mansur, learned in *fiqh*, philosophy, and astronomy, who was the builder of Baghdad. As the story goes, the Caliph was suffering from a stomach ailment which no doctor could cure. A foreign doctor, a Christian by the name of Juirjius bin Bakhtishu' al-Nishapuri, known to be the best of his profession, was recommended. Bustani writes:

Al-Mansur summonsed him to Baghdad. The aforementioned doctor took good care of and cured him until he recovered from his malady. The Caliph was exceedingly happy with him. The doctor had brought with him his student 'Isa' bin Shahlata and he resided at the court of al-Mansur until Bakhtishu' became ill. When his illness

worsened he requested to take leave for his country. The Commander of the Faithful said to him, "Since I have known you, I myself have found repose from maladies." Bakhtishu' said, "I commend to the hands of the Leader of the Faithful as my successor 'Isa, my student. He is skillful." The Caliph commissioned Bakhtishu' with ten thousand dinars and allowed him to take leave. He commanded the attendance [to his court] of 'Isa' bin Shahlata. When 'Isa' was received by him, al-Mansur questioned him and found him skillful and took him as his doctor.¹³

This story is a carefully chosen allegory. Bustani shows that the profession of medicine, one of the most sophisticated disciplines of Arab learning, was imported by foreigners (*'ajam*) at the invitation of the Commander of the Faithful. The allegory leads the reader to understand that the infusion of foreign knowledge then can directly cure the maladies of the Arabs' present condition.

The example of al-Mansur is improved upon by his successors. The legendary Harun al-Rashid was "famous in his desire (*raghbah*), zeal (*hammah*), and eagerness (*nishat*) for his beloved sciences and literature" of which "he disseminated throughout his vast kingdom," writes Bustani. The poet-king, "himself proficient in poetry and music, was enamored by these two elegant arts." Like his son Ma'mun and grandson Mustansir after him, he patronized poets as well as Muslim and non-Muslim foreign scholars. He also gathered books, built libraries, established schools, and sponsored innumerable translations.¹⁴ He sponsored the import of non-Muslim, notably Eastern Christian, intellectuals to manage and train native academics and administrators, and established a bureau of schools. "The first director of sciences (*'ulum*) for advanced schools in Harun al-Rashid's kingdom," al-Mu'allim Butrus states, "was a Nestorian Christian Damascene, his name was Yuhanna bin Masuyah" who set intellectual and moral standards of excellence.¹⁵

Harun al-Rashid, Ma'mun, and Muntasir, like their predecessor al-Mansur, actively searched for scientific and humanist knowledge among neighboring Romans, Byzantines, Syrians, Chaldeans, Persians, and Armenians. Each Caliph built and improved on the cultural infrastructure left by his predecessor. Each had an "appetite" (*shahwah*) for knowledge and possessed the "desire" to satiate the need, perpetuating cultural success. These leaders provide for Bustani the crucial historical proof of the Arabs' competency in commanding knowledge, thereby standing in testimony to Arab subjectivity's ontological efficacy.

So far, I have mapped out an epistemological syntagm to Arab presence that can be formulated as such: desire + will + ability = acquisition and master of knowledge = civilization. This formula, I will argue, also contains a juggernaut of Arab subjective presence because the ontological efficacy that it presents is always contingent on the supplement of an exterior subjective presence, namely Europe.

Bustani provides a clear example of this formulaic success (*najah*) through an

extended anecdote regarding the life of Ibn Sina, apparently taken from his autobiography. In a first person narrative, Ibn Sina tells us of his own quest for knowledge. He masters the Quran and literature, learns accounting from a vegetable merchant, studies under several teachers, and learns various disciplines, among them philosophy, logic, the natural sciences, and medicine. Every book would be read four times, Ibn Sina says, until it was memorized, including a book he bought for three *dirham* from a peddler who did not appreciate its value. By choosing to use Ibn Sina's own first person narrative, Bustani animates the leitmotif of a willful subject actively pursuing knowledge. This subject is contrasted with a book peddler who "thinks that there no worth in this knowledge (*'ilm*)." Cultural borrowing implicitly underlies the story of Ibn Sina who was heavily influenced by classical Greek knowledge, in particular Aristotle. However, cultural borrowing must be preceded by the subject's recognition of knowledge's value. The Abbasid caliphs' gathering and domestication of non-Arab scholarship demonstrate the de facto intellectual and cultural competency of the native to *recognize* and address the necessities of innovation by cross-cultural borrowing. *Khutbah* presents an etiology of progress where the ideal Arab subject is able to identify his need, to pursue, acquire, and develop knowledge that satisfies it, thereby translating them into subjective presence. I will argue that by focusing on this aforementioned syntagm, a paradox hidden within Bustani's paradigm of reform is revealed. This paradox is that the Arab subject who embarks on the road to reform must recognize his current failure. But this failure increasingly confirms is a lack, a lack of competency, will, and desire, that emerges as an imminent feature to his very subjectivity.

Slippage in the mastery of the Sign

The above topoi and leitmotifs show us that cultural success and subjective presence emerge as an eschatology where knowledge is a universal endpoint, handled and preserved only by the competent. The following paragraph reasserts the historical Arab's qualifications.

Science and literature (*al-'ulum wal-adab*) were in danger of disappearing and vanishing due to the wars, conflicts, and civil upheavals in the Western world. They found for themselves a refuge in the schools of the Arabs, which provided sanctuary. Therefore, the Arabs preserved the middle link in the chain of knowledge (*'ulum*) which ties ancient knowledge to modern knowledge. Without the existence of this link you would see a vast emptiness between new and old sciences.¹⁶

Reiterating what he had stated earlier, al-Mu'allim Butrus continues to say that knowledge reached the borders of Europe under the "patronage and protection of the Islamic

crescent.” Steeped in medieval ignorance, the West relied on Arab schools to “awaken from their indifference.” The leitmotif of borrowing is switched from Abbasid borrowing from their neighbors to European borrowing from the Arabs. In Andalusia, Bustani contends that the innumerable libraries, schools, and prolific translations characterized the Arab’s unprecedented level of cultural development. Arab Spain represents an exemplary nexus; a borrower and translator of texts from antiquity while also a cultural model for and an entrepot to medieval Europe where, after the Arab’s own decline, learning returned to flourish.

For Bustani, Andalusia is exemplary of the historic and inherent ability of the Arabs to master and reproduce knowledge. This very example also undermines the efficacy of the Ideal Arab that he is so meticulously trying to rejuvenate. The above passage which demonstrates Arab competency also highlights that Arabs are only a “middle link” in the eschatology of European predominance. This is a complex ontological paradox whereby Bustani, searching for historical proof of the Arabs’ ability for cultural success, does not confirm their innovation but only their roles as a depository for knowledge that would eventually return to and be capitalized on by the West.

Such a loop in the search for historical Arab presence is seen elsewhere in *Khutbah* when Bustani refers to the Arabs and Europeans as biblical cousins, in particular descendants of the sons of Noah.

The tribe of Shem (*benu Sam*) was happy because their [paternal] cousins, beni Yafath, had begun to return to them with what they had taken from them (beni Sam) originally, and in addition to this (i.e the original knowledge of beni Sam), having grown over four hundred years, their beni Yafath’s subsequent discoveries are of equal benefit. Some of the times, it is loathsome and a hindrance how some of our aforementioned cousins are arrogant and haughty towards our Eastern race and have contempt for it. We gave them knowledge (*sallamna al-’ulum*) from our right hand by one way. As for them, they took it, returning it to us in their left hand in variety of ways.¹⁷

Bustani again presents us with an etiology of progress where the privileged sign of subjective presence (i.e. knowledge) returns improved and, ironically signifies beni Sam’s (the Arab borrower’s) current lack in contrast to the successive achievements of Yafath’s offspring. Bustani’s positioning of the Arabs’ as original possessors of knowledge (knowledge “returning” to them from beni Yafath) is a veil that disguises the West’s primary relationship to knowledge which precludes Arab mastery of it.¹⁸ Since contemporary cultural and subjective reform is precipitated on the *autogenetic* will and desire for self-improvement (including cross-cultural borrowing), this veil permits the possibility of regeneration. Historical moments of Arab success thus reveal and disguise the fact that progress and civilization is an eschatology based on European predominance.



Within this eschatology of progress, “knowledge” has a nomadic quality where it has “moved from the West to the East coming from the direction of the North, returned with numerous profits from the East to the West from the direction of the South.”¹⁹ Here the example of their borrowing from the Arabs is transformed into a sign of Europe’s cultural presence and the Arabs’ subservience. This reversal is seen in a number of examples provided by al-Mu’allim Butrus. For example, King Carlos of France patronized the translation and importation of Arab knowledge just as the Caliph Ma’mun had done from Greek learning. Only a page later, the reign of Egypt’s Muhammad Ali (1805–49) is likened to that of Carlos because he sponsored the translation of European books into Arabic as well as the printing of classical Arabic texts.

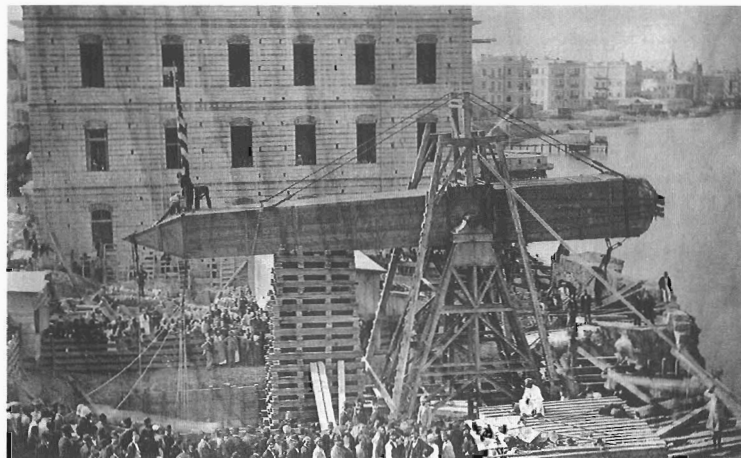
Reform depends on the recognition of the mastery of those who possess knowledge by those who lack it. This is apparent in the examples of Ma’mun, Carlos, and Muhammad ‘Ali. The Arabs’ subjective presence in this case parallels the Hegelian dialectic of self formation. The reference to the “middle link” in the example of Arab success, indirectly reinforces the West’s primacy as intellectual and scientific innovators, and the Arabs’ Otherness. This Otherness is not a temporary condition exclusive to the nineteenth century lacking but reformable subject. Rather, it is an epistemological condition essential to Arab subjectivity, to Bustani’s ideal Arab ego.

As we have seen in the case of Shem and Yafath and Andalusia, the authority of the West as the primary custodian of knowledge is implicitly reinforced by Bustani’s astonishment that even the Abbasids failed to imitate important classic genres:

What is strange is that with the existence of the poems of Homer and Virgil and other famous Greek and Latin poets, nothing is found in the poems of the Arabs adopting from them.²⁰

Consequently, Bustani's *nahdah* discourse articulates an Arab subject who perpetually recognizes a master of knowledge that precludes itself. Or as Hegel might say, the Arab subject recognizes Self-Consciousness that exists for itself, particularly the European Self, but apart from the Arab Self. Consequently, the Arab subject's reform is caught in a vicious paradox that is structurally inherent to it. The ability to recognize knowledge as the sign of subjective presence supplies the necessary possibility for reform. But paradoxically, the Arab subject is only a curator, never an autonomous master. Therefore, Arab subjectivity can only be conceptualized as a proleptic subject that continually approaches but never realizes full success.

Knowledge figures as a quasi-independent third term, mediating the relationship between European mastery and Arab subservience, or the European Same and the Arab Other. However, for Hegel, it is consciousness that is the "middle term" which serves as the prosthetic link necessary for subjective recognition and subjective presence.²¹ Therefore, recognizing knowledge's noumenal qualities, René Girard's own interpretation of this Hegelian dialect would be more enlightening. Girard would say that since the Arab subject's own Self is constructed as Other, the European Self mediates the relationship between knowledge and Arab Selfhood.²² The supplemental mediation of



Europe, their cultural, political, and social intervention, bestows knowledge, imbuing the Arab subject with presence. Such an assertion illuminates the reasons why so many native intellectuals called for and defended colonial intervention in the Arab world as the only means to achieve progress.²³

Paradox at the Heart of the Inscription:

As al-Mu'allim Butrus discusses the historical Arab success (*najah*) that should be imitated, we recognize that he is narrating synchronically the very failure of the Arab subject. Abruptly in *Khutbah*'s narrative, al-Mu'allim Butrus asks, "So where were the Arabs and where are they now? The generation of their golden culture (*jil adabihim al-dhababi*) has passed and its generation of darkness reigns."²⁴ In the following passage, notice how he draws his reader into two coinciding temporal realms:

Where are the poets, the doctors, and the orators? Where are the schools and the libraries? Where are the philosophers, the engineers, the historians, the astronomers? Where are the books of this art? Where are the inquiring scholars and the precise intellectuals? Yes, there remains in each community and sect knowledge struggling to satisfy what remains of its kind and defends it if need be. But what is this in comparison to the ocean of true knowledge? Where is the glory of Baghdad, the pride of Aleppo, the ornateness of Alexandria, the splendor of Andalusia, and the magnificence of Damascus? Where are Ma'mun and al-Mustansir? Where are al-Mutanabbi and Abu Fida'?²⁵

Despite the rhetorical nature of these questions, some eleven pages earlier Bustani anticipates the questions he poses: "It is said that one can find more than two hundred authors in the Royal Library of Paris on the craft of grammar (*sina'at al-nahwa*) alone." Continuing, al-Mu'allim Butrus recites a litany of renowned Arab intellectuals and litterateurs along with their corresponding disciplines whose works are found in the Paris Library.

Bustani narrates a fissure that culturally and ontologically separates two periods of time, past greatness and current decadence. He is narrating a teleology, the recognition of the failure and absence of Arab culture ("where are...?") and the primacy of European authority, in this case, exemplified by what "the Royal Library of Paris" possesses. Let us return to the successful "golden age." While in no uncertain terms the topos of the Abbasid refers to an Arab ideal, Bustani's narrative undermines the subjective referents it advances:

It is obvious that the culture (*adab*) of the ancients contained many blemishes and the manner of dissemination that they had was imperfect. They relied on the embellishment (*t'aqid*) in the whole of their literature (*tasanif*); and myths (*khurafat*) entered into most of their arts. They built much on the philosophic principles of Greece which their owners obtained from a mythical world (*'alam al-wahm*). They had pretensions of knowing the causes of everything. Due to this, their sophistry increased and their errors and delusions (*awham*) multiplied. If we confronted their knowledge (*'ulum*), literature (*adab*), medicine, and their natural sciences (*tabi'yat*) and so forth, the sons of this age (*abna' al-zaman*) would realize that the difference between modern and ancient knowledge would be as evident to us as the appearance of the midday sun. Those who did not make possible the pursuit of European knowledge and literature (*'ulum al-afraj wa tasanifihim*) for the Arabs have resolved to themselves that they are gods of industry (*alihat al-sina'i*), and act under the pretension that they are in control. But he who faces the truth cannot deny that the Europeans are the gods of knowledge (*alihat al-'ulum*) also and that the mind (*'aql*) in their heads is like our mind.²⁶

Certainly, Bustani was a prudent cultural critic and advocated a discriminating imitation of previous Arab success, not unlike the discretion he advises in the adoption of European knowledge and languages. Nevertheless, his caution incriminates the subjective ideal which he establishes in the preceding pages and implicates the degree to which the forefathers actually mastered knowledge. This passage is reminiscent of the example regarding his disbelief that the Arabs never reproduced a cultural artifact on the level of Virgil. The content of the Arab's cultural inheritance is *potentially* empty, built, despite its merits, on a series of false assumption and mythical premises. The last sentence implies that the gaps left by the early Arabs can be filled in, or bridged by the prosthetic of Frankish knowledge. In other words, Bustani explicitly recognizes that native lack can only be redressed through European intervention, that the failure imminent to Arab history and subjectivity can only be ameliorated by a European supplied supplement.

The defective core of the "historical cases" highlights the systemic anomie of Arab subjectivity and structural flaws of Arab culture. A skeptic might argue that al-Mu'allim Butrus is addressing Arab prejudice by putting European mind (*'aql*) on par with the Arab mind. After all, Bustani urges his compatriots not to be prejudiced against European knowledge just as the Europeans respect Arab culture for their contributions. However, a rereading of the last sentence tells us that if the Arab mind is being compared to the European mind, it is only one more veil that hides the fact that the European mind is the ontological referent for cultural success, or the Same. I am arguing that this Same is inescapable, and is the very standard upon which the Arab subject is both to reform himself as well as to find himself lacking. That is, the

European gods (*alihat*) of cultural success whose presence are always felt even when they are not visible haunt, as a specter, even the Arab ideal.

Beyond Present Absence:

The third section of *Khutbah* examines four interrelated contemporary issues concerning Arab society and culture; “the state of the Arabs in contrast to culture (*adab*, pl.); the state of culture itself upon the Arabs; the state of the means to acquire culture, and our hope for the future.”²⁷ We have seen that Bustani assesses the condition of culture as the “stagnation of the commodities of knowledge (*'ilm*) among the Arabs and the lack of marketability in its market among their public and especially their notables.” An inventory of scientific and cultural commodities (*fiqh*, poetry, history, etc.) is reviewed and, in each instance, Bustani remarks on their fallen state. In his discussion of confessional schools, he praises, in particular his alma mater the Maronite college of 'Ayn Waraqah, and the (Greek) Catholic schools of Dayr al-Mukhlis and 'Ayn Tarraz, as well as Greek Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, and Armenian schools. It is interesting that the Lazarite, Jesuit, and American Protestant schools are not distinguished as foreign but exist alongside native schools. The founders of these schools and seminaries, usually clerics, are the only contemporary natives admired by Bustani. However, al-Mu'allim Butrus states that:

There is wide room in all these aforementioned schools for reform (*islah*) and it is necessary that reform will enter slowly, slowly with the advancement of the century (*jil*).²⁸

In other words, the existence of cultural modes of production (intellectuals, disciplines, and schools), despite their qualities, signify the very failure to master fully knowledge. The litany of infrastructure displays more than the falling short of the cultural mark, but, as we have seen, the absence of native mastery and comprehensive success.

The theme that “culture (*adab*) among the Arabs is in a condition of total decrepitude (*inhibitat*)” is repeated throughout the text. Immediately preceding this aforementioned inventory, al-Mu'allim Butrus refuses to acknowledge the decadence of the Arab intellect:

While we think that the Arabs of today are the descendants of the ancient Arabs, we do not see in them what we have seen in those Arabs who struggle (*mujahid*) with perseverance and effort (*jihad*) in field of knowledge (*'ulum*). We are not willing to admit that these descendants have become corrupt (*fasad*). This is because the excellence of the Arab mind (*'aql al-'arab*) and the perfection of its predisposition to

obtain knowledge, in these days, demonstrates the contrary. But that is a consequence due to the many conditions and several reasons that we love, if time permitted us to make them evident, so as we can relieve from those who are from our flesh and blood the real blame put upon them by the foreigners who, we do not doubt, could have reached a state of deterioration such as our state if time kept them in conditions similar to ours.²⁹

Arab subjectivity inherently maintains a bond with knowledge, and while the reasons and cultural conditions that facilitate such a cathexis are “loved,” they remain unnamed. Yet, the European specter emerges as inquisitor, indicting native sons for their incompetence. Whether European success is a stroke of chance or fate (*dahr*), the need to rely upon it, to reaffirm Arab competency, indicates the same paradoxical Otherness as revealed by the indelible blemishes.

Bustani’s formula of decadent-but-not-corrupt camouflages is a teleology that, similar to the examples of Shem and Andalusia, veils a chronic dilemma of competency and will. The Arab’s natural “inclinations” for knowledge and the “excellence of their mind” veils the tension, the unbridgeable gap, between European cultural presence and the immanent, but deniable, Arab corruption (*fasad*). This supposition allows the subject to borrow without immediately disclosing the distance between it and knowledge, and as such keeps alive the *possibility* for reform. The patrimony, propensities, and success of the Arab forefathers, like the fine-but-reformable native schools, continue to re-establish the Arab as a potentially masterful subject, by keeping at bay the threat of inherent failures and foreign supremacy. In other words, the consequences and effects of this camouflage of decadent-but-not-corrupt are two-fold and paradoxical. They make modern Arab subjectivity possible by allowing the possibility of its presence, but also endlessly defer this very presence. Consequently, Arab subjectivity is based on a proleptic ideal of reform, recognizable but not realizable, what Bhabha calls “almost but not quite.”³⁰

Competency and causality

Let us return to the issue of European presence as a specter which looms in the background of nineteenth century discussions on Arab subjectivity, culture, and competency. Explaining this presence exclusively as the result of European military and economic successes fails to capture the profundity of its effects. Rather, my assertion is that European presence is inscribed within the native subject. It is a condition that defines Arab subjectivity as much as the empiricism of “culture” and “history.” European success is the referent upon which the Arab reforms himself, and to which his own success must, but never can, measure up. Consequently, we will see that the specter of Europe haunts

the contemporary Arab subject and challenges him to transform historical success, albeit tenuous, into praxis, thereby, demonstrating the ontological efficacy of the Arab intellect (*al-'aql al-'arabi*).

As in the case of native schools, al-Mu'allim Butrus names examples of native praxis which abate the slippage in the decadent-but-not-corrupt formula. His chief example is of his son-in-law, Khalil Effendi al-Khuri (1836–1907), an accomplished poet whose *al-'Asr al-Jadid* (*The New Age*, 1863) “pours classical poetry (*al-sh'ar al-qadim*) into a new mold, clear in intended meaning.” Khalil Effendi's true accomplishments were his newspaper, *Hadiqat al-Akhbar* (*The Garden of News*, 1858), one of the earliest Arabic newspapers, and his press *al-Matba'ah al-Suriyah* (“The Syrian Press”). His mastery of “the means for civilization” (*al-wasa'it li-tamaddun*) sets an example for his compatriots:

Undoubtedly, journals (*jurnalat*) are among the best means for the civilization of the masses (*jumbur*) and can increase the number of readers if they are used properly. There is hope that this young girl, (*al-Matba'at al-Suriyah*), the first Arabic press specializing in journals, grows in strength and that the struggles of her owner and her dear director, Khalil Effendi al-Khuri, are crowned by success. Among the sons of the nation (*abna' al-watan*), his reputation remains as a conqueror of a strong fortress of whose benefits, even, the forefathers had neglected.³¹

The example of Khalil Effendi is important because no other non-clerical native is mentioned by name in *Khutbah*. Khalil Effendi “conquers” new territory; his Arabic is lucid (*al-ma'na al-maqsud*), stylistically innovative while remaining faithful to classical standards. Moreover, he displays the will and ability to master the foreign technology of the press and, with it, disseminate knowledge requisite for “civilization” (*tamaddun*). His example redresses the failure and “neglect” of even the venerable forefathers, providing momentarily the proof of native competency.

If Khalil Effendi's example is to be reproduced en mass, then it must be anticipated by traditional and modern cultural infrastructure. The correlation between “the means to acquire culture,” reform, and progress becomes most clear in *Khutbah*'s praise of Sultan 'Abdel-Majid, who was chief advocate of the Empire-wide *Tanzimat* risorgimento. Al-Mu'allim Butrus awkwardly states:

It is obvious that 'Abdel-Majid's efforts along with the commerce between the Arabs and their mixing with civilized peoples and the increase in the number of presses and schools; the organization of literary salons (*majalis*) and assemblies (*mahafil*); the governmental officials' progress in knowledge (*rijal al-dawalah fi al-ma'arif*); the opening of the door of the fields of art of writing (*insha'*), oration (*khutub*), and cultural, religious, and political dialogue; the freeing of the intellect's reigns and the bridle of will (*iradah*); as well as the attention to the education of women, especially

in this city which, in the preceding ages, was the wet-nurse to the study of law, will all return in the future, one hopes, [the nation] back to being the wet-nurse to culture...³²

This passage nicely demonstrates how Bustani constructs an etiology of success through a causal relationship between cultural infrastructure, subjective will (*iradah*), and cultural practice. This relationship between how *having*, or possessing, knowledge and cultural infrastructure bestows *being*, subjective and cultural success, is seen throughout *Khutbah*. Bustani's earlier discussion of local presses, libraries, and schools emphasizes the connection between cultural success and native competency. Putting aside that 'Abdel-Majid is hardly a native son, his example, like that of Khalil Effendi, brings to a head the issue of natives' will and ability to transcend cultural decadence and master the instruments of subjective presence. For Bustani, their example is one of success (*najah*). The praxis of Khalil Effendi, for example, illustrates for Bustani that the native presses "benefit the masses (*al-jumhur*) in general regarding culture (*adab*) and civilization (*tamaddun*)" and actually "*can* enrich the sons of the Arabs with books and libraries within a short period."³³

Having vs Being

One further example of this causality, (infrastructure plus will plus competency equals success) is seen in *Khutbah*'s discussion of the renowned Bulaq press of Egypt.³⁴ Bulaq, started by Muhammad 'Ali in Egypt in 1821, sets the standard for *al-Matba'ah al-Suriyah*. Its products are influential and prolific; moreover, they establish the priority of Arabic. Bulaq displays, not unlike Bustani's praise of 'Abdel-Majid, competency at the more significant state level. The state's guidance is essential for the native masses. Bustani writes,

The press that most deserves mention and that has enriched the Arab race with multifarious books is Bulaq. We are guided by the excellence of the organization of this press and the greatness of its benefits from the many books, originals and translations, which have been put out by it. When they had begun translating, the keen-eye of this press avoided as much as possible using foreign terms in what they translated from European languages (*al-lughat al-afranjiyah*) although in the beginning, when the press was in the years of its infancy, they would use many Western terms despite the existence of the Arabic terms equivalent to them.³⁵

We see that the inscription of European knowledge occurs very quietly as a project of translation and editing essential to success. Success is signified not only by the mastery

of “the means to culture,” but the expertise of the subject, whose “keen-eye” (*nazzar*) identifies and corrects cultural and linguistic errors. The acknowledgment of Bulaq’s early short-comings displays a new level of native competency, the ability to translate and make knowledge intelligible to the Arabic speaker, an ability to dress new knowledge in Arabic garments. One might argue that Bustani’s self-criticism is a necessary tactic in the reform process. Furthermore, Bulaq’s change in preference from imported, foreign vocabulary to their Arabic equivalents indicates the capabilities of contemporary reformers to articulate modern knowledge within a new semantic system of Arabic.³⁶ However, I would argue that it is this shift from using foreign to Arabic terminology that evinces the depth to which European authority (as represented by the import of new knowledges) is inscribed within the Arabic language itself. The modern Arab subject can only be a reformed subject if he finds his ontological truth in the universal positivist knowledge which just happens to be codified by the European scholarship and “standards” of progress.

As I argued earlier, native intellectual, enlightened rulers, libraries, and presses serve both as signs of cultural success and reminders of cultural inadequacies. The contention that the subject’s failure prevents access to, or *material* possession of, the privileged sign of cultural presence is not wholly accurate as succinctly summarized by the following passage:

Although one finds many private libraries in this country, we see, on the one side, the cheapness of their book-buyers or curators, and, on the other side, the lack of good-faith of the borrowers of the books. Both, curators and borrowers, lock iron doors on the libraries, leaving them to the mercy of moths and the sanctuary for dust. So what is the benefit from the increase of books if there is no one to read them?³⁷

This passage confirms our previous discussion by demonstrating that the question of competency is a symbolic matter, *a matter of being not only having*. The analysis of the state of nineteenth century libraries discloses that the knowledge (as both sign of cultural presence, and the signified of, say, books) exists and is even sought among the Arabs. However, the borrower’s lack of trustworthiness and the lender’s greed reflect, in addition to moral defects, the inability of the native subject to command the sign apparently already at his disposal. The immanent decrepitude of the subject erects an introductory bar, the iron doors, between the native and the ontological stuff of subjective presence and cultural success. The metaphors of the moth and dust illustrate more than active and passive types of decay. They are the return of time (*dahr*) that we have seen earlier. Time literally eats up the possibility of transcendental presence, leaving not only an anomic Arab subject, but the actual absence of the native (reading) subject.

Bustani also comments on non-native presses in and out of the country and com-

mends the American Protestant press with whom he had very intimate ties. Despite its concern for the printing of religious books, this press “has the power to spread knowledge (*ma’arif*) and civilization (*tammadun*) in this country in a short time.” Bustani’s discussion of native competency, that of Khalil Effendi and Bulaq, is narratively lodged in-between the Arabs’ indebtedness to the activities of the American missionaries and foreign-based Orientalist presses. Bustani tell us that:

It is obvious that the Arabic presses in Europe and America are more numerous than in this country. If not for the care of these presses, not a trace of precious Arabic literature (*tasaniif*) would have remained. Thus, we see much of our Arabic books returning to us, after their long absence, printed in beautiful letters. If only we were able to say in perfect grammatical correctness and proper soundness.³⁸

In the last two passages, all the ironies of *nahdah* discourse as advanced in *Khutbah* burst out. In the discussion of libraries, Arab failure is profound. The incapability to master the knowledge that is already in their hands, let alone the knowledge of Europeans, compounds the dilemma of recognition of the sign’s worth. The existence of knowledge, then, does not signify presence but signifies the Arab subject’s perpetual absence. Even Arab success (Khalil Effendi and Bulaq) is enframed by Western presence, narratively and discursively delimited by the mastery of American and European presses.

Yet again, the last sentence utters an equivocality. The Arab subject comes upon his *adab* (culture and literature), and finds himself preserved but affected by the West; Arab(ic) in modern, printed form, ideal but dissimilar. The topos of the golden age Arab, the subject of presence, returns as a simulacrum of the reformed Arab subject. By recognizing the errors of European editors in a printed text, Bustani’s critical eye finds a hole in European mastery. The acknowledgement of grammatical errors can be seen as an assertion of the privilege of cultural difference. Lacan and Hegel both show us that the invocation of cultural authenticity and privilege is the residue that precedes the assimilation of the Other (the Arab subject) into the Self-Same’s (Europe’s) authority.³⁹ While this might be interpreted as “resistance,” we also must remember that this criticism is uttered in the context of the returning of Arab success as result of Western endeavors.

Vocative Conclusions

The narrative tone and address of *Khutbah* drastically changes upon Bustani’s conclusion and foreshadows the same narrative of *Nafir Suriyah*, written one year later after fierce intercommunal violence:

Oh sons of the nation (*ya abna' al-watan*)! The pinnacle of those of excellence, and grandchildren of fellow Syriacs and proud Greeks, the camel's hump of this 19th century is the century of knowledge (*jil al-ma'rifah*) and light, the century of inventions and discoveries, the century of culture and humanist knowledge (*jil al-adab wa al-ma'arif*), the century of industry and arts. Rise! Be alert! Awaken! Roll up the sleeves of determination. Culture, standing at every side of your door, knocks asking entrance to your beautiful, lofty mountains, valleys, plains, and deserts with which nature adorned the country in all its glorious beauty. Throw out your fanaticism, your partisanship, and your psychological prejudices (*aghradakum al-nafsaniyah*). Offer one hand to the study of culture. Open the doors to this old box that comes to you after a long absence. Welcome this box and meet it in all happiness and joy, so that your country is filled with comfort and leisure, and you can dress it in splendor and pride.

Undoubtedly, the continued progress which reached this country in the recent few years strengthens the resolutions of all who have the desire (*raghbah*) and zeal (*ghirah*) for awakening the Arab race from its fallen state. The toils of which they undergo, the many years both sons of the nation and foreigners have been introducing culture and civilization among the Arabs, will be crowned with success.⁴⁰

In this passage, all the themes and leitmotifs conjoin in a coherent articulation of the necessities of Arab subjectivity. Moreover, in it, al-Mu'allim Butrus explicitly provides a complete set of terms for reform. That is, desire and will's relationship to culture, civilization and progress are defined as opposed to sectarian bias, decay, and confessional fanaticism. While these elements existed in the syntagm of Arab progress, their advance to the forefront reveals that all subjective reform is not only national reform but that all subjectivity is national subjectivity. In his "fallen state," the native awaits revival; his great national past spurring him on towards progress. The once accusatory European specter emerges as a naturalized element of native progress. The correlation between native sons and foreigners corresponds to the relationship between Syriac and Greek and Arab ancestors, similar to the biblical metaphor of the children of Noah or the categorization of foreign schools as native. Quite clearly, Bustani is addressing the Arab Self as much as his compatriots. In particular, he is addressing the decrepit-but-not-corrupt subject, one who is decadent but able to recognize the need for reform, one who sees that the possibilities of awakening are alive but perpetually on the horizon.

Notes

1 I would like to thank Alexander Knysh, Brinkley Messick and Trevor Legassick for their helpful comments and extend a special thanks to Walid Ra'ad, Miriam Cooke, and Marguerite Zakhia-Sheehi for their most rigorous reading and tireless support.

2 Butrus bin Bulus al-Bustani (1819–83), one of the most notable intellectuals of his time, studied at the prestigious Maronite seminary 'Ayn Waraqah in Lebanon. As tutor to and translator for the newly arrived American Protestant missionaries, he converted, and taught at their school in 'Abeih. Bustani translated the Arabic Bible (1848–56), became the dragoman for the American consul, and the founding secretary for *al-Jam'iyah al-Suriyah lil-funun wa al-'ulum* ("Syrian Society of the Arts and Sciences"). Increasingly secular and independent of his American friends, he wrote *Nafir Suriyah*, stressing the need for interconfessional unity after the massacres of 1860. Three years later, he established the first secular school in Southwest Asia, named *al-Madrasah al-wataniyah* ("the National School"). Bustani is best remembered for *Muhib al-muhib* (1869), a comprehensive Arabic dictionary; the ground-breaking journal and newspapers *al-Jinan* (1870) and his incomplete encyclopedia, *Dairat al-Ma'arif* (1876–1900). Two dissertations have been written on Bustani. Yusuf Qizmakhuri wrote an exhaustive three volume biography, abridged and published as *Rijal sabiq li-'asrihi: al-Mu'allim Butrus al-Bustani* ('Amman: Ta'assas al-ma'bid al-malaki lil-dirasat al-diniyah, 1994). John Jandora, *Butrus al-Bustani: Ideas, Endeavors, and Influence* (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1981) discusses themes and methodology of Bustani's works from which two articles were published ("Butrus al-Bustani, Arab Consciousness and Arabic Revival," *Muslim World*, April, 1984; and "al-Bustani's *Da'irat al-Ma'arif*," *Muslim World*, April, 1986). Among others, Jean Day'ah al-

Mu'allim Butrus al-Bustani: Dirasat wa Watha'iq ([Beirut]: Manshurat Majallah Fikr, n.d.) are compilations of some of Bustani's social works along with extensive introduction.

3 al-Mu'allim Butrus al-Bustani, *Khutbah fi adab al-'arab* ([Beirut]: n.p., [1859]), 1859:40. Also found in, Yusuf Qizmakhuri, Ed. *al-Jam'iyah al-Suriyah lil-'ulum wa-al-funun, 1847–1852*. (Beirut: Dar al-Hamra, 1990).

4 In the introduction to *Da'irat al-Ma'arif*, Bustani discusses the considerable range that "knowledge" entails (1870:3). It includes philosophical and social sciences (*'ilm al-ahaliyah*); political sciences like jurisprudence, and natural, civil, and commercial law; the "historical sciences" as geography, ancient, modern, and Church history as well as archeology and Greek mythology; "the educational sciences" of algebra, engineering, accounting; astronomy and chemistry; the natural sciences like botany, geology, physiology and medicine; the classical literary disciplines like *fushah*, *al-bayan*, *sh'ir*, *al-insba'*, and literary history; and finally, "arts and crafts" including architecture, inventions, music, photography, commerce, mining, and printing (1870:5).

5 al-Mu'allim Butrus al-Bustani, *Da'irat al-Ma'arif* (Beirut: al-Matba'ah al-Suriyah, 1870), 2.

6 Bustani, 6.

7 In particular, I am thinking of Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi's *Aqwam al-masalik fi ma'arifat ahwal al-mamalik* (Tunis: 1867); and al-Shaykh Rifa'ah R. al-Tahtawi's *Manahij al-albab al-misriyah* (Cairo: 1869). It is noteworthy that Hourani (1962) discusses Khayr al-Din, Tahtawi, and Bustani in the same chapter.

8 Bustani, 6–7.

9 Bustani, 9.

10 Lacan states that "misrecognition is not ignorance. Misrecognition represents a certain organization of affirmations and negations, to which the subject is attached. Hence, it cannot not be con-

ceived without correlative knowledge (Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I*. Trans. and Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. [New York: W.W. Norton, 1988], 167. This definition enlightens our understanding of the process of subject formation during the 19th century Arab renaissance because it marks out the semantic and thematic fields, the epistemology itself, upon which all subjectivity is articulated.

11 Lacan, calling this the Ideal-ego, tells us that “it is in the Other that subject is constituted as ideal, that he has to regulate the completion of what comes as ego, or ideal-ego . . . to constitute himself in his imaginary reality” (Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Jacques-Alain Miller ed., trans. by A. Sheridan. [New York: W.W. Norton, 1978], 144). Slightly reversing this definition, I will suggest that it is the Arab subject who is Other to his own Selfhood and thereby finds his ideal-ego in his European “Other” which is in fact the standard Self-Same. Also, see Lacan’s discussion in *Seminar I* (Lacan, 1988, 129–148).

12 I am aware that the Abbasid’s are traditionally seen as dominated by non-Arab, particularly Persian, influences. However, such an inconsistency within Bustani’s discourse about who the Arabs are highlights the fact that modern Arab subjectivity, as we perceive it today, was still under a confused process of recognition.

13 Bustani, 13.

14 Bustani, 9–13.

15 Bustani, 9–10.

16 Bustani, 17. (my italics)

17 Bustani, 27.

18 The veil (*voile*), for Derrida, affirms the ontologies of both Self-Same, and its episteme; what it hides is not lack but the necessity of lack for the epistemology of subjectivity and its Other. (Jacques Derrida, *Spurs* Trans. by B. Harlow. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979]).

19 Bustani, 26.

20 Bustani, 15.

21 G.W.F Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. Trans. Howard Kainz. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 184.

22 René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and The Novel* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965).

23 Cairo-based, Lebanese intellectual Fransis Nimr and his numerous articles in his ground-breaking scientific-literary journal *al-Muqtataf* are fine examples.

24 Bustani, 26.

25 As a side note, this passage reemerges almost verbatim in al-Bustani’s vocative articles found in his journal, *al-Jinan*, some ten years later which discuss reform and social unit. See “Man nahu?” “Hubb al-watn,” and “al-Sharq” all in *al-Jinan* (vol. I, 1870), 26–27.

26 Bustani, 29–30.

27 Bustani, 31.

28 Bustani, 38.

29 Bustani, 31.

30 Homi Bhabha, “Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse.” *The Location of Culture*. (London: Routledge Press, 1994).

31 Bustani, 35.

32 Bustani, 40.

33 Bustani, 34. (my italics)

34 For a fine discussion on early translations especially involving Bulaq, see Ibrahim Abu Lughod, *Arab Rediscovery of Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).

35 Bustani, 35.

36 See Jaroslav Stetkevych, *The Modern Arabic Literary Language: Lexical and Stylistic Developments* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

37 Bustani, 35–36.

38 Bustani, 35.

39 Lacan calls this process “introjection” (Lacan 1988, 168).