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Re-discovering Alessandro Spina's Transculture/ality in *The Young Maronite*

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Abstract: Alessandro Spina, *né* Basili Shafik Khouzam, was born in Benghazi in 1927 into a family of Maronites from Aleppo and spent most of his life between Libya and Italy, speaking several languages and writing in Italian. He may be described as the “unsung” writer of Italian colonial and post-colonial past in North Africa. Spina’s oeuvre—collected in an omnibus edition, *I confini dell’ombra. In terra d’oltremare* (Morcelliana)—charts the history of Libya from 1911, when Italy invaded the Ottoman province, to 1966, when the country witnessed the economic boom sparked by the petrodollars. The cycle was awarded the Premio Bagutta, Italy’s highest literary accolade. In 2015, Darf Press published in English the first instalment of Spina’s opus with the title *The Confines of the Shadows. In Lands Overseas*. Spina always refused to be pigeonholed in some literary category and to be labeled as a colonial or postcolonial author. As a matter of fact, his works go beyond the spatial and imaginary boundaries of a given state or genre, emphasizing instead the mixing and collision of languages, cultures, identities, and forms of writing. Reading and re-discovering Spina in a transcultural mode brings to light the striking newness of his literary efforts, in which transnational lived life, creative imagination, and transcultural sensibility are inextricably interlaced.

Keywords: transculturality; transcultural novels; world literature; Italian literature; Libya; colonialism; mobility; identity; unbelonging; translation

1. Introduction

Writers with a neo-nomadic penchant, with complex cultural orientations, or engaged in transnational exchanges have become increasingly visible in the past decades. Such authors eschew former narrow identitarian labeling, such as (im)migrant, colonial, postcolonial, ethnic, Commonwealth, or minority writers and can no longer be considered to belong primarily to a single (or original) national framework. In a previous study [1], I explored what makes a writer a “transcultural” writer in this age of growing transnational movements taking place on many levels, from people and groups to global media and cultural products. The definition I came up with may well apply to writers of past ages as well as to Alessandro Spina, a contemporary Syrian author who became a naturalized Italian citizen. Indeed, Spina can be included in that loose category of writers “on the move” whose sense of identity and belonging—rooted in a complex mix of linguistic and cultural declinations—takes multiple trajectories and reflects itself in their narratives. In this article, I set out to reveal Spina’s transcultural disposition, its development through cultural encounters and processes of “transpatriation” ([1], p. 4), and its re-enactment in the form of transcultural narratives. For this purpose, I will analyze in detail Spina’s novel *The Young Maronite* [2] and expose its relation with the author’s lived experience, acquired transcultural sensibility, and extended body of work.

2. From Transculturation to Transculture/ality

My use of the term “transculture/ality”, which expands Fernando Ortiz’s [3] original notion of “transculturation” by combining Mikhail Epstein’s concept of “transculture” ([4], p. 49) and Wolfgang Iser’s concept of “transculturality” [5], provides this article with its theoretical framework. We can think of transculturality [5] as the analytical model through which one can give account of the cultural dynamics and the creative expressions happening in highly mobile individuals “out of the narrow national and regional boundaries” ([6], p. 45). And we can think of “transculture” as “the freedom of every person to live on the border of one’s ‘inborn’ culture or beyond it” ([7], p. 334). Thus, transculture/ality ([1], pp. 113–14) rests on the idea that individuals may find a mode of identity formation as well as of creative expression which goes beyond the conventions and obsessions of identity politics and the exclusive dimension of national identity. What makes cultures interesting, as Edward W. Said stated ([8], p. 15), is not their purity but their reciprocal enmeshing, mutual influences, and constant processes of borrowing and border-crossing (even when they are witnessing unbalanced power relations).

Working at the level of the individual, transculture/ality takes on a plurality of forms (as many forms as there are individuals); as such, it is a dimension which can be accessed by multiple entry points and engaged in different ways and circumstances. This transcultural dimension, or “transplace” ([1], p. 199), may be understood as an all-inclusive space of subjective consciousness and cultural possibilities which does not deny the formative importance of native cultures—and, to some extent, their accompanying worldviews—but at the same time allows an openness to the reception, integration, and negotiation of other cultures. I suggest that those writers who inhabit the transplace have previously undergone a “transpatriation” process ([1], p. 4). This process, which is the result of physical and symbolic movement through and embedding in deep and diverse cultural contexts, allows individuals to adopt new ways of self-identification. While leading to the formation of multifaceted identities, it also facilitates the development of a transcultural lens, “a perspective in which all cultures look decentered in relation to all other cultures, including one’s own” ([9], p. 312). Calling this process of becoming transcultural “transpatriation” emphasizes the importance of moving beyond one’s own culture, as well as of overcoming—or, better, “unlearning”—ways of identity formation strongly dependent on ethnicity, nationality, locality, or religious affiliation.

Finally, transculture/ality may lead to or may work in conjunction with its ensuing ethical (rather than ideological) stance: “a will to interact starting from the intersections rather than from the polarities and differences, a consciousness of the transcultural that is in us to better comprehend and accept what is outside of us, a vision that privileges flexibility and fluidity, movement and ongoing exchange, the constant re-negotiation of identity” ([6], p. 44). Though individualist in perspective, transculture/ality should not, however, be seen as a (somewhat natural) extension of the traditional liberal understanding of the individual. A transcultural disposition is rather to be seen as a socially mediated “process of subjectivity” that disengages itself from the conventional concept of individualism and asserts the difference-in-unity of mankind—that is the undeniable singularity, fluidity, but also interrelatedness of any self-constituting being as part of a “collective enterprise” ([10], p. 7).

To summarize, transculture/ality provides individuals: (a) a mode of identity formation; (b) a dimension of cultural belonging and artistic expression (the transplace); (c) an analytical tool to better capture the interplay between culture/s and the works of a globalizing imagination; and (d) a strategy of cultural resistance to the exclusive dimension of national/ethnic identity, to the homogenizing pressure (including the standardization of literary taste) imposed by corporate global culture, and to the isolating effects of current multicultural policies. As Epstein claims, in relation to our present, transculture “differs from both leveling globalism and isolating pluralism” ([7], p. 327).

3. What is a Transcultural Writer and what is a Transcultural Novel?

In a nutshell, a transcultural writer is a writer who, by undergoing a transpatriation process, has developed a transcultural sensibility and expresses it through her or his writing. It is impossible to

measure and thus quantify aspects such as sensitivities, imaginaries, or outlooks in a literary work. Nevertheless, these impalpable elements are revealed (and thus made detectable) in the choice of themes, characters, voice, setting, as well as in the use of dialogue, plot construction, or language performed by individual authors. Those writers who move outside their own native cultures or homelands tend to defy conventional categorizations: as with their works, their complex and fluid nature seems to dispel any attempt to pin them down, to fit them into any kind of defining box, even the most flexible and sophisticated one.

The main question thus becomes: Can we think of Spina in terms of a transcultural writer? In my book *Transcultural Writers and Novels in the Age of Global Mobility* ([1], p. 183), I came up with an initial list of elements that exemplify the tight connection between lived experience and creative/fiction narratives on the transcultural frontier. Those authors who, by virtue of their transnational and culturally errant status, write across cultures or with an eye to the dynamics of cultural encounters and negotiations, tend to: (a) set their novels in more than one country. Most importantly, though, foreign settings (but foreign to whom? we might ask) are not used as exotic stereotypes functional to the growing market of global mass fiction—the so-called “postcolonial exotic” [11]; (b) create characters coming from more than one cultural background or who are immersed in more than one culture; (c) display a proliferation of narrating voices and tell a story from “a multiplicity of perspectives” ([12], p. 257); (d) work in more than one linguistic code and narrative genre, thereby creating texts characterized by a mix of linguistic/cultural spaces and genres; (e) write in a way and express things in such a way that it is difficult for a reader to understand (or infer), without knowing their complex biographies, to what nationality/cultural community/ethnic group they belong; in other words, they tend to undermine “habitual classification of literary texts in terms of national or regional literatures” ([12], p. 251).

These elements tend to be common features of transcultural prose fiction; yet, they do not need to be present at the same time in the same novel for it to be defined as transcultural. The next section of this article therefore reviews some of these constitutive transcultural elements in order to analyze to what extent they inhabit Spina’s lived experience and literary output. For the purpose of illustration, and due to space limits, this will be done by focusing on a close reading of Spina’s novel *The Young Maronite*, published for the first time in Italian in 1971 with the title *Il giovane maronita* [13].

Before applying myself to the task, though, I wish to make a preliminary remark. As writers, readers, or critics, we are all somewhat defined by our own cultural and historical specificity, which—in addition—often changes with time and circumstances. We are all situated in time, space, and culture. Sharing the view that identities are inherently multiple in nature and constantly shifting, is not a new concept, although it has been interpreted and assumed differently according to different locations, intellectual contexts, and time periods. The way I/we may interpret a work of fiction through a transcultural lens is certainly influenced by our *Zeitgeist*, characterized by increased global mobility and cultural flows. Moreover, my perspective is inevitably situated in my being one of those scholars and creative writers living in the West and able to freely move across countries, cultures, and languages. As Said clarifies, “the real intellectual is a secular being” and as such is situated in society whereby his or her “morality” is influenced by “where it takes place, whose interests it serves, how it jibes with a consistent and universalist ethic, how it discriminates between power and justice, what it reveals of one’s choices and priorities” ([14], p. 120).

With Said’s warning in mind, what follows is not meant to be a celebration of what some might perceive as privileged lifestyles or elitist literary attitudes and theorizations, but as an effort to analyze the combined effects of transnational mobility and cultural globalization in the development of a specific form of transcultural writing. At the dawn of what Peter Burke sees as a “new form of cultural order”, what mostly matters is the need to find new interpretive keys and theoretical frameworks, together with a new terminology, that may prove better suited to the analysis of an emerging transcultural literature ([15], p. 115). What follows is just an attempt in this direction.

4. Alessandro Spina, World Literature and his Own Time

Alessandro Spina, né Basilio Shafik Khouzam, was born in Benghazi in 1927 into a family of Maronites from Aleppo, Syria and spent most of his life between Libya and Italy, speaking several languages (including Arabic, French and English) and mostly writing in Italian. He might be described as the “unsung” writer of Italian colonial and post-colonial past in North Africa. In 2007, the Italian publisher Morcelliana managed to publish his works in an omnibus edition, *I confini dell'ombra. In terra d'oltremare* [16]. A year later, the cycle, which comprises six novels, a novella and four collections of stories, was awarded the Premio Bagutta, Italy's highest literary accolade. This recognition, however, was not enough to put Spina on Italy's literary map: till today, only a limited number of readers, scholars, and literary critics know and have studied his work. In 2015 and three years after Spina's death, the poet André Naffis-Saheli produced the English translation of the first instalment (containing three novels—*The Young Maronite*, *The Marriage of Omar*, and *The Nocturnal Visitor*) of *The Confines of the Shadows* [17]. Hopefully, this will help to let Spina's genius out of the limiting bottle of Italian national literature and reach its due place into the wider realm of world literature.

In its broad generalization, world literature encompasses literary texts which are coming from different cultural and linguistic traditions and are able to cross national and cultural borders. David Damrosch views world literature as constituted by “all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language” ([17], p. 4). From the viewpoint proposed by Debjani Ganguly, this also means thinking of world literature as a literary territory “where the journeys are multi-linear and where literary capital can be found in works that are locally inflected and have both regional and global purchase” ([18], p. 26). In this light, the terrain of world literature has grown to progressively include a greater number of those transcultural works which by crossing borders and by going beyond their countries of origin challenge a way of studying literatures grounded in national traditions.

Spina's oeuvre is a colonial epic that charts the history of Libya from 1911, when Italy invaded the Ottoman province, to 1966, when the country witnessed the economic boom sparked by petrodollars. The first instalment is set during the initial Italian conquest and early occupation of the Ottoman province and it covers the years from 1911 to 1927. The other two instalments focus on the brief golden age of the Italian colony, in the 1930s, and on the period of independence leading up to Gadhafi's bloodless coup against King Idris in 1969. The dramatic social and political transformations the country went through in less than a century reverberate to this day and are a stern reminder of the multiple issues (from ethnic rivalry to lack of internal power structures) that any colonial conquest leaves in its wake.

Spina's body of work is intimately rooted in the transpatriation process he underwent, affecting the way he saw and fictionally described the world around him. As a writer, Spina always refused to be pigeonholed in some literary category; most of all—and rightly so—he refused to be labeled as a colonial or postcolonial author. Indeed, his works look past the spatial and imaginary boundaries of a given nation, ethnic group, or genre, emphasizing instead the mixing and collision of languages, cultures, identities, worldviews, and forms of writing. In doing so, they foster a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of identity-formation processes, especially when these happen in diverse transnational and cross-cultural frameworks.

5. Transcultural Elements in Spina's *The Young Maronite*

The Young Maronite is the opening novel in Spina's Cyrenaican saga. The novel is an existential and cultural examination of identity set against the backdrop of Italy's colonial past, in a time when Ottomans, Arabs, Berbers, and Italians found themselves, willy-nilly, living under the same north African sky and, most often than not, under the same roofs. It almost starts like a sort of dark Oriental tale, with a disfigured ogre (a powerful merchant) and his 12-year-old new wife; it develops into the tragic story of two young lovers; and it reaches its climax by plunging itself into the midst of modern Libyan history, exposing the “forgotten” pages of Italian colonization in Northern Africa.

Spina was particularly critical of the silence with which both Italian political factions—the left and the right—always carpeted the country’s colonial crimes. During the first phase of the Libyan occupation, starting from 1929 and onwards, more than 100,000 people were deported to several concentration camps in Eastern Libya to deny the rebels the support of the local population. Tens of thousands died in those camps, mainly of disease and starvation ([19], p. 48).

In *The Young Maronite* Spina is mostly interested in analyzing the moment in which Europeans crossed the Mediterranean again after the time of the crusades and the social disruption this new age of invasion caused. The Italian presence in Libya and in the Horn of Africa produced a distinct, although rather sparse, Italian colonial literature [20] and an even more limited post-colonial literature. Although Italy’s influence in the African continent extends well beyond the brief timespan of the former Italian Empire, the “writing back” by authors from Ethiopia, Libya, Somalia, or Eritrea has been small in comparison to that coming from the English-, French-, and Spanish-speaking areas of other former European colonial empires [21]. Within a literary context, the Italian post-colonial aftermath has certainly more to do with those writers who in the last two decades immigrated to Italy from its former colonies thus contributing to the establishment of an Italian (im)migrant literature. According to Ali Mumin Ahad, “for writers from Mussolini’s ‘place in the sun’, Italian literature is marked by the absence of any authentically post-colonial form of expression proper to itself, as it cannot rely on any interest in post-colonial studies understood as a form of artistic expression that is at one and the same time critical reappraisal and analysis of the present-day consequences of the colonial past both in Italy and in the former colonies” ([21], p. 4). As Ursula Lindsey states, “Spina was a product of the Italian colony—he owed it his education and his inspiration, what he called his *destino*” [22]. As such, his interest as a writer lay in capturing “the twisted logic of colonialism past and present, which to justify itself first insists on a fundamental difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’, and then insists on annihilating that difference” [22].

I will now proceed by discussing in more detail some of the fundamental transcultural elements of *The Young Maronite*.

5.1. Transnational Locations

The year is 1912 and Italy has just begun its colonial enterprise in North Africa, wrestling Libya’s eastern province of Cyrenaica from the Ottoman Empire. The story unfolds in the harbor city of Benghazi. From time to time, however, the narration shifts to Italian locales. Some of the most intriguing and revealing dialogues take place in a villa and at a theatre club in an undefined location in Lombardy. These are the settings in which Italian grand dames discuss the newly acquired colony and its future with Colonel Romanino, who is on a mission to find a suitable *buen retiro* for his friend and brother in arms Captain Martello. In the course of the narrative, several references are also made to Istanbul—the city where two other characters (Hajji Semereth Effendi and “the Venetian”) spent a previous chapter of their lives—and to Sicily, the island to which Libyan soldiers who had enrolled in the Italian colonial Infantry (Fanteria Libia) were sent for their training. Despite this territorial heterogeneity, Spina is not prone to use foreign locations as exotic stereotypes but rather as settings best suited to the issues he intends to address and the themes he set out to develop. In the case of the *Young Maronite*, the writer is keen to explore issues related to patriotism, nationalist propaganda, cultural stereotyping, honesty/duplicity, multiple selves, loyalty, belonging, and sense of estrangement.

5.2. Characters Endowed with a Cross-Cultural Background and Destiny

The main character in the first act of Spina’s Cyrenaican saga is undoubtedly Émile Chebas, a young and ambitious merchant from Aleppo who has just landed in Benghazi with his first cargo of goods from Alexandria. Once we get through the first pages, however, we quickly realize that other characters are as much relevant to the story as the young Maronite. The first one is the rich and powerful Turkish merchant Hajji Semereth Effendi, an imposing figure whose somber past makes him somewhat

“larger than life” ([2], p. 27). Readers soon learn that prior to his fall in disgrace—leading to his exile in the backwater of Benghazi—Hajji was a high public officer of the Ottoman Empire in Istanbul. Another central character of the novel is Captain Martello, an Italian army officer who goes missing in Africa. Despite (or maybe precisely because of) his disappearance at the very beginning of the book, his ghost looms over the colonial horizon like a haunting moral compass. Another seemingly marginal character, the Venetian—a repudiated woman of Italian origin who followed Hajj from Istanbul as a housekeeper—plays a fundamental role in the way the plot develops towards its tragic end.

One cannot but notice how the various cultural and linguistic features most of the characters display reflect their author’s hybrid identity and transnational destiny. On several occasions, in Spina’s works we encounter protagonists who, more or less consciously and/or willingly, are engaged in getting accustomed and, possibly, adapting to changing geographies, perspectives, and socio-cultural contexts. In *The Young Maronite* in particular, Spina gives us insightful accounts of how individuals react when another culture poses a challenge to their identity. Most revealingly, he lingers on those characters more prone to steer away from common and debilitating group dynamics based on the “us and them” dichotomy. In this regard, Colonel Romanino’s comment while conversing with Signora Ferrara is exemplary: “You’re afraid . . . of individual logic and experience. But our last hopes rest precisely on the individual. This is the moment to love Salvation more than the Motherland” ([2], p. 33).

5.3. A Proliferation of Points of View

Readers get often lost in Spina’s plurivocal mazes. The author is a master at aptly shifting the point of view from one character to the other. One is never certain from which visual angle the story is being seen and from which perspective is being narrated. We move on shifting sands here. Nothing is given for granted nor for certain. Each personality represents a fascinating and complex conundrum. Most of the characters in the *Young Maronite* discover that their identity is not what it seems to others and is never so clear-cut as the others would like it to be. This contributes to enriching the inner complexity and contradictory nature of the narrative and to generating a destabilizing effect. It is as if the author’s plural identities and points of view were dispersed among his characters, with their multiple voices, making it impossible to distinguish a single, reliable authorial standpoint. This aspect resonates with Brian Castro’s reasoning when discussing with Karen Barker the voice assumed by his culturally hybridized characters: “Their métissage opens up a multiplicity of views and worlds which are not only new to homogenous cultures but which embody an open secret, an overt mystery which is ungraspable by those cultures, not because it is a mystery per se in the end, but because uniform cultures are so blind” ([23], p. 246).

Hajji, for example, is perceived by the local community as a man whose words and opinions always sound “ambiguous” ([2], p. 38) despite the fact that his life deeds will show he is, after all, a man of integrity who answers his own inner moral compass, even when this means falling and being chased from paradise ([2], p. 64). In the eyes of the reader he may appear a real “monster”—an adjective used by the same author to describe him ([2], p. 41)—who has no scruples in marrying a terrified 12-year-old girl, who—although repelling him—will become the youngest of his four wives. But who is the real monster in the end? Is it Hajji Semereth, who agrees to let his child bride grow into a woman before claiming his husband’s rights and who is even willing to cover up her infidelity with the young and handsome Ferdinando (an orphan whom Hajji had rescued from a destiny of misery)? Or is it Hajji’s nephew, who—going against Hajji’s wish to forgive and save the two lovers—decides to kill them and thus avenge the family’s honor? De facto—and according to the group logic of the natives—forgiving such a sacrilege “might unleash a host of terrible consequences: there would be less to fear from Ferdinando’s [and Zulfa’s] death than from his absolution. The world would become drearier and gloomier, but at least it wouldn’t be turned upside down” ([2], p. 64).

In a similar fashion, we are exposed to Captain Martello’s ambivalent disposition and identity dualism. The Italian officer is not only portrayed as the military representative of a colonial power, the aggressive agent of an expeditionary force. He is also someone who feels uncomfortable in his

role as a colonizer, someone who is fascinated by the unknown Other and naively tries to develop a connection, finding only rejection and silence among the natives. He is a man torn between his sense of duty as an imperial military officer and his desire to get to know and be embedded in another culture. The dignity and the humanity that transpire from the enemy (for example, the troubling event of the Turkish soldier who kisses the beautiful face of a dead Italian young lieutenant) nurture the captain's respect towards his opponents and thus throw him in a state of doubt in regard to the whole colonial enterprise. According to the discerning description given by Signora Ferrara, Captain Martello is a man who, despite having a past "so similar to ours . . . has been to mysterious places where he's made new acquaintances or been dramatically deprived of certainties so familiar to us" ([2], p. 33). Later on, a fellow officer will confirm Signora Ferrara's shrewd reflection on the captain's unacknowledged wish to force his way into Libyan culture and his subsequent emotional derangement: "But what estranged him from us? Encountering a world governed by different laws, the legitimacy of such a society, the irredeemable sin of our attempt to destroy it? It's as if he'd stumbled into an opera house for the first time in his life and was confronted with a reality that followed its own rules: Instead of sitting back and enjoying the show, he suffered an identity crisis and could no longer draw any comfort from being a spectator" ([2], p. 216).

In one way or another, most of the characters in the novel are made to feel outsiders, and most of the time in more than one way. If it is true that Captain Martello and Colonel Romanino feel alienated among the native population of the Libyan colony, then, after their "long descent to that Underworld" (*i.e.*, Africa seen from the Italian shores), they have also become "estranged" in their native Italy ([2], pp. 33, 37). Again, it is Signora Ferrara who perceptively uncovers Colonel Romanino's true emotional state: "he feels like a stranger here, as though . . . he too, like Captain Martello, had been subjected to unbearable apparitions that now make his sweet Lombardy as incoherent and random as a nightmare" ([2], p. 33). One even gets to wonder, again through an outsider's point of view, who is the colonized and who is the colonizer in this complex identity canopy—the Arab rebels who, "as nimble as acrobats", resist the foreigner's invasion; or the Italian soldiers, barricaded within the city walls of few, well-defended coast locations, too afraid to venture in that "vast, obscure country stretching out before [them]" ([2], p. 36)? Hajji himself feels estranged in his Cyrenaican exile so far away from his native Istanbul and lost paradise: "A guarded man, who spent many years in a faraway place and only partially belonged to the city, seeming to dwell in another place altogether" ([2], p. 64). Hajji's estrangement is reiterated further on: "He was living in a different dimension to Benghazi's other residents, and his detachment from them was thereby accentuated" ([2], p. 46). Although in different terms, even Zulfa, Hajji's child bride, experiences her share of estrangement the moment she is forced to leave her childhood behind and enter Hajji's homestead: "It was as though she had got lost in an unknown country, armed with a language known only to her" ([2], p. 40).

Only Emile, the young Maronite, seems to have found his peace and stability in an in-between and neutral cultural space of "unbelonging", of positive or wise estrangement in which even a felt sense of exclusion can be used in one's favor as a point of strength instead of as a weakness. This clarifies the rhetorical question Hajji asks himself while watching the confident and tranquil way in which Emile converses with his guests upon his return from a trip to Egypt: "He was a Christian, like the invaders, and yet spoke the Arabic like the Libyans. Both factions would consider him one of their own. Would he experience this duality as a mark of unassailable foreignness, or use it as a talisman, a source of strength?" ([2], p. 61) Emile's state of "unbelonging" opens up onto a privileged, perhaps already transcultural, intellectual and psychological dimension where one is able to feel quietly *in place*, rather than constantly *out of place*, and in which "numerous, and contradicting, possibilities [can] co-exist" ([2], p. 160). This individualized, possibly transcultural state allows to reconcile in oneself even the most ingrained binary group oppositions—foreigners *versus* natives, Christians *versus* Muslims, colonizers *versus* colonized.

5.4. A Complex Mix of Linguistic Codes and Narrative Genres

The *Young Maronite* is exemplary in showing to what extent Spina likes to mix and play with literary genres and stylistic registers, to the point that it is hard to define it as simply a *novel*. In it, Spina breezily mixes real facts with fictions, documentary data with the works of the imagination, the personal and the fantastic with modern Libyan history. The writer finds no problem in interspersing his fictionalized narrative with excerpts from articles published in Italian and French newspapers of the time; with official documents (proclams, ordinances, royal decrees) released by the Italian Government; with accurate recounts of the Cyrenean colonial enterprise provided by British, French, or Italian historians; with the content of posters affixed by Arab insurgents on the walls of Libyan towns; or with *surahs* from the Koran. It must be noted, however, that André Naffis-Sahely, who did the English translation, omitted translating all the above-mentioned documents in order to give a smoother pace to the narrative and “keep the flow of Spina’s prose unimpeded” [22]. This “fairly daring choice”, as Naffis-Sahely himself described it, may be questionable but undoubtedly in its English amended translation *The Young Maronite* has acquired a new lightness and greater readability ([24], p. 367). Space and content restrictions do not allow a thorough discussion of the translator’s choices, omissions and possible alterations in allowing Spina’s voice to be heard in English. Due to its complexity and the ethical issues (in particular in regard to what Rodica Dimitriu calls “ethic ambivalence”) it raises, this discussion requires further investigation [25].

Spina also likes to play with different registers. Occasionally, he construes his dialogues as if the characters were on stage, reciting lines in a play. In those instances, the language is dignified, solemn, as if the reader had been magically transposed in the midst of a Greek tragedy. At other times, the narration takes almost the form of a moral fable, even expressing a rule of behavior—in cases like these, the reference to *The One Thousand and One Nights* is almost formulaic. It happens for example when a wealthy merchant meets Emile to intercede on behalf of Armand, the young Maronite’s brother. At the firm, with his careless and sometimes irresponsible attitude towards work, Armand had openly challenged Emile, thus embittering their relationship. After the merchant has successfully extracted a promise that Émile will forgive his brother and treat him more kindly in the future, he takes his leave with these words: “Criticism your own faults and weaknesses with the same vigor you apply to Armand’s. One must measure oneself against perfection, not other people’s mistakes” ([2], p. 107).

5.5. The Art of Unbelonging

Having made his home in an imaginary place at the intersection of Europe and the Middle East, Spina is hardly classifiable using traditional national or ethnic literary categories. He may thus better fit within that loose set of transcultural authors who wander across national and literary boundaries and whose identities cannot be reduced to nationalities. Let us just think, for example, of writers such as Paul Bowles, with his Moroccan acquired pedigree; of Marguerite Yourcenar, who devoted herself to spiritual and intellectual journeys across the Mediterranean; or of Jorge Luis Borges, who relished in his multifarious cultural vagrancies.

Spina was of Syrian descent but wrote and published in Italian. He was educated in Italy but spent most of his adult and professional life in Libya, speaking fluent Arabic and French while running the family textile business. While in Italy, he befriended Italian writers and poets (from Alberto Moravia to Cristina Campo), but his real writers of reference—from Proust to Joseph Conrad, from Thomas Mann to Robert Musil, from the medieval itinerant scholar Ibn Khaldun to the great Libyan writer Ibrahim al-Koni, from the fifth-century Greek philosopher-cum-bishop Synesius of Cyrene to Joseph Conrad—are to be found across many ages and many borders.

In his books Spina was not concerned with and did not delve into all those provincial lives and stories happening within the confines of the Italian peninsula. His scope was much wider and embraced the whole southern Mediterranean. Although writing in Italian, one senses he culturally and stylistically did not rely upon the limiting space of the Italian literary system.

All this partly explains why it was difficult for Spina to find proper recognition within the 20th century Italian literary canon. Whereas his complex sentence structure resonates with the 19th century German development of the philosophical novel, his choice of words seems to contain something of the poetic elements, elaborate forms, and layers of metaphor found in Arabic literature. Let us take, for example, the sentence “*come la caccia, la strage passa leggera*” ([13], p. 33)—in Italian it sounds beautifully lyrical (in this case, unfortunately, and in spite of Naffis-Saheli’s refined ability with words, its English translation does not seem able to fully convey its poetic resonance: “*like hunting—and massacres are taken lightly*” ([2], p. 35).

In other instances, however, and despite the fact that “his sharp, poetic images lodge instantly in one’s memory”, Spina’s way of conflating prose and poetry is not always that effective (at least in the Italian original text) [22]. For post-war Italian writers and readers, his writing style may be perceived as overtly elegiac and polished. Moreover, the conversations among merchants, married couples, Italian officers, or other representatives of the Italian community feel unconvincingly cerebral, stylized, and excessively eloquent. Above all, Spina’s elliptical descriptions and dense, erudite sentences often prove hard to follow, “demanding to be reread” [22]. Nonetheless, as Ursula Lindsey states, “the originality of Spina’s vision, the strength of his voice, compensates for the occasional *longueur*” [22]. Although stylistically Spina’s work suffers from this fairly self-conscious, pre-meditated narrative and split literary register, its historical and cultural insightfulness makes up for it. Having a chance to explore how occupiers operated and conquered their territory, how they imposed rules or bent to local customs has much to teach us about the present day. In this regard, the 2015 English translation of the *Confines of the Shadow* seems particularly timely. As the writer Hisham Matar stated when asked about Spina’s work, “What’s happening in Libya is tragic but also baffling to a lot of people, not least of all Libyans. I think that returning to these works, returning to history as it were, and understanding that the present is very much a symptom of that past is very valuable and so, notwithstanding my literary criticism of some of [its] aspects, [Spina’s work] does feel like a gift” [26].

In his youth and throughout his adult life, Spina underwent several transpatriation processes which led him to outgrow the culture in which he was raised, to embrace other cultures and, ultimately to transcend all of them. This made him simultaneously an insider and an outsider of the cultures in and with which he worked. Petra Rüdiger and Konrad Gross describe this position as the one of “an intimate insider and a determined outsider” ([27], p. xi), I prefer to describe this position as the one of the “outlier” rather than of the outsider—not of the one being (or willing to be) kept out of the group, but of the one who, having transcended various cultural, ethnic, religious, or territorial lines of demarcation ends up having a sense of “unbelonging” or of “belonging among the unbelonging”, wherever he or she is. I open here a small parenthesis to elucidate my way of using the term “unbelonging”. The writer Dubravka Ugresic has adopted the term unbelonging in her book *Europe in Sepia* when talking about “the intoxication of belonging (to a home, a homeland, a country, a faith) and the trauma of unbelonging” ([28], p. 204). In a personal email exchange, the writer Inez Baranay has provided a different nuance to the concept of unbelonging, which adheres to a transcultural viewpoint: “the transcultural is a theoretical arena, in which the company is fine with a sense of belonging among the unbelonging” [29].

By reading Spina’s works, it seems impossible to fit him within a single, fixed national cartography and identify the cultural/national context he and most of his characters speak from. It is as if his novels were set in a metaphorical or mental transplace—a transcultural territory (or, perhaps, a dimension) which can still be the homeland, the adopted land, or one’s country of residence, but where one nonetheless gets to feel a sort of intellectual or imaginary detachment from that well-known reality. Even when writing within an explicit Western canon, Spina still does it from a different perspective, as if he was thriving “on the fascination of the stranger’s gaze” ([30], p. 248). This, it may be argued, is another reflection of the author’s physical, cultural, and identity mobility, of his transient state of unbelonging—or belonging regardless.

As a result of all that has been said so far, *The Young Maronite* does not allow its readers to easily discern the author's nationality. At the most, Spina's readers may sense the author's underlying debt to an imagined (and possibly questionable) Western literary tradition but they would not be able to actually detect his ethnicity, nationality, cultural belonging(s), or religious view(s).

6. Conclusions

The Young Maronite clearly shows us to what extent Spina is willing—and able—to cross the fault-lines between cultures and societies—what Maurizio Ascari defines a “transcultural desire” ([31], pp. 3–4). Indeed, rooted in Spina's transcultural sensibility is a wish for and negotiation of difference. By acting as a “bridge writer”, Spina is constantly operating in the mode of a cultural translator, going back and forth from one culture to the other, recognizing that each culture is the bearer of a cognitive and cultural tradition which has an effect on the other culture and vice versa, even in unbalanced power relations. As Anne Holden Rønning suggests: “No one can live in another country or culture, or read extensively about other cultures, without being influenced and affected by it” ([32], p. 5). This work of interpretation undeniably shows “the performative power of literature to cross cultural barriers and weave a network of connections, for in a way all good works of literature are transcultural” ([33], p. 6).

Reading and re-discovering Spina in a transcultural mode brings to light the striking newness of his literary efforts, in which lived transnational life, literary imagination, and transcultural sensibility are inextricably interlaced. The main element that characterizes Spina as a transcultural writer and distinguishes him from his “cousin species” (migrant/diasporic/exile/postcolonial writers) is his relaxed attitude when facing issues linked to identity, nationality, rootlessness and dislocation. It is an attitude acquired through a more or less (sub)conscious process of transpatriation, which reflects itself also in his narratives. Writers such as Spina can thus truly act as cultural mediators between otherness and identity, two terms that in transcultural terms should be intended as complementary rather than simply opposed. It is not only a question—or not any more—of how Westerners see Others, but also of how Others see Westerners and the rest of the world.

For this reason, Spina's works can unmistakably be inscribed within transcultural literature, a literature (part of the wider republic of world literature) able to transcend the borders of a single culture in its choice of topic, vision and scope. As humans, we are constantly in search of ways to relate to each Other and to constantly adapt to changing societal patterns. Stemming from and describing processes of cultural negotiation and translation, transcultural literature may contribute to an increased global awareness and a wider sense of solidarity, thus ensuring the continuity of societies, as it has done throughout time.

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