

RABIE JABER AND YUSUF AL-INGLIZI

By Kamal Salibi

It is extremely difficult to get Rabie Jaber to talk about himself. He prefers to have his novels speak for him and for themselves, and would have done so anonymously had that been at all possible. At least, so he says. When I tried to interview him about his life and work, I found myself being interviewed by him instead. All he was willing to tell me about himself was the following: he was born in Beirut in 1972; he received a bachelor's degree in physics from the American University of Beirut in 1992; his family are Druze from the village of Kafar Nabrah, in the 'Urqub district of the Shuf mountains; he is a voracious and omnivorous reader and does not socialize much; he lives with his Maronite wife Renée Hayek in East Beirut. People who know him tell me, in addition, that his father, Riyad, is an agricultural engineer and an active member of the Lebanese communist party, and that his mother, Sukayna, is a schoolteacher.

Rabie published his first novel, *Sayyid al-'Atma* (Lord of the Darkness) in 1992, the year he graduated from the American University of Beirut. It won him a monetary prize with which (as he says in a later novel) he bought a set of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. For a time, he earned his living by doing odd jobs, such as working on a chicken farm, after which he joined the Beirut office of the London-based Arabic newspaper, *Al-Hayat*, where he edits the weekly cultural page. By the start of 2004, he had published ten novels, which in chronological order are the following:

1. *Sayyid al-'Atmah* (1992): the annals of a Druze village of the Shuf facing the famine and hardships of the First World War.
2. *Shāy Aswad* (Black Tea, 1995): the story of four young left-wing intellectuals, of different social and religious backgrounds, living and interacting in Ras Beirut during the horrors of the Lebanese civil war and the years immediately following.

3. *Al-Bayt al-Akhīr* (The Last House, 1996): a story woven around the career and accidental death in 1993 of the popular left-wing Lebanese Maronite film-maker, Marun Baghdadi.
4. *Al-Farṣsha al-Zarqā'* (The Blue Moth, 1996). The silk-reeling mill in the town of Btater, in the Jurd district of Mount Lebanon, was founded by the Frenchman, Nicholas Portalis, in 1841, and then taken over by his brother, Fortuné, in 1847. The son of Fortuné, Prosper Portalis, who had studied biology at the Sorbonne under Louis Pasteur, inherited the mill upon his father's death in 1882. This much is fact; then follows the story. As a child in Btater, Prosper Portalis had had a fleeting vision of a beautiful blue moth (instead of a drab and flightless yellow one) emerging from a silk cocoon and flying so high as to disappear into the sky. His father had told him at the time that what he saw was an illusion; but Prosper was to spend his whole life searching for his blue moth, and trying to crossbreed different wild and cultivated varieties of the species in the hope of producing one. The central figure in *Al-Farṣsha al-Zarqā'*, however, is Zahiyya 'Abbud: a Christian girl from the Btater neighbourhood who begins life in the first decade of the twentieth century as a child worker in the Portalis silk mill, and is chosen by Prosper to be his laboratory assistant, his dream of finding the elusive blue moth continuing to inspire her for the rest of her otherwise drab life. Rabie relates *Al-Farṣsha al-Zarqā'* in the first person as Zahiyya Abbud's grandson, Nur Khater – the pseudonym under which the novel was published. (Nur Khater is actually a combination of the names of two of Rabie's Druze ancestors).
5. *Ralph Rizqallah fī al-Mir'āt* (Ralph Rizqallah in the Looking-Glass, 1997): a story woven around the suicide of a popular writer and middle-aged professor of psychology at the Lebanese University in Beirut, who threw himself off the famed Beirut Pigeon Rocks in 1995, while at the peak of his success.
6. *Kuntu Amīran* (I was a Prince, 1997): a take-off on the fairy tale of the prince turned by a witch's spell into a frog, related in the form of a historical novel set in Sicily and Italy in the fourteenth century.
7. *Naḡra Akhīra 'alṢ Kīn Sāy* (A Last look at Kin Say, 1998): a story set in medieval China, centring around the changing relations between two hunters who start life as inseparable friends.
8. *Yūsuf al-Inglīzī* (Yusuf the Englishman, 1999): The story of a real or imagined brother of Rabie's great-great-grandfather, whose contacts with American and British Protestant missionaries in Mount Lebanon and Beirut, followed by a

prolonged stay in England, leave him at a loss at how to go on with life.

9. *Raḥlat al-Gharnāṡī* (The Journey of the Granadian, 2002). An Arab shepherd boy from late eleventh-century Granada loses his brother during the wars of Christian reconquest in Spain and travels around the Mediterranean world in a vain search for him, ending up suffering from hallucinations in Crusader Antioch.
10. *Bayrūt Madīnat al-‘Ālam* (Beirut City of the World, 2004). An epic account of Beirut between the early 1820s and 1840, centering around the life of a one-armed Damascene greengrocer who first arrives in the town as a fugitive and ends up as the founder of a prosperous Beiruti family.

I first came to know of Rabie Jaber in the summer of 2002, when he sent me two of his novels as a present: *Al-Farāsha al-Zarqā’* and *Yūsuf al-Inglīzī*. What first struck me was the immense amount of historical knowledge that had gone into the making of the two books, the imaginative and seemingly effortless manner in which this knowledge is presented, and the author’s engaging ability to recapture the vanished light of earlier days. Also, the subtle manner in which he shifts the historical setting: in *Al-Farāsha al-Zarqā’*, between the Jurd district of Mount Lebanon, nineteenth-century Paris, Ottoman Beirut, and Khedival Egypt; in *Yūsuf al-Inglīzī*, between the Shuf mountains, the Protestant missionary quarters in Beirut, and Dickensian London. In every case, the setting comes vividly to life, with hardly a detail missed. I have re-read these two novels several times since, each time to discover nuances I had not noticed before: about Druze and Christian family and village life in nineteenth-century Mount Lebanon; about British and American missionaries and French entrepreneurial families who insinuated themselves into the Lebanese scene to become part and parcel of the local landscape; and about countless other things besides.

In *Yūsuf al-Inglīzī*, Rabie Jaber relates something about the history of his family. Sometime in the early decades of the eleventh Christian century, he says, while the Druze *da’wa*, or preaching, was still open to converts, an illiterate shepherd from the Shuf mountains and his family accepted it. Thereupon the man, who was called Yusuf ‘Ali Jaber, handed over his flocks to the care of his sons, retired to a *khalwa*, or retreat, which he built for himself in the family vineyards, taught himself writing, and became a copyist of Druze sacred texts, thereby setting a family tradition. A seventeenth-century descendant of his, Ibrahim Jaber, was the most renowned copyist of the Druze

holy books in his time. Rabie Jaber is his direct descendant in the male line. Small wonder his familiarity with the Druze scriptures, and with the ancillary Sufi literature which the Druze prize. To preface his first novel, *Sayyid al-'Atma*, Rabie quotes from a Druze epistle: "Because what conceals is what is concealed, and what is concealed is what conceals; each is the other, there being no difference between them"; and, from the Sufi literature: "A thousand years past in a thousand years to come; this is time, and be not deceived by shadows." These two quotations, underlining the elusive nature of historical time and historical reality, might well also serve to introduce the work of Rabie Jaber as a whole.

To my mind, *Yūsuf al-Inglīzī* (1999) and *Bayrūt Madīnat al-'Ālam* (2004) are Rabie Jaber's masterpieces to date. For the purpose of the present conference on *Druze Perspectives*, I shall limit myself to a synopsis and some remarks on the first of these two novels, in which the theme is distinctly Druze.

Yūsuf al-Inglīzī is, by and large, a family saga – partly real, partly imagined – relating the tale of Rabie's ancestors, the Druze Jabers of the village of Kafar Nabrahk, in the Shuf mountains: a village which features in the novel under the fanciful name Kafar Burk, and is fictionally located on the opposite side of the Shuf mountain ridge from the one where the real Kafar Nabrahk stands. In the background is the turbulent history of nineteenth-century Mount Lebanon starting from the early 1830s, when Ibrahim Pasha and his Egyptian forces – including a contingent of "black men" from the Sudanese jungles – occupied Syria. More particularly, the novel concentrates on the life and career of Yusuf Jaber: the real or fictional son of the saintly Sheikh Ibrahim Khater Jaber by his second wife, Sarah Hamzeh. Sheikh Ibrahim's first wife, Zahiyya Hussein, had borne him ten sons and five daughters before she died. And of the ten sons, all had met violent ends without leaving progeny: nine in skirmishes or battles in the troubled years ending in 1840, with the expulsion of Ibrahim Pasha from Syria; and one, the eldest, when the roof of his house caved in on him, his wife and his twin baby sons during an unusually heavy snowstorm. Meanwhile, Sheikh Ibrahim's second wife, the young and frail Sarah Hamzeh, had borne him two sons – Yusuf and Nur al-Din – before she died in turn, leaving the two boys to be raised by their half-sister, Nassab, who was still unmarried at the time.

Born in 1832, Yusuf is an unusually sensitive child, his hair having turned completely white as he watched his eldest half

brother and his family being shovelled out dead from the snow. Having an uncanny gift for free-hand drawing, he can draw anything he sees to perfection. His father, before his death in 1840, had sent him to Dayr al-Qamar to live with a married half-sister and her family. The next year, three American missionaries, among them the physician and Arabist, Cornelius Van Dyck, arrive to set up a primary school in Dayr al-Qamar, and Yusuf is enrolled in their school. His father, Sheikh Ibrahim, used to read the Druze scriptures, so Yusuf is familiar with the Arabic alphabet and can draw all its characters. But the English which he begins to learn in the missionary school fascinates him. Before long, he completes reading the book of Genesis in English. Van Dyck is baffled when Yusuf, not yet nine years old, declares to him that "English words resemble things more than Arabic words do." Van Dyck, who is just beginning to master Arabic, disagrees; but Yusuf holds on firmly to his view. The missionaries, moreover, are amazed by the boy's facility at drawing. When, in that same year, the outbreak of violence between the Christians and Druze in Dayr al-Qamar forces the American missionaries to close down their school and return to Beirut for safety, they take Yusuf with them to complete his primary education there. He stays with an American missionary couple, the Sheppards, and grows up with their children.

In 1845, arrangements are made for Yusuf to go to London, to complete his studies at Westminster College; in 1849, he enrolls at the Royal Academy of Arts and studies painting. His sponsor in London is Helen Ashburn, a widowed upper-class lady living in Fleet Street whose sister is a missionary in Beirut. She asks him to address her as Aunt Helen. By the time he joins the Royal Academy, he has become a British citizen and changed his name to Joseph Abraham Mender - an attempt to translate his Arabic name. Finding painting not to his liking, Yusuf drops his studies at the Royal Academy, and Aunt Helen arranges for him to become an illustrator and engraver for *Punch* magazine - a job which earns him enough of an income to marry and have a home of his own. His bride is the beautiful Mary, daughter of Aunt Helen's cook, Elizabeth, and they are married in St. Dunstan's Church, Fleet Street. Their happy married life, however, does not last long. Mary bears him a son, whom he names Abraham after his father, Ibrahim, but the baby boy dies of a fever less than three months after his first birthday. Mary refuses to have him buried in the churchyard, so he is buried in their front garden, under a magnolia tree. Shortly after, Mary hangs herself on a branch of that same tree, over her baby son's grave.

His English life suddenly shattered, Yusuf Jaber takes his considerable savings and leaves London shortly after for Mount Lebanon, where he tries hard, but fails to resume his original life as a Druze villager. The missionaries get in touch with him once more and engage him as an engraver at the American Press in Beirut, where he is needed to make a new set of Arabic type to print their Arabic translation of the Bible (of which the New Testament is nearing completion). But, here again, Yusuf feels totally estranged. After dutifully completing the work, he boards an American steamer and leaves Beirut, never to be heard of again. When his brother, Nur al-Din, arrives in Beirut to bid him farewell a few days before his departure, Yusuf gives him his gold pocket-watch to keep: a watch he had bought during his London years, and which Nur al-Din passes on to his descendants.

Though covering one of the most violent periods in the history of Mount Lebanon, in which members of the Jaber family – not the least, Rabie's great-great-grandfather, Nur al-Din – were directly involved, the story of *Yūsuf al-Inglīzī* is told in placid tones and with total detachment. The characters in it – whether Druze, local Christians or Muslims, or foreign missionaries – feature as men, women and children of the same human stock. None among them are villains, and all of them have the potential to be big-hearted and kind even in dire adversity, although the logic of events sometimes drives them to commit acts of violence that run contrary to their nature. The novel is replete with parables to this effect. Here, for example, is a vignette that Rabie presents of his great-great-grandfather, Nur al-Din, at the battle of 'Ayn Dara: the first major encounter between the Druze and the Christians in the civil war of 1860:

In the battle of 'Ayn Dara, Nur al-Din suffered a stab in his neck. The stab did not kill him. He rolled down the thorns of a hillside with a man, then strangled him with his bare hands. Blood was spouting out of his neck. He tried to stop the wound with his hand; he was unsuccessful. He tore a piece of his clothes and wrapped his neck. To stop the bleeding, he had [virtually] to throttle himself. In the sun of May, amidst the noise and the shouting, he was able to reach a spring. He stooped over a pool of clear water to wash his wound. He saw his face in the pool covered with blood, with atrophied muscles, resembling a strange face: a face he had seen that day for the first time; the face of the man he had just strangled.

This vignette is somewhat reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Double*. Another vignette, again relating to the Druze-Christian

civil war of 1860, projects the Good Samaritan or Gallant Enemy theme, which features prominently in Druze folk history and lore. This time, the main figure in the parable is not Nur al-Din Jaber, but his brother-in-law, Mu'izz al-Din al-Tawil, of *Asbayya*, the husband of his half-sister Nassab.

[Mu'izz al-Din] was taking part in the battle of Jazzin. Overwhelmed by the enemy, he fled by way of a col in the [Jazzin] escarpment. He entered a passage not wide enough for his horse [to pass through], and he would not dismount and leave the horse as loot for his pursuers. He attempted a leap [from one rock to another] but fell into the crevice in [between]. His leg was broken and the bones of his horse were shattered. He lost consciousness. The next morning a Christian fellow spotted him from the opposite ridge of Mazra'at al-Shuf. It was said that he could see his sword glimmering in the sun, so he came and rescued him. Mu'izz al-Din gave him his sword and his dagger in appreciation. On the way [back] to Kafar Burk, as they [moved on] taking cover between the trees, Mu'izz al-Din said to his rescuer: "With my sword and my dagger I have killed of your kindred a number I can no longer count. Why did you rescue me, instead of killing me?" His rescuer answered: "I rescued you because you were not that [same] man while you were suspended from the cliff, with your horse impaled on the rocks underneath." That fellow was called 'Abd al-Ajad (Christian Arabic for Dominic). Mu'izz al-Din was to give his name to the [third] male child that Nassab was to bear him.

Mu'izz al-Din al-Tawil and Nur al-Din Jaber, in *Yūsuf al-Inglīzī*, are of the salt of the earth, so to speak: men who stay home, living simple lives with kith and kin in keeping with traditional norms, doing what circumstances compel them to do at times and accepting the consequences, and all the while siring families which survive on the same home grounds to the present day. Yusuf, by contrast, is the man who goes away, ultimately, to lose all contact with family and friends among whom, nonetheless, he continues to be fondly remembered. In relating the odyssey of the man, Rabie Jaber, neither acquitting nor condemning him on any score, follows his gradual estrangement, stage by stage, starting from his boyhood years.

As Yusuf becomes more and more attached to his Protestant missionary teachers in Dayr al-Qamar, and as his preference for English over Arabic becomes more set, he stops playing with his friends and young relatives, keeping more and more to himself. One day, the horrifying thought strikes him: what if the school

in Dayr al-Qamar closed down, and the missionaries left? Once he is established in Beirut with the Sheppards, the American missionary family that virtually adopts him, blurred scenes of his former village life occasionally flash in his mind for fleeting moments, then vanish; only in his dreams are these memories more sustained. During his second year in Beirut, his brother-in-law, Mu'izz al-Din, the husband of his sister, Nassab, who had been his surrogate mother, arrives in town to see him, carrying baskets of quince and bunches of dried okra as a present for the Sheppards, and bringing Yusuf some family news: Nassab has borne a son who they named Ibrahim, after Nassab's father; one of Yusuf's favourite nieces has been married and her father, Yusuf's elderly brother-in-law, 'Abd al-Latif al-Qadi, who had taken him under his loving care in Dayr al-Qamar, has died. Rabie does not note the reaction of Yusuf to Mu'izz al-Din's visit or the family news that he brings him, leaving the reader to assume that his reaction was, at best, one of indifference, if not also of social embarrassment at a peasant relative's unwelcome intrusion into his new life.

The Sheppards had left Beirut, and Yusuf is living on his own in the American mission house, when Mu'izz al-Din arrives to see him again two years later, bringing him news that Nassab had borne a second son, whom they called Hamzeh, this time after Mu'izz al-Din's father. He also tells him about the exceptionally stormy weather they are having back home in the mountains. Yusuf simply listens to his brother-in-law's conversation, then both fall silent. Finding nothing more to say, Mu'izz al-Din brings out bunches of red peppers and small jars of jam from a basket he carries - obviously, a present from Yusuf's loving sister Nassab - and gives them to Yusuf. He asks him how he is doing; Yusuf pretends not to understand the question. "You are like a younger brother to me," says Mu'izz al-Din, "You must let me know if you want something, if you need something. ..." "I know, I know," Yusuf interrupts, nodding his head in impatient affirmation. After bidding his brother-in-law a courteous yet perfunctory farewell, Yusuf opens one of the jars of jam sent him by his sister to taste it. A piece of gauze is glued over the mouth of the jar and, as he removes it, his fingers become stuck together by the glue. When he uses his other hand to taste the jam, all his fingers become sticky. Suddenly filled with rage, Yusuf throws the whole jar, jam and all, out of the window. No subsequent feelings of compunction are reported.

Yusuf is about to leave for England, and he decides to visit the mountains to bid his relatives farewell and see his brother, Nur

al-Din, in Kafar Burk before his departure. He is thirteen years old, and already looks like a young man. His brother, seemingly the only member of the family for whom he still feels some affection, is eight. Here is an abridgement of the account Rabie Jaber gives of this visit: an account, incidentally, which is typical of his narrative style:

The reader is now expecting the scene of the meeting between Yusuf and Nur al-Din. The brothers had not met for four or five years. The reader is also expecting the moment when [Yusuf] sees [his sister,] Nassab, now the mother of two children. He has grown taller, and his facial features have hardened. Nassab has also grown older and, after the first two children, her belly swells for the third time. Her breasts droop a bit, and the veins on the back of her hand are beginning to show. Otherwise, she appears happy. No matter all this. We now await the appearance of Yusuf on his white donkey, riding up the short dirt lane towards [his ancestral] house. Nassab is sitting on the terrace in the shade of a climbing grapevine. Nur al-Din is washing some fruits in a stone basin nearby. The next moment, Nassab hears the braying of the donkey, so she raises her head from her knitting needles and woollen thread. Nur al-Din also turns around, his hands dripping with water. When Nassab recognizes [Yusuf's] face, she embraces her brother and weeps. Yusuf, for his part, kisses her without feeling anything, as if he was embracing a stranger he had never known. This feeling does not puzzle him. He simply does not think of it. He feels as if he is in a dream: as if he is watching himself standing on this old terrace, embracing this woman, then turning towards Nur al-Din.

So much for the farewell scene. Yet, on the eve of his departure to England, Yusuf recalls his visit to the mountains as he walks along the Beirut seashore. Then follows a day-dream in which he revisits the graveyard and mulberry groves of Kafar Burk and remembers his mother and father.

Once he has settled in London, in Aunt Helen's palatial house, Yusuf's memories of his boyhood life in the Shuf mountains recede further and further into oblivion, all the more so after he changes his name to Joseph Mender, gets his British papers, marries Mary, and comes to have a London home of his own. Even in his dreams, the memories of his Lebanese mountain past become confused and unclear, sometimes turning into nightmares. The English weather takes so much of a toll on his Mediterranean tan that he begins to look increasingly English. He had brought with him to England a copy of the Druze scriptures, which he

continues to read dutifully twice or three times a week until he discovers, one day, that he no longer understands Arabic as he used to; so he puts the scriptures respectfully away in a drawer and drops the habit of reading them. Yet, even as the Englishman Joseph Mender, he still knows who he really is: Yusuf, the son of Ibrahim Jaber of Kafar Burk and his second wife, Sarah. He speaks to his wife, Mary, about them: how often, we are not told. And they agree to call their first son Abraham, for Ibrahim, and their second (not first) daughter Sarah, because Yusuf insists that their first daughter must be called Mary, after her mother.

Upon his arrival back in Beirut, Yusuf deposits a leather bag full of English gold pounds in the recently established Ottoman Bank before taking the donkey-ride uphill to his home village. He is twenty-six years old. His brother, Nur al-Din, is twenty-one; married at the age of fifteen, he is already the father of three boys and two girls, the eldest two, a boy and a girl, being twins, and the youngest, a baby boy called Yusuf, after his long-absent uncle. Mu'izz al-Din and Nassab, by then, had left with their children for Hasbayya, Mu'izz al-Din's original home, to make room for Nur al-Din's growing family in the old Jaber house in Kafar Burk.

Nur al-Din is beside himself with joy to see his brother again. He runs barefoot from the tomato fields to embrace him, kisses him on the shoulders and head, then bursts into tears. To honour Yusuf's return, he butchers two fattened sheep, seven hens and five ducks, and the feasting in his house continues for several days. On the first day, Yusuf is embarrassed to meet the guests while he still wears European clothes, so Nur al-Din lends him a set of his own to wear: the black baggy trousers called the *shirwāl*, the white shirt and black buttonless waistcoat, the white knitwear cap, and the goatskin *madās*, or boots. Once the greeting and feasting days are over, Nur al-Din takes Yusuf on a tour of the family property. Then they return home and sit on the terrace, face-to-face on a mat. While Nur al-Din prepares some coffee, Yusuf opens the conversation by asking him for a favour. Could he help him to find a tract of land to buy, large enough for him to build himself a house and have a field to farm. He is not rich, he assures his brother, and has not amassed a fortune in England; but he does have enough money for the modest purpose he has in mind. Nur al-Din thinks his brother is joking: "You? Buy land? When all this property is yours?" Yusuf does not understand. As he sees it, the property in question is rightly Nur al-Din's, because it was he who had tended it over the years and kept it from going wild.

At this point, Nur al-Din becomes so angry that the coffeepot and cups he is carrying almost fall from his hands: "You are my older brother, Yusuf," he says. "When I was a child crawling on all fours, and falling on the pebbles in the courtyard, you used to run and pick me up and press ^TMayyūn (*inula viscosa*) leaves onto my wounds. Am I a person of no breeding, so as to disown my brother? You build your house wherever you please. Right here, next door, if you wish." To appease Nur al-Din's anger, Yusuf concedes the point. But as he looks at the man who sits facing him on the mat, insisting on having him share his property simply because they are brothers, he sees in him a total stranger about whom he knows nothing.

No matter how hard he tries to re-adapt himself to village life, Yusuf remains an awkward loner. When Nur al-Din and his family go to attend the religious meetings held in the *khalwa* on Thursday evenings, Yusuf stays behind alone in his home, at a loss as to what he should do. He has his English books around him, and he sometimes picks up the King James Bible to read or whiles away the time singing English hymns. Nur al-Din does not mind his brother's eccentric habits. In due course, Yusuf begins to feel closer to him and becomes more appreciative of his boundless affection and magnanimity. Yet, he never tells him everything about himself. He remains Nur al-Din's brother and the English stranger at the same time. In the end, the English stranger gets the better of him. He collects the bag of English coins from the Ottoman Bank in Beirut and leaves his homeland again, this time not to return. All that he leaves behind, for his brother, is his gold watch.

With Yusuf's final departure, the leading role in *Yūsuf al-Inglīzī* is assumed by Nur al-Din: the brother who had hitherto stayed home. He is already deeply involved in preparations for the final encounter between the Druze and Christians in the Shuf mountains when he goes down to Beirut to bid his brother Yusuf farewell. The civil war of 1860 ends on all fronts with the rout of the Christians, several thousand of whom are massacred. Then follows the arrival of French and Turkish forces in Beirut and the Mountain to punish the Druze for the excesses they had committed during the hostilities. Four hundred and fifty among them are chosen by lot for exile to Belgrade, on the western periphery of the Ottoman Empire, and Nur al-Din is among them. He is locked in an underground cell, all by himself and virtually forgotten, in what was called the White Citadel of the city, living for two years "like a dog," as Rabie puts it, in total darkness. When an Ottoman bombardment of the Serbian sector of Belgrade from the White Citadel shatters its rickety

walls and causes them to collapse, all the Druze prisoners inside manage to escape and find their ways slowly back home, except for Nur al-Din. For months, he is caught in the rubble of the ruined citadel, drinking water from a leaking well and feeding on earthworms - and for some weeks, on the flesh of a snake - to survive. When he finally emerges from the rubble, he finds himself unable to tolerate daylight any more, and it takes him some time to re-learn how to talk, and to recall who he is and his homeland. Unable to work by day, he earns his living as a night watchman and grave digger in a Christian cemetery. In 1871, he finally manages to return home, only to find that half of his fields have been taken over by his married children. Having long taken him for dead, his wife and family are frightened rather than overjoyed to see him back, and treat him as an unwelcome ghost returning from beyond the grave to haunt them and disturb their lives.

Nur al-Din tolerates his unwelcome existence in Kafar Burk for five years, then disappears, to re-emerge the following year in a village on the opposite side of the ridge, living in a heavily darkened room and earning his living as a cobbler. That same year, his eldest son arrives to see him one day; and as Nur al-Din advances to embrace him, stumbling over the boots and shoes awaiting repair, his son pushes him away. He has simply come to deliver him a message: "The woman who used to be your wife has died." And having delivered the message, he turns and leaves. Nur al-Din's day-blindness prevents him from attending his wife's funeral; but he does go to Kafar Burk by night to visit her grave and, unable to locate it, visits all the family graves. Four years later, in 1882, he marries again, his second wife, Suhayla, being a woman of the Jayda family of Kafar Nabrakh. By now, he is forty-five years old. Suhayla bears him one son, whom he calls 'Imad al-Din. When the boy reaches the age of five, Nur al-Din takes him to Kafar Burk to show him his share of the family property. Still unable to abide the sunlight, he has to cover his eyes with a veil for the journey. He dies while they are on their way back home. Until his last days, two faces continue to haunt him: the white face of his brother Yusuf, whose gold watch he still carries and occasionally inspects, and the dark and emaciated face of the man he had strangled in the Battle of 'Ayn Dara. And, to end this presentation, here is an abridgement of the way in which Rabie Jaber terminates his novel:

'Imad al-Din inherited from his father that gold watch, and nothing more. He did not quarrel with his brothers nor did he claim property in Kafar Burk. He wished to live by the sweat of

his brow. He married at an early age, also a woman of the Jayda family. In 1899, his wife delivered twin boys: Muhammad and 'Ali. Both of them learnt from their father how to struggle quietly for their living. (Had he not worked as a day-labourer in the building of the government house in Baaqlin? Had he not worked as a day-laborourer in the construction of the railroad between Beirut and Damascus?) 'Ali immigrated to Argentina before the First World War and never returned. Muhammad remained in Kafar Nabrakh, survived the [war time] famine, cultivated a field, then bought another; and when he got bored with farming, he joined the French army [under the mandate]. After the independence of Lebanon, he became a sergeant in the gendarmerie. He had been married for years [by then], and had seven sons and five daughters. One of the sons is my father: upon the death of my grandfather in 1983, he inherited his gold watch - the watch of Yusuf the Englishman.

Rabie Jaber's *Yūsuf al-Inglīzī* can be read for sheer enjoyment, as an engaging though somewhat sad story told by a born story-teller. It can also be read as a study of the complexities of the Druze social character, economically sketched out in parables and vignettes. As well, it can be read time and again as a work of reference: a guide to a long-vanished world which, all things being considered, may not be as absent as we think.