A Bibliography for After Jews and Arabs

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Behind the Scenes:
Before *After Jews and Arabs*

The movement toward studies that went into what eventually became *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture*, published in 1993, began—faintly—in the late 1970s, and picked up speed and intensity in the mid-1980s. One form of the manuscript was finished, as my doctoral dissertation, in 1988. The circumstances of that writing, I would like to think, were somewhat different than much of the academic writing I generally encounter, either as a reader or within formal academic contexts. In retrospect, I find that *After Jews and Arabs* is a book that has seriously been read by a lot of poets and used as the tool I had meant it to become, because it has a poetic and musical structure. Its most sensitive and intelligent assessment (written by Peter Lamborn Wilson) was, in fact, published in *Sulfur*, the journal edited by the poet and translator Clayton Eshleman, arguably the most important American literary editor of the past thirty-odd years. While my textual models included works like *Call Me Ishmael* by Charles Olson, *Can These Bones Live* by Edward Dahlberg, *The Shape of Time* by George Kubler, *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. Du Bois, *Blues People* by Amiri Baraka, *Genoa* by Paul Metcalf, and *My Emily Dickinson* by Susan Howe, there was a deeper echo that had to do with the modes in which
“traditions” and “innovations” can be juxtaposed to stand out in relief. It was a musician, the guitar player Marc Ribot, who queried me about this and understood that I had in mind the kind of formal issues brought up by composers like Albert Ayler or Cecil Taylor. Such issues would include, for example, reference to a known refrain or blues phrase in a radically open improvisational composition.

At any rate, I was a writer (shades of the elated, belated, and painful declaration by William Carlos Williams, “I am a poet! I am. I am. I am a poet, I reaffirmed, ashamed”).1 That is, the quality and design of the writing were as important to me as what it was I was trying to say. I was lucky enough to have the support and wisdom of teachers who were also writers and translators of the first order, particularly Allen Mandelbaum (most well known for his translations of Dante, Ovid, and Homer, but also a poet whose linguistic and cultural sensibility is unique on the American scene), Frederick Goldin (a powerful interpreter of the medieval Troubadours and Minnesangers), and Burton Pike (recognized, most recently, for his pioneering work on and translation of Robert Musil). During this period, I had spent close to seven years in Jerusalem where, ironically, I had forgotten just how narrowly circumscribed American cultural space was regarding any kind of alternative views on the intellectual, social, and political history of the Middle East in general and the relationship of Jews, Arabs, Palestinians, and Israelis in particular. This is where even starker shades of another declaration cast their distinct outline, in the form of Mahmoud Darwish’s unequivocal lines: “Put it on record. / I am an Arab.”2 Framed within my own personal context, such a declaration might have seemed far-fetched, but within the collective endeavor I had undertaken — that is, an examination of, as I wrote in the preface to After Jews and Arabs, “the relationships between Jews and

1 William Carlos Williams, *Pictures from Breughel and Other Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1962), 120.
Arabs on the literary, cultural, social, and political planes…and the relationship of the Jew to the Arab within him or herself?" it came as a threat. In short, my manuscript began to circulate in an environment that was not only indisposed toward it formally but actually downright hostile toward it on ideological grounds.

Needless to say, attempts to get the manuscript published were met with enormous resistance. These attempts lasted close to five years before the book was finally accepted by the University of Minnesota Press. While this proved to be a very frustrating experience, I took umbrage in the fact that the vehement, vicious, and intellectually dishonest nature of the reactions to my work meant that it really was threatening and could actually effect change once it began to circulate. The bottom line boiled down to a very simple equation of power and authority: if my premises, assumptions, and conclusions gained in popularity, many of these people would simply no longer hold any legitimate authority in what they were teaching or writing without taking cognizance of my work or attempting to engage in a dialogue or a debate over it. If anything, it is this cowardly behavior that has most frustrated me. I feel that the field in which I am engaged — however one defines it, whether as Cultural, Middle Eastern, or Jewish Studies — has been very much impoverished by the absence of an open debate on After Jews and Arabs. I have tried, in a variety of ways, to ferret these anonymous critics out of their ivory bunkers and by-lines, but to no avail. After the Oslo Accords, an enormous victory for mainstream Zionism and a politically disastrous decision for the Palestinians, a new approach was taken. I was suddenly being asked to participate. It was quite comical to begin getting invitations for speaking engagements or article submissions from people who, only the week before, wouldn’t have dreamed of asking me to do anything. I am not sure whether what follows (extracts from two of the original anonymous reader’s reports, and my rebuttal to the second, more substantial report) will finally bring out the critics

3 Ammiel Alcalay, After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 27.
to engage openly with my work but at least, in Mahmoud Darwish’s words, it will be there for “the record.” Without further ado, here is the first extract:

This book does not represent new research but a very personal view of the situation of what the author calls “Mediterranean and Arab Jews.” It is a rather strange combination of history, literary analysis and quotes from a variety of literature worked into a pastiche containing the author’s own dislike of Israel, Zionism and Ashkenazic Jews. There is, therefore, no group of “specialists in the author’s field” who could welcome its publication.

There is a great deal of culling of quotations, but I would not call it scholarship. It is a highly romanticized work of the “picture of a vanished world” genre. The author does not mention by name the most important work on the major part of his many subjects, *The Jews of Islam* by Bernard Lewis. Since I didn’t receive a copy of his notes, I don’t know whether he quoted from it. Much of what Lewis, the outstanding scholar in the field, writes contradicts flatly statements by Alcalay about the socioeconomic status of the Jewish communities of which he writes.

If one is interested in the personal views of the writer — I don’t know who he is but I assume that he may be of Iraqi Jewish origin — it is a valid perspective on a little known subject. Not an important work in my view.

The style is florid and at times unintelligible. The spelling is horrendous in places: the author hasn’t learned the basic “i before e” rule, etc. The “organization” is such that I found it difficult to follow some of the author’s arguments. What gives it some power, however, is the strong emotional component. The author feels the subject strongly.

I cannot see this fitting into the publishing agenda of the Press. It is not a scholarly work nor is it a more personal work by a noted figure that would make it interesting to a broad public. It will be of interest primarily to people who want further ammunition to use against Israel although the author
sees his message as a broader critique of what modernity has done to the Middle East in general.

While I will let much of this go unremarked, I find the racist assumptions here to be most telling: that is, there seems to be some correlation in this reader’s mind between his or her assumption that I am of Iraqi origin (which I am not, unless of course one goes back to the tenth century, in which case I might be, and which would only further prove many of the points I was trying to make in the book), and the “strong emotional component.” I bring this up because it comes up, again and again. This first report, because of its brevity, must have relied on its author’s reputation and authority in the field since there doesn’t appear to be any need to even attempt proving its suppositions or claims. The writer of the next report, however, decided that my work posed such a threat that it needed to be misrepresented, in detail:

The main goal of the ms. is to provide a new view of the historical relationship between Jews and Arabs on the literary, cultural, historical, social and political planes; to shed light on “the relationship of the Jew to the Arab within himself or herself”; to examine the relationship of the Near Eastern or Oriental Jew “to a native space, namely, the Levant.” Although a great melange of evidence is marshalled for support, much of it is highly selective, some of it quite tendentious, and often it is grossly misinterpreted. (See my attached report).

Although polemical works are always stimulating, I do not think this is a significant contribution to the field. The author tries to disarm potential criticism by claiming to be an amateur. But that does not relieve him from responsibility for knowing what has been done in the field. He certainly has read a great deal, but he has also missed a great deal. Many of the false or exaggerated claims would not have been made if he had gone further. (See my attached report).

The dense style and the bombast preclude any general readership. Although this may appeal to some comparative literature people who have no acquaintance with the field, it
can by no means be termed “useful” because it is so tenden-
tious. (See my attached report).

Reader’s Report

Ammiel Alcalay’s manuscript is highly problematic. There is
certainly room for a new and fresh examination of the so-
cial, cultural and literary interaction between Jews and Ar-
abs over historical time and geographical space. And indeed
the literary aspects of this interaction (which seem to be this
author’s strong suit) are perhaps the least studied till now
(except within certain discreet topical limits). Unfortunately,
this manuscript fails to deliver. This is very much a piece of
what might be called “popular French intellectual writing”;
it never lets the facts get in the way of a good theory and it
is enamored, even self-absorbed in its own rhetorical flour-
ishes. The text is frequently couched in a dense, almost un-
readable style, heavily salted with a few favorite catchwords
which appear over and over again. “Space,” “duration,” and
“memory” are prime examples of this. And of course, there
is “palimpsest,” which is often used metaphorically, although
never literally. The pseudointellectual jargon is from time
to time punctuated—rather jarringly—with popular and
journalistic expressions (e.g., “x-ray vision”) which is totally
out of character with the purported tone. The manuscript is
simply a total mishmash throughout. The first chapter tries
to break out of the confines of the “rigid paradigms” of the
historical disciplinary approach and moves back and forth
from Maimonides to Osip Mandelstam, to Brenner, to the
Description d’Egypte of Napoleon’s scholars, to the Guide
Bleu of the 1930s, to Edmond Jabès, and Tahar Benjelloun
[sic]. Throughout these ramblings, the author makes all sorts
of historical and political points that are never really devel-
oped, much less proven, but which really ought to be. Some-
times these points are taken up in the lengthy asides of the
footnotes. Unfortunately, it is here that one sees the author’s
woefully inadequate knowledge of what has already been
done in the field. He is frequently dependent upon highly unreliable secondary works, some of which are scarcely more than political tracts. Marion Woolfson’s *Prophets in Babylon* is a case in point. Many of the gross generalizations regarding the lack of comprehensive studies on the multifaceted social relations “both within the Jewish communities and in relation to their societies” show appalling ignorance of the works of anthropologists such as Rosen, Geertz, Loeb, Deshen, Shokeid, Goldberg, and Bahloul, as well as historians, such as Zafrani in France, Ashtor and Hirschberg in Israel, Brown in England, Cohen, Schroeter, Stillman, Udovitch, and Valensi in the U.S.

The one major historian with whom the author is apparently familiar, and for whom he rightfully shows a great deal of admiration is S.D. Goitein. Chapter two, in fact, contains a very lengthy excursus on the Cairo Geniza and cites a potpourri of details from Goitein’s magisterial work *A Mediterranean Society*. This section of the manuscript, however, does not gel very successfully with the rest of the text and should be excised. The author is clearly out of his depth here. If there is the embryo of a publishable book here, it is in the first and final chapters.

The author’s strength is in describing how the Levant has been seen through 20th-century literary works, how Arabs and Jews viewed each other during the period of the rise of their respective nationalisms and in the period following the emergence of the State of Israel. Even here, however, there are some glaring weaknesses, for example, although the author is familiar with Israeli society during the 1950s and ’60s, when Middle Easterners were at best ignored, and at worst suppressed, he is totally out of touch with Israeli society of the 1970s and ’80s, when the situation changed dramatically and the Middle Eastern element began to be reclaimed and to assert itself both culturally and politically. (The author cannot retort that these decades are outside his highly idiosyncratic time limits — i.e., from the appearance of Dunash’s wine song in ca. 965 to the Yemenite laments in 1951 — since he is never
bothered by such temporal restrictions when it comes to airing his pet peeves).

What is most disturbing even in these stronger parts of the manuscript, is the thoroughly polemical tone and nature of the discourse. The author chooses only what fits his vision and conveniently ignores everything that does not. His one-sided depiction of the Arab in Israeli literature is a case in point. It fails to indicate that there was a range of attitudes from the romantic paternalism of Smilansky to the varied depictions in Yizhar, Shahar, Horgin, and others. Had he availed himself of other studies, such as G. Ramras-Rauch’s *The Arab in Israeli Literature*, rather than mainly Fouzi El-Asmar’s [sic] more partisan work, he might have presented an account of greater academic integrity. He might also have tried to give some sense of perspective by dealing with the image of Jews generally and Israeli [sic] particularly in Arabic literature.

Sometimes in reading this manuscript, I was not sure whether it was out of ignorance or the narrowness of polemical vision that the author makes some of the statements that he does. He laments the fact that the texts of Hebrew writers of Arabic milieu are ignored, mentioning three examples: Burla, Shami, and Kahanoff. Of the three only Burla is a truly first rate littérature, and it is simply false to say that he has been ignored. His novels are read in Israeli high schools and studied in universities in Israel, Europe and the United States. As for the other, they are really more mémoiristes, and even their work cannot be described as totally ignored. (There is in fact an interesting survey of these and other writers’ recollections of their Islamicate backgrounds by Jacob Landau which the author has obviously not seen.) More contemporary writers of this milieu, such as Sami Michael and Amnon Shamosh[,] are not only widely read, but have had their works dramatized on Israeli television.

The author’s hang ups so completely overwhelm the text at times as to make it ludicrous. Referring to the laureate of medieval Andalusian Jewry, Judah ha-Levi, he writes: “Yet like so many other works of the Levantine period these po-
ems have been read less than used like the perennial elephant of the Jewish joke — to handily answer one of the many forms of the ‘Jewish question,’ as another piece of evidence fit into the mold of an already predetermined set of assumptions. At its most vulgar, Halevi is made into some kind of proto-Zionist; this metamorphosis, naturally, precludes emphasizing the fact that he was also known as Abu al-Hassan.”

Speaking of vulgarity, the entire passage is crude, no less than it is false. The Arabic cultural formation of Judah ha-Levi is emphasized almost everywhere, whether in popular or scholarly writings. Passages such as this abound. They may score points with some people who have a political and cultural axe to grind (for example the readers of Khamsin, a polemical journal of dubious scholarship the author seems to read), but certainly not with any serious scholars. I fear that this book will do no better with the general educated reading public than with serious scholars. It is full of pseudo-intellectual jargon and bombast. For example, he states at the very outset that he is creating a model that “is ecological through the reclamation and recycling of antithetical episodes that can perforate circumscribed versions of history and serve to inform a forward looking future.” That is sure to attract a general reader!

Polemical works can make very entertaining reading. They can be intellectually challenging. This ms., alas, is not in that category. It should not be published by a self-respecting academic press. It will, I am sure, eventually find a publisher among one of the small, politically-oriented presses in Paris or London.

There is, obviously, much that can be said about such a report and I proceeded to say it, as evident from the text that follows. Perhaps the only detail that I did not cover in my meticulous response was this writer’s last point, that my manuscript would “eventually find a publisher among one of the small, politically-oriented presses in Paris or London.” This was, in fact, a possibility I considered but it was very clear to me that such an option
would even further neutralize the kinds of pressures I hoped the book could generate. The very terms in which this equation is stated point this out clearly: that is, the author of this report sees no contradiction or irony in encoding the word “political” to mean “not our politics,” even as he or she is in the very process of excluding me from any access into that very political realm. At the risk of tedium, it seems to me that reproducing my response here in full serves diverse purposes that go beyond a merely documentary value; the title then used was not *After Jews and Arabs* but *Re:Orienting/Writing the Mediterranean*; in addition, the page numbers refer to the original, pre-publication manuscript:

*Re:Orienting/Writing the Mediterranean* has primarily been an effort to shift the focus of a remarkably diverse literary and intellectual history (that of Jews and Arabs in the Near East) from the exclusive tutelage of an extremely narrow field of academic scholarship to the general community of literary scholars and students, from the traditional philological or “orientalist” approach to that of cultural studies and literary theory. In fact, this shift in literary focus has already occurred in other fields such as Asian studies, African and Afro-American studies, and Latin American studies, yet, as one of the reader’s reports points out, “Middle Eastern studies has been, for the most part, remarkably absent from these debates.” Unquestionably, any revisionist work is bound to meet some resistance along the way; my own awareness of this, along with the often heated emotional responses that the subject I have chosen to research sometimes elicits, made me all the more cautious regarding the scholarly and methodological foundations of my work. Given this, I sensed a definite bias towards my project in the second reader’s report, a bias that, upon a close examination of the reader’s objections, seems to rest more on an authority that would rather not be questioned or scrutinized than on intellectual rigor or scholarly evidence. Before surveying some of the particular inaccuracies contained in the report, a few general comments
behind the scenes

seem in order. Throughout, the reader utilizes what might be termed a “hit and run” method, making a point without fully substantiating it. This, combined with an ad hominem critique only supported by tautological arguments that never get beyond judgmental and evaluative language to actually specify the reader’s own contentions or position, all go into leaving the impression that this report is highly defensive but not very analytical. At the risk of being overly tedious, I would like to indulge in a point by point examination.

After summarizing the main goal of the work (in answer to question 1), the reader characterizes the evidence for my contentions as “highly selective, quite tendentious and often grossly misinterpreted.” Yet, these claims are never fully substantiated in the body of the report. As far as selectivity goes, the reader states that I showed “appalling ignorance” of a number of anthropologists and historians; however, as I will document in detail further on, many of these figures are not only mentioned or cited but heavily relied on in my work. As far as being “tendentious” is concerned, the reader never states specifically what arguments are referred to nor why my work is generally characterized as “polemical.” By then stating that I have “grossly misinterpreted” things, one can only come to the conclusion that this reader believes there is a correct and an incorrect interpretation to the very complex events, historical processes and texts that I present. This, in itself, is a highly suspect position in any academic context, and even more so in a field (“the social, cultural and literary interaction between Jews and Arabs over historical time and geographical space”) in which the reader him/herself states that “there is certainly room for a new and fresh examination.” “Indeed,” the reader goes on to say, “the literary aspects of this interaction (which seem to be this author’s strong suit) are perhaps the least studied till now.” What is, perhaps, most puzzling about this report (a point that I will also go into further detail on when answering the objections to my second chapter), is that while the reader states that the “literary aspects” are my strength, these very literary aspects — as well
as their conceptual and theoretical underpinnings — are all but ignored in the report. This, along with what appears to be an aversion to critical or literary theory, would lead me to believe that the reader’s primary field of expertise is not literature; even were it a subsidiary field, the reader’s language and terms of reference would seem to indicate that he/she is quite unfamiliar with and wholly outside the parameters of current debate, a debate that, I might add, has strongly influenced the practice of historical, anthropological and sociological writing, all fields that the reader emphasizes.

In answer to question 2, the reader states that “The author tries to disarm potential criticism by claiming to be an amateur.” This is a reference to the second paragraph of my introduction: “Re:Orienting / Writing the Mediterranean is an amateur’s attempt to shed some light on a realm that has been left in the hands of experts and ideologues too long.” Given my range over literary, historical, theological, philosophical, sociological and anthropological works in over half a dozen languages, only a reader hard pressed to find fault would not see the irony involved in this introductory statement and not internally anticipate quotation marks over both “expert” and “amateur.” Beyond even this more subtle point, I was surprised that the reader could not detect a reference to an article of mine from 1983 (“The Quill’s Embroidery,” Parnassus: Poetry in Review; Volume 11, Number 1; Spring/Summer 1983; pp. 85–115), an article that has come to be considered one of the most insightful introductions to Hebrew poetry written in English, where I discuss the late Professor Haim Schirmann’s suggested mandatory equipment for the exegete of Hebrew poetry, a set of equipment that he almost comes to claim, tongue in cheek, impossible to acquire within one lifetime. Oddly enough, like the general lack of literary reference mentioned above, the reader barely mentions this primary concern and subject of the book, namely, Hebrew poetry. Further on in this same paragraph (in answer to question 2), the reader states that “He certainly has read a great deal, but he has also missed a great deal. Many of the false and exagger-
ated claims could not have been made if he had gone further.” To begin with, and this is another point that will entail many specifics, the reader has read the manuscript quite selectively since many of the sources he claims I am ignorant of are, in fact, prominently cited. Moreover, these purportedly “false and exaggerated claims” are never specified. The certainty displayed here regarding truth and falsehood is, I daresay, a boundary I never overstep as examples I intend to quote on subjects I think the reader seems to be referring to will clearly indicate. Nor, for that matter, does the reader ever specify what makes this a “polemical” work rather than, as the first reader characterized it, a “radical critique, at once substantive and methodological, of a dominant version of the present sustained by a particular, and equally dominant, grasp on the materials of the past.” Scholarly rigor notwithstanding, one had hoped that enough revisionist work has been done to make such claims to exclusivity a thing of the past. Yet, the reader continually characterizes the work judgmentally (“very much a piece of ‘popular French intellectual writing’ — it never lets the facts get in the way of a good theory”), without specifying the particulars: we are led to believe that there is, actually, only one set of facts (but can only assume which set since the reader never tells us), and, moreover, we are given to believe that my work rests on some grand “theory,” rather than a continual questioning of assumptions along with a rigorous examination of both more traditional and neglected materials. Given some of the objections brought up in the body of the report, I would assume that the “false and exaggerated” claims the reader alludes to have to do with the relationship of Jews and Arabs as well as the transmission of the history and culture of Sephardi and Oriental Jews. This is substantiated by paragraph 2 on the second page of the report where the reader discusses my “one-sided depiction of the Arab in Israeli literature” as “a case in point.” To begin with, the reader misrepresents my sources by saying that I relied mainly on the work of the Palestinian writer and critic Fawzi al-Asmar; in fact, all of the quotes I actually used in the
section under scrutiny came from an Israeli critic, Ehud Ben-Ezer. In addition, I also cite the work of Risa Domb as well as Lev Hakak. Even given such a clear inaccuracy, this would not seem to me to be the point here. What appears to be at stake, in the reader’s terms, is some sense of balance given to differing points of view and interpretations of the historical relationship between Jews and Arabs. Yet, even the most cursory (but unbiased) reading of my work shows that my statements are continually qualified and problematized; in fact, almost anywhere one turns, qualifications are made to particularize the general experience that I depict. Although the following examples are completely out of context, they should give some sense of what I mean.

Beginning with my introduction, I anticipate precisely the kind of objections that the reader seems to allude to without ever really specifying them: “Any attempt to “right” such volatile terrain, however, exposes one to accusations of righteousness, the replacement of one exclusivity for another. Setting something straight, of course, also presupposes that something’s gone wrong, that once things were one way and now they’re another. This, too, leaves the work open to a broadside, categorical critique in which the very structure of the work can be seen as a set up: once there was unity and harmony, now there is fragmentation and dissonance. Yet, the central categories that concern me — the qualities of mobility, diversity, autonomy and translatability possessed by the Jews of the Levant for a very long time — have eroded drastically. The marker for this, of course, is literal and unequivocal: most of the Jewish communities of the Mediterranean and Arab world simply no longer exist. Those that do are but a mere shadow of their former selves […] . While I would obviously hold the qualities noted above as positive, they relate solely to themselves and do not necessarily imply further harmonies or idealized relations between either Arabs and Jews or Jews and themselves. The paradigms chosen to illustrate these qualities simply provide a catalog of possibilities that, given the constrictions of the present
context, seem almost inconceivable [...]. *Re:Orienting* is not about victors and victims: to pit a powerless and gnawed at “East” against a voracious “West,” with its consuming imagery, energy and capital, is to propose an argument as blind in its reliance on essences as the one it purportedly was trying to topple (pages iv–vi). As an aside, the reader objects to my “highly idiosyncratic time limits,” again, completely out of context and conveniently ignoring my own very specific qualifications: “I have suggested a time span within whose limits (with befores and afters), a certain fluidity exists. This fluidity does not signal an ahistorical aversion to the specificities of time and place, but is an attempt (within a very broad framework), to mirror the conditions of space, at least as I have presented them, in the Levant. My sole justification for this is decidedly historical: Jews lived and traveled, settled down and created from one end of this realm to the other throughout the 1000-year period in question” (page vii).

But back to the main point of contention; by citing things out of context and choosing to emphasize certain aspects of my work while ignoring others, the reader leaves one with the impression that *Re:Orienting* is a grossly oversimplified, “one-sided” book. Again, quoting myself out of context, I would hope that a few examples can serve to give the general flavor of the kinds of qualifications I have been particularly careful to make in anticipation of just these kinds of objections. On page 21, in a discussion of some of the factors leading to the mass emigration/expulsion of Jews from Arab countries: “often, as in other periods throughout the history of the region, wealthier Jews could find themselves in a much better position than poor Muslims while the fate of poor Jews was often more closely linked to that of the Arab masses. Amongst Jews themselves, there were distinct divisions between the more culturally Arab working class (who lived in the traditional old Jewish Quarters, the hara or the mellah), and the more Europeanized middle and upper classes who tended to live in the newer quarters.” Continuing on this topic (page 22), I go on to state that: “Here, the warring
parties managed to find common ground. The increasingly reactionary Arab regimes also had their proverbial two birds and they, too, could be killed with one stone: by expelling the Jews, they could confiscate a substantial amount of wealth and property; at the same time, the Jewish question could be manipulated as a scapegoat to mask their own inert rhetoric, indifference and lack of resolve regarding the question of Palestine which, in turn, could help deflect attention from the more pressing, volatile and brutal power struggles and social conflicts transpiring in their own countries.”

Again, out of context, the reader dwells on two issues, one of which has already been cited above: my “one-sided” depiction of “the image of the Arab in Israeli literature,” as well as what I claim to be the neglect of “Hebrew writers of Arabic milieu.” Just for the record, my discussion is not of “the image of the Arab in Israeli literature” but how a specific Hebrew novel that could not possibly be “Israeli,” since it was written in the 1920s, sets one parameter of a fairly fixed set of characteristics. At any rate, on page 30, immediately after introducing these topics (pages 25–29), I take great care to specifically address the fact that ignorance of the “other” is not a one-sided phenomenon: “It is not only in Jerusalem that the number of people born into a new reality has multiplied: all over the Arab world (except in Morocco), there are fewer and fewer people who can still recall either the diverse Jewish cultural presence or the full range of human encounters with people who just happened to have been Jews; at the same time, there are more and more people for whom Jews can only be seen through the dull film of “Zionism,” “Israel” and “war.”

The discussion of the writers whose work I contend has been neglected is also taken completely out of the context in which I discuss it, that of being made into representatives of a particular kind within a subordinate culture by a dominant culture. In addition, there is a further inaccuracy regarding the work of the three writers in question which, though seemingly minor, just adds to the very generalized nature of the report. The reader “corrects” my categorization of them
by stating that “Of the three only Burla is a truly first-rate litterateur. [...] As for the others, they are really mémoiristes.” Disregarding the constant need to put things in a hierarchy, the fact is that Jaqueline Kahanoff wrote a novel and essays (in English, not Hebrew, as one might conclude from the report) as well as memoirs, while Shami only wrote novellas and short stories. Another example relating to my purported lack of balance can be found in the section on Beirut in chapter 1, where prominent attention is given to the detrimental effects certain ideological trends had on Arab culture; on page 67, “But unlike certain tenets of Arab nationalism which, like Zionism, attempted to reduce and homogenize a plethora of social, historical, economic, cultural, ethnic and religious differences under the all embracing rubric of either ‘Arab’ or ‘Jew,’ these writers expressed their vision of a borderless and uncensored Arabic as a way of speaking for people without a voice.” By choosing to ignore my own often very critical discussions of events and texts emerging from the Arab world, the reader misrepresents my own sense of context and balanced argument entirely. Further examples of this abound, for instance: “Despite the short shrift given Muslims by the Blue Guide, during the 1,310-year period dating from the Arab conquest in 638 until 1948, there were only 129 years in which Jerusalem was not under one form or another of Islamic sovereignty. While this is not to suggest that such sovereignty was in any way uniform, ideal, or free from the practice of various kinds of occupation or exploitation” (page 94).

Again, in discussing the 1950’s in Israel: “The implacable fate of the Jew writing Arabic in Israel was to remain unread: on one hand, the increasingly high and feverish pitch of official nationalist Arab culture cut off outside avenues of expression to anyone even remotely connected with ‘the Zionist entity’; on the other hand, fewer and fewer Jews found the means to maintain the level of Arabic needed to contend with works of literature.” Here, as I believe everywhere else, I try to point in at least two directions at the same time in or-
der to do justice to the representation of incredibly complex phenomena.

In the second paragraph of page 1, the reader states that “The manuscript is simply a total mishmash throughout.” There follows a list of a number of authors, again taken completely out of context and without supporting evidence, that is supposed to serve as final proof for an argument the reader has not yet fully or even partially clarified. The seeming disparity of the authors is made an end in itself (“from Maimonides to Osip Mandelstam, to Brenner”), as if such a range already presupposed some kind of incoherence. Almost at random, I chose a book to see what range of authors or sources might be quoted or referred to within the space, not even of a chapter, but a few pages. The book, On the Art of Medieval Arabic Literature by Prof. Andras Hamori of Princeton University, is considered one of, if not the finest exposition on Arabic literature currently available. In the words of the great scholar Franz Rosenthal: “Professor Hamori’s book is distinguished by the fact that it attempts to take Arabic literature, mainly poetry, seriously and to apply the canons of modern literary criticism to it. There are hardly any books in English comparable to it, and few in other European languages.” In a discussion of a certain genre of Arabic poetry, Hamori mentions Spenser, Ariosto, Homer, the Serbo-Croatian epic and Heidegger in the space of two pages (74–75). Again, in a discussion of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, Hamori mentions R.P. Blackmur, The Death of Arthur, Chaucer’s Troilus, Plato, Socrates, Homer and Chinese poetry of the “Double Ninth Festival,” all in the space of three pages (20–22). Does the mention of these things together immediately connote incoherence? Possibly, but certainly not in the specific context that Hamori has chosen to use them.

The reader then goes on to write that “Throughout these ramblings the author makes all sorts of historical and political points […]. Sometimes these points are taken up in the lengthy asides of the footnotes. Unfortunately, it is here that one sees the author’s woefully inadequate knowledge of what
behind the scenes

has already been done in the field.” Despite my painstaking and, as I stated earlier, possibly tedious examination of the report, it is only at this point that the reader’s bias, through the obvious contradictions engendered by selective reading, becomes clear. After having given the impression that he has read the text and the footnotes thoroughly, the reader states that “He is frequently dependent upon highly unreliable secondary works, some of which are scarcely more than political tracts. Marion Woolfson’s *Prophets in Babylon* is a case in point.” Entirely skipping the very valid question of just what constitutes either a “highly unreliable” source or a “political tract,” the reader has chosen to mention a work that I referred to only once in a footnote (Chapter 1, footnote 11, p. 107). The report then goes on to state that I show “appalling ignorance” of a number of anthropologists and historians. Oddly enough, I mention many of these figures more prominently than I do Woolfson. The work of one of the anthropologists that I am purportedly appallingly ignorant of, in fact, is used to form a significant part of my argument in two chapters (the anthropologist in question is Harvey Goldberg; see chapter 2, pages 132–135; also see chapter 3, pages 262–264, particularly footnotes 14 and 16, pages 288–289). While the passages mentioned in the text heavily rely on Goldberg, in footnote 14, I state that Goldberg’s “whole introduction is well worth referring to as an example of a highly sensitive reading of completely forgotten material.” Another example is the case of the great historian Eliahayu Ashtor, someone who also appears on the reader’s list. Yet, in the footnotes to chapter 2, he is mentioned twice: footnote 3, page 240 and footnote 5, page 240, where I call his *The Jews of Moslem Spain* (in 3 volumes), “the standard work on the ‘golden age’ of the Jews during this period.” Not to know this, of course, would truly be an appalling indictment of one’s lack of knowledge in the field. There are other examples, as well: Shlomo Deshen, an anthropologist, is mentioned on page 109, in footnote 18 to chapter 1. Clifford Geertz, Joelle Bahloul, Haim Zafrani, Norman Stillman and H.Z. Hirschberg all figure prominently in
my bibliography. On page 3 of his report, the reader men-
tions an article by Jacob Landau “which the author has obvi-
ously not seen.” The tone of assurance is even more striking
here given the fact that on page 242, in footnote 29 to chapter
2, I specifically refer to the article in question: “For a survey
of some examples of this genre of memoir, see Jacob M. Lan-
dau’s ‘Bittersweet Nostalgia: Memoirs of Jewish Immigrants
from the Arab Countries.”’ Right after this, the reader men-
tions two contemporary Israeli authors whom I am also ap-
parently unaware of, Sami Michael and Amnon Shamosh.
Michael is discussed on pages 303–304, where I note that he
has become a significant writer on the contemporary Israeli
scene. The works of Shamosh are also mentioned in the bib-
liography; what any of this has to do with dramatization on
Israeli television is well beyond my grasp.

Yet, even more disturbing than these blatant inaccuracies
are the assumptions and inferences drawn from such a se-
lective reading. The fact that the reader is careful enough to
point out that a publication date is missing in a footnote or
that a quotation goes over from one page to another (noted
with an exclamation point), while assuming I am ignorant of
scholars, writers and articles that I mention prominently, can
only lead one to conclude that some form of bias is at work
here. An example of this can be seen on page 3 where the
reader has taken a quote completely out of context in order to
make another point that is, again, left unsubstantiated: “The
Arabic cultural formation of Judah ha-Levi is emphasized al-
most everywhere, whether in popular or scholarly writings.
Passages such as this abound. They may score points with
some people who have a political and cultural axe to grind
(for example the readers of Khamsin, a polemical journal of
dubious scholarship the author seems to read), but not with
any serious scholars.” What kind of an axe? Which serious
scholars? Which popular or scholarly writings? None of this
is specified, nor is the innocent receiver of this report at any
time given a fair representation of the range of sources that I
did consult and that I am familiar with. In fact, this kind of
argument is a gross misrepresentation of the range of my own scholarship for the huge areas it simply neglects to mention. For, as a reader of the journal Khamsin, I am also the reader of The Hebrew Union College Annual, Jewish Quarterly Review, Revue des études juives, Encyclopedia of Islam, Encyclopedia Judaica, The Jewish Encyclopedia, and numerous other standard sources. Why is Khamsin singled out (although only two issues are cited throughout), when other standard sources that are referred to more often are never mentioned? And why is the context of the quote, which has to do with the way cultures are transmitted by dominant groups and ideologies for particular purposes, never mentioned?

There are many other questionable aspects: in the second paragraph on page 2, the reader states that “although the author is familiar with Israeli society during the 1950s and ’60s, when Middle Easterners were at best ignored, and at worst suppressed, he is totally out of touch with Israeli society of the 1970s and 1980s, when the situation changed dramatically and the Middle Eastern element began to be reclaimed and to assert itself both culturally and politically. (The author cannot retort that these decades are outside his highly idiosyncratic time limits...).” Here, the reader simply seems to have conveniently skipped the last sections of the last chapter which specifically address the late 1970s and 1980s (see pages 305–329). Moreover, a recent article of mine (“Israel and the Levant: “Wounded Kinship’s Last Resort”), provides one of the most thorough surveys of “Oriental” Israeli culture in the 1980s to appear in English, not to mention my socio-political study (published in 1987) on political attitudes of Jews from Arab countries which has become a standard in the field (“La communauté sepharade en Israel et le processus de paix,” Perspectives Judeo-Arabes; No. 7; August, 1987; pp. 47–85).

An even larger issue that must be addressed here has to do with the question of literature itself. It is certainly odd that while the reader acknowledges the “literary aspects” of the field to be my strength, chapter 2 of the book (which deals extensively with Hebrew poetry and Jewish literature as well
as the relationship of Hebrew and Arabic poetics to literature in the romance languages), “does not gel very successfully with the rest of the text and should be excised. The author is clearly out of his depth here.” This seems like a major contradiction, yet, again, no evidence is given as to why I am “out of my depth;” it is simply stated as fact and linked to my use of the work of S.D. Goitein, “The one major historian with whom the author is apparently familiar.” This kind of disparaging remark is nowhere warranted by the range of sources that are used even within the particular section where Goitein is used as a primary source (only 24 pages of a 130 page chapter). Some of the sources in the historical section of the chapter (comprising 40 pages, including the Goitein section), include: Eliyahu Ashtor (mentioned earlier), Walter J. Fischel (a pioneer in studying the economic and political life of Jews in medieval Islam), Oleg Grabar (the foremost historian of Islamic art), Muhsin Mahdi and Ralph Lerner (two of the most respected authorities on medieval political philosophy), Jacob Mann (another pioneer in geniza studies, and a standard in the field), Jacob Landau (mentioned earlier), and Harvey Goldberg (mentioned earlier). This is just a partial listing and does not even begin to mention the range of sources consulted (and included on the bibliography), but not cited. These include many standard sources such as Salo Baron’s classic *A Political and Religious History of the Jews* (12 volumes); Itshak Baer’s *History of the Jews in Christian Spain*; the work of Fernand Braudel on the Mediterranean; Andre Chouraqui’s work on North African Jewry; Norman Daniel’s indispensable studies on the relationship of Islam and the West; Bayard Dodge’s standard work on medieval Muslim education; Renzo DeFelice’s work on the Jews of Libya; the extremely important but often neglected works of Levantine Jewish historians like Abraham Galante, Moise Franco, Joseph Toledano, Michael Molho and Joseph Nehama; the classic orientalist works of Ignaz Goldziher; Marshall Hodgson’s monumental *The Venture of Islam*; the work of Philip K. Hitti and Albert Hourani; Reuben Levy’s classic *The Social Struc-
ture of Islam; the works of Bernard Lewis and Maxime Rodin-
son; Andre Raymond and Janet Abu-Lughod’s important
works on Arab cities; Norman Stillman (mentioned earlier);
the works of Georges Vajda, Moise Ventura, Harry Wolfson,
Zvi Werblowsky and Gershom Scholem on Jewish philo-
phony and mysticism; and Yosef Yerushalmi’s important work
on Sephardi and Marrano Jews, to mention only some.

Not to even mention the range of sources I bring to bear
on the major part of chapter 2, that is, the literary part,
seems, at best, disingenuous. My own qualifications in the
field are not without distinction: I had both the luck and
honor to be a student of the late Dan Pagis for a number
of years when I was at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.
Pagis brought the study of medieval, renaissance and post-
expulsion Hebrew poetry into the modern age through his
groundbreaking works, Secular Poetry and Poetic Theory:
Moses Ibn Ezra and His Contemporaries and Change and
Tradition in Secular Poetry: Spain and Italy. Through study-
ing with Pagis at Hebrew University, I passed the standard
apprenticeship of those drawn, or better yet, magnetized to
classical Andalusian Hebrew poetry. This meant a thorough
knowledge of the standard works by scholars like Haim Bro-
dy, David Yellin, Shimon Bernstein, Ezra Fleischer, Yehuda
Ratzaby, Haim Schirmann, Nehemia Allony, Shaul Abdullah
Yosef, Dov Yarden and Ben Zion Halper, as well as keeping
abreast of the latest developments in Israeli, Spanish and An-
glo-American scholarship, the three major sites of research.
All of these sources are generously referred to in chapter 2
of Re:Orienting. Nor is this all: in addition to covering the
classical period in Andalusia, there is an extensive discussion
of Arabic poetics and its relation to both Hebrew poetry as
well as the development of the romance lyric. Having been
a student of both Allen Mandelbaum and Frederick Gold-
in, my sources here, as well (in Italian, Spanish, French and
Provencal), meet all the standards. The chapter closes with a
completely original piece of research on a Marrano poet who
translated Petrarch in 1567; this is followed by an extensive
discussion on the extant poetry of Jewish women in the Levant and how some recognition of these works might change many of our assumptions about the whole period. Yet, the reader’s report mentions none of this, despite the contention that the “literary aspects” remain my “strong suit.”

Finally, throughout the report, the reader criticizes my writing through labels, not analysis; some of these epithets include “dense style and bombast; almost unreadable style, heavily salted with a few favorite catchwords; pseudo-intellectual jargon.” There are others, as well, but they never seem to fully explain what the reader’s objections actually consist of. Here is a case in point: the reader states that the few favorite catchwords are “space,” “duration,” and “memory.” These are simply brought up as final proof of the reader’s argument without any legitimate grounds for discounting the use of these particular words. Again: “The pseudo-intellectual jargon is from time to time punctuated — rather jarringly — with popular and journalistic expressions (e.g. “x-ray vision”) which is totally out of character with the purported tone.” This is very difficult to grasp since the reader never specifies what my “purported tone” is supposed to be, nor is this made any clearer by the reader’s own characterization of my writing. In addition, all of the quotes, phrases and even single words are taken completely out of context. It is quite interesting to note that this reader chose precisely the same sentence (as a primary example of “pseudo intellectual jargon and bombast”) that the first reader chose as an “apt description” of my methodology. Not to blow my own trumpet, but that the quality of my writing should be attacked is, indeed, the oddest part of this report as I hope some of the following quotes might illustrate. Outside of the praise that one is always flattered to get, particularly from established figures whose work has been so essential to my own development, the important point about these quotes is the fact that they come from scholars and writers for whom writing itself, and style, are not, by any means, negligible qualities.
“Ammiel Alcalay is that rare thing — a gifted prose writer and poet, an accomplished intellectual and a true, as well as inventive, comparatist.”

Edward Said,
Old Dominion Foundation Professor in the Humanities,
Columbia University

“It is rare that someone has both an articulately perceptive grasp of cultural and political particulars and an art capable of their transmission in all the determining context of their fact. Ammiel Alcalay is far more than the usual cultural historian, or political scientist, or, simply, scholar of complexly “comparative literature.”

Robert Creeley,
SUNY Distinguished Professor,
Samuel P. Capen Professor of Poetry and the Humanities;
member, American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters

“As an accomplished poet, social commentator and historical investigator, as well as a tireless researcher, Ammiel Alcalay has pulled together many of the strands gathered during years of prodigious scholarship to present a view of the Middle East that is starkly at odds with that put forth in the establishment press and academic journals. Painstakingly, brick by brick, he has reconstructed a shared literary and historical tradition that has linked Arab and Oriental Jewish thought for the better part of millennium.”

Victor Perera, Lecturer, Journalism and Spanish Literature,
University of California, Santa Cruz

“Since the early 1980s I have been following the cultural involvements of Ammiel Alcalay with exceeding interest and admiration […]. His translations of Hanagid and Halevi
(among others), reflected, in the most intricate manner, his loyalties and appetites. However, in retrospect, this seems a mere honing of the tools for the main project that Alcalay took upon himself in recent years. I followed closely the writing of his *Re:Orienting / Writing the Mediterranean*, not only because I was a subject of scrutiny, but, mainly, because of the extreme relevance of this pioneering study to the current cultural scene of the Middle East. His reading of that turbulent region ranks among the most creative and imaginative readings of history that I, being so obsessed with the same subject matter, have ever come across."

Anton Shammas, Visiting Lecturer, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor

"I am impressed by the breadth of his knowledge, his uncompromising lucidity, and his commitment to the Mediterranean—a region too often maligned, idealized, or ignored. Alcalay’s scholarly and creative production is, especially for a comparatist of his age, astounding […]. Alcalay’s writing is superb. The activity of reading—or remembering a history—becomes in these pages nothing less than a quest for knowledge. The reader is jolted out of the comforts of received polemic, as Alcalay questions our conventional ways of thinking not only about the Middle East, but about Western civilization and European culture."

[Colin] Joan Dayan, Chair, Department of Comparative Literature, Queens College; 1990 Fellow, Shelby Collum Davis Center for Historical Study

Along with my response, quoted in full above, I sent the following letter, dated March 1st, 1990:

Enclosed is my rather lengthy rejoinder to the second reader’s report on *Re:Orienting*. I really wanted to make sure
that nothing got by on this so it took me little longer than I thought it would.

It may simply be that I’ve gotten used to this kind of a reaction to my work from certain quarters, but only after thoroughly examining this report against my own work did I truly realize just how vicious and personal an attack this particular one actually is. I’ve run my reply by a number of people and I don’t think that it should in any way be offensive to anyone — I’ve kept quite strictly to the specifics of the arguments involved. However, you obviously know your editorial board better than I do and I’d appreciate if you went over it and let me know if you think there’s anything there that might rub someone the wrong way. I think, though, that this reply utterly demolishes the reader’s credibility and exposes the kinds of bias involved.

As an aside (and I wouldn’t in any way want this to interfere with the editorial process nor do I know whether this is standard procedure or not), I think it might prove a valuable exercise for the reader to see my reply, if for nothing else at least to know that not everyone is willing to be bullied and cowed into silence by “authority.” Nor would I want this to be construed as some kind of vengeance on my part. I just became more and more amazed at the audacity (dare I say mendacity) of the reader’s claims as I examined them point by point. Disagreement is one thing, academic arguments with proof are another, but selective reading and willful misrepresentation simply have no place in this kind of a process.

The appeal failed and the book continued to circulate until it came out, as I mentioned, in 1993; although it was named one of the twenty-five notable books of the year by the Village Voice Literary Supplement and one of the year’s choices by the Independent in London, the book was generally ignored in academic and mainstream venues where the work of its “anonymous” critics regularly appeared. On the other hand, After Jews and Arabs has had an influence disproportionate to its circulation: like the method of poetry, those who read it have paid attention, with
the idea of using the information it contains for their own purposes. The book has also forced Israeli literary scholars to reconsider some of their assumptions, while engendering a concerted effort among mizrahi writers, scholars, and activists to publish standardized editions and anthologies of neglected or forgotten writers that can be used as textbooks. At the same time, it has opened a window onto a very neglected aspect of Jewish culture within the Arab world — while there are numerous indications of this, a formal and symbolic marker was an invitation that I received to participate in a conference commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Nakba, the disaster of 1948, held in Beirut. Unlike the kinds of invitations that I was getting after the Oslo Accords, this one carried profound meaning for me.