

# 66 Jacqueline Kahanoff: *Childhood in Egypt* (1959)

Introduced by Daniel Zohar

## Introduction

A prolific Jewish essayist and novelist, Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff (1917–1979) was interested in a wide array of topics, not least society, cultural differences, identity, politics, and gender. Born and raised in Cairo, she immigrated to the United States at the age of 23 and relocated to Paris following the Second World War. In 1954, the intellectual laid down permanent roots in Israel. Though Kahanoff's literary career began in North America, Egypt and Israel predominate her enterprise.<sup>I</sup> The author wrote in English and French, but is best known for the Hebrew editions of her oeuvre – translations that would have a major impact on generations of Israeli authors.<sup>II</sup>

Kahanoff was raised in Egypt's cosmopolitan bourgeois society.<sup>III</sup> This background animates the featured text, which is part of her best-known collection *A Generation of Levantines* (1959). More specifically, the essay's socio-cultural critique is laced with personal anecdotes. Another of the intellectual's formative periods was her long stint in New York, where she attended Columbia University and consorted with prominent intellectuals, some of whom had also taken flight from Europe.<sup>IV</sup>

Associated with “Levantinism” or “Levantinization,”<sup>V</sup> Kahanoff coined this term in her aforementioned collection. The objective behind this neologism was to transform “Levantine” from a derogatory term for a venal Orient into a catalyst for multiculturalism and for placing the East on an equal footing with the West. Kahanoff's “Levantinism” sprouted from the soil of the fledgling Jewish state, to which she had thrown in her lot. During this period, there was a major influx of Jews from Arab and Muslim countries to Israel. This flow stands in contradistinction to the largely European waves of immigration of prior decades. The new Sephardic arrivals were discriminated

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I Deborah A. Starr and Sasson Somekh, editor's introduction to *Mongrels or Marvels. The Levantine Writings of Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff*, by Jacqueline Kahanoff (Stanford, NJ: Stanford University Press, 2011), xi.

II Ibid., xii.

III Ibid., xii.

IV Ibid., xvi.

V The Levant refers to the Eastern Mediterranean, from Syria in the north, through Jordan, to Israel and Sinai in the south.

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against by the Israeli establishment, which viewed the former as culturally and intellectually backward.<sup>VI</sup>

At the bookends of her career, Kahanoff penned fictional works, some of which are semi-autobiographical. In “Childhood in Egypt,” which is perhaps the centrepiece of *A Generation of Levantines*, the novelist used her family stories to refract the heterogeneous society of her youth.<sup>VII</sup> Throughout Kahanoff’s writing life, she also opined on culture and literature, serving as an “important cultural mediator”<sup>VIII</sup> for Israeli readers. Her body of work attests to horizons that went well beyond the Jewish state.

## Bibliographical Information

Jaqueline Kahanoff, *Mongrels or Marvels. The Levantine Writings of Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff*, ed. and introd. by Deborah A. Starr, and Sasson Somekh (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011 [1959]), 1–13.

## Childhood in Egypt

When I was a small child, it seemed natural that people understood each other although they spoke different languages, and were called by different names – Greek, Moslem, Syrian, Jewish, Christian, Arab, Italian, Tunisian, Armenian. I was aware that Arabs were more numerous than other people, and poorer: they were servants, peddlers, and beggars who showed arms without hands, legs without feet, eyes without sight, and called out to Allah to send them a meager piaster. The children scavenged in garbage pails for something to eat. Rich Arabs were pashas, but then many of them were Turks, and the Turkish ladies were princesses. One only caught a glimpse of them when they passed in their carriages. They wore a little bit of white veil around their heads and chins, while the Arab women were all wrapped up in black.

Moslems prayed kneeling on small rugs when the muezzin called them to prayer from the top of a minaret; it was a sad, beautiful song that filled the sky when the sun fell and disappeared. But in the morning, it returned to shine on everything, and that was why one prayed to God: to thank him for the Light.

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VI Ibid, xxiii–xxiv.

VII Ibid., xviii.

VIII Ibid., xix.

It was a friendly world, with something exciting always going on. Crowds milled about in their brightest clothes for Bairam, after the Ramadan fast, and peddlers sold them magnificent sugar dolls in bright tinsel paper clothes, with little bells jingling on their heads. There were processions when the Holy Carpet returned from Mecca, or when the King opened Parliament; then all the streets were covered with orange sand and decorated with banners and festoons of light bulbs that shone brightly at night. At Easter time some shops sold chocolate eggs. Later, the Greek grocery stores sold eggs dyed in the most beautiful dark shades of purple, orange, and green. There was one holiday, *Shamm al-Nissim*, the Feast of the Sun, when absolutely everybody celebrated the spring by having a picnic by the Nile.

Mother said that before going to sleep, it was good to remember all the nice things that happened that day, and there were lots of them, even on ordinary days. Sometimes camels came into town, carrying bundles of fresh-smelling greens in the rope bats flung across their humps, and it was funny the way they twisted their mouths, always chewing on something. Often my uncle Nono would invite me to see the new toys they had received at the store, and he said I could choose anything I wanted, although Mother scolded him for spoiling me too much. Or there were uncles and aunts who came from Paris or Manchester for weddings or business affairs. There were days, late in summer, when Nono and Uncle David distributed among their married children the good things they had received from Tunis – olive oil, and delicious big green olives, dates, and muscat grapes that were so good, that when we had a party to eat them together, everybody, even the children, were tipsy.

On Sundays, old Maria, our maid, sometimes took me with her to early mass in St. Joseph's Cathedral, where fat little angels floated among the pink clouds painted inside the domed blue ceiling. Father said I could go because God was everywhere, but that I must never, never dip my fingers in Holy Water or make the sign of the Cross, because I was Jewish. Every people had its religion, he said, just as every bird had its song, and God loved and understood them all. Our religion, he said, was to await the coming of the Messiah, who would bring the day when people could love one another almost as God loved them all. I hoped that the Messiah would come quickly so that everybody could enjoy everything about other people's religions, as well as their own.

Our religion was also a mysterious language of prayers, called Hebrew, which only the men recited and understood. But, what was being Jewish most of all was to visit my father's parents, far, far away in the Abbassiyah quarter, where they lived in a little house surrounded by jasmine and honeysuckle. My grandfather Jacob, who came from Baghdad, sat in a long robe, with a turban on his head. He intimidated me because of his white beard and the prayer books which lay on a table at his side. My father gave me a little push, and I knelt before this old grandfather, who was also like a priest, to kiss his hand as my father had done, and received his blessing. When Grandfather Jacob's hand rested on my head, I felt that this blessing was something ancient and precious, a treasure, which the grandfathers of our grandfathers had re-

ceived from God. Because of this blessing, I was in God's safekeeping and belonged to the people of the stories in the old prayer books.

There were no real pictures in this grandfather's house; that was forbidden, but there were two frames containing writing on the plain white-washed wall, which I always saw as I lifted my head after the blessing. Father explained that one was the Ten Commandments in Hebrew, which God had given to Moses when they waited in the desert before entering the Promised Land, and these commandments told people what was right and what was wrong. The other was the Balfour Declaration, in English, and it said that the time was soon to come when we would return to our Promised Land. This land was called Erets Yisrael, Father said, but now it is called Palestine, for we had lost our Promised Land. But we should remember that the Lord God of Israel had promised it to the sons of Jacob.

"To the daughters too?" I asked, and, smiling, my father said yes, to the daughters too, for Israel honored its women, the daughters of Rachel and Sarah. I thought how beautiful it was that the people in my family had the same names as those in the stories.

My grandmother sat on a couch in another room, draped in gray silk, her legs crossed under her. She was religious, and wore over her black wig a kerchief decorated with many crocheted flowers which dangled on her forehead with each of her movements, and which made her look young. Although I was told she was not beautiful, to me, this ancient Jewish queen, who never shouted and before whom people lowered their voices, was more than beautiful. I wanted the years to fly quickly, till I became an old grandmother just like her. My father's parents were the only people I knew who were in total harmony with themselves, inwardly and outwardly, who accepted themselves as they were and did not want to be other than they were.

I remember one summer we were in a hotel in Alexandria, by the sea. It was full of English officers and their wives, and one lady asked me what I was. I did not know what to answer. I knew I was not Egyptian like the Arabs, and that it was shameful not to know what one was. And so, thinking of my grandparents, I replied that I was Jewish and Persian, believing that Baghdad, the city they came from, was in the country from which all beautiful rugs came. Later, my mother chided me for not telling the truth, and said that when people asked me such a question, I should say I was European. I suffered because I knew this was not the truth either, and I burned with shame when the English ladies who had been nice to me laughed about "the little girl who wanted to be Persian."

I knew that my father suffered too, but I could do nothing about it. The image of his parents became something precious and secret I kept locked in my heart. They were the pillars that supported the frail bridge which tied me to my past, and without which there could be no future.

Whenever we passed the Qasr al-Nil bridge, where the English barracks were, I thought of the desert far away where the past slept under the sand. This was the treasure I must find when I would be grown up and free, so that the past could come alive and become the future. Sometimes the bridge opened to let white-sailed feluccas

pass on their way to or from the mysterious place where the river and the world began. I thought that if once I stood at the edge of the bridge, just when it opened in the middle, I would fall into a felucca and be carried to that beginning, or to that end, where the river flowed into God, which was like a beginning. But perhaps I would miss the boat, and drown, sucked in by the whirlpools. I was safe only when I stood on the bridge. I knew that the feluccas traveled between Aswan and the Delta, carrying onions and watermelons, but the mythical river was my real world, where no harm would befall me.

We moved to a different house, where the river flowed by my window, and beyond it the three triangles of the pyramids spoke mysteriously of the time when everything called history started, long, long before English tutors taught us to read *Alice in Wonderland* and French schoolteachers made us memorize all kinds of nonsense about our ancestors the Gauls. The Wonderland was here, where our ancestors had created what the books called “ancient civilizations” at a time when the Gauls were savages clad in the skins of wild beasts, whose flesh they ate raw.

We played by the river where Pharaoh’s daughter had found Moses, and where He, who would be the Messiah, was perhaps already born, a little child sleeping amidst the reeds. The Messiah would surely usher in a time when there would be no Christians, no Moslems, and no Jews, no white, black, brown, or pink people, and no princes who rushed by in their big red cars, so hardened by the thick crust of their wealth that they could not see, hear, or smell the poor who crouched by the gates of the Qasr al-’Aini hospital, where the air was foul from the stench of their sores. Bare-footed, the princes would then approach them, and the crippled, the sick, and the poor would rise, forgive them, and be whole again.

My friend Marie, a Catholic, said that the Messiah had already come, and that he was Jesus. I could not bear to think the Messiah had come, and failed, without God giving men another chance, as he had done so often since the time of the Great Flood. Perhaps, I thought, many false Messiahs had to come, to suffer and to die before every person could open his heart to Him who would come last. Jews were people who knew that another Messiah had yet to come, and that was why they waited. No matter what happened they would wait. That was their faith, their hope, their belief, that the Kingdom of Heaven would and could be on earth, in every man.

Marie spoke constantly of charity but accepted poverty as something to be compensated for in heaven. She was a Syrian, and like me, was half-native Levantine. She, too, was humiliated by our embittered British spinster teachers, but she never dreamt of revenge. She spoke of turning the other cheek, of meek resignation, of enduring one’s sufferings for the love of Christ. I admired Marie; she also troubled and infuriated me. Marie never got angry. She told me I sinned through pride, and that people were not able to tell good from evil without the guidance of the Church. She pleaded with me and prayed for my conversion; she loved me and did not want me to burn in Hell because the Jews had killed Christ. I would retort, “When *my* Messiah comes, He

will save everyone, even those who do not believe in him. And if he doesn't come, I don't want to be saved while other people burn in Hell. It's too unjust."

I racked my brain to find these arguments. I had had no formal religious instruction and had fittted together, as best I could, the notions I had gleaned from books, from the English translation of the Haggadah my father had given me for Passover and from what he told me of my religion. I was grateful for his trying. But one thing would often remind him of another, just like when people told stories in Arabic, so that I didn't know exactly where a story began or ended, and what was important and what was not.

When I passed by the English barracks, I would remember Gulliver, a sleeping giant, pinned down to earth by thousands of threads nailed to the ground by thousands of little people. It occurred to me that perhaps our thoughts were like those threads. If we kept winding them between our heads and our hearts every day for years on end, like an invisible spider spinning a web around the barracks, then one day, all of us could pull together, and the slumbering giant would awake. But alas, too late. The barracks would crack open, like the Philistines' Temple, and an avalanche of stones and pink-faced soldiers would be hurled into the Nile when its waters were high, and disappear forever, sucked in by the whirlpools. Then, when the English soldiers were gone, we would lock up our nannies and Misses in chicken coops, and parade them in the streets, lined with orange sand, like when the King opened Parliament, so that everyone on our street would have a good laugh before we shipped them back to His Majesty King George.

I wondered if other children had such thoughts, and feared that perhaps I was mad. I tried to reason with myself. The Messiah who would come would most certainly forgive even the British soldiers and the English Misses, so before He came perhaps I should forgive them myself, and if I did, perhaps they would just go away. But I couldn't forgive. I didn't really want to. The truth was that I loved hating them more than loving them, because it excited and thrilled me, while love was something tranquil and restful, like sleep. But, if people loved to hate, then there was no difference between the black, the brown, the white, and it did not matter whether or not the barracks were destroyed, because the Messiah who would come would fail, as Jesus had failed, as Moses had failed, and nothing would change, and if nothing could change, there was no sense even in being Jewish and waiting for the Messiah to come.

This riddle was in the Haggadah, which I loved because it taught me that we were the people who would be given the Promised Land. God himself had not been able to soften Pharaoh's heart, nor make him give up his wicked power over another people. God had had to force Pharaoh by threatening him with the Ten Plagues, and He hoped that after each one Pharaoh's heart would be filled with pity. But Pharaoh loved his power and his wealth, and rather than give them up, he let the crops which fed his own people be devoured by locusts, and the river which fed their fields be turned to blood, and the first-born die in the little mud huts which were like those of the fellahin.

After all that Moses had sacrificed for them, even his own people had worshipped the Golden Calf, which was very much like Tutankhamen's mummy case in the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities. Moses, who was the son of an Egyptian princess, died of sorrow, thinking of those who had perished en route and were refused entry to the Promised Land. We, his people, had not been worthy of the Promised Land, and would weep in exile until we learned to know what we had been chosen *for*. Then we would return to the Promised Land once more, the Messiah would come, and all would be peace and harmony. Everything would be different. We and the Egyptians would be free together, and no one would set us against each other.

To make this happy end possible, I had to find out why things had turned out so badly in Pharaoh's time. I could do this only by elaborating fantasies around symbols, because I did not know the words needed to express my thoughts. True, I was very young, but I also felt that none of the languages we spoke could express our thoughts, because none was our own. We were a people without a tongue and could speak only through signs and symbols. Our elders spoke of ordinary, everyday things, or about religion. Their religion was to say *maktub*, *inshallah*, "amen", "Our Father who art in Heaven," and to pray and fast sometimes; but it did not say anything about the things that were so difficult for us in life. Whether, for instance, it was right to want the British to go, and wrong to hate them, right to learn so many things from them and from their schools, but wrong not to want to be like the British and French, or our parents, or the Arabs. We were searching for something *within* ourselves which we had yet to find. Religion seemed to have nothing to do with how people lived, and this did not seem to worry them, although they said that religion explained life and told them what they must do.

At school, we learned other things, but there too, we learned nothing about ourselves or what we should do. We did not know how it had happened that Jewish, Greek, Moslem, and Armenian girls sat together to learn about the French Revolution, *patrie*, *liberté*, *égalité*, *fraternité*. None of us had experienced any of these things. Not even our teachers really believed these words had anything to do with our lives. They seemed to think it was right for us to want to be like French children, although they must have known that we could not really become French, and that they did not really want us to be their equals or their brothers, and that actually we were nobody at all. What were we supposed to be when we grew up if we could be neither Europeans nor natives, nor even pious Jews, Moslems, or Christians, as our grandparents had been?

It was impossible to question anyone about these things. one could not ask one's parents, who kept saying they spent so much money to give us an education and advantages they had not had (and this was true), nor our teachers, who would laugh at us without even trying to understand. I could not share my feelings and thoughts with anyone, not even the other children, because I had no way of knowing if they were really happy and if they really believed the world we grew up in was true and good, or if they only pretended, as I did, because they were frightened and could not speak

out. It was only through fantasies that I could explain this inexplicable little world to myself, and be able to fit it into a larger world, where I could find my place.

In one such fantasy I imagined a ruby and a lightning rod. The ruby was an inheritance received from my grandfather. A gentle fire glowed in its depth, and whoever held it knew the answers to all questions, and was at peace. I would fall asleep, my hand clutching this imaginary treasure, but when I woke up at night, my hand was always open. The ruby was gone. I believed that a wicked priest had risen from a dream and stolen it. Nothing could check this priest's power once he possessed both the ruby and the lightning rod – except trickery and deceit.

The rod was light and fire, but it was a cold, hard, white light, and whoever touched it died instantly unless he owned a magic glove. When its rays touched men it made them work to build pyramids and bridges, and when it pierced the ground, the earth surrendered its riches. The lightning rod was in the movement of machines, trains, ships, and airplanes. It did things without thinking, while the ruby which had knowledge of all things, did nothing. The Master of the World used the rod to make life, and it was good when the ruby directed its action. The ruby was the jewel at the center of Pharaoh's crown, and the rod was the staff in his hand.

Pharaoh grew weary of holding the rod, as the power in it always wanted to strike, and from this power the wicked priest was born when Pharaoh slept. He persuaded Pharaoh to let him lock the rod in his temple, and replaced it by a stick. Then he stole the ruby, which he in turn replaced by another red stone. Pharaoh then became a statue, a dead, motionless god. But the people, seeing him with the ruby and the rod, did not know that he was dead, and that the wicked priest ruled by the rod alone. That is why they did not understand their own misery.

Pharaoh's daughter knew these things but, being a woman, she did not have the power to change them. She found the child Moses, and told him the secret. He became a novice in the temple, where he learned to use the power of the rod, which he caught and held in his own staff. He found the ruby too, and hid it in the desert, thinking that he could always return to it after he had defeated the wicked priest. When Moses challenged the wicked priest, he had to make his plagues more powerful than those devised by the wicked priest, but he could not stop them because he did not have the ruby. Even God could not stop the plagues, because if He made miracles men would not learn the meaning of their deeds and He would have to unmake the world He had created, starting from when he made the apple so tempting in the Garden of Eden that Adam and Eve *had* to eat it in order to learn right from wrong.

In the Wilderness of Sinai, Moses knew that even if he had not trusted in the ruby, but only in the rod, he would have died of a broken heart. After he died, mankind would be divided into two parts, those who remembered the ruby, and lived only to seek it in themselves, and those who knew only the power of the rod. The first were the People of the East, and because they rejected knowledge of the rod, they worked only if driven, grew lazy, sick, and poor, and waited idly for something to happen. The people of Europe knew only the rod which coldly lit their darkness; and



because they created machines and electricity, they worked and made others work. They ruled the earth, but without understanding. I thought the Messiah would finally arise from those people who kept the memory of oneness, with each person yearning for that part in himself which was lost. The Promised Land was where they would meet and be one, the people of the ruby and the rod, in whom all things would be united.

When I reached adolescence, these fantasies lost their grip on me, or rather they expressed themselves more deviously through rational thoughts and political sympathies. I was not entirely aware that I was pretending to believe in certain ideas because they were already clearly formulated, while I could not express my own, partly for fear of appearing absurd, and partly because a reflex of self-defense prompted me to keep secret what was my own. This measure of deceit and self-deception, which disguised self-doubt was – and still is – characteristic of my Levantine generation. We thought ourselves to be Socialist, even Communist, and in our schoolyard we ardently discussed the Blum government, Soviet Russia, the civil war in Spain, revolution, materialism, and the rights of women, particularly free love. The only language we could think in was the language of Europe, and our deeper selves were submerged under this crust of European dialectics, a word we loved to use. We talked and pretended to act as we imagined the youth of French lycées in France talked and acted, without being fully aware that they were still within a traditional framework which we had lost, and for which we envied them. We blithely dismissed everything that was not Left as reactionary, and because we were culturally displaced and dispossessed, without yet being able to define our predicament, we did not fully realize that our motives were not those of French youth, and were neither as pure nor as generous as we had imagined them to be. Revolution, which would destroy a world where we did not have our rightful place, would create another, where we could belong. We wanted to break out of the narrow minority framework into which we were born, to strive toward something universal, and we were ashamed of the poverty of what we called “the Arab masses,” and of the advantages a Western education had given us over them.

Our parents were pro-British as a matter of business and security, and we were pro-nationalist as a matter of principle, although we knew few Moslems of our age. We felt this nationalism was an inevitable step on the road to liberation and true internationalism and, sensing that we might be sacrificed to it, we accepted it as unavoidable and even morally justified. We hesitated between devoting ourselves to the “masses” and going to study in Europe, to settle there and become Europeans. In later years, many of us switched from one attitude to another, or attempted to achieve some compromise between them, the most usual being to help educate or improve the lot of the Arab masses either by social work or by preaching Communist doctrine. Some of us became cynics, bent on enjoying our advantages “while there was still time,” but some of us were acutely aware of our dilemma and the difficult choices before us. We felt cut off from the people and the country in which we lived, and knew that nothing would come of us unless we could build a bridge to a new society.

Revolution and Marxism seemed the only way to attain a future which would include both our European mentors and the Arab masses. We would no longer be what we were, but become free citizens of the universe.

There was in us a strong mixture of desperate sincerity and of pretense, a tremendous thirst for truth and knowledge, coupled with an obscure desire for vindication, from both the arrogant domination of Europe and the Moslem majority which, we did not quite forget, despised its minorities. We would be generous and get even with the Moslem masses by introducing them to hygiene and Marxism.

Few of us Jews were Zionists, because we believed that for humanity to be free, we had to give up our narrow individuality as other people were expected to or, at most, we argued that the Jewish people had a right to national existence as did all other people, as an inevitable preliminary to "international Socialism."

I said these things, as my friends did, but wondered if they too only half-believed and were biding their time before speaking up with their own voices. Our teachers expounded knowledge from on high, and most of us who sat, heads bowed, taking notes were Jews, Greeks, and Syrians, the Levantines, those whom the Moslems called with superstitious respect and suspicion, the People of the Book. We the Jews, and the Greeks, were always there, had always been there, changing the world more than we changed ourselves, remaining the same under our many guises. Other people passed us by, and we bowed our heads until their power spent itself. Our teachers, too, would depart, but we would pass on the ferment of knowledge, making history in our insidious, secretive way, without ever being totally undone by it. Perhaps in our own time, we would witness and share in the undoing of Europe's dominion, the fall of all its barracks, and even, perhaps, a return to the Promised Land. What would we, the Levantines, do in that world which would be ours, as well? In any case this new world would have to wait for us – we who were still in the schoolroom – to give it a different color and shape.

Throughout our Mediterranean world, and the vast continents it bordered, other young people were imbibing this knowledge from their teachers, never suspecting that the dormant seeds would suddenly burst out from under the silt of centuries. The Arabs and the other colonized peoples were the crossbreeds of many cultures by accident, while we Levantines were inescapably so, by vocation and destiny. Perhaps our ways would part, but together, we belonged to the Levantine generation, whose task and privilege it was to translate European thought and action and apply it to our own world. We needed to find the words that would shake the universe out of its torpor and give voice to our confused protests. We were the first generation of Levantines in the contemporary world who sought a truth that was neither in the old religions nor in complete surrender to the West, and this, perhaps, should be recorded.

In later life our paths sometimes crossed, and we could talk with our own voices, Greeks, Moslems, Syrians, Copts, and Jews; those who became Arab nationalists, and Zionists, Stalinists, and Trotskyites, Turkish princesses in exile, priests and rebels. We talked of our youth when our souls were torn, and were so divided within ourselves that we had feared we could never recover. Yes, we had mastered words, a language

in which to frame thoughts that were nearly our own. We were moved to discover how close we had been to each other in our youth, although it was perhaps too late to make any difference. Our choices had commanded other choices, which locked us in a position from which, in the adult world, there was no retreat.

Today, when we can no longer meet and talk, we know that history is our childish fantasies come true, and that they sometimes turn into nightmares. In newspaper stories we recognize the names of those we knew, hear the echoes of things we said or thought long ago. We understand why each one of us chose his particular road, and at last we recognize ourselves in events which happen *through* us, and not only *to* us, even though we may grieve that between our dreams and our deeds, the wicked priest has cast his shadow to separate us, and that none of us can as yet turn about and start again.