

# Ihab Hassan

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an excerpt from

## *Fundamentalism and Literature*

We have an incapacity for proving anything which no amount of dogmatism can overcome. We have an idea of truth which no amount of skepticism can overcome.

—Pascal's *Pensées*

### I.

A terrible simplicity is born, without beauty or grace, and we hardly know how to speak of it. It is the simplicity of violence in a space of fury, the fury of old convictions and new myths. Is it seemly to begin with a wisecrack? “What gets us into trouble is not what we don’t know,” Mark Twain quipped. “It’s what we know for sure that just ain’t so.” But to subsume this merciless topic with a wisecrack, however wise, is still reductive, a kind of parlor fundamentalism, you might say. We may need to skip from Hannibal to Kyoto.

At the Zen Temple of Ryoanji, fifteen rocks stand in a raked, undulating bed of sand, evoking an endless sea. They stand artfully so that no viewpoint can reveal all fifteen at one glance. A pragmatist, like William James, might remark that we lack the perspective—but not the desire, alas—to grasp the world “as a single fact.” The rocks themselves make no remarks.

I’d like to take a hint from that garden: I will offer no panoptic view, no panacea to the world, but invite readers to stroll among some rocks without leaving footprints in the sand.

### II.

What is fundamentalism? If you look up the word, you’ll meet *fundus*: basics and bottoms, first principles and animal posteriors—absolutisms of different

kinds. (At the University of Chicago the theologian Martin Marty has co-edited five obese volumes titled *The Fundamentalism Project*.) As for literature, we all know what an incorrigible shape-shifter *that* is. Can we think, then, of fundamentalism and literature as tyrant and trickster? Is literature really the antithesis of fundamentalism, its sworn enemy, like Shia against Sunni or the Hatfields and McCoys in the hills of Appalachia? Not quite.

True, I think of fundamentalism—it overlaps absolutism here—as a brazen tower, single and proud in its wasteland, disdainful of life. And true again, I think of literature as a rainbow arching over misty valleys and shrouded peaks, or perhaps a pleasure-dome refracting certainty, scattering power, coloring a monochromatic sky. But dichotomies simplify, antinomies constrict—and we are two steps away from fundamentalism again.

Why? Because, though literature may challenge dogmas, it is also quickened by commitments at the deepest level—commitments and, yes, obsessions: literature has its own absolutism, just as fundamentalism has its poetry of beliefs. In nuances begin our responsibilities.

### III.

But who speaks of nuances here? The question is relevant, especially for intellectuals, rash with their mental constructions.

The late Edward Said thought that the duty of the intellectual is to speak truth to power. Certainly. But more difficult still is speaking truth to oneself. Call it thinking against oneself. Or call it simply testifying for the other, though that other may hide in oneself. Let me so testify, in the following thumbnail memoir.

During my adolescence in Egypt, some time between 1940 and 1942, I became suddenly and insufferably devout. I prayed, turning my face toward Mecca; I fasted through the month of Ramadan; and I pointed my finger at hypocrisy and corruption everywhere, especially under the noses of my parents, who were Muslim by birth but practiced selectively their faith—as a matter of appearance, convenience, even class. In other words, I experienced fundamentalism as a kind of purity and wore it as a halo of rebellion. Needless to say, my parents were not amused. But that was precisely the point.

I did not join the Muslim Brotherhood, simply because I'm not a joiner. ("I didn't inhale," so to speak.) But I *might* have joined, as did some friends at the University of Cairo. Of course, the Brotherhood was relatively benign then;

its shibboleth—“Islam is the solution”—had not yet caught fire and laid parts of the earth to waste. In any case, I did not realize then that fundamentalism—Muslim or Christian, Zionist or Marxist—can serve, at a certain stage, as a form of idealism, a kind of self-transcendence, as well as a protest against the perceived depravity of the world.

Many feckless years later, I came upon a passage in T. E. Lawrence’s *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1926), where he describes a “family resemblance” in the mind-set of “Arabic-speaking Asia,” a “clearness or hardness of belief, almost mathematical in its limitation.” Lawrence continues:

Semites had no half-tones in their register of vision. They were a people of primary colours, or rather of black and white, who saw the world always in contour. They were a dogmatic people, despising doubt, our modern crown of thorns.

Did Lawrence really mean to exempt Egyptians, Libyans, and Algerians, as well as Turks, Persians, and Afghans, from *his* “register of vision”? Well, these people are not Asian “Semites,” he might say—but my point is elsewhere: I felt no affront on reading the passage, felt only my youthful shadow flit over his words.