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**Publication Date**

2017

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
Los Angeles

Against the Flow:  
Impassive Modernism in Arabic and Hebrew Literatures

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Comparative Literature

by

Shir Alon

2017

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Against the Flow:

Impassive Modernism in Arabic and Hebrew Literatures

by

Shir Alon

Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

University of California, Los Angeles, 2017

Professor Gil Hochberg, Co-Chair

Professor Nouri Gana, Co-Chair

*Against the Flow: Impassive Modernism in Arabic and Hebrew Literatures* elaborates two interventions in contemporary studies of Middle Eastern Literatures, Global Modernisms, and Comparative Literature: First, the dissertation elaborates a comparative framework to read twentieth century Arabic and Hebrew literatures side by side and in conversation, as two literary cultures sharing, beyond a contemporary reality of enmity and separation, a narrative of transition to modernity. The works analyzed in the dissertation, hailing from Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, Egypt, and Tunisia, emerge against the Hebrew and Arabic cultural and national renaissance movements, and the establishment of modern independent states in the Middle East. The dissertation stages encounters between Arabic and Hebrew literary works, exploring the

parallel literary forms they develop in response to shared temporal narratives of a modernity outlined elsewhere and already, and in negotiation with Orientalist legacies.

Secondly, the dissertation develops a generic-formal framework to address the proliferation of static and decadent texts emerging in a cultural landscape of national revival and its aftermaths, which I name *impassive modernism*. Viewed against modernism's emphatic features, impassive modernism is characterized by affective and formal investment in stasis, immobility, or immutability: suspension in space or time and a desire for nonproductivity. The impassive literary forms unearthed in the dissertation propose a host of metaphors for an alternative politics grounded in passivity rather than activism, and in weakness rather than force.

Chapter One, "There Is No Event Whose Mark Has Not Gone before It," explores the difficulties of the Arabic or the Hebrew text to be read as modern. I demonstrate how Arabic writer Mahmud al-Mas'adi and Hebrew writer S. Y. Agnon stage encounters between Orientalist and literary modes of readings in their mock-classicist texts, and envision a timeless, universal literary realm in which literary periodization plays no role. Chapter Two, "Scratching at the Surface: Predicaments of Settlement and the Poetics of Disgust," concerns the politics of settlement in the novel *al-Jabal* (The Mountain) by Egyptian Fathi Ghanem and in the story "Atzabim" (Nerves) and the novel *Shkhol ve-khishalon* (Breakdown and Bereavement) by Hebrew writer Yosef H. Brenner. It identifies an impassive mode of settlement in the works of both authors, embodied in the gesture of scratching, and countering models of productive settlement within a national context. Chapter Three, "State Time: Gendered Genres of the Everyday in Sonallah Ibrahim and Yishayahu Koren," identifies an anti-evental aesthetic in the work of both authors, which dismantles literary and historical logics of liberation and radical rupture. Chapter Four, "Impassivity: Resistance to Analysis in Post-Oslo Palestine" examines

two impassive genres developed in the works of Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman and writer Adania Shibli in relation to crisis ordinariness: the boring joke and the frustrating snapshot.

The dissertation of Shir Alon is approved.

Eleanor Kaufman

Aamir Mufti

David N. Myers

Gil Hochberg, Committee Co-Chair

Nouri Gana, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2017

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## Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have been possible without the support of numerous individuals and institutions. This project was funded by generous support from the Mellon Foundation, the UCLA Skirball Program in Modern Jewish Culture, UCLA Center for Jewish Studies and the Program in Sephardic Studies, UCLA Graduate Division and the Department of Comparative Literature. I am thankful for the opportunity to consider the global scopes of this project at the Institute of World Literature Summer Workshop in Lisbon, and to engage with a community of scholars at the Yale Seminar on Modern Hebrew and Jewish Literatures as the final loose ends came together. I have also benefited from presenting various incarnations of this project at the American Comparative Literature Association, the Association of Jewish Studies, the African Studies Association, UC Berkeley, Hong Kong University, and UT Austin.

I owe a special thanks to my patient and supportive committee members: Eleanor Kaufman, whose consistent enthusiasm and rigor are an inspiration, made sure I do not allow myself intellectual shortcuts. Aamir Mufti, who taught me not to fear risky comparisons and radical claims, and gave me an important key at the very last moment. David N. Myers introduced me to time's different narratives but reminded me repeatedly that history is not only about telling stories. Nouri Gana provided guidance in modern Arabic literature and pointed criticism when it was needed. I am particularly grateful to Gil Hochberg, who remained enthusiastic for this project throughout. Our conversations, and particularly her ability to extract brilliant thoughts from a hodgepodge of ideas, have been invaluable as this project took shape.

Many thanks to my shadow cabinet, the friends who read and offered thoughts on parts of this manuscript: Melissa Melpignano, the only dancer who can go against the flow, Danielle Drori, who brainstormed with me over long phone calls, master editor Zen Dochterman, and Alexander Jabbari, who came in late and stuck by me till the end.

I also want to thank the faculty at UCLA who offered inspiration during my studies: Ra'anana Boustani and Michael Cooperson, who had made it so difficult to finally "become modern," Sarah Stein, Todd Presner for his generosity, Kirstie M. McClure, and Arne de Boever. The members of the Hevruta at The Hebrew University extended encouragement when the research was at an embryonic stage: I am particularly grateful to Reut Ben Yaakov, Dina Berdichevski, and Amos Noy. I owe more than I could ever say to the community sharing the experience of graduate school with me: Will Clarke, the best neighbor, Helga Zembrano, Robert Farley, Jenny-Marie Forsythe, Suleiman Hodali, Omar Zahzah, Levi Thompson, Rebecca Lippman, Ethan Pack, Alexei Novak, Sina Rahmani, Duncan Yoon, Yuting Huang, Viola Ardeni, Emily Drumsta, and Amanda Apgar. I am so glad you were there.

To my surrogate family spread around the world: Nasia Anam, who inspired me to love LA, Fatima Burney, Noga Malkin, Elik Elhanan, Nitzan Keynan, Albert Diaz, Orit Gat, Molly Suber Thorpe, it is good to know I have a home wherever you are.

Finally, to my true, irreplaceable family, who are always too far away: my grandparents, Shula and Oded Mozes, whose love is so large it is tangible. To my incredible siblings, Tamar, Ayelet, and Omri, you keep growing astoundingly brighter. And to my parents, Yizhar Alon and

Tal Alon-Mozes, who taught me a love of learning, travel, and adventure, and who might regret that they did, but I am grateful and admiring of them because of it every day.

# Curriculum Vitae

## Shir Alon

### EDUCATION

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- “Decolonizing Judaism: Barbarism and the Return to Nativism,” coauthored with Gil Hochberg, *boundary 2* (forthcoming, October 2017).
- “A Specter Is Haunting Poland: Polish Art of Absence in the European Union,” *boundary 2* (forthcoming, 2017).
- “The Becoming-Literature of the World: Pheng Cheah’s Case for World Literature,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, (December 19, 2016).

### PRESENTATIONS AND TALKS

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- “Towards a Theory of Passive Activism: the Novels of Adania Shibli,” ACLA, Utrecht, July 2017.
- “Decadence in Revival: Hebrew Literature as a Case Study Between Transnationalism and Affect Theory,” National Association Of Professors Of Hebrew, New York, July 2017.
- “Suspended Temporalities at the Gate of World Literature: Repositioning Agnon’s ‘Edo ve-‘Enam,’” Association of Jewish Studies Annual Meeting, San Diego, December 2016.
- “The Passive Form: Literature, Surveillance, and Passivity,” Surveillance, Form, Affect: An International Multidisciplinary Conference, Education University of Hong Kong, December 2016.
- “Comparative Literature as Pedagogy,” Graduate Pedagogy Symposium, UCLA, 2016.
- “Decadence in Revival: Yosef Haim Brenner and the Seductions of Passivity,” American Comparative Literature Annual Meeting, Boston, March 2016.
- “The Timeless Literary: Inventing Modernism in Maḥmūd Al-Mas‘adī’s *Haddatha abū Hurayra Qāl*,” African Studies Association, San Diego, November 2015.
- “Facing the Illness of Infinite Possibilities: Neoliberal Precarity and Precaution in Orly Castel-Bloom’s *Dolly City*,” Politics and Poetics Workgroup, Institute of World Literature, Lisbon, June 2015.

- “The Third Person: Impersonal Poetics and Bearing Witness in Elias Khoury’s *City Gates*,” American Comparative Literature Annual Meeting, Seattle, 2015.
- “Disappearance as Form: The End of Cosmopolitanism in Jabra Ibrahim Jabra’s *In Search of Walid Masoud*,” Jil Jadid, University of Texas, Austin, February 2014.
- “An Immunizing Novel for Immunitary Times: Body Politic in *Dolly City*,” Association for Israel Studies Annual Meeting, Los Angeles, June 2013.
- “Walk, Witness, Imagine: A Nakba Guidebook as Praxis,” American Comparative Literature Annual Meeting, Toronto, April 2013.
- “Defining Poetic Responsibility: Sa’di Yusuf’s Beirut Poetry,” Comparative Literature Intra-Student Faculty Forum, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, March 2012.

## **CONFERENCE ORGANIZATION**

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- “Embodied Resistances,” workshop organizer, UC/NCP Interdisciplinary Psychoanalytic Consortium Meeting, Los Angeles, March 2017.
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- Dissertation Year Fellowship, UCLA, 2016.
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## Introduction: Against the Flow

### The Literary Critic at the Delivery Room

Over two issues, in October and November of 1911, alongside an informative geographic dispatch on Libya (“threatened to be torn from the body of the Ottoman empire by Italy”), a debate on the state of the Jewish workers in the Zionist colonies, and a serialized story by the young Hebrew writer S. Y. Agnon, the readers of the Hebrew journal *Hapoel Hatzair* were offered an evaluation of the state of modern Arabic writers and literature.<sup>1</sup> Arabic literature, the article begins, once the greatest and most appreciated art form among the Arab people, has been neglected, forgotten in slumber for hundreds of years. Only recently, after Egypt came into contact with other “civilized nations,” did life begin flowing again in the arteries of Arabic literary culture, extending beyond Egypt to the regions of Syria and Iraq. Egypt is now the center of a new period, the writer remarks, which the Arabs call “the Resurgence.” These are complex and fast-changing times, he stresses, and the literature that they have so far produced is still embryonic, in a fragile and unformed state, not yet having found its own bearings: “Not only did it lack sufficient time to discover new horizons, or destroy what must be destroyed of the old ones, but it is also not yet fully free of them: the secular and the sacred, religion and enlightenment, realism and romanticism, nationalism and assimilation, all of these are mixed together, and a thick fog covers it all” (Yitzhaq Shami 285). One exception, however, towering

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<sup>1</sup> “The Arab Writers,” by Yitzhak Shami, appeared in two segments on October 22 and November 7, 1911, and was republished together with all his stories in the collection *Taḥanat ha-ḥayim* in 2015. *Hapoel Hazair* was the official journal of the *Hapoel Hazair* party, a Zionist-Socialist workers party focusing on agricultural colonization and the promotion of Hebrew culture. The journal was founded in 1907 as a venue for the agricultural settlers of the Second Aliya, and quickly became one of the most important publications among the Jewish Zionist population, particularly as a venue for new Hebrew literature written in Palestine, as well as a stage for fiery ideological debates. See more in Shapira (*Yosef Haim Brenner: A Life* 172-3).

above this hodgepodge, is the work of the writer Jurji Zaydan (1861-1914), the first who “made his own path, without a trace of imitation, capturing something of the Orient in an authentically Arab manner” (293).<sup>2</sup>

The writer of the review is Yitzhaq Shami (1888-1949), a young Hebron born Hebrew writer. Having grown up in the old Jewish community of Hebron, in a predominantly Muslim and Arabic-speaking environment, Shami was fluent in the Arabic literary canon, up-to-date in the recent debates of the modern Arab renaissance (the *nahḍa* revival movement), and deeply familiar with the cultural traditions and customs of the local Palestinian population. Shami was also a fiction writer in his own right, though throughout his career he published very little – six short stories and a novella, all in Hebrew.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, in recent years there has been a renewed scholarly interest in Shami the author as the emblematic Jewish-Arab or Jewish-Palestinian author, an authentic specimen of what today seems to be a paradoxical identity. Salim Tamari, for example, writes that Shami could define himself as both an Arab and a Jew, and only historical circumstances forced this dual identity to collapse (Tamari 24). Adina Hoffman also posits Shami as a writer torn between conflicting identifications: “the various selves that had once been integrated easily within him (Arab and Jew, traditionalist and iconoclast) were with time and by others deemed irreconcilable” (Hoffman 5; see also Hever *Ha-Sipur Veba-Leom: Keriot Bikoratiyot Be-Kanon Ha-Siporet Ha-`Ivrit* 75-61). The identification of Shami as an Arab-Jewish writer, however, predates postcolonial paradigms, and attests to the Orientalist

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<sup>2</sup> Jurji Zaydan (1861-1914) was a Lebanese novelist, journalist, and editor working primarily in Cairo. His historical novels, written in simple and accessible language, were extremely popular and influential, and are considered to be some of the first examples of a modern Arabic literary output.

<sup>3</sup> Translated into English and collected under the title *Hebron Stories*.

assumptions underlying the nascent field of Hebrew literature.<sup>4</sup> Shami willingly took on the role of “native informant” translating the life of the Arabs to the new Jewish populations of Palestine (Dotan 81-82). While Shami’s stories, all concerning Sephardic Jews or local Arabs, are immersed in nostalgia for a world threatened by secular and national modernity, his writing is also full of Orientalist judgments and tropes, as is the abovementioned review. Shami notes that “the winds of the desert” gust through Zaydan’s prose, bringing to life the true “ancient and brave Arab, the child of freedom who tolerates no authority, wild, patient, and simple” (290). Today’s Arab, he notes, while smart and practical in daily life, is also bound to fanciful fantasies and wild flights of imagination, the source of the famous “Arab laziness” (288-289).<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, Shami characterizes contemporary Arabic literature as a dynamic venture, still struggling to find its form within the present’s radically shifting demands.

Two months earlier, the same journal featured another essay of literary criticism under the title “The Eretz-Yizraeli Genre and its Accouterments” (August 10, 1911). The author was Y. H. Brenner (1881-1921), a prominent agent of Hebrew literary culture at the time, and the essay, an apologetics in defense of *mi-Kan u-mi-kan* (*From Here and There*, 1911), his recently published, fragmentary, and memoiristic novel on Jewish life in Palestine, became one of the

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<sup>4</sup> Since the publication of his first story, Shami was defined as a niche writer, a native Arab-Jew with a unique perspective (Schwartz and Zernik 306). Clearly, there is a difference between the term “Arab-Jew” as used by Shami’s contemporaries, who looked to Shami as an authentic “Oriental soul,” in the words of fellow writer Asher Barash, able to penetrate the mysteries of the Arab mentality (Barash in introduction to “Nikmat Avot”), and the use of the term “Arab-Jew” by late twentieth century critics who seek to reclaim Shami as a figure that challenges the binary divisions of Zionist national identity. Keren Dotan, however, basing her claims on extensive research in Shami’s letters and archives, argues that the Arab-Jew postcolonial paradigm does not truly account for the conflicts Shami had to contend with, such as the onset of modernity or secularism. Shami was a dedicated Zionist, and as Dotan notes, Arabic was a language he mastered but not an identity he would claim for himself: he never wrote in Arabic and never seemed to identify himself with the Arab population or Arab nationalism (Dotan 78-81).

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that Shami probably collected such observations, including the overarching narrative of golden age, decline, and awakening, from contemporary Arabic intellectual debates. See Fieni (12-63) on the manner Arab writers of the *nahḍa* adopted the discourse of decline and decadence. See also Chapter One on Mahud al-Mas’adi’s reiteration of a similar narrative and the shortcomings of modern Arabic fiction.

most influential and analyzed critical essays on the new Hebrew literature. I will not linger here on this polemicist essay, which numerous scholars have puzzled over.<sup>6</sup> My interest, rather, is the manner Brenner and Shami point to the same problem plaguing modern Hebrew and Arabic literatures, using almost the same words: the problem of writing the Arabic and Hebrew changing and shifting present.

In “The Eretz-Yizraeli Genre,” Brenner claims that the only literary form fitting to describe the Eretz-Yizraeli Jewish settlement is fragmentary notes and memoirs, matching the unstable and uncertain character of their subject matter. Literature, he claims, should be the “revelation of inner life and their essence within a recognizable time and a recognizable place” (“Ha-Janer” 268). Works of “literature” can be written by the Yiddish writer about the Jews of Russia, or by the German writer about the people of Berlin. But since there is nothing recognized, specific, or fixed about the young Eretz-Yizraeli settlement, Brenner states, it is currently *impossible* to write proper stories – genre stories as he calls them – about this community. The local settlement is “a new and moving environment,” lacking stability and distinctiveness. As an example, Brenner mentions “Raiza the innkeeper,” a fictional but typical character of Yiddish-Russian literature, which all Jewish readers could immediately conjure in their minds. The Hebrew settlement does not yet have such “character types” available for the writer, and hence should suffice, at the moment, with quick dynamic sketches, rather than false depictions of “pastoral Jewish-peasant life.”

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<sup>6</sup> Brenner’s prose is the subject of Chapter Two, and I return to “The Eretz-Yizraeli Genre” and its histories of reading there. Suffice to mention here that Nurit Govrin, in the historical study *Brenner: "Oved-‘etsot" u-moreh-derekh*, claims that the article had a “chilling effect” on contemporary Hebrew literature, as writers desisted from writing about the Eretz-Yisraeli community for fear of Brenner’s criticism, and situated their stories in other localities.



Shami describes the Arab present in similar terms of instability and lack of fixity. The Arab present is a period full of events; changes and influences come at it from all directions. The Arabs had “realized that they are losing their ground, that everything must be fixed and renewed... And so the Arab buckled down and started performing strange leaps, absorbing everything with no discrimination, devoted to everything without informed judgment” (286). In such a confused period it becomes “impossible to find complete and healthy protagonists,” which could hold up a story of the present (289).

True “literature,” Shami asserts, and Brenner would agree, can only emerge from conditions of fixity and calm, set against established, recognized, and familiar social forms; both have the European and Russian novelistic tradition in mind as a model for a real literature, exhibiting both psychological complexity and social-historical specificity.<sup>7</sup> Zaydan’s genius, Shami claims, was that he instinctively realized that the Arabic present could not be written. Instead he became a writer of historical fiction, turning to Islam’s glorious past as a setting for his characters (289). The issue is therefore not the Arabic language or its means of expression; it is rather the present moment, which does not lend itself to proper literature. Brenner also highlights that the problem is not writing in Hebrew per se: “there is no problem for the Hebrew writer to write about Jewish life in Russia or Poland, since it is clear, though somewhat uncomfortable, that he is not writing in the spoken language” (269). The problem emerges when the Hebrew writer attempts to write the culture of revival in the messy midst of the revival efforts, in the Hebrew present.

Is the similarity between the two essays incidental? Did it ever cross Shami’s, or Brenner’s mind? There is no doubt that Shami, who considered Brenner to be a literary mentor,

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<sup>7</sup> On the *nahḍa*’s transformation of Arabic literary culture (*adab*) into modern Arabic literature (*adab*), see Allan (172-96).

had read Brenner's article.<sup>8</sup> But even if Shami was simply adapting Brenner's aesthetic theory, its application in the parallel context of Arabic literature is striking, revealing the two literary cultures' similar sense of predicament.

The story of modernity as an overwhelming experience of radical change and novelty is a familiar one.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the temporal framework that Shami and Brenner reflect on differs from the influential paradigm of "modernity shock," as elaborated by Walter Benjamin, linking Baudelaire's urban experiences in 1860s Paris and Freud's explorations of trauma in the 1920s (Benjamin "On Some Motifs" 163). Instead, the temporal structure they describe is aligned with what Moroccan philosopher Abdallah Laroui has called *le futur antérieur* – a future already outlined elsewhere, and that we are not at liberty to refuse (Laroui *L'ideologie Arabe Contemporaine : Essai Critique* 66). Shami's and Brenner's literary criticisms are written with the horizon of "real literature" in sight: they already *know* the form of a modern literature emerging from an established national modernity. It is against this predefined future novel that they can judge the Arabic and Hebrew novels of the present.

Modernity dictates a particular future on its subjects: the future of the nation-state and its economic, social, and religious logics. The non-Western subject, Laroui continues, can do two things: he can accept this future as inevitable and work to accommodate it, or he can claim this future is not valid, and assert a return to an "authentic" self. Either options, Laroui contends, cannot bypass an engagement with the modern West, its history of domination and the "prior future" it has established (Laroui *L'ideologie Arabe* 66-7).

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<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Shami appears to be one of the casualties of "The Eretz-Yizraeli Genre"'s scathing critique. Brenner begins by criticizing the idea that it is possible to write literature on "The Life of the Łódź Jews," "the Life of the Galicians," or "the Life of the Sepharadim" as if literature was an external, objective description of reality rather than a subjective account of the turmoil of inner life (Brenner "Ha-Janer" 268). "From the Life of the Sepharadim" was the title of Shami's first story.

<sup>9</sup> The canonic account of this narrative is Marshall Berman's *All That is Solid Melts into Air*.

This dissertation attends to Arabic and Hebrew's shared difficulties of writing the modern present in literary form, in light of a historical narrative of progress that should culminate in a future known in advance. Reading a series of Arabic and Hebrew prose works from across the twentieth century, it focuses on a range of static and stagnant forms and characters, emerging against a literary landscape of national revival and its aftermaths. I name this static aesthetic *impassive modernism*. If Shami and Brenner were anticipating a stable Arab and Jewish modernity that would allow them to start writing the novels of the present, the texts I read in this dissertation step back from modernity's promises of a future, seeking alternatives in momentary modes of passive and impassive existence, refusing the demands of productivity, and seeking a present cut off from history and time.

### **Modern Time: Awakenings, Orientalist Archives, and the Institution of Literature**

Brenner got up and said, "Our history was absurd before Zionism, and absurd with Zionism."

And small wonder that Brenner managed to upset those who believed they were partaking in the making of history.

(Agnon, *Me-atmi el-atmi*, 125)

The broad historical context for the comparative program of this dissertation is the modern narrative of the global spread of European political institutions, discourses, logics, and, of course, markets. Aamir Mufti usefully summarizes the logic and interconnectedness of this process of global amalgamation:

I regard... imperialism to be a multifarious movement of expansionism whose ultimate goal—in the final instance, as it were—is the global establishment of the

market, and thus of the rule of equivalence (but not equality). The reshaping, to this end, of the diverse and heterogeneous social formations that come under its grasp thus results in the creation of polities consisting of equivalent “values,” that is, citizens. (Mufti 3)

Dipesh Chakrabarty notes that this process imposes on its subjects a global “transition narrative:” a homogenizing narrative of transition from a medieval period to modernity (35). In the seminal *Provincializing Europe*, Chakrabarty elaborates how a politics of time, underlining imperialist expansion, has placed a large segment of the world’s population “in the waiting room of history” (21, 43). Deemed primitive, retarded, or simply “backwards,” global communities had to actively strive to “transition” themselves into coevalness with Europe. Thinking about this narrative, Chakrabarty adds, is to think in terms of institutions such as citizenship, the modern state, the discourse of civil rights and, I might add, a national, secular, and to a certain extent autonomous literary realm.

The modern project can thus be read as the merging of different ethnic and religious communities to one unique if unequal world, under one regime of time.<sup>10</sup> This is the comparative framework within which I position modern Arabic and Hebrew literatures, as two literary systems developing under the rule of equivalence. Abdelfattah Kilito comically captures the difficulty of the double chronology of the transition narrative:

For a long time, [Arabic literature] was tied to the Islamic calendar, then one day,

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<sup>10</sup> The formulation “one but unequal world” is the basis of Immanuel Wallerstein’s World Systems Theory, which has been incorporated into literary theory in the past two decades under the rubric of “World Literature,” particularly in the work of Pascale Casanova and Franco Moretti.

without warning, it moved to the Christian calendar! One day, after seven centuries of recumbency, it leaped up suddenly and gracefully over six centuries, and found itself in the middle of the nineteenth century, in another age and against a different horizon. (Kilito 9)

The works studied in the following chapters all negotiate the relation between historical-temporal narrative structures and literary forms. For these writers, the pressing question is that of positioning oneself in time – not *where* am I, which is the question much literary criticism posits to global modernist literature (the East or the West? Home or Away? Reality or symbol and sign?), but *when* am I, what is the time of literature and the time of writing, and how do they relate to the time of history.

This leap was rarely graceful or organic. Its trajectory was orchestrated by the respective Arab and Jewish modern renaissance movements. Arabic modernity, Elias Khoury writes, is a “revival modernity” (25); as such it shares much with Hebrew modernity, itself a product of a revival movement. As Lital Levy summarizes in an article arguing for the similarities between the Arab *nahḍa* and the Hebrew *haskalah*,

[t]hat metaphors of light and darkness suffuse both the modern Arabic and Hebrew revivals is no coincidence. Both were internally conflicted movements driven by intellectuals seeking answers to their societies’ predicaments of powerlessness. Their allegories of waking from slumber or of light dispelling the darkness betray the direct influence of Enlightenment thought, which disseminated its teleological narratives of ‘progress’ throughout the globe and

claimed that non-Western Europeans occupied a lower rung in the civilizational hierarchy. (Levy "The Nahḍa and the Haskala" 301)

The *nahḍa* ('awakening'), Levy writes, refers to the activities of clusters of intellectuals throughout the Arab and Islamicate world who sought coherent responses to the military and technological ascent of Europe and to global modernity (302). The origins and development of the *nahḍa* were profoundly linked to the political circumstances of foreign rule and colonial domination, from the Ottoman Empire's entangled history with Europe, through Napoleon's invasion of Egypt, to the British colonization of Egypt nearly a century later. The *nahḍa*'s areas of concern comprised literature and science, religion and technology, and social and political thought, and it was subsequently positioned as the originary moment of national selfhood, inspiring nationalist historiographies (304).

The Jewish modernization movement similarly developed in two consecutive chapters known generally as *haskalah* (Jewish movement of enlightenment) and *tehiyah* (revival). Whereas the *haskalah* engaged mainly with questions of cultural, epistemological, and religious reform, the *tehiyah* was more absorbed with ideas of nationalist formation and representation. While the original *haskalah* impulse was to integrate the Jewish community into the forming liberal European societies, later intellectuals and activists sought separationist nationalist solutions for the European Jewish population. Nonetheless, both trends had a similar goal – to introduce and integrate the Jewish population of Europe into modern time after the model of modern citizenship (what Amnon Raz Krakotzkin has usefully called, "a return to history," which is also "a return to the West" ("The Zionist Return" 167)).

Even though the Jewish *maskilim* were engaged in debates on emancipation within the inter-European context of forming liberal state structures, recent scholarship has emphasized the similarity between their modernization narrative (whether it culminated in calls to assimilation or to separatist nationalisms) and that of the colonial/post-colonial world, by means of both an external Orientalizing gaze and an internal adoption of its stereotypes in self-referential discourses (Heschel; Hess). There are some historical limitations to this analogy between anti-Semitism and colonialism, and it should be scrutinized carefully for its hiatuses (for example, colonialism's exploitation of local populations as a work force) as well as its benefits (highlighting a similar 'autobiographical' narrative of cultural revival). While colonialism proves to be a complex and imperfect paradigm when applied to European Jewry, Orientalism, as a scholarly and political discourse, is greatly relevant to its history and experience. As Kalmar and Penslar point out in the introduction to their collection on Orientalism and the Jews, "Orientalism is an instance of colonial discourse, but it is also more than that" and should not be subsumed only under the study of imperialism (Kalmar and Penslar xviii). Orientalist discourse played a significant role in the cultural and political renaissance movements of both Jews and Arabs. Raz-Krakozykin argues that Orientalism was one of the main discourses informing debates on the civic status of the German Jewry, and demonstrates the manner in which Edward Said's claims in *Orientalism* can be extended to the German Jewish experience. In his analysis, the eighteenth-century orientalist discourse that established the borders of European identity through the image of a Jewish other was internalized by Jews, then deployed in the twentieth century to create a secular, national Jewish culture (Raz-Krakozykin "The Zionist Return" 163). Similarly, the standard Arabic *nahḍa* narrative, which posits the *nahḍa* as the awakening of Arabic and Islamic culture and society after an extended period of slumber and decline, adopted and internalized the

view of the Orient as “lifeless, timeless, forceless,” to use Edward Said’s shorthand (*Orientalism* 241), in order to propagate a similar return to history.

Orientalism has participated in creating a hierarchized view of cultures and communities in modern time. Yet it also provided a means to engage with a cultural past that could be reclaimed as a personal or national treasure of tradition, to be relearned and at times re-inhabited in the modern period. Arabic writers’ (re)turn to the “golden age” of *turāth*, exhibiting “a desire to court a possible retention of a glorious past” in a national context has been extensively studied (Musawi 17). Jurji Zaydan, mentioned in the beginning of this introduction, is the quintessential example. Likewise, the central figures of the Hebrew renaissance, such as Bialik and Berdichevsky, transformed the traditional Jewish library into a resource for a secular and national Hebrew literary culture by the “ingathering of Jewish traditional texts in new, modern, and secular forms” (Pinsker 227).

The extent to which these texts can be so easily cast as “secular” and “modern” is precisely the question addressed in Chapter One. The transition narrative of both Hebrew and Arabic begins with reinventions and revivals of “national heritage” through engagements with Orientalist archives and epistemologies, and continues in parallel histories of modern institution making: revolutionary, socialist, and colonialist/paternalist projects of nation building and state formation, the consolidation of post-independence and post-colonial state bureaucracies, and a radical crisis of liberalism (pinpointed to the War of 1967), narrated as a loss of national innocence. The following chapters stage encounters between Arabic and Hebrew texts at each of these periods, in order to elaborate on the interaction between literary production and the narrative forms that accompany these institutional developments. This particular comparative paradigm, however, ceases to be meaningful after 1967, due to the increasing power inequalities



between Israel and its Arab neighbors, as well as Israel's broadly conceived shift from a settler-colonial model to a colonial model of control (Veracini).

### **Stasis Beyond Symptoms: Genres of the Present**

As I mentioned at the beginning of the introduction, one of the primary difficulties of Arab and Hebrew literary modernity was to find a genre of the present, particularly as the available genres (the novel or short story) did not seem to fit with the present's unstable conditions. One could argue that the present, in general, is the most problematic of tenses: While the past seems to extend back "for ages," and the future is by definition unlimited, their point of contact in the present is fleeting: try to catch it and it is already gone. The immediate present has no narrative, no story, since any such temporally bound genres immediately leak into both the past and the future.

The problem of the present took on a special urgency, however, in Arabic writing. In an essay titled "Arabic Prose and Fiction After 1948" (written as an introduction to the English translation of Halim Barakat's *Days of Dust* in 1997), Edward Said writes that the loss of Palestine in 1948 was conceived, particularly in Constantine Zurayk's influential book *Ma'na al-nakba* (*The Meaning of the Disaster*, 1948), as a deviation, "a veering out of course, a serious deflection from a forward path" (Said "Arabic Prose" 47). While other nations were setting on the path of decolonization, Arab modernity had suddenly lost its future. The force of Zurayk's book, Said writes, is that it made clear "the problem of the *present*, a problematic site of contemporaneity, occupied and blocked from the Arabs" (47, emphasis in the original). As a result, Arabic writing was tasked with the heroic duty of creating the Arab's obstructed present, to insist on Arab contemporaneity in the face of extinction. Said reflects on the prevalence of the

episodic *scene* as a form in modern Arabic literature, replacing the historical period or the linear, continuous narrative, and ties it to the precarity of the Arab present:

The past is usually identified with loss, the future with uncertainty. But as for the present, it is a constant experience, a *scene* to be articulated with all the resources of language and vision. ... It is the *scene* as the irreducible form of the present which the writer must affirm.” (49)

For the Arab writer, Said asserts, “the present is not an imaginative luxury, but a literal existential necessity” (53). Writing the present, making it in language, becomes in itself a historical act, a provocation, an act of resistance against extinction.

Writing in the midst of the Lebanese civil war, Elias Khoury also reflects on the Arab present as an obstructed site. Arabic modernity, Khoury writes, is a “revival modernity” (*ḥadātha nahḍawiyya*), which differentiates it from Western modernity. Revival modernity is experienced as a cultural/social/political break, for which the solution must be sought from outside, by latching oneself to a future that is already known in advance (Khoury 25).<sup>11</sup> This pre-modeled future, defined by Western capitalist hegemonic expansion, becomes in itself a kind of memory, seeking to replace historical-cultural memory, which has lost its legitimacy in the present and became a museum artifact. Between the obstructed cultural memory of the past, and the modern memory of the future, the present is absent, finding no place in either (26). The movement of the present becomes oppressive, taken over by the mechanisms of a state that sees itself as the owner of the legitimacy of the future (26; 28). The Arab writer must resist this

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<sup>11</sup> Khoury is echoing the temporality narrated by Laroui, cited above.

movement and reinstate himself in this absent present, “not as a witness *to* his time, but as a witness *in* them” (89).

Said and Khoury reflect on a similar crisis of historical continuity manifest in literary form, but their interpretation of the task of writing the present is affectively different. While Said highlights the heroic task of writing the present as a mode of national-historic resistance, carving a path in existence, Khoury writes that at this time of social self-destruction (writing in war-torn, sectarian, 1981 Beirut), literature can be nothing but itself. Literature becomes “a search for the ceremonies of the everyday, it recuperates them and positions them as a goal at the same time” (83).

The impassive modernist forms that I identify in this dissertation are far more in line with Khoury’s modest claims than with Said’s emphatic ambitions. The characters in these texts are drawn to states of stasis and immobility, rejecting an ethos of productivity and realization. Impassivity is about inhabiting the present in its fullness, without allowing it to project into the past or the future. It is an awareness of the body as it occupies space, in the present tense, in daily routines. Nevertheless, impassivity is written as a *desire* for an impassive present; it is a desire that is never fully fulfilled. The attempt to construct a fullness of the present, identified in Arabic and Hebrew works below, is always defined against and breached by history, or by both past and future memories. The purpose of identifying and lingering on these moments of impassivity and non-productivity is to analyze this desire’s origins, asking what it can achieve despite its limited capacities.

At this point it is important to mention “trauma” as the prevalent analytic model used to interpret passivity or emotional absence in modernist literature in relation to history, and its absence from the dissertation. Over the past 80 years, Lauren Berlant claims, trauma has become

the prominent genre for describing the historical present (Berlant 10). Felman and Laub's seminal *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* established the broken, fragmented modernist text as a symptomatic and compulsive return to a traumatic site of history. The widely accepted temporality of trauma, as described in Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience*, is of a present compromised by a repetition of one's own past as a belated experience.

As Laroui's, Khoury's, and Said's accounts illustrate, the temporal model shaping the present of the Arabic text is not one of "belated experience," and cannot be compressed into the formal structure of trauma. In light of their accounts, trauma emerges as *one* temporal genre – the unprocessed moment of shock or crisis that belatedly returns – which has been inflated to explain multifarious examples of passivity and emotional absence. In other words, it has become one predetermined and available model to explain endless variations, without having to attend to the historical and political particulars that shape them. The following chapters identify alternative temporal structures that define the encounter with the present, and elaborate on the variety of impassive literary forms that they produce.

Impassive modernism is a current that exists side by side with emphatic modernism – often even in the same text. Yet while emphatic modernism corresponds to the dynamic temporal forms associated with modernity – the experience of constant change or acceleration – impassive modernism corresponds to modernity's static temporalities: the obstructed "timeless" past, the repetition of the everyday, or the endless experience of waiting at a checkpoint. While modernist form has offered a powerful vessel for postcolonial writers to express resistance, forging a sense of national identity and political commitment, impassive modernism encompasses modernism's

more decadent and defeatist aspects.<sup>12</sup> Rather than empowerment or resolution, the archive of works explored in the present dissertation is rife with indecision, disorientation, or inertia. They explore affects that are associated with suspended mobility and agency: stuckness, minor irritation, lethargy, languor, or exhaustion. These emotions register modernity as an experience of impasse, rather than of increased mobility and access. Rarely asking its readers to emote, to be surprised, or simply interested, impassive modernism generates feelings of frustration, disgust, or simply boredom. Stuck in the present, barred from envisioning an alternate future, works of impassive modernism focus on embodied presence, and form minute registers of sense and sensations.

What kind of political work can this collection of passive feelings perform? How can it be read, politically and aesthetically, beyond a simple identification of symptomatic resignation? While emphatic modernism is often explicitly committed to political radicalism (manifestos, revolutions in language, daring artistic feats), impassive modernism is aware of its own shortcomings and constraints as a political agent. Theodor Adorno identifies this awareness with modernism itself: aware of art's autonomous position in a commoditized and bourgeois society, modernism embarks on guilty self-reflection on its own powerlessness (Adorno *Aesthetic Theory* 225). Sianne Ngai recuperates Adorno's observation, noting that textual examples of passivity and stasis can be read as allegories to art's restriction to an independent aesthetic sphere, and its resultant passivity and powerlessness in relation to political action. Ngai argues that this makes art, and particularly the archive of "ugly feelings" she chronicles, useful not only for thinking its own powerlessness, but for thinking of powerlessness in general (Ngai 3). Impassive modernism is diagnostic of the impasses of the present, but it also allows us to think beyond them.

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<sup>12</sup> On modernism as a vessel of postcolonial resistance, see Ramazani, "Modernist Bricolage".

I do not argue that we should reclaim impassivity as a full program of opposition, and ignore its frustrating and self-flagellating aspects, which in the case of Arabic and Hebrew modernisms are always also bound with uncomfortable legacies and stereotypes of Orientalism.<sup>13</sup> Works of impassive modernism refrain from emphatic proclamations partly because they recognize that statements of opposition and resistant stances are always entangled with mimetic desires, that there is no site of uncontaminated opposition. Impassive affects, I contend, perform ambivalent political work: while they have a critical capacity, they can hardly be thought of as ameliorative solutions to the political and historical problems they address. Instead, their uneasy appearance attests to an ambiguity persistent at the heart of modern political life and to the limits of progressive politics. Their ambiguity forces us to question the most basic logics and metaphors that we have come to associate with a resistant stance.

The task of modern critique was often conceived as *breaking* concepts, identities, and ideologies that have “solidified,” allowing them to assume their “natural” and free flow again. Hegel spoke of philosophy’s task as “freeing determinate thoughts from their fixity,” and setting in motion certainties that had been stalled (Hegel 20). Marxist and Frankfurt School thinkers similarly articulated critiques of reification as the need to unstiffen and release concepts that had congealed, putting them back into free circulation. Critiques of nationalism, and most recently of Zionism, have valorized movement, nomadism, or exile as correctives to the state’s inclination towards stasis, settlement, or rootedness.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> A pertinent example is Albert Cossery (1913-2008), an Egyptian who lived in Paris and wrote solely in French, whose magnificent modernist odes to laziness (*Laziness in the Fertile Valley* most prominently) push the trope of Oriental indolence to the absurd. Additional examples are discussed in Chapter Two.

<sup>14</sup> See Judith Butler’s recent elaboration of “exilic Judaism” as an antidote to nationalist exclusion (Butler 205-24). For a more dialectical account of “diasporic” Jewish identity against contemporary Zionist identity, see (Raz-Krakotzkin “Galut”). For an overview of the turn from a “metaphysics of sedentarism” to a “metaphysics of nomadism,” see Tim Cresswell’s chapter, “A Nomadic Metaphysics” (42-56).

Impassivity suggests that this conceptual landscape governed by the naturalization of movement might be misguided. Radical stasis points the way to logics resistant to enlightenment or progressive thought, as well as to automatic valorizations of movement, fluidity, and flows. The following chapters suggest that traversing borders is at times insufficient, as it only reestablished their power; that fluidity and flexibility are not necessarily aspirations, but can be used as tactics of coercion; that identity is not always a process of becoming, but at times is in a static state of being, even if that being is quite vacant. Relying on a host of alternative metaphors that resist the image of a “rupture” of congealed forms, such as the exponentially curving boundary, the dry accumulation of dust, or the futile but gratifying act of scratching, works of impassive modernism suggest that perhaps the right to settle should be recognized as more important than the right to freely move, and that the goal is not always to get things moving, but instead can be imagined as allowing them to settle.

### **Global Modernity/Transnational Modernism**

Stepping back from the particular Arabic and Hebrew case studies, the methodological context of this study emerges as comparative literary modernisms, or under its contemporary designations, global modernism; transnational modernism; world modernism: the study of modernist aesthetics as a *world* phenomenon, developing across vast regions of the world through the interaction of local and global processes.<sup>15</sup> In line with a growing cross-disciplinary interest in globalized networks and in World Literature (which has practically replaced, in recent years, the Comparative Literature institutional and conceptual framework), the renewed scholarly

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<sup>15</sup> Key surveys and anthologies of the field include Friedman "Periodizing Modernism"; "Planetarity"; Mao and Walkowitz; Wollaeger and Eatough; Hayot and Walkowitz, and the essays collected in a special issue on "Modernism and Transnationalisms" in *Modernism /modernity*.

attention to modernism is particularly concerned with a reevaluation of the transnational relationships between modernism, modernity, and modernization (Mao and Walkowitz 737).

Expanding modernism's geographical scope, and highlighting its transnational, cosmopolitan, or global concerns, the main challenge of global modernist studies is to maintain the moniker "modernism" but overcome its decidedly Eurocentric associations and attributes. Hayot and Walkowitz posit the question clearly in the recently published *New Vocabulary of Global Modernism*: how can scholarship move away from centralist or diffusionist narratives, which posit modernism as a European phenomenon subsequently dispersed across the world? (5). The foundational texts of the new World Literature are not very helpful to this end: Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters*, or Franco Moretti's "Conjunctures on World Literature," while concerned with the political valences of the global migration of modern literary forms, nevertheless remain wedded to an inflexible center/periphery model. David Damrosch's *What is World Literature*, while recognizing literature's myriad paths and routes, is largely interested in literary circulation, overlooking the manner global dynamics and processes shape literary production.

Why bother with modernism, then, if the term is so firmly attached to Eurocentric models of interpretation and dissemination? What do we gain by insisting on mutating it so that it fits with global processes? The first and simple answer is that the Arab and Hebrew writers explored in this study considered modernism to be an always-already-global literary sphere, into which their writing granted them access. As Moroccan scholar Abdelfattah Kilito writes, "the Arab writer, whether consciously or not, takes translation into account, that is, translation as comparison, evaluation, transformation of one literature into another. Every study of a modern Arab writer is, in effect, a comparative study" (Kilito 19). And so, of the writers explored in this



dissertation, Y. H. Brenner owes an unmistakable debt to Dostoyevsky, particularly to the proto-modernist Dostoyevsky of *Notes from the Underground*; both Yishayahu Koren and Sonnallah Ibrahim cite their encounter with Hemingway's stories as a breakthrough moment crucial to finding their own voice; Elia Suleiman conceals silent references to Beckett's plays in his works. The purpose in citing these canonical modernist examples is not to argue for the extent Hebrew and Arab writers were "under their influence," but to demonstrate how modernist techniques were created through such global encounters and cross-fertilizations.

Secondly, this project conceives of modernism broadly, as an ideological-aesthetic project emerging in response to modernity. Modernity itself, as Fredrik Jameson points out, is a self-referencing narrative trope, one which already includes a thinking of the global (Jameson *Singular Modernity* 34). The emergence of a global "rule of equivalence" concurs with Jameson's view of modernity as singular: tied to a singular set of phenomena (capitalism, secularization, imperialism), it nevertheless manifests itself differently and singularly across the globe (179). Likewise, "modernism" as a category is multifarious, encompassing a multiplicity of manifestations that can nevertheless be conceived as a singularity in its relation to modernity.

In order to do so, modernist studies must necessarily integrate the insights of postcolonial studies. This is not only to recognize that postcolonial literature *is* modernist (as Jahan Ramazani writes, "creolization, hybridization, and interculturalization become almost as basic to our understanding of modernism as they are of the postcolonial" (*Transnational Poetics* 32)), but also to permit the terms emerging from colonial and postcolonial literatures to change the scope and meaning of modernism itself, as Hayot and Walkowitz suggest doing in the *New Vocabulary*. This dissertation joins this effort by suggesting *stasis* as an interpretive node that can decenter modernism and recast it as a global term, particularly given the manner it can

illuminate the relation between modernist literary forms and global narratives of transition to modernity. The focus on stasis allows defining a particular, distinct, and central modernist strand, which I call impassive modernism.<sup>16</sup>

The global definition of impassive modernism is aligned, in a number of important ways, with Latin American scholar Alberto Moreiras' concept *negative globality*. Moreiras highlights *negative globality* against the tendency to articulate "micronarratives" of difference and heterogeneity, which always risk emerging as simple negations within a false dialectics of consciousness imposed by the supremacy of global consumerist culture-ideology (49). He uses the term *narrative fissure*, which refers to the contrasts between expectations of modernization and the realities of the course of events in modernity. These reversals of expectations are worldwide and affect everybody: They produce is a "rupture at the level of consciousness," emerging from the fact that modernization did not happen in the sense of was supposed to have happened (50). As a concept, *negative globality* maintains the global reach of modernity, but deflates its progressive promises. Impassive modernism often emerges as an aesthetic technique to address the narrative fissure between modern expectations the modern historical present.

### **Static Modernisms**

Despite canonical modernist literature's manifest interest in sites of immobility and situations of extreme stasis (most notably, probably, in Beckett and Kafka's writing, preempted by figures such as Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* and Dostoyevsky's *Underground Man*), the emblematic characters of modernism have been characterized by unrestraint or

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<sup>16</sup> The need to identify particular currents *within* modernism emerges precisely from its (purposefully) broad and expansive definition. As Jameson remarks, "any theory of modernism capacious enough to include Joyce along with Yeats or Proust, let alone alongside Vallejo, Biely, Gide, or Bruno Shulz, is bound to be so vague and vacuous as to be intellectually inconsequential, let alone practically unproductive" (Jameson *Singular Modernity* 104).

excessive mobility and movement – these are the *flâneur*, the stranger, the exile, or the émigré (Benjamin *Writer of Modern Life*; Simmel; Eagleton). Mid-to late twentieth-century discussions of modernism focus on mobility and its relationship to the formal innovations of modernist literature; either a triumphant tribute to speed and the moving image, or a melancholic reckoning with the fragmenting experience of exile and migration. Modernism is often celebrated as migratory, un-housed, and non-national, an aesthetic movement of transnational affiliations and histories. The focus on movements and flows is supplanted by an emphasis on the desire for newness, novelty, originality: the most cited banners of modernism are still Baudelaire’s acclamation of the transient and fleeting, Marx’s solids melting into air, and Pound’s command to “make it new.”

This perspective remains largely intact in the new global modernist studies. In their focus on cosmopolitan circulation, largely built upon James Clifford’s notion of “discrepant cosmopolitanism,” scholars of global modernism identify modernism in the movement between the local and the global.<sup>17</sup> In the seminal essay “Traveling Cultures,” Clifford argues that the tendency to view the local and the global as mutually exclusive stems from an understanding of culture as static. In its place, Clifford offers “discrepant cosmopolitanism”—an alternative conception of culture as dynamic and mobile. Clifford does not refer merely to the excessive contemporary movements of individuals and populations, but to the fact that cultures are never purely local but are always crossed by ongoing processes of hybridization, “inseparable from specific, often violent, histories of economic, political, and cultural interaction” (Clifford 36).

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Susan Stanford Friedman’s use of Clifford’s theory to categorize Tayeb Salih’s *A Season of Migration to the North*, by arguing its shared affinities and cultural circumstances with Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* in Friedman (“Periodizing Modernism” 435-39), or Jahan Ramazani’s appeal to Clifford in order to theorize poetry’s translocal conjunctures and intercultural circuits (Ramazani *Transnational Poetics* 28). For a critique of Clifford’s “discrepant cosmopolitanism” as a new form of cultural imperialism that overwrites conflict and allows no room for defensive nationalism, see Brennan, *At Home in the World*; Spiegel (108-9).

Clifford's theory of "discrepant cosmopolitanism" has proven particularly attractive to Global Modernist Studies because it calls for cultural studies to be supplemented by a more explicitly comparative approach: while the specific cultures might be unique, the processes and encounters that produce such cultures can be located and compared. However, one result of positioning this model at the foundation of Global Modernist Studies has been the valorization of movement and mobility as interpretive lenses, since "cultures are always traveling," as Clifford writes (cited in Friedman "World Modernisms" 514). Since the relation between the local and the global is conceptualized as a "movement," a voyage, or a translation, Global Modernist Studies have tended to focus on narratives and tropes of displacement, travel, or inter-culturation.

A number of recent studies of high modernism have turned the spotlight on modernism's concern with immobility, instead of with "the broken narrative of the journey" (Williams *Politics of Modernism* 34), or on its tendency to slow time down rather than reflect modernity as a shocking experience of speed. In *Modernism and Mobility* (2014), for example, Bridget Chalk examines modernism's transnational inclinations in light of strengthening technologies of mobility control and travel limitations between the two world wars, such as the uniform imposition of passport regulations. Chalk focuses on the "conditions of the production of modernist narrative projects in order to consider the delimiting factors on writers' abilities to lead mutable, mobile lives" (Chalk 11), and is not concerned with immobility as a literary form and an aesthetics. More pertinent to this project is Michael Sayeau's *Against the Event*, which argues for a dominant strand of "anti-evental modernism," heralded by authors who "attempt to think and write beyond the evental organization of time" (Sayeau 9). Sayeau focuses on the everyday as a narrative form, a structure of feeling that arrives as a side effect alongside the more familiar temporal effects of modernity: progress, acceleration, and teleological directedness.

Affects like boredom, ennui, or anxiety, he argues, so characteristic of the literary representations of the everyday, can be read as aesthetic-formal concerns; the result of a tension between a progressive and supposedly irreversible plot, and the cyclical, repetitive movement of the daily routine.

Sayeau's model shares some similarities with the temporal structure Laroui called "*le futur antérieur*": a future, or a narrative structure, already decided in advance, elsewhere (Laroui *L'ideologie Arabe* 66). Nevertheless, Laroui's model outlines a temporality of obstructed present conditioned not only by the repetitions of a daily routine, but also by the amputation of the past. Focusing on static affects in modernisms written in Arabic and Hebrew allows the account of global modernism to be decentered, as well as counters the tendency to view it as always moving and in shift.

### **Comparability: Reading Hebrew and Arabic Together**

The rationale behind the comparative scope of this dissertation is in line with what Middle East historian Orit Bashkin defined, in a 2014 roundtable, as "provincializing Zionism" (Bashkin 578). Bashkin surveyed a series of new studies in Jewish Middle Eastern history that reject of the notion that all identities of Middle Eastern Jews should be exclusively juxtaposed with a Zionist identity, attending instead to parallel and inter-related processes of modernization in the Ottoman Empire and around the Mediterranean.

The dissertation shares a similar ambition for provincialization or de-centering of the national narratives of Hebrew and Arabic modern literatures, as well as the scholarship that reads them together. Recognizing the entanglements of Jews and Arabs in the contemporary political landscape (which Judith Butler recently called "the wretched forms of binationalism that already

exist [in Israel-Palestine]” (Butler 4)), this dissertation nevertheless steps back from the circumscribed site of Israel-Palestine, and opens a perspective to examine Arabic and Hebrew as two literary cultures developing in response to similar pressures of modern political and ideological structures. Over the past two decades, an increasing number of studies in Comparative Literature argue for the value of reading Hebrew and Arabic literatures side by side (these studies are in ongoing conversation with the new Middle Eastern histories that Bashkin surveys). From a landscape of near absolute separation (with the study of Andalusian poetry as a notable exception), the pairing became conventional, producing books, dissertations, and curatorial and pedagogical projects, taking a stance against the logic of separation encapsulated in the moment of Independence/Nakba. Broadly conceived, this scholarship consists of two overlapping movements: the first positions Hebrew and Palestinian literary works together as a political-literary horizon, reflecting or transgressing the boundaries of contemporary politics (Hochberg *In Spite of Partition*; *Visual Occupations*; Bernard; Levy *Poetic Trespass*); the second, which also includes the postcolonial readings of Yitzhaq Shami mentioned above, engages in recuperative archival projects that trace and reopen the possibilities, foreclosed by nationalist ideologies of separation, for joint Jewish-Arab existence within the same body or the same body politic (Alcalay; Hochberg *In Spite of Partition*; Berg; Levy "Jewish Writers"; Anidjar; Starr). Driven by a desire to critique current oppressive logics and practices of partition, they position Arabic and Hebrew texts side by side in order to imagine alternative political configurations. The political import and influence of these projects notwithstanding, with their now familiar gesture of corrective coupling they have, to a certain extent, narrowed the available examples and possibilities of comparative Arabic-Hebrew literary scholarship to a particular set of encounters, contexts, and archives, based on critique of politically inscribed identities. Their

project of destabilization has stabilized into a new orthodoxy, with its own set of attending values. Crudely summarized, it turns to literature in order to find fluidity, movement, and trespassing, and to counter the identity, fixity, and passivity of political life.

My premise is that a consideration of Hebrew and Arabic (or Jews and Arabs) together can exceed the scope of their entanglement in Israel-Palestine, positioning them side-by-side as two literary trajectories within a larger history of modernity. The textual conversations staged by means of this positioning illuminate the limits and potentialities of literary writing in the twentieth century, which shape both Arabic and Hebrew literary creation.

Comparisons are never neutral. As R. Radhakrishnan writes, “they are inevitably tendentious, didactic, competitive, and prescriptive. Behind the seeming generosity of comparison, there always lurks the aggression of a thesis” (454). The “lurking thesis” of this current comparison, if I may spell it out, is that reading the history of modernist literary form in Arabic and Hebrew *together* is necessary in order to wrench the two traditions out of parochial national or regional scholarly debates, and to allow them to take their place as central elements in the scholarship of global modernism’s emergence, and particularly its relation to colonial and postcolonial dynamics. Like any program of interpretation, which wrenches an object out of what appears to be its “natural” context and casts it into a new one, it might seem, at times, aggressive. Furthermore, it has its particular dangers: the first is the conflation of (at least) two different histories of national and cultural revival in the modern period. The second, and perhaps more pertinent, is the danger of disregarding or “smoothing over” the radically divergent constellations of power and access to violence in Israel/Palestine in the present. Throughout this study, I strive to maintain what Radhakrishnan calls “perennially double conscious:” acting, on the one hand, as though the comparison exists in an ideal world of equivalence, detaching both

objects from the burden of their infinitely determined histories, and at the same time deconstructing such an idealistic ethics, recognizing the unequal and asymmetrical relationships that have and continue to structure the world in dominance (458-9).

A second impetus for casting Arabic and Hebrew within the broad comparative scope of impassive modernism is a sense that resonates in many of the texts that make up this research's archive: a notion of political impasse or exhaustion. As I am writing this introduction, the Israeli government voted that Arabic is no longer an official language in Israel, affirming in law what has been an ongoing reality of discriminatory policy. The occupation of the West Bank is fifty years old, and its end appears more distant than ever. A romantic novel featuring a (failed, impossible) affair between an Israeli and an Arab was recently removed from Israeli school curriculum and declared subversive.<sup>18</sup> It is difficult not to feel doubtful, if not simply cynical, about the liberationist promises that literature claims to hold and that literary criticism claims to uncover. Nevertheless, the exhausted novels and protagonists read in the following chapters can be instructive in our own current moment of political exhaustion of all possibilities. Their own exhaustion of can allow seeing what liberationist narratives might be actually holding us in place or taking us back. The exhaustion of the possible, Deleuze writes, is necessary in order to abolish the real (5).

### **Methodology: Reading Impassive Textures**

It is possible to construct a theory of affect that begins from stasis rather than from movement? According to the Spinozian definition, which lies at the basis of many affect-centered analyses, affect is synonymous with a force, “the capacity of bodies to affect and be

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<sup>18</sup> On Dorit Rabinian's novel *Gader haya*, translated as *All the Rivers*, see Rabinian, “The Day Israel Banned My Book From Schools.”



affected” (cited in Massumi 15). Ann Cvetkovich offers a variation, calling affect “the capacity to move and be moved” (Cvetkovich 4). The many divergent trajectories of affect studies emerging in the past decade share the association between force, motion, and emotion and, whether they are studying affect’s circulation between the body and its environment, between numerous bodies, or between historical moment, text, and readers.<sup>19</sup>

A radically different approach to affect is found in Fredrik Jameson’s *The Antinomies of Realism*, an analysis of English and French realism structured around a distinction between “moving” and “static” aesthetic forms. Jameson reads Euro-American realism as a genre defined by a collision between a narrative impulse, or *récit*, and a static or scenic impulse, which he names *affect*: in this he claims a specific, localized realm for affect, rather than an argument on the contemporary uses and denotations of the term, that is uniquely aligned with the moments of impassive modernism I identify in the Hebrew and Arabic texts. Narrative and affect are distinguished by their temporal forms: the narrative impulse, more simply understood as the plot or the story, adopts temporality as the regime of past-present-future. Affect, on the other hand, is marked by a reduction to the present, or, in Jameson’s striking phrase, a reduction to the body. Affect can be read as a mode of description, but it is an “existential description,” doing away with the allegorical or symbolic function of narrative description: in its appeal to the pre-linguistic immediacy of the body’s being-in-the-world, it does not signify anything, does not claim to be anything than what it is: “states of the world, they simply exist” (34).

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<sup>19</sup> The focus on motion is evident in Massumi’s spinozist account of incorporeality, we well as in Erin Manning’s work. Another vein of affect studies, by scholars such as Sara Ahmed or Teresa Brennan examines it as a relational function of being within the world, a kind of evaluative orientation towards objects, or as an embodied emotion that circulates socially, performing a range of political labors (Ahmed 4; Teresa Brennan 5). While Massumi turns to affect in order to do away with mediation and explore how bodies interact in impersonal, non-symbolic ways, Ahmed recognizes that affects and emotions themselves are forms of mediation between bodies. Her scholarship focuses on the circulation of emotions as social and public goods. Affect oriented literary studies, most pertinently by Lauren Berlant and Sian Ngai, add the aesthetic object to this circulation, examining how affect circulates between the writer’s historical moment, the text itself, and the reader.

Despite his statement that he is not taking sides for narrative or affect, but rather identifying realism as the antagonistic collision between the two (26), it appears that Jameson bemoans narrative's submersion into affect, which culminates in modernism's "eternal present" (curiously not, as Jameson's earlier work might suggest, in postmodernism).<sup>20</sup> The narrative impulse ties "character" to the notion of a unique destiny: the character has a story and a genre, its future is bound to its past as well as to the genre's (and to history's) demands. Affect, on the other hand, as the registry of the eternal present, avoids the notion of genre, since the moment's singularity would be lost when associated with an historical form or destiny. Affect, in other words, rejects Jameson's command to "always historicize" (*Political Unconscious* 9).

As I elaborate in Chapter Two, such dismissal of the temporal forms underlining affect might be too rushed. Nevertheless, I find Jameson's idiosyncratic model of affect useful, since by focusing on affect as an anti-narrative aesthetic tendency he identifies it with a *static* or scenic aesthetic composition and manages to circumvent the vitalist, movement-centered perspective that characterizes much of the field. Jameson's reading of realism as a collision between the narrative impulse's commitment to historical destiny and affect's resistance to destiny's constraints highlights that genre is a historical-dialectical process in which the negative and positive are inextricable (*Antinomies* 6). This claim, I maintain, should be extended to genres that seem to have been "overtaken" by the non-narrative affective impulse, such as modernism: in other words, the surface of affect, despite its claims to immediacy and presentness, can also be read dialectically. Impassive modernism obsessively returns the readers to surfaces, both of the text and of the body. These surfaces, however, are never simply evident and available to the

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<sup>20</sup> This preference is quite evident in the sarcastic account of narrative's loss of allure: "The 'serious' writer— that is, the one who aspires to the distinction of literature— will keep faith with what alone authentically survives the weakening of all the joints and joists, the bulkheads and load bearing supports of narrative as such, of the *récit* on its point of submersion: namely affect as such, whose triumph over its structural adversary is that bodiliness that alone makes any singularity in the everyday... its fate is henceforth the fate of modernism" (Jameson *Antinomies* 184).

reader, as last decade's manifestos for surface reading seem to assert.<sup>21</sup> Impassivity and affect (as Jameson defines it) are modes of representation that present themselves as *non-representation* or as immediacy. As a genre, their convention is the immediacy of the present. Even if affect has no temporality, as Jameson asserts, it has a spatial texture full of historical residues, to whose richness reading should attend (Sedgwick 13-16).

### **Dissertation Structure**

"Alas", said the mouse, "the whole world is growing smaller every day. At the beginning it was so big that I was afraid, I kept running and running, and I was glad when I saw walls far away to the right and left, but these long walls have narrowed so quickly that I am in the last chamber already, and there in the corner stands the trap that I am running into."

"You only need to change your direction," said the cat, and ate it up.

Inadvertently, this dissertation took on the structure of Kafka's "Little Fable" (est. 1920). Starting out with the wide literary and historical expanses of the mock-classicist texts of S. Y. Agnon and Mahmud al-Masa'adi, which lightly skip between myth, fantasy, modernist existentialism, and awesome erudition, each chapter chronicles another closing of horizons, another withdrawal into the individual body: the final chapter reads Palestinian works created under the obstructed conditions of the Occupation, in which the only available means of survival is adopting hermetic unreadability. After all possibilities of movement have been exhausted, is there anywhere left to go?

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<sup>21</sup> See Best and Marcus on surface reading as an anti-interpretive mode, suggesting "just reading" instead. For a powerful Marxist critique of surface reading, suggesting "perverted surface reading" instead, see Lesjak, "Reading Dialectically."

The full stakes of “impassive modernism,” as an aesthetic category resistant to reading and analysis, emerge only in the final chapter. The dissertation does not aim to trace the chronological development of impassive modernism (the chapters’ chronological organization is loose, allowing for exceptions). More accurately, the later texts allow elements that have already been present in earlier works to emerge more clearly to the reader and scholar’s eyes. As Borges writes of Kafka’s retroactive constitution of the category of the Kafkaesque, “the fact is that every writer creates his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future” (Borges 243). Likewise, one needs the impassivity of Palestinian Adania Shibli (b. 1974) in order to identify the impassivity of Y. H. Brenner (d. 1921).

Chapter One, titled “‘There Is No Event Whose Mark Has Not Gone before It’: Between Orientalist and Literary Typological Readings,” sets up the comparative framework of the dissertation, addressing the questionable modernity of Arabic or Hebrew texts. As two languages that have been read through orientalist and philological frameworks, how can Hebrew or Arabic escape Orientalist framings and be read as modern literatures? In order to explore this difficulty, I read two early-mid-century authors that claim not to be interested in novelty, recuperating instead the literary forms of the past. S. Y. Agnon’s novella “Edo ve-Enam” (“Edo and Enam,” 1950) and Mahmud al-Mas‘adi’s novel *Ḥaddatha Abū Hurayra Qāl* (*Thus Spoke Abu Hurayra*, written 1938, published 1973) explore the Orientalist practices of reading that continue to haunt the Arabic or Hebrew text. Both writers perform a “return to origins” in their works, but instead of positioning the timeless, static Oriental realm of origins as a site of national authenticity, they reclaim it as a literary space outside the temporal hierarchies of modernity.

While Chapter One questions whether the Arabic or Hebrew text can be truly modern and of its time, Chapter Two considers whether the Arab or Jew can properly settle, or properly be

“in place.” Titled “Between the Onion and the Scratch: Brenner, Ghanem, and the Predicaments of Settlement,” this chapter examines logics and ideologies of settlement in the Eretz-Yisraeli works of Hebrew writer Y. H. Brenner and in the rural novel *The Mountain* by Egyptian Fathi Ghanem (1956). I identify two models of settlement at conflict in these texts: The first, which I name a “settlement of depth,” appeals to a psychological narrative of rootedness and a productive symbiosis with the land in a national context. The second, which I call a “settlement of surface,” is associated with a set of Orientalist stereotypes: a futile, nonproductive, compulsive-but-pleasurable movement that goes nowhere, and remains close to the skin and to the surface of the earth. I demonstrate that each model of settlement aligns with a different literary form, as well as with a different set of political identifications. The formal instabilities of the texts are a reflection of the inability to reconcile the two conflicting fantasies of settlement.

Chapter Three, “State Time: Gendered Genres of the Everyday in Sonallah Ibrahim and Yishayahu Koren,” transitions from production to reproduction. This chapter reads two novellas written in the mid 1960s, shortly before the 1967 war: *Funeral at Noon* by the Israeli Yishayahu Koren, and *That Smell* by the Egyptian Sonallah Ibrahim. I position the two novellas against the popular genre of the housewife novel, and demonstrate how the politics of the housewife novel, which narrates a transition from the oppressive environment of domestic routine to the liberated linear time of the public sphere, are aligned with the state’s politics of time. *Funeral at Noon* and *That Smell* are failed housewife novels, whose anti-evental logics deplete the progressive political ideology of the state, as well as historiographical narratives organized around the notion of crisis, rupture, or trauma.

Chapter Four, “Impassivity: Resistance to Analysis in Post-Oslo Palestine,” explores works by two Palestinian artists: Elia Suleiman’s films *A Chronicle of Disappearance* (1996)

and *Divine Intervention*, and Adania Shibli's short fragmentary novel *Touch* (2003). Reading these works against the conditions of obstructed agency and movement of Palestinians in the post-Oslo period, this chapter also fully develops a theory of aesthetics impassivity. The chapter analyzes the work of impassive genres: the "boring joke," in Suleiman's films, and the "frustrating snapshot," in Shibli's novel. These genres join the impassive, opaque protagonists of Suleiman's and Shibli's works in their resistance to being read and analyzed, a resistance that translates into an impassive politics grounded in an experience of weakness, found beyond the limits of power.

## Chapter One

### **“There Is No Event Whose Mark Has Not Gone before It:” Between Orientalist and Literary Typological Readings**

The protagonist of *Avedot* [*Losses*, 1936], a posthumously published novel by the Hebrew author and poet Leah Goldberg, is Elhanan Kron, a young Russian-Jewish-Zionist arriving in Berlin in 1932 to complete his scholarly research.<sup>22</sup> An Orientalist specializing in Jewish and Islamic mystical traditions, Kron is also an occasional Hebrew poet. His greatest piece, by his own approximation, is a poem written to his estranged wife, composed in the style of Hebrew liturgical hymns dating from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and replete with Christian imagery of Mary Magdalene. Unfortunately, Kron manages to lose this masterwork shortly after its completion - it falls out of his pocket in a university lecture, as he hurries to catch up with an attractive German girl. By the end of the novel, when the poem seems to be irreparably lost, Kron suddenly comes face to face with his poem again, published in a well-respected Orientalist journal. But is this the same poem? Two of his Nazi-sympathizing colleagues at the department of philology had found the poem and published it as an original, recently discovered 13<sup>th</sup> century Hebrew manuscript, and moreover, as an authentic piece of evidence of medieval Jewry's anti-Christian sentiments. Helpless before such an appropriation, Kron “stood ashamed before his own poem, as if the poem was a living creature, much older and wiser than himself” (Goldberg, *Avedot* 309).

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<sup>22</sup> Goldberg began writing *Avedot* in 1936 and published sections of it in various literary journals in Palestine before abandoning the manuscript in 1939. Giddon Ticotsky published an edited version of the manuscript in 2010.

This misreading, which restores Kron's poem as an Orientalist object of philological study, illustrates an important crisis of twentieth century secular Hebrew culture, struggling to differentiate itself from Orientalist cultures of reading and establish itself as a modern literature (Schachter 346). Even the poet Kron, facing his "much older" poem, appears to be asking: Can a Hebrew text truly be modern? Can it escape its identification as a philological and Orientalist object of study? The fate of Kron's poem is illustrative of the temporal conundrums imposed on writers of Hebrew (or Arabic, or any other language that passed through scholarly philology on its way to becoming a vessel of "literature") coming to write in a modern idiom. How can the Hebrew text be of its time and escape the verdict of belatedness? And where lies the difference between the liturgical text, an object of study that marks the boundary between the German/Christian and the Jew, and the "modern" poem, read as an object of a humanist, secular, and universal literariness?

This chapter explores works by two writers whose oeuvres stage, formally and thematically, the questions captured so vividly in Goldberg's novel. In the first half of the twentieth century, both the Hebrew writer Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1888-1970) and the Arabic writer Mahmud al-Mas'adi (1911-2004) wrote erudite literary works that followed the linguistic and formal styles of pre-modern Jewish and Islamic exegetical texts, respectively. Toying with the risk of an anachronistic misreading, which was the fate of Kron's poem, their works remain unmappable according to the conventional metrics of history and historiography, purposefully upsetting the expectations set up by what Emily Apter calls, after Arjun Appadurai, literary Eurochronologies. The problem of Eurochronology, Apter explains, is that critical traditions founded in the Western academy contain inbuilt temporal categories and typologies adduced from Western literary examples (Apter 6). The works of Agnon and al-Mas'adi, on the other



hand, linking together formal and thematic elements that appear to be chronologically incongruous, explicitly challenge a presumed literary chronology extending from a classical theological holism to a modernist break. It is not incidental, I would add, that both writers have been called out for their “sly irony,” which upsets any attempt to cast them as successful embodiments of an ideal narrative of Jewish or Arabic modern national revival (and not for lack of trying) (Goldberg, “Motivim” 104; Omri 96). While much of vast critical literature dedicated to each of these two writers is invested in positioning them on the spectrum between tradition and modernity, authenticity and assimilation, secularism and piety, or more simply, old residues and new influences, this chapter demonstrates how their own writing undermines a modern literary economy that casts Hebrew and Arabic textual traditions as literary archives of national authenticity, or as keys to universal humanist wisdom, but never as emblems of a literary present.

Reading Agnon and al-Mas‘adi together allows stepping away from a verdict on the eventually futile question of their modernity in order to address their common concern with changing practices and institutions of literary reading. Furthermore, this comparative perspective, which addresses Hebrew and Arabic as two literary cultures subject to similar dynamics and pressures of modernization, steps away from a narrow assessment of the internal forces of one national culture, and permits a perspective on global processes by which particular types of reading come to matter, while others are neglected. The difference between a “traditional” text and a “modern” one, between a liturgical hymn, a historical document, and a literary poem, comes down to, as Kron learns, the mode by which it is read and interpreted. What does it mean to read something *as literature*? What is lost and what is gained when a text is read *literarily*?

As Michael Allan notes, literature is a set of practices inflecting how texts come to be read, rather than an ever-expanding body of works (174). Aamir R. Mufti demonstrates how the institute of “literature,” as a mode of reading that assimilates dispersed bodies of writing onto a plane of equivalence and evaluability, was produced globally in the nexus of colonialism and Orientalist philology (488). Literature conceals the unequal relations of power that constitute it through claims to humanist universality, and as such is particularly attractive to the colonized intellectual, allowing him to reconcile his national specificity with universal and human values as such (465; 468). As Shaden M. Tageldin demonstrates, acts of self translation into the imagined literary realm, particularly dressed in a national garb, allowed the Arab writer to assume a position of linguistic and intellectual exchangeability (Tageldin 124).

The two works read in this chapter, Agnon’s novella “Edo ve-Enam” [“Edo and Enam,” 1950] and al-Mas’adi’s novel *Ḥaddatha Abū Hurayra Qāl* [*Thus Spoke Abu Hurayra*, written 1938, published 1973], demonstrate how the plane of the literary does not only provide an opportunity for the Hebrew or Arab writer, but is also a concession, haunted as it is by legacies of Orientalist scholarship.<sup>23</sup> Staging two “returns to origins,” the two texts illustrate, formally and thematically, that the difficulty of “writing modern” in Hebrew or Arabic is more complicated than a model of influence and tradition (which characterizes postcolonial paradigms), or of imported forms and local content (as in Franco Moretti’s model of the modern novel), but must content with the problematic historicity of reading literarily.

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<sup>23</sup> All translations from al-Mas’adi are my own. I use Walter Lever’s translation of “Edo ve-Enam” throughout.

## **From Orientalist to Literary Readings in “Edo ve-Enam”**

In your writing we meet once again the ancient unity between literature and science, as antiquity knew it... We honor in you a combination of tradition and prophecy, of saga and wisdom.

*Ingvar Andersson of the Swedish Academy (Agnon "Banquet Speech")*

Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1888-1970), the only Hebrew author to win the Nobel Prize for Literature (1966), was undoubtedly aware of the stakes of entering the global literary realm in a language that, for a long time, was considered an obsolete object of study; this burden was made explicit at the awards ceremony. When the host of the Nobel Prize ceremony compared Agnon's writing to ancient texts in which one can find a holistic balance between literature and science, imagination and knowledge, he evoked the duality to which such texts are subject: on the one hand celebrated for their scientific value as historical and philological sources, keys to comprehend the true spirit of the archaic culture; on the other, recognized for their genius as literary works. Agnon's Hebrew writing, he seems to say, also cannot be simply literature, but must signify dually, as both a literary work and an historical source of wisdom.

Agnon's acceptance speech acknowledges this mode of reading with characteristic understated irony. Addressing the question of influences, Agnon lists the canon of Jewish texts that shaped his work, but refrains from mentioning any names of German authors who had influenced him. “Why, then, did I list the Jewish books?” He asks. “Because it is they that gave me my foundations. And my heart tells me that they are responsible for my being honored with the Nobel Prize” (Agnon "Banquet Speech"). Unlike other Nobel laureates, Agnon recognizes that he must share his prize with an archive and a birthright of foundational Jewish texts.

Throughout his literary career, Agnon undermined the influence of a non-Hebrew literary canon on his writing, and was content to present himself as a traditionalist Jewish author.<sup>24</sup> Readers have long argued the effect of this feigned naïveté. Much of the early criticism dedicated to Agnon was concerned with his adherence to, or departure from, a cohesive Jewish textual tradition.<sup>25</sup> Agnon himself was apparently caught between these two modes of production. Beyond his work as a writer, he was also an anthologist of Jewish stories and commentaries, and was the secretary of *Mekitsey Nirdamin* [Awakening the Sleepers], a society dedicated to the preservation and publication of old Hebrew manuscripts (Mintz and Hoffman 18). In Jerusalem, he was surrounded by a community of Orientalist and Judaic scholars, and numerous of his works feature tireless (though usually hapless) researchers.

“Edo ve-Enam ” was published in 1950, at a late period in Agnon’s career when, literary critic Baruch Kurzweil discreetly complained, Agnon had developed “an entire system of complex and intricate disguises and riddles... a kind of secret language that the author uses to converse with himself while speaking to an audience” (142-3). Weaving together countless references to Biblical and secondary Jewish sources, legends and myths, a semi-autobiographical narrator figure, and a mysterious “secret language” as a central plot element, “Edo ve-Enam” is a rich allegory of the act of reading and interpretation in an Orientalist setting. The mainspring of the story is the song of the beautiful Gemulah, a woman hailing from a distant, mythical Jewish tribe and brought to contemporary Jerusalem. Three male characters shape this translation, which ultimately proves destructive: Gabriel Gamzu, a trader in rare Hebrew manuscripts and

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<sup>24</sup> For example, his famous denial of the unquestionable influence of Freud and Kafka on his work (*me-Atzmi el atzmi* 256).

<sup>25</sup> Dalia Hoshen provides a comprehensive overview of the manner Agnon’s critical reception constructed an opposition between “believer” and “skeptic.” Consequently, she offers a reading that nulls this binary, identifying Agnon as the successor of a Mishnaic tradition that already embodies the ruptures associated with modernity (*Sipur* 33-48).

Gemulah's husband, Dr. Ginat, a modern philologist who studies her native tongue, and the narrator, "a reader" fashioned after Agnon himself through a series of biographical coincidences. The story stages the fraught position of the ancient Jewish text, surfacing from "timeless" origins, between philological scholarship and literary consumption.

The tension between scholarly research and literary reading appears early in the story. Taking place in Jerusalem of the mid 1940s, the tale opens when the unnamed narrator, upon an ordinary visit to his friends Gerhardt and Gerda Greifenbach, discovers that Dr. Ginat, the famously reclusive scholar, is a tenant at their house. The young Dr. Ginat gained his fame among philologists with the article "Ninety-Nine Words of the Edo Language," followed by the astounding study, *Grammar of Edo*. The narrator, however, is far more taken with Ginat's discovery of the Enamite hymns, examples of "splendid and incisive poetry," which impressed even the most doubtful scholars (102). As a lay or common reader, however, the narrator's reading of these poems is markedly different from that of the philologists:

All these scholars affirmed that the gods of Enam and their priests were male;  
how was it that they did not catch in the hymns the cadence of a woman's song?  
On the other hand, I could be mistaken; for I am not, of course, a professional  
scholar, only a common reader who happens to enjoy anything beautiful that  
comes his way. (102)

כל חוקרי עינם אומרים שאלוהיה של עינם וכמריהם גבריים היו, והיאך לא הרגישו שמתוך  
ההמנונים אנו שומעים כנועם שיח שירת אשה. או אפשר טעות היא בידי. הרי איני חוקר אלא קורא  
הנהנה מכל דבר נאה שהוא קורא. (שמה)

The common reader's intuition proves to be correct; the unfolding plot reveals that the origin of Ginat's hymns and lexicons is none other than Gemulah, the mysterious woman that Gamzu, the collector of Jewish manuscripts, had brought from a remote Jewish community at the end of the Eastern deserts to be his wife. The story sets up a classic romantic triangle, to which the narrator remains an external observer. Gamzu, the one-eyed devoted husband, is seduced by Gemulah's songs and wild beauty, while she is in love with the studious scholar Ginat. Ginat, on the other hand, is only interested in Gemulah's exotic language, and remains aloof to her approaches.

While the critical reception of the story has read Gemulah as an emblem of mystical, primordial, or unmanageable femininity, it should be noted that Dr. Ginat, whose very existence is at times doubtful, represents to the narrator an object of desire that is just as alluring and mysterious. For Ginat, Gemulah is a literary/textual object that requires careful recording, study, and interpretation, after which she may return to her proper place alongside her husband. For Gemulah, however, the encounter with Ginat, the scholar who records her language and "reads" her, is transformative. She longs to remain with him. Even Gamzu, the abandoned husband, is fascinated with Ginat, expressing an interest in his scholarship despite his declared resistance to books less than 400 years old. The Oriental philologist is the driving catalyst of the plot, despite his drabness – he is an unremarkable character, lacking any descriptive tropes.<sup>26</sup> In stark contrast to the vivid and detailed descriptions of both Gemulah and Gamzu, be they mythical or exactly realistic, Ginat is described as a "young man sitting by a table and writing," oddly nondescript (149).

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<sup>26</sup> Ilana Pardes, to whose reading of "Edo ve-Enam" this chapter is much indebted, claims that Ginat's character is based on Agnon's close friend, the ethnologist and Orientalist Shelomo Dov Goitein (101).

If Ginat is simply an empty locus for relations of desire, interest, or contempt, his figure nevertheless serves to highlight the promises and hopes invested in the scientific study of ancient languages and cultures. Ginat's colleagues discovered, in the language of Edo, "a new-found link in a chain that bound the beginnings of recorded history to the ages before" (102), echoing the philological axiom deeming language "a faithful witness to history that transcends the generations of humanity" (Olender 5). Adopting a common trait of Orientalist scholarship, they ascribe to the newly discovered language of Edo the status of an untainted and untouched point of origin, the historical foundation of living and evolving contemporary cultures. The Orientalist model positions the Orient as the "cradle of civilizations" suspended and petrified in this original state as if untouched by the progressive spirit of time (this stasis is further discussed below). As Jeffrey Librett demonstrates, Orientalist theories of history, tracking the progress of the human spirit from its origins in the East to its blossoming in the West, mimic typological traditions of "figurative interpretation" that previously structured Jewish-Christian theological relations. Just as the dead letter of Old Testament was viewed as a prefiguring the fulfillment of the New Testament in the "living spirit" of Christianity, the static Orient was viewed as prefiguring the living, evolving culture of the Occident (Librett 14). Studying the Orient's ancient cultures, preserved untouched, as it were, since time immemorial, provided access to Western civilization's primeval past.

Gamzu, a traditional trader in religious manuscripts, rejects this historicist mode of reading, particularly as it relates to the Jewish Scripture: "Those bible critics, who turn the words of living God upside down," he says. "In the depths of their hearts they know that no text of Scripture has any other meaning than that which has been passed to us by tradition" (124). He further complains against the scholarly separation between text and living culture: "People live

out their lives according to the Torah, they lay down their lives for the heritage of their fathers; then along come the scholars, and make the Torah into ‘research material’ and the ways of our fathers into folklore” (142). Gamzu’s criticism contrasts two modes of reading the Biblical text, though when he associates Ginat with the scholarly model he insinuates that this critique applies to the academic study of Jewish and ancient texts in general. The practice of the modern Bible scholars is contrasted to “reading the Bible for its own sake,” a form of reading that does not detach interpretation from culture, but shapes the reader’s life. Unlike a mode of reading that finds the significance of the text in the ability to position it securely in the past, secure in a chain of historical predecessors and successors, Gamzu views the text as living and intervening in the present.

How does this view translate to Gamzu’s own interpretation of Gemulah and her songs? As a dealer in ancient Hebrew manuscripts, Gamzu travels to remote sites in Africa and the Orient, purchasing forgotten and unknown scripts. But in the most desolate places he finds examples of pure, unaltered, and timeless religious practice. “If you wish to see Jews from the days of the Mishnah,” he says, “go to the city of Amadia. Forty families of Israel live there, all God-fearing and true to the faith” (119). The Jewish communities Gamzu finds have been frozen in time, tracing their origins back to the mythical lost ten tribes of Israel or to the Babylonian exile. Remote and resistant, they are timeless emblems, untouched by history. Rather than differentiating Gamzu, “the Medieval Jew” as the narrator calls him, from the modern scholar Ginat, Gamzu’s observation actually highlights their similarities. Both are drawn to Gemulah’s isolated desert community as a timeless site where a primordial state of origins has been preserved. The pious and the philologist both search for a genuine site of untouched authenticity. Tracking the similarities between the two men, Ilana Pardes summarizes: “Ginat is far more



indebted to traditional exegetical modes than meets the eye, while Gamzu rejects modern scholarship without realizing that there are unforeseen similarities between the interpretive practices he is accustomed to and the new scholarly trends” (107). Finally, both men’s methods prove to be destructive for Gemulah. Gamzu tears her away from her village and brings her to Jerusalem, where she grows depressed and ill. Ginat, on the other hand, cannot return Gemulah’s love, and by the story’s end they die together in a mysterious accident. Despite the temptation to position the two men as polar opposites, one representing a traditional form of Jewish scholarship and the other the new philological approaches, the relationship between them is one of reflection rather than opposition.

If indeed there is no great difference between the two modes of reading, this feat of equalization can only happen by means of the “literary” narrator. His role as a mediator between fields of knowledge and modes of interpretation is a recurring theme. When his friend Greifenbach, “who had made a hobby of philology,” begins to speak of the mysteries of language and the new discoveries in the field, the narrator is able to add “something of what [he] learned from the literature of the Kabbalah, which in this matter has anticipated academic scholarship,” bridging between the Orientalist and theological modes of reading, bringing the two realms into a meaningful and harmonizing relationship (106). The story’s structure further illustrates this point, staging the meeting of the philologist and the traditionalist during the writer’s shift as a watchman over the Greifenbach’s home. The two meet only in the writer’s presence, seemingly by pure chance, in a house none of them inhabits (Ginat is a temporary tenant) – it belongs to a couple that spend their evening reading and discussing Goethe. While Gamzu and Ginat may argue about the proper way to “read” Gemulah, the narrator is the mediator between the two, allowing for their encounter through a literary reading practice.

How, then, does this writer read Gemulah? Unlike Gamzu and Ginat, the narrator, a self-described “common reader” bearing autobiographical similarity to Agnon himself, responds to the hymns viscerally, emotionally, and intuitively; their beauty stirs an echo in his depths. “Ever since the day I had first read the Enamite Hymns,” he remarks, “that echo had resounded. It was the reverberation of a primeval song passed on from the first hour of history through endless generations” (103). Like the philologist, the narrator identifies the hymns as a link to a distant, primeval past. But rather than a “faithful witness,” he experiences them as an echo, a reverberation that strikes something familiar within him. His poetic mode of reading, positioning the hymns within a *literary* framework, appreciates them among many texts that echo that one “primeval song.” Testifying neither to an original state of man, nor to the origins of religious practice, their true value is this act of humanist aesthetic identification.

### **Literary Typologies**

The reference to Goethe, therefore, does more than just establish the Greifenbachs as a model German *bildung* couple. Goethe’s evocation of *Weltliteratur* is one of the most influential moments of naming a reading practice that reconciles Orientalist texts with a shared, timeless human spirit (Mufti 465). There is no need to elaborate here on the concurrence of Goethe’s reading in Orientalist texts and his vision of *Weltliteratur*, which has been recently and extensively explored (see, for example Veit; Mommsen; Einboden). Suffice to summarize that the circulation of Oriental and mystic texts in eighteenth century Europe shaped the fantasy of a global literary realm: a field in which both religious and secular texts, new German poems and ancient Sanskrit dramas, are evaluated in terms of their reiteration of a shared human spirit, or

their “literariness.” This is the mode of reading that the narrator of “Edo ve-Enam” adopts so enthusiastically.

Goethe’s cameo in “Edo ve-Enam” highlights other ways the story echoes the classics of German literature, particularly in its variations on the story of the Golem/Pygmalion.<sup>27</sup> When the Greifenbachs first hear Gemulah in Ginat’s room, they joke that he must have invented a woman to amuse him. This reminds them of the legend of Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol, who had created a woman to serve his needs. The narrator completes the story, adding that the king fell in love with this mechanical woman, forcing Ibn Gabirol to take her apart in order to prove she was fabricated (106). This variation on the story of Ibn Ezra’s Golem is quoted in one of Gershom Scholem’s collections, but with some significant differences (Scholem 419). It appears that the king’s passion for the mechanized woman is Agnon’s own addition, tying the legend more explicitly to the myth of Pygmalion and its literary transmutations, particularly in the German tradition. E.T.A Hoffman’s classic “The Sandman” is especially pertinent in this context, since it resonates with the figure of Gamzu, who obsessively fiddles with his empty eye socket, echoing Hoffman’s Nathanael and his fear of eyes (not to mention the association between the loss of the eye and Gamzu’s impotence, a thematic connection that Freud makes in his classic analysis of Hoffman’s “The Sandman” in the essay, “The Uncanny”).

This literary trajectory illustrates an idea that the story returns to repeatedly: the manner one story shadows another, and one poem echoes in all others and in all things. When the narrator recalls the night when Gamzu found his wife in Ginat’s room, he remarks,

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<sup>27</sup> Cynthia Ozick (1988) reads Gemulah as a variation on Heine’s “*Die Lorelei*,” itself a variation on the Ovidian myth of Echo.

with my own eyes I had seen Gamzu snatch his wife away, and yet it seemed to me that it was only a story, like the one he himself had told me, of how on one occasion dances were held, and Gadi ben Ge'im was about to seize Gemulah, and Gamzu forestalled him. There is no event whose mark has not gone before it. Such is the parable of the bird: before it flies, it spreads its wings and they make a shadow; it looks at the shadow, raises its wings and flies away. (152)

בעיני ראיתי שחטף גמזו את אשתו ואף על פי כן דומה היה עלי שסיפור דברים היה כאן, כאותו שסיפר לי בעל המעשה, שפעם אחת עשו מחולות ועמד גדי בן גאים לחטוף את גמולה וקדם גמזו וחטף אותה. אין לך דבר שלא קדם לו רישומו. משל לעוף קודם שהוא עף פורס כנפיו והן עושות צל, מביט הוא בצל ונוטל כנפיו וטס. (שצא)

As the narrator himself notices, Gemulah's story is a series of thwarted kidnaps and repetitions. No event is truly new, but they all have their precedent, their shadow, of which they must take notice, like the bird observing its shadow before taking flight. This is not an historical paradigm, but a literary one, that nevertheless views the past as a prefiguration of future fulfillment. As such, the literary inherits the typological modes of interpretation of both traditional religious forms and of comparative philology, and turns them into a model of literary creation. Yet, if Orientalist historicism constructed a model of unequal development, which served to justify political endeavors, literary readings promise to cast literature as always contemporary, always "of its time," precisely because it is atemporal. Literature does not participate in the narrative of progress, but instead echoes one recognizable human story.<sup>28</sup> "Edo ve-Enam" exposes how

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<sup>28</sup> As Agnon writes in the unfinished story "Hadam ve-Kisse" ["Footstool and Chair"], "all the events of one man are one event, and all times are equal but their combinations are different" (139).

literature as a humanist mode of reading conceals its entanglements in Orientalist forms of scholarship, while continuing to rely on the latter's tools and eroticized fantasies.

### **Literature's Times**

Literature as a realm of timeless echoes is attractive for the Hebrew or Arab writer, since it promises a way out of the Eurochronological problem – if literature is defined not as a particular mode of writing, but as a mode of reading for a shared humanism, then the unequal regimes of time that dominate the political sphere are rendered extraneous. Literary readings seek no novelty, but rather favor familiarity and recognition. It is within this context that Mahmud al-Mas'adi asserts, in the introduction to the novel *Ḥaddatha Abū Hurayra Qāl* (henceforth *Ḥaddatha*), that he has no interest in originality or newness, those hallmarks of modernism. Instead, al-Mas'adi famously declares: “all literature is tragedy,” a statement perhaps more effective when reversed: “All tragedy is literature,” literature is all that is concerned with the compromised state of the human.

Nevertheless, the manner Orientalist temporalities, rather than actual publication dates, can shape verdicts on what makes literature ancient or modern is evident even in some of al-Mas'adi's own thoughts. In a 1975 lecture on the state of Arabic literature, al-Mas'adi argued that the primary problem, and the reason that Arabic literature had not yet reached “the level of other World Literatures,” was its failure to integrate a historicist temporal worldview:

For a long time we [=the Arabs] continued to understand or imagine man as something given rather than evolving, static rather than developing, fixed rather than changing and transformed. But our modern literature has begun to grasp the

truth now, and to give us characters in which being acknowledges and integrates this temporal dimension, expressing itself in a sense of existential becoming. (al-Mas‘adi, *al-A‘māl al-Kāmila* 3: 111)

Arabic literature’s mistake, in this account, is its allegiance to a vision of man relative to the divine: unchanging, fixed, and timeless. Arab writers have only started to acknowledge that man is not a static given or an unchanging ideal, but is rather an ongoing and continuous process of becoming and evolution. The temporal orders of the worldly and the divine, al-Mas‘adi states, must now be separated: modern literature should consciously take into its scope of concerns the changing rather than the immutable.

In those same years, an alternative and controversial theory of literature between the static and the dynamic was presented by the Syrian poet Adunis, a self-declared modernist. In *al-Thābit wa al-mutaḥawwil* (*The Immutable and the Mutable*, a four volume study published between 1973 and 1978), Adunis argues that the Arabic textual heritage (*turāth*) should be read as a site of continuous struggle between static and dynamic textual currents, or between conservative forces and modernist ones dedicated to radical innovation, in form and content. Adunis positioned himself as the successor in a lineage of poetic innovators peaking in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century, rather than as the product of a newly established “modernity.” Al-Mas‘adi’s statement, on the other hand, creates a strict division between the modern and the ancient. Furthermore, he claims that the fluid and shifting definition of man in time is a distinctly *modern* one, while the temporal concepts (and literary forms) in which Arabic literature is still largely caught up have been inherited from the “Middle Ages” (*al-A‘māl al-Kāmila* 3: 109). To be

modern, according to this definition, is to write works of literature that recognize the dynamic nature of man and time; to be medieval is to have a static, immutable view of existence.

This form of periodization replicates basic Orientalist tropes by which Europe, having differentiated itself from its own feudal, religious past, cast the colonized world in that supposed Middle Age's image: static, lacking in historical consciousness and a sense of time (and so, by extension, positioned modern Europe as the colonized world's inevitable future) (Davis 8-9). The Orientals and Semites of the world were considered "immobile in time as well as space;" somehow immune to historicist processes and logics, they were deemed lifeless, monotonous, or stagnant (Olender 12; Masuzawa 197). The story of how the Semite intellectual often accepted this narrative of timeless existence in order to argue for his way into historical modernity has, by now, been told in numerous modes, focused on either Jewish or Arab modernity.<sup>29</sup> The Hebrew and Arabic revival movements often shared the implicit assumption that modernization entailed *joining* history and *recognizing* its dynamic progress, after a long period of slumber or denial. Al-Mas'adi was not immune to this mode of ideological periodization, even though he was clearly familiar with the rich Arabic textual archives, particularly of historical writing. Against this conviction, *Haddatha*'s reenactment of classical Arabic literary forms, linguistic register, and characters, as well as its resistance to a dynamic depiction of the present in favor of a timeless spiritual quest, begs questioning.

### ***Haddatha* and the Ambiguity of Origins**

Like the majority of al-Mas'adi's literary works, *Haddatha* was written during a creative burst between 1938 and 1941, as al-Mas'adi was concluding his second period of studies in Paris

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<sup>29</sup> For particularly insightful readings, see Raz-Krakotzkin; Tageldin; Fieni.

and returning to his native Tunisia. While some excerpts of the manuscript appeared in journals throughout the early 1940s, the text in its entirety was published only in 1973, when al-Mas‘adi was already well known as a political and cultural figure. As he writes in *Haddatha*’s introduction, this text emerged from a moment of disorientation and longing for his native home. The influence of his Sorbonne-earned doctorate in Arabic studies is evident in every page – astounding fluency in Islamic sources, as well as in the idioms of classical Arabic, appears alongside references to fashionable existentialist philosophical ideas, Nietzschean concepts, and citations from canonical works of European literature.

The epigraph to the novel, a verse from 9<sup>th</sup> century poet Abu al-‘Atāhiya (d. 847), captures the young al-Mas‘adi’s sense of geographical restlessness and uprooting, yet it also evokes the conflict between the static and the dynamic which, as discussed above, underlies the modern reception of Arabic literature:

فَلَمْ أَرِ لِي بِأَرْضٍ مُسْتَقَرًّا

طَلَبْتُ الْمُسْتَقَرَّ بِكُلِّ أَرْضٍ

ṭalabtu al-mustaqarra bi-kulli arḍin / fa-lam ara li bi-arḍi mustaqarran

“I sought the permanent in every land, but found residence nowhere”

The verse captures the strange tension and co-dependence between a desire for permanence and inevitable transience through its repeated use of the word *mustaqarr*. In the second part of the verse, in its indefinite form, *mustaqarr* implies a concrete notion of settlement, dwelling, or residence. However, the definite form (*al-mustaqarr*) can be rendered more abstractly, as durability, stability, or immutability. The poem’s speaker seeks more than a place to settle: he searches for intransience and an existence unchecked by time. Both searches are



fruitless, since the search for a dwelling conditions the search for the timeless: The repetition betrays that spatial restlessness on this earth (*ard*) is emblematic of a search for a state of being that will exceed its transience.

As al-Mas'adi himself notes, the mindset described in this line is emblematic of Abu Hurayra, the novel's restless protagonist (Omri 5). It successfully crystalizes the main plotlines structuring the text: Abu Hurayra is a wanderer and questioner, part prophet and part fool. As one of his companions testifies, "Abu Hurayra was like running water... He was always as if about to leave, always with leaving on his mind" (197). The novel, composed of a series of anecdotes told by or about Abu Hurayra, is set in the deserts extending between Mecca and Medina, in a period that is vaguely evocative of the early days of Islam. It opens when Abu Hurayra, a pious and law abiding man, accepts a friend's invitation and rides with him to the desert, where they view a striking primordial scene: two young and beautiful people, a man and a woman, dancing naked in joy and ecstasy before the rising sun. The following day, Abu Hurayra discovers that his friend has followed suit, and disappeared with one of his pretty slave-girls (58). Abu Hurayra names this moment "the first awakening" (*ba'th*): awakened to life's pleasures and freedoms, he embarks on a long journey of discovery (quite conveniently, his house happens to burn down and his wife struck by lightning, and so he is free to go). In a series of loosely linked episodes, the readers follow his radical conversions: lecherous drunkard, romantic lover, self-flagellating ascetic, leader of a utopian commune, solitary philosopher, or violent outlaw. Abu Hurayra appears to abandon each persona as suddenly and inexplicably as he adopts it. These sudden transformations, lacking any discernable narrative connections, make al-Mas'adi's statement on the need to write historically and temporally bound characters particularly dissatisfying.

Moreover, the environment in which Abu Hurayra wanders is anything but historical: despite *Haddatha*'s setting in the environs of 7<sup>th</sup> century Medina, it does not align with any of the conventions of a historical novel. To the contrary: *Haddatha* is an "un-historicizing" text, whose formal and thematic gestures aim to distort historicist temporalities and acts of periodization. For the sake of convenience, this article refers to *Haddatha* as a novel, though it is debatable whether this generic category is the most appropriate for it. Rather than subjecting the past to the linear narrative form characteristic of the historical novel genre, *Haddatha* mimics historical writing forms, following one of the most canonized literary genres of Islamic orthodoxy, the *ḥadīth*: a narrative about the deeds and utterances of the prophet and his companions, transmitted through a chain of witnesses that guarantees its authenticity. The combination "Ḥaddatha abū Hurayra Qāl," or "Thus Spoke Abu Hurayra," is the traditional *ḥadīth* introductory form.<sup>30</sup> Each one of the sections of the book, some as brief as a single paragraph and some extending over a dozen pages, is narrated by a witness to Abu Hurayra's adventures (except for a few that are told by Abu Hurayra himself). Moreover, the linguistic register throughout the text follows classical Arabic syntactic structures and employs a vocabulary richly evocative of a long tradition of Arabic theological, philosophical, and juridical writing, staging an ongoing conversation with the Quranic text and its exegetical traditions. To further complicate the question of genre, Abu Hurayra is the namesake of a historical figure: one of the prophet's companions, considered to be among the most reliable and prolific transmitters of *aḥādīth*. But while this renders the combination *Haddatha abū Hurayra Qāl* familiar to any reader acquainted with the Islamic canon, the two figures share little more than a name. While Abu Hurayra's licentious escapades, and his dismissal of any form of religious authority except

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<sup>30</sup> Ziad Elmarsafy suggests this translation since it echoes the novel's Nietzschean affinities (Elmarsafy 67).

for his own spiritual search, are hardly characteristic of the prophet's pious companion, the novel enraged some readers who encountered it in a book fair and "misread" it as a blasphemous and falsifying manuscript.<sup>31</sup>

*Haddatha* freely draws from an Arabic literary canon extending over hundreds of years, explicitly citing from or implicitly alluding to pre-Islamic poetry, the Qur'an and its exegetical traditions, works of philosophy and poetry from the Abbasid era, and Sufi accounts and traditions. It is not only, as Omri claims, that the narrative is "saturated" with references to *turāth* (the Arabic cultural and literate canon), but rather that the narrative is set within a textual landscape composed entirely of carefully chosen elements from the *turāth* archive.<sup>32</sup> This textual archive appears to be out of order, or more accurately lacking in any order or chronology. The narration explicitly addresses its anachronistic citations as a recurring internal joke, or as voices reaching Abu Hurayra from the future. When he is asked about his journey to the East, for example, Abu Hurayra enigmatically replies, "Were you to live in the future, you would read and enjoy Ibn Battuta's accounts of the East as though they were fairytales" (106). The famed traveler Ibn Battuta wrote his travel journals some 700 years after the supposed period in which *Haddatha* takes place, but as a key figure in the Arabic cultural archive he can still have a place in *Haddatha*'s textual landscape.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> In an interview, al-Mas'adi tells of the disappointment, if not rage, expressed by readers in Saudi Arabia who made such a mistake (al-Mas'adi, "Interview with Mahmud al-Mas'adi" 438). Omri suggests that fear of accusations of blasphemy was the reason for the novel's belated publication (Omri 67-8).

<sup>32</sup> Much has been written on the colonized writer's turn to an archive of "tradition" in order to establish an authentic postcolonial national identity and culture. The essential reading of the fetishizing of cultural roots in order to establish national continuity remains "On National Culture" in Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. See also Mufti, "Orientalism and the Institution of World Literatures," 462. On contemporary debates on cultural authenticity (*aṣāla*) and tradition (*turāth*), see Kassab, chapter 3.

<sup>33</sup> A similar trope appears in Agnon's story "Lefi ha-tza'ar ha-sakhar" [The Reward is in Accordance with the Pain]: the protagonist, Mar Ribbi Zidkiyah, recites a liturgical hymn that, as the narrator comments, "was composed a few generations after [him]." Unlike al-Mas'adi, he then provides an explanation: since the liturgies are first composed in heaven, and reveal themselves to the poet as the case proves necessary, some righteous men can "sense" them

In a different episode, Abu Ghural, Abu Hurayra's mad mentor, mentions Sibawayh (linguist and grammarian, d. 796) as "a man that will invent and create grammar" (209). This mention is evocative, since Sibawayh is an integral figure in the canonization of what is currently identified as *fuṣḥa*, or classical Arabic. Sibawayh deduced the Arabic grammatical rules from a presumably pure, perfect, and complete poetic Arabic archive, and they have continued to serve as a measure of correctness and eloquence ever since (Ayoub 32). This poetic archive emerged from the deserts of pre-Islamic Arabia, a site that has been as impervious to historicization by Orientalist scholars as by Islamic grammarians. The Islamic myth of a timeless *Jahiliya* (pre-Islamic age of ignorance) suddenly punctured by the miraculous appearance of the Qur'an, is echoed in contemporary scholarship of pre-Islamic Arabia as a region of blowing sands and nomadic vagabonds, somehow beyond time and impervious to change (Montgomery 203). The setting of *Haddatha*, therefore, is not a particular historical moment in the past, but rather in the past set as a mythical and timeless point of origin. This legendary Oriental past, however, is identified as a textually constructed fantasy rather than as a historical reality.

As if the historically anachronistic namedrops were not enough, *Haddatha* also cites sources that are not part of the *turāth* at all. The epigraphs introducing various chapters include citations from Friedrich Nietzsche, Henrik Ibsen, and Friedrich Holderlin, and the text is rife with implicit references to Goethe's Faust, Shakespeare's Hamlet, and Albert Camus's Prometheus, confusing any attempt to posit it firmly in one cultural legacy or tradition. These citations have a chaotic effect, upsetting the text's seeming adherence to a notion of cultural authenticity. Rather than remaining confined to the primeval, timeless realm of the past,

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before their actual manifestation in this world, and can evoke them in their discourse with God. The timeless space of poetry is here identified directly with the divine realm, rather than with its worldly and human manifestation (Agnon, *Ha-esh ve ha-'etsim* 14).

*Haddatha* extends this past all the way up to the present, weaving central works of European literature into its textual landscape. This practice illustrates the premises of the humanistic-literary mode of reading described above. In an interview, al-Mas‘adi claimed that

it is clear that ancient and modern writers ... have met in the same fields, shared the same concerns, and were brought together by the same tendency in feeling and thought. They strive to examine the reality of the human position, seek to understand human destiny and relate, describe or contemplate the existential adventure. (qtd. in Omri 46)

Nietzsche and al-Ma‘ari, al-Mutanabbi and Ibsen, all can meet together in the timeless fields of humanist literary endeavor. As Egyptian writer Ṭaha Ḥusayn notes in an early critical essay on al-Mas‘adi’s work, Abu Hurayra’s journey is an Existentialist search garbed in Islamic terms (reprinted in Sammud 73). Al-Mas‘adi’s late “response” to Goethe returns Faust to his Eastern origins: *Haddatha*’s merging of Islamic mysticism (further discussed below) and romantic existentialism testifies to a history of textual circulation that shaped humanist literary sensibilities in Europe, and returned to the Orient in new garbs.

### **A Moment out of Time**

Al-Mas‘adi learned the skill of weaving old and new texts into one literary tapestry from his teacher Louis Massignon (1883-1962), the renowned Orientalist and Islamic scholar. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said is impressed with Massignon’s ability to refer “easily (and accurately) in an essay to a host of Islamic mystics and to Jung, Heisenberg, Mallarme, and Kierkegaard”

(267). Massignon's scholarship was particularly invested in exploring the confluences of gnostic and mystic traditions in Islam and Christianity, in line with the comparative work carried out at Carl Jung's Eranos circle in Switzerland (Wasserstrom). His interest in cross-denominational relations and influences had a distinct influence on his understanding of Islam and Sufism, and subsequently on al-Mas'adi's construction of the literary space of *Haddatha*.

Al-Mas'adi was the first to admit this influence. "It may sound strange," he wrote, "when I say that I learned the deepening of my faith and religion from Massignon, because he revealed to me the horizons of al-Hallaj's experience and the greatest meaning, which is Sufism. Sufism is the summary of the human adventure" (*al-A'māl al-kāmila*, 3: 392). The ninth century Islamic mystic al-Hallaj (d. 922) was the object of Massignon's lifelong scholarly obsession, the subject of his doctoral dissertation and first monumental monograph. His concern with the Sufi mystic, famously executed for heresy, was far more than an intellectual passion. Massignon was a deeply devoted Catholic, and his religious and spiritual awakening, by his own account, occurred after the spirit of al-Hallaj was revealed to him.<sup>34</sup> In yet another typological reading, and to the aggravation of his Muslim colleagues, Massignon wrote al-Hallaj as a Christ-like martyr, whose death finally overcomes Islam's tragic rejection of the Incarnation (Massignon, *Essay on the Origins* 11; Jabiri 28). Massignon found, in the Sufi ideal of mystical union with the divine, the counterpart of the Christian model of the embodied spirit.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Massignon wrote numerous accounts of this experience, for example in "Visitation of a Stranger" (Massignon, *Testimonies and Reflections* 39-42).

<sup>35</sup> Sufism has often been "redeemed" as a laudatory form of Islam. Masuzawa explores how scholars of religion configured Sufism as a late Persian Islamic tendency, unrelated to its Semite origins, and therefore compatible with "religion as such" (203). Massignon did argue for the Qur'anic origins of Sufi thought, and viewed its Persian evolutions as excessively sensualist (Massignon, *Essay on the Origins*, xxvii). Still today, Sufism is considered a form of Islam compatible with Western modernity, and is encouraged and supported by both American and European governments (Muedini).

As Khalid al-Gharibi notes, al-Mas‘adi’s work is saturated with terms and concepts derived from the Sufi lexicon, and these guide the movements and ends of his characters (al-Gharibi 151-155; see also Omri 105-35; Elmarsafi 66-77). Yet it is a version of this al-Hallaj, as written by Massignon, which appears in *Haddatha*’s final episode as the emblem of the human tragedy as such. Al-Hallaj had to be translated into French in order to return to the Arabic as *the* universal hero, seeking, Faust-like, to defeat the limitations imposed by time. In an early episode, Abu Hurayra’s lover Rayhana explains why he deserted her: “He was always longing for the sun,” she recalls, “and always afraid of its arrival. He used to say, ‘if you can, make your entire life a dawn’ [aj‘alu kāmīl ḥayātuka fajrān]” (105). Abu Hurayra departs because he is afraid to settle (“hatred of houses” is his explanation), but his restlessness is motivated by desire for an intransience that can sustain the promise of a new beginning: a life suspended at dawn.

Towards the end of Abu Hurayra’s life, he is no longer searching for novelty, but the yearning for a moment out of time remains. In the final episode of the book, titled “The Last Awakening” [*al-Ba‘th al-ākhir*], thus concluding a path that opened with “The First Awakening” of the first episode, Abu Hurayra summons his friend Abu al-Mada’in, and presents him with a series of perplexing sketches and questions. “Would you like a day out of time [*dahr*]?” he asks, as he shows him a drawing of “vertical lines, circles and black dots of various sizes, and in the middle of the page a striking blank.” Abu al-Mada’in asks if this is a talisman or a joke. “It is Time [*al-zamān*] decapitated,” Abu Hurayra replies, “or a question without an answer” (222). He asks Abu al-Mada’in to join him the following evening, and they go riding in the direction of the sunset. After about two hours of riding and conversation, they hear a marvelous voice singing:

I am Truth, calling you

I am Love, courting you

I am longing, overflowing you (229–30)

أنا الحق يناديك

أنا الحب يناغيك

أنا الشوق طغى فيك (229)

The voice calls Abu Hurayra to the “shores of eternity.” Abu Hurayra responds with his own song, “Truth, here I am!” and adds: “This is what I have been waiting for” (231). He then surges forward on his horse and disappears into the darkness. Abu al-Mada’in recalls: “After few moments, I heard rocks falling, a horse shrieking in pain, and a joyful cry that made me shiver” (234). When morning arrives, he discovers that he is on the top of a mountain: below him there are some bloodied rocks and a bottomless pit.

Omri suggests that this ending concludes a complete Sufi journey, as Abu Hurayra reaches the “timelessness of the last station, being at one with the Absolute Being where eternity [*khulūd*] is attained” (Omri 130). Abu Hurayra’s union with the Absolute, or “moment out of time,” echoes al-Hallaj’s martyrdom: the heresy for which al-Hallaj was tried and martyred, according to some versions, was his statement “I am Truth!” [*anā al-ḥaq*]: a blasphemous claim to the divine. In this final episode of self-sacrifice, Abu Hurayra answers the call and finally finds a moment outside the inevitable passage of time: a “beheaded” time, or a moment outside of history and narrative.



Returning now to the initial question of the temporal politics of literary readings, and the manner *Haddatha* so clearly disappoints the demand for a historically grounded “modern” outlook, Abu Hurayra’s search for a moment out of time appears in a different context, beyond the existentialist-Sufi quest. The desire to find a moment untainted by history is parallel to the appeal to a timeless literary space, in which periodization and chronologies do not matter. Literature as a humanist reading practice makes no substantial distinctions between the ancient and the modern, and allows the Arab writer to escape the verdict of belatedness. *Haddatha*, however, by staging this mode of reading as the setting for its narrative, lingers on the Orientalist reading histories that underlie this reading practice: Literary readings imagine a humanist space that is equivalent to the timeless scene of a pre-historic Arabia. To wander its deserts is to visit an immutable point of origin: a space where time does not exist, or rather, all of time exists at once.

### **Conclusion: Songbirds and Parrots**

Is it a coincidence that both Agnon’s and al-Mas‘adi’s works end so similarly? Abu Hurayra, lured by a wondrous voice singing in the darkness “like blazing fire, or God calling being to awaken,” urges his horse towards an abyss in the darkness (230). In “Edo ve-Enam,” it is also a song that announces Gemulah’s death. Ginat wants nothing more than to hear the mythical song of the bird Grofit.<sup>36</sup> Gemulah promises him that she will sing it for him, and then, together, they will die (150). “Songs are conjoined,” the narrator comments, evoking the interconnected plane of the literary again,

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<sup>36</sup> Ilana Pardes traces the literature on the mythical bird Grofit and other legendary songbirds rumored to sing “the ultimate song” (Pardes, 119).

they are linked up with one another, the songs of the springs with the songs of high mountains, and those of high mountains with the songs of the birds of the air. And among these birds there is one whose name is Grofit; when its hour comes to leave the world, it looks up to the clouds and raises its voice in song; and when the song is ended it departs from this world. All these songs are linked together in the language of Gemulah. (151)

השירים דבוקים זה בזה וקשורים זה בזה, שירי עינות המים דבוקים בשירי ההרים הגבוהים, וההרים הגבוהים בעופות השמים, ובעופות יש עוף אחד גרופית שמו שכשמגעת שעתו לצאת מן העולם תולה ראשו בעננים ומנענע קולו בשיר, וכשהוא גומר את שירו יוצא הוא מהעולם. וכל אותם שירים קשורים בלשונה של גמולה. (שצ)

When the next full moon comes around, Gemulah and Ginat die, falling off the roof of Ginat's room. It remains unknown whether this death, though anticipated, was intentional or the outcome of a series of accidents.

The two texts conclude with the romantic ideal of merging with the absolute and ultimate song, a song of Truth that can encapsulate existence in its entirety; this ideal can only be sustained once "time is decapitated," in self-annihilation or death. The song, in both stories, is the pathway to an absolute and eternal realm – or at least, this is what Abu Hurayra, Gemulah, and the literary narrator of "Edo ve-Enam" would like to believe. Both texts, however, subtly undermine this ideal, introducing some ironically incongruent elements.

As Abu Hurayra and Abu al-Mada'in head out to the desert in the final episode, Abu Hurayra tells two troubling anecdotes from his youth. In the first, he darkly confesses to killing a prostitute (224). The second, however, is a practical joke: Abu Hurayra is hosting some friends,

and they all enjoy the beautiful singing of a singer concealed behind a screen, as modesty demands. The voice is enthralling, the guests quarrel for the right to spend the night with the attractive singer, and Abu Hurayra promises to circulate her among them fairly. Finally, he draws back the screen, only to reveal a large, multicolored parrot, which proceeds to mimic the men's enraged outcries (226-7).

The beautiful song was misread, turning out to be the mindless mimicry of a parrot. Yet, what about the ultimate song of Truth that calls out to Abu Hurayra in the following page? Who can tell if it is not just another mocking bird, an existential prankster? The authenticity of Gemulah's song is similarly questioned in "Edo ve-Enam," which posits the possibility that the language of Edo and the Enamite hymns are just a case of scholarly fantasy, a childish language invented by Gemulah and her father, now immortalized, through Ginat's books, as a site of primordial origins. Mentions of the female golem or the mechanized doll further introduce suspicions of beautiful forgeries and the efforts to cast them as sites of truth. Finally, what are Agnon's and al-Mas'adi's texts themselves if not sites of imitating fabrication (as all literature must be), mock-classicist works that keep revealing their own mechanisms and cogwheels, while still soliciting the readers' desires for authenticity?

Agnon and al-Mas'adi both recognized the political space that literary-humanist reading practices provide for modern writers. They participated in its construction, envisioning a literary space of timeless echoes, a mode of reading that is based on repetition, recognition, and commonality, and disregards the unequal political realities of modernity. The particularities of their texts, however, continually undermine this endeavor. Almost compulsively, they reveal the legacies of Orientalist scholarship, its fantasies and its toolkits, that continue to haunt the very category of the literary. Their returns to origins are laid bare as inventive fabrications, mimicking

the historicist search for the origins of the nation or the human in textual archives. Stubbornly unhistorical texts, succumbing to the demands of a timeless literariness, they nevertheless historicize and denaturalize the problematic category of literature by staging the contradictory demands made of the Arab or Hebrew author: to overcome their belatedness and finally arrive at the present, while still bearing the burden of their past.

## Chapter Two

### Scratching at the Surface: Predicaments of Settlement and the Poetics of Disgust

What does it mean to be stuck? What differentiates the immobility of being stuck from that of being settled? While settlement suggests that one can depart, move, and still be securely attached to one place, the one who is stuck is also unsettled: she is alien to her own place. Stuckness is an inability to move, but it is also an inability to stay still. This chapter asserts that the modern Arab and Hebrew subjects in the first half of the twentieth century often found themselves in this situation of stuckness – unable to properly move (or act), and unable to properly settle (and act from there). While the previous chapter explored the manner Arabic and Hebrew authors negotiate modern dictates of time and periodization, this chapter turns to the question of space and movement, focusing on the modern concept of *settlement*.

Settlement is the main plot twist in the narrative of Hebrew literature in the twentieth century, which relocated to the territorial and political space of Palestine, or Eretz Yisrael. More broadly, settlement is both a demand and a bequest of the nation-state: the state requires its citizens to be properly settled and accounted for, while the nation legitimizes their settlement within an ideological structure tying territory, people, and language. In the early twentieth century, both Jews and Arabs were engaged in projects of modern settlement in relation to the imagined horizon of the nation-state. The end of these projects was to legitimize Jewish and Arabic movement, which has been invalidated within Oriental, colonial, or nationalist discourses.

This chapter explores the manner political models and imaginaries of settlement shape literary aesthetics. It focuses primarily on two works by the Hebrew writer Yosef Haim Brenner (1881-1921): the novella “‘Atzabim” (“Nerves”, 1910) and the novel *Shkhol ve-khishalon* (*Breakdown and Bereavement*, 1920).<sup>37</sup> “Nerves” was written shortly after Brenner’s own immigration to Palestine in 1909, narrating an immigrant’s tumultuous journey to the Hebrew colonies in Palestine. *Breakdown and Bereavement* is Brenner’s last novel, published a year before his death, and takes place among the Old Jewish community in Jerusalem. While “Nerves” narrates the Zionist desire to become nativized as a “New Jew” in Palestine, *Breakdown and Bereavement* interrogates the conditions of the “old” Jewish community in Jerusalem, which is seemingly external to the Zionist project of settlement. Both texts are concerned with the question of whether and how the Jew can properly settle.

In order to elucidate the modern logics of settlement that lie at the base of the modernizing logic of settlement, I turn to *al-Jabal* (*The Mountain*, 1957), a novel by Egyptian writer Fathi Ghanem, which regards a paternalistic state project of resettlement and social reform in Lower Egypt. The two texts bear no direct relation to each other, but instead they serve as vectors that index the tensions and promises of enrootedness. For both writers, the demands of proper settlement translate into a crisis in the capacities of aesthetic representation and writing. Separately, they elaborate an alternative model of “impassive settlement,” embodied in the trope of scratching and scraping. Brenner’s protagonists move excessively, never finding a real foothold, while Ghanem’s novel comprises a refusal of movement and a treaty against it. Nevertheless, moving or not, both are stuck, bound to a nervous and abject gesture without a vector.

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<sup>37</sup> I use Hillel Halkin’s translations of both “Nerves” and *Breakdown and Bereavement*, with modifications when necessary to maintain allegiance to the original Hebrew.

## Reading the Body: Psychoanalysis as a Literary Effect

The title of the novella “Nerves” is indicative of a prevalent mode of relating to the body in Brenner’s prose, as well as in the scholarship dedicated to him. Nerves are physical symptoms, so the colloquial use implies, of the person’s mental state, of “deeper,” more complex problems.<sup>38</sup> As a rich critical tradition eloquently attests, Brenner’s nervous prose and nervous protagonists invite psychological and psychoanalytical readings.<sup>39</sup> Attending to “the talking body,” this tradition reads the expressions and gestures of Brenner’s characters as clues to conflicting psychological dynamics, or as hysterical symptoms revealing the truth of the psyche. These dynamics are often then traced back to Brenner himself, a famously charismatic, tortured, and sexually conflicted character in Zionism’s origin story, under its own telling.<sup>40</sup>

It is important not to overlook, however, that Brenner’s protagonists tend to talk just as explicitly and knowingly of their symptoms as the critics do. His characters track their own psychologies, providing their own relentless self-analysis and leaving no dark corner of their

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<sup>38</sup> The 18<sup>th</sup> century physician William Cullen defined neurosis as “disorders of sense and motion,” which could not be attributed to physiological causes, and instead were associated with the work of the nervous system (cited in Pinero 46). With the development of psychoneurotic and psychoanalytic theory, the origins of neurosis underwent a conceptual process of abstraction, from the movement of organs throughout the body and the flow of various fluids, to the obstructed flow of energy and eventually psychic dynamic drives. Impulsive movements such as scratching or twitching were reconfigured as physical and involuntary symptoms of a malfunctioning psychic system, which could be “tuned back” into ordered control.

<sup>39</sup> Pioneer among the critics to read Brenner using the tools of psychoanalysis was Dov Sadan in *Midrash psikhoanaliti*. Hamutal Bar-Yosef published a number of studies on the influence of psychoanalytic and psychopathologic discourses on Hebrew writers, among them Brenner (Bar-Yosef *Maga'im*; “Psychopatologia”). Dana Olmert reads Brenner’s London stories in light of Winnicott’s psychological method. Finally, Michael Gluzman explores melancholia and body image in Brenner’s *Shkol ve-Kishalon* in the context of his study of Hebrew masculinities.

<sup>40</sup> Anita Shapira’s biography of Brenner, *Yosef Haim Brenner: A Life*, is exemplary of the tendency to read Brenner’s stories as testimonies to his depression and psychological conflicts. The latest iteration of the drama that is Brenner is an imaginary reconstruction of an affair between Brenner and the Hebrew writer Uri Nissan Gnessin, by the influential editor and literary scholar Menahem Peri, titled *Shev 'alai ve-hithamem* [Sit on my Lap to Get Warm].

psyche undocumented or accounted for. The unnamed protagonist of “Nerves” repeatedly identifies his actions or gestures with psychological symptoms (“These too are nerves!” he says (41)). Hefetz, the protagonist of *Breakdown and Bereavement*, identifies his physical symptoms with sexual and gendered anxieties that have to do with masculine models of virility and productivity. These characters’ vocabulary, usually evoked in a tone of bitter sarcasm, attests that Brenner was well versed in the latest developments in psychopathologic and psychoanalytic theory. The characters’ confessional speech brilliantly corroborates, and consciously acknowledges, the hysterical pleasure of self-torment and the painful symptoms of a repressed sexuality.

Brenner himself claimed, in the meta-poetic article “*Ha-janer ha-eretz yisraeli ve-avizareyhu*” [“The Eretz-Israeli Genre and its Accouterments”], that his belletristic writing aims to record the “psychological depths of characters,” and that literature should be the “revelation of an inner life” (Brenner *Kol Kitve* 268). It should come as no surprise that psychoanalytic readings “fit” with Brenner so well – his stories already stage their own symptoms *as well as* their interpretations. If Brenner’s texts have an “unconscious,” or a realm that should be mined for non-manifest meaning, it is not lurking at that deep abyss of the psyche, which is, after all, consistently mined by the characters and exposed for all to see, but rather gliding on the surface of the text, at that porous boundary where the fictional body rubs against language and against the world. It is tempting to follow Brenner’s characters on their tormented self-explorations, yet there is much to be gained from resisting this urge. My guide in this resistance to psychoanalysis is a rather scathing critique the poet Hayim Nahman Bialik wrote of Brenner in 1909, which despite its cruel sarcasm bears more than a grain of truth:



The tragic – I don't give much credit to the tragic when it declares and celebrates itself as such. Regarding most of our Prometheuses, who, like cranes, shriek that the vultures are pecking at their hearts, one must suspect that they are being bitten by fleas: Those sorrows of the world, burdening them like an ugly hump... their origins do not lie in the deep abyss [omka dethoma raba] of the world's decline, or with Adam's original sin, but can be found somewhere much closer. (Bialik 380)

טרגיות. איני מאמין הרבה בטרגיות המכרזת על עצמה והמתגדרת בעצמה. רוב הפרומתיאוסים שלנו, שצונחים ככרוכיא, שהנשרים מנקרים את לבבם, יש לחשוך בהם, שמא פרעושים עוקצים אותם; צער העולם שלהם, העמוס כחטוטרת מכוערת על שכמם אינו באמת אלא צער על השגה עשירה ויכולת קבצנית... יסודו, אין לבקש דוקא מעומקא דתהומא רבה של קלקלת העולם וחטא אדם הראשון, על פי רוב, אלא מונח הוא במקום קרוב מזה.

The psychological torments of Brenner's characters, Bialik reminds us, are not a symptom but a literary trope, an authorial and authoritative effect. Rather than focus on this excavation of depths, it is worthwhile to notice the fleabites: the itchiness and irritation, the filth and disgust that pervade Brenner's texts. These textual affects match the undeniable nervous irritation, which Brenner's excessive, chatty verbosity evoke in his readers. The experience of reading Brenner often amounts to a visceral sense of disgust, which Bialik had compared to the flavor of "smoked herring with honey" (380).

More broadly, I suggest shifting the attention away from the great tormented Brennerian psyche to the Brennerian body, always sickly, itching, and pulsating. As a writer of disgust or filth, Brenner marks a disturbance in the order of propriety. Nevertheless, my reading skirts Julia Kristeva's influential psychoanalytic model of the abject as outside the symbolic order. For

Kristeva, the “fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed” abject is the pre-oedipal basis that the symbolic order must disavow, and yet on which it depends (Kristeva 207). The existential terror that it evokes brings us right back to the “omka dethoma raba,” or the narrative of a tragic fall, which Bialik warns against. Instead of following Kristeva to the abyss, I suggest staying “much closer” to the skin, as Bialik suggests, focusing on the Brennerian affect of surface irritation. This is a minor or “politically inadequate” affect, as Sianne Ngai has called it (Ngai 183), removed from the more emphatic affects of rage, anger, or shame. Identifying the politically minor in the itching, irritated, and stuck Brennerian body requires shifting the focus of reading away from a dynamic, major narrative of journeys and destinies, to static narrative moments of description. This reading illuminates a conflict between two political models of settlement: an emphatic, dynamic model, based on a metaphor of depths and on a symbiotic connection between settler and land, alongside a static, impassive model, located at the surface, at the level of the text, of the dirt, and of the skin. Finally, reading psychology as a trope, rather than as a symptom, allows identifying the different kinds of political work performed by these two modes of writing.

### **“Nerves” as an Immigration Story**

The structure of “Nerves,” a novella of immigration to Palestine told in retrospect, provides a particularly useful venue to examine such formal distinctions. “Nerves” was written in 1910, shortly after Brenner’s own immigration in 1909. At the time, Brenner was already a well-known figure in the small realm of Hebrew letters, a fiery polemicist and influential editor. His immigration is often marked as the end of the European sphere of Hebrew writing, and the beginning of a new Hebrew cultural center, in Palestine (Kimmerling 80). “Nerves” is an *aliya*

story, the narrative of “ascendance” or immigration to Eretz Yisrael (as the immigrants called it at the time). As the first literary text that Brenner wrote in Palestine, it personifies the symbolic immigration of literary centers that it narrates. Nevertheless, it is a strangely non-conclusive text, employing, as Boaz Arpaly notes, the familiar heroic narrative genre of a journey from Eastern Europe to Palestine in the least heroic fashion (Arpaly 83). The hectic, torturous journey does not conclude with a cathartic reunion with a long-abandoned homeland, but rather with a crude awakening. “So this is what our promised land is like!” the protagonist proclaims with bitterness (38).

The formal structure of “Nerves” dramatizes this disappointing encounter. The narrative takes place as the narrator and his companion (to whom I refer as the protagonist from here on, as his story occupies the majority of the text), a sickly and self-diagnosed neurotic newcomer to Palestine, take an evening stroll around the newly established Hebrew colony.<sup>41</sup> The two are day laborers, yet there appears to be little labor for them; the protagonist is too ill and weak to work in any case. As they wander, the protagonist is stirred to recount the story of his journey to Palestine, while the narrator interjects with scenic descriptions of their surroundings. Two time frames continually contrast and interact: the first is the narrative time of the dramatic journey to Palestine; the second is the present moment of narration. The end of the journey is therefore already known in advance: Eretz Yisrael, the object of desire in the mythic *aliya* story, is structurally juxtaposed to the Palestinian landscape.

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<sup>41</sup> The “Hebrew colony” is unnamed in the story, but it is identifiable as one of the *moshavot*, an agricultural settlement based on private land ownership (unlike the later Kibbutz model), established by immigrants of the First Aliya (1882-1904). Brenner and his characters are of the Second Aliya (1904-1914). Stories such as “Nerves” are responsible for establishing the image of the Second Aliya immigrants as young and idealistic pioneers, at an ideological struggle with the more established agricultural class. As Alroey points out, this idealistic group was a minority among the Second Aliya immigrants, but their image formed the basis for Zionist settlement’s self-image in subsequent years. On the conflicted cultural relationship between the Hebrew colonies and the Palestinian population, see Berlovitz, Chapter 4. For an overview of their strained political relations, see Morris (49).

As such, “Nerves” neatly lends itself to the dialectic model Fredric Jameson outlines in *Antinomies of Realism* (2013).<sup>42</sup> Jameson reads the realist novel as a collision between a narrative impulse, or *récit*, and a static or scenic impulse, which he curiously calls affect (Jameson *Antinomies* 28). Narrative and affect are distinguished by their temporal forms: the narrative impulse, more simply understood as the plot or the story, adopts temporality as the regime of past-present-future. Affect, on the other hand, is marked by a reduction to the present, or in Jameson’s striking phrase, a reduction to the body, “inasmuch as the body is all that remains in any tendential reduction of experience to the present” (28). The narrative impulse ties “character” to the notion of a unique destiny: the character has a story and a genre, its future is bound to its past as well as to the genre’s (and to history’s) demands. Affect, on the other hand, as the registry of the perpetual present, attempts to capture immediacy by marking the body’s presence in space.

In “Nerves,” the bodies of the characters are written through their physical, surface interaction with the landscape, as they sweat, shiver, or sit on the thorns of a prickly pear. The protagonist, however, yearns for a different form of interaction with the land, one that is deeper, rooted, more established. He bemoans the newness and transience of the Hebrew colony, condemns the members of the second generation for leaving in search of more luxurious life abroad, and likens the colony to “trees that have grown wings rather than roots” (37). The precarity of the colony cannot be ignored, the protagonist says, when compared to the

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<sup>42</sup> A number of critics have recently labored to argue that Brenner was a modernist writer, somewhat *avant la lettre* (these include Hasak-Lowy 45; Pinsker 56-63; Schachter 59-60). Their studies highlight the attributes Brenner shares with his Europeans and Russian contemporaries. This chapter, however, is not concerned with determining whether Brenner should be placed in the “realist” or “modernist” camp. One of the most useful observations in Jameson’s *Antinomies* is that the realist canon is rife with what could be identified as modernist techniques. Furthermore, Jameson argues that it is the tension between these techniques and a desire for a “story” that defines realism, rather than any question of mimesis.

surrounding Palestinian villages. At first the narrator does not understand, he cannot *see*, the villages that his companion is referring to, and so the protagonist clarifies:

The villages! The old ones, I mean, not ours. Those that blend in, the sun is their sun and the rain is their rain, that aren't merely a quarter of a century old... Well, [the Arabs] may be filthy beggars themselves... oh I'm sure of it: they are! But at least they are not the filthy outcasts of the earth. (37)

הכפרים! את הישנים, לא שלנו, אלא את הללו, שנתערו, שהשמש שמשם והגשם גשמם, ששנותיהם לא עשרים וחמש ... ואף העם היושב בתוכם הלא אינו בנים שגלו מעל שולחן אביהם ... שטעם דגת גושן בפיהם ... כי אם ... אמנם, אולי מזוהמים כשהם לעצמם – קרוב לוודאי מזוהמים – אבל, בכל אופן, לא מזוהמי עולם...

The protagonist is struck by the manner the Palestinian villages are rooted in the landscape. They have a relation of *ownership* to the natural elements, they are so embedded that at first they are invisible to the narrator, who simply regards them as part of nature. The Jewish colony, on the other hand, is blatant, foreign, and might disappear just as quickly as it was established.

Strikingly, the Palestinian connection to the land is, in the same breath, undermined: The Arabs are “filthy beggars” rather than farmers or peasants, lacking the proper means to inhabit and cultivate the land. Hillel Halkin’s translational flourish, which replaces the Hebrew “filthy” (מזוהמים) with “filthy beggars,” is ultimately telling. There is more similarity than difference between the Palestinian natives and the Jewish settlers, those “filthy outcasts of the earth,” (עולם) (מזוהמי) as the protagonist calls them. The settler, as history will prove only a few decades later,

inevitably views the Palestinian natives as improperly settled and therefore potentially moveable. Potentially, they are as transient as the Jews. Furthermore, it is the common filth of the Jew and the Arab that makes them similar—that deems them to be improperly settled.

### **Civilized Movement, Civilized Settlement**

In order to explore the modern logics of settlement that underlie this potential displacability, I turn to the novel *The Mountain (al-Jabal, 1956)* by the Egyptian Fathi Ghanem. Ghanem's novel, a critical interrogation of state-sponsored projects of modernization and paternalistic social reforms, may seem a far cry from the Zionist settlers of Brenner's text. Nevertheless, the newly minted Egyptian citizen-native (of Ghanem's novel), and the Jewish Russian settler (of Brenner's), embody two surprisingly corresponding subject positions negotiating models of modern settlement, albeit within different political structures, and questioning linear national genealogies leading back to antiquity (Pharaonic history in *The Mountain*, and the Bible in "Nerves"). Both authors, furthermore, write in a context that deems literary writing an urgent and crucial mode of political, national activism: Brenner within the context of the national revival of Hebrew, and Ghanem in the context of committed realism in 1950s Egypt.<sup>43</sup>

The narrator of *The Mountain* is a young government inspector from Cairo, sent to investigate a complaint coming from a small village by Luxor, in Egypt's remote south. The government had decided that the old impoverished village, which is located over the ancient Pharaonic tombs, must be evacuated for the benefit of both archeologists and tourists. The

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<sup>43</sup> On committed realism in Egypt see Selim (139-45); Verena (51-62), and additional discussion in Chapter 3. Regarding the role of Hebrew literature in the national revival movement, Menahem Brinker asserts that for Brenner, the "health" of Hebrew literature was a reflection of the "health" of the Hebrew nation (Brinker 197). See also Harshav, *Language in Time of Revolution*.

villagers, however, refuse to leave their caves and hovels and relocate to the new, modern, model town that has been built for them on the plain. Additionally, there have been a few acts of sabotage and vandalism in the new, still empty, town. The inspector, named, like the author, Fathi Ghanem, is charged with identifying the vandals. The novel dramatizes the rift between the urban administration and the native inhabitants of the countryside. The inspector's allegiances, it is implicitly and explicitly stated, should be with the forces of reform rather than with the unruly, unbathed villagers.

The novel is based on a true and famous episode: in 1945, the world-renowned Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy was commissioned by the Egyptian Department of Antiquities to design a model village in order to house some 7,000 residents of Qurna (also spelled Gurna), a cluster of villages located among the tombs and archeological digs (Mitchell 179-205; Reid 160-63). Fathy's model village boasted modern facilities, all necessary community institutions, and a sustainable building style based in vernacular tradition, which Fathy envisioned as the birth of an Egyptian "national style." But the project was never completed and the model village remained empty, partly because the residents of Qurna refused to move. Writing his account of the events some twenty years later, Fathy denounced the villagers as tomb robbers who

had no intention of giving up their nice, profitable squalid houses in the cemetery with treasure waiting to be mined under their floors, to move to a new, hygienic, beautiful village away from the tombs. (Fathy 176)

As Timothy Mitchell writes in his analysis of Fathy's project, it is the villagers' lawlessness and uncivilized hygienic habits that gave pretext to building the new village. "There

had to be some lack,” he notes, “something missing from the peasant,” for him to become the representative of Egyptian national culture (Mitchell 187). This state-sponsored civilizing mission reflects what Edward Said has identified as a “doxology of land:”

Among the supposed juridical distinctions between civilized and non-civilized peoples was an attitude toward land, almost a doxology about land, which non-civilized people supposedly lacked. A civilized man, it was believed, could cultivate the land because it meant something to him; on it, accordingly, he bred useful arts and crafts, he created, he accomplished, he built. For an uncivilized people, land was either farmed badly (i.e., inefficiently by Western standards) or it was left to rot. From this string of ideas, by which whole native societies who lived on American, African, and Asian territories for centuries were suddenly denied their right to live on that land, came the great dispossessing movements of modern European colonialism, and with them all the schemes for redeeming the land, resettling the natives, civilizing them, taming their savage customs, turning them into useful beings under European rule. (Said "Zionism" 26-7)

Said teases out two modes of inhabiting the land, bound with colonial histories of expansion. A civilized and proper mode of settlement implies putting it to productive use, inhabiting it in a *meaningful* way. The uncivilized and non-European subject, on the other hand, “leaves the land to rot.” An improper inhabitant of the land, he can always be moved to make room for more “useful” subjects, or displaced and resettled where he can finally be put to use. In *The Mountain*, the situation facing the residents of Qurna, engaged neither in agriculture nor in



any other productive mode of existence, clearly illustrates this process. Having lived for centuries in hamlets above the Pharaonic tombs, they are now deemed to be “in the wrong place,” and must move to a modern town. The first structures to be built in New Qurna, before dwellings or recreational facilities, are disciplinary institutions – the school, the police station, and the municipal hall. The civilizing mission here is not on part of European colonial powers, but of the modern Egyptian state, that seeks to resettle and incorporate the indigenous population as productive Egyptian citizen-subjects.

*The Mountain*'s government inspector, meanwhile, is strikingly mobile, going from the city to the village, from the new Qurna to the old one, with little obstacle. Paradoxically, civilized settlement also “civilizes” movement. The political subject who is most mobile (or who enjoys the most “freedom of movement”) is the Western citizen: a subject position that is most often tied to stability and sedentarism (Kotef 10).<sup>44</sup> The Westerner, since he is properly settled, is also the most legitimate and proper traveler – as tourist, businessman, humanitarian, or colonizer. Forms of movement *and* forms of settlement that do not emerge from the settled base of the Western subject, particularly those of colonized populations (or of refugees, their modern descendants), are vilified and proscribed.

This double structure, which conditions proper movement on proper settlement, also points towards the link between the native and the European Jew, always improperly settled and displaceable within a structure of modern citizenship.<sup>45</sup> In 1908, George Simmel modeled the unsettled figure of the stranger after the European Jew, writing that “the stranger is by nature no

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<sup>44</sup> It is also interesting to note, in this context, Hassan Fathy's cosmopolitan career. *Architecture for the Poor*, the book in which he described the civilizing ambitions of New Qurna and disparages the squabbling authorities and the local villagers who had thwarted the project, was published in English rather than Arabic.

<sup>45</sup> Aamir Mufti elaborates on this analogy in *Enlightenment in the Colony*. Mufti builds on Hannah Arendt identification of the Jewish minority as always potentially moveable within the model of the nation-state in order to explore parallel processes of minoritization and displacement in India/Pakistan.

‘owner of soil,’” not only physically, “but also in the figurative sense of a life-substance which is fixed... in an ideal point of the social environment” (Simmel 144). The stranger, which is the European Jew, which is the uncivilized non-European, is always potentially displaced, lacking a meaningful relation to the land, living somehow merely on its surface. Either too stagnant or too mobile, they are never sufficiently rooted in the soil to be able to properly move elsewhere – their moves will always be an aberration or a threat, while their settlement is never fully legitimate.

In *The Mountain*, the government inspector arrives at the village exhibiting the boisterous attitude of a modern administrative official. Narrated in the first person, the novel commences like a detective novel, a heroic tale of dangers and adventures in the Upper Nile. Upon his arrival, however, nothing proceeds as planned, and this generic framework quickly crumbles into a process of self-reckoning and defeat. After seeing the village himself, all his ideas on social reform project dissipate “like water evaporating from a pot over the flames” (7). If the process of investigation is a means to write a narrative, as Samah Selim suggests, the inspector’s questions lead him nowhere, and he must concede his authority to the villagers’ voices, and accept his painful marginality (Selim 143).

Selim frames the novel in the context of the Egyptian neo-realism of the 1950s, a literary project engaged with interrogating the junctures of power and ideology in Egyptian society. Critical of elitist politics, writers of the 1950s such as Ghanem, ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Sharqawi, and Yusuf Idris, placed the oppressed Egyptian peasant as the historical subject at the center of an anti-colonial Egyptian nationalism (127). This political framing is important, but by collapsing the village novel with the character of the peasant, Selim overlooks the fact that the residents of Qurna are not peasants or *fallahin* at all – as the “people of the mountain,” as they

are known, they are explicitly differentiated from the farmers, the dwellers of the plain. It is the futility of the villagers' life, not their vitality or resourcefulness, which eventually overwhelms the inspector, to the extent that he returns to Cairo with an empty report and quits his job.

In his conversations with the villagers, the inspector slowly discovers the origins of their reputations as tomb raiders. The villagers dig tunnels under their homes, driven by the improbably hope of encountering a Pharaonic treasure. The unusual verb used to describe this effort is *kaht*, meaning to scratch or scrape at the walls.<sup>46</sup> "Scraping is the only option, the only hope, for those that live on the mountain," the inspector comes to believe (109). Scraping, however, is also a dark destiny, extremely dangerous and often futile. Once the scrapers reach a dead-end, or a bottomless abyss, they have no choice but to start scraping at a new location, hoping for better luck. The inspector realizes the awesome futility of this way of life, and suddenly everything else becomes trivial (134). He questions the very law that he is supposed to represent, realizing that he can no longer uphold its logic. How can the villagers be considered criminals? He asks himself. It is like blaming the mountain itself of theft.

The word *kaht* gains something of a mythical nuance in the text and among the villagers. They view it as an inevitable destiny, which for some inexplicable reason cannot be replaced with more efficient, quick, or foolproof methods of digging for treasure. Scraping and scratching are a strikingly physical, frustrating, and eventually useless gestures. One can immediately sense the dirt and grime that collect under the fingernails, the endless routine, the monotonous gestures that very likely are in vain. For the inspector, scratching becomes an end in itself, an ongoing,

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<sup>46</sup> Currently, the term is commonly used for curettage, or abortion by means of scraping the uterus. This denotation emphasizes the nonproductive nature of the villagers' engagements, but I could not verify how far back this meaning can be traced.

continuous gesture that defines the villagers' life, and does not depend on the actual existence of the treasure as an end.

After the investigator quits his job, he becomes a writer – he becomes, quite explicitly, the writer Fathi Ghanem. The writer's job is very different from that of the investigator. The investigator discovers that the mountain cannot be investigated, recorded, or solved; it overwhelms the very categories and distinctions upon which the investigator relies in order to create a coherent narrative of criminals and innocents, uncultivated and civilized, depravity and reform. The alternate manner of approaching the mountain is through *kaht*, scraping slowly and blindly until hitting an empty pyre, then retreating and starting again at a new point. This nonproductive, self-contained scraping becomes the task of the writer: unlike the investigator, who is bound to a narrative of improvement, of solving a crime and reinstating order, the writer embraces the ongoing, laborious act of scratching, which is an end in itself.

### **Failed Natives: “Nerves” as a Settler Colonial Text**

*The Mountain* narrates the manner that the villagers' impassive, nonproductive, and abject model of settlement overwhelms the narrator, to the extent that he gives up the emphatic mode of writing-for-social-reform in favor of an impassive metaphor of writing-as-scraping. In Brenner's writing, however, the two modes continue to clash, without one ever overwhelming the other. The impassive mode continues to appear in his prose, undermining Brenner's more explicit commitments to ideological and Zionist modes of representation.

Read in terms of Said's doxology of land, Zionism was a self-civilizing mission aimed to solve the problem of improper Jewish mobility by establishing a proper mode of national settlement, in Eretz Yisrael. Settlement “in one's own land” was not only supposed to solve the

problem of Jewish movement in space, but also the problem of involuntary and improper movements of the Jewish body, imagined as sickly and perverse. “Nerves” explicitly stages the connection between involuntary corporeal movements and the unsettled body, what Dana Olmert has called the “geographic nervousness” of Brenner’s protagonists (123). As Sander Gilman demonstrates in *The Jew’s Body*, psychopathology and medical race studies intersected in figure of the Jew, which more than any other subject, was associated with neurotic symptoms.<sup>47</sup> This image was prominent among educated Jews as well: In popular Jewish and Hebrew publications in the beginning of the century, items on physical diseases were increasingly replaced by discussion of psychic and neurotic ailments, which were believed to be especially prevalent among the Jews (Bar-Yosef “Ha-Heksher”). Zionism was supposed to solve both problems, the Jew’s futile or unproductive movement in space or geography, and the impulsive, unproductive movements of his body, finally creating the figure of healthy, modern “New Jew.”<sup>48</sup>

In Brenner’s texts, the Jewish settler’s desire for proper settlement is repeatedly expressed through a double appeal to depths – both the depths of the soul and the depths of the earth. The protagonist of “Nerves,” for example, tries to explain what drew him to Palestine in characteristically non-idealized terms:

Perhaps what quivered in my “depths” was yearning for a shadow of a *homeland*,  
which as a Jew I had never known... a trace of the hope to find a grasp, some  
hold, maybe to suckle, *there*, in that picturesque corner of Asia... (41)

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<sup>47</sup> By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the problem of involuntary bodily movement, of unintentional jerks and spasms, was addressed under the medical discourse of neurosis, aiming both to track its source and to control it (Pinero 46).

<sup>48</sup> Much has been written on the New Jew and the New Hebrew body. In addition to Gilman, see Gluzman; Neumann.

אולי פירכס שם ב"מעמקי" גם עוד שריד תקוה, מעין – למצוא איזו אחיזה, איזו אחיזה שהיא, יניקת משהו  
שם, באותה ארץ חמדה, בקדמת אסיה...

The depths of the soul yearn for the depths of the earth: for a deep-reaching network of roots that grasp at the land, suckling and absorbing its nutrients. This symbiotic relationship is based on a doubled evocation of depths – of the psyche and of the land. A similar idea is evoked in *Breakdown and Bereavement*. Rambling in feverish madness, Hefetz, the protagonist, tells a shaggy-dog story of a “poor Italian [who] loved life, and even more than he loved it, he felt rooted in it, rooted just like an onion. The only problem was that here, in Palestine, he hadn’t seen a single onion. Not one farm grew them...” (*Breakdown*: 118). The many-layered onion is an analogy for the “deeply structured” settled subject, rooted deep in the earth. In both examples, a deep psyche corresponds to an access to and a rooting in the very depths of the land.

This “depths to depths” model, which is also a model of nativism, is nevertheless unattainable to the settler – as he notes, he sees no onions in Palestine. In “Nerves,” this model is written as an unattained desire, evoked and denied through a carefully constructed series of landscape descriptions rich with Biblical allusions and linguistic ambiguities. In stark contrast to the desire for depths, in the first two paragraphs the two characters turn to gaze over a large plane. The precise sentence describing this act is a slightly modified citation from Genesis 19:28:

אז פנה רעי לאחוריו וישקף על פני כל הכיכר.

My friend turned to look at the plain behind us.

כֹּה וַיִּשְׁקֹף, עַל-פְּנֵי סְדֹם וְעִמְרָה, וְעַל-כָּל-פְּנֵי, אֶרֶץ הַכְּכָר;

“And [Abraham] looked toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the plain, and beheld, and, lo, the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace.” (Gen. 19:28 King James Version)

The Biblical reference positions the Hebrew colony in the place of Sodom and Gomorrah, foreseeing its destruction. Here and in other places in this story, the use of a tapestry of biblical citations is particularly ironic. The Bible was supposed to be the Zionist settler’s textual medium to the landscape of Eretz Yisrael. Unlike other colonial settlers, for whom the encounter with the colonial landscape always posed a crisis of representation in its strangeness, the Hebrew writer had a unique frame of reference for comprehending and approaching the Palestinian landscape in the form of the biblical text.<sup>49</sup> The bible was supposed to provide the means for the settlers to become natives, returning to their “promised” homeland. The protagonist of “Nerves,” after admitting his desire to “suckle” at a homeland, continues narrating the fantasy that brought him to Palestine:

*[T]here*, in that picturesque corner of Asia in which Bedouin, the great grandchildren of Abraham the Hebrew, pitch their tent to this day and bring to the well real camels as once did his bondsman Eliezer [. . .] There... I mean: here... ah, let me cross over and see that goodly land, its fair mountains and the Lebanon... (“Nerves” 41)

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<sup>49</sup> The use of the Bible as a “map” of contemporary Palestine was not unique to Zionism, of course, but was shared by religious non-Zionist Jews as well as by Christian pilgrims. Zionism, however, read the Bible secularly, as a national history. On the relation between Zionism and the Bible, see Shapira, *Ha-Tanakh*; Pardes. On the crisis of representation of landscape in the colonial setting, see the introduction to Hooper. In the Zionist context, see Alcalay’s claim that the Zionist settlers saw the Palestinian landscape through a strictly European framework, to the extent that the local Arabs were imagined as Ukrainian peasants (Alcalay).

באותה ארץ חמדה, בקדמת אסיה, אשר אהלי הבידואים, אולי בני בניהם של אברהם העברי, ינטו שם עד היום הזה; אשר גמלים שם, ומברכים אותם, ממש כמו שעשה אליעזר עבד אברהם בשעתו; ואשר (ודאי, העיקר!) דור שלישי ורביעי למלוי בריבית לפריצים פולנים מנסים שם ללכת אחרי המחרשה... שם... רצוני לומר פה ... אה, אעברה נא אראה את הארץ הטובה ההיא, את ההר הטוב הזה והלבנון...

As seen earlier, the protagonist's tone is sarcastic, while still confessional. He evokes a familiar Zionist fantasy, employing the Biblical narrative to collapse past and present, and to create an undisturbed continuity between the Jewish presence in Canaan and in pre-exilic times and the “returning” modern Zionist settlers. To this end he casts the native Bedouins (the local Palestinians) as biblical figures, suspended in time: Not threatening and foreign natives, but emblems of one's “own” Jewish past. This Biblical structure is acknowledged here as a fantasy (“more to the point, where third-and fourth-generation children of Jewish moneylenders to Poles are learning to follow the plow,” he cynically acknowledges), but this passage admits to further failures of the project to “arrive” at the homeland. The homeland is always located *there* rather than *here*, in an absent site of yearning, and the speaker must repeatedly remind himself that this distance had actually been traversed. Moreover, the quote concluding the passage, from Deuteronomy 3:25, is borrowed from Moses, who never crossed the Jordan River. Like him, the settler is still waiting to cross over and arrive.

The Bible presents itself as a guide not only by virtue of its recognizable narratives, sites, and characters, but also by means of its language, and the revival of Hebrew was an inextricable part of the Zionist New Jew project. Before Brenner decided to leave Europe, he received a letter from his friend Yaakov Rabinovitch, recommending him to go to Palestine, since “there is only one corner where a Hebrew world is constructed—Eretz Yisrael... the place whose language is spoken by children” (quoted in Shapira *Brenner: Sipur Hayim* 103). It is not only that Eretz



Yisrael is the site of a unique social experience—a purely Hebrew community—but that Hebrew *is* the language of the place, as if there was some intrinsic relation, an immediate link, between the land and the Hebrew language. Already in the novella’s first sentence, the aspiration for a native and natural correlation between settler, land, and language is disappointed:

A smell of *parfum* rose around us—from the low *shitot* bushes, or “mimosa” as others call it, at the slope of the Hebrew colony in the Land of Judea. (35)

מעין ריח פרפום עלה מסביבינו – מגידולי השיטות הנמוכים, או ה"מימוזה", כאשר יקראו להם אחרים,  
שבמעלה המושבה העברית אשר בארץ יהודה.

This is first and foremost a verbal landscape, drawing awareness, by its own reservations, to the fact that it is landscape mediated through words and names. The excess of foreign words, such as perfume and mimosa, immediately undermine the phrase “Hebrew colony.” Two different names are offered for the surrounding bushes—the first is the Hebrew-biblical one, recently revived in a project of classification of Biblical flora and fauna, and the second is the Latin term, the one commonly used. The link between signifier and signified is revealed not as natural and unified, but random and multiple, like the artificial smell of perfume. The land does not speak Hebrew, and neither do the characters. “A bird, whose Hebrew name neither of us knew, flew brilliantly by, its multi-colored wings green against the sky-blue,” notes the narrator, giving shape to linguistic alienation.

## Models of Settlement

Supplanting the performance of linguistic estrangement of the Zionist settlers from the landscape, the settler's associative monolog charts a warning against the very notion of arrival at the homeland through the recurring figure of "the shore." The shore is first mentioned in the context of a collateral event, which had left a lasting mark on the protagonist. One of his fellow immigrants at a Jewish boarding house in London, who has been separated from his family, opens the gas flow in his room one night, without any prior indication. In the morning he is found in "perfect tranquility" (*mirga 'a*), having crossed to a "different shore" (42). From here on, the shore, perfect tranquility, and death, are bound together, each bearing each other's traces. "From shore to shore... he came to the shore... and when would I?" wonders the protagonist. And when he finally arrives at the shore of Haifa he cries emotionally "I felt whisperings of glory in my heart. Tranquility! Good!" The word tranquility—Brenner uses the unusual root-pattern *mirga 'a* in both cases—rather than marking a triumphal arrival, evokes the desperate suicide in London. Arrival at the shore is not the beginning of a new life, but rather its end. Settlement, the end goal of the journey, is synonymous with death.

This form of a journey readily lends itself to a Freudian reading: the settler's arrival at the shore is imagined as an ecstatic, erotically charged encounter, where pleasure comes dangerously close to death. Freud identifies the repetition compulsion with the death drive, a desire to return to a static state, positioning it at the very climax of sexual passion: The culmination of this desire is deathlike stasis. This desire to "return," however, is also the narrative structure of Zionism. What is the Zionist return to Palestine if not a wish, as Freud writes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, to return to "an ancient starting point, which the living being left long ago, and to which it harks back again by all the circuitous paths of development" (Freud *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 48)? Arrival is synonymous with stasis and with death, and is therefore

inconceivable, necessitating a compulsive departure, only in order to return again (this model of departure and return is the fate of Hefetz).

A problem emerges, however, once this condemnation of settlement as a goal that should never be achieved is contrasted with Brenner's explicitly stated political commitments. In his critical essays and in his political career, Brenner insisted that agricultural settlement, and the creation of a new, healthy, civilized Hebrew subject, are the only hope for the Jewish diaspora.<sup>50</sup> Why then does the literary text evoke the desired possibility of Jewish settlement, and then depicts its failure?

Hannan Hever addresses a similar question in his reading of Brenner's programmatic essay "The Eretz Israeli Genre and its Accouterments." Reflecting on Brenner's "prohibition" on generic or holistic depiction of life in the Zionist colonies in Palestine, as if they were established villages that had been there for decades, Hever argues that Brenner posits literature as a site of utopian tension: In order to recruit the fictional text to the Zionist project, the project should not be depicted as realized. Instead, it should be portrayed as a reality that does not *yet* exist: the literary text must sustain the dynamic desire for its realization precisely by depicting the utopian ideal as lacking (Hever *Ha-Sipur Veba-Leom: Keriot Bikoratiyot Be-Kanon Ha-Siporet Ha-`Yvrit* 52). Literature must continue to illustrate the necessity of the political project of Hebrew settlement, since an aesthetic "arrival" at this desired ideal is equivalent to its conclusion, to stasis or death.

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<sup>50</sup> See in particular the debates that came to be known as the Brenner Affair, instigated by Brenner's polemic article "From the Press and Literature" (Brenner *Kol Kitive* 3:476-87). In this text Brenner provocatively redefines the boundaries of the Jewish nation, rejects its association with Judaism as a religion, and instead grounds it in Hebrew expression, a national group identity, and a locus in Eretz Yisrael. On the outraged responses to this essay, see Govrin (*Me'ora Brenner*

Hever provides a clean solution, which reconciles Brenner's fragmentary and defeatist aesthetics with his activist and optimistic political opinions: it resolves the seeming contrast between the characters' deep, tormented psychology, and the utopian political project in which Brenner is involved. Yet this aesthetic ideology cannot fully account for some of the affective contents of "Nerves" or of *Breakdown and Bereavement*: there are elements that simply cannot find their place in it. The novella has undeniable excess, a surplus that escapes the neat economy that joins the aesthetics of psychic depths to the "depths structure" of settlement, which emerges in the static scenic descriptions of the colony and its surrounding that are external to the narrative of the journey. These scenes evoke no temporal progress but are grounded in presentness and in sensorial input, illustrating what I call an impassive "settlement on the surface."

This notion is more prominent in *Breakdown and Bereavement*, but elements of it are recognizable already in "Nerves." The description of the Hebrew colony itself, to which the two companions eventually return, is the most striking example of surface descriptions and of surface settlement. Instead of the detailed visual description of the landscape presented earlier, now the narrator constructs an almost exclusive soundscape, interrupted by shadows and silhouettes, presenting an account of surfaces, voices, and bodies:

A bareheaded adolescent girl stepped out of one of the houses in the colony and crossed the narrow street, humming the words of the Hebrew "folk song" to a pleasant Arab melody

*Pretty golden bird, fly far away*

*Find me a husband for my wedding day.*

From a courtyard opposite a voice that could have been either a man's or a woman's rose through the night air: "*Rukh, rukh min hun! S'tezikh tsugetsheppet?*"—the voices collided. The little colony's dark synagogue looked down on us with its broad but dark windows. Beneath them some local citizens stood discussing their affairs as proprietors. "It's time I fired Ahmed," one of them said. "I've never seen such a thief in my life." This sentence rolled down until it came to a dark ditch by the side of the street, from which suddenly appeared the silhouettes of two young workers, one in a costume of dark cloth, the other in torn linen pants, a shirt and completely barefoot. ("Nerves" 59)

מאחד הבתים יצאה נערה אחת גלויית שער ועברה על פנינו לרוחב הסמטה, כשהיא מזמזמת מילודיה ערבית קלה, נעימה ומטעימה את פסוקי "שיר העם" משל המשורר: "צפור זהב, עופי, חוגי, ובקשי לי בן זוגי" ... ממולה עלה מן החצר באויר הלילי קול של ספק זכר וספק נקבה: "רוך, רוך מנהון! (כלך! כלך מכאן!) ס'טעזיך צוגעטשעפעט?!"— הקולות התנגשו. חלונות בית הכנסת הגדול של המושבה הקטנה הביטו עלינו מעל הגבעה ברחבות, אבל- חשכים. אצלם עמדו מאזרחי המקום ושוחחו ביניהם על עניניהם בקול בעל ביתי: "את אחמד צריך היה לפטר; גנב מאין כמוהו!.." המשפט התגלגל ובא עד החפירה שבצדי הסמטה, שם צמחו פתאום צללי שני עלמים פועלים, אחד בתלבושת של אריג כהה. והשני בקרעי מכנסי בד וחולצה ויחף לגמרי.

The Hebrew colony emerges here in a multiplicity of languages and hierarchies, caught up in a calm, daily routine. Contrasting the landowners, who prefer hiring cheap and apparently unreliable Arab laborers, with the unemployed Jewish workers, the passage narrates immediate political concerns. At the same time, it constructs a set of hybrid forms and figures, all evoking a discrete sensuality grounded in the calm movements of routine:

The lines of the young girl's song are from "Between the Tigris and the Euphrates," a poem composed by Bialik and published in 1908 in a cycle of four poems titled "Folk Songs." The title, however, is rendered ironic once the poem is paired with an Arab melody. Bialik drew on Yiddish folk songs for this cycle, and in "Between the Tigris and the Euphrates" dresses them in the garb of Oriental fantasy. Yet once the poem is sang to a local Arab melody, it is no longer possible to clearly identify what is the "folk" to which it refers.<sup>51</sup> Against the girl's song rises a voice of unspecified gender, speaking in two languages—"go away! [in Arabic], why are you touching this [in Yiddish]?" The ambivalent gender of the speaker is directly related to his/her ambivalent linguistic identity, positioned between Yiddish and Arabic. As Naomi Seidman shows, Yiddish at the time was endowed with feminine qualities – weakness, impurity, unproductively, especially against the masculine Hebrew (Seidman). Arabic, on the other hand, was associated with a native masculinity desired by many of the settlers. The threat of intermingling is, nevertheless, neutralized by the calm serenity underlying the description. The acoustic scene is located at the point where language is no longer judged according to its accomplishments within a national frame, and the erotic extends beyond the metaphor of the feminized land waiting to be conquered, charting a diversity of desires.

While the suspended tension of the "deep settlement" model posits literature in relation to a yet-to-be-achieved political future, this literary description is self-sufficient and content in its presentness. And instead of complete *tranquility* (*mirga 'a*), it describes settlement as a continuous formal movement of bodies merging and breaking up again: Hebrew poem and Arab

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<sup>51</sup> The Yemenite-Israeli singer Bracha Zfira, who recorded the song in the 1930s, attributed the melody to the Iraqi song "Qaduk al-mayyas," which was popular in Palestine in the 1920s (Zephira). It appears that Bialik's poem was coupled to the Arab melody even earlier, and immediately following its publication.

melody, man and woman, voice into shadows, shadows into silhouettes. This is an ongoing, passive, and non-progressive movement—movement caught within stasis of routine.

The novella ends with this routine: the two companions return to the inn where they are staying, and join the family as they set up the table for dinner and discuss various ailments and remedies. The last sentence of the novella is a peak (if this is an appropriate term) of impassive rather than emphatic narrative: “All was as before. They smoked, they yawned, drank coffee, and ate pickled herring” (66). This passage could be read as another instance of Brenner’s negative aesthetics, postponing a utopian realization. Yet this interpretation forces a tension into the text, where there is none. The passive movements of routine, which are perhaps slightly repulsive, but all too human, hint at a mode of settlement that is not caught up in the psychological drama of arrival or realization. While this impassive mode only briefly appears in “Nerves,” it is further developed in *Breakdown and Bereavement*.

### **Breakdown and Bereavement and the Irritated Movement of Disgust**

*Breakdown and Bereavement* (*Shkol ve-Kishalon*), published in 1920, can be read as a sequel to “Nerves.”<sup>52</sup> Like “Nerves” protagonist, *Breakdown and Bereavement*’s Hefetz is a young settler suffering from a nervous condition, which in his case develops into periods of psychosis that require hospitalization. In the opening scene of the novel he collapses while working in the fields, suffering from a hernia that forces him to seek medical attention in Jerusalem. Hefetz does not return to the colony after his mental and physical health improves, but stays with his relatives in Jerusalem: his uncle Reb Yosef and his two daughters, the young

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<sup>52</sup> One of Brenner’s proposed titles for the novel, *Al saf ha-mirga’a* [On the Verge of Tranquility], supports this suggestion, given the central place of the unusual word *mirga’a* in “Nerves.”

and beautiful Miryam and the older, sour Esther, with whom Hefetz develops a painful relationship, grounded in repulsion and self-contempt rather than desire.

The novel takes place in the midst of what is called "*ha-yeshuv ha-yashan*," the "old" Jewish population of Palestine, which has no interest in the Zionist project. Like "Nerves," however, it is concerned with the possibility of Jewish settlement and belonging in the world, not just existentially but also politically. It is a story about homes and houses in the most mundane sense of the word – the novel obsessively tracks the real estate market of old Jerusalem; who moved where and with whom, which building was purchased by what estate, and who remained homeless in this process.

Hefetz, always unsettled, reliant on the support of others, and full of self-content contrasts himself directly with the "homeowners," imagining their derision of a person such as himself:

If some respectable homeowner or poet of beauty and high ideals (the two were not as far apart as seemed at first glance) were to know what I was thinking at this moment, he would surely look the other way. He would sniff categorically and say in a single breath, 'How cynical!' 'How ugly!' 'How disgusting!' and he would be right. Homeownership and beauty are always on the right. He, Hefetz, the dross of the human race, was in no position to argue. (67)

אילו ידעו מה שבלבי ברגע זה איזה בעל בית נכבד או משורר של יופי נאצל ואידיאלים רוממים – המרחק בין זה וזה הן אינו גדול כל כך, כאשר ידמה בסקירה ראשונה – כי אז ודאי היו שוטים ממני מעקימת חוטם קטיגורית: "ציניזם!" "כיעור!" "גועל נפש!" – היו קוראים שניהם בנשימה



אחת... והם היו צודקים... הצדק הלא גם הוא עם בעל הביתיות ועם היופי... הוא, חפץ, חלאת  
המין האנושי, אל יתופח אתם... הכבוד להם, היופי להם והצדק להם... (67)

*Ba'aley habayit* (the home owners) do not only have a grasp in the world but also a mandate on the concepts of beauty and truth. Hefetz's own suffering, his own homelessness and the Jew's homelessness by extension, cannot enjoy the poetic veil of melancholy. Instead he is confined to the realm of the disgusting.

*Breakdown and Bereavement* is possibly the most disgusting of Brenner's texts – or the text that makes the most use of the aesthetics of disgust. This might be attributed to the fact that *Breakdown* was first written in 1913, while Brenner was writing his large critical essay on the writer Sholem Y. Abramovich (known as Mendele Mocher Sfarim), “Self-Assessment in the Three Volumes.” Mendele, sometimes called the “grandfather,” was a maverick writer of Eastern European Jewish life, in both Yiddish and Hebrew. In a reading that seeks to “rescue” Mendele from nationalist readings, Amir Banbaji demonstrates Mendele's masterful use of the disgusting, arguing that it is one of his central literary techniques (184-292). *Breakdown* is the most “mendelesque” of Brenner's works, full of “old-style” Jews. The residents of Jerusalem are vividly and excessively described as badly dressed, unwashed, petty, narrow-minded, and particularly idle and unproductive. The disgusting also figures in the relationship between Hefetz and Esther, two people that are, according to him, “not young, not beautiful, and not healthy.” Descriptions of their moments of physical intimacy are replete with evocations of foul smells, rotting corpses, belches, and nausea. Finally, it is present in Hefetz's own repeated gestures of self-loathing and flagellation.

How are we to read the disgusting in this text? Brenner himself assigned a particular historical role to the disgusting in Mendele's literature, which he read as truthfully mimetic – a

stance that reveals Brenner's acceptance of anti-Semite physical and moral stereotypes of East European Jewry. Mendele, Brenner maintains, portrays the condition of the diaspora Jew as it is – morally and aesthetically repulsive. Mendele sees no contrast between the two, Brenner writes: “We are ridiculous and lowly because we are weak, and thus not beautiful, and thus immoral!” (Brenner "Ha-‘arakhat" 235). The historical role of Mendele's literature, he explains, is to provide brutally honest self-assessment – only by recognizing and reflecting the depraved condition of the Jew, can the Jew aspire to overcome his condition. Brenner reads literary disgust as a denouncement of the historical conditions of the present, ushering the utopian desire for “different Jews” that must come in the future (266-67).

But does this verdict hold true in Brenner's novel (let alone Abramovich's)? As in “Nerves,” the surplus of disgust and irritation in *Breakdown and Bereavement* exceeds the economy of negative utopianism, establishing a parallel model of presentness and non-productivity.<sup>53</sup>

### **The Gesture of Scratching**

One of the most physically irritating scenes of the novel takes place at the courtyard of the Jerusalem hospital, which is “filled to overflow with the sighs and groans of the ill and the afflicted, the indigent and in need, invalids on crutches and in bandages...” (27). Meanwhile, the depraved “sextons of the burial society... hurry to dispose of the dead so as not to be late for the distribution of the dole.” The suffering of the ill is reduced to its auditory and visceral secretions, narrated through the disturbance it causes those that must encounter it. The repellant scene of the

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<sup>53</sup> Brenner himself notices a different tone in Mendele's book *Emek Ha-becha*, which, he claims, is more poetic and forgiving. In this book Mendele no longer engages in wrathful or mocking “evaluation” of the Jews, writes Brenner, but in quiet and assured acceptance. His voice “leisurely merges with static life forms, health, and wholesome restfulness” (Brenner "Ha-‘arakhat" 255).

hospital courtyard contrasts with the indifference of those present. Hefetz's contemplates the general apathy to the wretched setting, when the world becomes petrified around him. The narration weaves in and out of his thoughts: "Nothing. The breeze blew through the yard of the hospital, the stones lay idly about. The world was turned to stone. *Stone*. It was all one" (32, emphasis in the original). It is in this ossified setting, among individuals floundering in petty gossip and *schadenfreud*, sharing tales of bureaucratic incompetence, slobbering and beating their chest - it is here, among the most repulsive of human specimen, that Hefetz declares, "I have become a Jerusalemite." And he goes on to explain: "Now I'll stand around and do nothing (*holech batel*). Or rather, I'll sit (*yoshev batel*)" (32). The petrified world of Jerusalem mimics Hefetz's new condition: from active to passive participle. Brenner makes full use of the semantic possibilities of Hefetz's name: from a worker or actor (*po'el*), Hefetz becomes an object (*hefetz*).<sup>54</sup> This transition also marks the difference from the active worker's form of settlement – *hityashvut*, a reflexive active verb that denotes a continuing action, to the passive sitting (*yoshev batel*) of the Jews of Jerusalem. From a settler (*mityashev*) he becomes a sitter (*yoshev*).

However, the turn to passivity does not imply an end of movement; movement rather becomes compulsive and non-productive, as Hefetz testifies when he compares himself to Job:

What an ugly way to suffer... in the book of Job the Leper it is written: "And he took a potsherd to scrape himself with." ... Only I am not Job: I have no complaints against God. In fact, I have no God. I have nothing to do with God.

And even if I could complain – I'm not complaining and I don't wish to protest.

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<sup>54</sup> The word *hefetz* actually has two related meanings. *Hefetz* is an inanimate object, but the same word can also mean a desire. The name encompasses the two combatting elements of Hefetz's personality, the emphatic and the impassive.

I'm not Job. And I don't sit in the ashes either, but in refuse, in the garbage of my own ugly suffering. Only I don't let go of the potsherd. I can't stop scratching.

Yes, a potsherd is probably the one thing I can't do without...(32)

הוא חשב: יסורים מכוערים... יסורים מכוערים ... בספר איוב המצורע כתוב "ויקה חרש להתגרד בו..." "אני איני איוב על האלוהים אין לי כל תביעות. בכלל אין לי אלוהים, אין לי מגע אל האלוהים. ואף במה שנוגע לתביעות – אין לי תביעות ואיני מתרעם. אינני איוב. ואף לא בתוך האפר אני יושב, כי אם באשפה, באשפת יסורי המכוערים. אבל את החרש איני מניח מן היד: להתגרד איני פוסק. כנראה, אי אפשר לי בלי חרש. (31)

Despite Hefetz's compulsive inclination towards suffering, the analogy to Job must fail. Not only is he removed from the drama of faith, since his faith is long gone, but unlike Job he does nothing but bemoan his state. Even Job's mound of ashes, which evokes a ritual of repentance and mourning (Job 2:2 KJV), is replaced by a pile of garbage, suffering that is repulsive and refused. The only attribute of the original Job that remains is the gesture of scratching, which Hefetz fully appropriates as an abject and repulsive compulsion.

Scratching is an automatic gesture. Attending to an itch might provide temporary relief and pleasure, but it causes damage that often exacerbates the itch, causing a self-sustaining cycle of irritation and excitation: Scratching can overwhelm the itch with a more intensified form of irritation. Scratching is therefore considered futile, a repetitive and mindless act that fails to produce a true improvement. Because it is associated with succumbing to a desire, scratching is often accompanied by a sense of failure or shame (Eccleston). Scratching remains at the surface level of the skin. Attending to symptom rather than searching for deep cause, "itching and scratching involve a rising to the surface of ourselves," Steven Connor writes, "a centering of

ourselves at our edges” (Connor 230). It is a form of immediate attention to the manner our skin is irritated and aroused by the encounter with the world. However, as a locus of shame and self-contempt, scratching reminds us that the skin is a “locus of some of the worst forms of the disgusting,” (Miller 52).<sup>55</sup> The skin is a bearer of disease, deformities, old age, and the shameful histories of the body. Scratching threatens to break through the skin and allow the slime and goo of the inside to break out to plain sight.

Hefetz begins to scratch when he accepts passivity, immobility, and idleness: when he accedes to the inertia of Jerusalem life and abandons the productive life of agricultural and nationalist labor. Reading this scene according to Brenner’s own negative aesthetic theory would deem it to be a condemnation of Jewish life in Jerusalem, unproductive and external to any national project, attending only to the most basic and visceral demands of the body. This might have been a satisfying reading, were this scene not repeated, with some variation, at the very conclusion of the novel, thereby offering a markedly different interpretation to the abject gesture of scratching.

The protagonist of the repeated scene is Haim, Hefetz’s older relative. The entire bereaved family, who had just lost a number of its members, as well as its Jerusalem home, had come to Tiberias in the hope of improving Reb Yosef’s failing health. Haim goes in the morning to sit at the shore of the Sea of Galilee, when the image of water and ships suddenly transforms, behind his closed eyes, to a landscape of stone:

Out on the water the mast of the single boat that sailed from Tiberias to the station, where one set out for Jerusalem, flashed with like gravel stones. The craft

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<sup>55</sup> See also, in this context, Julia Kristeva’s visceral reaction to the skin on the surface of milk as the abject exemplar (Kristeva 2-3).

rode evenly on the surface like the Jerusalemite guesthouse on its chapel of rocks.

(308-9)

לפני עיניו העצומות היבהב כאבני חצץ תורן הספינה היחידה, ההולכת על הכנרת מטבריה עד התחנה  
הסמוכה, שמשם נוסעים לירושלים. הספינה התנשאה על משטח המים כבית הכנסת האורחים  
הירושלמי על מישור הטרשים. (245)

Jerusalem, once again depicted as a petrified “stony” city, seems to appear, magically floating, on the water of the Sea of Galilee. The gravel and stones are reminiscent of the scene at the hospital, where Hefetz saw the world turn to stone before his eyes. But while Hefetz was jeering at the passivity of the Jerusalemites, the scene at the shore of the Sea of Galilee develops as an ode to passivity. Haim, lying in a ditch dug out by Arab merchants, lets his thoughts wander, reflecting that “clothes wore out quickly in Palestine because of the sweat, so it was best to lie quietly and not tear them” (309). Following this thought, he lies back and watches as the Arab merchants return, take off their cloaks, and jump to the water. Haim watches the “strong, swarthy, muscular bodies of the swimmers in the distance,” with delighted fascination, but then a “queer inexplicable notion” comes to his mind.

In the mikveh, he thinks, they couldn’t swim either, not even in the summer.” An odd smile spread over his cheeks as the queer inexplicable notion flashed through his aging mind. In his eyes there appeared what might have been a vision of mild retribution at the thought that somewhere there were waters, un-grand waters, the waters of the mikveh, in which even the Bedouin would have no advantage over

his brother or himself... One didn't drown if one was frightened of the water...

People like them never drowned. People like them kept alive. (309)

אבל מיד באה איזו מחשבת לצון אליו והוא התנחם: "במקוה, קָה קָה, לא היו שוחים גם אלה ואפילו בקיץ" – חלפו איזו מלים מתמיהות, מלים אשר אין שחר להן, במוחו המיושן, ואיזה חיוך משונה השתפך על לחייו הצמוקות. אפשר מעין איזו ראיית נקמה קלה התבטאה בעיניו על שיש בעולם מים, מים לא אדירים, מי מקוה, ששם אין כוחם של הבידואים גדול מכוח אחיו ומכוחו. הוא הוסיף להביט מרחוק על הגופים השחרחרים, האמיצים, המוקשים, של הרוחצים – ומחשבות נחמה משונות התרוצצו בתוכו: בין כה וכה... פטור נו... דוקא אלה טובעים הרבה, חה חה... המפחד מפני המים לא יטבע, חה... הנה יוסף, שאינו רוחץ אלא לשם רפואה... הנה הוא, שאינו רוחץ אלא בקיץ וסמוך לחוף... כמוהם אינם טובעים... כמוהם חיים... (246)

The mikveh is the Jewish ritual bath, and usually far too small for any swimming. The mere absurdity of the idea makes Haim smile, though he still finds comfort knowing that the strong, native Bedouin swimmers, which appear to be the embodiment of virility, can have no advantage over the Jews in the confided Jewish space of the Mikve. Furthermore, he reasons that many of the Bedouins drown, while he and his brother, who do not swim, are exempt from this threat. With this pleasant realization and feeling of well-being seeping through him, Haim picks up a pebble and, putting it under his shirt, begins scratching and scratching with great gusto (310).

This scene is fascinating for the way it returns to and redeems the same themes condemned earlier in the hospital courtyard. This is the same obsessive scratching Hefetz succumbed to earlier – but in this instance scratching is a gratifying gesture, a pleasurable abandonment to the sensations of the skin, that accompanies Haim's surprising espousal of his and his brother's passivity and weakness. Scratching his back with great pleasure, Haim embodies the figure of the old Jew, the one who suffices with the water of the Mikveh and has no

need to jump into the great oceans of the world. And with this comes a very true realization, which concludes a book full of meaningless and unnecessary deaths – those who are frightened of the water, who stay away from the great seas, do not drown, they are the ones who stay alive. And what could one wish for in life beyond the undeniable pleasure of scratching your back with a pebble?

This scene is also strikingly similar to the quiet settlement scene concluding “Nerves,” which I have called a “settlement on the surface,” in its focus on skin and surface contact. To begin with, the two settle into a tone of calmness and reconciliation at the end of a turbulent and resoundingly conflictual text. But furthermore, in both this calmness emerges from a similar, non-emphatic, evocation of censored or illicit eroticism. Haim’s gaze at the bare-chested swimmers parallels the song of the bareheaded girl, in that they simply acknowledge the erotic dimension of the encounter, recognizing a network of desires between bodily surfaces.

Finally, the repetitive, obsessive gesture of scratching is also a form of settlement that remains on the surface. Rather than striving for a symbiotic, constitutive relation at the depths, like the suckling babe, or the multilayered onion, contact with the earth takes place at the surface, at the pleasurable but utterly nonproductive encounter of the scratching pebble with the skin. And rather than approaching *land*, as a resource to be owned, cultivated, or sanctified, scratching is eventually about *dirt*: dirt that gathers under the fingernails and on the skin, and can easily be carried away or dusted off.

### **Between the Onion and the Scratch: The Book of Indecision**

Can, and should, these two voices, these two models of settlement, be reconciled? “Nerves” and *Breakdown and Bereavement* respond to the problem of the stuck, improperly



moving Jew with two models of settlement. The first corresponds to the symbolic political economy of the native nation. It posits that the Jew should stop being a Jew and become a Hebrew, a native that establishes a connection between the depths of his soul to the depths of the earth. This Hebrew settler would be a proper landowner and homeowner; he would use the land productively, renouncing the filth and dirt that bind the Jew and the Arab together. The second is the mode of “settlement on the surface,” settlement that is only skin deep. This model departs from the economy of proper movements, and appropriates the abject that is associated with the Jew: the dirt, the passivity, and the futile gesture of scratching.

These two models of settlement also posit two powerful models of stasis, which correspond to two aesthetics ideologies. In an article investigating the etymological and political possibilities of the concept of *stasis*, Dimitris Vardoulakis retrieves a line of poetry that captures the paradoxical nature of the Greek meaning of the term. The word *stasis* means “standing up,” both in its dynamic and immobile senses, and therefore at times seems to hold contradictory meanings, as captured in the poem. The poem describes a ship caught in stasis, rendered immobile by the clash of winds blowing in contradictory directions so that they cancel each other out. The result is a “restless repose,” a tense space of immobility that is sustained by continuous movement. There are two ways to read this space, Vardoulakis writes:

The space where the counter-directional winds cancel each other out can be viewed either as a dialectical overcoming, a station toward the anticipated result that legitimates it in advance, or as the sidestepping of any dialectical progression, a reversal of the dialectic or a “dialectic at a standstill” that eschews all attempts at legitimacy. (Vardoulakis 129)

There are two ways to think of stasis: as a step within a teleological dialectic, or as a stepping out from the dialectic and from the idea of destiny. While Vardoulakis reads these two options as possibilities for thinking the limits of political-theology, I borrow his image to illustrate the two aesthetic ideologies shaping Brenner's writing.

Brenner presents the native model negatively, as a utopian ideal that should not be represented, only conceived through its marked absence. The text sets up a suspended, static site of utopian tension between desired ideal and compromised present. However, this tension is a temporary respite: the static aesthetics should eventually be overcome, as it charts a desire for progressive movement towards the ideal of native, national belonging. The depth model represents the end goal of the dialectic: a symbiotic relationship between the depth of the soul and the depths of the earth, but it also creates the conditions for creating this tension through psychological effects.

The aesthetics of scratching, on the other hand, registers ongoing, constant movement that is caught within stasis, going nowhere, overstepping the dialectic. To utilize Deleuzian terms, it is a continuous movement of becoming the same, rather than becoming otherwise. The Jew, no matter how much he will scratch, will remain a Jew. Stasis is full of nervous movement, without trajectory or goal, sustained by inertia. And if we turn to that most common metaphor of writing, that of the scribe scratching letters on a white page, the aesthetics of scratching presents a mode of writing that is ultimately content with itself, with creating a record of bodily presence and affect, rather than with a prophetic and progressive narrative of historical destinies.

Both these aesthetics are present in Brenner's prose, and are by no means reconciled. As Jameson writes of the narrative impulse and the scenic impulse, they are engaged in struggle, and

no reconciliation between them is possible: one will ultimately overcome and vanquish the other. This is, perhaps, why *Breakdown and Bereavement* is subtitled “The Book of Indecision:” it has not decided yet what kind of book it wants to be, what kind of settler it wants to be – *po‘el o yoshev*, active or sitting idle? While history has picked the former (as did the history of reading the novel, which has rendered Brenner’s prose a testimony to his conflicted in-spite-of-everything Zionism), *Breakdown and Bereavement* testifies to a moment when the decision was not yet made.

## Chapter 3

### State Time: Gendered Genres of the Everyday in Sonallah Ibrahim and Yishayahu Koren

Nothing happens; this is the everyday. But what is the meaning of this stationary movement? At what level is this “nothing happens” situated? For whom does “nothing happen” if, for me, something is necessarily always happening? In other words, what corresponds to the “who” of the everyday? And, at the same time, why, in this “nothing happens,” is there the affirmation that something essential might be allowed to happen?

—Maurice Blanchot, “Everyday Speech,” *The Infinite Conversation*, 241

One of the surprisingly central figures to emerge in Hebrew culture of the 1960s was the housewife. Almost absent from the national canon before the establishment of the state, and celebrated as a resourceful guardian of the home front during the regime of austerity and rationing of the 1950s, the 1960s began to feature housewives burdened and limited by the everyday routines of the home. This transition is partially due to female writers gaining recognition in a literary sphere previously constructed as a debate among male authors (and protagonists): novels such as Yehudit Handel’s *Rehov ha-madregot*, (*Street of the Stairs*, 1955), and Amalya Kahana Carmon’s *Be-kfifa aḥat*, (*Under One Roof*, 1966), introduced female subjects and routines previously unexplored in Hebrew modern texts.<sup>56</sup> The most memorable housewife of the late 1960s, however, and one of the most canonical figures of the period, was

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<sup>56</sup> An important exception is Dvora Baron, who since 1927 published Hebrew stories largely concerned with the reality of Jewish women’s life in the Eastern European Jewish town. Nevertheless, the 1970 publication of Baron’s long novella *Ha-golim* (*The Exiles*), composed of two previously published stories brought together, can be seen as part of this interest in housewife routines. Unlike most of Baron’s stories, *Ha-golim* takes place among the Jewish community of Jaffa that was exiled to Alexandria during World War I. Orly Lubin writes on the manner *Ha-golim* establishes a circular “women’s time” in contrast to masculine linear time or the national subject.

written by a man. Hannah Gonen, the protagonist of Amos Oz's celebrated novel *My Michael* (1968), is a wistful housewife who escapes her orderly life in Jerusalem of the 1950s to exotic and violent fantasies, often with militarist or orientalist undertones. Hannah, a "poet who writes no poetry," tries to force herself to conform to life as the wife of a "brilliant young scholar," but this only leads to bitterness and madness. Another memorable housewife appears in Gilberto Tofano's film *Matzor (Siege, 1969)*, one of the first Israeli films to use explicitly modernist cinematic techniques. The housewife here is a young widow, besieged in her own home and in her daily routines by friends and neighbors. In both these works, national anxieties remain close to the surface: the housewife (rather than a desired beloved, for example) suddenly becomes a productive locus for national allegory.

In Egyptian culture, housework and housewives have long been an object of national concern. Qasim Amin's *The Liberation of Women* (1899), one of the central texts of the *nahḍa*, viewed the oppression of women as a metonymy to social oppression at large, and deemed that women must be educated in order to fulfill their role as modern mothers and housekeepers, raising the next generation of modern Egyptian men (Kassab 102-05). In the 1950s, however, the Nasser regime embarked on a project of "state feminism" as Laura Bier calls it, encouraging women to join the labor market, and invest in timesaving modern household appliances. The working woman was largely a symbolic figure, as the actual number of women who joined the workforce remained low (Bier 62). The interest in the domestic labor of women is evident in Naguib Mahfouz's *Cairo Trilogy* (1956-7), in which the most developed female character is Amina, the obedient and patient housewife, positioned against her more independent daughters and daughters-in-law. Novels by female writers, such as *al-Bāb al-Maftūḥ* by the political activist Latifa al-Zayyat (*The Open Door*, 1960), or *Yawm ba'd yawm* by Zaynab Sadiq (*Day*

*after Day*, serialized 1964-65, published 1969) narrated the feminine routine of the household as a space of oppression, and their heroines sought liberation outside the home.

This chapter examines two novels concerned with the routines of housework, dating from the mid-sixties: *Levaya h ba-tsohorayim* (*Funeral at Noon*, composed 1966, published 1973) by Israeli writer Yishayahu Koren, and *Tilk al-rā'ihah* (*That Smell*, 1966) by the Egyptian writer Sonallah Ibrahim.<sup>57</sup> Beyond their interest in chronicling the rituals of home-and-self maintenance, the two novels seem to have little in common. *Funeral at Noon* takes place in a small, dusty Israeli border town, chronicling a crumbling marriage set against a background of a murky, unspoken drama of betrayal and sacrifice rife with biblical undertones. The novel's precise attention to detail, its focus on the routines of daily life, and mostly its opaque characters, gained immediate critical attention in a literary environment shaped by a collectivist, militaristic ethos or alternately concerned with psychological dramas.<sup>58</sup>

*That Smell* was also singled out by critics immediately upon its publication, but read against the committed realism prevalent in Egypt at the time, it received radically divergent responses. The writer Yusuf Idris praised it as the beginning of a literary revolution; this is “not a story... but a slap, or a scream,” he wrote (Idris 27). Other authors, like the eminent Yahya Hakki, were offended by the apparent nihilism of the novel, while the censure was quick to confiscate all existing copies immediately after the 1966 publication. *That Smell* has since been recognized as a landmark Arabic novel, heralding the disenchantments of Arab intellectuals after the 1967 defeat. Written shortly after Ibrahim's release from prison, and set in Cairo, the novel

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<sup>57</sup> Citations are from the English translations of both novels throughout, with minor modifications to adhere to the originals.

<sup>58</sup> See, for example Gershon Shaked, who commends Koren since he “does not place his characters in the midst of an historical event,” “does not write the melodrama of a generation,” and “does not penetrate deep and spiritual depths” (455).

chronicles, flatly and succinctly, the daily routine of a political prisoner recently released from prison but still confined to nightly house arrest. Given its thematic concern and history, *That Smell* has been associated with the genre of prison writing or the narrative of confinement. I read it against the housewife novel for a couple of reasons: First, the modern housewife novel, which depicts the routines of the home as a mode of confinement that should be escaped, is a particular variation on the narrative of confinement, and there is much to be gained from highlighting the link between the two in order to interrogate our concepts of both confinement and liberation. Secondly, since the housewife novel has a relatively clear and standard plot structure (from oppression to liberation, even if liberation is tragic), it allows identifying the manner Ibrahim *diverges* from the genre's affective and structural expectations. Rather than viewing *That Smell* as the spontaneous product of Ibrahim's individual experience as a prisoner or a writer, this comparison positions the novel in conversation with established literary forms, which in turn allow moving beyond the general identification of "disenchantment" as the motivation behind the novel and articulating a more precise analysis of what, precisely, makes *That Smell* so disturbing.

Despite their clear thematic and affective differences, *That Smell* and *Funeral at Noon* are strikingly similar in style and narrative voice, sharing a formal resistance to any traditional notion of "the Event" as an outstanding or influential occurrence.<sup>59</sup> This is not to say that nothing happens in *That Smell* and *Funeral at Noon*: To the contrary, both texts are plot filled, and each could have been narrated as an exciting, suspenseful, or emotional drama, if they had only kept

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<sup>59</sup> My definition of the Event is loosely based on Slavoj Žižek's overview, which positions the Event as something that does not occur "within the world, but is a *change of the very frame through which we perceive the world and engage in it*" (10, emphasis in the original). Engaging with the many philosophical debates on the Event that emerged in the past few decades, by Deleuze, Derrida, Lacan, Badiou, and Žižek, is beyond the scope of this chapter. Suffice to say that the urgency of theorizing this concept and its conditions of possibility has to do with a general sense of obstructed history dominated by repetitive cycles of sameness, and the need to articulate the possibility of "newness."

to the genre's traditional structures of expectation and fulfillment. These generic expectations can be traced back to Aristotle's *Poetics*: Aristotle posits *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* (reversal and recognition) as two essential plot elements of an emotionally effective work. *Peripeteia*, a reversal or turning plot in the plot, should be accompanied by *anagnorisis*, recognition or a change from ignorance to knowledge (Aristotle 14). In both *That Smell* and *Funeral at Noon*, these two elements are detached and separated, to the effect that the affective potential of any narrative event is worn out and effaced, and its importance as crisis or epiphany is denied. The paradoxical result of this anti-evental narrative technique is that the reader, upon putting down the book, feels as if nothing has happened at all.<sup>60</sup>

I begin by identifying the housewife novel as a genre and its relation to temporal forms associated with the state, an association that explains the proliferation of housewives in the popular and literary culture of the 1960s in both Egypt and Israel. At a moment when historical progress seems to have reached an impasse, the housewife provides a narrative of liberation allowing time to "get moving" again, or get back on its progressive course. Subsequently, I return to Koren's and Ibrahim's impassive housewives. Following Lauren Berlant's assertion that tracking genre conventions and their betrayals of affective expectations can illuminate the changing pressures imposed on the present (Berlant 5-7), and tracking the manner Koren's and Ibrahim's anti-evental logics distort the classic housewife novel, I argue that both utilize the figure of the housewife to deflate the state's narratives of progressive liberation, which have themselves become oppressive.

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<sup>60</sup> I borrow the term "anti-evental structure" from Michael Sayeau, who identifies the work of the anti-evental in French and British works of High Modernism: "The evental structures [of plot] are maintained in place, but are at the same time ironically undercut, eroded from within and/or exposed as reflexive tropes through thematic and formal innovations" (Sayeau 39).



## The Housewife Novel and the Feminized Everyday

*Funeral at Noon* and *That Smell* dedicate considerable amount of narrative to ceremonies of housework, charting the sustaining yet non-productive cycle of shopping-cooking-eating-washing. “I slept,” the narrator of *That Smell* recounts. “I got up and washed. I put some powdered soap in a basin of water and stirred it until the foam rose, then put my dirty clothes in” (31). And in *Funeral at Noon*: “She began washing the dishes and put the kettle on the gas. The water hit the saucepans and dishes in the sink, spraying clear drops on her dress... She dried the dishes and put them away in the cupboard. Then she went to the bedroom and took a clean pair of socks, a white shirt, and pressed trousers out of the wardrobe” (7). These are novels of the daily management of the body and its needs, succinctly and methodically chronicling the administrative and repetitive rituals of the home and the self. Their repetitiveness feels claustrophobic.

The figure of the trapped, unsatisfied housewife has a well-established modern literary history, which allows identifying the “housewife novel” as a mini-genre with its own narrative conventions, prejudices, and expectations. In its plot, the housewife novel maps the duties of the household as oppressive and inhibiting, setting the housewife on a course of escape: sometimes to the arms of a new lover, sometimes to the labor market, and often simply to tragedy. In its texture, the housewife novel highlights domestic labor as repetitive, meaningless, and futile, opposed to and defined against the meaningful and productive labor carried on in the masculine sphere outside the home.

The genre’s emblematic forerunner is *Madame Bovary*, a novel often heralded as the harbinger of literary modernism as well as of the emergence of the everyday as a literary

concern.<sup>61</sup> Bakhtin chooses *Madame Bovary* to illustrate the chronotope of a provincial town, characterized by circular everyday life: “Here there are no events, only ‘doings’ that constantly repeat themselves. Time here has no advancing historical movement; it moves rather in narrow circles” (Bakhtin 248).<sup>62</sup> It has even become something of a convention to refer to *Madame Bovary* in the social sciences, as an exemplary text of the everyday (Highmore 10; Dorfman 12-13). Henri Lefebvre seems to have Emma Bovary in mind when he asserts that: “Everyday life weighs heaviest on women... Some are bogged down by its peculiar cloying substance, others escape into make-believe... They are the subject of everyday life and its victims” (Lefebvre *Everyday Life in the Modern World* 73).

“Everyday life is above all a temporal form,” Rita Felski writes. “As such, it conveys the fact of repetition; it refers not to the singular or unique but to that which happens ‘day after day’” (Felski 81). Yet, the everyday as a temporal form is gendered: everybody may experience the everyday, but women are assumed to experience it *more*, bound, like Emma Bovary, to the repetitive cycles and routines of the home. In “The Invention of Everyday Life,” Felsky explores the manner “the distinction between ‘time’s arrow’ and ‘time’s cycle’ is also a distinction masculine and feminine.” Since modernity has been associated with linear progress and development, she writes, the time of the everyday has been conceived as “belated,” antiquated, even a relic of “the conventions of pre-industrial society” (82). Accounts of the everyday, often

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<sup>61</sup> Michael Sayeau writes: “*Madam Bovary* is, if not the origin of modernism’s turn against the event, at least the most significant and influential moment of its early emergence” (55).

<sup>62</sup> Bakhtin continues to assert that the abhorrent circular time of the everyday cannot hold an entire novel, which is of course what Koren and Ibrahim attempt to do: “It is a vicious and sticky time that drags itself slowly through space. And therefore it cannot serve as the primary time of the novel. Novelists use it as an ancillary time, one that may be interwoven with other noncyclical temporal sequences or used merely to intersperse such sequences; it often serves as a contrasting background for temporal sequences that are more charged with energy and event” (Bakhtin 248).

in the wake of Lefebvre's model, consider the habitual home-centered aspects of daily life as outside, and in some ways antithetical to, the experience of authentic modernity (81).

The housewife novel, focusing on the repetitive horror of housework, equates liberation with a severing of all ties to the home and its routines. The narrative of the journey from oppressed housewife to liberated, self-governing individual became one of the key themes of second wave feminism, which assumed that being modern requires an irrevocable sundering from home.<sup>63</sup> As Johnson and Lloyd point out, this second wave narrative features “a familiar trope of modernity in which the modern self leaves behind the banality or everydayness of home life to become such a [modern] self” (Johnson and Lloyd 14-15).

The temporal conventions of the housewife genre reveal second wave feminism's alignment with other ideological demands of both empire and the modern nation-state, for example the demand to continue incorporating groups into the linear, progressive time of modern capitalist economy. For both Egyptian and Israeli writers, harnessing the housewife genre as a national allegory allowed addressing the anxieties generated by the routines of newly established nation-states, the waning of traditional objects of political struggle in its confines, and the circular and static temporal forms of its everyday bureaucracy.

### **State Time**

Egypt and Israel of the mid 1960s were two young nation-states, recently established after long-term projects of state-oriented nation building. Their particular political situations,

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<sup>63</sup> Most influentially in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1964). Friedan's bestseller, which “exposed the unhappiness” of many women confined to housework and influentially advocated for women to join the workforce, was drawing on sentiments expressed in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949). De Beauvoir paints a monstrous image of the temporally-limited housewife, claiming that few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework: “the clean becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day... The housewife wears herself out marking time: she makes nothing and simply perpetuates the present” (451).

however, were markedly different, in terms that are reflected in *That Smell* and *Funeral at Noon*. It is important to distinguish their similarities as well as differences before returning to the novels.

Sonallah Ibrahim's imprisonment is illuminating of the fraught political landscape in Egypt in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Ibrahim was only 22 and had just joined the Communist Party when he was detained in 1959, together with the majority of the members of the Party, accused of broad political conspiracy. He was sentenced to seven years in prison, of which he served five. Despite the regimes' oppression of communist groups, the relationship between the communists and Gamal Abdel Nasser's regime remained complex. The Officer's Coup of July 23, 1952, led by Nasser and the Free Officers, established a nationalist progressive liberation regime that overthrew the British backed monarchy. It was aligned with a revolutionary progressive program of land reform and social justice, drawing inspiration from a proliferation of other non-Western socialist models of modernization, and appealing to the Soviet Union culturally and in foreign policy (Beinin 207; Bier 3; Creswell 5). Yet, in the late 1950s Nasser also began persecuting the members of the communist party (as well as members of Islamist groups), afraid of challenges to his power. The communist parties, on their part, embraced Nasser's social-nationalist politics, and were eventually coopted and destroyed by it.

The novelistic model Ibrahim grew up on, and sought to break away from in *That Smell*, was the prominent Egyptian genre of committed realism. As Samah Selim elaborates, Egyptian committed realism of the 1950s and early 1960s was by no necessity committed to romantic or idealized depiction of the Egyptian peasantry, as cliché might have it. Its defining characteristic was rather a turn to the social realm as a field of contestation between classes and institutions and an evacuation of the elite authorial subject as a preferred vantage point in the text (Selim

142).<sup>64</sup> The commitment of the writer and intellectual was to portray the reality of an unjust and complex social field, inspired by political ideologies that cast history in terms of social and class struggle. But by the mid 1960s, writers found themselves trapped, being “both the children of the revolution and its strategic enemies” in Selim’s poignant phrase (148). The Nasserite regime both appropriated the discourse of progressive anti-imperialism and violently oppressed any radical challenge to its authority, leaving young writers at a loss. The social realism of the 1950s, having been largely integrated into the language of the regime, no longer seemed to be a viable novelistic model.

In one of the scenes of *That Smell*, the narrator goes to a café to find Magdi, a character that appears to be modeled after the committed writer, lost in a new reality. The narrator’s thoughts after meeting the embittered Magdi appear in italicized font:

*The world has changed. It’s no accident the words on his lips don’t mean what they used to. Some of them are practically meaningless.... He was in on the game, he understood its rules, he played by them. But they turned the rules against him and now he is the one weeping. (That Smell 41)*

ليس صدفة أن الكلمات التي يستخدمها قد تغير مدلولها منذ زمن، وبعضها كان يصبح بلا مدلول على الإطلاق.... وكان مشتركاً في اللعبة ويفهم قواعدها ويسير عليها. لكنهم طبقوا القواعد عليه، وسالت الدموع على مقعد وحيد. (48)

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<sup>64</sup> Fathi Ghanem’s *The Mountain*, read in Chapter Two, is exemplary of this current.

Ibrahim's translator Robin Creswell suggests that *That Smell* captures the sense of depoliticization that Ibrahim encountered when he was released from prison in 1965. Creswell describes it as

the feeling of life *after* politics. It registers the cooling temperatures and lowered expectations of a moment when Nasser's "holy march" towards Arab unity has stalled in the sands of economic reality and popular disaffection. (Creswell 6)

"Life after politics" does not imply that politics is over (as if that is even possible, as politics is the fact of social relations). It is rather a social structure of feeling, to borrow Raymond Williams' term, a "lived experience of the quality of life at a particular time and place" (Williams *Marxism and Literature* 131). It is the sense that the great battles have been fought and lost; that new struggles are lacking a form or genre to fall back on.<sup>65</sup> The time of large-scale mobilization for independence and liberation has ended, and the making of history has been replaced by market consumerism. The characters surrounding the protagonist of *That Smell* seem to have been overtaken by everyday life in the habitual, consumerist, and repetitive form condemned by Lefebvre. Besides family gossip, they are occupied with the prospect of buying a bigger refrigerator, a cheaper soap dish, or a faster washing machine. The novel registers Egypt's entrance into a global consumerist economy, experienced as the supersession of political or historical progress by the delusional progress of consumerism.

In the early 1960s, Israel was experiencing a similar introduction into a global commodity market. Having emerged from almost a decade of austerity (1949-1959), the Israeli

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<sup>65</sup> Alberto Moreiras calls the moment when the conflict between the so-called First and Second Worlds is revealed as a false dialectic of modernization "a historical moment of denarrativization" (Moreiras 51).

economy was rapidly improving with the assistance of German reparation funds. Historian Tom Segev's samples of letters written by middle class Israelis to their relatives abroad in 1965-66 seem to be taken straight out of the pages of *That Smell*, with their detailed accounts of the purchase of new furniture, wood paneling, and telephones (Segev 20-22). Israel too was experiencing the cooling temperatures following the establishment of a state and an uncertain first decade. And yet, in the few months before the 1967 war, Segev identifies a widespread sense of despair due to "the burden of boredom." It is "the second day crisis of the revolution," he quotes the poet Haim Gouri. "The time of dull routine seemed to have come too soon" (138-9). At the same time, this was a period obsessed with state borders, as *Funeral at Noon's* compulsive return to the border as a spatial and symbolic marker might suggest. On the one hand, state and military agencies sought to police the borders to ensure that the 1948 Palestinian refugees do not return to reclaim their lands. On the other, they pursued an activist military agenda, aimed at the potential expansion to more territories. Nevertheless, the historian Joel Beinin writes, after the Israeli withdrawal from Sinai and Gaza in 1957, "Zionist élan declined, and most Jewish Israelis sought 'normalcy'" (Beinin 14).

Given the clear political and social differences between Egypt and Israel in the early 1960s, what is the value of positioning them together in the same comparative framework? Zionism and Arab nationalism are not symmetrical, primarily in light of their fundamentally dissimilar relation to Western imperialism in the Middle East: While Nasserism emerged as a decolonial movement, Zionism was a settler-colonial project, and Israel was supported by the older Imperial powers as well as the United States. Keeping these differences in mind, I nevertheless follow Joel Beinin in claiming that "[d]espite the lack of symmetry between Egypt and Israel, the processes by which nationalist ideologies became the hegemonic political

discourse in the two countries were both similar and dialectically related” (Beinin 6). Beinin constructs a “relational history,” looking at the reciprocal relations between Israeli and Egyptian Marxists as well as the hegemonic, ideological, and political forces that shape them. These shared ideological and political forces construct similar temporal forms and structures of feelings, and in turn produce strikingly similar literary aesthetics. The feeling of “life after politics” in Egypt or “the second day after the revolution” in Israel are comparably characterized by routine and circularity, which define what I call “state time:” the static and seemingly empty time following the revolution.

The etymological connection between state and stasis deserves a digression, since it is revealing of the temporal forms at the basis of modern state thinking. Their significance emerges when compared to the Arabic or Hebrew terms for the modern institute of state, which have long etymological histories related to earlier or alternative political models. In Hebrew, the word *medina* (state), which first appeared in the period of the second temple, comes from the root *d-y-n*, associated with jurisprudence and law. *Medina* is simply a region or area bound by a legal system, and over the years the term was associated with a variety of geographical bodies, including a city, a region, or a country ("mi-medinah le-medinah"). The origin of its modern use passes through its Arabic cognate: the Arabic word *madīna* means a city, and in Medieval Arab philosophy was used to translate the Greek term *polis*, or city-state. It is probably through Judeo-Arabic philosophical texts that the word *medina* came to be associated with the modern day political institution of the state. The Arabic term for the modern state, *dawla*, derives from the root *d-w-l*, which means to turn, alternate, or cycle. Early dictionaries define the term as periodic change, and by implication, a period of rule, reign, or dynasty (Rosenthal). It is a non-territorial



term, referring primarily to the ruling elite and to the cyclical nature of power. The word became associated with the modern state during the Ottoman period, through the Turkish variant, *devlet*.

The Hebrew and Arabic terms highlight juridical authority or the cyclical nature of rule, respectively. The English term, however (as well as the terms used in both Romance and Germanic languages), alludes to a political philosophy of static spatiality that is at the heart of the modern Western theory of state. This relation is not merely etymological:<sup>66</sup> Henri Lefebvre argues that according to Hegelianism, historical time (or the dialectic process) gives birth to the space that the state occupies (in an ensemble of institutions and systems). The state is cut off from the history that constituted it, as time is solidified and fixed in space (Lefebvre *The Production of Space* 21). History is suspended, replaced by the state: “The Hegelian end of history,” Lefebvre continues,

does not imply the disappearance of the product of historicity [=the state] ...  
[Rather] it persists in being through its own strength. What disappears is history,  
which is transformed from action to memory, from production to contemplation.  
As for time, dominated by repetition and circularity... it loses all meaning. (21)

Lefebvre is concerned with the manner space “disappears” as an object of philosophy in the aftermath of history’s suspension and the state’s establishment (his reading of Hegel positions the state as both the end and the end-goal of history). His terms return, however, in David

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<sup>66</sup> The English term ‘state’ has a complex and non-linear etymology that can be traced back to both the Greek *stasis* and the Latin term *status* (both of which are related to standing or stature). The first meaning of *state* is broad, “a condition or manner of existing.” It can be attributed to both material conditions and emotional states (‘state of mind’). It is temporally defined, indicating a largely static situation observed in a particular moment in time. The second and more limited meaning of the term ‘state,’ as a political body governing over a geographical territory, developed around the 15<sup>th</sup> century, apparently out of inquiries on the “conditions (or state) of a country” (“State,” the OED). The state is conceived as a snapshot, a momentarily static state of affairs.

Lloyd's account of national aesthetics and their relation to the foundation of the state. Lloyd differentiates between the time of nationalism, or epic historical struggle, and the time following the foundation of the nation, which, he echoes Lefebvre, "puts an end to the epic of its historical destiny in a performative act that abolishes history at the same time it allows the epic to be fulfilled" (Lloyd 73).<sup>67</sup> History is displaced into cultural education: "culture becomes a sphere of reproduction - or recreation - rather than production, repetitively mediating the interpolation of individual subjects into citizens" (74). Commemoration (such as national holidays) ensures the reproduction of the state by re-invoking the moment of terror that founded it.

These two forms of time are clearly gendered. While the linear time of nationalism bears a masculine ethos associated with productivity, historical dynamism, and sacrifice, the repetitive time of the state is a feminine sphere of *re*-production and commemoration. State time is not the time of epic struggles, but rather a time of border management, bureaucracy, and maintenance. It is a time of the everyday, marked by the repetition of annual holidays, daily rituals, and the absence of distant goals. In other words, it is the time of the housewife.

The circular and repetitive structure of commemoration that characterizes state time is the underlying structure of *Funeral at Noon*, a novel that stages repeated returns to the violent moment of state-founding. As such, it also uncovers the connection between the widespread interest in the figure of the trapped housewife and the forms and imaginaries associated with the time of the state. *Funeral at Noon*, Koren's first novel, was completed in early 1967, months before the 1967 war, but it was published only in 1974. At this point the state's border, which plays a central role in the text, had acquired new contours and significances: in light of Israel's new expansive borders, stretching all the way to the Jordan river, the enigmatic presence of the

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<sup>67</sup> Lloyd is referring to Ireland's 1919 declaration of independence in this essay.

border in the novel could be read as an ominous prophecy. The novel was critically commended, though by no means commercially successful, but in the ensuing decades it enjoyed recurring cycles of rediscovery and acclaim – usually aligned with Koren’s slow but steady output of publications at an average rate of one per decade.<sup>68</sup> It is only during the recent wave of interest in Koren that critics began to pay attention to the central role of the ruined Palestinian village in *Funeral at Noon*, treating it otherwise than a natural part of the local landscape (Hochberg "Poetics of Haunting"; Siksek; Shmuelof). Instead, the unnamed village has been recognized as a significant and historically specific reference to the Palestinian Nakba (the Palestinian expulsion in 1948) and its overlook as emblematic of the Nakba’s silenced history in Israeli culture. The critical overlook is indeed striking, since the Arab village appears in the very first line of the novel, and is the site of its most dramatic events:

Hagar Erlich was sitting on the veranda overlooking the deserted Arab village. An open magazine was lying on the floor next to the round, wooden legs of her chair. She sat looking around her. Among the houses of the ruined Arab village she suddenly noticed a platoon of soldiers. There were packs on their backs. They were walking in a long line. (1)

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<sup>68</sup> On Koren’s appeal, see Yoni Livne, who claims that the recent interest in Koren is parallel to “the desire for organic, non-GMO, and non-processed food.” For an overview of the ebbs and flows in Koren’s popularity, see Sarna, “Healmuto ve-shuvo.” For a critique of this selective form of periodic rediscovery, which views Koren as a singular exception rather than positions him in a context of forgotten literary contemporaries, see Navot, “Alibi.” Despite some critics’ attempts to cast Koren as an outsider figure, he was never completely out of touch with the mainstream Hebrew literary sphere, and his work was always appreciated and supported by its key agents. One of the main reasons for his position on the margins of the Israeli canon, alongside his slow rate of publication, is his reluctance to play an outspoken public political role, like other Israeli male authors of his generation (Amos Oz, A. B. Yehoshua, David Grossman).

הגר ארליך ישבה במרפסת הצופה אל הכפר הערבי העזוב. שבועון פתוח היה פרוש על הרצפה, ליד רגלי העץ החומות והמעוגלות של הכיסא. היא הסתכלה סביבה. בין בתי הכפר החרב ראתה פתאום מחלקה של חיילים. תרמילים היו תלויים על גבם. הם הלכו בשורה ארוכה. (7)

Hagar is a young housewife living alone with her husband Tuvya in an unnamed small town, barely more than a village, walking distance from the Israeli-Jordanian border. Her days are spent cooking for her husband, cleaning, and mostly roaming around the ruins of the Arab village, sometimes accompanied by Yiftach, the neighbor's ten-year-old son. All of the novels' most dramatic events take place in this village or among other markers that the expelled Palestinian population left in the landscape. It is among the ruins of the village that Hagar meets an unnamed soldier with whom she has a brief affair, and it is on the outskirts of the village that Yiftach eventually finds his death in a tragic accident. While the exact story of the village is "expelled from the text," in Siksek's words, there is no doubt that its residents left or were expelled rather recently, during the 1948 war of Israel's independence. The violence of this departure is evident, though never discussed, and some of Hagar's neighbors still speak calmly of the days when they would go buy milk and eggs from the villagers (160-61). Noting this silenced history, Gil Hochberg argues that the words "the ruined Arab village" act as *phantom words*, a term she borrows from Abraham and Torok. They are "an attempt to capture in language a secret otherwise unattainable and to force the ghosts of a violent history into the open" (Hochberg "Poetics of Haunting" 65). The village, Hochberg continues, is "a ghostly presence that mobilizes Hagar, leading her time and again to leave her house and roam [it]." It is an open secret, a mode of making a violent, tabooed history present while still invisible or unreckoned.

Within the narrative scope of the novel, however, it is not the village that “mobilizes” Hagar, but rather the soldiers that now sweep down upon it. In the first line of the novel, it is the sight of a group of soldiers snaking through the village that catches her attention. The soldiers use the village as a training site, staging its conquest and occupation on a daily basis – a reenactment that never explicitly names its origins. The training soldiers eerily bring the village back to life: when Hagar visits the village in their wake, “the smell of the *tabun* [local outdoor ovens] still lingered... The troughs were full of water. An old pail, tied to a rope, lay on its side on the paving stones bordering the well. There was smoke rising from one of the courtyards” (4). The destroyed village appears to be an uncanny site of the living dead. Hagar is drawn to these reenactments, always on the look out for the soldiers:

On Friday afternoon she again sat on the veranda and watched the Arab village. And on Saturday too, when they got back from the sea. But it was only on Sunday, after lunch, that she saw them again. Appearing and disappearing between the ruined houses. A platoon of soldiers. Wearing packs and steel helmets. (9)

גם ביום ששי אחר הצהריים ישבה על המרפסת וצפתה בכפר הערבי. גם בשבת, כשחזרו מהים. אבל רק ביום ראשון, אחרי ארוחת הצהריים, שוב ראתה אותם. מופיעים ונעלמים בין הבתים החרבים. מחלקה של חיילים. חוגרים תרמילים, חובשים קובעי פלדה. (13)

The word “only” subtly reveals that Hagar’s affectless watch on the balcony was in fact in anticipation for the soldiers’ return, and she returns to the village in order to find them. The

soldiers repeatedly reenact the constitutive violence of the moment of state-founding, the expulsion and partition that establish its structure. Hagar is caught up in a repetition that is a pained mockery of Lloyd's model. For it is not in celebration and commemoration that she returns to this foundational moment, but in an obsessive compulsion to replay the founding gesture's repressed content.

Hagar's life is composed of the housewife's circular routine: visits to the grocer, cooking dinner, washing dishes. The Arab village pulls her into a parallel cyclical structure, the formal structure of state-time repeatedly returning to its moment of origin. This parallel exposes the state's ongoing work of maintenance: to keep a silenced history silent, to monitor the borders of what can be said, to reenact the conquest that founded the nation in order to maintain its legitimacy. As a housewife novel, *Funeral at Noon* is explicit about the manner the period's prevalent figure of the housewife is often a stand in for the anxieties associated with state time.

*That Smell* has a similarly circular and repetitive form. In the opening scene, the narrator is released from prison, but he has no address where the police can check on him during his house arrest. "You're a problem," the police officer tells him, "we can't let you go," and he puts him back in the cell (*That Smell* 20). On the next day, the narrator settles in his sister's apartment, and hence begins a daily routine: he leaves the room in the morning, wanders the streets of Cairo during the day, paying visits to relatives and old acquaintances, and hurries back to his room every night by sunset, when the policeman in charge of enforcing the house arrest knocks at his door. The narrative is bound to this structure, enforced by the terms of the house arrest. Nothing seems to break the cyclical routine: not surprising reunions, not the marriage of the narrator's sister, or the news of his mother's death. Regardless of the encounters of the day, it always concludes with a return to the moment of imprisonment. The spatial and temporal

movement of the novel, Mahmud Amin al-‘Alim asserts, is restricted, circular and repetitive as well as sterile, aiming for nothing and achieving nothing. The narrator’s aimless wanderings are exceptionally free but also utterly constricted (al-‘Alim 38).

Ibrahim published *That Smell* shortly after his own release from prison. His narrator too seems to have been arrested for political reasons, which are never explicitly spelled out.<sup>69</sup> Written under similar conditions of nightly house arrest, the novel is closely based on Ibrahim’s own personal diary, as he recounts in his introduction to the 1986 edition of the text:

One night I won’t forget I glanced over the diary, composed in telegraphic style, which I wrote in every night after the policeman’s departure... I read the whole thing, then shivered with excitement. There was a buried current running through that telegraphic style... reading my brief diaries, I felt that here was the raw material for a work of art. It only needed some arranging and polishing. (Ibrahim *That Smell* 71)

Regardless of whether this story is true or not, the published version of *That Smell* maintains an unpolished veneer and the particular non-dramatic structure of a diary, wedded not to a sensational narrative arc but to the repetitive routine of daily life. This unpolished and uncensored form of documentation, however, was initially not well received. The first edition, published in 1966, was immediately censored and confiscated. The pirated versions that began circulating subsequently had numerous scenes cut off, most notably the episodes relating the

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<sup>69</sup> When one of his fellow prisoners asks the narrator about the reasons for his arrest, he gives no clear response. “Drugs? No, I said. Robbery? No, I said. Murder? No. Bribery? No. Counterfeiting? No. So the man got quiet and confused and began looking at me with a strange look” (20). The list suggests that he was arrested for political reasons.

narrator's sexual failures and fantasies. Only in 1986 was the novel published in Cairo in its completed form, when Ibrahim's reputation as a writer, and the radical influence of *That Smell* as an exemplary work of Egypt's 'jīl al-sittīnāt' (the sixties generation), was already widely acknowledged.<sup>70</sup>

Ibrahim's classic housewife novel is the award-winning and formally innovative *Dhāt* [translated as *Zaat*, first published in 1992]. *Dhāt* contrasts the story of the eponymous heroine, trapped in a petite-bourgeois reality of marriage, children, and the race for modern consumer goods, with documents and newspaper clips chronicling modern Egyptian political and economic events, making explicit the manner that the housewife is not merely an exemplary subject in the modern nation, but also an allegorical figure. Can *That Smell* be read as a housewife novel, in some ways anticipating the more panoramic *Zaat*?

My contention is that much of the unease provoked by *That Smell* can be attributed to its charting of the transformation of the nationally committed writer into an ambigendered housewife: cleaning plates, buying groceries, or washing clothes. *That Smell* is a subverted version of the housewife novel, constructing a narrative in which the male protagonist himself is relegated to the cyclical sphere of the home, unable to break away. Literary studies of *That Smell* repeatedly characterize the narrator as emasculated or unmanned, and read his character as a prescient anticipation of the crisis of irrelevance of the Arab intellectual after the 1967 war (al-'Alim 52-3; El Sadda 119-42). The political and intellectual crisis manifests itself, such scholars argue, as a crisis of masculinity. For evidence, they turn to two scenes in the novel, which

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<sup>70</sup> The term 'jīl al-sittīnāt' (the sixties generation) has come to designate writers who began writing in the decade of the 1960s and who were associated with the new literary innovations of the time. Its most prominent members include Gamal al-Ghitani, Muhammad al-Bisati, Baha' Tahir, Ibrahim Aslan, Radwa Ashur, 'Abd al-Hakim Qasim, Yahya Tahir 'Abdallah, as well as Sonallah Ibrahim. On the politics and aesthetics of the sixties generation, see (Ramadan; Badawi; Hafez; Kendall; Jacquemond).



Ibrahim himself drew attention to in his foreword to the 1986 edition, remarking that these were the two scenes that got the most ire from censors and critics. In the first scene, with which the state censors took particular offence, the protagonist fails to perform sexually when a friend appears at his room with a prostitute. The second is a scene of solitary masturbation:

I began playing with myself and at last I sighed. Then I threw myself back in the chair, exhausted, staring at the page with a blank look. A little while later I got up and stepped carefully over the traces I'd left on the floor under the chair and went into the bathroom to wash my socks and shirt and hang them by the window. (44)

جعلت اعبث بجسمي. وأخيرا تنهدت. وارتيمت على مقعدي متعبا وانا احدق في الورقة بنظارة فارغة. وبعد قليل قمت وعبرت في حذر فوق الأثار التي تركتها على البلاط اسفل المقعد. وذهبت الى الحمام وغسلت جواربي وقميصي وعلقتها في النافذة. (50)

The narrator achieves climax, but he remains unable to take up the masculine role of the writer/intellectual: the page in front of him remains blank. Furthermore, after relieving himself, he leaves his desk and turns to the task of laundry. The problem in this scene is not sexual impotence, or the reproductive vacuity of the masturbatory act, but rather the protagonist's entrance into the feminized zone of daily routine and its drudgeries. Unable to reinsert himself into the productive realm of politics or writing, he is chained to the repetitive and masturbatory space of the home, in which labor is merely restorative and administrative, producing nothing. Like Lefebvre's women, he is imprisoned within the ruthless routine of cyclical time.

It is interesting that the main problem with the scene, at least according to the critic Yahya Haqqi, to whom Ibrahim personally handed a copy, is not the act of masturbation itself but its material residues. When the novel initially appeared, Haqqi wrote a scathing review in his weekly column in *al-Masa'*, focusing particularly on this scene:

Not content to show us his hero masturbating (if the matter had ended there it would have been of little importance), he also describes the hero's return a day later to where the traces of his sperm lie on the ground. This physiological description absolutely nauseated me... I am not condemning its morality, but its lack of sensibility, its lowness, its vulgarity. (Cited in Ibrahim's 1986 forward *That Smell*, 67)

Haqqi's sensitivities draw attention to the fact that the narrator, who is so vigilant about washing his socks, shirts, and dishes, avoids cleaning the remains of his own sperm. The negligence can be interpreted as the character's masochistic attempt to force upon himself a repeated encounter with evidence of his own baseness, much like the encounter forced upon readers like Haqqi. But it can also be read as an act of disobedience performed by the narrator in his role as a housewife, a glitch in the cycle of dirt/cleanliness, a small act of rebellion. The ambiguity of the gesture illuminates the difficulty of identifying acts of rebellion or liberation in *That Smell* as a whole. A second, and potentially more dramatic, act of indifference goes almost unnoticed: the narrator finds that the faucet has broken and water is covering the bathroom and the reception hall's floors. He calmly brushes his teeth and leaves the house, perhaps hoping for a disaster to finally strike in his absence. He does nothing to encourage it, but also nothing to prevent it.

The classic housewife novel has a decided narrative structure: The housewife realizes her oppression within the cyclical time of repetition. She takes action in order to escape and so enter the linear flow of time, narrative, and history. Sometimes she succeeds; most often, like Madame Bovary, she will encounter tragedy. At times, the final outcome of her escape remains ambiguous and full of potential, as in the resounding door slam at the conclusion of Ibsen's *The Doll's House*. Whether the housewife triumphs or not, the basic structure of the plot remains the same. Oppression can be identified, and liberation, though rarely guaranteed, can be recognized and chosen. Oppression and liberation are defined dialectically: because liberation is predefined as progress, freedom, movement, or change, then repetition, sameness and routine can be named oppressive.

As housewife novels, *That Smell* and *Funeral at Noon* allude towards this narrative structure of oppression to liberation, be it in *That Smell's* narrator's small acts of negligence, or in Hagar's unexplained act of infidelity, sleeping with the soldier whom she does not know. Nevertheless, these generic conventions are continually upset, failing to deliver the expected results. It is difficult to identify key dramatic moments in the texts, as it is hard to identify the characters' acts of agency. The two novels promise to be housewives novels, characteristic of their time, and yet they fail to deliver. Both adopt an anti-evental narrative style that makes it impossible for their housewives to be recruited as national allegories of liberation. The second part of the chapter explicates the anti-evental literary techniques, which make *That Smell* and *Funeral at Noon* exemplary texts of impassive modernism.

### **Anti-Evental Narratives**

While the thematic similarity between *That Smell* and *Funeral at Noon* is limited to their affiliations with the temporal conventions of the housewife novel, their formal and narrative techniques are strikingly similar. In both texts, the narrative voice (be it the third person narrator of *Funeral at Noon* or the first person narrator of *That Smell*) has no access to the main characters' interior life - their thoughts, emotions, or motivations. Instead, the narration is composed of an almost microscopic record of sensations, routine gestures, and detailed visual or auditory input, detached from subjective intention or affect. Ibrahim referred to this mode as "iceberg style" – a blunt, matter of fact account devoid of subjective or emotional content (1986 Introduction, 70. The term is addressed extensively below).

The main narrative of *That Smell* is occasionally interrupted by excursions into what are presumably the narrator's memories or thoughts. These sections are clearly separated from the rest of the text, appearing in italics. While they utilize a similarly simple language and sentence structure as the main narrative, they have a different quality to them, as they manage to create affective links between consecutive sentences. The only accounts of prison life, for example appear in these brief italicized sections:

*When the key slammed into the lock, we flinched. Then they came in. Our eyes flew to their eyes, hard beyond description. Quick, sharp, frightening sounds attacked our ears. Their hands—fat and coarse and cruel—squeezed our hearts. The walls made four corners. The door was shut. The ceiling was near. No help.*

(43)

The sentences remain bare of any embellishments, but the prose is intensely emotional and poetic – the translation does not preserve the repetitive sentence structure of the original:

وتلتصق عيوننا بعيون جامدة لا تتطق. وتصطدم أذاننا بأسوات سريعة باترة لا تتمهل. وتتعلق قلوبنا بأيدي  
سمينة ثقيلة لا تفكر. وحوالنا الجدران تلتقى في أربعة أركان. والباب مغلق. والسقف قريب. لا منجاة. (49)

A literal, crude translation would read:

*Our eyes clang to hard, unspeaking eyes. Our ears crashed by quick sharp  
unconsidered voices. Our hearts squeezed by fat heavy and unthinking hands.  
Around us the walls form four corners. The door shut. The ceiling near. No help.*

The narration generates emotional urgency through the repetitive structure and the shortening sentences concluding the paragraph, recreating the claustrophobic closing-in of the prison cell and the wardens' violence. This mode of affective correlation and intensity is markedly absent from the primary frame of narration. The same is true of flashbacks or of the narration of the characters' background in *Funeral at Noon*. These backstories, most notably the long digression on Tuvya's father and his business ventures (86-105), have a clearer narratological and grammatical structure of cause and effect, event and consequence, which is lacking in the accounts of the "present" moment of narration. The result is a striking separation between the past and the present moment. While the past has some narrative coherence, which occurs through the adoption of an individual subjectivity, the present narration is neutral, objective, and distant, having no access to affective subjectivity. This process can be demonstrated in the following passage, from the first pages of *Funeral at Noon*:

When she reached the main road she took the scarf of her head. To her left the road continued to the shops and the square. To her right – to the ruined Arab village. In the middle of the open field in front of her was a narrow path. A solitary donkey, tethered to the stump of a tree, was grazing on the grass. She stepped on to the path and walked toward the village. (13)

כשעמדה על הכביש הסירה את המטפחת מעל ראשה. משמאלה נמשך הכביש אל החנויות, אל הכיכר. מימינה אל הכפר הערבי החרב. באמצע השדה הפתוח שלפניה היה שביל צר. חמור בודד, שהיה קשור לגזע כרות, ליחך עשב. עלתה על השביל והלכה לעבר הכפר. (15)

The drama of choice staged in the passage goes unnoticed; standing at a fork on the road, Hagar can choose to turn to the town square and get groceries for dinner, or to continue to the ruined Arab village. Her decision is obscured by the accumulation of seemingly unrelated details, such as the donkey and his rope, and the lack of logical conjunctions between the sentences – a logic that could mimic a subjective thought process. The plot of *Funeral at Noon*, Idan Landau comments in a long essay on Koren, disappears behind its numerous traces, forcing the reader to toil on its extraction from countless details and sensations. The reader searches in vain for emotional motives or reactions in a text composed of a series of linguistically and temporally disjointed physical gestures, games of light and shadow, a meticulous soundscape, and the infinite minutiae of the still life photograph. The detached narrative voice, which lays no claim to motivations and intents, creates the effect of absolving Hagar from responsibility for her own actions. Her moves appear to be the outcome of an inevitable inertia, rather than a conscious intervention. Even when she takes action, the readers remain so distant from her emotion and

intent that it appears as if the action happens *to* her, rather than her being its subject. Impassivity, expressing itself in weariness, apathy, or the weakness of illness, is Hagar's main affective mode throughout the text.

*That Smell* is written in a similarly non-agential, impassive mode, as the narrator proceeds through the tasks of daily life in an almost automated fashion. The Egyptian writer and literary critic Idwar Kharrat, who offers a nuanced taxonomy of "the new literary sensibility" in Egypt in the 1960s, names this literary mode the "objectifying current" (*tayyār al-tashyī*). "Objectifying literature" depicts characters "that want to become object-like, fixed, given as if they are in and of themselves, neither signifying nor representing anything other than themselves, and appearing in a cold, external light" (Kharrat 15). Language in these novels, he continues, seems "as if it doesn't care" (16). Kharrat's terms illustrate how, despite the first person narration, the narrator of *That Smell* maintains a perspective external to himself – a perspective that does not have access to, nor shares assumptions about, the character's interior life.

The lack of narrated interiority in the two novels is reminiscent of Erich Auerbach's memorable analysis of the Biblical style in the first chapter of *Mimesis*, "Odysseus's Scar" (Auerbach 3-23). Here too the story proceeds with few syntactical connections. Speech does not serve to express thoughts, but to the contrary, everything "remains unexpressed" (11). In both cases we have no access to the characters' emotional life, we can only assume it exists by deduction from their gestures, silences, and fragmented speech. In *Funeral at Noon* in particular, an unnamed and unsolved biblical allegory of barrenness and sacrifice hovers over the mundane narrative, highlighted by the central characters' names: Yiftach, Hagar, and Sarah (Yiftach's mother and Hagar's neighbor). Like the Biblical text, *Funeral at Noon* is "permeated with the

most unrelieved suspense...[the whole] remains mysterious and ‘fraught with background’” (Auerbach 11-12).

Here, however, is where the similarity ends. For while in the Biblical narrative, “the decisive points alone are emphasized, what lies between is nonexistent” (Auerbach: 11), in both *Funeral* and *That Smell* the “space between” the decisive points is filled to the brim, so it is nearly impossible to recognize decisive points when they do occur. While the Biblical voice foregrounds actions, the voice of anti-evental, impassive modernism foregrounds the impenetrable and continuous presence of the body: its gestures, sensations, or excretions, which remain constants, unaffected by the plot’s “decisive points.” Without a subjectivity to latch on to, the plot and its events remain unremarkable.

In both *Funeral at Noon* and *That Smell*, revelations that ought to have been consequential as nodes in the plot – that should have *become events* according to the generic expectations of the housewife novel or the melodrama – remain nonemphatic and inconsequential. The final scene of *That Smell* illustrates how the anti-evental structure has to do with formation and disappointment of generic expectations. The narrator, providing no explanation, decides to visit his mother’s old house—this is the first time the mother is mentioned in the text. He enters a room in which three old women in black are sitting: they introduce themselves as his grandmother, his aunt, and his grandmother’s aunt. If this reunion generates any emotional intensity, it remains undocumented. Instead, the grandmother turns on the radio in order to listen to the daily episode of the radio drama, “The Shadow.” Any melodramatic narration of affect is relegated to the radio broadcast, where a young man’s voice says “tearfully: How can I live when I know my father is a murderer” (62). After half an hour, when the episode ends, the old women tell the narrator that his mother had died barely a week



earlier.<sup>71</sup> But this revelation is not followed by emotional distress, existential questioning, or a dramatic confrontation. The question of “how to live now” is never posed, since it is unnecessary. The narrator realizes that sunset is near and that he should return home before the policeman arrives. He bids the women goodbye and leaves for the metro. This is where the novella ends, with the circular, everyday routine overcoming and subduing the potentially dramatic narrative event. Whereas for the hero of the dramatic radio show, life after knowledge cannot possibly be the same, a parallel moment of discovery makes no discernable difference in the narrator’s behavior, or in the mode of narration. The expected relation between knowledge, recognition, and change is subverted. *Anagnorisis* is not followed by *peripeteia*, and remains insubstantial.

In *Funeral at Noon* too, knowledge rarely leads to the expected narrative outcomes. There is a gap between the event, the knowledge it generates, and the transformation it should bring about. Knowledge of Hagar’s infidelity is available to her husband Tuvya, yet he refuses to act upon this knowledge or acknowledge it (204). Their life, together but apart, continues in silence. Hagar’s betrayal is an open secret: knowledge that is fully available, that is that neither denied nor claimed, and that can be maintained in a state of feigned ignorance. Tuvya’s pointedly chosen ignorance parallels the other “open secret” of the text, the ruined Palestinian village, whose history in Israeli culture is both known and denied simultaneously, a taboo that must be discovered again and again in traumatic repetition. The open secret here is a mechanism to maintain stasis, to resist the violent or dramatic reversal that knowledge should bring about, at least according to generic expectations.

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<sup>71</sup> This entire scene can be read as a tribute to Albert Camus’ *The Stranger*. Ibrahim mentions Camus’ *The Plague* earlier in the text, when the narrator asks a friend, with great urgency, if she had read it (32).

Can anti-evental forms do anything beyond conservative maintenance of the status quo? What are the politics of the impassive housewife novel, in which nothing seems to happen? Can impassivity perform a political, not merely mimetic, gesture? It is here that the analysis of the two texts diverges, as they employ the impassive anti-evental structure to differing ends: *That Smell* adopts a model of the writer as tedious chronicler, setting literature itself as a realm of static repetition that attests to the absence of progressive politics. *Funeral at Noon*, on the other hand, dissipates the border between stasis and event, or between activity and passivity, in a manner that no longer allows distinguishing between the repetitive cycles of the home and the linearity of politics. Both techniques, however, offer impassive alternatives to emphatic gestures of liberation.

### **The Medusan Gaze of *That Smell***

The cover of the first edition of *That Smell* featured a manifesto of sorts, signed by Kamal al-Qilish, Rauf Mas'ad, and Abdel Hakim Qasim, Ibrahim's companions in the communist party, in prison, and in literary aspirations. In a tone that Ibrahim later characterized as one of "absolute self-confidence (reflecting, perhaps, an absolute lack of self-confidence)," the group declared that in order "to shatter the climate of artistic stagnation [*tajammada*, literally: that has frozen], we must turn to the kind of sincere and sometimes agonized writing you find here" (73).

This is a familiar metaphor. Modern critique has often been tasked with *breaking* that which has *congealed* and allowing it to assume its natural flow again. Hegel spoke of philosophy's task as "freeing determinate thoughts from their fixity," and setting in motion certainties that had been stalled (Hegel 20). Marxist and Frankfurt School thinkers similarly

articulated critiques of reification as the need to unstiffen and release ideological thought: Adorno viewed the task of immanent critique as “reliquifying” the thought movement that has congealed in philosophical concepts, “its validity traced, so to speak, in repetition” (Adorno *Negative Dialectics* 97). Idwar Kharrat, in 1960s Egypt, echoes the same language, arguing that Egypt’s new literary sensibility “differs from a sensibility that has declined, its springs dwindled, and has ossified (*tajammadat*) in the past” (Kharrat 14). If, for the moment, we leave unquestioned a metaphor that has matured into a conceptual axiom, and that is grounded in the assumption that everything in its “natural” and preferred state is in continuous flow, it still remains possible to ask how can this metaphor be pertinent to Ibrahim’s impassive style: how is it that in order to shatter a stagnated, ossified, and rigid environment, one turns to what Ibrahim described as “floating iceberg” style (70) – a style that is itself fossilized and solidified, vacant of the fluidity and flexibility of language and of traditional Arabic prose in particular? How can an iceberg break an iceberg, stasis shatter stasis?

To some extent, Ibrahim’s novel is tasked with performing the “housewife novel plot” in the field of Egyptian literature—to transition from circular stasis to movement and change—which the narration of the novel itself resists (another way of formulating this would be to transition the Arabic novel into modernity, a concern that was addressed in Chapter One). Ibrahim learned the “iceberg style” from Ernest Hemingway, who he discovered while in prison through studies such as Carlos Baker’s *Hemingway: The Writer as Artist* (1952). Hemingway described the iceberg style as an art of omission and precise economy: “The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water” (Hemingway 183). For Ibrahim, the technique had a “particular luster, set against the conventional flabby eloquence of Arabic literature” (Ibrahim *That Smell* 70). It was not only the art of omission that appealed to

Ibrahim, but also the sleek, smooth, and featureless façade of the iceberg, devoid of ornamentations.

Like numerous Egyptian intellectuals of the 1960s and 1970s, prison served for Ibrahim a formative intellectual and educational environment. His journals from this period, published in full in 2004, illustrate how extensively he struggled with the question of what, and more importantly, *how*, one should write. His scattered and fragmented literary education, determined by whatever random book or magazine found its way into the prison, seem like a “crash course” in canonical Western and Russian modernism, introduced decades after their prime. To this extent, Ibrahim is an obvious example of the process of assimilation Euromodernist forms that the Palestinian writer Jabra Ibrahim Jabra described in a series of lectures on “Arabic Fiction and the West,” delivered in the United States in 1968. “What Arab writers learnt from the West was essential to their prose,” Jabra asserted. “It helped them come to closer grips with the problems that demanded expression” (Jabra 89). Jabra narrates Arabic literature’s exposure to and engagement with Western modernism as an expedited launch into the present. Like the housewife, the Arab writer was outside the time of authentic modernity; after emulating modernist formal techniques, he could become part of the global “civilization of today” (91).<sup>72</sup> For Jabra, modernist forms are a currency that allows access to cosmopolitan cultural citizenship.

Ibrahim’s notebooks, however, which betray no such explicit anxiety of assimilation or belatedness, reveal Jabra’s model as both simplistic and outdated. To begin with, Ibrahim’s citations do not betray one model of modernity or liberty to be emulated, but rather an ongoing exchange between concepts and ideas coming from the Soviet Union, from Europe and the

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<sup>72</sup> The model of Arabic modern literature that Jabra presents in this essay, of abstracted modernist form joined to local content, is very similar to Franco Moretti’s formula of the global modern novel as “compromise between a western formal influence... and local materials,” formulated thirty years later (Moretti 58).

United States, as well as from Africa and the third world. As a Marxist, Ibrahim was far more interested in the Soviet Union and the manner Russian writers negotiated social and political commitments, than in the kind of first world cosmopolitanism that Jabra is alluding to. Furthermore, the literary culture Ibrahim was writing against was far removed from any “classical” Arabic tradition and its modes of production. It was rather the committed realist novel, in the tradition of Naguib Mahfouz and Yusuf Idris, which seemed, in its socially progressive commitments, detached from political realities. Ibrahim’s writing loses much nuance if positioned within a binary formula of “the West and the Rest” instead of in the complex globalized reality of Cold War allegiances and the transnational landscape of Bandung humanism.

Moreover, the manner Ibrahim engages with canonical modernism betrays less of a need to catch up on a backlog of Euromodernist movements, than an idiosyncratic process of excavation of models of writing that seem to resonate with the “time after politics” he confronted. The fragmented journals allow tracing a central shift in Ibrahim’s views of the goals and methods of literary writing. The first entries from the journal, dating to April 1962, are lists of potential writing projects and plot structures centered on dramatic reversals or moments of disillusionment: “Cairo commits suicide. The fire of ’52. The city that rose up and fell destructively on itself. Story of freedom in the streets, among the people” (Ibrahim *Yawmiyāt* 49-50). In June 1962, Ibrahim writes: “The following statement on the art of writing is attributed to Chekhov: ‘When you sit down to write, you must be cold as ice.’ No... No! The writer’s blood should boil as he writes, his face should pale with hatred, he should laugh and he should cry” (58-9).

By the following year, however, Ibrahim's preferences changed profoundly. The writers and citations that resonate with him verge away from the dramatic, revolutionary, and verbose narratives usually associated with political writing, and turn towards the minimalist, the objective, and the mundane. "All bad writers are in love with the epic," he underlines a quote from Hemingway (Ibrahim *Yawmiyāt* 100). In September 1963, he writes of Virginia Woolf with unconcealed admiration:

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* has opened up a new world for me... Her idea of art seems to be the same as that given in her novel by the painter: 'One wanted, she thought, dipping her brush deliberately, to be on a level with ordinary experience, to feel simply that's a chair, that's a table, and yet at the same time, It's a miracle, it's an ecstasy.' This is what Woolf does in the novel, handling everything that is simple, ordinary, quotidian. (95)

In a similar vein, Ibrahim is struck by the work of filmmaker Cesar Zavattini, and the principles of the Italian neorealist movement, their shift away from the epic and historical towards the mundane and material elements of daily life. He struggles to form an understanding of T. S. Eliot's "objective correlative" as a mode of combining personal content with an objective form (97). The journal charts a shift in Ibrahim's interests from what I call emphatic to impassive modernism – a modernism that is engaged in seemingly objective, non-evental documentation of subjective experience rather than in emotional heights and dramatic narratives.

When *That Smell's* narrator emerges from prison, the world has no need for his writing. The newspaper where he used to write has no use for him (46). When he tells a young woman

that he is a writer, composing stories “out of his head,” she says, “you must be a big-shot” (36). She uses the word *shakhsiyya*, which refers to a famous personality, a celebrity or a star. The woman has no interest in his writing, but in his potential social status. The position of the writer as a champion and chronicler of class struggle no longer seems viable, once the language of class struggle has been appropriated by the regime and commodified. *That Smell* recognizes the political irrelevance of the writer in a commoditized society, acknowledging his limited agency and limited audience.

The solution to this impasse emerges as *the repetition* of this reified reality of “life after politics” through subjective, depersonalized narrative. Repetition is not only the structure of the novel, but its mimetic technique, governing over the narration’s relation to the world. To return to Adorno’s definition of the task of immanent critique as cited above, “the thought movement that congealed in [philosophical concepts] must be reliquified, its validity traced, so to speak, in repetition” (Adorno *Negative Dialectics* 97). The key word in this definition is “repetition:” critique cannot attack philosophy from an idealized space external to it, but must take it on “in its own structure,” to repeat it in order to dismantle it. Ibrahim similarly takes on the circular, repetitive time of life after politics, adopting it as an aesthetic mode. His prose uses the Medusa’s ossifying gaze as a weapon: For the only way to defeat the Medusa, according to the myth, is to turn its gaze against itself.<sup>73</sup> Ibrahim thus allows his narration to be fully subsumed by the process of reification: If reification is the problem of contemporary society, in which thoughts and words are packaged as commodities, reification would also be the means of solving it.

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<sup>73</sup> I borrow the term Medusan from Adorno, who in his “Portrait of Walter Benjamin,” diagnoses Benjamin’s writing as a similar mirror act of reification: “Benjamin’s thought is so saturated with culture as its natural object that it swears loyalty to reification instead of flatly rejecting it [...] the glance of his philosophy is Medusan” (Adorno *Prisms* 233). In “Constellation and Critique,” Steven Helmling contextualizes this term in the context of Adorno’s writing on the role of critique, and usefully clarifies the differences between Adorno’s goal of “reliquification” and the manner he understood Benjamin’s technique.

Unlike Becket and Kafka, the writers that Adorno champions as models of aesthetic immanent critique, Ibrahim's text is firmly grounded in the concrete manifestations of commodity culture. It chronicles, perversely and insistently, the familiar and material routines of the everyday. In this manner, the political force of the novel does not emerge from a violent act of martyrdom or protest, or in the dramatic depiction of the drama of class struggle, but rather in the mirroring act of reification, in literature claiming it as its own. *That Smell* lingers in the present, refusing the false belief that literature participates in a march towards a progressive future. Embracing the tedious labor of recording the present, the labor of the housewife, as the task of literature, *That Smell* gives the lie to a fantasy of progress happening outside the home, refusing to join the progressive rhetoric of the state.

### ***Funeral at Noon and the Exponential Curve of the Border***

*Funeral at Noon's* anti-evental model differs significantly. Rather than repeating the repetitive vacuity of political life, it aims to undo the binary division between stasis and movement, or between passivity and action, by dismantling the concept of a boundary defined by an eventful or consequential moment of crossing. Unlike *That Smell*, which is a text of committed political engagement, *Funeral at Noon* explores the affects of disengagement, and the manner it undoes historical narratives based on the logic of radical, transformative events.

As a young wife, Hagar is constantly positioned within or against boundaries of proper behavior, abstracted boundaries that echo the state border that can be seen from her balcony. In *That Smell*, the narrator's constraint was concrete: the obligation to return, every evening at sunset, to his room. In *Funeral at Noon*, however, Hagar's restraint is diffused, embodied in the constantly evaluating gaze of the town inhabitants. Even the most private and secretive acts turn



out to have been witnessed, monitored, and publicly disseminated. The narration explicitly and implicitly voices the town's dissatisfaction with Hagar's behavior. Early in the book, the narration positions Hagar's character against that of Esther Schmerling, a local schoolteacher, whose funeral is the first of two funerals framing the novel. Hagar is about to head out to the Arab village, where she has spotted the soldiers again, when she sees three women with covered hair. She follows them to the main square, finding herself at Esther Schmerling's funeral.

'Esther was a good woman.' The headmaster repeated the comment several times... 'Esther was a good woman.' Hagar Erlich did not mingle with the mourners" (11).

Esther's passing at the beginning of the narrative illustrates the space into which Hagar is supposed to enter. Hagar half-willingly tries to embody this model of "a good woman" throughout the narrative, and at one point even considers getting her teaching certificate and replacing Esther at the local school, a plan that never materializes. Hagar's actions are too slow, too fatigued, to carry through. When she finally goes to the school headmaster to discuss taking the job, the school year had already ended.

At Esther's funeral, Hagar stays at the rear, and as the procession enters the cemetery, she "remain[s] standing behind the fence [me'ahorey ha-gader]" (12). The familiar Hebrew expression "behind the fence," further emphasized as it abruptly concludes the paragraph, foreshadows Hagar's act of adultery. This expression is not only the title of a famous novella by H.N. Bialik, which narrates an illicit and dramatic affair between a Jewish boy and a peasant girl, but also has an earlier provenance in Talmudic disputes associated with eavesdropping or sexual

deviance. The term appears in the Babylonian Talmud Tractate Sanhedrin in an ordinance discussing a man who has become ill due to his infatuation with a woman, deliberating whether he should be allowed to sleep with her in order to resume his health:

ואם אינא לא לימא ליה! הא בצנעה, הא בפרהסיא. אמר רב יהודה אמר רב: מעשה באדם אחד שנתן עיניו באשה אחת והעלה לבו סינא, ובאו ושאלו לרופאים. ואמרו: אין לו תקנה עד שתבעל לו. אמרו סכמים: מות ואל תבעל לו. תעמוד לפניו ערומה. מות ואל תעמוד לפניו ערומה. תספר עמו מאחורי הגדר. מות ולא תספר עמו מאחורי הגדר. פליגי בה רב יעקב בר אידי ורבי שמואל בר נחמני. חד אמר: אשת איש היתה, וחד אמר: פנויה היתה. בשלמא למאן דאמר 'אשת איש היתה', שפיר אלא למאן דאמר 'פנויה היתה' מאי כולי האי? רב פפא אמר: משום פגם משפחה. רב אחא בר ריה דרב איקא אמר: כדי שלא יהו בנות ישראל פרוצות בעריות. ולינסבה מינסב! לא מיתבחה דעתיה, כד רבי יצחק. דאמר רבי יצחק: מיום שחרב בית המקדש ניטלה טעם ביאה וניתנה לעוברי עבירה, שנאמר: "מים גנובים ימתקו ולחם סתרים ינעם" (משלי ט, יז).

Rab Judah said in Rab's name: A man once conceived a passion for a certain woman, and his heart was consumed by his burning desire [his life being endangered thereby]. When the doctors were consulted, they said, 'His only cure is that she shall submit.' Thereupon the Sages said: 'Let him die rather than that she should yield.' Then [said the doctors]; 'let her stand nude before him;' [they answered] 'sooner let him die'. 'Then', said the doctors, 'let her converse with him from behind a fence'. 'Let him die,' the Sages replied 'rather than she should converse with him from behind a fence.' Now R. Jacob b. Idi and R. Samuel b. Nahmani dispute therein. One said that she was a married woman; the other that she was unmarried. Now, this is intelligible on the view, that she was a married woman, but on the latter, that she was unmarried, why such severity? — R. Papa said: Because of the disgrace to her family. R. Aha the son of R. Ika said: That the daughters of Israel may not be immorally dissolute. Then why not marry her? — Marriage would not assuage his passion, even as R. Isaac said: Since the destruction of the Temple, sexual pleasure has been taken [from those who

practice it lawfully] and given to sinners, as it is written, *Stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.* (Talmud Bavli, Masechet Sanhedrin 75:1)

The sages ruled that the infatuated man may not sleep with the desired woman, see her naked, or speak to her “behind the fence” (implying erotic, hidden, or simply private conversation) even at the price of his life. The severity of the ordinance appears to have required an explanation: if the woman is married, the problem is clear enough. But why should a man not speak to the woman if she is unmarried? Rabbi Aḥa ben Rabbi Ika explains that it is to protect the women, so they won’t be “*prutsot be-‘arayot*”- shamefully and immorally dissolute. But what if, the questioning continues, the man was to marry the woman and make her his legal wife? It is here that the actual stakes of the man’s desire emerge, since, as Rabbi Yizhak says, that would not satisfy him. Since the fall of the temple, Rabbi Yizhak says, the joy of (legitimate) intercourse has ceased and only illicit desires can elicit any pleasure. Once he is legitimately married and may do with his wife as he pleases, the man would lose his burning passion.<sup>74</sup>

This desire for transgression, a dangerous and burning desire to *step out of bounds*, is therefore associated with a particular temporality – with a world that is *after* the collapse of the temple, when both time and the erotic have fallen from their proper state of grace. Man’s dissatisfaction with sexuality within the limits of the proper (that is, the religiously sanctioned institute of marriage) has to do with this fallen, exiled condition. The term *pritsut*, or harlotry, connotes a breaking and transgression of borders: *Prutsa* is a woman whose borders have been penetrated and left open (it is the same term used for a fence that has been breached). In the

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<sup>74</sup> Notice the similarity between the last observation and Michel Foucault’s argument in “A Preface to Transgression:” Foucault claims, after Bataille, that with “the death of God” transgression acquired a new character, since transgression itself has become God, most condensed and pronounced in sexuality – that secret we are henceforth always doomed to speak about since it is secret.

world of fallen Eros, only illicit, boundary-transgressing sexuality that ruptures the sanctioned sexual practices of the everyday can provide true pleasure.

How does this temporality relate to the temporality of the state, outlined earlier in this chapter? At the outset, the post-temple time (which is the time of exile) and state-time (which the time of re-established territorial sovereignty) appear to be precisely opposite: Zionism positions the latter as the corrective to the former. If the time of exile was a time of separation, the time of the state is one when nation, land, people, and God are once again in sync. However, as narrative structures, the two are strikingly similar: Both are based on the identification of a rupture, a crisis, or an event (the performative declaration of state, or the symbolic fall of the temple) that significantly changes the form of time itself (and subsequently the objects of desire).

*Funeral at Noon* establishes an alternative to this temporality of transgression-event-transformation, but not through an explicit act of rebellion on the part of Hagar (such an act would simply reinforce this temporality of the event) but through a dissipation of the border and its moment of transgression. The narrative structure of transgression is clearly present in the novel: Hagar sleeps with one of the soldiers. The two meet in the ruined Palestinian village and wordlessly walk together in the direction of (the state's) border, in what appears to be silent agreement. But while the border is threateningly present, it is never actually crossed. In a long scene that consists of endless deferrals, Hagar and the soldier walk towards the mountains visible on the border's other side, crossing a field, a canal, another abandoned Jewish settlement, more fields, a row of pine trees, an orchard.

Beyond the orchard they saw an old asphalt road. Beside it was a sign: "Stop!  
Border ahead!"

“We already crossed the railway,” she said. “Where are you leading me?” She stepped towards him and put her hand on the knitting bag that was in his hand.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said, “it’s just a warning. The border is 400 meters away.” The sign was yellow, and someone scribbled white chalk marks over it.

The letters were red. (116)

מעבר לבוסתן צץ מולם כביש אספלט ישן. בצד הכביש היה קבוע שלט: "עצור! גבול לפניך!"  
"כבר עברנו את פסי הרכבת," אמרה. "לאן אתה מוביל אותי?" היא פסעה לקראתו והניחה את ידה  
על שקית הסריגה שהייתה בידו.  
"אל תפחדו," אמר, "זו רק אזהרה. הגבול הוא עוד ארבע מאות מטר." השלט היה צהוב ומישהו  
קשקש בו קווים לבנים בגיר. האותיות היו אדומות. (116)

The border is never crossed, but remains a warning (or a promise). Like a mirage, it is continually postponed and pushed back. The sign marking the border is blurred, erased yet still visible behind the white chalk marks drawn by an unknown hand in a half-hearted effort. Hagar and the soldier’s movement draws an exponential curve, getting infinitely closer to the border but never actually crossing it.

Why this emphasis on a border that is never crossed, and by implication, on an act of transgression that never fully happens? The anti-evental structure is embodied here in the figure of the exponential curve: The postponement of the border is a spatial manifestation of the impossibility of the event as a revolutionary, transformative moment that brings on immediate, palpable change; enlightenment, illumination, or a sudden decision. Hagar’s encounter with the soldier is never identified as an emphatic event, nor is its immediate aftermath. To the contrary – the full tragic effects of Hagar’s trespassing unfold in a painstakingly slow pace, full of suspensions and digressions. It is only many pages later that we learn the fate of Yiftach (whose

name evokes the Biblical sacrifice story of the daughter of Yiftach), who had followed Hagar and the soldier to the border and fell in a cistern while running in the fields.

When Hagar finally leaves her marriage, on the morning of Yiftach's funeral, it is as if she has already been long gone. The departure is never discussed or brought up explicitly, and all of it is contained in a few brief sentences:

“Will you help me take the suitcases to the bus station?” she had asked Tuvia in the morning. She was standing on the ladder and climbing up to the storage loft over the bathroom. There was a bandaid stuck to her forehead, and white powder falling into her hair. He took the dusty cases from her and put them down on the floor. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him brushing off the dust. “Yes,” he said. After that he said nothing. With a sharp knife Hagar tried to scrape the calcium deposits from the kettle. Tuvia went to the funeral alone. (251)

The event (Hagar's departure) never takes place either as a transgression or as liberation, but rather accumulates and hardens like the calcium residues at the bottom of the kettle – residues that cannot be decisively washed or cut off, but demand protracted physical labor of scratching at the hardened calcium with a knife. In Lauren Berlant's apt formulation, “the extraordinary always turns out to be an amplification of something in the works, a labile boundary at best, not a slammed-door departure” (Berlant 10). When Hagar walks out on her ordinary housewife life, she is not crossing a border into a new temporality, since that border, that event, can never be identified.

Instead, the exponential anti-evental form provides a new model to narrate historical narratives. Most radically, it undermines the notion of the performative constitution of the state as a radical, revolutionary, time-changing event. It allows the Palestinian village to be seen as the site of the accumulation of residues accruing and ossifying over time, which cannot be easily scratched away, rather than a decisive rupture. The pre-state past is not abruptly cut off the present, but is coexistent with it, changing slowly through small, accumulated gestures. The same logic can be employed proactively as well, casting into doubt the historiographical narratives that position 1967 as a transformative rupture that brings on immediate, complete change. The receding border that is never triumphantly crossed is an apt antidote to the fantasies of expansionism that have characterized segments of Israeli society since 1967, and even to the opposite ones, of complete retraction and return to the ‘innocent’ boundaries of the state as it was before the war, instilling full separation between Israel and Palestine as if the occupation was just a bad dream.

### **Instead of Conclusion: the 1967 War as an Event**

In 2008, Koren published a short and unusual obituary for the writer, editor, and translator Aharon Amir in the daily newspaper *Ha'aretz*. After a complimentary tribute to Amir's role in encouraging Koren as a young writer, the true topic of the essay emerges – Amir's Canaanite vision of a vast “land of the Hebrews,” extending far beyond the Jordan River.<sup>75</sup> A few months before the 1967 war, Koren relates, Amir told him that Israel is about to become a

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<sup>75</sup> The “Council for the Coalition of Hebrew Youth,” better known as the Canaanite movement, espoused a Hebrew nativist nationalism completely dissociated from Judaism, spawning from a mythical Hebrew/Semitic nation that supposedly thrived around the Fertile Crescent in the second millennium BC. The Canaanites were as dismissive of Arab nationalism as they were of Jewish nationalism, imagining a regional Pagan-Hebrew culture under which the Palestinians as well were to be subsumed. On the legacy and influence of the Canaanite movement in Hebrew poetry, see Hanan Hever, “Territoriality and Otherness.”

regional Hebrew empire in a few short years. He saw the war as the first step towards the realization of that vision. Amir, Koren relates, “loved the flap of the great wings of History and wanted to become part of it through the dream of the Great Hebrew Nation” (Koren "Yarad Geshem Ḥalash"). The title of the obituary, “A Weak Rain Fell,” comes from a description of a meeting in a Paris café, where Amir laid out his vision. Koren notes that he

was very doubtful of his ideas. My own opinion was very different. Outside, it rained weakly. We sat alone at a small café. When we were about to leave, even the waiter had disappeared. We left a few old francs on the table and went out. The rain hadn't stopped, but Aharon was still quietly weaving his great dream. Only when I returned to my room I realized I had left my umbrella at the café.

הטלתי ספק רב בדבריו. דעתי היתה מאוד שונה משלו. בחוץ ירד גשם חלש. ישבנו לבדנו בבית קפה קטן. כאשר עמדנו לעזוב, אפילו המלצר נעלם פתאום. השארנו לו כמה פרנקים ישנים על השולחן ויצאנו החוצה. הגשם לא חדל, אבל אהרן עוד טווה בשקט את חלומו הגדול. רק כשחזרתי לחדר התברר לי ששכחתי בקפה את המטרייה.

Between the mundane and insignificant details, almost unnoticed, Koren manages to dissolve fantasies of empire and dreams of mastery with “weak rain.” This is the force of what I have been calling, throughout this chapter, “impassive modernism” – a form of stepping away from action, from emphasis, or from the transcendental Event, gently dissipating fantasies of expansion.

The extent that 1967 is cast as a transformative break in models of statehood, citizenship, and culture, in both Egypt and Israel, cannot be undermined. In Arabic the war is known as the *Naksa* (the setback or relapse) positioning it within a particular historical narrative of liberal



ascendance and regression. Egypt's rapid defeat to the Israeli army, and the loss of territories from the Sinai Peninsula through the West Bank and East Jerusalem, to the Golan Heights, resonated throughout the Arab world, becoming a symbol of the bankruptcy of the new postcolonial Arab regimes and crystalizing the disillusionment of Arab intellectuals with state structures. The impact of 1967 was tangible, and was intensely debated by writers and critics at the time: was it a decisive rupture, a natural progression of the events of the decade, or a defeat that had all but been clearly predicted by the artists of the age?<sup>76</sup> Still today, intellectual histories of the Arab Middle East tend to be organized around the rupture point of 1967 (See, for example, Abu-Rabi; Kassab). Even when trying to question the status of 1967 as a rupture point, contemporary writers cannot escape the lasting legacy of this historiographical narrative on concepts of the present. Scholars of Middle Eastern art recently noted that "it became necessary to ask whether the 1967 Naksa in fact generated a rupture in aesthetic sensibilities, subjectivities, and production, or if it was historical narration itself that produced that rupture" (Lenssen et al. 15).

In Israel, on the other hand, 1967, or the "Six Days War," marks the beginning of the ongoing occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, and the factual evacuation of any of its claims to a democratic regime.<sup>77</sup> The quick and unequivocal victory marked the emergence of a period of euphoria, self-confidence, and messianic aspirations. Military chauvinism and national pride came together in a newly established assurance in the future survival of a state, which until then

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<sup>76</sup> For an overview of these debates in Egyptian print culture, see Yasmine Ramadan's "The Emergence of the Sixties Generation." Influential responses to the 1967 include Sadiq Jalal Azm, *al-Naqd al-dhāti ba'da al-hazīmah* (*Self Criticism After the Defeat* 1968); Qustantin Zurayq, *Ma'nā al-nakba mujaddadan* (*The Meaning of the Disaster Renewed* 1967); Abdallah Laroui, *La Crise des intellectuels arabes* (*The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual* 1974).

<sup>77</sup> In *The One State Condition*, Ariella Azoulay and Adi Ophir that the Israeli occupation can no longer be considered a temporary, situation and has matured into an Occupation regime, which is part of the Israeli state (Azoulay and Ophir 11).

had seemed precarious (Segev 451). Culturally, alongside popular celebrations of militaristic state culture, 1967 also marked the emergence of independent or dissenting voices of various kinds, from the confessionals of *Siah Loḥamim* (*The Seventh Day*, a collection of soldiers' reflections on the war; 1968) and the liberal-Zionism embodied in the prominent figure of their editor, Amos Oz, to Hanoch Levin's dissident and groundbreaking political cabarets. The "peace camp" that formed against the upholding of the occupation (and that effectively dissipated when the al-Aqsa Intifada broke out in 2000) maintained that withdrawing to the 1967 borders, along the paradigm of "territories in exchange for peace" would achieve lasting peace in the region.

Be it from the perspective of the victors or the defeated, 1967 is memorialized as a watershed moment, a radical rupture that did not only change the geopolitical map of the Middle East but also the manner people came to think of their relationship to state, government, and art. Both novels read in this chapter challenge this narrative form, not only in their anti-evental literary structures, but also in the histories of their publication. Sonallah Ibrahim's *That Smell*, though it was published in 1966, gives full articulation to the intellectual crisis associated with the defeat of 1967: distrust of language, loss of faith in intellectual life, and political impasse.<sup>78</sup> *Funeral at Noon*, on the other hand, despite the game of attraction and repulsion that it stages around the border, eventually demonstrates that the core of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict lies not in 1967, but in the Palestinian village abandoned in 1948. It is to there that one must return to begin the laborious work of creating a just present.

Despite my insistence on the need to dislodge the 1967 war from its status as a radical event or a transformative break and embed it in histories of continuity, it nevertheless marks the

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<sup>78</sup> Ibrahim wrote a shelved novel titled *1967* while in Beirut in 1968. The novel will be published for the first time in Summer 2017, too late to be considered in this dissertation. I thank Hosam Aboul-Ela for bringing this novel to my attention.

end of the comparative paradigm employed thus far in the dissertation. After 1967, the histories of Israel and of the Arab states around it become too dissimilar to be the grounds of a meaningful comparison of the kind pursued so far – a comparison of the manner historical-political narratives of time shape the experience of the present and, in turn, the literary forms used to describe it. The next and final chapter therefore departs from this comparative paradigm, focusing solely on Palestinian works.

## Chapter 4

### Impassivity: Resistance to Analysis in Post-Oslo Palestine

Even the silence had become noisy.

(Suleiman "A Cinema of Nowhere" 101)

In real life, you need to neutralize all your emotions and become numb, but then writing neutralizes that neutralization. Other people don't have words for their rescue. But something else, a walk, a pavement, a tree, a stone, endless minor objects that turn into the place where they practice their humanity, a place where oppression cannot reach or destroy.

(Shibli "Palestine from the Inside")

The previous chapter examined two novels written shortly before the 1967 war, one in Israel and one in Egypt. Their anti-evental logic marks a profound skepticism with progressive politics and with the liberationist potential of historical narratives, turning instead to rituals and habits of daily life as alternative sites of establishing presence. They exemplify narrative strategies that shy away from the narration of internal life, focusing instead on a record of minor gestures and sensorial input. The works examined in this chapter, Elia Suleiman's films *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (*Sajl iḥtifā'* 1996) and *Divine Intervention* (*Yad ilahiya* 2002), and Adania Shibli's debut novel *Touch* (*Masās* 2002) and short story "Dust" ("al-Talā'ub bi-al-ʿadīd min dharrāt al-ghubār" 2002), further develop these two tendencies. The two Palestinian artists are noted for their depiction of private, non-sensational, daily life in Palestine on the one hand, and for their emotionally non-expressive and opaque protagonists on the other. The reading in this chapter, however, differs in a number of significant ways.

First, keeping in mind the previous chapter's discussion of the shortcomings of positioning the war of 1967 as an absolute transformative event, it is necessary to acknowledge that the aftermaths of the war led Israel and the Arab world, particularly the Palestinians both within Israel and in the Occupied Territories, in different trajectories. The mode of comparison that structured the previous chapters, positing Hebrew and Arabic literatures in the context of shared political-historical forms, demands, and imaginaries, no longer holds true after the establishment of the occupation regime. The transition of Israel from a settler-colonial state to a partitioned regime, with occupation on the one side of the border and limited democracy on the other, birthed new narratives tying together nation and history, and new aesthetic solutions that are by no means parallel to the narratives and forms emerging from Occupied Palestine, or in the greater region. This chapter turns to two post-Oslo Palestinian artists in order to explore an affective-aesthetic constellation that emerges in tandem with limitation of agency, both historical and individual, in Palestine.<sup>79</sup>

Secondly, the lack of interest in the interior life of the characters in Suleiman's and Shibli's works presents quite a different interpretive problem from that explored in the previous chapter. In the novels studied in Chapter Three – Ibrahim's *That Smell* and Koren's *Funeral at Noon* – there was a clear distance between the characters' interiority and the narrative voice. In other words, even though the two novels dealt with largely apathetic characters, these characters still appeared to have an emotional life, to which the readers had no access. Their desires and sentiments had to be surmised through their gestures. Shibli's and Suleiman's characters, on the

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<sup>79</sup> It is, of course, possible to compare Palestinian and Israeli texts from this period, focusing, for example on the depiction of ongoing, habitual crisis in both, emerging from a sense of unsolvable conflict (particularly after the breakout of the 2000 intifada). Such a comparison, however, which would have to account for the different power dynamics and positions of Israel and Palestine, extends beyond the framework of this chapter and this dissertation.

other hand, are scandalously impassive.<sup>80</sup> They are frustrating (in the case of Shibli), boring, (in the case of Suleiman), and mostly puzzling, as they appear to have no interiority or subjectivity at all: they are silent, passive, and impassive observers. This chapter therefore aims to account not for a distance between narration and interiority (where interiority is kept as a kind of a secret, a last vestige of privacy), but for the difficult notion of a passive character that has no interior life at all, and subsequently for the kind of aesthetic-political engagements this position allows for.

### **Experiments in Passivity: Structures of Feeling in the Oslo Era**

Adania Shibli's first piece, published in 1997 in *Mashārīf*, a well-established Palestinian cultural monthly, was a review of Elia Suleiman's film *Chronicle of a Disappearance*. Shibli was a twenty-two-year-old student at the time, and this was, as she readily confesses in the review, her first experience as a film critic. Writing a film review, she remarks, is like entering a dark room and imagining all that it may or may not contain: ignorant of the rules of the genre, the uninitiated critic has absolute freedom with regard to both content and form (Shibli "Ḥiwar" 139). Shibli takes full advantage of this freedom, and composes an idiosyncratic, associative, and personal essay titled "A Conversation With\About the Cinema of the Orient after Watching *Chronicle of a Disappearance*." Despite being a dabbler in film criticism, or perhaps because of this, she boldly asserts that Suleiman's work is "the birth of an Oriental cinema" ("Ḥiwar" 143).

What is the meaning of this phrase? Shibli of course recognizes that there has been cinema in the East before. Yet much of this cinema, she writes, was created "through Eastern eyes, but from a Western perspective." Its images were strange, random, or incomprehensible,

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<sup>80</sup> I borrow the term "scandalous" from Wendy Anne Lee, who names the effect of another im-passive character, Herman Melville's *Bartleby*, "a scandal of insensibility" (1405).

since they were merely supplementary to the dialogue and plot. With tongue-in-cheek irony, Shibli explains that this is due to traditional Oriental aversion both to the image and to the gaze, suppressed “since the time of Yahya ibn Mahmud al-Wasiti [13th-century Iraqi Islamic artist]” in favor of the word (139). “Why this sudden Oriental desire for images?” she asks, “Have words lost their magic? Or is this just another attempt to imitate the West, which itself is full of imitation?” (140).

Shibli’s polemic is partly in jest, and is heavy with sarcasm. Yet the quick chronology she draws up of a belated Eastern renaissance and a relationship of imitation to the West shows how the politically strained terrain of origin and originality, explored in Chapter One, continues to haunt Arabic production, and cinematic production in particular (how did we get from the seven *mu’allaqāt* to the seventh art? Shibli asks rhetorically.<sup>81</sup>) In Suleiman’s cinema she seems to find an authentic model for the production of a local – Oriental – image. Suleiman does not beautify anything, she writes, nor does he ridicule his objects. He creates non-banal images of the banal (143).

Ironically, the model of the gaze that Shibli associates with Suleiman’s work is anything but “authentic,” but rather is excessively contrived. Shibli begins her review recounting a minor predicament – the previous evening she had dropped a piece of tomato and stained the one shirt she owns that is appropriate for the film screening, as a result of a strange experiment: Shibli was trying to eat her salad using her left hand instead of her right, an unpracticed and unusual skill. Despite the unfortunate outcome, Shibli remarks on the eerie pleasure of using the wrong hand, the hand one cannot so easily control, for such a simple task. Luckily, the name of the film,

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<sup>81</sup> The *mu’allaqāt* are seven poems considered to be the highlight of poetic expression of the pre-Islamic era, as well as timeless emblems of Arabic eloquence.

*Chronicle of a Disappearance*, reminds her of a product in the supply cabinet designed to “disappear oil stains,” and the evening is saved (“Ḥiwar” 138).

Shibli returns to this anecdote at the very end of the review in order to characterize Suleiman’s cinematic technique, which she identifies with a fascination with experiences of banal passivity, or compromise of self-control (the word *salāṭa* or “salad,” is spelled the same way as the word *sulṭa* or “authority,” making it effectively impossible to establish whether Shibli’s game is to “eat a salad” or to “handle/manage control”). Watching the banality of daily life onscreen reveals something hitherto unknown, she writes, akin to “the joy of not being able to control one’s left hand” (144).

This little-known connection between Suleiman and Shibli is the starting point of this chapter. As Shibli’s anecdotes and comments on Suleiman’s film illustrate, both artists share a passion for studying passivity, lack of agency, or self-deactivation. Both seem to relish the experience of looking at one’s own body as if from the outside, from the vantage point of a detached stranger, challenging the assumption of a body controlled and inhabited by intention. As such, both have little interest in a Cartesian subject divided into a willful mind and obedient body, or to use alternative terms, an autonomous interiority that manifests or conceals itself in a self-governing body. Their works emerge from the contention that the body is still something to be discovered; that there is pleasure, or at least value, to be found in weakness and in the passive experiments of yielding power.

In a political setting that demands political commitment of its artists, Suleiman’s films have been criticized, by both Palestinians and non-Palestinians, for complicity, defeatism, or lack of national commitment (Suleiman “A Cinema of Nowhere” 101). Shibli’s work could similarly be critiqued for withdrawing from the public political sphere to spaces of individual and private



contemplation. How can these works' portrayals of impassive and affectless characters be read as political projects?

Suleiman and Shibli both associate their characters' radical immobility and emotional opacity with their political conditions. When asked about the passivity and paralysis of his films, Suleiman claims that "it comes from the conscious or unconscious acknowledgment that the dominant force that rules over you cannot be shaken" (Suleiman "The Occupation" 70). Shibli, too, notes that her writing is "a reaction to the ugliness of movement," resisting both physical and affective mobility while reflecting the increasingly restricted mobility of Palestinians (qtd. in Awda). Impassivity is a politically ambiguous subject position: It acknowledges the limit of one's agency, but also inquires, as Shibli does in her little salad experiment, after what can be claimed and achieved beyond agency, power, control.

This chapter attends to the scandal of positioning an affectless and passive character at the heart of a political crisis. It traces how the Palestinian situation in the late 1990s and early 2000s has become one of "crisis ordinariness," to use Lauren Berlant term, a crisis or impasse embedded in the ordinary, which must be managed and navigated continuously (10). It then identifies the impassive as that which implodes the movement of the ordinary, rendering it absurd. In this chapter, impassivity is identified with a resistance to reading and a resistance to analysis: the impassive character betrays no emotion and no will, and therefore cannot be read. The resistance to analysis is embodied in two genres: the boring joke, which is the primary genre of Suleiman's films, and the frustrating unfocused snapshot, which is the form of Adania Shibli's writing. Despite their similarities, Suleiman's wide-shots and Shibli's zoom-ins emerge as two different modes of resistance to reading and analysis. While Suleiman's images are pre-deciphered and overdetermined, Shibli's writing demands careful decipherment, which replaces

the work of interpretation. In both cases, this chapter claim, once impassivity is adopted as an aesthetic practice it cannot remain neutral.

### **Post-Oslo Regimes of Movement**

The post-Oslo period has been characterized by increasing limitations on the movement of Palestinians into and within the West Bank.<sup>82</sup> Emerging gradually since 1991 (when the first closure was imposed on the West Bank) and consolidated between the Oslo accords and the years following the Al Aqsa Intifada, this “regime of movement,” subjecting to Israeli control the circulation of West Bank people, goods, and services, marked control of movement as a central political technology and form of population management (Kotef 27-29; Azoulay and Ophir 19-21). During this period the Israeli military set up a tight network of roadblocks, both permanent and temporary, on the roads between ‘Israel’ and ‘Palestine’ (the spatial border became increasingly difficult to distinguish with the construction of separate roads for Israelis and Palestinians) but mostly within the West Bank itself, severely hampering the possibility of free Palestinian movement between the villages and cities of the West Bank. As Kotef wrote in 2011, “the density and location of checkpoints mean that all Palestinians have to pass through at least one checkpoint, whenever they need to move beyond the boundaries of their villages, towns, or cities” (30).

It is therefore not surprising that the checkpoint emerged, in this period, as a frequently used metonymy for the occupation as a whole, its cinematic proliferation leading critics to

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<sup>82</sup> The Oslo accords (1993 and 1995) were a set of agreements between Israel and the PLO which were supposed to outline the end of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the establishment of a Palestinian state, and the withdrawal of Israel from most of the Occupied Territories. The first Oslo agreements changed Israel’s mode of control in the OPT, handing control of some areas to the Palestinian authority. The peace process came to a stop, however, after the failure to reach additional agreements and the eruption of the 2000 Intifada.

identify an emergent genre of roadblock movies (See Gertz and Khleifi). As a clear, physical manifestation of obstructed agency, the checkpoint came to be associated with a familiar set of affects and emotions, from frustration to rage. In Suleiman's and Shibli's works, the checkpoints are unusual nodes of emotional intensity, appearing in stark contrast to the impassivity and fragmentation that are their signature style.

In Suleiman's *Divine Intervention*, the checkpoint is the site of one of the few sustained storylines, and provides some of the most memorable and spectacular images in the film (and by far the most cited). E.S., the movie's silent protagonist (played by Suleiman himself) lives in Jerusalem, while his nameless lover lives in Ramallah; their rendezvous take place at the no-man's-land of the parking lot at the al-Rahm checkpoint, between the two cities. When they meet they sit in the car and watch the checkpoint as if it were an all-too-familiar movie, while their clutched hands perform an elaborate and erotic dance. In an unusual close-up shot, the camera zooms in on the couples' hands for a long period, displaying a rare instance, not only of human touch, but also of reciprocal human interaction, in a film that is mostly devoid of dialogue. The checkpoint is also the locus of a number of the movie's fantastic scenes, enacting scenarios of illicit crossing by mobilizing familiar cinematic images and tropes.<sup>83</sup> During one of the lovers' rendezvous, E.S. blows up a red balloon bearing a caricature image of Yasser Arafat. This ambiguous symbol – a parody of a threat, stamped on a hot air balloon – captures the soldiers' attention, and E.S. and his lover steal across the border into Jerusalem. In a second scene, E.S.'s lover, wearing a pink miniskirt and sunglasses – the clichéd ensemble of a femme fatale – walks across the border, her resilience and erotic appeal apparently paralyzing the soldiers, and even

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<sup>83</sup> Gil Hochberg notes the use of cinematic citations and parodist repetitions in *Divine Interventions* as a critique of the dominant modes of representation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Hochberg *Visual Occupations* 69-73; see also Bresheeth 205).

collapsing the phallic symbol of control and surveillance from which they dominate – the military watchtower.

The checkpoints in *Divine Intervention* make the protagonist's passivity explicit, but they are also loci for creative, spectacular fantasies of empowerment, virility, and destruction.<sup>84</sup> These are unusual scenes in a film that depicts a silent and passive observer, and largely adopts this impassive perspective. Similarly, in Shibli's short story "The Game of Countless Specks of Dust" ("al-Talā'ub bi-al-'adīd min dharrāt al-ghubār," 2001, henceforth "Dust"), which I return to below, the checkpoint generates excessive and destructive feelings of aggression and resentment, strikingly different from the emotional vacuity that characterizes *Touch* or Shibli's second novel, *We Are All Equally Far From Love* (*Kulluna ba 'īd bedhāt al-miqdār 'an al-ḥub* 2004). For both Suleiman and Shibli, encounters at the checkpoint are extreme limit cases, as they provide a concrete manifestation of obstructed mobility and curtailed agency.

The checkpoint "regime of movement," however, and the limitations it imposed and continues to impose on Palestinian mobility, is only part of a larger sense of stasis characterizing this period. The failure of Oslo illustrated the dead end of the peace process, leaving Palestine more fragmented than ever before while still under Israeli control, and subject to increasingly violent interventions. The continued expansion of the settlements diminished any possibility for a continuous Palestinian state, and the relatively well-defined vision of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict dissolved into uncertainty and a sense of political and historical stasis. Under the leadership of the Palestinian Authority, the national movement for Palestinian liberation was redefined as a project of statehood framed through neoliberal institution building, turning from appeals to communal agency to individualistic responsibility (Khalidi and Samour

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<sup>84</sup> As Anna Ball notes, these fantasies are also traditionally gendered despite their subversive potential, repeating the trope of a passive male visionary who projects his active(ist) national fantasies onto a desired female icon (Ball 24).

6-7). Israel has shifted from a declared commitment to “solving the conflict” to an explicit stance of “conflict management,” an approach that has no end in sight (Bar-Siman-Tov 9-40).

The notion of stasis and “stuckness” in this period is not limited to the physical restrictions on Palestinian movement and mobility, but emerges from the concept of an historical and political dead end, as well as a sense of ongoing crisis that has become *ordinary*, with no clearly imaginable end in sight. Suleiman addresses this condition when he speaks about the differing forms that occupation takes within Israel and in the West Bank:

The occupation of 1948 Israel is no longer militaristic, there’s no longer a military government with tanks and soldiers in the streets and all that. It’s become psychological, economic, denial of rights, humiliation in all its forms, and it is manifested in the film by the ghetto atmosphere... In the 1967 territories, obviously, the occupation is overt. It’s as blunt and pornographic as it was for 1948 Palestinians, but with the difference of time. (Suleiman "The Occupation" 70)

Lauren Berlant has called this condition *crisis ordinariness*; unlike trauma, crisis ordinariness is “not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary, that unfolds in stories about navigating what’s overwhelming” (Berlant 10). Suleiman’s and Shibli’s anti-narratives, devoid of progress, turning points, or resolutions emerge in tandem with this crisis ordinariness, grounded in a situation in which routine violence has become so habitual that it is embedded in one’s psychology. In Palestine, this ordinariness is called *hamatsav*, the Hebrew word for situation, has become a colloquial shorthand for the totality of the

Israeli-Palestinian conflict, migrating into Palestinian-Israeli Arabic as well. Speaking about the *matsav*, the situation, is a mode of speaking about the occupation and the struggle against it as an ongoing, static, state of being, fluctuating but never coming to an end. Anything can be blamed on “the situation,” an inescapable condition by definition.

### **Elia Suleiman’s Stuck Narratives**

The salient feature of Suleiman’s films is their “non-linear episodic narratives,” or fragmentary structure and resistance to plot (Abu-Remaileh 1). For some critics, this characteristic amounts to a “dismantling of the very act of story telling,” or a complete rejection of form (Dabashi 160). Little attention, however, has been paid to the *actual* forms these episodes of daily life take in lieu of linear chronicity. Both movies have a similar structure: Their protagonist, known only as E. S. (though he is never named in the films) is a filmmaker visiting Israel/Palestine from his exile abroad, much like Suleiman himself (who also plays E. S. silently, without saying a word). Both films begin in Nazareth, where E. S.’s parents lives, the second part of both takes place in Jerusalem, and the third, significantly shorter in both films, takes place in Ramallah. Despite the similarities between the two films, *Divine Intervention* incorporates scenes of “hyper-visible” fantasy, in the words of Gil Hochberg, particularly in one extraordinary Palestinian ninja scene, which are an explicit departure from the restrained stasis that characterizes Suleiman’s work otherwise.<sup>85</sup> To some extent, this departure can be explained by the historical developments that took place between the productions of the two films. While *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (1996) was shot in the immediate aftermath of the Oslo accords,

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<sup>85</sup> Hochberg argues that while *Chronicle of a Disappearance* advances a “poetics of invisibility” while *Divine Intervention* advances a “poetics of hypervisibility,” both modes resisting a the demand to “represent the unrepresentable” or to fill the representational void (Hochberg *Visual Occupations* 59).

when the Palestinian citizens of Israel seemed to have been forgotten in the context of the vision of a Palestinian State, *Divine Intervention* (2002) was shot after the eruption of the 2000 Intifada, when the Palestinian global image was dominated by acts of violence and resistance.

Nevertheless, my reading attends to that which remains similar between the two films, the many scenes of routine, anecdotal, and non-contextualized encounters. The scenes of the “ghetto” of Nazareth, in both *Chronicle of a Disappearance* and *Divine Intervention*, are episodes of daily street life, featuring characters that do not exist beyond these anecdotal encounters. They are mundane, repetitive scenes characterized either by silence or by long, rambling monologues, and shot with a static camera from distant or removed angles. Most critical discussions of the films summarize them briefly as episodes of “passivity, in-fighting, and paralysis,” quickly moving on to the more exciting or action-filled episodes (Marks 80).<sup>86</sup> Yet, as they make up the majority of the two films, I maintain that it is important to resist the attraction of the film’s extraordinary or fantastic moments, at least for a moment, in order to ask how the static scenes attend to the condition of “crisis ordinariness” described above.

The governing structure of the ghetto episodes can be gleaned from a monologue in *Chronicle of a Disappearance*. E. S., who is “making a film about peace,” holds a number of meetings throughout the film, presumably for research, and this meta-scene, titled “Appointment with the Writer: a Story that Could Be Made Into a Film” (minute 30:00) is one of them. E.S. is absent, but we can assume he is taking a position behind the camera, merging for the moment with Suleiman. The Writer, depicted by the Nazarene poet Taha Muhammad Ali (1931-2011), walks into a static frame featuring an armchair and sits down. “I am going to tell you a story, a story that could have been a film,” he announces. “I visited my grandfather who was in the

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<sup>86</sup> In “Violence and Laughter,” Patricia Pisters offers a notable exception, analyzing the interaction of Deleuzian “virtual” and “actual” images in a number of these scenes from *Divine Intervention*.

Turkish army for three years... I asked him, ‘Grandpa, tell me a story about Istanbul.’” The grandfather proceeds to tell the following story:

Here’s a story you’ll never forget. We were stationed 15 minutes away from Istanbul. At lunch, the lentils were full of worms. I had 5 coins, and I was fed up with the worms. I would cross the street, pass by a bookshop, a clothes shop, until I reached the public garden. There, a man with sparkling pans cooked lamb heads, nicely spiced, with saffron and all. He’d serve me a head in two hot loaves of bread. I’d sit on the nearest bench, eat, throw the remains in the bin and go home. The beauty of Istanbul is beyond comparison.

Three years later, the writer returns to his grandfather, and asks him again for a story about Istanbul. “I thought he’d tell me a story with young people, adventure, and a tall green-eyed girl,” but the grandfather repeats the same story again, adding a few more spices to describe the unforgettable lamb head. In 1948, the grandfather is exiled to Lebanon while the Writer’s family moves to Nazareth. They are separated for many years, but after the Israeli occupation, the grandfather is allowed to come back for a visit. He has grown old, but when prompted with the same question, he tells the exact same story: the worms, the garden, the cooked meat. “Istanbul is the flower of all cities,” the grandfather concludes.

The Writer had promised us, and E.S., a story that could be made into a film; but he goes on to narrate the least cinematic of stories, lacking a narrative arc or enticing visuals, centered solely on the fantastic embodied memory of one meal. The Writer’s narration itself is littered with signposts preempting change or development, triggering the viewer’s expectations: we



expect that time would change the grandfather's story, that the violent histories of dispossession, expulsion, and conquest, would leave their mark on the story, that more –the *actual* story! – would be revealed. Yet these expectations are repeatedly and systematically thwarted, to a comic effect. Eventually, it is not even clear what is the story of which E.S. is to make a movie: Is it the story of the spectacular sandwich that comes to represent the glory of Istanbul? Or is it rather the story of thwarted narrative expectations and of habitual and persistent repetition? Both, of course.

This narrative and affective structure repeats throughout the two films. It is not that nothing happens: it only happens *less* than expected, and then that less happens again, and again, in only slightly modified (and in any case not obviously significant) repetitions. A repeated scene shows E.S. and his friends sitting outside a souvenir shop, watching the few cars and tourists passing by. The men are impassive, smoking, silently watching the empty street. At some point, a manuscript falls at their feet. “It’s raining culture,” one of them comments flatly. The camera, set at a wide angle, does not budge, and neither do the characters. They continue smoking, as before, for another 20 seconds before the scene ends. In another repeating scene, a car screeches to a halt in front of a local fish shop, two men (different every time) emerge and begin to fight. Men rush out from the shop to separate them; they tuck them back to the car and it drives off, without further resolution or development. In another scene in the souvenir shop, a miniature camel statue keeps toppling over, despite the shopkeeper’s repeated efforts to keep it upright.

These short scenes fall into the genre of the Joke: they are based on logic of mechanic repetition, visual witticisms, or ironic juxtaposition. Rather than a collection of fragmented, genre-less episodes, they are equivalent to a stand-up comedy routine, a sitcom, or a joke-collection: vignette-based genres in which the different elements do not necessarily relate to each

other in chronological continuity but are loosely bound together by a fixed context.<sup>87</sup> Lauren Berlant, commenting on “the situation” as a genre, defines it as a temporal structure of “animated suspension:” an uncertain state of continuity, which threatens, at any moment, to turn into an event, but meanwhile continues to tread water (Berlant 81). The situation comedy negotiates this suspended state, producing both anxiety (that things might topple over) and hilarity (as we see the character readjusting to the same).

The logic of a joke, as Kant notes in a short discussion of laughter from the *Critique of Judgment*, is the buildup of expectation, which, upon reaching the punch line, evaporates to nothing, and generates relief (cited in Critchley 7). Suleiman’s jokes, however, are bad jokes.<sup>88</sup> They purposefully deflect the anticipations they set up, and hence emerges their confusing and disorienting effect on the audience [*as well as* their ambiguous pleasure. As Berlant and Ngai write, “comedy is always a pleasure-spectacle of form’s self-violation” (234)]. Sometimes, as in *The Writer’s* story, they end somewhere far less than expected. Sometimes, as in a scene from *Divine Intervention* in which E.S. casually throws a peach pit from his car window and causes a tank to spectacularly explode, they end much too far. Are these jokes? Yes. The form is recognizable. But are they funny? Not exactly. Suleiman’s jokes are anti-jokes: they violate the form of the joke itself, often performing the equivalent of walking away after the setup, a

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<sup>87</sup> The humor in Suleiman’s films was noted by many critics, particularly as a subversive strategy. Najat Rahman reads the famous ninja scene in *Divine Intervention* as an example of fantastic dark humor, “using irony to attack an apparently absurd universe” (483). Pisters describes the “laughter-emotion” circuit in Suleiman’s work, or the manner small gestures carry disproportional violent effects (206). My focus is less on the psychological or transgressive aspect of jokes as destabilizing gestures of resistance to oppressive structures, but rather the form of the joke as a narrative genre, and the manner in which Suleiman repeatedly deflates it. The association between bleak modernist aesthetics and the joke form is not unique to Suleiman; Lisa Colletta observes that “the characteristics that define the modern aesthetic—fragmentation, incongruity, paradox, repetition—are the very characteristics of the comic” (450). The manner Suleiman’s films echo Beckett’s theatre, for example, relies on this comedic form. Suleiman pays a tribute to Beckett in the form of a poster advertising an Arabic production of *Waiting for Godot* at an East-Jerusalem theatre in *Chronicle of a Disappearance*.

<sup>88</sup> In taxonomies of humor, these are sometimes called anti-jokes, or jokes whose impact emerges from their deflation of the expectations of the joke-genre.

breeching of the “joke contract” that Simon Critchley judges to be “bad form or simply bad manners” (Critchley 5). The incongruity in these anti-jokes is between the joke form and the little laughter they aim to produce, the very minor gesture of tension-evaporation they hope to achieve.

Anti-jokes are made even less funny by the use of overdetermined, familiar, and all-too-clear symbols (jokes, after all, rely on the unexpected): An empty souvenir shop called “Holy Land,” a bus stop where no bus ever stops, a camel unable to stay upright, or an executive chair colored like the Palestinian flag. These symbols are evoked to ironic ends that nevertheless keep missing their comic timing, lingering just a bit too long to be properly funny. The bad joke requires a minor affective investment, a minor analytic gesture. An empty souvenir shop called The Holy Land is, after all, an allegorical irony that requires no analysis or strategy of reading. This is not simply because, as cliché would have it, analyzing jokes is a form of explaining them away, but the opposite – the joke is already its own explanation.

The structure of suspended expectation is visually captured in the final scene of *Divine Intervention*, as E.S. and his mother sit and watch a pressure cooker building up pressure and releasing steam. The two display no active anticipation but continue gazing at the pot, even after the mother says the flame should be turned off. The explosion is imminent, the allegory is clear, but the movie ends before allowing for the expected and gratifying eruption. With Suleiman’s jokes, the expectation never evaporates into relief, and we are left with “nothing” of a different kind from that evoked by Kant – the nothing of boredom.

## Unsurveillable Subjects

“Silence and humor are part of the same problematic,” write MacLure et al. “Both *resist analysis*. They are seen to displace or replace something that should have taken place” (492). The thing that *should* have taken place, in lieu of silence or jokes, is serious, sincere, and proper speech, the kind that provides plenty of material for the analyst (or reader/viewer) to work with. The resistance to analysis, in its endlessly morphing forms, is a concern Freud had to contend with from the very first phases of constructing the therapeutic method. In the *Interpretation of Dreams* he states: “Psychoanalysis is justly suspicious... Whatever interrupts the progress of analytic work is a resistance” [Freud 1995 (1900): 517]. Analysis is configured here as a continuous labor of meaning-making (or alternately, meaning-retrieving); it is a procession, a flow that resistance aims to obstruct by means of its recalcitrance.

Defined simply as the obstruction of process, resistance can refer to pretty much anything. Silence is clearly a resistance, since it ceases from producing an analyzable narrative. E.S. is clearly resistant to analysis (psychoanalytic, aesthetic, or political), as far as he offers no words, no engagement, and no symptoms to dissect. Yet, overproduction of speech – the excessive/aggressive verbiage that the characters in Suleiman’s films spew out (his aunt at the beginning of *Chronicle of a Disappearance*, or the neighbor at the conclusion of *Divine Intervention*) is also a resistance to analysis. Overproduction creates *too much* material for any meaningful engagement, simply “filling the air” in order to avoid silence (Comay 246). The jokes’ ironic self-consciousness and over-determination are also a mode of resistance, cheating analysis by over-preparing in advance, preempting the analyst’s interpretation.

Throughout the two movies, E. S. does not reveal any emotion or hints of interior life. E.S. is the pivot of the films, but he is an empty pivot – he never speaks, his face betrays no

emotion, and in most of his scenes he is simply watching, passively and impassively. Lacking in any emotional gesture or symptom, E.S.'s affects cannot be traced, let alone read or interpreted. Patricia Pisters claims that "Suleiman's approach can be characterized as a 'politics of the impersonal,'" since his invented self-portrait is completely undetermined by his personal subjectivity (Pisters 201). She goes on to suggest that E.S.'s passivity "can be seen more actively" than simple political resignation. While I agree with this last statement, I believe that the appeal to "the impersonal" misrepresents the character of E.S. and oversimplifies Suleiman's work.<sup>89</sup> Pisters associates "the impersonal" with "*a* life," primal to any identity. E.S., in this account, becomes a *one*, an everyman (not incidentally male), and his lack of subjectivity maintains an openness that allows for universal access (217). At the same time, Pisters problematically collapses the character of E.S. with Suleiman himself. While E.S. might have no subjectivity we can speak of, to identify him as a universal "*one*" or everyman is to ignore the various particular systems and orders he encounters and that produce him as a subject: as a Palestinian, as an Israeli citizen, as a man, or as an autonomous outsider (a category he has more access to as a man than he would as a woman). Instead, I suggest focusing on E.S. not as an impersonal, but as an *impassive* character, resistant to analysis. It is precisely in scenes in which E.S. comically rubs against these institutions that the paradoxical "activism" of his impassive stance emerges distinctly.

One such scene takes place in *Chronicle of a Disappearance*, when a troop of soldiers burst into E.S.'s East Jerusalem home to perform a search. E.S. is prepared for their arrival,

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<sup>89</sup> Pisters eventual argument is that there is no inherent contradiction between Deleuzian philosophy and a political stance, a point that holds in principle. Her analysis, however, suffices with a gesture indicating the existence of politics (as when pointing out that the tank, which E.S. so casually explodes, is of political concern) rather than an analysis of the politics of the film's aesthetic. As she writes, "the whole scene is hilariously absurd, which could be read allegorically as the absurdity of the whole political situation," (206). As noted above, Suleiman's anti-jokes and ready-made allegories already anticipate such a reading, preempting the desire to reduce his cinema to political allegory.

standing at the door, but despite his readiness to be seen, courteously entering each room before the soldiers and presenting himself to them, the soldiers pay him no heed. As a scene of violent intrusion and surveillance, it markedly lacks affects such as paranoia, outrage, or alarm. It is as if E.S.'s affective blankness makes him invisible to the over-animated, excited soldiers that had entered his home (Hochberg *Visual Occupations* 65). The deadpan that E.S. displays in this scene is regularly compared to masters of slapstick and silent comedy, such as Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, or Jacques Tati. Like these characters, he runs up against powerful institutions or machines, but he differs from them in one significant way.<sup>90</sup> When Keaton and Tati encounter modern mechanized or alienated systems, they collapse in "wobbling, mushy heaps," in Ngai's words (Ngai 294). E.S. on the other hand, remains hermetically solid. He is resolutely impassive, unmoved (both physically and emotionally) by the encounter with the violent, chaotic system that surrounds him.

In the following scene we hear, through a military radio transmitter that E.S. had found, a detailed account of everything the soldiers encountered in the house: two doors, four windows, a fan, a painting of a chicken, four chairs, a Japanese textbook, a man in pajamas. Gil Hochberg points out that this scene demonstrates "the invisible force of invisibility: the political and poetic potential found in being unseen" (Hochberg *Visual Occupations* 65). E.S.'s absolute passivity and impassivity orchestrate the overly-animated, mechanized, and absurd movement of the Israeli border police. He remains hermetic and immobile, an object among other objects, as the activity of the military force is magnified and choreographed to the level of absurd slapstick around him. It is not E.S. who collapses in the encounter with the world, but rather the world

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<sup>90</sup> Suleiman recognizes these similarities, but denies direct influence by these filmmakers, which he says he only watched after *Chronicle of a Disappearance* was made (Suleiman "Elia Suleiman Interview" 84).

around him begins to lose its phallic virility through the fatigue of exhaustive lists and automated action.

E.S.'s impassive observation creates a strange reversal in the politics and power structures of surveillance, for E.S. himself becomes a surveilling machine, passively witnessing the theatrical, frenzied movement around him. Throughout both films, the cinematic forms of surveillance are prevalent. Suleiman often uses a static shot, featuring an empty street or room into which the characters enter – this technique is particularly reminiscent of surveillance footage, documenting whatever happens to enter the frame. The characters are often shot from a distance, through doorframes or windows, or from top-down angles. All of these suggest the appropriation of the surveillance shot as a cinematic tool.

Surveillance technologies, and the scholarship that studies them, are frequently concerned with an active/passive binary, describing the scrutinized bodies under surveillance as passive and open to invasive and prolonged monitoring, or marking surveillance subjects as passive or indifferent as a result of ignorance, manipulation, or seduction (Marx; Rapoport). Yet there is an inherent tension to this division between active subjects who observe, and passive objects who are under observation, as surveillance technologies become increasingly automatic, passive, and disinterested.<sup>91</sup> Suleiman, adopting the impassivity of the surveilling machine, shows that the passive surveillance device has the power to generate frantic activity around it, rather than the opposite. For long sequences in *Divine Intervention*, E.S. and his lover sit side by side in a car, watching over the checkpoint – surveilling the surveillance apparatus. Their impassive and unrelenting gaze reveals what Hagar Kotef calls “a mode of population management that is based on ... confusion and irregularity rather than regulation” (Kotef 29), for through their eyes the

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<sup>91</sup> See Kotef's overview of the transition from “spontaneous” checkpoints to digitized, biometric terminals in the West Bank (42-49).

soldiers emerge as orchestrated and mechanized puppets, and their action becomes a slapstick performance.

This reversal unfolds as a scandal. As surveillance technologies increasingly focus on turning the body and its gestures into strings of data, “interiority” became defined precisely by its unavailability to the surveilling machine.<sup>92</sup> Thoughts, emotions, memories, are often theorized as a reservoir of freedom, subversion, or resistance, which cannot be tracked or completely controlled. The resistance of E.S., however, does not emerge from an interior realm of freedom or privacy, as he seems to have no interiority at all. It is precisely this *emptiness*, the admission that there is nothing further to monitor or control, which emerges as a resistance strategy in and of itself, since the impassive subject is un-surveillable and cannot be monitored. Instead, E.S.’s passivity, of mind and body, is able to render the movement around him absurd and empty of meaning. It makes the frantic movement of the state and its forces lose its agential logic, emerging as a desperate, ridiculous form of inertia. By the final scene of *Chronicle of a Disappearance*, this feat is complete: E.S.’s parents are asleep on the sofa, while E.S. himself is hidden in the shadows in the background, watching the darkness. Meanwhile, on the television set, the Israeli flag waves persistently, absurdly, to mark the end of broadcasting for the day. The characters are utterly impervious to this movement, and to the sound of the Israeli anthem playing in the background. Their impassivity renders movement absurd, depleting it of its political value.

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<sup>92</sup> Science fiction fantasies of penetrating this realm are becoming reality. The Israeli defense forces have been developing algorithms that can “predict,” based on Palestinians’ online activity, future lone terrorist attacks. Hundreds of Palestinians, according to IDF spokespersons, were arrested preemptively, for crimes they have not (yet?) committed. See Hirschauge and Shezaf, “How Israel Jails Palestinians.”



## **Impassivity Beyond the Limits of Power**

The characters in Adania Shibli's first two novels, *Touch* (*Masās* 2002) and *We Are All Equally Far From Love* (*Kulluna ba 'īd bedhāt al-miqdār 'an al-ḥub*, 2004), though radically different from Suleiman's slapstick incongruence, are similarly impassive, refraining from movement or emotional expression. Even though the narration follows the characters and their perception closely (while maintaining a third person perspective), they remain opaque and resistant, foreign and unyielding. Like Suleiman's film, the novels are composed of short scenes and fragments that do not clearly connect together. Yet while Suleiman's work is explicitly grounded in Palestine and in the complexities of contemporary Palestinian identity, Shibli's published novels lack any geographic or historically specific markers: places, years, or even names. Only scattered mentions, which enter the characters' spheres of attention as if by chance, allow tentatively associating the narrative with Palestine. The sparseness of the text, which focuses on individual, minute perceptions and gestures, deems such identifications superfluous.

The short story "Dust" (2002), however, is strikingly different, as it contends with the very particular experience of crossing the checkpoints between Jerusalem and Ramallah, and with the reality of daily Palestinian life in Jerusalem. Read as a choppy, day-by-day account of the encounters, thoughts, and emotions of a young female Palestinian protagonist, "Dust" directly engages the experience of obstructed agency and mobility, chronicling its intrusive and destructive effects. Reading "Dust" and its emotional intensities allows contextualizing and explaining Shibli's turn to "autistic perception" and impassive expression in the longer works.

"Dust" concerns the crumbling-away of any stable stance of defiance when facing the attrition of daily, minor oppressions. The narrator, a young woman from Jerusalem who periodically crosses the checkpoint to Ramallah in order to visit friends, admits that these visits

have become more of a duty than a source of social pleasure: she keeps to them regularly in order to defy the checkpoints. Yet, even this action makes less and less sense, as the act of crossing becomes increasingly punishing, involving violent or humiliating encounters with soldiers and children, and complex calculations in order to avoid even minor complicity with power. Since she owns no car, the narrator crosses the checkpoint on foot, walking through the pillowy layers of dust covering the narrow dirt path running by the road. The dust becomes the most critical and disturbing aspect of the experience, a material residue of the checkpoint that the protagonist must carry with her: “Dust. This is how the disaster managed to seize everyone. Even those walking on the most neutral roads. My hair my face my hands my clothes, all heavy with dust and despair” (Shibli "Al-Talā'ub" 302). Dust makes no distinctions; it envelops everyone, even those that try to stay neutral and uninvolved.

What initially appears to be a minor complaint becomes a pertinent metaphor for the operation of power: the manner dust clings, penetrates, pollutes; it is in the environment one walks through and the air one breaths, and it has a lasting physical, and sensory quality to it. The dust has ambivalent political significance for a protagonist who wishes to maintain her independent, defiant stance: On the one hand, the narrator's dusty shoes are proof that she passed through the checkpoint just like everybody else. It is filth she must bear, she says, a payment for her privilege as someone who can “freely” cross the border (307). On the other hand, the dust sticks, takes over her home, infiltrates her, illustrating that it is impossible to walk through the occupation's daily regimes of movement without becoming soiled. The dust of the checkpoint leaves no unoccupied space, tainting any individual agency or attempt at defiance. “But what can I defy,” the narrator sarcastically asks, “if those checkpoints are now set up inside me!” (303).

The infiltration is first experienced as aggression: The protagonist, irritated by the clinging filth, yells at a friend's son for no reason, stares menacingly at a little girl in the post office, curses at a hapless taxi driver. She grows impatient, rude, full of rage, which she eventually turns against herself in self-loathing. "Living asks nothing of me but self-destruction" (306), she says, as she grows reluctant to rise from her bed, to leave her house, and to face the routine of violence of the outside world. Increasingly, however, she is also persecuted by the anxiety of becoming, or being seen as, a collaborator. Every small act can become a mode of collaborating with power: speaking or staying silent; taking this taxi rather than the other; every act can potentially look suspicious.

Overcome by paranoia, the narrator tries to find a means to insist on her own, uncontaminated agency. When soldiers stop and ask her why she is carrying a passport rather than an identity card, she starts to scream:

"because I'm free because I'm free because I'm free..." I scream and scream and scream. Just like that. I do nothing but scream. I scream like a madwoman. I scream because I am not a collaborator. (309)

The soldier hands her the passport and politely asks her to leave – a gesture that depletes the narrator's reason for yelling. But what will people think if they see this? She asks herself. I must yell again so they will think I am a madwoman rather than a collaborator. Her yelling is no longer a form of protest or an insistence on freedom. The scream becomes a means to show those around that she is not a collaborator, even if that means she would look insane. Even the act of

screaming, supposedly the last resource of the oppressed body in the face of power, becomes implicated in the paranoid game of power and collaboration.

This problem of power's ability to contaminate whatever it touches threads through Shibli's entire oeuvre. Shibli's writing rarely romanticizes resistance, acutely aware that "resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault *The History of Sexuality* 95).<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, her work stages continuous attempts to find a position beyond power's limits. In a theatrical work composed in 2013 for an Edward Said commemorative symposium, Shibli addresses this question in the most direct way possible – by speaking to power on the phone.<sup>94</sup> In "A Phone Call," a panel moderator, who identifies herself only as "an engaged artist," receives a phone call from the "most powerful person in the world." She is interested in interrogating the perverse appeal of power, but as her (unheard, ungendered) interlocutor quickly points out, by seeking them out she falls prey to the same attraction to power that she wants to investigate. The work of power once again appears to be contagious: even when trying to challenge it, there is no escape from recognizing it and participating in its game.

Is there a possibility, the artist nevertheless asks, that instead of speaking to power we begin to "speak to" weakness? "What would happen if we start chasing after the weak, and look to celebrate the weakest person in the world?" she asks her interlocutor on the phone. "Simply not to play with the dogs of the powerful, but to jump with the bugs of the weak!" There must be some pleasure, she says, as well as creative resources, in weakness, which we overlook by focusing on power and disregarding weak positions in the world. "It is mad that we are so

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<sup>93</sup> One exception that I am aware of is "A Lesson in the Nature of Revolution," an article Shibli wrote at the beginning of the Arab Spring, which displays atypical optimism. .

<sup>94</sup> The piece was written for the symposium "A Journey of Ideas Across: In Dialog with Edward Said," held in Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin on October 31-November 2, 2013. It is a site-specific work, written as an introduction to W. J. T. Mitchell's invited talk. As the moderator introduces Mitchell, her phone rings, initiating the conversation. The play, under the title "Beyond the Limits of Power," was originally performed by Franziska Dick.

casually expected to reject different forms of being, because we consider them as weaknesses,” she concludes.

Power responds as power does: it casually affirms its powerfulness, setting the theatre on fire to counteract the artist’s challenges, and to provide light for her cigarette. But Shibli’s questions continue to reverberate against this excessive display of potency. There must be some resources that are worth retrieving “beyond the limits of power,” which is incidentally the name of the conference session in the one-act play. In Edward Said’s work, Shibli finds the occasion to contemplate how a sense of weakness could be incorporated into an active system of resistance:

Facing critique through disembodiment, lagging behind, loitering, fidgeting, or nail-biting, all surface as means of resistance against the powerful... The very techniques associated with weakness, such as “failing” and “misbehaving,” could indeed help foster what Said describes on a different occasion as a spirit, not of conformity, but of resistance. (Shibli "On the Journeys" III)

This mode of inquiry leads Shibli from “Dust” to *Touch*. If “Dust” is equivalent to an aggravated scream, presenting itself as an emotionally raw text that confesses all its frustrations, in *Touch* Shibli turns to impassive experiences of weakness and withdrawal from power, to explore what occasions of resistance they can offer.

### **Practiced Autism**

Throughout “Dust,” the protagonist continually attempts to manage her emotions in order to be able to cope with the “crisis ordinariness” of occupation. She claims that she “feels nothing

at all” (305), only to then state that “she feels more than necessary” (306). She is afraid of being overwhelmed by emotion, but she is also afraid of losing the little emotion that keeps her going through the day. Feeling too much and not feeling at all become equivalent, similarly paralyzing.<sup>95</sup> Shibli has repeated this sentiment in interviews, claiming that in order to maintain sanity in Palestine one has to adopt a kind of autism.<sup>96</sup> The neutralization of emotions, evoked also in the epigraph to this chapter, is primarily a defense mechanism: a form of avoiding emotional overload and breakdown. Nevertheless, as an aesthetic technique, such a “practice of autism,” “neutralizing the neutralization,” reveals resources-in-weakness that remain outside power’s invasive and assimilative matrix.

*Touch* is a slim book, and its pages sparsely printed. Like Suleiman’s films, it is constructed of fragmented snapshots rather than linear narrative lines, but its form is carefully structured. The book has four chapters – “Colors,” “Silence,” “Movement,” and “Language” – and every chapter is divided into eight short segments related to its theme, each two or three pages long. The segments are not organized according to any chronological order, though there are a number of key events they return to, as if the narration was cut up and rearranged thematically, or according to the focus on a particular sense, rather than chronologically.

The segments all narrate the experience of a nameless “little girl,” the youngest in a family of nine sisters and a brother. The girl is surrounded by silence; at first she pursues it, escaping the racket of the large family, withdrawing into her own world of silent observation. Then the silence becomes a heavy curtain around her, which she no longer knows how to lift.

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<sup>95</sup> Ann Cvetkovich notes that *acedia*, an intellectual precedent of modern political depression, is described as “a state of not caring,” as well as a form of restless “caring too much” (Cvetkovich 111).

<sup>96</sup> Most explicitly, in conversation with Egyptian writer Ahdaf Soueif, quoted in Soueif’s collection *Fi muwājīha al-madāfi’: riḥla falasṭīniya*. See also Shibli’s short essay, “Indifférente, ou Presque.”

The overwhelming tone in these fragments is of isolation, highlighted by the narrative voice that occupies a paradoxical position: It is external to the girl, yet closely follows her perception, her sensorial input, and her minor gestures. One can say that Shibli returns here to the disorienting effect created by purposefully using one's weak hand: the body appears detached from any subjectivity, it is observed and experienced as foreign.

Against the emotional overload of "Dust," *Touch* is an emotionally neutral narrative. Emotional drama is witnessed here as merely another element in a texture rich with sensual documentation. One of the first episodes, for example, takes place at a funeral, but it is only several episodes later, when the girl's older brother's death is casually mentioned, that the reader understand who was buried earlier. This detail is absent, like many substantial others: the words death or funeral, or emotions such as grief and mourning. Instead, the funeral is narrated solely through the interplay of colors that make up the scene, as observed by the girl. Any affective intensity in this episode relates to material and sensorial discomfort. The girl's dark pants have a hole in the knee; while with one hand she tries to cover the hole, in the other she holds a bottle of coke. The black liquid gradually spills as the crowd pushes back against her, until the bottle is completely empty. The girl stands against the wall, apart from the crowds, and observes:

The ambulance had no white left, after the black drape of women wrapped it. But above, on top of the ambulance, the red light kept spinning inside itself, not veiled by anything, switching regularly from dark red to light red. She waited for its regular return to dark red, so that it would look like the red label on the empty bottle in her hand. (7)

سيارة الاسعاف، لم يعد يبدو منها أي لون أبيض، بعد أن غطّأها ستار النساء الأسود. لكن فوقه، فوق  
السيارة، بقي الضوء الأحمر يلتفتّ داخل نفسه دون أن يحجبه أيّ شيء، متغيراً من الأحمر الداكن إلى  
الأحمر الفاهي بانتظام، وكانت هي تنتظر عودته المنتظمة إلى الداكن، ويشابه في كل مرة الورقة الحمراء  
التي غطت زجاجة الكولا الفارغة في يدها. (18)

The brother's death and the family's grief are subsumed under the drama of colors repeating and echoing each other. The unit making up the girl's perspective is not people, with feelings, desires, and agency, but blocks of color and movement in interaction. The ambulance, rather than a three-dimensional object concealed behind the mourners, is marked by "a white color". The rotation of the ambulance lights is registered as a continuous shift in color. *Touch* is composed in high-resolution, overwhelming in its attention to small details plucked out from their containing and obscuring contexts.<sup>97</sup> As a record of experience, it registers information not according to pre-established hierarchies or concepts, but pre-conceptually, as it were, according to patterns of colors, movements and temperatures. This is perception that has not been parsed yet into existing configurations, but that lingers beforehand, open to alternative assemblies and analogies.

Dance scholar and philosopher Erin Manning calls this mode of unparsed experience "autistic perception." While autism is usually diagnosed as a disorder of social communications (that is, through its external, interpersonal, effects), Manning turns to a growing corpus of interviews and texts by autistic writers in order to articulate a recurrent mode of perceiving the world in an undifferentiated manner:

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<sup>97</sup> It shares this characteristic with Koren's *Funeral at Noon*, explored Chapter Three.



“Autistic perception” is the opening, in perception, to the uncategorized, to the unclassified. This opening, which is how many autistics describe their experience of the world, makes it initially difficult to parse the field of experience. Rather than seeing the parts abstracted from the whole, autistic perception is alive with tendencies that create ecologies before they coalesce into form. There is here as yet no hierarchical differentiation, for instance, between color, sound, light, between human and non-human and what connects to the world. (Manning *The Minor Gesture* 14)

Autistic perception is characterized by sensual overwhelm, not differentiated into categories and hierarchies, but continuous, unprocessed, or unparsed. This mode of perception is not limited, inherent to, or definitive of autism, but, as Brian Massumi explains, “is a mode of perception that is a necessary factor in all human experience, but is lived in different ways to different degrees” (in prelude to Manning *Always More Than One* xxii). Everyone, potentially, has access to this mode of perception, but for neurotypicals, the distribution and division of perception into pre-established categories of self and world, matter and light, color and movement, happens rapidly and automatically.

I have no intention of making a diagnosis of *Touch*’s little girl here: While at some point her mother does comment on an illness that had “begun in the ears and ended in the brain” (Shibli *Touch* 31), such a diagnosis of character is of little interest for analysis of the book’s

unique impassive mode. Instead, I suggest that *Touch* is a literary experiment that *practices autism* as a means of resistance to reading.<sup>98</sup>

Throughout the book, the narrative prioritizes textures over forms and patterns and repetitions over accounts of human agency or intention: In the first episode, the girl is absorbed by the manner the brown of a rusty water tank, and the gold glitter of the rust on her hand, reverberate the colors and rough texture of her woolen dress (2). In a segment appearing under the chapter “Movement,” the writhing of tadpoles under the shadow of a hand is repeated in the dispersing cloud of smoke emerging from the father’s mouth (36-7). The girl’s swaying after a long car ride is echoed in the swaying of the body of a laborer, who apparently hang himself in shame (49). Tragedies and minor events are accorded even space, even attention. *Touch’s* narration follows the girl’s richness of perception, in tune to the minor shifts of the environment, but this leads to her paradoxical disappearance. The girl’s body becomes a series of isolated elements embedded in the environment, engaging in and responding to patterns of lights, shadow, textures, and minor gestures. The episodes elaborate a choreography of non-volitional movement, in which bodies, objects, sounds, colors, and lights interact, without a distinct line of narrative or narration tying between them.

In the absence of prioritization, or subjectivity to latch on to, the segments do not have a proper genre. The generic form they are closest to might be the snapshot, but as “verbal snapshots” of experience, they lack the snapshot’s conventionality. Roland Barthes calls this conventionality the snapshot’s *studium*; the contact, or the shared culture, between creators and

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<sup>98</sup> It is also important not to confuse *Touch* with autie-type, which is the poetic, figurative production created by autistics in collaboration with a facilitator and a computer, and which is the genre Manning studies (Manning *Always More Than One* 155). Julia Miele Rodas sums up the substantive features distinguishing autistic language, diagnosed by autism scholars from a variety of disciplines: repetition, non-dialogic communication, expressive bursts, verbal patterns and order, and linguistic invention (Rodas 173).

viewers that governs the picture's means of communication and that allows for the viewer's "average affect," or general interest (the joke necessitates a similar mode of "cultural participation" in order to work) (Barthes 26-7). Lacking *studium*, Shibli's snapshots also lack *punctum*, that one incongruous or accidental element that stands out and "pricks" the viewer. Put differently, *Touch*'s "verbal snapshots" are all *punctum*, since they are so utterly, and uniformly, foreign in their connections, movements, and highlights, like a snapshot whose mechanisms of focus had gone wrong. They have no heightened moments or lulls, but maintain a steady gaze. While in Suleiman's episodic scenes things happen *less* than expected, in *Touch* the high resolution does not allow anything to actually take place, since action is broken up into minor, impersonal gestures.

### **Not Reading Palestine: the Labor of Decipherment**

Palestine (or any specified marker of place/time) appears for the first and only time in the third episode of the chapter "Language." The episodes in this chapter are all concerned with the encounter with words as material or malleable objects; language does not emerge as a means of communication in these accounts, but rather as a vehicle for further isolation, estrangement or misunderstanding. Either a written language or a hostile language, it cannot overcome the silences. The third segment is about the words "Sabra and Shatila," which circulate around the girl without any clear reference.<sup>99</sup> She hears them on the radio and she witnesses their effects on

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<sup>99</sup> "Sabra and Shatila" are the names of two predominantly Palestinian neighborhoods/refugee camps in Beirut. During September 16-18, 1982, Christian Lebanese Phalangist forces massacred between 800 and 3,600 civilians in the camps, in collaboration with the Israeli military forces. This episode is known as the Sabra and Shatila Massacre, and marks a particularly traumatic and symbolically loaded episode in the Lebanese civil war and in Israel's occupation of Lebanon.

daily routines at home and at school, as her parents and classmates speak in whispers and tears. Not knowing what the words mean, she resorts to guessing:

“*Sabr* was cactus, and cactus plants, wherever they would be found, were always the same, never decreasing and never increasing. So she did not know if *sabr*: cactus had a *shatla*: a seedling form.” (56)

الصبير موجود في الأماكن الموجودة فيها ولم ينقص ولم يزد، فلا تعرف إن كان يوجد للصبير شتل. (84)

While the readers, unlike the girl, do recognize the horrific events condensed in the term “Sabra and Shatila,” they do not have a clear advantage over her, since the segment remains no less confusing for them. Alongside the traces and hints of the massacre, numerous other symbols circulate and create unexpected and disorienting analogies in the short episode. Over the parent’s bed, for example, there is a poster displaying “a woman wearing a dark green dress that exposed her shoulders. She [is] picking light green grapes from a medium vine tree” (56). In the schoolyard, the girl looks at “a part of a *sabr* plant the size of a donkey, which was blocked from view by a donkey standing in front of her” (57). These images come together at the end of the segment, when the girl sits in front of the green board in the classroom:

She turned the chair around, giving her a view of the empty green board. The color of the woman’s dress in the picture was like the color of cactus. The girl tried to understand the meaning of the words *Sabra* and *Shatila*. Maybe they were one word. The word *Palestine* was unclear, except that its use was forbidden. The

color of the green board resembled the color of cactus. She squeezed a piece of white chalk as if juicing a cluster of grapes across the board. [She wrote] “I am a donkey.” (58)

أدارت الكرسي وصارت عيناها على لوح الصف الأخضر الفارغ. لون ثوب المرأة في الصورة مثل لون الصبر. تحاول الفتاة فهم معنى كلمتي صبرا وشتيلا. ممكن أنها كلمة واحدة. كلمة فلسطين غير واضح منها غير مانع استعمالها. لون اللوح الأخضر يشبه لون الصبر.  
أمسكت بالطبشورة البيضاء كقطف عنب عصرته على اللوح. "أنا حمار". (86)

The passage, and the segment as a whole, is full of familiar symbols of the Palestinian landscape: the cactus, the donkey, the grapevine. Yet they do not cohere under the name “Palestine.” For the girl, the referent of “Palestine,” a taboo word, remains unknown. For the readers, the various local-national symbols are dispersed, their relations made random or illegible; they do not come together in any coherent allegory of the nation. Though both Shibli and Suleiman resist the mechanisms that harness image and text to a cohesive national narrative, the use of national symbols in Shibli’s segment is opposite to their use in *Chronicle of Disappearance*. Suleiman evokes a series of overdetermined symbols – their meaning is *too* coherent and blatant, it leaves no room for analysis, or for emotional identification and catharsis. Shibli takes the opposite route: the national symbols appear in her text but fail to attach to any clear national referent. Rather than search for meaning in these connections, or construct a narrative that can bridge between them, the reader is engaged in decipherment, struggling merely to comprehend what is taking place, hoping in vain that one textual observation would lead to others.

This disorientation and its required labor of decipherment are by no means unique to this segment; the two characterize the experience of reading *Touch* as a whole. The segment that concludes with the hanging, swinging laborer, for example, begins with a focus on the father's shoes, goes through the routine of changing shoes upon leaving the house, the blurring of landscape as seen from a moving car's window, the movement of the hair of the laborer's eldest daughter, and concludes with the mother spitting in the father's direction, just before the swinging figure in the shed is discovered (47-9). It requires several re-readings, a back-and-forth movement combing through the text (like the laborer's daughter combing through her hair), in order to piece together the story of the father's betrayal, of the daughter's tainted reputation, and of the laborer's shame that leads to suicide. This exhausting process of reconstruction through minute gestures is built into the reading process: the reader is engaged in decipherment, laboring to construct what had just happened, rather than in analysis or interpretation.

This mode of reading is the result of the text's "autistic practice." Suspending categorization in favor of lingering in a pre-parsed mode of perception, it tasks the reader with the frustrating labor of allocating and dividing a rich, continuous texture of experience into objects, intentions, and relations. The reader inevitably experiences reading as stuckness, loitering in a space resistant to meaning. At the same time, this frustration forces a new mode, unpracticed mode of patience, and an openness to the possibility of conceptualizing and parsing otherwise.

### **Impassivity as Resistance**

The two artists examined in this chapter turn to similarly impassive characters in order to address the sense of Palestinian impasse around the turn of the millennium; characters who do

not move and do not feel. These opaque characters, lacking interiority, agency, or initiative, present a recalcitrant resistance to be read, as do the aesthetic literary forms in which they are embedded: the boring joke, the frustrating, undecipherable snapshot. This chapter demonstrated that despite their similarities, Suleiman and Shibli's works turn to two different modes of resistance to interpretation. As Rebecca Comay summarizes in an overview of modes of resistance in Freud, "resistance to interpretation seems to oscillate between the two extremes of impossibility and redundancy. Either there's an excessive opacity that blocks interpretation or there's an excessive transparency that makes interpretation superfluous" (Comay 256). While Shibli's model aligns with the former, excessively opaque and undifferentiated, Suleiman aligns with the latter, providing the solution to his riddles even before posing them. Comay continues in an observation as surprising as it is simple: resistance may hamper analysis, but it is also crucial for the work of analysis to exist at all (258). If there was no resistance, and meaning was available immediately and evidently, as it were, the work of analysis would be redundant. The work of analysis and interpretation relies on the endlessly creative shape-shifting of resistance, which continues to provide "materials" for the work to proceed.

In this instance as well, resistance emerges as an immobility, a stuckness, that generates frantic movement around it. This can be the movement of power or of violence, but also the movement of reading, meaning-making, and decipherment. The mute, opaque core of the impassive, which is itself resistant to interpretation, to reading, and to monitoring, nevertheless generates analysis' need to reinvent itself anew. Impassivity "choreographs the political," to use Manning's term (*The Minor Gesture* 111), but it does so precisely from a position of withdrawal of agency and control, without, as Shibli requests, "playing with the dogs of power."

## Conclusion

The archive of texts and films brought together in this dissertation defines an aesthetic current running counter to modernity's narratives of development and progressive movement, which I name *impassive modernism*. Impassive modernism is characterized by its commitment to the fixed rather than the moving, the familiar rather than the new, the languid rather than the emphatic. Instead of generating events, impassive modernism tracks routines. Its figure is the impassive subject, an individual who does not move and does not emote, who is content to linger in the present tense rather than progress to the future or retreat to the past.

As a modernist current, impassive modernism can be traced throughout global modernist cultures and medias. To an extent, it aligns with Walter Benjamin's anecdotal departure from Marx's theory of history: "Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train – namely, the human race – to activate the emergency brake" (Benjamin *Selected Writings* 402).<sup>100</sup> Many of the figures and texts evoked in the dissertation share Benjamin's desire to stop the train hurtling towards disaster and get off. Nevertheless, the dissertation's focus on literary production in two non-Western languages reveals the manner impassive modernism emerges from a history of modernity introduced globally as a singular *memory of a future*, outlined elsewhere. As such, impassive modernism introduces an interruption from the margins of global modernist studies, arguing that global modernist formal techniques must be understood in relation to legacies of Orientalism as they negotiate Western cultural hegemony, not simply as an encounter with Western literary forms.

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<sup>100</sup> This is one of the preparatory notes to "On the Concept of History," which does not appear in the final versions of the document.



The works of Mahmud al-Mas‘adi and S. Y. Agnon illuminate the temporal politics of modern literature with which Arab and Hebrew writing had to contend, shaped by Orientalist epistemologies. Both writers toy with the possibility of chronological misreadings of their works, undermining the assumption that modernity necessitates a particular literary form. Instead, they construe the realm of literature as impassive – a realm in which history and periodization play no role. If both Orientalist and nationalist discourses imagined the static and timeless past as a site of mythic origins in, both Agnon and al-Mas‘adi undermine its authenticity by introducing a host of mimics and mockingbirds in their works. At the same time, their texts register a desire for a neutral, universal literary sphere external to the modern politics of time and history.

The impassive mode, as both a formal style and a subjective stance, begins to take shape in the writing of Y. H. Brenner, and in the novel *The Mountain* by Fathi Ghanem. The nonproductive ideal embodied in the act of scratching, either at the earth, as in Ghanem’s work, or at the skin, as in Brenner’s, emerges as an impassive and abject alternative to the progressive ethos of the state, personified in a productive and symbiotic relation to land and the to the nation. Scratching is a nervous, instinctual movement that goes nowhere; it is good for nothing except momentary relief and pleasure. Ghanem’s and Brenner’s abject scratching figures find their correlative in a mode of writing that is not wedded to linear narratives of solutions or arrivals, but remains committed to its present gestures, sufficing with itself.

If in Brenner’s and Ghanem’s texts emphatic and impassive modes of writing compete and clash, in the novellas of Yishayahu Koren and Sonallah Ibrahim the impassive mode takes over, subduing the active and dramatic elements of plot. Koren and Ibrahim develop anti-evental formal techniques, which undermine the liberationist assumptions inherent to the genre of the housewife novel, as well as to the narratives the nation-state tells of itself. Contemplating the

political implications of an anti-evental historical approach, this chapter demonstrates that the impassive characters in Koren and Ibrahim's works, which immerse themselves in household tasks, are not simply practicing withdrawal, but dismantle a political logic grounded in radical ruptures.

In their acute attention to the mundane details of daily life and sensorial input, these characters share much with the impassive protagonists of Elia Suleiman's films and Adania Shibli's fiction. My reading elaborates on the "scandal of impassivity" as it emerges in post-Oslo Palestine. These protagonists are not only removed from an explicit political struggle, but also seem to be evacuated from their own bodies. Their impassive stance generates hectic movement around them, both the absurd and meaningless movement of the state and the ongoing movement of interpretation and analysis. The opaque forms developed by these two artists emerge as *a resistance to being read*, a radical stance rejecting the subjection of the present to the future.

Against the revolutionary promises of emphatic modernism, the texts read in this study are at best, ambivalent: suspicious of progressive politics, wary of emphatic gestures, doubtful of claims of resistance or radical transgression, registering an intense desire for passivity. As such, they resonate forcefully with our times, when popular and hopeful revolutions birth oppressive regimes, and worldwide, the exhaustion with politics-as-usual lead to terrifying expressions of racism and xenophobia. Needless to say, these texts do not offer a better vision against these familiar specters of the past. Nevertheless, my contention throughout this study was that their exhaustion of the space of progressive politics becomes an invitation to put aside our familiar political vocabulary, and seek different temporal imaginaries at this moment of exhausted political visions.

Impassivity points to modes of resistance grounded in disengagement rather than in commitment and activism, and to states of being at a remove from the productive, progressive, and energetic demands of the modern nation-state. It can suggest a host of new metaphors to consider what politics can and should aspire to: Impassivity considers continuities rather than ruptures. It suggests that the right to settle might be more important today than the right to freely move. It considers the value of a performative evacuation of individual interiority in order to allow for new collectivities to emerge. In light of our current knowledge that the future will be quite short, threatened by ecological disasters and limited resources, impassivity suggests that we should focus on a justice of the present rather than a justice to come. Quietly, it asks whether we better aim for utopias of the present, rather than sacrifice the present for utopias of the future.

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