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Post-2003 Iraqi Fiction

Voice, Audiences, and Narrative Authority

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Post-2003 Iraqi Fiction

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Note on Translations and Transliterations

All translations from Arabic are mine except when otherwise stated.

For transliteration, I have followed the IJMES transliteration system. I have retained Iraqi Arabic pronunciations in last names and toponyms that do not conform to Standard Arabic phonetic norms (for example ‘Blāsim’ instead of ‘Balāsim’, ‘Gzār’ instead of ‘Qazzār’).

Riassunto

L'occupazione statunitense del 2003 è uno snodo fondamentale della storia irachena contemporanea. Da un lato, la fine del regime baʿthista ha rappresentato il culmine un ventennio estremamente drammatico caratterizzato da due conflitti internazionali (1980-88 e 1990-91) e dal decennio di embargo (1991-2003). Al tempo stesso, il 2003 ha segnato la fine di un intero modello arabo di stato postcoloniale (El-Ariss 2013), aprendo a una nuova stagione di conflitti civili e di violenza sistemica. In questo contesto, la letteratura irachena ha conosciuto un generale rinnovamento. Per quanto alcune dinamiche tipiche del campo letterario dei decenni precedenti sono state esasperate dai conflitti del post-2003 (Hanoosh 2012), la narrativa irachena di questo periodo si è distaccata dai modi e dai modelli di autorialità e fruizione del Novecento (Caiani & Cobham 2013).

La tesi studia questa nuova congiuntura usando la dicitura di 'dopoguerra' in modo critico, per salvaguardare l'eccezionalità del 2003 come data-chiave nella storia mediorientale e mondiale, e al contempo mostrare le continuità di questa fase con il ventennio pre-2003. In questo senso, le due principali esperienze che definiscono la letteratura irachena del dopoguerra sono quelle che la tesi raggruppa sotto i due termini-ombrello 'guerra' e 'migrazione'. Se la rappresentazione dell'esperienza della guerra è rimasta al centro del dibattito letterario iracheno per tutto l'ultimo quarto di secolo (ʿAbbūd 2003, Khiḍr 2005, Nāẓīm 2008), l'occupazione del 2003 ha reso la violenza armata un'esperienza quotidiana e un fenomeno sistemico. Il rapporto con questa nuova dimensione del trauma e della violenza è, secondo molte letture (Hanoosh 2013, Masmoudi 2015, Milich 2015, Bahoora

2015), all'origine della svolta antirealista della narrativa del dopoguerra. In modo simile, mentre l'esilio degli intelletuali ha caratterizzato la letteratura irachena fin dall'indipendenza, il 2003 ha portato i fenomeni migratori a una dimensione di massa, con un terzo della popolazione che nel decennio successivo all'occupazione ha vissuto qualche forma di *displacement* (Gatrell 2015). Questa nuova dimensione della migrazione ha riguardato anche gli stessi testi, che vivono sempre più in traduzione all'interno di circuiti globali – complice anche un nuovo interesse per la produzione irachena nei paesi parte della coalizione occupante. Queste trasformazioni hanno contribuito a riformulare i paradigmi dell'intellettuale in diaspora, con il passaggio dal modello esilico-profetico postcoloniale a uno basato sulla quotidianità della *refugeetude* (Halabi 2019, Nguyen 2020).

In questo contesto, la tesi indaga le forme narrative della *fiction* del/nel dopoguerra iracheno. I romanzi e i racconti brevi selezionati per l'analisi affrontano a livello tematico i due macro-temi individuati sopra ('guerra' e 'migrazione'), e articolano a partire da essi poetiche in vario modo scettiche nei confronti del realismo. Per studiare i modi concreti di questi superamenti del mimetico, la tesi si concentra sul livello narratologico della voce, e in particolare sulla costruzione di narratori omodiegetici che mettono in discussione i confini dell'io narrante autobiografico. Lo studio di questi io 'estesi' (Pennacchio 2020) è stato inserito nella cornice della narratologica retorica. In particolare, la tesi considera la voce nel doppio senso di *voix-x/voie-e* proposto da Mieke Bal (2001), che si propone di tradurre con il termine arabo *manṭiq*. La voce è intesa quindi come un supplemento alla narrazione, non necessariamente antropomorfo, in cui si

articola l'autorità narrativa attraverso quella che James Phelan (2005) chiama 'narrative progression'.

La prima sezione della tesi affronta testi che partono da un paradigma narrativo 'naturale' (Fludernik 1996) per decostruirlo alla luce dell'esperienza del dopoguerra. Il primo capitolo si concentra sull'intreccio tra la *life narratives* e fantastico in due romanzi di formazione ambientati tra la guerra del 1990 e il periodo successivo al 2003: *Sāʿat Baghdād* (2016) di Shahad al-Rāwī e *al-ʿIlmawī* (2019) di Murtaḍā Gzār. L'analisi si concentra sulla caratterizzazione di due narratori bambini come figure centrali della tensione tra familiarizzazione e straniamento dell'esperienza traumatica. In particolare, i narratori dei due romanzi riprendono e rovesciano il paradigma del narratore corale della letteratura realista araba, e al contempo assumono una postura autoriale che decostruisce costantemente il paradigma fantastico (o realista-magico).

Per problematizzare la ricezione e l'autonomia letteraria, il secondo capitolo affronta un'altra forma non-finzionale di *life narrative*, la 'storia d'asilo', ossia la narrazione che i richiedenti asilo devono produrre per essere riconosciuti come rifugiati. I due testi selezionati, il romanzo *Irāqī fī Bārīs* (2005) di Ṣamūʾīl Shamʿūn e il racconto breve 'al-Arshīf wa-l-wāqiʿ' (2012) di Ḥasan Blāsim, riprendono ironicamente la struttura dell'intervista per il riconoscimento dell'asilo. In questo capitolo l'attenzione si concentra sull'inattendibilità del narratore come strategia volta a sottolineare la finzionalità della 'storia d'asilo' ufficiale e a mettere in discussione le aspettative di trasparenza e parresia dei lettori, sia dell'originale arabo sia della traduzione.

La seconda parte della tesi è dedicata alle forme narrative innaturali e più prettamente anti-mimetiche. Il terzo capitolo presenta una panoramica del topos della narrazione post-mortem, ampiamente presente nei testi appartenenti a quello che Bahoora (2013) definisce 'gotico postcoloniale iracheno'. L'analisi affronta alcuni romanzi e i racconti di Azhar Jirjīs, Burhān Shāwī e Ḥasan Blāsim, e si occupa in particolare delle strategie per costruire una retrospezione (mimeticamente) impossibile. Il quarto capitolo affronta due testi in cui i narratori omodiegetici e corporei si trasformano in voci semi-onniscienti e immateriali: *al-Mashṭūr* (2017) di Ḍiyā᾽ Jubaylī e *Miyāh mutaṣaḥḥira* (2016) di Ḥāzim Kamāl al-Dīn. Entrambi i romanzi usano strategie metafinzionali per portare in primo piano il processo di costruzione e decostruzione di un io unitario e nazionale.

Il capitolo conclusivo situa le quattro figure di narratori individuate come paradigmatiche (il bambino, il richiedente asilo, la voce post-mortem, e la voce onnisciente in prima persona) all'interno di una più vasta interrogazione della soggettività nella narrativa irachena contemporanea.

Introduction

In November 2003, a few months after the fall of Baghdad, ʿUday Rashīd began filming *Underexposure*, the first movie produced in the country after the US occupation. The title refers to the expired Kodak tape on which the film was shot. This low-contrast, underexposed photography forms the story's background metaphor, questioning the limits of representation: 'Have you seen any colour in the street? Nothing is clear, everything is underexposed: the film stock, our lives' (Rashīd 2005). The materiality of the tape is part of the larger unit of war-torn Baghdad, as it condenses a twenty-year history: imported from Europe during the 80s, it had remained 'poorly stored' in the Department of Cinema throughout the war with Iran (1980-88), Desert Storm (1990-91), and the subsequent embargo. It had then been stolen in the lootings that followed the US-led invasion of 2003: Rashīd himself tells us about buying the tape from some of the looters (Rashīd 2007:66). On this apparently unsuitable, long-expired support (the Arabic title, *Ghayr ṣāliḥ* literally means 'not appropriate'), the images of newly occupied Baghdad contrast starkly with the videogame-like realism of those exposed by the media of occupying countries.

Yet, the intertwining of representation and experience symbolised by the material support of the film does not result in a documentary narrative. *Underexposed* is in fact a docufiction that juxtaposes real interviews with fictional ones, and with a metafictional plot devoted to the making of the film itself. The underexposed Baghdad filmed by Rashīd is explored through an 'inappropriate', supplementary fiction that runs parallel to the

fragments of presence and experience but is unable to re-configure them. Rashīd has indeed described his urge to write the film as an unmet desire for fictional sense within a chaotic experience: 'When I would spot someone breaking in and stealing something from the Department of Cinema and Theater in Baghdad [...] I would turn my head and look for the camera and for a director who would say to me after a while, "Cut! End of scene"' (Rashīd 2007:70).

The mediating instance that *cuts* together the documentary and the (meta)fictional in the film is a first-person voice over. Such voice surfaces only occasionally, reading from the Standard Arabic of what looks like diary entries. It does not provide strong causal links to the fragmented storyline, nor does it *explain* the long, descriptive shots of the city. Rather, its presence brings to the fore the making and unmaking of narrative authority, the failed attempts to produce a unified plot that could configure, and redeem, the documentary and the fictional. The meta-plot represented by this off-screen 'I' is thus parallel to that of the Kodak tape: the addition of a voice-off is both the cause and the consequence of the film being *ghayr ṣāliḥ*, of its lack of (narrative) *definition*.

The case of *Underexposure* powerfully illustrates how the study of form (of the narrative 'support' of the story) calls into question historical issues of artistic autonomy and of narrative authority. How does the experience of post-2003 Iraq condition the possibility and the authority to *tell* a fictional story? How does Iraqi literature invite its audience to read experience *through* the texture of fiction? This thesis addresses these questions from the point of view of the construction and deconstruction of the written equivalent of the voice-off in *Underexposure* – first person narrators. How does the addition of a narrating-'I'

shape the production and the reception of stories written in/about the extremely traumatic conjuncture of post-2003 Iraq? How do Iraqi novels and short stories problematise and dramatize the testimonial and the fictional element of character-narration? Drawing mainly from narrative theory, the reading proposed here will look at the 'content of form' of contemporary Iraqi texts that in various ways oppose mimetic representations of the post-2003 experience. This formal study does not exclude 'reality' from its scope, as it allows us to problematise form within the (increasingly global) circulation of Iraqi literature.

'After Iraq': Iraqi Fiction in the Postwar

In 'Experience and Poverty', Walter Benjamin tackles the 'flood of war books' published in Europe after World War I. What he notes of this literary landscape is the divorce of art from experience: modern war contradicted the very possibility of experience *as* narrative. The result, for Benjamin, was an art with no narrative nor narrators, an art dominated by the absence of voice: '[w]asn't it noticed at the time how many people returned from the front in silence? Not richer, but poorer in communicable experience?' (Benjamin 1999:731). Like Benjamin's World War I, the US invasion of Iraq marks one of the great crises of contemporaneity, but also a traumatic shift in the history of representation. The theoretical works that label extreme contemporaneity as something happening 'post-2003' are many. With a significant slip, some of these texts paradoxically define this historical turning point with the geographical label 'after Iraq', thus pointing to the effacement of the *country* itself (at least from discourse) as one of the founding moments

of a broad cultural turn.[1] While Benjamin's 1918 epitomises the irreparable departure from experience and the birth of modernism, 'Iraq' has been used as a shortcut for the turn-of-the century crisis: a discursive entity, an emblem of how de-realising strategies could be used to the destructive aims of the postmodern Empire.[2] Already at the time of the UN bombings of 1990, Jean Baudrillard famously stated that the First Gulf War 'did not take place': the televised footage of the bombings was constructing a virtual violence in which no space was left for the materiality of conflict. Werner Herzog's 1992 documentary film *Lessons of Darkness*, defining itself as a 'requiem for a country we have destroyed' represents one powerful artistic constructions of this metonymy of 'Iraq' as the paradigmatic postmodern apocalypse, with its long shots of burning oil fields and abandoned military vehicles. Rather than aestheticizing violence (the main accused moved to the film at the time), Herzog's film seems to base its poetics on the absence of 'communicable experience'. One of the most significant scenes is indeed a paradoxical non-interview with an Iraqi woman suffering from aphasia since the extremely traumatic loss of her son. Herzog's storytelling juxtaposes Benjamin's question with the one Gayatri Spivak asked about the subaltern: could the victims of post-wars speak? Were Iraqis 'after Iraq' as virtual as the war(s) that targeted them?

Twenty-five years after Herzog's film, Iraqi writer Sinān Anṭūn, who had left the country after the 1990 war, devoted his novel *Fihris* to an ever-incomplete encyclopaedic archive

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[1] So did for example a 2006 issue of New Formations titled After Iraq. Reframing Postcolonial Studies (Lazarus 2006), or Rosalyn Deutsche's book Hiroshima after Iraq (2010)

[2] See for instance Slavoj Žižek's thorough discussion of ideology Western discourses about on the war in *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* (2004). The discursive preparation of the war on Iraq has played a central role in the development of Critical Discourse Analysis (see Van Dijk 2008) and media studies (see Castells 2009:165-188).

of the untold stories of the 2003 war in Iraq. Faced with the difficulty of this task, one of the novel's many narrators echoes the question of 'Poverty and Experience'. Yet, crucially, it does so in the first person: 'How can I write what happened?' (Anṭūn 2016:20). 'What happened' had of course a profoundly different meaning within Iraq, and across the Arab world, than it has in narratives of 'the world after Iraq'. From an Iraqi perspective, 2003 needs to be read within the broader picture of a long chain of historical traumas. Coming after eight years of war with Iran (1980-88) and the first Gulf War (1990), with the repression of anti-Baʿthist movements and the ensuing harsh decade of international sanctions, 2003 represents a crisis within a much broader one. In this sense, my choice of the US invasion as a starting point may indeed show a certain degree of arbitrariness in obscuring the historical roots of the conflict. As Anṭūn himself has pointed out (Anṭūn 2016b), international attention to the 'last war' in Iraq, and to its immediate aftermaths, may well risk diverting attention from the genealogy of violence and oppression under the Baʿth regime, or from the immense damages caused by the embargo imposed on the country after 1990. Yet, there is little doubt that the US occupation has represented both the culmination of these longer dynamics, and an unprecedented breach in the symbolic order of Iraqi and Arab contemporaneity. At the most general level, Tarek El-Ariss points out that 2003 'put into question the viability of the nation-state as a political and social model emerging from *Nahda* discourses and practices' (El-Ariss 2019:17). Rather than the afterlife of a *country* 'we have destroyed', the occupation of Iraq marks indeed the crisis of a *state* and of the institutions that had shaped social life not only throughout the Baʿthist regime, but since the inception of its postcolonial history.

By privileging 'post-2003' or 'post-war' over other labels pointing to continuity (like 'post-Baʿth'), I do not intend to subscribe to naïve exceptionalism reading the US occupation as a moment of 'liberation', nor as theatre of a postmodern apocalypse. In this sense, the notorious 'post-' prefix will be used to point at 2003 as marking a significant crisis in Iraqi experience *and* to the elaboration of larger unit of crisis that this temporality enabled. The 'post-war' period, as I conceive of it, oscillates within the space of Anṭūn's question, between the present of writing and the temporality of 'what happened' (*mā ḥadatha*). As El-Ariss argues, *ḥadath* refers to an event as 'something that allows time to take off to a new patch' (Deleuze & Guattari, quoted in El-Ariss 2013:3), but is also used to denote particular traumatic events that could not be defined otherwise (*al-aḥdāth*) (*ibid*.). In this sense, the term 'post-war' I will be using points both to the new configuration of narrative and reality after the invasion *and* to a space of elaboration, a 'sit[e] of catastrophic unfolding that could not be named and thus reveal themselves only through a process of interpretation and analysis' (*ibid.*).

This use of post-2003, moreover, follows a periodisation widely present in criticism of Iraqi literature. Since the occupation, more novels have been published in Iraq than in the whole of the 20th century (Shamʿūn 2019:12). This 'flood' of narrative (to use Benjamin's phrase) has been a constant theoretical preoccupation of writers and critics and has reshaped the very structures of narrative communication in the country. In this respect, the end of the Baʿthist period could not be underestimated. Yasmeen Hanoosh has devoted a seminal essay to the increased polarisation between 'state literati' and 'street literati' throughout the postcolonial history of the country: writers and

intellectuals, Hanoosh argues, kept situating themselves along the porous line separating official and dissident writing, each claiming access to modernity across narrative forms (be they social realism, or a reference to *turāth*, or the fantastic) (Hanoosh 2012). In this polarised situation, from the 1980s on, war and migration were the main factors shaping this distinction.

The eight-year war with Iran, especially, led to a vast mobilisation of state-sponsored literati dedicated to the production of enthusiastic propaganda writings, which critic Ḥasan Nāẓim describes, with a phrase reminiscent of, but sensorily opposed to Benjamin's post-war muteness, as *kitāba ʿamyāʾ* 'blind writing' (Nāẓim 2008:29).[3] The sociological and artistic implications of such mobilised literature have been studied at length by dissident intellectuals like Salām ʿAbbūd (2002, 2014) and ʿAbbās Khiḍr (2005). ʿAbbūd's work, in particular, is a monumental genealogy of the 'culture of violence' in Iraqi literature, which he sees as hegemonic not only in state-sponsored works but also in most writing by the first waves of exiled intellectuals. Yet cultural oppositions and conflicts were still possible, especially within poetics that relied greatly on aesthetic autonomy and anti-mimeticism: the main figure in this respect is Muḥammad Khuḍayyir, a writer and an intellectual whose insights will be of great importance in our following discussion.[4]

The 1990 war, and even more the deadly embargo that followed (1990-2003), would then represent a major shift in this polarised literature defined by the discourse on violence.

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[3] On state-sponsored literature, see also Stepan Milich's seminal article on ʿAbd al-Razzāq ʿAbd al-Wāḥid, one of Saddam's favourite poets (Milich 2011). Milich addresses the 'positioning' of the poet by looking both at his own public stances and at the critical reception of his work across the 2003 war.

[4] For a discussion Khuḍayyir's fiction and its relationship with the war with Iran see Caiani & Cobham (2018).

As Hanoosh points out, literary production shrank throughout the 1990s, with the state unable to sponsor the literary machine, and an unprecedented rise in unofficial literature, often in the form of 'photocopy books' (Hanoosh 2012:397). The extremely harsh living conditions imposed by the embargo caused new waves of migration that exacerbated the binary opposition between exilic and state literati. As Hanoosh puts it, '[s]lowly the idea that the act of leaving Iraq was in and of itself an authentic identity quest worthy of risk and validation was being inculcated in the collective consciousness of Iraqi culture as a new measure of sovereignty and individual's success' (*ibid.*, 401).

In Hanoosh's reading, the 2003 war did not radically alter the social dynamic of binary opposition between official and disenfranchised intellectuality. Rather, the two key elements around which, according to Hanoosh, intellectual oppositions were constructed – war and migration – were both exasperated and radically altered. In her study on *War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction* (2015), Ikram Masmoudi brilliantly shows the continuities and discontinuities of literary elaborations of the three great conflicts of Iraq's recent history. Masmoudi's study focuses 'on the tangible experiences of the soldier, the war deserter, the suicide bomber and the camp detainee' (Masmoudi 2015:2) as paradigmatic of the production of 'bare life' by both the Baʿth regime and occupying powers. Masmoudi's reading manages to show the continuity between such traumatic experiences within the frame of necropolitics.[5] In this context, narrative authority emerges as both constructing and contesting the 'state of emergency' in which bare life can be produced. The US occupation of 2003, however, radically altered the workings of

[5] Building on Michelle Foucault's concept of biopolitics, Achille Mbembe defines necropolitics, as 'the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die' (Mbembe 2003:11)

necropolitics, marking the passage 'from the centralisation of violence to its chaos [*min markaziyyat al-ʿunf ilā fawḍāhā*]', as Salām ʿAbbūd puts it (ʿAbbūd 2014:101). The civil war of 2006-08, in this respect, marks a crucial turning point in this decentralisation of necropolitics: a violence originating across the borders of the nation-state, in which old 'state literati' and oppositions intellectuals were equally at risk. It is this new form of necropower what constitutes the focus of some of the most celebrated works of the 'flood of war books', like Aḥmad Saʿdāwī's *Frānkishtāyn fī Baghdād* (2013).

The post-2003 period also witnessed a dramatic increase in displacement movements that were already at work throughout the Baʿth period: of Masmoudi's four paradigmatic necropolitc experiences, two (the war deserter and the camp detainee) are predicated upon displacement and flight. Since 2003, however, the experience of displacement has become ubiquitous: by 2015, Iraq's refugee population, within or outside the country, was calculated at around four million, one in eight inhabitants (Gatrell 2015:173). Such an increase could not have left the old divide between 'home literature' (*adab al-dākhil*) and 'exile literature' *adab al-khārij* unaffected. As we have seen, sociological readings like Hanoosh's and ʿAbbūd's emphasise the artificiality of the divide, pointing both to the common aesthetic grounds and the porousness of the border separating the two 'literatures'. With the 90s, the formation of US-sponsored exiled intellectual groups moved the 'state versus street' dynamics to the diaspora community itself (Hanoosh 2012:402-403), while the 2003 occupation gave the distinction between occupier and occupied prominence over any other (*ibid.*). Furthermore, as Fabio Caiani and Catherine Cobham note, the binary opposition overlooks the 'various forms of internal exile' (Caiani

& Cobham 2013:242), and the struggle for the autonomy of narrative. To this complex and nuanced picture, the explosion of Iraqi literature has added an increased global circulation of Iraqi works in translation, giving Iraqi fiction, be it written within or without Iraq, a new set of possibilities and expectations.

In this context, the very paradigm of exile, within Iraq or outside it, undergoes a radical change, as Zeina Halabi's study on *The Unmaking of the Arab Intellectual* (2018) convincingly argues. Taking 1990 (the first Gulf War) as her point of departure, Halabi tracks the crisis of the national paradigm of the intellectual born from the *Nahḍa* project. Poets-prophets like Mahmoud Darwish and intellectuals as Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Halabi points out, incarnated the prototype of the exiled intellectual, speaking truth to power and embodying 'the emancipatory ethos' of the postcolonial period (Halabi 2017:3). In a chapter titled 'The Banality of Exile', the study draws on Edward Said's 'Reflections on Exile' (Said 2000:173-187) as paradigmatic of a 'metaphorical state of displacement that removes intellectuals from the enclave of power to its margins, which ultimately allows them to foster a critical approach to power with the word as their tool' (Halabi 2017:12). In his essay, Said explicitly differentiates between the exilic intellectual and 'the refugee, the displaced person, mass migration' (Said 2000:174). Yet the mass character of migration since the turn of the century, along with the crisis of pan-Arab nationalism (a crisis in which 2003 plays a major part), have fostered the crisis of the exilic intellectual's authority and foregrounded an 'ordinary exile' (Halabi 2017:124). Quoting from Palestinian film writer Elia Souleymane and Lebanese Canadian novelist Rawi Hage, Halabi shows how this new sensibility 'grounds exile back where it started: in wars,

occupation and political persecution' (*ibid.*, 125). In this sense, what Vinh Nguyen has called 'refugeetude' (Nguyen 2019) reverses Benjamin depiction of the 'modernist' post-war in which art is characterised by a divorce from experience. While Hanoosh shows how intellectual divisions in the Baʿth period were grounded in the struggle over 'modernity', the chaotization of violence and the generalisation of refugeetude call for a re-thinking of aesthetic autonomy. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor Adorno describes the autonomy of the work of art as an estrangement from the experiential:

> Form works like a magnet that orders elements of the empirical world in such a fashion that they are estranged from their extra-aesthetic existence, and it is only as a result of this estrangement that they master the extra-aesthetic essence. Conversely, by exploiting these elements the culture industry all the more successfully joins slavish respect for empirical detail, the gapless semblance of photographic fidelity, with ideological manipulation. (Adorno 2002:226-27)

In the post-war space, this dialectic of the aesthetic and the extra-aesthetic is reconfigured by the need of coming to terms with the *aḥdāth* of 'war' and 'migration', traumatic experience and his narrativization circulating on a global scale. Writing about Latin American literature, Josephina Ludmer (2007) has proposed a preliminary theory of what she calls 'postautonomous literatures'. Contemporary globalised texts, she argues, radically alter the process of aesthetic experience by establishing 'a diasporic relation between the literary and the non-literary'. To look at these transformations in the context of post-2003 Iraq, we must interrogate the 'form' of which Adorno writes: *how* can I write what happened? What narrative techniques are employed to 'order' the extra-aesthetic? How do these forms question the border of the aesthetic itself?

Corpus: Unsettling Realism

To answer these questions, this dissertation will provide a narratological reading of twelve narrative texts featuring character-narrators (seven novels, and four short stories), all published between 2005 and 2019. With a view to problematising narrative forms, texts have been selected by looking at the narrative techniques employed. At the most general, the corpus embraces narratives that accept the challenge of post-war literature, engaging with the elaboration of the post-2003 *aḥdāth*. Yet, from the point of view of narrativization, all texts discussed in this study distance themselves from what Adorno calls 'photographic fidelity', elaborating poetics that deeply problematise, and in most cases openly oppose, the role of mimesis in the emplotment of traumatic experiences.

Thematically, all the texts focus on the two main axes of crisis I have pointed to thus far: war and migration. These two thematic elements, as has been seen, are by no means theoretically separate, nor are they meant to isolate post-2003 Iraq as an 'exception'. For the purpose of my analysis, 'war' and 'occupation' are conceived of as fundamental plots (what rhetorical narratology calls 'narrative progressions'), shaping paradigmatic temporalities and demanding particular forms of readerly engagement. In short, my use of a generic word like 'war' points to a variety of historical events and processes (conventional war in the 1980s, invasion, occupation, civil/sectarian conflict) onto which the narratives cast plots of continuity and/or fragmentation. In this respect, my reading will be particularly concerned with the construction of characters that narrate *across* different traumatic moments of recent Iraqi history, as do the protagonists of two

Bildungsroman like Shahad al-Rāwī's *Sāʿat Baghdād*, and of Murtaḍā Gzār's *al-ʿIlmawī* (Chapter One), and more encyclopaedic novels like Ḍiyāʾ Jubaylī's *al-Mashṭūr* (Chapter Four).[6] At the same time, this narrative re-configuration of war often takes place within the temporality of exile, which constitute the paradigmatic afterlife from which *aḥdāth* can be named in retrospective. Thus, considerable attention will be devoted to such *exilic* positionings, which are occupied and contested by poetics explicitly claiming 'refugeetude' (as do Shamʿūn's and Blāsim's works, studied in Chapter Two), and by poetics of the supernatural hinged on trauma and its temporal structure (Chapter Three).

In this latter group of texts, the focus shifts from the construction/deconstruction of historical continuities to the temporality of present/presence. Within this set are texts engaging with terror, and with its correlate horror, as the affect relating to what ʿAbbūd calls *fawḍā al-ʿunf*, i.e., civil/sectarian conflict. These narratives, epitomised by Ḥasan Blāsim's and Azhar Jirjīs's short stories, construct extremely condensed and paradoxical temporalities of explosion (in the transitive sense of the Arabic *tafjīr*) as the *collapse* of presence and deixis, and a temporal *lapse* in which horror is induced. In this respect, a great deal of attention will be devoted (in Chapter Three) to the narrativization of death within the context of what has been called the Iraqi Gothic. As noted also, for instance, by Haytham Bahoora (2015) and Stephan Milich (2015), the supernatural, the gothic, and the horrific have gained an unprecedented centrality in Iraqi literary environment. In Bahoora's discussion, which will be addressed at length in Chapter Three, such anti-

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[6] The paradigmatic example of such encyclopaedic trend in contemporary Iraqi literature is indeed Sinān Anṭūn's *Fihris*. While it will not feature in the close reading, Anṭūn's novel is widely present as a theoretical reference throughout the text.

realist forms are better suited to 'articulate the unspeakable, lost, repressed, or deliberately silenced historical narratives of victims of this structural violence' (Bahoora 2015:189). Stephan Milich, on the other hand, describes the poetics of horror more within the frame of trauma studies:

> This new Arabic trauma literature carries forward reflections on the possibility of literary writing during and after human disasters (and the difficulty in adequately representing and narrating them) in a new way, [...] raising the question of the referentiality of literary texts by simultaneously engaging the assumptions of modernism, deconstruction, and psychoanalysis [...]. (Milich 2015:286)

Both Bahoora and Milich see 'traumatic fiction' in the light of a general critique and reorganisation of mimesis and referentiality. 'Trauma literature' opposes to representation as *taṣwīr* a 'performance' (*tamthīl*) that makes the reader/spectator to 'stand before' (*yamthul*) a violence that is both real and unspeakable, present and removed by historical and geographical distance.[7]

In the post-war narratives analysed here, 'war' thematises the temporality of trauma, the emplotting of both the unspeakably fast violence of the present and the long chain of traumas of the past (a chain that a novel like Ḥāzim Kamāl al-Dīn's *Miyāh mutaṣaḥḥira* traces all the way back to the Babylonic period). My equally generic use of 'migration', on the other hand, refers to the spatialised processes of displacement and deterritorialization of post-2003 literature. The texts I have selected thematise issues of

[7] In ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī's rhetorical system, *tamthīl* means 'representation through analogy' (on this see Harb 2020:35). The theme of analogy and allegory will be covered in Chapters Three and Four.

presence and absence through diasporic plot which question their own hybrid positioning with respect to experience and audiences. In this sense, my focus will not be the displacement of (real) authors, but rather the displacement of narratives and narrative communication. The increasing interest of world-literary studies in contemporary Iraqi fiction has tended to read it as a counter-discourse addressing Western imperialist narratives. While this counternarrative element is indeed present in post-2003 Iraqi fiction, the risk of overemphasising the documentary and the testimonial in the reception of Iraqi literature, as we have seen with *Underexposure*, has been a constant preoccupation of post-war authors and theorists ever since the invasion. In this respect, the critique of mimesis and the relevance of fiction are often politicised within the negotiation of an autonomous space for literary elaboration.

The 'diasporic relation' of fiction and experience of which Ludmer talks, in other words, does not result in the prevalence of the documentary, but rather in a different topology of the fictional. Introducing the miscellaneous science fiction collection *Iraq +100. Stories from a Century After the Invasion* (2016, published in English first), Ḥasan Blāsim, calls for writers to explore beyond Iraqi's present and immediate past: what authors need most, Blāsim argues, is to write 'about a life that is almost unknown, without relying directly on their own experience or their personal readings of the past or the present' (Blāsim 2016:v). Such 'almost unknown' does not exclude experience and history from its horizon: the fictional futures collected in *Iraq +100* are all built 'after the invasion', and endeavour to construct 'allohistories' as Ada Barbaro points out (Barbaro 2021:362-365). It is precisely the 'if' of fiction, Barbaro argues, that allows these narratives to unsettle

dominant historical accounts (*ibid.*, 370), retracing the borders of the aesthetic and the extra-aesthetic. In this sense, the displacement *of* Iraqi fiction, Blāsim's 'almost unknown' points to a desire to 'occupy the canon' (El-Ariss 2022:8), to subvert the relation of fiction to history. As Ṣamūʾīl Shamʿūn phrases it in the Foreword to another collection of Iraqi short fiction, *Baghdād Nwār* (2018), 'any Iraqi would agree that their lives always looked like crime fiction' (Shamʿūn 2018:12). The texts selected for analysis here all move within the diasporic dimension of Shamʿūn's simile, either by fictionalising non-fictional plots (as do the pseudo-legal narratives studied in Chapter Two), or by reinstating a testimonial element within utterly non-natural narrative frames (as do the 'afterlife' narratives addressed in chapter Four, and the magical realist ones covered in Chapter One).

To study the minute workings of these departures from the mimetic, my reading will focus on the level of narration (which narratology studies under the rubric of *voice*), as the fundamental textual mediation which articulates authoriality and reception. In this respect, the texts selected highlight a ubiquitous preference for first-person narration: all of the twelve works object of analysis are narrated by character-narrators. Such turn towards the narrating-'I' is indeed telling about the rhetorical dimension of post-war narratives, marking a shift from the modernist preference for figural narrative situations.[8] Florencia Garramuño has studied the 'return of subjectivity' in Latin American poetics that look for new forms of relation to experience beyond the anti-

[8] I.e. third-person narratives focalised through a character. Iraqi literature has produced some of the highest examples of this technique, at least at an Arab level, in the works of Fuʾād al-Takarlī. On this topic see Caiani (2004, 2007) and Cobham (2004).

subjectivist stances of modernism (Garramuño 2018:89). Far from going back to naïve forms of referentiality and subject-object constructions, Garramuño stresses the anti-mimetic, self-deconstructing nature of what she calls 'post-Selves' (*postyoes*, post-'I's) (ibid., 19).

To problematise this centrality of the narrating-'I' in post-war literature, my reading traces a set of figures that could be define within the frame of what cognitive narratolgist Marco Caracciolo has termed '*strange* narrators' (Caracciolo 2016). The *strange* narrator is studied by Caracciolo as a 'pattern that involves deviation' from mimetic interpretive strategies, thus eliciting creative and varied responses from their audience (*ibd*.). Among the paradigmatic narrators I have individuated are thus both 'deviant' treatment of familiar narratorial figures (as the child and the asylum seeker, covered in Part One), and straight-off unnatural ones (the dead and disembodied narrators Part Two).

Approach: Voice as *Manṭiq*

وصوتُ كلِّ شيء: مَنْطِقه ونطقه
Lisān al-ʿarab, *n ṭ q

At the most general level, studying narrative *voice* in post-2003 fiction means asking the old question of 'who speaks' in the story, by which Gérard Genette defined the term in *Figures III* (1972:225), distinguishing it from the question of focalisation ('who sees'). Within Genette's project of a *grammaire du récit*, the metaphor of 'voice' did not refer to the realm of the 'vocal', but rather to the linguistic category describing the relation of the subject to the verb. On this basis, Genette constructs his well-known topology of relations

between the story and its narrator. In terms of structuralist narratology, character-narration (how can *I* tell what happened?) is understood as homo-autodiegetic narrator, i.e., of a voice pertaining to the storyworld narrating her own story. The universality of this topology, and the very centrality of the question of 'who speaks', however, had already been disputed before the publication of *Figures*. In 1957, Käte Hamburger's *Die Logik der Dichtung* (translated in English in 1973 as *The Logic of Literature*) operated a radical distinction between first- and third-person fiction: for Hamburger, only the latter is truly narrative, as it is based upon an 'epic praeteritus' which, crucially, *needs no narrator* (Hamburger 1993:64). The deixis of presence of character-narration, on the other hand, assimilates it to 'dramatic literature': instead of narrativity proper we find instances of what I have called *tamthīl* 'performance'.[9] From Hamburger's work a whole trend of narratology developed (mainly represented by Anne Banfield and S. Y. Kuroda), that questioned the main tenet of Genette's theorisation of voice: that there *must* be an 'I' responsible for the telling of fiction. These 'no-narrator' theories, which played an important role in the development of 'post-classical' narratology, stress the distinction of literary communication: there is no need for 'voice' in an autonomous, written form of fictional communication. The question of 'who tells' could therefore more aptly be conceived of within the realm of authorship.

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[9] On this distinction of first-person from third-person deixis, the seminal reference is indeed Émile Benveniste (1971). As Benveniste himself cursorily notes, Arabic grammatical terminology for personal pronouns is particularly telling in this respect, defining the third-person as *ḍamīr al-ghāʾib* 'the pronoun of the absent', as opposed to the first-person *ḍamīr al-mutakallim* 'the pronoun of the speaking' (Benveniste 1971:197)

No-narrator theories primarily address narratives that may broadly be described through the label of modernism, and are particularly concerned with 'figural' narratives (what in Genette's terms are heterodiegetic narratives with internal focalisation). First-person narratives, as Anne-Marie Ryan observes, are left out of the picture (Ryan 1991:69). Predicated upon a profound re-thinking of structuralist narratology, but also embracing a much larger variety of fictional forms, more recent narratology has in various ways tried to combine the no-narrator critique of the metaphor of voice and the unity of fiction as an object of analysis. A seminal study in this respect is Mieke Bal's essay 'Voix/voie narrative: la voix metaphorée' (2001). Bal's proposes to disjoint narrative voice from the realm of writing, and to read it as the *addition* of voice to film. Voice appears thus not as an intrinsic property of narrative, but as the result of a process of what we may call, borrowing from jazz music, 'voicing'. In this sense, Bal sees the narrating instance as a 'prosthesis: a supplement, an artifice, but without which the story could not move' (Bal 2001:17, my translation). This theoretical move allows us to historicise voice as a 'rhetorical effect' (*ibid.*) open to a variety of configurations across different contexts and forms.

Yet, this theoretical shift towards voice as a supplement gives us the possibility rethink the anthropomorphic element entailed in the metaphor of voice. In her essay, Bal plays with assonance to coin the term *voie-e* ('way') as an extension and deconstruction of anthropomorphic *voix-x* ('voice'): beyond the idea of an 'origin' for enunciation, *voie-e* denotes voice as a spatial relation, the construction (and rhetorical negotiation) of a 'distance' between the story and its process (*démarche*) (*ibid.*, 24). Bal's historicization and

spatialisation of the metaphor of voice allows us to explore voice as a technology, a construct interacting with and shaping the field of post-2003 fiction: the deixis produced by the narrating 'I's of our texts politicised as a negotiation of authority and distance. On the other hand, the concept of *voie-e* will also help us describe the fictional lives of the 'post-Selves', the extensions to mimetic first-person (what I have termed *strange* narrators) that characterise most texts in our corpus, and shape their relation to trauma and migration.

To refer to this double character of the metaphor of voice, as both the 'voicing' of narrative and the spatialisation of 'distance', in what follows I will be using the Arabic term *manṭiq*. While narrative theory in Arabic usually privileges terms like *rāw*^{in} or *sārid* to refer to the narrating instance, *manṭiq* points both to the 'faculty for speech' (and in this sense is used to translate 'logic') and the *speaking* instance. In this latter sense, the term is used in the title of Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār's *Manṭiq al-ṭayr* (The Conference of Birds) and, in post-war Iraq, in Anṭūn's *Fihris*: in both these cases the term indicates an extension of voice to the non-human.[10] Anṭūn's novel, in particular, is constructed around a series of narrative sketches, each titled *manṭiq*, in which trees, animals, and objects narrate the first minute of the 2003 bombing of Baghdad. Furthermore, the morphological scheme of the word *manṭiq* may be seen as referring to a 'name of place', thus embracing the de-subjectivising of voice that Bal proposes to call *voie-e*: in this nuance, *manṭiq* points to the 'logic' of the story as its 'point of articulation', the necessary supplement of which Bal speaks. To study the *manṭiq* of the narratives selected here will involve looking at the

[10] 'Manṭiq al-ṭayr' is also the title of the opening story from the collection *Ighmāḍ al-ʿaynayn* by the Basran writer Luʾayy Ḥamza ʿAbbās (2008)

strategies employed to negotiate with the reader spaces of articulation in which the narrating-'I' is both expanded and fragmented. In this proliferation of *strange* voices, the mimetic component of voice as the representation of speech (the *voix-x*, or what Richard Welsh calls 'voice as idiom', see Welsh 2007:93) is not eliminated, but rather is constantly destabilised within the space of the *manṭiq*.[11]

To account for the duality of voice as *manṭiq*, this thesis draws particularly from two branches of contemporary narrative theory, that are to a large degree complementary to each other: rhetorical and unnatural narratology. Both are part of the wider renewal of the studies on narrative that has been labelled 'post-classical' narratology. In their general review of these new theoretical trends, Monika Fludernik and Ian Alber indicate four main axes of change compared to structuralist (or 'classical') narratology. On a more basic level, as we have seen in the discussion of the metaphor of voice, contemporary narratology is questioning and reconceptualising the 'geometrical' paradigms of structuralist narratology (Alber & Fludernik 2010). Such restructuration of the field is primarily motivated by the necessity of giving prominence to the reception of narratives and widening the canon of which theory is elaborated. In this respect, criticism of classical narratology is grounded in the necessity of de-universalising it, expanding the

[11] Phelan (2005:20) defines three components of the readers' engagement with narratives: the mimetic, the thematic, and the synthetic. The mimetic refers to the interest in the storyworld and the characters, the thematic to the extra-textual implications of the text, and the synthetic to the text considered as an aesthetic artifact. In my reading I will be constantly moving between these three levels to draw a comprehensive picture not only of the decoding of our strange narrators, but also of their extra- and meta-textual implications.

field of theory to literary traditions other than Western modernism/postmodernism, and to non-novelistic narratives (*ibid.*,3).

While such de-universalisation may still look at a preliminary stage, especially for what concerns the de-colonisation of the canon, post-classical narratology has produced more flexible models to account for the production and reception of narratives. In this respect, the rhetorical approach to narratology, which dates back to the work of Wayne Booth, has asserted itself as one of the more productive fields. As elaborated by James Phelan (2005, 2007b) and Peter Rabinowitz (1987), rhetorical narratology builds on a new emphasis on fictionality as a communicative process, and on a counterintuitive recuperation of intentionality in narrative. Rhetorical narratology, therefore, conceives of fiction as a 'game of indirections' (Phelan 2005:5) mediating a literary communication that is understood as historically specific. Reading is thus conceived of as an act aimed at 'apprehend[ing] the strategic organization of texts' (Fludernik 2019:193), an organisation that must be posited as *intentional* and purposeful.

Rhetorical narratology has devoted great attention to voice, and especially character-narration, as a main site of narrative mediation, and thus of negotiation of narrative authority. James Phelan's discussion of first-person voices is particularly relevant in this direction: Phelan reads first-person narration in terms of a 'narrative progression' aimed at leading the reader to an authorial positioning (Phelan 2005:17). This pragmatic approach allows for a focus on the discontinuities in narrative progression, most notably narrative ironies and unreliability (i.e., when the narrator provides an account that differs from what the reader perceives as the authorial one). The rhetorical negotiation of

(un)reliability has had a particular influence over postcolonial approaches to narrative theory, and will be discussed at length in the first section of this thesis (Chapters One and Two). In the process of 'voicing', a 'gap' (what in Arabic we may call *mufāraqa*) opens up in which narrative authority is exposed and thematised. Yet, as postcolonial narratologist have pointed out, the very notion of reliability may become the site of a conflict over narrative authority across different readings (Puxan-Oliva 2019). In my reading, thus, to point at the processes of (un)reliability will mean to politicise form, and namely the deixis opened by *manṭiq*.

Rhetorical narratology's recuperation of intention in narrative passes through a reconsideration of the author as an active element of literary communication. While models like Phelan's or Welsh's feature authorial intention as an element readers recuperate while making sense of plots, other approaches have devoted a more profound historical attention to the struggle for narrative authority *through* voice. Among this line of thought the contribution of feminist narratology stands out, with the seminal work of Susan Lanser (1992). Lanser reads the construction of female narrative voices in early English fiction through the lenses of discursive authority, i.e. 'intellectual credibility, ideological validity, and aesthetic value conferred upon a work, author, narrator, or textual practice' (Lanser 1992:7). For Lanser, 'narrative voice is a site of crisis, contradiction, or challenge that is manifested in and sometimes resolved through ideologically charged technical practices' (*ibid.*, 7-8). Within this frame, narrative analysis brings back history and politics as essential constituents of narrative mediation, which is articulated in the material communication between authors and (real) readers. In order

to tackle the issue of autonomy, my reading will thus try to locate specific forms of authorisation of fictional discourse, which will shed some light on the diasporic character of post-2003 fiction in a global context. To this aim, some attention will be devoted to the public epitext of the selected works (interviews and reviews chiefly), which shape this struggle for authority from the *hors-texte*.

Finally, the narrative analysis proposed in the following chapters will often approach the field of unnatural narratology. As Jan Alber defines it, '[t]he study of unnatural narrative is directed against what one may call "mimetic reductionism," that is, the argument that each and every aspect of narrative can be explained on the basis of our real-world knowledge and resulting cognitive parameters' (Alber *et al.* 2010:115). In contrast to Monika Fludernik's model of narrative as grounded in 'natural' forms of storytelling, unnatural narratology seeks to study the non-mimetic forms of fiction as irreducible to realist or spontaneous forms of storytelling, thus highlighting the deconstructive potential of the written in creating storyworlds that defy factual reading. Studying our 'strange narrators' within the frame of unnatural narratology will thus mean highlighting the strategies employed to construct and interpret *manṭiq* with no origin, that deconstruct themselves *as* they utter.

Thesis Structure

The thesis is divided into two sections. Section One discusses texts in which non-fictional narrative paradigms are unsettled by the challenges of the post-war conjuncture. Chapter One focuses on the intertwining of the life narrative with the fantastic in two

Bildungsroman set between the 1990 war and the post-2003 period: Shahad al-Rāwī's *Sāʿat Baghdād* and Murtaḍā Gzār's *al-ʿIlmawī*. The analysis will focus on the construction of child-narrators as the fundamental devices for a dialectic of estrangement/familiarisation (*taʾlīf*) of traumatic experience.

To problematise reception and literary autonomy, Chapter Two tackles another non-fictional form of life narrative, the 'asylum story' – i.e., the narrative asylum seekers are required to produce in order to be recognised as refugees. The two texts selected for close reading, Ṣamūʾīl Shamʿūn's novel *Irāqī fī Bārīs* and Ḥasan Blāsim's short story 'al-Arshīf wa-l-wāqiʿ', are built (partially in Shamʿūn's novel and entirely in Blāsim's story) as pseudo-factual legal stories narrated 'for the record'. Thus, in this chapter the focus will be on narratorial irony and unreliability as strategies aimed at fictionalising the legal genre of the asylum interview and questioning readerly expectations.

The second part of this thesis is devoted to unnatural, anti-mimetic narrative forms. Chapter Three presents an overview of dead-narrator trope, which is widely used in texts pertaining to what Bahoora defines as 'Iraqi postcolonial Gothic'. The analysis will tackle novels and short fiction by Azhar Jirjīs, Burhān Shāwī, and Ḥasan Blāsim, and will be particularly concerned with the construction and deconstruction of retrospective temporalities in which the narration of trauma and the 'asylum' plot intersect.

Chapter Four tackles two texts in which the disembodiment of the narrator and afterlife voice assume a metafictional dimension. Ḍiyāʾ Jubaylī's *al-Mashṭūr* and Ḥāzim Kamāl al-Dīn's *Miyāh mutaṣaḥḥira* both revolve around afterlife narrators blending the narratological features of first-person narration with those of an authorial, third-person

narrator (i.e., an omniscient narrator). In this chapter, the focus will be on authoriality as the textual authentication of super-natural 'I's enabled to narrate/disnarrate the nation.

SECTION ONE

(DE)NATURALISING NARRATIVES: WAR AND MIGRATION

1. Negotiating Reliability: Child Narrators and the *Taʾlīf* of the Fantastic

[...] its not like seeing a dead body walking
to the grocery store here. its not like that. its iraq you know
its iraq. its kinda like acceptable to see that there and not—it
was kinda like seeing a dead dog or a dead cat laying—;

(Solmaz Sharif, 'Look')

In the Introduction to his open-work *Basrayāthā* (2017), Muḥammad Khuḍayyir describes his task as a storyteller of Basra as one of reconstructing wonder and strangeness in a city that has lost any sense of the extraordinary: 'while these marvels were once every-day experiences, and indeed caused wonder only through narrative, the events and the situations of our time still await the power of wonder [*ʿajab*] to dress them up and take control of our mouths, ears, and minds' (13). As Khuḍayyir describes it, Basra is a city where the chain of traumatic events in Iraq's recent history has anesthetised the sense of what is extraordinary. Any literary 'composition' (*taʾlīf*) of the city implies defamiliarization, wonder (*ʿajab*), and estrangement (*istighrāb*). In this paradox of *taʾlīf*, which defines the act of literary writing and 'composition' but etymologically points to an idea of 'making something familiar', resides the task of the Iraqi storyteller, as Khuḍayyir sees her. In *Baṣrayāthā*, the goal of narrative is to nullify the anaesthetising power of the chain of traumas in Iraq, redeeming *ʿajab* in a war-torn city.

The turn toward the 'fantastic' and the anti-mimetic is indeed one of the most studied issues in contemporary Arabic literary criticism. Looking at post-2003 fiction in the global

Arabic context, al-Kabīr al-Dādīsī points out that 'today, with the crisis of values the Arab world is witnessing, the almost unintelligible chaos, the conflicts and clashes for which the Arabs themselves have no explanations, the path of the fantastic [*al-ʿajāʾibiyya*] may be the fittest to describe this "non-creative" chaos' (al-Dādīsī, 2018:62). The fantastic discourse is seen by al-Dādisī as an ethical posture adopted by narratives addressing an uninhabitable reality that offers no intelligible stories to realist representations. The 'chaos' al-Dādīsī talks about is 'non-creative' (*ghayr khallāq*) because it does not ask for aesthetic composition.[12] Like in Benjamin's depiction of the aftermath of World War I, people seem to 'return from the front in silence': the chaotic, generalised trauma brought to the surface by 2003 and its aftermaths pushes narrative away from experience. Yet, the chaos defined by al-Dādīsī is equally at odds with aesthetic transcendence – and the fantastic is referred to as paradoxically more suitable to *describe* a catastrophic experience: a narrative form to compose the incomprehensible without sublimating it.[13]

The tension of narratives that choose *ʿajab* stems from their being torn between 'aesthetic and anaesthetic' (Buck-Morss 1992), between pure estrangement and pure naturalisation. As Fabio Caiani and Catherine Cobham point out, writing experimental fiction during the war with Iran, Khuḍayyir himself had to respond to criticism aimed at his alleged detachment from reality. In response, Khuḍayyir developed a profoundly original poetics in which wonder enables narrative to transcend historical experience to

[12] Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht links composition to 'composure' when he refers to aesthetic objects as demanding from their public that they 'be composed' while observing (Gumbrecht 2004:103).

[13] As Lara Harb notes in the opening of her Arabic Poetics, this dialectic of aesthetic and anaesthetic is well known to early Arabic theorisations of *ʿajab* as something that 'fades [...] as a result of familiarity and frequent observation' (see Harb 2020:7)

engage with a planetary dimension (Caiani & Cobham 2019). However, Caiani and Cobham note that such poetics is 'alternative' to that of many post-2003 texts addressing Iraq's recent troubles in a more direct way' (Caiani & Cobham 2018:268). This section looks at natural works that combine this directness with poetics of the fantastic. In the construction and deconstruction of *ʿajab*, narrative voice plays indeed a crucial part, as the supplement that articulates the authorial side of *taʾlīf* (as an expression of narrative authority, or *sulṭat al-ʿajab* in Khuḍayyir's phrase) and its reception (*taʾlīf* as the interpretive strategy called 'naturalisation'). What narrative positionings are produced to defamiliarize the everyday character of violence? How do narrators *authenticate* estranged accounts of 'chaotic' experiences?

The issue of naturalisation has a great relevance to the development of postclassical narratology. Monika Fludernik's influential study titled *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* (1996) has introduced the scare-quoted adjective 'natural' into narratological discussions. For Fludernik, 'natural' narratives are the spontaneous form of experiential storytelling onto which more complex forms of narrativity are based. Drawing on Jonathan Culler's definition of naturalization (Culler 1975:137), Fludernik defines narrativity as 'mediated human experientiality': the process of narrativization entails the recipients' re-cognition of texts 'in terms of the natural telling or experiencing or viewing schemata' (Fludernik 1996:25).[14] This focus on spontaneous ('natural') forms of narrativity avoids positing (Western) realism as the standard *form* of narrative. Rather it addresses mimetic modes as

[14] It needs to be stressed that Fludernik carefully avoids using the term 'natural' in an essentialist way: 'natural' narrativity is conceived of as 'both a construction [...] and a pregiven frame of human cognization' (Fludernik 1996:6)

constructs relying on the readers' ability to naturalise narratives (Fludernik 1996:26-28). By pointing to the natural schemata underlying complex fictional narratives Fludernik's model allows us to look at the ways in which specific narratives construct both *ʿajab* and mimesis *within* mimetic forms, rather than reading them as 'deviations' from a 'realist' norm. Within this framework, the problem posed by Khuḍayyir in the quote above could be rephrased as follows: how can fictional narrative achieve estrangement by employing a mimetic narrative conventions?

The fictional texts discussed in this chapter incorporate and subvert non-fictional narrative genres relating to the life story (as a 'natural' paradigm) and life writing (as a well-established set of literary genres). I will focus in particular on two novels that deploy a poetics of *ʿajab* within an autobiographical frame to construct long narratives of the 1990 and 2003 wars: Shahad al-Rāwī's *Sāʿat Baghdād* (The Baghdad Clock, 2016, hereafter *Sāʿat*), and Murtaḍā Gzār's *al-ʿIlmawī* (The Science-enthusiast, 2019)[15]. Both texts are first-person-narrated *Bildungsromane* that rely on the characterisation of a child narrator in order to achieve de-familiarising effects. The characterisation of child-narrators addresses in the most direct way the dilemma of wonder as aestheticizing/anaesthetising. On the one hand, the child's voice is a traditional device of realist, choral narratives, a concretion of the alley's voice that grants the authenticity to the portrayal of individual characters.[16] Yet, at the same time, child-narrators are a typical device of the fantastic: children are 'aliens within' who can rename a familiar world from a still not socialised perspective. As Giorgio Agamben puts it, the question of

[15] The title refers to 'scientism' (*ʿilmawiyya*): *ʿilmawī* is thus the 'scientismist', the practitioner of scientism.

[16] I am thinking for instance of Nagīb Maḥfūẓ's *Ḥikayāt ḥāratinā* (Stories of our Neighborhood 1975).

in-fancy is one that tests the limits of the human. If the in-fant is the 'worldless', that which comes before language then, Agamben asks, '*how can in-fancy be humanly possible?*' (Agamben 1993:47, emphasis in the original). The infant narrator comes to stand metaphorically for both the pre-verbal belonging to the community *and* the uncanny alien to language, the irreducible to narrative that can only leak through the supplement of voice.

In the case of contemporary Iraq, this double metaphorical significance is amplified by the vastness of trauma in historical experience. Both al-Rāwī and Gzār are part of the generation of the 1980s: born during the war with Iran, they then experienced the events of the 1990s as children. Imagery related to childhood, moreover, is of course central in the public discourse about war, in Iraq and abroad, in its warmongering futurist declination and in critical analyses.[17] In this context, a child narrator inevitably poses a set of ethical and political problems to post-war literature writers and readers. In the non-productive chaos referred to by al-Dādīsī, the child (as a 'creature') is a highly controversial signifier.

To account for the historical and ethical implications of the construction of these narrative voices, my discussion will rely on the 'problem of reliability' – i.e., of the credibility of the narrators compared to the 'norms of the work' (Booth 1961:158). In a recent study on postcolonial narratology, Marta Puxan-Oliva calls for a general reconsideration of the now half-century-old debate on 'unreliability' in narrative. Moving

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[17] On this topic see ʿAbbūd (2002). On a global level, Herzog's *Lessons of Darkness*, which I have quoted in the introduction, is a particularly fitting example of the intertwining of wonder and extreme forms of realism – and a very controversial instance of (an)aesthetisation of historical experience.

away from the binary model opposing purely reliable to purely unreliable narrators introduced by Booth (1961), Puxan-Oliva rejects the idea of a 'default value which is taken to be unmarked 'reliability' (Nünning 2008:42, quoted in Puxan Oliva 2021:9). The assumption of a 'default reliability' rest on a rationalist, anthropomorphic conception of narrative voice that is based on realism (Nünning 2008:42). Both in cases of blatant unreliability and in more nuanced situations, in which the narrator's credibility continually negotiated, the problem of reliability implies a readerly engagement that is largely dependent on historical and contextual assumptions, and that ultimately requires a *political* positioning towards the text. Rhetorical narratology has particularly emphasised the role of author-audience communication in this process.

In *Sāʿat* and *al-ʿIlmawī*, posing the problem of reliability means addressing the ways in which *ʿajab* is leaked and authenticated into a 'natural' narrative frame, which it can ultimately reinforce or subvert. At the same time, the dialogic participation these narrators demand from their audience implies an ethical attitude towards the conjuncture of postwar Iraq – an issue that, as we shall see, has had concrete results in the debate sparked by the publication of *Sāʿat*.

Sāʿat Baghdād: First-person Omniscience and Magical Realism

Sāʿat Baghdad, Shahad al-Rāwī's debut novel, was met with remarkable success in Iraq and across the Arab world, as the book was reprinted three times in the space of a few months after its publication in 2016. This 'domestic' success was followed by international

recognition: the novel was shortlisted for the 2018 IPAF prize, and its English translation (*The Baghdad Clock*, 2019, translated by Luke Leafgreen) won the Edinburgh First Award. Already in the immediate aftermath of its publication, the novel was the object of a raging debate on social media. In an article published in the cultural supplement of the newspaper *al-Madā*, the Iraqi writer Khālid Miṭlak describes many responses to the 'phenomenon [*ẓāhirat*] of *Sāʿat Baghdād*' as a conservative reaction against a novel that was seen as alien to 'high culture': 'What I read was an instant-process [...] that for instance compared the novel to the works of Fuʾād al-Takarlī, Ghāʾib Ṭuʿma Farmān and their likes, as if we were still comfortably sitting in the mid-twentieth century and not in 2016' (Miṭlak 2016). According to Miṭlak, such reactionary criticism from 'us who print our books only to send them to our friends and neighbours for free', failed to acknowledge the novel's 'new sensibility'.[18] This eccentricity of the text emerges mainly through the novel's language, which Miṭlak describes as 'free of the embellishments and wordplay, moving (although maybe not intentionally) beyond the tropes of novelistic writing by Iraqis'. An overview of the reviews posted on *Goodreads* is sufficient to show how the debate on the novel revolves around the issues of the 'immediateness' of narration and language: while positive reviewers focus on the transparency of style and the empathetic relationship they have established with the protagonist, critical responses see the novel's discourse as insufficiently literary and lacking narrative tension.

This ambivalence about the novel's novelty is illustrated by Miṭlak's hesitation, in an otherwise enthusiastic review, about al-Rāwī's *intention* to move against the linguistic

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[18] Here al-Miṭlak is quoting the title of Idwār al-Kharrāṭ's collection of essays *al-Ḥassāsiyya al-jadīda* (The New Sensibility, 1993).

conventions of the literary field. Yet, the reason for the 'simplicity' of language in the text is linked to the characterisation of its child protagonist, 'that at first made me think that I was before a novel written for children, and only later appeared to me as an 'intentionally recovered childhood [*al-ṭufūla al-mustaʿāda qaṣdan*]'. The 'narrative' core of the debate around the literary value of *Sāʿat* lies in this hesitation about the recognition of authorial *intention* behind the text. In a 2018 article published on *al-Mudun*, the Iraqi writer Manāl al-Shaykh denounces the reposting, by some detractors, of an old tweet in which al-Rāwī wrote quite nostalgically about Saddam's epoch. While remaining sceptical about such personal attacks, al-Shaykh nonetheless reads *Sāʿat* as the product of the Iraqi bourgeoisie's ideology, to which al-Rāwī is described as belonging:

> The strange thing for me is how so many Iraqis do not seem to know about the existence of a social class that was once dominant in the social and economic life, and that nostalgia and sense of loss for that period are only natural for those who did not welcome political changes and live in a state of denial [*inkār*]. [...] These usually wealthy families lived mostly on streets where no oil and gas carriages entered, pulled by a horse or a mule, nor did any beggar knock at their door. [...] A class that had no link to the common reality [*al-wāqiʿ al-ʿāmm*] in which Iraqis have lived from the 60s to our time. It is not Shahad al-Rāwī's fault that she was born in a family belonging to such class, but it is her fault that she could not get out of its delusional bubble [*fuqqāʿatihā al-wahmiyya*]. (al-Shaykh 2018)

The issue of realism is here bound to the author's biography, which is superimposed to the (fictional) narrator of the story. Far from being autonomous from historical reality, al-Rāwī's work is judged on the ground of its distance from 'common reality'. The novel's

historical account, the gaze it casts from a postwar position back to the 1990s is indeed emphasised regardless of the fantastic (or, as we shall see, 'magical-realist') genres to which it subscribes. As the pejorative definition of *wahm* ('fantasy' in the sense of 'delusion') shows, *ʿajab* is not judged based on its capacity to generate an autonomous aesthetic response, but as fundamentally 'striated by the exterior' (Garramuño 2009:12). Besides the class character of al-Shaykh's criticism, the debate around *Sāʿat* shows how the anti-mimetic turn of postwar Iraqi literature runs parallel with a troubled change in the idea of literary autonomy that involves a de-aesthetisation of the literary (al-Rāwī's alleged difference from Takarlī), and an emphasis on authorial intentionality.

Rather than claiming the 'death of the author', rhetorical narrative theory allows us to reframe this issue of intentionality in terms of reliability (i.e. the asymmetries in the relation between author, narrator, and audiences), and of narrative progression (the change in attitude that the narrative requires from the audience). Can a child narrator so reliable that she can be considered a 'mouthpiece' of the author? And if she is to some extent unreliable, what ethical and political positioning must the reader reach to recognise the authorial intention? Depending on the readers' answer to that question, the child narrator, as a rhetorical device, can provide either a successfully estranging fantastic narrative about contemporary Iraq or a delusional bubble. As al-Shaykh's argument makes clear, this question engages also the historical specificity of narratorial authority: to socially determined readers, the child narrator's account is highly unreliable *even though* the 'overall logic' of the text does not mark such unreliability –

which results in a conflict between the historical reader and the abstract authorial audience.

I argue that such discordant readings originate in the novel's construction of narrative voice, and from the way in which the fantastic and the realist intertwine within narratorial discourse. *Sāʿat* is indeed a bildungsroman, following an unnamed narrator as she grows up in a middle-class neighbourhood in central Baghdad between the beginning of the 1990s and the aftermath of the 2003 occupation. With the neighbourhood as its exclusive setting, the novel often takes on a choral tone, lingering on the everyday life of its inhabitants. Their stories are told through the juxtaposition of narrative sketches, that are woven together by the narrator's fabulation (Miṭlak talks of *istiṭrādāt* 'digressions'). The middle-class neighbourhood emerges as a privileged point of observation on Baghdad's history, central (the eponymous clock tower lies just outside what is now known as the Green Zone), yet unnamed, detached from the harshest consequences of the catastrophes that invested the city. This paradoxical centrality within the city and marginality with respect to history allows for a metaphorization of the alley, in a way that is typical of the genre Stephan Guth describes as 'community narratives' (Guth 2008). In community narratives, Guth points, out, an enclosed textual space 'has the *function of metaphorically or metonymically representing* the idea of these person resp. groups *belong to a greater whole*' (*ibid.*, 95). In the case of *Sāʿat*, this metaphorical process revolves around the identification of the alley with the protagonist, and through the latter with the larger unit of Iraq.

This detached, almost abstract nature of the setting is mirrored by the depiction of a child narrator that works simultaneously as the mouthpiece of the neighbourhood's choral narrative and as an uncannily unnatural, quasi-omniscient voice. As a matter of fact, the very first pages of *Sāʿat* present us with a narrator that claims to see the dreams of her best friend Nādya:

> Before I closed my eyes, I saw her smiling in her sleep, slowly moving her lips as if she were talking to herself. Surprised, I got closer and put my face directly in front of hers. I saw colourful ghosts moving around her forehead, phantoms I had never seen before appearing and disappearing and coming back again. I was watching her dreams. That was the first time I entered somebody else's dreams. (12)

This early in the novel, the reader is still uncertain about how to naturalise the scene: is the narrator misreporting? Or do we need to postulate a narrative world in which dreams can be read? In his *Living to Tell About It,* James Phelan defines narration as reliable when it provides the same account the (implied) author would. Instances of unreliabilty for Phelan are distributed over three different axes: that of *facts* (the narrator mis- or underreports), that of *ethics* (mis- or underevaluates), and that of *perception* (mis- or underinterprets). Bridging between the narratorial account and the inferred authorial story implies, for Phelan, a narrative and ethical progression that constitutes the overall positioning of the narrative. The opening of *Sāʿat* poses an interesting question in this respect: is the narrator's claim of unnatural narrative powers evidence of her unreliability? This oscillation between different readings links the narratological question of unreliability to Tzvetan Todorov's definition of the fantastic as a narrative

event in front of which we hesitate between natural and unnatural explications (Todorov 1976). Todorov's essay in turn has had a great influence in the development of theories of magical realism, a genre within which al-Rāwī's novel has been placed by many Arab and international commentators (al-Rāwī 2018). In her classic study on the subject, Wendy B. Faris lists, among the five 'primary characteristics' of magical realism, the fact that its readers 'hesitate (at one point or another) between two contradictory understandings of events - and hence experiences some unsettling doubts' (Faris 2005:).

In the passage above, the hesitation of the fantastic involves also evoking formal conventions as to narrative voice, for 'mindreading' is indeed one of the classical attributes of the omniscient narrator. As the debate on the novel's ideology shows, the readers of *Sāʿat* tend to hesitate between an authoritative, transcendent voice associated with the *real* author and the childlike, immanent perspective of the experiencing-'I'. Such oscillation between authorial and character-bound prerogatives is indeed typical of contemporary treatments of 'I'-narration. Filippo Pennacchio addresses blendings of first-person and heterodiegetic narration as 'enhanced 'I's' (Pennacchio 2020:22). The construction of third/first-person narrators, Pennacchio argues, is increasingly perceived as a 'licit' narrative technique and does not necessarily imply the adoption of anti-mimetic interpretive strategies.[19] In *Sāʿat*, this 'natural' mode of the fantastic is quite evident from the setting of the scene where this first mind-reading instance occurs. The narrator has indeed just entered an anti-aircraft shelter during the bombing of Baghdad in the winter of 1991. The reference to the historical event marks a slight form of

[19] I will address cases in which enhanced 'I's do call for non-naturalising interpretive strategies in the next Section (chapters Three and Four).

unreliability, typical the child narrator: her focus on her friend and their games signals an 'underevaluation' of the significance of war:

> At that moment the [anti-aircraft] siren went off. I didn't like its sound. Nobody [*lā aḥad min al-nās*] liked it. I grasped her hand and we run to where my mother and hers were sitting. She stumbled on a big oil lamp placed in the middle of the shelter. The glass shattered. Oil flowed on the floor. The fire stepped a little forward on the moist pavement. We froze on the spot, with the blaze making our shadows move on the opposite concrete wall. (13)

Quoting from Shklovsky's definition of 'defamiliarization', Phelan has defined this rhetorical structure as 'naïve defamiliarization' (Phelan 2007:229), describing it as a kind of 'bonding unreliability' that 'has the paradoxical result of reducing the interpretive, affective, or ethical distance between the narrator and the authorial audience'. In our case, the war is made affectively close to the reader through the child narrator's partial unawareness compared to the rest of the neighbourhood (here marked by the unnecessarily explicit *nās* 'people').

The 'magical realist' hesitation in *Sāʿat*, thus, is linked to a narrator that is simultaneously the mouthpiece of the alley and transcends this realist dimension through an authority both supernatural (hence reliable) and childishly unreliable. The main conflict that drives the narrator's *Bildung* concerns the acknowledging that the alley itself is indeed a delusional bubble: so enclosed and detached from the rest of Baghdad that it constitutes a magical place, its very existence is jeopardised by the war and the subsequent embargo. The main device of the fantastic in the novel is the literalization of the metaphor of the

neighbourhood as a ship, a community with its own ontological rules and, more importantly, its own independent destiny. The first section of the novel climaxes with the narrator accidentally discovering the literal truth of this metaphor:

> I was on my way back when I saw the front of a giant ship, with the Maʾmūn Tower in the middle as a tree with a rolled-up sail. [...] I was hearing the sound of the waves, you all have to believe me when I tell you about my trip inside the ship. I am not lying, I'll tell you what I saw, or what I imagined. As I was wandering inside the ship, I was thinking to myself: should I tell you what I was thinking? Because most people understand only what fits in their minds, they know nothing about what doesn't fit. The captain came, and he was half asleep [...]. 'I want to sail away with the ship' I told him. 'But you were born on it, and if you wish to travel you must get off. [...]' (33-34)

At this point of the plot, the narrator distanciates herself from the 'people' of the alley, and in doing so she appeals to the narratee's trust. While the latter remains not characterised throughout, it can be inferred that the narrator is addressing somebody situated outside the enclosed world of the alley/ship. The uncertainty between 'what I saw' and 'what I imagined' is then gradually resolved as the narrator grows. Towards the end of the story, faced with the war of 2003, the narrator addresses the narratee in a much more defiant tone: 'I wanted to tell you about a good time, but where can I make one up for you?' (232). This *inkār* ('denial' but also 'refusal') of experience is at the same time a renounce to fictionality and storytelling. The desire for autonomy and sublimation, represented by the metaphor of the ship, finds itself striated with the anti-aesthetic non creative chaos. By stating her refusal to 'make things up' the narrator escapes this contradiction and at the same time claims full reliability. Yet such reliability rests upon

the narrator's estrangement from the grownups of the alley: it is her 'childlike' perspective that defamiliarizes the neighbourhood, laying bare the device (the ship) separating it from the historical world. Narrator and narratee are brought to the same position through the common distance from the alley's 'system of belief': something that keeps the novel apart from 'classical' definitions of magical realism, in which the magical is presented as embedded in society. This rhetoric of distancing, thus, 'familiarises' the magical element (to understand which the narrator simply asks for the reader's authorisation) in order to defamiliarize the alley.

The narrator's turn from unreliable-realist to reliable-magical is consolidated in the central section of the novel, titled 'Messages from the Absence' [*rasāʾil min al-ghayb*] which mostly consists of a monologue by a 'magician' (*mushaʿwidh*) predicting the (near) future of the neighbourhood to an assembly of women. The magician is initially considered reliable by the women due to his seemingly omniscient knowledge of the community: 'that thin man could mention the names of any member of somebody's family' (72). Having gained the women's trust (suspension of disbelief), the man draws a picture of the alley that coincides perfectly with the narrator's account of the ship episode:

> 'Sooner or later you are going to sink with this ship' 'What ship?' '[...] Human beings are born to life without wanting it, and fall headfirst onto the deck of the first ship they get. [...] This alley of yours is a small ship: when the birds fly above it, they just know that they are flying above a small ship, but you don't, because you were born on its deck as it was standing still at its place [...]. (74)

The metaphorical micro-narrative of the neighbourhood as a ship involves thus a temporality of sinking, oriented towards an inevitable catastrophe. The fact that, if the neighbourhood is a ship, it is going to sink, is an obvious inference to any reader acquainted with the history of Iraq. Yet this same catastrophic prediction alienates the magician from the trust of his public, which expected *ʿajab* and obtains 'sheer reality' instead. The repeated appeals for people to leave the alley, and Iraq, are met with suspicion, with the grownups accusing him of being 'a spy with a foreign agenda trying to scare us, hoping to devoid the country of its middle-class' (79). Again, the suspicions of unreliability are used to reinforce the reliability of the uncanny first-person narrator, who does follow the magician's make-believe to its ultimate consequences.

The narrator's supernatural *Bildung* towards omniscient prerogatives is thus parallel to the opposite metaphorical plot of the ship's sinking. Such 'covert progression' is indeed inferred by the readers through their knowledge about Iraqi history, which surfaces to the narratorial fabulation ever more frequently as narration advances and the protagonist grows more conscious of what surrounds the neighbourhood.[20] As she grows up, the embargo that followed the 1990-91 war looms in the background, causing most of the neighbours to leave. She has just started attending university when the 2003 war begins. In contrast to the episode of the shelter narrated in the novel's opening, there is no underinterpretation of the significance of this historical event:

[20] The concept of 'covert progression' have been proposed by Dan Shen to account for a 'hidden dynamic' parallel to the plot and 'convey[ing] contrastive or even opposite thematic significance, character images, and aesthetic values, which complicates or has the potential to complicate readers' response in various ways' (Shen 2021:2). The presence of such second textual dynamic complicates rhetorical models of narrative communication by positing a 'dual authorial communication' (Shen 2018:66)

> On our rooftop, I stand once again on the water tank, staring at our ship, with its high sail on the horizon, far away, I rub my eyes and wait for the war. I predict its objectives with precision now. I have become an expert on the place, an expert on wars and military objectives. I know exactly what the war is looking for. (163)

The character's progression from the experiencing-'I' of the child to the narrating-'I' position is evident: the account here can be only read as authorial. In this sense, the literalised metaphor of the ship symbolises the increased critical insight of the narrator, its closeness to the 'norms of the work', as Booth puts it. Yet, at this point, the question arises about the position of the narrator with respect to the 'covert' narrative of crisis. As critical responses like al-Shaykh's show, the narrator can be seen as paradoxically distancing herself from history as she grows, the novel thus idealising the alley and childhood as pure, only contaminated by 'external' agents which cause its progressive decay. It is in this sense that al-Shaykh and other critical readers have highlighted the lack of any depiction of the authoritarian regime - that by the 1990s time had mobilised its full repressive power. While these political considerations call for a broader sociological analysis of the novel's audiences and positioning, the questions concerning the embedded narrative of decadence (what we may call in Arabic *inḥiṭāṭ*) in *Sāʿat* deserve closer scrutiny even from a textual point of view, as they form the core of the novel's metanarrative discussion.

It is indeed only at the end of the first, longer section that the reader becomes aware of the metafictional device that lies behind this choral narrative: 'The Baghdad Clock' is in fact the title of a 'register' (*sijill*) that the narrator-protagonist starts writing with her

closest friend, Nādya. What inspires the narrator to write is her reading of the sequence about the 'epidemy of forgetting' in Gabriel García Marquez's *A Hundred Years of Solitude*. In García Marquez's novel, a sudden burst of insomnia causes a radical erasure of memory in the inhabitants of Macondo, forcing them to write names on the things surrounding them in order to remember their names ('Macondo that was caught by the same insomnia that we experience now', *Sāʿat* 192). In *Sāʿat*, the epidemy the narrator sets to combat is the forgetting connected with migration away from the alley/ship. As the *mushaʿwidh* had announced, the neighbourhood keeps depopulating, leaving those who remain with the task of taking care of their abandoned houses:

> At first, the mothers used to sit in front of the doors for a long hour of grief every time a family from the neighbourhood left their house for good: they remembered their neighbours from the first day in the alley to the last moment they had seen them getting on their cars. But we've got used to that now. Whenever we see a family getting on a black Chevrolet van, we know they are emigrating from the sight of their luggage piled on the car's roof. Everybody stops to say goodbye, then it's over. People get used quite fast to sad things when they repeat themselves, they become normal, natural, expected. (50)

The situation further deteriorates with the 2003 war, when the narrator's friends, and ultimately herself, eventually leave. The task of the metanarrative *sijill* named 'Sāʿat Baghdād' is therefore to counter not only forgetting but the anesthetisation of grief. In the context of the eponymous notebook, the narrator's omniscience reveals its incompleteness: despite her mind-reading and future-telling abilities, and despite the reliability she has negotiated throughout the novel, the narrator remains liable to the

epidemy of forgetting, and thus is fallible when it comes to the *tasjīl* 'recording' of the past. In this sense, the child narrator conceals the political and ethical ambiguity of the text: the development of the character, her increased reliability coincides with her distancing from the 'immediateness of things'. Indeed, the *sijill* takes on a curiously anti-narrative stance. When confronted with the possibility of leaving home, the narrator complains about the structures stories impose over things: 'in this house, I used to see things just as they are [...]. *Door*, *window*, *house* [...], when we say these things isolated, we feel the weight of their essence, and we kill their essence by putting them in well-formed sentences [*jumal mufīda*]' (192). The construction of the narrator's reliability (*jumal mufīda* means literally 'communicative, useful sentences')[21] becomes paradoxically another symptom of the *iḥhiṭāṭ* of the alley, which alienates 'things'. Eventually, the *sijill* is given to Baydāʾ, an old friend of the narrator now working as a translator for the US forces and constantly threatened by the militiamen that have taken over the neighbourhood. After Baydāʾ's intervention, the *sijill*'s realism becomes uncanny: 'life had been entirely transferred from reality to words' (220). As a result of this new fantastic twist in the story, a final section of the notebook appears, in which the *future* stories of the inhabitants are narrated. This final section is narrated by the notebook itself, blending authorial, 'invisible' third-person narration and a testimonial element that persists in the future tense.

[21] In the context of pre-modern Arabic literature, Harb (2020:64) translates *fāʾida* (the noun from the root of *mufīda*) as the 'additional meaning' one reaches after working through figurative speech. Yet, here the narrator uses the term pejoratively, as 'adding yet another layer of meaning' (Gumbrecht 2004:105): in this sense, al-Rāwī's critique of representation points to a claim for non-mediated presence.

The last section of this chapter will return this theme of the future. The text object of the next section, Murtaḍā Gzār's *al-ʿIlmawī*, problematises *Bildung* and reliability even further, subverting the very significance of the child-narrator trope within a humorous frame.

al-ʿIlmawī: Narration as a Gimmick and the Horizontal Fantastic

While *Sāʿat* was elicited a wide public response, Murtaḍā Gzār's oeuvre occupies a more avant-garde position within post-war literature. The three novels the author has published before *al-ʿIlmawī* (2019) are all experimental texts that play with complex and at times intentionally unreadable narrative devices. His 2012 *al-Sayyid Aṣghar Akbar* (Mr Little-Big), for instance, is a historical novel set in Najaf at the end of the 19th century, in which the expedient of a broken typewriter allows for a variety of textual experimentations. In an article presenting the translation of a chapter from the novel, Yasmeen Hanoosh stresses the 'defamiliarizing effects that Gzār creates through the novel's multiplicity of registers, shifting diction, and unconventional syntactic choices' (Hanoosh 2013b:148). Hanoosh links such poetics of the *strange* to a general tendency to 'depar[t] from the mimetic norms that characterize the dominant narratological models in modern Iraqi and Arabic fiction' (146). At the same time, it is worth noting that Gzār has until recently lived in Basra, and that many of the features Hanoosh ascribes to his writing (extensive intertextuality, defamiliarization, magical realism) have often been

linked to the 'Basra school' of Iraqi literature, pioneered, as we have seen, by the figure of Muḥammad Khuḍayyir.[22]

Al-ʿIlmawī continues this experimental line. The novel is opened by a pseudo-facutal 'Foreword' which presents the text as a biography commissioned by an American artist wishing to disclose the story of a child portrayed in a photo exposed at the Frye Museum in Seattle.[23] The child, whom the photographer has pictured half-naked in the desert during the bombings of 1991, is recognised by the fictional author in the person of a bizarre homeless Basran, ʿAbbās Rabīʿ. However, ʿAbbās accepts to collaborate with the author only on the condition that the biography be narrated in the first person:

> It was a matter of a few days before I met ʿAbbās, and we set to complete the present biographical book [*hādhā al-kitāb al-sīrī*], that has taken the form [*ṭābiʿ*] of the writing of the self [*al-kitāba al-dhātiyya*] due to what ʿAbbās felt as a necessity, as he expressed annoyance with the idea that his life be written in the third person. For this reason, and I want this to be a matter of interest and attention, although the present novel was not written by ʿAbbās Rabīʿ al-Sinjarī – also known as Ibn Rabīʿ 'Mr Density'-, he has agreed with every single word it contains. We have chosen it to be a fictional book to avoid legal issues with the persons mentioned in the text: to achieve this aim I have personally made up fictional names [*asmāʾ wahmiyya*] for some of them. But for

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[22] On this topic see Caiani & Cobham (2019). After the publication of *al-ʿIlmawī* Gzār has left Iraq to the US, and has since published a non-fictional memoir book (*I am in Seattle, Where Are You?*) in English only.

[23] Barbara Foley defines the 'pseudofactual' as the fictional pact typical of fiction based on non-fictional forms (like the epistolary novel): 'the reader is asked to accept the text's characters and situations as invented, which means seeing the text not as having no referent but as referring to relations rather than to particulars allegedly existing apart from their representation in discourse. At the same time, however, the writer asks the reader to approach the text as if it were a nonfictional text - a memoir, a confession, a group of letters' (Foley 1986:107)

> most of the peopled mentioned, including the dead ones, we have decided to keep their real names, so that nothing could compromise the truthfulness of the events narrated [*miṣdāqiyyat al-aḥdāth*] (11)

The text thus presents itself as a layered system of framings: a novel disguised as a first-person biography, which is still not an autobiography due to the existence of a fictional 'author' that assumes full responsibility for the text, and addresses it to an American buyer (acting thus as the narratee). The novel further unsettles the paradigm of the 'biographical book' (*kitāb sīrī*) by presenting the reader with a cross-cutting structure: the chapters, each beginning with the indication of date and setting, move back and forth from the narrator's childhood between the 1980s and 1991, to his adult life in post-2003 Basra. The principle of a chronologically ordered biography is immediately abandoned, as is the possibility of a unified narrative progression. To compare Gzār's novel to al-Rāwī's, we shall focus here on the chapters devoted to the child narrator, while occasionally referring to metanarrative statements in the other set of chapters.

The pseudofactual opening immediately lays bare the traumatic experience that makes the novel worth writing and reading to an American artist: ʿAbbās is a survivor of the US bombings of southern Iraq after Saddam's invasion of Kuwait. More precisely, his picture was taken just outside Basra, in the desert surrounding the notorious 'Highway of death', where a great part of the fleeing Iraqi army was destroyed in one of the most dramatic scenes of one of the most mediatized wars of all times (so mediatized, in fact, that Baudrillard could write 'it never took *place*'). Contrary to 'natural' forms of life-writing, thus, the first-person biography of ʿAbbās presents a twofold time structure. As a form of

life writing, it is linearly oriented towards the moment of utterance ('that's how I lived/survived to tell about it'). At the same time, as the story *behind* a photograph, it moves towards a predetermined, traumatic event ('that's how I got *there*'). The heterodiegetic introduction of the first-person narrator operated in the fictional foreword immediately posits competing interests: although he 'agreed with every single word', the narrator cannot control the readerly expectations of his story, and has no choice but to disclose a trauma that is stated from the beginning.

This odd positioning of the narrative voice vis à vis the narrated world is mirrored by the novel's liminal setting, which is at odds with the transcendent centrality of the unnamed neighbourhood depicted in *Sāʿat*. In fact, ʿAbbās grows up in the oil district of Barjisiyya, south of Basra. Son of an oil worker nicknamed 'Mr Density' (who has lost an arm excavating the wells) the narrator moves, along with his twin brother Fāḍil, in a suburb (*nāḥya*) populated by foreign labourers, close to the city yet surrounded by the desert, and a few miles from the Iranian border, where the war of the 1980s is being fought. Like the detached middle-class neighbourhood of *Sāʿat*, the oil suburb is simultaneously central to the very existence of Iraq and apparently far from the country's upheavals. Yet, contrary to the overall magical tone of narration in *Sāʿat*, ʿAbbās does not claim Barjisiyya as a place of *wonder*. As the adult narrator says quite early in the novel:

> The Important Thing is not to look awed [*allā uṣāba bi-l-ʿajab*], and that's quite granted in my case, for there is nothing easier for me, ʿAbbas Rabīʿ son of Mister Density, than to keep my face ordinary and free of any wonder [*muḍādda li-l-taʿajjub*], clear of surprise or marvel. Since my childhood the gland responsible for sensing the

wonder and the strange has atrophied in me, so that I couldn't experience any kind of surprise if a flying rabbit jumped in front of me. (28)

The 'scientismist' character to which the title of the novel refers, is thus a narrator that philosophically refuses a poetics of estrangement from 'things in themselves', an anti-literary positivist that refuses all kind of aestheticization and aspires to complete objectivity. Rejecting all possible transfigurations of present-day Basra, the adult ʿAbbās devotes his life to conjuring up strange machines he tries to sell to the British occupiers hoping to secure himself a new life abroad. In this mock-positivism, *taʾlīf* is embraced as a purely technical attitude, a particular form of *ṣināʿa* 'artifice': '[t]he important thing is that things look clear even if they are not exact. I wrote it on the glass of a dusty car one day: *What matters is clarity, not truth*, and I run away' (34).

In the chapters devoted to ʿAbbās's infancy, such anti-fantastic program is ironically contrasted with both the traumatic historical background and the child narrator's unreliability. The war with Iran of the 80s is only present in the child's experience through strange symptoms. One the one hand, the crucial importance of oil seems to protect the district from a conflict which, as a Bedouin friend of Mr Density states 'is like two whores fighting: everything is allowed except hitting below the belt, for they work with what is below the belt' (61). On the other hand, protected by the fact of living 'below the belt' of Iraq, the narrator and his twin experience the war through unusual sights, most notably from the appearance of unprecedented flocks of 'oil-coloured' butterflies, an animal he had only heard of when he was taught the letter *hāʾ* at school (64). The two brothers start catching and selling the butterflies, and celebrate solemn funerals for the

dead ones in the historical cemetery of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, next to the grave of the one of the founders of the interpretation of dreams, Ibn Sirīn (d. 729). In the cemetery, they witness long processions of coffins carrying soldiers killed in the war, and eventually remain trapped behind a wall of coffins:

> In those days the war was suffering from a temporary stroke, something like a burp in the cloud of rockets that made it close its mouth for some weeks preventing it from pouring rays and wooden boxes, although the war songs and the military music were always on. For that reason, we did not expect to see with our eyes that huge number of coffins all at once. From the names and the numbers written in chalk, we realised there were soldiers inside [...]. (45)

Unlike *Sāʿat*, the child narrator shows no traits of Phelan's 'naïve unreliability'. Coherently with the anti-fantastic authorial statement, moreover, the narrator negates any potentially uncanny implication of the situation. While trapped behind the coffins, the children simulate a phone call to God – a gag repeated throughout the novel -, only to hear the voice of a 'soldier who not only did not know he was dead, but thought he was God himself' answering from within an urn (46). A couple of chapters later, the uncanny is explained: the voice belongs to a man that has fled military service by hiding in a coffin, and makes a living by looting the graves of the dead soldiers (68).

This explanation of uncanny situations is indeed the basic plot device of the childhood section of the novel. In his study of the poetics of fantastic literature (2009), Shuʿayb Ḥulayfī devotes a chapter to the function of explanation (*tafsīr*) in the fantastic discourse. Moving from Todorov's definition of the fantastic, he defines explication as a means of

displacing the reader's hesitation caused by the fantastic by either reasserting the supernatural on a higher level (what he terms *tafsīr ʿumūdī* 'vertical explanation'), or simply deferring it by reinstating the law of the natural (*tafsīr ufuqī* 'horizontal explanation') (Ḥulayfī 2009:102). While Ḥulayfī locates in the first strategy the prominent technique of contemporary Arabic fantastic, *al-ʿIlmawī* constructs its narrative progression over a constant deferral of *ʿajab*. Such deferral is predicated upon the continuous oscillation between reliability and unreliability. For instance, the episode of the undead soldier sees ʿAbbās unmasking the unreliability of his own previous statements, and thus reinforces his overall reliability in the eyes of the reader. This structure is repeated throughout: the narrator's new consciousness about the war does not prevent him from begging some Iraqi soldiers to 'resume the raids' once the end of hostilities leaves him without butterflies (126). As he keeps exposing his own misinterpretations, the narrator questions the privileged positioning of the child-narrator. ʿAbbās is not a naïve prophet, but the sceptical observer of an absurd reality.

This 'horizontal' interplay of estrangement and 'atrophy of wonder', aestheticization and anaesthetisation, fantastic episodes and delayed explications, forms the backbone of the narrative progression as well as the inner structure of many of the novel's episodes. As announced in the fictional foreword, the beginning of the 1991 war brings the narration to its climax, forcing it beyond the paradoxical space of the suburb and into the desert. Here the twins are left without protection by the violent death of their mother-in-law, Veronica, who is raped and killed by US soldiers monstrously covered in oil:

> There were the blind soldiers: the wool from the explosion had fallen onto them and stuck to their bodies making them look like sheep, disfigured sheep, or wolves, or half-men-half-werewolf sheep, or a mixture of hyenas and sheep and human beings. (156)

The description of the soldiers illustrates the main resource of the novel's 'horizontal' fantastic: a widespread use of literalization. Rather than 'vertically' depicting a symbolic scene in which the soldiers *are* monsters, a rational explanation for their terrifying aspect is provided: the soldiers were stuck in a pool of oil when a flock stepped on a minefield, covering them in wool. By waving metaphors back into a plot, these literalised figures 're-introduc[e] dissonance into presumed consonance' (Caldwell 2003:486) and politicise metaphorical redemptions of the fantastic. Through rather absurd explanation provided in the passage quoted, the narrator refuses to turn the perpetrators into either fantastic 'monsters' or symbols of an abstract violence. At the same time, however, the explanation makes the passage more disturbing since it calls into question the ethical positioning of the narrator: is he aestheticizing an utterly traumatic moment? Is he bending such a violent scene to a comical aim? The hesitation typical of the fantastic is here enhanced by an ethical dilemma, as the narrator seems ready to make up details in order to produce *ʿajab*.

This contradictory narrative process tends to proliferate in *ʿIlmawī*, unsettling the magical element of the narrative, and tending to reduce the plot to a literalising machine connecting independent cadres. While in *Sāʿat* the narrator relies on the 'magical' to transcend the narrated, constructing an unnatural quasi-omniscient homodiegetic

narrator, magic in *al-ʿIlmawī* is a device that works through literalization, endlessly eliciting fantastic expectations only to systematically disappoint them. This rhetorical device of literalization and naturalization may be described as *gimmicky* form of fantastic. In her study *The Theory of the Gimmick*, Ngai defines the gimmick as an 'irritating yet strangely attractive' aesthetic judgment and/or device that strike the recipient 'as working too much, or too little' (Ngai 2020:1). A prominent category of late capitalism, the judgment of something as gimmick involves considerations about timeliness, the quantity of labour involved in art, and theory. Crucially, Ngai links the gimmick to a set of conflicting emotions: 'The capitalist gimmick is both a wonder *and* a trick. It is a form we marvel *and* distrust, admire *and* disdain' (*ibid.*, 54, emphasis in the original). This idea of the gimmick becomes thematically pivotal in the characterisation of the adult ʿAbbās, who has become a kind of professional trickster, devising and trying to sell a number of bizarre artifacts and contrivances to the inhabitants and the British occupiers of Basra. For instance, the adult ʿAbbās introduces himself through a prank (*naṣab* as the novel terms it), in which he disguises himself as a pilot landing in 2003 Basra directly from the war with Iran (25-28): the reader is once again forced to reconsider her judgment about the fantastic status of narrative when the trick is uncovered.

As these passages show, the idea of the gimmick does not only account for the ubiquitous presence of such contrivances on a thematic level: it also helps us also define the set of relations that the novel constructs between narrator, narrated, and reader. As Ngai puts it, the gimmick marks a 'conflation of reception and production' (*ibid.*, 60), in which the mixed response of marvel and suspicion is somewhat predetermined, like the adult

narrator's pranks are all about mocking the reaction of their public. In this sense, *al-ʿIlmawī* can be read as an ironic subversion of the magical realist paradigm. If there is any magic in the novel, it is a kind of entertainment magic, with a 'distinctively nonsupernatural, businesslike approach to enchantment' (*ibid.*, 46), that plays with the suspicion it causes in its own spectators. Gzār's fantastic enchants its readers only to bare its own device later. This pattern of trick and unmasking, moreover, results in a treatment of time that privileges the self-contained 'gag' over the protagonist's *bildung*: if any truth is to be found in the narrated, it is in the constellation of literalized metaphors, rather than in the authorial perspective of the narrating 'I'. One more example may help illustrate this point. Lost in the desert the twins simulate another phone call to God, and this time seem to obtain what looks like a response from Heaven when a bunch of paper suddenly falls in front of them:

> 'They're in English!' says Fāḍil, opening one. 'You're kidding, the sky does not speak English'. It soon became clear that they were flyers that the Allies were throwing along with their bombs and rockets. They were folded in two: on the first page there was a cartoon showing an Iraqi soldier surrounded by tanks (but there were different drawings on other fliers), with a sign that read: *Saddam is wrong, no more war can save Iraq, Iraqis are against Saddam*, with a dove carrying some grass flying above the sign. [...] On the second page, there were a few lines written in strange Arabic calligraphy that Fāḍil read mimicking the voice of anchor-man Nihād Najīb: 'Iraqi citizens, hello! Saddam is the one who caused this war and the results for you are: widows, and orphans, and cripples, and the choice is yours and yours only to put an end to the war and you can do it join your brothers and express your dissent [...]' (164).

The episode has no consequences at the level of the plot, and the whole sequence remains an isolated gag. Not only does the narrator 'horizontally' unmask the gimmick *behind* the supernatural: narration itself is a gimmick that serves the metaphor by providing it with a makeshift narrative frame. At its most general, this device works for the whole pseudo-factual biography, which, as we have seen, uses life writing to narrate a photograph rather than the opposite, setting a narrative that already contains its own reception.

The gimmicky magic of *al-ʿIlmawī* is paramount to the unconventional rhetoric associated to the child narration. The child here is not the bearer of a matter-of-fact take on *ʿajab*: rather, he is a permanently dubious source that accidentally uncovers the *deus ex machina* behind the supernatural. This is particularly evident in the central, dramatic section of the novel, narrating ʿAbbās's wanderings through the desert. After the death of their mother-in-law, the brothers follow a deaf Bedouin girl named Ḥadba to a magical oasis inhabited by bizarre creatures. The journey sees the protagonists crossing a series of dramatic war scenes, where the narrator refuses to linger, running away from the caravans of evacuated Basrans, from the camp of Shia insurgents, and from a US military basis (where ʿAbbas's photo is taken). Only after the death of his twin brother[24] does the narrator get to a mysterious oasis surrounded by smoke, entering which he discovers all sorts of animals, including a two-headed tortoise, 'swimming' in a pool of oil. Here again, far from any heterodiegetic prerogative, the narrator rushes to find evidence of what he is witnessing: 'I was looking for [...] any kind of evidence that could make my story refutation-proof [*ghayr qābila li-l-daḥḍ*]' (227). The last sequence devoted to the child-

[24] The death of the brother is indeed the only passage in which the narrator loses his explanatory power: 'I was confused: was just one of his usual tricks [*maqlab min maqālibihi*] or was his head really wounded?' (221)

ʿAbbās, however, has even this last remnant of the fantastic debunked by Ḥadba, who acknowledges that she had made up the story of the magical oasis. Yet here, ʿAbbās objects to the explication, which leads the story to the final reassertion of his reliability-in-wonder: '"But the oasis is there, my dear! I did ride the two-headed tortoise yesterday!" "I have no idea what that was. When oil explodes, strange things happen [*al-nafṭ ʿindamā yanfajiru taḥduthu al-ʿawājīb*"' (243).[25]

Magical Narrators? Child Voices and *ʿAjab* at War

> '[Q]ueer theory as I construct it, marks the "other" side of politics: the "side" where narrative realization and derealization overlap'.
> (Edelman 2004:7)

In the introduction of her *Companion to Magical Realism*, Wen-chin Ouyang called for the study of the 'Ideology of Fantasy' as a way to blend the distinction between fantastic and magical realism, by recognising their common political ground and decolonial desires. The two texts we have discussed in this chapter show how such political and ethical engagement with the fantastic is not a given, but rather is negotiated through narrative and rhetorical structures and devices. As our review of the debate around *Sāʿat* has shown, the uncertain autonomy of postwar literature makes the 'magical' always liable to be

[25] Gzār's treatment of language in the novel deserves an independent study. Here I will only note that the novel combines pre-modern terms and extremely unusual forms from spoken varieties (such as the unfamiliar plural *ʿawajīb* instead of the standard *ʿajāʾib*). This use of spoken Arabic is not mimetic: rather, it contributes to the construction of the defamiliarizing idiolect of the protagonist. On this estranging use of language in Gzār's previous novel *al-Sayyid Aṣghar Akbar* see Hanoosh (2013b).

rejected as *wahm* 'illusion' but also 'delusion' by contemporary readers. These processes of accepting/rejecting operate through the narrative negotiation of reliability – itself a layered process that interacts with character development, and knowledge of history.

In the two texts, this negotiation revolves around the characterisation and the authentication of a child narrator. Lee Edelman has argued that the Child as a signifier (as opposed to *historical* children) bears an inherently conservative charge in political narratives, as it stands for a promise of realisation and reproduction that audiences cannot reject. As Edelman notes, the Child forces onto narrative the temporal structure of 'reproductive futurism', a binary plot that compels recipients to *take sides*: 'We're fighting for the children. Whose side are you on?' (Edelman 2004:2). The child-narrators we have followed in this chapter are constructed within and against this temporality: in a world torn by war, they *stand for* the survival of their communities, their defamiliarizing gaze casting violence aside as something alien. Yet, these child narrators are themselves alien to their communities, haunting both the great ideological narratives of the war and the counternarratives thereof, and refusing victimisation.[26]

In the case of *Sāʿat*, the progression from the narrator's childish unreliability to an authorial position does not affect the supernatural authority claimed. This substantial identity of the protagonist, as we have seen, has led the novel's critics to (over)emphasise

[26] In Lebanon, this rhetoric of the Child was made evident by the debate around Nadīn Labakī's film *Kafarnāḥūm* (Capernaum, 2018). The film revolves around a child, Zain, that files a lawsuit against his own family for 'having given birth to him [*khallafūnī*]'. With a semi-documentary style, it portrays Zain's misadventures at the margin of Lebanese society, depicted as a world of racial segregation, semi-slavery, and child trafficking. In his review of the movie (which garnered an unprecedented success in Lebanon) Ilyās Khūrī argued that the depiction of the state apparatus siding with the child against his lumpen parents meant the paradoxical reaffirmation of the legitimacy of power (Khūrī 2018).

intentionality: despite being a clearly fantastic text, *Sāʿat* has been judged as an autobiography. In this context, as far as the narration remains anchored to the point of view of the child, the reader necessarily *sides* with the narrator, is inclined to believe her in spite of her supernatural prerogatives. Yet, as soon as the novel resolves the hesitancy, the narrator is increasingly be perceived as the 'mouthpiece' of the author, and thus held to real-life political scrutiny. In this respect, the focal moment remains the direct address made by the protagonist at the beginning of the 2003 war: 'I wanted to tell you about a good time, but where can I make one up from?'. This claim acknowledges a failure to become authorial, to 'stipulate' elements of the storyworld freely. Yet, the narrator also refuses to be a witness for the future: her telling is in fact marked by nostalgia for a time of plenitude that readers like al-Shaykh regard as ideological *inkār* 'negation' of the past, and positive reviewers like Miṭlak see as a successful *istiʿāda* 'recuperation' of childhood. In both cases, the sentence postulates a kind of extreme realism, a claim for historical truth. As the description of the narrator's project of a notebook shows, this realism is curiously anti-narrative at its core. *A Hundred Years of Solitude* is indeed referred to as a pessimistic reflection of the failures of narrativization, a novel 'written against forgetting and against memory at the same time':

> We always say to ourselves: we will come back. But that's just because we do not want to surrender, we do not want our first stories [*qiṣṣa*] to be transformed into memories [...]. In Marquez's novel, the village of Macondo is forced to face forgetting through writing, they write names onto every single thing before it slips into oblivion: table, chair, clock, door, wall, bed, kettle, and so on. Then they realised that a day might come when they would need to define things by the writing they carried,

> but would find themselves unable to discern their properties and use. [...] Had they just written 'cow', with no sentence, maybe after the epidemics somebody would have discovered it anew [...]. They ruined everything when they started to write well-formed sentences [*jumal mufīda*]. To resist forgetting in our alley too, Nādya and I thought about writing explanatory sentences on things. (202-3)

The very iterative power of narrative (saying once what happens many times), which is one of the key elements of social realism and its attention to 'everyday life', is thus described as a major constraint to the representation of experience (our 'true story'). To avoid letting anything out of her writing, the narrator plans to create a 'register', not a 'story'. Her insistence on the expression *jumal mufīda* (literally 'useful' sentences) recalls Roland Barthes's remarks on the 'grammarian's language' as a source of pleasure. For Barthes, in literary texts the shift from connotative language to meticulous, almost non-literary enumerations induces pleasure in the reader by making descriptions 'no longer oratorical discourse (nothing at all is being "painted"), but a kind of *lexicographical artifact*' (Barthes 1975:26-27 emphasis in the original). The fictional 'Sāʿat Baghdād' is a *magical* artifact which thanks to the supernatural prerogatives of the child narrator lists things-in-themselves, rather than fictional truths. In an essay on enumeration in Arabic literature, Christian Junge notes that Arabic uses the word *sard* to define both narration and enumeration: the *Lisān al-ʿarab* defines '*sard* in language' as 'presenting one thing next to the other, in good order [*taqdimat shayʾ ilā shayʾ taʾtī bihi muttasiq*]' (Junge 2019:281). The enhanced realism of *Sāʿat* oscillates between these definitions of *sard*: enumeration and iteration, immaterial text ('*muttasiq*') but also craft and artifact, an archive of

experiences but at the same time a negative force that reduces experience to 'well-formed sentences'.

While this negative approach to realism and narrativity in general is shared by *al-ʿIlmawī*, in Gzār's novel it is actively embraced rather than denounced as a form of *inḥiṭāṭ*. This negative realism works through a more extended use of unreliability and indeed through a subversion of the 'Child' paradigm. Stephen Bruhm has pointed out that non-natural narrative modes may be the better suited to subvert Eldman's 'reproductive futurism':

> While Edelman's incisive analysis offers us purchase on many kinds of normalizing representations of the Child, it imagines children as ostensibly stable and promissory figures who will always seduce us to fighting on their side. [...]. And while such a stabilizing move is ultimately necessary for his profoundly destabilizing argument, students of genres like science fiction or the gothic know otherwise: those readers habitually encounter children who are as likely to sterilize, poison, or explosively decimate the future as they are to ensure it. (Bruhm 2016:157)

At a micro-textual level, our reading has tried to show how Gzār's novel systematically unsettles readerly expectations as to the child narrator's unreliability: rather than a coherent narrative progression, ʿAbbās's *Bildung* moves through a number of narratively independent 'gags' which create patterns of realisation and derealisation, with the 'scientismist' protagonist ultimately reducing the uncanny and the traumatic to mimetic, albeit strange, explications. This gimmicky approach to the fantastic relies in other words on a fallible narrator, who shows no signs of the omniscience of the narrator of *Sāʿat* and who never gets to coincide with the authorial position. The irony of reliability in the

novel stems from the fact that as the narrator becomes reliable on the axis of fact (providing a logical explanation for incredible situations), he simultaneously becomes unreliable on the axis of ethics, as he distances himself from the 'wonder' of experience. Thus, as readers, we recognise a gap between narration and authorial intention when ʿAbbās begs the soldiers to resume the raids, or when he blatantly underevaluates the death of his mother-in-law.

This construction of voice is one of the elements of Gzār's poetics of strangeness, as Hanoosh has termed it. In an article on 'wonder' as an aesthetic judgment in pre-modern Arabic writing, Nasser Rabbat defines *ʿajab* and *gharāba* as 'the expression of puzzlement vis-à-vis a thing or an event, not because it was unobservable but because it occurred so rarely or because its cause and/or effect were not readily graspable or because the way to react to it was unknown' (Rabbat 2006:24). The humorous realism of *al-ʿIlmawī* moves then towards a rational observation of the traumatic history of Basra through the construction of a narrator *unable to react*. Rather than a pure fantastic being confronted with a reality of decadence, the Child is here portrayed as endlessly assembling and disassembling gimmicks, incapable of taking his own contrivances seriously. One of the many gags of the novel, for instance, revolves around the narrator and his brother hijacking a story which his mother-in-law tries to narrate:

> 'Come over you two, I'll tell you the story of a man called Ibn Sīrīn' said Veronica, trying to deceive us into going to bed, so that we could fall into a sound sleep and leave her to her business. 'Okay, but change his name' starts Fāḍil. 'Call him Rabīʿ! We already know Ibn Sīrīn, we know the rest of the story. People dream and he interprets their dreams, someone sees a cow the cow means everything is going to be

> fine, one sees some woman eating her breast and another without eyelashes'. [...] 'Yes, call him Rabīᶜ', I say, trying to hijack Veronica's story to deviate its path. 'There was a man called Rabīᶜ, a big boy who once found a lentil' she starts. 'No, there was a guy called Rabīᶜ who excavated oil wells' [...] 'Yes and he had seventy workers under him, who brought the excavator, a big, high machine higher than the school of al-Shanqīṭī'. [...] I complete the story [*al-sard*] as Fāḍil's face is wrinkled: I am getting to the gist leaving to him only the reactions of the listener, instead of those of the narrator. (128-29)

The narrator's control over the narrative paradoxically coincides with a realist turn: the mythical story of Veronica[27] is turned into a realist evocation of the incident that led the narrator's father to lose his arm. Instead of a mythic Child whose dreams about the future are reified as the 'magic' of reality, ᶜAbbās perversely demystifies *wahm* as a gimmick. In doing so, however, he makes clear how unequipped he is to grasp reality, as the overall tone of the story remains the tone set by the mother: a fantastic tale aimed at gratifying the teller and impressing the listeners.

In her definition of magical realism, Faris explicitly links magical realism to the child gaze:

> The narrative appears to the late-twentieth-century adult readers to which it is addressed as fresh, childlike, even primitive. Wonders are recounted largely without comment, in a matter-of-fact way, accepted- presumably - as a child would accept them, without undue questioning or reflection; they thus achieve a kind of defamiliarization that appears to be natural or artless. (Faris 2005-177)

[27] At another point of the story, the two children question the very existence of Ibn Sīrīn, whose treaty on the interpretation of dreams is said to be 'wrongly attributed to him' (67).

The discussion of narrative strategies in *Sāʿat* and *al-ʿIlmawī*, however, has shown that this description gets uprooted when the 'childlike' narrative is substituted by an overt child-narration. Not only do child narrators cast a doubt on both reality and fantasy: they continually negotiate their authority over the narrated, constructing complex and dynamic patterns of engagement. Our reading has shown how Iraqi contemporary fiction can negotiate hybrid forms of realism that allow it to resist the naturalisation of violence by maintaining a critical claim to historical truth. This hybrid form of realism occurs in the two novels through the readerly engagement with first-person child-narrators, who interweave elements of historical factuality, pseudo-factual genres (the notebook, the biography), and fantastic *tout-court*. Although generic definitions have often loomed in our discussion, such 'hybrid realism' has been studied here as a rhetorical strategy and does not imply any assumption as to the novels' belonging to genres like 'the fantastic' or 'magical realism'. Magical realism, in particular, is a label that is increasingly often applied to post-2003 Iraqi fiction, especially after the international affirmation of *Frankīshtāyn fī Baghdād*. Indeed, both novels easily fit in the generic definition, and *Sāʿat*'s reference to Marquez could be seen as an explicit claim in this direction. Yet, like the question of (un)reliability, the problem of genre calls into question issues about real narrative communication, and in this case the question of the global circulation of these novels. As Stephan Larsen (2014) puts it, the question is of *whose* magic and *whose* realism we are considering. To address these issues of global reception, in the next chapter we shall look at two literary treatments of a 'natural' genre that inherently problematises reception: the asylum story

2. Claiming Unreliability: Unmaking the Asylum Story

> They don't want ghost stories anymore: it is real experience that make their flesh creep.
> (Hanna Arendt, *We Refugees*)

In Ḥasan Blāsim's novel *Allāh 99* (2018), one of the many narrators describes the project of a videogame based on migration from Iraq. After physically getting through the journey, the game's protagonist needs to overcome a last test, based on a narrative performance:

> You make points by crossing borders and overcoming all the impediments. But reaching your chosen destination is not the end of the story. Here comes the last, crucial test: persuasion. You'll need to talk to the humans and animals of the place you have arrived at and convince them about the reason why you've come to their environment. (Blāsim 2018: 190)

In Blāsim's videogame, migration is described as a pre-existing set of constraints: one does not need to imagine an individual gameplay in order to read the story. What is *narrated* is a set of neutral rules, regulating not merely the traumatic experiences that constellate the journey, but the very recognition of the status of the refugee. In this negative plot, narrative authority (as the power to say 'I' and still stipulate elements of the storyworld) occupies a liminal zone between the various pre-set obstacles which the game's instructions set in advance. At the same time, the negative narration of the gamebook problematises the forms of readerly engagement and empathy. The 'you'

through which the videogame is narrativized is an empty pronoun, simultaneously eliciting the identification of the player and the impersonal voice of a set of instructions.[28] The asylum seeker's compulsory storytelling described as the 'final test' of the game happens within this empty address: a rhetorical performance in which the power structures and the teller's (counter)strategies constitute the real 'content' of the story.

This chapter argues that the set of rules and constraints described by Blāsim's novel are central aesthetic and narratological concerns in Iraqi fictional works confronting the non-fictional narrative genre of the 'asylum story'. While in the previous chapter I have addressed the authorisation of *ʿajab* in magical-realist fictions of war, here the main focus will be on the reception of narratives of migration. How do literary renditions of the asylum story move within the rules set by the literary *and* the juridical frame? How do the 'rules of evidence' employed in the legal construction and interpretation of migrants' compulsory narratives affect the literary circulation of stories 'striated' by the experience of migration? The two narrative texts I address in this chapter to this question by setting up fictional asylum interviews. Within this pseudo-factual frame, they bring ethical and political issues relating to the production and reception of narrative to the fore.

The main focus of my reading will be how these narratives *produce* their narrator as an asylum seeker, and the narratee as a judge. To this aim, the first section of the chapter proposes a review of the non-fictional genre of the legal asylum story, as it is configured

[28] On this construction of second person in gamebooks see Wake (2016).

within asylum systems on a national and international basis. Discussing the communicative and power structures underlying the production of such narratives will provide a background against which to read asylum stories in fiction. By focusing on this particular aspect of Iraqi literature of refuge, my aim is to foreground the complex deixis that post-war Iraqi fiction constructs as it circulates on a global scale, addressed by and addressing multiple audiences at once. By dramatizing the production/reception of asylum narratives in a global context, the texts by Ṣamuʾīl Shamʿūn and Ḥasan Blāsim analysed in what follow pose an ethical challenge to their reader, fictionalised in the position of the judge.

The 'Asylum Story' in the Legal and Public Domain

According to international law, refugee status is recognised on the basis of a storytelling performance. The 1951 Geneva Convention defines a refugee as any person who cannot return to her country of nationality 'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion'. This formulation, as the official UN guidelines note (UNHCR 1992:8), blends together an objective criterion ('well-founded') and a subjective one ('fear'). Despite local differences, asylum laws and practices identify narrative as the means through which these two axes are coherently articulated. In this context, the two works examined in this chapter show a concern not only with the asylum as a theme, but also with the peculiar textual dynamics entailed in its legal workings. This section sketches out the layered

communicative situation in which asylum narratives are produced and their 'well-foundedness' assessed.

The most widespread strategy of assessment of asylum claims is an oral interview, which may or may not be preceded by a written report depending on national laws. What is required of the candidate is a highly complex textual performance: the applicant should be able to provide a detailed account of his or her home country experience while simultaneously situating this experience within a larger context, 'appealing to a personal and a collective memory at one time' (Isnard 2011:108). Indeed, this task must be carried out within a limited amount of time, without any possibility of integrating and correcting unclear or missing memories on a second occasion, since overall narrative coherence is one of the main criteria of assessment. Over the past few years, a growing number of scholars have scrutinised this process of 'narrative breakdown' (Shuman & Bohmer 2021) aimed at assessing coherence, either through the narrative analysis of official narratives (Blommaert 2001, Millbank 2009, Shuman & Bohmer 2004, 2018, 2021), or by looking at their wider social circulation (Woolley 2017, Martínez García 2021).

The official narratives produced in such context obey a number of generic conventions in which an oral, semi-spontaneous form of storytelling is translated into a codified legal text for ensuing written analysis. The whole legal process rests thus upon specific *narratological* assumptions as to *what* a life story is and *how* it should be narrated if it is to carry any credibility. The UNHCR's official *Procedural Standards for Refugee Status Determination*, for instance, ask officers to encourage 'chronological order' in asylum seekers' accounts (UNHCR 2020, 153). A narrative is therefore deemed coherent insofar as

it is *ordered* in a way that allows for a lineal temporality and clear causal structures. At the same time, as Blāsim's passage shows, the asylum seekers' official narratives are rhetorical *performances* by which migrant storytellers try to occupy and bend these interpretive paradigms to their advantage.

Within this framework, scholarship on asylum stories has highlighted the cultural specificity of such narratological assumptions and their contradictory relation to the traumatic content the asylum story needs to convey. Former UNHCR judge Hélène Isnard describes asylum narratives as 'exploded accounts' (*récit éclaté*) (Isnard 2011, 109). The asylum story is inherently fragmented due to the traumatic nature of the elicited memories, and the socio-cultural differences it is built upon - which affects the very understanding of what a story is and how it should be told. In the discursive practice of official interviews, the subjective 'fear' and the objective 'well-foundedness' are deeply intertwined: to re-construct the official story, the judge exerts a power that is not confined to narrative authority. In fact, Shuman and Bohmer discuss an impressive array of biotechnological devices used to complement the extraction/breakdown of asylum narratives in the US: DNA testing, age assessment, fingerprinting, and various forms of medical examinations (Shuman & Bohmer 2018:59-80). All these instruments aim at assessing the narrative's coherence by comparing it with the migrant's body itself as a repository of narrative 'truth'. This breakdown of the migrant-storyteller is guided by a radical assumption on referentiality and accuracy. The request made to the migrant narrator, as Derrida, via Blanchot, puts it is to 'tell us exactly what happened' (Derrida 1979:97).

The analysis of oral narrative have focused on the minute workings of this imposition of coherence. In an article devoted to 'narrative inequalities' in the asylum assessing process, for instance, Jan Blommaert analyses a corpus of unofficial interviews with asylum seekers from different countries, and then contrasts these patterns with those required by the Belgian legal system. Blommaert identifies the processes of interpretation as a major cause of disparity in the asylum process:

> [...] [N]arrative analysis is, of course, performed in ways that can only be qualified as impressionistic. [...] [the] rules of evidence stress textual consistency, linearity, logic, rationality and factuality: they require considerable attention to details; they rely on written language as the basic and most lasting format of declaring 'truth': in short, they are highly cultural and society-specific and reflect local ideologies of language, literacy and communication. (Blommaert 2001:436)

Blommaert argues that non-linear, complex patterns of narration are inherent to the genre he calls 'home narrative', in which the teller seeks to depict his own life experience over a significantly long period by also placing it in a larger context. Such accounts need a continually shifting spatial and temporal deixis, 'nonlinear references to here/there and now/then/always [that] make up the considerable complexity of such stories, the trajectory telling' (*ibid.,* 435). Rules of evidence such as the demand for chronological order, concision, and coherence typically fail to recognise similar patterns and thus paradoxically favour inauthentic stories constructed specifically to comply with the standard. Such stories, as Blommaert notes, are more likely to be elaborated by well-

educated candidates who can master standard varieties of European languages, thus adding a further class barrier to an already uneven legal practice.

The deictic complexity of 'home narratives', as described by Blommaert, contrasts with the linearity expected by the judges. Such linearity, as Shuman and Bohmer note, is condensed in archetypical plots of *political persecution* whereby the migrant-storyteller is asked to provide strict causal explanations not only for her actions, but also for those of her persecutors (Shuman & Bohmer 2004:397). This emphasis on coherence threatens the very existence of asylum narratives qua narratives. As the authors of a volume titled *Beyond Narrative Coherence* note, the 'admiration for coherence and sequence' in the study of natural narratives 'leads toward the thinning away of narrativity', because it reduces the 'unexpected, experimental, even the chaotic' that constitute the *tellability* of a story (Hyvärinen *et al.* 2010:9).

Such production/interpretation of narrative in the asylum process runs parallel to a similar imposition/disavowal of narrative authority. During the interview and in its aftermath, the *récits eclatés* produced for status determination must, by their legal nature, be turned into official, coherent texts. Blommaert describes the process as an asymmetric re-writing resulting in a 'a tremendous text production *on* that narrative' (Blommaert 2001:438, emphasis in the original).

> These patterns of circulation are biased by inequalities in *thecniques* of discourse representation: recontextualizations and re-entextualizations of the narratives in specific ('official' and authoritative) generic formats [...]. At the same time, the story is treated as a *singular* text, and responsibility for that text (and thus for all re-

> entextualizations in the text trajectory) is attributed to the asylum seeker. The asylum seeker is constructed as the responsible author for the whole text. (*ibid.*, emphases in the original)

Thus, the *production* of the asylum seeker within the frame of the interview depends on a paradoxical authorialisation by which the candidate is made responsible for her story *as it is codified* by the legal system. This responsibility over the told, however, does not imply any privileged positioning or prerogative: digressions, non-linear emplotment, overt commentary are all deemed at odds with generic conventions. The disavowal of the co-constructed nature of legal narratives does indeed distort the *entitlement* to tell a story into a kind of compulsory authenticity in which the voice, and the body itself must speak the truth. To counter these distorsions, Isnard proposes that the 'exploded narratives' of the interview be read as 'collaborative fiction' (Isnard 2011:112). Such a recuperation of fictionality reframes indeed the issue of narrative breakdown in terms of the co-construction of a narrative world. It is only this kind of critical suspension of disbelief, in Isnard's thesis, that may disavow the kind of normative reception whose flaws Blommaert describes. In everyday practice, as Agnes Woolley argues, 'as their interpretive effect on the asylum story is unacknowledged, [...] [decision makers] draw a clear line between fact and fiction, the crossing of which can have devastating implications for the claimant' (Woolley 2017:380).

Woolley's study situates asylum seekers' official storytelling within a broader cultural analysis: asylum narratives, she points out, 'are not confined to courts and interview rooms. They circulate in media, advocacy and creative fora, which [...] maintain a

relationship with the law through the predominance of testimonial forms' (*ibid.*, 383). These public narratives often show an inclination towards reproducing the same ambiguities that affect official ones, especially in what concerns mutual expectations and credibility assumptions (*ibid.*). Artistic renditions of asylum stories in literature, theatre, and cinema (either directly by refugees themselves or through authors in the hosting countries) often imply particularly ambiguous narrative pacts that ask their audience to assume a judging attitude. The system of public expectations, in other words, tends to favour stories that tell us 'exactly what happened'. On the other hand, the very insistence, on the authorial side, on docudrama, self-presentation, and life-story monologues can be read within the same dynamics of narrative extractivism that regulate legal encoding, thus over-emphasising referentiality and reliability.

In contrast with ambiguously testimonial texts, Woolley argues in favour of metafictional representation, such as Dave Eggers' *What is the What?* (2006). In such texts, an awareness of the dangers of a purely testimonial approach and of the inevitable constructedness of asylum stories is made self-evident on the authorial-narratorial side, eliciting more critical responses from their reader (Woolley 2017:384-5). Like Isnard, Woolley sees fiction as the main counter-strategy to the generalisation of legal readings of refugees' storytelling. Self-conscious narratives may blur the line, which legal reception so problematically traces, between factual and non-factual statements. By looking at self-referential, metafictional texts, Woolley echoes Linda Hutcheon's famous definition of postmodern 'historiographic metafiction' (Hutcheon 1989): faced with the challenges posed by the narrativist school of historiography, postmodern literature challenged less

critical historical readings by highlighting its own fictionality, and therefore, paradoxically, its troubled relation to truth.

The texts analysed in this chapter can be inscribed in the trend described by Woolley: both Ṣamūʾīl Shamʿūn's opening of *ʿIrāqī fī Bārīs* (An Iraqi in Paris, 2008) and Blāsim's short story 'al-Arshīf wa-l-wāqiʿ' (Archive and the Real) fictionalise the asylum story frame. In so doing, they question the asymmetries entailed in the legal process, the encoded instructions governing Blāsim's videogame. Yet, these texts differentiate themselves from the works analysed by Woolley is that they *reproduce* to the generic frame of the official asylum story. Both Blāsim's story and Shamʿūn's novel parody the legal frame by sticking to it, rather embracing larger thematic units and fragmentary plots. By asking the reader to subscribe to a pseudo-factual pact, the two texts choose to thematise their own diasporic circulation, to bring the narrative breakdown to the fore. The deadlocks and asymmetries that we have seen at play in the translation of the seekers' experiences into legal plots become a metaphor of literary communication in the post-war conjuncture. Occupying this process of translation involves questioning not only reading dynamics in asylum countries, but also intellectual transformations in post-war Iraq.

To study this layered deixis, my reading will focus on voice as the main mediating instance, and site of irony in the texts. Both Blāsim's and Shamʿūn's narrators address the fictional narratee represented by the jury, an audience they simultaneously produce and are produced by as asylum seekers. In this respect, a central part will be devoted to the strategies of authentication deployed by narrators, and to the response they require from both their narratees and the real audience. To study this connection between authors,

narrators, and audience, a particular attention will be devoted to the rhetorical uses of unreliability and irony. Both unreliability and irony relate to the kind of 'gap' in meaning that can be translated with the Arabic *mufāraqa*: a gap between the legal frame expectations and their fictional treatment, but also the gap between the told and the (traumatic) untold. The discussion of these strategies of authentication devised by the interviewee will give an opportunity to address our more fundamental question about refugee authoriality (as opposed to the exilic paradigm of the writer).

Ṣamūʾīl Shamʿūn's 'Report' in *ʿIrāqī fī Bārīs*: Living on Borders

Ṣamūʾīl Shamʿūn (b. 1956) may be seen as a key transitional figure in the move away from exilic modes of intellectuality studied by Halabi. Having left Iraq in 1979, he is part of a generation of the Iraqi diaspora that predates the mass-migration of the post-war period. In his writings, Shamʿūn has always stressed his experience of refugeetude, and the ordinary character of his exile as compared to that of the great intellectual figures living along him in France and later in the UK. At the same time, Shamʿūn is a pivotal figure in the global circulation of Arabic literature, to which he committed himself by founding and directing the journal *Banipal*, publishing English translation of Arabic fiction.

His only novel to date, *ʿIrāqī fī Bārīs* (from now on *ʿIrāqī*) presents an account of this post-exilic, diasporic experience. First published in 2005, *ʿIrāqī* has been defined by the author as 'novelistic autobiography' (*sīra dhātiyya riwāʾiyya*) (Shamʿūn 2018a). The book zooms in on three different periods of Shamʿūn's life: his childhood in northern Iraq (narrated in

the final section), his life as a homeless in Paris (which constitutes the main body of the novel), and his journey to Europe. The latter is condensed in the opening section, situated before the title of the book and thus graphically separated from the main body of the text, under the title 'Report to the French Commission for Political Asylum' (11). The account of Shamʿūn's[29] journey, in other words, is presented as the one that has been provided to the authorities: whether this is the actual document or an autofictional artifact is unknown to the reader. This non-connected annex covers almost six years of the author's life in twenty pages. The opening paragraph makes immediately clear that a line between fact and fiction will be hardly drawn in the novel:

> I woke up and immediately looked at the clock hanging in the living room: it was around six. I felt some relief, for the bus that would take me from Baghdad to Damascus was to leave only at half past nine. I had already packed my suitcase before going to sleep. [...](11)

In contrast with the paratext indicating a 'report', the incipit is archetypically novelistic. Beginning *in medias res*, the scene is only gradually disclosed. Perfect tense verbs do not carry any clue about the temporal setting of the action and its relation to the moment of the telling. Narration is focalised through the experiencing-'I', who stages his own sensations as they present themselves ('I felt'). If we adhere to the 'assessment' reading frame, the experiential element disturbs the 'coherence', replacing the Labovian 'abstract' and 'orientation' sections (Labov 1972). This generic uncertainty plays with the horizon of expectations of what Woolley calls 'humanitarian storytelling': as readers/judges we

[29] I will hereafter refer to the novel's narrator as 'Ṣamūʾīl' and to the author as 'Shamʿūn'.

are always faced with the question of relevance. The details composing what Roland Barthes (1975) calls 'reality effect' play an ambiguous role within the performance of the asylum story: is the exact time when Ṣamūʾīl packed his suitcase relevant? Such generic undecidability is indeed a crucial ironic strategy of the whole section, in which the overreliance on conventional literary realism undermines the paranoid-referential legal breakdown of the interview.

The following plot further unsettles the distinction between literary and legal storytelling. Despite its evident leaning towards the literary, Ṣamūʾīl's account is by no means a *récit eclaté*, nor does it allow trauma to surface in a fragmentary, experimental narration. As soon as Ṣamūʾīl's journey begins, time and voice take on a clearly report-like pace. Events are presented in strict chronological order, in compliance with the generic expectations. Anecdotes are linked in an unbroken rhythm, in which the various stops of Shamʿūn's journey are not even separated by different paragraphs. The protagonist's move from Baghdad to Damascus, for instance, is narrated in the space of a few lines (p. 14). The Iraqi writer and critic Fāḍil al-ʿAzzāwī links this privileging action over introspection to an influence of classical Arabic prose:

> The form of the book reminds us of the traditional Arab style of storytelling: no central plot, no psychoanalytical conflicts or approaches to the characters. [...] What is important here is the adventure of the journey alone. [...] We never see the hero of *An Iraqi in Paris* sitting in a corner contemplating the events of his life. He is always in a hurry, as if the whole world were waiting for him. (al-ʿAzzāwī 2005)

Narration thus takes on a hyper-factual dimension in which the traumatic is not given any depth in the protagonist's consciousness. In this action-driven progression, voice occupies a minimal space, not the *logic* of the plot (*manṭiq*) but merely its reporting agent (*nāṭiq*). The humanitarian frame, at this point, is at a deadlock: how can trauma leave no trace on narrative?

Just like the novelistic transgressions, the over-adherence to the interview scheme ultimately results in its subversion. Both strategies, however, are not merely negative, counter-discoursive ironies aimed at destabilising the frame genre. The liminal space of the narrating-'I' in *ʿIrāqī* is indeed grounded in (and constructs) a poetics of immediacy and sincerity that questions the very possibility of redeeming traumatic experience in/through narrative authority. Interviewed by Syrian writer Dīma Wannūs, Shamʿūn condensed the life experience he dramatized in *Iraqi* in the frame of *innocence*: '[I was] just an innocent guy who found himself entangled in things bigger than himself' (*mujarrad shābb barīʾ wajada nafsahu mutawarriṭ fī ashyāʾ akbar minhu*) (Shamʿūn 2018b). W*ajadtu nafsī* 'I found myself', is a phrase frequently deployed throughout the novel, summing up the objectification of the narrating self, his renunciation of agency. The story narrated in this first section is indeed a story of constant de-humanisation and degradation, with the protagonist systematically denied any possibility of influencing the course of events.

This exclusion from agency is made evident in the novel's treatment of torture. Having left Iraq in 1979, in the same days in which the cadres of the Iraqi Communist Party were forced into exile, Ṣamūʾīl finds himself under suspicion pretty much everywhere in the Arab countries. He is tortured in Damascus, East Beirut, and Amman. He is not believed

when he claims not to be a Communist, an Israeli, a Muslim spy. The frequent torture scenes somewhat mirror on a deeper narrative level the overall communicative situation of the asylum interview: Ṣamūʾīl needs to prove his claims, and yet he is unable to do so, his only resource being his event-driven narrative. Even in these torture sequences, though, trauma and introspection are erased from the protagonist's voice. One major example of these torture sequences has the narrator imprisoned by the Lebanese Katāʾib, the armed party fighting on the Christian side of the war. Although an Assyrian Christian, Ṣamūʾīl is accused of espionage for the sake of the Western Beirut (Muslim) forces. While he is being tortured by the militiamen he clings to his most fundamental argument: since he is heading to the United States and dreams about working in Hollywood, he could not possibly be a Leftist spy. At one point, one of his torturers tests Ṣamūʾīl's interest in film by interrogating him on the *Nouvelle Vague*:

> 'You son of a bitch, how do you want me to believe that you dream about working in the movies when you don't know Jean-Luc Godard, you've never heard about the Nouvelle Vague? I gave you another opportunity and you wasted it'.
> At that point I found myself [*wajadtu nafsī*] screaming: 'But I know everything about John Ford, about John Wayne, about Henry Fonda, James Stuart, Gary Cooper [...]' (20)

The narrator's list of American celebrities goes on for some twelve lines. In the end, he is given credit and freed (only after enduring a lesson on the superiority of French cinema over Hollywood's). The rhetoric of sincerity in the passage uses the limitation of compulsory storytelling to accomplish a radical rupture with the paradigms of persecution and modernity of exilic and national intellectuality. Where the judge expects

political persecution, she finds a protestation of innocence, a comedy of errors in which the subject only ever 'finds himself' at the mercy of the torturers. The very fundaments of prison literature are here subverted. The whole passage could indeed be read as an overturning of the nationalist narratives of imprisonment and torture, which we could exemplify by referring to Munīf's *Sharq al-Mutawassiṭ* (1975). A fundamental work in the literature of imprisonment (*adab al-sujūn*), Munīf's novel, by staging a tortured hero who does not concede to power, epitomises the committed national literature aimed at constructing a political conscience and speaking truth to power. Accused, Ṣamūʾīl pleads innocence rather than resisting interrogation. His truth claims draw on his individuality rather than on universal principles. Furthermore, Ṣamūʾīl's innocence is also, ironically, cultural naivete: 'just an innocent guy', an outsider from his time's ideological battles, he is not aware of the avant-garde artistic movements linked to such battles.

Claiming innocence is thus a major source of narrative authority on the part of the protagonist. Rather than social responsibility, the narrator's authority rests upon a claim for sincerity. In an essay appeared in the seminal volume *The Rhetoric of Sincerity,* Jane Taylor has linked the very genesis of the term 'sincerity' to torture, and precisely to religious persecutions in Europe during the Reform period: '[...] we may propose that sincerity essentially arises in order to resolve the problem of the forced confession' (Taylor 2009:25). I this context, a whole theory of sincerity was elaborated to assess the truth behind confessions, to contrast the narrative extracted under torture with a tortured body that had to become 'an unambiguous signifier of truth' (*ibid*:26). In *ʿIrāqī*, the protagonist obstructs the narrative machine of sincerity by being too sincere, too

innocent to be believed. Even in the absurdity of the scene, as readers we are forced to consider the narrator reliable: we never doubt that the account presented is the authorial, authentic one, at least if we limit ourselves to the 'axis of facts' (Phelan 2005:50). Even if we consider the narrator's lack of psychological depth as a sign of unreliability on the axis of evaluation (*ibid.*, 51), we find this textual gap *bonding*: the audience sides with the protagonist *because* he is being unreliable in an asymmetric context. This paradoxical reliability forces the reader out of the position of the judge-narratee: it is precisely because his account is so understated that we are invited to be accomplices of the protagonist. The torturer/judge, on the other hand, is unable to 'take for true' (*yuṣaddiq*) the sincerity (*ṣidq*) he is looking for, and becomes the object of the narratorial mockery.

This ethical progression, bringing the reader from a judge-like positioning to an empathetic stance towards the character, accomplishes the ultimate task of the performance of the asylum story – persuasion. At the same time, by bringing the rhetoric of sincerity to its ultimate consequences, narration exposes the continuities between flight and refugeetude, the violent search for confessions and the legal extraction of narrative – the code of Blāsim's videogame. It is the power embedded in these two parallel interrogations that forces the voice into the liminal dimension of *wajadtu nafsī*. As a protestation sincerity (*ṣudq* or *miṣdāqiyya* 'reliability', as the narratological term is translated) is the technique of authentication required by the script of the asylum story. The parallel between the interrogation of repressive institutions in Mashreq countries and the one of the European asylum system is articulated *against* this rhetoric of sincerity. In both cases, Ṣamūʾīl 'speak the truth' not as an act of parrhesia, of political resistance,

but rather as a defensive performance. In doing so, he overstates facts upon interpretations, using the interview frame to eschew the dangers of narrativity (i.e., 'mediated experientiality').

To reach this goal, a rigid distinction between the narrating- and the experiencing-'I' is maintained throughout the section. The brief interventions of the narrating 'I', usually bracketed, further underline this ironic estrangement from the narrated: 'why did we drink so much Heineken those days?' (28) rhetorically asks the narrating voice while describing his daily routine in civil war Beirut. The self-conscious, gimmicky recourse to the reality effect diverts attention from the trauma the experiencing-Ṣamūʾīl is living. The narrator's irony becomes thus a device for 'dis-narrating' trauma (Prince 1988), continually shifting the focus from the narrative point.

The political context, furthermore, is intentionally disavowed: little reference is made to the different regimes responsible for the narrator's imprisonment and repeated torture. By playing down the ideological distinctions, Shamʿūn is using naïve, gimmicky sincerity to avoid the dangers involved in the 'home narrative' described by Blommaert, plot situating individual anecdotes in a larger context. What ultimately unsettles the asylum interview frame is an issue of tellability.[30] Many of the passages in Ṣamūʾīl's account do not seem to have a 'point' in the context of an asylum claim. As the end of the section approaches, and the narrator finally manages to leave the Mashreq and its troubles, the narration's pace decreases, and anecdotes are less and less related to an asylum request.

[30] Tellability refers to the 'specific incidents judged by storytellers to be significant or surprising and worthy of being reported in specific contexts, thus conferring a "point" on the story' (Baroni 2011).

The asylum section ends with the account of Ṣamūʾīl's late circumcision, which prevents him from engaging in a sexual relationship with a Tunisian girl. When he eventually recovers, the protagonist rushes to his girlfriend's place, only to find another man at the door. It is at this point that the asylum report abruptly comes to an end, and the narrative frame emerges:

> Once I felt that everything was right, I bought a bunch of flowers and went to her house. I knocked at the door. When it opened, I found an African guy before me. I told him I was looking for Valerie. He said that she was taking a shower. I told him I was an old friend. He said he was the new one. He said he was from Ivory Coast. [....] 'Are you sure he was from Ivory Coast?' asked the officer in the Political Asylum Department as he stood up with the file containing my asylum request. 'Who?'. 'The guy who took your girlfriend from you'. 'I guess so. Is this important for the sake of my asylum file?'. 'No, no' he answered, 'I just wanted to know whether he was from Ivory Coast' (36)

It is again Ṣamūʾīl's innocence that works as an ironic device here. While refusing any exilic intellectual authority, he still manages to empty the report frame by punctuating his narration with an excess of details. The question of whether a certain detail 'is important' is thus the very core of the section's humour. Interviewed by Muḥammad Quwwāṣ about the writer's responsibility towards History, Shamʿūn has made a case for a poetic of irrelevance: 'believe me [*ṣaddiqnī*], [...] I don't think there is any importance or necessity in what I do' (Shamʿūn 2015). This renunciation of intellectual agency is what keeps irony sharp in addressing both Arab intellectual models and the victimisation of refugees in the asylum countries. Genre hybridity is the main resource of such poetics:

presented as a novel but advertised as an autobiography, *Iraqi* constantly uses fiction as a way of evading the constraints of tellability. The brief frame paragraph quoted above, which somewhat pairs with the novelistic introductory section, brings irony outside the text. The dialogue reminds the reader that 'what is interesting' is not sheer facts, thus inviting her to reinterpret the text backwards, reading irony and trauma in the untold.

This constant awareness of the examiner's question ('is that important'?) is at the core of narrative construction in *ʿIrāqī*. To live along the borders of such question, the novel constantly renegotiates its belonging to the factual or the fictional, reliability and unreliability, the pertinent and the impertinent. From a poetic perspective, Shamʿūn's 'Report, and the whole novel, do not subscribe to the kind of postmodern metafiction described by Woolley. Rather, it opts for an autofictional form of writing in which the asylum story is integrated and subverted, but without any protestation of aesthetic autonomy. In what follows, I will turn to Blāsim's short story, in which the deconstruction of the asylum story frame inscribes itself more clearly within fiction, namely horror fiction.

'What matters to you is the horror': Ḥasan Blāsim's 'al-Arshīf wa-l-wāqiʿ'

Ḥasan Blāsim (b. 1973) is one of the emblematic figures of post-exilic Arabic literature. While Shamʿūn is somewhat a breakthrough character, intimately linked with the great pan-Arab writers and intellectuals and yet foreign to them, Blāsim's intellectual life is situated well beyond the 'unmaking' of the Arab intellectual. Born in 1973, he left

Baghdad in the 1990s, and then started his journey to Europe at the turn of the century, illegally crossing the borders of Turkey, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Germany until finally settling down as a refugee in Finland. In his public statements, Blāsim always stresses his political commitment in Iraq as a major cause for his migration. At the same time, he underlines his belonging to a multi-national asylum seekers' community, his distance from Iraqi official and diasporic literary landscape, becoming (one of) the most discussed Iraqi author within the framework of World Literature.

First published in English in 2012, the short stories collection *Majnūn Sāḥat al-Ḥurriyya* (*The Madman of Freedom Square*, 2012a, from now on *Majnūn*) was originally self-published on the author's website, and has appeared in Arabic later in the same year, in a 'toned down version' (Atia 2019: 320). It has then been included, along with the following collection *al-Masīḥ al-ʿIrāqī* (The Iraqi Christ, 2013), in the volume *Maʿraḍ al-Juthath* (The Corpse Exhibition, 2017). Many of the stories featured in these collections revolve around the experiences that fall within the realm of Vinh Nguyen's 'refugeetude', as the indefinite continuation of the line of flight beyond the recognition of the status of refugee. The narrative voice in the stories belongs to a variety of estranged characters living between ordinary exile and fragmentary traumatic experiences. To define this poetics of radical estrangement and traumatic realism, the author has used the label *wāqiʿiyya kābūsiyya* 'nightmarish realism', which he opposes to *al-wāqiʿiyya al-siḥriyya*, 'magical realism'.

Nightmare realism is based on the temporality of refugeetude, on the disavowal of the traumas of the journey and their haunting presence throughout the experience of

refugeetude.[31] In ‘Kawābīs Kārlūs Fwīntīs’ (The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes), for example, an authorial, the main character, an Iraqi refugee who makes himself known as Carlos Fuentes, only refers to a brief, though traumatic scene of his Iraqi experience. What comes to the foreground instead is Fuente’s trajectory as a refugee, his constant attempts to erase his own identity, ‘every day progressing in the task of burying his identity and his past’ (Blasim 2107:69). This concern with the continuities and with the gaps of refugeetude is indeed opposed to the teleological, hyper-linear narratives of the asylum story as I have described it above. In this respect, Blāsim’s nightmare realism often resists the biographical, insisting instead on the fragmentation of the narrating-‘I’s. The asylum seeker’s voice in the opening story of *Majnūn sāḥat al-hurriyya*, ‘Reality and the Records’ is emblematic in this respect. The story stages an asylum interview held in Malmö, Sweden. Already in the first lines, however, the interpretive context of the interview is both brought to the surface and deconstructed, as the heterodiegetic narrator troubles the line between fact and fiction, legal storytelling and narration of the self:

> Every resident at a Refuge Reception Centre has two stories: a real one [*wāqiᶜiyya*] and the one for the records [*arshīfiyya*]. The stories for the records are those narrated by refugees to obtain the right to humanitarian asylum. They are written down in the immigration department and stored in their private files. The real stories, on the other hand, remain locked in the refugee’s hearts, for them to coexist in complete secret. (11)

[31] On the Gothic element of ‘nightmarish realism’, see next chapter.

While the frame paragraphs in Shamʿūn's novel avoids any reference to the narrator's subjectivity, here the story is introduced by an authoritative voice making generalisations about truth in asylum interviews. Yet, what we may consider a heterodiegetic narrator is soon linked to the narrative word by the deixis of the passage: 'two days ago, an Iraqi refugee arrived at the Center' (11). The anonymous narrator, therefore, bases his observations on some kind of direct experience of life in the Center. However, the reader is left unable to ascertain the voice's positioning with respect to the narrated. This detached closeness seems indeed to grant the mimetic, realist character of the story. In this sense, in the Arabic original, the use of the adjective *wāqiʿī* is telling, for it describes a 'real', but also a 'realist' or 'realistic' story: the 'true' one, but also the 'mimetic' one. Compared with Shamʿūn's poetics of sincerity (*ṣidq*), this idea of 'realism' marks the inaccessibility of even the 'truer' of the two stories, its unspeakable character.[32]

The authoritative narrator, however, soon steps aside to let the reader hear directly from the newly arrived asylum seeker. The main body of the story consists of a single reported speech, that the frame narrator presents as part of an asylum interview. Like *Iraqi*, the asylum story in *Arshīf* begins *in medias res*, with the protagonist narrating the moment in which he is being sold by the terrorist group that kidnapped him to another one. Narration follows the scene as it develops, firmly situated along the experiencing 'I'. Here, too, the generic expectations of the official interview are disregarded: the chronological

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[32] From the root of *wāqiʿī* comes the plural noun *waqāʾiʿ* 'events', a synonym of *al-aḥdāth*, defined by El-Ariss as the events which one cannot name, as we have seen in the Introduction.

sequence of events is abandoned in favour of the time of the self, monologue begins to replace the report.

Only gradually does the applicant find his way back to the beginning of the plot, to the moment when he's kidnapped by a terrorist commando while driving an ambulance loaded with amputated heads in Baghdad's city centre. Instead of killing him, the militiamen ask the narrator to act in a propaganda tape they will send to Arab and worldwide broadcasters. The tape, in which he pretends to be an enemy about to be executed, results in a great success. The narrator's acting skills are indeed so praised that he is quickly sold to act for a larger militia. As the asylum seeker remembers the countless days of imprisonment, the story time becomes iterative, and the events stop being focalised through the experiencing-I of the protagonist, the asylum seeker narrating-I surfaces again. Yet, this change in pace does not bring along a new adherence to the expectations of the interviewers. As he turns away from a linear, action-driven account, the narrator's monologue becomes increasingly agitated, jamming the plot's progression, and mixing narrative past and present. The monologue incorporates and subsumes other voices, especially the discourse of a senior colleague of the protagonist, a mysterious intellectual named 'The Professor'.

This shift from events to commentary is also a claim for authoriality, for an overt control over the narrated. The infraction of the generic conventions and power dynamics of the asylum interview is marked by an increasingly paranoid narration. Emily Apter conceptualises 'paranoid globalism' as a way of narrativising the experience of an overwhelming 'oneworldedness', by taking 'the whole world as a unit of analysis' (Apter

2014:71). In Apter's discussion, the 2003 invasion of Iraq is the central moment of this paranoid frenzy, with US citizens urged by multiple sides to 'connecting the dots', either to 'see' the connection between the attacks of the 11th of September, or to undermine such narration (*ibid.,* 76). From the perspective of the victims, however, paranoia is a powerful device enabling the victims to devise links between the perpetrators. While in Blommaert's 'home narratives' the need to convey information about the social and political context disrupts the linearity required of the asylum story, paranoia in 'al-Arshīf' brings such need of generalisation to another, transnational level. Trapped in his mass-media nightmare, the narrator makes generalisations about power, death, and humanity in civil war Iraq. The paranoid climax ends with this hallucinated story, whose (authorial) responsibility is attributed to the Professor:

> All those difficult months I kept thinking about what the Professor said about his friend Dāwwud, the engineer. What did he mean when he said that the world is all connected [*mawṣūl baᶜḍuhu bi-baᶜḍ*]? We were drinking tea at the hospital door when the Professor said: 'while my friend Dāwwud was driving his family car through the streets of Baghdad, there was an Iraqi poet in London who was writing a fierce article in praise of the resistance, with a bottle of whiskey helping his heart to get harsher. And since all the world is connected, by feelings, by words, by nightmares, and by other secret veins, three disguised men jumped out of the poet's article and stopped the family car. They killed Dāwwud, his wife, his son, and his father. [...]' (15)

The oneworlded violence the narrator experiences is located at the intersection between exilic nationalism and religious terrorism. Indeed, the media – represented by the terrorist tapes – is what keeps the dots connected. But the passages targets the Arab

exilic intellectual as well. While Shamʿūn's novel parodies prison literature by subverting the poetics of resistance, the detained protagonist of *Arshīf* attacks the exilic intellectual directly, undermining the exceptionality of exile, and the very division of 'home' and 'exiled' literati. These references seem to address an Arab reader perhaps more than the Swedish jury (the story's narratee): the claim for authority passes for an attack to (Western) expectations as to the 'point' of the story. Instead of negotiating the tellability of the story by reasserting his own 'victimhood' (Atia 2019:324), the migrant of 'al-Arshīf' claims the prerogatives of a paradoxical omniscient narrator located in the margin. The very principle of causality and coherence, encouraged by the asylum system, are here over-generalised in a paranoid voice that can endlessly configure details. This paranoid authoriality contrasts with the depiction of the 'Iraqi poet' who conceal an uncanny authority to *make things happen*. The protagonist's paranoid delirium is a claim for a universal narrative authority that allows him to 'connect the dots': refusing a subordinate role in the interview, the narrator gives up providing a 'realistic' account and starts establishing relations from the individual to the global.

At this point, the asylum interview frame is completely subverted. The various experiences of detention the protagonist goes through seem indistinguishable. Yet, even as paranoia takes hold of the story, the narrator maintains an acute awareness of the communicative situation: 'What I'm saying has nothing to do with my asylum request. What matters to you is the horror' [*mā yuhimmukum huwa al-fazʿ*] (19)[33]. Again, the issue becomes one of tellability, echoing Ṣamūʾīl's question: 'Is this important?'. By referring to

[33] In the next chapter I will return to the issue of horror and on the definition Adriana Cavarero (2009) provides for the term.

the expectations of compulsory storytelling, the narrator directly addresses his narratee(s) and unmasks the structure of desire behind it: 'it's sheer reality that makes their flesh creep', as Hanna Arendt (2007:266) puts it in 'We refugees'.

The rhetorical structure of the story brings back the unreliable, hallucinated narration of the protagonist to the generalising, authorial voice of the first paragraph. This authorial narration sets the standard of reliability for the story it frames: we *know* that the protagonist is blending the real story with the one for the records, that he is misreporting and misevaluating facts, and yet we come to understand that what matters is *not* 'the horror' - i.e. the expected humanitarian cry for help. The audience is first invited to sit in the place of the judging committee, to use 'rules of evidence' to discern the reality from the records. Only gradually, in a climax the story constructs through narrative rhythm, do we understand that the narrator's misreporting does not imply his being untruthful.

This ethical progression on the part of the reader is mirrored, on the other side of literary communication, by the progression from a quasi-omniscient narrator to a solipsistic monologue. While genre hybridity and a poetics of sincerity allow Shamʿūn to detach himself from the constraints of both home and asylum, Blāsim's story remains more firmly within fiction, but only to attempt a more radical deconstruction of the asylum interview's frame. In order to do so, he constructs a paranoid subjectivity endowed with the authorial prerogatives which are negated on both sides of the refugee's journey.

A ‘turn towards the West’? Asylum Fictions and Bonding Unreliability

In a 2021 article, Audrey J. Golden reads the stories of *Maʿraḍ al-juthath* within the framework of literature and human rights (Golden 2021). Marking the beginning of ‘post-Abu Ghraib’ literature, Iraqi fiction is ready by Golden as a counter-discourse characterised by a ‘turn toward the West’ (*ibid.*, 259). Golden reads Blāsim’s work within the frame of Rita Felski’s influential *The Limits of Critique* (2015): the fiction collected in *Majnūn*, Golden points out, question the very utility of a critique based on human rights, by establishing ‘a different type of readerly relationship to the text’ that resist reification of unspeakable violence in the country, and especially torture (*ibid.*, 262). Blāsim’s nightmarish realism undermines critique as a discourse based on ‘the hermeneutics of suspicion’ (Felski 2015:1) because it envolves an agonistic stance, ‘show[ing] his Western reader how she might become implicated in perpetrating human rights violations through the very practice of analysis and critique’ (Golden 2021:261).

The narratological reading proposed in this chapter has followed the construction of the reader as a judge in Blāsim’s and Shamʿūn’s asylum stories. The interview frame in both texts elicit a reading based on suspicion and the fetishization of relevance, only to undermine this reading through textual ironies and genre hybridity. In the case of *ʿIrāqi*, we have seen how the over-compliance with the expectations of sincerity (as the desire that the migrant body be ‘an unambiguous signifier of truth’) ultimately ridicules the reader/judge’s expectations as to the aestheticization of trauma and political persecution. The direct address to the jury in ‘al-Arshīf’, on the other hand, tells of a more pugnacious

stance towards the biases of narrative extraction in the West: there is no critical (in the etymological sense relating to 'judging') reading that can discern the 'realistic' story in the narrative performance of the migrant.

My reading, however, moves away from Golden's conclusions on at least two levels. First, avoiding any distinction between 'home' and 'exile' literature allows us to problematise the assumption that post-war literature is about a 'turn toward the West'. There is little doubt that both Blāsim and Shamʿūn are liminal figures who have built their authorial careers in Europe and have committed themselves, in different ways, to 'combat Western images of Iraq in the Western media' (*ibid.*). In the case of *ʿIrāqī*, the lack of agency of a narrator who 'finds himself' forced to justify his presence wherever he goes equates, on a rhetorical level, legal questioning in the West and torture in civil-war Lebanon. In this respect, the irony aimed at critical Western readings works also to mock a whole tradition of exilic engagement represented in prison literature. Rather than a reactive counter-discourse, the residual voice of *ʿIrāqī* points to the 'new sensibility' of refugeetude, a narrative performance that can live only in the interstices of the set of instructions defined by home and asylum institutions. Aesthetic autonomy and authoriality, for this narrative performance faced with the risk of 'critical' readings, are not given but must be negotiated throughout.

In 'al-Arshīf', such negotiation of autonomy/authority does not settle for the ironies of a liminal dimension, but rather opens the way for a claim of omniscient authority. Far from being a mere response to Western discourse on Iraq, Blāsim's asylum seeker addresses the *world* as an interconnected unit (*mawṣūl bi-baʿḍ*). This paranoid generalisation results

in a proliferation of causal links and critical interpretations, all subsumed into the refugee's fabulation, that use fiction to tell *more* than the asylum story allows for. Again, this claim of narrative authority is not only made against the Swedish jury but also involves an agonistic stance towards Iraqi intellectual history, as represented by the unnamed Iraqi poet writing/killing from London. This multiplicity of addresses in Blāsim's writing is evident also in his use of language. Despite being often labelled as 'non-standard' Arabic, it never shifts to the Iraqi colloquial: the straightforward, often violent language of *Majnūn* is not simply 'born translated' (Walkowitz 2015), but rather actively challenges linguistic paradigms of modern Arabic.[34]

The study of narrative voice in both texts allows to track not only the negative element constituted by the 'impediments' to narrative, but also the rhetorical strategies to overcome them, and their implications on the level of poetics. In fact, both narrative performances are *effective*, as they result in the recognition of the status of refugee to both character/narrators. The awareness of (asylum) narrative as 'co-constructed' (*takhāṭubī*), in the end entails an embrace of their rhetorical (*khiṭābī*) dimension. In her reading of 'al-Arshīf' (one of the few based on the Arabic text), Nadia Atia (2019) points out that the seeker's account is defined *ḥikāya*, a 'tale' in the (popular) sense of 'phantasmagoric fables'. As Atia also underlines, *ḥikāya* is also linked to the verb *ḥākā*

[34] The only exception to in Blāsim's work to date are some retrospective paragraphs in his latest novel *Allāh 99*, which are nonetheless narrated in a simplified *ʿammiyya* highly comprehensible to Arab readers (far, for example, from the rich popular lexicon of the dialogues of Ghāʾib Ṭuʿma Farmān). On the use of colloquial in *Allāh 99*, see also the debate ensuing the Guardian labelling the author as 'Iraq's Irvine Welsh' (M Lynx Qualey 2020).

'imitate' (Atia 2019:323).[35] While indeed Blāsim's text calls for a kind of engagement that resists humanitarian, positive readings, it does so by positing narrative mediacy as (the main) way by which to 're-figure' (*yuḥākī*) the traumas of migration and torture, instead of 'telling' (*yaḥkī*) it.

The issue of narratorial reliability is at the chore of such structure: as readers, we may recognise the narrating voice as providing an account that differs from the one the author would give. In my reading, I have characterised this mismatch between the performance of voice and authorial intentions with the Arabic term *mufāraqa*. In a genre that foregrounds by its very nature issues of reliability and sincerity, the texts we have analysed construct a paradoxical dimension questioning the very possibility of sincerity. In the case of *ʿIrāqī*, we recognise the narrator is understating trauma in the torture sequences: our engagement with the narrating 'I' stems precisely from our inability to access it, in what I have called, after James Phelan, bonding unreliability. While Shamʿūn's narrator is only under-evaluating facts, Blāsim's asylum seeker in 'al-Arshif' is unreliable only on the axis of facts: nor the reader nor the frame narrator is able to discern the 'factual' and the 'paranoid' in his testimony. Yet, it is this unreliability that ultimately enables the reader to shift from a judging stance to a sympathetic attitude open to look for 'truth' in the narrator's paranoid storytelling. In other words, while Golden's reading is very effective in pointing at the kind of traumatising proximity Blāsim's fiction constructs between readers and horrifying experiences, my reading has

[35] On *muḥākā* as 'imitation' see Harb (2020:114-119)

tried to show how such proximity is born out of an enhancement of fictional mediacy, rather than its blurring.

To read the asylum story *through* unreliability, to abandon the critical position of the narratee, both texts rely on the untranslatability of experience, and on insincerity as a rhetorical stance. As Barbara Cassin defines it, the untranslatable is 'what one keeps on (not) translating' (Cassin 2013:xvii): to read outside the position of the judge we must accept the changing distribution of experience and fiction, the continual renegotiation of narrative authority, and the existence of impediments to narrative. In this respect, the figure of the frame narrator in 'al-Arshīf' is particularly significant: apparently detached and 'omniscient', she is tied to the storyworld by initial deixis, next to the character but ultimately unable to make sense of what the latter narrates. This distance mirrors the one the empathic reader is required to assume. In this respect, the accounts produced by our unreliable narrators produce what Leslie A. Adelson calls 'illogical reminders' of the commodification of migrant experiences, 'something out of step with the logic of representation to which cultures of migration are usually held' (Adelson 2009:187).

Just as Isnard's judge, both Arab and Western readers of these asylum fictions are prevented from completely accessing the narrating-'I' by the very work of *mufāraqa,* of insincerity and untranslatability. It is this opacity that makes narration 'bonding', and at the same time resists, at least to some extent, the fetishisation of migrant testimonial forms. While the texts, and their world-literary context, may ultimately purport such fetishization, a reading sensitive to unreliability may disclose their inherent literary tension.

SECTION TWO

IMPOSSIBLE NARRATORS AND THE FRAGMENTATION OF IRAQ

3. Leaking Realism: Impossible Voices in Gothic Fiction

> How smart these dead are! Just look at them: they flee from serving the flag! They cut their noses, stop their heartbeats, then they creep underground, unnoticed, keeping still in their dark pits, all covered in camphor to deceive, with the worms, even the gangs of the fascist Guard.
> (Salām ʿAbbūd 2014:7)

In Section One, we have seen how realist paradigms of narrator (the child in community narratives and the refugee in the asylum story) are reformulated within the post-war literary field. In both cases, we have focused on the disturbances introduced to mimetic conventions of life narratives in fiction, or what Yasmeen Hanoosh defines 'serious departures from these mimetic norms that characterized the dominant narratological models of the twentieth century in postwar Iraqi fiction' (Hanoosh 2013). In the narratives analysed thus far, such departure never results in a complete reject of the mimetic, nor of the life-narrative paradigm. Rather, we have seen how the fantastic element (Chapter One), and discursive ironies (Chapter Two) bring the ethical concerns about the emplotment of the post-war experience to the fore. As labels like 'magical' or 'nightmarish realism' make clear, the effort remains one of deconstructing and renegotiating some form of realism, and of social narrative authority. Yet, as we have seen in the Introduction, scholarship on contemporary Iraqi fiction has pointed to more radically anti-mimetic narrative forms that question the very possibility of referentiality

(Milich 2015:286). This section addresses post-war fiction from the perspective of the *non-mimetic* as the 'representation of impossibilities' (Alber 2014). The main focus will be, namely, with the construction of impossible *manṭiqs*, spaces of enunciation. In this context, the discussion will advance somehow gradually from more conventionalised forms of unnatural narration to more experimental *anti-mimetic* narratives, which will be addressed in more detail in Chapter Four.[36]

In the descriptions of non-realist modes in post-war Iraq, the representational impossibilities of unnatural fiction often intersect with the psychcological impossibilities studied by trauma theory. Trauma theory, as developed by scholars like Cathy Caruth, Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman in response to 'textualist' approaches, sought to give 'new relevance' (Craps 2014:45) to the literary field by rethinking referentiality in narratives dealing with human suffering, as well as the ethical problems posed by their interpretation. In this respect, trauma theory shares with post-classical narratology a deep concern with the problem of *knowing* in narrative. In Cathy Caruth's definition, trauma is 'not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it is precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on' (Caruth 1996:4, emphasis in the original). Within this framework, trauma theory has looked at fiction as 'possess[ing] a unique value for communicating our deepest psychic pains' (Pederson 2018:97). On the one hand, narratological research has shown that any narrative is dependents on the

[36] Brian Richardson (2005) distinguish between 'non-mimetic' from 'anti-mimetic' narrative forms. Whereas the former are conventionalised structures that pose no particular challenge to the reader (as for example fantasy fiction), the latter implies a cognitive defiance, asking the reader to come up with non-reductionist strategies.

information gaps Gerald Prince calls the ‘unnarrated’ (what narratives cannot incorporate) and the ‘disnarrated’ (what is narrated despite not having happened). On the other hand, as Pederson argues, trauma theory is particularly concerned with fiction’s ability to *tell* without *showing*, to avoid linearity, and to progress through figures of speech. Fictions can thus convey the traumatic without reducing it to the event, without questioning its unspeakable, ‘not known’ nature.

Caruth’s definition of trauma concerns our narratological reading on two levels: that of *knowing*, which narratology addresses in terms of voice and focalisation, and that of *time,* of the temporal relation between the telling and the told, including the temporality of the return of the traumatic. The question of telling what one does not *know* is indeed at the core of the development of post-classical narratology (Dawson 2013:195ff). Structuralist narratology defined focalisation as the mimetic principle for the distribution of information in narrative communication. In *Figures III*, Genette conceives of non-mimetic distributions of information as ‘breaches’ to the narrative pact. Among such breaches there is ‘paralepsis’, the case of a narrator providing ‘more information than is authorised in a given regime of focalisation’ (Genette 1972:253).

Such violations of epistemic norms have been the object of a radical rethinking in contemporary narratology. From a cognitive perspective, considerable attention has been devoted to the strategies readers employ to make sense of impossible storyworlds, and to the fundamental role of the ‘strange’ in narrativisation (Caracciolo 2016). Rhetorical narratology, on the other hand, has shifted the emphasis from mimesis as a ‘norm’ to mimesis as a strategy within determinate communicative practices. The

problem of the 'representation of impossibilities' is paramount for the branch of narrative theory that has defined itself 'unnatural narratology'. As Jan Alber puts it, '[t]he study of unnatural narrative is directed against what one may call "mimetic reductionism," that is, the argument that each and every aspect of narrative can be explained on the basis of our real-world knowledge and resulting cognitive parameters' (Alber *et al.* 2010:115). In contrast to Jonathan Culler's principle of 'naturalisation' (1975:137), unnatural narratology seeks to study fiction, especially in its non-mimetic forms, as irreducible to realist or spontaneous forms of storytelling.[37]

Both trauma theory and unnatural narratology, then, look at literary fiction as a means of narrativizing impossibilities. In fact, both approaches programmatically seek *not to reduce* the unspeakable in fictional narratives. At the same time, critical reviews of both fields have highlighted the limited nature of the non-realist canon used for theorisation. The risk of positing a narrow trauma canon consisting of non-linear, modernist texts by mostly Western writers' (Craps 2014:50) is one of the central points of a well-established postcolonial critique of trauma theory,[38] while the exclusive reliance on hyper-experimental Western postmodernism is indeed one major flaw in the development of unnatural narratology, leading to some preliminary attempts to reform (Richardson 2015:9). What postcolonial critiques of the trauma paradigm highlight is that prescriptive aesthetics may end up universalising Western definitions, while failing to acknowledge

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[37] Marie-Laure Ryan, for example, theorises the 'principle of minimal departure': while making sense of impossible or uncanny storyworlds, readers move from the real world and 'make only the adjustments dictated by the texts' (Ryan 1991:51).

[38] For an overview on postcolonial critique of the trauma paradigm see Visser (2015) and, in an Arab context, Lang (2018).

different conceptualisations of catastrophic experiences in non-Western contexts. The key targets of this critique are the individual and extra-ordinary nature of traumatic experience, and the radical unspeakability of such experiences (Craps 2014, Parr 2018). The paradigm of trauma thus fails when confronted with historical and cultural experiences in which the catastrophe is both ubiquitous and effectively represented: as Aminatta Forna puts it 'you call it disorder, my friend. We call it *life*' (quoted in Craps 2014:53).

While dealing with contemporary Iraqi literature, criticism has often stressed both its fundamentally traumatic structure and the collective nature of the catastrophe it depicts, in contrast with the focus on the individual of 'classicla' trauma studies. In particular, the uninterrupted series of tragedies that have invested the country since the 80s, poses a challenge the paradigm of an individual, temporarily limited trauma. As Haytham Bahoora (2015) points out, the great 'flood' of narrative fiction after 2003 happened *as* the catastrophe was unfolding, without any latency period, and with the burden of thirty years of sufferings that were still waiting for working-through. A postcolonial approach to trauma, thus, needs both to deconstruct and to expand the current paradigms. To use Stephan Milich's words:

> The question that arises then with regard to the MENA region is how we can safeguard the emancipatory character of trauma (manifesting itself for instance in Judith Herman's or Basma Abdelaziz' empowering understanding of trauma work) while recording locally informed articulations of suffering in a meaningful, situational, and ethical way. (Milich 2018:9)

More textual, if not narratological approaches, on the other hand, have indeed tackled the 'newness' of post-2003 Iraqi fiction from the point of view of unnatural narratology

(Hanoosh 2013b; Biwu 2017): seen in a literary-historical light, the collective catastrophe of war and postwar is precisely what generates non-mimetic accounts and 'extreme' forms of fiction. Yet, this notion of mimeticism risks universalising a very narrow paradigm based on an essentially Western corpus. As Laura Bucholz asks in an essay on the unnatural in postcolonial fiction: '[d]oes the term assume the "naturalness" of the very western, mimetic, and logocentric models it seeks to critique? And, if so, are there further steps that can be taken to free the method of yet another binary construct?' (Bucholz 2012:349). How does Iraqi fiction construct its narrative structures and tropes to *tell* trauma? What limits to vraisemblance do Iraqi traumatic texts set for themselves?

Iraqi Postcolonial Gothic and Afterlife Narration

Haytham Bahoora's essay on 'The Poetics of Horror in Iraqi Fiction' is one of the most thorough attempts at constructing a specific theory of traumatic and anti-mimetic character of Iraqi fiction. Starting from the observation that the routine and daily nature of violence is a 'constitutive thematic concern' of Iraqi literary production, Bahoora (2013:189) identifies a specific mode of expression aimed at accounting for such violence without reducing or naturalising it. This poetics of the unnatural is situated by Bahoora within the frame of 'postcolonial Gothic', a genre aimed at 'transforming the conventions of the gothic to rewrite the canon itself, to reclaim indigenous practices, and to narrate the terrors of colonial violence from the perspectives of its victims.' (*ibid.*, 191). In contrast to postcolonial readings of the Gothic that insist on the haunting of the disavowed colonial past, Bahoora identifies a specific temporal structure in the Iraqi

Gothic: not a disavowed memory haunting the present but an ongoing, now routine trauma that is 'never consigned to the past' (*ibid.*, 192).

In this reading, two figures emerge as constitutive: that of dismemberment and that of afterlife narration, which Bahoora addresses only briefly. The unnatural depiction of dismembering violence in the Iraqi Gothic challenges the assumptions on traumatic fiction: instead of a reticent means of representing trauma through its symptoms, horror fiction not only deliberately *shows* what the 'natural' mind disavows, but it shows it as routine ('You call it disorder [...] we call it *life*'). Moreover, Bahoora conceives of dismemberment as a metaphor: '[t]he dismemberment of Iraqi bodies in fiction can be read as a metaphor for the viability of Iraq's cohesion and the possibility of its very national continuity' (*ibid.*, 189). Looking at deeply allegorical works like Aḥmad Saʿdāwī's *Frankishtāyn fī Baghdād*, the essay traces therefore a peculiar allegory in the Iraqi Gothic, reading in the dismemberment of bodies the fragmentation of society during the civil war.

This reference to allegory is crucial to our discussion of Iraqi Gothic's narrative tropes. In his study on the figure in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Walter Benjamin claims that allegory is predicated upon '[t]hat which lies here in ruins, the highly significant fragment, the remnant' (Benjamin 2003:188).[39] Benjamin links allegoric thinking to the baroque consideration of death and decay, to a poetics of fragmentation that opposes the

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[39] Later in the essay, Benjamin directly tackles the issue of the dismemberment of human body: in Baroque allegorical thinking, the human body itself needs to be dissected in order to signify: 'the human body could be no exception to the commandment which ordered the destruction of the organic so that the true meaning, as it was written and ordained, might be picked up from its fragments' (Benjamin 2003:216).

holistic gaze of symbolism. In this poetics of indirection and incompleteness, trauma theory has seen one of the devices for conveying catastrophic experiences. In his overview essay on 'Trauma and Narrative', for instance, Joshua Pederson points out that

> [e]xplained as such, traumatic realism might be thought of as a sort of mirror image of medieval allegory. Christian writers like Spenser and Bunyan use symbolic structures to talk about God and his heavens even when dogma suggests that such themes are ultimately ineffable. For some psychologists and neuroscientists, traumatic experience is similarly inaccessible, and traumatic realism allows authors to discuss such experience through the filter (and with the protection) of metaphor. (Pederson 2018:103)

The allegory of dismemberment described by Bahoora, however, reverses this paradigm, for in this case the traumatic 'inaccessible' is rather the explicit, symbolic term of the allegory. The concrete *experience* of dismembering violence works as a symbol of Iraq, an emblem of the 'dissection' of the nation as an organic body. This sort of reversed allegory in the Iraqi Gothic is made possible by narratives that elaborate everyday trauma within excessive plots that eschew 'psychological realism'. In fact, Bahoora's definition of the genre encompasses non-human agents (as the Monster protagonist of *Frankishtāyn fī Baghdād*), the intertwining of dream and reality (as in Sinān Anṭūn's *Waḥdahā shajarat al-rummān*), and the case narrators uttering after their death. Rather than moving from the natural 'impossibility' to a metaphysical representation, all of these tropes move from a supernatural experience to address social life.[40] Yet, how 'unnatural' are these techniques? How is such paradoxical allegory constructed and, even more importantly, how does it

[40] The idea of postcolonial fiction as an 'allegory of the nation' is indeed paramount to Fredric Jameson's reading of 'Third-World Literature' (1986).

work in literary communication? To answer, I will look at one of the instances individuated by Bahoora, that of the dead narrator.

Introducing his book on *Unnatural Voices*, Brian Richardson claims the 'death of the narrator' (opposed to Barthes's 'death of the Author') as one of the outcomes of postmodern experimentation outside the boundaries of mimesis:

> [...] by moving beyond merely human narrators, texts begin to tamper with or destroy outright the 'mimetic contract' that had governed conventional fiction for centuries: no more can one assume that a first person narrator would resemble a normal human being, with all its abilities and limitations. [...] It should be readily apparent that a model centered on storytelling situations in real life cannot begin to do justice to these narrators who become ever more extravagantly anti-realistic every decade. (Richardson 2006:1-2)

Among the numerous examples illustrated by Richardson, there is indeed the case where the death of the (human) narrator is literalised: the narrator utters from the afterlife.[41] The theme of the undead is typical not only of western Gothic literature, but also of the Iraqi Gothic and, more broadly, of the 'new Arabic trauma literature' as defined by Milich. In the context of post-war Lebanon, Mark Westmoreland has devoted an article to what he terms 'catastrophic subjectivities' (Westmoreland 2010). For Westmoreland, the post-war sensibility in Lebanon, along with documentary and life-narrative forms, have enhanced narratives relying on the death of the subject as a new norm (*ibid.*, 187). Within this latter trend, the article operates a distinction between the 'undead' and the 'living-dead' as the two main forms of catastrophic subjectivity: while the latter are the 'feeling non-subjects' of zombie aesthetics, the former category comprises 'tragically displaced

[41] '[...] narration from the other side of the grave is found at least as far back as Machado de Assis's *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (1881)' (Richardson 2006:3).

phantoms caught in a cycle of abject violence' (*ibid.*, 188). It is this category, which Westmoreland defines 'non-feeling subjects' (*ibid.*, 190), that will interests us in what follows: narrative subjectivities displaced from the very 'embodied experientiality' that, as Monika Fludernik (1996) has shown, constitutes the core of narrativity.[42] Discussing a story by Luʾay Ḥamza ʿAbbās, in which focalisation remains anchored to the main character after his death, Bahoora points out:

> The narrative leap into the body of the murdered man moves the story into the realm of the supernatural, away from the voice of the narrator and into direct experience. This abrupt shift disorients the reader and complicates the narrative structure. [...] The macabre quality of this narrative combined with its disorienting shift in perspective raises a question about the plot itself - has the narrator, who had imagined the story of the murdered man, been killed? What does the shift in perspective to the consciousness of the murdered man signifies? (Bahoora 2013:202)

The trope of a character continuing to tell and to focalise in the afterlife, that is incredibly ubiquitous in contemporary Iraqi fiction. Trying to answer Bahoora's question ('has the narrator [...] been killed'?), we shall look at the time structures upon which dead narration is built: if the narrator has *already* been killed, how can the narrator tell the story? Alongside unnatural narratology, my reading will 'resist naturalisation' in order to better describe the inherent logic of the impossible storyworlds dead-narrated texts

[42] In an essay on the 'necropolitics of literature' focusing on the Iraqi field, Fatima Sai focuses on the corporeal dimension of catastrophic subjectivity by looking at the 'mourned flesh' as the central element of works pertaining to the Iraqi Gothic (Sai 2019:244). On a similar note, Hanan Jasim Khammas points out the 'dialectic between fragmentation of the form and fragmentation of the body' (Jasim Khammas 2022). By focusing on the residual mediation of voice, I do not aim here at reaffirming a primacy of subjectivity in a dualistic framework, but rather at following the transformation of voce as a supplement, of a *manṭiq* with no (corporeal) origin.

construct. Yet asking this question will force us to address the opposite one, posed by trauma theory: if the narrator has survived, how can he tell the trauma?

Within this framework, the discussion in what follows will focus on the *time* of narration. Having set a more conventional, retrospective plot by looking at two short stories by Azhar Jirjīs, we will then move to more radically unnatural situations that require a different cognitive work from their audiences. To this aim, particular attention will be devoted to Burhān Shāwī's novel *Mashraḥat Baghdād*, and to the short fiction of Ḥasan Blāsim, both of which will help to demonstrate how fiction not only represents the impossible, but endeavours to construct a non-mimetic communicative frame in which the reader is directly implicated.

'Was he dead?': Dead-narration as Impossible Retrospection

'The beginning is that you are almost dead'
(Khoury, *Bāb al-Shams*)

The trope of the afterlife is one of the recurrent elements in the fiction of Azhar Jirjīs (b. 1973). His short story collection *Ṣāniᶜ al-ḥalwā* ('The Sweet Maker', 2017), defines itself as 'dark humour fiction'. The book's epigraph claims the paradoxical documentary nature of the fantastic narratives collected: 'just tell them the truth, and they'll accuse you of writing black humour'. Most of the stories featured in the collection move indeed between the fantastic, the grotesque, and the strange.

Ṣāniʿ al-ḥalwā contains two stories narrated by (un)dead voices. The is titled 'Ḥānat al-Mashriq' ('Mashreq Pub') and opens with the narrator wandering through the streets of an unnamed town. In a sort of illustration of trauma theory, the traumatic event is not accessible to the narrative voice, who is only able to list its symptoms:

> That day I lost my shadow. I didn't know how that happened: at some point I turned around and it just wasn't there. I was roaming the streets with no shadow at all, and a big stain of blood on my coat. Where did it come from, I had no idea, but the city looked deserted on that cold December evening. The pubs' glasses were scattered all over the sidewalk, and the streets were empty except for some stray cats and dogs. (13)

The narrator's lack of understanding and comical unreliability work as a trigger for retrospection, opening up a space for an explicative narrative that links together the symptoms (the blood, the shattered glass) authoritatively. However, the impossibility of a coherent emplotment is inherent to the aporetic structure of trauma: from the point of view of mimesis, the narrator's lack of understanding enhances the credibility of the narrative. Is then the narrator unreliable? Is he underreporting when he lists his symptoms without explaining them? The irony of 'Ḥānat' resides in the fact that the reader recognises the impossible character of narration only when coherent retrospective information is provided. This information is woven into the story through an analepsis triggered by reduplication: the narrator recognises a dog who is pulling a corpse from under the collapsed sign of a shop (13). From this climactic moment, the narrative breakdown begins: we get to know that the protagonist had attended a work

meeting in a pub on that same street earlier that day, and that he had been killed in a terrorist attack directed at the 'drunkards' in the pub. As in a detective novel, all the unexplained details are put in their place: in order for the narrator to re-cognise himself as the corpse rescued by the 'compassionate dog' (16), he must fill in the void by re-living the trauma.

The irony of Jirjīs's treatment of time, thus, is based on the sudden movement from a natural but incoherent interpretive schema to an unnatural but coherent one. It is only as the narrator remembers his death that we grasp the supernatural character of the episode, yet it is only this fantastic element that allows for a retrospective linearity. The progression that the audience is required to make is similar to the one seen in Bahoora's 'reversed' allegory: the reader needs to conjure up a world in which the dead can narrate, if she is to grasp the truth of the civil war. To better understand how such allegorical breakdown is brought about, I will now move to one of the masters of allegory in contemporary Iraqi (and Arabic) writing, Burhān Shāwī (b. 1955).

In his review of Shāwī's novel *Mashraḥat Baghdād* (The Baghdad's Morgue, 2012), Muḥammad Khuḍayyir defines a genre he calls 'Baghdadi fantastic novels' (*riwāyāt al-fantāzyā al-baghdādiyya*), reminiscent of Bahoora's definition of Iraqi Gothic. Khuḍayyir describes the genre as a mixture of classic horror movies and novelistic realism, a textual mode in which 'everything realist in it is covered by a waxy layer [*masḥa shamʿiyya*] that leaks [*tusarribu*] a hidden horror into psychologically neutral images' (Khuḍayyir 2016). This idea of horror as something that only gradually 'leaks' ('*tusarribu*') an otherwise 'neutral' narrative situation does indeed shed light on the basic mechanism behind dead-

narration[43]. The metaphor of leaking (*tasrīb*) turns over Garramuño's idea of the text 'striated from the outside': here, the non-mimetic horror is described as a 'surface', as something located *outside* realism. Trauma is not buried inside (or below) the 'neutral images' of the narrating consciousness but rather surrounds it and finds a way through it.

Khuḍayyir notes that the 'fundamental paradox' (*al-mufāraqa al-asāsiyya*) in the novel is represented by its central section, in which some corpses stored in Baghdad's morgue gather to narrate their stories (*ibid.*). Contrary to what happens in 'Ḥānat al-Mashriq', however, in this case the first-person accounts are framed within an overall narration that is heterodiegetic and focalised through the protagonist, the morgue's janitor. This meta-narrative structure allows for a proliferation of testimonial-'I's retrospectively narrating their stories, which are set at different moments of the recent history of Iraq. The overall temporal scheme of a re-cognition, of the traumatic supernatural *leaking back* to a natural scene, is thus multiplied and repeated, creating an asphyxiating temporality. Furthermore, the presence of a independent character-focaliser allows the novel to dramatize the interpretation of the unnatural situation. The protagonist does indeed mirror the audience's response, as he overhears the first stories narrated by the dead from outside the room in which the corpses are stored. Just like the reader of 'Ḥānat', he has to wait until the conclusion of the first tale to realise that something *unnatural* is happening inside:

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[43] The same term *tasrīb* as 'leaking', as Tarek El-Ariss has shown, also translates the 'leaks' of information in digital culture (El-Ariss 2019:32ff). El-Ariss studies *tasrīb* as a bodily function, as a 'political affect that exposes both the leaking subject's body and the insecurities and violations of power: abuse, secrets, security holes, jouissance' (ibid., 33).

> [...] On the same morning, they took us to a cellar under a deserted, wrecked building. There, showing no mercy, and without even letting us prey before we died, they shot us. [...] and we were moved to this place, where they put us in rooms and cells, and that's how I ended up here.
>
> The guardian stood horrified. Was the man dead then? How could he speak? Maybe he just hadn't got the ending straight. He felt sorrow, anyway, and pity for that poor baker. (35)

Contrary to what happens in 'Ḥānat', where sight triggers the narrator's re-cognition, no visual information is available to the janitor/reader. It is only when narration reaches the moment of the execution that we must discard all real-life interpretive schemata. This failure of *taʾlīf* is what 'horrifies' the listener, forcing an anxious reconsideration of the whole plot.

In the embedded stories of *Mashraḥat*, thus, the exclusive reliance on voice allows for a constant manipulation of narrative time via a gradual disclosure of information. In this sense, the unnatural narration of the corpse-narrators provides the novel with an escape route from the utterly realist time structure of the morgue, where the continuous delivery of dismembered bodies is depicted as routine and meaningless (the preceding chapter, for instance, is titled 'A Typical Iraqi Day'). Furthermore, the repetition of the corpse-speech scheme structure gradually accustoms the reader to an archetypical plot oriented towards the moment of narration : 'and that's how I got here'.[44]

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[44] One of Shāwī's main references in this respect is Dante's *Commedia*, to whom the author makes extended reference in his later heptalogy *Matāhāt* (Labyrinths, 2012 – 2016). In *Mashraḥat Baghdād*, there is a significant though indirect refence through the incorporation of a direct quote by T. S. Eliot (*Waste Land*,

We have already encountered such conclusion-driven story paradigm in our discussion of the asylum story: posthumous temporal linearity is imposed 'here' (in the asylum/in the afterlife) over inherently non-linear experiences lived 'there' (in Iraq/in life). Deixis becomes thus the central element of the allegorical configuration, describing a gap between 'life' and 'afterlife': the 'here' and 'now' of narrative voice is detached from the time of the story, yet the gap between them is bridgeable through a retrospective narrative structure.[45] In fact, the recurse to retrospective dead narration may be seen as serving this basic purpose: to identify an unnatural positioning allowing for a coherent emplotment of trauma. Jirjīs' latest novel, *al-Nawm fī ḥaql al-karaz* (Sleeping in the cherry field, 2017) makes this nexus between the time structures of exile and dead-narration explicit. The novel's narrator and protagonist, Saʿīd, is a long-term resident of Norway, where he has found political asylum after leaving Iraq. After enduring the premature loss of his Norwegian girlfriend, Saʿīd begins to be haunted by the ghost of his father, a militant Communist who was disappeared under Saddam's persecution in the 1980s. When a mass grave is found by one of his Iraqi acquaintances, he leaves his job and returns to the country to hold a proper ceremony for his father's remains. While the protagonist is being driven back to Baghdad with the few bones he convinces himself to have recognised, he is kidnapped and tortured by an Islamist militia. Set free, he decides to get back to Norway, despite the protests of the ghost of his father, who appears in his nightmares to mock him for his 'cowardice': 'this time I will leave [Iraq] looking for a

411-414). In a note to these verses, Eliot in turn quotes Dante's Inferno XXXIII, in which Ugolino narrates his own, horrific death.

[45] In a study on the 'living dead' in Salīm Barakāt's fiction, Jonathan Morén (2019) also connects dead-narration to the theme of refugeetude.

proper death, not for a proper life' (210-11). On the eve of his departure, however, Saʿīd is killed in a terrorist attack in the Baghdad city centre:

> Everybody who was *there* died, except me. I don't know how I got out of the attack safe and sound. I touched my face, my body, my limbs, everything was in its place ... I looked at the other side of the street and saw somebody lying, brought there by the force of the detonation ... I turned to see my father looking at me with unusual compassion ... I stretched my hand towards him, and we disappeared together. (221)

Jirjīs once again stages a belated recognition, a vocal latency that allows his protagonist to keep on narrating after the explosion. In the novel, the episode abruptly interrupts the plotline tending towards the protagonist's return to Norway, where we think the narrating-'I' is uttering from. The expedient of the dead-voice, thus, simultaneously fixates the instability of refugeetude in the allegory of life/afterlife and creates a suspended *manṭiq*, a space of enunciation abstracted from that deixis.

Yet, who does this *manṭiq* address? Considering the time of narration means exploring not only the gap between the telling and the told but also that between the teller and the audience. If the dead narrators of Jirjīs' and Shāwī's texts are endowed with the uncanny possibility not only to survive death but to re-construct their own stories, where is their audience located? Where is the (real) reader asked to position herself? Jirjīs' novel partially solves the problem by reinstating a mimetic frame: the whole journey back to Iraq is revealed to be a simple hallucination produced by ketamine, which the narrator has managed to write down before dying of an overdose. This rhetorical move reinstates naturalisation as a cognitive frame. Yet what about texts that further resist naturalisation?

'Am I dead?': Implying the (Un)Dead Reader

The assumption on which many dead-narrated narratives seem to rest is that a post-mortem story can be grasped only by somebody belonging to the same (un)dead dimension. The recognition of the character's death becomes thus also a recognition that, as the authorial audience, we are placed on the same ontological level ('here' in the afterlife/exile) as the narrating-'I'. Another short story by Azhar Jirjīs may help illustrate this point. The main character of 'Infijār' (Explosion, also from *Ṣāniᶜ al-ḥalwā*) is in his flat during a violent car-bomb explosion. He rushes out looking for help for his wife, who remains under the debris, but soon realises that nobody can hear or see him:

> He went to the policemen [...] begging them one by one to get inside the house with him. He wanted them to rescue Suᶜād before another bomb would detonate, making the building collapse over her. [...] He called them, shouted, spat on their faces: they didn't even look at him. (Jirjīs 2017:81)

Here the unnatural narrative situation exposes the limits of the narratological metaphor of 'voice': horror in the scene is linked to *silence*, to what Adriana Cavarero (2009:17) calls the 'mute cry' of Medusa. In an essay about vampires in cinema, Lebanese visual artist and critic Jalal Toufic writes about 'diegetic silence over' (in contrast to the 'voice over') in film representation of the undead (Toufic 2003:126). In Jirjīs' story, the 'silence over' is not immediately associated with death, but rather with the deafness induced by the detonation. In the now familiar plot, only gradually does the audience understand the real cause of this absence of voice: the narrator's dead body has remained in the house. Unable to speak *out*, the main character still perceives himself as part of the world of the

living. Only at the end can the reader recognise this 'silence over' as an instance of unnatural narration, a presence haunting the past: the new reading of the story needs to abandon the mimetic component of the story and to question the very act of narrating.

However, 'Infijār' differs from our previous example because it describes the character's recognition from his point of view but does not posit an authoritative, third-person narrator. The main character's 'silence over' is voiced by another character, a fellow corpse who meet the protagonist in the afterlife:

> He kept haunting the streets for two whole nights before coming to this place. He sat right here [*hā-hunā bi-l-ḍabṭ*], on this little hill next to me, and told me his dark story. Then he descended with his body to the grave. He was lucky [...] I am still waiting for somebody to find mine. Then I will be able to rest, too. (82)

The here-and-now of voice, which this conclusion sharply situates through excessive deixis (*hā-hunā bi-l-ḍabṭ* 'exactly right here') frames the whole story as a reported one. This ending reveals the meta-plot underlying the story: the hybrid position of the fellow dead character works as a proxy allowing for a communication with the real audience, a narrator-narratee that mediates for the (literally) voiceless.

The framed narrators of *Mashraḥat Baghdād*, as we have seen, addresses an equally dead fictional audience in the fellow corpses stored in the morgue. Yet, as the passage quoted above shows, *Mashraḥat* dramatizes the role of the reader through the staging of a character-focaliser: as he overhears the dead conversations inside the cell, the morgues' janitor allegorically symbolises the readerly engagement with the unnatural narrative situation. The voice of the impossible narrators leaks (*yatasarrab*) through a closed door, and it is only the paradoxical ending ('and that's how I got here') that forces us to

reconsider the otherwise 'neutral' context. The guardian's response to the uncanny situation, however, juxtaposes two antithetical affects: horror, and empathy ('he was terrified [...] he felt pity').

Cavarero defines horror as the kind of fear that 'paralyses', as the horrified has no option of avoiding her fate (Cavarero 2009:16). While terror refers to a kind of fear that compels to flight, horror is linked to a *staring* immobility, which Cavarero illustrates through the figure of Medusa (*ibid.*). *Mashraḥat Baghdād* revolves around a number of scenes in which the central character remains paralysed (*yatajammad*) behind the door of his room, horrified as the dead bodies stored in the morgue move around and speak. Yet, unlike Cavarero's definition, in these scenes horror does not stem from what the protagonist *sees*, but rather from the voices that he (over)hears without being able to ascertain their origin. It is this kind of participation that the novel requires from its audience as it unfolds: an expectant immobility, faced with the possibility that the realist frame provided by the authoritative, heterodiegetic narrator could collapse at any time. In his reading, Khuḍayyir stresses this ontological uncertainty as the main issue posed by the novel: 'Shāwī's novel challenges the reader/spectator [*al-qāriʾ al-mutafarrij*] to construct [*tawlīd*] visual and acoustic meanings that exceed reality' (Khuḍayyir 2016). Like the protagonist, the reader of the novel is both compelled to watch and yet at the mercy of the voices she overhears. This position of expectant watching on the part of the reader is defined by Khuḍayyir, through a translation of a passage on the 'seeing function' in Deleuze's *Cinema 2*, as *istibṣār.* Connected to the idea of 'sight' (*baṣr*), the term conveys the idea of an 'effort to see', not a passive but a participant observation:

> The important thing is always that the character or the viewer, and the two together, become visionaries. The purely optical and sound situation gives rise to a seeing function, at once fantasy [*al-istīhām al-khayālī* in Khuḍayyir's translation] and report [*al-muʿāyana al-baṣriyya*], criticism [*al-naqd*] and compassion [*al-shafaqa*], whilst sensory-motor situations, no matter how violent, are directed to a pragmatic visual function which 'tolerates' or 'puts up with' practically anything. (Deleuze 1989:19/Khuḍayyir 2016)

The function of *istibṣār*, as Deleuze/Khuḍayyir defines it, is a mode of active seeing that encompasses ocular witnessing ('constat' in French, rather evocatively translated in Khuḍāyyir's article as *muʿāyana*, from the Arabic root of *ʿayn* 'eye') but does not naturalise the fantastic. From the perspective of reception, *istibṣār* resists anaesthetisation and involves a compassion that undermines sceptical engagement. The term which translates this compassion in Khuḍayyir's version (*shafaqa*) is indeed the same that the protagonist of *Mashraḥat Baghdād* uses to describe his feeling at the end of the passage quoted above. Building on this 'sensorial' empathy, Khuḍayyir argues, the texts engage the reader by making her 'seeing and seen at the same time' (Khuḍayyir 2016).

However, the retrospective structure of dead-narration that we have sketched above gives this readerly empathy an uncanny turn. As the story progresses, the unnatural leaks into the daily to the point that the equation is reversed: faced with a mass escape of the corpses, the protagonist eventually comes to *see* the dead. This extremely delayed visual contact does not bring about a clash between realism and the unnatural: once again the encounter leads to a radical reconsideration of the storyworld. In fact, the novel ends with the protagonist first noticing a big wound on his forehead, and then, as he leaves the morgue, questioning his own state as a 'living' person:

> [...] Why were the dead fleeing, he asked himself, are they afraid to die? Are they afraid of what comes after the burial? How do these corpses live? Do they move along with their souls or without them? And how could he know whether he was dead or alive? Was he dead or alive, really?
> The first signs of dawn appeared in the sky. As the first white ray shined, he saw the frenzy of people crossing the bridge. The dead life [*al-ḥayāt al-mayyita*] was creeping in Baghdad streets again. The roads were full of fleeing corpses. He recognised them, most of them, and they were dead for sure. He was sure of everything surrounding him, except for one thing: was he alive or dead? (101) [46]

Questioning the ontological status of the character-focaliser involves indeed questioning the role of the narratee: is the novel *addressed* to the dead? Contrary to what happened in 'al-Infijār', where the protagonist's fellow undead served as a mediator to gain the audience's empathy, Shāwī's novel ends by casting a doubt over the very ontological status of contemporary Iraq, by depicting Baghdad as a hunted city inhabited by the dead (in what is indeed the only depiction of external space in the whole novel). Just as the narratees of the framed stories are the other corpses stored in the morgue, the reader is thus allowed to watch closely only as long as she enters an unnatural authorial audience formed by the dead.

Parasitic Dead-Narration: Tabṣīr as 'Traumatising the Reader'

Ḥasan Blāsim's short fiction makes extensive use of unnatural narrative devices. In his overview of the 'impossible storyworlds of terror' in Blāsim's work, Shang Biwu devotes great attention to the almost ubiquitous presence of dead narrators in his oeuvre

[46] Aviva Briefel (2009) has defined the trope 'spectral incognizance' to describe characters in horror films not realising their own death. For Briefel, the trope endeavours to reassure the spectator's positions as part of the world of the living: 'if this one doesn't scare you, you're already dead' (Briefel 2009:95)

stressing the 'cognitive defiance' the trope involves (Biwu 2017:185-86). Compared to the texts we have covered thus far, Blāsim's 'undead' stories make such 'defiance' much more explicit, involving often an agonistic stance toward the reader (a narrative strategy that we have already seen in 'al-Arshīf'). While we have discussed the readerly engagement in Shāwī's novel as *istibṣār*, a horrified-compassionate gaze which ultimately asks the reader to identify with the dead, Blāsim's narrators challenge this paradigm of empathy, constructing narrative structures that make re-cognition impossible.

The main example Biwu makes for dead narration is indeed a short story employing the dead narrator as a mediator. The first-person voice in 'al-Masīḥ al-ʿirāqī' is a fellow soldier of the eponymous protagonist, whom he encounters again in the afterlife:

> I was killed by friendly fire. We were part of a joint force with Americans. They opened fire at us from a house of that little town. The Americans reacted hysterically. They thought it was we who were shooting. I got three bullets in the head. I met the Christ in our new world. I was so happy. He told me he felt bound to that guy in the kebab restaurant, in a way he could not explain. (Blāsim 2017:174)

In this case however, the retrospective time structure we have sketched at the beginning of the discussion is absent. The passage above, in fact, is not the conclusion of the story, but a narratorial intrusion that interrupts the plot's climax. At this point of narration the reader only knows that the protagonist, the 'Iraqi Christ' has been caught in a trap by a terrorist, who offers him to save his mother if he blows himself up in his place. By anticipating the outcome of the situation, the narratorial intrusion disturbs readerly identification with the protagonist and forces the unnatural interpretive pattern *before* the information is fully disclosed. Unable to follow the familiar path of re-cognition, the must rely on the information provided by the almost-authorial narrator. The community

of the dead does not encompass the reader, who is left at the mercy of the information leaking from the afterlife.

Another short story from the collection, 'al-Kalimāt al-mutaqāṭiʿa' brings this structure of interferences to re-cognition to its utter consequences. In this case, the story is narrated by a multiplicity of voices continually superimposing on one another and ultimately sabotaging the possibility of transmitting trauma as a coherent account. Starting from the innermost level of metalepses, we find a policeman describing his own death, occurred during a terrorist attack, in the familiar fashion:

> The fire blazed my body: I started running and screaming until I fell down in the reception hall. I found myself sitting on the floor, just a few steps apart from my charred body. I was two: a lifeless corpse, and another one trembling from cold. (195)

In this story, however, the narrator is not consigned to another dimension, to a detached 'here' where the 'I' can narrate. Instead, the character keeps walking until he enters the body of the only survivor.[47] As we soon discover, the policeman is narrating the quoted scene as a voice inside the head of the protagonist Marwān, a famous crosswords designer living in Baghdad. Yet, to make the situation even more intricated, Marwān himself is not the narrator of the story. In fact, the main voice presents itself as a third-person, authoritative narrator able to read Marwān's possessed mind:

[47] A very similar scene is depicted in Saʿdāwī's *Frānkishtāyn fī Baghdād*: just like in Blāsim's story, the wandering ghost is a police officer killed by a car-bomb (Saʿdāwī 2013:43-48)

> He sits on the hedge of the bed. Feels his extremities numb. Pours himself a glass of water. His gaze turns confused over the room. He sees a bird crashing on the window.
> A fat nurse jabbing an armless man.
> Thank you for the cold water, says the policeman voice inside him. (187)

This display of mindreading powers, however, is further complicated when the narrator reveals to be a friend of Marwān's and thus as another character in the storyworld. How, then, can he access another character's consciousness? As it turns out, the frame narrator's 'I' is inhabited by *another* voice, which the narrator addresses in the second person, and that is indeed in turn inhabited by Marwān's himself.

As compared to the texts analysed this far, 'al-Kalimāt al-mutaqāṭiʿa' thematises narration to a point where the narrated its almost irrelevant: the main 'story' is in fact the crossword of trauma who is passed off to each character in a different narrative mode. As Brian Richardson points out, in unnatural narratives 'the nature and identity of the narrator becomes itself a miniature drama as a familiar narrating situation is established throughout the text only to be utterly transformed at the end' (Richardson 2006:12). In Blāsim's allegoric concatenation of trauma, the reader stands at the end of the chain: reading the story makes her part of the crossword, caught the interplay of frames. Far from 'leaking' horror and empathy into a quasi-realist storyworld, Blāsim's texts choses to traumatise the reader through a metanarrative scheme (as in 'Ponzi scheme') that blurs the borders of the storyworld itself. Whereas the voice of 'al-Masīḥ al-ʿirāqī' is 'happy' to meet the protagonist in the afterlife, here the story presents us with an open ending, an unfinished dialogue in which the narrating-'I' begs the other voice to stop

telling: ‘I wish I didn’t hear you anymore, I wish you disappeared from my life’ (200). In contrast to the *istibṣār* of Khuḍayyir/Deleuze, then, the witnessing of death and trauma happens to what we could call *tabṣīr*: the unwilling reader is ‘forced to watch’, possessed by the voice of a dead voice which does not abandon the ‘here’ of the real world. As Ikram Masmoudi has pointed out, Blāsim’s fiction ‘confronts us with a performative aesthetics by staging horror within the text while invoking and implicating the reader as a partner, a witness, or an accomplice in producing/receiving the text’s horror’ (Masmoudi 2019-20:68). Blāsim’s challenge to the paradigm of untellability is thus predicated on a temporal structure that implies a radically different mode of engagement.

Voicing the *Shabaḥ*

In her discussion of contemporary Hebrew Gothic literature, Karen Grumberg defines the relation of Gothic to history as that of a ‘para-site’: while apparently moving away from everyday reality, ‘the gothic is not only compatible with but also necessary for the functioning of the real world: the parasite supports the host as much as vice versa”’ (Grumbeg 2019:7). The ‘miniature drama’ of unnatural narration in the texts we have considered entertains a similar relation to the ‘natural’ cognition of a traumatised reality (what Khuḍayyir terms ‘psychologically neutral images’). By keeping alive otherwise mute narrators, all the texts we have discussed resist the principle of aporia and create storyworlds in which the wound is *shown*, rather than being represented indirectly. In doing so, the Iraqi Gothic challenges both realist and modernist approaches to traumatic fiction.

At the same time, this para-sitic relation to reality questions the anti-mimetic assumptions of unnatural narratology, which draws mainly from postmodernist metafiction: dead narration in the texts we have considered does indeed play with the impossibilities of telling, but it does so in order to overcome them, in an act of 'cognitive defiance', in Biwu's terminology. As Monika Fludernik (2012:368) points out in her critique of unnatural narratology '[n]ot only is realism illusionary, but the mimetic reproduces both that which is natural and fictional scenarios that are non-natural'. Both Shāwī's *istibṣār* as an act of empathic watching and Blāsim's 'unsolicited' dead-narration require what Phelan calls 'ethical progression' on the part of the reader, and ultimately lead her to a *mawqif* towards reality.

Such progression also contributes to constructing the national allegory theorised by Bahoora. In this respect, our analysis has shown how the 'miniature drama' of narration (the patterns of re-cognitions, and metalepsis, the addresses to more or less characterised narratees) plays a central part in the allegoric 'dismembered nation'. By defining deictic systems that define voice as a space of enunciation (*manṭiq*), the texts we have considered fracture narrative communication by situating the 'here' of narration away from the 'here' of Iraq. As we have seen with the ending of Shāwī's novel, the rhetorical climax of dead narration leads to recognition of Baghdad as a city of the living dead: its depiction is only possible as long as the protagonist situates himself alongside the victims of the conflict. Engaging more directly with refugeetude, on the other hand, Blāsim's and Jirjīs's works construct a more definite dual deixis in which narration happens in 'our new world'. Interviewed by the French filmmaker Simone Bitton, the Palestinian poet

Mahmoud Darwish defined his experience of exile in terms of a haunting: ‘it is like I was there [in Palestine], and my ghost [*shabaḥī*] *here* addresses my essence [*jawharī*] *there*’. The texts we have considered allegorise the ‘dismemberment of the nation’ moving within this dialectic of *shabaḥ* and *jawhar*.

Still, not only does this dialectic of ‘here’ and ‘there’ mimic the path of recognition that the reader is asked to follow. By foregrounding the thematic side of voice, dead narration also questions the authorial side of the narrative situation: who is allowed to ‘speak for’ the dead? Does the voice stand with the ghost or with the ‘essence’? To answer these questions, the next chapter will look at narratives which employ unnatural devices in a metatextual environment, directly implicating the writing process and problematising the testimonial act.

4. Dead Narrators, Living Authors: Disembodied Voices and Metafiction

فمتى رأيت بستاناً يُحمل في ردن، وروضة تُقلّ في حِجر، وناطقاً ينطق عن الموتى،
ويترجم عن الأحياء
(Jāhiẓ, *Kitāb al-Ḥayāwan*)

In Chapter Three, we have looked at enhanced character-narrators who possess the uncanny ability to narrate their lives and deaths *retrospectively* from the para-site of the afterlife. These texts employ a variety of devices and techniques - the inter-crossing of voices, a gradual re-cognition, or more conventional instances of retrospection - to let the testimony of violence survive after the loss of the body. Even in its more complex versions, this trope ultimately relies on a circularity of the plot: the death of the character-narrator, which we have defined as the story's *manṭiq*, is both the origin and the 'cut' moment in which narrating- and experiencing-'I' are reunited. Yet, afterlife narration includes instances of narration that unsettle the paradigm of retrospection. In this chapter, we shall focus on afterlife narratives in which the death of the narrator is merely the point of departure, with the plot developing in a narrative *present* that extends indefinitely into the afterlife.

As we have seen, retrospective dead-narration bases its own legitimacy in the communication to the narratee, whom the narrator 'infects' with a horror that brings along some form of testimony. The narrative authorisation of a voice narrating its own experience *after the body*, on the other hand, poses a different kind of problem. In fact, the

necessity of distinguishing between the first-person voice from the embodied protagonist pushes ‘I’-narration to its limits, where it blurs into third-person narration. In the two novels discussed in this chapter, the problem of the boundaries of the ‘I’ is not only posed by the narrative situation but is widely dramatized through metafiction. While the texts we have read in the previous chapter revolve around a deixis of displacement (‘how did I end up here’?), the focus will shift here to the paradox of simultaneous narration (‘how can I *be telling* what’s happening?’). Answering this question involves addressing Bahoora’s national allegory from a different perspective: who is authorised to speak for/about (*ʿan*) the dismembered nation in the first person? And how? In what follows, I will begin with the definition of this *afterlife* (of) narration in terms of a *dual voicing*, in which the experiencing and the narrating-‘I’ are placed onto different ontological levels. I will then move to the discussion of Ḍiyāʿ al-Jubaylī’s *al-Mashṭūr* and Ḥāzim Kamāl al-Dīn’s *Miyāh mutaṣaḥḥira*, each offering a different poetic and political point of view on the problem of the dual voice.

Occupying the Ruins of the ‘I’: Dual Voice and Afterlife Narration

To introduce the metanarrative form of afterlife narration, and its link with authoriality, let us now briefly look at one of the most condensed and profound treatments of the trope of dead-narration in post-war literature. Sinān Anṭūn’s poem ‘Head’, published in the collection *Layl wāḥid fī kull al-mudun* (‘One Night in All Cities’, 2012), narrates a beheading through the eyes of the victim.

> I was not a tree

Nor a lamb
Yet they murmured something
And cut my head off
With a blind knife.
It rolled away
And I saw myself kneeling there
With my hands behind my back
A couple of seconds and the fountain of blood stopped flowing [...]
After a while the hungry dogs came [...]
Don't spare anything of my body!
But I begged them
To leave my head here
At the bottom of the poem. (Antoon 2012:8-9)[48]

As we have seen in Chapter Three, in the paradigmatic form of retrospective dead-narration the recognition of one's death is situated as a climactic moment at the end of the plot, casting a retroactive coherence onto the plot. Here, on the other hand, the transition is almost seamless, condensed in the paradoxical construct *raʾaytu-nī hunāk* 'I saw myself there'. The verse does indeed create an irreducible split between the narrating- and the experiencing-'I', with the latter relegated *hunāk* 'there'. Yet, as the voice lives on in another dimension, the narration does not become retrospective, and focalisation remains anchored to the severed head. The survival of the first-person pronoun *through* its splitting is what I propose to call afterlife narration.

In a chapter of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* titled 'You Only Die Twice', Slavoj Zizek offers a psychoanalytic reading of this 'difference between the two deaths' as the 'difference between real (biological) death and its symbolization, the "settling of accounts", the

[48] A similar sequence is found in the opening of Antoon's second novel *Waḥdhā shajarat al-rummān* ('The Pomegranate Alone', 2012b), which is one of the references in Bahoora's theorisation of the Iraqi Postcolonial Gothic.

accomplishment of symbolic destiny' (Žižek 1989:150). Among the many examples Žižek brings to illustrate this point, paradigmatic is the cartoon characters who keep walking beyond the edge of a precipice, only falling when they look down and *realise* their imminent death (*ibid.*, 148). The horror that Anṭūn's poem induces in its reader is connected to the extension of this suspended state: the reader urges the narrator to accomplish her destiny, but the voice is displaced, and the symbolic death postponed. This paradoxical survival is only possible through displacement/deferral, which makes the victim – as Žižek notes discussing the work of Marquis de Sade – 'in a certain sense, indestructible' (*ibid.*, 149). This displacement of the voice in the poem, however, is coupled with an extension of the function of seeing, as the narrative forces the reader to *ocularise* the point of view of the head. This testimonial element adds another layer to the idea of eye-witnessing that Khuḍayyir/Deleuze calls *muʿāyana*: as derived from form III of the root, *muʿāyana* etymologically points to an act of 'eyeing along', 'co-ocularising'. In Anṭūn's poem, this function of *muʿāyana* involves a loss of agency for both the narratorial and the audience side of narrative communication. Having walked past the edge of the precipice, the first-person narration compels the reader to look down the abyss along with the protagonist while simultaneously refusing to let go. From the perspective of 'natural' narratology, such a split configuration of voice and sight in the poem is traumatising because it takes to its extreme consequences one of the core assumptions of narrative theory: that stories be about embodied experience. Discussing anti-mimetic strategies in postmodern narratives, for instance, Monika Fludernik points out that they often 'refuse the reader the consolation of an embodied protagonist' (Fludernik 1996:22). If embodiment is a *consolation*, narrative situations as the one found in 'Raʾs' make its

refusal all the more disturbing precisely because it maintains a liminal, helpless embodied experience.

Contrary to the retrospective plots we have read in the previous chapter, this break with embodiment entails a temporality in which the gap between the 'two deaths' is infinitely stretched and frozen within the narrative present, at the moment of *iḥtiḍār* ('passing away', but from a root that conveys also the idea of 'present' and 'presence'). The ocularisation of trauma confines the scene to a brute form of presence: a stretching of vision and simultaneity beyond their natural boundaries, a time made immobile by the impossibility of action. This paradoxical present of 'passing away' relegates the voice to a dimension where no authority over narrative is possible, no possibility is there for the voice to 'stipulate' elements of the storyworld – as structuralist narratology would put it. This plot of passing-away reproduces on a temporal level the spatial dialectic of the ruin defined by Jalal Toufic: 'ruins' are both '[o]ccupied uninhabitable areas and deserted habitable areas' (Toufic 2003:69). The extended narrative present of afterlife narration is similarly a dimension in which narration is impossible, and at the same time an empty space occupied by the 'I' through an extension of its prerogatives.

In this ruin-like *manṭiq*, the narrator retains the 'I' but is not anymore an anthropomorphic construct, undergoing a metamorphosis similar to the one Tarek El-Ariss defined *tawaḥḥush* (literally 'becoming wild, monstrous'). For El-Ariss, *tawaḥḥush* is the metamorphosis brought about by *waḥsha*, as the experience of displacement and exile chanted by *ṣaʿālīk* poets in pre-Islamic Arabia (El-Ariss 2016:74). As El-Ariss notes, the dehumanisation defined by *tawaḥḥush* implies the (Kafkaesque) metamorphosis of the

voice, which becomes 'doubled, coming from him and from somewhere else' (*ibid.*). The gap between the voice and the sight in 'Raʾs' is thus *mūḥish*, making the (un)dead body into a monster and by that same movement doubling the deictic centres. Coherently with the unnatural approach to narratives, in my reading I will be interested in the meta-narrative represented by this displacement/reoccupation of the 'I', and with the readerly strategies it elicits. How does the voice occupy the uninhabitable *hunā* 'at the end of the poem'? How can the point of view of the head be narratively justified after the voice desertion?

Unnatural narrative theory has studied similar instances of extended 'I's as part of the discussion on the limits of first-person narratives. Henrik Skov Nielsen has devoted an article on what he terms the 'impersonal voice' in 'I' fiction (Nielsen 2004). Nielsen tackles what looks like violations of the mimetic convention by which character-narration is the fictional equivalent of an autobiography: 'mnemonic overkill' (i.e., when the character-narrator tells more information than we can reasonably assume she can remember), redundant telling (when the narrator conveys information that reader already possesses), and the incorporation of free indirect discourse of other characters. To account for such narrative situations, Nielsen borrows the term 'dual voice', that Roy Pascal has coined to describe free indirect speech, and theorises the existence of a second, impersonal voice in first-person narratives endowed with authorial prerogatives:

> The impersonal voice of the narrative can say what a narrating-I cannot say, produce details that no person could remember, render the thoughts of other characters, speak when the character remains forever silent etc. It speaks, however, in the first person, both when the possibilities of the person referred to by the first-person pronoun are abandoned and when it says what this person can say. (*ibid.*, 139-40)

This impersonal voice carries therefore the characters of a third-person narrator that 'occupies a character and says "I"' (*ibid.*). Nielsen's framework is indeed fundamental to understand the enhanced possibilities opened by post-mortem narration. Yet the dual voicing metaphor is conceived to account for narratives in which authorial, impersonal intrusions are only occasional. What happens when the *main* voice is disembodied, impersonal? In Arabic, the third-person pronoun is defined as *ḍamīr al-ghāʿib* 'the pronoun of the absent': what narratives like 'Raʾs' depict is a *mutakallim ghāʾib,* an absent 'I'.

Nielsen's framework is all the more crucial because it helps us account for enhanced 'I's in terms of authoriality. In Anṭūn's poem, the metafictional ending opens up the possibility of the voice's survival outside the text, in the public discourse. The horrifying run above the abyss is indeed (at least partially) revealed to be a movement *across* narrative frames. The keyword in this transformation is in the verb *tamtama* 'to murmur', by which the narrator-focaliser (at this point the voice is still embodied) defines the discourse of her killers. In an article discussing the depiction of torture in contemporary Iraqi poetry, Anṭūn himself quotes a brief poem by Sargūn Būluṣ (1944-2007), 'al-Juththa' (The Corpse), in which the verb describes the undistinguishable muttering of a tortured body about to enter the space between the two deaths:

> [...] As the torturers finally got tired
> And relaxed, the corpse moved its little finger
> Opened its wounded eyes
> And murmured [*tamtama*] something.
> Was it asking for water? Was it looking for food maybe?
> Was it cursing them, or asking for more?

What did the corpse want? (Būluṣ 2008:123)[49]

The word *tamtama*, itself an onomatopoeia, defines a voice with no narrator, a wordless utterance, what Cavarero calls the 'voiceless scream' of Medusa (Cavarero 2009). In the terms I have used this far, *tamtama* is a voice without *manṭiq*, with no point of articulation. This undifferentiated character of voice extends, in Anṭūn's poem, to perception: the dying-character's focalisation is blurred, its deictic centre too distant to convey precise information. Yet, as the ending of the poem shows, the vocalisation of the head's murmurs, and the internal focalisation, all depend on a metanarrative act, which procedes backwards to give voice and definition, to provide a *manṭiq* to the *tamtama*.

This act of ventriloquy, of speaking-through the inert (not of speaking-for, which would entail at least one third-person pronoun, nor of working-through, which would suppose some kind of central 'I') is what classical Arabic calls *istinṭāq*. Constructed on form X of the same root of *manṭiq*, *istinṭāq* refers to the process of 'looking for' a *manṭiq* but also of 'endowing with' speech an entity unable to utter. Discussing the classification of beings into 'speaking' and 'non-speaking', al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 869) argues that the process of *istinṭāq* grants *manṭiq* to the whole of the non-human *bodies*:

> The mute, speechless bodies are in fact speaking through signification, and express themselves by showing themselves: so that their guidance and the wisdom they contain are informative to those who examine them, and telling to those who make them speak [*li-man istanṭaqahā*]. (Jāḥiz 1969:34)

[49] This image of the murmur is given prominence in another poem of the same collection, significantly titled 'Tamtamāt min raʾs Urfiyūs' (Murmurs from Orfeus' head) (Būluṣ 2008:147)

Istinṭāq entails then the quintessentially authorial movement of interrogating the ruin, of offering new voice to the silent matter: in a poem published in the same collection as 'al-Juththa', for instance, Sargūn Būluṣ defines the very activity of the poet through the imperative *istanṭiq al-ashyāʾ* 'make things speak' (Būluṣ 2008:105).[50] Such an act of interpellation implies a historical and political stance both towards the interrogated 'voiceless' and towards the audience to whom the elicited *manṭiq* are presented. To the readership, the authorial voice-as-*istinṭāq* must present itself as endowed with the uncanny ability to articulate the unarticulated mutters *in the first person*: the now-empty space of *manṭiq* can become a ruin any entity can inhabit.

In Anṭūn's 'Raʾs', the metanarrative ending brings the relationship between a poetics of *istinṭāq* and authoriality to the fore, bringing the act of writing to the fore. In doing so, it opens a space in which the act of speaking 'through' (*ʿan*) can be problematised in terms of literary communication. In 'The Death of the Author', Roland Barthes famously claimed that as '[t]he voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins' (Barthes 1989:52). The narratives we will look at in this chapter use metafiction as a means of subverting this assumption: as the *character* enters her own death, an authorial, metanarrative voice leaks back into the gap between the 'there' of witnessing,

[50] The archetypical act of *istinṭāq* in Arabic literature is the trope of the 'interrogation of the ruins' (*al-wuqūf ʿalā al-aṭlāl*) in pre-Islamic poetry. References to this trope are widespread in post-war fiction: Anṭūn's Fihris, for instance, directly quotes Zuhayyir's *muʿallaqa* connecting it to his narrator's encyclopaedic collection of *manṭīqs*. In a recent article, Annie Webster has used the framework of the *aṭlāl* to read post-2003 Iraqi science fiction (Webster 2022). For Webster, the temporality involved in the interrogation of ruins 'redirect[s] the reader's gaze to the wreckage left behind' by oil-sponsored narratives of progress (*ibid.*, 396).

and the 'here' of literary communication. In doing so, it highlights issues of narrative authority, entitlement, and literary circulation.

The two novels analysed in this chapter build on the structure I have shown at work in 'Raʾs'. Both *al-Mashṭūr* (2017) and *Miyāh mutaṣaḥḥira* (2016) revolve around character-narrators that find themselves suspended in an interspace between life and death, and from that position narrate the destiny of their dismembered bodies. The two novels use metafiction to dramatize the narratological passage from the embodied, limited narration of the character to an 'impersonal' and quasi-authorial narration in which the 'I' constitutes a residual layer between character-character and author-audience communication. In my reading, I will focus on this 'residual' dimension: how does the narrative configure the relation between the disembodied narrating-'I' and its no-longer-embodied experiencing counterpart? To answer this question also involves questioning the ethics and politics of narration: by which authority can these 'I's interrogate the *ghāʾib* – and ventriloquise its answers?

The Quest for a National 'I': Omniscience in Ḍiyāʾ al-Jubaylī's *al-Mashṭūr*

Published in 2017, *al-Mashṭūr* ('The Cloven') is the sixth novel by Ḍiyāʾ al-Jubaylī (b. 1977). Born and based in Basra, Jubaylī has first come to fame as a writer of short stories that, with their markedly intertextual and fantastic character, are deeply embedded in the city's literary scene.[51] The novel is constructed as a playful re-writing of Italo Calvino's *The Cloven Viscount* (1952), as it revolves around the two halves of an Iraqi man

[51] On the 'Basra connection', see Chapter One.

dismembered by ISIS militiamen during the last phase of the civil war. Unable to ascertain whether he is Shia or Sunni, the kidnappers do in fact decide to cut the character narrator into two longitudinal halves. As the two halves wake up, they find themselves unable to retrieve their old identity: in order to reunite, they set out on a journey to Baghdad, where they hope to find Calvino's original novel, whose finale will show them how to be stitched back together. To this aim, the two protagonists (who soon name themselves 'Meso' and 'Potamia'), will need to try 'six illegal ways to cross the border towards Baghdad', as the subtitle of the novel goes. The novel is indeed divided into six sections, one for each of the borders the halves try to cross (Syria, Turkey, Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan).

The main structural difference between Calvino's and Jubaylī's cloven characters is related to narrative voice: while *The Cloven Viscount* is narrated by a marginal character (a homo-allodiegetic narrator in Genette's definition), the original narrator of *al-Mashṭūr* is the cloven character himself. In an interview for *al-Quds al-ʿArabī*, Jubaylī stresses this centrality of the 'I' in what could be defined as a minor literature:

> [...] I worked on a third 'I': the 'I' of the cloven narrator and main character that would gradually fade into his two halves until he is virtually forgotten. During my multiple readings [of *The Cloven Viscount*] I discovered that there is a third 'I' that was neglected by Calvino in his novel. It is one of the many tiny crumbs that great writers leave to the little birds like myself, something that initially I marvelled at, that made me study and think a lot before starting to write. To sum it up, *al-Mashṭūr* is a novel about an Iraq that has been losing its central 'I' [...]. It is the story [*riwāya*] of an Iraq that had to address one of the most pressing questions of its dismemberment and disintegration: are you Sunni or Shia? [...] (Jubaylī 2017b)

Jubaylī reads Calvino through the now familiar lenses of the allegory of national dismemberment, which we have addressed in the previous chapter. Yet, while *The Cloven Viscount* limits itself to the binary opposition between the two halves, the national character of Jubaylī's reading leads him to identify a residual narrative instance able to articulate national identity *beyond* dismemberment. This instance is indeed the protagonist's 'I' which is enabled to narrate the circumstances of his own death. The novel introduces the protagonist-narrator as (after)living concretion of Iraqiness: when his bag is searched by the terrorist, it is found containing not only a poetry collection by Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb but also a copy of the Epic of Gilgamesh, the code of Hammurabi, and a Sumerian statue. The main claim of *al-Mashṭūr* as compared to its archi-text is thus a narratological one: the identification of the character and the nation is so rooted in the first-person paradigm that the story is narrated by its protagonist *even though* he has been cloven. Yet, as Jubaylī's interview makes clear, the protagonist's liminal survival is possible only in the guise of a *central* 'I', a sort of omniscient narrator. In the already familiar trope of the dead-narration, the novel does indeed open on the unnamed protagonist's account of his own killing:

> I don't know if my Chechen murderer had ever read Italo Calvino's *The Cloven Viscount*. I wanted to ask, of course, but couldn't, for I was dead by then, the murderer cutting me up into neat longitudinal halves, using a chainsaw to that aim. (9)

As the narrator tells us through analepsis, this symmetric dismemberment has been chosen by the two kidnappers (a Chechen and an Afghani ISIS militiamen) as a retaliation for the protagonist refusing to identify as either Sunni or Shia – the only answer the narrator provides to their interrogation being 'I am Iraqi'. Yet, the unnamed protagonist

of *al-Mashṭūr* does not simply continue narrating after his death, caught between the diegetic and the extradiegetic. In the afterlife, the disembodied voice turns into a self-declared 'omniscient narrator' [*rāw*^{in} *ʿalīm*]. Soon after the two halves wake up and realise they are still alive, a chapter is devoted to this meta-narrative *tawḥīsh*:

> I... am not myself anymore. Or let's say at least that I don't know myself anymore. Are those two errant halves 'me'? And if they are: why don't they feel they belong to me? Why do I speak of them as if every half had its own 'I', as if they were characters in a novel? [...] Is 'I' before the dismemberment, or after the reunion, the same 'I' that is telling now about the two halves that have been cloven? If that dismemberment happened again, where would 'I' go, as the 'I' speaking for the two halves with the voice of the omniscient narrator [*al-mutaḥadditha ʿan al-nuṣfayn ʿalā lisān al-rāwī al-ʿalīm*?]? Is this how it feels to be schizophrenic? I don't think so, for each of the two 'I's of this psychotic knows itself individually, and ignores everything about the other one. As for me, there is a third 'I', the one that does not know where it is, it only knows it is in a mysterious place created by the dismemberment process. (37-38)

Located in an inaccessible space outside the storyworld, the narrator does indeed carry out his telling along the narrative conventions of the 'omniscient narration'. The story of the narrator is thus the story of an embodied, homodiegetic narrator who 'sprang' [*inbathaqa*] out of the violent dismemberment of the former. The paradox here is that the equation of narrative authority is reversed: the voice is authoritative, can make things *be* only insofar as it derives from a character. Omniscience is a quintessentially third-person prerogative, and as such involves a minimal departure from the authorial non-mediated account (or *is* the authorial account, for no-narrator theories). Yet, in this case, the self-referential voice that 'creates the world to which it refers by referring to it' (Cohn 1999:13) is that of a character, albeit disembodied.

Character omniscience

In his study on *The Return of the Omniscient Narrator*, Paul Dawson addresses what he defines as 'contemporary omniscient narration', i.e., 'works of fiction in which intrusive third-person narrators demonstrate an awareness of the influence of postmodernism on the figure of authorship' (Dawson 2013:63). Dawson's work is particularly interesting for its reframing of the debate on omniscience: instead of a definite set of techniques (mind-reading, above all), omniscience is conceived as an authorial *performance* through which 'hyperbolic or agonistic searches for new modes of narrative authority' are carried about (*ibid.*). To this aim, the contemporary omniscient narrators deploy historically specific frames of authority to justify their superior knowledge of the storyworld, their intrusions and digressions, and the alterations of the linearity of the plot. The abrupt passage from character to omniscient narration in *al-Mashṭūr* is a powerful illustration of these dynamics. On the one hand, the now-omniscient 'I' gestures towards the *hors-texte*, taking on an agonistic stance with respect to Calvino's novel. The persistence of a supernatural 'I' points to the survival of an overarching national narrative, a demand that the allegorical story be narrated in a unifying first-person pronoun. On the other hand, the narrator bases his[52] authority on his *having been* complete, coherent (on his *iltiḥām*, as the novel defines it, with a term that comes from the root of *laḥm* 'flesh'), in contrast with the lack of knowledge and infra-human status of the two protagonists.

[52] I use masculine pronouns to refer to the omniscient narrator, although, as a disembodied instance, neuter pronouns could be more appropriate. By so doing, I hope to highlight the relation between the authorial voice and the original character-narrator.

On a technical level, the transition to omniscience results most evidently in the zero-focalization through which the adventures of Meso and Potamia are told. The asymmetry of knowledge between the narrator and the two characters is further emphasised by the lack of agency of the latter, who usually find themselves at the mercy of events. The openings of the six sections, for instance, present a lot of displays of omniscience: they usually depict the two halves as unconscious, abandoned in the desert outside Iraq, with the narrating-'I' responsible for making up for the missing information:

> 'Where are we, I wonder?', asked one of the two, from within the sackcloth bag in which they had been squeezed once again. 'I don't know' said the other, 'I don't think they have returned us to the same border'. Before being thrown at the Iraqi-Saudi border, the two halves had spent three days in prison, after being arrested at a checkpoint in Samāwa. [...] The policemen had accused them of being agents of regional powers, then of terrorism, then they had claimed they were sheep-smugglers, then pimps, then homosexuals always sticking to each other. In the end, they had decided to consider the two halves strange creatures, stupid, ugly freaks that were smuggled in, or maybe thrown out some American airplane to scare the people. (167-68).

Not only does the narrator answer the question posed by the character, he does also open a retrospective analepsis in which he presents the free indirect discourse of the policemen, moving freely between the different consciousness populating the storyworld. Far from gradually disclosing his information, the narrator detaches himself from the characters' perspective, and sheds an ironic light on the story of their imprisonment, musing playfully on the repetitive nature of the frame.

This detachment from the portrayal of consciousness does not result in a focalization that remains rigidly external throughout, but rather in a shift of emphasis from the mimetic to the synthetic component of narrative. The whole novel is indeed organized in

a succession of independent narrative cadres which are oriented towards a generalising conclusion. As Tania Al Saadi points out in an article on '*jidd* and *hazl*' in the novel, the embedded narrative cadres are organised along two main rhetorical lines: 'd'une part, une visée informative qui consiste à renseigner sur la réalité négative du pays, et, d'autre part, une visée morale suggérant un système de valeurs positives qui dénoncent indirectement ou s'opposent au moral corrompu du temps présent' (Al Saadi 2020:37). In this context, the omniscient narrator takes on the authority of an oral, moralistic storyteller, who is solely responsible for linking the various cadres, and for extrapolating the teachings embedded in each one of them.[53]

Intertextuality and the Ironic Moralist Narrator

This rhapsodic character of narration is confirmed by the fact that many of the narrative cadres embedded in *al-Mashṭūr* have been later published by Jubaylī himself as independent short stories. Contrasting the embedded episodes with the independent versions gives us an opportunity to foreground the function of the disembodied, omniscient narrator of the novel. Here I will focus on the short story 'al-Ḍafdaʿ', published in the 2018 collection *Lā ṭawwāḥīn hawāʾ fī al-Baṣra* (No Windmills in Basra), and embedded into the 'Iranian border' section of the novel.[54] In the short story, the extra-

[53] Another signpost of omniscience narration is the direct address: the narrator frequently addresses the two halves, using the dual. As Al Saadi points out, these addresses, coupled with the frequent use of words like *ayyūhā* contribute to shaping a style that mimics that of pre-modern Arabic prose (Al Saadi 2020)

[54] I am inclined to believe that the story was written before the novel. While the latter, as we will see, is narrated in the first person, in one instance a typo maintains the third-person formulation of the short story (*qīla lahu* instead of '*qīla lī*', p. 123).

heterodiegetic narrator tells the story of ʿAlwān, a man from Basra who accidentally discovers that supermarkets are selling frog meat to the oil workers from South-West Asia. Having decided to become a frog fisher himself, ʿAlwān makes a fortune out of his business until the frogs disappear from the Shaṭṭ al-ʿArab. On his last fishing attempt, a 'human frog' takes the bait, which the narrator immediately uncovers as a frogman, a diver-soldier from the war of the 80s, who once ashore dramatically asks: 'Is the war over?'.

While the short story presents us with a straightforwardly omniscient narrator, who for example directly discloses the main point of the narrative (i.e., that the 'frog' of the title is in fact a frogman from the 80s), the novel produces a much more layered narrative situation. As Meso and Potamia slowly advance towards a Basra 'wrapped up in despair' (121), they stumble across a fisherman who claims to be fishing for frogs. His framed reported-speech story coincides almost exactly with the short story, except for the major shift from third-person to first-person narration. The story is anticipated by an authorial summary which unsettles the mimetic character of the reported speech: 'At that point, the man started to tell the two halves about the way he had come to fish frogs' (122). After that, in compliance with the narrative frame, the story is narrated in a linear, report-like fashion. The narrating-'I' makes narration more linear and mimetic than the authorial voice of the short story. For example, in one instance *hunāk* of the short story is replaced by a more explicit periphrasis '*fī tilka al-ʿāriḍa*', which presupposes a further

asymmetry of information between the narrator and the narratee.[55] The episode ends in the present of narration, with the protagonist lamenting the scarcity of frogs: 'And here I am, as you see me, throwing my hook in this river, hoping I can fish some more frogs' (124). The climax of the short story is thus placed outside the framed narrative, and is directly enunciated by our omniscient narrator. The abrupt intrusion of the authorial voice is emphasised by a couple of metaliterary references: the Shaṭṭ is said to be 'just like Badr Shākir al-Sayāb had described it in his "Hymn of the Rain', while the unnamed fisherman is likened to Calvino's eponymous *Marcovaldo* (124).[56] These intertextual references, which are absent from the short story, reflect the peculiar configuration of omniscience in the novel: the narrator obtains his supernatural prerogatives through his rhapsodic ability to connect the episodes between themselves and with the world-literary heritage. On the one hand, the intratextual element presupposes a stance similar to what al-Kharrāṭ has called '*al-rāwī al-ʿārif wa al-mākir*', who, despite an unlimited knowledge of the narrated world, choses to disclose the information only gradually (Kharrāt 1993). In the case of 'The Frog' episode in the novel, the climax is postponed, the recognition of the frogman is delayed, his description is closer to the protagonists' point of view. Yet, in the end, the solution of the riddle is provided authorially:

> 'Who are you?', asked the frogman, *who had been hiding in the river since the war between Iraq and Iran*, as he turned around, shading his eyes from the sun with the hand all covered in moss and warts: 'is the war over?'. (125, my emphasis)

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[55] It is worth noting that in a couple of passages the novel employs periphrases where the short story uses dialectal terms, which could be linked to the authorial selection of a broader public in the case of the novel.
[56] The reference makes explicit a previous covert quote of the poem in the description of the river, which is said to be 'shaken by the oars' (*tarujjuhā al-majādhīf*).

The intertextual element, on the other hand, informs most of the authorial intrusions throughout the text, and constitutes an ironic counterpoint to the protagonists' quest for Calvino's novel. Most of the instances of cross-textual references seem indeed explicative, aiming at the reader's complicity by appealing to the world literary canon. For instance, Khūkhī, an old woman with 'two eyes that repeated Arthur Rimbaud's words: misfortune was my Lord' (67) is defined as 'one of the women in the *Decameron* that keep telling funny stories while people die of plague around them' (70).

This exasperated intertextual character of narration in *al-Mashṭūr* poses the question of the historically-specific model of authority it relies upon. In his study, among a number of modes of narrative authority typical of contemporary omniscience, Dawson address what he calls the 'ironic moralist'. In this narrative situation, the authorial voice takes on the '"universalizing" moral authority of classical omniscience' but nuances it through a postmodern use of irony and metafiction (Dawson 2013:69). However, as Al Saadi points out (and as Jubaylī himself has remarked in the interview discussed above), in *al-Mashṭūr* the narrator's ironic moralism takes the nation ('la realité negative du pays' as Al Saadi phrases it) as its horizon, rather than the 'universal'. The main source of narrative authority, the positioning that justifies the survival of a disembodied voice, stems from the metaphor THE NATION IS A PERSON (Hogan 2009:45), from which we infer that A NATION IN A CIVIL WAR IS A CLOVEN PERSON. The ultimate task of such voice is to narrate *Iraq*, both by literally tracing its borders and by resorting to the 'allegory of dismemberment' of which Bahoora writes. On the one hand, the third 'I' of which Jubaylī speaks in the interview is (and must be) placed somewhere *beyond* the nation, in a

metaphysical position that enables him to speak for the nation as a coherent unity despite sectarianism and widespread violence. On the other hand, however, the disembodied narrator *is* the nation itself, he metaphorically condenses a whole narration of Iraqi past and: in this perspective, the narrator must be homodiegetic, he needs a narrative body to bear witness of the national dismemberment. This ubiquitous presence of the nation beyond narration is reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of the political in a minor literature. For Deleuze and Guattari, since the 'national consciousness' is 'often inactive in external life', a minor literature is quintessentially political not in spite but because of the marginal positioning of its storytellers: 'if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more the possibility to express another possible community' (Deleuze & Guattari 1986:17). The novel explicitly address this narrative of the nation in one of the last generalising digressions of the omniscient voice:

> This was the result of the musings of the two halves: they decided to live as displaced. Displacement itself is indeed one of the natural consequences of violence, it has become one of the elements of identity. If you want to prove that you are part of the people of this country you don't need to exhibit your ID: just show your wound, your psychosis, your disability, or the number the dead in your family. Or just say *I am displaced*. (226)

The dis-integration of the subject is acknowledged by the narrator as the condition for a unified narrative of the nation. Interestingly, this generalising 'lesson' of the story is paired with a direct address to an inclusive second person sharing the 'Iraqiness' of the narrator. In the pages immediately following this paragraph, the narrator will directly

address his characters by sending them a letter across narrative layers[57]. The letter abruptly and definitively poses an end to the project of *iltiḥām* of the two characters, and it does so by reasserting the metaphorical nature of the latter: 'just as it is difficult for this country to be united, so it is for you two'. The metafictional performance of the omniscient voice closes the story by relegating its characters to the symbolic realm of the nation. Within this symbolic space, the characters will be lacking unity, agency, and indeed voice as long as the nation is not unified.

Disembodied Performance: Ḥāzim Kamāl al-Dīn, *Miyāh mutaṣaḥḥira*

Published in 2017, *Miyāh mutaṣaḥḥira* is the second novel by Ḥāzim Kamāl al-Dīn (b. 1954). Persecuted as a Communist and sentenced to death, Kamāl al-Dīn left Iraq in the early 70s, and has since lived and published under a variety of pseudonyms in many Mashreq countries, until finally settling in Belgium. In Europe, Kamāl al-Dīn has continued his career as a director and playwright, leading Arab-Belgian companies and writing both in Dutch and in Arabic. Theatre and performative storytelling play a crucial role in Kamāl al-Dīn prose work. His debut novel is significantly titled *Kābārīhat* (Cabaret, 2014). In a reading of his following *Miyāh mutaṣaḥḥira* (henceforth *Miyāh*), Fayḥāʾ al-Sāmarrāʾī describes the novel's writing as a 'theatrical style meant to traumatise' (al-Sāmarrāʾī 2022).

[57] The omniscient voice uses a letter instead of a direct address to the character, thus introducing a further ironic level: pseudo-factual conventions are maintained even as narration unmakes itself.

The theatrical element does inform the novel's structure, as the plot is organised into a series of performative, mostly monologic scenes in which the present of narration and that of the story coincide. This performative nature depends on the fabulation of a first-person afterlife narrator: as al-Sāmarrāʾī puts it, 'it is as if the author-playwright-novelist stood on the stage repeating in a cold voice [...] "I am Ḥāzim Kamāl al-Dīn, or better, I am his corpse"' (*ibid.*). The first scene of the novel presents us, indeed, with the death of the narrator, in a plot that describes the same splitting of the voice that we have encountered discussing 'Head':

> My soul is trying to separate from my body, and I seize it by the collar. I fly above myself leaving my scattered limbs where everything turns in a violent confusion. Turmoil and fire and vegetables all over and the meat of the butcherers mixing with the limbs of the victims, thieves robbing the injured policemen too scared to get close ambulances running in circles. Something difficult to believe! [...] No way to understand the nature of what's happening. [...] I'm in a tunnel to which I can see no end. [...] My voice resonates in the tunnel in a mechanical tone, as if I am not the one who's speaking. [...] I see myself [*arā nafsī*] in the furnace of the tunnel, my voice ironing me out [*yasḥalu-nī*] and repeating: *The Murderer! I am the murderer!* (7-8)

The 'death' of the narrating voice implies an extension of the narrative present, rather than triggering a retrospective account of 'how did I die'. Yet, contrary to what happens in *al-Mashṭūr*, the narrator's point of view in *Miyāh* is extremely limited. The voice is so far from omniscience that it is unable to provide any clear information about the storyworld. The tight rhythm of the opening, with the almost unarticulated shift from the scene of what is probably a terrorist attack to the post-mortem 'tunnel', leaves the dead voice barely able to articulate any sentence. At the end of the section, however, the 'second' voice, the moment of *istinṭāq* surfaces as the authoritative, 'mechanical' voice that 'irons' the *tamtama*, and takes over ('I am not the one who's speaking'). While the

existence of the second 'I' is the main claim of Jubaylī's novel, as a promise of (national) emancipation, here the metaleptic 'I', the 'voice from the tunnel' is a sort of aggressive, extra-diegetic force that keeps the narration in a state of undecidability. The rest of the novel is indeed set within the post-mortem tunnel, which occasionally opens into a series of 'cavities' (*tajāwīf*) where the protagonist is 'made to narrate' a scene forcibly presented to him, sometimes with the collaboration of the voice of the narrator's nephew, resonating as well in the cave.

As in *al-Mashṭūr*, then, the duplication of the first person in the novel allows it to break with the life-narrative paradigm, the narration enabled to move across different scenes and characters. In *Miyāh* this enhancement of character-narration also involves an integration of the historical past in the scenic present of *iḥtiḍār*: occasionally, the cavities of the tunnel open onto scenes from the protagonist's family past. The 'Murderer' evoked at the end of the passage quoted, for instance, is later revealed to be the *laqab* of the protagonist's family. The cavity does indeed *show* to the narrator the origin of the surname: a 'great-grandfather' of the narrator needlessly kills a peacock that has stolen a date from him:

> *The Murderer! I am the Murderer* [*al-saffāḥ*]*!* I am not a murderer, I answer angrily to my voice. *Al-Saffāḥ* is but our family name. I'll then see myself in the past, face to face with the story of our great-grandfather Ḥamad al-Ḥumūd. Everything materialises [*yatajassadu*] in front of me. I will see a little peacock losing his way and ending up in our great-grandfather's garden. (11)

> [...] and because our hands are stained with the peacock's blood, they will stick to our family the nickname of *saffāḥūn*, those who do not refrain from shedding blood. So, from here comes our surname. I am Ḥāzim Kamāl al-Dīn al-Saffāḥ. [...] (15)[58]

As the fragment shows, narration is not carried out in the scenic narrative present, but rather in an overemphasised future tense. Almost every verb in the 'cavities' is indeed preceded by a *sīn*, the marker of future tense that is frequently omitted once the temporal frame is set. In the novel, however, such temporal marking carries no precise referential sense, as it equally concerns events set in Sumerian Mesopotamia or after the protagonist's death. In her discussion of 'odd' narrative tenses, Monika Fludernik addresses such instances of '*will* morphology' without deictic sense of future, pointing out that they can often 'be aligned with hypothetical discourse' (Fludernik 1996:191). In MSA, future markers are indeed used in hypothetical structures, in combination with a past tense auxiliary, to express impossibility in the past (third conditionals).[59] However, the deixis of presence in *Miyāh* excludes any instance of *actual* past tense. In fact, the extensive use of future tense marks the uncertain nature of the post-mortem experience. Compared to the abrupt move to omniscience in *al-Mashṭūr*, the undecidable character of post-mortem experience here is perhaps more a mimetic than an anti-realist strategy. Rather than immediately shifting to the symbolic, the characterisation of Ḥāzim's voice aims at performing what the immediate afterlife *really* feel like, often drawing from (para)scientific accounts of post-mortem experience: 'I find myself in the post-mortem

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[58] al-Saffāḥ was the *laqab* of the first Abbasid caliph, Abū al-ᶜAbbās (d. 754). Although the reference is never made explicit, the choice reflects the centrality of a national genealogy of violence, as we shall see.
[59] *Kuntu sa-afᶜalu* meaning 'I would have done'.

tunnel of which the Dutch physician Pim van Lommel spoke – much to my amusement when I first read it' (91).[60]

This 'realist' yet anti-referential treatment of time, is complemented by the constant reference to the protagonist's name, which coincides with the real author's.[61] The metaleptic function of proper name is similar to that of the final line of 'Head' in that it blurs the threshold of narrative. Yet, in this case, the identification of the character-narrator with the author is more disturbing. On the one hand, the name implies a much more direct engagement of the historical author, who accepts a greater degree of responsibility. In an interview for *Alyawm TV*, Kamāl al-Dīn himself has reflected on his choice to always give his character his own name, as a way of 'protecting' other people's stories, of granting entitlement in a context in which the appropriation of traumatic content is indeed a concern (Kamāl al-Dīn 2020). Yet, on the other hand, the author's name is given to a character which is presented to the reader as separated from his body, and deprived of all agency, including that of choosing *what story* to narrate. The name-of the-author identifies a non-authorial narrator, unable to comply even with the autobiographic paradigm. This paradoxical communicative situation makes it difficult to describe the novel in terms of autofiction. Discussing the relation between the fictional and the autobiographic proper, Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf conceives of the autofictional as oscillating between the two narrative pacts: 'slippery autofiction presents itself as a dynamic and versatile mental concept which alternately brings one or the other

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[60] Pim van Lommel (b. 1943) is a Dutch researcher of near-death experiences (NDE). His books (especially *Consciousness Beyond Life*, 2010) have popularised controversial theses on the 'continuity of consciousness' in victims of cardiac arrest.

[61] I will be referring to the author as 'Kamāl al-Dīn', and to the protagonist as 'Ḥāzim'.

dimension into the foreground while still allowing the other to permanently resonate' (Wagner-Egelhaaf 2022:33). In the case of *Miyāh*, the unnatural frame set at the beginning, makes leaning towards the autobiographic narrative pact more difficult. The simultaneity of narration (as opposed to the retrospection of autobiography) and the anti-mimetic direction discourage the reader from taking the referential hints seriously. The occasional autobiographic outbursts are more performative than accurate, aiming at *implying* the real author rather than telling about his real life. The very insistence on the author's real name, for instance, is accompanied at multiple points of the plot by a surreal chain of patronymics: 'I am Ḥāzim Kamāl al-Dīn al-Saffāḥ [the Murderer]! I am the son of Saᶜdūn b. ᶜAbd al-Ḥamīd scion of Faḥl al-Nakhīl [Master of the Palm Trees] father of al-Baghal [the Mule], of his grand-grandfather ᶜAbd al-Hādī, married to twenty women, four citrus trees, and seven river fishes' (35). In this bizarre chain, the author's name seems to stand in lieu of the body of the actor on the stage: an irreducible presence that cannot be obliterated by the fictional death of the protagonist. Only through this minimal oscillation between fiction and *hors-texte*, does the use of the author's name present the reader with the 'unstable narrative cente[r]' that, for Wagner-Egelhaaf, constitutes the 'narrative environment' for autofiction (*ibid.*, 90).

The authorial intrusion through the proper name serves also the function of expanding the scope of the narrated, to embrace the whole genealogy of Ḥāzim. The theme of genealogy is developed throughout the novel, with the aid of visual paratexts providing the family tree of the protagonist. Ḥāzim's account of his family history is dominated by the idea of tracing the roots of contemporary violence: the ancient, sometimes mythical

past is actualised until becoming virtually undistinguishable from the present of the civil war. The plot of al-Saffāh's murder of the peacock, for instance, is almost literally repeated after a few chapters, this time with an unnamed 'greatest grandfather' in Sumerian Babylon as the protagonist and a 'winged bull' in lieu of the peacock (37-41).[62] The episode's prologue addresses the transmission of such ancestral narrative through metalepsis:

> My nephew's [i.e. Ḥāzim's] family [...] possesses some secret oral histories [*tawārīkh*]. Hidden traditions that move along the generations with the family gatherings. Stories whose protagonists are grandparents and nephews. Sacred events that have kept the family unity alive from generation to generation in spite of the world outside. Yet those historical tales [*al-ḥikāyāt al-tārīkhiyya*] had leaked through time and through different popular alleys in Babylon, until they became, despite their secretness, very much open to additions, suppressions, and reformulations [*taḥwīrāt*]. (37)

The post-mortem dimension opens the space for the interrogation of genealogy through the oxymoron of 'historical tales': mythical episodes that condense the essence of the family. Narration is thus implicitly presented as a variation on the subject, yet another *taḥwīr* of the ancestral story. The ontological undecidability of narration is precisely what allows for this almost-choral turn: *because* the voice is so deprived of authority it has to rely on received narrative matter, it has to incorporate other voices in the detached dimension of afterlife. The dialectics of *istinṭāq* is evident here: as he gives voice to an

[62] Muhsin al-Musawi notes that there is 'in modern Iraqi narrative [...] an extensive use of Babylonian festivity and celebrations' (al-Musawi 2006:31). References to ancient Mesopotamia are a constant in Kamāl al-Dīn's oeuvre. Such mentions take also on an autobiographic note, as the author was born in the Bābil/Babylon province. The Sumerian and Babylonian tradition play also an important role in *al-Mashṭūr*, and in some of Jirjīs's short stories. A comprehensive study of old Mesopotamia imagery in post-2003 literature, as compared with its (anti-)Baʿthist uses in the previous decades, is still to be written.

ancestral story, Ḥāzim gets controlled by it, *finds himself* trapped in the tradition. In this sense, *Miyāh* seems somehow complementary to *al-Mashṭūr*: whereas the latter explores the horizontal dimension of Iraqiness by heading towards the 'centre' of the nation, Kamāl al-Dīn's novel tests a similar hypothesis by letting fictionalised ancestral memories surfacing to the *iḥtiḍār*. In the novel, this movement is symbolised by the figure of the protagonist's father, an archaeologist who was publicly honoured by Saddam Hussein for his discoveries in the Babylon site. A long section, for instance, is dedicated to the depiction of one of the father's dreams concerning a Sumerian funerary ritual (57-62). The autofictional element of the novel, thus, results in a sort of 'enhanced (auto)biography', in which the past makes itself present in the hypothetical future of the tunnel.

In most of the novel, however, the voice has no access to these enhanced prerogatives. Many of the narrative sketches 'shown' to the narrator in the cave revolve in fact around the fate of his dismembered body. The story of the protagonist's remnants reflects perfectly Bahoora's thesis on the allegory of national dismemberment. On the one hand, the circumstances of Ḥāzim's death remain uncertain, and a number of hypotheses arise depending on the political and sectarian status of the mourners, each accusing the enemy faction of the protagonist's death. On the other hand, the narrator's funeral becomes the object of a sectarian dispute: Ḥāzim's mother, herself a communist and an atheist, pushes for a Sunni ritual which is opposed by the father who, despite dreaming of a Sumerian ceremony, opts for the traditional Shia ritual in Najaf. The paternal branch of the family, meanwhile, organises a tribal burial in today's Babylon, only for it to be hijacked by the

bereaved's friends, who make quite mundane speeches about his former career as a screenwriter.[63] All these concurrent funerals are juxtaposed in the undifferentiated future tense of the postmortem tunnel, and incorporate contradictory details and absurd mythological hypotheses about the protagonist's death. Describing his Sunni burial site in the neighbourhood of Aᶜẓamiyya, for instance, the narrator puts the emphasis on the complete unreliability of the characters appearing on the scene:

> Every Friday a group of people from the area will gather in the cemetery to tell anecdotes about the dead [*waqāʾiᶜ al-mawtā*]. [...] . For this is the habit of the people here [*ahl al-bilād*]: they hate human beings until their death, then as soon as one of them leaves this mortal Earth they recall them as legends, in a way that allows them to overcome the reality of their present and to glorify its ruins. [...]
> 'Take this one', Abū ᶜUmar will say, pointing to my grave, scratching the stone, 'This guy passed away during a mortal fight with a twelve-for-three-meters scorpion' (20)

This moralistic authorial intrusion, with its national horizon, call for a strong narrative authority, much like that of an ironic omniscient narrator. However, what differentiates these instances in the novel from the omniscient model is that the narrator is completely unable to provide any counternarrative. In fact, what is shown as proof of the characters' unreliability, the janitor's absurd tale, will be narrated in one of the final sketches of the novel: the tunnel will show to Ḥāzim that he possibly has been kidnapped by an Islamist militia, that tortures him by placing him into a narrow room with a giant scorpion (159-164). Yet, whether this episode is a digression into the narrator's past or a hypothetical scene based on the janitor's comment remains unclear to the reader.

[63] In the novel, 'Miyāh mutaṣaḥḥira' is the title of the protagonist's last film project.

On several occasions, the detached nature of voice invites the reader to side with the narrator in mocking the characters' misevaluations. The post-mortem tunnel allows Ḥāzim to visualise other perspectives on his biographical past. His arrest during the post-2003 civil war, for instance, is narrated through the dialogue of some secret service officers, who comically misinterpret the signs of the protagonist's diabetes (especially his sudden avoidance of alcohol) as evidence of his activities as a radical Sunni Islamist. In this section, despite the first-person, narration shifts to the point of view of the narrator's friends and the policemen, and occasionally incorporates their direct discourse:

> Without warning, I will give up alcohol and its derivates. I will suddenly lose weight, as if I had started an intensive exercise program. I will let my beard grow, a grey forest will sprout out of the folds of my face that used to be submitted to a rigid regime of shaving. [...] My eyesight will start to deteriorate, as if I spent ceaseless hours reading God's book and its *tafsīr*. As I sat with my friends at the café of the Writers Union, I could not restrain myself from going to the bathroom every half an hour or so. 'Looks like he is performing the ablutions!' (93)

The narratorial fabulation subsumes the hypothesis about Ḥāzim's strange behaviour ('as if I spent'), as free indirect discourse: although the character knows that the policemen's explanation does not make sense, he violates the mimetic conventions to enhance the comical effect. This incorporation of free-indirect discourse within first-person narratives is indeed one of the signposts of the 'dual voice' situation as described by Nielsen. Yet here, as in the 'cemetery' sketch, irony stems from the character's complete lack of narrative authority: not from the authorial intrusion but from the persistence of an experiencing-'I' that cannot change the course of events. There is no possibility of counternarrative: the policemen's wrong explanations are shared by Ḥāzim's friends, and ultimately lead to his imprisonment in a detention centre named Abū Zaʿbal, in which he

undergoes all sorts of 'traditional, experimental, and postmodern tortures' (106). As he (possibly) manages to escape alive from detention, his very survival will in turn become evidence of his proximity with the repressive forces, which will lead to a new cycle of violence and torture under a Sunni militia. Instead of the playful subversion of metafiction, with disembodied narrators self-consciously modifying the rules and the events of the storyworld, here disembodiment results in a comical passivity, the 'I' unable to impose his storyline despite his privileged positioning. In one of the more obscure passages set in the tunnel, the protagonist himself links narrative truth to embodiment (*tajsīd* literally 'making corporeal'): '[w]hy am I so confused about everything, when moments ago things looked so sharp and coherent [*mujassama wa-mutamāsika*]?' (91). The post-mortem condition is a quintessential *makān mūḥish*: it provides the stage for a metamorphosis that involves the very loss of voice.

While we have talked about *al-Mashṭūr* in terms of minor literature, in *Miyāh* the ethical positioning towards narrative authority implies a radical refusal of any counternarrative. There is no act of *istinṭāq* that can make the voice *mujassama*, that can re-solidify the voice: against the endless categorisation that dissects the body, the novel proposes a radical effacement of narrative referentiality, as represented by the non-deictic future tense. As al-Sāmarrāʾī puts it, '[Ḥāzim] is in a reality with no *manṭiq* whatsoever' (al-Sāmarrāʾī 2022): not only no 'logic' but also no clear 'point of articulation'. The final chapters of the novel are particularly interesting in this sense, not least because they incorporate the asylum plot that we have been seeing subverted in Chapter Two. As Ḥāzim is about to reach the

proverbial light, he finds himself in front of a 'café' guarded by a woman who immediately starts to interrogate him:

> 'What do you think you're doing here, you hedgehog-haired terrorist?' she yells at me. I tell her I am no terrorist, and that my hair was standing on end out of sheer fear. 'You're lying!' she says. [...] 'And what will you do once you're in?'. 'I have no idea. I did not decide to be here'. I ask her if I should go back to where I came from, and she looks relieved. 'Yes'. Yes. Go back to where you came from. I have strict orders not to let any Iraqis in. 'Are Iraqis hated in the afterlife too?' I ask her after a while. 'I've been instructed not to open the door to any suicide bomber'. 'But I'm not'. 'You're lying' [...] (181)

To counteract these accusations of unreliability, the narrator finds no other strategy than to resort to another, delirious digression about his father's risking his life after a meeting with Saddam Hussein. The digression takes the form of a judicial speech in which witnesses are called to testify, and which overlaps the interrogation frame completely. When the narrator is seemingly 'let in', narration turns into verse: 'I am in the Nothing ... / No US bombing will tear me to pieces / No slaughterer's blade will cut my limbs off / No way out, no way back' (198).

Absent Bodies, Extended Voices: An Abstract Nation?

The discussion of the two novels has allowed us to locate two strategies to deal with a sustained dual voice situation. *al-Mashṭūr* presents the reader with a third-'I' that functions as a self-proclaimed 'omniscient narrator': able to interfere with the diegetic world, the unnamed 'I' anticipates or delays information, provides moral comment for the action, and constellates the text with a variety of intertextual references. The two

halves that would constitute the experiencing-'I' of the protagonist are thus relegated to a (dual) third-person or, occasionally, are directly addressed by the voice. *Miyāh mutaṣaḥḥira*, on the other hand, reverse the equation of what I have called *istinṭāq*: despite its privileged status located 'above' the diegetic level, Kamāl al-Dīn's protagonist constantly 'finds himself' narrated: not only is he systematically unable to make any information certain for the reader, but he is also at pains when it comes to asserting his own reliability to other characters.

This set of relations between narrating- and experiencing-'I' runs parallel with similar strategies at the level of author-audience communication. Both texts use their disembodied narrators within *mise en abyme* strategies to blur the threshold of the text. In Jubaylī's novel, narratological considerations about first-person narration and omniscience play a key role both in the thematic progression of the story (whose 'teaching' is ultimately metafictional) and to articulate the relation with Calvino's urtext. In *Miyāh* this metaleptic function relies mainly on self-reference autofiction, with the use of the author's name and the incorporation *en abyme* of the novel's title. In the first case, the authorialisation of the character legitimate his position as a *mustanṭiq*, as an interpreter and a moral commentator of the politics of post-2003 Iraq. In this sense, Jubaylī posits the disembodied 'I' as the residual form of the national in a context torn by sectarian divisions: only a quasi-impersonal, *super partes* 'I' can indeed re-present a unitary Iraqi identity (of which the novel traces the borders). The reader is therefore led to side primarily with the authorial narrator, and only through him with the two experiencing protagonists: '[w]hen the narratorial functions are operating independently

of the character functions, then the narration will be reliable and authoritative', as Phelan puts it (Phelan 1996:112). In my reading, I have linked this claim for national authority within Deleuze's idea of minor literature to show how the post-mortem dimension can constitute an ideal dimension of an extreme marginality that can result in narrative empowerment.

Metaleptic references in *Miyāh,* on the other hand, endeavour to uproot this possibility of an authoritative margin: in fact, the novel's tunnel is shown as constantly deterritorialising narrative voice, displacing its origin and preventing any clarifying address to the reader. The autofictional traits of the novel operate to de-realise the referential world rather than claiming autobiographical truthfulness. While a militant commitment to the reality of Iraq is evident in Jubaylī's text (written in Iraq and addressing a narratee well acquainted with Iraqi things), an exilic subjectivity is clearly at work in *Miyāh*, and appears evident in the final section of the novel. As Kamāl al-Dīn himself has put it, 'Iraq [...] doesn't exist. It is virtual' (interviewed in Jones 2020:1).

Despite these radical poetic differences, however, the 'content of form' in the two novel shows a notably common ground in the fundamental dramatization of narrative voice that I have tried to foreground through my reading of 'Raʾs': in both texts, the impersonal element latent in 'I'-narration becomes predominant, and the *how* of narrative becomes conversely much more crucial to the destiny of the story than the plot itself. These hypertrophic narrators integrate the prerogatives of firs- and third-person voice, embrace the entirety of the nation without renouncing to testimoniality, construct a

variety of intertextual and metatextual relations. The plot itself remains thus fragmented, ruled by abstractions.

Conclusions

Towards the end of Murtaḍā Gzār's novel *Ṭāʾifatī al-jamīla* (My Beautiful Cult, 2016), the narrator describes a blind man, Ḥakam, reading the cracks left in a wall by a car-bomb as if they were words written in braille. Ḥakam, who appears throughout the novel randomly pressing the keys of a paperless typerwriter, does not limit himself to reading the wall, but begins to *respond* by carving the wall himself:

> He kept reading the cracks on what remained of the wall. He would bend his neck, as if the sentence was very deep, or very harsh. At times, he would clap his hands in despair after deciphering yet another letter carved in the wall. [...] People started to gather, a boy, then two, then three. [...]
> At some point he started writing angrily, replying to the cracks written by the explosion with great seriousness. The boys didn't like to be ignored, so they started beating him. He didn't care, he just went on writing. (Gzār 2016:152-53)

Gzār's metaphor condenses the features of post-war Iraqi fiction I have tried to outline in this thesis. On the one hand, fiction is the site for the estranged and estranging reading of the traces of present and past catastrophes – a space for making sense of traumatic events and for naming the *aḥdāth* of past and present conflicts. Yet Iraqi fiction does not simply interpret the traces of reality, but rather reclaims an autonomous space in which to elaborate its own meanings within global literary communication. In this respect, the image of Ḥakam's wall-carving is particularly powerful because it questions the very borders of representation: there is no discontinuity between the cracks left by the bomb and Ḥakam's writing, between experience and narrative. The text carved into the wall by the character appropriates the fragmenting language of the explosion to create new plots

and characters. The four paradigmatic narratorial figures I have traced in the previous chapters (the child, the asylum seeker, the undead, and the disembodied voice) are in different ways emblematic of this fragmented writing, and of the challenges it faces. As characters *and* narrators, these narratorial figures dramatize this writing process and are at the same time the paradoxical, *strange* subjectivities produced by it.

In this sense, each of these four paradigmatic voices poses a different question to the fictionalisation of post-war experience. The child-narrators analysed in Chapter One address the issue of estrangement/familiarisation by situating the wars of 1990 and 2003 within a 'magical realist' treatment of *Bildungsroman*. As the reading has shown, the narrators of *Sāʿat* and *al-ʿIlmawī* use the fantastic and the magical to disrupt *taʾlīf* as the familiarisation operated by narrative. Both novels, in fact, challenge readerly expectations either by unmasking their own magic as a gimmick (*al-ʿIlmawī*), or by opposing an uncanny archive to narrativity as such (as represented by the *jumal mufīda* referred to by the narrator in *Sāʿa*). In both cases, estrangement is the result of a constant renegotiation of reliability: the child-narrators are not the authoritative (and naïve) mouthpieces of the community, but unstable narrative centres constantly re-negotiating their authority to *create* storyworlds.

A similar unmaking of *taʾlīf* as a device of narrative coherence is at play in fictional elaborations of the asylum story. In this case, the disruption of the life story frame rests on an agonistic implication of the reader, rather than the authorisation of super-natural narrators. Shamʿūn's novel and Blāsim's short story operate against the referential expectations of the Western audience, enhancing textual indirection and ironies to argue

for the untranslatability (i.e., the never-ending translation) of experience. In this sense, my reading has highlighted the importance of the mechanisms of narrative (un)reliability, as a way of engaging the reader's empathy beyond narrative exactitude and coherence. Both in the case of *Bildungsroman* and of the 'asylum story', however, the critique of narrative as a realist redemption of experience is not the only basis onto which irony is articulated: as we have seen, the texts in Chapter Two address Arabic fictional genres like community fiction and imprisonment literature. In this case, the construction of unreliable voices provide an alternative model to the unified, authoritative 'I's of modernist literature. The narrators of *Sāʿat* and *ʿIrāqī*, for instance, parody well-established tropes of Arabic literature (the choral narrator in community narratives, and the theme of *ṣumūd* in prison literature) by exaggerating their features: a supernatural child that is an alien within her own community, an 'innocent guy' who is not believed by his torturers because he *tells too much*.

While the child and the asylum seeker are liminal figures testing the limits of mimetic life narratives, the (un)dead narrators studied in Section Two explore the limits of first-person fiction from the outside of mimetic conventions. These texts appropriate the language of explosion depicted by Gzār more radically, using it to traumatise their reader and to construct non-human forms of subjectivity. In this context, Chapter Three has addressed the trope of the (un)dead-narrator as one of the key elements of Iraqi Postcolonial Gothic. My analysis complements Bahoora's allegoric reading of the genre by showing how the meta-narrative progressions of voice itself can become a unit of the Gothic's national allegory. The dead voices we have explored all problematise

retrospection and its underlying deixis of here/there, and thus show traumatic fiction as inherently diasporic and para-sitic. At the same time, the discussion has emphasised the forms of readerly engagement that the breakdown of this allegory entails, ranging from Shāwī's 'empathic watching' to the more antagonistic address of Blāsim's narrators.

While these forms rest onto the conventionalised impossibility of the 'speaking dead', Chapter Four has addressed more radical disruptions of narrative structure operated by afterlife voices. Here, the focus has been the dual voicing of plots *starting from* the traumatic moment in which voice and embodied character split. As the discussion of Jubaylī's and Kamāl al-Dīn's novel has shown, this doubling of the narrator results in a voice that takes on third-person characters while maintaining a diasporic relationship with the fragmented body of the protagonist. This authorial *mutakallim ghāʾib*, thus, allows for a metafictional disruption of textual coherence via continuous intrusions, multiple accounts of the same episode, and overt intertextuality.

On a more general level, all the individual close readings have shown the centrality of first-person narration not only as a technique but as a major concern in the Iraqi post-war conjuncture. The wide use of 'I'-narration does not limit itself to foregrounding the 'testimonial function' (Genette 1972:262) but also opens up a space for an experimental writing that addresses the question of the subject through the lenses of post-war experience. In this respect, the long chain of traumas, and the social and psychical fragmentation of war and post-war gives prominence to the question of *manṭiq*, of 'whence one can speak', rather than consigning it to the past. Our four paradigmatic

voices are in different ways emblematic of the crisis of the subject in the post-war. Often deprived of all agency at the level of the plot, these narrators witness the disruption of their communities (or, like in Jubaylī's novel, of a whole symbolic order), and are at the same time the target of the dehumanising ideology of the 2003 war. Like the paradigmatic figures studied by Masmoudi in *War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction*, the narrators described in this thesis inhabit a conjuncture in which they can always be (and in fact are multiple times) turned into *homini sacri*, bare lives. Yet, even after their deaths, they negotiate with their readers a *manṭiq*, a site for articulating new forms of narrative subjectivities. At the same time, they constantly point to the failures of of narrative coherence, as a redemption of experience. The paradoxical, fragmented 'I's that we have seen at play in the previous chapters dramatize the shortcomings of the idea that 'a certain type of repetition of experience in art repairs inherently damaged or valueless experience', as Léo Bersani (1990:1).

Such centrality of subjectivity is not however a mere counterstrategy to oppose a de-humanising reality. Rather, the works studied here interrogate the question of subjectivity through narrative forms, constructing and theorising narrative paradigms that make writing possible *next* to the site of the explosion. As we have seen, this interrogation of subjectivity does not result in the reinstatement of a sovereign subjectivity (even when, like in Jubaylī's novel, a desire in that sense can be easily identified). Confronting the 'ever more violent fragmentation of the subject', as Florencia Garramuño puts it, fiction can 'suspend the modernist litany of the "death of the subject"' to replace it with 'an intensification of the emotional states and paradoxical subjectivities

that this fragmentation engenders' (Garramuño 2009:21). In this respect, the study of the minute workings and strategies of these paradoxical subjectivities I have proposed in this thesis may serve to ground theoretical analyses of Iraqi and Arabic literature *in* the texts themselves, and particularly in their narrative structures.

Along with the 'death of the subject', the texts analysed show an equally sceptic stance towards the 'death of the author'. As the entitlement to tell a story and the possibility to define 'what is interesting' (*ma-yuhimmukum*, as Blāsim's asylum seeker puts it), the issue of authoriality is indeed central to the works analysed. In all texts discussed, the *manṭiq* becomes the rhetorical site of a struggle for *istinṭāq* 'voicing': narrative authority is presented as the partial and incomplete result of a progression, rather than a given quality of narration. While the texts studied in Chapter Two specifically bring this struggle over narrative authority to the fore, all the narrative works structure their rhetorical progressions around the issue of reliability and of the reader's authentication of their account.

The authorisation of our narrators does rest exclusively on textual dynamics, but engages the *historical* author directly, showing great metafictional awareness of their own place in real literary communication. Works like Shamʿūn's and Kamāl al-Dīn's directly use the author's name for their narrators, situating themselves along a nearly factual 'novelistic autobiography' (*ʿIrāqī*) or a much more estranging autofiction (*Miyāh*). In the debate on *Sāʿat*, the issue of referentiality was linked to the authorial figure by the readers themselves, as a fundamental element in drawing a line between *ʿajab* and *wahm*. In texts less reliant on hybrid autobiographical dynamics, authoriality depends rather on the

possibility of directly addressing the real reader, either by identifying her with a problematic narratee (like the reader/judge in Blāsim's 'al-Arshīf'), or by traumatising her by constructing an uncomfortable focalisation. The first-person omniscience of *al-Mashṭūr*, furthermore, entails the archetypical fictional authority of 'worldmaking', with the authorial voice intruding to anticipate the results of events, or to bring the discussion outside fiction.

In all these cases, rather than disappearing in the narrated, the authorial function is constantly brought to the fore and problematised as the effect of a rhetorical progression resting on historically and culturally specific dynamics. This thesis has tackled the textual and the immediately epi-textual dimensions of this process, yet there is still need for a more thorough analysis of the historical changes and tensions in post-2003 Iraqi literary field. The most notable issue which remains to be addressed concerning authoriality is indeed that of the gendering of narrative voice in post-war fiction. While the gender of mimetic, anthropomorphic voices is indeed a central element of the construction of narrative authority, the gendering of no-more-human and disembodied *manṭiq* raises even more pressing questions. For example, Jubaylī's metamorphosis of a narrowly focalised first-person protagonist into an omniscient narrator allows for a clear masculinisation of the latter, whereas traditional, extradiegetic omniscience is the site for more subtle forms of gendering, as Susan Lanser has shown. Yet, as we have seen, the narrator of *al-Mashṭūr* stands for a promise of an ever-delayed national unity that is only possible within a unification of the 'I' and its masculine body. The same question could be

asked about the 'national allegory' of the Iraqi Gothic: how does Gothic fiction gender the dismembered bodies of the victims of post-2003 Iraq, and how does it allegorise them?

Another issue that I have touched upon only from a textual perspective is the global circulation of post-2003 Iraqi literature. In this respect, an important development would be a reading of our non-/anti-mimetic corpus in a comparative frame, and especially in/as translation. Written in the diaspora, some of the texts analysed here were published in translation first, and only later in Arabic (as Ḥasan Blāsim's *Majnūn*, or the collection *Iraq +100* he edited), and actively participate in the literary scene of the asylum countries (again Blāsim in Finland, or Ḥāzim Kamāl al-Dīn in the Netherlands). Other authors, like Murtaḍā Gzār, have begun to publish directly in English after leaving Iraq. Yet, the issue is not merely related to the location of authors: a novel written and published in Baṣra as *al-Mashṭūr* shows indeed the widest global network of intertextual relations of our whole corpus, and an author based in the Middle East such as Shahad al-Rāwī appears regularly in literary events on a global scale. In this context, the challenge would be to stretch the boundaries of close reading, rather than deserting textual analysis throughout. As Rebecca Walkowitz has pointed out, what is needed is a 'close reading at a distance' that 'adds circulation to the study of production by asking what constitutes the languages, boundaries, and media of the work' (Walkowitz 2015:51). While my narratological reading has already tried to keep the larger unit of literary communication as a reference point, a cross-language, world-literary analysis of the most experimental texts of post-war Iraqi fiction may indeed provide important insights as to both the forms and strategies of narrative texts and their theoretical significance.

The exploration of the global dynamics affecting post-2003 Iraqi fiction should not contradict the importance of these literary works within the history of Iraqi and Arabic literatures. In this respect, the experimentations with narrative subjectivity that I have addressed in this work continue a long experimental trend that, as Fabio Caiani and Catherine Cobham have shown, has made Iraq one of the (often undervalued) centres of innovation for Arabic literary prose. Within this framework, the reading of first-person narration formulated in this thesis has indeed addressed a number of formal issues on which the discussion on Arabic modernism / experimentality relies: fragmentation of the plot, metafiction, figural narration are all aesthetically central to the works we have studied. At the same time, the anti-mimetic poetics common to all texts studied here cannot be read as a sudden rupture with previous traditions. Fantastic and non-realist forms have indeed an important tradition in pre-2003 literature, which could be symbolised (but not limited to) the figure of Muḥammad Khuḍayyir – who indeed has studied and continues to study with great attention the developments of non-realist writings in the country.

Rather than describing any radically new technique, my discussion has aimed to show the reframing and re-organisation of narrative forms within and against the conjuncture of post-war Iraq. In this sense, the common narrative forms and poetics I have traced in this dissertation seem to tell more of a 'new sensibility' (to borrow once more from Idwār al-Kharrāṭ), rather than of an explicitly literary opposition to more established poetics and narrative conventions. In particular, my discussion of anti-mimetic strategies makes a

point against binary oppositions between ‘social realism’ and ‘the fantastic’ as generic and poetic labels. What we have read are rather complex narrative elaborations on the relation between experience and telling. All texts studied use fiction to explore *theoretically* Anṭūn’s question: ‘how can I write what happened?’. In this sense, by looking at narrative authority as it manifests within textual dynamics, I have proposed to locate the ‘newness’ of post-war literature not in a set of techniques but in a variety of strategies employed to redefine aesthetic autonomy. Asking the question of (post)autonomy, in particular, means addressing the borders of textuality, the ways in which writing digress into the walls carved by the explosions. To such larger study of post-war fiction *within* contemporary Iraqi literature, this work is of course only ever preliminary.

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