On the Ruins of What's to Come, I Stand: Time and Devastation in Syrian Cultural Production since 2011[1]

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Syria today is synonymous with devastation. Like Iraq and Lebanon at earlier moments, its name conjures urban spaces scarred by bombings and empty streets stalked by fear. Drones that flew over the cities of Homs, Hama, and Aleppo produced slow-motion shots of urban wastelands, seemingly emptied of life. These eerie, aestheticized images, set to haunting music before their circulation on social media, took their place in modern warfare's catalog of destruction, evoking the cities of World War II, Sarajevo under siege, and the demolition of Hama in 1982.

Life in Syria is not included in this iconography of destruction. People inhabit burned-out cities and traverse rubble, fashioning routine amidst ruin. In Saraqeb, the site of a battle between the state and Free Syrian armies in 2012, residents knocked down walls between homes, creating unseen paths to remain alive.[2] "Cemeteries [have begun] to live among the people," wrote novelist Samar Yazbek, "another everyday part of life like the shops and the streets that wind between the houses" (C, p. 90). In 2016 in Ghouta, a suburb of Damascus and rebel enclave, children made swing sets of recycled missiles and shell cases during lulls in the fighting.[3] Their play, salvaged materially and temporally from devastation, should not be offered up as evidence of life's resilience in war. It took place three years after the regime's chemical attack on Ghouta and two years before the area's recapture by the state in "a daily barrage of attacks" that "deliberately kill[ed] and maim[ed]" inhabitants.[4] Like the cultural production discussed here, play in Ghouta resists reclamation.

Syrian and Syrian-Palestinian writers and filmmakers today depict networks of ruin in works centrally concerned with time: flattened into the repetition of war, drawn out in accumulated suffering, compressed in a sedimented present. Words by poet Firas Sulaiman—"on the ruins / of what's to come / I stand / the cursed Babylonian"—epitomize their sense of speaking within ruin, past and future.[5] The present threatens to dominate in this devastation that spreads, connecting destroyed cities and mass graves to Mediterranean crossings and prison-like camps. Ordinary modes of life and production mingle with their purported antithesis—erasure, stasis, death. Yet the very impulse to depict this barren present implicates Syrian and Syrian-Palestinian cultural actors in the writing of pasts, literary and political. Their ruins are not archaeological sites that evoke the inexorable movement of time's "blind fatality"; they are *produced* states of rubble and lived devastation.[6] To name these states is to make Syria the latest location of an "unbearable present" of violence and war that has rendered Arabic literature since

[1] An edited version of this publication first appeared in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 48, No.1, Autumn 2021 (https://doi.org/10.1086/715985) The current text is based on the author's manuscript.
[2] See Samar Yazbek, *The Crossing: My Journey to the Shattered Heart of Syria*, trans. Nashwa Gowanlock and Ruth Ahmedzai Kemp (London, 2015), p. 10; hereafter abbreviated C.
[3] See the *NGO Basma*, 8 Sept. 2016, www.facebook.com/basma4syria/videos/941840809254265/
[4] *Amnesty International* press release, "Syria 'Flagrant War Crimes' Being Committed in Eastern Ghouta," 20 Feb. 2018, www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/syria-flagrant-war-crimes -being-committed-eastern-ghouta
[5] Firas Sulaiman, *Forgetting*, trans. Samantha Kostmayer Sulaiman (New York, 2016), p. 17; hereafter abbreviated F. My thanks to author and translator for sharing this and other poems discussed here with me.
[6] C. F. Volney, *The Ruins, or, Meditation on the Revolutions of Empire: and The Law of Nature* (New York, 1890), p. 8.

1948 "bereft of the very end it professes and hastens to announce again and again."[7] While cultural actors are somberly conscious of this regional past, I argue, their use-refusal of the times nested in ruin imagery asserts new forms of "historically oriented political consciousness"—asserting the singularity of their present after Syria's uprising.[8] Their works depict archaeological traces, barren lands, and rubble in tense combinations of stasis and repetition; displacements and accumulations in meaning; and punctured ruin-rebirth narratives. Time is held, suspended but not empty. In an endless present—what the contemporary humanities dubs *living on*—this corpus' eschatology is propelled by a memory of revolutionary opening, a future whose contours were known and lived, now submerged by signs of an apocalypse that will not stop rearriving.[9]

The core concepts of this article are drawn from Syrian and Syrian-Palestinian texts and films whose authors—Sulaiman, Ra'id Wahsh, Yassin al-Haj Saleh, the Abounaddara film collective, Osama Esber, and Samar Yazbek—supported the uprising and held the state responsible for the war. Multigenerational, elite, and celebrated in their respective artforms, these authors reside in Europe and the US and do not self-define as a movement. Within the opposition's cultural field, these literary and documentary works are iterations of a fierce engagement with 2011's aftermath that represents the uprising obliquely because the revolution's political promise demanded new, noncoercive codes of representation.[10] Even the uprising and oppositional culture cannot become sacred symbols, hence Abounaddara's cry in 2015: "Down with the heroes of the Syrian revolution!"[11] Conscious of their address to multiple publics several works discussed here appeared simultaneously in Arabic and English translation—and of culture's many uses in the Syrian conflict, they eschew the codes of refugee literature, revolutionary discourse, and, for the most part, sensationalist address to international audiences. Thus, Abounaddara is known for its "right to the image" campaign, which critiques representations of Syrian corpses.[12] Wahsh notes, "writing is a [market] stall" for "pain."[13] "Because I am bored," interjects Sulaiman's Babylonian, "I play with the corpse of the future in the ill lit / language room," offering up "a sentence no one can use" (F, p. 14).

Collectively, their works recall that ruin's shifting "densities and distribution[s]" occur within figuration and that symbols bear structures of memory and anticipation.[14] For this reason, Syrian cultural production raises a salutary challenge to dominant methods for studying ruins in formerly colonized places. Following Ann Laura Stoler's influential theory of imperial ruination, ruins' referential qualities have been absorbed into academic method. When used by scholars, metaphors are "political actors" because "figurative language" can "join the waste of bodies, the degradation of the environment, and the psychic weight of colonial processes."[15] Poetics let the scholar *connect* the geographically,

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[7] Nouri Gana, "War, Poetry, Mourning: Darwish, Adonis, Iraq," *Public Culture 22* (Winter 2010): 40.
[8] Wendy Brown, *Politics Out of History* (Princeton, N.J., 2001), p. 162.
[9] See Ilana Feldman, *Life Lived in Relief: Humanitarian Predicaments and Palestinian Refugee Politics* (Oakland, Calif., 2018), and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, N.J., 2015).
[10] See Zaher Omareen, "The Symbol and Counter-Symbols in Syria," *Syria Speaks : Art and Culture from the Frontline*, ed. Malu Halasa, Zaher Omareen, and Nawara Mahfoud (London, 2014), p. 101.
[11] Cyril Béghin and Dork Zabunyan, "Fragments d'une révolution: Entretien avec Abounaddara," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 712 (June 2015): 73.
[12] See *Su'al al-Haqq fi al-Surah*, ed. Abounaddara and Katarina Nitsch (Damascus, 2019), www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1301510/FULLTEXT03.pdf, and Joscelyn Shawn Ganjhara Jurich, "Abounaddara and the Global Visual Politics of the 'Right to the Image,'" Journal of Visual Culture 18, no. 3 (2019): 391–92.
[13] Ra'id Wahsh, *Qit'ah naqisah min sama' Dimashq* (Damascus, 2015), p. 19; hereafter abbreviated Q.
[14] Ann Laura Stoler, "Introduction: 'The Rot Remains': From Ruins to Ruination," in *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination*, ed. Stoler (Durham, N.C., 2013), p. 24; hereafter abbreviated "I."
[15] Stoler, "Preface," in *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination*, p. x.

materially, and ontically disparate, even the invisible, as substrates of imperial power, breaking down "facile distinction[s] between political history and poetic form" ("I," p. 2). One might read this mapping as anthropology's latest engagement with what Bronislaw Malinowski called "creative metaphor" where the "word can grip the essence of things."[16] Indeed, Yael Navaro reads recent theorizations of ruin as affirming anthropology's linguistic commitments after the nonrepresentational turn.[17] Yet in ruination, symbols and metaphors of ruin circulating outside academia are curiously flattened. Literature and film are absented, unable to intervene critically in a world where figuration, if unleashed from the scholar's guardianship over "vital refiguration," reverts to the static contemplation of the European gaze on ruins ("I," p. 10). This nostalgic gaze haunts the field nowhere more than the Middle East, where colonial power abjected those who reside in ruins, uncultured beings in need of stewardship.[18] Ruination's attention to the temporalities of life in material ruin is, accordingly, conceived as an antidote to this aestheticizing legacy that treated, and still treats, the Middle East as ahistorical, "outside time and inaccessible to its ravages" in the moment of its ravaging.[19]

In Syrian cultural production, readers of ruination will find close attention paid to temporality and sedimented destruction—but on the paths of other politics. By rearranging time, this corpus aims to "create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity" that acknowledge, but do not cede to, continuities with past destruction in the Middle East.[20] Syrian cultural production works within and against its distinctive regime of historicity, an expression that captures a sense of authors being caught in an "unstable equilibrium" of temporal relations not of their choosing.[21] My point is not to suggest that Syrian writers occupy some purely other "Arab" time. Instead, I argue that the tensions they produce around ruin do not guard against colonialism's nostalgic gaze but against their works' uptake into established, even clichéd representational modes in Arabic.[22] They thus shift the burden of showing time's dynamism (and stasis) from life in material ruin to its figuration.

As "potential victims," mused Syrian filmmaker Omar Amiralay in 2007, "death surrounds us . . . each of us in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, maybe tomorrow in Syria."[23] As Amiralay's words suggest, within these cycles of revolution-destruction lie potential collectivities founded in vulnerability. Yet this vulnerability historically bolstered the Syrian Ba'th, whose supporters pointed to sectarian violence, first Lebanon's, then Iraq's, to justify dictatorship.[24] This threat points to an expropriation of historical time

[16] Quoted in Anand Pandian, *A Possible Anthropology: Methods for Uneasy Times* (Durham, N.C., 2019), pp. 38, 39.
[17] See Yael Navaro, "Affective Spaces, Melancholic Objects: Ruination and the Production of Anthropological Knowledge," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15 (Mar. 2009): 9.
[18] For an overview of this critique, see *Ruins of Modernity*, ed. Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle (Durham, N.C., 2010), pp. 1–3. On Egypt, see Elliott Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity* (Durham, N.C., 2007), pp. 97–115, esp. p. 113. On Israel/Palestine, see Nadia Abu El-Haj, *Facts on the Ground: Archaeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society* (Chicago, 2001), pp. 45–46.
[19] Michel Foucault, "Des espaces autres (conférence au Cercle d'études architecturales, 14 mars 1967)," in *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5 (Oct. 1984), foucault.info/documents/heterotopia/foucault.heteroTopia.fr
[20] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. and ed. Gabriel Rockhill (New York, 2013), p. 3.
[21] François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, trans. Saskia Brown (New York, 2015), p. xv.
[22] On nostalgia and ruins, see Schönle and Hell, *Ruins of Modernity*, pp. 1–2.
[23] Omar Amiralay, "Documentary, History, Memory," in conversation with Catherine David, DI/VISIONS: Kultur und Politik im Nahen Osten Konferenz, 2007, www.eume-berlin.de/publikationen/details/documentary-history-and-memory.html
[24] See Lisa Wedeen, Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria (Chicago, 1999), p. 7; hereafter abbreviated A.

and representation under the Assad regime's symbolic cult (1970–present), which denied the existence of Syria before the Ba'th. Into this desolate, "wild (wahshi) time" of "chaos" intervened Hafez al-Assad, "builder of modern Syria," heroic savior.[25] Only the state stood between nation and its purported wasteland origin-future, where historical time had "yet to occur or" would occur "no longer."[26] It is in this sense of a state rendering itself coextensive with historical time that the Ba'th announced its rule eternal. More than propaganda, this cult colonized public discourse and atomized citizens, as the regime's power manifested in performances of "compel[ling] people to say the ridiculous and avow the absurd" (A, p. 12). The threat of a return to wastelands was made manifest after 2011 in the proregime slogan "Assad or burn the country," spray-painted on the walls of destroyed villages after their reclamation by the state.[27] Today, writers and filmmakers depict barren and ruined lands— where a time bound to the "'for-which' of usability" is no longer available— without a triumphant leap into the future.[28] Theirs is an indictment of a state that *produced* the nation in ruin.

I note this divergence between Syrian cultural production and a US-centered academic field because the works I discuss are distinguished by their engineering of temporal structures of anticipation that are nested in ruin imagery. Reading them in translation raises the question of how to read the barren present that holds sway over Syria and its displaced populations: What pasts are to be parsed, and what futures remain? Contemporary debates on ruin are concerned with violence—paradigmatically, New York's smoking towers and bombed-out Iraqi cities—but gather processes of abjection, marginalization, and slow violence under the imperial (see "I," pp. 3, 9).[29] Empire's present in these debates looks much like Syria's, but its futures are vacant and its past Eurocentric, even if its contemporary geography is globally rhizomatic.

Contemporary Syrian writing on ruin decenters this notion of empire. The prominent essayist and former political prisoner Yassin al-Haj Saleh, for example, noted in his response to the Islamic State's destruction of Tadmur's archaeological sites that the Ba'th regime exploited the West's neo-imperialist gaze on Middle Eastern ruins: first, to promote tourism and, more recently, to fashion the Assad state as the secular protector of world heritage against ISIS, even while it bombed its own people.[30] Saleh's account echoes a history of elites in the region repurposing colonialism's ruin gaze to make stewardship an "unambiguous, desirable [index] of modernity and civilization."[31] The Syrian Ba'th's pursuit of modernity led it to preserve archaeological sites and condemn lives, labor practices, and collective memories as "backward and obsolete," sacrifices on the path to progress.[32] Such layering is precisely what ruination as method seeks to capture. By this account, Sulaiman's Babylonian, like Walter Benjamin's angel of history, would gaze on the debris of colonial, teleological modernities in Syria. Yet if the violence of modernity enters the following close readings, it does not exhaust their interventions, and Saleh is focused on drawing other equivalences—between the regime and ISIS.[33] This decentering of

[25] Quoted in Yassin al-Haj Saleh, *The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy*, trans. Ibtihal Mahmood (Chicago, 2017), p. 151.
[26] William Viney, *Waste: A Philosophy of Things* (New York, 2014), p. 18.
[27] Sam Dagher, *Assad or We Burn the Country: How One Family's Lust for Power Destroyed Syria* (New York, 2019), p. 355.
[28] Viney, *Waste*, p. 6.
[29] See also Schönle and Hell, *Ruins of Modernity*, pp. 3–5.
[30] See Yassin al-Haj Saleh, "Tadmur Ka-Siyasah [Tadmur as a Politics]," *al-Jumhuriya*, 27 June 2015, www.aljumhuriya.net/ar/33564
[31] Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities,* p. 14.
[32] Katharina Lange, "Submerged Memories: Memory, History, and Displacement around Lake Asad, Syria," *Memory Studies* 12, no. 3 (2019): 323.
[33] See Saleh, "Tadmur Ka-Siyasah [Tadmur as a Politics]."

colonialism is in line with Saleh's acute critiques of Western academics and leftists, haunted by the specter of Iraq in 2003, for choosing anti-imperialism over solidarity with the Syrian uprising.[34] What his essay on Tadmur's ruins shares with the literary readings that follow is an urgent need to reorganize categories of political memory—most notably, time. The true danger signaled by Benjamin's angel, notes Wendy Brown, was of "treating past, present, and their relations as givens."[35]

Recursive Ruin

Recurring motifs in Syrian cultural production today are rubble (*anqad*); barren lands associated with the Temmuzi fertility cycle of death and rebirth; and *al-atlal*. None of these motifs are metaphors for ideological futures past nor do they authorize a vocabulary of comparison, but they did have vibrant political and literary lives in the twentieth century and were used to celebrate the Algerian and Palestinian revolutions and to mourn for Palestine, Lebanon's civil war, and Iraq's ruin under sanctions, invasion, and occupation.[36] W. G. Sebald's critique of German silence after World War II thus finds its inverse in Arabic, where prolix ruin yields a generative referential grammar.[37]

The ruins on which Sulaiman's Babylonian stands are *al-atlal*, traces of the tribe's abandoned campsite. Beginning in pre-Islamic poetry, the poet addresses "the ruins beneath his feet in an elaborate reverie that embraces imagination and nostalgic yearning."[38] *Al-atlal* materialize "a frame of time of the utmost remoteness, where there is only an evanescence of objects."[39]

As topos, *al-atlal* bear a futurity of the classical ode's progressive structure, "an archetypal time" that proceeds from melancholy loss to the poet's journey and, finally, to praise and boast of the ruler and tribe (Z, p. 28). There, "in the fullest sense of the 'now' of time, the poet stands . . . in the presence . . . of what is found, and not found again, but new with each arrival"—the collective (Z, p. 29). Jaroslav Stetkevych's gloss underscores the generativity of repetition in the classical ode, where poetry's time, proceeding from loss to affirmation, yields renewed collective life. Evoking the *atlal*, the now of Sulaiman's text—written in New York, where the poet resides—collapses this progressive structure. The Babylonian's stance compresses *al-atlal* 's remote pasts (of Arabic poetry, of the poetic voice) into the ruins of present and future. *Al-atlal* are drawn into a possessive construction with "*al-ma ba'da*"—literally, "the *atlal* of the what [is] after." *Maba'da* is used to translate *post* in terms like *postmodernism* (*ma ba'da al-hadatha*) and *postcolonialism* (*ma ba'da al-ist'imar*).[40] The Babylonian's time is a novel

[34] See Saleh, "The Syrian Cause and Anti-Imperialism," trans. Yaaser Azzayyaat, *al-Jumhuriya*, 24 Feb. 2017, www.aljumhuriya.net/en/content/syrian-cause-and-anti-imperialism
[35] Brown, *Politics Out of History*, p. 162.
[36] Describing the 1990s, Zeina Halabi uses David Scott's "ideological ruins" to metaphorize Arab intellectuals' "tragedy of being abandoned in the contemporary," a present "that abounds with the aftermath of unfulfilled prophecies" (Zeina Halabi, *The Unmaking of the Arab Intellectual: Prophecy, Exile, and the Nation* [Edinburgh, 2017], p. 19). On Lebanon, see Ken Seigneurie, *Standing by the Ruins: Elegiac Humanism in Wartime and Post-war Lebanon* (New York, 2011), and Yasmine Khayyat, "Southern Counterpublics: The Poetics and Politics of South Lebanon's Ruinscapes," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 45, nos. 2–3 (2014): 169–217. On Iraq in Arabic poetry after 1991, see Gana, "War, Poetry, Mourning."
[37] See W. G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York, 2003), p. 58.
[38] Khayyat, "Southern Counterpublics," p. 175.
[39] Jaroslav Stetkevych, *The Zephyrs of Najd: The Poetics of Nostalgia in the Classical Arabic Nasib* (Chicago, 1993), p. 26; hereafter abbreviated Z.
[40] Sulayman's reception in Arabic emphasizes his diasporic location and linguistic experiments; see Fadi Saad, "Al-Suri Firas Sulayman Yuqanni'u Siratahu fi 'Nihayat Mu'attala,'" *al-Quds al-'Arabi*, 7 Feb. 2016, www.alquds.co.uk/%EF%BB%BF/السوري-فراس-سلمان-يقنّع-سيرته-في-ن

intimacy between pre-Islamic topos and a construction tied to translation, a prefix that opens temporally and semantically (we expect a noun or pronoun; none appears) onto an unknown. Arab origins stand in proximity to foreignness. While withholding arrival in Arab collectivity, Sulaiman uses classical topos to invoke a suspension that does not yield to absence, recalling more recent mournings, prior repetitions, over language and nation. Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish wrote, "here I measure the distance/ with the odes of the [pre-Islamic] poets"; "already," glosses Jeffrey Sacks, "the poem takes place in the fallout of losses remarked in this relation."[41] The Babylonian remembers amid recursion: "to return to the beginning is to have done so again [and] the beginning may not be separated from this repetition."[42]

Post-2011 depictions of ruin in Arabic summon a host of angels refracted backwards: past revolutions, wars, mass displacements, gestures of mourning. Their mode is not ghostly but recursive. In Derridean hauntology, a progressive logic of history returns after its end, occupying the present in indeterminable presence: "After the end of history, the spirit comes by *coming back* [revenant]."[43] The loops of ruin in Syrian cultural production do not signal the return of nineteenth-century historiography; they figure regional times in literary and historical-political ways, and their circling quality is both promising and treacherous. The act of drawing affinities between today's mass displacement and, for example, past displacements of Palestinian and Iraqi communities into Syria may be a source of solidarity or a slippage into authoritarian politics.[44] The *known* quality of this recursion is noteworthy because, in contrast to hauntology's uncanny elusions, its naming teeters on the verge of cliché, a pure repetition that would submerge Syria and its uprising into another anonymized instance of Arab violence.[45] To assert one's stance otherwise on these ruins is to carve out the singularity of a moment—to break time.

The remainder of this article moves through readings of rebirth imagery in contemporary Syrian literature against the backdrop of Arabic modernism and Ba'th ideology. I then read cinematic and literary depictions of the static but accumulating present and the narrative experiments to connect it to a regional past since 1948. The conclusion returns to the uncertain state of Syrian futures and this corpus's intervention into contemporary thought on ruins.

Geographies of *al-Kharab*

In Arabic modernism, revolution was depicted through barren landscapes whose rebirth—a sign of collective renewal—was imminent. In the 1950s, poets like Adonis, Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, Jabra IbrahimJabra, and Yusuf al-Khal took up myths of death and rebirth, collectively named for Babylonian mangod Temmuz (Adonis), whose blood sacrifice granted wastelands new life. Temmuzi poetry is associated with the translation of T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" into Arabic in the 1940s and the use of Semitic myth to world Syrian literature.[46] Its sterile landscapes were not a mimetic response to

[41] Jeffrey Sacks, *Iterations of Loss: Mutilation and Aesthetic Form, al-Shidyaq to Darwish* (New York, 2015), p. 68.
[42] Ibid., p. 69.
[43] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York, 1994), p. 10.
[44] This point should be distinguished from the stance that representing Syria's war is an intrinsically politicized, therefore nonliterary, act; see Syrian novelist Khalil Suweileh cited in "Riwayat al-Harb al-Suriyah . . . al Hikayah Qabla al-Ibda'," *Zat Masr*, 14 Apr. 2020, zatmasr.com/ روايات-الحرب-السورية-الحكاية-قبل-الإب/
[45] My reading of hauntology here is indebted to Brown, *Politics Out of History*, p. 153.
[46] On worlding Syrian literature, see Robyn Creswell, *City of Beginnings: Poetic Modernism in Beirut* (Princeton, N.J., 2019), p. 66. On T. S. Eliot, see As'ad Razzuq, *Al-Shu'ara' al-Tammuziyun: al-Usturah fi al-Shi'r al-Mu'asir* (Beirut, 1990).

immediate conditions of war; rather, modernist poetry contemplated cultural, political, and spiritual effects of los while retaining hope in "a newbirth."[47] Al-Sayyab's "*Fi al-Maghrib al-'Arabi* (In the Arab Maghreb)" begins with the poetic voice, alone in a desolate landscape contemplating its grave, marking its speech in a liminal zone between life and death.[48] His gaze on distant Algeria, at war for independence, yields a movement through archetypes of Arab-Islamic history that culminate in collective revolt, a future-oriented affirmation of the land's fertility for its inhabitants.[49] Time is complex, sedimented, but the poem advances "from ruin [*al-kharab*] to resurrection [*al-ba'th*], fertility and life through [its] journey."[50]

The standard translations for Eliot's poem are *ard al-yabab*, evoking an empty, arid land and *ard al-kharab*, which echoes the scope of *ruin* in English. *Al-kharab* names the material condition of devastation, encompassing barren lands and rubble, as well as an affective and/or civilizational state of ruin. It is pithily defined in the authoritative medieval dictionary, *Lisan al- 'Arab*, as "against *al-'umran*"—against civilization or society.[51] *Al-'Umran* is etymologically tied to building, constructing; it evokes the cycles of human history analyzed in the fourteenth-century historian Ibn Khaldun's *al-Muqaddima*, a work dedicated to the "new science" of human civilization, in which the decline of dynasties produced the rise of "new warriors, fresh from the desert."[52] Decline, decay, and the wilderness are proper to *al-'umran; al-kharab*'s destruction is not. Syrian cultural production unleashes *al-kharab* to depict an irredeemable force that spreads across Syria and into the diaspora. Death interrupts the orders of collective life, forcing new, "palpable intensities" of inhabiting landscapes of death.[53] The borders between here and hell stand in tatters, traversed by the burning violence of hellfire and the abandoned, bitter suffering of *Zamharir*, the cold section of hell (see Q, pp. 47–48).

The geography of a "branching" hell is the subject of "In the Land of Revelation" by Esber.[54] Based in the US, Esber is an established poet who self-translates into English. The text invokes a poetic tradition of entering hell by addressing Dante Alighieri and then setting "your book aside" ("L," p. 71). Esber's depictions of Syria as a hell on earth—where "trees of flame grow / Clouds of flame rain / Rivers of acid flow / Animals of flame wander"—also gesture to the eleventh-century Syrian poet Abu al-'Ala al-Ma'arri's *Epistle of Forgiveness*, which depicted the poet's descent into hell ("L," p. 72). Like al-Ma'arri, Esber finds hell populated by poets "sweating" over their verse ("L," p. 74). Yet the border between hell and the present world that structured these literary journeys is gone. Hell is "not a separated world" but a creeping destruction that "nests in the cells of cities and their defeated souls" ("L," p. 72). A landscape emerges that intertwines city and human bodies—tortured, mourned, and reduced to "carnage"—as twin grounds of ruin ("L," p. 72). Esber's text creates a quasi-scriptural geography of five rivers whose flows chart the invasion of bodies, emotions ("the first [river] flows from invisible wounds / the second flows from sorrows"), urban space, and language ("L," p. 71). Hell moves with the subject in flight from Syria; dubbed the "border-crossing," this wasteland "chases us" ("L," p. 73). The

[47] Rita 'Awad, *Usturat al-Mawt wa-l-Inbi'ath fi al-Sh'ir al-'Arabi al*-Hadith (Beirut, 1978), p. 6.
[48] See Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, "*Fi al-Maghrib al-'Arabi* (In the Arab Maghreb)," trans. Salma Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry* (Leiden, 1977), pp. 437–40.
[49] On archetypes, see Jayyusi, "Modernist Poetry in Arabic," in *Modern Arabic Literature*, ed. M. M. Badawi (New York, 2012), p. 155. On the land, see Terri DeYoung, *Placing the Poet: Badr Shakir al-Sayyab and Post-colonial Iraq* (Albany, N.Y., 1998), p. 80.
[50] Razzuq, *Al-Shu'ara' al-Tammuziyun*, p. 22.
[51] Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-'Arab*, 3 vols. (Cairo, 1966), 3:48.
[52] Robert Irwin, *Ibn Khaldun: An Intellectual Biography* (Princeton, N.J., 2019), p. 47.
[53] Gastón Gordillo, "Terrain," *Space and Politics*, 23 Dec. 2016, spaceandpolitics.blogspot.com/2016/12/terrain.html
[54] Osama Esber, "In the Land of Revelation," *Oxford Left Review* 14 (Feb. 2015): 74; hereafter abbreviated "L."

experience of crossing the sea; of begging; of waiting at borders—all these "small details" belong to the same hell as Syria's ruined cities ("L," p. 73). The poem thus sketches a single, rhizomatically continuous space: a wasteland that is material and affective; visible and unseen; comprehensive, yet unevenly distributed.

Esber's Arabic has the poetic voice reduced to "ashes" before its resurrection, evoking the phoenix, a common symbol among Temmuzi poets ("L," p. 74). This image, the poem's location in the Middle East as site of revelation, and its use of myth situate Esber's text in a genealogy of Arabic modernism. In keeping with the Temmuzi cycle, the closing stanzas limn hope, as the poetic voice speaks of its rebirth: "Since I gained consciousness / I was burned by its fire to charcoal / I was resurrected more than once with a new skin" ("L," p. 74). Yet Esber's address to European and Arabic canons deprovincializes Syrian literature not to join modernism's global networks but to signal a destruction that insinuates itself globally.[55] Moreover, the rebirth that resolves the Temmuzi cycle is an uncertain sign:

> A fire that illuminates the roads of the
> beginnings
> Where the steps keep moving without
> reaching
> the body remains happy despite despair.
>
> Oh hell
> In your name I announce my story
> With your vocabulary
> I make a poem for the future
> A necklace of words that
> Plants hope
> I hang around the neck of time.
> ["L," pp. 74–75]

While the poetic voice is trapped in a sadistic cycle of burning and rebirth, words plant a hope. Esber's Arabic uses a verb associated with agriculture, ending the poem with a promise of human production overcoming the branching disorder of *al-kharab*. Yet hell also "casts its seeds" in this Temmuzi spring, the Arabic suggesting a scattering associated with prose ("L," p. 72). Poetry, in contrast, fishes dead words from rivers—an echo of pearls, Eliot's drowned Phoenician's eyes—to string them uncertainly, heavily around the neck of time. An all-too-human body finds its happiness, traitorous in dull contentment. Untranslated Arabic lines make the break from divinity clear: "here I am on [hell's] roads unable / to catch the signs of redemption" ("L," p. 75). The barren lands multiply but no longer signify renewal. While sacrifice is everywhere, it does not accumulate at a border between man and deity.

Esber's rebirth imagery breaks from his literary forebears in the 1950s and 1960s, who embraced what Suhayl Idris, Lebanese author and editor of the pan-Arab *al-Adab* journal, called in 1958 "the right kind of *iltizam* [commitment]"— one whose horizons of collective rebirth aligned with the rhetoric of pan-Arab states like Nasser's Egypt and the future rulers of Syria and Iraq, the Ba'th.[56] In these decades, writers' commitments were formed in solidarity with the Algerian struggle for independence and the

[55] My reference is to Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, p. 58.
[56] Quoted in Yoav Di Capua, *No Exit: Arab Existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Decolonization* (Chicago, 2018), p. 116. Commitment in this context refers to Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of *littérature engagée*.

Palestinian cause. As Yoav di Capua shows, pan-Arabism in the 1950s and 1960s was both an ideology and a political theology. Among Arab intellectuals, it "sacralized politics and offered a form of post-colonial salvation," elevating the pan-Arabist state to "the embodiment of popular sovereignty."[57] In Temmuzi poetics, "national ideology" often "took the place of the deity," rendering the myth an allegory for political rebirth.[58] In particular, Temmuz merged with the *fida'i* (fighter) for Palestine, whose sacrifice would restore national and pan-Arab collectives. The rebirth imaginary accordingly moved fluidly between propaganda and poetry, geopolitical allegory and modernist explorations of spirit. Describing 1960s Palestinian poetry in 1973, Palestinian intellectual Jabra Ibrahim Jabra explained, "the blood of the god, giving hope and fertility to the land, is [Palestinian poets'] own blood, the blood of a whole new generation."[59] A similar mechanism appears in songs for the Syrian Ba'th's Vanguard (*Tala'i' al-Ba'th)* youth brigades, where children in military uniform sang, "we shine like the morning and carry weapons/ for the [Arab] unity that our people watered with [their] blood." Huge public spectacles celebrated Hafez as a new Salah al-Din who would liberate Jerusalem with the blood of masculine sacrifice (see A, p. 8). Such blunt forms of indoctrination recall that the Ba'th took shape in the same foment of pan-Arabist rebirth as Temmuzi poetry. Originally an anti-colonial movement that named itself for pan-Arab renaissance, the Ba'th merged an existing "conception of an awakening, the *nahda*" in circulation among intellectuals and writers since the late nineteenth century with "Marxist and Arab national theory [and] contemporary philosophy."[60]

Such sediments of lost Arab revolutions, as well as lingering intimacies between politics and poetics, are met not with resistance in contemporary cultural production but with a knowing air of refusal. This refusal wishes to cut symbolic relations, perhaps to find a new language in the ruin. Yet a cut would constitute erasure. As it rewrites the times of rebirth in ruin, contemporary literature asserts the remains of revolutionary trajectories unabsorbed by the state and summons not worldly but regional, nonnational collectives founded in vulnerability and outrage. Still, a risk remains. Esber's Arabic skirts Ba'th "resurrection" by adopting the neutral phrasing, "I was born more than once" ("L," p. 74). When Sulaiman depicts blood (a rare image in this corpus), he cuts it from landscape and bodies and uses staccato pacing, figuring an excess that will not resolve: "blood / on / the stairs / not from a killer / nor from [the] killed / just / blood that will not dry" (F, p. 48).[61] These cautions recall that, although public dissent against the Assad cult has existed since the late 1970s, "the image and vocabulary" for "complying with the regime [and] contesting it" were often the same (F, p. 24). In today's debates over language after the Ba'th, some authors hold that no revolutionary Arabic is possible for Syria—that there is no outside.[62] An abdication of representation forfeits too much for the works here, though instances of narrative strain and hypervigilance suggest the difficulties of depicting the ruined present without triggering discredited ends of revolutionary triumph. A central motif in the corpus is the sound of shelling, which, in what follows, punctuates the time and form of war's repetition.

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[57] Ibid., p. 109.
[58] Muhsin al-Musawi, *Modern Arabic Poetry: Trajectories of Modernity and Tradition* (New York, 2006), p. 61.
[59] Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, "Modern Arabic Literature and the West," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 2, no. 1 (1971): 87.
[60] Orit Bashkin, "Looking Forward to the Past: Nahda, Revolution, and the Early Ba'th in Iraq," in *Other Renaissances: A New Approach to World Literature*, ed. Brenda Deen Schildgen, Gang Zhou, and Sander L. Gilman (New York, 2006), p. 78. See also Max Weiss, "Genealogies of Ba'thism: Michel 'Aflaq between Personalism and Arabic Nationalism," *Modern Intellectual History* 17, no. 4 (2020): 1197–1199, 1212. On *nahda* studies, see Stephen Sheehi, "Towards a Critical Theory of *al-Nahdah*: Epistemology, Ideology and Capital," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43, nos. 2–3 (2012): 269–98.
[61] The rarity in literary texts can be contrasted with widespread reclamations of the state slogan "with [our] blood, with [our] souls, we sacrifice for you" in protests after 2011.
[62] See Mohammad Sami al-Kayyal, "Harb ghayr mulhimah," *al-Quds al-'Arabi*, 15 Oct. 2020, bit.ly/34GzsLX

Lost and Found

Abounaddara's 2014 film *Hadid bi-Hadid* (Lost and Found) opens with the sound of an explosion.[63] Dim shapes appear, and the black screen lightens onto a pile of rubble that lies in front of what appears to be a destroyed building. It is dawn. Three men—one wearing a protective white mask and carrying a flashlight—are searching in the rubble, from which grates and thick wires protrude. We hear a voice speaking on a radio and ambient conversation, signaling they are not alone at the scene. The masked man straightens and tugs at his mask, signaling to one of these off-screen voices that he has found something: a sewing machine. He struggles to move forward with it in the rubble while two male voices can be heard disagreeing over an object. "Careful, it might hurt someone" says one; "throw it out, it's ruined." The other demurs, "no, put it in the lost and found [*al-amanat*], what's the harm?" *Al-amanat* is in a store nearby ("*hutt-ha bi-l-dukkan*" continues the second voice).[64] In besieged Aleppo, residents organized a lost and found to gather belongings from bombings by regime and Russian aircraft.[65] Routines of life in war's wasteland begin to reveal themselves. The masked man, still struggling for balance in the rubble, hands the sewing machine to another figure who steps briefly into the camera's view. The shot cuts to black again before the title of the film appears on screen.

When the film resumes, it is daylight in a dusty landscape on the outskirts of a residential area. As a truck carrying what appears to be rubble enters from the right, the camera swings to a preadolescent boy who stands on the edge of a sharp drop down to a narrow pathway between this landmass and another large rock. "Get back, get back," he shouts, waving his arms at a group of boys below him. The truck is about to dump rocks, wires, branches, and unidentifiable debris. We watch the rubble tumble out in a cloud of dust. The boys spring into action, scrambling through the pile, disentangling wires, and grasping large bags to store their findings. One locates a damaged, dusty grating that dwarfs his skinny frame. He struggles to budge it, and his equally young companion brings a dolly. The faces of the two boys in these moments of cooperation are strikingly adult, calm in the distraction of familiar labor. But an explosion interrupts the scene and their faces, contorted in fear, return to those of children. They prepare to flee, and the screen fades to black.

I detail the events of this two-and-a-half-minute film, in order to establish a simple observation: *Hadid* has no recognizable plot or narrative structure. Some men disagree over the fate of a sewing machine. Boys interact with a dump truck. They are interwoven by three elements: material (rubble); sound (an explosion); and geography (their location in Syria). The film thus stands apart from Abounaddara's signature mode of face-to-face encounters with a speaker whose speech evokes an intimacy that approaches the genre of the confessional.[66] In a pluralist historical mode, the confessional films refuse unity and invite active interpretation.[67] Formally, the speaker sets the narrative emplotment of the film. They tell uninterrupted stories, and they close with a punchline, a resigned or embarrassed "and that's

[63] See *Lost and Found*, dir. Abounaddara (2014), vimeo.com/79467913
[64] The subtitles (in English and French) do not translate this portion of the dialogue, focusing the viewer's attention on the action unfolding on screen.
[65] The film does not reveal its location. I am grateful to Charif Kiwan for sharing it with me.
[66] See *Nothing but Light*, dir. Abounaddara (2011), vimeo.com/40768565, and the often-cited 2012 series *The Unknown Soldier*, vimeo.com/54135942
[67] The tendency to "begin and end in medias res, [leaves] the viewer to puzzle out [each film's] significance" (Creswell, "Voices from a Different Syria," *The New York Review*, 21 Mar. 2016, www.nybooks.com/daily/2016/03/21/voices-from-different-syria-abounaddara-films/).

it," or a drifting into silence. Even as overall meaning is withheld, the speaker lets viewers intuit causality and narrative continuity, both in the story (events are causally related) and in the film. That is, we understand someone is telling us of events—microhistories, as they have been called—that share a unity and have a conclusion known to narrator and filmmaker but not (yet) to us.[68]

Hadid sets aside this microhistorical labor. It is not that the film's heterogenous elements lack causality. The rubble exists due to bombings; the children in the second half of the film are afraid when they hear an explosion. It does not matter that this explosion did not create this rubble; the implication of sound is sufficient.[69] For the explosion/rubble relationship does not constitute the substance of *Hadid* (or its narrative telos); its aftermath does. More specifically, the film takes place in the lull between two explosions. If we read the sounds formally, the film recounts the in-between of bombings, yielding a narrative structure that might be described as bombing-rubble-bombing, a sequencing echoed in the title *Hadid bi-Hadid*. The temporal arc is replaced by an emplotment suggesting repetition—potentially endless bombings.

In the proliferating rubble, brief and interrupted scenes of salvage come to stand in for many others, past and future. The film thus distances us from a celebration of a human spirit that triumphs in the ruins, shifting attention to actions that persist. The lens remains with humans working in intimate relation to rubble—particularly in the second half, which abandons translation. Their moment is salvaged; shot through with affects ranging from distraction to abject fear; present tense yet held hostage to a sense of coming after and awaiting further devastation. As the Arabic title (literally "iron on/against iron," echoing an idiom for poverty or a lose-lose situation) suggests, this present is impoverished: ground down to its metal, caught in perpetual collision. Indeed, the film is perhaps most effective in its representation of the wordless fear that interrupts the children's routine, revealing that they are haunted by horrors that remain inaccessible to the viewer.

In protracted war, every event of ruin is the same and not the same. In a nonidentity of mirrored events, every bombing differently affects lives, buildings, and rooms that function as homes, mobilities, and senses of safety, however precarious. As *Hadid* suggests, the accumulation of devastation produces shifting affective responses: fear and anger, distraction and resignation. Rubble is not the same despite its lack of structure, whether in terms of the buildings it once was; the uncanny forms it takes; or its shifting shapes as destruction continues, people move through it, and the passage of time enacts decay and collapse.

This time of nonidentical returns perturbs Yazbek's *Bawwabat Ard al-'Adam* (The Crossing: My Journey to the Shattered Heart of Syria), which recounts her crossings from Turkey into Syria between 2012 and 2013. In a memoir that unfolds in sections marked by months and years, time and event are alarmingly uniform. "Even as I recall these events," she writes, "it seems impossible to write about them in [a] sequence that makes sense. There's no way I can narrate this in any kind of order. There's nothing I can do but break up time" (C, p. 14). The events to which she refers are testimonials of regime forces shelling homes, burning farms, and torturing and killing dissidents. Yazbek's reflexive commentary should not be read in terms of Benjaminian modernity. *The Crossing* is driven to differentiate destruction by writing the stories of the dead, of those who may soon be dead.

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[68] See Patricia Zimmermann and Helen De Michiel, *Open Space New Media Documentary: A Toolkit for Theory and Practice* (New York, 2018), pp. 30–31.

[69] This use of shelling's repetitive sounds to define the present is echoed in Wahsh, where artillery's sounds become "a pendulum for the hour of existence" (Q, p. 27).

> "All this soil, this dust is from the flesh of our children," one man said, barely finishing his sentence before we heard the roar of falling shells. We ran. When we reached a side street, the shell exploded as it hit the next house.
> The sky was filled with dust as night fell. In those moments, as bodies were being extricated from the rubble, and others were disintegrating, yet more human beings were being turned into corpses. Where do you even start trying to comprehend this spiraling cycle of endless massacre? [C, p. 91]

Dust ties the decay of human bodies underground to the explosions invading the sky, linking land, sky, and body in a single cycle of devastation. The man's inability to finish a sentence that passes judgment on the landscape without being interrupted by a new round of shelling points to the precarity of speech and of the literature that attempts to document it. Time moves too quickly—punctuated by repeated shellings—and not at all, as signifiers of life and reproduction have been inverted to signal cycles of death. The concluding rhetorical question should not be read literally but as an anxious acknowledgement of narrative lack. Rather than merging bombings into infinite iterations, contrary to *Hadid*, Yazbek speaks her anguish, relying on "emotive urgency" to break time.[70]

The novel remains the most translatable of genres in Arabic literature, and Yazbek's novellas and memoirs have been embraced in translation— to vocal critique in Arabic—as representative texts.[71] Since 2011, however, Syrian authors have developed hybrid genres of personal narrative, essay, and poetry. The reasons for this shift vary widely, from sarcastic embraces of social media to multivocal narratives of a pluralist nation. For Syrian- Palestinian Ra'id Wahsh, a departure from the novel in *Qit'ah Naqisah min Sama' Dimashq* (A Missing Piece of the Damascus Sky) signals a distinctly unanguished abandonment of linear time to write Syria's devastation into the regional past.

The Grammar of Disappearance

"I'll imitate a writer I imagined calling his novel 'Two Letters without A Reply and What Happened Between Them,'" writes the narrator of *Missing Piece* to his beloved, who has left Syria (Q, p. 110). The narrator imitates a figment of his imagination to write to a woman who may or may not be real. It is a temporary, discarded experiment in holding together the disorder through which he and reader pass. *Missing Piece* merges memoir, political critique, surrealist essay, televised skit, and more. Untitled sections take up disconnected events that circle the wartime present. Still, *Missing Piece* is unified by recurring characters and places (Khan al-Sheh, a Palestinian camp southwest of Damascus; al-Hajar al Aswad, an impoverished suburb of the capital), and by thematic preoccupations with the *madafa* (guest hall), instrumentalized language, and Palestinian memory.

Wahsh writes from the hyphenated identity of a Syrian-Palestinian born after the *nakba*. Recurring wars and narratives of asylum shape the ordinary speech *Missing Piece* depicts and critiques: "massacre[s] of words" without end about Arab displacements without end (Q, p. 33). The repetition of war and loss

[70] Quoted in Wedeen, *Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, Judgement, and Mourning in Syria* (Chicago, 2019), p. 121.
[71] See Syrian novelist Maha Hassan's discussion of *Taqatu' Niran: Min Yawmiyat al-Intifadah al-Suriyah* (Woman in the Crossfire) in Hassan, "Samar Yazbek, Katibah fi Marma al-Niran," *Al-Jazeera*, 9 July 2012. A measured representation of Yazbek's critique in Arabic (as a protected, middle-class voice beloved by the West) appears in "Hiwar ma'a Samar Yazbek," *al-Jumhuriya,* 28 May 2016.

is a historical fact: "the disaster is the same," passing from the *nakba* to Ba'th Syria, via Iraq and Lebanon (Q, p. 48). Contemporary experiences of war and displacement retrace Palestinian memory—materially depicted in the footsteps of grandmothers and daughters walking the same paths into and out of Syria. Yet if repetition is a historical fact, it is also a narrative device that the text associates with nostalgia, a collective tendency to indulge the speaker, avowing silently what is known to be untrue. What must be broken, in *Missing Piece*, is not a recursive time of history but its *narrative* conventions. To this end, the text destabilizes its authority as text by staging myriad, unresolved oppositions: between metaphor and reality, nightmares and "truth," where life becomes "mere interludes of delusion" (Q, p. 26). Its characteristic gesture is to reveal and retain its devices. The narrator, for example, dreams of returning to Palestine. He has never seen it; his return is written through the literature he read in school and the stories he heard in the camp, in this case from the Major, who waxes nostalgic about the animals, fruit, and women of Palestine and whose story of crossing becomes a map:

> I got to Tiberias on foot. I walked the distance between the camp and the Golan, then I advanced towards the lake [Tiberias] to swim across. I swam according to the Major's description. . . The Major lies; everyone knows he can't swim well, but they still listened to his escapades, especially [the part about] crossing the lake. [Q, p. 63]

The received nature of the stories does not undermine the emotional or political authenticity of the narrator's imagined return, his encounter with absented family—"grandfather like I knew him from the pictures"—and embrace of the land (Q, p. 66). Interwoven are references to the constructed nature of his narrative—"the story needs a horse," a horse winks as it speaks to him—and dreams within the dream (Q, pp. 65–66). The culmination of the scene is the narrator's discovery of the Major—younger and thinner— repeating verbatim his words about animals, fruit, and women in distant lands. As the Major's words drift into ellipsis, the narrator's arrival at his origin is displaced by the prospect of other places of awaited return, other nostalgias. The scene's formal structure—dreams within a dream that is a collection of stories—suggest endless narrative displacement, Matryoshka-like repetitions.

What kind of historical consciousness can emerge from *Missing Piece*? Despite its formal disorder, the succession of disasters traversing the text's memory and physical landscape must, as before, be cited and mourned even as the social and literary conventions to do so are destabilized. This commitment holds throughout *Missing Piece*'s ludic narrative tendencies: language must stay utile, and historical consciousness remains a succession of dates for wars and defeats. Instead, Wahsh is at his most iconoclastic against new pieties of Syrian unity in war and revolution. *Missing Piece* parodies revolutionary pressure to adopt coded language, for example, and rewrites political dissent through the iconic Syrian television character Ghawwar, star of *Ka'sak ya Watan* (Cheers to the Homeland!), who, Temmuz-like, is reborn in today's rubble. In the 1970s, Ghawwar was a Syrian everyman and a "good nationalist" (A, p. 95). His daughter died from spoiled milk because the doctors ignored her to treat a well-connected man in a critique of "unjust and systemic practices that normalize the privileges of officials" (A, p. 95). Invoking this popular tradition of dissent, *Missing Piece* shifts blame onto Syrian communities. The reborn everyman condemns the dead in a bitter rewriting of the *atlal*: he "talks to the rubble, full of *schadenfreude*: I think you deserve this, you sons of bitches. . . You needed to taste the curse [*al-wabal*] to know you aren't worthy of life" (Q, p. 96).

Against all established narratives, *Missing Piece* proffers a new "grammar [*'ilm nahu*] of the camp" to recount recurring disaster: a syntax of Palestinian waiting and/in the Syrian present, where "a barrel bomb can turn days of work into a heap of sand" (Q, p. 62). Echoing Amiralay's description of life awaiting death, Wahsh connects Palestinian past and Syrian present (and the disasters that lie between)

through precarity. Wahsh plays with the Arabic term for passive voice, *mabni li-l-majhul* (literally, built for the unknown), where the subject is removed from the sentence: "Houses are built for absence, and we are built for the unknown" (Q, p. 62). The juxtaposition with houses is not an opposition (to the active voice) but a progression into absence. The impending transformation of houses into abandoned ruins, whether due to displacement or war, promises to leave traces (*atlal*). The unending future for the collective voice is the substantive "unknown," a prospect of vanishing without trace.

This progression into absence structures Wahsh's narration of Palestinian, Iraqi, and Syrian losses. In the present, an Iraqi woman whose family had taken refuge in the narrator's home in 2003, came again "from Baghdad looking for her son whose traces had ended at a military checkpoint, and she hunted for a trace of him in a time when the ruins became tufts of wool *[ʻihnan manfushan*]" (Q, p. 73). The wordplay depends on the consonant group *a-th-r*, which transforms from the son's traces into looming *athar* (literally, archaeological monuments) morphing into wool tufts. The displacements of meaning are multiple, but they point neither to a Derridean critique of presence nor to a "potential vacuity of meaning."[72] The tumbling of meanings across word traces, rather, suggests an inexorable movement of subjective erasure into the Qur'anic image that concludes the sentence: "tufts of wool" (Q, p. 73).

How will you recognize the Calamity, asks the Qur'an in Surat *al-Qarʻiah*? What sign will announce end-times? The Qur'an's answers are enigmatic: people will be like scattered moths, the mountains like tufts of wool. *Missing Piece* sets the latter image into the sedimented, recursive Arab present. Ordinary people have lived multiple end-times; their accumulation gives no resolution. The Iraqi woman's visit, says the narrator, "ignited our tufts of wool with a pain that had jagged blades" (Q, p. 73). The apocalyptic sign is incorporated into bodies, an intimate scar that can be reopened and rent. The imagery bypasses choices between (or triumphant celebrations of) national causes, foregrounding the shared trauma of having lived one or many ends. The repetition is apparent in Wahsh's indefinite use of "wool tufts"—no singular sign of a singular end (the apocalyptic *al-ʻihn*), the calamities are many and painfully recognizable. The section closes on two mothers—Iraqi and Syrian—who "walking, hand in hand, between the shells, missiles, and bullets, become two lamps in 'the Wasteland'" (Q, p. 75). As Wahsh invokes Arabic modernism's rebirth cycle, his mourning is gendered and unqualified, limning through hypervigilant narrative a horizon of regeneration that is, nevertheless, familiar.

Ends

I began by suggesting that Syrian cultural production breaks its own time—literary, historical, political—in a figurative domain of ruins buzzing with noise. In its attention to the act of representing, this corpus places ruin in other regimes of historicity, other political imaginaries, than a Euro-North American concern with modernity, where ruins "make us aware of the vagaries of progressive vision as such."[73] My claim is, thus, one of discernment—of how to read a seemingly static present of devastation—against the backdrop of Baʻthist Syria, where the state maintains its violent hold on historical time and, like other authoritarianisms, "impoverishes spaces of discernment."[74] The literature and film I discuss claim the work of parsing, holding, and depicting time for themselves, not in a triumphant victory of interpretation against dictatorship but attesting to the treacherous terrain of representation in

[72] Hell and Schönle, *Ruins of Modernity*, p. 6.
[73] Svetlana Boym, "Ruinophilia: Appreciation of Ruins," *Atlas of Transformation*, monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/r/ruinophilia/ruinophilia-appreciation-of-ruins-svetlana-boym.html
[74] Nan Z. Da, "Disambiguation, A Tragedy," *n+1* 38 (Fall 2020), nplusonemag.com/issue-38/essays/disambiguation-a-tragedy

their present. Reading with them, academically in English, invites a pause to the accumulation of habitual histories and politics around the Middle East, a ceding of ruin's metaphors to emerging eschatologies and to other, more present futures than theologized unknowns.

"In the end," writes Sulaiman, "this recurs nonstop."[75] Hovering between prose and poetry, "The End That Recurs Non-Stop" repeats its key sentence three times in a paragraph/stanza, permitting an accumulation of meaning to occur within the pronoun "this." The Arabic performs the same with "the end [*al-nihayah*]:"

> Children, women and the elderly dangle from a hole in the air's wall separating the fighting fronts as seaweed dangles from boats full of blood.
> In the end, this recurs nonstop. Some watch in terror the disintegration of names and things and divide the regrets by so many numbers, then toss it randomly. In the end, this recurs nonstop.
> The living try to spit, to scream until their guts explode in decay. The rightness of history explodes into fatal mistakes.
> In the end, this recurs nonstop. Must the refugees thank God that their tents have no windows from which to view the ruined sky?
> Those fleeing from death, who haven't yet died, they live as echoes in places that no longer exist, live in the bloodied shelter of recollections.[76]

The folding of decay into the innards of the living and the ruin of the sky locate us in the proximity of death-in-life. "This" at first refers to the precarious state of vulnerable lives caught between military forces, in a zone that is at once invisible (the air) and material. The wall between fronts traps them such that their bodies are rendered limp, an inhuman seaweed hanging between tides of violence. The reference to bloody boats limns a connection to refugees, "those fleeing from death," in an expanding wasteland. In the "already-and-not-yet of waste-time," they are cast as not-yet dead, their journeys futile.[77] "The dead—one, two—they turn over / like the guts of waves / inside a crevice in the sky" (F, p. 18). Sulaiman merges sea and air, body and water, with the sky transformed into a crevice-ridden graveyard for the multiplying dead. We are far from Saadi Youssef 's defiant declaration to America from Damascus in 1995, "we are the drowned ones, dear lady / we are the drowned / let the water come."[78] The resurrection impulse in Arabic modernism foreclosed, Sulaiman's churning motion of corpses and gut-like ocean currents suggest that even the sky does not escape recursive torment.

These texts all depict injured skies, no longer a stable ceiling for the earth below. Esber and Yazbek depict them collapsing into one another; dust and "black clouds" rising from rubble suggest an irredeemable destruction of social, moral, and temporal orders ("L," p. 71). The sky is dilapidated in Sulaiman's "the End," suggesting stolen futures. A proliferation of ruined skies over Syria invokes Darwish's temporal figure from his "The Earth Is Closing on Us": "where do the birds fly after the last sky?"[79] Syrian literature acknowledges a lineage; Darwish's phrasing questioned the survival of poetry after "the saturation of the horizon of the possible."[80] The text's mourning (in the aftermath of the

[75] Sulaiman, "The End That Recurs Non-Stop," trans. Samantha Kostmayer Sulaiman, www.festivaldepoesiademedellin.org/en/Festival/27/News/Sulaiman.html
[76] Ibid
[77] Viney, *Waste*, p. 11. I am reinterpreting Viney's term for the creation of waste objects.
[78] Saadi Youssef, "America, America," in *Without an Alphabet, Without a Face: Selected Poems*, trans. Khaled Mattawa (Minneapolis, 2002), p. 176.
[79] Mahmoud Darwish, "Tadiqu bi-na al-ardu," in *al-Diwan*, 3 vols. (Beirut, 2009), 3:115.
[80] Gana, "War, Poetry, Mourning," p. 50.

Palestinian resistance's explusion from war-torn Lebanon) uses familiar imagery: "we will die here, here in the last passage. Here and here our blood will plant its olive trees."[81] The sacrifice is not triumphant; a disinterested earth has turned on the poem's collective voice, physically dismembered and geographically fragmented. Yet what remains, for Darwish—in ways that Esber shares—is a use of rebirth imagery to mourn lost poetic and revolutionary unities ("I wish we were its wheat so we could die and live again") layered into physical destruction. To invoke them is to ask what justice can still be imagined for Syria, Palestine, Iraq—the destruction accumulates.

Sulaiman turns instead to language, performing the end's accumulation of meanings. In "this" recurring devastation, wherein "names and things" disintegrate before our eyes, another act begins to repeat: the production of statistics ("so many numbers"), which introduces a calculated, resigned tone to the repetition of the text's key phrase. The repeating "end" becomes a matter for history endlessly gone awry. Sulaiman's pacing removes us from the uncanny territory of human seaweed towards historical errors that recur. The affirmed continuity of "this" destruction ("the end") is formally disrupted in the text, which can nevertheless hold the accumulations of human, intimate suffering and alienation in nonidentical repetition. We recall that repetition—in history and language—is a precondition for the intelligibly singular. [82] Sulaiman's inappropriable movement can be compared with Wahsh's narrator, who also worries the edge between exhausted repetition and the need to announce the end as new. He mourns-Damascus's "hunted" sky, scars of the destruction below and eponym for *Missing Piece of Sky*, then displaces the work's authorizing metaphor into an excess of violence, dissolving Damascus's sky into global blue: if "wars [disturbed] the blue of the skies . . . there wouldn't have been a sky [left] since the Second World War" (Q, pp. 9, 11).

Sulaiman's work, unlike Wahsh's, retains for literature the depiction of a mundane future that broke open ordinary time. In "Freedom," a pair of holey socks are the only stable trace of uprising amidst rubble, the closest approximation of a national flag:

> In the middle of a strange rapture
> we were talking about freedom
> my mother was darning
> the socks of my little brother,
> suddenly war broke out
> everything turned to rubble
> except my brother's socks
> which were left dangling
> from the clothesline like a
> flag[83]

The socks distance the poem from political contestations over the uprising and the war that followed. It gestures to 2011 and the future it signified as quotidian, perhaps even worn-out matters: "a strange rapture" that imploded imperceptibly into life. The word "suddenly" introduces a quasi-journalistic statement: war breaks out, things turn to rubble. Only the abandoned socks and the poem survive: one

[81] Darwish, "Tadiqu bi-na al-ardu," p. 116.
[82] See Reinhart Koselleck, *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories*, trans. and ed. Sean Franzel and Stefan-Ludwig Hoffman (Stanford, Calif., 2018), pp. 4–5.
[83] Sulaiman, "Freedom," in *Her Mirror Is an Unarmed Hunter*, trans. Samantha Kostmayer Sulaiman, Carey Harrison, and Jack Brown (New York, 2016), p. 17.

to speak of the rapture that was, and the other a patched-up object that might have been a symbol for ordinary collectives yet to come.

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