

Introduction:

A Survival Aesthetic for Ongoing War

For a while now I have felt this agony ...

So begins a Levantine student term paper on regional crisis. Assuming it is worth trying to understand the grounds for such common sentiments, how can agony be correlated to history? As a visceral response to concrete injustice or as a mere affectation of those who cannot see larger truths? There exists, of course, no way of correlating feeling and fact. The news media's picture-rhetoric of the present is of little help; its images can depict the moment's "wrath," "indignation," or "heroic suffering," but it cannot show the web of causes leading up to these agonies. And when one considers that these hieroglyphs are often deployed by obscure forces in a pitched battle over vague, unavowed stakes, the temptation is to declare there is no up or down, let alone right or wrong. So does one have to be a card-carrying postmodernist to grumble that the Levant looks, for all the world, like a vast reality spectacle, one that yields real-life tragedy but resists any attempt at fathoming it?

The Levant is of course only one example of reality spectacle, but few regions are as aesthetically and ideologically surfeited as this rocky shore. Perhaps this is why few today look to art for insight into the region's actual problems. Literature especially seems a singularly useless way of understanding actual crises. With its fictions, images, reductive topoi and appeals to emotion, literature seems part of the problem of reality spectacle, not its solution. Narrative is particularly suspect as it tends to impose closure, which "swallows up the event and its attendant conflicts" (Lyotard 219).¹ Yet stories remain a primary means of understanding and justifying human action, so it is probably worth the trouble to try to fathom how they relate to history and the spectacle. This book, at any rate, investigates such a possibility.

Most studies of literature and Levantine experience have followed the lead of Edward Said's *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism* to focus on Western art, literature, scholarship and news media. It is still the case that few outside specialists study contemporary Levantine self-representations, which may be one reason why terms straight from orientalist discourse spring to mind in describing the Levantine student's agony: his ostensible "visceral sincerity" or "affectation."² In the effort to loosen this hermeneutic vise, the contributors to this book explore how people who live through contemporary Levantine history have responded to it through narrative. These literatures, however, have a history of their own, and like most histories, dilemma figures prominently.

¹ "Conflict" in this quote is an inadequate translation of the key term "différend," a difference of opinion which cannot be resolved for lack of an idiom acceptable to both parties.

² See *Orientalism* (182, 205). Spurr explores these ideas in his "Idealization" and "Debasement" chapters.

1. The Dilemma of Modern Levantine Narrative in Arabic

The beginning of the twentieth century witnessed a flourishing of Arabic literature known as *al-nahḍa* (the renaissance). The beginning of the twenty-first century sees literary culture in the Arab Levant in a state of crisis.³ One prominent writer, Elias Khoury, affirmed in a recent lecture that business, security and religious interests have usurped the role of secular intellectuals who are now “marginalized, exiled or imprisoned” (“Intellectuals”). Yet without denying or diminishing the burden of censorship and repression, one cannot help seeing that Khoury’s own literary production and courageous stands testify to a margin for maneuver that varies from country to country. The crisis is therefore not solely on the side of production but also in consumption: few bother to read. The usual suspects here would include poor education, obstacles to book distribution, video culture, and entrenched philistinism. But beyond these mostly worldwide phenomena, what if a highly esteemed chapter of Arabic literary heritage is itself stifling innovation and consequently limiting literature’s capacity to remain in touch with history? And what if some writers have dared to break these fetters, but readers conditioned to the dominant aesthetic have misappreciated their work? Consider in this regard the legacy of *ʿadab multazim* (commitment literature) in the Levant.

As an import from the West, the novel vectored to the Arab world a constellation of modern values centered on progress, the rule of reason, political emancipation and individual conscience. Yet unlike other imports, the novel was an exceptionally flexible tool that could be immediately adapted to Arab needs. In an important special issue of *Fusul* devoted to the novel, the writer and professor of Arabic, Rashid al-Daif, suggests some of the Arabic novel’s specificity:

Throughout its history, the novel in Arabic was in direct contact with the Western novel but was not a copy of it. Instead, it followed its own path. This literature was marked by the shock of contact with the West and the issues this entailed: modernity, liberation, identity. Thus the three principal literary currents [realism, romanticism and existentialism] could not be for us what they were for those [Westerners] from whom they derived. (“Novelistic” 167)

“Modernity, liberation, identity” would remain perennial concerns of the Arabic novel in all its forms throughout the twentieth century according to al-Daif (168).⁴ Insofar as it was a prestigious element of modernity that lay in Arab hands, the novel was a privileged mediator between the Arab world and modernity. At the same time, the novel it-

³ See the United Nations’ *Arab Human Development Report 2002* for an authoritative assessment of a range of social and cultural problems in the Arab world.

⁴ The term “modernity” in this essay refers to the philosophical and social changes consequent to the Enlightenment. The Arabic novel in its realist, romantic and existential forms are part of this modernity. Later in the essay the term “modernist” will refer to a particular body of literary techniques in opposition to realism, but it is worth remembering that both modernist and realist techniques are part and parcel of modernity.

self was “Arabized,” especially in its thematic preoccupation with modernity. The rise of the novel in the Arab world was thus both a product of and an inquiry into modernity and the Enlightenment ideals of progress, the rule of reason, political liberation and individual conscience. The Arabic novel, therefore, was constitutively committed to the values of modernity such that, as M.M. Badawi reminds us, even the Romantic movement of the 1920s initially bore a politically committed profile (14).⁵

The close linkage in Arab Levantine culture between the novel and modernity meant that the fortunes of one rippled throughout the other. It was during this formative early twentieth-century period that Arab novelists established a remarkably resilient tradition of critically engaging with modernity at the very time when it would have been easier to break with it and, indeed, when Western novelists were in fact attempting to do so. Thus when modernity itself was indicted for twentieth-century horrors, from imperialism to world war and genocide, the Arabic novel did not attempt to reject the Enlightenment tradition as, for example, the *nouveau roman* or the postmodern novel did. For one thing, while modernity may have been to blame, *Arab* modernity was not. For another, to reject modernity would have been to risk sacrificing social and gender equality (to name just two kinds of progress) when the problem was arguably a malignant strain of modernity and not modernity as such. Thus when Badawi notes, for example, that by 1944, “a stream of angry social protest began to pour out” of Arabic literature, he is identifying a mid-century ratcheting up of novelistic commitment to modernity (16). The novel, as Mohammad Siddiq writes, was a means by which Arab modernity confronted essentially feudal elites:

In the postcolonial era, the state apparatus invariably came under the control of a privileged segment of the population: an elite, a party, a family, etc., which sought to collapse the national narrative with its own ideology in order to justify and perpetuate its political domination and cultural supremacy. It is precisely at this crucial juncture that each of the national literatures of the contemporary Middle East has made what may yet emerge as its most significant contribution to its respective culture. Over against the essentializing, totalizing, and monolithic thrust of the ideological “official” narrative, each one of these literatures developed a host of diverse, pluralistic, multivalent, and anti-hegemonic counter-narratives. (650)

In the Arab world, the founding of the modern utopia of Israel did more to discredit modernity than anything else. Yet even this failed to weaken Arab writers’ commitment. It signaled rather a renewed and modified commitment as writers began to narrow their

⁵ In a lecture given in 1968, Jabra I. Jabra made the point succinctly, affirming that commitment is part of the permanent landscape of modern Arabic literature:

What has marked Arabic writing for the last fifty years, apart from an ever-active classical revivalism, is the dominance of a number of themes that can be reduced basically to three: social justice, political struggle, and a moral evaluation of the human condition. (18)

focus within the range of modern preoccupations. By the early 1950s, the term *iltizām* (commitment) gained currency. Verena Klemm notes that the Beirut-based journal, *Al-Adab*, adapted the Sartrean notion of *engagement* to Arab needs through two key linkages: 1) The *engagement* priorities of freedom and responsibility “were merged” in *iltizām* “with aesthetic value, sincerity, and maturity of art”; and, 2) The post-1948 context of *iltizām* privileged the struggle against Israel (“Literary Commitment” 151). These linkages coincided with a burst of creative output by writers who have since become associated with commitment – Hanna Mina, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, and Ghassan Kanafani among them.

The Six-Day War of June 1967 only redoubled the conviction that the pen was an essential adjunct to the sword. Theoretical support came from Kanafani’s exposure of Zionist literary and political synergy in *ʿAdab al-Muqawamah fi Filistin al-Muhtallah: 1948-1966* (Resistance Literature in Occupied Palestine: 1948-1966) and especially, *Fi al-ʿAdab al-Sihyuni* (On Zionist Literature), which seemed to indict Arabic literature for naïveté in the face of ultra-committed Zionist literature. While Kanafani’s books are arguably saying much more than this,⁶ the notion that Arabic literature, despite everything, lacked the political commitment of Hebrew literature has returned in leitmotif ever since. Thus in 1974 Ahmad Mohammad Attiyeh compared the alleged frivolousness of Arabic literature to the efficacy of Hebrew literature and implied that Arab writers had much to learn from their Hebrew-language counterparts (9). He claimed that Arabs had to “fight then write,” calling for the linkage of literature and society to an all-out war effort:

The Arab writer is separated from the Arab fighter. In fact [social] reality is separated from the battle. And we find no trace of unity between literature and the battle except in rare instances. The behavior of the Arab revolutionary writer is completely separate from real revolutionary acts and stops at the penning of ideologies. (7)

By 1998 the ideal of the writer-warrior was supplanted by that of the religious martyr, who is arguably a mirror image of the Zionist zealot.⁷ Among many intellectuals however, the conviction that Arabic literature had never been sufficiently committed remained strong:

I am not exaggerating if I say that the Arab writer was not equal to the task of facing the dangers of Zionism to pre-1967 Palestine. It was little more than an emotional stand characterized by cursing Jews, lamenting, and reminding Arabs of their past glories.... The 1967 defeat exposed the lack of literary understanding toward the nature of the problems

⁶ See, for example, Kilpatrick who argues that Kanafani “is far from being simply a politically committed author, wedded to his cause” (157).

⁷ For more on Zionist religious martyrdom, see for example Yael Zerubavel’s analysis of the Trumpeldor legacy.

that plagued the Arab nation and the failure of discourse to play a major role in standing up to these problems. (Qaatami 156)

In his study of four post-1967 Jordanian-Palestinian novels, Samir Qaatami finds little to differentiate these from the insufficiently committed pre-1967 novels.

Today, the injunction to commitment can be so strong as to efface the aesthetic aspect of literature. In the pages of the influential journal, *Al-Adab*, numerous writers emphasize the extra-cultural roles of intellectuals as if to concede that writing itself is nugatory. Echoes of the 1970s lament for the writer's separation from the struggle remain in complaints about "the gulf separating the intellectual from his social context" (Tafifah 46). The word "*iltizām*" is not always used, but the injunction to writers is clear: they must be ever more socially committed in implicit or explicit imitation of Zionist commitment.

Thus *iltizām* has enjoyed considerable longevity since its 1960s and 70s heyday. Perhaps too much. Commitment in the programmatic sense described by Klemm has arguably become a yoke that writers and readers chafe under. As a result, writers often sound as if they eschew any social role for literature at all. Even Elias Khoury, who has never been accused of being politically inert, bridled at the mention of commitment during a recent interview:

I don't like commitment literature as it has presented itself, that is, literature related to social realism because it is simply not literature. Literature does not have a message. I write a political article as a citizen and I write it to the full, but literature is something else. *Literature is not an opinion; it is a state of being...* Literature does not serve anything; literature serves itself. ("Interview"; italics in original)

It is not that contemporary writers are any less moved by the fate of Palestine – still the moral cynosure of the Arab world – but that *iltizām*, like any long-dominant aesthetic (especially one that is conflated with "responsibility") fades into *iltizām*, compulsion. The novel that most doggedly tracks the Arab writer's disaffection with commitment in the 1970s is perhaps Rashid al-Daif's *Dear Mr Kawabata* (1995). It shows how commitment morphed into self-deception and, finally, self-disgust during the Lebanese Civil War:

We took words for our mounts, confident that we were riding history!

We grasped the reins of history and raced it towards the goal it had defined for itself: Communism, by way of Socialism.

Our role was to steer events in the right direction, to remove the obstacles from the path of history's wheel – *notice this expression* – so that it should not be held up or get stuck....

The world, with all its constituent parts, was simply words turned into things. As soon as the word changed, the thing would change: water, earth, air, individuals, groups – in short, all living and inanimate creatures.

All that was required was that the masses should learn these word-truths, and perfect their use, for the course of history to be changed. This was our mission.

The ruling class realized this, and realized in particular that it was against its interest. Its interest was to hide the truth, because the truth liberates. *Amen!*

... until one day, at the beginning of the war – *our war* – in 1975, I realized that my mouth was full of ants, that my lips were stitched together like a deep wound sewn up with strong thread. (5-6; italics in original)

This passage, which is rapidly becoming a *locus classicus* of disenchantment, illustrates how writers and their readerships landed in a predicament during the war. Having devoted their lives to modern liberation movements, they endured stinging disillusionment when these (along with every other political and ideological movement) fell to corruption and coercion. Commitment oozed away, leaving writers and readers sullen and empty but unable to cast off its aesthetic. *Itizām* had been so closely linked to the values of modernity and modernity's cause, Palestine, that to reject it would have been to admit their defeat as well. The alternatives, a return to a Levantine brand of feudalism or religious extremism were equally unpalatable, and so, in the anomic atmosphere of the 1970s, an aesthetic of alienation (*ightirāb*) arose, which changed nothing but at least does not concede defeat (Harlow 164). In sum, programmatic commitment has outlived its usefulness but how can writers discard its obsolete tools and methods without retreating into formalist, mass market or otherwise self-absorbed and complicit literature? This is the dilemma of Levantine Arabic literature since the 1980s.

2. The Dilemma of Modern Levantine Narrative in Hebrew

Commitment literature emerged in Modern Hebrew earlier than in Arabic – much earlier when one considers that a good deal of nineteenth-century East European Hebrew writing nourished idealized images of Palestine. Springing from the Talmudic tradition and the *Haskalah* (the Jewish enlightenment), this literature merged powerful ancient imagery with a Romantic longing for text-referent immediacy. East European Jewish readers interiorized vivid scenes of a sacralized Levant: “It can be said then that the Jews of Eastern Europe, at least in some intellectual sense, inhabited a world which had more to do with the Land of Israel than with Berdichev, Brody, Lublin” (Parfitt 65).⁸ If

⁸ Ambivalent identity does not disappear after the founding of the state of Israel, but the value polarity often reverses: Ammiel Alcalay, for example, shows how Ashkenazi Zionists strove to present Hebrew literature and Israeli culture as indelibly European (31).

commitment literature is an appeal for social progress and political emancipation, then from the Zionist perspective, this literature was at least prototypically committed. Robert Alter claims that it “led writers by imperceptible stages to Zionism” (*Hebrew* 78). Benjamin Harshav makes an even stronger case for the role of literature in the rise of Zionism. Identifying the 1881-82 Russian pogroms as a watershed, he writes:

What happened between 1881 and 1897 [the year of the founding of the World Zionist Organization]? The new Jewish literature burst onto center stage: first poetry, fiction, and essays in Russian; toward the end of the eighties, the new prose in Yiddish; at the beginning of the nineties, the new Hebrew poetry of Bialik and his followers.... This new literature created a fictional image of the world, which served as a vivid base for the nation’s and the individual’s self-awareness; it was mostly a critical picture, but written from the inside. Only on the basis of that self-image were the political ideologies formulated. Without understanding the rise of literature and its role in the formation of the new intrinsic polysystem, we cannot understand how these ideologies suddenly blossomed. (64)

While a range of other motives and inducements such as fleeing persecution and economic want surely played a role in bringing East European Jews to Palestine, still, it is arguable that only a culture possessed of a strong faith in literary representation could have performed such a task.⁹ Alter, in fact, traces the power of the image in Hebrew-language culture to the “representational bias of the Hebrew medium” itself (*Hebrew* 78).

By the mid-1920s Zionist commitment literature was flourishing in Palestine as Jewish literature waned in Eastern Europe. Yet with a post-World War I Jewish population of less than 60,000, Palestine was hardly a demographic center of Judaism. This gave rise to a highly unusual situation in which habitual social roles of writers and readers were reversed:

[T]he writers who left Europe to settle in *Eretz Yisrael* regarded themselves as being in their real homeland, while their readers in Eastern Europe were regarded – and, indeed, looked upon themselves – as being in exile. Whereas the writer in exile in other literatures is concerned with the task of changing the conditions of his homeland so that he may himself return to his readers, the Hebrew writer in Palestine was concerned with the task of bringing his readers to him and of helping to shape conditions to make such a major demographic shift possible. (Patterson 121)

The long history of religious literature extolling the Holy Land lent early Zionist literature a religious aura, which established a powerful tradition of aesthetic, religious and

⁹ To avoid overstating the mediating role of literature, it is necessary to note that the vast majority of Jews emigrating from Eastern Europe chose to go to the America. The first three waves of immigration spanning 41 years (1882 to 1923) brought a total of only 100,000 Jews to Palestine, a figure sometimes equalled in a single year of emigration to the United States (Shaked, *Modern* 243).

political linkages that lasted at least throughout the early years of the Zionist state. Gershon Shaked writes about the early Zionist writers:

For them, the pioneering experience was a form of religious redemption. Their writings did not so much mirror the surrounding reality as express a naïve enthusiasm for it. For the most part, these writers ignored the objective conditions of their world, creating instead a sort of dreamland. *Erets Yisrael* writers, notably Moshe Smilansky, Yosef Luidor, and Meir Wilkansky produced a literature that not only confirmed the values and ideals of pioneering Zionism but, in a way, invented them. So powerfully persuasive were these writers, both the Jews living in *Erets Yisrael* and those living in the diaspora, that one might say of their perceptions of the homeland that the influence of life on their literature was less important than the influence of their literature on life. (*Modern* 65)

Thus Yael Zerubavel remarks that literature was a key element of a wider project to build what she calls “collective memory,” albeit at the price of squeezing alternative literatures to the margins (215). Through fictional narrative, children’s literature, poetry, history, and holiday commemorations, the early twentieth-century Zionist movement constructed symbolic links to a heroic past:

The new literary works articulated the admiration of the “wondrous” quality of the national past and its symbolic continuity with the present. Hebrew writers and educators turned history into “legends” that would inspire the Hebrew youth. (Zerubavel 83)

Throughout the British Mandate years and into the 1970s social realism played a key ideological role in the formation of the Jewish state, featuring vigorous, single-minded Zionists in heroic situations. Shaked, who eschews sweeping generalizations (see “Waves”), nevertheless writes: “[F]rom the 1940s through the 1970s, social realism played an important role – perhaps the dominant role – in the creation of the national literature” (*Modern* 141). Depending on one’s point of view, this has proven a blessing or a bane. One may say with Shaked that realist tradition “provided an ideological social model for a population which lacked an established social reality” (*Modern* 167). Alternatively, one may go with Ilan Halevi who claims that this literature contributed to “the mass production of false consciousness” (qtd. in Alcalay 231).

Be that as it may, by the late 1950s Hebrew literature began to acquire a well-documented critical stance toward Zionist ideology (Band 123; Cheyette 239; Mintz 12; Yudkin 220). This was part and parcel of a worldwide phenomenon of modern disillusionment which, as Arnold Band notes, was not unique to Israeli writers, but is, “characteristic of most writers who are sensitive to the inevitable gap between the dreams they had inherited and the realities they must live with” (125). Yet since few other states are so beholden to literary commitment, the consequences of a problematic relationship between Hebrew literature and society may be greater in Israel than elsewhere.

The parting of the ways between post-1950s Hebrew literature and the Zionist state created a decades-long dilemma. If Hebrew fiction were to evolve too far from Zionist commitment, it could bring into question the foundations of Zionism such as the Enlightenment brought into question the Christian foundations of European society.¹⁰ On the other hand, if writers lash themselves to Zionist ideology, Hebrew literature could drown in doctrinaire formalism or irrelevance, forfeiting the centuries-old bond between literature and Jewish society.

The question remains serious enough to have exercised more than a few minds. Band wrestles it off the horns of dilemma by presenting another option, that Zionist hero types might evolve to correspond to the “wide array of transformations in what we might call the evolving Israeli identity” (130). In this spirit, Alan Mintz identifies a range of innovations and experimental techniques in Israeli writing since the 1970s (11-16). All of the techniques Mintz mentions, however – an increase in fantasy or magical realism, a deliberate derivativeness, a turn from ideology to story-telling, a dismantlement of the novel form, and a manipulation of point of view – either ignore or undermine not only the nationalist ideology but especially its foundation in “the representational bias” of Hebrew-language culture. Of course, none of these techniques are unique to Hebrew literature and they may turn out to be utterly inconsequential. Indeed, Zerubavel notes how language can dance around dilemma in satire and irony: “These texts debunk the [Zionist] myth, but the playful, nonserious framework helps blur the ideological import of their challenge” (237). Yet eventually the dilemma, which many nations may face but none so urgently as Israel, stubbornly resurfaces: Can a sense of the nation remain if literature and other cultural productions do not maintain it as an imagined community?

As if to fend off the specter of a split between representation and reality, Alter reassures the reader of his article on magical realism that “any manifestation of fantasy in Hebrew fiction has to be made against the heavy weight of a dominant tradition of intent realism that goes all the way back to Hebrew writing in nineteenth-century Russia” (17). He seems to be suggesting here that the pyrotechnics of contemporary Israeli literature must be measured by the criteria of committed realist literature. The article closes on an anxious note:

[T]here are moments [in Hebrew magic realism] when we begin to wonder whether we are on the verge of getting lost in a fun house of merely literary games.... The great danger is that it could turn into a set of mannerisms in which fantasy is a crazy mirror reflecting the writer's study, not an instrument to probe history, culture, and the eternal frailties to which flesh is heir. (34)

¹⁰ For an exploration of the nexus between myth and history, see for example, *Modern Jewish Mythologies* and Joseph Heller's, “The End of Myth: Historians and the Yishuv (1918-1948).”

Ostensibly a way of avoiding the dilemma, “fun house” literature actually ratifies the victory of political expediency and literature becomes, at best, an exercise in assuaging bad conscience.

The most cogent response to the dilemma, at least in English, comes from Hannan Hever who argues that Zionist culture has been responding to the threat of ideological loose cannons since the early twentieth century:

When divergent texts ... come to threaten this authoritative unity [of mainstream Zionist], ... countermovements arise in an attempt to repress or co-opt these texts. At the same time, efforts are made, within the dominant literary narrative, to conceal or erase the processes of reaction and accommodation that inform hegemonic literature. (5)

In just the way that one of the most thriving medical subspecialties is now “pain management,” Hever is identifying a kind of cultural “thought management” that is as superior to Orwell’s Thought Police as modern anesthesia is to ether. Mainstream Hebrew literature and culture appear both less monolithic but more sophisticated in repressing or co-opting alternative voices and then covering the tracks. Hever argues that this rhetoric of repression and recuperation operates even in the work of the “progressive” writers of the 1960s such as Amos Oz, A.B. Yehoshua, and Amalia Kahana-Carmon:

[D]espite their canonical status, these stories reflect the ambivalence of the cultural situation: in them, an empowered majority acts as befits the weakness of a minority, yet the stories themselves are masterworks of the majority canon (143).

Warren Bargad’s analysis of the image of the Arab in Israeli literature supports Hever’s point. Among the first generation of Israeli writers:

The central issues are Arab displacement from their land and property, the victimization of innocent villagers by forces beyond their control, and the agonized feelings of loss in terms of personal relations or possibilities of peace. The point of view is sympathetic; the tone, whether strident or understated, is clearly moralistic. (31)

Among the second, ostensibly more progressive, generation of Israeli writers, Bargad finds a “far more subtle and oblique” treatment of Arabs (34). Yet this rhetoric of ambivalence, as Hever notes, can work both ways. It also bears the potential for renewal inasmuch as Sephardic Jewish writers and Palestinian Israelis have also taken advantage of ambivalent techniques to carve a place out for themselves in the Hebrew canon. One may conclude that if these Sephardic and Palestinian Israelis are not themselves co-opted, perhaps Hebrew literature, which was at the root of the Zionist project, will eventually renew itself by leading the way to a post-Zionist Israel.¹¹

¹¹ Yerach Gover is among those who see little to be optimistic about in post-Zionism, arguing that “‘post-Zionism’ as it is currently developing stems from the same hegemony it claims to oppose” (31).