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LECTURE

Whither Theory in a Time of Surpassing Disaster?

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Attending to our responsibility to the dead in our present historical moment of danger, this lecture stages three distinct reading experiments in "living together with the dead" with special attention to Palestine and Algeria. The first scene contemplates the times of war and death that constitute what Jalal Toufic refers to as "the withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster." The second scene explores artistic resurrection in literature by examining antiphonic burial during colonial war while juxtaposing philosophical conceptions of the relationship between death, burial, and history writing. I thus elaborate a concept of death as non-secular and theological, and of history writing as a form of anamnesis that inhabits the isthmus between the Terrestrial realm and the realm of the Unseen. The final scene is a meditation on poetry under conditions of colonial and post-colonial catastrophe. Throughout, theology and poetry serve as provocations to the discipline of history.

For whom do we read and write? With every passing year, every war, every genocide, every massacre, and every suicide in our troubled present, the question becomes ever more pressing. For me the answer has always been deceptively simple—for the dead. As historians and scholars, what is our responsibility to the dead in our present historical moment of danger, what Sigmund Freud termed "the times on war and death"?[1] In cultivating an ethics of listening to, and learning to speak with, the dead, how can we attend to the gravitas of this encounter, in which we are inherently implicated, both consciously and unconsciously?[2]

Attending to the work of critical theory and practice, this piece stages three distinct scenes of reading, each of which grapples with experiments in what historian Sherene Seikaly terms "living together with the dead." Throughout I attempt to rethink the relationship between the group and the mediation, or translation, of the experience of war

[1]Sigmund Freud, "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death" (1915), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, ed. James Strachey (London, 1957), 273–300.

[2]See my discussion in "History and the Lesser Death," *History of the Present* 10/1 (2020), 172–5. See also Sherene Seikaly, *Reading in Time*, World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023.

and death—so staggeringly omnipresent in our troubled times. I do so, in part, through a meditation on necromancy and the practice of history writing.

The first scene thinks through the question of ethical semiosis as one inherent to the work of translation from the individual to the group, particularly in the times of "war and death" that constitute what Jalal Toufic refers to as "the withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster."[3] How might we understand what Gayatri Spivak terms the "irreducible work of translation, not from language to language, but from body to ethical semiosis"?[4] If the question of the group remains one of the persistent aporias within psychoanalytic thought, then Arab studies is well situated to reconceptualize the nature of group life in all of its instantiations. This is so precisely because so many of the experiments of group life—both in their traumatism and their collective resistance—have emerged from that part of the world.

The second scene contemplates the work of artistic resurrection and its limits by examining the exigencies of antiphonic burial under circumstances of colonial war—as evidenced in Assia Djebar's novel *Fantasia*. In the process, I juxtapose two distinct philosophical conceptions of the relationship between death, burial, and history writing, while elaborating a concept of death as non-secular and theological, and of history writing as a form of anamnesis that inhabits the *barzakh* (isthmus) between the Terrestrial realm and the realm of the Unseen.

The third, and final, scene is a meditation on poetry and the calligraphy of invention, or the right to life before death. Here, I delve into artistic forms, such as experimental prose and poetry as a mode of communicative and noncommunicative discourse with the group under conditions of colonial and postcolonial catastrophe. In so doing, I draw upon the concept of the imaginary and poetic invention as elaborated by the psychoanalyst Sami-Ali and as exemplified by the poet and painter Etel Adnan.

Throughout, I ask what it might mean for critical theory to contemplate the destruction of Gaza, and the world, which we are now witnessing, from the perspective of the Arab world. How shall we speak about critical theory both in the midst of genocide in Palestine, and also in the midst of the most sustained forms of resistance that we have witnessed in the modern imperialist West since at least 1968?[5] Internecine debates regarding "critical theory's generational predicament" as a "foreclosure of its own future as a tradition" are often predicated on the assumption that the Frankfurt school and Institute for Social Research embody both the means and ends of critical

[3]Jalal Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster* (Forthcoming Books, 2009).

[4]Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York, 2003), 13. Spivak, drawing on Melanie Klein, conceptualizes the human subject as the result of a "shuttling translation, from inside to outside, from violence to conscience," and from nature to culture; that is, as "the violent production of the precarious subject of reparation and responsibility." See Spivak, "Translation as Culture," *Parallax* 6/1 (2000), 13–24, at 13–14.

[5]On the encampments and their wider institutional and geopolitical context see the collection of essays in Maya Wind and Esmat Elhalaby, eds., "The Student Intifada," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 124/1 (2025), 400–41.

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theory *tout court*.[6] But if the proliferation of encampments on university campuses is to teach us anything, it is that our students, those vanguards of critical theory in action, rely on an entirely different repertoire of theory (lower-case "t"), one that privileges scholars not on the basis of provenance or institutional capital, but on the basis of their interventions within a complex discursive terrain that is at once theoretical, political, and psychosocial.

As such, our references, and more significantly our conceptual grammar, will entail a sustained engagement with the thought and writings of Jalal Toufic, Sherene Seikaly, David Marriott, Haytham El Wardany, Sami-Ali, Assia Djebar, and Etel Adnan, as well as al-Ghazali and Ibn ʿArabi.[7] As will become clear, I do not eschew modern European thinkers but place them in conversation with non-European and non-modern thinkers; such a shift will highlight the question of what constitutes theory and in what ways it might *actually* speak to "history and the present" of the world's demographic majority.[8]

Scene I: the withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster

If to be a living being entails the acceptance of the eventuality of catastrophic reactions, as Georges Canguilhem suggests, then how does such a being function within the confines of a community that has itself been the subject of a catastrophe, or, as artist and theorist Jalal Toufic outlines, a "surpassing disaster"?[9] For Toufic "whether a disaster is a surpassing one (for a community defined by its sensibility to the immaterial withdrawal that results from such a disaster) cannot be ascertained by the number of causalities, the intensity of psychic traumas and the extent of material damage, but by whether we encounter in its aftermath symptoms of withdrawal of tradition."[10]

[6]Samuel Moyn, "Critical Theory's Generational Predicament," *Constellations* 30 (2023), 419–21. See Robyn Marasco, *The Highway of Despair* (New York, 2015), 3, for a rethinking and expansion of critical theory's canon in terms of "negative dialectics: aporetic, aleatory, and untidy."

[7]For a reconsideration of the epistemological imperialism that relegates theory production to the Western academy and the history of thought to the non-West see Hosam Aboul-Ela, "The Specificities of Arab Thought: Morocco since the Liberal Age," in Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss, eds., *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Present* (Cambridge, 2018), 143–62; and Fadi Bardawil, "Sidelining Ideology: Arab Theory in the Metropole and Periphery, circa 1977," in ibid., 163–80.

[8]A brief note on the title: in asking "whither theory" I am echoing Marriott with respect to Fanonism, in which he is "thinking less of a telos or destination to which one has to hold or train oneself than of a question of incomprehension, deferral, and perpetual challenge … an evocation whose spirit of decision comes without guarantees or ends." David Marriott, *Whither Fanon? Studies in the Blackness of Being* (Stanford, 2018), 1.

[9]Georges Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, trans. Carolyn Fawcett in collaboration with Robert S. Cohen (New York, 1991), 199. This paragraph and the next draw on Omnia El Shakry, "The Work of Illness in the Aftermath of a 'Surpassing Disaster': Medical Humanities in the Middle East and North Africa," *Culture Medicine Psychiatry* 47(1), (2023), 99–113.

[10]Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition*, 11–12. For a discussion of the specificity of Toufic's conception of disaster and the distinction between Toufic's conception and that of Maurice Blanchot see ibid., 80–82. He states, "The surpassing disaster I have conceptualized is more limited than the disaster Blanchot writes about in his great book *The Writing of the Disaster* ('The disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving

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Crucially, Toufic does not define a community as bound together by "a common language and/or racial origin and/or religion"; rather, "being equally affected by the surpassing disaster delimits the community."[11]

As he elaborates, peoples that have suffered surpassing disasters—encompassing material losses, such as death tolls, psychic traumas, and the destruction of the built environment—also encounter immaterial losses that he terms the withdrawal of tradition (the "withdrawal of literary, philosophical and thoughtful texts as well as of certain films, videos, and musical works, notwithstanding that copies of these continue to be physically available; of paintings and buildings that were not physically destroyed; of spiritual guides; and of the holiness/specialness of certain spaces").[12]

In contemplating the cases in which "tradition did at one point or another undergo a surpassing disaster," Toufic cites the following examples:

> for the Jews, the destruction of the temple, the expulsion from Spain, and the Nazi-period extermination; for Twelver Shi'ites, the slaughter of imām Ḥusayn, his family, relatives and companions at Karbalā' … for the Armenians, the 1915–17 genocide; and for the Turks, who, in the first decades of the twentieth century, exemplify one of the clearest cases of the withdrawal of tradition, for instance of the Arabic script, Sufi lodges, Sufi music and Ottoman art music, and the fez….[13]

In the case of Palestine, the *nakba* presents itself as both a structure and a structuring condition, rather than a singular catastrophic event or surpassing disaster; it is, as Nasser Abourahme puts it, an "open present continuous" that functions as the latent logic of Zionism.[14] Such a logic seeks to relentlessly supplant the native population

everything intact'); the surpassing disaster leads to the withdrawal not of everything, but of tradition, and touches not everyone, but a community, with the caveat that this community is reciprocally defined by it as the community of those affected by it, and this tradition is defined by it as that which withdraws as a result of the surpassing disaster." Ibid., 81. For more on the distinction between structural and historical trauma see Dominick LaCapra, "Trauma, Absence, Loss," *Critical Inquiry* 25/2 (1999), 696–727.

[11]Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition*, 13; see also Jalal Toufic, *Over-Sensitivity*, 1st edn (Los Angeles, 1996), 70; Toufic, *Over-Sensitivity*, 2nd edn (Forthcoming Books, 2009), 59. For a conceptual history of the meaning of the term "disaster" and the social practice of catastrophic ideation across multiple linguistic spheres beginning in the late nineteenth century see Adrien Zakar, "Nakba: Catastrophic Ideation and the Meanings of Disaster (1895–1948)," *American Historical Review*, forthcoming.

[12]Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition*, 11.

[13]Toufic, *Over-Sensitivity*, 2nd edn, 75; see also Toufic, *Over-Sensitivity*, 1st edn, 75; Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition*, 29–30.

[14]Nasser Abourahme, "Palestine: Between Obliteration and Struggle," presentation, New York University, New York, 17 April 2024, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=4H4Ug162yxw. On the *nakba* as a structure rather than an event see Rabea Eghbariah, "The 'Harvard Law Review' Refused to Run This Piece about Genocide in Gaza," *The Nation*, 22 Nov. 2023, at www.thenation.com/article/archive/harvard-law-review-gaza-israel-genocide; Eghbariah, "Toward Nakba as a Legal Concept," *Columbia Law Review* 124/4 (2024), 887–991; Ardi Imseis, "The Nakba and the UN's Permanent Responsibility for the Question of Palestine," remarks, UN Headquarters, New York, 17 May 2024, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=aHh0ech78Kc. The insight that "invasion is a structure, not an event," is originally from Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8/4 (2006), 387–409, at 388.

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through genocide, ethnic cleansing, expulsion, spatial segregation, and obliterative moments of extreme violence such as we are witnessing today.[15]

In Palestine, as Sherene Seikaly notes, "The world has now learned of epistemicide—a policy that mandates the destruction of cultural and historical sites, libraries, bookstores, and the killing of educators."[16] Subjected to the destruction of archives, cultural institutions, and institutions of knowledge, and to overall epistemological violence—this violence is iterative and emblematic of the ongoing catastrophe that has structured Palestinian existence since well before 1948. In a comment to an article by Dan Sheehan on *Literary Hub*, titled "These Are the Poets and Writers Who Have Been Killed in Gaza," the Irish novelist Emer Martin says, "poeticide. Is that a word? To kill the story tellers, the poets."[17]

As the painful litany of counting and naming bodies has demonstrated, Israel's attempted destruction of Palestine is taking place at the level of the human organism—the body rendered as bare life and subjected to death and dismemberment. Indeed, the earth itself is now bearing witness to this attempted obliteration and the land in Gaza has changed color under the weight and tonnage of bombs. The earth is now an admixture of Palestinian bodies and human remains, as well as the sorrows of a population indefinitely displaced. And yet, as Seikaly suggests, "in this age of catastrophe, Palestine is not an object for sympathy, fear, or even salvation. Palestine is a paradigm. It can teach us about our present condition of the permanent temporary."[18]

Palestine as paradigm thus offers us an angle from which to contemplate the question of the group in the midst of a surpassing disaster. As David Marriott insightfully observes with respect to Frantz Fanon, what was unprecedented about his approach to Algeria (particularly during the war—an example of a "surpassing disaster"), "was the constant interrogation of the group as a veridical dimension of the real, since it sought

[15]As Abourahme notes, "In Palestine, genocide, understood even within the narrow confines of the UN convention not as the mass killing of individuals (which is the rarer case) but as the intentional destruction of a people's capacity to exist, has always been the condition of possibility for political Zionism—the *Nakba* was in many ways a clear case of genocide, even if it almost still cannot be named as such." Nasser Abourahme, "In Tune with Their Time," *Radical Philosophy* 2/16 (2024), 13–20, at 14. Esmeir argues that necropolitical colonial obliteration and removal, rather than "genocide," "ethnic cleansing," or "apartheid," is a more apt characterization, since it attends to the obliteration of historicity. Samera Esmeir, "The End of Colonial Government," in Sai Englert, Michal Schatz, and Rosie Warren, eds., *From the River to the Sea: Essays for a Free Palestine* (London and New York, 2023), 86–93.

[16]Sherene Seikaly, "Catastrophe, Disavowal, and the Palestinian Condition," lecture, Yale University, New Haven, CT, 6 March 2024. Scholasticide is another term used and was coined by Karma Nabulsi in 2009; see the online exhibit at www.silencedbyscholasticide.com/scholasticide. For a discussion that places contemporary epistemicide in Palestine within the arc of colonial educational policies see Esmat Elhalaby, "Toward an Intellectual History of Genocide in Gaza," *The Baffler*, 27 March 2024, at https://thebaffler.com/latest/toward-an-intellectual-history-of-genocide-in-gaza-elhalaby. See also Maya Wind, *Towers of Ivory and Steel: How Israeli Universities Deny Palestinian Freedom* (London, 2024).

[17]Dan Sheehan, "These Are the Poets and Writers Who Have Been Killed in Gaza," *The Hub* (blog), *Literary Hub*, 21 Dec. 2023, at https://lithub.com/these-are-the-poets-and-writers-who-have-been-killed-in-gaza; Emer Martin, comment on ibid.

[18]Seikaly, "Catastrophe, Disavowal, and the Palestinian Condition"; Seikaly, *Reading in Time*.

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to make being-there part of a group process wherein an awareness of the patient's 'phantasms' 'force[d] him to confront reality on a new register.'"[19] *Socialthérapie* aimed

> to force the group to become aware of the difficulties of its existence as a group and then to render it more transparent to itself, to the point where each member is provoked into an awareness of the relation (albeit previously disavowed) between phantasm and the real. It is then at the level of the phantasm that the *real unreality* of life in the colony could be fully understood …[20]

This is precisely what is at stake here in our discussions of the attempted eradication of the group itself as object of surpassing disaster, insofar as the confrontation of the real unreality of life in the colony must be addressed if any decolonial transvaluation is to occur.[21] The group under colonial occupation, then, must be retheorized, and Marriott notes that this is why the distinction between Francesc Tosquelles's institutional psychotherapy and Fanon's socio-therapy must not be glossed over; "in Fanon's clinic the psychodrama was substantially different; the necessity was not just to set up an analogy between the clinic and society, but to deduce the phantasms defining both."[22]

As Stefania Pandolfo elaborates, Fanon's clinical case studies in *Wretched of the Earth* invite "us into the fact of madness that bears witness to the real of an unending war, and the temporal indeterminacy of trauma, pondering that vulnerability exposed, and renouncing the mastery of an exit or the resolution of the cure."[23] David Lloyd, too, has emphasized such a nontherapeutic relation to the past in the context of colonialism, as has Samera Esmeir in reference to the *nakba* and "the death of human relationships, structured [in] its lived aftermath."[24] And while some have focused on colonial

[19]Marriott, *Whither Fanon?*, 46.

[20]Ibid., 46–7, original emphasis; also cited in El Shakry, "The Work of Illness," 108.

[21]Marriott, *Whither Fanon?*, 48. On settler colonialism as a psychologically extractive practice see Lara Sheehi and Stephen Sheehi, *Psychoanalysis under Occupation: Practicing Resistance in Palestine* (London: Routledge, 2022).

[22]Marriott, *Whither Fanon?*, 47.

[23]Stefania Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul: Madness, Psychoanalysis, Islam* (Chicago, 2018), 23; Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (1961) (New York, 1963), 249–310.

[24]On a nontherapeutic relationship to the colonial past in the context of the Irish Great Famine see David Lloyd, "Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery?", *Interventions* 2/2 (2000), 212–28, at 219–20. On Palestine see Samera Esmeir, "Memories of Conquest: Witnessing Death in Tantura," in Ahmad H. Sa'idi and Lila Abu-Lughod, eds., *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory* (New York, 2007), 229–52. She states, "Death generates present absence and non-existence. It is something that lives on with its survivors. By death, I do not simply mean physical death, but the death of human relationships, the death of societal bonds, the death of meaning, the death of commonalities—in short, the death of humanity conceived of in concrete terms. … The village [Tantura] was destroyed and the site of memories disappeared. To understand survivors' memories of the massacre, of this very specific incident of death, one has to understand the partial death of human relationships that Palestinian society was subjected to following the 1948 war and the establishment of the State of Israel. It is this death, this absence that does not dissipate, that structures the survivors' ability to remember the tragedy of 1948. … The remaining inhabitants of Tantura are still surviving every day, so they endure the impossibility of a moment of therapeutic recovery. The Nakba, resulting in the death of human relationships, structured its lived aftermath, and its effects can never be overcome

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violence as filtered through the clinic as the "undialectizable remainder" within Fanon's thought, Marriott's intervention is unparalleled precisely because it introduces a philosophical dimension into our understanding of the psychosocial nature of the group.[25]

Marriott explores what he terms the *n'est pas*—a rupture or void in the subject.[26] Such a concept, Marriott asserts, emerges in 1958—at a moment of exile, crisis, and exposure to death for Fanon, a moment when the political dimensions of psychotherapy reach their apex and in which the mortified body and petrified speech of the colonized may be grasped in the *force de rupture* of torture.[27] By 1958, "the cure becomes more aporetic," moving away "from a specular disalienation [as in *Black Skin, White Masks*] to a more unnameable *n'est pas*," culminating in an understanding of the non-sovereignty and "the (non)-signifying place for *the one who is black*."[28] And here Marriott reminds us that the question of torture (but, of course, not just) illuminates the fact that disalienation was definitively *not* the objective of institutional or group psychotherapy, certainly in the colony, and that the so-called cure remained ever elusive, ever aporetic.[29]

As I have intimated, the question of the group remains one of the persistent aporias within psychoanalytic thought, despite the fact that prominent figures ranging from Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Reich to Herbert Marcuse to Wilfred Bion have attempted to think through the question of group dynamics (all in the aftermath of wartime, one might add) and to move beyond the simplistic conceptualizations of Gustave LeBon and William McDougall.[30] But it is with Fanon that we begin to truly approach an understanding of the constitution of the group as generated by colonial wretchedness in terms of an abyss or ontological void, or what Marriott terms the *n'est pas*.[31]

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in the therapeutic sense. David Lloyd makes a similar point about the postcolonial condition and argues that a nontherapeutic relation to the past, structured around the notion of survival or living-on rather than recovery, is what should guide our critique of modernity and ground a different mode of historicization." Ibid., 248.

[25]Azeen Khan, "The Subaltern Clinic," *boundary 2: an international journal of literature and culture* 46/4 (2019), 181–217, at 190; cf. Marriott, *Whither Fanon?*.

[26]Marriott, *Whither Fanon?*, 62. See also David Marriott, "Blackness: N'est pas?", *Propter Nos* 4 (2020), 27–51.

[27]Marriott, *Whither Fanon?*, 60–65.

[28]Ibid., 64–5, original emphasis.

[29]This paragraph is from Omnia El Shakry, "Colonialism and Postcolonial Theory: Race, Culture, and Religion in Psychosocial Studies," in Stephen Frosh, Marita Vyrgioti, and Julie Walsh, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Psychosocial Studies* (London: Palgrave and MacMillan, 2022), 307–30, at 315.

[30]References to group psychology are numerous and what follows is by no means an exhaustive list: Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 18, trans. James Strachey (London, 1981), 65–143; Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933), trans. Mary Boyd Higgins (New York, 1970); Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (1955) (Boston, 1966); Wilfred Bion, *Experiences in Groups and Other Papers* (1961) (New York, 2001).

[31]And yet, insofar as, Marriott observes, the wretched are the very "figure of a dislocation at the heart of modern sovereignty," so too do they embody the potential of an "anti-mimetic reinvention of social life,

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And while the larger literature on institutional psychotherapy's attempt to address modes of suffering through collective healing by reenvisaging the form and content of the mental hospital has surely been edifying, it is necessary to ponder the difference—what Françoise Vèrges terms "a difference with many consequences"—of colonial sites like Algeria and Palestine.[32] Arab studies is well situated to reconceptualize the nature of the group and of group life. This is so precisely because so many of the experiments of group life—both in their traumatism and in their collective resistant sociality, such as the Blida psychiatric hospital in Algeria and refugee camps in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan, but also Orthodox monastic communities in post-civil war Lebanon, and Tahrir Square during the 2011 uprising in Cairo—not to mention smaller-scale practices of communal storytelling, Qur'anic cures and other embodied practices such as spirit possession and exorcism—model *other ways* of imagining collectivity as an ethical and social way of living. As Samera Esmeir reminds us, the political project of Zionism itself seeks "to limit Palestinians solely to biological or physiological existence and we cannot use the same vocabulary at the core of the project itself." She directs us, instead, to the collective and resistant sociality of Palestinians on and enabled by the land, which is itself the target of the obliteration.[33]

What might the Arab region have to contribute to our rethinking of the question of the group, of the individual's relationship to the collectivity under colonial and postcolonial duress? How might ethical conceptions of relations between the self and other, derived from systems *outside* the purview of Western philosophy, psychiatry, and psychotherapy, shape the question of the group? If war psychiatry—whether the Great War of Bion or the Spanish Civil War and Second World War of Tosquelles—created different ways of theorizing the group, and of reconfiguring or dispensing with notions of "cure,"[34] then how can we conceive of ethics and the group as likewise transformed

an invention that challenges the language of neocolonial mimicry and its psychopolitical immiseration." Marriott, *Whither Fanon?*, 227, 147.

[32]Ibid., 47; Françoise Vergès, "To Cure and to Free: The Fanonian Project of 'Decolonized Psychiatry'," in Lewis R. Gordon, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Renée T. White, eds., *Fanon: A Critical Reader* (Cambridge, 1996), 85–100, at 87.

[33]Samera Esmeir, "Palestine: Between Obliteration and Struggle," presentation, New York University, New York, 17 April 2024, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=4H4Ug162yxw. See also Esmeir, "To Say and Think a Life beyond What Settler Colonialism Has Made," *Mada Masr*, 14 Oct. 2023, at www.madamasr.com/en/2023/10/14/opinion/u/to-say-and-think-a-life-beyond-what-settler-colonialism-has-made.

[34]There is more work to be done on the interrelations between psychoanalysis, psychiatry, and war, but see Jacques Lacan, "British Psychiatry and the War" (1947), trans. Philip Dravers and Veronique Voruz, *Psychoanalytical Notebooks of the London Circle* 4, *Psychiatry and Psychoanalysis* (2000), 9–34; Michael Roper, "Beyond Containing: World War I and the Psychoanalytic Theories of Wilfred Bion," in Sally Alexander and Barbara Taylor, eds., *History and Psyche: Culture, Psychoanalysis, and the Past* (New York, 2012), 129–47; Max Maher, "Post-World War II Group Psychology and the Limits of Leadership: Bion, Lacan and the Leaderless Group," *Psychoanalysis and History* 22/3 (2020), 317–39; Carolyn Laubender, *The Political Clinic: Psychoanalysis and Social Change in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2024). On Tosquelles see *Francesc Tosquelles: Avant-Garde Psychiatry and the Birth of Art Brut*, American Folk Art Museum, New York, 12 April 2024–18 Aug. 2024; and Camille Robcis, *Disalienation: Politics, Philosophy, and Radical Psychiatry in Postwar France* (Chicago, 2021), Ch. 1.

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under the hallucinatory conditions of colonial war? Pondering these questions will require a reconceptualization of forms of collective and group life, notions of repair and the irreparable, and styles of narration.

"What," Jalal Toufic says,

> have we as Arab thinkers, writers, filmmakers, video makers, painters, sculptors, musicians, and calligraphers lost after the seventeen years of Lebanese civil war; after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982; after the symptomatic *Anfāl* operation against the Iraqi Kurds; after the devastation of Iraq; and after [Ḥāfiẓ al-]Assad's regime's symptomatic brutal repression of Hama in 1982? We have lost. It is this ascertainment that is to hint to us what we have lost concretely. We have lost tradition. We are not resisting because we are, in a more or less abstract way, *mahroumin* (disinherited); rather, we know, despite all the lies, the semblance of normalcy, the *life goes on*, that we have lost—and hence that we are *mahroumin* in a concrete manner—because we are resisting.[35]

To be clear, Toufic does not pronounce the loss of all tradition—and clarifies that he is referring to the loss of one kind of tradition, while others may flourish; we may "encounter that other, uncanny tradition, the one secreted by the ruins in a labyrinthine time, often a time-lapsed one,"[36] or more dangerously, a counterfeit tradition.[37] With respect to a work of art withdrawn, for example, Toufic cannot allow the viewer to hear the soundtrack *Maqam Kurdi* by Munir Bachir in a video on the Lebanese war, but can only include it in the music credits.[38] As Pandolfo notes, "for only that absent-presence, that silence associated with a name, can make visible and heard the fundamental inability to experience, and hence to hear the voice of an artistic tradition that in the aftermath of collective violence remains suspended and cannot be passed on."[39]

[35]Toufic, *Over-Sensitivity*, 1st edn, 68–9; cf. Toufic, *Over-Sensitivity*, 2nd edn, 57–8.

[36]Toufic, *Over-Sensitivity*, 2nd edn, 200 n. 94. See also Jalal Toufic, "Ruins," in Fundació Antoni Tàpies, ed., *Tamáss, Contemporary Arab Representations, Beirut/Lebanon 1* (Barcelona, 2002), 19–25, on the labyrinthine time-space of the ruins in the context of cinema, as well as post-civil war Beirut. As Abourahme remarks, this is why the Israeli army has reinvaded north Gaza: "In the spring of 2024, the Israeli army re-invaded areas in the north of Gaza it had claimed it had cleared not because the resistance factions remained standing, but primarily because people insisted on returning to inhabit the ruins." Abourahme, "In Tune with Their Time," 18.

[37]Toufic, *Over-Sensitivity*, 2nd edn, 75: "And hence is, in the absence of the resurrection of what has been withdrawn by the surpassing disaster, rather the arena of the duel with the double and of the suspicion of usurpation by the counterfeit (prior to the Mahdī's/messiah's resurrection of tradition, there is the danger that his double, *al-Dajjāl*/the Antichrist, will be mistaken for him). Following the surpassing disaster, I am confronted with the counterfeit/double in one form or another: without the seemingly absurd attempt at resurrecting what for most people is extant and available, the succeeding generations will have received counterfeit tradition."

[38]Toufic, *Over-Sensitivity*, 1st edn, 69, 268 n. 64.

[39]Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul*, 176. Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition*, 16, elaborates: "Herzog's remake of Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) can be viewed not so much as a sound and color version of a silent film, but rather as an attempt to resurrect Murnau's film after its withdrawal following a surpassing disaster, the Nazi period."

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Here, let us ponder Toufic's statement that a subjective working through of traumatism "cannot be fully addressed by psychiatrists or psychoanalysts, but demands the resurrecting efforts of writers, artists, and thinkers." In such sites,

> traumatized survivors … seek psychiatric treatment to regain a cathexis of the world, including of tradition and culture in general. But that subjective working through cannot on its own succeed in remedying the withdrawal of tradition, for that withdrawal is not a subjective symptom, whether individual or collective, and therefore cannot be fully addressed by psychiatrists or psychoanalysts, but demands the resurrecting efforts of writers, artists, and thinkers. Without the latter's contribution, either the psychiatric treatment fails, or else though the patient may leave ostensibly healthy, he or she soon discovers that tradition, including art, is still withdrawn.[40]

But, as Toufic, notes, such "resurrection takes (*and gives*) time."[41] Thus, he states, "I have to do my best to physically preserve tradition, while knowing that what I will save physically from the surpassing disaster still needs to be resurrected—one of the limitations of history as a discipline is that the material persistence of the documents blinds it to the exigency of the resurrection."[42] Indeed, this is why the discipline of history has become *so profoundly* inadequate to the Herculean tasks of our present moment.

Scene II: artistic resurrection and its limits

Drawing on Sherene Seikaly's conception of Palestine as method and abundance, I want us to think through the ongoing surpassing disaster faced in Palestine as a "living together with the dead."[43] How might such a living together, as an "essential possibility of existence," move beyond enumeration and recitation, beyond even processes

[40]Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition*, 57; also cited in El Shakry, "The Work of Illness in the Aftermath of a 'Surpassing Disaster'," 107.

[41]Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition*, 14, original emphasis. Pending resurrection only absent presences can be shown, as in the discussion above of Munir Bachir appearing in the credits and not the soundtrack.

[42]Ibid., 15–16.

[43]On Palestine as paradigm and abundance see Sherene Seikaly, "Nakba in the Age of Catastrophe," *Jadaliyya*, 15 May 2023, at www.jadaliyya.com/Details/45037/Nakba-in-the-Age-of-Catastrophe. On "living together with the dead" see Seikaly, "Return to the Present," in Elisabeth Weber, ed., *Living Together: Jacques Derrida's Communities of Violence and Peace* (New York, 2013), 227–42, esp. 228, 231. Seikaly is responding to Jacques Derrida, "Avowing—The Impossible: 'Returns,' Repentance, and Reconciliation: A Lesson," trans. Gil Anidjar, in ibid., 18–42, at 20. Derrida uses the concept of "living together" with the dead, originally. However, he does so in a manner so exclusionary and un-Derridean that it must be read in order to be believed. I thus reference Seikaly's more nuanced conceptualization. Very briefly, Derrida implicitly juxtaposes the coherence and cohesion of Palestine/Palestinians in order to disaggregate a Jewish self which is not one (a wholeness divided within itself). By contrast, Seikaly's meditations demonstrate how she moves through the ruins of Haifa, Palestine, not as a problematic part of the Israeli "whole" but as the living *apartness* of Palestinians separated from each other by expulsion, displacement, and apartheid. I am grateful to participants in the Palestine: A Conceptual Grammar reading group for their shared insights on Seikaly's work and to Sherene Seikaly herself. For more on Derrida and Palestine see Olivia Harrison, *Transcolonial Maghreb: Imagining Palestine in the Era of Decolonization* (Stanford, 2015);

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of commemoration, to include supplication and poetic invention?[44] How might we engage with poetic forms as a mode of figuration and communication that allows for the ritual embalming of the dead, and of the unburied dead in particular, through words?

If, as Hans Ruin notes, "the act of burial is not just about laying to rest and storing away but rather the center and starting point for a complex set of practices, rituals, and traditions that continue to *care* for and to *be* with the dead, among which *writing* itself … constitutes an integral part,"[45] and if we take Palestine to be paradigmatic of the predicament of the unburied dead in the times of war and death[46]—those left behind in the rubble under the debris and detritus of colonial and postcolonial violence—then we might find recourse to literature as a mode of artistic resurrection and ritual embalming. Such a resurrection must be seen through the prism of a region that "believe[s] in the depth of the earth where massacres have taken place, and where so many have been inhumed without proper burial and still await their unearthing, and then proper burial and mourning."[47]

I came to understand the work of artistic resurrection through Assia Djebar's magisterial *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, which I first read sometime in the mid- to late 1990s and which I have taught—in history lectures and seminars, no less—every year since I began teaching in 2003. The novel is structured as a complex contrapuntal musical composition with a tripartite arrangement that alternates between the French conquest of Algeria in 1830 and the so-called pacification of tribes, autobiographical memories from the twentieth century when the author was a child, and the recounting of narratives of women and girls who fought in the Algerian War of Liberation between 1954 and 1962. Within the field of comparative literature, *Fantasia* has been productively analyzed in terms of Algerian national-language politics (Arabic, Tamazight,

Zahi Zalloua, *Continental Philosophy and the Palestinian Question: Beyond the Jew and the Greek* (London, 2017). For a discussion of Derrida's problematic replication of a binary division between Europe and Islam that upholds an exclusionary model of the nation-state see Ebrahim Moosa, "Going Rogue on Islam: Derrida's Muslim Hauntology and Nationalism's Specter," in Atalia Omer and Joshua Lupo, eds., *Religion, Populism, and Modernity: Confronting White Christian Nationalism and Racism* (Notre Dame, 2023), 108–22.

[44]On the "differentiated acts of counting the [Palestinian] dead" see Seikaly, "Return to the Present," 233–4; on the act of burial as a continuation of dispersal in death, see ibid., 236–7.

[45]Hans Ruin, *Being with the Dead: Burial, Ancestral Politics, and the Roots of Historical Consciousness* (Stanford, 2018), 165, original emphasis. Further, he notes, such writing helps bind a given community together: "the historical account is a kind of burial practice and burial ground" that "constitutes an extension of older practices of *keeping* the dead as also ways for a community and culture to hold themselves together and 'ground' themselves." Ibid., original emphasis.

[46]The case of Palestine moves us beyond the unburied dead to consider the carceral conquest of colonized dead bodies and spaces of death. See Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, "Criminality in Spaces of Death: The Palestinian Case Study," *British Journal of Criminology* 54/1 (2014), 38–52; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, "Necropenology: Conquering New Bodies, Psychics, and Territories of Death in East Jerusalem," *Identities* 27/3 (2020), 285–301; Noura Erekat and Rabea Eghbaria, "The Jurisprudence of Death: Palestinian Corpses and the Israeli Legal Process," *Jadaliyya*, 8 Feb. 2023, at www.jadaliyya.com/Details/44797.

[47]Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition*, 102–3, discusses "the issue and aesthetic of the archaeological image" in "zones that have suffered massacres and mass graves."

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and French); gender and sexuality; feminism and autobiography; historical exhumation and the rewriting of colonial history; haunting and cultural memory; silence, oppression, and rebellion; and the politics of subaltern testimony and acoustics.[48]

Here I want to turn our attention to Djebar's "haunting testimonial poetics,"[49] as an exemplar of mortuary antiphonic witnessing, or more precisely of antiphonic burial. In the conclusion of a chapter on "Plunder," Djebar free-associates in an oft-cited passage that her "oral tradition has gradually been overlaid and is in danger of vanishing," likening the writing of an autobiography using French words alone to lending oneself to the vivisector's scalpel; an unveiling, a stripping naked, one that recalls the colonial conquest and plunder of Algeria in the preceding century. But she ends with a remarkable observation, one that captures the notion of antiphonic burial: "When the body is not embalmed by ritual lamentations, it is like a scarecrow decked in rags and tatters. The battle-cries of our ancestors, unhorsed in long-forgotten combats, re-echo across the years; accompanied by the dirges of the mourning-women who watched them die."[50]

The anthropologist Nadia Seremetakis has detailed the "ethics of antiphony," referring to the polyphonic and contrapuntal lament performances of the women of Inner Mani not merely as aesthetic, acoustic, and dramaturgical, but, importantly, as a "social structure of mortuary ritual" and "a prescribed technique for witnessing, for the production/reception of jural discourse, and for the cultural construction of truth."[51] "The discourse of the mourner," she states, "is simultaneously a revelation, a disclosure, a witnessing, and an objectification of pain and suffering."[52] Intently attuned to the acoustics

[48]See, for example, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Acting Bits/Identity Talk," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1992), 770–803; Jarrod Hayes, *Queer Nations: Marginal Sexualities in the Maghreb* (Chicago, 2000), 182–97; Nancy von Rosk, "'Exhuming Buried Cries' in Assia Djebar's 'Fantasia'," *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 34/4 (2001), 65–84; Shaden Tageldin, "Which Qalam for Algeria? Colonialism, Liberation, and Language in Djebar's *L'amour, la fantasia* and Mustaghanimi's *Dhakirat al-Jasad*," *Comparative Literature Studies* 46/3 (2009), 467–97; Michael Allan, "Scattered Letters: Translingual Poetics in Assia Djebar's *L'Amour, la fantasia*," *Philological Encounters* 2/1–2 (2017), 180–98; Réda Bensmaïa, "*L'amour, La fantasia*, Or, How to (Re)Write Colonial History," in Rajeshwari S. Vallury, ed., *Theory, Aesthetics, and Politics in the Francophone World: Filiations Past and Future* (Lanham, 2019), 131–42; Hoda El Shakry, *The Literary Qur'an: Narrative Ethics in the Maghreb* (New York, 2019), 100–16; Jill Jarvis, *Decolonizing Memory: Algeria and the Politics of Testimony* (Durham, 2021), 1–25; Amirah Silmi, "Voice and Silence in Assia Djebar and Adania Shibli," *Critical Times* 6/1 (2023), 58–84.

[49]Jarvis, *Decolonizing Memory*, 20.

[50]Assia Djebar, *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, trans. Dorothy S. Blair (Portsmouth, NH, 1993) 157. See also Assia Djebar's missives to the dead in *Algerian White: A Narrative*, trans. David Kelley and Marjolijn de Jager (New York, 2003), which are neither "an account of death on the march in Algeria" nor a literary lament, but rather "an irresistible search for a liturgy." Ibid., 6. I am grateful to Benjamin Brower for the latter reference and for his careful reading of this essay on its own terms.

[51]Nadia Seremetakis, *The Last Word: Women, Death, and Divination in Inner Mani* (Chicago, 1991), 100; see also Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul*, 38: "Antiphony, Nadia Seremetakis tells us, is the back and forth of a lament, which 'hears' and 'speaks' on behalf and in the voice of the dead, creating reciprocity and connectedness for both the dead and the living." On the poetics and musicality of grief laments in a Lebanese village see Ali Jihad Racy, "Lebanese Laments: Grief, Music, and Cultural Values," *The World of Music* 28/2 (1986), 27–40. On the gendered contours of mourning see David Fieni, "Algerian Women and the Invention of Literary Mourning," *Dalhousie French Studies* 103 (2014), 55–67.

[52]Seremetakis, *The Last Word*, 105. See also Samaah Jaffer, "Yet Another Karbala: On Martyrdom, Witnessing, and the Impossibility of Mourning," Palestine as Method: Witness, Poetics, Political Economy,

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of death amongst her interlocutors, Serematakis provides us with clues as to how the group might communicate with the dead; we might draw parallels with what Jill Jarvis terms the sonic qualities of Djebar's text and how they reveal "an imbrication of the aesthetic and deadly."[53]

In a harrowing scene, based on an oral history, the young thirteen-year-old shepherd girl Cherifa, whom the villagers had accused of "behaving as if she were the fourth son in the family," has joined the partisans alongside her brother Ahmed. During a dramatic ambush, they start running away from the French soldiers when he falls in front of her. After hiding out, she returns to retrieve the body of her brother, to wash him, or at least sprinkle water over his face, having dragged the corpse as close as she can to a nearby stream.[54] A group of partisans, among whom is another one of her brothers, Abdelkader, watch on:

> *One prolonged, preliminary cry has escaped her. The child rises, her body an even brighter patch in the transparent air; her voice shrills out, stumbling over the first notes, like the shudder of a sail before it is hoisted on the foremast. Then the voice cautiously takes wing, the voice soars, gaining in strength, what voice? That of the mother who bore the soldiers' torture with never a whimper? That of the little cooped-up sisters, too young to understand, but bearing the message of wild-eyed anguish? The voice of the old women of the douar who face the horror of the approaching death-knell, open-mouthed, with palms of fleshless hands turned upwards? What irrepressible keening, what full-throated clamour, strident tremolo? … Is it the voice of the child whose hands are red with henna and a brother's blood?*
>
> *The partisans behind her fall back as one man with the spurting blood. They know what they must live with from now on: the rhythmic wailing of the spirits of unburied dead, the roar of invisible lionesses shot by no hunter … the discordant dirge of inarticulate revolt launches its arabesques into the blue.*
>
> *The lament swells in an upsurge of sound: glissandos passing into vibrato; a stream of emptiness hollows out the air. Barbed wires taut above invisible torments … Then the thirteen-year-old suddenly starts to her feet, impelled to sway to and fro, keeping time to the rhythm of her grief; the shepherd girl is initiated to the ritual circle. The first circle around the first one to die …*
>
> *The men stared down at her from the edge of the ravine: standing there throughout that cry that lurches like a pall dripping with blood and flapping in the sun. The dead man swathes himself in it, using it to retrieve his memory: noxious emanations, foetid gases, borboyrgmic rumblings. Suffusing him in the reverberating, stifling heat. The plangent chirring, the rhythm of the cadences swaddle his flesh to protect it from decay. Voice armoring the dead man on the ground, giving him back his eyes on the edge of the grave …*

symposium, Yale University, 25 April 2024; Ahmed Diab and Stefania Pandolfo, lectures and conversation, "Palestinian Literature and the Writing of Trauma," University of California, Berkeley, 16 April 2024, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4-chsIxZ4k.

[53] Jarvis, *Decolonizing Memory*, 19–20.

[54] Djebar, *Fantasia*, 117–21.

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…

Her name is Cherifa. When she tells her story, twenty years later, she mentions no interment nor any other form of burial for the brother lying in the river bed.[55]

Like the women mourners in Seremakis's ethnography, Djebar stives to shelter the Algerian unburied dead from a double death, what Seremakis terms a "naked death," in which one is left alone by death, without clan or "numbers." Djebar herself refers to Cherifa as a "*new Antigone, mourning for the adolescent lying on the grass, stroking the half-naked corpse with henna-stained hands*."[56] But such ethnographic and mythical parallels often reach their limits in times of colonial war and in the aftermath of colonialism.[57] By Djebar's own account, the dead are absent presences who seek to become witnesses,[58] and critics have found in her work "an ambivalent desire to suture and restore what has been mutilated and dismembered, as if to perform a resurrection or *an act of necromancy*."[59]

Necromancy—let us linger on the concept for a while. Michel de Certeau has famously viewed writing, and historical writing in particular, as a mode of appeasing the spirits of the dead. It is an exorcism that aims at "calming the dead" of historical consciousness while erecting a barrier between the living and the dead. If history writing represents an entombment of the dead within the sarcophagus of discourse and practices of writing, it may also be said to embody a dramaturgical view of the dead in which we, the living, are not immanently a part of the psychodrama ("gallery of history" is the term Certeau uses to describe this removed relation).[60] We might think of this as an extractive relation to both discourse and the dead—mobilized by the living to open up the space of the present to themselves.

In a very lengthy critique of Certeau, Hans Ruin accuses him of an excessive structuralist formalism and a "theoretical-anthropological bias" which posits a "strict separation between supposedly earlier (or contemporary) nonhistorical cultures of death and memory and a modern European Enlightenment-style historicism" as well as "a strict separation between an outside (the dead) and an inside (the living)."[61] Instead,

[55] Ibid., 123–4.

[56] Ibid., 122, original emphasis.

[57] For a critical meditation on this question see Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul*, 62–3.

[58] *Les morts qu'on croit absents se muent en témoins qui, à travers nous, désirent écrire. Écrire comment?*
The dead we believe to be absent become witnesses who, through us, want to write.
Write how?—Assia Djebar
Je ne demande rien: seulement qu'ils nous hantent encore … mais dans quelle langue?
I ask for nothing: only that they haunt us still, again … but in what language?
—Assia Djebar
Cited and translated in Jarvis, *Decolonizing Memory*, 168.

[59] Jarvis, *Decolonizing Memory*, 22, added emphasis. There are echoes here of Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12/2 (2008), 1–14, and Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York, 2007).

[60] Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York, 1988), 1–2, 99–102.

[61] Ruin, *Being with the Dead*, 163. For a reading of Certeau that emphasizes instead the generative incommensurability of psychoanalysis and history see Joan W. Scott, "The Incommensurability of Psychoanalysis and History," *History and Theory* 51/1 (2012), 63–83.

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Ruin suggests a "'spectral' or 'hauntological' approach on the basis of the existential-historical predicament of *being with* the dead."[62] This approach is a self-acknowledged "social ontology of being with the dead" or a "metacritical thanatology."[63] But it is unabashedly premised upon a series of philosophical abstractions, through Hegel, Heidegger, and Derrida, most notably, that purport to universality through the key figures of the Greek classical tradition (Antigone and Odysseus). This, of course, is a standard move within both European philosophy and intellectual history—even if Ruin's materialist ambition takes him to domains as varied as ancient Egypt and Native American repatriation disputes.[64]

I am deeply sympathetic to Ruin's philosophical project and the elegance and audacity with which he executes a transhistorical and transcultural account of being with the dead through the exemplary phenomenon of burial, but his driving query betrays a fundamental anxiety. "How," he states, "can we have a secular and non-superstitious account of the way that the dead are somehow still there, or at least of the way in which they are not simply nothing?" and not "reduce history to a culture of piety, remembrance, or duty toward a particular community and their dead."[65] Thus the universal relationship to being with the dead becomes a secular conception of death, which is precisely what Certeau was alerting us to by noting the Enlightenment tendency of dissociating the present from tradition and imposing a break between present and past.[66] Certeau does so all the while drawing on examples that "bear witness to another relation with time, or what amounts to the same thing, another relation with death."[67]

Such is the project of his two-volume *The Mystic Fable*, in which he "described the mystics' style of dwelling and creating among the ruins of a tradition as an art of connecting to the generative 'abundance of a source.'"[68] In Certeau's words, "We must understand that the origin that was sought [by the mystics] is not a dead past. At issue is the advent of a 'voice' that speaks today in its avatars, and that infuses with its force the actual words that are uttered in the present."[69] Such a tradition-centered

[62]Ruin, *Being with the Dead*, 163. See also Ethan Kleinberg, *Haunting History: For a Deconstructive Approach to the Past* (Stanford, 2017).

[63]Ruin, *Being with the Dead*, xii.

[64]In this rendition, however, colonialism is no longer a historical rupture, but merely the pretext for a few scattered references and footnotes despite engaging the contentious debates surrounding the repatriation of indigenous human remains.

[65]Ruin, *Being with the Dead*, 8, 5.

[66]Ruin critiques Certeau only by expunging the theological imagination which was so central to Certeau himself.

[67]Certeau, *Writing of History*, 4–5.

[68]Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, vol. 1, *The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago and London, 1992); Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, vol. 2, *The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago and London, 2015); quotation cited and translated in Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul*, 9.

[69]Certeau, *Mystic Fable*, vol. 1, cited and translated in Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul*, 9. On the idea of a discursive tradition which "links the dead to the living" see Talal Asad, *Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason* (New York, 2018), 92–3.

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approach, touching as it does on medieval European historical cultures, does not conceive of death or the dead as relegated to a distinct time-space, nor do the mystics "labor against death." At the same time, this is not an idealized vision of a historical moment in which the past was enchanted, and the living and the dead were simply one. In fact, Certeau's examples are instructive precisely because his historical protagonists inhabit the time of the ruins.

Attending to the group's relation to death as non-secular and theological, therefore, might help us theorize the varied modes of being with the dead, including the question of what it means to partake of a hollowed-out tradition, be it historical or religious, in situations of social dereliction and ontological destitution in the aftermath of war and catastrophe. Let us return, then, to Djebar. In a remarkable reflective piece titled "Anamnesis in the Language of Writing" she contemplates what it means "to write, to return to the body, or, at the very least, to the hand in motion."[70] Through a reflection on a matrilineal and female genealogy, Djebar contends with "not the past, but pre-memory, before the rising of the first dawn, before the night of nights, before …";[71] here, as in her semi-autobiographical novel, anamnesis signifies the remembrance of the past as communicated through embodied practices transmitted through women. We might liken it to a pre-originary space, a primal scene that centers not on the murder of the father, but on the bodily encounter with the mother, and a refusal to sacrifice the mother "to the origins of our culture."[72]

We might further shift from a neo-Platonic sense of anamnesis toward an understanding of the soul's memory of death and the dead not in abstract universalist terms, but in terms of the elaborate Islamic and Orthodox Christian discursive traditions of the remembrance of death. Here I am invoking the renowned medieval theologian, jurist, and mystic Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's *Dhikr al-mawt wa ma baʿdahu* (*Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife*), the fortieth book of his magnum opus *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, an exposition of and appeal to the recollection of death "and an encouragement to remember it abundantly."[73] Traversing the agonies and violence of death, the conditions of the grave, the true nature of death, and other such topics, its most interesting chapter is "On the States of the Dead which have been known through Unveiling [*mukashafa*] in Dreams."[74] Likewise, the first chapter of *Confession and Psychoanalysis* by Spiro Jabbour, a deacon of the orthodox Antiochian Church from Latakia, Syria, magnificently translated by Aaron Eldridge, "opens with the remembrance of death and its intimate relationship to birth."[75] For Jabbour, the spiritual "atom" that portends life is also a harbinger of death.

[70] Assia Djebar, "Anamnesis in the Language of Writing," *Studies in 20th Century Literature* 23/1 (1999), 179–89, at 179. Anamnesis is not being used here in a psychoanalytic sense.

[71] Ibid., 179.

[72] Djebar, "Anamnesis," 185–7, is referencing Luce Irigaray, "The Bodily Encounter with the Mother," trans. David Macey, in *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford, 1991), 34–46. On "preoriginary space" see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", In L. Grossberg and C. Nelson, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana, 1988), 271–313, at 297.

[73] Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife, Kitāb dhikr al-mawt wa ma baʿdahu*, Book XL of *The Revival of the Religious Sciences, Iḥyā' ʿulūm al-dīn*, trans. T. J. Winter (Cambridge, 1989).

[74] Ibid., Ch. 8.

[75] Spiro Jabbour, *Confession and Psychoanalysis*, trans. Aaron Eldridge (New York, forthcoming).

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Within this conceptualization, there is no question of simply being with the dead; rather life "is always already in the arc of its being-for-death."[76] As such, the contemporaneity of the living and the dead is exhibited in a multitude of ways—for instance, in the contemporary Egyptian tradition of writing and sending letters (sometimes via parcel post) written to the deceased Sunni jurist Imam al-Shafi'i (d. 820 AD) at his mausoleum complex in Cairo.[77] The dead are not ghosts (s. *shabah*, pl. *ashbah*) who haunt us in the present, but souls who coexist with and prefigure us.[78] "When you recall the departed," Ghazali exhorts us, "count yourself as one of them."[79]

If we were to be bold enough to be even more psychoanalytic about this, we might say that the remembrance of death is not just a remembrance of the death of the other, but a remembrance of our own death, a death which has already transpired, if only we could remember it. The British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott suggested as much shortly before his own death. In his brilliant paper "Fear of Breakdown" he analyzed clinical material which intimated that his patients who lived in fear of breakdown (a fear that was destroying their lives) had, in fact, already experienced it as part of the primitive agonies. Analogizing this to the fear of death, he says, "it is the death that happened but was not experienced that is sought. … Death, looked at in this way as something that happened to the patient but which the patient was not mature enough to experience, has the meaning of annihilation."[80] The analyst, then, must assist in the anamnesis.

Annihilation (*fana'*) is extensively theorized within the Sufi tradition, itself counted amongst the traditions with a most elaborated conception of death. But the experience of death need not occur solely in the rarefied experiences of the annihilation of the self in its union with God. Indeed, the quotidian realm of sleep and dreams might provide just such an avenue. Within Sufi cosmology, the passage from the Terrestrial and Visible realm to the realm of the Unseen and the Kingdom takes place principally upon one's

[76] As Eldridge notes in his introduction to ibid., "The remembrance of death, which in Jabbour's text strikingly precedes his remarks on the infant and birth, echoes Freud's theorization of a regressive drive toward the 'inorganic,' that is, a life that is always already in the arc of its being-for-death." For a resonant discussion of the fungibility of the border between life and death see Basit Kareem Iqbal and Rajbir Singh Judge, "The Destruction of Loss: An Introduction," *Critical Times* 6/3 (2023), 151–66.

[77] As Mulder remarks, "Perhaps the best index of Egyptian devotion to the Imam is to be found in the thousands of letters that are continually deposited in the grille around his cenotaph and even mailed through the regular post, often simply addressed to 'Imam al-Shafi'i, Cairo.' In the 1970s these letters were the subject of a sociological study: see Sayyid 'Uways, *Rasā'il ilā al-Imām al-Shāfi'ī* … (Cairo, 1978). Stephennie Mulder, "The Mausoleum of Imam al-Shafi'i," *Muqarnas* 23 (2006), 15–46, at 42 n. 11.

[78] At this point, I hope the distinction between my approach and that of Jacques Derrida and the proponents of "hauntology" is clear.

[79] Said Abu'l–Darda, cited in Ghazālī, *The Remembrance of Death*, 14.

[80] D. W. Winnicott, "Fear of Breakdown," *International Review of Psycho-analysis* 1 (1974), 103–7, at 106. Winnicott states the matter simply, "that the breakdown, a fear of which destroys his or her life, has already been." Ibid., 104. "Again, it is the death that happened but was not experienced that is sought. When Keats was 'half in love with easeful death' he was, according to the idea that I am putting forward here, longing for the ease that would come if he could 'remember' having died; but to remember he must experience death now. … Death, looked at in this way as something that happened to the patient but which the patient was not mature enough to experience, has the meaning of annihilation." Ibid., 106.

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death.[81] However, sleep weakens the attachment to the Terrestrial and Visible realm, allowing a partial passage to the realm of the Unseen, or *al-ghayb*.[82] As Ghazali notes, "dreams, and the knowledge of the Unseen through sleep, are among the marvels of God's works (Exalted is He!) and the wonders of the primordial disposition [*fitra*] of man,"[83] as we see in this Qur'anic passage:

> And We have made your sleep [a symbol of] death
>
> and made the night [its] cloak
>
> and made the day [a symbol of] life. (Qur'an 78:9–11)

In our encounter with the dead across time and space, we could be said to inhabit the space of the *barzakh*—a liminal zone or an isthmus. Such an isthmus was conceptualized by the medieval mystic Ibn ʿArabi (1165–1240) as a space between the existent and the nonexistent, the known and the unknown, "which is neither the one nor the other but which possesses the power (*quwwa*) of both."[84] Separating the living and the dead, death and resurrection, the corporeal and the spiritual, the *barzakh* is the domain of the imagination and the imaginal world. Humans partake of this imaginal world, and it is most manifest in the realm of sleep and the dream, an imaginal realm of being known as the lesser death.[85]

Writing history, I humbly contend, may be conceptualized as just such a realm of the lesser death, in which a communication with the *beyond* of life takes place. Elsewhere I have explored these concepts in terms legible to Western historians through the minor traditions of modern historiography in which the ethico-theological implications of writing history have been emphasized and connected to the critique of historicism. I trace a line of thought from Walter Benjamin through Karl Löwith's assessment of the

[81] "Upon his death, a man passes from the Terrestrial and Visible Realm [*ʿālam al-mulk wa'l-shahāda*] to the Realm of the Unseen and the Kingdom [*ʿālam al-ghayb wa'l-malakūt*], and is no longer to be held with the physical eye, but rather with an eye which is apart. … For as long as one is awake one is occupied by the senses' reports about the Terrestrial and Visible Realm, and this composes the veil between one and the Kingdom. Sleep, which signifies the quieting of the senses so that they convey nothing to the heart, and whereby it is rendered secure from them and from the imagination, allows the veil which lies between it and the Well-guarded Tablet to be raised." Ghazālī, *The Remembrance of Death*, 149–50, 152–3.

[82] *Al-ghayb*—the unknowable, the unseen, the unthought, the hidden mystery—exceeds the domain of knowledge. Within the Islamic religious sciences, *al-ghayb* is a somewhat technical term referring to that which is inaccessible to human knowledge, both to reason and the senses, and hidden in the divine. In the Qur'an, God alone "knows the unseen [*al-ghayb*]," disclosing it to no one. See D. B. MacDonald and L. Gardet, "al-Ghayb," in P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W. P. Heinrichs, eds., *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn, online at http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0231 (accessed 20 Dec. 2021).

[83] "They constitute one of the clearest indications of the Kingdom, yet of this mankind is heedless, just as it is heedless of the other marvels of the heart and of the world [*ʿālam*]." Ghazālī, *The Remembrance of Death*, 151.

[84] Translated by William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, 1989), 118.

[85] William Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-ʿArabi's Cosmology* (Albany, 1998), 338–9.

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eschatological orientation of modern history as resonant with the ethical orientation of psychoanalysis.[86]

But perhaps there is no better example of trying to approach the *barzakh* in writing history than Assia Djebar's *Fantasia*.[87] The overarching epistolary structure of the novel—the love letters written by her cloistered cousins to the far-flung corners of the Arab world; her father, who "dares write to her mother," the secret missive from her lover, twice purloined—all find a parallel in the entire novel once it is perceived as a love letter to the Algerian dead. With Djebar, the dead are not spectral apparitions, but inhabit the *barzakh*, or the liminal space between life and death, a place the living may travel to, if only they would allow themselves the necromantic reverie.

Scene III: poetry, or the calligraphy of invention

I turn now, briefly, to Haytham El Wardany's book of experimental prose *The Book of Sleep*, written in Egypt in the spring of 2013 and published in Arabic in 2017.[88] The interim saw a counterrevolutionary coup and the mass killing of over a thousand protestors in a single day on 14 August 2013.

In *The Book of Sleep*, El Wardany queries three times, as if in an incantation, "*Who is the Sleeper?* A limb severed from the whole? A single self? A small group at rest?"[89] In the third, and final, iteration:

[86]See El Shakry, "History and the Lesser Death." Jacques Lacan proposed an experimental orientation toward the Last Judgment, conceiving ethics as "the relationship between action and the desire that inhabits it." Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York, 1992), 313. Such an ethical encounter could only be thought through in relation to the Last Judgment and it stood in explicit contrast to any notion of ethics structured by commonplace understandings of the Good, thus the question, "Have you acted in conformity with the desire that is in you?" Ibid., 314. I am inspired here by conversations with Stefania Pandolfo and by her work which engages the nature of such an *experimentum mentis* in greater detail in "Divine Trial and Experimentum Mentis: The Psychoanalyst, the Imam, and the Ordeal of Madness," *Psychoanalysis and History* 20/3 (2018), 293–311. History writing, in its current iteration, is faltering, having abdicated its ethical obligations to the dead, whether due to a naive positivism and/or an ardent historicism believed to be a bulwark against all ills—be they metaphysical mysticism or orientalism or genocide.

[87]Michael F. O'Riley, in reference to a different text of Djebar's, notes that her "text complicates Michel de Certeau's identification of the sepulchral act in the writing of history … through a refusal of the burial site and the conventional place of the dead that underpins the writing of history. … Djebar's text does indeed use narrativity as a means 'of establishing a place for the living,' but only through a critique of the possessive act of burial that engenders claims to History and its ghosts." Michael F. O'Riley, "Place, Position, and Postcolonial Haunting in Assia Djebar's 'La femme sans sépulture'," *Research in African Literatures* 35/1 (2004), 66–86, at 83–4, n. 12.

[88]Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul*, 9: "Certeau traced oral calligraphies of invention at a time of political and cultural crisis, and on the ruins of symbolic forms, exploring the possibility of transmission for a tradition uprooted from its system of reference." Here I consider poetry, similarly, as an oral calligraphy of invention at a time of crisis and I am motivated by a recurrent question and observation—why are we all reading poetry in the protests and encampments? See also Mahmoud Darwish and Muin Bseiso, "Poetry in the Face of History: Letter to an Israeli Soldier," trans. Ahdaf Soueif, Introduction by Esmat Elhalaby, *Mada Masr*, 6 Oct. 2024, at https://www.madamasr.com/en/2024/10/06/feature/politics/poetry-in-the-face-of-history-letter-to-an-israeli-soldier.

[89]Haytham El Wardany, *The Book of Sleep*, trans. Robin Moger (London, New York, and Calcutta, 2020), 62–5, original emphasis.

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Who is the Sleeper?

> A limb severed from the whole? A single self? A small group at rest? At the heart of every group is a wound which will not heal, its pain renewed each time some part of it falls away. Yet always the group will take the side of what remains visible, will privilege the living over the dead and place its hope in the future: the hope that the wound will heal with time. The group sees in itself a history of renewal and development, averting its gaze from a parallel history of loss and disconnection. But sleep does not look away; it turns to face this parallel history head on and, impelled by the catastrophe of loss, is drawn to what is visible no longer. The eye of the sleeper is fixed on the departed; all he sees of the community to which he belongs is the absent part, the crack and breaks which spread and widen day after day. The group to which the sleeper belongs is a lost group, marching towards the open wound. It is not cohesion that holds them together, nor looking forward, but a weakness, a looking backward. Sleep does not seek to bring ease to this wound buried in the heart of every group. It wants only to approach it.[90]

Here we see, most clearly, the way in which the group is constituted as a social body that traverses the living and the dead through sleep and dreams. Earlier El Wardany states that

> [w]hat the state of sleep proposes is that there is no individual as distinct from a group, and no group made up of individuals. There are only groups. There are big groups and little groups, human groups regulated by authority, groups which humans share with the dead, and trees. Through the act of sleep, which brings the self out of itself, the sleeper becomes a small, permanently open community, a group without a fixed centre.[91]

When we sleep, we are closer to the group and to the dead, and therefore also to the wound which lay at the heart of the constitution of each and every group. Within this framework, the dream is the space in which the sleeper is propelled and in which their body becomes open to others, the group, in particular.[92]

One of the historical actors in my current book project is a scholar by the name of Sami-Ali (b. 1925), the Arabic translator of Sigmund Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, author of a large body of original psychoanalytic writings, and translator of the poetry of the great Sufi shaykhs. It is significant that Sami-Ali introduced, translated, and personally calligraphed a collection of Sufi poetry by the great Shaykh Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj (d. 922)—Hallaj is especially resonant as the exemplar of a mystical excess that surpasses the unsurpassable in reaching for Truth, but also

[90] Ibid., 65.

[91] Ibid., 63–4. "And here, even if it never ends up joining the ranks of a large group, the individual is no abstract mathematical coordinate but a single group astir, in a state of action."

[92] Ibid., 62. On sleep and dreams in the context of the Palestinian right of return see Adam Hajyahia, "The Principle of Return: The Repressed Ruptures of Zionist Time," *Parapraxis*, special issue, *From the River to the Sea*, Nov. 2024, at www.parapraxismagazine.com/articles/the-principle-of-return.

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for bearing the wounds of the martyr and representing the finitude of death alongside resurrection and transfiguration.

Sami-Ali has theorized the space that I have been attempting to describe here through experimental prose, as the imaginary. For Sami-Ali the imaginary was coextensive with subjectivity itself and was more complex than phenomenological theories and more expansive than the restricted category of the imaginary within most psychoanalytic theories.[93] Within Sami-Ali's thought, the imaginary, as the embodiment of psychic life, centers on the dream world—believed to be at the core of human existence—as well as the equivalents of dreaming in waking life—phantasm, reverie, illusion, delirium, hallucination, play, belief, magical thinking, and so forth.[94] The dream world operates through projection and is itself the template for reality; "reality seems to prolong a dream that is, in turn, a reflection."[95]

Within this conceptualization, poetry is the quintessential embodiment of the space of the imaginary, representing the meeting point of the visible and the invisible, identity and difference, same and other. Poetry is supremely non-dialectical; it is beyond affirmation and negation. Rather than a totality that synthesizes opposites, it is a totality aimed from the outset at simultaneously grasping contradictory elements, all said in a single breath. It is akin to an instantaneous act that reiterates the semantic oscillation of words with opposite meanings. Everything approaches and recedes, surfaces and sinks, and everything is uttered in the same inspiration.[96]

Metaphorically, there are several ways to imagine this relation between the inside and the outside: as calligraphic letter and sign/signification, reflecting surface and reflected light, and point and circle circumference.[97] Each poem is a reflecting surface and reflected light: an epiphany of the Unique manifested in verse form:

> God makes all the ecstasies of Truth's ecstatic states,
> though great intellects fall short of these.[98]

For Sami-Ali, poetic knowledge represents the mystical intuition of the vision of the heart. Such knowledge operates not through processes of symbolization, but rather through allusions and signs (*isharat*) that combine the verbal and the visual. That which is said in poetry (*le dit poétique*) must be surpassed, transcending towards something unsurpassable. Sami-Ali refers to this as a tropism—an allusive sign reaching towards

[93]For more on Sami-Ali see Omnia El Shakry, "Psychoanalysis and the Imaginary: Translating Freud in Postcolonial Egypt," *Psychoanalysis and History* 20/3 (2018), 313–35.

[94]Sami-Ali, *De la projection: une étude psychanalytique* (Paris, 1970), xvi.

[95]Ibid., 211.

[96]Sami-Ali, "La Poétique de Hallaj," in Hussein Mansour al-Hallaj, *Poèmes mystiques*, calligraphie, traduction de l'arabe et présentation de Sami-Ali (Paris, 1988), 17–18. On poetic knowledge in Aimé Césaire as overcoming antinomies through *dépassement* see Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham, 2015), Ch. 2.

[97]Sami-Ali, "La Poétique de Hallaj."

[98]Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj, *Hallaj: Poems of a Sufi Martyr*, trans. from the Arabic by Carl W. Ernst (Evanston, 2018), 116.

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the sun which remains on the horizon that strangely echoes Wittgenstein's remark: "There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical."[99]

As such, the allusion is not a symbol but a reality which, having become knowledge, presages Being; it is akin to the martyred Sufi mystic Hallaj's "out-of-reach sun" toward which mystical knowledge turns (poem: "O my friend! The sun is here! Her light is near, but she is distant to reach").[100] This heliotropism or tending towards mystical knowledge will entail a transfiguration, simultaneously an annihilation and a union, one that founds mystical knowledge as much as it does poetic inspiration. Poetry is at one with the mystical, states Sami-Ali, insofar as "poetry speaks the unspeakable," here referencing Octavio Paz.[101] It is a tending toward both life and death, creativity and annihilation, an unresolvable spiritual struggle.

In what follows, I draw on Sami-Ali's theory of Arabic poetics within his theological understanding of the imagination, as one in which poetic utterance is an expression of an ecstatic state (*hala*), itself a sign and revelation of Being and a mode of witness and testimony (*shahada*).[102]

Poetry, or the right to life before death

"Is there life before death?" asks a graffiti artist in 1980s Belfast.[103] Such might be the question on all our minds as we bear witness to the relentless bombardment and siege of Gaza, the evisceration of Palestinian life worlds and the widescale destruction of institutions of learning and creativity, the bombing of places of worship and places of healing, and the catastrophic scale of death and dismemberment.

If, for Sami-Ali, the calligraphy of invention entails a permanent heliotropism towards an out-of-reach sun, then for the supreme poet of our catastrophic times, Etel Adnan, the poetic sublime embodies another kind of heliotropism. Her 1980 magnum opus *The Arab Apocalypse* is widely heralded as an exemplar of experimental poetry,

[99] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, section 6.522, trans. C. K. Ogden with F. P. Ramsey (London, 1922), original emphasis, cited in Sami-Ali, "La Poétique de Hallaj," 13–14.

[100] Sami-Ali, "La Poétique de Hallaj," 14; al-Hallaj, *Poèmes mystiques*, 57.

[101] Sami-Ali, "La Poétique de Hallaj," 21–2.

[102] Ibid., 18–19. See also Rajbir Singh Judge, who "in order to cultivate a disruption and reception against the ends central to historicization and universalization … center[s] poetic thinking or a poetics beyond the human." Rajbir Singh Judge, "Birha: Approaching a Poetics beyond the Human," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 42/3 (2022), 603–19, at 606. On Arabic poetry, literature, and art as exceeding the logics of colonial epistemes and state forms, I learn from Jeffrey Sacks's remarkable body of writing. See, for example, Jeffrey Sacks, "Lafẓ: Language Praxis," *PMLA* 139/1 (2024), 120–27; Sacks, "'The Visual Poetry of the Work': Critique, Form, and Life in the Art of Mona Hatoum and the Language of Theodor Adorno," *Critical Times* 6/1 (2023), 114–42; Sacks, "One: Poetic Love in Ibn 'Arabī," in Matthew J. Smith and Caleb D. Spencer, eds., *Literature and Religious Experience* (London, 2022), 193–208; Sacks, "The Philological Thesis: Language without Ends," *boundary 2*, 48/1 (2021), 65–107; and Sacks, "The Politics of Death and the Question of Palestine," *Comparative Literature* 71/4 (2019), 357–80.

[103] Jalal Toufic, *'Āshūrā': This Blood Spilled in my Veins* (Forthcoming Books, 2005), 63. On Frantz Fanon, poetry (especially that of Aimé Césaire), black social death, and the abyssal non-foundationalism of negritude, see Marriott, *Whither Fanon?*, 314–63. He states, "This is why, I maintain, one needs to enquire whether the abyssal is subtly graspable as a representation that dramatizes itself by making poetry out of black social death. Hence, anyone desirous of understanding Fanon's relation to negritude must go towards these abysses, if only to seek out what remains buried in their depths." Ibid., 320.

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or alternately, and far more metaphysically in the words of Toufic, as a work of resurrection amidst the withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster.[104] Composed from the time-space of diaspora—a position of extraterritorial vision—it is a text that could not be understood in its time, that had to wait for its time to be invented amidst the seemingly infinite proliferation of the disappeared and the vanquished.[105] *The Arab Apocalypse* seems to me to best embody El Wardany's discussion of a form of life that "does not seek to bring ease to this wound buried in the heart of every group. It wants only to approach it."[106] How better to approach this wound than through hallucinatory poetic reverie?

In her poem, we see that the sun functions as a contranymic cipher or glyph. The sun both appears and disappears; it is scorching and a shroud. It is a tending towards the sun of the apocalypse and a fiery death, and a tending towards the night of resurrection and eternal life.[107] The sun is a paradise towards which the refugee is walking, a paradise that ends in fire, that incarnates in flesh, that liquefies brains.[108] A bloodstained sun that presides over prisons.[109] And so too the sun appears as a camera, recording the massacre of Tal al-Za'atar for the archives.[110] This sun, born from antimatter in the face of the *fida'i*'s stillborn cause,[111] has no purpose other than being a shroud to commemorate or to remember Palestinian death.[112]

[104]Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition*, pp. 78–80. See also Sonja Mejcher-Atassi, *Reading across Modern Arabic Literature and Art* (Wiesbaden, 2012); and Jeffrey Sacks, "Against Simplicity: The Languages of Pain in Talal Asad and Etel Adnan," *MLN* 133 (2018), 1306–39. On Palestinian cultural production (including diasporic art) and the disruption of the chronopolitics of settler occupation see Hoda El Shakry, "Palestine and the Aesthetics of the Future Impossible," *Interventions* 23/5 (2021), 669–90.

[105]One might ask whether the diaspora acts as the Greek chorus. See Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition*, 12–14, on the relation between the diaspora and "pre-surpassing-disaster art, literature, music, and thought." Pandolfo elaborates on a similar point with respect to the exilic work of Etel Adnan and the figure of the condor as providing a distant position of vision. Stefania Pandolfo, "Etel Adnan, a Memorial Tribute" (Medicine for Nightmares, San Francisco, 14 May 2022), at https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/poetrycenter/bundles/239297.

[106]El Wardany, *The Book of Sleep*, 65.

[107]Etel Adnan, *The Arab Apocalypse* (Berkeley, 2020), LIX, 78. There are fifty-nine pages of poetry (each corresponding to a Roman numeral) in the poem. Mona Takieddine Amyuni recounts, "In a meeting with my students at the American University of Beirut on December 14, 2000, the Lebanese-American poet Etel Adnan told us that she began writing her long, prophetic poem 'The Arab Apocalypse' (The Post-Apollo Press, 1989) in January 1975 in Beirut, two months before the outbreak of the Lebanese War (1975–1990). 'Then, the war took the poem over,' said Adnan, and she added: 'The war wrote this poem. I started with tensions and rhythms and later wrote 59 pages corresponding to the 59 days of the Tal-el-Zaatar (a Palestinian camp in the outskirts of Beirut, destroyed by the Lebanese Forces in 1976) siege and destruction." Mona Takieddine Amyuni, "Etel Adnan's 'THE ARAB APOCALYPSE'," *Al Jadid Magazine*, 7/34 (2001), at https://aljadid.com/content/etel-adnan's-'-arab-apocalypse'.

[108]Adnan, *Arab Apocalypse*, XVI, 35; XXXVIII, 57.

[109]Ibid., XXXVIII, 57.

[110]Ibid., XL, 59.

[111]Ibid., XXXIX, 58.

[112]Ibid., XXXVIII, 57. On Adnan and death see Sacks, "Against Simplicity." See also his discussion of Mahmoud Darwish: "politics, in the late lyric poems, becomes a question of form. And form occurs as a relation to loss and death—as a relation of the poem to something else, as the poem's becoming something other than what it is and as its declining to belong solely to the present—in the persisting devastation of our shared and divided time." Jeffrey Sacks, *Iterations of Loss: Mutilation and Aesthetic Form, Al-Shidyaq*

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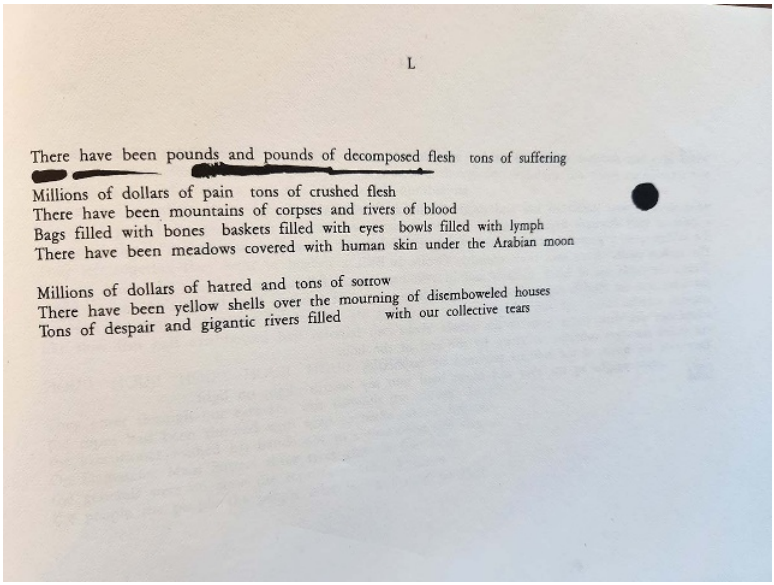
L from The Arab Apocalypse


L

There have been pounds and pounds of decomposed flesh tons of suffering

Millions of dollars of pain tons of crushed flesh
There have been mountains of corpses and rivers of blood
Bags filled with bones baskets filled with eyes bowls filled with lymph
There have been meadows covered with human skin under the Arabian moon

Millions of dollars of hatred and tons of sorrow
There have been yellow shells over the mourning of disemboweled houses
Tons of despair and gigantic rivers filled with our collective tears

There have been pounds and pounds of decomposed flesh tons of suffering

Millions of dollars of pain tons of crushed flesh
There have been mountains of corpses and rivers of blood
Bags filled with bones baskets filled with eyes bowls filled with lymph
There have been meadows covered with human skin under the Arabian moon

Millions of dollars of hatred and tons of sorrow
There have been yellow shells over the mourning of disemboweled houses
Tons of despair and gigantic rivers filled with our collective tears[113]

But then, Etel Adnan writes, through a miraculous transmogrification, the sun, burning itself up in an apocalyptic passionate rage, born of antimatter, becomes the matter-spirit of the night of eternal love.

to Darwish (New York, 2015), 33. There is a large literature on modern Arabic poetry and the Question of Palestine. For examples see Hussein Kadhim, *The Poetics of Anti-colonialism in the Arabic Qaṣīdah* (Leiden, 2004), especially Ch. 5, in which he relates the "central cause" of Palestine to Abd al-Wahhab al-Bayati's "Odes to Jaffa," as situated at the interface of the classical Arabic *qasida* (with its requisite themes of despair, loss, and melancholy, but also resolve and boastfulness) and the cycle of death and resurrection in Near Eastern mythology. See also Nouri Gana, *Melancholy Acts: Defeat and Cultural Critique in the Arab World* (New York, 2023), Ch. 2: "Perhaps poetry after Auschwitz—perhaps poetry after *al-nakba*, after *al-naqsa*, after Iraq, after every massacre and after every genocide—is no more than a melancholy rehearsal or compensatory act of what could have been done or undone." Ibid., 121. Anthropologist Khaled Furani theorizes the secularization of form, on the one hand, and submission to meter, on the other, and their respective relation to rhythmical freedom and political dissent within the Palestinian poetic tradition. See Khaled Furani, *Silencing the Sea: Secular Rhythms in Palestinian Poetry* (Stanford, 2012); and Furani, "Mastering Submission: Palestinian Poets Measuring Sounds of 'Freedom,'" *American Anthropologist* 120/4 (2018), 697–710.

[113] Adnan, *Arab Apocalypse*, L, 69.

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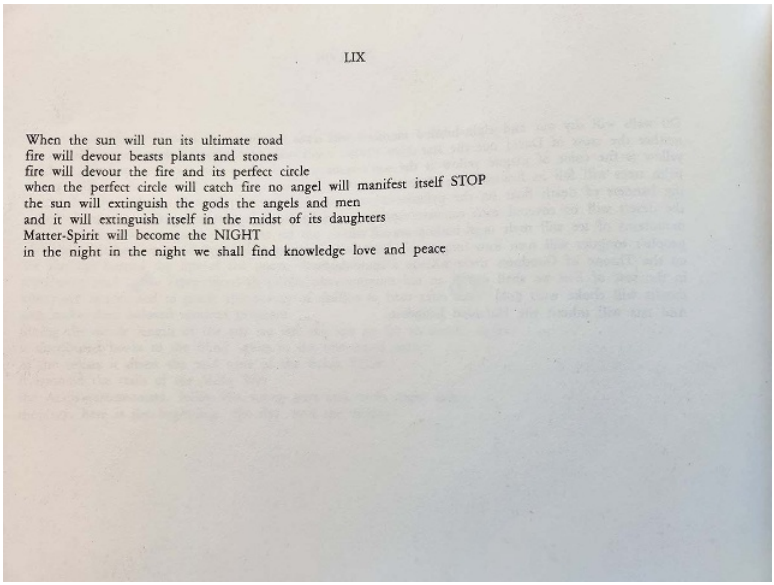
***LIX from* The Arab Apocalypse**



LIX

When the sun will run its ultimate road
fire will devour beasts plants and stones
fire will devour the fire and its perfect circle
when the perfect circle will catch fire no angel will manifest itself STOP
the sun will extinguish the gods the angels and men
and it will extinguish itself in the midst of its daughters
Matter-Spirit will become the NIGHT
in the night in the night we shall find knowledge love and peace

When the sun will run its ultimate road
fire will devour beasts plants and stones
fire will devour the fire and its perfect circle
when the perfect circle will catch fire no angel will manifest itself STOP
the sun will extinguish the gods the angels and men
and it will extinguish itself in the midst of its daughters
Matter-Spirit will become the NIGHT
in the night in the night we shall find knowledge love and peace[114]

Adnan's recourse to nonhuman time—the time of the sun and its extinguishment—as the perspective from which to understand both the catastrophe and the possibility of resurrection might be understood as a disclosure of divine witnessing.[115]

In another elegy for the dead, and two of her final poems, the Palestinian poet and novelist Heba Abu Nada, killed by an Israeli airstrike in Khan Yunis, Gaza on 20 October, swathes the departed in her poetry, well aware that she will soon be one of them.[116] Abu Nada envelops the "spirits of unburied dead" "keeping time to the rhythm of her grief"—a rhythmic lament that can "swaddle … flesh," "protect[ing] it from

[114]Ibid., LIX, 78.

[115]I thank Lamia Moghnieh for this insight and for pushing me to clarify this point. See Pandolfo, "Etel Adnan, a Memorial Tribute"; Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul*, 245.

[116]Abu Nada, educated at the Islamic University, Gaza, and Al-Azhar University, Gaza, was awarded the Sharjah Award for Arab Creativity for her novel, *Oxygen Is Not for the Dead*. See Dan Sheehan, "Read the Last Words of Writer Heba Abu Nada, Who Was Killed Last Week by an Israeli airstrike," 24 Oct. 2023, at https://lithub.com/read-the-last-words-of-writer-heba-abu-nada-who-was-killed-last-week-by-an-israeli-airstrike.

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decay,"[117] expanding and illuminating the grave of the *barzakh* or isthmus between this world and the next.[118] In the fifth and final stanza of her 10 October poem, "I Grant You Refuge," beautifully translated by Huda Fakhreddine, she writes,

> I grant you refuge
> from hurt and suffering.
>
> With words of sacred scripture
> I shield the oranges from the sting of phosphorous
> and the shades of cloud from the smog.
>
> I grant you refuge in knowing
> that the dust will clear,
> and they who fell in love and died together
> will one day laugh.[119]

With ṣumud she imagines her own death, alongside that of the little ones upon whom she poetically bestows a "a death as beautiful as they are," in an angle of lucidity that can only come from the contemplation of one's own disappearance.[120]

And yet such a disappearance is redolent with the knowledge that "amidst the ruins, a new city emerges."[121] Such an emergence is located, in the words of Palestinian artists Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abourahme, in the fault lines, the trace, the shadows that remain, the buried echo:

[117] Djebar, *Fantasia*, 123.

[118] The condition of colonial war raises the question whether or not the collectivity has access to "the chronal refuge" necessary for mourning. AbdalJawad Omar argues that "Palestinian resistances, in their different modes of articulations and manifestations, fight for the commencement of the process of 'mourning' in attempt to regain the 'right to mourn.'" On the politicization and depoliticization of mourning in the context of Palestine see AbdalJawad Omar, "Can the Palestinian Mourn?" *Rusted Radishes*, 14 Dec. 2023, at www.rustedradishes.com/can–the–palestinian–mourn. Likewise, Nasser Abourhame argues that the "Palestinian political community … has always—out of sheer necessity but with political effects—hinged on its capacity to turn grief into defiance." Abourahme, "In Tune with Their Time," 18. Here I attend not to mourning and melancholia, but to the ethical and theological contours of poetry as a mode of ritual embalming that illumines the grave in the *barzakh*.

[119] See https://proteanmag.com/2023/11/03/i-grant-you-refuge. On language, Qur'anic illumination, and bereavement with respect to Darwish's poem "Hibr al-ghurab" (The Raven's Ink) see Sacks, *Iterations of Loss*, 29–30.

[120] On ṣumud see Lena Meari, "*Sumud*: A Palestinian Philosophy of Confrontation in Colonial Prisons," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 113/3 (2014), 547–78. On disappearance, Pandolfo states, "for Lacan, remaining mindful of the pole of desire is also, necessarily, a matter of encountering the limit, risking to venture beyond the economy of self-preservation, where an angle of visibility can be attained from the living contemplation of one's own disappearance." Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul*, 132.

[121] According to poet and writer Anthony Anaxagorou these were Abu Nada's last words, penned just before her death: "We find ourselves in an indescribable state of bliss amidst the chaos. Amidst the ruins, a new city emerges—a testament to our resilience. Cries of pain echo through the air, mingling with the blood-stained garments of doctors. Teachers, despite their grievances, embrace their little pupils, while families display unwavering strength in the face of adversity." See https://lithub.com/read-the-last-words-of-writer-heba-abu-nada-who-was-killed-last-week-by-an-israeli-airstrike.

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To dig in the earth
To dig with your hands
To go under
into earth
to become the land[122]

The land will testify, bearing witness to resistant sociality in its infinite mutations.[123]

* * *

If this lecture has turned to theology and poetry, it is not only as provocations to the discipline of history, but also because they embody modes of collective sociality that exceed the violent logics of colonial epistemes and modern state forms.[124] Here I am reminded of Talal Asad's prescient distinction between disaster time and the time of learning to face disaster:

> But anticipating the probability of disaster is not the same as understanding its moral significance. Disaster time is not the time of learning to face disaster; that is one major reason why ritual time and the time of discursive tradition (both of them times of learning) may be undermined, and why that undermining is itself an aspect of the great disaster.[125]

In these times of infinite war and death, as we struggle to grasp the ethical significance of catastrophe, theology and poetry may offer avenues, among others, from which to learn how to encircle the inherent unknowability of the disaster.

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[122]Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, *Until We Became Fire and Fire Us*, 2023–, "Nebula," 2024, installation view, Complesso dell'ospedaletto, Venice, Italy.

[123]Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, Conversation with Adam Hajyahia, artist talk and conversation, Yale University, 14 Nov. 2024.

[124]In reference to Walter Benjamin, Talal Asad, *Secular Translations*, 148, remarks that anthropology might be generatively confronted with theology, poetry, cinema, and the arts generally: "Provocation being a way of overcoming the limitations of sterile habit"; indeed, history is in desperate need of such provocations.

[125]Ibid., 149.

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