

The Performative in Ilyās Khūrī's *Bāb al-Shams*

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Abstract

This article focuses on Ilyās Khūrī's engagement of performative aspects within his 1998 novel *Bāb al-Shams* (*The Gate of the Sun*). The novel utilizes different forms of the performative—the most transparent being oral narrative, but also video representations, television appearances, Jean Genet's essay-turned-play *Quarte heures à Chatila*, and street performances—to show the collapse of nationalist myths in Beirut's Palestinian refugee camps and to comment on the near impossibility of collective historical memory under the difficult conditions prevailing in the Palestinian diaspora. The failure of the epic genre in the context of the Shatila camp is the failure of the nationalist project and of historical memory; with the camp's inhabitants severed from both their land and their history, nationalist myths based on ideals of heroism cannot hold, the collective memory is acutely compromised and Palestine becomes little more than a simulacrum. The logical result of the narrator's failed epic cycle is a dislocation on the part of the camp's inhabitants from authentic forms of representation. The Palestinian experience is performed through the tools of modern media—video cassettes, television programs and Western theatre—by which the residents of Shatila lose both whatever remaining connections to Palestine they may have held as well as their ability to build a collective memory for their own history as an exiled community. The way in which the 1982 Shatila massacre is remembered and performed takes on particular importance. The only hope Khūrī offers is through a street performance which allows Shatila's residents the chance for reconnection to the tradition and an alternative to the simulacra by which they find themselves surrounded.

Keywords

Ilyās Khūrī, Elias Khoury, *Bāb al-Shāms*, *Gate of the Sun*, Palestine, Shatila, Epic, Orality, Archetype, Simulacrum, Jean Genet

It is no easy task to theorize the work of an author who is simultaneously an astute literary critic. Ilyās Khūrī is highly conscious of his own attempts to create a new kind of writing in both his novels and his extensive body of critical work. Repeatedly, he has stated his interest in integration and rupture, the concurrent engagement with the literary tradition and literature's rediscovery of itself as a form appropriate to its time ("Unfolding" 6). For Khūrī, this means not only Arabic literature's adaptation to the novel, a relatively new genre even in European literature, but its absorption of other contemporary media—namely cinema and theater—while remaining engaged with its past

(“Unfolding” 6). As he has noted, the *Nahḍah* was grounded in the dichotomy between the authentic and the modern: the authentic was linked to the classical heritage while the modern was linked to the West (“Unfolding” 1). This is a dichotomy that his writing deliberately breaks down in search of an authentic modern form for the Arabic novel, not dependent on imitation or the repetition of older forms, but in dialogue with the narrative tradition in order to create something new, a genuine expression of contemporary lived experience.

Here, the techniques Khūrī employs in his 1998 novel *Bāb al-Shams* will be explored with focus on how he engages aspects of the performative within the text. Most often described as the first Palestinian epic, *Bāb al-Shams* employs a frame story in which we find Yūnis, a former *fidāī* born in the Galilee prior to 1948, comatose in a derelict hospital in the Shatila refugee camp in Southern Beirut. Khalīl, something of a surrogate son to Yūnis and a doctor of sorts, attempts to heal his friend and patient *bi-l-kalām*, or, to be more specific, through the act of storytelling. As Yūnis lies unconscious after a stroke with no hope of recovery, Khalīl recounts what amounts to an oral history of Palestine, village by village, with Yūnis’s own story at its center. Like Shahrazād, Khalīl adopts the traditional role of storyteller in which the act of narration is explicitly intended to change the status quo, “to bring a state of affairs into existence,” through the simple fact of the vocalization of his stories (Leitch 1429). The structure of oral epic in Arabic can generally be broken down into two types: “linking” and “framing” (2: Lyons 73). *Alf laylah wa laylah* is representative of the latter, while linking is most often found in hero cycles like *Dhāt al-Himmah*, in which the various deeds of a single hero (though these are sometimes extended to include the clan) are presented. Here, Khūrī employs both, as Khalīl’s recitation to Yūnis is the frame story for a cycle in which Yūnis is the hero. Narration itself is the central form of action, and it is through the act of narration alone that Khalīl intends to cure his friend while simultaneously narrating Palestine’s history into the record of collective memory.

Some elements of the novel, like Khūrī’s reproduction of the style of traditional oral narrative in which the narrator moves from one story to another based upon an associative process, are not exclusive to *Bāb al-Shams*. The same overlapping parenthetical mode of narration can be found in Khūrī’s earlier novel *Riḥlat Ghāndī al-Ṣaghīr*, for example.¹ Some of the implications of this method in *Bāb al-Shams*, however, are distinct from his other works. The text utilizes different forms of the performative—the most transparent being oral

¹ Discussed at some length in Fabio Caiani’s *Contemporary Arab Fiction: Innovation from Rama to Yalu*.

narrative, but also video representations, television appearances, Jean Genet's essay-turned-play *Quarte heures à Chatila*, and street performances—to show the collapse of nationalist myths in the camps and to comment on the near impossibility of collective historical memory under the difficult conditions prevailing in the Palestinian diaspora.

Khūrī first grounds the novel in the tradition of oral epic—to which the first part of this discussion will be addressed—a genre inextricably linked to what are here interrelated concepts of national tradition and heroism. Khūrī does so, however, only to, through a scene of anagnorisis toward the end of the book, lay bare the illusory nature of these generic connections. The failure of the epic genre in the context of the Shatila camp is the failure of the nationalist project and of historical memory; with the camp's inhabitants severed from both their land and their history, nationalist myths based on ideals of heroism cannot hold, the collective memory is acutely compromised, and Palestine becomes little more than a simulacrum. The second part of this discussion will examine the logical result of Khalil's failed epic cycle. Disconnected from any authentic form of representation, the Palestinian experience is performed through the tools of modern media—video cassettes, television programs and, to some degree, Western theatre—by which the camp loses both whatever remaining connections to Palestine it may have held as well as the ability to build a collective memory for its own history as an exiled community. In this regard, the way in which the 1982 Shatila massacre is remembered and performed takes on particular importance. The only hope Khūrī's novel offers is through a street performance which allows Shatila's residents the chance for reconnection to the tradition and an alternative to the simulacra by which they are surrounded.

The Structural Use of Oral Epic: The Formula

While the oral quality of Khūrī's writing and his borrowing of techniques taken from traditional story cycles like *Alf laylah wa laylah* have often been noted, through an analysis of his use of formulaic tags, type scenes, archetypes and temporal shifts between contemporary and epic time as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin, the reader can better see how *Bāb al-Shams* accomplishes this oral effect. Though Khūrī ultimately destroys the generic connections he creates, without the initial construction of the stories of the generation born in Palestine proper before 1948 in the form of epic, the contrast between the impossible ideal of the genre and the reality of the camps could hardly carry the same weight. Additionally, the use of epic, even if it proves to be a failure, serves to emphasize the poverty of the adjacent series of connected images related to life

in the camp in which Palestine has become a mere simulacrum that has lost all connection to the real.

Before recounting one of the many discrete narratives that are woven into the novel, Khūrī's narrator declares, "I think his story deserves to be made into a book; if only I'd told it to a great writer like Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, he could have made it into an Epic" (429; Arabic 424).² Khūrī's choice of the word epic—*malḥamah*—is apt, in that it is precisely this genre that he utilizes to structure the novel's overlapping stories set within Palestine's original pre-1948 borders. In his essay "Epic and Novel," Mikhail Bakhtin characterizes the three central features of the epic. As a genre, the epic can be characterized as follows:

- (1) a national epic past—in Goethe's and Schiller's terminology the "absolute past"—serve as the subject for the epic; (2) national tradition (not personal experience and the free thought that grows out of it) serves as the source for the epic; (3) an absolute epic distance separates the epic world from contemporary reality, that is, from the time in which the singer (the author and his audience) lives. (13)

These three aspects of the epic share a focus ultimately centered on national tradition. The desire to both narrate an inaccessible past, definitively unattainable for the more than four million currently registered Palestinian refugees (regardless of its temporal proximity), and to record a tradition largely left out of the official historical narrative has, unsurprisingly, served as the driving impetus behind any number of Palestinian literary works. Likewise, *Bāb al-Shams* will meet all of Bakhtin's criteria before exposing the epic it constructs as untenable. Palestine as a national construct whose legitimacy is always in question, whose history is always in danger of effacement, needs to be performed in order to exist, even within the collective memory of its own people; this is in no small part the generic function of epic.

We can first note Bakhtin's choice of the word "singer" in his third stated feature of the genre. Milman Parry and Albert Lord have famously codified the methods by which epic verse is constructed, evolving over generations through the performances of illiterate singers of tales. Formulaic expressions would be paired with different themes to give rise to the stories of epic cycles, the combination of which would allow the work to take shape during the moment of composition itself. The "text" is created as the singer recites in front of his audience and changes, to one degree or another, each time it is performed. The formula's role is key to the process of rapid composition

² Unless otherwise noted, all translations from *Bāb al-Shams* will be taken from Humphrey Davies's translation. Translations of sections of Khūrī's *al-Dhākirah al-Mafqūdah* are my own.

necessary in the context of live performance. The poet, or singer, learns his craft through a process in which he first internalizes the central themes and formulas by listening to his elders, progressing to recite in front of an audience until finally he, himself, becomes the preserver of the tradition (Lord 25).

The process outlined by Parry and Lord is no less applicable to the Arabic epic tradition than to the Yugoslav story cycles with which their study is concerned. It is a process we can likewise relate to Khalil, the novel's storyteller. *Bāb al-Shams* essentially has a dual narrative structure. The first level of narrative revolves around Khūrī's narrator Khalil who works and lives in the hospital in the Shatila camp where Yūnis is a patient. These are the episodes that Khalil recounts which are set in contemporary time relating to a generation born in the diaspora. They are outside the generic boundaries of the epic. The second consists of the stories—primarily based in Palestine and set in the events of 1948 or shortly thereafter—that he recites to Yūnis in the hospital bed before him. Initially, Khalil would seem to be akin to a traditional singer of tales and an ideal vehicle for the transmission of the Palestinian epic. This is evident both in the way in which he has acquired the stories he relates and the frequent formulaic tags he utilizes to carry him through his narratives. The import of this can be seen in the role oral narrative has played within the Arabic tradition in regard to historical memory and communal identity, something Khūrī himself has acknowledged in his essay "Faḍā' al-nathr:"

Before writing, there was the *khabar*... The [early] tales, heroic epics, poems, religious texts and those resembling religious texts, are firstly oral *akhbār* (*al-ḥikāyāt wa-l-siyar wa-l-qaṣā'id wa-l-nuṣūṣ al-dīniyyah wa shibh al-dīniyyah, hiya awwalān akhbār shafabiyyah*), they take for themselves the form of a direct conversation founded upon the depth of the communal memory. (*al-Dhākirah* 79)

Historical memory, grounded in oral literature and the stories Khalil recites, will attempt—and, in the end, fail—to preserve a national memory in danger of effacement after the events of 1948.

Early in the novel, as Khalil sits at Yūnis's bedside, he refers to his own period of apprenticeship at Yūnis's hands: "I know you're sick of my stories, so I'm going to tell you your own. I'll return to you what you've given me" (Khoury 15; Arabic 20). Just as the traditional singer learns the names of his tales' heroes and their primary themes from his elders, Khalil has gradually internalized Yūnis's stories and proceeds to the second stage of his education in attempting to retell them to his mentor. And in this retelling, he often employs the tag that Yūnis himself would use. For example, at moments of historical import, Yūnis would punctuate his own speech with the formulaic expression *min al-awwal*, back to the beginning, as Khalil notes:

Back to the beginning (*min al-awwal*). Do you remember when you used to say, “Back to the beginning (*min al-awwal*)!” and would stamp your foot? Do you remember what you did after Abdel Nasser resigned in '67? People gathered in the alleyways of the camp and wept; it was night, and humid, and they were like ghosts weeping in the darkness. You stood in their midst, spat on the ground, and said, “Back to the beginning! (*min al-awwal*)” And after 1970, when you'd returned safely to the camp from the slaughter in the forests of Jerash and Ajloun, you said to the woman who came to ask about her son, “Back to the beginning! (*min al-awwal*)” and left. And after the Israelis went into Beirut, after each new thing that happened, you'd spit as though you were wiping out the past, and you'd say, “Back to the beginning! (*min al-awwal*)” So, you want the beginning (*tuwid al-awwal idhan*). (27; Arabic 31)

For Yūnis, the formula would be used to signal a shift to a new phase of action: “You used to say, ‘Back to the beginning (*min al-awwal*).’ You would talk, and we'd listen. It was enough for us to hear your footsteps for ‘the beginning’ (*al-awwal*) to return, for things to get started” (282; Arabic 282).

Khalil can be seen employing the same formula to initiate a number of the stories in the epic narrative he constructs. It is in this second level of narrative discourse relating to Yūnis's generation that we find the stylistic device of the formula in conjunction with themes, or type scenes, marking a shift into a different mode of narrative time. The two levels of narrative discourse within *Bāb al-Shams* comprise two distinct temporal spheres: the events of Yūnis's generation take place within epic time, while those of Khalil and his generation remain within the more familiar contemporary temporal plane of the novel. The use of formulaic tags helps to demarcate the difference between these two timeframes. And, while Khalil may have acquired the formula “*min al-awwal*” from Yūnis, its function changes when it is Khalil who utters it. Khalil was born in a refugee camp in Lebanon, and Palestine remained more mythical than tangible; his use of the tag “*min al-awwal*” comes to signal the beginning of the abstract act of narration, a move into the temporal sphere of the epic. It is with this phrase that he begins several of his accounts of Yūnis's early attempts to reclaim the villages of the Galilee after 1948, and even the story of his own father's life (223; Arabic 221); (298 Arabic 298).

Epic and Nonlinear Narration

Structurally, Khalil's stories follow the episodic pattern normative in epic narration. The particular temporal qualities of the epic genre, in which events are set within the absolute past, allow a distinct mode of nonlinear narration characterizing the genre. According to Bakhtin:

The absolute past is closed and completed in the whole as well as in any of its parts. It is, therefore, possible to take any part and offer it as the whole. One cannot embrace, in a single epic, the entire world of the absolute past (although it is unified from a plot standpoint)—to do so would mean a retelling of national tradition, and it is sufficiently difficult to embrace even a significant portion of it. But this is no great loss, because the structure of the whole is repeated in each part, and each part is complete and circular like the whole. One may begin the story at almost any moment, and finish at almost any moment. (31)

Following this template, Khalil's retelling of Yūnis's story, related in discrete self-sufficient episodes, inevitably begins and ends almost at random, with little regard for linear sequencing. The most fully developed tale that he has learned from Yūnis revolves around his relationship with his wife Nahilah, and it is primarily this story that he returns to again and again, recounting different episodes at different times, akin to the traditional singer of oral epic who chooses different episodes depending on the demands of the specific occasion. Fragmented throughout the novel, the scenes through which their story are told are, essentially, self-sustaining units. The story of their first marriage, as children, for example, is immediately followed by an episode said to occur many years later: a second symbolic marriage in the cave at Bāb al-Shams.

Yūnis and Nahilah's story is, at root, an archetypal tale of semi-unattainable love. It comprises the core of Khalil's epic cycle and is the means by which it is ultimately dismantled. While originally Yūnis's narrative, Khalil often reshapes the stories to make them his own: "It fell to me to collect your asides and mutterings and work them into a story to tell you. Now you can't shut me up. I can say whatever I want and tell you that it's your story" (Khoury 30; Arabic 34). In his recitation of Yūnis and Nahilah's wedding day, Khalil weaves other repetitions of his own formulas throughout, again creating the rhythm common to oral storytelling associated with epic. The story of the cotton swab, the implement used (in Khalil's telling of the story) to assist Yūnis in the consummation of his marriage, is representative of this mode of narration. Khalil first repeats the stock formulaic opening "In those days, as the story goes" (*fi dhālik al-zamān, taqūl al-qīṣṣah*):

I don't know any stories. Where am I supposed to get stories when I'm a prisoner in this hospital? Okay, I'll tell you the story of the cotton swab. You're the one who told it to me, I'm certain of that . . . In those days, as the story goes, in a small village in Galilee . . . (*fi dhālik al-zamān, taqūl al-qīṣṣah, wa fi qaryah ṣaghīrah fi-l-jalīl* . . .). (76; Arabic 78-9)

He continues a few paragraphs later again with, "In those days, as the story goes, the world was at war" (*fi dhālik al-zamān, taqūl al-ḥikāyah, kānat al-dunyā tukhabbi' al-ḥarb*) (78; Arabic 80). He then summarizes the night's

events by beginning each description of the evening's successive stages with the phrase "*kayfa yansā*," which, by occurring six times in a single paragraph, takes on the attributes of a formulaic tag:

How could he forget (*kayfa yansā*) when he could smell the blood for days and days and would hate himself until the day he died? How could he forget (*kayfa yansā*) the girl's face as she shook with fear? How could he forget (*kayfa yansā*) his mother closing the door behind them and waiting? How could he forget (*kayfa yansā*) that he fell asleep with the girl next to him in the bed, and didn't take off his clothes? How could he forget (*kayfa yansā*) the high-pitched *yoyous* of joy outside and the mother waving a white handkerchief with a spot of blood on it to announce the girl's virginity and purity? How could he forget (*kayfa yansā*) the room, with its bittersweet smell? (82-3; Arabic 84-5)

Repetitions of phrases like "*kayfa yansā*" are frequently paired with the specific themes of Yūnis and Nahīlah's story, guiding Khalīl through the narrative.

Temporal Shifts: Epic Time and Contemporary Time

Integral to Khalīl's authority as a transmitter of the Palestinian epic is his temporal and spatial distance from Palestine. Describing himself, Khalīl notes that he is just like all those "born outside of Palestine with no memories of his country except what his mother told him" (113; Arabic 114). Yūnis, however, as not only an actor in the events, but their central heroic figure in Khalīl's recitation, lacks the ability to transform them into epic. And here we move to the first and third related aspects of Bakhtin's defining criteria:

As a genre, the epic is, first and foremost, concerned with the national or "absolute" past: The world of the epic is the national heroic past... The epic, as the specific genre known to us today, has been from the beginning a poem about the past, and the authorial position immanent in the epic and the constitutive for it (that is, the person who utters the epic word) is the environment of a man speaking about a past that is to him inaccessible, the reverent point of view of a descendent. (Bakhtin 13)

To Khalīl, a child of the generation transformed into refugees in 1948 and born into a camp in Lebanon with little firsthand knowledge of Palestine, Yūnis's narratives represent an inaccessible past that Khalīl receives with a reverence born of his own remove. In the context of these stories, the heroes of Yūnis's tales are on a different hierarchical plane, both separate and definitively higher than the contemporary world of the Shatila camp in which Khalīl has almost always lived. As Khalīl says to Yūnis at one point, "Those

days were heroic days, these are not (*tilka al-ayyām kānat li-l-buṭūlah, wa hādhīhi al-ayyām li-lā buṭūlah*)” (Khoury 70; Arabic 73). That the Yūnis who serves as the protagonist of Khalil’s recitation is not precisely the man who lays in the hospital bed in front of him helps to create this evaluative temporal distance. Throughout the narrative, as Khalil recites Yūnis’s stories back to him, Khalil shifts from the second to the third person. Though he is speaking directly to Yūnis himself, the second person *anta* is inevitably replaced by either the third person *huwa*, or Yūnis’s full name:

“So, they sold out,” said the woman. But instead of letting the words slide past, as words usually do on such occasions, you stood up and said (*waqafita wa qulta*), “We never . . .” and fell silent. And everyone else fell silent. Yunis used Classical Arabic on that occasion, as though he felt himself (*ka-annahu sha’ara bi-nafsihi*) to be an orator or wanted to say (*arāda qawl*) the final and unanswerable word. So, he said, “We never . . .” in Classical Arabic and sat down (*fa qāla ‘nahnu lam’ bi-l-fuṣṣhā, wa jalasā*). (190; Arabic 189)

Here, as Khalil tells Yūnis’s account of the fall of Sha‘ab, he begins by referring to Yūnis as “you” (*anta*), which is to be expected, as it is to Yūnis that he is narrating the story, a story originally Yūnis’s own. He then switches to the third person, in pronoun and verb conjugation, establishing the difference between the Yūnis to whom he is speaking and the man participating in the events located in the heroic epic time that constitutes the temporal space of the story cycle.

The shift from second to third person is a strategy Khalil employs with consistency, and often this shift will be signaled by a formulaic tag, establishing that the narrator has moved into the plane of epic time:

For three nights you circled (*durta*) the barbed wire. You had your rifle (*kunta tamlak bunduqiyataka*) and ten hand grenades, and you decided (*qararta*) to tie the grenades together, throw them into the Jewish settlement’s workshop, and when they exploded, fire at the settlers.

It was night (*kāna laylun*).

The spotlight revolved, tracking the wire fence, and Yunis hid in the olive grove close by. He started moving closer (*bada’a yaqtarib*), crawling on his stomach. (69; Arabic 71-2)

Here, in describing Yūnis’s plan—ultimately aborted—to avenge the death of his first son, Khalil marks the narrative shift into epic time with the tag “It was night (*kāna laylun*),” positioned between the temporal plane of contemporary reality and that of the epic, set off in the text as its own paragraph and thereby further defining the demarcation of the two; it is the establishment of epic distance. Khalil further emphasizes the difference between the value of actions

in Yūnis's (as protagonist) time and his own: "Yūnis wasn't afraid, his heart never wavered. Yūnis 'withdrew' because he was a hero (*baṭal*). I, on the other hand, ... [am] a coward (*jabān*)" (70; Arabic 72). It is only in epic time that true heroism is possible, or, rather, all actions are almost necessarily heroic. Acts performed in this temporal category have heroic connotations simply by nature of being located in the absolute past of the epic. Khalil observes, "Have you noticed how things have changed? ... Yūnis got scared, so he became a hero (*baṭal*); I'm scared, so I've become a coward (*jabān*)" (70; Arabic 72).

Archetypes and Type Scenes

The concept of time is key to the genre of epic. It is not just that the epic's events occur in an idealized past, it is, moreover, that the timeframe of the epic is resolutely closed, and nothing more can be added. Its actors are transformed into heroes, their individual actions heroic, and this valorization, which elevates everything to a sphere higher than would be possible in contemporary time, further extends to include the relationships shared by its protagonists. As Bakhtin would have it:

Whatever its origins, the epic as it has come down to us is an absolutely completed and finished generic form, whose constitutive feature is the transferal of the world it describes to an absolute past of national beginnings and peak times ... In the epic world view, 'beginning,' 'first,' 'founder,' 'ancestor,' 'that which occurred earlier' and so forth are not merely temporal categories but *valorized* temporal categories, and valorized to an extreme degree. This is as true for relationships among people as for relations among all other items and phenomena of the epic world. (Bakhtin 15)

Yūnis's acts during the events of 1948 and shortly thereafter are transfigured into the heroic, imbued with the character of myth, as are all the acts located in what has, by the time of Khalil's narration, become the absolute past. And here we should take note of Bakhtin's observation above that the valorization of the absolute past: "is as true for relationships among people as for relations among all other items and phenomena of the epic world," for this extreme idealization pertains to the story of Yūnis's relationship with his wife Nahīlah no less than to Yūnis's attempts to liberate Palestine. As was already noted above, Khalil begins the story of Yūnis and Nahīlah's relationship with an epic formula: "In those days, as the story says, in a small village in Galilee (*fi dhālik al-zamān, taqūl al-ḥikāyah, wa fi qaryah ṣaḡhirah fi-l-jalīl*) called Ein El Zeitoun, Sheikh Ibraheem Ibn Sileiman El Asadi decided his only son (*ibnihi al-waḥīd*) should marry (Khouri 76; Arabic 79).

The following story of their relationship is then narrated exclusively through its valorized “peak times,” to use Bakhtin’s terminology; or, to borrow from studies on narrative structure in oral epic, through type scenes, defined as, “recurrent element[s] of narration or description in traditional oral poetry” (Foley 240). The idea of the type-scene was first worked out by Walter Arend in his *Die Typischen Szenen Bei Homer*, published in 1933. In short, the type-scene rests on the notion that there are certain fixed situations which the epic singer must perform according to an order of motifs: “situations like the arrival, the message, the voyage, the assembly, the oracle, the arriving of the hero, and some half-dozen others” (Alter 47). For example, the type-scene of the visit should subscribe to the following pattern: “a guest approaches, someone spots him, gets up, hurries to greet him; the guest is taken by the hand, led into the room, invited to take the seat of honor; the guest is enjoined to feast; the ensuing meal is described” (Alter 48). The result of the frequent structural use of type-scenes in the narration of Yūnis and Nahilah’s story is that they both become archetypes.³ Yūnis and Nahilah are highly idealized lovers and prototypical representations of their generation, and their story is transformed into a collective romance farther reaching than that of two simple individuals. Elements of the type scene can be observed in Yūnis’ story from its most initial stages. Yūnis’ birth is related to Khalil by his paternal cousin Amnah, as follows:

She said that Sheikh Ibraheem, son of Salim, son of Sileiman El Asadi, was in his forties when he married, and that for twenty years his wife kept giving birth to children who would die a few days later because she was stricken with a nameless disease. Her nipples would get inflamed and collapse when the children started to nurse, and they’d die of hunger. Then you were born. You alone, Amna told me, were able to bite on a breast without a nipple. You would bite and suck, and your mother would scream in pain. So you were saved from death. (Khoury 14; Arabic 18-19)

This miraculous survival is not unlike Robert Alter’s observation about biblical type scenes in which he notes the frequent reoccurrence of, “the oft-told tale in the Bible of a woman long barren who is vouchsafed a divine promise of progeny... and who then gives birth to a hero” (49). After twenty years of

³ According to Northrop Frye, an archetype is, “a symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of one’s literary experience as a whole” (Frye 365). Or, in Jungian terms, archetypes are “identical psychic structures common to all which together constitute the archaic heritage of humanity” (Stevens 46).

giving birth to infants who would die shortly thereafter due to a mysterious disease, only Yūnis managed to survive against all odds; it is the archetypal foreshadowing of extraordinary heroism to come.

The archetypal, and therefore somewhat interchangeable, nature of Yūnis and Nahīlah's romance can be seen as early as the narration of the commencement of their relationship. Indeed, the story of the cotton swab is not, in fact, Yūnis's story at all, but rather that of Abū Ma'rūf—a man Yūnis's age—and the consummation of his marriage to his first wife. Khalīl appropriates it and appends it to his version of Yūnis and Nahīlah's wedding night:

I see you before me, and I see Naheelah, I see everything. I can see you, a child, going into the bedroom, playing around with the young girl, and then falling asleep beside her. I won't say you were innocent, but you just didn't know how. Your mother arrives. She takes the girl to the bathroom. She soaps her and pours water over her, then puts the cotton in her—and you discover the secret of life through a little piece of white cotton. I know you won't like this story, you'll think it's a slur on your manhood. (Khoury 91; Arabic 92)

Though this is an autobiographical story told to Khalīl by Abū Marūf in the preceding pages, as a member of Yūnis's generation, Abū Ma'rūf is no less acceptable a transmitter than Yūnis himself, and as any singer of an epic tale can and does, Khalīl sculpts a story using elements of both Yūnis's and Abū Ma'rūf's narratives to create the tale he tells.

As an archetypal love story told exclusively through type scenes, absent from Yūnis and Nahīlah's tale is the mundane relatable quotidian typical of the narration of romance in the modern novel. It is only the peak events that are told, in a manner not unlike the conventions inhering in the type-scene of biblical narrative, where it “characteristically catch[es] its protagonists only at the critical and revealing points in their lives . . . not in the rituals of daily existence but at the crucial functions in the lives of the heroes, from conception and birth to betrothal to death bed” (Alter 49). Yūnis and Nahīlah's story is structured around marriages, births and deaths—both real and symbolic—punctuated by motifs common to oral epic. “The Bath,” in particular, figures prominently and will be analyzed below.

The story begins with Yūnis and Nahīlah's wedding day; Yūnis is fourteen, Nahīlah twelve. They are awkward children, and had not seen each other before the day of their marriage. The traditional ceremony is performed, Nahīlah entering the room with a lit candle on each finger, and later walking on a large cluster of white grapes. Immediately after, we are told of their symbolic marriage ten years later in the cave at Bāb al-Shams:

Years later, when Yunis and Naheeleh were in the cave at Bab El Shams and night fell, Naheeleh lit a candle she had hidden behind a rock she called the pantry. Yunis leapt up and brought out ten bunches of grapes he'd cut from the vines scattered around Deir al-Asad, and he spread these on the ground and asked her to walk on them. "Take off your shoes and walk. Today I'll marry you according to the law of the Prophet." (Khoury 85; Arabic 87)

What lends emphasis to the epic distance between these events and those of Khalil's contemporary world emanates from almost all of Yūnis and Nahīlah's interactions that take place in the space of Bāb al-Shams—itsself outside of the sphere of reality, with its very existence in question.

In addition to the recounting of the couple's two marriages, one literal, one figurative, we see them after the birth of their first son Ibrahīm, after the death of Yūnis's father, and after Yūnis's own symbolic death for which Nahīlah's ritualistic mourning becomes an act of heroism. Then, we see them after the tragic early death of the same Ibrahīm, and after Nahīlah's subsequent metaphorical rebirth following the profound depression brought on by that loss. A scene directly following the latter is instructive here:

You said (*qulta*) the woman had come to resemble her dead son and that when you smelled (*shamamta*) the coffee beans and the thyme rising from her hair, you fell (*saqata*) into that feeling that never left you (*lam yufāriqka*). You said that when you returned (*qulta innaka hīn 'udta*) to Lebanon after that visit, you were like (*sarta*) a lost man, talking (*tahkī*) without thinking, moving (*tamshī*) like a sleepwalker, unaware of your own existence (*lam tash'ur bi-wujūdika*) except when you were on your way (*ilā hīn takūn fī tariqika*) to Bab al-Shams. "That's real love, Abu Salem." . . . During that time (*fī dhālik al-zamān*), Yūnes lived (*qadā Yūnis*) in the forest for sixteen continuous months. He didn't tell Naheeleh he was nearby (*lam yaqul l-nahīlah innahu ya'ish bi-l-qurb minhā*). He would visit her (*kāna yazūruhā*) twice a week, amazing her with his ability (*qadratihī*) to traverse such distances and dangers. He didn't tell her (*lam yaqul lahā*) he had no distances to traverse, only time—the time that became his cross during the days and nights of waiting. (60 Arabic 62-3)

Sixteen months are compressed into a few lines and it is only the parsed down structure of the events that is conveyed: Yūnis performing the almost superhuman feat of living in the wilderness, subsisting on whatever could be found there, for nearly a year and a half simply to spend two nights a week with his wife. Despite Yūnis's declaration that "that's real love," the story resonates precisely because it is nothing of the sort. Nahīlah's symbolic value is comparable to Odysseus's Penelope; constructed exclusively of moments of extreme intensity in the form of thematic type-scenes, its lack of realism is hardly different than that found in 'Udhri love poetry (Foley 245-6). Love is eternally

unachievable and characterized by obsession and torment, the beloved little more than the personification of an ideal.⁴

Even within the episodic “crucial moments” noted above through which Yūnis and Nahīlah’s story is narrated, we find a layering of the motifs frequently observed in oral epics. The Bath scene, described by Arend as consisting of “washing, anointing, and donning new clothes,” and generally followed by a feast, recurs several times in the text and can be taken as illustrative (Foley 248). For example, when Yūnis returns as his father is dying, the schema of “the Bath” is followed precisely:

Naheelah took him [Yūnis] to the bedroom, undressed him, dried him with a large white towel, wrapped his naked body, and fetched hot oil and rubbed his back, his belly, and all his limbs with it. . . . She rubbed him with the hot oil and left him to bring dry clothes. . . . Then she came. . . . She said she’d brought him three boiled eggs, two sweet potatoes, two pieces of bread, and an onion. He took the food from her and devoured it. (Khoury 388; Arabic 383)

Yūnis, the incessantly returning hero is washed, anointed with oil, given fresh clothes, and something akin to a feast follows. The same pattern appears after Yūnis and Nahīlah’s conversation at the Roman tree in their final climatic meeting, albeit with a different import. Once they enter the cave at Bāb al-Shams, the following scene unfolds:

She returned with a banquet—*kibbeh nayyeh*—a meat pâté—with a topping of *hoseh*—soft cheese, tomatoes, and a bottle of arak. She set the food aside, heated some water and bathed him. He was like a small child in her hands, playing around in the water, incapable of issuing his usual orders or of making remarks about how hot or cold the water was. She took him to the open space inside the cave, which became a bathroom, ordered him to take off his clothes, bathed him with water and bay laurel soap, dried him and dressed him in fresh, dry clothes. Then they sat down together at the table. (408; Arabic 403)

Here the schematic of the traditional motif is followed once again. In this case, however, the conventional scene is functionally necessary because what immediately precedes it is, within the context of Yūnis and Nahīlah’s narrative, and within the generic demands of epic, so shockingly unconventional.

⁴ Along these lines, Khalil observes to Yūnis, “Take any love story, Brother. What is a love story? The story we call a love story is usually a story of the impossibility of love. People only write about love as something impossible. Isn’t that the story of Qais and Laila, and Romeo and Juliet? . . . All lovers are like that; they become a story of unconsummated love. . . . All of them loved at a distance and lived their love in separation” (Khoury 466-7; Arabic 464).

Anagnorisis: the Collapse of the Epic, the Demythologization of the Heroic

Khūrī grounds Khalīl’s story cycle in the tradition of oral epic only to dismantle it in a final scene of recognition in which we are shown the impossibility of the endeavor. In this scene between husband and wife—just pages before the bath scene described above—Nahīlah’s character breaks from the epic script she has followed throughout the narrative. Rather than meet Yūnis in the cave at Bāb al-Shams, she instructs him to meet her outside the fields by the large Roman tree. There, she forces Yūnis to absorb all the realities of her life that sever their story from the epic form to which it had previously subscribed. Even Yūnis had imagined his wife before this moment in a series of representational archetypes:

The first Naheeleh was his young wife that he didn’t know, because he was in the mountains with fighters. The second Naheeleh was the beautiful woman who was born in the cave of Bab al-Shams as she trod grapes and married her husband. The third Naheeleh was the mother of Ibraheem, the eldest who died. The fourth Naheeleh was the mother of Noor that Yunis clung to in the cave and called Umm Noor, Mother of Light, whenever she came to him with light shining from her eyes. The fifth Naheeleh was the heroine of the funeral who came out of prison to announce the death of her husband and lamented in front of everybody. The sixth Naheeleh was the mother of all those children who filled the square at Deir al-Asad. And on that night, the seventh Naheeleh was born. (395; Arabic 395)

The “seventh Naheeleh” assails Yūnis with a narrative of contestation: she describes a semi-abandoned wife’s life of poverty living in a house headed by an indigent blind Sheikh; the estrangement and alienation caused by living in a country no longer one’s own; her failed search for work in Haifa, a necessity due to Yūnis’s lack of financial support; their children’s performances in school and their future career plans, with two of their sons working in an Israeli garage; and her Israeli citizenship and practice of voting in the elections for members of the Knesset. The result of this monologue is a dramatic rupture between Yūnis’s narration and her own; she conclusively shifts their story from one comprised of the material of epic to something consistent with the contemporary novel. As she destroys the generic boundaries of their romance, she states: “Did you think you were Qays looking for Layla among the ruins?” (399; Arabic 394). She will not ultimately allow Yūnis to turn their story into epic, to mythologize their lives or their history. It is exactly the “rituals of daily existence,” cited earlier by Alter as the element absent from epic protagonists’ lives, that Nahīlah forces into their story: “Naheeleh told Yunis that the details of life are ordinary and meaningless but had to be taken care of” (405; Arabic 400). The bath scene cited above immediately follows this fifteen page speech

and allows Yūnis and Nahīlah to reenter the narrative space of epic, but it is, significantly, their last meeting, and, for all intents and purposes, the end of their story. It destabilizes the story's archetypal character, and by extension the epic status of Yūnis's narratives taken as a whole.

Yūnis's narratives, and the story cycle Khalil constructs with them, can ultimately be read as a failed epic cycle. The novel does not in the end offer a view of pre-1948 Palestine and the generation turned into refugees by those events as unequivocally heroic, the material of epic and myth. Thematically, Yūnis's story bears resemblance to the mythic pattern of the Return Song, yet it never fully achieves its logical conclusion, instead inconclusively circling through the same cycle again and again with no resolution. The basic schema of the Return, a pattern loosely followed by the *Odyssey*, for example, can be delineated as follows: "Absence (A), Devastation (D), Return (R), Retribution (Rt), and Wedding (W)" (Foley 362). Each episode of Yūnis and Nahīlah's story essentially follows this pattern. Yūnis is perpetually absent, forever returning after a chain of devastating events—the death of his son, the death of his father, Nahīlah's interrogation by the Israeli authorities—and invariably there is a subsequent reunion with Nahīlah. Elements (A), (D), (R) and (W) are in place, yet (Rt), Retribution, is never fully actualized. In the one instance in which we see an explicit example of Yūnis's attempt at revenge after the death of his son, caused either directly or indirectly by the Israeli authorities, he abandons his plan at the last moment:

You got up and said that you'd kill their children as they'd killed your son. "Tomorrow you'll [Nahīlah] trill with joy, because we'll have our revenge" . . . He crawled toward the fence, and after the spotlight had passed over him a number of times, heard the sound of firing and dogs barking. He flattened himself to the ground. Then he decided to run, not paying the slightest heed to the spotlight . . . he kept going until he reached the Lebanese border. (Khoury 69-70; Arabic 72)

Retribution is never achieved, nor, more importantly, is Yūnis's Return (R) ever final or definitive; it is always followed by another absence, until we find him on his deathbed in a refugee camp in Lebanon, return no longer an option.

It is not only in Nahīlah's final monologue, or in the stories' structural failings as a return song that we find the novel collapsing the relationship it establishes with the epic. Regarding the absolute past of the genre, Bakhtin observes: "It is as closed as a circle; inside it everything is finished, already over. There is no place in the epic world for any openendedness, indecision, indeterminacy" (Bakhtin 15). And, along the same lines: "In ancient literature it is memory, and not knowledge, that serves as the source and power for the creative impulse. That is how it was, it is impossible to change it: the tradition of the past is sacred" (Bakhtin 15). The point here is that, despite the flexibility

intrinsic to the epic in terms of the acceptable ways in which a singer can manipulate content—i.e. the selection of specific episodes at certain times, their expansion or contraction based upon the circumstances of recitation—there is, nevertheless, no room for vacillation and doubt. In this regard Khalil, as a transmitter of the tradition, is an utter failure. Often, he recites only to negate his own recitation shortly thereafter. He follows his story of Yūnis and Nahīlah's wedding night with, "Okay, okay, fine. It wasn't thanks to a piece of cotton that your marriage was consummated..." (Khoury 92; Arabic 93). He also introduces alternate versions of the same story, unsure as to which is correct. When describing Yūnis's return after surviving an Israeli ambush (a scene coming just before Nahīlah's feigned mourning in an attempt to lead the Israelis to believe Yūnis is dead), Khalil relates both Yūnis and Nahīlah's respective depictions of the story. Nahīlah's narrative shows Yūnis in the cave at Bāb al-Shams, barely conscience, terrified, "on the verge of tears...as though fear had almost paralyzed [him]" (135; Arabic 135). Yūnis, however, claims that he had simply not slept for four weeks and when he heard the sound of Nahīlah's footsteps, he surrendered to sleep, feeling safe in her presence (135; Arabic 135). Khalil then admits, "I don't know what to believe. Sleep or fear? Should I believe Naheeh, who saw her husband disintegrating, or the husband who claims he was sleeping peacefully to the sound of his wife's footsteps?" (135; Arabic 135). The open-endedness, indecision, and indeterminacy Bakhtin declares impossible in the epic genre are the very qualities that essentially characterize Khalil's recitation. As Bakhtin also notes, memory is paramount to the tradition codified and preserved by the epic, and it is precisely the severing of a people's connection to their historical memory that is at issue in *Bāb al-Shams*.

After the Failure of Epic: Palestine as Simulacrum

If the epic genre represents the performance of communal history and collective memory, Jean Baudrillard offers an interpretation of other types of performance in his *Simulacra and Simulation* in which we find the effacement of both, in which the real or authentic is replaced by signs disconnected from their referents. For Baudrillard, who blames contemporary consumer culture and imperialistic Western science and philosophy (in part the Western imperialist destruction of all "primitive," non-Western, non-metropolitan "others") for this shift, signs have come to take priority over the things signified (Leitch 1730). The result is that we are left yearning for the things we have destroyed, steeped in nostalgia, creating ever more signs to simulate that which was

lost. This new function of signs is denoted by Baudrillard's use of the term simulacrum, which holds the meaning of representation, but also the relentlessly negative connotation of a counterfeit. Because, while simulacra may seem to have real referents, they are no more than fabricated representations that mark the absence, rather than the existence, of the things they purport to represent:

Representation stems from the principle of the equivalence of the sign and the real (even if this equivalence is utopian, it is a fundamental axiom). Simulation, on the contrary, stems from the utopia of the principle of equivalence, *from the radical negation of the sign as value*, from the sign as the reversion and death sentence of every reference. Whereas representation attempts to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as simulacrum. Such would be the successive phases of the image: it is the reflection of a profound reality; it masks and denatures a profound reality; it masks the *absence* of a profound reality; it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum. In the first case, the image is a *good* appearance—representation is of the sacramental order. In the second, it is an evil appearance—it is of the order of maleficence. In the third, it plays at being an appearance—it is of the order of sorcery. In the fourth, it is no longer of the order of appearances, but of simulation. (Baudrillard 6)

If we shift to the level of narration in *Bāb al-Shams* set in the contemporary time of the camp, Palestine has become little more than a simulacrum. This is merely the flipside of Khalil's failed epic cycle. The oral narration of epic, when successful, creates an image of the first degree in Baudrillard's terms: it reflects a profound reality and representation is of the sacramental order. However, the performed representations outside of Khalil's recitation of Yūnis's stories that we find of Palestine in Shatila are of the fourth phase: they no longer have any relation to any reality whatsoever.

In *Bāb al-shams*, both consumerist culture (and in particular Western consumption of the Shatila massacre, which will be discussed further below) and the colonization of much of Palestine are largely responsible for the collapse of the original referent and its effacement by simulacrum; but, just as surely, Shatila's inhabitants are implicated. Khalil relates the story of Samih Barakah, an intellectual of Yūnis's generation who had spent time in Hebron prison:

Samih would always talk about his dream of writing a book without a beginning or an end. "An epic," (*malḥamah*) he called it, an epic of the Palestinian people, which he'd start by recounting the details of the great expulsion of '48. He said we didn't know our own history, and we needed to gather the stories of every village so they'd remain alive in our memory. (370; Arabic 367)

Samīḥ dies without achieving this goal, but his project is, recognizably, Khalīl's central occupation, and, clearly enough, that of the novel itself.⁵ But this is not metafiction and the text does not explicitly refer to its own objectives. Rather, this example serves to provide a contrast, effectively highlighting the particular kind of amnesia perpetuated by the residents of Shatila. It is, in no small part, their lost historical memory that has caused the destruction of the original reference, Palestine, and replaced it with pure simulation. A case in point is the reoccurring motif of the video cassette. Insofar as a simulacrum is, simply put, a copy of a copy whose relation to the model has become so diluted that it can no longer be justly considered a copy at all, the video cassette representations of Palestine that circulate in Shatila are paradigmatic illustrations of epic being overwhelmed by simulacra in the pages of *Bāb al-Shams*.

Palestine as Video

The first mention of the video cassettes occurs when it becomes known that Umm Ḥassan—the only midwife in Shatila, the symbolic mother of all those born in the camp and whose death opens the novel—has entrusted her cassette to Khalīl as a dying wish. It had been filmed six months beforehand, when she traveled to Abū Sinān to visit her brother, whom she then convinced to take her back to her village, al-Kweikat. His son Rāmī brings a video camera and films the tape. All the houses save the newest ones built on a hill have been demolished, replaced by the Beyt ha-Emek settlement; Umm Ḥassan's home had belonged to the group on the hill. She finds that in the house, now owned by an Israeli woman originally from Beirut, “Everything was in its place. Everything was just how it used to be, even the earthenware water jug” (104; Arabic 105). While Umm Ḥassan and the Israeli woman commiserate, exchanging nostalgias, the former for her decimated village in the Galilee, the latter for the life she was forced to leave in Beirut, Rāmī, ignoring their conversation, makes “the camera roam over the house and around the land and the olive orchard” (110; Arabic 111). The end result is, “a beautiful tape, made up of lots of snapshots joined together” (110; Arabic 111). The video, of which scores like it are said to circulate, is then viewed repeatedly and despite the decades that have passed, witnessing the destruction of the original village,

⁵ In his collection of critical essays *al-Dhākirah al-Mafqūdah: Dirāsāt Naqdiyyah* (1972-1981), Khūrī has stated that his fiction has the goal of eradicating amnesia. In this particular context he is referring to his work on the Lebanese civil war, as *Bāb al-Shams* was not yet published, but the principle remains the same.

and forced migration of its entire population, it is taken to be an accurate representation:

The Shatila camp has turned into Camp Video. The videocassettes circulate among the houses, and people sit around television sets, they remember and tell stories. They tell stories about what they see, and out of the glimpses of the villages they build villages (*yaḥkūn mā lā yarūnahu, wa yabnūn bilādan min ṣuwar al-bilād*. (103; Arabic 104)

They tell stories, but they are not those called for by Samīḥ Barakah above, the stories that would preserve the history of pre-1948 Palestine. They are, rather, stories inspired and mediated by the recorded images on their television screens. It is not through memory alone that their villages are reconstructed, but through memory aided and influenced by the intermediary of the necessarily distorted camera shots of remains that bear little resemblance to the original. And here the difference between the English translation and the Arabic is relevant.

The original Arabic reads literally that “they narrate what they *do not* see.” If this can be considered memory, it is memory at a double remove at best. The technology of video has usurped the place of oral narrative, the medium of epic usurped by the medium of the simulacrum. Palestine is reinvented through video images, a Palestine that can be watched and re-watched, recreated and consumed by the viewer/spectator. The result is simulation; Palestine has become precisely a copy (a video) of a copy (the remains of villages destroyed in 1948 rather than the villages as they were) whose relationship to the original referent (Palestine as it was) is so attenuated that it can hardly be said to exist. And the possibilities for repetition are, if not endless, given the lifespan of a videotape, prodigious nevertheless; and, with each repetition the distance between copy and referent, sign and signified, becomes greater. The resultant absurdity is accentuated in a conversation at the hospital between Abū Kamāl, of Yūnis’s generation, and Khalīl:

He [Abu Kamal] started talking about his problem with videos, and about how he couldn’t see: Everyone else could see, but he couldn’t. “They sit around their televisions and run the tape, and they see things I don’t. That isn’t Palestine, Cousin. Those pictures don’t look like our villages, but I don’t know what’s got into everyone, they’re glued to their television sets. There’s no electricity, and they still play them, signing up for Hajj Ismail’s generator just for the video. They pay twenty dollars a month and go hungry so they can watch the tapes; they sit in their houses and stare at those films they say are Palestine (*hādhihi al-aflām allatī yaqūlūn innahā filastīn*). We’re a video nation and our country’s become a video country.” (454; Arabic 450)

“Those films they say are Palestine” offers a direct equivalence: the films are Palestine. Palestine has entered the realm of the hyperreal: “More real than the real, that is how the real is abolished” (Baudrillard 81).

Western Consumption of the Massacre: Televised Spectacle

In the camp, the history of pre-1948 Palestine has become simulation and by a similar process so has Shatila's own history, the history of the refugees and of the diaspora. It is not just in the circulating videotapes that we find the substitution of the referent with a sign to which it is no longer connected. We can look as well, for example, at testimonials about the Shatila massacre. In the same way that the technology particular to video is the means whereby the Palestine of the video cassette is allowed to supersede that of reality, it is the medium through which the attestations of characters such as Dunyā are presented that helps to strip them of all meaning and content. As Marshall McLuhan observed to great notoriety, the medium through which information is conveyed is as important as the information itself. For every form of media, whether it be print, the telegraph, telephone, television etc., “the social action . . . [of the form] is also, in the fullest sense, . . . [its] message or meaning” (McLuhan 340). To illustrate, he offers the example of a language, which may be little affected by the use individual speakers make of it, but which, nevertheless, almost “entirely patterns the character of what is thought, felt, or said by those using it” (McLuhan 340). But while the above point regarding the dominance of form over content is relevant here, McLuhan's interpretation of the effects of new electronic media on society is far less negative than both Baudrillard's and the novel's. With the move away from the exclusively visual form of print in favor of forms of media that encompass the auditory, McLuhan sees something of a return to preliterate modes of awareness⁶: “Oral cultures are simultaneous in their modes of awareness. Today we come to the oral condition again via electronic media, which abridge space and time and single-plane relationships, returning us to the confrontation of multiple relationships at the same moment” (McLuhan 339). For McLuhan, electronic media mark a return to sphericity, simultaneity, and participation, and the effects are largely positive.

In his critical work, Khūrī has shown himself to be in agreement with McLuhan in his view that the age of electronic media marks a shift toward a new orality, but in the Arab context this is especially problematic:

⁶ These are also, it should be noted, the same modes of awareness that gave rise to the epic.

There is something like a void between the *ḥakawātī* and the television. Between the *sīrah* of 'Antarah and the *sīrah* of the astronauts there were small efforts that were unable to build an intellectual context on which the re-formation of prose could be based, or for the rediscovery of scientific knowledge in the *khabar*. We moved from ancient orality to modern orality. (*al-Dhākirah* 79)

While ancient orality had value and substance, for Khūrī, its modern incarnation does not. New media cannot serve as a substitute for the loss of epic, it cannot fulfill the same function in terms of collective history. On the contrary: "If ancient orality held within it the reserves of communal wisdom, modern orality is based upon the nullification of knowledge" (*al-Dhākirah* 89). Khūrī's prognosis is similar to Baudrillard's, for whom the mass media, through the excessive proliferation of signs and information, destruct meaning and signification by neutralizing and dissolving all content. The result is the collapse of meaning and the loss of distinction between media and reality. And in direct contrast to McLuhan's theory, rather than produce socialization, the social is imploded in the masses. McLuhan is reread and reinterpreted and electronic media are seen to close off all possibility of genuine reciprocity. The underlying model of communication, described by Ferdinand de Saussure as that of "transmitter-message-receiver," leaves no place for the ambiguity of true exchange; it is a simulation model of communication. In Baudrillard's words:

Information [mass media] devours its own content... Rather than creating communication, it exhausts itself in the act of staging communication. Rather than producing meaning, it exhausts itself in the staging of meaning. A gigantic process of simulation that is very familiar. The nondirective interview, speech, listeners who call in, participation at every level, blackmail through speech: "You are concerned, you are the event, etc." More and more information is invaded by this kind of phantom content, this homeopathic grafting, this awakening dream communication. A circular arrangement through which one stages the desire of the audience. (80)

It is primarily this last sentence to which we will return in analyzing Duniyā's filmed testimonies.

The events of the 16th to the 18th of September 1982 have almost certainly become the most emblematically tragic in recent Palestinian history, the days which witnessed the Phalangists' entrance into the camps of Sabra and Shatila and, under Israeli observation, the brutal murder of as many as two thousand⁷ of the camps' civilian inhabitants. In the novel, Duniyā is found in a mass

⁷ Estimate taken from p. 390 of Robert Fisk's *Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.)

grave after the massacre. As the Lebanese Red Cross sprinkle quicklime over the bodies one of the men realizes she is alive and rushes her to the hospital: "She was a wreck. Fractures in the chest and pelvis. Blood and holes everywhere" (Khoury 250; Arabic 249). After a transfer to the American University Hospital, she survives, and after two years of surgeries and rehabilitative treatments she goes to see Khalil, imploring him to help her find work. About her injuries, she says that she does not remember anything, just running through the street, then waking up in the hospital. Shortly thereafter, she develops a relationship with a professor of psychiatry, Dr. Munā, who works with the Association for the Disabled in the camp. Foreign journalists come and Duniyā tells her story, the professor translating: "Dunya had become a new kind of storyteller (*ṣārat Duniyā ḥakawāṭiyyah min naw' jadid*), one who tells stories only to foreigners, and she had become a story herself" (255; Arabic 254). In contrast to the storyteller of the epic concerned with maintenance of the tradition and the preservation of memory, Duniyā produces content based on consumer demand and it is content devoid of meaning. Her performance is pure simulation, the staged desire of the audience in Baudrillard's words above. She becomes a story telling its own story, the original referent again lost, if it can be said to have ever been there at all. (257; Arabic 257). Khalil watches one of Duniyā's performances:

I saw her. I was watching the Women's Conference on television when they announced a "Palestinian testimony," and I saw Dunya come forward, on crutches... She was neither hurried nor embarrassed, as though she'd learned her role well. She reached the podium... She looked straight ahead and started speaking. And she amazed me. This woman was telling a completely different story. I'd no idea she'd been... had no idea how she could have hidden all these things from us and could now be saying them in front of these foreigners... Dunya's face filled the small screen; she seemed to have black rings around her eyes. She spoke and spoke, in a flat voice without any trace of emotion, as though she were telling some other woman's story. As though it had nothing to do with her. Later I learned from Professor Muna that all Dunya did was relate what had happened to her and yet listeners would be taken by surprise each time by some new thing she hadn't mentioned on previous occasions. (257; Arabic 255)

Duniyā is transformed into eyes surrounded by black rings, a face filling a television screen, a distortion performing a role. Duniyā had the uncanny ability to cry on command, allowing her to generate the pity required to inspire international aid organizations to give out money (255; Arabic 255). And it is a particular kind of narrative that they want to hear: her "Palestinian testimony," projected to the masses, is no more than staged simulated performance, the fulfillment of her audience's expectations. It has no relationship to her real experience of the Shatila massacre, of which she has no memory. And

like the videotapes, with each repetition her televised testimonies are further and further removed from reality: "listeners would be taken by surprise each time by some new thing." The flow of information from the mass media is believed to produce "an accelerated circulation of meaning, a plus value of meaning, homologous to the economic one that results from the accelerated rotation of capital;" it instead "devours its own content" (Baudrillard 80). In Duniyā's case more and more false content is added until the entire edifice of her story collapses. Khalil observes:

I believe she became separated from her own story when she agreed to participate in Professor Muna's game. I saw her on TV; I saw how she bent over the microphone after the horrible clatter of her crutches hitting the round. And she was lying, I swear she was lying. How can you rape a girl with a shattered pelvis? She said she'd been hit in her right thigh, meaning her pelvis, and then that she fell and they threw themselves on top of her—which is impossible. But that was the story the public wanted to hear. Rape is a symbol . . . Man connects war with rape. (Khoury 281-2; Arabic 281)

The audience wanted a narrative of rape and she supplies it, the cost, however, is the story itself. Though rape may be the testimony her Western audience and the international humanitarian organizations desire, in her own cultural context it turns her into a scandal and puts a definitive end to her narrative. Pushed to the extreme, her story implodes: "That was the first and last time she spoke about the gang rape. The story went around the camp, her mother got very angry, and everyone . . . well, you know the people here better than me, Doctor" (257; Arabic 257). And this is not just the last time she mentions the rape, it is the last time she tells her story in any form. She falls silent, is once again hospitalized and dies shortly thereafter. Noteworthy is that the effect generated by the medium is so great that irrespective of the fact that Khalil knows Duniyā's story is a fiction, he loses the ability to distinguish between what he knows to be true and what he sees on the screen. Her story is a performance, a simulation, and it is Khalil himself who observes that she is lying, but still he says: "It seems, however, that Duniya wasn't acting; she was really telling her story" (255; Arabic 255). The loss of distinction between media and reality prevails.

Theatrical Representations of the Massacre and Jean Genet

The second representation of the Shatila massacre in the novel, one which does not ultimately come to fruition, is characterized by more ambivalence than Duniyā's testimonies. Three French artists, one woman and two men,

come to the hospital seeking to learn more about the camp in order to stage a one-woman performance of Jean Genet's text *Quatre heures à Chatila*. As background to their production, they want to speak to the families of the massacre's victims, see the sites of the mass graves. The equivocation with which this is treated in the novel is due to three factors, the first of which is the representation's prospective medium. The second and third are connected to the complicated nature of Genet's *Quatre heures à Chatila* as intertext, both because of the character of the text itself and because of Genet's particular ideas regarding the social and political role of the theater.

Unlike the videotaped images of Palestine and Duniyā's televised performances, the French theater troupe that arrives in Shatila intends to stage their representation within the much older tradition of live performed drama. As medium, the differences between theater and electronic media are significant. Cultural critic Rustom Bharucha has observed in regard to theater that, "it would be fatuous... to deny that the 'now' of any performance is absolute" (Bharucha 16-17). Like electronic media, theatrical performances must, by nature of the genre, repeat themselves, but unlike a recorded image, a gesture can never be repeated exactly the same way twice. Likewise, in contrast to a filmed image, capable of the transformation into an object completely divorced from reality, the theater, "for all its new flirtations with virtuality... remains subject to unprecedented [sic] forms of interruption, disruption, infiltration and infusion of the 'real'—the chaos of the 'real'" (Bharucha 18). This insinuation of the real saves the medium, helping to prevent the blurring of the lines between representation and reality, and thereby theater resists becoming pure simulation. In theater, rather, the reciprocity impossible with electronic media, in which the simulation model of communication reigns, retains its potentiality. This is particularly true in Genet's case, for he wanted "to involve the spectator in the theatrical event, and thus create a sense of actual encounter" (Finburgh 4).

Genet was among the first Europeans to witness the scene left by the Phalangists after the massacre. The essay that he produced as a result, *Quatre heures à Chatila*, is said to have renewed his faith in the act of writing (Bharucha 20). As Bharucha points out, the *jouissance* of the writing is palpable, raising the question of the possibility of exploitation, and the issue of the ethics of witnessing the tragedy of war in such a beautiful and markedly exuberant prose, the style of which can be seen in the following brief excerpt:

Sitting on a chair surrounded by silent and relatively young men and women, a woman was sobbing—a woman in Arab dress who as far as I could tell was sixteen or sixty. She was weeping over her brother whose body almost blocked out the street. I moved closer to her. I looked more carefully. She had a scarf knotted

around her neck. She was weeping, mourning the death of her brother there next to her. Her face was pink—a baby’s pink, more or less uniform, very soft, tender—but there were no eyelashes or eyebrows, and what I thought was pink wasn’t the top layer of skin but a deeper layer edged in gray skin. Her whole face was burnt. Impossible now to say how, but I understand by whom. (Genet 224)

Genet’s response to these events of war, be they triumphant or tragic, was that they are best remembered through their representations.⁸ His text stands as a contestation of the representations offered by the electronic media in the current age, generally disseminated in accordance with what is deemed “consumable for global grief” (Bharucha 20). In regard to the beauty of the prose specifically, his response was simply that, “It is beautiful because it is true and what is true is always beautiful” (20).

Quatre heures à Chatila was not designed to be a play; rather, it is an essay intended to be read and meant to memorialize Shatila’s victims—“to restore to them all their dignity” by immortalizing them—through the medium of the written text rather than that of performance (20). Genet recalls another performed text when describing the lives of the Palestinian fedayeen in the last sentence of his essay, when he references a famous Homeric epic: “The struggle for a country can fill a very rich life, but a short one. This, we recall, is Achilles’s choice in the *Iliad*” (Genet 228). Genet also had the desire to turn the Palestinian struggle into the material of epic, though he did not presume to hold the power to do so. His theoretical views on the limits of the theater’s role in this regard deserve some discussion.

Putting him in almost direct dialogue with Baudrillard, in a number of essays written between the 1950s and 1980s, Genet “developed a singular concept of performance that attempted to conceive a notion of theatre that might avoid consumer appropriation and, in some way, contest the dominance of visual media (photography, television and cinema) that invaded French culture in the aftermath of the Algerian War” (Finburgh 13). Despite his position against the proliferation of the hyperreal in the electronic age, Genet’s own plays have some affinity with Baudrillard’s simulacra—rather than engage in direct mimesis, they are reflexive, structured purely as theater-in-the-theater, “inward looking like a kaleidoscope” (Shevtsova 45).⁹ Acutely

⁸ In Edmund White’s biography of the writer, Genet is noted to have said, “The fame of heroes owes little to the immensity of their conquest and everything to the success of the tributes rendered them” (pg. 556).

⁹ *The Blacks*, *The Screens* and *The Balcony* all have this quality. One can take, for example, *The Balcony*, a play that looks at how revolutions are appropriated through mass-media manipulation, in which mirrors are used to put the image of the theater’s audience on the stage, both images reproducing each other.

aware of the danger of the simulacrum, however, Genet does not go so far as to set up chains of ever-receding signs that no longer denote a material reality; his characters retain relationships to their referents in the phenomenological, real world (45-6). He engages with Baudrillard's worldview, but offers something of an alternative.

Genet's plays are often interpreted as offering a new aesthetic that shifts "the focus from the theatrical to the performative," an aesthetic in which, rather than being divorced from reality, "performance is productive of reality" (Finburgh 13). And for some, like Bharucha, his theater is politically critical because it directly implicates the "First World" spectator in being aligned with the capitalist forces that have wreaked havoc throughout the world—"it supplies the voice that the West refuses to hear" (Finburgh 3). Yet, this is an interpretation of Genet's theater in opposition to his own views on the conceivability of drama's political role. For Genet, theater has no relationship with sociopolitical reality. In an interview with Madeleine Gobeil conducted in 1964, when asked about the political utility of his play *The Blacks*, he replied: "If my plays are useful to Blacks, it's not my concern. I don't think they are, in any case. I think that action, the direct struggle against colonialism, does more for Blacks than a play does" (Genet 13). From the 1950's forward, Genet reiterated his belief that political drama aiming to educate its audience violates the essence of what theater should be. In his own words, "politics, history, classical demonstrations... will have to give way to something more... sparkling. All that shit, that manure will be eliminated... If, despite ourselves, they slip into the theatrical act, they should be chased out until all traces are erased: they are the dross that should be used to make movies, TV, cartoons, *romans-photo*" (Finburgh 10). His views stand in explicit contrast to a playwright like Bertolt Brecht, for whom theater was an integral part of direct struggle.

This diametrical opposition of the theater (or at least Genet's theater) and political struggle is shared by the novel. The explanation of the catalyst behind the French theater troupe's production of *Quatre heures à Chatila* makes this point clear:

When he [one of the troupe's members] read Jean Genet's text on the massacre, he said, he felt as though he'd been struck by lightning; he said he hadn't read the words, he'd seen them—the words emerge from the pages and moved around his room. That was why he'd decided to come here: "I had to see the people so the words would go back into the book and become just words again." (Khoury 253-4; Arabic 253)

Here, the desired effect of the performance is not a step toward the advancement of the Palestinian cause, nor any kind of resolution of the camp's

significant problems, nor even a move toward the most marginal improvement in Shatila's living conditions. The goal is, instead, a misplaced catharsis. The Frenchman wants to see the camp and stage the performance so as to cease to be troubled by the contents of the text. The inherent danger in this approach is elucidated by Genet in his 1960 *Avertissement to The Balcony*: "When the problem of a certain disorder—or evil—has been solved on stage, this shows that it has in fact been abolished, since, according to the dramatic conventions of our times, a theatrical representation can only be the representation of a fact. We can then turn our minds to something else" (xiv). The catharsis achieved by the performance is perilously illusory, and in the case of the novel would simply allow the theater troupe, and by extension its audience, to store the events of the massacre within the deepest recesses of memory, regardless of the fact that no resolution had been achieved.

When Khalil takes the French theater troupe around the camp to speak with the massacre's survivors, Shatila's inhabitants, though polite and hospitable, refuse to share their stories. He is told, "No, Son. We're not a cinema. No" (Khoury 252; Arabic 252). That Genet's theater "supplies the voice that the West refuses to hear" is of no importance.¹⁰ In the novel, Genet's situation as writer, that of a European outsider serving as documentarian of the massacre's aftershock, places him and his text (at least when it is transformed into a vehicle of performance) in a position roughly analogous to that occupied by the engineers of Dunyā's testimonials. In explaining their planned production, one of the Frenchmen remarks to Khalil: "We wanted to preserve the spirit of the text; we wouldn't want to do violence to the work of Jean Genet (*lā nurīd al-i'tidā' 'alā jān janayh*)" (246; Arabic 245). The choice of words here, *al-i'tidā' 'alā*, literally to violate, perform an act of aggression—and, in the Arabic, the act committed is against Genet himself and not his work—is darkly comic, for the answer to the question of who is violating whom in this context is evident.

The role of Genet's essay-turned-play in *Bāb al-Shams* can perhaps best be clarified through a brief examination of a parallel between the text of *Quatre heures à Chatila* itself and a sentence repeated several times in the novel. When the troupe's single actress, Catherine, sees the reaction of Shatila's residents to the troupe's desire to hear their stories, her response is to have second thoughts about the production: "'*Nous sommes des voyeurs*,' Catherine said to the tall man, who tried to translate what she had said, to the effect that it was the tragedy of intellectuals and artists that they had to go and look and react, and

¹⁰ Genet's irrelevance here is highlighted when a member of the French delegation asks Khalil, "You know Genet, I'm sure," to which his response is, "I nodded, though it was the first time I'd heard the name" (Khoury 246; Arabic 245).

then they'd forget" (253; Arabic 253). This quote echoes Genet in two ways. First, the sentence, repeated more than once—*Nous sommes des voyeurs*—written in Latin script in the original text just as it appears here, is a conspicuous iteration of the essay.¹¹ The setting for part of Genet's description is another hospital, the Akka hospital, occupied by the Israelis during the massacre:

I have seen a lot of collapsed apartment buildings, gutted houses with eiderdown floating out, and was indifferent, but when I saw the ones in West Beirut and Shatila, I saw the horror. The dead generally become familiar to me, even friendly, but when I saw the ones in the camps I could discern nothing but the hatred and joy of those who had killed them. A barbaric celebration had unfolded there: rage, drunkenness, dances, song, curses, laments, moans, in honor of the voyeurs laughing on the top floor of the Akka hospital. (225)

The voyeurs in this case are, of course, the Israeli forces, said to have, at worst, masterminded the massacre, or at best, to have been complicit in its execution. They at the very least illuminated the camps with flares to provide the Phalangists with light from multistory buildings, like the hospital mentioned above, which served as observation posts. Catherine's damning self-accusation creates a symmetry between the theater troupe's project and the depiction of the massacre's original perpetrators in Genet's text.

The maleficence latent in the troupe's plans for the text's performance is embedded in Genet's philosophy of the danger of political theater discussed above, the significance of which reoccurs in the second part of Catherine's quote: "the tragedy of artists and intellectuals is that they must go, look, react, then they can forget" (*innahā mā'sāt al-muthaqqifīn wa-l-fannānīn, 'alaynā an nadhbhab wa natafarraj wa nanfā'il, thumma nansā*) (Khoury 253; Arabic 253). Whereas the text had the goal of the massacre's immortalization, the performance would engender the event's erasure. Functionally, it stands opposite the tradition of oral epic, the ultimate goal of which is to remember. What redeems *Quatre heures à Chatila* in the novel is that, due to Catherine's trepidation, it is not, ultimately, performed.¹²

¹¹ Though later in the text the word *baṣṣāṣūn* is used.

¹² Even this, however, is not without contradiction. Though Catherine's initial refusal to perform is grounded in her unease with the latent voyeurism in the act, she later changes her explanation and says, "I decided not to take the part. I can't see the victim as someone turned executioner because that would mean history is meaningless" (Khoury 424). To which Khalil responds, "In your view, our death doesn't deserve to have a play put on about it" (428).

The Return to Oral Epic: the Archetype of the Trickster

The one performance in the text presented as capable of offering a sound and productive representation of Shatila's tragedy can be found in a return to the tradition of oral epic. Where Khalil fails, Salīm As'ad succeeds. Khalil initially calls Salīm As'ad's performance "a trite representation of the massacre," until he sees it (292; Arabic 293). His response afterward is significant: "The French actors should have come to see this play, *The Old Man's Return to His Youth*. 'This is the play of the massacre,' I'd have told Catherine if she'd been standing at my side watching Salīm's transformation from youth to old age and from old age to youth, as though he were purchasing his life by performing it" (293; Arabic 293). Salīm's hair turned white during the massacre, when he was five years old. In Salīm's version of the story, his mother had run with him through the shooting and he awoke in the hospital; in other versions, he was found under the bodies, his mother dead. In either case, in the hospital they found him with hair "as white as snow." At five o'clock on the first Thursday of every month he performs his sketch in front of the mosque, the ostensible aim of which is to sell hair dye. Khalil observes the performance:

The youth bewitched me. He played his part amazingly well. He comes forward, his back hunched, walking in circles and moaning. Then he draws an imaginary circle around himself and walks around and around inside it. He goes around in circles without getting tired until the number of onlookers is sufficient. Then the show begins. A voice like a death rattle. A back hunched and broken. A face—the face is the real genius. He turns and swallows his face, sucking in his lips and swallowing them so that it becomes a mask, as though he's put on the mask of old age. . . . He goes around in circles, groaning, his legs shaking, staggering, almost falling but not falling. Then says in a low voice, "My children, my children. Your old father is about to die. Come, my children." (291; Arabic 293)

He then involves the spectators, imploring one of the members of the audience to pour a bucket of water over his head; he rubs the shampoo into his hair, staining it black. After another sequence of highly exaggerated, yet effective, acting, he leaps up and declares, "The old man's returned to his youth! Welcome, welcome to eternal youth!" (293; Arabic 293).

The question is, then, how is this—a performance with no direct reference to Shatila—the play of the massacre. If in Khalil's attempted story cycle, Yūnis is the archetypal hero, and he and Nahīlah fit the roles of archetypal lovers, Salīm is representative of another, far more slippery, archetype: that of the trickster. In M.C. Lyons's definitive three volume study of Arabian epic, the trickster is a narrative agent present in all but one story cycle, *Sirāt Sayf*

al-Tijān, the relative lack of success of which Lyons connects to the absence of this archetypal figure (2: 118).¹³

The trickster, in keeping with its nature, eludes precise definition and categorization. For Jung, the trickster as an archetypal psychic structure is identified with his notion of the “shadow,” the part of the personality representative of an earlier, pre-rational level of life, still present but hidden in the unconscious. This aspect of the personality reveals itself in nonsensical irrational behavior, at one and the same time masking and pointing to the more deeply buried part of the self, the ‘anima.’ Robert Pelton summarizes Jung’s interpretation as follows:

Even in his still incompletely evolved state, the trickster holds forth the possibility of transforming the meaningless into the meaningful. His very objectification in mythic form reveals movement from primordial unconsciousness toward integrated consciousness. His buffoonery is partly the mockery with which this more mature state looks at the ignorance of the past, partly a promise that the dark side of life still holds a blessing for the future. (229)

Jung’s definition is problematic insofar as the trickster does not necessarily represent a moment in an evolutionary process, a remnant of an earlier level of consciousness. The essence of the trickster lies within his contradictoriness and his symbolic function in the contexts in which he is found, and has no relationship to levels of societal development. He embraces contrary, normally oppositional poles: he is both harmful and helpful, impossible to subdue, at once cunning and stupid, the very spirit of disorder, but also a revealer of truth. He is an outsider, a transgressor, and he is comical; in the Arabic tradition his incarnation can be seen not only in almost all of the epic cycles without fail, but even in the figures of Jūḥā, or al-Ḥamadhānī’s Abū-’l-Faṭḥ al-Iskandarī.

¹³ Salīm’s performance engages traditional storytelling in a manner that becomes particularly clear when read alongside Richard Burton’s description of a nineteenth-century performance of an oral epic: “Here the market people form a ring about the reciter, a stalwart man affecting little raiment besides a broad waist-belt into which his lower chifions are tucked, and noticeable only for his shock hair, wild eyes, broad grin and generally disreputable aspect. He usually handles a short stick; and, when drummer and piper are absent, he carries a tiny tomtom shaped like an hour-glass, upon which he taps the periods. This Scealuide, as the Irish call him, opens the drama with extempore prayer, proving that he and the audience are good Moslems: he speaks slowly and with emphasis, varying the diction with breaks of animation, abundant action and the most comical grimace: he advances, retires and wheels about, illustrating every point with pantomime; and his features, voice and gestures are so expressive that even Europeans who cannot understand a word of Arabic divine the meaning of the tale. The audience stands breathless and motionless surprising strangers by the ingenuousness and freshness of feeling hidden under their hard and savage exterior. The performance usually ends with the embryo actor going round for alms.” Quoted in Lyons, M.C., *Arabian Epic*, Volume 1, p. 2.

Salīm As‘ad is emblematic of the type. Khalīl notes, “Salim As‘ad bewitched me with his stories and his play and his white hair” (Khoury 295; Arabic 295). Part conman, he has been arrested for selling a medicine he dubbed Ekza, a mixture of water and soya oil, which he claimed could eradicate all pain. He is a liar who creates stories about having lived in America for two years with a mother who was killed seventeen years beforehand. He is, moreover, a prankster who cannot be taken too seriously. And when Khalīl hires him to work in the hospital, the result is chaos:

He worked here for about a month and turned the place upside down: He stole medicines and sold them, he flirted with Zainab, he told anecdotes, and he went into patients’ rooms and sold them medicines he’d made himself from herbs that he claimed were more effective than the ones we used. I knew all about it but was incapable of reining him in. (294; Arabic 294)

Despite the flaws in Jung’s hypotheses, his observation that the trickster holds the ability to transform, to change the meaningless into the meaningful is apt, for regardless of Salīm’s negative traits, in a manner typical of the trickster archetype, he has the uncanny ability to do just that. His play, *The Old Man’s Return to His Youth*, is, at root, about recovery and rebirth, the presence of optimism and hope where reasonably there should be none. It is the only way to cope with the absurd circumstances in Shatila, and as such, it encapsulates Dunyā’s mother’s reaction the day they finally succeed in building a wall around the mass grave: “Umm Ahmad al-Sa’idi let out a long *youyou* and cried, ‘We won, everybody. We won, and we have a grave’” (249; Arabic 249). She has just lost seven children, her husband and her mother in the massacre, yet she is “trilling and leaping about,” celebrating Shatila’s small victory. But, even the wall of this grave, the symbol of their triumph, however trifling, is later destroyed during the War of the Camps. The wall is replaced by a fence, and the grave transformed into a soccer field, nevertheless a kind of renewal in its own right (251-2; Arabic 251).

The trickster is an embodiment of the contradictory and anomalous, an enabler of transformation and reconciliation:

[He] pulls the most unyielding matter—disease, ugliness, greed, lust, lying, jealousy—into the orbit of life, and because . . . he links these anomalies in their most commonplace forms to the taxonomies of communal life, he reveals how it is precisely on the plane of the daily and the specific that time is cooled down, social order enlarged, and all experience opened to transformation. (Pelton 252)

In myth, the trickster incorporates death and defeat into the structure of normal life and maintains a connection to magic and the supernatural; he is a mediator between the sacred and the profane. These are the traits that both

marginalize him and give him his transformative power. It is telling that after Dunyā's final hospitalization, Salīm is the only one to whom she responds:

He'd go into her room and do his act and sell her mother weird and wonderful things. She was happy and said that her daughter had finally smiled. "It's the first time she's smiled, Doctor. Please don't stop him from coming to her room." She said Dunya responded to the medicine Dr. Salim prescribed for her. "Dr. Who?" I [Khalil] asked. "Dr. Salim. Really, he's better than all the other doctors!" said the mother. When I asked about the amazing medicine he'd made for Dunya, he looked at me from behind the mask of the old man I'd seen in front of the mosque. "Leave me in peace. You don't understand." And I didn't. (294-5; Arabic 295)

Salīm, playing the role of the trickster, can take the guise of transcendental healer or revealer of faulty assumptions: he is able to restore some equilibrium to Dunyā after the destruction brought on by her participation in Dr. Munā's project; and it is Salīm, also, who tries to force Khalil to recognize the truth of his situation:

Work, Doctor? You think you're working, but you're a fool (sorry, Doctor, I say whatever pops into my head). You're a fool, and you're cheating everybody by making them believe they're in a real hospital. You sell them things you don't have. I'm better than you, I sell them the real thing, the white haired man who gets rid of his white hair and feels like he's young again. But you give them nothing, just a continuation of the lie. Stop lying, please; stop lying and let people live their lives. (296; Arabic 296)

He recognizes and reveals the simulacra by which Khalil is not only surrounded, but which he, in fact, perpetuates. The most germane figure to put on a performance of the massacre, the trickster disrupts but ultimately works to restore social order. Additionally, in this case, he restores the oral tradition of storytelling to the community. He gives them back the possibility of collective memory, of a connection with their own history. Where Khalil fails in his attempt to construct an epic based upon standard heroic archetypes unfeasible in the camp, Salīm succeeds, drawing upon the marginal but omnipresent archetypal figure of the trickster, a figure who is always elusive, and who fittingly, after only a month of working in the hospital, disappears without a trace.

Conclusion

Khūrī's engagement with the performative throughout *Bāb al-Shams* is illustrative of the crisis that he sees besetting the modern Arabic text, as he

elaborates in his critical essays. Regarding the effect of the Lebanese civil war on modern Arabic literature, he states: "Our modern memory rooted in the *Nahḍah* (*dhākīratunā al-nahḍawīyyah al-ḥadīthah*) was pierced, then fragmented with the war's escalation... A war of memory that erases memory, none of the pre-existing modes of expression could withstand, the texts were collapsing, the establishments collapsing, and memory collapsing" (Khūrī *al-Dhākīrah* 26). We can expand this to include a similar crisis of memory within the Palestinian diaspora, in which a people's forced exile and separation from their land and history necessarily created an analogous crisis. A new kind of text was needed to preserve the communal memory. Khūrī explains his view of the novelist's role as follows: "The novelist has begun to resemble a historian or sociological analyst. But he writes his history outside the rigidity of the history of power, he writes history for the communal consciousness, to form it" (*al-Dhākīrah* 85).

For Khūrī, the novelist's role is much like that of the epic singer, he is the preserver of tradition, the creator of the community's consciousness of their own history. And for this, it is the oral in its original premodern sense, performative by nature, to which Khūrī turns. Regardless of Khalīl's failure, Salīm's success makes it clear that the tradition of oral performance retains its utility and that with some adaptation it remains the means by which memory can be preserved, even in the most difficult of circumstances.

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