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A Shared Imaginary City: The Role Of The Reader In The Fiction Of Muḥammad Khuḍayyir

Abstract

This study examines the literary output of the Iraqi author Muḥammad Khuḍayyir (b. 1942), and specifically analyzes how his fiction—by turns puzzle-like, metafictional, and open-ended—invites the reader to create meaning. This project employs the theoretical approach of reader-response theory to examine his texts, specifically addressing the work of three theorists: firstly, Umberto Eco and his concept of the “open work” as a distinct quality of modern literature; secondly, Wolfgang Iser, who proposed that texts destabilize the reader’s horizon of expectations, and thus prompt her to fill in its gaps; and finally, Stanley Fish, who argues that a reader’s response is structured by his participation in an interpretive community. These insights are applied to stories from Khuḍayyir’s collections (*al-Mamlaka al-sawdā’* [1972], *Fī darajat khams wa-arba‘īn mi’awī* [1978], and *Ru’yā kharīf* [1995]), as well as to his full-length texts (*Baṣrayāthā* [1993], *Kurrāsāt Kānūn* [2000], and *Ḥadā’iq al-wujūh* [2008]). Notably, his longer works blend elements of fiction, literary essay, memoir, and history, and thus subvert familiar expectations of genre. The prolonged violence wrought by war and international sanctions—particularly the destruction that his home city of Basra endured during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988)—has prompted Khuḍayyir’s thematic preoccupation with an organic local past that stubbornly endures against forces that seek to erase it. This sense of endurance is encapsulated in his magnum opus, *Baṣrayāthā*. The city of *Baṣrayāthā*, Basra’s fictional analogue, appears not only in the book of the same name, but in several of his more recent stories. In them, Khuḍayyir envisions memory as urban space, and the city as a palimpsest of all its past historical iterations. Drawing on Fish, this study suggests that *Baṣrayāthā* and its interpretive community are mutually generative: not only does a pre-existing set of readers familiar with the Iraqi context create aesthetic meaning from a text such as *Baṣrayāthā*, but the book in turn creates its interpretive community, as evidenced by some of the extra-textual phenomena influenced by Khuḍayyir’s literary project.

Degree Type

Dissertation

Degree Name

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

Graduate Group

Near Eastern Languages & Civilizations

First Advisor

Roger M. Allen

Keywords

Arabic, Basra, fiction, Iraq, Muhammad Khudayyir, reader response theory

Subject Categories

Modern Literature | Near Eastern Languages and Societies

A SHARED IMAGINARY CITY:
THE ROLE OF THE READER IN THE
FICTION OF MUHAMMAD KHUDAYYIR

John Rossetti

A DISSERTATION

in

Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

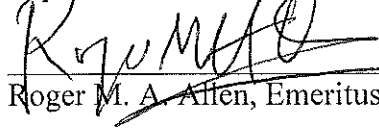
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Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

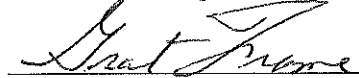
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ABSTRACT

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MUḤAMMAD KHUḌAYYIR

John Rossetti

Roger Allen

This study examines the literary output of the Iraqi author Muḥammad Khuḏayyir (b. 1942), and specifically analyzes how his fiction—by turns puzzle-like, metafictional, and open-ended—invites the reader to create meaning. This project employs the theoretical approach of reader-response theory to examine his texts, specifically addressing the work of three theorists: firstly, Umberto Eco and his concept of the “open work” as a distinct quality of modern literature; secondly, Wolfgang Iser, who proposed that texts destabilize the reader’s horizon of expectations, and thus prompt her to fill in its gaps; and finally, Stanley Fish, who argues that a reader’s response is structured by his participation in an interpretive community. These insights are applied to stories from Khuḏayyir’s collections (*al-Mamlaka al-sawdāʾ* [1972], *Fī darajat khams wa-arbaʿīn miʿawī* [1978], and *Ruʿyā kharīf* [1995]), as well as to his full-length texts (*Baṣrayāthā* [1993], *Kurrāsāt Kānūn* [2000], and *Ḥadāʾiq al-wujūh* [2008]). Notably, his longer works blend

elements of fiction, literary essay, memoir, and history, and thus subvert familiar expectations of genre. The prolonged violence wrought by war and international sanctions—particularly the destruction that his home city of Basra endured during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988)—has prompted Khudayyir's thematic preoccupation with an organic local past that stubbornly endures against forces that seek to erase it. This sense of endurance is encapsulated in his magnum opus, *Başrayāthā*. The city of Başrayāthā, Basra's fictional analogue, appears not only in the book of the same name, but in several of his more recent stories. In them, Khudayyir envisions memory as urban space, and the city as a palimpsest of all its past historical iterations. Drawing on Fish, this study suggests that Başrayāthā and its interpretive community are mutually generative: not only does a pre-existing set of readers familiar with the Iraqi context create aesthetic meaning from a text such as *Başrayāthā*, but the book in turn creates its interpretive community, as evidenced by some of the extra-textual phenomena influenced by Khudayyir's literary project.

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Introduction

Hundreds of eyes have looked at it, extracting from its letters a refined elixir for the mind or memory. A series of substances and transmigrating souls pass into this literary work—the author is not the first of them, nor is the final reader the last, but between them is a continuous stream or successive series of recipients. Each of them relates it to himself or imagines it as something for his life...¹

Why does a shared imaginary city appear to every one? Because the sources of this dream are one: the desert surrounding the city's walls, its domes, the tunes pouring from towers, earth, forests, and clouds are possessions held in common among dreamers, limitless symbols, realizations driven by winds from one imaginative region to another.²

—from *al-Ḥikāya al-Jadīda* (*The New Tale*)

This study examines the literary output of the Iraqi author Muḥammad Khuḍayyir (b. 1942), and specifically analyzes how his fiction—by turns puzzle-like, metafictional, and open-ended—invites the reader to create meaning. In contrast to the often heavy-handed social realist mode that was dominant among his fellow Iraqi writers when he began his career in the 1960s, Khuḍayyir's ambiguous fiction—often drawing on elements of magical realism, surrealism, and science fiction—is constructed

¹ Muḥammad Khuḍayyir, *al-Ḥikāya al-jadīda: naqd adabī* (Amman: Mu'assasat 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Shūmān, 1995), 33-4. Throughout this study, the translations of Arabic-language texts are my own, with the exception of *Başrayāthā*, for which I quote from William Hutchins's published English translation.

² *Ibid.*, 54.

so as to maximize the participation of the reader in creating literary meaning.

Khuḍayyir's readers are not simply passive recipients of a narrative that does all its work for them, but instead play an active role in the experience of the text.³

Although this study places emphasis on the role of the reader in constructing meaning from Muḥammad Khuḍayyir's work, it acknowledges that the historical and cultural background of contemporary Iraq has informed his writing, both in his selection of subject matter and in his recurring themes. Likewise, as this study will show, Khuḍayyir's interpretive community of readers shares an awareness of that cultural context, which provides the grounding for that community's meaning-making. Because Khuḍayyir's biography reflects these historical and political realities, it merits a brief overview here. He was born in a working-class neighborhood in central Basra to a family that had recently arrived from the countryside. Both of his parents were illiterate, although he—in keeping with the rise in education levels in Iraq in the 20th century—received a formal education, and worked most of his adult life as a schoolteacher. He first began publishing fiction in the 1960s, and by 1978 had published two short story collections. From the beginning, his enigmatic fiction showed a marked

³ This study follows the style and formatting rules of the *Chicago Manual of Style, 16th Edition*, using the Gentium Plus font. For the transliteration of Arabic words I have followed the transliteration guidelines of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. "IJMES Translation & Transliteration Guide," http://ijmes.chass.ncsu.edu/IJMES_Translation_and_Transliteration_Guide.htm. Accessed 8/22/16.

break with the socialist realism that had dominated the Iraqi literary sphere in the 1950s and 1960s, as represented by an earlier generation of Iraqi authors such as ‘Abd al-Mālik Nūrī (1921-1998) and Ghā’ib Ṭu‘ma Farmān (1927-1990). After 1978, Khudayyir ceased publishing fiction for almost a decade—a gap that can be explained by the disruption caused by the Iran-Iraq War. His devotion to his home city of Basra has meant that, unlike many of his contemporaries, he did not leave Iraq to live in exile, but remained in place, earning him the sobriquet “the palm tree of Basra” (*nakhlat al-Baṣra*) in honor of his deep roots in the city. He began publishing again near the end of the Iran-Iraq War: since 1993, he has published a third short story collection, three full-length composite texts, and a collection of essays and lectures on literature.

His post-1993 writing career is characterized by a number of consistent thematic concerns, including the endurance of memory, the destruction caused by war, and a renewed focus on place. Nowhere are these themes more strongly expressed than in his best-known work, *Baṣrayāthā: ṣūrat madīna* (*Basrayatha: Portrait of a City*, 1993). His emphasis on place and “localness” is expressed in the name “Baṣrayāthā” itself, which Khudayyir uses for his imagined literary counterpart to his home city of Basra, not only as the title of the full-length composite text, but as the setting for some of his more recent stories.

Methodologically, this study will employ the broad rubric of reader response theory in analyzing how Khudayyir's texts invite readers to create literary meaning. Reader response theory emerged in the 1960s in response to (and largely as a rejection of) New Criticism, a formalist approach to literature which was predominant in the field of Anglo-American scholarship in the 1950s and 1960s. With its focus on the text as the sole origin of meaning, New Criticism rejected any analysis that laid emphasis on the reader and his or her response to the text, labeling such an approach an example of the "affective fallacy," that is, a misguided belief in the significance of the reader's reaction to the text. The reader's response was to be rejected as being too closely linked to an individual reader's psychology, and therefore too idiosyncratic to be of any use in understanding a particular text.

Reader response theory—a broad term encompassing a number of different scholarly approaches—aimed to topple New Criticism's overemphasis on the text alone. In arguing that Khudayyir's fiction is written so as to ensure the reader's participation in constructing meaning, this study in turn addresses the ideas of several major theorists of reader response in chronological order and applies them to different texts by Khudayyir.

This study is organized into three separate parts—Theory, Context, and Application—which serve to establish a methodology and provide historical and biographical background before turning to an analysis of the texts themselves. The first part (Theory) consists of a single chapter (Chapter One, “Reader Response Theory and Reception Theory”), which establishes the theoretical background, starting with the formalist approach of New Criticism (Section 1.2) and the emergence of reader response theory as a reaction to it (Section 1.3). It then provides an overview of the salient features of the ideas of three of the most prominent theorists of reader response—Umberto Eco, Wolfgang Iser, and Stanley Fish—whose work forms the theoretical underpinnings of this study.

Section 1.4 examines Umberto Eco’s notion of “the open work” (*l’opera aperta*), developed in his 1962 text of the same name, which viewed “openness” as a distinct quality of modern literature and art, and which necessitated the involvement of the reader in the creation of meaning. Like the earlier Russian Formalists, Eco located a text’s “literariness” in its violation of expected norms, which demanded further imaginative work from the reader.

Section 1.5 presents an overview of the Konstanz School—a group of German scholars based at the University of Konstanz in the late 1960s who were key proponents

of reader response theory (*Rezeptionsästhetik*). Among them were Konstanz School theorist Hans-Robert Jauss (Section 1.6), who developed the concept of the “horizon of expectations” (*Erwartungshorizont*), as a set of cultural, literary, and ethical expectations which the reader brings with her to the text; and Wolfgang Iser (Section 1.7) whose theory of “aesthetic response” (*Wirkungstheorie*) proposed that aesthetic meaning exists virtually between the text and the reader. In Iser’s formulation, a literary text has gaps which the reader must fill in, making reading a dynamic process of negotiation and a text a set of signs inviting the reader to produce meaning out of indeterminacy, while offering coherent deformations of the reader’s accepted norms.

Section 1.8 reviews the work of the American scholar Stanley Fish, who found fault with Iser’s (and Eco’s) hedging view of the reader’s role. In contrast, Fish’s work emphasized that none of the features of a text can be said to pre-exist the reader: we see a simile or foreshadowing in a text, for example, because we are part of an interpretive community that agrees on what those features are and finds meaning in them. Fish’s idea that an interpretive community shapes responses to the text eliminates the problem that had previously plagued reader response theories: namely, how to rule out subjective or eccentric readings.

The second part (Context) presents the historical and cultural background behind these texts, as well as biographical material on the author. This study does not adhere to a totalizing view of the relationship between Khudayyir's texts and Iraqi history or the author's biography, but instead adopts the more nuanced insights of New Historicism, in which texts negotiate with cultural institutions and conventions, rather than simply reflect external social realities.

Chapter Two offers a diachronic overview of the development of modern Iraqi fiction over the course of the 20th century. The relatively late development of modern fiction in Iraq (Section 2.2) was due in part to its geographical isolation from other parts of the Arab world in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The mandate years witnessed the growing maturity of Iraqi fiction (Section 2.3), as well as a turn towards romanticism in the 1930s and 1940s (Section 2.4.) Romanticism was supplanted in turn by socialist realism (Section 2.5), which dominated Iraqi fiction in the 1960s, in part due to an embrace of Marxist ideas by the literary class, as well as Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of literary "commitment" (*al-iltizām*). The movement away from socialist realism (Section 2.6) reflected a more metaphoric turn in Iraqi literature, and a growing awareness of the limitations of mimesis in fiction. The systematic repression and co-optation of writers by the Ba'athist state (Section 2.7) prompted the initial wave of

authors living in exile, while complicating the notion of the author as an “organic intellectual.” State violence and co-optation—particularly during the years of the Iran-Iraq War—led to authorial self-censorship and self-imposed silences (Section 2.8), while the decade of international sanctions after 1991 led to a weakening of the state censorship apparatus, even as ongoing isolation and state authoritarianism introduced elements of the strange and fantastic into Iraqi fiction (Section 2.9). The violence and upheavals that have marked Iraqi life since the U.S.-led invasion in 2003 (Section 2.10) have overturned hierarchies of “insider” and “outsider” authors, while further complicating the conception of the author as an “organic intellectual.”

Chapter Three provides biographical background on Khudayyir. Although reader response theory generally de-emphasizes the importance of an author’s biography, Khudayyir presents a noteworthy exception, since many of his texts blend elements of memoir and personal experience with fiction. Likewise, many of his writings closely parallel or were directly inspired by external events, such as the damage and destruction visited upon Basra during the Iran-Iraq War, and the Ba‘thist state commemoration of the 1991 Gulf War which led to the publication of *Kurrāsāt kānūn*. Thus, this chapter discusses his parents’ peasant background, his education and training as a teacher, as well as his early flirtation with Communism, which he believes

led him to undesirable postings as a young teacher in remote villages in the marshes of southern Iraq (Section 3.2.) It also addresses his publishing history, and the gap in his published work during the years of the Iran-Iraq War (Section 3.3.) Finally, it analyzes Khuḍayyir's own ideas on authorship and texts (Section 3.5), as expressed in his essays, interviews, and other public material, as well as his relationship with Basra (Section 3.4), Iraqi identity (Section 3.6), the state (Section 3.7), and his literary peers (Section 3.8.)

The third part (Application) examines how reader response theories illuminate specific texts by Khuḍayyir and invite the reader's role in creating meaning. In it, Chapter 4 examines the ambiguity and indeterminacy of several of Khuḍayyir's short stories in light of Umberto Eco's theories. The ambiguous qualities of early stories such as "al-Tābūt" ("The Coffin," Section 4.2), "al-Asmāk" ("The Fish," Section 4.3), "Ilā l-ma'wā" ("To the Shelter," Section 4.4), and "Iḥtiḍār al-rassām" ("Death of the Artist," Section 4.5) characterize them as open works in Eco's definition. The deliberate indeterminacy of plot, structure, and narrative thus requires the active engagement of the reader, while revealing how closely Khuḍayyir's early work adhered to the "halo of indefiniteness" that Eco considered a hallmark of modern art and literature.

Chapter 5 applies to Khudayyir's fiction the insights of Wolfgang Iser's work, in which the reader's role is activated not simply by ambiguity, but by the text's subversion of the reader's expectations of genre, narrative, and plot. As such, this chapter also addresses Jauss's concept of the horizon of expectations. The chapter examines how Khudayyir's texts use a number of strategies to destabilize the reader's horizon of expectations. In particular, short stories such as "Zahirat al-qirṭa" ("Afternoon of the Honey Badger"), "Shajarat al-asmā" ("Tree of Names"), and "al-Mamlaka al-sawdā" ("The Black Kingdom") incorporate fantastic or supernatural elements (Section 5.2), even though Khudayyir is not generally known for writing in the magical realism tradition. The effect is to compel the reader to reconcile an unexpected narrative logic with the expectations she brings to reading.

Iser's concept of a text's "defamiliarization" is also accomplished through narrative doubling (Section 5.3), in which scenes are repeated, or when one character seems to become another character from earlier on in a story. The story "al-Qiṭārāt al-layliyya" ("Night Trains," 1972) features a couple at a theater watching a film that seems to be about them. A longer story, "Manzil al-nisā" ("House of Women," 1978), presents a formally unusual technique of doubling, in which the story consists of two

parallel narratives that are physically separated by a horizontal line that runs across the middle of each page of text.

Iser's notion of "coherent deformations" of familiar norms applies as well to Khuḍayyir's texts that violate commonly accepted boundaries of genre. Specifically, Section 5.4 looks at two of Khuḍayyir's more recent book-length texts, *Kurrāsat kānūn* (*January Notebook*, 2001) and *Ḥadā'iq al-wujūh* (*Gardens of Faces*, 2008). These full-length composite texts (*nuṣūṣ jāmi'a*) blend elements of memoir, fiction, essay writing, and history, and thus subvert genre expectations. Both exemplify Iser's idea of a text as a response-inviting structure.

The application of reader response theory to Khuḍayyir's texts culminates in Chapter 6, which draws on Stanley Fish's "interpretive community," defined as a group of readers that share similar interpretive strategies for endowing texts with meaning. The text gives readers the opportunity to make meaning, and it is through a shared set of strategies that a community of readers can reach similar understandings about what a text means. Section 6.2 examines the motif of cities in Khuḍayyir's post-1993 writings (both his fiction and his essays on literature), arguing that Khuḍayyir sees cities (such as the fictional Baṣrayāthā) as a symbol of an interpretive community: the city is a

repository of symbols and collective memory to provide organic meaning, and is thus an ideal metaphor for the notion of an interpretive community.

Section 6.3 addresses the theme of an organic past that is evoked by his fiction, particularly as a reassertion of memories that state violence and war have sought to erase or overwrite. Khuḍayyir's limning of Iraqi pasts—Mesopotamian, early Islamic, and late Ottoman—invites the reader to rescue those pasts from oblivion. Specifically, this section examines three stories—"Ru'yā al-burj" ("Vision of the Tower"), "Ḥikāyāt Yūsuf" (Yusuf's Tales"), and "al-Ḥukamā' al-thalātha" ("The Three Wise Men")—from his 1995 collection *Ru'yā kharīf* (*Autumn Vision*), all of which deal in varying degrees with themes of history, forgetting, and the fragile endurance (and rediscovery) of an organic essence. In Fish's terms, an interpretive community of readers familiar with the difficulties faced by Iraq in the wake of the destruction and oblivion caused by war will bring a specific set of interpretive lenses to these stories and thus find particular meaning in them.

Other stories from *Ru'yā kharīf* also provide material for an interpretive community of readers aware of the historical context in which Khuḍayyir wrote. In particular, Section 6.4 addresses Khuḍayyir's fiction that traffics in imagery of fear, paranoia, and danger, and presents a more sinister view of the imagined city of

Başrayāthā, focusing on the long story “*Şaḥīfat al-tasā’ulāt*” (“Page of Questions”). The story’s paranoid atmosphere is rare in *Khuḍayyir*’s fiction, and the cognitive estrangement it narrates suggests some links to the genre of science fiction. Its engagement with signifying practices and conventions suggest that it should not be viewed as monologically reflecting an external reality, but instead should interact with an interpretive community that shares those conventions.

The final part of the chapter, Section 6.5, addresses *Başrayāthā: şūrat madīna*, and its mutually generative relationship with its interpretive community. *Khuḍayyir* has referred to *Başrayāthā* as a novel, but its composite form allows for a multifaceted, varied portrait of the imagined city, including a focus on specific urban sites and marginalized individuals as well as an account of a day under siege during the Iran-Iraq War. *Başrayāthā* not only addresses a pre-existing interpretive community of readers that will respond to its themes of memory and endurance, but it in turn focuses the attention of readers, creating an interpretive community attuned to its themes and preoccupations. This study ends by considering some of the extra-textual influences of *Khuḍayyir*’s literary project, and of *Başrayāthā* more particularly, such as a renewed interest in place evinced by Iraqi writers after 2003. The bidirectionality of the relationship between interpretive community and *Başrayāthā* demonstrates the

dynamism of Fish's theory, while confirming the centrality of the reader's role in assigning meaning to Khudayyir's unusual fiction.

Part I: Theory

Chapter 1: Reader-Response Theory and Reception Theory

1.1 Introduction

This chapter will present an overview of the varieties of reader response theory that I will apply to Khudayyir's texts. Muḥammad Khudayyir's fiction emerged within the specific context of Iraq over the last five decades—a historical and cultural background that informs his literary techniques and subject matter. His writing frequently places high demands on its readers—not only because of his numerous references to authors both contemporary and ancient, from Arabic, European, Persian, Latin American, and other literary traditions, but also because of the enigmatic, puzzle-like structure of his stories. Much of his more recent writing, starting from his 1993 novel *Başrayāthā*, eschews a straightforward narrative in favor of a collage of images on memory, storytelling, and history. His writing also frequently crosses generic boundaries, blending elements of the short story, memoir, travelogue, and literary criticism. In that light, the analytical approaches broadly grouped under the rubric of “reader response theory” offer an array of tools to analyze Khudayyir's writing, by illuminating the reader that his fiction creates or implies, as well as by highlighting those aspects of his writing which invite the reader to create meaning in the process of

experiencing the text, as opposed to extracting a meaning from the text once it has been read.

In general, the role of the reader has not received sufficient attention in studies of modern Arabic fiction. While Arabic has commonly accepted renderings for the terms “reader-response criticism” and “reception theory” (*naqd istijābat al-qāriʿ* and *naẓariyyat al-talaqqī*, respectively), those terms have not found widespread use in Arabic-language studies of contemporary literature. However, Khudayyir’s writings are particularly suited to a reader-response approach. In light of their often ludic, enigmatic qualities, and their defiance of conventional narrative voice and structure, Khudayyir’s texts place high meaning-making demands on the reader. Likewise, his later writings such as *Baṣrayāthā* and the stories of *Ruʿyā kharīf* explicitly reflect the reader-response concept that texts require an interpretive community that will assign meaning to them; his texts also exemplify Stanley Fish’s further idea—to be discussed in Chapter 6—that a text can create its own interpretive community.

Although reader-response theory offers a new approach to the study of Khudayyir’s work, his texts have previously been the subject of critical study in Arabic, primarily by Iraqi scholars. Those studies have often examined Khudayyir’s work from phenomenological or socialist-realist approaches. In his 1975 study of Iraqi fiction and

realism, for example, Yāsīn Naṣīr argues that Khuḍayyir is ultimately a writer in the vein of socialist realism, since his characters come from the lower social classes. But Naṣīr takes Khuḍayyir to task for allowing his stories to depart from realism, since realism, in his view, offers the best way to provide focus to his working-class characters.⁴ In his 1980 study of the Iraqi short story, Bāsīm Ḥammūdī also criticized Khuḍayyir for taking part in the “ambiguous trajectory” of the Iraqi short story that abandoned realism and displayed a distinct lack of the political commitment (*al-iltizām*) that had characterized Iraqi fiction in the previous decade.⁵ Like Naṣīr, Ḥammūdī take the presence of lower-class characters in Khuḍayyir’s fiction as an indication that he should be read primarily as a socialist realist author. Thus, both critics force his work into a socialist realism mold that Khuḍayyir (like many of his peers) had already abandoned, while downplaying the demands that Khuḍayyir’s fiction places on the reader.

Iraqi critics have also examined Khuḍayyir’s early writings through the lens of phenomenology, which aims to scrutinize the author’s mental world, and view the text

⁴ Yāsīn Naṣīr, *al-Qāṣṣ wa-l-wāqī‘: maqālāt fī l-qīṣṣa wa-l-riwāya al-‘irāqīyya* (Baghdad: Wizārat al-I‘lām, 1975), 54-56.

⁵ Bāsīm ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Ḥammūdī, *Rihla ma‘ al-qīṣṣa al-‘irāqīyya* (Baghdad: Dār al-Rashīd lil-nashr, 1980), 148.

as “a pure embodiment of the author’s consciousness.”⁶ Shujāʿ Muslim al-ʿĀnī, for example, in his 1989 work, *Fī adabīnā al-qīṣāʿī al-muʿāṣir*, focuses on the “constants” of Khudayyir’s fictional world, the preoccupations that run through his texts, such as the desert, Bedouin faces, lower-class cafes, and the Shaṭṭ al-ʿArab river.⁷ As Terry Eagleton has noted, however, the phenomenological approach has the disadvantage of locating meaning in the author’s consciousness, while jettisoning human history and the human interactions that give rise to meaning.⁸ As this chapter will demonstrate, meaning-making is instead the result of a community of readers that interpret meaning by a set of shared values.

1.2 Background: New Criticism and the Affective Fallacy

Reader-response theory in all of its varieties is best understood in light of the scholarly context from which it emerged, as well as the literary theories which preceded it, and which it aimed to challenge and supplant. Its primary theoretical predecessor is the approach known as New Criticism, which dominated Anglo-

⁶ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 51.

⁷ Shujāʿ Muslim al-ʿĀnī, *Fī adabīnā al-qīṣāʿī al-muʿāṣir* (Baghdad: Dār al-Shuʿūn al-Thaqāfiyya al-ʿĀmma, 1989), 167.

⁸ Eagleton, 53.

American literary theory for several decades in the mid-twentieth century.⁹ Almost all writings on reader-response theory frame it as a reaction to (and rejection of) New Criticism.

As with other branches of the humanities, the study of literature became theorized over the course of the 20th century, as scholars of literature—emulating the social sciences—sought to ground their analyses on more rational, objective bases. New Criticism emerged as “a self-consciously rigorous reaction”¹⁰ against traditional literary scholarship with its focus on evaluation, biography and “influence.” New Criticism began to take theoretical shape in the 1920s, and came to play an outsized role in literary studies in the UK and the US in the following decades.¹¹ Its influence waned in the 1970s, battered and ultimately eclipsed by the arrival of what Terry Eagleton has termed “the golden age of cultural theory.”¹²

⁹ Ibid., 40-43. Also, Raman Selden, Peter Widdowson, Peter Baker, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory, 5th Edition* (Harlow, UK: Pearson Longman, 2005), 17.

¹⁰ Claire Colebrook, *New Literary Histories: New Historicism and Contemporary Criticism* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 221.

¹¹ The founders of New Criticism are generally taken to be a group of scholars and poets—including John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren—who were based at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee in the 1920s. (John Crowe Ransom's 1941 study, *The New Criticism*, gave the movement its name.) Wilfred L. Guerin, Earle Labor, Lee Morgan, Jeanne C. Reesman, John R. Willingham, *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature, Fifth Edition* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 101.

¹² Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 1. Peter Widdowson and Peter Brooker refer to this era as “The Moment of Theory,” which they place between the late 1960s and the late 1990s.” Selden, 3.

The defining feature of New Criticism was formalism, that is, an insistence on analyzing a text without regard to contextual factors, which the New Critics considered extraliterary, including the author's biography, historical milieu, or other cultural contexts.¹³ Above all, New Criticism insisted that a text was to be considered an autonomous and nonreferential object, one that had no meaning or function outside itself. More important were the relationships they found between elements within a text, which were characterized by "tension," "paradox," and "irony."¹⁴

The critical vocabulary of New Criticism expanded with the publication of two highly influential essays by Yale English professor William K. Wimsatt, Jr. and his colleague Monroe C. Beardsley: "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946), and "The Affective Fallacy" (1949). While the former term emphasized the irrelevance of the biography or psychology of a text's author, it is the latter term that is most applicable to later reader response theory, as most proponents of reader response theory grounded their arguments in opposition to it. The affective fallacy declared that any analysis that attempted to find significance in a literary text's effect on the reader was misguided:

"The Affective Fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its *results* (what it *is* and what it *does*)... It begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem and ends in

¹³ Guerin, et al., *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature, Fifth Edition*, 101.

¹⁴ Colebrook, 221.

impressionism and relativism. The outcome of either Fallacy, the Intentional or the Affective, is that the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear.”¹⁵

In this view, the effect of the text is synonymous with its psychological effects on the reader, which are too individualized to be of use in crafting an objective analysis of a literary text.

New Criticism’s aim was to reify the text, stripping social or historical context from any analysis of it. However, when applied to the writings of an author such as Khudayyir, the weaknesses of this stringent approach become apparent: Khudayyir’s stories do not offer merely a series of “ambivalences,” “tensions,” and “paradoxes” (to use terms commonly associated with the New Critics)¹⁶, but instead demand the active involvement of the reader in making meaning. Other writings of his are so deeply embedded in a social and historical context (i.e., Basra) that they require a community of readers that can respond to that context and make meaning from it, rather than dismiss that response as an affective fallacy.

¹⁵ Ibid., 21.

¹⁶ Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 42.

1.3: Emergence of Reader Response Theories

New Criticism retained its pre-eminent position in Anglo-American literary criticism for decades, but began to fall out of favor under the onslaught of a broad wave of challenges to formalist approaches that began in the 1960s. Much of the opposition came from literary theories—such as feminist, postcolonial, or Marxist approaches—that insisted on the centrality of the historical, social, and cultural specificities that formalism preferred to downplay.

However, the challenge also came from reader response theories, which, each in their own way, problematized the notion of the recipient of the text. Writing in 1978, Susan R. Suleiman looked back at the then-recent emergence of what she referred to as a “revolution” in literary studies, whereby “the words *reader* and *audience*, once relegated to the status of the unproblematic and obvious, have acceded to a starring role.”¹⁷ Since texts are directed (either implicitly or explicitly) to a reader or audience, the varying nature and role of that recipient must be addressed, rather than simply dismissed as irrelevant.¹⁸

¹⁷ Susan R. Suleiman, “Introduction: Varieties of Audience-Oriented Criticism,” in Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman, *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 3.

¹⁸ In her wide-ranging introduction to *The Reader in the Text*, Suleiman helpfully distinguishes between six “varieties” of audience-oriented criticism that merit mention here: Rhetorical; Semiotic and Structuralist; Phenomenological; Subjective and Psychoanalytic; Sociological and Historical; and

1.4: Umberto Eco and the Open Work

One method of understanding how readers understand a text by an author such as Khudayyir is a semiotic approach, which examines the codes and constructions actual readers employ.¹⁹ Notable for this approach is the Italian semiotician Umberto Eco, whose notion of “the open work” (“*l’opera aperta*”) in the early 1960s presaged many of the ideas of reader response theory. His ideas were first formulated in his 1962 collection titled *Opera aperta*.²⁰

Because it characterizes the production of aesthetic meaning as a joint undertaking by text and reader, Eco’s concept is commonly associated with the more fully developed theories of reader response criticism that came after it, namely those of Wolfgang Iser, Hans-Robert Jauss, and Stanley Fish. Although Eco’s “open work” has been retroactively linked to their writings, Iser, Jauss, and Fish do not seem to have

Hermeneutic. Ibid., 6-7. Of the six categories, two—“Semiotic and Structuralist” and “Phenomenological”—are directly applicable to this study, as they characterize the approach of the scholars discussed at greater length in this chapter: that is, Umberto Eco, Hans-Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser, and Stanley Fish.

¹⁹ As noted in footnote 24, this “Semiotic and Structuralist” approach is one of the six varieties mentioned by Susan R. Suleiman.

²⁰ In this study, I will refer to the English translation, published as *The Open Work* by Harvard University Press in 1989. The first six chapters of the English translation are taken from the 1962 edition of *Opera aperta*, and are followed by five other chapters exploring aspects of “the open work,” all of which were taken from later editions of the Italian version, which was revised, altered, and added to several times.

been unduly influenced by him.²¹ Nevertheless, Eco's insights into the role of the reader and the meaning-making capabilities of her responses merit his inclusion in this study of Muḥammad Khudayyir's texts. (Notably, Khudayyir is familiar with Eco's concept of the open work, and cites it in his introduction to his volume of essays on literature, *al-Ḥikāya al-jadīda*.²²) Thus, without committing myself to Eco's points in their entirety, I provide here an overview of his main ideas.

Eco's concept of the "open work" is premised on the idea that some literary texts are constructed so as to ensure that their meaning is cooperatively generated by the addressee (that is, the reader.) In order for a text to be considered "open," the author must have envisaged the reader's role in generating meaning from the beginning.²³ At the same time, an open work should not be taken to mean that it is open to "unlimited semiosis"²⁴—that is, open to an infinite number of meanings introduced by whatever experiences, education, biases or other factors a reader brings to it.

Eco distinguishes his theory from the truism that every addressee (such as a reader or audience member) receives a work differently, refashioning or interpreting it

²¹ For example, Iser does not cite Eco at all in *The Implied Reader*, and makes only a few, minor references to *The Open Work* in *The Act of Reading*.

²² Khudayyir, *al-Ḥikāya al-jadīda*, 10.

²³ Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1979), 3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

mentally according to that addressee's personal experiences, background, and sensitivities. Indeed, in Eco's view, the capacity of a work of literature to accommodate a diverse array of perspectives and understandings in its readers is a sign of its "aesthetic validity."²⁵ In that sense, every work of art, even if complete and "closed," is conceivably open to an infinite number of interpretations that readers bring to it. Eco's theory instead addresses a quality of openness that an author deliberately creates within a work, one that specifically envisions a meaning-generative role for the reader.²⁶

Eco is reluctant to claim "openness" as a characteristic found in all literary texts. Specifically, he states that openness applies in particular to modern art and literature, which he finds deliberately and systematically ambiguous. All art has what he terms an "openness of the first degree," that is, a structure that permits the reader or viewer the aesthetic pleasure of integrating its messages into meaning. However, contemporary literature has an "openness of the second degree," which situates aesthetic pleasure not in "the final recognition of a form" but in the process of

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁶ In the context of Italian letters, Eco's "open work" represented a challenge to the then-dominant aesthetics of Benedetto Croce. Croce's aesthetics were based on the concept of "pure expression," a unified mental act which communicated itself directly to the reader (or viewer, or listener, depending on the medium), and placed little value on literary genre as a means for structuring reader's expectations. Like New Criticism, Croce's ideas also considered the context of a work, such as the author's biography or intentions, irrelevant.

discovering “ever-changing profiles and possibilities in a single form.”²⁷ Contemporary works, then, produce a distinct aesthetic experience in the reader by means of an openness that is “intentional, explicit, and extreme.”²⁸ Certainly, in that sense, the lack of readerly guideposts provided by Khuḍayyir’s fiction, such as straightforward plotting or a protagonist through whom the narrative is focalized, would qualify for Eco’s notion of openness, particularly when compared with much earlier works of Iraqi fiction, such as Sulaymān Fayḍī’s *al-Riwāya al-iqāziyya* (*The Awakening Story*) from 1919, the didactic nature of which makes it “closed.”²⁹ An open work is inherently dialogic, to borrow the term devised by the Russian literary theorist M.M. Bakhtin. It thus accepts the fact that its language does not exist in a neutral state, but will be adopted and interpreted according to the contexts, intentions, and expectations of its readers.³⁰

Eco takes as a counterexample medieval aesthetics, which were governed by a system of allegory, and which offered the reader “a range of rigidly pre-established and ordained interpretative solutions, [which] never allow the reader to move outside the strict control of the author.”³¹ However, it is not only pre-modern texts that can be

²⁷ Ibid., 74.

²⁸ Ibid., 39.

²⁹ Fayḍī’s novel is discussed in greater detail in Section 2.3.

³⁰ M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, Michael Holquist, ed., Carly Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 294.

³¹ Ibid., 5-6.

considered “closed”: contemporary texts such as light reading or genre fiction that seek to generate a precise response from the reader, or to pull the reader along a “predetermined path,” also lack the quality of openness that demands the reader’s heavy involvement in resolving ambiguity and generating meaning.³²

Eco’s notion of openness encompasses everything from the use of language and diction to the spacing of words, typographical adjustments, and composition in poetry—in short, everything that works to “prevent a single sense from imposing itself” on the reader. In open works, all of those techniques create a “halo of indefiniteness and... make the text pregnant with infinite suggestive possibilities,” indicating the author’s deliberate attempt to open the work up to the addressee’s free responses.³³

Eco attributes this growth of ambiguity as an authorial strategy to a shift in European culture over the last several centuries, whereby the certainties of the pre-modern world were replaced with a shifting moral and philosophical terrain in which values and dogma came to be routinely questioned and destabilized.³⁴ The impact of

³² Eco, *Role of the Reader*, 8. At the same time, as he points out, even a “closed text” can be read “aberrantly”—that is, deliberately decoded in a manner different from the author’s intentions. He cites as examples the possibility of reading Superman comic strips as romance, or a mystery novel as an Oedipal myth.

³³ Eco, *Open Work*, 8-9.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

post-Newtonian scientific discoveries, which called into question commonly accepted understandings of causation, has spilled into other cultural arenas, including literary theory.³⁵ Eco's notion of textual openness is thus highly diachronic and Eurocentric, being highly dependent on the historical phases of European art.

The ambiguity of modern art and literature is accompanied by (and finds expression in) formal innovation. For Eco, the violation of expected conventions—of form, narrative, and style—is the source of ambiguity and thus a distinguishing feature of modern aesthetics. Eco's idea that the unconventionality of a text is the source of its “information” to the reader echoes the work of the Russian Formalists in the 1920s and 1930s, who sought to define literary writing as language that deviates from everyday usage. That is, a text's “literariness” increases in proportion to its deviation from the norms of language, and that deviation alerts the reader to the text's status as “literature.”³⁶ However, where Eco diverges from Russian Formalism is his emphasis on the role of the reader, about which the Russian Formalists had little to say. Specifically, Eco objects to what he sees as Russian Formalism's simplistic *szujet/fabula* division.³⁷ Eco finds problematic the idea that there can be only one possible *fabula* which

³⁵ Ibid., 15 and 18.

³⁶ Selden, 31.

³⁷ Boris Tomashevsky, “Thematics,” in Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, Editors, *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 66.

undergirds the *szujet*, since “according to the power of abstraction that the reader is able to manage, the *fabula* can be established and recognized at different levels.”³⁸ The question, “What really happened?” in a literary text may not always be clear, or can be answered in multiple ways.

The ambiguity, or flexibility, of an open text is enacted in a “suggestive function” that invites the participation of the reader. Appropriately enough for the subject of this study, Eco illustrates this “suggestive function” with the sentence, “That man comes from Basra.” He then contrasts the kinds of associations that an Italian reader might bring to that sentence (such as Orientalist imagery or evocations of *Alf layla wa-layla*) to the very different connotations it would hold for an Iraqi reader.³⁹ In this light, Eco seems to argue that the source of meaning lies in the reader: “The referential diversity of the proposition (and therefore, of its conceptual value) resides not in the proposition itself but in the addressee.”⁴⁰

Eco’s insistence on the centrality of the role of the reader in generating meaning is somewhat undermined, however, by arguments he makes elsewhere in his texts *The Open Work* and *The Role of the Reader*, in which he implies that the author is the

³⁸ Eco, *Role of the Reader*, 28.

³⁹ Eco, *The Open Work*, 30-31.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

ultimate source of meaning. An open work is not an “invitation to indiscriminate participation,” but is constrained by the work of the author, who “proposes a number of possibilities which had already been rationally organized, oriented, and endowed with specifications for proper development.”⁴¹ No matter how “maze-like” the structure of an open text, its very structure is a function of the limits and focuses the author has placed on it, and which the author thus places on the reader as well.

Eco’s writings on the reader and his role in creating literary meaning offer valuable insights into the nature of literary texts that are deliberately indeterminate in their structure, plot, and aesthetics. But with his focus on contemporary European literature, and his insistence on a distinct category of “openness” that characterizes some contemporary works, he seems to set arbitrary limits on the applicability of his ideas.⁴² Likewise, he seems conflicted about the relative importance of the author and the reader in creating literary meaning. Nevertheless, his concept of the “open work” and the demands it places on the reader make it a useful tool for analyzing the purpose and effect of indeterminacy in *Khuḍayyir*’s fiction.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴² According to Eco’s formulation, despite the ambiguity that generations of scholars have found in Shakespeare’s plays, or the multiple layers of meaning that can be found in Abū Nuwās’s poems, the works of neither of these pre-twentieth-century poets could be considered “open.”

1.5: The Konstanz School

In addition to Eco's work, this study also draws on the work of Wolfgang Iser and (to a lesser extent) on Hans-Robert Jauss, both of whom came out of the group known as the Konstanz School, which presented a more fully theorized approach to reader-response theory (as well as its close relative, *Rezeptionsästhetik* ("aesthetics of reception," usually translated into English as "reception theory"). The Konstanz School consisted of several like-minded scholars who began their academic careers on the faculty of the University of Konstanz in Germany, which was established in the late 1960s as a "reform university," founded to offer new approaches to scholarship, learning, and scholarly collaboration. As part of this reform mission, faculty members were organized in research units that crossed disciplinary lines, rather than on the traditional basis of autonomous academic departments. As a result of this cross-disciplinary work, scholars found themselves working together in ways that a traditional university structure would not have countenanced.⁴³

From this setting emerged the vibrant interdisciplinary research group known as the Konstanz School.⁴⁴ Forming a loosely united group, they explored how literary

⁴³ Craig A. Hamilton, "From Iser to Turner and Beyond: Reception Theory Meets Cognitive Criticism," *Style* 36, no. 4 (2002): 642.

⁴⁴ The scholars were Wolfgang Iser (scholar of English literature) Hans-Robert Jauss (scholar of medieval French and Romance languages), Harald Weinrich, and Karlheinz Stierle.

works were received in a given historical and cultural moment, as well as the changing fortunes of individual works across time.⁴⁵ This approach, which they termed *Rezeptionsästhetik* or *Rezeptionsgeschichte* (history of reception), became the hallmark of the Konstanz School, of which Iser and Jauss became the most prominent representatives.⁴⁶

Before turning to the work of Jauss and Iser, respectively, it is worth examining the intellectual underpinnings of the ideas of the Konstanz School, and in particular the scholars whose work laid the foundation for *Rezeptionsästhetik*. Gabriele Schwab points to the influence of three predecessors in particular: the philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), generally regarded as the originator of the concept of phenomenology⁴⁷; Roman Ingarden (1893-1970), scholar of aesthetics and ontology; and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), leading scholar of hermeneutics.⁴⁸

Edmund Husserl's pioneering work in the philosophical field of phenomenology was particularly central in the development of *Rezeptionsästhetik*. Phenomenology seeks

⁴⁵ Suleiman, 35.

⁴⁶ In this dissertation, I will use the English term "reception theory" as the translation for their terms *Rezeptionsästhetik* and *Rezeptionsgeschichte*.

⁴⁷ Christian Beyer, "Edmund Husserl," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/husserl/>>. Accessed 10/15/16.

⁴⁸ Schwab, 75-76. Jeff Malpas, "Hans-Georg Gadamer," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/gadamer/>>. Accessed 10/15/16.

to establish the nature of how a perceiver experiences the world. It argues that there is no such thing as a neutral perception; instead, every perception is premised on a background that provides meaning to it, and informs the horizons of the world that is perceived. The phenomenological approach to literature centers on the perceiver's aesthetic experience of reading, that is, the experience through which a reader will "appropriate" the text and realize it as literature.⁴⁹

1.6: Hans-Robert Jauss and the Horizon of Expectations (*Erwartungshorizont*)

The philosophical insights of Gadamer, Husserl, and (to a lesser extent) Ingarden served as intellectual guideposts for the reception theory being worked out by the Konstanz School scholars in the late 1960s and 1970s. Hans-Robert Jauss, for example, applied Husserl's phenomenology to literary theory in order to develop his concept of the "horizon of expectations" (*Erwartungshorizont*).⁵⁰ Jauss defines the "horizon of expectations" as the set of expectations—cultural, ethical, and literary—that the reader of a work brings to a text. Those literary expectations can include

⁴⁹ Suleiman, 22. Notably, this application of phenomenology, with its focus on the reader, differs from that employed by Bāsim 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Ḥammūdī in his writings on Khudayyir's early texts, as discussed in Section 1.1. Ḥammūdī applies the insights of phenomenology to the author: the role of a critic is to divine the author's inner consciousness as manifested in his work.

⁵⁰ Hans-Robert Jauss, *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970). Hans-Robert Jauss, "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," *New Literary History* 2, no. 1 (1970): 7-37.

assumptions about genre, theme, and style that will inform the reader's understanding of the text. The work is both produced and received on the basis of these expectations: the writer writes with an understanding of the expectations and assumptions of his intended readers (even if he aims to defy or subvert those expectations); readers then make their way through the text with those expectations shaping their experience.⁵¹ Jauss argues that reception underlies our critical understanding of a work, and as a result, traditional criticism must expand to include an aesthetics of reception, one that acknowledges a text's literary status as a "dialogue between work and public."⁵²

Reception theory permits us to study literature diachronically, as a record of the changes in attitudes and receptions that informed how a given work was understood. At the same time, reception theory can be applied synchronically, as a way to examine a cross-section of literary works at a particular historical and cultural moment.⁵³ In either case, the notion of a "horizon of expectations" allows for a more systematic study of the history of reception, examining why an author's reputation changed over time, or how works were received when they first appeared—why they were viewed as "ahead of their time," "passé," or popular in their day. In each case, it is because a

⁵¹ Suleiman, 35.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵³ Jauss, "Literary History...", 27.

particular work frustrated, conformed to, or anticipated a particular set of expectations in readers.⁵⁴

Jauss's argument for reception theory emphasizes the "definable frame of reference of the reader's expectations," which is a culture's set of understandings about genre, form, and themes.⁵⁵ (In this emphasis on a cultural set of expectations, Jauss seems to foreshadow Stanley Fish's notion of "interpretive communities," discussed below.) Even within this presumably stable cultural frame of reference, the text allows for a dynamic interaction, since reading involves a "process of continuous horizon setting and horizon changing" in the reader, as she experiences how the text she is reading operates within—or pushes against the boundaries of—a genre or familiar theme.⁵⁶

Although other scholars have taken issue with Jauss's ideas—Susan Suleiman, in particular, finds his concept of a single cultural horizon of expectations too limiting, since any given society can have more than one set of horizons of expectations, or can

⁵⁴ Suleiman, 36.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 13. Jauss also claims that the horizon of expectations also determines the "literariness" of a given work: for example, a text in which the "aesthetic distance" is large—that is, a work that defies or challenges our familiar set of expectations—has a high aesthetic value. By contrast, a work that makes no demands of our horizon of expectations is instead what we would call "light reading," or simply genre fiction. And when we read acknowledged classics, we may be tempted to view them as unquestionable or possessed of eternal verities, but we must strive to read them "against the grain" in order to view them with fresh eyes, aesthetically speaking. *Ibid.*, 13-15.

have one group of readers embrace a text, while another rejects it⁵⁷—his notion of the “horizon of expectations” represented a major advance in the reader’s meaning-making role. While a horizon of expectations precedes any individual reading of a text, it is not immobile, as a text can push against and reshape those generic, thematic, and stylistic horizons. Likewise, while no individual reader brings a context-free reading to the text, neither is he constrained by a monolithic set of expectations.

1.7: Wolfgang Iser and Reader Response

Jauss’s colleague Wolfgang Iser drew heavily on Jauss’s work for his own scholarship, but Iser takes a slightly different tack, by making a distinction between two different approaches to literary texts that are commonly joined together under the rubric of “reception theory.” At the start of his main work on literary theory, *Der Akt des Lesens: Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung*, translated into English as *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*⁵⁸, Iser makes clear that he is presenting not a theory of

⁵⁷ Suleiman, 37.

⁵⁸ The word “Wirkung” is generally translated as “effect” in English, although a footnote on the first page of the Preface for *The Act of Reading* justifies translating it as “response” because “effect” is too “weak.” There is no translator listed on the cover or copyright page of the English edition, but since Iser was closely involved in the translations of his German books into English, it seems likely that he chose the terms “response” and “reader-response theory” himself. John Paul Riquelme, “Wolfgang Iser’s Aesthetic Politics: Reading as Fieldwork,” *New Literary History* 31, no. 1 (2000), 12, n2.

aesthetic reception (*Rezeptionstheorie*), but a theory of aesthetic response (*Wirkungstheorie*). In Iser's distinction, a theory of aesthetic reception (*Rezeptionstheorie*) is concerned with how works are received by a reading public, and involves historically and culturally conditioned responses to literature. It focuses on "real readers," whose collective reactions to a work can be documented in the form of book reviews, awards, or other judgments on a text reflecting the values and attitudes of a reading public.⁵⁹ Aesthetic response (*Wirkungstheorie*), on the other hand, considers a hypothetical reader, while placing more emphasis on that hypothetical reader's imaginative and perceptive faculties.⁶⁰ This study encompasses both *Wirkungstheorie* (in examining how many of Khudayyir's stories require the "imaginative and perceptive faculties" of readers in order to make sense of them) and *Rezeptionstheorie* (in addressing the reception of the text by interpretive communities, as well as the way that texts such as *Başrayāthā* have in turn created and nurtured interpretive communities.)

Iser proposes that the effects that a text has on a reader (or rather, the aesthetic responses that a text generates) do not inhere entirely in either text or reader, but rather exist virtually between them. The text is not the ultimate source of the response,

⁵⁹ Ibid., 28.

⁶⁰ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), x. When referring to this text, I will cite the English translation.

but simply “represents a potential effect that is realized [*konkretisiert*] in the reading process.”⁶¹ The text is not fixed to only one correct reading, but can be realized in multiple ways by different readers.

In his 1978 study, *The Act of Reading*, Iser expands on the idea that a text contains multiple realizable meanings by rejecting the 19th-century notion that literary meaning is pre-existent in a work of art, and that a critic’s job is simply to extract it. In this new understanding of aesthetic meaning, the images in a painting or the plot of a story were not to be deciphered to uncover the “true” object. A text’s meaning is not something to be discovered, but an effect that is to be experienced.⁶² Following this line of argument—that the meaning of the work is not an embedded object, but rather an effect—Iser draws the conclusion that the reader must be a central participant in order for that effect to be realized. Since the reading of a literary work involves the interaction of text and reader, and an analysis of that work should concern both the text and the response to it, Iser’s reader response work posits the notion of the “virtuality” of the literary text. That virtuality, operating in a dialectical relationship between the text and reader, is the source of the literary work’s dynamism.⁶³

⁶¹ Ibid., ix.

⁶² Ibid., 10.

⁶³ Ibid., 275.

For Iser, the reader's input is required because literary texts are necessarily partial and incomplete. The text's "unwritten aspects" draw us into a narrative, working together to form expectations of what is to come. However, as readers, we want literary texts to defy or modify the expectations we build up as we read it, "for the more a text individualizes or confirms an expectation it has initially aroused, the more aware we become of its didactic purpose."⁶⁴ That is, like Eco and Jauss, Iser sees texts as existing along a continuum ranging from "expectation-confirming" to "expectation-defying," which determines to what extent we classify them as "literary" or "genre" fiction. Reading is thus a dynamic process, a "kaleidoscope of perspectives, pre-intentions, recollections" that is continually negotiated with the unfolding text.⁶⁵

1.7.1: The Text's Controlling Structure and the Reader's Performance

Iser's definition of "the reader" as an "implied reader" opens up the question of readerly competence and status—a question that every variety of reader response theory has had to address. Specifically, if meaning is somehow embedded in or produced by a reader, then what qualifies a reader to make that meaning? Must all readings be accepted as equally valid, or can any be ruled out as unacceptable or

⁶⁴ Ibid., 278.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 279.

incompetent? Iser aims to answer this question not by seeking to establish the cultural literacy and competence of a presumed reader, but by insisting on what he terms “intersubjectively verifiable” meanings derived from the text.⁶⁶ By this, he means that no interpreter can elucidate all the potential meanings of a text, but those meanings she does create from it must have at least some basis in the text itself.

In Iser’s formulation, a fictional text is a set of arranged symbols which instruct the reader on how to perceive:

“The iconic signs of literature constitute an organization of signifiers which do not serve to designate a signified object, but instead designate *instructions for the production of the signified.*”⁶⁷

Guided by those signs, the reader is led to construct a meaning, thus fulfilling the potential of the text.

At the same time, the textual structures composed of signs are never fully determinate. Instead, fiction is marked by indeterminacy, which is what allows the text to communicate with the reader.⁶⁸ The text can accommodate multiple readings, which will in turn be influenced by readers’ particular historical or cultural circumstances.

Thus, Iser characterizes literary meaning as an “event” or “performance” of the text. In

⁶⁶ Ibid., 22.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 65.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 24.

sum, the literary text initiates performances of meaning without actually formulating meanings itself: that is, the text is not identical to its meaning, which is realized by a reader.⁶⁹

Overall, Iser believes that literary texts operate somewhat askew from the linguistic and cultural conventions out of which they grow. They do not adhere fully to existing norms, but necessarily take an oppositional stance toward dominant systems of language and culture. A text inhabits “the borderlines of existing systems,” and represents a reaction to them. It thus rearranges and reorganizes hierarchies and patterns of meaning.⁷⁰

Texts can critique dominant cultures and language systems because they are “depragmatized”: that is, as nonreferential works, they take objects out of their “pragmatic context,” and can thus reveal social norms or other realities that otherwise would have been unexamined or unexposed.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Ibid., 27.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 72.

⁷¹ Ibid., 109.

1.7.2: Repertoires and Strategies

Although in Iser's formulation, the text is not fully determinative of meaning, it controls the reader's response via two means: firstly, through what Iser calls the "repertoire," and secondly, through "strategies."⁷² For Iser, the text's repertoire refers to the range of literary conventions that are necessary to establish communication between text and reader. The repertoire includes genre norms, literary allusions, and the entire cultural milieu out of which the text emerged.⁷³

If the repertoire represents Iser's "raw material" for communication, then strategies (which Iser also calls "techniques") represent ways that a text organizes this repertoire.⁷⁴ Strategies and techniques are the text's means of defamiliarizing the repertoire for the reader, disrupting the illusions that form as we read, and indicating to the reader that the assumptions she is making along the way must be rethought. (An example might be the technique of the unreliable narrator, which aims to unsettle the

⁷² Iser draws on J.L. Austin's speech-act theory for his concept of textual repertoire and strategies. In Austin's formulation, the three conditions for a successful performative utterance include: 1) conventions common to speaker and recipient; 2) accepted procedures; and 3) the willingness of both to participate. J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words, Second Edition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 14-15.

⁷³ Iser, *Act of Reading* 69. The repertoire corresponds to Austin's first condition ("conventions common to speaker and recipient") mentioned in note 72 above. Austin, 14.

⁷⁴ In terms of Austin's speech-act theory, strategies correspond to Austin's second condition, "accepted procedures." Austin, 15.

reader's conventional assurance of the narrator's authority.⁷⁵) These strategies toy with the reader's assumptions with the aim of re-directing her focus and moral point of view:

The efficacy of a literary text is brought about by the apparent evocation and subsequent negation of the familiar. What at first seemed to be an affirmation of our assumptions leads to our own rejection of them, thus tending to prepare us for a re-orientation.⁷⁶

As nonreferential works, texts take objects out of their "pragmatic context," and can thus reveal or critique dominant social norms or other realities that a reader would otherwise leave unexamined.⁷⁷

Overall, then, Iser believes that literary texts operate somewhat askew from the linguistic and cultural conventions out of which they grow. They do not adhere fully to existing norms, which gives the text its dynamic aesthetic value.⁷⁸ For Iser, literary texts necessarily take an oppositional stance toward dominant systems of language and culture. A text inhabits "the borderlines of existing systems," and represents a reaction to them. It thus rearranges and reorganizes hierarchies and patterns of meaning.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Iser, *Implied Reader*, 289.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 290.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁷⁸ Iser, *Act of Reading*, 70.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

1.7.3: Coherent Deformations

One of the primary techniques of defamiliarization that Iser sees in literary texts is the use of what he terms “coherent deformations.” Coherent deformations represent a deliberate distortion of what is familiar to the reader. Through them, the text alters the “apparent immutability” of everyday life in the reader, and thus begins the process through which the reader assembles the text’s meaning.⁸⁰ These deviations from accepted norms are not ends in themselves, he argues, but must have the aim of producing a response in the recipient (i.e., the reader.)⁸¹

The coherent deformations and defamiliarizing strategies the text employs do not act in isolation from each other, but cause a “wandering viewpoint”⁸² in the reader, which permits him to travel through the text and connect and reconcile multiple interconnecting perspectives. These perspectives can include different characters through whom a text can be alternately focalized, or differing interpretations of an event in a novel. The reader’s role is to choose from a network of possible connections

⁸⁰ Ibid., 82.

⁸¹ Ibid., 90.

⁸² Ibid., 135.

in the text, and no two readers will make the same set of interconnecting perspectives.⁸³

Drawing on Jauss's ideas, Iser sees reading as a process of a shifting horizon of expectations. Every moment of reading looks forward and backward—confirming or frustrating the memory of what we have read, and looking ahead to the next sentence to see if it confirms or frustrates our current viewpoint. Individual sentences “always imply an expectation of some kind,” and each one in turn either narrows or confounds the horizon of expectations the reader has before her.⁸⁴ Through the interplay of changing expectations and retroactively modified memories, the reader participates in forming a gestalt—that is, an encompassing structure of meaning drawn from what she has read and the expectations she is forming. The responses the reader has to the text—surprises, expectations, disappointments, etc.—are simply reactions to the gestalt being disturbed or displaced.⁸⁵

⁸³ Ibid., 118.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 111.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 128.

1.7.4: “Blanks” in the Text

The gestalt-forming process is also disturbed by ambiguities in the text, which Iser compares to “a puzzle which we have to solve ourselves.”⁸⁶ These ambiguities can include “gaps” or “blanks” in the literary text as the source of the reader’s response.⁸⁷ A “blank” in the text not only disturbs the gestalt the reader has formed, but it also prompts the reader to supply what is missing, unsaid, or ambiguous. An artistic novel will include blanks as part of its strategies, while a didactic novel will be correspondingly low in blanks, as its primary aim is to direct the reader to an already conceived meaning.⁸⁸

Iser also shares with Eco a diachronic view of the nature of indeterminacy, finding it more prevalent in—and in fact, a defining feature of—modern literature.⁸⁹ In contemporary works, blanks include the deliberate omission of generic features,

⁸⁶ Ibid., 129.

⁸⁷ Iser credits his notion of “blanks” in the text to Roman Ingarden’s concept of “places of indeterminacy” (*unbestimmtheitsstellen*), which originally referred to the nature of a literary text as a schematic structure that is not universally determinate as a real object is. Ibid., 170.

⁸⁸ Blanks are not confined to “literary” texts, but can also be used effectively in “lower” genres. Iser offers the example of the “serial story” that was commonly published in popular magazines, which effectively employed cliffhangers as blanks to ensure a continuing readership from week to week. Ibid., 191.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 172. Although he borrows Ingarden’s term, Iser does not find Ingarden’s own concept of *unbestimmtheitsstellen* useful for analyzing modern literature, since Ingarden’s concern was solely traditional, classical forms of art. Ingarden insisted that an aesthetic object must have limited indeterminacy in order to achieve harmony and permit the reader or viewer’s concretization. In Iser’s reading, Ingarden’s insistence on a minor role for indeterminacy in a work of art is thus incapable of accounting for modern literature.

including the traditional orientation regarding characters, events, and a linear plot. Blanks can also refer to a straightforward withholding of information from the reader, or what Wilfred L. Guerin, et al., refer to as the “discursive manipulation of the raw data” of the text, as well as “flashbacks, unequal treatment of time, alternation of dramatic and expository passages, shifts of viewpoint of speaker, or even the absence of viewpoint.”⁹⁰ When confronted with a text marked by a fragmentation of narrative and an “intensive switching of viewpoints” such as James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Iser says, the reader becomes extra-productive and “his expectation forms the background against which the disconcerting jumble of narrative patterns is thrown into relief.”⁹¹

For Iser, the significance of a text’s blanks is that they are a “hindrance [to] image-building” and thus trigger acts of ideation in the reader.⁹² Specifically, the blanks—whether a sudden shift of viewpoint or a departure from an expected narrative flow—render the text a series of unconnected segments, and propel us to connect the fragments into a comprehensible whole, since the reader “cannot help but try and supply the missing links that will bring the schemata together in an integrated gestalt.”⁹³

⁹⁰ Guerin, 374.

⁹¹ Iser, *Act of Reading*, 207.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 188.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 186.

Wolfgang Iser's extensive writings on reader response theory, and his elaborate conception of the deformations, blanks, and strategies that undergird the reader's responses, drew several criticisms from fellow scholars, which he attempted to refute with varying degrees of success. In particular, Stanley Fish's objections to Iser's ideas contributed to the eclipse of Iser's work in the Anglophone academic world.⁹⁴ His theories suggest that some readings are preferable to others, but Iser lays out no criteria for dismissing particular realizations of a text as idiosyncratic or unacceptable, other than by referring to the notion of "intersubjectively verifiable" characteristics.

However, Iser's theory of aesthetic response (*Wirkungstheorie*) offers useful approaches to a literary text, in suggesting that a text deliberately deforms what is familiar and accepted, as a way to catch the reader off-guard and force him to supply missing connections. Although, like Eco, Iser sometimes seems to hedge on whether the text or the reader is the ultimate source of meaning, his idea that a text has "blanks" and defamiliarizes conventions is particularly applicable to Khudayyir's fiction, which Iser would characterize as high in the kind of indeterminacy that prompts readers to produce meaning.

⁹⁴ Craig A. Hamilton, "From Iser to Turner and Beyond: Reception Theory Meets Cognitive Criticism," *Style* 36, no. 4 (2002): 641.

1.8: Stanley Fish: Meaning-Making and Interpretive Communities

Both Eco and Iser seem to accept that the reader's response is sharply limited by the text and fundamentally guided by it (by extension, the reader's response is controlled by the author—even if they rarely discuss the author in their writings.) In contrast, Stanley Fish has no hesitation in placing emphasis on the role of the reader. Fish's version of reader response theory upends the argument over the ultimate source of a text's meaning. His concept of the interpretive community as the locus of meaning-making has great implications in particular for Khudayyir's later texts, as will be discussed in Chapter 6. Fish worked out and developed his arguments over the course of a series of essays he wrote and published in the 1970s, and which were later collected and published in his book, *Is There a Text in This Class?* Like Iser, Fish argues that the meaning of a text is actualized temporally via the reader as she reads it. Its meaning(s) are not pre-existing in the text for the astute critic or the informed reader to discern. In fact, the very spatial form of the text—the fact that it exists on a printed page, with a fixed set of words, sentences, and chapters—deceives us into thinking that its meanings are already there.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, 2.

Fish's assertion that a text had no pre-determined meaning put him at odds with more traditional approaches to literary scholarship, and in line with adherents of poststructuralism, which emphasized language's tendency to undermine its apparent sense, and championed the free play of meaning at the expense of a Western logocentric tradition that insisted on privileging certain meanings over others.⁹⁶

Instead, Fish posits that meaning resides within "interpretive communities," which obviates the problem of the validity of an individual reading and the "competence" or other qualifications that a reader supposedly needs to bring to a text in order for her reading to be considered acceptable. In Fish's theory, the question whether "the reader" refers to an actual, historically situated reader as opposed to an idealized one (a problem that one scholar has called "the Achilles' heel of 1970s reception theory"⁹⁷) becomes less important.

⁹⁶ Robert Crosman's 1978 essay, "Do Readers Make Meaning?," provides a useful contemporary snapshot of the major scholars and critics who came down on either side of this debate in the 1970s. Some scholars, such as Fish, Jonathan Culler, and Jacques Derrida, affirmed that readers did make meaning; others, notably E.D. Hirsch and Wayne Booth, asserted that the text was the ultimate source of meaning, and that by implication, the admission that readers could make meaning would lead to "solipsism and moral chaos." Part of the confusion, Crosman suggests, is that "meaning" can refer both to an authorial intention as well as the interpretation a reader assigns to a text. Robert Crosman, "Do Readers Make Meaning?" in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, edited by Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 149.

⁹⁷ Hamilton, 643.

1.8.1: Reading as an Event

Fish suggests that critics, in analyzing a text, should replace their usual question (“What does this text mean?”) with a more direct one: “What does this text do?” That is, critics should concern themselves with the nature of the experience it has on the reader.⁹⁸ The effect on the reader, in Fish’s definition, goes beyond the emotional response that Wimsatt and Beardsley objected to, but extends to all the activities that a text provokes from a reader:

the projection of syntactical and/or lexical probabilities; their subsequent occurrence or nonoccurrence; attitudes towards persons, or things, or ideas referred to; the reversal or questioning of those attitudes; and much more.⁹⁹

This formulation acknowledges the temporal nature of reading, whereby a reader continually reassesses his ongoing assumptions, attitudes, and reactions to narrative, character, and mood as he makes his way through a text. The formalist approach, on the other hand, constrained the meaning of a text by insisting that the reader perceives meaning only at the end of a unit of sense (such as a line of verse, a sentence, or a paragraph), while any understanding a reader developed before that—a prediction about the course of the plot that later proves to be wrong, for example—was

⁹⁸ Ibid., 25.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 27.

simply “an unfortunate consequence of the fact that reading proceeds in time.”¹⁰⁰

Instead, Fish argues that the text is a dynamic event, not a locus of stable meanings which a reader only grasps at the end. Thus, an ambiguity in the text need not be a temporary misreading on the reader’s part, since Fish locates meaning in the reader’s encounter with that ambiguity, whether or not it is eventually resolved.

Fish argues that the temporary adoption of assumptions and understandings, which later prove to be wrong, is itself a response to the strategy of the text: no part of the reading event is to be discarded since the reader does not simply absorb the deep structure of a text, but reads “in terms of a relationship between the unfolding, in time, of the surface structure and a continual checking of it against our projection... of what the deep structure will reveal itself to be.”¹⁰¹ The errors that result are part of the experience and therefore part of its meaning.

Fish’s holistic approach to the event of reading and its contribution to meaning leads him to reject the critical approach known as stylistics, which focuses on the formal characteristics of texts, and in particular on the distinctive styles characteristic of historical eras or individual authors.¹⁰² Fish objects to stylistics as an approach to

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰¹ Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, 48.

¹⁰² Joseph Childers and Gary Hentzi, Eds., “Stylistics,” in *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*, New York: Columbia University Press (1995), 289,

literary analysis on two grounds. Firstly, stylistics claims that a critic's role is to identify pre-existing formal patterns and stylistic devices within a text. For Fish, these formal patterns do not exist prior to the reader's activities, but instead, the reader's activities are guided by a structure of concerns that generates the patterns she sees in the work. That is, the reader does not passively receive "literary facts" inherent in the text, but instead, acts as an "interpreting entity" who "determin[es] what counts as the facts to be observed."¹⁰³ Fish also objects to stylistics on the grounds that its emphasis on certain textual elements draws a distinction between "ordinary" and "poetic" or "literary" language, whereas Fish consistently argues that the experience of a literary text is holistic, and cannot be limited to those sections deemed particularly "aesthetic."¹⁰⁴

1.8.2: Formal Units and Interpretive Strategies

Countering the arguments put forth by stylisticians, transformational grammarians, and others, Fish avers that a text's formal features—such as its themes, narrative elements, and structure—are in fact the result of the reader's interpretation,

¹⁰³ Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, 94.

¹⁰⁴ In creating this hierarchical distinction between heightened aesthetic language and everyday language in the text, stylistics echoes the idea of the Russian formalists, who drew a similar distinction.

and do not exist prior to it. The syntax and vocabulary alone on the page are not sufficient to realize a formal structure—let alone an aesthetic meaning—but are instead assigned significance by the reader. If formal units were to exist prior to the reading, the reader’s role would be limited to selecting or activating those ones that are relevant to him as he creates meaning.¹⁰⁵ Instead, the reader brings to the text interpretive strategies that construct not only formal features (an understanding that the text one is reading is a *Bildungsroman* or a sonnet, for example), but the textual meaning, and even the author’s intentions. That is, it is through our interpretive strategies as readers that we claim to know what an author “meant.”¹⁰⁶

In making this claim, Fish was responding to contemporary scholars who argued that a text has some *a priori* features that are objective and universally agreed-upon. Fish responds that that argument mistakenly conflates our habituation to certain formal features with their supposed universal objectivity:

We find it easy to assume that alliteration as an effect depends on a ‘fact’ that exists independently of any interpretive ‘use’ one might make of it... But phonological ‘facts’ are no more uninterpreted (or less conventional) than the ‘facts’ of orthography.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 9.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 163.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 167.

In short, Fish argues that a supposedly “objective” formal feature is in fact an interpretation, even if it is rarely acknowledged as one. A text’s objectivity is, in fact, a “dangerous illusion,” helped by the fact that the text is a physical object consisting of fixed letters on the page.

More importantly, the interpretive decisions we bring to a text predispose us to look for certain features within it, including themes and relationships that resonate with us. Those strategies, Fish argues, are not applied after we read a text and absorb its pre-existing features, but instead form the shape of our reading.¹⁰⁸

However, the contention that the text is effectively created by its reading leads to a further question that has bedeviled reader response theory: namely, the question whether any readings of a text can be dismissed out of hand as unsupportable or incorrect. If the text is a function of interpretation, then we cannot turn to the text itself as a reference in order to reject particular interpretations as invalid. Wayne Booth raised the objection that there are certain formal features in texts that are commonly agreed upon, and that therefore some readings can in fact be collectively ruled out.¹⁰⁹ To take one example, an Arabic text written in *sajʿ* (rhymed prose) and featuring the picaresque adventures of a character who at the end is revealed to be the

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 168.

¹⁰⁹ Wayne Booth, “Preserving the Exemplar.” *Critical Inquiry*. Spring 1977: Vol. 3, n. 3, 413.

trickster Abū l-Faṭḥ al-Iskandarī, can with confidence be declared to be a *maqāma*, while a reading that interprets it as a *qaṣīda* (or a Shakespearean sonnet, or a work of drama) can be ruled out as invalid. Fish has no argument with Booth's assertion, but Fish locates the mechanism for ruling out readings not in any of the text's formal features, but in those interpretive strategies that are collectively and currently recognized as ways to produce a text. A reading can be ruled out of bounds or incompetent not because it fails to hew closely to a pre-existing meaning in the text, but because it fails to adhere to acceptable interpretive strategies. In other words, "no reading, however outlandish it might appear, is inherently an impossible one."¹¹⁰

Fish's focus on the interpretive strategies a reader brings to the text counters the usual concern of other theorists to determine what constitutes a valid reader response, which invariably becomes enmeshed in the question of who constitutes a valid reader. The fear that an interpretation will be "anarchic," "totally relativistic," or "off-the-wall" is misplaced, since, as Fish puts it,

The mistake is to think of interpretation as an activity in need of constraints, when in fact interpretation is a *structure* of constraints... within a set of interpretive assumptions, to know what you can do is, *ipso facto*, to know what you can't do.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, 347.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 356-7.

A reader response may be considered fringe or otherwise unacceptable according to current standards of interpretation, but, if the spectrum of acceptable interpretations realign, a fringe interpretation may eventually move to the center, while other reader responses in turn come to be considered passé or eccentric.

1.8.3: Interpretive Communities

Fish's point is that texts—whether on the level of words, sentences, or full narratives—do not have pre-existing normative constraints on their meanings. But at the same time, his concept of “acceptable interpretive strategies” mentioned in the previous section suggests that readers do not have absolute freedom to assign idiosyncratic meanings to them—or to be more precise, the rest of us, as students and critics of literary texts, are not obligated to treat an off-the-wall response to a text as equally valid as all other responses.

For communication to occur, there must be a stable, public norm that the text must adhere to and which the reader comprehends (or in Jakobson's terms, a stable, public Context by which the Addressee can interpret the Message.) The context, as Fish understands it, is a set of shared assumptions and conventional practices that structure

our interpretations.¹¹² The fact that these strategies are communal and conventional, rather than individual-specific, is what allays “the fear of subjectivity” that underlay the formalist rejection of the affective fallacy.¹¹³ A group of readers that shares a communal set of strategies thus forms an “interpretive community” that structures the reader’s response.

Literature is a conventional category, meaning that what counts as “literary” is a product of a communal decision. We assign a text literary properties—properties that we have collectively already agreed are literary, since a text does not “exhibit[...] certain formal properties that compel a certain kind of attention; rather, paying a certain kind of attention (as defined by what literature is understood to be) results in the emergence into noticeability of the properties we know in advance to be literary.”¹¹⁴ Formal units in the text, in other words, are produced by interpretive acts, since the text does not exist as an entity independent of interpretation.

Neither the reader nor the text has an entirely independent status: the text relies on the meaning-making activities of the reader, which “activates” the potential

¹¹² Ibid., 318.

¹¹³ In the introductory essay which opens the collection *Is There a Text in This Class?*, Fish traces the development of his own thinking on reader response over a decade’s worth of essays. In it, he acknowledges his own fears of reader subjectivity, which he later came to reject, and admits that in his earlier conceptions of reader response, he was “much more dependent on new critical principles than I was willing to admit.” Ibid., 7.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 10-11.

meanings within a text. At the same time, while the reader “makes” literature by making sense of what she is reading, her subjectivity is qualified by her membership in a community of readers that shapes her reading of the text. Her strategies in reading a text are, in effect, the “community property” of the interpretive community to which she belongs.¹¹⁵

The notion of the interpretive community resolves the problem of readerly subjectivity, but the interpretive community itself is not a source of objectivity, since such a community represents “a bundle of interests, of particular purposes and goals,” which can include commitment to a particular theoretical standpoint (Marxist, postcolonial, poststructuralist, etc.) or to a cultural or historical perspective (nationalist, religious, etc.)¹¹⁶ We can make our way through one of Khudayyir’s puzzle-like, non-narrative stories because we share a certain understanding of the literary conventions his text are defying. Likewise, his readers can bring to his texts a common understanding of memory, loss, and renewal—or even a familiarity with Basra itself—that causes them to respond to and embrace a text such as *Başrayāthā*.

On one level, the interpretive community explains why different readers can agree on the meaning of a text: it is due to the stability of interpretation that results

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

from readers belonging to the same community. It also explains why there can be disagreements over a text's meaning: "not because of a stability in texts, but because of a stability in the makeup of interpretive communities and therefore in the opposing positions they make possible."¹¹⁷ That stability is always temporary, however, as readers can shift positions from one interpretive community to another over the course of the career as readers, critics, or scholars. Likewise, interpretive strategies, which form the basis for interpretive communities, can fall out of favor and be supplanted by new ones. Interpretive communities are stable enough to prevent "interpretive anarchy" and allow different readers to speak comprehensibly to each other about a text; at the same time, they are flexible and mutable because they are learned, not universal.¹¹⁸

In his later collection of essays, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, Fish responds to criticisms that the concept of an interpretive community cannot account for change. That is, if a reader belongs to an interpretive community because she brings to a text a communally shared set of preconceptions, expectations, and ways of reading, and if texts do not possess pre-existing meaning-making features that exist beyond her interpretive horizons, how is it possible for a reader (or a collection of readers) to alter

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 172.

how they read a text—that is, to move from one interpretive community to another? Fish's response is that interpretive communities are not monolithic, and that a reader's beliefs and approaches to a text "are not all held at the same level or operative at the same time," but can affect and displace each other.¹¹⁹ An interpretive community, in this reading, is not a static, enclosed set of horizons, but "an engine of change": it permits readers to organize and make sense of the world.

Fish contrasts his approach with what he calls "the old model," whereby an "utterer" (the author) handed over a text whose meanings were "prefabricated," and which was communicated by a code that existed independently of the text's readers, who could either adhere to the code (and thus receive the meaning), or be considered deviant. Instead, Fish proposes that, in his model of interpretive community,

what utterers do is give hearers and readers the opportunity to make meanings (and texts) by inviting them to put into execution a set of strategies. It is presumed that the invitation will be recognized.¹²⁰

The author in that sense invites readers to respond, and those who already possess shared interpretive strategies will comprise the text's true readers: the author "hazards his project" of writing, in Fish's words, "because of something he assumes to

¹¹⁹ Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 146.

¹²⁰ Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?*, 173.

be in his reader.”¹²¹ Readers enact a text by assigning it a meaning, but the text also calls into being its interpretive community: in *Doing What Comes Naturally*, Fish argues that an interpretive community is not simply a group of individuals who share a static point of view about how to approach a text. Rather, an interpretive community should be understood as an “engine of change,” one that interprets a text as being already related to the community’s interests and goals. That is, the community does “the work of transforming the landscape into material for its own project, but that project is then itself transformed by the very work it does.”¹²² This notion of the shared source of the reader’s response, and of the mutually-engendering relationship between text and readership goes a long way toward explaining the resonance that a text such as *Başrayāthā* has had, both in its reception by an interpretive community of readers, and in its formation of that interpretive community.

1.9: Conclusion

The variety of critical approaches that are collectively known as “reader-response theory” offers a theoretical grounding for understanding the fiction of Muḥammad Khudayyir, as will be made clear in the following chapters. Reader-

¹²¹ Ibid., 173.

¹²² Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989), 150.

response theory emerged as part of a broader scholarly reaction to and rejection of New Criticism in the 1960s. In its singular focus on the text, New Criticism overlooked the fact that texts are directed (either implicitly or explicitly) to a reader. Reader-response theory thus problematizes what had been the unexamined role of a text's recipient.

Umberto Eco's notion of the "open work" takes as its premise the theory that ambiguity and "openness"—often signaled by formal innovation—are qualities distinctive to modern literary works, which envisage the reader's role in generating meaning. *Khudayyir's* stories reflect this concept of openness as theorized by Eco. A more fully developed approach to reader-response theory emerged from the Konstanz School, influenced in particular by phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, philosopher Roman Ingarden, and scholar of hermeneutics Hans-Georg Gadamer. Applying Husserl's concept of phenomenology to literary theory, Hans-Robert Jauss developed the concept of the "horizon of expectations" (*Erwartungshorizont*), defined as the cultural, ethical, and literary expectations that inform a reader's understanding of a text. The emphasis on a reader's reception of a text undergirds *Rezeptionsästhetik* (aesthetics of reception), while avoiding a reductive biographical or historical approach.

Although he draws heavily on the work of his colleague, Jauss, Wolfgang Iser makes a distinction between “reception theory” and “reader response,” the latter of which places greater emphasis on the reader’s imaginative and perceptive faculties. Iser argues that a literary work is “virtual” because it exists in a dialectical relationship between reader and text. The dynamic process of reading is informed not only by the reader’s pre-intentions, assumptions and shifting perspectives, but by “gaps” or “blanks” in the text. For Iser, literary texts exist somewhat askew to dominant linguistic and cultural conventions: they highlight deficiencies or contradictions in those systems, and through strategies of deformation and defamiliarization, they force the reader to assemble the text’s meaning.

Stanley Fish, in his writings, makes clear that a text’s meaning is not pre-existing, but is actualized by a reader. The effect on the reader includes not only an emotional response, but the panoply of activities that a text provokes. As reading is a dynamic event, meaning is not something revealed at the end of the process, and ambiguities and temporary misunderstandings are to be understood as part of a text’s meaning. Fish insists that even supposedly pre-existing formal patterns and stylistic devices do not in fact exist prior to the reader’s activities. Rather, we perceive those formal patterns because we belong to interpretive communities. Those interpretive

communities act as a structure of constraints on our reading, and thus eliminate the question of whether a particular reading is sound or *a priori* unacceptable. At the same time, a text invites a response from those readers who bring to it a set of shared assumptions and framework, and in that sense, the text summons into being its own interpretive community.

These different theoretical approaches to reader response theory will be applied to Khuḍayyir's texts in Part Three of this study, although some of his writing is more conducive to particular flavors of reader response theories than others. For example, the theories of Eco and Iser are particularly applicable to Khuḍayyir's earlier writings, since they often rely on an enigmatic, puzzle structure that necessitates the readers' active involvement, and the reader is forced to continually readjust her assumptions and expectations as she makes her way through them. Likewise, many of Khuḍayyir's texts published since 1993 can be considered a larger literary project aimed at reclaiming public and private memory. Fish's theory of interpretive communities will thus be of greater relevance in the discussion of reader response theory as applied to those later works.

Part II: Context

Chapter 2: Modern Iraqi Fiction

2.1 Introduction

Before turning to Muḥammad Khuḍayyir and an analysis of his individual texts, this chapter presents a brief diachronic overview of the literary, social, and historical context for his writing, focusing specifically on the milieu in which contemporary Iraqi prose fiction developed over the course of the 20th century. Inevitably, the political and cultural environment of Iraq has informed Khuḍayyir’s writing, his themes, and the interpretive community of readers he is addressing.¹²³ As such, this study incorporates the insights of New Historicism, which sees art as a “negotiation between a creator or class of creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society.”¹²⁴ At the same time, the New Historicist approach aims to avoid simplistic understandings of mimesis, allusion, and symbolism that posit a direct correlation between a text and a supposedly monolithic

¹²³ To acknowledge the cultural and political background that informs a work of literature is not to negate or diminish the role of the reader and interpretive communities in the construction of meaning. In the case of Khuḍayyir and his Iraqi peers, political and social realities have shaped the contours of their writing—from the choice of subject matter to the reality of state oppression.

¹²⁴ H. Aram Veenser, ed., *The New Historicism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 12.

culture out of which it grew.¹²⁵ In that spirit, this study addresses the emergence of contemporary fiction in Iraq in the context of its historical and cultural environment.

2.2 The Emergence of Iraqi Literary Fiction

For a variety of reasons, modern Arabic prose fiction emerged comparatively late in Iraq, particularly in comparison with Egypt and Lebanon, the epicenters of the 19th-century cultural and literary revival known as the *nahḍa*. Separated from the Levant by the barrier of the Syrian desert, and with poor transportation networks, 19th-century Iraq was effectively cut off from intellectual currents taking place in other parts of the Arab world. At the same time, it also had close ties (religious, cultural, and commercial) with the Indian Ocean, Iran, and the Gulf, which caused traditional norms and genres to remain prevalent longer.¹²⁶ Iraqi intellectuals have painted a dire portrait of Iraq before the changes wrought by modernity, such as Yūsuf ‘Izz al-dīn, who says of his country under Ottoman rule:

¹²⁵ Veaser, xii.

¹²⁶ Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction, Second Edition* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 16-17.

It was in complete isolation. It hardly sensed the world and what was happening in it, other than great events it heard about from time to time.¹²⁷

The later development of prose fiction in Iraq was made possible by political and economic changes set in motion during the 19th century, starting with the re-establishment of direct Ottoman rule over Iraq in 1831, and including reform of property law, such as the Ottoman Land Law of 1858.¹²⁸ As with the rest of the Ottoman Empire, Iraq was drawn into a European-dominated global capitalist system, and the growing pace of change in the 19th century, such as the introduction of steamboats, the telegraph, and the growth of state schools, was accompanied by expanding British economic penetration.¹²⁹ The expansion of the Ottoman state education system under Abdülhamit II (1876-1909) led to a rise in literacy rates in Iraq, which in turn ensured an audience of readers for Iraq's nascent print and literary cultures.¹³⁰ Despite its relative isolation, modern Iraqi fiction, including the genres of the short story and novel, grew

¹²⁷ Yūsuf ʿIzz al-dīn, *Al-qīṣṣa fī l-ʿIrāq: judhūrḥā wa-taṭawwūrḥā* (Cairo: Jāmiʿat al-Duwal al-ʿArabiyya, al-Munazzama al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Tarbīya wa-l-Thaqāfa wa-l-ʿUlūm, Maʿhad al-Buḥūth wa-l-Dirāsāt al-ʿArabiyya, 1974), 10.

¹²⁸ Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba'ṭhists, and Free Officers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 53-55.

¹²⁹ Batatu, 22.

¹³⁰ For more details on the growth of state education in late Ottoman Iraq, see Benjamin Fortna, *Imperial Classroom: Islam, the State, and Education in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.)

out of the broader Arabic *nahḍa*, which Roger Allen has characterized as the result of two forces:

the encounter with the West, its science and culture, on the one hand, and on the other, the rediscovery and stimulation of the great classical heritage of Arab-Islamic culture.¹³¹

As part of that “classical heritage,” Sabry Hafez points to a long tradition of narrative in Arabic, ranging from the literary *maqāma* genre to more popular storytelling traditions, including the *Alf layla wa-layla* stories. These traditional Arabic narrative genres, coupled with the impact and influence of modern western narrative genres, form a “dynamic intertextuality” with modern Arabic narrative.¹³² Within the Iraqi context, intellectuals and writers could find inspiration in Baghdad’s storied history as the capital of the Abbasid Empire with a rich literary history behind it.¹³³

The encounter with Western genres of fiction occurred first by way of translation of foreign stories and novels into Arabic, and only later by way of Iraqi authors creating their own texts. As elsewhere in the Arab world, the appearance and development of press journalism in Iraq created both authors and readers of fiction,

¹³¹ Allen, *The Arabic Novel*, 11.

¹³² Sabry Hafez, “The Modern Arabic Short Story,” in *Modern Arabic Literature (The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature)*, edited by M.M. Badawi, (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 270.

¹³³ Roger Allen, “Foreword,” in *Baghdad: The City in Verse*, translated and edited by Reuven Snir (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), xxiii.

although the remoteness of the three Ottoman vilayets of Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra meant that the press emerged later in Iraq than in other Arabic-speaking regions.¹³⁴ Despite strict censorship under Ottoman rule—particularly under the long reign of Abdülhamit II (1876-1909)—newspapers frequently published fiction, and many Iraqi authors well into the 20th century began their careers as journalists. The earliest newspaper in Iraq was *al-Zawrāʾ*, which was introduced by the reformist Ottoman *wali* of Baghdad, Midhat Pasha during his three-year period of office, from 1869 to 1872, and published in both Ottoman Turkish and Arabic.¹³⁵ *Al-Zawrāʾ* is frequently cited as the forebear of Iraq’s contemporary literary culture, as the first venue that offered a publication of “strong determination and intense zeal,” that “began to examine critically and... restore life to dead souls,” as Yūsuf ʿIzz al-dīn somewhat melodramatically puts it in his study of the development of the Iraqi short story.¹³⁶ For *al-Zawrāʾ* and similar early publications, the pressure of official censorship remained strong, at least until the 1908 revolution initiated by the Committee for Union and

¹³⁴ For a more detailed history of journalism in Iraq, see Ami Ayalon, *The Press in the Arab Middle East: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), particularly 64-68, 70-72, and 91-95.

¹³⁵ Orit Bashkin, *The Other Iraq: Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 19. Following the lead of Midhat Pasha in Baghdad, the governors of Mosul and Basra eventually also launched official newspapers in the 19th century: respectively, *al-Mawṣil* in 1885, and *al-Baṣra* in 1889. Ayalon, 25.

¹³⁶ Yūsuf ʿIzz al-dīn, *Al-qīṣṣa fī l-ʿIrāq: judhūrḥā wa-taṭawwūrḥā*, (Cairo: Jāmiʿat al-Duwal al-ʿArabiyya, al-Munazzama al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Tarbīya wa-l-Thaqāfa wa-l-ʿUlūm, Maʿhad al-Buḥūth wa-l-Dirāsāt al-ʿArabiyya, 1974), 11.

Progress (CUP, commonly referred to in English as the “Young Turks”), which led to a rapid expansion of the press throughout the Ottoman Empire. Notably, between 1908 and 1911, forty-four new publications appeared in Baghdad.¹³⁷

External political events, such as the 1913 coup by the Committee for Union and Progress and its policy of “Turkification,” spurred pan-Arab sentiment among urban Iraqi elites, who formed societies such as Baghdad’s “National Scientific Club” that acted as fronts for political activity.¹³⁸ In the field of prose writing, however, Iraqi authors in the late Ottoman period and into the early years of the British mandate (1921-1932) participated in some of the same trends in prose fiction that were taking place elsewhere in the Arab world. Sabry Hafez sees two main literary modes at work during this period:

One sought to express the new experiences and realities resulting from the socio-cultural transition... by rejuvenating the form of the *maqāmah* and widening its scope and variation; while the other attempted to achieve the same end through a hybrid form... the narrative essay.¹³⁹

A third literary trend that was unique to Iraq in the decades before and after World War I was a variant of the narrative essay known as *al-ruʿya*, which took the form

¹³⁷ Bashkin, 19.

¹³⁸ Muhsin Jassim al-Musawi, *Reading Iraq: Culture and Power in Conflict* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006). 14.

¹³⁹ Hafez, “The Modern Arabic Short Story,” 274.

of a visionary dream, often to express political and social criticisms in an allusive or idealistic manner.¹⁴⁰ Yūsuf ʿIzz al-dīn traces the *al-ruʿya* form to the influence of the book *Rūya (Dream)*, an essay on liberty by the Ottoman littérateur and political reformer Muhammad Namik Kemal (1840-1888), which was translated into Arabic by the poet Maʿrūf al-Ruṣāfī (1875-1945).¹⁴¹ The translation was printed in Baghdad and made an impression on intellectuals there in part because of Kemal’s pre-eminence in literature and public life.¹⁴²

The Iraqi authors who wrote in this mode began publishing their “visions” in the journal *Tanwīr al-afkār* (1909-1921.) Their dream-narratives were didactic and frequently revolved around contemporary nationalist issues; that is, “despite their name they can be read as a commentary on the present more than a blueprint for the future.”¹⁴³ These visions may have been “naïve forays into the domain of narrative literature,” but they also allowed writers to express pointed political criticisms in a

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 274.

¹⁴¹ Although al-Ruṣāfī’s translation of Muhammad Namik Kemal’s text was the proximate inspiration for this Iraqi literary trend, the literature of dreams-visions and dream-interpretation has a long history in Arabic. For recent scholarship on this subject, see Leah Kinberg, *Morality in the Guise of Dreams: Ibn Abī al-Dunayā’s Kitāb al-Manām* (Leiden: Brill, 1994); as well as *Dreaming across Boundaries: The Interpretation of Dreams in Islamic Lands*, edited by Louise Marlowe (Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies Trustees for Harvard University, 2008); *Dreams and Visions in Islamic Societies*, edited by Özgen Felek and Alexander D. Knysh (Syracuse: SUNY Press, 2012); and Dwight Reynolds, “Symbolic Narratives of Self: Dreams in Medieval Arabic Autobiographies” in *On Fiction and Adab in Medieval Arabic Literature*, edited by Philip F. Kennedy (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), 261-86.

¹⁴² ʿIzz al-dīn, *al-qīṣṣa fī l-ʿIrāq*, 31.

¹⁴³ Hafez, “The Modern Arabic Short Story,” 277.

disguised manner.¹⁴⁴ Although Iraqi authors turned away from the dream-narrative genre in the 1920s, this fictional mode clearly had resonance for later generations of writers (including Muḥammad Khudayyir) as a form of oblique commentary on society and the place of the individual within it, blending fantastic, dystopian, and mythic elements.¹⁴⁵

2.3 Mandate Iraq and the Parameters of Iraqi Fiction

The massive changes in Iraqi political and economic life in the wake of World War I—the occupation of the three Ottoman *vilayets* of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra by British forces, the 1920 uprising and its suppression, the British mandate, and the establishment of Iraq as a unified political entity under a Hashemite monarchy—shaped the history and development of Iraqi fiction, and often served as subject matter for novels and short stories. Certainly, Iraqi writers since the mandate period have played a key role in Iraq’s political and social history: authors belong to the intellectual class

¹⁴⁴ Muhsin al-Musawi, *Naz‘at al-ḥadātha fī l-qīṣṣa al-‘irāqīyya. I: marḥala al-khamsīnāt*, (Baghdad: al-Maktaba al-‘Ālamiyya, 1984), 13.

¹⁴⁵ The “visionary” mode that Iraqi intellectuals found so compelling early in the century found echoes in Muḥammad Khudayyir’s 1995 story collection, *Ru’yā kharīf* (*Autumn Vision*), which includes the story of the same name, as well as the story “Ru’yā al-burj” (“Vision of the Tower”). His 1995 collection of literary essays, *al-Ḥikāya al-jadīda* (*The New Tale*), includes the essays “Madīnat al-ru’yā” (“City of Vision”) and “al-Ru’yā al-mar‘īyya” (“Visible Vision”).

that helps to shape Benedict Anderson’s “imagined community” via their published texts. Even if, as Orit Bashkin states, Iraqi intellectuals have often been criticized as “impotent in the face of political oppression and, at worst, responsible for many of their country’s miseries,” they have been vital to Iraq’s national project.¹⁴⁶

One prominent example of early Iraqi prose fiction with didactic, moralizing aims directed at a nascent community of Iraqi readers is *al-Riwāya al-iqāziyya* (*The Awakening Story*), published in 1919 by Sulaymān Fayḍī (1885-1951), who also published a similarly-named newspaper, *al-Īqāz*. Fayḍī’s *Riwāya* is a schematized story recounting the “awakening” of a schoolboy from a bad character into a virtuous one through the moral suasion and good behavior of two friends.¹⁴⁷ Although it is titled a *riwāya*, it is not strictly a novel—at that time, the term *riwāya* could be applied to any short narrative piece. In keeping with the early stage of modern Iraqi prose, it blends several styles, including an ornate style derived from classical *adab*, rhymed prose (*sajʿ*), as well as proverbs and verse.¹⁴⁸ Likewise, following the then-prevalent *ruʿyah* tradition, the narrative begins by declaring that it came to the author in a dream.¹⁴⁹ In both his

¹⁴⁶ Bashkin, 1.

¹⁴⁷ Fabio Caiani and Catherine Cobham, *The Iraqi Novel: Key Writers, Key Texts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 4.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

newspaper and his *Riwāya*, Fayḍī wrote with explicit political and nationalist aims, using the power of “print capitalism,” to borrow Benedict Anderson’s term, in order to “propagate a sense of identity and revolt” among his Iraqi readers.¹⁵⁰

External events and realities shaped the substance, setting, and tone of what constituted literature in Iraq. The growth of urban life in the decades of the monarchy (from its establishment in 1921, through the end of the formal British mandate in 1932, to its overthrow in 1958), and particularly the expansion of Baghdad’s population played a substantial role in Iraqi fiction. As Muhsin al-Musawi has pointed out, Iraqi authors of the first half of the 20th century were primarily urban in outlook and experience, and thus urban life was the focus of much of their fiction.¹⁵¹ Their concern with rural social and economic issues was mostly theoretical, and not based on a deep familiarity with rural life.¹⁵² Those same decades also witnessed the emergence of an educated urban class, which came to play an important role in shaping Iraqi culture and politics.¹⁵³ The resentment felt toward ongoing British control over Iraqi politics

¹⁵⁰ Muhsin Jassim al-Musawi, “The Sociopolitical Context of the Iraqi Short Story, 1908-1968,” in *Statecraft in the Middle East: Oil, Historical Memory and Popular Culture*, ed. Eric Davis and Nicholas Gavrielides (Miami, FL: International University Press, 1991), 204.

¹⁵¹ In this regard, early 20th-century Iraqi authors shared similarities with their 18th- and 19th-century European counterparts, as the emergence of the genre of the novel has been linked to the rise of an educated, urban bourgeoisie. Famously, Hegel referred to the novel as “the burgher’s epic.”

¹⁵² Al-Musawi, “Sociopolitical Context,” 210.

¹⁵³ Fabio Caiani and Catherine Cobham, 2.

led to widespread dissatisfaction with the monarchy, and political allegiances until 1958 could be roughly divided between those who were loyal to the Hashemite monarchy and its government, and those who chafed at the country's lack of full independence, which they blamed for many of Iraq's political, economic, and social problems. As Fabio Caiani and Catherine Cobham point out, most writers, including a generation of older poets, fell into the latter, oppositional group.¹⁵⁴

The writings of Maḥmūd Aḥmad al-Sayyid (1903-1937) exemplify both a growing maturity in Iraqi fiction in comparison with Fayḍī's text, as well as a more explicit contemporary setting and a concern with political and social issues that would foreshadow the later work of Dhū l-Nūn Ayyūb (1908-1988) and the proponents of social realism. During his brief life, al-Sayyid published three novels and three short story collections, and was associated with a Baghdad-based group of Marxists headed by law student Ḥusayn al-Raḥḥāl.¹⁵⁵ Caiani and Cobham consider al-Sayyid's 1928 novella, *Jalāl Khālīd*, a significant advance, both in style and content, over Sulaymān Fayḍī's *al-Riwāya al-iqāziyya* from the previous decade.¹⁵⁶ The autobiographical work

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 3. Caiani and Cobham refer to three older, established poets in particular who shared the sentiments of their younger peers: Jamīl Ṣīdqī al-Zahāwī (1863-1936), Ma'rūf al-Ruṣāfī (1857-1945), and Muḥammad Maḥdī al-Jawāhirī (c. 1900-1997).

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 12-13.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 6. The authors point out that al-Sayyid specifically refers to it as a "novella," using a transliteration of the French term, *nouvelle*.

traces the political and intellectual education of a young Iraqi whose travels to India broaden his intellectual horizons¹⁵⁷. Stylistically, al-Sayyid's "simpler and more economical" prose is very different from Fayḍi's more traditional style.¹⁵⁸

Despite these examples of longer-form prose texts, the short story remained the preferred fictional genre among Iraqi writers before World War II, while the novel was relatively slower to emerge.¹⁵⁹ The development of the Iraqi novel thus mirrored a similarly slow and disjointed development in the rest of the Arab world, due to the greater technical and stylistic challenges that the longer novel form demanded.¹⁶⁰

Sabry Hafez links the centrality of the short story (in Iraq and elsewhere in the Arab world) to the political uprisings that occurred during and after World War I, and that both reflected and fomented an awareness of national identity. In Hafez' view, the often violent suppression of these uprisings—such as the British suppression of Iraq's 1920

¹⁵⁷ *Jalāl Khālid* thus reverses a trope common in the *Bildungsroman* genre from the *nahḍa* period—namely, the intellectual awakening of the young educated Arab protagonist who travels west and encounters Europe.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁵⁹ Allen, *The Arabic Novel*, 47.

¹⁶⁰ Roger Allen, "The Development of Fictional Genres: The Novel and Short Story in Arabic." In *Humanism, Culture, and Language in the Near East: Studies in Honor of George Krotkoff*. Winona Lakes, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997.

revolt—“bred a sense of failure and frustration which... is particularly conducive to the form of the short story.”¹⁶¹

2.4 Iraqi Fiction in the 1930s and 1940s: Romanticism and Dhū l-Nūn Ayyūb

The emergence of Iraqi romantic literature during the 1930s and 1940s illustrates the dramatic shifts that Iraqi fiction has taken over the course of the 20th century, particularly in light of the prevalence of socialist realism a decade later. Like its prose counterpart, Iraqi poetry in these decades contrasted sharply with later styles and tastes: Iraqi poetry was still largely neo-classical, and was only transformed by *al-shi‘r al-ḥurr* (“free verse”), introduced to Arabic literature in the late 1940s by Iraqi poets Nāzik al-Malā’ika, Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb, and others.¹⁶²

In the 1930s and 1940s, as elsewhere in the Arab world, Iraq witnessed the growth of romantic short stories. The blossoming of national identity, coupled with the disillusionment felt by many Iraqis in the mandate era, led to a demand for “an artistic

¹⁶¹ Hafez, “Modern Arabic Literature,” 278. Hafez acknowledges that the link he finds between political frustration and the short story genre is derived from Frank O’Connor’s 1963 study of the short story, *The Lonely Voice*. Specifically, O’Connor addresses the relationship between “submerged population groups” and the short story. Frank O’Connor, *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1962), 18-21.

¹⁶² Salma Khadra Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry*, v. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 534-564. Caiani and Cobham, 8.

expression undiluted by realistic presentation,” that is, romanticism, which tended to exalt the role of the artist, glorify the homeland, and exaggerate emotions to a sentimental level, such that “the individual romantic hero is presented as having emotions, ideas and aspirations that cannot be adequately satisfied within the society in which he must operate.”¹⁶³

As Muhsin al-Musawi demonstrates in his study *Naz‘at al-ḥadātha fī l-qīṣṣa al-‘irāqīyya. I: marḥala al-khamsīnāt*, Iraqi writers in the 1930s and 1940s felt the need to produce “authentic Iraqi thinking, one that wells up from the Iraqi self” in their short stories.”¹⁶⁴ Al-Musawi cites a number of authors from this decade whose stories reflected this romantic temperament “filled with longing and feelings of poverty, love, fear, pain, and desire,” including ‘Abd al-Majīd Luṭfī, Fu‘ād Baṭṭī, and Mīkhā’īl Ilyās.¹⁶⁵

But perhaps the most prominent Iraqi author who is often linked to romanticism in this period is Dhū l-Nūn Ayyūb (1908-1988). Ayyūb’s best-known work, which can be seen as a precursor to later fiction, is his sardonic 1939 novel *Duktūr Ibrāhīm*. The title character is a scheming social climber whose story allows the author

¹⁶³ Hafez, 292-293.

¹⁶⁴ al-Musawi, *Naz‘at al-ḥadātha fī l-qīṣṣa al-‘irāqīyya*, 16.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

to criticize contemporary Iraqi politics, and represents a break from its predecessors.¹⁶⁶ Born in Mosul, Ayyūb belonged to Iraq's growing Communist party and worked as a secondary school teacher.¹⁶⁷ (Ayyūb's profession as a teacher was one that many later Iraqi authors would share as well, including Muḥammad Khudayyir.) Written in an unadorned, journalistic style, *Duktūr Ibrāhīm* mocks the contrast between intellectuals' discourse on freedom and justice, and their self-interested support for oppressive regimes. In its critique of a "native elite" that has internalized the colonizer's ideology and takes for granted its privileged right to rule its less-assimilated countrymen, *Duktur Ibrahim* has been called a precursor of postcolonial fiction¹⁶⁸, and an early example of metafiction in modern Arabic literature¹⁶⁹. Ayyūb takes to task both the Iraqi state and the intellectual class for corrupting language in the service of power. With its emphasis on gritty detail and concern with contemporary society, Ayyūb's fiction shares affinities with later Iraqi authors, even if his work came to "represent[...]"

¹⁶⁶ Caiani and Cobham, 16. Notably, the romanticism of Iraqi fiction in this period was not incompatible with the sardonic, ironic style of a novel such as *Duktūr Ibrāhīm*. Other authors from this romantic period employed irony as part of their social criticism, including Ja'far al-Khalilī and Khalaf Shawqī al-Dāwādī. See al-Musawi, *Naz'at al-ḥadātha*, 18.

¹⁶⁷ Batatu, 494-5.

¹⁶⁸ Muhsin al-Musawi, *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel: Debating Ambivalence* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003), 67.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 351.

a line of traditional thought that provoked a revolt” with the emergence of younger writers who wrote in the social realist mode.¹⁷⁰

Idwār al-Kharrāṭ has written that the 1940s were an “insidiously seminal decade in Arabic literature,” inasmuch as the texts of that period planted the seeds for later fictional developments, even if the socialist realism that dominated in the following decade declared itself opposed to the romanticism that preceded it, and sought to establish its aesthetics on a very different basis.¹⁷¹

2.5 Ascendancy of Socialist Realism

Orit Bashkin has characterized Iraqi intellectuals in the years after World War II as moving in “new public spheres,” as they became more global in outlook and more international in their literary tastes.¹⁷² That global outlook included greater exposure to Marxist ideas and contacts with the Soviet Union. These expanded intellectual horizons, coupled with widespread disillusionment over corrupt governments and a wealthy class that often sided with colonial interests over national ones, prompted

¹⁷⁰ Muhsin al-Musawi, “The Sociopolitical Context of the Iraqi Short Story, 1908-1968,” in *Statecraft in the Middle East: Oil, Historical Memory and Popular Culture*, edited by Eric Davis and Nicholas Gavrielides (Miami, FL: International University Press, 1991), 210.

¹⁷¹ Idwār al-Kharrāṭ, “The Mashriq,” in *Modern Literature in the Near and Middle East: 1850-1970*, edited by Robin Ostle (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 180.

¹⁷² Bashkin, 90-91. See also al-Musawi, *Naz‘at al-ḥadātha fī l-qīṣṣa al-‘irāqīyya*, 22.

many Iraqi intellectuals (like their peers elsewhere in the Arab world) to embrace a Marxist outlook on society.¹⁷³

This turn toward Marxist ideology was the basis for the rise of socialist realism in Arabic literature that began in the late 1940s. Socialist realism promotes the notion that literature should reflect and advance socialist ideas.¹⁷⁴ Its appearance is tied to what Sabry Hafez calls a “unique amalgam of revolutionary fervor and overt optimism” that swept the Arab world in the late 1940s and early 1950s.¹⁷⁵ Socialist realism can also be seen as a reaction to the escapism and sentimentality that characterized the romantic fiction of the previous decade. Many Iraqi authors who began their writing careers in the late 1940s or early 1950s adopted a socialist realist mode in their fiction. However, socialist realism, although dominant, was not the only trend in Iraqi fiction during this decade: prominent writers such as ‘Abd al-Mālik Nūrī (1921-1998) and Fu’ād al-Takarlī (1927-2008), for example, were as much concerned with creating “a local

¹⁷³ M.M. Badawi, “Introduction: The Background,” in *Modern Arabic Literature (The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature)*, edited by M.M. Badawi (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 20-21.

¹⁷⁴ Badawi, “Introduction: The Background,” 21.

¹⁷⁵ Hafez, “Modern Arabic Short Story,” 299.

literary current” steeped in Iraqi identity,¹⁷⁶ as well as a more risk-taking approach to literary creativity and experimentation.¹⁷⁷

Closely linked to socialist realism’s insistence that literature should advance a political agenda is the broader idea of “commitment” (*al-iltizām*), a translation of Jean-Paul Sartre’s concept of *engagement*, the idea that intellectuals, including writers, must take a stand on contemporary political issues, and that literature must not remain aloof, but rather be committed (*engagée*) to the society around it.¹⁷⁸ The idea of literary commitment gained currency in the Arab world in the 1950s in large part due to the influence of the Beirut-based literary journal *al-Ādāb*, which began publication in 1953. (Not coincidentally, its founding editor, Suhayl Idrīs, had translated many of Sartre’s works into Arabic.) Commitment/*al-iltizām* meant different things to different authors and critics (Sabry Hafez calls its meaning “diffuse”): while in some cases, it referred to a commitment to literature of socialist realism that espoused specifically Marxist ideas, it

¹⁷⁶ From a January 31, 1951 letter by ‘Abd al-Mālik Nūrī to Fu’ād al-Takarlī, quoted in al-Musawi, *Naz‘at al-ḥadātha fī l-qīṣṣa al-‘irāqīyya*, 29.

¹⁷⁷ al-Musawi, *Naz‘at al-ḥadātha fī l-qīṣṣa al-‘irāqīyya*, 77. See also Nūrī’s article “Šuwar khāṭifa min ḥayātnā al-adabiyya” (“Fleeting Images from Our Literary Life”) on al-Takarlī, praising him for his aesthetic openness to his characters. The article, originally published in the newspaper *Akhbār al-Sā‘a*, 4/2/1953, is reprinted in al-Musawi, *Naz‘at al-ḥadātha fī l-qīṣṣa al-‘irāqīyya*, 132-40.

¹⁷⁸ Allen, *The Arabic Novel*, 68-9.

could also suggest commitment to other intellectual or political stances, such as Arab nationalism or existentialism.¹⁷⁹

Accompanying a newfound sense of commitment to the society around them, and in some cases a Marxist-inspired adherence to socialist realism, Iraqi writers of the 1950s also demonstrated in their fiction a new awareness of place, as the growth of cities reaffirmed the urban nature of the Iraqi short story:

Its urbanism is steeped in the political context of Iraqi life that began to be focused on city centers... Readers of Iraqi short stories are bound to notice two conspicuous aspects that became established during the 1950s: the attachment to city life and simultaneously an avowed hatred for it.¹⁸⁰

Additionally, writers of Iraq's "1950s generation" aimed at a more rigorous approach to their fiction, consciously setting themselves apart from their predecessors. In addition to Nūrī and al-Takarlī, mentioned above, this generation of young writers whose careers began during this era includes Ghā'ib Ṭu'ma Farmān (1927-1990), Mahdī 'Īsā al-Ṣaqr (1927-2006), and Shākir Khuṣbāk (1930-). In Catherine Cobham and Fabio Caiani's estimation, these writers presented an "uncompromising" stance against their

¹⁷⁹ Hafez, "Modern Arabic Short Story," 21.

¹⁸⁰ Musawi, "Sociopolitical Context," 214.

Iraqi predecessors, whose texts they found sentimental, in contrast to their own “artistic” (*fanni*) work.¹⁸¹

While Iraqi writers in the 1950s aimed at a more consciously aesthetic literature, one that would put an end to “generalization and rhetoric”¹⁸² in fiction, their efforts often fell short. For one thing, the genuine concern that Iraqi authors felt about the plight of the peasantry (including the waves of rural people, collectively known as *sharagwa* (“Easterners”), who flooded into Baghdad in this period) often expressed itself in a socialist realist mode, whereby urban, educated authors struggled to portray characters and settings that lay outside their own experience.¹⁸³

In general, characterization remained a weak point in Iraqi short stories and novels in the 1950s. Idwār al-Kharrāṭ has criticized social-realist works of literature as “pompous,” and as texts in which characters “were reduced to mere stereotypes of the positive, forthright, optimistic and activist mould.” Characters were often two-dimensional, and in many cases, a stand-in for the author and the ideas he espoused. In Iraq’s socialist realism, Caiani and Cobham find continuities with later Iraqi fiction that similarly aimed to “engage the public, to inform and even to contribute to reforming

¹⁸¹ Caiani and Cobham, 36.

¹⁸² Musawi, “Sociopolitical Context,” 210-11.

¹⁸³ Caiani and Cobham, 19.

society,” but they, too, agree that the predominance of socialist realism tended to produce a flatness of literary style that “rarely [made] imaginative demands on the reader.”¹⁸⁴

In spite of the criticisms regarding plot and characterization that have been leveled at the socialist realism that dominated the literary field at the time, Iraqi fiction in the 1950s reflected a new aesthetic seriousness among Iraqi writers, a seriousness prompted by a rejection of the more traditional and sentimental style that prevailed in the 1940s. A majority of Iraqi authors at the time were part of the same class of urban, educated elites, a fact that hindered their ability to portray the lives of rural or working-class Iraqis with a degree of familiarity. Likewise, many writers were in the awkward position of being employed by the Iraqi state while at the same time seeking to criticize it.¹⁸⁵ Nevertheless, socialist realism (and the related concept of *iltizām*) encouraged Iraqi authors to address in their fiction the social ills of the wider community around them.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 19.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 18. This tenuous position was not confined to socialist realism authors of the 1950s: Dhū l-Nūn Ayyūb, as a teacher employed by the state, found himself exiled internally to an undesirable teaching post after the publication of his 1939 short story collection, *Burj Bābil*, which included a story widely seen as an attack on the then-Minister of Education Fāḍil al-Jamālī. In response, he expanded that story into a set of stories that became the basis of his novel *Duktūr Ibrāhīm*.

2.6 The Decline of Socialist Realism and the Shift from Metonymy to Metaphor

In the decade of the 1960s, a number of factors led to the decline of socialist realism as the preferred mode of fiction among Iraqi writers. After its dominance in the previous decade, socialist realism had been supplanted by fiction that was more formally daring and less overtly political in its themes. One factor was that a number of prominent writers—those most likely to be affiliated with leftist and Communist political groups—had been imprisoned by governments in the Arab world and thus were no longer publishing.¹⁸⁶

More broadly, some scholars have pointed to a distinct shift in Arabic literature after 1960, one which was shared by Iraqi fiction. Sabry Hafez, in particular, roughly divides Arabic novels chronologically into a “first period” up to 1960, and a “second period” that encompasses fiction up to the present day.¹⁸⁷ In this reading, during the first period, the assertion of local identity in the face of European colonialism prompted a sense of a cohesive national self in the Arab world, one that was “monolithic” and “collective” in contrast to a colonizing foreign presence.¹⁸⁸ This

¹⁸⁶ Hafez, “The Modern Arabic Short Story,” 302.

¹⁸⁷ Sabry Hafez, “The Transformation of Reality and the Arabic Novel’s Aesthetic Response,” in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* (Vol. 57, No. 1, February 1994), 93.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 94.

cohesion was reflected in the fiction of this period, when the “self” was often identified with the nation. By contrast, fiction in the second period, generally occurring in the postcolonial period, often reflects a “ruptured self,” as well as feelings of alienation, fragmentation and tension.¹⁸⁹

Hafez also expresses this literary shift as a change in the rules of reference, for which he draws on Roman Jakobson’s distinction between metaphor and metonymy. A text (such as realist fiction) is metonymic if its signs are linked through their direct association with each other. A metaphoric text (such as poetry), on the other hand, substitutes one sign for another on the basis of some similarity.¹⁹⁰ Using this distinction, Hafez considers pre-1960 Arabic literary texts to be metonymic, in that they “aspired to be representative, substituting the part for the whole, genus for species or vice versa.”¹⁹¹ Novels aimed to reflect a commonly understood and shared reality. Authors shared a confidence in mimesis, and the ability of their fiction to represent real life accurately. To borrow Umberto Eco’s term, older novels were “closed texts,” and in Hafez’ judgment, they required minimal intertextual competence on the part of the reader.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 96.

¹⁹⁰ Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1956), 90-6.

¹⁹¹ Hafez, “The Transformation of Reality,” 99.

¹⁹² Ibid., 104.

Post-1960, a metaphoric sensibility predominates in Arabic literature, with a wider gap between the subject and its representation on the page. The metaphoric turn

liberat[ed] the literary text from slavish adherence to the logic and order of social reality and allow[ed] for occasional flights into fantasy, the dissolution of time, a wider gap between the world of art and that of reality and a higher degree of textual autonomy.¹⁹³

The “new narrative” reflected a growing understanding of literature as a set of literary conventions: realism was not a privileged mode that offered a faithful imitation of an external reality, but rather constituted its own set of conventions. The “causal logic” of metonymic fiction was thus replaced by the “dialectical logic” that found expression in the novels of the 1960s and afterwards.¹⁹⁴

In the Iraqi context, the 1963 coup that overthrew the regime of ‘Abd al-Karīm Qāsim—a regime that had championed priorities such as social and economic reforms that were shared by many Iraqi writers on the political left—has been characterized as the external political event that catalyzed new forms of writing in that decade:

Many of the coup’s victims were artists and writers. The so-called Sixties Generation was nothing other than a group of young men and college students when many of them were arrested and tortured in the Baathist

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

prisons because of their Communist affiliations and membership in youth and student organizations.¹⁹⁵

In addition to the political suppression that followed the 1963 coup, the shock of the 1967 war with Israel led many intellectuals in Iraq, as elsewhere in the Arab world, to question and reappraise the assumptions and expectations of their societies.¹⁹⁶ Idwār al-Kharrāṭ characterizes the 1960s more broadly as a decade of destabilization and disillusionment, which he considers the proximate cause for a general turn away from a mimetic approach in fiction to a more modernist sensibility, one which called into question the claim that fiction could imitate reality at all. The resulting “modernist sensibility” could take many forms, including breaking the “pre-ordained order of narration,” the dismantling of traditional plot structure, and broadening the scope of fiction to incorporate dreams, myth, and what al-Kharrāṭ calls “implicit poetry.”¹⁹⁷ In his article outlining this modernist sensibility in the eastern half of the Arab world (*al-Mashriq*) published in 1991, al-Kharrāṭ considers the most promising aspect of the

¹⁹⁵ Fatima Mohsen, “Debating Iraqi Culture: Intellectuals between the Inside and the Outside,” in *Conflicting Narratives: War, Trauma and Memory in Iraqi Culture*, edited by Stephan Milich, Friederike Pannewick, and Leslie Tramontini (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag Wiesbaden, 2012), 8.

¹⁹⁶ A useful point of comparison is Alexa Firat’s study of the Syrian novel as part of a “post”-discourse following the 1967 war. Firat’s study makes use of Bourdieu’s notion of a literary field as a site of contestation. As with Iraqi literature, a rigid socialist realism in Syrian literature gave way to greater experimentalism even as the political sphere became more restrictive. Alexa Firat, “Post-67 Discourse and the Syrian Novel: The Construction of an Autonomous Literary Field” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2010.)

¹⁹⁷ al-Kharrāṭ, 187.

modernist sensibility to be the “contemporary-mythical current,” one that draws on folk-tale and fantasy in a contemporary or historical setting. Al-Kharrāṭ points specifically to Muḥammad Khudāyyir as a prominent Iraqi writer who employs this contemporary-mythical mode.¹⁹⁸

Another factor that accounts for a shift in literary sensibility in Arabic fiction during this period was the spread of more politically coercive governments in the region, prompting a radical change in outlook among writers and causing them to reassess their relationship to their societies.¹⁹⁹ Within Iraq, tensions between Ba‘thist and Marxist groups, coupled with the curtailment of civil society and a rise in authoritarian policies in the wake of the 1963 coup, contributed to a growing polarization between state authority and individual artistic expression, in which Iraqi authors increasingly came to see themselves in the latter camp, in opposition to the former.²⁰⁰ On a more practical level, political oppression also made overtly political novels riskier to write and publish.

¹⁹⁸ al-Kharrāṭ, 191.

¹⁹⁹ Hafez, “The Modern Arabic Short Story,” 316-7.

²⁰⁰ Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 151-2. Yasmeen Hanoosh, “Contempt: State Literati vs. Street Literati in Modern Iraq,” in *Journal of Arabic Literature* (Vol. 43, 2012), 386.

Notably, the text from this period that is most frequently cited as the first aesthetically mature Iraqi novel is also an example of realist fiction: *al-Nakhla wa-l-Jirān* (*The Palm Tree and the Neighbors*, 1966), by Ghāʾib Ṭuʿma Farmān. In comparison with *al-Nakhla wa-l-Jirān*, earlier Iraqi novels were retrospectively criticized as excessively sentimental, or, if aiming for realism, overtly political or blunt. Set during World War II, and focused on working-class characters in Baghdad, *al-Nakhla wa-l-Jirān* by contrast, displays a greater sophistication in character and literary style, which is “simple and economically effective in alluding, evoking, and implying rather than explaining, describing, and commenting.”²⁰¹ Thus, while it retains realism for its dominant mode, and does not employ some of the formal techniques that would characterize other Iraqi fiction of the 1960s, *al-Nakhla wa-l-Jirān* reflected a new maturity in Iraqi fiction.

The maturing literary sensibility of the 1960s was marked not only by a departure from overtly political and social themes in fiction, but also by a sense of “disillusionment and doubt,” as expressed in the early stories of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Majīd al-Rubayʿī, Sarkūn Būluṣ, and others.²⁰² Additionally, the new sensibility found expression in more formally experimental texts that incorporated technical devices

²⁰¹ Caiani and Cobham, 86.

²⁰² Al-Musawi, “Sociopolitical Context,” 219.

such as interior monologue, stream of consciousness, and polyphony.²⁰³ Prominent examples of the latter include Ghāʾib Ṭuʿma Farmān’s *Khamsat Aṣwāt* (*Five Voices*, 1967) and later, Fuʾād al-Takarlī’s *al-Rajʿ al-baʿīd* (*The Distant Return*, 1980).

2.7 State Co-optation of Intellectuals and “The Project for Rewriting History” (*Mashrūʿ li-iʿādat kitābat al-tārīkh*)

The development of Iraqi fiction in the 1970s and beyond took place in the context of the changing cultural and political environment under the Baʿthist regime, which took power in a coup in 1968 and ruled Iraq for the next thirty-five years. Founded in Syria in the 1940s by Michael ʿAflaq and Ṣalāḥ al-dīn al-Bīṭār, the Baʿth Party was a secular pan-Arabist party that originally envisioned a full political unity for Arabs.²⁰⁴ The early years of Baʿthist rule in Iraq were marked by “a belligerent anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist rhetoric,” along with attempts to court the Iraqi Communist Party.²⁰⁵ By the 1970’s, following an aborted coup in 1973, the Baʿthist

²⁰³ As Fabio Caiani and Catherine Cobham point out, however, these technical devices were not new to Iraqi fiction: they point to ʿAbd al-Malik Nūrī’s 1948 short story, *Jiyaf muʿaṭṭara* (*Perfumed Corpses*), as the first example in Arabic fiction of the stream of consciousness technique, influenced by the author’s reading of Joyce’s *Ulysses*. However, at the time, the story was mostly ignored, and thus made little impact on the decade of social realism that followed. Caiani and Cobham, 52.

²⁰⁴ Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs: A History* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 305.

²⁰⁵ Davis, *Memories of State*, 153.

regime enjoyed a fairly broad level of support among Iraqis, in part because substantial oil revenues allowed it to fund major infrastructure, housing, electrification, and other projects.²⁰⁶

However, in his 2005 study, *Memories of State*, Eric Davis argues that the support the Ba‘th regime received in the 1970s was in fact due to a “deceptive political calm.”²⁰⁷ The good will generated by rising oil wealth masked the fact that the modern state of Iraq had never developed a cohesive sense of political community based on a set of commonly accepted foundational myths. As a result, after Ṣaddām Ḥusayn deposed president Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Bakr and assumed power himself in 1979, the Ba‘thist regime felt compelled to expend great efforts on the manipulation of Iraqi historical memory in order to bolster its rule.²⁰⁸ The state’s need to establish hegemony over Iraq’s culture and populace only intensified during the pressures of the Iraq-Iraq War (1980-1988). By fostering a state-sanctioned narrative of an Iraqi past, the Ba‘thist regime was attempting to achieve hegemony, defined by Antonio Gramsci as power attained through both coercion and consent in which a ruling elite creates subjects that have internalized the elites’ ideology and who thereby willingly consent to its rule.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 149.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 149.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 2.

²⁰⁹ Selden, 100.

The state's discourse of nationhood, in al-Musawi's view, "became the official mask that was hiding hegemonic practices."²¹⁰

A key element of this hegemonic state project was the *Mashrū' li-i'ādat kitābat al-tārīkh*, or "The Project for Rewriting History," which was launched officially in 1979.²¹¹ The state-led effort included a number of officially authorized publications, including a multi-volume history of Iraq, that purported to replace previous "unreliable" accounts of Iraqi history.²¹² This project extended to a collection of Ṣaddām Ḥusayn's speeches, along with essays by historians, entitled *On the Writing of History*, as well as other state-commissioned volumes on history-writing.²¹³ In its attempt to forge a state-sponsored past, the Ba'athist regime drew on both pan-Arabist and Iraqist approaches to history, at times co-opting ideas from the Iraqi left, while fostering a cult of personality centered on Ṣaddām Ḥusayn.²¹⁴

A related element in the state's quest for hegemony was the co-optation or silencing of Iraqi intellectuals. Muhsin al-Musawi argues that the state sought to co-opt

²¹⁰ Al-Musawi, *Reading Iraq*, 68.

²¹¹ Davis, *Memories of State*, 148. Davis also notes that the Ba'athist state's interest in acting as a patron of Iraqi culture and history predates Ṣaddām Ḥusayn's internal coup: he notes that as far back as 1970, there had been a "dramatic expansion" in the number of conferences and festivals on popular culture and archaeology that the state sponsored.

²¹² Al-Musawi, *Reading Iraq*, 77.

²¹³ Davis, 171. Ṣaddām Ḥusayn, *Ḥawla kitābat al-tārīkh* (Baghdad: Dār Ḥurriya li-l-Ṭibā'a, 1979.)

²¹⁴ Al-Musawi, *Reading Iraq*, 79.1.

intellectuals (including authors) because they posed a threat to the regime's status: the Ba'athist government was well aware that intellectuals, with their cultural background and education, might offer a better alternative vision for the state. Faced with a cultural scene that presented "a glittering façade of refinement and tolerance," Ṣaddām "had to forge a competitive one drawn under his own supervision."²¹⁵ The result was an attempt to "ba'athify" cultural production through control, censorship, and the sponsorship of amenable artists. To take one example, in 1978 the regime commissioned the poet and Ba'athist functionary 'Abd al-Amīr Mu'alla to write a semi-fictionalized biographical novel about Ṣaddām Ḥusayn and the failed 1959 assassination attempt against 'Abd al-Karīm Qāsim, *al-Ayyām al-Ṭawīla* (*The Long Days*), which was then made into a film.²¹⁶ Writing in 1991, Kanan Makiya offered a bleak assessment of the state's power to co-opt writers and artists into state projects: "By and large, an entire generation of Iraqi intellectuals collaborated with the Ba'athist regime in Iraq,"²¹⁷

²¹⁵ Ibid., xiii.

²¹⁶ Joseph Sassoon, *Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party: Inside an Authoritarian Regime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 165, n.7. 'Abd al-Amīr Mu'alla, *al-Ayyām al-Ṭawīla* (Baghdad: Wizārat al-I'ḷām, 1978.) Ṣaddām Ḥusayn himself reportedly wrote and anonymously published four allegorical novels with unmistakable political themes, beginning with *Zabībah wa-l-Mālik* published as "a novel by its author," with no author name given. *Zabībah wa-l-Mālik* (n.p.: Maṭba'at al-Bilād, 2000.)

²¹⁷ Kanan Makiya, *The Monument: Art and Vulgarity in Saddam Hussein's Iraq* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 116. Original edition: Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

while the nation's culture is "wholly state-produced and 'imitative' of its ruler's wants and desires."²¹⁸

The regime could also create its own opposition, in the form of organizations that mimicked genuine opposition groups, but that allowed the state to manipulate or otherwise control them. These officially sanctioned opposition groups (which Muḥammad Ghāzī al-Akhras calls "specific antibodies" (*ḍidd nawī*) allowed the state to neutralize cultural opposition on its own terms.²¹⁹ The regime displayed a Foucauldian understanding of the power of discourse—as applied to both language and historiography—in its efforts to promote its own agenda and maintain its rule.²²⁰ Iraqi authors and intellectuals often found themselves incorporated into the state's cultural projects, or alternatively found themselves shut out of opportunities for publishing their work and effectively denied access to readers.²²¹

The state's efforts to rewrite history and co-opt intellectuals are particularly relevant in the case of an author such as Muḥammad Khudāyyir, whose writings both

²¹⁸ Makiya, *The Monument*, 114.

²¹⁹ Muḥammad Ghāzī al-Akhras, *Kharīf al-muthaqqaf fī l-ʿIrāq* (Beirut: al-Tanwīr, 2011), 5, quoted in Hanoosh, 390.

²²⁰ Leslie Tramontini, "The Struggle for Representation: The Internal Iraqi Dispute over Cultural Production in Baathist Iraq" in *Conflicting Narratives: War, Trauma and Memory in Iraqi Culture*, edited by Stephan Milich, Friederike Pannewick, and Leslie Tramontini (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag Wiesbaden, 2012),

²²¹ Hanoosh, 374.

during and after the decades of Ṣaddām Ḥusayn's rule frequently focused on Iraq's past, and can be read as a counterhistory to official narratives of selective memory and forgetting. As a number of scholars have demonstrated, the Ba'ṡhist regime failed to achieve complete hegemony, as is demonstrated by the literary output of Khuḍayyir and other writers, whose work did not echo back the sentiments and stances of the regime.

The resistance to this state project of cooptation can perhaps be attributed to a recurring trope in the field of Iraqi literature in which a writer or poet posits herself as creating a counterhegemonic discourse to oppose a hegemonic project imposed by the state. As Yasmeen Hanoosh demonstrates, the beginnings of this trope can be traced to the early 20th century, when poets such as Ma'ṡrūf al-Ruṣāfī adopted the role of "organic intellectuals," offering themselves as authentic voices of Iraqi society in contrast to those in power.²²²

However, despite the appeal of this idealized self-image, Iraqi intellectuals could rarely claim to be authentic "organic intellectuals" in the face of state power. In her essay on the political and cultural binary in Iraq that categorizes Iraqi writers as either co-opted insiders ("state literati") or marginalized outsiders ("street literati"), Yasmeen

²²² Ibid., 376.

Hanoosh argues that the division between the two was never firm, as instead “both repeatedly shifted political affiliations, negotiated ideological and literary spaces, engaged in a reciprocal dialogue... and ultimately produced multiple and intersecting cultural discourses.”²²³ Unlike previous Iraqi governments, the post-1979 Ba‘thist regime had more resources at its command to commit to its hegemonic project, and its oppressive character drove a number of authors into exile. Far from being “organic intellectuals” able to speak truth to power, the weakness of author vis-à-vis state power, coupled with the regime’s ability to co-opt the intellectual class, ensured the “mutual dependence” between the author and the state.²²⁴

If the state was successful at silencing, co-opting, or exiling intellectuals, it ultimately failed in its efforts to rewrite Iraqi history. As Hanoosh points out, echoing Eric Davis, it was the regime’s own success in isolating and marginalizing Iraq’s political left (including the Iraqi Communist Party and other leftist groups to which authors frequently belonged) that ultimately led to the failure of its cultural narrative: by leaving so many intellectuals outside its sphere, it failed to ensure their “buy-in” of the state-sanctioned narrative.²²⁵ And, as al-Musawi points out, the Project for Rewriting

²²³ Ibid., 374.

²²⁴ Leslie Tramontini, “The Struggle for Representation: The Internal Iraqi Dispute over Cultural Production in Baathist Iraq,” 28.

²²⁵ Hanoosh, 392.

History produced no serious works of scholarship, although “a counter-effort developed among writers to recollect and re-address recent history as if to buttress a pervasive nostalgia for a lost past.”²²⁶ The state succeeded in suppressing an open counterhegemonic project among Iraqi intellectuals, but failed to fully graft its “memories of state” (to borrow Eric Davis’s term) onto them and their writings.

2.8 Repression, Silence, and Exile: The Impact of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988)

The eight-year-long Iran-Iraq War, which began when Iraq launched an invasion into Iranian territory in September, 1980, intensified the regime’s efforts to achieve hegemony. The Iraqi government’s attempts to use culture to boost support for the war included its sponsorship of the 1981 film *al-Qādisiyya*, which was about the early Islamic conquest of Sasanian Persia in 636CE. The film served as thinly-disguised anti-Iranian propaganda, a connection that was particularly clear since the Ba‘thist regime had already made “al-Qādisiyya” the official name for the Iraqi war campaign. Some Iraqi poets, such as ‘Abd al-Razzāq ‘Abd al-Wāḥid and Ḥamīd Sa‘īd,

²²⁶ Al-Musawi, *Reading Iraq*, xiii.

wholeheartedly embraced the government line and authored verse enthusiastically praising Ṣaddām Ḥusayn.²²⁷

In the first year of the war, the state launched “a campaign of arrests, purges and dismissals” which affected intellectuals linked to the left and the Communist Party and prompted a wave of exiles.²²⁸ Authors who were deemed to be opposed to the war faced imprisonment or execution, and thus, by the time the war ended in 1988, “Indirection as a way to escape censorship flourished.”²²⁹

Evasiveness often led writers to come up with methods of “narrative codification” that permitted them to express their critical views safely.²³⁰ The use of complex literary techniques to avoid the dangers of a repressive political environment was neither new nor unique to Iraq: Roger Allen writes that for authors in the Arab world in the 1960s, “the copious use of symbolism... was not merely an artistic phenomenon but a matter of strict practicality.”²³¹ Cultural opposition in the 1980s often took the form of a generational challenge, as younger Iraqi writers and poets

²²⁷ ‘Abd al-Razzāq ‘Abd al-Wāḥid became known as “the poet of the war,” and won the Saddam Literature Prize in 1987. For an overview of ‘Abd al-Wāḥid’s status during the Ba‘thist period and the critical assessment of his work by critics and poets in the Arab world after 2003, see Stephan Milich, “The Positioning of Baathist Intellectuals and Writers Before and After 2003: The Case of the Iraqi Poet Abd al-Razzaq Abd al-Wahid,” in *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 4, No. 1 (2011): 298-319.

²²⁸ Mohsen, 5.

²²⁹ Al-Musawi, *Reading Iraq*, 85.

²³⁰ Hafez, “Modern Arabic Short Story,” 325.

²³¹ Allen, *The Arabic Novel*, 58.

came to resent older writers from the 1960s generation who had become co-opted by the state. Their opposition also found expression in the adoption of the new genre of the prose poem (*qaṣīdat al-nathr*).²³² Nevertheless, as Fatima Mohsen points out, during the 1980s, “there was almost no writer or artist who was spared the ordeal of declaring his strict and unwavering agreement with the war and praising the President.”²³³

Another option left to Iraqi authors seeking to avoid being co-opted or absorbed by the state was the more drastic step of self-censorship. During the long Iran-Iraq War, Muḥammad Khuḍayyir himself stopped writing fiction (or at least stopped publishing it), crediting the political volatility of Iraq as both the inspiration for his writing and the reason for the decade-long gap between his 1978 short story collection *Fī darajat khams wa-arbaʿīn miʿawī* and the individual essays published in Iraqi journals in the late 1980s that would later become chapters of *Baṣrayāthā*. Khuḍayyir’s period of silence is not unusual among Iraqi authors; perhaps the most prominent example of an Iraqi author with a long self-imposed silence is Maḥdī ʿĪsā al-Ṣaqr, who also had a long gap between his early collections of short stories and his prolific output later in life, including five novels and a short story collection published between 1986 and 1998.²³⁴

²³² Hanoosh, 393.

²³³ Mohsen, 15.

²³⁴ Shakir Mustafa, *Contemporary Iraqi Fiction: An Anthology* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 44.

Many Iraqi authors chose to live in exile rather than be forced to choose between silence and varying degrees of co-optation by the state. The 1970s saw the first wave of emigration of Iraqi intellectuals and writers into exile, in some cases imposed by the state, which termed exile “the migration option” (*khiyār al-hijra*) for dissident writers and those who otherwise refused to be co-opted. The exile or deportation of Iraqi writers and poets did not begin with the Ba‘thist regime—the time that renowned Iraqi poet Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb spent in exile in Kuwait is an earlier example of this phenomenon—but the scale of it was new. The numbers of exiles increased during the years of the Iran-Iraq War, continuing through the sanctions period and through the years of violence and civil war that have plagued post-Ba‘thist Iraq.

Many writers who remained in Iraq compromised with or were absorbed by the state, and a division grew among writers along ideological and geographical lines, between a growing diaspora of authors in exile, and those who remained in Iraq. Fatima Mohsen characterizes this outside/inside binary as a new “rift” in Iraqi culture,²³⁵ as the literature produced by exiles and by those within Ba‘thist Iraq grew increasingly disconnected from each other. The rift was further widened by Iraqi government

²³⁵ Mohsen, 5

efforts near the end of Iran-Iraq War to suppress the works of writers in exile within Iraq.²³⁶

The social and political impact of the Iran-Iraq War influenced Iraqi writing in a number of ways: for one thing, the war served as the subject of a number of novels, including those written by exiles writing critically about the war. A literature of escape (*adab al-hurūb*) emerged among writers in exile, portraying the devastating effects of war on individual protagonists.²³⁷ At the same time, it also gave rise to a series of short story volumes on heroic Iraqi soldiers published by Iraq's Ministry of Information as a form of propaganda. The war also took its toll on Iraq's cultural scene in the 1980s, as the state's success at co-opting or silencing authors produced what Muhsin al-Musawi terms a "mixture of complacency and dissent, compliance and revolt."²³⁸

2.9 Violence, Sanctions, and War

The years of the Iran-Iraq War were not the only period in recent Iraqi history in which instability, political repression, and violence have placed constraints on the lives of Iraqi writers and played a role in the nature of fiction being written in Iraq. One

²³⁶ Mohsen, 10.

²³⁷ Hanoosh, 399-400 and 399, n.84.

²³⁸ Al-Musawi, *Reading Iraq*, 94.

scholar has even referred to the collective Iraqi experience in recent decades as “a historical nightmare and a horror serial.”²³⁹ The years that followed the Iran-Iraq War, however, are notable for their violence: the 1990 occupation of Kuwait; the Gulf War in 1991, followed by a widespread Shi‘i uprising in southern Iraq and its suppression by the regime; the years of embargo (1991-2003); the destruction caused by the U.S.-led invasion in 2003; and the years of chaos, civil war, and violence that followed.

The sanctions era (1991-2003) witnessed a shift in Iraq’s cultural landscape, causing “the iron fist...to loosen[...] its grip,” as Ṣaddām Ḥusayn’s oldest son ‘Uday was put in charge of several official cultural organizations.²⁴⁰ ‘Uday removed many writers of the 60s generation from their posts and absorbed younger outsiders into the state apparatus. Yasmine Hanoosh attributes this shift in part to a greater attention paid by the outside world—including new Gulf media and Western academics—to marginalized Iraqi voices.²⁴¹ Internally, it also reflected the growing disjuncture between Iraqis and the regime that had failed to impose hegemony over them: as Muhsin al-Musawi expresses it, “the masses no longer had a vested interest in a system that, to use

²³⁹ Ferial J. Ghazoul, “Iraqi Short Fiction: The Unhomely at Home and Abroad,” in *Journal of Arabic Literature* 35, no. 1 (2004): 1.

²⁴⁰ Mohsen, 22.

²⁴¹ Hanoosh, 394.

Fanon's words, expelled them from history."²⁴² Al-Musawi's view of the Ba'athist state's failure to impose hegemony over the Iraqi populace contrasts with an earlier conception of Ba'athist Iraq as a uniquely totalitarian state that used fear to ensure the silent consent of Iraqis, a view associated most closely with Kanan Makiya and his 1998 book *Republic of Fear*, and which scholars have more recently come to reject.²⁴³

The weakening of the regime's authority during the embargo years had an emboldening effect on the Iraqi literary field: the regime's censorship apparatus weakened sufficiently that writers on the inside were able to produce writing that Fatima Mohsen terms "resistance" literature, although they avoided direct confrontation with the regime through the use of symbols and indirect narrative.²⁴⁴ The high cost of printed books due to the embargo led to the phenomenon of the "photocopy book," in which self-published and pirated texts circulated on the black market. The result was an informal circulation of literature that escaped the notice and control of state censorship.²⁴⁵ At the same time, the extended period of sanctions

²⁴² Al-Musawi, *Reading Iraq*, 88.

²⁴³ Kanan Makiya, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989; Revised edition: 1998). For a summation of the arguments against Makiya's view, see Achim Rohde, "Revisiting the Republic of Fear: Lessons for Research on Contemporary Iraq," in *Iraq Between Occupations: Perspectives from the 1920s to the Present*, edited by Amatzia Baram, Achim Rohde, and Ronen Zeidel (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 129-141.

²⁴⁴ Mohsen, 6.

²⁴⁵ Hanoosh, 397.

coupled with decades of authoritarian rule led to “aridness” and “fatigue” in Iraqi culture, which drove many prominent Iraqi writers who came of age during the 1990s—such as ‘Alī Badr (b. 1977) and Ḥasan Blāsim (b. 1973)—to leave Iraq during that period, or soon after the 2003 occupation.²⁴⁶

The decades of authoritarianism, war, and economic isolation inevitably had an impact on the nature of Iraqi fiction as well, as a number of scholars have pointed out. In contrast to the realism that predominated in previous decades, Ferial Ghazoul says that recent Iraqi fiction

has veered towards the fantastic, the surrealist, the Kafkaesque, the labyrinthine, the uncanny, not out of renunciation of the real, but out of verisimilitude... [C]onfidence in a hopeful future has given way to a consciousness of the absurd and monstrous.²⁴⁷

In a separate essay, Ghazoul links the “excesses and contradictions in Iraqi culture” to the prominence of the “fantastic” and the “strange” in contemporary Iraqi fictional discourse.²⁴⁸ In this essay, she encapsulates this sense of displacement and strangeness (“the unfamiliar experienced as familiar”) as being “uncanny” (borrowing a translation

²⁴⁶ Mohsen, 20.

²⁴⁷ Ferial Ghazoul, “A Forest of Symbols: Iraqi Fiction Today,” in *Banipal* 14 (2002): 3-4.

²⁴⁸ Ghazoul, “The Unhomely at Home and Abroad,” 1.

of Freud's term *Unheimlich*.)²⁴⁹ The Iraqi critic Fāḍil Thāmir also noted an experimental and fantastic turn in Iraqi literature in the late 1980s and early 1990s, pointing out that many of its proponents were older writers from the 1960s and 1970s generations, including Khuḍayyir. For Thāmir, the turn towards the fantastic was “marked by an attempt to return to legend, history, and fantasy, and sometimes has recourse in making use of storytelling and classical (*turāthiyya*) language.”²⁵⁰

To be sure, the fantastic mode draws on much older sources. Iraqi critic Qays Kāẓim al-Janābī links the fantastic mode to ancient Mesopotamian myth, magical realism, and the tradition of visions in Iraqi fiction, by means of which “new narrative writings attempt [to] transcend a narrative account through the use of the tools of intertextuality and suggestion.”²⁵¹ Ghazoul describes the fantastic as an “irruption” of pre-modern narrative elements into contemporary fiction: it offers a range of motifs that serves as “both an aesthetic quest and a political camouflage,” as a way to avoid censorship.²⁵² But even if fantastic motifs draw on earlier narrative traditions, their

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁵⁰ Fāḍil Thāmir, *al-Maqmū‘ wa-l-maskūt ‘anhu fi l-sard al-‘arabī* (Damascus: Dār al-Madā, 2004), 225.

²⁵¹ Qays Kāẓim al-Janābī, *al-Riwāya al-‘irāqiyya al-mu‘āšira: anmāṭ wa-muqārabāt* (Damascus: Manshūrāt ittiḥād al-kuttāb al-‘arab, 2012), 157-58.

²⁵² Ghazoul, “The Unhomely at Home and Abroad,” 22.

presence in contemporary Iraqi fiction, along with tragic, paranoid, and absurd elements, also reflect the crises that have marked Iraqi life at least since the 1980s.

2.10 Iraqi Fiction after 2003

The toppling of the Ba‘thist regime in 2003 by a U.S.-led military coalition removed a political reality that had dominated Iraqi life for three decades. However, the years of occupation, chaos, and civil war that followed opened up further debates over the nature of Iraqi literature, and over which voices were qualified to speak as Gramscian “organic intellectuals.” In the years since 2003, Iraqis have bitterly contested their own recent history. Leslie Tramontini points to the “current ambivalent and often polemic relationship” between those Iraqis who lived in exile from the Iraqi regime—some for decades—and those who remained in Iraq. With the end of Ba‘thist regime and the return of some exiled writers to Iraq, the former divisions between “inside” and “outside” have become muddled.²⁵³

At the same time, a second dividing line among intellectuals—between those who support the current post-Ba‘thist government and those who oppose it—remains, as some authors and intellectuals who were closely allied with the Ba‘th regime have

²⁵³ Tramontini, 26.

found themselves in the unaccustomed role of outsiders. Some intellectuals and historians are now “engaging in a retrospective assessment of the failed role of the modern Iraqi intellectual” with “a great deal of self- and collective-loathing.”²⁵⁴ While it is too soon to assess contemporary shifts in recent Iraqi fiction, some new works of fiction have addressed the realities of post-2003 Iraq, including the U.S. occupation (Gūlāla Nūrī’s *Akādhib burtuqāliyya* [*Orange Lies*], 2013), and the brutality of war and sectarian violence (Ahmad Sa‘dāwī’s *Frānkishtāyn fī Baghdād* [*Frankenstein in Baghdad*], 2013).²⁵⁵ The occupation also brought a wave of “resistance poetry” that dealt with the relationship between occupier and occupied.²⁵⁶ Qays Kāẓim al-Janabi says that contemporary Iraqi writers “live in a state of loss and a feeling of intellectual calamity; as do the writings of Iraqi novelists at the edges of occupation, or what accompanied it or followed it.”²⁵⁷

²⁵⁴ Hanoosh, 405. Orit Bashkin would object to this self-criticizing dismissal of Iraqi intellectuals, and has written, in *The Other Iraq*, that this represents a trope of “failed Enlightenment and liberalism” and reflects a deterministic historiography that posits the Ba‘thist dictatorship as inevitable, while overlooking what had long been the pluralist nature of the Iraqi public sphere. Bashkin, 13-14.

²⁵⁵ In 2013, ‘Abd ‘Alī Ḥasan published a full-length study on changes in the Iraqi novel and short story in the 1990s and after 2003, including “post-narrative” (*mā ba‘d al-sard*) literature and the transformation from “reading as consuming to reading as productive of meaning.” ‘Abd ‘Alī Ḥasan, *Taḥawwulāt al-naṣṣ al-sardī al-‘irāqī* (Baghdad: Dār al-Shu‘ūn al-Thaqāfiyya al-‘Āmma, 2013), 5, 9.

²⁵⁶ Hanoosh, 407.

²⁵⁷ Janābī, 160.

2.11 Conclusion

The aim of this brief overview of the development of modern Iraqi fiction is to provide some historical and cultural context for Khuḍayyir's work, particularly in light of his writings that explicitly reflect the historical ruptures that have severed organic ties of memory and place from Iraqi life. Despite the relatively late emergence of modern narrative forms in Iraq (in comparison with other parts of the Arab world), Iraqi fiction developed particular forms, such as the early *ru'yā* genre, that later found echoes in Khuḍayyir's fiction. This study does not claim to find a direct correlation between fictional texts and their cultural context, but, following the New Historicist model, it aims to situate Khuḍayyir's writings as part of a negotiation between the author and the conventions, practices, and environment he shares with his readers.

Chapter 3: Muḥammad Khuḍayyir—His Life, Background, and Fiction

3.1. Introduction

This chapter presents a brief overview of the life and work of Muhammad Khuḍayyir, including some biographical elements and thematic preoccupations that have cropped up repeatedly in his writing, often in the form of autobiographical snippets. Included here are Khuḍayyir's own responses to questions about his background and writing, conveyed in response to emailed questions, as well as details on his relationship to Basra and to Iraqi identity more generally. Khuḍayyir's writings routinely blend elements of fiction and memoir, and thus warrant attention to his personal background and writings on literature, history, and identity.

3.2 Biography and Background

Muhammad Khuḍayyir was born in the riverside neighborhood of Manāwī Bāshā in central Basra.²⁵⁸ According to his regularly updated Facebook page, which he uses to publish his recent writings, short essays, and artwork, he was born on July 1,

²⁵⁸ Many of the details in this chapter on Khuḍayyir's personal and family life come from my email correspondence with him. In response to two sets of questions I emailed him in Arabic, he wrote to me on July 22, 2014 and on June 19, 2015. Quotations attributed to him are my translations of his responses.

1942.²⁵⁹ At the time, British troops were stationed in Iraq, including at a base in Basra, in the wake of the “second British occupation” a year earlier. Both of Khuḍayyir’s parents came from peasant families from the region around Basra, and were recent arrivals in the city itself:

My father was from a peasant family in the al-Jazīra region on the eastern bank of the Shatt al-‘Arab, and my mother was also from a peasant family that resided in Abū l-Khaṣīb south of Basra. Except that my father’s family migrated to live in the city center soon after the First World War and the entry of the British into the city...²⁶⁰

Khuḍayyir’s father, a recent rural transplant to the city, worked with the Hills Brothers Company, which exported Basran dates to the United States. Hills Brothers was one of the export companies—mostly British and American—that created a large agricultural industry in the Gulf in the late 19th century, and contributed to the growth of port cities such as Basra and Muscat.²⁶¹ Khuḍayyir describes Hills Brothers as a British company, although it was in fact an American firm. The confusion possibly stems from the company’s British staff, such as its manager H.P. Clark, who ran the

²⁵⁹ “About Muḥammad Khuḍayyir”. https://www.facebook.com/mohammed.khudair/info?tab=page_info, Accessed 3/17/15.

²⁶⁰ Personal correspondence, 7/22/14.

²⁶¹ Matthew S. Hopper, “The Globalization of Dried Fruit: Transformations in the Eastern Arabian Economy, 1860s-1920s,” in *Global Muslims in the Age of Steam and Print*, edited by James L. Gelvin and Nile Green (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013), 169.

company's Basra office in the years immediately before World War I, when Hills Brothers dominated Basra's date trade.²⁶² By the time Khudayyir was born, however, a British company, Andrew Weir, working in conjunction with the national government in Baghdad, had secured a monopoly on date exports lasting from 1939 to 1949.²⁶³

Employment with an international export company represented a major opportunity for Iraqis such as Khudayyir's father, since Hills Brothers "employed, along with my father, dozens of peasants who had migrated from the eastern bank of the river."²⁶⁴ Working on the motors of steam launches, his father learned the trade of a mechanic and eventually earned a pilot's license, which in turn broadened the horizons of the future author as well:

From the company he obtained a river pilot's license that allowed him to go back and forth between the banks of the river, where the company had set up date presses among the dense palm orchards. My father's career allowed me to accompany him on his launch and visit unknown districts in the branches of the river and the most remote villages. This was a stimulating experience that acquainted me with different kinds of people and with strange creatures from virgin nature not yet touched by civilization.²⁶⁵

²⁶² Hopper, 175.

²⁶³ Reidar Visser, "Britain in Basra: Past Experiences and Current Challenges." <http://www.historiae.org/cosmopolitanism.asp>. Accessed 11/11/14.

²⁶⁴ Khudayyir, personal correspondence, 7/22/14.

²⁶⁵ Khudayyir, personal correspondence, 7/22/14.

Khudayyir rarely speaks of his own religious background, although his fiction is littered with mentions of prominent literary figures and scholars from Islamic history, as well as occasional mentions of local shrines (such as the tomb of Zubayr, a Companion of the Prophet Muḥammad, described in his novel *Başrayāthā*.) In spite of the prominent Shi‘ī presence in southern Iraq, Khudayyir rarely mentions specifically Shi‘ī cultural or religious practices: the exception is his short story “al-Shafī” (“The Intercessor”), published in his 1972 collection, *al-Mamlaka al-sawdā’*, which is about a pregnant woman watching an ‘Āshūrā’ procession from her building as it passes by on the street outside.²⁶⁶

Both of Khudayyir’s parents were illiterate, but they enrolled him in state schools, starting with the King Ghazi Primary School in 1948. His experience, as the first generation of his family to receive formal schooling, reflected the general expansion of access to primary and secondary education in Iraq over the course of the twentieth century.²⁶⁷ Khudayyir did not continue on to university, due to what he terms “economic and political circumstances.” Basra had no university until 1964, which may

²⁶⁶ In an 2013 interview, he makes oblique reference to a Shi‘ī religious background when he is asked about this story, comparing the Arab defeat in 1967 to “the tragedy of Karbalā’,” and telling the interviewer that “I was one of the river of collectively hypnotized human masses, carried away and sinking into the vault of debacles and collective performances that continue down to today.” ‘Adnān al-Hilālī, “Muḥammad Khudayyir: al-qīṣṣa al-‘irāqīyya al-yawm naw‘ maḥallī rathth.” *Al-Safir*, 18 January 2013. <http://assafir.com/Article/212/299011/AuthorArticle>. Accessed 6/25/15.

²⁶⁷ Batatu, 477.

also have been a factor, but it is likely that his Communist sympathies at the time played a role in the “political circumstances” he refers to. In a recent essay published in the Lebanese newspaper *As-Safir*, he attributes the July 14, 1958 coup in Iraq to the spread of “the contagion of Bolshevik madness” among Iraqi youth, a “crimson cloud” that he admits enveloped him as well.²⁶⁸

In lieu of a university degree, he obtained a teaching diploma in 1962 equivalent to a certificate in education, and began a thirty-year career as a primary school teacher, at first teaching in rural schools in the governorates of Dhī Qār, Dīwāniyya, and Basra. Khudaḡayyir makes reference to his early teaching years in the countryside in the initial autobiographical chapters of *Ḥadāʾiq al-wujūh*, including his spartan accommodations in a residence attached to the school, his readings of literature by lamplight, and his friendship with a local ferryman.²⁶⁹ He attributes his undesirable posting to remote village schools in those years to his Communist beliefs at the time, referring to his experience as being “exiled to the most remote fringes of the unfortunate republic”

²⁶⁸ Muḡammad Khudaḡayyir. “al-Washm al-Baghdādī... ilā ‘Abd al-Malik Nūrī.” *As-Safir*, 6 August 2012. <http://assafir.com/Article/277945/Archive>. Accessed 6/25/15.

²⁶⁹ Muḡammad Khudaḡayyir, *Ḥadāʾiq al-wujūh: aqni‘a wa-ḡikāyāt* (Damascus: Dār al-Madā, 2008), 29-31.

from 1964-68.²⁷⁰ However, he has also credited this same rural “exile” as having taught him to closely observe people and the natural world, which shaped his early writing.²⁷¹

3.3 Published Writings

Khuḍayyir has been publishing his fiction since his late adolescence: his first published story, “al-Arḍ saqaynāhā” (“The Land We Irrigated”) appeared in an Iraqi newspaper in 1960.²⁷² Two years later, his story “al-Nīsānī” (“al-Nīsānī”) appeared in the magazine *al-Adīb al-‘Irāqī*, published by the Iraqi Writers’ Union.²⁷³ Drawing on his experiences as a teacher in the countryside around Nāṣiriyya, Khuḍayyir employed colloquial Iraqi Arabic for his protagonists in this early story—a technique he dropped soon after, since he has since used only Modern Standard Arabic for all of his later fiction. He wrote several other stories during his early teaching years in the countryside, primarily during the summer vacations, when he had more free time: as

²⁷⁰ Khuḍayyir, “al-Washm al-Baghdādī... ilā ‘Abd al-Malik Nūrī.” *As-Safīr*, 6 August 2012. <http://assafir.com/Article/277945/Archive>. Accessed 6/25/15.

²⁷¹ Khuḍayyir, personal correspondence, 7/19/14. “The isolation of the rural areas that contained the schools I taught in helped me to observe nature and the simple people whom I happened upon in the course of traveling by train. My first short story experiences (especially in *The Black Kingdom*) can be considered a reflection of these associations, the study of human nature...”

²⁷² “al-Arḍ saqaynāhā”, *al-Ḥadāra al-baghdādiyya*, July [Tammūz] 6, 1960. In his study of the Iraqi short story, Basim Hammudi mentions this first story as Khuḍayyir’s first publication, but states that it “doesn’t express the author’s present writing ability.” Bāsīm ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Ḥammūdī, *Rihla ma‘ al-qīṣṣa al-‘irāqīyya* (Baghdad: Dār al-Rashīd lil-nashr, 1980), 147.

²⁷³ Muḥammad Khuḍayyir, *Kurrāsāt kānūn* (Baghdad: Dār al-Shu‘ūn al-Thaqāfiyya, 2001), 5.

with “al-Nīsānī,” Khudaḡayyir feels that these early efforts were “not worthy of attention because of the weakness of their aesthetic structure,” and he has not republished them in his book-length collections.²⁷⁴

In 1966, his story “Al-Baṡṡāt al-baḡriyya” (“Sea Ducks”) drew him wider attention by winning first place in a story contest held by the Iraqi literary journal *al-Jumhūriyya*.²⁷⁵ Two of his stories, “Taḡāsīm ‘alā watar al-rabāba” (“Solos on a Rebab String”) and “Al-Urjūḡa” (“The Swing”), were published in 1968 in the prestigious Beirut-based literary magazine, *Al-Ādāb*, a periodical which privileged social realism as the most suitable fictional mode for the leftist political commitment (*al-iltizām*) that its editors championed. As a result, he came to the attention of *Al-Ādāb*’s editor Suhayl Idrīs (1925-2008) and Palestinian author Ghassān Kanafānī (1936-72).

He published two well-received short story collections in the 1970s: *al-Mamlaka al-sawdā’* (*The Black Kingdom*, 1972) and *Fī darajat khams wa-arba‘īn mi’awī* (*At 45 Degrees Celsius*, 1978). While the stories in *Al-Mamlaka al-sawdā’* contain some oblique references to current events, such as the 1967 war and the Palestinian cause, it is clear that even from the beginning of his writing career, Khudaḡayyir preferred a more enigmatic fictional mode than the “nuanced social realism” espoused by *Al-Ādāb* and adopted by

²⁷⁴ Khudaḡayyir, personal correspondence, 7/22/14.

²⁷⁵ Khudaḡayyir, *Kurrāsāt kānūn*, 5.

many of his Iraqi contemporaries, such as Fuʿād al-Takarlī, Ghāʾib Ṭuʿma Farmān, and Mahdī ʿĪsā al-Ṣaqr.²⁷⁶ Some early stories, such as “Al-Tābūt” (“The Coffin”) and “Al-Qiṭārāt al-layliyya” (“Night Trains”) share the characteristics of his later fiction, including thematic doubling, an experimental style, and a lack of straightforward narrative.

The stories in *Fī darajat khams wa-arbaʿīn miʿawī* convey more of the characteristics that would become a hallmark of Khuḍayyir’s fiction, such as a puzzle-like structure (“Ilā l-maʿwā” [“To the Shelter”]), formal innovation (“Manzil al-nisā” [“House of Women”]), and a thematic preoccupation with Iraq’s forgotten recent past (“Sāʿāt ka-l-khuyūl” [“Clocks Like Horses”], “Iḥtiḍār al-rassām” [“Death of the Artist”]). An exception in this collection is the story “Tāj li-Ṭaybūtha” (“A Crown for Taybutha”): set in a Bedouin encampment in the desert, it was written in 1970, several years before the rest of the stories in *Fī darajat khams wa-arbaʿīn miʿawī*; in both style and theme (the narrator is a young teacher in a remote posting), it belongs to Khuḍayyir’s earlier fiction.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁶ Yasmeeen Hanoosh, “Contempt: State Literati vs. Street Literati in Modern Iraq,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43 (2012), 382.

²⁷⁷ Khuḍayyir, *Fī darajat khams wa-arbaʿīn miʿawī* (Köln: Manshūrāt al-Jamal, 2006; Baghdad: Wizārat al-Thaqāfa wa-l-ʿilām, 1978), 13-24.

After *Fī darajat khams wa-arbaʿin miʿawī*, there is a gap in his publication record, as he did not publish any other fiction in book form for fifteen years. In fact, he has stated that he considers that collection to represent “the end of a period rich in meanings and experimental (avant-garde or original) artistic styles—a period that included most of Iraq’s writers.”²⁷⁸ In 1985, he published in a newspaper the story “*Waṣiyyat jindī*” (“A Soldier’s Orders”), but he has chosen not to republish it. Later in the decade, he began publishing stories in Iraqi literary journals, which then became chapters in *Baṣrayāthā*, which would not be published until 1993.²⁷⁹ The gaps in his writing and publishing history can be partly explained by the disruptions caused by the Iran-Iraq War, during which Basra was threatened by military action on several occasions, and was besieged by Iranian forces for several months in 1987.²⁸⁰ However, in a period when many of his fellow writers and intellectuals were either choosing exile or were being absorbed by the state cultural apparatus, Khuḍayyir opted for a kind of internal exile from fiction, in light of a repressive political environment and its potential to stifle creative expression or mold it to political ends:

²⁷⁸ Khuḍayyir, personal correspondence, 7/22/14.

²⁷⁹ Khuḍayyir, *Baṣrayāthā: Ṣūrat madīna* (Baghdad: Manshūrāt al-Amd, 1993; Damascus: Dār al-Madā li-l-thaqāfa wa-l-nashr, 1996), 183.

²⁸⁰ Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, 3rd edition (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2011), 186.

Iraq's capricious political environment was a chief reason for the outpouring of my literary talent... but its heavy shadow and unhealthy climate (like the hot and humid weather of Iraq) became a curse and an obstacle to the creativity of writers and artists, and a hindrance to freedom of expression for both (especially in the years of the Iran-Iraq War, 1980-88).²⁸¹

As Yasmine Hanoosh has written, Khuḍayyir was not alone in this regard: like him, other Iraqi adherents of magical realism and magical history “had mostly chosen silence during the Ba‘athist era.”²⁸² Khuḍayyir in fact calls these self-imposed periods of silence a “conspicuous phenomenon” among Iraqi authors.²⁸³ The Ba‘athist government demanded vocal support from intellectuals for its war efforts, which led to difficulties for authors like Khuḍayyir who opted not to offer full-throated support in their fiction. An Iraqi author was then left with two options: he could either “feign stupidity and write openly, and so write his death sentence at the same time. Or he could be silent, and in that way write his literary death sentence.”²⁸⁴

Perhaps due to the weakening of state authority under the sanctions regime, Khuḍayyir began publishing more often in the 1990s, starting in 1993 with the novel *Başrayāthā*, his first novel-length literary work. He continued in 1995 with both the

²⁸¹ Personal correspondence with Khuḍayyir, 7/22/14.

²⁸² Hanoosh, 406.

²⁸³ Khuḍayyir, personal correspondence, 7/22/14.

²⁸⁴ Salām ‘Abbūd, *Thaqāfat al-‘unf fi l-‘Irāq* (Köln: Al-Kamel Verlag, 2002), 19-20.

short story collection *Ru'yā kharīf* and his collection of essays and lectures on literature and literary history, *al-Ḥikāya al-jadīda (The New Tale)*. Just as *Fī darajat khams wa-arba'īn mi'awī* represented, for him, the end of a particular stage in his literary output, he views *Ru'yā kharīf* as coming “at the start of a new period of artistic and intellectual experimentation, following the end of the war.”²⁸⁵ In 1998, he published a collection of short stories, *Taḥnīṭ (Mummification)* as part of a series, *Thaqāfa Ḍidda al-Ḥisār (Culture Against the Embargo)*, established by the Iraqi government in order to find a publishing outlet for Iraqi authors during the sanctions era.²⁸⁶ *Taḥnīṭ* included some of his older stories that had only been published previously in magazines, as well as two stories republished from *al-Mamlaka al-sawdā'* and five from *Fī darajat khams wa-arba'īn mi'awī*.

His next published work, *Kurrāsāt kānūn (January Notebook)*, was a “Cubist” text commissioned by the Ba'ṯhist government as part of a project in honor of the tenth anniversary of the 1991 Gulf War. Along with other writers, Khuḍayyir had been summoned to a meeting with Iraqi president Ṣaddām Ḥusayn and requested to provide

²⁸⁵ Khuḍayyir, personal correspondence, 7/22/14.

²⁸⁶ Āmūrī Al-Rammāhī, “Silsila ‘Thaqāfa ḍidd al-ḥisār’... mustamirra fī Baghdād,” *Al-Ḥayāt*. http://daharchives.alhayat.com/issue_archive/Hayat%20INT/2003/2/11/-سلسلة-ثقافة-ضد-الحصار-مستمرة-في-بغداد.html. Published 2/11/03. Accessed 7/5/15.

a text honoring “the Mother of All Battles” (Umm al-Ma‘ārik”).²⁸⁷ The resulting novel did not glorify the war in a way the government was likely hoping for, but instead offered a fragmented account of life under bombs and sirens, blended with meditations on artists such as Goya and Picasso (both notably famous for paintings—*The Third of May 1808* and *Guernica*, respectively—inspired by, and protesting against, the brutality of war.)

For Khuḍayyir, the violence that engulfed Iraq after the US-led 2003 invasion marked “a historical breach that I began to fill with personal efforts and ideas,”²⁸⁸ although it was not until 2008 that he published his next book, *Ḥadāʾiq al-wujūh* (*Gardens of Faces*). Like his other more recent writings, *Ḥadāʾiq al-wujūh* defies readerly expectations of genre and structure: the book opens with a group of short autobiographical vignettes, drawing on his childhood, education, and years as a rural teacher. The rest of the book alternates between essays on well-known literary figures (including Rabindranath Tagore, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jorge Luis Borges, Gibran Khalil Gibran, and Abū l-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī) and paired short stories that reflect either the style or subject matter of each writer.

²⁸⁷ ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Amīr. “‘Riwāyāt Umm al-ma‘ārik’ tuṭayyih ‘uzlat Muḥammad Khuḍayyir.” *Al-Ḥayāt*. Published 21 April 2001. Reposted to <http://www.aliabdulameer.com/inp/view.asp?ID=201>, November 16, 2009. Accessed 7/5/15.

²⁸⁸ al-Hilālī.

More recently, he has published two short, relatively minor works: a collection of essays on writing (along the lines of *al-Ḥikāya al-jadīda*, titled *al-Sard wa-l-kitāb* (*Narrative and the Book*), published by *Majallat Dubayy al-thaqāfiyya* (*Dubai Cultural Magazine*) in 2010. In 2012, he published at his own expense *al-Rajul wa-l-fasīl* (*The Man and the Palm-seedling*), a collection of eight previously published essays on the late Iraqi author Maḥmūd ‘Abd al-Wahhāb.²⁸⁹

In addition to the essays and articles on literature that he publishes in magazines and newspaper, Khudayyir also currently maintains a frequently updated Facebook page, on which he posts short essays on fellow authors, reprints his published articles, and uploads his drawings.²⁹⁰

Of his own writing career, he has said in a 2014 interview that he has never aspired to be a litterateur (*adīb*), but rather to be “a craftsman of narrative books or dossiers, or an archivist of events.” Ideally, the writer of narrative fiction should be like a traditional writer of petitions who set up his shop on the street, and who is at one remove from the real-world implications of his subject matter: “He observes, looks, and interprets, but he doesn’t get involved in changing anything.” By contrast, he

²⁸⁹ Muḥammad Ḥanash, “Iṣdār al-Rajul wa-l-fasīl.” *Al-Dawaa News*, 4/29/13. <http://www.adawaanews.net/ArticleShow.aspx?ID=14187>. Accessed 4/1/15.

²⁹⁰ <https://ar-ar.facebook.com/mohammed.khudair>. Accessed 7/13/15.

denigrates writers who treat their characters as political puppets “as though they were directing them in a mass demonstration.”²⁹¹

3.4 Basra

No study of Khudayyir would be complete without a mention of Basra, the city where he was born and where he still lives. The city has served as the setting for his fiction and is the inspiration for (and real-world counterpart to) his imagined city of Baṣrayāthā. Some Iraqi authors and journalists have called him “the palm tree of Basra” (*nakhlāt al-Baṣra*), a nickname that plays up his image as a writer nurtured in the soil of the city, and whose roots in it run deep.²⁹² Other than visits to Baghdad, and his years teaching in rural villages in Iraq’s south, he has never left Basra, and indeed, remained in the city throughout the years of the Iran-Iraq War, as well as the years of violence after 2003. Despite years of political instability which he acknowledges led to periods of silence as an author, he has not opted to live in exile, as many of his fellow Iraqi intellectuals have felt compelled to do. In a recent published interview, he has

²⁹¹ ‘Abd al-Sattār Ibrāhīm, “Qirā’at isti‘ādiyya li-ākhir ḥiwār ma’ Muḥammad Khudayyir” *al-Tākhī*, 5/29/14. <http://www.altaakhipress.com/printart.php?art=50066>. Accessed 7/21/15.

²⁹² ‘Adnān al-Hilālī, “Muḥammad Khudayyir: al-qīṣṣa al-‘irāqiyya al-yawm nū’ maḥalī rathth.” *Al-Safir*, 1/18/13, <http://assafir.com/Article/212/299011/AuthorArticle>. Accessed 6/25/15.

described his lifelong decision to remain in Basra as “a choice from my first upbringing,” elaborating that:

My texts can travel and leave their place instead of me. In *Başrayāthā*, I tried to travel, as a departure from the first place. All my texts try to travel from their fixed place through language, form, and vision.²⁹³

Basra played a key role in the history of early Islam as an important early garrison city and as a center of intellectual activity in the Umayyad and early Abbasid period. Likely built on the site of a Sasanian Persian settlement known as Vahishtabadh Ardasher, Basra was founded in the year 17AH/638CE on the orders of the Caliph ‘Umar²⁹⁴ and takes its name from the white rocky terrain of the region.²⁹⁵ Historically, its importance has stemmed from its position at the mouth of the Gulf: in the Ottoman period, for example, it served as a commercial hub linking India, Persia, and the Arabian Peninsula with the interior of the Ottoman Empire.²⁹⁶ Basra’s

²⁹³ al-Hilālī.

²⁹⁴ Charles Pellat and S.H. Longrigg, “al-Başra,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, edited by P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Brill Online, http://ezproxy.library.nyu.edu:2358/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/al-basra-COM_0103. Accessed 7/14/15.

²⁹⁵ In his lexicon, Edward Lane offers several definitions for “başra,” including “rugged ground,” “soft stones in which is whiteness,” or “land of which the stones are gypsum.” Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (Beirut: Libraire du Liban, 1980), 211. See also Yāqūt ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥamawī, *Mu‘jam al-Buldān* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1993), 1:430 and Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab* (Beirut, Dār Ṣādir, 1968), 4:67, both of which confirm this etymology.

²⁹⁶ Reidar Visser, *Basra, the Failed Gulf State: Separatism and Nationalism in Southern Iraq* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2005), 10.

cosmopolitanism—which once served as a justification by the city’s elites for a brief separatist movement in the 1920s—is central to Khuḍayyir’s conception of his home city, and undergirds the literary kinship that he claims with a broad range of cultures and literatures.²⁹⁷

Although the site of the modern city of Basra, “refounded” in the 18th century, is some distance away from ancient Basra, Khuḍayyir frequently portrays the city as one that simultaneously embraces not only its ancient incarnations and inhabitants, but also its more recent past, as time, war, and modernization threaten to erase the memory of the 20th-century city. In a 2009 essay, he describes contemporary Basra as the “eleventh or twentieth copy of the ancient city of Bāṣūra,” (perhaps an allusion to “Bassora,” a spelling used by medieval and early modern European writers and travelers), in which individuals from past eras rise up through the city’s lower historical strata, each carrying a message to pass on to a specific modern inhabitant such as himself.²⁹⁸ The dominant image is of a symbolic link between the city’s past and present.

²⁹⁷ Visser, *Basra, the Failed Gulf State*, 1.

²⁹⁸ Muḥammad Khuḍayyir, “Bāṣūra,” in *Al-Makān al-‘irāqī: jadal al-kitāba wa-l-tajriba*, edited by Lu’ayy Ḥamza ‘Abbās (Beirut: Ma‘had Dirāsāt ‘Irāqīyya, 2009), 125.

Khudayyir's "archaeological layering" of the city in fiction is a postcolonial reassertion of local identities in the face of the spatial violence wrought by imperialism, authoritarianism, and war.²⁹⁹ This project to reclaim the city's past mirrors Muhsin al-Musawi's statement that

it is only through immersion in local sites... that writing undermines centrism, essentialism, authoritarianism, and their tenets of containment, absorption, erosion of difference, and repression of dissent.³⁰⁰

Khudayyir's focus on Basra—its local flavor, its forgotten public squares, and its inhabitants, both famous and obscure—is therefore an act of literary defiance, and not simply a product of nostalgia and sentiment.

3.5 Khudayyir's Writings on Authors, Texts, and Readers

Much of Khudayyir's creative output addresses, either obliquely or directly, the role of authorship and fiction in the world. His more recent hybrid texts, such as *Ḥadā'iq al-wujūh*, include essay-like elements that allow him to muse on the nature of storytelling and imagination. Likewise, *Başrayāthā* includes metafictional elements

²⁹⁹ Sara Upstone, *Spatial Politics in the Postcolonial Novel* (Farnham, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 91.

³⁰⁰ Al-Musawi, *Reading Iraq*, 119.

which reflect similar ideas on fiction. However, he most fully outlines his thoughts on fiction, texts, and readers in his 1995 essay collection *al-Ḥikāya al-jadīda*, as well as in his published interviews and Facebook posts.

Khuḍayyir has said that “writing is a universal act,” and indeed, his texts display his familiarity with a broad array of world literature.³⁰¹ In *Başrayāthā* as well as in other, more recent works such as *Ḥadāʾiq al-wujūh*, Khuḍayyir references the works and styles of authors from the European, Arabic, and other literary traditions, as well as contemporary literary theorists. For Khuḍayyir, the field of literature means a freely-flowing, well-read republic of letters, and his writings implicitly require that the reader be widely read, too.

Texts and their authors do not live in a vacuum, according to Khuḍayyir, but instead share in a broad web of interconnections, in which disparate minds connect with each other across barriers of history, language, and culture. The connection can link an author and reader, but it also connects authors to each other, as he makes clear in an interview published as part of *al-Ḥikāya al-jadīda*:

I believe in the creed of the author that regards his partner authors in separate places as minds that swim in a continuous time. Perhaps I approached the domain of Borges, as I once approached the domains of Chekhov, Hemingway, ‘Abd al-Malik Nūrī and Fuʾād al-Takarlī... This is

³⁰¹ al-Hilālī.

the law of interaction or borrowing or transmigration or inter-realization (and I prefer these designations over the widespread technical term ‘intertextuality’ (*al-tanāṣṣ*).³⁰²

In this view of authorial interaction, major texts can exert “galaxies of influence” on other writings that orbit around it like satellites. This model of literary influence as an orbit is not static, since a text can be knocked out of its orbit by another text: he takes as examples *Don Quixote*, *Ulysses* and Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* as “great visions” that have pulled other minds into their orbit through their literary gravitational force.³⁰³

Although he insists on the universality of literature, and rejects political and linguistic boundaries that he considers arbitrary, Khudayyir acknowledges the sometimes fraught relationship between western and Arab literatures. The European short story drew inspiration from eastern prototypes, such as the *Alf Layla* stories via Galland’s French translation, although he also references the French and German writers, such as Flaubert, Nerval, Voltaire, Balzac, and Goethe, who wrote on the Orient, using it as romantic inspiration, and seeing in this borrowing the antecedents to 20th-century genres such as science fiction and fantasy.³⁰⁴

³⁰² Muhammad Khudayyir, *al-Ḥikāya al-jadīda: naqd adabī* (Amman: Mu’assasat ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Shūmān, 1995), 101-2.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 57, 60.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

Khudāyyir laments what he sees as the parochial nature of the contemporary Arabic short story, finding that it has “very little share in the ancient storytelling inheritance.”³⁰⁵ In Arabic literary circles, he sees a retreat from the ideal of universality, particularly since “regional meetings and panels have persisted in glorifying slogans and the circumstantial goals limited to them. Year after year, arguments calcified and the outlets of [literary] techniques were blocked up.”³⁰⁶ He finds this same isolation in Iraqi fiction, as well, both in cultural attempts to isolate the work of Iraqi authors from their Arabic narrative orbit, and in attempts to cut it off from its broader literary roots outside the Arab world. Instead, the Iraqi short story

is in the same situation as the Latin American short story written in Spanish, and the American short story written in English, and the German, Russian, French and Indian short story with their most encompassing linguistic borders. Regional isolation neglects the shared roots of the genesis of the Arabic short story, and the shared stylistic influences on its development.³⁰⁷

In Khudāyyir’s estimation, Russian, American, and British literatures were the source of the realist current that found expression in the Iraqi short story’s socialist

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 20. He singles out the fiction of Zakariyā Tāmir and Jamāl al-Ghiṭānī as notable exceptions.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 63.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 62-3.

realism.³⁰⁸ However, when Arab authors borrow from western writings, he considers this “an attempt to recover plundered goods,” even though those authors are unjustly accused by their fellow Arabs of “colluding with the western invaders.”³⁰⁹ Given his own expansive view of the universality of literature, and his rejection of a view of Arabic and Iraqi literature as separate and isolated from world currents, such an accusation may at some point have been leveled against his own writing.

* * *

Khuḍayyir has written much about the short story form, a genre he seems to prefer for his own writing. Even a longer text such as *Başrayāthā* reads more like a group of fragmented impressions than a single narrative. In a recent interview, he has characterized his long form works as “composite texts” (*nuṣūṣ jāmi‘a*).³¹⁰ Rather than a single narrative structure, a fragmented text reveals that “the truth of the world consists of parts and fragments that are gathered on your outstretched shore, before a

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 62. In Khuḍayyir’s estimation, this realist current represents one of the four major “galaxies of influence” on Iraqi literature from these other literary traditions. The other three “galaxies of influence” are: stream of consciousness; existential neo-realism; and, most importantly, an “estranging realism and symbolic realism,” which began with Iraqi writers in the 1960s and has continued to the present.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 105.

³¹⁰ ‘Abd al-Sattār Ibrāhīm, “Qirā’at isti‘ādiyya li-ākhir ḥiwār ma‘a Muḥammad Khuḍayyir” *al-Tākhī*, 5/29/14. <http://www.altaakhipress.com/printart.php?art=50066>. Accessed 7/21/15.

wide sea of expression.”³¹¹ In its brevity, simplicity, and inherent incompleteness, the short story offers greater access to narrative truth than a single extended narrative can.³¹²

The short story’s self-contained scope and limited imagery permit a broader range for fictional characters, allowing them to “emerge from the half-darkness of perceived existence to the light of true existence.”³¹³ He compares reading a story to looking through a small window—as a reader, we can only see the details that form parts of a larger reality, and hear echoes of larger events, but it has “a stunning effect on our psyches.”³¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, in light of the inspiration that Basra has provided for his fiction, he has also stated that short stories derive from a more local (*maḥalli*) impulse, one he finds superior to the universality he attributes to the novel.³¹⁵

* * *

In his writings and statements on fiction, Khuḍayyir has had much to say about the nature of authorship, sharing views that echo reader-response theory, which also

³¹¹ Facebook. “Muḥammad Khuḍayyir—Mu’allif”. <https://ar-ar.facebook.com/mohammed.khudair>. Published 2/2/15. Accessed 6/30/15. In the same post, he uses the analogy of the beautiful carpets that his aunt, who was a seamstress, would assemble out of many pieces of differently-colored cloth.

³¹² His essay, “Simple Proofs,” focuses specifically on the merits of “simplicity” (*al-basāta*) in the short story. *al-Ḥikāya al-jadīda*, 45-56.

³¹³ *al-Ḥikāya al-jadīda*, 98.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

downplays the importance of authorial intention and biography. In his essay, “al-Qaṣṣāṣ al-Majhūl” (“The Unknown Storyteller”), published in *al-Ḥikāya al-jadīda*, Khudāyyir approvingly cites the notion (which he attributes to Baudelaire) that texts are not composed or crafted by authors, but are rather found in nature, and that authors merely bring them to a suitable milieu.³¹⁶ In *Baṣrayāthā*, he explores this inversion of the customary relationship between author and text, saying that, just as *Baṣrayāthā* existed before Basra, the *Iliad* existed before Troy and attracted Homer to itself, so that Homer’s recitation of the *Iliad* summoned Troy into existence.³¹⁷ The text, in that sense, does not belong to an author, but is antecedent to it. And in any case, the author has little presence in it: as authors, “we are nothing but the ghosts of our names in the reality of our stories.”³¹⁸

The gap he posits between the author and the story only grows with the passage of time and the number of intervening readers that have left their mark on a text: he takes as an example an old manuscript that has been read (and written in) by many people over the years:

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

³¹⁷ Muḥammad Khudāyyir, *Baṣrayāthā: ṣūrat madīna* (Damascus: Dār al-Madā li-l-thaqāfa wa-l-nashr, 1996), 11.

³¹⁸ *al-Ḥikāya al-jadīda*, 37.

Hundreds of eyes have looked at it, extracting from its letters a refined elixir for the mind or memory. A series of substances and transmigrating souls pass into this literary work—the author is not the first of them, nor is the final reader the last, but between them is a continuous stream or successive series of recipients. Each of them relates it to himself or imagines it as something for his life...³¹⁹

Khuḍayyir seems to concur with reader-response theory that readers manifest texts, and that authors hold no exclusive or even primary claim to them. Ultimately, an author is alienated from his text, and by manifesting it, the reader becomes alienated from the author as well.³²⁰

Khuḍayyir asserts elsewhere that the role of author is, in fact, a “mask,” behind which authors conceal their true aims. In turn, “writing is a masked ball,” to borrow the title of an interview published in *al-Ḥikāya al-jadīda*.³²¹ An author becomes anonymous from the moment his book is written: as readers, we are no more privy to the intentions and internal impulses of a contemporary author as those of a long-dead poet. Any importance that readers and critics attribute to the personality, intentions, or identity of an individual author is a modern development: Khuḍayyir points to the

³¹⁹ Ibid., 33-4.

³²⁰ Ibid., 41.

³²¹ Khuḍayyir’s statement that “writing is a masked ball” suggests his familiarity with the 1859 opera *Un ballo in maschera* (*A Masked Ball*), composed by Giuseppe Verdi and with libretto by Antonio Somma. Khuḍayyir’s use of the phrase has less sinister overtones than the opera, however, in which the masks drive a story of suspected infidelity, political conspiracy, and murder. I would like to thank Roger Allen for pointing out this connection to me.

example of an ancient work such as *Kalila wa-Dimna*, which reflects the contributions of various, unknown writers.³²² Khudayyir writes approvingly of ancient authors who did not see writing as an act of the individual ego; they were far more comfortable with the notion of writing as “an act of transmigration, adding, and crosspollination,” and were consequently less bothered by notions of plagiarism.³²³

* * *

Finally, with respect to his own writings, he acknowledges that his work takes the “fantastic path of vision” (*ṭarīq al-ruʿyā al-hawāʿiyya*), but he also insists on calling himself a “realistic writer,” albeit one on the “dangerous edge of realism.” In his estimation, this characterization is justified because the dichotomy between “fantastic” and “realistic” is a false one, as they represent two aspects of the same event.³²⁴ His approach to the fantastic is to “look for the unfamiliar in the familiar, [and] search for the hidden and buried in the usual and obvious.” By selecting the right “proofs”—that is, suitable signs and words on the page—this “fantastic” or “airy” approach can “allow the participating reader... to share in the enjoyment of traveling to the oases of the

³²² *al-Ḥikāya al-jadīda*, 39.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 65. On the “flimsiness” of authorship and the durability of genre in the Arabic written tradition, see Abdelfattah Kilito, *The Author and His Doubles: Essays on Classical Arabic Culture*, translated by Michael Cooperson (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001).

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 28-9.

text.”³²⁵ His insistence that the reader participate in the experience of the text—which he sees as a journey—parallels many of the ideas articulated by reader response theory.

* * *

Khuḍayyir’s texts make clear that he takes a strong interest in the visual arts, and figurative art itself often plays a role in his fiction. In the story “Iḥtiḍār al-rassām” (“Death of the Artist”), for example, the central character is a professional artist who learned to draw while imprisoned by the British during World War I. In “al-Mamlaka al-sawdā’” (“The Black Kingdom”), charcoal drawings of animals on the walls of a house come to life, and in “al-Ṣarkha” (“The Scream”), the images of circus performers painted on the side of a circus truck play a central role in the story.³²⁶

His 2001 novel *Kurrāsāt kānūn* draws even closer connections between writing and painting, as that work claims to be a “Cubist text” that reflects multiple surfaces at once.³²⁷ In the opening chapter, the narrator (often difficult to distinguish from

³²⁵ Ibid., 10. He finds his approach to “fantastic” fiction in harmony with the ideas of literary scholars such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michael Butor, and Umberto Eco (specifically citing *The Open Work*.)

³²⁶ Although I have been unable to get hold of a copy, the Iraqi artist and literary critic Shākir Ḥamad has recently published a full-length study on the influence of the visual arts of Khuḍayyir’s early fiction, which he labels “visual narrative.” See Shākir Ḥamad, *Al-sard al-tashkīlī fī “Al-Mamlaka al-Sawdā’” li-Muḥammad Khuḍayyir* (Baghdad: al-Rawsam li-l-ṣaḥāfa wa-l-nashr wa-l-tawzīʿ, 2016.)

³²⁷ Khuḍayyir, *Kurrāsāt kānūn* (Baghdad: Dār al-Shuʿūn al-Thaqāfiyya, 2001), 23.

Khudayyir himself) states that the book began as a series of portraits drawn in a “January notebook” he kept during the bombardments of January, 1991.³²⁸

Largely self-taught in art, Khudayyir began drawing during his early teaching days, sketching his students, peasants, and fellow train-passengers. In turn, those sketches, based on close observation of his subjects, became the inspiration for stories:

I developed a passion for sketching the faces of my characters in drawing pads and school notebooks, so that it became a hobby and self-tutoring in drawing. I still have some of these notebooks, from which I can retrieve the topics of my stories... Even today, I still practice the art of sketching in ink in notebooks and scraps of paper in order to base my themes on them, the ideas for which crowd together around the initial sketches of my stories.³²⁹

Like his fiction itself, he characterizes his sketches as having “an expressive style” that takes his sketches out of mere “eyewitness reality” and into a more symbolic representation.³³⁰

3.6 Khudayyir and Iraqi History and Identity

Khudayyir’s writings often seem to hold at arm’s length the violent events of Iraq’s recent history and the tangled complexities of identity. Nevertheless, Iraq’s

³²⁸ Ibid., 13, 23.

³²⁹ Khudayyir, personal correspondence, 7/9/14.

³³⁰ Khudayyir, personal correspondence, 7/9/14.

political and social realities have shaped his fiction. Khudayyir has acknowledged the role of historical events as turning points in his development as a writer (“I view great dates as a stimulus to elemental consciousness, and basic launching points for consciousness.”)³³¹ For him, Iraq’s revolution of July 14, 1958, which occurred during his adolescence, was a “dividing line” in his life, marking a political consciousness and personal maturity he said he had lacked before. As it did for many Arab authors, the fallout of the 1967 war with Israel had a profound effect on his self-understanding. His initial response to the Arab defeat and the emergence of the Palestinian resistance movement was “a new consciousness of the Arab nationalist identity (*bi-l-huwiyya al-qawmiyya*) of writing,” although he says that this consciousness later expanded to become “a global, human feeling,” one that transcended nationalism.³³² While early stories published in *al-Mamlaka al-sawdāʾ*, such as “al-Urjūḥa” (“The Swing”), “al-‘Alāmāt al-muʿnisa” (“Distinguishing Marks”), and “Ḥikāyat al-mawqīd” (“Tale Around the Hearth”) refer obliquely to the Palestinian cause and the deaths of young soldiers in war, those plot elements are not present in his later work.

Khudayyir’s later fiction may be lacking in overt references to contemporary political identities and affiliations, but it does dwell frequently on Iraq’s long history,

³³¹ al-Hilālī.

³³² al-Hilālī.

both ancient and Islamic. In *Reading Iraq*, Muhsin al-Musawi notes that Sumerian, Babylonian, and Islamic narrative themes are recurrent elements in Iraqi contemporary writing, and in this regard, Khudayyir's work displays much of this same historical preoccupation.³³³ His story "al-Shafi'" ("The Intercessor"), for example, was written in the immediate wake of the June 1967 war, with the aim of drawing a connection between the tragedy of the 1967 defeat with the tragedy of Karbalā'.³³⁴ Likewise, in the stories of *Ru'yā Kharīf*, written after the Iran-Iraq War, he incorporates elements of ancient Mesopotamian mythology, such as "al-Ḥukamā' al-thalātha" ("The Three Wise Men"), in which three Sumerian gods (including Atrāḥāsīs, the Babylonian hero of a version of the Flood story³³⁵) roam through Baṣrayāthā and visit a gathering of the spirits of Iraq's dead poets and writers. In *Baṣrayāthā*, he envisions the city as having a continuous chain of storytellers who act as Baṣrayāthā's organic memory from one generation to the next.³³⁶

More often, his fiction addresses historical ruptures, either to mourn the severing of a generational chain of urban storytellers, or to acknowledge that Basra's once-lively Umm al-Burūm square has been obliterated and become a parking lot. Links

³³³ Musawi, *Reading Iraq*, 27.

³³⁴ al-Hilālī.

³³⁵ Georges Roux, *Ancient Iraq, Third Edition* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 111.

³³⁶ *Baṣrayāthā*, 46.

to a society's past are hidden away, and the approach to them is labyrinthine and confusing, such as the secret entrance to the statue in the story "Ru'ya al-Burj" ("Vision of the Tower") or Yūsuf's antique manual printing press tucked away on an unmarked floor of the massive new publishing house in "Ḥikāyāt Yūsuf" ("Yūsuf's Tales"). These links, however obscure, portray a kind of eternal Iraq, where history becomes a palimpsest of memory in which individuals from different centuries interact freely.

3.7 Khudayyir and Iraqi State Power

As a number of scholars have noted, the regime of Ṣaddām Ḥusayn, who became head of state in 1979, intruded into the cultural sphere far more than previous Iraqi governments had. The need to marshal popular enthusiasm for the prolonged Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) led the state to attempt to control cultural production.³³⁷ The "Qādisiyyat Ṣaddām" campaign, a propaganda effort linking the then-current war against Iran with the original Arab military campaign against Sasanian Persia, held literary competitions, awarded prizes, and sponsored publications of war fiction, effectively co-opting Iraqi writers and poets into the state's war effort.³³⁸

³³⁷ Davis, *Memories of State*, 176.

³³⁸ Ikram Masmoudi, *War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 13-14.

Khuḍayyir seems to have mostly avoided being directly co-opted by the state during these years, even at a time when “it was demanded of the writer and artist to be, whether willingly or unwillingly, a full part of the system of power.”³³⁹ As has been mentioned previously, a fifteen-year gap separates his second and third books, and he likewise published stories infrequently during the 1980s. During the same period, Khuḍayyir’s writing became increasingly less narrative and direct: as Ikram Masmoudi notes, many Iraqi authors turned to an “opaque and oblique” style because fear and state censorship made it difficult to directly criticize the war or the regime.³⁴⁰ Even his ruminating, impressionistic narrative style did not entirely prevent him from avoiding the attention of the state, however, as is evidenced by his being instructed by the regime to produce a novel commemorating the tenth anniversary of the 1991 Gulf War—an experience noted in the media at the time as one that had broken his “spiritual and regional isolation.”³⁴¹

The readiness of the Ba‘thist state to co-opt the cultural sphere for its own ends and its ability to employ fear and censorship in pursuit of those ends raises familiar questions concerning a writer’s ethical responsibility and the nature of her

³³⁹ Salām ‘Abbūd, *Thaqāfat al-‘unfi l-‘Irāq* (Köln: Al-Kamel Verlag, 2002), 9.

³⁴⁰ Masmoudi, 13-14.

³⁴¹ ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Amīr, “‘Riwāyāt Umm al-ma‘ārik’ tuḡayyih ‘uzlat Muḥammad Khuḍayyir,” *Al-Ḥayāt*, 21 April 2001.

collaboration. However, as Salām ‘Abbūd has pointed out, one measure of an author’s co-optation is “the degree that this literature matches the goals of the regime in power and its politics.” In that regard, Khuḍayyir’s co-optation by the state in 2001 must be considered a failure: *Kurrāsāt kānūn* takes its inspiration from artists, such as Picasso and Goya, whose paintings show the terrible effects of war. The resulting novel as a whole is hardly the commemoration of the 1991 war that the regime had undoubtedly hoped for.³⁴²

3.8 Khuḍayyir and His Peers

In his more recent writings, particularly *Başrayāthā* and *Ḥadā’iq al-wujūh*, Khuḍayyir has alluded to and expressed admiration for authors and poets from many different eras and cultures, indicating the breadth of his reading. Likewise, on many occasions, he has written about his sense of kinship with other Iraqi authors. To take one example of many, in 2012 he wrote a newspaper article in praise of ‘Abd al-Malik

³⁴² Much more recently, Khuḍayyir has written a long Facebook post on the cyclical nature of history and the human invention of the calendar. In that post, in what is clearly an allusion to the *Alf Layla wa-Layla* frame story, he has characterized writers and artists as having the ability to domesticate the worst instincts of tyrants, saying: “Writers and artists with their imaginative tools deceived kings and bons vivants, and tamed the lust for power in their heads, through their poems, tales, and imaginary riddles.” https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=206612989752339&id=100012109175548. Published 10/2/16. Accessed 10/9/16.

Nūrī (1921-98), an Iraqi pioneer in the use of stream of consciousness and interior monologue in the 1940s and 1950s, whose work he credits as influencing his own.³⁴³ And despite his own enigmatic, non-realist narrative style, he has stated his admiration for Iraqi authors who write in the socialist realism tradition, and who use their fiction to act as a kind of social conscience. He admires authors of the 1950s generation such as Nūrī, Fuʿād al-Takarlī, Mahdī al-Ṣaqr, and Ghāʾib Ṭuʿma Farmān, all of whom “illuminated the night of the 1950s short story, the story of despair and living souls and isolated struggle,” while acting as “writers of petitions,” that is, addressing the powerful in the name of those at the bottom of the social scale.³⁴⁴

His assessment of the current state of Iraqi fiction, however, is much bleaker. In a 2013 interview he gave for the Lebanese newspaper *As-Safir*, he characterizes the contemporary Iraqi short story as being “a threadbare local genre that breathes environmental, social, and political pollution.”³⁴⁵ More recently, he has decried the lack of laws in Iraq that would nurture the book market within the country, as well as the absence of a robust field of literary criticism. He lays much of the blame for “this dreadful cultural poverty” that has diminished contemporary Iraqi literature at the feet

³⁴³ Caiani and Cobham, xii.

³⁴⁴ Khuḍayyir, *al-Ḥikāya al-jadida*, 31, n3.

³⁴⁵ Adnān al-Hilālī, “Muḥammad Khuḍayyir: al-qīṣṣa al-ʿirāqiyya al-yawm nūʿ maḥalī rathth,” *Al-Safir*, 18 January, 2013. <http://assafir.com/Article/212/299011/AuthorArticle>. Accessed 6/25/15.

of national organizations and offices, such as the Publishers' Union and the Ministry of Culture.³⁴⁶ The violence and wars that have scarred Iraqi life in the last several decades have damaged the aesthetics of Iraqi fiction as well, such that he finds Iraqi novels written since the 1991 Gulf War “chock-full of violence and fatalism.”³⁴⁷ Khuḍayyir's fiction shows less fatalism than many of his Iraqi peers—a fact that Muhsin al-Musawi says explains his greater sophistication in rendering an individual in the larger social environment.³⁴⁸ In the same revealing interview, Khuḍayyir also deplores the current “sophistries” of Iraqi intellectuals, as well as their close alignment with current political parties, which leads to “sterile debate [that] ignores the ability of Iraqi intellectuals to adjust, change, and escape from deadly crises.”³⁴⁹

Although he has negative views on current Iraqi writing, Khuḍayyir is highly esteemed by his literary colleagues. Already in 1990, his fiction was the subject of a book-length study by two Iraqi poets, although at the time he had published only two short story collections.³⁵⁰ Now in his sixth decade as a published author, he has become

³⁴⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100012109175548&fref=ts>. Published 9/21/16. Accessed 10/9/16.

³⁴⁷ al-Hilālī.

³⁴⁸ Musawi, “The Sociopolitical Context of the Iraqi Short Story, 1908-1968,” 221.

³⁴⁹ al-Hilālī.

³⁵⁰ The book, by Mālik al-Muṭṭalibī and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ṭahmāzī, takes a structuralist approach to Khuḍayyir's stories, and as such, has been of limited use in a study such as this one that approaches his texts through the lens of reader-response theory. On a separate note, al-Muṭṭalibī and Ṭahmāzī's text was unfortunate in the circumstances of its publication: it was published in Iraq in late 1990, around the time

something of an elder statesman of Iraqi fiction. He did not join the long exodus of intellectuals into exile, nor has he been perceived as an “insider” coopted by the Ba‘thist regime. Instead, in the face of a Ba‘thist state that sought to impose its vision of a unitary Iraqi past on the country, while rewriting history to serve its purposes, Khuḍayyir offered a counter-history in fiction in the form of *Başrayāthā*.

He attributes *Başrayāthā*’s positive reception by readers and critics to “the newness of its subject matter and its special formal qualities.” He refers to it as the biography of a city—a genre that he says originated in western literatures, and which has, in the wake of *Başrayāthā*’s publication, been adopted by other Arab writers: he points in particular to the memoir *Sīrat Madīna: ‘Ammān fī-l-arba‘īnāt* (*Biography of a City: Amman in the 1940s*) by ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Munīf, which was published a year later, in 1994.³⁵¹

It is difficult to pinpoint the extent of Khuḍayyir’s influence on current trends in Iraqi fiction. In his 2008 text *Ḥadā’iq al-wujūh*, he expresses some doubt about who his

of the invasion of Kuwait. It seems not to have circulated widely and is little cited in Arabic writings on Khuḍayyir. Mālik al-Muṭṭalibī and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ṭahmāzī, *Mir’āt al-sard: qirā’a fī adab Muḥammad Khuḍayyir* (Baghdad: Dār al-Kharīf, 1990.)

³⁵¹ Khuḍayyir, personal correspondence, 6/19/15. See ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Munīf, *Sīrat Madīna: ‘Ammān fī-l-arba‘īnāt* (Beirut: al-Mu’assasa al-‘Arabiyya lil-Dirāsāt wa-l-Nashr, 1994). Although Munīf’s book shares some similarities with *Başrayāthā*, including a section of historical photos of the city), it more clearly falls into the genre of memoir, rather than fiction. Munīf’s book is much more grounded in historical fact, even to the point of including an index of the many names of actual residents of ‘Ammān mentioned in the book.

literary heirs might be: that book's opening chapter contains an extended metaphor on the masks that authors wear, which they remove on their death and pass on to younger writers. He ends the chapter by admitting that "I do not know to whom I will bequeath this mask."³⁵² At the same time, however, there is certainly evidence of a "spatial turn"—a growing focus on the importance of place as a site of meaning and discourse—among younger Iraqi writers, one that echoes the centrality of Basra in Khuḍayyir's writings. For example, the 2009 volume, *al-Makān al-ʿIrāqī*, edited by Luʿayy Ḥamza ʿAbbās, collects essays by a variety of Iraqi authors, poets, critics, and scholars writing on Iraqi urban environments and on individual cities (Baʿqūba, Najaf, Kirkuk, and the Baghdad quarter of Madīnat al-Thawra, among others.)³⁵³ The theme of Basra's past and present overlapping, which features so prominently in *Başrayāthā* and other texts, also found expression in another recent Iraqi novel, albeit in a different fictional mode: the 2005 novel *al-Maqāma al-başriyya al-ʿaşriyya* (*The Modern Basran Maqama*) by Khuḍayyir's contemporary Mahdī ʿIsā al-Şaqr features a straightforward narrative and plot, but it concerns the appearance of the 11th/12th-century Basran *maqāma*-author al-Ḥarīrī in the contemporary city. At a local festival celebrating the city's founding, al-Ḥarīrī is

³⁵² Khuḍayyir, *Ḥadāʾiq al-wujūh*, 15.

³⁵³ Luʿayy Ḥamza ʿAbbās, 322-27. Khuḍayyir's essay, "Bāşūra," is also included in that volume, which uses a quotation from *Başrayāthā* as one of its epigraphs.

invited as a guest of honor, where he is joined by other time-traveling figures from Basra's early history, including the city's founder 'Utba ibn Ghazwān, the writer al-Jāhiz, and the theologian Ḥasan al-Baṣrī. Khuḍayyir himself is mentioned as being in attendance, too, as the festival's master of ceremonies points him out to the audience as the author of *Başrayāthā*.³⁵⁴

At the same time, there is evidence of a cultural and literary revival in the city of Basra in the last few years, in spite of the violence and instability that Iraq has suffered in the years since 2003. Basra hosts an annual Mirbad Poetry Festival, which attracts poets and critics from Iraq and elsewhere in the Arab world. Named for the Mirbad, an open market area in Basra where poets recited their verse in the early Islamic period (including such prominent poets as Jarīr and Farazdaq, who held their public poetic contests [*naqā'id*] there), the modern Mirbad festival was founded in 1971 by the Ba'athist regime, which eventually moved the annual event to Baghdad. In 2004, the Festival returned to Basra, where it has since remained.³⁵⁵ Yasmine Hanoosh sees this as evidence of a revival led by a younger generation of Basran authors, including

³⁵⁴ In al-Ṣaqr's novel, the master of ceremonies informs the crowd that Basra's name in Syriac was "Basrayatha," and then tells them: "You must have read or heard about the brilliant book about Basra, which carried this title, by the Basran author Muḥammad Khuḍayyir, who I see now is sitting there beside the poets Maḥmūd al-Braikān and Kāzīm al-Ḥajjāj." Maḥdī 'Īsā al-Ṣaqr, *al-Maqāma al-baṣriyya al-ṣaṣriyya* (Baghdad: Dār al-Shu'ūn al-Thaqāfiyya al-Āmma, 2005), 158-9.

³⁵⁵ *Al-Masala*. Published 10/23/14. Accessed 8/13/15.
<http://almasalah.com/ar/NewsDetails.aspx?NewsID=40294>.

Lu'ayy Ḥamza 'Abbās and Murtaḍa Jazzār, who have been influenced by the “local color of magical realism and magical history” pioneered by Khuḍayyir.³⁵⁶

Even more indicative of Khuḍayyir's direct influence on the cultural sphere in Iraq is the existence of the electronic literary magazine, *Başrayāthā*, which took its name from his 1993 book. The literary magazine was founded in 2004 specifically by and for authors from the Basra governorate. Founded amid the chaos and growing violence that marked Iraq after 2003, the new magazine evoked the spirit of Khuḍayyir's novel in seeking to reclaim and restore an Iraq in danger of being obliterated and forgotten. The magazine has since broadened its mandate and now publishes authors from around the Arab world, while asserting its independence from party or sectarian factions.³⁵⁷ *Başrayāthā*'s founder has in fact described it as a “*minbar* [pulpit]” for authors and as a “free *minbar* for ideas,”³⁵⁸ echoing Khuḍayyir's own opening section of his book, titled “al-Nawl wa-l-Minbar” (“The Loom and the Minbar”), in which he says that “none of us can any longer imagine a city without a

³⁵⁶ Hanoosh, 406.

³⁵⁷ “About Us,” <http://basrayatha.com/?cat=13>. Accessed 8/12/15.

³⁵⁸ ‘Abd al-Jabbār al-‘Atābī, “Başrayāthā... thaqāfiyya al-iliktrūniyya iḥtafalat bi-‘ashar sanawāt li-şudūrihā.” *Īlāf*. <http://elaph.com/Web/Culture/2014/8/928640.html>. Published 8/3/14. Accessed 8/12/15. Notably, in 2014 the magazine expanded to become an internet radio station (“Rādiū Başrayāthā”) and the magazine's editor has expressed interest in also putting it out as a print edition and in publishing English translations of its articles online.

public poet (*qawwāl*), nor a public poet without a minbar.”³⁵⁹ The fact that his fellow Basran writers began a literary magazine inspired by his book is testament to the esteem in which his peers hold him.³⁶⁰

3.9 Conclusion

In this brief overview of Khudayyir’s biography, literary preoccupations, and statements on the nature of authorship, fiction, and reading, I have endeavored to make clear that his long-term fictional project should be seen as an assertion of the local and the fragmented over the grand narrative, and as a reclamation of an organic, hidden past in the face of historical ruptures and authoritarianism. His insistence on the primacy of the local (*maḥalli*) is tempered by his cosmopolitan notion of literature as a worldly endeavor, one that draws together authors separated by time, language, and culture. His enigmatic style, coupled with his periods of self-imposed silence, allowed him to remain in Iraq without becoming a regime insider during the decades of Ba’thist rule. At the same time, the puzzle-like, composite nature of his writing requires

³⁵⁹ *Başrayāthā*, 9.

³⁶⁰ There is also an Iraqi music ensemble, based in Sweden, that has taken the name “Başrayāthā.” The musicians and singer are all Iraqis living in Sweden who are devoted to playing traditional Iraqi music. Nizār ‘Askar, “Başrayāthā al-suwaydiyya tarudd al-i‘tibār li-l-ghanā’ al-‘irāqī al-aşil,” *Idhā‘a al-‘Irāq al-Ḥurr*, <http://www.iraqhurr.org/content/article/24331496.html>. Published 9/16/11. Accessed 8/13/15.

the participation of the reader, and in doing so, evokes a counterhistory of his society—a fictional project that in recent years seems to have found resonance with other Iraqi authors.

Part III: Application

Chapter 4: Ambiguity, Indeterminacy, and the Construction of Meaning: Khudayyir's Stories as "Open Works"

4.1 Introduction

Muhammad Khudayyir's texts can be characterized as "open works" as Umberto Eco defined them, in which meaning is cooperatively generated between text and reader, because they frequently offer an ambiguous composition, one that prompts the reader to construct the text's meaning for herself. In some of his stories, crucial information is withheld or is otherwise vague, leaving a "halo of indefiniteness" within the text, as Eco described it in *The Open Work* (see Section 1.4.)³⁶¹ Others of his stories present the reader with a puzzle-like or circular structure, so that reading the text becomes a ludic exercise in which the text presents a challenge to be overcome. To read the text is to "solve" its puzzle. In either case, the reader is confronted with a text that requires more meaning-making input on the reader's part than a traditional narrative would.

On one level, ambiguity and openness are characteristic of all Khudayyir's fictional output; however, in his fiction written and published in the wake of the 1991

³⁶¹ Eco, *The Open Work*, 9.

Gulf War and in the past decade, Khuḍayyir's writings have hewed closer to Iser's notions of deformation of narrative and genre, as well as an interest in a shared interpretive community that dovetails with Fish's writings on reader response theory. On the other hand, Khuḍayyir's earlier writings especially reflect the kind of ambiguity and openness intrinsic to Eco's thinking on the role of the reader, and for that reason, this chapter focuses exclusively on stories originally published in his collections *al-Mamlaka al-sawdā'* (1972) and *Fī darajat khams wa-arbaʿīn miʿawī* (1978), which most exemplify this trend in his writing.

4.2 “Al-Tābūt”

Khuḍayyir's story “al-Tābūt” (“The Coffin”), which was published in 1972 as part of his first story collection, *Al-Mamlaka al-sawdā'*, is a model example of deliberate narrative indefiniteness through an intentional restriction of information provided to the reader. Written in 1971, the story reflects Khuḍayyir's shift away from the more realist style that characterized his first published stories. “Al-Tābūt” is composed of two sections—the first set in an anonymous train station, and the second at a café facing a city square. The only object that links both otherwise unrelated sections is a

coffin that has been repeatedly shipped to a non-existent address and returned as undeliverable.³⁶²

The story indicates Eco's "halo of indefiniteness" from the start by opening with a vague setting, described as simply "a hall somewhere." The hall is in fact part of a train station filled with row upon row of coffins, presumably the corpses of soldiers.³⁶³ The story offers a detailed description of the arrangement and positioning of the coffins in the hall but gives no further context or explanation.³⁶⁴

The coffins themselves are made of reused wooden boards that create their own semantic ambiguity of disjointed words:

the wood... is cut from different wooden boxes, so the original writing has been transposed on the coffins, writing in English and Arabic (whiskey...cups...Deliver c/o...1970... Ceylon Tea... 10 lira... No. 107... etc.) and other words with incomplete letters...³⁶⁵

Each coffin has an address on its top, written in red paint, presumably indicating where the coffin is to be delivered. Those addresses, too, are presented to the reader

³⁶² This pairing of two otherwise unconnected sections is a common feature in Khudayyir's later writings, and as such, "al-Tābūt" can also be said to show a "coherent deformation" (Iser's term) of the short story genre. By upending the apparent immutability of everyday life, the story's magical elements also compel the readers to construct meaning. These approaches to meaning-making will be applied to other stories in Chapter Five.

³⁶³ Muḥammad Khudayyir, *Al-Mamlaka al-sawdā': qiṣaṣ* (Köln: Manshūrāt al-Jamal, 2005 [original publication: Baghdad: Wizārat al-Thaqāfa wa-l-i'lām, 1972), 167.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 168.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 167.

cryptically, as a series of initials: “(N, Q, City of B, Region ‘Ayn, House No....), (K.R.B., City of N, Village M...) etc.” The text directs the reader’s attention to one coffin in the hall that is covered with multiple crossed-out addresses from repeated attempted shipments.

Much of the story’s ambiguity is centered on the nature and character of the narrator. The story is focalized through this insubstantial narrator, in that the reader observes only what passes before the narrator’s vision, but it is ambiguous about whether this narrator is a nameless character walking through the train station (in Gérard Genette’s terms, homodiegetic) or is merely a disembodied, depersonalized observer absent from the story (heterodiegetic.)³⁶⁶ The story is an open work, in Eco’s definition, since the ambiguity built into the story compels the reader to construct meaning without the customary reliance on a conventional plot or narrator.

The openness of a work can also be expressed in its use of language and structure. In the case of “al-Tabūt,” that openness is particularly striking in the second section, as a narrator relates what he sees on the street through the window of a café. Nothing indicates whether this narrating voice is the same one as in the previous section. This narrator begins this second section by recounting the departure from the

³⁶⁶ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, tr. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 245.

café of a group of ghosts, who may be the dead soldiers whose coffins were stacked at the train station. In a reflection of the story's intentional openness, the narrating voice offers a contradictory, indeterminate account of their departure for the reader to puzzle through:

They left, all together, at some time: hours ago, yesterday, years ago (from when war was declared)... They got up one after another, or all at once... But no... They didn't leave completely... They were still here, all together, in the empty café looking out over a wide asphalt public square: they left behind a reflection on the glasses and jars, and on the mirrors that cover the café walls.³⁶⁷

These nameless ghosts retain a spectral presence at the otherwise empty café. The narrator calls them “still movements, a floating, evaporating life, echoes of silent words.”³⁶⁸ They exit by passing directly through the glass window, leaving behind only “renewed emptiness” inside.³⁶⁹ The emptiness of the coffee shop foregrounds the enigma of the narrator's own position relative to the narrative, either because he is standing outside the story, or because he, too, is a ghost.

The narrator goes on to describe actions on the public square that are visible through the café window, which serves as a constricted frame. For example, the

³⁶⁷ Khuḍayyir, *Al-Mamlaka al-sawdā'*, 170.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 171.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 171.

narrator (and therefore the reader) has only a limited view of a truck that has pulled up on the sidewalk, since “only its blue front end and part of its front tire appeared through the glass of the façade.”³⁷⁰ By focusing on the obstructed visual perspective, Khuḍayyir foregrounds the reader’s incomplete understanding of the scene. This restricted view neatly echoes a metaphor that Khuḍayyir has used in his essay “Dhākīrat al-‘Aṭṭār” (“The Perfumer’s Memory,”) saying that a short story

...is content with a small aperture for viewing... Through this aperture we only see details, or parts of the greater panorama of external reality. Great events may be happening outside, but we only hear and see echoes, flashes and intimations of them.³⁷¹

Still viewing the wordless scene through the café window, the narrator observes five municipal workers in uniform take a coffin out of the truck and place it on the sidewalk. The reader is left to determine the significance of this scene, an act made more abstract and disorienting by the narrator’s depersonalized description of the workers as “languid, torpid masses” acting with “mechanical movement” as they bend over to put down the coffin. When they straighten up, they seem to lose their individuality altogether as they separate, divide, and merge into one object: “the masses of their bodies in the desolate space divided, were attracted to each other and

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 172.

³⁷¹ Khuḍayyir, *Al-Ḥikāya al-jadīda*, 27.

collided. As if they felt in danger of melting, they only lingered for a little while near the coffin, then turned away.”³⁷² The visual distortion continues as the narrator describes a black cat crossing the city square toward the abandoned coffin: the reflection of the light in the café window divides the black cat into increasingly smaller images until it vanishes. From the point at which the cat disappeared, a young man emerges. He advances across the street, described as a shape suspended in a continuous act of emergence and motion:

While he is walking, he is not walking; he walks in the same spot he emerged from. He doesn’t advance, but continuously emerges in the light... He advanced at every moment that he emerged.³⁷³

The transformation of the cat into a young man is unexplained, as is the atomization of the cat’s image and the young man’s simultaneous movement and stasis. The hallucinatory distortion of visual images—an abstraction of our usual modes of seeing and of description on the page—through the café window conveys a sense of temporal suspension and futility, much like the repeated delivery and return of a coffin that has no final destination. Likewise, near the end of the story, the actions of the five municipal workers are reversed, as the narrator sees the truck partially reappear, and

³⁷² Khuḍayyir, *Al-Mamlaka al-sawdāʾ*, 172-3.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 173.

the coffin picked up again and hauled away. Thus, what passes for plot in this half of the story is entirely undone. At the end of the story, the narrator suggests that this half of the story is now irretrievably nonexistent, as he reveals that the café is now “rubble”—presumably a casualty of the same war that produced the coffins. With the café gone, “the emptiness by itself reclines on the chairs.”³⁷⁴ The story thus ends by implying that the narrator in the café is himself part of this “emptiness.” The reader, in other words, must piece together this cryptic story on its own: is the narrator, perhaps, a ghost? Is he the dead soldier in the coffin that has no final destination? In other words, depending on the reader’s capabilities, as Eco put it, “the *fabula* can be established and recognized at different levels.”³⁷⁵

In “al-Tābūt,” the reader is confronted with a formally innovative text, one that has no characters to speak of (the protagonist seems to be an inanimate object), an ambiguously situated narrator, and little in the way of plot. Likewise, the prismatic multiplications and distortions of images—from the cat crossing the street to the image of the workers merging and dividing when viewed through the café glass—echo the ambiguity that is central to the story. Its violations of familiar norms of structure,

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 174.

³⁷⁵ Eco, *The Role of the Reader*, 28.

character, and plot are a source of its openness, requiring the active involvement of the reader in determining what to make of its narrative.

4.3 “Al-Asmāk”

This story, also taken from *al-Mamlaka al-sawdāʾ*, challenges the reader with its disorienting shift in narrative perspective, moving between detailed physical description of an everyday setting to a fantastic metamorphosis involving drowning and rebirth.³⁷⁶ Despite the mass of details, the text provides little guidance to the reader in terms of plot and character, and much of the story is written in the second person, addressed to a nameless young woman whose presence is only mentioned to the reader, almost as an afterthought, after a detailed description of other items in the room. As with “al-Tābūt,” the disruption of familiar story elements not only makes “al-Asmāk” an open work, but also destabilizes what is familiar to the reader, to use Iser’s terms. The young woman is seated on a balcony on a house overlooking a rapidly rising

³⁷⁶ Perhaps because of his interest in the visual arts, Khudayyir frequently slows down his narratives to focus on careful descriptions of physical and architectural details, such as the shape and ornamentation of the wall in his story “Manzil al-nisāʾ”; the location and arrangement of windows in his story “Ilā l-maʾwā”; or the elaborate architectural details described in later stories such as “Burj al-ruʾyā,” “Ḥikāyāt Yūsuf,” and “Ṣaḥīfat al-tasaʾulāt.”

river, viewing the river through a latticed screen that gives her only a partial view, but which seems to be her only outlet to the world outside:

The one who is sitting inside the darkened balcony, without moving, is a girl who is observing the limited scene through the latticed net that occupies the façade of the balcony looking out over the river. The balcony has no other exit except those small square windows in the net, which are centered on a low wooden barrier at its base.³⁷⁷

Behind her are three fish tanks against the wall in various states of cleanliness.

The motionless girl, who seems unmoved by the rising tide that threatens to flood her balcony, is contrasted with both the violent waves outside and the liveliness of the fish, described as luminous and active, as they dart among the sea-grasses in the tanks.³⁷⁸

The story provides very little detail about the girl on the chair, even though she is the sole human character in the story (other than four boys whom she sees swimming in the river at the end of the story.)³⁷⁹ Like “al-Tābūt,” this story deliberately omits thinking, feeling characters in favor of a non-human narrative, in which the reader is asked to construct a story from the actions of objects. As she sits and views

³⁷⁷ Khudayyir, *Al-Mamlaka al-sawdā'*, 83.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

³⁷⁹ Al-Ṭahmāzī and al-Muṭṭalibī see the young woman's mute passivity as part of a broader pattern of female characters in Khudayyir's early fiction in which “her communicative position is suppressed.” Other examples they list include the soldier's wife in “Taḡāsīm ‘alā watar al-rabāba,” the wife in “al-Qiṭārāt al-layliyya,” the female protagonist of “al-Mi'dhana,” the young peasant widow in “Ḥikāyāt al-mawqīd,” and the sea-girl from “Shajarat al-asmā'.” *Mirāt al-sard*, 20.

the swelling river, she is described in impersonal terms, as “the still body on the balcony,” whose head is plunged in darkness. The story abruptly shifts to an extended account of “the body” sinking into the watery darkness, surrounded by fish and summoning up fleeting images of the body’s past life on its way to the bottom, only to receive an “unexpected rescue” that returns it to the surface:

An unexpected rescue brings out the body from the dark settling-place, and liberates it from pressure, raising it with great speed toward the surface...it resembles a rescue through sieves and illuminated nets, and lights like gazing eyes.³⁸⁰

The shift to images of drowning makes it unclear what has happened: readers could conclude that the girl was pulled into the river after the flood rose over her balcony; or that this extended description of a sinking body is her recollection of a past suicide attempt, from which she was rescued; or that she is simply imagining herself as a fish in the river outside her room. The story leaves these narrative possibilities open, while focusing instead on the variety of marine life the body encounters in the depths—from “siamese-twin fish” to sea creatures with phosphorescent lights, to a giant, blind

³⁸⁰ Khudayyir, *Al-Mamlaka al-sawdāʾ*, 88.

fish in the unlit bottom.³⁸¹ The open-ended structure deliberately works to “prevent a single sense from imposing itself” on the reader.³⁸²

Midway through, the story switches to the second person, presenting the kind of “improbable” deviation from linguistic order that Eco considers the hallmark of original aesthetic discourse.³⁸³ It becomes clear in the Arabic that the “you” addressed is the girl, whose drowning is narrated again, this time as a result of the flooding river. Unable to resist the flood, she seems to shed her human character and eventually become the river itself:

You are washed in water, your most remote inner opacity and obstructions will leave you, as well as your ties, your links, your talismans and your innermost parts. You will be transparent like glass, and become an absolute center. Cosmic lights penetrate and dissolve in you, as do transformations, cleavages, delicate explosions, formations, structures and relationships, various phenomena and secrets...³⁸⁴

In this imagining, the girl (“you”) becomes the river itself, and she flows down to the sea, passing by villages, palm groves, water buffalo, and banana trees, as well as river’s pagan, magical elements, such as river spirits and demonic half-human

³⁸¹ Ibid., 86.

³⁸² Eco, *The Open Work*, 7-8.

³⁸³ Ibid., 60.

³⁸⁴ Khudayyir, *Al-Mamlaka al-sawdā'*, 89.

creatures.³⁸⁵ The transformation into the river becomes a reluctant rebirth into the human world, where she is placed in a “cradle” that seems more like a cage (“You continue to drown in what seems to be a tank, a jar, a coffin, and oven, a giant fish filled with a thick sticky liquid.”)³⁸⁶

The end of the story returns the reader to the girl on the balcony the following morning, after the flooding has receded. The river below is now full of dead fish, contrasting with the still-living fish in the tanks behind her and the thick overgrowth of climbing plants on the walls: “Silence, still air, a sigh. The girl sits on her chair, the middle of the balcony—the place overgrown with plants.”³⁸⁷ Other than the dead fish below, the story has returned the reader to the story’s opening scene. “Al-Asmāk” has a satisfying circularity to its beginning and ending, but its unusual structure, which reads more like a series of dreams, veering off into elements of magic, fantasy, and metamorphosis, suggests an openness that Umberto Eco particularly associated with contemporary writing. The openness of the story also finds expression in the “actual” events that undergird the narrative, and which the reader must make sense of as she reads; that is to say, in Russian Formalist terms, the *szujet* provides multiple *fabulae*. Is

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 91.

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 93.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 96.

this a story of a young woman’s suicidal madness? Is it a comment on the restrictions of modern life, in which the reader compares the young woman to her fish confined in narrow, dirty tanks? Is it a meditation on the human impulse to cast off our modern selves and plunge into a more primitive, spiritual world, symbolized here by the river and its demons? These variations are all conceivable through the series of abductions the reader makes in the course of reading, and thus contribute to the story’s status as an open work.³⁸⁸

4.4 “Ilā l-ma’wā”

Eco’s concept of the open work is even more pronounced in Khuḍayyir’s 1978 collection *Fī darajāt khams wa-arbaʿīn miʿawī*, primarily because of his abandonment of any lingering attachment to realism. “Ilā l-ma’wā” (“To the Shelter”) from that collection is a particularly good example of a story veering into the fantastic. It also employs a kind of narrative circularity, in which the narrator views a scene and then comes to enact it himself. The result is that the narrator’s position in the story is blurred, as he becomes both observer and participant. Many of Khuḍayyir’s stories possess a similar geometric logic—such as narrative circularity, a mirroring effect, or a

³⁸⁸ Eco, *The Role of the Reader*, 28.

division of narrative, as in “Manzil al-nisā” (“The House of Women”), also from *Fī darajat khams wa-arbaʿīn miʿawī*.³⁸⁹

Unlike “al-Tābūt” and “al-Asmāk,” “Ilā l-maʿwā” has a homodiegetic narrator, to use Genette’s term—that is, a narrator who is also a character within the story, rather than a voice outside it.³⁹⁰ The narrator is sitting in a nearly empty café, observing two blind men at a nearby table who are not aware of his presence. At the beginning of the story, the narrator implies that this late-night café is the “shelter” of the story’s title, characterizing it as a “safe lair” and “a night shelter that doesn’t kick me out early in the evening.”³⁹¹ However, the story also suggests that the “shelter” in fact refers to a boarding-house across the narrow city street, which he can observe through the café window. (As in “Al-Tābūt,” a café window becomes a visual frame for witnessing a mute scene outside, offering a glimpse that is both privileged and distancing.) The narrator observes through the hotel’s windows a resident climbing the stairs and returning to his room. Unusually, one of the two blind men also seems to be “watching” the same

³⁸⁹ “Manzil al-nisā” will be discussed in Chapter 5, in relation to Iser’s notion of defamiliarization.

³⁹⁰ Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 245.

³⁹¹ Muḥammad Khuḍayyir, *Fī darajat khamsa wa-arbaʿīn miʿawī* (Köln: Manshūrāt al-Jamal, 2006 [original publication: Baghdad: Wizārat al-Thaqāfa wa-l-iʿlām, 1978]), 37. With this theme, Khuḍayyir seems to gesture towards Ernest Hemingway’s story, “A Clean Well-Lighted Place.”

scene, waiting for a “sharp reflection” to pass through his dark glasses.³⁹² Also watching is the mirror on the back wall of the café:

I and the gleaming mirror, redolent with the steam of the last teapot,
would take turns watching through the window of the hotel, illuminated
and open like a mercury eye dominating over my back.³⁹³

The all-seeing (but unseeing) mirror and the sighted blind man both contribute to the story’s emphasis on the faculty of sight and visual organization, which extends to the detailed descriptions of the hotel’s architecture and the placement and style of its windows.

The blind man’s paradoxical visual ability contrasts with the uncertainty and disorientation both blind men express in their overheard conversation. The story conveys an undertone of terror as the men talk about the disorientation each feels on waking up at night, particularly when they find that objects in their room have been moved. The sense of disquiet veers into the fantastic and gothic when the boarder across the street, having climbed up to his room, can be seen removing his shirt to reveal an odd, hairy object growing out of his chest. The object is variously described as “a raised, dark protuberance at the top of his chest,” “a firm body that throbs,” “a

³⁹² Ibid., 38.

³⁹³ Ibid., 38.

small, throbbing secret,” “a red fruit,” and “a thick-haired animal” that comes and goes as it pleases:

The red fruit comes into view, hanging on the ribs of his chest, it floats on the pale yellow skin, it throbs, it grows, soft and ripe, with a pointed head. He observes it well. Soon this ‘thing’ will burst forth like a small animal, imperceptible, and leave in its place a dark hole, and begin its customary nocturnal excursion in the streets, public squares, bridges, and rubbish barrels, then return at dawn, reach the boarder’s ribs and cling to them.³⁹⁴

Through the hotel windows, the narrator (and the blind man) can see that all the sleeping boarders also have similar furry creatures lying on their chests, which make them groan in their sleep. The story presents us with the unusual perspective of seeing this monstrous sight through the eyes of the blind man facing the café window, but it is the fruit-like chest creatures that take this story out of the realm of realism.

In light of Eco’s work, the ambiguity of “*Ilā l-ma’wā*” permits the reader to determine which textual elements to activate, and which codes to apply to it.³⁹⁵ The story’s end echoes its beginning as the narrator reveals himself to be a boarder at the hotel across the street. In the final lines, he walks up the stairs, stopping midway up, just as he had seen the previous boarder do. He ends by entering his room and begins

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 44-5.

³⁹⁵ Eco, *The Role of the Reader*, 39.

removing his clothes, although if the narrator has a protuberance on his chest, the text doesn't mention it. Is the narrator re-enacting the scene he saw earlier from across the street? Or has he somehow become the other boarder he saw previously?

The surprising element of non-realism that is expressed by the chest-creatures lies open to a number of interpretations: they could, for example, symbolize the loneliness and anomie of city life, particularly for residents of a dreary boarding-house. They could also be Khuḍayyir's grotesque re-imagining of the human heart as a kind of pulsating red animal. As a story, "Ilā l-ma'wā" does not present the reader with a set of clear instructions for meaning: while much attention is given to visual detail (particularly in tracing the silent actions of the boarder), there is little in the way of a traditional plot structure, and the relationship between the blind men (who seem to be musicians) and the boardinghouse is unclear. At the same time, the position of the narrator himself is put into question as he re-enacts the boarder's progress up to the hotel. For all these reasons, this story offers an open structure to readers—the kind of openness that would characterize much of Khuḍayyir's later fiction.

4.5 “Ihtidār al-rassām”

The “openness” of this story, also published in *Fī darajat 45 miʿawī*, is due to an ambiguity of plot and narrative that is inseparable from its aesthetic organization.³⁹⁶ In other words, its ambiguous elements are a necessary element for the story’s effect upon the reader. In some ways, this story anticipates Khuḍayyir’s interest in Iraq’s urban past, which animates his novel *Başrayāthā*. Unlike *Başrayāthā*, this story is set in Baghdad, but it shares the same narrative technique of overlaying historical events on an urban present.

In this case, the central character is a professional artist in Baghdad, Maḥmūd Efendi. In the story’s present, Maḥmūd Efendi is an old man, confined to his second-floor room with a balcony overlooking the Tigris. But early on, the reader learns that Maḥmūd Efendi had learned to draw decades ago while a prisoner of war during World War I. As a young recruit in the Ottoman army, he had been captured by the British during their invasion of Iraq and spent the rest of the war in Pune, India.³⁹⁷ Later, as a portrait artist in Baghdad, he undertakes a large project of sketching the entire city as both urban geography and historical portraits, starting with sketches of past Ottoman governors. From these individual portraits, Maḥmūd Efendi moves on to rendering

³⁹⁶ Eco, *The Open Work*, 40.

³⁹⁷ Khuḍayyir, *Fī darajat khamis wa-arbaʿin miʿawī*, 77.

scenes from Baghdad's history, in particular depicting the final days of the rule of Dā'ūd Pasha, the last Mamluk governor of Baghdad, in 1831. The city at the time was decimated by plague and besieged by an army sent to reassert central Ottoman control over the region.³⁹⁸ As it narrates Dā'ūd Pasha's tour of the devastated city, the text creates ambiguity by seeming to place the artist within the scene he is rendering on paper:

On this hanging balcony, Maḥmūd Efendi lays out plans for going about incognito in the depth of night, and he runs a scattering of charcoal on the fine grains of paper... Maḥmūd Efendi had followed the provincial governor Dā'ūd Pasha on several excursions, which he went out on in order to inspect the affairs of the province. Those excursions struck him with an intense feeling of exhaustion.³⁹⁹

Maḥmūd Efendi is drawing this scene into existence, but the text suggests that he also becomes part of the narrative itself: "In this cold night of the winter of 1831, Maḥmūd Efendi doesn't know the place he has reached, so he began to grope the walls, declining in strength, feeling tight in the chest..."⁴⁰⁰ Rather than being somehow above the action, the artist is subject to the same ailments and dangers as he would be in real life. The narrative voice switches to a first-person plural ("We see other corpses with

³⁹⁸ Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985), 22.

³⁹⁹ Khuḍayyir, *Fī darajat khams wa-arba'īn mi'awī*, 79.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 82.

the approach of the *wālī*'s procession through the entrance of the market leading to the head of the bridge”), so as readers we seem to be looking over the artist’s shoulder, as it were, and viewing the scene through his eyes.

Later in his tour, the *wālī* Dāʿūd Pasha climbs to the top of a minaret to look down on the semi-abandoned city, described as a “labyrinth” from which he can hear “the death-rattle of the dying,”⁴⁰¹ echoing the way that Maḥmūd Efendi has earlier been described as looking down on the city of modern-day Baghdad from his river-view balcony. Here and elsewhere, the text makes Dāʿūd Pasha the artist’s *doppelgänger*. Eco would argue that in an open work, this doubling can be given a number of different interpretations: it could simply suggest that the artist is identifying himself with the figure he’s drawing. It could also allow the reader to interpret this as a darker commentary on modern Iraqi society, implicitly comparing the artist’s contemporary Baghdad to its earlier incarnation as a desolate, plague-ridden city.

The scene from 1831 foreshadows the artist’s own death at the end of the story: in both 1831 and the present, death is personified as a hunchback with a mouse-like face. Dāʿūd Pasha first sees this menacing figure on his tour of the city, and his cavalry unsuccessfully chase after him in the darkness. Later, in his citadel, Dāʿūd Pasha

⁴⁰¹ Khuḍayyir, *Fī darajat khamsa wa-arbaʿin miʿawī*, 82.

encounters him again while dictating his final official document to his secretary, including a statement recording his own death from plague, an ingenious use of metafiction in which the event and the writing of it merge. As he and the secretary record the names of the city's officials and important individuals that have died of the plague, the hunchback figure of death leans over Dā'ūd Pasha, asking, "My lord, has the time come for us to leave the citadel?"⁴⁰² The secretary records his own death by adding his name to the list of plague victims at the bottom of the document, and presumably the mouse-faced hunchback takes both governor and secretary with him.

The narrative returns to the present day, where the elderly artist is visited in his second-floor balcony room by old comrades reminiscing about the war and about early 20th-century Iraq. In a further blurring of the narrative, the artist is also visited by phantoms of men and women from his younger days, now long dead. A phantom woman whom he presumes to be a singer from a café from before the war places a rifle in his hands. Later that night, an unnamed man rows a skiff (*quffa*) up to the bank of the river below Maḥmūd Efendi's balcony. He ties it up and climbs up to the balcony where the artist sits: in a parallel with the story of Dā'ūd Pasha, the visitor is "an ugly

⁴⁰² Khuḍayyir, *Fī darajat khamsa wa-arbaʿin miʿawī*, 83.

creature, with a mouse-like face [who] came into view in front of the artist; his beady eyes pour out secret spite and deadly scorn.”⁴⁰³

The final element of ambiguity in the story is the event that gives the story its title: namely, the artist’s death, which *Khuḍayyir* leaves unclear. The mouse-faced figure of death watches *Maḥmūd Efendi*’s hands shake as they try to aim the rifle at him. Then:

The hammer fell and a harsh blast shot out. Whoever heard this sound reckoned it to be the stifled cry of life in the artist’s throat... In a short time, the end happened, something fell in the river, feet quickly went up the stairs, and the smell of gunpowder filled the room.⁴⁰⁴

Did *Maḥmūd Efendi* fire the rifle at the mouse-faced figure of death, or did he turn the gun on himself? The text deliberately leaves it unclear about the nature of the “something” that dropped into the water, whether it was the gun, the artist’s body, or death himself. The skiff seems not to be a figment of *Maḥmūd Efendi*’s imagination, since the narrative informs us that it remains tied to the fence below the balcony for several days afterward. One Iraqi literary critic, *Shujā‘ Muslim al-‘Ānī*, believes that *Maḥmūd Efendi* simply committed suicide, although the story gives no indication that

⁴⁰³ *Khuḍayyir*, *Fī darajat khams wa-arba‘īn mi‘awī*, 88.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.

the character intended to end his life.⁴⁰⁵ Alternatively, Maḥmūd Efendi could be said to have provoked his own death by summoning into existence the figure of death in his drawings of 1831 Baghdad. Ultimately, the ambiguity surrounding the protagonist's death acts as Eco's "suggestive function," as discussed in Section 1.4, and thus prompts the reader to draw her own conclusions about the nature of the artist's demise, including the level of credence to apply to the text's historical and fantastic elements, and their overlap with its more realistic aspects.

4.6 Conclusion

These four early stories by Khuḍayyir offer particularly good examples of the ambiguity of structure, theme, and plot that make a story "open" as Eco defined it. Stories such as "Al-Tābūt" and "Al-Asmāk" do not present a traditional plot driven by the actions of human characters. In "Iḥtiḍār al-rassām," the "openness" of the story depends on the ambiguity of a crucial plot point as well as the semantic indeterminacy of its sentences. Likewise, "Ilā l-ma'wā" presents the reader with a doubled scene in which the narrator is both spectator and participant, while introducing unusual elements (blind men in a café, creatures that live on people's chests) that require the

⁴⁰⁵ Shujā' Muslim Al-Ānī, *Fī adabīnā al-qāṣṣī al-mu'āṣir* (Baghdad: Dār al-Shu'ūn al-Thaqāfiyya al-Āmma, 1989), 172.

active involvement of the reader in the construction of meaning. These early stories highlight Khudayyir's willingness to introduce into his fiction the "halo of indefiniteness" that Eco considered essential to modern art.

Chapter 5: Defamiliarizations and Deformations in Khuḍayyir's Fiction

5.1 Introduction

Khuḍayyir's fiction compels the reader to produce meaning not solely on the basis of its ambiguity, but through his subversions of readers' expectations of genre, narrative, and plot. That implies that his readers must bring to his text a horizon of expectations (Jaus's *Erwartungshorizont*) concerning style, structure, and language, which shape how they perceive and understand the work. In exploring how Khuḍayyir subverts these expectations, this chapter turns to Wolfgang Iser's concepts of defamiliarization and "coherent deformation." By arguing that the text is not the ultimate source of meaning, or rather, does not fully determine the meanings a reader derives from it, Iser characterized the reading process as "virtual," in that it exists solely in the interaction between text and reader. A text's meaning is only generated through the act of reading, during which the reader negotiates with text through a "kaleidoscope of perspectives, pre-intentions, recollections."⁴⁰⁶ (See Section 1.7.)

In Iser's terms, a literary text uses strategies that destabilize this horizon of expectations, rather than simply mirroring it. In our capacity as readers, we want the

⁴⁰⁶ Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 279.

text to defy these expectations and surprise us, rather than routinely confirm them.⁴⁰⁷

These strategies disrupt the reader's gestalt-formation while emphasizing the

contingent nature of the assumptions she is making as she reads.

Iser refers to this disruption, which renders our assumptions and expectations as unfamiliar and new, as defamiliarization. In Khuḍayyir's fiction, defamiliarization can take several forms; this chapter will examine three of these forms—magical realism and the uncanny; narrative doubling; and deformation of genre—across specific texts of his. Khuḍayyir is not the only modern Arabic author to have deployed magical realism: other writers have also used the technique as a way to mirror the disorientation and defamiliarization associated with the experience of colonialism, such as in the novels *Nazīf al-ḥajar* (*The Bleeding of the Stone*) by Ibrāhīm al-Kūnī and *Zaman al-khuyūl al-bayḍā'* (*Time of the White Horses*) by Ibrāhīm Naṣrallāh.⁴⁰⁸ Likewise, in her analysis of more recent contemporary Iraqi fiction, Ferial Ghazoul has referred to the irruption of the supernatural and strange into the everyday as “the uncanny.”⁴⁰⁹ This chapter will examine three of Khuḍayyir's stories—“Ḍahīrat al-qirṭa” (“Afternoon of the Honey

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., 278.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibrāhīm al-Kūnī, *Nazīf al-ḥajar* (London: Riyāḍ al-Rayyis, 1990.) Ibrāhīm Naṣrallāh, *Zaman al-khuyūl al-bayḍā'* (Beirut; al-Dār al-‘Arabiyya lil-‘Ulūm, 2007.)

⁴⁰⁹ Ferial Ghazoul, “Iraqi Short Fiction: The Unhomely at Home and Abroad,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 35:1 (2004): 2. It is worth noting that in this article, she acknowledges that she is using “uncanny” as a translation of Freud's term *unheimlich*.

Badger”), “Shajarat al-Asmā” (“Tree of Names”), and “al-Mamlaka al-sawdā” (“The Black Kingdom”)—that employ supernatural or uncanny elements to unsettle readers’ expectations.

Likewise, the technique of narrative doubling is a recurring motif in Khudayyir’s fiction, and this chapter will examine two early stories that employ this kind of doubling, either through the use of characters who act as doubles, or in the case of a doubled narrative itself: these stories are “al-Qiṭārāt al-layliyya” (“Night Trains”) and “Manzil al-nisā” (“House of Women”).

Finally, this chapter will examine two of Khudayyir’s longer texts that are notable for their deformation of genre, in which conventional boundaries are deliberately distorted. In this case, these stories parallel Iser’s concept of “coherent deformation,” in which apparently fixed assumptions (in this case of literary genre) are destabilized and recodified.⁴¹⁰ Khudayyir’s best-known text that blends and blurs the boundaries of genre is *Başrayāthā*, but this chapter will focus on two more recent, but lesser known, book-length texts of his: *Kurrāsāt kānūn* (*January Notebook*, 2001) and *Ḥadā’iq al-wujūh* (*Gardens of Faces*, 2008.) By combining elements of autobiography, fiction, essay, and criticism, these two works defy conventional expectations of genre

⁴¹⁰ Iser, *Act of Reading*, 82.

and thus compel the reader to draw connections and make meaning in ways that he would not otherwise make.

5.2 Defamiliarization through the Magical and Uncanny

Although Muhammad Khuḍayyir is not generally considered an author of magical realism, many of his stories contain elements of the fantastic and supernatural. The appearance of these elements in Khuḍayyir's fiction written post-*Baṣrayāthā* can be ascribed to the broader current of fantastic and uncanny elements in contemporary Iraqi fiction, which Ferial Ghazoul sees as a reflection of and reaction to the decades of political authoritarianism, violence, and war that have colored the imaginations of Iraqi writers.⁴¹¹ Recent Iraqi novels that have incorporated elements of the supernatural and the monstrous include Aḥmad al-Saʿdāwī's *Frānkishtāyn fī Baghdād* (*Frankenstein in Baghdad*) and Burhān Shāwī's *Mashraḥat Baghdād* (*The Morgue of Baghdad*).⁴¹² At the same time, the fantastic often represents an irruption of folkloric and mythical elements into modern narrative, as exemplified by Iraqi texts such as

⁴¹¹ Ghazoul, 1.

⁴¹² Aḥmad al-Saʿdāwī, *Frānkishtāyn fī Baghdād* (Beirut: Manshūrāt al-Jamal, 2013.) Burhān Shāwī, *Mashraḥat Baghdād* (Beirut: al-Dār al-ʿarabiyya li-l-ʿulūm nāshirūn, 2012). Ikram Masmoudi's introduction to her monograph, *War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction* provides a wide-ranging overview of recent Iraqi novels that address or respond to the violence that followed the U.S. invasion and occupation of 2003. Masmoudi, 1-27.

Shākir Nūrī's *Kilāb Jiljāmish* (*The Dogs of Gilgamesh*) and Fāḍil al-ʿAzzāwī's *Akhir al-Malāʾika* (*The Last of the Angels*).⁴¹³

In Khuḍayyir's stories, the magical and non-rational elements stubbornly refuse to adhere to an otherwise realistic, and even everyday, setting. In that regard, his fiction compels the reader to reconcile different narrative logics in drawing out the meaning in the story.⁴¹⁴ The three stories discussed in this chapter are by no means the only pieces of fiction by Khuḍayyir that use magical elements. However, all three exemplify a technique of defamiliarization in the service of prompting meaning-making in readers. The result is that the reading becomes, in Iser's terms, an "event" or "performance," as discussed in Section 1.7.1.

5.2.1 "Zahīrat al-qirṭa"

An excellent example of a story that blends odd elements with the realistic is the story "Zahīrat al-qirṭa" ("Afternoon of the Honey Badger.") Khuḍayyir seems to

⁴¹³ Shākir Nūrī, *Kilāb Jiljāmish* (Algiers, Beirut: Manshūrāt al-Ikhtilāf / al-Dār al-ʿarabiyya li-l-ʿulūm nāshirūn, 2008.) Fāḍil al-ʿAzzāwī, *Akhir al-Malāʾika* (London, Cyprus: Riyāḍ al-Rayyis, 1992.)

⁴¹⁴ As discussed in Chapter Four, the stories "al-Tābūt" and "Ilā l-maʾwā" seem to draw on some of these magical/non-rational elements as well.

have first written the story in 1968, and then revised it in 1995 for publication in the 1998 collection *Taḥnīt*.⁴¹⁵

The setting of “Zahīrat al-qirṭa” is distinctly rural, taking place in the marshes of southern Iraq. The story focuses on a man and his deaf-mute adolescent son. Throughout the story, the father and son communicate via gestures (*ishārāt*), displacing the usual role of dialogue in the narrative. The story opens with the son climbing onto the roof of their semi-open shelter in the heat of the afternoon to hang palm tree spadixes which are filled with water to cool.⁴¹⁶ The scene is domestic, but is interrupted by the appearance of an old woman, her face covered in warts, who is a witch-like folk healer with an air of supernatural menace about her:

She was one of those women who appear unexpectedly, and often it is difficult to make her out at sunset as she gathers herbs from a hill behind the palm grove, or wanders in a graveyard like a bat: the late afternoon air spreads out the abaya she is wrapped in.⁴¹⁷

The woman has instructed the father to hunt and kill a honey badger as a cure for his son’s muteness. The father is to cut out the honey badger’s tongue, dry it, grind and mix it with cat urine for his son to drink. The witch has had a claim on the boy

⁴¹⁵ Muḥammad Khuḍayyir, *Taḥnīt: mukhtārāt qīṣāsiyya* (Cairo: Thaḳāfa ḍidda al-Ḥiṣār, 1998), 41.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

since infancy: as a baby, when he was late in speaking, his grandmother had brought him to the witch to nurse him, and now she pointedly tells the father, “Remember that he is my nurseling.”⁴¹⁸ (Throughout the story, the boy’s mother is asleep in the hut, thus yielding her maternal role to the old woman, who instructs the father not to let his wife know of the cure she is prescribing for her son.)

The boy’s muteness and his ties to the witch mean that his ability to speak is both less and more powerful than other humans: the father knows that when a witch’s nurseling, like his son, is able to utter speech, “then he can address dumb beasts, wild animals, and winged creatures, and he will possess the nurses’ ability to control deaf and dumb people, wrongdoers, thieves and baby-snatchers.”⁴¹⁹

One part of the narrative is focalized through the son, as the father and son float on a boat down the river to the hill where the father will hunt for the honey badger’s lair. The reader becomes privy to the son’s wordless, soundless encounter with the visual world. As he lies in the boat, he watches the sunlight and leaves overhead pass by him

... in silence, a silence whose essence he didn’t understand, nor could he fathom its extent. Nature’s shapes and colors made him sense existence stripped of sounds. They were signs that accompanied his first visual

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 35.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 35.

perception of the things that he did not know how to name, but he sensed the visible world with a profound internal intelligence and its images were not absent from his memory.⁴²⁰

He also makes shapes with his lips, forming words that are otherwise “blocked” since he cannot make the sounds other creatures—including his father—make.⁴²¹ At the same time, the text seems to suggest that the son understands the language of animals, while he misattributes this same ability to his father as well (“He thought that his father could hear their singing and their secret talk but that he pretended not to know of their existence”). Iser, drawing on Roman Ingarden’s term, would refer to this section of the text as a “place of indeterminacy” (*Unbestimmtheitsstelle*), and therefore a site which compels the reader to determine the meaning of the son’s muteness and the significance of the reader being privy to the son’s encounter with the world.⁴²²

The story ends with the father shooting the honey badger and bringing its corpse back to the boat where his son is waiting. The honey badger becomes a proxy for the old woman who nursed the son: like her, the honey badger’s face is covered in warts, and it has long dugs hanging from its chest. At the sight of the dead body, the son lets out “a frightful howl,” imitating the sound the animal made when it was shot,

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 36.

⁴²¹ Ibid., 37.

⁴²² Iser, *Act of Reading*, 170.

and runs away.⁴²³ For the father, his son’s animal-like howl—presumably the first sound he has ever uttered—may be a sign that he can now speak.

With its elements of folk magic, “Ṣahīrat al-qirṭa” blurs lines between elements reader would normally think as separate: in this story, speech is rendered as gestures (particularly during a long sign-language conversation in which the father explains to the son his connection to the old woman), while a non-speaking character is portrayed as being able to communicate with animals in a way that speaking humans cannot. As a result, the story defamiliarizes the normal hierarchies of language and speechlessness, and the boundaries between the human and non-human worlds. Iser would argue that it succeeds in requiring the reader to modify his expectations in the course of reading and thus enact a “performance” of the text.⁴²⁴

5.2.2 “Shajarat al-Asmā’”

The story “Shajarat al-Asmā’” (“Tree of Names”), published as part of *al-Mamlaka al-sawdā’*, shares some of the same themes as “Ṣahīrat al-qirṭa,” although that story was published in its final form over two decades later. Like “Ṣahīrat al-qirṭa,” “Shajarat al-Asmā’” also revolves around adolescents, and features an unfamiliar

⁴²³ Khudāyyir, *Taḥnīt*, 41. The story uses the same noun, ‘awā’, for both sounds.

⁴²⁴ Iser, *Act of Reading*, 27.

language, as well as a female character who embodies magical qualities and straddles the human and natural worlds.⁴²⁵

The setting for this story is a river bank near a city at low tide (presumably modeled on the Shaṭṭ al-ʿArab in Basra) in a liminal area between the water and the rocks along the shore that block the view of the corniche above. The city and ships are reflected on the surface of the river, where “a cover like a green cloud undulates in the sky of a lower city under the water.”⁴²⁶ The story opens, then, with the image of an alternative world beneath the water. Ṭahmāzī and al-Muṭṭalibī, in their study of Khuḍayyir’s fiction, argue that this riverine world also exists outside of the confines of time, as symbolized by the image of the ships endlessly rocking on the river, which they characterize as “a movement of nothingness.”⁴²⁷

The sole two characters of the story are a school boy, whose connection to the human world is represented by the school book he carries, and a girl who approaches him on the sandbar. She not only smells like water, but is the same gray color as the rocks behind them.⁴²⁸ The receded water of low tide has exposed the hollows in the

⁴²⁵ Several other stories in *al-Mamlaka al-sawdāʾ* feature children or adolescent characters, including “Nāfidha ʿalā l-sāḥa” and “Al-mamlaka al-sawdāʾ”. In his study of Iraqi fiction, Bāsim ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd Ḥammūdī de-emphasizes the magical, supernatural elements of this story, seeing the plot instead as “an act of protest by two young children against reality.” Ḥammūdī, 152.

⁴²⁶ Khuḍayyir, *al-Mamlaka al-sawdāʾ*, 67.

⁴²⁷ Ṭahmāzī and al-Muṭṭalibī, 25.

⁴²⁸ Khuḍayyir, *al-Mamlaka al-sawdāʾ*, 68.

rocks behind them that contain dormant sea creatures that will wake when the water returns. Like those hollows, the liminal position of the sandbar allows her access to the boy and dry land.

In their cryptic conversation, the girl tells the boy that she knows the language of turtles and can summon them out of the water.⁴²⁹ In turn, he tells her that she looks like a turtle, and he gives her the name of “Dew Drop...a witch’s daughter.”⁴³⁰ She carries with her a box in which she places objects that she finds along the shore—a piece of mirror, a small flask filled with water, and shining pebbles.” The box becomes the locus of her connection to the submarine world, as the narrative suddenly switches to what seems to be a heterodiegetic narrator:

Can you imagine her amazing box? Do you wonder if it resembles a Chinese box inlaid with ivory and oiled with whale-liver oil and ambergris?... Perhaps the sound of its cover when she raises it teaches her the language of turtles and fish, as though the sound of the cover is the song of the lower kingdoms in the water, the kingdoms of unknown caves in the rocks, the kingdoms of seashells.⁴³¹

The same narrator explains that at the girl’s death, the next owner of the box will possess her spirit, and will also know the language of turtles, while she herself “will

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 69.

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 70.

⁴³¹ Ibid., 71.

transform into a piece of rock in her box, and her image will be carved on the cover, while her spirit will inhabit the chambers of the rocks of the shore.”⁴³² As in “Zahīrat al-qirṭa,” language in this story becomes strange and unfamiliar, as the boy and girl go up to the corniche above the rocks to write their names on a eucalyptus tree. At her request, he carves both their names in a circle on the tree (she asks him to use the name he gave her, “Dew Drop”); she in turn carves their names in the language of turtles, “drawing glyphs in the form of disorganized circular and leaning shapes that resemble livers and stones of the shore.”⁴³³ The story closes on the image of the cryptic characters she has carved, along with the ceaseless rocking of boats on the river and the sound of water that rushes into the rock hollows and revives the dormant sea creatures.

The quotidian realism of the world of “dry land” embodied by the boy, his schoolbooks, the corniche, and cars whizzing by are juxtaposed with the mythical, supernatural figure of the water-girl who can speak the language of turtles. Iser would suggest that both these elements introduce a coherent deformation of the other, or rather that each “acts as an irritant upon the other,” thus calling into question the

⁴³² Ibid., 72.

⁴³³ Ibid., 74.

bright divisions between the real world and the world of myth and magic.⁴³⁴ Notably, in both “Zahīrat al-qirṭa” and “Shajarat al-asmā’,” the real world is coded as masculine, while the supernatural or otherworldly is embodied by female characters, specifically, the witch and the girl on the river.

5.2.3 “al-Mamlaka al-sawdā’”

The third and final example of a story that uses magical and uncanny elements is the title story of Khudayyir’s 1972 collection. The action in the story is quite brief: a boy named ‘Alī, on his way to school, enters the house of his elderly aunt to find an inheritance that he believes his (dead) father must have left him. The house itself is traditional in its construction, and is accessible by a heavy, bronze-decorated wooden door carved with Hijri dates and religious expressions. Beyond it is the house’s enclosed courtyard, with a lote tree at the center.⁴³⁵

Within this traditional Iraqi family home, ‘Alī expects to find his inheritance, which turns out to be a meager collection of odds and ends kept in a box under his aunt’s sickbed. ‘Alī never knew his father, who had left ‘Alī’s mother and returned to

⁴³⁴ Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 81.

⁴³⁵ As in other stories by Khudayyir, the text provides detailed architectural description of the initial setting.

live with his sister, ‘Alī’s aunt, in the family home, where he later died. As a result, ‘Alī has only just learned who his father was, and introduces himself to his paternal aunt for the first time in the process of claiming his inheritance.⁴³⁶

What is most striking about the courtyard that ‘Alī enters is the giant charcoal drawings of animals that cover its walls, often in fantastical forms, such as horses with multiple legs like a spider, girls with long hair, “fish without flippers and serpents with flowing mouths, and birds with giant wings and long beaks.”⁴³⁷ As the aunt makes clear, this artwork is graffiti made by trespassers, which she, in her sickbed upstairs, is helpless to prevent. This two-dimensional animal kingdom in charcoal—the “black kingdom” of the title—is alive and moving: ‘Alī can hear the whinnying of the horses as he goes upstairs, and on his return, he finds that the horses are lying down and warming themselves in the courtyard sunlight: “He descended the stairs, paying no heed to the horses, which woke finally, crossing the kingdom of sleeping animals.”⁴³⁸

The reader’s attention is drawn not only to the magical ability of moving drawings, but to the role of light and color: the morning sunlight is rendered as dynamic and mobile as it makes its way across the courtyard: the sun’s rays are “like

⁴³⁶ Khuḍayyir, *al-Mamlaka al-sawdā*, 78.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

radiant silver clock hands [that] roam along the fixed ornamented pillars that held up the roof of the domed kiosk.”⁴³⁹ The story details the sunlight’s penetration through a stained glass arch window. The sunlight gives off an “unreal smell” and surrounds the aunt’s head with a “pale halo, as though the head had been dipped in a liquid dyed with drops of dark blue and red rays.”⁴⁴⁰ The transformative, dynamic effect of the light makes both the courtyard and the aunt unfamiliar and new.

The story seems to juxtapose its dynamic magical elements with imagery of stasis, abandonment and death. The lote tree in the courtyard holds an empty bird cage that was only recently occupied: the image seems to suggest the now deceased father, whose last years were spent within this oppressive, funereal house, but who has now become free, like the birds. His father’s box under the bed, unopened for a decade, also symbolizes release after long stasis. All of its contents—a cracked mirror in which ‘Alī can see himself, a photo of the father in a *sidāra* hat, a silver dagger, and other odds and ends—have been “imprisoned since his childhood, just waiting for someone to free them to the light.”⁴⁴¹

⁴³⁹ Ibid., 76.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., 76-7.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., 80.

The motifs of a family home with an enclosed courtyard and a father's modest legacy of objects firmly rooted in an Iraqi-specific masculinity draw on what Iser would call a repertoire of existing norms, perhaps evoking in Khudayyir's Iraqi readers associations with tradition and paternal authority. But in this story, those norms are presented "in a state of suspended validity," as Iser puts it, and instead, the father's legacy is linked to stasis and death. The literary text, in other words, does not perfectly adhere to accepted cultural conventions.⁴⁴² The unreal/uncanny element of a menagerie of living drawings on the walls offers a rearrangement of expected patterns, in which the natural world (embodied by the vivid sun and the restless animals) are given a dynamism denied to human characters. Since Iser argues that a text's aesthetic value lies in its oppositional stance to a dominant system (see Section 1.7.1), one aesthetically valid reading of the text is that it breaks with a cultural norm that privileges a traditional masculinity over the non-human and magical. This inversion of familiar hierarchies is reinforced by the ending of the story, in which 'Ali replaces the box beneath the bed and leaves the house, symbolically rejecting his compromised, confining inheritance. This coherent deformation offers a way for readers to step outside this dominant system and invites them to critique it.

⁴⁴² Iser, *Act of Reading*, 70.

5.3 Defamiliarization through Narrative Doubling

While some of Khudayyir's texts deploy uncanny or supernatural thematic elements as a way to disrupt the reader out of her horizon of expectations about the workings of reality, many more of his texts achieve this narrative estrangement through narrative doubling. In some cases, this doubling can take the form of a character who seems to become or inhabit another character from earlier in the same story.⁴⁴³ In other texts, a character overlaps or merges with a character at another fictional level (that is, a character from a story within the story), such as the soldier and woman in "al-Qiṭārāt al-layliyya" ("Night Trains") who are in a movie theater watching a soldier and woman on the film screen. In other cases, this narrative doubling can occur at the level of the text itself, such as in the story "Manzil al-nisā'" ("House of Women"), with its unusual split-narrative structure. The result of the doubling, in all the above cases, is what Iser would characterize as a gestalt-disrupting "blank" in the text that triggers acts of ideation in the reader.⁴⁴⁴

⁴⁴³ "Ilā l-ma'wā," discussed in Section 4.4, also fits this pattern of doubling: in that case, the story's narrator makes the same walk up the boarding house stairs and turns out to have the same creature on his chest as the boarder he had witnessed earlier.

⁴⁴⁴ See Section 1.7.3 above.

Khuḍayyir has written about narrative doubling in his collection of essays on literature and writing, *al-Ḥikāya al-jadīda* (*The New Tale*), emphasizing that the essential “anonymity” of an author allows him to exchange his personality with a fictional character, who then becomes his literary doppelgänger.⁴⁴⁵ In all the instances mentioned above, narrative doubling confronts the reader with a shift in perspective on the events and characters in the text. As such, this type of deformation acts as a metafictional device, highlighting the artificial, constructed nature of the narrative.

By self-consciously drawing attention to the status of the text as artifact, the metafictional mode questions the relationship between fiction and reality, and highlights the constructed nature of fiction.⁴⁴⁶ In doing so, metafiction—in this case, the use of narrative doubles—acts as a tool of defamiliarization. Iser’s statements on defamiliarization would seem to parallel scholarly writing on metafiction, such as Patricia Waugh’s. The difference is one of emphasis: whereas Iser emphasizes the centrality of the reader’s response, for Waugh and others, the author remains the most important element; metafiction is a product of the author’s decisions about her text.⁴⁴⁷

⁴⁴⁵ Khuḍayyir, *al-Ḥikāya al-jadīda*, 10.

⁴⁴⁶ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London, New York: Methuen, 1984), 2-3.

⁴⁴⁷ Waugh, 22. Waugh chooses as an example of metafiction the novel *Breakfast of Champions*, by US author Kurt Vonnegut, specifically calling the effect of the novel’s metafiction a “defamiliarization,” which reflects the author’s despair at being able to critique or counteract cultural representations.

5.3.1 “al-Qiṭārāt al-layliyya”

Published in Khudaḡyir’s first short story collection, “al-Qiṭārāt al-layliyya” (“Night Trains”) was, like “al-Tābūt” (discussed in Section 4.2), a precursor of the kind of experimental, non-linear fiction that Khudaḡyir adopted in his later writings. Like several other stories in *al-Mamlaka al-sawdā’*, “al-Qiṭārāt al-layliyya” includes a soldier character, and war appears in the background. Presumably, that war is a fictional reflection of the prolonged first Kurdish-Iraqi conflict, which broke out in 1961 and was only concluded in 1970. More specifically, his early stories of war are not about battle, but revolve around domestic life or a soldier’s return.⁴⁴⁸ Divided into three sections, the story is preoccupied with themes of light and shadow, and how they render objects visible and invisible. This cinematic approach to narrative is particularly appropriate, since the story opens with a young couple—a soldier and a woman—taking their seats in an empty movie theater where a film is already playing. The first doubling in the story involves the film itself: the couple sitting in the empty theater are watching a film

⁴⁴⁸ Other stories in the same collection that mirror these themes include “Ḥikāyat al-mawqīd” (“Tales by the Hearth”) in which a poor rural family tells tales around the fire while waiting for the father to return from the military; “Taqāsīm ‘alā watar al-rabāba” (“Solos on a Rebab String”), in which a soldier returns home by train and recounts some of his traumatic memories to his wife as their daughters lie sleeping and “al-Urjūha” (“The Swing”), in which a soldier on leave visits the family of a comrade who has died and plays with his young daughter. “Al-Tābūt” also falls in this category of war story.

about a similar couple (also a soldier and a woman) traveling in an otherwise empty train through the desert at night. The woman in the theater complains about the cold, and her counterpart on screen, huddled under the soldier's overcoat, feels cold as well.)

The overlap between the two levels of storytelling in this first section (titled “Qiṭār khārij al-sikak” [“A Train Derailed”]) is heightened by the frequent screenplay directions that announce changes of scenes or camera shots (“A shot focused on the light on the ceiling of the train car,” “A shot outside the car,” “Interior shot”)⁴⁴⁹ as well as interruptions from the film's voiceover narration. The switch to an exterior scene emphasizes the contrast between the powerful light of the train and the darkness and emptiness of the desert around it.⁴⁵⁰

Little happens in the film onscreen, other than that the train pulls into a desert station, and the soldier emerges from the train on what turns out to be a fruitless search for food. The setting is during wartime, as the station loudspeaker broadcasts news from the front. The first section ends with the cinema-going couple leaving the theater while the film is still playing.

The story's second section presents a further narrative doubling, as it narrates a soldier's return to Baghdad from the front for home leave. Like the soldier onscreen, he

⁴⁴⁹ Khuḍayyir, *al-Mamlaka al-sawdā'*, 153, 155.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 154.

too is traveling by train at night: unlike the station in the film, this desert station is crowded with vendors and travelers, with the station lights and fog forming shapes out of the darkness.⁴⁵¹ As the soldier stands in the train, a woman in a black abaya and face veil hands him a letter through the window, hoping he can take it to her husband on the front. The narrative does not indicate whether this scene is also taken from the film, and only in the third section does it become clear that this soldier is the same one who was in the theater.

The final section takes place in the bedroom, where the soldier and the woman are lying in bed, after the movie. It becomes clear in this section that the soldier is the same as the one on leave from the second section, as he shows his wife the letter the woman in the abaya handed to him. He was unable to find her husband at the front, and when the two of them open the letter, they find that it is blank. His wife compares herself to the woman in the abaya, saying “I can picture her now...She has an alert face. Like my face.”⁴⁵² The concluding image of the story—a focus on the mirror on the room “taking pictures” of objects in the room, evokes this same idea of doubling.

The division of this story into three non-chronological sections produces in the reader the type of “wandering viewpoint” that Iser described, in which the reader is

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁴⁵² *Ibid.*, 165.

compelled to reconcile various perspectives and form an understanding of the narrative.⁴⁵³ Likewise, the story produces a “coherent deformation” in readers’ understanding of the world through its doubling of characters—the couple at the movie theater and their counterparts onscreen, the wife and the woman in the abaya, and even the repeated image of a glass jar of yogurt that reflects the image of characters (in the first section, when the soldier and woman emerge onto the Baghdad street, and in the second section, on the station platform). The result, in Iser’s terms, is a deliberate distortion of seemingly immutable reality, as the distinction between real life and cinema is blurred, as is the separation between wartime life and domestic life.

5.3.2 “Manzil al-nisā’”

Perhaps the most formally experimental of Khuḍayyir’s short stories is “Manzil al-nisā’” (“House of Women”) from *Fī darajat khams wa-arba‘īn mi’awī*. The story is in fact two parallel narratives recounting the same events from different perspectives, each complementing the other.⁴⁵⁴ In print, the two narratives are separated by a horizontal line printed across each page, and the two halves of the story can be read in tandem or

⁴⁵³ Iser, *Act of Reading*, 135.

⁴⁵⁴ Bāsīm ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Ḥammūdī labels this technique “non-temporal parallelism,” noting that it has been “little used in the Arabic short story.” Ḥammūdī, 160.

in succession. By compelling the reader to decide how to read these two narratives, “House of Women” exemplifies Iser’s notion of the text as a set of response-inviting structures that the reader must assemble to make meaning.⁴⁵⁵ This experimental form is unusual, but was not without precedent in Iraqi fiction: early in his career, Mahdī ʿĪsā al-Ṣaqr had attempted a similar parallel structure in a story he wrote in the 1940’s. Al-Ṣaqr had tried writing two parallel narratives in separate columns on the same page, apparently inspired by a similar format used by an American short story writer, although the attempt ended in failure, and al-Ṣaqr’s story was never published.⁴⁵⁶ Khudāyyir’s more direct inspiration, as Shujāʿ Muslim al-ʿĀnī points out, was the experimental short story, “Möbius the Stripper—A Topological Exercise” by the British author Gabriel Josipovici, which employed the same split-narrative. Josipovici’s story has the additional feature of being continuously readable in the form of a Möbius strip, in which the end of the bottom narrative can continue by beginning again at the top. Josipovici’s story, published in English in 1974, appeared in the Iraqi magazine *al-Ādāb*

⁴⁵⁵ Iser, *Act of Reading*, 34.

⁴⁵⁶ Caiani and Cobham, 141. Caiani and Cobham do not mention the author or title of the short story that inspired al-Ṣaqr’s attempt.

al-Ajnabiyya (*Foreign Literatures*) in an Arabic translation by Yūsuf al-Yūsuf, and in al-‘Ānī’s opinion, served as Khuḍayyir’s model for “Manzil al-nisā’.”⁴⁵⁷

In al-‘Ānī’s view, the top narrative of “Manzil al-nisā’” presents the “external social truth” of the characters, placing heavy emphasis on description and incorporating “a trace of *nouveau roman*,” while the bottom narrative is informed by the characters’ psychological, internal truths.⁴⁵⁸ On a more basic narratological level, the top narrative is told in the third-person, focalized through a young man making his way through a house, while the bottom is told in the first person, narrated by the same character, ‘Alī (whose name is not mentioned in the top narrative.)

The story recounts the nighttime visit of a young man to the all-female boarding house (the “house of women” of the title) where he grew up with his mother. As we learn in the bottom narrative, this man’s name is ‘Alī (although he was known to the residents of the house as Ibn ‘Awāsha), and he has just returned to civilian life after two years of military service. The house is owned by a woman, ‘Awfā, who offers shelter for divorced and abandoned women, including the wives of seamen who are away for months at a time. ‘Alī’s mother was one of those women. As ‘Alī enters the house and

⁴⁵⁷ Shujā‘ Muslim al-‘Ānī, *Fī adabīnā al-qaṣaṣī al-mu‘āṣir* (Baghdad: Dār al-Shu‘ūn al-Thaqāfiyya al-‘Āmma, 1989), 173. Gabriel Josipovici, *Mobius the Stripper and Other Stories* (London: Victor Gallancz, 1974), 64-85.

⁴⁵⁸ al-‘Ānī, 173.

ascends the stairs, he passes a number of rooms of sleeping women, and finally finds ‘Awfā who introduces him to a group of women boarders. His relationship with ‘Awfā is strained: he calls her “mother ‘Awfā,” reflecting her maternal role as the head of the household, although she in turn refers to him as “the ungrateful Ibn ‘Awāsha.”⁴⁵⁹ It becomes clear that his main purpose in visiting the house is to find a particular woman, Dalāl, who may be his lover, and who seems to suffer from mental illness. ‘Awfā claims she is no longer in the house, but his search of different rooms leads him to the basement storage room, where he finds Dalāl sitting in an empty tub. It is unclear whether ‘Awfā is confining her there against her will, but she has not eaten in two days, and he fetches from the kitchen a bowl of porridge (*harīs*), which he feeds to her.

The opening sections of the two narratives are indicative of the differences in perspectives between the two halves. The top half, with its more impersonal, cinematic technique, is focused on architectural detail (a visual emphasis that is particularly pronounced in Khudāyyir’s later fiction, although it is evident as well in stories such as “*Ilā l-ma’wā*.”) The top begins with a long description of the arrangement of bricks, windows, and electric lights that line a side street at night, where high second floor balcony windows on either side of the alleyway block the light above by jutting out like

⁴⁵⁹ Khudāyyir, *Fī darajat khams wa-arba‘in mi’awī*, 103.

“giant saw teeth.”⁴⁶⁰ Only after a page of description is the reader informed that there is a man hurrying through it. The human figure is almost an afterthought in this opening sequence.

By contrast, the bottom half begins with “My name is ‘Alī,” and continues with the protagonist giving the details of his life and his reluctant visit to “a house I failed to visit all through the past two weeks, but I am incapable of ignoring its walls, its silence, and its inhabitants any longer.”⁴⁶¹ The alleyway to the house is characterized not as a series of architectural features and geometric patterns, but as an urban environment that retains the imprint of its inhabitants. As he walks down the passage, ‘Alī muses on the sounds of daily life there, the smells of cooking, and the sight of clothes drying on clotheslines. The passageway is imbued with the spirits of the people who have lived there:

I make my way among the souls of the ancestor inhabitants, which stayed behind in the holes in the walls and in their passageways, among the bridges connecting roofs and in the narrow openings of windows and columns, in boxes and long-necked bottles, in the cotton of cushions, boxes, windows and skylights.⁴⁶²

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*, 92.

Even before he enters the house, he dwells, too, on personal memories of his mother, and of the other women, even if the fleeting nature of memory makes their faces blend together, “just as scenes viewed through the window of an express train are lost.”⁴⁶³

The parallel middle sections of the two narratives also show a split between external observation and interior memories and impression. In the middle part of the top narrative, for example, he encounters the owner of the house, ‘Awfā, who takes him to a room full of women and asks him to read a letter for her addressed to one of the house’s inhabitants, as she is illiterate. The tension between Ibn ‘Awāsha/‘Alī and ‘Awfā soon becomes clear, as the reader learns that Ibn ‘Awāsha is looking for a woman named Dalāl, but that ‘Awfā does not want him to find her.

The “external focalization” of the top narrative, to use Genette’s term, allows the reader to see only the actions of Ibn ‘Awāsha/‘Alī and ‘Awfā, without any sense of their internal motivations.⁴⁶⁴ The result is a series of what Iser calls “blanks” in the text which the reader is prompted to fill in order to make sense of what she is reading.⁴⁶⁵ While the relationship between the two characters is made clearer in the bottom narrative, in which he reminisces about how he came to live at the house and how

⁴⁶³ Ibid., 97.

⁴⁶⁴ Genette, 190.

⁴⁶⁵ Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 191.

‘Awfā gave him the name “Ibn ‘Awāsha,” the bottom narrative in turns introduces new blanks into the text. In place of ‘Alī’s meeting with the women in the room, the bottom narrative presents his memories of Dalāl, who was a “stranger” among the women, and whom he remembers as lonely and imaginative when they both lived in the house:

She was ten years older than me. She wasn’t given the opportunity to smile coquettishly, but she would overcome her loneliness with naïve, childlike imagination and free, instinctive pride...⁴⁶⁶

As a boy, he would watch her talk to the mirror in her room, which she used as a portal for her imagination (“the mirror lets her travel by night toward distant shores covered with tortoises and crabs...”) ⁴⁶⁷, and as a release from unhappy memories, including suggestions of an unhappy marriage (“What is your desire? To forget my birth and my wedding, my happiness and my misery, my staying in one place and my moving around, my love and my subjection.”) ⁴⁶⁸

In the top narrative, ‘Awfā attempts to keep him from finding Dalāl, whom she has locked away overnight in a basement storeroom, although she eventually hands him the key and he stumbles on her in an empty tub in the dark. It is a pathetic scene of reunion, in which he tells her, “I didn’t believe I would find you here. I don’t believe it,”

⁴⁶⁶ *Khuḍayyir, Fī darajat khams wa-arba‘in mi’awī*, 106.

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 106-7.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

after he fetches her food to eat.⁴⁶⁹ The bottom narrative renders ‘Alī and Dalāl’s meeting more cryptically, although ‘Alī’s interior monologue suggests mental illness as an explanation for Dalāl’s isolation (“She only chose this place because she is going through one of her difficult periods”)⁴⁷⁰ Their encounter ends with him asking her what her name is, and listing a long series of women’s names—all of them residents of the house at various points.⁴⁷¹ She replies to his question with cryptic responses (“The serpents of the palm trees alone know”; “The ring-necked doves know my name.”)⁴⁷² In Shujā‘ Muslim al-‘Ānī’s reading of the story, the difference between the two endings is merely an apparent contradiction, and they in fact complete each other. While ‘Alī and Dalāl are capable of communicating externally, their internal communication—a series of names and cryptic answers—is “impossible.”⁴⁷³

Khuḍayyir’s use of a split narrative defamiliarizes the short story for the reader; its paired structure requires an adjustment of the cultural expectation that a single narrative, with a single focalization, will be presented linearly for the reader to absorb. The division in the text means that the reader “cannot help but try and supply the

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., 117.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid., 115.

⁴⁷¹ As Shujā‘ Muslim al-‘Ānī has pointed out, all the names that ‘Alī lists are names associated with lower social classes. Al-‘Ānī, 175.

⁴⁷² Khuḍayyir, *Fī darajat khams wa-arba‘īn mi‘awī*, 116-7.

⁴⁷³ Al-‘Ānī, 175.

missing links” that will knit the two halves together and thus, in Iser’s terms, produce “an integrated gestalt.”⁴⁷⁴ “Manzil al-nisā” also undermines expectations on a thematic level as well. Here, as in “Zahīrat al-qirṭa,” “Al-Mamlaka al-sawdā’,” “Nāfidha ‘alā l-sāḥa,” and “Shajarat al-asmā’,” a male narrator encounters a female domain in which he is relatively powerless or uncertain. The coherent deformations in “Manzil al-nisā” and other stories parallel this loss of male narrative authority, by subverting expectations of a realist, male-centered narrative. The result is an implicit challenge to the claim of socialist realism—then predominant in Iraqi fiction—to be able to communicate a stable external reality. In this sense, then, all these stories illustrate Iser’s idea that literary texts must operate “askew” from predominant literary conventions in order to trigger the reader’s response.⁴⁷⁵

5.4 Defamiliarization of Genre

If, as Northrop Frye argued, the purpose of literary genres is to “clarify... traditions and affinities” for the critic and the reader⁴⁷⁶, then deviation from familiar generic norms, Iser would argue, forces the reader to develop acts of comprehension.⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁷⁴ Iser, *Act of Reading*, 186.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁴⁷⁶ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 247.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 108.

While the use of narrative doubling in early stories such as “Al-Qiṭārāt al-layliyya” and “Manzil al-nisā” can be said to stretch the boundaries of literary convention, those texts remain firmly within the short story genre, and, more broadly, within the category of fiction. However, beginning with the appearance of *Başrayāthā* in 1993, Khuḍayyir’s published texts have been far more likely to transgress boundaries of genre, while confounding or subverting widespread expectations regarding the divide between fiction and nonfiction. Indeed, Khuḍayyir has acknowledged the generic unconventionality of *Başrayāthā* and its position as a turning point in his writing, stating that “I consider *Başrayāthā* a free literary genre that has opened up to me a door for the composition of various genres.”⁴⁷⁸

Like *Başrayāthā*, his more recent book-length works, *Kurrāsāt kānūn* and *Ḥadāʾiq al-wujūh*, are composite texts (*nuṣūṣ jāmiʿa*) constructed of short pieces that alternate between fiction, memoir, literary criticism, and philosophical musings. That is not to say that they are simply disparate short writings collected in one volume. Rather, Khuḍayyir makes it clear that these books are to be considered as aesthetically cohesive wholes, as is evident from his introduction to *Kurrāsāt kānūn* and from his elaborate chapter structure and careful pairing of generically different texts in *Ḥadāʾiq al-wujūh*.

⁴⁷⁸ Khuḍayyir, personal correspondence, 6/19/15.

This section examines how *Kurrāsāt kānūn* and *Ḥadāʾiq al-wujūh* cross and blend genres (although relevant to this topic, *Başrayāthā* will be discussed in the following chapter in light of Stanley Fish’s insights into the “interpretive community” as it applies to the cultural and political conditions that have informed Khudayyir’s more recent writings.) By not adhering fully to dominant literary systems, including a hierarchy of genres that would keep fiction distinct from memoir or essay, *Kurrāsāt kānūn* and *Ḥadāʾiq al-wujūh* compel the reader to construct aesthetic meaning in new ways.

5.4.1 *Kurrāsāt kānūn*

First published in 2001, *Kurrāsāt kānūn*, as has been noted in Chapter Three, was written in response to a Baʿthist government directive that obligated selected Iraqi authors to produce texts commemorating the ten-year anniversary of “Umm al-Maʿārik” (the Mother of All Battles), the government’s term for the 1991 Gulf War. *Kurrāsāt kānūn* was one of twenty books published by a state-run publishing house, Dār al-Shuʿūn al-Thaqāfiyya al-ʿĀmma (Public Cultural Affairs House), as part of this official

commemorative project, in spite of the perennial paper shortage in Iraq that international sanctions caused at the time.⁴⁷⁹

In its published form, *Kurrāsāt kānūn* contains two paratextual elements of note. Paratexts, as defined by Gérard Genette, refers to those elements that accompany a published text and can influence the reader's approach to and interpretation of it. A paratext acts as a "zone between text and off-text." Their threshold status belies their importance, since they represent "a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading" of it.⁴⁸⁰ With *Kurrāsāt kānūn*, the title page—at least on the second printing of the book—refers to it as a "novel" (*riwāya*), which presents expectations in the reader concerning the book—namely that the contents represent an entirely fictional and cohesive text.⁴⁸¹ Likewise, the book opens with an epigraph attributed to the Spanish painter Goya, who also plays a key role in the text itself as it muses on the nature of art, brutality, and the artist's imagination. The epigraph ("When reason sleeps, monsters wake") is a loose rendering of the title of one of Goya's well-known

⁴⁷⁹ ʿAlī ʿAbd al-Amīr, "'Riwāyāt Umm al-maʿārik' tuṭayyih ʿuzlat Muḥammad Khuḍayyir." *Al-Ḥayāt*. Published 4/21/01. Reposted to <http://www.aliabdulameer.com/inp/view.asp?ID=201>, 11/16/09. Accessed 7/5/15.

⁴⁸⁰ Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, translated by Jane E. Lewin. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1.

⁴⁸¹ Muḥammad Khuḍayyir, *Kurrāsāt kānūn* (Amman: Azmina li-l-nashr wa-l-tawzīʿ, 2004), 3.

sketches, titled *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (*El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*).

The text is divided into numbered chapters, each of which offers ruminations on a particular theme. Each numbered chapter is followed by a titled chapter which more consistently falls within the category of fiction. While not quite an example of narrative doubling, this paired structure is similar to the structure of *Ḥadā'iq al-wujūh*. In both books, the arrangement of fiction and essay invites the reader to draw connections between styles of writing generally unlinked, while linking fictional narratives to authorial memories that may have inspired them.

In addition to switching between genres, *Kurrāsāt kānūn* includes changes in narrative voice as well, even within the fiction sections. In Genettian terms, sometimes the voice is homodiegetic, as when the narrator speaks as a man living under air attack in 1991 who has a relationship with a woman named Z and becomes an adoptive father to a blind orphan girl. At other times, such as in a segment in which the artist Goya dreams he is conversing with a rat, the narrator is heterodiegetic. Finally, where the text loses any pretense to fictional narrative, the narrative voice discusses art history and the obligations of artists during times of war. In each case, however, it is difficult

for the reader to determine how closely the narrator's persona overlaps with Khudayyir himself.

What unites the entire text, however, is the source material it alludes to at the beginning, which gives the book its title: the "January notebook," as described by the narrator in the opening section, was a collection of sketches of faces he created during the night of blackouts that followed the air attacks of January, 1991 and which serves as an organizing motif for the text.⁴⁸² The order to produce a book in honor of the "Mother of All Battles" has obliged Khudayyir to revisit his ten-year-old drawings, such that "the time has come for the dreams of the notebook to speak openly about the truths of my texts that have today passed their tenth year."⁴⁸³

The shifts in genre and writing style reflect his characterization of the book as a "Cubist text" (*naşsan tak'ıbiyyan*) in which objects overlap and appear on more than one surface.⁴⁸⁴ Picasso, the most prominent artist to be associated with Cubism in art, is discussed several times in the text, as is his Cubist painting *Guernica*, which, like *Kurrāsat kānūn*, represents an artistic response to the destructive violence of aerial

⁴⁸² Although Khudayyir has not confirmed it, it is probable that he himself kept a notebook of sketches in January, 1991, and that it is not simply a narrative conceit. In that case, the narrator and the author overlap completely in this opening section.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

bombardment and war. In Cubist painting, Khuda'yir explains, "Things appear on more than one surface, and faces are seen from the front and side and back... objects are cubed and life is composite on a single surface."⁴⁸⁵ The book's six numbered chapters correspond to each side of a cube. In Iser's terms, the multiplicity of narrative sides rejects the "apparent immutability" of a fixed narrative perspective, and the reader is thus compelled to assemble the six sides into a single meaning herself.⁴⁸⁶

The text's Cubism causes an overlap in motifs and topics, in which the same event or image is repeated more than once, while also seeming broken or incomplete. Khuda'yir, in his opening chapter, expressly favors incompleteness, declaring his "faith in the endless, fleeting, incomplete form, the shape that seeks its lack."⁴⁸⁷ In Khuda'yir's understanding, Picasso substituted art's pursuit of a visual illusion of three dimensions with a Cubist overlay of surfaces. His aim is to achieve the same effect on the page by collapsing time rather than surfaces:

Writing can realize a Cubist text by abridging past events in the temporal moment of image-making, the moment of memory encompassing details and parts. Narrative writing moves on a surface with no depth, but it always points to an etching of mixed images, surprising evocations, and opened visions.⁴⁸⁸

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid., 22.

⁴⁸⁶ Iser, *Act of Reading*, 82.

⁴⁸⁷ Khuda'yir, *Kurrāsāt kānūn*, 14.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., 23.

The temporal overlap in *Kurrāsāt kānūn* is a familiar theme in Khuḍayyir's later writing, as his city becomes a palimpsest of past cities, real and imagined, as well as an echo of artists' canvases. That is, the narrator dwells on the surface of "a city whose image was copied from the memory of Sumerian cities, constructed of Picasso's cubist imagination or Goya's multi-surfaced dream of reason."⁴⁸⁹

In evoking a Sumerian past that overlaps with other eras, the text introduces in several places the figure of Dudu, a historical figure who around 2400 BCE served as a priest-scribe in the Sumerian kingdom of Lagash.⁴⁹⁰ One chapter, "Dudu's Wagers," evokes the Sumerian scribe as a harbor employee charged with counting steamboats entering Shaṭṭ al-ʿArab in the years between 1914 and 1941.⁴⁹¹ The text then links Dudu more directly to the 1991 war by imagining him communing directly with an American peace activist, Donna Baranski-Walker, who, in late 1990, initiated a movement opposing the U.S.' imminent attack on Iraq, and whose open letter advocating peace was translated into Arabic and delivered to the Iraqi Women's Federation.⁴⁹²

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁹⁰ Roux, *Ancient Iraq*, 138. A black basalt statue of Dudu sits in the Iraq National Museum in Baghdad.

⁴⁹¹ Khuḍayyir, *Kurrāsāt kānūn*, 47ff.

⁴⁹² Donna Baranski-Walker, "Small Lights in the Darkness," *New York Times*, 24 December 1990. Rebuilding Alliance website (<http://www.rebuildingalliance.org/staff/>). Accessed 1/31/16.

As exemplified by the recurring figure of Dudu, this multi-surfaced Cubist text transcends divisions of time and space. Likewise, the theme of visual art embodied in the metaphor of Cubism is reinforced by the text's frequent digressions into discussions on the painters Goya, Picasso, and others. In each case, Khuḍayyir emphasizes works by the painters that demonstrated their response to and rejection of war and violence. The narrator appreciates Picasso's *Guernica* for the brutality of its incomplete, cut-off shapes.⁴⁹³ He also admires Goya's series of lithographs criticizing the French occupation of Spain in 1808, and commends Goya's use of his etchings "to expose aristocratic stupidity and social cruelty and arrogance."⁴⁹⁴ The text's discussion of Jacques Louis David's painting, *The Death of Socrates*, seems to contain an implicit criticism of the book's origins in Ṣaddām Ḥusayn's summons to Khuḍayyir and other authors to write books commemorating the 1991 war: although "the philosopher does not fear death," the image that the painting depicts—of Socrates forced to drink hemlock—evokes the power of the state to impose its will on a moral individual.

While the book addresses themes of war and violence in relation to art and artists, it also speaks more directly in Chapter Two about the nature of the 1991 Gulf

⁴⁹³ Khuḍayyir, *Kurrāsāt kānūn*, 14.

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

War itself, condemning modern, televised warfare embodied by the American-led invasion of Iraq using apocalyptic imagery:

From the waters of the sea appeared a monster with dozens of heads, and crammed between each head were an anti-Christ, whore, mercenary, spy, astrologer, news analyst and TV correspondent, strategic heads from the age of Star Wars.⁴⁹⁵

The tone in this chapter veers between prophetic and philosophical, such as when the narrator (who in this section is particularly hard to distinguish from Khudayyir himself) notes that warplanes encapsulate and combine in one object two opposing human instincts—the millennia-old desire to fly and the urge to kill.⁴⁹⁶

The essay-like sections on the nature of art and the role of the artist contrast with other “surfaces” of the Cubist text, which offer personal, memoir-like glimpses of life in wartime, including the recurring image of a radar listening tower in the narrator’s neighborhood known as Burj al-Khuffāsh (“Bat Tower”) and scenes of human connections among his fellow Iraqis, as they pass fire to each other’s homes at night after their electrical power has gone out, and walk together in the dark streets to survey the destruction of their homes.⁴⁹⁷

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 35.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid., 41.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid., 69.

The book makes a further deformation in customary expectations of genre—or rather, of generic consistency—in later chapters, as the philosophical musings and pronouncements give way to a more clearly fictional narrative, one that includes some elements of magical realism. The setting is still the Iraqi city in wartime, although the narrator interacts with two other characters: a woman known as “Z,” who works as a cook at a girls’ orphanage and who is one of several women who doles out *harīs* porridge to the public at night in the city’s main square. (Presumably, the city’s inhabitants are lining up for food because their electricity is cut.) Z and the narrator seem to be romantically linked, and they also share a quasi-parental concern for an orphaned blind girl who comes to the square for *harīs* every night.

Approaching the blind girl, whom he considers “a ghost of a child,” the narrator offers her food.⁴⁹⁸ The conversation between the narrator and the girl is reminiscent of other cryptic conversations between male and female characters in Khudāyyir’s fiction:

“What’s your name, little girl?”

“I have no name. I am not called anything.”

“Where did you leave your name? Are you hiding your name from me?”

Are you lost?”

“No, I can fly. You are lost.”

...

“Where do you fly?”

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid., 78.

“I fly in your dreams. Can you fly with me?”⁴⁹⁹

Eventually, Z. puts her in a class for blind girls at the orphanage, and Z and the narrator marry. The mysterious blind girl, effectively their adopted daughter, demonstrates her ability to fly by wrapping a rope around the three of them so that Z and the narrator can fly with her. The story veers toward the magical and fantastic as the girl flies them over their ruined city and just outside the city walls, where they land on “Bat Hill” (the site of Bat Tower), which is covered in skulls. Amid the haunted, apocalyptic landscape, there are hints of renewal, as the narrator sees birds returning to their nests on the city walls, even as the dawn light reveals the extent of the carnage around him. The girl disappears, apparently having transformed into a bird, and is never seen again.⁵⁰⁰ In March, Z dies, and the narrator leaves her on the field of skulls outside the city. In a later chapter, presenting another Cubist surface to the text, the narrator reveals that the girl did not disappear, but was in fact evacuated outside the city with the other orphanage girls to “the land of Dudu.”⁵⁰¹

By refusing to limit *Kurrāsāt kānūn* to a single genre, and by writing it as a composite text that compels the reader to confront and absorb different modes of

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., 79.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid., 91-2.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid., 97.

writing, thinking, and narrative, Khudayyir deliberately upends expectations that the book can be read as a straightforward commemoration (let alone glorification) of a war. For a book prompted by a historical event, it is only loosely tied to the events of the Gulf War: aside from references to Donna Baranski-Walker and descriptions of life under bombardment, the text is vague about dates and places: the city is unnamed, and even the place names the text describes (“Cookpot Trivet Square,” “Bat Tower,” “Hill of Skulls”) are informal and cannot be identified with actual places. While the 1991 war makes an appearance, one way or the other, on each “surface” of the text, it is not directly relevant to the ruminations on Goya and Picasso. With those essay-like sections, the text deforms what is familiar, and the reader is prompted to assemble a meaning for the book that takes account of the role of artists and moral individuals when confronted by state power and violence.

5.4.2 *Hadā'iq al-wujūh*

Published in 2008—Khudayyir’s first full-length text since *Kurrāsāt kānūn*—*Hadā'iq al-wujūh* is also a hybrid, genre-crossing text that combines autobiographical vignettes with short stories and essay-like meditations on literary figures. While the short stories and essays in *Hadā'iq al-wujūh* offer a number of themes for analysis, this

section will focus solely on how this composite text deforms genres to prompt responses from the reader. The book's title, *Ḥadā'iq al-wujūh*, comes from a verse in the poem "Amāma Bāb Allāh" ("Before God's Door") by the Iraqi poet Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb, which serves as the epigraph, describing humanity as "stray wanderers... who wander in gardens of faces."⁵⁰² The book opens with a short chapter called "al-Bustānī" ("The Gardener") that envisions the world as a garden in which individual people are, to borrow an image from the Persian poet Rumi, "'half-ripe fruits on the tree of the world,' waiting to grow ripe and be plucked."⁵⁰³ The dominant metaphor of an eternal garden is a space is at once bounded and schematically organized (the opening chapter describes in detail the arrangement of the garden in six sections that surround a seventh section), but at the same time, all-encompassing.⁵⁰⁴

The other predominant image, of "faces," is equally paradoxical: faces are intimately personal and closely identified with the self, but also represent a persona projected onto the world, when the faces are characterized as "masks." Masks represent the personae that writers put on and remove in composing texts, as is

⁵⁰² Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb, *Dīwān Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb* (Beirut: Dār al-ʿAwda, 1971), vol. 1, 135-6.

⁵⁰³ Muḥammad Khudayyir, *Ḥadā'iq al-wujūh: aqni'ā wa-ḥikāyāt* (Damascus: Dār al-Madā, 2008), 7.

⁵⁰⁴ The complex layout of the garden suggests the title of one of Jorge Luis Borges's collections of stories, *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* (*The Garden of Forking Paths*). Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, translated by Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1998), 532.

evidenced in the various essay-like chapter titles (“The Mask of Rabindranath Tagore,” “The Mask of Gabriel Garcia Marquez,” “The Mask of Abū l-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī,” etc.)⁵⁰⁵ As with *Kurrāsāt kānūn*, which was divided into six “Cubist” sections, *Ḥadā’iq al-wujūh* mirrors the geometric pattern of the garden mentioned in the opening chapter by consisting of seven sections. The opening section, called “Ḥadīqat al-A‘mār” (“Garden of Ages of Life”), relates a series of brief autobiographical sketches from different points in Khudāyyir’s life. This central “Garden” is followed by six other “Gardens,” each of which consists of two chapters, pairing an essay on a well-known author with a story that reflects the themes or setting associated with that author.

The opening chapter makes clear that the gardeners in the “garden of the world” represent authors, and Khudāyyir himself admits that for this text “I have put on the masks of six great gardeners,” by adopting themes that resonate with their work in each garden.⁵⁰⁶ Building on ideas expressed in the essays of *al-Ḥikāya al-jadīda*, *Ḥadā’iq al-wujūh* imagines a universal kinship between authors, whose work transcends barriers of language, culture and time. Through the immortality of literature, these authors’

⁵⁰⁵ Khudāyyir, *Ḥadā’iq al-wujūh*, 206.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

masks are “saved from disintegration,” even as “the sap of their bodies... returned to the dust of corruption and death.”⁵⁰⁷

The “Garden of Ages of Life” that follows is distinctly autobiographical, beginning with a section on his earliest memories as an infant in a crib, and continuing through an homage to the aged peasant midwife who birthed him (and many others). Khuḍayyir in these sections refers to himself as “the face,” noting in particular his birth during wartime in 1942, the year of Stefan Zweig’s suicide.⁵⁰⁸ The sections within “Garden of Ages of Life” are chronological, with occasional irruptions from the present: the section called “The Face as a Youth: Bleeding the Loaf of Bread,” for example, offers a fond reminiscence of his schoolmates and his childhood neighborhood, concluding with a stark mention of the destruction wrought on the neighborhood sixty years later by foreign warplanes, in what is clearly a reference to the US-led 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq.⁵⁰⁹

More revealing about Khuḍayyir’s own formation as a thinker and author is the section “Al-Wajh Shābban: mu‘allim al-ṭabī‘a” (“The Face as a Young Man: Teacher of

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid., 10.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid., 21. This aged midwife, Abūliyya, is similar to “Grandmother Turtle” (*al-jidda al-silahfāh*) in his story “Ru’yā kharīf.” In that story, the “Grandmother Turtle” is also an old midwife who takes the narrator as a boy to a village in southern Iraq to keep him safe during the British occupation of Iraq in 1941. Muḥammad Khuḍayyir, *Ru’yā kharīf* (Amman: Mu’assasat ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Shūmān, 1995), 12-14.

⁵⁰⁹ Khuḍayyir, *Ḥadā’iq al-wujūh*, 28.

Nature”), which builds on his experience as a young teacher in a remote village in the marshes. In it, he portrays himself as a young teacher reading the Soviet poet Andrei Gorky in his free time, in keeping with his own stated Communist leanings in that period.⁵¹⁰ The “teacher of nature” of the title refers to a local ferryman who regularly visits him and becomes his tutor in the natural world, offering a kind of elemental wisdom of the river and river life outside of books and sophistication epitomized by Gorky:

The young village teacher discovers a spiritual teacher of nature in the guise of the ragged ferryman... He learned the anthems of hawks from Gorky, but he learned from the Euphrates ferryman Hulayyil the songs of the difficult crossing of the river of drowned souls...⁵¹¹

Although some of the sections within “Garden of the Ages of Life” reach back into the past, such as the entrance of the British General Maude into Baghdad in 1918 and a story about a guard from Zanzibar who worked under the supervision of Khuḍayyir’s father for Hills Brothers Company, they are all grounded in Khuḍayyir’s own life and family.

⁵¹⁰ Muḥammad Khuḍayyir. “al-Washm al-Baghdādī... ilā ‘Abd al-Malik Nūrī.” *As-Safir*, 6 August 2012. <http://assafir.com/Article/277945/Archive>. Accessed 6/25/15.

⁵¹¹ Khuḍayyir, *Ḥadā’iq al-wujūh*, 31.

The six following “Gardens,” while also using elements of Khuḍayyir’s personal life, partake far more of the fiction and essay genres. Within the “Garden of Silence” section, for example, the first of the paired chapters is “The Mask of Rabindranath Tagore,” in which Khuḍayyir discusses contemporary architects who have built buildings with silence and contemplation in mind. He then links the theme of silence to Tagore and his writings on mysticism and meditation. He concludes the chapter by mentioning Tagore’s visit to Iran and Iraq in 1932, and describes a photo of the Iraqi poet Jamīl Ṣidqī al-Zahāwī (1863-1936) meeting Tagore in a train station.⁵¹² The chapter as a whole is a tribute to a literary figure whose work and concerns are seen as universal.

The second chapter, “al-Burānī” (“The Purānī”), is the short story counterpart to the preceding essay. It is set at the Indian consulate in Basra, in which the narrator—an Iraqi secondary school student—begins attending sessions on meditation on a houseboat led by an employee of the consulate. The story is filled with references to the Sanskrit epic poem, the *Ramayana*, and to other Hindu myths. The young Indian woman who pushes a stroller along the river, for example, is compared to Sita, a major female

⁵¹² For more on al-Zahāwī, see S. Somekh, “The Neo-classical Arabic Poets,” in *Modern Arabic Literature (The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature)*, edited by M.M. Badawi (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 49.

character in the *Ramayana* and the wife of the god Rama.⁵¹³ The adolescent narrator himself is given the nickname “purānī,” a term meaning a storyteller versed in the ancient genre of Indian text known as “purāna,” which dealt with legends and stories about Indian gods and their relations with humanity.⁵¹⁴ With its numerous references to Indian legend and to Tagore’s own major work of poetry, *Gitanjali*, “The Purānī” evokes Tagore’s own concerns and preoccupations, while placing the Indian characters and motifs in a Basran setting.

To take one other example, the section “Garden of the World” is similarly divided into an essay and a short story, linked by a single author. The essay, “The Mask of Jorge Luis Borges,” recounts Khudayyir’s encounters with Borges on the page and in his imagination, in which he dreams of conversing with Borges in English about Indian classical music, the structure of the short story, and humanity.⁵¹⁵ The following story, “Rumūz al-liṣṣ” (“Symbols of the Thief”), is set in the marshes of southern Iraq, in which the narrator (a teacher, like the young Khudayyir himself) is visited by a professional thief from a nearby village. The thief has come to ask the teacher about

⁵¹³ Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 107-9.

⁵¹⁴ Ainslie T. Embree, ed., *Sources of Indian Tradition, Volume One: From the Beginning to 1800*, 2nd edition (New York: Columbia, 1988), 276, 320.

⁵¹⁵ Khudayyir mentions that he read his first Borges story in Arabic translation in 1979 and that he has continued to expand his collection of books by Borges in his library since then. *Ḥadāʾiq al-wujūh*, 117.

the meaning of a repeated dream he has had, about a bird holding a snake in its beak, while the snake resembles a gold anklet. The dream turns out to be a harbinger of the thief's death by snakebite the next day—the revenge of a woman whose anklet he stole forty years previously. The implication is that she has supernaturally turned herself into a snake. The story conveys a flavor of Borges's stories, which often feature surprising revenge and can be heavily symbolic.

Both of these “Gardens”—linked to Rabindranath Tagore and Jorge Luis Borges, respectively—encapsulate how *Ḥadāʾiq al-wujūh* deforms the genres of fiction, essay, and autobiography by joining them into one text. As with *Kurrāsāt kānūn*, *Ḥadāʾiq al-wujūh* upends accepted distinctions between genres of writing, fulfilling Iser's observation that a literary text will not entirely adhere to a conventional literary system. Rather than reproducing that system, a text “almost invariably tends to take as its dominant ‘meaning’ those possibilities that have been neutralized or negated by that system.”⁵¹⁶

Iser's oppositional stance towards dominant systems of language and culture is reflected in Khudayyir's insistence on reorganizing the generic divisions within literature, which would keep personal memories and essays separate and distinct from

⁵¹⁶ Iser, *Act of Reading*, 72.

fiction. Instead, by combining autobiographical vignettes with fiction, and stories set in Basra with the work and personality of international authors, *Khuḍayyir* is deliberately inscribing the local and the personal into world literature. In Iser's terms, *Khuḍayyir* takes the repertoire of genre—a set of conventions assigning meaning and hierarchies to different kinds of writing—and deploys the strategy of reorganizing them. (See Section 1.7.2 above.) The context for such an oppositional stance in *Ḥadā'iq al-wujūh* is not difficult to discern: written by a citizen of a country that was isolated internationally during a decade of sanctions, followed by years of occupation and war, the text takes a refractory stance towards a dominant literary system that would marginalize an Iraqi author, and instead asserts a literary kinship with authors—Gibran Khalil Gibran, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Arabic-language authors on love, both human and divine—whose appeal is frequently deemed to transcend culture, language, and political circumstance.

5.5 Conclusion

The five stories and two book-length texts addressed in this chapter exemplify Iser's notion of texts as “a network of response-inviting structures” that prompt

meaning-making in the reader.⁵¹⁷ In the dialectical relationship that Iser posited between text and reader, the places of indeterminacy (i.e., “gaps”) and coherent deformations in the text serve to destabilize the expectations that readers bring to it, while defamiliarizing linguistic and cultural conventions. In some cases, Khuḍayyir’s fiction defamiliarizes the conventional through the use of magical realism and the irruption of the supernatural into the human or natural world. At other times, the use of narrative doubling (both in the metafictional technique of “al-Qiṭārāt al-layliyya” and in the story structure itself of “Manzil al-nisā”) also serves to subvert conventional expectations of narrative, while emphasizing to readers the constructed nature of fiction. And finally, the mingling of normally separate genres within a text as a whole—something evidenced not only in the two books discussed in this chapter, but also in *Başrayāthā* itself—places existing aesthetic norms in “a state of suspended validity.”⁵¹⁸ For *Kurrāsāt kānūn*, its composite structure as a six-sided Cubist text (*naṣṣ tak‘ībī*) subverts the expectation of a fictional commemoration of war as a single, straightforward narrative. Likewise, *Ḥadā’iq al-wujūh* juxtaposes different genres of writing to prompt the reader to draw connections between the local and the universal, that is, between Iraqi writing and a global “republic of letters.” The effect of each of

⁵¹⁷ Iser, *Act of Reading*, 34.

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

these deformations is to subvert the horizon of expectations and to ensure that meaning is generated through the interaction of reader and text.

Chapter 6: Khuḍayyir's Interpretive Community

6.1 Introduction

Stanley Fish has defined an interpretive community as a set of agreed-upon practices and conventions among readers that determines how a text is read, and which informs the meanings produced by a reader within that community. An interpretive community shares similar interpretive strategies for “constituting the properties of texts”: that is, readers are in fact the “writers” of the texts they interpret.⁵¹⁹ Without attributing meaning to authorial intention, Fish’s notion of the interpretive community allows for a less unidirectional view of meaning-making: an “utterer” gives readers “the opportunity to make meanings (and texts) by inviting them to put into execution a set of strategies.”⁵²⁰ As discussed previously in Section 1.8.5, “Interpretive Communities,” a text is an “invitation” to which certain communities of readers, who already possess those interpretive strategies, will be receptive.⁵²¹

⁵¹⁹ Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, 14.

⁵²⁰ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁵²¹ *Ibid.*, 173.

Fish's notion of the interpretive community is particularly applicable to the fiction that Khudayyir has written since the 1991 Gulf War, which features a group of recurring themes and concerns. Among those themes are a focus on place and memory, driven by a sense of an organic past forgotten or deliberately obliterated in favor of the new. Some of his stories take a more positive view of renewal, and suggest the durability of links to the past. Other stories are notable for a claustrophobic sense of menace and the need for secrecy in the face of ruthless state power. Iraq's recent history, featuring decades-long authoritarian rule, wars, international sanctions, violence, and instability, should be considered as contextual background for these texts. In all cases, the texts considered in this chapter are directed to and evoke an interpretive community that is attuned to these concerns and produces meaning accordingly.

Approaching these post-Gulf War texts with an understanding that they reflect a particular historical context incorporates the insights of New Historicist scholarship, which foregrounds the relationships between texts and the historical, cultural context in which they are embedded.⁵²² New Historicism eschews a totalizing view of history, in which a text merely replicates a monolithic cultural and historical reality; instead, texts

⁵²² H. Aram Veenser, "Introduction," in *The New Historicism*, edited by H. Aram Veenser (New York, London: Routledge, 1989), xii.

are, in Stephen Greenblatt's words, "the product of a negotiation between a creator... equipped with a complex, communally-shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society."⁵²³ Greenblatt's view—and New Historicism, more broadly—differs greatly from reader response theory in placing emphasis on the author rather than on the text and reader. But where the two critical approaches share similarities is the notion of a broadly-shared set of conventions and concepts—for Fish, the interpretive community, and for New Historicists, the "communally-shared repertoire of conventions"—that acts as the engine that creates meaning.

This chapter will begin by examining the metaphor of the city, both historical and imagined, which plays a central role in much of *Khuḍayyir's* later fiction. In these texts, the city—whether identified as Basra, Baṣūra, or Baṣrayāthā—serves as a model for an interpretive community, as a locus of memory and meaning around which *Khuḍayyir's* fiction revolves. In addition to being located in a place (the city), the interpretive community evoked in his fiction is also rooted in a local past; section 6.3 in this chapter examines three stories—"Ru'yā al-burj," "Ḥikāyāt Yūsuf," and "al-Ḥukamā' al-thalātha"—that evoke histories—mythological and contemporary, Iraqi and local—that have been forgotten or are otherwise concealed from view. Section 6.4 examines a

⁵²³ Stephen Greenblatt, "Towards a Poetics of Culture," in *The New Historicism*, edited by H. Aram Veenser (New York, London: Routledge, 1989), 12.

story that readers familiar with Iraq's recent history will understand as a reflection of an Iraqi experience of fear and paranoia (“*Ṣaḥīfat al-tasāʿulāt*”). Finally, section 6.5 addresses Khuḍayyir's full-length text, *Baṣrayāthā: Ṣūrat madīna*, examining it as a text that invites the reader to participate in an interpretive community that will provide meaning to its fragmented, composite structure.

6.2 The City as Interpretive Community

Cities occupy a central position in Khuḍayyir's post-1991 writings, particularly in his two major works of fiction published in the 1990s: his “portrait of a city,” *Baṣrayāthā: Ṣūrat madīna* (*Baṣrayāthā: Portrait of a City*, 1993), and his third short story collection, *Ruʿyā kharīf* (*Autumn Vision*, 1995). In these texts, cities symbolize the interpretive community which Khuḍayyir's fiction imagines. As Henri Lefebvre has elucidated in his work on the meaning of space (both physical and mental), cities are shaped by social activities embedded in history.⁵²⁴ They are the organizing metaphor for the social world of his fiction, a site of both historical memory and forgetting.⁵²⁵ In his

⁵²⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 73.

⁵²⁵ Khuḍayyir's affinities with the European modernist tradition of Borges and Calvino brings to mind Calvino's 1972 novel *Invisible Cities*, which also employs cities as a central motif. Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (Orlando: Harcourt, 1978.)

collection of essays on literature, *al-Ḥikāya al-jadīda*, which was published the same year as *Ruʿyā kharīf* and thus reflects his contemporaneous thinking on the nature of literature, authors, and readers, Khudaḡyir defines the close relationship between cities and a collective imagination:

Why does a shared imaginary city appear to everyone? Because the roots of the dream are one: the desert surrounded by walls, the domes, the tunes pouring from towers, the earth and forests and clouds, contents radiating among the dreamers, symbols without borders, realizations driven by the winds from one imaginative region to another.⁵²⁶

Although Khudaḡyir in his essays and interviews frequently portrays authors as high priests of the imagination, or as kindred souls in communion with other writers (as masked gardeners in the “khan of the world,” as in *Ḥadāʿiq al-wujūh*, or as “galaxies” that exert a gravitational pull on other authors⁵²⁷), the connection he describes here is mutual: a writer may envision a city, but that writer’s vision only takes hold if that imagined city—a repository of memory and symbols—is shared by others.

Khudaḡyir’s introduction to *Ruʿyā kharīf* makes clear that all the stories in the collections are “of a piece,” since for all of them, the imagined city of Baṣrayāthā is their “nurse” and “home country.”⁵²⁸ In his contribution to *al-Makān al-ʿIrāqī*, a 2009

⁵²⁶ Khudaḡyir, *al-Ḥikāya al-jadīda*, 54.

⁵²⁷ Khudaḡyir, *al-Ḥikāya al-jadīda*, 57.

⁵²⁸ Khudaḡyir, *Ruʿyā kharīf* (Amman: Muʿassasat ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd Shūmān, 1995), 9.

collection of essays by Iraqi writers on place, focusing on specific Iraqi sites and cities, Khuḍayyir refers to Basra's imagined counterpart as Bāṣūra, which represents an ur-city on which newer incarnations are layered, with the contemporary city of Basra being the most recent.⁵²⁹ In *Baṣrayāthā*, he describes the imagined city as a “heterotopia,” borrowing Michel Foucault's term for a real place that acts as “a kind of effectively enacted utopia” in which real sites are represented and inverted. The heterotopia is distinct from a nonexistent utopia, but instead reflects reality like a mirror, simultaneously existing and virtual.⁵³⁰ The heterotopia of Baṣrayāthā, then, offers “paths to the real Iraqi place,” in the same way that al-Farābī's *al-madīna al-fāḍila* (“the Virtuous City”) contained elements of actual cities.⁵³¹

Khuḍayyir's choice to evoke an interpretive community for his fiction in the form of a city—one that preserves all of its pasts and which represents a “counter-site” for real Iraqi cities—dovetails with a trend in literary criticism to focus on the use and meaning of space in fiction. Sometimes referred to as a “spatial turn” in literary studies, this emphasis on space is particularly applicable to postcolonial fiction.⁵³²

⁵²⁹ Muḥammad Khuḍayyir, “Bāṣūra,” in *Al-Makān al-‘irāqī: jadal al-kitāba wa-l-tajriba*, edited by Luʿayy Ḥamza ‘Abbās (Beirut: Maʿhad Dirāsāt ‘Irāqīyya, 2009), 125.

⁵³⁰ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 24.

⁵³¹ Khuḍayyir, *Baṣrayāthā*, 17.

⁵³² Sara Upstone, *Spatial Politics in the Postcolonial Novel* (Farnham, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 2. Henri Lefebvre's studies on space paved the way for this more recent spatial turn. For an overview of his work on space as a socially constructed product, see Henri Lefebvre, “Preface to the New Edition [of

Governments—both colonial and postcolonial—view space as a site of power and of imagination, and thus they seek to “overwrite” its meaning with new representations.⁵³³ Thus, the imagined city of Baṣrayāthā becomes a form of resistance to a monologic, authoritarian discourse, and instead “reclaims a diversity of heterogeneous voices and experiences,”⁵³⁴ even as it evokes a community of readers that will imbue it with meaning.

6.3 Reclaiming Memory for the Interpretive Community

Khuḍayyir’s recent fiction frequently features an Iraqi past that is both organic and stubbornly enduring: in that sense, the interpretive community that responds to his fiction is one that would find meaning in a text presenting local histories that have either been neglected or obliterated by war and by the power of the state, which includes the power to refashion public spaces and manipulate public memory.

In response to this force for forgetting, Khuḍayyir’s fiction limns what has been lost from Iraqi life, while leaving the reader to reclaim it from oblivion. Earlier in his career, Khuḍayyir demonstrated a thematic interest in Iraq’s 19th- and early 20th-

The Production of Space,” trans. Imogen Foster, in Henry Lefebvre, *Key Writings*, ed. Stuart Elden, Elizabeth Lebas, and Eleonore Kofman (New York: Continuum, 2003), 206-13.

⁵³³ Upstone, 6.

⁵³⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

century past, particularly with two stories published in *Fī darajat khams wa-arbaʿīn miʿawī*: “Iḥtidār al-rassām” (“Death of the Artist”), in which the titular artist imagines himself in Baghdad in 1831, while the story begins with his experiences in World War I, and “Sāʿāt ka-l-khuyūl” (“Clocks Like Horses”), in which an old clock-repairman reminisces on his seafaring days and the cosmopolitan milieu of the Indian Ocean trade.⁵³⁵ More recently, his fiction has dwelled on Sumerian and Babylonian history and mythology, particularly in stories like “al-Ḥukamāʾ al-thalātha” (“The Three Wise Men”) and “Ṣaḥīfat al-tasāʾulāt” (“Page of Questions,”) as well as in *Kurrāsāt kānūn*, in which the scribal figure of Dudu plays a recurring role.

The reassertion of historical memory expressed in his post-1991 fiction is not simply an exercise in nostalgia, but must be viewed in the context of the Baʿthist regime’s own hegemonic state project aimed at controlling Iraqi historical memory, an undertaking known as *Mashrūʿ li-iʿādat kitābat al-tārīkh* (The Project for Rewriting History). In this light, as discussed in Chapter Two, Khuḍayyir’s fictional project on an Iraqi past falls within the tradition of Iraqi intellectuals and writers taking a counterhegemonic stance in opposition to the state.⁵³⁶

⁵³⁵ Khuḍayyir, *Fī darajat khams wa-arbaʿīn miʿawī*, 55-68.

⁵³⁶ Yasmeeen Hanoosh, “Contempt: State Literati vs. Street Literati in Modern Iraq,” in *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43 (2012), 376.

6.3.1 “Ru’yā al-burj”

Published in his 1995 collection *Ru’yā kharīf*, “Ru’yā al-burj” (“Vision of the Tower”), is set in Baṣrayāthā thirty years after an unnamed, but destructive, war: for readers familiar with Basra’s contemporary history, the obvious analogy is to the destruction that Basra had recently suffered in the Iran-Iraq War. In the story, after “the river was purified and the air cleansed of the odors of decomposing corpses,” the inhabitants pooled their money to construct a large tower in the center of the city, topped by a glass dome enclosing a gold statue.⁵³⁷ As elsewhere in Khuḍayyir’s fiction, architecture plays a prominent symbolic role: or rather, the story’s themes are embodied in a narrated physical space. In this case, this massive tower serves as an emblem of Baṣrayāthā’s rebuilding and renewal, and the gleam of its golden statue can be seen throughout the city. The tower itself is set in a wide plaza, out of which radiate new, straight streets in all directions, while looking over new residential blocks.⁵³⁸

⁵³⁷ Khuḍayyir, *Ru’yā kharīf*, 29.

⁵³⁸ The description of the tower—including the complex, geometric stacking of levels, each of a progressively shorter height—and the new layout of surrounding streets suggest some real-world analogues, including Baron Haussmann’s modernization of streets and public squares in 19th-century Paris, as well as ancient structures such as the Lighthouse of Alexandria and the Colossus of Rhodes. The golden statue also bears a resemblance to the ninety-nine commemorative statues in the shape of Iraqi military officers that the Ba’thist government built along Basra’s waterfront in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War, each of which pointed accusingly across the Shaṭṭ al-‘Arab towards Iran.

But the renewal of the city that the tower symbolizes has a dark edge, as it is also a tool of forgetting. The narrator points out that, while the city's inhabitants devoted efforts to rebuilding public sites such as the airport, the harbor, public parks, and the printing house, they ignored the cemetery, while consigning parts of language itself to oblivion:

What is the cemetery really? It's something effaced in the series of designations that their tongues abandoned, such as *dictionary, restaurant, brothel, hotel, guard, hammer*, and other words that died out during the days they worked on building the tower. The tower's stories devoured lore, words, and familiar qualities.⁵³⁹

The tower also represents a puzzle to Baṣrayāthā's inhabitants. As was discussed in Section 1.8.4, we, as readers, bring to the text interpretive decisions that predispose us to see themes and relationships that we find meaningful. In this story, a reader familiar with the literary tradition of quest narratives soon understands that the narrator, Idrīs ibn Sīnā, is the protagonist of a quest to solve the tower's puzzle. Readers familiar with Arabic and Islamic heritage will recognize in the protagonist's name the Qur'anic prophet Idrīs, associated with mysticism and wisdom⁵⁴⁰, and the 5th/11th-century physician and polymath Ibn Sīnā. Both names suggest a character who

⁵³⁹ Khuḍayyir, *Ru'yā Kharīf*, 30.

⁵⁴⁰ Sūrat Maryam Q 19:56-57 and Sūrat al-Anbiyā' Q 21:85.

combines mystical insight with scientific curiosity and learning. At certain times of day, writing appears briefly on the tower, when the sun hits metal strips on the building at the right moment. Even this ephemeral writing, however, is an enigma, since the language is Akkadian, which the inhabitants no longer understand. The tower itself is also a labyrinth, with a set of levels underground that exactly mirror the levels above ground: that is, the tower is as deep as it is high, with a network of rooms that decrease geometrically with each subterranean level, starting from 1024 rooms in the first basement and ending with four rooms at the deepest level, five floors below ground. The tower's labyrinth is a physical representation of memory, as the narrator must thread his way through its underground chambers in order to access the secrets locked away at the top. As with so much of Jorge Luis Borges' fiction, this story employs the motif of the labyrinth (*al-matāha*), which comes to symbolize the complexities of memory. Time is "spatialized" in this story—that is, embodied as a physical, subterranean space, rather than enacted (or re-enacted) as narrative.⁵⁴¹

⁵⁴¹ Suzanne Nalbantian, *Memory in Literature: From Rousseau to Neuroscience*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan (2003), 117. Nalbantian finds this "spatialization of time" not only in Borges's fiction—particularly in stories such as "The Library of Babel" and "The Circular Ruins"—but in the writings of his contemporaries Octavio Paz and Anaïs Nin. In Nalbantian's terms, all three modernists—and Khudayyir can be counted among this group—follow a "Lacanian approach" to memory, as it is enacted on the level of the signifier (the metaphor of the labyrinth) rather than as a perceived or hidden experience in their fiction.

The narrator, Idrīs ibn Sīnā, reveals that he is the last surviving architect of the ten who built the tower thirty years before. None of the ten knew all the secrets of the tower, although Idrīs recalls that the architectural blueprints are locked up inside a hidden room near the top: the key that can unlock the secrets of the tower, in other words, is itself locked away. The only one of Idrīs's fellow architects who knew how to access the elevator to reach the statue died by a fall from the fifth floor. Idrīs hints that he may have been pushed, suggesting to readers a more foreboding background to the bright new beginnings that the tower supposedly represents.

Determined to locate the blueprints, Idrīs enters the subterranean labyrinth as a way to the top, and spends months making frustrated attempts, which end with “blindness, confusion, and forgetting.”⁵⁴² Time is experienced differently in the labyrinth, like a descent into the Freudian subconscious: upon entering, Idrīs feels himself “cut off completely from slow earthly time, on the threshold of the interior reflected in the depth of the earth and in its passageways that were opened up in my memory a long time ago.”⁵⁴³ Likewise, his descent is accompanied by “a fragrance of field flowers, awakened by a shift in times.”⁵⁴⁴ For an interpretive community attuned

⁵⁴² *Khuḍayyir, Ru'ya Kharif*, 38.

⁵⁴³ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

to an Iraqi context, Idrīs's descent into an underworld on a quest for an elusive prize, suggests an echo of Gilgamesh's quest for the plant of eternal life in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, in which he descends to the bottom of the ocean to bring the elusive magical plant to the surface.⁵⁴⁵

The story relies on an interpretive community that finds resonance in ancient Sumerian and Babylonian myth and legend as a crucial part of an “imagined community” of Iraqis. While Khuḍayyir's aim is counterhegemonic, it benefits from the Ba'ṯhist state's deliberate emphasis on an unbroken Mesopotamian heritage—one specifically linking the political legitimacy of ancient Mesopotamian rulers with the personage of Ṣaddām Ḥusayn.⁵⁴⁶ Elsewhere the tower is deliberately linked to a Mesopotamian heritage, not only in the analogy to Gilgamesh's quest and the Akkadian writing that appears on the exterior walls, but in the form of the tower itself, which was “designed on the basis of the Mesopotamian sexagesimal system.”⁵⁴⁷ In his dreamlike descent, he encounters both ancient writing and an ancient goddess, both of which guide him to the elevator that brings him to the top of the tower. In one cell underground, he sees raised shapes on the floor, from which he can make out the

⁵⁴⁵ Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 207.

⁵⁴⁶ Tripp, 217.

⁵⁴⁷ Khuḍayyir, *Ru'yā Kharīf*, 39.

Babylonian expression “E-temen-anki,” which was the name of a ziggurat from Babylon in the 6th century BCE. Like the tower in “Ru’yā al-burj,” E-temen-anki was a “giant tower made up of multiple stories like a stepped pyramid,” and may have been the historical inspiration for the biblical Tower of Babel.⁵⁴⁸ In the same cell, a woman appears out of a vision and reveals herself to be an eternal goddess who has married multiple men across the millennia of Iraqi history, including the narrator himself, although she reminds him that he has forgotten his own previous lives (“You gave up all your many past names”).⁵⁴⁹ Among her many roles, she is a *shā’iltū*, the Sumerian word for a priest or priestess who interpreted dreams.⁵⁵⁰ His foray into the labyrinth of memory is a dream-like quest for which the *shā’iltū* provides answers.⁵⁵¹

The mythological, magical elements of the story blend seamlessly, as an eight-pointed star on the floor guides him to the labyrinth’s elevator, and the *shā’iltū*’s ring has engraved on it the series of numbers for the elevator’s access code. His return to the upper world brings new life to Idrīs: “I became free and strong like a bull, flooded with a real joy I hadn’t tasted since I finished working in the tower.”⁵⁵² He ascends to

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid., 42-3. I.L. Finkel and M.J. Seymour, editors, *Babylon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 55. See also Michael Seymour, *Babylon: Legend, History and the Ancient City* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 194.

⁵⁴⁹ Khudayyir, *Ru’yā Kharif*, 46.

⁵⁵⁰ Deirdre Barrett and Patrick McNamara, editors, *Encyclopedia of Sleep and Dreams: The Evolution, Function, Nature, and Mysteries of Slumber, Volume One* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2012), 748-9.

⁵⁵¹ Khudayyir, *Ru’yā Kharif*, 46.

⁵⁵² Ibid., 47.

the tower's map room, where the blueprints remain as they had been left thirty years before. Using the blueprints, he is able to access the dome where the golden statue is found.

Idrīs's access to the statue is at once disillusioning and comforting. The secret of the statue is emptiness, as he can see that its two golden hands "are enclosing something that is not there, that could not ever be found. They are protecting a kernel of emptiness..." At the same time, when he touches the hands of the statue—sealed away from public access for three decades—he can feel "the flesh of existence, the touch of eternity... the hidden circulation of life under the golden skin."⁵⁵³ The sense of expectation that is produced in the reader (and which is deflated at the end) is, as Fish argues, a necessary part of the reading experience, an "inappropriate strategy" that we later adjust after we reach the story's end.⁵⁵⁴ Likewise, for an interpretive community attuned to themes of destruction and renewal—and in particular, familiar with ancient Mesopotamian mythological motifs and the destructiveness of the Iran-Iraq War—the story suggests the possibility of an organic past that can be reclaimed and reencountered in spite of forces that seek to block all memory of it.

⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁵⁵⁴ Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, 48.

6.3.2 “Ḥikāyāt Yūsuf”

Of all the stories in *Ruʿyā kharīf*, “Ḥikāyāt Yūsuf” (“Yūsuf’s Tales”) takes the most unproblematic view of the relationship between Iraq’s past and its renewal in the present. It shares many of the same motifs as “Ruʿyā al-burj”: in each, time and memory are spatialized as a multi-level building that contains a secretly accessed room. But where “Ruʿyā al-burj” focused on a deliberate concealment of the past, in which the narrator must puzzle through an enigma to rediscover it, “Ḥikāyāt Yūsuf” suggests a less sinister relationship between the past and present.

Here, too, the setting is a city (presumably Baṣrayāthā) that has recently been reconstructed after a war. The setting is an enormous printing and publishing house, twelve stories high, built on a large plot of land overlooking the river. The massive, gleaming new building—the highest building in the city—houses a busy collection of authors, copyists, and printers devoted to their work.⁵⁵⁵ The elaborate printing house is an idealized image of a project of making knowledge and literature universal, a kind of anti-Babel. Whereas the tower with the statue is opaque and labyrinthine, the printing press features enormous glass walls and floors, so that nothing is concealed from sight.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid., 51.

Contextually, Khudayyir's readers may see in this vision an imagined counterpoint to the oppressive conditions under which Iraqi authors and intellectuals labored under the Ba'athist regime. This story envisions a bright transparency (embodied by the glass floors) in the production of culture, with abundant resources for literature, in contrast with a more sinister reality of the state's censorship, persecution, and co-optation of intellectuals, as well as the shortage of publication materials caused by international sanctions.

The narrator of the story enters this palace of literary culture in search of "Yūsuf the Printer," who has promised to share with the narrator a secret he has locked in a room in the printing house.⁵⁵⁶ Yūsuf is a kindly, older man who is in charge of the entire printing house, although the narrator has to make his way through the entire building to find him.

The narrator ascends in a glass elevator through twelve floors—passing warehouse workers, printing presses, and floors housing proofreaders, calligraphers, designers and illustrators on the way up. The four top floors include "authors, copyists, editors, translators, and manuscript researchers," who stay at the printing house to finish their work before being rotated out so others can take their place.⁵⁵⁷ Among the

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁵⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

inhabitants of the top floors are a fifteen year-old female poet and a translator reciting sayings by Rabindranath Tagore. The narrator also mentions other distinguished inhabitants of the top floor, who are real poets and authors, although the story cryptically gives only the initials of their first names: they include the author Muḥammad ʿĪsā al-Ṣaqr (1930-2006) and the poet and educator Muḥammad Jawād Jalāl (1901-1983).⁵⁵⁸ And the narrator himself, as he tells the reader, is a writer as well, who is permitted to stay at the printing house while he finishes his novel, *The Last Portrait of Khumawarayh*.

Yūsuf himself is a benevolent overseer of the printing house: he not only offers the narrator more time to revise his novel, but he embodies a Borges-like vision of literary infinity, as his sparkling eyes resemble “an enormous printing press, where thousands of machines run day and night, printing one book composed of continuous parts.” Yūsuf’s own story as a printer and author is less happy: he had once owned a press before the war, which had to be closed when the city was being heavily bombed, just as his own autobiography was about to be printed. When the narrator finally meets him on the twelfth floor, Yūsuf takes him down in the elevator to the basement level, and unlocks a room containing an old, small, manual printing press, telling the

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid., 53. “Muḥammad Jawād Jalāl,” http://www.almoajam.org/poet_details.php?id=6271. Accessed 3/13/16.

narrator, “ ‘This is my secret, my friend...The treasure of the house.’”⁵⁵⁹ The printing press was originally used by the Ottoman authorities to print the first issue of the newspaper *al-Nafīr*, and was then used by British occupiers and Iraqi revolutionaries. Yūsuf bought and restored it, and then kept it safe at his own home during the war. As a symbol of a living Iraqi past, the printing machine seems to give off “a mysterious current” that evokes for the narrator a much older and richer literary heritage:

The pounding of my heart grew as if I were touching with my fingers ancient folios in a volume, bound in deer hide, of *Kalīla wa-Dimna* or *Alf Layla wa-Layla* or the *Qānūn* of Ibn Sīnā or the *Commandments of Aḥīqār the Wise*.⁵⁶⁰

As with the secret of the golden statue’s hands at the end of “Ru’yā al-burj,” the reader, along with the narrator, uncovers at the end of the story something that is otherwise hidden or inaccessible. The story has its effect on us, as readers, because we are part of an interpretive community familiar with narratives (such as riddles) that rely on a revelation at the end. Rescued from destruction and oblivion, the printer symbolizes a past that provides an organic core of meaning to what is new. The printing of books that the machine represents provides an immortality that individuals themselves do not possess. Yūsuf himself has written a collection of tales, which he is

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid., 56.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid., 57.

slowly printing by hand on the ancient printer. As he points out, if you want to publish a great book, you must print it by hand yourself, and only need to print a few books (“Ten copies are sufficient to immortalize your name for ten centuries.”)⁵⁶¹ Looking over Yūsuf’s shoulder, the narrator is able to read a story from his book about a giant mirror set on a hill near a city that reflects that city’s past, present, and (in a fleeting glimpse) future. Yūsuf’s “The Mirror of Turdin”—a tale within a tale—reflects the same preoccupation with time and the unrecognizable transformations it brings to a city.

For a community of readers aware of the difficult circumstances in which authors and poets wrote in Iraq, the fantasy of a glass-walled palace devoted to writing and printing resonates as an idealized vision of the future: like the brief, marvelous glimpse of Turdin’s future, which only one fortunate shepherd happened to lay eyes on, “Ḥikāyāt Yūsuf” presents a possible future Baṣrayāthā, in which the brilliance of the new is undergirded by a careful preservation of the past, concretized here by the Ottoman-era printing machine.

⁵⁶¹ Ibid., 57.

6.3.3 “al-Ḥukamā’ al-thalātha”

Unlike “Ru’yā al-burj” and “Ḥikāyāt Yūsuf,” which are both set in a distant future after a destructive war, “al-Ḥukamā’ al-thalātha” (“The Three Wise Men”) is a magical realist tale set in Baṣrayāthā during wartime, when the city is not far from the front and is teeming with refugees and family members looking for their sons who have gone missing in action. An interpretive community will interpret this text by bringing to it “a bundle of interests, of particular purposes and goals,” as was discussed in Section 1.8.5⁵⁶²: for many of Khuḍayyir’s readers, that would include a familiarity with Mesopotamian mythology, and the ability to produce, via interpretive acts, the “formal units” in the text that mark it as magical realism.

Khuḍayyir gives March, 1986 as its date of composition, which makes it one of the earliest of the stories later collected and published in *Ru’yā kharīf*. In the story, the reader learns that for the past two weeks a battle has been going on eighty kilometers away at the mouth of the Gulf. The story may be referring to the real-life capture of the al-Faw peninsula by Iranian forces early in 1986, around the time the story was written.⁵⁶³ The story’s titular three wise men are spectral, angelic figures who appear in Baṣrayāthā unnoticed during the chaos of war (“amid the clamor and sirens of speeding

⁵⁶² Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, 14.

⁵⁶³ Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, 3rd edition (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2011), 186.

ambulances and rousing anthems.”)⁵⁶⁴ They are messengers from the pagan gods of Ashur, sent to study the battle-front. Their leader is Atrāḥāsīs (“Exceedingly Wise”), who was also the protagonist of an Akkadian-language epic from 1700 BCE, which recounts a version of the flood myth in which Atrāḥāsīs is spared the gods’ destruction of humanity.⁵⁶⁵

While evoking ancient Mesopotamian mythology and history, “al-Ḥukamā’ al-thalātha” presents Baṣrayāthā as a palimpsest, where the ghosts of historical and literary figures from Basran history interact across chronological periods. Specifically, the three wise men visit the “Abode of the Wise” (*manzil al-ḥukamā’*), a kind of lodging house where writers and poets such as al-Jāḥiẓ (776-868/69) and Badr Shākīr al-Sayyāb (1926-64) rub elbows. In this regard, “al-Ḥukamā’ al-thalātha” presages many of the same themes found in *Baṣrayāthā*, while its references to al-Sayyāb and the lively atmosphere of Umm al-Burūm square during the 1960s parallels the chapter “Umm al-Burūm: walīma fī maqbara” (“Umm al-Burūm: A Banquet in a Cemetery”) in *Baṣrayāthā*.

While these literary and mythological figures from the past are very much present in Baṣrayāthā, the tone of the story generally is one of lamentation for the fraying ties that once linked the city’s past with its present. When Badr Shākīr al-

⁵⁶⁴ Khudayyir, *Ru’yā khariḥ*, 17.

⁵⁶⁵ Roux, *Ancient Iraq*, 111-3. See also Jacobsen, *Treasures of Darkness*, 116-20.

Sayyāb joins the gathering, his entrance causes a stir, and his blind companion apologizes for Sayyāb's lateness by complaining that "the city's landmarks have changed, and new streets have been cut through it."⁵⁶⁶ The new geography of the city now makes the Abode of the Wise difficult to locate, although it can still be found in those places where the city is most unchanged: "Go to the old part of the city, and enter any house there, and you will find yourself in the abode you are looking for..."⁵⁶⁷

Likewise, even with the ghost of Sayyāb beside him, the blind man recalls to the gathered crowd the memory of Sayyāb's funeral twenty-one years before, when his coffin was placed on the sidewalk of Umm al-Burūm square, at the time a street of taverns and cafés popular with the city's poets and authors, but later torn down and replaced with a parking lot. For readers who have become accustomed to Basra in the present—as a city ravaged by wartime destruction and subject to an erasure of its recent past—this spectral evocation of a lost urban space is a reminder that uprooting of familiar landmarks threatens to the city off from the wisdom of its past.

The despairing image of a city in wartime and in danger of losing its ties to a local past, embodied by the phantom presence of long-dead poets, is balanced by the presence of the three wise men, whose ties to the Mesopotamian pantheon offer the

⁵⁶⁶ Khuḍayyir, *Ru'yā khariḥ*, 22.

⁵⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

possibility of renewal and salvation for Baṣrayāthā. Viewing the gathering at the Abode of the Wise, Atrāḥāsīs recalls the council of the gods, who had counseled him to convey a message of peace and renewal to the region:

Shamash the radiant said, “Let my sun rise on the land of the south so that my rainbow may stretch over the sea as a gateway through which the boats of the world pass.” Sin the radiant said, “Let the dust be scattered. Let the bloody rain cease. Let abundant floods pour out and wash the earth of blood and corpses, washing away the remains of destroyed weapons. And let the green plain, divided by the river of life, appear flowing toward the distant sea.” Then came the quiet, deep voice of Ashur: “Let peace hold sway after this and let the people love each other...”⁵⁶⁸

The gods’ call to renew humanity after the flood, as expressed in the Atrāḥāsīs story, is linked here to an end to the Iran-Iraq War and the establishment of a lasting peace. The story’s historical elements—from ancient divinities to 20th-century poets and writers—emphasize the deep organic roots of Baṣrayāthā, in contrast to the unstable, chaotic, and imperiled position of the city in wartime. For Khuḍayyir’s Iraqi contemporaries, this expansive, generous view of Basran identity (rendered in the fantastic mode through its alternative fictional counterpart of Baṣrayāthā) counteracts the “intensified and narrowly focused state-sponsored historical memory” espoused by

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid., 26. Shamash (cf. Arabic *shams*, “sun”) is an alternate name for the Sumerian sun-god, Utu; Sin was the Semitic name for the Sumerian moon-god Nanna, and is the origin of the name for the Sinai peninsula. Roux, 87-8.

the Ba‘thist government as the Iran-Iraq War went on: the state Project for Rewriting History, which had once been “thematically diverse” in the 1970s, became progressively tied to a cult of personality focused on Ṣaddām Ḥusayn and the idea of eternal enmity between Iraq and Iran.⁵⁶⁹ As with “Ru’yā al-burj” and “Ḥikāyāt Yūsuf,” this story incorporates elements of an Iraqi past that is both fragile and enduring. In light of the historical context of Khudayyir’s writing, an interpretive community of readers attuned to this context will find meaning in this reassertion of buried or forgotten historical roots.

6.4 Evocations of danger and fear

While some of the stories in *Ru’yā kharīf* suggest the possibility of rediscovering a buried or forgotten urban past, other stories from the same collection reflect a more sinister understanding of Basra/Baṣrayāthā. Although the authority of the Ba‘thist government may have weakened during the sanctions years⁵⁷⁰, Iraq was nevertheless still an authoritarian state that could leverage its power against individual Iraqis with little regard for human rights. From a New Historicist perspective, this political reality provides the historical context for a story such as “Ṣaḥīfat al-tasā’ulāt” (“Page of

⁵⁶⁹ Davis, *Memories of State*, 193.

⁵⁷⁰ al-Musawi, *Reading Iraq*, 94.

Questions”), which possesses themes of menace and betrayal, while casting Baṣrayāthā in a more negative light. Beyond simply providing a background for the story, the historical context, Stanley Fish would argue, forms part of the “situation” from which meaning is made, such that “the normative meaning of an utterance will always be obvious or at least accessible” to an interpretive community of readers aware of that historical context.⁵⁷¹

6.4.1 “Ṣaḥīfat al-tasāʿulāt”

“Ṣaḥīfat al-tasāʿulāt” (“Page of Questions”) is the final story in *Ruʿyā kharīf*, and it is also Khuḍayyir’s longest published short story. Although other texts in this collection can be said to inhabit alternative realities (“Dāmā, Dāmī, Dāmū”) or offer a glimpse of a gleaming future city (“Ruʿyā al-burj,” “Ḥikāyāt Yūsuf”), “Ṣaḥīfat al-tasāʿulāt” may come closest to the genre of science fiction (*adab al-khiyāl al-ʿilmī*) in depicting a futuristic dystopia with social institutions that are radically different from the present.⁵⁷² In that sense, the story adheres to Darko Suvin’s definition of science

⁵⁷¹ Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, 307.

⁵⁷² Carl Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England/Wesleyan University Press, 2000), xvi. Freedman also addresses the genre’s use of dystopias, which extrapolate from negative realities of the present in order to “estrangle the status quo.” As prominent examples he lists Orwell’s *1984*, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, and more recently, Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Freedman, 82-3.

fiction as a genre involving a dialectic of “estrangement and cognition... whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment.”⁵⁷³ The story can also be said to belong to the science fiction genre because it sustains a dialectic between the present and past. Although the genre is associated with future settings, it can equally be said to be concerned with the past, and has even been labeled a form of “disguised historical fiction.”⁵⁷⁴ Khuḍayyir himself has suggested that this dynamic, collapsing past and future, is at play in “Ṣaḥīfat al-tasāʾulāt”: in the published interview titled “al-Kitāba ḥafla tanakkuriyya” (“Writing is a Masked Ball”) he is asked whether this story suggests a “historical turn” in his recent writing, either by moving into the past or gesturing toward the future. Khuḍayyir responds that:

“History isn’t only the past, it is also the future. It isn’t only time, it’s a place as well... History is an imagined region where we encounter our dead characters when they were alive, and we encounter those who have not yet been born, and those whom history has tyrannically removed...”⁵⁷⁵

The futuristic setting, then, is an approach to the past in another guise, and hence, a “disguised historical fiction,” as mentioned above. Likewise, in his response

⁵⁷³ Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 7-8.

⁵⁷⁴ Freedman, 56.

⁵⁷⁵ Khuḍayyir, *al-Ḥikāya al-jadīda*, 104.

above, Khuda'yir seems to envision "history" as a broad chronotope where long-dead and never-born characters can exist together, and where individuals "tyrannically" cast out by history can be restored to life. The futuristic setting, in other words, is grounded in its historical elements, through which an interpretive community of readers will find meaning.

Notably, "Ṣaḥīfat al-tasā'ulāt" does not take place in Baṣrayāthā, but is set in a nameless newly-built city that is surrounded by the ruins of older cities nearby, including Baṣrayāthā. The narrator works at the new city's House of Records, where he is in charge of documents pertaining to the ruined city of Baṣrayāthā. Dominating the skyline of the narrator's nameless city is a large electronic monitor (*mirqāb*) which overlooks a city square, and which displays short signs and messages that individual citizens can type in for the public to see briefly until the message is replaced by a new one. One night, the monitor displays a puzzling riddle from an ancient text called *The Book of Questions*, which asks, "If the rising path is the descending path, and if the path of going is itself the path of arrival, then in which direction lies Baṣrayāthā?"⁵⁷⁶ This is the first in a series of cryptic questions that appear on the monitor on succeeding nights, although there is no obvious way to identify the person who typed them in.

⁵⁷⁶ Khuda'yir, *Ru'ya kharif*, 99.

Between the narrator's work as an archivist of old documents and the presence of the electronic monitor, communication and the interpretation of messages are the primary thematic motifs of the story.⁵⁷⁷

As the narrator reveals, *The Book of Questions* is one of the texts for which he is responsible, as it was written by a Basrayathan and exists in a single copy in the House of Records. The text's author, Ismā'īl al-Başrayāthī, was one of four wise men of Başrayāthā who immigrated to the new city at different times and whose manuscripts are now stored in the House of Records.⁵⁷⁸ From the beginning, the narrator suspects Ismā'īl al-Başrayāthī was the person who placed the questions on the monitor, and believes that *The Book of Questions* somehow conceals within it his own city's name.⁵⁷⁹ The value and meaning of names is a running theme throughout this story, although the narrator's perusal of the book's 804 riddles and questions gives him no answers.

Although the narrator suspects that it was Ismā'īl al-Başrayāthī who put the message on the screen, implying that he is a living contemporary, every other indication in the story suggests that the four wise men from Başrayāthā came from a

⁵⁷⁷ With its focus on the decipherment of various modes of communication, and its cognitive estrangement, "Şahīfat al-tasā'ulāt" evokes parallels with Ursula K. LeGuin's short story "The Author of the Acacia Seeds," written in the style of a linguist or anthropologist studying animal language and poetry. Ursula K. Leguin, "The Author of the Acacia Seeds," in *The Compass Rose* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 3-11.

⁵⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁵⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

pre-modern era: they are described as long-haired “mendicants” (*fuqarā*), clothed in traditional loose-sleeved garments and leather sandals. The image of a long-dead ancient sage secretly typing messages on a modern public electronic screen encapsulates Khuḍayyir’s notion of the overlap between history and the future in his fiction.

Beyond that, the wisdom attributed to the four Basrayathans contrasts with the frustrating emptiness the narrator finds in his modern but nameless city: when he looks out on the urban landscape from high up in the House of Records, “the city... seems completely built up, but it appears lacking, defective at the same time,” while its remaining empty spaces “will not be filled by a building, no matter how large or high it is.”⁵⁸⁰ As with “Ḥikāyāt Yūsuf” and “Ru’yā al-burj,” the new post-war city is symbolized by a tall, architecturally impressive building—in this case, the House of Records. Its newness, however, is somehow devoid of meaning and identity, a lack that is symbolized by the city’s namelessness. The new city is severed from an organic historical past that is represented by the ancient, ruined city of Baṣrayāthā. That organic past remains tantalizingly present, through the cryptic screen messages, which suggest a stubborn irruption of the past into modern life. That sense of the city being

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid., 103.

unmoored from its organic past is made explicit in another of Ismā'īl al-Baṣrayāthī's riddles:

The complex returns to its simple state, and like to like, and the line to its point. So where does that which has no name go back to? Is it to its yesterday, or to its tomorrow? Its old or its new?⁵⁸¹

At the behest of the Director of the House of Records, the narrator attempts to discover who is posting questions from the Book of Questions on the electronic screen, posing questions of his own there in order to lure the mysterious writer to respond. This requires him to sit out on the public square with other lonely souls who watch the monitor flash signals in desperate hope of making communication, such as a message from a relative who may be a prisoner of war or gone missing in action, or a note from a lover.⁵⁸² In a criticism of technology, the electronic monitor—which takes the form of a spinning convex mirror—fails to relieve the isolation, despair, and anomie felt by the city's inhabitants:

Contrary to what was hoped for, those numerous means of communication didn't lessen the inhabitants' feelings of a diminishing capacity for firm communication and connection... They are strangers, scattered brothers, they can't stifle their growing social impulse.⁵⁸³

⁵⁸¹ Ibid., 103.

⁵⁸² Ibid., 113.

⁵⁸³ Ibid., 112.

Having sent his message aimed at the Basrayathan wise men, the narrator retreats to the shade under the trees of the public square, accompanied by his fellow-citizens who are described as “gray creatures” and “dying meteors” watching the monitor for signs of inspiration and hope.⁵⁸⁴ An old woman he meets on a bench, for example, lost her three sons in the war, leaving her with only “ghosts of images.”⁵⁸⁵ The sadness of her own story is amplified by her conversation with the narrator about the origin of the electronic monitor: the monitor’s inventor had a son who suffered from a phosphorus deficiency in his blood, which made his innards radiate and caused the child’s body to dissolve before his father’s eyes in pieces of light, leaving the hospital bedsheets to smolder in flame. The vanishing traces of fire gave the father the idea for the evanescent electronic flashes.

The narrator’s search for the origin of the cryptic questions leads him to encounter not only the city’s desperation and loneliness, but also its hidden, conspiratorial menace. He meets, seemingly by chance, a young man named Ghulām Zuḥal (“the slave of Saturn”), who the narrator declares is “the phosphorescent child”

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid., 115. This scene echoes the scene in *Ru’yā al-burj*, in which citizens gather outside the tower to witness the fleeting, cryptic appearance of letters on the tower’s face.

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid., 116. The “ghosts of images” echo a key plot element in another story from the same collection, “*Atyāf al-ghasaq*” (“Twilight Phantoms”), in which the protagonist uses a spectrographic camera to film the spirits of long-dead people, including his own grandfather.

mentioned by the old woman on the bench.⁵⁸⁶ Telling the narrator to follow him, Ghulām Zuḥal leads him through a hidden underworld within the city, starting with a shop in the city’s crowded marketplace, which is the gathering place for a secret society under the leadership of Ghulām Zuḥal’s father, Hudhud Sulaymān (“Solomon’s Hoopoe,” a name echoing the hoopoe bird who speaks to Solomon in Sūrat al-Naml in the Qur’ān.)

Through Ghulām Zuḥal, the narrator learns that not only are the manuscripts by the four Basrayathan wise men in the House of Records not originals, but that they are copies made by Hudhud Sulaymān himself.⁵⁸⁷ Hudhud Sulaymān was the fifth Basrayathan mendicant, left unmentioned in the texts by his four colleagues. Of the five Basrayathans, he is the only one still alive, and he is, in fact, the aging Director of the House of Records. As the narrator himself points out, the existence of a fifth mendicant destroys the “spherical harmony” of the city: Hudhud Sulaymān, then, represents the fifth element (the “quintessence”) of the Aristotelian theory of elements—a hidden presence, embodied by Hudhud and his secret society, in contrast

⁵⁸⁶ For this character, Khuḍayyir borrowed the name “Ghulām Zuḥal” from a 10th-century Baghdad astronomer who participated in *majālis* organized by the humanistic philosopher al-Sijistānī. Joel L. Kraemer, *Philosophy in the Renaissance of Islam: Abū Sulaymān Al-Sijistānī and His Circle* (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 64.

⁵⁸⁷ Khuḍayyir, *Ru’yā kharīf*, 122-3.

to the four visible elements represented by the other four, each of whose texts is related to a new building in the city.⁵⁸⁸

Hudhud Sulaymān, as the narrator discovers, is the hidden hand controlling the secrets of the new city (among other things, he is the inventor of the electronic monitor), and has deliberately led the narrator astray. Hudhud's secret society is composed of people (including the older woman the narrator met on the bench) wearing phosphorescent neck rings (an echo of Hudhud's own child whose death inspired the invention of the monitor), which gives them the power to read the narrator's innermost secrets. Or as Ghulām Zuḥal tells him,

You are near us at this moment; our neck-rings of light have surrounded you. I see your pounding heart shouting out secrets in your illuminated veins beneath your transparent skin. We have observed the changes in your condition, your gait, your voice, your mood... Come to us. Come. For you are now incapable of stopping this transformation.⁵⁸⁹

The narrator now sees his employer in a new light, as a cult-like leader, addressing his assembly of adherents, all clad in white, in a subterranean meeting. Hudhud speaks to them in poetic terms, reminding them of the importance of names,

⁵⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁵⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 124.

or rather of the insignificance of names, implying that their unnamed city is actually the older city of Baṣrayāthā.

The narrator, now under the sway of Hudhud, joins the other disciples who recline on cushions and drink a liquor that Hudhud and his son Ghulām Zuḥal provide to them. By accepting the drink, the narrator falls under the sway of Hudhud, and becomes progressively more passive over the course of the story. On waking from his state of intoxication, the narrator proceeds to the House of Music—another new building inspired by the text of one of the Basrayathan mendicants. The House of Music, a futuristic glass-domed construction, controls a series of large metal organ pipes planted in the city that play music. The House of Music attracts draws to it crowds of people, all wearing sheepskins, who are plunged into a kind of hypnotic state by the music. They offer the foreboding image of sheep mindlessly walking toward their death, as they “walk the walk of one who has a premonition of his impending slaughter in an abattoir...”⁵⁹⁰ He, too, finds himself now wearing a sheep’s wool garment, as he joins the crowds. His passage through the House of Music is hypnotic and hallucinatory, as songs seem to flow from the walls of the house “like celestial waterfalls, filling the house with stars, sand, and water. They had no mover or player.”

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid., 127.

The music itself is characterized in terms familiar from texts on philosophy and mysticism, as being both “evanescent and eternal” (*al-fāniyya wa-l-bāqiyya*).⁵⁹¹

Only after his emergence from the House of Music at dawn does the narrator realize the menace represented by Hudhud Sulaymān: walking alone in the desert outside the city, he comes to a well where Ghulām Zuḥal is waiting for him. In a metafictional turn, the narrator surmises that “our story will end at this well, far from the city,” a prediction that Ghulām Zuḥal confirms.⁵⁹² It dawns on the narrator that Hudhud Sulaymān had lured the four other Basrayathans to this well and pushed them in, while Ghulām Zuḥal confirms that Hudhud Sulaymān has ordered the same fate for him in order to protect the secrets of Baṣrayāthā, which the narrator has unwittingly been uncovering.

Hudhud’s aim is to consign memory to oblivion, as Ghulām Zuḥal tells the narrator that he has been instructed “not to inter your body, but to bury your memory, which contains the truth of Baṣrayāthā, its books, its globes, its astrolabes, its ouds, and its other trifles, all of its questions.”⁵⁹³ In an unusual twist, Ghulām Zuḥal, disobeying his orders, volunteers to take the narrator’s place: he disappears at the lip of the well in

⁵⁹¹ Ibid., 128.

⁵⁹² Ibid., 129.

⁵⁹³ Ibid., 129-30.

a blaze of light, leaving behind “the remains of a disintegrated question.”⁵⁹⁴ Just like the doubling that links the new, nameless city to the ancient ruin of Baṣrayāthā, or the recurring references to the originals and copies of the texts by the four mendicants, the narrator and Ghulām Zuḥal become doubled characters.

“*Ṣaḥīfat al-tasāʿulāt*” provides a rare example in Khuḍayyir’s fiction of paranoia and a sinister conspiracy as plot elements: in this story, the severed/enduring relationship between past and present are represented not by urban architecture—such as a building or city square that has replaced an older structure, or a gleaming new publishing house that conceals an old-fashioned printing press—but by an individual with a malign agenda, one who heads a secret society that is willing to commit murder to keep secrets hidden. The benign figure of the elderly, genial director of the House of Records is revealed to be a cult leader who is responsible for the cryptic messages appearing on the electronic monitor he invented. Notably, the story “*Dāmā, Dāmī, Dāmū,*” from the same collection, likewise shares this evocation of menace and paranoia: in that story, Basrayathan society is divided into three races, each of which is associated with a different types of board game. The games, which are played in public, can have disturbing consequences, such as when the narrator—having lost three times

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid., 130.

to a mysterious opponent—is forced to descend to an underground prison, to join hundreds of other game-players who are confined far beneath Baṣrayāthā’s surface.

In some sense, “Ṣaḥīfat al-tasā’ulāt” can be read as simply a story of cognitive estrangement: in Fish’s terms, that reading would be shared by an interpretive community that reads the text in light of its ties to the science fiction genre, and in particular, to those short stories and novels that deal with links between a society’s past and an imagined future. However, a community of readers familiar with the historical context of fiction written in the immediate aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War and the Gulf War of 1991 may well see the story (as well as “Dāmā, Dāmī, Dāmū,” which employs similar themes) as a reflection of the social and political environment in which Khuḍayyir was writing. Even if the sanctions era witnessed “the hollowing out of the institutions and the services of the state” and the “collapse of [Baṯhist] ideology,”⁵⁹⁵ the Iraqi state continued its domestic hegemonic practices, particularly aimed at the co-optation of intellectuals and the manipulation of historical memory.⁵⁹⁶ The insights of New Historicism caution against reading Khuḍayyir’s fiction as merely reflecting a monologic historical and cultural milieu, but as interacting with signifying practices

⁵⁹⁵ Phebe Marr, “One Iraq or Many: What Has Happened to Iraqi Identity?” in *Iraq Between Occupations: Perspectives from the 1920s to the Present*, edited by Amatzia Baram, Achim Rohde, and Ronen Zeidel (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 29.

⁵⁹⁶ Davis, 2.

and conventions that are communally shared.⁵⁹⁷ For “*Ṣaḥīfat al-tasāʿulāt*,” the story’s elements of paranoia, danger, and the fantastic reflect the literary convention of the “uncanny” (*Unheimlich*) in recent Iraqi fiction, to which Ferial Ghazoul has alluded, and which Iraqi readers would understand as both as an aesthetic choice and as “political camouflage.”⁵⁹⁸

6.5 *Baṣrayāthā*: An Invitation to an Interpretive Community

As Khuḍayyir’s first full-length text, *Baṣrayāthā* remains his best known work of fiction, and is the only one of his books to have been fully translated into English.⁵⁹⁹ *Baṣrayāthā* represents the most complete expression of the themes that have pervaded Khuḍayyir’s writing in the last few decades. It also is the most complete in evoking its own interpretive community: to read the book and to embrace its themes of a counter-city, one that contains intimations of Basra’s nearly-forgotten past, is to participate in

⁵⁹⁷ Veerer, 12.

⁵⁹⁸ Ghazoul, “The Unhomely at Home and Abroad,” 22.

⁵⁹⁹ Muḥammad Khuḍayyir, *Baṣrayāthā: Portrait of a City*, translated by William Hutchins (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2007). Before that, most of the chapter “*‘Aṭāyā al-jum‘a*” (“Friday Bounties”) had been published in English translation by scholar Shakir Mustafa. Muḥammad Khuḍayyir, “Friday Bounties,” in *Contemporary Iraqi Fiction: An Anthology*, edited and translated by Shakir Mustafa (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 13-20.

an interpretive community that was summoned into existence along with *Başrayāthā* itself.

As with any text, readers bring to *Başrayāthā* a set of interpretive strategies and a horizon of expectations that permit them to make meaning of it, such as expectations of genre, which *Başrayāthā* both incorporates and subverts. But in this case, the text creates its own interpretive community of readers. This phenomenon reflects the more dynamic understanding of the notion of “interpretive community” that Fish presents in his text, *Doing What Comes Naturally*. In that mutually reciprocal model, the interpretive community evoked by a text such as *Başrayāthā* may have extra-textual repercussions, as is evinced by the interest in place shown by Iraqi writers in recent collected volumes such as *al-Makān al-‘Irāqī*, as well as the establishment of the Iraqi cultural and literary website “*Başrayāthā: Majālla thaqāfiyya wa-adabiyya*,”⁶⁰⁰ which takes its name from *Khudayyir’s* book.⁶⁰¹

⁶⁰⁰ “*Başrayāthā: Majālla thaqāfiyya wa-adabiyya*” (<http://basrayatha.com/>). Accessed 1/14/16. Originally planned as a magazine dedicated to literature and culture of the Basra governorate, the magazine has more recently expanded its mandate to encompass literature from across Iraq.

⁶⁰¹ This notion of a text creating its own interpretive community is not entirely novel, as other scholars have used Fish’s concept in this way. Hannah Gourgey and Edward B. Smith have made a similar claim regarding William Gibson’s 1984 novel *Neuromancer*, as “an example of how a text can serve to create and sustain an interpretive community,” in bringing—or, in the authors’ words, “rallying”—a new set of readers for his text. In that case, they argue, Gibson’s novel is a “literary performance, operating as an agent of cultural formation,” in creating a genre known as “cyberpunk.” By creating an interpretive collective of readers who are attuned to the fictional world created by the author, the novel itself has repercussions on how its own text is understood. As the authors of the article point out, the blurring between text and its interpretive community, or rather the bidirectionality of the two, undermines the

Although nominally a novel, *Başrayāthā* employs the composite text (*naṣṣ jamīʿ*) form that Khudayyir would later employ with *Kurrāsāt kānūn* and *Ḥadāʾiq al-wujūh*). In places, the text has elements of personal memoir, urban history, folklore, and literary essay. The author has described the book as “a sort of a fictional reportage [that] describes many aspects of old Basra history.”⁶⁰² However, Khudayyir’s literary project in creating *Başrayāthā* is not simply to evoke nostalgia or to decry the present day. As the Arabic subtitle, “*ṣūrat madīna*” (“a portrait of a city”), suggests, the subject of the book is *Başrayāthā*, a fictional counterpart to Khudayyir’s home city of Basra, one that pre-exists the actual city and represents its “hidden essence.”⁶⁰³ Early in the book, the narrating voice—at times indistinguishable from the author himself—characterizes *Başrayāthā* as a genuine, but idealized, version of his city, which negates the obliterations of historical events and destruction that characterize the real-world city of Basra:

...this is what has led me—the eternal resident in a real city, which hides its reality beneath a pile of fickle history’s rubble and collective

conventional distinction between real and fictional worlds. Hannah Gourgey and Edward B. Smith, “Consensual Hallucination: Cyberspace and the Creation of an Interpretive Community,” *Text & Performance Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (July 1996), 234, 245.

⁶⁰² Personal communication with author, 7/17/2006.

⁶⁰³ Muḥammad Khudayyir, *Başrayāthā: ṣūrat madīna*. Damascus: Dār al-Madā (1996), 22. Muḥammad Khudayyir, *Basrayatha: Portrait of a City*, translated by William Hutchins (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2007), 14. Throughout this chapter, when quoting from *Başrayāthā*, I will use Hutchins’s English translation, and cite both the 1996 Arabic and 2007 English editions.

tragedies—to continuously rediscover my city and to pretend to forget any uninterrupted reality about it.⁶⁰⁴

As a fictional setting that transcends individual narratives—as it also makes an appearance in several of the stories in *Ruʿyā kharīf*—Başrayāthā serves as a “heterocosm,” a term devised by Linda Hutcheon to refer to an alternative world envisioned by an author.⁶⁰⁵ It is a metafictional conceit, one that “constructs through language an imaginative world that has, within its own terms, full reference status as an alternative to the world in which we live.”⁶⁰⁶ Khuḍayyir constructs his imagined heterocosm through his elaborate evocation of Başrayāthā as a mirror-image utopia of his home city.

As with the six-sided Cubist evocation of the 1991 Gulf War in *Kurrāsāt kānūn*, *Başrayāthā* sketches its namesake city from a number of different angles. The introductory chapter is titled “Al-Madākhil al-arbaʿa ilā l-Başrayāthā” (“The Four Points of Entry to Başrayāthā”), presenting the text as a map guiding the reader into

⁶⁰⁴ Khuḍayyir, *Başrayāthā*, 22; *Basrayatha: Portrait of a City*, 14.

⁶⁰⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press (1980), 7.

⁶⁰⁶ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London, New York: Methuen, 1984), 100.

this imagined urban space.⁶⁰⁷ The introductory chapter is followed by eight separate sections (some subdivided into multiple parts) that blend genres and draw on contemporary literary theory as well as pre-modern Arabic narrative traditions. These various glimpses of *Başrayāthā* culminate in a final chapter, “*Şabāḥiyyāt wa-layliyyāt*” (“Morning Airs and Nocturnes”), that takes place over the course of a single long day while the city is under siege during the Iran-Iraq War: the chapter begins at dawn, following a sleepless night of artillery bombardment, and ends with the narrator walking the nearly-deserted streets after dark to visit a now-empty, silent apartment where a musical group once played.

With its recurring imagery of a forgotten or neglected urban past and an evocation of the power of literary imagination, *Başrayāthā* taps into a shared community of readers who are familiar with and will respond to those themes. At the same time, the text is not only addressing a pre-existing assortment of potentially sympathetic readers, but is also creating a network of readers. Paradoxically, the difficulty of the text—its non-narrative structure, its multiple intertextual allusions, and its highly personal elements—binds the community of readers to it. As a fictional

⁶⁰⁷ Khuḍayyir’s use of the text as an urban map bears some similarity to the 2011 Egyptian novel *Kitāb al-Ṭuḡhrā* by Yūsuf Rakhā, in which the protagonist’s nine trips through Cairo map the city’s space and history. Yūsuf Rakhā, *Kitāb al-Ṭuḡhrā* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2011).

text that incorporates real-world referents (such as specific locations in Basra and mentions of historical events), *Başrayāthā* allows for the transformation of a real landscape through the response of readers to fiction. Karlheinz Stierle notes that, like Khuḍayyir, authors such as Baudelaire, Proust, and Garcia Marquez have all transformed “actual landscapes...into mythic ones” in their fiction. In turn, “the fictionalized landscape may very well become part of our experience of the real landscape,” as readers’ understandings of a real place are transformed by their response to the mythologized versions on paper.⁶⁰⁸

At first glance, it may seem difficult to square reader response theory—premised on the notion that a reader is central to the production of meaning—with a text such as *Başrayāthā*, because Khuḍayyir so often emphasizes the centrality of his role as an author. The first section of the introduction, “The Loom and the Minbar” (*al-nūl wa-l-minbar*), for example, evokes the storyteller’s role as weaver of stories, stating that “none of us can imagine a city without a storyteller or a storyteller without a minbar.”⁶⁰⁹ Khuḍayyir’s aim is not to inflate his own unique status as an author: in New Criticism terms, he is not pursuing the intentional fallacy by locating his authorial

⁶⁰⁸ Karlheinz Stierle, “The Reading of Fictional Texts,” in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 91.

⁶⁰⁹ Khuḍayyir, *Başrayāthā*, 10; *Başrayāthā: Portrait of a City*, 4.

status as the source of meaning. Instead, the book—and the imagined city of Başrayāthā itself—preceded his involvement, and he, as author, merely gives voice to something pre-existing:

The book's essence appeared from nonexistence to grant a name to a newborn fully aware of its own birth, since its birth was repeated over and over again... So the book gave birth to itself, from itself.⁶¹⁰

The book is the product of a system of meaning already in place before the author arrived; it thus inhabits a larger, communal reality that exists independently of its author. Indeed, in an inversion of the usual hierarchy, the text declares that its imagined city pre-exists any external reality (“before Basra, there was Başrayāthā.”⁶¹¹) Early in the book, the communality of the experience of Başrayāthā is rendered as a narrative of childhood memories framed as first-person-plural recollections:

Once we had left the gates we would fan out through the streets and alleyways. Then we would reunite in the corners of the squares and in coffeehouses. We would inspect our faces and limbs and then separate, roaming the streets, our steps regular and following in stride: one step back in to the history of an open space, on the highway of a memory forged by thousands of wayfarers before us.⁶¹²

⁶¹⁰ Khuḍayyir, *Başrayāthā*, 12; *Basrayatha: Portrait of a City*, 5.

⁶¹¹ Khuḍayyir, *Başrayāthā*, 11; *Basrayatha: Portrait of a City*, 5.

⁶¹² Khuḍayyir, *Başrayāthā*, 29-30; *Basrayatha: Portrait of a City*, 21.

As she reads the text, the reader is roped into the collective experience of Baṣrayāthāns, while her encounter with the city is framed as a spatial exploration of the city's urban features.

Elsewhere in this initial chapter, the narrative “we” specifically embraces Baṣrayāthāns on the margins of society, implicitly incorporating the reader into this subaltern community, one of “us, the trembling civilians, workmen, and tramps or beggars, bootblacks, gamblers, prostitutes, agents, thieves, and peddlers,” all of whom are associated with marginal, undesirable places (“We arrived from the deserts, fields, cemeteries, huts, prisons, quarries, underground vaults, low-ceilinged rooms, damp schools, and narrow lanes.”⁶¹³) Groups marginalized by society, whom governments and other authorities had “expelled...from history,” are instead made central to the story of Baṣrayāthā. ⁶¹⁴ Elsewhere in the first chapter, “The First Exploration” (“al-Iktishāf al-awwal”) the first-person plural is used to narrate a collective experience of war. In a foreshadowing of the book's final chapter, the text implicates the reader among a group of Baṣrayāthāns in the city under siege in the heat of day:

We entered the city one morning only to find it a desert bombarded by a sun that was closer to the earth than ever before. We sought refuge from its midday heat... It was a day of pestilential moonlight, a day of

⁶¹³ Khuḍayyir, *Baṣrayāthā*, 29-30; *Basrayatha: Portrait of a City*, 21.

⁶¹⁴ Al-Musawi, *Reading Iraq*, 88.

upheavals, a day of gunfire, a day of suicide, a day of death, a day of collapse, a day of rejection, and a day to end all days.⁶¹⁵

In all the above instances, the use of the first-person plural makes the reader a participant in the world of *Başrayāthā*, rather than simply a passive observer or recipient of the narrative. And in opposition to the Ba‘athist government’s own Project for Rewriting History, with its insistence on co-opting grand historical narratives for the Iraqi state project, *Başrayāthā* finds its sources in marginalized individuals and local particulars.⁶¹⁶

For a community of readers inclined to assign meaning to the motif of time in a text, *Başrayāthā* presents glimpses of the city’s invisible histories, both ancient and recent. These histories, mapped on to the urban spaces of *Başrayāthā*, exemplify Suzanne Nalbantian’s concept of the “spatialization of time” in fiction.⁶¹⁷ One chapter, for example, relates the history of an area in Basra/*Başrayāthā* known as Umm al-Burūm that once was a lively public square, and which was surrounded by cafés and bars frequented by poets in the 1950s, but has since been paved over as a bus station.

The text represents the square as a physical embodiment of the city’s collective unconscious, described as “the city’s heart...head, brain, or subconscious,” while the

⁶¹⁵ Khuḍayyir, *Başrayāthā*, 33; *Basrayatha: Portrait of a City*, 24.

⁶¹⁶ Khuḍayyir, *al-Ḥikāya al-jadīda*, 25.

⁶¹⁷ Nalbantian, 117.

restaurants nearby serve as the city's shared stomach.⁶¹⁸ At the same time, readers follow the many changing incarnations of Umm al-Burūm over the centuries, including a cemetery for the poor, a public square named for Iraq's King Ghazi, and a public market. Taking a more narrative turn, the chapter moves back in time to the plague year of 1831—the same year Khuḍayyir also drew on for his earlier story, “Iḥtiḍār al-rassām” (“Death of the Artist”), discussed earlier in Section 4.5. During that year, the historical nadir of Baṣrayāthā's fortunes, the city's storyteller perishes in the plague, but his role is taken up by a replacement, who forms the latest link in an enduring chain of storytellers that connects the city's past with its present and ensures the city's renewal. From 1831, the text surveys other turning points in the history of the square, taking the reader up to the 1950s and 1960s, when Umm al-Burūm hosted a number of cafés and bars popular with poets (including Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb, who memorialized the square in his poem “Umm al-Burūm.”) The tavern where once al-Sayyāb and other poets met regularly during the 1960s was replaced by a run-down hotel that the narrator states he visited again in 1990, noting its sad decline with the passage of time.⁶¹⁹ The text renders urban space as a palimpsest, continually erased and redrawn,

⁶¹⁸ Khuḍayyir, *Baṣrayāthā*, 42; *Basrayatha: Portrait of a City*, 34.

⁶¹⁹ Khuḍayyir states that the hotel continued to host regular meetings of the poets as ghosts, long after their death, and served as the inspiration for his story “al-Ḥukamā' al-thalātha” (The Three Wise Men.)

and thus in some way permanent, in spite of its continual transformations. Khudayyir's image of the city as superimposed historical layers embodies Lefebvre's notion that "social spaces interpenetrate one another and/or superimpose themselves upon one another"—even when those social spaces are linked diachronically.⁶²⁰ The underlying permanence of the city means that Başrayāthans are also linked, forming a community that crosses chronological periods: the reader, by virtue of entering Başrayāthā through the text, becomes a part of this community.

Başrayāthā's continuity can be found in its urban spaces, such as Umm al-Burūm, but also in its natural environment: unlike the protean quality of a city square, the Shaṭṭ al-ʿArab river remains a continuous presence that unites all those who have been touched by its waters. The chapter subtitled "Ḥulm nahrin" ("A River's Dream") opens by relating the powerful dreams the river creates—or rather, the dreams it has produced over the millennia in the people who have lived with its presence. The narrator own dreaming merges with that of the Shaṭṭ al-ʿArab, and he declares himself "a medium through which the river was dreaming." As in Khudayyir's early story, "al-

The sign on the hotel—"Abode of the Wise"—also inspired the story's title. Khudayyir, *Başrayāthā*, 53; *Basrayatha: Portrait of a City*, 44.

⁶²⁰ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 86.

Asmāk”, the river’s flow becomes a metaphor for all of human history and experience.⁶²¹

The chapter alludes to the mythological, agricultural, cultural and historical presence of the river in Iraqi life. Whereas once the river was vital to the lives of the city’s inhabitants—a constant presence in their daily lives and their occupations—it is no longer. While people once washed their clothes in the river and got their drinking water from it, today, washing machines and tap water in people’s homes have helped to sever the organic ties between them and the river. But even here, the city’s contemporary inhabitants have an emotional connection to the river, however tenuous and threatened, as the chapter ends with the image of “the Basran lover” strolling along the riverbank, while “a deeper river flows within his heart.”⁶²²

A preoccupation of the text is the attenuation and withering away of the city’s links to its past: just as the river has been tamed and its organic connection to people’s lives has been severed, so too has the tradition of storytelling. In the chapter “Abū l-Khaṣīb: Story Road,” the text invites the reader to “imagine with me a man whose job is collecting stories.”⁶²³ As with the chain of storytellers in the “Umm al-Burūm” chapter,

⁶²¹ Khuḍayyir, *Baṣrayāthā*, 57; *Basrayatha: Portrait of a City*, 49.

⁶²² Khuḍayyir, *Baṣrayāthā*, 74; *Basrayatha: Portrait of a City*, 63.

⁶²³ Khuḍayyir, *Baṣrayāthā*, 77; *Basrayatha: Portrait of a City*, 67.

this storyteller, now retired, represents an organic local tradition that is threatened by modernity, as the city's storytellers have been "dispersed by iron pipes, swift wheels, and ocean-going vessels that had swept across the virgin land and rivers."⁶²⁴ The chapter ends by suggesting that the narrator, to whom the retired storyteller has given his old bicycle as a kind of symbolic inheritance, may learn to become a storyteller himself.

Nevertheless, much of the second half of the book is concerned with absence, as exemplified by the withdrawal of the storyteller from his public role. Absence occurs as well in the short section "House of Names," which describes a house in an old, working-class section of the city: the source for this material is a meter reader—a humble contemporary counterpart for the human source (*maşdar*) behind a pre-modern Arabic narrative account (*khavar*.) In the House of Names, every object and every room has its name written on it in chalk ("Door to stairs," "Salih's room" "bath," etc.) This self-inscribed house, the reader learns, is the work of a child who lives there, who "has tried to keep his family's house from being deserted, sad, and silent when the family members leave it."⁶²⁵ The house is both filled with words and empty of people. For readers attuned to the book's images of absence and loss, the child is a metaphor for

⁶²⁴ Khuḍayyir, *Başrayāthā*, 78; *Basrayatha: Portrait of a City*, 67.

⁶²⁵ Khuḍayyir, *Başrayāthā*, 159; *Basrayatha: Portrait of a City*, 138.

Khudayyir himself, who is reconstructing his home through words as a way to keep his city from being “deserted, sad, and silent” in the absence of long-gone inhabitants.

Absence plays a central role in the book’s penultimate chapter, “Morning Airs and Nocturnes: A War Diary,” which takes place during the Iran-Iraq War, when the city is under siege.⁶²⁶ The chapter is divided into several sections, taking the reader through the course of a single day; although absence is a predominant theme, the effect on the reader is an assertion of community and life. Notably, the chapter begins with the narrator at 5AM, unable to sleep because of the sounds of artillery fire, ambulances, and explosions. Even so, the wartime siege retains a sense of community, as the thumping of “a million sleepless hearts” is organized into a single beat that became a “familiar tune that traveled from house to house until it reached the soldiers in the trenches beyond the river.”⁶²⁷ With the ending of fighting at dawn, the reader is invited to join in the narrator’s assertion of the community’s survival (“The world is alive. The nation is alive. We are alive.”)⁶²⁸

⁶²⁶ William Hutchins’s English translation of *Başrayāthā* left off the book’s final chapter, “Min Kitāb al-Tasā’ulāt” (“From the Book of Questions”), which echoes the story “Şaḥīfat al-tasā’ulāt” published in *Ru’ya kharif* in 1995. As suggested by its title, “Min Kitāb al-Tasā’ulāt” is a series of philosophical questions that seems to be unconnected to the rest of the book. In an email, Khudayyir was unsure why the English-language edition had left this chapter off, but admitted that it used “Sufi language that is different from the language of the book.” He also described it as a “final appendix” rather than part of the main text. Muḥammad Khudayyir, personal correspondence, 6/9/15.

⁶²⁷ Khudayyir, *Başrayāthā*, 163; *Basrayatha: Portrait of a City*, 143.

⁶²⁸ Khudayyir, *Başrayāthā*, 164; *Basrayatha: Portrait of a City*, 144.

The final section of this chapter, “Aqmār wa-awtār” (“Moons and String Instruments”) closes the book on an image of persistence and community in the face of absence. After midnight, the narrator goes out into the deserted streets of the wartime city, hearing everywhere a silent melody that calls to mind a five-piece musical group that he used to hear play. The felt absence of his musician friends—presumably now scattered or killed in war—pervades the apartment where they used to play: climbing up the stairs to the now soundless apartment, the narrator sees their abandoned instruments hanging on the wall, along with a group of photos: “The merchants’ coffeehouse. The Suriyan clock. The sailing-barge harbor opposite the date warehouse. The bar known as the White Rose. No one.”⁶²⁹ Like *Başrayāthā* itself, which consists of character sketches and fragmented images rather than sustained narrative, the once-vibrant apartment now contains only silenced music and still images from the city’s past.

The despair and emptiness of the apartment is counteracted when the narrator returns to the street, where the invisible string instruments he heard before resume their tune as proof of the city’s permanence and beauty, even in its darkest hour:

“What a creative composition this is! It is produced by the radiant solitude, the great

⁶²⁹ Khuḍayyir, *Başrayāthā*, 179; *Basrayatha: Portrait of a City*, 154.

heart of the night, and the night's spirit, which is packed with hope, life, and constancy." The city, which once seemed empty and abandoned, is revealed to be alive and the chapter's final image is one of dynamism and hope: "The city repeats the song. The city is dancing. It strips itself to fly. The dead emerge from the netherworld and share in the singing."⁶³⁰ The city's dead—its past iterations buried under the present-day city, much like the Umm al-Burūm cemetery buried under a layer of asphalt—are not simply static memories, like the photographs on the apartment wall, but rather play a vibrant part in the city's collective identity, participating in the singing that unites the city even at its ebb. For readers who have responded to the themes of memory and continuity that have pervaded the book, the note of hope and continuity at the end of this chapter furthers a sense of connection to the imagined city. To use Stanley Fish's formulation, *Başrayāthā* invites readers to find meaning in its array of urban portraits and fragmented narratives. Those readers who, by the end of the text, have found meaning in them become part of *Başrayāthā*'s interpretive community of readers, a community which in turn has consequences for how those same readers interpret other texts. The book's inversion of the usual hierarchies between reality and

⁶³⁰ Khuḍayyir, *Başrayāthā*, 180; *Basrayatha: Portrait of a City*, 154.

fiction is thus mirrored in the bidirectional relationship between the text and the interpretive community that it creates and which in turns creates meaning in the text.

6.6 Conclusion

Stanley Fish's concept of the interpretive community—defined as a set of readers who adhere to shared interpretive strategies in their approach to a text—allows for a stability of interpretations among readers. As texts, in Fish's view, have no pre-determined meaning, an interpretive community determines what constitutes the text's properties, including what they find relevant and meaningful in the text. As this chapter has demonstrated, the concept of interpretive communities is particularly illuminating when applied to Khuḍayyir's post-1991 fiction, particularly in light of a New Historicist view in which texts are seen as embedded within a historical context and in negotiation with the practices and institutions of the society in which they are written. In the case of Khuḍayyir, his recent writing is informed by the ravages of war and the designs of the authoritarian state, including its Project for Rewriting History. Readers aware of that context form an interpretive community that find meaning in texts on the recovery of an organic past, in stories such as "Ru'yā al-burj" and "Ḥikāyāt Yūsuf," which take a menacing and sunny view, respectively, with how that past is

preserved and remembered in a post-war society. That same interpretive community of readers will respond to the assertion of the local, the forgotten, and the marginalized in *Başrayāthā*. The imagined city of Başrayāthā, which plays a recurring role in these stories as well as the full-length text of the same name, reasserts the importance of the city as a site of an organic, enduring community. Unusually, *Başrayāthā* not only draws on a pre-existing interpretive community of readers familiar with the historical and cultural context with which the text negotiates, but as this chapter has demonstrated, it also creates its own interpretive community by inviting readers to construct meaning from its composite elements.

Conclusion

This study has sought to demonstrate that Muḥammad Khuḍayyir's texts can be read as requiring the reader's participation in constructing meaning. There are several reasons why his fiction is particularly suited to reader response theory as a methodological approach. His stories frequently possess a labyrinthine quality and often subvert conventional expectations about narrative, character, and genre.

His early stories can be dream-like, such as "al-Asmāk," or abstract and devoid of human characters, such as "al-Tābūt." Other stories considered in this study, such as "Manzil al-nisā'," display unusual formal features, or feature supernatural or magical elements, such as in "Zahīrat al-qirṭa" or "al-Mamlaka al-sawdā'." All of Khuḍayyir's full-length composite texts—*Baṣrayāthā*, *Kurrāsāt kānūn*, and *Ḥadā'iq al-wujūh*—also subvert expectations of genre in their fractured (or Cubist) form, and the reader is left to assemble meaning from disparate elements. As such, the ideas put forward by Umberto Eco and Wolfgang Iser find neat parallels in Khuḍayyir's work, particularly since both adhered to the idea that contemporary fiction places greater demands on the reader than pre-modern texts do, and that, therefore, the reader's response is of greater importance to modern fiction.

Additionally, both Eco and Iser emphasized the constrictions on meaning that the text already has in place (or, more strictly speaking, that the author has already put in place) and that guide or shape the reader's meaning-making. In contrast, Stanley Fish asserts a more expansive view of the reader's response, namely, that texts have no pre-determined or inherent literary features. His theories therefore place greater emphasis on the reader as the creator of a text's meaning. Although Fish's theories liberate the reader's response from any pre-existing formal units in the text, the reader is not entirely unconstrained in her response. As was discussed in Chapter One, Fish's concept of the interpretive community locates the tools of meaning in interpretive communities, which provide a stability of meaning across groups of reader, and which structure the reader's response through a commonly-agreed set of conventions and interpretive strategies.

The thematic concerns common to both *Başraqāthā* and the stories in the 1995 collection *Ru'yā kharīf* resonate with an interpretive community attuned to and informed about the particular historical circumstances of Ba'ḥist Iraq in the wake of the lengthy Iran-Iraq War and the 1991 Gulf War. Motifs of memory, renewal, and hidden links to an organic past are central to stories such as "Ḥikāyat Yūsuf" and "Ru'yā al-burj," and have particular resonance for readers familiar with the destruction

meted out to Basra during the Iran-Iraq War. Likewise, themes of fear and paranoia in “Dāmā, Dāmī, Dāmū” and “Şaḥīfat al-tasāʾulāt” also resonate with a community of readers aware of the political and social circumstances in which these texts were written.

The prominence of the fictional city of Başrayāthā (not only in the novel of the same name, but in the short stories that mention it as a setting) offers an example of the dynamic nature of interpretive communities that Fish characterized in *Doing What Comes Naturally*. Başrayāthā embodies the concept of the city as a model of an interpretive community, one that preserves within itself its past histories as a kind of collective memory, and which counteracts forces of forgetting and erasure, such as the Baʿthist state’s Project for Rewriting History and the destruction caused by war, which forcibly obliterates and reshapes the urban environment. The image of an organic local reality resonates with a pre-existing interpretive community that places significance and aesthetic meaning in such a project of reclamation. But Başrayāthā can also be said to act as an agent of cultural formation by generating a new, wider interpretive community of readers. Although Başrayāthā’s full extra-literary impact on the field of Iraqi literature and memory lies beyond the scope of this study, Khudayyir’s imagined

city has reached readers far beyond the confines of the actual city of Basra and made them part of an interpretive community of Basrayathans.

Appendix: Khuḍayyir's Short Stories

Stories are listed in the order in which they were published in book form. The date of composition is given where known, either from dates given in the books themselves, or through personal correspondence with the author. The 1998 collection *Taḥnīṭ* included several stories previously published in earlier books: preferring thoroughness at the expense of duplication, I have included those stories twice on this list.

Al-Mamlaka al-sawdā', 1972

| Arabic Title | English Translation | Date of Composition | Notes |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------|---|
| Al-Maḍhana | The Minaret | ? | |
| Umniyat al-qird | The Monkey's Wish | 1966 | |
| Nāfidha 'alā al-sāḥa | A Window Overlooking the Square | ? | |
| Al-Shafī' | The Mediator | ? | |
| Shajarat al-asmā' | Tree of Names | ? | |
| Al-Mamlaka al-sawdā' | The Black Kingdom | ? | |
| Al-Asmāk | The Fish | ? | |
| Ḥikāyat al-mawqīd | Tale by the Hearth | ? | |
| Taqāsīm 'alā watar al-rabāba | Solos on a Rebab String | ? | First published in <i>al-Ādāb</i> , May 1968. |
| Al-Urjūḥa | The Swing | ? | First published in <i>al-Ādāb</i> . |
| Al-'Alāmāt al-mu'nisa | Distinguishing Marks | ? | |
| Al-Qiṭārāt al-layliyya | Night Trains | ? | |

| | | | |
|----------|------------|--------------------|--|
| Al-Tābūt | The Coffin | September, 1971 | |
|----------|------------|--------------------|--|

Fī darajat khams wa-arbaʿīn miʿawī, 1978

| Arabic Title | English Translation | Date of Composition | Notes |
|---|------------------------------|---------------------|-------|
| Ghurfa fī darajat khams wa-arbaʿīn miʿawī | A Room at 45 Degrees Celsius | October, 1977 | |
| Tāj li-Ṭaybūtha | A Crown for Taybutha | August, 1970 | |
| Al-Ṣarkha | The Scream | May, 1972 | |
| Ilā l-maʿwā | To the Shelter | June, 1973 | |
| Al-Ḥājj | The Pilgrim | 1974 | |
| Sāʿāt ka-l-khuyūl | Clocks Like Horses | July, 1976 | |
| Ilāh al-mustanqaʿāt | God of the Marshes | August, 1976 | |
| Iḥtiḍār al-rassām | Death of the Artist | August, 1977 | |
| Manzil al-nisāʾ | House of Women | 1970-77 | |

Ruʿyā kharīf, 1995

| Arabic Title | English Translation | Date of Composition | Notes |
|------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------|
| Ruʿyā kharīf | Autumn Vision | September, 1983 | |
| Al-Ḥukamāʾ al-thalātha | The Three Wise Men | March, 1986 | |
| Ruʿyā al-burj | Vision of the Tower | August, 1988 | |
| Ḥikāyāt Yūsuf | Yusuf's Tales | March, 1987 | |
| Dāmā, Dāmī, Dāmū | Dāmā, Dāmī, Dāmū | March, 1993 | |
| Aṭyāf al-ghasaq | Twilight Phantoms | August, 1993 | |
| Ṣaḥīfat al-tasāʾulāt | Page of Questions | January, 1991 | |

Taḥnīt, 1998

| Arabic Title | English Translation | Date of Composition | Notes |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------|---|
| Taḥnīt | Mummification | 1966-87 | |
| Al-Baṭṭāt al-baḥriyya | Sea Ducks | 1965-95 | Won first place in 1966 in a short story contest in the Iraqi literary journal <i>al-Jumhūriyya</i> . |
| Ẓahīrat al-qirṭa | Afternoon of the Honey Badger | 1968-95 | |
| Umniyat al-qird | The Monkey's Wish | 1966 | |
| Al-Tābūt | The Coffin | September, 1971 | |
| Al-Şarkha | The Scream | May, 1972 | |
| Ilā l-ma'wā | To the Shelter | June, 1973 | |
| Al-Ḥājj | The Pilgrim | 1974 | |
| Sā'āt ka-l-khuyūl | Clocks Like Horses | July, 1976 | |
| Ilāh al-mustanqa'āt | God of the Marshes | August, 1976 | |
| Balāghāt min al-Marşad | Reports from the Observatory | 1989 | |
| Dāmā, Dāmī, Dāmū | Dāmā, Dāmī, Dāmū | March, 1993 | |

Stories Not Published in Books

| Arabic Title | English Translation | Date of Composition | Notes |
|------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|---|
| Al-Arḍ saqaynāhā | The Land We Irrigated | 1960 | Khuḍayyir's first published story. Appeared in the newspaper <i>al-Ḥaḍāra al-</i> |

| | | | |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------|--|
| | | | <i>baghdādiyya</i> , July 6, 1960. |
| Al-Nīsānī | Al-Nīsānī | 1962 | Published in the Iraqi Writers' Union magazine <i>al-Adīb al-ʿIrāqī</i> . “Among my first attempts at writing stories... It was the result of my service in education in the countryside in Nāṣiriyya (Dhū Qār): its protagonists are peasants, and its dialogue is in the colloquial.” |
| Al-Muharrīj wa-l-amīra al-sawdāʾ | The Jester and the Black Princess | 1966 | |
| Mādhā qāla al-raʾs al-maqṭūʿ | What the Decapitated Head Said | 1966 | |
| Ṣafiyya | The Lion's Share | 1966 | |
| al-Jifa | The Cadaver | 1966 | |
| Awḥamū baʿḍakum baʿḍan | Instill Delusions in Each Other | 1967 | |
| Jāmiʿū al-juthath | The Corpse Collectors | 1967 | |
| al-Nidāʾ | The Proclamation | 1967 | |
| Waṣiyyat jindī | A Soldier's Orders | 1985 | |

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