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For Pauline, who has helped so much with this project
Beirut

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Beirut Awakens: 1860–1900

Modern Beirut’s literature has been intertwined with the city since the nineteenth century. While Beirut is an ancient city, it lacked the stature of the great Arab cities like Damascus, Baghdad, or Cairo. But as the city grew to become a thriving provincial capital in the late 1800s, Beirut also became the home of the Arab world’s first press culture, and many of its intellectuals were foundational figures of the Arab nahda, renaissance. In Arabic-language journals like al-jinān, al-Muqtaṭaf, and al-Mashriq Beirutī intellectuals like Butrus al-Bustani, Sheikh Nassif al-Yaziji, and Father Yusuf Shaykhu debated ideas in passionate editorials and articles. Like many other print publications during the nineteenth century, these journals dedicated a special section to literature, in which writers experimented with new forms of prose and poetic writing, including the realist novel set in the contemporary city. In his first novel, al-Hiyām fi-jinān al-Shām (Passion in Damascene Gardens 1868–1870), Salim Bustani described Beirut as a center of learning exerting a sort of magnetic pull on young individuals from all over the Arab world, such as Sulayman, the novel’s hero, who, “came to Beirut because he had heard that it was advancing in the sciences and in civilization” (Bustani 1868, p. 699). In Arabic, the words for city (madīna) and civilization (tamaddun) share a common root, one which Bustani makes good use of. What is uncanny about Bustani’s work is how much it preempts and foreshadows several of the tropes that have since been used to describe Beirut.

The first of these tropes portrays Beirut as an exceptional space, a cosmopolitan world city. Bustani’s Beirut is described as having rushed up the ladder of development, as the narrator mentions that what Beirut has
achieved in progress in 20 years, Europe took 100 to develop (Bustani 1868, p. 701).

Further, Bustani qualifies this effusive description of Beirut as a site of exception and a paragon of progress by pointing backward into the past just as he gestures toward the future:

Undoubtedly, due to the many schools and reading, (the people) will cast off the robes that they inherited from the centuries of ignorance and each one of them will stride forth with eyes open on the road ahead, walking without fumbling and not believing what he does not see; thus, Beirut will become what it used to be: the motherland of knowledge and science. (Bustani 1868, p. 700)

This particular trope reverberates across nineteenth-century Arab *nabda* accounts of the immediate past as one that has been a dark time for the Arab Middle East. Thus, by alluding to Beirut’s glorious Roman past, Bustani circumvents its Ottoman history and present.

Yet, just as *al-Hiyām* sets up Beirut as a center of progress and learning past and future, the novel suggests that the city can also be dangerous. After all, as the next passage makes clear, it is not only progress that can spread:

Certainly, Beirut danced for a long time in the square of ignorance, when it should have been sitting on the chair of awareness and sobriety. It took more bad habits than good from western civilization, holding on to the shell and not the essence; this poison traveled from it to most of the cities and towns of the East. (Bustani 1868, p. 700)

The dual positioning of Beirut as threat and Beirut as site for the progress of the entire East are both related to Beirut’s perceived position as a space of interchange and a site of influence—and perhaps to continuing fears that the violence that had broken out in Mount Lebanon less than a decade before in 1860 could reignite or spread in the city. But it also highlights Beirut as a colonial space, one at the intersection of East and West.

In this 1868 novel lie the kernels of some of the most enduring tropes about the city of Beirut and some of its most powerful dialectical associations. The city emerges as a multitude of contradictory qualities: progressive, yet nostalgic, a site of knowledge but also of a dangerous hedonism, a producer and transmitter of ideas about modernity and progress but also an exporter of vice and excess to the other cities of the Middle East.

**Wasted Beirut, 1920–1943**

Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire (1299–1922), Lebanon came under French mandate rule, which effectively lasted from 1920 until 1943, although French troops did not leave Lebanon until 1946. The 20 years until
1943, when the country gained its formal independence from the French, were busy ones. Beirut had ceded its centrality as the capital of the Arabic press to Cairo, but the city’s writers and authors continued to produce work that expanded notions of genre, in Lebanon and in the diaspora.

In general, this period of Lebanese history is culturally more associated with the movement that Jens Hanssen has dubbed “mountain Romanticism,” in which writers turned away from the city, striving instead to locate a kind of untouched authenticity in Lebanon’s mountain villages (Hanssen 2005; Salem 2003).

Although the cultural national and diasporic elite may have turned their attention away from Beirut, the city and its problems continued to feature in popular culture, such as in the songs and poems of vernacular poet ‘Umar al-Zinni, whose popularity earned him the title šā‘ir al-ša‘b, the poet of the people. Zinni’s poems and songs—which he performed himself—were scathing social and political critiques that often connected politics and the everyday life of urban Lebanese. In his 1938 poem, Ya Di‘ānik ya Bayrūt (What a waste, O Beirut), Zinni launches into an acerbic depiction of the city’s present. Like Bustani a few decades earlier, Zinni’s poem also introduces concerns about the city as a location of potentially corrupt practices—here, of course, in the Mandate context, Zinni links Beirut’s decline to the nefarious influence of the French presence in Lebanon:

O, you images on the screen/you cheating fraud
You bride with a rattle / You corpse mounted in a coffin
What a waste, O Beirut
(Nu‘mān 1979, p. 118; my translation)

In imagery that emphasizes the grotesque yet feminine nature of the city, Zinni directs his accusatory anger at Beirut, revealing the city to be a simulacrum, an unreal site that is also an uncanny bride and a dead corpse, images both horrifying and lamentable.

The horror of Beirut’s present in Zinni’s poem is matched by a mournful lament apparent in the title phrase that is repeated three times in the poem “ya di‘ānik ya Bayrūt / what a waste, O Beirut.” Just as Bustani’s text did, the poem also reaches into the past to gesture nostalgically to the city’s thwarted possibilities. In particular, Zinni’s poem laments the city’s new reality under the French mandate, suggesting that not only has the latter broken people’s spirits but also has led to the city’s corruption “ideas are broken / spirits are oppressed / freedom has been buried / and only the stick speaks,” before, in the penultimate stanza, declaring “there’s no respectability any more / the law is a plaything / wherever you go, there is gambling / in clubs and in houses / what a waste, O Beirut” (Nu‘mān 1979, p. 118). His final stanza conjures up images of a prison, where “he who enters does not leave, and he who leaves cannot enter” (Nu‘mān 1979, p. 118). If mobility and teleological progress were at the forefront of Bustani’s mind in the late nineteenth century, a few decades later, Zinni is despondent at the thought of any such thing. Further, in his choice of rhyme
scheme (aaabb / ccccb / ddddb / eeeeb / ff.bb / ggggb), Zînni forces together the words Beirut, with tābūt (coffin), nabūt (stick), tamūt (to die), al-rūt (food; in the sentence “people are starving”), buyūt (homes; invaded by gambling, as seen above), and ma bi-fūt (does not enter). The poet rhymes all these words, associated with death, starvation, corruption, and violence to Beirut, shackling the city with all sorts of negative associations.

In another of Zînni’s poems from the same period titled simply “Baynūt,” the poet targets his critique at the city’s inhabitants’ frivolity and links it to impending destruction: “Drinking ’araq, playing cards / racing horses and hunting pigeons / are your capital, Beirut,” continuing on to say “Eating drinking laughing playing / happiness and riding in taxis / are your life, Beirut” (Nu’mān 1979, p. 119). All this “showing off and excess / have exhausted Beirut,” the poet concludes sorrowfully (Nu’mān 1979, p. 119). In Zînni’s poem, it is precisely Beirut’s easygoing lifestyle that becomes problematic; Beirut’s frivolity can only lead to “ziżḥ bi ziżḥ (literally tat, but figuratively rubbish, awfulness) and the destruction of Beirut’s souks” (Nu’mān 1979, p. 119). In 2012, when alternative musician Yasmine Hamdan re-recorded this song, the poignancy and prescience of Zînni’s depiction of a city that danced itself into destruction was obvious to all even as they highlighted the fact that anxieties over the city and its lifestyle did not begin with the civil war.

**GLOBAL BEIRUT, 1950–1975**

The period between the 1950s and the early 1970s in Beirut was one of the most culturally rich and active in the life of any modern Arab capital, although Beirut and Lebanon were not completely unscathed by political turmoil, including the outbreak of civil conflict in 1958, the Arab–Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973, and the expulsion of the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organisation) from Jordan and their relocation to Beirut after 1970. The PLO had been founded in 1964. Nevertheless, those decades marked a moment of prosperity for many, and an especially culturally fertile one for Beirut. Beirut became a destination. It is during this period that, to paraphrase Elise Salem, Beirut’s “aura” began to develop regionally and globally (Salem 2003, p. 138); Mahmoud Darwish describes the city as a place where “Arabs came searching for something missing in their own countries... a lung which a mixture of people... could use to breathe” (Darwish 1995, p. 93).

Beirut became a laboratory for literary and cultural experiments, “busy sticking out a mocking tongue at the sand and the repression on all sides of it. It was a workshop for freedom” (Darwish 1995, pp. 52–53). Founded in the 1950s, journals like al-Adāb and Sh‘ir became known for promoting literary modernisms and for publishing work by poets from across the Arabic-speaking world. In the pages of these journals, and in the many cafes that were now established in the areas around the American University of Beirut, literary and aesthetic debates raged over such issues as modernity, global postcolonial struggles, and the role of art and literature in society.
During this period of rapid urban change in all aspects of life, Beirut itself became the symbol of the modern (Kassir 2011, p. 400). For example, Suhail Idriss’s 1958 novel *al-Kbandaq al-Ghamig*, named after a conservative Beirut neighborhood, stages a critical coming-of-age moment for Sami, its protagonist, as one in which he leaves his conservative neighborhood having, much to his neighbors’ horror, removed his religious garb. In the novel, Sami takes the tram into the heart of the city and, as he settles in, “looks around him, and feels content. How light life is, and how delightful!” (Idriss 1958, p. 111). The further he gets into the city and away from his neighborhood on board the tram, the more “modern” Sami becomes. In the novel, Sami’s journey toward secular modernity culminates in his deeper entrenchment in the urban space. City and modernity are irrevocably entwined.

Even authors whose earlier work had celebrated the Lebanese mountain village, like Emily Nasrallah or Tawfiq Yusuf Awwad, turned their attention to Beirut. In novels like *Tryur Ayld (September Birds)* and *Tawhalin Bayrut (Death in Beirut)*, Nasrallah and Awwad explored Beirut’s liberatory promise for young women from the countryside, but they did not spare the city with a critical gaze either. Beirut was, as it had been for Z’inni and Bustani, a place of dualistic tensions, at once modern and exciting yet potentially dangerous, a place where young women encountered violent ends and young men and women could get lost in material or political excess.

In retrospect, it is remarkable how many artistic works that gesture to the turmoil of the times seem also to be foreshadowing the violence to come. Awwad’s 1972 novel ends as protesting students stream into Martyrs’ Square in the heart of Beirut. In 1974’s *Nazl el-Surur, The Inn of Happiness*, Ziad al-Rahbani situates his musical play’s action in a rundown urban hotel in a Beirut seething with student protests and violence. Rahbani’s status as heir to the Rahbani musical tradition which celebrated an idealized, pastoral, Lebanese village setting made his work’s urban relocation all the more significant, and has been seen as a sign of a continuing generational shift away from the mountain and toward the city and its everyday life (Stone 2007). Sympathetic to political action, the play is mostly concerned with the everyday struggles of ordinary urban dwellers, and emphasizes the marginal and overlooked Beirutis who had been seduced by the city’s rapid modernization and urbanization, but for whom its promise remained elusive.

The crackle and energy of that moment of fervent intellectual and political activity is perhaps best captured in Mahmoud Darwish’s description of Beirut as “a global transformer station that converted every deviation from the norm into a program of action” (Darwish 1995, p. 54). The sentence does not end there, however, and continues “for a public busy securing water and bread, and burying the dead” (Darwish 1995, p. 54). With its language of electrical transformation, the sentence manages to evoke energy and modernity, while its second half reminds its readers of those for whom all of this meant little if the basic necessities of life were unsecured. It sums
up the city during this time as follows: not only a place of electric political and intellectual fervor but also of growing inequalities; not only a site of modernity and experimentation but also of insouciance. In April 1975, it all came to head in an outbreak of violence that was to endure off and on for 15 years, and transform the city into “a mythological prototype of the city torn by civil war, disheveled by death, dismembered by destruction” (Khoury 1995, p. 137).

The Necessity and Difficulty of Writing Beirut, 1975–1990

In 1975, Beirut and Lebanon were irrevocably altered by the outbreak of civil war. Initially, a relatively clear-cut conflict between left-leaning Lebanese and Palestinian, often, but not exclusively Muslim political groups and right-leaning Lebanese mainly Christian militias, by the time the fighting was brought to an end in 1990, the conflict had devolved into a messy intersectarian morass. Very early on in the conflict, Beirut was split into two, west and east, with a demarcation line known as the Green Zone separating the city. Downtown Beirut was shut off from both sides of the city, and gradually emptied of its shops, cinemas, theaters, and public life, becoming by the late 1970s, a wasteland.

As the country disintegrated and the urban fabric was altered beyond recognition, Lebanese authors began to experiment with narrative form in an unprecedented manner, producing some of the most formally and thematically innovative work in modern Arabic literature. As Elias Khoury eloquently put it:

The unbridled spaces of war... made daily life in Beirut a myth in itself. Survival was our leitmotif, our sole concern to safeguard body and soul, to recreate life in the midst of overwhelming horror and death. At the center of this, writing became a necessary means of survival. Naming the horror was a way to protect oneself from it. (Khoury 1995, p. 138)

In novels like Little Mountain (1977), White Masks (1981), The Journey of Little Gandhi (1989), Beirut Nightmares (1977), Sitt Marie Rose (1978), The Story of Zabra (1980), authors like Khoury, Ghada Samman, Etel Adnan and Hanan al-Sheikh found creative ways to name the horror, and exploded the form of the novel into prose fragments as they wrote searing accounts of everyday life in the war-torn city and condemned the violent social forces that had brought about its destruction.

If novels from that period are angry, explosive, and fragmentary, using the form of the novel itself as a way to push the boundaries of what could be expressed in language, its characters often restlessly wandering a restless city, the poetry of Beirut during this period is likewise haunted by the possibility of expressing what has happened to the city in verse. The early days of conflict still allowed for the possibility of poetry that in form and content attempted a
reconciliation with the city. So, for example, in “Beirut, Lady of the World,” from 1976’s poetry collection *To Beirut, The Feminine, With My Love*, Nizar Qabbani, known across the Arab world for his love poetry, describes Beirut as a beautiful woman who has been robbed of her beauty. In the poem’s final stanza, he declares:

I still love you, crazy Beirut
You river of blood and jewels
I still love you, good-hearted Beirut,
Chaotic Beirut,
Beirut of godless hunger and godless plenty
I still love you Beirut of justice
And Beirut of injustice
Hostage Beirut,
And Beirut of the murderer and the poet
I still love you Beirut of passion
And Beirut of murder from artery to artery
I still love you despite human folly
I still love you, Beirut
Why don’t we start now?

(Qabbani 1976, pp. 46–47)

In Qabbani’s poem, despite the chaos and extremes of the war, the city is nevertheless redeemed and redeemable; the poet and the city may have a chance to start over together. This modicum of hopefulness was not to last long, however, as the 1970s segued into the 1980s and the conflict seemed to simultaneously become more entrenched and more confusing as new players entered into the field and alliances shifted.

The tragic crescendo of the conflict was the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the siege of Beirut in the summer of 1982. For Qabbani, whose wife Balsis had died in a suicide attack on the Iraqi embassy in Beirut a year earlier, his relationship to the city changed irrevocably. “In the poet’s grief, the city becomes narrower and narrower,” he writes in his long eulogy titled “Qasidat Balsis / Balsis’ Poem” (Qabbani 1981: lines 168–169). Not only does the city feels narrow but also feels dangerous to both people and language itself:

Beirut . . . every day murders one of us
And looks every day for a victim
Death . . . is in our coffee cups . . .
In our apartment keys . . .
In the flowers on our balcony . . .
In the pages of the newspapers . . .
And in the letters of the alphabet . . .

(Qabbani 1981: lines 66–72)
Moreover, in Qabbani’s murderous city, people are forced to evaluate their relationships with each other, but also, their relationship to writing, now firmly caught up in the violence, as the city and all those in it:

Enter into the age of ignorance...
We enter into savagery
And backwardness... and ugliness... and
We are entering into the barbaric ages...
Where writing is a journey
Between pieces of shrapnel

(Qabbani 1981: lines 73–78)

As he mourns, Qabbani wonders, “what can poetry say, Balqis / in this time? / What can poetry say?” (Qabbani 1981: lines 414–415). In its final three lines, the poem starts itself shrinking through the removal first of one word, then another, until finally the letters of the remaining two words are detached completely, unmooring language itself from the text and the city.

As they recall the 1982 siege of Beirut, poets call into question the use of writing during a time of conflict. In his poem of that time, titled “The Desert / The Diary of Beirut Under Siege, 1982,” Adonis declares that in Beirut, “The papers that love ink, / The alphabet, the poets say goodbye, / And the poem says goodbye” (Adonis 1984, p. 151), gesturing to the impossibility of writing poetry in a city where “the houses leave their walls and I am / Not I” (Adonis 1984, p. 153). In Memory for Forgetfulness, Mahmoud Darwish’s poetic prose memoir from the 1980s, the formal experimentation in both genres underlines the poet’s quest to find the language to commemorate the conflict and the city. In the work, the poetic becomes ethical, until finally the poet resolves to remain silent. But then, Darwish runs into a journalist who questions this decision. Again drawing into question the adequacy of poetic language to capture the world of the city under siege, Darwish ultimately collapses the distinction between the urban body and poetic expression:

Beirut itself is the writing, rousing and creative. Its true poets and singers are its people and fighters... They are the genuine founders of a writing that for a long, long time will have to search for a linguistic equivalent to their heroes and their amazing lives. How then can the new writing—which needs time enough for leisure—crystallize and take form in a battle that has such a rhythm of rockets? And how can traditional verse—and all verse is traditional at this moment—define the poetry now fermenting in the belly of the volcano? (Darwish 1995, p. 64)

During much of Lebanon’s violent and protracted civil war, authors and poets grappled with the inadequacy of language to capture the everyday that they were now enduring. Once the war was brought to an end, they had a new struggle: to try and recuperate the memory of a city that they felt to be endangered by the controversial reconstruction project. Beirut’s center became the site of struggle in these new politics of memory.
Much has been written about the astonishing literary and creative output of the 1990s in Lebanon and its relationship to the politics of commemoration, as if to confirm Elias Khoury’s statement that “in this city systematically ravaged by civil war, the only space left for memory is literature” (Khoury 1995, p. 139; Salem 2003; Hayek 2014). In my book, Beirut: Imagining the City, I show how novels of the 1990s are effectively commemorative counter-memories that deliberately call into question the policies and narratives of reconstruction initiated by the entwinement of Lebanese politics and private capital (Hayek 2014). By inserting their protagonists—and more importantly, their protagonists’ everyday memories of life in the area under reconstruction—back into the landscape of central Beirut, these novels by authors like Hoda Barakat, Rashid Da’if, and Hanan al-Shaykh contrast personal memories and personal claims to the city with the “culture of amnesia” promulgated by the Lebanese political and business elite (Haugbolle 2010, p. 72). For example, in Barakat’s The Tiller of Waters, the narrator wanders the downtown area and names all the stores that used to be there in a sequence of pedestrian speech acts that not only archives these no longer extant sites but also reminds those who knew them of their location:

I convinced myself to take a serious walk to the further end of the Place des Martyrs, as far as the Café Parisiana and opposite the shop of Qaysar Amir, king of fireworks (…) Then I made a turn at Zayn, the fresh juice seller… I passed in front of the Café Laronda, then the theater of Shushu the comedian, and went on to Gaumont Palace (Barakat 2004, p. 43)

By reclaiming these memories of the prewar city, authors of the 1990s like Barakat drew on their personal knowledge of the cityscape to reinsert themselves and their readers into the urban landscape and national memoryscape.

Such vivid spatial memories are not accessible to a newer generation of Beirut-based writers and artists, whose relationship to the city center is always mediated by the memories of an older generation. Since 2006, a younger generation of authors like Rabee Jaber, Sahar Mandour, and Hilal Chouman, as well as graphic novelists like Lena Merhej and Mazen Kerbaj, have used art not only to respond in creative ways to the ongoing crises in the country (such as the assassination of ex-Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and various political and cultural figures, including Samir Kassir in 2005, also the 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon, civil conflict in 2008, religiously motivated terror attacks, multiple rounds of fighting in Lebanon’s second largest city, Tripoli, the ongoing refugee crisis from the war in Syria, and growing political dysfunction that at the time of writing (2016) has blocked the election of a president for almost two years, and has led to the country’s worst ecological crisis in decades), but also to bring into question older modes of writing the city, without glossing over its legacy of conflict (Hayek 2014).
Contemporaneity and the representation of the present preoccupies many of these recent novels. For example, a few months after Hariri’s assassination in February 2005, Rabee Jaber published *The Mehlis Report*, named after Detlev Mehlis, the German special investigator brought in to investigate the murder, (it implicated both Lebanese officials and Syria, for its involvement). The title’s evocation of Mehlis places the novel firmly in its moment. The main character of Jaber’s novel is an architect named Saman Yarid, who, like all the rest of his friends and “Beirut, (is) suspended, waits for the unknown” (Jaber 2013, p. 62). In terse, disjointed prose, the novel produces some of the anxieties and tensions of the city during those days, as well as its contradictions: “the city was hopping, as if it hadn’t been rocked by explosions just a few weeks earlier. As if there weren’t a threat of it being completely upended at any hour. At any moment” (Jaber 2013, p. 35).

As the novel gestures to an unknown future and an anxious present, it also connects Saman’s world with the city’s distant and more recent past. As he wanders the city obsessively, Saman passes by buildings whose history is intimately entwined with his own family’s history, since many were built by his grandfather, also named Saman Yarid, or by the older Saman’s competitors. Saman moves around the contemporary city recalling stories of his grandfather’s time, and of the destruction caused by the war. But Saman also maps Beirut in the present through his wandering past specific shops, buildings, restaurants, etc. Significantly, Saman registers the change wrought not only by conflict but also by ongoing urban development, some of which he is responsible for.

The novel’s connection to the past is consolidated in its second half, narrated by Saman’s sister Josephine, who was murdered during the civil war. Josephine inhabits an underworld where those who have died violent deaths attempt to condense their entire lives into writing, an act that is both necessary because the dead “don’t want to forget”—in fact, their environment will not let them, since every scrap of paper they use is kept in the archive, where nothing can be torn up—but also impossible, since “words wouldn’t say what I wanted to say” (Jaber 2013, pp. 185, 183). The novel seems to gesture to the futility of trauma narratives. The dead who inhabit this underworld read and write obsessively, trying to narrate their lives and deaths, to no avail. Yet, *The Mehlis Report* also suggests that Josephine and the others like her, who include Rafiq Hariri and Samir Kassir, who remains unnamed in this section of the novel, are there by choice because they are unable to let go of their memories of their physical selves. Josephine’s purgatory of remembering, and incomplete dissatisfactory commemoration is, the novel suggests, one of her own making. With Josephine’s story, Jaber seems to draw a large question about the usefulness of testimonial narratives as a form in which to engage with Beirut’s bloody past, its anxious present, and its unknown future.

Yet, despite the anxieties and tensions of living in a city on the verge of eruption and yet another potential destruction, the novel makes it clear that there is nowhere else that Saman can see himself. “What’s keeping him in this city?” Saman wonders at some point, before tying his sense of belonging firmly
to his sense of place: “he knows these paths so well. He’s lived his whole life here. He never once traveled far from Beirut without feeling as if he’d left half of himself behind” (Jaber 2013, p. 116). In a novel where those who leave are forgotten by a city endlessly changing and relentlessly transforming, the desire to stay attached to this place becomes valuable in and of itself.

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