

**Title:** Literature and War, Beirut 1993-1995: Three Case Studies.

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War novels by Lebanese authors Hoda Barakat ('Ahl-lil-hawa'), Abdo Wazen ('Hadiqat al-hawass') and Sabah al-Kharrat Zueyn ('Al- Bayt al-ma-il, wal-waqt, wal-jidran') are discussed, with a focus on the emergence of a new type of writing. Themes include the breakdown on geographic boundaries and categories, silence, and an interior monologue of an isolated narrator.

The eminent literary critic Edward W. Said rightly believes that texts are worldly, are events, "a part of the social world, human life, and of course, the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted." A little further down in that same essay, titled "Secular Criticism," Said adds that what he wants to explore in this type of criticism is the individual consciousness which is "placed at a sensitive nodal point . . . this consciousness at that critical point."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, my commitment to a study of the literature of what I have called "Wounded Beirut"<sup>3</sup> springs from the tragic feeling of loss and disintegration which hit us, the Lebanese people, when the war exploded in our country (1975-90) and threatened us with total annihilation. We lost our bearings during our long war, and my preoccupation with the artistic rendering of this experience saved my soul and allowed me to carry on with reading and writing. The process was certainly cathartic, and an immediacy was constantly established between the text, its author, its reader, and myself. In this sense, the text was a living thing with its own secrets, ambiguities, resistance, and the many "games" it plays with the reader.

Moreover, a generalized condition of despair and alienation prevails in times of crisis, a condition which defines the three texts I have chosen to analyze. Their authors were certainly part of the social order, but they witnessed and recorded its tragic disintegration. In their late thirties, Hoda Barakat, Abdo Wazen, and Sabah al-Kharrat Zueyn all came of age during the war. They wrote their respective war novels during the conflict's final, extremely violent phase, and they published them a little later, between 1993 and 1995. Journalists as well, the three authors were deeply involved in the daily events of their country. They recorded such events in the best Arab newspapers to earn a living,<sup>4</sup> but they also transmuted those same historical moments into literary works which effectively ushered in a new mode of writing in Lebanon, a new sensibility placed at a "nodal point," a consciousness at a "critical point."

Thus, in the three texts I have chosen as case studies of writing in "Wounded Beirut," geographic boundaries have broken down. The categories of "ours" and "theirs" have lost all meaning, at every level. There are deep ruptures within the self, between the self and others, the self and society, the self and reality at large. Dialogue is broken off, and so is communication. The world is become deaf and mute. Silence prevails. The three texts, moreover, are all built on the interior monologue of a totally isolated narrator. These narrators' links with the community are nonexistent, and they are all caught up, graphically, in fragile postures which dominate their tales: a large man sitting on a high rock ecstatically merging with the moonlit night after having killed his beloved, in Hoda Barakat's novel *Ahl lil-hawa* (Of Dust and Love); a man half-bent over his table in the darkness of a night which reflects his innermost somber core, in a text by Abdo Wazen titled *Hadiqat al-hawass* (Garden of the Senses); and finally, a woman standing hesitantly at the doorstep of an oblique house, unable to decide whether to go in or out, in Sabah al-Kharrat Zueyn's dramatic poem *Al- Bayt al-ma'il, wal-waqt, wal-jidran* (The Oblique House, and Time, and the Walls).<sup>5</sup>

As for the other, the sexual partner, whether man or woman, he/she is completely occluded. We hear only the interior monologue of the narrator. In a postmodern stance, the self, like the other, is anonymous, with hardly any physical description, any history, any personal name. The authors deal with what Raymond Williams calls "structures of feeling"<sup>6</sup> rather than events, against the backdrop of a city, breaking down as it is being dismembered and burned to the ground by its own inhabitants. All points of reference thus disappear, all sense of orientation is lost, movement disintegrates, and feelings are pushed to the absolute limit.<sup>7</sup> Such "structures of feeling" convey fear, loss, despair, dispossession, and emptiness, in an often fragmented, syncopated style. Maurice Blanchot's fragmented modern man, fragmented writing-l'écriture fragmentée- readily come to mind.<sup>8</sup>

Hoda Barakat's protagonist in *Ahl lil-hawa* has just killed his beloved. Perched now on a high rock, he feels suddenly peaceful, having mended his fragmented body when he murdered his lover. The novel opens in arresting fashion:

I stood on a high rock after killing her. I closed my eyes for a long time until I recollected myself. My muscles relaxed, my limbs rested and reconnected, like water calming down and reintegrating, following much turmoil.

My skin gently grew cooler with the soft breeze, now that I had regained it, now that I had recovered the strong envelope which keeps me intact without any holes - a new man.

The scene is lyrical, the moon lovely, the night harmonious. Anyone who has never experienced the ecstasy of killing his beloved, of fully absorbing her soul, knows nothing of life, says the narrator. Dawn is about to break. The man sings loudly to welcome the sun that will warm him up.

Thus begins Barakat's novel, which later doubles back on itself at its conclusion, erasing what it had stated at the outset by letting the narrator say: "But all this may not have happened. She may very well have gone back to her husband. I may well have invented the murder scene. I am mad, after all, am I not? and he sings comically: 'Ya ley!'" Framed in this fashion, Barakat's tale is a parody of the Lebanese war. Her protagonist was kidnapped and tortured. He went mad and was placed in the (psychiatric) Hospital of the Cross, above Nahr el-Kalb on the east side of Beirut. The hospital (which is still in operation) becomes the emblem of a sick nation murdering itself. Through its clever play with spatiotemporal shifts, Barakat's novel unfolds as a tale recounted by her deranged narrator. He first met the woman during a heavy bombardment, the narrator says. She took refuge in his village and in his home. They made love under heavy shelling. He did not want to pull out of her. He wanted to breathe in her very soul. She, however, never spoke, never reacted, yielding compliantly to his insatiable desire. The two bodies became one, boundaries fell, and in a maddening "nodal point" he absorbed her completely by killing her.

In her narrator's inner monologue, Barakat creates an incredible amalgam of jarring elements, juxtaposing lyric, erotic, humorous, and highly realistic scenes all set among the mentally ill in the hospital. A kind of shock treatment seems to be at work here, as human behavior is conditioned by the savage bombardment going on outside, and shock creates parody, a forceful parody of the Lebanese war, as the male protagonist loses his mind in the midst of collective hysteria. Barakat had prepared us for this parody in her first novel, *The Stone of Laughter* (orig. 1990, Eng. 1994), where the protagonist was also marginalized in the midst of a mad society. In "Of Dust and Love" he literally loses his mind-or so the doctors say. The ambiguity is maintained against the Freudian reality of prolonged sexual intercourse, leading to the ecstasy of murder with which the novel opens. Now her protagonist sits on a high rock singing "Ya ley!," as we have seen. Witness the disturbed condition of the narrator, one night in the hospital:

At first, I used to be quiet in the shelter. But when I heard screams, my whole body shook. My hair stood up on my head, my limbs were electrified, and an incredible force would swell me up. I would yell and hit my head against the wall until blood gushed out. And a deep, fragmented sound would overcome me, would erase, would absorb the sound of the shelling. The total delight of that new sound. (20)

But witness as well the lyricism of the love scenes:

For the first time I make love without looking at her. I don't see her body, some flowing liquid for drink. . . . I lie down next to her, I look at her face with ecstasy. I pull out of her but I know I shall never leave her. . . . I breathe over her mouth to catch her breath. . . . One day she will leave, I say to myself. (64)

Thus, personal and collective dramas are looked at through a "de-centered perspective," as defined by Linda Hutcheon. The boundaries between Barakat's protagonist, his beloved, and the world at large are not only unbalanced but ever moving, for the self has lost all sense of reality. Hutcheon adds, in her study *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, that postmodern parody often conveys "ironic discontinuity." She thinks that "parody is a perfect postmodern form, . . . for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies."<sup>9</sup> In fact, Barakat does incorporate and challenge, with intense dramatic irony, the cruel practices in which people indulged during the Lebanese war. Her parody is even more ferocious in that it is based on the "de-centered perspective" of her crazy narrator.

In contrast to Barakat, Wazen and Zueyn neither incorporate nor challenge those wartime practices. Dramatic irony, however, runs through their two texts, and the war is continually present/absent. Individual dramas are recollected almost mutely, with hardly any sound. As a result, a kind of restrained violence lurks everywhere, but it is never rendered with the factual realism found in Barakat. Thus, Wazen's protagonist in "Garden of the Senses" is immersed in total darkness. Dead to his own body, dead to the world, he adds that he himself has no history, for he has lost his memory. Caught up in the small confined space of his bedroom, he knows he will never be able to overcome his feelings of desolation, despair, and emptiness. His inner monologue is a kind of murmur, his utter alienation caught up in the space of the text like a deep wound.<sup>10</sup>

His story is quite simple, and contains hardly any "event" at all. It unfolds through his inner monologue by means of images, metaphors, and symbols. Highly poetic, the narration makes abrupt halts, shifts fluidly backward and forward, repeating musically in a kind of "theme and variations" fashion the same few obsessions which haunt the narrator. "Structures of feeling" take shape, and the narrator says, in one typical passage, "I bend over myself at night to confront the fear which invades me, to kill the slowly ramping coldness which sneaks into my body, to overcome the choking inner feeling of isolation, of incapacitation and paralysis" (10).

Images of numbness and paralysis recur; others speak of broken glass similar to his broken soul, of his body crumbling down like a heap of ashes, et cetera. He feels fragmented and scattered, and seems to be standing at the edge of an abyss, which once again sheds light on the theme of human instability and vacillation in the midst of the shambles of a city called Beirut. A sense of unreality dominates the narration, and the lovers are often described as shadows about to disappear.

Elsewhere they are dislocated, dispersed, absent/present at the surface of the narrator's psyche. Their story is stripped down to a stark double movement, which will be the case as well for Sabah al-Kharrat Zueyn's dramatic poem. In Wazen's "Garden of the Senses" the woman arrives one day from nowhere and departs another day to nowhere. Silently, at dawn, she goes out, leaving the door half-open. The narrator watches her without any sound. He then struggles with the white paper lying on his table, struggles to write down their story.

His solitude is primordial. His only link with reality is a small patch of sky he can see through his window, plus the sound of waves breaking on the shore. The shimmering moon sheds some faint light on an otherwise dark scene. Isolation and strangeness prevail everywhere.

We were strangers [he says], complete strangers, absent. Time was not ours, nor was the window overlooking the sea. . . . Anguish burned us up. We became the shadows of bodies which had been alive, of creatures that ceased to exist, present/absent to the world. . . . We looked at ourselves as we were quickly scattered in the darkness of our prison. Our faces were many and we had no faces. . . . Silence united us. . . . When we met we were absent, fading away like the destruction around us, like the debris we became at the end of our love. (30-31)

The woman slowly metamorphoses into a symbol, and a pseudoreligious level is contrapuntally introduced, with political overtones. The narrator discovers scars all over her body, old wounds which continue to bleed. She never explains them, and he is both intrigued and moved. Thus she reflects obliquely, in her own body, the wounds of Beirut. Wazen here joins scores of poets and novelists who have addressed Beirut as their (female) beloved.<sup>11</sup>

She leaves. Bent over his desk, he is obsessed with the single haunting *idée fixe* of the white paper before him. Whiteness connotes death in Wazen's text, from beginning to end.<sup>12</sup> Will he be able to write, or will he die? Struggling for meaning, Wazen builds up a multilayered construct he calls *nass* (a text), refusing to pin it down more precisely. In this fashion, he entertains much ambiguity and develops, in counterpoint, one more level for his composition. The theme of writing echoes intimately that of the sexual relationship. Unstable boundaries between the self and itself, between the self and the other, between the self and the world threaten to annihilate the couple. Unstable boundaries threaten writing as well with its own impossibility. "To be or not to be" rests on "to write or not to write." Each word Wazen uses, each assemblage of words, images, and metaphors, creates new harmonies among several levels of reality. Or, rather, new disharmonies invest the fragmented poetic prose. Reality has been irremediably shattered outside. Will writing mend it within the author?

In fact, the conclusion of the text releases language, endowing the function of writing with great ambiguity.

Silent I am. Far away, muffled voices are heard. Voices out of my own night, out of the universe's night. Black papers in front of me. . . . I expect nobody. . . . Her face fades away. I don't remember her face any more. . . . The white papers fill my eyes. My eyes close. The dense white papers in front of me.

Alone. I realize I am alone. I don't remember exactly what has happened. I only remember I am writing. I write so that I won't die. I write to die the death we did not die together.

Alone. I face my papers. They are wet with her water, her blueness, her smell, which spreads over my face, over my hands. I write to acknowledge her absence, writing will not imprison her. Writing is born out of the instant of

her vanishing away. That instant which burnt her up. Like desire which remains alive in an ever absent longing. (134)

Desire is fixed on the white paper, as Wazen salvages life through the completion of his text.

Sabah al-Kharrat Zueyn's dramatic poem "The Oblique House, and Time, and the Walls" bears fascinating parallels with Wazen's text. Silence and isolation prevail as in "Garden of the Senses." A first-person narrator is described with neither name nor features, except for her very white skin and her slim fragile body. She stands at the doorstep of an "oblique house," undecided. Will she go in or will she return to where she came from, one day, by train? Unstable boundaries threaten her, as she walks in circles in a misty city. She stands at the doorstep of that house as if at a razor's edge, with abysmal depths ever present in her psyche. In counterpoint here, as was the case with Wazen's text, she weaves her tale between what had happened a year ago and the need to capture those events in writing at the present moment. The theme of writing as an act of consciousness, giving life to the self, acquires existential importance due to the total absence of any other points of reference.

Zueyn's story is stripped down to a few essential occurrences, as was the case with Wazen's text. The woman narrator comes to the city by train. She hesitantly steps into the "oblique house," where four white walls stare at her, walls she often feels coalescing into a single huge cement edifice about to enfold and crush her. She meets the man immediately upon her arrival inside the house. With great hostility, she refers to him in practically every scene as he or the other. They play out an extremely violent sexual relationship. She feels broken down, dead, scattered. She leaves, comes back, then departs for good. A year later, she reenacts their devious relationship in writing. Here is her recollection of their last day together, as she was about to leave:

I woke out of a sleep that was not sleep, the sun warmed up the windows and the corners of the cold house, so painfully quiet, I smiled to the other, the other who came toward me without a smile, who was so deeply still when I writhed with pain, when I writhed under my destruction, I could not sleep, I had been subjected to such perversion, such perversion he exercised on me, and my time went out of hand, I lost my face in the dim light . . . , and when I tried to come closer to his body, for it was time [to leave] and time and space were annihilated, when I tried to come closer, he stepped back, empty space stretched out in front of me, the impossible mad space, my body stood still, such pain, such pain on my white body, my body crumbling down during that last morning, I couldn't stand up, darkness all around me, and he fell down and went away without turning to look at me, and the maddening silent space as if language too had gone mad, totally paralyzed . . . (32-33)

Highly charged language captures the recollected past experience, while body language rather than speech conveys the lived moment. Interestingly, Zueyn's dramatic poem is constructed in seventy-five vignettes called "scenes." The text could be performed beautifully by two mute actors, playing out a recitation by a backstage narrator. Highly visual, the scenes are evoked in syncopated style, with full-stops only at the end of each part. Thus, an accumulation of short, gasping sentences with commas-brief pauses needed to catch one's breath- evoke this extreme relationship on the verge of a madness unto death. Pattern and rhythm are created through desperate leitmotifs (encountered in Barakat and Wazen as well). Words such as fear, despair, annihilation, anguish, emptiness, madness, and guilt fill the space of each scene, charged with an almost unbearable intensity.

Such extreme "structures of feeling" are dramatized by bodies bent over, crouched, bleeding, dislocated, fragmented, at the edge of an abyss, or otherwise terrified, hiding in bed beneath several blankets.

To convey such outer limits of living and perceiving, the language Zueyn uses so brilliantly is composed of a succession of sentences which accumulate vertically, endlessly. As a result, those syncopated sentences thrown onto the page as if by blasts of wind create waves of highly compressed emotions at the point of explosion-and indeed they do often explode. In the chaos of each instant, not only do sentences accumulate like blasts announcing the approach of a destructive tornado, but thoughts, feelings, and action follow in the same brutal way, contradictory, stubborn, submitting to the tyranny of the instant and the arbitrary reign of desire. Fear, hatred, love, attraction, and repulsion-all merge to convey an atmosphere of tremendous violence and passion. Language and silence, living and nonliving, the scarred faces, the shattered selves are imitated stylistically by a broken-down language and the failure of words to express a primitive, sinful human condition.

Moreover, Zueyn's spatiotemporal units seem to crush or smother the female narrator, who strains for air. The walls which are featured in the title stand for this claustrophobic feeling of being crushed as if by cement, by entire buildings, by the city itself, crumbling down on the horizon. In perfect mimesis, words are lost. They

struggle and break down under tremendous pressures. Like the wounded and bleeding bodies, words as well are injured and incapacitated. Rescuing words, language, and meaning, as was the case with Abdo Wazen, becomes the only reality for Zueyn, an impossible reality.

The final scene before the fall of the "curtain" presents the debris of time and dismembered bodies yearning for death. The narrator recalls, ultimately, their pain, their distorted selves, their memories and madness, even as she tries to escape and to glean some meaning from it all. But words fail her, and she can find no such meaning whatsoever. Utter chaos usurps the space while the white walls observe her constantly. The closing sentence is about writing itself, which is as sinful as the protagonist's own soul: "I did not find the meaning . . . our things in our death ended up taking us unawares, no memory of a city, our souls escaped our bodies, our bodies washed away our sins, but I came back every day committing the sin of writing, and every day I wished I were dead, I wished to abolish the abyss from which I came" (96).

To recapitulate: an absolutely desperate stance at the end of Sabah al-Kharrat Zueyn's dramatic poem; the highly ambiguous function of writing in Abdo Wazen's text; and self-parody in Hoda Barakat's novel ("I am mad! Ya leyl!"). Could one perhaps understand such a new type of writing in Beirut as the result of a harrowing situation in a fragmented epoch and a destroyed city? We should pause for a moment and recall that when the fighting finally ceased in Lebanon, the Lebanese failed to understand both the war and the ceasefire. What were the reasons for the destruction of a city and a nation by its own people?

What had been achieved? How would we reconstruct and reinvent our boundaries and our identities? We found no answers to those haunting questions.

But our artists did. They did not so much give us answers as dramatize in their works a completely mad situation, a "no exit" condition. Witness this one last passage from "The Oblique House":

Our bodies went through tunnels, walked in narrow streets, I was separated from him, I stopped seeing him, I was in deep pain hoping for a time outside this space, I was at the zenith of violence, bending my shattered body, and he in his silence tried not to lose me . . . , and the city was dreamlike, its houses reflecting a lost language with their closed doors and windows, its houses in the paralysis of my voice, . . . its dead houses, . . . our ghostlike bodies trying to patch up reality and madness. (95-96)

Are we about to see the end of such tunnels? we wonder along with our young authors. Barakat, Wazen, and Zueyn have certainly ushered in a new epoch in the literature of Lebanon, an epoch marked by radical demands and new languages. Texts are worldly, after all. The absence of such new literary pressures would be unimaginable amid the debris of a city both hated and loved by her own people.

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1 I dedicate this short poem to the companion who held me tight, during the war, when we watched Beirut aflame and the collapse of what we thought of as our stable boundaries.

2 Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic*, Cambridge (Ma.), Harvard University Press, 1983, pp. 4 & 15. My essay is a revised version of a paper delivered at an international conference ("For a Critical Culture") honoring Edward Said, held 29 June to 1 July 1997 in Beirut.

3 I used the expression "Wounded Beirut" for the first time in an essay titled "The Image of the City: Wounded Beirut," published in *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* (the American University in Cairo), 7 (Spring 1987), pp. 27- 52. The essay was reprinted in *The View from Within: Writers and Critics on Contemporary Arabic Literature*, eds. F. J. Ghazoul and B. Harlow, Cairo, American University in Cairo Press, 1994, pp. 53-76. Also, a book on the literature of Wounded Beirut is in preparation.

4 Barakat lives in Paris today, writes for al-Hayat, and broadcasts news on Radio al-Sharq. Wazen also writes for al-Hayat and Zueyn for An-Nahar. Both live in Beirut.

5 Hoda Barakat, *Ahl-lil-hawa*, Beirut, Dar an-Nahar, 1993, p. 7. The author uses hawa ambiguously, for it means "wind" but also "love." It was my friend the novelist Dominique Edde who suggested to me the beautiful translation of the title as "Of Dust and Love," but the novel has not yet come out in English. Barakat's first novel,

Hajar al-dihk (London, Riad el-Rayyes Books, 1990), has appeared in English as *The Stone of Laughter* (tr. Sophie Bennett, New York, Interlink Books, 1994) and in French as *La pierre du rire* (tr. Nadine Acoury, Paris, Actes Sud, 1996). Abdo Wazen, *Hadiqat al-hawass* (Garden of the Senses), Beirut, Dar al-Jadid, 1993. See my review in *The Beirut Review* (Beirut,

7 [Spring 1996], pp. 145-52), which has inspired parts of the present discussion. Sabah al-Kharrat Zueyn, *Al-Bayt al-ma'il wal-waqt wal-jidran* (The Oblique House, and Time, and the Walls), Beirut, Dar Amwaj, 1995). Excerpts from all three texts are in my own translation; parenthetical page references are to the original Arabic texts.

6 This expression recurs in Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1973.

7 See Nathalie Sarraute, *L'ère du soupçon: Essais sur le roman*, Paris, Gallimard, 1956, where her discussion of Kafka in the wake of Dostoevsky applies to the ethos of the three Lebanese authors I am analyzing here. Sarraute writes what I have partly translated: "Ici, ou des distances infinies comme les espaces planétaires separent les êtres les uns des autres, ou vous avez, à tout moment, 'l'impression qu'on a coupé avec vous toute liaison', tous les points de repère disparaissent, le sens de l'orientation s'emousse, les mouvements peu à peu se dérèglent, les sentiments se désagrègent (ce qui subsiste encore de l'amour n'est qu'une mêlée brutale dans laquelle les amants sous les yeux indifférents des spectateurs, 's'acharnent l'un sur l'autre, déçus impuissants à s'aider' . . ." (51-52).

8 Maurice Blanchot, *Le livre à venir*, Paris, Gallimard, 1959, pp. 153-72. Blanchot writes of a fateful disintegration ("disintégration inévitable"), of the dislocated, discordant, fragmented individual, or all that the individual has missed out on ("le caractère disloqué, discordant et fragmenté de l'être ou . . . les manques de l'homme"); such elements abound in my three case studies.

9 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, New York, Routledge, 1988, p. 11.

10 Maurice Blanchot expresses this feeling beautifully when he writes, "La solitude au niveau du monde est une blessure"; see *L'espace littéraire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1955, p. 9.

11 Suffice it here to mention Nizar Qabbani, Mahmoud Darwish, Adonis, and Nadia Tueni among others. See my book, *La ville, source d'inspiration: le Caire, Khartoum, Londres, Beyrouth, Paola Scala*, Stuttgart, Steiner, 1998.

12 Maurice Blanchot's *L'espace littéraire* comes to mind here, as the following subtitles suggest: "La solitude essentielle" (Essential Solitude), "L'Œuvre et l'espace de la mort" (The Book and the Space of Death), and "Recherche d'une juste mort" (Search for the Proper Death). Interestingly, Abdo Wazen told me recently that he was obsessed with death as he wrote his text inside the city at war. He wanted to go to the extreme limit of the sexual relationship and beyond, into that symbolic dimension I have indicated here. He also confirmed that he greatly admires Maurice Blanchot and the latter's concepts of "fragmented modern man" and "fragmented writing."

Unstable

I stand

looking in front of me

looking behind me

I call you

I stretch out to you

come to me

don't let me fall

don't let me lose you

don't let me lose myself.

- Mona Takieddine Amyuni1

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