

Effacing the Author, or the Detective as Medium

Fathi Ghanim and Elias Khoury

In a 1980 essay for the weekly literary supplement to the Lebanese daily *al-Safir*, the prominent Lebanese author and critic Elias Khoury argued that, while Arab modernism has “managed to adapt all the forms of Western modernism, from the nation-state to the police and modernist art,” still “one particular art form has remained impossible to borrow: the detective novel [*al-riwāyah al-būlīsiyyah*].”¹ Khoury backs up his claim by highlighting the ideological role detective fiction plays in Western capitalist society. In the West, Khoury writes, the bourgeois class exercises power through a “complex network of state apparatuses” that allow the capitalist order to “reaffirm its ‘logical, rational’ nature . . . as one that defends against the baser social instincts and impulses it must suppress.” The police officer emerges as the epitome of this nature (“law incarnate,” in Khoury’s phrase), a hero figure rather like G. K. Chesterton’s “unsleeping sentinels,” who guard civilization from barbarous criminality.² In the Arab world, however, the mystification by which the police are transformed into heroic defenders of civilization has yet to occur. “Power is an apparatus *outside* society and its relations” in these countries, Khoury writes, “and for this reason . . . it doesn’t have any ideological justification for its legality.” The “good cop,” according to Khoury, remains a foreign figure to Arab readers; Arab modernism simply declined to import the “detective novel.”³

Around the same time that Elias Khoury the literary critic was asserting the impossibility of “detective stories” in Arabic, however, Elias Khoury the novelist was experimenting with a new “poetics of prose” adapted from the *Thousand and One Nights*. In “The Death of the Author” (*Mawt al-Mu’allif*) an essay published in *al-Safir* only eight months after “On the Police and the Police Story,” Khoury criticized a prevailing tendency in Arabic letters to view poetry as the

“true mouthpiece of the people” and to dismiss prose as a mere “medium of communication.” Against this tendency, Khoury upheld the *Nights* as “the only text that voluntarily renounces the power of text.”⁴ Crucially, for Khoury, the *Nights* offer contemporary Arab authors a model of prose writing in which “there is no longer an author, and the need for a single individual to summarize the experiences of others disappears,” unlike in premodern Arabic poetry, where the poet serves as the spokesman for the tribe. The “poetics of prose” that Khoury adapts from the *Nights* thus “erases its author,” transforming him into “the first absentee and the first victim, a figure who only appears in order to disappear inside a world that cannot be controlled, a world into which he dissolves, and in which the words alone flourish, the victims flourish when their faces and their language are revealed in a never-ending series of secrets.”⁵ “The Death of the Author,” in short, uses the *Nights* to outline a new relationship of power between the author and his narrative materials, between the narrative subject and the objects of his representation.⁶ Here authorship is decoupled from authority, just as the *mu'allif*—literally, the “arranger” or “composer” of words, thoughts, and ideas—is transformed from a puppet master into a mere “medium” through whom others, particularly disenfranchised or “victimized” others, might speak.⁷

Curiously, however, to put this new poetics into practice in his 1981 novel *White Masks* (*al-Wujūh al-Bayḍā'*, literally “The White Faces”), Khoury uses the premise of a murder mystery. That is, to effect the reconfiguration of narrative power he deems so necessary in “The Death of the Author,” Khoury takes his cue from the detective fiction whose impossibility in Arabic he had announced in the same publication a mere eight months earlier. Although *White Masks* may not follow all the rules of the classic detective story, it still shares many features with crime fiction.⁸ How else are we to understand a novel that begins with the discovery of a man's corpse in a Beirut trash pile and proceeds as a search for his killer, passing through a series of interviews, court testimonies, and forensic reports in the process? Despite his own pronouncement regarding the impossibility of Arabic detective stories, then, even Khoury himself dabbled in detection.

In the last chapter, we saw how Mahfouz and Jabra experimented with metaphysical detection as a way beyond the limits of the subject but ultimately ended up only with individuals engaged in infinite, atomized searches. This chapter remains with the topic of metaphysical detection in Arabic, but it focuses on two works that use the premise of *baḥṭh* somewhat differently. As in the works by Mahfouz and Jabra examined in the last chapter, both Khoury's *White Masks* and Fathi Ghanim's *al-Jabal* (The Mountain, 1959) feature detective-like characters who set out in pursuit of answers, immersing themselves in worlds and communities about which they know next to nothing. Yet in these novels, the detective character serves as a fictional stand-in for the author himself, and his voice is ultimately silenced as the suspected criminals gradually, communally assume control of the novel's

narration. These are investigations that, far from solving the original mystery, only end up erasing the investigator's voice, language, and subjectivity.

The effect of this structure, in the work of Ghanim and Khoury, is twofold. First, it allows each author to interrogate and dismantle a specific, official or quasi-official ideological discourse used, at the time of his writing, as a justification for state violence. In Ghanim's case, this was the Egyptian discourse of "reformism" or *iṣlāḥ*, and specifically the 1947 project to relocate the people of al-Gurna (al-Qurnah), a small Upper Egyptian village, from their homes in the antiquities-laden Valley of the Kings to a "model village" designed by renowned Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy, thus transforming them from criminal "tomb robbers" into "model peasants."⁹ In Khoury's case, the discourse in question was the wartime Lebanese one lionizing the figure of the "martyr" or *shahīd* while ignoring or erasing the everyday suffering, violence, dislocation, and death suffered by Beirut's most marginalized civilian communities. Second, the effacement of the detective—and, by extension, of the author—allows each writer to open up the novel as a communal and social form, rather than a metropolitan, individualist one. Ghanim's interruption of *al-Jabal* with the popularly sung Egyptian "narrative ballad" or *mawwāl* of Bahiyyah and Yasin gives a hopeful glimpse of what the novel as a narrative form might become, of how to transform the solitary, detective-like act of reading into a performance of radical empathy, a communal act rather like listening to a *mawwāl*. Khoury's novel also places its faith in the possibilities that the communal, associative poetics of the *Nights* make available to authors of Arabic fiction. Although they are responding to very different conjunctures of social and material conditions, both *al-Jabal* and *White Masks* use "investigation" to model a form of unlearning, of erasure, of opening the supposedly fixed borders of the modern self to the voices and experiences of others. They craft a new epistemology of fiction, a poetics of investigation that destabilizes the self-assurance of the all-knowing narrative subject and, by extension, that of the reader herself.

LITERARY COUNTERPOINT, AL-GURNA TO BEIRUT

Despite the different historical periods and national contexts in which they were writing, both Elias Khoury and Fathi Ghanim found themselves surrounded by political discourses whose rigidity and reductionism left little room for negotiating what were, in their view, complex social and material conditions. They therefore turned to fiction as a contrapuntal space, and the form of their novels as open, unsolved investigations represents a turn away from the prescriptivism and triumphalism that saturated public discourse in both post-1952 Egypt and wartime Beirut. Understanding the political and historical significance of the narrative structure to which they both turned, however, requires greater familiarity with the nonliterary discourses in which each work was embedded and to which it was responding. Let me first address the context of *al-Jabal* before

linking Ghanim's disillusionment and narrative experimentation with Khoury's in *White Masks*.

Before he became better known as a journalist and novelist, Ghanim, like Tawfiq al-Hakim before him, worked as a government functionary—an “investigations inspector” (*mufattish li-l-tahqīqāt*), to be precise—with the Egyptian Ministry of Education.¹⁰ It was in this capacity that he was sent, in 1947, to investigate a case of vandalism and theft in the recently constructed model village of New Gurna, and this real-life trip forms the heart of *al-Jabal's* fictional investigative narrative. The actual history of the Egyptian village of al-Gurna, its people, and their relationship to the model village of New Gurna, has been told and retold many times, as historians, anthropologists, architects, and Egyptologists alike have inscribed this small, local space within a web of national and international relations and concerns. Located on the west bank of the Nile, across the river from Luxor, al-Gurna's inhabitants—the Gurnawis—live among the tombs and funerary temples known to archaeologists as the Theban Necropolis and to visitors as the Valley of the Kings. For the better part of al-Gurna's modern history, the Gurnawis made their living through the antiquities trade, both as laborers on European-managed archaeological digs and as traders themselves in the illicit international market for ancient Egyptian artefacts.¹¹ In 1945, following a case in which an entire bas-relief wall was removed from one of these tombs and sold to a private buyer, the Egyptian Antiquities Department decided that the Gurnawis' trade in “tomb robbing” had gone too far.¹² The villagers were to be forcibly uprooted from the Theban Necropolis and relocated to a model village built on the farmland in the valley below. To design the village, the Antiquities Department commissioned Hassan Fathy, a Cairo-based architect who had previous success with “rural rehabilitation” in the model village of Bahtim, just north of Cairo.¹³ For Fathy, New Gurna represented an opportunity to experiment with the “vernacular modernist” style for which he had become internationally renowned. Against the homogenizing, industrial style of modernist architecture in the United States and Europe, Fathy's designs used local Egyptian materials such as mud brick and straw (rather than imported red brick and concrete), and they integrated features from Islamic architecture that were much maligned among Europhilic Egyptian architects, such as the dome as a form of air conditioning, the inner courtyard, and the windcatcher.¹⁴

But the Gurnawis' relocation to New Gurna did not go as planned. In addition to the bureaucratic and logistical difficulties Fathy faced, the villagers' resistance to being forcibly removed from their homes was perhaps the biggest and—for Fathy—the most puzzling problem of all. “They had no intention of giving up their nice, profitable, squalid houses in the cemetery with treasure waiting to be mined under their floors to move to a new, hygienic, beautiful village away from the tombs,” Fathy wrote in his memoir of the project.¹⁵ Two years after construction began, villagers cut the dikes that protected New Gurna from seasonal flooding and inundated the better part of the model village. In the frenzy to identify the

culprits, many local and metropolitan inspectors were sent to New Gurna, among them a young Fathi Ghanim. For his part, Hassan Fathy was underwhelmed with the investigations. "While all this [repair work on the dikes] was being done," he writes, "the district attorney descended upon us to make an investigation into the flooding. He and his assistants went round asking every villager in turn: 'Did you pierce the dike?' Every villager in turn replied 'No,' and when the attorney had filled three sheets of legal-sized paper with these answers, he went home satisfied that the affair had been investigated."¹⁶ It is as if Fathy has borrowed the scene (and his own disdainful, condescending attitude) from Tawfiq al-Hakim's *Diary of a Country Prosecutor*.

Ghanim, by contrast, sought to transform his own investigations in New Gurna into something other than a useless bureaucratic report. *al-Jabal* chronicles the journey of its first-person narrator (also named "Fathi Ghanim") from Cairo to Luxor to New Gurna, and eventually to the village of (old) al-Gurna itself. On his way, the investigator moves from a world of government functionaries in Cairo to local officials such as his friend, the deputy prosecutor in Luxor, to the European-trained "architect" (Hassan Fathy's fictional stand-in) and his entourage of French artists in New Gurna.¹⁷ Each stratum of upper-class Egyptian society proposes its own solution to the "problem" of the countryside and its inhabitants, the impoverished peasant masses who must be civilized before they can be considered part of the emergent nation.¹⁸ Eventually, the narrator ends up among the "people of the mountain" (*ahl al-jabal*) themselves, who, after some resistance, agree to confide in this government representative, telling him stories of the violence and exploitation they have endured both as excavators of antiquities for insatiable European collectors and as the subjects of governmental "rural rehabilitation" projects like New Gurna itself. Neither fully committed to the authorities' projects of relocation and reform, which he correctly understands to be laced with violence, nor satisfied with the life-threatening conditions in which the Gurnawis are forced to make their living, the detective-narrator of *al-Jabal* represents a rare medium between the people and the state. Whereas Hassan Fathy laments being "in an unhappy in-between situation, neither properly of the government nor of the village," and thus "suffering from both sides,"¹⁹ this "in-between situation" is precisely what Ghanim cultivates for himself and his fictional detective stand-in in *al-Jabal*.

In its focus on al-Gurna, *al-Jabal* takes part in a long tradition of writing about the Valley of the Kings, both as an archaeological site, in nineteenth-century accounts of Egyptological excavation (for example, in the memoirs of Howard Carter, the famed uncoverer of Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922),²⁰ and as a space, in twentieth-century accounts, where questions of modern national sovereignty are negotiated in conjunction with archaeology, tourism, and state power.²¹ For the most part, as Kees van der Spek points out, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European accounts of al-Gurna took scant interest in the lives and

livelihoods of the modern residents of the Nile's west bank, granting pride of place instead to the reconstructed histories of ancient nobles. When modern Gurnawis are depicted in these accounts, it is usually as lawless "tomb robbers" with no understanding of or respect for the art-historical significance of ancient valuables.²² "The silence that surrounds the cultural specificity of west bank villagers," van der Spek notes, "stands in sharp contrast with the epigraphic and archaeological activities of Egyptologists whose many annual research projects seek to shed light on all aspects of life and death in ancient Egypt."²³ This privileging of ancient history over modern socioeconomic realities has served both to attract increasingly wealthy foreign tourists to Upper Egypt and to bolster local "political objectives that center on the construction of a national identity and its associated tourism-industry revenue base."²⁴ The marginalization of the Gurnawis through the veneration of the pharaohs thus changes from a strategy of colonial-archaeological labor exploitation, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,²⁵ to one by which a new national bourgeoisie, in the second half of the twentieth century, neutralizes an unruly local populace threatening its financial interests. These interests lie specifically in the tourism industry, with all its power to attract foreign capital. Both van der Spek and Timothy Mitchell amply chronicle the social and economic dimensions of this "enclave tourism" with its emphasis on "minimizing unregulated contact . . . and increasing [tourists'] physical separation from the local community," as well as on the production of a "heritage consumption" industry.²⁶

In its simultaneous focus on the "model village" project at New Gurna, furthermore, and on Hassan Fathy's architectural project more generally, *al-Jabal* also converses with another discourse: that of rural reform and social improvement (*iṣlāḥ*) as it was envisioned by Egyptian social scientists, intellectuals, and statesmen at two crucial periods of anticolonial nationalism. The first period followed the mass protests of March 1919 and the rise of the anticolonial Wafd Party with populist hero Saad Zaghloul as its figurehead. The second period followed the Officers' Revolt of July 1952, when the postcolonial Egyptian state was reorganized around what Omnia El Shakry calls a "social-welfare mode of regulation," which aimed at "containing radical social change through piecemeal social reform and amelioration of the conditions of the working poor."²⁷ In both of these historical moments, El Shakry argues, rural Egyptians like the Gurnawis formed the "central contradiction of national identity within Egyptian colonial society—at the same time that they were localized by the nationalist elite as the repository of cultural authenticity, they were also demarcated as a locus of backwardness to be reformed and reconstituted as modern moral subjects of the nation-state."²⁸ The project of resettling the "lawless" and "thieving" residents of al-Gurna in a model village designed by a "modern" architect thus also aimed at recreating the Gurnawis in the mode of "model peasants," changing not only their physical location but also "reconstructing bodies and minds."²⁹

Ghanim's novel simultaneously participates in these discourses and stands apart from them, criticizing while refusing to counter one form of prescriptivism with another. On one level, the narrator's distance from the "model village" project allows him to criticize the aestheticizing tendency in the architect's language and design, its emphasis on form and appearance over function. While leading the narrator of *al-Jabal* on a tour of the new village's mosque, for example, the architect explains to him "how the holes where light came in were meant to harmonize with the lines of the building and the movements of the people praying—as though they weren't people praying at all, but rather ballet dancers on a stage with the most modern theatrical lighting."³⁰ It quickly becomes clear to the narrator that the "model village" is less a project to improve the lives of the Gurnawis and more, in the words of Mohamed Elshahed, "a reactionary response to modernism as a style and a project," an architecture "less about authenticity and more about romanticism . . . primitivism, and revivalism."³¹ Indeed, Ghanim's fictionalized version of Hassan Fathy is willing to marshal any means necessary to increase his international renown. "We'll make [the project] succeed by force!" the architect exclaims to a visiting official from the Ministry of Education later in the novel. "The people of the mountain are ignorant and don't understand . . . People won't be civilized except through the force of the whip. Fine, if that's what they want, then let's whip them!" (J 161). Hidden beneath the rhetoric of reform, modernism, and nation making, both in Ghanim's novel and in Hasan Fathy's own accounts, there still lingers the whip—the *courbage* or *kurbāj*—that enduring symbol of colonial coercion, conscription, and violence in Egypt.

The narrator of *al-Jabal* soon takes issue not only with the architect's project in New Gurna, but with all the flashy, high-minded reform projects that "wear the mask of reform" but "were undertaken for reasons unconnected to true reform," including "personal interest and glory, false ideas, or naïve attempts to imitate Europe or America." These thoughts lead to the culmination of the novel's moral message: through creative tautology, and through a play on the Arabic root *ṣ-l-ḥ*, both narrator and author attempt to reclaim the term "reform" (*iṣlāḥ*) from the overuse and stagnation to which it has been subjected. "Reform," the narrator affirms, "must be in the interest of improvement ('al-iṣlāḥ' yajib an yakūn li-l-iṣlāḥ). It should be done in the interest of (*li-maṣlaḥat*) those for whom the reformist project was intended" (J 166).

The moment is admittedly heavy-handed. Ghanim would later express regret about being so direct. "Perhaps it would have been better," he said in a 1995 interview, "to let the characters and events in the novel express the conflict for themselves and not rely so much on theoretical discussions about the city and the country."³² Still, the passage raises an important question: if "reform" is to be more than mere "sloganeering" or "fashion," what would it look like? How is "true reform" to be achieved? On this point, Ghanim is less prescriptive. After the narrator

spends a night among the Gurnawis in *al-Jabal*, listening to their stories in their own words, he returns to the model village “between waking and sleep” with his head “full of vague and delirious words” and promptly collapses into bed (*J* 155). While asleep, he dreams of the mountain dwellers uncovering a new tomb filled with treasures. But instead of selling the artifacts to foreign collectors for a quick profit, as they have done for nearly a hundred years, the Gurnawis alert the Egyptian Antiquities Department of their discovery. Soon al-Gurna is teeming with archaeologists and tourists, who begin buying the “beautiful straw platters” woven by the village’s women and the limestone statuettes carved in the ancient style by its men. “This is the real treasure that the people of the mountain discovered,” the narrator thinks in between waking and sleep. “The statuettes that they make with their own two hands are the real treasure. They’re not fakes, because . . . they are the product of their labor, and they symbolize labor itself. Labor is the real treasure” (*J* 156). He subsequently envisions the government building statuette-manufacturing factories in al-Gurna, to be cooperatively owned by the people of the mountain.

The fantasy is short-lived, however. “What is this nonsense running through my mind?” the narrator thinks. “To the people of the mountain, the government is the police who want to uproot them from their caves by force and toss them into houses roofed with domes like tombs. The government is not *their* government. All it ever thinks about is how to control them” (*J* 156–57). The villagers, in other words, are right not to trust government officials like him, since all these officials ever seem to bring with them are violent, coercive, and thoroughly useless forms of control. That the narrator of the novel shares his name with its author, furthermore, reveals Ghanim’s recognition of the potential for the author to become yet another exploitative agent of the state, yet another essentializing social reformer whose representations of village “backwardness” will be mobilized as a justification for state violence.

If the narrator’s dream vision of cooperative statuette-manufacturing factories is not the answer to the question of “true reform,” then what is? In the same 1995 interview I cited earlier, Ghanim suggested that the novel was a “caution” to the Nasser regime against mere “sloganeering” on the question of reform. “Reform,” he noted, “is an abstract issue that cannot be resolved overnight. It is a process of studying psychological customs that can only change slowly, over a long period, on the condition that there is real conviction on the part of the people that what is happening is in their best interests. They cannot be convinced through mere words.”³³ But there is another answer to the above question embedded in the form of Ghanim’s novel itself. Maybe the first step in “true reform,” Ghanim seems to imply, would look something like the narrative of *al-Jabal*: the erasure of the detective’s voice, and of all official, metropolitan voices weighing in on the lives and livelihoods of the Gurnawis—from the Antiquities Department and Hassan Fathy all the way to the author-*cum*-government-inspector Ghanim himself, and

the amplification of the stories told by *ahl al-jabal*, the people of the mountain, in their own words and their own dialect.

I will return to the form of Ghanim's novel in a moment, to illustrate how its commentary on al-Gurna serves also as a metafictional lesson in learning to read and seek knowledge differently. For now, however, let me turn to Khoury's *White Masks* to show how it also struggles with political language, and with words whose meaning seems to have been lost, distorted, or calcified through overuse. Khoury's concern is not with the Egyptian rhetoric of *iṣlāḥ*, however, but with the figure of the *shahīd* or "martyr" in the historically and politically intertwined contexts of the Palestinian Revolution and the Lebanese Civil War. The Palestinian Revolution is usually dated from the Cairo Accords of 1969 to the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982, when the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) held political control of the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, transforming them into what Laleh Khalili has called "the central node of the transnational Palestinian national movement and the primary base of Palestinian military operations against Israel."³⁴ Khalili also notes the centrality of "commemorative practices" to the articulation of Palestinian national identity in the camps both during and after the revolution, stressing in particular the historical dynamism and rhetorical contestation enacted through these practices, which reflect "transformations in the character, affinities, values, and mobilizing strategies of the Palestinian national movement."³⁵ Where the figure of the guerilla-fedayee armed with Kalashnikov and keffiyeh was central to the PLO's iconography of resistance during the period of the revolution, after 1982 the *shahīd* or "martyr" gradually assumed the fedayee's place as emblem of heroic sacrifice.³⁶ This shift was the consequence of numerous historical developments on the local, regional, and international levels, chief among them the replacement of the ethos of anticolonial liberationist heroism with the "liberal discourse of rights and development at the end of the Cold War."³⁷

Though intertwined with these Palestinian histories of commemoration, martyrdom as public discourse in Lebanon has its own specific history, as Lucia Volk has shown. Against the predominant tendency to associate martyrdom with "Islamic radicalism," Volk notes the long-standing use of martyr discourse by "political elites of different ethno-religious backgrounds" who sought to "give concrete shape to, and win political legitimacy through championing, a unifying national idea" by "sketching faces, sculpting bodies, carving texts, and circulating photographs and banners that show Lebanon as a place where Muslims and Christians struggle and die together."³⁸ The intersection of martyr culture with the rise of mass media during the years of the Lebanese Civil War, however, arguably transformed the commemoration of martyrs from the grave business of political elites and national publics into a practice hotly contested among various parties, groups, and factions.³⁹ That the designation "martyr" often came with material

compensation from these factions also played a significant role in this contested semantic and iconographic terrain.⁴⁰

Khoury's *White Masks* is, in many ways, a literary response to this complex, ever-shifting discourse surrounding both the freedom fighter and the martyr. Formed as he was in the crucible of the Palestinian liberation struggle,⁴¹ Khoury has long been concerned with the "question" of Palestine (*al-qadiyyah*) in both his literary and his critical work. Yet the many interwoven stories that comprise the text of *White Masks* are deeply—if obliquely—critical of these iconic figures. In particular, the novel questions the politics by which certain stories of death are granted added significance through their designation as "martyrdom," while others are engulfed in a generalized sea of forgetting. At one point, for example, Khoury stages a conversation between a humble building caretaker, Mahmud Fakhro, and an idealistic fighter with one of the local cadres, who used to be a university student. "We're fighting for the revolution," the young man tells Mahmud, "for the sake of the poor . . . for people like you who have nothing and live in poverty and misery."⁴² Yet, even as the young man's comrades in arms later declare him a *shahid* after his body is torn up by sniper fire on the street, Mahmud is acutely aware that, despite his rhetoric, the young man's sacrifice has done nothing to transform his own social, economic, and personal situation. How can the fighter be called a martyr if his death changes nothing in the lives of "the poor" for whom he claims to fight and die? "He's a martyr, and I'm a martyr," Mahmud ultimately notes with a mixture of sadness and irony (*WM* 103; *WB* 112).

Elsewhere in *White Masks*, the story of Imm Mohammad also questions the ethics of awarding some deaths not only the political significance but also the economic compensation that comes with the designation of "martyrdom," at the expense of others. In a first-person testimony tucked into the novel's "Provisional Epilogue," Imm Mohammad tells the narrator how her husband, on returning to work as a longshoreman after a preliminary end to hostilities in 1978, was killed not by a sniper's bullet but by a refrigerator, which fell on him while he was unloading it from a truck. "He wasn't hit by a bullet or a shell," Imm Mohammad tells the narrator. "No one abducted him, so that we could say he died as a servant of God, no, he just dropped dead" (*WB* 330). A poor mother of eight, Imm Mohammad tries to register her husband as a martyr to get a monthly compensatory stipend from a local militia. But the militiamen reject her plea because her husband was not a fighter. "But he *is* a *shahid*," she protests. "Say that he died in the line of duty, for his country, for the port . . . for whatever the devil you like, but please consider him a *shahid* of something!" (*WB* 331). Though martyrdom is meant to function symbolically as a "struggle for life" and a "heroic resistance which redeems suffering and overcomes tyranny,"⁴³ here Khoury criticizes the mundane calculus, the everyday social and economic discriminations that, far from being obliterated by the martyr's sacrifice, are in reality only further entrenched by it.

Khoury's critique is perhaps at its most cutting, however, in the chapter narrated by Fahd Badreddin, a "retired" fedayee with the leftist Lebanese National Movement (LNM). The entire chapter, in fact, is dedicated to highlighting the distance between the idealistic rhetoric of heroic sacrifice used by the fedayeen and the actual, embodied fact of death as Fahd experienced it in the war. Fahd describes feelings of invincibility and limitlessness in the early days of his enlistment, a desire to "hold up the sky," to "reach the sky and carry it in my hands, just as I've read about in books" (*WB* 197, 202). Yet this transcendence quickly disintegrates in a series of encounters Fahd has with death on the battlefield. After being forced to leave a dying comrade in arms behind during a retreat on snowy Mount Sannine, for example,⁴⁴ Fahd asks his commanding officer to send a search party back for the young man. The officer refuses. "It's simple," the officer says with surprising calm, "We'll call him a martyr" (*WB* 223). Here the designation of martyrdom, like a philosopher's stone, is used to transform meaningless death into sacrificial significance. Fahd, however, has seen the real circumstances surrounding his comrade's demise: the young man did not "rush off into the sky" but was torn apart in an explosion of flesh and blood, dragged through the snow, burning with fever, delirious and on the edge of death, begging Fahd to leave him behind and save himself. In another scene, Fahd watches as his commanding officer murders an eight-year-old Christian boy in cold blood, simply because the boy wandered into enemy territory in the mountains. "Do you think that if he'd arrested *you* he'd have left *you* alive?" the officer asks Fahd. "No one has nothing to do with it . . . This is a war, they kill us, and we kill them" (*WB* 235). A few days later, Fahd collides with "something hard like an inflated tire," while crawling across the battlefield on his stomach. "Then the worms started crawling over my hand and my arm," he remembers in horror, "on my waist and the lower part of my chest, on my cartridge belt, and there was that smell . . ." (*WB* 236). The object turns out to be the young boy's rotting corpse, and this sensation of worms crawling all over his body, combined with "that smell," haunts Fahd throughout the chapter he narrates, recurring in all the encounters he remembers with the murdered man at the heart of *White Masks*, Khalil Ahmad Jaber. Here again, we are far from the fantasy of the shahīd's heroic transcendence.

Khoury places Fahd between two irreconcilable positions. On the one hand, this retired fighter can no longer muster the kind of naïve dedication that he sees in the newly recruited young men, fueled by idealizations of death as martyrdom and of the shahīd as nationalist hero. "They don't know the meaning of the word death," Fahd writes of the new recruits. "Death is disgusting. They talk about it as though it were something beautiful, but it's disgusting. I tell them . . . but they don't believe me" (*WB* 210). On the other hand, as an adult, Fahd has never led any life outside the realm of the fedayeen. He left home, family, and university to enlist, and he now no longer knows how to live as a civilian. Throughout the many prolepses and analepses of his chapter, he constantly returns to his liminal status

in the party offices of the LNM's Joint Forces. "Here I sit," he repeats. "I'm here . . . and I won't go anywhere else. I can't. Maybe they can, but as for me, I just can't" (WB 213). War has immobilized Fahd both spiritually and physically, and this immobility literalizes Khoury's own ambivalent position between passionate commitment to the cause of Palestinian liberation and rejection of the brutal tactics deployed by the PLO and the LNM in the name of that cause.

Khoury's ambivalence became particularly acute in the wake of the PLO's siege of the predominantly Christian coastal town of Damour in January 1976. In revenge for Christian Phalangists' massacres in the predominantly Palestinian camps of Karantina, Maslakh, and, most notably, Tell al-Zaatar, in which many thousands of Palestinians had been killed (often through extremely gruesome torture),⁴⁵ the PLO and LNM laid siege to Damour, killing hundreds of civilians, destroying homes, and even desecrating a centuries-old Christian cemetery.⁴⁶ In a cruel twist of irony, the PLO would subsequently resettle many survivors of the Tell al-Zaatar massacre in Damour.⁴⁷ "I was astonished," Khoury said in an interview several years later, "that the progressive Palestinian camp believed in al-Damur. It was the crucial moment for me to discover that our ideology did not protect us from behaving in a savage, fascist way. What is the meaning of all our discourse and all our ideology if we kill children, women, and men because they are Christians or Muslims or whatever?"⁴⁸ Before Damour, Khoury had hesitated to criticize the PLO. "Criticism was very difficult," he said, "because in our consciousness the Palestinian revolution was sacred."⁴⁹ Following Damour, however, Khoury began to use literary writing to work through the difficulties and intricacies of his position. His aim, as he wrote in an essay for *al-Safir*, was to work against the wartime situation in which the exchange of ideas was enacted not with "writing" but with "bodies," how "corpses had become a way of proclaiming a position, through shell-ing, kidnapping, or execution."⁵⁰

The character of Fahd Badreddin in *White Masks* thus literalizes Khoury's sense of in-betweenness. Suspended between his continued belief in the cause and his unwillingness to perpetuate the endless cycle of killing and revenge, Fahd's tone oscillates between the self-righteousness of revolutionary commitment and the self-questioning of intellectual introspection. "I fought just like everyone else," he affirms, "and I stayed. Others left, but I stayed." Yet this claim to authenticity begins to ring hollow in the very next line: "Anyway how could I leave? Where would I go?" (WB 243). The world of Beirut at war has no place for a disillusioned fedayee, so scarred by his recurring memories of death that he cannot resume life either as a fighter or as a civilian. The party offices become the limbo between "rushing off into the sky" and colliding with decomposing corpses:

I'm here in the office, I stay without budging, I remain here and I wait [*antaẓir*] . . .
I'm waiting for my mother, I'm waiting to get married, I'm waiting to die, I'm waiting
for the revolution, I'm waiting, I'm waiting for nothing, I'm here and I'm waiting for
nothing, expecting nothing . . .

I'm the one who waits, expecting nothing.
 I'm the one who waits, expecting everything. (WB 245)⁵¹

The ambivalence of the Arabic verb *intaẓara*—which can mean both to “wait” and to “expect”—semantically reproduces the hesitation between the teleological, historicist nature of revolutionary action and the existential uncertainty of mere waiting. Through Fahd, Khoury reconsiders his unquestioning embrace of heady nationalist rhetoric extolling heroism, self-sacrifice, and martyrdom earlier in his career. “Writing was very important,” Khoury said of this time, “because it gave me the chance to rethink and to understand what was going on.”⁵² The PLO, however, did not take kindly to Khoury’s “rethinking.” *White Masks* was all but banned from distribution in the Lebanese camps until the PLO’s withdrawal from Beirut in 1982.⁵³

Where Fathi Ghanim’s *al-Jabal* articulates a counterpoint to the state’s empty rhetoric of “rural reform” (*iṣlāḥ*) and “model villagers,” then, Khoury’s *White Masks* reconsiders the language and iconography of martyrdom and heroism that were so central to the Palestinian Revolution. These are, admittedly, extremely different conjunctures of material, social, and political circumstances, but on the level of theme and content, both novels share a single purpose: they register a disillusionment with the uses of language—and of the Arabic language in particular—by official or semi-official bodies in contexts of national struggle, liberation, and post-colonial state building. They highlight how far terms like *reform* and *martyrdom* had been displaced and manipulated through their use in slogans, posters, and other public forums produced either by the state (as in Egypt) or by anticolonial nationalist organizations (as with the PLO in Lebanon). Within these contexts, both Khoury and Ghanim assumed the task of making language strange again, wresting words from the hands of sloganeers and reinvigorating them by returning (quite literally) to their roots. The plot-level investigations conducted by their frame narrators thus crystallize the authors’ own metafictional quests for new languages and literary forms that might resist appropriation and manipulation.

At the same time, neither author was content merely to counter one form of triumphalist rhetoric with another. Ghanim’s narrator’s dream of cooperative ownership and government-supervised economic uplift under Gamal Abdel Nasser ultimately amounts only to so much “ranting and raving” in *al-Jabal*, and Khoury’s murdered protagonist, Khalil Ahmad Jaber, only ever replaces the martyr posters he tears down with whiteness and erasure in *White Masks*. The alternatives that both Ghanim and Khoury offer their readers, I wish to suggest, must be excavated not from the content of these novels but from their form, their structure, and specifically from the way they sideline the voices of their central investigators (in both cases, frame narrators with autobiographical parallels to the authors themselves) to make room for the voices of others. In this way, both Khoury and Ghanim offer us lessons in how to read, see, seek, and know differently.

IN SEARCH OF NEW LANGUAGE,
FROM MATHAL TO MAWĀL

One reading of Fathi Ghanim's *al-Jabal* views it as a parable about "the confrontation . . . between old and new; between backward village society and progressive urban society; between the traditional way of doing things and the wish to improve the living conditions of the mountain dwellers."⁵⁴ According to this reading, the novel is primarily significant for its "didactic . . . social and political message: namely, that social changes must grow from within and not be imposed from without, that a change inspired by personal interests and empty slogans is doomed to fail."⁵⁵ This is the reading I reviewed above, and it aptly ties Ghanim's novel to its political, historical, and social context in the debates around al-Gurna and the Gurnawis. Yet what interests me in *al-Jabal* is not so much its moral and pedagogical message (whose blatancy in the text its author later regretted) but rather its reflections on the practice of investigation itself, alternately expressed as *taftīsh* and *taḥqīq*. What interest me are the moments when the narrator comes up against the limits of his professional training and is forced to surrender his identity as an investigator to clear space, instead, for the voices of the mountain dwellers, in whom he finds a "human" alternative to his inhuman training as a government bureaucrat.

Two moments in *al-Jabal* encapsulate this confrontation particularly well. The first is a tale within a tale told to the narrator by the 'umdah (mayor or leader) of al-Gurna. In this nested narrative, the 'umdah recounts to the narrator a confrontation he had with a woman referred to only as "the princess" during the opening festivities for the model village organized by the architect.⁵⁶ Although the other Gurnawis took up arms to protest the party and the model village whose completion it was celebrating, the 'umdah tells the narrator that he hoped to use the event as an opportunity to tell the princess his people's side of the story, in their own words. After finally gaining an audience with her, the 'umdah urges the princess to prevent the mountain dwellers' forced relocation to the model village, and he does so in a long monologue that Ghanim writes in the Upper Egyptian dialect (substituting the letter *jīm* for the letter *qāf*, for example, and using several local turns of phrase).⁵⁷ A combination of intoxication, exoticization, and linguistic misunderstanding, however, comes between the 'umdah and the princess, who likely speaks and understands English, French, and perhaps Turkish better than she does Arabic, let alone the 'umdah's Upper Egyptian dialect. She and her American entourage "looked on the 'umdah as he spoke and gestured with his hands as though he were a ballet dancer or an actor in an incomprehensible Chinese opera" (J 77). "I'm not afraid," she brags in English. "I don't think they are the kind that eat human flesh" (J 73). The Americans, meanwhile, ask if the 'umdah is the "Chief" of their people, "just like the Indian Chiefs in our country. Bring us some beads and sweets to give him as presents!" (J 75).

On one level, the ‘umdaḥ’s tale is yet another in a series of instances in *al-Jabal* where Westernized city dwellers exoticize and tokenize the Gurnawis as enticing, charming, but ultimately backward savages in need of civilizing and sanitizing.⁵⁸ Yet, as a scene *about* understanding and its failure, the ‘umdaḥ’s story has an additional and, I would argue, more significant narrative function in *al-Jabal*. Not only does the narrator, “Fathi Ghanim,” understand the ‘umdaḥ’s point of view in a way the princess never could, but hearing about the princess’s attitude toward the ‘umdaḥ forces the narrator to question his own presumptions as a state investigator. This passage immediately follows the ‘umdaḥ’s nestled tale within a tale:

As the ‘umdaḥ told me his story about the princess, and as I recreated what had happened in my mind, images and visions swirled in my head, and my respect for the man sitting next to me increased. I felt an awe for him that I had never felt for any other person in existence . . .

I was engulfed by feelings of disgust with my mission. What was this nonsense for which I had been sent here? What can I do about a problem like this? What does the head of investigations want from me? In truth, he doesn’t want anything at all; all he wants is for routine to run its course . . .

My duty as a government employee and investigations inspector is to summon Husayn ‘Ali and ask him those timeless questions that appear in every report—name? age? profession? nature of your complaint?—and after that, to appoint some other inspectors to form a committee that would take an inventory of the model village and report on whether there had been any misappropriation or not. If they didn’t find any evidence, they’d close the investigation, and that would be that. The noise in our heads would be gone, but the real problem would remain unchanged.

I realized that I was not carrying out an investigation [*tahqīq*]. I was misrepresenting [*tazwīr*] the ‘umdaḥ’s feelings and the mountain dwellers’ problems—the troubles they were suffering, the poverty they were enduring, and the hope they were searching for in the belly of the mountain.

My mission as detective inspector [*mufattiḥ li-l-tahqīqāt*] is to suppress all of these truths [*ḥaqā’iq*] and transform them into a few trivial questions. (J 79)

Once again, Ghanim revives worn out, overused Arabic words by playing and punning on their grammatical roots. The narrator affirms that his is not a true “investigation” or *tahqīq* but merely “fabrication” and “misrepresentation”—*tazwīr*—which rhymes morphologically with its counterpart *tahqīq*, yet has the opposite meaning. Ironically, as an inspector or, more literally, a “truth establisher”—*muḥaqqiq*—the narrator’s job is to *suppress* the mountain dwellers’ “truths” (*ḥaqā’iq*), not reveal them. “It bothered me that I was disturbing the ‘umdaḥ,” he notes later on, “that my nature as an inspector still drove me to pose questions and insist on having them answered, until I seemed to be invading people’s souls and feeding off their emotions . . . I still don’t know how to get rid of this state bureaucrat, this investigator buried deep inside me” (J 81). The investigator’s task in *al-Jabal* is much more than

merely “finding the truth,” it turns out. It is a question of overcoming the knowledge-seeking drive within himself, retraining his intellect and his senses in such a way that he can hear, understand, and ultimately transmit the Gurnawis’ tales of immiseration and loss. Ghanim the author, in turn, trains his readers in the same.

The narrator surrenders narrative control a second time in *al-Jabal* on meeting Husayn ‘Ali, the man whose official complaint served as the impetus for his deployment to al-Gurna. Husayn describes for the narrator how the drive to “scrape away” at the mountain (*al-kaht*, a keyword of the novel) in search of ancient treasures to sell in the absence of any other livelihood ultimately led to the deaths of both his sister and his father—the first by her own father, who mistook her, in the darkness of the cave, for an intruder out to steal the treasure he was about to uncover, and the second when he was later crushed by falling rocks. While Husayn’s story itself offers a salient critique of the Orientalizing tendencies of foreigners and metropolitan Egyptians alike,⁵⁹ the narrative gesture through which it is introduced to the reader is—to me—even more central to Ghanim’s narrative poetics of investigation and seeking. When questioned about his complaint, Husayn does not begin with himself or his own life’s story but with a kind of moral lesson for the prosecutor, a prologue drawn from the oral archive of Egyptian folk literature. Specifically, he seats the narrator so that he can hear but not see a band of Gurnawis performing a “narrative ballad” or *mawwāl*, a form of sung poetry that, especially in Upper Egypt, often laments the injustice of the law (whether colonial or national) and celebrates the exploits of a rogue hero.⁶⁰ Beginning with an invocation to the upper-class “effendi” narrator, Husayn ‘Ali sets the scene for his own story by invoking another, written in Upper Egyptian:

إسمع يا أفندي أبو ليلة بيجول . . .
 “Listen, Effendi, to what Abu Laylah has to tell you!”

The voice of Abu Laylah was strong, beautiful, and sad, monotonous in its melodies yet full of emotion and despair. It told the story of a crime . . .⁶¹ [and] Husayn ‘Ali sang along with it at some parts, whispering passionately: “*Oh Bahiyyah, tell me tell me, who killed Yasin?*” and growing quiet as the refrain rose:

“Give us your sentence, oh lawyer, oh Bey
 We’ve been wronged, and we stand here before you today!”
 The Bey tilted his chic tarbush over one ear
 And sentenced the man to no more than four years
 “Two years in the prison,” he said with refinement,
 “and two more in the cells, solitary confinement.”

Husayn ‘Ali grew quiet again, then his voice rose with that of Abu Laylah:

*I sing my lament, but you don’t cry for me
 To whom can I tell these tales of misery?
 Lean to the left now, then lean to the right,
 but no one around us can make things all right.*

I realized that Husayn 'Ali had intended for me to hear this song, as though he wanted to show me the opinion the mountain dwellers have of the investigators and prosecutors who tilt their tarbushes over their ears and issue verdicts to the oppressed without ever understanding their problems . . .

I was completely incapable of communicating these thoughts and feelings to Husayn 'Ali. I wanted to say something, but I found that ordinary speech was worn out and meaningless in comparison to this heightened, poetic language echoing and resonating off the mountain. (J 93–94)

By prefacing his own tale with the well-known mawwāl of Bahiyyah and Yasin,⁶² Husayn is invoking a long tradition in Egyptian folk literature whereby the narrative ballad speaks truth to power, revealing the vast distance between the law as it has historically been practiced upon the bodies of Egyptian peasants and the notion of justice with which it is supposed to coincide. By including the narrator in the audience of the mawwāl, moreover, Husayn 'Ali invites his metropolitan interlocutor “not passively to listen, but to share in” a particular interpretation of events.⁶³

This invitation, however, also extends beyond the pages of the novel to include the reader herself. Like the narrator, she too is being asked to look beyond the “worn out,” “meaningless,” and “trivial” words of the government case file and open herself to this poetry, transcribed in Upper Egyptian colloquial Arabic, which seems to “broadcast from a great radio in the sky,” “echoing and resonating off the mountain” until it becomes one with the landscape, taking on the elemental qualities of air and rock.

In these scenes, to be an “investigator” seems like much more than merely a profession. It is a spiritual and bodily disposition, an ethics, a learned way of being in the world and interacting with others. It is as if the narrator of *al-Jabal* must battle against his own moral and intellectual education to fully connect with the mountain dwellers who are the objects of his search. Just as Husayn 'Ali commands the narrator, Fathi Ghanim, to “listen to what Abu Laylah has to say,” so too Fathi Ghanim the author commands his refined, literary readers to absorb the vital language of the mawwāl in his novel. Ghanim forces his readers to confront their own resemblance to “detective inspectors,” performing their status as powerful, knowing subjects by constituting the mountain dwellers as quaint, exoticized literary objects. Through this confrontation, Ghanim makes the Arabic novel a space in which to train readers in a different kind of reading, one that is less like investigating, excavating, or digging after treasure (*al-kaht*), and more like “getting rid of the state officer, the investigator buried deep inside us” by listening to and participating in a mawwāl, relating to other people “as human beings, rather than as state bureaucrats” (J 81).

This renunciation of narrative power enacts precisely the “death of the author” that Khoury theorized in his 1980 essay for *al-Safir*, more than twenty years after the publication of *al-Jabal* in Egypt. It is also precisely the poetics of prose

that Khoury puts into practice in *White Masks*. Both the prologue and the “provisional epilogue” of this novel dramatize its narrator’s compulsive yet fruitless efforts to wrest the “truth” about Khalil Ahmad Jaber’s murder from the information he has collected through his own interviews with people connected to the victim in various ways. In the prologue, the frame narrator enumerates several possible motives for the murder (money, women, mistaken identity, suicide), only to dismiss each one for a variety of reasons. The more he reads, the more distant the truth begins to seem. “I’ve searched, I’ve spent many months seeking, searching, and reading in order to know . . . but to no avail” (*WB* 303). In the end he decides to simply “let the documents speak for themselves” (*atrūk al-kalām li-l-wathā’iq*), and his use of the word *kalām* (strongly tied to spoken language in Arabic) presages the colloquial Arabic that will pepper the testimonies given in subsequent chapters. The stories of others, spoken in their everyday, familiar language, gradually erase the voice not only of *White Masks*’ unnamed frame narrator, but also that of its author, Khoury himself.

Khoury thus “refuses to provide readers with any sort of ordering or reordering of the totally fractured world within which they find themselves living,” perfecting instead “a craft of complete narrative uncertainty in which a ‘speaker’ is unable to explain much of the causality of what he endeavors to report.”⁶⁴ This refusal is evident from the very first line of the novel: “This is not a story” (*Hādhihi laysat qiṣṣah*) (*WB* 9). The use of the Arabic *qiṣṣah* is important here, as the word simultaneously connotes not only cutting, trimming, or splicing together (*qaṣṣa, yaquṣṣu*), but also a notion of sequentiality. The thirteenth-century lexicographer and grammarian Ibn Manẓur notes the following: “It is said *qaṣaṣta al-shay*’ if you followed its traces sequentially, one after the other . . . And it is said ‘the storyteller tells stories’ because he links together one event after another and utters his words in an orderly fashion.”⁶⁵ Orderliness and sequence are thus inherent to the definition of *qiṣṣah* (story) in Arabic and persist even into modern usage. The purpose of a conventional story, then—including the detective story—is to lead the reader from a mysterious or puzzling situation to a logical, cathartic, and instructive conclusion.

In the history of Arabic letters in particular, such conclusions have often been articulated as aphorisms or proverbs (*amthāl*, sing. *mathal*). Derived partly from Hellenistic letters and partly from the “wisdom literature” of ancient Near Eastern cultures, the proverb is one of Arabic’s oldest and most esteemed modes of cultural transmission.⁶⁶ The Qur’an itself often assumes an aphoristic tone, just as it emphasizes the importance of proverbs derived from illustrative parables.⁶⁷ The hadith too—the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad—assume the form of aphorisms meant to guide good behavior, and their condensed form facilitates both the mnemonic practice of the transmitters and the activation of this wisdom through the practice of the believers. Also central to the aphoristic tradition in Arabic are the sayings of ‘Alī ibn Abī Talīb, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad.⁶⁸ In the medieval period, knowledge of aphoristic literature was an

“story” has been used by political actors on all sides of the Lebanese Civil War to justify a seemingly endless series of atrocities. The PLO’s massacre of Christian civilians at Damour in 1976 was justified as a retaliation for the Christian Phalangists’ massacre of Palestinians at Tell al-Zaatar, just as the Phalangists’ massacre of Palestinian civilians on a bus headed to the camps on April 13, 1975 was justified as a retaliation for the Ain El Remmaneh incident earlier that day, when a car of unidentified gunmen killed four men at a church gathering attended by several prominent Phalangist partisans.⁷² The loss of Palestine and the aftermath of that loss in the Lebanese Civil War have laid waste to the delicate mechanics of reference, torn apart the tenuous cords that conventionally weave remembered experiences into morally instructive, chronological narratives. Revolutionary rhetoric, moreover, has perverted the language of liberation by using it to paper over atrocity. In response to this situation, a new language becomes necessary.

Khoury begins to assemble this experimental language in the fragmentary monologues spoken by Khalil Ahmad Jaber to Fatimah Fakhro, the wife of the building caretaker Mahmud Fakhro and narrator of the novel’s third chapter. Fatimah subsequently remembers and relates these monologues to the narrator, who then transcribes them for his “investigation.” These speeches are composed of “ruptures, fragmentations, a rhetorical piling up of incomplete sentences, syncopated questions, unfinished statements, hallucinatory and oneiric images, in short, ambiguities of all sorts which often baffle the reader.”⁷³ Fatimah and Khalil meet as two survivors, each having lost a son either directly or indirectly to the war. Khalil’s language articulates a series of “calamities” for which Fatimah previously had no words (*WB* 90–91):

لا يبقى هناك شيء، كل شيء يختفي، أنت تختفين وأنا أختفي والمدينة تختفي والصور تختفي كل شيء يختفي
ويصبح أبيض، أبيض مثل بياض البيضة، مثل بياض العيون، مثل الأبيض. كل شيء يمحي، تسقط الأشياء
هكذا كأنها لا تسقط. كل شيء يموت، كأننا نموت، كأن كل شيء يموت، كأن كل شيء.

There is nothing left, everything is disappearing, you disappear and I disappear and the city disappears and the pictures disappear, everything disappears and becomes white, white like the whiteness of egg white, white like the whites of your eyes, white like white. Everything is being erased, everything falling just like this, as though it weren’t falling . . . Everything dies, as though we’re dying, as though everything were dying, as though everything. (*WB* 139–40)

Arabic grammar and syntax themselves are shattered in this passage.⁷⁴ In contrast with the way newspapers, martyr posters, and documentary films lay claim to truth throughout *White Masks*, Khalil speaks a language that contains its own effacement, whose assertions and descriptions trail off into senselessness (“white like white,” “as though everything”) but never claim authority or singularity. For Fatimah, as for other parents forced to grieve their children in this novel, Khalil’s defiance of sense making offers a palliative to the martyr posters

and missives that hasten to exploit an unthinkable occurrence by appropriating it for a singular, revolutionary purpose. The monologues fill in the negative space left by Khoury's parodic piling-up of proverbs.

OVERCOMING THE INVESTIGATOR WITHIN

Faced with a crisis of language and authorship, both Khoury and Ghanim refract themselves and their voices through the novel as if through a prism, troubling the premise of detection from the very beginning. By staging their narrators' confusion and forcing them to relinquish control over their narrative materials, both authors use the structure of "investigation" to repaint the figure of the author not as an all-knowing cultural authority but as a self-questioning investigator in search of new literary languages. Where Ghanim calls on the musical Upper-Egyptian language and communal function of the *mawwāl* in contradistinction to the state-controlled rhetoric of "reform" (*iṣlāḥ*), Khoury takes apart the martyr-poster, the *qīṣṣah*, and the *mathal* alike to play instead with the dream language of a madman. In both cases, the premise of the detective narrative allows the author to experiment with a new epistemology of fiction, one that relinquishes detection's often unspoken ties to authority, knowledge, and—by extension—to colonial, imperial, and state power. These shifting narrative poetics marked important transformations in the politics of literary representation in both national contexts. Ghanim's experiments with voice, language, and structure formed part of a generalized shift away from earlier Egyptian litterateurs' romantic depictions of rural space and people,⁷⁵ yet his narrator's uncertainty about the future of étatist reform projects maintains a reticence about Nasserist triumphalism notably absent from other Egyptian works of Soviet-inspired socialist realism. Khoury's antiheroic depiction of the *fedayee* and the *shahīd* alike, meanwhile, contrasts sharply and self-consciously with the heroic tones surrounding these figures in earlier works by Ghassan Kanafani, Mahmoud Darwish, Fadwa Tuqan, Nizar Qabbani, and others.⁷⁶

The most important link between Ghanim's fictional meditation on al-Gurna and Khoury's imaginative critical reflection on the Lebanese Civil War, however, is their shared meditation on reading itself. In both books, reading, like detection, is no longer a process of objective, dispassionate observation, deduction, and instructive conclusion. Rather, the reader, like the narrator in each case, must relinquish her obsessive drive to know (the "investigator within," in Ghanim's formulation) and instead listen to the voices, languages, and experiences of others, even if these seem to defy the rules of the novel as a literary form, as well as the logic of sense and grammar themselves. Distinctions between narrative subjects and narrated objects are thus not fixed but permeable and ever-shifting in *al-Jabal* and *White Masks*. Through their narrators' struggle with and eventual overcoming of their learned investigative drives, Khoury and Ghanim model a new reading practice for those encountering their novels. As the narrators renounce their

authority to observe, deduce, and ultimately speak for the disenfranchised people whom they've been sent to investigate, so the reader is invited to relinquish her impulses to "make sense" of postrevolutionary Egypt and Civil War-era Lebanon to ultimately transform them into objects of her knowledge. The texts thus offer lessons in method not only to their respective Arabic readerships but also to contemporary scholars in Middle East studies and comparative literature alike.

Still, there is a utopian bent to *al-Jabal* and *White Masks*: both seem to hope that by dramatizing the narrative subject's eclipse in fiction, that subject's domineering, official, "investigative" voice can be replaced with forms of communal narration excavated from the archive of Arab folk literature, on the one hand, and from the everyday, colloquial speech of Upper Egyptians, southern Lebanese, door-men, maids, and garbage collectors, on the other. While readers of these novels may yet learn the lessons they have to offer—about how to read less like a "truth establisher" and more like a mawwāl-listener—their anticolonial poetics remain relatively marginal to the literary establishments in both contexts. The significance of *White Masks* has been largely eclipsed by *Gate of the Sun*, Khoury's later and more sweeping tome of the Nakba and the Palestinian resistance struggle, and few contemporary Egyptian writers cite Fathi Ghanim as any sort of influence. Where *al-Jabal* and *White Masks* articulate their new "ways of seeking" in this positive, even utopian register, the texts in the next chapter—Sonallah Ibrahim's *The Committee* and *Zaat*—work negatively, first staging the failure and futility of "seeking" when undertaken in the isolation of a neoliberal economy and society, and then transforming the process of baḥṭh into a principle of composition that calls on readers to redefine, reclaim, and reinhabit the notion of a "public."