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## In the Thick of National Consciousness: Difference and the Critique of Identity in Elias Khoury's Little Mountain and Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children

Karim Abuawad, *The University of Western Ontario*

Supervisor: Calin-Andrei Mihailescu, *The University of Western Ontario*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Comparative Literature

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In the Thick of National Consciousness:  
Difference and the Critique of Identity in Elias Khoury's *Little Mountain*  
and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

Monograph

by

Karim Abuawad

Graduate Program in Comparative Literature

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
The University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario, Canada

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## Abstract

How should the relationship between literary texts and nationalism be explained? What is the difference between texts that resist nationalism's logic *aesthetically* and those that do so *discursively*? The answers to these questions form the core of this study whose central inquiry focuses on how the internal operations of fictional narrative handle the persistent depositories of national culture represented by a visceral bond between individual and nation. Most crucially, the potential of unraveling this resilient bond is located in the narrative's aesthetic operations, not in its discursive pronouncements, irrespective of how critical such pronouncements may be.

Rather than promoting or rejecting the bond while leaving intact its guiding premise of representational identity, the narratives considered in this study unravel this bond by pushing its logic to its breaking point so as to expose the fault line at its heart—its pure difference. This study delineates how this narrative-based critique deals with the debilitating problematics of national identity by rethinking its operation so that it becomes possible to envisage a non-rhetorical resistance to national identity.

The literary analysis of Elias Khoury's *Little Mountain* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* demonstrates that although following different trajectories, both novels ultimately deploy the resources of fictional narrative to advance such a critique of national identity. The narrative styles of these two novels speak a language through which a current is created, a current resisting the assumptions of conventional national identity. *Little Mountain* isolates the symptoms of national identity through a circular narrative movement fuelled by repetition. Repetition then shakes the foundation of all continuities—the necessary component of temporally solid identity. *Midnight's Children's* narrative movement begins by deploying the body of nationalism's central metaphor of nation as individual—a body extracted from the depositories of national culture—and ends by obliterating that body into pieces out of which neither the ghost nor the body could be resurrected.

This study's final chapter contains a reflection on the broader consequences of this rethinking of national identity through an exploration of the connections between modernity and nationalism.

### Keywords

Elias Khoury; *Little Mountain*; Salman Rushdie; *Midnight's Children*; nationalism; narrative theory; identity; Gilles Deleuze; literary style; aesthetic and bourgeois modernity

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Călin-Andrei Mihăilescu for the support he has shown me throughout my tenure at Western University, his swift responses, his relentless dedication to his students, but especially for walking the fine line between rigorous supervision and allowing for the intellectual freedom I very much needed—a freedom without which I would not have been able to take charge of my text. A special thanks is also due to Professors Luca Pucci and David Darby, Professor Pucci for his superb seminar, “Narrative and the Self,” in which the germ of this dissertation first took shape, Professor Darby for his unceasing encouragement and support. Last but not least, I thank Professor Walid Hamarneh, not only for his critical comments on the initial idea which later developed into the second chapter, but also for overcoming the limitations of geography to serve as this dissertation’s external reader.

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## Introduction: Toward a Feasible Critique of National Identity

All identities are only simulated, produced by an optical 'effect' by the more profound game of difference and repetition.

Gilles Deleuze, from the preface to *Difference and Repetition*

Art requires philosophy, which interprets it in order to say what it is unable to say, whereas art is only able to say it by not saying it.

Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

The relationship between literature and nationalism is undoubtedly a problematic subject matter for literary criticism. As a socio-political phenomenon arising from a type of mediation between individuality and affiliation, nationalism is certainly easier to examine from a social science perspective than from a literary one. One could begin by imagining the potential errors of a study that seeks to elaborate on this relationship from a literary standpoint. An error that comes to mind would be an attempt to analyze the link between the literary text and nationalism by means of an explanation as to how literature can serve as a vessel for or as an aesthetic exposition of a set of concepts produced by this resilient type of mediation between individuality and affiliation.

The problem with such explanations is all too obvious: it starts from the (usually undeclared) premise which holds the literary text to amount to little more than a second-hand representation—a Platonic Shadow, pure mimesis. It is also not too difficult to imagine what the *modus operandi* of such a study might look like: W. B. Yeats' "Second Coming" as an illustration of the National Bard's engagement with the projects of national liberation and decolonization in early twentieth-century Ireland, or George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* as an early document to be placed on the

trajectory of the formation of the Jewish national consciousness in the final decades of the nineteenth century.

The conclusion of this sort of analysis, then, will probably turn to either approbation or condemnation: an approbation of given formulations and the type of literary text that espouses them, or a condemnation of the regressive nature of certain ideologies and the text that serves as their aesthetic guise. There is, of course, a great deal of simplification in this sketch. The key point, however, appears not to be far off the mark because even the most complex of analyses (from a linguistic standpoint) can revert to a value judgment of representations instead of pressing on for a critical assessment of representation as such.

To avoid this error, a few key questions must be raised: how should the relationships between literary texts and the socio-political phenomenon of nationalism be explicated? How is the uniqueness—the distinctive aesthetic quality—of the literary text to be maintained when it is placed in conjunction with a socio-political phenomenon that usually finds its expression in political rhetoric? How is a meaningful distinction to be made between literary texts that embody the logic of nationalism and those that resist it? And, finally, how should one discern the vital difference between literary texts that resist nationalism's logic *aesthetically* and those that do so *discursively*. The answers to these questions form the crux of this study. For the present moment, I should indicate that all of these answers are to be revealed by way of a theoretical approach that traces the internal operations of the literary text, mainly its narrative style but also its literary devices and tropes.

To be more precise, this study's central inquiry focuses on the manner in which the literary text's internal operations handle the persistent depositories of



national culture aesthetically rather than seeking only the text's discursive pronouncements with regard to that culture whose excessive influence is anything but escapable. This is certainly not to say that discursive content has no place or that it is of no significance to the text's internal operations, but that its consideration must come into play as part and parcel of the creative force that constitutes the way a literary text operates.

Having briefly stated the key questions of this study, I would also add that there are two choices to be made. While the first of these choices has to do with the treatment of the literary text as being inherently distinctive, the second is related to the ideal literary form to be targeted—the novel. Unlike, say, a pamphlet or a piece of propaganda couched in an art form, both of which might seem to offer a more direct access to their discursive or rhetorical content, the literary text's distinctiveness is the result of its ability to be simultaneously a cause and a sign: in other words, of having the capacity to be at once the originator of experience as well as its expression. This is of utmost significance to this particular context. Only by way of a consideration that passes through the aesthetic nuances of the literary text can one avoid the fruitless (and perhaps hopeless) effort to make sense of nationalism as a product of false consciousness, as being necessary for efficiently conducting the business of nation-states, or as simply being the cynical concoction of Machiavellian politics.

Hence, as both the forger of experience and its prism, the literary text constitutes the fundamental ground for critically assessing the experience of being entrapped within the logic of nationalism, even if this logic appears to be unrelated to the text's internal operations by virtue of its seeming reliance on discursive

representations to produce the optical illusion of similarity. This experience's dizzying multiplicity, however, prevents it from ever being neatly condensed only in discourse. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor Adorno famously writes that "art requires philosophy, which interprets it in order to say what it is unable to say, whereas art is only able to say it by not saying it" (99). Adorno's pithy statement is especially pertinent to an analysis concerned with nationalism and the literary text, precisely because of the tendency for (and perhaps the ease of) taking the literary text "at its discourse." Adorno's basic yet often forgotten reminder provides me with the opportunity to lay stress on my own methodology which is informed by the conviction that the literary text can meaningfully and forcefully articulate what it says only through its aesthetics, not by way of its discourse or rhetoric.

With that in mind, I come to the second choice: the novel. Claiming that the novel is the ideal form for understanding better the workings of national consciousness has little to do with it being a prose genre. To make this assumption would be the equivalent of a critical analysis that speaks of the content of a novel and a political speech in the same breath, an analysis fixated on discourse as such. Rather, the novel is ideal because of the narrative resources it offers. These narrative resources, after all, are fundamental to both the creation and sustenance of this particular mediation between individuality and affiliation.

This study's contribution comes forth out of the notion that narrative is fundamental to the creation and sustenance of national consciousness. This contribution's bare outline can be condensed in the following statement: not only do these narrative resources put the novel in the position of being instrumental to the formation of national consciousness but also to the attempt of taking that

consciousness apart, of examining it as well as pushing its premises to their inevitable and logical end—to their ultimate breaking point. While the plasticity of narrative allows it to mobilize the resources of the story so as to consolidate identity diachronically and synchronically, thus giving it its own “sacred history,” that same plasticity also allows it create a story that brings that identity into the realm of profane difference.

Before I move on to discussing the specifics of my analysis, there is an explanation to be made with regard to the meaning of “taking national consciousness apart.” To begin with, resisting national consciousness or taking it apart ought not to be read as suggesting that nationalism can simply be overcome, or as promoting the view that it is actually possible to be entirely insulated from its influence. As I explain here briefly, but at length in the chapters to follow, resisting the logic of national consciousness within the parameters of this study means something quite different. My analysis of novels that push national consciousness to its breaking point, as the analysis to follow will make abundantly clear, should not be mistaken as a variant of the research which either celebrates or condemns the new “globalized world.” If the constant and steady flare up of nationalist fervour is to demonstrate anything at all, it would show clearly that despite all the discourse on globalization, multiculturalism, living “on the hyphen,” hybridity, and the new forms of mobility that facilitate the crossing of national boundaries, nationalism in all its forms is still far from becoming a spent force.

The resisting of national consciousness coupled with rejecting even the mere feasibility of the utopian ideal of a post-national order might present a debilitating dilemma for those interested in going beyond rhetorical defiance and in formulating

a viable alternative. This dilemma transpires as the result of the false choice one is forced to make between two views, one of which can be regarded as naïve, while the other as passive. It is to some extent naïve to oppose nationalism's identification pattern, the first view would imply, knowing that we have no real alternatives—perhaps not even the imagination required to bring into being a new form of identification that governs the relationship between individual and group. The second view, however, would imply that it is utterly passive to accept the logic of nationalism, given its regressive and limiting nature.

The true alternative, however, begins with refusing to subscribe to either view. This, though, involves examining the mechanisms of national consciousness, not only to show how it is prone to crumble under its own weight, but, more importantly, to allow for the disclosure of the aporia of difference that is already at its heart—the starting point of “taking national consciousness apart.” Through putting this crucial procedure in motion, one stands the chance of being able to provide avenues for formulating individualized ways of relating to the nation. Doing so is not so much a choice but an unavoidable necessity, especially since, as I argue, it is neither feasible to mount a successful opposition to national identity nor is it possible to accept its elemental premises which draw on the similitude of the copy and disregard the power of difference.

To put the above in more specific terms, instead of the choice to either accept or reject the idea of the nation according to its principal guiding premise of *representational identity*, it is necessary to push this premise to its breaking point so as to expose its fault line—the pure *difference* at its heart. In *Difference and Repetition* Gilles Deleuze mounts his seminal critique of the subordination of this pure

difference to the identity of representation. His critique, in fact, affords us the opportunity to deal better with the debilitating problematics of national identity by rethinking national consciousness itself, which in turn allows for the readjusting of the proverbial scale as far as identity and difference are concerned.

With regard the interplay of sameness, identity, and difference, Deleuze has the following to say:

In reality, the distinction between the same and the identical bears fruit only if one subjects the Same to a conversion which relates it to the different, while at the same time the things and beings which are distinguished in the different suffer a corresponding radical destruction of their *identity*. Only on this condition is difference thought in itself, neither represented nor mediated. The whole of Platonism, by contrast, is dominated by the idea of drawing a distinction between 'the thing itself' and the simulacra. Difference is not thought in itself but related to a ground, subordinated to the same and subject to mediation in mythic form. Overturning Platonism, then, means denying the primacy of original over copy, of model over image; glorifying the reign of simulacra and reflections. (66)

From this, one begins to see the outline for a cogent and ethical critique of national identity: cogent because it does not seek to refute what cannot be subjected to refutation and ethical because it mitigates nationalism's violence whose point of reference is the original form which must be approximated at any cost. Accordingly, the resisting of national consciousness as it is structured—by way of privileging representational sameness at the expense of what Deleuze calls *difference in itself*—is not only viable but is also ethically necessary as "the equal or identical always moves toward the absence of difference, so that everything may be reduced to a common denominator" (DR 65).

One of my central objectives, then, is to locate the Deleuzian *difference in itself* in the way the text deploys its structuring literary devices. In other words, the objective is to explicate the literary procedure that creates stylistic “conditions” through the deployment of narrative devices—conditions which in turn forge the space necessary for rethinking national consciousness along the lines of pure difference rather than in accordance with representational similitude. These conditions, in a nutshell, constitute the driving engine of the thoroughly singular force of narrative.

This approach to the critique of national identity achieves two interrelated aims, the first of which serves as the foundation of the second. It is a critique that makes it possible to form a fuller understanding of the mechanisms of national consciousness, especially insofar as these mechanisms function in the bounds of narrative. It is, most crucially, a critique that moves away from formulations focusing either on the rights and wrongs of national consciousness or on its real or imaginative nature. This foundation consequently opens up avenues for the conceiving of different forms of relating to the nation. Writing about Deleuze’s critique of identity and representation as they take shape in the Platonic worldview, James Williams explains that

through a critique of illusions of identity we allow ourselves to become open to the expression or thought of virtual becomings and to their structural relation to actual individuals. Critique clears the way...by allowing us to divest ourselves of the strong tendency of thought to return to identity and representation. (*Gilles Deleuze’s Difference and Repetition* 19)

These possibilities of “virtual becomings” stand as further proof that what is at stake is neither the rejection of certain identities nor the embracing of alternative ones.

Rather, what is really at stake is a more general procedure whose aim is the ultimate shifting of the concept of identity itself.

Notice also that in the above quotation William uses the term “actual individuals,” which is a reference to a point he makes earlier in his text. His previous point is meant to clarify that rather than treating the individual as a conscious being implying the existence of solid, temporally continuous identity—a move that would take us back to square one—Deleuze speaks of the individual as

a thing where thought takes place as an event but not necessarily [as] the conscious thought of a human being. The individual is a take on the whole of reality, where reality is not restricted to actual things that we can show or identify in the world. The individual is, rather, a series of processes that connect actual things, thoughts and sensations to the pure intensities and ideas implied by them...An individual is not a self-conscious ‘I’, it is a location where thoughts may take place. (6)

In my own analysis I do not wish to go as far as speaking of the individual *only* as the confluence of ideas and intensities. Such a contention which views individuality as being restricted to a site where ideas materialize would not suffice in the context of fictional narrative, unless one intends to turn the text into a mere illustration of philosophical ideas. Having said that, the Deleuzian individual is certainly an important element that adds consequential shades of signification to my analysis of individual characters. Rather than going so far as embracing the notion of the individual character as lacking the self-conscious “I,” I hold that *in addition* to speaking of individual characters in the customary sense, I also see them as having greater significance because they help us identify that point of convergence at which different visions of national identity emerge or, to continue with Deleuzian terminology, become actualized.

Such a flexible definition of individual characters makes it possible to formulate a critique that leaves behind the view of identity as necessarily standing for a localized or personalized issue and instead think of it as also being a designation of an approach which has the potential to transcend any single local context, thus forming a sketch or an outline of a broader *style of thought*.

It remains to be mentioned that this definition of the individual character should not be construed as an attempt to have the cake and eat it too. It is, rather, part of the effort to maintain the distinctiveness of the literary text—the individual character, from an aesthetic viewpoint, is simultaneously a cause, originating the experience as it happens to take shape in the text, as well as an expression, giving that experience an actualized form out of an infinite series of virtual forms.

The overriding aim of this study, then, is to interrogate the manner in which two novels address the problematics of national consciousness as it relates to the individual character. The discussion of nationalism as such, though lengthy in some parts, is necessary because it illuminates the background of the main concern of this study—the different ways in which Elias Khoury's *Little Mountain* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* use the resources of fictional narrative to provide different visions of national identity, visions which still deploy elements of this inescapable phenomenon of our age. The potency of these visions lies in their taking apart of national consciousness through the placing of pure difference at the centre of national identity, thus exposing the breaking point of representational sameness that has been established as that identity's principal hallmark.

My analysis of the two novels departs from the argument that their form, narrative style, and literary devices speak a language through which a current is



created, a current that resists the assumptions—of representational sameness—through which conventional national identity is formed. It would be relatively unchallenging to find narratives that seek to do the same at the level of discourse, but the difficulty of this project lies in its insistence on locating this resistance at the structural level, at the level of narrative form rather than remain fixated on the novels' discursive content.

As I indicate at the outset of the third chapter, we can think of *form, narrative style, and literary devices* as the basic grounds for comparison in this project. After all, the subject matter, the genre, and the tone of *Little Mountain* and *Midnight's Children* are quite distinct. The tone, for instance, ranges from the tragic in Khoury's novel to the absurd in Rushdie's. The genre ranges from fragmentary storytelling to magic realism. The subject matter ranges from the fractured memories of street fighters to the *Bildungsroman* of an Indian boy. The form, narrative style, and literary devices of the two novels, my argument goes, form the site where one finds the possibility for a comparative approach—a site which comes into being as a result of non-discursive features these novels share.

From this viewpoint, the choice to analyze these particular novels is very much related to their being so far apart in terms of their approach to storytelling. The choice in itself serves as a demonstration of this study's spirit, a spirit which stimulates the conviction that difference ought not to be subordinated to similarity. One could also see in this juxtaposition of difference a non-rhetorical statement whereby each of the two novels becomes a counterweight to the other, each preventing the other from an undue and disproportionate influence.

Both Saleem of *Midnight's Children* and the unnamed fighter we encounter in *Little Mountain's* first chapter come together in this analysis through their different enactments of actualizing new visions of national identity. Rather than simply offering new forms of identification, their actualized visions, more importantly, point to the virtual side which is often eclipsed by the concreteness of the actual. In this sense, each of these two characters embodies as a key part of its individuality principle a site where a confluence of ideas takes shape, a point of intensity where a thoroughly different vision of national identity is revealed. "Forward-looking movement," as Deleuze envisions it in *Difference and Repetition*, "depends on creative experiments by individuals...[who] must experiment in a way that expresses reality as the virtual and the actual, and according to principles that apply to all individuals" (Williams 30), with each individual initiating this as a procedure whose attributes are varied and multifarious. Not only do these characters stand for this productive site of experimentation, they also exhibit the fluidity of characters who do not function a mere set of ideas.

Both of these narratives, it should be added, employ stylistic and formal features that surprise or disrupt the conventional as well as upset that which is normally taken for granted vis-à-vis national identity—by opponents and proponents alike. To put it in yet more specific terms, the primary stylistic features that guide the discussion on *Little Mountain* are repetition and fragmentation. It is true that one could find these features in countless other narratives, but the general point I want to begin with is that these relatively common features function differently in Khoury's novel. On the surface, the incessant repetition of loosely connected stories that turn into endless and imperfect cycles results in a chaotic and disfigured narrative about an incomplete, incoherent, and ultimately stunted life.

According to this reading, which would be correct if we were to stop at the novel's discursive surface, stylistic repetition symbolizes a search for an order that has yet to be articulated. The original order that existed prior to the calamity for which the Lebanese civil war stands was nothing but a mere collective formula (i.e. an identity that seemed whole in its proposed representational similitude, possible only by way of ignoring the split at its heart).

In contrast, my reading of *Little Mountain* in the second chapter involves treating repetition from a structural standpoint instead of stopping at its outer manifestation. This reading is one that benefits from Deleuze's formulation of repetition as, first, being closely connected to pure difference and, second, as holding the potential to disrupt the "strong tendency of thought to return to identity and representation" (Williams 19).

While the stylistic features guiding the discussion on *Midnight's Children* are quite distinct, they end up producing (via different but related means) a similar effect insofar as the different vision of national identity is concerned. Hyperbole and digression—the principal features under consideration in Rushdie's novel—also seek to remake a collective formula that no longer holds together. Instead of reading hyperbole as applying pressure to the collective formula, for instance, interpretations of *Midnight's Children* tend to read it as a straightforward—if comical—articulation of the chief nationalist metaphor which equates the nation with the individual and vice versa.

In other words, these interpretations take Saleem's hyperbole at face value instead of considering its function as the principle according to which the entire arch of the narrative is structured. If there is a paradigm of interpretation that *Midnight's*

*Children* seems to invite, it is this paradigm which reads the novel's central metaphor only as a re-enactment of national identity's birth. In addition to the hyperbolic amplification of the nationalist metaphor, the other stylistic feature under consideration in the third chapter is digression. Digression—the novel's dominant motif of things, events, stories, histories, and characters “leaking into each other”—is brought into sharper relief for its generation of a sense of connectedness. This facet is crucial to both the act of storytelling as well as the act of creating a community. Digression also plays the pivotal role of naturalizing and maintaining the connectedness necessary for the advent of the national community across time and space.

After laying down the theoretical groundwork in the first chapter (focusing on the intersection of narrative, nation, and individual as well as on literary style) and concentrating on the literary analysis in the second and third chapters, I devote the fourth chapter to the consideration of the connections between the larger question of modernity and the conventional understanding of national identity. As a result of these connections, the novels' engagement with national identity represents in a way an indirect engagement with modern identity as such. This final chapter discusses the ramifications of the advent of modernity on the question of national identity as well as the interaction between cultural and industrial modernities. This discussion provides an explanation as to how the force that unravels national identity does not only relate to the question of identity but is additionally part of an intervention that seeks to readjust conventional assessments of modernity. Given that the interconnections between the projects of nationalism and modernity cannot be overlooked, this chapter also examines modernity's seemingly unshakeable attachment to a conventional understanding of national consciousness.

Having provided a sketch of the study's main arguments, I will conclude by way of a meta-clarification concerning my theoretical approach. There is no doubt that any literary analysis that takes form seriously faces an intractable problem as it instantly conjures up the stale image of the now ossified New Criticism. This is indeed a sad state of affairs which results in the continued influence of New Criticism, not positively, of course, but negatively in that the strong aversion against any type of formal literary criticism leads to the steering away from anything that might be associated with that most stale of approaches.

Taking narrative form seriously, as I do in this study, ought not to be judged merely based on a presumptuous association with a defunct school of literary criticism. Rather, it should be seen as an attempt to allow formal analysis to occupy once again its rightful place, a place it had lost as a result of a flood of discourse analysis that has yet to subside. Mark Currie expresses this very sentiment in his *About Time*, published in 2007. He writes that "it is only when a degree of formalism is allowed back into the analysis that the critic can do justice to the nature of narrative" (28). In an interesting twist in the tumultuous and constantly shifting history of literary criticism, the analysis of form and style appears to be becoming something of an underdog!

## Chapter 1

### 1 The Narrative Structure of National Affiliation

It is only when a degree of formalism is allowed back into the analysis that the critic can do justice to the nature of narrative.

Mark Currie, *About Time*

The nations are not something eternal. They had their beginnings and they will end.

Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation?"

But nationalism as a phenomenon, not as a doctrine presented by nationalists, is inherent in a certain set of social conditions; and those conditions, it so happens, are the conditions of our time.

To deny this is at least as great a mistake as to accept nationalism on its own terms.

Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*

#### Part One: The Cultural Depositories of Nationalism

In a dialogue from Elias Khoury's novel, *As Though She Were Sleeping*, the reader comes across a reflection on the difference between the novel and poetry.

Meelya, the novel's protagonist whose world is a complex mixture of dream and reality, is in conversation with her husband, Mansour. An avid lover of poetry, Mansour makes the following plea to convince Meelya of the superiority of poetry to the novel:

Every mortal is compelled to relive his own story...Every mortal is a story. What is life, my darling? We live a story written by someone else, we don't know who. That's why I'm afraid to read novels. Whenever I read one, I feel the writer must be a monster, putting people into tragic situations just to entertain his readers. I feel as though I'm being stuffed with stories that never end, as though at any moment I might fall out of life and find myself inside a book. No, poetry's better. For the Arabs, poetry was the highest art because it described without telling a story. When they wanted

to make a story readable they put poetry into it, so the poetry's the story and the story's structure, and so on. (186)

Whereas Meelya appears to have found a balance between the plastic inner world of her dreams and the givenness of the outer world, Mansour continues to search for such tranquility to no avail. His fear of novels is mainly associated with their ability of engulfing the individual, of mixing the inner and outer elements of that individual's existence. Unlike poetry, which, according to Mansour, describes without telling, the novel is the creation of a monster precisely because it captures individuality (in the sense of apprehending or imprisoning it) through a structure that gives it no hope of ever escaping.

Not only is the individual unable to break free from a novel created by someone else, the novel is even seen as being the antithesis of life! There is surely an unresolved contradiction in what Mansour says, namely in his equating of the mortal and the story, before equating being-in-a-story and falling out of life. Nevertheless, the more important connection being made is the one between the inexhaustible nature of novels and the existential fear that they might actually succeed in blurring the distinction between "life," the mainstay of the individual's consciousness of itself, and story, which provides that individual with the ability to project that consciousness outward, thus grasping the external world in all its multiplicities.

The novel, therefore, is a terrifying genre as it can be an instrument whereby the individual's private life loses its own privacy and becomes only one story among innumerable stories, all dictated by an external, god-like author.

What is to be found in this case is a frightening alignment between the exteriority and interiority of experience. The melancholia which Mansour suffers from (and his rather romantic notions about poetry) has its roots in the loss of privacy he unsuccessfully mourns, a loss that the proliferation of novels, he believes, bears the responsibility for.

One should be aware that the events in *As Though She Were Sleeping* take place in Nazareth and Beirut during the 1930s and 40s, a period during which great changes are in the making and new states are being carved out of what previously had been a single geopolitical entity. Needless to say, this law-making carving up of states and the dangers associated with it are accompanied by a proliferation of narratives (for which the novel provides an ideal home) meant to create a ground for that dramatic change: narratives of independence, of liberty from foreign aggression, of Arab unity, of local nationalisms, and so on. The basis of such narratives is of course the anonymous, fluidly defined collective and not the autonomous individual. What this perspective occludes, as to be shown later on, is the possibility of a sort of novel that is capable of providing a home for a storytelling that reverses the alignment that makes Mansour fear all novels without exception.

This distinction between the novel and storytelling proper forms one of the axes of Walter Benjamin's seminal piece, "The Storyteller," which deplores, from the outset, the loss of the storyteller, a figure Benjamin sees as the bearer of an authentic artistic tradition, the beginning of whose rapid decline coincided with the onset of modernity. I should also add that Benjamin prefers not to see this decline as a "symptom of decay," but rather as a long process that gains



great momentum with the rise of capitalist bourgeois culture. The rise of the novel—contemporaneous with the rise of capitalism—is “the earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling” (Benjamin 87). The relationship between the novel and storytelling, Benjamin’s analysis suggests, is one based on a zero-sum game: as the novel gains in prominence, storytelling recedes into the archaic. This picture gets more complicated with the rise of “information,” a menace to both storytelling and novel. It turns out that information “confronts storytelling as no less of a stranger than did the novel, but in a more menacing way, and that it also brings about a crisis in the novel” (Benjamin 88). By characterizing it as a danger to both novel and story, Benjamin sets information apart. But what he actually does is affiliate the novel with information, namely in the way he presents the menace of information as an amplification of that of the novel.

The trouble with this view is its disregard for the plasticity of the novel as a genre, one which holds the potential of incorporating both story and information, as Benjamin defines them. In fact, it is possible to find a great deal of overlap (as far as the culprit is concerned) in the two condemnations of the novel mentioned above. On the one hand, the danger lies in the proliferation of novels, which Mansour regards as turning *all* experience (including private one) into pure anonymity or exteriority, while robbing the individual of the precious sense of distinctiveness or interiority. (It is no wonder, then, that he subscribes wholeheartedly to the romantic notion that poetry is the only genre that gives us access to interiority, which compels him to find refuge in it.)

On the other hand, what Benjamin calls information can creep into any narrative, be it story or novel, with a differing degree of influence. The ubiquity of information functions in a similar way in that the alignment of the external with the internal leads to the primacy of exteriority over interiority (something Mansour sees as inherent to the novel). Benjamin writes that

the founder of *Le Figaro*, characterized the nature of information in a famous formulation. 'To my readers,' he used to say 'an attic fire in the Latin Quarter is more important than a revolution in Madrid.' This makes strikingly clear that it is no longer intelligence coming from afar, but the information which supplies a handle for what is nearest that gets the readiest hearing. (88-9)

While the founder of *Le Figaro* makes this point by emphasizing the importance of the near (Latin Quarter) as opposed to the far (Madrid), what really sets that type of information apart from the wisdom of storytelling is that its exteriority (i.e., anonymity) is camouflaged with interiority (i.e., sameness). The victims of the fire across the city are not simply characterized by their physical proximity, but rather by their belonging to what appears to be the same collective; their anonymity, in other words, is circumvented and made subjective to the reader who mistakenly sees in it the appearance personalized facts.

The above two examples lead to the recognition that what is at stake in Benjamin's text is not the novel or storytelling as such, but the way in which narrative as a category, be it oral or written, organizes experience. Therefore, the distinction which Benjamin makes between the novel as a form or as a book and storytelling as an activity reliant on attitude and expertise can be misleading because it comes at the expense of those novels, which, no less than storytelling,

resist both the proliferation of information as well as the exteriority camouflaged with subjectivity that information represents.

As is the case with storytelling, the novel is capable of both shunning information and serving as the channel for collective, distant memory, as long as it is written in a style that treats its reader not as the anonymous subject of that memory but as its rightful inheritor. Storytelling as a craft, then, cannot be the determinant factor as Benjamin maintains when he writes that “what differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature—the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella—is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it” (87). The comparison between a form and an activity, one could argue, is bound to obfuscate the productive strands of both.

Benjamin’s judgment of the novel is quite understandable if one were to think of the realist novel and its cousin the historical one. The historical novel, I argue, is an excellent example of novelistic narration whose essence depends on information, whose main function is to swallow individual characters into the externality and anonymity of history, and whose conclusion is the stuffing of readers with stories coupled with conveniently provided explanations.<sup>1</sup> Even if one disagrees with most of Georg Lukács’ pronouncements on the characteristics

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<sup>1</sup> In *Metahistory*, Hayden White shows that a similar procedure is deployed in supposedly disinterested historical accounts whereby meaning is generated via the narrative structure the historian chooses. He writes that “providing the ‘meaning’ of a story by identifying the kind of story that has been told is called explanation by emplotment. If, in the course of narrating history, the historian provides it with the plot structure of a Tragedy, he has ‘explained’ it in one way; if he has structured it as a Comedy, he has ‘explained’ it another way” (7). Though White is concerned with historical accounts, his reading is crucial to the central argument I develop in this chapter because it captures the movement from explanation through discursive information to explanation by way of narrative structure.

of a “good” historical novel, his discussion of it in *The Historical Novel* still provides us with an excellent description of what he holds as the accomplished historical novel and what I prefer to call the “novel of information.” In short, his description shows us how the pre-eminence of information in the novel, which coincides with what I call the alignment of the exteriority with the interiority of experience, can lead to the masking of the individualized element, even when that element appears to be the central concern.

Lukács’ book I mention above is essentially a study of the rise and fall of the historical novel with a short note on the prospects for (positive) change to its predicament in the works of authors such as Thomas Mann. More specifically, one of the central arguments Lukács advances goes as follows: what is lacking in historical novels before those of Sir Walter Scott is the derivation of the individuality of characters from their historical epoch (19). For him, this shortcoming on the part of the novelist who tries to reproduce a historical era, i.e. give the reader *information* about it, results from the failure to connect narrated events with the psychology of principal characters, as Flaubert does in *Salammbô* (193), or from failing to give human embodiments to historical-social types (35).

## 1.1 Narrative and Nation: Some Basic Assumptions

Lukács’ materialist and teleological approach to the novel is pertinent to the discussion at hand: it gives us an extreme instance of the role the novel could play in the formation of affiliation between the individual and external forces, in his case, the social antagonism of history, social trends, and historical forces, in ours, the idea of the nation. Before proceeding further with the question of how narrativity figures into the individual’s relationship with what I call the

exteriority of experience, we should take a step back and take stock of some basic assumptions about the link between narrative, nation, and the formation of national consciousness. Although somewhat rudimentary, these assumptions will prove to be invaluable throughout this dissertation.

In the opening pages of *Nations and Nationalism*, Ernest Gellner approaches the discussion on the difference between nation and state by way of calling attention as to how, in the modern imagination, the idea of nationality is utterly indispensable to the individual. While many of us can quite easily imagine an individual who is stateless, an individual who lacks a nationality is almost incomprehensible:

A man without a nation defies the recognized categories and provokes revulsion...a man must have a nationality as he must have a nose and two ears; a deficiency in any of these particulars is not inconceivable and does from time to time occur, but only as a result of some disaster, and it is itself a disaster of a kind. All this seems obvious, though, alas, it is not true. But that it should come to *seem* so very obviously true is indeed an aspect, or perhaps the very core, of the problem of nationalism. Having a nation is not an inherent attribute of humanity, but it has now come to appear as such. (6)

An individual who is not affiliated with a nation, then, is not only a curiosity or an anomaly but does not fit in the modern world altogether! This individual is, to use Gellner's metaphor, a person who no longer casts a shadow. Even if we are conceptually aware of the constructed nature of the nation and that it is far from being an inherent attribute of humanity, the perception itself has the formidable influence so as to endow it with a givenness, thus making it very much part of

“reality.” It is for this reason that refutation and affirmation cannot be used as poles for a system meant to judge the nation.

If we try a more metaphorical standpoint, the homophonic quality of the terms “nation” and “narration” (which Homi Bhabha capitalized on in his collection of essays, *Nation and Narration*) would point us to an intimate, visceral connection between the two terms and what they signify. Narration, from this symbolic perspective, could be seen as at once a precondition of the nation as well as the mechanism which metaphorically gives birth to the nation. The story of the nation—from the Latin *natio*, literally meaning “that which has been born”—comes to life from the travails of narrative.

One can take this metaphorical conception even further and elaborate on the ways in which nationhood is often spoken of through analogies which transform the entity (or should I say the hypothesis?) we call “nation” into something akin to a human subject: the nation was *born* out of its people’s distinctive culture, language, or civic laws, it *came of age* during one era or another, it *holds* certain religious or secular values, visions, and even a worldview. Ernest Renan, for instance, invokes this principle several times in his essay, “What is a Nation?” “The nation,” he says, “like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice, and devotion,” and its existence resembles an individual’s existence in that both are a sign of the “perpetual affirmation of life” (19). In addition, the moral qualities of a nation are to be judged based on the same moral yardstick applied to those of the individual: “I often tell myself that an individual who had those faults which in nations are taken for good qualities, who fed off vainglory, who was to that

degree jealous, egotistical, and quarrelsome, and who would draw his sword on the smallest pretext, would be the most intolerable of men" (Renan 20). This demand for consistency insofar as moral standards are concerned, moves the bond between individuality and nationhood from metaphor onto a more tangible level.

Narrative also has the more concrete function of providing a model for the embodiment of individual and nation, an embodiment that any nationalism must naturalize in order to become established and perpetually disseminate in order to overcome the test of time. Of course, nationalists are in the habit of making the claim that nationalism is a characteristically grassroots movement, one which comes into existence through people's loyalties, certainly not through narrative qualities. It is true that nationalism needs to "infect" a large number of people in order to become a sizable force, but we must be careful as not to confuse the effect of nationalism with its genesis. Nationalism becomes *visible* when it mobilizes the crowds, but that visibility should not be confused with its ontology as such. There are, as Gellner points out, an almost unquantifiable number of nationalisms that do exist. Their failure to attract the crowds, however, results in a lack of visibility that would otherwise give them an assured existence in the world of quantifiable facts.

Unlike Eric Hobsbawm, who, in *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780*, professes his preference for an inquiry that pays special attention to the view from below (10-11), i.e., the crowds, Gellner points out that the introduction of the standardized high culture of nationalism *from above* is the phenomenon to be scrutinized. What is to be noted, however, is how the two approaches (though, to

a lesser degree in Gellner's case) fail to assess nationalism's genesis adequately because they both need visibility in order to produce their findings. For Gellner, the age of nationalism is not so much the age of mass movements, but rather the period during which there is an

imposition of a high culture on society, where previously low cultures had taken up the lives of the majority, and in some cases of the totality, of the population. It means that generalized diffusion of a school-mediated, academy-supervised idiom, codified for the requirements of reasonably precise bureaucratic and technological communication. It is the establishment of an anonymous, impersonal society, with mutually substitutable atomized individuals, held together above all by a shared culture of this kind, in place of previous complex structure of local groups. (57)

Gellner reaches his conclusion from a socio-political angle, while Hobsbawm does so from a historical one. We know that the footprints of mass movements and the vital changes to the world of bureaucracy are very conspicuous. Because of their conspicuous nature, these phenomena become the ideal ingredients of a procedure that develops explanations and puts them in the service of facts. A given configuration of explanations and facts, if it gains a certain level of influence, makes the next step on this ladder and becomes a theory. Materialist theories, as Aijaz Ahmad succinctly puts it in his *In Theory*, evolve in the following manner: "facts require explanations, and all explanations, even bad ones, presume a configuration of concepts, which we provisionally call 'theory.' In other words, theory is not simply a desirable but a *necessary* relation between facts and explanations" (34). This, obviously, would not be credible enough to make the cut in the context of aesthetics, where it would not be possible to say that narrative simply institutes a homogenized high culture, and it would not be



enough to show how narrative gives voice to that high culture. The literariness of fictional narrative necessitates that it be read as a cause as well as a sign of what it embodies and not as an explanation or an illustration.

## 1.2 Narrative and Identity: From Individual into National Subject

To sum up the point of departure developed thus far, we can say that in what Gellner terms as “the modern imagination” the individual and the nation are inextricably linked, that the nation owes its existence and resilience to narration, and that fictional narrative ought to be evaluated according to its literary components, not only its discourse. This point of departure, then, leads us to recognize that there is something to be learned from bringing together the three focal points—narrative, nation, individual.

Bringing the three together allow us to ask the right questions with regards to how their confluence give rise to national consciousness and the specific form of identity it engenders; it also makes it possible to put the three in conjunction laterally rather than hierarchically. In other words, this lateral approach helps us avoid seeing one simply as the result of another or as its cause. In addition, national consciousness, though riddled with bad faith and contradictions, develops within a complex set of factors and never as a chain reaction. Treating national consciousness as such can either lead to its promotion through crude ideology or produce a feeble attempt to refute it, an attempt that may well invoke another set of theories and ideologies but can never be coherent enough to form either a theory of nationalism or of anti-nationalism. We can start, then, by asking the following question: how does the individual acquire a

national identity or become a “national subject,” and how does this subject configure into the tripartite of narrative, nationhood, and individual?

Before going further, however, I think a qualification is in order: I use the term “national subject” not in the sense of a subject that possesses or has acquired a strong, ideological identification<sup>2</sup> with a given nation (or, even, a subject that has been nationalized out of its presumed privacy), but simply to denote the end result of a process of formation whereby individuals come to understand their selfhood as implicated in a bigger whole, as constituting a part of a certain nation, which is quite different from the pernicious associations we draw from any noun to which the adjective “national” is attached. It is worth remembering that the usage of the term “nationalism” as a term that implies a racist worldview is a relatively recent development in the history of what Hobsbawm calls “the principle of nationality,” a development which, he argues, took place in Europe from 1880s onwards. Hobsbawm writes that one of principal changes to occur in the period between 1880-1914 is a shift “which affected not so much the non-state national movements...but national sentiments within the established nation-states: a sharp shift to the political right of nation and flag, for which the term ‘nationalism’ was actually invented in the last decade(s) of nineteenth century” (102). Hobsbawm chronology, to start with, is belated. What should be noted, however, is that the overlap between nationalism and a racist, exclusivist worldview ought not to convince us that nationalism and a racist worldview are constant facets of the phenomenon of nationalism.

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<sup>2</sup> Also known as “patriotism.”

Nationalism, by definition, is exclusivist, but different nationalisms draw the line in various ways. The main concern, then, is not whether Hobsbawm's chronology is accurate, but simply to point out that some nationalisms draw the line based on race, others deploy different exclusionary measures such as language, culture, or legal status.

On the connection between racism and nationalism, Hobsbawm holds that "what brought 'race' and 'nation' even closer [in the nineteenth century] was the practice of using both as virtual synonyms, generalizing equally widely about 'racial'/'national' character, as was then the fashion" (108). This shows that the pernicious connotations of right-wing politics and racial purity that the word "nationalism" sometimes elicits are connected to specific historical developments rather than part of nationalism as such. They pertain, in other words, to some nationalisms at certain historical junctures and are not wedded to national consciousness itself.

Thus, for the purposes of this discussion, the national subject, at its most fundamental level, is an individual who has come to base his understanding of his selfhood on a double narrative rather than on a singular one. The identity of the individual as such has been theorized as being formed through a private and singular narrative that (selectively) incorporates life events in order to assemble a "history of oneself." Looking back at this history from the vantage point of the present is what allows the individual to form an identity whose current attributes are the consequence of what appears to the individual as an evolutionary past. Although taken for granted, this identity-through-narrative is the crucial baseline for any assessment of the way an individual becomes

viscerally implicated in the foggy entity we call nation. Paul Ricœur, to take one example from a long line of philosophers and critics,<sup>3</sup> starts his essay “Narrative Identity” with the following remark:

Do not human lives become more readily intelligible when they are interpreted in the light of the stories that people tell about them? And do not these ‘life stories’ themselves become more intelligible when what one applies to them are the narrative models—plots—borrowed from history or fiction (a play or a novel)?... It is thus plausible to endorse the following chain of assertions: self-knowledge is an interpretation; self interpretation, in its turn, finds in narrative, among other signs and symbols, a privileged mediation; this mediation draws on history as much as it does on fiction, turning the story of a life into a fictional story or a historical fiction, comparable to those biographies of great men in which history and fiction are intertwined. (188)

Narrative, from this perspective, is an organizing pattern, an *Urmodel* for the synergy of specific, localized events and their possible temporal arrangement. Although the combined effect of this synergy is self-knowledge or knowledge of one’s own identity, this type of knowledge, Ricœur stresses, is dependent on a necessary interaction with and opposition to other exterior identities within a social milieu that is saturated with signs and symbols—something that the title of Ricœur’s book, *Oneself as Another*, captures well.

There are, nevertheless, two interrelated problems with this explanation. First, there is an absence of differentiation between what could be termed as tangible identities and purely abstract ones. Second, the investigation is

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<sup>3</sup> See Jerome Bruner’s “Life as Narrative,” *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, Paul J. Eakin’s *How Our Lives Become Stories*, Donald E. Hall’s *Subjectivity*, and Christopher Lasch’s *The Minimal Self*.

restricted to narrative as it pertains to individual selfhood. Interactions between individuals in a given society could be split into two categories: tangible or concrete interactions with other individuals and abstract or possible ones.

Possible interactions remain virtual and are never actualized. Such “interaction” is abstract or hypothetical, “taking place” only on a conceptual level. This abstract interaction is neither actualized nor can they be actualized as both individual identities in question, those of oneself and of another, are not defined by concrete social determinations, but only by a common affiliation to a collective. Unlike the possible interactions, tangible ones are first and foremost defined by one or more social determinations and never simply by a common affiliation which could come into play either rhetorically or as an added layer of signification.

Ricœur’s explanation also fails to account for complimentary forms of identity such as the national one. The point to note about the nation’s narrative is its capacity to be both separate from and part of the subject’s narrative of itself. This function is the underlying condition that could lead to mistaking purely abstract identities for concrete ones. While the private narrative allows one to conceive of one’s own identity and those of others through actual interactions, the national narrative allows one to conceive of those abstract identities without

always requiring actualized interaction.<sup>4</sup> What occurs is essentially a misrecognition whereby purely abstract identities are misrecognized as actualized ones, which in turn leads to eradicating the possibility of difference inherent in abstract identities.

The influence of those abstract identities, however, arises conceptually through the hypothetical mediation between the private narrative and the national one. Therefore, unlike the private individual, the national subject must draw on a double narrative. This double narrative, as the name suggests, is a product of two narratives, the first of which is private and the second is collective. The point at which the two understandings meet is the point at which the private individual is effectively turned into a national subject.

The private strand of the national subject's narrative become determined by the larger narrative, which gives the nation a story and a life of its own, while at the same time that private strand comes to be conceived as constituting an essential component of the larger narrative. The national subject is a nationalized subject who is at once a product and a component of the collective nation. In other words, what I call the national subject is a subject morphed by a narrative that is always larger than life while at the same time perceiving itself as a component that influences (or at least ought to influence) that larger narrative.

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<sup>4</sup> This is in part the result of the time conception within which nationalism is possible. See Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*: "An American will never meet, or even know the names of more than a handful of his...fellow-Americans. He has no idea of what they are up to at any one time. But he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity" (26).

The structure of this double narrative is captured by two Latin phrases: the first is *e pluribus, unum*, meaning “out of many, one,” and the second is *e unibus, pluram*, which means “out of one, many.”<sup>5</sup> The connotations of the first phrase are quite obvious: the nation is a harmonious whole, a whole which though comprised out of numerous elements is characterized by oneness nonetheless. The connotations of the second one, however, are more intricate. If the national subject constitutes an essential component of nationhood, then the oneness that defines it turns out to be oneness out of which the plurality of the nation is generated. While this might seem as evident as not to require comment as collective narratives always existed in one form or another, it ceases to seem evident when we consider the distinction which must be made between other collective narratives that may be described as concrete and the narrative of the nation. The affiliation with the narrative of the nation has the following major differences.

First: the double narrative in the case of nationalism is not determined through a chosen affiliation, or through a “daily plebiscite” as Renan puts it,<sup>6</sup> but presented as the default. (Gellner’s metaphor of the individual who lacks nationality as one without a shadow comes to mind here.) To grasp the difference between other affiliations and the national one, it is enough to think

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<sup>5</sup> I borrow this Latin phrase from David Foster Wallace’s essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction.”

<sup>6</sup> After considering and dismissing several criteria of the nation, namely history of conquest, race, language, material interest, religion, geography, Renan concludes his “What is a Nation?” by insisting that common will is the single, most decisive criterion: “A nation’s existence is, if you will pardon the metaphor, a daily plebiscite” (19).

about how some nations owe their formation to the fact that their borders, whether physical or more fluid, have been determined by the outer borders of other, already established nations. In the age of nationalism, even if the national affiliation is not constituted by a set of historical, cultural, or linguistic developments, nationalist sentiments will still come about nonetheless simply as a result of being squeezed between other, perhaps more resilient, national affiliations. This is certainly not applicable to other collectives such religious or tribal ones. (This also explains the difficulty of determining the criteria of nationhood through religion, language, customs, or cultural inheritance as the “by-product” nationalisms always form insurmountable exceptions.)<sup>7</sup> Most important, the “affiliation by default” presents a serious difficulty when it comes to writing. The narratives which will be discussed in the coming chapters will elucidate this point further: because they try to forgo the logic of the national affiliation, they must always begin at this default position and work their way from there.

Second: it is virtually impossible to cast away the national affiliation procedurally. We can see this at work in countries that require immigrants to assimilate: they can do so in bureaucratic and civic terms, but they can neither fully cast away their original nationality nor fully adopt the new one.

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<sup>7</sup> The difficulty of determining a universal set of criteria of nationhood is also the result of nationalism’s tendency to demarcate the nation in hindsight. The end result is a process of selection rather than an attempt at providing a definition. This is to say that each nationalism selects from a community’s unique histories and mythologies (or a mixture of the two) those criteria which happen to be useful. This is also to say that all attempts to isolate those “essential” criteria of nationhood are doomed to failure which is an unavoidable component of the approach itself.



Consequently, states that drop this requirement and define civic assimilation as being sufficient have been much more successful in integrating immigrants into society. In comparison, religious affiliation, to take one example, can be cast away through non-practice or conversion, procedures that the individual has the capacity to undertake. Obviously, the process of renouncing or revoking citizenship also does not apply because it is a function of the state, not the nation.

The third and most important distinction is that the national affiliation comes by way of a double narrative does not simply signify a conflation of two narratives that have morphed into a singularity; it is rather the crucible, a matching point, or a point of binding, at which the national narrative meets the private narrative of the national subject. The nature of this double narrative represents a fertile ground for ideology as it binds subject and nation in a way that is extremely difficult to be undone. It is crucial at this point to distinguish between the acts of binding and superimposition and account for the difference in the way ideology operates in each case.

To approach this distinction, let us turn to Benedict Anderson's classical study of nationalism, *Imagined Communities*. Anderson articulates the incorporative nature of the nation's narrative saying that "the nation's biography<sup>8</sup> snatches, against the going mortality rate, exemplary suicides, poignant martyrdoms, assassinations, executions, wars, and holocausts. But, to serve the narrative purpose, these violent deaths must be remembered / forgotten

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<sup>8</sup> Notice how even the most impartial critics of nationalism frequently use words applicable to individuals when discussing the nation.

as 'our own'" (206). Anderson's intention is to draw attention to the selective (in some cases, sinister) process through which national history is usually constructed. What inadvertently comes across in this comment, however, is how these occurrences do not always become remarkable on their own "merit" but as a result of their superimposition onto the nation's narrative.

The straightforward superimposition of discrete occurrences onto the nation's narrative arc is most evident in the historical novel in which the character's private story becomes remarkable by virtue of its occurring as part of the foreground of an important juncture in the nation's story. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, for instance, exhibits this kind of superimposition. Hester's story, a woman's adulterous love affair with a young priest, is surely a story worth telling, even without the national background. Nevertheless, the backdrop of puritan America, a story that is the property of the nation as whole with all its repressions and its witch hunts, puts the novel on a completely different level of significance and possibly makes it a better candidate, as far as the literary historian is concerned, for the inclusion in the American literary canon. (A more mundane and certainly less accomplished example of this process is the Hollywood historical film, which tends to be conventional and unremarkable when it comes to the character's private story and very heavy on the grander, national level.) Lukács' emphasis on the individualization of the historical epoch is thus misleading because such individualization does not produce an autonomous individual but an automaton. Ideology in the case of superimposition is mainly projected onto the background itself. Even if the character's actions or discourse are part of that grand ideology (how we

overcome this and the motivation for making amends for it), such actions and discourse remain a function of the domineering background.

In the case of binding, however, something more subtle happens: the national narrative in the background does not necessarily serve as the validation of the private narrative, nor does it dominate it openly. Rather, the two narratives are no longer simply superimposed, no longer run parallel with their interaction restricted to the surface, but they are connected through various structural literary mechanisms, the most important of which is the plot itself.

To illustrate this point, let us consider how this pertains to plot in a somewhat cursory manner before giving this critical point its due treatment in the discussion of specific novels in the second and third chapters. In addition to being the most visible organizing pattern, the plot is also the site at which two often confused notions of identity overlap. Ricœur argues in the essay I quote above that the failure to distinguish between these notions is the source of the difficulties contemporary discussions face with regards to the question of identity. Ricœur labels these notions with the Latin terms *ipse* and *idem*: “identity as sameness (Latin: *idem*; English: *same*; German: *gleich*) and identity as selfhood (Latin: *ipse*; English: *self*; German: *Selbst*)” (189). Identity as *ipse* is the notion of selfhood as uniqueness (or the fundamental differentiation between the self and the other), whereas identity as *idem* is the notion of identity as maintaining coherence over the course of time (i.e. being one and the same or having a solid temporal permanence). For instance, retrograde amnesia would impair identity as *idem* more significantly than it would identity as *ipse*. From this, Ricœur draws the conclusion that “the basis for the discontinuity in the determination of the

identical is that identity as uniqueness does not thematically imply time, which is not the case with identity as permanence” (190). How does narrative plot figure into this distinction? Plot, according to this thesis, is the mechanism that creates a dynamic link between the two forms of identity, a link that can only be located in narrative, irrespective of how complex or primitive it happens to be. This capacity is a constitutive element of narrative which “constructs the durable properties of a character, what one could call his narrative identity, by constructing the kind of dynamic identity found in the plot which creates the character’s identity” (195).

It is possible, then, to account for both private and national identities by keeping Ricœur’s scheme but supplementing it by arguing that there is at the centre of the binding model an axes point at which four different strands coalesce. The first two strands belong to the character (or national subject) and the other two belong to the nation which gets a characterization of its own. This characterization posits the nation as having its own identity through being distinctive from other nations and through having a degree of coherence or permanence in time, permanence that often stretches to a period preceding the official establishment of the nation state.

If we separate the dual plot, the private segment and the national one, each of which with own *idem* and *ipse*, then look at its arrangement, we would find that the two segments are aligned so that their critical turning points are inextricably bound together in two complementary ways. First, the nation’s identity mirrors the individual’s in both respects, uniqueness and sameness. Second, this mirroring is reinforced so that there are on the narrative’s arc key

matching points: the reversal, conflict, and resolution in one segment of the plot match those in the other. All this may be done without resorting to making the connection between the turning points overt discursively. The end result is a double and synchronized narrative that generates national consciousness or reinforces it by way of its specific arrangement of the private and the national. This procedure would not be greatly affected by narratological variations such as linearity or fragmentariness.<sup>9</sup>

Drawing on Louis Althusser's terminology, one could call the cumulative effect of this process "the literary interpellation of individuals into national subjects." In "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Althusser, argues that the subject is always a product of ideology in the sense that it is through ideology that individuals get interpellated into subjects (170). "The category of the subject," he adds, "is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects" (171). In this essay, Althusser describes how the ideological state apparatuses generally use non-violent means to maintain the status-quo by *turning* individuals into subjects. Despite suggesting that individuals *become* subjects, he still holds "that an individual is always-already a subject, even before he is born, is nevertheless the plain reality, accessible to everyone and not a paradox at all" (176). While Althusser speaks of a process entailing *becoming* a subject, he still posits the subject as *always-already* a subject.

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<sup>9</sup> This is in contrast to Anderson's argument that it is the realist novel that succeeds in cementing national consciousness (*Imagined Communities* 25), though it is certainly easier to recognize this procedure in the realist novel than it would be in a fragmentary or nonlinear narrative.

The first part of his argument, therefore, is persuasive. The second part, I think, is in need of some refinement as it is much too deterministic to be plausible, not to mention that it remains irreconcilable with the first part. Introducing the distinction between the two models of double narrativity to Althusser's deterministic ontology of subjecthood makes it possible to refine it so as to allow for an opening in Althusser's closed system. While the fictional narrative based on the background-foreground model establishes the subject as an always-already national subject, my argument goes, the one based on the binding model begins with establishing an individual before using literary mechanisms to turn that individual into a national subject.

Unlike what takes place in the superimposition model, the national narrative in the binding model does not need to have a domineering and palpable presence in the economy of the fictional narrative as a whole. The national narrative could coexist as another, remote level of action and events, or could simply recede and thus appear to bear little significance to the dynamics of the private narrative. The key point, however, is that the two narratives are bound together in a way that allows them to provide mutual validation of each other. Moreover, the national subject arises "naturally" as part of a process of becoming rather than a process of authorial imposition.

It is for these reasons that the superimposition model tends to produce a less sophisticated ideological structure than does the binding model. We can take this further and imagine the difference between the two models to be akin to the difference between the repressive state apparatuses and the ideological state apparatuses as Althusser describes them: while one functions in overt, direct,

and often violent manner, the other functions covertly, indirectly, and is often more effective than its counterpart. Finally, because the binding model is embedded within the narrative's structure, rather than on its outer surface, it tends not to need to draw on the resources of discourse in order to be effective. In this situation, the national narrative no longer determines the private one openly through providing the purpose or cause for the subject's actions. The mutual validation instead makes it possible for the private narrative to give the national one its purpose and *raison d'être*.

The result of this ideological structure can be a reversal of the usual operation of ideological principles. Because it is possible for the national narrative to be determined by the private one, the hegemonic elements of that determination become so muted so as to make such elements appear either as benign or non-existent altogether. The other consequence of this ideological structure is to give the national subject the prerogative of law-preserving as it is defined in Benjamin's "Critique of Violence." Although the national subject has a particular, private orientation, other subjects belonging to the same nation must by definition have either the same orientation or at least ones that significantly overlap with that of the national subject. Thus, national affiliation becomes constituted through these orientations which come into existence through the private narrative rather than imposed through the national one.

### 1.3 Narrative and Ethics: The Individual and the National Community

This drive toward homogeneous orientations effectively transforms the question from one concerned with whether affiliations are free choices or default

submissions into one that plays out in the territory of ethics. This reformulation of the question is of great significance since the success of a school of thought depends more on its ability to reformulate questions rather than on its ability to provide satisfactory answers to them. This procedure of changing the territory of the question at hand is not to be understood as a method for creating confusion. Confusions, after all, could be dispelled through making more reliable information available, an effort that is relatively easy to undertake. What this procedure accomplishes, rather, is a change of the field in which ideas operate, and that is where its true power is to be found. Furthermore, the reformulation of the question from choices to ethics is quite logical and in many ways inescapable since it is perfectly in line with the putting forth of national affiliation as a default position rather than as part of a social, cultural, or historical development. The novel, which Lukács neatly describes as the epic of a world abandoned by God,<sup>10</sup> could play a massive role as a result of its capacity to shape ethical orientations that come about not as dictations by a transcendental figure but as ones which transpire out of a structural mediation between the individual and the group.

According to what rubric, then, is the ethic of national affiliation formulated in this environment, and what coordinates should one use in its evaluation? Answering these questions requires an outline of the interplay between narrative and ethics before the issue of ethical adherence to community can be properly addressed. A good starting point is the deep-seated connection

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<sup>10</sup> A few pages later in *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács writes that “irony, the self-surmounting of a subjectivity that has gone as far as it was possible to go, is the highest freedom that can be achieved in a world without God” (93).



between narrative and ethics, a connection that is the subject of a key section in Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self*. At the end of this section, entitled "The Self in Moral Space," Taylor provides the following convenient summary:

My underlying thesis is that there is a close connection between the different conditions of identity, or of one's life making sense, that I have been discussing. One could put it this way: because we cannot but orient ourselves to the good, and thus determine our place relative to it and hence determine the direction of our lives, we must inescapably understand our lives in narrative form, as a 'quest'. But one could perhaps start from another point: because we have to determine our place in relation to the good, therefore we cannot be without an orientation to it, and hence must see our life in story. From whichever direction, I see these conditions as connected facets of the same reality, inescapable structural requirements of human agency. (51-2)<sup>11</sup>

According to the passage quoted above, individuals do not only read a narrative, encounter an ethical frame of reference, then deal with it through adopting its frame of reference, rejecting it altogether, or by forming a more nuanced position with regard to the coordinates it establishes. Rather, Taylor argues that ethical orientations and the narratives they compel individuals to develop are the conditions that precede identity itself. Unlike Ricœur, who believes that individuals draw on the resources of fictional and historical narratives to form the knowledge of the self, Taylor holds the formation of self-knowledge to be a more innate process than Ricœur would acknowledge. In addition, self-knowledge has a rooted linkage to ethics. In other words, individuals become the

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<sup>11</sup> The first thing we must do is put Taylor's "good" in quotation marks, as it were, not because of the postmodernist ethos which absolves us from having to make judgments or grapple with definitions, but because I am not concerned with the specific content of this "good," but in its function as a structural principle. It is, for our purposes, only a compass that defines direction, regardless of its specific direction.

way they are through an inevitable and inescapable “cognitive instrument” whose basic elements are narrative and ethics.

Putting aside the moralizing tone of Taylor’s argument, I want to glean two conclusions from this understanding of one’s life as an unfolding story with an identifiable orientation: first, narrative should not be considered as either exterior or interior from the individual’s perspective, but as one that privileges one over the other. To account for narrative’s dual nature is to form a more comprehensive picture of its role in the formation of affiliation—perhaps one of the most important tokens of one’s ethical orientation. Put differently, narrative’s duality means that it does not play out only as a narrative read, but also as a narrative lived. Second, the “concealed” narrative (or the one lived), is critical to the formation of private identity, and consequently comes to be the essential mechanism through which the “revealed” narrative (the one read) is grasped. This partly explains the resilience of the binding model as its instinctual appeal greatly exceeds that of the background-foreground model: because the privileged domain of the binding model is the private narrative, whose instinctual qualities are imbued with the characteristics of the “concealed” narrative of identity, it proves to be more difficult for the critical faculties to tackle as this type of narrative lacks the more explicit or discursive separation between interiority and exteriority one finds in the “revealed” one.

With this in mind, let us go back to the question about the ethic of national affiliation. Commonsensical notions suggest that such ethical structure is very much part of a commitment to a national community, to a substantial and largely anonymous group of people. The main issue with these notions is their ability to

obscure the fundamental core of this ethical commitment to a community, a core that is mistakenly seen as being the national community at large. As a result, two principal views on this ethical community are formed.

The first camp finds in such ethical commitment a way for the individual to connect with a unified national community and thus manage to overcome an impersonal and alienating world, a world where individuals live as isolated monads bent on achieving maximum, selfish benefits. It is also possible to add to this camp its strategic version which is based on the following argument: in perilous times, when there is a legitimate struggle for liberation and/or emancipation, the ethical commitment to the community is an indispensable structure (perhaps the only viable one) which could unite and mobilize a significant number of individuals behind a single, clearly defined cause.

The other camp, however, finds in it an ominous and cynical method (directed from above) to compel the private individual to commit all energies and resources, not to mention readiness to make precious sacrifices. This view also has a strategic version which grudgingly accepts its cynical side because, all things considered, it is a lesser evil to the alternatives available, especially where sectarian, ethnic, and racial divisions are rife.

As these two camps begin from an inaccurate starting point, the different directions they end up taking come full circle because they lead to the same problem: that the focal point is the community as such. The argument I want to formulate starts with the assertion that the assumption which holds this ethical commitment to be rooted in the community ultimately changes the field within

which this set of ideas operate; it ends with the assertion that this ethical commitment beginnings and endings lie at the level of the national subject who misrecognizes the orientations of those abstract identities which are themselves actualized through a process of misrecognition.

Taking this misrecognition for a valid connection between individual and community forms the impetus for Fredric Jameson's controversial argument in his "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." In this essay, Jameson tries to articulate an interpretive paradigm for a body of literature that he insists is bound to be misread if one were to approach it using interpretive paradigms developed for Western literature. Jameson does so, he claims, to remedy serious mistakes made by critics who either follow "the strategy of trying to prove that these texts are as 'great' as those of the canon itself," or do more damage by arguing that they "remind us of outmoded stages of our own first-world cultural development" (65). Because of their belated development, the second view maintains, these literary forms are constantly trying to catch up with their Western counterparts.<sup>12</sup>

There is no doubt that the basis for Jameson's clear-cut dichotomy between Western and third-world literatures is to come up with credible critical tools to deal with habitually misread texts, in addition to countering a type of literary history whose foundation is the denial of coevalness of different literary

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<sup>12</sup> See Roger Allen's *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction*. Allen's literary history of the Arabic novel is very much informed by this view.

traditions.<sup>13</sup> After making his much criticized dichotomy, Jameson proceeds to his central assertion:

Let me now, by way of a sweeping hypothesis, try to say what all third-world cultural productions seem to have in common and what distinguishes them radically from analogous cultural forms in the first world. All third-world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call *national allegories*, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel. (69)

What is striking about this “hypothesis,” first of all, is its absolutist nature and the virtual absence of any qualifications. Putting that aside,<sup>14</sup> however, one finds in this claim an expression of the error mentioned above, namely the tendency to conceive of the subject’s national affiliation either as a metaphorical embodiment of the nation or as a realization of its alleged characteristics, principles, or ethical values. “Third-world texts,” Jameson adds, “even those which are seemingly private...necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*”<sup>15</sup> (69).

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<sup>13</sup> In *Time and the Other*, Johannes Fabian critiques the discipline of anthropology for defining its subject, the Other, as existing within a different timeframe. In doing so, anthropology “gave to politics and economics—both concerned with human Time—a firm belief in ‘natural,’ i.e., evolutionary Time. It promoted a scheme in terms of which not only past cultures, but all living societies were irrevocably placed on a temporal slop, a stream of Time—some up stream, others down stream” (17).

<sup>14</sup> These two problems are not insignificant, of course, but they have been discussed at length elsewhere: see Aijaz Ahmad’s “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory’” in his *In Theory*, 95-122.

<sup>15</sup> Emphasis in original.

The palpable consequence of this type of reading is the miniaturization of the individual's attributes and actions by taking them to be merely mimetic. Although giving these attributes and actions a grander stature might seem to endow them with surplus significance, what it actually does is cripple them because fixing them to events outside their scope and beyond their influence is equivalent to stripping them of the openness and the spontaneity that we expect from modern narrative. Therefore, the overriding characteristic of the subject whose attributes are fixed to an external force is dependency and powerlessness: such subject is entirely dependent on the nation for its private identity as well as the ethical orientation underpinning it and powerless to initiate an action, ethical or otherwise, to mitigate the "*embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.*"

It is well known that censorship under authoritarian regimes makes it necessary for some writers to mask their works' social and political criticism through the use of literary devices such as allegory—a practice that could have been the genesis of Jameson's national allegory itself. But even if a fictional narrative uses allegory to squeeze through censorship, masked criticism in this case hardly qualifies to be a national allegory since such criticism's chances of being *anti-national*, of countering the logic of the nationalism within which it is conceived, are far greater than those of its rendering the individual as a mere shadow of the nation in question—a counterproductive strategy at best!

The paradigm of the national allegory,<sup>16</sup> though, does generate some by-products, a number of which, it has to be conceded, are positive. This approach to reading<sup>17</sup> puts the burden of historicizing on the reader, something very much in keeping with Jameson's famous motto in *The Political Unconscious*—"always historicize!" A reading of a given text against the national allegory necessitates a certain level of knowledge of the historical, political, and literary background of that text, a requirement that makes casual "literary tourism"<sup>18</sup> either an unethical attitude or a virtual impossibility. In addition, there is in this approach a tacit awareness, on the whole, that postcolonial fiction, to take one example, tends not to be as apolitical as comparable fiction written in the West. This puts those works of fiction that engage politics either directly or indirectly in perspective and prevents their accomplished qualities from being obscured by that engagement, an engagement that is often judged to be either unaesthetic or in bad taste. Finally, a reading of this kind at least attempts not take fiction written in the West to be the fundamental reference point (even when the form is itself a

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<sup>16</sup> Ian Buchanan defines the national allegory as "a type of narrative whose essential subject is the nation state. Because of the life of a nation, large or small, exceeds the capacity of what any novel can actually accommodate, narrative fiction of this type uses allegory as a means of expressing a dimension of existence greater than that of the lives of its individual characters. National allegories tend to be focused on the lives of ordinary people, however, rather than heads of state or aristocracy, using the mundane daily struggles as a means of illustrating the state of the nation" (333).

<sup>17</sup> Jameson makes it clear that the national allegory is an approach to reading rather than a theory (68).

<sup>18</sup> Literary tourism can be defined as an attitude to reading, whereby the literary text is read on the assumption that it provides an entry point to an unfamiliar country, culture, or people. See Haunani-Kay Trask's "Decolonizing Hawaiian Literature" in *Inside Out: Literature, Cultural Politics, and Identity in the New Pacific*.

Western one) for the critical assessment of works that have become indigenous to their environments through developing their own artistic trajectories.

I started my discussion of Jameson's argument by suggesting that its impetus is the mistaken supposition that the ethical commitment is rooted in the national community. The question is, then, how does Jameson's national allegory differ from the notion of the double narrative, in its two varieties, the superimposition and binding models? The "allegory" in the national allegory suggests that there is hidden meaning, that there are at least two levels of meaning, one can be located easily while locating the other requires a hermeneutic exercise. In both double narrative models, however, what is at play are two manifest narratives, neither of which needs to be uncovered or derived from other elements in the narrative. Rather, what is at stake in the double narrative is the structural principle according to which the two narratives interact. This is an important distinction as both segments of the double narrative have a surface which implies that there is no need for "uncovering" something that the reader does not experience directly. Thus, a consideration of the double narrative as opposed to the national allegory leads to a reading that does not seek to uncover, but to trace the contact points of the text's multiple surfaces and/or structures.

In addition, Jameson's introduction of allegory in this context might seem to liberate the text from strict materiality. However, what should be noted is his radical use of allegory. While we tend to associate allegory with its fluidity and resistance to the fixity of meaning, the version of allegory we encounter here actually undermines these associations. Through a sleight of hand, another,



arguably stronger, form of fixity or materiality—history and politics—is brought right back in. Conceiving of allegory in this strict one to one manner, where the latter endows the former with fixity instead of fluidity, makes for a decidedly rigid reading so as to strip the allegory of its power. Jameson, we might say, materializes allegory through subtracting its fluidity and adding material history.

Finally, the most serious flaw in the national allegory interpretative paradigm is its essentially regressive and, to some degree, elementary nature, regressive because it justifies the ideological operation of national narratives, elementary because it fails to account for the complex temporal structures of identity in national narratives. As an interpretative paradigm the national allegory is bound to produce either a misreading of the text or a legitimization of its ideology. If it imposes the national element onto a text that does not contain it, it inhibits all its other potentialities, and if it indeed produces credible results, it would be because it conforms to the ideological structure that already animates the text. The mere act of such interpretation concedes that the individual's attributes and actions cannot be anything but a derivative of the national community. How could the individual be anything other than an expression of the ethical commitment to the national community? How could the individual be anything other than a perennial national subject with the full weight of ethical responsibility and none of the freedom to initiate genuinely creative action? By virtue of having these assumptions as part of the methodology itself, the national allegory is inherently incapable of bringing about a critical assessment of the ideological structure of those narratives that are genuinely national.

## 1.4 Narrative and Time: Which Time Is It?

Not only does the national allegory rely on the old (but apparently very persistent!) metaphor of the nation as a human subject, it effectively entraps that subject's present and future trajectory within the parameter of the nation. Placing that inhibited trajectory in conjunction with orientation principle discussed above helps illustrate this point, namely how turning the national subject into a surrogate of the nation inhibits the development of a more thorough understanding of the temporality of narrative.

To begin with, the connotations of the word *orientation* suggest both an existence in the present and, most importantly, a particular viewpoint which in turn determines possible becomings. Orientation, then, encapsulates both an actualized and manifest present as well as what one might call a possible and latent futurity. Even if that future is yet to be actualized, even if it is beyond what is visible from the vantage point of the present, the subject's identity is nonetheless reliant on the desire for a "future to 'redeem' the past, to make it part of a life story which has sense of purpose, to take it up in a meaningful unity" (Taylor 50-51). The notion of orientation embodies an extension of the actualized present, an extension which always points to an open-ended future possibility that, though virtually nonexistent, is still formative of the present since it dominates it in a very tangible way. This open-ended futurity, an essential component of the present, has to be completely overlooked in a reading based on the national allegory since such reading cannot avoid being limited by its historicist outlook.

Furthermore, the national allegory must also relegate the subject, at whose level the orientation necessarily originates, into a reflection or a likeness of the nation. The subject, in essence, is made dependent on historical and political circumstances external to it, circumstances part of a passive archive which lacks the potential of creating a direction on its own. This emphasis on historicity and retrospection as well as the failure to scrutinize the role anticipation and futurity play in narrative, Currie argues in *About Time*, is a symptom of a larger problem that narrative theory suffers from.

Narrative theory's excessive preoccupation with memory and the passive archive meant that it failed to develop a more sophisticated understanding of both futurity in narrative and narrative as mode of being. Currie insists that this deficiency in narrative theory can only be remedied through a philosophical intervention, as philosophy's capacity to deal with time, he explains, is greater than that of narrative theory. "One of the things that narrative theory can learn from philosophy," Currie writes, "is a proper sense of the importance of the future" (51). Thus, "with philosophy as its teacher, narrative theory can turn its attention to narrative not only in its function as archive but to the question of narrative as a mode of being" (Currie 51). As a first step of overcoming this deficiency, we must be aware that

a fictional narrative encourages us to think of the past as present no more than it encourages us to think of the present as a future past. But whereas narrative theory has explored the first implication, of what Ricœur calls the presentifying of the past, exhaustively, through the themes of memory, the reliability of the narrator and other aspects of retrospect, it has paid far less attention to the correlative issue in which the present is experienced in a mode of anticipation. (Currie 5)

If we reflect on this neglected aspect of narrative in relation to my general argument which holds national affiliation to be a deeply personal business rather than a function of the national community, we are bound to discover something about the logic of nationalism itself which tends to favour a preoccupation with the present's connection to the passive archive and pays little attention for the present's connection to anticipation. "Nationalism," we must keep in mind, "has to be understood by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which—as well as against which—it came into being" (Anderson 12). The logic of nationalism has tremendous power over the passive archive, through which it can delineate the solidification of the national affiliation and the historical circumstances that legitimized it, made it possible or necessary, in addition to how these circumstances continue to do so in the present. Its weakness, however, lies in its inability to supply a script of the future as it can neither form a picture of the dissolution of the national affiliation nor of its further development. The present form of national affiliation might have a long, maybe even endless, history of maturation behind it but cannot have a radically different or virtual future form because the mere contemplation of such future implies the inadequacy of its present form or trajectory.

This inability to imagine the future of national affiliation or allow for virtual possibilities has bearing on our discussion not only insofar as the deficiency in narrative theory is concerned, but also in the particular conception of time that is essential to the logic of nationalism. The underpinning of this

conception is time's continuous flow, a flow made transparent through a delineation of progress. In order to differentiate between religious communities and national ones, Anderson contrasts the two by way of their disparate conceptions of simultaneity. Not only does differentiating between these two using the category of time makes it clear that nationalism is not simply an outgrowth or a secular development of earlier forms of community forging, but also that nationalism, more crucially, becomes possible only with a conception of time that is not based on what he terms the medieval simultaneity-along-time, or on an understanding of time in which past and present can be conceived as having the capacity to coexist as in the presumption that makes possible the typological interpretation of figures and symbols.

This vertical conception of time, of course, is fundamentally different from nationalism's horizontal one, according to which time maintains its constant run from past through the present and onto a future fettered by the past, as the modern ideology of progress would have us experience it. In contrast, Anderson asserts, "the mediaeval Christian mind had no conception of history as an endless chain of cause and effect or of radical separations between past and present" (23). Drawing on Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Anderson stresses that this change from the medieval simultaneity-along-time to our modern conception of time as an arrow whereby events transpire and other individuals exist simultaneously-across-time "has been a long time in the making, and its emergence is certainly connected...with the development of the secular sciences" (24). Though Anderson suggestion that this conception of time simply "emerged" rather than became dominant is questionable, the point to

keep in mind is that simultaneous time is a critical component of nationalism's logic.

Modern conception of time, then, is "of such fundamental importance that, without taking it fully into account, we will find it difficult to probe the obscure genesis of nationalism" (Anderson 24). The idea of the nation as a group of national subjects who share the same affiliation, who have a palpable and contemporaneous presence across time's horizontal line, therefore, is dependent on a measured, divisible, and quantifiable time, a time in which the word "meanwhile" comes to have great significance. Borrowing from Benjamin, Anderson describes the modern conception of time which "replaced" the medieval one as being predicated on "an idea of 'homogeneous, empty time,' in which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfillment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar" (24), instruments that makes possible the division of time into equal, comparable units. The relationship between the nation and homogeneous, empty time, Anderson writes, should not be underestimated as "the idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history" (26).

While clock and calendar provided the instrumental basis for this distinctly modern conception of time, other also distinctly modern structures and forms profited from these basic instruments and put them into practice:

Why this transformation should be so important for the birth of the imagined community of the nation can best be seen if we consider

the basic structure of two forms of imagining which first flowered in Europe in the eighteenth century: the novel and the newspaper. For these forms provided the technical means for 're-presenting' the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation. (Anderson 24-5)

This coupling of the newspaper and the novel is reminiscent of Benjamin's "The Storyteller." It is not inconceivable that Anderson is influenced by Benjamin's judgment, although Benjamin's judgment is made in a different context. There are, however, clear divergences between the newspaper and the novel in their treatment of time. To begin with, the conclusion that both are underpinned by a single conception of time does not justify the coupling, especially when considering that this conception underpins an entire epoch which makes it bound to spread widely irrespective of the medium so as not to justify a classification based on this single variant. While both forms adopt homogeneous, empty time, they do so differently.

The newspaper adopts homogeneous, empty time quite literally; it does so in an overt and static manner through placing great emphasis on precise time sequence and unit division. This precision might lead one to see in it an alignment with state apparatuses and bureaucracy. The precision, however, does little to explain the genesis or flourishing of national affiliation insofar as it relates to the national subject's affective attachment to the nation and deeply held conceptions with respect to a particular ethical stance. Therefore, there needs to be two categories in place of the single one which Anderson proposes, not only because the creation of a novel involves the transformation of narrative into an art form, but also because its treatment of homogeneous, empty time is an articulation of the experience itself, not the relay of information about experience.

The argument for proposing two categories could be formulated as follows: while the newspaper's structure is suitable to elucidate the way the state utilizes homogeneous, empty time as it reflects the time conception according to which its bureaucratic machinery functions, the novel is the form par excellence for elucidating the unique manner in which the nation adopts the same time conception.

As a point of departure, one could say that the novel's adoption of homogeneous, empty time is comparatively covert and fluid. Unlike the newspaper, whose structure as well as the division and precise equivalency of units it implies could be evident to the majority of literate national subjects, the untangling of the novel's structure requires at least some training and/or experience. This difference, it should be noted, mirrors another key difference (related to the one alluded to above) between the state and the nation: while the state tends to be visible and definable through its laws and symbols (the map, the flag, the parliament, and the constitution), the nation tends to have a built-in ambiguity (language, ethnicity, religion, and culture) that functions as an inherent component rather than an added complication. It is true that the novel does postulate events as occurring as part of a causal chain and characters as existing or acting contemporaneously (the two essential conditions of empty time), it still introduces problematics such as time manipulation, multiple levels of narration, questions of authorship, and formal unpredictability. The novel's capacity to use time and literary devices to create a double narrative as it has been outlined thus far makes its postulation of homogeneous, empty time much more elaborate as the relationship it creates between the two strands remains an



undercurrent. The unmasking of this synchronization, as I explain in the second and third chapters, happens through a structural shift.

In light of the previous discussion of the two time conceptions, it is now possible to address more fully Currie's criticism of narrative theory, a criticism that invokes the potential of interpretation which takes anticipation in narrative seriously. Benjamin's "Theses," in fact, provide a model that incorporates within its analysis of history and retrospection a treatment of anticipation and future. In the second part of the eighteenth and last thesis, Benjamin writes that "the soothsayers who found out from time what it had in store certainly did not experience time as either homogeneous or empty" (264). From this standpoint, the soothsayer, whose concern is the future as it relates to the present, is the opposite of the chronicler whose interest lies in the past and its relationship to the present. At the risk of stretching this comparison, one could argue that the chronicler's past events bear a resemblance to the stuff of traditional narrative theory, whereas the soothsayer's mystical pronouncements about the concealed and virtual future are what make the Benjaminian historical ruptures thinkable.

Rather than a future that is realized through incremental, somewhat predictable, progress, Benjamin's messianic future is realized through a fundamental break from the steady passage of time. For the soothsayers, Benjamin points out in the same thesis, time was not organized around the present, or the *Gegenwart* of homogeneous, empty time; rather, its focal point was what we might call the present-moment, or the *Jetztzeit* of messianic (medieval) time. The difference between the two experiences of time is crucial to Benjamin's understanding of history *and* the future as consisting of particular moments of

ruptures within which open-ended possibility is embedded, rather than empty, constant, and made up of indistinguishable units whose content, while contingent, is somewhat predictable.

Countering the soothsayers, therefore, meant the necessary institution of a prohibition against investigating the future by those who sought a qualitative experience of time in place of the quantitative one: the prohibition “stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment” (Benjamin 264). From the perspective of the current discussion, prohibiting the soothsayer’s magic is not merely part of theological dogma, but an essential component of nation-building as its potential to imagine a radically different future marked by ruptures and discontinuities rather with than progress and development makes questionable the idea of the nation as “as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history.” The genre of magic realism, as we will see in the third chapter, provides an invaluable space to test the limits of this prohibition.

It is not enough, then, to examine the role of futurity or anticipation in narrative by following the same criteria that narrative theory established for its investigation of the past as a passive archive. As Taylor rightly puts it, humans seek a narrative that gives them an opportunity to conceive of a future that would redeem the past in the same way past generations hoped for a future that will redeem their own past and present.

“Our image of happiness,” Benjamin says in the second thesis, “is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption. The same applies to our

view of the past, which is the concern of history. The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption” (254). It is of the essence, however, that the contemplation of the future is coupled with an awareness that the operation of such redemption can be undertaken only according to different criteria. A given narrative can seem to organize time as to allow for a redemptive future, but unless that organization is based on a truly new scheme, such redemptive future would amount to nothing but a deception. If such a truly new scheme is to be found, it would certainly be an integral part of that easily discerned yet difficult to pin down concept—literary style, the subject of the second part of this chapter.

## Part Two: Literary Style

At the outset of her *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*,<sup>19</sup> Liah Greenfeld writes that nationalism’s specificity, which makes nationality fundamentally different from other types of identity, is derived from the way nationalism locates the source of individual identity in a collective termed the “people,” a collective that is necessarily larger than any concrete community. “This specificity,” she continues, “is conceptual. The only foundation of nationalism as such, the only condition, that is, without which no nationalism is possible, is an idea; nationalism is a particular perspective or a *style of thought*”<sup>20</sup> (3-4).

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<sup>19</sup> Greenfeld describes the focus of her book as “a set of ideas...at the core of which lies the idea of the ‘nation,’ which I believe forms *the constitutive element of modernity*. In this belief, I reverse the order of precedence...Rather than define nationalism by its modernity, I see modernity as defined by nationalism” (18). This thesis will be discussed in the fourth chapter whose concern is the fraught relationship between nationalism and modernity.

<sup>20</sup> Emphasis added.

Though Greenfeld does not follow through on the compelling assertion that nationalism is a style of thought in the main text, she expands on it in an endnote:

The concept of “style of thought” was coined by Karl Mannheim...and was based on the notion of style developed in art history. It encapsulated the idea that broad cultural currents, or traditions, similarly to artistic styles, cannot be characterized by any of their composing elements, each of which may be found in many other traditions..., but only by an organizing idea, or principle, which brings these elements together in a distinctive configuration that imparts to each element a special significance it would lack in any other configuration. (493)

Greenfeld then strangely dismisses the “concept of style” immediately after invoking it, arguing that she finds it problematic and thus not applicable because nationalism does not have the unity of a tradition such as liberalism. While it is true that nationalism lacks clear and distinct tenets of a tradition like liberalism, it could indeed be seen as resembling a tradition, even if neither theoretical unity nor ideological solidity can be ascribed to it. In fact, nationalism exhibits the most important qualities of a tradition: evident durability over a significant period of time and an emergence as a viable organizing idea in numerous environments, an idea with a number of recognizable features and claims. The formation and sustenance of traditions tend to be processes riddled with all kinds of contingencies, processes that can hardly be described as coherent.

Greenfeld’s claim, I want to argue, ought to be adjusted so that it does not disqualify the notion of nationalism as a tradition but the notion of nationalism as a *doctrine*. Unity, coherence, and testable plausibility are requirements of doctrines, not traditions. A key conclusion is to be drawn from this view: “the

precise doctrines” of nationalism and their varying degrees of credibility “are hardly worth analysing... [because] we are in the presence of a phenomenon which springs directly and inevitably from basic changes in our shared social condition, from changes in the overall relation between society, culture and polity” (Gellner 124). Thus, it is essential to recognize that nationalism’s forcefulness is actually a function of the loose tradition it has formed and managed to maintain, not a function of its specific and localized doctrines that are not particularly well reasoned. The absence of plausibility coupled with the survival of this tradition explains as to why nationalism, though tending not to hold up to critical scrutiny, has been and remains massively influential.

The power of nationalism as such, therefore, lies in the image of tradition it projects, a tradition that is in turn underpinned by a “style.” As is the case with style, nationalism is a category that lacks clear boundaries. Despite being capable of absorbing various elements, of invoking any number of specific doctrines, ethical frameworks, historical narratives, and time conceptions, it does not have enough solidity so as to be interrogated the way a doctrine might be. If nationalism is to be treated as a style, then, the inverse image is just as accurate: as we can speak of nationalism being predicated on a particular style of thought (which could be termed traditional or classical), it is possible to think of resisting it as a procedure that is predicated on another type of style (which could be termed for the time being as non-traditional). Such a style is not necessarily anti-nationalist or diametrically opposed to the classical one, but one which forms a challenge to nationalism’s image as a broad cultural current.

## 1.5 The Concept and Condition of Style

Naturally, for a study concerned with fictional narrative, the style in question is literary style in general and narrative style more specifically. First of all, any discussion of literary style must begin with conceding that style is perhaps one of the most difficult literary notions to pin down; this is so mainly because style has a great and indefinite scope as an abstraction yet it can be sensed as being remarkably specific when encountered in the singularity of the text. Inquiring into style's textual specificity, however, necessitates a sketch of the traditional understanding of what constitutes style as an abstraction.

Roland Barthes' compact essay "Style and Its Image" offers a concise summation of that traditional understanding and is thus a good entry point to the question of style. The basis of what is traditionally called "style," Barthes tells us, is contained in two fundamental oppositions: the first is the opposition of Form and Content, or its relatively recent incarnation of Signifier and Signified. Style, according to this vision, often invoked in the teaching of literature, is the medium through which content finds its expression. The second opposition (the more recent of these two) is that of Deviance and Norm, or Message and Code. It should be noted that Barthes' consideration of these basic oppositions is part of a bigger question that revolves around the image of style: "how do we *see* style?" (90). Having started with these traditional visions of style, Barthes explains that he neither accepts them as they are nor does he intend to undermine their principal premises. Rather, he wishes to set them up in order to "complicate" them in the course of his essay.

The complication which Barthes brings into the first opposition is certainly the more conventional of the two; it is, in many ways, reminiscent of traditional formalism. It starts as a justified proposition for an analysis that pays particular attention to the internal operation of the text but ends up resembling the unjustified paradigms of traditional formalism which are now taken more as a curiosity rather than as serious principles to be applied in literary analysis. Instead of treating “the text as a fruit,” Barthes writes about the first opposition, whereby the pit is the content and the flesh is the form, this kind of analysis treats form, which is ultimately constituted by style, “as an onion, a superimposed construction of skins (of layers, of levels, of systems) whose volume contains, finally, no heart, no core, no secret, no irreducible principle, nothing but the infinity of its envelops—which envelop nothing other than the totality of its surfaces” (99).

From a utilitarian standpoint, calling attention to the text’s multiple surfaces can be especially useful to the notion of double narrative structure as described in the first part of this chapter; from a programmatic one, a reassessment of Barthes’ structural phase might address the need we have today for an analysis that takes form seriously yet avoids the well-known pitfalls of the old varieties of formalism; theoretically, however, accepting the extreme claim that *everything* is form containing no core is simply a position which cannot be sustained.

Unlike this somewhat puritan image of style, the second image of Code and Message holds more promise as it has the potential to lead to the type of analysis I argue for in Part One: an analysis that traces the internal operations of

the text without maintaining the puritanical posture made so explicit in the old “all is form” claim. Before complicating or refining the opposition of Code and Message, Barthes describes its premise as follows: style here is “an aberrant message which ‘*surprises*’ the code...the features of style are undeniably drawn from a code, or at least from a systematic space...: style is a distance, a difference” (94) from the already existing code which permeates language, culture, and aesthetics. The “code,” to put it differently, stands for conventional expression and thus the “message” (if it does fulfill the novelty requirement) must shake it up.

The complication Barthes introduces to Code and Message, however, remains so minimal that it risks not being noticed at all: the Message, rather than a mere aberrance, is a transformation or a reformulation of a convention handed down, one that is both accepted and to large degree ubiquitous. We might extrapolate, then, that innovation through style upsets and shocks the Norm through *using it up* or consuming it rather than through using it in its ubiquitous form or by way of mounting an active and complete rejection of the premises which inform it. From this perspective,

stylistic features [are] *transformations*, derived either from collective formulas (of unrecoverable origin, literary or pre-literary), or by metaphoric interplay, from idiolectal forms;...what should govern the stylistic task is the search for models, for patterns: sentential structures, syntagmatic clichés, divisions and clausulae of sentences; and what should animate this task is the conviction that style is essentially a citational procedure, a body of formulas, a memory..., an inheritance based on culture and not on expressivity...stylistic ‘models’ cannot be identified with ‘deep structures,’ with universal forms derived from psychological logic; these models are only the depositories of culture...; they are repetitions, not foundations; citations, not expressions; stereotypes, not archetypes. (Barthes 98-9)



While the formulas already exist and the creation is not entirely new, Barthes seems to argue once more, it is in the specific operation of style where true innovation is to be found. This operation can be interpreted as a movement that turns a body of culturally dispersed depositories or formulas into new *reformulation*. Put differently, it is a stylistic deviance that does not flaunt its deviance but embodies it as formal part of the process that creates an original expression.

We can infer from this that a fictional narrative which articulates its stance through only resorting to the resources of oppositional discourse suffers from a sort of deficit—a deficit that puts the work at the risk of losing its distinctive literariness and becoming a tired form that can neither become a true “alternative history” nor would it maintain its status as an artwork. The deficit at the centre of such fictional narrative, moreover, arises from the space it relinquishes to second opinions or second confirmations; it is a deficit that arises from stories already filtered through different, make-believe discourses, which then disincarnate unto becoming information bits rather than genuine stylistic transformation.

The crucial point in stylistics according to Barthes, then, could be summed up as follows: rather than the sum, synergy, or dialectic of literary devices and motifs one finds in the text, style is essentially a distinctive and individual way of deploying the memory or depositories of culture that he speaks of in relation to the most basic unit—the sentence. While this summation may involve the broadening of style’s field as Barthes outlines it, from the sentence to cultural

memory, it does not necessarily mean doing away with style's smallest units. Though style's linguistic and syntactical elements are very much part of this understanding, the point is to define as its most crucial element the particular inclination to adjust the position of the inherited material within the totality of the text.

If we apply this understanding of style to the discussion about national identity, we can conclude that dealing with the ramifications of the process that turns the individual into a national subject neither materializes through avoiding the immense and inescapable cultural memory of nationalism nor through opposing it rhetorically—and certainly not through a retreat into apolitical subjectivity as a response to the alienation from national culture or as an expression of general malaise and disillusionment.

The solution that apolitical subjectivity might represent entails that one turns a blind eye to the national subject's deep, built-in attachment to the nation as well as to national ethics and the type of identity it engenders. There is no denying that radical subjectivity does provide a respite and sometimes a much-needed fresh perspective. What it cannot do, however, is grapple in any meaningful way with the inescapable depositories that permeate national culture. Style as transformation, in contrast, is one that remains fully conscious of the cultural memory and its idiolectal forms; it neither interrogates nor opposes these forms but takes account of them not through overt objection, refutation, or subversion (for that is the territory of the essay) but by way of an operation whose function is to absorb and consume them before redeploying them in a distinctive manner.

Despite getting us closer to a satisfactory outline of style, this operation of style remains somewhat blurred as it is articulated by Barthes, both before and after his complication. The most conspicuous problem relates to deviance, which seems to bear much resemblance to aberrance. They are both, by definition, departures from an establish standard. Thus, the deviance or the transformation (which adds up to little more than an alternative label) that is supposed to complicate what Barthes admits to be one of the two traditional understandings of style turns out to be almost a mirror image of the aberrant message. In addition to introducing very little complication, Barthes appears to be explicating something other than the territory of style itself. Rather than targeting the fluid and inconstant territory of style, what his explication actually elucidates is the distance between the traditional and the non-traditional, the non-traditional being the most explicit manifestation of the consequences of style, not how it really operates.

A proposition about this distance, while incredibly helpful as a starting point, does very little to elucidate the category of the non-traditional itself. If we take the traditional to be that which “delivers across” (from *tradere*), then it is not sufficient to define the category of the non-traditional as either an aberrance or a deviation. The most conspicuous quality of the non-traditional is actually a gap that is normally expected to be filled with convention; ultimately, it is not a positive value but a lack, an absence of delivering across. Style here is sensed in an encounter, one which takes place at the very moment of recognition that there is a palpable absence of what one expects to be there. The perpetual shift in the definition of style over time can be accounted for in the constant weathering of

that moment recognition, in its tendency to be fleeting and to become ephemeral. In contrast to the genuinely non-traditional, the action of deviation needs an original path, a starting point, a standard from which to deviate. Rather than touching upon the space of the non-traditional, style as a deviation delineates the space in-between, the space separating the traditional and non-traditional, not to mention that the difference embedded in deviation remains dependent on the degree of its dissimilarity from the conventional.

This result, in fact, is to be expected because style as deviation, Carsten Meiner argues in “Deleuze and the Question of Style,” “obtains its scientific signification from the identity of an *a priori* form and obtains its functionality as a function of the space separating the specific style from the *a priori* form—whether a system of grammatical rules or a psychological model of genius” (157-8). This problem not unique to Barthes, says Meiner, but is a feature of all attempts of modern stylistics to conceptualize style. What all these attempts do is

pay the price of scientificity: they explain the individuality of a given text as a deviation from something general. The problem thus haunting stylistics...could be formulated in the following way: how do we create a concept which can identify the specific individualities of texts without reducing those to deviations from the stable identity of another form? (158)

Getting a satisfactory answer to this question entails a two-step process: a liberation from the scheme of the original form and the deviant copy as well as an articulation of style through Deleuze’s philosophy of difference (Meiner 159). The idea is to approach style by means of the Deleuzian difference: more

specifically, as a difference of nature rather than a difference of degree, a distinction which Deleuze borrows from Bergson.

Theoretically, we are still in the territory of the second opposition as Barthes clearly says that “style is a distance, a *difference*”<sup>21</sup> (94). Now, however, the interrogation targets the denotation of “difference” rather than distance or degree. Following Deleuze’s preposition, then, difference in nature is to be conceived as an actualization of the virtual. This movement which turns the virtual into actual can be described as “the passage from the virtual [or potential] differentiation to the actual differentiation” (Meiner 166), a movement that implies a non-resemblance rather than a similitude which is implied by the scheme of an initial identity and a different yet derivative copy. The virtual, Meiner suggests, resolves the problem of traditional stylistics (whose definition of difference remained dependent on that of identity) since a given actualization of the virtual will become real principally through its *difference* from the possible or the virtual. The conclusion, then, is that “style animates the virtual structure to inhabit the species, classes and orders of representation in an individual way” (Meiner 167).

The novelty of style as a Deleuzian actualization of the virtual lies in the way it encompasses both categories of the traditional and the non-traditional in equal measure. Both of these categories become actualized through the same procedure whose central mechanism is differentiation. It is evident that this description of style, unlike that of Barthes, offers a notable complication,

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<sup>21</sup> Emphasis added.

especially when compared to the straightforward transformation model. Nevertheless, what style as an actualization of the virtual presuppose is that style *must* be conceptualized if one is to understand it adequately.

What is at stake, however, is not necessarily which concept of style is superior or introduces more complications. In general terms, anytime conceptualization is applied to style, the result tends to be a concept that is either too broad as not to move us closer to precise understanding or too narrow as not to account for all existing (actual) and non-existing potentials (virtual) of style. By necessity, to conceptualize is to place a limitation, and it is for this reason that any concept of style remains somehow inadequate, regardless of its complexity or ingenuity. Style is not to be limited through the *concept*, but is to be isolated in the *condition*. Rather than deploying an analysis that moves from the general concept to the specific condition, the suggestion is to focus on the condition as such. If by style we mean the creation of the genuinely original, the non-classical, and the non-traditional, then we speak about a singular category that defies all types of conceptualization but one which has a remarkably palpable condition that deserves special attention.

How can style as the creator of conditions be a viable alternative to conceptualization? What is the overriding manifestation of this image of style, especially if it is one which cannot use subjectivity to ignore the cultural inheritance (if that is even possible), solidify that inheritance through reproduction, or confront it directly since that can only be done through an over-reliance on rhetoric and information, an over-reliance that is detrimental to the artwork as such? And, finally, in what way would Deleuze's philosophy

contribute to the proposition of style as a condition creator? First of all, there needs to be a recognition that Deleuze's philosophy of difference as a unified principle (nor any unified philosophical principle for that matter) is unlikely to produce the outcome theoreticians of style always sought: an adequate, all-encompassing concept of style. An attempt to do that can amount only to a philosophical intervention based on the principle of application: all that needs to be done is applying Deleuze's "difference" and the problem is solved!

Instead of deploying any one aspect of Deleuze's philosophy as a master key that opens all locks, what I propose as an alternative is the locating of certain elements of his interventions in the debate about style before deploying these elements to refine the two principal stylistic conditions I wish to examine in the second and third chapters. As Deleuze says in the preface to *Essays Critical and Clinical*, "every work is a voyage, a journey, but one that travels this or that external path only by virtue of the internal paths and trajectories that compose it, that constitute its landscape or its concert" (Ivi). The multiplicities of paths and trajectories governing the artwork consistently resist the unifying violence of the concept. A perpetual tension is thus generated as a result of the friction between the unifying, exterior concept and the artwork's disparate, unpredictable paths and trajectories. The consistency of this friction is nothing less than a predicament which provides the impetus for the perpetual deployment of new concepts of style, each intended to cannibalize its predecessor.

The first of the three elements of the Deleuzian interventions I would like to invoke comes from his treatment of Sacher Masoch in his late work, *Essays Critical and Clinical*. In the seventh essay entitled "Re-presentations of Masoch"

Deleuze flips on its head the customary paradigm of psychoanalytic interpretation which tends to seek the patient in the text. “More a physician than a patient,” he argues, “the writer makes a diagnosis, but what he diagnoses is the world; he follows the illness step by step, but it is the generic illness of man” (53). With that as a guiding principle, “the idea was not to apply psychiatric concepts to literature, but on the contrary to extract non-pre-existent clinical concepts from the works themselves”<sup>22</sup> (187). It is crucial to note that the writer does not only rework or reformulate a condition already identifiable in the world. Rather, the writer’s procedure is to use literary style to isolate a set of symptoms in order to create a condition that becomes identifiable in the world after the fact. If we were to accept the Barthes’ reformulation thesis provisionally, then we would have to recognize that it is not only a reformulations of things past, but also a reformulation of things yet to come—in the vein of Currie’s call for greater emphasis on future in narrative and in the spirit of holding the future as the site of ruptures.

The creation of a condition, then, involves straddling the imaginary line we call the present so as to incorporate historicity and futurity in equal measure. Not only does Deleuze turn the table on the typical psychoanalytic reading (which locates in the text what is already known), he also “shows that the clinical symptoms of sadism and masochism are themselves inseparable from the literary techniques and styles of Sade and Masoch” (Smith 187). Therefore, style as the creation of a condition is manifested in the isolation of symptoms which in turn

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<sup>22</sup> Daniel W. Smith, “Critical, clinical.” *Gilles Deleuze: Key Concepts*.



gives us an image that includes both history and future, an image that is both retrospective and prospective. Using the terminology of the previous discussion, one could add that literary style offers a non-rhetorical diagnosis and prognosis by isolating the symptoms of the national subject or isolating those of national stagnation. One could put it succinctly by saying that style is the capacity to create a literary image of this kind.

## 1.6 Two Conditions: The Circular and the Directional

The question as to the number of the different ways of achieving this “creation of a condition” is perhaps impossible to answer because the process of actualization is characterized by its infinite nature—there are certainly more possible ways than can be accounted for. Therefore, rather than providing an exhaustive list or imposing a limitation by means of an absolutist claim, I examine only two case studies, two distinctive stylistic conditions. My focus on these two conditions is informed by their standing for two extremes on a continuum whose poles are disconnectedness—as is the case in Elias Khoury’s *Little Mountain*—and enactment—as is the case in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. The importance of these two conditions, I argue, stems from their occupying two ends of what might be termed the spectrum of stylistic innovation. While their stylistic approaches are as different as they could be, they end up reaching a similar endpoint: the non-rhetorical critique of national identity. Their contradictory nature, moreover, is a further proof that there no single way, no single concept that can account for stylistic innovation. These two conditions could be best described in spatial terms: one is circular and the other is directional.

The first stylistic condition (the circular, the topic of the second chapter) is one characterized by an explosion of stories incorporated into a single narrative frame. This explosion renders the structured binding model infeasible and the straightforward superimposition model utterly impossible. The perpetual circular revolutions that generate seemingly endless stories point to a kind of storytelling that abandons the scheme according to which the movement toward progressive development must take center stage. Instead of the unceasing building up of tension, one finds in circular storytelling a desire for constant dissipation of tension; there is, in other words, a constant striving to do away with development for the sake of making prominent the forcefulness of the simplest of stories to create and recreate endless points of perspectives before contrasting this forcefulness to the spent force that underlies the seemingly colossal political and social dogmas.

The second element I borrow from Deleuze further elucidates this stylistic condition. Deleuze's discussion of representation in *Difference and Repetition* is haunted by representation's inability to move "beyond the form of identity, in relation to both the object seen and the seeing subject" (68). Identity as a component of representation or as the centre around which multiple perspectives orbit can only be superseded by what Deleuze calls the modern work:

When the modern work of art develops its permutating series and its circular structures, it indicates to philosophy a path leading to the abandonment of representation. It is not enough to multiply perspectives in order to establish perspectivism. To every perspective or point of view there must correspond an autonomous work with its own self-sufficient sense: what matters is the divergence of series, the decentring of circles, 'monstrosity'. The totality of circles and series is thus a formless *ungrounded* chaos which has no law other than its own repetition, its own

reproduction in the development of that which diverges and decentres. (68-9)

Unlike the text whose centre is radical subjectivity—narratives relying on stream of consciousness come to mind here—but still conforms to the laws of representation, the work Deleuze discusses in this quotation forms its centre out of a chaos that forgoes the identity of representation. Repetition, discussed in the next chapter in conjunction with Elias's *Little Mountain*, is undoubtedly the key entry point to this stylistic condition.

The second condition (the directional, the topic of the third chapter) operates by way of an extreme application—to the letter—of the binding and superimposition models, an application that takes both of these arrangements to their inevitable conclusions. In doing so, the directional movement of storytelling places enormous strain on both models so as to make their absurdity apparent. The cultural depositories of nationalism, as the first part of this chapter shows, turn the individual into a national subject through a multilayered linkage to the nation—in terms of identity, sense of belonging, and ethics. The directional pattern, thus, makes the weakness of that linkage apparent without opposing it overtly but by way of rendering all of its underlying assumptions as literal as possible, a rendering that parses through these assumptions and exposes their breaking point.

The third Deleuzian element I invoke illustrates this pattern's incredible power. I interpret this extreme application as a way of giving rise to the simulacrum, and

by simulacrum we should not understand a simple imitation but rather the act by which the very idea of a model or privileged position is challenged and overturned. The simulacrum is the instance which includes a difference within itself, such as (at least) two divergent series on which it plays, all resemblance abolished so that one can no longer point to the existence of an original and a copy. (DR 60)

Not only does the simulacrum challenge the privileged position of the model as well as the ensuing consequences, it also plays a critical role in the creation of the non-oppositional, non-rhetorical stylistic condition which at the same time manages not to ignore the depositories to which it responds. While I treat repetition as the entry point to the first condition, I treat metaphor and hyperbole as the entry point to this condition.

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In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari state that “a minor literature doesn’t come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language” (16). In *Essays Critical and Clinical*, Deleuze writes “that the masterpieces of literature always form a kind of foreign language within the language in which they are written” (71). There is a clear overlap between these statements: how do we read this minor/foreign language? How do we see the image of style? How do we recognize in it the isolation of the condition? The answers to these theoretical questions could only be articulated through the works themselves—could only come about within the literary works to be discussed in the next two chapters.

## Chapter 2

### 2 Repetition and Consequences in Elias Khoury's *Little Mountain*

For storytelling is always the art of repeating stories.

Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller."

When things are repeated, they lose a fraction of their meaning. Or more exactly, they lose, drop by drop, the vital strength that gives them their illusory meaning.

Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

I wrote about life ... about life according to the conditions of war, not about the war itself. I wrote about people in war, not a history of the Lebanese Civil War.

Elias Khoury, *Tributaries*

#### Part One: Backgrounds

I ended the previous chapter with several questions about the process of creating stylistic conditions. I would like to begin this chapter by pursuing one of those questions, namely the one concerned with the manner in which one can recognize those instances when a text does succeed in creating a given stylistic condition through isolating a set of symptoms. Such a text, thus, moves beyond identifying, validating, or opposing an image already existing in the world onto shaping an image which becomes visible or recognizable only after the fact. The answer to such question, as the previous chapter's conclusion also suggests, must come about through the literary text itself, which speaks such a condition into existence (to use Heideggerian terminology), as this answer cannot be confined only to the abstract and the theoretical.

By way of approaching this question, I examine Elias Khoury's novel, *Little Mountain*, as a case study for circular storytelling, doing so through taking the stylistic notion of repetition as the textual manifestation of this type of storytelling. *Little Mountain's* repetitive structure becomes apparent from the outset of the narrative where the narrator recalls the neighbourhood in which he grew up:

They called it Little Mountain. And we called it Little Mountain. We'd carry pebbles, draw faces and look for a puddle of water to wash off the sand, or fill with sand, then cry. We'd run through the fields—or something like fields—pick up a tortoise and carry it to where green leaves littered the ground. We made up things we'd say or wouldn't say. They called it Little Mountain, we knew it wasn't a mountain and we called it Little Mountain. (3)

The circular movement of narration begins and ends with Little Mountain. Between the circle's beginning and its end, however, lies a discovery of sorts about the nature of representation—they called it...we called it..."because the mountains were far away" (3)—whose law of discursive correspondence is laid bare through repetition.

In broad terms, the central notion proposed here could be summed up as follows: though *Little Mountain* does not condemn, critique, or even address nationalism discursively or rhetorically, through its narrative style, it defies the logic which connects nation and narration on the one hand, and nation and

individual on the other.<sup>23</sup> It does so not to debunk the idea of the nation as such but to reverse the process which deploys representation in order to interpellate the individual into a national subject. Not only does Khoury's novel avoid creating a structural binding of the national story with the personal one, but it also deploys a form of repetition which shakes the foundation of all continuities—the necessary component of identity as *idem* or coherence over the course of narrative time.

## 2.1 Resilient Misconceptions

It may be useful, then, to begin the discussion of repetition in Khoury's novel by taking account of two common misconceptions about repetition's role in literary texts in general and in *Little Mountain* specifically. Repetition, first of all, should not be interpreted as either the opposite of order or the antithesis of chronological storytelling. I will come back to this crucial point and consider it more thoroughly, but, for the time being, it suffices to say that interpreting repetition in this manner might seem to illuminate dimensions of chronological storytelling (by means of speaking about what appears to be its opposite or antithesis) but would ultimately tell us very little about both the way in which

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<sup>23</sup> This is in many ways both independent of and in keeping with Khoury's own views on Arab nationalism in both its versions, the pan-Arab, cultural version and the state-based, territorial one. Though this chapter does not discuss Khoury's own views, it is perhaps worthwhile to know that his views were ambivalent. In her essay "On the Necessity of Writing the Present," Sonja Mejcher-Atassi writes that "for a time Khoury frequented the 'Arab National Club' founded by the Palestinian intellectual George Habash. He sympathized with the ideas of Arab nationalism but was not part of any political group in particular. This changed with the Arab defeat in the June War of 1967. Shocked by the political events, he joined the *fidayyin*, the Palestinian resistance group in Jordan. While pursuing his studies in Beirut, he repeatedly took part in military action in Jordan and southern Lebanon" (88).

repetition can serve as the scheme of narrative and about the consequences of such a stylistic choice.

Therefore, rather than assuming that repetition in narrative signifies a simple escape from or avoidance of chronology, repetition will be treated here as pointing to a burdensome weight that the narrative we encounter in *Little Mountain* tries to shake off. This weight is ultimately made up of depositories that influence not only the way we think about identity but also the way identity is fashioned aesthetically. This weight or burden, as we shall see later, is more related to fundamental questions about the nature and power of representation rather than to chronology as such.

What the reader encounters in Khoury's novel is in many ways a desire to counter conventional notions of representation and in doing so weaken the symbolic order governing identity and ethics which existed prior to the crisis for which the civil war stands. In "The Mature Arabic Novel outside Egypt," Roger Allen states that Khoury's novels tend "to provide a challenge for the reader which greatly enriches the process of discovery" (219). From this perspective, the term "weight" could be applied to both reader and narrative: the dominance of the mode of repetition makes it seem as though the narrative and its reader are destined to start at the beginning, must perpetually repeat that beginning, rather than simply march forward while pretending that representation could somehow dissipate the traumatic consequences of the civil war. Repetition, in short, is the mark of hesitancy to accept progress and the illusion of continuity, two key ingredients of nationalism as ideology.



Expressing this weight of “the eternal beginning” through repetition (and now I come to the second misreading) reveals that we are not simply dealing with a trauma-induced crisis of mimesis. According to Mona Takieddine Amyuni, for instance, it is the incoherence of the situation depicted which motivates Khoury to use this anti-realist style. In her essay entitled “Literary Creativity and Social Change,” she elaborates on the effect of the social upheavals of the sixties on the Arabic novel. Amyuni describes Khoury’s inability or unwillingness to write coherently about the Lebanese Civil War saying that

a fractured reality, indeed, haunts Khoury’s personae<sup>24</sup> and is rendered through a similarly broken down style. The only reality...is made of endless stories one creates...the rest totally escapes one’s grip. These chopped-up stories are like a ‘mirror of a broken reality,’ and a basic question is posed in all of Khoury’s fiction: how can literature weave the language of our troubled epoch out of the mirrors of a broken reality?’ (108)

The metaphor of narrative serving as a mirror of reality (broken or otherwise) Amyuni deploys points to a persistent theoretical approach to make sense of literary experimentation.<sup>25</sup> The intimation is that narrative cannot (or at least ought not to) weave a coherent language out of a reality characterized by chaos.

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<sup>24</sup> The narrator is often compared to Khoury himself as a result of the biographical overlap with the main narrator’s experiences.

<sup>25</sup> This is a simplified characterization of this theoretical approach which is often posited in more complex terms. In *Modern Arabic Literature*, Paul Starkey puts it as follows: “a prominent characteristic of Ilyas Khuri’s work is its ‘self-referential’, or ‘metafictional nature, a strategy that attempts to involve the reader as a creative partner in the making of the text, which both marks the author out as a ‘post-modernist’ in the full sense of the term but which also reflects the fragmentation of the society to which he belongs” (150).

While Amyuni's discussion of Khoury's style is descriptively accurate, it is analytically questionable. Amyuni assumes that the inability to represent a broken reality through a coherent narrative is a shortcoming of mimesis. How is it possible to represent chaos through formal orderliness, the reasoning goes? This reasoning proves insufficient when considering the abundance of realist (or even documentary) narratives which seem to be capable of depicting chaos through well-ordered, chronological narratives. Since it would be questionable to claim that such depictions are in essence unsuccessful or unethical, we are left with no choice but to concede the possibility that aesthetic order could indeed successfully capture chaos.

Rather than a crisis of conventional mimeses, then, the fragmentary, repetitive narrative of *Little Mountain* points to an attempt to strip the story bare and leave it with as few symbolic traces as possible. Since the concept of mimesis is imbued with the connotations of recreating the world with a certain degree of fidelity, of imitation, and realist representation, thinking of repetition as a crisis of mimesis would suggest that the work suffers from an inability, at worst, or a refusal, at best: an inability to recreate what *really* took place or a refusal to invest the necessary effort to render it satisfactorily. Dealing with what took place through stripping the story of symbolic traces, however, suggests both the ability to create an alternative to conventional mimesis and the acceptance of the challenges this entails. The symbolic traces I have in mind, it must be reiterated, are the building blocks of the process that inextricably links the individual and the nation at the crucial levels of identity and ethics. The point behind stripping the story of such symbolic traces in *Little Mountain* is not simply to dispute or to

respond to the questionable premises that initially contributed to the crisis but to use the fragmented parts of those premises as the primary material for creating an alternative style of articulation. In other words, it is a style of articulation that *uses up* the symbolic traces rather than deploys them. By using them up, it renders them ineffective.

## 2.2 The Civil War and the State of State and Cultural Nationalisms

*Little Mountain* renders the symbolic traces ineffective as it narrates episodes taking place during a devastating civil war, a war which epitomizes the utter failure of nationalism's program or at least the decimation of its unifying spirit. "What's the difference between war and civil war?" (24), asks one of the fighters who appears in *Little Mountain's* second chapter entitled, "The Church."<sup>26</sup> Despite the fact that the question is posed and then repeated later on, it remains unanswered; it is never addressed by the seemingly indifferent fighters who show little interest in endowing the war they are engaged in with any philosophical, ideological, or ethical meaning. *Little Mountain*, after all, is "free of any moral positioning or partisanship for one militia group over another" (Mejcher-Atassi 88).

This is just a small part of *Little Mountain's* overall tendency to deflate the imperial drive of discourse, not necessarily by countering its propositions but by

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<sup>26</sup> This chapter tells the story of a group of fighters who take position in a church because of its strategic location overlooking the surrounding neighbourhoods. The chapter resembles a self-contained play more than a part of coherent or holistic narrative.

not allowing it to have a voice of its own. If the fighter's question about the difference between war and civil war strikes many as being complicated or as needing serious philosophical or ethical contemplation, it would be because the logic of nationalism is simply the reigning logic of our era. "Whether we know it, or like it, or not, most of us are Hegelians and quite orthodox ones at that" (92) writes Paul de Man in his essay "Sign and Symbol in Hegel's *Aesthetics*." Something similar is at play here. The answer to the fighter's question might seem complex because, whether we know it, or like it, or not, most of us have internalized the logic of nationalism. A civil war is inimical to that logic.

Though set during the early phase of the Lebanese Civil War, a war that lasted from 1975 to 1990, Khoury's novel focuses on the disjointed voices of narrators who are dragged into the bloody conflict more than on giving any documentary account, whether full or partial, of the war itself or of its historical roots. The novel

consists of fragmentary narratives that relate to different spatial and temporal situations and have, at least in part, an autobiographical nature. They recall a Beirut childhood in the Christian neighborhood of Ashrafiyya, also called "the little mountain"; a childhood that is increasingly overshadowed by the events of the civil war. Tensions escalate until roadblocks are set up: then fighting—in which the narrator takes an active part—breaks out between the Palestinian and Christian militias, spreading throughout the streets of Beirut and dominating everyday life. (Mejcher-Atassi 87)

Aside from the fourth chapter narrated by an emasculated, middle-aged civil servant, the novel focuses on the stories (or to put it more accurately, the ramblings and conversations) of men fighting with the Joint Forces, a group

comprised of a number of allied groups who were, to varying degrees, sympathetic to the cause of pan-Arab nationalism. The Joint Forces fought against the Lebanese nationalist, umbrella group known as the Phalanges, one known for its commitment to Lebanese, state-based nationalism.

My focus has been on the way *Little Mountain's* narrative treats the Lebanese Civil War and, by extension, nationalism, invoking this term in a relatively uncomplicated fashion. The focus on nationalism as such is meant to establish a foundation for the thesis proposed in this chapter before introducing the more complicated and complicating variables that any discussion concerned with nationalism in the Arab world ought to include. Knowing that nationalism in the Arab world could mean several things, the term "nationalism" ought not to be mistaken for a signifier pointing to a homogeneous ideology or for a unified and uncomplicated worldview.

The variables I refer to above are the result of the unconventional way in which the idea of the nation played out in the Arab world. Broadly speaking, the additional variables pertain to the two almost mutually-exclusive senses of the term "nationalism." My starting point is Adeed Dawisha's *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, a book containing useful distillations of these two divergent understandings of nationalism. As a preface to what follows, I should mention that, as a book on nationalism, Dawisha's suffers from some flaws, the most apparent of which is the author's beginning by defining the theoretical underpinnings of pan-Arab nationalism before proceeding to critique it (or scathingly condemn it) based on demonstrating how nationalism was exploited by the authoritarian rulers of Arab countries. Consequently, he ends up

expressing a vehemently critical and overtly cynical viewpoint of political intrigue, but he ultimately fails to produce a satisfactory critique of the concept on theoretical grounds.

That being the case, Dawisha correctly states that nationalism in the Arab world has always had

two ideological paths: *al-qawmiya* ([or pan-] Arab nationalism) and *al-wataniya* (nationalism based on state sovereignty). In a sense, here was a re-enactment of the nineteenth century philosophical debate between the German and the Anglo-French schools. The German school would stress *al-qawmiya*, with its emphasis on the oneness of the people (the *Volk*) under a unifying language and a continuous historical experience. Political and geographic divisions that might have separated members of the nation were artificial and therefore irrelevant to the definition of *al-qawmiya*. The Anglo-French school, however, would embrace *al-wataniya*, the nationalism built (or at a minimum, nurtured) through state institutions within a geographically limited space, even if the citizens were to speak different languages and/or profess different ethnicities. (219)

It should be said that each of these categories of nationalism has multiple forms. *Al-wataniya*, for instance, does not always denote the type of rhetoric advocated by an already established nation-state, as it is clear in the case of regional nationalism (Greater Syrian nationalism comes to mind here) which neither sought a unified Arab state based on the hypothetical oneness of Arab culture and language nor had it ever had a civic nation-state of its own. Because this chapter is concerned with national identity and Khoury's *Little Mountain* rather than with nationalism in the Arab world, what is pertinent from our perspective are the fundamental characteristics of these two principal categories, not their historical trajectories or the splinter ideologies each produced.

The difference between these two strands of nationalist ideologies is first and foremost political, meaning that it is more the outcome of disparate political orientations than the result of contrasting interpretations of the constituents of Arab national identity (language, common history, culture, etc.), which is the case with the different forms of pan-Arab nationalism such as those described as Ba'athist or Nasserist. *Al-wataniya* (in many cases, though not in all<sup>27</sup>) emphasizes certain characteristics that pertain to a smaller group, more often with the intention of making a stronger case for the political sovereignty of the concerned group than to question their Arabness.

What must be stressed, however, is that, for programmatic reasons, many who believed in and advocated for *al-qawmiya* were willing to embrace *al-wataniya* hesitantly because they saw the latter as a transitory period that could or should at some future time lead to the former. This pragmatic solution meant that the two distinct political orientations of *al-qawmiya* and *al-wataniya* were able to survive and flourish simultaneously, leading to a situation in which it was relatively easy for those with enough political influence to win followers from both ideological camps by supporting the state-based *wataniya* actively while making sure to pay lip-service to the more idealistic notion of a united Arab national state.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See Taha Hussein's *The Future of Culture in Egypt*.

<sup>28</sup> This is precisely why Dawisha provides a scathing history of Arab nationalism. It is for the same reason his account, in reality, is a history of political opportunism and/or mismanagement rather than an account of pan-Arab nationalism as such.

Therefore, while *al-wataniya* proved more successful in practical terms, *al-qawmiya* remained the nobler, least expedient of the two alternatives. This is so mainly because its narrative proposes an Arab identity that has an impressive historical continuity, in addition to highlighting the artificiality of political borders separating Arab states, borders which were envisioned on maps by competing empires but were in many cases meaningless at the ground level. Not only did its narrative take account of and proposed to correct this basic historical reality, it also proposed an inclusive Arab national identity that (at least in theory) transcended the numerous religious and sectarian divisions.

These elements among others made *al-qawmiya* an especially appealing strand of nationalism, so much so that even the overtly critical Dawisha admits that “if there was one period where this sectarian divide was at its lowest, it was during the 1950s, and particularly in this 1955–1958 period” (174). This is of course the same period he labels as the heyday of pan-Arab nationalism. Add to this admission his rare praise of this strand, writing that

Arab nationalism, in its heyday, bestowed many gifts on its children: independence from the outsider; purposeful strides onto the road to social and economic modernity; a sense of dignity after the long years of colonization; a set of words and phrases that allowed the Arabs to narrate their own history; an abiding belief in their own ability to sweep aside all doubters and naysayers who blocked the way to progress. (312-3)

Dawisha, nonetheless, considers all of these gifts insufficient as a result of the absence of democracy, an absence, according to him, which was responsible for the failure of the entire project of pan-Arab nationalism, if not wholly then at least partially (298). Of course, blaming its failure on the lack of democracy



requires one to forget that cultural nationalism is much more difficult to institute than civic nationalism as it involves bringing together a larger number peoples, usually in the absence of the required institutions but with the existence of a noble, liberatory idea. This difficulty, one might add, is evident even in the absence of foreign intervention represented by colonialism and imperialism as has been the case with the rise of nationalism in the Arab world.

While *al-wataniya* is a nationalism that requires either the existence or the feasibility of a state with all its necessary institutions which are then entrusted with sustaining and nurturing it, *al-qaawmiyai* is a nationalism that is more akin to a nationalism as a style of thought, one that is reliant more on the adoption of a particular worldview than on being a subject of a set of concrete and enforceable laws.

Without a doubt, cultural nationalism is a type of nationalism that could benefit from the existence of a state with all its powerful institutions, but it is crucial to note that while it might seek a political nation-state actively, it does not require one as an absolute criterion.<sup>29</sup> The thinkers of pan-Arab nationalism, such as the influential Sati' al-Husri and the less so Zaki al-Arsuzi, did not see the

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<sup>29</sup> I should indicate here that the case of Lebanon is unique in that the state preceded the Lebanese nation. Though this constitutes a unique example which might call for a greater scrutiny of the state in this particular case, what should be stressed is what transpires once the idea of the nation has been solidified: the nation becomes the more affective of the two. In other words, even in those cases where the nation is actually the product of the state machinery, the nation remains the entity with the power to embed itself in narrative in line with how this process is described in the first chapter. While the state does deserve special attention, achieving the objectives of this study requires that my attention be devoted to the nation, the generator of the deep-seated bond between the one and the many.

non-existence of a united Arab state or the difficulties involved in establishing one as being detrimental to Arab national/ cultural identity, whose inspiration and basic principles come, according to Dawisha, not from the region we now call the Arab world, but from the German idea of nationalism developed by the romantics. Writing about the type of nationalism promoted by al-Husri, Dawisha says the following:

In his definition of the nation, Husri opted categorically for the German idea of cultural nationalism promoted by Herder, Fichte, and Ernest Moritz Arendt. In this formulation, as we have seen, a nation cannot depend on such ephemeral bases as the "will of the people"; rather, a nation is objectively based through the unity of its linguistic community and the coherence of its history. It is the individual's language and history, regardless of his own preferences, that determine his national identity. Echoing the German romantics' definition of what constitutes a "German," Husri would contend that people who speak Arabic as their mother tongue are Arabs, the very people who recognize the common thread of their long and distinguished history. The Arab nation is therefore predetermined and eternal. (64)

This preference meant two things simultaneously: the German cultural model constituted a positive influence in that it was the one judged as being more suitable in the Arab context, while the French civic model constituted a negative influence in that al-Husri's definition of Arab national identity was formulated against Renan's definition of national identity as voluntary, participatory, and as derived from a group of individuals being or becoming the subjects of laws and institutions. Its appeal could also be explained by the fact that, unlike Britain and France, Germany was not engaged in a direct occupation and colonization of Arab lands.

By opting for the German model, however, al-Husri did not necessarily import it as he found it. He had to subject it to what might be termed as a process of “cultural translation.” Thus, there are key differences to note between the original German romantic model of nationalism and the one al-Husri chose to adopt and promote. These differences can be interpreted as proof that al-Husri was keen on ridding cultural nationalism of its racial and racist overtones. They can also be interpreted as an indication that what took place ought not to be seen as a simple act of borrowing but is rather the result of a striking similarity in the way two geographically distant groups of people related to themselves prior to the age of nationalism.

Since discussing this in detail would make for a rather long digression, it is enough to provide a brief outline of the adjustments al-Husri introduces to the German idea of nationalism. In *The Arabic Language and National Identity*, Yasir Suleiman highlights some of these differences, writing that

although al-Husri shares with Herder, Fichte, and Arendt the view that language is the main ingredient of nationhood, he differs from the last two in his refusal to ascribe to Arabic and the Arabs the status of “original” language and “original” people [unlike al-Arsuzi who did exactly that]... In addition, al-Husri adamantly refuses [to accept] ideas [according to which] race and language are said to coincide. (131)

By emphasizing the role of language while downplaying the role of race or descent, Suleiman points out, the cultural pan-Arab nationalism achieves two important aims: it proved that it is indeed

anchored (1) to those elements in the history of the Arabic-speaking peoples..., and (2) to the ideas of the German Romantics. Viewed

from the perspective of these two formative impulses, the Arab nation emerges as a construct that is sanctioned by the past and supported by evidence drawn from the course of nationalism in modern European history. (162)

These divergent forms of nationalism, though, are not spelled out explicitly in Khoury's novel. They do, however, appear in the separation between the groups of fighters: while those belonging to the coalition sympathetic to *al-qawmiya* are given the opportunity to narrate their disjointed stories, those belonging to the one subscribing to an extreme form of *al-wataniya* are not.

Despite this, *Little Mountain* is first and foremost a novel of and about storytelling and not one of or about historical, sociological, or political information. The encounter with the narrative produces little effect (if any) on the reader's historical, sociological, and political information concerning the Lebanese Civil War or nationalism in the Arab world for that matter. Rather than coalescing to make a holistic image or an arc of the civil war itself, the narrative's disjointed stories remain isolated images, separated from each other by unbridgeable textual gaps.

More importantly, the civil war, as it is depicted in *Little Mountain*, never forms a solid background to these decidedly personalized and distinctly individualized incidents. It should be added that the mere constructing of isolated, unbridgeable images through fragmentation on its own would not be sufficient to eliminate a dominating background. It would be possible to organize fragments in such a way that they become fathomable through a

uniform background which would pull them together in spite of their apparent heterogeneity. In contrast, the isolated images remain disconnected from a temporal, unifying background which is then made to serve as their organizing principle.

With the absence of a uniform, narrative background, these individualized incidents become the only way one could make sense of the precarious positions of the fighters and their various social and sectarian origins. This knowledge is not gained from accessible, explanatory, and information-based narration but from the choices they make, from the scattered signifiers of different ideologies, as well as from the images they create out of their fears, insecurities, and hopes. Their decisions to fight alongside this diverse and socially heterogeneous group known as the Joint Forces despite their varied social and sectarian origins is a significant part of the story that remains below the narrative's discursive surface. These decisions are never explained explicitly, neither through an ethical stance nor by way of ideological discourse. In "The End of Illusions," Andreas Pflitsch correctly states that in his novels, Khoury "dispensed with anything unequivocal" (30). In line with this approach, the fighters' decisions remain part of an underlying scheme rather than part of a manifesto-like, rhetorical explanation. The end result is a narrative whose focus is the war experiences of fighters, told through voices that are confused, repetitive, rambling, and disjointed.

### 2.3 *Little Mountain* and the Arabic Novel

Before getting to the consequences of these repetitive, disjointed voices, some preliminary comments are due—about the Lebanese novel, the civil war, as well

as about the position of *Little Mountain* within the tradition of the Arabic novel. It would not be an overstatement to say that the Lebanese Civil War has had a tremendous impact on the novel in Lebanon. The civil war was influential in that an unprecedented number of experimental works were written in response to it as a result of its effect which was such that “dreams were shattered and language lost its innocence” (Pflitsch 30). Nouri Gana characterizes this immense influence saying that the war was the “midwife” of the Lebanese novel (157).<sup>30</sup> Khoury himself “has emphasized the crucial importance of the civil war to Lebanese literature, claiming that it simply did not exist prior to the conflict. Before the war, only ‘Egyptian novels’ had been written in Lebanon” (Pflitsch 30).

“How many novels will be written about us...?” (26), one of the fighters in *Little Mountain* wonders. To him, it is as if the yet to be written novels could provide a justification for the war or ascribe it with a rationale<sup>31</sup> in the form of a future redemption in the vein of Taylor’s reasoning that humans always seek a future that would redeem their past (50-51). The fighter’s question could also be read as an expression of hope that these novels might one day form an archive which would be the war’s saviour and redeemer—this is precisely what *Little Mountain* does not do for it is a novel that channels highly subjective stories and memories, doing so while resisting the urge to build an archival structure into

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<sup>30</sup> This metaphor, though appropriate because it calls attention to the civil war’s significant influence, can be somewhat misleading as it suggests that the Lebanese novel was “born” during this national trauma. In fact, the earliest Arab novelists came from Lebanon which was at the time part of the Ottoman administrative province of Greater Syria.

<sup>31</sup> This is particularly important since the fighting soon “obey[ed] its own logic, decoupled from the ideological goals the parties had formulated at the outset” (Mejcher-Atassi 89))

which these stories and memories can fit. As Norman Saadi Nikro describes *Little Mountain's* narrative movement in his *The Fragmenting Force of Memory*, the movement, far from following a historical pattern, is a "downward *vertigo* (dizziness, light-headedness)...beginning with the little mountain, Ashrafieh, sinking into surrounding Beirut, and ending in the subterranean hollows of the Paris Metro" (104).

The appearance of these war novels, which were written from the perspectives of those who fought the war as well as of those who were devastated by it, has come on the heels of fully fledged experimentation in the Arabic novel. To put it in generic terms, these novels intensified what is described in main-stream literary history of the Arabic novel as the transition from the dominance of the realist mode to the supremacy of the experimental one. Angelika Neuwirth points out that "what distinguishes the Lebanese novel from the rest of contemporary Arab literature is not only its introspection and rigorous destruction of political grand narratives but its experimental character, unique in its daringness" (61). Hyperbole aside, Neuwirth locates the beginnings of the transition from realism to experimentalism (which she calls "a critique of representation") in the works of "the authors of the 'new sensibility,' a literary trend [in Egypt] that emerged in the early 1960s as an attempt to overcome the dominant realism" (45). Examples of experimentation in form and themes, then, can be traced back a decade earlier (Ghassan Kanafani's *All That's Left to You* also comes to mind here). But it is with the publication of these civil war novels that this mode of narrative experimentation became normalized, or at least more widespread and accepted.

From the literary historian's perspective, *Little Mountain*, taken as an emblem of the civil war novel, has since come to occupy a special position on the trajectory of the Arabic novel's development<sup>32</sup> as it is taken to represent the accomplished narrative experimentation. Therefore, given that the Arabic novel is a relatively new form (within the Arabic literary tradition which spans a millennia and a half), the movement from the more or less traditional realist mode of storytelling to the experimental one is often described as both a significant milestone and a welcomed development, a period marking what Allen terms as the "period of maturity" (46) in his survey, *The Arabic novel*.

The significance of Khoury's novel also becomes especially evident when considering the emphasis some critics place on connecting the history of the Arabic novel and its evolution with the political history of the state. As a result of taking the Lebanese Civil War as its setting, *Little Mountain* is frequently seen as a remarkable and faithful document of the civil war's early phase. Though one can disagree with this approach (especially the assumption that the novel's most pressing task is the delineation of history), it remains difficult to dismiss it out of hand for the simple fact that it has proven to be quite a resilient approach in critical writings about the Arabic novel.

In *The Politics of Nostalgia in the Arabic Novel*, Wen-chin Ouyan indicates that

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<sup>32</sup> Tayeb Salih's *The Season of Migration to the North* competes with *Little Mountain* for this position. In the case of Salih's novel, it is not so much narrative experimentation but the novel's fresh approach to the question of colonialism.



the past and tradition in contemporary Arabic discourses...are more often than not defined according to ideologies attendant to Arab nationalism and modernisation, and above all, the reality of the nation-state. The Arabic novel writes its own (hi)story in tandem with narrating the emergence, modernisation and failure of the Arab nation at large and Arab nation-states in particular. (66)

For instance, literary critic Faisal Darraj contends that the literary history of the Arabic novel has a precise correspondence to the political and social history of the region as whole and that the Arabic novel should not only be read as a historical document but also as an archive. Not only is the correspondence between the novel and the region's tumultuous history evident, Darraj suggests, it is one which can only be ignored on pain of misinterpretation. In his book *The National Memory in the Arabic Novel*, Darraj writes that the Arabic novel represents, in essence, "a qualitative archive of an entire century, or 'a novelistic history' of the different phases of modern Arabic history, which spans from one defeat to another, or from a potential victory to an assured defeat" (17, my translation). Darraj also maintains that

the novel, which mixes reality with the product of imagination is nothing less than the primary Arabic document which gave us and still does objective knowledge, for this novel has gone through an entire century while proving once and again, throughout its different phases, the objectivity of what it recorded and the validity of what it predicted. (21, my translation)

The terms archive, document, objective, and record are no doubt in conflict with the concept of the autonomy of the artwork. Having said that, it is essential to be reminded of one crucial point, more for the sake of explanation than for the sake of justification. This approach, which turns the novel into a historical document,

is undertaken with the intention of elevating the status of the novel—perceived as the bearer of a brand of truth that never found its way to the political discourse throughout an entire century dotted with crushed hopes, failures, and perpetual setbacks. From this perspective, Darraj’s reading unequivocally assigns the novel a privileged position: first, as an unquestionably authentic form and, second, as the bearer of modernity which managed take root in novel’s aesthetic form but failed to become established at the social and political levels.

As one of the influential literary critics writing in Arabic, Darraj<sup>33</sup> formulates an argument that highlights the type of expectations awaited from the novel in a highly charged political context. In the previous chapter, I made the point that the critic ought not to ignore the accomplished qualities of some works classified under the label of “postcolonial fiction” because of their tendency to be politically engaged, an engagement that tends to be judged unfavourably. What we find in Darraj’s approach, however, is something rather different: it is not only an appeal to accept the political engagement of some novels or not to allow such an engagement to undercut their other facets, but it is also a critical *expectation* to which the novel is supposed to conform. If the Arabic novel indeed forms an archive of the twentieth century, then it follows that each individual novel would necessarily form only a part of that archive, if it is to fulfill its social and ethical duty. As part of an enormous textual reference book, an individual novel must always be read (at least tacitly) as being complementary and never as being self-sufficient.

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<sup>33</sup> Darraj admires Khoury’s novels. See *The National Memory in the Arabic Novel*, 248-54.

*Little Mountain*, in short, defies those expectations. It defies them by being structured as an anti-archive and by making its commitment to the individual, not to the national subject whose identity is governed by the political or historical background. This commitment could be sensed in how the novel makes it impossible for the reader to assemble its fragments into a satisfactory, conventional, or coherent whole. The novel, after all, create fragmented fictional worlds that teem with stories and memories which are endowed with anything but certainty or reliability—the essential ingredients of a document that might be judged as containing objective knowledge or historical truth. If it seems to be archival, it is perhaps the result of its setting or the multiplicities of its stories.

Edward Said's short essay, "After Mahfouz," contains another view on *Little Mountain's* position within the tradition of the Arabic novel. Said does not go as far as treating the novel as an archival document but still subscribes to the paradigm of narrative as a mirror of reality. The main premise of Said's essay is encapsulated in his argument that Khoury's novels are "in stark contrast to [those of Naguib] Mahfouz, whose Flaubertian dedication to letters has followed a more or less Modernist trajectory. Khoury's ideas about literature and society are of a piece with the often bewilderingly fragmented realities of Lebanon" (323).<sup>34</sup> In contrast to the modernist Mahfouz, "Khoury has forged (in the Joycean

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<sup>34</sup> This is in line with the claim Pflitsch makes in his essay on the Lebanese-American author Rabih Alameddine, "So We are Called Lebanese": "mistrusting history and historical writing is unsurprising for Lebanon in particular, where up to the present day a 'national history' accepted by all the country's confessional and ethnic communities has yet to gain a foothold" (322).

sense) a national and novel, unconventional, Post-Modern literary career" (Said 323).

Said develops this argument by presenting a comparison between Mahfouz and Khoury, a comparison based on a delineation of the different circumstances within which the Egyptian and Lebanese novels have first come into existence and later thrived. The outline he sketches "so schematically" (320) connects those circumstances directly with the texts' stylistic qualities in a way that allows him to move briskly from describing the political and historical realities of the two countries to the narrative techniques which he sees as both influenced by and reflective of the circumstances of each country.<sup>35</sup> Speaking about a break which he locates between the Egyptian Nobel Laureate, Mahfouz, and Khoury, Said writes that unlike Mahfouz, whose works express the compact, unique, and resilient Egyptian culture, "Khoury...is an artist who gives voice to rooted exiles and the plight of the trapped refugees, to dissolving boundaries and changing identities, to radical demands and new languages. From this perspective Khoury's work bids Mahfouz an inevitable and yet profoundly respectful farewell" (325).

The feature one notices in this comparison is that it is derived from the belief that narrative is ultimately mimetic and representational, even when it does not appear to be so, as is the case with *Little Mountain*. Mahfouz's novels

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<sup>35</sup> Said also makes the connection between to Khoury's own life experiences and his novel: "*Little Mountain* replicates in its own special brand of formlessness some of Khoury's life [experiences] (323)). "Khoury's work embodies the actuality of Lebanon's predicament," which is, he adds, "so unlike Egypt's majestic stability as delivered in Mahfouz's fiction" (322).

(Said has *The Cairo Trilogy* and *Midaq Alley* in mind) are representational of the stability of Egyptian national culture, whereas Khoury's novel reproduce the unstable, fragmentary, and precarious nature of Lebanese national culture. From this we could deduce that the novels of both authors are "realist," whether or not they follow the conventions of realism.

Said's sketch is carried out with two presuppositions. First, the assessment of individual works involves viewing them as part of a tradition whose guiding principle is a necessary and unceasing process of development. Second, assessing the contributions of a given Arabic novel in relation to that constant process of development is best carried out with the yardstick that the novel that has already established in the West.<sup>36</sup> Said also emphasizes that we should "keep in mind

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<sup>36</sup> Notice, for instance, that the comparisons with Flaubert and Joyce are meant to illuminate the approximate positions of Mahfouz and Khoury within their own tradition. The source of this comparison can be located in the perpetual "anxiety of comparison," an anxiety to which corporatists are prone. How should one establish satisfactory grounds for comparison? This is a complicated issue which cannot receive proper treatment here, other than making a reference to the intelligent discussion of this question in Abdelfattah Kilito's *Thou Shalt Not Speak My Language* where he amusingly tells a story of delivering a lecture to a French-speaking audience on *al-maqamah*, a classical Arabic narrative genre. How should Kilito establish the *maqamah*'s historical and cultural contexts? Should he use the Islamic calendar or the Western one? If he uses the Western calendar, is he misleading his audience by pointing them to a timeframe that is meaningless in the context of this genre? If he tells them the author of these *maqamat* (al-Hamadani) lived in the fourth century according to the Islamic calendar, is he bound to confuse them by using a timeframe they are not familiar with? "What I would like to note here," Kilito writes, "is that when I hear of al-Tahtawi and al-Shidyayq [nineteenth-century Arab writers], my mind does not turn to the thirteenth [century according to the Islamic calendar], but to the nineteenth century" (8). Whereas, "when thinking of classical Arabic literature," he adds, "I always refer to the Islamic calendar" (8). Here, Kilito points to the Arab intellectual's literary memory which, he argues, is divided between the classical period and the modern one. The classical Arabic literary tradition, which developed more or less independently from that of Europe, has now become the heritage of a modern Arabic literary tradition that is greatly influenced by European literature. Hence, any discussion of modern Arabic literature (especially the novel) spontaneously refers one "to Europe as a chronology and a frame of reference" (8).

that the Arabic novel is an engaged form, involved through its readers and authors in the great social and historical upheavals of our century, sharing in its triumphs as well as its failures” (318). The question we are left with is the following: while it could be possible to concede that the Arabic novel *is* an “engaged form” (or an “embattled” (318) one, as Said writes in the next paragraph), is it a form destined to be read *only* as a manifestation of its political, social, or historical engagement? Could the aesthetic form be appreciated and assessed on the individual level without using history or political commitment as the only keys with the potential of unlocking it?

From this progress-oriented view, then, the appearance of a certain, truly new text, which surely belongs to a heritage that no one can entirely ignore, constitutes an Event that alters the history of the entire tradition that stretches both before and after it. The issue with this view, which could ultimately be traced to T. S. Eliot’s famous formulation in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” is that while it seeks to elevate the stature of the new text without causing injury to its precedents, it ends up doing violence to both texts, or bodies of texts, being compared. Neither text could, the supposition goes, make visible its own difference independent of the particular tradition to which it belongs. It is for this reason that one should take with a grain of salt this teleological understanding of literary history.

## Part Two: What’s the Deal with Repetition?

The decision to use *Little Mountain* as a case study implies that it exhibits special characteristics, or that it is at least a noteworthy text which deserves a special consideration. If the previous overview of *Little Mountain*’s critical reception

suggests that we ought to be hesitant in accepting the pronouncements of mainstream literary history, which, as we have seen, does accord Khoury's novel a special status, then how are we to reconcile these two seemingly contradictory claims, the one implied and the one suggested? To reconcile the two claims, a distinction should first be made between repetition as a device deployed in narrative and repetition serving as the narrative's scheme.

The effect of repetition as a narrative device could be explained in many ways. To mention only two cursory explanations, one could say that the effect is the highlighting of a significant site within the text or the creation of a mantra-like utterance that emphasizes a critical (though often ambivalent) point that the text is at pains to make. In this case, repetition is concerned with what we might provisionally term as the "production of meaning," regardless of whether the meaning produced is explicit, insinuated, or has the potential to support multiple interpretations. Of course, this can take shape in many different ways, from the simplistic (and insufferable) didactic to the cryptically coded enunciation which can quickly debunk any deciphering attempt that is thrown at it. Since this type of repetition is not the main concern here, we can simply say that, in general terms, the deployment of repetition as a narrative device could be explained by either a desire or an impulse to place emphasis or to draw attention and thus to generate meaning rather than dissipate it.

## 2.4 When Repetition is the Narrative's Scheme

Using repetition as the narrative's scheme, on the other hand, has a very different relationship to the production of meaning. By way of beginning to clarify this crucial difference, I want to turn to one of this chapter's three epigraphs. In Part

Seven of Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, the protagonist, Jan, tries to explain to himself the peculiar effect of the image of borders which repeatedly occurs to him. "When things are repeated," he reasons, "they lose a fraction of their meaning. Or more exactly, they lose, drop by drop, the vital strength that gives them their illusory meaning" (296). In this instance, the reoccurring or repeated image fails to generate meaning because it neither highlights a point at which interpretation could begin, nor does it illuminate those other parts which are not subject to perpetual reoccurrence. If anything, this repeated image makes things even more obscure, makes the context within which it appears even more uncertain than it would have been without that repeated image. This repeated image, in essence, takes on the role of a structuring principle for everything else rather than the role of an isolated occurrence that has the potential to serve as the context's key or its solution. For Jan, memory (by constantly repeating a single image) does not merely point to a specific site through which an explanation could be constructed. Rather, the repetition of the image acquires a logic of its own in that the effect is not one of illumination. The consequence of this type of repetition, then, is to weaken what would otherwise be the critical site of meaning—making it lose, drop by drop, its vital strength which gives it its illusory meaning.

Repetition in *Little Mountain* follows this scheme as its effect is neither the rhetorical illumination of the image repeated nor of its context. Repetition in Khoury's novel appears not as a function for the generation of meaning but as the *modus operandi* of the narrative, as its *logic*. When compared to the rhetorical



tendencies common in many celebrated Arabic novels,<sup>37</sup> this repetition as a scheme, as the structuring principle of *Little Mountain*, produces consequences which make the novel stand out for its stylistic difference, a difference that is neither historical nor necessarily progressive. Not only does this explanation of the novel's contribution differ from the one given by main-stream literary history in that it targets the work itself rather than the larger trend to which it might belong, it is also one that does not require a progress-oriented conception of the development of literary forms.

The special qualities of the novel are not necessarily related to its being modernist, postmodernist, experimental, or because it supersedes Mahfouz's brand of realism (all explanations based on the literary history of the Western novel, not the Arabic one), but are related to its avoidance of generating meaning on the back of rhetorical devices. This would allow the reformulation of Said's turn of phrase: rather than bidding Mahfouz's works a profoundly respectful farewell, *Little Mountain* actually offers a refreshing alternative to the Arabic *roman à thèse*.

Having already discussed the framework within which Said places *Little Mountain*, it is now time to move into another part of the essay, namely the one concerned with explicating the function of repetition. The explication Said offers with regard to order and repetition can be summarized as follows: it is an

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<sup>37</sup> It is difficult and perhaps unnecessary to provide an exhaustive list here but one could mention a few well-known examples of this tendency where rhetorical exposition as well as intellectual concepts and debates take precedence over aesthetic elements such as forms, plots, character development, and settings, as in Taha Hussein's *A Man of Letter* and Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's *The Ship*.

attempt to offer a reading that reconciles these two divergent concepts. Toward the end of his essay, Said argues that “style in *The Little Mountain*”

is, first of all, repetition, as if the narrator needed this in order to prove to himself that improbable things actually did take place. Repetition is also, as the narrator says, the search for order—to go over matters sufficiently to find, if possible, the underlying pattern, the rules and protocols according to which a civil war, the most dreadful of all calamities, was being fought. Repetition permits lyricism, those metaphorical flights by which the sheer horror of what takes place—‘Ever since the Mongols ... we’ve been dying like flies. Dying without thinking, of bilharzia, of the plague ... Without any consciousness, without dignity, without anything’ (Khoury)—is swiftly seen and recorded, and then falls back into anonymity. (324)

For Said, repetition, far from being the inverse of order, is a mechanism that compensates for the absence of its supposed opposite. Though this can be characterized as a textbook example of deconstructing a binary, it represents a productive beginning. Repetition, though appearing as a disorderly form, is still seen as a search for order in a situation in which all order is obliterated by a chaos that is no longer an anomaly but has become part of mundane experience. Said draws attention as to how even in the chaotic form that Khoury creates, there is an underlying, fundamental desire to seek an order that could possibly mitigate the traumatic experience of the individual. From this standpoint, the traumatized individual constantly seeks a fleeting order even when such an individual appears hopelessly lost in an all-consuming chaos.

There is, however, another crucial point to be made with regard to this reading whose aim is to underline the improbable connection between order, chaos, and repetition. While going in the right direction, Said’s reading remains

inadequate because it does not go far enough. While he rightly criticizes the misleading binary of order / repetition and (by extension) its aesthetic counterpart linear / fragmentary, he does so by accepting that the search for order implies understanding the chaos of the war through the same illusory logic of the past. After the crisis, one cannot seek an equivalent or at least comparable logic to the one that existed prior to it. What emerges through repetition, I want to argue, is something rather different because the traumatized individual, the fractured society, or the fragmentary narrative, cannot simply have recourse to same logic that reigned before the catastrophe as critical threshold has already been crossed.

In "Postcolonial Literature in a Neocolonial World," Saree Makdisi indicates that what remained after the start of the Lebanese Civil War,

was necessarily fragmented, and any engagement (fictional or nonfictional) with these realities was compelled to adopt new forms, different from the ones typical of prewar cultural production...for both the fictional and the nonfictional narratives of the war are laid out in confusing and incoherent—schizophrenic—disorder...As the narrator of *Little Mountain* says, sardonically, "Even surprises occurred in an orderly fashion before the war. My dreams were comprehensible. As for now, everything's changed..." Thus, Lebanese writers, who have been forced to confront not only the war itself but its *retroactive* schizophrenic dissolution of what turns out to have been merely the *illusion* of prewar stability, have been engaging in the creation of new literary styles and forms...in which both the war *and what went before it* have been radically reimagined, reconfigured, and understood in new ways. (277-8)

Stylistic repetition in *Little Mountain*, then, does not seek to reorder the past but creates *a form* meant to imagine that which has yet to be articulated—it is a movement eying a concealed future rather than a revealed or disclosed past.

Repetition, in other words, does not simply recreate something along the lines of the order which existed before—the type of mediation between individuality and affiliation proposed by a nationalized and nationalizing style of thinking, or the collective formula, or idiolectal form (if we are to use Barthes’s phrase).

Repetition as a narrative style seeks a new conception of the mediation, one that does not follow the assumptions of the old one. Though the starting point of this movement could be traced back to the old one, its overall effect (or consequences, as it is described in this chapter’s title) works to cast a shadow of uncertainty on the law which governs the established order of things, not only to mount a challenge to it or subvert its assumptions but also to uncover them or to render them bare.

Unlike the proposition according to which repetition seeks to search for or recreate order (in other words, seeks to create a new law as an alternative to the defunct one), the proposition I put forward indicates that the true novelty of repetition is to uncover the already existing law because simply creating a new one would take us back to square one, to the more common and much too general exercise of replacing one law with another, an action which Benjamin describes as “law-making.” At the present moment, it is useful to formulate this idea by applying to it the terms of this study: instead of a quest to create what is sometimes termed as post-national, international, or global identity (new law), narrative repetition in *Little Mountain* seeks to push the limits of the law of national identity itself (existing law). The creation of a post-national identity, after all, would be an extension of the premise of national identity.

This is in accordance with the previous chapter's overarching thesis, which argues that narrative is the ultimate grounds for undoing the national affiliation based on the equivalency between the national subject and the nation as narrative constituted the grounds on which this affiliation was initially imagined. From this perspective, the significant differences between pan-Arab, cultural nationalism and state, civic nationalism become less important because they both remain copies of the same existing law that regulates the relationship between the national subject and the nation. This is not to equate the political and historical consequences of these different versions of nationalism. Rather, it is to suggest that insofar as identity formation is concerned, the differences between the two are technical rather than fundamental. Therefore, the replacement of the national affiliation (in its two main versions, the civic and the cultural) with another type of law-making, post-national affiliation (which is not as convincing or as functional as the national one), would be anything but a novelty.

While it is feasible to delineate the functioning of the law-making process, be it the national or the allegedly post-national one, it is impossible to provide a workable methodology of the law-uncovering process as this process proceeds on the assumption of the absence of methodology. Though we cannot pinpoint a single method associated with it, it is certainly possible to locate its effect. As a result of the law-making process being replicable, insofar as it is never truly new but is always another, modified copy of a law that already existed, it is in essence a methodological process based on a given symbolic arrangement, which is capable of withstanding a great deal of rearrangement. In contrast, the mere

suggestion of methodology in the context of the law-uncovering process would be in stark contradiction to this process's most important constituting element which is its individual style. It is for this reason that this study targets case-studies rather than sets up a universal or widely applicable theory about postcolonial or third-world fiction. Therefore, what could and should be done instead is provide a description of the specific manner in which this uncovering of the law takes place in Khoury's text, in addition to expanding on its overall consequences and effect on the logic of national affiliation.

## 2.5 Representation and Its Law of Correspondence

To start with, then, let us consider a passage that appears in the opening pages of Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*. Discussing the nature of the subtle interaction between repetition and the law (which is the structuring principle governing order or generality), Deleuze says the following:

If repetition can be found, even in nature, it is in the name of a power which affirms itself against the law, which works underneath laws, perhaps superior to laws. If repetition exists, it expresses at once a singularity opposed to the general, a universality opposed to the particular, a distinctive opposed to the ordinary, an instantaneity opposed to variation and an eternity opposed to permanence. In every respect, repetition is a transgression. It puts law into question, it denounces its nominal or general character in favour of a more profound and more artistic reality. (3)

As a first step of approaching Deleuze's description of what repetition says, let us examine the several polarities he underscores: singularity / the general, universality / the particular, distinctive / the ordinary, instantaneity / variation, and eternity / permanence. At first glance, these polarities can be somewhat

puzzling, especially when considering the first two sets according to which “singularity” corresponds to “universality” whereas “the general” is put on the same plane as “the particular.” An educated guess that could be proposed to deal with this apparent mismatch might be formulated as follows: Deleuze’s use of these binaries is meant to exploit their descriptive power while simultaneously deconstructing them. This could pass as an adequate explanation, that is, until one reads what he writes two pages later: repetition “is by nature transgression or exception, always revealing a singularity opposed to the particulars subsumed under laws, a universal opposed to the generalities which give rise to laws” (5). It turns out that the terms Deleuze uses are neither a mismatch (intended or otherwise) nor a poststructuralist exercise in deconstruction; they are, in fact, terms which he deploys specifically in relation to the function of the law whose premises are not only questioned by repetition but whose origins are also exposed by it. What he calls “the particular,” therefore, is not “the unique” but is rather an isolated yet ordinary occurrence that still follows the laws of “the general.”

In order to get to the point that concerns us most here, namely *Little Mountain’s* narrative repetition, its circular storytelling, and the impact on the national affiliation’s narrative structure, it is essential to put what Deleuze says about the law as it is described in the quotation above into conversation with what he says about the repetitive and circular structure of the modern work of art, a work for which, I argue, *Little Mountain* stands. We should be reminded that such a work, according to Deleuze’s suggestion, develops both “permutating series” and “circular structures” (68), all in an attempt to create an escape route

out of the prison of representation. Broadly speaking, storytelling, representation, and national identity are closely connected. (Mis)Representation, by definition, has to submit to the logic of the identical which gives it the capacity to construct all the different forms of identity, whether they are aesthetic, social, or political; representation is actually the closest instance one could find to the structuring principle of the law; it is, in this sense, the law's primary and most visible manifestation, one which is not confined to the aesthetic but also to the political. Not only does it provide the necessary sustenance to the law, allowing for its unceasing expansion into new domains of applicability, representation is also the mechanism through which the initiation of the law-making procedure becomes possible.

By way of thinking through what repetition in *Little Mountain* does to representation, the mainstay of political imaginative constructions such as national identity, let us turn to an instance of what Deleuze describes as "circles and series" that stand on "a formless *ungrounded* chaos which has no law other than its own repetition" (69). This instance will also serve as an illustration of some aspects of the novel's narrative style which introduces this repetitive, circular, and permutating storytelling to the context of the travails of the Lebanese Civil War and, by extension, of nationalism.

It might, then, be useful to start at the beginning, that is, to start with a passage that appears in the first few pages of Khoury's novel before being repeated two more times in the course of the first chapter. The choice of this specific passage is related to its status as a microcosm of the novel as a whole—a microcosm that exhibits the novel's other characteristics. Each time the passage is



repeated, several small differences are introduced. These differences pertain to a change in tense (a switch between the present and past) but also to a change in the content being conveyed. Thus, these changes are stylistic in all cases, but they are also conflicting insofar as meaning is concerned. Spoken by the main narrator, not only does this passage give us crucial clues about the repetitive style in which the novel is written, it also includes an indirect suggestion, a trace or a signifier of the main narrator's political allegiances. The narrator says:

Five men came, jumping out of a military-like jeep. Carrying automatic rifles, they surround the house. The neighbors come out to watch. One of them smiles, she makes the victory sign. They come up to the house, knock on the door. My mother opens the door, surprised. Their leader asks about me.

—He's gone out.

—Where did he go?

—I don't know. Come in, have a cup of coffee.

They enter. They search for me in the house. I wasn't there. They found a book with Abdel-Nasser on the back cover. I wasn't there. They scattered the papers and overturned the furniture. They cursed the Palestinians. They ripped my bed. They insulted my mother and this corrupt generation. I wasn't there. I wasn't there. My mother was there, trembling with distress and resentment, pacing up and down the house angrily. She stopped answering their questions and left them. She sat on a chair in the entrance, guarding her house, as they, inside, looked for the Palestinians and Abdel-Nasser and international communism. She sat on a chair in the entrance and they made the sign of the cross, in hatred or in joy.

They went out into the street, their hands held high in gestures of victory. Some people watched and made the victory sign. (4-5)

There are several things that need to be elaborated with regard to this passage, among them is the slight variations introduced in the next two repetitions. These

variations are indicative that this type of repetition amounts to more than an experimental maneuver or a meaning-generating device. We will get to this crucial aspect after establishing some principal observations.

From the repetition of the sentence, “I wasn’t there,” we come to understand that the speaking subject in Khoury’s novel is constituted by absence (this also applies to other narrators and storytellers who appear in the following four chapters.) This absence is not complete, but rather an absence from the designated or expected place. The character, the passage, as well as the individual plot are not in their designated place—not tied down to an anchoring or illuminating background. In addition to the physical absence from the scene itself, there is another, more extreme absence indicated by the fact that the main narrator is never given either a name or a set of clear and distinctive characteristics which might allow the reader to identify him with any certainty as he reappears in the course of the narrative—the ultimate absence, perhaps, is the absence from one’s own narrative.

This textual self-elision of *Little Mountain’s* principal narrator is in line with the novel’s reticence on the question of national affiliation, despite its setting being a civil war fought in the name of competing ideas with regard to that type of affiliation. The narrator’s self-elision points to a crucial choice, a choice to form out of an absence a disfigured but a newly imagined presence, one based on the individuality, uniqueness, and fleeting nature of character identity rather than on the illusory fixity of the affiliation identity, be it a broad, national affiliation or an exclusive, sectarian one. Notice that the same cannot be said about the militia men who storm the house. They are indeed present, but their

presence is determined by symbols which are in turn determined by the fixity of affiliation and of group. Thus, the only thing we know of this narrator with any certainty is his storytelling which is couched in a chaotic and disfigured narrative about an incomplete, incoherent life: episodes from a sheltered, confused childhood in the neighbourhood known as "Little Mountain," episodes of street fighting between various nationalist and sectarian groups, and finally a short episode of the narrator's time in Paris where he goes to be treated of his wounds.

In *Signifying Loss*, Gana calls this absence "belated." Gana's central argument in the chapter treating Khoury's work could be summed up as follows: the after-the-fact absence from the crucial scene quoted above represents a device intended to make sense of the trauma discursively, that is, through the utterance and re-utterance of what took place between his mother and the militia men.

"The ability of the first person narrator to tell us he 'wasn't there,'" Gana writes,

becomes possible only belatedly, when he reinserts himself into the narrative gap, and reproduces the absence (the 'not being there') to which he was subject, but not yet a retrospective witness. Laying claim to an absence from the scene of the traumatic event at the moment of its unfolding becomes belatedly the inaugural moment of the discursive reconstruction of what happened. For the first person narrator of *Little Mountain* to go on repeating again and again (in a chiastic vacillation of sameness and difference) the circumstantial sequence of this arch event throughout the narrative is indicative of the ways in which repetition here a narrative device or an organizing principle of narration: not only does it sustain the rhythmic unfolding of the story, but it also frames the very painstaking and gradual transformation of the traumatic event into a belated experience. (162)

Having already addressed the difference between repetition as a narrative device and as an organizing principle, I want to focus here only on the other aspects of

Gana's reading, namely the gap produced by the narrator who, not bearing witness to the event firsthand, attempts to fill it with yet another gap which he creates through repeating that he "wasn't there." From Gana's perspective, then, to lay claim to an absence from a key segment of one's narrative also marks the moment of beginning to reconstruct that very segment discursively, an action which appears to Gana as having clear therapeutic connotations.

Despite approaching the question of repetition from a different perspective, Gana seems to agree with Said that narration is always a way of ordering or reordering the events either to make them more comprehensible or to deal with their traumatic residues, two aims that can be interpreted as at least closely connected or as part of a single, more general method of narration. In Khoury's novel, the two critics agree, the principle of chaos or chiasmus becomes the device through which the traumatized subject makes sense of the combination which brings together the perceived *coherence* of the subject's own, national identity as well as the *incoherence* of the context in the midst of which that subject finds itself. This "formless form," as Gana describes it, or the "patchwork novel," as Stefan Meyer puts it in *The Experimental Arabic Novel* (129), does not simply stand for the incoherence of the civil war itself, but rather for the difficulty of grasping the mutual erasure of the seeming coherence of national identity and the utter incoherence of civil war. According to the specific mechanism Gana proposes, either the subject experiences the traumatic event firsthand or engages in trying to fill the gap that absence creates through the production of a repeated sequence of discursive absences, in a perpetual "chiastic vacillation of sameness and difference," as Gana poetically puts it.

The claim that a specific type of narration could fill the gap of absence takes us back to the problematic of representation. What is at stake in Gana's reading (also in those of Said and Darraj) is the question of how does narrative *represent* its context accurately and how does it do so faithfully and ethically? The point I want to emphasize, however, is that rather than posing the question of how does one represent that context accurately, *Little Mountain's* repetitive scheme proposes the more difficult question of how one does *not* represent it in the sense of reproducing its law with all the premises that make that law functional. Put in general terms, the repetitive scheme proposes the question as to how one could make a clean escape from what I call the prison of representation. Therefore, the "chiastic vacillation of sameness and difference" or the "permutating series and circular structures," as Deleuze phrases it, instigate the severance of what I call in the previous chapter "the dual plot's matching points," points that are the prerequisites of the law of representation which seek to reproduce the nation's story in the background—the civil war—in the guise of the character's story in the foreground—the scene of absence.

Although it might seem improbable or counterintuitive, the fighters who barge into the narrator's home—in one version they are allowed in, in the other they force their way in—constitute a part of the national story. They are, both literally and metaphorically, intruders. They are such because they serve as caricatures which repeatedly appear as signifiers of the civil war itself, of its brutality as well as its destructive, sectarian nature. The absence of the narrator, rather than simply standing for psychological trauma, actually stands for the attempt to institute a non-correspondence between himself and the war as a

national event. His acts are those of an independent character, unlike the militia men who enter the house as automatons, adorned with symbols, repeatedly appearing before disappearing forever into the non-distinct background.

The severance of the dual plot's matching points is also a function of the time conception which governs the narrative in Khoury's novel. This can be seen in the variations between the multiple versions of this event. It is true, first of all, that this repetition with variation casts a shadow of doubt on straightforward narrative knowledge (usually established by means of chronological and/or realist narration) through proposing alternative, unconventional ways to deal with what had occurred—this, though, might be one of the least interesting aspects of repetition in *Little Mountain*.

The other important aspect of repetition with variation is that in addition to making this pivotal episode formally separate from the nation's story, it also makes it utterly timeless in that the episode is narrated in a way that makes it impossible to be located within homogeneous, empty time. There is in the overall narrative an absence of the principle of "meanwhile" or, as Anderson puts it, the principle of coincidence: not only is narrative time in *Little Mountain* inconstant, in the sense that individuals *do not* move "calendrically through homogeneous, empty time" (Anderson 26), it also lacks the temporal markers that are necessary, first, to put individual incidents and national ones on a single time-plane and, second, to put different individuals in a hypothetical "temporal dialogue" with one another. In other words, there is no temporal dialogue capable of making parallel the movement of different characters within the narrative's time, with moments that have the potential of becoming nodes of temporal coincidence or

correspondence, so much so that the variations in the repeated event ensure the negation of this principle of correspondence.

Once we reach the third repetition of this event, it becomes clear that the cyclical repetition which reappears without discursive justification does not simply shed more light on what exactly *happens*. If anything, it makes the question regarding what “exactly happens” an unanswerable and perhaps even an irrelevant one. Rather than “what occurred?” the question becomes “why it reoccurs?” The first iteration of the scene serves to synchronize the national story and the personal one. Repetition, then, tears apart that initial bidding by turning that moment of contact between the two strands into a discontinuous line whereby the progress of that parallel is stunted with both strands petering out—a technique in line with Khoury’s work in general where “much remains inconclusive; narrative strands come to nothing and peter out” (Pflitsch 30). From this viewpoint, repetition puts representational truth itself in question: according to the law of representation, the third and final repetition of the scene would indeed hold the answer to the previous two as it is the one most illuminated, the one most reflective of the incident that the narrative retells by virtue of its building its momentum by way of the previous two.

It is now time to turn to the third version in order to explain further the challenges it poses to the law of representation. It is not necessary, I think, to focus on the second variation because its importance lies in its function as part of the series of repetition rather than on what it specifically accomplishes. It is perhaps enough to mention in passing that the main difference between the first and second versions is the addition of the threat the militia men make to the

mother once they realize the narrator is nowhere to be found: “—He’d better not come back here” (13).

In the third version, however, the differences are amplified:

They came.

Five men, jumping from a military-like jeep, carrying automatic rifles. Five men wearing big black hats with big black crosses dangling from their necks. They surround the house. They ring the church bells and bang on the door.

Five long black crosses dangling before my mother as she opens the door. She mutters unintelligible phrases. She slams the door in their faces and cries.

Five men break down the door and ask for me. I wasn’t there. They find a book with a picture of Abdel-Nasser on the back cover. I wasn’t there. My mother was there, trembling with distress, resentment, and fear. My mother was there. She sat on a chair in the entrance, guarding her house as they, inside, looked for the Palestinians and Abdel-Nasser and international communism. She sat on a chair in the entrance, guarding her house as they, inside, tore up papers and memories.

My mother was there.

I wasn’t there.

I was in the East, searching with short, almost barefoot men in rubber shoes that didn’t keep the cold out. I was in the East, looking for Little Mountain stretched across the frames of men, the sea surging out of their beautiful eyes. (17-8)

The return of this event is not the reappearance of the same under a different guise. The moment we start to apply what we take to be the normal workings of memory to its “reappearance with difference” is also the moment we begin to go astray. Memory, initiates the past into the present by the repetition of bygone events. With each repetition, the imperfections of memory begin to show



themselves through differences which start to surface as small discrepancies before such discrepancies become ever larger. This might be true insofar as it is taken as a descriptive observation about the way individuals remember events. It is also a difference which Deleuze argues is posited as being subordinated to similarity.

It is inaccurate, however, to extend this descriptive observation so as to explain the function of a past event as a *representation* in the economy of a given narrative. Far from only highlighting the unreliability or imperfections of memory, these variations weaken discursive meaning by recycling symbolic markers—Abdel-Nasser, the automaton-like militia men entering the house, the crosses, and victory signs—which usually gain their power through being explained and sometimes through being critiqued. It is crucial to notice that the two sets of symbols—representing the two forms of national attachment—are organized by the militia men themselves. The narrator never tries to claim the symbols of pan-Arab nationalism assigned to him by the intruders, despite the fact that his *choice* to fight alongside the Palestinians and their supporters gives us clues as to where his sympathies lie. His sympathies, however, are defined by his individualized choice (one taken against the grain), not through any specific symbolic arrangement. His attachment to the national idea is individualized as an attachment to a cause, governed by a sense of injustice rather than by a sense of false togetherness. In the first version, these markers appear to regulate the symbolic relationship between the narrator and the militia men: they come wearing big crosses; he has a book with Abdel-Nasser's picture on it. In the third

one, these symbols become nothing more than dead signifiers devoid of any discursive content.

It is, therefore, urgent to recognize that by narrating the third version the way he does, the narrator does not simply remember the event imperfectly, whether intentionally as a way of sorting out his trauma or unintentionally as a result of his faulty memory. Rather than repeatedly bringing a recollection to the surface, he relates the event in its guise as a formative experience, so that its content and symbols (Abdel-Nasser, the crosses, the weapons, the reactions of the neighbours and that of his mother) are recycled through the imperfect, repetitive permutation from powerful discursive icons into bits of muted reference points that lack the symbolic network necessary for endowing them with potency.

To narrate here means to put forward an inharmonious jumble of formative experiences and to create through repetition a collection of moments that decidedly bring to the fore the individual's narrative, one guided by actions and choices, at the expense of the homogenizing tendencies of affiliation narratives, which absolutely need a discursive, symbolic network of meaning in order to operate effectively. In this way the narrative becomes first and foremost the property of the individual story, regardless of how incoherent it happens to be, rather than a mere replication of the real-world event or of its background, which is often treated as the model against which the copy or the individual's narrative is judged. This type of fidelity-judgment is evident in the readings discussed above, readings based on the following formula: fractured reality => fractured narrative = faithful rendering. Repetition, thus, is not the eternal return

of the same, nor is it the eternal return of the almost-the-same. It is rather the creation of a set of events that can stand as individual stories, neither expected to resemble something other than themselves nor rejuvenate the symbols of the law.

A critical question should be posed at this point: in what way is the preceding reading of repetition significant with regard to the problematic of national identity? It is significant because at the basis of national identity is the presumption that such identity is a copy whose model or a priori form can be found out there, in the world of politics, in history, in the world of social relations, or in a given system that regulates ethical responsibility. As is the case with the event narrated in *Little Mountain*, the narrator's national identity is not a representation which re-enacts a larger model, one which is then judged based on its degree of fidelity, but an individuation whose most important constituent is its difference, not its degree of resemblance. From this perspective, then, it is no longer an *identity* but an imperfect repetition echoed by a single individual.

If we make the mistake of taking the third version as simply the one that is most faithful to the event as it takes place in "reality," we are bound to remain stuck with the question of why should it be repeated and why should it be preceded with two versions?—questions that will almost certainly take us from the crucial problematic of representation to the secondary problematic of trauma and memory. We should be reminded here that the appearance of the first version, inserted as a textual fragment that is out of place, generates an expectation that the stories to come will smooth out its rough edges by giving voice to the ideological signifiers it contains. The appearance of the third and

final version shatters such expectation by first amplifying the ideological signifiers before showing that these signifiers do not in fact have a content, do not point directly to signifieds as they are expected to do. With this in mind, we can begin to see how the repetition of the formative event holds at once a “distinctiveness” and a “universality,” distinctiveness by virtue of being an individual experience of one man, a “universality” by virtue of being an instance of what it means to choose the ethics of individual action at the expense of national and/or communal affiliation.

## 2.6 The Last Word

Repetition with variation starts by creating a temporal non-correspondence and ends by showing the way of imagining other types of political, national, and communal non-correspondence that are not part of passive disengagement. These variations also show that repetition in *Little Mountain* is a textual procedure which flips over the concept of identity on its head in that the reoccurring event produced in the text achieves two forms of independence: first, from the necessity of constructing a representation of the reality existing out there within which there is a coordination of the movement of characters and the occurrence of events, second, from parasitical dependency based on the primacy of that which comes first, an independence from respecting the primacy of what Deleuze calls the a priori form.

The first form of independence could be described in more mundane terms as follows: the difference which the textual reoccurrence envelopes steers away from the perennial question of representation/misrepresentation, that dichotomy which governs aesthetic judgment in the world of identities. The

fictional world of *Little Mountain* is one teeming with radically independent individuals/characters that do not appear as mere subjects of their narrative's background. "All identities are only simulated," Deleuze says in the preface to *Difference and Repetition*, "produced as an optical 'effect' by the more profound game of difference and repetition" (xix). It is perhaps the absence of this comforting optical effect which makes storytelling in *Little Mountain* disorienting but liberating. As Pflitsch contends in his discussion of Rabih Alameddine's novels, "identity can turn out to be a prison, a heavy burden, and the effort to cast it off can become the task of a lifetime, an obsession pursued passionately and full of suffering" (324).

It is rather appropriate to end this chapter by coming full circle, by going back to the question proposed in the chapter's opening: what exactly is the stylistic condition that Khoury's novel creates and what kind of image do we arrive at? The answer to this question is also a sort of summation: the novel takes the civil war as an opportunity, as an event that allows for the isolation of the symptoms of national identity, more specifically the conjunction of two nationalist ideas (the cultural and the civic) as they vie for "the legitimate use of violence," the prize and goal of law-making processes.

As to the image the novel creates, it is one that takes form through a rendition of the idea of the nation that does not rely on a representation of that idea's tenets or on its method; it is, instead, one that conjures that idea's spectres. Rather than two competing nationalist ideas, complete with their respective discourses, what one finds is the palpable presence of shapeless spectres, which, though not resembling the nationalism as it operates in time and space, in the

world of history and politics, it still points to it with spectacular clarity. *Little Mountain*, then, gives space to individual action; it neither pits ideologies against each other nor puts them in dialogue. Instead, it robs them of the discursive narrative properties they very much need to thrive. This image, combining newness and potency, is the image of the muted idea of the nation.

## Chapter 3

### 3 The Magic World of Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Simulacrum: Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

Magical realism reorients not only our habits of time and space, but our sense of identity as well: with over five hundred children of midnight talking through his head, is Saleem himself anymore?

Wendy Faris, "Scheherazade's Children"

I even made the boy and the country identical twins.

Salman Rushdie, Introduction to *Midnight's Children*

Whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum.

Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*

With the discussion of novelistic narrative and national identity moving from Khoury's *Little Mountain* to Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, it is worthwhile to start this chapter with a reminder of the stark differences between the two novels: the subject matter, the narrative style, the tone, and the contexts of the two novels are quite distinct. The context, for instance, ranges from a devastating civil war to the history and aftermath of a long-awaited national independence. The tone ranges from the tragic to the absurd. The narrative genre ranges from fragmentary storytelling to magic realism. The subject matter ranges from the memories of street fighters in war-torn Beirut to the *Bildungsroman* of an Indian boy growing up in bustling Bombay and coming of age in Pakistan. Last but not least is their radically different handling of the relationship between subject and national affiliation.

### 3.1 Grounds for Comparison: Different Aesthetics, Convergent Tendencies

Beginning with placing emphasis on these stark differences, however, also serves as an opportunity for calling attention to the convergence of the two novels, a convergence that forms the central part of this study's "grounds for comparison." Though this convergence is far from being immediately evident, it is, I argue, well worth pursuing, if not simply for the sake of the "comparative challenge" of putting in conversation two very different novels as a way of getting at the shared literariness that informs comparative literature as a discipline, then for the sake of drawing attention as to how two sets of very distinctly divergent literary techniques could end up creating a comparable effect—could wind up with stylistic images whose effect produces a convergence which cannot but be underlined.

To reiterate this idea in more specific terms, one could say that the narrative styles of these two novels create comparable images that push the representational law of national identity to its limit. In doing so, they expose its breaking point, all while forgoing both straightforward discursive criticism and the institution of a new law. They forgo these alternatives and instead speak into existence a language through which a current is created, a current that creatively resists the presuppositions forming the thrust of the conventional understanding of national identity. The narrative structuring schemes these novels employ—repetition and fragmentation in Khoury's *Little Mountain*, hyperboles and digression in *Midnight's Children*—I argue, offer a unique structural way of interrogating the assumptions upon which national identity was constructed, not



only in relation to nationalism in the postcolonial societies in which the events of these novels take place but also in relation to nationalism as such. In short, the fictional worlds they bring about are ones in which national identity has lost its hypothetical yet comforting coherence.

The creation of such fictional worlds is first and foremost an attempt to imagine truly new and distinct ways of dealing with the question of national affiliation. (And this is yet another indication that what is at work in these novels is an operation with no single identifiable methodology.) From this study's viewpoint, then, one could say that while their processes of "isolating of symptoms" of national affiliation are highly individualized, i.e. materialize in two aesthetically distinct manners, the resulting stylistic images share the characteristic of being imbued with a single desire and animated by a comparable energy: the desire to address the issue of national identity and the energy required to imagine new ways of assessing it, away from the typical dichotomy of either rejection or acceptance.

If it were not for running the risk of proposing a dichotomizing and dichotomized reading, one would go as far as claiming that the two novels are opposites—as far as their narrative movements are concerned—which are animated by underlying energies that come so close to being identical. While Khoury's novel uses repetition and fragmentation to propose an image of a muted national identity, *Midnight Children* uses hyperbole and digression to propose a world in which the metaphor of national identity is *fully* adopted: "I had been mysteriously hand-cuffed to history" Saleem Sinai says amusingly in

the novel's first paragraph, "my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country" (9).

In *Metaphor*, David Punter proposes an "over-adventurous" way of thinking of metaphor "as ectoplasm: as the fruit of an attempt to give material form to, to incarnate, that which otherwise remains latent, ghostly" (68). With Rushdie's novel in mind, Punter suggests that metaphor is "the bodying-forth of sets of correspondences" of which we have all been "aware in a *liminal*<sup>38</sup> way, hovering somewhere around the threshold of articulation" (68). In *Midnight's Children*, however, the crossing of the articulation's threshold represents a narrative movement which goes further than giving the ghost a material form. It is, in other words, a narrative movement which begins by deploying the metaphor's body—extracted from the depositories of national culture—and ends by obliterating that body into pieces out of which neither the ghost nor the body could be resurrected. The approach of fully embodying the central metaphor connecting subject and nation, I argue, is one which turns out to mount one of the strongest forms of interrogating the solemnity of national identity, doing so through a narrative movement that renders its usually potent and affective ethos as absurd rather than as seriously cogent or ethically binding.

"Above all things," Saleem tells the reader shortly after, "I fear absurdity" (9). What he seeks above all, therefore, is "to end up meaning—yes, meaning—something" (9). Saleem's preoccupation with "meaning," it must be emphasized, does not emerge out of the writing process which he undertakes later in life as he

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<sup>38</sup> Emphasis in the original.

approaches his thirty-first birthday. The creation of meaning retrospectively, as we saw in the first chapter, is inescapable. Given that it is so, if Saleem's desire to create meaning were to emerge at the time he begins to write his "autobiography," then such desire would be nothing out of the ordinary. Saleem, however, is aware early on that his personal life carries a great deal of meaning, that he is at the centre of history, if not the cosmos.

How is this meaning to be created? And better still, how is it to be optimized to such an extent as to satisfy the exceedingly narcissistic Saleem? It is created by way of asserting a visceral bond between a select number of subjects and their nascent nation, with Saleem being the most remarkable member of this group. Describing the moment of his birth, Saleem writes the following:

Understand what I'm saying: during the first hour of August 15th, 1947—between midnight and one a.m.—no less than one thousand and one children were born within the frontiers of the infant sovereign state of India. In itself, that is not an unusual fact (although the resonances of the number are strangely literary)—at the time, births in our part of the world exceeded deaths by approximately six hundred and eighty-seven an hour. What made the event noteworthy (noteworthy! There's a dispassionate word, if you like!) was the nature of these children, every one of whom was, through some freak of biology, or perhaps owing to some preternatural power of the moment, or just conceivably by sheer coincidence (although synchronicity on such a scale would stagger even C. G. Jung), endowed with features, talents or faculties which can only be described as miraculous. It was as though—if you will permit me one moment of fancy in what will otherwise be, I promise, the most sober account I can manage—as though history, arriving at a point of the highest significance and promise, had chosen to sow, in that instant, the seeds of a future which would genuinely differ from anything the world had seen up to that time. (195)

It is, first of all, rather remarkable that Saleem uses a mere understatement when he refers to the number of children born during this magical hour of concrete and metaphoric births. Despite receiving no more than a casual reference, this evocative number is an acknowledgement of the undeniable literary and imaginative component of the subject-nation bond.

Though implying the power of magic, the imaginative correspondence taking place at the moment of birth has consequences that Saleem and the other midnight's children are not yet able to grasp:

At the most literal level, we might say that Rushdie is pointing to the way in which to have been born at a certain "magical" moment forever robs us of our private life; more broadly, we might say that this very idea of privacy itself is a myth, a metaphor, because as we try to explain or understand another life we become automatically involved in a process of metaphorisation whereby we try to see the individual life as a metaphor for wider historical forces. (Punter 68-9)

The moment Saleem makes central to the subject-nation bond (and the meaning that ensues from it) is actually the moment the *state* is born. Would it still be legitimate to interpret it as the bonding moment between subject and nation rather than subject and state? Without a doubt, reading the description of the children's birth with this distinction in mind could compel one to object to speaking about this miraculous incident via the nation as it is clear that the moment being described here is the moment of the birth of the *state* of India rather than the *nation* of India. Is it the nation or the state which "forever robs us of our private life"? One ought to keep in mind that, from nationalism's viewpoint, the birth of a state—far from being the mere emergence of a

bureaucratic machinery—is a moment of great significance as it stands for the *fulfillment* of the nation. The nation’s political sovereignty is the single, most crucial notion that animates nationalism as a style of thought.<sup>39</sup> In fact, the desire to establish political sovereignty is often seen as an essential requirement for a given nationalism to be defined as such. Since the birth of a nation can never be located at a precise historical moment that could be invoked on a regular intervals, the moment the state is born comes to stand as an interchangeable symbol representing at once the birth of the nation and that of the state. Just as political sovereignty animates nationalism, such a one-to-one symbolic representation animates its primary legitimization principle.

Elsewhere in his narrative, Saleem ironically reflects on this very point, namely how the birth moment of the Indian state becomes a symbolic representation for that of the nation. As Saleem explains, India’s independence meant that

there was an extra festival on the calendar, a new myth to celebrate, because a nation which had never previously existed was about to win its freedom, catapulting us into a world which, although it had five thousand years of history, although it had invented the game of chess and traded with Middle Kingdom Egypt, was nevertheless quite imaginary; into a mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will. (112)

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<sup>39</sup> In the *Umma and the Dawla*, Tamim al-Barghouti indicates that “if the nation is an objective reality consisting of a group of people, having in common a number of traits...which result...in a sense of togetherness, then these elements are associated with a quest to express them politically by forming a [non-existing] nation-state...If, on the other hand, the nation was an abstraction invented and propagated through government discourse, its function is still to legitimize [an existing] state...In both cases, the state is the purpose, end and aim of the nation” (34).

For the time being, the final comment to be made about the visceral bond between subject and nation as it is rendered in *Midnight's Children* is that what makes the event noteworthy—read: meaningful—is not only the political independence of the nation/state, but also the children's features, talents, and faculties which they acquire via their deep-rooted bond with the nation. We will discuss the notable promise Saleem makes—namely, to narrate this miracle within an otherwise sober account—in the section addressing national identity and the genre of magic realism, but, for now, it would be sufficient to keep in mind both the centrality of the generation of meaning to *Midnight's Children* and the magical phenomenon invoked in order to give that meaning its peculiar shape and pattern.

The final point to be made with regard to the grounds for comparison is as follows: while the discussion of repetition in *Little Mountain* is driven by the effort to show how the novel is at pains to counter the conventional narrative prerogative of meaning production, the discussion of hyperbole and digression here is driven by the effort to explain the peculiar consequences of *Midnight's Children's* extreme urge to produce meaning—its extreme but ultimately playful urge to seam subject and nation ever so neatly so as to call the bluff of national identity. The discussion of both novels, nevertheless, underscores the crucial role *difference* plays in the treatment of national identity in both novels.

### 3.2 Comedy and Absurdity, Discourse and Structure

In what way does *Midnight's Children's* playfulness come about? To the novel's reader, who cannot but be fully aware of Saleem's wit and sense of humour, the answer might seem too evident as to make the question itself superfluous. Put

shortly, the playfulness comes about through the narrative's irreverence and its unabated comic effect. While this would certainly be true on the descriptive level, it is crucial to recognize the distinction between the narrative's deployment of the comic and the absurd, especially if we want to address the issue of the novel's treatment of well-established conventions such as those governing the functioning of national affiliation.

While the comic facet is crucial, as it is evident from Saleem's incessant penchant for jokes, this discussion focuses more on the novel's absurdist facet. The explanation for this choice is quite straightforward in light of this study's aim: it is because the comic takes form as part of a purely discursive arrangement, as part of the particular language that *Midnight's Children* puts forth. Examples of this comedy are to be found in the discursive jabs at the often hollowed and passively accepted "national characteristics"—characteristics which in turn form the discursive bedrock of national identity. This comic effect is the product of statements such as the one describing Saleem's grandfather's (Aadam Aziz) identity transformation from the local (Kashmiri) to the national (Indian): "Aadam Aziz has simply paid the price of being Indianized, and suffers terribly from constipation" (MC 52). Unlike the discursive nature of this comic effect, the absurd in *Midnight's Children* comes across as part of a formal arrangement. It is one which materializes by way of putting Saleem's personal story in a highly improbable conjunction with that of the nation. Rather than targeting the discourse within which national identity operates, absurdity targets its very structure.

From the above mentioned quotation about absurdity and meaning, one which appears as early in the narrative as the second paragraph, we are presented with two central notions that govern Saleem's narrative. The first of these notions relates to the narrative's use of hyperboles as a way of setting into motion the exaggerated production of meaning. Of course, this is manifested most clearly in the metaphor that the narrative deploys, namely the concern for making every personal detail gain in importance through connecting it to an event or to a date of national significance—a technique which arguably constitutes the driving engine of this ever-expanding, exceptionally digressive narrative. Examples of this abound. For the time being, however, it is sufficient to consider only one of these examples so to highlight the importance of this metaphor before it is discussed in more detail later on. For instance, when Saleem's grandparents, Aadam and Naseem, are finally about to see each other face to face for the first time after having fallen in love "in segments," through a "perforated sheet," Saleem tells us that this long-awaited meeting, the significant harbinger of his own consequential birth, happened "on the day the World War ended ... Such historical coincidences have littered, and perhaps befouled, my family's existence in the world" (27).

It might appear that what Saleem calls "historical coincidences," which are essentially an overdetermined specimen of what I term in the first chapter as the "binding points" of the national affiliation's narrative, are meant to create the novel's characteristic comic effect. There is certainly some truth to this view. More importantly, however, the primary purpose of these historical coincidences is to amplify or to put into overdrive the representational law of national



identity—a law that gives such identity both meaning and cogency—to such a degree so as to erode the relative invisibility of this law’s principal device and, in the process, make its operation utterly conspicuous, thus virtually impossible to miss.

This amplification of meaning is very much connected to the novel’s second aspect which is related to setting up Saleem for failure in his quest to give his life the kind of meaning he so desires: while he finds nothing more terrifying than absurdity, his predetermined fate leads him to what he fears the most—*to be* absurd. In short, absurdity is the nemesis of meaning. What starts as a movement between the poles of meaning and absurdity ends up becoming a process meant to deconstruct the dichotomy itself, so that the narrative does not simply delineate the “rise and fall” of meaning but brings to the fore the traces of absurdity that always stain the structure of meaning. Comedy is incapable of highlighting this critical relationship between meaning and absurdity because its attack on meaning remains a separate force that might weaken such meaning but cannot undo its internal structure. While comedy does seem to undermine the potential of ideas to appear meaningful, powerful ideas can nonetheless survive the onslaught of comedy whose effect is mostly temporary and fleeting. It is for this reason that Saleem shows absolutely no fear of the comedy he directs at his nation, his family, and above all at himself. If anything, he exerts himself to be comic, to tell jokes, and to relate even the most serious of events in the most facetious manner possible.

Contrary to common belief, then, which holds comedy to be a potent weapon against ideology and/or power relations, comedy is actually more likely

to serve as a tool in the service of powerful ideas than to serve as their true adversary. If comedy does seem to be a formidable adversary in some cases, this would be proof that the ideology or the set of power relations it opposes are already too feeble to confront real challenges, rather than proof of comedy's own forcefulness. In those cases where comedy appears to be exceptionally powerful, that power is in reality nothing more than an optical illusion produced by the weakness of the idea it pokes fun at. In the presence of a truly potent force—such as the idea of the nation and its “binding” mechanism—comedy functions merely as a safety valve that ultimately preserves established power relations when there is a credible risk that things might be about to go out of hand. This is an uncomfortable truth attested to by Methwold when he asks Ahmad Sinai not to take offence at the clown's out-of-line joke, telling Ahmad that the joke is merely part of “the tradition of the fool... Licensed to provoke and tease. Important social safety-valve” (102).

With so many compelling studies and cogent arguments illustrating the inescapable power of discourse, is it not perplexing to attribute comedy's weakness to its discursive nature? When I contend that comedy is weak, my contention is made in relative terms, not absolute ones. In other words, I claim that comedy's weakness is thrown into sharp relief when it is compared to absurdity's compelling strength. When I claim that the relative weakness of comedy is related to its operating within the discursive field, I do so to draw attention to as to how comedy operates within a field which it shares with the same ideologies and power relations it seeks to attack and weaken. Discourse is a flexible field whose resiliency lies in its capacity to accommodate polarities

without suffering a great deal for it. What this means is that comedy could—and indeed often becomes—only a single side of one of these multiple polarities. As a result of sharing the same field with what it attacks, its damaging potential remains more limited than one would hope, more limited than we are often led to believe.

Absurdity, on the other hand, tends to come about as part of a structural maneuver that chips away at the very structure of ideas rather than being necessarily constrained within or bounded by the limits of what one could call the “discursive superstructure.” Saleem, then, is absolutely correct in indicating that it is absurdity which ought to be feared—not comedy—precisely because it is a structural maneuver which has the capacity to uncover the *unreasonable* nature of a dominant idea and expose its implausibility, consequently, inflicting irreparable damage, rather than simply pretending that it is sufficient to laugh away questionable yet influential ideas.

If absurdity in *Midnight's Children* is a structural maneuver brought about by the extreme and improbable alignment between the personal and the national, what is, then, the genre of magic realism's role in this alignment? Does not this reading make the novel's most evident characteristic, i.e. the combining of the fantastical and the realist, superfluous? There is, in fact, a close connection between absurdity and magic realism as magic realist narration is precisely what allows for the “structural absurdity” to form and develop organically rather than emerge either as a contrived textual extra.

### 3.3 Magic Realism: Digression and Leakages

To illustrate this connection between absurdity and magic realism, we must first take stock of the role digression plays in the narrative. *Midnight's Children* is above all an encyclopedic narrative that mixes the serious and solemn with the humorous and irreverent. As is the case with *Little Mountain*, *Midnight's Children* is a narrative bent on the generation of stories, though, in Rushdie's novel, this is done through the mode of digression rather than through circular storytelling. While circularity emphasizes the disconnectedness between stories or different versions of a single story, digression puts at the forefront the importance of connecting the various stories it helps generate. As a consequence, the former results in a narrative imbued with a melancholic worldview that dwells on the unbridgeable gaps within the community, while the latter results in one whose worldview takes the community's connectedness, at least initially, as a given.

There is no doubt that digression in *Midnight's Children* is closely related to oral storytelling.<sup>40</sup> What I want to focus on, however, is another facet of this digression—a facet that is of more relevance to this study: digression as the natural and organic growth insofar as both narrative and character are concerned. This point is made clear in Saleem's comparison between himself as a fetus growing inside his mother's womb and the narrative itself: "What had been (at the beginning) no bigger than a full stop had expanded into a comma, a word,

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<sup>40</sup> In *Salman Rushdie*, Catherine Cundy writes that "*Midnight's Children* draws on the models of the seemingly endless and digressive Indian epics the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*...With its thirty chapters or 'jars' of pickled personal and national history, its meandering digressions and metronomic swings through time and space, *Midnight's Children* illustrates a link between Rushdie's chosen style of communication in the text and the oral narrative that he seeks to reproduce" (27-8).

a sentence, a paragraph, a chapter; now it was bursting into more complex developments, becoming, one might say, a book—perhaps an encyclopedia—even a whole language” (100). Not only does *Midnight’s Children* conceive of the character—in both its conception and development—as being comparable to narrative, it endorses the view that the narrative element at the heart of personal identity necessarily leads to a form of connectedness between the self and the other, a connectedness from which there is no escape.

In Saleem’s own words, “things—even people—have a way of leaking into each other” (38). Saleem insists on this idea as he attempts to provide a justification for the digressive nature of his narrative. His justification for deploying digression as a critical component of narration is addressed quite explicitly in the novel’s first book. As he writes the story of the midnight’s children, Saleem faces constant harassment by his often impatient companion, Padma, who is at times a patient listener but is often unwilling to tolerate the style of Saleem’s storytelling. Her criticism is based on what she perceives as his shortcomings as a storyteller: she neither understand why it takes him far too long to narrate sub-plots (as a result of his tendency to avoid resolving narrative threads promptly) nor does she appreciate his dwelling on certain events at the expense of others. On one such occasion, Saleem loses patience with her pestering him and decides to explain his position and, in a way, spell out his manifesto as a narrator:

But here is Padma at my elbow, bullying me back into the world of linear narrative, the universe of what-happened-next: “At this rate,” Padma complains, “you’ll be two hundred years old before you manage to tell about your birth.” She is affecting nonchalance, jutting a careless hip in my general direction, but doesn’t fool me. I

know now that she is, despite all her protestations, hooked. No doubt about it: my story has her by the throat, so that all at once she's stopped nagging me to go home, to take more baths, to change my vinegar-stained clothes, to abandon even for a moment this darkling pickle-factory where the smells of spices are forever frothing in the air. Now my dung goddess simply makes up a cot in the corner of this office and prepares my food on two blackened gas-rings, only interrupting my Anglepoise-lit writing to expostulate, "You better get a move on or you'll die before you get yourself born." Fighting down the proper pride of the successful storyteller, I attempt to educate her. "Things—even people—have a way of leaking into each other," I explain, "like flavors when you cook." ... "To me it's a crazy way of telling your life-story," she cries, "if you can't even get to where your father met your mother." (38)<sup>41</sup>

As an encyclopedic and deliberately digressive narrative, then, *Midnight's Children* follows the different strands—plots and subplots—all the way to their inevitable end. In doing so, it ensures that each connection is exploited and each plot or subplot is completely exhausted, mirroring through this narrative procedure the novel's propensity for avoiding going against convention explicitly and instead showing how tenuous conventions become when they are stretched to their logical endpoints.

By employing digression as a way of handling the multiplicity of its stories, *Midnight's Children* simultaneously illustrates Saleem's worldview as well

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<sup>41</sup> There is in this quote a clear example of the key role Padma plays in the novel. If I do not elaborate on Padma's role in the narrative or on that of the other women in this text, it is not because I play down their roles in shaping the narrative and its movement. From this perspective, my focus on Saleem (as a male protagonist) ought not to be interpreted from a gender perspective. Rather, I see Saleem as playing the most crucial role because of the particular connection he establishes between himself and the nation. Had the protagonist of *Midnight's Children* been a female character, my reading would obviously be adjusted in some places but its outline would remain unchanged.

as the spirit of its magic realist narrative: the metaphoric “leakage” of people, stories, things, and concepts into each other is the essence of magic realism, which is, according to the generic definition, a composite genre that seeks to reconcile various modes of storytelling into an unexpected unity. In order to refine this critical point, I want to draw attention to two quotations, the first deals with the treatment of convention while the second is concerned with uniqueness.

The first of these quotations is in fact the novel’s very first sentence. Saleem initiates his idiosyncratic autobiography with his birth: “I was born in the city of Bombay ... once upon a time” (9). From the narrative’s first sentence, then, we come to learn its first crucial feature: while this sentence contains highly conventional elements—beginning with the protagonist’s birth and deploying the proverbial “once upon a time”—it also contains a maneuver which announces that the ground beneath these conventional elements is a shifting one; this sentence, by way of its playful arrangement, signals that far from being anchored to a secured ground, the conventions are incorporated into the narrative with the stipulation that they continuously teeter on a floating, shifting surface. There is, in other words, a particular attitude at work, one that is neither guided by a disregard for or an abandonment of the questionable but influential traditions nor by an unquestionable embracing of it: I was born ... oh wait ... once upon a time!

The second quotation appears later in the narrative. In it, Saleem comments on an issue close to his heart: uniqueness. Here, he suggests that “if one wishes to remain an individual in the midst of the teeming multitudes, one

must make oneself grotesque" (109). In *Self, Nation, Text in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children*, Neil Ten Kortenaar points out that "if India were a person it would be a grotesque such as Saleem, its paternity would be in dispute, and its ability to tell its story would be in question" (35). While one could make the case for this analogy, one would have to do so with the view that grotesqueness in Rushdie's novel has only negative connotations implying inadequacy, when, in fact, the connotations of grotesqueness are uniqueness and power. A reading more in line with the values of this fictional world would consider this grotesqueness in conjunction with the principle of connectedness. On the one hand, we are presented with the proposition that people "leak" into each other which suggests the inevitable connectedness of the stories out of which individual identities take shape. This principle, of course, is one that transpires out of a belief in a certain unity between the things that leak into each other. On the other hand, there is a genuine a desire to seek uniqueness, even if it has to come at the cost of embodying the grotesque.

Using the grotesque as an individuation mechanism could even be extended to the novel as a whole; it could be taken as a rough description of *Midnight's Children* as a narrative that grapples with ways to depict the grotesqueness and distortedness of its context. There is in this context a coming together of a fledgling national identity and a state which takes on the mission of becoming that identity's incubator. The distorted nature of the novel is a function of the style of narration which takes digression and hyperbole as its principal tools to generate meaning. Later on, we will see how the narrative tools of digression and hyperbole are responsible for the construction and deconstruction



of the two devices—metaphor and metonymy—upon which the representational law of national identity relies. For now, though, we should be reminded that hyperbole also means power, a point that becomes evident if we compare the “distortion” of the narrative with its distortion of Saleem’s body as his disproportionate physical appearance is closely tied to the magical powers he possesses.

Saleem’s legs “were irretrievably bowed” and his “baby-snaps reveal that my large moon-face was too large; too perfectly round. Something lacking in the region of the chin. Fair skin curved across my features—but birthmarks disfigured it; dark stains spread down my western hairline, a dark patch coloured my eastern eye. And my temples: too prominent: bulbous Byzantine domes” (Rushdie 124). His distorted anatomy, however, also mean that his ever clogged up sinuses become the instrument through which he discovers his ability to communicate with his fellow midnight’s children. In short, he “was a radio receiver” even better “than All-India Radio” (164). As John McLeod puts it in “Nation and Nationalisms,” this allows the children to “form an imagined community in Saleem’s mind when, owing to a bizarre accident, he discovers that he can telepathically communicate with all of them” (116).

These lopsided physical characteristics, therefore, make Saleem one of the exceptional children whose qualities and powers must, by definition, be exaggerated through hyperbole. The immediate associations which the adjective “hyperbolic” evokes are exaggeration and amplification. This is to say that the novel’s “grotesqueness” is a characteristic meant to guarantee its uniqueness as a narrative about the nature of national affiliation. The desire to seek uniqueness,

however, is in constant tension with the initial concession to the principle of leakage, a principle according to which it is inevitable for the teeming multitudes to leak into the self. This tension serves as a symbolic reference to the contradictory principles of national affiliation which requires both the uniqueness of the subject and the oneness that is necessary to bring together an anonymous group of subjects.

With the above distillation of the novel's key characteristics—first, the shifting ground of tradition, second, the distorted and disproportional use of the representational law of identity, as well as the two forces of connectedness and uniqueness which inform both—we are now better able to answer the previously proposed question about the role of magic realism in Rushdie's novel. Given the existence of these varied constitutive forces—embracing tradition, but interrogating it, embodying the representational law, but stretching it thin, accepting the inevitability of social connectedness, but actively seeking uniqueness—how are they to be reconciled into a single narrative that claims to pursue the production of meaning rather than relative, fragmentary truths—a narrative which seeks anything *but* to be incoherent?

The answer lies precisely in the “toolbox” afforded by the genre of magic realism. Magic realism is what allows all of these varied, constitutive forces to “leak” into each other, thus forming an ad hoc unity and allowing the multiple forces not only to develop organically, but naturalizes them to such an extent that they come to seem as if they were meant to commingle in the first place. Put in different words, not only does the principal, generic leakage between magic and realism make all the other tributary leakages possible, it also makes them

seem natural within *Midnight's Children's* fictional world. This is precisely why the novel's structural absurdity, which is generated by another leakage between the personal and the national, is neither a textual extra nor a supplement developed through narrative discourse. It emerges and develops as part and parcel of the novel's internal operation.

### 3.4 Magic Realism: History, Fiction, Myth

Continuing with the principle of "leakages," one of *Midnight's Children's* most notable "leakages" is the one between the two key facets of nationalism: history and myth. In her study of the genre of magic realism, *Ordinary Enchantments*, Wendy Faris describes the genre's distinctive capacity to bring together history and myth<sup>42</sup> as "idiosyncratic recreations of historical events" (15). It is worth noting that, even in the case of some nationalisms where mythology or religion serve as an essential foundation, nationalism tends to be an outwardly secular and profane movement whose most compelling feature is the ardent drive toward modernity and modernization. In outwardly professing this, however, nationalism unwittingly underscores its "split personality" condition.

"Nationalism is Janus-like," Suleiman rightly observes: "it looks towards the past, for valorization and authentication. And it looks towards the future for modernization on all fronts: social, economic, political, cultural and linguistic"

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<sup>42</sup> In the introduction to his novel, Rushdie writes that "in the West people tended to read *Midnight's Children* as a fantasy, while in India people thought of it as pretty realistic, almost a history book. In "Errata': or, Unreliable Narration in *Midnight's Children*," an essay collected in *Imaginary Homelands*, he hopes "that Saleem Sinai is an unreliable narrator, and that *Midnight's Children* is far from being an authoritative guide to the history of post-independence India" (22-3).

(226). The content of such past, it should be added, is not derived only from material history but also from the rich chest of mythology. If it were not for nationalism's conscious suppression of any association which risks putting on par with the products of the imagination, one could argue (facetiously, as it were) that proponents of nationalism should widely acknowledge that magic realism is perhaps the most ideal genre for nationalism, namely because of the genre's capacity to accommodate nationalism's both forward and backward outlooks, all without the jarring contradictions for which nationalism's discourse is infamous.

This combination of history and myth that magic realism is able to bring to bear "implies that historical events and myths are both essential aspects of our collective memory" (Faris 16). This implication, Christopher Warnes writes in *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel*, counters the argument that the fantastic stands for an evasion of history: "where the fantastic has been thought of as an escape from history, Rushdie reclaims it by showing how it is already present in the language of history in *Midnight's Children*" (122). In the case of nationalism, the formation of "collective memory," whose sources are history and myth, is comparable to the one which, according to Ricœur, plays out at the level of individual identity: the arrival at self-knowledge. Self-knowledge, of course, is crucial to the formation of any identity. I point out in the first chapter that Ricœur holds that the arrival at self-knowledge results from a chain of assertions. It is worthwhile at this point to reconsider this chain of assertions in light of both nationalism's use of mythology as well as magic realism's facilitation of the meshing of history and mythology. This chain of assertions, then, evolves in the

following manner: “self-knowledge is an interpretation; self-interpretation, in its turn, finds in narrative, among other signs and symbols, a privileged mediation; this mediation draws on history as much as it does on fiction” (Ricœur 188).

I revisit Ricœur’s argument not to suggest that the role of fiction in the case of individual self-knowledge is equivalent to that of mythology in the case of national self-knowledge. Rather, I do so in order to reflect on how, unlike the mechanism at work at the individual level, one which strives to efface or blur the distinction between history and fiction, magic realism in *Midnight’s Children* meshes together history and mythology organically: it does not do so by effacing the distinction between the two categories, but through altering the rules of the world in which history and mythology arise side by side without inflicting damage upon each other. Instead of changing the definitions of the categories themselves, i.e. making the differences between them more difficult to ascertain, the novel changes the properties of their context: an entire new world—complete with its novel physical laws—must be invented for nationalism’s two contradictory facets to cease being incongruous.

For the present moment, let us keep in mind this new world *Midnight’s Children* speaks into existence as we examine magic realism’s primary characteristics according to the outline Faris proposes in the introduction to her study:

As a basis for investigating the nature and cultural work of magical realism, I suggest five primary characteristics of the mode. First, the text contains an “irreducible element” of magic; second, the descriptions in magical realism detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world; third, the reader may experience some unsettling doubts in the effort to reconcile two contradictory

understandings of events; fourth, the narrative merges different realms; and, finally, magical realism disturbs received ideas about time, space, and identity. (7)

Before undertaking any detailed discussion of the primary characteristics Faris proposes, I should mention that three of these characteristics are really part of a single but more general characteristic of magic realism. The first, second, and fourth characteristics could all be considered as different aspects of a single characteristic produced by the coming together of magic and realism. All three, therefore, could be condensed as follows: they describe the procedure and effect of bringing together the magical and the realist into the same textual space. As these three characteristics are relatively straightforward so as not to need extended commentary, I will concentrate only on the third and fifth characteristics, which could be seen as closely interrelated when tested against *Midnight's Children* and the new world it brings about.

According to the third characteristic, the reading experience of magic realism produces unsettling doubts as a result of the contradiction inherent in the two starkly different portrayals of events. On the one hand, we witness miracles that could neither be fully or partially explained through reference to the properties of the phenomenal world. On the other hand, though they transcend the properties of the phenomenal world, these miracles are portrayed by way of "a sober account" (as Saleem explicitly states), namely by way of a portrayal that speaks the language of the phenomenal world.

If having “unsettling doubts” about the magic<sup>43</sup> or the strange mixture is indeed an essential feature of magic realism, then it would surely become difficult to accept the argument that *Midnight’s Children* magic realist world is one which comfortably accommodates the polarities represented by secular history and fantastical myth. Given the centrality of this argument to my overarching reading of the novel, two explanations must be provided in order to deal with this counterargument. From this perspective, these explanations are not necessarily meant to debunk the centrality of Faris’s third characteristic. Rather, they are meant to deal with this issue because of its importance to the argument proposed in this chapter. While the first explanation deals with the reason my argument seems to be at odds with Faris’s third characteristic (which, after all, seems to be intuitive), the second one explains what is at stake, namely, how the difference between *Midnight’s Children* being in line with this requirement or at odds with it actually means the difference between endorsing or accepting nationalism’s logic and resisting or countering it.

First, Faris’s criterion of “unsettling doubt” applies more to the fantastical than it does to magic realism. It is, without a doubt, the same criterion that Tzvetan Todorov applies to the fantastical, though he describes it as

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<sup>43</sup> There is a clarification to be made about the use of the terms “magic” and “myth.” I use the term “magic” not as a synonym for “myth,” but as a term referring to the text that is capable of speaking myth into existence, in the same way that the term “realism” is used to describe texts that strive (whether they succeed or not) to generate a concrete and detailed depiction of the world.

“uncertainty.”<sup>44</sup> It is true that this might seem as too fine a distinction to make, especially given the influence of the fantastical on magic realism. However, this is actually a crucial point to make as this unsettling doubt (which necessarily transpires out of the magical element as it is the one transcending the world we know) suggests that the magical and realist are indeed arranged hierarchically (with realism occupying the privileged position). This is, however, an argument that Faris herself does not agree with as she accepts the premise that magic realism constructs no such hierarchy (48).

Considering this criterion further, one also finds out that this characteristic appears to be designed for the purpose of being applicable to the decidedly varying novels that Faris considers as belonging to the same category rather than for the purpose of being rigorously applied to each one of them. A case in point is the precise applicability of this characteristic to a novel such as Milan Kundera *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*—one of the novels Faris addresses in her study— despite Faris stating on several occasions that Kundera’s novel does not fit incredibly well within her grouping. For instance, she writes that there are “very small intrusions of magical events in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*”

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<sup>44</sup> In *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Todorov explains “the heart of the fantastic” in this way: “In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination—and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality—but this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. Either the devil is an illusion, an imaginary being; or else he really exists, precisely like other living beings—with this reservation, that we encounter him infrequently. The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty” (25).



(27), and that the novel actually “exists on the fringe of magical realism” (62).

The question we are left with is how could this novel be on the fringe of this genre yet fit Faris’s core characteristics with incredible precision? The answer, of course, is that the characteristics are meant to cast too-wide a net rather than serve as meticulous criteria.

Second, if *Midnight’s Children* indeed reproduces nationalism’s ambivalence vis-à-vis its double outlook toward history and myth, it would only be reproducing the discourse of nationalism as that discourse operates in the political sphere: a reproduction (even a comic one) is necessarily dependent on the initial copy. Ironically, the novel pushes the limits of nationalism because it deploys magic realism to resolve this persistent contradictory stance of nationalism. By doing so, it erases this discursive ambivalence. As a result of delivering this resolution, the novel leaves its reader without any unsettling doubts about the magical gifts of the midnight’s children and about the fact that “the children of midnight were also the children of *the time*: fathered...by history.” “It can happen,” Saleem insists, “especially in a country which is itself a sort of dream” (118).

Faris’s fifth and most pertinent characteristic supports this conclusion. The magic realism of *Midnight’s Children* disturbs received ideas about time, space, and identity by creating a new world that does not suffer the limitations of the phenomenal world. Having unsettling doubts about such world means that it would no longer have bearing on these categories—time, space, identity—as they manifest themselves in the phenomenal world as doubt creates is a clear-cut separation between the magic realist world and our own. As a result, the magic

realist world would remain as a fanciful construction and, consequently, an impossibility that should not be taken seriously. The experience of being presented with a magic realist world that allows for the suspension of disbelief, one which generates no doubt, is precisely the experience that makes possible the shift in the categories of time, space, and identity as they manifest themselves in the phenomenal world.

With this crucial point in mind, one begins to see the consequences of conjuring into existence a world in which nationalism's discursive contradictions are resolved. The importance behind this move lies in the paradoxical way it puts nationalism at odds with itself as well as with the world it allegedly seeks to bring about. If nationalism makes good use of a serviceable past—made up of myth, questionable ancient history, fiction, or a mixture of the three—to buttress the sense of collective identity while projecting a future-oriented outlook based on the precepts of modernity, then the apt response ought not to be to draw attention to the jarring inconsistency in its discourse but to deploy the tools of narrative fiction to create the very world that could support such discourse. To do so is to adopt fully nationalism's logic, thus underscoring its imaginary and fictional character rather than to mount one argument against another.

Rather than proposing "idiosyncratic recreation of historical events," *Midnight's Children* paradoxically proposes to recreate historical events "as they really were." From this perspective, one could flip the equation Faris creates as she argues that "history [remains] the weight that tethers the balloon of magic ... as if to warn against too great a lightness of mythic or magical being" (16). Though Faris makes an excellent point in suggesting that history checks the

uninhibited nature of magic, fantasy, or myth, what it is even more remarkable about *Midnight's Children's* magic is that it also tethers the "balloon of history." It does so in order to produce an image of that history that is not strictly materialist. Its magic also checks the excesses of historical representations, excesses that could, counterintuitively, exceed those of magic itself. This is especially true in the case of a novel such as *Midnight's Children*, one of whose principal objects is to create a fictional world in which the portrayal of nationalism in its multiple faces, the historical and the mythological, becomes a true possibility.

### 3.5 "Re"presenting the Representation: National Identity and the Simulacrum

Is it not problematic to argue that Rushdie's novel creates a world in which it becomes possible to portray nationalism in its multiple faces or, in more mundane terms, to recreate historical events "as they really were"? Putting it in these terms could be perceived as problematic because it seems as if the argument takes us back to the question of representational fidelity. This, in turn, invalidates, or at least goes against, this study's broader argument that strives to mount a critique of both mimetic representation and interpretations whose point of departure is a tacit acceptance of the "re" in representation. In addition to this is the tendency of the phrase—"as they really were"—to produce formulations according to which truth arises as a result of a process involving uncovering or disclosure: truth as *aletheia*.

I want to emphasize, therefore, that the phrase "as they really were" means something very specific. I certainly do not insinuate that the novel

exposes the weaknesses of national identity simply by uncovering the truth that things were never as coherent or as consistent as they seemed to be. Rather, *Midnight's Children* recreates historical events "as they really were" in the sense of recreating their representation as such; in other words, it creates what could be called a representation of the representation. This recreation, however, does not involve a loss in line with Jean Baudrillard's fourth phase of the image as he characterizes it in *Simulations*—a phase part of a scheme whose end point is pure simulation (6). Rather, it is a vital gain because *Midnight's Children's* representation of the representation is a form of aesthetic resistance made possible by way of a remetaphorization which has close connections to the notion of reterritorialization: "the notion of resistance through remetaphorisation, through what the French thinkers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari called a 'reterritorialisation' of conquered realms..., becomes a substrate of literary resistance itself" (Punter 54). The resistance entailed by the redeploying of representation, therefore, reveals that what is at work is an aesthetic procedure akin to the function of the Deleuzian simulacrum.

It is now necessary to make reference to the brief section which appears at the end of this study's first chapter, namely the one introducing the "directional stylistic condition." This reference is meant to highlight two basic premises about the Deleuzian simulacrum. The first premise dictates that the simulacrum ought not to be understood according to Plato's formulation of Forms and Appearances with the simulacrum serving as their poor cousin: not as "a simple imitation" (*DR* 60), as a degraded copy, as twice removed from the model, and, consequently, as inferior to both model (Form) and copy (Appearance). The

second premise dictates that the simulacrum ought to be viewed as “the act by which the very idea of a model or privileged position is challenged and overturned” (DR 60). The starting point, therefore, is to indicate that rather than being a simulacrum in the sense of recreating an imitation of the classical national identity narrative (parodic, subversive, or otherwise), *Midnight’s Children* puts forth a simulacrum constituted first and foremost by its *difference* from the classical narrative, not by its similitude to it.

To say “constituted by its difference,” however, is not to state some rhetorical verbiage. There is within this statement an assertion touching the very core of the way in which the discursive and formal elements of Saleem’s narrative interact. While the narrative’s representational similitude is directly tied to its discursive element, something that is evident, as we have seen, in Saleem’s incessant attempt to embody the nation-subject bond while maintaining his self-professed status as an agent of events, central to their unfolding rather than subject of their wrath. This is a position he strongly maintains until it starts to become clear that the representational discourse of nationalism he skillfully puts in motion is at odds with the novel’s formal underpinning, an underpinning that should ideally function as a support mechanism of the novel’s discursive surface. The strain placed on the discourse of nationalism begins to intensify as it becomes more and more apparent that Saleem’s project of meaning production<sup>45</sup> is destined to disintegrate under the weight of the simulacrum<sup>46</sup> which takes

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<sup>45</sup> A project made possible by the mirroring effect, a *similitude*.

<sup>46</sup> A simulacrum made possible by a magical world that has no original model, a *difference*.

shape slowly but surely. Saleem hints at the unstoppable disintegration as early as the third chapter, which he begins by saying

Please believe that I am falling apart. I am not speaking metaphorically; nor is this the opening gambit of some melodramatic, riddling, grubby appeal for pity. I mean quite simply that I have begun to crack all over like an old jug—that my poor body, singular, unlovely, buffeted by too much history, subjected to drainage above and drainage below, mutilated by doors, brained by spittoons, has started coming apart at the seams. In short, I am literally disintegrating, slowly for the moment, although there are signs of acceleration. (37)

Because this hint comes too early in the narrative, it could be read as an effect of Saleem's penchant for hyperbole. As he approaches midway into his narrative, however, Saleem is no longer simply hinting. Rather, he unmistakably gives vital confirmation of the conundrum he faces in his attempt to reconcile the representational discourse at the surface with the anti-representational simulacrum lurking beneath it. Notice how his tone here is different—a tone that is distinctively solemn and serious rather than typically facetious. "Am I so far gone," Saleem writes,

in my desperate need for meaning, that I'm prepared to distort everything—to re-write the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in a central role? Today, in my confusion, I can't judge. I'll have to leave it to others. For me, there can be no going back; I must finish what I started, even if, inevitably, what I finish turns out to be not what I began. (166)

If there is a single keyword capable of unlocking the tension that progressively builds up—the tension between the discursive meaning and its formal undermining—it would be the adverb "inevitably." It is worthwhile to pause

here for a moment and reflect on how this inevitability is very much in line with the term I give to *Midnight's Children's* stylistic condition: directional. Though the enterprise of meaning production shows signs of collapsing under its own weight, this stylistic condition's imperative is to keep pushing forward nonetheless. There is, in other words, no possibility of changing the narrative movement's direction in the midst of writing—even on the pain of destroying the initial purpose postulated by the narrative's discourse.

Saleem, therefore, is not going to be the judge of what transpires at this point, at least not rhetorically. Saleem's narrative, one could argue, is a test case underlining how even when the narrative does voice its motive discursively, the ultimate result is the formal undermining of that voiced motive. Instead of being the judge of the imminent collapse, Saleem allows for the inevitable judgment—in the form of the simulacrum—to transpire silently by way of the narrative's formal procedure. The narrative's fundamental turning point, then, could be described as follows: while one finds within the narrative's discourse a doomed endeavour to deploy the representational logic of nationalism through embracing national identity fully, one finds within its structure the overturning of that endeavour.

It is now possible to outline a more detailed explanation as to how the simulacrum overturns the discourse of national identity. I want to undertake this explanation as part of an answer to the following question: how does this tension between discourse and the simulacrum relate to the distinction made in the first chapter between the background-foreground and the binding models? In the discussion on Althusser and subjecthood, I indicate that while the background-

foreground narrative imagines the individual as an always-already national subject, the binding narrative begins with postulating an individual before deploying literary mechanisms to turn that individual into a national subject. What makes *Midnight's Children* a particularly complex narrative when measured against this distinction is its manifestation of characteristics belonging to both of the above models. However, if the novel indeed stands as an example of both models, then what is the purpose for making the distinction in the first place?

To answer this question, I begin with the more straightforward part, namely the one concerning the background-foreground which Saleem creates through discursively pushing the connection between himself and the nation. *Midnight's Children*, I think, unquestionably exhibits the essential features of this model, so much so that Saleem admits from the start that he has been “handcuffed to history,” that his personal narrative is always cast as the foreground of the grander narrative in the background. Accordingly, within the foreground-background framework, his inflated self-importance and self-presumed agency notwithstanding, Saleem is always-already a national subject, ever since the moment of his birth. It is possible to go even further and say that Saleem is a radical re-enactment of the Althusserian subject: not only does he enter subjecthood at the precise moment of his birth (before entering the social/linguistic symbolic regime), he is a national subject even prior to that, an unusual feat made possible by the prophesy his mother solicits before giving birth: “a son, Sahiba,” she is told, “who will never be older than his motherland—neither older nor younger...there will be two heads—but you shall see only one” (Rushdie 87).



The second part concerns the formal arrangement that emerges out of the extreme application of the binding model, or, in other words, the simulacrum which, within the narrative's logic, is presented as both being inevitable as well as created by chance. While Saleem uses the conventional discourse of nationalism to give himself a central role in the law-making procedure for which India's independence stands, he ends up pushing the binding model beyond its limits. Instead of producing a representation, one based on the principle of model/copy, nation and subject, he ultimately creates a simulacrum that causes his whole project to come crashing down. It is precisely for this reason that Saleem realizes midway through the narrative that it might well be the case that what he finishes will turn "out to be not what [he] began" (Rushdie 166). While the motivation behind Saleem's pushing forward nonetheless is determined by the stylistic condition described as "directional"—he "must simply continue (having once begun) until the end" (422)—one could also read it more generously and say that his pushing forward is additionally a function of his dedication to the notion of the storyteller's honesty, even if that honesty comes at the expense of localized, information-based instances of dishonesty such as his narrating the murder of Shiva which does not really take place.

The ultimate manifestation of the directional approach and/or storyteller honesty is the acceptance and recognition that the simulacrum which takes over the narrative progressively also makes the model/copy formulation—national identity's enabler—utterly unsustainable. What begins as a conventional representational bond formulated in accordance with the model/copy

conception is transformed into a sort of representation of the representation, though not as a copy of the copy.

In “Plato and the Simulacrum,” Deleuze points out that understanding the simulacrum as a copy of the copy is to miss the point:

If we say of the simulacrum that it is a copy of the copy, an endlessly degraded icon, an infinitely slackened resemblance, we miss the essential point: the difference in nature between simulacrum and copy, the aspect through which they form two halves of a division. The copy is an image endowed with resemblance, the simulacrum is an image without resemblance ... Doubtlessly [the simulacrum] still produces an *effect*<sup>47</sup> of resemblance; but that is a general effect, wholly external, and produced by entirely different means from those at work in the model. The simulacrum is constructed around a disparity, a difference; it interiorizes a dissimilitude. That is why we can no longer define it with regard to the model at work in the copies—the model of the Same from which the resemblance of the copy derives. If the simulacrum still has a model, it is another one, a model of the Other from which follows an interiorized dissimilarity. (48-9)

The first critical realization that comes to light from thinking of *Midnight's Children's* formal structure<sup>48</sup> as a simulacrum is that there is a procedure at work within the novel that surpasses the writing strategy described as “metafiction.” Metafiction is a type of writing whose primary guiding principle is a postulation of the truth as *aletheia*: the disclosure of the truth behind history, fiction, and myth involves the uncovering of the way they are constructed which highlights the commonalities between these categories.

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<sup>47</sup> Emphasis in original.

<sup>48</sup> Toward the end of the novel, Saleem says the following: “Sometimes I feel a thousand years old: or (because I cannot, even now, abandon form), to be exact, a thousand and one” (440).

In *Magical Realism and Deleuze*, Eva Aldea describes reading *Midnight's Children* via the notion of metafiction, writing that

The argument generally follows this pattern: Rushdie's use of magical realism shows us in practice how the imagination offers us ways of making sense of the world. Referring to Linda Hutcheon's concept of "historiographic metafiction," which she uses to describe writing with a "theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs," critics assert that the novel's magical realism, by foregrounding the commonality of the process of making history and making fiction, allows us to understand how all identity is created by the process of the imagination. (57)

There are surely many indications in Saleem's narrative which vindicate reading the novel via metafiction. The most apparent of these indications is the narrative's equal concern with the telling of Saleem's autobiography and with the writing decisions he has to make, his torments, hesitations, and the dilemmas he faces as he writes it all down. Despite the value to be found in exposing the mechanisms of writing and identity-making, it is crucial not to stop at this feature. Doing so ultimately amounts to focusing on the mechanisms of writing at the expense of its outcomes, which leads to accepting that the novel culminates in postulating the conclusion that national identity is an imaginative construct.

As opposed to critiquing national identity in this manner, the simulacrum offers a more original and cogent critique, away from the dichotomy of the true and the false. A case in point is the distinction Baudrillard makes in *Simulations* between feigning and simulating an illness (3).<sup>49</sup> This distinction leads to a critical

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<sup>49</sup> Though I disagree with Baudrillard's analytical judgment of the simulacrum, I still appreciate the clarity of his description of it.

question: if the simulator holds the potential of producing the “true” symptoms, should one consider the simulator sick or not? Baudrillard’s answer indicates that “objectively one cannot treat him as being either ill or not ill” because “the simulation threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false,’ the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’” (3).

This is precisely why critiquing national identity as a manifestation of the simulacrum holds more potential than explaining its function through metafiction. Metafiction belongs to the first category in that its principal result is to uncover that what is posited as concrete through the mechanisms of representation is in reality a product of the imagination. The simulacrum, however, threatens the difference between these categories and thus demonstrates that national identity cannot be explained as emerging and developing by way of false consciousness. Given that national identity cannot be satisfactorily measured against either the category of the concrete or the imaginary, the simulacrum allows for the forming of a more sober understanding of national identity as neither based on falsehood nor on the truth—the most remarkable accomplishments of *Midnight’s Children’s* structuring mechanisms.

Focusing on the novel’s metafictionality, therefore, makes it possible to skirt these crucial questions, thus shelving it under the heading of the “search for identity” rather than under the “critique of identity.” As Aldea argues while making the case for putting Deleuze’s philosophical contribution in dialogue with Rushdie’s novel,

Deleuze's theoretical framework indicates that the central conflict in *Midnight's Children* is not so much between the plurality of the masses and the idea of a unified India, as is commonly held, as between the possibility of identity, be it hybrid and multiple, and the breakdown of an order that upholds that possibility. That is, an order that makes possible the distinctions, categories and divisions — the segments—necessary for identity. (59)

Given the novel's context and subject-matter, Deleuze's framework of difference and the simulacrum indirectly debunks two commonly held presuppositions: first, that "the search for identity" is limited to certain cultural and geo-political spaces and, second, that such a search remains mystifyingly elusive in those spaces where a truly modern conception of identity is yet to take root. Proposing to focus on the simulacrum *Midnight's Children* brings to bear an implicit recognition that the narrative's contribution is not limited to its cultural or geo-political space, but has something to offer that is applicable anywhere national identity is to be found: that is, everywhere.

I argue, therefore, that reading *Midnight's Children* via the simulacrum allows for a richer conclusion than the one offered by metafictionality. Rather than the deployment of postmodernist narrative devices which make the reader privy to the process of constructing history, fiction, or identity (or, in more simplified terms, to undertake a dissection of identity in the third- or postcolonial world), *Midnight's Children* isolates the symptoms of national identity by way of a configuration of the *fabula* and the *sjuzet* whereby the first demonstrates Saleem-the-midnight's-child's embracing of national identity in its representational variant whereas the latter demonstrates Saleem-the-storyteller's inevitable embracing of it as a simulacrum. This is the ultimate reason behind the

reader being privy to the writing process because without an access to the mechanisms of writing, its outcomes cannot be felt: the access to the construction of historicity or fictionality is meant to allow for the separation of the discursive and structural strands.

The narrative's turning point, then, is Saleem's discovery (intended or haphazard) of the infeasibility of meaning creation in accordance with the parameters of representational national identity—the parameters meditating the experiences of Saleem the-midnight's-child. The *sjuzet*, in other words, cannot proceed on the same assumptions posited by the *fabula*. Proceeding according to the *fabula*'s assumptions entails remaining within the realm of model/copy.

Ultimately, critiquing national identity through the simulacrum leads to the following conclusion: given that national identity will continue to mediate relationships between individuals/subjects and communities in the foreseeable future, the redefinition of this identity's core in terms of difference rather than similarity constitutes a genuine and viable breakthrough. As the world remains distant from being without nations—the one Renan saw over a century ago as a clear possibility and in some ways an inevitable conclusion—the simulacrum holds for the time being the possibility of a liberating difference that can mitigate the violence of similitude. Rather than being a pragmatic or a utilitarian viewpoint, this is a possibility that goes beyond the false choice between a more entrenched nationalism and an illusion of globalization. These two alternatives, though seemingly oppositional, take similitude as their ultimate orientation.

### 3.6 The Play of Metaphor and Metonymy

An essential point must be underscored with regard to what I call the “violence of similitude.” The conjunction of the words “violence” and “similitude” within a larger discussion examining nationalism might conjure images of a totalitarian emphasis on achieving the goals of establishing conformity and stamping out singularity. This is not what I have in mind. Rather, the violence I am alluding to is far more subtle and, arguably, more menacing precisely because it comes about by way of a similitude which has the capacity to lurk under surface of things, thus determining an instinctual understanding of national identity and, consequently, relations between the self and the other.

Describing similitude as instinctual is not an arbitrary move; it is, rather, a move meant to place emphasis on the tendency of representation to conceal or to naturalize the prefix “re.” To illustrate how *Midnight’s Children* deals with this operation, I want to start by referring to Jorge Luis Borges’ “On Exactitude in Science”—the story which Baudrillard uses as an entry point to his discussion on simulacra and simulations.

“In that Empire,” the story begins,

the Art of Cartography attained such perfection that the map of a single province occupied the entirety of a city, and the map of the empire, the entirety of a province. In time, those unconscionable maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guild struck a map of the empire whose size was that of the empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following generations, who were not so fond of the study of cartography, as their forbears had been, saw that the vast map was useless, and not without pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the inclemencies of sun and winters. In the deserts of the west, still today, there are tattered ruins of that map, inhabited by animals and beggars; in all the land there is no other relic of the disciplines of geography. (325)

There are, undoubtedly, many possible readings of this specimen of Borgesian brevity. For our purposes, though, it is sufficient to bring into focus only two suggestions this story makes. In their quest for perfection and scientific exactitude, first of all, the cartographers fully materialize the (hypothetical) representational nature of maps. To put it another way, they have forgotten about or simply chose to eliminate the prefix “re” in “representation.”

This “literal map,” the second suggestion goes, ceases to be a map altogether because it no longer has the basic justification of its existence as an object whose relationship to the territory is first and foremost metaphorical. While it is true that this extreme application kills the metaphor, what is of more significance is that the hypothetical bond which the metaphor maintains between map and territory dies with it as well. The cartographers’ exactitude is comparable to Saleem’s inclination to exploit the hypothetical bond, which, while giving him the illusion of meaning, ends up obliterating any chance of it. This tendency of his, Saleem concedes, is part of a scientific worldview: “setting my face against all indications to the contrary, I shall now amplify, in the manner and with proper solemnity of a man of science, my place at the centre of things” (237-8). In addition to stressing the decisive role of the fantastical in this operation, Borges’ story confirms the conclusion that while this operation’s first step is undertaken for the purpose of achieving optimal accuracy and is thus in line with the endeavour to apply the maximum conformity possible to the logic of mimetic representation, its inevitable consequence is the radical undermining of that very logic.



In Baudrillard's description of this operation, which takes form as part of the cartographers' fundamentalist scientific project, the initial representational motivation is characterized by its specular and *discursive* nature, whereas the consequence (simulation) is characterized by its nuclear and genetic nature: "This representational imaginary, which simultaneously culminates in and is engulfed by the cartographer's mad project of the ideal coextensivity between the map and the territory, disappears in the simulation whose operation is nuclear and genetic, no longer at all specular or discursive (2).

These characteristics—specular-discursive / nuclear-genetic—throw into sharp relief not only the operation of metaphor and metonymy in *Midnight's Children*, but also that of hyperbole which functions as their enabler. As Warnes points out, "hyperbole, the splitting, fusing and blurring of the literal and metaphorical, and an emphasis on the constitutive and performative over the merely descriptive capacities of language, are all central to Rushdie's modes of narration and strategies of representation" (101). As is the case with the cartographers, then, Saleem's operation of ideal coextensivity is fuelled by a penchant for hyperbole, which in turn saves itself from the assault of reason and logic by being couched in the fantastical where such rules are suspended. Bearing in mind the essential qualities Baudrillard posits in relation to the representational imaginary, on the one hand, and the simulation, on the other, it becomes possible—as a pivotal first step in taking stock of the operations of metaphor and metonymy—to avoid the pitfall of reading hyperbole in Rushdie's

novel as a discursive device rather than a genetic or structural one which regulates the different aspects of the narrative.<sup>50</sup>

In his monograph on Rushdie's oeuvre, for instance, Stephen Morton interprets the use of hyperbole in *Midnight's Children* as enabling Rushdie to make concrete the horrors of history that the arc of the story encompasses. He writes that "in *Midnight's Children* Rushdie uses hyperbole to register how the excessive forces of history and the power of the postcolonial state terrorise Saleem's body. For Saleem's hyperbolic role, as a messianic figure who represents the nation, is unsustainable and ultimately leads to his physical destruction" (44). To "register the excessive force" is a different way of saying "to represent the effect of these forces" on Saleem. In this reading, registering the aforementioned horrors takes place discursively as hyperbole in this case is a device based on the utterance whose effect stops when such utterance is adequately recorded.

Saleem's hyperbolic role *is* unsustainable, but not only because he mistakes himself for a messianic figure but because the narrative's movement refuses to support that role. If we think of hyperbole as the unceasing movement toward the inevitable, we are bound to recognize that the central issue is not only related to Saleem's inflated sense of self-worth, but to the underlying premise which makes his hyperbole a possibility in the first place. As a device at the novel's nuclear, then, hyperbole rearranges Saleem's position within the totality

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<sup>50</sup> This is, after all, the same distinction that makes it possible to reach a fuller evaluation of the different operation of the comic and the absurd.

of his world, pushing him to the very centre via the exploitation of metaphor so he could organically discover that his drive for meaning, for reaching the very centre is not the only problem leading to his ultimate downfall, but that the true problem lies in the metaphorical postulation of the centre itself—a centre which turns out to be empty, hallow, and purely hypothetical. “I am coming to the conclusion that privacy,” Saleem says toward the end of his narrative, “the small individual lives of men, are preferable to all this inflated macrocosmic activity. But too late” (435). The point itself, it must be said, is made too late as the narrative’s structural movement has already made it clear.

Rather than constructing a register, the novel obliterates the idea of the register itself by demonstrating the inadequacy of the representational imaginary which would give such a register its power. If we think about the reading of hyperbole as enabling the creation of a register in conjunction with Borges’ story, we would begin to see the problem with this reading: it would be the equivalent of interpreting the story as if the cartographers use hyperbole to make concrete the territory of the empire. Their desire, however, is not to make the territory concrete but to achieve the perfection of the map. The focus and brevity of Borges’ story make impossible an interpretation of hyperbole as a way to make the territory concrete—a “safety mechanism” that Rushdie’s novel lacks as a result of its proliferation of metaphors.

The absence of this safety mechanism also allows Morton to interpret the metaphor’s symbol—Nehru’s letter—as if it were the enabler of hyperbole rather

than one of its effects. The letter congratulates Saleem on the “happy *accident*<sup>51</sup> of [his] moment of birth,” (the crucial keyword which Saleem ignores) but, more importantly, describes him as “the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is also eternally young” and promises him that “we shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own” (122). According to Morton, the letter gives Saleem the prerogative “to imagine himself as a figure of national importance. Indeed, Nehru’s letter provides Saleem with a license to employ frequent hyperbolic descriptions of how events in his own family life influence and even cause events of national significance” (36). Given that the novel’s nucleus is the metaphorical implications of Saleem’s birth, the letter—which is, after all, only the effect of that unique correspondence—cannot be seen as the license of hyperbole. The license of hyperbole is already embedded at the novel’s core (the correspondence of the two births and the metaphor that ensues), a core without which neither hyperbole nor the narrative itself would be possible.

The play with metaphors through making them literal is not unique to *Midnight’s Children* but is a more general mechanism found across the genre of magic realism. Faris illustrates this very well by providing a long list of examples from novels that literalize metaphors (110-14). She sets this mechanism apart in *Midnight’s Children* only for the “metafictional awareness” (112) pervading it, something she hypothesizes is “the result of Rushdie’s position as a later magical

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<sup>51</sup> Emphasis added.

realist, more self-conscious about its characteristic techniques than his predecessors (112).

There are in *Midnight's Children* many localized instances of literal metaphors, some of which are nothing more than amusing linguistic games. Examples of this include Saleem's new found ability upon his arrival in Pakistan "to smell the vengeful odours leaking out of [his aunt's] glands" (307) or his "powers of sniffing-out-the-truth, of smelling-what-was-in-the-air, of following trails" (307). Others go beyond linguistic games in that they hold a distinctive suggestive power, such as the time when Saleem feels as though the world of his childhood is falling apart, an idea delineated by his using adhesive tape to put together his broken globe. "I clanked my tin sphere around the Estate," he says, "secure in the knowledge that the world was still in one piece (although held together by adhesive tape) and also at my feet" (266). There is no denying the suggestive power of this mechanism. Nevertheless, what is of far greater significance than these localized instances is the novel's central metaphor itself, which is the only one capable of what Faris holds to be inherent to magic realism's literal metaphors, namely the capacity to take "us beyond representation conceived primarily as mimesis to re-presentation" (115).

The metaphor of the nation as individual usually works in one direction: the nation is posited as having the characteristics of the individual—it is born, grows, has values, etc. In *Midnight's Children*, however, this relationship is also activated from the other direction in that Saleem comes to stand for the totality of the nation. In other words, while the relationship of nation/Saleem is metaphorical, the obverse relationship of Saleem/nation is metonymical.

“Metonymy,” Søren Frank says in *Salman Rushdie: A Deleuzian Reading*, “helps indicating the distributive forces of the word through its endless, dynamic, and displacing qualities. Whereas metaphor distributes and renews through the complex relation between similarity and difference, the distributive force of metonymy works through an interminable logic of fragmentation” (171). From this perspective, literalizing the metaphor does not only debunk the metaphor itself by turning it into its opposite. The literal metaphor also gives Saleem the impetus to imagine his relationship to the nation as metonymic. The side by side qualities of metonymy, however, end up inflicting irreparable damage to the illusion of similarity and correspondence which the metaphor creates. This readjustment of the relationship of metaphor and metonymy—of arranging them side by side—highlights further the weakness of metaphor.

Though I disagree with his central thesis which places undue emphasis on nationalist discourse’s role in fashioning “nationalism as cultural politics,”<sup>52</sup> Anshuman Mondal proposes a productive description of the ways in which metaphor and metonymy serve as instruments for identification. He begins with a general reflection on representation saying that it is “double-edged” in the sense that “it has two meanings which are not unrelated to each other. On the one hand, it is ‘discursive’ – a description of a thing, a painting, a photograph –

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<sup>52</sup> In the first chapter of his book *Nationalism and Post-Colonial Identity*, Anshuman Mondal writes that “nationalism is...a form of cultural politics. It is political because it is a movement which desires to seize control of (liberate), or break away from and create its own (secede) state; or, indeed, break away and join another state which would satisfy its own principle of national self-determination (irredentism)...it is cultural because it bases the legitimacy of its own actions upon the uniqueness of its national culture (22).

and on the other, its political sense, it is a form of institutional practice. In both cases, representation substitutes for the 'thing itself' (5). There are, Mondal says, two conclusions to be drawn from this basic remark about representation. He describes the first of which as "the most valuable insight" of twentieth-century philosophy, though it is by now largely taken for granted: it is the "idea that life is lived in and through representations (of both sorts)" (5).

The other conclusion, which is of special concern to the discussion at hand, relates to the change taking place as a result of the passage from pre-modern societies to modern ones in which the notion of identity gains notable import. "In modernity," he explains,

a number of processes converged that produced a reorientation in notions of representation of both kinds. On the one hand, there is a gradual displacement of the sovereign as the metaphoric embodiment of sovereignty – first of God, then of the state – by the metonymic 'assembly' representing the sovereignty not of a dynastic state but of the 'people': the nation-state. (5)<sup>53</sup>

While its focus is on sovereignty, this argument is of a more general nature in that the implication is the passage from the regime of metaphor to the regime of metonymy. In addition, one should not interpret this characterization as if the passage from one phase of social organization to another necessarily involves the complete shedding of previous forms of identification. While this might hold sway in other contexts, it remains not applicable to the context of nationalism, which has the tendency to appear entirely novel despite drawing on older

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<sup>53</sup> In *The New Science*, Giambattista Vico suggests that metaphor is an ancient residue which humans deployed to mitigate their ignorance of the world (116-7).

regimes of association and identification such as religion, mythology, and traditional customs. Nationalism's appeal is very much a consequence of its ability to form a convincing amalgamation of elements drawn both from the present as well as from an immemorial past. The question of metaphor and metonymy, therefore, is no different as "this shift towards the metonymic in both the cultural and political fields is nonetheless triangulated by a 'metaphor': the nation" (6).

But if this is indeed the case, how can we, then, explain the survival of metaphor even in nations who are described as having sophisticated postmodern societies? Metaphor survives the onslaught of modernity through its parasitical reliance on metonymy. Metonymy is the proverbial fig leaf as "unlike metaphoric or symbolic representations, metonymic representations are relatively less polysemous and thus *appear*<sup>54</sup> to be more 'transparent'" (Mondal 5). With this in mind, it becomes clear that there is a second decisive step to be made after "killing" the metaphor through ideal coextensivity: a step involving the dispelling of the metaphor's illusion of similitude and correspondence by introducing metonymy not as it appears to be—the symbol of the subject's influence on the nation or as the mark of transparency. Rather, it is to introduce it as part of an arrangement whereby it becomes metaphor's nemesis.

### 3.7 The Last Word

*Midnight's Children* plots the organic adjustment of Saleem's understanding of his national identity using the resources of narrative, the grounds of all identities. In

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<sup>54</sup> Emphasis added.



*Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks points out via Rousseau that this linkage between narrative and identity is nothing short of the fundamental catalyst of modern narrative:

The question of identity, claims Rousseau – and this is what makes him at least symbolically the *incipient* of modern narrative – can be thought only in narrative terms, in the effort to tell a whole life, to plot its meaning by going back over it to record its perpetual flight forward, its slippage from the fixity of definition. To understand me, Rousseau says ... the reader must follow me at every moment of my existence. (33)

Moving through *Midnight's Children*, the reader recognizes that it is narrative which grants Saleem the opportunity of vacillating between identity and difference in the same way he vacillates between his tragic desire for meaning and his ultimate end—to be absurd. This desire is the same desire that also moves “the reader through narrative...If the motor of narrative is desire, totalizing, building ever-larger units of meaning, the ultimate determinants of meaning lie *at the end*, and narrative desire is ultimately, inexorably, desire *for the end*” (Brooks 52).

In the process of isolating the stylistic condition I call “directional,” Rushdie’s novel ties in all these strands together by interrogating the rudimentary desire for meaning and by pushing the limits of national identity which serves as the motor of narrative meaning. In doing so, *Midnight's Children* does not ignore the cultural depositories of nationalism which postulate an identity that draws on pre-modern elements as well as on forms of association that become possible only with the onset modernity. As this discussion moves to a consideration of the fraught relationship between modernity and nationalism,

it remains to be stressed that *Midnight's Children* mobilizes the narrative mechanisms discussed in this chapter without ever positing the subject as impotent—as one who simply stands powerless on the receiving end of invincible discourses, thus abdicating all responsibility for the role he plays in the game of identity formation.

## Chapter 4

### 4 National Identity and the Intrinsic Difference of Modernity

Modernity is defined by the power of the simulacrum.

Gilles Deleuze, "Plato and the Simulacrum"

Conversely, it could be argued that the equation of 'identity politics' with postmodernity is, quite simply, wrong. Instead, 'identity politics' as such is precisely what nations and nationalisms are about. From this perspective, modernity is not an enclave of pure instrumental reason but rather the harbinger of a new type of politics hitherto unknown in the world: cultural politics.

Anshuman Mondal, *Nationalism and Post-Colonial Identity*

Modernity, [for Charles Baudelaire], can be defined as the paradoxical possibility of going beyond the flow of history through the consciousness of historicity in its most concrete immediacy, in its presentness.

Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*

After discussing the manner in which the narrative schemes of *Little Mountain* and *Midnight's Children* mediate the interaction between the two principles of individuality and nationality, I now arrive at this study's final chapter, one concerned with addressing the arguably most vital question of any analytical enterprise: so what? To flesh out this question and possibly pose it less provocatively, is the purpose of this analysis the elaboration on the stylistic approaches of rescuing the individuality principle from the violence of similitude? Is it part of a postmodernist celebration of a narrative-based, aesthetic positing of a distinctive identity capable of making its presence felt in a world characterized by anonymity and brimming with similitude? The short answer is a resounding "no."

## 4.1 So What?

Before I attempt a more thorough answer, I want to state a few remarks concerning what my analysis does *not* seek to propose. The narrative schemes analyzed so far, repetition and fragmentation in *Little Mountain*, hyperbole and digression in *Midnight's Children*, have all been seen as signs of literary movements. Under such rubric (i.e., localized signs defining broader movements or literary trends), the reflections of *Midnight's Children's* narrator contained in his "manifesto" on narration may also serve as definitive signs of the text's postmodernist outlook. Moreover, the narrator's hopeless quest for larger meaning coupled with the narrative's simultaneous deployment of the absurd could also serve as a justification for the influential argument that Rushdie's novel indeed belongs to the canon of the postmodernist novel. While making such a claim is not wrong *per se*, a claim of this sort overshadows the novel's more significant contributions outlined in the third chapter for the sake of proving yet once more that literature of or about the so-called third-world merits serious consideration, not necessarily as a result of its own specific aesthetic qualities but for its coevalness (read: similarity) to what is being written elsewhere.

A comparable argument could be proposed with regard to the specific approach to narration by repetition, fragmentation of narrative cohesiveness, focalization, and point of view the reader encounters in Khoury's novel, though it is not at all clear whether the definitive verdict in this case would grant *Little*

*Mountain* the status of belonging to the canon of modernism or postmodernism.<sup>55</sup> Khoury's novel, as we have seen, is presented as having finally pushed ahead and entered into the realm of the contemporary novel, leaving behind the lagging or still developing tradition of the Arabic novel.

My intention, however, is not to use the analysis of the novels' literary devices either to celebrate their aesthetic "maturity" or to argue for their inclusion (and by extension, their authors') into one literary club or another, be it the club of modernism, postmodernism, or to world literature.<sup>56</sup> Instead, what I pursue in this final chapter is in many ways a continuation of the line of thought established in the second and third chapters, namely looking at the way in which these same narrative elements (which, I concede, could undeniably be read as markers of literary modernism or postmodernism) should actually be read as treating a more basic yet more intractable question, doing so through intervening to achieve a readjustment of modernity's relationship to nationalism as well as providing an opportunity to rethink conventional assessments of the advent of modernity.

This readjustment is especially remarkable as it is brought about through narrative elements which are not in any clear or definitive way inimical to conventional ways of positing "national consciousness." Instead, their specific

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<sup>55</sup> Starkey writes that Khoury's work is "variously described as 'modernist' or even 'post-modernist'" (149).

<sup>56</sup> World literature is undoubtedly a slippery designation. I think it is more productive to think of this designation as a network than a body of specific works. Thinking of world literature as a network allows us to define the works based on their impact or influence and would prevent us from delimiting the designation through criteria, criteria which would be in need to constant readjustment.

intervention in narrative, as elaborated upon in the previous two chapters, engenders a force which could be seen as one that strives to tackle the resilient suppositions of national consciousness rather than serve as its diametric opposition. These narrative elements, by virtue of their dialectal forgetting of the corrosively sacred force of national consciousness, end up creating stylistic conditions whose influence reaches beyond the questions of nationalism and national identity. This is so mainly because they push against the set of assumption normally associated with what is termed as the “condition of modernity” by penetrating under the groundwork from which modern identity emanates.

It is now time to go back to the question with which I begin this chapter. Is the purpose of the analysis limited to elaborating stylistic approaches which celebrate individuality? If the short answer to this question is simply, “no,” according to what terms, then, the longer one about identity, similitude, and difference is to be pursued? In order to show the ramifications of the particular treatment of the principles of individuality and nationality in these case studies, the longer answer must add to the central categories henceforth interrogated (those of individual identity and the nation) the undeniably broader category within which the former two operate—modernity.

As a way of integrating the inescapable problematics of modernity into this analysis, I start with an exposition whose goal is two-fold: to narrow down the broad, umbrella term “modernity” so as to focus on those issues applicable to the context at hand before providing an overview of the ubiquitous problems relating to definitions, interpretations, and critiques that arise almost anytime

modernity is invoked. With this two-fold goal taking up a significant portion of this chapter, the focus then shifts to demonstrating the necessity—perhaps even the urgency—of an alternative assessment of modernity and to explaining how the narrative-based critique of national identity also leads to the undoubtedly more daunting task of interrogating the standard assessments of modernity. This task is especially daunting in those contexts that experienced the ramifications of modernity's introduction as part of the projects of colonialism and imperialism.

## 4.2 Points of Intersection and Definitions

The inherently broad term “modernity” is inseparable from the question of national consciousness. The term “modernity,” however, also describes a pattern of social organization, an aesthetic attitude, and serves as a general marker for a historical period. The fluid nature of the term and the multiplicity of its possible significations make the task of identifying its many points of contact with nationalism especially onerous as such task would have to crisscross a significant number of academic disciplines. Nevertheless, despite this difficulty and regardless of which one of the previous signifieds one chooses, the preliminary starting point is likely to be that without the type of identification with anonymous others made possible by modernity's re-imagined conception of time and space, the idea of the nation as well as its by-product, national identity, would be unthinkable.

In the first chapter, I show—via Benjamin and Anderson—how “homogenous, empty time,” or the time of modernity as they would have it, is a crucial component of the process that resulted in the rise and spread of national consciousness as well as of the resilient sense of hypothetical togetherness it

engenders. In *The Consequences of Modernity*, Anthony Giddens complicates this further when he suggests that “the ‘emptying of time’ is in large part the precondition for the ‘emptying of space’ and thus has causal priority over it” (18). One of the conclusions to be taken from Giddens’ suggestion is that this “coordination across time is the basis of the control of space” (18). The condition within which national consciousness develops, then, indicates that issues relating to time—the mainstay of narrative—are not to be taken lightly in the face of the overwhelming concreteness of issues relating to hegemony over actual places.

Considering the operations of national affiliation independent from the fundamental question of time would simply lead to the assumption that control over places is the issue deserving the most critical attention. This—perhaps understandably partial—assumption is manifested in most definitions of nationalism, which tend to narrow its scope to an unrelenting (vicious or benign, illegitimate or justified) desire for sovereignty over concrete places by fluidly defined “peoples.” While this is indeed a partial definition (in both senses of the term), it is not patently incorrect. The maintaining of this view, however, explains as to why the study of nationalism has been, for the most part, the domain of social sciences in general and political science in particular. Given that this is the case, a study of nationalism, even one whose subject matter revolves around literary texts, cannot proceed without taking stock of the findings accumulated by scholars in the social sciences.

The introduction of the problematics of modernity to the discussion ensures for one thing that the scope of nationalism is not unduly reduced either to contestations over geography or to a tool deployed at will in the rhetorically



oriented game of geopolitics. As Giddens explains, “the development of ‘empty space’ may be understood in terms of the separation of *space* from *place*” (18). This separation shows that it is an error to study nationalism by focusing exclusively on actual places since doing so means ignoring the crucial issue at stake—the nationalization of abstract space rather than direct hegemony over geography.

Giddens’ point about the emptying of time and space as well as the resulting separation between place and space could be summed up as follows. The relationship between the condition of modernity and nationalism could be seen in two essential ways: first, in the way in which modernity’s “empty time” either facilitates or even predates the creation of space as empty or devoid of local distinguishing markers, a space whose principal feature is no longer its attachment to a specific, localized *place*; second, it could be seen in how the fundamental contestation of nationalism is concerned with the politics of defining the identity of the rightful heir of a given space rather than with the concrete force which determines actual political sovereignty over places.

The politics of definitions takes its cue from the binding of “empty time” with “empty space.” This binding, which arises only in modernity, creates “conditions under which time and space are organized so as to connect presence and absence” (Giddens 14), thus making possible the sense of hypothetical togetherness we call national consciousness. Giddens call this process “disembedding,” which he defines in *Modernity and Self-Identity* as “the lifting

out of social relationships from local contexts and their recombination across indefinite time/space distances" (242).<sup>57</sup> The binding of empty time/space (perhaps more adequately, the virtual rebinding) is a capacity limited to "modern societies (nation-states)" (14), in which the invocation of time also entails the invocation space and vice versa. "Virtually no pre-modern societies," Giddens adds, "were as clearly bounded as modern nation-states" (14).

These basic changes to conceptions of time and space ushered by modernity shape the tenets of nationalism and thus the sense of identification it engenders. More specifically, however, placing the necessary emphasis on these changes leads to recognizing that modernity, as Mondal puts it, "is not an enclave of pure instrumental reason but rather the harbinger of a new type of politics hitherto unknown in the world: cultural politics" (2). This is made possible by the specific emphasis placed on collective abstract identity as the basis of what Mondal terms as "cultural politics."

It is, therefore, crucial to acknowledge that cultural products, especially those with a capacity to manipulate the sense of time and space in sophisticated ways, ought to receive the proper attention for their role not only in combining the ingredients necessary for the rise of national identities but also in showing

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<sup>57</sup> This notion of "disembedding" is very similar to Anderson's notion about the abstract confidence one has with regard to the simultaneous existence of all other national subjects and their activities without the need for any immediate experience (Anderson 24). Giddens' "disembedding," however, could be interpreted as an expansion of Anderson's notion so as to include, in addition to relations between national subjects, the relations between subjects which transcend national boundaries. This forms a key component of Giddens' analysis of high (or late) modernity as "the radicalising or globalising of basic traits of modernity" (244).

how the process of chipping away at the basic tenets of national consciousness is only the beginning of a needed reassessment in the way modernity itself is understood. The critique of national identity, then, represents a crucial step of engaging in this reassessment, a reassessment that engages with modernity by targeting its most ubiquitous manifestation.

The symbiotic relationship between nationalism and modernity is at work irrespective of whether one thinks that modernity represents a shift in the configuration of social relations which ultimately and necessarily gave rise to nationalism, as Gellner holds, or that nationalism was the indispensable “road” that eventually led society into modernity, as Greenfeld’s counter-argument states, an argument succinctly captured in the title of her book, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*. Greenfeld’s treatment of five nationalisms—English, French, Russian, German, and American—is guided by this principal counter-argument. In her own words, the nature of the book’s argument could be described as follows:

The focus of the book—throughout—is a set of ideas...at the core of which lies the idea of the ‘nation,’ which I believe forms *the constitutive element of modernity*. In this belief, I reverse the order of precedence...Rather than define nationalism by its modernity, I see modernity as defined by nationalism. (18)<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Emphasis in original.

Nationalism for Greenfeld is not *a* constitutive element of modernity, but *the* constitutive one.<sup>59</sup> This is crucial as it implicitly gives nationalism so great an influence so as to be the determinant component governing not only the political and social spheres in modernity but also the aesthetic one, especially when one considers the extent to which the aesthetic sphere contributes to the particular types of identifications which later come to form an integral part of “collective memories.”

This is not to suggest that Greenfeld’s sweeping argument ought to be accepted uncritically, but that it indicates the almost unanimous agreement that nationalism and modernity are simply inseparable. According to Greenfeld, nationalism is the indispensable road without which none of the societies analyzed in her book could have shed their pre-modern past—represented either by religious affiliations, hierarchical communal bonds, or by the medieval “body politic” with the king/queen as its naturally ordained head—and thus arrive at modernity—represented in the political sphere by the rule of law and legitimate governance in the name of the people. This development is tacitly posited by Greenfeld as the teleological endpoint of a metaphorical road. However, if we continue with this metaphor, taking it to its logical conclusion, modernity turns out to be a dead-end that allows no further movement or change.

If we put aside the question of historical precedence and with it the cause-

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<sup>59</sup> In the introduction to the collection of essays, *Nationalism and the Mind*, Jonathan R. Eastwood, Greenfeld’s former student, claims that this reversal of roles “represented a major breakthrough in a field of study long stifled within the confines of an old unproductive paradigm in which the phenomenon [of nationalism] was regarded as a product of the ‘structures’ and processes of modernization” (vii).

and-effect relationship which seems critical to these two theorists of nationalism,<sup>60</sup> we would recognize that both Gellner and Greenfeld would tacitly agree that it would not be possible to say anything of substance about nationalism and national identity without invoking the shift from the pre-modern condition into that of modernity. Modernity, in other words, casts a long shadow on nationalism, either as the creator or enabler of its ideas or as the inevitable and teleological conclusion of its guiding premises.

Not only is modernity crucial to this discussion as a result of its connection to the type of identification that makes it possible to speak of the normative abstraction that is national identity, it also provides the basis or the blueprint of those features that we associate so closely with such identity. At the outset of his discussion on national and cultural politics, Mondal makes this very point, writing that “even those who argue that the ‘core’ features of nations predated modernity itself...concede that it was the advent of modernity that radically transformed those features into what we would now recognize as nations” (15). This also means that the continuity of identity “characteristics” or “traits” that do manage to cross the threshold separating pre-modern and modern societies are not to be taken as a temporal yardstick which determines

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<sup>60</sup> The cause-and-effect dynamic and the question of succession also plays a role in Giddens view of empty time and space, though less so in his overall assessment of modernity. This could be seen in his view that rather than the successor of modernity, postmodernity, he argues in *The Consequences of Modernity*, is the radicalization of the conditions of modernity itself: “Rather than entering a period of post-modernity, we are moving into one in which the consequences of modernity are becoming more radicalised and universalised than before. Beyond modernity, I shall claim, we can perceive the contours of a new and different order, which is ‘post-modern’; but this is quite distinct from what is at the moment called by many ‘post-modernity’ (3)”

how far a given society has made it (or failed to make it) into the condition of modernity. Even if “pre-modern” traits seem to prevail in some contexts, the question of their survival is not what is important. Rather, the crucial question has to do with how they are deployed in what might be termed as “the condition of nationalism.”

Taylor begins his “Nationalism and Modernity” by calling attention to how disconcerting it is to witness the mixing of “an unquestionably modern discourse—self-determination, rule of the people, etc.—with other elements which seem to us alien to (what we understand as) modernity” (191). This seemingly strange mixture of incompatible elements ceases to be disconcerting once one appreciates how these various elements are all “linked to modernity, both to central features of its political culture, and to the stresses and malaise to which it gives rise” (Taylor 191). Rather than a mark of a fundamentalism belonging to a bygone era or a falling back on notions of pure ethnicity, these seemingly pre-modern elements still play out in the domain of identity politics—a quintessentially modern domain. Taylor’s exploration of this phenomenon illustrates that rather than a mark of pre-modern tendencies, these seemingly “out of place” elements are thoroughly modern because they are guided by the two basic paradigms of modern nationalism: by both the conception of time developed by Anderson and the non-hierarchical direct access to society which forms a key component of Gellner’s theory of nationalism.

The final point to be made with regard to the views of Greenfeld and Gellner is related to the features they ascribe to modernity. A crucial thing one quickly discovers while reading Greenfeld’s *Five Roads to Modernity* and Gellner’s

*Nations and Nationalism* is that aside from their valuable insights with regard to the specific operations of nationalism within the institutions of society, both Gellner and Greenfeld treat modernity as if it were a condition affecting only the way societies conduct concrete transactions, whether such transactions are conducted between equal subjects or between the subject and the institutions responsible for the governing of behaviour. Rather than modernity as an unwieldy term, as a perpetually shifting concept, or as a multi-faceted condition affecting society, culture, politics, the arts, as well as the subject's awareness of time and space in different ways, modernity for these theorists<sup>61</sup> is posited principally as being limited to the material process of organizational and bureaucratic modernization. These material processes in turn result in the change of attitudes formed in the other spheres.

### 4.3 Modernity and Its Splits

Both Greenfeld and Gellner develop their views on nationalism's interconnections with modernity on the presupposition that the term "modernity" refers only to the modernity which Matei Calinescu describes in his *Five Faces of Modernity* as the industrial bourgeois modernity. In addition to making the critical distinction between bourgeois and aesthetic modernity, Calinescu demonstrates that the modernity of which Greenfeld and Gellner

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<sup>61</sup> I would be unfair to add Giddens to this list as he goes beyond this material approach to understanding modernity. This is the case because of nature of his analysis which pays adequate attention to both material and nonmaterial aspects of modernity. See his discussion of the mechanisms of trust and risk (7), perception of time and space (17), reflexivity (36), and trust and personal identity (120), to highlight just a few sites in which he goes beyond and complements the material manifestations (institutions, bureaucracy, etc.) of social phenomena.

speak has also been in perpetual conflict with aesthetic modernity. Moreover, Calinescu's distinction between aesthetic and bourgeois modernity is not only crucial to any discussion of modernity's influence on nationalism but is also especially pivotal to a discussion of the ways in which the idea of the nation (as part of the "bundle" of modernity) has operated outside of Europe and North America.

To start with, the distinction is crucial because the aesthetic and industrial varieties, far from simply constituting different manifestations of a single phenomenon, are in fact two oppositional, even inimical forces. Calinescu couches this idea of the enmity between the two modernities in one of his book's central arguments. He elaborates on this point when he emphasizes that "aesthetic modernity should be understood as a crisis concept involved in a threefold dialectical opposition to tradition, to the modernity of bourgeois civilization (with its ideals of rationality, utility, progress), and finally, to itself, insofar as it perceives itself as a new tradition or form of authority" (10). While modernity's oppositional relationship to tradition is generally taken into account regardless of the theorist's background or discipline, the other two tend to be either downplayed or not taken into account altogether. What will guide the discussion to follow are the latter two oppositions, namely aesthetic modernity's resistance to industrial modernity (often confused with the process of modernization) and its acute self-awareness with respect to the possibility that it too could at a future date reappear in the guise of yet another tradition.



Starting with the first opposition, then, I now turn to Calinescu's chapter entitled "The Idea of Modernity." Under the heading "The Two Modernities," Calinescu points out that

it is impossible to say precisely when one can begin to speak of the existence of two distinct and bitterly conflicting modernities. What is certain is that at some point during the first half of nineteenth century an irresistible split occurred between modernity as a stage in the history of Western civilization—a product of scientific and technological progress, of the industrial revolution, of the sweeping economic and social changes brought about by capitalism—and modernity as an aesthetic concept. Since then, the relations between the two modernities have been irreducibly hostile, but not without allowing and even stimulating a variety of mutual influences in their rage for each other's destruction. (41)

This split between the two modernities helps us appreciate the operation behind nationalism's alignment with modernity as well as understand as to why nationalism tends to be perceived as aligning itself more with bourgeois modernity than with the aesthetic one. There is no doubt that this perception is justified, especially if one's focus is limited to the rhetorical strategies deployed by nationalism's proponents who utilize the romantic elements of aesthetic modernity merely as a support for their project of advancing the goals of bourgeois modernity. What emerges is a more complex picture than the one engendered by the perceived, straightforward alignment between nationalism and bourgeois modernity, one which is often characterized by nationalism's opponents as an alignment of convenience. This pragmatic alignment, it should be added, is especially critical in those instances where tradition proves a force to be reckoned with.

As a movement reliant on the support of the masses, nationalism deploys elements of bourgeois modernity in order to acquire the legitimacy it needs by way of establishing consensus. What is left out from the equation, however, are the mutual influences as well as the “productive hostility,” without which both modernities would lose their force or even their *raison d’être*. As we shall see later, applying pressure on the premises of national identity as well as highlighting the split at its very core constitutes an engagement with the inherent split in modernity itself.

At the risk of oversimplification, one could imagine that each modernity contains a rudimentary impulse. While the impulse of aesthetic modernity is the thoroughly present and independent sense of individuality, the impulse of bourgeois modernity is a sense of homogeneity anchored to a clearly defined idea of progress, historicity, and “sweeping economic and social changes” that seek very much to form a new and stable tradition—a new tradition that redeploys any recyclable elements from what existed in the past. In other words, aesthetic modernity encourages the individual to think independently by way of what Giddens terms as “radical doubt” (3) in his *Modernity and Self-Identity*, even if that means going against the accepted norms on which there is a more or less broad social consensus. Bourgeois modernity, on the other hand, discourages such independent (and potentially disruptive) individual initiative and encourages trust, conformity, and consensus.

After highlighting the split between the two modernities, Calinescu elaborates on the nature of bourgeois modernity explaining that

with regard to the first, bourgeois idea of modernity, we may say that it has by and large continued the traditions of earlier periods in the history of the modern idea. The doctrine of progress, the confidence in the beneficial possibilities of science and technology, the concern with time (a *measurable* time, a time that can be bought and sold and therefore has, like any other commodity, a calculable equivalent in money), the cult of reason, and the ideal of freedom defined within the framework of an abstract humanism, but also the orientation toward pragmatism and the cult of action and success. (41-2)

The pragmatist nature of bourgeois modernity, as opposed to the critical ethos of aesthetic modernity, makes its closer alliance with the surviving traces of traditional values not surprising at all. This pragmatist nature and the resulting mutually beneficiary alliance also explains the currency of the common rhetorical formula according to which only those elements of modernity that are compatible with tradition are to be accept. The rest are conveniently described as either unnecessary or incompatible.

The nature of aesthetic modernity, on the other hand, could be understood through its manifestation as a rebellion against the traditional values cast anew which Calinescu enumerates in the previous quote. It is, in other words, characterized by an outlook that is keen on perpetually maintaining its status of non-alliance with the bourgeois ethics which underlie industrial modernity:

By contrast, the other modernity, the one that was to bring into being the avant-gardes, was from its romantic beginnings inclined toward radical antibourgeois attitudes. It was disgusted with the middle-class scale of values and expressed its disgust through the most diverse means, ranging from rebellion, anarchy, and apocalypticism to aristocratic self-exile. So, more than its positive aspirations (which often have very little in common), what defines cultural modernity is its outright rejection of bourgeois modernity, its consuming negative passion. (Calinescu 42)

Unlike industrial modernity's facility for pragmatic alignment, aesthetic modernity finds in the attitude of non-alignment an opportunity not only to question the values proposed by bourgeois modernity but also to enact its own conceptual view on the value assigned to pastness and presence. This point will be discussed in greater detail in the next section. In the meantime, it is important to make clear that the cultural-aesthetic modernity does not define itself through a simplified opposition or by a mere rejectionist attitude (neither to bourgeois values nor to the old conception of pastness and presence), even if the above-quoted passage might appear to suggest so. Doing so, after all, would amount to little more than a restaging of the old quarrel between the ancients and the moderns.

Rather, what takes place in the case of cultural modernity is an embracement of a perpetually re-enacted difference that should not be mistaken for the embracement of the arguably mundane "value of novelty" (Calinescu 47). Deleuze expresses eloquently this critical development brought about by modernity as an aesthetic concept in his essay "Plato and the Simulacrum," where he succinctly points out that "modernity is defined by the power of simulacrum" (55).

Keeping in mind the discussion in the previous chapter on the simulacrum, we can begin to understand that the power of aesthetic modernity is not so much related to its declared opposition to its pragmatist nemesis, which might be compared to the Platonic copy—posited as inferior to the model itself but seen as the best thing to which we have access. Instead, the power of

aesthetic modernity—comparable to the simulacrum—is its general capacity to disrupt the status quo necessary for the temporal continuity that bourgeois modernity requires, irrespective of the specific form that status quo happens to take. Though Deleuze does not explicitly make the distinction between the two modernities in this essay, there is little doubt that what he has in mind is the aesthetic one.

The other point to be made about the quarrelling two modernities is that the split between cultural and industrial modernities also leads to the establishment of two co-existing discursive traditions concerned with modernity. Though co-existing and developing side by side, these discursive traditions still hold the potential of being appropriated or invoked separately, thus quickly ceasing—at least at the discursive level—to have the mutual and dialectical influence to which Calinescu points.

#### 4.4 The Time of Aesthetic Modernity

One of the earliest examples (if not the very first) of the discourse on aesthetic modernity appears in Charles Baudelaire's "The Painter of Modern Life," an essay which Baudelaire begins by describing his fascination with a sketch-maker who chooses not to sign his sketches. This man (Constantine Guys), who prefers to remain anonymous, "was not precisely an *artist*, but rather a *man of the world* in a very restricted sense" (Baudelaire 6).<sup>62</sup> By being such, Baudelaire explains later, the sketch-maker knows and understands his (contemporary) world. He is, consequently, part of this teeming and perpetually unfolding world, unlike the

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<sup>62</sup> Emphasis in original.

traditional artist who is removed from it by several degrees and who is “a specialist, a man wedded to his palette like the serf to the soil” (Baudelaire 7).

What is so characteristic about this man, in short, is his modernity which is not necessarily defined by a newly developed approach meant to comprehend better the nature of the contemporary world but by his *attitude* to that world. One could put it in the following way: it is as an attitude that comes to life as a particular and necessarily singular way of making an identification with or of internalizing the external stimuli that the contemporary world has to offer.

More specifically, Baudelaire explains in this formative text, modernity stands for “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half whose other half is the eternal and the immutable” (13). By being a singular half added to an eternal and immutable half—“consisting of the most general laws of art” (Calinescu 50)—aesthetic modernity simultaneously ceases to signify simply that which is “new” and escapes the fate of becoming yet another “periodizing label”:

Because of its newly discovered but deep hostility to the past, modernity can no longer be used as a periodizing label. With characteristic logical rigor, Baudelaire means by modernity the present in its ‘presentness,’ in its purely instantaneous quality. *Modernity, then, can be defined as the paradoxical possibility of going beyond the flow of history through the consciousness of historicity in its most concrete immediacy, in its presentness* (Calinescu 49-50).<sup>63</sup>

Baudelaire’s choice to describe modernity as ephemeral, fugitive, and contingent reveals that modernity for him is first and foremost a form of liberation from

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<sup>63</sup> Emphasis added.

aesthetic stipulations rather than a newly written aesthetic contract: it is a perpetually fleeting key which unlocks the shackles of convention and tradition, neutralizes the primacy of pastness which confers on tradition its hollowed status, and, finally, unravels the influential idea that posits tradition as “a model or an example to future artists. Separated from tradition (in the sense of a body of works and procedures to be imitated), artistic creation becomes an adventure and a drama in which the artist has no ally except his imagination” (Calinescu 50). Thus, modern art, according to Baudelaire, is art at whose core is a sense of continuously relived, immanent presentness—with as many specific forms as there are possible combinations of the two halves—rather than a desire to recreate a copy of a past masterpiece in a contemporary guise.

Calinescu describes this aesthetic value which Baudelaire celebrates (or even inaugurates), writing that “what we have to deal with here is a major cultural shift from a time-honored aesthetics of permanence, based on a belief in an unchanging and transcendent ideal of beauty, to an aesthetics of transitoriness and immanence, whose cultural values are change and novelty” (3). In addition to this preoccupation with sketching the present (almost haphazardly) at the expense of the already established model, Baudelaire’s cultural modernity also comes to stand for an open-ended possibility as well as for a potentiality (what Deleuze would call virtuality) which seeks to redefine both aesthetic objective and method so that they both begin to place the contingent and fleeting difference of the present precisely in the position where the comforting

similitude of the copy used to be. “Romanticism,” which Baudelaire associates with modernity,<sup>64</sup>

is... not only ‘the most recent, the most contemporary form of the beautiful,’ but also—and this point deserves to be stressed—it is substantially different from *everything* that has been done in the past. The awareness of this dissimilarity is actually the starting point in the search for *novelty*, another cardinal concept of Baudelaire’s poetics. (Calinescu 47)<sup>65</sup>

While the terms “novelty” and “dissimilarity” might strike us as the crux of the matter, it is in fact the *awareness* of the novelty and dissimilarity that matters the most. Instead of characterizations that are determined by the concreteness of how finished works appear (or ought to appear), the concept of modernity which Baudelaire inaugurates is instead focused on characterizations of modernity which are determined by an awareness, an attitude, a way of knowingly interpreting the externality of the world, and even as “a way of acting and behaving” (384), as Paul de Man encapsulates modernity’s nature in his essay “Literary History and Literary Modernity.”

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<sup>64</sup> With regard to Baudelaire’s terminology, Calinescu says the following: “Today, we might speak of the romanticism Baudelaire had in mind as largely ‘antiromantic,’ or ‘modern,’ if we consider ‘modern’ as an antonym for ‘romantic,’ according to a more recent terminological opposition for which Baudelaire’s critical influence is directly responsible” (47).

<sup>65</sup> Emphasis in original.



De Man's essay (whose argument Calinescu critiques for being too sweeping while still holding it as deserving a lengthy consideration)<sup>66</sup> takes Nietzsche as its starting point. Couched as part of a discussion that begins with Nietzsche, specifically his concept of forgetfulness of the past or history as a means of enacting the genuinely creative act, de Man goes on to indicate that this Nietzschean concept is applicable not only to Baudelaire's concept of modernity. Rather, de Man argues, the desire to forget the past and start anew, taking the present as a fresh moment of origin, has actually been the perennial condition of *all* literature. "The appeal of modernity," de Man insists,

haunts all literature. It is revealed in numberless images and emblems that appear at all periods—the obsession with a *tabula rasa*, with new beginnings—that finds recurrent expression in all forms of writing. No true account of literary language can bypass this persistent temptation of literature to fulfill itself in a single moment. The temptation of immediacy is constitutive of a literary consciousness and has to be included in a definition of the specificity of literature. (392)

To write the (truly) original literary text is to start anew or, at least, to start with an obsession with beginnings. Forgetfulness and beginnings, for de Man, come together as part of a single and purposive movement that defines the essential quality of all literary texts, irrespective of period or aesthetic characteristics.

Admittedly, one cannot help it but take issue (as Calinescu rightly does) with this

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<sup>66</sup> Calinescu writes that he does "not wish to argue here with de Man's view that all literature embodies in some fashion the 'unsolvable paradox' of modernity. My own opinion is that modernity in general, and literary modernity in particular, are aspects of a time consciousness that has not remained the same throughout history, and that Baudelaire's theory of modernity cannot be enlarged to account for the whole of literature" (51).

sweeping and arguably overstretched concept of modernity as de Man outlines it.

The principal sticking point with this argument is that it goes so far as to empty out literary modernity of any specific or recognizable content it could possibly have. This position remakes the concept of modernity into what may be regarded as a purely formal concept that could potentially be applied to all literature, regardless of the shape it takes or the historical moment out of which it arises. I will come back to this crucial point shortly—the concept of modernity as a content and as a form—but, before doing so, I would like to sketch out briefly how Calinescu and de Man agree and where they diverge as the position I want to propose is situated between the two.

What should be highlighted with regard to de Man's position, then, is his critical assertion that modernity "invests its trust in the power of the present moment as an origin, but discovers that, in severing itself from the past, it has at the same time severed itself from the present" (390). If taken at face value, this assertion could be mistakenly associated with the idea that the turning of the artist's back on the inescapable influences from past (by way of deliberate "ruthless forgetting") would do very little to erase the stubborn traces which that past always manages to leave on the present, even if the present happens to be postulated in an abstract fashion as a spontaneous and definitive moment of origin.

Stopping at this face value reading, however, would be insufficient; it would be insufficient because the active and purposive nature of ruthless

forgetting makes this “way of behaving” quite different from the passive negativity of an uncomplicated a-historical position. I am not interested in the a-historical position as there is very little to be gained by exploring such tendency. The purposive nature of ruthless forgetting, on the other hand, indicates something else. For the main part, it indicates a willful response to the crisis that modernity presents the artist with, a crisis originating out of the necessity of living and being fully aware of the split which Calinescu illustrates so well in his analysis of Baudelaire’s essay. Only the modern artist, Baudelaire suggests, has an awareness of the split.

The question remains, how does this split relate to the act of ruthless forgetting? To forget ruthlessly is part of the problematic of past and present. Being aware and “living the split” of industrial and aesthetic modernities is in many ways a corollary of having an awareness of the “two halves,” one of which is timeless, i.e., having a constant value and is handed down successively from past, to present, to future, the other is fleeting and ever-changing, i.e., having a value only insofar as it is that value is produced by the momentary present. From this, one begins to see that the split of the two modernities has a temporal dimension; it is not, in other words, separate from aesthetic modernity’s complicated positing of the past and the present.

By way of examining this positing further, I want to discuss modernity’s peculiar relationship to both the present and the past, before returning to de Man’s essay. On the one hand, modernity’s relationship to the temporal division of past and present necessitates the existence of a moment of recognition—a moment of discovery that has been somehow already known—that the pastness

of tradition is always a fundamental constituent of the freshness of the present. On the other, modernity's relationship to the division of fixity and potentiality transcends the need for a singular moment. Modernity, as such, deals with the questions of time and creativity by simultaneously giving each its sphere of operation while collapsing the two into a single unit that later becomes the new modern work.

Put another way, willful forgetfulness of the past is not simply a naïve negation of the inescapable power of tradition, but rather a necessary requirement for generating that forceful moment of recognition whereby the newness of the present is not compromised and the power of tradition is not taken too lightly. De Man, however, goes even further in his critique, suggesting that this relationship between past and present forms a vicious circle so that "the more radical the rejection of anything that came before, the greater the dependence on the past" (400). The suggestion here is that dealing with the consequences of what comes before is best done by conceding its necessarily continual presence rather than consigning it to the past through the assumption that the abstract temporal division would actually protect against "leakage," to use the useful metaphor from *Midnight's Children*.

With the vicious circle of rejection and dependence in mind, let us turn to the preceding pages of de Man's text where he comments directly on Baudelaire's essay, writing that

Yet his modernity too, like Nietzsche's, is a forgetting or a suppression of anteriority: The human figures that epitomize modernity are defined by experiences such as childhood or convalescence, a freshness of perception that results from a slate

wiped clear, from the absence of a past that has not yet had time to tarnish the immediacy of perception. (396)

This human figure, the *flâneur*, moves through the crowds with a perceived lucidity and freshness. His lucidity and freshness is built not on the presently ignored ruins of the past but on the presupposition that being on the posterior end of the constantly readjusted temporal division is somehow sufficient to achieve the highly prized condition of modernity. It is highly prized because its immediacy and contingency would cleanse us of the stink and staleness of the past.

Modernity's peculiar relationship to time could be best illustrated in the divergence between Calinescu and de Man with regard to how the concept of aesthetic modernity is to be articulated. Before Calinescu calls attention to de Man's two insights which he claims to have been very helpful to him, he suggests leaving aside what he holds as de Man's unacceptable generalizations—the assertion that “modernity” is the impulse of *all* literature and the transferring of “all the problems of history... to the plane of language and *écriture*” (52). What Calinescu wants to retain “from de Man's article is both his excellent analysis of ‘Le Peintre de la vie moderne’ and the suggested opposition between *modernity* and *historical time*.<sup>67</sup> Both are actually very helpful for the understanding of a specific stage in the development of modernity's concept, if not of the essence of literature or history (52).

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<sup>67</sup> Emphasis in original.

It should be noted that the concession Calinescu makes is not as generous as it might seem. The delimiting of the opposition between modernity and history to a specific stage is Calinescu's way of minimizing what could be termed as the excesses of de Man's reading. In other words, it is a way of accepting the insights as such without necessarily subscribing to the overstretched (or a-historical) definition of modernity that de Man offers. Despite acknowledging the benefits of de Man's ideas to the formulation of his own position, Calinescu remains adamant to indicate that, although

there is indeed a conflict between modernity and history, ... this conflict itself has a history. As far as literature and the arts are concerned, one may even point to an approximate date: Baudelaire's poetics of modernity can be taken as an early illustration of the revolt of the present against the past—of the fleeting instant against the steadiness of memory, of difference against repetition. (52)

As a preface to the discussion to follow, it is worth pointing out that it is a mistake to treat the present and the past as if they were only temporal labels. Treating them as such cannot be considered wrong per se, but such a treatment is an indication that the view in question is incomplete. Calinescu's treatment of modernity could be seen as proceeding with the presupposition that the past and the present are indeed temporal labels, with an exception being made for aesthetic modernity which escapes the fate of becoming yet another term pointing to a definitive historical period. As a literary historian, Calinescu is right. However, what remains missing is a critical aspect of the revolt described in the above quotation, a revolt that does take place in a specific historical context but one whose functioning is reliant on a recognizable formal procedure.

The question of whether the past and the present ought to count for more than temporal labels is the meeting site where the position of de Man and that of Calinescu could enter into a fruitful dialogue. While Calinescu insists on focusing his attention on the historical contextualizing of various postulations of the past and the present, de Man is determined to eschew such meticulous historical contextualization. Avoiding such a historical contextualization is perhaps understandable given de Man's ambitious project to re-imagine nothing less than our conception of history. What is to be noted is that each of the two positions suffers from a shortcoming that is largely the result of the very different objectives of each of the two projects.

These shortcomings are a function of not acknowledging sufficiently that in addition to being temporal labels, the past and the present also function on a different level of signification whereby the present additionally stands for potentiality or virtuality, as encapsulated in Deleuze's formulation of difference, and the past additionally stands for tradition or its perceived or actual fixity. The concept of modernity, especially its highly complex articulation of pastness and presentness, can neither be taken as a purely formal procedure, as de Man's position suggests,<sup>68</sup> nor could it be filled to the brim with historical content, all while paying little attention to the formal procedure that informs the concept's very essence.

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<sup>68</sup> I should perhaps emphasize the word *suggests* as de Man does not argue explicitly for this position.

If the preceding discussion (and especially the divergence between Calinescu and de Man) is to reveal anything that could help in reaching a more accurate assessment of modernity, it would show that modernity in general and aesthetic modernity in particular ought not to be interpreted only as a condition with a set of definite and recognizable characteristics or features; rather, modernity should be taken as a label pointing to a procedure through which the Baudelairean “two halves” come together and take shape. Taken as such, modernity has the potential of putting on as many faces as there are possible combinations between the enduring elements of tradition and the fleeting elements of presentness. “Modernity,” Taylor writes, “is not a single wave” (205). From this perspective, there are not only “five faces of modernity,” but an infinite, “virtual,” number of modernities. Modernity, to add a crucial addendum, is a universal procedure (its form) whose mechanism of enactment is always singular (its content). This answer, however, gives rise to a conundrum: do the infinite faces of modernity imply that “to each his own modernity”?<sup>69</sup>

#### 4.5 A Modernity of the Other?

My discussion of modernity thus far has concentrated on two problems that consistently surface in the discourse on modernity: the condition’s inherently split character as well as its complicated relationship to the temporal division of past and present, which is after all a function of its dialectical opposition to

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<sup>69</sup> The idea of alternative modernities has been proposed as a way of dealing with this question. I am hesitant to adopt this idea because of its relativist tone. The same way I argue for the readjustment of our understanding of national identity instead of proposing a new one, I similarly argue for a readjustment of our understanding of modernity instead of proposing alternative ones.



(rather than rejection of) tradition as Calinescu rightly points out. Continuing along the same lines, then, I turn to two other problems that surface in a different context, only this time this second set of problems surfaces in the discourse on what I refer to as “traveling modernity.”

I use this term as a neutral alternative to explanations which adopt the view that the appearance in other parts of the world of attitudes and modes of thought connected to modernity could simply be seen as a process of appropriation and borrowing of European modernity. The problem with views based on borrowing is not one of political correctness. Rather, I think that ideas about borrowing and appropriation lead to the misunderstanding that modernity outside of the European landscape reappears elsewhere either in the same form, with slight modifications, or as an utterly corrupted version of its former self. If we understand modernity’s dialectical opposition to tradition correctly, we would recognize that its dialectical opposition to a different tradition means that it is more fitting to call it a “traveling modernity” rather than a borrowed one.

The second set of problems, then, results from the diffusion of modernity into new contexts, a diffusion that is associated with the colonial project. As an illustration of this association, I quote a helpful summation from Wail Hassan’s *Tayeb Salih: Ideology and the Craft of Fiction*. Hassan begins the introduction to his book on the celebrated Sudanese novelist with a summation that clearly illustrates the first of modernity’s second set of problems:

Customarily, 1798 is cited as the beginning of the modern era in the Arab world. That year, in a remarkably pristine instance of imperial

harnessing of power and knowledge, Napoleon Bonaparte arrived in Egypt at the head of an army of occupation that included a legion of scientists who were to compose the monumental *Description de l'Égypte*. It has since become an intellectual habit, both in Europe and in the Arab world, to divorce the colonial from the scientific mission, recasting the latter in terms of advantages or gifts compensating for the naked aggression of the former. (1)

Hassan's summation calls attention to an intellectual habit to divorce the two sides of the colonial enterprise. The rise of postcolonial studies and the scrutiny that Orientalist discourse receives have done a great deal to remedy this problem. What is interesting, though, is that it is also problematic to associate too closely the supposed gifts of modernity with the aggression of colonialism.

To associate modernity too closely with colonialism is to run the risk of eliding the fact that modernity, by definition, is multi-sided. Therefore, the tribulations of modernity within the colonial project is actually comparable (not from historical standpoint, but from a structural one) to the tribulations of modernity within the European context. Knowing that modernity is a more complex phenomenon (containing mutually inimical elements) than the discourse on reason, rationality, and progress makes it out to be, it is not at all surprising that modernity's advent in a new territory would also be riddled with complications relating to its face which is indeed created out of conflicted features.

Focusing on the jarring combination of the aggression of colonialism with the presumed beneficence of scientific modernity would lead one to lose track of an essential aspect of modernity—its split nature. Add to this the other risk pertaining to the potential of such a focus to be especially hindering because it

keeps the assessment of modernity at the level of critiquing a tradition of discourse the falsity and duplicity of whose claims are amply apparent. In light of these risks, then, it is essential to move beyond this criticism of modernity whose basis rests upon the undeniable historical fact that modernity's advent in the so-called third-world went hand in hand with the colonial enterprise. To do so (far from being either a "defence of modernity" or a reassertion of what is sometimes termed as its "values") would make it possible for a different type of critique to emerge—a critique in the sense of "assessment" rather than "criticism."

The point to keep in mind before discussing the second problem is that by drawing attention to the double-sidedness of modernity, Hassan's remark highlights a resilient, deep-seated ambivalence toward modernity in the postcolonial world. As such, his characterization—despite its focus on the rhetorical and discursive levels—is a useful reminder that any appraisal of modernity is bound to run into this sticking point. As Calinescu's analysis shows, modernity after all has had a double-sidedness since at least the first half of the nineteenth century. In *The Name of Identity*, Amin Maalouf articulates this ambivalence even more bluntly than Hassan does: "when modernity bears the mark of 'the Other' it is not surprising if some people confronting it brandish symbols of atavism to assert their difference" (72).

Viewed with suspicion for its association with colonial expansion, modernity additionally suffers from the ease with which its (always partial) discourse can be appropriated, even by those on opposing ends of a given issue. Mondal, for instance, explains how colonial discourse which

suggested that India could not be a nation because it was not modern and was not a single homogeneous nation [led to the response by nationalists who] became convinced of the need to reform Indian society in order to modernize it; this was a matter of such fundamental importance that all nationalists had to engage with it. Modernization and social reform became, in principle, axiomatic within Indian nationalist discourse. (50)

What was required, Mondal explains, is nothing less ambitious than the redefinition of tradition so that it becomes “consonant with the principles of modernity” (50). This discursive division between modernity and whatever existed before it becomes possible through simplifying modernity’s concept of time and by assuming that modernity could actually be treated as an import—as if it were separate from tradition or as being wieldy enough to be instituted via purely concrete means. Rather than recognizing that modernity is constituted by difference and that it is established as part of an uneasy but ultimately productive coexistence with what preceded it, nationalist discourse tries to make a pragmatic pact with bourgeois/industrial modernity in the hope of cutting off modernity in its totality from the very domain which sustains as well as invigorates its most beneficial energies.

This problem is not unique to India. The problem of reconciling modernity with tradition is as perennial as the phenomenon of nationalism itself. Whereas the first is deployed within nationalist discourse partly as proof of having a future-oriented outlook, the latter is seen with one eye as a proof of former glory and/or historical continuity, with another as an impediment to be overcome, irrespective of the feasibility of such undertaking. This is precisely where aesthetic modernity’s “disruptiveness” comes into play. Aesthetic

modernity disrupts what is presented as a seamless continuity of pastness and presence in a comparable way to the simulacrum's disruption of what appears as a seamless continuity between the copy and the model. Aesthetic modernity's work is to put up a challenge to the false discourse which posits the advent of modernity along the lines the following formula: tradition as the model and modernity as the copy.

Though the contours of this arguably intransigent problem could be observed wherever the idea of nationalism took root, the specificities of the discursive approaches meant to treat it are understandably different in the Arab world. In his comprehensive study, *The Arab World: Society, Culture, and State*, the novelist and sociologist Halim Barakat<sup>70</sup> calls the final product of the above-described process a distorted and inverted modernity (23).<sup>71</sup> "This

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<sup>70</sup> With regard to the rise of nationalism, Barakat argues that "the dominance of nationalist ideas during this period [1918-1945] must be explained in terms of the imperialist oppression that befell Arabs and not in terms of the emulation of European models" (251-2). In other words, he also frames the question of nationalism between a response to outside forces or emulation of a foreign idea.

<sup>71</sup> In his analysis of modernity and tradition, Barakat draws on Hisham Sharabi: "Generalizing the patriarchal nature of the Arab family to other institutions has been more fully and broadly developed by Sharabi in a later major work, *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society* (1988). By patriarchy, Sharabi understands 'a universal form of traditional society,' in contrast to modernity (which 'occurred in its original form in Western Europe'). He further argues that the Arab renaissance in fact deformed rather than displaced the patriarchal structure of Arab society, in the sense that modernization produced a hybrid society and culture. What developed was neopatriarchy, a system that is neither traditional nor modern. The central feature of this new system has continued to be 'the dominance of the father (patriarch), the center around which national as well as the natural family are organized. Thus between ruler and ruled, between father and child, there exist only vertical relations: in both settings the paternal will is the absolute will, mediated in both society and the family by a forced consensus based on ritual and coercion'" (264).

modernization,"<sup>72</sup> Barakat explains, "has not only failed to break down patriarchal relations and forms, it has provided the ground for producing a hybrid—the present neopatriarchal society, which is neither modern nor traditional, but which limits participation by its members because of the continued dominance exercised by single leaders" (23). Modernity, Barakat suggests, is expected to "breakdown" older forms in order to be deemed successful. One cannot argue in favour of patriarchal forms, but to expect modernity to break them down is too optimistic. It is an optimistic expectation because of its underlying assumption that modernity simply replaces (or at least ought to replace) that which existed before, or that its manifestation in a given milieu would necessarily resemble its manifestation elsewhere.

After an active struggle lasting "a century and a half to meet the challenges of modern times," Barakat writes, the final product of this struggle between local and borrowed elements is nothing short of an amalgamation of contrasting social structures. As such, the mixture of contrasts and variations that is postcolonial Arab society makes any meaningful generalization virtually impossible:

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<sup>72</sup> Notice that there is no meaningful distinction being made between modernity and modernization. This general lack of nuance with regard to these labels is widespread and is not specific to Barakat. Amin Maalouf, for instance, treats the achievements of what Calinescu calls cultural and industrial modernities as if they were the achievements of a single, homogeneous process rather than two distinct processes which tend to express fierce hostility toward each other, not to mention that he uses the concepts of modernization, westernization, and modernity interchangeably (78-79). While modernization can be undertaken in material terms, modernity has to penetrate deep enough in the social fabric so as to give rise to a new worldview—rather than to skyscrapers. Modernism, as Calinescu rightly points out, is a single face of modernity which enacts such a new worldview (or an artistic mediation of it) in the aesthetic arena.

The result has been a battle between the old and the new in every aspect of human life. Confrontations between vehemently opposed forces have led to a strenuous process of rebirth. The intensely transitional nature of contemporary Arab society makes generalization difficult. Arab society today is neither traditional nor modern, old or new, capitalist or socialist or feudal, Eastern or Western, religious or secular, particularistic or universalistic in its cultural orientations. (Barakat 22)

As Mondal explains, the discourse of modernity in India was deployed in an attempt to stamp out the multifarious traditions of the subcontinent in order to establish the cultural homogeneity required for a cohesive and functioning nation-state. In the Arab world, however, the situation necessitated the accommodation of what was—and to a large extent still is—seen as a unitary tradition because this unifying tradition represented the main pillar supporting nationalism in its pan-Arab incarnation. It is for this reason that (pan-) nationalist discourse in the Arab world has deployed tradition at the expense of its interpretation of modernity rather than choosing to deploy the discourse of (industrial) modernity to lessen the affective impact of tradition. This is understandable considering that tradition was posited as the main source of pride around which the masses can coalesce, in addition to representing the hope for a potential rebirth that would establish continuity between the past and the presence.

These critiques remain hampered by their continuing to revolve around the axis of similitude. The claim that modernity in these contexts is distorted could only be made on the assumption that it is possible for it to be authentic in the sense of replicating its course elsewhere. It would, therefore, be questionable to claim that modernity either succeeded or failed, nor is it possible to determine

whether its fight against tradition has been either won or lost. Doing so would be to begin by posing the wrong question. In postcolonial contexts, the introduction of modernity is a point of no return: it is neither possible for tradition to reemerge nor for modernity to stamp it out. With this in mind, Baudelaire's enthusiasm for the theoretical clean cut modernity makes between the past and the present is certainly not applicable here—that is, if we assume it were really applicable even in Baudelaire's own context.

#### 4.6 An Alternative Critique

What one cannot fail to notice that the lines of criticism of modernity outlined above have a decidedly descriptive nature—*how* the discourse of modernity was deployed coupled with a description of the adverse results of such a deployment. The core idea driving this criticism revolves around the notion that the main issue with modernity's face in those contexts is related to its appearance either as corrupted or as an outright foreign transplant. While this might be true in a strictly historical sense, this criticism remains lacking in that it does not provide a thorough assessment—rather than answering the question “*how* the advent of modernity took place?” the true question ought to be “in what way could the project of modernity be best reassessed?” It is no surprise that the descriptive approach, despite its indispensable historical insights, produces only part of the picture—the part that focuses either on interrogating industrial modernity or on pointing out the falsehood of the discourse on modernity proposed mainly by the nationalists. In some cases, it does not even move beyond the problems inherent in the process of modernization, which is itself only a single component of industrial modernity.



In his recent book, *The Trials of Arab Modernity*, Tarek El-Ariss attempts to provide an alternative to these critiques of modernity. In order to do so, he proposes to analyze a select number of texts, a number of which are associated with the Arab renaissance of the nineteenth century (known in Arabic as *al-Nahda*). Rather than follow the wide-spread practice of highlighting the historical, sociological, and political aspects of these texts, he instead reads them by focusing “on the body as a site of rupture and signification... [in order to shift] the paradigm for the study of modernity in the Arab context from questions of representation and cultural exchange to an engagement with a genealogy of symptoms and affects” (2).<sup>73</sup>

Though I disagree with the letter of his proposed reinterpretation of Arab modernity, I very much subscribe to the spirit of his reassessment, the mere existence of which responds to the urgency of undertaking such work as well as the necessity to rethink the project of modernity itself:

This study reframes Arab modernity (*hadatha*) as somatic condition, which takes shape through accidents and events (*ahdath*) emerging in and between Europe and the Arab world, the literary text and political discourse. Focusing on travelers and literary characters as they wander, run, take shelter, crouch, faint, panic, and go mad, I identify the simultaneous performances and contestations—or trials—of modernity. (3)

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<sup>73</sup> Despite the author’s intention of going beyond traditional interpretations of modernity, a quick look at the book’s table of contents reveals that the book still adheres more or less to the conventional narrative of Arab modernity which is based on providing historical surveys: its starts with Rifa’a Rafi’ al-Tahtawi (1801-1873), moves through Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq (1804-1886) before getting to Tayeb Salih’s (1929-2009) famous novel, culminates with an examination of contemporary novelists, and ends with discussion on blogging. What he manages to do, however, is leave behind the crippling question of the success and failure of modernity.

Explaining modernity by way of examining its performative aspect could be traced back to Baudelaire's essay. However, the spirit animating El-Ariss's reading remains refreshing. This reading comes out of a conviction whose underlying impetus is an acknowledgement of the shortcomings of previous interpretative models according to which modernity stood mainly for a teleological or utilitarian project. This project was associated with a more or less clearly defined objectives as well as with the assumption that its success could be judged according to the familiar criterion of similitude.

Most important, the development of new approaches to the evaluation or interpretation of modernity entails first of all the divergence "from the linear genealogy of Arab modernity starting with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt (1798) and Haykal's *Zaynab* (1913), which is considered to be the first Arabic novel" (El-Ariss 8-9). Doing so is necessary for the above mentioned reason but also so as to avoid the pitfall of reducing the question of modernity to the colonial enterprise: "rather than reduce modernity to the European colonial project deployed through an identifiable set of social, political, and discursive practices, it's necessary to perform instead a careful exploration of spaces of critique within [modernity's] literary manifestations and instances unraveling in Arabic texts" (El-Ariss 11). This self-awareness ascribed to the modernity of the Arabic texts that El-Ariss analyzes is a fundamental aspect of modernity's formal procedure. If we are to interrogate modernity as it is manifested in text, the first step would entail the abandoning of the conventional critiques of modernity whose pillars rest on the models of aesthetic representation and political discourse.

The spirit animating the analysis of El-Ariss, for one thing, leads to the conclusion that the so-called neopatriarchy (alongside other terms used to describe a stunted or deformed modernity) is not so much the definitive proof exposing the face of the “failed project of modernity.” A close look at the discourse of critics of modernity reveals the tendency to interpret the project of modernity as a project of transference. As such, the project’s success or failure is decided on the basis of its degree of resemblance.

The fact that the same criterion of similitude is deployed in the assessment of national identity is not a coincidence. The symbiotic relationship between modernity and nationalism indicates that we are dealing with the same problem, only that this problem has various manifestations. Continuing with this idea, one could say that, as modernity’s offspring or begetter (depending on which side of the cause-and-effect argument one takes), national identity ought not to be judged on whether its (always perceived) effect is beneficial, destructive, or ethically justifiable. Rather, the judgment ought to be based on whether it is borrowed in line with the paradigm of similitude or newly re-imagined in accordance with the paradigm of difference. As such, modern forms of identification come to be seen as arising out of modernity’s perennial split and not out of the reproducibility of its condition. Put in other words, they are forms of identifications that deliberately expose the split between difference and similitude so as not to embrace similitude at the expense of suppressing the difference which lies at the heart of all identities.

By way of concluding this chapter, I want to highlight two key points to be distilled from the preceding discussion. Knowing that modernity is always in

a perpetual *dialectical* opposition to tradition, it would be misleading to judge its success or failure outside of the Western context through the degree of its resemblance to the modernity that originally emerged in Europe. The project of modernity as such cannot succeed or fail because it can neither be assessed from a teleological perspective, nor could its accomplishments be measured on the basis of resemblance. As Calinescu argues, modernity is a crisis concept whose mode of operation relies on perpetually responding to the specific crisis at hand rather than on providing functional solutions to it.

As is the case with nationalism, then, modernity emerges as a response to a problem, not as a portable set of mechanisms or reform objectives as certain (sometimes even opposed) discursive traditions would have us believe; modernity appears as a way of engendering new forms of identification to replace preceding ones which are no longer in tandem with the society's condition. Its form and shape will ultimately be determined by the problem to which it initially responds, not by its degree of similitude to the modernity that developed elsewhere, under different circumstances, and in response to a different crisis.

In addition, "reflexivity" is an indispensable, constituent element of modernity. As Giddens explains in *Modernity and Self-Identity*, modernity creates the "trust in institutions," a trust in faceless institutions upon which national identity is predicated. Its reflexivity, however, promotes radical doubt not only insofar as institutions are concerned but also with regard to other aspects of modern society, including the conceptual mechanisms of identification. This radical doubt should be considered to be an endemic force that works from

within the trust-promoting mechanisms—as a corrosive agent intrinsic to that same national identity. Giddens elaborates on this point, writing that

Modernity is a post-traditional order, but not one in which the sureties of tradition and habit have been replaced by the certitude of rational knowledge. Doubt, a pervasive feature of modern critical reason, permeates into everyday life as well as philosophical consciousness, and forms a general existential dimension of the contemporary social world. Modernity institutionalises the principle of radical doubt and insists that all knowledge takes the form of hypotheses: claims which may very well be true, but which are in principle always open to revision and may have at some point to be abandoned. (Giddens 2-3)

While it is the condition of modernity that makes possible the development of national consciousness—or, as Mondal would have it, the cultural politics whose functioning is dependent on national identities—the same condition contains within it the seeds of radical doubt that make it possible for non-normative forms of identifications to emerge. It is, from this perspective, misleading to see in modernity a complete replacement of previous forms of social organization or to assume that it is necessary to go beyond the premises of modernity to achieve a state of affairs in which the pernicious sameness of national consciousness ceases to be the fundamental parameters for identification between the self and the other.

This is the point at which one begins to grasp the broad significance of the narrative-based critique of national identity. Not only does this critique represent a refusal to engage nationalist discourse on its own territory, it also mobilizes the perennial doubt which imbues the experiences of individuals in modern society. The critique of national identity, then, reaches the heart of the trouble with

modernity by targeting modernity's ubiquitous surrogate. From this perspectives, accentuating difference in national identity constitutes both a countering of the discursive assumptions that underlie nationalism as well as a readjustment of the way modernity is understood and, thus, critiqued. Placing pressure on national identity's assumptions of similitude is the same procedure holding the potential of remaining the other of the two main camps concerned with modernity: from the one advocating the enactment of modernity according to the model/copy formula and from the reactionary forces which reject modernity precisely because of that. If the narratives which posit national identity as difference do not provide serviceable solutions to the most intractable problems facing the modern national community, they at least carve out the space required for beginning to ask the right questions.

## Conclusion: The Promise of a Re-Imagined Community?

The effects of power are both immensely durable and fragile... the subject, far from being powerless to intervene in the operations of discursive power, has the ability to shape and reorganize the discursive formation itself.

Anshuman Mondal, *Nationalism and Post-Colonial Identity*

It is the map that precedes the territory.

Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*

When considered against the background of nationalism, narratives tend to be interpreted as supportive of its cause, as critical of it, or as exhibiting at least a suspicion of its operation. The reading of *Little Mountain* and *Midnight's Children* offered here aims to transcend this line of interpretation for the sake of proposing an analytical judgment that would not be persuaded into accepting the text's discursive pronouncements. This analytical judgment is not meant to suggest that it would not be possible to find instances where the unraveling of the premises of national identity as described in this study actually coincides with a decidedly critical discourse. Instead, it is meant to underscore the danger which lies in those instances where the seemingly critical discourse coincides with a structure that has the capacity to undermine silently what could rightly appear as critical discourse.

As an example of this structural capacity to undermine critical discourse, I want to consider the narrative of Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum*. In "Saleem Fathered by Oskar," Patricia Merivale compares the literary strategies of *Midnight's Children* and *The Tin Drum*. After enumerating the considerable

overlap of literary strategies in the two novels, Merivale alludes to what I find to be the most decisive overlap: “the ‘literal’ connections between the heroes and history are deliberately strained” (18). “Both Grass’s and Rushdie’s heroes,” she says, “are... ‘handcuffed to history,’ obliged to bear witness to their times, ‘with no getting away from the date’ for either of them. Year by year, event by event, the ‘times’ build up their selves as well as their stories” (6). They both, however, “retreat, at thirty, to ‘the fringes’ of life, an insane asylum and a pickle factory” (Merivale 8). The narrator’s retreat is an essential structural element in both novels. Writing the narrative from this vantage point gives the narrator the prerogative to rearrange narrative discourse in such a way as to add a critical shade of meaning: to mount a structural form of resistance in the face of nationalism’s logic of identity. In both novels, the retreat becomes the site at which the binding of the nation and the narrative’s central figure is structurally unraveled. For the purposes of undertaking such a project, the image of the insane asylum is just as fitting as that of the pickle factory.

It would be superfluous to analyze Grass’s novel in line with the analysis of *Midnight’s Children* and *Little Mountain* offered in this study. What I want to do, instead, is offer a brief comparison of the transformation which the narrative of *The Tin Drum* undergoes in the film adaptation. I draw attention to this transformation because it serves as a concise illustration of how a narrative could keep its critical discourse, but is ultimately stripped of the structural unraveling of national identity. In “A Different Drummer,” Carol Hall describes part of the transformation as follows:



In Günter Grass's novel, Oskar, the thirty-year-old narrator, retells his picaresque tale of anti-development from the scrubbed bed of a mental hospital. In the film, the offscreen child-voice of Oskar takes us episodically and in chronological order from the conception of his mother to his twentieth year. The decision to relinquish the perspective of the omniscient, older Oskar was central to Schlöndorff's vision of the film as a whole. (237)

This decision is explained as being necessary for creating a successful cinematic adaptation.<sup>74</sup> Rather than the requirements for cinematic adaptation, what I find interesting are the consequences of that adaptation. In light of the preceding analysis, the transformation results in a narrative which leaves the visceral bond intact— though the narrative in the film is inspired by one whose structure unravels the binding of character and nation.

In both film and novel, Oskar's stunted growth serves as an important narrative mechanism. Oskar ceases to grow with the rise of National Socialism and resumes right after the end of the war. The novel's third part, removed in its entirety from the film version, undertakes the crucial step of unraveling the bond made so explicit in the connection between the personal and the national. Made through critical plot points, this connection remains intact in the film as the narrative concludes with the fall of National Socialism and the resumption of Oskar's growth. As such, the end result is a narrative whose discourse condemns

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<sup>74</sup> I think that cinematic adaptations of novels are not required to be faithful to the text. The comparison between novel and film, therefore, should not be seen as implicitly arguing for fidelity to the text. Rather, I bring up this comparison only to illustrate the interaction between the discursive and structural elements of narrative—which happens to be quite lucid in this particular example—in light of this study's central argument.

National Socialism but maintains Oskar's visceral bond to the German nation as such.

It is essential, then, to recognize that the logic of nationalism is reliant on a law of representation, which, though drawing on discursive elements, is ultimately guided by a structural procedure. Because this is an essentially modern structural procedure governing identification between the one and the many, the distinctive tackling of national identity in *Little Mountain* and *Midnight's Children* is not merely an exercise in "identity politics." Rather, tackling the intricate problematics of national identity is ultimately an expression of the novels' implicit engagement with the daunting project of reassessing modernity's legacy. This conclusion comes about as part of the assertion that a holistic assessment of modernity's role in the domain of the nation must take stock of the fundamental forces of similitude and difference—it must, in other words, lay bare the inherent split at the heart of nationalism's incessant drive for similitude.

Since both *Little Mountain* and *Midnight's Children* do precisely that, the image of national identity each creates is not only a new or alternative reenactment of that identity, one which brings to the fore this underlying split, neither by "ruthlessly forgetting" that identity's tradition nor by simply incorporating the forces of similitude and difference. Most crucially, this critique of national identity gains its momentum by allowing difference to reclaim its rightful space. In some ways, this narrative tension between similitude and difference mirrors the hostility resulting from the enmity of the two modernities, each trying to consume the other. Highlighting the fundamental split of

difference at the heart of national identity—exposing the weakness of similitude—constitutes the core of the process which organically develops the uneasiness about identity as similarity.

From this standpoint, posing the right question about nationalism's function in the time to come does not require an investigation as to whether national identity happens to be genuine, a pure construct, or even imagined. Instead, the right question involves inquiring as to whether or not national identity should be imagined *without annulling the difference at its heart*. This is not so much the promise of re-imagining a new national community. It is, rather, a more modest promise of reassessing the national community itself. What the narratives analyzed in this study do is take apart the elemental building blocks of national identity which was developed based on the model of similitude—on the old Platonic paradigm of model and copy. In doing so they express the possibility and willingness to interrogate nothing less than the most formidable pattern of identification to which the project of modernity has given rise. These narratives show, in addition, that the identity of modernity is always an “other,” a difference aware of its being such. Even the conventional identity of modernity that is associated with what Mondal terms as an “enclave of pure reason” has in its own time been an “other” to a state of affairs within which the principal mechanism of identification was ordained by a transcendental authority.

On the theoretical level, this identity may be described as identity set against itself. This theoretical formula is translated in *Little Mountain* in the form of a fragmented narrative set against its own primeval desire to unfold, with its forward movement repeatedly stunted by the unbearable burden of repetition. In

*Midnight's Children*, it is translated in the form of a narrative that undoes its own efforts to produce the meaning it hopelessly desires to produce—its primeval desire to be a “proper” national narrative.

National identity, in the final analysis, amounts to more than a deformed child of political discourse. Given that the seeds of doubt about national identity already exist at its very core, it is far more forceful to create the condition within which the seeds of difference could grow rather than expect rhetorical attacks to achieve what they are ultimately incapable of achieving.

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## Vita

<b>Name:</b>	Karim Abuawad
<b>Post-secondary Education and Degrees:</b>	Western University London, Ontario, Canada Ph.D. 2011-2015  University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Urbana, Illinois, United States M.A. 2010  University of Illinois at Chicago Chicago, Illinois, United States B.A. 2008
<b>Awards</b>	German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) Research Grant for Doctoral Candidates and Young Academics 2014-2015  Dean's Graduate Thesis Research Award Arts & Humanities, Western University 2013  Arts & Humanities Interdisciplinary Scholarship Western University 2012
<b>Related Work Experience</b>	Instructor Western University 2011-2014  Sessional Professor Fanshawe College Fall 2013  Lecturer Al-Quds University 2010-2011