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Prometheus in the Iraqi Alley: Muḥammad Khudayyir's 21st Century *Adab*

INTRODUCTION

In the first part of his long literary career, Muḥammad Khudayyir (b. 1942 in Basra) was far from being a prolific author, having had only three collections of short stories published in more than three decades. However, lately Khudayyir has become a keen user of digital platforms and published an impressive quantity of short pieces of different kinds (from fiction to book reviews, from observations on figurative art to socio-political commentary), especially via his Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100012109175548>).

It is evident that one of the factors that has led to this late flurry of production is the perilous state of Iraqi society and culture, especially after 2003. As far as Iraqi culture is concerned, one of the most distressing events of 2003 was the partial burning and looting of the National Museum and National Library and Archive. Khudayyir has reacted to the threats to the Iraqi cultural memory by writing short articles that were then collected in the book *Tārīkh zuqāq: maqālāt fī mi'awiyyat al-sard al-irāqī* ('History of an alley: articles on the centenary of Iraqi fiction', 2019).

In this work, Khudayyir writes his own version of a history of modern Iraqi fiction, paying imaginative and intricate homage to the writers of previous generations. Here we will first analyse how Khudayyir inscribes his literary historiography within a cultural context that is both specifically Iraqi and typical of today's globalisation. We will then show not only how he evaluates the legacy of Mahdī 'Īsā al-Ṣaqr (1927-2006), but also how he interacts with al-Ṣaqr's work. In an attempt to evaluate Khudayyir's writing in this latest phase as symptomatic of an ambivalent cultural project, we will analyse:

1) the style he adopts in his literary historiography as he responds to the burning of the archive and tries to preserve a ‘memory of literature’ (Erl 2011: 70);

2) the content of relevant fictional texts in which he questions whether his own attempts to recover a literary past can have real purchase in the current Iraqi cultural landscape;

3) his use of the internet, as a way of placing Khudayyir within the new context of digital literature in Arabic.

IRAQI CULTURAL MEMORY IN PERIL: THE BURNING OF THE ARCHIVE

The destruction and burning of local archives during the sectarian strife of recent years, and the disappearance of the libraries from monasteries and old churches, have shaken confidence in any positive value provided by auxiliary memories, internal or external. There is a great fear that the losses to the nation’s cultural memory since the beginning of the twentieth century will be replaced by alternative resources supplied by expedient political and cultural memory (literary theories, translated technical terms and dictionaries, publishing houses, conferences and prizes, book exhibitions, superficial laws, in general all forms of the new dogma). There is an astonishing knowledge vacuum, which this centenary catalogue is attempting to fill before it is too late.

Muhammad Khudayyir, *Tārīkh zuqāq*, 21¹

It is enough to read only the first few pages of *Tārīkh zuqāq* to realise that Khudayyir sees this book as his contribution to salvaging part of Iraq’s cultural memory of the troubled 20th and early 21st century. The articles that refer to individual writers, or a group of writers or works,

are preceded by six chapters that, along with a very brief preliminary note, are Khudayyir's personal attempt at tracing the development of modern Iraqi fiction and evoking a cultural and literary context within which writers operated and their works appeared (sometimes only to disappear and be forgotten). These preliminary chapters are dominated by the author's acute awareness of the recent disruptive and violent events affecting Iraqi culture. Perhaps the most emblematic of these has been the burning and looting of the Iraqi National Museum and the Iraqi Library and Archive in Baghdad in April 2003, following the collapse of the Ba'athist regime and the invasion of the city by American-led forces. These latest events are seen within a historical context from the colonial period to the globalisation of today, passing through the years of 'war, blockade and dictatorship' (Khudayyir 2019: 21), a context that is seen as continuously threatening the preservation of a national cultural memory:

Our cultural memory is characterized by a common feature of national memories that are plundered from time to time because of wars and ideological and ethnic intolerance: ours is a branded, violated, confined and wasted memory, a precious energy that militarized powers and colonial authorities have squandered in systematic attacks, and may subject to a process of globalisation through inflicting on it a kind of cultural entropy [...] (Khudayyir 2019: 19)

Figure 1

It is to confront 'the burning of the archive' and the threat of this 'globalised adaptation' that Khudayyir proposes a cataloguing of texts, to which he aims to contribute. However modest he feels this archival project might be, he offers it in an attempt 'to prevent the literary energy

and its traditions from being squandered and abused' (Khudayyir 2019: 19). Although he is no reactionary nationalist, nor a traditionalist looking nostalgically back at the past, Khudayyir is aware of the ambiguous potential of globalisation. As Andreas Pflitsch has indicated, globalisation can indeed result in a predominantly western popular culture damaging 'deep-rooted traditions and ending their rich diversity of form'. Conversely, 'cultural globalization processes can replicate the "purified" homogenous cultures of nation states and everyday culture can be enriched through borrowings from across the globe' (Pflitsch 2010: 233). In order to confront the threat of globalisation and, at the same time, exploit its possibilities, Khudayyir's work moves into two directions simultaneously. On one hand, he strives to salvage a memory of past literary practices that are part of the long cultural history of Iraq; on the other, he is uncompromisingly open to the different cultures of the world.²

Khudayyir sees his work as part of a broad cultural tradition that resulted in the creation of substantial encyclopaedic works appearing in Iraq in the 20th century. He recalls the works of Iraqi historians (like the literary historian and critic 'Abd al-Ilāh Aḥmad - 1940-2007) and lexicographers (like Father Anastas the Carmelite, 1866-1947). After the decline of this kind of work and the partial destruction and looting of the Iraqi Museum Library, the National Library and Archive, which Khudayyir calls 'catastrophes', 'the link between memory and its active traditions was broken' (Khudayyir 2019: 20). This chronic instability, Khudayyir observes in *Tārīkh*, has led to a lack of any organic development in the writing of fiction, as the new generation has been prevented from building effectively on the achievements of their predecessors. Here, Khudayyir reiterates the concerns expressed by 'Abd al-Ilāh Aḥmad in his seminal critical works (see Caiani and Cobham 2013: 61).

It is within this context that Khudayyir pays homage to key Iraqi writers of the previous generations, whose legacy he feels has been betrayed, and those who have been largely neglected and whose published work has been dramatically curtailed by unfavourable

circumstances (often of a political nature) and is now hard to find. These include the main figures of ‘the lost generation’ (*jīl al-ḍayā*), a term he borrows from ‘Abd al-Ilāh Aḥmad that describes the generation who came of age during, but were disoriented by, the first republican phase of 1958-1963, writers who could not build on their promising early stories, such as Yaḥyā Jawād (1928-1984), Nizār ‘Abbās (1934-2003) and Muḥammad Rūznāmjī (b. 1927) (Khudaḍayyir 2019: 109). Khudaḍayyir then goes on to survey the writers of ‘the generations of danger’ (*ajyāl al-khaṭar*) who, like himself, produced their main works during the rule of the Ba‘th from 1968 to 2003, a regime that put increasing pressure on writers to comply with its official line and ideology.

It is when writing about the ‘professors’ of realist writing of the so-called ‘1950s Generation’ that Khudaḍayyir conveys most strikingly, through his own original kind of literary criticism, how he sees his own development as a writer and the development of Iraqi modern fiction as a whole. For readers familiar with the works of ‘Abd al-Malik Nūrī (1921-1998), Mahdī ‘Isā al-Ṣaqr (1927-2006), Fu‘ād al-Takarlī (1927-2008) and Ghā‘ib Ṭu‘ma Farmān (1927-1990), to read the often moving pages that Khudaḍayyir dedicates to them is an exhilarating experience.

PROMETHEUS IN THE IRAQI ALLEY

In this section, we will focus exclusively on Khudaḍayyir’s writing on just one of the masters of the ‘1950s Generation’, his fellow Basran, Mahdī ‘Isā al-Ṣaqr. In his article ‘Qal‘at al-ṣaqr’ (‘Al-Ṣaqr’s castle’ or ‘The hawk’s castle’) Khudaḍayyir sees al-Ṣaqr as a Promethean figure. In Greek mythology, the demigod Prometheus defies the gods and steals fire from Mount Olympus to give it to humankind. In Khudaḍayyir’s allegorical vision of the history of Iraqi

fiction, al-Şaqr's Promethean fire is what he names 'the second language', 'the vast language of dreams' (Khudayyir 2019: 89) that allows al-Şaqr to transcend his 'first language', that of mimetic, realist representation. Ambiguity and indirectness are features of a superior form of fiction in Khudayyir's view, and he criticises today's Iraqi writers for imitating the realist style of those masters, without possessing their empowering 'second language'. Khudayyir urges the Iraqi writers of today to know their predecessors, to learn how to read their works, because the gleam of al-Şaqr's stories 'only shines when they are translated into the forgotten language of Prometheus' (Khudayyir 2019: 89). In other words, in order to build on the legacy of al-Şaqr's fiction, writers should go beyond realism in imaginative ways. This means that, in Khudayyir's view, whereas Prometheus heroically gifted humankind with the fire of creativity and art, al-Şaqr's gift of the 'second language' to the following generations of Iraqi writers has not always been received efficiently.

The call to remember and the concern about forgetting are central to Khudayyir's work. An analysis of the evolution of his literary homage to al-Şaqr will not only show how he reflects on the legacy of the '1950s Generation', but also how he engages with this legacy creatively.

ANATOMY OF A LITERARY HOMAGE

'Qal'at al-şaqr' is Khudayyir's latest contribution to tracing the legacy of the pioneering phase of realist fiction in Iraq and takes place within a discourse that is ambivalent and always evolving. The text included in *Tārīkh* is the latest version of a piece that first appeared on the writer's Facebook page on 9/8/2012 under the title 'Ḥulm şaqr' ('The dream of a hawk'). The same piece was updated with significant edits and additions under a new title, 'Qal'at al-Şaqr', included in the collection of articles *Rasā'il min thaqb al-saraṭān* ('Letters from the crab hole', 2017). This new updated version is dated 12/3/2016. Apart from a couple of typographical

corrections, this *Rasā'il* version was then used as the first part of the most recent, undated version of 'Qal'at al-Şaqr' included in *Tārīkh* (2019), to which a new, substantial second part has been added.

The changes made to this text over time indicate an increasing pessimism in Khuda'yir's vision regarding the ability of today's writers to learn 'the second language' of the pioneering realist writers and safeguard their legacy, and, ultimately, question whether their realist approach is still tenable today. At the end of the first Facebook version of the homage ('Hulm şaqr', 2012), Khuda'yir seems to suggest that today's realist writer ('of the first language') could perhaps be inspired to rise to the heights reached by al-Şaqr: 'He is forever lost in the roads of the deep valley while the hawk's flame [al-Şaqr's flame] burns over his head, inextinguishable, on a high rock. Suddenly he grows two wings and soars up into the heights' (Khuda'yir 2012). The end of the first part in the new version, that of 'Qal'at al-Şaqr' (2017 and 2019), is much more sceptical:

Woe to the new realists!

[...] When they manage to reach [al-Şaqr's] old [castle], they stand there in bewilderment. Then suddenly they grow wings and soar up into the heights and break into the ancient cities. Is this another tragedy looking like a new beginning? (Khuda'yir 2017: 338; Khuda'yir 2019: 91-2).

Khuda'yir's non-fictional writings can always be read as addressing his own fictional work, more or less overtly. In 'Qal'at al-Şaqr' (2017, 2019) he refers ironically to himself as an inadequate heir to al-Şaqr's legacy, who could only aspire to invent a conclusion to one of al-Şaqr's dreams. This is a clear reference to the text 'Hulm al-şaqr' ('Al-Şaqr's dream'; not to

be confused with the Facebook post ‘Ḥulm ṣaqr’, ‘The dream of a hawk’) included in *Aḥlām Bāṣūrā* (‘Bāṣūrā’s dreams’, Khudaḡyir 2016: 81-9), a *naṣṣ jāmi* ‘, a hybrid ‘assembling text’ in which fictional and non-fictional pieces are collected.³

This hybrid text is made up of a short introductory paragraph and three sections. First, Khudaḡyir introduces briefly a dream that al-Ṣaqr narrated in his autobiographical *Waj’ al-kitāba* (‘The pain of writing’, 2001). In al-Ṣaqr’s narration of the dream, he sees himself being chased through a strange, deserted city, ‘half city, half village’ (al-Ṣaqr 2001: 47). He is unable to see his pursuer, although he can hear the pounding of his feet behind him. A blind man blocks his way and directs his pursuer towards him. Terrified, al-Ṣaqr is unable to escape and wakes up in a panic (al-Ṣaqr 2001: 48). Al-Ṣaqr’s narration of the dream is economical and Khudaḡyir adds telling details to it and attempts to imagine a conclusion. He first builds on the nightmarish atmosphere of the original text: the city his authorial persona is moving through, in search of al-Ṣaqr, is not only strange and deserted but is a post-apocalyptic space containing rubbish left behind by its former inhabitants, who have departed in a hurry or are in hiding (Khudaḡyir 2016: 81). As the Khudaḡyir character is looking for al-Ṣaqr (in an attempt to dream his dream), he is in turn chased by sinister long clubs, truncheons (*al-hirāwāt*), whose shadows he sees moving along the walls (Khudaḡyir 2016: 82). Al-Ṣaqr’s real nightmare can be read in different ways. It might be interpreted as a reflection of the state of mind of a writer living in a society ruled by a coercive political power that strives to control him. Accordingly, the blind man would stand for an Iraqi everyman, a common citizen who, having lost the ability to ‘discern’ (*abṣara*), is at the service of that coercive power. In Khudaḡyir’s dream/story, the atmosphere of a police state is conveyed further (the long truncheons). However, literary considerations are never far away in Khudaḡyir’s work and here his character wonders what remains of al-Ṣaqr’s legacy and what happened to the forsaken city. With a clear reference to a quintessential Iraqi city (Basra or Baghdad), once glorious and now reduced to the city-village

of al-Ṣaqr's dream, he asks: 'Wasn't it once ruled by caliphs, kings and adventurous leaders, wasn't it brimming with monuments and traditions, wasn't it a city of words (*kalām*), so why has it become wordless?' (Khudayyir 2016: 82). The police-state atmosphere goes hand in hand with the cultural decline of the city: 'not a gleam of light to indicate a human being or generation or group [of writers/artists] who used to be there, no book, no newspaper, no printing house' (Khudayyir 2016: 82). In Khudayyir's text, the connection between the blind man and power is confirmed and expanded. Here, crucially, the undiscerning man is in charge of al-Ṣaqr's legacy, his texts. Khudayyir's persona finds the blind man of al-Ṣaqr's dream in a cave full of computers. He tells the Khudayyir character that the texts of the old master have been confiscated by those in charge of the cave, who have subsequently wiped them. But the narrator leaves the cave and intends to go on looking for another, more collaborative character (*anmūdḥaj ḥaqīqī*, literally 'a genuine model', Khudayyir 2016: 85) from al-Ṣaqr's fiction, who might be able to help him find a trace of the master. There is a glimmer of hope here, suggesting that Khudayyir and the other Iraqi writers of today may be able to rescue something from the generation of the masters, and be fruitfully inspired by them.

However, this glimmer of hope is even fainter in the latest version of 'Qal'at' (2019). In its new second part, Khudayyir refers briefly to al-Ṣaqr's life and some of his works, and suggests sadly that with the death of these old writers, the loss of their legacy is a distinct possibility in a country ravaged by violence. He mentions that al-Ṣaqr's death in 2006 coincided with a particularly dark period in the modern history of the country, when sectarian violence was escalating: '[al-Ṣaqr's] voice faded away at dawn on a Wednesday in mid-March 2006, the evening sealed it with the imposition of a curfew in the capital of political turmoil and the morning of the following day closed the doors of the castle of tales, so that no foot walked there, no voice narrated stories.' (Khudayyir 2019: 95) The gloomy atmosphere is unrelenting, and the piece ends thus:

The castle was abandoned and the boat carrying al-Şaqr's stories sailed down the Tigris among the corpses that floated on the river each morning as it returned to its original home. The last metaphor [*al-şūra al-majāziyya al-akhīra*] is a reflection of a reality whose story was not included in a single collection by the previous generation of writers. So the mighty river flows alone with its tales to the gulf of open endings in the Iraqi tragedy. (Khudayyir 2019: 96)

This is a sombre depiction of the state of affairs in Iraq in which the current violence is seen as affecting the writers and texts of an often forgotten past, in addition to contemporary writers, an elegiac characterisation that offers only a glimmer of hope expressed here in the phrase 'open endings'. This reminds us of the finale of 'Hulm al-Şaqr' where the dreamer is determined to search for a way of rescuing al-Şaqr's legacy and a happier ending. It is, however, beyond doubt that Khudayyir has decided to dispel the ambiguity of the first draft of his homage to al-Şaqr (the finale of which envisages the contemporary writer soaring into the sky in search of al-Şaqr's Promethean flame) by turning towards a darker, more disenchanting vision of the new generations of writers, and one that is even dismissive in places. The potential recovery of the legacy of the immediate past, which is hinted at, does not take shape within the text, as if to suggest other texts could come to fill the void and realise the recovery.

Khudayyir's view of the writers of the castle of literary realism (the writers of 'the second language', Khudayyir 2019: 89) is ambivalent as it moves from a convincing expression of his gratitude to them to a poignant evocation of their demise. His more general critical discourse is equally ambivalent. It promotes the retrieval of literary roots as a powerful component of literary and cultural development, but also gestures to the ongoing disruptive

incursions of the political into literature and culture in the Iraqi context. An analysis of three key elements of Khudayyir's writing - *style*, *content* and *medium* - will allow us to characterize further this tension at the heart of his discourse on cultural memory in today's Iraq.

A QUESTION OF STYLE

We sentimental ones who resemble one another in using symbols instead of truth [...]

Muhammad Khudayyir, 27 April 2021, Facebook, *Tamrīn sardī: Rajul bilā dhikrayāt*

Khudayyir writes fiction as if it were literary criticism, and literary criticism as if it were fiction.

The short articles that make up *Tārīkh* are full of symbols. In 'Qal'at', Khudayyir builds symbolically on the literal meaning of al-Ṣaqr's surname, 'the hawk'. The latter is the hawk who can alight from the heights and use the Promethean 'second language' to extract the subject matter for his stories from the silent rocks of the deep valley (that is, the mundane reality of the Iraqi street). His is the flame that burns on the high rocks (fire here being a symbol of the literary sophistication that can elude writers); his is the castle that now lies in ruins (the legacy of realist writing has been a tragic one). This is how the first of the introductory chapters, 'Mawāqī' wa-anṭūlūjjiyāt' ('Sites and Anthologies') begins:

Iraqi literature is drawn to its hundred-year-old roots, just as the eyes are drawn to the vast expanses of land extending for hundreds of kilometres beside the roads between Iraqi cities. Barren fields that are laid bare in the sun, revealing their thorns

and salty plants, and their remaining shepherds, peasants and scattered mud huts. A land that can be clearly viewed in its succession of literary treasures, some dispersed by fierce seasonal winds of change, or consumed by the vermin of greedy ideologies, their rich fat dried up by the sun of wars and conflagrations. Yet in spite of everything, the treasure is not depleted, the heritage, dispersed in the wasteland of fractured memory, continues to be collected and stored. (Khudayyir 2019: 11)

Readers have to work to follow the writer's imagery: he uses symbols and metaphors, which he builds on gradually and returns to in an allegorical set of possible allusions. Reading *Tārīkh* is often more akin to reading poetry than a work of straightforward literary history or criticism. The latter are expected to inform the readers by offering them a coherent narrative and a set of compelling arguments and informative observations. Khudayyir's writing is not entirely devoid of these features, but it is his figurative language that stands out, and through this style, he aims at triggering the imagination of his reader. In his perceptive and informative review of *Tārīkh*, the Iraqi scholar Qays Kāzīm al-Janābī comments approvingly on Khudayyir's 'brilliant' (*shayyiq*) essay-writing style, thanks to which he manages to collapse the borders dividing creative narrative prose and criticism: 'he made essay [writing] [*al-maqāla*] closer to the art of narrative' (al-Janābī 2020).

This insistence on adopting an aesthetically complex language arguably weakens Khudayyir's ability to articulate a rigorous discourse that engages with contemporary events with the urgency and clarity demanded by the current state of Iraq. However, style here fulfils one of the intellectual responsibilities whose importance Khudayyir regularly emphasizes in his cultural discourse: to resist the impoverishment of language. This is a duty that has obvious political implications. Khudayyir has hinted more than once that a vulgarisation and

impoverishment of language has a debilitating effect on the ability of a people to resist tyranny and create independent and original forms of culture.⁴ Khudayyir tries to make sense of the present through language, but he crucially chooses language that is aesthetically charged and is meant to be challenging and to stimulate the reader's imagination. Whereas metaphors and symbols are to be expected in fictional texts, Khudayyir's use of these rhetorical devices in his critical writing is a distinctive feature that makes him stand out from the critics he mentions in his work (like 'Abd al-Ilāh Aḥmad). Within the classical discourse on *majāz* (metaphor) by Arab rhetoricians and linguists, the term is used to describe the symbolic style of the Qur'ān and is seen as a powerful form of expression that some consider rhetorically and stylistically superior (*ablagh*) to *ḥaqīqa*, veridical expression, non-metaphorical style. What the literary theorist and grammarian 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 1078) says about *majāz* describes well the effect of *majāz* as used by Khudayyir:

Majāz, as presented by al-Jurjānī, is a communicative strategy meant to go beyond the limits of conventional language and create new fields of associations. It operates on both the emotional and cognitive levels. Rhetorical communication is a process of encoding and decoding, with the words merely giving a vague indication and the listener being challenged to infer what is intended on the basis of his knowledge of context and situation. (Simon 2011)

The challenge of *majāz* gains further significance if we go back and consider the context within which Khudayyir writes, a context marked by the traumatic experience of 'the burning of the archive'. The transfer from trauma to its image creates a distance between the person the image is addressed to, and the traumatic event. *Majāz* literally means the place or time of 'a going

beyond', 'a leaving behind', and therefore, 'a transcending'. This transfer gives the image a different spatio-temporal dimension from that of the traumatic event inspiring it. Khudayyir often gives his images an atemporal dimension where past, present, and potentially future, coexist. The transfer from the specific time of the trauma to a future when the trauma can be overcome is possible if a cultural memory of the literary past is salvaged.

Khudayyir tries to salvage a national cultural memory by using his imagery and stylized prose. A parallel with the classical European concept of *ars memoriae* can be fruitful here. Ancient mnemonics works on the connection between *loci* (sites, the *mawāqi'* in the Arabic title of the first chapter of *Tārīkh*) with *imagines* (images, *ṣuwar* in Arabic): 'To a series of real or imagined places (*loci*) in one's imagination, one adds images, ideally very vivid pictures (*imagines agentes*), which refer to the things to be remembered' (Erl 2011: 68).

In *Tārīkh*, there is often an evocation of a place that is invested with a special symbolic meaning within Khudayyir's own discourse on Iraqi fiction. A series of images that pertain to authors and their works are associated with these locations. For example, when he refers to the realist writers of the 1950s he often mentions an imaginary 'castle; 'the museum' in Baghdad is used as a symbol of the writers of the colonial period, the barren swathes of land outside urban centres with their thorny plants represent the inhospitable and unforgiving space where the forgotten writers wander, their feet bloodied, their works lost (see extract quoted on p. 12 above). Khudayyir's mnemonic writing through sites and their images can also be compared to Harold Bloom's own concept of *ars memoriae* in his discourse on the western canon. In his conceptualisation, the *loci* are the great writers (e.g. Shakespeare), and the *imagines* are their masterpieces (e.g. *Hamlet*) (Bloom 1994: 21). Whereas Bloom builds on these classical concepts of *loci* and *imagines* to defend the traditional western canon from accusations of exclusivism, Khudayyir's narrower scope is inclusive of marginal, almost forgotten figures (his focus on fiction also demonstrates his attention to the marginal, as there are more Iraqi

canonical *poets* than writers of fiction). Whereas Bloom can be seen in a context of neoliberal globalisation, as a reactionary defender of the western status quo (its literary canon), Khudayyir inscribes the works of the victims of literary and political history in an imaginary Iraqi canon, by writing from a position that the same context has made marginal and perilous.

In her discussion of the expression ‘memory of literature’, Astrid Erll distinguishes between its two aspects. On one hand, the expression indicates how literature is remembered (*genitivus objectivus*) ‘in a socially institutionalized manner, [...] for example, through canon formation and the writing of literary histories’. On the other hand, the expression also indicates how literature remembers itself (*genitivus subjectivus*): ‘In a work of literature, earlier texts are “remembered” through intertextual references’ (Erll 2011: 70). Above, we have seen how Khudayyir’s unusual way of writing literary history can be seen as his original contribution to a would-be future canon. In other words, *Tārīkh*, with its powerful mnemonic imagery (*majāz*) is a work through which Khudayyir ‘remembers’ literature and tries to rescue a national cultural memory. In the following section, we will analyse how in some of his fictional texts, ‘literature remembers itself’ through intertextual references. However, by considering the aesthetics and content of these texts, we will also show how they articulate Khudayyir’s scepticism and questioning attitude further.

KHUDAYYIR’S POETICS OF FIRE FROM PROMETHEUS TO ABŪ ZAYD AL-SARŪJĪ

Let hell unlock

Its mounded oceans of tempestuous fire,

And whelm on them into the bottomless void

This desolated world, and thee, and me,
The conqueror and the conquered, and the wreck
Of that for which they combated!

Prometheus Unbound, Shelley, Act III, Scene 1

Khudayyir appropriates the voice of Abū Zayd al-Sarūjī, the picaresque hero of al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt*, in a short text, 'Ru'yā al-Sarūjī' ('Al-Sarūjī's vision'), included in *Aḥlām Bāṣūrā* ('Bāṣūrā's dreams', 2016). 'Ru'yā al-Sarūjī' is introduced by another sketch, 'Ta'bīr ḥulm maḥfūzī' ('Interpretation of a Maḥfūzian dream'), that gives the vision of Khudayyir's al-Sarūjī a surreal literary and historical context. Najīb Maḥfūz (1911-2006) is imagined, at the end of his life, dreaming of visiting Iraq in 2003, after the fall of Baghdad, referred to as 'the capital of collective death' (Khudayyir 2016: 60). Maḥfūz and his Egyptian *ḥarāfīsh* are welcomed by a strange set of Iraqi characters in an Abbasid khan midway between Baghdad and Wāsiṭ.⁵ The Iraqi characters are presented as a troupe of travelling actors led by a 'fool' (*rajul makhbūl*). The Iraqi actors entertain their Egyptian guests by performing al-Ḥarīrī's *maqāma* n. 29, also known as 'The Maqāma of Wāsiṭ'.⁶ In the *maqāma*, the narrator al-Ḥārith ibn Hammām tells the story of how the eloquent rogue Abū Zayd al-Sarūjī, after his usual virtuoso display of verbal skills and knowledge, drugs and robs the travellers staying at the khan of Wāsiṭ.⁷ In Khudayyir's text, Maḥfūz and his companions similarly fall victims to the Iraqis who drug them, tie them with ropes and abandon them in the middle of the night. Whereas in the *maqāma* the trickster is the affable rogue Abū Zayd, whose literary knowledge and eloquence is extraordinary, in Khudayyir's story, the make-up of the troupe is sinister: the actors are actually a group of 'doctors', whose real occupation is to torture prisoners, some madmen who escaped

from al-Shammā'iyya psychiatric hospital, and some merchants, all in flight from Baghdad, a city now under occupation (Khudayyir 2016: 61).

The end of the eccentric Iraqi dream that Khudayyir ascribes to Maḥfūz mirrors the end of 'Qal'at al-Ṣaqr' and its scepticism. In the latter we have al-Ṣaqr's stories streaming down the Tigris along with anonymous corpses; here we read that, whereas Maḥfūz has left the legacy of his great novels, 'the Iraqi dream descends with its impostors [*jarābīz*]⁸ towards its unknown destiny' (Khudayyir 2016: 62). In the postscript to *Aḥlām*, Khudayyir refers to himself and Maḥfūz as kindred spirits who oppose the religious fanaticism that led to the latter being stabbed in 1994, and contributed to the post-2003 sectarian violence and the rise of militant extremist groups in Iraq at the time the former wrote *Aḥlām*.⁹ Their dreams express a 'vision of light and freedom' against the background of violence and its impact on society. We find at the heart of Khudayyir's cultural discourse a dilemma. On one hand, there is a striving to preserve the memory of past literary texts and figures, with an ambition to inscribe them into a collective consciousness. The writing of dreams is invested with an almost militant meaning and is also testament to the sheer freedom of playing with genres, scenes and characters: in spite of its anxious finale, Khudayyir's Maḥfūzian dream is not devoid of the picaresque element that features prominently in the *maqāmāt*. On the other hand, literature's power to combat the 'fear and repression' engendered by endemic violence is diminished by the awareness that an obscure future might await the Iraqis (Khudayyir 2016: 224). This is alluded to in the Iraqi narrative, where the Maḥfūzian optimism in *al-Ḥarāfīsh* is distorted by 'impostors'.

Figure 2

This feeling of uncertainty and pessimism is taken further in the dense prose of the text that follows Maḥfūz’s dream, the obscure vision of Khudayyir’s Abū Zayd al-Sarūjī. Here, the famous protagonist of al-Ḥarīrī’s *Maqāmāt* directly addresses a mysterious group of *jawārī*, the sophisticated courtesans and refined slave-girls of the Arab classical period (disguise is a prominent theme here, as it is in al-Ḥarīrī’s *Maqāmāt*, and this means that the identity of these women remains shrouded in mystery). His connection to al-Ḥarīrī is established in a negative, if poetic, way when he says: ‘I am a voice evicted from the *Maqāmāt*’, ‘I see my end. I am a drop falling from the lake of the *Maqāmāt*’ (Khudayyir 2016: 63, 65). Whereas al-Ḥarīrī’s Abū Zayd is a master of disguises (both visual and verbal), Khudayyir’s Abū Zayd has been subjected to metamorphoses that are out of his control and he refers to the ubiquitous presence of spies, and a feeling of watching and being watched. Al-Ḥarīrī ‘was employed by the Abbasid administration in Baghdad to report on local affairs’ in Basra, as an intelligence officer, *ṣāhib al-khabar* (Cooperson 2020: xxi); in Khudayyir’s piece, Abū Zayd and his master al-Ḥarīrī are fleeing the sinister intelligence officer of Baghdad who is eventually able to catch the former and enrol him to carry out subversive activities. Abū Zayd, a man fleeing the future and approaching his end, conveys to the *jawārī* of ‘the house of love and the Andalusia of songs’ his apocalyptic prophecy: ‘the city of al-Ḥarīrī’ is destined to be devoured by fire. In his remarkable speech, dense with allusions to literature and history (and that in places gestures to the style of the *maqāmāt*), he evokes a world unravelling under a shadowy power dedicated to surveillance and destruction. It is hard here not to think of a nightmarish continuum from the Ba‘thist rule of the past to a future dominated by religious extremists, two realities in which writers and common citizens alike need to resort to disguise in order to survive. At the end of an increasingly intense sermon of fire, Khudayyir’s Abū Zayd proclaims: ‘So you see – my dear ladies – my reality and my ending – I am [a] conflagration [*innī ihtirāq*]’ (Khudayyir 2016: 66).

Above we have seen how, in some of his latest short pieces, Khudayyir articulates a poetics of fire. Al-Ṣaqr is presented as a Prometheus of Iraqi fiction. Khudayyir grows increasingly pessimistic as to whether al-Ṣaqr's creative fire can be passed on to Iraqi writers, but this fire remains a symbol for literary maturity and artistic skill, which might be elusive, but retains the potential to inspire. Conversely, Khudayyir's Abū Zayd is a prophet of doom, who sees fires consuming everything and lighting up the sky from end to end in a hell that is unimaginable, even within the context of the destruction wrought on Iraqi cities. This fire has the ability to wipe out or, at least distort, the legacy of al-Ḥarīrī and the *maqāmāt* and threatens artistic creativity. Abū Zayd says: 'I am an image returning from the vast imagination of fictional creation to the dungeon of distortion and madness' (Khudayyir 2016: 65). In another dream/story collected in *Ahlām*, 'Mush'ilū al-ḥarā'iq' ('The arsonists') the authorial persona starts by imitating the book burners of the past by burning some newspapers and books 'that have had their day' in a tin can in his back yard (Khudayyir 2016: 146). Despite its modesty, his bonfire reminds him of the burning of libraries and archives in the ancient and modern cities of Iraq (Khudayyir 2016: 145). As we have seen above, these destructive acts spurred Khudayyir on to write his *Tārīkh*. Soon the whole of Iraq engages in burning the books of the past, 'from the capital of wisdom and literature [*al-adab*] [Baghdad] to the South, home of schools of grammarians and circles for philosophical debate [Basra]' (Khudayyir 2016: 146). In a clear reference to the collusion and responsibility of intellectuals in the demise of Iraqi culture, at the end of the dream/story, those who were once men of knowledge and books have become arsonists at the service of forces of obscurantism and destruction. These characters turn to the Khudayyir figure and crucify him on a cross of smoke in his own fire. When he summons the famous Andalusian writer Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064) and his judges and literati (*udabā'*) to set him free, they refuse to help him and, instead, all scoop up the ashes and pelt him with them (Khudayyir 2016: 148). The literature of the past is again remembered but again fails to

save Khudayyir's characters from the troubles of their day. In all these texts Khudayyir shows how in the Iraqi context the legacy of the literature of the past (Maḥfūz and al-Ḥarīrī) can be falsified by obscurantist and coercive forces. In spite of the gloomy images evoked in these texts, they always present an appealing element that derives either from an ironic, often comic, surreal setting, or from an intensified poetic stylization of the language.

At the end of his book on the *maqāmāt*, *Les séances* (1983), Abdelfattah Kilito reflects on how the use of the term *adab* has changed since the classical period. More recently, scholars who have explored new Arab writing in the digital age have re-engaged with the classical concept of *adab*. It is within this critical context that Khudayyir's position in contemporary Arab literature should be evaluated.

CYBER ADAB: KHUḌAYYIR AS BOTH AL-ḤĀRITH IBN HAMMĀM AND ABŪ ZAYD AL-SARŪJĪ

Que faire de la *séance*? Que faire de l'*adab*?

Kilito, *Les séances*, p. 265

Kilito states that *adab* is the real protagonist of al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt* (Kilito 2020: xiii). In a classical context, *adab* is a complex concept that means not only *belles-lettres* and a sophisticated knowledge of the literature of the past, but also etiquette, a refined, proper way of behaving. Works of *adab* were usually compilations, written in prose in a high literary register, rich in references to poetry and anecdotes, and were supposed to both entertain and educate (see Hämeen-Anttila 2014).

In his attempt to rescue the memory of literature in Iraq, Khudayyir is like the narrator in al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt*, al-Ḥārith ibn Hammām, someone who finds himself in a period of decline and crisis and is thirsty for *adab*. For Khudayyir, *adab* involves a salutary knowledge of the works of the writers of an illustrious past, from al-Ḥarīrī to Maḥfūz to al-Ṣaqr. Kilito's compelling discussion of the travelling narrator in the *Maqāmāt* of al-Ḥarīrī's predecessor al-Hamadhānī (d. 1008) and his search for *adab* is pertinent not only to al-Ḥarīrī's al-Ḥārith, but also to Khudayyir himself:

A true understanding of *adab* cannot be separated from a familiarity with the texts [...] of the past. We have already indicated the limits of direct observation [of reality]; a prisoner of synchrony, the traveller addresses tradition in order to move around in time and have control over diachrony. Memories arise at every moment from deep in the past, like so many layers too far down for a direct observation [of reality] to reach [...] (Kilito 1983: 25, this passage is partially quoted in Kennedy 2006: 159)

The memory of literature resurfaces within Khudayyir's consciousness as he embarks on an imaginary journey through Iraq's literary sites (*mawāqī'*) to write *Tārīkh zuqāq*, his story of the Iraqi alley of fictional writing.¹⁰

As we have seen above, the fictional and non-fictional coexist within Khudayyir's hybrid texts. However, when he talks of the writers of the recent past, he can be considered a writer of modern day *adab*. Conversely, when he writes his more obviously fictional pieces he tends to inhabit an Abū Zayd persona, who fulfils a subversive function towards *adab* itself.¹¹ Al-Ḥarīrī's Abū Zayd is a trickster, but he is also the owner of *adab*, a gift he never fails to bestow

generously on an appreciative, eager audience. In Khudayyir, Abū Zayd is eloquent, but the message he carries is not one of possible salvation through culture: he is the man of letters transformed into a creature of the night, spying and spied on, he is a fire that will ultimately engulf everything, even al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt*, even *adab*!

Where should Khudayyir be placed in the current Arab literary scene, especially in view of his keen use of social media that leads him to disseminate most of his short pieces online first, as posts on his Facebook page? Tarek El-Ariss and Teresa Pepe have explored the emergence of a new digital kind of Arabic literature and culture by starting with an examination of the evolving concept of *adab*. Pepe underlines how the imperative of classical *adab*, education through entertainment, has been re-appropriated by the promoters of the idea of modernity expressed in the *Nahḍa* (end of 19th c. – beginning of 20th c.) and the subsequent phase of committed literature (*iltizām*) (Pepe 2015: 76-77). While maintaining a committed attitude, a willingness to engage with the socio-political issues of the present, the new writers of digital literature in Arabic tend to reject the idea of modernity and the *adab* of the previous generations of writers, whom they see as 'the generations of defeat', so disconnected from the public that they were taken by surprise by the recent Arab revolutions (El-Ariss 2019: 22-23). Digital media also allow further democratisation as the absence of gatekeepers leads to new alternative voices emerging more easily.

Khudayyir, as an enthusiastic user of social media, occupies a space between the younger practitioners and the writers of the pre-digital revolution. His regular posts on Facebook build a digital archive of sorts, which is all the more important in view of the actual burning of the official, physical archives in Iraq (even though it remains to be seen if this kind of archive will be more stable and durable than its physical ancestor). In this way, he embraces a conservationist attitude that distinguishes him from his younger peers, who often embrace an iconoclastic stance towards the literature of the past. There are other elements of his online

writing that would make him appear as a representative of the previous generation. His posts are written in a high literary style of Modern Standard Arabic, which is far removed from the language of demotic expressions, colloquialisms and English borrowings championed by the new generation of online writing. Regarding the impact of the digital medium on the nature of writing and reading, El-Ariss writes: ‘the Internet operates as a space of confrontation and exposure that breaks down and reconstitutes the text, and refigures its author function, reading practice, literary-critical significance, and reading public [...]’ (El-Ariss 2019: 25). Something Khudayyir shares with the bloggers and new practitioners of online writing is a willingness to be approachable, interact with his readers online in an immediate fashion, and experiment with the possibilities of the digital medium. For example, Khudayyir posts on his Facebook pages ‘narrative exercises’ inspired by photographs, to which readers are, either explicitly or implicitly, invited to participate.

Which idea of Arab culture does Khudayyir express through the new digital medium? He promotes a project that aims to preserve a memory of literature, only for this quest to be questioned from within the project itself: Prometheus and al-Hārith promise the fire of literature and *adab*, but a disfigured Abū Zayd brings the fire of destruction. In promoting a questioning attitude, and in placing the hermeneutic onus on his readers, Khudayyir is the heir of a certain trend within modern Arab literature that can be traced back to the 1960s, for example to the work of the Egyptian writer Idwār al-Kharrāt (1926-2015).

Ultimately, it is down to the readers to determine whether the memory of literature is retained and if culture can fulfil its ‘vision of light and freedom’ in the uncertain future of Iraq. Cooperson compares seekers of *adab* like al-Hārith to the ancient Christians who asked mystics in the desert for ‘a word’, implying, according to Cooperson, ‘a memorable summation of some spiritual precept’ (Cooperson 2020: xxv). Khudayyir provides his readers with a ‘word’ in the

form of *adab*, to continue with Cooperson's formulation. Khudayyir's *adab* here constitutes a spiritual salvation from the fire raging in Iraq, but also a warning that the fire might prevail.

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¹ All translations from Arabic in this article are by Caiani and Cobham.

² See Caiani and Cobham 2019, and especially 2-3 and 12-15, for a discussion of Khuḍayyir's multifarious sources of inspiration. What Sune Haugbolle writes about memory studies in the Middle East is relevant to Khuḍayyir's attempt to salvage an Iraqi cultural memory: '[T]he 1990s and 2000s was a period of change, liberalization and globalization. Memory then could be seen as a tool for resistance against the onslaught of neoliberal globalization and creative destruction-cum-reconstruction [...]' (Haugbolle 2019: 284). In the Iraqi context, 'the onslaught of neoliberal globalization' realised itself starting from 2003 as change through destruction and controversial reconstruction, rather than liberalisation.

³ For a discussion of two examples of Khuḍayyir's *naṣṣ jāmi'*, see Caiani and Cobham 2019; 3-9 on *Kurrāsāt Kānūn* ('The Winter Sketchbook', 2001), and 9-13 on *Ḥadā'iq al-wujūh* ('The Gardens of the Faces', 2008).

⁴ Reflecting on the way the Egyptian authors of the 'new sensibility', like Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī and Ṣun'allāh Ibrāhīm took sides politically against the policies of Sadat, Angelika Neuwirth writes: 'this commitment has shifted its locus from a direct accusation to inner spheres and ultimately into language itself' (Neuwirth 2010: 46).

⁵ Khuḍayyir refers to Maḥfūz's novel *Malḥamat al-ḥarāfīsh* (1977; *The Harafish*, 1994) and appropriates its characters. The *ḥarāfīsh* are 'the common people' or 'the toiling masses' in Maḥfūz's novel (Cobham 2007: 124).

⁶ Khuḍayyir's dreams/stories in *Aḥlām Bāṣūrā* are fifty, the same number as al-Ḥarīrī's *maqāmāt*.

⁷ For the Arabic text, see al-Ḥarīrī 2020a: 147-153; for Michael Cooperson's eclectic translation of the *maqāma* into English after the style of Aphra Behn's (d. 1689) comedies,

see al-Ḥarīrī 2020b: 257-68; for Steingass’s translation into English, see al-Ḥarīrī 1898: 14-24.

⁸ Khudāyyir’s use of archaic, unusual words (here *jarābīz*, pl. of *jurbuz*, for ‘impostors’) shows his predilection for a vocabulary that is at times fastidiously high-brow, and as such echoes the style of the *maqāmāt*.

⁹ The postscript to *Ahlām* is dated April 2016, a time when the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria was still controlling large swathes of land in both Syria and Iraq, including Mosul.

¹⁰ As Maḥfūz rarely left Cairo in his life, so Khudāyyir has rarely left Basra. For these writers, literature is the real journey. For both, the alley is a microcosm that symbolically stands for something much wider: Cairo, Egypt and the world, for the former; Basra, Iraq and a literary tradition, for the latter.

¹¹ Numerous scholars have remarked on the potentially subversive nature of the *maqāmāt* within classical *adab*. For example, Philipp F. Kennedy, referring to Kilito’s work on the *maqāmāt*, has pointed out how ‘the atmosphere of complacency which prevails in the orthodox temple of *adab*’ is threatened by the *maqāmāt* as the latter are clearly fictional whereas *adab* is usually about historically identifiable personages (Kennedy 2006: 197-98; Kilito 1983: 73-74). In the *maqāmāt*, the *adīb* is a beggar and an impostor whose ‘language is so powerfully in excess of material reality that it overwhelms the agreed-upon relationship of word and object,’ which creates ‘what Daniel Beaumont [...] calls the work’s “dreamy, haunting mood”’ (Cooperson 2020: xxvi).