WHEN NEXT WE MEET
ON THE FIGURE OF THE NONPOSTHUMOUS SURVIVOR

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Framed as posthumous, or that which lives on past its death, the survivor is tagged by official postwar discourses and practices an impediment to the reconstruction of society along normative guidelines. But the persistent conditions of protracted civil war in Lebanon call for a reconceptualization of the figure of the survivor along another temporal axis. No longer posthumous, the survivor is not an overliver[1] who aimlessly questions the significance of his brute survival, but rather a witness who knows too much, carrying the weight of an unwelcome knowledge gathered from within war and crisis that challenges the official closure of the present to the unfinished past. What is this figure of a nonposthumous survivor, and what is the knowledge that it carries?

1 In John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the fallen Adam asks why he remains alive: "Why delays/ His hand to execute what his decree/Fixed on this day? Why do I overlive . . . ?" (*Paradise Lost*, Longman Edition, edited by John Carey and Alistair Fowler [London: Longman, 1968], 10.771–10.773). In her excellent study of tragic overliving in the literature of classical antiquity and the English Renaissance, Emily R. Wilson argues that her use of the word *overlive* is "an essentially questionable, paradoxical form of survival," in contradistinction with *survival*, which implies "that continued existence is an unexpected triumph." She adds that while one survives catastrophes, "one overlives oneself," 2. As will become clear through my essay, I employ the word *overlive* to make implicit the posthumous condition in survival and, against both quotations above, to propose a figure of the nonposthumous survivor. See Emily R. Wilson, *Mocked with Death: Tragic Overliving from Sophocles to Milton* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

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How are we to reconceptualize the writing of history through this figure, and what are the images it continues to safeguard?

ON PROTRACTED CIVIL WAR AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF WITNESSING

To begin with protracted civil war is to propose a particular structural logic that must be theorized and necessarily distinguished from that of other forms of organized violence, be they genocides or interstate warfare. Protracted civil war is a temporality, particularly nefarious and iniquitous, governed and maintained by politico-sectarian factions structurally capable through the deployment of intermittent bouts of violence of renewing the necessary conditions for their long-lived dominance. Crucially, this protracted temporality—indeed, protracted *now*—continues to be accompanied by a wishful discourse on the necessary future release from the binds of sectarianism, labeled a false ensnarement to the past. Enlightened *extra muros* processes, such as open access to knowledge, national education, rational modernist technologies, or class struggles, will, according to this wishful discourse, professedly eradicate the ill that is sectarianism. Sectarianism is thus diagnosed as either an anachronistic leftover to be discarded or an ideological mask to be torn asunder by the dawning of true historical consciousness,[2] but never as a foundational structural component in the making of the modern Lebanese Republic. By palliatively accompanying the intermittent violence of protracted civil war with this wishful discourse, the fatalism of the protracted *now* is clothed with a tragic form, since the Lebanese appear agonistic, seeking release from a morbid past that inhabits them. The pairing of actual violence with this longed-for future release, indefinitely deferred, generates an ethic of hope that appeals to a wholesale rejection and abandonment of the past in the name of a regeneration that must follow a general agreement that everyone has somehow suffered equally.[3] Accordingly, this

2 Although outside the purview of this essay, it is worth noting that during the civil war of 1975–1991, sectarianism was not always seen as an illness. Justified through an alleged richness of cultural and ethnic differences, sectarianism was depathologized and reconceptualized through the political category of federalism. The many pronouncements of Samir Geagea, leader of the Lebanese Forces, during the 1980s are a case in point. For more, see Nolla Emile Cherfan, "The Idea of Lebanon in the Political Discourses of Nabih Berri and Samir Geagea during the 1975–1990 War: Similarities and Differences," master's thesis, Department of Political Science, American University of Beirut, 2004.

3 During the early 1990s, many Lebanese intellectuals called for an ethic of shared sufferance as an inlet into the restructuring of a post-civil-war society. Most critical amongst

protracted *now* holds the Lebanese, who, amidst a structural violence, in turn palliatively represent it as a necessary furnace for a yet-to-be-born, nonsectarian future when the past will finally be declared evil and evil be declared past.[4]

Within such a structural logic, I argue, witnessing, as an act of disclosure that requires (and even at times is capable of generating) a listener, and of prompting the performative authority of Law and a process of accountability, is impossible: not interdicted, but rather made impossible because always preempted. Witnessing in such a structure is a vacuous solitary act lost in the interstices, narrow or gaping, of the contending politico-sectarian factions. This impossibility of witnessing finds one of its most telling manifestations in the available book-length accounts by Lebanese ex-civil-war combatants or returnees from lengthy forced disappearances. To date, a dozen of these testimonies have been published, all of which—from the earliest one, privately printed in 1985 by Paul ʿIndari, to the latest, published in 2014 by Nada El Murr[5]—have remained confined to a limited audience that did not, no matter how sympathetic it may temporarily seem, become the listener who could make of these accounts an act of witnessing. Moreover, not only are these supposed testimonies lost to what was or still is an opposing politico-sectarian faction, they are also often lost to what can be considered their own expected audience, their own ilk.

Paul ʿIndari's book *Al Jabal: Haqiqa la tarham*[6] contains a telling episode. In 1983, during the early stages of what came to be known as the War of the Mountain,[7] ʿIndari, a middle-ranked militia commander

them was Waddah Sharara: see, for instance, his *Al-Mawt li ʿaduwwikum* [Death to Your Enemy] (Beirut: Al-Jadeed, 1991) and his curiously allegorical "Arkhabīl al-gulag aw kayfa natadabaru māḍina?" [The Gulag's Archipelago, or How to Manage Our Past?], epilogue to Aleksandr Soljenitsyne's *Comment réaménager notre Russie?*, trans. Ali Majid and Waddah Sharara (Beirut: Dar Al-Jadeed, 1991), 91–133.

4 Echoing one strand of Robert Meister's copious and far-reaching critique of the transitional justice prevalent in mainstream human rights discourse. See his *After Evil: A Politics of Human Rights* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

5 Nada El Murr, *Leur guerre mon combat* [Their War My Combat] (France: L'Onctiale Editions, 2014).

6 Paul ʿIndari, *Al Jabal: Haqiqa la tarham*, self-published in 1985 and translated into English as Paul Andary, *War of the Mountain: Israelis, Christians and Druze in the 1983 Mount Lebanon Conflict, through the Eyes of a Lebanese Forces Fighter*, trans. Rani Geha (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012).

7 This battle lasted for a year and was mainly played out by the Christian Lebanese Forces against the Druze militia of the Progressive Socialist Party in the mountainous Chouf district, located southeast of the Lebanese capital Beirut. It is considered pivotal, since it followed the gradual retreat of the invading Israeli army and opened onto the later stages

fighting with the Lebanese Forces in the Chouf villages, makes his way at great risk down mountain roads to the Christian eastern sector of Beirut. What he finds among his people is an indifferent audience aloof from what for him is the fateful battle of the Chouf Mountain. Amongst them, he feels bitterly estranged, a witness without a listener and a carrier of a testimony made vacuous: "The world of the Mountain," he writes, "is one of hardships, killings, abductions, destruction, freezing cold, sieges," as it is also "a challenge to this epoch, a forging of history"; while the world of East Beirut and the rest of the coastal Christian area is one of "lethal indifference, Bingo, brokerage and casinos. . . . In the Mountain rages a battle for survival while East Beirut is preoccupied by a popular theatrical play."[8] Unable to bear witness to an attentive listener or find a fitting reception for the testimony he burns to convey, ʿIndari decides to return to the embattled mountain, where he believes he can be a fervent Christian witnessing to God alone. This particular episode in ʿIndari's book dramatizes the inevitable retreat of witnessing from its potential as a destabilizing disclosure within the social to a monologue delusively believed to find its anchor in the benevolence of an attentive deity.[9]

The affect of the witness in retreat is similarly found in Regina Sneifer's book-length testimony titled *J'ai déposé les armes: Une femme dans la guerre du Liban* (I have laid down the weaponry: A Woman in the Lebanese War)(2006), translated into Arabic in 2008.[10] An active member of the Lebanese Forces since her late adolescence, Sneifer finds herself in the mid-1980s, lost and disoriented amidst the ruthless internal strife that in time tore that same militia and its wider Christian supporters to shreds. Horrified by the violence and torture she sees in the makeshift prisons in the district of Ashraffiyeh in Beirut, Sneifer becomes the beggar who beseeches high and low for a listening ear. She meets and bears witness to her leader Samir

of the war, during which sectarian coalitions completely overtook the political programs of the early years of the civil war.

8 ʿIndari, *Al Jabal*, 81. The play mentioned by ʿIndari was based on one by Georges Feydeau (1862–1921) and rendered in spoken Lebanese as *Le'eb el far bi ʿeb el sitt* [The Mouse That Frolicked in the Madam's Bosoms], directed by Ghassan Moujaess and Naji Maalouf, produced by Marwan Najjar, 1983.

9 The scripting of God in the testimonies of Christian Lebanese ex-war combatants is the main subject of an essay of mine entitled "Spelling Survivor" (forthcoming, 2015).

10 Regina Sneifer, *J'ai déposé les armes: Une femme dans la guerre du Liban* (Paris: Editions de l'Atelier, 2006); translated as *Alqaytu al silah: Imraʾa fi khidam al harb al Lubnaniyya* (Beirut: Dar Al Farabi, 2008).

Geagea,[11] to the Maronite Patriarch, and to fellow combatants, but to no avail. She is alone with her truth. Appalled, she resigns from her duties and chooses to spend Christmas Eve 1986 in a dungeon with the humane Father Khawand, known as "the singing priest" and a remainder of ten brutally tortured prisoners. During that bleak night, the priest chooses song over words to provide solace. His voice is soon joined by one prisoner who sits alone, farther back and to the side. "Lord, how utterly beautiful is this voice," she writes. "He is Palestinian, his accent I immediately recognize. His voice cuts through the prison bars, through the confines of this space, it is unbounded. . . . I shut my eyes for his voice to penetrate me, to carry my soul outside . . . thus on Christmas Eve we find peace in this pit; and the prison is no longer a prison."[12] In the pages that follow, Sneifer continues to write longingly of that fateful Christmas Eve and that Palestinian voice, which along with "His [Christ's] wooden cross has conquered all the vengeance and beaten all the violence I harboured for years."[13] At the far extremity of her retreat, away from a world in which her witnessing is impossible, Sneifer stumbles upon an epiphanic conversion to a truth that consequently leads her to choose self-exile in France.

FROM IMPOSSIBLE WITNESSING TO THE WITNESS WHO KNOWS TOO MUCH

'Indari and Sneifer proffer an inlet into the quandary of the individual and solitary witness who believes himself to be holding a truth that is unknown to the group. The agony of this solitary witness is built on a disavowal of what anthropology has come to term a *public secret*. The deaf ears that Sneifer finds in the Maronite Patriarch are for her a damning proof that His Beatitude did not want to know, or at least did not hold her truth to be necessarily urgent or relevant. Sneifer's agony is therefore born of the impossibility of being in a world stunted and held hostage by malevolent representation, she who has beheld the world in its true or good representation. What Sneifer refuses to recog-

11 Samir Geagea was then struggling with Elie Hobeika over the leadership of the Lebanese Forces. On January 15, 1986, following mass executions and gruesome street combats, Geagea secured his leadership of the Lebanese Forces by expelling Hobeika to the Bekaa valley and the protection of the Syrians, with whom he had earlier tried—along with Nabih Berri, leader of the Amal movement—to engineer a contested end to the civil war through what came to be known as the Tripartite Accord.

12 Sneifer, *J'ai déposé*, 219.

13 Ibid., 221–22.

nize, or rather disavows, is that the Patriarch as well as Samir Geagea and her former fellow combatants know perfectly well what she is so passionately witnessing. What she believes to be the disclosure of a liberating truth is for them a public secret—namely, the silence that binds the group in unaccountability. To step outside the rules of the public secret turns the witness beholding the truth into a solitary voice and a candidate for exile, or into a scandalous voice good for little more than seasonal entertainment, as was the fate of Jad Hatem's (a.k.a. Cobra's) book-length account.[14] Such an individual and solitary witness knows what everyone else knows just as well, and yet she steadfastly believes that she alone has this knowledge. By disavowing the structure of the public secret, the authors of such accounts safeguard for themselves the status of witness, even if only a tragic one. Their accounts are true testimony, even if it is insufficient to prompt a process of accountability and incapable of embarrassing a society with its own ghastly deeds. The ordeals of Sneifer and ʿIndari call on us to develop a more complex understanding of witnessing and consequently of the writing of history, and to challenge the structural logic that maintains protracted civil war immune to the struggle of truth against falsity and unconcerned with either the moral claims of the witness or the legal accountability of the perpetrator. For while these two ex-combatants may be said to have admirably broken the covenant of the public secret, they nevertheless failed to recognize that what is needed is another form of witnessing—one that no longer holds on to the tenets of an enlightened and enlightening truth. The question then becomes one of theorizing another figure who can bear a knowledge of the past that does not aim solely at exposing falsity and replacing it with a truth that is supposed to liberate, but rather a knowledge that accrues into a historical future; a future built with the indelible past. In order to elaborate on this other figure, or what I term a *witness who knows too much*, let us revisit the contrary trope of a truth that liberates, as deployed in Alfred Hitchcock's 1934 film *The Man Who Knew Too Much*.

The film plot is structured around a piece of excess knowledge—a knowing too much—that drags a vacationing British couple and their daughter down a spiral of intrigue, violence, and an attempted political assassination. The couple is unexpectedly made privy to important

14 Robert M. Hatem, *Cobra: Fi zil hobeika mururan bi sabra wa shatila* (Beirut: *Al Maktaba al ʿArabiyyah Lil Tarjama*, 1999). Translated into English as *From Israel to Damascus: The Painful Road of Blood, Betrayal and Deception* (La Mesa, CA: Pride International, 1999).

information by a dying French spy and is then blackmailed by the assassins, who kidnap their daughter. The film develops as the beleaguered couple learns to use that same excess knowledge to foil the kidnappers, sabotage the assassins' plans, and finally rescue their daughter. Hitchcock's film grapples with the troubling nature of excess knowledge and provides, through the genre of suspense films, a resolution to it. What the vacationing couple eventually manages to do is liberate themselves from the excess knowledge by instrumentally using that unwanted knowledge to their advantage. Knowing too much in Hitchcock's film is fundamentally inimical. The resourcefulness of the main protagonists goes to show that excess knowledge is only useful if it can ultimately be gotten rid of.

The fervor of the solitary witness in protracted civil war finds a fitting narrative form in Hitchcock's film. The filmic proposition that sees in excess knowledge a burden to be ultimately liberated from is aligned with a form of witnessing understood as an act of unburdening the self of an excess, and therefore excessive, knowledge. Yet therein lies precisely the challenge when attempting to theorize the figure of a witness who knows too much: not one who forcedly carries knowledge from which he seeks eventually to be released, but rather a witness who indefinitely bears an excess knowledge that structures his living and conditions his future. A witness who knows too much is one who carries the burden of a knowledge that cannot simply be disclosed. Such a witness finds a most compelling articulation in Simon El Habre's 2008 documentary *Semaan bil day'a* or *The One Man Village*.[15]

In this film, we encounter the figure of Semaan, who, having spent years working in the coastal entertainment hub of Maameltein in Northern Lebanon, has settled in his home village of *'Ayn al Halazon*, an inchoate rubble-strewn landscape sprawled on both sides of a winding road somewhere in the Chouf Mountains of Lebanon. Semaan is not alone in his depopulated village. He lives with his animals. He milks his dairy cows, cajoles them by their nicknames, and on early mornings loads his rickety car and drives to the neighboring villages to sell the day's fresh yield. The documentary shows him as reluctant to elucidate the causes of what befell him and his fellow villagers,[16] and

15 *The One Man Village*, directed by Simon El Habre (Lebanon, Beirut DC, Front Row Filmed Entertainment, 2008, 86 minutes.)

16 The documentary gradually contextualizes the village as having been predominantly inhabited by Christians and then completely destroyed during the War of the Mountain. (See note 7 above.)

calmly uninterested in naming those responsible for the calamity that still marks the village. Yet the signs are there aplenty to be read, with him, Semaan, amongst them. Can it be that Semaan's memory is simply afflicted with the illness of forgetting? Or it is that Semaan carries a memory that actively forgets? For whereas the displaced villagers and landowners who visit and speak to the camera are capable of naming and recalling the causes of their suffering, and in doing so rehearse their memories and maintain them close at hand, Semaan's memory of the calamity is ungatherable. When bluntly asked by the documentarian's disembodied voice to name those responsible for the murder of his family, Semaan is at first elusive but then profoundly nonplussed. His tense smile, the evasive turn of his face, and the slight retreat of his head all seem to indicate that indeed he knows. But what he knows is most probably born of bearing a load that is not his alone, the weight of a knowledge that makes for an indelible implication. What is stunning is how Semaan's load moves him toward a quiet, liberating, and nontriumphant knowledge that makes him disinclined to simply name the perpetrators. For that would lead yet again to the tragic spectacle of witnessing to ears deafened by the public secret. Rather than the obscenity of naming—the spectacle of a truth and nothing but—Semaan offers a memory that is viscous and expansive, a memory that forgets because what it remembers is not easily mobilized: a memory that is nonvengeful and, accordingly, disarmingly unuseful. What the figure of Semaan makes possible, if not compellingly necessary, is a reconsideration of the witness who steps outside the covenant of the public secret and stands as a witness who knows too much, whose primary task is to persistently inhabit the place marked by sectarian violence, bearing a knowledge that is not all his to instrumentally use or deploy. This witness is therefore not one who returns from hell to tell the truth of what has occurred,[17] but rather comes forth by lingering in the place of violence: a daguerreotype, one might suggest, gradually formed by a sitter who patiently sits through long and tortuous minutes in front of the camera to impress a face on the silver-plated copper plate. Instead of a tragic and solitary witness, Semaan comes forth as a slow apparition in the location of violence: a witness uneager to tell, but resolved not to

17 The trope of the witness returning from hell is often encountered in the testimonies of ex-combatants, and is also the main theme and title of a published book-length account by Ali Abu Dehen, incarcerated and tortured in the prisons of the Syrian Ba'ath regime from 1987 until 2000. See his *'Aed min juhanam* [Returning from Hell] (Beirut: Al Jadeed, 2012).

exit, bearing a knowledge that does not disavow the logic of the public secret, and thus does not appeal for recognition; a witness whose criticality is born first of a conscious durability in and persistence through loss. In this regard, consider, if you will, the figure of the Trojan prince Aeneas: not the Aeneas who exits a fallen Troy and later becomes the founder of Rome, not the Aeneas who dutifully descends into the underworld in search of his father's counsel, but rather the Aeneas fixed by a few, mostly little known, paintings and sculptures in that one, crucial moment when Troy is ablaze all around him and Anchises, his aging and decrepit father, is on his back.[18]

BECOMING POSTHUMOUS AND THE LURE OF KATABASIS

In Book II of Virgil's epic poem *The Aeneid*,[19] the Trojan prince Aeneas concludes his impassioned narration of Troy's fall with acquiescence: "Shouldering father I made for the mountains. I had lost, and I knew it."[20] These are Virgil's words, and yet they could be ours as well, if we set ourselves the task of resisting the conditions of living in protracted civil war. To say that we have lost, and know that we did, is to carry, like Prince Aeneas, the load of an inexorable knowledge that is utterly necessary for building a liveable future. Virgil's words are the crossroads at which those who live under the conditions of civil war's protracted *now* meet. But under the augury of Hecate, the goddess of crossroads, they probably must also part, for Virgil's words open to at least three divergent paths.

The first path, if taken, leads to the sublimation of loss into the edifices of new expansionist projects. Such is the case with the pious and dutiful son Aeneas in the second half of Virgil's epic poem, who goes on to wage war and lay the foundation for the great Roman Empire. To have known loss, for this later Aeneas, calls for its eradication through an avenging energy directed at history and against fate. Consider, in this regard, a Lebanese documentary film by Katia Jarjoura, *Terminator: The Last Battle* (2006),[21] which compellingly presents a tragicomical obverse to the revanchist Aeneas. The film chronicles the efforts of a zealous supporter of the deposed ex-general Michel

18 Among the more powerful representation of that legendary episode, see a small 6th-century BCE Etruscan sculpture from Veii at the Museo Etrusco di Villa Giuli in Rome.

19 Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Frederick Ahl (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

20 Ibid., Book II, line 804.

21 *Terminator: The Last Battle*, directed by Katia Jarjoura (France/Lebanon, Bizibi, Khayyam Cinéma, 2006, 90 minutes.)

Aoun,[22] waging his last and belated battle against the Syrian army by partaking in the popular manifestations and sit-ins that followed the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri on February 14, 2005. Contradictory and pathetic, this young zealot, known to his friends and detractors alike by the name of Termi or Terminator, tries hard to turn the loss, whose symptoms he so unmistakably manifests in his quotidian habits, into a final ablutionary victory. The exorbitant cost he pays at the end of the documentary is more disabling than the loss he so eagerly tried to undo: his last battle is a desperate attempt to live again rather than to merely continue living on. What the documentary suggests is that neither following the withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon in April of 2005, nor after the triumphant return of General Aoun from exile in the following month of May, could Termi continue to fend off the numbing realization that in refusing to acknowledge his loss he was becoming posthumous, an overliver.

Posthumous is also the operative term of the second path opened by Aeneas's statement in Virgil's epic. It leads to a particular temporality that marks the works of a roster of renowned European post-Holocaust writers who have placed the recognition of loss at the end of history and positioned the witness with his back turned to the foreclosed future, looking intently at the uncircumscribable site of the catastrophe. In this second path, the witness/survivor is a traumatized sentry of catastrophe busily standing still, already long after the Benjaminian storm blowing from Paradise had died down. This witness/survivor is a posthumous figure who lives on, in spite of his symbolic death, in an ambiguous state described by Maurice Blanchot—in his *récit* entitled *The Step Not Beyond*—as "To survive, not to live, or, not living, to maintain oneself, without life, in a state of pure supplement, movement, or substitution for life, or rather to arrest dying, arrest that does not arrest, making it, on the contrary, last."[23] This living on is obviously a predicament, but it is also what constitutes the intellectual attraction of the posthumous: a strange, active passivity that is symptomatic of the posthistorical condition, in which the past is looked upon as a space in

22 Michel Aoun, former Lebanese Army Commander, served as prime minister of one of the two rival governments contending for power from September 22, 1988, until October 13, 1990, when his "Liberation War" against the Syrian Occupation declared on March 14, 1989, ended in defeat and his exile to France.

23 Maurice Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*, trans. Lycette Nelson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), quoted in Jeremy Tambling, *Becoming Posthumous: Life and Death in Literary and Cultural Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), 18.

which nothing is finished, as well as a space in which nothing has happened, because from the position of this overliver (or posthumous survivor), the past can only be said to "will have happened." In other words, the past for an overliver may become representable in an unspecified future if and when a therapeutic process proves itself successful. This path of the posthumous, curiously, is not only prevalent in post-Holocaust European thought, but also dominant, with a few exceptions, in the films, arts, and literature produced in Lebanon following the official end of the civil war.[24] A recent case in point is a documentary film that returns to the scene of a murder that took place on December 9, 1980, in the village of Edleb in North Lebanon, where thirteen members of a single family were killed. Only three young siblings escaped the butchery, among them a child named De Gaulle Eid. In 2009, Eid, a filmmaker now residing in Corsica, returned to Lebanon for his documentary *Chou sar?* (What Happened?).[25] According to plot summaries made available in the local press, the documentary tells of Eid's attempt to search for the killers, who turn out to be former neighbors who still reside in that same village. The documentary was barred from being shown in Lebanon by Internal Security censors,[26] and the polemic surrounding the prohibition of the film took center stage. Eid appeared on countless TV shows in the role of the wounded artist and insulted democrat. Yet the minutes of this very familiar, even maudlin, controversy lead elsewhere, away from freedom of expression and the right to know and name the truth. Rather, this highly mediatized controversy proffered Eid as an Orphic figure, in ways that tell much about the role of the posthumous survivor as historian. To think of De Gaulle Eid as Orpheus is to posit his documentary film as a *katabasis*, or a descent into hell, into the underworld. Like Orpheus, the documentarian is of two gazes. The first he directs at the ghosts around him as he descends into the hell of Northern Lebanon and the village of Edleb, and from that gaze he gathers a filmic record. The second gaze is the one that fails, also

24 The official end of the Lebanese civil war was declared in phases, starting with the *Ta'if* Agreement in January 1989 and concluding in March 1991, when parliament passed an amnesty law that pardoned all political crimes prior to its enactment.

25 *Chou sar?*, De Gaulle Eid (France/Liban/Palestine, Cined Production, 2010), 75 minutes.

26 Eid's documentary was barred from the Lebanese Film Festival in August 2010 and from the Cinema Days of Beirut in the following month of September. It is relevant to add that the Internal Security censors never issued an official prohibition, but simply sent word to forbid the screening. See the press file compiled by the organization UMAM for Documentation and Research, Beirut, November 2010: www.umam-dr.org.

like Orpheus before him. Unable to soothe or charm the lords of the underworld, the documentarian is unsuccessful in resurfacing with his collected images. The public secret, actualized in this instance by the censor's prohibition and a notional protest by nongovernmental organizations such as UMAM, robs him of his witnessing. Yet if the *katabasis* of Eid is read through the prism of Siegfried Kracauer's last work, *History: The Last Things before the Last?*,[27] the documentarian can be said to have accomplished what for the German author is the historian's task and only possible journey. For Kracauer, the second gaze of Orpheus—namely the pathos of the moment when, in looking back, Orpheus loses his wife again—is of no importance. Kracauer focuses on Orpheus's first gaze, directed within the underworld at the ghosts around him, including that of his wife.[28] Kracauer's emphasis on the first gaze allows him to challenge the notion of historical time as linear and progressive; accordingly, the historian never resurfaces, never returns from his *katabasis*; he never emerges with one thing to tell. The historian's journey into the underworld is without a resolution. It is a movement in myriad spaces at the end of time, a movement in which the historian's mind, as Kracauer writes, "is in a measure unlocalizable, it perambulates without a fixed abode."[29] The historian's journey is not a descent into the past followed by an ascent. Rather, it is an always-unfinished journey into an underworld of history with which he must engage, he tells us, with the relatively estranged gaze of the photographer. And yet Kracauer's book includes an important excursus away from Orpheus and toward another legendary figure, that of Ahasuerus, and through it extends into very speculative terrains that, I argue, are more relevant to thinking the figure of the nonposthumous survivor. In Chapter 6 of his *History*, "Ahasuerus, or the Riddle of Time," Kracauer grapples with what he calls the antinomy at the core of time, or the paradoxical need to think of time as linear, homogeneous, and flowing ever-forward, and the simultaneous knowledge that this conception of time distorts our vision of the past. He

27 Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things before the Last* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969). This work by Kracauer was presented as the pivotal text for a conference on art and the writing of history held in Beirut at Ashkal Alwan and organized by the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Arab Image Foundation in December 2012.

28 I am here indebted to the work of Alan Itkin, "Orpheus, Perseus, Ahasuerus: Reflection and Representation in Siegfried Kracauer's Underworlds of History," *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 87, no. 2 (2012): 175–202.

29 Kracauer, *History*, 93.

thus begins to search for the figure of a historical observer who could reconcile this antinomy, a figure who would have to be made, fashioned, and formed of the many provisional histories, of the breaks and ruptures, the developments and transitions he has seen. Ahasuerus is for Kracauer such a figure: a perfect exile, the name given to the legend of the Wandering Jew invented by medieval Christianity, Ahasuerus is a figure that does not grow or age, is not rooted in the world of everyday life, and in a sense is a stranger not just to the various places he visits, but also to the times he wanders through. The only "reliable informant," Kracauer writes, "on these matters which are so difficult to ascertain is a legendary figure—Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew. He indeed would know first-hand about the developments and transitions, for he alone in all history has had the unsought opportunity to experience the process of becoming and decaying itself."[30] Kracauer continues this particular paragraph with a most evocative, but also puzzling addendum placed—ventriloquist-style, one might say—between parentheses: "(How unspeakably terrible he must look! To be sure his face cannot have suffered from aging, but I imagine it to be many faces, each reflecting one of the periods which he traversed and all of them combining into ever new patterns, as he restlessly, and vainly, tries on his wanderings to reconstruct out of the times that shaped him the one time he is doomed to incarnate.)"[31] In calling on the legendary figure of Ahasuerus, Kracauer seeks a nonsequential conception of history. Yet this legendary figure is in part an impediment to his attempt, because it is also posthumous. Ahasuerus is a figure that errs and wanders precisely because he has overlived his own significance. But even if Kracauer cannot but see in the many divergent fields of the past—and therefore in the fragments that make up the unspeakably terrible face of Ahasuerus—the terrible storms of pasts that do not pass, he nevertheless points to the necessity of another kind of history: one that begins to recognize the accumulation of complex and unfinished pasts into a historical substance.

And so it is here—at the crossroads marked by Virgil's Trojan Prince Aeneas, who speaks the moment of catastrophe with the words "I had lost and I knew it"—that we meet to find a third path, away from

30 Ibid., 157.
31 Ibid., 157.

the first path of revanchist rewritings of history and the second path of becoming posthumous sentries to an end of history. Down this third path we may walk instead, and here we find adumbrated the figure of the nonposthumous survivor—a figure that bears all the unwelcome knowledge that is necessary for building a liveable future.

ON THE INTERDICTION OF SURVIVING

The nonposthumous survivor of protracted civil war is born of the disturbing realization that civil war does not constitute a historical trauma; a civil war does not interrupt a social history, nor does it liquidate a social body's ability to represent itself. In more demotic terms, a civil war is not the hell from which we must ascend and about which we witness an ugly truth. In an unforgettable passage from his seminal book *Hurub al istitbaʿ* (1976),[32] historian Waddah Sharara disputes what in civil war parlance is known as *qasf ʿashwaʾi*, or random and indiscriminate shelling. He argues that when shelling an opponent, an intimate enemy, any damage caused, no matter where or to what, is in fact precise bombing.[33] If one of the aims of a civil war is to unhinge a power structure and alter the distribution of wealth, it nevertheless does not aim at completely annihilating the opponent, but rather at savoring its mutilation. The ability and possibility for such a savoring is not generated circumstantially, but rather is taught, imbibed, and maintained by a structural logic that keeps the opponent's body present and available in as much as it is despised, even if this body may shift its boundaries, and even if the zeal of hatred may at times be tempered with calls for tolerant cohabitation.[34]

Such violence certainly turns many into victims and many others into ruthless criminals. But victims and criminals, if we are able to

32 Waddah Sharara, *Hurub al istitbaʿ aw Lubnan al harb al ʾahliyyah al daʾima* [*The Wars of Subservience, or Lebanon: An Abiding Civil War*] (Beirut: Dar al Taliʿa, 1976). It is important to note that the publication of this text early in what quickly came to be framed as a civil war tells much about the author, who was writing soon after his secession from the Communist Action Organization in Lebanon. His text is therefore both a critique of that organization's mistaken reliance on the military capabilities of the Palestinian Fatah organization, as well as an early augury of the later logic of protractedness.

33 Ibid., 231.

34 It is important to note that when describing civil war in such terms, one is, in fact, critiquing the violence that comes to cover the revolutionary ideological struggle that initiated that social struggle. In other words, this emphasis on the violence that structurally leads to the protractedness of civil war should be, in another context, the necessary prompt for a rigorous investigation of the contentious ideas that are covered up by that same protractedness.

maintain the stability of these categories, already have their literature, their therapies, their causes, and that admirable discourse on human rights. The witnesses/survivors I am concerned with here are those who are clearly neither and yet know much—in fact, too much—and who cannot but bear the weight of this knowledge, because in fact they are formed by it. But it must be noted that these witnesses/survivors are elusive. They disappear during hostilities as they retreat into the relative safety of narrow corridors and poorly lit recesses of makeshift shelters, where crammed bodies wait in fear of hate and in fear of hope. During hostilities, they return to the company's fold and there dig deep toward a common root. Complying with the rule of company, they do more than nestle. They bury their individual features to look alike in the embracing trait of fear. Of that fear is born a war's interiority: the company's viscosity to which witnesses/survivors surrender and into which they dissolve like the protuberance of an added spoonful of honey into a honey jar. Such is the exorbitant cost of a sameness that promises safety. But when a truce is called, no matter how tenuous, or when the discourse and practices of reconstruction are unleashed on a dizzied population, it is they who populate, or rather crowd, the city. It is they who seem to be most out of place, bearing an unwelcome knowledge. These witnesses/survivors, ex-combatants and noncombatants alike, in times of aftermath are weighed down by doubt and shadowed with suspicion. They seem to bear the embarrassment of what seems to be mere overliving. Like uninvited returnees who have outlived not only one round of civil war but also the miraculous act of seemingly ending it, they are countless idle Lazaruses who remind us of just how miraculous that cessation was.

That is why the warlords who engineer truces and reprieves, whether tenuous or relatively lengthy, impose strict regulations on all whom they dubiously tag as overlivers, and therefore require of them to come forth with evidence of impartiality and justifications for their continued presence. Prohibited from visibly grappling with the difficulty of resuming living and recommencing what has been shattered, these witnesses/survivors strain to fix their features and reign in their expressions. "Appear insipid or be suspect": such is the severe law under which they are allowed to exist. The violence of reprieves within protracted civil war lies in part in the injunction for those assumed to be mere overlivers to come forth as if new, intimating no accrued hatred or interminable grief, and ambulating in mutual disregard of

their neighbors in cities deeply suspicious of visible grief. Coerced to leave behind traces of a life lived in the intimacy of fear, they nevertheless furtively try to look back, without turning around, in search of the witnesses/survivors they are interdicted from becoming. They seek others who have also had to act as if they had relinquished their burden to the requirements of insipidity. But to be seen and embraced by such others, they must show without recklessly disclosing the ill-favored knowledge that indelibly marks them. They must send a call that cannot be answered, except by another who generously does the same. To do so is to opt for inhabiting the so-called errors of chronology that are generally discounted or unacknowledged, a furtive inhabiting that gives the slip to the reductive label of an anachronistic overliver.

These witnesses/survivors do not want to be openly recognized and fixed as a mere living body lingering from a past allegedly overcome and surmounted. Under the edicts of truces and reprieves, where they ought to encounter one another in a system of insipid mutual disregard, they search in their relative retreat for where the continuance of the past in the present can still find byways to elude the gates of interdiction and begin to build the necessary liveable future from the knowledge that only they know how to gather and bear.

And it is precisely this gathered knowledge that begins to come forth in the impersonal but historical figure of the nonposthumous survivor, gradually making manifest the dream work of a civil war officially over. If we notice this, we may see in this figure a radically altered appearance of what can no longer be spoken or revealed. Displaced and condensed, this figure will tell nothing specific and make nothing simply available. Yet it will be the unavoidable screen flickering with the truth that is still operative but severely prohibited. Before and behind this screen, witnesses/survivors gather to look at a time when next they will meet. Not a mere time to come during which witnesses and survivors will be socially reintegrated, having been analyzed and given a place in chronology as a past event. Rather, a time that is theirs and growing out of an initial disinclination to resume normative living, and then opening onto a liveable living gathered from the accumulated knowledge of having lost and of knowing it.

NOTE *For a supplementary conversation between Walid Sadek and Nadia Bou Ali on related topics, visit* ARTMargins Online *at www.artmargins.com.*