



BRILL

Unpacking Sa‘dallāh Wannūs’ Private Library: On the (After)Lives of Books

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Abstract

The private library of the Syrian playwright and public intellectual Sa‘dallāh Wannūs (1941-1997) arrived at the American University of Beirut in 2015. This article sets out to read Wannūs through his library. After presenting a brief overview of the books in Wannūs’ library, their subject matter, and their provenance, it examines personal book inscriptions, which unravel a rich intellectual network and provide insight into Wannūs’ trajectory and recognition as a playwright and public intellectual. It then explores the conditions under which Wannūs’ library came into existence and flourished in a Syria marked by the Ba‘th party and the al-Asad regime’s authoritarian control of the political and cultural fields, under which it migrated from Damascus to Beirut in the wake of the 2011 Syrian revolution-turned-war. Wannūs’ library, the article argues, opened an Arabic and world literary space, both physical and metaphorical, from which Wannūs emerged as a modern Arabic and world-renowned playwright.

Keywords

Syria – Sa‘dallāh Wannūs – libraries – book history – world literature – theatre – cultural history – Arab intellectuals – American University of Beirut

Just after dawn on November 1, 2015—four years into the Syrian revolution-turned-war that has to date claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and displaced millions more—a battered truck arrived at the heavily militarized Syrian-Lebanese border crossing. Wary Syrian soldiers eyed the driver suspiciously, checked and double-checked his paperwork, pocketed the \$100 bill tucked among the papers, and waved the truck through. The relieved driver shifted the

truck into gear and crossed the border into Lebanon, saving his passengers from almost certain death.

*The refugees, however, were not people fleeing a war.
They were books.*

What actually happened at the border crossing, I do not know. I was waiting for the truck to arrive at the American University of Beirut (AUB), but the anxiety I felt might best be described in this imaginary scene of border crossing.¹ I was co-organizing a conference on the Syrian playwright and public intellectual Sa'dallāh Wannūs at AUB as my colleagues were staging one of his most famous plays, *al-Ightiṣāb* (The Rape, 1990),² when Wannūs' widow, Fayzah, and daughter, Dīmah, approached me with the idea of giving Wannūs' private library to AUB, twenty years after the author's death. They had moved to Beirut and were looking for a safe home for the books, which they had left behind in Damascus.³

Wannūs' books arrived together with other literary refugees in the same truck, namely the books of Fu'ād Muḥammad Fu'ād (b. 1961), a medical doctor and poet from Aleppo, now a professor at AUB. Fu'ād wanted to rescue his books left behind in Aleppo in 2013. Books can be refugees, too, said Fu'ād, as we watched the boxes being unloaded from the truck and recalled *Rijāl fī al-shams* (*Men in the Sun*, 1962), the famous novel by the Palestinian writer Ghassān Kanafānī, in which three Palestinian refugees cross the border from Iraq into oil-rich Kuwait in an empty water tank in search of a new life. Whereas the protagonists in Kanafānī's story die as the truck is delayed in the unbearable heat at the border, Wannūs' and Fu'ād's books arrived safely. Can we compare book collecting, the act of rescuing a book, to the act of rescuing a life? Do books, too, have lives and freedoms that can be put at risk or lost? If yes, then book collecting is not merely a personal affair; it has political and ethical implications.

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- 1 I thank Fayza and Dima Wannous, who made this research possible in the first place by giving Wannūs' private library to AUB, and the staff of the AUB libraries, in particular Mariette Atallah Abdel-Hay, Kaoukab Chebaro, and Lokman Meho. I am grateful to colleagues and friends who generously commented on earlier drafts of this article: Tarek El-Ariss, Mohammad Ali Atassi, Doyle Avant, Zeina G. Halabi, Stefan Höppner, Iman Al Kaisy, Wolf-Dieter Lemke, Robert Myers, and *JAL*'s editors and anonymous readers. I wish to also thank the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, which provided me with a most stimulating fellowship in 2017-18.
 - 2 The play was translated into English by Robert Myers and Nada Saab. It was produced by Myers and directed by Sahar Assaf.
 - 3 In 2017, Fayzah and Dimah Wannūs moved from Beirut to London.

The library in its various meanings constitutes “one of the most enduring human institutions,” writes Fred Lerner in *The Story of Libraries: From the Invention of Writing to the Computer Age* (2009); it is part and parcel of the culture in which it operates.⁴ As a subject of study, it sheds light on “the ‘worlding’ of literature,” argues B. Venkat Mani.⁵ Mani proposes the notion of “bibliomigrancy,” the physical and virtual movement of literary texts in the form of print culture, books, “finding new homes on new shelves, entering and inhabiting the space of world literature.”⁶ Here, world literature is understood not merely as the circulation of literary works in their original languages, translations, or adaptations beyond their culture of origin, as elaborated by David Damrosch,⁷ rather is understood to be tied to socio-economic, cultural, and political factors as they shape the library’s instrumentality in making literary works accessible.⁸ Research on libraries in the Arab world has generally focused on medieval to Ottoman times.⁹ The spread of public and private libraries since the Arab *Nahḍah*, and especially since the Arab independence movements of the mid-twentieth century, is gaining academic attention.¹⁰ Literary estates,

4 Fred Lerner, *The Story of Libraries: From the Invention of Writing to the Computer Age* (New York: Continuum, 2009), ix.

5 B. Venkat Mani, “Bibliomigrancy: Book Series and the Making of World Literature,” in *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, eds. Theo D’haen, David Damrosch and Djelal Kadir (London: Routledge, 2012), 284.

6 *Ibid.*, 285.

7 David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 4.

8 See B. Venkat Mani, “Borrowing Privileges: Libraries and the Institutionalization of World Literature,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 74.2 (2013): 238-269; *Recoding World Literature: Libraries, Print Culture, and Germany’s Pact with Books* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

9 See especially Konrad Hirschler, *Medieval Damascus: Plurality and Diversity in an Arabic Library: The Ashrafīya Library Catalogue* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016) and *The Written Word in the Medieval Arabic Lands: A Social and Cultural History of Reading Practices* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012); Verena Klemm (ed.), *Die Rifā’iya: (Refā’iya): Katalog einer Privatbibliothek aus dem osmanischen Damaskus in der Universitätsbibliothek Leipzig* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2016); Boris Liebrecht, *Die Rifā’iya: aus Damascus: Eine Privatbibliothek im osmanischen Syrien und ihr kulturelles Umfeld* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); Nelly Hanna, *In Praise of Books: A Cultural History of Cairo’s Middle Class, Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003); Arnold H. Green, “The History of Libraries in the Arab World: A Diffusionist Model,” *Libraries & Culture* Vol. 23, No. 4 (1988): 454-73; Youssuf Eche, *Les bibliothèques arabes publiques et semi-publiques en Mésopotamie, en Syrie et en Égypte au Moyen Âge* (Damascus: Institut Français de Damas, 1967).

10 See, for instance, Asaad Al-Saleh, “The Ministry of Culture in Syria: History, Production and Restriction of Official Culture,” *Journal of Cultural Research* Vol. 20, No. 2 (2016): 137-56; Dahlia E.M. Gubara, “Al-Azhar in the Bibliographic Imagination,” *Journal of Arabic*

private libraries and papers of writers often remain with the writers' families, and few private and public museums dedicated to specific writers have opened their doors.¹¹ In many cases, access remains a problem and research is driven by chance encounters.¹² In addition, the colonial legacy, war and occupation in the Arab world, in particular in Palestine, have led to the destruction and looting of literary estates.¹³

With the focus on the materiality of literature in the digital age, the study of writers' libraries has gained renewed interest in the field of literary studies.¹⁴ This article draws inspiration from this research and aims at introducing the study of writers' libraries more thoroughly into the study of modern Arabic literature. It suggests that writers' libraries offer significant insight into writing, reading, and collecting practices as well as into the social conditions and larger cultural and political contexts in which these practices partake. What can Wannūs' private library tell us about Wannūs' life and work, and about his status as one of the foremost Arab playwrights and public intellectuals in the second half of the twentieth century? How does it help us to understand the

Literature 43.2-3 (2012): 299-335; Ami Ayalon, *Reading Palestine: Printing and Literacy, 1900-1948* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004); Geoffrey Roper, "Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq and the Libraries of Europe and the Ottoman Empire," *Libraries & Culture* Vol. 33, No. 3 (1998): 233-48; Dov Schidorsky, "Libraries in Late Ottoman Palestine between the Orient and the Occident," *Libraries & Culture* Vol. 33, No. 3 (1998): 260-276.

- 11 2018 saw the opening of the Beit Touyour Ayloul Foundation, a museum dedicated to the Lebanese writer Emily Nasrallah (1931-2018) in her childhood home in the village of Kfour in south Lebanon. There has been some coverage on, for instance, the opening of the Naguib Mahfouz Museum in Cairo, the planned Muhammad al-Jawahiri Museum in Baghdad, and the Edward Said reading room at Columbia University. See <https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/a-wish-fulfilled-inside-the-cultural-foundation-setup-for-emily-nasrallah-1.795850>; <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/13749.aspx>; <https://arablit-org.cdn.ampproject.org/v/s/arablit.org/2018/06/12/>; https://library.columbia.edu/news/libraries/2009/20091202_said.html (Accessed 28.11.2018).
- 12 See in particular Sherene Seikaly, "How I Met My Great-Grandfather: Archives and the Writing of History," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 38.1 (2018): 6-20. See also Sonja Mejcher-Atassi and John Pedro Schwartz (eds.), *Archives, Museums, and Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).
- 13 In the case of Palestine, see Gish Amit, "Ownerless Objects? The Story of the Books Palestinians Left behind in 1948," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 33 (2008), 7-20; Benny Brunner, *The Great Book Robbery: Chronicles of a Cultural Destruction* (Netherlands: A29n Foundation and Xela Films, 2010), documentary; Hannah Mermelstein, "Overdue Books: Returning Palestine's 'Abandoned Property' of 1948," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 47 (2011), 46-64.
- 14 See Stefan Höppner's introduction to *Autorschaft und Bibliothek: Sammlungsstrategien und Schreibverfahren* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2018), 14-22. See also Richard W. Oram and Joseph Nicholson (eds.), *Collecting, Curating and Researching Writers' Libraries: A Handbook* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014); Paolo D'Iorio and Daniel Ferrer (eds.), *Bibliothèques d'écrivains* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2001).

man, his theatre, and the world in which he lived? What does it tell us about modern Arabic and world literature as it is read, written, circulated, and collected in the Arab world?

Reading Another Person's Books

Wannūs' private library consists of approximately five thousand books. There are few rare copies or fancy coffee-table books. Most of the books are cheap paperback editions, the kinds of widely produced publications that were affordable to readers in 1960s–1990s Syria. Wannūs' library was not a showroom of precious items but first and foremost the writer's work place, where he sat at his desk, read, and wrote. His books offer insight into what Wannūs read and how his reading left its mark on his work. Moreover, they give us an idea about the kind of books that circulated among intellectuals in Damascus at the time. The books' symbolic value far exceeds their monetary value and is intricately interwoven with Wannūs' symbolic capital, grounded in his knowledge of and recognition in Arab cultural fields and beyond.¹⁵ In reading another person's books, we must bear in mind the difference between real and virtual libraries,¹⁶ the latter comprising all books read in a lifetime, which are not necessarily physically present in a private library. Besides, many books remain unread in real libraries. Accordingly, some books in Wannūs' library look as if they have never been opened, while others are heavily used. Many volumes include notes, written neatly by Wannūs in pencil in the margins of the pages. These marginalia, material traces of his reading, and the intertextual references they might draw to other texts as well as to Wannūs' own texts open myriad avenues for research.

The books' subjects range from literature to history, philosophy, politics, art, and erotica. The majority are Arabic-language books published in Damascus, Cairo, Beirut, Baghdad, Tunis, and other Arab cities. There are many books by

15 Pierre Bourdieu defines symbolic capital as a “degree of accumulated prestige (...) founded on a dialectic of knowledge (connaissance) and recognition (reconnaissance)” in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 7. See also Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (New York: Polity Press, 1996).

16 Daniel Ferrer, “Bibliothèques réelles et bibliothèques virtuelles,” *Zeitschrift des Schweizerischen Literaturarchivs* 30-31 (2010): 15-18. See also Magnus Wieland “Materialität des Lesens: Zur Topographie von Annotationsspuren in Autorenbibliotheken,” in *Autorenbibliotheken: Erschließung, Rekonstruktion, Wissensordnung* ed. Michael Knoche (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2015), 154.

Arab playwrights, from the so-called pioneers of modern theatre such as Abū Khalīl al-Qabbānī (1835-1902) and Tawfīq al-Hakīm (1898-1987), to Wannūs' contemporaries. Theatre in the Arab world, especially since the 1960s, has drawn inspiration from Arabic cultural heritage, especially the *ḥakawātī*, the traditional story-teller, who figures prominently in several of Wannūs' plays.¹⁷ At the same time, it has delved into a process of cross-cultural interaction as it has experimented with global modernisms, as can be seen by the large number of volumes of world literature in Wannūs' library. A significant number of Wannūs' books are in French. Some of these books date to the years that Wannūs spent as a student of theatre in Paris in the late 1960s. They include books by Jean Genet and Kateb Yacine, whom Wannūs befriended in Paris.¹⁸ Russian literature in Arabic translation also figures prominently. This can be explained by Syria's close political ties with the Soviet Union, which have permeated the cultural field, as well as by Wannūs' political views.¹⁹ Though Wannūs was not officially a member of the Communist party, he was an avowed Marxist, and his library contains various editions of Marx's works in Arabic and French translations. There are many works of world literature in Arabic translation, from Brecht to Chekhov, Dostoyevsky, Eliot, Goethe, Huxley, Ibsen, Kundera, Lorca, Márquez, Neruda, Ngugi, Pamuk, Pirandello, Schiller, Shakespeare, Strindberg, Soyinka, Tolstoy, and Weiss. Some of these volumes are part of book series, a prominent form of publication in different geo-cultural locations in the second half of the twentieth century, which "became a very important source of access to world literature and a resource for the continued 'worlding' of literary narratives," as Mani writes.²⁰ The book series in Wannūs' library include *Riwāyāt al-Hilāl* (al-Hilāl's Novels), published by Dār al-Hilāl in Egypt in the 1960s, *Min al-masrah al-‘ālamī* (From World Drama), published by Kuwait's Ministry of Information in the 1970s and 1980s, *Masrahīyāt ‘ālamīyyah* (International Plays), published by Syria's Ministry of Culture in the 1980s, and *‘Ālam al-ma‘rifah* (World of Knowledge), published by Kuwait's National Council for Culture, Art, and Literature in the 1990s. The

17 See Friederike Pannewick, *Das Wagnis Tradition: Arabische Wege der Theatralität* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2000).

18 Wannūs' conversations with Jean Genet were published in the Palestinian cultural journal *al-Karmil*. Jān Jīnīh, "Wulidtu fi al-ṭariq wa-sa-amūtu fi al-ṭariq," *al-Karmil* Vol. 5 (1982): 8-44.

19 On Russian/USSR Arab cultural relations, see Andreas Pflitsch, *Zweierlei Barbarei: Überlegungen zu Kultur, Moderne und Authentizität im Dreieck zwischen Europa, Russland und arabischem Nahen Osten* (Würzburg: Ergon-Verlag, 2012); Margaret Litvin, "Egypt's Uzbek Mirror: Muḥammad al-Mansī Qandil's Post-Soviet Islamic Humanism," *Journal of Arabic Literature* Vol. 42 (2011): 101-19, and "Another East: Arab Writers, Moscow Dreams: Essays on the History of Arab-Soviet Literary Ties 1840-2015" (work in progress).

20 B. Venkat Mani, "Bibliomigrancy," 293.

titles of these series are telling; as the word *‘alam* (world) is repeated in various inflections, the “‘worlding’ of literary narratives” is rendered programmatic. In addition, there are a number of brochures of plays, which Wannūs saw in Damascus and Beirut as well as abroad. There is a folder of the “Brecht-Dialog 1968,” organized by the East German Center for International Theatre Institutes, the Berliner Ensemble, and the German Academy of Arts in Berlin in 1968, which Wannūs attended. It includes the programs of a number of Brecht’s plays staged at the occasion, among them *Der Aufhaltsame Aufstieg des Arturo Ui* (The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui), *Mann ist Mann* (A Man’s a Man), and *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* (The Good Person of Sechuan).²¹

In his address on the occasion of World Theatre Day in 1996, Wannūs spoke about “the thirst for dialogue,” and imagined a theatre that would expand and spread “to encompass all peoples and cultures ... to enhance man’s freedom, consciousness, and beauty.”²² The theatre imagined by Wannūs can be found in his private library, as books of diverse cultural background, language, and genre are juxtaposed side by side on its shelves, converging across time and space. Wannūs’ library reminds us that the very idea of world literature comes out of the private library, namely Goethe’s library in Weimar.²³ However, in Wannūs’ library, world literature is read not from a European perspective, grounded in early nineteenth-century cosmopolitan—and Orientalist—dreams, but from within the modern Arab world, the books’ worldiness derived not from their entry into Western but into Arabic book markets. Wannūs bought most of his books in his favorite bookshops in Damascus—al-Tanbakjī, al-Nūrī, and Maktabat al-Nūbil—as from the *maktabāt al-raṣīf*, the street booksellers, who until the 1990s used to sell their books every Friday when the shops were closed for prayer, in the Ṣālihiyyah district of Damascus.²⁴ In the 1960s and 1970s, these bookshops sold a wide range of books from across the Arab world as well as ones published in Europe.²⁵ Some of the books in Wannūs’ library

21 I thank my colleague Robert Myers for drawing my attention to this folder. Myers presented work-in-progress on the brochures at the convention of the Modern Language Association in New York in 2018.

22 Sa’dallāh Wannūs, “World Theatre Day, 27th March 1996: Message of Saadalla Wannous,” ed. International Theatre Institute, Paris: UNESCO, 1996, https://www.world-theatre-day.org/pdfs/WTD_Wannous_1996.pdf (Accessed 14 March 2017).

23 Reingard Nethersole, “World Literature and the Library,” in *The Routledge Companion to World Literature* eds. Theo D’haen, David Damrosch and Djelal Kadir (London: Routledge, 2012), 309.

24 Conversation with Fayzah and Dīmāh Wannūs, 09.11.2016.

25 On the publishing and bookstore sector in Syria, see Samar Samaan Haddad, “État de l’édition et du livre en Syrie,” in *Regards sur l’édition dans le monde arabe*, eds. Charif Majdalani and Frank Mermier (Paris: Karthala, 2016), 251-69.

were given to him as gifts by other writers in symbolic exchange. A significant number of these books bear personal, handwritten inscriptions to Wannūs.

Reading Dedications and Personal Book Inscriptions

Drawing on anthropological studies on gift exchange from Mauss to Bourdieu and Derrida, Muhsin al-Musawi explores dedications as important discursive strategies in modern Arabic literature's "journey towards self-awareness, the recognition of failure and achievement on individual and communal levels."²⁶ As he writes, "dedications assume the significance of presents and gifts while vying for recognition or ascendance with or against each poet's ghost."²⁷ Wannūs dedicated some of his own books to other writers. His famous play *al-Ightiṣāb*, for instance, is dedicated to "Nāji al-ʿAlī, Mahdī ʿĀmil, and Fawwāz al-Sājir, who were murdered by this darkness (*al-ḡalām*) and hard times (*al-zaman al-ṣaʿb*)."²⁸ Nāji al-ʿAlī was assassinated in exile in London in 1987, and Mahdī ʿĀmil in Beirut the same year, their murders remain unresolved; Fawwāz al-Sājir died of cancer in 1988. Remembering the Palestinian cartoonist, famous for his character Ḥanḡalah, the ten-year-old boy who became a symbol of Palestinian identity and resistance, the Lebanese Marxist intellectual, and the Syrian playwright, Wannūs inscribes himself with *al-Ightiṣāb*, published in 1990 after a long silence into a pan-Arab, leftist intellectual network critical of both Israel and Arab authoritarian regimes.

Wannūs' complete works, published shortly before he died of cancer in 1996, are dedicated to his daughter Dīmah. In the dedication, Wannūs writes about his generation's defeat but looks at her generation to find ways to break free.²⁹ Despite the political setbacks that his generation experienced, Wannūs remained hopeful—in his address on the occasion of World Theatre Day, he coined the phrase "we are condemned to hope" (*maḥkūmūn bil-amal*). The al-Asad regime sought to claim the celebrated playwright as one of its own, as it stepped in to pay the hospital bills for Wannūs' cancer treatment in Syria and

26 Muhsin J. Musawi, "Dedications as Poetic Intersections," *Journal of Arabic Literature* Vol. 31, No. 1 (2000): 30.

27 *Ibid.*, 1.

28 Sa'dallāh Wannūs, *al-A'māl al-kāmilah* Vol. 2 (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 2004), 61; English translation: Robert Myers and Nada Saab (eds.), *Modern and Contemporary Arabic Theater from the Levant: A Critical Anthology* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 204.

29 Wannūs' expression lends its title to Eyad Houssami's *Doomed by Hope: Essays on Arab Theatre* (London: Pluto, 2012).

France.³⁰ It was an occasion for the regime to demonstrate that it supported oppositional arts, as the former director of the Higher Institute for Dramatic Arts and Minister of Culture, Riyāḍ 'Iṣmat says.³¹ Wannūs, however, felt obliged to explain his situation; thanking Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad, he made use of an expression of gratitude in Arabic that can be interpreted in a double sense, the President's support, he writes, enclosed his neck (*tawwaqat mubādratihī 'ūnqī*).³²

The personal inscriptions found in some of the books in Wannūs' library differ from dedications in that they are not part of the published text but were added later in handwriting by the author who gave his book as a gift to Wannūs. They tell us something about the addressee, Wannūs, as seen through the eyes of each author inscribing a book to him, as well as about that author and his relation to Wannūs. They give us a sense of the larger social context in which Wannūs' library operated as an Arabic and world literary space, and they make Wannūs' trajectory and recognition as an Arab and world literary writer legible.

The first group of inscriptions dates to the late 1960s and early 1970s. Born in 1941 into a poor family of rural, Alawite background in the village of Ḥusayn al-Baḥr near the coastal city of Tartus, Wannūs was part of a generation of writers who journeyed out of the countryside and back to the capital Damascus in search of broader intellectual horizons. As a journalist in Damascus, he wrote for the Syrian daily *Al-Ba'th* and the Lebanese daily *Al-Safir* as well as for the cultural and literary journals *Al-Ma'rifah* and *Al-Ādāb*. At the same time, he published his first plays, notably *Ḥaflat samar min khamsah ḥuzayrān* (An Evening's Entertainment for the Fifth of June, 1968) and *al-Fil yā malik al-zamān* (The Elephant, O King of All Times, 1969).

Ḥaflat samar marked Wannūs' breakthrough as a playwright and gained him recognition as an Arab leftist writer. The play opens with a play-within-a-play that cannot be performed. As its director and actors discuss the reasons, a refugee from the Golan Heights, a former Syrian area occupied by Israel in the June 1967 War, disrupts them to question who bears responsibility for the Arab defeat. As the debate spins out of control, actors disguised as security forces move onto stage and address the real audience. As they announce that

30 An account of al-Asad's personal intervention in Wannūs' cancer treatment is given by Mamdūh 'Adwān in *Junūn akhar* (Damascus: Dār Mamdūh 'Adwān lil-Nashr wa-l-Tawzī', 2007), 194-95.

31 Riyāḍ 'Iṣmat, *Ḥadāthah wa-aṣālah* (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 2013), 83.

32 Quoted in Jān Aliksān, "Sa'dallāh Wannūs: Mujāladat al-maraḍ bil-fann," *al-'Arabi* Vol. 39, No. 446 (1996): 78.

the evening's entertainment is cancelled, the play ends.³³ The play captures "the profound malaise of a majority of Arabs in the aftermath of the 1967 war: people overwhelmed by humiliation, disappointment, anger, and fear,"³⁴ writes Suzanne Elizabeth Kassab in *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (2010). The play was first printed in 1968 in the Lebanese cultural journal *al-Mawāqif* and produced in Beirut the same year, before being banned shortly thereafter.³⁵ It was staged again in Damascus in 1972, where it reached a broad audience over the course of its run, and subsequently in other Arab capitals. Together with Wannūs' 1970 essay *Bayānāt li-masrah 'arabī jadīd* (Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre), *Ḥaflat samar* set the stage for *masrah al-tasyīs* (the theatre of politicization)—a project influenced by Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht's didactic theatre, which Wannūs developed further in *Mughāmarat ra's al-mamlūk Jābir* (The Adventure of Mamluk Jaber's Head, 1971), and *Sahrah ma'a Abī Khalīl al-Qabbānī* (An Evening with Abu Khalil Qabbani, 1972).³⁶ The politicization of theatre proved increasingly difficult after Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad's *coup d'état* in the so-called Corrective Movement (*al-ḥarakah al-taṣḥīḥiyyah*) of 1970 and the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, which helped the al-Asad regime to consolidate its power.³⁷

The personal book inscriptions dating to this early phase of Wannūs' literary career are rather sober in tone. This is illustrated by the note written by Yūsuf al-Khaṭīb in his *Diwān al-waṭan al-muḥtall* (Diwan of an Occupied Homeland), published in Damascus in 1968. Al-Khaṭīb was a distinguished Palestinian intellectual, part of the literary field's establishment and one of the first alongside Kanafānī to write about literary production inside occupied Palestine. Al-Khaṭīb inscribes his *Diwān* to Wannūs as follows:

33 See Edward Ziter, *Political Performance in Syria: From the Six-Day War to the Syrian Uprising* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 61-77; Friederike Pannewick, "Sa'dallah Wannūs," *Kritisches Lexikon fremdsprachiger Literatur* (KLF) 55. Nlg. 6/01.

34 Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 53.

35 The play was translated into English by Roger Allen and published in the online journal *The Mercurian: Theater in Translation* Vol. 5, No. 2 (2016). The translation is based on the version in his complete works published by Dār al-Aḥālī in Damascus shortly before his death in 1996 and republished by Dār al-Adāb in Beirut in 2004. As Allen says, the second version differs from the 1968 version as it omitted or altered a number of local and contemporary references. See <https://themercurian.wordpress.com/2016/06/17/soiree-for-the-fifth-of-june/>.

36 Roger Allen, "Arabic Drama in Theory and Practice: The Writings of Sa'dallah Wannūs," *Journal of Arabic Literature* Vol. 15 (1984): 94-113.

37 Ziter, *Political Performance in Syria*, 2-3.

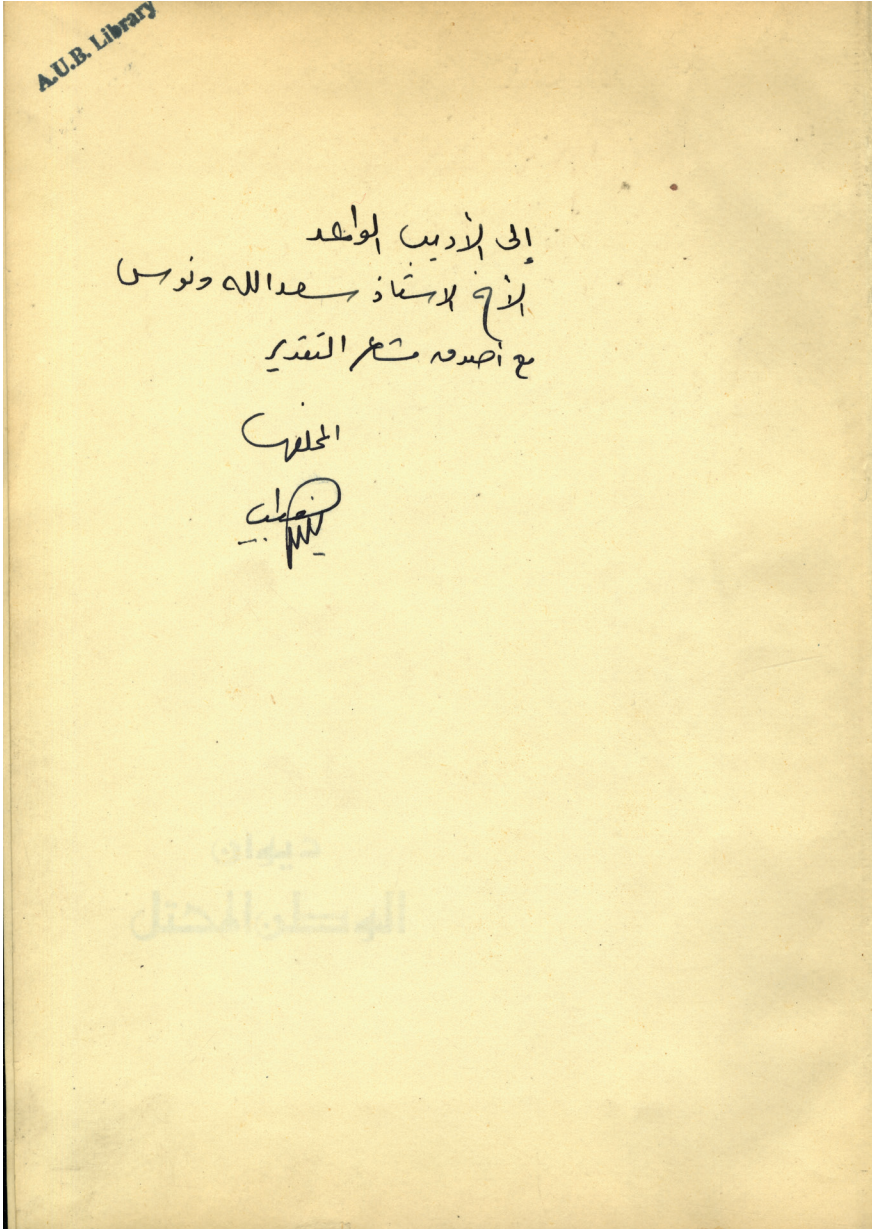


FIGURE 1 Yūsuf al-Khaṭīb's handwritten book inscription to Wannūs in his *Dīwān al-waṭan al-muḥtall* (Damascus: Dār Filasṭīn, 1968)

إلى الأديب الواعد
الأخ سعد الله ونوس
مع أصدق مشاعر التقدير
المخلص يوسف الخطيب

To a promising writer
my brother Sa'dallāh Wannūs
With my most sincere sentiments and appreciation
Sincerely, Yūsuf al-Khaṭīb³⁸

To inscribe his book “to a promising writer” (al-adīb al-wā'id) clearly shows that in al-Khaṭīb's eyes Wannūs had a future in the Arab world republic of letters but his success remained to be seen. The inscription also speaks to the close ties Wannūs established with Palestinian writers and to his commitment to the Palestinian cause, which was gaining regional and international solidarity.

The personal inscriptions change in tone as Wannūs gained recognition as an avant-garde writer and a public intellectual in Damascus' cultural scene in his capacity as the director of the experimental Qabbani Theatre, founded in 1976, editor-in-chief of the journal *Al-Ḥayāt al-Masraḥiyyah* (Theatre Life) published by the Ministry of Culture, and a founding member of the Higher Institute for Dramatic Arts. Writing in his 1978 *Fī khidmat al-sha'b* (*khamas masraḥiyyāt*) (In the Service of the People: Five Plays), Ḥasīb Kayyālī, one of the founding fathers of theatre in Syria, inscribes the book “ilā masraḥiyyinā al-awwal” (to our first playwright):

إلى مسرحيينا الأول وابننا البار
الحبيب سعد الله من شيخه المحب
حسيب كيالي
٩٧٩١/١/٥٢

To our first playwright and devout son
the dear Sa'dallāh from his loving sheikh
Ḥasīb Kayyālī
25/1/1979

38 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Arabic are my translations. Yūsuf al-Khaṭīb, *Diwān al-waṭan al-muḥtall* (Damascus: Dār Filasṭīn, 1968).

He acknowledges Wannūs' success as a playwright in the Syrian literary field, while at the same time, he inscribes a teacher-student or father-son relation between himself and his addressee, Wannūs, who is referred to here as "ibnunā al-bār" (our devout son). Kayyālī's recognition of Wannūs comes from above, as Kayyālī refers to himself as "shaykhihi al-muḥibb" (his loving shaykh), the word "shaykh" placing him in a position of authority over Wannūs, the authority of one of the founding fathers and gatekeepers of theatre in Syria who here gives recognition to a rising star of the younger generation.

Wannūs published *al-Malik huwa al-malik* (The King is the King, 1977) and *Riḥlat Ḥanzalah min al-ghaflah ilā al-yaqzah* (Ḥanzalah's Journey from Slumber to Consciousness, 1978) but then fell silent, struggling with severe depression. His silence has been interpreted as a response to the Camp David Accords, the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty signed by Anwār al-Sadāt and Menachem Begin on September 17, 1978. The same night the accords were signed, Wannūs attempted suicide. Palestine continued to play a key role in Wannūs life and work, as is recorded in the documentary film by 'Umar Amīrālāy, *Wa-hunāka ašhyā' kathīrah kāna yumkin an yataḥaddatha 'anhā al-mar'* (There Are So Many Things Still to Say, 1997), in which Wannūs at the end of his life traces the spread of cancer in his body to the Arab-Israeli conflict.³⁹

Political commitment has played a major role in modern Arabic literature.⁴⁰ Taking up the pen against oppression aligned Wannūs with other writers across the Arab world. The acclaimed novelist 'Abd al-Raḥmān Munīf, deprived of his Saudi citizenship for his political engagement, inscribed his *Taqāsīm al-layl wa-l-nahār* (Improvisations of Night and Day), published in Beirut in 1989

39 In Amīrālāy's documentary film, Wannūs is recorded as saying, "The news sent me reeling. It was evening ... sunset. To ease the unbearable tension I took a sleeping tablet. [...] Two hours passed. Then I woke up, even more tense and anxious. It was completely dark. I tried to kill myself during the night. It was a time of silence and distress. I read and pondered. I was continually compelled to face up to the painful questions of history." Quoted in Friederike Pannewick, "From the Politicization of Theater to Individual Humanism: Towards a New Concept of Engagement in the Theater of Saadallah Wannous," in *Commitment and Beyond: Reflections on/of the Political in Arabic Literature since the 1940s*, eds. Friederike Pannewick and Georges Khalil (Wisbaden: Reichert, 2015), 226. See 'Umar Amīrālāy, *Wa-hunāka kathīrah kān yumkin an yataḥaddatha 'anhā al-mar' ...*, documentary film (Damascus/Paris: Arte, 1997).

40 See Yoav Di-Capua, *No Exit: Arab Existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Decolonialization* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2018); Friederike Pannewick and Georges Khalil (eds.), *Commitment and Beyond: Reflections on/of the Political in Arabic Literature since the 1940s* (Wisbaden: Reichert, 2015); Verena Klemm, "Different Notions of Commitment (Itizām) and Committed Literature (al-adab al-multazim) in the Literary Circles of the Mashriq," *Arabic and Middle Eastern Literatures* 3.1 (2000): 51-62, and *Literarisches Engagement im arabischen Nahen Osten: Konzepte und Debatten* (Würzburg: Ergon, 1998).

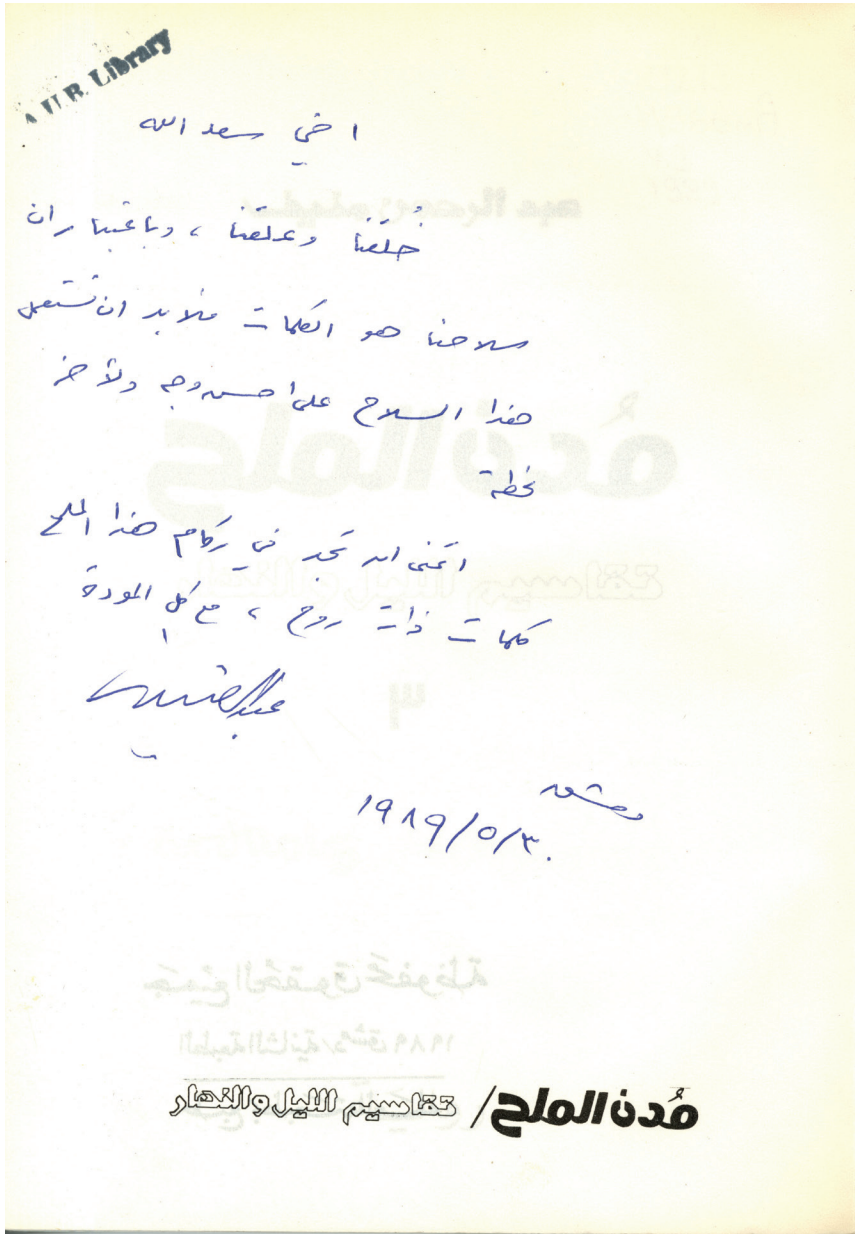


FIGURE 2 Abd al-Rahmān Munīf’s handwritten book inscription to Wannūs in his *Taqāsīm al-layl wal-nahār*; *Mudun al-milḥ* (Beirut: al-Mu’as-sasa al-‘Arabiyya lil-Dirāsāt wal-Nashr, 1989)

as the third of his five-volume *Mudun al-milḥ* (*Cities of Salt*), to Wannūs. His words speak *égale à égale*, as they build a brotherhood between men of letters of different literary domains—the novel and theatre—who join forces and find in writing a tool for change.

أخي سعد الله
 خَلَقْنَا وَعَلَقْنَا، وَاعْتَبَارَ أَنَّ سِلَاحَنَا هُوَ الْكَلِمَاتُ فَلَا بَدَّ أَنْ نَسْتَعْمَلَ هَذَا السِّلَاحَ
 عَلَى أَحْسَنِ وَجْهِهِ وَلَا آخِرَ لِحِظَةٍ.
 أتمنى أن تجد في ركام هذا الملح
 كلمات ذات روح، مع كل المودة
 عبد الرحمن منيف
 دمشق
 ٩٨٩١/٥/٠٣

My brother Sa'dallāh

We were born and left hanging, but since our weapon is our words, we have to make use of this weapon to the best of our ability and until the last moment.

I hope you find in this heap of salt words full of spirit. With all my affection,

ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Munīf / Damascus 30/5/1989⁴¹

Wannūs returned to writing, encouraged by the *Intifaḍah*, the Palestinian uprising against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. With the publication of *al-Iḡtiṣāb* in Beirut in 1989, he embarked on a last highly productive phase in his life.⁴² The play has sparked controversy as it gives a human face to Israeli individuals and critically addresses the impact of political oppression, violence, and torture on both the victim and the victimizer. In parts close to an adaptation of *La doble historia del doctor Valmy* (The Double

41 ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Munīf, *Taqāsīm al-layl wal-nahār, Mudun al-milḥ* (Beirut: al-Muʿassasah al-ʿArabiyyah lil-Dirāsāt wa-l-Nashr, 1989).

42 Mārī Ilyās published a number of interviews with Wannūs in this time: “Ḥiwār: Mādhā yaʿnī al-masraḥ al-yawm,” *Al-Ṭarīq* Vol. 3 (1997): 4-23; “Maʿālim wa-taḥawwulāt fī masīrat Saʿdallāh Wannūs,” *Al-Ṭarīq* Vol. 3 (1997): 25-29; “Ḥiwār Wannūs ʿan kitābātīhi al-jādīdah: li-awwal marrah ashʿur bil-kitābah ka-ḥurriyyah, li-awwal marrah ashʿur anna al-kitābah mutʿah,” *Al-Ṭarīq* Vol. 1 (1996): 92.

Life of Doctor Valmy) by the Spanish playwright Antonio Buero Vallejo, the play ends with a dialogue between the Israeli psychoanalyst Doctor Menuhin and the playwright Sa'dallāh Wannūs, who himself steps onto stage. The doctor asks Wannūs:

الدكتور: وأنت . . ماذا ينتظرك؟

DOCTOR MENUHIN: What about you? What is it that awaits you?

Wannūs replies:

سعد الله: عداوة الصهاينة الإسرائيليين والصهاينة العرب.

SA'DALLĀH: The enmity of Israeli and Arab Zionists.⁴³

However, Wannūs does not allow the play to end on this dark note, instead allowing a glimmer of optimism to appear in its final moments:

الدكتور: إذا . . دعنا نتبادل الإشفاق.
سعد الله: الإشفاق . . وربما الأمل.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Then let us feel pity for one another.

SA'DALLĀH: Pity ... and possibly hope.⁴⁴

Wannūs' late plays, such as *Munamnamāt tārīkhiyyah* (Historical Miniatures, 1993), *Ṭuqūs al-ishārāt wa-l-taḥawwulāt* (Rituals of Signs and Transformations, 1994), *Ahlām shaqīyyah* (Wretched Dreams, 1995), *Yawm min zamāninā* (A Day in Our Time, 1995), and *al-Ayyām al-maghmūrah* (Drunken Days, 1996) are true masterpieces in employing Arab history, from the fourteenth to the twentieth century, to shed light on contemporary social conditions. In *Political Performance in Syria: From the Six-Day War to the Syrian Uprising* (2015), Edward Ziter argues that Wannūs' late work was "increasingly premised on a belief that analysis of historical processes is best accomplished through the analysis of individual psyches and specific moments in historical development."⁴⁵

43 Sa'dallāh Wannūs, *al-A'māl al-kāmilah* Vol. 2, 167; English translation: Robert Myers and Nada Saab (eds.), *Modern and Contemporary Political Theater*.

44 Ibid.

45 Ziter, *Political Performance in Syria*, 149. See also Friederike Pannewick, "Historical Memory in Times of Decline: Saadallah Wannous and Rereading History," in *Arabic*

This turn towards “individual psyches and specific moments” drew Wannūs away from Brecht’s didactic theatre to focus instead on questions of humanistic concern.⁴⁶ Although Wannūs’ late plays have been praised as his best, they have not been staged in Syria—with a few exceptions, notably in the 2008 UNESCO celebrations of Damascus as Capital of Arab Culture.⁴⁷ The al-Asad regime proactively promoted Wannūs *outside* Syria as a means of “making oppositional arts official,” which is the subtitle of miriam cooke’s study *Dissident Syria* (2007).⁴⁸ It thus gave the appearance of supporting culture and tolerating political opposition while simultaneously repressing and striving to contain dissident voices inside Syria. This, however, did not keep Wannūs from experimenting with various theatrical forms in search of a socially meaningful theatre capable of taking a position against political oppression. His creative and critical output increased in his last years, and his intellectual network expanded well beyond Syria. From 1990 to 1992, he co-edited *Qaḍāyā wa-shahādāt* (Causes and Testimonies), published out of Damascus together with Munīf, the Palestinian literary critic Fayṣal Darrāj, and the Egyptian writer Gābir ‘Aṣfūr, a journal that re-visited the close ties between literature and the Arab *Nahḍah* and played an important role in what Kassab describes as an enlightenment (*tanwīr*) movement that anticipated the Arab uprisings of 2011.⁴⁹

The personal book inscriptions of the 1990s set themselves apart in their emphatic and celebratory words, mirroring the playwright’s success, as he approached the end of his life. “The theatre,” writes Bourdieu, “which directly experiences the immediate sanction of the bourgeois public, with its values and conformisms, can earn the institutionalized consecration of academics and official honors, as well as money.”⁵⁰ Wannūs was applauded from all sides, regime supporters, eager to show that their country tolerated political opposition, and opponents, who saw in Wannūs a beacon of hope for change. In his introduction to Wannūs’ complete works, Munīf describes Wannūs as the child who saw that the king is naked.⁵¹ Wannūs was transformed from “a promising writer,” as described in al-Khaṭīb’s book inscription, to “rā’id min ruwwād

Literature: Postmodern Perspectives, ed. Angelika Neuwirth, Andreas Pflitsch, and Barbara Winckler (London: Saqi, 2010), 97-109.

46 See Pannewick, “From the Politicization of Theater to Individual Humanism,” 221-33.

47 See Ziter, *Political Performance in Syria*, 191-93.

48 miriam cooke, *Dissident Syria: Making Oppositional Arts Official* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

49 Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 58-59.

50 Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 51.

51 ‘Abd al-Rahmān Munīf, “al- Ṭifl alladhī ra’ a al-malik ‘āriyan,” in *al-A’māl al-kāmilah* Vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 2004), 7.

al-masrah al-‘arabī al-ḥadīth” (a pioneer among the pioneers of modern Arabic theatre), as described by the literary critic Yumnā al-‘īd in her personal book inscription to *Tiḡaniyyāt al-sard al-rivā’ī* (Techniques of Novel Writing), published in Beirut in 1990.

إلى رائد من رواد المسرح العربي الحديث
إلى سعد الله ونوس
مع كل الود والتقدير
يمنى العيد
بيروت 09/60/91

To a pioneer among the pionzeers of modern Arabic theatre
to Sa‘dallāh Wannūs
With all my friendship and appreciation
Yumnā al-‘īd / Beirut 19/06/90⁵²

In *al-Ḥadāthah al-ūlā* (The First Modernity), published in Beirut in 1993, the Syrian scholar Muḡammad Jamāl Bārūt puts Wannūs on a pedestal. Reversing Kayyālī’s inscription to “a devout son,” he looks up to Wannūs in awe.

أستاذنا سعد الله
كأ صغاراً عندما كنا تتابعك بدهشة
وها قامتنا ارتفعت قليلاً، وما زالت
قامتك فيها الأطول تقول لنا ألا ننخي
جمال باروت
حلب ٣٩٩١

52 Yumnā al-‘īd, *Tiḡaniyyāt al-sard al-rivā’ī fī ḍaw’ al-manhaj al-bunyawī* (Beirut: Dār al-Fārabī, 1990).

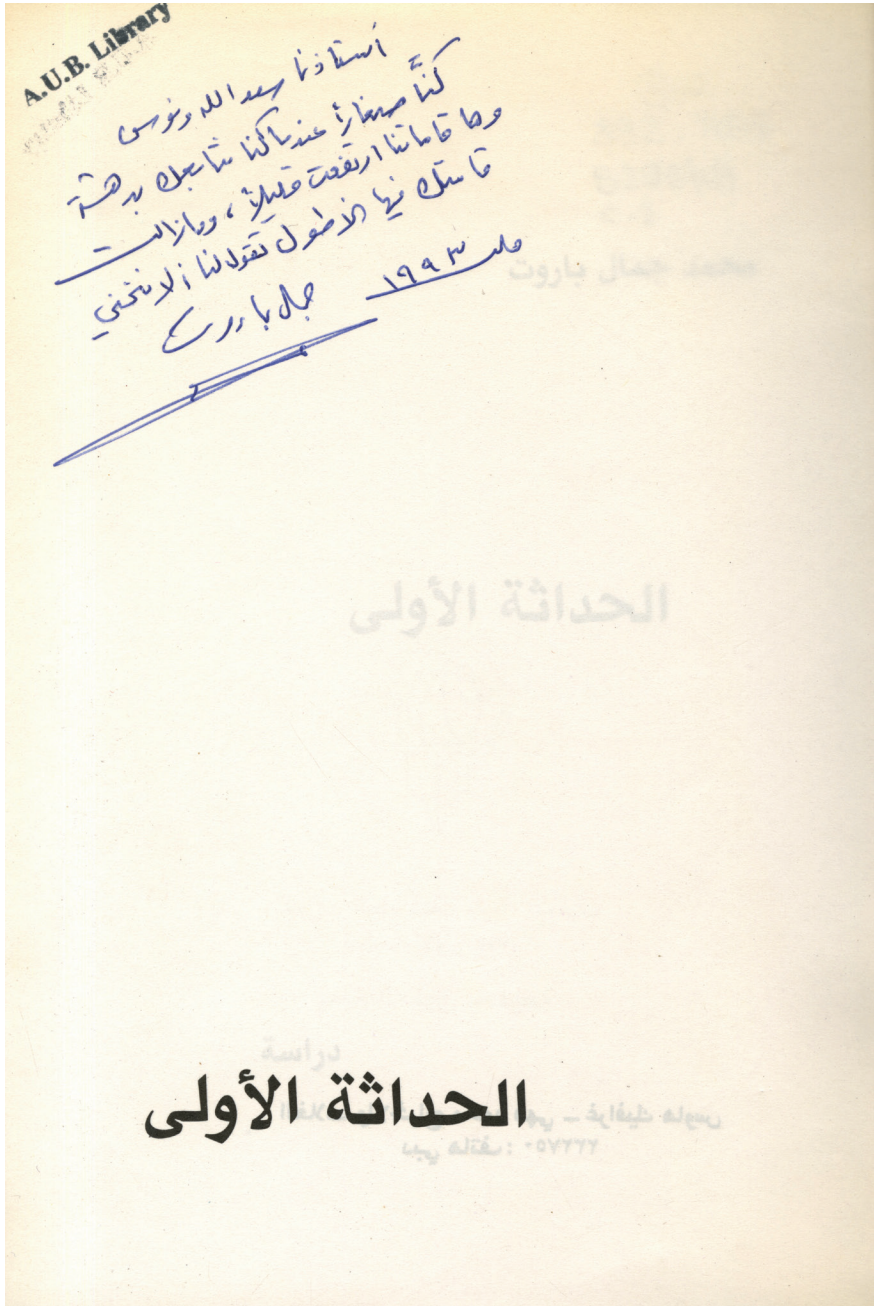


FIGURE 3 Muḥammad Jamāl al-Bārūt's handwritten book inscription to Wannūs in his *al-Ḥadāthah al-ūlā* (Dhabi: Manshūrāt Ittihād al-Kuttāb wa al-Udabā', 1993)

Our teacher Sa'dallāh
 We were young when we followed you with awe, and now our heights
 have risen and still you tower over us, telling us never to bow down
 Jamāl Bārūt / Aleppo 1993⁵³

The Library as a Fantastical Counter-Site to the Political Prison

As Wannūs' recognition as an Arab and world literary writer increased, his library grew in Arabic and world literary space; more books were added to its shelves, reflecting an intellectual network expanding well beyond Syria and a lifetime of creative and critical reading and writing. In his preface to *The Books in My Life* (1951), Henry Miller writes, "Those who know how to read a man know how to read his books."⁵⁴ Whereas Miller describes his encounters with books as his "encounters with other phenomena of life or thought," books being as much a "part of life as trees, stars, or dung," deserving "no reverence ... per se,"⁵⁵ Walter Benjamin describes a very different relationship with books in "Ich packe meine Bibliothek aus" ("Unpacking My Library: A Talk About Book Collecting," 1931), likening the process of collecting books to containing them within a magic circle:

The most profound enchantment for the collector is the locking of individual items within a magic circle in which they are fixed as the final thrill, the thrill of acquisition, passes over them. Everything remembered and thought, everything conscious, becomes the pedestal, the frame, the base, the lock of his property. The period, the region, the craftsmanship, the former ownership—for a true collector the whole background of an item adds up to a magic encyclopedia whose quintessence is the fate of his object.⁵⁶

This *magic circle* or *encyclopedia* (Benjamin uses both terms interchangeably) is lost to us as we set out to read Wannūs through his books. We can gather

53 Muḥammad Jamāl Bārūt, *al-Ḥadāthah al-ūlā* (Abu Dhabi: Manshūrāt Ittiḥād Kuttāb wa-Udabā', 1993).

54 Henry Miller, *The Books in My Life* (Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions Books, 1962), 13.

55 Ibid., 12.

56 Walter Benjamin, "Ich packe meine Bibliothek aus," in *Gesammelte Schriften* Vol. IV.1 ed. Tillman Rexroth (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1981), 389; "Unpacking My Library—An Essay About Collecting," in *Illuminations* ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (New York: Schocken, 2007), 60.

information about the provenance of his books—where, when, and how he acquired a given book—but we cannot possibly reconstruct “everything remembered and thought” in Wannūs’ library, especially since the books are now placed in a different order and we have no record of the order they were arranged in back in his apartment in Damascus. Benjamin opens his essay by describing the process of book collecting in personal and enchanting ways. He goes on to explain how books “cross the threshold of a collection and become the property of a collector,” as his essay takes an epistemological turn away from the personal toward the political.⁵⁷ New terminology, words that carry legal meaning, such as “Erbschaft” (inheritance), “Besitz” (ownership), “Verpflichtung” (responsibility), and “Vererbbarkeit” (transmissibility) take priority.⁵⁸ Read in this light, book collecting has little to do with the love of reading; rather, it is permeated with social processes that surpass any personal enchantment one may have with books. Book collecting, reading, and writing were not idle private pastimes in “Sūriyā al-Asad” (al-Asad’s Syria), as the country was identified on public walls across Syria, but social and politically subversive practices in the precarious margins, more specifically in private rooms.

In “The Library of Babel” (1941), Jorge Luis Borges portrays an imaginary library that is likened to the universe as it expands into “an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries” and exists “*ab aeterno*.”⁵⁹ As Alberto Manguel tells us, Borges might have had “the old library of Buenos Aires National Library on Calle Méjico where he was the blind director” in mind,⁶⁰ but the library of his short story is a creation of the imagination—as ambitious in scope as the historical Library of Alexandria.⁶¹ The space of the library, writes Manguel, makes possible “unwitnessed communication between the book and the reader.”⁶² Wannūs’ private library, unlike Borges’ imaginary library of Babel, was tangible and real. It enabled Wannūs to transform what Virginia Woolf described as “the dust of reading” into creative and critical output, as it offered him a space to breathe, think, and dream freely in the private rooms of his modest apartment in Damascus’ middle-class neighborhood

57 Ibid., 390; 61.

58 Ibid., 395; 66.

59 Jorge Luis Borges, “The Library of Babel,” in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 76, 79.

60 Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (New York: Viking, 1996), 198.

61 Alberto Manguel, *The Library at Night* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 27. See also Teresa Vilariño Picos, “The Library and the Librarian as a Theme in Literature,” *Comparative Literature and Culture* Vol. 13, No. 5 (2011): 1-7; <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss5/15> (Accessed 14 March 2017).

62 Manguel, *A History of Reading*, 51.

of Masākin Barza in “al-Asad’s Syria,” where even the walls had ears to record political dissent.⁶³ Unfolding inwards into private rooms, it was out of the immediate reach of political power, which extended outwards and manifested itself in the personality cult of larger-than-life public monuments of “al-qā’id lil-abad” (the leader forever).⁶⁴ As much as “al-Asad’s Syria” tried to control the cultural field and the production and dissemination of knowledge, including literary narratives, through a politics of fear culminating in the political prison, it failed to control the vast Arabic and world literary space opened by Wannūs’ private library. The regime’s inability to fully appropriate this space, Wannūs’ private library and by extension the famed playwright Wannūs himself, can be understood as an indication of the fact that there have always been cracks in the long-standing wall of fear in Syria. “Enforced consensus and compliance with the political regime in the public sphere,” writes Sune Haugbolle, “belie a range of practices of resistance in private and semi-private situations.”⁶⁵ Wannūs’ library can be described in Michel Foucault’s terms as a heterotopia,⁶⁶ a counter-site to the political prison, both the prison as built environment and Syria as one big prison, as some political dissidents have described it; it is real and tangible yet not confined by walls or borders but expanding *ad infinitum* as its books are opened and read. The “space of reading—the physical and metaphorical space of the library—,” writes Mani, “demands an account of the agreed-upon and the contestable, as shelf lives of books are created beyond their points of origin (...). It [world literature] becomes a space of multiple sites with discontinuous temporalities, each one deriving its meaning through—to use Foucault’s terms—vectors of juxtaposition, dispersion, inversion, and contestation.”⁶⁷

In Syria, Wannūs’ private library existed in the precarious margins, in opposition to the external space, which threatened its very existence. This threat was manifold—it was in the possibility of the writer’s imprisonment but also in censorship, the library’s confiscation, or its destruction as a deliberate act or as collateral damage. “Book and library destruction shares many elements

63 Virginia Woolf, “How Should One Read a Book?,” in *The Second Common Reader* (London: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1932), 291.

64 Lisa Weeden has shown how this personality cult made people act “as if” they adhered to the regime in the public realm, while seeking ways out in private rooms, in *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

65 Sune Haugbolle, “Imprisonment, Truth Telling and Historical Memory in Syria,” *Mediterranean Politics* Vol. 31, No. 2 (2008): 261-262.

66 Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* Vol. 16, No. 1 (1986): 24, 26.

67 Mani, “Bibliomigrancy,” 293.

with iconoclasm, the destruction of images,” writes Rebecca Knuth.⁶⁸ “The history of biblioclasm,” she continues, is “entwined with the history of vandalism and political violence in general.”⁶⁹ Her book includes a chapter on the cultural destruction in Iraq in the wake of the 2003 Iraq War, but so far there has been little research on the fate of books and libraries in Syria since 2011. In *When the Library was Stolen: On the Private Archive of Abd al-Rahman Munif* (2016), Fehras Publishing Practices sets out to document the fate of Munif’s private library, which included more than eight thousand books. The library was burglarized, damaged, and vandalized in Damascus in 2015, as Munif’s widow Su‘ād Qawādī reports.⁷⁰ It brings to mind the tragic fate of the library of another master of modern Arabic literature, the Palestinian exiled writer Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā (1920-1994), which was reduced to rubble in bomb attacks targeted at foreign embassies in Baghdad in 2010.⁷¹ In an effort to rescue what was left from such piles of rubble, a group of Syrian activists built an underground library in the besieged city of Daraya, south of Damascus, in 2012. It was destroyed in 2016, when the Syrian army moved in. These activist librarians tried to document as much as possible the traces of the *magic encyclopedia* of the various public and private libraries destroyed by the regime’s barrel bombs, from which they rescued the books that served as founding stones of “Syria’s secret library,” as Delphine Minoui recounts in *Les Passeurs de livres de Daraya: Une bibliothèque secrète en Syrie* (2017).⁷²

Dislocated from Damascus to Beirut, Wannūs’ books had a different fate. In “Unpacking My Library,” Benjamin transforms the general statement that books, too, have fates to mean not just the reception of books in the course of

68 Rebecca Knuth, *Burning Books and Leveling Libraries: Extremist Violence and Cultural Destruction* (London: Praeger Publishers, 2006), 3. See also Rebecca Knuth, *Libricide: The Regime-Sponsored Destruction of Books and Libraries in the Twentieth Century* (London: Praeger Publishers, 2003).

69 Ibid.

70 Kenan Darwish, Omar Nicolas and Sami Rustom (eds.), *When the Library was Stolen: On the Private Archive of Abd al-Rahman Munif* (Berlin: Fehras Publishing Practices, 2016). See also <https://arablit.org/2015/07/16/documenting-the-books-in-abdelrahman-munifs-missing-library/> (Accessed 20 November 2017).

71 The destruction of Jabra’s library, which some considered the author’s second death, was reported in Western and Arab media. See especially Anthony Shadid, “In Baghdad Ruins, Remains of a Cultural Bridge,” *New York Times* 21 May 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/22/world/middleeast/22house.html> (Accessed 20 November 2017).

72 Mike Thomson, “Syria’s Secret Library,” *BBC News* 28 July 2016 <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-36893303> (Accessed 20 November 2017); Delphine Minoui, *Les Passeurs de livres de Daraya: Une bibliothèque secrète en Syrie* (Paris: Seuil, 2017).

history but the circulation of books as concrete material objects.⁷³ He writes that “one of the finest memories of a collector is the moment when he rescued a book to which he might never have given a thought, much less a wishful look, because he found it lonely and abandoned on the market place and bought it to give it its freedom—the way the prince bought a beautiful slave girl in *The Arabian Nights*.”⁷⁴ In the German original, the text differs slightly; Benjamin here uses the verb “beispringen,” to come to the assistance of a book to give it its freedom. The choice of words suggests that books do indeed have lives and freedoms that can be put at risk or lost, that rescuing a book can be compared to rescuing a life. Benjamin concludes his essay with the disappearance of the book collector inside his dwelling, constructed with books as building stones. Singling out ownership as “the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects,” he explains that it is “not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them.”⁷⁵ Following this Benjaminian vision of the book collector’s disappearance into his collection, we can say that it is not Wannūs’ books that embark on a new life at AUB, it is AUB that begins a new life with and *à travers* Wannūs’ and other private libraries.

Wannūs’ books arrived at AUB at a time of increased awareness about the importance of private libraries and archives in documenting the region’s modern history, with AUB’s libraries playing a leading role in their preservation. Other recent donations to AUB include the private libraries and/or papers and notebooks of Fu’ād Muḥammad Fu’ād, whose books, as mentioned earlier, arrived at AUB together with Wannūs’ books; the Arab-American journalist Anthony Shadid (1968-2012) who died covering the war in Syria;⁷⁶ the Palestinian scholar and educator Muḥammad Yūsuf Najam (1925-2009), who was a Professor of Arabic literature at AUB;⁷⁷ the novelist and journalist Jurjī Zaydān (1861-1914), who studied at AUB (when it was known as the Syrian Protestant College), and later opened the publishing house Dār al-Hilāl in Cairo, which published *Al-Hilāl* journal as well as *Riwāyāt al-Hilāl*, one of the book series found in Wannūs’ library;⁷⁸ and Quṣṭanṭīn Zurayq (1909-2000), a prominent Syrian intellectual who had an influential career as a professor and diplomat, and served as Acting President of AUB and Delegate to the

73 Benjamin, “Ich packe meine Bibliothek aus,” 389; “Unpacking My Library,” 61. See also Wieland, “Materialität des Lesens,” 148.

74 Benjamin, “Ich packe meine Bibliothek aus,” 392-93; “Unpacking My Library,” 64.

75 Ibid., 396; 67.

76 See <https://www.aub.edu.lb/development/Pages/Anthony-Shadid-Library-Gift.aspx> (Accessed 14 March 2017).

77 See <http://staff.aub.edu.lb/~webbuln/v10n6/article40.htm> (Accessed 14 March 2017).

78 See <http://web.aub.edu.lb/libraries/asc/Pages/index.aspx> (Accessed 14 October 2018).

UN Security Council and General Assembly.⁷⁹ The donation of Wannūs' private library also comes at a time when AUB is launching a theatre initiative that has seen the translation into English and the production of a number of Wannūs' plays.⁸⁰

However, the donation of Wannūs' library to AUB has sparked controversy.⁸¹ While many have spoken favorably about the donation,⁸² some have criticized the family for giving Wannūs' books to AUB. The official newspaper of the Syrian government *Tishrīn* described AUB's acquisition as "ta'fish al-maktabah" (the looting of the library), appropriating a term "ta'fish" (derived from the Arabic verb "afasha," which translates into English as "to furnish") that has been used by Syrians to refer in particular to the looting of private homes, including furniture and books, carried out by the Syrian army and affiliated militias in areas besieged and subsequently emptied of their inhabitants. These practices in addition to Syria's new housing law no. 10, which "calls for what looks like mass property expulsion in those areas of the country which rebelled against the Syrian government after 2011," as Robert Fisk writes, show "painful parallels (...) to the plight of the 1947-48 Palestinian refugees and their families, who are deprived of their homes under Israel's 1950 Absentee Property law."⁸³ Echoing the position of *Tishrīn*, the Syrian journalist Khalil Šuwayliḥ termed the relocation of Wannūs' books "iḡhtiyāl al-maktabah" (the assassination of the library) in the Lebanese newspaper *Al-Akhbār*.⁸⁴ Whereas the word

79 See <http://web.aub.edu.lb/ulibraries/asc/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/constantine-zurayk> (Accessed 14 March 2017).

80 The translations are published in *Sentence to Hope*, eds. Robert Myers and Nada Saab, forthcoming in Yale University's Margellos World Republic of Letters.

81 See Sonja Mejcher-Atassi, "Library Brings Praise, Controversy," *The Daily Star* 04.03.2017, 16; <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Arts-and-Ent/Culture/2017/Mar-04/395993-library-brings-praise-controversy.ashx> (Accessed 20 November 2017).

82 See for instance <http://www.lebanonfiles.com/news/1148515>, <http://www.alhayat.com/Articles/20485528/>, <http://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/303490/> (Accessed 14 March 2017).

83 Robert Fisk, "Syria's new housing law is a veiled attempt to displace tens of thousands of refugees – but even that won't help the regime win the war," *The Independent* 31 May 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/bashar-al-Assad-syrian-civil-war-law-10-displacement-homes-papers-latest-a8377306.html> (Accessed 28 November 2018). See footnote 13.

84 <http://tishreen.news.sy/?p=75868>; <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/273202> (Accessed 14 March 2017). Given Sweileh's previous employment as the cultural editor of *Tishrīn*, his article does not come as a surprise. Read against his 2014 novel *Jannat al-barābirah* (Barbarian's Paradise), however, it appears preposterous. Chronicling the violence and destruction that engulfed Syria between April 2012 and December 2013, the novel includes the description of a private library ravaged by war. Khalil Šuwayliḥ, *Jannat al-barābirah* (Cairo: Dār al-'Ayn, 2014); English translation by Michele Henjum at <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/19036/khalil-sweileh-from-barbarians-paradise> (Accessed 14 March 2017).

used in *Tishrīn*, *taʿfīsh*, assumes that the library is a space or a private home, *ighṭiyāl* assumes that it is an individual. Thus Wannūs' private library stands in for the celebrated playwright and public intellectual himself, affirming that the symbolic value of his books is indeed closely tied to his symbolic capital. Responding to attacks like those in *Tishrīn* and *Al-Akhhbār*, Fayzah and Dīmah Wannūs issued a statement explaining their reasons for giving Wannūs' books to AUB. Before turning to AUB, they had contacted various Syrian cultural institutions, from the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts to the al-Asad Library, about the possibility of finding a home for the books in Syria.⁸⁵ However, according to Fayzah and Dīmah Wannūs, both institutions rejected the library, considering it to have no significant value.⁸⁶ The articles in *Tishrīn* and *Al-Akhhbār* raised issues of belonging and turned Wannūs' library into a commodity over which "al-Asad's Syria" postulated ownership twenty years after the author's death, similar to how it had claimed Wannūs himself as one of its own.

Against this background, the move of Wannūs' private library from Damascus to Beirut can be read as an effort of Fayzah and Dīmah Wannūs—the latter herself a journalist and writer who has taken a public position against the regime—to free Wannūs' legacy from the grasp of "al-Asad's Syria". Wannūs, "who was never confined by walls and geographical borders," they say, would have looked favorably on the donation to AUB:

سعد الله الذي لم يكن يوماً محصوراً بجدران وجغرافيا. سعد الله الذي ولد في حصين البحر وكان يحلم بالعيش في حلب، وانتهى به المطاف في دمشق بعد محطات في القاهرة وباريس وبيروت. سعد الله الذي كان دائماً مؤمناً بالثقافة العابرة للحدود والهويات الصغيرة. سعد الله الذي عاش بين أوراق هذه المكتبة وشكلت وعيه وفكره ومصدرًا ملهمًا لكتباته ومسرحياته، سيكون سعد الله، راضياً أن تُهدى مكتبته كاملة من دون نقصان أو رقابة لتكون في

85 Asaad Al Saleh considers the al-Asad library one of the best achievements of the Syrian Ministry of Culture in terms of library building and services. As he argues the Ministry of Culture provided significant cultural resources and spaces for the Syrian public despite it having been an integral part of the regime. Al-Saleh, "The Ministry of Culture in Syria," 137-56. On the entanglement of the literary field with the state apparatus in Syria, see also Alexa Firat, "Cultural Battles on the Literary Fields: From the Syrian Writers' Collective to the Last Days of Socialist Realism in Syria," *Middle Eastern Literatures* Vol. 18, No. 2 (2015): 153-76.

86 Conversation with Fayzah and Dīmah Wannūs, 09.11.2016.

متناول الطلاب والباحثين والمهتمين من جميع الهويات والاهتمامات بمن فيهم
السوريين وما أكثرهم في الجامعة الأميركية.

Sa'dallāh who was never confined by walls and geographical borders, Sa'dallāh who was born in [the coastal town of] Ḥusayn al-Baḥr and dreamt of living in Aleppo but ended up in Damascus after stops in Cairo, Paris, and Beirut, Sa'dallāh who always believed in culture as reaching across borders and beyond petty identities, Sa'dallāh who lived among the papers of this library that shaped his consciousness and his thought and served as a source of inspiration for his writings and his plays, would be satisfied that his library has been given in full, with nothing excluded or censored, so it is available to students, researchers, and others from all walks of life, including Syrians. And there are many, many of them at the American University of Beirut.⁸⁷

Conclusion

In "The Return to Philology," written shortly before his death and published posthumously in 2004, Edward Said argues that "art is not simply there: it exists intensely in a state of unreconciled opposition to the depredations of daily life."⁸⁸ Wannūs' private library came into existence and flourished in "a state of unreconciled opposition" to what Said in the title of one of his books terms "the politics of dispossession" that have marked both the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and political oppression in Syria and the Arab world more generally, as Wannūs' play *al-Ightiṣāb* and its mention of "Israeli and Arab Zionists" suggest.

Having found a new home on the shelves of AUB libraries, Wannūs' private library has embarked on a new phase in its life, as it is now accessible for research. As I hope to have shown in this article, Wannūs' library is a treasure for research in Arabic and world literature, theatre, and the intellectual history of Syria and the Arab world, as well as on how state power, war, displacement, and exile intersect in the library. As is often the case with cultural treasures, the gift bears the scars of war. "There is," writes Benjamin in "Über den Begriff der Geschichte" ("Theses on the Philosophy of History," 1940), "no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the

87 <https://www.facebook.com/fayza.shawish.9?fref=ts> (Accessed 14 March 2017).

88 Edward Said, "The Return to Philology," in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 63.

manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another.”⁸⁹ The history of collecting—the history of museums, archives, and libraries alike—is inextricably interwoven with the legacies of colonialism and war. Had Syria’s revolution not been orphaned, to use an expression coined by Ziad Majed,⁹⁰ the country not turned into a battlefield where various local, regional, and international players fought, Wannūs’ books would likely not have migrated from Damascus to Beirut. Wannūs’ private library gives us a sense not only of Wannūs’ life and work, his trajectory and recognition as one of the foremost playwrights in modern Arabic literature and his intellectual network well beyond Syria, but also of the very conditions in which modern Arabic and world literature is produced—circulated, collected, read and written—in the Arab world.

89 Walter Benjamin, “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” in *Gesammelte Schriften* V/ol. 1.2 ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1978), 696; “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations* ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (New York: Schocken, 2007), 256.

90 Ziad Majed, *Syrie, La Révolution Orpheline* (Paris: Actes Sud et l’Orient des Livres, 2014).