

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

HISTORICIZING THE ARAB APOCALYPSE
WITH WALTER BENJAMIN:
ETEL ADNAN'S "MASTER OF THE ECLIPSE" AND
RABIH ALAMEDDINE'S *THE ANGEL OF HISTORY*

by
VANESSA KATHERINE BOND BREEDING

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
to the Department of English
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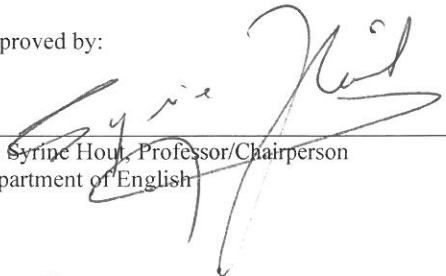
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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: Historicizing the Arab Apocalypse With Walter Benjamin: Etel Adnan's "Master of the Eclipse" and Rabih Alameddine's *The Angel of History*

In 2009 the prominent Lebanese American painter, poet, and author Etel Adnan published a book of short stories whose title story, "Master of the Eclipse" focuses on the life of Iraqi poet Buland al-Haydari and his interest in angels. In the story, Adnan situates this interest in relation to the Marxist German dialectician Walter Benjamin's famous allegory from his theses "On the Concept of History" (1940), i.e., the angel of history. Recently, in 2016, another prominent Lebanese American author, Rabih Alameddine, published a novel that also revolves around the life of a poet, and which bears the title *The Angel of History*.

Both Alameddine and Adnan have been recognized as offering complex literary presentations of the Lebanese civil war in their previous work by scholars such as Syrine Hout and Sonja Mejcher-Atassi. Hout and Mejcher-Atassi also link these authors to the problem of narrating the unnarrateable, a conundrum that has been related to post-war Lebanon by Saree Makdisi and Sune Haugbolle. This project extends this investigation of narrative experimentation in the Lebanese context by asking: How can we understand the angel in the context of Benjamin's philosophical work in order to better interpret Adnan's and Alameddine's literary re-glossings of said angel? What narrative mode surfaces in the confluence of post-war Lebanese themes about remembrance and Benjamin's materialist historiographical vision for using the past as a tool to combat danger in the present?

Highlighting Benjamin's 6th, 9th, and 17th theses from "On the Concept of History," this research shows that Adnan and Alameddine are confronting images from the past constructively in order to combat the personal and poetic dangers of silence, depression, and despair during an ongoing historical moment of loss and destruction in the Arab world. Within the frames of philosophical and literary-generic explication with Benjamin and Mikhail Bakhtin, close readings of these two pieces by Adnan and Alameddine show that they constitute consciously intertextual pastiches that suspend time in a fixed present and narratively gather images from the past into that arrested present in order to present a subjective model and ethical rationale for continuing to live and write poetry in the devastated Arab context.

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This work is dedicated to myself and all the people in my life who are seeking counsel as we make our way through this devastated landscape. May we continue to grasp glimpses of openings until the day our strength fails us completely, if such a day ever comes.

CHAPTER I, INTRODUCTION: REMEMBRANCE AND COMBATING DANGER IN THE TROUBLED ARAB PRESENT

“Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it ‘the way it really was.’ It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger. The danger threatens both the content of the tradition and those who inherit it. For both, it is one and the same thing: the danger of becoming a tool of the ruling classes.” – Walter Benjamin, 6th Thesis from “On the Concept of History” (1942).

Considering the glut of information about the rapidly deteriorating state of the world that assaults us today, how can a human being determine an ethical and sane mode of subjective existence? In other words, how to reconcile our need to do or be good with the ongoing apocalyptic situation in which we find ourselves? These are questions that have occupied my mind for several years, as the contradictory sentiments of “save the world now before it’s too late!” and “it’s too late” reverberate through my mind. While writing a creative essay in 2014 called “How to be OK in the Ongoing Apocalypse,” I ran across Lebanese poet, author, and painter Etel Adnan’s book of short stories *Master of the Eclipse* in a public library, and found that it was engaged with similar questions, but from a particularly Arab point of view. I also became sensitive to German Marxist philosopher Walter Benjamin’s work through the book, as its title story features lengthy descriptions of the philosopher’s “angel of history.” A year later, I began work on Master’s research about Anglophone Lebanese literary representations of the degraded body within the Arab Apocalypse, and became more intimate with Benjamin’s oeuvre. Shortly thereafter, I was given an intellectual boon by fate. In 2016 one of the most well-read and canonical English-language Lebanese authors, Rabih Alameddine, published a book called *The Angel of History*. My destiny was written, the gods smiled upon me. I would write a Master’s thesis not only about contemporary Anglophone Lebanese literary treatments of apocalypse, but also about this strange referential coincidence: what is it about this angel of history that has captivated both

Adnan and Alameddine? Why are these prominent Lebanese American authors featuring Benjamin's angel of history and to what effect? How can we understand the angel in the context of Walter Benjamin's philosophical work in order to better interpret Adnan's and Alameddine's literary re-glossings of said angel?

I posit that one should begin answering the above questions by looking at the sixth and seventeenth theses from Benjamin's "On the Concept of History." These two theses, the first of which serves as the epigraph to this project, focus respectively on the two interlocking ideas of using an image from the past in the fight against classist exploitation and confronting a historical event as a frozen constellation, or monad. In the sixth thesis Benjamin dismisses historical accuracy and urges the historical materialist to appropriate "a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger," a moment in which both the content of cultural tradition and those humans whose lot it is to inherit said tradition are exposed to the imminent threat of "becoming a tool of the ruling classes" (391). The seventeenth thesis expands on this idea of holding "fast that image of the past" by elaborating on the contrast between conventional historicism and Benjamin's dictates for "materialist historiography." Here the idea of "arrest" becomes central to the subversive historiographical act (396). Freezing a memory in the present is intended to activate that past moment's revolutionary potential, what Benjamin refers to in the second thesis as its "weak messianic power" (390). This is meant to suggest that certain historical moments prophesize revelatory or transformative events in their posterity, but in a "weak," easily avoidable way, unlike the traditional, inevitable sense of messianic prophesy within Christianity. The domination and degradation of our ancestors *could* demand that the future take a different form, that the regularity of class injustice, exploitation, and genocide come to a stop, but it certainly does not *have* to.

In Benjamin's view, however, a break in the oppressive status quo will only occur if Marxist historians *make* the potential of past moments come to fruition in the present, via his

model of confronting history constructively as a monad, i.e. a frozen, unified constellation of parts. Unlike conventional historicism, the philosopher writes that:

Materialist historiography... is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the movement of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly comes to a stop on a constellation saturated with tensions, it gives that constellation a shock, by which thinking is crystallized as a monad. The historical materialist approaches a historical object only where it confronts him as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a messianic arrest of happening or (to put it differently) a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history. (396)

Thus, materialist historiography seeks to disrupt the status quo of fascist, capitalist expansion and exploitation of the working class by seizing historical images, confronting them as an arrested totality, perceiving their messianic potential, and presenting them constructively as such. Together, the sixth and the seventeenth theses from “On the Concept of History” prepare my argument that in what I call their “angelic” works Adnan and Alameddine are participating in a Benjaminian mode of literary, materialist historiography, giving rise to an alternative realist mode for presenting experience and history and a narrative suspension of time that challenges the primacy of neoliberal and fascist global domination on the human psyche. Stylistically, this dissident act of freezing takes place in what I call Arab Apocalypse as narrative structure.

Before we delve into the particularly Arab and Lebanese literary-political landscape into which Adnan’s and Alameddine’s works are inscribed, we should briefly consider the specific “moments of danger” that the two authors are addressing. For her part, in the title story of *Master of the Eclipse*, Adnan focuses as an artist on the problem of culture and the risk that any given artist or work of art could become yet another piece of the ruling class’s cultural riches and wealth of information¹. Specifically, “Master of the Eclipse” focuses on a

¹ In order to limit the scope of this study, I have chosen to focus only on the title story from the larger work, *Master of the Eclipse*. In total, the book contains twelve stories divided into two parts. The eight stories in Part One are set in locations that span the globe, based mostly on the narrator’s memories, and told from a perspective that could be reasonably argued to be

friendship between the narrator, who can be read as a version of Adnan herself, and the Iraqi poet Buland al-Haydari. Over the course of the story we meet al-Haydari in many guises: a young inspired communist and favorite poet of Saddam Hussein, a drunken but moving poetic representative of Iraq's suffering during the Gulf War, an unhinged alcoholic exile in London, and a ghost. After the poet's death, the narrator is asked to speak to an American professor of literature about her friend Buland and the significance of angels in his work. In this context, the narrator confronts the dual dangers of either speaking about her friend and allowing his story to be understood and co-opted by the fascist proponents of empire or of remaining silent and allowing him to be forgotten, his story erased from history.

Alameddine similarly confronts the danger of silence, in addition to the less intellectual problems of losing one's mind and losing one's job. The Arab-immigrant protagonist of *The Angel of History*, Jacob, has not been able to write poetry since the death of not only his partner but also all of his best friends during the AIDS crisis. If it were not for the ongoing conversation with Satan that is going on in his head, his writer's block would not be too much of a problem, but Satan wants him to return to writing poetry and will not stop tormenting him. The fallen angel's voice has been getting louder and louder until one day, while at work, Jacob shouts out in response to him, scares his co-workers, and is sent home early. It is at this point that Jacob decides to go to a psychiatric clinic, hoping that they will medicate and institutionalize him for a three-day "vacation." This hope is not satisfied, but it does beg the question of what would have happened if Jacob had gotten the drugs and the vacation he wanted. Perhaps he could have avoided the leaking out of his insanity and kept

the voice of Adnan herself. The titles of the stories are as follows: "Master of the Eclipse," "The Power of Death," "The American Malady," "annunciation," "First Passion," "My Friend Kate," "Eavesdropping," and "Yellow, Yellow Cab." Part Two consists of only four stories, all of which fixate on macabre scenes of death, dirty-dealings, and putrefaction in Arab cities. For the most part, the stories in Part Two are clearly not told from Adnan's perspective. Their titles are: "Listen, Hassan...", "Amal Hayati," "The Radio," and "A Stream Near Damascus."

his job, but what then? Then the real danger begins, as he would have continued to live life as a “productive member of a comatose society,” estranged from both pain and pleasure (277).

Here, the principle of erotic satisfaction is added to the more purely aesthetic and political elements that Adnan’s story plays with. In tandem with the risk that empire will blot out psychic and intellectual freedom, we must also consider the risk that empire will blot out pleasure. All of these principles are related to memory; how do we express ourselves, what stories do we need to tell, what do we think and how, what turns us on and gets us off? By juxtaposing philosophical discussion with literary close-reading, and with special focus on the Lebanese Civil War (1975-90) and its aftermath, I hope to show how these two mixed-genre fictional works mobilize particular readings of the indictment of conventional historicism that Benjamin mounted in “On the Concept of History.” They do so within a complex temporal and spatial narrative field that extends the stakes of their previous works and interest in chronicling Arab devastation in the 21st century.

A. Adnan, Alameddine, and the Arab Apocalypse

Master of the Eclipse was published in 2009, well into Adnan’s prolific career². In 1978 she published a canonical work on the Lebanese civil war, the novella *Sitt Marie Rose*.

Besides being an important name among those who wrote about the war, Adnan has been

² Etel Adnan was born in 1925 in Beirut, Lebanon to a Greek mother and a Syrian father. French-educated from a young age, she first began writing creatively in the French language. Between 1949 and 1955 she studied philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris, and then moved to the USA. She published several works in French before shifting her focus to English between 1958 and 1972. She made this shift for two reasons, both related to her anti-war and anti-colonial politics. Writing in English allowed her to participate in the counter-cultural wave that was sweeping America in protest to the war in Vietnam (1955-75). In addition, in the context of the Algerian war for independence from France (1954-62), Adnan felt that if she continued to write in French she would be taking sides with the colonizer. In 1972, Adnan returned to Lebanon to work as a journalist and began writing in French again. Since then she has produced prose and poetry in English and French, and achieved a great deal of success in painting. For more on Adnan’s life and oeuvre, see Majaj and Amireh, 2002.

clearly linked to the projection of an apocalyptic Arab temporality since the publication of her book-length visual and verbal poem *The Arab Apocalypse* (1989). This research expands on existing critical literature that deals with cataclysmic and poetic themes in Adnan's oeuvre³. "Master of the Eclipse" presents a complex multi-locational and supernatural configuration of time and space that revolves around destruction during the Iraqi Gulf War. Out of this literary setting emerges a subjective concept of the figure of the poet as a violent angel. Because nothing has been written about this particular book of short stories, there is no critical understanding of the configuration of history or meanings of poetic composition that it presents.

While the term "The Arab Apocalypse" is taken directly from Adnan, its meaning and development must be connected with the religious usage of apocalypse in the New Testament's Book of Revelation and the Quran's *Surat al-Qiyama*. I define the Arab Apocalypse as an ongoing historical period that began with the Palestinian Nakba and continues to the present moment. Here, apocalypse denotes destruction, death, and suffering, but departs from preterite or futurist Christian or Islamic eschatologies related to the Day of Judgment. In this context Apocalypse is not momentary. It extends by virtue of ongoing destruction and degradation. Neither a final ending or beginning, future or past, apocalypse is radically present, suggesting the end but not arriving there.

Herein lies my unusual usage of the concept of apocalypse. *Apokalypsis*, "revelation" in ancient Greek, is firmly connoted with end-time scenarios in the Abrahamic religious traditions. In this era, however, and from a globalized Lebanese perspective, the fire and brimstone aspect of apocalypse has superseded its momentary, final temporality. In the light of American-and-Israeli-led neo-imperialism, global climate change, and the destructive

³ For more on cataclysmic themes in Adnan's work See Mejcher-Atassi, 2006, and Seymour-Jorn, 2002. These two articles along with other literature on Adnan's work will be discussed in Chapter Three, "Bending and Mixing Time, Space, and Genre in 'Master of the Eclipse.'"

imperatives of the military industrial complex within late capitalism, apocalypse means the present. It means loss, death, and suffering, but it does not mean the end. Life goes on. Both “Master of the Eclipse” and *The Arab Apocalypse* present this type of temporally extensive version of apocalypse. This is an Arab, non-religious, prosaic apocalypse, in which revelatory moments certainly take place, true to such meanings of apocalypse as “disclosure” and “uncovering,” but we remain. There is no “end of the world.” All change, even the apocalyptic variety, is ordinary, happening constantly and not just in elevated moments of conflict.

“Revelation” may happen, but it is not accompanied by any form of ascension or closure, unless of course you count something like the glorified scenes of masochistic sexual satisfaction found in Alameddine’s *The Angel of History*, the author’s fifth and most recent novel⁴. His first novel, *Koolaid: The Art of War* (1998), juxtaposes the Lebanese civil war with the contemporaneous San Francisco AIDS crisis and is an important work in the genre of post-war Anglophone Lebanese fiction. In addition to making Alameddine one of the most well-read authors to write about the Lebanese civil war in English, *Koolaid* also demonstrates his previous interest in the concept of the apocalypse. This is demonstrated in the novel by extensive references to the four horsemen of the apocalypse from the Book of Revelation, which provide structure to an otherwise jumbled text. With these authors’ canonical standing and their fascination with apocalypse and form in mind, we can now examine the body of literature that revolves around the issue of narrating the Lebanese civil war in order to more clearly understand the stakes and conditions of their literary historiographic endeavors.

⁴ Born to Druze Lebanese parents in Amman, Jordan in 1959, Alameddine writes almost exclusively in English. After growing up in Kuwait and Lebanon he left the Arab World for London and the United States at the age of seventeen. In addition to five novels, Alameddine has also published one book of short stories, *The Perv* (1999), and has exhibited work as a painter. For more on Alameddine, see Hout, 2012.

B. Narrating the Unnarratable Following the Lebanese Civil War

Scholars such as Saree Makdisi and Sune Haugbolle have observed that the modern history of Lebanon and its capital city, Beirut, is an unstable, elusive, constructed, and effaced entity. In “Beirut, a City Without a History?,” Makdisi examines the trials and tribulations of writing a historical master narrative for Lebanon after the cessation of the country’s 15-year-long civil war, as well as the state of temporal arrest in which Lebanese society has found itself since the end of the war in 1990. “In contemporary Beirut,” Makdisi writes:

Time has not quite stopped, but certainly the discordant, uneven, unfinished, rough present looms larger than either an increasingly remote past or the prospect of a brighter future, both of which seem to be fading away, leaving Beirut stranded, cut off from the past and the future. (204)

Makdisi also reads an “imagistic plenitude and narratological or historical scarcity” into both the continued circulation of pre-war post-cards for tourists and the quasi-memorial gestures made in the re-construction of downtown Beirut by Solidere (205). Makdisi’s work provides a link in this project’s critical and theoretical framework, making an important connection between the questions of cultural memory, historicization, and literature.

Sune Haugbolle works within the field of memory studies to plumb the psychological depths of the same dilemma in his article “Public and Private Memory of the Lebanese Civil War.” Specifically, he examines the contradictions between public and private memory, and the possibilities, as well as pitfalls, of forging a shared collective memory. He brings attention to the famous *la ghalib la maghlub* (no victor, no vanquished) formula, which put a stop but not an end to the civil war, thereby ensuring that it will stubbornly remain inconclusive (193). According to Haugbolle, Lebanese society is faced by a “Gordian knot:” not talking about the war will cause it to recur eventually, but talking about it now is likely to “make it happen again right away” (197). He wonders ominously whether public and private memories can be accommodated in a collective narrative, and what will happen if they

cannot, quoting Elias Khoury's comments in *On Beirut* that civil wars of the past do not simply disappear from the present: "Banished from the written, they take to the spoken. Erased from memory, they colonize the subconscious" (177). Makdisi's and Haugbolle's observations about the status of contemporary forms of memory surrounding the civil war and pervading Lebanese society provide us with a critical link between the fictional works at hand and the peculiarity of their relationship to narrativity and historicization.

Makdisi dwells on "image fetishism" of the pre-war past in Lebanon, describing an aestheticized avoidance of remembering that has allowed for the institutional failure to present a public narrative (206). In this context image fetishism refers to a fixation on visual images that serves not as a supplement to historical narratives, but as a substitute. Images are provided and latched onto in order to create a sense or feeling of history, constructing "history as spectacle," as though history itself is nothing more than a certain look or "special character" that can be safely isolated in the past and visited imagistically in the present (206). A coherent presentation of historical time, the narrativization and weaving together of past, present, and future, is eschewed and disallowed by image fetishism. This failure to narrativize is part and parcel of the aforementioned nostalgic and imagistic preservation projects that are manifested in the circulation of pre-war post-cards and in Solidere's chic architecture. Makdisi then directly transitions into a discussion of "several more-or-less 'genuine' histories of modern Lebanon and of the Lebanese war" (206-207). Here he briefly mentions standard "historical" texts before introducing the question of more literary works such as memoir, fiction, and non-fiction, which offer accounts of the war but "face formidable obstacles in trying to present a consistent narrative" (207). It is in this vein, pursuing a historically fixated, culturally-based analysis of literary genre in the contemporary Lebanese context, that Makdisi's work connects to our task of examining historicization and temporal suspension in Adnan's and Alameddine's works.

Makdisi argues that simple narratives tend to put forward a single, totalized perspective, while more complex attempts to narrate spend much of their textual space reflecting on the challenges of the task at hand; how to “narrate and represent the unnarratable and unrepresentable.” According to Makdisi, the most successful attempts at narration, such as those by Rashid al-Daif, Elias Khoury, and Huda Barakat, create new forms, narratives, or structures in order to “adapt to their own sense of formlessness and narratological anarchy” (207). He then concludes that if “experimental historical refashionings of history and the present” are to flourish in contrast to the total amnesia promulgated by public repression and the lack of an official narrative, it will also be in contrast with fanatic gestures of triumphalism, as embodied by Solidere’s project to reconstruct central Beirut. According to Makdisi, Solidere seeks to sew up the ugly seam between past and future, Beirut’s uneven present, by directly uniting the foggy pre-war past with a concrete, surface-level, and visually appealing post-war future (211). In response to this “cultural and political failure” to engage with the “the fragments of historical memory in a present unevenly strewn with the detritus of unfinished future possibilities,” Makdisi calls for an urgent reconstitution of history as the conceptual conjunction of memory with the wreckage-strewn present. This is an aesthetic, narratological, cultural, and political project that will best flourish in experimental forms that force people to reach new understandings of “narrative,” “community,” “temporality,” and “subjectivity” (213). Now, we can turn to the specific sub-section of post-war Lebanese literature that Adnan’s and Alameddine’s angelic works must be situated within: post-war Anglophone Lebanese fiction.

C. From Post-War Lebanese Fiction to Global Lebanese Literature: Arabizing Benjamin

The literary scholar Syrine Hout is responsible for first identifying and making critically visible the English-language works that fill the narrative vacuum which was left

behind by collective Lebanese amnesia following the civil war. In her comprehensive book-length study *Post-War Anglophone Lebanese Fiction* (2012), Hout examines works that extend Lebanese literature's experimental departure from traditional literary realism and simplistic objective historical narratives in a particularly hybridized, diasporic, and global mode. This project inscribes itself within the critical tradition that was inaugurated by Hout, and contributes a reading of Lebanese fiction in a state of globalized, cultural, and spatial in-betweenness. Furthermore, it emphasizes narrative spatialization, and historical, temporal, and memorialistic complexity, as well as the tenacity with which the present moment's wrecked unevenness is presented in these fictional, historical works. It also hopes to reveal how Adnan and Alameddine have managed to Arabize Benjamin's historical themes. Thus, not only does their work expand the significance of post-war Lebanese literature's prevailing themes into the global domain, but it also offers a new, Arab re-glossing of philosophical ideas that have previously been relatively constrained to the European context.

It is with the aforementioned temporal, destructive, and historical themes in the foreground of my analysis that I choose to situate both Adnan and Alameddine as American Lebanese authors, as opposed to Francophone or Arab-American authors. Naturally, studies have been performed that adopt a different critical, classifying lens when reading these authors' works. What constitutes Arab or Lebanese literature is a widely-debated issue, wherein critics differentially privilege criteria such as geographical location, language, themes, content, and the author's nationality or heritage⁵. I am aware that different

⁵ The debate on what constitutes Lebanese literature is especially heated for several reasons. Foremost among those reasons is that the nation itself, which achieved independence for the first time in 1943 is younger than the first Anglophone Syrio-Lebanese publications that emerged from writers like Ameen Rihani, Mikhael Naimy, and Gibran Khalil Gibran in the early 20th century. Second, there is the contemporary heteroglossic nature of Lebanese society which makes French, English, spoken Arabic, and Modern Standard Arabic all "fair-play" when it comes to composing in a national tongue. Thirdly, there is the ongoing Lebanese diaspora which has flung the young nation's people all over the world since before the nation itself was born, and which dictates that its literature can and does emerge in a

classifications foreground different issues, and that by classifying these authors primarily as Lebanese I could be inadvertently suggesting a disavowal of Lebanon's Arabness, in favor, for instance, of Lebanon's Phoenician heritage or intimacy with its French colonial past and attendant pretensions of being totally separate from the Arab world. It should be clear from my reading, however, that this is not my intention. Because of the genre's post-war emphasis on arrested temporality and unconventional historicization, Anglophone Lebanese literature is the best lens through which to position this inquiry into Adnan's and Alameddine's presentations of historical time in conversation with Benjamin's angel of history.

There is no need for Lebanese literature to mean non-Arab literature, and in fact, in this case, the opposite is true. There is also no reason that English-language literature cannot be deemed Arab. This sentiment is most succinctly summarized by Yasir Suleiman in "The Betweenness of Identity: Language in Trans-National Literature" when he states that "while all Arabic literature is Arab, not all Arab literature is Arabic" (16). The works examined here are decidedly Arab on the basis of content, themes, setting, and the authors' nationalities and backgrounds. As my focus on the concept of "Arab Apocalypse" makes apparent, the Arab dimension of these Lebanese works will be central to the project and its critical intervention. This research extends the existing conversation taking place within the field of post-war Lebanese literature into a global domain, expanding the parameters of a nationally delimited literary genre by showing how Lebanese post-war literary questions are related to larger Arab themes and transnational issues of historiography.

multitude of national and linguistic contexts. Lastly, there is always the more general gripe against nationalist literary classifications which can be readily applied to the Lebanese context. For more on the complexity of language and identity with regard to Arab literature see Suleiman, 2006. For more on Lebanese literature of the diaspora see Bayeh, 2014. For a challenge to nationalist approaches to reading literature in the Lebanese context see Hartman, 2014

D. Benjamin and his Angel: Against Historicism and Leftist Conformism

In situating Adnan's and Alameddine's angelic works within the intractable narrative domain of post-war Lebanese literature, this thesis project combines philosophical explication of Benjamin's critique of historicism with literary close reading. In the process, it will distinguish between conventional, totalizing, and linear modes of historical representation on the one hand, and non-linear, disruptive literary modes of historiography that avoid false coherence and progressivism on the other. After elaborating on the political, literary, and temporal implications of Benjamin's critique of historicism and "the angel of history," I will argue that Adnan's and Alameddine's angelic works give rise to a narrative suspension of time and an alternative realist mode for presenting historical experience. This particularly Arab and apocalyptic narrative form historicizes important events in the region during the last century in a non-progressive, non-linear, and modestly hopeful way, creating a literary field that is open to individual, interpersonal, and artistic agency.

In order to read these works in terms of Benjamin's "angel of history," we need to ask how and to what end Benjamin uses the angel to inform his philosophical and political meditations on history. Published posthumously, "On the Concept of History" is the last text that Benjamin composed. During its writing in 1940, Benjamin was exiled from Germany due to the rise of Nazism. In this collection of theses Benjamin puts forward his allegory of the angel of history, basing his vision on the German artist Paul Klee's 1920 monoprint *Angelus Novus*. Benjamin describes the angel as gazing at the past and seeing an accumulation of debris created by the storm of progress: "Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet." He also argues that the "state of emergency" in which German fascism is arising "is not the exception but the rule," and that anti-fascists must "attain to a conception

of history that accords with this insight” (392). Thus, the angel perceives history as an ongoing disaster and is used to urge historians to do the same.

Esther Leslie’s introduction to his book on Benjamin, *Overpowering Conformism* (2000), reveals the historical and political stakes that were on the line at the time of the theses’ composition. According to Leslie, “in the wretched late 1930s, while some of his contemporaries looked to Moscow and others vacillated (and numerous others hailed Hitlerite Munich), Benjamin attacked the ‘innate’ conformism of the left parties” (vii). Benjamin writes to overpower the conformist, leftist view that history has a progressive, linear, momentum of its own. This progressive fantasy claims that regardless of actual atrocities and the working class’s deplorable situation, everything is moving along towards a utopian leftist future. He refutes the Marxist interpretation which states that class struggle will inevitably succeed as historical imperative. In his view, any concept of history which pretends that things are naturally improving over time and expresses surprise when atrocities continuously take place serves to block the possibility of bringing about an *actual* state of emergency. This upheaval of the status quo, what Leslie calls “the absolutely revolutionary fracture,” would need to recognize that crisis, not progress, is business as usual, in order to bring that ongoing catastrophe to an end (viii). My reading of Adnan and Alammedine in conversation with Benjamin suggests that creating a complex, multi-layered presentation of historical time is one way to engender this recognition and challenge the fascist myth of progress.

E. Layers of Genre, Time, and Space: Opening Historical Experience to Poetic Possibility

In order to demonstrate the above, it is important to elucidate the generic features of *The Angel of History* and “Master of the Eclipse,” and to suggest ways in which these features relate to Benjamin’s philosophical, historical intervention and the contemporary field of Anglophone Lebanese fiction. In addition to clarifying the place of Benjamin’s angel in his

larger oeuvre, Chapter Two, “Historical Time and Genre with Benjamin and Bakhtin,” will also examine certain aesthetic and literary concepts such as intermediality, pastiche, and temporal openness, as elaborated upon by Ingeborg Hoesterey and Mikhail Bakhtin. Hoesterey will help to identify the stylistic elements of our two primary texts and Bakhtin will help to understand how these elements determine the conditions of literary openness. Literary openness can then be mapped onto historical openness and the possibility of an actual revolutionary fracture, i.e., of halting the (seemingly) ineluctable march of late-capitalist, neoliberal, western, global domination. I will argue that both “Master of the Eclipse” and *The Angel of History* are pastiches, and that the latter falls into the seriocomic tradition elaborated upon by Bakhtin. Both works are temporally open and sincere, but Alameddine’s mixes satire with its sincerity.

The concept of pastiche, in which seemingly incongruous images and techniques are combined into one piece, will be grafted onto the theory of interarts, which explores how different mediums of art interact, inform, and constitute one another. Pastiche and interarts are also related to Benjamin’s comments on the art of storytelling in his essay “The Storyteller” (1936). Specifically, they map onto the idea of telling the perfect story as a never-ending accumulation of individual layers that are open to interpretation. With this in mind, I will put forward a spatial model for storytelling which likens the accurate presentation of historical experience to the geological process by which layers of sediment pile on top of one another. I will also argue in conversation with Bakhtin’s model for “newness” that the creation of the new is actually just the sedimentary process by which the new is composed of layers of the old, a process which is well-represented by pastiche’s self-conscious referentiality.

Ingeborg Hoesterey’s historical survey and discussion of the pastiche as “genre mineur” in “Postmodern Pastiche: A Critical Aesthetic,” demonstrates how Alameddine’s

and Adnan's works exemplify pastiche in two ways: medley and imitation. I use the term pastiche to designate the ways in which both the novel *The Angel of History* and the short story "Master of the Eclipse" are intertextual and rely on unusual multi-generic techniques. Another article by Hoesterey, "The Interarts Experiment in Early German Film," helps to discuss the significance of Adnan's and Alameddine's multi-generic work as painters, as well as their extensive referencing of non-literary art forms and the correspondingly diffuse aesthetic focus in Benjamin's work. In this context it will also be useful to establish the Bakhtinian distinction between novelistic forms which are open and incomplete as opposed to closed and finished, in order to suggest that the short story, and particularly the unfinishable short story (best represented by Scheherazade's life-or-death storytelling task in *The Arabian Nights*), is the precursor to a novelistic form whose failure to finish itself (or success in remaining open) maintains possibility and snubs finality, positivism, and totality. Ultimately these questions of genre will help me arrive at sound conclusions as to how exactly a specifically Arab and Apocalyptic narrative structure emerges in Adnan's and Alameddine's darkly angelic works.

In Adnan's story, Benjamin's angel forms the basis for the emergence of a subjective form, the poet-as-angel. She claims that Klee's *Angelus Novus* embodies an evolutionary journey from pure Being to "man-as-angel," and that this man/angel is "the prototype of the poets" who will confront these dire times (46). I will argue that the figure referred to in the story as "man-as-angel," which is inspired by Buland al-Haydari, reaches equivalence with the Benjaminian angel of history within a spatially diffused temporality wherein history is an ongoing crisis and *man-as-angel* is the appropriate form for the contemporary poet to take. In Benjamin's work, this allegorical figure sees and experiences the past as a storm, blowing it into the future from Paradise. It is worked into "Master of the Eclipse" via temporal and

spatial displacement, and the tropes of transit, memory, and grief, all of which express the story's heterogeneous and transnational temporal and spatial structures.

The unconventional and not-readily-knowable temporal and spatial imaginaries that surface through "Master of the Eclipse" lend to the substance and subversiveness of Adnan's angel/poet. The Arab American angel/poet compares geographic entities and moments in time that are shifting and mutable. She traverses Baghdad, Sicily, California, and London in the space of a few lines. She travels erratically back and forth through both the existence of being itself and the life of a single friendship, allowing us to begin perceiving the type of mental spaciousness that it is a poet's job to keep open within the history of constant crisis.

In order to make this argument and highlight the ethically sound, crisis-retaining, and subversive nature of the man-angel-poet in "Master of the Eclipse," I will draw on Nouri Gana's "War, Poetry, Mourning: Darwish, Adonis, Iraq," in which he shows how Arab poets conjured Theodor Adorno's provocative dictum "poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" in their poetry after the 1948 creation of the Israeli state, i.e., the Palestinian disaster, or *al-Nakba*. He argues that most Arab poets used the dictum not to end poetry, but to express inconsolability, a gesture that allowed the poet to eulogize and grieve lyrically without also suggesting acceptance or a sense of moving on from that which has been lost. Updating Adorno's question for the Arab context, Gana argues that his comparison is merited by a critical exercise that shows how post-Nakba Arab poets took up an aesthetic project which retains the catastrophe of Auschwitz while also expanding its significance to include disparate catastrophes that remain illegible in certain geopolitical contexts (39). The Nakba is an event that cannot be read by those who are operating according to mainstream European and American historical narratives. Here, the Nakba represents that which cannot be spoken about lightly, that which we cannot allow to be beautified or assimilated into a master-narrative of progress if we want to keep open the possibility of accessing its weak-messianic power. The

same is true for the life of poet Buland al-Haydari, the messianic thrust of which Adnan is activating in “Master of the Eclipse.”

These writings make the Arab Apocalypse (as an ongoing catastrophe) non-apocalyptic in the sense that it belies the idea of finality. The Arab world is not gone, and neither are Arab ex-patriots’ ties to the region. It seems to have been lost many times over and yet it is still here, even as it is taken away or left for lost again and again. This state of affairs could easily create a melancholic fugue which admits no hope for a better present or a beautiful future. But there is also another meaning of melancholia, which is caused by the will to strive for beauty in spite, or perhaps because of, the distance between reality and the beloved. This inspiring, or poetic, brand of melancholia has roots in the Middle Ages, and is elaborated upon in Giorgio Agamben’s discussion of melancholia from *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* (1993). There is something melancholic in a positive sense in the fictional, historicizing mode of Adnan’s and Alameddine’s angelic works, which attests to the openness of daily, present, prosaic existence within the Arab Apocalypse.

I will treat Adnan’s and Alameddine’s usages of Benjamin’s allegory quite differently from one another, as the former puts forward a fully-conceived philosophical position through the narrative intersection of historical reality, Benjamin’s angel, and the Arab poet, while the latter merely mentions Benjamin in passing. Therefore, rather than reading Alameddine’s text as philosophical treatise, I will analyze the character and story elements that give form to the text’s protagonist in relation to philosophical commentary on Benjamin’s work. To do this, I must first pass not only through Agamben’s aforementioned cultural and etymological treatment of melancholia from *Stanzas*, but also through Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic discussion of the concept in relation to human loss in his 1922 essay “Mourning and Melancholia.” This will provide necessary conceptual grounding and clarity for situating this research with regards to one of the primary debates that surround Benjamin

and the angel of history within modern critical theory: are Benjamin and his angel melancholic?

In Chapter Four, “Melancholic Fetishism and the Meaning of Life in *The Angel of History*,” I draw on discussions of melancholia and fetishism put forth by Benjamin scholars Sami Khatib and Rebecca Comay. Together, their analyses provide a theoretical framework for my argument that the textual fabric of Alameddine’s novel works to narratively suspend time, construct present experience between loss and fulfillment, and celebrate fetishistic fixation. In this process, the protagonist is situated within a melancholic fetishism that insists on dealing with loss and ongoing life in a personal, non-teleological mode, thus expressing Benjaminian themes with little to no interest in change beyond the development of individual coping strategies. In *The Angel of History*, perversion reigns and becomes the signature of Alameddine’s new barbarism, an aesthetic mode that was coined by Benjamin in “Experience and Poverty” (1933), and which characterizes the novel in question.

Addressing the intertwined problems of the static Lebanese present and the ongoing Arab Apocalypse, Adnan and Alameddine inscribe characters who manage to reconcile with an all but unassimilatable reality. Their fictional works constitute complex narrative forms that historicize the contemporary Arab world and put forward subjective, artistic solutions without positing naive and insensitive optimism or hope about continuing in life. Such naiveté would efface historical realities and foreclose the loss and destruction that mark this historical period in the Arab world. Furthermore, it would subscribe either to fascist triumphalism, leftist conformism, or both at once. The angel of history’s debris-strewn, irredeemable conception of history aligns with the one in which Adnan’s poet comes to be, as well as the messy narrative world into which Alameddine inscribes his own angel/poet. In fact, according to Makdisi’s treatment of Lebanon’s arrested temporality, Benjamin’s critique of progressive historical ideology seems to echo Lebanon’s peculiar historical quagmire;

being trapped in a present that fails to adequately account for its past realities and possible futures. On generic, stylistic, and philosophical levels, “Master of the Eclipse” and *The Angel of History* challenge the simplicity and foreclosure of finished narratives and the forward-looking progressivity of future-oriented historical ideologies and storytelling styles. Refusing to ignore the pile of wreckage that Benjamin’s philosophical version of Klee’s visual angel brings to the fore, Adnan’s and Alameddine’s texts seize the past’s present ruin and envelope it into a narrative experiment.

“Master of the Eclipse” and *The Angel of History* make use of Walter Benjamin’s allegorical angel of history and the Arab Apocalypse as narrative structure in order to present historical time in an open way and create space for individual political and aesthetic agency. Neither work has been seriously criticized and both should take their places within the field of Anglophone Lebanese Literature as exciting, unique contributions to the well-established tradition of experimental, troubled, and open-ended historiography in the post-war era. This open apocalypse is an eschatological oxymoron, an end day that refuses end. What does humanity do in such a situation? Can we avoid being incapacitated by melancholy? How do Adnan and Alameddine deal with the question? Assuming that humanity is unfinished, and that experience is open, its temporality constrained but undetermined by past and present events, how do Adnan and Alameddine work with Benjamin to find potential in human experience and offer counsel? It is my hope that this project will make three important contributions to the critical fields of Anglophone Lebanese Literature: tracing an existing but as yet uncommented upon intertextual relationship between two of the field’s most prominent authors, elaborating on specific examples of how the general problem of historiography following the Lebanese civil war is being treated, and extending some of the genre’s central critical questions into a more global domain.

CHAPTER II: HISTORICAL TIME AND GENRE WITH BENJAMIN AND BAKHTIN

Where exactly does this notorious angel of history fit into the texts in question? How do these fictional and philosophical works relate to one another? Furthermore, how do the themes which surface herein connect with the other artistic genres and mediums which are central to Adnan's, Alameddine's, and Benjamin's respective bodies of work? In order to answer these questions, we will begin by reviewing the location of "the angel of history" in all three central texts: Benjamin's "On the Concept of History," Adnan's "Master of the Eclipse," and Alameddine's *The Angel of History*. Beginning with Benjamin's text we see that his thesis on the angel of history interacts with other important theses in order to link the angel's role of recognizing catastrophe as the ongoing status quo with the complementary ideas of seizing the historical image in monad-form and using the past as a weapon in contemporary struggles.

After an initial introduction to the central Benjaminian themes and their place in Adnan's and Alameddine's works, we will draw on the work of other literary critics in order to focus on the question of medium, the concept of interarts, and issues of literary style for all three authors. Examining the interaction of multiple generic forms will lend itself to bringing the concept of pastiche into the discussion of these texts and to thinking about the accumulation of existing works of art as an interartistic, intertextual aesthetic mode that creates newness by glossing over the old. This sense of pastiche as an accumulation, complication, and new version of the old resonates deeply with Benjamin's model for crafting the perfect story in cumulative layers, as put forth in "The Storyteller." This literary-genre-focused essay will prove very helpful in our efforts to delineate open and closed narrative models and consider the stakes of poetry and storytelling within the contemporary era of technological reproduction and rapid information relay. In order to draw out some of

the essay's relevant themes we will briefly place Benjamin in conversation with Mikhail Bakhtin, making special use of his literary concepts of temporal openness and polyphony, which are to be contrasted with both relativism and dogmatism, concepts that Bakhtin finds to be humanistically and historically dead-ended. This final comparison of Benjamin and Bakhtin will allow me to highlight the similarities of their respective critiques of positivism. These considerations help to elucidate the political stakes of exposing ongoing catastrophe, maintaining temporal openness, and crystallizing a past moment through literary temporal suspension. Ultimately, literary remembrance in Adnan and Alameddine operates in conversation with Benjamin's angel of history in order to salvage human agency and the heterogeneity of historical time within the late capitalist information era.

A. The Angel of History, The Catastrophic Status Quo, and Using the Past as a Weapon

After comparing Adnan's, Benjamin's and Alameddine's presentations of the angel, I will identify the main features of Benjamin's angel, the specific intervention that these features constitute within the realm of leftist historiography, and how they relate to Benjamin's model for using the past in the struggle against fascism, as articulated in the 6th thesis from "On the Concept of History." Briefly looking at Mohomodou Houssouba's reading of Adnan's *Sitt Marie Rose*, we will see that using the past to confront the present has precedent in analyses of Adnan's work. Finally, we will begin to understand how literary remembrance in conversation with Benjamin's angel of history stubbornly makes past moments prominent within a palpable, stylistically arrested present moment. This allows the text to refuse the misleading allures of progress and nostalgia, expose an ongoing state of emergency as the true status quo, and activate the "weak messianic potential" of past events.

The facility with which Adnan incorporates and explicates artistic and philosophical intertextual references into the story and provides the reader with tools for reading her

complex work is a testament to her skill not just as a writer of fiction but also as a reader of philosophy and visual art. While references to angels are present throughout “Master of the Eclipse,” it is on the forty-second page of the forty-seven-page story that the narrator begins to specifically discuss the two German intellectuals, Klee and Benjamin, who have direct bearing on her vision of the angel-poet. Fleshing out the connections that are made in Benjamin’s theses “On the Concept of History,” the narrator of “Master of the Eclipse” goes to the source of his angelic inspiration by first discussing Klee’s visual angels at length, and then gathering her discussion into a claim about the general figure of the poet.

Explaining what angels meant to Buland, the narrator emphasizes that for him angels have to do with vision, not belief, and that in order to understand them more thoroughly one must discuss Klee and Benjamin, because Buland was an avid reader of Benjamin’s work. This section of the story is told briefly in inner monologue and then switches to an uncited quotation, offering a fairly complete explanation of the angel of history’s genesis:

Benjamin had focused on one of Klee’s most famous angels, the *Angelus Novus*, which he found, and I think acquired, in the early twenties. For the German poet/philosopher, that was the angel of history, “that visionary angel [who] is seeing the chain of catastrophes which affected humanity as the unfolding of a single and continuous event.” (45, brackets in original)

It is unclear from where this quotation is drawn. It could be one of the multiple uncited instances of embedding that are meant to be fragments of al-Haydari’s poetry and prose into the story. It could also be from a philosophical article. For now, we can simply comment on the similarities and differences between this description and the thesis that it summarizes,

Benjamin’s ninth:

There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives

him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is this storm. (392)

While Adnan's rendition echoes Benjamin's text closely, the latter can be distinguished by its focus on the concept of progress and its relationship to the remaining theses of the larger work.

As for Alameddine's *The Angel of History*, the titular reference is activated only once in the actual text, twenty-eight pages into the 294-page novel, in a section titled "Walter Benjamin." After running into two young, white, gay poets at a restaurant, Jacob is triggered by one of the men's sympathy for Joan Didion. The man asks, "can you imagine, she lost her husband and within a year and a half lost her daughter as well, how horrifying is that?" and in an instant, Jacob flies off the handle, writing, "Can you imagine, and alarm bells woke me from a twenty-year nap" (31, 32). Comparing Didion's loss to his own, he yells that he "lost six friends in a six-month period" and harangues the young poets for forgetting him and his friends, for allowing "the grand elision of queer history," and for choosing assimilation into mainstream society when Jacob and his friends had refused everything (32). He is then ejected from the restaurant by someone whose name tag he reads as "Walter Benjamin." Smiling to himself, Jacob says softly, "I am your angel of history," and then promptly realizes that he has misread the nametag. It reads "Walter Bartender," not Walter Benjamin. It is after this encounter that he admits to Doc, and therefore to the reader, that he was not able to cry or write after Doc died. After a while he did write again, but badly. At the end of this section Jacob relates that he walked home, and "needed to sleep" (33). This moment of rupture situates the angel of history in relation to Jacob's subdued but stubbornly re-surfacing queer, American, and Arab past. In the context of this anecdote from the restaurant, Jacob reflects that in order to protect himself from being attacked, he has always covered himself "with layers and layers, with false fronts and bitchy attitude, but [his] charred history refused

entombment.” Laying down his “own mask,” Jacob aggressively expressed his historical position but received no satisfaction (33). He simply went home tired.

Now to return to the angel in its philosophical context, where it acts to uncover a view of history as continuous catastrophe which piles rubble on top of rubble, belies the notion of historical progress, and guides the historical materialist, instructing her in how to use the past as a weapon. This angel of history is part of a historical materialist philosophical intervention, acting as inspiration in the struggle against fascism. The angel’s point of view exceeds our own, such that “*he sees*” something we cannot: the continuity of catastrophe in the human context. By using *Angelus Novus* to activate an awareness of this continuity, Benjamin hopes to enable historical materialists to attain to a non-progressive and non-messianic concept of history and make constructive use of remembrance. Thus, Benjamin seems to be promoting an amorphous political, psychic, and aesthetic task, asking us to take hold of and use frozen images of the past even as the moment in which they can be grasped passes in a single instant. Elusive as it may be, my argument is that “Master of the Eclipse” and *The Angel of History* achieve this sort of armed but empty-handed mobilization of the past against fascist domination.

Mohomoudou Houssouba’s reading of *Sitt Marie Rose* in his essay “Ever Since Gilgamesh: Etel Adnan’s Discourse of National Unity in *Sitt Marie Rose*” offers a critical precedent for reading Adnan’s work as using the past to confront the present and maintain hope for the future. He argues that Adnan’s novel provides an explanation for the lack of Arab unity which enabled the Lebanese Civil War by reaching back into the historical wellspring of Arab mythology. Houssouba also describes the narrator’s unique movement between present and past. Unable to see “any peace or justice” in the sectarian religious structure of Lebanese society, the narrator confronts a “present that offers little hope,” dominated as it is by the brutalities of internecine war. Because of this paucity of resources in

the now, according to Houssouba, “the narrator steps back to the distant past when an epic hero, Gilgamesh, sets out on a journey to find truth on his own” (140). This description of a narrator who pulls moments from the past in order to deal with the present usefully echoes Benjamin’s notion of the past as weapon. Adnan has long shown herself to be a politically committed Arab American author, and Houssouba’s analysis identifies a literary precedent in her oeuvre for taking up the past as weapon in her confrontation with the present.

This tendency in Adnan’s work to pull from the past in her present-oriented, political, and aesthetic writing unites her with Alameddine and makes both authors into versions of Benjamin’s ideal, time-arresting historical materialist. The theses which surround the ninth are almost all dedicated to identifying and making distinctions between the progressive concept of history that the social democrats promoted during the 1930s and the concept of history and time that Benjamin claims could truly serve the task of historical materialism. In the eighth thesis he writes, “we must attain to a conception of history that accords with this insight,” that “the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule” (392). This conceptual attainment, if achieved by the historical materialist, would help her “clearly see that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency” and this would “improve [her] position in the struggle against fascism” (4). It is for the sake of this strategic move, improving historical materialisms’ battle position within the conceptual terrain of history, that Benjamin composed his theses and allegorized Klee’s *Angelus Novus* into the angel of history. It is also in the name of political struggle that he challenges the idea of human progress within “homogenous, empty time” and asserts that “history is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time [Jetztzeit]” (395). In so doing, he criticizes the nostalgia which relies on purified views of the past and names the suspension of time as a crucial weapon, stating in the sixteenth thesis that: The historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time takes a stand [einsteht] and has come to a standstill. For this notion defines

the very present in which he himself is writing history... The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called "once upon a time" in historicism's bordello. He remains in control of his powers—man enough to blast open the continuum of history. (396)

It is because of this confluence in Benjamin's work of the need to focus on heterogeneous historical time, assert now-time, and dispense with eternalized, romantic notions of once upon a time, that I focus on the story's and the novel's presentistic structures and their rejections of naïve nostalgia. For now, we will deviate from philosophy and literature to explore the role that the visual arts play in all three of our central authors' works and establish a framework for interpreting the formal aspects of their writing.

B. Interarts: Cultural Production Across Artistic Mediums

In her article "The Interarts Experiment in Early German Film," Ingeborg Hoesterey discusses an emphasis on various inter-dependent and inter-linked artistic mediums that was at play in the making of German film during the early twentieth century. Considering the close relationship between Benjamin and German experimental film, it is not surprising that intermediality plays a role in his oeuvre and its broad aesthetic scope. As for Adnan and Alameddine, their work as painters is reason enough to think about the angelic works in relation to the interarts, but we find even more compelling justification for this comparison when we examine the concept of the Arab Apocalypse and its genesis as an intermediary book of poetry by Adnan. In this section I will discuss Adnan's and Alameddine's works in relation to the interarts and then look closely at Benjamin's and Adnan's verbal re-glossings of Paul Klee's monoprint. This discussion will demonstrate how the stakes of the type of historiography that concerns us here go beyond literary forms and encompass the entirety of human cultural existence.

Sonja Mejcher-Atassi's article "Breaking the Silence: Etel Adnan's *Sitt Marie Rose* and *The Arab Apocalypse*" helps to elucidate not only the intermedial emphasis in Adnan's

previous work, but also to link Benjamin with the concept and its background in early twentieth-century German film and book making. *The Arab Apocalypse* was written between 1975 and 1976, during the time of the massacre of Palestinian refugees at the Tall al-Za'tar refugee camp in Beirut, Lebanon. According to Mejcher-Atassi, this massacre marks a time when the senselessness of the war had gathered unstoppable, foreboding momentum. She further argues that “the typographical arrangement of the text is of central importance. It includes blank spaces, words written in capital letters, and sketch-like images” (207). It is this use of unusual typographical elements and hieroglyphic-like symbols throughout the book-length poem that drives Mejcher-Atassi to situate it within “the context of European avant-garde literature,” and to suggest that it “brings to mind the *Bauhaus Bücher*,” or *Bauhaus Books*, a series edited by Walter Gropius and Maholy-Nagy, and which makes “use of design and format to convey content” (207). It is telling here that Mejcher-Atassi cites László Moholy-Nagy, a Hungarian painter and photographer who was part of the G group that greatly influenced Benjamin. This is not a coincidence. It is a clear link between the intermedial concerns of Benjamin and Adnan and their sources in the globalized history of European avant-garde modernist art. Mejcher-Atassi goes on to argue that the intermediality of *The Arab Apocalypse* indicates that “verbal language alone” was no longer adequate for Adnan to express herself⁶. Indeed, as painters, Adnan and Alameddine insist on using more than verbal texts to express themselves, and Benjamin insists on taking into consideration all mediums of cultural production when analyzing human perception and how it relates to the work of art.

In “Master of the Eclipse” the interarts becomes linked to Arab decline and displacement through the extensive discussion of paintings. Several pages of the story dwell

⁶ For more on Adnan’s forays into the fusion of verbal language and other aesthetic mediums, see Mejcher-Atassi, “The Forbidden Paradise: How Etel Adnan Learned to Paint in Arabic.”

on paintings. One page describes in detail a visit to an exhibit by the Italian painter Pizzi Canella called *Diary of a War*. We read about “canvases, earth-colored, brutally large and brutally spare [covering] the walls of this municipal building” (6). She describes the land-focused paintings in detail and then explains that:

the whole installation is about deliquescence. It tells that the country is being disintegrated before our very eyes. Iraq—with its battlegrounds—is being transferred here, from thousands of miles away, by an Italian painter who’s declaring his horror through maps seemingly made of mud, asphalt, and pulverized bones (6).

With these detailed descriptions Adnan brings the expressiveness of painting into her literary presentation of a contemporary global and Arab reality.

Adnan’s unique view on *Angelus Novus* as an apocalyptic and nihilistic angel of the future can be contrasted with Benjamin’s reading. The narrator has her own take on *Angelus Novus*, which is larger than Benjamin’s. She quotes Benjamin from the theses when he turns Klee’s angel into the catastrophe-perceiving angel of history, but continues with a differentiating “but,” to muse:

I would think that when Klee drew that angel, he endowed him with the totality of his metaphysical vision. That is not only the angel of history but also the angel of the future, a future whose cataclysms will continue and surpass those of the past. We can say that when he’s staring at history he is also staring beyond, at cosmic destiny. (45)

Whereas Benjamin’s description of *Angelus Novus* seems to depart completely from the painting, effacing its visual actuality for the sake of verbal musings, Adnan’s stays close to the original, as is most apparent when she describes the painting out loud to an invasive interviewer:

‘*Angelus Novus*’ ... ‘is figured in the painting as a wild beast with a leonine face, the wings of a bird, the feet of a bovine, and with the atrophied wings ending with human hands at their extremities. He is the composite figure that calls to mind the winged creatures that guarded the Babylonian temples, and also suggests a living tree. This all-encompassing form embodied, at once, the journey of Being from cosmos to plant, to animal, and to man-the-angel. It is also a link to the past because it announces a being for the future, it fuses the emblems of the four Evangelists into a single image. It is Klee’s ultimate creation of Parousia—of Revelation. (46)



Figure 1.1. *Angelus Novus*. Paul Klee, 1920. Monoprint of ink on wood.

Linking the angel to a concept of *time which takes a stand*, Adnan glimpses in the monoprint an evolutionary link between animal and human which envelops the apocalypse. Klee's angel becomes a harkening of the end of days, a visual component of the intermedial apocalyptic presentations of reality that Adnan and Alameddine are putting forth in their angelic works.

C. Pastiche, Intertextuality, and Creation as Accumulation

Having discussed the accumulation of previous artworks in Adnan's story, this section will introduce and define the concept of pastiche and argue that both "Master of the Eclipse" and *The Angel of History* can be thought of as intermedial pastiches. In this view, all artistic production becomes mere combinations and glossings-over of preceding cultural

artifacts, and artistic originality or newness is achieved not through aesthetic breakthroughs or individual genius, but through the emergence of a novel blending of pre-existing debris. Ingeborg Hoesterey will provide our definition of pastiche, and Julia Kristeva will help us define the related concept of intertextuality. We will also look at precedents for reading Alameddine's work as pastiche and begin to imagine a geological, sedimentary model for thinking through Adnan and Alameddine's mode of literary production.

Rabih Alameddine's interest in the interarts is evident throughout his oeuvre. He is a painter and many of his characters are also painters. Although he has not focused on mixed media work to the same extent that Adnan has, he has achieved moderate success as a painter, and his writing is riddled with references to non-literary arts. The main character of his 2001 novel *I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters* is a painter and writer who needs both mediums to express herself. Alameddine also experiments with fonts in *I, the Divine*, which is the closest that he comes to directly incorporating the visual with the literary. He also plays with linguistic registers, using mostly English and sometimes French to provide the layers that will constitute the text of *I, the Divine*. We also see the significance of the interarts in *Koolaid's*, where one of the novel's main narrative voices, Mohammad, is also a painter and wants to be writer. In line with their intermedial emphasis, these works fit into the category of pastiche, a term which comes from painting. As a literary form, pastiche makes the spatial and multi-generic conditions of cultural production visible insofar as cultural objects come into being through the accumulation of aesthetic layers over the course of historical time and a literary pastiche gathers together disparate references and styles.

Hoesterey's article "Postmodern Pastiche: A Critical Aesthetic" demonstrates how the history of the pastiche has transitioned from painting and the simple concept of stylistic hodgepodge to a fully-fledged postmodern literary style, signaling not only the random juxtaposition of disparate styles and forms in a single work but also conscious confrontation

with artistic predecessors. One meaning of postmodern pastiche is the mixing of classical and modern styles, a meaning that harkens back to a painting style from the Italian Renaissance called *pasticcio*. Hoesterey explains that “*pasticcio* was highly imitative painting that synthesized—‘stirred together’—the styles of major artists” (495). What was originally a low-art form transitioned as “pastiche” into the fine arts by way of appropriation into the discourse of seventeenth-century French *Beaux Arts*. From here, a complex generic “typology” has evolved that emphasizes a “hodgepodge structure,” which in turn evolved into “post-modern pastiche,” a cross-medium form wherein an artist “confronted with the vast archive of the artistic tradition...consciously acknowledges this past by demonstratively borrowing from it” (495, 496). In “Master of the Eclipse” Adnan brings together such diverse forms as prose poetry, philosophy, art criticism, interview, social geography, and eulogy into a single short story. Drawing on the work of Klee, Benjamin Canella, and al-Haydari, the story is a post-modern pastiche because it imitates and mixes diverse aesthetic components and preceding works.

Because of its blatantly referential nature and hodgepodge structure, pastiche as a literary form uncannily mimics, or makes legible, the intertextual conditions of discourse production as well as reality’s spatiality. A related term, intertextuality, also gives substance to the concept of creating new art, discourse, narratives, and realities through the transposition of existing cultural products. According to J. A. Cuddon’s *Dictionary of Literary Terms*, the term “intertextuality” was coined in 1966 by Julia Kristeva to denote “the interdependence of any one literary text with all those that have gone before it.” He further explains that Kristeva views any single text “not as an isolated phenomenon” but instead as “a mosaic of quotations” and cites her description of any text as but the “absorption and transformation of another” (367). She also borrows the word “transposition” from Freud in order to point not only to the way that texts echo one another, but also to the way that in the

layering of discourses, meanings, and remnants of previous texts, something novel is produced. According to Cuddon, Kristeva calls this a “new articulation” (367). This concept of a radically referential and dependent new articulation can be related to Benjamin’s and Mikhail Bakhtin’s mutually reminiscent models for creating a story that is mimetic of historical experience and time. These models can be best understood in relation to Adnan’s and Alameddine’s angelic works through a spatial, geological analogy wherein textual layers accumulate in a book as physical layers accumulate on earth: iterations of sediment, ruins, destruction, and construction piling on top of one another to constitute the unique, present now.

Reading Adnan and Alameddine as intertextual glossings of Benjamin, of one another, and of the rest of the artistic archive that they and their predecessors have confronted, we can glimpse the emergence of a collective, iterative narrative mode which uses the concept of remembrance and images from the past for revolutionary purposes. *Angelus Novus* is intertext to “On the Concept of History,” which are both intertext to “Master of the Eclipse” which are all three intertext to *The Angel of History*. Each is a new gloss on the works that preceded it. This collective, iterative creative process mimics the spatial conditions of human life over historical time, wherein each moment leaves marks (left behind by empire, civilization, violence, art, dust and more) on the surface of the earth, and the stage of human existence is a constantly novel mishmash of previous moments. We may begin to see culture much the same way that Benjamin’s angel sees the movement of historical time as a pile of debris left behind by the storm of progress. Layers accumulate over one another, producing something new in the process, a present moment which could be folded into the ready-made imperatives of capitalist progress, or which *could, possibly*, become a true revolutionary fracture.

D. Natural History and Literary Openness with Benjamin and Bakhtin

We can now delve into the details of Benjamin's discussion of literary genre from his essay "The Storyteller" in order to see how Adnan and Alameddine are recreating Benjamin's preferred model for storytelling through their reliance on pastiche and their evocation of human agency and aesthetic possibility. Using Bakhtin's discussion of concepts such as polyphony, temporal openness, dialogism, and newness, I will emphasize in contrast to Benjamin that the novel form need not be read as diametrically opposed to the story form. Bakhtin's theoretical musings, which revolve around Fyodor Dostoevsky's novels, help to understand how natural historical time can be rendered into novel form. This theoretical framework helps us understand how Adnan's and Alameddine's angelic works render the revolutionary potential of Benjaminian materialist historiography by opening up historical time that is elsewhere constantly being closed by conventional historicism.

According to Benjamin, a good story must be easily consumable by its listener so that it can then be retold by said listener in a new way, making it, so to speak, highly re-glossable. For ultimate re-glossing potential, the first condition is that it must be open to interpretation, and thus ready to be possessed and re-deployed by a listener-turned-storyteller in a novel way. In section VIII of "The Storyteller" Benjamin writes that "the more natural the process by which the storyteller forgoes psychological shading, the greater becomes the story's claim to a place in the memory of the listener" (149). Thus, the greater her inclination to repeat the story. This process not only requires a simple "chaste," not ready-made story, but also "a state of relaxation which is becoming rarer and rarer" (149). Boredom is the highest state of mental relaxation, Benjamin claims, and its birthing ground is the rhythm of repetitive work such as weaving and spinning. This environment, "the ambience of the oldest forms of craftsmanship," was fading out of existence as Benjamin was writing in the 1930s, and now it has all but vanished (149).

Benjamin argues that like all crafts, storytelling in its pure form is an “accumulation” of various movements, causes, and layers, which slowly create a perfect object. He then draws on the French poet Paul Valéry’s claim that “this patient process of nature was once imitated by men” but that now, “modern man no longer works at what cannot be abbreviated” to make a point about cumulative storytelling. Extending Valéry’s claim, he argues that in contrast to the oral storytelling tradition, the modern short story “no longer permits that slow piling up, one on top of the other, of thin transparent layers which constitute the most appropriate image of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of various retellings (150). I reject Benjamin’s harsh distinction between oral and written storytelling, and argue that in fact Adnan and Alameddine are mimicking the oral style that Benjamin is describing. In doing so, they are ensuring that their narratives remain unfinished, possessing what Benjamin calls “surplus value,” or eternal openness to re-interpretation and re-telling. This insistence resonates with the dictates of literary historiography in post-war Lebanon, where a closed historical narrative constitutes a dangerous and dishonest imposition of unified truth, masquerading as an impossible and unethical master narrative.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s comments on surplus, non-equivalence, and the value of the humanities in the chapter “Characteristics of Genre and Plot Composition in Dostoevsky’s Works” from *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1972) correspond not only to Benjamin’s model for the perfect narrative, but also to his polemic against leftist conformism. In conjunction with Bakhtin, it becomes clear why literature is an important field with which to challenge the leftist conformism of Marxist progressive thinking. Bakhtin argues that:

As long as a person is alive he lives by the fact that he is not yet finalized, that he has not yet uttered his ultimate word... One cannot apply to him the formula of identity $A=A$. In Dostoevsky’s artistic thinking, the genuine life of the personality takes place at the point of non-coincidence between a man and himself. (59)

In this vein, the most perfect version of a story exists only as the cumulative non-coincidence of infinite narratives about the topic, where each narrative would add something new to the

telling and would challenge the positivist notion that a story, a history, is or can be closed. Gary Saul Morson offers a useful interpretation of these ideas in “Bakhtin, Genres, and Temporality,” writing that “Bakhtin was keenly aware that this conception was profoundly at odds with the Marxist tradition” (1081). In this way, Bakhtin echoes Benjamin’s own critique of historical materialism as the supposedly inevitable success of class struggle. Keeping this emphasis on surplus as the endless non-coincidence of narrative re-tellings and its relationship to temporal openness in mind, we can now examine Bakhtin’s concepts of open temporality and polyphony in more detail, preparing us to securely situate his literary claims in relation to the post-war Lebanese context and the fictional works at hand.

According to Bakhtin, both relativism and dogmatism rule out the possibility of telling a story that has a proper mimetic relationship to human historical experience. In the place of these two discursive modes, Bakhtin proposes the polyphonic approach as the superior mode for conducting the humanities. He argues that the “polyphonic approach” is not similar to relativism, and that “both relativism and dogmatism equally exclude all argumentation, all authentic dialogue, by making it either unnecessary (relativism) or impossible (dogmatism)” (69). In the context of fictional historiography in the global post-war Lebanese context, we can read relativism as surrender to the notion that we cannot tell the story of the war or of a life because there are too many perspectives on it, or that any story can be told and all are equally valid. On the other hand, dogmatism would correspond to stubborn triumphal views which espouse a master or dominant narrative and leave no room for additional stories. But what do these systems have to do with time? For Bakhtin, they take the potential for agency and newness out of it. Morson writes that Bakhtin saw “both determinism and pure chance, both absolute certainty and total relativism” as destroying “human agency because they *close down time*” (1073). If change is perceived as occurring at

all, it is considered to be the unfolding of pre-determined outcomes. For Bakhtin, however, time genuinely “forges the new.”

The relationship of the seriocomic novel form that Bakhtin associates with Dostoevsky to the concept of time and the possibility of newness was central to his thinking. While Benjamin claims that a good story should be open, and that novels are necessarily closed, Bakhtin frames the Dostoevskian novel as an open genre and uses that example to generalize the concept of polyphony. Again, Morson’s analysis is useful, this time to clarify Bakhtin’s position on the seriocomic novel and what constitutes open historical time within the novel form. Morson explains that in Bakhtin’s view, “the humanistic disciplines describe a world in which events are irreducibly particular, individuals are partially free, and time is consequently open” (1071). This idea of time-as-open is closely related to the concept of eventness. A text presents an “open temporality” when it operates in line with Bakhtin’s descriptions of the narrative space of dialogic expression, a space that is inconclusive, unfinalizable, and ultimately open. The events, past, present, and future, that happen over the course of historical time, and within any text which succeeds in mimetically presenting it, cannot be fixed and are always open to possibility. Events happen, but neither they nor their consequences are inevitable. Eventness tells us that different tellings and new conclusions to the same events can occur.

E. Literary Remembrance as Antifascist Historiography

Thinking with Benjamin and Bakhtin about literary openness, we can begin to see how performing historiography as literary remembrance in the post-war global Lebanese context constitutes a challenge to scientific and information-based discursive modes and narrative practices. Both Benjamin and Bakhtin see literature as a way to wrest human history free from the limitations of natural science and positivism. Read in this light, Adnan’s and

Alameddine's works seem to be saving historical time from the positivist and deterministic tendencies of our contemporary information era.

In "On the Concept of History" Benjamin contrasts a positivist projection of the past into the present with the possibility of an actual lament which would be guided not by nostalgia or idealism, but instead by genuine remembrance. He argues that nostalgia falsely renders history in terms of a closed view of both the past and the present. In contrast, true remembrance could make the past speak in the present, letting it take effect instead of becoming monolithic or uneventful. Benjamin makes this point by arguing that historicism has brought the past into the present as a "the substitution of homogeneous configurations for changes in the physical world [*Körperwelt*]." These homogenous configurations are "the quintessence of the 'scientific' character of history, as defined by positivism," and they are secured at the cost of completely eradicating every vestige of history's original role as remembrance [*Eingedenken*]." Insofar as it removes the sense of "lament" from history, Benjamin asks us to understand this process as "history's final subjection to the modern concept of science" (401). This indictment of the subjugation of history to science completes our view of Adnan's and Alameddine's historiographical mode as a humanistic, multi-layered style of narrative-weaving that diverges from mainstream positivist historicism.

If keeping a tale free of psychological shadings and explanations is the hallmark of a good, memorable story for Benjamin, then information as it is disseminated in modern times is the story's natural enemy. In the age of headlines and the 24-hour news cycle, we are now more receptive to tidbits of information about our environments than we are to more involved tales about the world. This is because of a need for instant verifiability that has been born out of our increased access to information. In Benjamin's words, "if the art of storytelling has become rare, the dissemination of information has played a decisive role in this state of affairs" (147).

Whereas information's value is contained exactly in its utterance, a story's value has growth potential due to its very lack of verifiability. A good story "does not expend itself" like a piece of information, "it preserves and concentrates its energy and is capable of releasing it even after a long time" (148). We could think of this capacity to continue releasing value as related to the built-in surplus that a temporally open, unfinished, and eventful (in the Bakhtinian sense) story possesses. Thus, by wresting a historical narrative free from the dictates of the information era, a given author can be seen as creating openings for wisdom and newness to travel from their stories out into the larger culture. The author resists fascism and leftist conformism by creating openings in human culture as it plays out over time.

There is a deep harmony between Benjamin's statements about the information era and Bakhtin's critique of theoretism. Bakhtin's work is a polemic against all forms of scientific thought that try to reduce human life and history to a set of rules. In "The Storyteller," as in all of his work, Benjamin is preoccupied with conceiving of the changes that are happening to human beings due to the material conditions of contemporary culture around them. Here, we are pre-figuring both our discussion of ethical mourning and the risk of turning the dead into information in Chapter Three, "Bending and Mixing Time, Space, and Genre in 'Master of the Eclipse'" and our discussion of experiential poverty and the end of wisdom in Chapter Four, "Melancholic Fetishism and The Meaning of Life in *The Angel of History*." Benjamin's comments about the degradation of storytelling gesture directly towards a notion of wisdom decay. For Benjamin wisdom is "counsel woven into the fabric of real life [*gelebten Lebens*]." This constitutes the "epic side of truth" and, without it, storytelling cannot survive. Without wisdom we have information, but we do not have what Benjamin conceives of as the perfect, psychologically unshaded, ultimately re-glossable story. But why is wisdom leaving us? According to Benjamin, wisdom's departure is "only a concomitant of the secular productive forces of history," forces that are gradually removing

narrative from “the realm of living speech” and making it possible for us to more fully appreciate the beauty of that which is disappearing (146).

This configuration of the relationship between wisdom, storytelling, and “the secular productive forces of history” gives substance to the overall problematic with which this thesis is attempting to deal. Considering the advanced stage of global capitalism in which we live, the intense hegemonic power of the United States that spans the globe, the ruinous remains of the colonial era, the global refugee crises, and the state of both internecine and external warfare that marks the Arab world and constitutes the contemporary Arab Apocalypse, it is worth asking, how do we impart wisdom? How do we counsel ourselves and others as we confront the apocalyptic status quo and the overwhelming forces of global capital?

In light of these questions we can begin to see what it might mean to “seize a memory” in the fight against the status quo, i.e. catastrophic class subjugation. Benjamin’s and Bakhtin’s models for reading and interpreting the relationship between economic and scientific forces on one hand and literary style on the other show us how the layered, open-ended nature of these texts allow them to tell history as the messianic seizure of a memory (a moment from the past as it flares up as an image). They offer a historical *presentation* that might be useful for personal or aesthetic revolutionary purposes, eschewing scientific *representations* of history that render time as a series of events with supposedly causal and (monstrously) progressive relationships to one another.

CHAPTER III: BENDING AND MIXING TIME, SPACE, AND GENRE IN “MASTER OF THE ECLIPSE”

Focusing on the friendship of two Arab poets as situated around the fixed historical moment of the 1991 Gulf War, Adnan manages to weave wisdom and counsel into her contemporary presentation of historical time. When read closely through the dual lenses of using the past to create now-time and proclaiming poetic inconsolability, the Arab Apocalypse becomes narrative structure in Adnan’s “Master of the Eclipse.” The story takes place in transit, where space and time are collapsed and transposed onto one another. The single disaster of the Gulf War is expanded by the protagonist’s personal experience, causing the reader to witness a tense distortion of time, a structurally smooth but narratively coarse slippage between the past and the present. The most central characteristic of both space and time in this story is unconventional transposition. By that I mean that both moments and locations are disorientingly laid over one another. The past takes on materiality against the backdrop of a somewhat effaced present. This present remains established, however, even as the illusion of a traumatic experience’s temporal removal from the now is undone, thus allowing the past to crowd in on and lay itself over the conventional present. The act of recollection and the unavoidability of remembrance-related emotions interrupt any semblance of distance between disparate times and spaces. Below we will see how exactly a collapse of time in “Master of the Eclipse” that can be thought of as resembling the Benjaminian “real state of emergency” is created in Adnan’s story.

My reading of Adnan’s fictional intervention in poetic subjectivity in light of this ongoing state of emergency puts me in conversation with Caroline Seymour-Jorn’s analysis of her work. Seymour-Jorn’s interpretation of Adnan’s relationship to the concept of catastrophe elicits a more oncoming, rather than ongoing, crisis. Her article, “*The Arab Apocalypse as a Critique of Colonialism and Imperialism*,” reads the book of poetry as an

indictment of colonial violence and a warning about the cataclysmic events that are oncoming if things continue on their present course. In its emphasis on futurity, this reading presents a temporality that runs counter to what I find in “Master of the Eclipse.” It would be inappropriate to read this newer work as primarily a warning about the “tragic *future* that awaits mankind,” because the story is pointedly interested in a tragic ongoingness, past, present, and future, all-inclusive (37, emphasis added). Here we find a historical sense of destruction’s continuity both in and out of the Arab world, as it crystallizes around the single event of the Gulf War, but extends in time and space as a recurrent catastrophe. It does this both by making the destruction of Iraq move between disparate moments and spaces and by visiting Italian sites of destruction such as Old Gibelina and Palermo.

Once again Paul Valéry’s work is relevant to our analysis of Adnan, this time by way of Eric Sellin’s reading of temporality in Adnan’s oeuvre from his article “Etel Adnan: A Cosmic Poet.” Comparing what he calls Adnan’s “theophanies” (*The Indian Never Had a Horse* (1985) and *The Spring Flowers Own & The Manifestations of the Voyage* (1990)) to Valéry’s meditative poetry, Sellins argues that Adnan uses Valéry’s “interzone effect” instead of figurative language in order to convey “the essential message of her work” (30-31). According to Sellin’s reading of Valéry, this interzone effect is brought about by charting “the celestial geometry of pure meditation... that occurs at a moment whose chronology exists only in terms of the point of juncture of two measurable time definitions.” This moment of in-betweenness “has no actual duration and is more properly the timeless moment between ante- and post-meridian duration” (30). From this understanding of writing poetic theophany, a literary sense of being frozen in a mutable moment emerges, one that has “philosophical development without forward chronological movement” (30). As such, the temporal sense that Sellins extracts from Adnan’s poetic work echoes the sense of time created by “Master of the Eclipse” that I will elaborate upon below, a sense that hovers

around a single, fixed moment in history and develops non-chronologically within that stasis. It does this through extended recollection in monologue form that displaces the present moment, and erratic switching between verb tenses that replaces linear time with time as ongoing-crisis. This is a literary experience of time made to stand up and surround itself, surfacing through Arab Apocalypse as narrative structure.

The narrative configurations of time and space in which Adnan's poet-as-angel is configured and the aesthetico-political dimensions of the poet's work take on new significance in relation to Nouri Gana's juxtaposition of Adorno's poetic problematic with modern Arabic poetry. The analytical lens used by Gana in "War, Poetry, Mourning: Darwish, Adonis, Iraq" helps to situate the story and its central figure, the Arab poet, in relation to questions about the purpose and morality of writing poetry after massive human loss and cruelty. Gana situates Adorno's claim that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" within a context that is normatively kept quite separate from western continental philosophy: Palestinian poetry. Thus he makes a highly useful intervention, tying together Adorno's question (and its particular historical marker) with the distinct Arab, colonial, and imperial indicators that operate in Adnan's work. With his focus on the idea of lending visibility or legibility to marginalized crises through poetry, Gana's discussion prepares my argument that Adnan's poet-as-angel is a psycho-subversive figure that resists the United States' hegemonic, surveilling sweep and mourns its own, particularly Arab, losses.

A. Poetry, Philosophy, and the Image: Mimesis and Retaining Catastrophe

Beyond the reference to Benjamin, Adnan's and Alameddine's angelic works share another obvious connection; they both revolve around the life of a poet. Why prosaic fiction about poets? How might we think through the connections between the figure of the poet and the frozen historical image, or monad, in these two works? These questions present us with

the first opportunity to look closely at several intertwined themes: the role of the poet in both the post-Holocaust and post-Nakba contexts, the attending ethical problematics of poetry, and the relationship between philosophy, poetry and the image according to Etel Adnan.

Before moving directly to the Arab context and Adnan's reflections, we must establish the link between medieval melancholy and the poetic inclination, as melancholia is central to each of the three topics that we examine here in concert: Palestinian poetry, Walter Benjamin's angel of history, and art in the Arab Apocalypse. "The Phantasm of Eros," from Agamben's *Stanzas* provides a detailed discussion of the meaning of melancholia as it has shifted throughout the medieval and modern eras. In particular, Agamben reveals how melancholia during the Middle Ages was both a negative, sinful version of *acedia* (sloth), and a positive, aesthetically motivating *tristitia salutifera* (saving sorrow) (4, 7). The latter shading of melancholia was perceived as a virtue because of its associations with an unquenchable thirst for greater truth or wisdom that could give birth to poetry. For this reason, melancholia can be thought of as a poetic mood, experienced as the urge to strive for the realization of greater levels and new presentations of truth and beauty within human culture. In medieval clerical writing, the feeling of melancholia is not thought of as a neutral, worldly dissatisfaction, but a deeply felt need to be closer to the divine, to improve or revitalize one's experience of life.

Gana's work deals with a particular cross-section of Arab poetry, in which there is no shortage of the melancholic, lyrical mood: post-Nakba Palestinian poetry. This genre is also discussed in Alameddine's *The Angel of History*, but in a strikingly less-positive light. Whereas Gana focuses on the poetry of inconsolability, Alameddine sets his sights on lampooning the poetry of nostalgia. In a section on his long-term relationship with poetry titled "My Muse," Jacob explains to his dead lover Doc: "I loathed the poetry of nostalgia, so I chopped down the olive trees of my ancestors, if I hear one more stanza eulogizing the scent

of orange blossoms in Palestine, I will buy a gun I swear” (145). In the next chapter of this project we will look more closely at the figure of the poet in *The Angel of History*, as well as the protagonist’s problem of poetic writer’s block and its eventual resolution. For now, however, it will do to suggest that Jacob’s writer’s block is linked to the ethical problems of writing poetry that Adnan’s and Gana’s works bring to the fore.

“Master of the Eclipse” has a great deal to say about the role of a poet and the risks inherent in writing poetry, but we can also go back further in Adnan’s career to understand what the genre means to her. In “‘Unless You Change the World:’ The Art and Thought of Etel Adnan,” a joint review of Adnan’s *Sitt Marie-Rose* and *The Indian Never Had a Horse* (1985), Reja-e Busailah emphasizes the importance of political and social artistic commitment in Adnan’s work. He draws the phrase “unless you change the world” from Adnan’s poem “Beirut 1982,” in which she lyricizes around a figurative image of Beirut under siege: a woman belly dancing under phosphorous bombs. Before ordering, “Poets go home/ unless you change the world,” she expresses her surprise at the usefulness of rancorous remembrance; “I never believed/ that vengeance/ would be a tree/ growing in my garden” (39, 35). For Adnan, the poet who beautifies is a traitor. This points to a conundrum that both Adnan and Alameddine work with: how can the poet function to disrupt and not to beautify the horrific chain of history that expands before us towards the sky?

A question from the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin’s *Elegies* serves as the first epigraph to Adnan’s story, “what are poets for in these destitute times?” As the story progresses, the narrator wonders about whether or not poetry is useless and grapples with its function. This question is foregrounded in the text, particularly through reflections on al-Haydari, European poetry festivals, and the general figure of the poet. Happening contemporaneously with the Gulf War, these festivals are put on in the name of solidarity with the suffering people of Iraq. Continuing her critical line of questioning, she muses, “are

these countries considering ‘culture’ a remedy? Do they believe it is redeeming? But then, do we have to always think in terms of punishment and redemption?” (4). For Adnan, poetry clearly does not have inherent value in the Kantian sense of *l’art pour l’art*, and it does not represent a political good just because it is uttered by someone whose country has been destroyed. From “Beirut: 1982” we know that Adnan is calling for poetry that changes the world, but how can poetry do that? Perhaps it could begin by first imitating the world, taking a shape that mimics our experiences of living and thinking, and thereby becoming capable of engaging with and affecting our experience.

In an interview with Lisa Robertson, Etel Adnan discusses her view that writing is more natural, closer to the way humans actually think, when it comes as poetry and philosophy together. In her mind, contemporary poetry is an intellectual union between the two writing genres. She argues that this union forges a natural, life-like way of writing, resolving the limitations of poetry’s phobia of thought and philosophy’s phobia of abandon. Adnan attributes the breaking down of the boundary between poetry and philosophy to Heidegger’s reading of Hölderlin, arguing that:

Philosophy is freer now and for that reason Heidegger could say that the great philosophers were the poets. That a real, trained philosopher like Heidegger would come to that is very important to poets. Poets were afraid to think and philosophers were afraid to let go, to let loose and speak of themselves as part of their thinking. This boundary has been broken down. I love contemporary poetry because it moves between what we call *poetry* and what we call *philosophy*. It joins these fields and makes writing more natural, as in how it is lived in person. (105-106)

Thus, for Adnan contemporary poetry is the ideal terrain in which to search for the expression of impossible truths that could be worthy of our lived experiences.

Adnan’s interview with Robertson also elaborates on the concept of the image as it relates to poetry and philosophy, thus providing a perfect companion text with which to interpret the artist’s references to Benjamin, treatment of poetry, and gestures to Arab apocalypse in “Master of the Eclipse.” Commenting on her relationship with religion, Adnan

explains that although she always had a natural dissident relationship to her religious education, something about the saints touched her: “their speaking of revelation.” The same is true for poetry, she explains, citing a poem by Joanne Kyger called “Night Palace” that “opened up infinity” for her. Apparently, this poem “was actually a revelation” (104). She mentions the poem while speaking about light and the existence of the sun in relation to her Catholic education and the concept of revelation, stating that “the universe makes sense only as infinity, not as a continuation of objects” and that “to look at an object is a spiritual activity; it is not mechanical. The object is not there, you see. The object is only there when your mind meets it. In that sense, you can say everything is spiritual” (104). But how does a revelation, as the true apprehension of an object, actually happen? We can find clues for answering this question in her strikingly non-positivistic discussion of images.

In fact, her comments about the image are so simultaneously elusive and central to her writing that Robertson is compelled to write playfully in her introduction to the interview that “Etel Adnan is a poet. She is a philosopher. And she is a painter. In her world, each of these activities gives its images and its movements to the others—whatever an image is” (102). We may not be able to reach a clear definition of the image, but it is worth fleshing out what it means for Adnan, because we are concerned with the image of the past as a monad that Benjamin urges historians to apprehend. Prompted to speak about the image in poetry and painting as well as women’s images, Adnan floats intellectually through a broad exploration of what it means for people to be containers of images. Here, images are not only “what we receive, but they are also the tools with which we think.” She further explains that for the renowned French poet Charles Baudelaire, images are not only visual forms, or shapes, but also “ideas made visible,” and to see them is not passive, but active (103). Evoking spatiality once again, Adnan claims that “there are layers of images... There is thickness. Vision is multidimensional and simultaneous. You can think, see, see beyond.” Thus, they are not only

an object, but also “an event.” An image is “a speed that you catch.” They “are not still. They are moving things... they are not even visual—ultimately they are pure feeling” (103). Thus, to arrest an image is to make still the moving components of our thinking and feeling, foregrounding specific layers of experience which cannot be extricated from the other layers which surround them. This theoretical constellation of philosophy, poetry, and the image working together shows that for Adnan, poetry is writing like lived experience, I would like to add, like natural sediment. With this in mind we can think of “Master of the Eclipse” as an example of an intermedial mimetic mode that works to change the world by imitating it and acting upon it.

Now, returning to poetry in the Arab context, Adorno’s dictum can be situated in relation to Adnan’s story in conversation with Palestinian poets’ transposition of the great dialectician’s inquiry, and its specific historical marker, Auschwitz, into the Arab context. Gana claims that Arab poets appropriated Adorno’s idea that poetry after catastrophe is barbaric not in order to end poetry, but to express inconsolability, a gesture that allows the poet to eulogize and grieve lyrically without also suggesting acceptance or a sense of moving on from that which is lost. He shows how Arab poets conjured Adorno’s famous dictum in their poetry written after the 1948 creation of the Israeli state, i.e. the Palestinian crisis, and other instances of Arab catastrophe, such as the Gulf War.

In the epigraph to his paper, preceding various versions of Adorno’s claim of poetic barbarism, Gana exemplifies this phenomenon through Darwish’s words from *Faras l-il-gharib*; “O my friend/ There’s no room for the poem on this earth/ Is there any room for this earth in the poem, after Iraq?” Gana argues that this move drew attention to “the embattled referential differentials of the geopolitical legacy of Auschwitz in Europe and the United States... and in the Arab world, where the creation of Israel... went hand in hand with the Palestinian Nakba” (37). In the Euroamerican philosophical and political field, within which

Adorno contained his intellectual work, the Nakba was largely perceived not as a Palestinian tragedy, but instead as part of Europe's atonement for the crimes of the Holocaust: recompense for the Jewish people's losses. Thus, Gana's comparison between post-Auschwitz and post-Nakba poetic conditions is merited by a critical exercise that shows how Arab poets have taken up an aesthetic project that renders visible a crisis that remains illegible in much of the world.

For those who are operating according to a mainstream European and American historical narrative, the Nakba cannot be read as a poetry-threatening crisis, because its counterpart, the formation of the Israeli state, exists as a happy triumph for those who were victimized by Auschwitz. In this embattled aesthetico-political context, modern Arab poets have worked to present the Nakba lyrically and in a pointedly muted fashion. Their work exemplifies poetic expression on the subject of catastrophe that does not provide it with aesthetic justification or otherwise make it understandable, thus evading the problem of cancelling the moral challenge that the crisis embodies.

Instead of neutralizing horrific events in a sense-making and purportedly barbaric aesthetic project, Gana reads these poets as preserving the Nakba's tragedy and unthinkability. He argues that "Arab poets retain the monstrosity that Adorno's master phrase denotes but open it up to the seriality of catastrophes whose disparate monstrosities have yet to penetrate forms of intelligibility and habits of mind alien, if not almost blind, to them" (39). Thus, the comparison of Auschwitz and the Nakba is not mobilized in a way that collapses the violent extremities into a single universalized blob, divesting each instance of its brutal specificity and using poetry as a way of unproblematically "moving on." Instead, the aesthetic and analytical project examined here by Gana exposes and challenges "the hierarchical perception of injustices" which I would name as more "barbaric" than the act of lyricization itself, insofar as it makes endless catastrophic recurrence and the continued

unethical assault of human dignity palatable, and “even permissible” for human thought (39). Thus, the inconsolability of these renowned modern Arab poets maintains crises that might otherwise be jettisoned, exemplifying how poetry in the Arab context, while still a risky endeavor, need not be a morally bankrupt practice. It may even be thought of as an ethical requirement. This is true insofar as it can both avoid suggesting consolation or acceptance and make Arab crises visible as more than mere information, unmoored images, or disturbing sound bites. This is a poetic mode that holds space for effaced historical realities located in the past, present, and future.

B. Spatial Displacement and the Story in Transit: Arab Apocalypse as Narrative Structure

Now we can look directly at Adnan’s story and see how it manages to make past, present, and future historical images visible through formal techniques that mimic the Arab experience of ongoing catastrophe over historical time. This section will highlight a few of the literary devices that render Arab Apocalypse as narrative structure in “Master of the Eclipse.” The story’s setting is initially established as being in transit and in relation to a specific Arab crisis that is both spatially and temporally fixed. Disaster is then expanded across time and space through the narrator’s experience of involuntarily straddling disparate places and moments. This conjoining of disparate entities and troubling of conventional temporality happens through the distortion of verb-tense and the displacement of present narrative action into past-recalling monologue. The result of these devices working together is that “Master of the Eclipse” allows images of the past to emerge as a monad and a weapon within the compromised present, in line with Benjamin’s historiographic vision.

Rather than choosing a geopolitical locale, Adnan selects a mobile spatial entity to begin her story; “Sitting in this bus I am, as in any vehicle, be it plane, train, truck or boat,

myself an object in a magic container whose inner sides are at this moment in a state of suspension” (3). Her emphatic use of “I am” in this opening line offers the reader an immediate point of situational clarity. She is sitting on a bus. And this bus is no neutral setting. Rather, the state of transit seems to be privileged as a place which offers a screen on which images of the past become visible; “memories are projected on [the inner sides of the bus] like shadows running back and forth in a space both existing and unreal” (3). Here we get a clear sense of the ephemerality of remembrance, and with the mention of “shadows,” we glimpse the constructed nature of the historical reality that this story elaborates upon.

The beginning of the novel’s second paragraph is no less emphatic than the first, but it situates us within a specific time instead of a specific space. “We are in the summer of ’91,” Adnan writes, “bombs are falling mercilessly on Iraq; the country is being destroyed; from the start the process looked irreversible and the outcome bound to be annihilation” (3). It is true that Iraq is mentioned and central to the story’s initial setting, but the country’s destruction is offered to us with an emphasis on a moment in time and annihilation’s ongoingness and inevitability, as opposed to the concrete space of Iraq. As the story continues, the experience of catastrophe becomes more and more displaced from Iraq, even as the Gulf War continues to be the story’s central temporal reference point, the interzone around which all other events are situated before or after. To repeat, the narrator is sitting on a bus, “we are in the summer of ’91.” From here the story continues, allowing this expository bus ride to remain indeterminate as we are transported directly into the narrator’s third day in Gibelina, Italy, where she is attending a poetry festival that is set against the psychosocial backdrop of the Gulf War. We are within the space of bombs falling on Iraq, but we are not in Iraq.

After setting the initial transient scene, the narrator’s spatial displacement due to crisis is introduced in a stable, quaint setting, a small Sicilian hotel that reminds her of her

Mediterranean home, Lebanon. Literally speaking, she is in the dining room of a hotel, but literarily speaking, if we take the narrative at its word, she is also in Iraq. It is not her spirit or her thoughts that are there, but herself, as expressed in another emphatically situating sentence: “While drinking coffee I am in the midst of the Gulf War” (5). There in the dining room the narrator runs into Buland al-Haydari, the angel-obsessed Iraqi poet whom she met fifteen years earlier in Baghdad. The two visit a museum with their guide and when the reading for which they both have been brought to Gibelina happens, al-Haydari captivates his audience by gathering within himself the pain and crisis of his country. As soon as the reading ends, we are brought to a “now,” that takes place fifteen years ahead of the reading, where it is the sound of bombs falling and not the narrator’s person that is displaced from its literal locale. Following on the toes of Buland’s recitation, she writes: “Now, some fifteen years later, I am again hearing bombs falling on Baghdad. They are shattering my windows all the way here in California” (10). This is a strange “now” to come across, as it previously seemed that we were in the now of ’91 Iraq, and then ’91 Italy, and suddenly we are fifteen years ahead but find ourselves still in ’91.

Temporal and spatial slippage is again emphasized as the bulk of the story is shifted into the form of monologues delivered by Buland. Another section opens after a break, and we learn of the poet’s death as the narrator sets a new scene: “The man whose ghost is visiting me tonight in my California room has died in London” (13). We are still in the untitled first half of the story, and shortly after naming Buland’s death we will return to Gibelina, where the two poets are together. The use of the present perfect, “has died,” here suggests that his death is either a recent or temporally imprecise event. There is not enough chronological development to say with certainty whether or not the narrator would in fact have been in California when Buland died. The sense of the sentence suggests that regardless of the facts of death, movement, and haunting, the poet’s passing is contemporaneous with

his afterlife; his loss continues to be visited upon the narrator even after it happens. The ghost “is telling” her that “the best burial we can perform for a friend is to tell the story” and with that we are brought to the two friends’ first ever encounter at a poetry festival in Saddam’s mid-seventies Iraq. One more page and we are returned to Gibelina. Buland and the narrator are riding in a bus to see the ruins of Old Gibelina, a now-deserted city that was once destroyed by an earthquake. On this outing the two will also travel towards Palermo, the ancient center of culture and trade that has seen so many layers of conquest, downfall, and dailiness. It is on this journey that Buland begins telling stories from his childhood and youth in Iraq, and nearly a full ten pages of the short story takes the form of his monologues (17-27). There are only a few brief narrative interruptions, short paragraphs where the narrator reminds the reader of the physical setting by describing things such as turning in her seat towards him as he speaks, that he is “perspiring heavily,” and that he “moved a few rows ahead” (18, 21, 24). Thus, crisis is distributed in time and space as it surrounds the Gulf War and the narrator’s friendship with Buland. There is no before or after that could avoid what is.

C. Mourning, The Big Eye, and the Ethics of Speech: The Subversive Man-Angel-Poet

In tandem with the above literary techniques, Adnan mobilizes the act of aesthetic retention (retaining the catastrophe) and its attending moral hazards (making sense or beauty of it, justifying it, exposing the dead to prying, calculating eyes) through the narrator’s conflicted feelings about publicly mourning Buland. The second section of the story is titled “The Master.” Here we are introduced to a professor from Virginia who is conducting research “on the Iraqi poets who lived during Saddam’s era,” and who wants to interview the narrator about Buland (29). Whereas the first section of the story is shared with the living Buland and dominated by events taking place in Italy and Baghdad, the second half surrounds the event of his death and is staged in Paris and London. Prompted by the professor’s

inquiries, the narrator remembers her last visit with Buland before he died of alcoholism in a mental institution. She remembers this evening, which she shared with a drunk, physically degraded, and voluble Buland as “The Night of the Angels,” and recounts their encounter in flashback form. The deeply suffering poet shares his view of himself as “a fallen angel, not Iblis or one of his cohorts,” whose physical body and ego have been attacked and pierced by another (or possibly the same) angel. His transcendence is proven in his poetry, which he claims is “the matrix of [his] destiny,” a destiny for which he is the prophet (32). Completing the flashback of “The Night of the Angels,” the narrative relapses into present-time Paris where, “the professor [does not] comment,” but instead moves to his list of prepared questions, inquiring mechanically about Buland’s motivations for joining the communist party, whether he was aware of Stalinism’s cruelties, and whether the narrator liked her friend’s poetry (33). She answers each question in a perfunctory manner, expressing what she states are obvious answers, until the professor exclaims, “we have something here,” and the narrator is suddenly overcome by “a strange uneasiness” that “warns her against this man” (33). It is here that the professor’s malignancy begins to show, as does the narrator’s discomfort with discussing her poet-friend.

The two characters both step into first-person plural voices in what follows, representing not only themselves but also American imperial and Arab poetic collectivities. Continuing to speak for herself, Buland, and the unspecified “all,” which seems to designate contemporary Arab poets in general, the narrator explains, “we’re all the contemplatives of an ongoing apocalypse. So what’s left for us to think about...?” She then seeks clarification from the interviewer: “are you a professor or an investigator?” Here the man from Virginia easily outs himself, responding that he is “probably both.” He is “a Big Eye, the guardian of a supreme power” (34). This aspect of the character is further developed by his use of the first-person plural. He disagrees with the narrator’s claim that these are terrible times, and

identifies with those who have the means to “displace mountains” and reduce “them to powder, to dust, for example in Afghanistan” (34). In short, he identifies at length with the American empire and its project of world domination, treating it as an inevitable and ungrievable process.

Thus, we see how the professor represents an agent of those information services which have nearly apprehended the entire world as a collection of data. Their surveilling capacity and its magnitude are illustrated directly after the professor claims his part in the project of recreating the world on American terms. The narrator hears the sounds of his tape recorder as it captures the interview and supposes that he must have installed the same device around the globe, in locations from San Francisco to the Rio de la Plata, and even, “very probably the moon” (36). Because the narrator’s discomfort with talking about Buland and her skepticism of “thinking” are accompanied by the professor’s self-identification as a surveilling agent of power, it is clear that there is a direct connection between their dynamic and Adorno’s claim that poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.

Set against the narrator’s reluctance to remember her friend out loud, the subsequent character development of the professor as an agent of the imperial, all-seeing, American surveillance state speaks directly to a specific ethical dilemma related to the poetic task after or during crisis: the appropriation of grief and art as information to enable further domination. When the sense of uneasiness strikes, the narrator attempts to backpedal: “I’m sorry, I may not be of much use to you. He’s dead now. I wish we could leave him alone,” and asks, “Why should we investigate people all the way into their graves?” (33). Here, a “cold fury” and barely repressed disappointment takes hold of her interlocutor. Instead of giving up, he makes small talk and then returns to questioning her about angels, mystified by their meaning and frustrated by their useless “invisibility.” He wonders why Buland, an atheist, would believe in angels. She responds that the poet was more interested in vision than

belief. She then states in a collective voice, “we know that thinking is often no more than looking for ways to run away, cheat, cover up, or betray.” This triggers an accusation from the professor: “you’re all nihilists, aren’t you?” (34).

After staging this encounter between the tentative Lebanese poet who grieves the Arab world and the intrusive professor of the Big Eye, the story returns to its insistent question: what can the poet be in this all but impossible situation, if not silent? By way of answer, “Master of the Eclipse” develops a cosmic evolutionary model from Being to man-as-angel, invoking Benjamin’s allegorical angel of history as the solution to the problem of writing poetry after Iraq. It is worth re-visiting here the details of a passage that we also read in Chapter Two, wherein the narrator describes Klee’s *Angelus Novus* as an “all-encompassing form [that] embodies, at once, the journey of Being from cosmos to plant, to animal, and to man-the-angel,” and as a unifying symbol of revelation and the end of days (46). This story’s angel allegory finally ends with one of Buland’s posthumous visits to the narrator. He appears as a voice asking her to “take a pen and write,” lingers as an apparition, disappears as she is transported into “an aviary full of shrieking birds,” and then reappears again as pure voice (47). Buland informs her, shouting, that his angels have betrayed him and they are eating him alive. Before settling finally into this dark image, however, the narrator offers a nearly positive vision for the poet’s role “in these destitute times,” the *man-as-angel* poet.

In conjunction with the narrative’s non-linear history-as-crisis temporality, the emergence of this model for the poet answers the questions that are implied by Adorno’s famous dictum; can we write poetry after unthinkable crisis without reiterating evil, dishonoring the dead, and making blasphemous, fascist sense of unthinkable crisis? The angelic poet of history can, but not within a historical conception wherein crisis is unique and justice is belated. Instead this poet writes as a tortured and torturing witness to a history in

which the experience of singular crisis is a personal or national affair, and history as an ongoing crisis is the pure truth of time's passing. The poet-narrator-self that is made manifest in "Master of the Eclipse" finds that we can write poetry, yes, we can memorialize the dead, but we must write as grieving chroniclers of an apocalyptic ending that has not yet finished, as poetic, cosmic historians.

I read in the story a suggestion that this mode of being as poet provides a small hope of evading the total eclipse which consists of completed American domination of the globe and destruction of the human environment. Benjamin's angel forms the basis for Adnan's poet/angel, who, by protecting her memory from power's inspecting, utilitarian eye, carves out mental space that eludes the empire's surveilling sweep. In the third to last paragraph of the story, directly after positing her evolutionary model based on *Angelus Novus*, the narrator explains in dialogue with the inquirer:

Angelus Novus is the *new* angel because he is neither one of the contemplative angels who are in perpetual adoration of God, nor a messenger. He is himself the 'good news.' He is not only propelled by a storm, but is himself the storm. We don't need eyes to distinguish him but ears. He is the prototype of the poets (poet/philosophers, and artists) who will deal with these destitute times. That's what poets are for: to be the energy, to take part in the perennial physical and spiritual battles waged for the destiny of man. That action is always urgent, although the outcome of these confrontations has been and always will be, throughout the centuries, open-ended, precarious, and this, until end's end. (46)

This beautifully wrought explanation of the poet's task comes not only after the narrator reflects on the inquirer's tape recorder and its relationship to a global system of surveillance, but also after she relates these reflections to the American empire's ability to control consciences. Not only does America's "awesome" power revolve around the advantage of distance, which "renders responsibility invisible and retaliation impossible" (36). This power is also magnified "by the ability to enter every conscience, to paralyze all impulses for curiosity or happiness, to silence doubt, to destroy any rebellion of the spirit, introduce self-censorship to the point of turning minds into mortal silence" (36). Thus, the man-as-angel defends a space in his or her mind from paralysis and silence, combating fascism by

preserving the pulse of a crisis that those in power seek to crowd out of our consciences. Such a tortured task casts the poet's work as aesthetic, moral, and political imperative. It is an attempt to create an opening in historical time by grasping at flashes of the past in such a way that could derail the inevitability of capitalist progression, or at least disrupt our passive acceptance of this monstrous state of affairs. Couched as this story is in inevitable and extensive destruction, hope is a violent winged thing.

CHAPTER IV: MELANCHOLIC FETISHISM AND THE MEANING OF LIFE IN *THE ANGEL OF HISTORY*

Hope in *The Angel of History* is also a violent thing, but it is violence for sexual pleasure, violence that is best doled out consensually. As we discussed previously, Benjamin claimed in “The Storyteller” that novels seek to express “the meaning of life,” attempting to crystallize the ultimate moral over the course of a coherent and unitary story. But *The Angel of History* specifically attempts to undercut this falsely-coherent, pretentiously grand nature of the novel, thus making his work more closely associated with short story cycles than with modern realist novels. Its structure evades coherence more than it completes itself into universal wisdom. But it does seem to suggest a sarcastic meaning of life; hope lies in owning your past and your kinks.

Following a brief literature review of scholarship on Alameddine’s work which focuses on parody and pastiche, this chapter revolves around the Benjaminian concepts of experiential poverty and new barbarism, as put forward in his short piece “Experience and Poverty.” These concepts are central to two connections that this project must illustrate: first the connection between Benjamin’s critique of historical progressivism and modern artistic and literary endeavors, and second the connection between pastiche, generic openness, and claims about human agency in the contemporary moment. Taken from Benjamin, *experiential poverty* will refer to the emptiness and meaninglessness of lived experience within post-World War II late capitalism, and the corollary anachronism or impossibility of telling simple, finalized stories that carry clear moral lessons within them. *New barbarism* refers to Benjamin’s concept of a positive form of barbarism that would serve as a cultural antidote to experiential poverty and what he sees as the newfound aesthetic and moral uselessness of inherited cultural forms of art and wisdom. He names Paul Klee, Paul Scheerbart, and others as examples of new-barbaric artists, a movement which consists of taking that which has

been considered vulgar, barbaric, and not-fine and presenting it as art, wisdom, and aesthetic source-material for contending with catastrophic, senseless reality. In his most provocative lines, Benjamin describes the naked man of the contemporary world “screaming like a newborn babe in the dirty diapers of the present,” and suggests that new-barbaric artists “greet the present with... joy and hilarity” (733). I argue that experiential poverty is a complementary problem to those which animate *The Angel of History* and “Master of the Eclipse,” and that, in particular, Alameddine’s novel can be read as an example of new barbarism.

Sami Khatib’s discussion of this question in “Melancholia and Destruction: Brushing Walter Benjamin’s ‘Angel of History’ Against the Grain” and Rebecca Comay’s conceptual play in “The Sickness of Tradition: Between Melancholia and Fetishism” will help to clearly situate the significance of Benjamin’s angel with respect to social and political change, the debate about melancholia’s impotence, and issues of temporality. I will argue in line with Khatib that Benjamin should not be reduced to equivalence with the angel of history that he describes, and that within, or besides, the angel’s melancholic desire to “make whole what has been smashed” lies a non-perverse capacity to release the lost, desired, incomplete object, even while grabbing for it again and again (392). Comay’s discussion of fetishism and melancholia also helps imagine a non-perverse fetishism or a healthy melancholia. Insofar as they point to a moment in-between loss’s posterior melancholic phantom and its anterior fetishistic expectation, her reflections give philosophical substance to the suspension of time that I argue is created through the narrative structure of *The Angel of History* and its fetishistic and melancholic themes.

A brief discussion of Alameddine’s past works and their iterative nature shows that there are critical precedents for understanding his novels as having a scattered and incomplete narrative form as opposed to the all-encompassing coherence that Benjamin associates with

novels. His first novel, *Koolaid*s (1998), bounces between San Francisco and Beirut, drawing a parallel between the Lebanese civil war and the destruction of the AIDS crisis. The narrator's point of view oscillates wildly and with minimal guidance for the reader as to which perspective she is situated within. The basic conceit of his second novel, *I, the Divine* (2001), is that the narrator is making various, failed attempts to tell her story. The novel is subtitled "a memoir in first chapters," because it is supposed to be a memoir written by the protagonist, but she never manages to feel satisfied or confident enough with her initial attempts at telling to continue and add a second chapter. After each attempt, she begins again at zero. Thus, the book both trashes and preserves every single draft of the memoir's first chapter. With every attempt at narration beginning from a supposed zero, the story in no way goes from a to z with the authority of the lone novelist. *Hakawati* (2008) is perhaps the most clearly non-novelistic of Alameddine's novels, as it is largely composed of short story cycles that draw from traditional Arabic fables such as "Fatima's hand." These cycles are sewn into a more traditional novelistic plot that concerns a young Lebanese immigrant to America who returns home to Lebanon to visit his dying father. The reader easily loses the thread of this primary plot while reading, however, as diversions dominate the text.

Both *Koolaid*s and *Hakawati* have been classified as pastiches by Steven Salaita, Therí Pickens, and Zuzana Tabackova. In "The Internationalization of the Nation: The Uses of the Lebanese Civil War in Arab American Fiction," Salaita discusses *Koolaid*s as "a classic example of pastiche," and discusses the concept at length in conversation with Wail Hassan and Frederick Jameson. Emphasizing the parodic tendencies of the pastiche form, Salaita quotes Hassan's description of how Alameddine "subverts dominant discourses, ideologies, and sanctioned narratives" (61). In "Feeling Embodied and Being Displaced: A Phenomenological Exploration of Hospital Scenes in Rabih Alameddine's Fiction," Pickens writes that *Koolaid*s "has a pastiche structure, so the identity of the narrator is not always

evident, and the text moves between past and present.” She also notes that “the novel comprises several genres such as drama, letters, fantasy, e-mails, and Associated Press articles” (74).

Tabackova provides a useful description of *Hakawati*'s stylistic form in her study “The Thousand and One Tries: Storytelling as an Art of Failure in Rabih Alameddine’s Fiction,” observing that “the author’s preoccupation with the narrative (or narratives)” itself is the primary focus of his aesthetics, contained within a:

postmodern pastiche composed of a mosaic of vignettes, mythical stories, traditional tales of the beautiful Shahrazad, stories from the Bible or the Koran, historical heroic tales as well as family histories of the ‘unheroic heroes and heroines’ whose identities are broken between their civil war driven Lebanese homeland and the USA. (113)

With these words, Tabackova draws attention to the continuous line that runs between the post-modern novel and the oral storytelling tradition. She later concludes that because of the ruptured nature of Alameddine’s characters and the stories they are attempting to tell, his “failing narrators are, thus, the postmodern versions of the beautiful Shahrazad, whose modern tales always begin and never end” (113). By dubbing Alameddine’s story-telling as “story-trying” and linking his pastiche narrative style with Scheherazade’s stories, Tabackova helps me to elucidate the generic tendencies that are manifested in *The Angel of History*, as well as their psychic-life-or-death narrative importance. Scheherazade will be killed if she finishes her story. She must continue to fail to reach narrative completion. Tabackova’s argument that failure and the re-iteration of attempts is central to Alameddine’s style echoes my own claim that his novels are not conventional vessels for the meaning of life, but are instead complex cumulative attempts to create a multi-layered dynamic narrative that presents and perversely welcomes impoverished human experience in true new-barbarist fashion.

A. Narrative Stasis and Satirizing the Meaning of Life

Now, with the concept of pastiche in mind, we can look directly at the structure of *The Angel of History*, as well as its mixture of erudite and vulgar linguistic registers. The novel does not offer its readers a traditional narrative arc, in which a protagonist goes through some sort of transformative ordeal and changes over time. Instead we find the narrative presentation of a man with rich, diverse life-experience that is non-linearly laid out within the frame of temporal suspension and developmental stasis. Jacob was conceived in the wealthy Christian area of Ashrafieh, Beirut, when a wealthy, white-skinned, fourteen-year-old Lebanese boy impregnated his family's Yemeni housemaid. Describing himself as "the congenital immigrant," Jacob was forced out of Lebanon by his paternal grandparents while still in his mother's womb (15). Together, they traveled to Yemen where his mother supported them by working as a prostitute. Her work eventually brought her and her son to Cairo, where they lived together in a whorehouse. As an adolescent, Jacob was displaced once again, separated from his mother and the whorehouse's loving madam, Badeea, and sent off to boarding school in Lebanon under his father's care. His love for writing, relationship with "the fourteen holy helpers," and status as a racial and sexual deviant all developed while in school in Lebanon. Upon graduation, he is beaten by his classmates and subsequently sent to Sweden for medical care against the backdrop of the onset of the Lebanese civil war. He then immigrates to the US. There he joins the ranks of the thriving gay scene in 1980s San Francisco, has a long-term relationship with a man referred to as Doc, and finds expression for his masochistic, submissive sexual desires. He and his partner form a close-knit community with five other young gay men. All six of Jacob's intimates die during the AIDS crisis, leaving him alive and radically at a loss. Jacob then struggles to continue writing poetry and eventually, in frustration, he turns to prose. This America-based state of extreme bereavement is enhanced by Jacob's overseas losses: beyond the normal estrangement of the

immigrant, there is the disappeared status of Jacob's mother and the trauma of recurring drone strikes in Yemen.

I have distilled his story into conventional form, but the novel itself does not do that. Technically speaking, none of Jacob's life-experience makes up the action of the story. Instead, the novel takes place in a single night, some twenty or more years after the loss of his friends and lover, when Jacob can no longer bear the nagging voice of Satan in his head. This is the second time that Satan will not leave him alone. He was talking to him in the days after Doc died, which drove Jacob to spend three days on "vacation" in a psych ward and resulted in Jacob's silence. Now that the voice is back a few decades later, Jacob decides to return to the public clinic in hopes of being admitted for another mini psychiatric vacation. If he can silence Satan once again, he will not be pushed to remember, and he can return to living a simple, perfunctory life. Thus, the novel's present action begins when Jacob enters the clinic and ends later the same evening when he leaves. Time is suspended in that it is only one night that matters for this narrative, one evening of radical immediacy. Reflections on the past are made significant only in the context of this frame, as remnants (or debris in the Benjaminian sense) that are mulled over by Jacob, Satan, Death, and the fourteen holy helpers, but not as narrative action.

The novel moves between the past and the present via four recurrent narrative frames: "Satan's interviews," "Jacob's Journals," "Jacob's Stories," and "At the Clinic". These chapter titles and their attending conceits alternate and repeat in no particular order, and they are not numbered. Only the latter category, "At the Clinic" is told in traditional third-person omniscient narrative storytelling form. The first two categories are inserted narrative conceits, wherein journal entries give the novel a partially epistolary form, and short stories supposedly written by the protagonist, Jacob, are embedded into the novel itself. The third category, "Satan's Interviews," is made up of narrated conversations between Satan, Death,

and Jacob's fourteen holy helpers, his posse of saint-supporters. Within each of these larger sections, there are sub-sections that are given titles such as "Catherine" if Satan is interviewing Saint Catherine, or "The Bouncing Nun" if this section of Jacob's journal entry concerns a nun sexually molesting him. Everything we know about Jacob's past comes in the form of dialogue in the interviews, memories in the journal entries, or reflections at the clinic.

Another narrative device and dimension of Jacob's semi-insanity is that he talks not only to his dead lover, Doc, but also to Satan. The recollections, when told from Jacob's point of view, are addressed to Doc as Jacob's ever-present interlocutor. The first section of the novel is "Satan's Interviews," subheading: Death. Here, while interviewing Death, Satan establishes himself as a sort of twisted guardian to Jacob, looking after him, trying to get him to remember, to write poetry again, and to reject the pleasantness of a flat, productive life. In contrast, Death champions his own cause of forgetting as a form of peace. In the end, after spending time in the waiting room, consulting a therapist, and seeing a psychiatrist at the clinic, Jacob is discharged. Devastatingly deemed not-crazy-enough for a psychiatric "vacation," Jacob despairs and Satan celebrates, hissing "Yessssssss" as the doctor prescribes a mild anti-psychotic and sends him home (280). In addition to consisting of an amalgamation of distinct textual forms, the novel also combines biblical rhetoric and highly erudite references with vulgar eroticism and sexual deviance. It is within this past-oriented, presently situated, mixed-genre, multi-perspective, and utterly irreverent narrative context that Benjamin's angel of history operates in intertextual conversation with the novel.

Because of this narrative complexity, Alameddine's *The Angel of History* does not fit the mold of the unitary, positivist, "meaning of life" novel that Benjamin describes in "The Storyteller." Alameddine does not balk, however, at neat endings. Indeed, after reading this work, one could even walk away with a sense of the meaning of life. This grandiose message seems to satirize the presumptuousness of containing the meaning of life in a novel, however,

and its vulgar simplicity begs us to laugh at any pretensions of either having it all figured out or of being above the messiness of globalized power imbalances, exploitation, and violence. According to *The Angel of History*, the meaning of life is “To be dominated, get whipped, suck dick, and maybe write some poems about it.” The message arrives, but it can hardly be taken seriously. Its authority is unlikely to last beyond the initial giggles or discomfort that it engenders. But in the Bakhtinian seriocomic vein, we can think of it as a completely, deathly genuine joke.

B. Experiential Poverty, Melancholia, and Personal Revolutionary Fracture

It is this take on the meaning of life that I argue could be read as an example of new barbarism. In addition to our definition of new barbarism, which we discussed above as centering around abandoning tradition and embracing vulgarity, we must understand the conditions in which Benjamin made the call for this artistic mode, as they are elaborated by Benjamin himself. The short essay “Experience and Poverty” begins with a description of a classic fable wherein an old man on his deathbed convinces his sons that treasure is buried in the vineyard. The boys dig, find nothing, and think themselves fooled. When autumn comes, however, the vineyard bears incredibly profitable fruit. The sons realize that through this story they have received “a valuable piece of experience,” a lesson about hard work as a blessing more precious than gold (731). Benjamin offers this anecdote to exemplify an experiential currency that, according to him, is no longer in circulation. In his youth, he explains, “such lessons in experience were passed on” to his generation as patronizing gifts for inexperienced youngsters. This used to be a highly valuable way of imparting wisdom, but it is clear to Benjamin that “amid a generation which from 1914 to 1918 had to experience some of the most monstrous events in the history of the world,” experience has lost its value. Men went off to fight in World War I and came back poorer rather than richer

in “communicable experience” (731). Experience no longer amounted to something useful. He has experience, yes, but it cannot be packaged and offered with a simple moral lesson. Instead, his experience creates an elusive atmosphere that the readers are exposed to in an incoherent way. It is into an experiential field thusly marked by poverty that Alameddine introduces his take on Benjamin’s angel of history and its tacit critique of nostalgia.

We can also link the problem of experiential poverty and its attending existential conundrum (how to offer counsel or communicate experience) more generally to the historical challenges facing contemporary Lebanese culture and literature, and to the suspension of time that occurs within the Arab Apocalypse as narrative structure. Makdisi’s description of time’s texture in Beirut helps draw this connection: “increasingly a flat and depthless present is all that seems to be available: when there is not much sense of the past, and little prospect of the future, as discrete entities, past and future become extensions of a present from which there seems to be no escape” (205). Indeed, the temporal suspension that I read into these texts does not represent an escape from the angel of history’s past-gazing, detritus-accruing predicament, or from its particular Lebanese manifestation. Instead it engages with elusive, polyphonic, and painful historical realities. In the process, like Adnan’s story, this novel provides a subjective model to its characters, narrators, and readers: the inconsolable, psychically free, geographically unmoored, resisting, and surviving Arab poet.

Saleem Haddad’s review of *The Angel of History* helps us to perceive how Alameddine mobilizes Benjamin’s critique of historicism not for collective political purposes, but for the sake of a personal revolutionary fracture. Writing for the online magazine *Muftah*, Haddad effectively guides us in reading the relationship between Alameddine’s novel and Benjamin’s work as one that affirms the act of troubling supposedly whole, beautiful pasts. This reading is in line with the criticism of nostalgia found in

Benjamin's "On the Concept of History," as well as the non-transferability of wisdom from experience that is posited in his "Experience and Poverty." Thus, Benjamin's work identifies things that are central to Jacob's experience and his ultimately successful negotiation of living with trauma in an unjust world. Concepts such as non-progressive historicism and impoverished experience are central to how Jacob engages with life in the present. In pointing to the mixture of beauty and horror that colors Jacob's recollections, Haddad begins to articulate Jacob's non-progressive, anti-nostalgic view on time. He states that Jacob and his lover Doc's "relationship is never idealized, it is up and down and contradictory and perfectly in line with their status as outsiders," and then extends the claim to describe the troubled nature of all the "other queer relationships" in the novel. When recalling the past, "shame, guilt and stigma" are retained along with "freedom, joy, and humor" (Paragraph 6).

Like the angel in Benjamin's text, Jacob as the angel of history longs painfully for a realization of wholeness, a return to an unbroken past that he has never known and that he cannot achieve. He is tortured by the accumulation of debris that he sees when he is forced to face the past. Jacob also aligns in some ways with the historical materialist that Benjamin seeks to conjure into being. He is not duped by a simplistic application of wholeness to the past. If there is any "once upon a time" in Jacob's life, any imaginable paradise, it was destroyed well before he came into the world. His non-idealizing view of his relationship with Doc and status as the congenital immigrant show that he is not limited by nostalgia. Using Benjamin's ironically masculinist language from his 16th thesis on the concept of history, we can say that Jacob is "man enough to blast open the continuum of history" (396). Now, turning directly to the concept of melancholia and Sami Khatib's and Rebecca Comay's analyses of Benjamin's work will set us up to see how Jacob's personal revolutionary fracture with the historical status quo is constituted by melancholic fetishism.

C. Maintaining the Fantasy of Loss: Melancholia and Fetishism with Khatib and Comay

As previously demonstrated by our discussion of medieval melancholia as a poetic mood, the concept of melancholy has a rich and ambiguous history. Since the publication in 1917 of Sigmund Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," however, the mood has been decisively associated with a pathological condition. Departing from medieval formations of melancholia as a spiritual affliction or an excess of black bile, Freud contends that melancholia is an incomplete form of grief that should be juxtaposed with mourning as such. Here mourning is the grief-process that occurs when we lose a beloved-object whose position in our lives was stable, and for whose loss we can adequately account. Melancholia, on the other hand, takes place when we have an unstable or incomplete relationship with the lost object. Having never fully possessed the object in the first place, we cannot properly account for its loss. In melancholia, as posited by Freud, the grieving subject does not mourn and she does not let go of the lost object. Instead she remains attached to it, narcissistically refusing to let it go. This is the pathological state that Benjamin and his angel are frequently associated with; the state of a lover who has lost something that they cannot fully recognize as either having previously been present or as now being gone, something that they could never have and of which they cannot let go. Politically speaking, melancholia is considered dangerous because it is defeatist, idealistic, and narcissistic.

In "Melancholia and Destruction: Brushing Walter Benjamin's 'Angel of History' Against the Grain," Khatib draws on Comay's Freudian analysis of Benjamin to argue that the angel of history should not be read as a melancholic figure, conflated with Walter Benjamin himself, or made to symbolize his vision of the ideal historical materialist. He makes this argument in a paradoxical fashion that is characteristic of dialectical philosophy, however, gesturing towards the possibility of a non-melancholic melancholia. Khatib identifies melancholia's perverse fixatedness on the lost-object as a political handicap, and

then asks whether or not “there is a promise of melancholy that exceeds the horizon of perversion by presenting its inner contradictions in order to overcome the fantasy of melancholy altogether – by exiting fantasy through traversing it” (23). This overcoming of fantasy is a positive in terms of political action and the battle against fascist capitalist progression, because living in the fantasy of loss which melancholy and nostalgia allow is considered to enable the perpetuation of paradise’s illusion and capitalism’s expansion. Rather than maintaining a “fantasy of loss,” Khatib explains, we need to somehow discard it for the sake of rupturing the status quo: “the possibility of rupture – the undoing of melancholic fixation in order to set free the fixated and the fixator – would assume that the fantasy of loss can be overcome or, rather, interrupted by acknowledging structural lack” (23). What this emphasis on discarding fantasy in order to achieve rupture does not foreground, however, is that there is a kind of rupture which sustains fantasy and which is not interested in wholly liberating “the fixated and the fixator.” A kinky, pleasure-oriented rupture like that which I perceive in *The Angel of History*.

Comay’s discussion of melancholia and fetishism helps us to understand the connections between Jacob’s deviant sexuality, melancholia, fetishism, and the suspension of time. In “The Sickness of Tradition: Between Melancholia and Fetishism,” Comay explains how melancholia and fetishism correspond in their objectification of that which has been or will be lost, and how they both edge up against the idea of a present moment in their respectively belated and anticipatory temporalities. Fetishism is obsessed with the inanimate, stubbornly maintaining a relationship with the non-relational. Melancholia, correspondingly, is “a way of staging a dispossession of that which was never one’s own to lose in the first place – and thus, precisely by occluding structural lack as determinate loss, would exemplify the strictly perverse effort to assert a relation with the non-relational” (89). In the case of fetishism, Comay usefully points out that the body itself can take the place of the inanimate

fetishized object. This is the case for Jacob, who enjoys having his own body bound and whipped, and who seeks out relationships with men who dominate and belittle him.

This is a melancholic fetishistic rupture that insists on maintaining the lost object in its very objectification, because the subject achieves libidinal pleasure through this fixedness. If, as Khatib writes, “a non-fetishistic concept of history that frees itself of melancholic fixation has to let go the fantasy of loss (of the past as some primordial unity, completeness or meaning),” then *The Angel of History* is in no way working towards such an end to fetishistic historicization or to fixated melancholia (23). Instead, in suspending time through narrative stasis, it performs a rupture of progressive, homogenous time that maintains “the fantasy of loss” even as it responsibly calls the past what it is: incomplete, disjunctured, and disturbingly lacking in clear meaning.

Nearly every major loss in Jacob’s life corresponds to melancholic loss. He lost his father and his home country in-utero, before he could ever know them. He lost his mother in an opaque manner twice over, never understanding it in clear terms. When he was sent to boarding school, he did not realize it would be never to return, never to see his mother again. He later loses her again when she disappears from postal communication with no explanation. She might be alive, she might be happy, but regardless she is gone for Jacob. The central romance of his life, the relationship with Doc, is a troubled one. Among Doc’s abuses are banishing Jacob to a separate bedroom, belittling his poetic practice, and parading other lovers in front of him. Jacob resented Doc a great deal for both his infractions and his illness, especially while caring for him during the time of his slow death from AIDS. When Doc finally died, the proof of their life together disappeared, as Doc’s mother snuck into the apartment and cleared them out, stealing from Jacob every object that could help him establish what it was that he had loved and lost in some clear, concrete way. Through Jacob, the congenital immigrant becomes the radical melancholic. We will see below, however, that

like the new barbarian he manages to find a happy departure from the past, a fulfilling experience of the present. This joyfulness is found in fetishistic behavior that is conventionally considered perverse.

D. Melancholic Fetishism as New Barbarism: Freezing Time for Pleasure and Freedom

After naming the devaluation of experience following World War I in “Experience and Poverty,” Benjamin claims that people now have a different attitude towards the accumulation of experience and the relationship of the past to the present, and offers his concept of new barbarism as an antidote to that problem. According to Benjamin, the poverty of experience does not mean that people “are yearning for new experience.” Instead, “they long to free themselves from experience; they long for a world in which they can make such pure and decided use of their poverty—their outer poverty, and ultimately also their inner poverty—that it will lead to something respectable” (734). In their experiential gluttony, they have “‘devoured’ everything” and they are exhausted. They suffer from a kind of tiredness that puts them to sleep and offers them a dream which might somehow compensate for the “sadness and discouragement of the day—a dream that shows us, in its realized form, the simple but magnificent existence for which the energy is lacking in reality.” (734). For Benjamin, this dream is artistically presented by the vanguards of a “new barbarism,” among which he counts Paul Klee, Bertolt Brecht, Adolf Loos, and Paul Scheerbart, and to which I would tentatively add Rabih Alameddine.

These artists are willing to “reject the traditional, solemn, noble image of man, festooned with all the sacrificial offerings of the past,” starting from scratch to avoid reproducing fascist artifacts. They turn instead to “the naked man of the contemporary world who lies screaming like a newborn babe in the dirty diapers of the present” (733). Introducing the idea of happily welcoming the present, he states that, “no one has *greeted this present*

with greater joy and hilarity than Paul Scheerbar” (733, emphasis added). Khatib extends the concept of new barbarism in the context of his intellectual disavowal of melancholic fixation, stating with regards to Agamben’s Marxist reading of Benjamin that “a happy separation from the past would first necessitate a full realization and ‘working-through’ of this tension, rather than internalizing it as loss” (26). He is referring to the tension between the angel’s desire to make history whole again and his visual awareness of that very history’s inherent fracturedness. Khatib claims that by maintaining a melancholic reading of the angel we “revert to a flat, non-historical concept of history, fetishizing loss over structural lack” (26). Alameddine, however, in creating a character who ultimately greets the present “with hilarity,” fetishizes loss *with* structural lack. Thus, the novel inserts a structural lack (chronic, melancholic distance between Jacob and stable subjective positions or loving interlocutors) into the very loss that one can objectify, freezing time and experience as fetishistic fulfillment.

Comay demonstrates how the melancholic fetishist might arrive into a heightened experience of *now* that is reminiscent of both Valéry’s interzone effect and Benjamin’s concept of time taking a stand or “now-time.” Temporally speaking, if the melancholic is always too late, perpetually existing just after a loss, the fetishist is always just before, experiencing their impending loss as extreme pleasure. In Comay’s words, “the melancholic ‘too late’ may function as a pre-emptive assumption of trauma which evaporates impending catastrophe by insisting on the latter’s absolute anteriority” (95). The loss has always already happened. Melancholic temporal martyrdom “effectively overleaps time itself so as to win the payback of an otherworldly compensation: loss is staved off as always already in the past.” Fetishism, on the other hand, effectively under leaps time, displaying “the same temporal logic in reverse: loss is warded off as always already in the future” (95). Thus, in melancholic fetishism, two fixated fantasies overlap to trap time into a heightened experience

of now. In melancholia, I fix a permanent ‘was’ which has always already been taken away from me, and in fetishism I rejoice in reliving the final moments before that loss, fixing a permanent ‘will be’ that is always on the edge of happening. Jacob finds relief and ultimate triumph in this enjoyable trap of the current moment, this particularly melancholic and fetishistic seizure of a now time, a seizure that maintains the fantasy of loss from both past and future angles.

Rendering Jacob’s experience in a disorienting, meandering, present-based frame, *The Angel of History* forces time to stand still, thus devastating any sense of teleological human progression. It does not do so in the name of a collective political struggle against fascism, however. The past is rendered a mess of debris, hideousness and beauty alike, and time stands still in order to achieve a personal triumph against the fascist requirement to forget one’s personal trials, tribulations, and pleasures, and live as a quiet exploited worker. Thus, I read Alameddine’s use of the angel of history in contrast to Khatib’s and Comay’s philosophical elaborations on the figure of the angel and the concept of melancholic fetishism. They are driven to ask whether the object-fixation found therein is politically productive on a collective scale. I find, instead, that Jacob practices a melancholic fetishism in a way that is politically productive on a personal scale, if only because it allows for voice and heightened experiences of pleasure within a landscape that actively numbs, mollifies, and silences him. The possibility of collective salvation fades, making way for this personal assertion of presence and pleasure to articulate itself, even as it becomes legible only *against* larger socio-political hegemonic trends.

E. The Vulgar Meaning of Life: Masochistic Sainthood and Spatializing Queer History

At three points in the novel the reader is led to celebrate the satisfaction of Jacob’s submissive, masochistic sexuality. In Jacob’s journals, under the headings of “Bloom” and

“Betrayal,” Jacob shares two memories of leaving his and Doc’s shared home after Doc had brought another man home. He goes out in a moment of hurt and desperation, searching aimlessly for something. Both times he ends up in a dungeon where he is tied up and whipped by a stranger. In “Bloom,” he is lashed by a professional sadist and he almost howls, “thank you, sir,” but stops himself just in time, and remembers to say “six, please,” as he has been ordered to do. In his memory, degradation is paired with the highest possible elation as he recollects; “I was the lowest of the low, I was in heaven” (134). This extreme satisfaction expressed in the fetishization of his own objectified body is something that he later returns to again and again at the hands of this professional sadist. Held down by the saints who help him, he is described as turning human, feeling real, and experiencing the peak of ecstasy as “revelation,” all while the fourteen holy helpers chorus jubilantly “beatification, here we come,” and “praise be.” Saint Catherine even calls “first dibs on his hagiography,” referring to his newfound status as a saint and her intention to write his autobiography (135). Thus, because of his experience of masochistic sexual revelation, he is placed among the saints.

In the section “Betrayal,” this equation of fetishistic fulfillment with sainthood is extended as Jacob remembers the first time he met one of his best friends. This encounter also happens after fleeing his home in desperate search of objectification, but this time is not only savage, it is also sweet. Jacob meets Greg in a bar after Greg saves him from going home with an out-of-control, violent, and dangerous sadist. Greg thus presents a figure of safe domination. He takes Jacob home and kisses him before whipping him. Jacob describes this as being “disinterred” and “like all saints before” him, he relishes “the ecstasy of martyrdom” (225). Again this celebration of Jacob’s deviance is inscribed in the text through the encouraging voices of his holy helpers. Alameddine’s novel refuses to remove fixated melancholia. Instead it protects Jacob’s fetishism. This is further evidenced by the novel’s

ending, which offers a pointedly fetishistic vision for happily embracing the present in true new-barbarist fashion.

Rather than the achievement of a non-perverse melancholia which would release the fantasy of loss and happily depart from the past, in line with Khatib's reading and the importance of challenging fascism on a collective political scale, the end of *The Angel of History* places perversity at the center of Jacob's personal victory over fascism. Iblis, "looking better than [Jacob had] ever seen him," escorts his favorite human out of the clinic, and encourages him to call on the fourteen holy helpers, something he has not done in years. When they arrive, Jacob tells his adoptive mother, Saint Catherine, that he is not sure he "can bear living with memories" and she tells him to "look up at the stars, look, they are not there, what you see is the memory of what once was, *once upon a time*" (291). Here, Jacob is stating his basic dilemma; he does not think he can deal with the present, being what it is, a view on the wreckage of his past. Catherine's response suggests that his memories are somehow not real. They are a fantasy of what has passed, a nostalgic illusion like what Benjamin claims is a whore in "historicism's bordello." The phrase "once upon a time" gestures towards the much-demonized state of nostalgia, and makes it melancholic insofar as it refers, as in fables, to something that never really was. The nostalgic presumes to know its past, while the melancholic is pining inconsolably for something that is not and never really was there. In what follows, Catherine removes Jacob's heart from his chest and places it on the parking lot pavement where he had previously dropped a pill of Atavin. Death, whom Jacob has not previously met, appears and picks up the organ. "Using an archaeologist's hand brush of the softest bristles," he gently dusts the rust off Jacob's heart (292). One by one, the holy helpers follow Death's lead, each performing a different cleaning or comforting service to the heart until finally handing it back to Catherine who replaces it into Jacob's body.

This almost sickeningly sweet resolution to the problem of Jacob's existence in the present moment comes as a surprise considering the anti-sentimental tone of the novel as a whole. With its sweetness, however, and significantly so, the ending makes sure to maintain Jacob's perversion. With his heart returned to his body, Jacob gets up to walk home. Just before passing an alley, Pantaleon calls Jacob's attention to a pair of figures arranged under a streetlight, insisting that he "shouldn't miss this." What he sees is "a man in full leather gear leaned against a dark wall, his eyes shut, his cock out of his pants and another man, a chain around his neck, knelt before him offering a worshipful blow job." After Jacob instinctually said "wow," a little too loudly, "the man opened his eyes and looked at [him], the kneeler tried to pull away but the man held his head where it belonged. The man smiled." In response, Jacob said, "thank you," the man gave him "a thumbs-up," and Jacob continued his walk home (292). In the remaining two pages of the walk home and the novel, Jacob writes poetry on bus stops and street signs. He then inscribes anecdotes about his past with Doc and their friends on the walls, doorways, and windows of the buildings where the seven men lived their lives together before the AIDS crisis separated them. The presence of the men in leather in between the heart-cleaning and the poetry-writing/history-chronicling that deliver Jacob into a state of happy existence in the present emphasizes the importance of fetishism to the story's negotiation of remembrance and forgetting.

Concentrated in the realization of fulfillment through submission, *The Angel of History* negotiates a happy departure from the past that fits the mold of melancholic fetishism and avoids pathologizing perversity. In so doing, it satirizes the meaning of life novel and participates in a new mode of barbarism by maintaining fixations on an irremediable, unsubstantiated loss. Jacob as a black, Arab-American, gay, masochistic, submissive, son-of-whore, never had a chance at paradise—not even its illusion. He came into a world bent on degrading him. The story of his experience could never seriously pretend to summarize the

point of life. By representing his personal story of coping with historical reality through the interplay of forgetting and remembering, Rabih Alameddine's newest novel puts Walter Benjamin's concepts of heterogeneous now-time and impoverished experience to individual, as opposed to collective, use. It may not save the world, but oh how sweet it is to preserve the lost object in the ruptured life of a melancholic fetishist.

CHAPTER V, CONCLUSION: SUSPENSION AS OPENING: FINAL REMARKS AND POSSIBLE DIRECTIONS

With these contributions to the genre of post-war Anglophone Lebanese fiction, Adnan and Alameddine have narrativized human experience in historical time in a way that allows the past to stand up in the present, releasing it from the imperatives of fascist progressivism, and creating subjective openings in now-time. Thus, they are continuing the work of self-consciously and experimentally narrativizing Lebanon's war-ridden past and troubled present, and expanding this task to encompass an Arabized global world. Moreover, the presence of Benjamin's angel of history in the two works puts them in conversation with his vision for materialist historiography. They write as courageous contenders in the challenge to keep history free from the lies of nostalgia and progress, lies which dominate standard, closed attempts at telling history "as it is." Benjamin's alternative mode begs the historian to confront images of the past as a monad, or a constellation of disparate parts that make up a whole, in order to make the past stand up in the present and activate the messianic, or revelatory, potential of memories, all in the name of rupturing the degrading status quo. It is this rupture, a rupture achieved through the act of remembrance within the state of suspension, that is enacted on the level of human subjectivity in Adnan's and Alameddine's angelic works. This narrative fissure in the status quo offers hope for injecting some kind of openness or freedom into our daily experiences of historical-time-as-ongoing-apocalypse. It gives us counsel for how to cope with the debilitating pain of living through pasts, presents, and futures that are marked by unending loss.

Because of their thematic attention to spatialization and their formal and stylistic status as pastiche, the works examined herein offer a literary image of historical time as sedimentary layers and piles of psychic debris, layers that are cumulatively gathered together to resemble the monadic grasping of images from the past. Thus, memories are seized

without being divested of their temporally-open eventness. Within the narrative, supposedly inevitable causes and ends are challenged as the historical-image-as-m Monad is deployed in the present to combat the dangers of silence, exploitation, and living life as a “tool of the ruling class.” In “Master of the Eclipse” a tortured but confident figure, the poet-as-angel, emerges. He is a poetic subject who embraces his melancholic inclination to lyricize his losses because he knows that his musings hold open space for thoughts, ideas, and memories that run counter to the world view and dominance of economic and political world super powers. In *The Angel of History*, we glimpse the glee of a depressed soul (the nearly ultimate subaltern who is gay, masochistic, black, Arab, the son-of-a-whore, and an Arab immigrant in America), as he regains his will to live, remember, and write poetry by embracing his wounds and celebrating their erotic dimension.

Adnan’s angel/poet emerges through several significant tropes: a focus on war-torn Iraq in 1991, various scarred landscapes that have been glossed over again and again by both natural and cultural catastrophes, and the act of remembrance presented as the projection of images onto the sides of a screen-like vessel in transit. Alameddine’s angel/poet comes into his own by writing verses about himself, his love life, and his community onto the very buildings, windows, walls, and street signs that make up the physical settings of his remembered experiences. In both works, the telling of history achieves mimesis insofar as it mimics the spatialized passing of time that we experience as historical reality: open ended events taking place and leaving traces on the ground of our environments and psyches. With their mimetic freeze-frame views on spatialized time, Adnan and Alameddine open history to the tremors of endless repressed catastrophes and the possibility that thinking (in Adnan’s sense, thinking as the active examination of images through poetico-philosophical reflection) can yield useful counsel for continuing our lives as individuals beset by the globalized Arab apocalypse.

There are several possible directions for continuing this research, of which I would like to highlight only a few. With regards to criticism of Adnan's work, this project's line of questioning could be extended in order to examine her poetry in light of the man-as-angel prototype for the poet. Great candidates from her oeuvre for such an analytical visitation include *The Arab Apocalypse* and the newer *Premonition* (2014). A small prose poem that was published alone, *Premonition* is riddled with references to holes in time, angels, and history. It claims optimistically in the opening line that, "there's always a constructive thread through space for an untenable position," and later sets a momentary scene in which "somebody just knocked at the door, a winged being, an angel. I opened on time" (1, 11). Etel Adnan has handed us a guide in prose-form for understanding poetic practice within the transnational Arab apocalypse, we could take this guide forward and use it to illuminate our readings of her lyrical work. It could also be interesting to look more closely at Adnan's historiographical methodology in "Master of the Eclipse," specifically with regards to the work of Buland al-Haydari, asking to what extent Adnan included actual translations of his work and events from his life in the story. This would be a comparative study of the story and al-Haydari's work, and it would tell us more about the layers that Adnan used to forge the narrative.

Another interesting line of inquiry that would involve continuing the comparison between Adnan's, Alameddine's, and Benjamin's works has to do with focusing more specifically on the cumulative, layered, and open storytelling mode that I have elaborated upon in this project, and putting it in conversation with the conventional juxtaposition of short-story versus novel. Benjamin himself reifies said juxtaposition in "The Storyteller," when he claims that the novel is a closed literary form which has nothing to do with the tradition of open-ended oral storytelling that preceded it. I have argued above that in fact there are similarities between Alameddine's novelistic style and Benjamin's model for telling

the perfect story through layers of highly re-glossable spoken narratives. Surely it is an obsolete Eurocentric notion dating back to the renaissance to see the novel as a completed (or completing) art form which totally departs from oral storytelling traditions. Could not a novel, like a spoken story, be read as a gloss on narrative representation without being considered radically exceptional with regards to the overarching novelistic genre? Further examining this question and challenging the reflexive juxtaposition of story and novel could lead to a more complete understanding of the open, cumulative storytelling mode.

Finally, insofar as storytelling-as-layers-of-sediment relates to the themes of remembrance and apocalypse, it should be examined in conversation with trauma studies in order to see whether a model for working through trauma emerges from this narrative mode and how that model relates to the larger field of post-war Anglophone Lebanese fiction. There is substantial critical precedent for discussing the work of Adnan, Alameddine, and other Anglophone Lebanese authors in relation to trauma and apocalypse. Syrine Hout has written about how trauma is narratively materialized not only in Alameddine's work, but also in Patricia Sarrafian Ward's moving novel about a young woman coming of age during the Lebanese civil war and immigrating to the United States, *The Bullet Collection* (2003)⁷. Therí Pickens has written about how psychic trauma is materialized as physical illness in hospital scenes in three of Alameddine's novels⁸. Najat Rahman has written about violence against the human being and the state of siege in which we exist due to the ongoing apocalypse, as presented in the work of Lebanese Canadian author Rawi Hage, who is best known for his dark bildungsroman set during the Lebanese civil war, *De Niro's Game* (2006)⁹. These

⁷ See Hout, "The Tears of Trauma" and "Revisiting Lebanon: Testimony, Trauma, and Transition in Patricia Sarrafian Ward's *The Bullet Collection*."

⁸ See Pickens, "Feeling Embodied and Being Displaced: A Phenomenological Exploration of Hospital Scenes in Rabih Alameddine's Fiction."

⁹ See Rahman, "Apocalyptic Narrative Recalls and the Human: Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game*."

precedents for looking at narrative reflections of trauma and apocalypse in post-war Anglophone Lebanese fiction should be placed in conversation with the cumulative storytelling mode that is found in Adnan's and Alameddine's angelic works in order to ask how telling open ended stories through the suspension of time and the layering of past-images interacts with prevailing models for how trauma is experienced and the role that narrative plays in healing or living with said trauma.

This question is particularly interesting insofar as it relates to the problem of narrative ownership and the dilemma: "to narrate or not to narrate." This dilemma has perhaps been applied to the Lebanese condition most aptly by Sune Haugbolle and his Gordian knot model, which was examined in the introduction of this work: if the Lebanese talk about the war, it will start again immediately, if they do not, it will happen again inevitably (197). If we translate this into personal trauma terms, it goes something like this: if I talk about my trauma, I will relive it now, but if I do not, I will relive it always. A common model for overcoming trauma contends that once a person is able to tell the story of a given traumatic episode coherently and without becoming disturbed, they have achieved narrative ownership of that episode and are healed of that trauma. But that means closing the possible interpretations of the event and applying only one. It also means "moving on," something that one might have personal or political reasons to refuse, as we saw in Nouri Gana's analysis of Palestinian poets and their pointed inconsolability. If your trauma is being systematically elided by the ruling class in order to perpetuate the status quo, it is actually more in *their* interests than it is in your own for you to heal by telling the story. While the protagonists of "Master of the Eclipse" and *The Angel of History* need to discuss their memories and they do find some modicum of peace through telling stories about traumatic episodes, they are in no way finishing with their trauma or healing it completely. They are working through the crisis while retaining it. The most exciting direction for this research to go in from here might be to

answer the question of how this cumulative, time-arresting storytelling mode, which Adnan and Alameddine have practiced in conversation with Benjamin, textualizes a complex model for working *with* trauma that narrates not to unify and close but to multiply and open traumatic past events. Thus, narrating while avoiding the pitfalls of narration could be read in relation to ongoing individual and collective trauma within the global Arab apocalypse, and not just in relation to the complexities of narrating the Lebanese civil war. One thing is certain, much remains to be explored about human experience and the narrative mechanisms that we might use to help navigate our way through apocalyptic time and space.

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