Conflicting Narratives: War, Trauma and Memory in Iraqi Culture

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Introduction

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Min ayna yurjā lil-ʿIrāqi taqaddumu / wa-sabīlu mumtalakīhi ghayru sabīlihi...[1]
How to hope for Iraq's progress / when the way of her rulers is not her own...

Maʿrūf al-Ruṣāfī's verse from the early 1920s resonates with much of Iraq's modern historiography. Since its inception after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Iraq's history has been perceived as turbulent and tragic. In most historiographical accounts and public memory, Iraqi politics after the 'instauration' of the Iraqi monarchy by the British in 1921, is considered to have mainly served the interests of the foreign colonial power and its domestic 'collaborators'. The first anti-colonial uprising in 1920 (*thawrat al-ʿishrīn*) against the British had failed. Later efforts to establish democratic structures during the British mandate resulted in the consolidation of power of a limited number of families; cabinet after cabinet duplicated itself, reshuffling members of the same families who took over various ministerial functions. In the 1930s rebellions against corruption and British influence, which kept determining the course of Iraq's politics in spite of formal independence in the year 1932, were brutally quelled. The 1940s witnessed even more brutal repressions and more dependency on the British but also the growth of political parties and activism. Hand in hand with this came a flourishing of cultural and artistic movements, with the "Free Verse" (*al-shiʿr al-ḥurr*) soon becoming a leading literary model in the whole Arab world. The revolution of 1958 brought with it great hopes for a better society, social justice and an independent politics, – hopes that were dashed quite early on. Republican governments followed in the 1960s, but they remained instable. After a period of relative stabilization as well as economic and social progress in the first years of Baathist rule in the 1970s, Saddam Hussein's seizure of power at the end of the decade ushered in an unprecedented period of brutalization of society and totalitarian politics: an enormous machinery of surveillance, repression and censorship was put in motion which spread its tentacles throughout daily life, both private and public. The internal opposition was oppressed, killed and outlawed; neighbours were attacked militarily, resulting in the long drawn-out Iran-Iraq War (1980–88) and the invasion of Kuwait in 1990–91. As a result, a harsh regime of international sanctions, imposed on the country, would remain in place all through the 1990s until the invasion of 2003. Its repercussions were grave: the erosion of society, the crippling of the economy, the impoverishment of the middle class, an immense exodus of intellectuals, professionals and artists, the revival of confessional and tribal identities (already initiated by Saddam in the 1980s), and international and regional isolation. In 2003 the US invasion, unauthorized by the United Nations, toppled Saddam's regime but at the price of a new occupation. In the aftermath none of the expectations fostered by the regime's fall – a stable democracy, a pluralistic political landscape, stability and prosperity – materialized; on the contrary, public and private security deteriorated until a state of civil war was reached, unemployment soared (and continues to do so), and confessionalism raised its ugly head.

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[1] Quoted in Rafāʾīl Buṭṭī, *al-Adab al-ʿaṣrī fil-ʿIrāq al-ʿarabī* (Contemporary Literature in Arab Iraq) (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-salafiyya, 1923), 91–93, translation Leslie Tramontini.

The hopes, expectations and fears of the political and intellectual actors are at odds: the organized Shia, long oppressed and excluded from the political process, now hold on to top government posts; the disillusioned Sunna, struggling to adjust to the new power constellation, are only slowly accepting the status quo and emerging as an organized political actor; the Kurds have yet to realize their aspirations for full independence; the Iraqi exiles who returned full of new ideas and energy feel lost in their homeland; the regional neighbours try to manipulate the political process to their own advantage, while for a long time the US remained quite helpless in the face of the turmoil of the occupation years. In the midst of all this are the Iraqi people with their ordinary wishes for a "normal" life in peace and safety.

In this complex situation, the role of Iraqi intellectuals, writers and artists takes on a special importance. In an attempt to clarify this role a conference was held in cooperation with the Berlin-based research program "Europe in the Middle East – The Middle East in Europe" at the Center for Near and Middle Eastern Studies at Philipps-Universität Marburg in December 2008: "Cultural Voices of a Fragmented Nation: War, Trauma and Remembrance in Contemporary Iraq". One key working assumption of the conference was that in such a fragmented and traumatized society like Iraq had been for the past four decades, a fierce struggle over the representation of the past is taking place, with conflicting narratives interweaving and often clashing with each other. "Iraq may be the most conspicuous example of the collapse of a regime and its memory narrative", as Haugbolle and Hastrup put it.[2] Not surprisingly, a great deal of recent literary and artistic productivity is concerned with depiction of violent events and past developments that have harmed the structure of Iraqi society and culture. Contemporary Iraqi prose writers and poets have created gloomy images and metaphors for the depiction of modern Iraqi history, negotiating their visions of historical truth and presenting their explanations for why identity formation and political development have proven so difficult in Iraq.

In this context, it is crucial to ask what happens to the cultural fabric and the self-image of a society when it is afflicted by several traumatizing events or racked by a number of fierce prolonged crises and conflicts, as is the case of Iraq. How does the fact that some Iraqis have lived through more than three wars and many other extremely violent events in their lifetime shape their perspective on life, politics and their prospects for the future? For trauma victims, as for whole communities, everyday beliefs and common assumptions are fundamentally shaken, normality ceases to exist, and life itself is radically called into question. Collective trauma is "[…] a blow to the basic tissues that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality", as Kai T. Erikson has put it.[3] It is important to note, however, that on a cultural level it is not the event itself which is traumatizing, but the meaning constructed and attributed to it. We are convinced that literature and other forms of cultural expression can provide significant and illuminating insights when trying to understand how extensive and far reaching the impact of traumatic events – personal and collective – on Iraqi society and individuals has been.

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[2]   Sune Haugbolle and Anders Hastrup (eds.), *The Politics of Violence, Truth and Reconciliation in the Arab Middle East* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), xi.

[3]   Quoted in Jeffrey Alexander (ed.), *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 4.

The main concern of this collection of essays is to critically scrutinize how cultural events and processes are connected to texts and textual strategies, including not only social and historical analyses but also belles letters. Literature is a medium of cultural representation and coding, it shapes traditions and belief systems, key symbols and behavior patterns as well as the perception of self and other. It is possible through literature to gain access to a society's practices of self-description; thus, literary, social and historical texts are subject to the same set of key questions in this volume.

Processes of remembering and forgetting, or indeed deliberately ignoring, can be discerned and interpreted particularly well in literature. A society's or culture's archive of knowledge can be explored by drawing on a literary text. Knowledge conveyed through literature is always tied to processes of reflection, and these serve the development of self-perception as well as simultaneously posing questions about individual and collective self-relations. Literature is pivotal, a place where the self emerges and develops – and precisely in distinction from respective others.

Literary texts thus offer several aids for gaining understanding. They reveal the nexus between symbols and conflict-charged actions and situations, and show how these can be functionalized to serve social and political interests as well as ethnic self-representation through the weapon of the word and the power of imagery. A pivotal place, one where these ideas and images are put up for discussion (i. e. both created and presented as well as criticized and deconstructed), is the semi-fictional and fictional, "literary" texts in the broadest sense, such as autobiographies, interviews, stories, essays, poems, or songs, but also political opinions expressed by literary and other figures of public life. These texts are essentially understandable in their specific historical context.

Literary forms of representation are always at work in these personal testimonies. To analyze these forms, their rhetoric, stylistics, and functionality, solid methods of literary criticism are indispensable. The aim is to unlock discourses, texts, performative speech acts, and media representations in a new way, with the techniques and concepts inherent to literary criticism, namely to plot them in their diversely ramified paths, crisscrossing the usual boundaries of genre, but also in their recourse to tradition, their intertextual interweaving, and their intermedia translations. The assumption here is that, like almost no other cultural practice, literature can help us understand deeper dimensions of human behavior and experience, dimensions in which imagination and emotion, discourses and images regulate and steer our perception.

Analyzing literary texts is therefore essential if we wish to interpret and classify culture, understood here as artistic coding and narrative context; or put differently: literature is essential for understanding culture. This is why literary texts must be examined with the same intensity as historical or political writings. As Stephen Greenblatt, employing methods gleaned from anthropology to interpret literary works, has stated[4], "a culture's narratives […] are crucial indices of the prevailing codes governing human mobility and constraint. Great writers are masters of theses codes, specialists in cultural exchange. The works they create are structures

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[4]   Stephen Greenblatt, "Culture," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, 2nd ed. (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 225–232.

for the accumulation, transformation, representation, and communication of social energies and practices."[5]

Taking Stephen Greenblatt's ideas of artistic coding and narratives into account, literature is relevant for society and social life in more than one respect: literature can play a healing role helping to recover from loss, exile or physical and mental wounds; literature can be used as a medium of public and personal mourning, and it prevents certain events of importance for the community from falling into oblivion, at times reintroducing forgotten events into collective memory; moreover, literature can help to get a better idea of the present and the other. To stress Michail Bakhtin's literary model of dialogical speech – of the novel, but especially in the context of Arabic literature this also counts for poetry –, it can initiate social communication which might have been broken beforehand: it can bring the walls of silence and misunderstanding tumbling down.

Nevertheless, literary texts and other cultural forms of expression have to be read carefully and critically, and in view of the lasting political crisis and fragmentation of post-war Iraqi society it is evident that not only official and state-sponsored but also subordinate and oppositional narratives of Iraqi history have their own political agenda. A recently enflamed struggle that started soon after the fall of the Baath regime in 2003 over how to (re)write the 'true history' of modern Iraq raises mainly three questions: "who or what is entitled to speak for that past"[6], or in other words, how to come to terms with the legacy of dictatorship and war; how to reconcile or mitigate the struggle between all conflicting groups over political power; and finally, whose memories are acknowledged and heard, and whose memories remain hidden and unheard? In view of the confusing political and cultural scenery, and in contrast to the memory politics before 2003 where a clearer picture can be drawn, it remains difficult to ascertain who the makers of Iraqi memory are today. It seems unsatisfying to restrict oneself to the statement that every ethnic and confessional group in present-day Iraq has its own separate narrative. But when "the fragments imagine the nation", as Sami Zubaida had already stated in 2002,[7] is there any chance for this imagination to lead to the creation of a new and less conflict-ridden nation in the near future?

In our view it is the controversy within the Iraqi community itself on how to evaluate the past and the role of Iraq's intelligentsia which lies at the heart of the matter. It has turned out to be not only a theoretical dispute fought on a purely academic level, but has indeed resonated on interpersonal levels as well, not devoid of high emotions, polemics and accusations. While some of the Baathists now exiled in neighboring Arab countries may still cling to obsolete ideologies former victims of the regime try to establish a new discourse which might also serve certain interests.

This ambiguous and blurred state of affairs concerning both the past and the present of Iraqi society was the "birth pang" of this volume, its moment of genesis. While Iraq's history, politics and economics continue to attract scholarly attention, especially and because of the invasion

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[5]   Ibid., 230.

[6]   Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (eds.), *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory* (London, New York: Routledge, 2003), 1.

[7]   Sami Zubaida, "The Fragments Imagine the Nation," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 34 (2002): 205–215.

and ongoing occupation of 2003, the study of its cultural production and the overarching dilemma of the cultural dichotomy between voices inside and outside still lag behind. However, beside the research on oppositional cultural voices, also the issue of those intellectuals who not only supported but actively shaped the Baathist cultural system has to be studied so as to obtain a clear picture of the mechanisms and processes of the Baathist system as a whole. This is a very sensitive and highly political issue. Only hesitantly international scholars[8] have started to analyze recent Iraqi cultural production in its many layers and strata. This may be due to the difficult access of any kind of information on Iraq in the past, but perhaps also to the sensitive issue of the inner Iraqi split and the different trajectories they drifted in, resulting in a state of quasi non-communication.

This volume tries to fill this vacuum. The first chapter "Cultural and Political Narratives in Conflict" deals with the issue of Iraqi cultural production both in terms of institutional dynamics and the struggle for representation amidst the ongoing fragmentation of Iraq's cultural elite. The changing cultural landscape and the terrain of cultural production under the impact of dictatorship, sanctions and successive wars are the main topics of the contributions in the second chapter on "The Poetics of Trauma: Literary and Artistic Representations of Violence". A number of articles take a closer look at the tensions of home and exile as exemplified in exile and Diaspora culture (The Dialectic of Home and Exile). Finally, the multiple identities of the collective memory find a more individual expression in five essays by different Iraqi intellectuals and writers (Shahādāt: Essays on the Poetic Semantics of the "Iraqi Place"). The volume is divided into these four main chapters, and one of its main concerns is to listen to previously unheard voices[9] that offer different perspectives on the Iraqi past and culture without trying to impose their narrative.

Cultural and Political Narratives in Conflict

During the last five decades, cultural expression by Iraqi writers and artists has been dominated by ideological concerns, a response to the strained and violent political and social situation in Iraq. Notwithstanding the efforts of Saddam Hussein and other Baath ideologues to monopolize Iraqi historiography and cultural production, many Iraqi artists and academics in the country and in exile have put forward their perspectives to counteract, correct and deconstruct the official narratives. As a consequence, the Iraqi cultural scene was characterized

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[8]   In the first decade of the 21st century, a number of books in English have been published focusing on Iraqi culture: in 2005, Eric Davis' insightful book on *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* appeared, one year later Muhsin al-Musawi followed with his *Reading Iraq: Culture and Power*, and in 2010 Achim Rohde presented an in depth analysis of *State-Society Relations in Ba'thist Iraq: Facing Dictatorship*. In Arabic, more books have recently appeared analyzing the relationship between culture and power, such as Salām ʿAbbūd's study *Thaqāfat al-ʿunf fil-ʿIrāq* (The Culture of Violence in Iraq), 2005, or articles like ʿAlwān, ʿAlī ʿAbbās (2000): "al-Ruʾya al-maʾsāwīya fil-rīwāya al-ʿirāqīya al-muʿāṣira", in *Min al-ṣamt ilā l-ṣawt: Fuṣūl adabiyya wa-lughawiyya / From Silence to Sound: Studies in Literature and Language*, 99–117; in Francophone studies the aspect of culture has recently started to be dealt with: cf. e. g. David Baran, *Vivre la tyrannie et lui survivre: L'Irak en transition* (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2004); Pierre Darle, *Saddam Hussein, maître des mots: Du langage de la tyrannie à la tyrannie du langage* (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 2003); Inaam Kachachi, *Paroles d'Irakiennes* (Paris: Serpent à Plumes, 2003).

[9]   Several of the articles published in this volume have been translated from Arabic for this purpose.

by an ideological gap between those supporting Baathist state-run cultural and academic policies and those opposing them. However, more than once, the boundaries between writers co-opted by the state and oppositional voices have been blurred in the everyday cultural life in Iraq since the early 1980s. Since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003, this gap has been further reinforced. Highlighting the inner Iraqi dispute on questions of compliance and complicity, and the relation between power and literature, in the first chapter the introductory articles of Fatima Mohsen (Debating Iraqi Culture: Intellectuals between the Inside and the Outside) and Leslie Tramontini (The Struggle for Representation: The Internal Iraqi Dispute over Cultural Production in Baathist Iraq) concentrate on the internal split in the Iraqi community. Mohsen gives a historical overview of the "inside" and "outside" intellectuals and artists throughout the past five decades while Tramontini focuses on this divide during the Baath era and the repercussions nowadays. Hala Fattah (Hashemite Iraq and the Pitfalls of Memory in the Recollections of Two Respondents to the Iraqi Oral History Project) lets Iraqis speak who have lived through the different stages of Iraqi history and who voice their concern about the ongoing radicalization, claiming Iraq has always been the victim of external influences. According to Fattah, the memory of older Iraqis often oscillates between nostalgia on the one hand and rather dark visions of the national history on the other hand.

The Poetics of Trauma: Literary and Artistic Representations of Violence

This chapter is particularly interested in the ways writers deal with the interrelationship between political violence and war as an individual, national or collective experience on the one hand, and the narration and poetic aestheticization of it on the other. Friederike Pannewick (Dancing Letters: The Art of Subversion in Sinān Anṭūn's Novel *Iʿjām*) analyses the art of subversion and its intricacies in the novel *Iʿjām* of the contemporary Iraqi writer Sinān Anṭūn. The novel, published in 2004 after he had left Iraq in the early 1990s, reflects upon different options for subversive and individualized camouflage strategies vis-à-vis the hegemonic discourse and the alleged truth of a dictatorial regime. Wiebke Walther (Between Heroism, Hesitancy, Resignation and New Hope: The Iran-Iraq War 1980–1988 in Iraqi Poetry) describes the eulogizing war poetry of the 1980s, drawing comparisons with English war poetry and well-known ancient Arabic battle poetry. This poetry was a direct implementation of the regime's cultural policies, preaching self-sacrifice till the very end and the heroic glorification of the leader Saddam Hussein and Iraq, – a country constantly falling victim to external threats and foes, as the official doctrine ran, a doctrine that remains very much alive today in the thinking of Iraqis of all shades. The contribution of Achim Rohde, Amatzia Baram and Ronen Zeidel (Between the Unknown Soldier Monument and the Cemetery: Commemorating Fallen Soldiers in Iraq, 1958–2010) is concerned with the culture and rites of memory in Baathist Iraq, focusing on the key figure of nationalist discourse: the martyr. In the contribution of Fleih Rikabi, post-2003 poetry is analyzed (Time and Place in Contemporary Iraqi Poetry post-2003: An Inner Iraqi Perspective). Depictions of the harsh living conditions in times of war and embargo as well as violence and discrimination against individuals have dominated the literary and academic discourse since 2003. Rikabi puts a special focus on the management of time and place, reinforcing the common discourse that Iraq is and always has been subject to external threats,

occupations and destruction. In his contribution, Stephan Milich introduces the exiled Iraqi poet Kamāl al-Sabtī whose poetics is fundamentally shaped by elements of traumatic memory (The Other Martyr: The Trauma of War and Exile in the Poetry of Kamāl Sabtī [1955–2006]). Focusing on the subversive elements in Sabtī's poetry of the 1980s and his later poems on the repercussions of war and exile in his poetic writing, he shows, drawing on the thinking of Jacques Derrida, how Sabtī's poetry of mourning tries to historicize his own personal past. It is his intimate, deeply traumatized language that acquires a highly public meaning by presenting an uncanny counter discourse to the official narratives of state culture.

The Dialectic of Home and Exile

This chapter brings together several contributions which deal with various aspects of exile literature. In her comparison between the different ways of dramatizing the 2003 invasion of Iraq in British and Iraqi plays, Christiane Schlote (Iraqi Playwrights and the (Un)Reality of War) demonstrates the diverging approaches of four authors to addressing the relationship between representations of war, the understanding of knowledge and the mediatization of cultures. Abdulwahid Lu'lu'a introduces Muẓaffar al-Nawwāb, the oppositional poet par excellence to Saddam's regime (Iraqi Poetry of the Diaspora). The dilemma of home and exile is broadly elaborated with the example of Nawwāb, never co-opted by an Iraqi regime, rebelling not only against Baathist despotism but against all authoritarian regimes. Astrid Ottosson al-Bitar offers the reader an interesting insight into Iraqi exiles' literature through the analysis of two Iraqi writers residing in Sweden, Janān Jāsim Ḥillāwī and Salām ʿAbbūd (Another Story to be Told: Iraqi Novels of Exile in Sweden). By applying Bakhtin's theory of the novel as a genre which travesties official discourses, she can demonstrate the writers' strategy to develop alternative visions of Iraq's official Baathist narrative. Andreas Pflitsch (Violence from a Distance: Trauma in Iraqi-German Literature) presents the Iraqi-Kurdish-German exile writer Sherko Fatah who resides in Berlin and compares his attitude and work to those of other Iraqi writers in Germany.

Shahādāt: Essays on the Poetic Semantics of the "Iraqi Place"

The last chapter opens with a short essay by Atef Botros on place and memory, where he argues that writing the "Iraqi place" constitutes an attempt to preserve and keep alive Iraqi history and experiences of the past in the collective memory. The following essays by the Iraqi authors Ḥaydar Saʿīd, Aḥmad Saʿdāwī, Ṣafāʾ ʿAlwān and Jāsim ʿĀṣī as well as by Abbas Khider, an Iraqi exile writer residing in Germany, deal with towns such as Najaf, Thawra City and Qalʿat Sukkar and with the experience in prison in a rather poetical way. They constitute translations from Arabic made available for the first time to non-Arab speakers to gain an insight into Iraqi thinking at present, its sense of fragmentation and fear of loss of place.

Needless to say, in view of such a wide range of topics – and highly sensitive ones, too – the opinions expressed in the contributions of this volume are those of each single writer and do not necessarily coincide with the opinion of the editorial team. As mentioned above, this book is in part the outcome of the conference held on Iraqi culture in 2008; however, the editors have taken the effort to contact potential contributors from various academic contexts and

backgrounds. Of course we have not been able to present an exhaustive overview, and many important voices may be missing (unfortunately there is no contribution on the Kurdish perception of the situation for example). But quite a few international and Iraqi scholars (from inside the country and outside) present their point of view on Iraqi culture and on the years of war, sanction, invasion and civil strife.

Dealing with the past – be it the immediate one or Saddam Hussein's wars and the legacy of Baath dictatorship – is inevitably a highly emotional process, even more so if the whole affair is still ongoing and the opportunity to write "official" history anew is open and contested. The aim of including as many diverging points of view as possible from scholars of various ideological proveniences and approaches is to bring together the many pieces of this puzzling jigsaw of Iraqi culture and history and to illustrate the broad spectrum of literary criticism. In the end, a heterogeneous picture has emerged consisting of diverging multilayered interpretations and evaluations. Mindful that these articles will not cover the huge range of perspectives on Iraqi culture, they constitute in themselves conflicting narratives and may be received within an emotionally charged academic atmosphere. Nevertheless, we hope to contribute with this volume to a better understanding of Iraq's rich and heterogeneous culture at this juncture in time.

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