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# Baghdad City in Poetry: Fabled Metropolis Valorized and Elegized

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**Abstract:** Amongst the return to ruin ravaging Baghdad, its poets lamented the fall from utopian bliss to dystopia with their words representing a pained spatiality and reckoning with character-altering devastation. There is a love of place as it suffers human vices, one of the complexities of representation. Within these poeticisms are numerous historiographies. Earlier poets such as Muti ibn Iyas and Abd Allah ibn Al-Mubarak capture the urban majesty igniting the imagination. Yet it inspired contradictory emotions. Time ensured that, as destruction defined space, the poet crossed the threshold in the subject-object interaction. Those like Sa.,di Shirazi, elegizing the ghostly capital after the 1258 Mongol invasion, was broken himself with his rhythmic cadence reflecting a hemorrhaging mentality. When violence invades the poetics of creation, some like Abdulghani Al-Jamil strip language of an embellished exterior. It is a desire to resist. Woundedness speaks back to the city uncovering a spatiality of loss.

**Keywords:** Baghdad, space and place, poetry, ruination, dystopia, wounded identity.

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## 1. Introduction

### Baghdad City in Poetry: Fabled Metropolis Valorized and Elegized

“My condolences for Baghdad, what a town!  
Once glory nested here; now, it has flown away  
She was a bride like the morning’s sun  
Her jewels were not to be lent...”

– Abdulghani Al-Jamil

The poets of wounded Baghdad refuse to go quietly. They remained committed to the poetic depiction of every ounce of hurt over myriad centuries. Since the moment of its founding, the city was assured of the documentation of each historical pivot, moments of gladness but also that looming pain scarcely leaving it alone. It was the only form of literature that would perform this task before others followed a while later. Their written negations of love and hate, a desperate lamentation of orchestrated division, for the hurting city have conjured an intimate portrait through the eyes of countless generations. Their once enchanted home, perched atop a world of luxuriance and limitless possibility, a place where one would sense “breeze reviving the sick / blowing between sweet basil branches” in the lyrical words of ninth-century poet

Mansur Al-Namari, also created great disaffection [1]. Poetic verses captured the creative imaginings of quotidian life thus setting the stage for a relationship with space and spatiality as paradoxical as Baghdadi urbanity itself. Beyond isolating the homogeneity of a single moment in time, the ever-present pattern of writing the capital passed it through a two-pronged method of engaging deeply with its ills, leaning heavily on communicating economically the pain of manifested geographies of displacement and ruin, and afterwards speaking back to it what it must be feeling. Yet all is enveloped in the complexity of representation that none of them tired from, forever a sense of competing emotions, “poets pass rueful comment as its people find themselves in the midst of a war...” but continue to “celebrate the life of the city, the beauty of its vistas”[2]. Complicating conventional notions, it is common practice for the poet in one poetic offering to dart back and forth between the valued and the elegiac. His task serves to actualize a synchronic structural paradigm accounting for concrete forms in such a way that conveys their double meaning.

Bearing witness and poetically responding to the immediate, the conceptualization of variegated life in the city, everyday minutiae and surely the happenings of the day by the poet may have been divergent across thirteen odd centuries but the invisible thread of Baghdad as aesthetic ruin acts as a point of contact. Indisputably, “the destruction of Baghdad inspired many poets in the centuries following and up to our own times” with their musings around a culture of woundedness blending with the living process of the urban center continuing on still to create a narrative in contradistinction from a singular ethos [3]. Put simply, no particular characteristic spirit could be given to a pluralistic place except perhaps through the prism of destruction as a force that has necessarily shaped it. It rings true, then, that “Baghdad cannot be reduced to a single universal ethos which may serve as a recognizable core of identity shared in common by its inhabitants” and in the poetic sphere, there is something to be said of the historic, most recently capitalist, space of ruination taking shape in the creative imagination as an uninterrupted association with aestheticized control [4]. Strikingly, it has evolved into an abstract substructure. Dialectic in nature though perhaps not meaning to present as such, the archetypal poem on the capital, of and as a space of volatility, is both metaphorical and literal, genuinely meaning to critique destitution however also repurposing it in a beautified exterior. Henri Lefebvre calls for the criticism of everyday life and would deem poetry as one of “those activities which rise above the everyday” yet the meditation on and contemplation of the wounded space, as a project of paradoxical creativity, cannot be divorced from the real [5]. That broken spirit, approaching the act with vulnerability, recasts the nature of poeticization so that it does not merely look to the charm of the ruined. It is precisely in and through these scars that the nooks and crevices of the everyday are communicated.

Woundedness, as a state of being, is able to rise to the surface of the poetic experience never trumped and unruffled by the

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<sup>1</sup> Reuven Snir, “Breeze,” in *Baghdad: The City in Verse*, ed. Sharmila Sen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 71.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, xxii.

<sup>3</sup> Reuven Snir, “The Eye’s Delight: Baghdad in Arabic Poetry,” *Orientalia Suecana* 70 (2021): 32. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1536725/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Henri Lefebvre, “Foreword to the Second Edition,” in *Critique of Everyday Life*, ed. Robert Gray (London: Verso Books, 2014), 31.

habits of creative expression because it is a gaping hole itself with permeable borders that see through to the ordinary. Pain itself emerges as a plaintive dwelling in line with Bachelardian thought, the French philosopher critically viewing “the spaces of our past moments of solitude” even those where we “desired and compromised solitude” as remaining “within us” precisely because “the human being wants them to remain so.” The poets extol Baghdad in good times and bad return to them in their dreams, these retreats having “the value of a shell” not in a negative sense but room that is liberally given by Gaston Bachelard for a poetic bond with space over time [6]. Many poets would situate themselves in such sweet melancholy, transfixed by the city that is heartwarming but possessed, always a combination of the two so that hurt is a part of the unconscious. Abdulwahab Al-Bayati lets out a sigh for his distant hometown, struck by how in “...this garden of gold / the summer came and left / and you still laugh” happily carrying on though the beloved have gone away [7]. Trees have withered and died, “only death hovers over ruins and temples” though “after one thousand years the grapes will ripen / and cups will be filled / and the singer will be revived”[8]. The rising and falling beats of the urban space, like a person stumbling from the effects of a mighty blow yet managing to walk still, form the cadence of these poetic meters. They fluctuate, the movement of the sentence producing tension within its grammatical structures reflecting the rhythmic ingenuities of ruin, a fixed sequence of changes.

Essentially, ruination is the paradoxical catalyst at the center of this rapport edging the art form, modern and antiquated, closer to the landscape while also having it take on a realist slant to combat the unreality of devastation, “by representing the destruction of a past...they seek to rethink the historical traces of modernity” stretching back farther into historiographic considerations as regards the Baghdadi space [9]. These poems consciously move in tune with the metrical existence of ruin. In the Iraqi oral tradition, this has been an experiential observation of note where pain has entered into the tonality, the modulation in inflection of any artistic work. Poetry is driven by an entrenched sadness so that the reader who comes upon it will register its particularity, a decaying body that cannot be extracted from the experience. It, in fact, nurtures it as the politics of loss evolve into a poetics of great melancholy, “trauma not only destroys but creates” and it has become the stock and trade of the eulogizing poet who muses over the state of the city to “create ruptures in the healing” [10]. Thus in the words of the many Baghdadi poets over the ages, denizens who came from all walks of life and all those who were entranced by the space, reflecting on ruin must be undergirded with this hopeful misery. They are written to be heard if only so that unique brand of hurt inculcated over centuries might be appreciated. It must rise up to the challenge of an insurmountable level of disturbance and does so by being performative, poetic as a solemn act. The wounded-thinking poem, needing an outlet for the burden of carrying around that sense of grief though encased in a whimsical shell, cannot

<sup>6</sup> Gaston Bachelard, “The House from Cellar to Garret the Significance of the Hut,” in *The Poetics of Space*, ed. Eugène Minkowski (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 10.

<sup>7</sup> Reuven Snir, “A Sigh in Baghdad,” in *Baghdad: The City in Verse*, ed. Sharmila Sen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 218.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>9</sup> Cecilia Rangel, “The Effects of the Real: Reading Ruins in Modern Poetry,” in *Cities in Ruins: The Politics of Modern Poetics*, ed. Carlos Aguirre (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2010), 270.

<sup>10</sup> Naje Al-Ali and Deborah Al-Najjar, “Introduction: Writing Trauma, Memory, and Materiality,” in *We Are Iraqis: Aesthetics and Politics in a Time of War*, ed. Michele Callaghan (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2013), xxvi.

help but lend itself to theatricality. Camelia Elias would label this as part of the genre of the fragment, wounds becoming an image of movement, “style, form, and content become one another as the fragment is composed as a fragment that represents a fragment. It keeps things moving” [11]. The Baghdadi space is understood, in poetic practice, as forging connections at every turn though in the form and as the bearer of an absolute incompleteness. Through a manifest performativity, the wound as represented by equally hemorrhaging poems allows poets across space and time to interact, a “poetics of intersections” [12]. Strangely yet surely, their summative influence, though mired in the fragmentary, seeks to comprehend a wrecked spatiality by rebuilding it. They give themselves to a certain kind of hereafter so that this may happen hence their voices when linked are each a separate piece of the sought-after whole.

The selected poems navigate this tension across a long span of time changing in their structure and disposition to match a sustained fractured existence. In some moments, it would require the setting aside of the self to engage with something far deeper. The verses express genuine concern rising in intensity as empires fall and Baghdad is repeatedly scorched. They are furthermore permeable, even wounded themselves by everyday experiences. Yet even in the pits of desperation, there exists the possibility of the wound opening up the senses to the heart of life, reality and the sheer enormity of being. It can perhaps even be a necessary corrective. Some of the main poems to be analyzed chart this interesting course. The poems “The Hand of Generosity is Crippled” by Abu Al-Aliya written in the ninth century and Ali ibn Abi Hashim’s “Builders Build for Ruins” a century later is a disruption of form in this regard. The lament of a rapidly declining capital comes at the expense of eloquence and artistry synonymous with Arabic poetry. As space suffers, so does the poetic word the incremental materiality of pain breaking its surface and mortally wounding it. In “A Bird in a Falcon’s Grip” written by Sa,di Shirazi depicting the disastrous Mongol invasion, the poet resigns himself to great sadness beckoning death to take him.

This and other offerings begin to bear out this feeling of ache that is almost as if they themselves are physically shattered, cracked open without any orderly closure. The eighteenth to twentieth centuries display a continuum of a sort of willful disenchantment given all that had transpired distilled into writing poetically with a penchant to resist. This is a natural evolution for the art form. For example as is clear in “Complaint” by Abdulghani Al-Jamil is the chastising of a place where people have been driven to error and injustice while Muhammad Mahdi Al-Jawahiri’s “Chant of Peace” reworks this simmering frustration. The historical moment in time following the First World War was calamitous leading the country down a frightfully dark and ominous path. So the poem, in turn, learns to allow more of the outside into its landscape at once, serving as a verbal memorial to countless atrocities and adopting the same unapologetic rigidity to fight back. Poetry is in essence weaponized and at this stage comes renewed meaning and beauty. Today, there is what one can only describe as solemn acceptance of an urbanity that has succumbed to life after death. This is articulated in “Baghdad’s Date Palms Apologize to You” written by Ahlam Mustaghanimi where the language is didactic. It is in fact accusatory in tone calling

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<sup>11</sup> Gray Kochhar-Lindgren, “The Fragment: Towards a History and Poetics of a Performative Genre,” *SubStance* 35, no. 2 (2006): 173. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4152891>.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

back those who have forsaken the city who are sure to never truly live afterwards. What this implies is a changing relationship with death and how the poetic voice must likely approach the subject during a period of reckoning. The poet becomes a healer and his work taps into the collective unconscious.

### 1.1. Peace Is Born Out of Blood Within Circular Walls

Caliph Al-Mansur “led the reconnaissance for his new capital himself” and was not a man who would entrust such a significant task to his officials, sailing up and down the Tigris in search for the most appropriate site [13]. Long before his historic arrival to what would become the walled city, violence encroached upon the space when Abu Bakr swooped on Souk Baghdad, as it was known then, plundering “every piece of gold and silver” before leaving the ruined community to descend into obscurity, an instance of bloodshed “that would tragically dominate features of the city’s life in the centuries to follow” [14]. It was nonetheless a glorious attraction mere decades after its founding, Muti ibn Iyas quite literally drunk off of its worldly pleasures and on one morning in Baghdad, “our cupbearer mixed wine or served it pure / what a wonderful wine when mixed!” [15]. Close to what Yi-Fu Tuan would call a delicate betweenness, a contemporary of the befuddled poet, Abd Allah ibn Al-Mubarak, praises the pious ascetic of the capital telling his brethren to “stay on the frontier, be modest / Baghdad is not an abode for hermits” [16]. Thus an early defining spatial trait was the “fundamental contrasts of human experience.” In line with Tuanian contrasts, contradictions such as these in Baghdadi urbanity eventually went on to produce nuances, “nuances of being in the world, nuances of engaging with the world, and nuances of laying claim to bits and pieces of the world.” Polar opposites did not remain separate so that being-in-the-world came to mean a status of “mutual inclusion...providing a foundation of self-identity” that would carry over into Baghdadi life [17]. Eventually, the blurring of lines would emerge as a distinguishing symbol. The intoxicated and the devout, the wealthy and the penniless, love for the place and contempt for the people are the dichotomies initiating this spatiality of nuance, intrinsic to the character of the city, and it would progressively mount to the most definitive of all reaching beyond mere optics, that being the presence of death in life.

The city moved through its earlier decades with a haughtiness perhaps matching the libertinism of Ibn Iyas, delighting in its grandeur and millions of dinars would be poured to satisfy an appetite for luxury. There appeared to be nothing but the zenith of prosperity. But it would soon pay dearly perhaps due to this image of glory enticing outside forces but not before the inner sociology of space worked against it. An unknown poet decries the Baghdadi public who were nothing but ornamented rhetoric and lies for “Baghdad’s residents have no pity for the needy / no remedy for the gloomy” and in their actions, the fabled capital would lose its luster. Their immoral nature corrupted the place, laying bare a classist struggle and

<sup>13</sup> Justin Marozzi, “The Caliph and His Capital: Mansur and the Foundation of Baghdad (750-75),” in *Baghdad: City of Peace, City of Blood*, ed. Stuart Proffitt (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 2.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Reuven Snir, “Stars Whirling in the Dark,” in *Baghdad: The City in Verse*, ed. Sharmila Sen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 53.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>17</sup> Paul C. Adams, “Tuanian Geography,” in *Place, Space and Hermeneutics*, ed. Bruce Janz (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 281.

“abandoning the path of nobility / they rival each other instead in disobedience and sinfulness” [18]. A perceptual experience well-documented in early Abbasid history, a dysfunctionality rotting beneath the glossy exterior came to comprise the “embodied space” of the city [19]. The potential of place-making and where it oriented the production of space arose from a nexus of negative social relations. Soon enough, the wretchedness of human nature and its consciousness would take on spatial form. Separating them as was done before was an impossibility so that Tuanian nuances on the ambiguities and ambivalences of the human experience indefinitely extended to place. Perhaps an explanation is that the implication of place at this time is only ever secondary to what ultimately constitutes identity and a sense of belonging. People then paid far greater allegiance to lineage. The relationship to it, in this case to the city of Baghdad, grew throughout the centuries to the point that humanity has reached today where the modern affectation of place and self as codependent entities thrives. In the desolation that the poem describes, there was that clear separation worsened by vices that began to take hold making life unbearable. It had not yet started to anchor personal consciousness and gain new meaning. The distinct character attached to this space presently, though overly situating it in the romantic to its detriment, would steadily come into being.

Lefebvre, moreover, insisted on the basic duality of space, something it cannot readily escape, as “both a field of action” and a “basis of action” and the energies that are derived and directed culminate into an embodied reality [20]. Poetry, in turn, began to reflect this inextricably. Ishaq Al-Khuraimi elegized a Baghdad wrecked with misfortunes and gradually debilitated by internal strife preempted when Al-Mansur embarked on a “...second building spree” born of dynastic considerations. He needed to establish Mahdi, “his son and heir, as a powerful figure in his own right” [21]. The poet knows the city yields her residents the abundance of all that is good “but Time has vicissitudes / evil-doers continued to nibble at her kingdom” continuing on “till she was steeped in a cup of trial / whose offenses cannot be abolished” [22]. Despair would, over time, cease to be purely attributable to the evils of caliphs, viziers and lowly subjects moving to inhabit space and its overall essence. The phenomenology and material form of woundedness began to take shape in the capital and the poetic voice, taking note of the mixing of two constructs once finely-delineated, would recreate it in sadness. Living a nomadic lifestyle in the desert between Al-Yamamah, a historical area lying in the Najd region, and Basra, Umara ibn Aqil would visit the city and ironically likened it to the harshness of the environment he frequents. In a lament, he cries “oh Baghdad, when it rains or wind strikes / you are nothing but dung / when you are dry, you are only evil dust” and so he, and

<sup>18</sup> Reuven Snir, “Ornamented Rhetoric and Lies,” in *Baghdad: The City in Verse*, ed. Sharmila Sen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 61.

<sup>19</sup> Setha M. Low, “Towards an Anthropological Theory of Space and Place,” *Semiotica* 175, no. 1/4 (2009): 22. <https://www.coris.uniroma1.it/sites/default/files/Low%20S%20anth%20theor%20of%20space%20place%200.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> Henri Lefebvre, “Spatial Architectonics,” in *The Production of Space*, ed. Graham Eyre (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 191.

<sup>21</sup> Justin Marozzi, “The Caliph and His Capital: Mansur and the Foundation of Baghdad (750-75),” in *Baghdad: City of Peace, City of Blood*, ed. Stuart Proffitt (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 21.

<sup>22</sup> Reuven Snir, “Elegy,” in *Baghdad: The City in Verse*, ed. Sharmila Sen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 82.

other poets, had no choice but to accept the hedonist aspect, the shamelessness of the space [23]. As they wrote in opposition of degenerate city living, the afflicted urban center could not register a resistance to widespread vice in their words leading to a transgressive poetics. It would displace the metaphysical onto the spatial reality of repetitive tragedies, corruption ironically enough igniting the poetic imagination.

As Bachelard concedes, “inhabited space transcends geometrical space” and the experience of Baghdad then was subject to the phenomenology of the receiving mind [24]. In the dynamic rivalry between the city and wrongdoing as it took place within it, the end result was an inevitable amalgamation forming the essence of space. Andalusian geographer Ibn Jubayr, who visited the city in 1184, reported back on its sorry state describing how “this ancient city, though it still serves as the Abbasid capital, has lost much of its distinctive character and retains only its famous name” though even that would be negatively impacted with time. No longer what it once was “before it fell victim to recurrent misfortunes and repeated calamities – the city resembles a vanished encampment or a passing phantom.” Like the Baghdadi poets who connected the material and the literary, his account “employs the qasida tropes used to invoke the vanished encampment of the beloved” signaling “a shift to the trope of elegy” [25]. Abbasid Baghdad was reduced to nonentity triggering a transformative poetics before the space became a post-Mongol city as it were. Continuous destruction, even as it passed through its golden age, perhaps meant there was a poetic adjustment being made to register a paradoxical complexity, that odes were being composed in her praise that she did not outright deserve. There was more disaster on the horizon but all the lovestruck poet knew at that moment was the permanence of the elegiac.

## 1.2. Gradual Stagnation Precipitates the End of an Age

The poem seems to anticipate the ultimate fate of Baghdad though as bad as matters were conceived in its words, it would devolve into a situation that was much worse. Meaning to or not, many poetic descriptions enchanted by the city from afar misled the reader. Spatial distance clearly turned it into an object of yearning yet as time went on, these poets also suggested “...that actually living there could prove frustrating” thus a cause of disappointment [26]. There was the abstract image of space and then its disruptive reality. The dual discovery produced profound disorientation around the capital; however this gap began to be filled, the charm wearing off, in Baghdadi poetry as its lack of progress could not be ignored. Ali ibn Abi Hashim criticizes the powers that be as “they build and say: we shall never die but / builders build for ruins / I have never encountered an intelligent person / untroubled by the anticipated ruination” [27]. Another poet still, Abu Al-Aliyah, has strong advice telling all to “leave! Baghdad is not a place to stay in / there is no benefit from her” for the hand

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>24</sup> Gaston Bachelard, “House and Universe,” in *The Poetics of Space*, ed. Eugène Minkowski (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 47.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Cooperson, “Baghdad in Rhetoric and Narrative,” *Muqarnas* 13 (1996): 99. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1523254>.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>27</sup> Reuven Snir, “Builders Build for Ruins,” in *Baghdad: The City in Verse*, ed. Sharmila Sen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 112.

of generosity is crippled [28]. Caliphal initiatives show the beginnings of regression within the city. If the utopia of the rich was conceived of as a placeless space of progress and order, their intention to imbue real space with those very same qualities did not come to pass. A clear classist division, these plans, in Lefebvrian terms, merely account for physical space as perceived and never executed. It is the epitome of a representation of space, “conceptualized space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists...” that imagined the urban center as a treasured ideal and not once echoing lived experience [29]. As such, it was a symbol and many poets were ensnared by its symbolism until passing through daily life there presented a different set of circumstances. It could be appropriated from afar but actual space shattered marketed abstraction to be sure, the disjunction itself growing into a spatial theme.

Space in this period of Abbasid decline was also that of an intriguing contradiction where urban life was not necessarily affected by it, persisting despite a torrent of troubles, which Ibrahim Allawi clarifies remarking that “this paradox can probably be explained by the nature of the social structure that arose within the framework of Islam” [30]. The heart of city life lay outside the corrupted palace and was continuously a force of advance and renewal. A place of plenty, any space independent of centralized power projected an operational urbanity and Al-Tahir ibn Al-Muzaffar Al-Khazin pictured it as such declaring that “this is a beautiful city that grants her residents / things never conjoined elsewhere since they were created” provided under the conditions of Islamic social life [31]. Space brought into existence a particular duality, a disharmonic union of several different elements. Contracting systems invariably clashed becoming a tradition omnipresent in the urbanistic form and function. Perhaps in the layered construct of Baghdadi spatiality it emerges as the only clearly demarcated aspect. The hustle and bustle of the marketplace, where space is lived and actualized, is social production from below a spatiality that is part of the real while above, overwhelmingly detached from the everyday, wants nothing more than an abstract formulation. It is solely interested in the unreal. This is a rendering of space as Tuan would conjecture it, contradictory in its love and hate, inevitability of power and genuine affection in juxtaposition, the chaos of the topophobia abound but an acute topophilia persisted, tactile as it was, “a delight in the feel of air, water, earth” [32]. As they are provided for, a fascination forms linking people with place and a reluctance to give up on it even if necessary.

Constantinople-born Yaqut Al-Hamawi, renowned for his great geographic encyclopedia during the late Abbasid era, describes his birthplace of Baghdad at the close of the reign of Caliph Nasir and the plans of the city “gain a fullness of detail” in his articles. He writes of “West Baghdad as consisting in his day of a number of separate quarters, each surrounded by its own wall” [33]. On the eastern bank, “the center of population, was the great Palace of the Caliph,

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>29</sup> Henri Lefebvre, “Plan of the Present Work,” in *The Production of Space*, ed. Graham Eyre (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 38.

<sup>30</sup> Ibrahim Allawi, “Some Evolutionary and Cosmological Aspects to Early Islamic Town Planning,” *Archnet*, 1988, <https://archnet.org/publications/3097>.

<sup>31</sup> Reuven Snir, “Sweeter than Wine,” in *Baghdad: The City in Verse*, ed. Sharmila Sen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 131.

<sup>32</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, “Topophilia and Environment,” in *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values*, ed. John Jackson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 93.

<sup>33</sup> Guy Le Strange, “Baghdad during the Abbasid Caliphate: A Topographical Summary, with a Notice of the



described as occupying a third part of the whole area of the city..." and a network of markets and streets lay all around it. He paints a picture of Baghdadi life "as the great city stood immediately prior to the Mongol invasion" [34]. Open spaces, as the dynasty experienced political and economic decline, interestingly flourished continuing a paradoxical narrative. Justin Marozzi makes clear that though the upper echelons were caught in a weakened state, this did not "...entail a parallel architectural decay in Baghdad." On the contrary, "as the tenth century unfolded, the caliphs' diminishing sway saw them become masters of little more than their palaces and gardens" [35]. The city was still a marvel to all those who visited her. There was still an air of wealth as Ali ibn Al-Faraj Al-Shafi'i would observe in his poetry for "how wonderful is the bridge, stretching over the Tigris / great in perfection, saturated with glamor and beauty" and Ma'dan Al-Taghlibi, a few decades later during the eleventh century, would behold the same magnificence [36]. He proclaims that "had Korah, the god of opulence, resided there / he would have become anxious and frightened" [37]. Just before the impending catastrophe, space in the city under waning Abbasid jurisdiction deceived the beholder. It was represented as an impenetrable whole, able to transfix those passing through, however it long ago began engaging in the fragmentary. Yet it was by no means a fragmented spatiality of negative consequences. Residents were still besotted with civic life for the most part, perhaps even enjoying greater social freedom as the state withdrew into itself. But it would be the independent states and foreign attacks that advanced the final blow.

The year of 1258 came and went bringing with it striking transformations to the cosmopolitan city from which it, and Islamic civilization for that matter, has never recovered which has been described by Mona Hassan as "painful to all those, near and far, who had witnessed or imagined its grandeur" [38]. A shell of its former self, many would recite mournful poetry for the lost capital such as historian and public official Zahir Al-Din ibn Al-Kazaruni did recalling how "I bewail its ruins at times / and I cry over those who have departed / so if eyes were to vanish from crying / out of excessive desire, we would have gone blind" and so poetic elegies continued to be written [39]. Poets composing them in memory of the fallen city were plentiful and as they wrote depicted a ghostly scene where space was characterized as a topos of loss. The space was before lively as its inhabitants created a vibrant social scene with many of them now having tragically passed who "breathed life and memories into the spaces of Baghdad" and their sudden departure "irrevocably altered the city's landscape and quarters" [40]. From this moment on in a spatial sense, Baghdad is bound up in an unavoidable liminality not entirely breaking with what Lefebvre deems an overlay of the imagination onto physical space. The notion is essentially

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Contemporary Arabic and Persian Authorities," *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (1899): 878. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25208155>.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 879.

<sup>35</sup> Justin Marozzi, "The Later Abbasids: Farewell to The Meadows of Gold (892-1258)," in *Baghdad: City of Peace, City of Blood*, ed. Stuart Proffitt (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 93.

<sup>36</sup> Reuven Snir, "Elephants on Mercury," in *Baghdad: The City in Verse*, ed. Sharmila Sen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 132.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>38</sup> Mona Hassan, "Visions of a Lost Caliphal Capital: Baghdad, 1258 CE," in *Longing for the Lost Caliphate: A Transregional History*, ed. Fred Appel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 20.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 47.

flipped as ruination begins to develop into a character. Materiality now also seeks “to change and appropriate” the essence of lived space “making symbolic use of its objects” with destruction that is intrinsic to their undertone [41]. The urban center sustains a spatial truth that is twofold, the subjective experience of space colliding with the unchanging objectivity of the ruined topography and the latter having a say in the production of meaning. Somewhere in the middle is where this spirit resides. Hostility would disturbingly become the *modus operandi* taking after the sack of the capital not as “an outburst of barbarism, but a meticulously organized campaign of systematic and controlled violence” [42]. Henceforth, systematized violence would remain emerging as part of the spatial structure and brought all the more closer to social normality. Reuven Snir details the poetic rendering of the ruinous siege that plagued the damaged and spent city remarking that

On the whole, all that was written about the destruction of Baghdad, both at the time and in the succeeding decades and centuries, reflects the paradigm that sees political changes as pivotal in their effects on religious and cultural life. Hulagu has been engraved on the Arabs’ memory as the fundamental reason for the destruction of their great medieval civilization and the cause for the cultural stagnation of the Arab world until the renaissance, *nahḍa*, in the nineteenth century. [43]

The phased destruction of Baghdad, each layer complicating spatial configuration, would impact the representation of space and the poetic image simultaneously. Karkh lay in shambles to the west and Rusafa on the eastern side is in an equal process of severe disintegration that would inspire that same transformation in the understanding of place. As ruination manifested itself into numerous forms, facets entrenched themselves into the everyday unlike the destruction of old, largely a passing phase. This would have repeated psychological repercussions resounding across several centuries. Spatiality and the poem, no doubt a development that Bachelard would herald though it comes here in the most negative of circumstances, involves a new subjective power essential to understanding the city. To his mind, “a metaphor is a false image, since it does not possess the direct virtue of an image formed in spoken verse” and Baghdadi poets do not completely abandon it but there is a defining shift [44]. They must contend with this metaphysical force that has entered the urban space. There, essentially, cannot be rationality for the irrational so the poetics of colossal ruin as it appeared in the poem from then on was mindfully chaotic, as thrashed around and disoriented as space itself. No claims in the least are made to objectivity. Emotive in his retelling of the tragedy, Persian poet Saʿdi Shirazi commits to the direct images he observed emanating from an, unsurprisingly, imaginative faculty that had nothing to do with a so-called conscious world relaying how “I kept close

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<sup>41</sup> Henri Lefebvre, “Plan of the Present Work,” in *The Production of Space*, ed. Graham Eyre (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 39.

<sup>42</sup> Michal Biran, “Violence and Non-Violence in the Mongol Conquest of Baghdad 1258,” in *Violence in Islamic Thought from the Mongols to European Imperialism*, eds. Robert Gleave and István Kristó-Nagy (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 20.

<sup>43</sup> Reuven Snir, “The Eye’s Delight: Baghdad in Arabic Poetry,” *Orientalia Suecana* 70 (2021): 34. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1536725/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

<sup>44</sup> Gaston Bachelard, “Drawers, Chests and Wardrobes,” in *The Poetics of Space*, ed. Eugène Minkowski (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 77.

my eyelids to prevent tears flowing / when they overflowed, the dam could not stop them.” Just as his beloved Baghdad was destroyed, so too did his soul as the poeticism reaches a point of the duality of subject and object. After the heartbreak he felt, “if only after the destruction, Baghdad’s eastern breeze / had blown over my grave!” and with this admission, he situated himself in the center of its immediacy [45]. He is no longer merely an observer but very much the observed. That gulf does not exist for all those who treat the pain of the city in poetic terms after the horrific massacre by Hulagu Khan and his forces.

### 1.3. Of Frequent Conquests and Empires

Space would forcefully submit itself to constant renegotiation in the aftermath of the Mongol assault dashing from one perspective of self to the other. It would become an urban atmosphere made up of a complex blend of multidimensional experiences. Apart from the ruinous fall of the city that certainly took its toll, destructive natural forces impacted it heavily from the inundations of the flooding Tigris to uncontrollable fires. As Philip Hitti explains, “sweeping waters from the river often left pools for germs to develop and added epidemics to the list” and the defunct capital then was under the dominion of the Ilkhanid realm.<sup>46</sup> Falling under the Mongol Empire and constituting present-day Iran, the political entity was the first to govern it in the wake of the cruelties that had taken place. Creative voices waxing elegiac grew to be “more and more commonplace with the passage of time, figuring in historiography...and in popular literature, *The Thousand and One Nights*” [47]. This sense of loss was the crux of the poetic sphere in the early years, still painfully fresh in imaginative minds and well before time would bend space into countless representations. The cherished abode was empty and so was the verse written in lamentation. What begins to develop is a new spatial understanding, the rhetorical significance found within the image of ruined urbanity. The Arabic topos signifying “...the encounter with the ruins, at last, triggers the memory of the lost beloved and the morning of the separation” and so the city holds the sanctity of a gentle lover [48]. Fully overcome by his fiery passions, the poet cannot help but weep over the absence of the loved one, the loss of whom stimulates a poetic outpouring. The space, in equal measure, feeds into and expresses in the disastrous state of its being the extent of the misfortune it has suffered. They come together in this instance in phenomenological interrelation. The moment of being in this individual space and time, of the experience of that ruin, has embedded within it that which is conducive to subject-object interaction. It undermines any weighted authority from the poet and offers a new aesthetic.

As everything is broken down, space transforms into a runescape and a maker of ruination in fact from which emerges an alternative concept of origination. Subject and object converge, destroyed matter is the cause of distress but also functions as the instrument through which poets comprehend and respond to circumstances. All the while, as destruction is seeping into spatial character, it puts on several faces as Baghdad moves from one dynasty to the next. On a July morning in 1401,

<sup>45</sup> Reuven Snir, “A Bird in a Falcon’s Grip,” in *Baghdad: The City in Verse*, ed. Sharmila Sen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 156.

<sup>46</sup> Philip Hitti, *Capital Cities of Arab Islam*, 1st ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1973), 106.

<sup>47</sup> Michael Cooperson, “Baghdad in Rhetoric and Narrative,” *Muqarnas* 13 (1996): 105. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1523254>.

<sup>48</sup> Miguel Vazquez, “Poetic Pilgrimages: From Baghdad to Andalucía, Abu Tammam’s La Anta Anta Wa-La Al-Diyaru Diyar,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 34, no. 1/2 (2003): 126. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4183479>.

the noose was tightening around the city as Timur, “self-proclaimed Sword Arm of the Faith...” and better known in the West as Tamerlane, continued his “pilgrimage of destruction” [49] by descending upon it “with troops countless like ants, moths and locusts...” effectively flattening it [50]. Not surprisingly, interest waned in the decades since as distinguished visitors in this era “who left a record of their experiences were few and far between” where it once was the ultimate destination [51]. The great Persian poet Abd Al-Rahman Jami visited it in the winter of 1472 and was filled with bitterness during the four months spent there.

Compounding the collapse of the physical space, he puts forward the absence of a spiritual essence, that society is without blessing for “although Baghdad was in the past / prosperous because of the Junayd’s blessing / now Baghdad has become Samarqand / because of the “Ubaydis, Baghdad would be in danger now” [52]. A ninth-century Persian mystic, Junayd was of the Sufi order leading a transition from asceticism to mysticism in the then-flourishing capital, a conversion “into something unthreatening” that would be his reconciliatory attempt, the lack thereof to Jami when he wrote these damning verses was all too apparent [53].

Whereas Junayd was the picture of sobriety, the city would spatially remain in a drunken state unsure of what it was or has depressingly become. The seat of the Islamic Empire, a beacon of religiosity, it was no more. The Sufi “might go so far...as to lose consciousness of himself” but inevitably returns to an altered consciousness of reality [54]. Baghdad, however, did not move past the first stage having lost its way and the deep-rooted traces of regicide would reassert themselves in public space. Scores would be settled out in the open. Baghdadis were divided along sectarian lines with Jami, who was wrongly accused of attacking the Shi’a population, complaining of the unpleasantness of their explosion of rage, “Baghdad was tossed to and fro in a storm of instability” [55]. As far as the specific rhythms of everyday life, the city was moving into an area of synthesis however antagonistic, Lefebvre representing it as “a directional shift” where the question was no longer how to escape it “but how to explore its potential.” Reality took on a surrealist aesthetic and society could not push past a set of “irreconcilable contradictions” though due to ritualized bloodletting, space is anything but dull and monotonous [56]. The everyday, where all disjointed activities of life came to pass, was by now scarred and bruised by many a foreign invasion and civil war to boot, necessitating not so much a revolution but a reimagining of everyday life. Existence was beset with the centrality of the real, auspicious moments of violence, that it did nothing if not develop the conditions of

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<sup>49</sup> Justin Marozzi, “This Pilgrimage of Destruction: The Mongol and Tatar Storm (1258-1401),” in *Baghdad: City of Peace, City of Blood*, ed. Stuart Proffitt (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 156.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>52</sup> Farah Shadchehr, “Abd Al-Rahman Jami: Naqshbandi Sufi, Persian Poet” (PhD diss., The Ohio State University, 2008), 77, [https://etd.ohiolink.edu/apexprod/rws\\_olink/r/1501/10?clear=10&p10\\_accession\\_num=osu1217869380](https://etd.ohiolink.edu/apexprod/rws_olink/r/1501/10?clear=10&p10_accession_num=osu1217869380).

<sup>53</sup> Christopher Melchert, “The Transition from Asceticism to Mysticism at the Middle of the Ninth Century C.E.,” *Studia Islamica* no. 83 (1996): 66. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1595736>.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>55</sup> Justin Marozzi, “Black Sheep, White Sheep (1401-1534),” in *Baghdad: City of Peace, City of Blood*, ed. Stuart Proffitt (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 173.

<sup>56</sup> Sara Nadal-Melsió, “Lessons in Surrealism: Relationality, Event, Encounter,” in *Space, Difference, Everyday Life: Reading Henri Lefebvre*, ed. Kanishka Goonewardena (New York: Routledge, 2008), 162.

human resilience.

Moreover, inhabitants had to contend with abstract control. But through their everyday practices, “an actual manifestation rather than a general notion” so that space is appropriated with individual desires, there can be a reclamation of social space, a regaining of some of the use value previously stripped [57]. They resist in their words and actions however the Lefebvrian prospect for some form of utopianism is impossible, complicated by interchangeably latent and manifest instability. With real and abstract power disfiguring space, no other option presents itself for the capital than to privilege “the collective over the psychological, time over space” and allow to enter into social existence a set of new relations that negotiates its identity through a hostile environment [58]. By the start of the sixteenth century, the Turkoman tribal confederation of Aq Qoyunlu was “embroiled in civil war” and finally overtaken by the Safavid Empire having ruled since 1469, “the White Sheep dynasty was tearing itself apart” [59]. Persian influence on account of “shared religious and cultural affinities” was present yet indirect over the centuries until the reemergence of Persia “as an independent regional empire under the Safavid dynasty.” Baghdad in 1508, and all of the current Iraqi state in fact, “became the battlefield for intermittent wars between the Ottomans and the Persians” and this geopolitical reality deepened the spatial crisis undoubtedly, its marked confusion. [60]

It was the incentive for Safavid policy uniting the general public around militaristic objectives while little effort was made to ease tensions. Though twenty years or so passed without any major disturbance, the empire planted into the urban form denigration of the Sunni other that was reciprocated and, more broadly, a socially engineered othering process. Quite literally contributing to the boiling over of spatial anxieties, it was an old bitterness between the sects that would now draw lines in the sand as it were zoning the city and creating territorial demarcations. Iraqi historian Abbas Al-Azzawi recounts how the victorious Shah Ismail I made no secret of his Shi'i allegiance, “it is said what he did to Abu Hanifa's shrine, and violating the sanctity of Muslim cemeteries and shrines led to even more hate...” [61]. Poetic expression scarcely lifts its head at this time of troubles and rapid change. This is noted by Marozzi who recognizes the significance of the arrival of German physician and botanist Leonhard Rauwolff amongst other European explorers “returning with a series of reports that are particularly valuable in light of the declining number of other sources from this era” and even Snir alluded to this in his compilation of Baghdadi poems [62]. Notably, there are “many gaps” such that the publication “contains no poems

<sup>57</sup> Celine Jeanne, “Comparing the Right to the City Concepts of Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey,” University of Oxford, March 8, 2016, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317044472\\_Comparing\\_the\\_Right\\_to\\_the\\_City\\_Concepts\\_of\\_Henri\\_Lefebvre\\_and\\_David\\_Harvey](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317044472_Comparing_the_Right_to_the_City_Concepts_of_Henri_Lefebvre_and_David_Harvey).

<sup>58</sup> Sara Nadal-Melsió, “Lessons in Surrealism: Relationality, Event, Encounter,” in *Space, Difference, Everyday Life: Reading Henri Lefebvre*, ed. Kanishka Goonewardena (New York: Routledge, 2008), 162.

<sup>59</sup> Justin Marozzi, “Black Sheep, White Sheep (1401-1534),” in *Baghdad: City of Peace, City of Blood*, ed. Stuart Proffitt (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 173.

<sup>60</sup> Efraim Karsh, “Geopolitical Determinism: The Origins of the Iran-Iraq War,” *Middle East Journal* 44, no. 2 (1990): 257. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4328101>.

<sup>61</sup> Amjad Al-Mahawily, “The Safavid Dynasty 1501-1736 in the Annual Blogger of Abbas Al-Azzawi,” *Al-Qadisiyah Journal for Humanities Sciences* 23, no. 1 (2020): 178. <http://qu.edu.iq/journalart/index.php/QJHS/article/view/199>.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

written between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries” attributable to this period of pause [63]. There was certainly some poetic activity however meager but it would not compare to the output of the past and the revival to come. It is as glaringly silent as the passive city not to witness some measure of steadiness, albeit under a conquering power, until the coming rise of the Ottoman Turks. Many victors had shaped and reshaped it, bringing in all manner of people and their customs in tow, so that it entered into what would be the next five hundred years a place of great diversity. But the capture of the capital was nothing more than part of a larger socioeconomic game as the Ottomans sought to solidify their control of the entire region.

#### 1.4. The Magnificent Suleiman and the Declining Vilayet

Almost overnight, Baghdad fell out of the hands of the Persian Empire and into the Ottoman orbit with poetry experiencing somewhat of a resurgence. A constellation of poets wrote verses in praise of Suleiman the Magnificent and of the most well-known was Mahammad bin Suleyman Fuzuli, a Karbala-born Azerbaijani poet, who mastered the Arabic language along with his native Azerbaijani and Persian. After an introduction where he describes the city, he prays that “may God immortalize a sultan who watered the land of Iraq / when it was forced to send clouds like seas / if not for him, we would not have walked to the place of pleasure / if not for him, we would not have slept on the promise of stability.” A lyrical poet through and through, he practically sang the idiosyncrasies of Baghdadi society in his lines expressing pain for its ills. He lived “with this sensitivity full of patriotism and his sufferings were mixed in with those of the people” he encountered daily [64]. Familiarity and attachment, as far as Tuan is concerned within the context of the topophilia, relies upon an “awareness of the past” with “patriotic rhetoric” serving to stress the roots of a people [65]. Perception of space assumes a romantic air in his mind and was a form of escapism through which there can be a love of place. There had to be a harkening back so that he and others like him may move forward. Spatial reality was yet one of conquest but an element of it in this sense was conceived. Taken without resistance, Baghdadis predicted solace for their home in the inclusionary actions of the sultan who wanted to prove his moniker.

Fuzuli grew up “suffering from the chaos that pervaded society raging with contradictions and conflicts” so clinging to the sultan constituted a great hope for a space of greater tolerance and so excitable was he that his verses foresaw the betterment of the city [66]. The not too distant past inspired fear in Shi., a circles “yet Suleyman appeared determined to propitiate his subjects, Shia and Sunni alike” [67]. Some truth can be gleaned in his impartiality as he made religious

<sup>63</sup> Joseph Braude, “Baghdad – A City in Verse,” *Majalla*, March 17, 2017, <https://eng.majalla.com/node/38996/baghdad-%E2%80%94-a-city-in-verse#>.

<sup>64</sup> Ahmed Al-Toma, “The Knowledgeable Turkoman Iraqi Poet Fuzuli Al-Baghdadi,” *Safavid Personalities*, <https://www.mesopot.com/mesopot/old/adad9/34.htm>.

<sup>65</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, “Topophilia and Environment,” in *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values*, ed. John Jackson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 99.

<sup>66</sup> Ahmed Al-Toma, “The Knowledgeable Turkoman Iraqi Poet Fuzuli Al-Baghdadi,” *Safavid Personalities*, <https://www.mesopot.com/mesopot/old/adad9/34.htm>; for further information on the life of the poet Mahammad bin Suleyman Fuzuli, see the referenced web page and page 251 in the second volume of *History of Arabic Literature in Iraq* by Abbas Al-Azzawi where an entry on the poet can be read.

<sup>67</sup> Justin Marozzi, “Black Sheep, White Sheep (1401-1534),” in *Baghdad: City of Peace, City of Blood*, ed. Stuart Proffitt (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 178.

pilgrimages to Shi,i shrines here and restored Sunni tombs there. It was no longer implausible to imagine a tolerant place as it was made into an actuality. Though the impression of difference persists, a seal of identity for the Baghdadi space, not to be perceived in local poetries until the seventeenth century. A declining number of sources from the 1534 Ottoman takeover mysteriously marks this era, information remaining “shadowy due to the later destruction of city records, so much so that the precise succession of the Turkish pashas who held sway here is not known” [68]. Some voices penetrate this darkness and memorialize the time nonetheless, interestingly enough Fazli the son of Fuzuli being one of them. As the city crossed the threshold into the growing realm of the empire, the onset of religious acceptance and a political framework in support of this dictum confronted antithetical particularities. In response to Murad III ordering the Jews to don red headgear, the late sixteenth-century poet composed an “impertinent verse for the occasion, making a verbal play on the red headgear imposed on the Jews and the distinctive crimson headwear worn by the Qizilbash” who were a Turkoman Shi,i militant group [69]. There is a rapidity of spatial confusion registered between the imperial polity and the faraway administrative center. As time went on, physical distance would negate empty reconciliatory efforts as they are without merit and the poet is content with the image of a confused cityscape.

Though enamored with the character of the sultan and his pacifying initiatives, the poets of Baghdad would soon awaken from their daze as this same great peacemaker single handedly dragged everyday life deeper into a space of fanaticism. The confusion of old had never left the Iraqi psyche and in time would be solidified under Ottoman dominion. Saleh Abdallat makes clear that in early 1570, “Suleiman ordered the execution of the religious scholars who took stipends from Shah Tashmasp for reciting the Quran in the holy shrine cities to the family members of the Safavid monarchy. He also dictated the arrest of the Shia individuals who were in oath of allegiance with the Shah ” thus generating a sectarianization of space [70]. The Shi,,a community would not be denied its school of thought and jurisprudence so they would adamantly formulate their social space as Lefebvre would deduce. It is fragmented yet within each built environment is a sense of the whole because in their demarcated zones is “a materialization of social being.” Open animosity led to a spatiality of closed off realities where permittance of entry sadly relied upon the content of that social being, where these spaces took on “...fetishized and autonomous characteristics of things” and so disparity was produced and reproduced [71]. Here begins the spatialization of ethno religious identity. Two seventeenth-century authors, Şeyhoğlu and Evliya Çelebi, jointly write that “Baghdad is caught between two tribes: one is that of the shah of “Ajam; the other is of the sultan of Rum...when the “Ajam comes to Baghdad he says, heretic and Sunni! And when the Rum comes to Baghdad he says, Shi“ite and infidel!” Çelebi in addition, who had traveled to the city, remarks that it is “like a person caught in a whirlwind” [72]. The Arabic

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>69</sup> Melis Taner, “Introduction,” in *Caught in a Whirlwind: A Cultural History of Ottoman Baghdad as Reflected in Its Illustrated Manuscripts*, eds. Lale Uluç and Serpil Bağcı (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 1.

<sup>70</sup> Saleh Abdallat, “The Role of Tribalism and Sectarianism in Defining the Iraqi National Identity” (Master’s thesis, Harvard University, 2020), 12, <https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/37365053/ABDALLAT-DOCUMENT-2020.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>72</sup> Melis Taner, “Introduction,” in *Caught in a Whirlwind: A Cultural History of Ottoman Baghdad as Reflected in Its*

language, and works of poetry along with it, would necessarily decline during this period suggestive of the state of the capital just as much as any poetic verse would illustrate it. There was widespread “misuse of language in literature and poetry, due to the enforcement of the Turkish language” widening the gap between colloquial slang and pure Arabic. Due to increased instability, a number of writings were lost and it also resulted in “a confusion of the identity of their writers” [73]. Much like the silenced and stumped poet, the meaning of space in the confused city was that of meaninglessness due to endless troubles barring it from seeking out a character of its own.

With the eighteenth century comes an image of “integral beauty” in the city of Baghdad though it is “one of the ignored urban themes in conventional historiography” and domes in particular are an object of admiration. Their interpretation “goes beyond the limits of the physical form” intermingled with the sociality around them making these structures a source of dynamism.<sup>74</sup> There was stability in the first half of this era but Baghdadis knew it to be “an alien condition” not preventing the 1733 siege at the hands of Iranian ruler Nadir Shah who was later assassinated in a rebellion [75]. Once more, space is mired in the consistency of the inconsistent and recognizable in the poetry of the time is its change of tone firmly lambasting a place that has invaded the intimate poetics of creation. The mind of the poet, like that of Abdulghani Al-Jamil who lived and worked in the latter part of the century, cannot conjure “escapades of imagination” to withdraw from the cruelty of the real [76]. He writes in anger of how “passing my eyes over Iraq, all I notice / among people is their hatred and enmity / they are nice to strangers, cruel / toward one another, pretending all is fine.” With hate stewing inside of him, he asks “why stay in a city / where we are treated like asses? / why not move to another place / to be honored and comforted?” [77]. The dialectics of inside and outside, that Bachelardian thought sees as forming synergistic division, no longer exists as the poetic voice has been denied a protected space. As the city as object is in or out, so too is the poet in this reformulation of a poetics of ruination. Boundaries are blurred and the aesthetic experience affects the subject too because the restless energy of restless words, belonging to Al-Jamil and others, have already been polluted with external danger. There is an inner disturbance of being matching in its volatility and brashness, the nothingness of space that is anything but a clear-cut entity.

The metaphysical anthropology of Ottoman Baghdad increasingly lent itself to a symmetry combining the public and private and the poet, himself a careful observer laboring through a lived experience of insecurity, lives out the qualifying labels attached to both. Space in this exchange is less reciprocity and more linearity. The image ceases to be one of a utopian alternative but that of a lifeless earthly reality so that the city that once inspired the poetic imagination that may

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*Illustrated Manuscripts*, eds. Lale Uluç and Serpil Bağcı (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 2.

<sup>73</sup> Iman Al-Attar, “Textual Representations of the Socio-Urban History of Baghdad: Critical Approaches to the Historiography of Baghdad in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries” (PhD diss., University of Tasmania, 2014), 86, <https://eprints.utas.edu.au/18555/2/Whole-attar-thesis.pdf>.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>75</sup> Justin Marozzi, “Plagues, Pashas and Mamluks (1639-1831),” in *Baghdad: City of Peace, City of Blood*, ed. Stuart Proffitt (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 214.

<sup>76</sup> Gaston Bachelard, “The Dialectics of Outside and Inside,” in *The Poetics of Space*, ed. Eugène Minkowski (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 215.

<sup>77</sup> Reuven Snir, “Inner Storm,” in *Baghdad: The City in Verse*, ed. Sharmila Sen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 167.



offer an escape immersed itself in a poetics of destruction. Mid-nineteenth century poet Abd Al-Hamid Al-Shawi speaks the elegiac language of a nuance of being with its feet firmly on the ground taking in and never elevated above this spatiality of devastation. While in Najd, “I remember Baghdad neither because I love her / nor because of the friendship of her denizens” thus validating indifference as an answer to the question around his emotionality or lack thereof. It was after all the case for him that “in Baghdad, we encountered only frigidity / and injustice – no humans were there” [78]. To Jamil Sidqi Al-Zahawi, prominent poet and philosopher, everyday life in the capital is paradise lost and like the demolished edifice appearing unironically out in the open as if to enforce its presence as new-fangled normalcy, he addresses the matter with candor. Not unlike a prisoner, “in Baghdad, I was never at peace / in Baghdad, I was never happy / singing to others from behind bars / surviving off mere crumbs / I saw a life of humiliation spreading / people are happy or sad” awaiting precious freedom [79]. A dose of realism is injected in this evolving poetic sensibility deciding to forsake the romantic in favor of a greater understanding of the humanistic experience of space. Tuan will recognize the centeredness of the human being, his agency and consciousness in the expression of discomfort, lived emplacement of that discomfort as it is poetically rendered, “denigration, defacement, and destruction are means rather than ends.” Indeed, people are “often under moral obligation to belittle and decrease” and the written word is hence preceded by ruination in its creativity, encompassing love and hate in its execution [80].

Leading Ottoman statesman Midhat Pasha was made governor of the city in 1869 and he would introduce revolutionizing “ambitious reforms” architecturally speaking although his legacy is mixed at best. For one thing, “public buildings thrust up into the skyline...” and Baghdadis could also thank the modernizer for the “...first public park, the baladiya, municipal, park” whereas families who wanted green spaces before had to trek for a distance north of the Al-Adhamiyah neighborhood [81]. However, blunders still resulted from his “modernizing zeal” the most unfortunate being “...the demolition of Baghdad’s venerable city walls, the massive Abbasid defences that had withstood...so many foreign invasions and attacks over the centuries” [82]. He would fashion a contemporary image carrying it through to the twentieth century but these structural changes came too late for an already declining vilayet. This attempt was never extended into a social movement admitting Iraqis to positions of power, the Turks therefore continuing to act as the oppressor. Maruf Al-Rusafi, anti-imperialist, poet and educationalist, laments in 1907 as the empire is drawing to a close the overflowing of the Tigris, Euphrates and Dayali rivers exposing managerial incompetence since “your people have lost their minds / how can a nation be rightly guided by ignorant leaders? / the nation has lost its glory and fallen apart / you see a group, yet they are merely fragments” [83]. An unkempt irrigation system made this a frequent natural disaster, one of the many ignored crises of

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>80</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, “Language and the Making of Place: A Narrative-Descriptive Approach,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 81, no. 4 (1991): 693. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2563430>.

<sup>81</sup> Justin Marozzi, “Empires Collide (1831-1917),” in *Baghdad: City of Peace, City of Blood*, ed. Stuart Proffitt (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 260.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 261.

<sup>83</sup> Reuven Snir, “The Flood,” in *Baghdad: The City in Verse*, ed. Sharmila Sen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press,

urbanity during the period that ironically should have been concerned with reform. Before the First World War had the city brace itself for conflict, spatiality embraced an entirely new level of decay. A poetics of ruination nurtured over countless centuries was intriguingly mixed in with renewed physical degradation. Their combination lethal, it would precipitate the unraveling at the seams of the capital in the decades to come. Lefebvre theorizes that a spatial form such as this is “dominated by the worst of abstractions” which is that of power, the struggle of repetitive animosity and the permanence of its transient state [84]. Another reading plays into the spatial culture of absolutes. For on the other hand, this could be seen as the beginning of the immateriality of the urban though admittedly resulting from the decision to scrape at any semblance of potentiality within ruin. Nevertheless this importantly does not limit itself to man as a vessel for such possibilities. As the decades rolled on, the ultimate question was one of the chance to extract the physical from these worst of abstractions. What the city physically engenders when great loss has swept it is an atmosphere at the intersection of ruination and creation. It can perhaps be thought of as a purposeful drift into such territory that the creative mind can harness. Something coming out of nothing becomes a definite choice.

### 1.5. Scrambling Kingdom Begets Unruly Republic

Emerging out of a brutal war and with “an abject population” driven to the brink of starvation as well as “many of its buildings completely leveled” once more, the city crawled into the modern age a broken shell of its former self [85]. Space had naturally embraced in the aftermath of devastation a temporal status of liminality for the forever-compromised possibility of peace hung over Baghdad. It now only existed in transience. The poetic image similarly treats this strange new condition, flight from the real to the imaginary and back again, both redundancy and utter surprise as part of spatiality. The British mandate, though looking to exercise permanent control over the Iraqi expanse, was met with fervent nationalism and had to succumb to a revolutionary climate that long deemed it provisional. Changing attitudes paved the way towards rebel poetry such as that of blind poet Muhammad Mahdi Al-Basir who well-embodied this transformation. Once writing “in support of the British occupation” even going as far as collaborating with it in some form, he expressed “public repentance” and wished to atone “by sacrificing his life for the sake of his country.” He beseeches that “I wish only that you grant me the honor of death / a death that lets me rest at the side of your martyrs / for God’s sake, grant me the death you have chosen / Fatherland, or I am not fit to be one of your sons” establishing a dynamic whereby life continues in lieu of, because of a sacrificial death [86]. It is a noble thought in which he forges a perhaps novel idea not knowing what time would bring unifying life and death yet continuing to paradoxically sustain their difference. Soon enough, they would be one and the same and the teleology of a regressing city and country. The ultimate mode of transience would be the interchangeability of life and death evolving from this main concept.

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2013), 185.

<sup>84</sup> Henri Lefebvre, “Spatial Architectonics,” in *The Production of Space*, ed. Graham Eyre (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 208.

<sup>85</sup> Justin Marozzi, “A Very British Monarchy: Three Kings in Baghdad (1917-58),” in *Baghdad: City of Peace, City of Blood*, ed. Stuart Proffitt (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 283.

<sup>86</sup> Kevin M. Jones, “Rebel Poetry: Colonialism and the Poetry of Rebellion, 1914-1920,” in *The Dangers of Poetry: Culture, Politics, and Revolution in Iraq*, ed. Tim Roberts (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), 48.

Fueled by a desire for independence, socially constructed space longed for martyrdom and extrapolated from the fact of a changing place its eventual reclamation from colonial rule however this relatively controlled ephemerality would spiral out of control. It originated in the public realm noble in the intention to move from a chaotic state of oppression to complete sovereignty yet what began as a positive transience would devolve as the heritage of open spaces by and for the people was hijacked by greed-stricken groups. Localized power in this urban landscape was done away with fully, converting the experience of civic spatiality into a privatized display of state authority and ascribing a negative connotation to change. After the 14 July Revolution in 1958 which was preceded by intermittent unrest, Baghdad would enter a new social order that did not allow for space to orient itself towards the preservation of difference as a central value where “Iraqis found themselves subject to the command of individuals, more or less skilled at manipulating systems of patronage and coercion...” [87]. So ensues a challenge of epic proportions. Revolutionary poet Muhammad Mahdi Al-Jawahiri, whose life and work followed twentieth-century Iraq, may have represented a paradox according to Sami Zubaida as he “sometimes sought the patronage of kings, presidents and even feudal shaykhs.” However, these circumstantial episodes “always ended with angry outbursts against these patrons...then he would atone in the eyes of his revolutionary friends with renewed and even fiercer attacks on the authorities...” and his poem one year on from the revolution in 1959 captures this tendency [88]. He wrote in praise of it at the time but in retrospect criticized heavily warmongers debilitating the notion of peace calling “O drinker of blood peace is not a weakness / nor a sickness to distract oneself and boast / for it is faith, and capability / and honor, and trials, and a lesson” [89]. He witnessed how his initial hope for freedom would dissipate and urbanity, though an impossibility, was forced to appear as “a homogeneous and empty space” clashing with its phenomenological purpose as Bachelard sees it which is “a space thoroughly imbued with quantities...” [90]. Still the poetic image would not as it had done in the past, as is shown by Al-Jawahiri, cower and retreat into itself to access the diversity of a heterogeneous space since the poetic verse stood firmly in opposition.

In fact, Iraqi poetry as a conduit of confrontation was a moniker historically figuring into its structure but perhaps the poets of the early medieval period leading up to the fall of the Ottoman Empire saw nothing but the city as an aesthetic being. Even when violent interludes came to pass, they would symbolize pain behind this veil of aestheticization in rhythm, meter, rhyme, form and sound precisely because beauty remained. Yet somewhere in that formula though not as easily perceptible a resistive element was imbued. All that has happened from the First World War onwards in the Baghdadi space saw to it that the poetic verse would be shaken up. It is not just that “Iraqis view poetry as a potent vehicle of resistance and, historically, poets have occupied the space of dissidents...” but it now led the charge. In other words, resistance was quite

<sup>87</sup> Karol R. Sorby, “The Political Climate in Iraq in the Aftermath of the 1958 Revolution,” *Asian and African Studies* 14, no. 2 (2005): 169. [https://www.sav.sk/journals/uploads/021810115\\_Sorby.pdf](https://www.sav.sk/journals/uploads/021810115_Sorby.pdf).

<sup>88</sup> Sami Zubaida, “Al-Jawahiri: Between Patronage and Revolution,” *REMM* 117/118 (2007): 82. <https://journals.openedition.org/remmm/3301>.

<sup>89</sup> Muhammad Mahdi Al-Jawahiri, *Al-Jawahiri Collection of Poems: Third Volume*, 3rd ed. (Beirut: Dar Al-Awda, 1982), 225; the poetic verses from the poem “Chant of Peace” were translated from the Arabic.

<sup>90</sup> Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,” transcript of speech delivered at the Cercle D’Études Architecturales, Paris, FR, March 14, 1967, <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf>.

literally spelled out, the words reading like a solemn manifesto, much like Al-Jawahiri went about it rather than waxing romantic. They had to fight fire with fire. The matter-of-fact tone is a pivot in poetic circles in the stricken Baghdad for composing lines was no more an act of aesthetic remembrance “but a vital part of the struggle for the nation’s future” according to Dan Veach. Ultimately, it would throw itself into this “cultural function” though appreciation still remained for aesthetic excellence [91]. Poetic writing becomes synonymous with will, healing and the ability to overcome. What is more, there is no holding back going forward in the illustration of suffering, all of its gory details and perpetual grief. To be able to grapple with unadulterated pain translates into the poetic imagination necessarily putting down these words in the rawest of terms. It is obligatory to speak from the positionality of the real. So it has a responsibility in its literary defiance to shock, forsake heightened language as it were that would never meet the challenge of pushing back on everyday slaughter. Thus fixation was far more on the story being told largely one of great human urgency and unspeakable agony to the extent that every poem was a force of weaponized rage.

Political turbulence continued into the coming decade and the crisis into the very meaning of space would deepen, the power of the all-encompassing individual proclaiming himself the purveyor of public consciousness against actual heterogeneity. Spatial politics came down to ideological, incredibly divisive performativity and so the poetic word was employed to counter it, amplifying private anger against a very public spectacle. Reaching down into the innermost core of the city in the mind of the pained Al-Bayati, one would move past the imaginary and see through to the real and distress of lived experience that would come to the fore. Writing in 1969 just before the Baathist rise to dominance, he echoes a deep sorrow that would now become the frontage of the wounded space as “when the city undressed herself / I could see in her sad eyes / the shabbiness of leaders, thieves, and pawns / I saw in her eyes erected gallows / prisons, and incinerators / sadness, confusion, and smoke” [92]. Marozzi documents that when Baghdadis woke up on January 27 of that year, they turned into “...the radio announcer urging them to celebrate this holy day of joy and happiness by going down to the Liberation Square”, coming upon an extraordinary sight. They could see “nine Jewish corpses” hanging from “improvised scaffolds” and so this was their interpretation and use of open space [93]. People were meant to rejoice at the macabre in this twisted distortion of their beloved capital. Spatiality and the understanding around it would invariably split into a violent duality. The state had a perception of it equated with ritualized torture and humiliation and those like Al-Bayati mourned bloodshed and the spread of crime, erecting a monument of corpses in the center of urbanity and deeming it quite ordinary to behold.

Death began to rear its ugly countenance into everyday life gripping public space in recurrent physical and afterwards

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<sup>91</sup> Sarah Al-Saden, “Poetry as Resistance and Recovery: An Examination of Violence, Trauma, and Exile in the Poetry of Iraqis and American Veterans of the Iraq War” (Undergraduate honors thesis, University of Michigan, 2013), 11, [https://lsa.umich.edu/content/dam/english-assets/migrated/honors\\_files/ALSADEN%20Poetry%20as%20Resistance.pdf](https://lsa.umich.edu/content/dam/english-assets/migrated/honors_files/ALSADEN%20Poetry%20as%20Resistance.pdf).

<sup>92</sup> Reuven Snir, “The City,” in *Baghdad: The City in Verse*, ed. Sharmila Sen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 219.

<sup>93</sup> Justin Marozzi, “Coups, Communists and Baathists: The Mother of All Bloodshed (1958-),” in *Baghdad: City of Peace, City of Blood*, ed. Stuart Proffitt (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 337.

psychological torment that continues to this day. Adunis, acclaimed Syrian poet and essayist, confirms as much during a visit again in 1969 to attend the Arab Association of Writers conference and stepping into the urban scene of Baghdad is like whispering to ever-present death, its phenomenological inculcation into the urban ethos. Taking in the charged political atmosphere, he notices that “men turn their faces toward shapes / shapes without faces / shapes like holes on the page of space / men walk in the streets as if digging them / it seems to me / their steps have the forms of graves” [94]. As he enters into dialogue with the city, he makes of it a space that has lost all sense of an innate subjectivity in addition to where the tediousness of life and its minutiae is counted as death and carved into the faces of the living. City and inhabitant, subject and object are now emblematic of a new modernity paradoxically fronted by misery, ruin as a rhythmic ritual that had bled into the very steps people take on street and pavement. Confronting, lifeless and yet anesthetized, this becomes the crux of Baghdadi urbanity. The terror of place and its emerging as a cultural narrative of sorts passes space through a manic state but also rationalizes it when no other option exists. The landscape of fear as lived experience and shaping it into an aesthetic tradition takes hold, an arresting “phenomenology sketched out by Tuan” but it must be furthered into the realness of fear as an “activity, practice and process...” rather than an object, resulting in the topophobia as representational [95]. In such cases of which the Baghdadi space at the onset of Baathist power is one, “the ugliness of the place itself, the everyday challenges of surviving there, and the depression and anxiety of inhabitants, seem to reinforce one another in a vicious cycle” [96]. The seventies were an uncharacteristic period of progress able to focus on a public space reinforced with a national consciousness made up of “a voluntarily composite, even schizophrenic symbolism” European in style and rhetoric yet orientalist as it reintegrated the Iraqi past [97]. However, the reshaping of the city ran parallel to its eventual destruction as the end of that decade saw Saddam Hussein take on a prominent role within the government. He made no mistake of using open space to manifest his authoritarianism and his own people would pay the price dearly.

Sami Mahdi wrote in 1978 on the agony of a hopeless architectural rebirth, already dead and gone upon arrival, because public space is predicated on a pile of ruins, never a site of genuine engagement but of performative display. That is, the individual standing in for the collective. While the state installed an unforgiving totalitarianism, Baghdadis fell victim to spatial appropriation, “you left them between two illusions / and took refuge in silence / you never gave them any option but death / and waited for them to die” and they eventually would, opening their windows then quickly closing them in fear [98]. The poetic voice embraces a certain immediacy concomitant with a situation relegating the public sphere to a theater so

<sup>94</sup> Reuven Snir, “Poetry Presses Her Lips to Baghdad’s Breast (Baghdad 1969),” in *Baghdad: The City in Verse*, ed. Sharmila Sen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 227.

<sup>95</sup> John R. Gold and George Revill, “Exploring Landscapes of Fear: Marginality, Spectacle and Surveillance,” *Capital & Class* 27, no. 2 (2003): 34. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/247788562\\_Exploring\\_landscapes\\_of\\_fear\\_Marginality\\_spectacle\\_and\\_surveillance](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/247788562_Exploring_landscapes_of_fear_Marginality_spectacle_and_surveillance).

<sup>96</sup> Edward Relph, “Topophobia,” *Placeness, Place, Placelessness*, November 2, 2015, <https://www.placeness.com/topophobia/>.

<sup>97</sup> Caecilia Pieri, “Modernity and its Posts in Constructing an Arab Capital: Baghdad’s Urban Space and Architecture, Context and Questions,” *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 42, no. 1/2 (2014): 4. <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00941172/document>.

<sup>98</sup> Reuven Snir, “Ruins,” in *Baghdad: The City in Verse*, ed. Sharmila Sen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013),

it abandons the creative license to instruct choosing only to report with exasperation. Speaking with arresting realism replaces the tendency to wax quixotic. The reader will no longer gain any value from the poet who wails at the ghostly figure of a bygone Baghdad. It cannot keep up with a looming liminality, a space where the public element is only normatively present therefore the word itself loses all meaning. Marozzi details how from then on, as the war with Iran raged, the “post-modern reinvention of the city” came across as an “exercise in alienation” negating any real-world progress and underlined by regime propaganda [99]. His militaristic calamities would ultimately come back to tragically destroy whatever intricate projects had begun. Now the language must rise to the grim occasion and start to barter in graphic visualization like Abdulkader el-Janabi who personifies the city in 1986 with its foreskin removed and guts hanging. Like a shadow, it must grow accustomed to a reality of absence “and before falling asleep / they advised me not to dream of perfection / it’s lagging behind / they told me / decay is in the present / tomorrow is also decay / everything will fall apart / dust is master of all!” [100]. Baghdad was altered into, as part of this transformative phase and as Lefebvre argues, a place subjected to the ills of representation “rather than the possibility of free creative expression” [101]. Urbanity plays host to and becomes the means by and through which ruination as aesthetic fully survives and thrives.

The bombing of Baghdad proper during the Gulf War was the harsh physical accompaniment to this changing ethos marked by a poetics of destruction firmly cementing it. This would be the beginning of the ruin of the city in the modern age persisting to this day. With a historical and then phenomenological basis for urban decay already established, the typical poem shuddered at the seismic loss incurred and also saw it as all too familiar. Ruination in the post-1991 Baghdadi space initially shocked and awed but afterwards was eerily and disturbingly embraced into the spirit of the capital. It had for some time been destined to concurrently meet a tragic fate where architectural collapse was its illogical claim to life. Ronny Someck flirts with death and the unavoidable damage done to the self that exists in tandem with so-called being in the world, a particularity of Iraqi consciousness, drawing an adverse image for as he walks “along these bombed-out streets my baby carriage was pushed.” Space accommodates the antithetical, the all at once accepted truth of new life finding a place amongst the wreckage. Though being alive is tainted and never in its truest form. The city turned to black and “like the baby carriage we moved from the shelter / during the days of waiting for another war” and so the poetic imagination latches onto the trope of recurring death [102]. The language of poetry, if one were to heed Bachelard’s idea in following the poet to the extremity of his images, must and does in this wounded space speak with danger, becoming “the echo of heartache”

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<sup>99</sup> Justin Marozzi, “Coups, Communists and Baathists: The Mother of All Bloodshed (1958-),” in *Baghdad: City of Peace, City of Blood*, ed. Stuart Proffitt (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 343.

<sup>100</sup> Reuven Snir, “Bildung,” in *Baghdad: The City in Verse*, ed. Sharmila Sen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 282.

<sup>101</sup> Andrzej Zieleniec, “Lefebvre’s Politics of Space: Planning the Urban as Oeuvre,” *Urban Planning* 3, no. 3 (2018): 8. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325727588\\_Lefebvre%27s\\_Politics\\_of\\_Space\\_Planning\\_the\\_Urban\\_as\\_Oeuvre](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325727588_Lefebvre%27s_Politics_of_Space_Planning_the_Urban_as_Oeuvre).

<sup>102</sup> Reuven Snir, “Baghdad, February 1991,” in *Baghdad: The City in Verse*, ed. Sharmila Sen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 292.

punctuated with “a pure dramatic tonality” [103]. Words and silence alike have to allow ruins to speak. They not only naturalize a “sort of derangement” taking shape spatially but embody it [104]. Understanding Baghdad in this crippling decade, when Iraqis were “punished by economic sanctions” for state actions they had “little power to change” fueling a defeatist attitude, was to know that ruins evolved into a motif [105]. It would henceforth be carried around with the city dweller constituting his essence and perpetually stand for a former presence never to be restored.

### 1.6. A Forever War and a City Reckoning with Death in Life

Unable to counter an American-led coalition that invaded the country, Baghdad fell shortly after entering the new millennium in a botched operation condemned the world over and which has led to further infrastructural damage and needless death. The devastating image was now complete of a placeless space living out continual loss as part of everyday life. It has crossed an inconceivable threshold characterized by the visceral and absurd. In poetry, there is first the raw sentimentality around the conquering of the capital that is so catatonic a siege it is compared to Hulagu Khan, the modern invaders unmistakably Western Mongols. Egyptian poet Faruq Juwayda cries out in disbelief certain that the children of the grieved city wonder “for what crime they are being killed staggering on / splinters of hunger / they share death’s bread, then they bid farewell” [106]. Before Baghdadi spatiality devolved into nightmarish realism, the poetic voice saw it fit to resist in the name of humanity tugging at the heartstrings of the passing reader. Death was a casual acquaintance turned frequent visitor, a political consequence having lingered as far back as when the Baathists rose to prominence. It will imminently, as violence runs rampant and corpses tragically fill the streets, be transformed into a dismal poetics. Nada Shabout, Iraqi art historian, puts the cultural impact of the damage done in so many words describing how “the destruction following the 2003 invasion became the decisive rupture between Iraq’s progressive past, whose memories lingered throughout the years of sanctions, and its present, which does not even foresee a future” lodging itself into the urban spirit [107]. Having sprung from unreality, the aestheticization of this destruction pays no heed to reason and, in a Bachelardian manner, forms a connection between “opened awareness and natural phenomena” [108]. Space and its inhabitants alike find themselves having to negotiate this new negative esthetics with intent.

The forever war has introduced a distinct domestic understanding in relation to destruction which, as time goes on, must step around the warranted drawbacks of the everyday in a wounded space such that life is imagined because of and not in spite of it. This is crucial and suggestive of the self-directed attempts at healing within Baghdadi urbanity. Poetry would ultimately meet this phenomenological challenge and the soul of the city black with misery would be draped over many

<sup>103</sup> Gaston Bachelard, “The Dialectics of Outside and Inside,” in *The Poetics of Space*, ed. Eugène Minkowski (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 220.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>105</sup> Sarah Graham-Brown, “Intervention, Sovereignty and Responsibility,” *Middle East Report* no. 193 (1995): 3. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3013416>.

<sup>106</sup> Reuven Snir, “Baghdad, Don’t Be in Pain!,” in *Baghdad: The City in Verse*, ed. Sharmila Sen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 285.

<sup>107</sup> Isis Nusair, “The Cultural Costs of the 2003 US-Led Invasion of Iraq: A Conversation with Art Historian Nada Shabout,” *Feminist Studies* 39, no. 1 (2013): 120. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23719300>.

<sup>108</sup> Robert Allen Goff, “The New Science of Rêverie,” *The Christian Scholar* 47, no. 4 (1964): 348. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41177407>.

verses urging its people to accept this abnormality, to carry on living. Algerian poet Ahlam Mustaghanimi adopts an almost didactic tone writing nearly a decade after the descent into chaos in 2012 chastising those who departed early. No matter how far away they travel, “you have never been more full of life / than when you were a guest in the cities of death” but they are suffering just the same and take their bleeding selves with them. With it, they water the tree of humanity and all of their being is defined by that perpetual woundedness. The dweller of this contradictory place may try escaping in a dream but she asks him to hold firm, “ignore death! / be strong! / Baghdad’s date palms ask about you / they ask me about you” [109]. The date palm knows of the collective grief but perhaps in the passage of time and waiting is consolation and the post-war fulcrum of Iraqi identity that embraces its innate ruin. Baghdad is aware that it cannot wait for revelation but has to create it. Waiting in this sense in a space of war, virtually a non-place, where struggle is continually rebirthed is without value and no longer needed when one does not anticipate arrival. On its own, “the world of supermodernity...” with no connection to conflict props up a spatiotemporal framework that creates “spaces of waiting” which are in short “spatial expressions of power” [110]. The war-torn city on the other hand, the waiting subject, is beyond regulation and not structured for the perusal of peace. So the spaces of waiting chose not to hang in the balance. Their only hope for some sense of reclamation is to dance with the darkness and come out the other end with an absolutely assorted but fuller perception of self.

Hence Mosteghanemi calls those who have left Baghdad back to it, promising that there can still be life in a place that has been drowned out with various forms of death. The city can only move forward if it claims the idiosyncrasies of its situation, fashions a new urban character from its overstated spatial liminality. Architecture in the wounded space undergoes a phenomenological change, appearing as a place of in betweenness and what Victor Turner terms a territory of anti-structures fixing it in perpetuity in a multifaceted liminal state. The painted capital is further required, in this ethos of a fragmentary existence, to anticipate the post-2003 violence that has not relented tragically intervening and absorbing it into its make-up. With this fragility and life that is necessarily ambiguous, space is represented “as possessing nothing” and whatever is acquired is not afforded the security of remaining [111]. Nothing remains in postmodern Baghdadi spatiality with all sadly departing if not physically and psychologically. The war grows up with nameless newborns in this world of deprivation and when it is old enough to disrupt the innocence of childhood, Dunya Mikhail announces it as the rambunctious newcomer. He steps into their sanctuary of dreams and creates a new game, “the winner returns from the journey / alone / full of stories of the killed ones / of the flutters of wings passing / over their broken trees” [112]. They are being honed and ever so masterfully readied for fleeting lives. Nothing will be made their own but the agony of warfare which invariably stays, their loyal and capricious friend. It must deliver this message in complete irony to devastating

<sup>109</sup> Reuven Snir, “Baghdad’s Date Palms Apologize to You,” in *Baghdad: The City in Verse*, ed. Sharmila Sen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 296.

<sup>110</sup> Christoph Singer et al, “Introduction,” in *Timescapes of Waiting: Spaces of Stasis, Delay and Deferral*, eds. Yvonne Jende and Andreas Schwengel (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 2.

<sup>111</sup> Victor Turner, “Liminality and Communitas,” in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, ed. Edith Davis (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969), 359.

<sup>112</sup> Dunya Mikhail, *The Iraqi Nights*, 1st ed. (Damascus: Dar Afkar, 2013), 8.



effect. The city cannot resist its discursive reality so it is obliged to “transition into an urban revolution” in a Lefebvrian sense where the main obstacle “is to promote heterotopias...” to construct some meaning around them [113]. This is the case because despite inexorable suffering, “Baghdadis do not give up on their city” reformulating it anew in the image of lurching between mayhem on one end and progress on the other if there is a chance for it [114]. Such resilience commits it to renewal whatever shape it takes.

Indeed the city is today a space of life after death and its attitude has hardened to the sheer brutality of killing welcoming it in spite of itself into the urbanistic spirit. The reformulated energy that destruction brings cannot be beaten. So Baghdad has found it best to traverse and then appropriate these spatial contradictions, transition into an urban futurity that both visually and internally does not dispute the material conflicts left behind by the scourge of war. Evoking a corpse with no identity, Wisam Al-Ani composes verses that show this near lifeless being is denied by the city as it knocks on its door but it will not open. It could not ignore the soon-to-be dead body for long because time would standardize the presence of this new intrusive normal to the point that it found a place in Baghdadi spatiality. Initially acting out in resistance is expected but it must not forget that “I am O city of sorrows / tired just like your eyes / drenched with the smell of war / and gunpowder / and the sidr with which they wash the dead” so it is senseless to run from this fate [115]. They are one and the same, subject and object equally tormented and there are no more coffins to contain them. So space is carved out for public decompositions now as common as breathing in the surrounding air. Following Lefebvre, this is understood as a natural progression for the wounded space as oeuvre in its own right “as constituted by its inhabitants through ongoing acts of making places.” At a conceptual level, its woundedness takes charge proceeding to represent the complex spatialities of post-war life. It is no different than the dynamism of a city untouched by destruction for “as human and non-human lives move, interact, and engage with others through complex temporal and spatial pathways, the symbolic and material places they make also become part of their bodies-selves-environments” [116]. It has slipped into this unusual incarnation to give itself a chance at life even if laced with death. Perhaps this is why Sadiq Al-Sa’igh finds it amazing since “she was bombed / trampled underfoot / just as a broken watch is crushed / but it is as if she / were just born / she is still heard ticking under the rubble / measuring her heartbeats / stroking her lost limbs” [117]. In her depths there is anger and she is devastated yet dreams of olden times and something of a future run through her being.

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<sup>113</sup> Orlando Junior, “Urban Common Space, Heterotopia and the Right to the City: Reflections on the Ideas of Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey,” *Brazilian Journal of Urban Management* 6, no. 2 (2014): 155. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/269747181\\_Urban\\_common\\_space\\_heterotopia\\_and\\_the\\_right\\_to\\_the\\_city\\_Reflections\\_on\\_the\\_ideas\\_of\\_Henri\\_Lefebvre\\_and\\_David\\_Harvey](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/269747181_Urban_common_space_heterotopia_and_the_right_to_the_city_Reflections_on_the_ideas_of_Henri_Lefebvre_and_David_Harvey).

<sup>114</sup> Justin Marozzi, “Coups, Communists and Baathists: The Mother of All Bloodshed (1958-),” in *Baghdad: City of Peace, City of Blood*, ed. Stuart Proffitt (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 379.

<sup>115</sup> Wisam Al-Ani, “Corpse Without an Identity,” Madarat Thakafia, March 28, 2020, [https://www.madaratthakafia.com/2020/03/blog-post\\_96.html#.X7f5rFritPY](https://www.madaratthakafia.com/2020/03/blog-post_96.html#.X7f5rFritPY); the poetic verses were translated from the Arabic. In a 2020 article, the work of the poet is described as evocative of the forever “bleeding Iraqi wound” (Al-Rubaie).

<sup>116</sup> Karen E. Till, “Wounded Cities: Memory-Work and a Place-Based Ethics of Care,” *Political Geography* 31, no. 1 (2012): 259. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/251628988\\_Wounded\\_Cities\\_Memory-Work\\_and\\_a\\_Place-Based\\_Ethics\\_of\\_Care](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/251628988_Wounded_Cities_Memory-Work_and_a_Place-Based_Ethics_of_Care).

<sup>117</sup> Reuven Snir, “This is Baghdad (Excerpts),” in *Baghdad: The City in Verse*, ed. Sharmila Sen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 255.

The poet at present is privy to its otherworldly transformation and an active participant in getting across the contrasting duality that defines it, encapsulated in that finite moment of infinite repercussions when it is shaken by violence without losing balance. It achieves this impossible feat with each bombing and every needless death. The lie was at the beginning of the invasion which many an Iraqi has suffered through but time handed them the challenge of renegotiating the identity of their beloved city or watch it die away with tired expressions. Many rightly marvel at the will of the Baghdadi space to carry on however it is what the poetic phrase has always seen in advance of the layman and fell in love with. The capital fights and does so to its final breath. To Islamic scholar and poet Ahmed Al-Waeli, his home never waves the white flag even when brought to its knees writing with deep affection that “Baghdad whether your love worsened or regained its health / your face will remain wonderful and attractive / the attributes of a glorified sheikh that is crowned / and rich traits overflowing with youth” [118]. This is Baghdad somehow despite being overrun by ruin. It is a place of fractured memory and pain still able to recall and live another day with all of the broken pieces. Surely an outcome of centuries of tragic conflict, the post-intervention city nearly two decades following the war thirsts after a pluralistic reality. It wobbles along this road but chooses to persist in trying to realize this dream and the future generation has marched to the tune of a new kind of space. Much like the broken city, it has tired of fragmentation and come to represent the one and the many, a truly “amorphous identity” challenging the status quo [119]. Woundedness cuts across all of the spatial complexities that depict Baghdadi spatiality today. It brings them together and weaponizes the pain so that viewing it as a commonality connects hearts and minds with one another in the pursuit of a future to speak of.

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