

Political Modernism, Jabrā, and the Baghdad Modern Art Group

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**Abstract:** In his article "Political Modernism, Jabrā, and the Baghdad Art Group" Nathaniel Greenberg discusses how the art and literature of the late Palestinian novelist Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā challenged the normative perception of Arab modernism both within and outside the Middle East. Greenberg evaluates the influence of French existentialism on Jabrā's political vision of modernism and discusses the impact and nature of existentialism on Jabrā and on the Middle East. Educated in Europe, Jabrā returned to the Middle East in 1948 to live permanently in Baghdad where he was a member of the influential Baghdad Modern Art Group, established in 1951 under the direction of the preeminent Iraqi artist of the time, Jawād Selīm. While Jabrā became a leading proponent of the Baghdad Group and wrote about Selim's vision of modernism, in his own art he sought to move beyond the binary of Islam and the West, repetition and change, emulation and innovation. In politics, Jabrā attributed the loss of Palestine to an "outmoded tradition" and thus his novels and paintings depict individuals experimenting with action over reflection and self-determinism over communalism.

## Nathaniel Greenberg

### Political Modernism, Jabrā, and the Baghdad Modern Art Group

More than any other prose author of his generation, the Palestinian exile and Iraqi citizen Jabrā Ibrahīm Jabrā strove to integrate Western epistemologies into the creation of a local aesthetic that served both his political stance toward the Palestinian struggle for self-determination and the role of modernist art in the post-World War II era. The principal translator of Shakespeare, Faulkner, and Becket to Arabic, Jabrā's knowledge of Western literature did not define his understanding of the craft; rather, it helped him in expanding the horizon of experimentation in the Arabic literary form (see Neuwirth). Poet, painter, novelist, and critic, the diversity of his talents suggests a greater concern for the ideas implicit in art than the medium itself. His first two novels — *Passage in the Silent Night* (1955) and *Hunters in a Narrow Street* (1960), both written in English — reveal in the words of his former student and lifelong critic Issa J. Boullata, a "deep concern with the contemporary Arab city" ("Living" 216). In step with the visual avant-garde leanings of the leading figure of the Baghdad Modern Art Group, Jawād Selīm, Jabrā sought to confront the new kineticism of the post-war city with a similarly dynamic philosophy, existentialism. Jabrā believed the novel was the only form capable of capturing the "revolutionary fire" of the times and conversely igniting in the reader the kind of radical "immanence" that was necessary to rattle the quiescence of traditionalism that in his eyes had allowed for the loss of Palestine (Jabrā, "Jabrā" 54). The uniqueness of Jabrā's art derived from a preoccupation with acts of spontaneity, self awareness through internal division, and a form of activism based not on alliance building or political posturing but a commitment to existential and temporal affectivity. The philosophy behind his novels developed first in his paintings. As in a blueprint we find in these paintings the fundamentals of an acutely existentialist eye. However, his art and the importance of the epistemology of European existentialism were always at risk of compromising the very subject-centered activism he purported. In examining several of his paintings, a work of criticism and his last two novels — *Bahth 'an Walīd Mas'ūd (In Search of Walid Masoud)* and *Yawmiyyat Sarab 'Affan (The Journals of Sarab Affan)* — I discuss the roots and political energy of his artistic projects: its limitations and ultimately its disappearance as a mode of viable political aestheticism.

Jabrā was one of the earliest Palestinian intellectuals to write on the experience of exile and the necessity and difficulty of fashioning an aesthetic to express the experience were apparent in his work by the early 1950s. In a 1979 essay Jabrā recalls meeting British historian Arnold Toynbee in Baghdad in 1949 and quotes him saying the Palestinian ordeal of exile seemed comparable "to the expulsion by the Turks of the Greek thinkers and artists from Byzantium in 1453," who went on "to spread throughout Europe and were a major factor in ending the European dark ages and bringing about the Renaissance" (Jabrā, "Palestinian" 85). Jabrā drew a similar comparison to the Jews, who, like Palestinian exiles, were "knowledge peddlers" traveling with no more than a memory of home and a commitment to the recovery of what had been lost ("Palestinian" 77). Although he evaded the desperation felt by many Palestinians who fled in 1948, he would never return to the land of his birth. Alienation from his personal past mirrored what he perceived as the alienation of the Arab people from their collective past. But unlike the rest of the Arab world the heritage he had lost was not a buried concept but a separate reality. Perhaps the result of an overwhelming intellectual desire to integrate the existential experience of exile into the explosion of ideas that had taken root in the post-War period, Jabrā's work assumed an expository, didactic quality that has obfuscated his reception at times, particularly in the West (see also Rashad Selim). A number of Arabic literary scholars and critics, most notably Roger Allen, have sought to explicate the didactic style of his work by tying it to an indigenous heritage, specifically *A Thousand and One Nights*. Allen, who has written more than any other non-Arab academic on Jabrā, points to his emphasis on the resemblances of his work to the ancient collection of oral tales, including his use of "multi-layering," "the fragmentation of time," and his "concern with the individual" (16). Yet Allen maintains a curiously uncritical approach. The links he identifies between Jabrā's work and *A Thousand and One Nights* may be said to be true of virtually all twentieth-century novelists. Moreover, Jabrā's willingness to locate the presence of ancient themes in his art

should not be interpreted as an objective reflection on his craft, but rather as a kind of "subjective antiquity," to quote Benedict Anderson, which is one of the basic purposes of the art itself (5).

The artist's gesture of "looking back," what Kenan Makiya has referred to as "*turath-as-art*" or "heritage-as-art" was connected to political posturing from its earliest manifestations in the Arab world (Makiya qtd. in al-Khalil 78). Tawfiq al-Hakīm's 1933 novel *'Awadat al-ruh (Return of the Spirit)* was the first major work to signal the aesthetic and political currency of the "heritage" gesture. The 1919 revolution depicted in the novel emerged from the same "emotions that built the pyramids" (Hakīm 183). It is little surprise that al-Hakīm imparted the most ardently nationalistic lines of the novel to a French archaeologist engaged in an argument with a British colonialist about the proclivity of the Egyptian people. Al-Hakīm wrote the novel in France at a time when both nationalism and the traditionalism of René Guénon were in full sway (Sedgwick 25). Locating the Pharaonism of his novel in the words of the Frenchman isolates and challenges the British colonist. The implications are ostensibly prejudicial, but the rationale behind al-Hakīm's intention would seem to be that where an Egyptian character might compromise the Pharaonic argument for nationalism with subjective bias, the Frenchman's Pharaonism leads to the defense of nationalism. In the Iraqi context, the emergence of heritage art in the 1950s was also linked to the struggle against colonialism, but it was the lifting of the British mandate in Palestine and the creation of the Israeli state that would define the true character of the movement. By 1949, the year the Prime Minister Nuri al-Sa'id proposed a population exchange of 100,000 Iraqi Jews for 100,000 Palestinian refugees (Eppel 91), Iraqi animosity toward its Jewish population was no longer linked to anti-British sentiments or anti-Zionism for that matter, but to pan-Arabism. The creation of Israel shifted the nationalist debate from a local struggle against British imperialism to a general and "positive" struggle for Arab unity that would find its greatest spokesman in Abdel Nasser (Khadduri 177). Jabrā played a key role in developing heritage art of the 1950s, but the thematic of the ancient past while useful to the pan-Arabist movement in the abstract, could not easily be applied to the local context in Palestine as there the question of the ancient past had been thoroughly interwoven into the foundational story of the Israeli state. The preponderance of the heritage movement and the limitations of its usefulness to the Palestinian struggle would ultimately define Jabrā's existentialism and indeed the caliber of his literary experiment.

Before addressing Jabrā's existentialism it is important to understand the atmosphere of the post-War II Iraqi art scene and in particular Jabrā's relationship to the Baghdad Modern Art Group which launched its first exhibition at the Museum of Ancient Costumes in 1951. The founder of the group, Jawād Selīm, was a key figure of the time and highly influential: "No single artist has had so much influence on art in Iraq," Jabrā wrote "an influence that has in time overflowed Iraq's borders to the rest of the Arab world" (Jabrā, *The Grass Roots* 18). When Iraq declared itself a republic following the 14 July revolution of 1958, Selim was commissioned by the new leader of the republic, Brigadier General 'Abd al-Karim Qasim, to create *Nasb al-Hurrayyah* ("Monument of Liberty") which was to be placed in the center of the city, overlooking Liberation Square (Baram 432). Completed in 1961, the Monument was, according to Jabrā, "the final result of twenty years of study, experimentation and heart-searching" (*The Grass Roots* 22).

Referencing Assyrian and Babylonian wall-reliefs, the bronze figures of the Monument against the fifty meters by ten meters travertine slab raised six meters off the ground told a "visual narrative," read right to left, of the 1958 revolution (al-Khalil 83). The breaking apart and isolation of the figures of the narrative reflected a motif Selim had developed in his earlier paintings. In the eyes of one critic in 1953, the blank spaces he used to isolate the figures of his paintings gave his work a "kinetic" effect (al-Hidari 78), a quality Selim himself still sought to imbibe in his work in the late 1950s (Jabrā, *Jawād* 189). His intention was to address the heterogeneity of the socio-political landscape with an equally complex mode of expression (Jabrā, *Jawād* 189). And while his work underwent several different phases throughout the 1950s, it should be noted that early on the impulse behind his art was to externalize its meaning in order to contribute, in however academic a fashion, to a broader reassertion of "national self-esteem" (al-Khamis 24). The Group's reference in its manifesto to the fall of the Abbasid caliphate following the Mongol invasion of Baghdad in 1258 should be understood less as an aesthetic or traditionalistic gesture than a political and thoroughly academic response to the perceived absence of "a distinctive Iraqi identity" (al-Khamis 24). The Group drew on a broad array of scholar-

ship, but perhaps no other literary work was more important to the philosophy of the modernists than Jabrā's 1958 translation of James Frazer's *Golden Bough: Adonis, Attis, Osiris; studies in the History of Oriental Religion* (see DeYoung 73, 282).

Jabrā had originally titled his translation *Adūnis: dirāsah fīal-asātīr wa-al-adyān al-sharqīyah al-qadīmah* (Adonis: Studies in the Myths and Religions of the Ancient Orient), but later changed it to *Adūnis aw Tammūz: dirāsah fīal-asātīr wa-al-adyān al-sharqīyah al-qadīmah*. Although Frazer uses the names Tammuz and Adonis interchangeably — it was a god of "many names" — Jabrā's altered title highlights the earlier Mesopotamian character of the deity Tammuz over the Semitic and later Greek appropriation of the name. His translation, which he had already completed by 1946 "had an unexpectedly profound effect upon the Arab poets of that day" (Boullata, "Living" 215). T.S. Eliot had signaled the importance of Frazer's book to his *The Wasteland* and thus the book's influence on European modernist did not go unnoticed by Arab intellectuals. According to Tunisian scholar Abdelaziz Kacem the feeling was that if "Eliot borrowed our myths, why not us?" (189). The leading Iraqi poet of the day, Badr Shakir Sayyab who discovered Frazer's work through his friendship with Jabrā, read Frazer's text along with Jabrā as he translated it. Its impact on the poet was considerable: "After 1954 ... all the lines of his poetry meet in the myth of Tammuz and branch out from there" (DeYoung 73). It is possible that Jabrā's interest in Frazer's work was guided primarily by an aesthetic interest in a particularly Nietzschean trend of European modernism, i.e., the aspiration of modern art to make "contact with the archaic" (Habermas 87). However, the formal appearance of his translation in 1958 — the year in which the military coup of 14 July, the 14th of *Tammuz*, toppled the Hashemite leadership in Baghdad — would suggest a close parallel if not direct relationship between the work and the cultural façade of the revolutionary government. Along with Qasim's commissioning of Selim's "Monument" the Tammuz revolution signaled for the Baghdad Modern Art Group both its full assimilation into the ideological machinery of nationalism and in many ways its disappearance.

Samir al-Khalil, an Iraqi dissident who wrote *Republic of Fear* under his real name Kenan Makiya, traces the emergence of the heritage ideology into Ba'thist aestheticism in his *The Monument: Art, Vulgarity and Responsibility in Iraq*. His primary thesis is that under the auspice of the Ba'thists who came to power upon the assassination of Qasim in 1963, the "*turath-as-art*" movement of the cultural renaissance surrounding the Baghdad Modern Art Group devolved into a kind of "*turath-as-kitsch*," becoming in the process a literary and mimetic aesthetic that severed from modernism its avant-garde character in favor of pure historical resurrectionism. The "Victory Arch," conceived and commissioned in 1985 by Saddam Hussein, years before the Iran-Iraq war was over, epitomized this phenomenon for Makiya. The giant monument of two clashing sabers held by opposing right hands modeled on Saddam's own arm and surrounded by 5,000 helmets of dead Iranian soldiers is meant to link the Iran-Iraq war to "the defeat of the Persian Sassanian empire by the invading Arab-Muslim army in the battle of Qadisiyya in AD 637 a defeat which paved the way for the Islamicization of Iran" (al-Khalil 2, 10). Hardly subtle in its message, the gesture of referencing the past was not unusual. The communicability and efficacy of *turath* had been well tested in the popular reception of Selim's "Monument of Liberty" and elsewhere before becoming an institutional form of cultural hegemony (Baram 433). In *Le Nationalisme arabe* Oliver Carré writes that "Ba'thist ideologues saw the nation before all else as a cultural reality (54)". Inspired by nineteenth-century German nationalism — Carré points to the influence of Fichte and Nietzsche on Zaki Arsouzi and Michel Aflaq — Ba'athist ideologues envisioned culture as a monolithic expression of a perceived common heritage defined less by religion than "language and history" (54), less by the complex puzzle of different peoples that was Iraq than the singular cause of Arabness. The implications of a culture based nationalism despite the adherence of many proved equally devastating for artists as for cultural minorities in Iraq. The survival of Selim's "Monument of Liberty," according Makiya, rested solely on the fact that the Ba'thist maintained that their "notion of freedom" was a direct extension of the 14 July revolution (al-Khalil 82; Baram 438). And while it is impossible to gauge precisely the degree of Jabrā's loyalty to the Ba'athist regime, there is little indication that he was at all opposed to Hussein's rise to power.

In 1977, the year two thousand people were arrested and eight Shi'i 'ulama' executed at a demonstration in Karbala (Makiya 316), Jabrā was working for the Ministry of Culture and Information in Baghdad (Jabrā, *Arā* 98). No evidence suggests that he was complicit with the malicious actions of the government, but to be certain he was deeply mired in Baghdadi society. Except for the Zionists, his work offers little critique of the politics of the day. Although it is unlikely he could have done otherwise without incurring persecution, his novels simply ignored the expulsion of Jews or Shi'is, the



murder of Kurds, or the decimation of private liberties. When Hussein took power in 1979, Jabrā was of the opinion that he merited the cult of personality surrounding him. According to Lance Gay, Jabrā saw in Hussein's reconstruction of the ancient city of Babylon at the height of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988 the behavior of a great ruler who, like Nebuchadnezzar the Mesopotamian king and builder of ancient Babylon, "erupted out of this very soil" ("Babylon" 1). When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, Jabrā described it as the culmination of a "rising political consciousness" ("Babylon" 1). Like many others in the Arab world he believed the Kuwaiti border was just one of many "political boundaries" drawn by Western powers at the expense of the greater Arab nation. Recorded by Western reporters, Jabrā's sentiments resemble eerily the language of the Ba'athist constitution and Hussein's own referencing to himself as Nebuchadnezzar, a figure celebrated as "he conquered the Jews and captured Jerusalem, something modern Arabs haven't been able to do" (Gay, "Babylon" 1). Still, Jabrā's complacency toward the regime and his apparent adherence to Arab nationalism should be evaluated with a certain degree of skepticism. In 1979, the year of the Iranian revolution and the same time Hussein declared in a speech in Baghdad that he was a "'descendant of 'Ali'" (al-Khalil 13), Jabrā published in English the essay "The Palestinian Exile as Writer" in which he writes of the 1950s that "in spite of all the apparent instability, (Baghdad society) seemed to offer the prospect of a people vigorously pushing their intellectual, economic and social frontiers toward a kind of health and power which, however long it might take, would bring about the regeneration of the nation" (85). Like many intellectuals, his affinity for the Ba'athists was expressive of the desire for a pro-active, secular leadership capable of confronting the Israelis.

Although by the end of his career he began to alter his descriptions of life in Baghdad, such a tone of nostalgic optimism prevailed throughout his work. What in the 1950s and 1960s was an imaginary world of leafy streets, thriving restaurants, and private salons became by the early 1990s, in his last novel *The Journals of Sarab Affan*, a place of walled existences, office buildings, sullen ex-ministers in dark trench coats, and dimly lit islands of refuge inside the lobby bar of the Holiday Inn. But even this shadowy atmosphere of which he gives only glimpses could be averted, as in *The Journals of Sarab Affan*, by simply traveling to Paris. The Parisian gesture should not go unnoticed as it conveys both the fundamental orientation and the character of his existentialism. Closely linked to its French epistemology, but hopelessly peripheral to the Parisian experience, Jabrā's existentialism would remain torn between its usefulness as a modernist approach to the post-war challenges facing the Middle East, particularly the crisis in Palestine, and the Europeanisms of the philosophy. Jabrā came close to what Samir Amin describes in *Eurocentrism* as the required "abandonment of metaphysics" in the modernist impasse (133). Yet the tendency of situating Paris as the intellectual complement to action in Palestine risked exposing Jabrā's existentialism to an essentialist dichotomy that allows for the kind of fundamentalism that Amin suggests would later be filled by a thinker like Sayyid Qutb (132-35). Jabrā recognized the danger of casting his philosophy in diametrical opposition to any perceived traditionalist discourse, be it that of heritage and nationalism, or religion, but made no move to avoid it by completely turning away from metaphysics based identity projects, or abandoning interest in the dichotomy of modernity and tradition altogether. Rather, his existentialism emerged from this tension that would color his novels throughout.

Prior to Jabrā's mature novels *The Grass Roots of Iraqi Art* (1983), written originally in English, is one of the few non-fictional examples that allude to the principles of his existentialism. Considering the political atmosphere of the time, the general risk to artists and the institutional acceptance of heritage art it is no surprise that he chose in his survey of contemporary Iraqi art to focus on the prevalence and meaning of heritage themes. But there is another level at work in his treatment of the matter: evaluating each of the thirty-three artists in the book separately in short vignettes that focus on the struggling artist battling the abstraction of the concrete and the rendering concrete of emotions and ideologies, terms like "heart-searching," "quest," "search," "man in search of himself," "mystical quest" occur throughout giving the work a distinctly ontological tone. The artists in *The Grass Roots of Iraqi Art* appear gripped simultaneously by a search for history — "elegiac tones" — and a preoccupation with "the dilemmas of twentieth century man" as epitomized by the Palestinian fight for independence (13). The dualism of Iraqi art complemented what by 1983 had already become for Jabrā a principal literary aspiration: to synthesize the heritage gesture with the concrete. The importance of this dichotomy to his criticism in *The Grass Roots* perplexes Makiya. He asks why would Jabrā highlight such "sickly sweet, nostalgic and sentimental painting" like Kadhem Haider's renditions of the story of Hussein at Karbala, Fayek Hassan's iconic wild horses, or Mahood Ahmad's "The Struggling Leader Saddam Husain with the People" after having known the work of Jawād Selīm (see al-Khalil 95)? This critique is relevant, but the disparity between the language of Jabrā's criticism and the im-

ages themselves creates a sense of detachment that in retrospect emphasizes his preoccupation with the individual over the symbolism of the paintings. This is a gesture one finds equally in earlier European formations of existentialism.

The earliest French philosopher of existentialism was also the first to introduce Hegel to France during the inter-war period. Jean Wahl, who lived in exile as a Jew during World War II, described the essence of Hegelianism as an expression of an uncertain spirit that "wants to reassure (itself) by imagining (itself) as being swept along by a universal spirit" (*Vers* 29). The "unhappy conscience" of the Hegelian dialectician — a condition comparable to the "sick soul" that sparked the philosophy of William James (*Vers* 57), Kierkegaard's "dialectic" (*Vers* 45), and Gabriel Marcel's "metaphysical doubt" (*Vers* 188) — was at the core of a "vast movement 'toward the concrete'" (*Vers* 41). And it was this movement "vers le concret" that characterized early existentialism. Wahl noted that in *The Concept of Irony* Kierkegaard tried to highlight in his reading of Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* the latter's insistence on "the personality of Socrates" ("Hegel" 333). According to Wahl, Hegel's focus on the person of Socrates served to confirm for Kierkegaard the "importance of the subject, of subjective choice" ("Hegel" 333). Hegel, the same philosopher who sought to eliminate "any difference between the interior and the exterior," who "destroyed any ethico-religious consideration" established the logic of a concrete universal through a basic concern with the private, individual condition of man ("Hegel" 351). It was this preoccupation with individual existence and basic uncertainty that Wahl identified as the seminal characteristic of the "philosophers of existence" (*Short* 1).

In the postwar milieu of Iraq the use of *turath* images for explicitly political aims, be it the construction of a myth of origin by Ba'thist ideologues or the political aim of the reversal of the situation in Palestine, helped intensify the feeling among Arab intellectuals that Palestine had been lost because Arab governments "confronted a ruthless modern force with an outmoded tradition" (Jabrā, "Palestinian" 82). The atmosphere following 1948 "suited [Jabrā] perfectly" (Boullata, "Living" 215). The persistence of "outmoded tradition" in the face of Western modernity generated an ideological dialectic around which formed opposing artistic and intellectual camps. Two such examples in Iraq were the Société Primitive (S.P.) led by Fayak Hassan and the Baghdad Modern Art Group (Baram 432). While Jabrā was more closely aligned with the latter, it was the combination of both that stimulated his own personal movement toward the concrete. A refugee of the *nakba* (1948), he had already begun "to chide the Arabs for their inaction and for their insensitivity to human misery" (Boullata, "Living" 215). According to Boullata, Jabrā believed that "Arab tradition had to give way to individual talent gradually and incrementally and inexorably, until a new order of things prevailed" ("Living" 215). The aesthetics and politics of heritage, which was more pronounced with the S.P., did not go far enough when applied to the cause in Palestine. Although not a traditionalist aesthetic— heritage art was clearly a modern art form as well— the idea of celebrating a cultural heritage that had no exact geographical existence began to intensify for Jabrā the feeling that Palestine was merely a symbol for the construction of a greater Arab identity. Heritage art in the service of the Palestinian cause amounted to little more than "a golden map hanging on a golden chain adorning the throats of women in exile" as Mourid Barghouti wrote in his 1997 autobiography *I Saw Ramallah* (23). Arab existentialism as a longing for concrete existence, which found perhaps its finest articulation in Barghouti's book, developed first in the work of Jabrā and in direct response to the tendency of Arab intellectuals and political leaders to overlook existing reality on the ground in favor of a rhetoric that favored in virtually all instances the "glorious past" as "remedy" to the impoverished condition of the newly independent nations (Dawn 22).

In order to understand the aesthetic of Jabrā's existentialism it is important to examine the greater arc of his artistic career. Well before developing as a literary artist, Jabrā began as a painter. His paintings remain difficult to locate, but the few examples available reveal a great deal about his process as an artist and intellectual. "Al-nāfida" ("The Window") appeared in 1951, the year Jabrā described as his *annus mirabilis* (*Princesses* 64). The image contains one of the artist's crucial motifs of the time: contained in the woman's portrait are two forms of division, alluding to both an internal/temporal division between youth and old age and an aesthetic contrast between lightness and darkness, smoothness, and roughness. The tunnel-like effect of the composition, the title of the painting and the de-centering of the figure draw the viewer's gaze toward two adjacent windows. The juxtaposition of these two figures — a window and a woman — creates a metonymic effect. The division of the face may speak to the experience of exile, torn intellectual alliances, or the private knowledge of self-decadence. But the window expands the meaning of division to emphasize the phenomenological presence of light and dark, inside and outside. It is suggestive of a passageway and alongside the internal division of the figure, the movement of time. *Imrā wa tuful'ha* or "Woman with her Child" is

another example from the same period. Here the symbolism of the painting rests on an emotional gesture similar to that of "The Window." In the painting, the woman holds her child such that it appears less an organic creation than a kind of duplicate or simulation; an external manifestation of her internal sphere. Jabrā uses the same tone of color for both figures and only a thin veil separates the two. The child's posture mimics her own, his legs and knees spread outward. Held in front of her uterus the woman is almost displaying this connection and her upright posture and extended neck convey a sense of pride and elegance. Throughout his paintings the dual symbolism of internality versus externality helped to create a visual language for the conflicting temporal experiences of traditionalism and modernity which, as Boullata suggests, would become "the primary subject" of his literature ("Concept" 175). If we leap forward to Jabrā's most complex novel, the 1978 *In Search of Walid Masoud*, the raw symbolism of his paintings appears in the form of intimate confessions between close acquaintances, lovers, and friends. In the novel, Walid Masoud is a missing protagonist. His friends have gathered to reconstruct what they know about the man. They imagine he returned to Palestine to martyr himself. From a taped confession found after his disappearance the reader gains a sense of who he was and what he wanted: "By getting away from the life of contemplation that, so I'd been taught, was the only valid life of the spirit, I had, at last, fallen into the world of the flesh, the world of the senses, the world of time ... I came to realize that I'd now started the 'Great March' he (St. Augustine) spoke of somewhere; the Great March into time through time: my soul fell from 'Eternity' into the abyss of 'Time' when I allowed that deep concern about it to control me, so that I wanted to abandon the contemplation of what is continuous and makes me a part of God's eternity, in favor of a desire for my soul's experience in the world of time and sensual realities" (144).

To accept time is to accept as well its decadent effects. It is the marriage of two sides torn that characterizes the woman of the "The Window." To embrace the movement of time, the "Great March" of man which can only be described as modern aspiration is to expose oneself to the decaying mechanism of time and ultimately death, but also to love. This call to action does not entail a compromise of national or political objectives, but rather urges the reader to exit the sanctimonious and timeless sphere of traditionalist thought: "Falling into time is simply entry into the world of action" Walid exclaims (144). The novel embodies an idealized form of action, an ideal that emerged from a combination of Jabrā's interest in European literature and the cultural milieu of the time. In particular, "the early 1950s for the young literati of Baghdad" Jabrā wrote, "was the golden age of existentialism" (*Princesses* 83). French philosophy had "swept the universe of intellectuals with its magic fire" and it was no different for the Arab world (*Princesses* 74). When Denys Johnson Davies — a British translator — visited Baghdad, the phenomenon crystallized in his memory: "One thing that amazed him was the constant talk about existentialism" (*Princesses* 88). Conversing on the subject, Jabrā described an exercise that Denys had suggested: to write a poem with "very strange images, symbols, and language," translate it into English and read it to a group of friends, claiming it to be a newly discovered work of Sartre. In his autobiography he includes a piece of the fake poem: "The claws of night mangle / The streets' torn-off fragments / And the windows are bleeding / With eyes made of steel" (*Princesses* 89). The deception worked and Jabrā described the experience as a kind of artistic breakthrough: "That night, I deleted more than half of the fake poem. What remained of it was a truth that could not be ridiculed ... I entitled the resulting poem 'A Song for Mid-Century.' It was a middle-of-a-century love song, replete with man's state of being torn — physically, spiritually, historically" (*Princesses*'91). The idea of being torn, of division, consumed Jabrā's early work. Division captured for him a basic paradox of the human condition which the experience of exile, *ghurba*, served to exonerate. The meaning of exile is apparent in the faces of the two women featured in his 1955 painting *Al-'awda* ("The Return"). The face of one, a girl, is shaded away from the other two figures, while the woman's face in the center is shaded towards the cold façade of the male figure to her other side. It is possible that the image speaks to a generational divide as well as a cultural one. But the divide, as expressed by the young girl's face, has a yin and yang quality. The young girl who has altered her head dress to show her earrings and neck is perhaps breaking from her parents' values or returning to them. While interpretations will vary, the women in his paintings, like the women in his novels, provide the concrete symbolism for his modernist philosophy. Temporal, affective and oscillatory affiliations emerge from the suspension of values and the existential embrace of action. While the women in his paintings are the result of a certain a priori vision of division and crisis, the reverse would seem to be true in his novels. Here the primacy of sex as the arena for self-determination marginalizes the role of women to



that of "a body." Virtually every female character in his novels sleeps with at least one other person, which may also entail cheating on a husband or forcing the man to cheat on his wife. The objective for both the men and women in his novels is the "glorious madness of sex," a phrase that reappears throughout all of Jabrā's oeuvre and that serves in each instance to illuminate the author's philosophy of action over contemplation. His art and novels draw attention to the motivational qualities of existentialism and not unlike the philosophical novels of Sartre, Camus, or Bataille attempt to produce philosophy. The spirit of "al-janun al-'erosee" ("erotic madness") drive the narrative most explicitly in Jabrā's final novel, *The Journals of Sarab Affan*. The story follows a love starved Iraqi girl in her late twenties, Sarab, who through a series of journal entries imagines meeting the renowned novelist Nael Imram. Eventually realizing her desire, a love affair ensues. Jabrā exhausts a great deal of words on her naiveté and shapeliness and the "mysterious" attraction between the two. After six months she disappears: "I knew that Sarab's departure had to do with an Arab organization she'd been determined to join," Nael exclaims, "hoping that she might one day find herself ... waking up under an olive tree on a Jerusalem hill" (146). Like Walid Masoud, she has left to join the resistance in Palestine. Nael finds her years later, studying inside the library of the Pantheon in Paris enjoying an intellectual respite from her activities in Palestine. He asks her to return to Baghdad. She responds: "Do you want me to go back to compulsion, blindness, and this accursed individualism in everything, the affliction of all Arabs? I'm here in the heart of everything now, and living life the way I like" (185). Although sitting in a library, Paris is curiously the "heart" of life for Sarab. Jabrā substituted the typical association of a library with the mind in order to emphasize the character of Sarab's commitment in Palestine. While her work in the library is an activity of the "heart," her activism in Palestine stems not from emotional investment, but intellectual deduction. Nael understands the seeming contradictions of Sarab's position: living comfortably in Paris while lamenting the situation in Palestine. She, like Walid Masoud, is a kind of product of the elite world that Nael introduces her to. Although the novel is perhaps too brief, Sarab's catharsis as an admirer of literature to a committed reader and finally a "freedom fighter," delineates an often overlooked character type of postcolonial Arabic literature that is universal in essence. "Let us say that moral choice is like constructing a work of art," Sartre wrote (45). The evolution of Sarab's commitment mirrors precisely this relationship.

Impassioned and idealistic Sarab comes to represent the spirit of action "missing" from Arab society. Her devotion to the cause is suggestive of the Sartrean mantra "total commitment," but dismisses the predicative information that "there is no one particular situation or action that fully commits you, one way or the other" (Sartre 39): "Everything I'm doing pours into the Intifada," she tells him, "the Revolution of Stones" — Thawra al-hagāra — "the revolution that has baffled the world" (*Journals* 185). Her zeal is more complicated than it seems, however. Her name itself, Sarab, meaning "mirage," and Nael Imram's pursuit of her invokes the love drunk desert wanderings of the great jāhiliyya (pre-Islamic) poet Imru al-Qays (Egeiq interview). Sarab points this out herself: "Like the Arab poets, he (Nael) links love to *janun*, madness, and he combines them in the concept of *janan*, the mind in the philosophical sense" (*Journals* 115). Jabrā resuscitates the "mad poet" in the form of Nael Imram whose wanderings in *Sarab Affan* extend as far as Paris. While Sarab embodies the spirit of action, the writer embodies the spirit of the pursuer, of the possessed.

In their final conversation Sarab explains: "Can't you see, Nael, I've decided I would only face death with my full volition, when I'm still fully in control of my mental and physical faculties?" Again, facing death is not an emotional endeavor, but an intellectual one. Ever the wiser man he responds: "I wish the body were pure mental energy, unbounded, weightless... And thus *being* (*al-Baqā'*) and *nothingness* (*al-Finā'*) would become one" (*Journals* 187). "To be," she tells him, "is to be in our pain and struggles against death, against getting killed, as we *are* all the time ... To be inside a storm of thundering noises coming at you from every direction, noises that rise to a peak of violence then fall into a sudden silence of unconsciousness and death" (187; the italics are in the English translation of the text and may well have been part of the original manuscript). It is clear that Jabrā's conclusion as with previous novels hinders on the question of being. Sarab's bizarre wish to be in the "heart of the moment" "against death" and surrounded by an all encompassing noise, echoes the enigmatic last lines of Camus's *L'Étranger* in which Meursault exclaims that he hopes his execution will be greeted with cries of hate. If there is heroism to her cause it is that of the martyr; based not on existential com-

mitment but ideological conviction. The difference between existential and ideological activism would depend here on the extent to which her activism is a reaction to the initial crisis: i.e. the establishment of Israel and the displacement of Palestinians. Is her "natural condition," to quote Sartre, performed in good faith to the cause of her condition? Here Jabrā's novel remains ambiguous: she is the descendent of Palestinians, but born in Iraq; she travels comfortably between the Middle East and Europe, and joined the cause in part because she was attracted to another activist; the images of Palestine that fill her head and her inherited nostalgia serve to detail her plan of action. In this way, she exhumes her familial folklore while burying her own conviction that "you create your own freedom" by tying it to an inherited idea (40). However, to retain the spontaneity of her character which is crucial to the notion that her activism be in good faith, Jabrā resists concluding her story: "Sarab would at times shine like a faraway, unreachable star, and others like a burning coal, but always slipping away like that quicksilver I'd become used to, taking pleasure in losing it and getting it back" (187). For the reader her commitment remains a gesture, a will to act. The conclusion reflects a measured understanding on Jabrā's part of Sartre's philosophy, of "the will to freedom, implied in freedom itself," with the latter defined in large part by the former (Sartre 48). To describe the realization of the freedom to act risks compromising the spark that ignites it, or in other terms, as Sartre put it: "we never speak of the gratuitousness of a work of art" (46).

I think the creative energy underpinning Jabrā's work did not outlive the moment in which it appeared. If we take, as Fredric Jameson wrote, the endurance of Proust's work to be in part the "vital Utopian reality" that "contradicts the limits of its official philosophy, of that Platonic anamnesis which proves to be a return to the past only in the appearance; as though the Utopian impulse itself were able to do its work only in disguise, were obliged to realize its projections of the future under the cloak of a mystique of nostalgia" (156), Jabrā's art more often dashes this vitality by explicating the very gesture that its nostalgia implies. With Proust, realization of the instant, the ultimate gesture of existentialism, remains shrouded in "darkness" (Jamson 155). It is protected from the dialectic and thus preserves a nascent vitality. In Jabrā's work the fragile concepts of the concrete and spontaneous are overwhelmed by the paramount desire for actual statehood. The utopian impulse in Jabrā's work has a name. And while contradiction and accidental vitality remain possibilities for his work its original gesture does not as Palestine today is a concrete reality.

Jabrā's 1955 painting *Al-safdar* ("The Brass Seller") provides a good way to summarize my understanding of his oeuvre. Painted sometime in the 1950s in the midst of Jabrā's burgeoning career, the street-seller in the painting appears at home among his things and most likely, somewhere along the street in Baghdad, at home in his city. Jabrā's desire for a temporal, perhaps decadent but actual reality for the Palestinians is manifest in the engulfing materiality of the brass-seller's reality. Were this figure to be removed from his belongings, set alone like an ascetic in vacant space, his gritty and wonderful reality would be lost. He would represent the life of contemplation that Jabrā, like Walid Masoud, wanted so desperately to move away from. The temporal, street level reality of "The Brass Seller" represents thus a subtle, but incisive kind of political aspiration: to be grounded. While perpetual landlessness and the reminiscence of Palestine is the opposite of the "to be" philosophy that Jabrā sought to inspire, the entrapment and poverty of twenty-first century Palestine was no doubt the nightmare, the "no exit" of his existentialism.

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