Building a Homeland upon the Ruins of Literature: al-Bukāʾ ʿalā al-aṭlāl by Ghālib Halasā as a Case Study

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The aim of this paper is to analyse how the *ghurba*[1] can take a literary shape in the Arabic novel and be related to a specific cultural space rather than a physical one. In order to attain this goal, the paper focuses on *al-Bukāʾ ʿalā al-aṭlāl* (Crying over the ruins, 1980), a novel by the Jordanian author Ghālib Halasā (1932-1989), in which the theme of exile is expressed through a number of issues recalling some crystallised features of modern and contemporary Arabic literature, such as the symbolic role of the mother, the village and the coffee. However, the novel also interestingly displays a deep attachment to some major *topoi* of the ancient Arabic literary heritage – i.e. the reference to *jāhilī*[2] poetry contained in the title, the verses by Imrūʾ al-Qays (6th century AD) quoted in the opening, the quotation of the *Kitāb al-aghānī*,[3] and others –, which

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[1] The word *ghurba* can be defined as a "type of emigration […] accompanied by a deep feeling of estrangement resulting from an uninterrupted sense of belonging to the original society and the yearning for it; on the contrary, voluntary emigration results in the assimilation into the new society and the adoption of its identity" (Barakāt 2011: 199).

[2] *Jāhilī* is an adjective referring to the Jāhiliyya ("the age of ignorance"), namely the era before Islam appeared in the Arabian Peninsula in the Seventh century AD.

[3] *Kitāb al-aghānī* is a multivolume compilation of *aḫbār* (facts) written by Abū al-Faraǧ al-Iṣfahānī (10th century AD), a Persian historian of Arab origin who lived under the Buwayhid princedom, at the

contributes to build up a net of literary references, and to freshen them up by providing them with a new content. Given the historical circumstances in which Halasā happened to live, and his continuous displacement to various Arab capitals due to his political stances, it seems clear that building a new world of words upon the old ruins (*al-aṭlāl*, as quoted in the title of the novel) was not simply a literary matter, but the very core of a survival strategy to him and to an entire generation of Arab intellectuals.

Through the analysis of some of the ways in which intertextual references are fashioned in *al-Bukāʾ ʿalā al-aṭlāl*, this paper attempts to highlight both the narrative function of intertextuality and the significance it gains with regards to the author, in relation to the vicissitudes experienced by him and many other coeval writers and intellectuals.

GHĀLIB HALASĀ AND HIS PERPETUAL EXILE

Ghālib Halasā was born in the village of Māʿīn, close to Madaba (Jordan) in 1932, to a Christian family native to the outskirts of Karak, in Southern Jordan. He had his first education in Madaba and completed it in Amman, at the prestigious secondary school al-Muṭrān. During this period, he experienced prison for the first time, due to his closeness to Ḥasan al-Nābulsī, founder and director of the pacifist journal *al-Fajr al-Jadīd*, and to his political activism, which started very early in the ranks of the Jordanian Communist Party, following in the footsteps of his two elder brothers Yaʿqūb and Ḥannā, also members of the Communist party. After finishing high school, at 17, he went to Beirut to obtain a bachelor's degree in Journalism at the American University, but in Lebanon he found himself in trouble again – he entered the Lebanese Communist Party and was jailed a second time for joining demonstrations in Tripoli. Ṣāliḥ al-Ḥamārna remarks that "Ghālib Halasā is perhaps the only Arab citizen who joined the ranks of four Communist parties – the Jordanian, the Lebanese, the Iraqi and the Egyptian – besides taking part in the Palestinian Intifada [1987-1993]" (al-Ḥamārna 2011: 41).

He was also jailed for some months in Baghdad before being definitely banished from Jordan in 1955 and moving to Egypt, where he spent twenty years of his life, working as a translator and a journalist, and writing some of his most outstanding novels and essays in literary criticism. Politically active in the Egyptian Communist Party, he was imprisoned in Egypt in 1966 because of his political involvement with the Trotskyist wing of the Party, and eventually expelled once more in 1976, due to his opposition to the policies of Anwar al-Sadat.[4] After leaving Cairo, he wandered for a

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end of the Abbasid caliphate. For a long time employed almost exclusively as a source of diverse cultural, social and political historic facts, this encyclopedia has been studied as a literary work by Hilary Kilpatrick (Kilpatrick 2003).

[4] Ghālib Halasā was ousted from Egypt in October 1976, with the accusation of having verbally offended the president Sadat during a six-days conference he had contributed to organise, titled "The

few years in Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen, and finally settled in Damascus, where he died to a heart attack in 1989.

Considering such a biography, it cannot surprise that one of the most relevant features of Halasā's fictional work is the insoluble link between the personal past of the author and the Arabic literary heritage, both ancient and modern. The memories told in his novels – and particularly in his late works, among which we can count *al-Bukāʾ ʿalā al-aṭlāl* – are systematically filtered by the filter of literariness. In this way, the individual memories of the author's childhood become really collective and able to express the feeling of a whole generation who experienced that peculiar existential condition defined in Arabic as *ghurba*, a word definitely belonging to the field of realia, and which usually stays untranslated. The three-letter root '*gh-r-b*' gives the idea of estrangement and exile, but actually the word *ghurba* is nowadays deeply imbued with literariness, and it evokes a series of novels, mostly – but not exclusively – belonging to Palestinian literature, which are characterized by the presence of alienation and homesickness. As it will be argued in the considerations expressed in the conclusions of this paper, the literary halo surrounding the idea of *ghurba* does not diminish the dramatic impact of exile on the lives of those who are forced to face it – an issue notably raised by Edward Said in his *Reflections on Exile*. "If true exile is a condition of terminal loss, why has it been transformed so easily into a potent, even enriching, motif of modern culture?" (Said 2000: 173). His answer is uncanny, as it is at odds with the humanism and the aestheticism surrounding the notion of exile in an "age of anxiety and estrangement" (ibid.) such as the Twentieth century:

> [E]xile cannot be made to serve notions of humanism. On the twentieth-century scale, exile is neither aesthetically nor humanistically comprehensible: at most the literature about exile objectifies an anguish and a predicament most people rarely experience first hand; but to think of the exile informing this literature as beneficially humanistic is to banalize its mutilations, the losses it inflicts on those who suffer them, the muteness with which it responds to any attempt to understand it as "good for us." […] exile is irremediably secular and unbearably historical. (Said 2000: 174)

Despite the indisputably material burden of exile, however, the Twentieth century witnessed the appearance of an abundant literature pouring out of such a tragic experience. Exile literature does not seem to be a simple objectification of feelings and situations which readers do not usually experience firsthand, but – as it will be discussed below – it is a tool which authors themselves use in order to give back substance to a world they have lost. Intertextuality is a powerful device enabling the writer to rebuild a world: a text can be inhabited, manipulated, revisited, rewritten – which Halasā actually did, continuously reshuffling excerpts from his texts and reusing them in different contexts. His imaginary has a vital relation to reality, and the text of his life is interwoven with the texts he read and wrote in a lifetime: even though

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American interests in the Arab nation". Some Egyptian colleagues of Halasā give testimony of this event in an episode of the Al Jazeera documentary programme "Basamat" (see Works Cited).

his biography does not totally overlap his literary production, the former cannot be detached from the latter and *vice versa*.

A NEST IN THE RUINS OF EXILE: LITERATURE AS HOMELAND

Published in 1980, *al-Bukāʾ ʿalā al-aṭlāl* is the fourth novel written by Ghālib Halasā, after *al-Ḍaḥik* (Laughter, 1970), *al-Khamāsīn* (Sandstorms, 1975), and *al-Suʾāl* (The Question, 1979).

The storyline of this novel is quite tenuous, since there is almost no action in it: the protagonist Khālid (clearly an alter-ego of the author Halasā) remembers his childhood and his love stories in a ceaseless stream of consciousness, interspersed with dreamlike scenes, which the narrator – in a sort of a meta-literary reflection – calls *aḥlām al-yaqaẓa*, "daydreaming". Khālid spends most of his time at home, in bed, with few exceptions – for instance, when he wanders around the streets of Cairo, or visits the house of a couple of friends.

On the contrary, the fabula is rich of events, situations and themes, located at different levels of the narration and molded through different narrative techniques: memories of the past, dreams, reveries, ideological considerations, metanarrative reflections, dialogues, quotations, descriptive scenes and many other elements draw the complex picture of this multi-layered novel, which, just like many other pieces of work by Ghālib Halasā, has been defined a postmodern one,[5] mainly due to the extreme diversity of its registers and the massive resort to intertextuality, as it will be clarified in due time. The distinction between what actually happens in the novel and what is simply remembered or dreamt is not always clear, as the author does not always explicitly mark the shifts between dreams, reveries, events and memories.
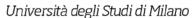
The story told in the novel is set in Egypt at the beginning of the Seventies, as it can be inferred from a number of small details scattered here and there, such as – for instance – a hint to Nixon, Kissinger and the fights the Arabs will be forced to engage in in the 1973 Yom Kippur war (Halasā 2008: 17), and from the dialogues in Egyptian dialect. In a typical semi-autobiographical fashion, most of Halasā's novels are set in Egypt, and only his novel *Sulṭāna* (1988) is extensively set in Jordan, yet almost all of them are literally studded with mentions to the Jordanian environment in which the author lived his early years, and *al-Bukāʾ ʿalā al-aṭlāl* makes no exception.

The deliberately exotic ambience which the author creates in the chapters dedicated to his childhood memories contributes to make the "Jordanian" part of the novel even more remote in space and time, definitely belonging to a mythic past which cannot be recovered except by putting it on the same level of the mythic past of literature.

Nevertheless, the innocence usually associated with childhood is definitely lost: the memories of Khālid are everything but naive, and everything but concluded, if it is

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[5] For a partial account of postmodernism in Ghalib Halasā, see Khurays 2004.

true that he keeps manipulating and rebuilding them through his *aḥlām al-yaqaẓa*. An example of this process can be found in Chapter 1 – Part 2, when Khālid, laying in his bed in Cairo, recalls the memory of a young Bedouin girl living around his village at the time of his childhood in Jordan. One day he was laying down and reading a book – the novel *Majdūlīn* by Muṣṭafā Luṭfī al-Manfalūṭī[6] – in a deserted area outside the village, when the girl got close to him, kissed him against his will, and finally ran away. They met a second time, but this time they had a bodily, tight fight, ended with the girl insulting and throwing stones at him, and with him running away. After recalling this memory, Khālid starts a reverie in which the fight between himself and the Bedouin girl, instead of ending with a bitter defeat, ends with the two of them making love inside a cave.

The apparently insignificant detail of the book Khālid is reading before meeting the Bedouin girl appears to be relevant when considered within the frame of the integration of the literary heritage into the narration operated by Halasā in *al-Bukāʾ ʿalā al-aṭlāl*. As it will be clarified later on, in fact, in this novel quotations play a fundamental role in broadening the scope of the narration – namely, a concise hint to a poem, a novel, or even an author, opens up a window on additional meanings attached to the narration, resulting in a kaleidoscopic refraction. Not much is said in the novel about al-Manfalūṭī's book, which talks about the love of the young and idealist Stephan for the rich and frivolous Magdoline, except that Khālid is bothered by Stephan's unwariness. The technique employed by Halasā is one of fragmentation and reverberation, and it seems likely that, just like he does in other parts of the novel, the author uses this flash reference here to allude to what is about to happen between Khālid and the Bedouin girl.

THE GAME OF MIRRORS: QUOTATION AS PROLEPSIS

The title of the novel relates to a topos of the classic Arabic *qaṣīda*,[7] born in pre-Islamic era and extensively used in Arabic poetry until the blank verse appeared in the Forties of the Twentieth Century. According to the Abbasid scholar ibn Qutayba (829-889), the *qaṣīda* has a rigid ternary structure, though it has been recently proven to be less the case than the scholars used to think until a few years ago. However, the ode is usually introduced by the so-called *nasīb*, a prelude mentioning the sudden view of the traces of an abandoned Bedouin camp, which gives the poet the pretext to remember his lost love. The *nasīb* is composed by two conventional phases: the stop before the ruins (*al-wuqūf ʿalā al-aṭlāl*), with the description of the traces of the former camp, and the

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[6] The novel *Majdūlīn* by Muṣṭafà Luṭfī al-Manfalūṭī (1876-1924) is an adaptation of the French novel *Love Under the Limes* (1832) by Alphonse Karr.

[7] "The classical Arabic ode, the *qaṣīdah*, is a polythematic and monorhymed poetic form, generally ranging in length from fifteen to eighty lines. The *qaṣīdah* genre flourished from the outset of its history approximately in the late fifth century C.E. during the pre-Islamic age (the *Jāhiliyyah* or 'Age of Ignorance') to its decline at the beginning of the twentieth century" (Sumi 2004: 1).

consequent weeping over them (*al-bukāʾ ʿalā al-aṭlāl*), since they are remindful of the woman the poet used to love, now gone forever with her tribe. These two phases are traditionally followed by the *raḥīl* (the journey in the desert), the *waṣf* (the description of horses or camels, and the nature), and the *fakhr* (the poet's boast) or the *madīḥ* (praise of the ruler).

The *jāhilī* Bedouin motive of the *aṭlāl* is certainly deeply rooted in the subsequent Arabic poetry,[8] but it has made its appearance also in the prose fiction, as shown by Hilary Kilpatrick in her essay about the *aṭlāl* in modern Arabic fiction (Kilpatrick 2000: 28-44). After highlighting the in-medias-res character of the *nasīb*, which starts with the sudden view of the abandoned camp without explaining how the poet reached it, Kilpatrick states that the *aṭlāl* motive does not usually appear at the beginning of modern narrative work. Such work, she claims, "as a rule, require a minimum of motivation for characters' actions and a degree of information about their thoughts and feelings before" (32). Nevertheless, in Ghālib Halasā's *al-Bukāʾ ʿalā al-aṭlāl*, the *aṭlāl* motive acquires a central status – not only the novel itself is titled after it, but it even opens up with some selected lines from the *muʿallaqa*[9] of Imrūʾ al-Qays, contradicting one of the general conclusions drawn by Kilpatrick in her article (42). In this manner, the *muʿallaqa* loses the mere status of an ephemeral and ornamental quotation, to attain a significance that it does not seem to have in other pieces of work.

The verses selected by Halasā are the following:

On the morning of separation, the day they loaded to part,
it was as if I, standing by the tribe's acacias, were splitting colocynth […].
Yet the cure for my sorrow is indeed an outpouring of tears.
But is there, among disappearing remains, a prop for me?
Such is your way; so it was with Umm al-Huwayrith before her
And her neighbor Umm al-Rabab at Mas'al;
When they got up to leave, the aroma of musk emanated from them,
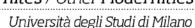Fragrant as the gentle east wind bearing the scent of cloves. […][10]

In his choice, Halasā interestingly included also the "wolf lines", today rejected as spurious by the scholars because they reflect "an attitude of humility and self-pity absent elsewhere in the *qaṣīda* and wholly inappropriate for a proud prince. The composer of these lines does not struggle against hard luck; he accepts it and finds a partner in misery" (Farrin 2011: 16-17):

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[8] See for instance Hafez 1996: 99-120.
[9] The *muʿallaqāt* is a compilation of seven (or ten, according to another tradition) selected odes which were supposed to be written in golden ink and hung on the walls of the Kaʿba in Makkah in the Pre-Islamic era.
[10] Translation by Raymond Farrin (Farrin 2011: 5).

And many a waterskin of the clans
have I borne its leather strap
Upon my shoulder, submissive
and much traveled
And many a reverbered, a bare waste like
the belly of an ass, I crossed,
Where the wolf howled like and outcast profligate
with many mouths to feed.
So when he howled I said to him,
Our lot is meager sustenance
If you have not gained wealth,
[for I have none].
Each of us when he acquires a thing,
it soon escapes him
Whoever tills your tilth and mine,
it will leave lean.[11]

The quoted excerpts of the *qaṣīda* are first of all a self-explanation of the title of the novel itself. The main title and the titles of the single chapters, as underlined by the Jordanian scholar ʿĀdil al-Usṭa in an essay entirely devoted to the analysis of the paratext of this novel, are relevant as they stand. Chapter 1 – Part 2, which – as previously mentioned – revolves around the memory of the Bedouin girl, is titled *al-Wuqūf ʿalā al-aṭlāl* ("Stopping before the Ruins").

Furthermore, besides being the main title, *al-Bukāʾ ʿalā al-aṭlāl* is also the title of Chapter 2 – Part 2, in which Khālid mentions for the first time his love story with a woman called ʿAzza, that runs as a leitmotif through the whole novel. With such an additional reference to another traditional element of the *qaṣīda*, the *fil rouge* that links Khālid's past with his present becomes quite clear (al-Usṭa 2004: 120): the episode of the Bedouin girl, and the juvenile defeat attached to it, is seen as a remote anticipation of the defeat suffered by Khālid due to the failure of his sentimental relationships as an adult. This chapter finally clarifies over which ruins Khālid is exactly crying – not only the ruins of his lost Jordanian childhood, but also the ones of his Egyptian love, whose loss seems to mark the definite end of any possibility for him to build a stable life in exile. The reason that makes nostalgia and alienation so consuming is that they have no solution – the return to the past is impossible, since it is covered with debris, and this feeling of irreparable loss is precisely expressed by the recourse to the terminology of the *nasīb*.

Drawing from the study of time in the *nasīb* of the *qaṣīda* conducted by Jaroslav Stetkevych in his much debated *The Zephyrs of Najd*, Wen-chin Ouyang argues that "[i]n the structured forward movement of the *qaṣīda* from *nasīb* to *raḥīl* then *fakhr*, the return to this 'lost paradise' is impossible. The nostalgia is so palpable in the *nasīb* precisely because of the protagonist's knowledge of the impossibility of return" (Ouyang 2013: 34). In order to keep on living, claims Ouyang, the *jāhilī* poet has to

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[11] Translation by Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych (Pinckney Stetkevych 1993: 254).

obliterate his longing for the past; therefore, he interrupts his lamentation and moves on (*raḥīl*), boasting his prowess and his sexual vigour, and praising the horses or camels he rides (*fakhr*). This part is totally missing in the lines of the *muʿallaqa* chosen by Halasā, whose selection was restricted to the more nostalgic parts of the ode. In this respect, Ken Seigneurie maintains that the use of the traditional and highly-stylised *topos* of the *wuqūf ʿalā al-aṭlāl* in the modern Arabic novel might be an end in itself, since it elicits the nostalgia of the reader and serves the purpose of creating the proper ambience to the reception of the further content of the novel (Seigneurie 2011: 16).[12] Seigneurie, nonetheless, states also that one of the goals of the use of this *topos* is the reappropriation of the past and the strengthening of identity in a present that constantly threatens it.

Finally, besides justifying the title of the novel and putting the reader in a nostalgic mood, the quotation of the *muʿallaqa* – as shown above with regards to Manfalūṭī's novel – seems to have also a proleptic function, since it contains some of the main issues emerging from the novel: the exile of Khālid/Ghālib, symbolised by the expedition in the desert in order to look for water; the theme of the woman, declined in a number of shades going from the mother to the prostitute in *al-Bukāʾ ʿalā al-aṭlāl*, and condensed in the two figures of Umm al-Huwayrith and Umm al-Rabab in the *muʿallaqa*;[13] the alienation and sense of loss of Khālid/Ghālib, symbolised by the sorrowful "dialogue" with the wolf.

A proleptic role seems to be played also by Chapter 3 – Part 1. Titled "Funerary ode to ʿĀʾisha bint Ṭalḥa" (*Rithāʾ ʿĀʾisha bint Ṭalḥa*), this chapter is indeed a long, verbatim quotation from the *Kitāb al-aghānī*. At a first glance, this chapter seems totally unrelated to the context, since it comes after a chapter fully dedicated to Khālid's childhood memories in Jordan, "The idiot's song" (*Ughniyat al-ʿabīṭ*). The only thing in common between the two chapters seems to be that they both refer to songs: in "The idiot's song", the 'song' is the verse monotonously repeated by the teapots seller while going around in the village – "The teapots seller is here!" –, while in "Funerary ode to ʿĀʾisha bint Ṭalḥa" the song is the poem which al-Ḥārith ibn Khālid, the ruler (*amīr*) of Makkah, wrote to celebrate ʿĀʾisha's beauty. This link, however, is subtle and implicit, and can be caught only by the readers who are familiar with the *Book of Songs*.

The chapter tells the story of ʿĀʾisha bint Ṭalḥa,[14] a noblewoman well known for her stunning beauty and her unprejudiced marital relationships to some of the most prominent men of her time in the Umayyad Iraq. The episode of *Kitāb al-aghānī* quoted here tells the story of a "beauty contest" between ʿĀʾisha and Sukayna bint al-

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[12] Such psychological explanation of the *nasīb* is actually old, being proposed for the first time by ibn Qutayba (Stetkevych 1993: 7).

[13] Significantly, the reference to the two women in the *muʿallaqa* is characterised by an olfactory quality, the same one characterising the women of the Jordanian village in Chapters 1 and 2 – Part 1 (pp. 13, 26).

[14] ʿĀʾisha bint Ṭalḥa was the "daughter of a Companion of the Prophet, […] beautiful and coquettish, married several times; fl. mid-first/seventh century" (Kilpatrick 2003: 326).

Ḥusayn, granddaughter of the caliph ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib and her co-wife to Muṣʿab ibn al-Zubayr (d. 691). ʿĀʾisha is described in this scene as an "aristocratic Umayyad virago, who goes unveiled, taunts her admirers, and marries and divorces her way through the ranks of nobility at her own pleasure", according to a new model of femininity introduced during the Abbasid era, in a frame of detribalisation of the social customs (Bray 2004: 138).

The quoted excerpt is introduced by a short passage in which Khālid speaks using the first-person singular, unlike the rest of the novel, which is told by a heterodiegetic narrator. The dreamful-nightmarish atmosphere recurrent in the whole novel – and, above all, alongside the passages that mark an immersion into memory – is employed in this passage too:

> I fell asleep, pervaded by ʿĀʾisha bint Ṭalḥa. I had read about her in *The Book of Songs*, and I thought and dreamt of her a lot before falling asleep. That great artist, Abū al-Faraj, had made her so corporeal and close that I could almost see her. Her world fascinated me. I was trying to recall it passionately, to rebuild it so that I could have a place in it, loving her from a close distance, when I felt asleep, lusting for her.
> Before deep sleep took me, in that span of time that divides the sleep from the wake, ʿĀʾisha became possible – a warm, intense and limitlessly bestowing presence stemmed from her. A presence falling in the sphere of the dissolution of the harsh daily reality […]. I woke up and I realised that ʿĀʾisha did not exist anymore. That sumptuous body, ardent with liveliness, desire and love, had turned into dust and rotten, fragile bones.[15] (Halasā 2008: 30)

It is not totally clear why this long quotation comes exactly at this point of the narration, but it is likely to be a sort of foretaste of the erotic and sentimental content at the core of the novel, while representing at the same time another reference to the stories Khālid used to read in his childhood and one of his fictionalised dreams. The title of the chapter refers to a sub-genre of the classic Arabic *qaṣīda*, namely the funerary elegy (*al-riṯāʾ*). Apparently, it does not match the content of the anecdote quoted in the text, which depicts a lively and lustful ʿĀʾisha. Nevertheless, the words with which Khālid introduces the chapter dissolve the conflict between title and content – ʿĀʾisha is not dead in the *Book of Songs*, but she is so in Khālid's reality, outside of the dominion of his dreams, and prefigures the end of his sentimental relation with ʿAzza.

A POSTMODERN NOVEL?

As mentioned above, Halasā's novels are often described as postmodern due to the use of some peculiar techniques linked to postmodernism; quotation and pastiche are

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[15] Here and elsewhere translation from Arabic is mine, unless stated otherwise.

two of the most relevant devices featured by postmodernist fiction. "At the present time, any discussion of the place of intertextuality within the arts leads us towards the issue of Postmodernism", Graham Allen states (Allen 2000: 181). Nonetheless, such a labelling is quite problematic, and raises many doubts about its viability with regards to the novel analysed here, and to the Arabic novel in general.

Quotation is far from being a mere act of copying – to say it with the words of Gérard Genette, "the mere displacement of context turns even the most literal rewriting into a creation" (Genette 1997: 17). This (re)creation and resignification through displacement of a ready-made matter, and its ironic reassembly in order to create new pictures with old jigsaw pieces, revitalises old text fragments. Therefore, the old text does not belong to a dead past, since it can be used and reused, shifted to a different context and in a different era, and even been attributed to a different author, to say it with Borges in his short story *Pierre Ménard author of the Quixote*, repeatedly mentioned by Genette himself in his *Palimpsests*:

> Menard (perhaps without wanting to) has enriched, by means of a new technique, the halting and rudimentary art of reading: this new technique is that of the deliberate anachronism and the erroneous attribution. This technique, whose applications are infinite, prompts us to go through the *Odyssey* as if it were posterior to the *Aeneid* and the book *Le jardin du Centaure* of Madame Henri Bachelier as if it were by Madame Henri Bachelier. This technique fills the most placid works with adventure. (Borges 1964: 44)

The postmodern significance of *al-Bukāʾ ʿalā al-aṭlāl* might be recognised precisely in this reshuffle of the literary matter, which expresses at the same time a definitive loss of innocence: since everything has been said and there is no more room for a naive claim of originality, the relation between texts is not anymore one of imitatio/aemulatio, but one of open and unveiled acknowledgement. Nevertheless, the use of such "postmodern" technique does not seem to be an end in itself, and it does not even seem to be totally correct to describe it as postmodern, even though some hints here and there show that the intention of Halasā might have been that of writing a novel of postmodern taste.[16] His ironic explanation of the use of *aḥlām al-yaqẓa* seems to go in this direction as well:

> Daydreams are a sort of regression to childhood, and what art is usually asked for is that it gets away from reality, just like this kind of dreams does… Any bored or worried man asks himself: what will I do tonight? Shall I go search for a woman? Shall I drink bad brandy, read a novel, watch a movie? (Khurays 2004: 20)

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[16] Besides the abundant and diverse quotations, which are not limited to the few examples mentioned in the present paper, in the novel there are – for example – lengthy descriptions of paintings (pp. 23-24, 133), and several mentions to topics ranging from literature to pop music and cinema, from religion to nationalist culture. Moreover, there is a quite explicit statement in Halasā 1996: 10, where the author alludes to "the mix of times and places" and "the concept of history as a daily reality turning around us" that pushed him to link the story of al-Zīr Sālim to tribal skirmishes waged in his village during his childhood.

As shown by means of the analysis of the quotations and the literary references presented earlier, however, the irony usually implied in the use of pastiche is hardly detectable in the examples of intertextuality available in the novel. Moreover, the first and the "second degree" of literature – to borrow Genette's terminology – are still well distinguishable in *al-Bukāʾ ʿalā al-aṭlāl*, where quotation and narration do not mix to the extreme consequences displayed by the *Pierre Menard*. When Magda al-Nowaihi writes – while discussing postmodernism in Muḥmmad Barrāda's *Luʿbat al-nisyān* – that the Arabic novel seems generally reluctant to adopt the disengaged version of postmodernism prevailing in the Western postmodern novel, she actually makes a point: the Arabic novel cannot avoid dealing with a reality which cannot be overshadowed by any narrative alternative dimension. Therefore, her words seem to comply with *al-Bukāʾ* when she claims that

> in distinction from western texts where postmodernity and commitment often seem to be mutually exclusive, we have here a narrative that is postmodern in sensibility and structure, but also is fiercely concerned with the here and now and committed to struggling for its improvement. (al-Nowaihi 1999: 23)

Another problematic feature in Halasā's alleged postmodernism is the apparent contradiction in the coexistence of a modern, nearly Proustian attention to temporality and memory, and the expected postmodern preeminence of spatiality, due to the effacement of the monadic self in favour of a fragmented subject (Jameson 1991: 15-16). Khālid does not even seem to be fragmented, indeed – though he is wrenched by several external forces, he finds his aggregating centre in his dreams and his memories. This novel – as well as other Arabic novels fallen in the all-encompassing, yet often blurred and abused, category of postmodernism – should be analysed also in its modernist (or neo-modernist, as Frank Kermode would put it) aspects, in order to better highlight some of its paramount internal characteristics. This issue, however, goes beyond the scope of the present essay, and shall be postponed to further studies.

Conclusions

As the present essay has attempted to show, the high level of what could be called a "literary autobiographism" in *al-Bukāʾ ʿalā al-aṭlāl* never leads Halasā to undue complacency and mere aestheticism. On the contrary, the intertwining of life and art makes clear that the author is tormented by the need for a safe place, capable to save him and his generation from the frustration of a present continuously threatened by repression, torture, and imprisonment. As previously mentioned, Ghālib Halasā spent most of his life in exile, in order to avoid being persecuted for his political ideas. Persecutions, though, chased him ceaselessly throughout all his life. To say it with the words of another displaced Arab intellectual, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Munīf (1933-2004), who was only one year younger than Halasā,

[t]o be an exile means that you are an accused person from the outset. Never mind the nature of the accusation or from where it emanates, the important thing is that you acquired an ambiguous status whose explication results in more and varied accusations. […]. You escaped prison and restrictions in your land, but you become an uninvited guest in another land, and this makes you undesirable. […] (Hafez 2006)[17]

Despite the relatively few years he spent in Jordan, Halasā kept living all his life in a "waṭan al-dhākira" (al-Azraʿī 2007: 13), a homeland of memory, and all his novels and short stories display an overflow of references to the places of his childhood. The overabundance of the more diverse "objects" in the novel – poetic and literary excerpts, descriptions of canvas, dreams, reveries and so on, in a *horror vacui* which goes hand in hand with the flood of commodities unleashed by Modernity – recalls the crowded Flaubertian pages described by Jacques Rancière in his *The Politics of Literature*. According to the French philosopher, in the modern novel all subjects democratically attain the same dignity, be they sublime or humble, relevant to the collectivity or strictly personal. So – Rancière wonders – what does it mark the distinction between art and life, when not only art imitates life, but life imitates art itself (as we can see in the character of Emma Bovary, for instance)? The answer, according to Rancière, is that in the novel art and life are definitely indistinguishable from each other, but still a distinction lies in the ways such an indistinguishability can be used: it can be good or bad, depending on whether it is deployed by the author or by his fictional *alter ego*. The undue complacency and unauthentic aestheticism of Emma Bovary, for whom literature means above all a beautiful desk, "the mystical languor of the perfumes" and "the glow of the candles" (Rancière 2011: 57), is what leads her to death; the same ache for the past, which can be compulsively revived only through quoted texts, is what condemns Khālid to horrific nightmares and an irreparable ineptitude. The good aestheticism, instead, is the one that does not pretend to come out of the printed page to become lifestyle, and Ghālib Halasā, like Flaubert, seems to know well the distinction laying between "literature and interior design" (58).
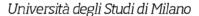
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[17] The passage, translated by Sabry Hafez, is excerpted from the famous *al-Kātib wa-l-manfā: Humūm wa-afāq al-riwāya al-ʿarabiyya* (1992, al-Muʾassasa al-ʿarabiyya, Beirut, pp. 95-97).

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