

# THE MEMORY OF THE GREAT WAR IN A SELECTION OF WRITINGS BY MĀRŪN ‘ABBŪD

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*The consequences of the First World War left a lasting mark on the life of many writers. The Lebanese critic, journalist, poet, and writer of fiction Mārūn ‘Abbūd (1886-1962) is one of them. During the conflict, extreme poverty and starvation forced him to abandon his work and move to a village on Mount Lebanon eking an existence for his family. Only after the end of the war did he return to writing. From that time on, references to the Great War and its aftermath started to appear in his writings. The aim of this paper is to document these references in Mārūn ‘Abbūd’s literary writing, chiefly through a selection of short stories from the collection Wuḡūh wa hikāyāt (Faces and Stories, 1945). As it will emerge from the analysis, however brief and rare, these writings bear witness to the enormous pain that remembering the event caused the author. They also belong to the number of voices that shed light on the dramatic changes that the Great War and its aftermath brought about in Lebanese society.*

The literature of the Great War escapes the spatial and temporal boundaries, both because the effects of the conflict were perceived directly and indirectly in a vast portion of territory, and because many literary responses to those events occurred even after several decades<sup>1</sup>. Alongside the detailed descriptions of military actions, two main aspects emerge related to this narrative: on the one hand, the attention to local and daily details of a life for which we want to preserve our memory; on the other, the adoption of a non-objective but personal point of view, which can give voice to individual stories dispersed in the sea of history. As the historians Isnenghi and Rochat have pointed out, the local aspect of the narration and the personal point of view do not affect the strength of this narrative and «non sempre del resto la concentrazione spaziale comporta un restringimento dello sguardo»<sup>2</sup>. On the contrary, they allow us to frame an experience «dove i grandi rivolgimenti

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<sup>1</sup> On the temporal classification of the First World War literature see, among others, M. Higonnet, *The 2005 ACLA Presidential Address: Whose Can(n)on? World War I and Literary Empires*, in “Comparative Literature”, LVII, 3 (2005), pp. vi-xviii; G. Capecchi, *Lo straniero nemico e fratello. Letteratura italiana e Grande guerra*, CLUEB, Bologna 2013. For a general overview of these studies see also M. Peroni, *La Grande Guerra nella letteratura contemporanea. Una riflessione sul canone e sul romanzo storico*, in “In Limine. Quaderni di letterature viaggi teatri”, 11 (2015), pp.118-129.

politici e militari sono vissuti come drammi personali che influenzano uno spazio affettivo: la propria regione, il proprio paese, la propria casa»<sup>3</sup>. The description of this space in a given text will be therefore a representation of the model of the world of a given author. In other words, the way in which an author describes the space in a given text related to the war can illuminate his position about this event.

This contribution will use this approach to analyse the way in which the Lebanese Mārūn 'Abbūd (1886-1962) described the local space in some of his short stories and to draw some hints about his experience of the Great War. After an introduction to the author, it intends to provide first a description of his experience with the war, contextualising it within the Lebanese collective experience during the conflict; secondly, it will provide an analysis of three stories, highlighting in particular the effect of the war in the description of the local space before and after it. Far from being exhaustive in its goal, this paper represents a first attempt to analyse the production of an author too little studied.

Mārūn 'Abbūd is a point of reference in the development of literary criticism. «A man of great originality, courage, integrity and charm, he was the greatest iconoclast modern Arab criticism has known»<sup>4</sup>, as Salma Khadra Jayyusi states. Thoroughly formed in the Quran, the Bible and the classical Arabic literature, interested in Arab philosophy and history, and fairly acquainted with French literature, 'Abbūd showed a great critical sensibility. This helped him in the reading of the extraordinary developments of Arabic poetry that he witnessed in his long life during the first six decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This vast knowledge, coupled with the abhorrence of conventionalism, the search for talent and innovation, and a literary style full of originality and irony are the basis of his practical, impressionist critical writings, which dismissed the adoption of any fixed major theory<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> M. Isnenghi; G. Rochat, *La Grande Guerra 1914-1918*, il Mulino, Bologna 2008, pp. 555-556, quoted in M. Peroni, *La Grande Guerra nella letteratura contemporanea*, cit., p. 124.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 125-126.

<sup>4</sup> Salma Khadra Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry*, vol. II, Brill, Leiden 1977, p. 517.

<sup>5</sup> His works in literary criticism include *'Alā 'l-mihakk* (1946), *Muğaddidūn wa muğtarrūn* (1948), *Fī 'l-muḥtabar* (1952), *Dimašq wa urğuwān* (1952), *'Alā 'l-tā'ir* (1957) and *Naqadāt 'ābir* (1959). For an introduction to his ideas concerning literary criticism, see As'ad Naṣr Allāh al-Sakkāf, *Mārūn 'Abbūd al-nāqid*, Dār al-Ṭaqāfah, Bayrūt 1966; Salma Khadra Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry*, cit., pp. 517-522.

His life begins in 1886 in ‘Ayn Kifā’<sup>6</sup>, a small Christian village in Mount Lebanon, situated on a plateau surrounded by mountains, overlooking the sea from the northern side and a small fertile valley from the east. The village economy was mainly based on agriculture, chiefly the plantation of olive trees, quinces, pears, oaks, and vineyards. As the author says in a short story in the collection *Aḥādīṭ al-qaryah* (Tales from the Village, 1956), «its story is the story of any village on Earth and Mars: the people is the same in any place and time, and only the city makes life complicated»<sup>7</sup>. The very same title of the collection epitomises the centrality of the village – and ‘Ayn Kifā’ specifically – in Mārūn ‘Abbūd’s writings. In fact, not only did the rural life of the village represent the primary source of inspiration and the privileged scenario of most of his short stories, but his lifelong bonds with the village contributed also to shape his thought, which lies harmoniously in-between locality and open-mindedness<sup>8</sup>.

Brought up in a pious family – both his grandfathers were priests<sup>9</sup> –, he began his studies in the schools of ‘Ayn Kifā’, later moving to other schools in the surroundings before enrolling at the Madrasat al-Ḥikmah in Beirut, where he stayed two years (1904-1906). Those school years opened his mind to an international culture – thanks also to the study of French – that provided the basis for his encyclopaedic knowledge. At the age of 20, he was offered to work for the journal “al-Rawḍah” (The Garden), founded by Ḥalīl Ṭannūs Bāḥūs in 1893. His activity as a journalist was soon coupled with the teaching of the Arabic language at a number of institutes and schools, starting from the Jesuit Université Saint-Joseph. ‘Abbūd enjoyed the time spent in the cultural atmosphere of Beirut, but his ideas on reform and emancipation apparently attracted even death threats. He was expelled by the Jesuits and later worked for ‘Abbūd Abū Rāšid’s journal “al-Naṣīr” (The Protector). As a consequence, he decided to move to Ġubayyil (Jbeil), a province that was granted a certain degree of autonomy during the period of the Mutasarrifate.

<sup>6</sup> Also Kfē’. According to Elie Wardini, the etymology is uncertain. Cf. Elie Wardini, *Lebanese Place-Names (Mount Lebanon and North Lebanon). A Typology of Regional Variation and Continuation*, Uitgeverij Peeters and Departement Oosterse Studies, Leuven-Paris-Dudley, Ma 2002, p. 392. In one of his stories, Mārūn ‘Abbūd connects the name of the village to a Syriac word meaning «al-‘ayn al-maḥfiyyah» (the hidden spring). Cf. Mārūn ‘Abbūd, *Aḥādīṭ al-qaryah: aqāšiš wa ḍikrayāt*, in Id., *Mu‘allaḡāt Mārūn ‘Abbūd. al-Maḡmū‘ah al-kāmilah. al-Muḡallad al-sābi‘: al-Aqāšiš*, Dār Mārūn ‘Abbūd, [Bayrūt] 1980, p. 157.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* Translations from Arabic are mine.

<sup>8</sup> Ḡamīl Ḡabr, *Mārūn ‘Abbūd fī sirātihi wa adabihi*, Nawfal, Bayrūt 2006, pp. 40-41.

<sup>9</sup> One of them, Yūḥannā ‘Abbūd, was particularly important in Mārūn’s life, «ḡaddī wa mu‘allimī», as he described him in one of the stories that he devoted to his memory. Cf. Mārūn ‘Abbūd, *Aḥādīṭ al-qaryah: aqāšiš wa ḍikrayāt*, cit., pp. 137-144.

In Jbeil, he became the editor of the magazine “al-Ḥikmah” (The Wisdom) and a teacher of Arabic and rhetoric from 1909 to 1914<sup>10</sup>.

The political changes that occurred after the entry of the Ottoman Empire into war led to his dismissal from office and to his return to ‘Ayn Kifā’. The touching experience of the war years will be dealt with later. In 1921 he got married to a relative, Naẓīrah Fāris ‘Abbūd, who bore him four children: Kātīrīn (1922), Nadīm (1924), Muḥammad<sup>11</sup> (1926) and Naẓīr (1929), the last one named after his mother who died seven days after childbirth. Her death left a mark both in his working life and in his literary one. He found himself alone bringing up four children, while working as the director of al-Ġami‘ah al-Waṭaniyyah in ‘Ālayh (Aley), where in 1922 he had started what would become a 35-years long teaching experience. The profound sorrow prevented him from writing during the following five years and only in 1945 a new collection of short stories was published, *Wuġūh wa hikāyāt* (Faces and Stories).

From that moment onwards, he published most of his works on social and literary criticism, as well as his most mature literary works, which include the collections of short stories *Aqzām Ġabābirah* (The Giant Dwarfs, 1948) and *Aḥādīṭ al-qaryah*, and the long stories *al-Amīr al-Aḥmar* (The Red Prince, 1948) and *Fāris Āġā* (1964).

He steadfastly continued his teaching work until 1959, and his readings and writings until his last day, despite the problems caused by the illness that ultimately led to the deterioration of his health and to his death at the age of 76 in 1962<sup>12</sup>.

Mārūn ‘Abbūd seldom left his rural environment of ‘Ayn Kifā’ and Aley – also given to his aversion towards a city like Beirut – but this was never a cause for isolation from the world. Through his many contacts, he was familiar not only with the literary changes in the other Arab countries, but to some extent also with what occurred abroad. In addition, the relatively isolated position of ‘Ayn Kifā’ did not grant the village immunity from the effects of central events in the history of Lebanon, not the least of which is the First World

<sup>10</sup> For further knowledge of Mārūn ‘Abbūd’s contribution as a journalist see Mārūn ‘Abbūd, *Mārūn ‘Abbūd wa ’l-ṣiḥāfah*, Dār Mārūn ‘Abbūd, Bayrūt 1976; Walīd Nadīm ‘Abbūd, *Mārūn ‘Abbūd fī ġarīdat al-Rawḍah: ṣafḥāt lam tuṭāla*, Dār Mārūn ‘Abbūd, Ġūnyah 1986. For his work in the field of education, see Naẓīr Mārūn ‘Abbūd, *al-Madḥal ilā mu’allaqāt Mārūn ‘Abbūd al-kāmilah*, Dār Mārūn ‘Abbūd, [Bayrūt] 1980, pp. 121-149, 175-195.

<sup>11</sup> Behind Mārūn ‘Abbūd’s choice of naming his child with a Muslim name there was an intention of fighting sectarianism with facts and not only with words. This choice attracted him much criticism but also the support of friends, among whom Amīn al-Riḥānī, who expressed his encouragement in a letter to ‘Abbūd dated November 11, 1926. Cf. Naẓīr Mārūn ‘Abbūd, *al-Madḥal ilā mu’allaqāt Mārūn ‘Abbūd al-kāmilah*, cit., pp. 164-171.

<sup>12</sup> Further information about his life can be found in *Ibid.*

War, which consequences left a lasting mark on 'Abbūd's life, as they did for an entire generation of Lebanese people.

Indeed the whole Lebanon suffered the effects of the war. Turkey entered the war in October 1914 on the side of Central Powers. At that time, Ğamāl Pasha was sent to Damascus as commander-in-chief of the Fourth Army and military governor of the area, which was suspected by the Empire of anti-Ottoman, pro-Arab and pro-French feelings. Lebanon was soon occupied, and its autonomy and the capitulations abolished. The country remained under direct Ottoman rule until the end of the war. Ğamāl imposed military conscription, set up in Aley a military court, which dealt summarily with all kinds of cases, and particularly suspicions of treason. On the 6<sup>th</sup> of May 1916, fourteen Muslims and Christians in Beirut and seven in Damascus were hanged with charges of being suspected of sympathy with the French or with the Arab cause, then upheld by the Šarīf Ḥusayn of Mecca. As Philip Hitti reports:

Of the two countries [i.e. Syria and Lebanon] Lebanon undoubtedly was the greater sufferer. In fact, it is doubtful whether any other Ottoman province suffered as much. Tourists and summer visitors vanished. Delivery of remittances from relatives and friends abroad was delayed for months if not years. Under pretext of tight Allied blockade of the coast the authorities made no effort to introduce food, medical supplies or clothing from abroad. Trees were cut down and used as fuel for trains for army use. Prices rocketed to the skies. Depreciated Turkish paper money was introduced for the first time in the history of the country. Early in the winter of 1916 famine stared the population in the face. Druzes fled to Ḥawrān. Fatherless and motherless children strayed into the desert to be picked up by Bedouins<sup>13</sup>.

The Great Famine is probably one of the most tragic pages in the history of Lebanon. The crisis in wheat production started towards the end of 1915 and deteriorated in 1916. Because of the blockade of the coast, food could only be introduced from the inland, from the route coming from Alep. Nevertheless, this being a military route, the effective delivery of supplies depended on the situation on the field. Prices increased and the situation was particularly negative in Mount Lebanon because of the lack of arable lands, the stop of the remittances coming from abroad and of the job market, and the high rate of indebtedness among the population<sup>14</sup>. Ğurġus al-Ḥūrī al-Maqdisī, professor at the American University of Beirut, described the dramatic sight of starvation and death that he witnessed in Beirut:

When winter came in 1916 and the weather turned colder, the wealthy Lebanese people took refuge in their place, while the poor ones partly headed to

<sup>13</sup> Philip K. Hitti, *Lebanon in History. From the Earliest Times to the Present*, Mac-Millan & Co Ltd, London 1957, p. 484.

<sup>14</sup> Ğurġus al-Ḥūrī al-Maqdisī, *A'zam ḥarb fī 'l-tārīḥ*, al-Maṭba'ah al-'Ilmiyyah, Bayrūt 1927 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), pp. 63-68.

the inland in quest of sustenance to escape from the mouth of misfortune, after selling all their possessions. Others remained in their villages waiting for death under the roof of their houses. And still others went down to the coast and spilled over into Beirut in large numbers, enlarging the army of beggars. They were divided into two classes. The first one was made up of those who still had some sort of energy that let them roam around the doors of deposits and houses and beg for something. They searched in the ruins and the dumps with the hope of finding something to fill the empty stomachs, was it banana, potato or lemon peels, cactus leaves or something similar. Some of them headed even to decomposed corpses and devoured them. As for the second class, it was made of those who lost their strengths because of the bad conditions of life and the starvation they suffered. Those lied down along the streets asking for help with heart-breaking words. Some of them did not even have enough strength to raise their voice and could speak only through their submissive eyes. The hardest sight to bear was that of children writhing in pain for starvation in the arms of their mothers who fell down because of the extreme weakness. God, what a pain to see those terrifying bodies!<sup>15</sup>

In addition to famine, the war also brought a series of diseases that contributed to decimate the population: smallpox, rubella, malaria, dysentery, typhus, scabies, cholera, and so on, led to the death of several peasants in the region of Mount Lebanon. According to the reports of the local church, some villages lost up to one third of the population because of disease and starvation<sup>16</sup>.

The tragic conditions of Lebanon during the war were to affect many men of letters of the time, whether in the country or abroad. Poems, letters, memoirs, plays, movies reported – dramatically unheard – the terrible scenes of what occurred in those years. It suffices to recall Ġubrān Ḥalīl Ġubrān's letter to Mary Haskell, where he lamented the responsibility of the Turkish government towards the death of thousands of people because of starvation<sup>17</sup>, or his *Māta ahlī* (My people died), a poetic text in prose published in

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 68-69. Partially quoted in Philip K. Hitti, *Lebanon in History. From the Earliest Times to the Present*, cit., pp. 485-486.

<sup>16</sup> Ġurġus al-Ḥūrī al-Maqdisī, *A 'zam harb fī 'l-tārīḥ*, cit., p. 75. It is still hard to obtain an exact estimate of the casualties during the war in Lebanon. On the famine see also L. Schatkowski Schilcher, *The famine of 1915-1918 in Greater Syria*, in J.P. Spagnolo (ed.), *Problems of the modern Middle East in historical perspective*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1993, pp. 229-258; Ch. Taoutel-P. Wittouck, *Le peuple libanais dans la tourmente de la grande guerre 1914-1918: d'après les archives des pères jésuites au Liban*, Presses de l'Université Saint-Joseph, Beyrouth 2015; the special section of the magazine "Bidāyāt" (Beginnings): *Maġā'at al-lubnāniyyīn fī 'l-ḥarb al-'ālamīyah al-ūlā*, in "Bidāyāt", 12 (summer-fall), 2015, <https://www.bidayatmag.com/taxonomy/term/99>, last accessed June 26, 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Ġubrān Ḥalīl Ġubrān, *Risālah ilà Mārī Hāskil*, in "Bidāyāt", 12 (summer-fall), 2015, <https://www.bidayatmag.com/node/648>, last accessed June 26, 2019.

*al-‘Awāṣif* (The Tempests, 1920) where we can feel all his desperate impotence before that tragedy:

مات أهلي وأنا قيد الحياة أندب أهلي في وحدتي وانفرادي.  
 [...] مات أهلي جائعين ومن لم يموت جوعاً قضى بحد السيف [...] لو ثار قومي على حكاهم الطغاة وماتوا جميعاً متمردين لقلت إن الموت في سبيل الحرية لأشرف من الحياة في ظلال الاستسلام. [...] ولكن لم يموت أهلي متمردين، ولا هلكتوا محاربين، ولا زرع الزلزال بلادهم فانقرضوا مستسلمين. مات أهلي على الصليب.  
 [...] ماتوا صامتين لأن آذان البشرية قد أغلقت دون صراخهم<sup>18</sup>.

My people died and I, alive, mourn my people in solitude and isolation.

[...]

My people died starving and those who did not perished by sword [...]

If my people had revolted against their despotic rulers and had died together as rebels, I would have said: a death for the cause of freedom is more honourable than a life in the shadow of surrender. [...]

And yet my people did not die as rebels, nor did they succumb as warriors, nor an earthquake shook their country so that they died submissively.

My people died on the cross.

[...]

They died in silence, because humans' ears were closed before their cry.

Mārūn ‘Abbūd himself experienced the dramatic conditions of the war. The military government that was established in Mount Lebanon dismissed the existent administration, including Mārūn ‘Abbūd, who was the mayor of the village Ġarzūz at the time, and this fact ultimately led to his return to ‘Ayn Kifā’. As for the rest of the province, the village suffered the imposition of the siege from the side of the Allies, the cut of supplies, the forced military conscription, the devastation of the fields because of the locusts, famine and epidemics.

As he describes in his story *Fāris Āġā*:

Starvation spread in the Christian region of Lebanon, people ate what they should have not, and I will not name what they ate because I do not want to

<sup>18</sup> Ġubrān Ḥalīl Ġubrān, *al-‘Awāṣif*, Dār al-‘Arab li ‘l-Bustānī, al-Qāhirah 1991, pp. 84, 86. In addition to Ġubrān’s texts, we can find the memory of the famine in many works published during and after the war. The poem *Aḥī* (My Brother) by Mīḥā’il Na‘īmāh, the autobiography *Qabl mā ansà* (Before I Forget) by Anīs Furayḥah, the novel *al-Raġīf* (The Bread, 1939) by Tawfīq Yūsuf ‘Awwād, or even the popular movie *Safar Barlik* (lit. Mobilisation, 1967) by Hanrī Barakāt and featuring Fayrūz, are not but a few examples. For some references in this respect, see Yūsuf Ḥamīd Mu‘awwad, *Dākīrat al-Ḥarb al-‘Uzmā: al-maġā‘ah am ḥabl al-mašnaqah?*, in “Bidāyāt”, 12 (summer-fall), 2015, <https://www.bidayatmag.com/node/645>, last accessed June 26, 2019.

arouse disgust in the reader. They did not refrain from eating the carcasses and the not digested barley grains in the droppings. The government did not give them any sustenance, but everything was seized with the exception of cereals, which they lacked completely... Cows, horses, mules and donkeys were seized, as well as oil and must. In short, during that war they took anything the locusts had left<sup>19</sup>.

In these conditions, ‘Abbūd quit all his work as a writer and journalist to work and eke an existence for his family. He worked mainly as a peasant, getting books to learn new methods to increase the production, but he worked also as a trader of food supply among the villages from Mount Lebanon to the coast and Beirut. The economic conditions were desperate, as it emerges from some of his private letters and from the fact that he was forced to sell his rich library in order to deal with the extreme poverty. His literary activity completely stopped, his pen put aside if not to write a few letters. As he expressed in one of them, addressed to a relative in America: «as for what occurs in Lebanon, it can be described in three words: injustice, famine, and death»<sup>20</sup>.

Mārūn ‘Abbūd did not write extensively about World War I, nor do we find many hints in his literary production. Nevertheless, the few references that we find in works published several years afterwards reveal to what extent those events had affected his soul. We have already mentioned the passage about the Great War in *Fāris Āgā*, which represents the mere historical frame of the facts that involve the three main characters towards the end of the story. References are also in other writings of his, chiefly the collection of short stories *Wuḡūh wa hikāyāt*, which includes three stories where the theme of the war is not only clearly evoked, but is also central in the plot as much as functional to the structure of the stories. The three stories are *Mu‘allim* (A Teacher), *Umm Nahhūl* and *Wa‘zah wa dīk* (A Sermon and a Turkey), where war is approached from three different angles, despite the many similarities: that of a teacher’s father, that of a peasant and that of a priest.

The first short story, *Mu‘allim*, tells the story of a teacher<sup>21</sup>, son of two probably uneducated, but hardworking commoners. The father’s aim in life is to provide a proper education to his child, who manages to follow up his career

<sup>19</sup> Mārūn ‘Abbūd, *Fāris Āgā*, in Id., *Mu‘allafāt Mārūn ‘Abbūd. al-Maḡmū‘ah al-kāmilah. al-Muḡallad al-sādīs: Fī ‘l-qiṣṣah*, cit., pp. 272-275.

<sup>20</sup> Naẓīr Mārūn ‘Abbūd, *al-Madḡal ilā mu‘allafāt Mārūn ‘Abbūd al-kāmilah*, cit., p. 155.

<sup>21</sup> The teacher has been identified as Ṭannūs Ḥannā Ilyās, one of the most respected teachers at the school Taḡt al-Sindiyanāh. Cf. As‘ad al-Sakkāf, *al-Mu‘allif fī suṭūr*, in Mārūn ‘Abbūd, *Wuḡūh wa hikāyāt*, Dār Mārūn ‘Abbūd, [Bayrūt] 1997, p. 11. The teacher is mentioned also in another memory of his. Cf. Mārūn ‘Abbūd, *Ruwwād al-nahḡah al-ḡadīyah*, in Id., *Mu‘allafāt Mārūn ‘Abbūd. al-Maḡmū‘ah al-kāmilah. al-Muḡallad al-tānī: Fī ‘l-dirāsah*, cit., pp. 24-25; Issa J. Boullata, *The early schooling of Aḡmad Amīn and Mārūn ‘Abbūd*, in “Muslim World”, 65 (1975), pp. 100-106.

in the educational field. The typical Lebanese urge to emigrate – «al-ğurtūmah al-lubnāniyyah»<sup>22</sup> (the Lebanese germ), as the author writes – pushed him to travel to Palestine, from where he came back with his future wife, and later to Brazil. There he established a school of Arabic for the Lebanese migrants and the news of his success as a teacher reached the parents' little village in Lebanon, filling his father's heart with pride because, as the author reports, «a good reputation is better than the collected money»<sup>23</sup>. Things changed with the outbreak of the war. The money promised by the teacher for the family was never sent because the exchange rates were never as auspicious as one had expected. The hardship of life during the war forced the father to sell his house and grant a living to his family. After he died, very few of his savings were left. Yet, as the author sadly states, those who did not die for starvation died for something else. The young granddaughter contracted the smallpox and died soon after the grandfather. Henceforth, no more news about the teacher arrived to the village until the newspapers announced his death in the *Mahğar*. The father cannot express his sorrow and disappointment and prefers to keep them locked in his heart: «leave it in the heart and suffer but do not disclose it and be victim of rumours»<sup>24</sup>.

The second short story bears the title *Umm Naḥḥūl* and tells the story of a peasant woman who lives at the borders of the village. At the head of a large family, made up of more than a dozen people, she represents almost a myth in the village, embodying the image of the strong woman able to maintain her family, sometimes sarcastically depicted as masculine for both her appearance and the energy in dealing with the hard rural life. The story is divided in two parts: «qabl hāṭik al-ḥarb» (before that war) and «ba'd hāṭik al-ḥarb»<sup>25</sup> (after that war), as the subtitles report. In the first one, the young narrator is pushed by the curiosity to know the legendary woman and decides to go and visit her. The visit to Umm Naḥḥūl's household gives the author the chance to describe the fascinating peasants' environment and life that he is very familiar with: the garden full of fruit trees and populated by farm animals of any kind; a clean and warm house; the many everyday activities that living in the countryside requests. The second part tells about a second meeting between the narrator and Umm Naḥḥūl, which occurs 20 years after the first one and bears all the signs of gloom, melancholy, and desperate sadness. Differently from the teacher's father, who prefers to keep inside his concerns when he meets the narrator, Umm Naḥḥūl expresses the need to speak out her sorrow and liberate her tears. She informs the narrator on how the large family – that in their first encounter he had labelled «dayr»<sup>26</sup> (monastery) –

<sup>22</sup> Mārūn 'Abbūd, *Mu'allim*, in Id., *Wuğūh wa ḥikāyāt*, cit., p. 50.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>25</sup> Mārūn 'Abbūd, *Umm Naḥḥūl*, in Id., *Wuğūh wa ḥikāyāt*, cit., pp. 135, 145.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

is now reduced to her and her youngest child. Everyone else died or left. During the war years, the family managed to survive thanks to the continuous hard work in the fields, which granted them a living. But after the war, something changed. Fascinated by the life in the city, the young sons began to be annoyed by their hard life as peasants. One by one, they got tired of the field and the animals and emigrated. The only one interested in the care of the land died in an accident, as well as Abū Nahhūl, who died after a snakebite. The house gradually fell in ruins, in front of Umm Nahhūl's eyes which cannot bear the sight of the collapsing of her memories and hopes towards the luminous past, as testified by the words she utters towards the end of the story: «as the proverb says, the hen dies with the eye on her chicks. The destruction of the house in front of my eyes weighs on me»<sup>27</sup>. Here again we have the news of the death of the heroin, the day after her meeting with the narrator.

The third and last story bears the title *Wa'zah wa dīk* and revolves around the moral responsibility of man with regard to destruction and war. It reports the encounter between the narrator and one of his school friends, who devoted his life to God and became priest. Since the meeting occurs in the proximity of Christmas, the priest insists and succeeds in bringing the reluctant narrator to the Christmas night mass to listen to his sermon. After the amused description of the sacredness of the church, the narration is fully absorbed by the sermon. The boring, lengthy speech – the author succeeds in his aim of sharing with the reader his discomfort! – is a duplicate and an extension of what the author stated at the beginning of the story, where in few words described the ferocity of mankind during the war. We may infer that the author resorts to this expedient in order to doubt the consistency of the sermon or, at least, to stress the unnecessary verbosity of the religious discourse. Despite the gravity of the opening paragraph and of the sermon, most of the story is in fact very fluent and light. We find an extensive use of humorous passages, which suggest a different stance of the author towards the gravity of the issue, if compared with the previous two short stories.

The theme of the Great War is present in all the three stories, although not being the central topic in any of them. Despite that, war acquires a specific role in the spatial structure of these stories. An analysis of the organisation and the description of this space with relation to the war will illustrate the definition of the model of the post-war world of the author.

Jurij M. Lotman identified a relationship between the spatial models of the texts of culture and the world view of a given culture and a given author. As he writes, «the space of a cultural text is a universal set of elements of the given culture, since it is the model of *everything*. It follows from this that one of the basic features of the structure of some cultural text is the nature of

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

its fragmentation-boundaries dividing its internal space»<sup>28</sup>. According to his model, «one basic boundary [...] divides cultural space into two different parts [...]. Cultural space is continuous only within these parts and is broken at the place of the boundary»<sup>29</sup>. The simplest type displays a two-dimensional space, divided into two parts by a border homeomorphic to a circumference: one internal and limited and the other external and unlimited. This representation of the space of culture behind a text is typical of the opposition us vs the others, from which other oppositions derive such as internal vs external, my/our people vs foreign peoples, sacred vs profane, culture vs barbarism, good vs evil, etc. If we adapted this structure of the space of culture to a temporal level, instead of a purely spatial one, we would notice that in certain texts such oppositions arise again. Instead of internal and external space, in this case we will talk about the space of the before and the space of the after, and the border between the two will no longer be a physical barrier, but an event that takes place at a given moment.

This organisation of space seems to underlie the structure of Mārūn 'Abbūd's texts, where the Great War acts as a temporal frontier between a space of the before (or the space of the absence of war), corresponding to Lotman's internal space and therefore loaded with positive aspects, and a space of the after (or the space of the presence of war), that is the external space, where the negative connotations accumulate.

The shared aspect of these two spaces is the fact that, as we anticipated at the beginning, they are characterised by a distinctly personal and local point of view. On the one hand, each of the main characters of the stories, i.e. the teacher's father, Umm Naḥḥūl, and the priest, tells how his/her personal life was affected by the war. There is no room for general discourses on the military developments and political consequences of the conflict, but the concern is entirely devoted to elements that pertain the personal experience of it.

On the other hand, both the space of before and the space of after the war display specific features of the local environment to which the characters, as well as the author, belong. According to the critic As'ad al-Sakkāf, the village is the true hero of all Mārūn 'Abbūd's stories, who did not look at it as the romantics did, projecting on it the image of an ideal nature. On the contrary, he never split his creativity from the reality in which he lived. As a consequence, the characters «whether they are taken from the village paths [...] or they are invented in the laboratory of his imagination, are in harmony with those anxieties [i.e. the anxiety of humans], they are sons of the reality [...] as they were made exactly for the role imagined for them»<sup>30</sup>. The characters seem taken directly from the reality in which the author lived – and it is

<sup>28</sup> J.M. Lotman, *On the Metalanguage of Typological Description of Culture*, in "Semiotica", 14, 2 (1975), p. 103.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>30</sup> As'ad al-Sakkāf, *Tawḥī'ah*, in Mārūn 'Abbūd, *Wuḡūh wa ḥikāyāt*, cit., p. 24.

worth mentioning that the author himself features as one of the characters in many occasions. Far from being a limit to his creativity, this proves once again his capacity in merging fantasy with reality.

Leaving aside this personal and local mark, we can observe that each space stands out from the other on the basis of a) the descriptions of places and characters; b) the respect for moral values; and c) the room accorded to humour.

The space before the war displays a pattern of positive elements, which clearly emerges in the description of the environment where the characters move. An example of this is the idyllic portrait of Umm Nahhūl's household that we find in the second story.

Before I reached the white house, I passed by trees all laden with fruits, some of which were covered with nets that protected their fruits from the birds. On the top of the high branches there were skulls of sheep and goats. Eggshells were fixed on reeds planted in the terrain and strips of cloths of different colours decorated the supports of the vineyard, as if they were medals of honour that Umm Nahhūl granted to the most prolific trees, or amulets and charms that protected the crops from the devil eye. As for the beasts, she had another solution: there were two scarecrows, one in the shape of a man and the other in the shape of a woman. Their features and colours make human skin crawl. How could it not terrify jackals and birds! She left me walking close to them, as if they were guardians of different aspect, but each of them gruff and rough<sup>31</sup>.

Colours and abundance characterise the environment, as much as pride and optimism define the characters. Umm Nahhūl is a strong hard worker, even masculine in some behaviours, at the head of a large family, confident in the well-being coming from the land. Likewise, the teacher's father is proud in front of the people while reading the news of his son's successes in Brazil.

The space before the war is also where the values connected to the unity of the family and the bond to the land are constantly affirmed. Despite the hardships of peasants' life and the drawbacks of emigration, Umm Nahhūl manages to feed and keep the unity of the large family, and the teacher's father maintains an epistolary contact with his son.

Finally, this space is also where colourful and lively sketches of the life in the village take place, including many elements drawn from the folklore<sup>32</sup>. The positive and pleasant atmosphere of the feast is coupled with a light style of writing, which makes use of humour diffusely. With regard to the latter,

<sup>31</sup> Mārūn 'Abbūd, *Umm Nahhūl*, cit., pp. 137-138.

<sup>32</sup> It is worth pointing out to the fact that in the 1980 edition of Mārūn 'Abbūd's complete work – and the same holds true for the subsequent editions, like the 1997 one of *Wuḡūh wa hikāyāt* that I used in this paper – we find a rich body of notes that explains most of the references not only to folklore, but also to literature and language.

we can resort again to As‘ad al-Sakkāf and say that Mārūn ‘Abbūd’s attitude is not aggressive and moralistic, as we could find for instance in Ġubrān’s bitter and angry humour against the men of religion who were responsible of the travails of his fellow citizens. On the contrary, ‘Abbūd’s humour is an innocent one, aiming at the creation of caricatures out of the lively characters of his stories<sup>33</sup>. In order to generate the laughter, he makes use of common and popular motifs and of other devices, such as intertextuality, recalling popular sayings, proverbs and classical literary references, which serve the vital depiction of the characters and increase the comicality of some descriptions.

For instance, the common motif of the mother-in-law’s attitude with the daughter-in-law is what we find in the description of the teacher’s marriage to the Palestinian woman, about which we read in the first story:

His [i.e. of the teacher] was the first wedding I attended. Crowds came forward with that honeyed pace, chants, hymns and trills. Sugared almonds, rice and grains were poured from every house the bride passed by. Kind hands held small bottles spraying on her and the parade flower and rose water. The groom stood on the terrace above the entrance on which doorstep the bride stuck some [auspicious] yeast, while a shower of pomegranate grains rained on her. Whereupon, she got off from the horse and entered her new nest. The groom’s mother faked a smile and welcomed the future daughter-in-law twirling around her with bowls of incense. She incensed her while giving a lesson in physiology. The robes were beautiful and the dress precious. The bride was in her school years and yet her face, thin and golden like a coin, suggested that she was very unattractive. [...].

And so Ziyārah – this one was the bride’s name – became Venus and Balqīs’s sister, if not for that rumour I heard that said: «Had he come back alone, it would have been better. God help his mother»<sup>34</sup>.

Intertextuality is another device in Mārūn ‘Abbūd’s hands when dealing with humour and is particularly present in the third story. At a closer look, this story does not display a clear-cut distinction of a space before and a space after the war, since all the facts that are described occur during the war. However, as we said, the space of before the war can be defined also as the space of the absence of war. This means that we may find the same characteristics even in passages that follow the war on a temporal level, but that do not report any references to it even if we are expected to find them. Accordingly, the third story can be split in two not contiguous parts: the opening paragraph and the sermon of the priest from a side, and the meeting with the narrator from the other. While the first part is the space of the presence of war, displaying all the features of the space after the war, the second one is the space of the absence of war and displays the features that we have seen in the

<sup>33</sup> As‘ad al-Sakkāf, *Tawḥī‘ah*, cit., pp. 26-27.

<sup>34</sup> Mārūn ‘Abbūd, *Mu‘allim*, cit., pp. 50-53.

space of before the war, among which we find humour. The latter emerges at the closure of the story, during the last dialogue between the narrator and the priest: «father Ibrāhīm said: “And how did you find my speech?” I answered: “Love creates everything, even eloquence. Happy Christmas!”»<sup>35</sup>. But it clearly emerges also in the descriptions of the darkness of the church, where comicality is increased by the intertextual references to illustrious medieval authors:

And he pushed me before him.

Really, as he said, did his church during daylight stroke fear in the hearts. Think how much more frightening it was in that dark night while the snow was on the treetops, as al-Farazdaq said. Only a lantern lighted it up. I wish it had a long wick like the lamp of Imru' al-Qays' monk! But instead it was like the candles of al-Ġāhiz's *Avaricious*<sup>36</sup>.

The joyful and positive descriptions of places and people, the solidity of the values of family and land, and humour are completely reversed in the space of the afterwar, a clear-cut change epitomised by Umm Naḥḥūl's words to the narrator: «Ta'ammal ayna kunnā wa kayfa širnā»<sup>37</sup> (Look where we were and what we are now). Desolation and a state of neglect replace the joyful prosperity of the previous description of Umm Naḥḥūl's garden. Through a series of similes that anthropomorphise the house and its surroundings<sup>38</sup>, the author successfully describes the condition in which Umm Naḥḥūl now lives:

The throne of the hidden queen was empty when I visited the hanged village once again. I was surprised when I found myself in front of a *lifeless door*, which yesterday was *palpitating* like the heart of a scared sparrow.

The house without its people looked like a *body* without blood and standing in front of it was the same as standing in front of a cemetery. [...]

The lush, small and young trees got thinner and yellow and they stood around the house as *sick people* in a sanatorium. The vines fell from the supports and were disseminated here and there like the *corpses* of combatants after the battle. The land was fallow since years. The thorns took power over Umm Naḥḥūl's reign, which appeared as a beautiful *woman* in worn-out clothes<sup>39</sup>.

<sup>35</sup> Mārūn 'Abbūd, *Wa'zah wa dīk*, in Id., *Wuġūh wa hikāyāt*, cit., p. 168.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>37</sup> Mārūn 'Abbūd, *Umm Naḥḥūl*, cit., p. 148.

<sup>38</sup> The relationship of isomorphism between man and the world model is one of the aspects that Lotman touches to establish a correlation between the models of culture and the texts of culture. He writes: «In this way, there emerge various types of anthropomorphism of the world, such as the notion that the world, which is divided into organized (cosmic) and unorganized (chaotic) spheres, is on the whole isomorphous with man who also contains these two elements». Cf. J.M. Lotman, *On the Metalanguage of Typological Description of Culture*, cit., p. 114.

<sup>39</sup> My emphasis. Cf. Mārūn 'Abbūd, *Umm Naḥḥūl*, cit., pp. 145-146.

The change in the description of the teacher's father is also emblematic in this respect: a dismayed, discouraged and taciturn person takes the place of the satisfied figure of the past, who was proud and eager to speak of the success of his son.

The space of the afterwar is where the author not only describes the material consequences of the war, but also the change that the war produced in the human behaviour, with a particular attention to the gradual collapse of the traditional values connected to rural life. This attitude does not originate from a moralistic stance of the author, which is quite unusual in his production, at least in this direct form, but rather from his sincere and strong bond to the family and to the land. He is sad when he tells about the interruption of the exchange of letters between the son and his father, as much as he is disappointed when he listens about the destiny of Umm Naḥḥūl's family:

The war ended and everything changed. Our children used to obey their father but they started answering back. The life in the city fascinated them. Our neighbour's son used to stand in front of our door so that we could give him a morsel of bread. After the war, he left the village and came back like a foreign visitor. He talked only of singers and dancers – with all due respect – and he corrupted and took one of my sons with him. The rest spent their days unwillingly and complaining<sup>40</sup>.

The corruption of values is developed in the third short story. The opening paragraph introduces the reader directly to the dramatic historical context: «The war that has just passed was a fierce one, it stuck its teeth in the Lebanese village and covered it with wounds. Those collapsed houses were like the mouth of an inanimate body that testify how much more devastating are the human beings in comparison with their brothers in flesh and blood»<sup>41</sup>. As we said, much part of the story is then occupied by the long Christmas sermon of the priest, who repeatedly reproaches human beings for their responsibility for the war and for causing a fratricide that no beast would dare to perpetrate.

In the negative atmosphere of the space of the afterwar (or presence of war) humour cannot find any expression. Gravity and drama dominate this space, leaving no signs of hope for the characters, who ultimately die in solitude and desperation.

In conclusion, War World I is present in some of Mārūn 'Abbūd's stories and, despite the limited references within his whole production, his sensitiveness in dealing with it in the few cases here considered reveals how much intimately war affected his life. This sensitiveness emerges in the spatial descriptions in the texts, where war acts as a divide between two apposite spaces. The space before or in the absence of war is luminous and populated by lively images of rural life and of optimistic characters, it records the celebration of the values of family and land, to which the author is particularly attached,

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 149-150.

<sup>41</sup> Mārūn 'Abbūd, *Wa ʿzah wa dīk*, cit., p. 162.

and leaves much room to comicality. On the other side, the space after or in the presence of war bears the signs of a dramatic and desperate scenario, that ultimately ends with the image of death.

The ability of the author lies in connecting these two spaces and he does so by using the unifying element of the narrator, who is the hero, «the mobile element of the text»<sup>42</sup> that moves through the two spaces, meets the characters and tells their stories in the first person and adopting their language. The latter is in fact one of the most interesting features that make ‘Abbūd’s style particularly enjoyable. In obedience to his strong bond with real and rural life, but at the same time firm advocate of the correctness of the literary language, he resorts in many passages to a peculiar intermediate language between *fushḥā* and ‘*āmmiyyah* that we could define as *fushḥā* read in ‘*āmmiyyah* or otherwise ‘*āmmiyyah* read in *fushḥā*<sup>43</sup>. This does not originate only from the diffuse use of a vocabulary that is frequently found in the vernacular, but also from the structure of the sentence itself that, depending on the reading, may sound *fushḥā* or ‘*āmmiyyah*, as in the following example:

فصار بيتنا مثل جهنم الحمرا. حديثهم الدائم: فلان ما عنده رزق وعيشته أحسن من عيشتنا، وفلان أفقر أهل الضيعة وثيابه جوخ وحرير شغل البلاد – تعنى أوروبا – ونحن نلبس من حياكتك<sup>44</sup>.

Our house went to hell. They used to say: that guy does not have any salary and lives better than us. That other guy is part of the poorest family in the village but he wears silk clothes made in the city – that is Europe – while we put on handmade ones.

A final remark concerns the possible reference to World War I in other writings of Mārūn ‘Abbūd, chiefly in his critical essays. He was a very attentive reader of the cultural development elsewhere in the world, as well as of the local literary production. He was certainly aware of the literary changes that followed the dramatic events of the war in Europe. The question is then: did he ever consider the war as a catalyst for changes also in Arabic literature? A close reading of his essays might eventually contribute to reconsider old and new turning points in the history of Arabic literature, including War World I.

<sup>42</sup> J.M. Lotman, *On the Metalanguage of Typological Description of Culture*, cit., p. 102.

<sup>43</sup> This kind of language reminds us of the so-called third language in the theatre of Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm. Cf. G. Montaina, *Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm e il problema della «terza lingua»*, in “OM”, LIII, 9 (1973), pp. 742-755. According to Ilyās Ḥūrī, the rediscovery and the writing of orality in Mārūn ‘Abbūd’s early texts paved the way for a mature Lebanese novel, as the ones written by Tawfīq Yūsuf ‘Awwād and Yūsuf Ḥabašī al-Ašqar, despite the fact that he «did not achieve the possibility of reconstructing the oral in a cultural project». Cf. Elias Houry, *The Unfolding of Modern Fiction and Arab Memory*, in “The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association”, 23, 1 (Spring, 1990), p. 7.

<sup>44</sup> Mārūn ‘Abbūd, *Umm Naḥḥūl*, cit., p. 150.