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A Desert Place:
Asceticism in the Aftermath of Destruction

by
Aaron Frederick Eldridge

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
Anthropology
and the Designated Emphasis
in
Critical Theory
in the
Graduate Division
of the
University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:
Professor Charles Hirschkind, Chair
Professor Stefania Pandolfo
Professor Samera Esmeir
Spring 2022

Abstract

A Desert Place: Asceticism in the Aftermath of Destruction

by

Aaron Frederick Eldridge

Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

Designated Emphasis in Critical Theory

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Charles Hirschkind, chair

This dissertation is an ethnography of asceticism after and amid destruction. Based on eighteen months of fieldwork at Antiochian Orthodox monasteries in Lebanon, it considers the inheritance of this form of Christian asceticism as it intersects with a particular history of dispossession following Lebanon's civil war. Tracing out the grammar and practices of this tradition of withdrawal, the dissertation moves through the historical archive of the monastic properties, their ruination and reinhabitation, the hagiographic narratives of the ascetics, their theological and philosophical writings, as well as the reproductive and poetic labours of the broader communities that are sustained by them. These elements are not gathered under the terms of institutional monasticism, but under a singular sensibility of ascetic withdrawal. Tracing out this movement toward 'the desert,' as both a metaphorical place of passage for the soul and the physical space of the monastery, coordinates this tradition of spiritual struggle even as it dissolves it.

Part One traces out the history of monasticism in Lebanon, attending to the waning of monastic life in the early twentieth century and its return under the impetus of an Orthodox revival movement before the Civil War. The dereliction of the present is translated by my ascetic interlocutors into a space for spiritual struggle; its estrangement beckons a return to humility. Part Two turns to the therapeutic dimensions of ascetic practice and its particular attention to stillness and the soul. The stillness in the desert of the soul here works to metabolize the traumatic effects of post-war life, opening to a shared experience of divine tribulation. Part Three considers the language of subjectivity and ethics, counterposed by the ascetic interdiction against the moral 'self', as it also moves to understand the staging of Islamic poetics at the monastery. The common retreat to God, a destructive limit that forms a relationship to an outside, is finally found in the repose of death. In this, the dissertation as a whole focuses on the ambivalence of destruction for my interlocutors; its paradoxical capacity to disclose through destitution.

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Prologue: On Method

This dissertation is a study of asceticism as a form of life. In that, one is immediately presented with the difficulty that asceticism, as I argue here, is constituted as a gesture of departure from scenes of appearance. Following the cue of this tradition of Orthodox Christian ascetism as I encountered it in Lebanon, I draw out this mode of tending toward non-appearance, taking up this tradition's own ways of formulating its central concepts and practices.

The task of thinking—anthropologically, philosophically—I take to be a means whereby one “lets Being be”¹ in Heidegger’s memorable phrase. This mode of writing, as a form of ‘letting be’ is a way of engaging Talal Asad’s anthropological claim that “life is essentially itself.” Allowing a form of life to appear, then, far from a work of *anthropological conceptualization*,² draws on a materialist demand to allow for that which *already stands in view* to disclose itself.

The structure of this dissertation is an attempt to unfold a way of being; in that, this procedure follows Kant’s schematism of *metaphysica specialis*, as it was interpreted by Heidegger:

Man’s [sic] knowledge is concerned with nature, with that which is actually given in the broadest sense of the term (cosmology); man’s activity concerns his personality and freedom (psychology); finally, man’s hope is directed toward immortality as bliss, as union with God (theology).

This triad—which, as Heidegger recounts, Kant also glosses through his more typical language, “what can I know?”, “what should I do?”, “what may I hope?,”—is reducible to the question “what is man?”³ Heidegger, who locates the last question in the possibility of a “philosophical anthropology,” finally concludes that such an undertaking, the “concept of anthropology itself” belies the very *abgrund* of metaphysics and the finitude that sits behind the philosophical concept of the study of the human being.

Without turning to Heidegger’s philosophical security in the existential, this dissertation takes the structure of the recounted schematism as it is articulated in a specific mode of life: cosmology, psychology, and theology. I translate these field of inquiry, using the Arabic terms *al-‘ālam* (world), *al-naḥs* (soul), and *allāh* (God).

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (Indiana University Press, 1997), 236.

² C.f., Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pedersen, *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

³ Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, 214.

Part one, *al-‘ālam*, traces out ascetic returns as they intersect with the world. The first chapter looks at the history of the return of monastic communities, which, while emerging from process revival reminiscent of their Catholic and Islamic analogues departs from the mode of revival through an encounter with destruction. This encounter, which reifies the groundlessness of the tradition, incites the ascetic ‘leap’ into the desert space of the monastery; this tradition, as it is inherited in the present, is located in the impossibility of institutional restitution and communal impoverishment. The next chapter traces the historicity of the monastery and the ascetic returns it hosts; this historical trace, which ebbs and flows through the centuries, is spotted in the circulation of names, land deeds, and documents but remains excessive to that archive. Instead, the archive’s wavering harkens to another scene in which destruction, the other side of history, opens as an aperture onto the work of non-appearance. The final chapter of this section traces how ascetic forms of language mark the site of a loss that is lived as the constitutive gap in knowledge and subsequently worked on as the disjuncture between God and creation. Translation figures in the ascetic form of life, not as a means of assimilating more desirable modes or repairing language, but as a space in which the wound in language is most clearly felt.

Part two, *al-nafs*, turns to the work and the theory of the soul as it is articulated with ascetic practice. The first chapter delimits the fundamental terrain of *hudu’iyya*, still-experience, as a method of gathering the senses and energies of the soul around the desert space at its center—the nous or the heart. The desert of the soul takes two iterations—either in its numbing through passional excitation or in its violent ordering around its heteronomous center. The next chapter, having delimited the energetic nature of the soul in this ascetic practice, turns to consider the work of chant and vocality at the monastery. These fundamental modes of energetic release ramify the soul into an anonymous, common space of tribulation; chanting as the form of voice that is both excessive to the soul and a means of metabolizing one’s singular sojourn in the world. The final chapter focuses on tears as a central mode in ascetic life; it marks both the endurance of historical forms of destruction and the rending of the soul. Tears mark an opening that is not reducible to an affect or a bodily disposition (phenomenological psychologism) but mark an encounter with the constitutive foreignness of the soul and its heteronomy.

Part three, *allāh*, turns to what the ascetics take to be the fundamental threshold between the uncreated God and creation. The first chapter, taking its cue from the ascetic grammar by which departure from the self is a means of drawing towards god, argues for a concept of ascetic withdrawal beyond the terrain of the self. In this mode, the law that the ascetic follows is not a moral or ethical law which obtains the highest good, but is instead a

means of suspending the self and its operations; this operation of suspension brings into view that which is beyond creation. The next chapter focuses on Islamic modulations at the monastery, where the Muslim neighbor's relationship to God is posed as an impossible limit. The poetics of a relation at the limit eschew the secular language of ecumenism and sectarianism and harken to a mode where the other's relationship to God encountered as impossible. The final chapter recounts death in the life of asceticism as the ultimate threshold that delimits spiritual struggle. Death within the ascetic form of life is the departure from the scene of struggle and the recapitulation of the repose of the senses.

The use of this schematism as a triptych of a form of life resonates with Etienne Balibar's recent comments on the *concept*. Eschewing a dialectical method that produces as it reifies contradiction, Balibar's turn to schematism

has to do with an attempt at modifying, inverting the function of "schematism," as it were, so that the concept—*der Begriff, das Begreifen*, which means the formation of concepts—does not work as an instrument to distinguish, *isolate* the faculties or elements of intellectual activity that could generate conflicts from one another, be they ideologies, subjectivations or sensibilities, but, on the contrary, to bring them together and transport them into a single *topos*, in order to problematize the uncertain effects of their encounter.⁴

The space of anthropological writing, as I take it, forms such a singular *topos*, in which the *contingency* of concepts, forms of living and dying for and beyond the human being, unfold.

⁴ Étienne Balibar, "Concept," *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon*, January 15, 2018, <https://www.politicalconcepts.org/concept-etienne-balibar/>.

PART I. *al-‘ālam*

World is a collective noun which is applied to the so-called passions. But if a man does not know first what the world is, he will never come to know with how many of his members he is distant from the world, and with how many he is bound to it. Many are the persons that with two or three members have parted from the world, and curb themselves with respect to these, and suppose themselves to be strangers to the world in their way of life. This, however, is because they neither understand nor prudently see that with two of their members they have died to the world. For which cause they have not even been able to perceive so much as their passions. And since they have no awareness of them, neither have they made any effort to heal them.

—Isaac the Syrian, *Ascetical Homilies*

The themes which monastic discipline assigned to friars for meditation were designed to turn them away from the world and its affairs. The thoughts which we are developing here originate from similar considerations.

—Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” trans. Harry Zohn

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“*mā huwwa al-‘ālam?*” What is the world, I asked the elder priest. He did not hesitate: “*khalq, sharr, maḥabba.*” Creation, evil, love.

أ Toward Non-Appearance

تَصْرِفُ وَجْهَكَ فَيَضْطَرِبُونَ تَنْزِعُ أَرْوَاحَهُمْ فَيَمُوتُونَ وَإِلَى تُرَابِهِمْ يَرْجِعُونَ تُرْسِلُ رُوحَكَ فَيُخْلَقُونَ وَتَجَدِّدُ وَجْهَ الْأَرْضِ

You turn Your Face and they are troubled. You take away their spirits and they are annihilated and return to their dust. You send Your Spirit and they are created and You renew the face of the earth.

(Ps. 103)

In 2011, at the Institut de théologie orthodoxe Saint-Serge in Paris, Metropolitan Ifrām (Kyriakos), the Orthodox⁵ archbishop of al-Kūra and Tripoli, was asked to speak to his audience concerning what the organizers termed “le renouveau monastique,”⁶ the monastic revival that had taken place in Lebanon and Syria over the past half-century. Speaking in slow, deliberate French, with some Arabic asides to his co-speaker, the monastic elder recounts in the recording the pre-history of monastic revival with reference to the Orthodox Youth Movement (Mouvement de la Jeunesse Orthodoxe or MJO)—*al-ḥarika al-shabība al-urthūdhaksiyya*—which had been founded in 1942 by several Lebanese and Syrian Orthodox students studying in Beirut; some of them, in particular the most well-known figure of the movement, Georges Khodr, would go on to study at the Institute of Saint Serge in Paris. The MJO, an organization still active today across the Levant, was one of many organizations that wedded the *nahdawī* (Arab renaissance)⁷ vision of an anti- and post-colonial politics in the Arab world to the reform of religious life; many of the founders of the MJO had themselves been members of Lebanese and Syrian labour and socialist movements.⁸

⁵ Historically, Chalcedonian Orthodox Christians (as opposed to other, non-Chalcedonian Eastern Christian traditions like those of the Syriac Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, and Maronite Christians) were referred to as both *malakī* and, still partially in use today, as *rūm*, both of which signal a particular tradition of Eastern Christianity. Charles Stewart also notes a similar distinction—whereby Hellenic affiliation is distinct from a “Romeic” Christianity—in his study of Orthodox Christians on the Greek Island of Naxos. See Charles Stewart, *Dreaming and Historical Consciousness in Island Greece*, Reprint edition (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2017). In that sense, it is misleading to translate, as scholars often do, this tradition of Christianity as ‘Greek Orthodox.’

⁶ *Visite de Mgr Ephrem de Tripoli à l’Institut Saint-Serge* (Paris, 2011), <https://vimeo.com/24376731>.

⁷ See Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss, eds., *Arabic Thought beyond the Liberal Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Nahda* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

⁸ Georges Khodr, one of the architects of the revival movement and now retired Archbishop of Mount Lebanon, also worked a professor of Arab Culture at the Lebanese University and taught theology at Balamand. Khodr, a prolific essayist, has contributed numerous pieces to the Lebanese newspaper An-Nahar. See also his writings on Jerusalem, *al-Quds* (Beirut: Ta‘āwuniyya al-Nūr al-Urthūdhaksiyya, 2003) and his aphoristic autobiography, *Law Ḥakaytu Masrā Al-Ṭufūla* (Beirut: Ta‘āwuniyya al-Nūr al-Urthūdhaksiyya, 1989).

Persons from the early MJO, as Ifrām recounts, went on to begin communal monastic life in two locations—a men’s monastery at Mār Georgios, Dayr al-Harf, and the women’s monastery of Mār Ya‘qūb in Deddeh; even though they took up the monastic life in abandoned sites without any guidance these communities remain active to this day. Aside from these few modest attempts, Ifrām recalls, it was “another aspect,” that of the destruction wrought by Lebanon’s civil war (1975-1990), which brought about a different kind of beginning. Narrating it in the form of a biography, he explains how he was a member of the MJO studying at the Arab Orthodox center of theological learning, Balamand, just south of Tripoli. Driven from the school by battles in the north of the country, the students found themselves in Greece; Ifrām, himself already a priest, continued his studies at the theological school of Thessaloniki for another two years. The theological center was itself a major site of scholarship for Greek Orthodox learning, in part because it was located not far from Mount Athos, which has been the heart of Greek Orthodox monasticism for the past millennium.

Like the war that had driven him from Lebanon, Ifrām recounts that it was an illness, a “stomach problem,” that initially took him to Mount Athos. Father Iṣḥāq ‘Atāllāh, a Lebanese monk who was a disciple of a certain Greek ascetic—the man who would eventually be known as the Holy Paisios of Athos—was working at the school in Thessaloniki; when Ifrām fell ill Iṣḥāq offered to take the young priest to recuperate on Athos. He recounts that they first visited the small monastery of Stavronikita where he convalesced. At this point he recalls a surprise: “I discovered something that was for me really a discovery,” [*j’ai découvert quelque chose qui était pour moi vraiment un découverte*]. This disruptive surprise is given no further gloss in his narrative. But, he notes, it spurred him to become a monk and stay on Athos, even though his bishop, Georges Khodr “angrily” told Ifrām that the church was in need of priests and not reclusive ascetics.

After spending over two years on Mount Athos learning the monastic life at the Holy Paul monastery, Ifrām tells his audience, he was encouraged by the Fathers on the mountain to go back to Lebanon and to “found monasteries, monastic communities.” He did so despite the fact that it was the height of the civil war and so, as he describes it, “very, very dangerous.”

What Ifrām named a “synthesis”—a word he uses to refer to the interface between Athonite monasticism and the “Antiochian” (i.e., Arab Orthodox) tradition in the Levant—also marks an encounter with other itineraries that I trace here—the transmission of hesychasm, the name often used for the practice of Orthodox asceticism and renunciation through Greek, Russian, and Romanian itineraries, Islamic poetics, psychoanalysis, Arab practices of voice and image, and the material spaces of the monastery. These strands are knotted in a particular procedure, the central sensibility of this mode of life, which Ifrām himself captured that day in Paris:

Truly, the tradition of Mount Athos is worth it, I think, for any Orthodox. Unfortunately, women cannot enter there (speaking of tradition), yet it is worth it, for any Orthodox, to know [*connaître*] this monastic experience. I don't know how to explicate this experience [*Je ne sais pas comment l'exposer cette expérience*]. It is necessary to know, to encounter [*avoir rencontré*] monks. If we encounter monks, real monks, and above all monks who live in reclusion [*en cachete*], in reclusion, as we say, and not only those who are reputed. We say in Greek, for those who know Greek, a kind of advice [*conseil*] that we learned on Mount Athos. They say, “να ζει κάνεις στην αφάνεια...στην αφάνεια.” One must live...the monk lives in the ‘non’, non-appearance [*il faut vivre...le moine vit dans la non, non-apparence*]; ‘a’, this is a prefix which...one tries, in his habitation, *not* to appear [*ne pas apparaître*]. Which is why in the large monasteries (I was a priest and a priest is going to appear) one prefers to remain a monk.

This practice described by Archbishop Ifrām on that day does not lay hold of a proper “experience,” one which could be transmitted as one would the knowledge of wisdom or philosophy. It is, at its initiation, the encounter with an incapacity; *Je ne sais pas comment l'exposer cette expérience*. Ifrām describes countenancing an incapacity as a discovery, one that is disclosed in spaces of “reclusion” and that initiates a struggle or attempt, which is only traceable inasmuch as it has failed. This articulation is translated in the form of “advice,” given as a hint or password, that coordinates the struggle as one that must take the form of a grammatical accusative—*stēn aphanēia*, “toward non-appearance,” takes aim at the ‘non’ as a place of habitation.

This dissertation takes its aim at *aphanēia* as it seeks to attend, even as it fails to do so, to attempts at a human habitation in the ‘non’. This, as the dissertation explores, implies a practice structured by a sensibility of slipping away, of a flight to the desert, that remains the definitive gesture for this ascetic form of life.

A Topology of Non-Appearance

I am searching for information on the monastery of Mār Georgios at Dayr al-Harf, one of the two mentioned in Bishop Ifrām's talk; I am finally able to obtain a copy of ethnologist and photographer Houda Kassatly's small 1996 volume, *La communauté monastique de Deir el Harf*.⁹ The volume details the history of the monastery's reinhabitation, a brief account of monastic life there, and some photographs. In it, I find an image of the monks on the roof of their

⁹ Houda Kassatly, *La communauté monastique de Deir el Harf* (Balamand, Lebanon: Université de Balamand, 1996).

church praying toward the East. It reminds me of a time when I was staying at Ruqād al-Sayyida; late at night I had spotted the ascetic community's elder pacing on the roof of the monastery, prayer rope in hand. I saw him from below only for a moment as he turned to disappear again on the rooftop. Looking back at the image, it is difficult to tell the time of day; it is either *ghurūb* or *saḥar*, evening or morning prayer, both of which occur at the interchange of light and darkness. Underneath the image is a simple title: *Prière des moines*.



Figure 1.1

Gaze

I am drawn to the center monk at the foreground of the frame, whose silhouetted posture extends to the vaulted bell tower. The gaze moves left to the ascetic at the front (□*man*) of the group. I am uncertain, but I think it is the monastic whom I would come to know as shaykh Yūsif, the one who would take up leadership of the monastery after the passing of his elder Ilyās. Yūsif's face is downcast, inviting the viewer into the empty space and ground of the monastery's rooftop. From there, my eyes move into the background, tracing out the two monastics nearest the pillar. The backgrounded man, like Yūsif, is downcast, but he is also

covering his face with his hand. Traversing the empty space against the direction of the ascetics' orientation I find an overlap of two figures apart from the other four. The foreground of this duo is a monastic in comparable posture to the others. Shadowing him is a visitor to the monastery, dressed in blue trousers and a shirt; he holds an open book in his hand. His foot is stretched out as he pivots his hips toward the camera; looking on as he cuts across the orientation of his guide and the others in prayer, he is the only one to return the gaze.

The perspective that the image opens up is one in which the gaze of the ascetics, coordinated in their bodily orientation, is denied to the viewer. Our only interlocution is with another who, as a visitor, comes to this scene from outside even as he misses its encounter. This doubling, of the occluded ascetic gaze and the mirrored gaze of the visitor, produces a dynamic torsion in the image; my gaze, as it is drawn to leap to the empty space gestured to by Yūsif's downturned face, is pulled back against the other ascetics' orientation to find the point of return in a fellow visitor. From there, looking again to the orientation of the visitor's companion, I am prompted to reenter at the center of the image once more.

The always re-directed gaze constitutes a refusal of the viewer's eye, wherein its economy fails to exhaust the scene in a reciprocal dialectic (of social recognition, of emplacement). Yet the exile of the viewer from the aim of the ascetic, the latter's nondisclosure as a failure to encounter, is only shown in the meeting of the gaze of another onlooker; the appearance of another visitor.

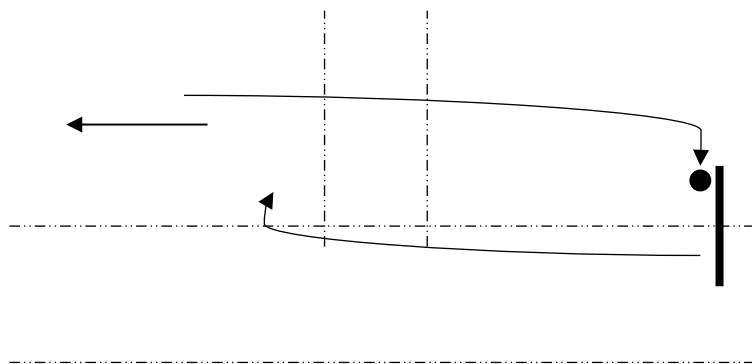


Figure 1.2

Space

The pillar at the center of the image grounds its composition; structured around the missing center of the pointed arch, the pillar acts as a passage through which these asymmetrical positions, the aim of the bodies' direction East and the back-turned West, are knotted. Where the apparatus of the camera cuts off the cross-topped dome, there the viewer is pushed down

to the terrestrial and to the doubled grounding of the pillar and the ascetics who themselves are anchored to the surface.

There is no vanishing point. The lines of the image run parallel, solely vertical or horizontal. The barren space of roof is outlined by two short parapets which run in parallel lines East-West; what sense of space is given is only in the monks' standing in relation to one another, as well as in relation to a small boulder at the foreground and edge of the frame, and to the pillar at the background. This three-edged circumscription of space in the image leaves the eastern (left) edge of the frame un-delineated.

Where is this surface? The emptying of the roof of the monastery, the cutting off of the celestial vault; the "prayer of the monks" is organized by a desert scene. Their posture is still, not only for the photographic capture. The disposition of the monastics to the *sharq*, the East, constitutes itself as the orientation, a form.

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The 7/8th century ascetic Yūḥannā al-Dimashqī (John the Damascene), as he would come to be known in the monastic sites of Palestine, wrote in his "Concerning Prostration [*proskunein*] towards the East":

It is not merely by chance that we fall down in worship towards the East. But since we are composed of a nature visible and an invisible, indeed, noetic and sensory, we bring twofold prostration to the Creator; just as with our *nous* we chant and with our bodily lips, and are baptized with both water and Spirit, and are united with the Lord in a twofold manner, partaking in the mysteries and in the grace [*kharitos*] of the Spirit. Since, therefore, "God is light," and Christ is named "Sun of Righteousness" and "Dayspring" [*anatolē*] in the Scriptures, the East must be assigned to him for prostration. For everything beautiful [*kalon*] must be assigned to God, out of Whom every good [*agathon*] arises. Indeed the divine David also says, "Sing unto God, you kingdoms of the earth: chant unto the Lord: to Him that rides upon the heavens of heavens towards the East."¹⁰

Yūḥannā coordinates the orientation of "toward" with that of twofold worship. Presented here is not a vertical topography (of nature/supernature, say) but a horizontal one, in which multiple dualities (East/West, Spirit/Sense) are reified through an orientation and a prostration "toward" the East. In Orthodox liturgics, the only time the West is marked as an orientation is during the exorcism that precedes baptism, wherein the candidate is called to

¹⁰ Ιωάννης ο Δαμασκηνός, *Ἐκδοσις Ἀκριβῆς Της Ὀρθοδόξου Πίστεως*, ed. Νικόλαος Ματσούκας (θεσσαλονικη: Πουρναράς Π. Σ., 1992), 361.

turn and spit upon the Devil. Drawing on other scriptural examples of the East as the proper orientation of worship, the ascetic writer concludes, “this transmission [*paradosis*] of the apostles is unwritten [*agraphos*]. For much that has been handed down to us is unwritten.”¹¹

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This orientation holds within its possibilities of prayer—prostration (in Arabic, *sujūd*), mapping the body by making the sign of the cross over it with one’s right hand (*ṣulība*, ‘to be crucified’), and combining them both in the act of what is called a ‘*metanoia*’ (*tawba*). *Metanoia*, carried over into Arabic from Greek as the index for this gesture, names both the act of signing the body with the cross as it bends down in prostration and a change in the state of the soul (*meta, nous*). This synonymy of the act of prostration and a change in one’s condition is a work of the *nafs*, the soul, and the *qalb*, which in Arabic is not only the ‘heart’ but that which “turns” and is overturned. The upright position, the origin and end of the gesture, etches the form of the articulation without distinguishing its act from its potential.

This form is not shared by the visitor whose posture is turned; he remains behind and he, with his guide, creates a one-sided frame to the image. The empty space between him, his guide, and the community of monastics is navigable and so invited to be traversed. The void space *before* Yūsif is without a frame and boundless. It opens onto an occluded expanse, an ‘elsewhere’ that is disclosed as a departure from the deserted space.

Shadows, Colour

The image is in twilight, with the ordinary sense of the English; a ‘doubled’ light. There is another light but it has no origin from the East (left) or from the West (right). The ambiguity of the image as to the time of day makes possible the disclosure of this other light. Where the pillar served as an interchange of the asymmetrical space of ascetic desert and the distance of visitation/accompaniment, here it relays as it equivocates the positions of setting (*ghurūb*) and rising (*saḥar*), manifesting a light without a source; illumination without a ‘position’ in the alternation of sunrise/sunset. It is this light, the doubled side of the *sharq*, the East, to which the monastics are oriented.

This other light heightens both the rose taupe of the terrestrial and the blue-gray of the sky. Yet the image, like those crafted in the mode of an Orthodox icon, is nearly devoid of shadow. This unoriginate light unites the earth and sky as it illuminates their colours in opposition. The flattening of the image, pushing toward the style of the Orthodox icon, an image that is ‘all surface’, is also what Pavel Florensky, writing about iconography, likened to

¹¹ Ιωάννης ο Δαμασκηνός, 362.

the curve of non-Euclidean geometry.¹² The chiaroscuro of the natural image establishes a single, realist perspective through a unique source of illumination, positioning the eye of the viewer through this coordination. Instead, shadowless, the image here points to the heterogeneity of space to itself and the impossibility of a single center for viewing.

The tracing out of the gaze as it circulates in the constricted space formed in the relay of the monastic ‘pillars’ opens onto a total and heterogeneous interiority that the image allows; the gathering (*mujtamaʿ*) of the ascetics encompasses their relationship—of foremost, leading the group of ascetics, accompaniment by the westernmost monk for those entering the monastic space, and visitation for the outsider. This ascetic communion, in profile, is an interiority that is not framed by an exteriority; there is no horizon with which to contextualize and to inscribe its taking place. This pure interiority, a suspension in the desert, is a groundless ground; it is a ‘nowhere.’ This nowhere stages a gesture, an orientation, toward an ‘elsewhere’.

Toward Renewal

The aim of non-appearance—that which is disclosed, as in Ifrām’s account, through the destruction of war and the illness in his body—emerges perpendicular to the activation of the project of revival; the intersection, as in *Prière des moines*, is only found in their missed encounter. The Orthodox revival movement (1942-) in Lebanon, having its antecedent in the *nahḍa* and interwar European Christian movements, would come into being during the French occupation of Lebanon and Syria (*bilād al-shām*) at a time when the Orthodox monasteries were all but deserted. The Mouvement de la Jeunesse Orthodoxe (MJO), instituted by a group of young Orthodox intelligentsia studying at the Jesuit university of St. Joseph in Beirut, initiated a kind of search for the spirit, *rūḥ*, of an already present but stagnant communal body. In these “Catholic schools”, Jibrāʿīl Saʿāda, one of the founders of the movement, writes, “the Orthodox youth really confronted the issue of Orthodoxy.”¹³

The founding of the Université Saint-Joseph de Beyrouth in the late 19th century by Jesuit missionaries marked the increasing entrenchment of Catholicism in Lebanon, one that had earlier iterations in the unification of the Maronite Church with Rome in the 12th century,

¹² Pavel Florensky, “Reverse Perspective,” in *Beyond Vision: Essays on the Perception of Art*, ed. Nicoletta Misler, trans. Wendy Salmond (London: Reaktion Books, 2002).

¹³ Jibrāʿīl Saʿāda, “Nubdha Fī Tārīkh Al-Taʿsīs,” in *Anṭākiyya Tatajaddad: Shahadat Wa Nuṣūṣ (1943-1992)* (Manshūrāt al-Nūr, n.d. [1942-1950]), 9.

and the former's reformative Latinization from the 18th century onward.¹⁴ Roman Catholic Christianity, as encountered by the founders of the MJO and bolstered by French colonial rule in Lebanon, appears as an ambivalent figure of lack:

He [Jibrā'il Sa'āda] sees his Catholic companions confessing to priests knowing the essence of true confession, attending different religious societies which nourish religious poetry in their souls so that they experience a true religious life, then he turns to his church and finds it devoid of interest in spiritual life; vexation dominates his thoughts and he falls into confusion over himself.¹⁵

This confusion confronts the writer with a decision, "is it necessary for him to change his path [*madhhab*] and become Catholic? Contradictory feelings clash, producing at times brutal expressions to which his professors expose the painful state of Orthodoxy,"¹⁶ that elicit superficial reasons for preserving the "faith of his ancestors." The solution to the contradiction, as Sa'āda writes in the annals of the movement's own publication *al-Nūr*, was to work towards "the revival of Orthodoxy." The push for revival, in the form of the MJO, took as its model the Jeunesse Étudiante Chrétienne, which was established at the university in Beirut and connected with the Catholic labour movement L'Action Catholique.

The Movement, like its Catholic prototype, was dedicated to enlivening the consciousness of the particular people of a "sect" or "faith" (in a modern cartographic technique that would also furnish the liberationist, anticolonial, and labour movements to which these members at times belonged) that formed the organic 'vine' of the church; the map of the institutional church and its dioceses (*abrashiyya*) are overlaid with a new map of different *far'*—branches, variegations—that name a part of the MJO: Dimashq, Tartūs, Ṭarablūs, Ḥalab, Bayrūt.

Inscribing the movement as a form of spiritual enlivening falls into a recursive structure with the 'work' of the movement itself. An exigency is stipulated: "Orthodox Christians are in need of renewal;" and a destination: "toward renewal" [*naḥwā al-tajdīd*]. This explanation is penned by Georges Khodr in 1950 as a gloss on the principles [*mabādi'*] that had been laid down at the MJO's inception:

¹⁴ Richard van Leeuwen, "Monastic Estates and Agricultural Transformation in Mount Lebanon in the 18th Century," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23, no. 4 (1991): 601–17. Around this time, much of the Eastern Orthodox Church also joined the Catholic Unia—a community known today as 'Melkite'. For some of this history see Makārīyūs Jabbur, *Wathā'iq hāmmah fī khidmat kanīsatinā al-Anṭākiyah: man ṣana'a al-infiṣāl sanat 1724?* (Beirut: Manshūrāt al-Nūr, 2000).

¹⁵ Sa'āda, "Nubdha Fī Tārīkh Al-Ta'sīs," 9.

¹⁶ Sa'āda, 10.

1. The Orthodox Youth Movement is a spiritual movement that calls all the children of the Orthodox Church to religious, moral, cultural, and social revival [*nahḍa*].
2. The Movement believes that religious and ethical revival is based on following religious obligations and on knowledge of the teaching of the Church. For this reason, it strives to spread these teachings and to strengthen the Christian faith among the people.
3. The Movement strives to find a culture that inspires her members by the spirit of the Orthodox Church.
4. The Movement treats societal issues which pertain to general Christian principles.
5. The Movement repudiates blind prejudice [*al-ta'aṣṣub*] and sectarian politics, but it considers consciously holding fast to Orthodox principles to be a basic condition for strengthening the faith and discovering brotherly bonds between the other Christian churches.
6. The Movement is in contact with the international Orthodox current [*al-tayyār*] and follows the dogmas of the Orthodox Church and her tradition, even as it contributes to her ecumenical development and humanitarian mission.¹⁷

The iteration of the principle requires the supplement of an exegesis; as Khodr notes, the movement is itself based on the structure of a mystery or secret (*sirr*): “everything that has been or will be said about it, even all the works it undertakes, is nothing but a defective, external expression [*t'abīr*] of the fount from which we have flowed: therefore, language does not lead to knowledge of our path [*ṭarīq*].”¹⁸ This structural reiteration of the principles of the movement of revival establishes a vector and an edifice upon which it can work; it produces a scansion in which the failed reforms of the past, evident in the corrupted institutional edifice, and the exigency of its continual reiteration, fall into time.

This unity as scansion, as movement, is thus the vitalist embodiment of a word, in which the taking place of speech evinces the inspired body¹⁹ of the community: “these pages are nothing but an attempt to present principles.”²⁰ This taking place of speech, in the tracing out of an Orthodox “religious renaissance,” activates the different ‘sectors’ of the life of “the

¹⁷ “Mabādi’ al-Ḥarika al-Shabība al-Urthūdhaksiyya,” in *Anṭākiyya Tatajaddad: Shahadat wa Nuṣūṣ (1943-1992)* (Manshūrāt al-Nūr).

¹⁸ Georges Khodr, “Sharḥ Mabādi’ al-Ḥarika,” in *Anṭākiyya Tatajaddad: Shahadat Wa Nuṣūṣ (1943-1992)* (Manshūrāt al-Nūr, 1950), 62.

¹⁹ For a contemporary anthropological study of Christian revival, also drawing on Catholicism, see Maria José de Abreu, *The Charismatic Gymnasium: Breath, Media, and Religious Revivalism in Contemporary Brazil* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

²⁰ Khodr, “Sharḥ Mabādi’ al-Ḥarika,” 62.

people” [*al-nās*] as it enlivens them. Something has been lost. The need for renewal comes from a crisis that is both “stagnation” and distanced from the originary teachings of Christ in the gospels. This loss of the vital connection institutes a projective space, one in which speech at once draws from the secret as its source and as that from which it extends. This extension forms a map that is also the grounding and building up of a world: “the building [of the Church] must rise.”²¹ The reiterative project of revival meets destruction with upbuilding; at the height of the Civil War, during the MJO’s sixteenth convention in 1979, Khodr would put forward “A New Reading of the Principles.”²²

One of the aims of the MJO in its work of upbuilding, in coordination with the institutional Antiochian Church, was to establish new monastic communities and to restore their abandoned monastic sites [*dayr*]. These monasteries, themselves situated on ‘religious’ land endowments called *waqf*, are properties dedicated to God in perpetuity under the terms of Islamic law. Their material goods, the law stipulates, are to be given for the care of the poor, the orphaned, or for the establishment of mosques or monasteries. In the course of the late 19th to early 20th century, the *awqāf* that had Orthodox monasteries built on them had been abandoned and become schools or managed simply as farming estates.

As Nada Moumtaz argues, the *waqf* had been transformed into the communal patrimonies of sects under the French legal forms, a colonial system that had emerged through the French colonization of Morocco and Algeria.²³ Religious land endowments, spaces that invoked a relationship with God that had stood outside confessional (communal) relations²⁴ became the sectarian heritage of various religious communities. As Moumtaz writes:

A characterization of *waqf* as religious under the particular architecture of state, religion, and law instated by the French Mandate in Lebanon—namely, secularism—produces a different meaning. Using the term *religious* to describe *waqfs* as possessions places them in

²¹ Khodr, 59.

²² Georges Khodr, “Qirā’a Jadīda Li-l-Mabādi,” in *Anṭākiyya Tatajaddad: Shahadat Wa Nuṣūṣ (1943-1992)* (Manshūrāt al-Nūr, 1979), 432.

²³ Nada Moumtaz, *God’s Property: Islam, Charity, and the Modern State* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2021), 52.

²⁴ Moumtaz notes the subtle shift by which the *waqf* became a communal property: “one should recall that medieval and early modern Muslim jurists considered a *waqf* whose revenues were dedicated to ‘Muslims’ invalid.” (227-228) She also notes, citing anthropologist Raja Abillama, that “Ottoman religious minorities founded *waqfs* in the shari’a court as individual endeavors that were not necessarily managed by the archbishops but were left to families and each parish” (Moumtaz, footnote 7, 227); Raja Abillama, “Contesting Secularism: Civil Marriage and Those Who Do Not Belong to a Religious Community in Lebanon,” *PolAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 41, no. S1 (2018): 148–62.

the “sphere of religion” and therefore as part of the “private” affairs of the community to be managed by the community according to its own laws (which also become characterized as religious); here the classic secular scheme of privatized religion makes itself visible through the proclaimed “autonomy” and “independence” of the various religious communities in the running of their “properly religious” affairs.²⁵

Reinvigorating the *waqf*, now as a proprietary “moral person,” took on a new impetus in post-colonial Lebanon. For its part, the ‘patrimony’ of the Orthodox was the object of a plan for economic development in 1972, when a committee was convened that consulted an agronomics expert who had worked in agricultural fields in Syria and Lebanon; he filed a detailed report on the state of the monastic properties and his recommendations for their modernization.²⁶ This project of modernization was complemented by the reinhabitation of some monasteries under the impetus of the MJO. During these years, several women monastics took up residence, attempting to begin monastic communities in conjunction with the mandate of youth education and the reform of the Orthodox community.²⁷ One of these communities would go on to form the second monastic group spurred by the reform movement: Mār Ya‘qūb in the village of Deddeh in al-Kūra.

Permanent Departure

“The movement, since its establishment, has been pregnant with monasticism” [*al-tarahhub*], the young monastics of Mār Ya‘qūb write in collective anonymity a few years after establishing themselves at the monastery. Their turn to monasticism began, the text explains, as the expansion and affirmation of *al-kalima*, the word: “the word led to asceticism and to the reading of the Desert Fathers; the experience [*khibra*] of the ancients was repeated, they who would come together as one in their dwellings before the movement of Antonios burst forth.”²⁸ Taking as their model the original Christian turn to the desert that is attributed to Antonios the Great and the Syriac and Greek ascetic texts that were produced in that turn, the text

²⁵ Moumtaz, *God’s Property*, 94.

²⁶ Nicolas Razouk Chehadé, “Les patrimoines communautaires grecs-orthodoxes au Mont-Liban: les waqfs des monastères, réseaux de rapports sociaux à l’époque contemporaine” (France, Bordeaux 3, Université Saint-Joseph Beyrouth, 2012), 206.

²⁷ Houda Kassatly, *La communauté monastique de Deir el Harf* (Balamand, Lebanon: Université de Balamand, Section de documentation et de recherches antiochiennes, 1996), 24–26.

²⁸ “Dayr Mār Ya‘qūb,” in *Anṭākiyya Tatajaddad: Shahadat Wa Nuṣūṣ (1943-1992)* (Manshūrāt al-Nūr, n.d. [1951-1960]), 175.

details how their group in Beirut practiced the activities of the movement but emphasized “ascetic ethics [*qiyam*]” while still “in the world, reading the masters of renunciation [*zuhd*].”

The small text recounts the group’s disjointed movement from Dayr al-Harf to Mār Ya‘qūb as a form of divine trial—“the Lord tested the group.” The movement toward monasticism, in the form of a surprise, is the interruption of another way of being that emerges from, as it is excessive to, the work of revival. The text lays out in striking fashion this other mode, as it approaches the language of permanent revolution: if the “movement” was an *intifāda*, a popular uprising, against “ossification” (*jumūd*) and a “release [*inṭilāq*] from standstill,” then “monasticism” is the “*intifāda* of the *intifāda*” and the “permanence [*dawm*] of release.”²⁹ The turn toward an aim heterogenous to revival pivots on the very ambivalence of *inṭilāq*, which is both an explosive ‘release’ (sharing the same root as the verb ‘to fire’ a gun), and ‘a departure’. The shift to what is attested to in the missive from Mār Ya‘qūb as the permanence of explosive release can equally be read as a permanent departure into non-appearance.

The second community established by MJO members was that of Mār Georgios at Dayr al-Harf, which had been used as a school during the French Mandate between the years 1922-1929 and 1946-1949 after which it was occupied for a time by the women who would soon move to Mār Ya‘qūb at Deddeh. In 1957, some members of the MJO successfully began a men’s monastic community there after gaining permission from Bishop Iliyā Karam. The majority of these few men were drawn from Ladhāqiyya; one of them, then known as Marcel Murquṣ, was head of the MJO branch in the city and a municipal civil servant; in several years’ time he would become the leader of the monastic community, taking the name Ilyās.

Collated alongside the testimony of the women of Mār Ya‘qūb in the MJO’s publication is that of Mār Georgios, titled “The True Revival.”³⁰ Narrating the movement toward renewal, the text follows the women’s community, writing that “after the sisters of the monastery of Mār Ya‘qūb, Deddeh were the brothers of Dayr [Mār Georgios] al-Harf: they are now five members following the rule of the monastic life and trying to begin to make it known to others through the monastery publication.” The effort at the monastery is “a humble effort,” and one still “at its beginning,” yet it is one of sincere and deep “longing” that espouses an “ecclesiastical commitment” (*al-iltizām al-kanasī*) in which “life” is “dedicated to God” (*takrīs*). In this, the text indicates that the two monastic communities “represent the deepest and most originary of what the movement called into existence.”

²⁹ “Dayr Mār Ya‘qūb,” 175.

³⁰ “Dayr Mār Girgis Al-Ḥarf Wa al-Nahḍa al-Haqīqa,” in *Anṭākiyya Tatjaddad: Shahadat Wa Nuṣūṣ (1943-1992)* (Manshūrāt al-Nūr, n.d. [1951-1960]).

Like its sister text from the monks at Mār Ya‘qūb, this writing situates monasticism as the pinnacle of the revival movement while hinting at something excessive to it. It draws strikingly on the theological and liturgical language of the Eucharistic offering: “the monastery from this perspective is, as what belongs to the movement, ‘Your own of your own, we offer to you on behalf of everything and for everything.’” This liturgical and theological formulation casts monasticism as the incarnation and plenitude of the revival. In the same way as the Eucharist offering to God of Christ’s body (‘Your own of Your own’), monasticism is the plenitude of the movement offered back to its source. The monastery as a “school for the spirit,” finally, is the “guarantee” of the movement’s continuation: “persons die yet institutions remain.”

The ascetic life of monasticism, unlike the reformative impulse from which it sprung, immediately encountered its own groundlessness. This lack of ground, disjunctive to the institutional edifice of a decadent church upon which reform could be enacted, stages a different space of struggle. The young ascetics of Mār Georgios, with no elder, solicited a Romanian hieromonk, André Scrima (d. 2000), to come to the monastery and instruct them in 1959, after he had narrowly escaped arrest in his home country. He was a man whom shaykh Yūsif, along with the other monastics, had often spoken about as vital to the establishment of their community.

Father André had avoided imprisonment in Romania with the other members of an Orthodox revival movement there called the Burning Bush.³¹ Unable to return to Romania, he spent time in Lebanon and India. The same year he traveled to Lebanon at the invitation of the monks of Dayr al-Ḥarf, the Romanian monastic gave his teachings, spoken and then written in French, to the young ascetics. They were translated and later published in Arabic as *Uṣūl al-Ḥayā al-Rūḥiyya* (*The Principles of the Spiritual Life*).³² The struggle of monastic life institutes a different mode of seeking:

the monastic searches [*yufattish*] for *allāh* because it is upon the human being to find *allāh* before any thing else: yet *allāh* is present in every place, and the exterior life reflects *allāh*

³¹ This group, like the MJO and St. Serge, consisted of urban intelligentsia. Critical to this movement was the circulation of a text, the *Philokalia*—a compilation of Greek ascetic writings first published in the mid-18th century—and a Russian ascetic, John Kulighin or John the Stranger. The hieromonk originated from the Optina Monastery near Moscow, the center of hesychastic asceticism. He was freed from a Soviet concentration camp by Romanian troops during the Second World War and brought to Bucharest where he became the elder of the group, teaching the *Philokalia*. When the Soviets occupied Romania, the hieromonk was sent to Siberia in 1946 where he reposed. See, Athanasios Giocas and Paul Ladouceur, “The Burning Bush Group and Father André Scrima in Romanian Spirituality,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 52, no. 1–4, 2007 (published in 2010).

³² The Monks of Mar Girgis, al-Ḥarf, *Uṣūl Al-Ḥayā al-Rūḥiyya* (Dayr al-Ḥarf, 1992).

by way of things, senses, and mind: “The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament proclaims the work of his hands. Day after day pours forth speech and night after night manifests knowledge” (Psalm 18) Therefore life in the world according to its modes is not contemptible: however, it reflects *allāh* in an indirect image, whereas the monastic yearns for direct knowledge of God, “I indeed marvel in [God’s] works yet I thirst for its creator.”³³

This search is not for the communal body of the reform movement, the works of the creation, but institutes a desire for God, “withdrawn from the world.”

Father André, still an itinerant, would not remain in Lebanon, and the monks themselves were soon driven from Mār Georgios in 1983 by the war. Metropolitan Georges Khodr was able to secure assurances of their safe return to Dayr al-Harf in 1987³⁴ from the head of the Progressive Socialist Party’s militia Walid Jumblatt, but the monastery had been ransacked and many icons defaced. In the interim, the monks had stayed at another abandoned monastery, Ruqād al-Sayyida in Kaftūn.

While the revival movement continued, the war meant that the projective report for modernizing the waqf and the monasteries was, as Razouk Chehade writes, a “dead letter.” Many of the monastic properties were occupied by militias and looted. Yet, as this dissertation details, the turn to monasticism and its “permanent departure,” even during the war and after, continues. This withdrawal into non-appearance produces a another space to that of revival. It is within the gesture of withdrawal and displacement, toward non-appearance, that I trace this practice of asceticism.

Ghurba in Aftermath

I return to the old Tripoli bookstore, called *The Itinerant’s Bookshop* (*Maktaba al-Sā’ih*), hoping to meet Abūnā (“Father”) Ibrahīm—a senior Orthodox priest and the proprietor of the nearly fifty-year-old shop. It is located on *shār’ al-rāhibāt*, Nuns’ Street. I enter to find only Ibrahīm’s daughter, Hiba, Kierkegaard in hand and bundled up next to a small heater, in the drafty shop. I have met her once before—she was recently returned from Germany where she had some years prior completed a doctorate in Physics. Now back in the world of her youth, she explains that she is busying herself with the development of a new academic project on the entanglements of science and religion while she supports her family store. She tells me that

³³ The Monks of Mar Girgis, al-Ḥarf, 15.

³⁴ See Amal Abdelmalak Morcos, “Greek Orthodox Monasteries of Lebanon and Their Impact on Lay Communities” (MA Thesis, American University of Beirut, 2005).

her father was in Beirut (where I had just arrived from) of all places that day looking at new stock for the publishing house. In the meantime, I scan the library, searching for the writings of several Orthodox ascetics. Hiba offers to show me the beginnings of their new garden, an open courtyard in the back consisting of dilapidated tiling and a single concrete garden bed with a large tree. She and several other young people working at the store are attempting to renovate it after the fire.

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The bookstore and publishing house, founded by members of the Orthodox Youth Movement, is known in Tripoli for its tens of thousands of volumes—among them some rare books dating back to the early 19th century—but now also for the fire that nearly destroyed them and the shop in 2014. The inferno, which resulted in the loss of some twenty thousand books, is said to have followed from some young men discovering a manuscript promulgating opinions against Islam, set to be published by the bookstore’s press. Reports of the fire, which were widespread enough to elicit a statement from a former chief of the Lebanese Internal Security Forces (ISF),³⁵ were laden with anxieties around the sectarian and extremist (*taṭarf*) image of Tripoli. The Sunni Mufti of the North, Mālak al-Sha‘ār, likewise assured those in the city that the Orthodox priest was both a friend to Islam and not answerable for the opinions of those whom his company might publish.³⁶ This initial narrative, however, as well as the responses it provoked, “retreated” (*tataraja*), as one article put it, giving way to a second narrative in which the manuscript row was a pretense for a real estate issue in the old market. The dual grammar of sect and property invoked a world of substantial, misanthropic interest and of superficial, dissimulating difference—an anxiety that re-inscribed the secular cut between parochial religious forms, their irrational cathexes, and the pure, if base, humanity of capitalist property.³⁷ This supercessionary movement acts as a balm in Lebanon in moments where the anxiety of sect, despite its seemingly proven spectrality, persists. One is assured, even at the

³⁵ Sāndī al-Hāyak, “Ṭarāblus...maktaba al-sā’ih afḍal mim mā kānat,” *Al-Modon*, March 1, 2015, <https://www.almodon.com/society/2015/1/3>.

³⁶ “Iḥrāq maktaba ‘al-sā’ih’ yuthīr istiyyā’ bi-lubnān,” *Al-Jazeera*, May 1, 2014, <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/cultureandart/2014/1/5/احراق-مكتبة-السائح-يثير-استياء-بلبنان>.

³⁷ As Nada Moumtaz tracks, the making of specifically ‘religious’ property, other than that of properly economic property, cannot easily be equated with the dedication of property to God in the pre-modern Middle East. See also the work of Mahdī ‘Āmil. In ‘Āmil, reading sectarianism is not a simple ideological mask for class antagonism. Rather, the specific grammar of sectarianism, especially in its connection with a bourgeois conception of crisis, displaces and essentializes the concept of sect while at the same time promising to transcend it. See Mahdī ‘Āmil, *Fī al-dawla al-tā’ifiya* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Fārābī, 1986).

cost of a relation with the other—where the neighbour has become the enemy—that the form of the neighbor’s enmity remains rationally translatable.

Following the fire, the effort to save the bookstore was organized as a communal endeavor that drew, as described by one *ṭarāblūsi* man, from “all sects” and “all regions.”³⁸ The young people who spearheaded the clean-up and restoration of the bookstore even inaugurated a group named “enough silence” (*kafanā ṣamatān*)³⁹ which sought to respond to a sectarian symbolic economy in which the media and officials predictably participated. Years later, during the revolutionary protests [*thawra*] that began in 2019, protesters in Tripoli, the poorest city in Lebanon, would remove all of the thousands of images of political figures, which, like in other public urban areas in Lebanon, decadently adorned buildings or were hung across city streets. Just as with the bookstore, the group made a concerted effort to undermine the familiar mobilization of sect for political party gain. During the time they helped to rebuild the library, they actively worked with the children of Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh during a 2014 clash. These two areas of the city in particular have become metonyms for Tripoli’s sectarian violence and a related and increasing anxiety over importing Syria’s civil war. The reconstruction of the bookstore was not total, its reopening through communal fundraising and labour saw the donation of new books, as well as new painting, roofing, and even a washroom. Yet, as one newspaper article recounted bitterly, at the time a television crew came to report on the reopened bookstore another clash at Bab al-Tabbaneh abruptly started. The crew ended up reporting on the clashes from inside the library, eschewing any mention of its restoration: “perhaps the truest expression of the order of priority in this city.”⁴⁰

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“People have done a lot to help us,” Hiba explains. The would-be garden is a dense workspace, crowded with conspicuous metal bookshelves, themselves filled with lightly scorched, plastic-wrapped books. As we walk she explains that many people have donated new books to the library to replace the ones lost in the fire, even helping her father to develop a digital catalogue of the books. The books, which were catalogued in order of processing (rather than on the basis of author, genre, or theme), are nearly impossible to find in the labyrinthine shop without the proprietor’s intimate knowledge of its shelves. Disappearing back into the bowels

³⁸ *Maktaba Al-Sā’ih...wa al-Taḥarruk al-Madanī* (MTV Lebanon News, 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wt291rXlyqU>.

³⁹ “Iḥrāq maktaba al-sā’ih al-tābi’a li-l-ab sarūj fī ṭarāblus wa rīfī: innuhu ‘amal ijrāmī!,” *Annahar*, March 1, 2014.

⁴⁰ Adam Shams al-Ḍīn, “Kafanā Ṣamatān...‘an Ṭarāblus,” *Shabāb Al-Safīr*, accessed October 3, 2019, <http://shabab.assafir.com/article.aspx?articleid=11547>.

of the cavernous shop, one can find the very first books held by the bookstore started by Ibrahīm's father: a collection of Muslim and Christian scriptures. Hiba is committed to turning the bookstore into a library where people in the community might read in the garden or borrow the books through a loan system. "But it is difficult," she sighs, "my father is worried that people will steal the books."

The following morning, I make my way, once more, to Tripoli. I find the old priest, seated and wearing his usual worn, grey cotton cassock. He is typically gregarious and unusually focused on the business at hand. He leads me into the back of the shop for our interview, once again to the small, tiled courtyard and garden, where work continues while we speak. I turn on my recorder and awkwardly place it on a piece of furniture while one of the young men burnishes a metal bookshelf. I begin our conversation by asking after the MJO and its attempts to bring a revival (*nahḍa*) to the Orthodox Church. "I have become disaffected with it," he states bluntly; he had been at the heart of some of the earliest formations of the MJO and had embraced and continued to hold its most Marxist iterations, emphasizing the poor and post-colonial class struggle. "Do you know liberation theology? Well, where is our liberation theology?" After this initial qualification, his tone turned more pedagogical, giving me a diligent overview of the history of the movement. For his part, in the 1960s, the priest had worked to provide aid for Palestinians; their dispossession in diaspora and under occupation is a cause that remains central to him.

His pedagogical tone yields to a more present despair: the MJO has become an "empty anthem," and its leadership, along with that of the church in the form of its bishops, have become corrupt and forgotten the poor. They are the mere bureaucratic "servants of material goods" (*ʿabd al-māl*). The words of reform are nothing but "lost speech" (*kalām ḍayiʿ*) when the poor have no place in the institutions of the church—a painful contradiction in impoverished Tripoli, around which many Orthodox monasteries and churches are located. The priest's oratorical voice cascades, rising and falling rapidly, stressing the importance of me recognizing this failure in the midst of palpable "dissimulation" (*dajl*). Recognizing failure is to acknowledge disarticulation of language (*kalām*) from spirit (*rūh*), following the recognizable topology of the revival movement. Yet within Ibrahīm's grammar of revival and its failure, another figure emerges, that of *ghurba*—estrangement, alienation, exile: "today we live in *ghurba*" (*al-yawm nahḥna naʿish fī ghurba*).

Ibrahīm articulates *ghurba* as a space within which one risks inhabitation. I urge him to continue: "But then what can we do, Abūnā?" I rephrase: "If revival failed, what do we do now?" "Where are the words of God?" he answers my question with his own: "Georges Khodr pronounced loudly that one must speak in a 'prophetic voice', but where did they manifest it? Where? The prophetic voice fell!" It is not enough to invoke the prophetic voice; one must

“speak” (*naqūl*) and “write” (*naktūb*) as one “crying in the wilderness.” Father Ibrahīm cites the words of Yūḥannā al-Ma‘madān (John the Baptist) who himself is echoing the prophet Isaiah before him; in this theological grammar, the enunciation of divine speech is possible in the wilderness (*al-barrīya*), the place for exile and in which a kind of speaking can be placed: “the voice of one crying in the wilderness, proclaiming the way of the Lord.”⁴¹ Attending to the failure of the revival in the absence of the prophetic voice is not reducible to invoking or waiting for the voice, Ibrahīm insists, but of striving to attain to it.

Drawing on an ascetic grammar, the priest characterizes *ghurba* as a condition of bellicose “struggle” (*niḍāl*). His words wend their way to this monastic topology by recalling his dear friend, an ascetic and deacon of Mār Georgios, Hierodeacon Aspiro: “he taught us the struggle.” “In his last days he told me that the reform (*iṣlāḥ*) of the Antiochian See is impossible, he told me that if I myself want to reform it, then it is impossible. One alone is weak, whereas allāh by his own hand sets the time of reconciliation (*sā‘a al-taṣāluḥ*).” His strong voice softened for a moment: “This is what I trust in.”

It was not the first time the recently reposed hieromonk had entered our conversations. During the final years of Aspiro’s life he had clashed with members of the church hierarchy; Abūna Ibrahīm had protested his treatment and he and his wife had even hosted him in Tripoli for the short time when he was removed from his home monastery. In exhorting me to struggle, Ibrahīm seized on the crystallized image of the words of “his last days,” captured in the transposition between the forms of the root *ṣ-l-ḥ*: the causative form IV word *iṣlāḥ*—to repair, to restore, to set in order—and the reciprocal form VI word *taṣāluḥ*—to make peace, to become reconciled with. The order of reform, *iṣlāḥ*, a word highly charged with the affects of the Arabic *naḥḍa* and the revival movement, enunciates its own capacity to effect a change that is at the same time promised. While *taṣāluḥ*, on the order of reciprocity, is used to denote not human action, but God’s intervention at an unknown time. The transposition effected on the level of grammar is between the causative and the reciprocal, the agentive and the exilic voice. “Struggle is difficult,” he concludes, “you have to be prepared to pay.”

Abūnā Ibrahīm’s invocation of John the Baptist poses the ambivalence of ascetic withdrawal. John, the ascetic prototype for Christian monasticism is *malāk al-saharā’*, the angel and messenger of the desert. The scriptural and prolific poetic textual tradition speak of John as living in the desert, preaching to the non-human witnesses of angels and demons. When John did appear at the end of his life it was to preach the coming of Christ and to rebuke King Herod, the latter of which resulted in his death. Paying the price for truth for Ibrahīm implied

⁴¹ John 1:23 and Isaiah 40:3.

a relationship of the desert to the city through the ancient tradition of *parrhesia*⁴² in which the prophetic voice appears as a rupture and judgement; to suffer truth as one suffers from an ailment. It is to undergo truth as a passion.⁴³

Ibrahīm repeated to me over the course of our encounters (attempting, perhaps, to prefigure his own ‘last words’) his vision of an “unorthodox Orthodoxy”; a tradition that could reckon with a present condition of being out-of-joint. Like John—who figures the condition of being cut off in an act of inheriting the Messianic revelation—Ibrahīm seeks to realize speech as an exilic condition, to suffer truth. In the form of a chiasmus, exilic speech is both the impossibility of a passage and the passage of impossibility.⁴⁴

As in Kassatly’s photograph of the monks of Mār Georgios, which opened this chapter, John’s turn to the desert and even his ‘appearance’ in city can be read as a non-appearance in which impossibility is lived. An icon of John adorns the South side of the iconostasis at Mār Georgios’ main church, above which the monks were praying in *Prière des moines*. Painted as part of the monastery’s restoration by a Romanian iconographer, this icon, like most Orthodox imagery, is not singular but rendered in a typological and shared format.

⁴² The *troparion* chanted for John likewise contains this decisive vision, where his prophetic victory, the inheritance of the promise, and his slaying at the command of the law, collapse into the same figure: “having witnessed the truth, you joyously proclaimed the good news to those in Hades.” The condition of witness, as a martyr who suffers for the truth, is communicated in the Arabic text through the preposition ‘*an* and may alternatively be translated as “you bore witness to the truth” (*shahadata ‘an al-haq*). But the translation is even more ambiguous in Greek, where the suffering takes “the truth” as the direct object in the genitive case (της αληθειας). An instructive, if corrupted, translation would read “you suffered of the truth.”

⁴³ The model of ascetical life (*zuhd*) that John crystallizes in the image of mutilation is likewise found in Nauman Naqvi’s own memorable depiction of *askesis*. For Naqvi, the possibility of inheritance is premised on the acceptance of sacrificial self-curtailment: “the extremity of askēsis then: self-decapitation for the abyssal passion of witnessing the phenomenal miracle of life, for the abyssal violence of poiēsis.” (62, in Nauman Naqvi, “Acts of Askēsis, Scenes of Poiēsis: The Dramatic Phenomenology of Another Violence in a Muslims Painter-Poet,” *Diacritics* 40, no. 2 (2012): 50–71.)

⁴⁴ It is in John’s figuration as a limn that his exemplarity for exilic speech is manifest. The ninth ode of the vigil of the canon dedicated to him acclaims John to be “the site of the law [*sharī‘a*] and of grace [*na‘ama*] at once.” John as the *maqām*—that is, the site, situation, or location—of the prophetic tradition and its messianic end hosts a division. The *maqām* of law and grace is contained in a single moment (*fi ān*), disallowing the place for an objectifying vantage. The condition of ‘at once’ implies that this division cannot be schematized through antinomy (law or grace), which might enact a sovereign decision to mediate between them. Rather, here the limit is figured as an impossible passage that is called to be endured.



Figure 1.3 The icon of John the Baptist at Mār Georgios

Like *Prière des moines*, the icon's radical interiority forces the gaze to circulate as it draws one through the verticality of the image; from the Forerunner's severed head through his intact figure holding the sign of blessing (the name of Christ, in Greek letters, 'ICXC'; *Iēsous Christos*). This bodily articulation of the saving word forms the second of two horizontal scenes, which are mediated by the text that flows between them. The lines of the scroll, unraveled and leading as it were to the singular image of John's own mutilation reads, "he [Christ] must increase and I must be curtailed." The verb in Arabic describing the action of Christ (*yanmū*) is in the active voice, while the verb ascribed to John (*anqaṣ*) is passive: the ascetic prophet is subject to curtailment, literally "cut off." This knotting of diminution and expansion is suspended within a desert scene; once more, a 'nowhere'. The nowhere of this desert scene, the pure interiority of its flat, perspectiveless surface, gestures—in both John's orientation, his face in profile, and the scroll exceeding the border of the image—to an 'elsewhere' that does not appear. The viewer is once again within the space of an infinite interiority that harkens to a horizontal 'elsewhere'—toward non-appearance.

Father Ibrahīm's invocation of John speaks to the ambiguity of *ghurba*. The priest orients himself in the exilic space of the desert as a staging ground for a reappearance in

speech and word; but the desert is also a space of the radical interiority of dispossession, impossibility, one which, as a 'nowhere,' opens as a leap to an elsewhere. It is, as the ascetics of Mār Y'aqūb wrote in anonymity, an "endless departure." It is specifically the manifestation of groundlessness, and the incapacity it engenders, that opens up a time in which asceticism, toward non-appearance, is articulated as a mode of human life. This turn to the elsewhere of non-appearance is traced out in forms of communal labour, in the work of the soul, and in relation to other human beings.

ب Destruction, the other side of history

يَا رَبُّ فِي الْبَدْءِ أَنْتَ أَسَّسْتَ الْأَرْضَ وَالسَّمَاوَاتِ هِيَ صُنْعُ يَدَيْكَ هُنَّ يَفْنَيْنِ وَأَمَّا أَنْتَ فَتَبْقَى. وَكُلُّهُنَّ كَالثَّوْبِ يَبْلَيْنِ. وَتَطْوِيهِنَّ
كَالزَّيْءِ فَيَتَبَدَّلْنَ

In the beginning, O Lord, Thou didst found the earth, and the heavens are the work of Thy hands. They will perish, but Thou remainest; they will all wear out like a garment, and Thou wilt change them like clothing and they will be changed.

(Ps. 101)

This chapter attempts to write a history from the vantage of ascetic withdrawal in the latter's its aim toward non-appearance. This brief history is one of a vector, 'toward *aphaneia*,' in which the forms of appearance (names, built spaces, bodily remains) are traces. Destruction—as between an origin and a present appearance—rather than that which historiography sutures, is an opening to the 'nowhere' of here that, in the idiom of ascetic withdrawal, passes to an 'elsewhere.' What kind of history can asceticism obtain? It is a history that is not the space between an origin and a present. There is no origin in asceticism, non-appearance. This history is given in the form of a 'wake' that manifests as the traces of habitation (labour, built space) and hospitality (common, social).

Inferno, Archive

It is early morning and we are travelling to the Orthodox monastery of Hamatoura. My friend, whom I here choose to call Khalil, along with his brother, first introduced me to the monasteries, wants to bring me there for morning liturgy on *yawm al-aḥad*, Sunday—the weekly celebration of Christ's resurrection and the height of the monastery's porosity to visitors. Situated high on an escarpment overlooking the mouth of the *wādī qādīshā*, the 'holy valley' which houses numerous ancient sites of Christian asceticism,⁴⁵ Hamatoura is only accessible by steep and half-repaired switchbacks. As we make our ascent, I notice that the once largely dirt path has been slowly expanded in the years since I had first climbed to the monastery; it was now in the process of being lined with cut stone to accommodate the growing number of travelers to the monastery, some of whom we pass on our way up the

⁴⁵C.f., Guita G. Hourani and Antoine B. Habchi, "The Maronite Eremetical Tradition: A Contemporary Revival," *The Heythrop Journal* 45, no. 4 (October 1, 2004): 451–65, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2265.2004.00266.x>.

mountain. I am surprised at the age of some of those who climb the mountain. With the sun barely risen, we hasten up the steep paths in time for the morning liturgy.

The verticality of ascent to the monastery⁴⁶ has its equivalent in the degrees of horizontal interiority in the monastery; passing the initial gate, Khalīl and I enter the courtyard of the monastery over the escarpment and from there into the old church itself, which is built into the mountainside. The church is divided into degrees of outside and inside by which one passes deeper into the earth; we pass those standing in the narthex, the outermost part of the church, and into the nave. There we find spaces in the small church, which is already full, as we look on at the iconostasis—the icon ‘screen’ that separates the easternmost and innermost space of worship, the altar table—the space reserved for those performing liturgical functions.

Enveloping the church from within are icons of saints and cosmic events; they adorn half of the sanctuary’s walls. On the other half lies a thick white plaster; the plaster is said to have been put over the icons by the monks as an act of preservation after Ottoman officials defaced the frescoes. This plastering, which still marks many Orthodox monasteries in the Levant today, exemplifies the interplay of ruination and preservation and brings them into a space of ambiguity.

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In the years following Lebanon’s war, I later learned, the monastery in which we stood was abandoned and derelict. People would still come to the empty monastery, which was devoid of any ascetics, and light candles in the unusable church. The lack of a consistent human presence meant that the lit candles were often neglected, and one night the supplicatory torches caused a fire that ravaged the already-worn building. The walls of the church were at that time entirely covered by the same suffocating plaster; in the intense heat of the fire, the plaster began to crack and blister. The conflagration in 1993 revealed the near-millennium-old images, unknown to anyone living, lying under the surface.

Not long after this, a Lebanese monk, Panteleimon, returned from the Greek monastic island of Athos to Hamatoura to begin the long work of resuscitating its cenobitic life. Panteleimon was a disciple of Iṣḥāq, the Lebanese ascetic who had introduced Archbishop Ifrām to monasticism on Athos.

Iṣḥāq had come to Hamatoura in the second half of the 20th century, decades after it had been abandoned. The few monks there quit the monastery in 1917, after it was fired upon by

⁴⁶ Ascent as a trope is ubiquitous in Orthodox Christian liturgics. The long morning prayers, *saḥar*, have within them the ‘hymns of ascent.’ These chanted poems are drawn from Psalms 119-133, which are those thought to have been sung when ascending the Temple Mount at Jerusalem.

Ottoman artillery in the First World War and, most decidedly, after a devastating earthquake destroyed much of its structure.⁴⁷

A short account of Iṣḥāq penned by an Orthodox priest Milḥim, taken from the recollections of Iṣḥāq's brother Anṭūn, traces out the form of a drive to withdraw, one that is given in destruction much like the 'gap' of an aperture:

One day in the summer of 1962, he packed his clothes in his bag, left his work at the famous hotel [in Beirut], and returned to his home. Once he reached the house he delivered to his father a savings ledger for 'Civil Bank,' saying to him: "this frozen account in the bank is in your name, and the claim date is thus. I ask you, at the time of the claim date, to withdraw the money and distribute it to the members of the family equally. I do not want anything because I am leaving to the monastery." His father asked him: "what do you need in this life that I could provide you, so that you will not go to become a priest?" Fāris [i.e., Iṣḥāq's given name] answered him: "even if you make me owner of this world [*al-dunyā*] my eyes would not desire it. My calling [*d'awa*] is not here but in the monastery."⁴⁸

Fāris would have gone to the monastery at Bkiftīn, a village located outside Tripoli and not far from Hamatoura. At that time, in the 1960s, the head of the monastery was an archimandrite Yūḥannā, another member of the MJO. Yūḥannā had only recently moved to the site, the only occupant of the ruined monastery save for one other. When Fāris's brother Anṭūn, who had accompanied his brother, reported to their father the state of the monastery and that he was sure it would hasten the young man's return, the text tells us, his father simply replied, "Whatever difficulties your brother faces, he will never return."

The young novice went to study not far from Bkiftīn at Balamand. Becoming first a deacon, taking the name Fīlabbus, the would-be ascetic travelled to Greece to continue his studies. There, the text tells us, he encountered the monastic life and his spiritual Father, the elder Paisios, on Mount Athos.

Returning to Lebanon, Fīlabbus, then a priest, would serve at Hamatoura's church, Mār Girgis, as a communal priest. Empty of ascetics, he worked to restore some of its cells and the orchards on its land. In only a few years, the war began in Zgharta and the region of al-Kūra would be occupied by militias and their artillery. This finally forced the priest Fīlabbus to leave Lebanon and stay in Thessaloniki, where he would aid the displaced students of Balamand and

⁴⁷ Razouk Chehadé, "Les patrimoines communautaires grecs-orthodoxes au Mont-Liban," 180.

⁴⁸ al-Ab Milḥim, "Min al-Sīra al-Arshmandrīt Iṣḥāq 'Aṭāllāh," 2015, roumortodox.org/-سيرة-من-حياة-وشيوخ-قديسين-وشيوخ-حياة-من-سيرة-الأرشمندريت-إسحق-عطاالله. A French version can also be found here, "L'Archimandrite Isaac (Atallah) l'Athonite 1937 - 1998," *Le Bon Pasteur: Bulletin de l'Association Des Chrétiens Orthodoxes D'Antioche et de Leurs Amis*, 2006.

introduce Ifrām to Athos. There Filabbus would finally take the ‘great schema’ [cite] and with it the name Iṣḥāq; he would, as the texts notes, remain in *ghurba* until his death.

It was on Athos that iṣḥāq commissioned his disciple Panteleimon to found a monastic community at Hamatoura, a site where he had served as a priest, but had been driven out of by the war. Panteleimon returned to Lebanon shortly after the end of the war and began the work.

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After the morning liturgy, my friend and I go up from the main monastery to a second, newly-built church that has been constructed further along the escarpment in a neo-Greek style. The small, bright interior had yet to be furnished with frescoes; a simply-adorned iconostasis partitions the altar space, and some standing chairs populated the back space of the church. Near the iconostasis, along the empty north and south walls, were placed four wooden coffins with glass tops. The bodies of the martyrs (*shuhadā*) of Hamatoura, “*al-qaddīs ya‘qūb wa aṣḥābuhu* [the Holy Jacob and his companions]”, were shrouded in fine embroidered cloth. Through the glass, I can see that Jacob’s relics are robed in black monastic clothing as an *reconquista* adorns his neck, which marks him as both a priest and a monastic. The icons of each martyr have been placed atop their respective glass coverings. A sweet scent, one of the signs of deified relics, escapes into the air through the seams of the glass covering.

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In the years following the Lebanese war, an account was discovered of an unknown martyred man named Ya‘qūb in a manuscript in the Balamand monastery archives.⁴⁹ The *gerontikon* (a collection of local elders’ names and biographies) which contained his name stated that his synaxis (the day the saint is celebrated) had been commemorated yearly by the previous inhabitants of Hamatoura on October 13th; later editions of the original document had neglected to transmit his name. The earlier edition of the synaxarion tells of a 13th century ascetic, Ya‘qūb, who was a monk in Hamatoura until the Mamluk governate, having established itself in Tripoli, drove him and his fellow ascetics out of the monastery. After founding a new monastery dedicated to St. George at the top of the mountain, on the limn of the lands of Hamatoura, the ascetics were eventually arrested and brought to the provincial

⁴⁹ “Ms. Balamand 149 (previously 432) copied in the village of Btarram in the Kura district in 7064 of Adam's year (1556 A.D.) by the deacon David for the church ‘of the leader of the angels Mikhail (Michael) that is in the city of Tripoli in the quarter of al-Nasr” quoted in, Ray Mouawwad, “Christian Martyrs in Tripoli in the Mamluk Era,” in *Towards a Cultural History of the Mamluk Era*, ed. Mahmoud Haddad et al., Multilingual edition (Beirut; Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2011), footnote 25.

capital, Tripoli. The synaxarion attests to the fact that the martyr, after being tortured for a year in an effort to compel him to recant his faith, was beheaded and burned by his captors along with his companion. The new community of Hamatoura, which had only been re-established a few years prior, celebrated the saint's day for the first time in 2002.

The martyric destitution of which the archival name is a trace would appear once more when the bodily relics of the newly-celebrated ascetic and his companion were unexpectedly discovered during a renovation of the monastery's church floor in 2008. The removal of the heavy stone tiles near the iconostasis uncovered a small enclosure with several skeletons inside. The discovery of the initial two bodies led to another pair of bodies in the same area, and finally to that of a young child. While the remains of the first body showed signs of trauma, all the relics remained, at that time, of unknown origin. A piece of the child's skull was found inlaid in the altar, confirming that the child was considered a martyr. The first set of remains was tested and showed the marks of decapitation on the vertebrae and scorching by fire—the same actions the synaxarion records in the martyrdom of Ya'qūb. It was soon agreed by the head of the monastery and community members to be the body of the saint.

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We venerate the relics in the church and we are approached by one of the younger monastics who knows Khalīl, as he would come to the monastery regularly. He greets us and takes the opportunity to tell us several stories about Ya'qūb and his appearances to those in the monastery and to the community. The sustained presence of the saint, he explains, was crucial to the return of a monastic community; perhaps the most important of these events was the first revelation of Ya'qūb's image (*ṣūra*). I don't have my notepad. I listen as well as I am able and consult with Khalīl afterward:

There was a woman whose son had a disorder where the boy's organs did not grow along with his body, and so this child was not expected to live past the age of twelve. The woman brought her son to the monastery to pray for the intervention of the Theotokos [Maryam, the 'Mother of God', to whom the monastery of Hamatoura is dedicated]. But when she came, a hieromonk met her and told the woman instead, "What are you doing here? This boy will certainly die, you should name him Ya'qūb after me." To this the women responded with bitter tears and fled from the monastery. When she returned to her home, she called for her son, but he did not answer. Finally, he responded to his mother's call, asking "Why do you call me by this name? You should call me Jacob." So, the woman did so. The boy was soon healed and showed signs that he would live. Then the woman returned and asked the head of the monastery for

the hieromonk named Jacob. The head of the monastery, Panteleimon, with surprise, told her that there was no monk living at the monastery by this name. But knowing of the saint, he prompted her to describe what he looked like. Her description, which was painted by a *rāhiba* [a women monastic] and iconographer at the neighboring Mār Ya‘qūb monastery, is the origin of the image of Ya‘qūb of Hamatoura.

After our conversation we leave the church. Descending from the slopes of the monastery, we hear and then see a low-flying jet which Khalīl, with dismay, says must either be Russian or Israeli. It is heading to Syria to continue the war. Life at Hamatoura, which has and continues to house Syrian Orthodox fleeing the war just across the border, is far from insulated from the scenes of ongoing destruction that impress upon it.

The points of appearance here mark out moments of failure, given as a surprising discovery, to ‘not appear’; Ya‘qūb, himself a recluse and displaced from his monastery, fled higher up the mountain. He was eventually *brought into appearance* by the governing powers of the time, taken from his desert dwelling to the city and made subject to the law. His subsequent death, a return to the destitution of non-appearance is traced in the archive as a name, Ya‘qūb, and a “life” (that which forms the basis of the genre of hagiography). Like the plaster that the monks placed over the defaced frescoes, and the bodies of the martyrs that were buried under the church, the archive serves to preserve the trace (the appearance) as a ruin.⁵⁰ The return of monastics to the monastery, in turn, is made possible by displacement and destruction of the war; the groundlessness of habitation.

⁵⁰ In his remarkable book treating similar material among Orthodox in Greece, Charles Stewart argues that, buried objects incite historicization. A tangible object comes to light. Its discovery signifies “miracle,” but its material existence sooner or later raises questions about possible pasts, thus stimulating historical accounts. This would be the difference between European Catholic and Greek Orthodox miracles. Catholic cases can only be given a history back to the moment of theophany. Antecedent sources lie in the ether of transcendence. The Greek cases, by contrast, begin at the moment when the objects were first created; their discovery in the present activates a historical imagining of the land and its former inhabitants. (Stewart, *Dreaming and Historical Consciousness in Island Greece*, 169).

Valentina Napolitano’s account of traces resonates with that of Stewart’s when she writes, traces emerge out of a condensation of stories/histories. I use the word condensation here in the Freudian sense, to mean a process of compromise and convergence of multiple stories into a knot. That knot has a form and is in space – so that a trace is both a form in space as well as the process through which histories and reminders of different worlds imprint and condense on a given space. When multiple stories from different worlds condense into a trace they become powerful as they stand not only for a singular history. (Napolitano, “Anthropology and Traces,” *Anthropological Theory* 15, no. 1 (March 1, 2015): 47–67, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499614554239>.)

These uncanny nodes form a trace which variegates as it ‘returns’ through archives, bodies, visitations, and spaces: what is being traced?⁵¹ From the vantage of ascetic withdrawal, it is the aim of tending toward *aphaneia*; the condition of the emergence of this trace is a doubled destruction, one that opens both to the work of non-appearance and to the encounter with it as an aftermath.

These ruinous aftermaths form a spatial coordinate that condenses time; the ruin denotes the function whereby space is *temporalized*, crystalizing into a set of overlapping temporalities. The displacement of Ya‘qūb collapses into that of the anonymous monks of the early 20th century, and of Iṣḥaq’s at the start of the civil war. The ruin of the church building, the conflagration of its walls and the tearing up of its foundations, likewise collapses into the prior ruination of the remains of the body. The appearance (i.e., the failure of non-appearance), on the other hand, denotes a primarily temporal element that forms the rhythm of a proliferating work of a trace: the hagiographic life of Ya‘qūb and, later, Iṣḥaq, but also the presumed if non-extant writ of Tripoli’s authorities condemning Ya‘qūb to death, the forms of writing that proliferate, including this text, in the transcription of the dream and in the painting of his image. In that sense appearance is a function of *spatialized* time; that is, of contoured temporality.

The tracing out, the *shahada* (witness, testimony, the translation of the Greek *marturīā*), of ascetic retreat’s failure witnesses to the gap that asceticism tends toward. This gap, like the launching into the atemporal ‘elsewhere’ from the destitution of the desert, cuts across the historical dialectic of destruction and production, of appearance and disappearance.

The Historiographic Rend

This initiatory ascetic impulse, to dig cave-dwellings into rocks, to retreat to the desert, or to return to ruined buildings, founds and collectivizes the monastic form of life.⁵² One of the

⁵¹ Another way of rendering this history, as Robert Orsi has done in his remarkable work, is as a history of presence. Drawing on the central Catholic idiom of ‘Real Presence’—a theological principle that was developed in 16th century Europe and so is importantly absent from Orthodox and other Eastern Christian traditions—Orsi proposes to write a history of presence where the latter is the subject; “the gods never departed lived experience” (251) as he notes. Here, I call attention to the fact that what Orsi calls presence (the example he gives in his epilogue is interestingly the veneration of a “dead monk’s body” at a Georgian Orthodox shrine) is also a site of ruin. See Robert A. Orsi, *History and Presence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

⁵² In this sense there is no hard distinction between coenobitic and anchoritic monasticism (something monastics themselves will insist upon). Both communal and eremitic asceticism are oriented around an initial withdrawal, and both cohere in practices of obedience to a spiritual father or mother. Much of documented ascetic life is

youngest monks of Hamatoura, I learned in one of my conversations there, regularly came to the monastery as a youth against his family's wishes. In his fervent desire to join the monastery, he would often flee to the sanctuary, climbing the mountainside at night only to sleep on the monastery stoop until the doors were opened before the break of dawn. Despite the young man's eagerness, the head of the monastery could not accept him as a monk until he turned eighteen, as he was still under the legal guardianship of his parents, who categorically forbade his entrance into the monastic life. At eighteen the young man joined the monastery without delay and his life continues there to this day. This story evinces the decidedly dual articulation of 'cleaving' in the monastic life—"the monk is he who is detached from all, yet joined to all"⁵³—which inhabits a doubled temporality: a striving to return to a time before the human being's separation from God, and anticipating the time of end (of death and of the eschaton, through a withdrawal to the 'desert') and thus a separation.

Given the form monastic cleaving, the fundamental modes of asceticism—fasting, vigil, and prayer—cannot be delimited by an analytic notion of individual self-cultivation or strictly reduced to an external disciplinary apparatus (although individual self-discipline is by no means excluded). As one contemporary Athonite monk writes, "what is conspicuous in the monastic literature is the principle of diversity, the acceptance of various forms and the free choice between different ways of ascesis, in accordance with personal character, potential and desire."⁵⁴ A single form of life, its discursive or sensible modalities, cannot be *strictly* said to delimit monastic withdrawal. Rather, the "protological and eschatological" cut—instantiated in the dispositions of "chastity, obedience, and nonpossessiveness"⁵⁵—coheres the shared acts of monastic discipline. Renunciatory obedience, toward non-appearance, both outstrips and makes possible the singular yet shared life of the ascetic.

Historiography and contemporary forms of governance grant a certain place for the ascetic form of life—the institutional property of the monastery. As the previous chapter

rhythmically reclusive, periods of solitary withdrawal are marked by communal returns. Moreover, the withdrawal of the singular ascetic, and their claim of an experience of God, is paradoxically able to found a human community. In this, Alexander Goliztin notes, "the seer of the apocalyptic texts, transformed as the result of visionary experience, is a basis—even arguably *the* basis—for the eventual portrait of the ascetic holy man, the elder or 'Abba,' as initiate and guide into heavenly mysteries." In "The Vision of God and the Form of Glory: More Reflections on the Anthropomorphite Controversy of AD 399," in *Abba: The Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West*, eds. John Behr, Andrew Louth, and Dimitri Conomos (Crestwood, N.Y.: SVS Press, 2003), 279.

⁵³ Nilus (Evagrius of Pontus), *Περί προσευχής*, 124, PG 79.1193C, quoted in Chrysostom Koutloumousianos, *The One and the Three: Nature, Person and Triadic Monarchy in the Greek and Irish Patristic Tradition* (Cambridge, U.K.: James Clarke & Co, 2015), 85.

⁵⁴ Koutloumousianos, *The One and the Three*, 90–91.

⁵⁵ Koutloumousianos, *The One and the Three*, 85.

noted, in the Levant and other parts of the Mashriq monasticism is made legible through the contemporary legal category of the *waqf*, one originating in the Islamic juridical category of the religious land endowment (which was related to the historical transition from Byzantine religious land holdings to the Ottoman *waqf*)⁵⁶ but which has been significantly reconfigured through 19th century Ottoman reforms and French governance. The integration of the Ottoman economy into capitalist forms of exchange, which accompanied both the mid-19th century modernization efforts and the French mandate period (1923-1946), significantly reconfigured the place of the *waqf* in class relations and agriculture production.⁵⁷ As Moumtaz writes, “according to these late Ḥanafī fiqh definitions, the ownership of the *waqf* belongs either to God or to the found, not to a juristic entity called *waqf*. The *legal formulation* of the *waqf* as being a moral person is completely novel.”⁵⁸

The *awqāf*, both Christian⁵⁹ and Muslim, continued as sites of contestation, conscripted into new orders of ecclesiastical, economic, and state rule. Their legal stability across historical variegation is an afterimage produced through this inscription and re-inscription of *appropriation*; the result is a supposedly natural body around which there forms an archival edifice.

In this sense, the dialectical alternation of use and disuse, upbuilding and degradation, is indifferent to the aim of ascetic habitation. The Orthodox monasteries likewise have historically-traceable narratives of transformation, ruination, and renovation. Standard

⁵⁶ Slim, *The Greek Orthodox Waqf*, 45–47. One of the major shifts for Christian land holdings in the new Ottoman empire was a renovation of their legitimate ends. In the new Ottoman dispensation, Christian *awqāf*, however massive (for example, the Maronite Church holdings at one point covered as much as a third of all of Mount Lebanon), could serve the poor (i.e., those that are the common care of all) but could not uphold institutional church or monasteries. This directly impacted the constitution of Orthodox Christian urban *awqāf*, which became sites that served the destitute and the orphaned. See also Anṭuwān Rājīḥ, *al-Awqāf al-Masīḥīyah fī maḍāmīn al-shar’: nubdhah tārikhiyah wa-ta’līq ‘alā al-shar’ al-nāfidh* (Lebanon: Manshūrāt al-Jāmi’ah al-Anṭūniyah, 2007).

⁵⁷ Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London; New York: Pluto Press, 2012), 47.

⁵⁸ Moumtaz, *God’s Property*, 49. She also quotes on the same page the commentators of the French edition Muhammad Qadri Pasha’s legal manual, which notes “The main legal effect of the constitution of a *waqf* is taking out the ownership of the *biens* [possessions] made into a *waqf* from the patrimony of the founder and its transfer into the ownership of the moral person called *waqf*”, Muhammad Qadri, *Code Annoté Du Wakf*, trans. Abdel Aziz Kahil Pacha, annotated by Umberto Pace and Victor Sisto (Paris: Librairie G.P. Maisonneuve, 1942, 1:Article 1.6).

⁵⁹ Richard van Leeuwen has offered the most comprehensive study of the *waqf* economy in relation to Maronite monasticism. He describes the commercialized production and the considerable extension of Maronite *waqf* land along with the consolidation of Roman Catholic authority over the growing Maronite monastic ‘Lebanese Order,’ the latter itself being a new form of monasticism tied to the increasingly dominant form of sericulture. See Richard van Leeuwen, “Monastic Estates and Agricultural Transformation in Mount Lebanon in the 18th Century,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23/4 (1991), 601–17; Richard van Leeuwen, *Notables and Clergy in Mount Lebanon: The Khāzin Sheikhs and the Maronite Church, 1736-1840* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994).

accounts of the waqf and its monasteries mark the variegations of institutional life through mapping out the monastery head, who may not reside at the monastery or may manage multiple monastic sites. At other times quotidian management of these spaces, depending on their levels and modes of agricultural production, may pass from clergy entirely to a tenant farmer. Accounts often note that monastic properties are built on ruins of earlier inhabitants; the northern coastal monastery of Balamand, for example, was established in 1603 on the ruins of a Cistercian abbey left by the Crusaders. Shifts in modes of production (e.g., to sericulture) or political events (e.g., the peasant revolt in the mountain in the mid-19th century) mark the variegations of material life at the monastery, or even the ability to sustain organized human presence. Orthodox monasteries in the north, contemporary historiography tells us, suffered from immiseration and weakened communal life during other times in the Ottoman period as well;⁶⁰ the monastery of St. John of Dūma in the region of Batrūn was “deserted for a long time,”⁶¹ and repopulated in the 18th century by monastics from Mār Ilyās.⁶² The mode of production, the forms of labour that produce certain kinds of social relations,⁶³ locate and stabilize the monastery as a property.⁶⁴

In these periods of alternating transformation and continuity, the archive’s possible rupture or disappearance, heightened by the major destruction of Lebanon’s war, threatens the index of a productive archive.⁶⁵ As Abou el-Rousse Slim’s study of the history of Orthodox monasteries laments,

⁶⁰ Constantin Alexandrovich Panchenko, *Arab Orthodox Christians Under the Ottomans 1516–1831*, trans. Samuel Noble and Brittany Pheiffer Noble (Jordanville, N.Y: Holy Trinity Seminary Press, 2016), 214–15.

⁶¹ Slim, *The Greek Orthodox Waqf*, 25.

⁶² Slim, *The Greek Orthodox Waqf*, 83.

⁶³ Althusser, for example, notes, in a historiographic moment, that “every generation of individuals always finds the existing instruments to hand; it can improve them or not...the technical level of the agents of a labour process and, more generally...by the existing *means of production*.” (23) While his point here is to insist that the “determining element” of production is the existing productive modes and not “people”, the additional consequence is that disuse (unproductivity) is always in relation to an existing or deficient productivity; monasteries (like factories and farms) can suffer from ruination because they are ultimately understood principally as sites of (material, social) production. See Louis Althusser, *On The Reproduction Of Capitalism: Ideology And Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (London : New York: Verso Books, 2014).

⁶⁴ Collected manuscripts from these monasteries have been compiled in recent years at the University of Balamand. See, for example, Antioch (Orthodox patriarchate), *Maḥfūzāt Baṭriyarkīyat Anṭākīyah wa-Sāʿir al-Mashriq lil-Rūm al-Urthūdhuks*. (Bayrūt: Qism al-Tawthīq wa-al-Dirāsāt al-Anṭākīyah, Jāmiʿat al-Balamand, 2001); *Maḥfūzāt Dayr Sayyidat al-Balamand al-Baṭriyarkī wa-Dayr al-Nabī Ilyās al-Baṭriyarkī, Shuwayyā, wa-Dayr al-Qiddīs Yūḥannā al-Maʿmadān, Dūmā*. (Bayrūt: Qism al-Tawthīq wa-al-Dirāsāt al-Anṭākīyah, Jāmiʿat al-Balamand, 1995).

⁶⁵ For a study of the possibility of a history of that which has no archive or witness, see Marc Nichanian, *The Historiographic Perversion*, trans. Gil Anidjar (Columbia University Press, 2009).

The choice of archives has been practically imposed by the availability of documents. Most of the archives of monasteries and episcopal sees have been destroyed by disasters, by time, or by spring-cleaning initiatives. For example, during the civil war in Lebanon, the episcopal sees of Tripoli and Mount Lebanon were sacked and burned in the course of fighting, and their archives perished in the fires. During the battles in Kūrah in 1976, the manuscripts, archives and icons of the monastery of Balamand were stolen; fortunately, they were restored, but not until 1987.⁶⁶

In another example, Slim's study notes that the documents of the monastery of St. John of Dūma "were obviously damaged due to the fact that it became a barracks during the Lebanese war."⁶⁷ The occupation of St. John of Dūma by the Lebanese Forces is hardly unique; Hamatoura was occupied by the Marada Movement and Sayyida al-Nūriyya by the Syrian Army.⁶⁸ In these cases, historiographic writing focuses on the fact that destruction disperses the possibility of (historical) recuperation, one that might be assuaged through the recovery of historical documents or, equally, the productive presence of life at the monastery.

The reiteration of presence, in the form of the historical appropriation of a communal territory, bears resemblance to earlier modes of legal legibility which was grounded at times in the form of productive *use*. The legitimization of the reclamation and expansion of *waqf* land to state officials was accomplished through the language of renewal, that is, of renewed *use*.⁶⁹ This was specifically the case where *waqf* land had expanded to include previously state-held usufruct (*mīrī*) land. In the case of the re-inhabitation of St. John of Dūma, occurring at a time of upheaval and land redistribution in the 18th century, Slim notes that "a specific term, *jaddadna*, was also used to designate new acquisitions. It means 'we have renewed' and is used 6 times."⁷⁰ The employment of this term, she argues, stemmed from the monks' "insistence on explaining their estate had not been given out as *waqf* but had been won thanks to their efforts and labor at a time when al-Baklik [i.e., a local notable family] *mīrī* lands were bestowed on religious orders only in return for the *mīrī* tax payment."⁷¹ The language of renewal in this case is not only tied to profitability but more fundamentally to the reclamation of unused land. The notion that ascetic life is initiated in 'use' (of enclosed land, or ruined buildings)—i.e., a movement from passivity, absence, to activity, presence—is bolstered by the juridical language

⁶⁶ Slim, *The Greek Orthodox Waqf*, 35.

⁶⁷ Slim, *The Greek Orthodox Waqf*, 25.

⁶⁸ Razouk Chehadé, "Les patrimoines communautaires grecs-orthodoxes au Mont-Liban," 156.

⁶⁹ For an important study on the concept of 'use' in Western Christian monasticism see Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

⁷⁰ Slim, *The Greek Orthodox Waqf*, 84.

⁷¹ Slim, *The Greek Orthodox Waqf*, 84.

of usufruct, used at times by monastics themselves in the legitimation and expansion of *awqāf* to state officials.

This impulse, to take destruction as a gap or a threat to the archive, is shared by national and communal histories that understand the juridical grammar of the *waqf* and the territorialization of land as the consolidation of a coherent identity or a communal ‘patrimony.’ Anna Poujeau, in her volume *Des monasteres en partage*, ethnographically traces out what she calls a “national monasticism” of Eastern Christian—principally Antiochian Orthodox—communities in modern Syria. The monastery, she argues in her own account of monastic revival, becomes a site for reaffirming Christian presence and identity by witnessing to a “Christian history.”⁷² This sense of a distinctly Christian *property*, one which Moutaz argues to be a decidedly post-Mandate phenomenon, has analogues in Lebanon as well. In 1997, an “entrepreneur” bought some of the land of the *waqf* of Dayr al-Harf, building and renting out some 400 homes with the expressed purpose of stabilizing a Christian population that had been significantly diminished from the time of the war.⁷³ This parceling of the *waqf* is opposite of the expansion of the *waqf* through the language of usufruct but symmetrical in its operation; both claim the right of appropriation through the legal grammar of productivity.

Yet, Slim herself affirms that “monks have always lived at the sites of these monasteries, which were often only caves dug into the rock or the remains of an earlier building,”⁷⁴ and, in another article, writes that “these monasteries, which had at one time been mere hermitages and caves surrounding a cave church [*kanīsa kahfiyya*], came to be, since the 18th century, the center of agricultural investment.”⁷⁵ Likewise, Constantin Panchenko, in his historical account of monastic life in Syria and Lebanon, muses that monasteries “arose spontaneously around the dwelling place of a well-known ascetic.”⁷⁶ This pre-history of the institutional monastery, which works as an originary supplement⁷⁷ for the historiographer,

⁷² The renewal of monasticism, she remarks, operates on different levels: “the renovation and construction of monasteries, promoting the growth of the monastic life, encouraging the faithful to come and gather there for a few hours or days for a spiritual retreat,” the latter of which, she notes “may spark [monastic] vocation, but also marks national territory through symbolic Christian spaces. these newly erected monasteries certainly shape a new landscape [*paysage*] but above all a territory.” (79) In Anna Poujeau, *Des monastères en partage: Sainteté et pouvoir chez les chrétiens de Syrie* (Nanterre: Société d’ethnologie, 2014).

⁷³ Razouk Chehadé, “Les patrimoines communautaires grecs-orthodoxes au Mont-Liban,” 292.

⁷⁴ Slim, *The Greek Orthodox Waqf*, 77.

⁷⁵ Souad Slim, “The Relations between the City and the Village through the Orthodox Waqfs of the City of Beirut,” *Chronos* 37 (October 15, 2018): 181, <https://doi.org/10.31377/chr.v37i0.132>.

⁷⁶ Panchenko, *Arab Orthodox Christians*, 205.

⁷⁷ C.f., the work of the supplement in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Corrected edition (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) or the “pathological” in Georges

from the vantage of ascetic withdrawal, forms the groundless space from which to launch; already subsisting in ruins, monastic life, at its impetus, finds itself in the non-place; an often-literal desert.

Slim's work notes, finally, that within the archives of the monasteries themselves, "the concluding colophons of these manuscripts or their bindings give us supplementary proofs as to the existence of a monastic life prior to the official establishment of the monastery."⁷⁸ The colophon—the copyist's concluding and marginal inscription in monastic manuscripts—marks the threshold of the archival trace and that which does not appear. It presents and defines the supposed wholeness of the text (and indeed, the colophon is the most useful part of a document for historiographic knowledge) while gesturing to that which outstrips it.

The ascetic flight to the monastery does not end with establishment at its site; the monastery itself is structured by the main church and residence and the continual movements away from those centers in the form of meagre hermitages or bare sites of reclusion at the edges of the *waqf*, the anonymity of new names in life and washed bones without named graves in death. In this, the ascetic impulse draws on the earlier grammar of the *waqf* as a site of divine intercourse—that which precisely exceeds the social relation.⁷⁹

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Speaking of the 'return' of Orthodox asceticism, then, follows what the women of Mār Ya'qūb named as taking up the originary flight of Antonios as the assumption of the groundlessness of the desert.

To accord this as a productive 'revival' is to take asceticism as a means linking an origin to the present, in the mode by which Michel De Certeau describes the "reconquista" of a "de-Christianizing" seventeenth-century rural France. This is relevant because one of the farthest-reaching consequences of this reconfiguration through revival, as De Certeau demonstrates, is the development of a definitive historical methodology—a rationalist and exegetical philosophy of history—in which

the 'return to origins' always states the contrary of what it believes, at least in the sense that it presupposes a *distancing* in respect to a past (that space which precisely defines

Canguilhem, *On the Normal and the Pathological*, trans. Carolyn R. Fawcett (Dordrecht, Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1978).

⁷⁸ Slim, *The Greek Orthodox Waqf*, 77.

⁷⁹ See also Amira Mittermaier's work on the Sufi *khidma* in Cairo, wherein forms of service to the poor escape the logics of charity, Amira Mittermaier, *Giving to God: Islamic Charity in Revolutionary Times* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2019).

history: through it is effected the mutation of lived tradition by which one makes a 'past,' the 'ob-ject' of study), and a will to *recover* what, in one fashion or another, seems lost in a received language.⁸⁰

Revival takes the dual functions of a "will to recover" and the perception of a salient temporal wound that a particular kind of historiographic recuperation, as a form of ground, is meant to suture.

For these contemporary ascetics, the return is not to an origin but rather to a lived modality of groundlessness, non-appearance. The originary groundlessness did not occur in the past and is not brought to the present as a repetition; instead the present is constituted through an originary groundlessness that the ascetic attunes herself toward. From the perspective of ascetic withdrawal, the discovery of the forgotten name in the translation/transmission of the archive, the name's eschatological signification that betokens healing, the reposed body, and the revealed image, do not simply disclose a once-occluded and now-revived history. Rather, these figures of ruin seize the present, enfolding its contours into wider temporal architectonics, which harken to one's space of habitation as a deserted 'nowhere'.

The Desert Of Destitution

*Woe on me! How my soul is distressed! What fire of affliction devours me!
In Tripoli is born the expression "woe on me!" as pain consumed me before I even composed this poem,
On Christians and what happened to them and their children!
Christians, their glory was on the whole earth, and nothing remains of them, no mention neither work,
They dispersed in the countries in Egypt, Damascus, Gaza and the Hawrān,
B'albak until Hims, Aleppo, al-Ma'arra and to the distant countries...*

Sulaymān of Ashlū^c, 13th century poem (trans. Ray Mouawwad)⁸¹

Maurice Blanchot remarks that the emergence of the image is premised on a demise: it is only the cadaver which can *image*. Yet Blanchot goes further than this, noting that there are two ways of being toward the image. The first is *regard* (where the viewer maintains sovereignty

⁸⁰ Michel de Certeau, "The Inversion of What Can Be Thought: Religious History in the Seventeenth Century," in *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 136. Importantly, De Certeau observes that the secular division between rationalist and so-called 'hagiographic' histories originates in the desired recovery of what at that time appears as a lost Western Christian tradition.

⁸¹ This poem was written at the time of the Mamluk conquest of Tripoli by an Orthodox priest. This translation is found in Mouawwad, "Christian Martyrs in Tripoli in the Mamluk Era," 33.

over their gaze). The second, “to live an event as an image,” Blanchot notes, “is to be taken: to pass from the region of the real where we hold ourselves at a distance from things the better to order and use them into that other region where the distance holds us—the distance which then is the lifeless deep, an unmanageable, inappreciable remoteness which has become something like the sovereign power behind all things.”⁸²

Appropriately, within the space of the monastery, the image of repose appears in marginal spaces—anterooms, corridors that are off the main lines of traversal. These sites topologize a withdrawing digression, or, to recall Lacan’s writing on prehistoric art, a form of anamorphosis.⁸³ At Mār Ya‘qūb the Mothers have set up a small chapel with a relic of the Athonite ascetic who directed them, over correspondence, to a source of drinking water as well as a piece of clothing of Iṣḥaq of Athos. The room chosen for this reliquary is, however, merely a walled-off alcove created from the intersection of the domed roof and the monastery’s floor; in this it also resembles a tomb.

A similarly obscure place is given for the ossuary at Hamatoura, in which, following the practice on Mount Athos, the bones of the monastic Fathers that have reposed are collected. This is done after three years of burial; once the flesh of the body has sufficiently decomposed, the bones are exhumed,⁸⁴ washed, perfumed, and placed in an open but small space directly underneath the main church.

As the head of the monastery at the time, Archimandrite Panteleimon, explains to a documentary crew filming the space, these relics are placed “under the church” because there remains a relation to the living; “they are connected to us by prayer, they pray for us and we

⁸² Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 260.

⁸³ “To put it briefly, primitive architecture can be defined as something organized around emptiness. That is also the authentic impression that the forms of a cathedral like Saint Mark’s give us, and it is the true meaning of all architecture.” Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter, vol. 7, *The Seminars of Jacques Lacan* (New York: Norton, 1997), 135–36.

⁸⁴ The reburial, or “secondary treatment,” of human remains is a common human practice and the Athonite tradition likely has shared roots in the wider Greek practice, one documented in Loring M. Danforth’s anthropological text, *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982). Using Clifford Geertz’s symbolic analytic that marks a radical division between a “religious” and “common-sense perspective” (which is also described as between “subject” and “objective”, “fiction” and “real”), Danforth writes that inasmuch as death is “final,” “the religious perspective, with its denial of death, is quite painfully contradicted by the common-sense perspective, with its forced acceptance of death.” (32) Danforth thus, following Geertz, takes ritual as a symbolic mediation of this “contradiction” and “transition from life to death.” The most stark example of this is the exhumation which “can be seen as an attempt to deny death by reversing the process of burial, and thus as an attempted or partial resurrection.” (33) As I argue here, reburial is the formation of a death-image, a synonymizing figuration of a life that is always already a death, not, as Danforth suggests, an attempt to assert life over death.

pray for them.”⁸⁵ The bones are gathered together and arranged *en masse*, forming an oceanic image of a collectivity stripped, like the ascetic, of worldly attributions. This renunciatory mode of *memento mori* is found in the Orthodox funeral chant:

I called to mind the Prophet who shouted, “I am but earth and ash.” And once again I looked with attention on the tombs, and I saw the bones therein which of flesh were naked; and I said, “Which indeed is he that is king? Or which is soldier? Which is the wealthy, which the needy? Which the righteous, or which the sinner?” But to Your servant, O Lord, grant that with the righteous they may repose.⁸⁶

The coordination of images of repose in death at the monastery finds a strong example in Mār Ilyās, the patriarchal monastery in Shwayya, in whose main church a triptych of images coordinates a space that conjoins a number of areas; this space, which must be accessed through back corridors, serves a second-floor mezzanine overlooking the main church, on a path leading to a rooftop courtyard. In this interstitial space, from which one can pray as on the main floor during liturgies, there is an icon of the reposed Nektarios (d. 1920) hung over the mantel leading to the rooftop courtyard, directly to the left (the North) of those facing to the East during liturgy. The image depicts the bishop and ascetic reposed on his deathbed, mourners surrounding him holding vigil candles, with one leaning in to touch the hand of the dead man.

The second Image is that of the *kafn* (or *epitaphios*), the “burial shroud” used liturgically in the final days of Holy Week—the most vital days between the end of the Great Fast (known as ‘Lent’ in Western Christianity) and the celebration of Pascha. It depicts the reposed Christ, naked and prepared for burial after his crucifixion with his arms likewise crossed over his body. This icon, woven from cloth, is the image of Christ’s day in the tomb after his death and before his resurrection.

The final image is that of a reposed bishop Makarios Sadaqa, a bishop of Beirut who lived the 19th century and whose body was found underneath the monastery around the time of the civil war. His body lies, like the relics at Mār Ya‘qūb, in an awkward space; from the balcony to the right of the one praying to the East (South) there is a narrow set of a few stairs leading to an entranceway only a few feet tall. This opens to a small, dark room in which the glass-top coffin of Makarios lies, with the bishop still vested and veiled. There is a wall light mounted near each of the two icons on the wall and lights that must be turned on to enter the windowless crypt.

⁸⁵ Celia Peterson, *The Good Struggle: Life In A Secluded Orthodox Monastery*, Documentary (Journeyman Pictures, 2018).

⁸⁶ This hymn was composed by John of Damascus (d. 749).

These three scenes form a kind of anamorphic space in which the gaze of the suppliant facing East is always taken into a polycentered economy of repose:

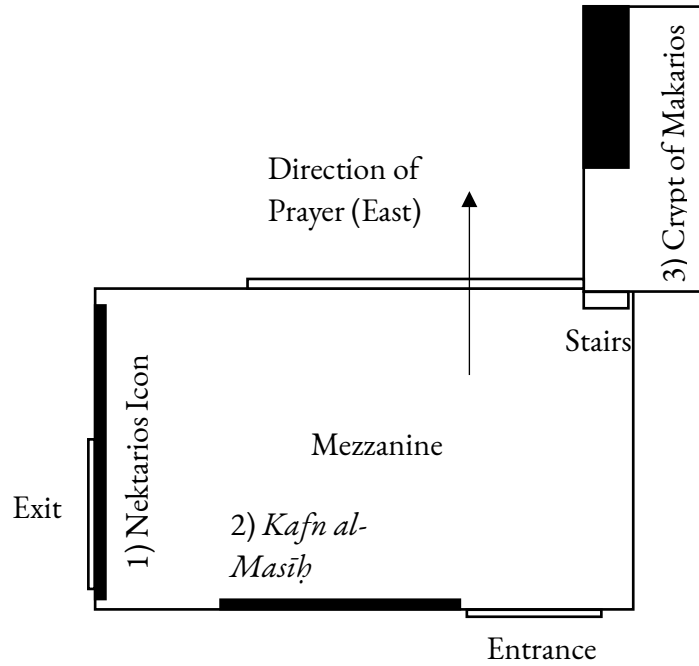


Figure 1.4 a map of Mār Ilyās,

Like the gesture to the elsewhere of non-appearance, situated in the ‘taking place’ (“here”) of the desert, one praying on the mezzanine is caught in a displacement and an anamorphic projection. This anamorphosis, like examples drawn from painted images, is not one found in a fixed relationship of the gaze (between the viewer and the image); instead it is an embodied movement through a space that marks a change in what Stefania Pandolfo names, following Lacan’s schema, the “coordinates of the real.”⁸⁷ In this, implication with the dead one becomes coordinated, gaining an orientation precisely through the distorting ‘bordering’ effect that occurs with the image(s) of repose. To countenance the image of death one must necessarily

⁸⁷ Writing of the remembrance (*dhikr*) of death in Islamic tradition, Pandolfo continues:

The visualization of death in their recollection explodes the existential frames of daily life. It inscribes the object-like quality of the corpse in the present as a ‘remembrance of death,’ which is not a cultivated attitude, in the sense in which gnostics practice *dhikr*, or at least not explicitly, but something that befalls them, as death does. The experience of death, of the corpse, radically alters the coordinates of the real, tangibly producing a temporality of the afterlife in the here and now of presence. (216)

In Stefania Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul: Madness, Psychoanalysis, Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 216.

disrupt the proper orientation for liturgical prayer; turn entirely around to the West to look at the shroud, crane one's neck to view the icon of Nektarios' death above the exit and to the North, and finally stoop down to enter Makarios' crypt to the South.

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After we exited the main church at Mār Ya'qūb, Khalīl asked them my question, which was whether or not the monastery was occupied during the war. They affirmed that indeed it was, and they themselves lived it. They then told several stories, which included their spiritual mother Um Salām (who passed away recently).

During the war the militiamen wanted to set up some artillery on the roof of the monastery, the nuns tried to refuse but they insisted. After this, the artillery would not fire; they tried and tried again but it would not fire. It was then removed and tested back outside the monastery walls where it fired without incident. It was then moved back inside again only to refuse to work. This, the nuns told us laughing, happened multiple times until the militiamen finally gave up and decided not to set up the artillery there.

Another story involved the proximity of the militiamen. The nuns were scared of them so one day the abbess went out to them, scolded them, and asked them for their identity papers (huwiyya), told them they should not be there and that they should go. This frightened them to the extent that they indeed left.

Another story involved the abbess likewise threatening one of the leaders of the militia, whom Khalīl assured us was a butcher that would put people in cement alive. The climax of this story and the laughter (which was as much about remembering the departed Um Salām as anything) was when the head of the monastery yelled at the militia leader "do you know who is behind us?" (warā'nā). The stories also spoke about the destitution of the monastery and how much of it was destroyed being hit by shells, all except the church which remained largely intact. The nuns spoke about how they were forced to sleep outside, if within the monastery walls, but that luckily the weather was good.

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The covering up of the defaced icons, like the nuns' displacement in the monastery, is a form of non-appearance. Subject to defacement, destruction—the ascetics do not reform the image, but effect a completion of its hiddenness in its obscuration. The monastic ascetic life, thus viewed from the margins of the colophon, is manifest in its signature relation to the time of withdrawal, to the non-appearance and a lack of place (its propriety) in the most literal sense. The modes of juridical legibility, made and remade under regimes of tax-farming or capitalist land tenure, as well as the various forms of communal patronage and agricultural subsistence,

are not unimportant to the institutional life of the monastery. Yet from the vantage of Orthodox asceticism, its withdrawal and abasement, these forms always follow from rather than initiate the monastic space. In that sense, these modes of delimitation furnish and seek to give place to that which seeks to have no proper place. The historiographic operation, inasmuch as it wills to return the ruin to its place in discourse as proper history, eschews the gesture of ascetic withdrawal, a mode of life that pushes on the limits of the archival trace.

Historiography, in its turn, evinces this paradox—it outlines an absence (figured as ‘the withdrawing recluse’) that conditions its production of a legible presence (a monastic community). The historiography of monasticism, once it is separated from the ‘hagiographic element,’ is one almost entirely dependent on the form of propriety (i.e., the *waqf*), which, in the juridical language of the state, grants temporal continuity to a monastic community. In this ambivalent production of the archive, as De Certeau describes, historiography “finds its support precisely in what it hides: the dead of which it speaks becomes the vocabulary of a task to be undertaken.”⁸⁸

Returns are always dispossessive. They are the mark of a repetition, that, like the inscription of the colophon, gesture to a threshold. Orthodox asceticism cultivates a form of life oriented toward this threshold, toward an encounter with a God, elsewhere, but staged in the desert of a ‘here’. The destitution of the ‘here’ is a process in which the historicity of space opens to its *aphaneia* rather than its firm presence; the specificities of Ya‘qūb’s life, the events of his death, and his uncanny return are articulations of destitution that, much like the Lebanese and Syrian wars, the life of Iṣḥāq or the women of Mār Ya‘qūb, gesture to the aim of asceticism. Yet inasmuch as these events are enfolded into the architectonics of asceticism—of dispossession—they resist historicization either into a chronological history of monastic community or as a means of marking the unique crisis (or redemption) of present time. Ruin—a heterotopic archive of another time in the present—undergoes a conversion in monastic grammar. Ruination here is at once a process of destruction of the ‘here’ and of God’s self-disclosure in another scene.

⁸⁸ Michel de Certeau, “The Historiographical Operation,” in *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 102.

ت Language, Loss

بِكَلَامٍ شَانِقٍ يَفِيضُ قَلْبِي فَأَحَدْتُ عَنِ الْمَلِكِ بِمَا أُحَرَّرُ وَلِسَانِي مِثْلُ قَلَمِ الْكَاتِبِ الْمَاهِرِ

With excited words my heart overflows, I address the King by what pours forth. My tongue is like the pen of a deft writer.

(Ps. 44)

This chapter attempts to sketch the ways by which asceticism attends to language. It draws on a preeminent thinker in Orthodox Christianity, Maksīmūs al-Mu‘tarif (Maximos the Confessor), to treat the proliferation of language, speaking and writing, that accompanies the ascetic reinhabitation of these monastic spaces. This chapter marks the ways the ascetic attention to discursive transmission, in words and letters, mirrors the disclosure of the divine *logos* through an act of turning, as in the topology of non-appearance, away from the desert scene of the world. The inheritance of the Orthodox ascetic tradition in Lebanon, its return, is one that registers its own groundlessness as the desert space from which its practice can be launched. In this, linguistic acts take a distinctive place. Language in this ascetic practice that follows the destitution of one’s place and one’s possibility of transmission. Language forms a space of projection and torsion, of tracing out as the overflowing work of divine disclosure in the very impossibility of transmission. That failure serves as a ‘hint’ or incitement to turn and return.

Tracing the Holy

Archimandrite Gregorios, the learned elder of the small monastery dedicated to *Ruqād wālidat al-illāh*, the Repose of the Mother of God, had taught at Balamand’s theological institute and received his advanced education in Greece. The small community of monastics which gathered around him are all young men, and all but one originate from outside of Lebanon. Including the head of the monastery, they only numbered five; the meagerness of the community was accentuated by the disrepair of the monastery.

The monastery, commonly called Ruqād al-Sayyida, borders the village of Bkiftīn, only a short drive from Tripoli, and is situated on a slightly elevated portion of land. To the north, the monastery overlooks olive groves, while to the east the horizon stretches out to the Akkar province, where large verdant fields open between sharp clusters of mountains. The monastic building itself is a sizable if partially dilapidated compound. Built entirely from cut beige sandstone, the space consists of a two-tiered ring wall surrounding a courtyard, which itself is

bifurcated by the main church building. The kitchen, refectory, monastic cells, and chapel all line the courtyard. The second courtyard, still filled with broken and upturned stone, had been the playground (*mal'ab*). The old classrooms—burgeoning with century-old chalkboards, plumbing, desks, and other detritus—line the second level. While the site itself has roots as far back as the 6th century, in the 19th and 20th centuries it has been used as a school for children.

In our first conversation, Gregorios explained that they had established themselves in the space only quite recently, although there were previous ascetic residents at times, including Ishaq 'Atallah. During the civil war, it had been occupied by militiamen who had also stolen every icon from the church and, like at Hamatoura, the church's interior walls here were and remain covered by a thick white plaster. The ruination of the monastery was a combination of historical censure from the time of Ottoman governance, abandonment of the school at the end of the French mandate period, and destruction wrought by battles during the civil war.

Gregorios, a prolific writer, recently published a volume that details the scholarly and elaborative biographic, historical, and theological contours of three *a'mida al-imān* (pillars of the faith): Mark of Ephesus (1392-1444), Photios the Great (810-893), and Gregory Palamas (1296-1357). The volume, moreover, ends with the text of a canon chanted to the saints themselves and the different poetic recitations (apolytikion, stichera) used in their celebration at the various services on the day in which the three are commemorated. Written in Arabic with full diacritics to aid in vocalization and translated from its Greek antecedent, these ekphrastic poetics of praise (*tasbīh*) stage the commendation of the three saints, a “triple lamp of lights”. The exemplarity of the saints produces a linguistic proliferation that invokes both the letter and the tongue.

What is the ‘truth’ (*al-haq*) that organizes the various modalities of ekphrasis to these figures and to which they are exemplars? The chain of transmission, constituted by the forms of *lisān* (tongue, language) is an attestation which brings into relief a diremption. The elder, in distilling Palamas’ teaching, writes:

The Holy Gregory Palamas distinguishes between the knowledge of the Hellenistic sciences and its philosophy, and the knowledge preceding from the Holy Spirit, which is a divine manifestation [*‘ilān*] given to the apostles and prophets.

Worldly human knowledge ≠ Divine spiritual knowledge

Natural knowledge ≠ The gift of divine grace

Secular knowledge ≠ Eternal and divine wisdom

Human wisdom ≠ Divine wisdom

The goal is purification from error.⁸⁹

The hagiographic transmission, as an attestation, is not that which bridges the symbolic gap (≠) in language but that which draws its opaque articulation from this gap. The citational *exemplarity* of the saint is a disarticulating articulation; it is a gap in language that does not follow from the holy one (the ‘saint’) as much as properly *constitute* it. The written line that follows Gregorios’ attestation of the gap is a fitting non-sequitur, in which a horizon of desire, stated in letters and sought for in its very lettering, is instituted; it draws from this gap an impossible kind of sustenance.

In the hagiographic trace, outlined in the previous chapter through Hamatoura, the lettered writing out or narrativizing of the holy as the *siyar al-qidīsīn* (lives of the holy ones), traces out the surprising encounter cited by Ifrām: the failure to completely depart into non-appearance. This trace, instigated at the divine manifestation of Christ, does not offer a transparent reclamation of an origin but a re-turn to the desert; the vector that has been traced out in the previous chapters, from which one launches into the elsewhere. Different than an intellectual history of theology or ecclesial learning, hagiography is organized by a withdrawal to which one is called to encounter and which elicits transcription, translation. The writing of hagiography, perhaps the most common genre of monastic writing, is taken up by the ascetics in Lebanon; Archimandrite Tūmā Bīṭār, head of the Orthodox monastery of St. John of Dūma, composed his volume *Al-Qiddīsūn al-Mansiyyūn fī al-Turāth al-Anṭākī*,⁹⁰ *The Forgotten Saints in the Antiochian Tradition*, not long after monastic life returned there. In this case, the work of the archimandrite in the archive, oriented around “forgotten saints,” (*al-qiddīsūn al-mansiyyūn*) is not premised on linking, by way of a communal presence, an authentic origin to those in the present. Instead, the “inheritance” (*turāth*) is a truth that is hinted at through the trace, like the martyr of Hamatoura, which is hidden and disclosed in various ways in the present.⁹¹ The work of language for contemporary ascetics operates according to this

⁸⁹ Gregorios Iṣṭfān, *A‘idatu al-Imān al-Urthudhaksī* (Tripoli: Saint Gregory Palamas Publications, 2018), 287.

⁹⁰ Tūmā. Bīṭār, *Al-Qiddīsūn al-Mansiyyūn Fī al-Turāth al-Anṭākī* (Beirut: Manšūrāt al-Nūr, 1995).

⁹¹ This trace may be thought to work as an exemplar that “never arrives at universality but points to a series of (new) resemblances by way of analogy,” Lars Højer and Andreas Bandak, “Introduction: The Power of Example,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21, no. S1 (May 1, 2015): 7. As the authors note, drawing from both Agamben’s concept of the ‘paradigm’ and the Maori notion of *hau*, the example “entails the setting in motion of particular trains of imagination, or series of particulars, that are always simply in the process of exploring and proposing generality.” Or as Alice Forbess has it in her own work with Orthodox monastics, as a “perpetual openness and mutability—as with the unruliness of examples,” Alice Forbess, “Paradoxical paradigms: moral

mode of attestation where language takes place not as the mark of presence but as the disclosure of something hidden in language itself—the groundlessness of the taking place of language.

The groundlessness that is at the heart of this ascetic attestation is muted in organizing hagiography as a *genre*, as a properly *signifying* event, delimited by an example. Indeed, the hagiographic citation at Hamatoura brings one not to a comparative enterprise but to one in which the world comes under a new coordination in the desert space. The linkages of continuity found in this hagiographic space are that of a common aim toward non-appearance. The reiterative ruptures of Lebanon do not lend themselves to an easy periodization or singular attestation of an event of loss but ramify into obscure losses. The hagiographic writ, ‘ascetic literature’, is thus not the attribution of an ‘I’ as the proper subject of a complete language; it is the signature of the withdrawal of ‘I’ and its obliteration in another scene. Like the ruinous wake of past destitution in the previous chapter, ascetic hagiography is a shadow language. This shadow language,⁹² ultimately, is not an otherworldly transcendence that populates the earthly and immanent (with power, genealogy, sovereignty);⁹³ it is, instead, language’s other.

The 7th century *Ambigua* of Maximos the Confessor is instructive in understanding the kind of practice of language operative in the ascetic form of life: treating Gregory Nazianzus’s

reasoning, inspiration, and problems of knowing among Orthodox Christian monastics,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21, no. S1 (2015): 125, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12169>

⁹² There is a homology between the anonymous and exemplary attestation of the signature, its foreignness, and the hagiographic trace. At the close of a 14th century declaration from Mount Athos, issued in support of Gregory Palamas’ then recent defense of hesychasm—“Αγιορείτικος τόμος υπέρ των ιερώς ησυχάζοντων” [In Defence of Those who Devoutly Practise a Life of Stillness]—the elders of the monastic communities on the Mountain adjoined their signatures. Among the elders were several hieromonks who signed in their other, non-Greek, languages: Slavonic, Georgian, and Arabic. Thus, one attestation among the list of signatories reads “Είχε και την υπογραφή του Σύρου γέροντα ησυχαστή στη δική του γλώσσα [The signature of an elder and hesychast from Syria in his own language/tongue].” The attestation, written in Greek, gestures to the illegible signature without the possibility of encompassing its foreignness. The Arabic signature, like the Slavonic and the Georgian, remains an anonymous and exemplary mark; its language and its tongue—the ambiguous marker; لسان, γλώσσα—cleaves to the palate. The missed encounter with the language or tongue, alone remains attestable.

⁹³ C.f., Anna Poujeau, “Monasteries, Politics, and Social Memory: The Revival of the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch in Syria during the Twentieth Century,” in *Eastern Christians in Anthropological Perspective*, ed. Chris Hann and Hermann Goltz (University of California Press, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520260559.003.0008>.

oration on Christ's Nativity, entitled "The Word became thick,"⁹⁴ Maximos puts forward three ways of understanding this 'thickness'. In the first,

the Logos...deemed it worthy to 'become thick' through his manifestation in the flesh (which was taken from us, and for us, and is consistent with, *but without [error]*), so that He might instruct us by means of words and examples suited to us, in mysteries that transcend the power of all human speech. (For we know that *all that He said was in the form of parables, and that He said nothing without a parable*, for teachers typically have recourse to parables whenever their pupils are not immediately able to follow them, and so endeavour to lead them to [1285D] an understanding of what is being said.)⁹⁵

A second explanation offered by Maximos follows:

The Logos 'becomes thick' in the sense that for our sake He ineffably concealed Himself in the logoi of beings, and is obliquely signified in proportion to each visible thing, as if through certain letters, being whole in whole things while simultaneously remaining utterly complete and fully present, whole, and without diminishment in each particular thing. He remains undifferentiated and always the same in beings marked by difference; simple and without composition in things that are compounded; without origin in things that have a beginning; invisible in things that are seen; and incapable of being touched in all that is palpable.⁹⁶

And, finally:

Or one could say that the Logos 'becomes thick' in the sense that, for the sake of our thick minds, He consented to be both embodied and [formed] through letters, [1288A] syllables, and sounds, so that from all these He might gradually gather those who follow Him to Himself, being united by the Spirit, and thus raise us up to the simple and unconditioned idea of Him, bringing us for His own sake into union with Himself by

⁹⁴ The original Greek has it: "Ὁ Λόγος παχύνεται," from Ambigum to John (33) in Maximos The Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua*, trans. Nicholas Constas, vol. 2 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014).

⁹⁵ Maximos The Confessor, 2:63.

⁹⁶ Maximos The Confessor, 2:63.

contraction to the same extent that He has for our sake expanded Himself according to the principle of condescension.⁹⁷

These exegeses, rather than being positioned by Maximos as mutually exclusive alternatives, compound one another. In the first, Maximos attends to the problem of citationality vis-à-vis exemplarity and typology. Just as the examples of the monastic elders' words demonstrate, citationality here ramifies as a genealogical chain of transmission. The transmitted citation is dissimulating at the same time it is illuminating: "all that He said was in the form of parables." The forms of the circumambulatory proliferation that lead one onward are themselves the veiling/revealing *logoi* of the Logos.

The second explanation clarifies the first. The *logoi*, in their very veiling (ἐγκρύψας), intimate (ὑποσημαίνεται) the Logos. This fact does not, however, relieve the Logos of its impalpability. The missed encounter of the untouched is the revelation made possible in the paradoxical concomitance of the One and the many, the intemporal and the temporal.⁹⁸ The proliferations of the many circle the ever-withdrawing center of the one, which is infinitely, yet immanently, distant. Illuminating words, the luminary holy ones, gesture to an insurmountable and brilliant divine darkness.⁹⁹

The final explanation synthesizes in this way the previous two: the Logos is formed (τυπωθῆναι, a word that also articulates artistic practice¹⁰⁰) and embodied as "words," "syllables," and "sounds." These forms condense and 'contract'—and, following Maximos' earlier formulation, disclose, at the same time that they differentiate and obscure. This movement of contracting expansion or expanding contraction is articulated by the elder Gregorios in his writing when he argues that whereas Western (Christian) thought, metonymized by Plotinus and Thomas Aquinas, "refuses a distinction between [divine] essence and power" for the sake of "preserving the philosophical theory of divine simplicity," divine power or grace (*n'ama*) is, in contrast, a "living disclosure and revelation of his [divine]

⁹⁷ Maximos The Confessor, 2:63.

⁹⁸ In this rendering, the Logos is not an essence that undergirds manifest appearance. The language of depth versus surface—critical to the genealogy of 17th century Western philosophical debates between, for example, Spinoza or Gassendi and the Cambridge Platonists—is inadequate to the relationship between the Logos and *logoi* in Maximos' articulation. For more on the former debate, see Warren Montag, *The Unthinkable Swift: The Spontaneous Philosophy of a Church of England Man* (Verso, 1994).

⁹⁹ For more on Maximos' *logoi* and their inheritance of the concept of *energeia* see Chapter 8 of David Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁰⁰ See "τυπώω" in the *Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon*, Perseus Digital Library, Gregory R. Crane (ed). Tufts University. (accessed online June, 2020).

being”¹⁰¹ (*kashfun ḥayyun wa izhārun li-wūjūdihi*). This vital proliferation expands and contracts, breathes, not *in* letters, bodies, or images, but *as* these forms.

The gap in language is the space of a disclosure, one that dislocates the systematic working out of interpretation (*tafsīr*), both in the philosophical activity of stabilizing through the signifying of the relationship between the one and the many, simplicity and plurality, the text and its referent, but even of Maximos and Gregorios, who both remain drawn to their lettering activity. In this lettering, their ultimate recourse is to the gap in the symbolic, found both in the diremption of syntax (≠) and the ‘thickness’ of the letter itself.

Jahl

Arabic Orthodoxy—marred, as its practitioners in the Levant will often report, by Ottoman rule and then especially by 18th and 19th century Catholic expansion and assimilation and later by Protestant missionizing efforts—is largely estranged in the contemporary from its historical canon of Arabic writing. It marks the aftermath of culture,¹⁰² where the coordinates of the symbolic, a ground for speaking as the articulation of a form of life, become increasingly opaque. The (in)capacity of this thickness that runs across the division inside and outside language is constitutively ambiguous. Within the terrain of asceticism, it incites a kind of work that is not to be captured by the term ‘revival’, but which is instead one oriented around a horizon of disclosive unknowing—*jahl*.¹⁰³ The horizon of this opacity importantly does not, in its most essential mode, originate historically, but rather in the opacity of letters, of hearing, and of the heart itself.

This is quite distinct from the vision of language fostered in the Arab *nahḍa*, where language becomes the object of reform organized according to a temporal division. Specifically, the shift from an aural posture vis-à-vis scriptural language to a reading subject can be viewed in the *nahḍawī* transformations of the 19th century Mashriq. While the earliest

¹⁰¹ Istfān, *A‘idatu Al-Imān al-Urthudhaksī*, 195.

¹⁰² Stefania Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul: Madness, Psychoanalysis, Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Work of Culture: Symbolic Transformation in Psychoanalysis and Anthropology* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

¹⁰³ This problem is compounded in the question of postcolonial traditions (of language, of ethics, of God) where one is called to locate and diagnose the space of the division between colonizer and colonized, between influence and authenticity. A few recent and innovative treatments of this problem note the impossibility of diagnosing the coordinates of rupture. See Rajbir Singh Judge, “There Is No Colonial Relationship: Antagonism, Sikhism, and South Asian Studies,” *History and Theory* 57, no. 2 (2018): 195–217, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hith.12057>; Ananda Abeysekara, “Protestant Buddhism and ‘Influence’: The Temporality of a Concept,” *Qui Parle* 28, no. 1 (June 1, 2019): 1–75, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10418385-7522565>.

translations of the Christian gospels into Arabic can be traced to the 7th century, the Smith-Van Dyke bible, a 19th century American Protestant missionary translation¹⁰⁴ accomplished in Beirut with the help of Levantine scholar Butrus al-Bustani, marked a turn to a bourgeoisie ‘reading’ subject of emerging national bodies.¹⁰⁵ Al-Bustani, for his part, shared the anxiety that colonial reformers would assume over half a century onward regarding state sovereignty and language. In an 1861 missive, the secular reformer notes that the solidification of Arabic through education is meant to keep the Levant from becoming “a Babel of languages, customs, and styles of life, just as it is a Babel of religions (*adyān*), nations, and traditions.”¹⁰⁶ This translation, despite its proffer as a novel and modern form of language, was, curiously, based on an existing Orthodox translation that was codified in the 17th century.¹⁰⁷

Concomitant and vital to this form of national subjectivity were the emerging institutions of children’s education in Lebanon. Beginning at the time of the Ottoman reforms and coming into full force during the French Mandate, educational reformers instituted French as the language of modern, rational education, according Arabic the uneasy status of ‘poetic’ and ‘religious’ language.¹⁰⁸ In both these exercises of language sovereignty—the renovation of Arabic language for the purposes of modern national learning and the fulfilment

¹⁰⁴ The Protestant translation was only recently replaced in contemporary Orthodox usage, following the new translation and publication of the scriptures by the Orthodox bishop of Kuwait. However, as one hieromonk from Mar Ilyās lamented to me in a conversation, the Kuwaiti translation, while a step forward, was done by a native Greek, not Arabic, speaker.

¹⁰⁵ As one scholar of this bible translation argues, betraying the same anxiety of the *nahḍa*, “the intention of providing an accessible Bible for the common lay people to read for themselves, in many ways rubbed against the Islamic, and perhaps even a general cultural Arab of Middle Eastern understanding of a sacred text as mysterious and somewhat inaccessible. The quintessential form of recitation was, of course, the Qur’an. However, Arab Christians had always memorized and recited their scriptures as well.” (223-224 Grafton).

¹⁰⁶ February 22, 1961 in Buṭrus al-Bustānī, *Nafīr Sūrīyya* (Beirut: al-Ma‘āhid buṭrus al-bustānī, 1990). This same anxiety over the proliferation of language can be found in earlier Catholic missionizing efforts in the Levant; when one Orthodox bishop, Melitius Karma, attempted to develop a new Arabic translation of the scriptures through a survey of multiple translations—found across monastic sites and in multiple languages—in conjunction with the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in Rome, the latter party first insisted on the singular use of the Latin vulgate and subsequently withdrew support. For this account see Elie Dannaoui, “From Multiplicity to Unification of the Arabic Biblical Text: A Reading of the Rūm Orthodox Projects for the Arabization and Printing of the Gospels during the Ottoman Period” (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2018), 22–36, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004383869_003.

¹⁰⁷ Luay Hanna, “The Famous Smith-Van Dyck Bible of 1860: Nothing Else but a Polished Re-Edition of the Orthodox Gospels?,” *Parole de l’Orient* 42 (2016): 255–70.

¹⁰⁸ See Nadya Sbaiti, “‘If the Devil taught French’: Strategies of language and learning in French mandate Beirut” in Osama Abi-Mershed and Laila Shereen, *Trajectories of Education in the Arab World: Legacies and Challenges* (Florence, USA: Taylor & Francis Group, 2009).

of this role by the French and subsequent maintenance of Arabic as a sectarian/spiritual language—a temporal division is instituted around a lack in language.

This lack in language as figured by the reformers was echoed by Khalil's brother, Ḥakīm. Speaking uncharacteristically in Arabic (our conversations usually occurred in English) while we walked along the shoreline outside of Beirut, Ḥakīm positioned himself against what he described as an inhabited linguistic distinction between 'pure' Arabic (*fuṣṣḥa*) and its colloquial variants. As he argued, the "language of the heart" (*lugha al-qalb*), as that which guarantees the transmission of an experience of God through those who drew new to him in this life, was endangered by the hard distinction in Arabic between spoken and written forms, which he argued found their origin in the Islamic filiation to Qur'anic language. In Islam, "*allāh biyaḥkī bi-l-fuṣṣḥa*" (God speaks in *fuṣṣḥa*), he stated. And this meant, he concluded, that Arabic could not develop (*taṭawur*). When I noted that other linguistic traditions of Orthodoxy have diglossic linguistic distinctions similar to Arabic, he replied, "I ask you, what language do the saints of those languages write in? They always *write* in the language of that particular time (*zamān*)."¹ The language of the time, one consonant with spoken forms of Arabic, would in this case reinstitute the verve of language deadened by the grammatical weight of old forms. Here, the opacity of the written word is a historical problem that is to be overcome.

The recourse to a temporal diagnosis, for Ḥakīm, was not merely a moral division between progress and arrest. Instead, his demand from language—which, in addition to a language of the heart he also termed a *lugha adabiyya*, a literary language—was oriented toward the *realization* of an interpersonal theophany. In Ḥakīm's view, the poles of Arabic language, its impoverished colloquial variant and its distanced formal speech, demanded redress that would take the form of a productivity. In the social aftermath of Lebanon, speech had become dissimulative and inept. Language, for Ḥakīm, bespoke the solipsism of a subject without recourse to a manifest communal interchange. Like the transformations of the 19th century in terms of language, here too the written word bears a cathexis oriented around its traumatic lack.

Ḥakīm likened the distinction in language to a kind of "parallax," one that was analogous to the parallax of our lived existence. Our walk along the coast afforded us a view of the Zouk power plant. Built before the civil war on the shores of a small nearby village, the power plant's two red and white spires constantly coughed their pollutants onto the dense and informal urbanity that pressed upon it. Looking at the power plant, Ḥakīm mused that "the destroyed world around has in fact, from another view, been redeemed." In the modality of revival, language, like the world, is conjured as the site of a productive and rectifying activity; language marks the movement of past to future, from opacity to transparency. We approached *nahr al-kalb* (Dog River), whose steep banks were littered with placards bearing ancient

Egyptian, Assyrian, Arab, as well as modern British, Israeli, and French historical inscriptions, including to one belonging to Napoleon III. The French Emperor, rather than add to the sequence of imperials one alongside another, had noticeably placed a commemoration of his arrival to Lebanon in 1860 over top of one of the ancient Egyptian panels.¹⁰⁹

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The constitution of a reading and reformed bourgeois subject in time with a national or communitarian culture is jarred by the asynchronous persistence of ascetical formations of language that are cultivated at the monastery. The recitation of the Arab Orthodox psalter (*al-mazāmīr*), with its intimate attachments to audition and vocalization, like the hagiographic trace, marks the expansion and contraction, the ‘thickness’, of the letter. The contemporary psalter draws from the earliest translations (7th century) of the Greek Septuagint and makes up the backbone of liturgical life; it is recited in its entirety by Orthodox monastics every week (and, during the Great Fast, twice a week) and populates each of the seven daily offices. In the past, the memorization of the Psalter resembled that of the Qur’anic *madrassa*, where young students would regularly learn to recite the psalms.¹¹⁰ Relearning this disciplined capacity of performing the daily services is part of the monastic work—that is, to recite, in the details of its form, and to develop the aural sensibilities integral to its practice.¹¹¹

As the hieromonk Antonios had once explained to me, his French and hence Catholic education had set him at odds with this sensibility. His return to Orthodoxy asceticism, as he narrated it, came in the form of a discovery of a writing explaining the liturgical *typikon*—the complex poetics and rubrics of daily worship. He discovered the book, as he explained, when he had come to visit his brother, who had then recently become a monk at a monastery in Lebanon. Dubious of this turn in his brother’s life, Antonios, then a practicing lawyer in Beirut, was soon seized by a desire to understand the monastic form of life in this reading of its

¹⁰⁹ For a more detailed study of the monument site, see Lucia Volk, “When Memory Repeats Itself: The Politics of Heritage in Post Civil War Lebanon,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 40, no. 2 (2008): 291–314.

¹¹⁰ Reference to this fact is made in Alexandre M. Roberts, *Reason and Revelation in Byzantine Antioch: The Christian Translation Program of Abdallah Ibn al-Fadl*, (University of California Press, 2020), 37.

¹¹¹ In his introduction to his revised 1954 translation, the Orthodox Beirut translator Rizq Allah Fatah Allah Arman, notes that the psalter in its unchanged form from its 11th century Arabic translation is deficient and, echoing other contemporary language projects, seeks to mitigate this deficiency, “*ya’ūz*”, found in the “old Arabic translation.” Even so, the translator notes that “*wa qad ahtifazna- ma astaṭāna ila dhalik sabīlan- bima amkan al-ihfāz bihi min ta’abīr al-tarjīmah al-qadīmah allati ta’wadat adhān al-nas sama’ha*” [we have preserved—insofar as we were able—what was possible to keep of the old translation’s *expressions* that the ears of the people were used to hearing]. The sonority of the psalter and the audition of the ear, even in the aftermath of cultivation, continues to impress upon formations of modern textuality. See “Translator’s Introduction”, Rizq Allah Fatah Allah ‘Arman, trans., *Kitāb Al-Mazāmīr al-Sharīf* (Baniyas: Manshūrāt Maktaba al-Bishāra, 2011).

complex of practices. The monastery of Mār Ilyās, in its turn, where Antonios was tonsured and now lives, has become a major site of Orthodox pedagogy. As he once lamented to me, “We are not like the Muslims, they are taught well and they know what their faith teaches them. We do not know.”

Illustratively, one of the novices at Ruqād al-Sayyida, the only one of Lebanese origin, often struggled to recite the psalter or the lives of the saints for his fellow ascetics. Elder Gregorios, therefore, regularly had him recite the appointed prayers of the hour, or read aloud while the community of ascetics would eat their midday meal. He also asked another young monk, an Egyptian, to work with him to help improve his pronunciation of the texts. This kind of learning, which seeks to institute the body into a vital relation to the letter, trains the mouth and the ear in continuity with the (re)learning of the monastic prayers and gestures of the body.

The postcolonial conditions of incapacitation for recitation thus spur ascetic discipline as a attending the work of *lisān*, rather than as a reform of language. As Gregorios, the elder of Bkiftīn, understood, there is little in Arabic from which the monastic life draws sustenance: “It is not the language upon which we built our tradition, our faith, our history.” I had asked the archimandrite to explain to me the status of Arabic in the tradition, to which he responded by drawing out a historical narrative of dispossession; “the Arabic language is imposed on us, on the church, in maybe the 11th or 12th century. Until [those centuries] our church language was instead Greek and Syriac.” The dearth of an Arabic corpus for the elder was rooted in the very tangible problems it presented for monastic life: the lack of full translations of the service books, and of the Menaion from Greek in particular. This latter collection, the largest of Orthodox textual sources, contains each day’s commemorations and hymnography for the saints, and is used daily by monastic communities.

The textual impoverishment in Arabic, one that encompassed both liturgical sources as well as ascetic and theological writings, was not located, for the elder, in Arabic as such. When I asked if this was a problem that in some way belonged to Arabic itself, Gregorios clarified,

No, I think everything is clear in the Arabic language. Our faith, our Orthodox faith. We can express our faith fully in Arabic. We have no problem with that. The Arabic language is a very rich language, as a language. Like the old Greek. And you can express the faith very well. But the problem is that we don’t have [it]. We should live the faith before [we] transmit it. Before you transmit it. If we don’t live it, live the faith, we will not transmit it, as it is, in an Orthodox *akrīveia*.

The Greek term *akrīveia*, invoked by the elder, connotes a strict exactness that in both the ascetics' spiritual language and the language of ecclesiastical institution is counter-posed to the leniency implied in *oikonomia*. This need for strict adherence spoke to the kind of concern that continues to inform much of Gregorios' writing, including his aforementioned book on the "Pillars of the Orthodox Faith." The pressing conditions of the present—a term, as the elder would enumerate, that encompasses, at times, French colonizers, Catholic or Protestant missionizing, or Muslim rule—do not impinge on language as a site of historical trauma, rather they give way to a more elusive problem: the capacity to "transmit" the tradition.

The monastic thus inverted the terms of reformism vis-à-vis language. The problem that was located within language—its temporal displacement and ossification—Gregorios locates within the field of articulation. In the latter's case, history does not mark an originary and axial wound (the institution of Qur'anic Arabic) but rather dissolves into a space of the present impressed with loss. Hence, for the ascetic, Arabic remains a "clear" and "rich" space that must nevertheless draw in sustenance. The efforts to teach those who sojourn at the monastery to enunciate prayers, prostrate, cross themselves, or use a prayer rope are oriented around not a *lack* in language but in its gap. The novice, in learning to enunciate the *siyar al-qidīsīn*, learns to deftly articulate the gap in signification (≠) that attests to the withdrawal of these 'Holy ones' into the thickness of the letter—its disclosive opacity. Dwelling on this thickness, living, as it were, the life of divine disclosure, does not open to hermeneutic clarity, but to the movement of drawing into the infinite by way of contraction.

Translations

The considerable archival holdings of these monasteries, which contemporary scholars in Lebanon and elsewhere have begun to collate and utilize, form a backdrop, like the histories of the monasteries themselves, to which the ascetics who live there now are largely indifferent. At Mār Georgios, a publication house was set up near the time of the community's establishment and the monastics have worked to translate volumes of Orthodox theological and ascetic literature from French, English, and Greek. In producing an Arabic translation of John Climacus' *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, the monastics eschewed the Arabic volume from the 18th century housed at the monastery in favour of producing their own translation drawn from Greek sources and a contemporary English translation.

As I exited the chapel at Dayr al-Harf following morning liturgy, I was approached by one of the monks, Lūqā, for a second time. He joked with me and Khalīl about mixing up our names, unable to keep straight who was "Harun" and if, in fact, Khalīl was his brother "Musa." I chuckled, disarmed by his manner, as he nimbly removed his soft cap. Showing us the top of

his balding head, he said “but I’m a garbage can (*tankat zbāla*), when I take off my lid you can smell it!” A conversation ensued where Lūqā detailed his biography to us. As he explained, he had joined the monastery many years ago, but at some point afterward, had reneged on his monastic commitments and returned to Syria. Only three years ago had he rejoined the monastery, now humbly assuming the status of a perpetual novice.

Trained as an engineer at a Lebanese university, Lūqā had worked with his brother as a mechanic on high-end vehicles in Syria. His trade meant that he often encountered Syrian elites, a fact he detailed in one story of a government elite with an armed escort. Even in his abandonment of the monastery, the former monk would still say the Jesus prayer as he worked on the cars, making the sign of the cross, as he also carried an icon with him. And yet, in the world, “nothing remains” (*ma shī biḍal*), he explained. The “[lack of] ascent to God” (*ṣa‘ūd ilā allāh*) eventually compelled him to return to the monastery, even against his own initial inclination and that of his brother’s. Lūqā’s words emphasized that the monastery, as a space that folds the whole world into its prayer, offered the only possibility for peace. “What God asks of us is very simple (*basīṭa*),” he said, even if one does not realize it.

At the beginning of our conversation, the monk had apologized to me for speaking in Arabic, as he saw that some of his jokes were lost on me. He reiterated that he regretted not speaking in English, clarifying that he was quite able to do so. His elder shaykh Yūsif, he explained, had enjoined the monk upon his return to the monastery not to speak languages other than Arabic. I asked for him to explain. He simply said that the *shayṭān* is able to work through the smallest crack; the beginning of the spiritual life is a firm foundation. Speaking foreign languages, of which English was not the only one that Lūqā knew, was part of his broader education, which included his engineering skills. All of this was censured under the direction of his elder. This practice, of effecting an inversion of the coordinates of worldly life, is common in Orthodox monasticism. Those trained in particular skills or trades before entering the monastery are obligated to refrain from performing them once they have joined. A former scholar, for instance, might be charged with caring for the garden rather than working in the library. Likewise a medical doctor, rather than opening a clinic at the monastery, might be given the task of preparing food in the kitchen. In that sense, the restraint of language use does not originate from something specific to Arabic, in the form of either singular capacity or insufficiency.¹¹² Instead, the contraction of language here is a means of (re)orienting life, “*basīṭa*,” simply, as Lūqā would have it.

The call to dwell ‘simply’ at the monastery, in the ascetical contraction of language, is countered by the complex linguistic expansions in which life at Mār Georgios, like many

¹¹² For an example of the latter see Moustapha Safouan, *Why Are The Arabs Not Free?: The Politics of Writing* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007).

monasteries, is situated. The translation efforts that proliferate around and within monastic centers—Dayr al-Harf, Hamatoura, Ruqād al-Sayyida, St. John of Dūma—are oriented in different ways, yet all draw from linguistic spaces exterior to Arabic. One may draw from interviews with contemporary Russian or Romanian monastic elders, and another from Greek or Syriac spiritual writings. In the bookshop of Dayr al-Harf, an Arabic translation of an originally Russian book detailing the life of the priest Arseny (1893-1973) explains in the preface that the Arabic translation was done through an English translation of the Russian. On the website of St. John of Dūma, under the subsection ‘Sermons and conversations,’ is a small biography of German critical theorist Erich Fromm, and a translated excerpt of an essay—“On the Limitations and Dangers of Psychology”—in his book, *The Dogma of Christ*.¹¹³

At the monastery of Hamatoura in particular, there is an ongoing retranslation of much of the psalmody used liturgically. As detailed in part two of this dissertation, the rhythm of vocalization—its happenstance as its forms are *yaq‘a*, ‘cast’—comes to be critical in the articulation of asceticism. The monks of Hamatoura, as I learned through several conversations there, have begun to take the Greek hymnody that was translated in the pre-civil war era and mold it according to the rhythm and sonority that the formations of Arabic allow. This shift away from the previous translation of Greek marks a departure from what Benjamin deemed the translator’s desire to “communicate something, from rendering the sense.”¹¹⁴ The goal to communicate the meaning of the Greek text is eschewed in the monastic desire to produce, within the Arabic, a resonance and harmony that responds to the rhythmic intention, rather than the meaning, of the Greek text. Translation here is a rhythmic movement that traces out the discontinuous and dense variegations of language and tongue.

Likewise, the inhabitants of Mār Georgios, which is home to its own humble publishing house, have translated many Orthodox works from Greek, Russian, and French. The monastery always carries an ample supply of Arabic books for sale—practical liturgical texts, prayer manuals, theological treatises—at the small bookshop in one of the corridors. Once, while standing and looking at the books, I was approached by one hieromonk who asked me, “what is the word for *khalaq* in English?” “Create,” I answered. Typically gregarious, the monk laughed at the phonetic similarity between the English word “create” and the French *ecrit*—“*allāh btaktabak!* [God wrote you!]” he exclaimed. Later that day, after the evening meal, shaykh Yūsif spoke, still seated at the table, of the bonds across language. Whether we speak Arabic or English, he mused, we are united through the life in Christ and in the Holy Spirit (*al-rūḥ al-quḍus*).

¹¹³ Erich Fromm, *The Dogma of Christ: And Other Essays on Religion, Psychology and Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004).

¹¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1988), 78.

The elder named the Holy Spirit as the means by which the fragmentary field of language, or in Maximos' more precise rendering, "words, syllables, and sounds," in their thick hiddenness, come to hide qua disclose the messianic Logos. *Rūḥ*, the word for God's Spirit, is the animating breathfulness not as much 'behind' the field of language as emergent within its punctuating terrain. Instead of the Spirit overcoming the cessation of understanding marking linguistic difference, here the Spirit 'breathes'—expands and contracts—precisely in the "thickness" of its rupturing proliferations.¹¹⁵ The chance misattribution of *ecrit* and *create* as cognates, the ramification of their collision, enables the attribution of God as the author of existence.

Transmission

Khalil and I are weaving through the valley, passing through the village of Baskinta, and then down through Beka'ata to reach the Archangel Michael monastery, situated in the lowest point of the valley. The sun is still powerful and bright as we exit the car. Walking up the stone steps to the entrance, Khalil explains that he has arranged a meeting with the head of the monastery, Archimandrite Yūḥannā. We meet a monk gardening as we climb; we greet him and explain our presence. He invites us to enter with a smile as he briefly pauses from his work and gestures for us to continue upward. We go and sit in the monastery's salon, lined by a number of red-cushioned chairs and benches, with various photographs of landscapes hanging on the stone walls. Soon the elder enters and greets us. We take his blessing and sit down.

Our conversation begins and I try to summarize for the elder what has brought me to Lebanon—a desire to understand the revival of Orthodox tradition in the postcolonial period and its formations in the present. I use an awkward phrase, *tajdīd at-taqlīd*, 'renewal of tradition'; my phrase is an awkward translation of the anthropological terms in which I had been steeped. The archimandrite balks at my characterization, laughing gently at the oxymoronic quality of my notion that *taqlīd*—that which is the imitation of what came before—could be renewed. He begins pedagogically: "What is the meaning of *taqlīd*?" he asks. "*imān*" (faith), I reply, with a somewhat feigned surety. "But then how can there be a renewed

¹¹⁵ This movement does not create pneumatic 'release' as in, say, Maria José de Abreu study of Brazilian Catholic and Evangelical Charismatics. Indeed, the fluidity and flexibility that paradoxically ground and absolve in the latter's pneumatological dynamics—across neoliberalism, new media, and aerobics—are not found in ascetical cultivation. Inhabiting the density of the forms, their play of hiddenness and manifestation, of monastic discipline, organizes translation as a means of 'rendering sense', as a translation qua transmission of the tradition; its delimitation *as form* (rather than as a release from form) is a linguistic circumambulation around the transfigured *qalb* (heart/nous). For a lucid account of the aforementioned charismatics see Abreu, *The Charismatic Gymnasium*.

tradition?” he exclaims with quiet mirth. “What does the faith consist in? The Holy Scriptures, doctrine, and the liturgy all belong to the tradition—can we then change them?”

I am confused about how to move forward, and, realizing the inadequacy of my own schematization to the question I wanted to pose, I fumble to find a reply. Mercifully, the hieromonk resumes: “Tradition cannot go against itself.” After a brief pause he continues, bemused but firm: “There is no renewal of tradition.” Seeing that I am not following, he continues to explain: “Tradition [*taqlid*] happens with our speaking in the language [*lugha*] of the day, not from renewing the tradition...the faith is sound [*thābit*] from the days of the Holy Fathers, this is the tradition for all time. We speak in *its* language [*lughatu*], as the Fathers did.” *Lugha* is doubled. It marks that by which the repetition, *taqlid*, is articulated in speech, *ḥakī*, and yet also as that which belongs to the tradition. Language, in marking the division, is itself divided:

In terms of this issue, in all simplicity, we safeguard [*nuḥāfiẓ*]—you told me that *taqlid* is *imān*—we safeguard the faith [*imān*] that is once for all given to the Holy Ones, as it says in the Holy Scriptures. We are keepers of it. But, in each given time and each given society we speak in a language [*bi-lugha*]. Nothing more and nothing less. This is not renewal, nor modernizing or transformation [*taghyīr*]. This transmission of the tradition [*naql al-taqlid*] is in the language of the day; nothing more and nothing less.

Naql, the transmission or translation of the tradition, has an ambiguous relation with language. The shaykh elaborates: “There are words [*kalimāt*] that with time become dead, people don’t know what they are, but you can, for instance, apply [*ḥaṭṭ*] the existing meaning [*al-ma‘nā al-mawjūda*] in the present.” The translation of the word *ḥaṭṭ*, which is most simply translated as “to put,” has a more complicated referential terrain. It is not ‘application’ in the sense of transposition of a thing from one delineated space to another but rather much more closely approaches the notion of ‘set up’ or even of ‘bricolage’—*ḥaṭṭ*, in short, connotes a creative engagement: it is a bodily articulation that gives a sense of the *ma‘nā mawjūda*—what can be translated as the “*found* (mawjūda) meaning.”¹¹⁶ The translative rendering of sense is not accomplished in the field of language proper but in an articulation that exceeds it.

Chuckling, the elder expands on this creative articulation, finding sense: “we express [*nu‘abbir*] the teachings, the tradition, once for all given unto us, but in the language of today.” The verbal form “to express” in Arabic (*‘abbara*), as in English, invokes a passage, the space

¹¹⁶ For a fascinating study of the use of the term *ma‘nā* in Medieval Arabic philosophy see Alexander Key, *Language Between God and the Poets: Ma‘na in the Eleventh Century* (University of California Press, 2018).

that is traversed; it figures an encounter with one's time.¹¹⁷ I try to elicit an expansion and gesture to the problem of capacity; I want to ask what is to be done when we are not strong enough to carry the tradition. While I fumble for a word, Khalil, who had been sitting beside me and intervening at times, decides that *mutamāsik* is appropriate. The word, which could be translated as 'holding steady', likewise signifies holding oneself: "What if we are not *mutamāsikīn*?"

"So, do you think, if we were firm, we would begin to transmit the tradition?" Unclear of where his question is leading, I reply tentatively, "Perhaps not." "People" he repeats the word again, "people, everyone, daily, are weary, extremely weary of talk [*hāki*]." The shaykh falls silent in demonstration of his point. The drone of a passing vehicle swells, drifting in through the window of the salon. "People want to see persons who are alive. That is renewal [*tahdith*]." After another pause, he continued his thought: "Weary, and they have become alienated [*tinfur*] as well." His voice begins to take on the weariness that he speaks of, and his body, likewise, appears gently subdued under the strictures of the fasting period, done before the celebration of the repose of the Mother of God, in the second half of August: "They have come to consider it an old language. The truth [*al-ḥaqīqa*] is not an old language."

A phone call interrupts and draws the elder away for a few moments. Khalil and I quietly confer over the elder's words. Soon he hangs up the phone and continues as if without interruption: "We are able to transmit the tradition when we know how to live it." Pausing for a moment, allowing for the force of his word to hang in the air, continues: "For this reason...the repentant human being—this is the one who is living. This is the one who has the capacity to safeguard [*yuḥāfiẓ*]. People are demanding of us to live the tradition, that we be a contrite people [*al-nās al-tā'ib*], then they might begin to look at us, and ask 'these people, why are they not like our experience?'"

Repentance, *tawba*, the existential act of turning toward God, is that which marks the shift in language. The archimandrite, however, does not call for people to be repentant or to

¹¹⁷ Shaykh Yūḥannā's argument at this point rehearses the same concept that has been elucidated in Talal Asad's writings on tradition. Namely, that tradition is a process of translation, whereby, "translation is never a direct move from discourse A to discourse B because it always involves an interpreting (mediating) sign X." (4) This mediating sign for Asad is not "intersemiotics" in Roman Jakobson's strict sense (i.e., the conveyance of meaning); insofar as both sensible bodies and language are imprinted through translation, they are not necessarily carriers of semiotic meaning. For the hieromonk, likewise, the operations of updating tradition for the sake of the present and speaking in the language of the day are antipodal precisely because the mediating sign (here, "we speak"—*mnaḥki*) is opposite to subjecting a tradition (a set of practices and discourses) to renovation (*jaddad*). The latter assumes a spatialized temporal apparatus of transposition (A to B) in a pure historical continuum. See Talal Asad, *Secular Translations* (Columbia University Press, 2018); Talal Asad, "Thinking About Tradition, Religion, and Politics in Egypt Today," *Critical Inquiry* 42, no. 1 (September 1, 2015): 166–214.

turn toward God in response to a momentary condition of failure to countenance the divine. Instead, he uses the form of the verbal noun *tā'ib*, which does not connote a single reparative action—a return, as it were, following a period of being astray—but rather an existential condition of recognizing incapacity. It points to a form of life, wherein creaturely being and the act of turning to God interpenetrate.

“What we are doing here...we are not living by chance [*bi-l-ṣudaf*]. It is a time for us to safeguard the tradition and to transmit it. *Idha hakaynā fi min hallā' li-ākhir al-ʿumr, ma biyʿanīlun shī wa lā biynlakashū fiyyu*” [If we spoke from now to the end of the age, it wouldn't mean anything to them, and it wouldn't affect them]. The shaykh marks this passage of life to death and the vapidness of the letter through the diacritic vowel of the alif (æ) in the word *hallā'*, which he draws out, stretching the time of its enunciation. The weakness in language—without *mʿana*, meaning, or *lakash*, touch—elicits the turn to the deserted space of incapacity. This gestural argument parochializes both the capacity of speech and its means of grappling with an incapacity that extends beyond a paucity in language. The failure to live the tradition is not on the order of being unable to speak its truth. The truth, not an “old language”, is instead the living gap in signification (≠), carried in the letter as a missed encounter, that is transmitted and translated. This gap is lived as a form of life; “purification from error”, a repentant people.

Coda: Loss

The impoverishment of language in the alienating aftermath of culture carries the strange possibility of impossibility. The grammatical forms of Arab Orthodoxy articulate this impoverishment in particular ways—the loss of rhythm, the loss of a capacity to proliferate through recitation the salvific enunciations of prayer. Yet these losses derive from a prior and primordial loss that cannot be delimited historically. Ascetic grammars gesture to a primordial obfuscation which exceeds the division in language even as these grammars organize and translate that division at the limits of the *nafs*. Failure as a form of passage and trial becomes a form of life.

The monastic response to language is ascetic; the letter, the gap manifest in language is worked within a grammar of failure, watchfulness, and discipline. The ascetic sets out to dwell on the words of the constantly repeated *yā rabbī, yasūʿa al-masīḥ, ibn illāh, irḥamnī* (O My Lord, Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, have mercy on me), or of the psalter through the night. Recitation here, meditating on the word as *lisān*—language, tongue—does not produce interpretation, but gathers the energies of the soul, *nafs*, which circulate and work to purify one's heart. It is the very density and ‘thickness’ of the words, their cleaving to the palate, that opens the possibility of a disclosure in the noetic center, a disclosure that is not hermeneutic

clarity but a diremption. One is thus strangely called to dwell in language's loss, in the *logoi* themselves, i.e., in the very formations of prayer, citation, and recitation. This dwelling is *jihād al-nafs*, the struggle of the soul's passage in the world.¹¹⁸ As Rizq Allah, an Orthodox translator of the psalter into Arabic wrote in his 1954 preface, "in each of its poetic forms one sees before their face a mirror of their soul, visible and plain, so that the psalms make clean the human soul in a manner that vexes the mind (*ʿaql*)."¹¹⁹

The anonymous yet recognizable signature of language, as that which discloses as it veils, figures the aporias of language as it proliferates in monastic settings. From within such a reading of language, the problem posed by postcolonial Arabic is not that of the *nahḍa*,¹²⁰ i.e., Arabic would not be a cultural enclave, wounded in its past and now subject to either nostalgic repair or re-animation. No language is given by which to articulate this loss. The fissures of

¹¹⁸ In his writings on language, Valentin Voloshinov echoes his contemporary Wittgenstein's turn to the concept of a 'language game' in the latter's attention to "ideological themes"—the drifting linkages of material signs. Unlike the German philosopher, however, Voloshinov stipulates that the antagonism of class struggle must be thought as immanent within a given grammar. Only once a sign is "withdrawn from the pressures of the social struggle" is it the subject of philological allegory rather than "social intelligibility." The claim of a constitutively agonistic language is compounded by Voloshinov in his treatment of the psyche. In attempting to delineate a position not capturable within the logics of psychologism (i.e., functionalist psychology) or anti-psychologism (i.e., phenomenology), he turns to the concept of an "ideological sign", one that encompasses both the formation of the psyche and ideology. This allows Voloshinov to schematize a double schism: on the one hand, a division between a bio-logical psyche and ideology (or 'the social') that is dialectically reckoned with through the notion of the material sign. On the other, the constitutive social antagonism that explicitly cuts across the first division (rather than be positioned *between* an individuated subject and the social whole). That is, the ideological sign that synthesizes the psyche and the social is itself first constituted as a division. Strikingly, Voloshinov himself terms that which unites the complex of physiology, psychology, and physics, as the "soul" (*dusha*), which parallels the ascetic formation. In Orthodox ascetic conceptions of the soul, the soul is likewise the liminal space of these complexes. Yet the point that is perhaps implicit if unthematized in Voloshinov—that the thing that divides, the soul, is itself divided—is explicitly formulated in ascetical practice. The terms of the division of the soul are found in articulations of the world and God. Like the 'ideological sign', not only is the soul the site of division between the bio-logical organism and the object-world, but the soul itself is dirempted between its heteronomous, Divine aspect, and its passional and automatic elements. See V. N. Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (Harvard University Press, 1986).

¹¹⁹ "Translator's Introduction," Rizq Allah Fatah Allah 'Armān, *Kitāb Al-Mazāmīr al-Sharīf*.

¹²⁰ Language, whether as a recovery of postcolonial culture or as a political community, here is the object of a project (revival). This project, while not reducible to the sovereign ends of state-making, participates in the same temporal presupposition. To wit, that language is the space in which the realization of freedom (even in recovering a past authenticity) occurs. In Jeffrey Sacks words, the scene of *nahḍawi* language is a violent event, enacting "a temporal rupture that gives place to a sense of time and being in language, where the past is compelled to appear as if it belonged to another time, as if it were on the side of stillness and death, of 'religion' and the 'theological.'" (*Iterations of Loss*, 8).

Arabic, rather, are iterative of the immanent differentiation of the Logos; an irreducible plurality that is situated before any circumscribable language or human tongue. It is within this topography of contraction and expansion, touched and untouched, the many and the one, that Arabic's compelled differentiation comes to its place. The missed encounter with language, the hidden borne in language(s) ramifies as the working out of ascetical forms, which take as their object this primordial differentiation in view of an eternally withdrawn unity. Maximos likewise concludes:

'For He remains hidden even after His manifestation,' says the teacher, 'or, to speak more divinely, He remains hidden *in* His manifestation. For the mystery remains concealed by Jesus, and can be drawn out by no word or mind, *for even when spoken of*, it remains ineffable, and when conceived, unknown.' Beyond this, what could be a more compelling demonstration of the Divinity's transcendence of being? For it discloses its concealment by means of a manifestation, its ineffability through speech, and its transcendent unknowability through the mind, and, to say what is greatest of all, it shows itself to be beyond being by entering essentially into being.¹²¹

There is no interpretive space outside this loss. This withdrawal, that escapes mind and thought, is not a silence that harkens language's cessation, but is an unassimilable, the desert space, *in language*. It harkens to the uncreated plainly hidden in the created. Expanding in translation, transmission, transposition, and contracting into the letter, the parable, the tongue, is a loss that asks to be found.

¹²¹ Maximos The Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers*, 37, my emphasis.

PART II. *al-Nafs*

Abu ‘Abdullah al-Maghāzī the renunciant said: A man passed by a monk, so he called him and drew near, and said: O monastic, when does the heart and body withdraw from the love of the world? So the monastic cried out forcefully, falling unconscious in his cell, and the man did not cease keeping watch over him until he perceived him recover, and then he called out to him: I have waited for you for a day, O monastic, so he drew near and said: You! What is it you want of me? By allāh, the heart and body do not withdraw from love of the world and the eye looks to its family, while the ears listen to their word, this by allāh is what I say to you until the seeker of God looks for shelter in the protection of the mountains and the bosoms of the valleys and caves, remaining with the beasts to replenish your resources, eating the fruit of trees under their shade, he will not see in this that the blessing is more complete for him.

— Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, *Kitāb al-Ruhbān* (8th century)

هُنَاكَ طَلَبَ مِنَّا الَّذِينَ سَبَّوْنَا أَنْ نَشْدُو بِتَرْنِيمَةٍ، وَالَّذِينَ عَدَّبُونَا أَنْ نُطْرِبَهُمْ قَائِلِينَ: أَنْشِدُوا لَنَا مِنْ تَرَانِيمِ صِهْيُونَ
كَيْفَ نَشْدُو بِتَرْنِيمَةِ الرَّبِّ فِي أَرْضٍ غَرِيبَةٍ؟

For there, they that had taken us captive asked us for the words of a song, and they that led us away for a melody, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion." How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

(Ps. 137)

A small group of us have come to the monastery of Mār Simaʿān in the latter half of August. The head of the monastery, Um Pūrfīriyā, greets us warmly. We take her blessing, kissing her hand as she invites us to sit on a collection of stumps arranged under the shade of a large tree at some distance from the monastery. The tree stumps, one of our party and myself remark together, are reminiscent of those used by the famous Athonite and recently acclaimed saint, Paisios. On Mount Athos, deep in its interior valleys, the contemporary monastic would instruct spiritual sojourners, who would call on him in large numbers at his meagre hut, to sit on the collection of stumps that the frail elder himself had hewn and set up. While Mār Simaʿān differed from the valleys of Athos in its endless view of the Mediterranean, it did not want for green. The elevated coastal plateau upon which the monastery sat prominently featured planted cactus groves, which stretched the whole length of the mesa. The white stone monastery and its courtyards were built up to the very edge of the cliff face, where the land steeply dropped off to meet the sea. Strong winds continually pushed up and over the escarpment, animating the large tree under which we sat and likewise the long black robes of the head of the monastery.

She turns to me and asks me what had brought me to Lebanon. I explain that I am researching Orthodox spiritual life in the country. "Is this an academic interest, or a personal one?" she asks almost immediately in English. Demurring for a moment, I affirm that it was personal. "Yes," she says in affirmation but also in warning, "There is no time in this life for laboring on worldly things [*dunyawī*], only on those that are eternal [*abadī*]."

A visit to Lebanon by a relation of mine has prompted our sojourn to the monastery this Sunday afternoon. Though he speaks no Arabic, he has come from Canada for spiritual counsel. While Um Pūrfīriyā is conversant in English and so can understand him, she often resorts to Arabic in offering her pedagogical replies. My relative expresses to the elder his feeling of despair over his own spiritual state. "I sometimes weep at the thought of my own wretchedness," he admits readily. With a gentle smile the head of the monastery replies in

English, “This may be a gift from God, but it is necessary to pray, and to discern if it is from a divine source or not.” She then quickly moves to a brief paraphrastic invocation of the well-known story from the life of Antonios, the founder of the monastic life, who encountered a cobbler who said: “O wretched man, all will be saved and only you will remain fruitless.” The complete story, as I have heard it told and read it elsewhere, I have rendered here:

The holy Antonios once prayed: “Lord, reveal to me how the faithful person in the city among the noise can reach the spiritual level of the ascetic who dwells in the deep desert.” He had not even finished this request to the All-good God when he heard a voice tell him: “The Gospel is the same for all men, Antonios. And if you want to confirm this, how one who does the will of God is saved and sanctified wherever he is, go to Alexandria to the small cobbler's store, which is simple and poor. It is there below the last road of the city.” “To the cobbler's store, Lord? And who there can help shine some light on my thought?” replied the puzzled Saint. “The cobbler will explain to you.” replied the same voice. “The cobbler? What does this man know about struggles and temptations? What does the poor toiler know of the heights of faith and of the truth?” he wondered. His objections however could not be straightened by the divine explanation. Because of this, at dawn he traveled to the city. However, as God had shown him, he stopped at the small cobbler store that he found. Happily and reverently the simple man welcomed him in and asked him: “In what way could I be of use to you, Abba? I'm an illiterate and uncouth villager, but for the stranger, whoever he is, I will try to help, whatever the need.” “The Lord sent me for you to teach me,” replied the ascetic humbly. The poor worker jumped up in wonder. “Me? What could I, the illiterate one, teach your holiness? I don't know if I have done anything good or noteworthy in my life, something which could stand unadulterated before the eyes of God.” “Tell me what you do, how you pass your day. God knows; He weighs, and he judges things differently.” replied Antonios. “I, Abba, have never done anything good, I only struggle to keep the holy teachings of the Gospel. And further, I try to never forget, to never overlook my shortcomings and my spiritual fruitlessness. Therefore, as I work during the day I think and say to myself: O wretched man, all will be saved and only you will remain fruitless. Because of your sin, you will never be worthy to see His Holy Face.” “Thank you, O Lord,” the ascetic said raising his weeping eyes towards heaven. And as the cobbler remained puzzled at this, the ascetic embraced him with love and bid him farewell saying: “And thank you, O holy man. Thank you, for you taught me how easy it is with only a humble mind for someone to live in the grace of Paradise.” And as the poor cobbler continued to stare uneasily, without at all understanding this, the holy Antonios took his staff and departed for the deep desert. He

walked, his only companion being the sound of his staff. He walked and his prayer burned like the sands of the desert, rising towards heaven. He traveled all day and prayerfully reflected on the lesson that he received that day from the poor cobbler.

In Um Pūrfīriyā's telling of the encounter, my relative's dejection was likened to the cobbler's cry of his singular damnation: "O wretched man, all will be saved and only you will remain fruitless." Blessing his despair through her telling of the parable, the monastic coordinates the doubled condition of the struggle of the *nafs* (soul), opacity and disclosure, through the topology of the desert: Antonios leaves the desert to receive a vision of his own lack of humility while the cobbler remains deserted in his righteous struggle. The divine occlusion of the latter's awareness of his humility remains, being revealed only to Antonios, and those who hear the parable, as their dispensation. The opacity of the word given by Um Pūrfīriyā remained with my relative, who silently listened to the words of the parable. After our conversation, the head of the monastery would gift him an icon of Antonios to take back with him to Canada.

This form of encounter at the monastery is one that assumes the possibility of guidance of the *nafs* on the part of the elder and the desire for guidance on the part of the visitor. In that sense this *ad hoc* reception, and indeed the paraphrastic and fragmentary parable, falls under the larger rubrics of spiritual direction—a formal and authoritative relationship with a guide (*murshid*)—which is the precondition of monastic life and struggle. The struggle of the *nafs* is instituted, for both lay and monastic, by obediently situating oneself under an appropriate other's direction. This initiatory obedience to the will of a spiritual elder displaces—and ultimately endeavors to vitiate—the self. Hence it is in the differential of vantage—both the assumption the sojourner's inability to view their own passage in the world, and the elder or spiritual guide's capacity for discernment—that authorizes the form of interlocution. Indeed, a friend of mine, well-acquainted with Mār Sima'ān, mentioned that Um Pūrfīriyā was a sought-after and lauded spiritual mother and that she even somewhat unconventionally might take on men as spiritual children.

In terms of poetic form, the interlocution is fundamentally aural; the one seeking guidance is called to properly listen to the word that is given. The spiritual guidance, for its part, is orally delivered and highly specific to the situation. Because of the capacity for discernment on the part of the elder, their guidance harkens the listener to attend even in the at times enigmatic form of the word given. The form of guidance operates through living speech as the locus of a kind of disclosure of that is which is necessarily opaque to the listener. Thus the opacity of one's own passage—"he who chooses himself as a spiritual director has chosen a fool and a blind man," as one of the desert sayings affirms—is routed into the opacity

of the spoken direction. The still obedience with which one receives words of guidance manifests the spiritual struggle, which then circulates in the aural relationship with the elder.

In this instance of spiritual direction, a clear rhetoric of exemplarity is eschewed (for neither Antonios nor the cobbler are called to be specifically imitated)¹ and the telling of the parable is an illuminating event by way of a re-coordination of the encounter that initiates it. Indeed, the topology of the story, and of our encounter at the monastery that day, is situated between the city (the world) and the desert. Antonios, as already invoked by the women of Mār Ya‘qūb, is the preeminent figure of flight from the world into the destitution of the desert, yet the story turns on an inverted pilgrimage into the heart of the city and the desert of the *nafs*. The exchange of place reverses the initiatory ascetic cleavage (between desert and the world); the ascetic, the one who paradoxically inhabits the desert, returns to the city—where obtaining to an encounter with God is initially deemed impossible—in order to learn from one who is more accomplished in spiritual struggle. Um Pūrīriyā, receiving her visitors on the order of this topology, likewise inverts our sojourn to the monastery by offering the possibility of returning to the city, the scene of ‘the world’, as a deifying desert. In that sense, the positions are in their final form upended; one unexpectedly leaves the monastery, a desert of the passions, to sojourn once again in the world, the impassioned civilizational space of the city. The world opens up the site of a disclosure.

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On the subject of disclosure, Um Pūrīriyā continues, now in Arabic, using the story of Antonios to speak of the necessity of the deifying transformation of the cobbler—the attainment of the divine fruit (*thamr*). This possibility exists, she explains, even in the most hostile circumstances. “The feast of *al-tajallī* [transfiguration], which we will celebrate soon, attests to this fact; deification (*ta’liya*) in this life is not only for hesychasts and monks but for all people.” The feast, rendered in Greek as *metamorphosis* and thus into Latin languages as *transfiguration*, commemorates the gospel account of Christ’s ascent on Mount Tabor accompanied by his disciples Peter, James, and John. At its summit, the Messiah stands before his disciples, shining “like the sun,”² and flanked by Moses—the symbol of the law and of the dead—and Elijah—the symbol of the prophets and of the living.

¹ Of note here is Alice Forbess’ work on Rumanian Orthodox monastics. In her article, the author notes that Orthodox monastics’ emphasis on creativity and mutability pushes against a strict notion of exemplarity. See Alice Forbess, “Paradoxical paradigms: Moral reasoning, inspiration, and problems of knowing among Orthodox Christian monastics,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21, no. S1 (2015): 113–28, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12169>.

² Matthew 17:2.

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Figure 2.1 Icon of *al-Tajallī* (*Transfiguration*), Theophanes the Greek, 15th century.

‡ *Ekphrasis*

The image of Christ's disclosure on the mountain depicts in images what Um Pūrfīriyā had insisted on in her speech. The image, which is painted according to a set of regular rubrics and appears in different iterations across Orthodox communities, is set in the center of the church during the feast. The fourth ode to the canon of the feast chanted in the morning of the day exclaims:

Thou, O Christ our God hast delivered the written Law upon Mount Sinai, and hast appeared there riding upon the cloud, in the midst of fire and darkness and tempest. Glory to Thy power, O Lord.

As a pledge of Thy glorious dispensation, Thou hast ineffably shone forth on Tabor, O Christ our God, who wast before the ages and whose chariot is the clouds.

Those with whom Thou hast conversed of old in fiery vapour, in darkness and the lightest of winds, stood before Thee in the manner of servants, O Christ our Master, and talked with Thee. Glory to Thy power, O Lord.

Moses who in past times foresaw Thee in the fire of the burning bush, and Elijah who was taken up in a chariot of fire, were present on Tabor and made known there Thy decrease upon the Cross.

Lightning flashes of divinity preceded forth from Thy flesh: there the chosen prophets and apostles sang and cried aloud: Glory to Thy power, O Lord.

Thou hast preserved the bush unharmed, O master, though it was united with fire, and Thou hast shown to Moses Thy flesh shining with divine brightness, while he sang: 'Glory to Thy power, O Lord.'

The visible sun was eclipsed by the rays of Thy divinity, when it saw Thee transfigured on Mount Tabor, O my Jesus. Glory to Thy power, O Lord.

Thou wast revealed as an immaterial fire that burns not the material substance of the body, when Thou hast appeared to Moses and the apostles and Elijah, O Master who art one in two natures and both of them perfect.

The image depicting the illumination of the apostles, Elijah, and Moses, is itself pierced with light. Christ is wrapped in the uncreated light as a brilliance of white and blue. Likewise, as it tracks in minor forms the ascent and descent of the apostles with Christ, the icon figures the soul's struggle to encounter the unapproachable light. Here, flanked by the dual tradition of the divine law and the prophets, the hidden things of God are made known in the Messiah; the apostles avert their eyes while their spiritual eyes, their hearts, are rent by surpassing light.

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The term in Arabic, *al-tajallī*, does not connote a change in form or condition (*tahawwul*), much less an outward shift in appearance, but instead a self-disclosure.³ *Ta'liya* (in Greek, *theosis*) thus denotes the creature's participation in God's self-disclosure (*al-tajallī*)—in that sense the

³ Fr. Alexander Treiger, in a personal correspondence, identified that, historically, the Syriac word used for this feast is likewise at times *gelyānā* – 'revelation' (and so more a cognate of ἀποκάλυψις than μεταμορφωσις). The fact that the Arabic rendering of this event from the Gospels maintains the revelatory aspect thus appears to be of theological significance. For more on this term in Islamic and Sufi thought see, for example William C. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn Al-'Arabi's Cosmology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

transformation on Mount Tabor is that of the being qua vision (*ru'ya*) of the disciples.⁴ Participation in the uncreated energies of God, as Um Pūrḫīriyā made clear, refuses an absolute partition between the monastic space and the city or in the differentiation of human learning and capacity. Both are evinced in the story of the cobbler where the estranging terrain of the city and the simplicity of the cobbler are not barriers to the disclosure of the Uncreated Light. Beholding that Divine Light, which is one yet multiple, gathers all into common, now divinized, human nature.

“That essence is one, even though the rays are many, and are sent out in a manner appropriate to those participating in them, being multiplied according to the varying capacity of the receiving them,”⁵ writes Gregory Palamas. This great 14th century exponent of hesychastic asceticism grounded his theological understanding, like Um Pūrḫīriyā and contemporary monastics in Lebanon, in the disclosive event of transfiguration. In this vision (*ru'yā*) of the Uncreated Light—one which Palamas contended was participated in both by Moses, in beholding the burning yet unconsumed bush, and by Palamas’ own contemporary hesychasts on Mount Athos—those present participate in the Divine energies, a “light without beginning or end.”⁶ Importantly, participation in the divine energies is not to know God in his *essence* (*jawhar, ousia*) which is ever impossible for the creature. Burning eternally, the Uncreated Energies disclose themselves to the created as overwhelming light:

The light of the Lord’s transfiguration does not come into being or cease to be, nor is it circumscribed or perceptible to the senses, even though for a short time on the narrow mountain top it was seen by human eyes. Rather, at that moment the initiated disciples of the Lord ‘passed’, as we have been taught, ‘from flesh to spirit’ by the transformation of their senses, which the Spirit wrought in them, and so they saw that ineffable light, when and as much as the Holy Spirit’s power granted them to do so. Those who are not aware of this light and who now blaspheme against it think that the chosen apostles saw the Light of the Lord’s Transfiguration with their created faculty of sight, and in this way they endeavour to bring down to the level of a created object not just that light—God’s

⁴ The nature of this vision was of concern in the Islamic tradition as well. As Alexander Treiger notes in his paper, al-Ghazālī develops a Christological reading of *al-tajallī* which diagnoses the Christian and Sufi misreading of disclosure—wherein Christ simply ‘mirrors’ the divine light. His disciples, according to al-Ghazālī, misunderstood this vision and improperly attribute divinity to Christ himself; an error he interestingly coordinates with those of al-Bastāmī and al-Ḥallāj. See Alexander Treiger, “Al-Ghazālī’s ‘Mirror Christology’ and Its Possible East-Syriac Sources,” *The Muslim World* 101, no. 4 (2011): 698–713, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-1913.2011.01370.x>.

⁵ Saint Gregory Palamas, *The Triads: In Defense of the Holy Hesychasts* (Paulist Press, 1983), 99.

⁶ Palamas, 100.

power and kingdom—but even the power of the Holy Spirit, by which divine things are revealed to the worthy.⁷

The nature of this light became of matter of serious contention in 14th century Constantinople. In reference to an Augustinian⁸ and broader Latin Christian tradition,⁹ the opponents of the Athonite hesychasts claimed that the latter’s perception of God’s light was theologically inadmissible. At worst, it was evidence of the psychosomatic delusion of the hesychasts. Within an Augustinian paradigm, Divine manifestation was by necessity a created *medium*—either as a theophanic angel (i.e., how Augustine understood Moses’s encounter with the burning bush) or an intellectual dialectic (i.e., in rational contemplation).

In contrast, the hesychasts affirm both that the vision in question is of the Uncreated Light and that it is not only possible, but—to use Um Pūrfiryā’s words—necessary, “for all people.” Indeed, often eschewed in scholarly recapitulations of the debate is the centrality of the *authority* of the hesychastic experience for monastic practice.¹⁰ The attainment to deifying disclosure forms the foundation of Orthodox ascetical life, and likewise its perfectibility (*taḥasun*). As Palamas writes, “he alone knows the energies of the Spirit who has learnt of them

⁷ St Gregory Palamas, ‘Homily Thirty-Four on the Holy Transfiguration of our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ’, in *The Homilies*, trans. Christopher Veniamin (Dalton, PA: Mount Tabor Publishing, 2009) 269, quoted in Stoyan Tanev, “Created and Uncreated Light in Augustine and Gregory Palamas: The Problem of Legitimacy in Attempts for Theological Reconciliation,” *Pemptousia, Analogia: The Pemptousia Journal for Theological Studies Vol 4* (St Maxim the Greek Institute, 2018).

⁸ The relationship of Augustine’s formulations to this debate has been an issue of considerable polemic, bound up in a larger concern for the marginality of this figure to Eastern Christianity. Yet what is at stake for my purpose is both the way that Palamite theology is garnered by contemporary monastics in practice and mobilized as a pivot from Latin theology, which is seen to marginalize or dismisses the centrality of Divine disclosure: not the supernatural event of *trans-figura* (and with it, *transsubstantiatio*) but *al-tajallī*—transfiguration as disclosure.

⁹ Inadmissible for Barlaam, and to this day for many critics of Palamas, is the division between the Divine Essence and the Divine Energies, which has been argued to be at worst a form of ditheism and at best an unhelpful and vacuous distinction. Yet, it appears that part of the problem may be traced to Latin attempts to render εὐεργία, a word which, as David Bradshaw has noted, the earliest Latin translations of Aristotle have rendered as *operatio*, *actus*, and *actualitas* (the first two being classical and the latter a Scholastic term). What persists, Bradshaw notes, is an inability to reckon with a “fusion of activity and actuality,” (153) which must always resolve into operativity. See David Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁰ Arguments concerning ‘political hesychasm,’ as a modern project eschew this point entirely. See Daniel P. Payne, *The Revival of Political Hesychasm in Contemporary Orthodox Thought: The Political Hesychasm of John Romanides and Christos Yannaras* (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2011).

through experience.”¹¹ The experience of deification is “beyond every name,” Palamas contends:

This is why we, who have written much about *hesychia* (sometimes at the urging of the fathers, sometimes in response to the questions of the brothers) have never dared hitherto to write about deification. But now, since there is a necessity to speak, we will speak words of piety (by the grace of the Lord), but words inadequate to describe it. For even when spoken about, deification remains ineffable, and (as the Fathers teach us) can be given a name only by those who have received it.¹²

This double relation articulates Orthodox monasticism in present-day Lebanon as well. The fact of the possibility of an illuminating encounter with the Divine in this life, while it comes at the end of asceticism, affirms the space of spiritual struggle (found in the form of eldership and spiritual guidance). Um Pūrfīriyā’s exhortation and advice on concrete matters of prayer and stillness is made possible by the affirmation of *ta’liya*, even while its content remains necessarily unfurnished.

While deification in the Divine disclosure is ineffable, it does not follow that asceticism is disembodied. The practices of ascetic *hesychia* are principally determined through a bodily posture, lowering the head toward the chest while breathing lightly, and a discursive form—noetically or verbally uttering the Jesus prayer. This posture seeks to actively circumscribe the *nafs* by delimiting a circular vector of its faculties. This form of life greatly troubled Barlaam (Palamas’ chief opponent), who derided it as ‘navel-gazing’. In Barlaam’s view, mystical *ekstasis*, the idiom in which he understood the hesychasts’ practice, implied an abandonment of the body and an ascent into non-discursivity. Palamas responds that “when the Holy Spirit visited the apostles in the Temple, where ‘they were persevering in prayer and supplication,’ he did not give them ecstasy, did not ravish them to heaven, but endowed them with tongues of fire, making them pronounce words—which, according to you, those in ecstasy should forget, since they must be forgetful of themselves.”¹³

The abandonment of the senses in ecstasy, then, as a form of transcendence is refuted by Palamas: “Again, when Moses was silent, God said to him, ‘Why do you cry to me?’ This reference to his voice shows that he was in prayer; but since he prayed while remaining silent, he was clearly engaged in mental prayer. Did he then abandon his senses, not noticing the people, their cries, and the danger hanging over them, nor the staff that was in his visible

¹¹ Palamas, *The Triads: In Defense of the Holy Hesychasts*, 87.

¹² Palamas, 87.

¹³ Palamas, 53.

hand?”¹⁴ At stake between Palamas and Barlaam is the possibility of ceaseless prayer, cited in Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, and consequently a variant understanding of the *noetic* faculty of the soul. For Barlaam, the noetic faculty referred to the ecstatic state where both the bodily and discursive faculties are transcended; hence ceaseless prayer was never an actual, permanent state in this world, but one held *in potentia*. For the hesychasts, ceaseless prayer was and is the possibility of continually participating in the Divine energies while the intellectual and bodily faculties of the soul continue to function and are in turn illumined by the constant participation in God. It is the constant remembrance of God (*dhikr*), even in the repose of sleep. The light of the God’s self-disclosure marks the poetic threshold of kataphasis and apophasis:

The disciples would not even have seen the symbol, had they not first received eyes they did not possess before. As John of Damascus puts it, ‘From being blind men, they began to see’, and to contemplate this uncreated light. The light, then, became accessible to their eyes, but to eyes which saw in a way superior to that of natural sight, and had acquired the spiritual power of the spiritual light. This mysterious light, inaccessible, immaterial, uncreated, deifying, eternal, this radiance of the Divine Nature, this glory of the divinity, this beauty of the heavenly kingdom, is at once accessible to sense perception and yet transcends it?¹⁵

Critical to Palamas’ defense of ceaseless prayer is his assertion that the soul is not an essence but a plurality of *energies*. The circumscription of the activity of one’s mind in the body (through the posture of prayer) hence gathers the mind, “which has been dissipated abroad by the senses,”¹⁶ gathering the faculties of the soul in the heart. This active recollection and quieting combats the phantasmatic wandering of the mind. Hence, Palamas strictly rebukes a mode of actively seeking in prayer to contemplate, “intelligible visions” which is “a doctrine which engenders folly and is itself the product of madness.”¹⁷ By the soul and body together returning in a circular fashion to itself, one might deflect the passional aspects of the *nafs* (i.e., desire and appetite) back toward God. Tellingly, Barlaam argues for a different approach: a suppression of the passional faculties of the soul in contemplation:

¹⁴ Palamas, 53.

¹⁵ Palamas, *Triads*, 1, 3, 27, in Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ Συγγράμματα, eds. Π. Χρήστου et al., vol. 1 (Θεσσαλονίκη: Κυρομάνος, 1966) 22, quoted in, Stoyan Tanev, “Created and Uncreated Light in Augustine and Gregory Palamas: The Problem of Legitimacy in Attempts for Theological Reconciliation,” *Analogia: The Pemptousia Journal for Theological Studies Vol 4* (St Maxim the Greek Institute, 2018).

¹⁶ Palamas, *The Triads: In Defense of the Holy Hesychasts*, 43.

¹⁷ Palamas, 44.

[Barlaam] calls ‘impassibility’ the state in which the passionate part of the soul finds itself in a state of death. ‘The activity of this passionate part of the soul,’ he says, ‘completely blinds and gouges out the divine eye, and so does not allow any of its faculties to come into play.’ Alas! Should hatred of evil and love of God and neighbour gouge out the divine eye? Yet these are activities of the passionate part of the soul.

Palamas intensifies his point, noting that the desiring aspect of the soul is integral to approaching God: “Indeed, it is with this faculty of the soul that we love or else turn away, that we unite ourselves or else remain strangers.”¹⁸ The possibility of an active and unceasingly praying soul is thus dependent on the passional faculties, whereby “those who love the good thus transform this power, and do not put it to death; they do not enclose it immovable in themselves but *activate* it towards love of God and their neighbours—for, according to the Lord’s words, ‘on these two commands hang all the Law and the Prophets.’”¹⁹

The dispute between Barlaam and Palamas was not simply a different understanding of theophany (manifest event and self-disclosure respectively), but of the nature of the soul; the soul’s quiddity for Barlaam is countered by a notion of a soul forged and contoured in a struggle that vitiates the agency of that struggle (i.e., the self). Ceaseless participation in the Uncreated energies—*synergia*—which are multiform yet one, calls forth a different poetics than those established in and by an imagination in silent ecstasy.²⁰ Whereas mystical silence is oriented toward an impossibility *in speaking*—and thus theophany might be offered as an overcoming of that impossibility by Divine grace (a breaking in of the supernatural)—ascetic quietude entails an active and poetic circumscription of the energies of the soul.²¹

¹⁸ Palamas, 111.

¹⁹ Palamas, 111, my emphasis.

²⁰ Giorgio Agamben’s writings often work through an opposition between mystic operativity—which conceals and resolves into the act—and a kind of in-fantile potential, exemplified in the Eleusinian initiatory rites. In the latter, for example, Renaissance paintings or James’ *Portrait of a Lady*, form and content become indistinguishable: “these images have reached the point at which, because there is nothing left to say on the discursive level, thought and vision coincide” (37). Taking up Benjamin’s “image philosophy” seeks to countenance that in art which ‘cannot be discursively presented shines out of the ruins of language’ (39). See Giorgio Agamben and Monica Ferrando, *The Unspeakable Girl: The Myth and Mystery of Kore*, trans. Leland de la Durantaye, (London: Seagull Books, 2014).

²¹ I defer in mapping this practice in terms of a *vita contemplativa* over a *vita activa* or vice versa, which has been used not only in the analysis of Western monasticism but also in critical thought (see Arendt’s *The Human Condition*). Indeed, Western monasticism becomes markedly different from the Eastern ascetic forms (both Islamic and Christian) from the 12th century onward, wherein contemplatives led the insulated and sedentary life of silence while active monastics (i.e., mendicants) worked for social welfare in the emerging cities of Europe. This

Jihād al-Nafs

Palamas' articulation of the hesychastic and ascetic life was as vital for Um Pūrfiryā as for Archimandrite Gregorios, who had gone so far as to take the name of the 14th century hierarch of Thessaloniki. Gregorios would often converse with his monks and visitors about the necessity of forging and circumscribing the *nafs* in struggle.

It is a spring afternoon, following the morning work and the communal, midday meal. A damp chill still clings to the air in the monastery, one which is compounded by the typical easterly wind that spills across the olive groves and which has remained strong in the mornings and into afternoon. Looking to combat this vestigial chill, Khalīl, myself and Gregorios seek out the sunlight in the middle of the stone courtyard. At Gregorios' behest I quickly retrieve three plastic chairs from inside the church building and set them in a small circle. The conversation that ensues is, as is typical, sedate; the archimandrite's almost tentative demeanor belies a depth of consideration in his speech as it always approaches the tenor of a whisper.

Khalīl mentions that he is hoping to attend the Orthodox school of theology at Balamand in the fall, at which point the archimandrite noted that he worried for the institute, which trains most of the region's clergy. Although the monk had taught at the institute some years prior, he feared that it was suffering spiritually from the poor conditions of life in the Mashriq. The turmoil in Syria and economic depression in Lebanon had prompted many young men to attend the school in the hopes of acquiring a stable position in the priesthood. This vocational orientation, the archimandrite softly cautions, while perhaps understandable, risks the death of the spiritual life. "There is no Orthodox spirituality without asceticism," he affirms, and asceticism is synonymous with struggle (*jihād*). If one tries to learn about God (i.e., theology) without an inner spiritual life, one risks subjection to destructive delusion.

The centrality of asceticism for Orthodox spiritual practice, a point often pressed upon us by the hieromonk, was the theme of this conversation as well. Wanting to hear more about the contours of the spiritual life, I use this moment to ask the elder to clarify the difference between the heart, *qalb*, and the *nous*, a polysemic Greek word that implies the organ that receives Divine relation. "It depends," the archimandrite answered simply, "they are often used synonymously, but there are some differences." He recommends that I read Archbishop Hierotheos Vlachos' volume, *al-ṭibb al-nafsī al-urthūdhaksī*. Originally written in Greek, *Orthodox*

dichotomy greatly informed the thinking of Weber, who in his *Sociology of Religion* (1920), counterposes asceticism and mysticism—active self-cultivation on the one hand and passive contemplation on the other; the former figure being a key development in the 'hard-working' subject of Protestant capitalism.

Psychotherapy (as it was translated into English²²), as it contains a helpful distillation and parsing of the terms of the ascetic writers.

In collected works of Isaac the Syrian, the 7th century ascetic whose writings Gregorios recommended highly, address this in his text. Answering the question, “what is the ‘nous’, and what the ‘heart’, of the human being?” he writes,

Nous is spiritual perception, which is made to show forth the visionary power, as the daughter of the bodily eyes, which receive in themselves the light of perception. As for the *nous*, it is one of senses of the soul. As for the heart (the spiritual) it encompasses and commands the inner senses. It is also the root. And, if the root is holy so are the branches. That is to say, if the heart is cleansed, it is clear that all the senses (of the soul, in her and the *nous*), are cleansed.²³

The *nous* and heart together, then, is both root²⁴ and passageway. It marks the space of revelation other to the powers of the soul. The noetic heart and the *nafs* are two distinct but enfolded dimensions of the human being. In the language of the ascetics, the heart is open to purification (*taḥīr al-qalb*) and divine disclosure through this passage to the hidden. And so the heart is that which is darkened or lightened. The *nafs*, the energies of passional sensation and subjectivity, is that which is forged.

This topology is one that, once more, draws on the desert as a space of destitution and opening. The heart or *nous*, that which can receive God (*al-tajalli*), is a groundless, barren space within the passional and energetic architectonics of the *nafs*.²⁵ As in the parable of Antonios,

²² Hierotheos of Nafpaktos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy: The Science of the Fathers*, trans. Esther Williams (Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, 1994).

²³ Ισαακ Του Συρου, *Τα Εγρεθεντα Ασκητικα*, ed. Μοναχος Δαμασκηνος (Ιερά Μονή Καρακάλλου, Αγιον Ορος: [Unknown], 2018), 87.

²⁴ For a genealogy of the problem of localizing the soul’s root and self-otherness, see Daniel Heller-Roazen, *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation* (New York : Cambridge, Mass: Zone Books, 2007).

²⁵ In her volume, *Sites of the Ascetic Self: John Cassian and Christian Ethical Formation* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), Niki Kasumi Clements reads the ascetical writings of John Cassian (d.435) against the emphasis placed on interior renunciation, most famously by Michel Foucault. Instead, Clements argues for focusing on the cultivated and coenobitic forms of monasticism for which Cassian advocated. Clements’ careful reading is compelling; here, I want to simply note that the problem of renunciation versus cultivation—a problem Clements rightly diagnoses as central to a certain genealogy that can be found in Nietzsche, Foucault, and Weber—eschews the central dynamic of the *nafs* within hesychastic practice. Renunciation and cultivation synonymously belong to the energetic work of the *nafs*; its enfolded other, the heart or *nous*, cannot be understood either as a result of renunciation or cultivation but is instead a groundless space of encounter. As I

the city and the desert topologize the enfolded conjoining of subjective *nafs* and its destitute inner void.

To the work of the *nafs* Gregorios once again directed our conversation. The initiation of spiritual struggle, he continues, is a circumscription and redirection of the natural capacities of the soul: “*lāzim taghaṣab al-nafs*”—you must compel the soul, the elder tells us quietly. The use of the word *ghaṣab* evinces the severity of the elder’s calm exhortation; a verb used in other contexts to denote forceful coercion or at its most extreme, rape, was here used to emphasize the force of circumscriptive *nuskiyya*; as the gospel saying quoted by ascetics relates, “The kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.”²⁶ The archimandrite’s implicit reading of the Messiah’s words turned on the interior division of the soul, which at once divides and is divided.

Indeed, as the conversation progressed in the courtyard, the elder’s explication more clearly pivoted on an initiatory division of the life of the *nafs*: ‘outside’ (*bārrā/khārij*) and ‘inside’ (*dākhil*). The *nafs* in this topology is not relegated to a single domain. It is not strictly interior. Rather, inasmuch as it is united to the body through the senses, it is the isthmus and the limen by which the two positions (inside and outside) are joined as a division: the *nafs* is the orifical boundary and thus also the figuration of a limit-passage. Gregorios explains that the means by which the spiritual life is preserved (*hifṭ al-hayā al-rūhīyya*) is through the setting of limits (*ḍawābiṭ*); the Messianic enjoinder, Isaac the Syrian (who Gregorios would often cite) writes, is not “the doing of the commandments,” but rather “the soul’s amendment,”²⁷ to which the former is oriented.

It is precisely the “ease” (*sahil*) of life today, the hieromonk laments, that deadens the *nafs*: “This was not the case thirty years ago,” as he cites the time of the civil war. The elder, who had lived for some time abroad as a younger man with his family, had returned to a post-war Lebanon after his studies in Greece to become a teacher and guide (*murshid*) in the spiritual life. Whereas Lebanon’s war is typically narrated as prompting a call to societal revival following destruction, the archimandrite’s words pointed instead to an occluded aftermath: for him, the war was far from a destructive event that now endured in the present as an oppressive trauma, which was either repressed (in the judicial enactments of political

recount here, Gregorios insists that asceticism is not a form of ethical or moral (*akhlāqiyya*) formation but neither is it the ‘sacrifice’ of the self as Foucault would have it.

²⁶ Matthew 11:12.

²⁷ Isaac, *Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2011), 422.

entente as *lā ghālib wa lā maghlūb*, “no victor, no vanquished,”²⁸ or neoliberal reconstruction under the likes of Solidere²⁹) or healed. Rather, the transformative responses to the war had yielded a numbness of the soul in the very excitation of passional attachments. This passional narcosis the elder terms as *ḥiss*, sensible feeling; the dominant idiom, according to Gregorios’ writings, of contemporary life and that which is foundational to Western (and therefore heretical) Christianity. This misguided claim to know God, the archimandrite argues, was tied to the supposed solidity of affective, sensory knowledge for the *nafs*, which, coupled with a determinist (*ḥatmiyya*) rationalism (*‘aqliyya*), formed the dyad of Western thought.

The imbrication of *ḥiss* with unfeeling obduracy runs counter to a typical contrast of feeling to emotional numbness (as might follow trauma), yet it is consistent with hesychastic formulations of impassible dispassion (*al-lāhūwā*). The ‘fire of dispassion’, as it is named in the ascetic writers, is the form of attachment made possible in the enlightened and purified heart. Passional determinism, on the other hand, denotes a darkened noetic center; yielding to the autonomous logic of the passions leads to the heart’s intransigence. The topology of inside and outside hence reveals two forms of desiccation: one of the desert of the impassible heart, and the other that of the overwhelming passions of the *nafs*. The former, in its stilling estrangement and circumscriptive struggle, opens to a disclosure. In the case of the latter, the destruction of the civil war and the vertiginous proximity of other forms of destruction in the contemporary have rendered an undisclosed choking of the *nafs*, occluded in the moment of its incapacitation: a desert of the passions.

The Desert of the Passions

Reaching my friends in the suburbs of Beirut by taxi or local bus invariably involved traveling along the *autostrad* and passing through the gauntlet of Jal El-dib and Zalqa. The freeway, typically at a standstill at the chokepoint at which it turned northward, is lined with massive advertisements (*‘ilānāt*) oriented toward those trapped on the highway. Towering images of food, clothing, political leaders, pithy slogans, and invitations to invest in Greek property wordlessly seek to entice the gaze of stalled passengers and drivers. Looming askance, pressing at the edge of the gaze, these images form an effervescent impression of a real consumption to come. Groups of men peddling mass-produced commodities between the disjointed flows of vehicle—toys for children, water bottles, and backgammon boards—mark the uncanny inversion of those abstracted and aspirational advertisements framing them from above.

²⁸ See Sami Hermez, *War Is Coming: Between Past and Future Violence in Lebanon* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); Andrew Arsan, *Lebanon: A Country in Fragments* (London: Hurst & Co, 2018).

²⁹ See Hannes Baumann, *Citizen Hariri: Lebanon’s Neoliberal Reconstruction* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

My friends' family home was located just off the bustling Antilyās highway. After I reached it by this route, we began our journey together to the Ruqād al-Sayyida. Passing along the highway in his car, my friend remarked that the bridge we were driving over was destroyed completely in the 2006 war with Israel. The journey along the North-South highway, as usual, involved passing through a major military checkpoint, which separates the Beirut and North governates. Entering the line of cars, a quick check from the soldiers is typically ended by a flick of their chin and a “y‘aṭīk al-‘āfiyya! [God grant you relief]” in response from the driver. Instead of the nod this time we received an “‘alā yamīn”— to the right: they wanted to inspect our vehicle and check our identification. We were approached by a young man with a large rifle strapped to his chest who took my passport and my friend's Lebanese ID. A few words regarding our purpose and destination, followed by a sweep of the car along with the trunk, and we continued on our way. My friend, typically gregarious, now laughed in relief, and chuckled nervously that he had never been subject to the infamous ‘alā yamīn while showing me his trembling hand. Navigating the busy interchanges surrounding Tripoli, we eventually reached the monastery. Since our last visit, the monastery's cat, Slingo, had given birth to her kittens.

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The distinction between passion and reason, or feeling and thinking, marks a critical formation of modernity. Susan James notes in her work on early-modern European philosophy that the agonism of reason and passion was less an eschewal of the passions than a hierarchization, one in which the reasoning intellect sought to alternatively bridle or meld with the increasingly singular ‘force’ of the passions.³⁰ The distance between thinking and feeling, likewise—as Asad notes, drawing from R.G. Collingwood³¹—comes to constitute the possibility of a reasoned language of experience. Experience, which in previous centuries had designated an authoritative ground for knowledge, was now open to “being disciplined and re-presented through measurement and calculation...separating intellect from what was supposed to be inessential to it for genuine knowledge.”³²

Archimandrite Gregorios, drawing from the various practical and theoretical topoi of Orthodox asceticism, has, in his writings and teachings, sought to dismantle the operativity of the division between reason and passion. He does this by gesturing to the *aphaneia* of the

³⁰ Susan James, *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, *Passion and Action* (Oxford University Press), accessed June 3, 2020,

<https://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/0198250134.001.0001/acprof-9780198250135>.

³¹ See Asad, *Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason*, 62–63.

³² Asad, 63.

subject and, relatedly, to the heteronomous aspect of the soul.³³ “God is exalted [*mutasām*] above all our human sensations [*aḥāsīs*] ill with the passions,” he writes in one of his missives from 2017.³⁴ “In Orthodoxy, faithfulness toward God is not a rational [*‘aqlāniyya*] matter, and the attainment of it is not possible through sensory figuration [*al-ṣūwwar al-ḥassīyya*] or emotions [*al-mashā‘ir*], nor concepts [*mafāhīm*], all of which we receive in our selves [*dhūwātīnā*].” The elder, writing a polemic against contemporary Western Christian movements in Lebanon, diagnoses what he considers to be a constitutive split in Western Christianity between rationalist scholasticism and affective sentimentality (*‘aṭifiyya*); the former, high theologizing of the Latin schools, leads to the latter—an underside of affective and mystical (*taṣawwuf*) spiritual movements. These pious spiritualist movements, of which Taizé, the subject of the monk’s article, is one, form cathexes around Christ’s “suffering, his pain, his blood, and sweat” and a “demand [*ṭalab*] for an experience [*ikhtibār*] of this sensory pain.” It is specifically in the catalyzation of experience (*khibrah*) directed toward sensation, especially pain, that risks “westernizing” (*tagharrbān*) the “ascetic tradition” (*al-taqlīd al-nusukī*).

Niklaus Largier, in part of his larger study of the mystical Christian traditions of Western Europe, has argued that early modern formations of the secular subject—best traced in the figure of Martin Luther—can be delineated by a translation of earlier mystic tropes from their monastic, liturgical, and “medieval hermeneutical context” into a “new epistemological space,”³⁵ based in a “poetics of self-fashioning that is meant to bridge the abyss between the secular order of submission and the abstract freedom in faith.”³⁶ This translation of mystic tropes, denuded of the practices of liturgy and prayer, functions through a dyad of self and world; the “production of sensual experience,” located in the self, acts as an “experiential supplement” to the now “abstract concept of faith.”³⁷ This shifted threshold, situated between self and world, yields a genre of poetics—*arts* of living, of perception, and of the self—that seek

³³ Hierotheos Vlachos, in his writings on the therapeutics and hesychasm, notes that the reduction of the heteronomy of the soul in Western thought can be discerned partially through the historical Latin translations (and contemporary English use) of the Greek word νοῦς as ‘intellect.’ While the noetic soul designated forms of higher understanding, it was not synonymous to human reason, which existed as a separate function in the soul. As Vlachos argues, it is precisely when the νοῦς—the Divine, foreign centre—is absorbed into reason that the dyad of reason and passion (and likewise, of that association producing a dualism of god-like reason and human body) assumes dominance. See Hierotheos of Nafpaktos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*.

³⁴ Gregorios Iṣṭfān, “al-Rūḥāniyya al-‘Urthūdḥaksiyya wa al-Rūḥāniyya al-Bida‘,” *Saint Gregory Palamas* (blog), 2017, <https://saintgregoriypalamas.org/>.

³⁵ Niklaus Largier, “Mysticism, Modernity, and the Invention of Aesthetic Experience,” *Representations* 105, no. 1 (2009): 39, <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2009.105.1.37>.

³⁶ Largier, 48.

³⁷ Largier, 49.

to suture the two realms at the same time these genres are banished from the prosaic, reasoned speech of the secular.

Ikhtibār, to experiment or have an experience of something through probing, is opposed to hesychastic stillness inasmuch as it participates in the ‘wandering’ of the intellect that Palamas warned against in his polemics with Barlaam. Gregorios continues this polemic, where the contemporary “experiences” (*khibrāt*) of Western Christian movements in Lebanon “depend on apparitions [*zahrāt*] and deceptive wonders [*‘ajā’ib muḍalla*],” and especially “the experiment [*ikhtibār*] of the Messiah’s suffering in the experience of wounds.” The poetics of experience are a passionate engagement through the different faculties of the *nafs*: the imaginal faculty (*al-ṣūwwar*) becomes the ground of one’s self (*dhāt*)³⁸ that is formed through the modulation of affective experimentation. The latter is a poetics which remains as the ‘hidden’ underside of a reason to which it is subordinate. The cause and ground of this poetics remains the autonomous ‘self.’

Following the topography of asceticism outlined by Gregorios, one is not rendered obstinate and numb by the withdrawal of sensitivity to the world, but by the fact of “the senses being alive to every occurrence,”³⁹ in hopes of feeding one’s insatiable soul (in its various faculties).⁴⁰ The desert of a bourgeois subjectivity here is delineated through the doubly founding command to experiment (with one’s willful consumption) and thus to find one’s self anew (in new sensation).

In contrast to reason (*manṭiq*), which colonizes the noetic center of the *nafs* with the self, and that consequently either bridles or mobilizes the passions, Gregorios argues, “living faith is that which grows in experience of the knowledge of God [*khibrat m‘arifat illāh*],” which requires “reclusion, and true purification of the heart.” “God” he writes,

³⁸ *dhāt* in Arabic refers both to an essence, but unlike the more technical philosophical terms *jawhar* or *mawjūd*, it has the quality of a demonstrative. It denotes that which is tautologically selfsame.

³⁹ Isaac, *Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, 276.

⁴⁰ The stupor of *acedia* (despondency or slothfulness) thus must be understood in distinction to a dominant reading which takes as the mode of desire’s withdrawal (as in Agamben’s reading: a frustrated dialectic of desire and its object). In the opening chapter of his book *Stanzas*, he notes that “what the slothful lacks is not salvation, but the way that leads to it, in psychological terms the *recessus* of the slothful does not betray an eclipse of desire but, rather, the becoming unobtainable of its object: *it is the perversion of a will that wants the object, but not the way that leads to it, and which simultaneously desires and bars the path to his or her own desire.*” Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 6. Yet it is remarkable how often in Orthodox ascetic teachings (e.g., the *Philokalia*) the counter to *acedia*—which is here not the abrogation of any desire, but self-love—is minor or even inconsequential physical *movement*. My point here is simply to note that the ‘will’, a psychological realm of consciousness, is neither here the locus of *acedia* nor the struggle against it; instead, it is the terrain of the body/soul and its apparatus of energies.

discloses (*yakshif*) himself in the hearts of those bodies which die, in reclusion, to the passions (*‘ahwā*) of this world (*al-‘ālam*). The manifestations [*‘ilānāt*] of God to humankind are not obtained through the mind [*al-‘aql*] and its reason but through the experience of stillness [*khibra hudū’īyya*], the experience of purification and illumination [*khibrat il-taṭahurr wa al-istināra*].⁴¹

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This polemic, in a different iteration, became the subject on an impromptu teaching given by the elder at his monastery. A group from the Orthodox Youth Movement (MJO) in the Metn region had come to the monastery at the behest of one of my friends for a day-visit. The branch, while led by a man who had lived through the war, consisted of a number of committed individuals who were born at the time of its close. Inheriting a post-war Lebanon, members of the contemporary MJO, like those of the generation before them, spent much of their time organizing community events, charitable drives, or teachings on Orthodox life and theology. Far from being strangers to the growing monastic communities, they had come that summer day to hear from the elder. As was the case with our sojourn to hear from Um Pūrfiriyā, the encounter was authorized under the rubric of the audition of spiritual guidance.

The elder invited them up to one of the newly reconstructed rooms, which was largely barren and unfurnished save for some chairs and a plastic table. The group quietly took their places around the diminutive archimandrite. The pregnant pause preceding his speech was typical. The elder did not, as might other monastics, transition causally from lighter words into more serious topics. Rather every word he spoke was said with consideration and through staid deliberation, giving his language a charge that offsets its exceeding softness.

Straightaway, the elder’s words warned of satisfaction in how one subsists “in the world” (*bi-l-‘ālam*). “One might consider himself good, that he is struggling, he is living such a way well, that it is acceptable (*maqbul*) before God. But, perhaps, I am saying, reaching the end of their life; they did not produce fruit (*thamr*). And why? Because in everything, in all their life as it was, there was no fruit, at the end.”⁴² After pausing for a moment, he continued: “Often,

⁴¹ Istfān, “al-Rūhāniyya al-‘Urthūdhaksiyya wa al-Rūhāniyya al-Bida’.”

⁴² The struggle that yields fruit is an important theme in ascetic writing: “It was said of Abba John the Dwarf that he withdrew and lived in the desert at Scetis with an old man of Thebes. His abba, taking a piece of dry wood, planted it and said to him, ‘Water it every day with a bottle of water, until it bears fruit.’ Now the water was so far away that he had to leave in the evening and return the following morning. At the end of three years the wood came to life and bore fruit. Then the old man took some of the fruit and carried it to the church saying to the brethren, ‘Take and eat the fruit of obedience’” Benedicta Ward, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, Revised edition (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1987), 85–86.

the Christian person [*al-insān al-maṣīhī*], and even this monastic life often, is lived like this. Yet the monk lives his life on the earth waiting for one thing [*shaghla waḥda*] before he dies, and that is grace [*nʿamah*],⁴³ Divine grace, the grace of the Holy Spirit. This is our need [*khalitnā*] and our aim [*tʿamidnā*].” The attainment of the Holy Spirit, the transfiguring fire toward which the monastic life is lived, is threatened by the passions, as the elder explained. “The human being always, as we know, wants to lose it, we lose it often. And it happens that we sleep [*ntikr*] in errors [*khaṭāyyā*], that these passion (*ahwā*) bolster within us, control us [*t-ṣayṭr ʿalaynā*].” This “craving” (*shahwa*) the monk explained, comes multiform, “vainglory” (*majd al-bāṭil*), “incapacity” (*ʿajz*), “arrogance” (*takabbur*). The passions, figured as a substance, fill the soul and prevent deification: “They spread in us (*tanbudd finā*), and the grace of God cannot live with the passions.”

This condition of “losing” and of “breaking” grace, the elder continued, is a universally shared condition for human beings. The difference, he explained, was in the means by which a Christian learns to struggle. One of the younger monks appeared in the room with a platter carrying some freshly squeezed and chilled lemonade. Inviting him into the room, the archimandrite continued to speak as the juice was distributed to the group:

We don’t just struggle by way of ethics [*akhlāq*], say, or by way of Western rights [*ḥaqūq gharbiyya*], this way is just intellectual [*fikriyya*], just in our action. [We think] our work is sufficient, that it is pretty good, and that this work is enough to save us [*khalīṣnā*]. Work by itself does not save. You cannot do good work unless there is the fruit of faith [*thamr al-imān*], the action of the fruit of Divine grace in us.

The elder returned to the exemplarity of the *rāhib*, the one who enters the monastery oriented around “one thing, that he be able [*yaqdar*] to receive this grace [*yijzu ha-l-nʿamah*].” To the attainment of grace that Um Pūrfīriyā couched as universally open, Gregorios added that it is necessary for “every human being,” including those non-monastics “living in the world”, to struggle “in a serious way.” This ground of asceticism, struggle, called into question for the elder the posture of some of those in the Orthodox community:

As I said, unfortunately, in our society and even in our church...we are satisfied with some work. We do some good work and we consider ourselves righteous in our life; [we think that] ‘it’s fine, we have pleased God (*ʿam nurḍa allāh*).’ Certainly, we are not sufficient. As I

⁴³ *Naʿmah*, in Greek χάρις, has a meaning more expansive than is allowed by the English word ‘grace.’ Here it refers to favor found in God by his servants; the acclamation given by God as master in the parable, “well done, good and faithful servant.” (Matthew 25:23). It is the attainment of *theosis* in the disclosing vision of God.

said, the fundamental concern for the Christian person...this is the fundamental concern; how can one inhabit this grace [yaqīnā ha-l-na‘amah] even before death.

The monastic gesture of withdrawing from the world, the elder explained, functions to circumscribe the energies of the soul: “thus, every person returns (*yirj*) anew.” One commits [ḥaṭṭ] to this gesture in one’s life, even in the world, “so this station [muḥaṭṭ] always returns to preserve one’s *nafs*.” This returning withdrawal localizes the circulation of the *nafs*: “returning to preserve one’s soul, if they are living in a correct manner.” The risk of delusion is thus in the wandering of the *nafs*, one which yields an unjustified spiritual confidence; “As for the one who is simply deluded [makhdū‘a], as we say—this person may be one who lives in the church, or perhaps has a ‘branch’ [of the MJO], or is learned, or they do much for the people of the church.” “However,” he cautioned, “Perhaps, they are seriously deluded by the end of their life. They are entirely working for the satisfaction of their ‘I’ (*anā tab‘atū*), the satisfaction of their ego (*irdā anāniyyatū*); their ego has slipped in through their activities in the church.” “This does not just happen often,” he warned, “it happens most of the time, and sometimes even for priests. For the priest specifically, he becomes pleased with himself: that he is serving, he is teaching, he is shepherding the people etc. He becomes self-oriented [‘am biwajhu al-dhātū], unfeelingly and unknowingly.” If a priest, the elder warned, can “in the end” become deluded in this way—thinking well of themselves, and thinking that they “gather the people, people are returning to the church; they teach, they do activities, they are powerful,”—“how much more” Gregorios lamented, might Orthodox communities find themselves, at the end, “deluded” (*makhdū‘a*) and “misguided” (*dāl*).

The edifice of activity in and as ‘the world’ is anchored in the self (*dhāt*). It is this reasoned if effervescent center that forms the underside of the passions. The hegemonic idiom of work (‘amal), the elder mused, comes from the lack of a “deep” (‘amiqah) “Christian pedagogy” (*tarbiyya masīhiyya*); this form of pedagogy, the elder explained, allows one to “reach the work of the spiritual life: how the human being dies to the world. How the human dies to the world in a serious way.” At this point, one of the visitors interjected, asking how to make sense of the fact that membership in the community does not guarantee “fruit,” while pointing to the possibility of fruit outside of the community. “Fruit is grace, as I said,” the elder replied, “our entire measurement [*qiyas*] is the Messiah; there is no second exemplar, no worldly treasures [*khayrāt duniyāwiyya*] and no specific prosperity [in it].” “True fruit,” he reasserted, “is the dwelling of grace [*sakan al-n‘ama*].” For attainment of this grace, the elder continued, “the human being must be stripped [*tajarrad*] of everything, internally free of everything.” This is Christ’s meaning, when he says that one must die completely to the world.

“Thus, the matter is not only in our work or our activities (*nashṭatnā*), but it is in our internal life, how the human being struggles.”

The facticity of one’s being (*dhāt*) is the ground of action while the ‘I’ (*anā*) is the object of that activity. In producing the self and its glory (*majd al-dhāt*), it proliferates itself as world and destroys the possibility of humility: “We are working and just waiting for someone to speak to us or to thank us...while Christ said he took his wage (*akhadha ajruḥu*).”⁴⁴ At this point the leader of the group asked Gregorios, “pragmatically” (*‘amaliyya*), how one can die to the world in the way the elder enjoined:

This way of life, the spiritual way of life, we always say—I am speaking about the experience of the church [*khibrat al-kanīsa*], assuredly I am not speaking about anything else, another experience—firstly, one needs to begin with recognition/confession (*al-‘itirāf*).⁴⁵ The first matter, and this is how the Fathers arrived at it, is that the human being must struggle in the way of the salvation of his *nafs*. One needs to have before him spiritual lessons [*al-‘ibar ar-rūḥī*]. And, in the same way, the spiritual lesson is also the one who is struggling for the sake of the salvation of his soul. Understand? Perhaps, this is an important point, a spiritual teaching itself is not heedful [*wā‘*] of the way entirely. For this reason, one needs to see that, and needs to see the capacity [*qadr*] of the message [*risāla*].

⁴⁴ This is in reference to the parable of the vineyard, where God rebukes the jealousy his servants have of His mercy:

For the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So, they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing; and he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the householder, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ So, the last will be first, and the first last. (Matthew 20)

⁴⁵ This word in Arabic both means recognition in the broad sense used here, as well as indexing the practice of confession in Orthodoxy.

The *adhān* from a nearby mosque spilled into the room, furnishing the elder's words as he continued to speak: "But this is foundational. There is no human being in society. Here it is the beginning that I am speaking about, the beginning of all spiritual life. It is begun through recognition/confession, and spiritual direction [*al-irshād ar-rūḥī*]. There is no human being, and who could be one? And even if there was, who could be, when there is one who says, 'I do not struggle'. This one is certainly a human being without their *nafs*, certainly they will have come to delusion in the end."

Society (*al-mujtamaʿ*) is named as a site of allurements (*ighrāʾāt*) that incapacitates true knowledge of God. It itself, as the host to the passions, is hostile to the spiritual life:

The passions assault us. All society assaults us, our egos, it centers the ego. It assaults us with craving (*shahwah*), assaults us with exaltation (*tʿallu*) on the earth. Correct, no? Look at the all the advertisements (*ʿalināt*), television, all assaulting us, exalting us, sinking us (*biyjazirnā*) thus into this world. Such that we, forever, keep this world, that you are all righteous (*khayrīn*) in this world and that your paradise (*fardaws*) is here found in the world: you get a job, you go out, you go travel, and do your work. This, we imagine (*tasawwarnā*), is paradise here. This is clear. If a person is a library, he completely assimilates all this, without feeling, he starts being 'correct' (*ṣaḥīḥ*)—he is living in the church, he is living, he is carrying, the Christian life. However, practically, this person's heart will have no place (*qalbu ghayr maḥal*).

The place (*maḥal*) for the heart is absent in the soul whose faculties of imagination are dominated by the passional images of a successful life; one in whom the precarious securing of labor is tied to soliciting cravings for leisurely consumption. Yet the economy of goods is not exhausted in these passionated iterations, one that would leave a space for righteous activity *in the world*. As Gregorios' words make clear, both forms—resting as they do on the consistency of the self qua agent—forget God in their own activity. The reasoning mind, *al-ʿaql*, finds its 'self' in its passional and likewise affective activity. In an exaltation (*tʿallu*) that is also a submersion (*jazr*), the heart is darkened, incapable of illumination or circumscription.

The elder's words, like those of Um Pūrfīriyā, were grounded in an idiom of spiritual direction. The rhetoric of his teaching to the members of the MJO was tailored to the specificity of their condition. Echoing his concerns for those joining the seminary without spiritual struggle, Gregorio's warning could likewise be summed up by the words of the hesychast ascetic Macarius:

“Where your heart is, there also is your treasure” (Mt. 6:21; Lk 12:34). For to whatever thing one’s heart is tied and where his desire draws him, this is his God. If the heart always desires God, he is Lord of his heart. If man renounces himself and becomes possessionless, having no city, and he fasts, yet if he is still attached to the man he is or to worldly things or to a home or to parental affection, where his heart is attached, there his mind is held captive—that is his God. And he is found to have gone from the world through the large, front door, but he has reentered and thrown himself into the world through a little side door.⁴⁶

The place of the heart is the site of a passage; it is the place (*maḥal*) for a manifest condition (*ḥāl*) of the soul. This kind of manifestation (*‘ilān*)—the same word used for consumer advertisement—in the heart is not embroiled with the passions. Divine disclosure in hesychast practice is that of a *passionless* image. This image free from passion, is nothing other than *khibra hudū’iyya*, which in a precise translation of the Arabic is not an experience of stillness (that is, where stillness is still the object of the faculties of the soul) but rather a paradoxical *still-experience*.

The passage of the heart, put in other terms, allows for two forms of still movement: an outer, wandering indifference or an unceasingly internal circumscriptive stillness. As Ishaq of Athos advises in a recorded conversation with him:

One should know what it is to be indifferent (*mutawānī*)...if I take in more than three persons in this cell, it will become a monastery and it will not be of any benefit afterward. Do not seek external stillness (*al-hudū’ al-khārijī*) for it is an evil (*sayyi’*) stillness originating (*yanjum*) in the passions. Seek the stillness that is found (*yūjad*) in the heart.⁴⁷

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A stillness “originating in the passions” bears striking resemblance to the conditions of the fragmented sensorium under capitalist modernity as outlined in the writings of Nadia Seremetakis. In her anthropological exploration of Greek material culture,⁴⁸ processes of commodification disable sensorial memory, its specific capacity to codify the past. The

⁴⁶ Pseudo-Macarius, *Pseudo-Macarius: The Fifty Spiritual Homilies and the Great Letter.*, ed. George A. Maloney (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 219.

⁴⁷ Alain Durel, “Ab’ad min al-Bashariyya,” trans. Reader Yūḥannā, 2017. This Arabic translation is excerpted from the original French volume, Alain Durel, *La Presqu’île interdite: Initiation au Mont Athos* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2010).

⁴⁸ C. Nadia Seremetakis, ed., *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity* (The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

sensorial and thus temporal fragmentation yields a dominant feeling of eternal *anostos*—tastelessness—wherein sensation and consumption is privatized, cordoned off to individual experience. Indeed, the eternity of a fractured sensorium is not only found in a subjective relation to processes of consumption, but, as Kiarina Kordela notes, in processes of labour.⁴⁹ Here, in the dominant logic of symbolic valuation—i.e., that which might be exchanged—an immortal subject is rendered, indifferent to the world of ‘mortality’—i.e., use and subsistence.

While for these authors the problem of the sensorial indifference is located within a certain historical field (modernity, capitalism), the ascetic tradition intensifies this problematic to the level of ontology, without, however, transcending the historicity of the present. In lieu of the ‘new’ performance—that is, the eternally recurring consumption promised both as commodity and as sensation—*poesis* is “the making of something out of that which was previously experientially and culturally unmarked or even null and void.”⁵⁰ Ascetic poetics is the site of a passage, not a creation, from the nowhere, the deserted space of one’s ‘here’.

Poetics of Still-Experience

The day opens at night. The punctuations of the wooden *semantron* cascade and echo off the heavy stones of the monastery. Roused by its rhythmic alternation and the increasing urgency

⁴⁹ She writes, at length:

As the process of production is increasingly exported to the “excluded,” the included are increasingly absorbed by the reproductive sectors of economy (e.g., services, education, information), whereby their relation to the products of the “excluded” becomes exclusively that of exchanging them and consuming them. The process of direct production, which is increasingly alien to the included, takes place in a temporality radically other than that of the circulation of exchange-values. For while in production, an object is not a differential value, but a physical thing with inherent qualities (specific materials, shape, etc.), which in turn requires a specialized kind of labor for its production. Nothing is arbitrarily exchangeable or substitutionable within the process of production. Far from being a value or symbol, which is by definition immortal, not subject to physical decay, both the material of the objects and the laborers who produce them wear out and eventually perish. While the included who labor on material that is reminiscent more of exchange-value (information, language, image, etc.) rather than physical objects of utility, perceive time as a synchronic infinity in which they are immortal, the excluded are left alone to deal with diachronic finite time and mortality. The world of global capitalism consists of two universes that, more than being simply the one of non-prosperity and the other of “relative prosperity,” are the one of multiple (mortal) beings and the other of the univocity of the (immortal) simulacrum—with the latter claiming for itself the position of superiority. (66)

A. Kiarina Kordela, *Surplus: Spinoza, Lacan* (SUNY Press, 2008).

⁵⁰ C. Nadia Seremetakis, “1: The Memory of the Senses, Part I: Marks of the Transitory,” in *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity* (The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 7.

of its rapidity, the monks and we few visitors gradually congregate in the small, dark chapel used for daily prayer. Silently we enter the church, venerating the icon at the entrance and taking our places on the back wall of standing chairs. The narrow chapel is a converted section of the south part of the complex. The stone altar table is inset into a deep alcove, where on the anterior wall is an icon of the Theotokos as the Divine Mercy Seat, upon whom Christ is seated. The prayers of the morning begin with the midnight prayer (*ṣalāt muntaṣaf al-layl*), the monastic prayer added to the seven daily prayers in the Orthodox cycle. The midnight prayer opens with several psalms. It focuses on the 17th Kathisma of the psalter, called ‘The Blameless’, which dwells on the Divine law, the remembrance of God, and the watchful heart:

Blessed [ṭūbā] are the blameless in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord.

Blessed are they that search out His testimonies; with their whole heart shall they seek after Him.

The lengthy psalms continue to be read in the dark; the only light admitted is a dim lamp above the reader stand. The few people there—the monastic brethren and few visitors—line the walls, alternatively standing or sitting in the narrow chairs.

The way of Thy commandments have I run when Thou didst enlarge my heart.

The elder sits in his accustomed place opposite the cantor stand near the iconostasis. Seated, he has in hand a lengthy rope of knots (*misbaḥa*), which steadily moves through his fingers.

Multiplied against me hath been the unrighteousness of the proud; but as for me, with my whole heart will I search out Thy commandments.

Curdled like milk is their heart; but as for me, in Thy law have I meditated.

It is good for me that Thou hast humbled me, that I might learn Thy statutes.

The law of Thy mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver.

After the reading of the psalms, the troparion of the midnight prayer is chanted:

Behold, the Bridegroom comes in the middle of the night

And Blessed is the servant He finds watchful
As for the one whom He finds heedless, he is unworthy

So attend O my soul, lest you drown in sleep

And shut outside of the Kingdom and delivered to death

But be vigilant crying, Holy, Holy, Holy are you O God

هاهوذا الختن يأتي في نصف الليل
فطوبى للعبد الذي يجده مستيقظاً
أما الذي يجده متغافلاً فهو غير مستحق
فانظري يا نفسي ألا تستغرق في النوم
ويُغلق عليك خارج الملكوت وتُسلمي إلى الموت
بل كوني منتبهة صارخة قدوس قدوس قدوس أنت يا الله

The liturgical rite continues for several more hours. By its close, the glow of sunlight can be spotted through the two westerly windows. And the birds nesting in the nearby palms awake, offering their own morning song.

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The prayers of midnight center on watchfulness (*yaqza*), and in that sense they are exemplary of the ascetic struggle. Yet the lexical triad definitive of monastic life—fasting (*al-ṣawm*), vigil (*al-sahar*), prayer (*al-ṣalā*)—all center around forming the place around the heart through the poetics enabled by the *nafs* and guarding the heart against the narcosis of the passions that might choke the *nafs*. Prayer, Gregorios explained in his teaching, is principally a matter of “*taqṣīr dākhlī*”—a curtailment that occurs *in* the interior, but also the bounding *of* the internal space. The trilateral root of the gerund *taqṣīr*, q-ṣ-r, invokes a physical fortress; that which is delimited, set apart, and guarded. Like fasting, it is in the exterior and physical act of delimitation that creates the possibility of true fasting in the heart. Recalling our encounter with Um Pūrfīriyā, it is this form of curtailment—initiated in the still obedience of receiving her word—that makes an illuminating disclosure possible (for it is possible only when the passions are stilled) and thus one’s return to sojourn once again in the world (which is that domain of the passions). The effect of curtailment, as figured in Antonios’ encounter with the cobbler’s humility, marks a returning passage to the desert of the *nafs*, the heart.

This circumscription of the soul as it guards the heart opens onto a proliferation—not in conceptual and rational schematization, but in “the language of poetry and images”⁵¹—

⁵¹ Christos Yannaras, *Elements of Faith: An Introduction to Orthodox Theology* (Edinburgh: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2000), 17.

oriented around the desert centre. The proliferation marks a plenitude (*al-fayḍ*) that originates in that barren place:

Likewise, these things are seen in one flash, they are formed and imaged in the small pupil of the eye. So it is with the mind toward the heart. And the heart itself is but a small vessel, yet there also are dragons and there are lions; there are poisonous beasts and all the treasures of evil. And there are rough and uneven roads; there are precipices. But there is also God, and also the angels, the life and the kingdom, the light and the Apostles, the treasures of grace—there are all things.⁵²

⁵² Pseudo-Macarius, *Pseudo-Macarius: The Fifty Spiritual Homilies and the Great Letter.*, 220–21. See also, Eva Anagnostou-Laoutides, *The Eye of the Soul in Plato and Pseudo-Macarius: Alexandrian Theology and the Roots of Hesychasm* (Brill, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004439573_013.

ب Chant, Vocalization

يَا رَبُّ إِلَيْنِكَ صَرَخْتُ فَاسْتَمِعْ لِي. أَنْصِتْ إِلَى صَوْتِ تَضَرُّعِي حِينَمَا أَصْرُخُ إِلَيْكَ. اسْتَمِعْ لِي يَا رَبُّ

O Lord I have cried unto Thee, hear me. Hear me, O Lord. Receive the voice of my prayer when I cry to you. Hear me, O Lord.

(Ps. 140)

Our visit to the monastery of Mār Sima‘ān, where we heard the exhortative words of the head of the monastery, Um Pūrfīriyā, concluded with the daily *ghurūb* (the sunset or evening office). It was August, which in the Orthodox calendrical cycle is marked by two feasts: *al-tajallī* (Transfiguration), and *ruqād wālidat-il-illah* (the Repose of the Mother of God). Each evening of the two-week fast that precedes the latter feast is notable for being heightened by the chanting of the *paraklēsis*—a supplicatory canon (with two iterations, ‘small’ and ‘great’) or long-form poem—to the Mother of God. The term, taken directly from the Greek name, means both invocation and consolation.

Um Pūrfīriyā beckons us into the monastery’s church, a simple, square building situated independently on the edge of the mesa overlooking the sea. Inside, the walls and vaults are stark white, covered by the same protecting, effacing plaster seen in other Levantine Orthodox churches. The unusual lack of wall iconography was offset by an image-laden wooden iconostasis. As it is a weekday, the monastery and church are largely empty of other visitors. We take up a place in the back of the church as the rapid strikes of the *semantron* echo outside. In slow succession, several women monastics, a few lay visitors, and over a dozen novices enter the church. A few of the novices take up spaces in various fringe spaces of the church while most of them proceed to the left cantor stand north of the altar. Um Pūrfīriyā, in her role as head of the monastery, leads the *ghurūb*. When the time comes to chant the *paraklēsis*, the elder assumes a position at the south, and so main, cantor stand, accompanied by one other monastic, who supports the elder’s chant with an *ison* (a drone note). Opposite the elder, at the second cantor stand, stands a large number of the novices—distinguishable from full *rāhibāt* by their lack of distinctive black clothing and complete head coverings—who chant verses in response to their elder; the practice, common in much of Orthodox psalmody, of antiphony. In this way the chant alternates between the resonant, singular voice of the elder, as she initiates each of the stanzas of the ode, and the large group of novices and monastics who completed each phrase:

Ode 1

Most Holy Mother of God save us.

Many trials (tajārib) have surrounded us, O
Virgin
Asking for salvation,
We hasten unto you;
O Mother of the Word, save us now
From all distresses and oppressions deliver us.

Most Holy Mother of God save us.

O Maiden, barrages of the passions (ahwā')
have much assaulted us
Our souls have been put
into abundant sorrow (kābatan ghazīratan);
Deliver us to stillness (hudū'), O Maiden,
Of your own Son and your God, all-blameless
One.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the
Holy Spirit.

O virgin, in that you gave birth to the Saviour
We ask you to save us from all dangers;
For now we run to you for refuge,
And toward you we extend both al-nafs and
the mind (al-'aql).

Now and forever, and to the ages of ages,
amen.

O only righteous Mother of God
As you gave birth to The Good and The
Righteous
Offer us to the divine pledge and the care
which comes from you;
We, those divided in soul and body together

In the course of the paraklēsis, one *rāhibā* distributes small booklets which contained the text of both of the canons. The introduction to the booklet, written by Archbishop Ifrām, explains the theology and liturgical order of the two poems. Ifrām includes a note distinguishing the difference in chant affect between the two versions of the poem—whereas the great paraklēsis is chanted in a “celebratory” (*iḥtafālī*) manner, the booklet explains, the small paraklēsis “does not carry the same celebratory nature [as the great *paraklēsis*] and is used throughout the year to intercede for every heavy-laden [*muthqala shadda*] or choking [*ḍayyiq*] *nafs*.”

The *rāhibāt* continue to chant, moving through the nine odes of the canon. The antiphonic division of those chanting across the two cantor stands, compounded by the monastery head chanting on her own, gives the impression of the *chora* (in Arabic, *jawqa*)—the orrectic circulation (a ‘dance’ in the Greek—*choros*) of energy in the form of a responding voice (*anti-phonē*). The energetic modality of kataphatic expulsion outlined at the end of the last

chapter —whereby the energies of the soul are redirected as they proliferate around the desert space of the heart—manifests here in the circulation of a voice. The antiphonic chant of the paraklēsis, a genre of poetry that prays for intercession, here from Christ’s mother, metabolizes one’s singular passional tribulations (*tajārib*) in the world and circulates them through the common monastic body:

Ode 9

*O pure virgin we are saved by you
we confess that you are truly the Mother of
God; and we magnify you with the ranks of
heavenly bodies.*

Most Holy Mother of God save us.

*O Holy Virgin do not reject the streams of our
many tears,
you who gave birth to the One who eliminated
every tear from every face.*

Most Holy Mother of God save us.

*O Virgin overflow our hearts with joy,
you who received the overflowing joy;
take from us the grief of error.*

Most Holy Mother of God, save us.

*O Virgin, be for those seeking refuge
[multaji’in] in you
a port, a protection, and a wall unshaken,
A veiling and joyful shelter.*

*Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the
Holy Spirit.*

*O Virgin, illumine by the rays of your light
The ones who call you most piously Mother of
God, Take all the gloom of our ignorance
And banish it away.*

*Now and forever and to the ages of ages.
Amen.*

*O Virgin, as we have been humbled,
in a place of distress and illness.
Therefore heal us.
Transform for us illness [asqām] into health
[ṣaḥa]*

*Truly you are worthy to be praised,
Mother of God, ever blessed one,
All blameless one, the Mother of our God.
You who are more honorable than the
Cherubim, and more glorious than the
Seraphim;
You, who without corruption,
did bear the Word of God;*

Chanted in the fourth plagal mode, the odes of the paraklēsis follow a number of set musical phrases that repeat throughout and allow for different lines of text to assume the same melodic structure. While long form chant such as the paraklēsis can be learned in conjunction with written neumes (*alamāt*), as is typically done, it remains at its core a form of aural training, one central to the common ascetic life. As the Arabic word for chant, *rattal*, itself indicates, to learn to chant is to come to articulate, through audition and vocalization, a set of gestures.

These gestures, in their sonorous dimensionality (timbre, pitch, volume), impact on the ear and the body as a transduction of (sonic) energy.⁵³ The kataphatic expulsion of the faculties of the soul into an outward form produces a common, impersonal, aleatory space.⁵⁴ This vocal space, forged through the sonorous rhythms resonating through the ear and body, likewise invokes a common trauma—in the form of “trials”, “tears”, “illness”—borne by an anonymous body and soul. This traumatic body, fleshy and sonorous, coincides with the common: “*naḥnu al-munqasimīn nafsān wa jasadān ma’ān*” [We who are split body and soul together]. This ending phrase of the ode both reifies and addresses the coincidence of trauma in a common space. *al-Munqasimīn*, those who paradoxically form a collectivity in being dirempted between body and soul “together” (*ma’ān*). This common wound, not abstract but collectively molded in the dance of the chorus, is what founds the possibility of transformation of “illness into health” in the monastic community.

At the close of the evening office, we step outside to see the setting sun over the sea. In previous visits to the Ḥāmāt plateau, Khalīl had taken me to visit the other Orthodox women’s monastery located there, Sayyida al-Nūriyya. While that monastery was more illustrious, garnering frequent visits from Muslim and non-Orthodox Christian pilgrims, the monastic community there was nearly gone. The few elderly ascetics that remained were diminishing in number; the recent death of one of the Mothers, Khalīl informed me, reduced the ascetic community to a single pair. Further along the mesa, Mār Sima’ān was experiencing the opposite condition. Um Pūrfīriyā continued to attract more young women to fill the ranks of their burgeoning community overlooking the sea.

⁵³ Patrick Eisenlohr, “Suggestions of Movement: Voice and Sonic Atmospheres in Mauritian Muslim Devotional Practices,” *Cultural Anthropology* 33, no. 1 (February 1, 2018): 32–57.

⁵⁴ Interestingly, the Greek original of this paraklēsis, written in the 9th century by a monk named Theosterictus, maintains a play between the singular and the plural in its use of the first-person. That is, the Greek text largely uses the singular first person (Παθῶν μέ ταραττουσι προσβολαί—“assaults of passions have surrounded *me*”) in a dialogue with the Theotokos. In the Arabic translation chanted at *Mār Sima’ān*, however, all appearances of the first person (pronouns, verbal conjugations, object suffixes) are rendered in the plural first-person.

One of these women happened to be someone whom Khalil and I had known from the MJO meetings in the suburbs of Beirut several years prior. Standing just outside the church after the chanting of the *paraklēsis*, we greet her briefly. With a warm smile she welcomes us to the monastery which has been her home for the past year. When I had first met her, she and her sister had been two of the most engaged members of the MJO; converts from a Maronite family, they had been exceptionally hospitable in introducing me to Orthodox life in Lebanon. With the calm of evening pleasantly adumbrated by the cool if strong wind spilling over us, our brief exchange is simple and little more than a smile and a few words. The fact that nothing needed to be said does nothing to diminish the strength of the encounter, which is marked by the lingering effects—the emptying of words into the poem—of the evening prayers just performed. Shortly afterward our party departs the monastery.

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Taking its cue from this scene at the monastery, this chapter traces the poetics of vocalization and audition as the energetic proliferations of the *nafs* and so the rhythmic gestures of a form of life; the ascetic guarding of the heart through the work of learning the *kataphatic*, declamatory, articulations of a common, sonorous body. Where the previous chapter traced the singularity of the soul's struggle in the world, here I draw on the scene of a heterogenous common in which the *nafs* figures.

This common scene is focalized through the inhabitation of chant qua vocalization. The verb repeated in reference to saints and especially to the Mother of God throughout Orthodox poetry, *ʿazama*—to magnify—captures a key facet of the orientation of the practice of chant. Magnification is made possible through an articulation of the breath. As the central Psalm excerpt chanted in the morning prayer has it: “*kullu nasama fa-l-tusabbih il-rabb*” [let every breath praises the Lord]. The vocalization of the young novices at Mār Simaʿān is thus conceived here as a coming to inhabit an articulation of one's *rūḥ* (spirit, breath) in the form of (often laudatory) intensification and expansion. The chanting voice, both in the careful circumscription of the ear and in the expulsion breath, is staged as a rhythmic circulation and proliferation, conjoined in hesychastic practices of the heart and cohering in daily monastic life.

As with the young monastics' chant at Mār Simaʿān, the circulation of the voice is an 'eternal work' playing on the threshold of audition and vocalization, of stillness and expulsion, and of singularity and collectivity. The overlapping, uneven, and contradictory forms of immiseration, the dispossessive aftermaths that mark life in Lebanon, are attenuated within the therapeutic gestures of voice as it delimits the space of the heart. Vocalization, following the language of Orthodox asceticism, is found in the productive failure to circumscribe the

energies of soul interiorly; they are expelled in the form of the ‘cry.’ This cry is the vocal articulation of the common of singular tribulation; the cry is impersonal yet unique in the form of its outward ‘cast.’ Its rhythm, then, is the signature of the trial of the soul, taking the outward form of a common play of the voice across antiphony and monophony.

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The monastery at Mār Georgios, like its inhabitants, breathes. It expands with visitors and hospitality, beginning every Thursday and reaching its zenith on Sunday. The monastery then exhales, closing for the following three days to anyone outside the monastic ranks, when the monks enter their regular reclusion (*khalwa*). This rhythmic alternation was instituted by the shaykh Yūsif once he had assumed eldership at the monastery. During the time of shaykh Yūsif’s own elder, Archimandrite Ilyās, the monastic community, still young, would receive hundreds of people a day without restriction. The porosity to the outside—at a time before the inception of the civil war and when Mār Georgios was one of only two functioning nascent monasteries in the country—threatened the hesychastic life of the monks to the point that, as one monk there explained to me, he himself was compelled to leave for a time and seek a quieter life back in Syria.

In the monastery’s moments of expansion on Saturdays and Sundays, groups of families and spiritual sojourners would come to fill up the ample salon. In those gathered sittings, an elder hieromonk or two, or at certain times elder Yūsif himself, would sit in their customary spots and receive visitors with a blessing. The salon was often the site of friendly and gentle exchanges, which would often recede into silence if the shaykh or one of the monks began to speak or indicated that what they were speaking to a topic that was worthy of the attention of all of those present. The salon, an aleatory site of hospitality and consolation, is primarily a space of learning how to listen.

During a visit in February, the Feast of the Presentation is being celebrated. Those gathered in the salon are called to listen to the *qindāq* (long-form poem), which the elder reads in a loud voice.⁵⁵

*Having said this, invisible they [the angels] worshipped the Lord,
While they called mortals blessed,
Because he who is borne on the shoulders of the cherubim makes his life with them;
Because he whom angels cannot approach has appeared easily approachable to those born of earth;
Because he who carries and embraces the universe as Creator,*

⁵⁵ This English translation is a modified version of the one found in Saint Romanos the Melodist, trans. Ephrem Lash, *On the Life of Christ: Kontakia* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995).

*Who fashions bases in their mothers' wombs,
Has without change, become a babe from a Virgin, yet remained inseparable
From the Father and the Spirit, like them without beginning,*

The only Lover of humanity [wa huwa waḥdahu muḥabat al-bashār]

The final line, unlike the rest of the strophe, is chanted, first by the elder and by those gathered in the salon who, almost automatically, repeat the ending with the same musical phrasing: *wa huwa waḥdahu muḥabat al-bashār*.

Another hieromonk joins to read the next strophe, alternating his reading with that of the elder until all eighteen strophes are read, each with the requisite antiphonic response from the crowd. The poem in its entirety tells the story of Christ's entrance and presentation at the temple by his mother as well as his meeting with the elder Sima'ān who, upon seeing the Messiah, now proclaims his readiness to depart this life. The *kontakion*, composed in Greek by one of the greatest poets in the Orthodox tradition, Romanos the Melodist, comes from the sixth century.⁵⁶ It is a genre form that is both exhortative and poetic. And while the metre in the Greek was not maintained in the contemporary Arabic translation and recitation of the *qindāq*, shaykh Yūsif maintains the pedagogical aspect of its vocalization:

*Now I, poor wretch, become strong again, because I have seen your salvation, O Lord.
You are the perfect image*

At this he pauses his reading, "see Hebrews 1:3," he says, providing the reference. He continues, repeating the verse:

*You the perfect image of the incomprehensible being of the Father,
You are the beacon which no one may approach,
The exact seal of the Godhead the reflection of its glory,*

⁵⁶ The Greek composition, according to Eva Catafygiotu Topping, is divided "into proem of six lines in one metre, and eighteen strophes of nine lines each in another metre." (fn. 14). As her detailed study of the *qindāq* (*kontakion*) notes, the poem is a didactic exhortation, one which weaves a number of diverse genera: "minor hymns, prayers, quotations from the Scripture, statements of theology and dogma, sacred drama enacted by figures of the New Testament, allusions to persons and episodes from the Old Testament, monologs and dramatic dialogs, psychological elaboration and sublime lyric," (411) in Eva Catafygiotu Topping, "A Byzantine Song for Simeon: The Fourth Kontakion of St. Romanos," *Traditio* 24 (ed 1968): 409–20.

The elder stops again, reading the footnote: “see Hebrews 1:3.”

*You are the reflection of its glory, whose truth makes radiant the souls of the people.
You exist before the ages and you made the universe,*

He pauses for the final time: “Hebrews 1: 11-13”.

*For you are the far-shining light, the light of your Father, unconfused, unbounded,
And beyond understanding, though you have become man,*

For you are the only Lover of humanity

Response:

For you are the only Lover of humanity

The appeal to scriptural reference maintains both the pedagogical aspect and theological rhetoric of reading the *qindāq*. Within the scene of the salon, the voice emerges in the circuits and collective utterance and in the passage between audition and orality. Listening to the proliferation of the words of the poem, even in its textual references, circulates with and emerges in an antiphonic vocalization—*for you are the only Lover of humanity*—at a limit-space (the ear, the mouth/the single, the collective).

“*Amīn*.” The shaykh closes the poetic reading and silence falls over the salon. “Speaking these words makes mountains tremble,” he muses. Yet he is quick to rejoin; the passionate attachment that follows from such words, the feeling that “we understand, and we are intelligent,” he violently interrupts: “Then Father Aspiro came and humbled us, what did he say? The human being is a trash bin. You all desire thusly? A trash bin...but be humble so that the smell does not escape. [We think] ‘I am very good, I am a saint, I give a holy witness.’” The elder pauses. His check on the cosmo-poetic contemplation, induced through the audition of the *kontakion*, came in the admonishing form of a recently reposed member of the monastery—the hieromonk Aspiro Jabbur. The interruption, figuring as the voice of the dead, spills into the domain of the lived present. “Our condition [*ḥāla*] is woeful, woeful [*wayl*], may God guide us. In these very precarious [*ḥarija*] days, east and west, the human being is collapsing [*yanhār*] more and more. What does this mean? A holy one [i.e., a saint] needs to be vigilant, and vigilant, and vigilant. Last Sunday was about what? The Sunday of the blind. This is our feast, and it is yours.”

Ayām harija—"precarious days"—evokes the dark thicket of a forest. The shaykh figured the contemporary through the dearth of a clearing; an increasingly universal condition (*hāla*) of collapse and woe for the human being. A reconciliatory recourse to the festal and cosmological poetics of Romanos' *kontakion*, the poem's capacity for illuminating and thus ameliorating the choking constriction of life, was thus anticipated by the shaykh's eschatological check on its recitation. The heterotopia of the voice, which had been circulating from the text through the vocal antiphony of spiritual elder and those listening, yields to the call of the dead that echoes as an intrusion and disruption in the present. The near-automatic circulation of the voice between the shaykh and the living in the salon opens onto a surprising encounter—invoked by the shaykh as an afterthought—with the dead.

In this vocalization brings into relief an exhaustion—an immiseration that appears as the voice itself. This binding of the present to an oppressive choking is catalyzed by the heterotopic intrusion of the voice of the dead within the space of the cosmo-poetic recitation; like the cobbler's cry, the cry of "woe" is given as a failure to circumscribe the energies of the *nafs*. The restriction and opening of the breath (*rūḥ*) is constitutive of the voice in that it marks the passage of a limit.

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The voice (*al-sāwt*) is an ambivalent operator in hesychastic life. It marks the threshold between the coenobitic and the eremitic modalities of monasticism and between peace and anguish. Diadochos of Photiki, an early desert father and often quoted by the ascetics at Mar Georgios, outlines this distinction in his "On Spiritual Knowledge":

When a person is in a state of natural well-being, he sings the psalms with a full voice and prefers to pray out loud. But when he is energized by the Holy Spirit, with gladness and completely at peace he sings and prays in the heart alone. The first condition is accompanied by a delusory joy, the second by spiritual tears and, thereafter, by a delight that loves stillness. For the remembrance of God, keeping its fervour because the voice is restrained, enables the heart to have thoughts that bring tears and are peaceful. In this way, with tears we sow seeds of prayer in the earth of the heart, hoping to reap the harvest in joy (cf. Ps. 126: 5). But when we are weighed down by deep despondency, we should for a while sing psalms out loud, raising our voice with joyful expectation until the thick mist is dissolved by the warmth of song.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ St Diadochos of Photiki, "On Spiritual Knowledge," in *Philokalia: The Complete Text*, trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, vol. 1 (London; Boston: Faber & Faber, 1981), 277–78.

Beyond the division between a “natural” state in the which vocal chant is present in the noetic prayer of the heart, there is also the modality of vocalization as a form of therapeutics. The restraint of the voice, sought in the practice of hesychastic stillness, allows for the remembrance of God (*dhikr allāh*) in the heart. Yet at times this becomes impossible: the voice in “deep despondency” is rendered in the psalms and hence throughout Orthodox poetics as a ‘cry’ (*ṣarakh*)—a forceful, energetic expulsion of the breath to an outside (*khārij*). Chant, as the molding of the cry into a form, is the productive failure to constrain the breath in prayerful stillness. The typical distinction between voice and silence—where silence is a *potential* of that which, holding the voice in reserve, is expressed at times in vocal *actuality*—is insufficient to the despondent yet joyful modalities of vocalization in hesychastic practice. The voice, in the absence of vocalization, circulates in and as the noetic energies of the *nafs* and thus, in the case of anguish, denotes the transduction of the energies of the soul into an outward form as the cry.

Importantly, the Arabic word *ṣawt*, ‘voice’, does not distinguish between human and non-human sound. Within its idiom, voice cannot be read as either dirempted or elevated from the sound of the animal (the division between, say *phonē* and *logos*⁵⁸). The practice of chant, understood as the vocal proliferations of the cry, is not that of a distinctly ‘human voice’ that (logically) expresses (an identity, a theology, or a belief).⁵⁹ Instead, vocalization is the projection of the energies of the singular *nafs* into a *common* space of creation. Vocalization

⁵⁸ Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* project interrogates this division, initiated by the Classical Greek definition of the human as the ‘speaking being’—i.e., where infantile and animal *phonē* becomes *logos*.

⁵⁹ Several recent studies of Orthodox music ethnographically situate its practice within the logic of expression (and of the division of *logos* and *phonē*, of actuality and potentiality). Jeffers Englehardt, in his study of Estonian Orthodox singing, argues that, the “performance of liturgy realized Orthodoxy” as “a way of making and inhabiting Orthodoxy vocally, producing in diverse ways the correct unity of *doxa* (belief) and *praxis* (practice) that is inherent in the literal meaning of Orthodoxy as ‘right belief’ and ‘right glory’ or ‘right worship.’ This was the economy of orthodoxy (correct belief) and orthopraxy (correct practice) that was the essence of right singing.” (11) in Jeffers Engelhardt, *Singing the Right Way: Orthodox Christians and Secular Enchantment In Estonia*, (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). Likewise Tore Tvarnø Lind, documenting what he terms the “revival” (even noting this is not a term used by monastics) of monastic chant on Mount Athos argues “Byzantine chant is understood to be prayer, the sacred voice of Orthodoxy, of spiritual beauty, and of a way ‘to engage correctly the divine potential of the ceremony’ (Hagedorn 2001: 76). Simultaneously communicating to the faithful and being a voice directed at God, Byzantine chant gives meaning to creation, life, and afterlife. The revival of Byzantine chant thus reinvigorates and reconfirms—indeed resounds—the transcendental power of the Orthodox voice,” in Tore Tvarnø Lind, “Byzantine Blossom: The Monastic Revival of Orthodox Chant at Mount Athos,” in *Resounding Transcedence: Transitions in Music and Ritual*, ed. Jeffers Engelhardt and Philip Bohlman (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). In both cases, the authors translate religion into a set of symbolic expressions, via a parsing of actualities and potentialities, that thus produces ‘meaning’ (authority, authenticity, theology, belief).

within hesychastic practice, as a form of the cry, is oriented in the space of collective chant toward *monophony*, wherein monophony denotes the at once singular and common human creation in praise of its creator. In that sense the singularity of the human being's cry is metabolized into a dual apparatus of monophonic expulsion and circumambulatory, hence common, praise.

Labour and Voice

For the growing community of young monastics at Mār Ilyās, learning to chant in common is inextricable from the practice of daily life.⁶⁰ Like at Mār Georgios, the monastery typically swells with visitors from Thursday to Sunday and then recedes into a calm reclusion for the first days of the week. The monastery, which had endured bombardment and occupation during the civil war, resurged as a spiritual center in the past decade, attracting the young post-war generation of the Metn to participate in its communal life. Tellingly, for those who did not commit to the monastery as novices, this relationship to the monastic life occurred on the borders of familial and wage-labour obligations. The end of the work week and evenings became the times when the monastery was at its busiest—where another kind of work was instigated at the borders of ‘the world.’

This rhythmic departure to and from the world for many of this generation was not the case with a pair of brothers whom I came to know at the monastery. ‘Āṭif and Rabīʿ were from Syria and had fled to Lebanon at the inception of the war. ‘Āṭif, with his warm smile and stout build, worked around the monastery in many capacities—running the small shop at its entrance, helping with cleaning, and aiding in the monastery's many repairs and expansions. Rabīʿ, quiet and lithe in comparison to his brother, had practiced dentistry in Syria. When I first met him, he had enrolled in the Lebanese University—considered the country's best public school—to study IT in an attempt to find good employment. Yet this had become impossible not a year later; in one of the many group conversations at the monastery he simply noted mutedly that his disqualification was due to “*siyāsa*”—politics. The life of the brothers around the monastery was mirrored by a pair of young women who were establishing themselves as monastic novices. While they subsequently formed a monastic community on the grounds of Mār Ilyās in a separate space, at the time they simply frequented the

⁶⁰ The learning of chant, its eightfold system of modal scales (four authentic, four inauthentic or ‘plagal’), is critical to the daily life of monastics. While there is considerable scholarly work on the systematicity of the *Octoechos*—and likewise explorations of it as a rarified set of vocal techniques—little attention is paid to the means by which chant is a set of embodied vocal affinities, actualized in the bodily comportment of learners and teachers.

monastery, slowly learning the spiritual life. Other groups of young people stayed at the monastery in semi-regular fashion— one group being those training to be clergy in the North, who, during the summer break, would make Mār Ilyās, among other monasteries, their home.

Within the ebb and flow of this collective of ‘spiritual sons and daughters,’ it was in moments of shared labour specifically—that is, as opposed to the conversant and restful nature of the salon—where multiple forms of vocalization emerged. Work in the kitchen might be accompanied by a single voice reciting the prayer of the heart (the central hesychastic prayer) or with an antiphonic division of other audible forms of prayer. In the same way, chanting or listening to well-known melodies together was a common practice, especially in the kitchen. Food preparation—for the large communal meals following Sunday liturgy, the daily meal of those at the monastery, or for visitors—was the most important and collectively engaging kind of labour. The many times I found myself working in the kitchen were almost always accompanied by collective chanting of well-known psalmody. If no one chanted, a CD player in the corner of the kitchen would play one of the increasingly common recordings of chant— either in Greek from Athos or Thessaloniki, or in Arabic from one of the few Lebanese cantor groups—with which those working might chant.⁶¹

The coalescence around these forms of collective labour, with or without vocality, is oriented toward the regulation of the energies of the soul as they are exerted outwardly. The potential of the soul’s ‘wandering’ in the fragmentary world is checked by the vocal circuits that proliferate in the course of collective work. I remember a time when Khalīl and I were cleaning the large salon at Ruqād al-Sayidda with his spiritual father, Antonios. The hieromonk, throwing water on the floor, would say in a clear voice, “*bi-ṣaluwāt al-qidīsīn*” [through the prayers of the holy ones] to which we would be called to respond with an “*amīn*.” After a time, Khalīl, still mopping the floors, would recite the initiating phrase, soliciting an affirmative “*amīn*” from the hieromonk.

As Antonios confirmed for me one night in the kitchen at Mār Ilyās—as he continued to bellow out the memorable melodic lines of the canon chanted for Pascha—chanting kept him awake and energetic at times when he became tired. To his chanting of the canon I contributed an *ison*, the ‘holding note’ that is typically the root of the tetrachord of the given mode’s scale. The *ison*, the steady and sustained expulsion of breath, supports the melody that is chanted

⁶¹ This scene might be described as what Charles Hirschkind has termed a tradition of “ethical listening.” As he notes, such traditions attend to soundscapes beyond the trope of self-fashioning and instead “contribute to the creation of a sensory environment from which the subject draws its bearings, an environment that nourishes and intensifies the substrate of affective orientations that undergird right reasoning.” (125) in *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*, Cultures of History (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006). The notion of ‘drawing bearing’ is an effective means of conveying the acoustic inhabitation of monastic spaces like the kitchen.

without strictly harmonizing with it. The vocal genres of antiphony, monophony, and their *ison*, all mark the idioms that are equally applied to common labour: working alternately, in common, or with one monastic supporting the other.

Inasmuch as vocalization relates to the soul's exertion of energy, it can fall, following Orthodox ascetical grammars, within the field of labour that is specifically ascetic. Gregory of Sinai, one of the most important figures in the establishment of 14th century Athosite hesychasm, addresses this particularly in his writing (once more collected in the *Philokalia*) "On Stillness":

'When the watchman grows weary,' says St. John Klimakos, 'he stands up and prays; then he sits down again and courageously resumes the same task.' Although St. John is here referring to the [nous] and is saying that it should behave in this manner when it has learnt how to guard the heart, yet what he says can apply equally to psalmody.⁶²

In Gregory's writing, the weariness of the noetic prayer is attenuated "in the amplitude of psalmody."⁶³ Noting his own experience of becoming "exhausted through calling upon God" where "body and heart begin to feel pain because of the intense concentration," Gregory recommends that one should "stand up and psalmodize, either by yourself or with a disciple who lives with you, or occupy yourself with meditation on some scriptural passage or with the remembrance of death, or with manual labour...preferably standing up so as to involve your body in the task as well."⁶⁴ The danger of becoming complacent in interior prayer is mitigated through extensions of the soul's energies outwardly.

Gregory explicates John Klimakos' words, noting that for the latter, "to attain the state of stillness entails first total detachment, secondly resolute prayer—this means standing and psalmodizing—and thirdly, unbroken labour of the heart, that is to say, sitting down to pray in stillness."⁶⁵ Psalmody, as was found in the words of Diadochos, is connected to an entanglement with an 'outside' that also has an active physical posture (standing and, it follows, moving). Chanting, continual prayer, the remembrance of death, and labour all coalesce as the form of productive failure to maintain the wearying equilibrium of interior prayer. As Gregory further notes, quoting a passage from the gospel already seen in the previous chapter, "No activity, whether bodily or spiritual, unaccompanied by toil and hardship bears fruit; 'for the kingdom of heaven is entered forcibly' says the Lord 'and those

⁶² Gregory of Sinai, "On Stillness," in *The Philokalia*, trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, vol. 4 (London; Boston: Faber & Faber, 1981), 266.

⁶³ Gregory of Sinai, 268.

⁶⁴ Gregory of Sinai, 269.

⁶⁵ Gregory of Sinai, 266.

who force themselves take possession of it' (Matt. 11:12), where 'forcibly' and 'force' relate to the body's awareness of exertion in all things."⁶⁶ The extension of the energy of the soul, its bodily exertion, out from its circumambulation around the heart to the productive activities of the body, encompasses both labour—the work of the kitchen, the cleaning of the monastery—and chanting.

Thus chant, despite its secondary status vis-à-vis hesychastic prayer, is "rightly given so that concord is maintained when there are many praying together."⁶⁷ The labour of the monastery, as a form of outward exertion, is partly constituted by these forms of orality and audition that originate in an ascetic vision of the soul and its forms of concordance. In vocalization, itself the coordination of the breath and hence the energies of the *nafs*, the inner work of prayer is translated to an outward form. The relief of labour *in common* from the singular work of the ascetic is differentially received by those who live in the ambit of the monastery but are not themselves monastics or novices. Yet Gregory's description of psalmody as a form of rest, one that attenuates noetic weariness or the 'choking' soul described in the *paraklēsis*, is apt for typifying its contours even for the non-monastics who work and pray within the monastery. In this cry of the choking soul, the forceful, amplifying expulsion of air, common to chant and to the exertion of the body, discloses an embodied and thrown voice that, as it traverses the thresholds of ear and mouth, marks a common, and so groundless, gestural body.

Monophonic Gestures

Khalil and I are staying at Ruqād al-Sayyida for the monastery's patronal feast in the middle of August and a number of the monks from nearby Orthodox monasteries—Hamatoura and Archangel Gabriel—have come to celebrate. As monks enter the monastery, they greet one another warmly. Meetings of this variety were rare among the different monastic communities, who did not depart *en masse* to other monasteries save for such occasions. The monks of Hamatoura were especially known for their voices and would make up one of the two cantor stand for the festal vigil, which would be celebrated until liturgy at dawn. Watching the gathering of monks enter the dark, hushed chapel, Khalil leans over. "This is why I love the monks," he quietly told me. "They are one body." As I stood, arms crossed on one of the standing chairs near the right cantor stand, a monk whom I did not recognize approaches me. As I make a small gesture of acknowledgement the monk extends his hand to me and pulls me

⁶⁶ Gregory of Sinai, 273.

⁶⁷ Gregory of Sinai, 266.

close, greeting me with the typical three ‘kisses’ made at the shoulders. He takes up a place next to me, awaiting the start of the all-night vigil.

The ‘monastic body’ is the limit-threshold, constituted as it is traversed, by the certain play of singularity and commonality. The necessity of an interior and private spiritual life (*al-ṣalā al-dākhilīyya wa al-fardīyya*) is established in the ascetical activities of prayer, fasting, and vigil; they delineate the singular contours of the *rāhib*, the one who ‘fears God.’ The solitary quality of the monastic struggle (the meaning of *monachos*) is manifest in this form of interiority. Yet this interiority speaks not so much to the possessive privation of the subject of these activities (c.f., the previous chapter and the incepting immiseration the ‘self’) but to their singular contours—the *particular* proliferations of the energetic *nafs*. In counterpoint, the modality of communion, ultimately guaranteed in the weekly coenobitic gathering celebrating the resurrection of Christ on Sundays, which themselves typify the collective celebration of Pascha, is the form of the energetic expulsion to an outside. That outside manifests equally in and as the possibility of harmony or disharmony. Thus in chant, less a metaphor than a proper metonym of commonness, the eremitic modality—regardless of the place in which the ascetic resides—is drawn out rhythmically into a relationship to the common (external) form of antiphony and *mono-phonē*; a single ‘voice.’ The voice that is and always was conjured impersonally names this modality of being in common.⁶⁸

This modal shift, accomplished in the violent explosion of the voice, is not a proper movement from the one to the many, i.e., to the ‘social’ body in the strict sense. It is rather an encounter qua non-coincidence (i.e., the limit) of the body with itself that is held in common. We recall that this is the common thrownness that is invoked in the chant of *paraklēsis*—“divided ones, together”. The temporality of this encounter is likewise enfolded in the withdrawing grammar of asceticism. The singularity of the one’s trial, or passage, is metabolized, once molded into the cry of the voice, through the circuits of a creaturely common. The restorative work of the remembrance of God (magnification, praise by way of the breath) harkens to the harrowing and anticipatory time of one’s end (in death; where one can no longer cry out to God). Together they mark the present vocalization as one’s singular, yet common passage; the time given to end.

Chant is a gesture that thus exists on the limit-space of the prolific repetition of this doubled temporality. Vocalization is unique as a gesture, inasmuch as it is the place where

⁶⁸ It would seemingly be untenable to translate this division as one between a private self and public expression (of a self). The division between singularity and the common here is better understood as a question of the forms of energetic proliferation, whether they are contained (interior) or expelled/wander (exterior). The limit brought into relief by this division is the threshold of the body.

discursivity and body⁶⁹ encounter each other in their non-coincidence. The two terms form a dyadic play without being encompassed in a third term.⁷⁰ Rather, vocalization is forged in the passage of a limit-threshold—traversed through the ascetical language of interiority and exteriority—and cohering in the existentially impersonal space of common creation. The apophatic Divine creator, encountered in the deserted center (of the heart, of chant) makes possible the impersonal yet relational common and the singular ascetical formations of the monastic life.

In learning to chant, one learns to inhabit a chain of these bodily gestures. As one talented local cantor who had recently begun his own teaching program would often explain to me, one practices the gesture of the neumes (‘*alāmāt*’) together many times over. The initial steps of formal musical training—learning the scales and their intervals, as well as the melodic formulae of the mode being chanted—was a necessary but insufficient condition to chanting ‘as one’ (i.e., *monophonically*). It was the rhythm (*al-iyqāʿ*), coordinated in part through the hand gestures of the head cantor and inhabited through collective dispositions of the body, that conjured the *namīṭ*.

Namīṭ is thus the signature of the vocal gesture. It is the singularity of vocalization, the individual and collective inhalation and exhalation, that at once coalesces and effervesces in its own time—that is, its rhythm.⁷¹ As Plato’s *Laws* has it, rhythm is the “order of motion.” In repetition of this ancient definition, a Lebanese manual for learning Orthodox chant (published in 2017), defines *al-iyqāʿ* (rhythm or projection) as “order (*nizām*) in movement, and

⁶⁹ Asad has often remarked on tradition as a genealogy of embodied forms and language games, and moreover pointed to the critical means by which the former (bodily practices) gain an unspoken coherence. It is in this movement that tradition, it follows, becomes unavailable to ‘scholarly’ representation. The forms of vocalization I treat here are not concerned with the discursive transmission of a practice (e.g., pedagogy or rhetoric) but are themselves a linguistic-bodily practice.

⁷⁰ As Lacan importantly noted in his seminar on anxiety, “language is not vocalization” (274) and again, “the voice responds to what is said, but it cannot answer for it. In other words, for it to respond, we must incorporate the voice as the otherness of what it said,” in Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, trans. A. R. Price, (Cambridge Malden, MA: Polity, 2016). See also Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (MIT Press, 2006).

⁷¹ Khaled Furani’s study of Palestinian poetry offers rhythm as a key through which to understand the articulation of form of life and its wavering (or at least transformation) under secular sensibilities: “In the quest to modernize poetic forms, whereby Palestinian poets, and Arab poets generally, have radically transformed the sound structures of their poems, poets have adopted free verse and prose poems, forms in which poets, not ‘the sea,’ stand sovereign over rhythms. This substitution of sovereignties has emerged from a protean process in which modernizing poets have essentially rejected poetic meter and refused to measure sound in their compositions.” (1). The sea, as Furani clarifies, stands as a natural force, for poetic meter (over which the poet is now sovereign). As in the case of Orthodox chant (albeit in an inverted sense) the relationship between a natural force over which God is sovereign and the human being informs practices of rhythm and sonority. See Khaled Furani, *Silencing the Sea: Secular Rhythms in Palestinian Poetry* (Stanford University Press, 2012).

the orderly course of chant, it is also the order of the distribution of duration.” *Iyqāʿ*, the rhythmic projection of sound, derives from the same word in Arabic as that of ‘signature’ (*tawqīya*). It is that which ‘falls’ or is ‘cast’ and in so doing forms a trace—the aftermath that is the voice. It is in the style or signature as an afterimage that chant may be most likened to the cinematographic effect.



Figure 2.2 The monks of Hamatoura chanting

The gesture, cinematographic or cantorial, inasmuch as it finds itself *in media res*, puts on display that which cannot be said⁷²—namely, one’s common passage (*ex nihilo*) in the desert topos of the world. In this passional passage, the monophonic rhythm ‘falls’ (*waqaʿa*) as if by chance. The encounter with another non-time (protological and eschatological) is missed (linguistically, representationally) yet unmistakably signed in the gesture of chanting.

The *namiṭ* style of audition is returned by way of the singular voices that repeat and ornament, breathe in and out. This movement is the epiphenomenon of the voice returning belatedly in the present. Like Um Pūrfīriyā with the novices, chanting the openings of the strophes of the canon, or shaykh Youssef soliciting the echo of the response at the end of each stanza, the voice, the singular inflections and rhythms that constitute its performance, are inherited and returned through the breathy circuit of audition and vocalization. The transformative capacity of vocalization is found precisely in this encounter with a (singular, common) passage.⁷³

⁷² See “Notes on Gesture” in Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics* (Univ of Minnesota Press, 2000).

⁷³ A rather eloquent demonstration of the work of gesture is found in a documentary on Jacques Lacan by Gerard Miller. In an interview, a patient of Lacan describes one of their sessions: “One day, in a session, I was telling Lacan about a dream I had. And I told him, ‘I wake up every morning at 5am, and added that it is at 5am that the Gestapo came to get the Jews in their homes.’ At that moment, Lacan jumped up from his chair, came toward me and gave me an extremely gentle caress on my cheek. I understood it as a ‘geste a peau’, the gesture.” Gerard Miller asks, “He had transformed the ‘Gestapo’ into a ‘geste a peau.’?” The patient continues “A very tender gesture, it has to be said—an extraordinarily tender gesture. And to my surprise it didn’t diminish the pain, but it made it something else. The proof now, is that 40 years later, when I recall that gesture, I can still feel it on my cheek.” The point here is that the singular gentleness of a gesture is its transformative capacity. See, Gérard Miller, *Rendez-Vous Chez Lacan* (FR 3, 2011).

Infancy, Play

I was heading to one of the coffee shops in Geitawi that had cropped up in recent years in order to speak with a man whom I call here Ayyūb. I had met him through others in the Metn. Ayyūb, who worked as a chemical engineer, was close with the monks of several monasteries in Lebanon as well as on Athos. Aside from chanting at his local church, he is also an *isokratema* (one who ‘holds’ the *ison*) in one of the Antiochian Orthodox choral groups that had formed this past decade.

The first time I had spoken at length with Ayyūb, he had offered to drive me home from the Metn to my apartment in Geitawi. When he learned that I was a graduate student, he spoke of his desire to go to France and study analytic chemistry; instead, out of obligation to his family, he had remained and had been working in a local paper mill. With the crowded night life of Mār Mikhael pressing against his slowly wending car, Ayyūb spoke of an urge to leave Lebanon, one which remained stubbornly desired, checked by his knowledge of the estrangement—*ghūrba*—that emigration yielded. Our conversation turned to our encounters with monastics and the importance of their consolation. For Ayyūb, the choking burden of life was alleviated by intercession of these spiritual fathers and mothers: “the knowledge that they are praying for us is crucial.” The paralysis of the either/or (to remain in Lebanon or to leave) that threatened Ayyūb, he explained, was mitigated by the monastic enjoinder “to have joy.” As he explained, this was the profound comfort that he had recently received from his recent visit to Athos.

Now, in our meeting at the cafe, I asked after the practices of chant. Ayyūb, like other cantors I had spoken with, noted the disintegration of Arab Orthodox music during the Ottoman period, one which was mitigated in the national period before the inception of the civil war. Yet when I enquired about the relationship between the *maqamāt* and Orthodox chant, he agreed that they were largely synonymous. “Only radicals deny this relationship,” he explained, referring to Greek and European scholars who sought to Hellenize the eight-mode chant system used in Orthodox practice. It was at this point Ayyūb told me a story concerning this unacknowledged connection:

There was a renowned cantor, Būṭrus al-Mūrī, who lived during Ottoman times in Constantinople. Being a great friend of one of the city’s *mu’adhin*, the cantor was having lunch at his *masjid*. He was asked by his friend to chant the *adhān*. This, of course, was a practice forbidden for non-Muslims. Even so, Būṭrus acquiesced. As the cantor chanted, the sultan happened to be passing by at the same time. The sultan recognized the voice of the cantor, whom he knew personally.

Ayyūb smiled as he told the final turn of the story. When Būṭrus was later imprisoned (in a sanatorium, I later discovered, as he pretended to be insane), he composed much of the hymnography that is used in the church today. Būṭrus, who is also credited with integrating the *‘ajam* maqam into Orthodox chant, brings into relief the means by which the common—which enfolds the non-coincidence of bodies—articulates the Orthodox tradition’s relationship to its outside. It was in this sense that Ayyūb noted the relationship between the *maqamat* and Orthodox modes of chant. This material imbrication is returned to in the third panel (Thresholds). For now, it is sufficient to demonstrate that the modality of vocalization brought into relief through the story is not that of the cultural enclave (and of the social ‘other’) and thus of an authenticity made or remade in the present (as a fidelity to origin). Instead, vocalization is constitutively impersonal; it remains unmarked vis-à-vis inside and outside. The *adhān*—a rhythmically complex performance—chanted by Būṭrus, rather than symbolizing assimilation, gestures, in the particulars of its sonorous rhythm, to a creaturely imbrication forged in orientation toward God.

Rhythm, we recall, is not ecstatic to form in chant, which is necessarily vocalized. The modulation of chant (i.e., between different modes) is staged in liturgy rhythmically; that is, where form persists as a fluidity. "You know, you feel like it is going higher and higher and it is really amazing, and then the music breaks and brings you back down to the first mode, suddenly," Ayyūb said. This is done, Ayyūb explained, to intentionally disrupt the inertia of the maqam. "To resist *ṭarab*?"⁷⁴ I offered. "Exactly," he replied. The polysemic term *ṭarab* refers to the ecstatic quality of music—where the intention of music, through the virtuosity of its delivery, is to arouse the listener into a heightened state.⁷⁵ In the language of asceticism, resistance to *ṭarab* might be construed as a concern over the wandering energies of the *nafs*.⁷⁶ *Tarab* explicitly takes as its aim the emotional ‘experience’ of the subject. Instead, as Ayyūb

⁷⁴ For an important and elaborative article on *ṭarab* see, Jonathan H. Shannon, "Emotion, Performance, and Temporality in Arab Music: Reflections on Tarab," *Cultural Anthropology* 18, no. 1 (2003): 72–98.

⁷⁵ As Shannon’s article argues, *ṭarab* constitutes a specific kind of subject, wherein “conventional tarab reactions metaphorically link the domains of musical performance and emotional experience: one might describe them as ‘internal metaphors’ that gloss the experiential states of individual listeners who present tarab responses. In another sense, they can be thought of as marking a metonymic or part-whole relationship between the listeners and the overall performance: the shouts and gestures that occur within the context of a performance may come to stand for the performance itself. In a similar manner, a given performance may come to stand for an entire genre and indeed, for ‘heritage’ and ‘cultural authenticity’ as a whole” (81).

⁷⁶ This point is clarified in Gregory of Sinai’s admonition: “read by yourself but not in a pompous voice, or with pretentious eloquence or affected enunciation or melodic delectation, or, insensibly carried away by passion, as if you are wanting to please an audience.” (271).

confirmed, chant, in its melodies and rhythms, is oriented around “a particular meaning” or “point.” The expansion and amplification of the voice demands its restriction and return to a space of interiority. The “point” is thus not a concern to reassert the primacy of meaning over excessive affectivity, but rather to attend to the vicissitudes of the breathy soul.⁷⁷ This belonged to a general argument that Ayyūb communicated: chanting in the liturgy is a form of prayer; it educates and discloses, just as in the example of the recitation of the *kontakion* by shaykh Yūsif.

Vocalization is thus the modulation of *kataphatic* language in the form of the cry. In chant, language is deconstructed and recedes into the rhythmic demands of modality. This playful destruction at once mutes the discursivity of chant while it remains dependent upon it.⁷⁸ In chanting, language is brought to its limit; it encounters its foreign facticity as a voice. In the gesture of chant, the singularity of the body, encounters a temporalizing division (‘not-yet’ and ‘always-already’—the protological and eschatological) that is emergent in the proliferation of the voice. In that sense, the *namīṭ*, or ‘style’, of chant—the singular particularities of vocalization—is a surplus in the form of the neume.⁷⁹ The gesture implicates finitude with an infinite common. The composition (as text or performance) cannot locate or ground, even as an origin, this monophonic (impersonal because common) voice.

⁷⁷ Patrick Eisenlohr, in his recent volume *Sounding Islam*, makes a complementary point in addressing the supposed autonomy of affect (for example, in the work of Brian Massumi) and the supposition that virtual potentialities temporally precede actualities of ‘meaning.’ He writes, “The perception of sound, whether through the ears or other parts of the body, and the perception of the suggestions of movements, are one and the same: they cannot be dissociated. The suggestions of movement that sonic atmospheres revolve around are not symbolic or cognitive qualifications applied after the fact. On the contrary, they inhere in the very material structures of sounds” (127) in Patrick Eisenlohr, *Sounding Islam: Voice, Media, and Sonic Atmospheres in an Indian Ocean World* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

⁷⁸ “In this case one must compare the learning of a language and the learning of music,” writes Archpriest Rūmānūs in his Arabic introduction to chant. “For the human being begins in speech (*kalām*), learning first what they hear from their surroundings; the child learns some words then comes to construct small sentences, then enters school to learn to read what he had learned previously and to write it. Therefore it is on the student to first learn some chant, memorizing (*ḥāfiẓ*) its strophes by heart without any of the musical text.” Archpriest Rūmānūs Jibrān, *Mabādi Al-Mūsīqā al-Kanasiyya*, vol. 2, 3 vols. (Beirut: Manshūrāt Muṭrāniyya al-Rūm al-Urthūdhaks fī Bayrūt, 2018).

⁷⁹ This, it seems, is where most studies of chant falter. By seeking a totalized space in which to encompass the practice (often, but not always, it is the ‘text’) these analyses fail to attend to the caesura in vocalization itself; the non-coincidence of the ‘text’ with the ‘style’ of the gestural body. One recent and noteworthy work that engages with the latter distance is Jack Khalil’s compelling dissertation, “Echoes of Constantinople: oral and written tradition of the psaltes of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople” (2009, UC San Diego). In it, Khalil tracks the means by which ‘*yphos*’—the extra-textual vocal gestures of the cantor—‘echo’ historical memory in the form of a palimpsest.

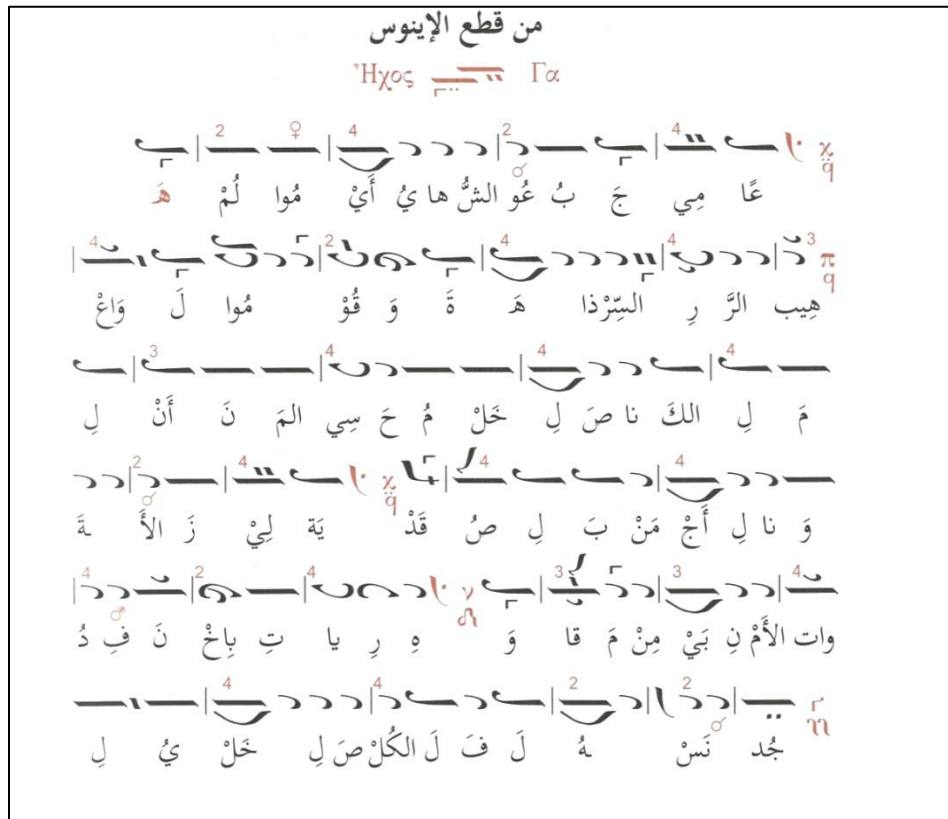


Figure 2.3 An example of chant neumes and text

The destructive disarticulation of language, and its rhythmic reconstitution in a vocal projection, is a kind of play. The forms of *kratemata* and *melismata*—the chanting of the ‘nonsense’ vowels “te-ri-re”, or the lengthy melodious dwelling on the vowels between consonants respectively—offer the starkest example of this.⁸⁰ Chant in these iterations forces language to traverse and approach its limit. As this section has argued, chant is a molding of the form of the cry. In that sense these agrammatical (*agrammatov*) forms of vocality insist on

⁸⁰ *Kratemata* especially is often read as an alternatively affective, ‘ekstatic’, and ‘mystical’ practice or as purely pragmatic and aesthetic; in other words, as purely ends or as end oriented. For that reason it is a matter of some debate in contemporary Orthodox chant. Yet it seems clear that these vocal forms, practiced as they are under the liturgical form of the all-night vigil, already suggest (without having to ascribed representational meaning) a rhythmic dilation of time, one that amplifies the passivity of duration (over the punctuality of the ‘now’, say). This allows one to read these sonic atmospheres as the most regressive or intense form of the passage. For a historical study touching on these topics see Andrew Mellas, *Liturgy and the Emotions in Byzantium: Compunction and Hymnody* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108767361>.

making the cry appear in its purest, most regressive form. It is an infantile form of play; the passage of the *nafs* as such.

إني أنا عبدك - مطوّلة

* متري المر *
باللحن القائم

λ η Nη

إني أنا عبدك
 يا نا أ
 يا دك ع
 يا وا
 يا ل وا
 يا ل الإ ة ذ ل وا
 يا ت يا را
 يا ق يا ب ة ل الع
 يا م ية م ح م ة د ق ا

Figure 2.4 Melismatic chant, composed by Mitri al-Murr⁸¹

⁸¹ *Ṣalāt Al-Nawm al-Kubrā Wa Madīḥ al-Sayyida* (Tripoli: Dār al-Kalima, 1992), 157.

ت Unending Tears

صَارَتْ دُمُوعِي خُبْزاً لِي نَهَاراً وَنَيْلًا إِذْ قِيلَ لِي فِي كُلِّ يَوْمٍ أَيَّنَ هُوَ إِلَهُكَ؟

My tears have become for me bread day and night, while it is said to me daily, where is your God?

(Ps. 41)

Inheriting Tears

We are travelling to Mār Georgios to meet with the elder Yūsif. In our first audience in a small salon, the three of us had sat there, leaning forward to hear his words. He had begun by welcoming us to the monastery, noting that the “blessing” (*baraka*) of the visit is reciprocal; not only the hosted but the host is enlivened in the act of hospitality. “Nothing is possible without God’s Holy Spirit [*al-rūḥ al-quḍus*],” he affirmed, “And we thank God for your coming, which is not only beneficial for you but for us as well.” For the elder, the aleatory nature of our meeting bespoke neither pure contingency nor discernable fate. It was rather the variegations of an occluded, Divine catalyst; the third person of the Trinity, who in Orthodox tradition is contemplated as what in Greek is *paraklētos*, or “Comforter.” In Arabic likewise, the Holy Spirit’s most common hyponym is *al-mu‘azzī*—that is, one who consoles.

In our meeting on this occasion, the shaykh once again speaks of *al-mu‘azzī*, now as the fire that enlivens the whole of creation, repeating to us and himself with eyes closed, “*majūn, majūn, nashkur allāh*” (incredible, incredible, thank God). It is at this point in his meditation that he looks to me and asks, “Harūn, what comes at the beginning of the spiritual life, and what comes at the end? Joy [*farah*] or sorrow and tears [*ḥuzn wa bukā*]?” “Joy is at the beginning, and sorrow and tears at the end,” I answer, anticipating but not entirely understanding the inversion of the expected answer. He nods in approval, “Yes, the spiritual life does end in tears (*bukā*).” But it is more complicated, as he hastens to elaborate. These modalities, sorrow and joy, form a unity in their opposition. The elder quotes Christ’s farewell discourses to his disciples as recounted in John’s text: “Truly, truly I say to you, you will all weep [*tabkī*] and mourn while the world will rejoice. You will all be sorrowful, yet your sorrow

will turn into joy.”⁸² The elder repeats these lines three times, enunciating with each repetition the beginning of the verse, “Truly, truly I say to you, you will weep...” The elder emphasis on the tribulation of the Messiah’s *kenosis* (self-emptying) differed its resolution to joy. Instead, Yūsif stages both himself and us in an immanent field of the address by these words, wherein the meaning of true weeping remains veiled and yet to be disclosed.

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The verses of John’s text, which immediately precede that which was cited by the elder, intensify the relation of tears and joy to *al-mu‘azzī*; the Divine and fiery Spirit. Speaking to his disciples of the tribulation that they would endure following after him and his crucifixion, Christ announces:

But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, [*al-mu‘azzī*] will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will reprove the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not have faith in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to my Father, and you will see me no more; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

The word *t‘azīya*, from which the appellation of God’s Spirit as *al-mu‘azzī* derives, implies both consolation and mourning in the same gesture. This doubled sense, where to comfort is also to mourn, speaks to the duplicity of consolation; Joy is, to use the elder’s schema, sorrowful tears and vice versa. Taken together, the manifestation of *al-mu‘azzī*—the one who comforts, the one who mourns—is not the simple resolution of sorrow into joy, but a binding of the two into the form of a violent, Divine summons—“truly, truly you will weep.”

‘The world’ (*al-‘ālam*) and the life in the Spirit, *al-mu‘azzī*, are counterposed. The world is the site of a division between sorrow and joy, produced by their passional dialectic or, to follow Freud, a drive. Counterposed to the world within ascetic grammar, the Divine Spirit is

⁸² The verse (John 16:20) that follows the elder’s citation continues: “When a woman is in labour she has sorrow, because her hour has come; but when she is delivered of the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for the joy that a human being is born into the world. So, you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”

not dirempted between joy and sorrow which remain a unity of opposites. Within the interior scene of the *nafs*, at its center, is a space in which joy and sorrow intertwine.

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As he continues to speak to us, the elder's eyes remain downcast; we sit listening in silence, not wishing to interrupt him. Recapitulating his scriptural citation, Yūsif delivers to us, in a poetic cadence, a pair of five words. With particular emphasis on the final syllabus of each phrase and raising each finger of his right hand in sequence, he enunciates:

laysa aḥad yaʿīsh bidūn khaṭīyya
laysa aḥad yaʿīsh bidūn tʿazīya

No one lives without error
No one lives without consolation

Having gestured to the total image of the spiritual life in the couplet, the elder leans back in his seat with a great sigh. He rubs his eyes as he moves his glasses onto his forehead in a single motion; the ensuing silence in the small salon emphasizes the weight of his saying, but also the lack of necessity to say more.

The parallelism of the couplet and its rhythmic structure form an image that is in excess of its semantic function, or perhaps more precisely its *capacity* for denotation. And yet the couplet's dyadic form, its figuration of point and counterpoint, establishing a hiatus between error and consolation as they remain united by human life, manifests the ascetic truth of the lesson. This, and the other. Here, and there. The life of the *nafs* here is staged in the binding of joy and tears; the two are modalities of the soul. *Tʿazīya*, mournful consolation, is counterposed with *khaṭīyya*, sinful error or evil,⁸³ as the shared condition of life—"no one lives" without either. The possibility of the life of the *nafs* is at once joy and sorrow; *al-muʿazzī* is also known as *al-muḥī*, the one who enlivens. This binding forms the topos of the 'life' of spiritual struggle, the rhythmic movement of failure and tearfully mourning that failure as a penitent return.

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⁸³ The word *khaṭīyya* I have elected, here as elsewhere, not to translate simply as "sin" though its direct cognate in Greek is ἁμαρτία. Indeed, the connotations of sin in English—guilt and thus propitiation—are not entirely salient in the Arabic Orthodox usage of the word *khaṭīyya*, which denotes the act of overstepping or exceeding a limit, rather than the (Greek) notion of missing a mark.

I would not return again to Dayr al-Ḥarf until winter. By the time I did, the pinecones had been harvested and gathered into burlap sacks, ready to be dried and cracked for their fruit. The summit upon which the monastery sits remained mercifully free of snow, but was nevertheless encircled by the white, luminous peaks of its neighbours. Only after we were settled into our rooms and evening prayers were complete did the elder finally greet us and beckon us once again into the small salon. He inquired after us and apologized for asking me some of the same questions over again. Once the shaykh heard the topic of my research (Orthodox Christian tradition in Lebanon) for a second time, he asked after my sources (*maṣādar*). I explained how ethnographic research was conducted and what its method was, yet I faltered in identifying a specific object of interrogation. “You study people’s experience,” (*khibrāt al-nās*) he interjected approvingly. “The life of people in Christ” (*ḥayāt al-nās bi-l-masīḥ*).

Opening a small book in which he had handwritten notes alongside the names of his many visitors, the elder reminded himself of the timing of our last visit. Noting that, by happenstance, it had fallen on the commemoration of Maksīmūs al-Mu‘tarif (Maximos the Confessor), he took the opportunity to speak about him. Maximos, a 7th century monastic and scholar, wrote extensively on the soul, most famously in his “Four Centuries on Love,” which was also collected in the *Philokalia*. He was later condemned by the Byzantine imperial powers, whom he had served as an official, for his refusal to accede to a theological edict issued by the emperor. A prolific writer and teacher, Maximos had his tongue cut out and his right hand—the two bodily instruments of the word—severed before being exiled to Georgia, where he died peacefully in 662 AD.

“Maximos says that Orthodoxy is the inheritance of the holy [*mīrāth al-muqaddasa*]—how?” the elder asks as he provides the answer immediately: “*al-dumū‘ al-abadiyya*,” eternal tears. Tears take a central place in the ascetic practice of hesychasm; a continual refrain in ascetic writing on hesychastic prayer is the accompaniment of tears to the prayer of the heart. Great ascetics are spoken of as having wept so continuously in their prayer that their tears have etched permanent marks on their cheeks. Elder Yūsif coordinated tears with two more terms: *shahāda* (martyric witnessing) and *jihād* (struggle). Like the trace of the violent martyrdom of Ya‘qūb at Hamatoura, tears mark the historicity of a transmission, tribulation, one that opens onto an ahistorical site (the desert, the heart). In the tearful space of this witnessed transmission, one is summoned to one’s own spiritual *jihād* as a passage.

Tears mark the bodily passage of hesychastic practice from the penitence of the turn—toward the elsewhere of non-appearance—and the fruit of making one’s dwelling in that non-appearance. Diadochos of Photiki, in his spiritual writings, offers a helpful interpretation of the two modalities of tears:

Initiatory joy is one thing, the joy of perfection is another. The first is not exempt from fantasy, while the second has the strength of humility. Between the two joys comes a 'godly sorrow' and active tears; 'For in much wisdom is much knowledge; and he that increases knowledge increases sorrow.' The soul, then, is first summoned to the struggle by the initiatory joy and then rebuked and tested by the truth of the Holy Spirit, as regards both its past sins and the vain distractions in which it still indulges. For it is written: 'With rebukes Thou hast corrected man for iniquity and made his soul waste away like a spider's web.' In this manner the soul is tested by divine rebuke as in a furnace, and through fervent remembrance of God it actively experiences the joy exempt from fantasy.⁸⁴

Tears, then, are the image of *t'azīya*, the consolation that is also a mourning. They both mark a turn to the space of the heart and act as the passage to it. This transmission is not strictly a tradition in terms of anthropological localization.⁸⁵ Inheriting tears, within the topology of this ascetic grammar, is to inherit this return to the otherness of the heart; the possibility of inheriting, thinking with Maximos, is always at an impossible limit.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Diadochos of Photiki, "On Spiritual Knowledge and Discrimination," in *The Philokalia*, trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, vol. 1 (London; Boston: Faber & Faber, 1981), 271.

⁸⁵ Tears as outlined here evince a field that cannot be compassed by a sentimental or emotional modality properly (i.e., they are not pathological and hence cannot be thought of as a cultivated affect). Indeed, Talal Asad's volume, *On Suicide Bombing* (Columbia University Press, 2007), probes the grammars of Western Christianity, wherein the violent death of Christ is understood as the ultimate atonement and redemption of 'humankind.' This logic of propitiation, consequently, leads to a specific Christian/secular attunement to the pain of others directly informs the violent contradictions of humanitarian war. In contrast, here it is the singularly kenotic, that is, dispossessive, gesture of Christ's passion—not its propitiatory potential vis-à-vis a quantum of pain—that orients hesychastic practice. This dispossession is doubled as abandonment and being-abandoned (cleavage).

⁸⁶ C.f., Joan Copjec's reading of Freud's *Group Psychology* through Abbas Kiarostami's film, *Where Is the Friend's House?*:

Group Psychology keeps its eyes on both phenomena, on groups formed around a common substance, idea, or leader and the possibility of group feeling independent of the sharing of some common substance. The discussion of the boarding school incident is the point in the text where the latter comes within sight. Here, group feeling emerges as a sense of belonging to an indeterminate totality. The girls, Freud says, do not identify with the girl who receives the letter; rather, they "place themselves in the same position," a position of "openness to [. . .] emotion" (107). The argument risks getting lost if read as a mere shifting of the point of identification from the girl to her position. The critical point is that the position of *openness* renders the girl inimitable. Openness to what? To emotion, to affect. *Not* to something or someone, but to her own self-otherness.

Like the ascetic fleeing to non-appearance, tears are not localizable in the proper sense. Instead, they are the heteronomous and fleeting trace of the gesture of withdrawal. Isaac writes as much in his ascetical homilies:

This shall be a sign for you, in whatever matter you wish to penetrate, if you have truly entered into that realm: when grace begins to open your eyes so that you may perceive the divine vision of things such as they are, then your eyes will immediately start to shed torrents of tears, so much so that they will wash your cheeks by their abundance. Thereupon peace comes to the war of the senses and it is curtailed within you.⁸⁷

Tears mark the passage to the desert space of the heart, wherein the passionate battle with the *nafs* comes to its cessation.

Amrād al-nafs

Hesychastic withdrawal, embodied and sought in the tears that signal both consolation and mourning, marks the monastery as a particular space of therapeutics for the *nafs*. Monasteries, in the Ottoman Levant as elsewhere, have been historical spaces of convalescence⁸⁸ and healing; the Orthodox ascetic tradition, eschewing an idiom of moral pedagogy, typically invokes the terrain of therapeutics and healing (*shifā'*).

It is one of my first encounters at Mār Ilyās. I am speaking with the hieromonk Antonios, one of the leaders at the monastery, about the illnesses of the soul (*amrād al-nafs*) that afflict people, and especially the youth, whom he encounters. We speak in his office in the corner of the monastery. It is furnished with icons and volumes of Orthodox writings. Antonios insists on speaking English and readily engages the topic of alienation: “This society, especially young people...they are trying to find or to see someone that can listen to their weaknesses or their problem because no one has time to listen to other problems and to support [them] and to remember [them] in [their] prayers.” The monastery, as mentioned, had gained a large

Joan Copjec, “Cinema as Thought Experiment: On Movement and Movements,” *Differences* 27, no. 1 (May 1, 2016): 162–63, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-3522781>. Also see Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, ed. Peter Gay, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990).

⁸⁷ Isaac, *Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, 147. C.f., Iṣḥaq the Athonite’s contemporary Arabic translation, Iṣḥaq al-Siryānī, *Nusukīyyāt*, trans. Iṣḥaq ‘Aṭāllāh ([no place]: Manshūrāt al-Nūr, 1983), 91–93.

⁸⁸ John Alexander and Sophia Laiou, “Health and Philanthropy Among the Ottoman Orthodox Population, Eighteenth to Early Nineteenth Century,” *Turkish Historical Review* 5, no. 1 (April 30, 2014): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18775462-00501003>.

following of young unmarried men and women who frequented the monastery and were spoken of as spiritual sons and daughters of the monastics.

The hieromonk impresses upon me the seriousness of the problem: “the father and the mother, they work together, so they can support the family financially... the children avoid communicating with their parents, and the children [don’t] have this communication.” At this point the conversation pauses for a brief moment of levity. Antonios smiles and apologizes for his fragmented English, “Are you understanding? I am sorry, because I am weak [in English]”. I assure him that I can understand him, and he continues:

They take a razor, metal, and try to cut themselves because they are very angry, and they don’t know where they can confess, or [where] they can tell the people their problems. They don’t have anyone to communicate with them. They don’t trust in anyone. For this reason, the psychology problems start with home. It is a part, there are a lot of girls. They smoke, they try to...what is to put the cigarette? [interjecting, I say, “oh, to put out cigarettes”]. Yes, to put out [here it is implied that they put the out on their skin]. Yes, psychological problems, because they don’t have any peace.

Antonios translates the terrain of the *nafs*—which is already ambiguously shared across the grammars of the psychiatric and the soul—into the modern language of psychology. Depression in Lebanon has been the concern of many post-civil war analyses,⁸⁹ even receiving the attention of the World Health Organization, which in a 2010 report noted a dearth of mental health facilities and personnel.⁹⁰ The language of social disorder in our conversation quickly crosses into the grammar of the soul.

“No one has time to listen to the other problems and to support him and to remember him in [his] prayers,” Antonios continued. “[It is] something very important. Because the relationship between the spiritual son and the people of the monastery, it is a spiritual relation.” The hieromonk, referencing the foundational premise of ascetic life—spiritual obedience to another as the guide (*murshid*) of the life of the *nafs*—begins to explain how people are spiritually inculcated in therapeutics: “When you remember him with your prayer, and you try to support him or to ask him ‘what happens with you’? Or if you are good not, or if

⁸⁹ See, for example Hala Ahmadieh et al., “Diabetes and Depression in Lebanon and Association with Glycemic Control: A Cross-Sectional Study,” *Diabetes, Metabolic Syndrome and Obesity: Targets and Therapy* 11 (November 8, 2018): 717–28, <https://doi.org/10.2147/DMSO.S179153>; E. G. Karam et al., “Major Depression and External Stressors: The Lebanon Wars,” *European Archives of Psychiatry and Clinical Neuroscience* 248, no. 5 (1998): 225–30.

⁹⁰ “WHO-AIMS Report on Mental Health System in Lebanon” (Beirut: World Health Organization, 2010).

they make a progression in their spiritual life. In this way they feel that someone is supporting [them] and orienting [them] and that someone adopts [them].”

Forging a space for the *nafs* in common, as the previous chapter argued, metabolizes one’s singular struggle: “You teach him how to prayer, and to make *metanoia* and to try with a *kamposkini*.” Along with the space of a common encounter of others in tribulation, the complementary interior struggle of the *nafs*, the delimitation of the heart, is molded through the fundamental ascetic gestures; enunciating the words of prayer seven times a day, bending the body into a repentant prostration, and using the prayer rope as a method of gather the energies of the *nafs* to the remembrance of God. Alienation in the soul, its illness, is knotted through the interior condition of the *nafs* as it encounters a social void. The incapacity to call to remembrance (*dhikr*) the other in prayer is not simply a failure to recognize the other. In the scene of the *nafs*, one does not so much remember the other as offer the other to the memory of God. The therapeutics of remembrance and prayer are gestures by which the *nafs*’ energies are collected as they delimit the heart.

The space of the monastery, as it stages the *nafs* it houses, is meant to navigate the believer to God, yet, Antonios insists, this has been largely impossible in Lebanon: “the majority of the church and the society here, or in this area, the priests—they are not very spiritual, and they don’t have a background: spiritual background, theological background.” Antonios directly links the wavering of Orthodox life to two related processes—the upending of religious life during the civil war, and a post-colonial condition of assimilation into a Western Christian ethos: “Because we have a war...the men didn’t have anything to do. And they are attached to the church. The village tried to orient him to be a priest, and here they are priests, but they didn’t have a background of theology, or a spiritual background, because we didn’t have monasteries here.” Antonios—who, in making his point notes that he himself was educated at a French Catholic school—correlates the war with the influence of Western forms of Christianity to explain the wavering of ascetic practices of the soul: “they are oriented or referred to the Catholic or Maronite church. [Those who are oriented this way] are very weak.”

The weakness of the life of *nafs*, for Antonios, makes it impossible to countenance the instances of depression and alienation that have become so common in Lebanon. This “weakness” (*du’uf*), which within ascetic grammar is weakness of the soul and an inability to strictly follow the rule, is rendered as both a social and subjective condition. The topology of the *nafs* binds scenes of depression, alienation, self-harm to the social aftermath of the civil war, capitalist modernity, and institutional vacuity, without rendering the latter as the ‘social conditions’ that form the subjectivity of the former. Instead, the *nafs* names the very site of passage between these sites. Implied in Antonios’ words, then, is not simply the difficulty of

responding to the strained conditions of life; rather, it is the incapacity of living a form of life that the practices of prayerful remembrance and ascetic repentance articulate. This weakness and inability to delimit the heart through engaging the energies of the soul is not the lack of an identity or knowledge, which refers back to the passional self, but to a condition of the soul's numbness and obduracy.

“Spiritually we don't know anything about our church,” the hieromonk concludes sadly. It is past eleven. We have been speaking for over an hour and Antonios needs to attend to his spiritual sons, to confess them for Sunday liturgy the next morning. He walks me back to the starlit courtyard. I take his blessing and retire to my cell to write some notes and get some rest. It is December and the weather has finally turned cold.

Ambivalence

Written as a contemporary treatise on *‘ilm al-nafs*, the science of the soul, Aspiro Jabbur's volume *al-Itirāf wa-l-tahlīl al-nafsī* (*Confession and Psychoanalysis*) probes the resonances between Freudian psychoanalysis and Eastern Christian asceticism. In it, the question of lucidity—which the term *itirāf* connotes as both the rite of confession with a spiritual guide and the broader notion of ‘recognition’—is posed.

A central symptom of the soul and its incapacity is the predominance of ambivalence (*taḍādd*), an important concept in psychoanalysis that denotes a contradictory disposition towards an object. As the ascetic notes, the human being experiences “countless conditions and alternations” in the *nafs*, which cannot be escaped and which mark what the elder Yūsif already delimited as the binding of error and consolation:

Ambivalence causes us to be indecisive in our kindness and in our aggression...One may pardon in one moment, and then never pardon. One may come to the aid of his adversary while the friend rejoices in the affliction of his friend. It is not fixed. For one may the first time return quickly to reopen the wound of hostility, and then quickly regret the second time, or he may be astonished at his malicious joy over his friend and change to stifle the rebukes of conscience, if there is a live conscience.⁹¹

Quoting Maximus, the monk Aspiro attributes the inescapable ambivalence of the soul to self love, *athira*, a translation of Maximus's Greek term *philautia*: “Self love” is “the mother of all passions.” The inevitability of ambivalence in the life of the *nafs* clarifies the terrain of ascetic struggle without offering a resolution: “What salvation is there before death?”

⁹¹ Aspiro Jabbur, *Al-Itirāf Wa-l-Tahlīl al-Nafsī* (Akkar: Orthodox Metropole Akkar, 1990), 62.

Coming to terms with the ambivalence of the drive opens, as it did for other hesychasts in Lebanon, onto the hidden aspect of the history⁹² of contemporary Lebanon, its fierce dialectic of destruction and upbuilding:

This is ambivalence. It is the cause of the alternation of our history between edifice and razing. We have a vivid image of this in the harrowing events of Lebanon. After a massive period of progress and civilizational upbuilding [*‘umrān*], construction and cohabitation, the fires broke out. How do people alternate between the positives of upbuilding, and the negatives of destruction? How does an exceedingly stable and lively country change [*taḥawwal*] to a country of destruction and of the annihilation of the human being? How do people change from being gentle and compassionate in hardship and crises, to being false and harsh men?⁹³

This constitutive ambivalence is further compounded in the dual possible effects and overall danger of the harrowing image that are the “events of Lebanon” (*aḥdath lubnān*). In the first instance the form of the impression, participating in the imaginal (*taṣawarāt*) and rational faculty of the soul, have the possibility of darkening the noetic heart, continuing to impinge upon the struggle to delimit a space for it. Proliferating in the passional soul through fantasy and anxiety, the image here can propagate cruelty. The other possibility that Aspiro’s text offers is to receive the image on the order of tribulation⁹⁴ (*tajriba*). While in both cases the reception remains within the imaginal faculty, the modality of tribulation offers the possibility of receiving the harrowing image without yielding to it; that is, the space of the heart remains guarded.

These two possibilities of the drive, then—being crushed by the harrowing image or enduring it—are elaborated by Aspiro as the modalities of “hardness” and “gentleness”, respectively. In that sense the ailment of the *nafs* exposed in Lebanon’s wars, the hieromonk

⁹² Such was the case for the historical dialectics of Ibn Khaldun, who, writing in the 8th century (AH), sought to countenance the considerable destruction of his time in light of the Divine command (*‘amr*) to which the created order is invariably subject. Ibn Khaldun, who lived in a tumultuous period, seeks to countenance the time when “the whole inhabited world changed.” And again: “it was as if the voice of existence in the world had called out for oblivion and restriction, and the world had responded to its call. God inherits the earth and whomever is upon it.” (30) See, Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, ed. N. J. Dawood, trans. Franz Rosenthal, Abridged edition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁹³ Jabbur, *al-I’tirāf wa-l-tahlīl al-nafsī*, 76.

⁹⁴ Basit K. Iqbal’s dissertation deals in detail with the problem of tribulation (in Arabic, *ibtīlā’*) in and as an Islamic theodicy of the Syrian war and forms of Islamic aid. See, Basit Kareem Iqbal, “Tribulation and Repair: Islamic Humanitarianism after the Syrian War,” (PhD Diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2019).

contends, evinces a “lack of preponderance of gentleness (‘atf) over hardness (qaswa).”⁹⁵ More expansively, the dyad employed by Jabbur to denote the soul’s ambivalence—gentleness and cruelty—directly inflects the physical language of plasticity and hardness. Whereas ‘atf is the capacity for pliancy and inclination, qaswa is that of obduracy. The order of tribulation thus evokes the paradoxical capacity of incapacity: to receive the affliction in pliant obedience. In the other case, the heart is hardened, and, being brutalized, it brutalizes. The form of the trial is constituted by the very ambivalence of its origin. *Tajriba* (tribulation) garners an ambivalent meaning in Orthodox tradition: it may denote “a test or trial sent to man by God, so as to aid his progress on the spiritual way”⁹⁶ or, perhaps, a demonic instigation that is meant to lead the human being into error.

The recognition of ambivalence in the *nafs*—“no one lives without transgression, no one lives without consolation”—forms the coordinates of ascetic struggle in which the energies of the soul must be guided and collected under the terms of a trial. This turn to tribulation is both the tears of repentance and mourning, and the passage to the desert of the heart.

Shock

Welcoming the event as ordeal shifts the coordinates of the real. It means to move from a modality of the world in which things are transformed into objects in order to be ‘grasped,’ used, possessed, to a modality in which they are transformed into that which ‘cannot be grasped.’

Stefania Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul*

Analyses of post-war Lebanon have sought to reckon with the traumatic temporality manifest in post-war life⁹⁷ by orienting their various accounts around the notion of a stagnant present; this is most lucidly articulated in Judith Naeff’s concept, following conceptual historian Reinhart Koselleck, of the “suspended now.”⁹⁸ According to Naeff, who focuses on the urban

⁹⁵ Jabbur, *Al-Itirāf Wa-l-Tahlīl al-Nafsī*, 76.

⁹⁶ G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, “Temptation,” in *Philokalia: The Complete Text* (Faber & Faber, 1981).

⁹⁷ Sami Hermez, *War Is Coming: Between Past and Future Violence in Lebanon* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); Sune Haugbolle, *War and Memory in Lebanon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁹⁸ Elaborating on this concept of suspension through Koselleck’s meta-categories of experience and expectation, Naeff writes, “if experience is represented as a space, because it seems to contain a volume in which layers of the past are accumulated, expectation forms a horizon, a line that retreats whenever it is approached”, (37) which opens to suspension in “the inaccessibility of an unresolved past as Beirut’s space of experience and inaccessibility of a radically uncertain future as its horizon of expectation. Both produce a present that seems somehow suspended, disconnected from temporal linearity.” (38) Judith Naeff, *Precarious Imaginaries of Beirut: A*

environment of Beirut, this suspension is the result of a past dynamic: the unresolved antagonisms from the civil war period, most politically salient in the amnesty law stating that there would be “no victor, no vanquished” (*lā ghālib wa lā maghlūb*). Second, the suspension of the present is a result of the volatile future horizon, as one of “anxious anticipation” and expectation of being subject to displacement, austerity, or physical violence. This precarious horizon is, in her explanation, a result of neoliberal capitalist forms of “creative destruction” which continually and quite literally destroy lived urban environments in a constant process of unmaking and remaking.⁹⁹ In these analyses, the ‘now’ of human life in Lebanon is caught between the destruction of an irreconciled past and an uncertain future.¹⁰⁰

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The work of re-inhabiting the monastery of Ruqād al-Sayyida was, as with the other monasteries, oriented in part around establishing the material sustainability of life there, as the monastery was in serious disrepair. The small group of ascetics were assigned different responsibilities for aspects of the common life. One managed the kitchen, overseeing meal preparation, while another cleaned the monastery and oversaw hospitality. Two of the monastics worked outdoors, managing the flock of chickens and the large garden. These two also labored with some hired workmen within the monastery, who were lending skill to the considerable masonry work being undertaken. These two were also responsible for managing the large amounts of debris that still populated most of the monastery’s old classroom.

My time at of Ruqād al-Sayyida would be spent helping in the latter capacity. On one of our visit’s, Khalil and I bring around fifty quail hatchlings—a gift from Mār Ilyās—in Khalil’s car. The monks are quite excited by this gift and ask my friend for details: how were these birds are to be cared for and how many eggs they would lay. After we unload them, the monks decide that they would need a separate enclosure in the chicken coop, away from the other birds. We will build this the next day: “It will be hot tomorrow,” Sarafīm warned us with a smile. It was now May and the heat of the summer had arrived. Our day begins at 3:45am, with morning prayers lasting until both the sun has risen and the birds nesting in the palms have

City’s Suspended Now (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). See also Reinhart Koselleck, “‘Space of Experience’ and ‘Horizon of Expectation’: Two Historical Categories,” in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 267–88.

⁹⁹ The 2019–2020 protests in Lebanon have centered around these particular neoliberal infrastructures, and around the form of the amnesty law itself. See Rima Majed and Lana Salman, “Lebanon’s Thawra,” *Middle East Report* (Fall/Winter 2019).

¹⁰⁰ For an analogous and recent anthropological study on the temporality of middle-class activism in Lebanon see Yasemin Ipek, “Longing for a Nation: Cross-Sectarian Publics and Ethical Activism in Lebanon,” PhD Diss., (Stanford University, 2018).

stirred. Following a light breakfast, we begin our work. The sun is already climbing as we search for some appropriate material in the collected scraps. A large piece of corrugated sheet metal, several pieces of old planed wood, and a large piece of particle board are collected. We help Sarafim and another monk detach some rusted metal mesh from a large old window screen, which we use for the cage. With our materials collected, we head outside the walls to the monastery's grounds.

We pass the garden and descend the overgrown and steep stone steps and come to the birds' enclosure, which is situated on the edge of a refuse-laden olive grove. We begin by clearing a space in the corner of the large pen in which to erect a cordoned space for the quail. By ten o'clock the heat is strong enough that even a brief cessation of work compels us to move to the shade of the enclosure's sole tree. While we work, we speak about various topics: Sarafim mentions an upcoming visit to his family in Syria, which he would undertake in a month's time and would be his first since becoming a monk. Having opened the painful wound of the topic of the Syrian war, he laments at the egoism and desire for control that he saw as underpinning the conflict. "People are never satisfied," he says with gentle rebuke in his voice.

The work on the quail enclosure continues. We clear the surrounding ground of its considerable debris and dig several holes in the soil in which we set the wood paneling. We discuss how we might control the air temperature in the enclosure; without consistent power (northern Lebanon has only twelve hours of electricity a day), it will be difficult. The work is decidedly patchwork. The use of scraps collected from the ruins of the monastery to build the enclosure is that of bricolage. Bricolage work, by no means unique to monastic spaces, at least in Lebanon, catalyzes the facticity of the object world within the ambit of at-hand suitability. In the case of icons, the dual iconoclasm of effacement and theft are met by the simply sufficient gesture of re-painting icons on worn, ruined boards. Here, debris sustains life.

We return to the corridor at the entrance of the monastery. While the monks and Khalil chat about the prospects of consuming the anticipated bounty of eggs, I idly take photographs of the monastery, which is pleasantly framed by the entranceway in which we were standing. A deafening sound envelops us. Two more shocks quickly follow. Khalil at once has crouched and covered his ears, while I spin around to him and the monks looking for a cue. The two monks remain standing, and warily peer out the entrance to the monastery without crossing its threshold. Khalil anxiously looks to them and me, "My God, my God, they're bombing us!" Sarafim turns to him and me; he reassures us with his calm voice that the Israelis, or whoever it may be, are bombing Syria and not Lebanon. "They would not attack Lebanon right now." This assuages our fears, less for the coherence of Sarafim's reasoning than the gentle fortitude he maintains. The day's work continues.

The next evening, the coordinates of the previous day's shock become clear; Khalil and I are standing on the low section of the monastery's roof, next to a large pile of drying sumac. With the day's work done and little time before the start of evening prayers, we quietly look out over the olive groves that surrounded the monastery, and beyond that to Tripoli's outline along the coast. At this point the ominous sound of an aircraft, like we heard as we descended the mountain from Hamatoura, swells and intrudes upon the calm scene. We soon spot a low-flying bomber approaching from the coast; it is headed for nearby Syria. The debate of whether it was Israeli or Russian was minutiae and made little difference for the impact it had on Khalil.

"I hate that sound, man," he says with visible discomfort on his face. "It reminds me of Ḥarb Tammūz." The 2006 Ḥarb Tammūz, the July War—what was largely a massive Israeli bombing campaign across two-thirds of Lebanon—saw over a thousand deaths in the country and marked the return of widescale war in the post-civil era and, for those of Khalil's generation, the first encounter with it. The bomber is still in sight. He recounts to me that at the start of the 2006 war, his mother worked in Ḍāhiyya, the densely-populated southern suburbs of Beirut and the most heavily shelled part of the city. During the month of the war, he recalls, the sound and brilliant light of the bombing raids on Beirut and its environs would wake him at 3am "like clockwork." It was a very difficult time for the family, he explains: work was non-existent, and danger was constant. Telling me this, his face drops and he states definitively that if a war starts in Lebanon again, he will leave immediately; the means of that departure, however, are not at all clear.

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The sensible intrusion of the bombing produced a psychological shock similar to what Walter Benjamin treats in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire."¹⁰¹ As Benjamin illustrates, the overwhelming force of shock is successfully metabolized only in cases where the shock is deflected from its integration into experience (*Erfahrung*) to that of a mere solipsistic moment (*Erlebnis*). In this schematization, trauma is the repetition of an integrated shock; for Khalil and the monks of the monastery, this was not the first bombs they had heard fall. For the former, the sound of planes marked a repetition of the traumatic expectation of violence.

The oppressive power of the harrowing image, the sensory complex of the *nafs*, is moreover highlighted in the ethnographic writing of Andreas Bandak on Syrian Christian life. Writing about the Christian experience of the Syrian uprisings, he argues that a "fear of extinction" subtends a general quietism or even outright support for the Ba'athist government

¹⁰¹ Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (Schocken Books, 1988).

among Christian Syrian populations.¹⁰² Using as a foil Benjamin’s messianic reading of destruction,¹⁰³ Bandak notes that “it could conversely be argued that, rather than postponing death, the stories and images circulating in the Syrian conflict only bring it closer. Death is no longer to come in due time but is seen as awaiting everyone imminently. Here, hope is precisely what is lacking.”¹⁰⁴

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We continue to watch the jet fly out of our sight. “War is always the work of the *shaytan*,” Khalil notes dispassionately. “You know,” he concludes as he looks out over the now-dark olive groves, “I like coming here, to the desert, where one can hear God.” We soon turn and descend from the roof to go to evening prayers with the monks.

The vicissitudes of the soul manifest in a historical knot of the passions. Read through the concepts articulated in this ascetic tradition, this alternation in the condition of the human world is not resolved via the diagnoses of the juridical state (crimes and their punishment) or the language of the market (competition and economy), but to an illness and darkening of the heart: “wars expose the ailment of the human being.”¹⁰⁵ The ambivalent historical image, of the imbrication of ruin and return, discloses the occluded illness of the soul.

The turn to the desert, the ruination of one’s ‘here’, works to launch a kind of procedure wherein the soul’s energies are gathered and delimited. The lucidity of the trial, by which both the traumatic memories and repetitive shocks of the present as well as the ambivalence of the soul’s aim are shown in their heteronomy to the human being, opens up this other scene within the terrain of the *nafs*.

The afflicting image opens up to the possibility of articulating the gesture of ascetic withdrawal, *metanoia* or *tawba*, to turn. As Maximos writes

the 'rough places'—that is to say, the attacks of trials and temptations suffered against our will—shall be made 'smooth', above all when the [nous], rejoicing and delighting in

¹⁰² Andreas Bandak, “Reckoning with the Inevitable: Death and Dying among Syrian Christians during the Uprising,” *Ethnos* 80, no. 5 (October 20, 2015): 671–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2014.941896>.

¹⁰³ See, Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (Schocken Books, 1988).

¹⁰⁴ Bandak, “Reckoning with the Inevitable,” 687.

¹⁰⁵ Jabbur, *al-I'tirāf wa-l-taḥlīl al-nafsī*, 76.

weakness, affliction and calamity, through its unsought sufferings deprives of all their lordship the passions in which we deliberately indulge.¹⁰⁶

To rejoice in calamity is not to boast, it is to countenance the humbling excess of evil, as Khalīl did with the invocation the *shayṭan*. The gesture of the repetitious turn and re-turn to dispossession, non-appearance, follows from the lucidity found in ‘not knowing’. The Arabic word for being stripped (*yatajarrad*) in ascetic renunciation (from the same term for “abstract art,” *al-fann al-tajrīdī*) is likewise the way one might describe a desert, “barren” (*mujarrad*). The latter is also the adverbial word by which one indicates that there is “nothing but”; a retreat that attains its purity in destitution.¹⁰⁷ Inheriting the dispossession of *aphaneia*, as Maximos wrote, is to inherit “eternal tears”—the rend at the heart of the human being’s historicity and subjectivity.

¹⁰⁶ Maximos the Confessor, “Second Century of Various Texts,” in *Philokalia: The Complete Text*, vol. 2 (London; Boston: Faber & Faber, 1981), 198.

¹⁰⁷ C.f. Spinoza’s *conatus*—the striving of life for perpetuation defined as specifically a *resistance* to destruction: “the demand by means of which each thing demands to persevere in its being.” See Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics: With The Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect and Selected Letters*, ed. Seymour Feldman, trans. Samuel Shirley, 2 edition (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1992).

Part III. *allāh*

*Let me be confined alone in my cell,
leave me along with the benevolent God alone,
keep far away, remove yourself to a distance, leave me alone
to die in the presence of the God Who fashioned me!*

—Symeon the New Theologian, *Hymns of Divine Eros*, trans. Daniel K. Griggs

Death belongs to the realm of faith. You're right to believe that you will die. It sustains you. If you didn't believe it, could you bear the life you have? If we couldn't totally rely on the certainty that it will end, how could you bear all this?

—Jacques Lacan, *Lecture at Louvain*

1 God at the limit, God beyond

لَأَنَّ أَبِي وَأُمِّي هَجَرَانِي أَمَا الرَّبُّ فَأَلَيْهِ أَخَذَنِي

For my father and my mother abandoned me, but the Lord took me to Himself.

(Ps. 26)

“I have a theological lesson [*dars lahūti*] for you” shaykh Yūsif tells us as we greet him. Giving his blessing with brevity, he ushers our trio, once more, into the small salon at the monastery of the pines. In the center of the room is a small metal bucket filled with the same pinewood that populates the environs of the monastery and which has been stripped for use as kindling. The shaykh takes a piece of kindling in one hand and a small knife in the other. Deftly pressing the wood between his thumb and the knife, he excises a small portion. Handing us the now lacerated flesh of the wood, he asks, “Can you smell the scent [*rīḥa*]?” The pinewood, which each of us in turn raise to our nose, is bracingly aromatic and fresh. The wood [*khashib*] is much like the human being [*insān*], both are sweet-smelling internally [*bi-dākhil*], but one must pierce the outside [*khārij*] first, he tells us. And the problem is that the human being fears being cut because the pain is too great.

The elder’s lesson turned on the division and thus the threshold of *dākhil*, inside, and *khārij*, outside; it exemplifies the rend in subjectivity and historicity that the ascetic had previously outlined. The scent of the wood, *rīḥa*, likewise exuded by the fragmentary remains of holy bodies and images,¹ marks the human being’s condition between obduracy and pliancy; the cut, the puncture, is the way opening to the inner site of the *nafs*—the heart. The allegorical passage between wood and human body in the elder’s articulation, producing the scent by cutting the wood, itself participates in the translation of outside to inside, the desertification of the world and soul as they disclose a groundlessness that stages a divine unveiling: “Split a piece of wood, and there am I; lift up the stone, and you will find Me there.”² In this allegorical unfolding—a rhythmic disjuncture from the city to the monastery, the entrance to the salon, the knife edge to the wood, the pine to the body, the outer to the inner—ascetic life is topologized, as previous chapters have shown, through the process of desertification.

¹ See Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination* (University of California Press, 2006).

² ‘Gospel of Thomas,’ quoted in Kallistos Ware, “How do we enter the heart?” in James Cutsinger, ed., *Paths to the Heart: Sufism and the Christian East* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2003), 18.

If asceticism is aimed toward non-appearance, the desert of the world and the desert of the soul, it is because God is beyond creation. The wound of desertification opens onto a leap into the gap of divine otherness within creation itself. Ascetic desire is constituted as the intimate courtship between creation and the uncreated, and is consummated by attending to the limit-threshold: the ‘beyond-creation,’³ suffered as a wound. This horizon of desire, the nature of the cut, is not situated between a subject and its unobtainable object but as an encounter at the *threshold* of creatureliness and the uncreated. In other words, the distance and cutting distinctions are not on the order of two extrinsic and essential *esse* but between being and that which is beyond being.⁴

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We are walking on the coast near Batrūn. Khalīl’s sister Khalīla and I are talking about her work at an accounting firm in Dekwaneh, a suburb of Beirut. I ask her how her work is going; she is grateful for the ability to make money and support her family, she tells me, but she is increasingly drawn to spend her time at the monastery of Mār Ilyās. She mentions, with some hesitation, that she has been considering becoming a monastic, a fact that she asks that I not relate to anyone.

A few years later, once I had left Lebanon. I find out that Khalīla has indeed become a novice, alongside several other young women, at a newly founded monastery, supported by attachment to the *waqf* of Mār Ilyās; the monastic community is dedicated to *wālidat illāh yanbū‘a al-ḥayāt* (The Mother of God, the Life-giving Spring). On one of his first visits to see his sister at the new monastery, Khalīl sends me a photograph of a wood-burnt icon made by Khalīla herself: it is commonly known as *The true life of a monk*.

³ Amira Mittermaier, drawing on the ubiquity of the phrase *allāhu akbar* (God is greater) in the Middle East, has recently published on the anthropological affordances for thinking of God as beyond, “a god who is greater (*akbar*), who cannot easily be comprehended and accommodated,” Amira Mittermaier, “Beyond the Human Horizon,” *Religion and Society* 12, no. 1 (September 1, 2021): 21–38, <https://doi.org/10.3167/arrs.2021.120103>.

⁴ Christos Yannaras, argues that while the erotics of the Western mystics were meant to counter scholasticism, “everything takes places within the insurmountable limits determined by the priority of the difference of essences. And this means that no personal relationship can function as an existential possibility (i.e., as a *mode of existence*), preceding any *essential* definitions of existence.” This difference of essence turns out to constitute the “subject” and its “attainment of the individual sufficiency of consciousness” Yannaras concludes,

in both instances [that is, scholasticism or mystics] we relate to an unknown, inaccessible ‘object’ of thought or consciousness, which calls us to individual attainments of intellectual formation, or mystical ecstasies, leaving the possibilities for an authentic life *essentially* predetermined and thus preclusive of the one genuine *relationship*, which would allow one to know God as a genuine reality in personal otherness.

Christos Yannaras, *On the Absence and Unknowability of God: Heidegger and the Areopagite*, trans. Haralambos Ventis (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2007), footnote 21.



Figure 3.1

Ekphrasis

The image depicts a monastic “suspended” on a cross (*mu‘alaqa ‘alā ṣalīb*) beset by the passions. These invisible creatures, true to Arabic’s atmospheric word for them⁵—*ahwā’*—blast the ascetic with demonic gales. Above the crucified monastic—who is stretched out as

⁵ In other iterations of this image the passions are figured as arrows shot by demons and which pierce the different parts of the ascetic body.

a subject to them in tribulation—is Christ who blesses the trial; crowns of martyrdom are likewise borne down by angels. Below the wounded feet is God’s enlivening Spirit, figured through the dove, and Word, figured through the book, both enthroned, as well as the instruments of Christ’s own death—the reed of gall offered him on the cross and the spear which pierced his side. The fire, both depicted in the vigil candles held by the arms of the cross at the hands and the fiery tongue emanating from the head evince both the consuming fire of the trial and the illumination that is offered in martyric tribulation. The passive figure, here wrapped in the clothes of a monastic, figures and pursues an imitation of the Messianic event that mortifies the very field of the self. It is the instantiation of a form of life in circumscription.

The image-type, drawn from a common body of icons,⁶ does not so much represent monastic life (acting as a *credo* or an organization and solicitation of affect) as spatialize the work of wounding. The depiction of crucifixion (where the hands and feet are pierced much like the pinewood) in Khalīla’s scoring of the wood serves as an energetic tracing out of a wounding—what Maximos describes as *perigraphē*, circumscription, a tracing out—wherein the tautness of one’s being, its passionate life (of both body and soul) is stretched out, returned to in lucidity, and, ultimately, abandoned to a God which is beyond it.

“How does the monastic ‘commit’ to the ascetic life?” Father André Scrima asks in his translated guidance to the monks of Mār Georgios. “It will suffice to answer this question now by providing a description of the image [*ṣūra*] of the monk, of the spiritual image which expresses how to commit one’s whole life within the monasteries of the Lord.” Where does one find this image? “The cross of Christ. The monastic is the human being who lives on the cross of Christ.”⁷

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It is the ‘crack’ in creation, gestured to by the elder Yūsif, that both gainsays a grammar of being as self-sufficient essence and marks the ultimate threshold of a heteronomous desire,⁸

⁶ Hierotheos Vlachos notes that icon-painters, especially monastic ones, do not invent or create novel image-types but as a discipline reproduce the genera that have preceded them. This, he notes is because images in Orthodoxy do not engage the passions (and thus the active imaginal faculty) but “crucify them” in *The Science of Spiritual Medicine: Orthodox Psychotherapy in Action* (Birth of the Theotokos Monastery Press, 2010).

⁷ The Monks of Mar Girgis, al-Ḥarf, *Uṣūl Al-Ḥayā al-Rūḥiyya*, 23.

⁸ Desire is called το επιθυμητικόν in the Greek ascetic writings. This appetitive power is paired with the incensive power (το θυμικόν) as the two lower, passible aspects of the soul. It remains a passible aspect of the *nafs* that is itself double. Worldly desires (*shahwa duniyawi*) incite movement and offer no rest, only a bitter frustration that

one which I locate in Khalīla’s energetic inscription. Mortification in this idiom is the wound, at the limit of the subject of the world, that opens onto another scene.

In his contemplation of the words of the Psalter: “*My father and my mother abandoned Me,*” Maximos writes:

Thus, again, when David said, *My father and my mother abandoned me, but the Lord took me to Himself*, I think he was speaking obscurely about the abandonment and flight from the natural law of the flesh, which governs the process of birth and corruption, and into which, on account of the transgression, we are born and exist. This includes abandonment and flight from sensation, which feeds us like a mother, a parting that is necessary for those who desire incorruptible things. In this way, the visible world is abandoned by us and abandons us, *but the Lord takes us to Himself* and according to the spiritual law adopts those who are worthy, becoming their adopted father through virtue and knowledge, and in His goodness He gives the whole of Himself to the whole of them, *according to the likeness*.⁹

The mutual abandonment, life on the cross, as a move toward the limit, yields space for that which is beyond the world and the soul. Renunciation as typically conceived, it follows, appears at once inadequate to this formation. For the ascetics, the gesture of renunciation of one’s being (*inkār al-dhāt*) only serves to stage the *passage* for a God beyond creation.¹⁰

incites further wayward movement. The desire that is the movement in return to God (*shawq*, and then eros, ‘*ishq*) ultimately finds its rest in the dispassionate still-experience of God. One must pass through created being and its multiform movements to God. Desire is thus the site of ambivalence; it traverses both the passage/risk of wounding, inasmuch as it is passible, and the inclination of the heart in a charged field of multiplicity, inasmuch as which movements are wayward and which are Divinizing is necessarily ambiguous.

⁹ Maximos The Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua*, trans. Nicholas Conostas, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), 181.

¹⁰ In his *Ambigua* Maximos states that the soul is comprised of “three general movements” which “converge into one”— the sensorial, the reasoning, the noetic. The human being moreover participates in three “modalities” (*tropoi*) of being: “being [εἶναι] well-being [εὖ εἶναι], and eternal being [ἀεί εἶναι].” It is the second that invokes the complex of the soul’s movement:

For the end of the motion of things that are moved is to rest within eternal well-being itself, just as their beginning was being itself, which is God, who is the giver of being and the bestower of the grace of well-being, for He is the *beginning and the end*. For from God come both our general power of motion (for He is our beginning), and the particular way that we move toward Him (for He is our end). If an intellectual being is moved intellectually, that is, in a manner appropriate to itself, then it will necessarily become a knowing intellect. But if it knows, it surely loves that which it knows; and if it loves, it certainly suffers an ecstasy toward it as an object of love. If it suffers this ecstasy, it obviously urges itself onward, and if it urges itself onward, it surely intensifies and greatly accelerates its motion. And if its motion is intensified in this way, it

True to the lesson in the salon at Mār Georgios, this inclining movement of the soul as described by Maximos is not the result of a fall from God but is the very desire of creation's *ex nihilo* turn to the uncreated God.¹¹ Ekstasis here, as an ascetical "saving circumscription", is thus the consummation of this return, one which, as Maximos will go on to write, is found exemplified in Christ's deferral of his own will. This ekstasis, is "suffered" (πάσχει), and thus forms a topology of desire as wounding: "the [holy ones], wounded with longing for God, unerringly drew near to Him through the natural manifestations of the divine present within them."¹² Wounding here marks not the irrevocable separation of a subject from its object (two essences or beings) but of the participatory exodus¹³ into the split *in* being. The dispassion of the desert, a form of life lived in desire for God, does not mark the demand for a return to a lost primordial unity, but is itself the *end* made possible by creation's genesis, a cut that opens to the desire beyond all desires: "nothing that is in motion has come to rest, since it has not yet attained its ultimate desired end."¹⁴

The self, the world, suspended

will not cease until it is wholly present in the whole beloved, and wholly encompassed by it, willingly receiving the whole saving circumscription by its own choice, so that it might be wholly qualified by the whole circumscriber, and, being wholly circumscribed, will no longer be able to wish to be known from its own qualities, but rather from those of the circumscriber, in the same way that air is thoroughly permeated by light, or iron in a forge is completely penetrated by the fire, or anything else of this sort.

Maximos The Confessor, 1:87–89.

¹¹ This refers to the doctrine of unity (*henad*) of rational beings, as Nicholas Conostas notes, "In contrast to the Origenists...Maximos argues that temporal movement is not the result of a fall from God, but the very means of creaturely return to God" (ftn. 52, page 488), Maximos The Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers, Vol. 1*.

¹² Maximos, 165 (my emphasis).

¹³ In "'Moving Rest' in Maximus the Confessor" (*Classica et mediaevalia* 35 (1984): 177–190), Plass notes: "Maximus uses, on the one hand, an overall pattern of vanishing extension. At the same time, the relationship between natural and supernatural levels involves 'participation,' which preserves the creature's identity and therefore its extension. Thus 'ever-moving rest' specifically points to a hybrid category of 'temporal timelessness'. Maximus similarly says that the 'thrice Holy' signifies our union with the higher powers 'through the identity of immobile eternal motion around God' (91.696C). 'Identity' and 'immobility' denote the disappearance of temporal διασπικτα; 'motion around God' denotes the persisting διασπικτα that marks the difference between Creator and creature, who still has a 'history' in some sense," quoted in Paul M. Blowers, "Maximus the Confessor, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Concept of 'Perpetual Progress,'" *Vigiliae Christianae* 46, no. 2 (1992): 151–71, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1583788>, footnote 64.

¹⁴ Maximos The Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers, Vol. 1*, 1:77–78.

It is Sunday morning at the monastery in Bkiftīn. After the liturgy we eat a small breakfast in the refectory and then begin the day's labour. Khalīl and I walk in step with Sarafīm, who circumvents the dilapidated courtyard to enter into one of the large rooms on the second level. The old chalkboards and desks are stacked in the corner alongside large piles of scrap: an old gate, a safe, copper plumbing. The site had been an Orthodox children's school in the early twentieth century.

As we work to move out the debris and scrap from the room, Sarafīm, whose lower back seems to be suffering, remarks to Khalīl that he appreciates the pains of his body, as they make possible the remembrance of the poor and ill. The novice, while he works with us, tells us something of his background. Originating from elsewhere in the Mashriq, he had come here to move from the alienating space of 'the world' which was dominated by the "logic" (*manṭiq*) of "egoism" (*anāniyya*)¹⁵. Having myself heard his elder speak about the world in this way, characterized through the term *manṭiq*, I ask Sarafīm to clarify. He likens the world to a machine that is organized around the I (*anā*): "Everything is about me, me, me, [anā anā anā]" he says with a gentle smile; this machinic quality to the world, where the world 'turns' (*ḥawal*) about the ego, enslaves one to one's self. He in turn asks me where I am from, I explain and he notes with a smile how much he loves to travel in his mind, to scan maps, and to study the statistics of geography. He quickly delivers a few facts about landmass and distance to me and Khalīl. And yet he quickly notes that if he left the monastery, he would die.

We continue to work and I am surprised to see the care that the young ascetic accords each piece of material. Holding it in his hand and examining it, much like one might study the topography of a map, he discusses with me and Khalīl both what the former use of the material might have been and for what it might be repurposed. At one point, Gregorios comes to see our work and they consult about some planks of particle board, irregular and rough. Looking with concern, the elder notes that they were used for icons and could be used again for that same purpose. Nothing remains of the image on the front, a result of defacement during the war (an iconoclastic topology, one that, as previously described, also marks the monastery's frescoes, covered since the Ottoman period), but on the back an inscription marks the name of a priest, "Iṣḥāq," who, the elder explains, was the head of the monastery when it was a school.

¹⁵ The term *Anniyya* ("thatness," as abstracted from *anna*) has historically served both as a translation of the Greek το εἶναι (the infinitive form of "to be") and as a paronomasia in Sufi writings serving like *anāniyya*—in the former case referring to existence (versus essence) and in former referring to the extrinsic epiphany of Allah (as opposed to his unknowable self—*huwwiyya*). See Toby Mayer, "Anniyya," *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Three*, June 1, 2009, https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/anniyya-COM_22817; Richard M. Frank and Dimitri Gutas, eds., "The Origin of the Arabic Philosophical Term 'anniya," in *Philosophy, Theology and Mysticism in Medieval Islam: Texts and Studies on the Development and History of Kalam, Vol. I* (London: Routledge, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003110378>.

The concerted attention directed by the ascetics toward this “material” (*mādda*)—which in Arabic is that which is “stretched out” (*mādd*) or “extended” (*imtidād*)—catalyzes the former’s continuity with created being; Sarafīm is enjoined by his spiritual elder to cultivate a gentle care for the ruins that does not constitute an objectification via appropriation of something. The sensibility of non-possessiveness in like manner suffuses the ascetic’s relationship to the body; the inscription of the body through pain does not for Sarafīm mark its objectification as much as its continuity as creaturely being. I recall one evening at the monastery, when Khalīl and I took our leave of elder Gregorios just as he and his monks had sat down in the refectory for their only meal of that day. As we turned to leave Sarafīm and another monk immediately rose from their seats and offered us their plates of food for our journey.

This attentiveness¹⁶—drawn in and through the ascetic’s practice of the watchfulness of the heart in orientation to God—stretches from the lowest forms of creation to the highest. In it, the truth of creation, as a *tropos* of Divine manifestation, is brought into view at its limit. The split wood, the effaced icon, the renunciant’s pained or deprived body; this circumscription of creation manifests, in the process of stripping away/being stripped, the *riḥa*, fragrance which is not a ‘self’ that remains,¹⁷ as a *subject* (i.e., ‘that which underlies’) in the world. Cultivating an attentive intimacy to creation qua destruction draws the ascetic through the movement of the cut, the disjuncture of effacement, where desire for God, the one beyond being, finds its rest: “Fasting [before every Orthodox feast]...is the principal agent in the return of the *nafs* [soul] to its being [*dhāt*], that [the soul] may contemplate with freedom in her being [*li-tata’ammal bi-ḥuriyya fī dhātihā*]”¹⁸

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¹⁶ C.f., another genealogy of attentiveness, beautifully rendered, in David Marno, *Death Be Not Proud: The Art of Holy Attention* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

¹⁷ While Orthodox asceticism is organized around a locality (the body, the soul, the heart), it does not follow that this localization is a ‘self’ in the sense of a Cartesian subject. The latter assumption grounds Gavin Flood’s far-reaching account in *The Ascetic Self*, wherein “the eradication of subjectivity in ascetic pursuit entails the assertion of subjectivity in voluntary acts of will,” one in which a subject realizes itself through performance in the gap between “goal and means” (2). This gap is sutured by a “will,” in the double sense of the grammatical future and an actualization of potential. Flood’s analytic premise, which follows Kant both in the deduction of an *a priori* transcendental self and in the radical link between human will and potential (“man muss wollen können”), starkly sublates the inoperativity of withdrawal into another moment of self-production.

¹⁸ Gregorios Iṣṭfān, *Al-Īmān al-Urthūdhaksī Wa al-Injīlīūn al-Mu‘amadānīūn* (Archangel Michael Monastery: Saint Gregory Palamas Publications, 2016), 135.

What is the limit of the self? Within the analytics of subjectivity, the relation to the body and to desire has been a site of contestation. With recourse to Ibn Sina’s “flying man”¹⁹ and Freud’s *Group Psychology*,²⁰ Joan Copjec challenges what she characterizes as an Aristotelian “behaviorism” in the writing of Saba Mahmood’s *Politics of Piety*:²¹ an inclination by which one finds the “lamination of body to subject without hint of separation.”²² It is in this that Copjec takes Mahmood’s reading of Muslim women’s piety to be deficient, wherein “one seems to be *in* one’s body or to *inhabit* it, to be in or to inhabit the world.”²³ Wishing to emphasize a distinction between ‘one’ and ‘one’s body,’ Copjec continues: “The ‘outer behavior’ of bodies trained by ritual exercise, produces affects whose ‘appropriateness’ is an indication of the unity or harmony that exists between these embodied subjects and the actual world in which they act.”²⁴ Copjec, in contrast, characterizes embodiment as a kind of “self-displacement”: “*one is not ‘in’ one’s body; one is alongside it.*”²⁵

And yet this disjuncture between the body (as well as the soul) and the self appears to be precisely what *drives* the women of the piety movement in Mahmood’s account. As she recalls of a pious Muslim, Mona, and her guidance to the latter’s fellow practitioner:

Does it hurt you when you see someone committing a sin or does it not affect you? These are the things that have an effect on your heart (*qalbik*), and they hinder or impede (*ta’ttal*) your ability to get up and say the morning prayer. (The constant) guarding against disobedience and sins wakes you up for the morning prayer. Salat is not just what you say with your mouth and what you do with your limbs. It is a state of your heart. So when you do things in a day for God and avoid other things because of Him, it means you're thinking

¹⁹ This account is found in different versions in a number of Ibn Sina’s texts. Inati Shams’ translation of one instance reads: “Further, if you imagine yourself at the beginning of its creation with a healthy intellect and a healthy disposition, and supposedly it is altogether in such a position and disposition as not to perceive its parts nor have its members in contact—but separate and suspended for a certain moment in free air—you find that it ignores everything except the assertion that it is,” in *Ibn Sina’s Remarks and Admonitions: Physics and Metaphysics: An Analysis and Annotated Translation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 94. See also the translation Copjec relies on in Daniel Heller-Roazen, *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation* (New York: Cambridge, Mass: Zone Books, 2007), 220–221. See finally, Michael Marmura, “Avicenna’s ‘Flying Man’ in Context,” *The Monist* 69, no. 3 (1986): 383–95.

²⁰ Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*.

²¹ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2005).

²² Copjec, “Cinema as Thought Experiment: On Movement and Movements,” 159.

²³ Copjec, 166.

²⁴ Copjec, 166.

²⁵ Copjec, 166.

about Him, and therefore it becomes easy for you to strive for Him against yourself and your desires. If you correct these issues, you will be able to rise up for the morning prayer as well.²⁶

As Mahmood subsequently argues, the temporality of the inclination of the heart is not the chronological time of an “alarm clock,” rather, “it encompasses an entire attitude one cultivates in order to create the desire to pray. Of significance is the fact that Mona does not assume that the desire to pray is natural, but that it *must be created* through a set of disciplinary acts.”²⁷ In that sense, the constitutive gap between one’s body/soul (the capacitating apparatus of prayer) and the inclinations of one’s self—a coordination of inner disposition and outer conduct—mimics the space of “inner distance” in Copjec’s characterization of resistance and desire.

This distance is evident in Talal Asad’s account of medieval Western Christian monasticism. In his careful reading, Asad shows how the monastic self is, in part, structured through penance, a critical concept which he reads “in the first place,” as “an offense against divine law.”²⁸ Coordinating the law of the community of monastics and the divine law, “reconciliation,” is the primary if separate procedure from the cultivation of virtuous dispositions. In this, Asad seeks to depart from a view of penance as a mode of “social control”; its mode was to cultivate, “a desire for obedience to the law,”²⁹ as an intrinsic part of the self. Like the piety movement practitioners in Mahmood’s case, Asad argues that “the overall aim of this monastic project was not repress secular experience of freedom but to form religious desires out of the.”³⁰

As such there is the supervening presence of an incompleteness to the self (in both cases, though differently, marked by the body) that constitutes the subject through the self’s appropriation; in Mahmood’s account, between the inclinations of the soul/body³¹ and a

²⁶ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 124.

²⁷ Mahmood, 126.

²⁸ Talal Asad, “On Discipline and Humility in Christian Monasticism,” in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 163.

²⁹ Asad, 165.

³⁰ Asad, 165.

³¹ In one of the few references to the soul in her monograph, Mahmood writes:

Thus we find that even though Plato and Aristotle both used the body/soul distinction, they had very different conceptions of the relationship between the two terms. Plato accorded the soul a metaphysical priority over the body, whereas for Aristotle the two were part of an inseparable unity in which the soul became the form of the body’s matter. In keeping with this language, one might say that the women I worked with seemed to regard the body almost as the material enactment of the soul whereby the latter was a condition for the former (ftn. 22).

sought-after, pious self (where, in both her and Asad's case where one's body and intent would conform to the divine law), and, in Copjec's, between the body and one's inner sense of self (the failure of the law—marked in prohibition and the foreign resistance of the body). The 'self' is thus for both, in Copjec's words "that which holds itself in relation to all that it is not."³²

Yet, whether the self is an incomplete project of entelchic perfectibility or a primordial "wavering" (in Copjec's phrase) of identity, the scaffolding of the self in relation to the law remains inadequate to understanding the ascetic retreat to its limit, one which defers appropriating the self (which is tied both to the 'I' but also to heteronomous, demonic passions) and marks it as that which is deserted, even to the extreme case of "hating one's own soul."³³ This is not the abrogation of one's being, but marks the aim of a desire for that which exceeds it.

Indeed, Ibn Sina's concern in his fiction, utilized by Copjec, was to show the soul's unity and existence apart from the body as a means of encountering one's being (*dhāt*) through intuition, and therefore as the preexisting and capacitating antecedent to the latter.³⁴ Encountering the fact of one's being as preexisting the self,³⁵ rather than opening onto an

³² Copjec, "Cinema as Thought Experiment: On Movement and Movements," 164. This formulation, surprisingly, approaches Foucault's as quoted in *Politics of Piety*: "[The subject] is not a substance. It is a form, and this form is not primarily or always identical to itself. You do not have the same type of relationship to yourself when you constitute yourself as a political subject who goes to vote or speaks at a meeting and when you are seeking to fulfill your desires in a sexual relationship." (ftn. 3, pg. 121).

³³ "We should reject, in a spirit of true service, the senseless presumption which arises from wealth and we should hate our own desires—which is to hate our own soul (cf. Luke 14:26)". St Diadochos of Photiki, "On Spiritual Knowledge."

³⁴ In the introductory section to "On the Heavenly and Terrestrial Soul" (*fi al-nafs al-samāwiyya wa al-arḍiyya*), Ibn Sina begins "return to your soul [*nafs*] and contemplate if you are sound, rather if in some of states of yours otherwise, whereby you discern something soundly, do you neglect the existence of your being [*wujūd dhātak*], or not affirm your soul [*nafsak*]?" (343-344). Ibn Sina continues, "if you imagine your being [*dhātak*] created, originally, and of sound of mind [*'aql*] and disposition, and say that it is wholly in a situation and disposition to not apprehend its parts, and not for its members to be touching, but it is wide open and *suspended* [*mu'alaqa*] in a moment, in the open air [*hawā'*], you find that it neglects everything save the affirmation of its quiddity [*anniyatuhā*]." (344-345, my emphasis) in *Al-Ishārāt wal-Tanbīhāt*. 4 vols. Ed. Sulayman Dunya. Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, Part Two, 1992; Part Three, 1985. The most prominent English translations of his thought experiment take *nafs* and *dhāt* as synonyms for 'self' despite the fact that Ibn Sina's phrasing suggests their difference. See Heller-Roazen, *The Inner Touch*; Inati, *Ibn Sina's Remarks and Admonitions*.

³⁵ Asad echoes Ibn Sina when he writes, "the self cannot make itself because and to the extent that to construct itself it must already be able to conceive its own purposes. It is preexisting being (ensoulment) and not the individual self that makes the self." Talal Asad, "Thinking about Religion through Wittgenstein," *Critical Times* 3, no. 3 (December 1, 2020): 407, <https://doi.org/10.1215/26410478-8662304>.

appropriating work in and around the self (as an “act of being”³⁶), drives the fact (for the ascetics) that the human being is *properly* something created (*makhlūq*), and that creation has an other that is beyond it. What is decisive is not the fact of wavering or incompleteness to oneself qua a subject (of history, morals, or social relations) but the suspension of the self and its law; bringing the self and the law to its limit in order to pass beyond it.

The enfolded limit of creation thus invokes the ascent (*ṣaʿīd*) of creation to God: inasmuch as “we are according to the image of God [*ṣūrat allāh*]”, “the human being is more than his soul/self [*akthar min nafsihi*]”³⁷ in the words of the reposed elder Ilyās of Dayr al-Harf. Desire here implies something other than an organizing principle of human subjectivity qua repetition, whether in relation to self-formation or as a form of self-destabilizing relation with others.³⁸ As Copjec argues elsewhere, desire marks the syncopation between being and appearance.³⁹ In this latter case, however, if the subject is constituted by a lack—a destabilizing

³⁶ “Act of being”, according to David Bradshaw, is the influential definition Thomas Aquinas gave to *esse*. *Esse*, the translation of the Greek εἶναι, is distinct from substance in that the former is specifically unqualified. Also compare Foucault’s definition of the subject (footnote 19) to Boethius’ scholastic distinction between *esse* and *id quod est* (that which is) “*Esse* and *id quod est* are different; for simple being (*ipsum esse*) is “not yet” (*nondum est*), but *id quod est* is and comes to a stand (*consistit*) when it has received the form that gives it being (*forma essendi*)” in Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West*, 115.

³⁷ This is taken from a partial transcript made by the monks of Dayr al-Harf of their elder Ilyās’ sermon at the Church of St. Nicholas in Beirut in 1999, titled *alān aṭliq ‘abdak* [‘Now let your servant depart’].

³⁸ Here our interpretation of desire differs from Lacan’s rather famous remarks in “God and the *Jouissance* of The Woman,” which follow quite strikingly in the footsteps of both Augustine and Aquinas, that “the first being of which we are aware is that of our own being, and everything which is for our own good will, by dint of that fact, be *jouissance* of the supreme Being, that is, of God. In short, in loving God it is ourselves we love, and by first loving ourselves.” Participation in God, who is essential *esse*, is on the order of *similitude*, and is stymied, Lacan tells us, as it was for Augustine, by the faltering of language: “The being—if I absolutely must use the term—the being I set against this is the being of *signifiante*...[and] the motive of this being of *signifiante* lies in *jouissance*, *jouissance* of the body.” (142) Indeed it seems worth considering how the terms of debate internal to a tradition of a scholastic, Latin Christianity appear in force in the debates between (via various proxies) Lacan and Foucault. The scholastic emphasis on the contemplation of God by the intellect (either in mimetic form via his created signs, or ultimately in the beatific vision of God in essence) disciplines the possibly disruptive body to that end. This authentic life of rational contemplation (of God, but also of one’s being, the latter being reminiscent of Foucault’s late writings) ‘trips up’ on the excess marked by the (symbolic) body, a fact that both the Latin mystics and Lacan use to invert the conventional terms of scholastic hierarchy of mind and body.

³⁹ As Copjec argues in *Read My Desire*, against Foucault’s idealism:

Yet the fact that representation *seems* to hide, to put an arbored screen of signifiers in front of something hidden beneath, is not treated by Lacan as a simple error that the subject can undo; nor is this deceptiveness of language treated as something that undoes the subject, deconstructs its identity by menacing its boundaries. Rather, language’s opacity is taken as the very *cause* of the subject’s being, that is, its desire, or

cathexis of a screen behind which is ‘nothing’⁴⁰—the ascetics affirm this readily; the ego/self and its process of ‘worlding’ logic is ultimately an illusive trick, a wavering, behind which *really* is non-being. This field instantiates a passionate life—what Spinoza calls *conatus* and Copjec describes as the subject’s “want to be” (see footnote 16)—that has a *manṭiq*, a logic of restless pursuit. Yet ascetic desire does not incline here, toward what is beyond the screen⁴¹ (which is ‘nothing’, or, if one were to commit a ‘religious’ error, a symbolic ‘something’⁴²) but what is beyond creation (i.e., both being and nothing). “We are more than our souls/selves,”⁴³ does not connote the excessive relation of beings (i.e., creation) to one another but the desire for the uncreated that the ascetics encounter through the ‘cut’ in creation.

At the limit of nāmūs (Law)

In following the law of abandonment, the limits of the social world manifest. In an interview for a documentary, one of the ascetics with whom I had become acquainted at Hamatoura spoke of his entry to the monastic life:

My name is Brother Lūqā. Lūqā like Luke the Surgeon, Confessor of Russia. I have this name because I had previously studied medicine. The first difficulty I faced when I first came to the monastery was to cut links with the family, and our relationship was reframed [*ghayr iṭār*]. Love of the family was an important thing. I thank God that, while that hurt me a lot at the start, I later became accustomed to it. My age was then about 30 years. My family was very negative [*salbiyyīn*], they did not comprehend it at all. I had a younger brother who even threatened to bring the army to the monastery.⁴⁴

The word by which Ibn Sina described the human subject of his philosophical fiction, “suspended” (*al-mu‘alaq*), approaches a contronym—like the English “cleave”—in that it

want to be. The fact that it is materially impossible to say the whole truth—that truth always backs away from language, that words always fall short of their goal—*founds* the subject. (35)

⁴⁰ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1998).

⁴¹ See Lacan’s topology of ‘the screen’ in his *Four Fundamental Concepts*.

⁴² As Omnia al-Shakry writes, “Within psychoanalysis the mystic mistakes the Symbolic for the Real, or in Freudian terms ‘the obscure recognition...of psychological factors and relations in the unconscious is mirrored...in the construction of a *supernatural reality*, which is destined to be changed back once more by science into the *psychology of the unconscious*.” 58, Omnia El Shakry, *The Arabic Freud: Psychoanalysis and Islam in Modern Egypt* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017).

⁴³ Ilyās Muruqus, “alāān aṭliq ‘abdak,” 1999.

⁴⁴ Celia Peterson, *The Good Struggle: Life In A Secluded Orthodox Monastery*, Documentary (Journeyman Pictures, 2018).

denotes both the separation from one's environs or "attachment" and in "relation" to them (*yata'alaq bihi*). In this sense, the ascetics likewise find themselves suspended: "the God-fearer [i.e., the monastic] is not attached [*yata'alaq*], neither to people, nor to the earth; he lives contemptuous of the *dunya* and its wealth [*māl*]." ⁴⁵

This return to one's being, and consequently the circumscription of one's self, clarifies a trajectory of a desire for a beyond that cannot be reduced to the proliferations and extensions of world—the kinetic grappling of the nihil point of the ego with the excessive relations of the id (marked by one's foreign body ⁴⁶); like the maps Sarafim studies from the space of the monastery, the self and the world become stretched out, taut. Piercing this surface, ⁴⁷ going through and beyond the disjunctive multiplicity of the world and the facticity of one's being, the *insān* shows the vector of its movement: "In this way, the visible world is abandoned by us and abandons us, *but the Lord takes us to Himself* and according to the spiritual law adopts those who are worthy." ⁴⁸

The conversation with Sarafim continued with the world-making problem of the logic of the ego. In contrast to the law of the logic of the ego, Sarafim explained, "we are free; we can decide whether to eat meat or not. Unlike our brothers," he added gently. This was in reference to that day's reading, recited during the liturgy, from one of Paul's letter to the Corinthians. The text of the reading for that day, which inaugurates the season of strenuous fasting before the Feast of the Resurrection (Pascha) is as follows:

⁴⁵ Jabbur, *Al-ʿtirāf Wa-l-Tahlīl al-Nafsī*, 114.

⁴⁶ In this way, my reading of Eastern Christian asceticism markedly differs from Asad's treatment, which follows Foucault, of Western askesis: "this need for an unending struggle against the permanent potentiality for transgression defines the basic character of Christian asceticism," in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (JHU Press, 2009), 104. The struggle in the case of Orthodox ascetics is for deification and assimilation in God, both in this life and in death. While the danger of transgression and evil is present, it is dangerous insofar as it constitutes a bitter and wayward engagement of the desiring aspect of the soul with the ephemeral world instead of toward God. Askesis—framed as either cultivation or renunciation—is thus less a prophylactic against transgression than the realization of the desire to be circumscribed within God alone.

⁴⁷ "Passing with vigorous effort beyond the surface of the body and the world, [the holy ones] observed that the one was contained in the other: the world by virtue of nature, the body by virtue of sensation—and that each is subject to the other through a determinate property alternating between them, so that, consistent with their respective principles, neither the body nor the world is free from circumscription—seeing this, I say, the saints considered it disgraceful to allow the soul, which is immortal and ever-moving, to be circumscribed and perish within things that are circumscribed and mortal, and so they bound themselves indissolubly to God" (Maximos *Ambigua* vol.1, 165).

⁴⁸ Maximos The Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers*, Vol. 1, 1:181.

Brethren, food will not bring us closer to God [*yuqaribuna ilā allāh*]. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. Only take care lest this strength [*ṣultān*] of yours somehow become a stumbling block for the weak [*ḍuʿifā*]. For if anyone sees you, a man of knowledge, at table in an idol's temple, might he not be encouraged, if his *ḍamīr* [i.e., conscience, inner thoughts, awareness] is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak man is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, erring toward your brethren and wounding their *ḍamīr* while they are weak, you err toward Christ. Therefore, if food is a cause of my brother's falling, I will never eat meat, lest I cause my brother to doubt. Am I not free [*ḥurr*]? Am I not one sent? Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.⁴⁹

Sarafīm juxtaposed the law of the passions' ego and the external formation of the juridical law, most clearly evinced in the prohibition (one readily thinks of Paul's diagnosis of the pathogenesis of the law).⁵⁰ In response to both of these juridical-deterministic modes, Sarafīm rejoins “we decide” (*nuqarar*). Yet this decision is nothing other than the renunciation of one's self-will; the freedom obtained in submission to circumscription. In other words, this is a decision to obey a law that does not instantiate a self (of piety or righteousness) but, delimiting the field of creation, opens to what is beyond it.

Sarafīm's elder, Archimandrite Gregorios, writes, “the precepts of the gospel are not ethical-legal precepts [*waṣāyā akhlāqīyya nāmūsīyya*] whose aim is to make better [*taḥsīn*] the external [*khārājī*] human being, rather [the precepts of the gospel] are for the purification of the internal human being [*al-insān al-dākhālī*] from the corrupt passions and the attainment of the vision of allāh and union with him.”⁵¹ In this, the practice of fasting (*al-ṣawm*)—perhaps the most central monastic practice—is not the law in a juridical or ethical sense (it does not cultivate the self) nor is a gnostic technology (it does not bring one closer to God).⁵² Instead,

⁴⁹ The Arabic text of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (8:8-13; 9:1-2), in Orthodox usage, is as follows:

يا إخوة إن الطعام إن يفرئنا إلى الله. لأننا إن أكلنا لا نزيد وإن لم نأكل لا ننقص * ولكن انظروا أن لا يكون سلطانكم هذا معثرة للضعفاء * لأنه إن رأيت أخذ يامن له العلم منكنا في بيت الأوثان أفلا يتقوى ضميرة وهو ضعيف على أكل ذبائح الأوثان * فبذلك بسبب علمك الأخ الضعيف الذي مات المسيح لأجله * وهكذا إذ تخطئون إلى الاخوة وتجزؤون ضمائرهم وهي ضعيفة إنما تخطئون إلى المسيح * فليذلك إن كان الطعام يشكك أخي فلا أكلن نحنا إلى الأبد لتلا أشكك أخي * ألسن أنا رسولاً. ألسن أنا خراً. أما رأيت يسوع المسيح ربنا ألسن أنتم عطلي في الرب * وإن لم أكن رسولاً إلى آخرين فإني رسول إليكم. لأن خاتم رسالتي هو أنتم في الرب

⁵⁰ “What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, “You shall not covet.” (New King James, Romans 7:7)

⁵¹ Istfān, *Al-Īmān al-Urthūdaksī Wa al-Injīlīūn al-Muʿamadānīūn*, 126–27.

⁵² An emphasis on askesis as cultivation (rather than renunciation—a reading attributed to Weber, Nietzsche, and Foucault) can be found in Niki Kasumi Clements' recent *Sites of the Ascetic Self: John Cassian and Christian Ethical*

suffered as a wound, its purifies and stills the heart and thus clarifies the insufficiency of the world and self to attain to God. The law is fulfilled as it is suspended in the dispassionate “freedom”, as in Khalīla’s image, in assuming the cross. This law in suspension is a common modality of creation whereby it, in its diremption, comes to be disclosive of that which is beyond it.

Sarafīm’s invocation of “our brothers” (*ikhwātānā*), moreover, marks out another space, shared by both Christians and Muslims, as it eschews the dynamic of the law as, ultimately, one of prohibition (*ḥarām*) or enjoinder (*ḥalāl*). This ambivalence of “the brother” and the fact that Sarafīm notes, “we can decide to eat meat or not” (as he himself, an ascetic, never eats flesh meats) gestures to a site *beyond* the law but only available through it via the weakness (*duʿf*) of creation that it manifests. Following the law of mortification, imaged in the cross, is to be subject to a circumscription, not the moral and social categories of Christian, Muslim, prohibited, enjoined.

This amoral law, the paradoxical *capacity* to receive the wound in the law of suspension, are marked in Paul’s letter by the relative strength or weakness of “the brother’s *ḍamīr*”—a term that appears as a translation for the original Greek συνειδησις, the latter likewise being rendered as *shaʿūr* (sensible knowledge), *waʿā* (awareness), or *idrāk* (apperceptive realization).⁵³ Gregorios, when responding to my question concerning the meaning of *ḍamīr*, noted that it was immaterial (*mānu shī mādi*) and an “inner” (*dākhlī*) energy or potential (*tāqa*), implanted within “the human being’s nature” (*bi-ṭabīʿat al-insān*) and cultivated “like the law” (*mithl nāmūs*).

If, for instance, a human being “returns to his being” [*byirjaʿ ʿa-dhātu*] we say he “returns to his *ḍamīr*”; and *ḍamīr*, what is *ḍamīr*? This. This return to facticity [*hal-ʿawda ilā al-dhāt*]. Such a human being returns to preserve [*yaḥfaz*] his soul [*naḥs*] in this way. This human being discovers God’s law (*nāmūs allāh*), in this way, this return to being. It is the examination of *ḍamīr* [*faḥṣ al-ḍamīr*], we have this saying, “the examination of *ḍamīr*”

Formation (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020). While a welcome complication of studies in asceticism, both the tropes of renunciation and cultivation tend to emphasize a disposition of the ascetic towards their self, one which I am attempting to show misses the vector of ascetic desire as tending beyond the self.

⁵³ “*ḍamīr*,” in *Greek-Arabic Dictionary: For the words of the New Testament and the first Christian Writings* (Wadi al-Natrun: Dayr Anbā Maqār, 2003). Oddbjørn Leirvik, in an impressive survey, has argued that *ḍamīr*, while having a long history in both Islamic religious and philosophical writings as a form of inner thought or awareness, is heavily modulated by (Western) Arab Christian translations of *ḍamīr*—those of Eulogios Bocthor and Butrus al-Bustani—as specifically “moral conscience.” See Oddbjørn Leirvik, *Human Conscience and Muslim-Christian Relations: Modern Egyptian Thinkers on al-Damir* (Routledge, 2007).

Gregorios continued to speak about *ḍamīr* as a kind of “arbiter” (*ḥakam*) of the *nafs* by which one’s entire life and work is lived in accordance with the Divine law: “in the end, *ḍamīr* is something cultivated.” “Certainly for us the law is written,” he continued, “for those for whom the law is not written the *ḍamīr* is a way to be aware of a particular error; *ḍamīr* is what rouses them.” By this one comes to live by the “precepts of the Messiah” “without knowing the Messiah: living the precepts of the law without knowing the law.”

This energy, inasmuch as it is implanted (*mazrūʿ*) must be cultivated (*zaraʿa*) in order to grow as a capacity for the human being. This is the case, he reiterated, “even if a human being cannot follow the precepts of the gospel.” In this sense the law of the *ḍamīr*, Gregorios continued, as a part of the nature of *insān* has an excessive quality. “If a Muslim, for example, does good [*khayr*]” and “returns to [his] being... therefore he oversteps (*biyjāwaz*), for this reason, he receives salvation [*khalāṣ*] by *ḍamīr*, the law of *ḍamīr*.” Whereas “for us, the precepts of the Qu’ran will not ever save,” the *ḍamīr*, as a common energy and potential, makes it possible for “non-Christians” to “exceed” (*biyjāwaz*) “the restrictive nature [*maḥdūdiyyāt*] of the law of the Lord.”

The “return to [one’s] being” that Gregorios consistently used to characterize *ḍamīr*⁵⁴ is consistent with the form of watchfulness (*yaqza*, *νηπις*) and the movement of ‘guarding the heart.’ More than this, however, is the fact that the divine law the work of suspension.

Given that the law of one’s *ḍamīr* is an “inner” energy, *ṭāqa*, (not a faculty, *qadra*) and considering the elder’s teaching on egoism, one’s “being”, *dhāt*, is less of an absolute point of grounding in its distance from an object of desire—prohibited by the moral law and the object of attachment—than the facticity of creation, catalyzed by the lucidity in *ḍamīr* that comes from cultivated spiritual watchfulness (*yaqza*). To follow the divine law is to encounter one’s creaturely insufficiency as a space of freedom. The return to one’s being is at once the structure of the law and a form of repentance (*tawba*): “a true return, in actuality to God, not theoretically, and this is its path; ‘The Lord says: return to each of your hearts in fasting, tears, and mourning.’”⁵⁵

Dayr, a space for another desire

⁵⁴ One could read *ḍamīr* as a gap in the subject, a chiasmus between body and self, that constitutes qua a fundamental lack—hence a pathological repetition. This would be how *ḍamīr*—when translated as “conscience”—might be understood; as a form of the instantiation of relationship between the ego and super-ego.

⁵⁵ Istfān, *Al-Īmān al-Urthūdhaksī Wa al-Injīlīūn al-Muʿamadānīūn*, 135.

[God] is the cause of nothing, for everything posterior to him is in accordance with the cause of being and not being; for nothing itself is privation. For he has being, because he is the nothingness of beings, and he is not being because he is and surpasses existence, being everything, as creator, and being nothing, as transcendent, or rather being beyond both transcendence and being.

John of Scythopolis⁵⁶

Following the law of mortification is a tracing out of a continual estrangement—“they to whom the world is dead submit to contumelies with joy....he who would attain to this virtue must depart from his kinsmen and live the life of a stranger.”⁵⁷ Estrangement (*ghurba*)⁵⁸ in creation—being abandoned by the world—marks an encounter with its limit. In the same documentary in which the ascetic Lūqā spoke, an elder monk a Hamatoura is recorded:

The one who wants to be a monk must first abandon everything: the whole world, his possessions, his children. He should not think of anything at all. He places Jesus and nothing else in front of him. Love is the basis of all being [*al-kawn kuluha*]. Without love the world is worthless.

The monastery, in this iteration, is a space of abandonment. The *polis*, as the central term of political, human dwelling, offers a means by way of counterpoint of countenancing *al-dayr*, the monastery from the vantage of desire. How might one conceptualize a space that, as the monk in the epigraph states, is barren and wordless?

⁵⁶ John of Scythopolis, *Scholia on the Divine Names* PG 4, 260D-261A, quoted in Yannaras, *On the Absence and Unknowability of God*, 78.

⁵⁷ Isaac, *Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, 165.

⁵⁸ In the ascetics one finds an encounter with estrangement—*ghurba*—that approaches what Heidegger describes (in both *Being and Time* and “What is Metaphysics?”) as “anxiety”: “being held out into the nothing—as Dasein is—on the ground of concealed anxiety is its surpassing beings as a whole. It is transcendence.” *Ghurba*, this uncanny encounter with suspension, shows a constitutive relationship to nothing as ground: “only because the nothing is manifest in the ground of Dasein can the total strangeness [*Befremdlichkeit*] overwhelm us.” In this sense the question of the nothing—and its derivations into modes of destruction—cannot be posed through the division (or decision) of immanence versus transcendence. Indeed, that the nothing, for Heidegger, as part of the being of beings is *prior* to negation, thus “forces us to face the problem of the origin of negation, that is, ultimately to face up to a decision concerning the legitimacy of the dominion of ‘logic’ in metaphysics.” This question of negation is thus founded in an antecedent condition, in the constitutive binding of being with the nothing. See Martin Heidegger, “What Is Metaphysics?,” in *Pathmarks*, trans. David Farrell Krell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

Émile Benveniste, both in his *Dictionary*⁵⁹ and more elaboratively in his essay offered to Levi-Strauss, “Deux Modèles Linguistiques de la Cité,”⁶⁰ traces the Latin and Greek philology of ‘the city’—*civitas* and *polis*—and offers what appears to be a decisive, if interwoven, distinction. These two terms, and the conceptual models they imply, Benveniste argues, derive their meaning and force in opposing ways. Whereas *civitas* is constituted by and originally derived from the *cives* (i.e., the citizenry) as a “mutual summons” that incarnates a literal body politic, the Greek *polis* is, as Aristotle corroborates,⁶¹ a part of nature, an “abstract body” as Benveniste writes, in which humans can come to participate and as that which derives its authority from its territorial extension.

Derrida in his late lectures *The Beast and the Sovereign*⁶² strings into a continuity of sovereignty the European city that Benveniste schematizes, —“the polis, the city, the republic, the social body, the law in general, war and peace, terror and terrorism, national or international terrorism, etc.”—even while Derrida notes that Hobbes wrote the *Leviathan* and *De Cive* to break with Aristotle’s definition of the *polis*.⁶³ This sovereign place, at once vitalist prosthetic and machinic apparatus, the place that sovereignty establishes for itself, has a “political-theological” character, inasmuch as the city emerges as a space betwixt animality and divinity; to be *apolis*, ‘without city’, Derrida reminds us, citing Aristotle’s *Politics*, is to approach a god or a beast. Sovereignty, which Derrida characterizes as “anthropo-theological” and may well be considered political-theological (inasmuch as *polis* is the space of the human), is thus enacted through a double exclusion—a spectacular modeling of Divine power as *causa sui*; the city is here the scene for the staging of onto-theological sovereignty.⁶⁴

The sovereign good of the *polis*, ‘political-theological goods’, are thus enacted through a doubled if disjointed movement; the *polis* is both an order of nature and territory and a ‘living’ form that emerges from the mutual summons of the citizenry: *polis* and *civitas*—abstract body and incarnate body. In other words, the machinic *and* the organic, ‘theory’ *and* ‘life’ (‘anthropology’ *and* ‘theology’), the masculine, divine state of nature *and* the bestial, feminine excess of flesh, coordinate and place sovereignty—the ‘highest form of good.’

⁵⁹ Émile Benveniste, *Dictionary of Indo-European Concepts and Society*, trans. Elizabeth Palmer (Chicago: HAU Books, 2016).

⁶⁰ Émile Benveniste, “Deux Modèles Linguistiques de La Cité,” ed. Jean Pouillon and Pierre Maranda (De Gruyter Mouton, 2020), 589–96, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111560168-043>.

⁶¹ See Aristotle, *Politics: Books I and II*, trans. Trevor J. Saunders (Oxford: New York: Clarendon Press, 1996).

⁶² Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington, vol. 1 (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press).

⁶³ (Benveniste is thus helpful in understanding how this dispute, between the Latin body incorporate or Greek natural state, constitutes a single tradition of thought)

⁶⁴ I am drawing on Heidegger’s notion of ontotheology, see Heidegger, “What Is Metaphysics?”

This can be most clearly seen where Derrida addresses Heidegger's thought on the *polis* in its full sense, which for the latter "is not rendered by the translation as city or city-state, *Stadt und Stadtstaat*. Before the state, and thus before what we call the political, the *polis* is the *Da*, the *la* in which and as which *Da-sein* is *geschichtlich*, advenes as history, as the historical origin of history."⁶⁵ Here again, the spontaneous, novel event, the evasion or rupture equally forms the good place for a humanist historical origin. This has the important additional consequence that to contend with historicity is already to invoke a *polis*—historical work is always-already organized by the *polis*.

To the *polis* as the instantiation of the *da, là* (there), I effect a translation, into what Lacan in his seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis,⁶⁶ following Freud, termed *das Ding* (the thing).⁶⁷ The space of the monastery, *dayr*, a cognate of *dār*, an abode, comes from root *d-w-r*, which conveys a circumambulation, itinerancy, a pivot, or axis of rotation. In the 14th century *Book of Definitions (Mu'ajam al-Ta'rīfāt)*⁶⁸, by the Persian Sufi Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani, the word for rotation/circulation, *dawarān* is defined as "itinerancy/ambulation around a thing [*shī*]. It is the causal condition of a "thing", *shī*, being dependent on something else, something that, through its gravitational and elliptical force "structures" some-thing, or might well be—in the same definition—the paroxysm of a disease or the necessary punishment for a violation of the moral law. It is, in short, not the *thing* itself but the thing always deferred through something else, spied only in its symptomatic return or deflecting force.

In this sense the *dayr*, the space of this circumambulation, is a *polis* that can be figured neither as an incarnation in, as Benveniste says, "edifice, assembly, or institution" nor as that natural good "independent of men" which has its selfsame territory or spatiality; both of which are operative on the order of the supreme good (God) or of goods (subjects of nation, capital, piety etc.). The in-operativity of the order of the good, this ambulant and itinerant structuration, elliptically tracing out the *Ding*, the *shī*, deflecting around it, conceptualizes

⁶⁵ Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, 1:265.

⁶⁶ Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*.

⁶⁷ As El Shakry writes in her own investigation of the confluence between Sufism and psychoanalysis, 'the psychoanalytic tradition acknowledges the opaque core of the subject, something *beyond* the unconscious and *beyond* symbolization, known as *das Ding*— a chasm, an impossible primordial object around which the subject circumambulates, a 'traumatic particle of internalized exteriority.' As a commentator on Lacan notes, *das Ding* is 'a gap always in abeyance (*a beance*) of religious men and mystics.' The mystic inhabits this gap in abeyance, in anticipation of the Divine. In being ineluctably drawn to the Divine, he approaches *deus absconditus*, veiled as in the well-known Sufi parable, by seventy thousand veils that separate the world of matter from the world of the One reality. The Sufi path provides an apocalypse of the seventy thousand veils and a mode of knowing that enables a human soldering to the Divine."

⁶⁸ 'Alī bin Muḥamad al-Sayyid al-Sharīf al-Jurjānī, *Mu'ajam al-Ta'rīfāt* (Cario: Dār al-Faḍīla, 2012).

both the *dayr* and the heart as a localization and spatialization of a movement around something that is other to it.

The *dayr* is, in this way, a spatialization of erotics for that which is beyond goods. God, the ascetic Aspiro writes, “exceeds essence, exceeds righteousness, exceeds uprightness, exceeds light, exceeds splendor, exceeds power, exceeds wisdom, exceeds glory, exceeds praise, exceeds mercy, and is also: the totality of mercy, the totality of desiring beauty”⁶⁹ This, he concludes, means that God is of a degree above “every understanding and concept” and consequently, “[God] is *not* the supreme good (*al-khayr al-‘aẓam*), but he is above every good, every description, and every appellation.”⁷⁰

The term hieromonk Aspiro uses for good, *khayr*, is not ‘the good’ as in the Greek of Aristotle (*agathos*) but is what is choice or ‘better’. *Khayr* in Islam and Eastern Christianity refers to charity, almsgiving, public benefactions, the knowing choice to perform virtuous good (in the plural *khayarāt* are good deeds and, tellingly, a shorthand for charitable *awqāf*⁷¹) but *khayr* also refers to material goods, things of value etc. In short, they refer to the economy of goods that includes not only ‘base’ goods of subsistence and reproduction, but the highest good; the virtuous ‘free gift’ that appears at first glance to be situated outside of the economy of exchange.⁷²

To accord one’s life to the manifest Divine energies of God, the one who is beyond the economy of goods *and* the supreme good, is the task of the monastic; it structures the movements at the *dayr*. Recalling the words of Um Pūrfīriyā in our first encounter, “There is no time in this life for laboring on worldly (*dunyawī*) things, only on those that are without end (*abadīyā*).” A labour on things ‘without end’. The elder’s gloss attunes our differing trajectories (of life at the monastery, of life pursuing the ethnographic), to the orbit and desire of the thing beyond the perishing things of this world.

The translation from *Da/Là* (‘there’) to *Ding/Shī* (‘thing’) defers the political-theological constitution of the *polis* as a self-same homogenous space that constitutes its human good by bracing itself between God/animal—as constituting, we recall, a space of sovereignty that moves doubly and in the operative disjunction between citizenry as body politic and the *polis* as a natural reality. This deferment of sovereignty, *polis* as a *dayr*—the

⁶⁹ Aspiro Jabbur, *Allāh fī al-Lāhūt al-Masīhī*, 2010, 40.

⁷⁰ Jabbur, 40.

⁷¹ See Moumtaz, *God’s Property*.

⁷² Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2011); Mittermaier, *Giving to God*.

political as a question of itinerant movement around heterotopia⁷³— is precisely what opens up the ethnographic both as a space and as practice of writing out the deflection of a desire for something that is foreign to the ethnographic and the theological alike.

It is in this manner the ascetic form of life is one that brings its own dissolution into relief, its own technologies and forms of practice under a primary erasure. The stillness of prayer, of the fasting of the body, marks a dynamic curtailment in which ascetic forms, like the effaced image, come to articulate something in their restful, dynamic cessation. It marks the orectic and diminished point from which one—although this ‘one’ may not be termed the self—glances toward the variegations of the city, studying its lines and its contours, encountering in the pain of one’s body or the strain of one’s lettering the alienated denizens of the *polis*; to live *in the desert* is to live a life in view of its own vanishing without remainder.

Submission to circumscription is thus a “purifying” (*tathīr*) force because it rarifies the insufficiency of the creature, its limit. Encountering this limit, at the heights of Divine disclosure (i.e., *ru’yā*—vision), is described by the ascetics as a vision of the “uncreated light” (*al-nūr ghayr makhluq*), one which both comes from an inner *outside* and is described as a “dazzling darkness”⁷⁴: “beyond the stripping away [ἀφαίρεσιν] of beings, or rather upon their cessation...there would remain [ἄν υπάρχη] unknowing [ἀγνώσῃα], it being beyond knowledge, there would remain darkness.”⁷⁵

Coda

Visiting the monastery at Bkiftīn again, I am shown to my room by one of the novices; I have stayed here before. But this time I notice a missing piece of brick behind the wooden door in the small cell. Coming closer, I see an icon has been placed within the crack, *al-masīh dābt al-kul* [Christ, Almighty]. The icon, itself peeling and cracking, depicts both the Messiah’s mercy, his hand raised in blessing, and the judgement of the law, figured in the book of the gospel.

⁷³ As Stefania Pandolfo writes, “The Thing, Lacan tells us, which occupies in his reading the place that in Aristotelian philosophy was assigned to the Good, and to the arbitrary rule of the gods, is also the term by which Meister Eckhart referred to the soul, and which, as *causa pathomenon*, wellspring of human passions, points to the fact of destruction, and to ‘the radical question of evil’ as such. Such a Thing, says Lacan, cannot be mastered or dialecticized; it can only be encircled (*cerner la chose*).” *Knot of the Soul: Madness, Psychoanalysis, Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 264.

⁷⁴ Gregory Palamas, “ΛΟΓΟΙ ΥΠΕΡ ΤΩΝ ΙΕΡΩΣ ΗΣΥΧΑΖΟΝΤΩΝ,” 191.

⁷⁵ Gregory Palamas, “ΛΟΓΟΙ ΥΠΕΡ ΤΩΝ ΙΕΡΩΣ ΗΣΥΧΑΖΟΝΤΩΝ,” 190.



Figure 3.2



Figure 3.3

I am reminded of the sermon given by the elder Ilyās :

Fa-allāh muhibbatun fī thālūthi, For God is loving in Trinity. That is, God is a constant movement of eros, a constant exodus of each of the hypostasis [*aqanūm*] toward the other...of the entrance [*dakhūl*] into the other. Jesus went out from the bosom of the Father to the world in order to unite the world with him and to save it; at the same time there was his desire [*ishtiyāquhu*] to return to the Father.⁷⁶

In the elder's words, the movement of desire inscribed in God's triadic unity makes the creation's movement to God possible. Christ, the Divine image of God, is the one who opens the way back to God for creation through his own desire to return. In that sense, *incarnation*, of the image, the Messiah, the creature, is host to a heteronomous and divine desire. Christ—whom ascetics like Khalīla seek to emulate in his self-denial and desire to return to the “bosom of the Father”—is the ultimate lure for creation. God is the “Passion of the passions,”⁷⁷ that wounds creation itself, drawing it into the triadic economy of Divine eros. The placement of the cracked icon in the broken wall of the monastery draws one through and beyond the scene of the world, the self, and the law, through the visible to the invisible: “The one limit of virtue is the absence of a limit. How, then, would one arrive at the sought-for boundary when he can find no boundary”?⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Ilyās Murquṣ, “alāān aṭliq ‘abdak” [Now let your servant depart], Beirut, 1999.

⁷⁷ This is found in one of the odes of the canon of the Resurrection chanted on Sunday Orthros.

⁷⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2006), 5.

ب Islamic Modulations

الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَتَطْمَئِنُّ قُلُوبُهُمْ بِذِكْرِ اللَّهِ أَلَا بِذِكْرِ اللَّهِ تَطْمَئِنُّ الْقُلُوبُ

Those who have been faithful and whose hearts have rest in the remembrance of allāh. Verily in the remembrance of allāh do hearts find rest

(Q. 13:28)

This chapter looks to clarify the modalities of imbrication across the traditions of Eastern Christianity and Islam as brought into relief in contemporary Arab Orthodox monastic space. In it, I recall the structure of self, other, and the divine that both shapes and cuts across sensibilities common to Islamic and Eastern Christian traditions. Where the previous chapter delineated the unnamable and primary orrectic division between creation and the Uncreated, this chapter traces the perpendicular relational field formed from that division; the fact that what the multiplicity of creation keeps in common is “that its existence is preceded by nonexistence.”⁷⁹ Creation’s impossible multiplicity/unity is only formed through the *ex nihilo* participation in, and passage toward, its limit. This structure finds particular articulation through monastic withdrawal inasmuch as ascetic dispossession marks the *obverse* of an inclination to the Uncreated; ascetic dispossession as a passage, which has been previously shown in the inheritance of (a)historical time and the practice of vocalization comes likewise in the staging of Islamic modes. I trace this structuring of a relation that, while tacit, evinces a historically particular sensibility (in that it is learned and inherited)—and so makes possible certain kinds of experience (i.e., events)—of human others as only routed through another mode of being inclined (*ṭarīqa, tropos*) toward God. The resulting relational dynamic of self and other is thus perpendicularly yielded from the heart’s encounter with its own limit—what the medieval Muslim mystic Ibn al-‘Arabi names a *barzakh* (a barrier, isthmus) that implicates the doubled relation of the self and the other with the Divine.

This *barzakh* of the heart structures a relation that, in (ascetically, dispossessively) inclining to the limit, affirms an impossibility: *the only mode to salvation is ‘this-side’. Another receives salvation.* Affirming this impossibility as such thus eschews a secular topology of inside and outside (the exception), where two (Muslims, Christians) are mediated by a third referent (religion, the social, community). Instead, this relation is one that (as in Lacan’s well-known remarks on the sexual relation⁸⁰) meets at the limit. Consequently the ‘other side’ is

⁷⁹ Maximos The Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers*, 2:115.

⁸⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Autres Ecrits* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), 474.

indeterminately staged as both imbrication and digression (an ‘aside’). To that end, I open with an ethnographic scene wherein the monastery becomes a space for learning to listen and inhabit another’s mode of being in inclination toward God.

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I am sitting in the salon at Mār Georgios. It is Saturday and the salon is full of visitors. Shaykh Yūsif is reading out from the poetry⁸¹ of Rābi‘a al-‘Adawīyya,⁸² born at the close of the first century AH (8th century AD) and one of the most well-known Muslim and Sufi renunciants in Islam:

*I have known passion since I knew your passion
I shut my heart on those who are your enemy*

عَرَفْتُ الْهَوَىٰ مُذْ عَرَفْتُ هَوَاكَ
وَأَغْلَقْتُ قَلْبِي عَلَىٰ مَنْ عَادَاكَ

*And I come to confide in you, O you who sees
the secrets of hearts while we do not see you*

وَقُمْتُ أَنَاجِيكَ يَا مَنْ تَرَى
خَفَايَا الْقُلُوبِ وَأَسْنَا نَرَاكَ

*I love you with two loves, a passionate love
And a love of which only you are worthy*

أَحِبُّكَ حُبِّينِ حُبِّ الْهَوَىٰ
وَحُبًّا لِأَنَّكَ أَهْلُ لِدَاكَ

*As for passionate love, it occupies me with
remembrance of you beyond all others*

فَأَمَّا الَّذِي هُوَ حُبُّ الْهَوَىٰ
فَشَغَلَنِي بِذِكْرِكَ عَمَّنْ سِوَاكَ

*As for that of which you alone are worthy,
Your uncovering the veils allows me to see you.*

وَأَمَّا الَّذِي أَنْتَ أَهْلٌ لَهُ
فَكَشَفَكَ لِي الْحَجَبَ حَتَّىٰ أَرَاكَ

*And so, no praise in this and that love is for me
But for you is praise in both this and that.*

فَلَا الْحَمْدُ فِي ذَا وَلَا ذَاكَ لِي
وَلَكِنْ لَكَ الْحَمْدُ فِي ذَا وَذَاكَ

⁸¹ C.f., an example cited in Robert M. Haddad’s volume where he observes “the dismay of an Arab Protestant pastor in 1877 upon hearing Orthodox students at the Russian college in Nazareth chanting the poems of the great Muslim mystic, ‘Umar ibn al-Fārīd [d. 1235].” Robert M. Haddad, *Syrian Christians in a Muslim Society: An Interpretation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2015), 85. For an English translation of his poetry see, ‘Umar ibn ‘Alī ibn al-Fārīd, ‘Umar Ibn Al-Fārīd: Sufi Verse, Saintly Life, trans. Th. Emil Homerin (Paulist Press, 2001).

⁸² For a contemporary treatment see Rkia Elaroui Cornell, *Rabi‘a From Narrative to Myth: The Many Faces of Islam’s Most Famous Woman Saint, Rabi‘a al-‘Adawīyya* (Oneworld, 2019).

After a pause, the shaykh remarks, “this is [her] madness [*majnūna*] for allāh, she prays and ascends...like Abūnā Ilyās [said], like the goose that entered its bath water and got out, not a thing stuck to it, not even its feathers!” There are some chuckles and the shaykh continues to recite the ascetic’s poetry, returning to the pages in his hand:

*O beloved of hearts, I have no one but you
Be merciful today, a visitor has come to you,*

يا حبيب القلوب ما لي سواك
ارحم اليوم زائرا قد أتاك

*You are my request, my source, my delight,
A heart has refused to love any but you.*

انت سؤلي ووجدتي وسروري
قد أبى القلب أن يحب سواك

*O my wish, my master, my support,
My desire draws out when it encounters you.*

يا منيتي وسيدي واعتمادي
طال شوقي متى يكون لقاكا

*My request is not graceful paradise,
Save I want it so that I can behold you.*

ليس سؤلي من الجنان نعيفا
غير أني أريدها لاراكا

The shaykh pauses again. “Lord have mercy,” he says, mulling over the words under his breath. He concludes, reading another verse from the ascetic-poet; at this point his recitation takes on the form of a coda:

*O Lord, I am consumed by fire as a heart loving you, as a
tongue remembering you, and as a servant fearing you.*

يا رب أتحرق بالنار قلبًا بحبك،
ولسانًا يذكرك، وعبداً يخشاك

The elder rests for a moment and muses: “Rābi‘a al-‘Adawīyya prayed one thousand *rak‘aa* day and night.” An elderly monk sitting beside him exclaims his amazement. The shaykh pauses, “The Christian [asks] how could this be?” and then he reiterates, “One thousand *rak‘aa*, every twenty-four hours.” “Yā rab-urḥam [Lord have mercy],” he says under his breath, “Yā rab-urḥam.”

The invocation of the ascetic’s bodily act of supplication works as a recursive synecdoche: the act of bowing, *ruku‘*, is part of the total gestural sequence of Muslim prayer, *salat* (*qiyām, sujūd, jalsa*—upstanding, prostrating, sitting), and it is the only bodily movement that occurs once in the complete sequence of prayer; “*Alif rak‘aa*,” one thousand prostrations, indexes one thousand circuits of *salat*. Inasmuch as it follows the recitation of her poetry, the

gesture also gathers and affirms the supplicatory sensibility of her recitation, given voice in the salon by another.

In that sense, it ultimately stands for the entire ascetic comportment of withdrawing retreat that shaykh Yūsif and his monastics seek to inhabit in their own forms of supplication. During the April of 2020, in the period of the Great Fast (*al-ṣawm al-‘azīm*) that precedes the celebration of Pascha, the monastery, like most places in Lebanon, was isolating from visitors due to the pandemic. A few of the ascetics, led by shaykh Yūsif, were recorded in penitential prayer as a form of consolation and instruction for those who could not come to the monastery. The shaykh read from the poetic penitential of Ephraim the Syrian, “the prophet of repentance [*nabī al-tawba*]” as he named him:

*O you who wept for Lazarus
Pouring out tears for him
Make sound my pains by your pains
And heal my wounds by your wounds*

يا من بكى على لعازر
ذرفا عليه الدموع
ابري أوجاعي بأوجاعك
واشف جروحي بجروحيك

This penitential reading and its recording last a few minutes. Another recording was also uploaded, in which the monastic elder read out a prayer in the same posture, this time penned by Metropolitan George Khodr in 1945:

*I do not utter poetry O Lord,
I will not send you my prayer
Rather I feel a need in my soul
To stammer out some words to you*

أنا لا أقول الشعر يا رب
ولن أرسل لك صلاتي رَغْمًا
إنما أحسُّ بحاجةٍ في نفسي
لأتمتم لك بعض الكلمات

*All that I direct to you issues from my soul
And I have no knowledge of how to pray
Or how to be able to pray
For you are he who intercedes for me with
indescribable groans*

وكلّ ما أوجهه لك صادرٌ عن نفسي
أنا لا أعلم كيف أصليّ
وكيف أستطيع أن أصليّ
وأنت الذي تشفعُ فيّ بأنات لا توصف

*For how can prayer come from an inexistent heart?
Living prayer issues nothing but life
And my heart is moribund O Lord
O master, forgive me
As I utter your Holy name*

فكيف للصلاة أن تخرج من قلب لا كيان له؟
والصلاة الحيّة لا تصدر إلا عن الحياة
وقلبي مانت يا رب
يا سيدي اغفر لي
إذ أتقّوه باسمك القدوس

The reading of the long prayer lasts for over ten minutes and ends along with the recording. These videos capture modalities of supplication analogous to what was staged the day Rābi‘a’s poetry was read in the salon. Rābi‘a’s continuous act of falling down in prayer—a practice, as seen here, germane to Orthodox Christian prayer and a central discipline of the ascetics—marks an implicated space of self and another in a modality of inclination to the Divine limit. This mode is twofold; inasmuch as the body’s posture of prayer and its supplicatory comportment marks a common gesture, it reenforces the poetry in which a dialogic language between the self and the divine is staged. The desire animating Rābi‘a’s words, recited and given breath by the Orthodox Christian ascetic elder, is ultimately signed by the forceful exemplarity and overwhelming gesture of her supplicating body.

The coincidence of form, its parallel imbrication, is found in this articulation of dispossessive inclination, and, as such, is a consequence of the “unnamable division” attended to in the previous chapter. This anonymous division, “which naturally divides realities from each other, and which excludes their union in a single essence,” yields a number of nameable “divisions”(diarēsis): within creation, between the intelligible and the sensible, within the sensible between the heaven and the earth, within the earth between paradise and the inhabited world (*oikoumenē*), and finally, within the inhabited world, the division of human

nature between male and female.¹ Unity and extremity obtain an inverted relation in this schema, wherein the human being figures as both a microcosm and an *ergasterion* (a “capacious workshop”) “containing all thing.”²

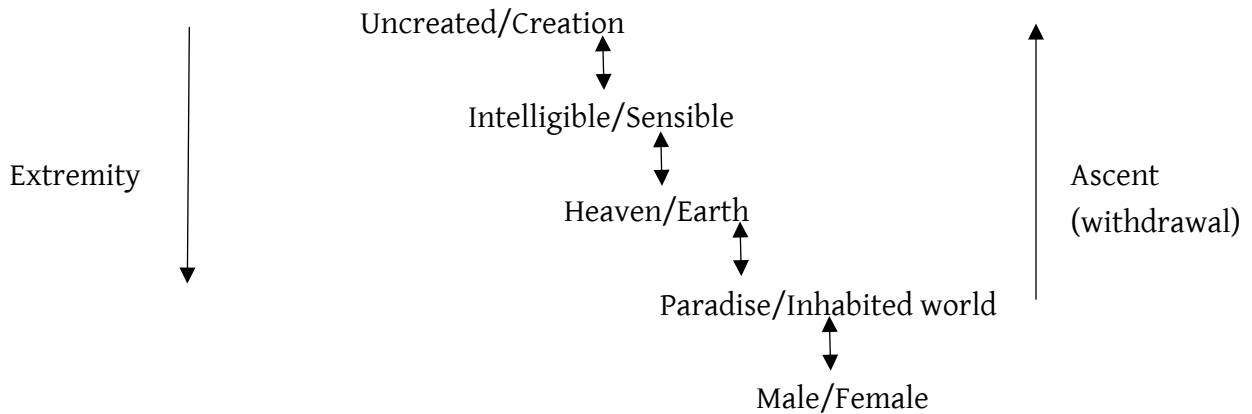


Figure 3.4 Maximos’ schema of creation

In this, Maximos continues, the human being is “naturally mediating through himself all the divided extremes” and in living a “proper holy way of life,” which admits no “designation of male and female,” these divisions are united and gathered in “sublime ascent.” The restoration of the possibility of this ascent is given in the Messianic revelation, the descent of the Divine Word, which shows

all creation is one, as if it were another human being [καθαπερ ἄνθρωπον ἄλλον], completed by the mutual coming together of all of its members, inclining [νεουσσαν] toward itself in the wholeness of its existence, according to one, unique, simple, undefined, and unchangeable idea: that it comes from nothing. Accordingly, all creation admits of one and the same, absolutely undifferentiated principle: that its existence is preceded by nonexistence.³

¹ The division of “male and female” is not, it appears, reducible to one between human men and women (even though they are cited as preeminent examples of this division). Indeed, Maximos argues that in Divine ascent this division in human nature is overcome, “completely shaking off from nature...the property of male and female, which in no way was linked to the original principle of the divine plan concerning human generation.” (105)

² Maximos The Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers*, 2:104.

³ Maximos The Confessor, 2:115, my emphasis.

Where the human being is both the distal end of the chain of these divisions and dirempted in nature, it marks a space of ingathering and movement. Not unlike the Sufi rumination on *al-insān al-kāmil* (the complete/perfect human being⁴), in Maximos' vision *another* human being—given in the exemplary image of Christ's humanity—stands for the form of gathered and inclining creation itself. Appropriately, the human being, the *ergastarion* or “workshop,” is, as Nicholas Conostas' translation gloss has it, a center of both “production and exchange.”⁵ This production/movement is given in the fact that creation is *produced* from “non-being”, initiating a movement that is wayward or rightly inclined toward its end (see previous chapter). Within this dialectic of being and non-being, the mode of supplication manifest in the gesture of human beings in motion toward God is always *ex nihilo*. The relation of the coincidence of a human mode of being, following the coordinates given at the monastery, is only citable in the dispossessionive *aim* of this mode itself, as it derives from a shared ‘principle’ of non-existence.

This citation of coincidence in these modes is a problematic well-known in scholarship on the Middle East. The act of *ruku'* and its attendant gestures garners special mention in James Grehan's singular and compelling volume *Twilight of the Saints*, which tracks 18th and 19th century Levantine spaces of what he calls “everyday religion.” Within the context of these spaces, Grehan argues that

many gestures of prayer and devotion *transcended* religious boundaries and cannot really be classified as Muslim, Christian, or Jewish. *They were freely available to worshippers of all backgrounds*. Nowhere was this convergence of posture and motion more apparent than at shrines, which tended to mute sectarian identity anyway. Petitioners would have routinely presented themselves, for example, through the act of prostration, which did not belong to any single religious tradition...Though prostration is today regarded as a quintessentially Muslim gesture, many Middle Eastern Christians and Jews would have used it, in one manner or another, in their churches and synagogues.⁶

This free ‘availability’, which Grehan will elaborate on throughout his study, is found in a “shared religious culture” that either transcended or was indifferent to the specific terms of

⁴ See the Chapter 7 in Salman H. Bashier, *Ibn Al-'Arabi's Barzakh: The Concept of the Limit and the Relationship between God and the World* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012); Chapter 2 of William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994); William C. Chittick, “The Perfect Man as the Prototype of the Self in the Sufism of Jāmī,” *Studia Islamica* 42 (1979): 135–57.

⁵ Maximos The Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers*, 2: footnote 4, pp. 360.

⁶ James Grehan, *Twilight of the Saints: Everyday Religion in Ottoman Syria and Palestine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 177, my emphasis.

“religious difference” that itself developed under the auspices of a growing scriptural culture and European missionization whereby “religious experts”⁷ become increasingly concerned with educating sectarian differences via ‘*aqīda*, doctrine or creed. Instead of thinking religion as systematic “doctrines or creeds”, Grehan intriguingly attends to a “common fund of religious geography and history,” most prominently found in a popular sensibility of saintliness. This sensibility was key to what he names “agrarian religion” that was “as much urban as it was rural,” and “the expression of an entire social and economic order whose rhythms were tied to the slow turning of the seasons, finely attuned to the vagaries of the earth, sky, and environment,” which, finally, “profoundly shaped cultural conditions and psychological reactions across the whole population.”⁸ Its central figure, the saint, quite unlike the authority of scholarly religious elites (nor, Grehan argues, “Sufis, priests nor monks”⁹), cuts across sectarian divisions.¹⁰

Despite the fact that Grehan gestures to the possibility of the continued life of this sensibility of holiness and its topography,¹¹ he cedes the present Levant to a “modern religiosity,” radically reshaped by mass media and education, that has entirely overtaken “premodern” “agrarian religion” and its forms of life. The question of the completeness of this (secular) break notwithstanding,¹² characterizing this repertoire of prayerful gestures and localities, and specifically the sensibility of holiness and the desire for God that sustains them, as transcending doctrinal ‘religious difference’ belies the specificity of the very structure to which Grehan’s study points. Grehan, in short, stabilizes the comparability of the ‘difference’

⁷ Grehan, 12. As the author explains, “most forms of religious devotion had relatively little to do with the pronouncements and ministrations of religious experts.” (ibid)

⁸ Grehan, 16.

⁹ Grehan, 62.

¹⁰ For a volume of contemporary studies on the politics of ‘the saint’, see Andreas Bandak et al., eds., *Politics of Worship in the Contemporary Middle East: Sainthood in Fragile States* (Brill, 2013), <https://brill.com/view/title/23685>.

¹¹ Grehan, *Twilight of the Saints*, footnote 62, 268. For evidence of this continued trace Grehan cites Valerie J. Hoffman, *Sufism, Mystics, and Saints in Modern Egypt* (Columbia, S.C: University of South Carolina Press, 2009). See also Angie Heo, *The Political Lives of Saints: Christian-Muslim Mediation in Egypt* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018).

¹² For the problem on deciding on the ‘break’ that is called modernity see, Charles Hirschkind, “Media, Mediation, Religion,” *Social Anthropology* 19, no. 1 (February 1, 2011): 90–97, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8676.2010.00140_1.x; Stefania Pandolfo, “The Thin Line of Modernity: Some Moroccan Debates on Subjectivity,” in *Questions of Modernity*, ed. Timothy Mitchell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Basit Kareem Iqbal, “Asad and Benjamin: Chronopolitics of Tragedy in the Anthropology of Secularism,” *Anthropological Theory* 20, no. 1 (July 19, 2018): 77–96, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499618770310>; Ananda Abeysekara, “Religious Studies’ Mishandling of Origin and Change: Time, Tradition, and Form of Life in Buddhism,” *Cultural Critique* 98, no. 1 (July 26, 2018): 22–71; C. Nadia Seremetakis, *Sensing the Everyday: Dialogues from Austerity Greece* (Routledge, 2019).

between Islam and Christianity (and Judaism) through a third referent, “agrarian religion,” where the structure he studies affirms the impossibility of such a position.

This is shown in the structure of difference within “agrarian religion.” By implying these forms are unlearned (a constantly used adjective, despite an initial qualification, is “popular,”¹³ and often cited is a lack of “education”) Grehan gives the impression that these forms are unthinkingly (or functionally) reproduced,¹⁴—“participants”, we are told, of those visiting Sufi lodges and Christian monasteries, “came mainly for ritual worship, which required no learning and rested on oral transmission and face-to-face instruction and initiation.”¹⁵ Instead of the rigid ‘cultural’ religion of literati, the porous peasant religion is ‘natural.’¹⁶

Yet these encounters in lodges or monasteries, which continue in spaces like Mār Georgios, point to a kind of learning in which a movement of drawing nearer to God is centrally placed. This sensibility that ‘in-forms’ *rukuʿ* and all it stands for must be learned—the capacity to recognize and be affected by particular movements of the body as *rukuʿ*, to use the word within different grammars of supplication, to intuit its aims and its disposition as supplication to God—And so, the terrain of modality, “ritual worship,” “instruction,”

¹³ This tacit reliance on the figure of ‘the crowd’ and ‘the peasant’ mimics the very division, albeit in the form of an inversion, apparent in the citation of “*jahl al-nās*” (ignorance of the people)—a grammar that is so readily adopted by religious reformers, missionaries, literati, and one which Grehan himself rightly seeks to interrogate.

¹⁴ In his text, Grehan emphasizes that “monks were lax about performing prayers and other religious rituals, and were careless about prescribed fasts” (52). This claim, extrapolated from only a few sources that concerned Latin reforms of Maronite monasticism, insists that monastic life concerned itself with the “perfunctory” “performance of ritual rather than any deep or nuanced understanding of creed” (ibid). Grehan extends this to a vision of rural priests; the Orthodox in particular he writes “were capable of few tasks aside from rote officiating at religious services, conducted in Greek or Syriac liturgy that they could not comprehend” (53). The sources Grehan cites—extremely brief 19th century European missionary accounts, which show, above all, surprise at Eastern Christian priests being of peasant background (not an unexpected reaction given the bourgeois station of these Protestant and Anglican missionaries)—do not appear to support this claim of a gulf between *lingua sacra* and *lingua franca*; the only mention of a liturgical language is one reference among Grehan’s cited sources, which points to the liturgy being done in Arabic and memorized in concert with the text. More than this, however, is Grehan’s underlying and puzzling claim that the performance of rituals, oral transmission, or the memorization of liturgical scriptures are evidence of a general ignorance among practitioners. The contingency and limits of the explanation of why one does what one does, on which Wittgenstein was keen to insist, does not imply a lack of learning as such. Its inhabitation, rather, points to an ongoing inheritance and cultivation of ways of being and thinking that do not *necessitate* a critical explanation for its coherence.

¹⁵ Grehan, *Twilight of the Saints*, 50.

¹⁶ Grehan’s study is one later example of many scholarly treatments that show the monastery as a perennial space of imbrication between Muslims and Christians. See especially Jack Tannous, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East: Religion, Society, and Simple Believers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

“initiation”, cannot be thought of as unmarked nor, “freely available” in a simple sense.¹⁷ Rather these gestures must be cultivated as they are bound up in a whole series of grammatical objects, sensibilities, and bodily aptitudes; they are a mode of being, *ṭarīqa*. And this mode, following the poetic sensibilities of withdrawal, fixates on the limit in the division of creation and the Uncreated; the relation between Muslims and Christians remains indeterminant.

The indeterminacy of this modal relation was affirmed by shaykh Yūsif, who after his recitation of the Muslim ascetic’s words went on to recall: “Once we were speaking some time ago, before the fast and we were encouraging everyone to read [*yaqra’ū*] the New Testament, and I dared to say: ‘okay, why do Muslims, Muslims from four years old, fast? Learn the Qur’an? Learn how to perform prostration [*sujūd*] and what not?’” “The Qur’an is predominant [*ghāliban*], *Abūnā*” a voice from one of the visitors in the salon interjected. The shaykh countered him, “yes? Even so. A lawyer from among my spiritual daughters called me after a while and told me: ‘*Abūnā*, there is a person named so-and-so’, I said, ‘yes and?’ and she said, ‘he is saying that you are evangelizing Islam [*tbashshir b-islām*].” The shaykh looked around the salon and smiled, “I am evangelizing Islam.” He repeated “I am evangelizing Islam.” The man who had spoken before made an audible “*tsk*,” while another woman exclaimed her surprise that the elder’s words would be characterized in that way. The elder concluded, with some mirth, “Instead of reading the Gospel he said that I am evangelizing Islam.”

The verb *bashshara* forms both the noun *bishāra* and is a cognate of *anjil*—both referring to the revealed Gospel at once as the scriptural word and the revelation of Christ. Where the individual in the anecdote and the one salon listener understood shaykh Yūsif as inappropriately drawing on non-Christian ‘religion’ (their objects of concern are, interestingly, nouns—Islam, Qur’an) the elder’s emphasis was on these specific human modes of being in movement toward God (alongside his emphasis on verbs, the object of *bashshara* is indirect—

¹⁷ I quote Grehan at length:

The citadel of Homs kept one of the original copies of the Qur’an, first commissioned by the caliph `Uthman in the seventh century. In moments of collective crisis, such as plague or drought, the local ulama would put it on public display and place it at the head of a long procession beseeching God for mercy and deliverance. Christians used their holy texts in the same manner. Parishioners would place themselves underneath a copy of the Bible, which was recommended for such common ailments as headache and back pain. In serving these practical and entirely unlearned functions, the Qur’an and Bible lost much of their textual quality. With few exceptions, participants in these ceremonies did not, and could not, read them. For the vast majority of the population, they were magical objects which did not have to be studied or interpreted. Holy texts were, above all, talismans whose intrinsic potency could be unlocked with the right procedures. (154)

Grehan’s rendering here, while a welcome check on the (European) reduction of scripture to literacy, is strikingly absent of any consideration of the audible life of these texts; an emphasis on recitation and aurality that (as I argued in Ch.6) is common in Eastern Christian and Islamic traditions. As his own account attests, the regular hearing of scriptures at liturgy or prayer was constitutive of the sensibilities of “agrarian religion.”

the elder “evangelizes by way of Islam”), naturally following his own recitation of Rābi‘a’s words and invocation of her supplicating posture. The shaykh drew on the fact that Muslims from a young age *fast, recite (yaqra’)* the Qur’an, and make worship through *prostration (sujūd)*. These inhabited forms, all practiced and intelligible within Orthodox ascetic tradition,¹⁸ are structured by a relation of desirous *inclination* and retreat toward God that they likewise stage; in their citation, there is the implicit presupposition that these modes articulate a relationship between these others and the Divine and so a ‘relation’ (between Rābi‘a and Yūsif) even while it remains *impossible* to characterize.

The impossibility of definition, of a ‘mediated’ relation (between two religions, say), is given in the very structure of ascetic retreat, one that Rābi‘a’s poetic acts of body and letter figure. The vocalization of her “madness for God,” is tellingly not used by the elder to highlight an identity between Islam and Christianity (where two is actually one) nor to enforce their distinction (where two is actually two). He simply marks the mode of withdrawal of another one to her Divine beloved: “As for passionate love, it occupies me with remembrance of you beyond all others.”¹⁹

Marking another’s withdrawal implicates the heart, wherein one finds oneself attendant to an outside as a *remembrance* of the other’s *ex nihilo* movement to the same limit. The heart as the organ of *dhikr* is invoked by the notable visibility of Qur’anic text in the monastery of Mār Georgios. As Father Mitri, an Orthodox priest of Mount Lebanon, recounts in his online blog:

¹⁸ In this sense the contemporary Orthodox monastery in post-war Lebanon harkens to the coincidence of Muslim-Christian forms already seen in Grehan’s historical exploration of shared supplicatory practices and to the capacity of the 18th century Constantinopolitan cantor Butrus al-Mūrī to chant the morning *adhan* at the request of his friend, the *mu’adhan* (see chapter 5). In the latter case, the staging of the other’s desire for God is an activity that requires the *capacity* to inhabit another form, to which one remains alongside. The formations of al-Mūrī’s ear, his vocal cords, lungs, and voice, but also his *maqṣūd*, his aim, are arrayed in such a way as to produce the *adhān* of his companion and to recognize himself in the *barzakh* of that desire. This translation, dislocation, does not transcend the limits of form or religious creed that might be captured as a movement from inside (a tradition) to its outside, but confounds the *a priori* stipulation of inside and outside in the image of the other as a digression—a participatory multiplicity in the form of ‘outside/not outside.’

¹⁹ Like the encounters recorded in the *Kitāb al-Ruhbān* (Book of Monastics)—a second/eighth century collection of Christian ascetic encounters and sayings compiled by the Muslim ascetic and scholar Ibn Abī al-Dunyā—the relation between Rābi‘a and Yūsif is found at the limit. The former, like the 8th century Christian ascetic might ask, ‘what do you want from *me*?’ Rābi‘a, as a figure of withdrawal signals a relationship that experiences its own impossibility as it becomes transparent to the desire for the *Ḥabīb al-Qulūb*, Beloved of Hearts. Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, “al-Muntaqā min Kitāb al-Ruhbān l-Ibn Abī al-Dunyā,” *Dominican Journal* 3 (1956): 6, <https://shamela.ws/>.

In the monastery of St. George, Dayr al-Harf (Mount Lebanon) in a small, inner hall, the monastics have place on a table, “framed” [sic], an Aya [verse] of the Surah of Thunder, “verily by the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest” [أَلَا بِذِكْرِ اللَّهِ تَطْمَئِنُّ الْقُلُوبُ]. This hall was the place in which the monastics welcomed their visitors before they used the one known today. Once I asked Father Ilyās Murqus, Allah rest him, about the Aya. He answered, “Surely it reminds you [*tudhakkir*] of the Jesus Prayer?”²⁰

The reposed elder and spiritual father of Yūsif, Ilyās, when solicited to provide an account of the text’s presence, invoked the central prayer of Orthodox asceticism—the prayer of the heart, also known as the Jesus prayer: “*yā rabbī, yasū‘a al-masīh, ibn illah, irḥamnī* [O my Lord, Jesus the Messiah, Son of God, have mercy on me].” We recall that this complex arrangement of body and language coordinates and gathers the energies of the *nafs* around the heteronomous center of the heart (*qalb*). This ingathering is aimed at producing a dispassionate stillness (*hudu’*) in the heart, an opening to an encounter with God. The heart, in short, is the stage of a desire that inclines beyond the field of creation and that which also accomplishes what Maximos described as the gathering of creation’s extremities in this ascent to the limit.

Yet in display of the Qur’an, *another* heart in movement toward God is invoked. In this sense, the implication of the Jesus prayer with the Qur’anic text is framed, as the words of Ilyās indicate, by a *dhikr*. This practice of recollection does not denote a specific ‘ritual’ (which, say, Christians and Sufis both practice²¹) but as a structuring ascetic sensibility of withdrawing to God in a motion that comes from “non-existence.” The elder Ilyās asking the priest Mitrī if the Aya did not “remind [*alā tudhakkir*]” him of the Jesus prayer can then be viewed as a movement of translation/transmission that performs the very motion it invokes; his exclamation, which mimics the structure of the Aya in its rhetorical affirmation of *dhikr* (“surely you are reminded/surely in remembrance do hearts find rest”), connotes a remembrance that is recapitulated as it passes through the Qur’anic text, its invocation of God and the retreat to

²⁰ Elia Mitrī, “Min Kul Al-Qalb,” accessed November 2, 2021, www.fatherelia.org.

²¹ There is a long genealogy of studies that seek to uncover the historical origins and influence between specifically Sufi and Christian ascetic practices. Indeed, the question of the possible relationship between Islam and Eastern Christian asceticism has often been posed around fields of resemblance that themselves give way to frames of ‘influence’. In one such notable volume, published in Arabic by Samira ‘Awad Malaki, is *Ḥiwār al-Qalb: dhikr Allāh fī al-masīhīyya al-urthūdhuksiyya wa al-taṣawwūf al-islāmī* [Dialogue of the Heart: The Remembrance of God in Orthodox Christianity and Islamic Sufism] (2012, Balamand). This volume, a published master’s thesis in Religious Studies at Balamand University, is structured by the “resemblance” (*tashābuh*) between Sufism and Hesychasm; the thesis recapitulates each of their histories in brief, their practices, and the concepts (*‘aqida*) that inform their practices.

restful encounter in the heart, and the Divine name *Yasūʿa*. Yet like his disciple, Ilyās defers from characterizing this *memento*, rendering it as a properly mediated relationship.

In this, a staging of another’s supplicatory mode of body (*rukuʿ*, *sujūd*) and language (poetry, Qur’an), in the space where others come to the monastery (“have mercy today, a visitor has come to you”), calls to remembrance an asymmetrical relationship that remains opaque—the other’s inclination to the Uncreated.²²

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The great Arab Orthodox writer Theodore Abu Qurrah, in his polemic with his Muslim counterparts, who objected to the veneration and prostration before images in the church, asked “Tell us, regarding the act of prostration, do you make it only to the thing onto which you put your knees and forehead, or to what your intention wills by putting down your knees and forehead in bowing?” He continues:

Everyone who makes prostration to God touches at least either the ground or a carpet with his knees, but his prostration is conducted only according to his intention to make a prostration to God. So also with the Christians, their touching of the image in the prostration is in accordance with their intention thereby to honor Christ, their God, or his saints, or the prophets, the apostles, the martyrs and others.²³

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This experience of the impossibility as relation, an implication of the self and other within this opaque and asymmetrical space, is appropriately described through Ibn al-ʿArabi’s concept of the imaginal partition, the *barzakh*. As William Chittick describes in one of his multiple volumes on the medieval Muslim shaykh, the *barzakh* acts as a bridge

²² Hilary Kilpatrick, in her analysis of the *diyārāt* books, a fourth/tenth century collection of writings on the monasteries of Bilad al-Sham, Iraq, and Egypt, notes where recollection is a decisive theme. Recounting instances of *memento mori* through monastic space, she writes,

In these instances an inhabitant of a monastery or else the building itself, speaking through a poem, warns the visitor of the transitoriness of everything in this world and, at least by implication, of the Judgement to come, a theme common to spirituality and moral reflection in Christianity and Islam. If Muslims visited monasteries in order to remind themselves of this ascetic truth, or if, having heard it perhaps unexpectedly, they took it to heart, one can certainly speak of a religious motivation. Hilary Kilpatrick, “Monasteries through Muslim Eyes: The Diyārāt Books,” in *Christians at the Heart of Islamic Rule*, ed. David Thomas (Leiden: Boston: Brill, 2003), 26.

²³ Arendzen, op. cit. p. 19 (Arabic), pp. 20-21 (Latin); Graf, *Die arabischen Schriften*, p.22 (Arabic) p. 203 quoted Sidney H. Griffith, “Theodore Abū Qurrah’s Arabic Tract on the Christian Practice of Venerating Images,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 105, no. 1 (1985): 53–73, <https://doi.org/10.2307/601539>.

between the reflected object and the mirror. We have to affirm that the image is both the same as the mirror and different from it, or that it is identical neither with the object nor with the mirror. In a similar way, dreams are imaginal realities. If someone sees his father in a dream, he has seen his father and not his mother or his brother; at the same time, what he has seen is nothing but himself. The perceived imaginal reality is an isthmus between himself and his father. The most succinct statement that can be made about the dream image is "he/not he."²⁴

The modulations of the dream image, as the imbrication of self and other, is likewise found in the figuration of Rābi‘a’s body, the Qur’anic text, and, finally, the words of Rābi‘a, which are articulated by the tongue of shaykh Yūsif: “I am consumed by fire as a heart loving you, as a tongue remembering you, and as a servant fearing you.” The metaphoric and imaginal movement between states/modes (*aḥwāl, tropoi*) of the human nature, invoked in the text but given principally in the voice of another, is both the poetic isthmus that bridges other acts of language and body and the field of imbrication that implies another, recollected, scene:

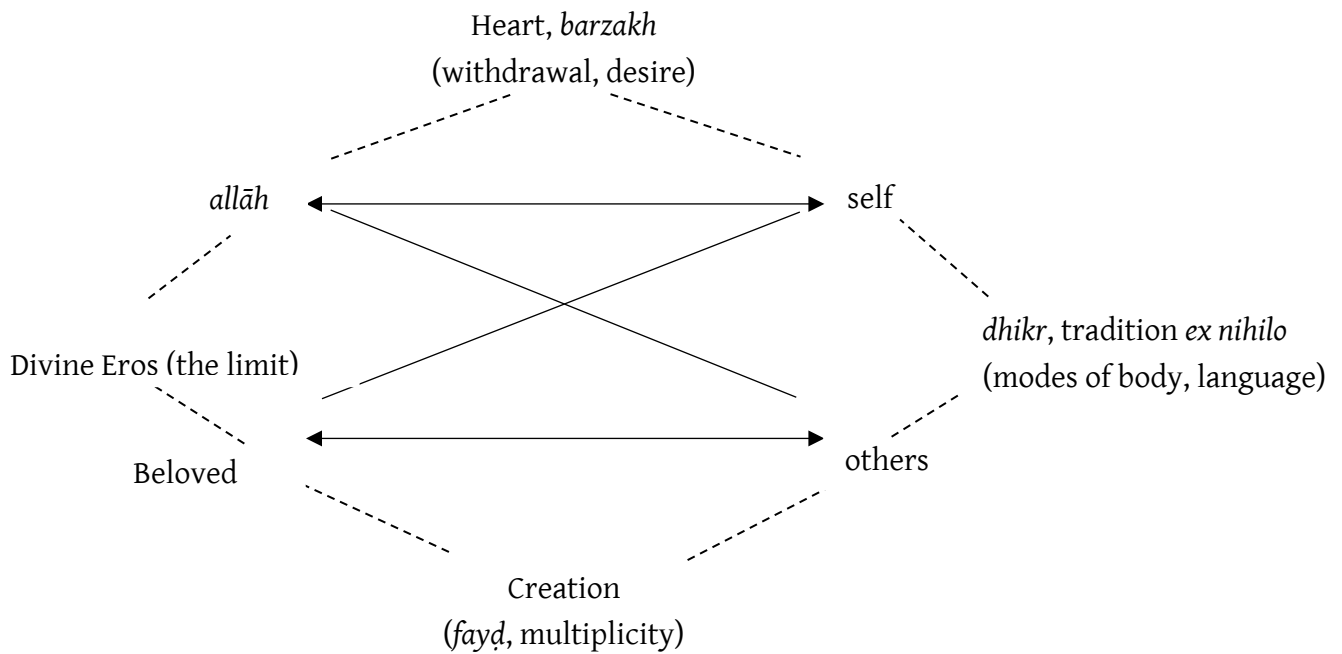


Figure 3.5

²⁴ Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 25.

*In this semiotic square, the primary contrary pair (*allāh*—self) is intersected with its negative contrary pair: ‘Beloved’ (the contradiction of ‘self’) and ‘others’ (the contradiction of ‘*allāh*’). This structure produces different fields of implication, the most important is that of *allāh* and the self (Divine ascent) and neither *allāh* nor the self (i.e., others). Consequently, in this structure, the relationship between self and others is not properly a *relation* at all, but rather a coincident of creation; it thus implicates a field that is imaginal and embodied; it is like a dream image, “he/not he”.

Ibn al-‘Arabi goes on:

The human being may bind himself only through that by which he is bound in his essence—which is, as we said, his binding through God, *who created him, then determined him, then eased the way for him* [80:20]. Since this is his level, and inescapably so, he should never allow himself to halt except in the *barzakh*. It is the imaginal station that has no *wujud* [existence] save in imagination between the world of the witnessed and the world of the absent.²⁵

As Chittick explains, Ibn al-‘Arabi is linking the practices of *ṣalāt* to the two worlds (the witnessed and the absent) and their *barzakh*: “Thus it is not surprising to see Ibn al-‘Arabi explain the three basic times of the *ṣalāt*—daytime, night, and the in-between periods of morning light and evening light—in terms of the three worlds.”²⁶ The two forms of in-between period follow from the “two directions” of the *barzakh* as imagination, which “corporealizes meanings” and “subtilizes bodies” (ibid) in the movement from light to darkness and vice versa. This field is one in which the opaque inclination of the other—another ensouled body, not yet a ‘social’ other named Christian or Muslim—is remembered; the modality of the form, the *tropos* or way of being of a human nature. In this recollection, then, what is recalled in part is true multiplicity; as Maximus quotes *On the Divine Names*, “there is no multiplicity that does not participate in the one.”

These in-between stations, formally articulated in prayer, recall Maximus’ description of the human as an *ergasterion*, a center of production and exchange. As in the dream of elder Tūmā, the scene of both transmission and inclination is given within an imaginal *maḥaṭṭa*, a way station, that stages the work of exchange between forms of reification and obscuration. The play of corporealization and subtilization, then, denotes where the *barzakh* is specifically

²⁵ William C. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn Al-‘Arabi’s Cosmology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 261.

²⁶ Chittick, 263.

engaged, one example of which is the figuration of Islamic modes at the monastery by shaykh Yūsif and others. The imaginal space of this asymmetrical and opaque relation is not so much a work on the ‘in-side’ or ‘out-side’ but rather a digression or ‘aside.’

Exception, Digression

The topology outlined, as shaped within and informative of the monastic scenes recounted, does not relate to Islamic modes as forms of exception²⁷ which would thus become vital to sustaining the cohesive force of an Orthodox Christianity. Instead, ascetic modality encounters its *barzakh*, as the previous chapter recounted, in the “unnamable division” between creation and the Uncreated, one which, through Divine ascent/withdrawal (i.e., a movement toward the limit), recalls the experience of an impossible relation *ex nihilo*. In this eschatological sense it is post (and pre-) social; what Marilyn Strathern called a recursive temporalizing “relation” by which “alternation” marks “a movement between states, a sequence of events.”²⁸

In contrast, the form of exception in secular and so sectarian law works precisely through a topology of inside/outside, one that is critical to the continued juridical sensibilities of anxiety and suspicion²⁹ that ground secular/sectarian forms of Lebanese legal practice. It appears at the monastery where identity and its legal status (itself grounded in sexual differentiation³⁰) become central—namely in conversion. Mār Ilyās in particular was vibrant space of conversion, where those from other Christian and Islamic traditions would come to learn from the monks. In my time there the number of those interested became so great that the Hieromonk Antonios developed a weekly lecture in which he or one of the other monks would speak on diverse topics—history of Orthodox Christianity, theology, ethics, etc. On one of these occasions, before the meeting, I conversed with a man who was visiting from the

²⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford University Press, 1998); Roberto Esposito, *Two: The Machine of Political Theology and the Place of Thought*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 37–39.

²⁸ *The Gender of the Gift*, 287. Speaking about gift exchange Strathern writes: “This is the recursiveness of the anticipated outcome. There is nothing particularly mystical or humanistic about it. It derives, I argue, from making explicit a particular technique of objectification, namely, the personifying mode in which the objects of relations are always other relations. One calls others into existence—a sequence visible in what people seek to know about themselves. If relations consequently appear to them in such objects, *then these objects are apprehended as both cause and effect of the relations.*” (221).

²⁹ Hussein Ali Agrama, *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton University Press, 2015).

³⁰ Maya Mikdashi, “Sextarianism: A Way of Studying the Lebanese State.,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Middle Eastern and North African History*, ed. Amal Ghazal and Jens Hanssen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

Akkar district in northern Lebanon. It was only later that I learned that he was Muslim, and one interested in converting to Orthodox Christianity. These unmarked encounters, where a common inclination informs them, stood in contrast to an anxiety around how they might be perceived from outside; the Hieromonk Antonios on more than one occasion requested that I stop recording our interviews because he was going to speak about a Muslim who wished to convert to Orthodoxy.

A conversation with another monk, Arsāniyūs, at Mār Ilyās evinced a similar anxiety. Our conversation opened with my asking him to elaborate on the difference between Western Christian image-making and Orthodox iconography, since the monk was learning to paint icons and had increasingly become quite proficient. Speaking about difference, as I had prompted him, soon led to an attention to the formal distortions that *al-gharb* (the West) yields; making the sign of the cross in an incorrect way, not preparing one's body and soul through ascetic practices before making images of saints, the difference in "the Mass from region to region." "The West did not preserve the teaching", the hieromonk said flatly, but instead they continually move from "sect to sect."

In this, Arsāniyūs continued, the West is like "Nestorius" who argued that "salvation [*al-khalās*] is for the whole world [*l-kil al-ālam*] and so that "the truth is not only found by Orthodox Christianity but is found with the whole world" and where salvation is found by "Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, countless Christianities." In this vision, he continued, "the truth is scattered" and the "whole world is saved in the end." "This is entirely wrong," he insisted. "Salvation is only through the Orthodox Church. Through the Orthodox faith, why? We don't say this because we are fanatics [*muta'aṣībīn*] or like ISIS [*da'īshī*]...we speak the truth." He continued by demonstrating the ways others distort Christianity, giving the example of an Evangelical Christian who tempted God by holding a snake; he offered in juxtaposition ascetic saints like Seraphim Sarovsky and Paisios of Mouth Athos as examples of those who have peaceful [*musālima*] relationship with animals. In contrast these heretical Christians say, "I am faithful [*m'umin*], I am a Christian. This is arrogance."

As Arsāniyūs continued to express dismay at these "errors," he also included Islam, quoting Sūrat Maryam (Qur'ān 98) to point out how it refutes the Messianic revelation of the Divine Word and, consequently, confirms that the Prophet was a student of Arius.³¹ These Islamic polemics ultimately indicate "a change of the Gospel," [*taḥwīl al-injīl*] but one that participates in the larger history of distortion. For a prominent example, the hieromonk then

³¹ This charge has its origins in the 8th century writing of Yuḥanna Damashqī (John of Damascus), but Arianism in general stands for the insistence of Christ's creatureliness and lack of divinity. For the former see Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The "Heresy of the Ishmaelites,"* Bilingual edition (Leiden: Brill, 1972).

turned back to Western Christianity where, he said, there is the prevalent and incorrect notion that the Eucharist is a “symbol” of Christ’s body and blood.

It was only at the end of this long digression on difference that it became apparent that the monk was ultimately speaking about “ecumenism” (*maskūniyya*), which in his view “dominates everything”, mediated through the West as a *unifying* figure that both effects differentiation and equivocation³² over which it presides.³³ The monastic was anxious about the grammar of *religious* difference itself, one in which he was interpellated as a sectarian “fanatic” rather than a reasonable pluralist invested in public order.³⁴

³² Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

³³ This same structure of mediation/exception appears in Angie Heo’s study of Muslim-Christian entanglement in contemporary Egypt. For Heo, it is forms of mediation, “the sign”, that acts as a third referent which gathers and distributes forms of difference across multiple dyadic forms; “imagining saints and their activity in the world,” she writes, “is a material practice of interacting with ordinary signs of extraordinary presence in space and time.” (19) The imaginal mediation of nature (ordinary, politics) and culture (extraordinary, theology) is found in the mediatic forms of “martyrs, miracles, and mysteries” which are “not only signs of an otherworldly cosmology; they also extend clues into a social universe that existed before mass literacy and religious identity” (15). In short, the imaginal here does not have the character of a *barzakh*, a staging which only meets at its limit, but participates in the very structure of ‘religious difference’ (nature/culture, politics/theology, Christian/Muslim) as it is excepted from it.

³⁴ Many analytics of sectarianism tacitly rely on a dyadic structure (already seen in the previous chapter via Lacan vs Foucault) of bodily praxis/theological language, porosity/rigidity, pluralism/sectarianism. This has already been seen in Grehan’s historical argument on 19th century Levantine religion, but it also appears in Bowman who succinctly captures this impulse:

As Jack Tannous, Christian Sahner and Fred Donner have all recently shown, religious networks in the Near East in the early centuries of Islam were exceptionally porous in nature. A firm command of specific doctrine, law and ritual would not have generally been within the dominion of the common people. In the absence of finite principles of faith, determined by higher authorities, their religion was one of a *lived praxis*, the core tenets of which would have been shared across diverse communities. In the words of Sahner, “Levels of lay catechesis were probably very low, and in the cities and villages of Egypt, Syria, and Palestine where Muslims and Christians first rubbed shoulders, it was not always clear where the practice of one faith ended and the other began.” (233).

As I have argued in this chapter, it does not appear that the learning of “principles” versus “lived praxis” can be so easily disaggregated, much less aligned with rigidity and porosity or sectarianism and pluralism. Mediating these forms is always a ‘third’ referent that enables comparison—here social “networks” and, most critically the concept of religion now universalized. This is far from the sensibility I have attempted to outline, which affirms the impossibility of a universal perspective on relation itself. For the works referenced by Bowman see, Tannous, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East*; Christian C. Sahner, *Christian Martyrs under Islam: Religious Violence and the Making of the Muslim World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); Fred McGraw Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 2012).

This structure of in-side and out-side, through which sectarian and so secular forms of legal status are made intelligible, is the ‘either/or’ produced within a topology of exception (a fanatic or a pluralist, nature or culture). It fails to capture the structure of eros and its perpendicular *barzakh* (relation). This digression, even while it is open to parallel and imbrication, remains alongside the sole “measure” (*qiyās*) that delimits one’s singular inclination and attraction toward the Divine and the impossibility of creation’s multiplicity-in-unity found at the *limit* of creation’s division from God.³⁵

For the monk Arsāniyūs, no limit appears (and therefore no “relation”) within the secular grammar of *maskūniyya*, only the sovereign and mediating figure of ‘the West’ which exempts itself from the anxious topology of religious difference and public order. Yet the monastic’s insistence on the differences in mode and the necessity of inclining toward God is, perhaps counterintuitively, consistent with the structure previously laid out; the doubled insistence on the singularity of one’s *aim* (‘this side’) and the irreducibility of multiplicity (‘aside’) to a unitary perspective.

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Indifferent to the topology of exception, the digressive movement of incarnation/obscuration points to a relation formed through approaching a limit, and it appears in monastic writing as well. In his previously cited ascetic monograph on *‘itirāf* (confession, recognition) and psychoanalysis—a text which, again, must be characterized as a modern example of *‘ilm al-nafs*, the science of the soul—Aspiro Jabbur writes:

Repentance is not only the feeling of guilt, but it is the collecting of all the energies of the soul to combat iniquity and acquire virtue. It is rare among Christians for a transgressor to exist that does not feel that he is a transgressor. Nevertheless, what is the rate of true penitents? *allāh* knows. Maximos the Confessor, Ishaq [Isaac] the Bishop of Nineveh, St. Sim‘ān the New Theologian, Imam al-Ghazzālī, and Ibn al-‘Ibrī [Bar Hebraeus] lamented the

³⁵ This parallel attraction to the limit confounds the ‘either/or’ differentiation made within secular law, and follows what Hussein Agrama has noted within the *Shari‘a*—a lack of anxiety around exceptions or a problematic of sovereignty qua an ordering decision. Agrama notes, “*Makārij* literature, however, though it is involved in exceptions, is not directly connected with questions of sovereignty. It may be that this literature can be theologically connected with the sovereignty of God. But the fact that it is a part of legitimate *Shari‘a* jurisprudence in a way difficult to countenance within modern legal doctrine suggests that it does not partake of the *problematic* of sovereignty—the tendency to associate the exception with the defense of public order and security within social life. It also shows that the law’s continual attempt to overcome its exceptions is not a quality intrinsic to it, but arises from its being attached to distinctive historical forms and structures of organized suspicion.” Agrama, *Questioning Secularism*, 114.

dearth of righteous people capable of devoted prayer, even doubting it of themselves. Maximos said, “where do we find in the present generation a soul free completely from all thoughts and passions, becoming worthy through pure, immaterial prayer?”³⁶

The recollection of these righteous figures, which includes both Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī and al-ʿIbrī (the prolific 13th century Syriac Christian bishop), does not operate through a vision of indigeneity/exogeneity, nor the typological ordering of ‘influence’, despite the fact that this figures are named chronologically. Instead, they form a historical-eschatological, and therefore contingent, iteration of *dhikr*, reminiscent of what shaykh Yūsif named (chapter 3), quoting Maximos, as the “eternal tears” that disclose the Divine within the scene of the destructive world.

Jabbur’s writing evokes another encounter recorded in the *Kitāb al-Ruhbān*³⁷ (the Book of Monastics) in the 2nd (AH)/ 8th century (AD) between Caliph ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-Azīz (d. 101/720) and a Christian monastic at Dayr Simʿān in northern Syria, “the only reference that seems, in any way, to compare Islam and Christianity”³⁸ as Bradley Bowman remarks in his own excellent treatment of these encounters[cite]:

Concerning what Abi Bakr bin Musafir al-Salmi said: ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-Azīz saw a monastic at Dayr Simʿān, words passed between the two of them, and ʿUmar said at the end of his words: O Monastic! If only you had come over to Islam. [The monastic] said: O Prince of the Faithful! Your faith [*dīn*] is new and you with it are flourishing, and your companions rejoice in this good news [*mustabashirūn*]. My faith has been worn [*qad khaliqa*] and its people have changed, would that you live, O Prince of the Faithful, until your faith is old and so you will see [its people] change, such that it is beyond recognition, and you no longer know it.³⁹

This exchange, which as Bowman writes evinces “a mutual lament for the shortcomings of the human condition,”⁴⁰ is remarkably consonant with Aspiro’s writing some thirteen hundred years later. Taking these figures as both the measure of their respective historical times and as they manifest the possibility/inability of Divine ascent, the other tradition as an ‘aside’ figures

³⁶ Jabbur, *Al-Iʿtirāf Wa-l-Taḥlīl al-Nafsī*, 38.

³⁷ Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, “al-Muntaqā min Kitāb al-Ruhbān l-Ibn Abī al-Dunyā.”

³⁸ Bradley Bowman, *Christian Monastic Life in Early Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 201.

³⁹ Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, “al-Muntaqā min Kitāb al-Ruhbān l-Ibn Abī al-Dunyā,” 7.

⁴⁰ Bowman, *Christian Monastic Life in Early Islam*, 201.

as a tracing out of the multiform movements toward God in a historical-eschatological motion *ex nihilo*.

The hieromonk follows his citation with a quote from Isaac the Syrian:

“It is rare to find one among the multitude, who has been accounted worthy of pure prayer. Many have not been accounted worthy of pure prayer, save few.” Isaac follows up on this aforementioned level [of prayer], for he says that it is rare to find one man in every generation who has drawn close [*iqtaraba*] to this gnosis of the good-pleasure of allāh. The intended meaning [*al-maqṣūd*], at the end of the sentence is the highest spiritual state which the *mutaṣawwafūn* [i.e., Sufis] arrive at: union with allāh, Divine witnessing.⁴¹

Turning to the *maqṣūd*—a word which connotes a meaning that is also the *aim*—of Iṣḥāq’s words, Aspiro offers the Sufi idiom of Divine union (*ittihād*). In this, another recursive structure appears, wherein the inclination of the ascetic Iṣḥāq’s words are clarified as they are translated and brought, digressively, through to the aim of the Sufis; Divine eros. Yet just as the Qur’ānic Aya’s manner of evoking remembrance (*dhikr*) cannot easily be characterized and mediated (hierarchically, say, or its derivation, typologically⁴²) but connotes an opaque relational field (another’s inclination to God); the *maqṣūd* is illumined precisely as a digressive and subtilizing translation, reaching its clarity at the height of its obsuration (*barzakh*). In that sense the interpretation of one’s “intention” is not an assimilation to or of the other, but an imaginal staging of this other’s digressive encounter with the Divine

This *barzakh* structure is repeated elsewhere in Aspiro’s text; when writing about the pivotal relation of eldership at the monastery, he notes: “The winds of *allāh* moved within him to become a monastic, yet he needs leadership. The Muslim Sufis say: ‘Whomever does not have a *shaykh*, the *shaytan* [devil] is his *shaykh*.’”⁴³ This citation, which does not have specific attribution, appears paratactically as an act of clarification as to the necessity of a *shaykh*—invoking a common structure of erotic eldership and the delusional passions (in the figure of

⁴¹ Jabbur, *Al-ʿItirāf Wa-l-Tahlīl al-Nafsī*, 38.

⁴² The specific mode of typology I have in mind is recounted in Kathleen Biddick’s *The Typological Imaginary: Circumcision, Technology, History* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), which orders its other (in her account, Christians from Jews) through a temporal process of subsumption and transcendence. This mode of typological time—one which appears to be only one of its multiple permutations and is specifically localizable as a mode of polemic—is also found in George Khodr’s contemporary critique of Western Christian theo-ecclesiology; a synonymy of unfolding time and territorial expansion of ‘the Church’ which necessitates a refusal of Islam as a prophetic tradition. See Georges Khodr, “Christianity in a Pluralistic World — the Economy of the Holy Spirit,” *The Ecumenical Review* 23, no. 2 (1971): 118–28.

⁴³ Jabbur, *Al-ʿItirāf Wa-l-Tahlīl al-Nafsī*, 104.

shaytan). More than this, however, the digressive corporealization through the Muslim saying serves syntactically as a translation, a movement, of the heteronomous *desire* that is located as a “Divine wind” (*riyāḥ illāh*) by which the Christian-turned-ascetic is riven. With the ascetic idiom of withdrawal to God Islamic modalities (of Muslim speech, of righteous figuration, of Divine eros) are staged at the *barzakh*—where the alternation between illumination and obscuration are drawn together in another’s withdrawal to God.⁴⁴

This encounter at/of the limit clarifies the aforementioned account of *ḍamīr* by the elder Gregorios, who we recall spoke of the *ḍamīr* as a kind of “arbiter” (*ḥakam*) of the *nafs*, by which one’s entire life and work is lived in accordance with the Divine law. The law of the Lord thus also alternates between being manifest (*maktūb*) and hidden. Thus *ḍamīr* becomes the name for the encounter at the *barzakh* of corporealization and subtilization; *this side*, in which “certainly for us the law is written” and another side, “those for whom the law is not written.” Like Aspiro’s clarification of *maqṣūd* in obscuration, the *ḍamīr* “is a way to be aware” and something that “rouses” but accomplishes this through its own indeterminant position vis-à-vis the inside/outside of the law: “living the precepts of the law without knowing the law.”

It was only once this indeterminacy was established that Gregorios invoked a Muslim figure, who emerged as a digression, in order to extrapolate the opaque field of *ḍamīr*: “if a Muslim, for example, does good [*khayr*]” and “returns to [his] being... therefore he oversteps (*biyyāwaz*), for this reason, he receives salvation [*khalāṣ*] by *ḍamīr*, the law of *ḍamīr*.” Having turned to Islam, Gregorios repeats the same structure of indeterminacy in reverse, “for us, the precepts of the Qur’an will never save,” yet the *ḍamīr* capacitates one to “exceed” (*tajāwaz*) “the restrictive nature [*maḥdūdiyyāt*] of the law of the Lord.” “*Manū qiyās akhir*” “no other measure but Christ” as Gregorios once said. *The only mode to salvation is ‘this-side’. Another exceeds the law of the Lord and receives salvation.* Impossible, yet there it is.

The use of *tajāwaz*, “to exceed” “to leave behind” “to overstep”, while cited by the elder as a form of example (“*fa-mathalan*”), confounds exemplarity as a paradigmatic or sovereign structure⁴⁵—and instead follows the digressive movement that we have seen in the examples of shaykh Yūsif and monk Aspiro. The clarification of *ḍamīr* is given in its alternation between obscuration and illumination, one that is intensified in the reversal of its aim. In its

⁴⁴ This, I think, is far from the structure of ‘Christian’ touching that concerned Jean-Luc Nancy or Jacques Derrida in Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, trans. Gabriel Malenfant, Michael B. Smith, and Bettina Bergo (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009); Jacques Derrida, *On Touching, Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). For a compelling anthropological account of this field of inquiry see, Valentina Napolitano, “On the Touch-Event: Theopolitical Encounters,” *Social Analysis* 64, no. 4 (December 1, 2020): 81–99, <https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2020.640405>.

⁴⁵ See Andreas Bandak and Lars Højer, eds., *The Power of Example: Anthropological Explorations in Persuasion, Evocation and Imitation*, 1 edition (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015).

overstepping, the other here does not (as one might expect) exceed the limits of their own insufficient law; i.e., the Muslim does not, through the power of conscience, overstep and transcend the Qur’ānic law. Rather the Muslim *jawāza*, oversteps, the “law of the Gospel” and in this undefinable, other, relationship to the God, “receives salvation.” This movement follows the structural erotics constitutive of ascetic dispossession—where withdrawal both de-limits (in the forms of askesis) and experiences (as still-experience, the Uncreated light) the limit. This overstepping can thus only be marked as the trace of exceeding a threshold, and one that remains opaque in its illuminating disclosure.

The alternation implied in *jawāza* finds an exegesis in the magisterial sixth/twelfth century treatise of Imam al-Ghazzālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, *The Niche of Lights*. In a discursive “aid” (*musā’ida*) to his first chapter which attempts to clarify the nature of the Divine light (*al-nūr al-illahī*), its relationship to creation, and the possible experience of it. Deferring to his reader’s dearth of comprehension, al-Ghazzālī turns to “words that are nearer to your understanding and more suitable to your weakness.”⁴⁶ Using the metaphor of visual light, the Imam refutes those who insist that “light has no meaning and that there is nothing along with colors except colors.”⁴⁷ Yet, the author continues, demonstrating that at the setting of the sun there is a “necessary diremption” [*tafriqa ḍarūrī*] perceived between the “place of darkness” and the “position of light”⁴⁸; this manifest division leads to the “recognition” that light is a meaning [*ma’nā*] beyond [*warā’*] the colors perceived alongside the colors, so that it is as if by the intensity of its brilliancy it is not perceived, and by the intensity of its manifestation [*zuhūruhu*] it is hidden [*yakhfā*].”

This structure has already been seen in the topology of non-appearance in chapter one and Ibn al-‘Arabi’s articulation of the *barzakh*; just as the in-between stations of prayer occur at the juncture of light and darkness, al-Ghazzālī perceives the *ma’nā*⁴⁹—the meaning that is

⁴⁶ Al-Ghazzālī, *The Niche of Lights*, trans. David Buchman (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1998), 22.

⁴⁷ Al-Ghazzālī, 22.

⁴⁸ C.f., a line excerpted from the earliest extra-biblical hymn, still used in the Orthodox evening office, “Gladsome Light” (*al-nūr al-bahī*, Φῶς Ἰλαρόν): “having come to the setting of the sun, we have beheld the light of evening/we praise God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit”

⁴⁹ As Alexander Key notes, “*Ma’nā* often appears when eleventh-century Arabic conceptual vocabulary is being used to talk about ideas, qualities, or meanings,” located at a “confluence” of “language, mind, and reality” or “epistemology and ontology.” (69-70) Key continues in his excellent study to argue against what I term a homological structure in producing structural parallels in European languages to the disparate meanings of *ma’nā*. Eschewing semiotics for attention to “intent and the lexicon” Key ultimately argues that “*Ḥaḳīqah* [truth] was the theologians’ goal: to accurately align their mental contents (and their vocal forms) with the truth of the divine creation.” (241) This intent and “aim” resonates with the sensibility this chapter has sought to outline. See Alexander Key, *Language between God and the Poets: Ma’na in the Eleventh Century* (University of California Press, 2018).

light—at the dis/juncture of light and darkness at sunset. The Imam’s conclusion to this paragraph is decisive: “manifestation may be the cause of hiddenness. For if something oversteps [*jāwaza*] its limit, it is reflected in its contrary” [*wa al-shay’ idhā jāwaza ḥaddaha in‘akas ‘alā ḍiddihi*]. The Imam is establishing the fact that God, the one who makes manifest, is found in those things made manifest, as light does for color; here he brings his reader to see darkness as the manifestation of light in the form of *jāwaza*, overstepping (as the subtraction of God from the earth and heavens is impossible). The latter sentence hence abstracts from the metaphoric language of visual sight and darkness, clearly indicated by the conditional mood and the use of *al-shay’* (‘something’), in order to comment on the nature of *jāwaza*.

Like the Divine arbiter of the *nafs* in the heart, that is, the *ḍamīr*, the passage to the limit of something, by which it reflects (or even resounds) its contrary, *jāwaza*, is the excess of relation, inborn in the movement of multiform creation towards its Uncreated limit. The monastery stages imbrication as dusk does light and darkness; their alternation marks a relation whose content is indeterminant yet clarifying in its opacity. Creation, between light and darkness, being and non-being, yields to that which is beyond being, what both traditions have called the Light of lights.

ت Death, Departure

لَأَنَّ رَحْمَتَكَ أَفْضَلُ مِنَ الْحَيَاةِ وَشَفَعَتِي تُسَبِّحَانِكَ

Because your mercy is better than life my lips praise you

(Ps. 62)

This final chapter attends to the limit of death as it is articulated within the hesychastic form of life. This distinction is one which we have already encountered in the previous two chapters—the movement to a limit-threshold (*barzakh* in Islamic tradition denotes this same space, albeit with a different character) that at once harkens to the cleaving of creation to the Uncreated. The law of mortification, of suspension, is a law of repose, tending to a threshold that passes beyond death and life as it objectifies (rather than represents) their dialectical (and infinite) unity as ‘world’; the eschatological Judgment names this other side of the law (of the world, of death/life), i.e., that the world *really* has an end, as it discloses resurrection as form of continual release from the law of the self. The topology of non-appearance, the hint that the ascetics receive to depart from appearance and into *aphaneia*, finds its total expression in the passage of death.

Sixth Day (Struggle)

Even the act of supplication interrupts the particular form of attention, the listening of the heart demanded by the funeral.

Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*

It is morning, the sun is well risen, but we have been in prayer since dark. Today is *sabt al-amwāt*, one of several days commemorated as a ‘Saturday of the Dead’, wherein those who have passed from this life, both the dead within human memory and the long dead, are commemorated and commended to God’s remembrance. The liturgy at Ruqād al-Sayyida ends after dawn and the memorial service immediately follows it. The previous day we had written down the names of the deceased we wanted to commemorate at the monastery. Khalīl was surprised at the sparse five names I had put down; he had penned over twenty. I recalled the stories he had told me of his uncles being killed by the occupying Syrian army when he was

young, and of his father who had died when he was younger still. Standing in the middle of the church and gently swinging a censer, Archimandrite Gregorios chants out the names of the departed of the community which had gathered at the monastery that day. He chants out the collection of names in a low, grave voice: *Antūniyūs, Yuḥannā, Maryam*. The repetition of given names, bereft of their family names, ebbs and surges, producing a common and oceanic anonymity that impresses upon and gathers all of us present. *Ilyās, Dīnā, Diala*. The sea of names, an afterimage of destruction, collects and communalizes the living from the vantage of the dead. *Hiba, Georges, Dmitrī*.

After chanting the names, Gregorios leads the gathering out into the small necropolis that is housed in the monastery walls; censing the tombs of the dead, he intones in a loud voice three times over: “*liyakun dhikrahum mua’bbadan*.” May their memory be eternal. After the liturgy and memorial we eat a small amount of koliva (boiled wheat, sweetened with honey and fruit) in commemoration of the dead; we then go to a small breakfast in the refectory and shortly afterward begin the day’s labour.

The following day at the monastery is *aḥad al-daynūna*, the Sunday of the Last Judgement. The monastery is typically open on Sundays for the celebration of the Divine Liturgy (*qaddās*) and this particular Sunday is all the busier. Archimandrite Gregorios, celebrating the liturgy, also gives a sermon about the *daynūna*:

In the judgment, at the end, at the time of death, when we die, the judgment doesn’t come directly. The judgement comes at the end of time [*akhir al-zaman*] when our Lord will see that it’s the end of the world, and there is no longer sure-hope [*rajā’*] in the world that we all live in, there is no sure-hope. We are seeing, we all see the corruption, evil and corruption, how it is spreading. This condition [*ḥāl*], how it spreads. Even if there were those among wanting to be with God in some way in our life, we are in this condition in our lives, there is not true faith [*imān*] or trust. This is why Christ gave this image [*ṣūra*] for salvation. An image that is not just the faith in me but how I live ontologically [*bi-shakl ḥayy*].

The elder continues, reiterating first that “when we die it is not our *daynūna*”; this comes only at the end of time, when the world is in total corruption (*fasād*). The notion that the *daynūna* immediately follows death, he explains, is something said by “Muslims, and those not of our faith.” “[For them] the *nafs* just passes [*rāḥ*] and just goes from the body and will diffuse over [its] life.” “Now all of us are the same as Muslims [in our thinking about death], but we don’t feel this way.” Rather than the *nafs* “returning to God” after death, Gregorios explains, it is

“ignorant of the matters of the world after the body. The body desires the soul and the matters of the world have concluded, so it does not feel, being itself in darkness.”

This strong attachment of the *nafs* to the body, and the radical closure that their separation represents, means that “before the *daynūna*” the soul is “stripped” (*mujarrad*) of matters. While the elder quickly clarified that those who lived righteously are “near” God, this constitutes an “intermediary judgement,” not the one to be experienced at the end of time. Here the hieromonk made mention of the Saturday of the Dead that was just commemorated, noting that while every Saturday is a commemoration of the dead, this one in particular is important. “We remember all the dead who have passed, everyone remembers the reposed that have died, gathering them with us, the living, and with the generations that have come also.” He continues:

And so, this is something that calls to remembrance God’s *daynūna*...we don’t forget that there is an end to the world...Our Lord what did he give us, death, however what he gave us is time. [The Lord] says, no one knows the time of the Judgement. Reminding us by this always, the remembrance of death [*dhikr al-mawt*], the remembrance of the Judgement, is a great virtue [*faḍīla*]. This is a great virtue. Like the student, if we just remember God, if we remember in our life like the student in school, concerned with his study, who is just reminded to read his material, you see him begin and he keeps studying on own way. We are like the student of the teacher, it is incumbent on us to start and to keep studying, keeping vigil, being attentive, so if the Lord indeed came soon, we would be ready to meet Him.

The *daynūna* and death were distinguished by the elder in a forceful manner even as they both found their ultimate end in the remembrance of God. The insistence that the body and soul’s separation (physical death) speaks to a condition of radical incapacity and deprivation, one harkened to and indeed “studied” in the ascetic life. Jonathan Zecher, in his excellent study of early desert monasticism—focusing on the pinnacle text *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*—notes this division as well as one between “mortality and future judgement.” Nevertheless, Zecher defers in dwelling on this division, as he concludes that it “cannot be separated, except *logically* as different aspects of the experience that Christian ascetics expect from death.”⁵⁰ Yet citing the origin of this distinction as a matter of logical movement, while helpful in denoting the way ascetic grammars move through mortality *through* to judgement, leaves the question of the distinction open.

⁵⁰ Jonathan L. Zecher, *The Role of Death in the Ladder of Divine Ascent and the Greek Ascetic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 111, my emphasis.

The force of Elder Gregorios' distinction not only finds antecedents in *The Ladder*, but is deftly treated in an excursus of Isaac the Syrian, who writes:

In this age there is no eighth day, nor is there a true Sabbath. For he who said that 'God rested on the seventh day,' signified our nature's rest from the course of this life, since the grave is also of a bodily nature and belongs to this world. Six days are accomplished in the husbandry of life by means of keeping the commandments; the seventh is spent entirely in the grave; and the eighth is in departure from it.⁵¹

In his Arabic translation of this passage Iṣḥāq of Athos translates "departure" (*exodos* in the Greek text⁵²), as *khurūj*, an "exiting". He was also compelled to add a clarification not found in the Greek; after "departure" he writes, in brackets, "*al-qiya'ma*", resurrection. The 7th century Isaac continues,

Just as those who are worthy to receive in this world the mysteries of the Lord's day in a similitude [*ramziyyan*], but not that day itself so long as they are in their bodily nature, so ascetic strugglers receive the mysteries of the Sabbath in a similitude, but not the true Sabbath itself, which is repose from every sorrow and perfect rest from every troublesome passion. For God has given us to taste a mystery, but He has not ordained that we here lead our lives in the true reality. The true Sabbath, the Sabbath that is not a similitude [*lā mathīl lahu*], is the tomb, which reveals and manifests perfect repose for the tribulations of the passions and from the toil against them. The whole man, both soul and body, there keeps the Sabbath.⁵³

Gregorios' insistence in his sermon that the soul is not capacitated by the cessation of the body's energies but rather woefully dispossessed is consistent with the vision of Saturday (in Arabic there is no distinction between "Saturday" and "Sabbath"—both are *al-sabt*) as the day of total repose. The six days of ascetic struggle (*jihād*) are likened in Isaac's text to the six days in which God fashioned creation, and so "[God] fixed repose as a limit to our corporeal elements so that they should follow their primeval kinship with the earth, which means dissolution from this life."⁵⁴ As Iṣḥāq of Athos' translation gloss notes, "the body is of earth

⁵¹ Isaac, *Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, 267. See also the Arabic translation, Iṣḥāq al-Siryānī, *Nusukīyyāt*, 264.

⁵² Ισαακ Του Συρου, *Τα Εγρεθεντα Ασκητικα*.

⁵³ Iṣḥāq al-Siryānī, *Nusukīyyāt*, 268.

⁵⁴ Isaac, *Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, 267.

[*turāb*] and earth is a tomb.”⁵⁵ As for the departure from both labour and repose, i.e., “the Lord’s day,” it is “too great a thing even for us to speak of.” Isaac concludes: “our Sabbath is the day of the grave; it is here that our nature truly keeps the Sabbath.”⁵⁶

This cosmological scheme of the days is followed in the weekly calendrical cycle of daily prayers, strictly adhered to in Orthodox monastic life. It is not only typologically following the creation narrative of Genesis but also mimetic of Christ’s final week in Jerusalem as recounted in the gospel narratives—Monday through Friday commemorate the labour of struggle and attention to the commandments, which finds its end in mortification, death; Saturday, the ‘Seventh Day’, is both the day of rest (for both God and the human being) and so brings one to the commemoration of the dead, while Sunday is the ‘Eighth Day’ on which the Resurrection (and so too, as on the aforementioned Sunday at the monastery, Judgement) is commemorated. In this way the remembrance of death and its figuration as life (i.e., temporality) is distinguished from the eschatological image of the Divine Judgement—that which is beyond life and death, labour and repose—even while the latter yields to the former in the movement to the limit-threshold.

The dialectical alternation between life and death, the time of struggle and the time of repose, as the image of temporality, manifests as an infinite repetition that shows its terms in a recursive sequence; it encapsulates both the vitalist affirmation of life in its rhythmic renewal and the negativity that is bound up in that process of becoming.⁵⁷ The time of death is, as Isaac the Syrian wrote, what a monk looks to as “a merchant fixes his eye upon dry land,”⁵⁸ as that which manifests temporality *as such*. On the other hand, “departure,” signified, as Gregorios reminded us at liturgy, by the “time of the Judgement”, is *constitutively* unknowable. The intemporal image of the Judgement (*daynūna*), the Eighth Day, thus figures as an atemporal migration that names the limit of the dialectical structure of life/death. In that sense we are presented with two images folded into one another: the temporal image (death/life) and the intemporal image (Judgement/Resurrection):

⁵⁵ Iṣḥāq al-Siryānī, *Nusukīyyāt*, trans. Iṣḥāq ‘Aṭāllāh ([no place]: Manshūrāt al-Nūr, 1983), Ftn 1, 264.

⁵⁶ Isaac, *Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, 268.

⁵⁷ Compare Charles Hirschkind’s account of Isma’il Humaydi Islamic sermonizing in Egypt, where death and life are synonymized through their mutual status as *makhlūq*, creatures formed by God. Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*, 197–98.

⁵⁸ Isaac, *Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, 366.

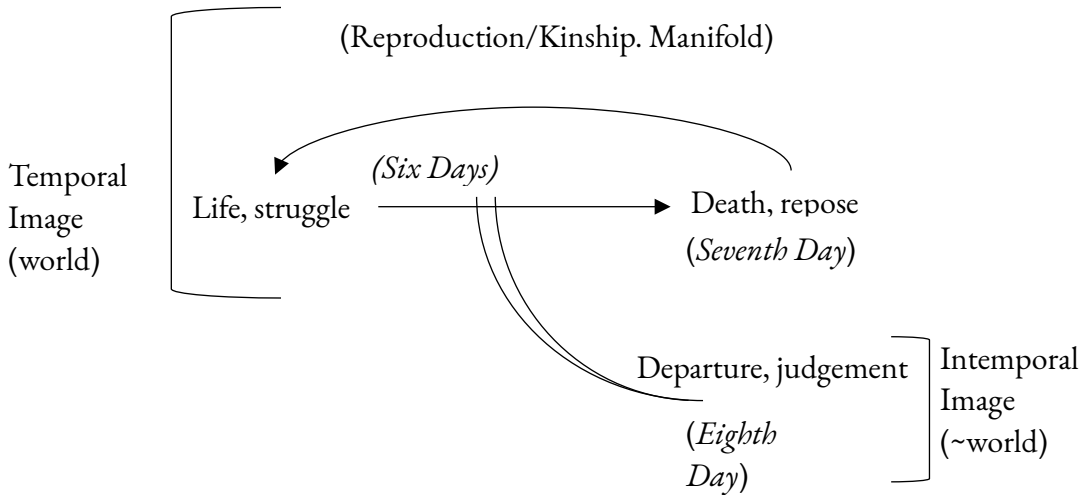


Figure 3.6

Death hence clarifies not only the series as a causal chain of the self running along within a horizon, focused on an ultimate expectation that is death, but, more than this, manifests the temporal subsistence of ‘the self’ as such. As such the temporal nature of one’s passional self is also marking the time given to labour against it; a life that is already a dying and a beginning that is already an end. In this way, the image of death serves to recall a primary temporal sense of *not yet*⁵⁹ that is drawn from a futural anticipation of a repose that, recalling Isaac’s words, “has no equal”.⁶⁰

The Judgement, folded within the temporal-image, is an image of the disclosure of the hidden that the former anticipates—it is salvation and resurrection heteronomously imparted from an outside that has no place or horizon as such, only spied in an emigration from the scene of the world. The two sides of the eschatological image thus mirror the structure of ascetic withdrawal into a still-experience and the possible disclosure within that desert scene.

Seventh Day (Repose)

⁵⁹ As Zecher writes, “the prospect of mortality serves, in the *Ladder*, not only to highlight the urgency of renunciation, but to remind the monk that he has *not yet been judged*. So long as death looms, the monk still has time” (202-203).

⁶⁰ Consider Heidegger’s description of the existential mode of fate for Dasein, “Only an entity which, in its Being, is essentially futural so that it is free for its death and can let itself be thrown back upon its factual “there” by shattering itself against death—that is to say, only an entity which, as futural, is equiprimordially in the process of having-been, can, by handing down to itself the possibility it has inherited, take over its own thrownness and be in the moment of vision for ‘its time’. Only authentic temporality which is at the same time finite, makes possible something like fate—that is to say, authentic historicity” (437)

The account of the life of Iṣḥaq on Mount Athos notes with particular clarity the relation of death to one's 'here':

At first, [Iṣḥaq] lived in the Resurrection skete alone for four years in severe austerity and was exposed to many trials that tried to make him depart from the skete. One time, the thoughts intensified in him to the point that he became confused in them and he found an old tomb in his roaming in the wilderness; he stopped before it and prayed, and he made remembrance of his death and said to his soul: "Here I die" [*hūna amūt*], and at this condition the thoughts vanished.

The text continues as it explains that, as part of the "Athonite monastic tradition," the monk should "dig his own tomb with his hands, in order that he not give up the remembrance of death as long as he lives." Iṣḥaq dug his grave next to his skete in the earth of a garden; "each day he would incense the grave which in the end would hold his relics after he reposed in the Lord on the evening of Thursday, July 16th 1998."

The taking place of the human being's "here" [*hūna*] that "dies" in the present, at the very moment it forms its tomb, is the making of an image of temporality itself; the tomb becomes, as the divine law of circumscription that Iṣḥaq assumed for himself, the final image of time and, it follows, of the ascetic 'struggle' that was itself being threatened by his vexing thoughts.

Within the topology of asceticism, death figures as the final recapitulation of withdrawal; it marks both the unity-in-opposition of life and death (reproduction) and so the "bitterness hidden within the sweetness" of the world. Contemplating the death of the body figures as a mode of renunciation and repose, which anticipates the impassibility perfected in the grave. When I asked elder Gregorios about the remembrance of death as a practice, he noted that its use was often only limited to combatting passional attachments; the remembrance that "this life will have an end...that everything will be finished" is a strong impetus to repentance. More than this however, the time given to us, as Gregorios imparted over our many conversations, was time to learn to die. In his words of counsel given to the young MJO members, Gregorios was adamant:

Unless one is able to receive this grace, one arrives at the end without reaching anything [*mā haqqaq shī*], without any spiritual fruit or any true fruit in their life. He is fearing death as one on the verge of passing. He feels this loss [*ḍay'a*] and confusion [*tashawwash*]. You

feel it the most at the time of death, the time when the human being has to die. And this truth no one can escape from, the truth of death.

“There is, before grace, death to the world,” he insisted to his small gathering. This death to the world is a death to “ourselves” [*dhātnā*], and the attainment to “true humility.” “The holy Silouan the Athonite, his disciple asks him before he dies, ‘are you going to die, Father?’ He told him, ‘I have not yet learned humility [*tawāḍuʿ*].’”

The form of humility here, *tawāḍuʿ*, is less a disposition⁶¹ than the orientation toward *aphaneia*. Silouan’s refusal to depart the struggle and enter repose comes from his concern that he has not sufficiently departed the appearance of the self in life. Gregorios’ citation of his words acts to affirm the necessity of struggle for *aphaneia* until the movement of death. It also serves to illuminate why Gregorios insisted on the separation of the body and soul as a debilitating loss. It does not absolve the loss of the body (into the immortality of the soul, say), but insists that death is a real and absolute deprivation and so the recapitulation of the impassible ‘still-experience’ that grounds hesychastic life.

The seventh day, repose in the grave, within this sensibility, is a rest from the struggle against the passions of the *nafs* and the cessation of its capacity to produce evil. The first chapter of Hieromonk Aspiro Jabbur’s text on the science of the soul is fittingly called “The Remembrance of Death”; Aspiro notes how the “prime of youth” masks the “fate” that awaits all in illness and age. In this way the remembrance of death, if ascetically engaged with as a “daily sustenance,” becomes a “spectre for our passions, inclinations, and desires.”⁶²

The remembrance of death in this way recapitulates the ascetic struggle—it is the pinnacle of “healing violence” that exists in “the terror of death, renunciation, and strict asceticism.” Aspiro is keen to insist that this terror is staged communally as well, “especially in our era,” which has the ignominious distinction of being the time when atomic weapons have been developed; “whoever boasts in them,” he writes, “boasts in the devices of the evil one.” From this Aspiro is led to contemplate—in a way resonant with Freud’s own 1914 twin essays “Thoughts for the Time of War and Death”⁶³—the opacity of the death drive and its necessity:

⁶¹ C.f., Talal Asad’s comment that the achievement of a certain disposition, “the will to obey what is seen as the truth, and therefore the guardians of that truth,” is the “Christian virtue of humility” (131). Asad, “Discipline and Humility.”

⁶² Jabbur, *Al-ʿtirāf Wa-l-Tahlīl al-Nafsī*, 26.

⁶³ Sigmund Freud, “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death,” in *The Standard Edition of Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 14 (1914–16) (Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing, 2015).

So thanks be to Allāh for his good dispensation [*tadbīr*] that we are punished with death, which is established as a spectre to frighten our monstrous drives, strongly deterring us from evil deeds. Despite the existence of this specter, the Christian in this world is the one who has perpetrated, throughout the last five centuries, the most terrifying wars and abysmal shades of annihilation. If the Gospel [*injīl*] was incapable of instructing Europe, how would things be if death was inexistent? If those counterfeit scientists had destroyed this world? This first atom, this first seed which encompasses all disintegrative potentialities in the human being today, thwarts the science of understanding.⁶⁴

Like Freud, the monastic ponders death as both internal and external to the human being—it marks a limit as both that which conditions human life (a limit set by God) and as a drive internal to the possibility of human life (*ḥāl*). The “disintegrative potentialities” of the human being perversely mark the integral “seed” of its existence. Because death is at once outside and inside the human being, it rightly recapitulates the entirety of temporal existence—as Gregorios noted likewise, to be given time and given death are synonymous and so death might be rendered as both fate, *maṣīr*, and time, *waqt*. Living time is, when viewed from its end, living a death.

Eighth Day (Departure)

Zecher, concerning the resurrection in his study of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, writes:

Even then, though, Climacus would remind the reader that resurrection continues the mode of existence already defined as dead. We could say, in an appropriately paradoxical fashion, that for Climacus, *resurrection is itself lived death*. Perhaps, though, we simply have it backward and Climacus wishes to correct our error—what we call death is, in fact, life. Not in a physical sense, as Heraclitus or the Orphics might have put it: physical death really is death. Rather, for Climacus, “death” refers to a mode of existence that is really a way of life: the “death” to oneself is “life” in God.⁶⁵

The ascetic form of life is, as it was in the time of Climacus, a mode in which the terms of life and death become inverted and, in that inversion, offer an opening into the desert space of the heart. Living death, then, is the passage to rest from passional struggle and to vivifying rest in

⁶⁴ Jabbur, *Al-I'tirāf Wa-l-Tahlīl al-Nafsī*, 28.

⁶⁵ Zecher, *The Role of Death in the Ladder of Divine Ascent and the Greek Ascetic Tradition*, 225.

God. That departure, which is “unspeakable,” as Isaac wrote, opens to another scene; the judgement and resurrection of the dead.

On one of my last visits to see Archimandrite Gregorios, we heard again about the horizon of death in the spiritual life. The elder received us in the large salon; he was quite pleased to see us, as it was also the feast day of the holy healer Panteleimon, the early 4th century martyr. This led the elder to give us a word on the nature of martyrdom and love. “The world” (*al-‘ālam*), he explains, destroys the possibility of the “remembrance of God” (*dhikr allāh*), through its passions, problems; this “squeezing” (*ḍagħṭ*) of the *nafs* is what causes us to forget God.

Gregorios continues to ponder the eschatological struggle between remembrance and forgetting, being and non-being, in the figure of death: the “fear of death” (*khawf al-mawt*) is in the world, he explains, and can be reduced to a fear for oneself, *khawfli-ḥālu*. His use of the prepositional letter, *lam*, appropriately captures the narcissistic loop that forms in this fear of death—it is a terror that is at once directed at oneself (literally, one’s “condition”) and *for*, as in ‘given to’, oneself.⁶⁶ For this reason, the elder explains, the fear of death is a forgetting of God (*nasyān*); as he had done in many of our previous discussions, the elder is displaying for us how what, at first, appears as something outside-the-self (in ‘the world’) is critical to the self’s passionate constitution.

A martyr’s death, Gregorios continues, is martyric inasmuch as it both calls God to remembrance and, in doing so, overcomes the fear of death—the fear *for* oneself. This love for God is also how Christ purifies the law (*nāmūs*); not content to remain within the boundaries of the law (world), Christ, and the martyrs in repetition after him, gesture to that which is “*akthar*,” more than the law; by taking the law to its limit, through the “healing” (*shifā*) of the *nafs*, the law is “purified” (*taṭhīr*). We cannot love God as long as we love ourselves; here the elder quotes Christ’s words from the gospel: “if you love me you will keep my commandments.” Being in the world but not of the world was the difference between forgetting and remembering God. He concludes, telling us all that we probably knew these things already, but that they were important to hear.

“Is this the end of the world?” inquires one of the visitors, a young man who had just entered Balamand’s seminary. The man cites as “signs” the spreading of war, the rise of ecumenism, and the general condition of *nasyān*, the forgetting of God. The elder defers, agreeing that these are indeed signs but that there were others as well.

⁶⁶ C.f., Georges Bataille’s statement on death and narcosis: “Anyone wanting slyly to avoid suffering, identifies with the entirety of the universe, judges each thing as if he were it. In the same way, he imagines, at bottom, that he will never die. We receive these hazy illusions like a narcotic necessary to bear life.” Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), (xxxii).

Coda: Elder Tūmā's Dream

At the end of his lecture on the concept of *inṭlāq*, departure or release—of which the women of Mar Y‘aqūb declared monasticism to be a constant life—the elder Ilyās fittingly writes: “death is a release: ‘Bring my soul out of prison’, says David in his Psalms. Eternal life in its entirety is departure, a departure without end....”⁶⁷

Some years after Ilyās’ repose in 2011, one of Ilyās’ counterparts, Archimandrite Tūmā, began writing about the deceased ascetic. This hagiographic trace, the form appearance drawn from Ilyās’s departure into *aphaneia*, was published as a volume called *The Spiritual Life of Father Ilyās*.⁶⁸ In a series of written *t‘āmulāt* (treatments), thirty-one sequenced in total, Tūmā recalls the mode of life of the elder. The treatments, he tells us, were written every Friday, one each week over the course of eight months in 2019.

At the mid-point of the numerical sequence of these written treatments is hiatus which interrupts the progression between number 14 and 15 and what Tūmā appropriately calls a waypoint, *maḥaṭṭa*. In this *maḥaṭṭa* (a word which implies both an interchange and a passage), the author notes a cessation—he “does not want to stop discoursing about Father Ilyās,” but he must interrupt himself in order to “relay what I observed.” The archimandrite explains that typically his writing would proceed normally (himself being an accomplished writer) but that this time was different, full of “apprehension [*qalaq*]”:

 this time, I began thus, whereupon a certainty was affirmed within me that about whom I wrote (Father Ilyās), or I wrote [*uktubahu*] (if it is an acceptable expression), or his angel, if it was him who was truly driving me to write, accompanying me in it, then I would continue and when the flow of words dwindled, I would stop.⁶⁹

To his surprise, the words and, more than this, the “expressive forms” were always precisely present at the time of writing. His deceased counterpart, Father Tūmā concludes, was not merely present in the endeavor, but accompanying the “definitive aim [*qaṣd muḥaddad*]” of the writing.

After a night had passed, the ascetic recounts entering a *Barzakh*: “between insomnia, light sleep, and prayer, I observed what is between a dream and wakefulness, and what I recorded

⁶⁷ Ilyās Murqūṣ, “alāān aṭliq ‘abdak” [Now let your servant depart], Beirut, 1999.

⁶⁸ Tūmā. Bīṭār, *Al-Sira al-Rūḥiyya Li-l-Ab Ilyās (Murqūṣ)* (Dayr al-Ḥarf, R’as al-Matn; Dūmā, al-Batrūn: Dayr al-Qaddis Yūḥannā al-Mu‘amadān and Dayr al-Qaddis Jāūrjūs, 2021).

⁶⁹ Bīṭār, 118.

once I was lucid. And this is what this speech concerned; I recorded it and my *nafs* was thus completely restful!" The elder's dream follows in the text and here in full:⁷⁰

I write these words on Tuesday morning, on the 12th of the month of August, beginning at six and a quarter in the morning:

I woke from sleep a short while ago, after a night in which my sleep was light. The last of what I saw before my lucidity was a dream, as if it was actual, imprinted in my mind, evident [māthil] before me. I found myself, in two instances, seeing the matter exactly the same: a crystal cup of wine appearing totally pure to the brim, and a cup that appeared to me to be filigreed. The wine was, at the brim, undulating a little, yet a single drop from it did not fall. The cup did not seem small. It was as if it was a massive vessel! Carrying it from the side was a being [kā'in] that I did not completely see who it was. And he was asking me, in my feeling, in my interior, to share in bearing [the cup] and moving it from where it was placed! I felt as if that being was an official personage! It was decided to share in moving the cup! I did so terrified, though I had not noticed if I had put my hand on the cup, for I saw the cup just so. Only, my feeling was that I truly shared in moving it. I saw the cup had moved! And I greatly desired that not a drop was shed from it. I felt myself dreadfully desirous! While the cup was being moved from a table of which I do not know its nature, I woke up.

I asked myself, what is this?! For this condition brought me to the idea that this must itself be an important message! What crossed my mind was that it had something to do with Father Ilyās, about whom I am writing these days, and I find myself hesitating in writing more as one whom has nothing yet to say! Every week I write, by Allah's good pleasure, and I don't know beforehand about what I will write! As if I must write and I cannot but write! From whence come this speech?! As if there is, at times, someone imposing it [yumliahu] upon me, even in detail! My inclination [maylī], to some extent, is to stop on the pretext of my empty awareness. Suddenly, a word forms from here and an idea from there, and I cannot but be delirious in it! Then, when I sit at my bureau and ledger, I find the pen moves with clear and direct affluence, as if someone is inspiring what I say, though some of the expressions and appendices I add, or some of the ideas I refine, and add to the emphasized meaning, as I understand it. At times, I write and write, and I do not include in what I write any justification, which makes me certain that someone joins me in writing the piece! The thoughts, from one perspective, are interconnecting in themselves and the thought opens a horizon to new thoughts. Thus, I find myself face to face with birth after birth, unanticipated, in writing the piece of the week! This crossed my mind after I awoke, and the wine, to the brim of the cup, undulating a little upon the confluences, in captivating clarity! For I said: I record what I saw and felt. I took this paper and sat half-sitting on my bed, and I wrote what I wrote without hesitation or change...

⁷⁰ Bīṭār, 119–20.

The time, now, is Six Fifty-Five exactly.

To the Glory of God,

Tūmā

2019, August 12th

The wine, as the hieromonk concludes, marks that which is transmitted (*naql*) across Father Ilyās and himself and yet belongs to neither of them properly; like the dream itself, it reveals as it discloses an ‘elsewhere.’ The elder goes on to speculate that if God wanted to reveal (*yu‘alan*) Father Ilyās’ holiness (*qidāsa*) then he would supply “every word about him”. He continues, assuring his readers that he is not a “man of dreams”; they are often forgotten or carry little weight and at times they even “distress” him. Yet, he explains, while he had felt in writing these entries that these thoughts “were not entirely from me” and that he had learned “aspects of Father Ilyās as if for the first time,” he “delayed in saying that this is Father Ilyās presenting himself to me, these days, I had not entrusted it before, not in its intensity or its types....this I announced and announce [now] petitioning the Divine trust (*al-imāna li-llah*), my conscience [*ḍamīr*], and the man who was a father to me in every meaning of the word, and I know him, today, through what I wrote of him, according to the deepest knowledge I have known in my life, my birth in Christ!”⁷¹

The trace of Ilyās presents as an appearance in the dream-like otherness (the limit, *barzakh*) staged in the scene to the *nafs* and its *inclination* (*mayl*):

How is it that I contemplate *allāh* and the beloved [*al-aḥibbā*]—and Father Ilyās is a beloved [*ḥabīb*]*—in such a way? [‘alā hadhā al-nnaḥū]*” “Is it delusion,” he asks, “to imagine something or someone guiding me, and I am obliged to accompany him in this endeavour to add such a sacramental trace to a person with whom I commune in speech?”⁷²

The trace of Ilyās’ eternal departure moves through the field of creation—being/non-being, life and death. As Archimandrite Gregorios notes concerning hagiographic depictions, “[the

⁷¹ Ali Atif Mian describes a similar scene of “sublimation” of homosocial erotics among Deobandi Muslims, wherein “moral and spiritual transformation is animated by the love for a human exemplar who loves God more than non-divine objects. The Deobandī scholar makes himself available for the sensual touch, and once the friend’s romantic love for him becomes kenotic love—a self-emptying attachment—he then connects the friend to God.” (137) in Ali Altaf Mian, “Genres of Desire: The Erotic in Deobandī Islam,” *History of Religions* 59, no. 2 (October 23, 2019): 108–45, <https://doi.org/10.1086/704928>.

⁷² Bīṭār, *Al-Sīra al-Rūḥiyya Li-l-Ab Ilyās (Murqūṣ)*, 121.

holy ones] are glorified because Divine grace dwelt in them. Subsequently, Divine grace is that which is worshiped [*yusjid*], yet it is not worshipped isolated from the person who bears it. For though this person remains created he is deified by grace uncreated.”⁷³ The restful movement at the limits of the *nafs*, doubly traced out in the inclination toward *aphaneia* in the desert of the heart and the repose of *Ilyās*, points, as ever, to another scene and to the God beyond.

⁷³ *Iṣṭfān, Al-Īmān al-Urthūdhaksī Wa al-Injīlīūn al-Mu‘amadānīūn*, 293–94.