Introduction: theory, history and form

In 2010, 'a museum of modern Iraqi culture' was destroyed by an explosion in Baghdad.[1] The house in Mansour neighbourhood belonged to the late Palestinian writer Jabra Ibrahim Jabra. Since his death in 1994, his family kept the house intact in the hope that its valuable contents would one day be open to the public. Now, lost forever, are thousands of letters from the Arab world's leading writers and artists in the last half century, paintings by famous Iraqi artists (such as Jewad Salim, Shāker Hasan, and Su'ad al-'Atar), hundreds of books and manuscripts, numerous unpublished works by Jabra himself, and, finally, numerous recordings of literary evenings and talks. For many commentators, this event was rife with symbolism, and indicative of contemporary Arab fragmentation and decline.

Jabra was one of the leading intellectuals in the Arab world. Poet, painter, novelist, translator, and cultural commentator, he represented a whole generation of writers and artists who responded to the challenges of twentieth-century Arab history, such as the Palestinian *nakba* (catastrophe) of 1948 and the Arab defeat of 1967, by constructing a new Arab cultural renaissance. The formal end of Western colonialism meant the freedom to build a new Arab foundation, neither imitative of the West nor beholden to the values and traditions of the old social order. If Palestine was the colonial exception to a region-wide decolonization, its main lesson for Jabra was clear: renew in order to redeem and rectify. The road back to Jerusalem went through Arab enlightenment and modernization. What Jabra signified, then, is the artistic freedom, innovation, and versatility of a whole generation of Arab modernizers. And what was lost in his house is 'the memory of one of the richest and most fertile periods of creativity' in the Arab world.[2]

Among the ravages and rubble of the US occupation of Iraq and its political institutionalization of sectarian, ethnic, and religious infighting, something else was registered. A uniquely Palestinian journey: a story of a Palestinian refugee from Bethlehem who, on the heels of the Palestinian

nakba, found a secure home in buzzing Baghdad of the 1950s, and scaled the heights of Arab and Iraqi culture. It is a Palestinian story of Arab integration and belonging. Here too the symbolism was rife: the destruction of Jabra's house is an emblem of the destruction of the Palestinian community in Iraq. It restages Palestinian dispossession, and it reminds Palestinians of their permanent insecurity. As a consequence of the sectarian civil war, 28,000 Palestinian refugees (out of 35,000) were forced to flee Baghdad and become refugees again. It is a small number compared to the catastrophic scale of Iraqi numbers: hundreds of thousands dead and five million internally and externally displaced.[3] Yet it compounds the Iraqi tragedy to note that none of the surrounding states would take the Palestinian refugees, and many would languish for years in the no man's land between Iraq and Syria and on the borders of Jordan and Saudi Arabia. If some found shelter in Latin America or Scandinavia, none would be allowed to return to Israel or the 1967 occupied territories. Thus, the story of Jabra and Iraq's Palestinians ends as it began: in homelessness and insecurity. Statelessness, permanent exile, and occupation mark out the Palestinians historically from their Arab counterparts.

How might one best access this cultural repository of the second Arab renaissance lost in Jabra's house? How to reinsert oneself into its 'structure of feeling' (its 'meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt') and possibility, and register the loosening hold of a Western-subordinated Arab order, and the emergence of Arab autonomy and self-determination which marks this period?[4] Through the novel, I would posit, and the Palestinian novel at that. The novel became the dominant Arab literary form of the twentieth century, and with its preoccupation with ordinary, everyday, lived experience, it is the form best suited to capture the social imaginary of a whole historical period. More specifically, the Palestinian novel, because the social and political position of Palestinians after the *nakba* – as refugees and outsiders geographically scattered all over the Arab world who had the least stake in an oppressive status quo – gave them both an Arab-wide vantage point and the restlessness of dispossession. Rather than express narrow particularism, they affirmed universal categories: humanism, self-sacrifice as collective redemption, mutuality, reciprocity, and individual self-realization.

Novels like Jabra's *The Ship* (1970) and *In Search of Walid Masoud* (1978), Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun* (1963), and Emile Habiby's *The Secret Life of Saeed, the Ill-Fated Pessoptimist* (1974) were at the core of Arab contestation and innovation. They were as central to the Arab novel culturally as the Palestinian cause was central to the Arab world

politically, marking both significant region-wide shifts and crucial conjunctures. Nothing better captures the Arab malaise after the defeat of 1967 than Jabra's *The Ship*, where a group of intellectuals float around the Mediterranean interrogating their lives and histories, and searching for existential coherence and meaning, or Jabra and Abdelrahman Munif's jointly written *World without Maps* (1982), which through its depiction of the imaginary city of 'Amuriyya marks both the failure of the radical attempt to roll back the effects of 1967 and the emergence of Gulf oil regional dominance.

With its unique openness to Arab-wide feeling, the Palestinian novel marks the struggle between emancipatory emergence and authoritarian restoration. It is not only a chronicle of the Palestinian and Arab history of dispossession, renewal, and defeat, but it also constructs distinctive aesthetic forms and features that register the story of both Palestinian and Arab historical transformation after the *nakba*. Palestinian refugee narratives tell of exile and embeddedness, settler-colonial dispossession and entanglement. As dispossessed exiles living among other Arabs, Palestinian writers were in positions structurally attuned to region-wide political and cultural phenomena. The novel articulates this distinction.

The Palestinian Novel traces the development of the novel from the *nakba* to Oslo. My main objective is to present an arc argument about novelistic development as it relates to the four central Palestinian novelists active after 1948: Baghdad-exiled Jabra (1919–94), Beirut-exiled Kanafani (1936–72), Haifa-based Habiby (1922–96), and Nablus-based Sahar Khalifeh (b. 1942). As is widely acknowledged, their *oeuvres* constitute the core of the Palestinian novel in Arabic. There are clearly other aesthetically compelling Palestinian novels in this period, and increasingly in languages other than Arabic as well – especially in Hebrew and English.[5] But I will only focus on these four writers because the Palestinian novel is substantially (though not exclusively) associated with their foundational work. I do, though, refer to other writers as well, and will discuss two additional texts at key points in my argument: Jean Genet's seminal *Prisoner of Love* (1986) and Elias Khoury's hugely influential *Gate of the Sun* (1998). Both exemplify, in different ways, how the Palestinian revolution became, in Genet's words, '*my* revolution'. Throughout *The Palestine Novel*, I chart the relationship between history and aesthetic form, and show how it has changed since 1948. Categories like realism and modernism are adapted to Palestinian conditions in order to help understand the significant literary shifts and emergences that take place in the novel. My overall aim is to develop a materialist framework for interpreting the Palestinian

novel that combines two major categories: historical processes (including social and political developments) and literary form (including distinct aesthetic characteristics and features). This framework must be sensitive enough to distinguish Palestinian specificities from general Arab conditions, and to take account of uneven temporalities and 'wildly multiple Palestinian actuality' (to use Edward Said's phrase).[6] As a dispossessed and scattered people, Palestinians live under various political, economic, and legal jurisdictions. If most Palestinians became refugees in 1948, their areas of dispersal, and their social and political circumstances of exile were varied. They were also marked by conditions and events that were both Arab-wide (such as the rise of Arab nationalism in the 1950s and its defeat in 1967) and state-specific (such as Black September in Jordan in 1970, when the Jordanian monarchy crushed the Palestinian resistance groups and expelled them to Lebanon).

Uneven condition is thus endemic to Palestinian existence, a basic fact of dispossession and exile. This has very specific consequences. Its main effect, I argue, is political unevenness: structurally disordered conditions of struggle, mass mobilization, and terrains of cultural production. For example, the fact that in 1982 the PLO was politically destroyed by Israel and routed out of Beirut does not mark the end of Palestinian anti-colonialism. A self-organized mass uprising against the Israeli occupation (the first *intifada* of 1987), distinct to Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, ruptured that sense of defeat and unleashed new capacities and possibilities of struggle. In other words, while exiled Palestinians organized their revolt in the period after 1967 and were finally defeated in 1982, the culmination of occupied Palestinian mobilization comes in the first *intifada* of 1987 and is ultimately defeated a few years later in Oslo. In their political rise and fall, occupied Palestinians are belated and out of sync with the politics of the exiled. If they were influenced by regional and diaspora developments, their political mobilization remained, nonetheless, autonomous and independent.

In *The Palestinian Novel*, Palestinian unevenness is, therefore, not a general marker of disjointed and discontinuous cultural and economic logics, but something more specific: a distinct and changing relation between culture and politics with its own historical determinations. Here praxis and collective transformation are key categories to prize open novelistic form, and anti-colonial revolutionary struggle becomes a key determinative historical process that develops unevenly and shapes aesthetic choices and possibilities. Such distinct circumstances and uneven temporalities of existence and struggle are crucial for interpreting the Palestinian novel.

Lukács, realism, nation

In the history of twentieth-century criticism, Georg Lukács' writings in the 1930s are best attuned to changes in both history and literary form. It is, in fact, hard to investigate the Palestinian or Arab novel without noting how important Lukács has grown in Arab criticism (Tarabishi's influential translation *The Novel as Bourgeois Epic* appeared in 1979).[7] In addition, categories such as realism (lyrical, social, documentary), critical realism, and socialist realism are intrinsic to Arab criticism, as is the idea (attributed to Lukács) that the novel is a bourgeois form. As editor of *al-Hadaf* magazine, for instance, Kanafani published a positive assessment of Lukács titled 'Georg Lukács: Studies in Realism';[8] and the leading Palestinian critic Faisal Darraj wrote a critical piece about Lukács in the Palestinian resistance journal *Shu'un Filasṭīniyya* titled 'Georg Lukács and the Theory of the Novel' (1979), criticizing his decadence thesis, his tight wedding of novel form to economy and to the fate of the bourgeoisie, and his rejection of the autonomy of art.[9] While Sartre and others were more pervasive and have remained better known influences, the terms of Lukács' criticism filtered in because of their obvious pertinence.

I turn to Lukács in order to construct a critical framework for interpreting the Palestinian novel that connects massive political ruptures to shifts in novel form. Lukács' *The Historical Novel* (1937) is a prototypical materialist interpretation of the European classical realist novel that can work on several historiographical and aesthetic levels for Palestinian novels. Several crucial categories and concepts are usable, especially a Lukácsian periodization of novelistic development based on historical conjuncture. With due consideration to the *unevenness of development* of the novel form that Lukács himself insisted on, I aim to utilize his materialist method and mode of argumentation without falling into his historical parallelism or schematism, or reproducing his prejudices against non-realist forms. By critically examining Lukács' categories, I show how they are informed by a specific political-historical temporality that can be adapted to charting the trajectory of Palestinian novels.

Lukács argues that certain historical circumstances, such as the French Revolution of 1789, generated distinct literary forms (classical realism, or the Scottian historical novel) that were no longer possible after the revolutionary defeats and political disintegration of 1848. Similar hopes and energies arose in other economically less developed countries like Russia, and were shaped by Pushkin and Tolstoy, while in France Balzac's realism was replaced by Flaubert's disillusionment in *Sentimental*

Education (1869). Novelistic form responded to major historical shifts and revolutionary-democratic transformations in the East as well. For Russia, Lukács saw 1905 as politically similar to 1848, with the distinct difference that in the Russian line of development defeat came to be redeemed by the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917: 'If, for instance, we note that there was a turning point in the history of the novel with the revolution of 1848 we must realize that this concerns those countries that were affected by the revolution of '48; that Russia – *mutatis mutandis* – experienced a similar turning point of its entire social development in 1905. The Russian novel before 1905 therefore will, in many respects, correspond to the European novel between 1789 and 1848 and not to that of the period after 1848'.[10] Both society and literary genre are affected by historical uneven development. Similar Lukácsian connections emerge in the colonies. In the period of the anti-fascist popular front of the 1930s and the 'heroic struggles of the people against imperialist exploitation and oppression', 'the field of [realist] portrayal' has indeed broadened: 'Now, however, when we are contemporaries of the heroic liberation struggles of the Chinese, Indian, etc., people, all these developments flow concretely into the common historical stream of the liberation of mankind and are therefore portrayable in literature.'[11] As early as the 1930s, when the colonial world was just beginning to awaken politically, Lukács could see that his framework for analyzing the historical and classical realist novel had broader implications. The conjunction of revolutionary-democratic humanism and popular mobilization that lies at the base of his model in *The Historical Novel* can now also be found in the anti-colonial struggles of his day.

I am not suggesting a historical equivalence between European historical conditions in the nineteenth century and the Arab world in the twentieth, or between the European so-called bourgeois revolutions and the anti-colonial struggles in the East. Their content, class composition, and conditions of possibility are different. I don't seek to force Palestinian conditions into pre-existing boxes. Joe Cleary makes this point in relation to Ireland: 'The difficulty with the historical schemas developed by Lukács and Jameson is that they cannot easily be transposed onto the Irish situation. Whatever their differences otherwise, these Marxist cultural histories are elaborated with a metropolitan European or Euro-American capitalist history in mind.'[12] What I aim to do, therefore, is flesh out the Lukácsian relationship between political and aesthetic developments and examine how Lukács' argument about the connection between revolution as mass history and aesthetic form plays out in the Palestinian context. Lukács is wrong when he produces a reductive reading of modernism as

ideologically decadent (Adorno's reading of modernism as resistance to a reified modernity is much more plausible, as I argue in Chapter 5, and link it to the demise of revolutionary potential) or when he judges artworks merely by their producers' proximity or distance from class struggle (the German expressionists exemplify both), or when he suggests that realism ends after 1848. But he is right when he insists that major shifts in novelistic form are rooted in historical transformations, that the artistic autonomy and the social meaning of art are distinct yet relationally mediated notions, and that a historicism attuned to conjuncture and rupture can bear significant literary-critical interpretive fruits.

What interests me is the conceptual apparatus that undergirds Lukács' argument. My critical outline of his views emphasizes his historical periodizing conception and then utilizes what is defensible about his work in order to understand the trajectory of the Palestinian novel. By engaging with recent postcolonial conceptions of the nation, I also argue that a Lukácsian materialism neither ignores nor inflates nationhood in literary interpretation: rather it situates it historically, without assuming its explanatory primacy. This prepares the ground for examining the historicity of the Palestinian novel.

For Lukács, then, all great art is characterized by the capacity to penetrate into the depth of objective reality in order to convey its dynamic forces and real contradictions: its essence and social relations. Such unique epistemological capacities define great art for him: 'Real art thus represents life in its totality, in motion, development and evolution.'[13] Classic realism does exactly that for Lukács. As Lunn explains: 'Lukács defined realism as a literary mode in which the lives of individual characters were portrayed as part of a narrative which situated them within the entire historical dynamics of their society.'[14] Its main features are typicality, writers' social position and knowability. In his writings from the 1930s onwards, the loss of typicality, the loss of connection to popular life, and the loss of the ability to comprehend the world causally, mark a historical and aesthetic turning point between pre-1848 and post-1848 Europe.

Typicality utilizes Engels' notion of 'typical characters in typical circumstances'. Neither merely 'average' nor 'mediocre' – though these elements can be present (as in Scott's 'middling' heroes) – a type is a literary amalgamation of various force-fields (individual, social, and historical) that 'give living human embodiment to historical-social types' (*HN*, 35). These qualities allow 'types' to be individual and universal, expressing uniqueness and commonality at the same time. Their particular features are connected up with the overall determinate structure of society. They

are both fully individual and historically typical, depicted as both subjects and objects of history.[15] Here again Lukács' earlier realist epistemology is evident: type is a form of character that best expresses the movement of social development and its basic contradictions. Lukács judges the efficacy of characters from this specific vantage point.

Because of these distinct features, types enable crucial realist literary goods: the connection between the individual and the historical, and the seamless integration of private and public. Types thus stand at the intersection of major historical changes and ruptures, and are focal points for both large-scale and more private and domestic processes: '[they] stand at the meeting-point of great social-historical collisions. The historical crises are direct components of the individual destinies of the main characters and accordingly form an integral part of the action itself. In this way the individual and the social-historical are inseparably connected in regard to both characterization and action' (*HN*, 200–201). Rupture in this link is consequential: it signifies the breakdown of classical realism and the beginning of its literary-historical disintegration and decay. What is lost is the capacity to depict characters as historical private individuals.

The year 1848 institutionalizes this shift for Lukács. That is the crucial historical point to note. It also ushers in a period of political disengagement and disconnect. This is also felt on the level of writers' social position. Although Lukács finds it hard to sustain this argument, he insists that the shift is not just historical-conjunctural but has to do with the writer's own ability to participate in active class struggle. That too has a drastic impact on style. As Lukács emphasizes in his essay on Zola in *Studies in European Realism*: 'The writer no longer participates in the great struggles of his time, but is reduced to a mere spectator and chronicler of public life.'[16] Solitary observation of human existence is a symptom of such 'social degradation' of the writer. No longer was there a revolution for writers of the imperialist age to actively participate in or engage with, leaving them unmoored from historical and social grounding – in a word, alienated from the people. But active participation in revolt was never the key issue. If it was so, then a totally uninvolved Thomas Mann could never be praised for his realism and elevated above a politically engaged public intellectual like Zola. Realism cannot be made to depend on whether writers actually man the barricades. Suggesting that writers can achieve realism merely by joining the struggling working class is, therefore, an analytically deficient category.[17]

With the shift in social position comes a degradation in mode of description: from realist narration to naturalist description. If Zola

'*described* from the standpoint of an observer', 'Tolstoy … *narrated* from the standpoint of a participant'.[18] 'Narration establishes proportions, description merely levels', and what is lost is 'the real causality of the epic events. And only the experience of this causality can communicate the sense of a real chronological, concrete, historical sequence'. If typicality was about constructing a balance of determinations in narrative – distinguishing between essential and ephemeral, laws and exceptions, fundamentals and fleeting moments – description marks its collapse: a loss of interaction, of meaningful communication, and of the integration of public and private. The clamouring contemporaneity of events undercuts what is primary, while chaotic surface-detail undermines selection and aesthetic organization. The net result is that reality becomes difficult to comprehend and basically unknowable.

What the classic realist novel ultimately represents for Lukács is the idea that history is about popular life. Popular mobilization no longer exists to force the bourgeoisie to engage with subaltern interests and participate in the emancipation of mankind. With the historical defeat of the democratic forces in 1848, fear of the rising power of the proletariat and the revolutionary masses causes the bourgeoisie to ally itself with the *ancien régime*. If Lukács can depict the bourgeoisie as the historical leader of cultural and political revolution, there were other moments when he thought that this was an overestimation of its capacities – as in his essay on Gorki when he states: 'that the tasks of the *bourgeois* revolutions were always carried out really radically by the plebeian democratic elements *against the will* of the *bourgeoisie*'.[19] Historically, this emphasis on plebeian mobilization as the driving force behind the so-called bourgeois revolutions is much more accurate than the notion that these revolutions were bourgeois projects in conception and execution. What both interpretations maintain, however, is the notion of significant bourgeois responsiveness to popular life and mass mobilization. Revolutions radicalize the bourgeoisie and force their hand against the old order. That, indeed, is the crucial component of Lukács' theory of novelistic development. As a result of pressure from below, aesthetics and politics take the form of revolutionary democracy and classical realism. Absent plebeian revolutionism, narrow class interests, and aesthetic decay predominate, for Lukács – even among the progressively minded bourgeoisie.[20]

Lukács' emphasis on history as mass mobilization and popular life comes out of 1789 and is key to understanding his interpretative project. 'The French Revolution', as Michael Löwy notes, 'was a crucial moment in the constitution of the oppressed people –the "innumerable mass"

(Marx) of the exploited – as *historical subject*, as actor in its own liberation'.[21] The masses come into their own here politically as historical actors, and their bold emergence and historical consciousness reshapes both nineteenth-century history and the contours of Lukács' historical novel. A shift in the broad conditions of the bourgeois epoch is marked.

'Bourgeois revolution' thus ushers in various competing forces, struggling over the meaning, direction, and principles of the revolution. For Lukács, these manifest themselves not only on the social level of class struggle and on the economic level of the rise and gradual expansion of bourgeois property, but also in the form of national ideas about independence and national character. Though the national idea is never as fully integrated as a concept in *The Historical Novel* as capitalism and class struggle are, it is worth noting its place in the Lukácsian framework. Early in *The Historical Novel*, he states: 'But the awakening of national sensibility and with it a feeling and understanding for national history occurs not only in France. The Napoleonic wars everywhere evoked a wave of national feeling, of national resistance to the Napoleonic conquests, an experience of enthusiasm for national independence.' Whether 'regenerative or reactionary', whether of 'progressive or reactionary ideology', 'it is clear that these movements – real mass movements – inevitably conveyed a sense and experience of history to broad masses' (25). The national idea is not reified here or disconnected from Europe-wide structural historical changes, or seen as the main generative cause of novelistic form in the trajectory of the historical novel. It is, in fact, seen as part and parcel of a multiple set of determinations that come to affect the nature of the novel. The national idea is seen as part of a changing world history, not its single most important harbinger of meaning and coherence. Placing the nation in the context of history as mass life, capitalist development, and class struggle allows Lukács to formulate the development of the novel in a way that is attuned to its multiple social and historical determinations.

This factor is important to keep in mind before I start discussing the Palestinian novel because the nation has been a key category for interpreting novels from the colonies. What Lukács does here is to show that national features of development can be incorporated into the analysis of the novel without presuming that the nation is the singular determiner of novelistic meaning – in other words, without the novel being always read as a Jamesonian 'national allegory': 'All third-world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical, and in a very specific way … *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*'.[22]