

CHAPTER ONE

Empty Spaces and Unveiled Placeholders

Locating Southern Iraq

And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name
that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him.
And power was given unto them over the fourth part of
the earth, to kill with the sword, and with hunger,
and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.

—Rev. 6:8

It may seem odd to begin a study devoted to the consideration of how insights generated by postcolonial literary theory might apply to the verse of Iraqi poet Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb with a chapter highlighting the apocalyptic element in his work. As is abundantly clear from even the most casual perusal of apocalyptic writings, their dominant focus is always on temporality: the representation of the end of things as they have been, with perhaps a hopeful gesture toward a renewed and better future. When Sayyāb avails himself, as he does in many of his most successful poems—like the famous “Unshūdat al-Maṭar” (Hymn of the Rain)—of apocalyptic categories, this temporal element is never absent, but hovers over the trajectory of the poem like a vengeful specter waiting for the appropriate opportunity to emerge.

In postcolonial literary theory, in contrast, as in postmodernism, the tropes of “place,” “space,” and “spatialization” have become *the* privileged signifiers in the creation of analytical constructs, though perhaps this parallel development has not occurred for entirely the same reasons in both cases. In postmodernism, and in the allied critical discourse of poststruc-

turalism, the emphasis on spatial metaphors and figures of speech seems to have come to the fore at least partially under the pressure of attempts to think beyond, or against the grain of, the modernist valorization of temporality.¹ As Fredric Jameson says in his landmark study of postmodernism, “a certain spatial turn has often seemed to offer one of the more productive ways of distinguishing postmodernism from modernism proper, whose experience of temporality—existential time, along with deep memory—it is henceforth conventional to see as a dominant of high modernism.”²

On the other hand, in colonial and postcolonial writing—and postcolonial theory—the focus on space may indeed relate to an antitemporality, but it can also be said to represent at the base something more tangible: space is quite literally (as well as metaphorically) the location where colonizer and colonized engage in struggles for power. The matter of who possesses the *place*, the land, becomes important not only terms of imaginative representation and what it might assert as possible but also in terms of quite specifically who can *do* what to whom. As Edward Said has recently said, speaking from the perspective of the colonized, “. . . anti-imperialist resistance . . . literature develops quite consciously out of a desire to distance the native African, Indian, or Irish individual from the British, French, or (later) American master. Before this can be done, however, there is a pressing need for the recovery of the land that, because of the presence of the colonizing outsider, is recoverable at first only through the imagination.”³ Elsewhere in the same essay, Said notes that this tactic of “recovery of the land,” is usually formulated as part of a direct response to deterritorializing strategies of the colonial powers already in play, such as redrawing national boundaries (or instituting them in the first place), building new cities or renaming old ones, instituting Western practices for recording land ownership, and even carrying out construction projects, such as the building of roads or ports, and agricultural schemes.

It may be useful to sketch out briefly some of the possible typologies for this struggle in order to come to grips with their implications for the representation of place in the literature of colonialism. The extreme case, for instance, might be located in the practices of settler colonialism—where the land is physically taken away from the people who had formerly lived there. This would then be seen as the most devastating form of colonial usurpation, one that generates enormous ambivalences and anxieties, not only for the dispossessed but for those who do the dispossessing.⁴

Adjacent to settler colonialism, and often interfacing with it, one could speak of colonialisms where the educational system for the “natives” was

completely dominated and directed by the European power, as was the case in the Arab world in the portion of the Maghrib under French control. Even in those places where British sway held—and there was less formal control of the educational system—there were various attempts at interference.⁵ Because education includes lessons on geography and history—the two elements most widely recognized as constructing an individual with a sense of a “national” identity, of belonging to a “nation”—it can act as an extraordinarily powerful tool in the hands of whoever runs it.⁶

Thus we can see that even for colonized groups who remained in physical possession of the land, loss of control over their governing institutions constituted a deracinating experience of imperialist power that could destabilize their relationship to this land and transform it into what Richard Terdiman has usefully phrased, in another context, a “problem,” “a site and source of cultural disquiet.”⁷ In other words, what is often most important in tracing the trajectory of a thematic or style of expression, such as a preoccupation with descriptions of nature or a penchant for tropes dependent on spatialization, is not so much pinpointing its origin, the instant when it first occurs, but in recognizing when—and in what ways—it seems to become the index for a trauma, a crisis, something that forms a source of anxiety for a large number of the members of a given cultural group. It becomes equally important, then, to pay close attention as well to the context in which that anxiety is expressed and made explicit.

As an example of how this contextual way of looking at a recurrent theme can be heuristically useful, one could posit postmodernism’s tendency toward spatialization not only as a countermove against the temporalist bias of modernism but also as a sign of an increased anxiety about the subject’s spatial relations: not only the self’s relation to a particular place or location but relations with “others” from different places and different cultures who are contending for the same place or the same recognition. This could then be used to set up a further contrast with modernism, where the characteristic anxiety might be portrayed as being over the self’s relationship to the past and to “others” from history. To put it in an authorial context, T.S. Eliot’s anxiety would have been more over his relationship to predecessors from English and American literature than to his contemporaries writing poetry in other countries, while Steven Spielberg’s anxiety as a postmodernist storyteller would not be over his “place” vis-à-vis Charles Dickens or even D.W. Griffith, but François Truffaut or Akira Kurosawa or Satyajit Ray.

In the same register of looking for recurrences and then contextualizing them as anxieties, one might consider European romanticism’s obsession

with organic metaphors as not only a reaction against the mechanistic theories of the immediately preceding period⁸ but also as index of an anxiety over new ways of thinking about organism, about the new discoveries problematizing the nature of life and living beings that are exemplified so perfectly in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. In a similar sense, then, the themes of land, space, and geography would seem to form an anxiety or "problem" for all colonial and postcolonial writers, whether settlers or indigens, and it should not be surprising for us to find these themes highlighted in their writing.⁹

In light of the foregoing, then, it should hold a special interest for us that the importance of place in the works of the Iraqi poet Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb is singled out in virtually every critical evaluation of his writings, often yoked in an uneasy juxtaposition with acknowledgment of its apocalyptic bent. All of the earliest commentators to deal with the young Sayyāb's poetry, for instance, specifically fix at one point or another in their discussions upon the role played by "the Iraqi environment (*bī'a*),"—as one of them puts it—as a defining characteristic of his work, something setting it apart from that of his contemporaries.¹⁰ In virtually the first evaluation of Sayyāb's writing, penned by the noted Iraqi journalist and man of letters Rafā'il Buṭṭī in an introduction he wrote for Sayyāb's first collection of poems, we find the following description of the poet: "He is the happy son of the Iraqi countryside, with all of [its] wide open spaces laid out before him."¹¹ The date-palm groves surrounding Sayyāb's home village of Jaykūr became, in another early critic's view, "fields of passion and a home ground for inspiration, where Sayyāb stood enchanted, wondering and jubilant."¹² At the other temporal extreme, in an appreciation written shortly after Sayyāb's death, the eminent Egyptian critic Lewis 'Awaḍ would go even further, saying that Jaykūr had become in the poet's final years "a symbol of salvation," and "a last refuge from the hell of the present,"¹³ a focal point around which the process of composition revolved.

This response has become, if anything, significantly more pronounced in recent works.¹⁴ It may even have determined the global strategies used in writing Sayyāb's life in the works undertaken by his two major biographers, 'Īsā Bullāṭa and Iḥsān 'Abbās.¹⁵ Both writers begin with exceptionally long and detailed descriptions of the village where Sayyāb was born before proceeding to the more conventional topics, like the subject's family background and upbringing, usually addressed at the beginning of biographies.¹⁶

It becomes even more worthy of note that we find Sayyāb constantly revisiting the landscape as a reference point from which to theorize an

identity and come to terms with the issues of self and other as they relate to his own existence once we recall that his life roughly parallels the period when Britain controlled Iraq, first through a mandate from the League of Nations and later through a succession of sweetheart treaties with nominally independent Iraqi governments, which allowed the British to maintain a military and commercially dominant presence on Iraqi soil. Thus it would seem more than advisable, in any approach to understanding Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb's poetry, to make at least an attempt to visualize something of this land from which he came and where he lived, on and off, for the larger part of his life.

To attempt to get a handle on this question of place, then, one might begin, rather conventionally, as follows. Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb was born in 1926 in southern Iraq, not far from the Iranian border and the Persian Gulf. His birthplace was a tiny village, Jaykūr, with a population of less than 500. It lies on the banks of the Shaṭṭ al-'Arab, as the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers is known once they join together at the town of Qurna, about 100 miles from the sea. Although Jaykūr rarely appears on maps, modern or otherwise, it lies not very far from the large "capital city" of the south, Baṣra, where Badr received his secondary schooling.

The group of statements given above would constitute the first step in forming an inventory of "facts" about Jaykūr and about Sayyāb's life there, without which it would be impossible to proceed. But even such a modest beginning raises questions. For instance, to recite them is to begin to develop a "discourse" in Michel Foucault's sense of the term: an organized linkage, or "apparatus" (to again use Foucault's terminology) of words that, properly groomed, pruned, sorted, and arranged, will allow us to constitute for ourselves an "episteme" (though a very minor one, to be sure)—literally, a knowledge system or coordinated understanding—of Sayyāb's life and career as poet. The question of epistemes and discourses is a very complicated one that I will treat in much more detail in a moment. For now, let me simply emphasize that epistemes function by *excluding* as well as including information.

The specific impasse I would seek to highlight here is related to, but to a degree also separate from, the previous point. It revolves around the fact that any such attempt to delineate these places, inventory the "facts" about them, and seek a point of entry into Sayyāb's world creates a special difficulty for Western readers because they have at hand, ready-made, another very powerful interpretive episteme of the space known as "southern Iraq," one

that differs markedly from the one operative in Sayyāb's works. Nowadays this Western discourse of southern Iraq has become inextricably bound up with geopolitical concerns, with questions of national power and conflicting interests whose end point has been expressed in war. The power this discourse now has, because of its pervasiveness, to overwhelm—and thus to exclude—any other that might be ranged against it is difficult to deny.

This is where another aspect of Foucault's analysis concerning the nature of discourse becomes productive. In his studies of various apparatuses of social power and their sites of articulation—the clinic, the madhouse, and the prison—Foucault became increasingly drawn to the examination of the contending forces that drive the dialectical relationship of knowledge and power—a relationship he then sought to isolate, externalize, and map in as much detail as possible. Increasingly over time this process came to express its terms through metaphors of war.¹⁷ Eventually, however, Foucault seems to have come to the conclusion that the relationship between knowledge and power appears to be, of necessity, a symbiotic one of mutual dependence. As he himself put it, “the exercise of power itself creates and causes to emerge new objects of knowledge and accumulates new bodies of information. . . . It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power.”¹⁸ A major vehicle for disseminating this knowledge/power nexus is through what Foucault calls a discourse, the structure of words (oral or written) in which we find the articulation of what can—and cannot—be said about any subject, always within the implicit parameters set down by the dual apparatus of knowledge/power.

It is this aspect of Foucault's work, how it applies to the formation of discourses, that seems to have held the greatest relevance—and certainly the greatest interest—for the early developers of postcolonial literary theory, since one of its major effects was to refocus critical attention on the question of just how disinterested or “objective” any piece of writing can be. And what they were discovering was that the colonial enterprise was as much a textual construction as it was the result of applications of armed force.¹⁹ Of course, one may protest that knowledges or epistemes may not be consciously created to exercise power. But Foucault's answer would be, I think, that the potential for utilizing knowledge for the purposes of power is always there and may be seized on and so deployed at times and in places far removed from their first articulation. How those potentials may be actualized should therefore be seen as a subject worthy of attention and

study, rather than identifying it as an unimportant or “subjugated” knowledge, ignoring its existence, and thus allowing it to operate unexamined. In point of fact, a salutary example of how the knowledge/power relation works in practice to control the development of an episteme (what can and cannot be said about a certain subject) can be given ample illustration by recounting the story of how a discourse actualizing “southern Iraq” in the minds of Americans in the 1990s came to be formed.

For most of this century the operation of conceptualizing the Iraqi landscape in the minds of those ordinary Westerners who were called upon, for one reason or another, to do so could easily be likened to that of the youthful Joseph Conrad, who is reported to have himself enacted in the 1860s the same scene he would so memorably father upon his character Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*: the young boy who imperiously plants his finger on what he perceives as a “blank spot” upon the globe and confidently declares, “One day, when I grow up, I shall go there.”²⁰ What is implied by this “mapping” operation, of course, is that only with the arrival of the “civilizing,” “sovereign” subject of Western rationalism and humanism will this spot be rescued from its blankness and come to exhibit a topography of meaning, order, and coherence.²¹ Southern Iraq, to the ordinary inhabitant of Europe or America could be said to occupy a similar “blank spot”—an area of absence waiting to be invested with meaning.

What is especially interesting about Conrad’s story—at least for our purposes in speaking of the creation of a space the West now knows as “southern Iraq”—is that once the adult Marlow performs his self-appointed task, he creates a landscape that exhibits certain submerged but markedly apocalyptic overtones. The constant display of a chiaroscuro description of light and darkness in *Heart*, relieved only by the fitful illumination of baleful fires glowing cherry-red, the sudden appearance of strange beasts and the gradual breakdown in the descriptions of the boundaries between man and beast, the strange characters who, when encountered, speak in the same maddeningly ambiguous riddles as the angels in Revelation (like the runaway Russian sailor to whom Marlow gives Towson’s *An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship*), the splitting of the major female characters into a duality of good and evil (the Intended vs. Kurz’s African native mistress, recalling the biblical division between Babylon the Whore and the mother who flees with her child into the wilderness), and finally a confusion of temporality coupled with a doubling that makes it difficult to differentiate the events of creation, of Genesis, from those of the end, of Armageddon—all these make it easy to understand why, when Francis Ford Coppola chose

to use *Heart of Darkness* as his scaffolding for interpreting the Vietnam war, he titled the resulting film *Apocalypse Now*. Similarly, Kurz's final cry, "the horror, the horror"—which to a certain extent became the rallying cry of Anglo-American modernism early in this century—gains a large portion of its evocative resonance from its resemblance to what one might imagine the cry of the damned on the Day of Judgment would be. Even more provocative is Homi Bhabha's comment made during a discussion of Conrad's story as a paradigm for representations of the colonial experience: "Marlow keeps the conversation going, suppresses the horror, gives history the lie—the white lie—and waits for the heavens to fall."²² In this last phrase, "waiting for the heavens to fall," Bhabha seems to point to without being explicit, an ambivalence evident in Conrad's use of apocalyptic in *Heart of Darkness*: for Marlow, "the horror" is real, he constantly reiterates his obscure premonitions of some dramatic, irreversible dénouement, but the events the narrative itself recounts read as a parody of real apocalypses, especially the Book of Revelation in the Bible. When the end finally does come, then, in Marlow's interview with the Intended, it is Chicken Little waiting for the sky to fall, not Armageddon.

What makes this linkage between a narrative recounting a colonial journey into an unmapped space and the apocalyptic even more interesting is that apocalyptic is an essentially "placeless" discourse—since to be everywhere, as the Judgment Day will be, is to be no special place in particular. While apocalyptic language is saturated with markers of temporality (even though that temporality may be confused), its lack of readily recuperable place markers is equally characteristic. Even when particular places are mentioned, like Babylon or Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation, they are clearly not referents to real physical locations, but are either allegorized and/or metonymically transformed through rhetorical devices like personification. Thus when "Babylon" is mentioned, it appears before us in the form of a woman, upon whose head is written the legend: "mystery, Babylon the great, the mother of harlots and abominations of the earth" (Rev. 17:5). This city-turned-woman is then implicitly contrasted, shortly thereafter, with "the new Jerusalem," that St. John witnesses "coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev. 21:2).

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parallels with the “Beast” in Revelation, who has been consistently linked to political leaders through the ages, from the Roman emperor Nero to Oliver Cromwell and, in our own century, Stalin and Hitler); there is as the paragraph unfolds a gradually heightened set of references to origins (thus “fear and faith” become “elemental” and “primordial,” for example) mingled inextricably with “ending codes” (the two leaders are “locked in a fight to the finish,” “a war like this” has “a final meaning” in its destruction of the “humanness” of humanity). Probably the key gesture in the direction of apocalyptic teleology is found in the middle of the paragraph, where Makiya asserts that “fear and faith . . . have the force to make men die in droves,”²⁷ thus heightening the destructiveness of the event in order to make it representable in apocalyptic terms—and this is because the men “cannot imagine doing otherwise”: that is, their actions are determined by the power of a vision outside themselves, not by their own wills—the same kind of pre-supposition that is underwritten by the inexorable course of the apocalyptic vision.

In this paragraph, what we see is in many ways a preparation for the much more decisive turn toward apocalyptic we find in discourse about the 1991 Gulf war, where such symbolism becomes almost universal as the ground for engagement with war events in both prowar and antiwar rhetoric. It is as though all of the apocalyptic vocabulary developed during the cold war, once so useful in representing all the imagined (or unimaginable) possibilities of nuclear holocaust but now, with the end of the Soviet Union, temporarily homeless, finds a new refuge in that triangle bounded by Baghdad, Basra, and Kuwait City. Other discourses founded on apocalyptic idiom relating to past Western wars also made their contributions to this turn. For George Bush, of course, Saddam Hussein became Hitler (the twentieth century’s most ubiquitous stand-in for the Beast of Revelation), and he was to catapult this into an extremely effective rhetoric representing the war as a quasi-religious “crusade” against evil, eliding its more prosaic origins in a struggle over the control of an essential industrial resource: oil.

On the left we might picture the extreme edge of the discourse as being marked out by predictions of a global ecological catastrophe that was to ensue on the heels of the retreating Iraqi army’s firing of the oil wells in Kuwait. Not untypical is the paragraph introducing an article entitled “For Generations to Come: The Environmental Catastrophe,” most notable now because its inclusion in *Beyond the Storm: A Gulf Crisis Reader* has ensured that it will continue to reach a broader audience in time as well as space than the more ephemeral discourse of newspapers and magazines:

The coalition forces have stopped fighting and Kuwait has been “liberated.” The emir has been restored but the country has not. A new human nightmare has emerged. The specter of exploding oil wells, day indistinguishable from night, black rain, a massive oil spillage, thousands of tons of toxic chemicals released into the atmosphere, the tragic plight of the Kurdish and Iraqi peoples mean that the misery and suffering will linger on, perhaps for decades. It has been estimated that spending a day in Kuwait City is equivalent to smoking 250 cigarettes. Only now, is the world waking up to the terrible price being paid for engaging in military hostilities in Gulf. The world’s ecology is very fragile.²⁸

Here—in the catalog of reversals of natural phenomena especially, like the “black rain,” the inability to distinguish night from day, or the transformation of the Gulf waters into oil, as well as the globalization of its effects—the overtones of apocalyptic are unmistakable. No one should doubt that such a discourse had its uses for both sides. Not the least, it was effective in underscoring the seriousness of their claims. But apocalyptic is also a radically dehumanizing, totalizing discourse that, in the case of “southern Iraq” at least, ends up legitimating images of this place, this location, as a kind of theater where the spectacle of battle, destruction, and death are naturalized: not only made possible but “logical,” “rational,” and even “necessary” in order to fulfill the apocalyptic presuppositions. As Edward Said noted shortly after the end of the war: “From early on there was an overriding sense of inevitability, as if George Bush’s apparent need to get down there and, in his own sporty argot, “kick ass” *had* to run up against Saddam Hussein’s monstrous aggressiveness. . . . The public rhetoric, in other words, is simply undeterred, uncomplicated by any considerations of detail, realism or cause and effect.”²⁹ The temporality invoked here is precisely that of the apocalyptic. What Said seems to have failed to notice, or at least chooses not to mention, is that the deterministic, hyperbolized, eschatological language used by Bush was echoed in the discourses of those who opposed the war, and this may well have inadvertently led to a reinforcement—rather than an undermining—of the notion that this war was inevitable.

One should not, on the other hand, see this particular discourse as something essentially foreign to a number of discursive precedents familiar to the Iraqis themselves. Apocalyptic in this case is not an interpretive pattern exclusively imposed on a subaltern, colonized people from without. The Koran, still a primary source of cultural authority in the Islamic world just as the Bible is in the West, contains many suras that exploit eschato-

logical imagery, compatible with the Islamic teaching that there will be a Last Day and a Final Judgment when all mankind will be called to account for their deeds on earth. One of the most intensely wrought and frequently quoted of these passages is in Sūra 81:

- 1) When the sun shall be wrapped up into a bundle
- 2) When the stars shall stoop like hawks from the heavens
- 3) When the mountains shall be set in motion
- 4) When the camels about to birth shall be left to wander alone,
unattended
- 5) When the wild beasts come together in droves
- 6) When the seas shall spill over their banks
- 7) When the souls shall be coupled
- 8) When the baby girl buried alive shall be asked
- 9) For what sin she was killed
- 10) When the scrolls shall be unrolled
- 11) When the roof of heaven shall be stripped off
- 12) When the fires of hell shall be stirred to life
- 13) When the Garden shall draw near
- 14) The soul shall realize what it has brought.³⁰

Vividly rendered scenes of destruction are here clearly coupled with references to a time of Judgment and a millennial return to Eden or Paradise, all themes familiar to anyone even minimally conversant with the apocalyptic prophecies of Christianity and Judaism, as a good portion of Muhammad's original audience undoubtedly was. These eschatological aspects of the Koran have tended to be de-emphasized by most later Islamic thinkers, however, in keeping with their emphasis on Islam as a life-affirming religion that concerned itself with people's relationships—with one another as well as with God—indelibly woven into the fabric of their existence in this world, as much as it did with their relationship solely to God in the next. Early Muslims generally emphasized a position that called for Islam to redress what was perceived as an imbalance in these relationships generated by the kind of monastic Christianity that flourished in the area prior to the rise of Islam. For them, the contemporary Christianity's fixation on the hereafter, and its tendency to consider achievement of a virtuous life in this world as an impossibility (at least without separation from the ordinary run of humanity by retreat into a monastery) represented an extreme of behavior that, if used as the basis for social formation, would impede the fashioning of the bonds needed to bind the group sharing religious beliefs (the *umma*, or "community") together, and might even eventually

undermine the benefits that human society offered to the individual by undermining the presuppositions on which “society,” as a concept, rested.

As with the evidence from nineteenth-century archaeological excavations in southern Iraq for Westerners, however, the Koran-created categories of apocalyptic could be seized upon by Muslims and exploited when the time was right. The invasion of Iraq by the Mongols in 1258 A.D., which resulted in the destruction of the city of Baghdad, the extermination of the Abbasid dynasty, and caused widespread havoc in the system of irrigation that supported agriculture in the Tigris–Euphrates valley, has been frequently portrayed in apocalyptic terms—in Arabic histories as well as in Western recountings of the events drawing upon those sources—as bringing utter destruction to the structures undergirding classical Arab/Islamic civilization. Similarly, in an even more specifically Iraqi context, the “triple tragedy” of 1831—when Baghdad was struck by an epidemic of plague, a flood, and the depredations of a punitive expedition sent by the Ottomans to depose one of their governors who had shown too many independent tendencies, all taking place in the space of scarcely more than a month—was deployed to account for the supposed backwardness of Iraqi economic and social development in the nineteenth century. The “triple tragedy” increasingly was portrayed as apocalyptic³¹ because it was a convenient stand-in, in less detailed accounts of Iraqi history, for a complex array of factors that had made that country slower to appropriate Western technology than some of its neighbors, like Egypt and Syria. Thus apocalyptic was not only naturalized in the society where Sayyāb grew up, under the authoritative sign of the Koran, it was also underwritten and supported by some powerfully appealing readings of history.

More recently, it should perhaps not be surprising to find Saddam Hussein himself quite capable of appropriating certain echoes of these same apocalyptic categories during the Iran–Iraq war. Even as late as the speech he made at his last meeting with the U.S. ambassador before the invasion of Kuwait, he twice remarks that the Iraqis deserve special consideration from the United States and their other allies in the region because they shed “rivers of blood,” during the Iran–Iraq war. This reference fits quite comfortably within the lexicon of apocalyptic imagery, whether of the biblical or the Koranic variety.

Had Badr Shākīr al-Sayyāb lived long enough to have seen how deeply the Iran–Iraq war and, more especially, the Gulf war would inscribe the apocalyptic upon the landscape of his beloved southern Iraq and its inhabitants, he probably would have been troubled, but it is unlikely that he would

have been surprised. More than once he had written that very same narrative into his own work. For example, in one of the few public lectures he gave during his lifetime outlining his concept of poetry and the role of the poet in society, he begins by saying that what distinguishes the poet of modernity from his predecessors is precisely his resemblance to Saint John the Divine, the author of the Book of Revelation in the Bible. Like Saint John, in Sayyab's opinion, the modern poet's "eyes have been ravaged by his visions and he perceives the seven sins pervading the world like a terrifying monster."³² In his bold use of such a comparison, there can be no more direct evidence of precisely how important the apocalyptic categories could be for Sayyāb, especially as they underwrite his concept of the poet as inspired visionary, one that would be familiar to most students of Western romanticism.

Given this context, one should give special attention to the fact that Sayyāb's first widely recognized poem, "Unshūdat al-Maṭār" (Hymn of the Rain)—still considered by many to be among his best—contains the following lines:

- 53) I can almost hear Iraq storing up the thunder
- 54) And massing the lightning in the mountains and the plains,
- 55) Until, when men tear away their seal
- 56) The winds from Thamud will not leave
- 57) Any trace in the valley.³³

According to Sayyāb himself, the poem was written early in 1953 when he was living temporarily in Kuwait as a political exile.³⁴ He was being sought by the Iraqi police for his role in demonstrations that had broken out late in 1952. These were aimed at toppling the Iraqi government, which had just signed a treaty with Britain allowing that country to keep troops indefinitely on Iraqi soil and to maintain its special rights and privileges, particularly those related to the oil industry, upon which Britain had grown increasingly dependent in the postwar years. These demonstrations and riots had failed to topple the British-supported regime of Nūrī al-Sa'īd, as had a similar outbreak in 1948, but hundreds had been arrested, and hundreds more, like Sayyāb, were being sought.

In "Hymn of the Rain" the speaker³⁵ is represented as standing on the shore of the Persian Gulf, looking northward to Iraq. He is racked with despair over what he sees as the failure of his fellow Iraqis to achieve real freedom, and he has a vision of them trapped in an eternal sterile seasonal cycle where the superficial change from winter to spring brings in reality only the endless recurrence of repression and famine as their harvest is taken

from them by oppressors. He then imagines the apocalyptic scenario just quoted as an alternative temporality, one where the destruction of the apocalypse would lead to a final and permanent “spring,” when social justice would prevail.

The specific imagery of the passage relies heavily on apocalyptic discourse as it appears in the Koran. This is signaled most explicitly by the mention of “Thamūd,” which was a pre-Islamic tribe destroyed by God for refusing to listen to a prophet who was sent to them. Sayyāb’s use of the allusion, however, has two features particularly worth mentioning as distinguishing it from the typical apocalyptic eschatology that is at the core of these scenarios in the Bible and the Koran. First, the punishment story of Thamūd refers not to an event at the end of history, but something very early in history—preceding the appearance of Islam. Thus it is not concerned with the universal end of all things, but posits a time beyond that end, potentially a time of new beginnings. Sayyāb’s stress on this can be seen even more clearly in some of his later poetry, like “Madīna Bi-lā Maṭar” (City Without Rain, 1958), where he depicts the impending destruction of the city of Babylon (standing in for modern-day Baghdad, which is located close to the site of ancient Babylon), but the apocalyptic scenario is short-circuited by the bold appropriative gesture made by a young girl in a procession of children who have come to pray to Ishtar for intercession

- 73) And the sky flashed lightning, as though a lily of fire
- 74) Was opening above Babylon and illuminating our valley.
- 75) A glow penetrated to the depths of our land, and stripped it bare,
- 76) With all its seeds and roots, with all its dead.
- 77) And clouds—beyond the walls and ramparts Babylon had raised
- 78) Around its fever and around its thirsty soil—
- 79) Were pouring down rain—if not for those walls, they would have quenched our thirst!
- 80) In the eternity of listening between one thunderbolt and the next
- 81) We heard, not the rustling of palm tree under a torrential cloudburst
- 82) Or the wind whispering among the wet trees
- 83) But the pounding of hands and feet
- 84) A murmur, and the “Ah!” of a little girl as she seized with her right hand
- 85) Upon a moon fluttering like a moth, or upon a star,
- 86) Upon a gift from the cloud,
- 87) Upon a tremor of water, a drop in which a breeze whispered,
- 88) So that we may know that Babylon will be cleansed of its sins!³⁶

With this last line of the poem and the mention of “cleansing sins,” the signifier “Babylon” is suddenly revealed as “overdetermined,” acting as a referent pointing to more than one discursive formation. It has links both to the overt coding of “ancient world” Babylon, where the fertility religions that form the poem’s ostensible subject were practiced, and to “Babylon, the whore” found in Revelation. The “whore” element of sin, further, is precisely negated by the gesture of the “innocent” young girl, which converts the “destructive torrent” of apocalyptic coding into the “cleansing water drop” that will bring new life. Thus there is a time beyond the destruction: the time of real (but final) rebirth that is tied neither to the inexorable teleology of linear human time nor to the unvarying—and therefore ultimately sterile—cycle of seasonal time, which brings rebirth in the spring only to have it snatched away by death in the winter.

Such millennialism contrasts with the kind of reading of apocalyptic that many observers have found increasingly prevalent in popular Western culture of the late twentieth century, where the emphasis in apocalypse—undoubtedly influenced by the desacralized representations of a nuclear holocaust—is placed on the catastrophe itself, the finality of the end, with no millennial expectations allowed. As Christopher Sharrett, in speaking of filmic representations of the apocalyptic genre, says, “the apocalypse of postmodernity is almost always couched in that popular misuse of apocalypse not as revelation³⁷ but doomsday, disaster, the end.”³⁸

This way of realizing apocalyptic categories has had—and continues to have—a powerful influence on current Western, and especially American, conceptualizations of Iraq. One such representation, that has formed a kind of counterpoint to my own work in writing and revising this chapter in the early months of 1995, is a PBS announcement that is part of a series—scheduled, fortuitously or not, just in time to influence the current debate in Congress over the funding of the PBS corporation—highlighting the achievements and importance of public television in providing material for public viewing that would be otherwise inaccessible because commercial television networks would not provide it (each spot ends with the sentence displayed on the screen: “If PBS doesn’t do it, who will?”). There are a number of installments dealing with relatively unproblematic PBS documentary portrayals of famous American individuals and events: the Civil War (“PBS: Historian”), Amelia Earhart (“PBS: Storyteller”—“She was missing for over fifty years. Only PBS could bring her back the way she really was . . .”), Lou Gehrig (“PBS: Observer of the American Scene”).

But for the piece devoted to highlighting the achievements of the MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour, the “jewel in the crown” of the network’s public affairs programming, the creators of the campaign have chosen to focus on Iraq. After a brief silence—during which the phrases “PBS—Journalist” and “Dateline: Iraq 1994” do a slow crawl across the screen—the familiar, comforting, vaguely southern American drawl of Jim Lehrer begins with his formulaic phrase that signals the end of the newscast: “Finally, tonight . . .” Usually this signals the transition to an “essay piece” by Roger Rosenblatt or Ann Taylor Fleming, planned to give the viewer a chance to ruminate thoughtfully on the deeper meaning of life. But this time Lehrer continues with “. . . the story of the Shia Muslims of Iraq. They tried to declare their independence from the Saddam Hussein regime in Baghdad.” The visuals accompanying this narration are of a desert landscape dotted with crumpled, wrecked military vehicles, tanks and armored personnel carriers, and scattered, slowly burning fires, all surrounding a sleek black plastic television set, perched on a pedestal of similar texture and color, planted incongruously together on the crest of a sand dune. The camera pulls back to show us another perspective of the television set, this time seen through the holes of camouflage netting draped over an empty Bedouin tent. All the while, the soundtrack carries a recording of what seems to be Iraqi folk music that has apparently been distorted to emphasize its resemblance to the sound of the incoherent screams of women in terror. The pictures have likewise apparently been enhanced to heighten the purity and flatness of the colors: the sky is bluer, the sand is yellower or more orange, the fires are redder than our ordinary visual perception of them would be. The narrative voice then shifts to that of the correspondent, who continues “Saddam’s republican guard and their tanks had been left intact by the allies. In the end the rebels were hopelessly outgunned. There were no TV cameras there to record what happened. Only this extraordinary amateur videotape taken by two brothers, one of whom was later killed. Most of these people are about to die . . . desperate women and children can only call upon God to help them. . . . This casual brutality has been justified by the Iraqi dictator throughout his career in politics. . . .” The key point here is that, although the report itself seems to have focused on individual Iraqis as human beings, the packaging, or “wrapping,”—to use an important postmodernist term—denies the humanity of these people and makes the centerpiece a barren apocalyptic landscape where Saddam Hussein is the only recognizably human figure to appear on the television screen. This is “doomsday apocalypse” with a vengeance. To put it in other

words, and perhaps somewhat crudely, this representation, so glossily packaged as a cultural commodity for the American television viewer's consumption, portrays the "story" of southern Iraq as one that is basically over, finished. There is, the pictures imply, no point in paying further attention to it, because there is nothing left there to save. The irony is that such a reductive visual interpretation of these events directly contradicts the overt message of the advertising campaign—that PBS is the only broadcaster who goes beyond sensationalism to do the in-depth research that will provide the "real story"—and probably violates the humanistic values of those who sponsored it. But such is the power of apocalyptic discourse to shape, perhaps more unconsciously and deterministically than any other, our perceptions of our world.

If the conceptualization of time in Sayyāb's apocalyptic, with its emphasis on the millennial, is able to sidestep provisionally the "ultimate destruction" scenario found in Western apocalyptic readings of the Iraqi landscape, like that found in the PBS announcement, the picture of apocalyptic presented in those lines taken from "Hymn of the Rain" also has a second interesting feature that works against the grain of traditional apocalyptic. In that poem, it is man—not God—who "tears the seal" and unleashes the wind. While this kind of focus on the human may appear, especially when used in conjunction with "atom bomb" scenarios, to heighten the pessimistic prognostications of "doomsday," here, when conjoined with a millennial vision, the privileging of human agency over divine in fact works to lessen the deterministic inexorability of traditional apocalyptic, where man is usually portrayed as the passive victim of another's (in traditional apocalyptic, God's) actions, incapable of mounting any successful resistance to it. Both these features suggest that Sayyāb tends to use apocalyptic imagery in a framework that—beyond its interest in the millennial, postapocalyptic period as a time of idealized redemption—has many features in common with what has been called "prophetic eschatology." This is important because it links this set of tropes to Sayyāb's frequently reiterated concern with the prophetic experience as a model for producing poetry, probably the most stable and lasting framework found in the various conceptions of poetry he sketched out at different points in his career.

An important difference that distinguishes prophetic eschatology from true apocalyptic is what one author has called its "implied 'if-clause,'"—in other words, the destruction only proceeds after and because humanity has failed to heed the prophet's warning.³⁹ The catastrophe is not posited as inevitable, and the discourse therefore places much more emphasis on

humanity as a force that may intervene in history. Attention to the agency of the Iraqi people as an active subject position in the unfolding of the historical process—and more particularly the various strategies, besides armed struggle, that they might use to enact this—is precisely what is missing from Western apocalyptic discourse that purports to construct southern Iraq and its inhabitants as an object of representation. This too should be seen as an element working to simplify the “doomsday” reading and give it a tidy, but false, impression of totality.

Sayyāb’s version of apocalyptic, of course, precedes the final formulation of “apocalyptic Iraq” in the American media by several decades. So it cannot be properly considered as a response to the limiting conditions the later formulation the latter imposes. Yet the fact that Sayyāb’s version has status as a *discourse*—a construct of words not necessarily bound to remain enmeshed within the modes of power relations in a particular epoch or social body—means that it can be seized upon and redeployed at any time (as, in a sense, I am doing here) to form what might be termed a “counter-discourse”⁴⁰ designed to critique or resist those discourses encapsulating the epistemes of more dominant centers of power. In fact, it might be difficult for any contemporary reader in the Arab world who is exposed to American attitudes through CNN or other satellite news services to read Sayyāb’s apocalyptic poetry now as anything but a discourse that counters—or at least provides an alternative to—the Western media images.

That the exercise of power begets resistance would seem to be a concept rather easily retrievable from any examination of the relationships between social or political groupings. Yet even Foucault, for all his study of the deployments of power within institutional structures and across the levels of social hierarchy, by his own account only slowly came to recognize its importance for his analyses. For a long time, he says, he analyzed power within what he calls a “domination-repression or war-repression schema,”⁴¹ which imposed a reductive, dualistic framework (probably conditioned by the paradigms of binary opposition found in classical structuralist thought) on what was generally a much more complex process. It was only in his later work, from the late 1970s and early 1980s, that he begins to look at power as something that “circulates” and is in constant flux as it moves through the temporal and spatial matrix. As he says in a key passage from this period:

. . . power is co-extensive with the social body; there are no spaces of primal liberty between the meshes of its network. . . [yet] one should not assume a massive and primal condition of domination, a binary structure with

“dominators” on one side and “dominated” on the other, but rather a multiform production of relations of domination which are partially susceptible of integration into overall strategies. . . . there are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised; resistance to power does not have to come from elsewhere to be real, nor is it inexorably frustrated through being the compatriot of power. It exists all the more by being in the same place as power; hence, like power, resistance is multiple and can be integrated in global strategies.⁴²

Such notions of power/knowledge and resistance/counter-knowledge have been immensely helpful as an essential condition of possibility for much of the analysis that has recently been attempted of colonial and postcolonial literatures.⁴³ What emerges from these examinations is that literature in a colonized society is compelled at least in part to organize itself as a “counter-discourse” to the colonial project, to take that very intrusive “reality” into account. Seen in this way, then, many of its recurrent themes—as we have observed in the case of geographical projections and assertions of control over the land—reveal themselves as not being contingent or accidental (as they are not infrequently portrayed), but possessed of a very real and strategic value. Such strategies are of necessity opportunistic (in the sense of taking advantage of the opportunities for resistance/critique that are made available) and practical, rather than striving for theoretical precision and cohesiveness, which makes them more susceptible to charges of contingency, haphazardness, than might otherwise be the case. But then theoretical precision may be, in fact, the privilege mainly of those whose identity and perhaps even their very existence are not at stake in a given struggle. In the next three chapters I will suggest several ways in which Sayyāb’s poetry may be seen as providing examples for such use of opportunistic counter-discourses to directly oppose the colonial discourses of place.