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TO STAUNCHLY "REMAIN A READER" AND BUILD UP A WORLD COMRADESHIP

Reflecting with Rabih Alameddine on World Literature

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Taking J. Daniel Elam's recent work titled *World Literature and the Wretched of the World* (2021) as a point of departure, in this article I closely read and critically assess Rabih Alameddine's novel *An Unnecessary Woman* (2013) as a way to tackle questions relating to world literature, the canonization of literary texts, and the supposedly universal reach of so-called classics. The essay further calls attention to the silent complicity of the literary establishment, education programs, and knowledge more generally with authoritarian and colonial regimes and the subsequent necessity of reorganizing public libraries, private bookcases, individual and collective reading practices in antiauthoritarian and anticolonial ways. Taking British India as his case study, in the preface of his book, Elam notes the following: "the establishment of 'good European librar[ies]' across British India became the means for the British to extend their imperial project. British authorship was the mechanism of British colonial authority" (2000: ix).

Born in Amman in 1959 and raised between Kuwait and Lebanon, Alameddine's roots are steeped in the territories of three former British and French colonies; quite surprisingly though, the post-colonial concerns of his works, which are a distinguishing feature of Alameddine's writing, have partly remained overlooked. Today, he is an acclaimed though not universally recognized US novelist, who has recently won the 2022 PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction with his latest novel *The Wrong End of the Telescope* (2021). Since he writes in English—the global language par excellence—but is

of Arab descent, his texts have been alternately included under the broad and non-specific rubric of "Arab Anglophone Fiction" or "postwar Anglophone Lebanese Fiction," as the works of Tasnim Qutait's *Nostalgia in Arab Anglophone Literature* (2021) and Syrine Hout's *Post-War Anglophone Lebanese Fiction* (2012) demonstrate. Both his location as a writer and literary endeavors are difficult to pin down. *The Hakawati* (2008), for instance, is an epic narrated through the ancient Arab art of storytelling; *Koolaids* (1998) shatters the novelistic form and recomposes the text as a disordered assemblage of news reports, diary entries, personal memories, short plays, and dreams; *I, the Divine* (2001) is a radically innovative (auto)biography, narrated in the first and third person through aborted first chapters. Because of this formal complexity and genre irresolution, critical work on Alameddine's writing has mainly focused on thematic issues, which are somewhat easier to handle, such as home and diasporic space (Fadda-Conrey 2009), the Lebanese Civil War (Awad 2016), dislocation and hybridity (Garrigós 2009). An exception to this trend is Michelle Hartman's critical essay "Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine*," which offers a reading of his 2001 novel within the wider framework of world literature. As Hartman explains:

> The novel is written largely in a fast-paced American English and deals with themes and issues ranging from the Lebanese civil war to Lebanese/Arabs in the Diaspora to Arab American life to exile more generally. It is a feminist story that both includes important gay and lesbian characters and questions the values and norms of traditional Lebanese society. *I, the Divine* explores elements of Druze history and faith as well as the life of a seemingly rootless, nomadic Lebanese American woman. This broad reach is partly why the novel readily lends itself to interpretation within the framework of "world literature." (2013: 339)

According to Hartman, by containing a multitude of perspectives—feminist, Druze, Lebanese and otherwise—and by moving intermittently between the American and Lebanese context, the local and the global dimension, Alameddine's novel offers readers the possibility to engage, in David Damrosch's words, with "worlds beyond [their] own" (qtd. in Hartman 2013: 342). This is why Hartman considers *I, the Divine* an exemplary, although very peculiar, case of a world literature text. A similar reading,

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I suggest, can also be applied to the novel discussed in this article, which interrogates the role and value of books and literature, and of humanistic knowledge more generally, while also promoting reading practices guided by radically egalitarian, anticolonial, and antiauthoritarian principles.

Inspired by Alameddine's fascinating portrait of Aaliya, the memorable protagonist of *An Unnecessary Woman*, I ask: how does world literature look from the perspective of a reclusive and rather static woman who engages in daring acts of reading, translating, and circulating books, which are carried out secretly and behind closed doors in a society that considers Woman still "a second-class citizen, a second-gender offspring" (Alameddine 2013: 70)? What does Aaliya's furious act of storage, preservation, and linguistic transfer tell us about individual and collective agency and the possibility to reverse the bloody logic of the war, which lays waste on everything and for which nothing counts, not even human life? Finally, how does Aaliya reinvent reading and translating practices so that, in Elam's words, readers may be encouraged to imagine "an egalitarian world, rid of its murderous drive for purity, defined instead by hospitality, heterogeneity, and improvisational assemblage" (4–5)?

Aaliya is a solitary woman, who has lived her entire life in Beirut and has never abandoned the city of her birth. Despite her physical immobility, her inner world as well as her perspective on the planet at large are extremely rich and informative. They are indeed steeped in reading habits that are heterogeneous, contingent, independently established over and over again. I suggest that this reading practice brings the fictional character of Aaliya in close proximity to the 1920s and 1930s anticolonial thinkers celebrated by Elam in his work, such as the little-known S. R. Ranganathan and the more famous Frantz Fanon, as well as with German Jewish philologist Erich Auerbach, who wrote his masterpiece *Mimesis* out of fragments during his exile in Istanbul as a response to the inhumanity he had witnessed in Nazi Germany.

In open contrast to a vision of world literature as a field that either pretends to cover the whole world by reading a strict selection of masterworks in translation or accepts losing single units in order "to understand the system" as a whole (Moretti 2000), in *An Unnec-*

essary Woman, reading is staged and performed as an intimate, critical, and imaginative worldly practice, performed by individuals who voluntarily renounce mastery and dominion and build up a nonviolent world comradeship. This unique vision, which abhors hegemony and promotes a sense of egalitarian and nonviolent comradery that knows no boundaries, is what world literature should promote. In the visionary words of Fanon quoted by Elam: "now comrades […] let us leave this Europe which never stops talking of man yet massacres him at every one of its street corners, at every corner of the world…. come, comrades, the European game is finally over, we must look for something else" (2021: 113).

This "something else," which Fanon urges his comrades to look for, is unfortunately nowhere to be found in recent conceptualizations of world literature, revolving around a "planetary system" made up of direct or indirect loans and debts (Moretti 2000) or a World Republic of Letters that considers Paris its undiscussed gravitational center (Casanova 2008). Partly departing from these mainstream theorizations, Alameddine joins the ranks of postcolonial critics, such as Aamir R. Mufti and Lorna Burns, who have called into question the "'one-world' reality" of world literature (Mufti 2016: 3) as well as its tendency toward abstraction. I argue in this article that in *An Unnecessary Woman*, Alameddine intervenes in key postcolonial and world literature issues, although in an unusually covert and confidential manner, which is in tune with the overall spirit of the novel. He indeed celebrates a staunch yet solitary Lebanese woman, who runs a bookstore as the war rages around her and boldly engages in reading and translating practices, which she conceives as acts of maladroit beginnings rather than as ends in themselves. Aaliya selects her works according to arbitrary decisions, improvisational adjacencies, and awkward connections instead of slavishly following norms of literary greatness, religious veneration or neoliberal market idolatry. Her acts of literary preservation and transmission are carried out secretly for the benefit of the communal and even the planetary; yet, none except Aaliya is aware of that. I contend that by celebrating Aaliya's strenuous attempts to gather and protect the shared texts that make up our communal world library and by praising her radical decision "to remain a reader, and thus perpetually abjure self-mastery"

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(Elam 2021: xii), Alameddine not only thematizes a world ravaged by the logic of colonialism, authoritarianism, patriarchy, fanaticism, and nationalism but also "performatively enact[s]," quoting Pheng Cheah's *What is a World?*, "the possibility of another world" (2008: 38), one that welcomes plurality and encourages the practice of egalitarian, anticolonial, and antiauthoritarian modes of living. I share with Cheah and Alameddine the conviction that the emergence of this other world is what world literature should promote.

BOOKS AS MATERIAL OBJECTS, COMPANIONS-IN-ARMS, AND CULTURAL TREASURES: WORLD LITERATURE AS A TOOL TO REVEAL THE BLIND SPOTS OF THE WORLD

In "Unpacking Sa'dallāh Wannūs' Private Library," Sonja Mejcher-Atassi reflects on the furtive removal and clandestine transfer of Wannūs's private collection from Damascus to Beirut, a relocation that took place covertly after his death and has both "garnered praise and sparked controversy" ("The Daily Star"). On November 1, 2015, 4,500 books belonging to the Syrian playwright and pioneer of modern Arabic theater, who had always regarded his art as "an expression of civil society, but also a necessary condition for its establishment and growth" (Swairjo "Sa'dallah Wannous"), crossed the Syrian-Lebanese border "as refugees in the back of a truck" ("The Daily Star"). Prompted by this rather exceptional circumstance, Mejcher-Atassi asks in her article: "can we compare book collecting, the act of rescuing a book, to the act of rescuing a life? Do books, too, have lives and freedoms that can be put at risk or lost? If yes, then book collecting is not merely a personal affair; it has political and ethical implications" (2019: 2).

In *An Unnecessary Woman*, Rabih Alameddine addresses similar questions but from a different, fictional angle. The protagonist of his novel—Aaliya Saleh—reads, translates, and collects a vast array of books in war-torn Beirut, a place where even human life, let alone books and literature, have been quickly discarded as unnecessary. As a way to rebel against this cruel and heedless logic, at the beginning of each year, on January 1st, Aaliya starts a new project and translates one of her favorite books into Arabic, by comparing a pre-existing English and French translation. Her translations are thus removed from the original of at least

one level and privilege works that are not written in the two quintessentially colonial languages. Her translations, as she herself admits, are translations of a translation; yet, they retain a very specific quality, as these words clearly suggest: "my translations aren't champagne, and they're not milky tea, either. I'm thinking arak" (2013: 105).

Crates and boxes, containing her translated manuscripts and displaying the French and English versions of the original book on each side of the box, fill her apartment. Like Aaliya herself, the books gathered in her apartment have witnessed the brutality of the war and are damaged goods bearing onto their bodies the traces of those tragic occurrences. As she explains: "there's another relic on the desk, though not as ancient, a souvenir from the war years in Beirut: a copy of Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, scorched in the lower right corner, but just the back cover and the preceding twenty-two pages. The front isn't damaged. I was reading the book by candlelight while people killed each other outside the window" (26).

Conceived as an imaginary travelogue in which the Venetian traveler and explorer Marco Polo describes to the Mongolian general and statesman Kublai Khan the 55 odd-cities he has encountered on his way to China, Calvino's *Invisible Cities* is a collection that defies standard categorizations (is it a travelogue?; a work of the imagination?; a divertissement?), since it contains a detailed description of fantastic cities meant to delight the isolated Kublai Khan and make him evade from his condition of confinement. For Aaliya too, Calvino's book represents a form of escape, while she is segregated in her house and witnessing the tragic destruction of her beloved city.

Besides offering companionship and evasion in troubled times, books represent for Aaliya functional objects with a practical value. Accordingly, from the main characters of Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News* (1993), Aaliya learns how to survive in an inhospitable environment, while from the sea stories of Joseph Conrad and *The Ashley Book of Knots* (1944), she learns how to make sailor knots to use in dire situations.

Far from being just digital data that can be counted, graphed, and mapped (Moretti 2005) or disposable goods ready for con-

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sumption, books for Aaliya are tangible, material objects invested with affects and delivering both knowledge and practical abilities. Thanks to her passion for books, Aaliya is well-versed rather than oblivious to anything occurring outside her forcibly limited world. For example, by reading Alberto Moravia's *The Conformist* (1951), which portrays the gradual and inexorable moral downfall of the Fascist bureaucrat Marcello Clerici, Aaliya partly understands Ahmed's unexpected and sudden metamorphosis from a young Palestinian refugee with a passion for books into a merciless militia man. His life story elucidates with extreme clarity how the logic of superiority, domination, machismo, and conformism typical of fascism can corrupt, pervert, and destroy an individual plagued by material needs and the desire to be like everyone else.

The promotion of an alternative reading practice, which reveals the blind spots of authoritarian and imperial regimes, abandons the security and comfort of the familiar, wanders off and goes astray, is what world literature should strengthen together with forms of kinship that are not narrowly conceived but cosmopolitan in spirit. This idea is confirmed by Cheah who writes: "this sense of the infinite opening onto a world is the unique contribution of world literature as cosmopolitanism. It tells us that we can belong in many ways, and that quivering beneath the surface of the existing world are other worlds to come" (2008: 38). To the vibrations of these other worlds, detected by Cheah and enacted by Alameddine, we will now turn.

OPPOSING RELIGIOUS VENERATION AND NEOLIBERAL MARKET IDOLATRY: WORLD LITERATURE AGAINST CULT CLASSICS AND POP IDOLS

Through the figure of Aalilya, Alameddine critically interrogates the logic of authority and the blind reverence that regulate the classical Arabic literary tradition with its cult of the ancestors and the veneration of foundational texts such as the holy Qur'an. On the one hand, Alameddine celebrates a mythic past in which people showed strong appreciation, great care, and deep respect for the written word, as suggested by the mythical story of the seven mu'allaqat, the Suspended Odes of pre-Islamic time that, according to the tradition, "were once written in gold on Coptic linen and hung on the drapes of the Kaaba in the sixth

century" (2013: 84). On the other, however, he opposes dogmatic conceptualizations of literary greatness, particularly the construction of religious texts as bearers of absolute authority and truth and of canonical works as unattainable and inimitable masterpieces. As Aaliya painfully recalls:

> Yet only in Arabic class were we constantly told that we could not master this most difficult of language, that no matter how much we studied and practiced, we could not possibly hope to write as well as al-Mutanabbi or, heaven forbid, the apex of the language, the Quran itself. Teachers indoctrinated students, just as they had been indoctrinated when younger. None of us can rise above being a failure as an Arab, our original sin. (7–8)

Aaliya contests here acts of indoctrination, especially those that inculcate in the younger generations the belief that Arabic is an essentially impervious language, therefore crippling from the start any promising élan aimed at overcoming the tradition, innovating the language, and experimenting with theme and form.[1]

Besides contesting the obligation contracted by young Arab readers vis-à-vis a strict selection of 'great' books, which literary history has in part contributed to mummify, Aaliya looks with contempt also at transitory works that blindly follow the neoliberal logic of the market, are of little substance, and promote a narcissistic and self-absorbed viewpoint. As she sarcastically observes:

> Books in and of themselves are rarely boring, except for memoirs of American presidents (No, No, Nixon)—well, memoirs of Americans in general. It's the "I live in the richest country in the world yet pity me because I grew up with flat feet and a malodorous vagina but I triumph in the end" syndrome. Tfeh!
>
> Books into boxes—boxes of paper, loose translated sheets. That's my life. (4)

It is precisely to oppose the logic of commercial publishing, which flattens meaningful differences, endorses standardization, and fol-

1. On the humble yet powerful ability of classical Arabic writers such as al-Ma'arrī and Abu Nuwas to exceed their predecessors, see Abdelfattah Kilito's lecture "Why Read Arabic Classics?" As Kilito has shown, these authors are now considered to be canonical yet their contemporaries judged them incapable of measuring up to their literary predecessors.

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lows the volatile tastes of the market, that Aaliya voluntarily produces through her translations a work that is not palatable, non-marketable, non-competitive; hers is a derivative work, a translation of a translation done in a minor language. Inspired by Aaliya's resistant translating practice, which renounces any authorial/authority claim and is carried out in the intimacy of her home, I invite world literature scholars and teachers to welcome in their syllabi public icons together with less-known authors, so-called authorities in the field together with less luminous stars. Most important, besides spreading an awareness of global circulation and transnational reception, practitioners of world literature should critically interrogate the hindrances, blockades, and changing fates that literary works and their authors have encountered along the way, due to the repressive force of sexism, racism, neoliberalism, religious fanaticism, and authoritarianism.

If an oppressive power determines what counts, what is valuable, and worth preserving, then Aaliya prefers to define herself as *de trop*, to be identified with the unnecessary woman of the title. The episode narrating how the Jewish artist and intellectual Bruno Schulz was first exploited and later killed by Gestapo officers is indicative of the ways in which authoritarian regimes have first made use of and later carelessly discarded and liquidated whom they had previously judged necessary:

> In 1941 Drohobycz fell to the Germans […].
>
> The Gestapo officer in charge of the Jewish labor force, Felix Landau, decided that Bruno was no ordinary Jew, but a necessary one.
>
> Think of the term for a moment.
>
> What is a *necessary* human? What saved Bruno's life, or, I should say, what delayed his death, was that Landau fancied himself a lover of art. He forced the necessary Jew to paint murals for his son's bedroom depicting scenes from beloved fairy tales. Landau kept Schulz alive until one day in November 1942, when Karl Günther, a rival Gestapo officer, killed Schulz to get back at Landau, who'd killed a dentist Günther favored—a necessary dentist, one presumes.
>
> Günther said to Landau, "You killed my Jew—I killed yours." (182–3)

Schulz, who was in the end considered an unnecessary human being according to the opportunistic and egotistic logic of the Gestapo officers, is one of the first writers that Aaliya convokes in her apartment together with other poets, writers, and philosophers

but also ordinary men and women who have cultivated beauty in dark times and a confident, expansive outlook. Among these, Aaliya mentions the following: "Tolstoy, Gogol, and Hamsun; Calvino, Borges, Schulz, Nádas, Nooteboom; Kiš, Karasu, and Kafka; books of memory, disquiet, but not of laughter and forgetting" (63). The ones favored by Aaliya are historically displaced literary figures, men and women who have nowhere to go; they are wanderers, outcasts, writers who have renounced exclusive affiliation to one single nation or group and have preferred instead to concern themselves with the human condition at large without forgetting, however, the precise historical circumstances and the local contingencies that impact on each single life. This is a great lesson also for practitioners of world literature, whose ambitious project of covering the whole world is often done at the expense of what Vilashini Cooppan has called "a reading of literature that is temporally deep, historically informed, textually sensitive, and culturally nontotalizing" (2009: 37). A reading, as Cooppan makes patently clear, that "stages both an ethical obligation to imagine the other as other and a historical obligation to locate the other in space-times not our own" (39). In *An Unnecessary Woman*, Alameddine trains readers to imagine a life different from their own, one that is located in a space and time far from the familiar. I believe that this is also the kind of practical training that world literature should encourage.

HIGH-LEVEL ERUDITION AND EMBODIED ART OF LIVING: WORLD LITERATURE AS *ADAB*

Aaliya does not only dive deep into the works of liminal authors such as Kafka and Karasu, who belong to a space and time not her own, but also reads widely and unsystematically. As she selects her books, she refuses to follow what Elleke Boehmer has called "the oppressive linearity and rationality implied by colonial European historiography" (2010: 202), with its strict categories of genre and form and its chronological order, as well as what Wai Chee Dimock has termed the "automatic equation between the literary and the territorial" (Dimock 2001: 175). It follows that ancient Roman poets Virgil and Ovid are mentioned along Proust and Nabokov; contemporary novelists, such as Lampe-

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dusa, Murakami, Molina, and Sebald, share the same space with premodern Berber poet Ahmad al-Tifashi (1184–1253), who composed a twelve-chapter anthology of Arabic poetry interspersed with jokes about erotic and sexual practices (both heterosexual and homoerotic), and who achieved world fame with a bizarre and for today's standards rather unclassifiable genre, the lapidary *Book of the Flowers of Thought on Precious Stones* (1242).[2] I see Aaliya's rather mismatched and anomalous connections as an encouragement to world literature scholars and teachers to daringly jumble together in their syllabi texts that go over the top, such as a lapidary, a poem with erotic jokes, and a novel that overturns the conventions of fiction. In Aaliya's unstable and unpredictable congregation, comrades Robert Bolaño and Danilo Kiš rub shoulders with medieval scholar Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, a prolific writer in theology, philosophy, astronomy, and mathematics, whose major scientific findings in astronomy would have an enormous influence upon early modern European astronomers such as Copernicus.[3] Finally, in mentioning al-Tūsī's exceptionally wide erudition, Alameddine indirectly reinvigorates the Abbasid concept of *adab* as a historically broad and inclusive category denoting (humanistic) knowledge with all its nuances, ranging from the social aspect of "good conduct," "civility," and "courtesy" to the quality of "being erudite" not only in matters of literary and scientific knowledge but also in the concrete, embodied, and down-to-earth art of living. By underlining the fact that books are not detached from but rather deeply enmeshed with historical and socio-political occurrences as well as with the quotidian practice of sustaining oneself, Alameddine disrupts the artificial division between "high art" and engaged literature, which has produced an antagonism and hierarchy between the two. Among others, Burns has criticized Pascale Casanova's division staged in *The World Republic of Letters* between "a privileged, pure literary realm detached from the infringements of political, social and historical forces, on the one hand, and on the other, an overdetermined, unimaginative literature which, like all postcolonial literatures, by Casanova's account, maintains too close a relationship to its sociopolitical

2. See more on this author: Levey (1973).
3. For more information on Nasir al-Dīn al-Tūsī, see *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

context" (2019: 77). *An Unnecessary Woman* contests this artificial and unproductive schism by celebrating a widely-read yet down-to-earth woman who responds to the catastrophes of her own time. She engages in resistant reading and translating practices and congregates in her apartment a new (literary) community of planetary size that defies the divisions, hatred, and violence propagated by colonial, patriarchal, and authoritarian powers.

AGAINST ENTRENCHED IDENTITIES AND MYTHS OF SELF-SUFFICIENCY: CONVENING A COMRADESHIP OF PLANETARY SIZE

Throughout the novel, Aaliya brings back to life and gathers in her apartment an eclectic group of writers, such as Al-Mutanabbi, Rilke, Tacitus, Márquez, Balzac, Munro, Faulkner, Yourcenar, Farah, Ondaatje, Malouf, Borowski, Levi, Milton, and Kassir, but also a crowd of ordinary men and women who have rose up against oppressive powers. Although today most of the writers mentioned by Aaliya are recognized as authoritative literary figures within their own national literature, during their lifetime these same writers have been harshly criticized if not socially ostracized by their communities because of their nonconformist and anti-parochial views. As Aaliya explains: "I like men and women who don't fit well in the dominant culture, or, as Alvaro de Campos calls them, strangers in this place as in every other, accidental in life as in the soul. I like outsiders, phantoms wandering the cobwebbed halls of the doomed castle where life must be lived" (2013: 195).

The intellectuals and ordinary people who secretly gather in Aaliya's house can hardly be considered as representatives of a single nation; even less, they can be regarded as repositories of patriotic or sectarian memory and knowledge. Precisely because they have held themselves apart from the majority and have occupied the margins of the nation, these men and women have seen things differently and more clearly than the rest of society, an ability that has helped them forge an alternative world (at least in their works) freed from the yoke of religious dogma, parochialism, fanaticism, and xenophobia. The story of Spinoza is emblematic in this sense:

> The philosopher I feel the most kinship with is Spinoza; I identify with his story and life. The Jewish elders of Amsterdam issued a cherem—a fatwa, for you non-Hebrew speakers—against my kinsman when

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> he was a mere twenty-three. He was excommunicated for his heresies. He didn't fight it, didn't rebel. He didn't even whine. He gave up his family inheritance and became a private scholar, a philosopher at home.
>
> In paintings and drawings he is portrayed with big brown eyes (and a big Semitic nose like mine, of course), inquiring eyes that penetrate the darkness surrounding us, and the one within us, by looking unblinkingly—intense, shining eyes that disperse mists and miasmas.
>
> He worked as a lens grinder until the day he died at forty-four, of a disease of the lungs, probably silicosis, exacerbated by the glass dust he inhaled while plying his trade.
>
> He died early trying to help people see.
>
> [...]
>
> Now, if he hadn't written *Ethics*—if he hadn't developed the concepts of religious freedom, freedom of the press, democratic republicanism, and a secular morality detached from theology—I wouldn't claim him. The fact that he wrote that masterwork is what makes him a genius. (211)

Spinoza appears to occupy here a marginal position within the nation and religious group to which he is expected to naturally belong; it is precisely his nonconformism and detachment that guarantees him the intellectual freedom that Aaliya so much admires in him. In a similar way, Aaliya herself (whose Arabic name means "the elevated") rises high above the clamor made by warlords and contenders, who spread a divisive and polarized vision of the world relying on the construction of barbaric enemies, entrenched identities, and myths of self-sufficiency. Clearly opposing this narrow-minded and deleterious ideology, Aaliya shows a genuine curiosity towards others, is extremely open, and cultivates an interest towards anything occurring outside her comfort zone. A similar desire to wander off the beaten track and build up an innovative world comradeship is what world literature should promote, as I will attempt to demonstrate in the last section.

BETWEEN ELEGY AND ANTICIPATION: A RUINOUS WORLD REPLACED BY "THE TIME AND IMAGE OF ANOTHER WORLD"

The crisis that closes the book—the flood that from the neighbor's bedroom upstairs menaces to destroy Aaliya's life work—is indicative of the necessity for Alameddine to overcome one's insularity and to spread awareness on the fragility of intimate archives (particularly those of women, often viewed as private and therefore

as irrelevant)[4] as well as of the cultural heritage at large. This is how Aaliya's neighbors, so far mentioned in the text as "the three witches," hastily inform the protagonist of the incumbent threat posed by the water pipe leak:

> Haphazardly soggy, the witches surround me, orbit me like planets on Dexedrine, talking, talking, talking. A water pipe—maid's bathroom upstairs in Joumana's apartment—flood—no danger anymore—plumber's been called—they hope I don't have anything valuable stored in my maid's room.
>
> Anything valuable? Valuable? My crates, my crates and crates, my life—they know nothing of that. (264)

The new calamity, causing sudden damage and distress, paradoxically offers Aaliya the opportunity to see her neighbors differently, not as distant and hostile enemies but as close and sympathetic comrades, and for them to see her for the first time as a valuable person and an ally. Most important, from now on, Aaliya's apartment stops being a place of confinement and isolation and becomes instead a social space within which the four women engage in a collective act of rescue. This is how Aaliya describes the ways in which the four women—now a collective engaged in a quiet yet impressive struggle against time—use what is at hand to save the manuscripts stored away in the maid's room: "we work all morning. I run the iron in one corner of my reading room. Fadia and Marie-Thérèse blow-dry. The three of us form a triangle, or three points on a circle, within which Joumana moves. She performs triage: she organizes the piles, decides what needs resuscitation first, which page for ironing and which for hot air" (286). The realization that the shared works of literature they had personally read and cherished may disappear does not leave this group of women indifferent and pushes them into direct action. Their tacit recognition of those books as valuable and treasured goods fosters their immediate engagement in what they perceive as a struggle against time.

Aaliya and her neighbors' frenetic attempts to save her books and the memory they embody acquire even more significance

4. On this issue, see among others Maryanne Dever et al., *The Intimate Archive: Journeys Through Private Papers*.

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given the context in which this act of rescue is being carried out. The inhabitants of Beirut have indeed not only witnessed a bloody civil war, which lasted fifteen years and provoked innumerable material destructions and human losses, but have also been impotent bystanders of the demolition of the city's prewar architectural heritage, particularly of its lively and cosmopolitan city center—al-Burj—during the state-sponsored, amnesiac plan of post-war reconstruction carried out by the joint-stock company Solidère.[5]

In open contrast to the corporate power of neoliberalism, which views ancient buildings as not worth preserving and orders their demolition to make room for the new, Aaliya stays put, remains firm in her beliefs, strong and principled, her integrity untouched by the corruption of power and the lure of easy money. Echoing Czeslaw Milosz's important endeavor, Alameddine thus indirectly deals in his novel with what Milosz considered the central issue of our time: "the impact of history upon moral being, the search for ways to survive spiritual ruin in a ruined world" (Terrence Des Pres, *The Nation*). This one, it appears to me, is among the most urgent tasks that scholars, teachers, and students of world literature should engage in: to spotlight the ruins produced by this world regulated by the logic of profit, exceptionalism, and dominance, and imagine a valid though unguaranteed alternative. In Cheah's own words: "to contest this world by offering the image and timing of another world" (2008: 36).

The description of the crumbling Ottoman house in the closing pages of the book, which refuses to collapse and stubbornly reminds Beirutis as well as foreign visitors of the silenced atrocities of the war, points to this kind of moral obligation, one that tenaciously refuses to condone violence and keeps the memory of the past alive as a form of admonition and as a springboard to envision more sustainable and less violent futures:

5. On the highly contested reconstruction plan of the downtown in Beirut, see Saree Makdisi, "Laying Claim to Beirut;" Samir Khalaf, *Heart of Beirut*; Jens-Peter Hanssen and Daniel Genberg, "Beirut in Memoriam;" Paola Ardizzola and Roula El-Khoury, "From the Port City of Beirut to Beirut Central District: Narratives of Destruction and Re-Construction."

> Amid the proliferation of unsightly buildings, this crumbling Ottoman house with its triple arcade and red tile roof stands out as starkly as a woman in parliament. […]
>
> Pockmarked and perforated, disemboweled, roofless and doorless, it allows entry to all manner of trash, yet it appears majestic, to my eyes at least. Encroached upon by bigger, taller, mightier armies, it is poor, infirm, weak, and despised, but unlike Lear, it remains defiant, remains regal, probably till the end. It stands alone. (238)

I see world literature as promoting this kind of project, one that that defies the gradual erosion and supposedly final collapse of the humanities, by engaging in a task of historical excavation, rigorous critique, and fierce imagination. Anyone involved in this task should not be afraid of but consciously delve into what Elam has called "disorderly histories, promiscuous modes of thought, impossible transformations, and improvisational adjacencies" (2021: 8), even if that means taking into account the risk of precariously standing alone, in ways similar to the crumbling Ottoman house.

WORLD LITERATURE IN A CATASTROPHIC TIME: "BUILDING UP WORLD-FELLOWSHIP" AND REMAINING A "PERPETUAL NOVICE"

In *An Unnecessary Woman*, Alameddine offers readers the opportunity to regard closely what we lose—in terms of difference and richness but also of shared patrimony and inheritance—when books (and human beings) are easily dismissed as unnecessary.[6] Alameddine refuses to consider Aaliya's precarious condition as unique and exceptional, widening instead the sphere of trauma and catastrophe across geographical borders and historical periods, thus showing that what may appear as specific local conditions—vulnerability and loss confined to a turbulent buffer zone such as that of Lebanon—are in fact common conditions across the globe and unfortunately increasingly widespread.

The novel is a fine and nuanced rendering of one woman's life, as she attempts at everyday activities under siege. Hence, for Aaliya walking down the street, for instance, constitutes significant action; her quiet and unassuming daily struggles to keep

6. On the material destruction of libraries around the world in times of war, see James Raven, *Lost Libraries: The Destruction of Great Book Collections Since Antiquity*.

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a literary, humanistic culture alive in such a barbaric time represent defiant counteracts to contrast a vision of the world that rests on hate, domination, and xenophobia.

The novel is disseminated with occasional encounters that become a binding and whose eventual break is caused by the sudden and traumatic irruption of violence in the characters' daily life. I suggest that by privileging unorthodox forms of alignment, such as Aaliya's friendship with the charming Hannah, Alameddine affirms the value of affiliative rather than filiative forms of attachment, thus voluntarily undermining the family, the clan, one's ethnic group, religious sect, or nation. I believe that this emphasis on innovative connections and affiliations represents one of the most valuable contributions that world literature could make. To quote Ngũgĩ wa Thiong' o: "to seek connections in phenomena even in the seemingly unconnected" (2012: 20).

Aaliya, as Alameddine makes patently clear, has not reached amiability with her maturity; she stubbornly continues to refuse to ingratiate herself with official authorities or individuals in power. In doing so, she joins the group of writers she has silently and surreptitiously congregated in the rooms of her apartment. By narrating the exceptional story of this apparently "unnecessary woman" then, Alameddine makes us become aware of the value of an inwardly focused life, who voluntarily chooses detachment rather than complicity with power yet remains an active participant and a crucial witness of the tragic historical occurrences of her time. His original novel reads like an invitation to cultivate beauty through disobedient acts of reading, translating, disseminating, and preserving books, which emerge here not as trivialities but as the only possible antidotes against cyclically resurgent social ills, such as hatred, religious extremism, and bloody wars. Instead of destroying communities as weapons do, shared books and communal reading practices, which are guided by antiauthoritarian and anticolonial principles, contribute to the establishment of a collectivity of planetary size constantly in the making. In Elam's words: "[Anticolonial reading] represents an anticolonial politics that does not seek dominance and mastery but rather attempts to remain perpetual novice, in the service of a world after colonial rule" (2021: xiv).

A "perpetual novice" himself, Alameddine does not represent Aaliya as a snobbish old lady living in an ivory tower, but rather as a neophyte; he further locates her in a very tragic historical moment and in a very hazardous geographical location, one of the most difficult to inhabit. The writer moves smoothly from a mundane world described in its material, and often brute, reality to a poetic, almost etheric world made of love for literature, fading memories, fragile affective attachments, and elective affinities that are by their very nature cosmopolitan. Once again then, not an abstracted and privileged world of belles lettres contrasted to a painful reality plagued by socio-political constraints and historical disasters but an aesthetic realm that is, quoting a famous passage by another lifelong amateur, "always enmeshed in circumstances, time, place, and society—in short [it is] in the world and hence worldly" (Said, 1983: 35).

By and large, the novel reads like an elegant and erudite investigation of the relationship between life and literature, historical occurrences and fictional reconstruction, and of the ways in which books help endure hardships and illuminate, albeit intermittently, the absurdity of life. Indeed, as Umberto Eco writes: "This is the consoling function of narrative—the reason people tell stories, and have told stories from the beginning of time: [...] to find a shape, a form, in the turmoil of human experience" (qtd. in Bondanella 1997: 165). It is important to note, however, that literature has not only a consoling function in Alameddine's novel but is also the medium through which Aaliya abandons her isolation. As the narration proceeds, readers see Aliya gradually knitting composite, both (literary) and real, connections that enable her to be simultaneously a passionate citizen of Beirut but also of the world at large; they magically transform her from a reclusive woman into a cosmopolitan globetrotter, one who actively "build[s] up world-fellowship" (Elam 2021: 37).

The spontaneous tone of the narration should not overshadow Alameddine's attentive craft and complex formal choices. In fact, the flavor of the oral narrative, the surprising turns and nuances of the spoken voice destabilize the rigid dichotomy separating orature from literature, orality from writing, which is yet another residue of colonialism, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o reminds us laconically:

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"writing and orality were natural allies, not antagonists; so orature and literature" (2012: 72). The intricacy of orality and writing in Alameddine's novel has not only the merit of breaking up yet another colonial dichotomy and its ensuing hierarchy but also of creating a sense of participatory immediacy that directly implicates the readers, who cannot consider themselves untouched by the catastrophes they hear, see, and ultimately witness thanks to Aaliya's confidences. Finally, the continuous flashbacks provoke an erosion of the chronological order and together with it a disruption of the narrative order, aesthetic devices that disrupt the tyrannical linearity of colonial historiography, while also pointing to a catastrophic time. Indeed, as Edward Said writes with reference to Ludwig van Beethoven's late compositions, which are characterized by a constitutive fragmentation that finds no resolution, these tragic musical pieces are "about 'lost totality,' and are therefore catastrophic" (2006: 12–13). Distrustful of any form of totality, Alameddine is intransigent when it comes to impose coherence and wholeness to its narrative design. Aaliya too appears in this book as a figure of lateness itself, a "scandalous, even catastrophic commentator on the present" (Said, 2006: 14). From her marginal position, Aaliya comments with shocking clarity on the disastrous effects of the Lebanese Civil War and on the ways in which colonial hegemony and divisions, sectarian entrenchment and polarization, neoliberal greed and corruption provoke irremediable damage. Her mocking spirit, however, undoes the spectacle of violence and breaks its sensationalistic effects through an emphasis on memory, mourning, and loss.

The novel closes with yet another moment of crisis. The unfavorable circumstances, the disaster that risks ruining and destroying Aaliya life's work may have, however, a liberatory potential. The novel situation despite its catastrophic weight seems in fact to harbor latent promise. It offers Aaliya the possibility, on the one hand, to connect with her neighbors, gain visibility, and be recognized for her worth but also to join a real rather than imagined comradeship and get her hands dirty, as the following poetic line suggests: "Aaliya, the above, the separate, can step in the mud" (2013: 290). Most important, this new catastrophe represents for her a new beginning, a favorable circumstance to leave behind old habits

and self-imposed, imprisoning rules as well as to revitalize her status as a "perpetual novice" (Elam 2021: xiv). As she explains: "this destruction is an opportunity to break free from the rules I've set for translating, or from some of them, at least. Like a teenager, I too can rebel. Maybe I can translate a book written in English for a change" (Alameddine 2013: 289).

If beginning and beginning-anew, as Said teaches us, is "a consciously intentional, productive activity, […] an activity whose circumstances include a sense of loss" (1983: 372), then we may indeed consider the catastrophic event that knocks at Aaliya's door as a new beginning and an opportunity for her to remain what she always wanted to be: a lifelong apprentice. We may, however, hesitate a moment and worryingly ask: will Aaliya's precious work survive this new calamity? Will she regain her regal composure and find the force to collect once again the dispersed fragments of her life and the soaked pages of her cosmopolitan bookcase? Alameddine does not offer a final, reassuring answer to these questions; he withholds, in other words, a happy ending. He avoids an easy resolution, handing over the problem and its ensuing responsibility to the reader. An end, as his novel suggests, may sometimes represent a new beginning and therefore an opportunity to staunchly cultivate one's inexpertness and non-mastery; other times, however, as Judith Halberstam notes, "an end is not a new beginning: an end is an end is an end" (2011: 118).

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