‘In Mockery of the Narcissus of the Universe’: Hisham Bustani in the Digital Age

by

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Abstract

Based on close readings of Hisham Bustani’s short story “Nightmares of the City” and his collection of flash prose The Perception of Meaning, this thesis seeks to identify the main forces at play in Bustani’s writing. The form and content of it are closely intertwined and both must be taken into consideration when trying to understand the significance of his work. Bustani is a strong adherent to the short prose form. The shortness of his pieces can create the illusion that the meaning behind them is simple and fleeting. However, this is not the case. Bustani’s writing always contains a narrative and there is always a purpose to his writing. Bustani has said that he intends to encourage free reading and free understanding in his work. In light of these considerations, this thesis attempts to explain the literary devices and effects at play in Bustani’s work.
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Introduction

Hisham Bustani is a contemporary Jordanian writer. He was born in 1975 in Amman. A dentist by profession, Bustani has nevertheless started to receive notoriety for his innovative writing. He has published four collections of short fiction to date; they are ‘An al-Hubb wa-l-Mawt (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 2008), al-Fawda al-Ratiba lil-Wujud (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 2010), ’Ara al-Ma’nan (Dar al-Adab, 2012) and Muqaddima la budda minha li-fana’ mu’ajjal (Cairo: Dar al-Ain 2014). ’Ara al-Ma’nan was translated into English under the title The Perception of Meaning by Thoraya El-Rayyes and published as a bilingual edition by Syracuse University Press in 2015. “Nightmares of the City” and “Freefall in a Shattered Mirror”, short stories from al-Fawda al-Ratiba lil-Wujud (or, in English, The Monotonous Chaos of Existence) had previously been translated by El Rayyes in 2012 and were released online, originally one in the St. Ann’s Review and one in The Common respectively but both were subsequently made available on a number of literary websites. The English translation of The Monotonous Chaos of Existence will be released this year. Clearly, Hisham Bustani is becoming a recognizable name amongst literary circles in the English speaking world; this thesis is a direct result of his increasing notoriety. It is a particularly exciting time to study the work of Bustani at a time when his writing has provoked so much interest but before his name has become widely known in the West.

The fact that Bustani’s writing is receiving so much attention is somewhat surprising as his writing is not what one could truthfully describe as “accessible”. In a review of The Perception of Meaning Gretchen McCullough describes it as being like a “house of mirrors at a carnival, reflecting the distortion, absurdities and maladies of the modern world that worships
technology and destroys nature.”

The simile is very appropriate for describing Bustan’s writing, both in terms of its content and its style. In terms of content, every aspect of the modern world is fodder for Bustani, from the environmental destruction caused by the ubiquity of technology to the prevalence of loneliness and alienation epitomized by the prevalence of Facebook, from the treatment of homeless people to the failure of intellectuals to connect with the reality that surrounds them.

As his range of subject matter suggests, it is very tempting to label Bustani as an “activist” and several people have. He has, on several occasions taken a firm stance against specific government actions. In 2015, the US State Department put him in their “additional security” category and this meant that he was unable to travel to the US in time to participate in a number of literary events where he was scheduled to appear. In response he wrote a letter entitled “Writing is Not Terrorism Mr. President” (in English) which was published in the LA Review of Books. “From my position as an insignificant member of the world, I am unable to influence events the way governments with their political, economic, and military arsenals can. But I have protested such policies and practices with my pen.”

Bustani is vigorously involved in political activity; however, his critique of unbridled governmental power does not mean that he is always on the side of the people in opposition to this governmental power. In fact, Bustani is


2 One example is the author biography found on the Syracuse University Press webpage for the translated version of The Perception of Meaning.

very critical of the public for acting in ways that circumvent its own capacity to act independently of the trajectory set for it by the government. Bustani has said that the Jordanian government is merely following the public’s lead in limiting public freedom. Freedom, for Bustani, is an important condition for the good of humanity. In his open letter published in the LA Review of Books, Bustani said

The least anyone with a minimum sense of justice and a concrete conviction about liberty and equality can do is speak his mind about the general good of humanity and the planet; to speak out about those who are blinded by power and profit, but unmoved by tragedies.

It is clear, in reading Bustani’s work that “those who are blinded by power and profit” are not just those in positions of power but rather that the capacity for this confusion exists within everyone. Bustani’s aim in targeting this confusion is not to be prescriptive and to re-direct people’s thinking but is instead to challenge people’s thinking and to make them examine whether they have become “unmoved by tragedy”.

Bustani sees tragedy in every facet of contemporary existence but what occupies him most is the unresponsiveness of people to the scenes of tragedy that confront them every day. The first section of this thesis will examine the way Bustani treats social media, which he sees as having facilitated people’s unresponsiveness, and the ways in which people confuse the technology of communication for actual human contact. This process has meant that people have begun to lose their capacity to perceive things on a sensory level and so Bustani challenges this by writing about subjects that re-invoke sensory perceptions. It is not just Bustani’s subject matter that challenges people’s ability to perceive on a sensory level though, he uses a very

5 Bustani, “Writing is Not Terrorism Mr. President.”
specific combination of analytical concepts, including Affect Theory and magical realism, in such a way that challenges the over-intellectualization of his subject matter and forces people to confront the subject matter in a way that often makes them feel physical discomfort. The second section of this thesis will look at the specific literary forms Bustani employs and the ways in which these literary forms work to challenge people’s perceptions, to make them experience viscerally the scenes he creates through his writing. Bustani has been explicit about how he sees his function as a writer vis-à-vis the rest of society. In an interview he stated: “We share this very nice word in Arabic, marhali. It means ‘leading people step-by-step’, this is not the role of the writer.” Bustani does not lead people step-by-step. Rather, he throws a brick wall in the path of each person who encounters his work, forcing her to stop and question where she is going and how she is going to get there, given the very drastic change in conditions she has just been confronted with.

6 Morison Jr., 27.
Chapter 1

In his short story “Nightmares of the City”, and in his pieces of short prose that make up the book *The Perception of Meaning*, Hisham Bustani confronts the contemporary urban phenomena of loneliness and alienation. He has classified his work as part of the “New Arabic Writing” which he defines by its ability to confront contemporary problems ignored by other disciplines. It is an “evolution in the techniques of the literary form; in the themes and subjects that correspond with societal change in ‘real time’; and in the relationship between the writer, the “cultural authority,” and the official cultural sphere designated by governments and institutions.”

Bustani engages with what he terms “governments and institutions” in a distinct way. He focuses not so much on what governments impose on people through institutions but rather how people respond to contemporary institutions. Bustani’s concern with confronting subjects in “real time” is apparent in his choice of subject matter: digital cameras, Facebook and intellectualism are among the objects he critiques. They are the subjects that Bustani, as a contemporary author who considers it important to engage dynamically with the conditions of the present, is uniquely poised to confront. Bustani’s concern is that current forms of digital communication have encouraged people to detach themselves from reality and, as a result, people are no longer responsive to world events, even if these events are affecting people in close physical proximity to them. Reality here means what is real rather than imagined or desired. Digital communication allows people to avoid the pain of recognizing the loneliness that ensues from this detachment.

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Bustani’s response to the distance each individual puts between herself and her surroundings is to reconnect people with feeling so they can once again feel the horror and loneliness of their situations. Bustani seeks to make people aware of how detached, how lonely they are in the modern world. The way he does this is by writing in a way that makes the physical pain of loneliness present. For Bustani, people are already this lonely, it is only that they are detached from it and from the physical destruction of their environment that is taking place. Through his writing, Bustani seeks to reconnect people with their pain and, in doing so, make them aware of their capacity to be affected by their surroundings.

Bustani’s concern with the detrimental consequences of contemporary technologies of communication on human interaction mirrors the writing of Walter Benjamin in some important ways. Nearly a century has passed since Benjamin was writing yet his analysis of the ways in which picture magazines, newsreels, painting and photography changed the way in which humans interacted with one another and their environments shares the same concern with the effect of media representations as Bustani’s work does. Although writing about and in completely different eras, Benjamin and Bustani share a concern with the way technologies affect human interaction. Both men are concerned in particular with how the changes wrought by technology affect how individuals interact with larger groups of people in society, what Benjamin refers to as “the crowd” in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”. “The crowd” referred to here by Benjamin in the context of Baudelaire is the crowd of the big city, the object of observation of the flâneur. The flâneur is a specifically male individual who travels through urban centres observing the dynamics of urban life but remaining somewhat aloof from them, although being affected emotionally by them in profound ways. “The crowd” is made up of the urban inhabitants observed by the flâneur; he is part of the big city crowd although he remains uncomfortable with this association as he is “unable to rid himself of their essentially inhuman
make-up”.\(^8\) The crowd’s “essentially inhuman make-up” will be discussed in greater detail shortly. In his discussion of how Baudelaire treated the specifically urban phenomenon of “the crowd”, Benjamin notes that Baudelaire, as someone who stood apart from it, had something of a paradoxical relationship to it. According to Benjamin, far from experiencing the crowd as an opposed, antagonistic element, this very crowd brings to the city dweller the figure that fascinates. The delight of the urban poet is love—not at first sight, but at last sight. It is a farewell forever which coincides in the poem with the moment of enchantment. Thus the sonnet supplies the figure of shock, indeed of catastrophe.\(^9\)

As someone who was not part of the crowd, Baudelaire, the poet, experienced isolation and loneliness (“the catastrophe”) as a result of his exclusion but the crowd also provided an embodiment of the human connection that Baudelaire was lacking (the “enchantment”). Thus, it was simultaneously something that provoked an adverse reaction while simultaneously provoking feelings of desire. Benjamin’s paradoxical pairing of “love” and “catastrophe” is useful for understanding Bustani’s evocation of loneliness in his protagonists. His protagonists are all situated outside of the crowd, although they are intimate observers of it. The crowd makes the protagonists’ loneliness apparent while simultaneously offering a temporary escape as it allows one to lose herself in the emotions and actions of other people. “But the nature of the poet’s emotions has been affected as well. What makes his body contract in a tremor-\(^\text{crispé comme un extravagant,}\) Baudelaire says- is not the rapture of a man whose every fiber is suffused with eros, it is, rather like the kind of sexual shock that can beset a lonely man.”\(^10\)


\(^9\) Benjamin, 169.

\(^10\) Benjamin, 169.
is part of the crowd, who feels connected, experiences sexual feelings as part of a continuum of feelings toward others. Conversely, one who is outside the crowd is alone, so sexual feelings are experienced as a shock, the extreme intimacy of sexual feelings is not part of a continuum of feelings one experiences when interacting with others but rather something completely incongruous with the isolation the outsider regularly feels in relation to the crowd. This graphic description of Benjamin’s is extremely useful in isolating exactly what Bustani is doing in his evocations of the physical pain that is associated with loneliness. His protagonists are all isolated from everyone around them physically and emotionally. They are incapable of crossing over the barriers that separate them from those around them. Many of these barriers have been constructed, knowingly or unknowingly, by those around them and this leads to a great deal of anger and alienation on the part of the protagonists, even as their bodies ache with the desire to truly connect with these same people. The visceral impact of the protagonists’ loneliness is evoked through the “shock” described by Benjamin. Bustani makes it clear that each of his protagonists have a clear idea of what human connection would look like in their lives and they are continuously yearning for it yet, the connection continuously eludes them. The “shock” of their isolation remains something physically experienced as they continuously try and ultimately fail to establish human connection. The protagonists’ state of physical isolation remains constant.

The worst parts of human existence for Bustani- the ones from which the observers of the crowd are trying to escape- are those associated with the urban experience- the specific loneliness that comes from being simultaneously surrounded by people and unable to connect with anyone. This unique position created by the urban environment allows people to be anonymous, which has problematic consequences even as it simultaneously is a source of pleasure. Bustani’s narrators, his protagonists, are always in the position of observer and, in being so placed are privileged in that they have detailed knowledge of the crowd, even though
they are also excluded from it and experience the heavy loneliness associated with exclusion. Technology, specifically social media, gives Bustani’s protagonists the ability to observe intimate details of others’ lives while remaining physically distant from these people. Bustani never uses the phrase “the crowd” specifically but the protagonists in his pieces are united in the experience of being separate from others, in being in a position to make close observations of everyone around them from the position of observer. In this, they display a very close connection with Benjamin’s discussion of Baudelaire as a flâneur.

It is precisely this image of the big-city crowds that become decisive for Baudelaire. If he succumbed to the force by which he was drawn to them and, as a flâneur, was made one of them, he was nevertheless unable to rid himself for a sense of their essentially inhuman make-up. He becomes their accomplice even as he dissociates himself from them. He becomes deeply involved with them, only to relegate them to oblivion with a single glance of contempt. There is something compelling about this ambivalence where he cautiously admits to it. Perhaps the charm of his “Crépuscule du soir” so difficult to account for, is bound up with this.11

The sense of the crowd’s “essentially inhuman make-up” can be found abundantly within Bustani’s writing. Benjamin was writing before anyone could have even predicted the forms of social media that act so destructively on human relationships in Bustani’s writing, yet both writers have a massive preoccupation with the “inhuman make-up” of the human relationships surrounding them. For Bustani, the isolation of the urban dweller causes him to fall into a state of numbness and lack of feeling. Piece # 60 in the chapter of The Perception of Meaning entitled “A Game of the Senses” describes graphically the way in which the elements of urbanism have destroyed the five senses, leaving humans unable to perceive reality in an unmediated way.

Sight collides with tall buildings and the light of big screens, smell is muddled by the odor of exhaust fumes and canned perfumes, touch has evaporated with the rough feel of

11 Benjamin, 172.
selfishness, taste has melted in artificial flavoring, hearing has been pierced by the clanging of the wheels turning and turning without end.\textsuperscript{12}

The infrastructure of the modern world does not merely affect human perception, it permanently corrupts the human ability to perceive one’s surroundings. By representing the changes wrought by modernity as phenomena that interfere with the body’s sense organs, Bustani takes the changes out of the sphere of intellectual debate and inscribes them directly on the human body.

The physical damage caused by technology impacts the mind in a way that mirrors the effects on the body: in both cases technology is constraining the ability of people to operate, physically and mentally, outside of the realm of the technology. “With all this technology, absence has become a lie, imagination a lie. And the endless space the mind ran through, once, is penned in by tall fences made of wires and high-speed microprocessors.”\textsuperscript{13} This is a really crucial passage for understanding Bustani’s concerns with the impact of technology on human interaction. When they become completely engrossed in it, people no longer realize that there are things that exist outside of the realm of technology- that technology is incapable of representing all the exists in the world and all that humans are capable of. It is this slip of the human mind, the one in which people mistake what is represented by technology for reality itself that creates the problems Bustani identifies.

This slip of the mind has an impact on human perception to such an extent that it transforms the senses. “The five senses held a meeting and decided to commit mass suicide and


\textsuperscript{13} Bustani, 165.
this is why Man runs, every day, in a world that is vacant.” The vacancy of the world referred to here is of the worse kind for it is the kind of vacancy that is so complete that nothing can be generated in its space. The space has been taken over completely by technology. The physical barrenness and artificiality of this scene is made infinitely worse by the death of the imagination. Everything is empty and there is no longer even the possibility of people imagining that things could be otherwise. The absence of imagination means an absence of any sort of productive force outside of mechanical reproduction but nothing of any substance can be produced through mechanical reproduction. In this situation, the death of imagination is the outcome of the prevalence of technology over human perception.

It is significant that, in Bustani’s scene where technology has taken over life, even “absence” has gone or, as he puts it, “is now a lie”. For Bustani, the illusion that technology facilitates that each individual has access to everything instantaneously is problematic. Thus, losing the idea of absence is dangerous. Like, “absence”, imagination becomes a lie when technology dominates life. Along with “absence”, “imagination” is something that exists outside of digital communication. Its loss represents the loss of an important human generative capacity. Benjamin’s concept of imagination is useful here to elucidate what is at stake in Bustani’s world when imagination is lost.

The perpetual readiness of volitional, discursive memory, encouraged by the technique of mechanical reproduction, reduces the scope for the play of the imagination. The latter may perhaps be defined as an ability to give expression to desires of a special kind, with “something beautiful” thought of as their fulfilment.

14 Bustani, 165.
15 Benjamin, 186.
It is the “desires of a special kind, with “something beautiful” thought of as their fulfilment” that Bustani is especially concerned with. The “tall fences of wires and high-speed microprocessors” have replaced people’s ability to notice when something is missing and to create “something beautiful” by themselves in order to fill the “endless space the mind ran through”, the infinite mental capacity that humans possessed before technology changes their ability to use their senses of perception. In the reality Bustani describes, it is technology, not humans, that determines what is possible and what is not. In this scenario, humans have become numb, all their senses have been replaced, and they are no longer even able to retreat in their own minds.

Bustani tries to combat this numbness in his writing by provoking an intense and extensive palette of emotions that have a powerful impact on the body. In this way, he invokes the physical pain associated with the urban experience, the pain people are trying not to feel. Although it is a negative sort of feeling, it is productive because it forces people once again into feeling and awareness of what it is they are missing. Even though it is painful, noticing one’s isolation can bring one closer to the comfort of human company and overcome numbness. In a state of numbness, one does not even realize that she is missing anything; she cannot perceive that anything is absent. Conversely, when one is feeling the full impact of her isolation, she is focused very deeply on the all the aspects of human connection that she is not experiencing and her desire to have it. Even though she does not have it, her perceptions are much more acute than they would be in a state of numbness.

Bustani’s protagonist in “Nightmares of the City” has a very strong capacity to imagine things; however, it ultimately fails to save her from her sense of overwhelming loneliness. She is acutely aware of what she is missing in terms of human connection. Like all his protagonists, she is an observer of human activity, waiting for a bus that never comes. She waits for it in real,
waking time; however, all the details of it come from an unconscious, dream state. In reality, she is alone her only experience of people is through her observations of them from a distance, or in her imagination. The bus that never comes is an object of her imagination, and incorporates in full all of the human interaction she is missing in reality. On the bus are all of her favourite famous people and others.

Every time it stops at a station, everyone gets off. They spread a mat and circle around cups of wine, pieces of cheese, garlic yoghurt and dark bread freckled with nuts. To one side, there is a garbage bag: soldiers throw in their boots and rifles, the informer throws in his eyes and ears, the tart throws in her high heels, the student throws in his teacher, the opportunist throws in his position, the prostitute throws in her society, and the deified leader throws in himself.

Only then does everyone drink for love and freedom. They undress and each describes the details of their faults, deformities, and neuroses. They converge in a huge orgy becoming one body and then disintegrate into their own selves again. They climb back into the bus, hand in hand, and head to the next station.

But the bus never comes.16

The relationship between the people on the bus in notable for its extreme intimacy. Each person is able to throw away the objects that link them with their occupations, suggesting that social position does not matter on the bus. The people on the bus are able to reveal the “details of their faults, deformities, and neuroses” to one another. In addition to the orgy, an extreme form of close physical intimacy that excludes no one, there is the physical intimacy of holding hands, which the people do as they return to the bus. The people on the bus experience the most extreme forms of physical and emotional closeness with others that it is possible to experience. The opportunity to be in this sort of relationship with people never actually manifests though.

Throughout the story, the girl is waiting for the bus that never comes. In contrast to the all the

social activity on the bus, the girl faces extreme loneliness in reality, where she observes her aunt and uncle’s fractured and physically violent relationship, and the sadness and isolation of her grandmother. It is the narrator’s awareness of her own loneliness and that of her family members that provides the fodder for her fantasies of the bus where the ties between people are as deep as the fractures between the narrator’s family are. The narrator is this piece does not have a life that is dominated by technology; thus, she is acutely aware of all of it is that she is missing and has the imaginative capacity to conceptualize it in great detail. This means that the discrepancy between what her life is and what is might be hits her harder than someone who has social media at her disposal but, for Bustani, the narrator’s capacity to notice what is missing and to imagine how things might be different than they actually exist are human capabilities that once lost, could cause irreversible damage.

The narrator’s fantasies also turn toward the fatalistic. In contrast to her fantasy of the bus, she experiences the fatalistic fantasies from a distance, in the same way she observes people in reality. However, in her fantasies, she is observing herself which makes her have a strange awareness of her own body, even though she is experiencing it from outside of herself. The pain of her isolation is intensified by her vision of her grandfather crying over her own dead body “charred and stiff.” She witnesses herself again after she runs away from this apparition, but this time she is alive.

I turned quickly and found myself in front of myself, face to face. My adrenaline surged, my pupils dilated to the maximum, I started to shake- meanwhile I was completely silent, calm like a grassy hedge, my facial expressions wiped blank with an eraser and dyed with lemon concentrate.17

17 Bustani, “Nightmares of the City”.
Unlike her (fantastical) experience of being perceived and accepted by the people on the bus, the narrator fails to notice any sign that her doppelganger is in any way moved by seeing her: the narrator experiences panic while her doppelganger remains impassive. Making direct eye contact with herself, the narrator fails to experience what Benjamin refers to as the “aura” in her doppelganger. When he discusses aura, Benjamin is talking about what is lost when one looks at a photograph, in comparison to what one experiences when looking at a painting. In both cases, there is a distance between the object and the viewer that must be overcome. In the case of a painting, the situation is conducive for the viewer to invest the object with an aura, to imagine that there is a communion between the object and the viewer. This is not possible in the case of a photograph. The “aura” refers to the “perceptibility” one experiences when she looks at someone else. For Benjamin “looking at someone carries the implicit expectation that our look will be returned by the object of our gaze.” When this expectation is met, there is an “experience of the aura to the fullest extent”. The portrayal of the narrator’s loneliness is so powerful precisely because she fails to register her gaze being returned by any of the objects of her gaze except by the people on the bus. Everywhere else she encounters people, her grandmother, her grandfather, her aunt and uncle, she is not noticed, she fails to perceive any sign that these people notice she exists. She fails to experience her gaze being returned with anything but impassiveness, even when she is meeting the gaze of herself.

18 Benjamin, 186-187.
19 Benjamin, 188.
20 Benjamin, 188.
21 Benjamin, 188.
The protagonist’s sense of detachment from everyone around her expands into a sense of being detached from her own body. Although the protagonist seems initially to be free to think and act as she wishes, she repeatedly experiences restrictions to her movement. She experiences seeing her own dead body, the ultimate state of powerlessness. When she runs away from the scene of her own dead body and her doppelganger, she struggles to make her body do what she wants it to:

I was struggling to open my eyes. I wanted to wake up. Invisible fingers closed my eyes tight. I gathered all the strength left in my body, turned it into a chisel and hammer that I slammed to open my eyelids. Haaaaaahhh, I inhaled withdrawing all the air in the room, and exploded in tears.
I almost died from sleepiness, but I didn’t want to go back to that room, that street, the wall blocking the road, the other me, and the feeling of not being able to open my eyes.  

The narrator’s movement is repeatedly restricted: she waits for a bus that never comes, she sees her own dead body, she tries to run away from her own dead body but is blocked by a wall and her doppelganger. She runs, dreams and tries to travel but fails to escape by any of these means. Every time she tries to exercise her agency, she is physically prevented from doing so. In staging all of these ruptures, Bustani creates a protagonist who has no agency. Despite her continuous movement and her attempts to escape her predicament, she is “running terrified in no specific direction as if someone is chasing her…She runs, and runs, and runs…When they catch her and ask what she is looking for and what she wants, she replies, gasping for breath: ‘the stop of the bus that never comes.”

Noticing the way her body reacts to the various situations she finds herself thrown into without warning allows us to “reintroduce in the process questions of agency, performance and

22 Bustani, “Nightmares of the City”.
23 Bustani, “Nightmares of the City”.
movement (travelling, running, fainting)”, as Tarek El Ariss exhorts us to do. 24 El Ariss presents a very coherent view of Affect Theory as it relates to the writings of those living under colonial rule in the Middle East during the nineteenth century. Affect Theory is useful to bring up here because it allows one to examine the significance of the protagonist’s movements. Affect is “integral to a body’s perpetual becoming…pulled…by the way of its relation to, indeed its composition through, the forces of encounter.” 25 Through her encounters with her family, her doppelganger and her search for the bus that never comes, the “pull” causing the protagonist to run is apparent. Significantly, in El Ariss’s discussion of affect, the circumstances in which affect becomes important are negative ones in which a person is confronted with physical discomfort that they cannot get away from and so their body begins to resist in any way it can. The negative situation creates an environment in which the body becomes more engaged with the person’s emotions, creating a paradoxical situation in which bad things are happening, but one’s ability to perceive things and express oneself becomes more direct. The narrator experiences what El-Ariss refers to as a “hellish prison”; these dire circumstances are felt and expressed as something that is simultaneously terrible and entrancing: an “Orphean procession that engulfs the text with its flames and smoke.” 26 The narrator is in an environment that is not idyllic nor conducive to any sort of redemption; this provokes a kind of immediacy and intensity of feeling that would not otherwise be reachable. Until the very end, the protagonist is running, but unable to actually realize her goal. The protagonist holds nothing back, she physically pushes herself as


26 El-Ariss, 66.
hard as possible to try to find what she is looking for but completely fails. The bus that never comes remains a fantasy completely out of her reach.

Like the protagonist in “Nightmares of the City”, the protagonist in piece 26 of “The Book of Meaning”, is in El Ariss’s “hellish prison”. The protagonist “embraced one, had sex with the other” and “engaged in a furious battle with enemies of the wall”\textsuperscript{27}, all emotionally intense, meaningful actions except that he is, in fact, doing all of this on Facebook, so is not in fact physically interacting with anybody. Most importantly, he is unable to perceive the gaze of anyone; neither the people he his furiously disputing nor the people he is having sex with return his gaze. “He threw around smiles and winks and sadness. And when he was emptied of all his internal organs, he closed Facebook, tripped over his ashtray full of cigarettes, and dropped into his deep, deep well.”\textsuperscript{28} The protagonist does not move physically because he is so engrossed with Facebook, although he “smiles, winks” and expresses “sadness” via Facebook, which are all physical actions at their root, although the protagonist is performing them all through social media and so he himself remains motionless. At the end, he finally experiences actual physical movement but only to fall into “his deep, deep well.” He is liberated from his physically restricted state but upon leaving his inert state, he immediately disappears into a void.

The man in this piece is desperately lonely- in his desire to get out of this state he tries to connect with people, giving everything in pursuit of this until he is “emptied of all his internal organs”. Through the desperation caused by this man’s lack of connection, we see the intensity of the connection he is striving for: a connection with people with whom he is so intimate that he

\textsuperscript{27} Bustani, 85.
\textsuperscript{28} Bustani, 85.
does not have to hold up any barriers to protect himself. In the extreme form of intimacy he is striving for, he does not even need the protection of his own skin, he feels able to share everything until he is “emptied of all his internal organs”. This ability to make himself so vulnerable to others is not all that it seems, however, as the protagonist only does it through the medium of Facebook. The mediation of this technology changes the nature of the man’s actions. Devoting oneself completely to someone on Facebook is not the same devoting oneself completely to someone in a face to face interaction. The protagonist completely fails to reach other people. Having devoted himself entirely to Facebook, he looses his connection with everything as he drops into his “deep, deep well” and physically falls away from his surroundings; an ironic event as he was already separate from everyone at the outset, only he failed to perceive this. Once he falls, however, his physical state matches his emotional one, he is trapped in hole both literally and figuratively.

The protagonist succumbs to the “urge” described by Benjamin to “get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction”.29 The man desired to interact with people, to affect people via Facebook, the “reproduction” of face to face human interaction. He failed to see that “reproduction… differs from the image seen by the unarmed eye. Uniqueness and permanence are as closely linked in the latter as are transitoriness and reproducibility in the former.”30 All the actions the man engages in with other people are reproductions of actions and are thus transitory and do not have any actual impact on reality. He “embraced one, had sex with the other” and “engaged in a furious battle with enemies of the wall”; embracing, having sex, and

29 Benjamin, 223.
30 Benjamin, 223.
battling are all very intense actions completely distinct from one another. However, the protagonist manages to do all of them consecutively without the shift from one action to the next being registered because, in this scenario, the actions are interchangeable. No one else is participating in any of these actions, all of which are generally associated with at least two people. In the same way, the protagonist “threw around smiles and winks and sadness” without any of these emotional indicators, or the shift from one to the next being registered, as they have also become interchangeable here. There is not one to receive his smiles, his winks, or his sadness. All these actions and indicators of emotion have been reproduced from those found in actual face to face interactions and, in the process, the component of communion with others has been lost. The protagonist completely fails to be perceived by any of the people he is trying to commune with; there is no one returning his gaze. This absence of aura ends in disaster for the protagonist.

The concept of transitoriness is hugely important in Bustani’s work. Like Benjamin, Bustani is concerned about the transitoriness that characterizes human interaction as takes place via the means of mechanical reproduction. However, Bustani also uses transitoriness as part of the form of his writing. Both his flash prose and his short stories are characterized by quick shifts between fantasy and reality, between feelings of hope and despair, and between vastly different physical settings. This creates a disorienting narrative. Unlike the transitoriness of mechanical reproduction, the transitoriness of Bustani’s writing makes one want to grasp onto anything that will slow the speed with which things are changing to try to understand what is being evoked while realizing that this is impossible. The problem of mechanical reproduction identified by Bustani and Benjamin is one in which the people engaging in mechanical reproduction do not realize the way in which it alters reality and so assume that there does not need to be any change to what they are perceiving or the way in which they are perceiving it. Bustani makes the
distinction between mechanical reproduction and reality apparent and, in doing so, makes the implied reader feel what is being lost in the process of mechanical reproduction.

Benjamin’s link between mechanical reproduction and “reproducibility” is evident in piece # 34 of “The Book of Meaning”. Here, images of various natural phenomena are mixed with images of a romantic relationship. Each one of the images should be unique and permanent but they all occur in a rush simultaneously. From the point of view of the digital camera, they are all the same as one another, none is unique and they are all fleeting. “Digital camera: in the photo, the whole world is a backdrop…You are the star before the sea. You are the star before the forest. You are the star before the wind, the flowers, the tiger crammed in a cage and mountains of ice.”31 The protagonists have visited multiple marvels of the world but have not truly experienced them because all the natural phenomena have been permeated with a “sense of the universal equality of things” in the process of being photographed and this sense has “pried” each object from its shell and destroyed its “aura”.32 There has been no communion between the protagonists and the objects they have photographed; in this piece, the camera itself is the object of focus, instead of the objects the protagonists are capturing the images, or reproduction, of. Bustani here is portraying the way in which the human desire for the reproduction of an object, rather than for the object itself, leads to the devaluing of the object and ultimately the destruction of all meaning associated with the object.

Once the meaning of an object has been destroyed by means of the object’s reproduction, nothing “matters, the world can be exchanged like a curtain, wilting, breaking…I do not become

31 Bustani, 101.
32 Benjamin, 223.
forlorn. In the photo, I stand and behind me the corpses of things are embalmed.”33 The images in the photographs are dead, they are corpses, yet the protagonists invest the images with the depth of meaning associated with the actual objects. According to Benjamin, this desire to experience objects through their reproduction comes from the desire of the contemporary masses to bring objects “closer” spatially and humanly.34 This is paradoxical, people desire to bring objects closer spatially and humanly but in the process, make the objects further away as the reproductions do not capture those elements of the object that the person felt an affinity with; those elements that connect the object to the viewer are lost in the process of reproduction. In Bustani’s piece, it is not just objects that the protagonists desire to bring closer spatially and humanly, it is human experience itself, starting with artifacts from various parts of the world and ending with a romantic relationship. Both the objects and the relationship become dead as a result of the protagonists’ attempts to make these things infinitely meaningful by capturing their image with a digital camera.

For Bustani, the inability of people to distinguish between objects and their reproductions is the result of people’s destructive self-centredness. The particular self-centredness of the protagonists in piece #34 of “The Book of Meaning” is portrayed as a living thing within the digital camera. “They leaned their heads in and smiled for cold eyes looking at them through two cold boxes. The light shone and each of them went on their way. It was what they called a date. As for the photo-it is: the relationship.”35 Bustani portrays a romantic relationship that does not

33 Bustani, 101.
34 Benjamin, 223.
35 Bustani, 101.
seem to have any meaning outside of the photograph taken of it; after the photograph, each person goes on their way. The relationship clearly lacks vitality; it is not that the image has sapped the vitality out of the relationship but rather that the only vitality of the relationship is in the image of it. In stark contrast to the emptiness of the relationship, the digital camera is portrayed as being able to see like a sentient being. In portraying the digital camera as sentient, the process of mechanical reproduction takes on a very disturbing quality. In the process of capturing the image of the relationship, the object of the image is not only devalued, it is as though the object being photographed is being violated by the digital camera itself.

Bustani depicts the impersonal global phenomenon of social media as an insidious force that confronts the individual on a deeply personal level, managing to reach him when he is alone and in a state of emotional and physical vulnerability. The protagonist in piece #61 of “This Deluge of Emotion is Going to Make Me Vomit” struggles to perceive his relationship with his romantic partner as something unique from her relationship with everyone else on social media. To the protagonist, it appears as though his relationship with his partner is diminishing, becoming indistinguishable from her relationship with everyone on social media. “Everything dissolves into digital language: 01,01, and bodies evaporate to become shapes on a screen.”

The protagonist is aware that what he perceives may not actually be what is real, but, like the protagonist in Bustani’s other pieces, this knowledge only isolates him further from the connection he is seeking and others are engaging in, albeit in a false way, through social media. “How will I know if the kisses at the end of every sentence she sends to whomever leaves a line of nonsense on her wall are different from the kisses she gives me? How do I know they aren’t a

36 Bustani, 171.
prelude to kisses like the ones she gives me? How will I know if my kisses are really kisses and not a long line of the letter x?”37 The narrator is not only afraid that the kisses his love gives him no longer signify her particular devotion to him; rather, he is worried that this sort of devotion no longer exists at all, that is has been replaced by the letter x. “Her promise of love/honesty/a date has become a passing line that quickly disappears behind the top frame of the chat screen.”38

Once again, we see what Benjamin refers to as “transitoriness” here. Love, honesty, a date, concepts that have a weighty existence in the reality of a romantic relationship have become not only a line of digital language on a computer screen, but have come to have a transitory existence that eludes the grasp of the protagonist.

The protagonist in this piece occupies a very uncomfortable position. He realizes that what is being represented through social media is not reality, but he is the only one to remember this. It is all the people around the protagonist who are mistakenly engaging in human interaction that is actually devoid of any human essence, but it is the protagonist who physically experiences the loneliness that results from the meaningless interactions via social media. “It used to be that the local madman who pulled down his pants and bared his goods to everyone in the market would be cursed at and chased with insults. Today, I’m the only one left holding up his trousers, walking shyly through the Nudist Market.”39 Here we get a very perverted image of the flâneur—outside of the crowd, witnessing it, and holding onto a social custom that pre-dates the technology of social media, one no one around is concerned with any more. The isolation

37 Bustani, 171.
38 Bustani, 173.
39 Bustani, 175.
experienced by the narrator is extreme- he is at odds with everyone around him. Even though the narrator is able to see how all reality is disintegrating, only to be replaced with empty representations, there is no hope of salvaging any of what used to exist.

The important aspect of these scenarios is time- the protagonist, or the observer, is able to see the actions of the people around him in perspective; he knows that the object of focus of the crowd is fleeting and not permanent, something those around him do not see. He remembers the time when clothes were worn by everyone, but everyone around him is nude and does not understand the context for the protagonist’s decision to wear clothes. In this unique position, the protagonist is like Baudelaire’s poet observing gamblers around a table playing cards.

The poet does not participate in the game. He stands in his corner, no happier than those who are playing. He too has been cheated out of his experience, a modern man. The only difference is that he rejects the narcotics with which the gamblers seek to submerge the consciousness that has delivered them to the march of the second-hand.40

In this piece the “narcotics” are nudism. The protagonist does not participate in what everyone around him is participating in, yet he is unable to transcend the vapidity and loneliness of the modern situation that affects him and those around him. He is privy to a truth that others cannot see but seeing the truth only serves to isolate him further from those around him despite the fact that it is the isolation of being a “modern man” that has caused him to seek out the truth in the first place in hopes of remedying his situation.

It is important to notice that the alienation experienced by the protagonist, or the observer, in Bustani’s piece is so powerful that it extends to his romantic relationship. “What is

40 Benjamin, 180.
left for me when my darling fills the desert of her slow time with a mirage made of letters that do not look like my shadow?" Here, the process of mechanical reproduction, of reality being replaced by its representation, is occurring to the narrator himself as he becomes replaced by letters, a process that his romantic partner fails to perceive.

Bustani simultaneously evokes Benjamin’s discussion of how the modern man experiences time with Benjamin’s discussion of mechanical reproduction. The narrator is the only one who notices that everyone around him is mistaking representations of reality for reality itself. The reason for the prevalence of this confusion is that mechanical reproduction, at its most powerful, is able to hide those signs that indicate it is a reproduction and not reality. According to Benjamin, modern technical means of representing reality, because they operate through the “thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment” are able to depict an “aspect of reality which is free of all equipment”. Because the mechanical reproduction of reality is free of obvious signs that show it is a mechanical reproduction, it is easy to confuse the representation of reality with reality itself. As Richard Shiff notes, digital processes of mechanical reproduction fully embody all the factors isolated by Benjamin in his discussion of painting and film, in fact, digital processes may even be said to more fully demonstrate the validity of his concerns about the loss of “aura”.

The template or pattern can be reproduced in any physical form and, although it may have been derived by scanning an object or pre-existing image, it could have been derived by scanning any other source using a suitably different algorithmic operation. Digitization shows little respect for the integrity of objects, and so takes perception ever further from the experience of aura.

41 Bustani, 177.
42 Benjamin, 233-234.
Both Bustani and Benjamin confront the new technologies of their age in a way that emulates the form of the technology itself. Bustani writes his prose in emotionally volatile and intense, yet brief, segments that echo the way people interact via contemporary forms of social media, particularly Facebook. Although Benjamin had many concerns about the medium of film, Shiff argues that Benjamin, by Benjamin’s own system of classification, is a “filmmaker, not a painter.”

44 Shiff quotes Benjamin’s distinction between the two types of artist: “A painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it he can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it has already changed.”

45 Shiff points out that “Accelerated speed, the rate of change, is much of the problem.”

46 Because film reveals images so much faster than a painting, film is able to influence the thought process to a great extent, a process that goes unnoticed for the most part, whereas looking at a painting allows the spectator to follow his own thought processes. Benjamin demonstrates the way in which the spectator’s “process of association in view of these images is indeed interrupted by their sudden, constant change”.

47 Rather than allowing the spectator to reflect on the images, film determines the spectator’s thought process by switching the images so fast that there is no time for the spectator to reflect on the images being presented. The key filmic element in Benjamin’s writing, according to Shiff, is in Benjamin’s extensive use of analogies.

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44 Shiff, 69.
45 Benjamin, 238.
46 Shiff, 69.
47 Benjamin, 238.
“His analogies move cinematically to create ungraspable, illusory continuities from fragments. His phrases move faster than a reader’s thought.”

In the same way that the form of Benjamin’s writing mirrored film at the very same time that he was critiquing mechanical reproduction, Bustani’s writing mirrors that of Facebook while he seeks to interrupt the process by which people unthinkingly absorb the content of social media. And, just like Benjamin, a crucial aspect of his ability to make his critique mirror the medium he is critiquing is the pace at which his writing is delivered. Bustani strictly adheres to the short prose form which makes reading his pieces an extremely rapid process. Contributing also to the pace of his work is the fact that, while the pieces of short prose are organized into titled sections, the subject matter of each varies a great deal. This adds to the pace of the reading as a wide array of subjects are presented to the reader in quick succession and there are no external markers indicating these shifts. Within the pieces of short prose, Bustani repeats certain words but makes each subsequent occurrence of a word arise in a very different context so that even though there is the illusion of repetition, it is superficial and not meaningful which works towards drawing the reader in with the illusion of an easy read. The short form and the repetition make his pieces mirror the discourse one may observe on Facebook. However, while using these devices, Bustani manages to subvert them and, like Benjamin, to interrupt the accelerated speed with which people are expected to observe the media being presented to them. Bustani always uses these devices in pieces about social media because the repetition mirrors the repetitive nature of exchanges between people that one can observe on social media in reality.

What is left for me when my darling has shared with all the inhabitants of the earth?

48 Shiff, 69.
What is left for me when my darling is *available to chat* with anyone at any time?

What is left for me when people *tag* my darling in their photo albums and stuff her in their *notes* and *attach her* to their music and drawings and stupidities and filth?

What is left for me?

What is left?49

The seemingly innocuous terms adopted by social media here are portrayed as processes which are forming a barrier to the protagonist connecting with his romantic partner. Social media is purported to connect people to ever expanding social networks but here each operation is making the protagonist’s partner increasingly unreachable by him. Here, the wide array of Facebook terminology is laid out but despite the different terms, each terms refers to a function that has the same result which is to draw the partner of the protagonist further and further away from a real, physical relationship as she becomes increasingly bound to Facebook. The repetition of “What is left…” provides a contrast to the different Facebook terms but ultimately demonstrates that these terms all mean the same thing beneath their titles. Despite the repetition, the phrase “What is left…” serves to convey a sense of raw panic because, even though the phrase is repeated, it is not one that has reached a level of ubiquity and therefore meaninglessness like the Facebook terms. There is the sense that time is passing and the protagonists partner is becoming more and more unreachable physically, to the point where there is nothing left of her.

Bustani uses these devices to treat each one of his vast array of subjects so that there is a sort of unity of form, even though the content varies shockingly. The way each of the devices is applied has a different effect, sometimes an emotional response is elicited while other times revulsion is elicited. Within the shortness of his form, he always manages to incorporate some

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49 Bustani, 175-177.
sort of unexpected change in the direction of the piece. The result is that although his pieces are short, it is impossible to skim over them; the speed with which consumers are encouraged to read content on social media is thus necessarily interrupted as it becomes necessary to slow down in order to fully comprehend what is happening in each scene.

The penniless beggar wasn’t able to sell his sad eyes and amputated leg that day.

He rose, came out against the people brandishing his sword, and cut off their legs.50

This piece is extremely short and so it can be read very quickly, yet the element of shock caused by what happens in the second line interrupts a quick reading of it. Bustani employs repetition in this short story with the recurrence of the mention of legs. The fact that the protagonist has an amputated leg and then cuts off the legs of the passers by has a sort of symmetry to it, even though his move to cut off the legs of the passers by is completely unexpected and requires a second glance. Here, Bustani also manages to convey a great deal of emotion. The first line describes the protagonist in a passive way, anyone who has passed by a homeless person on the street can recognize the description quite quickly; however, in the second line the protagonist is not passive, his violent act against the people who were ignoring him is shocking because it does not fit with the passive description in the first line. Furthermore, because the protagonist is so passive in the first line, the question of his emotional state does not arise; however, in the second line it becomes clear that he is feeling very angry. This sudden, violent outburst of emotion interrupts a quick reading of the piece and forces the reader to engage with the piece in an active way, interrupting the accelerated pace at which the reader is able to process the information being presented, even as the pace of the information being presented is accelerated.

50 Bustani, 93.
Bustani uses extremely physical language in order to demonstrate the dangers of the confusion between objects and the images of these objects that are mechanically reproduced. For Bustani, it is only by viscerally shocking people that there is any hope of showing people what is at stake. “The entire world is having sex in a giant bedroom full of wires. The entire world is peeping into that room and masturbating.”

Bustani makes the wires occupy the same visual space that they influence technologically in the transmission of social media. Bustani is furious that people have consented to be defiled by social media; he portrays the process by which people have devoted themselves entirely to social media with graphic sexual imagery. His aim is to shock people into realizing that they have allowed technology to become too close to their needs and desires. People have become too intimate, physically and emotionally, with technology. They exchange the façade constructed by social media of a multitude of admirers for real face-to-face human connection between two individuals. Bustani uses the element of shock to try to illustrate to people what they have consented to have taken from them. To understand Bustani’s intentions in using shock, it is necessary to look at what Benjamin says about the “shock factor”.

The greater the share of the shock factor in particular impressions, the more constantly consciousness has to be alert as a screen against stimuli; the more efficiently it does so, the less do these impressions enter experience (Erfahrung), tending to remain in the sphere of a certain hour in one’s life (Erlebnis). Perhaps the special achievement of shock defense may be seen in its function of assigning to an incident a precise point in time in consciousness at the cost of the integrity of its contents. This would be a peak achievement of the intellect; it would turn the incident into a moment that has been lived (Erlebnis). Without reflection there would be nothing but the sudden start, usually the sensation of fright…

51 Bustani, 177.
52 Benjamin, 163.
The failure of the “shock defense” may be seen as a success in realizing the unique, unprecedented and therefore shocking elements of an event. If the “shock defense” is not activated, the mind keeps the event distinct, the event does not become incorporated into the routines of human existence which occur so often that the mind does not fully register them. Conversely, “a moment that has been lived” is put into the part of the mind that deals with experience; this sort of moment does not evoke the shock response. In throwing sexually graphic language into a discussion of social media, Bustani seems to have precisely calculated the degree of shock needed to avoid recourse to the “shock defence”. The result is that the implied reader is inevitably disturbed by the graphic sexual imagery in a piece in which, until that point, has only been conveying the cold, distant and lonely nature of social media in a manner that is entirely devoid of feeling.

Bustani’s use of shock is so successful because of the way he manages to combine contradictory descriptions of one phenomenon. His graphic sexual references are shocking because they are not describing any sort of intimacy between people but rather random transgressions on the body of someone who is devoid of emotion. “My dear: gather your imaginary candles, the sentences full of lies, the piles of virtual compliments trying to forge a real-life path to what is between your thighs, and fuck off. I am not interested in your orgy.”

Here, the sex his partner is engaging in is intimate, it contains all the exterior signs of a romantic relationship, but it is virtual, incapable of creating a “real life path” to her even though she is engaging in it with a lot of people.

53 Bustani, 179.
What is so reprehensible to Bustani is that people have consented to the extreme violation inherent in full participation in digital communication. “To become a billionaire, I have to defile you,” said Mark Zuckerberg to the people, so they opened their thighs and the show began.”

People have become alienated, a process well documented by Benjamin in his discussion in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”. Like the way in which the modern factory worker was alienated from the entirety of the work process of which he was one part amongst many, people in modern times have become alienated from their own lives. Like gamblers, the “figures presented show us how the mechanism to which the participants in a game of chance entrust themselves seizes them body and soul, so that even in their private sphere, and no matter how agitated they may be, they are capable only of a reflex action.”

Bustani’s protagonist is the only one who is capable of acting outside of a “reflex action”, meaning he is capable of distinguishing between what is real and what is an image of something real but devoid of the substance of the actual object. He is capable of deliberating on his actions and acting accordingly, rather than only acting in response to the automatic processes of digital communication.

Ironically, Bustani uses vomit, a “reflex action” to represent the protagonist’s liberation from the all of the “reflex action” he finds to be so empty in those around him. Bustani’s use of vomit is, like his use of sex, extremely successful in its ability to elicit shock. However, unlike the sex in this piece, which is used to convey the ways in which people are stuck in intimate relationships devoid of connection with real people, the act of vomiting is a sign of liberation. “Here I am, running quickly to the bathroom- this flood of emotions is going to make me

54 Bustani, 179,
55 Benjamin, 178.
vomit.” The visceral nature of this reaction stands in contrast to everything else that has been mentioned— the love, the sex, those things are not real and their falsity makes the narrator vomit, a bodily function that elicits disgust but is distinct from all the other actions because it is at least real and not an illusion.

Bustani creates a juxtaposition between two ways people engage with one another: there is the passive, distant, self-contradicting discourse of the mind which over-intellectualizes things to the point of incomprehensibility on one hand and, on the other, the intense, dynamic physical response of the body which he sees as more trustworthy because these responses have not been mediated. He uses this juxtaposition to great effect in piece #28 in “The Book of Meaning”. Like in his other pieces, the protagonist here is able to see the truth that is not seen by those around him.

On the way he passed:
the intellectual who lies as easily as he breathes.
the intellectual who is led by a chain around his neck and responds to: sit, dog, sit.
the intellectual who conspires against himself after liquidating everyone around him.
the intellectual who became a theorist after reading an article about Marxism in a newspaper.
the intellectual who wrote the Marxist article in the newspaper (he last read a book thirty years ago).
the intellectual who…
At this point he had enough.

The intellectuals around the protagonist are caught in meaningless processes that they nevertheless mistake for substantive intellectual discourse. They are like the gamblers alluded to by Benjamin, who are capable only of a “reflex action”, here very pointedly embodied by the intellectual who is “led by a chain around his neck and responds to: sit, dog, sit.” Despite

56 Bustani, 181.
57 Bustani, 89.
appearing as people fully capable of original thought, they are completely disconnected from the
processes they are devoting themselves to. This is how one intellectual is capable of becoming a
theorist after reading only one article on Marxism in the newspaper, an article that was written
by another intellectual who had not read a book for thirty years. For Benjamin, those who are
capable only of reflex action consent to it because they have the sense that they are experiencing
the passage of time more fruitfully than those who engage in a more deliberate manner.

The gambler who performs a coup in a game of chance has the illusion that he is the master of his
fortune, that his life is proceeding at an excitingly fast past when in fact, it is “devoid of
substance”, very much like the drudgery of a laborer who works at a machine all day.

Both Benjamin and Bustani seek to expose the illusion held by the gambler, the person engaging in a
process “devoid of substance” but hoping it will magically transform into something substantive.
The disconnected way people live makes their lives meaningless, a loss that the pleasure of
living in the moment, of “reflex action” does not compensate for. Bustani has his protagonist
reject living the life in this disconnected way.

He will not pass through the street of intellectuals after today.
He left them to swim in their vomit,
and plunged into a sea of women.

Unlike the action of vomiting by the protagonist in piece # 81 of “This Deluge of Emotion is
Going to Make Me Vomit”, the vomit the intellectuals swim in in this piece represents the
uselessness and repulsiveness of the ideas being passed on, again and again, by the intellectuals.
The vomit the intellectuals are left to swim in is put in contrast to the “sea of women” chosen by

58 Benjamin, 180.
59 Benjamin, 177.
60 Bustani, 89.
the lone intellectual. Set out in this way, the intellectuals are swimming in regurgitated waste and
the lone intellectual is swimming in something alive and human, capable of regeneration through
the sexual possibilities implicit in a man swimming in a “sea of women”. Here Bustani again
makes a distinction between how people perceive the world intellectually and the way the body
reacts to external stimuli. The former is a process fraught with illusion and misdirection whereas
the latter is credible because the body cannot respond to anything but the truth, it cannot mistake
the representation of reality for reality in the same way the mind can. The move the protagonist
took when he “plunged into a sea of women” represents his possession of a more direct
connection between his senses and reality than the intellectuals who are left to “swim in their
vomit”, ideas that have already been conceived by others. The lone intellectual is in a position to
create something new.

Bustani’s protagonists are all in the position of observer, of witnessing the major shift
occasioned by the instantiations of modern urban life. These instantiations have reached their
apogee in the digitization of communication, in the replacement of face-to-face interactions with
Facebook, in the replacement of experiencing a romantic relationship first hand with looking at
the digital reproduction of a romantic relationship. These processes have caused people to
become disconnected from their surroundings and from one another, an outcome that is insidious
because people do not fully recognize the degree to which they have become disconnected from
reality. In conveying these processes in his work, Bustani shares a great deal with Benjamin, for
whom the mechanical reproduction of reality has been a crucial factor in causing people to
become disconnected. Because the two men were writing at different times, the specific media
used for the mechanical reproduction of reality are very different. Nevertheless, this does not
impinge on the cohesion of Benjamin and Bustani’s ideas. What Bustani contributes to the
discussion is a graphic exploration of the impact of new forms of representation, new means of
reproducing objects, has on people and their bodies. In his short story and his flash prose, he re-
creates the pain of loneliness, the frantic desperation for human connection, and the violence that
people subject their bodies to as they seek human connection through the inhuman digital
systems of social media. Bustani uses the element of shock in his prose to make people fully feel
the pain they have already been experiencing but have failed to register. He is like his
protagonists, the lone man observing the crowd who are in the thrall of modern life without
realizing its cost, or even that there is an alternative. By evoking pain and revulsion, Busatni and
his protagonists attempt to shock the people around them out of apathy.
Chapter 2

Bustani describes his task as a contemporary writer as one of dealing with the “now” which he defines as the “condensed point where the past meets the future, a collision of different sensibilities in the boiling pot that is today’s Arab world.” This “condensed point” and the site of the “collision” is the human body—where one can see the damage caused by the worst parts of contemporary existence, either through a body in the text or by provoking a visceral reaction by graphically demonstrating the worst effects on the body. In focusing on the body, Bustani is deliberately fighting against the intellectualization of the scenes he is presenting. Bustani seeks to hone in on human interaction in real time and to examine the way the dynamics of human interaction mark the human body, particularly those who have been disenfranchised by neo-liberalism, i.e. the homeless, and women whose autonomy over their own bodies continue to be denied to them.

Amongst these groups of people who face exclusion, Bustani focuses specifically on those who no longer have the option of voicing their resistance to the status quo. They have faced marginalization to such a degree that there is no longer room for them to be represented at all in the prevailing discourse. Bustani’s protagonists have experienced this silencing for so long that their bodies have begun to resist, independent of their mind’s interpretation of the protagonists’ marginalized position. He is concerned with the moment when a human body experiences transgression to such a degree that conscious resistance is no longer an option. Tarek

61 Hisham Bustani, “‘New’ Arabic Writing Cataclysm in Fast Forward”.”
El Ariss has explained the importance of the body’s “posture and movement, reverberation and indigestion, and disgust and collapse” in observing how the modern “emerges” from a text. El Ariss is focused on the way in which the bodies of Arab people who travelled to the West during the nineteenth century when ideas about the superiority of the West in relation to the East were part of the status quo which meant that those who travelled from the East to the West faced extreme forms of exclusion. Obviously, in focusing on the twenty first century, the prevalent assumptions being challenged by Bustani’s protagonists are slightly different from those being challenged by the protagonists in the texts discussed by El Ariss. However, El Ariss provides an extremely useful framework for examining Bustani’s texts because both men are concerned with extreme forms of exclusion and the way the body responds to enduring them over time. In focusing on the body’s “physical reactions and susceptibility to various hazards” within a narrative “ingesting and expulsing food are thus important functions that allow us to trace the body’s actions and movements, and identify in the process the centrality of affects”. It is these “affects”, or what also might be termed visceral reactions, that are the focal point of Bustani’s writing because, as El Ariss explains it, these reactions are crucial to the Shidyaqian processes of kashf, or, “unveiling, diagnosis, critique” at the centre of the text. By incorporating scenes that contain vomit or in which human body undergoes some form of mutilation Bustani reveals the instances of oppression that have become systematized in contemporary life that have been avoided by those whose privileged positions has allowed them to do so.

62 El Ariss, 67.
63 El Ariss, 67.
64 El Ariss, 67.
In engaging in a process of “unveiling, diagnosis, critique” by focusing on the responses of bodies to certain stimuli, Bustani ensures that his narratives never become discursive. His writing is necessarily succinct, something that is reflected in the form of his texts. Bustani is interested in what he refers to as “the event”, which he considers to be the most basic requirement for a narrative and if the is a narrative “probes the depth of that event, then what we have is a story, whether long, short or, short-short.”65 Clearly, brevity is very important to Bustani, the condensation of the text, the paring of it down to the event ensures that there is nothing in the piece that can confuse or obfuscate the essence of it. While Bustani’s “events” are focused on the body where physical signs are apparent, he also employs magical realism so as to give a physical existence to phenomena such as oppression that would otherwise only have an ephemeral presence in his texts.

Bustani shows the ways in which some of the worst phenomena in contemporary life can transform the human body in a negative way, in other words, how the human body is trapped as the consequences of human ignorance start to affect physical reality. Bustani seeks to re-engage people who no longer take notice of those whose bodies are subject everyday to violence or systematic coercion. Bustani uses fantastical imagery in conjunction with hyper-realistic descriptions of scenarios portraying tensions that exist in reality. In combining the fantastic and the real, Bustani uses elements of magical realism. This term is useful because, unlike other forms of literary writing in which fantastic elements arise, in employing the magical realistic mode, the author brings in “two conflicting, but autonomously coherent, perspectives, one based

on an “enlightened” and rational view of reality, and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as part of everyday reality.” Bustani brings in supernatural, or fantastic, elements to provide physical manifestations of the destructive consequences he is trying to draw attention to. He integrates supernatural phenomena into scenarios taken directly from contemporary life in such a way that the “educated reader”, even though she recognizes that there are supernatural elements mixed with reality, “does not react to the supernatural in the text as if it were antimonious with respect to our conventional view of reality, since it is integrated within the norms of perception of the narrator and characters in the fictitious world.” When Bustani incorporates supernatural, or fantastic elements, it is clear that their purpose is to physicalize his critique of reality and it adds to the immediacy of his message. Bustani himself has very eloquently explained how he sees the relationship between reality and imagination. For him, the two are not dichotomous. Rather, imagination is a “tool to recall and recreate all the unseen, unnoticed or ‘unperceived’ paths, turns or developments.” Bustani uses intricately imagined apocalyptic scenes to draw attention to those aspects of reality that are being ignored. In this process, rather than being reality’s opposite, the imagined becomes a tool to use for re-engaging people who have become apathetic with reality. The difficulty in getting people to acknowledge reality, for Bustani, is that reality can be harder to comprehend than anything that could be created by the imagination. Given this, a literary intervention is needed just to make reality comprehensible. “When ‘the real’ is so present, so pressing, and more surreal than anything that

67 Chanady, 23.
68 Bustani, “’Perception of Meaning’: At the Boundary of Arabic Poetry and Apocalypse”.
could be imagined; my answer to it would be violent literary engagement: the ‘real’ is re-read, questioned, probed, destroyed, pulled, twisted and turned; examined for every possibility, for every possible history, every possible reading.”69 The “violent literary engagement” is a process of interrogation, of questioning and re-questioning that attempts to reach a deeper and more profound understanding than that which is superficially apparent.

In presenting “events” by using magico realist elements, Bustani is fundamentally concerned with those whose lives embody, in the starkest way, the isolation faced by contemporary people. This isolation is a global phenomenon; however, there are those whose lives are marked by it in an overt way, whereas it is not so obvious in other people’s lives. In looking at those people’s lives were the marks of isolation are very stark, it is not hard to see the destructive consequences of people’s choice to choose ways of living that cause destruction in the lives of others. In the pieces where Bustani deals with people whose physical oppression tends to be minimized, i.e. elite women, he uses magical-realist elements so as to make the interior damage experienced by women explicit. When he is dealing with people whose lives are marked by oppression in a very overt way such as homeless people, the magical realist elements are used to show the dignity of the people, to push against the tendency of people to write these people off and to see them as having no existence aside from what is externally apparent. In bringing elements of peoples’ lives to the fore that are not immediately visible, Bustani is showing that peoples’ ability to correctly perceive the lives of others has gone awry. Being able to exist alongside people who are so obviously in pain is the manifestation of the extent to which humans have become unreachable to one another. In examining people’s ability to cause harm,

69 Bustani, “’Perception of Meaning’: At the Boundary of Arabic Poetry and Apocalypse”.
Bustani’s interest in what affect this has physically on people, on the effects that may be perceived by all, rather than on an individual’s internal thought processes that can only be understood by an individual.

To understand the importance of Bustani’s choice, it is necessary bring in Georg Lukac’s discussion of the importance of individuals’ internal thought processes in creating meaning in novels. Bustani eschews what Lukacs refers to as the “biographical form”. According to Lukacs, the biographical form is used to reconcile the contradiction inherent in the novel form, the contradiction between a “conceptual system which can never completely capture life and a life complex which can never attain completeness because completeness is immanently utopian”.70

Bustani leaves this contradiction open. Rather than creating a schema in his writing that will allow for the co-existence of a conceptual system that exists outside of any person’s control and the utopian desires of the individual, he focuses on the moments in which these two entities collide and produce destructive consequences. Bustani is not attached to any particular utopian ideals, but he does consider ideals important. He criticizes contemporary political uprising for having “no ideals, no thinkers”.71 Whether this is the fault of the general public or its leaders is not clear. Given the scope of his writing, the most likely explanation is that it is both, or rather the ability of all people to accept reality without ideals. This occurs as an individual struggles to integrate his own internal ideals with the incompatible larger structure of the world outside of himself. Ideals are ideas within an individual which do not correspond to the outer reality, that

are at odds with it and cannot be realized. They are important because they represent the ability of the individual to create a coherence to reality that is not otherwise apparent.

This difference manifests itself most clearly in the pure negativity of the ideal. In the subjective world of the soul the ideal is at much at homes as the soul`s other realities. But, at the level of the soul, the ideal by entering lived experience can play, even in its content, a directly positive role; whereas in the outside world the gap between reality and the ideal becomes apparent only by the absence of the ideal, in the immanent self-criticism of mere reality caused by that absence; in the self-revelation of the nothingness of mere reality without an immanent ideal.

Without ideals, it becomes much more difficult to attach meaning to reality. This is extremely problematic for writers. Those who write novels are able to attach meaning to reality through the interior processes of the individuals in the novels. Bustani does not write novels and so there is an obvious “absence of the ideal” in his writings, but he avoids the “self-revelation of the nothingness of a mere reality without an immanent ideal” without recourse to individual ideals. He does this by presenting his “event” in such a way that all the absurdities, the profanity, the dirty parts of it are laid bare, he reveals what Lukacs terms the “nothingness of mere reality without an immanent ideal.” Bustani does not incorporate any system of ideals within his writing. The “nothingness” he reveals in his writing is presented as problematic but not because it is at odds with a specific set of ideals, rather the “nothingness”, or what we might also call absurdity, profanity or dirt of existence in Bustani’s writing become dynamic forces within his “event”, forces with which people struggle with continuously. Bustani ensures that these dynamic forces never become normalized, they never become routine. Rather, he seeks to engage

72 Lukacs, 78.
73 Lukacs, 78-79.
with these forces in a way that causes shock, sometimes by bringing in the supernatural to otherwise realistic scenes and sometimes by describing scenes that hone in on the revolting aspects of them.

Bustani’s piece number 62 in the section entitled “Cunning Clouds of Betrayal” ostensibly centres around the issue of betrayal but the piece’s most shocking element is the representation of a woman’s body. It starts off with a conversation between a man and a woman, then goes on to magico-realist scenes in which the woman has become a piano. When the man and the woman are talking at the beginning, they are discussing the issue of betrayal using a number of similes about the ways in which betrayal affects people. “Why do lies invade us like an incurable plague, occupy our cells, flow through our blood so that we infect others? Why do lies trap us like a cloud of poison gas- out of Akira Kurasawa’s dreams-between inhaling it or being torn apart on a rocky shore at the bottom of the abyss?” Here, lies are like a physical entity, something which can physically injure the body.

The central focus- the insidious destruction that comes as a result of one person lying to another- morphs from a simile into a fantastical scene where the protagonist’s romantic partner is a piano and he the piano player. The piano is not just standing in for his romantic partner, rather she is his romantic partner after deception has become part of the relationship. Her body has already been completely transformed by her deception and she is now an object capable of damaging the bodies of the men she comes into contact with. She is the protagonist’s

74Bustani, 185.
unknowable partner, capable of containing more within her than that which can be known by him.

She was radiant, dressed in yellow. When his fingers touched her black-and-white keys, out came the sounds of someone else. Maybe he hadn’t practiced well enough. In his mind he read over the sheet music again and moved his fingers over and over, then tried once more, and out came someone who didn’t resemble his reflection in the mirror, then another, and another. When the protagonist tried to communicate with his partner, or, in the magico-realistic scenario presented by Bustani, to play the piano, she made “the sounds of someone else”. After attempting again and again no avail, “out came someone who didn’t resemble his reflection in the mirror, then another, and another”. The deception here has affected the relationship so much that the woman is no longer recognizable to the man and the man, as he exists in the woman’s mind, does not resemble himself. In this piece, the use of magical-realism contributes a great deal to the brevity of the piece. Were Bustani to go into a detailed description of the estrangement felt by the protagonist in relation to his partner, the piece would necessarily be a lot longer and would not have the sharp, instant emotional shock that is felt in the piece as the woman all of a sudden, without any warning or explanation as to how or why, becomes a piano. The use of fantastical elements here allows Bustani to convey the shock and confusion of the protagonist in an immediate way there is no ambiguity about the feelings of the protagonist and there is no need for extensive authorial intervention. Furthermore, the use of fantastical elements, specifically the woman’s transformation into a piano, illustrates more clearly than a lengthy description could, the degree to which Bustani thinks people have become isolated from one another. It is not merely that people retain distance from others, rather, people are no longer able
to recognize those around them, these people may as well be an object, like a piano, in which no human elements are recognizable.

The effects of the deception— all that she has been keeping hidden inside— are lethal, not only to the protagonist but to other (piano) players, or men who try to get to know the woman subsequently by going inside of her. In making the woman a piano and making her a danger to the men in the piece, Bustani is presenting a scenario that is “totally alien” in an “otherwise recognizable world”.76 He is literally objectifying the woman in the piece, that is to say, he makes her an object but one that is endowed with qualities not associated with a piano in reality.

In piece number 62, the representation of the woman’s body as a piano is meant to be shocking. The fact that the transformation that occurs is one of a woman’s body into a piano is significant. From the outset, the woman’s body in this piece is already subject to a number of assumptions based on constructions of gender that do exist in reality and that are quite powerful. The woman’s transformation into a piano can be read as a physical manifestation of the restrictions put onto women in reality that are real, but do not take on a corporeal form. As a piano, the woman no longer has a voice and she is physically entered without her consent. Her only actions as a piano are a direct result of the actions of the men who enter her. Clearly these characteristics are meant to be magical-realist depictions of the gender distinctions that exist in reality and do, in reality, restrict a woman’s actions.

The element of shock occasioned by the woman’s transformation into a piano is exacerbated by the obliviousness of the men in the piece who all unthinkingly enter her and are

76 Chanady, 22.
killed while they are in the piano. Each man who enters the piano is confronted with a different scene, none of which are associated in any way with a piano in reality thus presenting another “totally alien view” and destabilizing the certainty with which the text can be read. The scenes all have enough in common with reality to be recognizable but their placement in the piano makes them shocking. The first man, when he “examined her insides, he did not find strings but a swimming pool. He stepped onto the edge, dived in, and died for it held no water.”

Not only does this man not find strings, as he would expect inside a piano, he finds a swimming pool, but unlike what he anticipates, it holds no water and so he is killed. The illusion that each player sees is different but all three illusions are lethal and the elements which kill the protagonists are unnoticed by the protagonists until it is too late. The second, when he “examined her insides, he did not find strings but a grotto from which strange lights shone with a weird glare, and as soon as he went inside, the entrance was sealed by a boulder that let no air in, and he died, suffocated.”

The third player “hit the keys and out came a stifled wooden sound.” When he “examined her insides, he saw a street, and as he crossed it he was hit by a speeding care and…died as well.” In this piece, Bustani quite literally uses “violent literary engagement” to examine the question of the male protagonist’s perception of the deception he feels he has been the victim of. The violence is not only to be found where the men are killed but also in the transformation of the woman’s body into a piano. As a piano, she kills men but is also subject to them as they are free to enter her without her consent. Furthermore, as a piano she does not have

77 Bustani, 187.
78 Bustani, 187.
79 Bustani, 187.
80 Busatni, 187.
a voice of her own but only makes noise when a man “touched her strings”. In being portrayed in such a violent way, it is clear that Bustani is aiming to evoke a visceral reaction of shock and disgust at the woman’s portrayal in this piece. The protagonist is musing on the topic of deception, at the ways in which a romantic partner can be unknowable and it is clear the protagonist thinks it is that he is the one who has been wronged. Bustani’s depiction of the woman as a piano that is entered by three men and who has no form of expression outside of what the men instigate satirizes the male protagonist’s view of the woman. The male protagonist feels like his is the victim of the woman but clearly he is the one preventing her from all forms of movement and expression.

The woman in piece 31 of “The Book of Meaning” is represented in a way that is opposite to the woman in piece 62. Whereas the woman in piece 62 is not given a voice, Bustani intervenes in piece 31 to give the woman a form of expression denied to her in reality. This particular piece centres on a woman who lives on the street and who sells corn to be fed to the pigeons. People buy corn from her yet completely fail to notice her.

Nobody notices a tear escaping from the corner of her eye; no one cares that she explodes with anger when a beautiful tourist takes her picture.

So she continued to shrivel, shrink.81

Although it happens very quickly in this piece, the juxtaposition between the “old, old woman” whose “clothes are tattered and her sight is weak” and the “beautiful tourist” is pivotal. The old woman is permanently stuck out in public, she has no privacy and is subject to the stares of everyone, despite being completely ignored, regardless of what she does.

81 Bustani, 95.
As the day ended, she flew off with her friends to sleep below the bridge, leaving behind her tattered clothes, cans full of corn kernels, and multitudes passing through-as they had been-paying no attention.  

The only way the protagonist can escape the physical confines of someone who, day after day, regardless of what she does, is ignored by the public is to turn into a bird and fly away to be with other birds. Bustani uses magical realism in this piece in order to reintroduce this woman who has been pushed beyond the realm of perception of the general public back into its consciousness. She is not noticed when she “explodes” in anger but perhaps she will be noticed when it is revealed that she can transform into a bird. In introducing this fantastical element into the piece, Bustani is not merely trying to give the woman a means of escaping the confines of a homeless person’s life. Rather, he is ridiculing the depth of ignorance of the passers-by. This woman’s remarkable ability could very well be true; at any rate, it cannot be objectively refuted by anyone who has been in a position to observe her because all who have been in a position to observe her have remained completely ignorant of her presence even when they have interacted with her.

As will become evident, a significant number of Bustani’s protagonists are homeless people. In choosing to make people whose voices have been consistently ignored be the central character of his short narratives, Bustani faces the possibility of committing the very same error that he attacks in his writing: obscuring the inconsistencies of contemporary reality by providing explanations of them that make them acceptable and not shocking. But he avoids committing this error in a very deliberate way by using the short form. His choice allows him to portray reality in

82 Bustani, 95.
a raw and immediate way that allows him to pose big questions and leave them unanswered. A longer form of writing would not have allowed Bustani the same leeway in this regard.

In piece number 62, Bustani responds directly to one of the problems faced by novelists, a problem that has been discussed at length by Georg Lukcas. Lukacs describes the problem that novelists must address in their writing as one of resolving the “self-destruction of reality” that takes place as a result of the disparity between an individual’s ideals and the larger structure of reality in which the individual exists. This “self-destruction of reality” poses a problem for writers of the novel become the destruction is not “immediately evident in a poetic and sensuous way”.83 This problem faced by writers of the novel, Bustani confronts in his flash prose. In his magico-realist flash prose, reality can be depicted in a “poetic and sensuous” way. In prioritizing the poetic and the sensuous, Bustani’s depiction of reality is entirely different from the reality depicted in the form of the novel. In the form of the novel, the “self-destruction of reality” appears in two ways:

First, as disharmony between the interiority of the individual and the substratum of his actions; the more genuine is the interiority and the nearer its sources are to the ideas of life which, in the soul, have turned into ideals, the more clearly this disharmony will appear. Second, as the inability of the outside world, which is a stranger to ideals and an enemy of interiority, to achieve real completeness; an inability to find either the form of totality for itself as a whole, or any form of coherence for its own relationship to its elements and their relationship to one another; in other words, the outside world cannot be represented.84

The “interiority of the individual” referred to by Lukacs is all that goes on inside the head of an individual that does not manifest itself through her actions, in other words, the thoughts and feelings not acted upon. There is no “interiority of the individual” to be found within Bustani’s

83 Lukacs, 79.
84 Lukacs, 79.
protagonists. He is concerned with people’s perceptions only insofar as they affect the way people conduct themselves in the “outside world”, or, the reality that exists outside of the individual. Bustani is concerned with the outside world because, unlike the “interiority of the individual”, the outside world can be represented. It is only in the outside world where the consequences of human action can be observed. If there is no evidence of ideals in the outside world, than that means that they are only inside people and are not affecting reality which calls into question people’s adherence to them and is exactly what Bustani intends to do. Bustani agrees with Lukacs description of the outside world as failing to “find either the form of totality for itself as a whole, or any form of coherence for its own relationship to its elements”. For both men, the outside world is chaotic and completely at odds with what people, according to their ideals, desire. It is precisely this lack of coherence and prevalence of incongruity that provide Bustani with the fodder for his work and because he avoids writing novels, he can represent the chaos and incongruity without distorting them.

Bustani wants to do more than make people question their adherence to ideals. He wants to hone in on the “disharmony” Lukacs refers to between people’s ideals and reality and to show the consequences of it. The consequences always manifest themselves for Bustani’s protagonists so forcefully that they threaten to overpower them. Often, the consequences are manifested as vomit. In piece number 7 of “Apocalypse Now”, the protagonist is forced to physically confront the vomit of everyone who lives in the city continuously. In this piece, the city takes on the persona of a human with whom the protagonist struggles. The protagonist is subject to the transgressive behaviour of the city in which the protagonist lives. The “city of exhaust fumes and polystyrene boxes” is always on the point of overwhelming the protagonist. The protagonist in this piece, referred to only as the “orange man” has to continuously struggle in this city, as he
“walks, trudging guzzling with his broom, thousands of people’s vomit”.85 Aside from the protagonist, there are no other humans in this piece, only their vomit which the orange man is forced to continuously clean up.

And when he is awoken by a mouse moving in his stomach,
he runs to the bathroom,
out of his guts emerge gas stations, opposition parties, fast-food restaurants, newspapers, shopping malls, and neighbourhoods
stagnant with featureless inhabitants.
And before the water current that sweeps it all away stops, he
Throws himself in so that he might die.
But he finds himself- again and again- in the street,
walking, trudging,
guzzling with his broom, thousands of people’s vomit.86

All the people aside from the orange man are part of the scenery in this piece, “featureless inhabitants”. Despite the inhabitants being featureless, they produce a remarkable amount of waste, vomit, which the orange man must continuously confront. Despite it being waste, it seems to have a dynamic regenerative quality. His continual confrontations with it cause him to become ill and throw up the “gas stations, opposition parties, fast-food restaurant, newspapers, shopping malls, and neighbourhoods”. This is not the end, however, there is no purgative quality to the orange man throwing up. Rather, he continues, “guzzling with his broom, thousands of people’s vomit”. Bustani’s critique is clear here. This man has no autonomy- he must live with the garbage of the city, continuously cleaning but never escaping it, he cannot even die to escape it.

85 Bustani, 17.
86 Bustani, 17.
In the extremes to which the orange man is pushed, there is a kind of violence. There is no direct physical confrontation between people in this piece; however, the orange man’s physical state is being subject to pain that is directly the result of the actions of others. The fact that the violence is perpetrated by the negligence of the people living in the city rather than the result of their deliberate action does not in any way diminish the consequences of it. Bustani makes the physical damage that people are capable of inflicting upon one another become the central part of the piece without any accompanying explanation to make the violence coherent or understandable. One on hand, this scene has familiar elements for anyone who has been in a city and witnessed the lives of those who live on the margins. On the other hand, it represents the indignities that the orange man is forced to go through in such a stark way that it also reads as something new and shocking.

Like the protagonist in number 7 from “Apocalypse Now”, Sayyed Banat (Abul-Fida) in piece number 17 of “Apocalypse Now” is someone who is ignored and must continuously struggle against being overcome by the city’s waste. Abul-Fida’s existence is dependent on the city, even while the same city is an ever-present source of torment.

All there is to it is that a city belching smoke and clatter kidnapped you from between your mother’s thighs and force-fed you her sour milk that you vomited time after time, then carried your gauntness and cast it on her sidewalk:

loose cigarettes, sleight-of-hand tricks, books on the torment of the grave, and toothpicks.87

In a kind of inverse image of the one of the protagonist in 7 who is perpetually “guzzling with his broom, thousands of people’s vomit”, Abul-Fida is “force fed sour milk” by the city until he

87 Bustani, 39.
vomits. He is engaged in a physical struggle with the city who targets him personally, mocking him while she beats him. “Is it you who denounces me? she says, releasing her mice and her odors like the slashes of a whipmaster on your back.” By making the city an entity capable of deliberation and action against people, Bustani makes Abul-Fida’s struggle the result of human action, rather than some accident of fate. By incorporating this supernatural element, Bustani is able to make this piece an “event”, and not a description of the problem of the generalized social ill of homelessness.

Abul-Fida vomits as a result of what he ingests from the city. Abul-Fida is not in a position from which he can protest his treatment by the city. Despite his lack of autonomy, his body still rejects what it is being subjected to by vomiting which, in this piece seems to be a form of involuntary protest, the body rejects that which the mind has been forced to accept. There is no way to know for certain Abul-Fida’s internal thought processes on his situation but knowing this would not be conducive to understanding what is at stake in this piece which is Abul-Fida’s existence being literally stamped out by the city who makes Abul-Fida the repository for all of her waste.

The city has physically inscribed its marks on Abul-Fida but he has not had such an impact on the city, his death goes unnoticed: “On the bed of the poor hospital, he crumbled without a single person to his side and disappeared into forgetting.” In this piece can be found, again, what Lukacs refers to as “absence of meaning”. Bustani does not inscribe any sort of meaning on the life and death of Abul-Fida; in fact, the absence of meaning is the point of the

88 Bustani, 39.
89 Bustani, 41.
piece. The piece reveals the fact that there are people who are forced to physically bump up against all the waste of the city, who toil away pointlessly until their death which fails to have any impact on the city with whom they have been locked in battle their whole life. This failure to have an impact on the city is not because their lives have been meaningless but rather because of the fractures that exist between people that allow one person to be completely ignorant of the lives of people with whom they bump up against on a daily basis.

The insularity of contemporary life which allows people to be completely ignorant of the lives of people close to them has negative consequences for the people who remain unaffected by the suffering of others as well as the people who are subject to extreme physical suffering. The same ignorance that makes a person ignorant of others makes them unable to have any depth in their lives and so they are obsessed with the superficial. Bustani’s two pieces, numbers 41 and 42, that make up “In Mockery of the Narcissus of the Universe” trace the fate of a woman who is turned into a booklouse, then back again into a woman. The woman is fixated on being attractive to men, so much so that she willingly turns her fate over to a man called the “Magnificent”.

Could He, who made me, be anything but Magnificent?” she asked.

Her eyes fell to the ground,

And from her mouth a lisping tongue flopped out.90

The woman’s fixation on the man who created her is so great that her body literally starts to fall apart. Like the woman in piece 62 of “Cunning Clouds of Betrayal”, the woman’s body is transformed into a non-human form. In this piece, it is animate initially but soon morphs into an inanimate object as the “Magnificent” changes her body. The physical transformation in this

90 Bustani, 123.
piece accompanies her increasing subjugation at the hands of a man to the point where her physical form is determined by a man.

She sat constantly in front of the mirror alone, turning right and left, checking on the slope of her nose and pout of her lips.

In the two hollows under her forehead appeared worms, shaped like letters: “M,E, N.”

Never had they lined up at her door and so, she became the Narcissus of the Universe made by the Magnificent.91

The piece pushes to the extreme the idea that a woman’s fate is subject to the whim of a man. Instead of resisting her subjugation, the woman is fixated on her own image in the mirror. She is ignored by men, but alone in front of the mirror, she becomes fixated on the idea of being attractive to men- so much so that the word “man” is inscribed in maggots on her face. She is, quite literally, under a man’s thumb.

He raised his eyebrows and as they descended, a giant finger pressed down on her. She, whose creation (when, where, how, why) He could not recall. And she became: shorter than a millimeter, six-legged, living between sheets of paper, reproducing asexually. When you look her up in scientific reviews, you’ll find her name: the booklouse.92

Bustani’s choice to make this woman turn into a booklouse whose attributes can be read about in scientific reviews makes the system that this woman is living in, the system which makes her completely subject to men’s actions, take on extra weight. It makes it clear that, in this piece, Bustani is not merely creating some fantastical scenario where a woman can morph into a booklouse. Rather, he has in mind something that exists in reality, a system of inequality in

91 Bustani, 123.

92 Bustani, 123.
which science can be used to justify oppression. In this, he is being true to the magical realist form. As Chanady puts it, the magical realist presents a “world view that is radically different from ours as equally valid. He neither censures nor shows surprise”. Bustani presents the woman’s transformation into a booklouse as a fact, not a matter of conjecture. Each aspect of the booklouse and each event that occurs is intentional and designed to illuminate an aspect of reality that is not superficially apparent. In the case of the booklouse, it is clear she is meant to represent a woman subject to the most powerful forms of patriarchy.

Much of Bustani’s work centres on scenes that shock, either by graphic descriptions of vomit or disturbing scenes intended to evoke disgust. In capturing this physical dynamism, Bustani makes it very clear what it is that the body of his protagonist is reacting to, that is to say, what El Ariss refers to as the “external stimuli that cause it to experience danger, confinement, malnutrition and collapse.” Like the woman whose body becomes a piano in “Cunning Clouds of Betrayal”, the transformation of the woman’s body into a booklouse happens quickly and arbitrarily, without any explanation. Clearly, Bustani intends to comment on contemporary women’s control, or lack thereof, over their bodies. The response of the body to its position in a text, its reaction to “external stimuli that cause it to experience danger, confinement, malnutrition, and collapse” reveal parts of reality that remain obscure when one only studies the ways human act en masse. Each visceral reaction of the individual body is directly linked to larger historical processes, El-Ariss cites colonial expansion whereas here Bustani is concerned

93 Chanady, 30.
94 El Ariss, 69.
95 El Ariss, 69.
with neo-liberalism and patriarchy. Each of these phenomena are so large and their influence so powerful, it is only at the level of the individual body that they can be “interrupted”.

The body “viscerally” reacts to the physical stimuli with which it is confronted “on the one hand, and to ideological and political projects on the other.”

The protagonist in “In Mockery of the Narcissus of the Universe” has no control over her body, it transformed completely by the Magnificent whose relationship to “ideological and political projects” is evident; he is a sort of amorphous embodiment of monotheist religion and unquestioning belief in the scientific progress. Her transformation into a booklouse is followed closely by her transformation back into a woman; this woman is completely subject to whims of men, right down to her whether she is incarnate as a person or an insect.

The booklouse made over by the plastic surgeon into a moderately attractive woman tripped over something on the ground as she left the hospital. She looked and found it was a crown that had just fallen from the royal procession speeding by, trampling in its wake bodies paved in the form of a street.

The fate of the woman/booklouse already suggests that, in this piece, bodies can be subject to any form of transformation or mutilation. Evidently, bodies can be easily killed as it revealed that the street itself is made of bodies. The convergence of living bodies and inanimate objects is taken even farther by Bustani when silicone balls start to fill her skull.

She runs and runs and her magnificent maker chortles from his place at the window above, watching the silicone balls jump up-down, up-down, seeping slowly, slowly to fill

96 El Ariss, 70.
97 El Ariss, 70.
98 Bustani, 125.
her skull. He says to himself “Could he, who made her, be...” and drowns once again in laughter.99

The silicone balls filling her head seem to be the logical progression of her fixation on being attractive to men. Initially she was staring in the mirror, so consumed with looking attractive to men that the word “men” appeared on her forehead, written in maggots. Following this, her head becomes filled with silicone balls. The woman, who, from the beginning, has had no autonomy, is subject to the whim of the “Magnificent” again as he fills her head with an inanimate substance. Unlike the orange man and Abul Fida, the body of the protagonist in this piece cannot even resist against its complete lack of autonomy, there are no involuntary bodily functions experienced by the woman/booklouse; all of her actions are completely under the control of the “Magnificent”.

Bustani’s protagonists all experience pain as a result of the fractured nature of contemporary life. His concern is with the physical effects that contemporary life has on the bodies of individuals. Bustani conceptualizes contemporary life as problematic, not because it excludes certain individuals but rather because it makes isolation and loneliness prevalent as each person removes herself further and further from the lives of others so that everyone’s pain goes unnoticed by those around them. People have no awareness of global phenomena, of what is happening in their city or what is happening to the earth but the fundamental problem is people cannot even see what is happening in the lives of those right next to them. Despite peoples’ lack of intellectual comprehension of what is happening on a global level, they are affected by global phenomena everyday on a physical level. Bustani does not want people to become superficially

99 Bustani, 125.
concerned with these issues, so he makes his protagonists engage with these issues viscerally in pieces of flash prose. This way, there is no intellectualization of these issues, no opportunity for individuals to distance themselves again from the every deepening fissures separating them from others. El-Ariss argues that writing in which the protagonist is subjected to “experiences of aversion, anxiety and indigestibility unsettles civilization’s association with fixed historical narratives and models of truth and knowledge.”

This passage is particularly appropriate to Bustani’s work as all of his protagonists in this section experience “aversion”, “anxiety” or “indigestibility”, or a combination of these as their bodies are subject to the negative consequences of people’s disregard for one another. As the pieces in this section have demonstrated, Bustani completely avoids “fixed historical narratives” and current “models of truth and knowledge”. Rather, he is concerned with what the “event”. He focuses on the violence that is being done to the bodies of those who are excluded and ignored. Sometimes these are people who bear the signs of this violence in very overt ways but other times the violence is more insidious. By having protagonists who are those who are very visibly living on the margins as well as those whose lives hide the signs of the affects of their loneliness and isolation, Bustani makes it apparent that the problems he treats are global in scale, even though it is individual bodies where the consequences may be seen. Bustani predicts that the physical effects will become increasingly pronounced. In his view, humans have clearly made a choice to pursue a path in which inequality and suffering will become increasingly oppressive markers on all individual bodies.

100 El Ariss, 72-73.
Conclusion

Bustani consciously engages with the contemporary world in his writing. His deliberate effort to meet the contemporary world on its own terms is reflected in his writing style which evokes the speed and repetitiveness of contemporary life, dominated as it is by technology and industry. Bustani writes neither novels nor poetry and this makes it difficult to know where exactly to situate him in relation to other Arab writers. Despite writing in a style that is not easily categorized, Bustani does not see his writing as existing within a vacuum. He is not hesitant about acknowledging his influences. He cites a plethora of writers of various types of writing. Amongst them, he cites prose writers Zakariya Tamar and Haidar Haidar and poets Ahmad Taha and Ziad al-Anani.101 Significantly, Bustani distances himself from modern writers such as Nagib Mahfouz, Abdel-Rahman al-Munif, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra and Suheil Idriss. According to Bustani, these writers were bound by a “paradox”:

They possessed both an internal (subtle, undeclared, but discoverable in their literature) admiration of the West and its accomplishments of material progress, order, and state building and an external (declared, outspoken) anti-colonist liberation drive that fueled their aspiration to freedom and sovereignty. This aspiration has not been realized but has rather stumbled in the opposite direction. These successive defeats became the womb of today’s “new writing”. 102

As was discussed in the first section, Bustani identifies himself as being part of this “new writing”. New Writing seeks to engage the world as a “whole’- overarching

101 Bustani, ““Perception of Meaning: At the Boundary of Poetry and Apocalypse”.
102 Bustani, ““New’ Arabic Writing: Cataclysm in Fast Forward”.
social/economic/political- and the limits of existentialism but from the starting point of internal conflict: questioning, premonitions, losses, defeat.”

It is from this disadvantaged, yet conscious and productive place that Bustani situates himself. Other writers who have written work that adheres to the definition of “new writing” are Yusuf Idris, Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino, Lydia Davis, Charles Bukowski and Margaret Atwood. It is important to emphasize here that it is these writers’ works that are part of New Writing, not the writers themselves. There are a limited number of pieces that are able to provoke the “internal conflict” so essential to New Writing.

Bustani states that he has found that New Writing, for the most part, lies “outside of the novel”. His reasoning for this is that New Writing tends to be less focused on adherence to genre and saleability than novels generally are. The caution with which Bustani treats the novel genre matches that of Georg Lukacs. As was discussed in the second section of this thesis, Lukacs has indicated the ways in which the novel genre imposes a certain form of coherence on writing and compromises the author’s ability to reflect the nuances and contradictions of reality.

It is tempting to see New Writing as a distinctly post-modern movement but this is not entirely accurate. Temporal distinctions influence the divide between modern writing and New Writing. However, when the authors were writing is not the only deciding factor in determining how to classify them. It is not enough for a person to identify themselves with a movement, rather, their writing must in some way reflect contemporary realities and engage the reader in these realities completely in a productive way. What is productive about this process of literary

103 Bustani, “‘New Arabic Writing’.”
engagement is that it induces a process of questioning. This process of questioning is not only found in the work of contemporary writers; it has been employed for centuries. In writing pieces that provoke such deep questions, Bustani is carrying on a tradition that goes back to some of the medieval poets. Adonis describes the poetry of Abu Nuwas, al-Niffari and al-Ma‘arri as offering a particular kind of knowledge, one that is not based on certainty but instead invokes a very important thought process.

…while the poet does not provide an answer, this is not to say that he does not think as poetry is a questioning, it leaves the horizon open to inquiry and further knowledge, it offers no certainties. Questioning is thought, giving rise to anguish and doubt, while answering is a sort of cessation from thought, bringing confidence and certainty. Questioning, in other words, is thought which provokes more thought. 104

The questioning that occupied the work of Abu Nauwas, al-Niffari and al-Ma‘arri also plays a huge role in Bustani’s work. He has in fact mentioned the influence classical poetry has had on him. He states that classical poetry is a “basic and essential part of any writer: it is the poetry one is exposed to as a child in school, and the first rhythm in language one absorbs.” It does not seem far-fetched to surmise that the “questioning” of the medieval poets has influenced Bustani in a profound way, equal to the influence the “rhythm” of the language of the classical poets has had on him.

For the process of questioning to have any resonance, it must engage fully with the world in which the work doing the questioning is written. What Bustani questions in his writing is human perception specifically, contemporary humans’ ability to perceive their world. Bustani focuses on the contradictions, the losses and the extreme discomfort found in everyday existence. The

everyday is profoundly important for Bustani. It is the everyday habits of people that make up the larger processes that define contemporary life. When Facebook is invoked, as it is in “The Book of Meaning” where Bustani describes a man who “threw around smiles and winks and sadness./ And when he was emptied of all his internal organs,/ he closed Facebook, tripped over his ashtray full of cigarettes,/ and dropped into his deep, deep well”, it is not Facebook that is the defining feature of this piece, rather it is the way in which the protagonist engages with it, the way in which he devotes so much to an inanimate object in the hopes of creating human connection that he physically disappears.

Bustani, like Benjamin, seeks to elucidate the ways in which people mistake mechanical (for Benjamin, for Bustani “electronic” might be more accurate) processes for human ones. Benjamin describes a public who observes the various processes of mechanical reproduction in a “state of distraction”105, that is to say, it is not only that mechanical reproduction has come to replace processes that were previously human driven, but that the public, in observing these processes, does not even fully comprehend what it is they are observing. The public not only is no longer involved in the processes that are so intertwined with human life but it does not even fully perceive the significance of these processes. When Bustani describes the homeless man who is the protagonist of “Apocalypse Now” he describes an orange man who “finds himself-again and again-in the street,/walking, trudging,/guzzling with his broom, thousands of people’s vomit.”106 Bustani evokes the repetitive nature of the routine the man has been forced into. Like a machine, the man is forced to clean up people’s vomit “again and again”. Bustani’s purpose in

105 Benjamin, 240.
evoking this scene is not simply to demonstrate the ways in which human life has come to operate like a mechanical process. Rather, Bustani seeks to challenge the perceptive abilities of all the people who are in a position to witness the existence of the orange man but fail to perceive him because of they are in a “state of distraction” which renders them incapable of noticing the difference between human and mechanical processes.

This thesis has sought to explain the ways in which Bustani invokes the process of questioning. Through close readings of Bustani’s work, it has sought to examine the way in which the form and the content of his work interact with one another to provoke questions and destabilize the certainty that is so prevalent in contemporary life. Bustani is not the first writer whose writing has centred on the process of questioning, but his ability to make his writing take on the exact same form of the processes that he is challenging is striking. He manages to graphically depict the consequences of people’s unquestioning acceptance of technology in a visceral way that forces them to question their perception of reality.
Bibliography


