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Jason Bahbak Mohaghegh, *The Writing of Violence in the Middle East: Inflictions, Suspensions: Contemporary Middle Eastern and Islamicate Thought*, Bloomsbury, 2012, 256 pp., \$37.95 US (pbk), ISBN: 9781472529442.

Exordium

The Writing of Violence in the Middle East: Inflictions attempts to capture a literary palimpsest layered with conceptual engravings that *recast* the movement of violence outside the framework of the political. Jason Bahbak Mohaghegh has chosen from the very outset to distance his hermeneutic methodology from the procedural anxiety of building empirical chronicles, histories, archives, and scientific *modus operandi* whose supposed aim is *to grasp* the material and rhetorical event of violence and its catastrophic protagonists: the martyr, the extremist, the terrorist, the fanatic, the militant, and the insurgent. On this account, the author may have risked an exegetical subversion: to theorize multiple modes of *thinking, imagining, and writing* violence more by excavating the utmost visceral terrains of the semiotic exigencies of our modern epoch. Of greater significance, such inquiry breaks a certain silence on *textual meritocracy* by investigating an unknown *revelation*: that peripheral, ethnicized and Orientalized voices may have construed violence beyond the logic of the tragic, and more insistently, at the farthest edge of a prototypical (post)-modern vision for a post-apocalyptic horizon. Mohaghegh's argument would perhaps have less appeal to compel us to think *differently* about violence if it were not for his scrupulous—though always already incomplete—selection of texts *worthy* of inclusion in such autopsy. These exilic poets and writers are themselves *inscribed* into the ill-omened, ghastly resources of a threshold-imagination.

Mohaghegh's hermeneutic enactment *operates* a certain mercurialness-of-fancy offered by a concentrated elite of chiefly visionary poets—including, among others, the Iranian Ahmad Shamlu and Khosrow Golesorkhi, the Syrian Adonis (Ali Ahmad Said Esber), and the Palestinian Taha Muhammad Ali and Mahmoud Darwish. These poets and their figures, for the ultimate purposes of this book, have been positioned as fresh guardians of the unfinished project of modernity, as the final *breathers* of the zero-world consciousness. The author's methodology of coupling these texts in particular allows for their new thoughts to crystalize thereby detecting obscure incantation and affirmative leaps of mania, delirium, and decadence.

Of greater significance, when Mohaghegh pairs these poetic articulations of the East with philosophical reflections of the West, his analysis is inescapably engaged with the very question of writing in literature and philosophy that Derrida spelled out in *Of Grammatology*. From Maurice Blanchot's meditation on the impossibility of thinking disaster juxtaposed with the poetic suggestion of Ahmad Shamlu perceiving ruin as "Guarding" (Quarrel), to Walter Benjamin's notion of violence, mythic or divine, as belonging to the metaphysics of absolute negation placed alongside Adonis's inscription of violence as strangeness inherent in our agitation and fundamental disorientation, we trace an inverted dismantling and negotiation of a history of logocentrism that has consistently debased writing to the level of mediation.

Instead, Mohaghegh traces the unnerving play of the infinitude-of-meaning, the experimental perceptions and shattering encryptions by juxtaposing and leaking homonyms, homophones, and homographs into one another. The author is unapologetic: he must begin where he feels he ought to begin, and must execute the terror of a counterpoint: staging in his Preface a scene of confrontational conversations between his self-vetted passages from Eastern and Western writings. This textual staging, as it zeroes in more on the writing of the new East (with a privileged and discerning treatment of poetry) for the rest of the book, is choreographed by misaligned and bumpy typography. Ultimately, it has mobilized its open-ended typology of exorcism of concealed demons of *desperation* buried deep in cadency, pulsation, throbbing, and gasping of literary figures; the casting out of "unknown barbaric principles" (xiii).

Prolegomenon 1: Orthography-Typography-Typologies

How does *Inflections* "proceed," then, in mapping out its "suspension"? How does it delimit Western obscurantism on the *totality* of knowledge about violence? Mohaghegh *drives* his reading as a set of hermeneutic unveilings buried in the *scraped* layers/mirrors of verse, and at the borders of war narrative and philosophical speculations. In these sites we come across mazelike typologies of gravitational thoughts and intuitions uncovering the absolute limits of Marx's universe of, "All that is solid melts into air"; this modernity *uncovered* is no longer just "a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish" but it is *the last deadly straw* of a "unity of disunity."¹

Mohaghegh's own methodological terrain of interpretation is, therefore, complicit in the violent letter of the texts; his hermeneutic intervention is mostly ambiguous, blurring, disorienting and mystifying. One builds less assurance to follow the chain of thought-on-thought as Mohaghegh improvises his navigation through an English translation. Clearly there is no room here to grapple with a philology of violence in Arabic and Persian, but buried in the midst of Mohaghegh's perfidious domain of sorting-out *a different* and ruptured reading, there is a pressing call to confront the dynamics between the diachronic and synchronic components of violence in Islamic languages. One is usually dismayed by the author's inclination to collide, at a moment's notice, metaphoric distances between poems, fictional narratives or philosophical reflections. Mohaghegh's aggressive archeological arrangement *pursues* an inexorable hurricane of slippages of meaning. At times, one is left with an unanticipated sense that exhausting one realm of thematic comprehensibility in one poem is but a cruel and ungraceful invitation to enter a whirlwind of more malignly

¹ Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Verso, 1982), 15.

illuminating dusts-of-potential (in)-comprehensibilities. Does such a seemingly inhospitable manner succeed in *adjusting* the spectrum of the reader? How does the author, then, play *the patient host* in order to *entangle* the cynical structuration of that guest-reader he is mostly interested to reach, the one still locked in a Greco-centric construction of violence? How can one ever write the very palpitations *today* of an Islamicate verse/thought differently and dynamically?

For this reason *Inflections* presents us with a glaring initial difficulty: how do we approach what seems to be a solipsist and evocative analysis of violence that claims to pass for a certain insightful methodology of critique? Has the real quantifiable history of suffering been compromised at the expense of a labyrinth of textual play?

Inflections's ostensible procedural flaw is a *political gesture of adjustment* of what *escapes* the ideological expurgations of the sciences of politics. Mohaghegh's argument concedes that the euphoric relationship between the real world of violence and the world of violent metaphor (and its history in both the West and the East) is already woven exuberantly as finitude and infinitude, as boundary and escape, and as predicament and promise. This perspective, dismissed by dogmatic empiricism on violence, is but a blind spot to pore over. It takes us back to the larger crisis of reference, of naming, and uttering this unspeakable appellation called, the East, the Muslim, the Arab, and ultimately the disruptive stranger of the West. *Inflections* is, therefore, always already haunted by a political-methodological anxiety to reset "the rules of engagement"; to underscore how much more sober reading and newly stratified re-reading must cover the shifty ironies of violence.

Even though Mohaghegh may not need to supply a direct elaboration of the antediluvian signification of the zero that sets Chapter 0 into hermeneutic motion and into a boundary from which there is no possible escape, one understands very quickly that its *foreign* enunciation (against the political order of three-and-more-worlds) happens in an emerging debate on *Suspensions*. The site zero, *sifr*, is a crispy sign full of "sound and fury signifying nothing" and many things; it inhabits its incubator (world) in a compound, contracted relationship, in a hyphenated state of cross-referentiality. Zero, the guest-reader must realize, is not a self-detached organizing numerical principle referring only to itself as *naught*; the zero-world, then, is more of a deconstructionist device, a hazy manner of tracing, deciphering a scrambled realm of thought-making and unmaking in the thresh-holds of these texts. It is this zero-world that *inaugurates* and *zeros in* on the very figuration of a multitude of extreme zones of contact and overflow of sites. The zero-world is a site in excess of everything because it is a metaphor that brings about a world that is "neither a *non-place* nor an *other world*."²

Capitalizing and blending the terms from every cosmology of poetic or philosophical thought in Mohaghegh's Preface is a way of imagining combative phraseological collocations. Mohaghegh does not operate a simple act of geometric comparison here; instead, he takes the risk of *initiating* imagined geographies of East and West back into a new inter-dependent *shuffling* of texts. "In the West, one speaks of uninhabited plateaus; in the East, there are still those leaner kinds who walk the hills" (xxiv), or, "In the West, evil is handed over to synthetic attractions; in the East, it finds itself engraved, harvested, and smuggled in well-monitored textual riots" (xxxiii). Those cross-mirrored thoughts are composed by parenthetical phrases made of qualifying collective (adjectival) nouns. These twenty-eight spheres of *phrasemes* intentionally arranged in conflictual binary-oppositions are summoned restrictedly by the liminal imaginative demands of the texts themselves.

² Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1978), 8.

For this reason, perhaps Mohaghegh is almost always less consistent in his orthographic choices. Whilst the title pages of chapters 0, 2, and 7 benefit from unswerving use of capitonyms (all collective adjectival nouns), the headings inside the chapters are stripped of their status of distinction, and where the author uses Roman numerals for his title pages of chapters 1, 3, and 5, that method of enumeration is dropped out of the headings for analysis, and perhaps supplemented by the return of collocations—with the exception of chapter 6.5, which sustains Roman numerals standing on their feet without corresponding collocations.

These erratic alterations mirror poetic mutations of imagination; they are invented as gaps-of-suspended meaning. The disappearance of capitonyms on one single title page is accompanied by an introduction of a repeated modality throughout the analysis. The modal phrase headed by the auxiliary verb “must” punctuates itself by a replicated ellipsis, or at times by the use of the double aposiopesis as in the case of Chapter 2, where the realms of cruelty in the twenty-eight descriptions veer towards horrid beginnings, unfinished thoughts, pauses, and terrifying silences. Each principle within the principality of imprisonment is predicated by an obligation; the figures of the zero-world are bound by a commitment to becoming, traversing, creating, inspiring, confronting, attaining, and wielding. On this account, Mohaghegh’s orthography of uneven capitalization, word-breaks, emphasis, and punctuation has less to do with affectation or stylistic craftsmanship, and is more in tune with the political-methodological preoccupation to exercise a duplicitous kind of hospitality towards a persistently stuttering guest-reader.

Prolegomenon 2: Zero-World Consciousness

Now what about a second matter of the organizing structure, the “device of idolatry” of the zero-world consciousness? How does it operate as mobile and fundamentally outside the structure of the center of the One-world?

To weave subjective intuitions and perceptions buried in the subliminal realm of shuttered representations of violence, Mohaghegh dispatches well-conceived principles for the zero-world consciousness: Cosmology, Sightlessness, Threshold, Entanglement, Factionalism I, Factionalism II, First Immortality, and Enchantment. These principles organize and clear the space for the unpredictable movements of the stranger who creates his libidinal literature that defamiliarizes “our” reality; he speaks in folk-tongued languages, and he shamelessly introduces flow and volatility into the matrix of direction. In Mohaghegh’s taxonomies, Ahmad Shamlu once again formulates the first principle of Sightlessness in his poem, “The Pitch Black of Sightlessness” where, as the author explains, “the zero-world is a site of intentional occlusion” (4); where the question of the archeology of things, the significance of *bio-facts* must be deferred to grapple with the compulsory question of the solitude in death that forces the poetic imagination to see, observe, and survey the poetic figure veiled, cloaked, and disoriented by the restless creative embedding of blindfolds, entrances and exits, improvised interventions in the literary darkened canvas always witnessing its own unmaking, and the painful occultation of his own verse by the constant death of light.

Chapter 0 proceeds with the elaboration of seven more principles allowing the bleak verse of Shamlu to punctuate those other poetic figures belonging consecutively to the threshold, to a new red cartography of bitterness and malice and ultimately to factionalism and the universe of sectarian violence all haunting the realms of “principality” in principles 2, 3, and 4, until the voice of Sadeq Hedayat takes over from principle 5 to 7.

This author is here because he shifts our sight to the site of an asylum in “Three drops of Blood” where the zero-world figure must allow the factionalism of his own consciousness to take shape by the very confines of his shared “sanctuary.” Our poetic figure, the author of the zero-world, must be driven by the urge to write, yet his drive to write is converted to chronic fright which in turn unlocks a certain terror of writing to redirect it towards another horizon. This opens up the sixth principle on Hedayat’s “Dead-End,” where our figure must seek immortalization and must settle the “literary-existential paradox” with a new plot (12).

Mohaghegh’s taxonomy of the constellations of the zero-world thickens as he swerves to fortify his process of argumentation through seven chapters interluded by chapter 6.5, which operates as a breathing space halting, if only for a while, the apocalyptic ravages of the assassin coming from Chapter 6. In Chapter 1, “Threat: Writings of Betrayal,” Mohaghegh returns to initiate the poetic intervention of Shamlu’s “The Resurrection” coupled again mainly by tracing personified oxymoronic elements in the interventions of Adonis, Darwish, Mahmoud al-Buraikan and others, where writers take control of their readers by playing games of intimidating them, issuing their own threats by announcing their own “hyper-sensorial nightmares” (25), forcing “depictions of shadow-armies” (26), “images of stifled children” (36), setting up suspect visitations to mass graves, or through “civil wars of dust” (32), and ultimately through a certain threat of hauntology.

In Chapter 2, Mohaghegh “combs through” the lexicon of descriptions of annihilation where the Syrian writer of the Lebanese civil war, Ghada Samman, for example, inscribes her annihilation as being frozen by over-watchfulness of looming dangers. Others have compiled the rest of twenty-seven descriptions where authors’ self-annihilation range from enduring confines of noise, exposure to sun, burning of manuscripts, moon-light, littered corpses, untimeliness, self-impoverishment, and drunkenness to the ultimate description where the author “annihilates himself against annihilation itself” (59). Chapter 3 moves, then, to “iconographic diagrams of sharpening” as an abundant feature of Middle Eastern literature on violence where, as he explains, “the sharpening transforms text into an impermanent knife” (62), where Eastern poetic gestures mobilize moves of incision, decapitation and dissection—bracketing out rational elaborations. As modern reason exhausts itself by now, Mohaghegh changes the tone of his unveilings from self-unnerving analysis to another aggressive methodological deviation. “One wonders” is the persistent question that undermines the goals and the status of the sharpener’s unprecedented operations including his duplicity with evil.

Through these chemical morphologies, Mohaghegh laments that in his selected texts of Réda Bensmaïa, Samih al-Qasim, Darwish and others, “everything is driven into abrasive fits, everything is a single motion of words” (108), and what’s more significant, as the lines of Samih al-Qasim reveal, is that “the enraged shall be impersonated.” Alongside this figure appears the prominent figure of the assassin, armed with his neologistic journal, provides a shift in perspective as it upholds “writing as a kind of assassination” (145), inscribing connections for terror, severe incantations, the spectacular performance in the arena of animality, the excess of fatality, and the incitement of the apocalyptic.

This is why Mohaghegh’s next hermeneutic act is to interlude his thirty-three poetic barriers, or orders of a multitude of others whose figurations, languages, and modes of consciousness betray the possibility of direction in writing—this is, indeed the culmination of his argumentation; these and many others’ inscriptions magnify the post-apocalyptic *streak* of Middle Eastern narratives on violence that must “shift out of a catastrophic perception of the world” and must grapple with “cosmological reckoning” (170).

The conceptual frameworks mapped out in these poetic realms aim “to envision a writing-act” that pushes the boundaries of historical, social, and political readings of Middle Eastern violence. Mohaghegh’s reading uncovers in the depictions of rage, delirium, solitude, and alienation a movement towards “a will to destruction, transfiguration, and escape” (170); the possibilities of both the tragic and the ecstatic that give rise to the destruction of nine cities seen through the conceptual prism of damnation, dysphoria, shattering, coldness, drowning, wreckage, lateness, contamination, and darkening. The real cities fall, but the poets continue to build them over again and again through novel iterations and the will to create new beginnings, to supplement old-fashioned topographies of violence with a new cartography of unfettered fantasies, and a “lunatic atlas of missing land” (184). The poetic intervention of the authors is a journey into the uncharted realms, routes, spheres, and underworlds and over-worlds of the unknown sea.

Perhaps the major merit of *Inflections* is not only the strength of its argument, but it is more the book’s relentless counter canonical approach—a timely political-methodological intervention which *boldly* contemplates the inscriptions of real violence as integral to the very movement of absolute laceration of writing itself and the ultimate depleting of the metaphysics of presence.

By taking the writing on violence out of hierarchical, imperialistic, pseudo-scientific, and repressive frameworks, and by positioning the acts of conceiving violence *elsewhere*—always already stationed at the cutting-edge of what has been termed as “asymmetric ignorance”³—Mohaghegh’s manner of re-reading, dicey as it may be, has advanced potentially a fresh debate about a *poetics-of-suspended-reflexivity* that can only be subverted from the creative arena of the now fully-fledged post-modernizing stranger—and yes, from *this full*-barbarian of the future. From this multi-dimensional perception of how we ought to *begin* reading violence, from this deferred universe, the ideas of post-apocalyptic visions emerge and unfold. By all means, one can only hope that this book excites more inquiries peeling through more engravings-of-thought contained in concealed poetic, fictional, and philosophical palimpsests waiting for their moments to emerge.

Youssef Yacoubi
Assistant Professor of Arabic and Comparative Literature
The Ohio State University

³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who speaks for ‘Indian’ Pasts?” *Representations* 37 (Winter 1992), 36.

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