

# Literary Trajectories of Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī, a Hero Who Was Born a Criminal

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**Abstract** On 14 June 1800, Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī, a Syrian student, stabbed to death General Kléber, leader of the French occupation forces in Egypt. A few days later, the first account of the event – the trial documents – was written, translated into the main languages spoken in Cairo and distributed by the French military. Since then, accounts of this fact have multiplied, each presenting Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī in a different manner, ranging from fanatic, to victim, hero, then back to the fanatic and the hero. Comparing the different stories about Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī and relating them to their context of production, this paper explores their possible motives and effects, showing how the character's literary trajectories depend more on the circumstances in which the stories were written, rather than on a search for truth. Until now, three main tendencies have decided Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī's destiny: legitimation, mirroring reality and responding to the regime's propaganda.

**Keywords** Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī. 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ġabartī. Zakariyyā Tāmir. Alfred Faraġ. Ṣun'allāh Ibrāhīm. Historiography. Narrativity.

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## 1 Introduction

When we approach literature and history, we commonly relate to them as two distinct writing practices. However, they have many points of contact, as Hayden White observes explaining that suppression and subordination of certain events, as well as characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view are techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play, but we also find them in historical writing (White 1978, 84). Likewise, there is no clear limit between literature and history in terms of reception as a historical event described in a work of fiction can equally impact collective memory. The specificity of the literary text is that it remains permanently available for many readers and many generations of readers (Baudorre 2006, 36). Since the literary text does not gather images, but creates them (41), any fictionalization of history might contribute to create a certain perspective that continues to develop in today's vision of this portion of history. On the other hand, if we consider that no literature can exist in a vacuum but is influenced by history, as well as by the present, so that one needs to understand the historical time period in order to understand that literature, the rewriting of historical events becomes an even more complex issue, as it must be seen through the lens of the time when it was rewritten. Furthermore, not only is literature influenced by the present and the past, but can in itself influence the present and the future, which is the aim of cultural propaganda.

The many stories recounting Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī - the student from Aleppo who killed General Kléber in 1800 - are an excellent example of how narratives can develop in time, pursuing different purposes and overlapping historiography. From the first account by the French military translated into Turkish and Arabic (beyond the French original version) and distributed amongst people in Cairo only a few days after the event, Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī has been described in several historical writings of that time; he is the protagonist of two short stories by Zakariyyā Tāmīr: "al-Ġarīma" (The Crime, 1963) and "Man qatal al-ġinirāl Klēbir" (He Who Killed General Kléber),<sup>1</sup> and of a historical drama by Alfred (Alfrīd) Faraġ (*Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī*, 1964); more recently, he has been included in Ṣun'allāh Ibrāhīm's novel *al-Imāma wa-l-qubba'a* (The Turban and the Hat, 2008) and is again the protagonist of a novel by a scarcely known Syrian writer called Dāwūd Abū Ṣuqra: *Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī, al-miḥraz wa-l'ayn* (Sulaymān from Aleppo, the Awl and the Eye, 2016), both novels using the literary *topos* of the rediscovered manuscript.

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<sup>1</sup> This short story was written recently (maybe in 2011) and published by the Syrian magazine *Al-Taḍāmūn* but I could not find its whole text. It is mentioned in al-Ḥayr 2011.

The political aspects involving the story of Sulaymān make him an especially intricate character. Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī's literary trajectories represent both new paths the story takes and the reflection of existent ideas in the changing collective memory. And so, those stories are first analyzed here in chronological order, within their context of production, and are then compared to one another. Specificities of the literary genres are taken into account. When intertextuality evidently links two or more texts, this fact is detected and commented upon.<sup>2</sup> The main point of this analysis is certainly not to understand how the facts *really* went, nor to give a judgment on them or on the way they were recounted. Instead, this study will try to reflect on the role of literature in shaping history and on the role of history in shaping literature and, particularly, on the possible reasons why a character underwent so many different depictions, going from the infamous criminal, to the fanatic, the victim, the rational hero, back to the fool and eventually back to the hero, but this time in a nationalistic tint.

## 2 From the First Accounts. Sulaymān the Infamous Assassin

General Kléber had been designated as commander of the French forces in Egypt by Napoleon upon his departure. When in June 1800 he was killed by Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī, a student from Aleppo, the singular fact generated a great curiosity. The very first account of General Kléber's murder was available just after his trial, as the French printed many copies of the *Recueil des pièces relatives à la procédure et au jugement de Soleyman El-Hhaleby, assassin du général en chef Kléber* (Collection of pieces concerning the proceedings and judgment of Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī, murderer of General in chief Kléber) at the National Press in Cairo and distributed then among the population. The leaflets were in three parts, one for each language: French, Arabic and Turkish,<sup>3</sup> the main languages spoken in Egypt, and each part is about fifty-pages long.

The account opens with the report of the visit of General Kléber's corps (*Recueil* 1800, 3-4), citizen Protain's injuries (4) and then follows the interrogations of Sulaymān, who was recognized by Protain. Dialogues are reported in the third person. Sulaymān is asked about his origin, his religion, how long he had been in Cairo, why he was there and if he had connections with the Ottomans. As Sulaymān denies having killed General Kléber and justifies the injuries to his head

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<sup>2</sup> I mean here what Genette calls a "massif" and "declared" hypertextuality (1982, 18-9).

<sup>3</sup> I have looked for eventual discrepancies between the French and the Arabic version, but there are none.

as being caused during his arrest and not inflicted by Protain, General Menou orders that he is beaten “according to the local custom”: “l’accusé persistant dans ses dénégations, le Général a ordonné qu’il reçût la bastonnade suivant l’usage du pays” (*Recueil* 1800, 7). After that, the version changes: Sulaymān declares that he had come to Cairo to kill General Kléber, that he was promised money by the Janissaries’ Aga and that he, alone, planned and executed the murder.

Sulaymān also mentions the names of the three sheikhs he informed about his plan. Despite the fact that he says that they did not agree with his plan and tried to dissuade him, they are suspected accomplices and they are interrogated (*Recueil* 1800, 9-14). At this point, General Menou instructs a commission for the judgment of Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī and these instructions are included as an exact copy (*copie conforme*) in the leaflet (15). Then follow witnesses’ statements (17-19), the interrogations of the accused and cross interrogations (21-33).

The final report with the judgement comes as a touching conclusion to the story, since commissary Sartelon’s reconstruction of the facts include appreciation for General Kléber’s bravery (especially, *Recueil* 1800, 41) and French justice and clemency (36), in contrast to the Ottoman’s cowardice and cruelty (34). Sulaymān is described as an assassin (34, 35, 39), one who was already “sullied by crime” (36) and then became “excited by this crime” (37). Religion encourages him (39) and his firmness is taken as a sign of his fanaticism (39).

To the Egyptian audience of the time, the romantic note, exaggeration, climax and reticence added by Sartelon was certainly not as impactful as its officiality, granted by the formality of the narration. Every interrogation presents the date and the time and is signed by the accused and the French generals. The leaflets’ length, quotation of laws and signatures must have acted as rhetorical devices impressing the Egyptian people. At least this is the impression “the most illustrious historian of the time”, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ġabartī (Moreh, Tignor 1993, 11), wants to give to his reader:

The French distributed leaflets on the case in which they discussed the event and its particulars. They printed many copies in three languages: French, Turkish, and Arabic. I was going to ignore the leaflets because of their length and poor style due to the Frenchmen’s defective knowledge of Arabic, but then I observed that many people were eager to peruse the leaflets because they contained an account of the event and of the trial; which was indicative of the legal investigation and court procedure of the French who hold reason supreme, and do not profess any religion.

For, indeed, a reckless stranger treacherously attacked their leader and chief; they seized him, interrogated him; yet did not proceed to

kill either him or those named by him, on the mere basis of his confession, despite the fact that when they caught him they found on him the deadly weapon spattered with the blood of his commander and leader. Nay, they instituted a court procedure, summoned the assassin, and repeatedly questioned him orally, and under duress; then summed those named by the assassin, interrogated them individually and collectively, and only then, did they institute the court procedure in accordance with what the law prescribed. (al-Ġabartī [1880] 1994, 181-2)

Born in Ottoman Egypt in 1753-4, 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ġabartī came from a long line of important scholars and prominent members of Cairo's religious elite. Son of an important *'ālim* (scholar of Islamic sciences), al-Ġabartī was the only one of many brothers to reach maturity. Like his father, he was cultured, received a good education, and became a famous scholar. He directly witnessed many of the facts he described in his texts and was famous for his three main works he wrote while he was still alive (Moreh, Tignor 1993, 7). al-Ġabartī was close to the French administration's activity, but had also strong links with the caste of the Mamelukes who were governing the country.

His first book, *Tārīḥ muddat al-Faransī bi-Miṣr* (Chronicle of the French Period in Egypt) depicts the first seven months of the French occupation of Egypt. It was written in 1798 "under the immediate impression of the events of the French occupation" (Moreh, Tignor 1993, 183), namely, "à chaud" (Raymond 1998, 4). *Maḏhar al-taqdīs bi-zawāl dawlat al-Faransī* (The Demonstration of Piety in the Demise of the French State), which was written in December 1801 after the liberation of the Grand Vizier Yūsuf, aims at exonerating the sheikh from the accusation of cooperation with the French (Raymond 1998, 4).

The story of Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī is included in the third volume of his last book, *Aġā'ib al-āṭār fī l-tarāġim wa-l-aḥbār* (The Marvelous Chronicles. Biographies and Events, called *History* hereafter), a comprehensive work written in two versions dealing with the history of Egypt from 1517 to 1806. In it, the historian included information he could verify from older witnesses, registers, tombstones and other chronicles (Moreh, Tignor 1993, 11). The book was a long-forbidden publication because of its criticism of Muḥammad 'Alī, the Viceroy of Egypt from 1805 until 1849. Only in 1880 was the entire work published and, for a long time, it was the only developed Egyptian point of view regarding the occupation (Delanoue 1982, 3).

al-Ġabartī wrote his *History* in a Cairo where the idea of history was changing. At the end of the eighteenth century, the Western reason brought by Napoleon clashed with a world dominated by a history seen through the glasses of the Koranic revelation (Chevallier et al. 1995, 16). For his closeness to the French social, religious and political background, al-Ġabartī can be considered an Occidental

(‘Abdallahī Aḥmad 2017), since the historian’s narration expresses the ideas he had assimilated during his formation, with judgments about men and events, and reveals what he thinks about the French expedition (Delanoue 1982, 3). Especially the account of Kléber’s murder shows al-Ġabartī’s admiration of the French administration (Delanoue 1982, 81). Leaving the place to the French narration, al-Ġabartī’s own account of Kléber’s murder occupies a couple of pages, in which Sulaymān is described as “a person from Aleppo and a reckless stranger” (al-Ġabartī [1880] 1994, 149-51).

A story more detached from the facts than al-Ġabartī’s comes from Niqūlā al-Turkī (known as Nakoula el-Turk, 1763-1828), a Syrian<sup>4</sup> Christian historian from that time whose *Aḥbār al-mašyaḥa al-fransiyya fī Miṣr* (News of the French Chieftom in Egypt, 1798-1804) was translated and published in French in 1839.<sup>5</sup> Like al-Ġabartī, al-Turkī expresses admiration for the leaflets the French printed (al-Turkī 1839, 190), but he enriches his account with details that are not mentioned in the French leaflet and differ from it at several points. Al-Turkī describes Sulaymān as “a poor guy in ragged clothes” (al-Turkī 1839, 188), notes that Sulaymān spoke with effrontery during the French trial (190), and his only judgement comes when he depicts Sulaymān as “a heinous killer” (*al-qātil al-ṣanī’*) (190).

A more romanced version of the story insisting on religious zeal comes from Sir Sydney Smith, the British naval commander in the eastern Mediterranean, with whom Kléber was negotiating when he died, according to which Sulaymān was “an obscure fanatic” inspired by Allah and further pushed to act by the Aga of Janissaries at Gaza (Parsons 2009, 65). Of course, many accounts of the facts are written from the Western stance. The point of view of the occupier is expressed already within al-Ġabartī’s account in the trial documents. Then, for instance, in an introduction to *Napoleon in Egypt* – the English translation by Shmuel Moreh and Robert L. Tignor of al-Ġabartī’s *Tārīḥ muddat al-Faransīs bi-Miṣr* – Tignor describes Sulaymān as “a religious enthusiast from Aleppo” (Moreh, Tignor 1993, 11).

### 3 Sulaymān in the Sixties Speaks to the Present

The first writer to make Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī a protagonist of an intentional fictive tale is Zakariyyā Tāmir (born in 1931) with “al-Ġarīma” (The Crime), a surreal story included in the collection *Rabī’*

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<sup>4</sup> He was born in Dayr al-Qamar, in modern-day Lebanon.

<sup>5</sup> M. Desgranges Ainé, secretary and interpreter of the King of France, translated and edited the book in a bilingual version (French and Arabic) to give students of Arabic a tool for their learning and to spread knowledge of French glory (al-Turkī 1839, vi).

*fī l-rammād* (Spring in the Ashes, 1963), the second of the eleven short story collections by the Syrian-born author and journalist. The first collection, *Ṣahīl al-ǧawād al-abyaḍ* (The Neighing of the White Horse, 1960), had brought him success and a job as a government official in the Writers and Publishing Department of the Syrian Ministry of Culture (1960-3). At that time, Zakariyyā Tāmīr had already developed his typical style, where the economy of the text and surreal sarcasm reflect on the reality of oppressive regimes.

“Al-Ġarīma” is told by an omniscient narrator and starts with Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī walking in the streets, when two tall men stop him, ask for his ID and force him to follow them. In the room they enter there is a metal desk and a man with black moustache, who Sulaymān names “the black man”. Acting like a policeman, the black man reads from some papers that during the night of 6 June, Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī dreamt of killing General Kléber (Tāmīr [1963] (1994), 32), and asks Sulaymān if that is true. Sulaymān denies the statement, saying that he does not know General Kléber. The black man calls the witnesses and three persons enter. He recognizes them straight away and, when they talk, he addresses them as his father, mother and sister. The three witnesses each have a different version of the murder. This fact makes it clear that they have been forced to accuse him. Anyway, their testimony is taken as reliable and they are dismissed.

Sulaymān reaffirms his innocence, but the black man replies that they do not need his confession to prove his guilt. He continues reading from the papers:

On the third of April, at three minutes past eleven, Sulaymān stares at the moon, and says to himself, “The moon is happy as it does not live in a city ruled by General Kléber” (Tāmīr [1963] (1994), 35)<sup>6</sup>

The black man reads other private actions and thoughts from Sulaymān, then he smiles and announces to him that he will disappear at six o'clock. Sulaymān panics as it is almost six and he hardly believes that this is happening for real. He thinks that perhaps it is a dream. At six o'clock, Sulaymān is undressed, then he is slowly cut, one piece after another while some music is played, which the black man enjoys. First the fingers of one hand, then his whole arm and the other arm are cut. The black man orders the two men to hurry up as he has an appointment; while he thinks of his beloved wife, the two men talk about what they are going to do after work, and then one of them sinks a knife in Sulaymān's neck, killing him. Sulaymān's head separates from his body, while his eyes remain open. Before going

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<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the Author.

out, the black man orders the two men to clean the room. The story ends with the two men complaining about that loudly.

In Tāmīr's tale, violence is perpetrated as a common action. Carelessness and cruelty prevail over humanity and compassion. Visions, memories from Sulaymān's childhood, comments and scenes from the city, together with the pain and anger Sulaymān feels, intersect with the events happening in the room, dilatating the time and the space of the action, as if the whole scene was a movie or a nightmare. The story is set in a contemporary city, any contemporary city in a country ruled by a police state. Traces of a faraway past are noted by Sulaymān in the three witnesses' faces, which are yellow and their clothes are covered with dust, "as if they slept hundreds of years in a tomb" (Tāmīr [1963] (1994), 33) and in the hand of the black man, strangely crackled by wrinkles (34).

The papers the black man reads recall the trial proceedings and prove that testers can lie. Moreover, the process is like a judgment on intentions and the black man acts as an authoritative judge with full powers. As in al-Ġabartī's narrative, documents are meant to contain the truth, and upon them, and against Sulaymān's declaration, the judgment is based. Set in present time, the historical event presents analogies with the despotic regime's military violence against the smallest sign of rebellion. In this story, Sulaymān is far from being a criminal. Instead, he is a boy imagining a better world. Kléber's homicide being barely evoked, Sulaymān appears as the victim of "the crime" mentioned in the title, a victim recalling the present situation and whose act of rebellion is eliminated on its possible start.

Only one year after "al-Ġarīma", in 1964, the Egyptian playwright Alfred Faraġ (1939-2005) wrote *Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī*, a play inspired by al-Ġabartī's partial account of Kléber's murder. The author's attention does not only turn to the event itself, but also to the narration. In a letter, Alfred Faraġ asked his brother Nabīl to suggest a reliable edition of all the four books of al-Ġabartī's *History*, that had been kept in good condition and would be available as soon as possible (Faraġ [1963?] 2009, 89). In Egypt, in 1962, Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī had already been the protagonist of the 27th volume of the *Silsilat al-qīṣaṣ al-tarbiyya* (Series of Educational Stories), edited by the Maktabat Naḥḍat Miṣr (The Library for Egypt's Renaissance). The 32-page-long version for children of the story was in line with the Nationalist programme and its control history (see Di-Capua 2009, ch. 9).

In a foreword to his play, Alfred Faraġ expresses his play's intentions. After recalling Kléber's murder, the author proceeds with a veritable essay about the suspicious truthfulness of the story that has been propelled by historiography. First, he draws the wider context of previous and succeeding events showing al-Azhar's power. Interestingly, he begins his argument by quoting a description that *al-mīṭāq* (the charter) provides of the institution. "The charter" is The



National Charter that President Nasser had presented a few years earlier, on 21 May 1962, at Cairo University (Nāṣir 1962). What follows is the extract Faraĝ quoted in his text:

It was not the French campaign in Egypt at the beginning of the seventeenth century that awoke Egypt in that time, as some historians say. Instead, the French campaign, when it arrived in Egypt, found al-Azhar in ferment with new trends crossing its walls to the life of the entire Egypt. (Faraĝ [1964] 1988, 9)

In the words of his President, Faraĝ must have found it crucial to read, re-read and re-write Sulaymān's story. Indeed, the continuity between past and present is a central assertion in historical plays of all times and styles (Lindenberger 1975, 6). More than a theatre of the historical fact, historical drama is a theatre of reflection upon history where the authentication of facts is not the main concern, but rather the main issue is a debate on what history does. Then, the playwright can even invent, working history as a literary mouldable material and not as a proven immobile fact (Fix 2010, 13-4).

Keeping as a key-concept his argument that al-Azhar was a central institution, Faraĝ argues that Sulaymān's declaration could be fake and he undertakes research to support his reflections. He recollects facts previous to Kléber's murder (Faraĝ [1964] 1988, 9-11) showing al-Azhar's prominent position on many questions, particularly concerning justice (10). To support his view, Faraĝ quotes sources other than al-Ġabartī and reports an extract from another famous history, *Tārīḥ al-ḥaraka al-qawmiyya fī Miṣr wa-taṭawwūr niẓām al-ḥukūm fī Miṣr* (The History of the National Movement and the Development of the Administration in Egypt) by 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Rāfi'ī (1889-1966), who wrote his books beginning in 1926. Faraĝ quotes a text - without mentioning its sources - maintaining that, after Kléber's murder, harsher measures were taken against al-Azhar (Faraĝ [1964] 1988, 11).

A study on al-Rāfi'ī's works reveals that a "national epic" constitutes a uniform topic of his sixteen-volume history (Di-Capua 2004). In January 1952, al-Rāfi'ī's *Tārīḥ al-ḥaraka al-qawmiyya* was the second history book banned by the Egyptian monarchy, while the first was al-Ġabartī's *History*. Several months later, in the wake of the July Revolution, al-Rāfi'ī's status had changed dramatically. His books were reprinted and widely distributed, and the president quoted him in his speeches. By the early 1960s, al-Rāfi'ī had become Egypt's most recognized and celebrated historian of the twentieth century and was selected as Egypt's candidate for the Nobel Prize (Di-Capua 2004, 429). The historian al-Rāfi'ī presented the French domination as a detailed account of an uncompromising popular struggle. "The various skirmishes, incidents, and clashes were treated as the outcome of this inherent nationalist consciousness" (Di-Capua 2004,

437). Everything is depicted as the outcome of nationalist revolutionary consciousness, popular forces, and heroic leaders of the nationalist factor and its agents are the central thread that runs through his Egypt's modern history (Di-Capua 2004, 437). Faraḡ's rewriting, then, must be considered impregnated with such ideology that permeated the reading of history during his time. As a matter of fact, Nasser's words might be inspired by the *History* of al-Rāfi'ī.

Faraḡ then maintains that history might have recorded a fake testimony and provides evidence for his theories presenting a polemic view on the torture Sulaymān went through and claiming that his confession, which occurred during the second interrogation, might be a lie resulting from a moment of reflection. He might have wanted to avoid the involvement of dozens of sheikhs from al-Azhar who must have been acquainted with his intentions. Then, it could be convenient for the French to believe Sulaymān for several reasons. First, if Sulaymān was paid by the Aga, as he admitted, the Ottomans would be responsible for the murder. On the one hand, this could provide a strategic position for the French to continue their long cold war with the Ottomans and would also prevent another rebellion from al-Azhar if the latter was responsible instead.

Faraḡ also complains about the scarcity of information it provides on Sulaymān. The point of departure of his play will be the one history has not provided answers to:

Who was that mysterious daring boy?

Which blood flowed into his veins, which feverish and rational ideas possessed him all the way from Giza to al-Azbakiyya on that memorable day... step by step behind the General of the French?

Which motive filled his heart when his hand was grasping the handle of the dangerous knife? (Faraḡ [1964] 1988, 8)

Nevertheless, the playwright goes further as he also warns the reader that he wants to explore the context of the fact, as history has reported it (Faraḡ [1964] 1988, 9). Indeed, Faraḡ considered al-Ġabartī both as a historian and as a writer, "a sarcastic social writer, who dips humour in bitterness" (Faraḡ 1989, 28). Equally, as we have seen with al-Rāfi'ī's *History*, the reading of past facts and their consequent perception differs on the basis of the context of reception.<sup>7</sup>

A detail that shocked Faraḡ was that Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī has been preserved in history by means of his decapitated head being dis-

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<sup>7</sup> To have a wider perspective on the matter, Faraḡ must have consulted other sources as well, since in the play Sulaymān presents a paper to Kléber to attract his attention (Faraḡ [1964] 1988, 153) and this detail does not exist in al-Ġabartī, while it appears in al-Turkī's version of facts (1839, 189).

played in a museum in Paris, identified as belonging to the assassin of General Kléber. Faraĝ recalls that in the foreword:

And then his head. The very head of Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī! Embalmed and dried, can be seen today by visitors from inside a showcase in the Museum of the Criminals in Paris. A tag on it says: "A murderer's head. The name: Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī"! (Faraĝ [1964] 1988, 8)<sup>8</sup>

Sulaymān's depiction in the play overturns this view, so that, throughout the play, Sulaymān emerges as a tragic hero, motivated by a rational sense of justice. He follows his full honesty in a world ruled by tyranny and corruption and - within his Hamletic doubt - he alone fights the tyrant. To make this aspect more meaningful, Faraĝ compares Sulaymān to Saladin, another real character deeply shaped by literature and cinema. The first time he appears in the play, alone in his room, Sulaymān impersonates him:

Sulaymān If your name was Richard and you had a lion-heart, as you are called, be aware that I would be Saladin. Don't think, oh king of the English people, that the earth of the Messiah, peace be upon him, blessed you or provided you with immunity. You're greedy on the harvest that we sow from green olives. Stay in your place! Woe unto you! If you were bringing us something, as you claim, then throw your weapons away and advance in peace. But if you were approaching to invade, as it seems from your mounts, advance alone towards Saladin and come to me man to man, sword to sword and stop bloodshed of your men and servants... (Faraĝ [1964] 1988, 31-2)

Behind the rational justification of the political assassination of a tyrant, there is a specific allusion to Faraĝ's times. Indeed, some scenes from the play are reminiscent of Egypt during the sixties and particularly, the impact of the government's secret service on life under despotic rule. When Sulaymān says that the only person "the ruler of the colony" has to be scared of is the writer or the artist, the reference is not Kléber for sure, but is more likely to be Nasser instead, as some critics have noticed (Badawi 1987, 175). The play even disrupts the logics of time by inserting anachronisms in it, such as references to Bertolt Brecht's theatre, Thomas Paine and Luigi Pirandello, which are aimed to create a *V-Effekt* and stimulate a reflection on history writing (Potenza 2018, 92, 110-11).

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<sup>8</sup> According to Faraĝ and other journalists, Sulaymān's head was and is still an exhibit at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris.

Interestingly, all critics of the play *Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī* refer to the hypotext before focusing on its text. For instance, Luwīs ‘Awaḍ, who analyzes the play to show that it is a “beautiful failure”, summarizes a part of al-Ġabartī’s account (Awaḍ 1967, 366). As one of the first pieces of information offered, Laila Debs defines Faraġ’s text as “a tamed version of the historical material found in al-Ġabartī’s chronicle” (Debs 1993, 216). Amīr Iskandar begins his article on the play by claiming that history says a few words on a matter and then it passes over in silence (Iskandar [1965] 2002). Maḥmūd Amīn al-‘Ālim insists on the role as historian Faraġ takes in this play, contesting the sources (al-‘Ālim 2002, 69-70). Commenting on the play, Rasheed El-Enany remarks that in contemporary Arab history books Sulaymān is portrayed as a hero (El-Enany 2000, 184).<sup>9</sup> These reactions to the play show that the work leads inevitably to a reflection on its sources and on the narration of history.

Moreover, the critics who studied Faraġ’s play, who are mostly from the Arab world, but also Western scholars, all speak of the historical Sulaymān in either neutral or positive appreciation. Critics contemporary with Faraġ were more inclined to define Sulaymān as a hero and take Faraġ’s version as more truthful than history itself.<sup>10</sup> And so, al-‘Ālim exalts the logic of Sulaymān (al-‘Ālim 2002, 69) and Iskandar appreciates the tragic character’s desire for freedom, which opposes the silence of history on him ([1965] 2002). These comments, like the play itself, are in line with Nasserist Egypt, where the revolutionary movement resulted in a control of history, “above all, Nasserism was a quest for a kind of dignity that formed the inner meaning of the word *independence*” (Di-Capua 2009, 282; italics in the original). The perception of Sulaymān’s story and of Faraġ’s play, is clearly modulated by the circumstances in which those comments were written, so that later critics tend to be more neutral.

And so, El-Enany tries to be as objective as possible, referring to Sulaymān only by name (2000, 182), Laila Debs advances some positive judgment by speaking of the French army’s invasion: “a young Azharite Syrian scholar who assassinates the invading French army commander-in-chief in Egypt” (1993, 215) as does Dina Amin, who describes him as the historical figure Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī, who assassinated the French military commander Kléber in order to free

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<sup>9</sup> Today school history books in Egypt speak about a Syrian student from al-Azhar who killed Kléber without providing any further detail or judgment (Nawār et al. s.d., 8; Maḥsūb et al. s.d. 51).

<sup>10</sup> An exception is Luwīs ‘Awaḍ, who believes that history has already been even too clear with regard to the murder. He accuses Faraġ of having invented the religious motive, which according to him is superfluous to the tragic hero (‘Awaḍ 1967). However, as we have seen, the religious delirium mentioned in the French trial quoted by Ġabartī and Faraġ moderates it.

Egypt of the French occupation at the turn of the nineteenth century (2008, 88); Atef Ahmed El-Sayyid provides a neutral description: “the Azharite Syrian scholar who murdered General Kléber” (1995, 168); and Nehad Selaiha describes the facts without judgment (2004). Singularly, the meagre article on the French *Wikipedia* page about Sulaymān even quotes Faraġ’s play as a historical reference (*Wikipedia.fr* s.d.).

A journalist has recently claimed that if Faraġ had not written his play, Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī today would just be “the man who killed General Kléber”, meaning that the perception of his act changed thanks to Faraġ’s play (‘Azzām 2018). From 1965 until today, that story has been rewritten many times and many other pictures of Sulaymān have been depicted.

#### 4 Two Recently Rediscovered Manuscripts and Two New Sulaymāns

From the sixties on, many streets have been named after Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī both in Egypt and in Syria: one is in Cairo, in the al-Azbakiyya district, where Sulaymān killed Kléber, one in Rhoda Island, one in New Cairo, but there is also a small alley in Alexandria; in Damascus, where also a school is named after Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī, and in Aleppo a whole district carries his name; many streets exist everywhere in Syria and also in Riyad and in Jeddah there is a Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī Street.<sup>11</sup>

Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī is shown as a brave man in an Egyptian television series entitled *Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī* dating from 1976 written by Maḥfūz ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, and in an Egyptian film.<sup>12</sup> *Adieu Bonaparte* (in Arabic *Widā’an Būnābart*), the famous Egyptian-French historical drama film written and directed in 1985 by Yūsuf Šāhīn (Youssef Chahine), was an entry in the Cannes Film Festival and offered to the world the Egyptian people’s perspective of Napoleon’s campaign in Egypt.

In 2005, in Syria, a petition from intellectuals, journalists, politicians and students asked for Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī’s skull to be returned to his homeland (al-Ḥayr 2011). In 2007, the Syrian journalist Biyānkā Māḍiyya wrote *Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī, Awwal muntaqim li-l-‘arab min al-‘udwān al-ġarbī al-ḥadīṯ* (Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī. The first Avenger of the Arabs against the Modern Occidental Tyranny) in support of

<sup>11</sup> This information is based on the present: I do not know precisely when those places were named after Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī.

<sup>12</sup> This was directed by Muḥammad al-Sa’id Yūsuf and it was shown recently (2013) in a national cinema chain.

this campaign. In an article dating from the same year, she announced the Egyptian intellectuals' solidarity (*al-taḍāmun*) with the Syrian national campaign and defined Sulaymān as a martyr hero (*al-šahīd al-baṭal*) of the [Muslim] community (Māḍiyya 2007). Her book aims at giving a complete and truthful portrait of the hero, collecting all the available sources about him (Yūnis 2011). In July 2011 another petition was raised in Cairo's Tahrir Square to ask for Sulaymān's skull from the Musée de l'Homme (al-Ḥayr 2011). It seems that 50,000 signatures were collected on that occasion alone (Ismā'īl 2011).

And so, in the first ten years of the twenty-first century, especially in Syria, but also in Egypt, TV programmes and articles about Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī have multiplied, most of them spreading the narrative of the martyr hero. Many programmes have had tens of thousands of views on YouTube (*DreamsTV channel* 2011; *al-Tārīḥ al-Islāmī* (Abū al-Zubayr) 2015; Mekameleen TV 2016; *Qanāt al-šarq* 2018; *Mixture Canal* 2018), but there are many more private videos with fewer views in recent years. Some articles firmly support the idea of Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī being a hero (Māḍiyya 2007; Yūnis 2007, 2011; Ismā'īl 2011; Ġamīl 2017), but a few others are neutral (Ġamāl al-Dīn 2018). Perhaps as a result of renewed interest in Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī's story, *al-Ġarīma* was republished online in 2016 (*al-Anṭūlūgīā* 2016).

In 2005, the Egyptian novelist Muḥammad Ġibrīl (b. 1938) wrote *al-Ġūdariyya. 'An tārīḥ al-Ġabartī bi-tašarruf* (*al-Ġūdariyya. A free adaptation of Ġabartī's History*) (Ġibrīl 2005), in which the historian's narration of the French campaign is deliberately questioned and reversed and where the protagonists of the novel are the sheikh al-Bakrī and his daughter Zaynab. From the same generation as Alfred Faraġ, with *al-Ġūdariyya*, Ġibrīl examines the sources, then "moves to the past to write about the present" (Šam'ūn 2017). In this novel, little space is given to Sulaymān, who is described as "a student from Aleppo" (*ṭālib 'ilm min Ḥalab*) (Ġibrīl 2005, 201), and whose trial is commented on considering the partiality that ruled it. If *al-Ġūdariyya* is in line with the sixties' way of reviving the past, other novels are more involved with today's debate around Sulaymān.

As Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī has now been explicitly appropriated by the rhetoric of the Syrian regime, appreciation or contrast in regard to this character can be linked to corresponding feelings felt for this controversial government. Two novels, instead, are more involved with the recent facts regarding Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī. It might be no coincidence then if two recent novels on the Napoleonic campaign both use the *topos* of the rediscovered unpublished manuscript, a narratological device that is commonly used to legitimate one's work and demonstrate its authenticity. *Al-ʿImāma wa-l-qubba'a* (The Turban and the Hat, 2008) is a fictional memoir of an unnamed apprentice of al-Ġabartī's by the acclaimed Egyptian writer Šun'allāh Ibrāhīm and *Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī, al-miḥraz wa-l'ayn* (Sulaymān from

Aleppo. The Awl and the Eye, 2016), by a scarcely known Syrian writer called Dāwūd Abū Šuqra, is based upon a fictional manuscript on Sulaymān's story that a Syrian family had been handing down for generations. Apart from sharing the rediscovered manuscript device, the two novels are different in the style, in their message and in their author's experience.

Şun'allāh Ibrāhīm's *al-'Imāma wa-l-qubba'a* seems detached from the recent issues involving Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī. From the same generation as Alfred Faraĝ and like the playwright, Şun'allāh Ibrāhīm was a journalist when he was arrested, in 1959, during political purges ordered by President Ğamāl 'Abd al-Nāşir (Gamal Abdel Nasser).<sup>13</sup> Like Faraĝ, in prison, Ibrāhīm too smuggled his notes on cigarette paper (Starkey 2016, 22). Ibrāhīm's first novel, *Tilka al-rā'iḥa* (The Smell of It and Other Stories, 1966), was politically subversive and challenged Arabic literary orthodoxy. As a matter of fact, the book was banned from being published in Egypt in its uncensored version only twenty years later. The writer left Egypt from 1968 until 1974.

All of Ibrāhīm's novels are directly affected by their literary, social, historical and political context, both in their production and in their reception, displaying their commitment in contemporary society. President Anwar al-Sādāt's censorship criticized in *al-Laġna* (The Committee, 1981) led to this book being published in Lebanon. *Ḍāt* (Zaat, 1992), coming after seven years silence from *Bayrūt, Bayrūt* (Beirut, Beirut, 1984) – centred on the Lebanese civil war – conceptualizes an ahistorical form of subjectivity that suits its context of production, the 1980s, when Arab and Egyptian historians, and cultural commentators widely debated the so-called crisis of historical consciousness novel (Di-Capua 2012).

*Al-'Imāma wa-l-qubba'a* presents al-Ğabartī's apprentice proletarian view of the French occupation of Egypt which opposes his master's bourgeois version. Through his diary, the reader is introduced to the events, but also to his deepest thoughts, his friends and his relationships involving even the French occupiers, as he has an affair with no less than Pauline Fourès, who served as Napoleon's mistress. The diary starts in July 1798 and ends in August 1801, with al-Ğabartī dictating to his apprentice a revised account of the French occupation that will clear him "of the charge of collaboration with the French" (Ibrāhīm 2008, 328). The structure of the novel is reminiscent of the annals structure of al-Ğabartī's *History* with the student deciding to imitate the master, recording his diaries as well. Having the same structure and recounting the same events, the different perspective on the facts appears clearly, while the closing note on the "new book, which will be the same as the old one" (Ibrāhīm 2008, 328) under-

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**13** On censorship and freedom of speech in Egypt during the sixties, see Stagh 1993.

lines how the historian is ready to change his version of the facts according to the benefit he draws from it.

*Al-ʿImāma wa-l-qubbaʿa* is linked to another of Ibrāhīm’s novels dating from the same year, *al-Qānūn al-Farānsī* (French Law, 2008), which focuses on the same topic, namely the French occupation of Egypt. This time the perspective is from a contemporary Egyptian professor who travels from Cairo to France to participate in a conference about the French occupation of Egypt. The professor presents a recently discovered manuscript by one of al-Jabarti’s pupils. The context is 2005 France, shocked by a period of intense civil unrest following the recent promulgation of a law dealing with aspects of the French colonial legacy. Commenting on the topic of *al-ʿImāma wa-l-qubbaʿa*, *al-Qānūn al-Farānsī* considers how another manuscript could give new insights on history and historiography and complicates the fictional intertextual weave that lies behind *al-ʿImāma wa-l-qubbaʿa*. Links to current affairs are to be found in the American invasion of Iraq and the *good* principles that accompany it, as well as the local forces’ complicity, making it a “a real fake historical novel” (*Lelitteraire.com* 2012).

In Ibrāhīm’s novel, the apprentice meets Sulaymān a few days before the murder and immediately sympathises with him and his idea of *ḡihād* (Ibrāhīm 2008, 275). The day after, the apprentice looks for Sulaymān to know about him, his studies in al-Azhar, his trip to Jerusalem and his will to be a martyr fighting the French, because he heard that “every hundred years, God sends somebody to renovate the religion” (Ibrāhīm 2008, 276). The day after, a Friday, the apprentice goes to al-Azhar for prayers and Sulaymān tells him that the angels are preparing to meet him in Paradise.

Rumours about Kléber’s murder reach the apprentice. The day after Kléber’s death, once he knows the news about the interrogations, the apprentice notes his fear that Sulaymān could mention his name. He is so scared that he cannot sleep. Reading the copies of the trial his master has brought home, the apprentice does not doubt their truthfulness nor does he comment on the punishment’s cruelty. He also reports his master’s appreciation of the trial organized by the French with neither positive nor negative comment.

On the day of Kléber’s funeral and Sulaymān’s impalement, he witnesses both spectacular shows of power that he describes in detail (Ibrāhīm 2008, 280-1). The day after he takes only one note:

Thursday, 19 June

I didn’t sleep yesterday. The nightmares assaulted me and I saw myself more than once next to Sulaymān bound on the pole. (Ibrāhīm 2008, 281)

Ibrāhīm decides not to give his character a critical view on Sulaymān’s sentencing. However, he makes this episode central to the narration



as the protagonist personally meets Sulaymān and is affected with contrasting feelings. An initial fascination is followed by an interest in his project and then detachment and fear – when the French discover Sulaymān (manifested in a sleepless night) – that transforms into terror (manifested through the nightmares) showing the effects of Sulaymān’s act used by the French as a deterrent to possible revolts. In this sense, Ibrāhīm’s point of view is similar to Faraġ’s play. With Faraġ, Ibrāhīm, shares also a despotic view upon General Kléber, who says that Egypt must be squeezed like a lemon to establish a durable colony (Ibrāhīm 2008, 269). However, Sulaymān’s depiction is different.

Justified by a sense of duty fighting the usurper that comes from a religious background and is propelled by indirect incitements from al-Azhar and a fanatic attitude, Sulaymān’s murder is not for sure the deed of a hero, nor the action of a criminal. Moreover, in Ibrāhīm’s novel, it is clear that Sulaymān did nothing useful for his people. On the contrary, his actions allowed the French to be more repressive. If we consider the ongoing debate about Sulaymān, it seems that Ibrāhīm’s description wants to oppose it. Indirectly, he opposes the Syrian regime’s narrative exalting (and creating the image of) the hero.

On the contrary, published by the Syrian Ministry of Culture in 2016, *Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī, al-miḥraz wa al-‘ayn* is directly linked to recent developments in the perception of Sulaymān and sustains them.

The novel departs from the petition in Tahrir Square, of which a man reads from a piece of a newspaper put under his dish (presumably in a popular restaurant). While the man reads the newspaper, he sees himself as a child looking at a picture of Kléber’s murder in his brother’s history book. The child is still too young to read well, but is curious about the strange picture, where a poor guy is stabbing a man dressed like a military leader (Abū Šuqra 2016, 9). The day after, he asks his father about the fact and, to let him know the real story about Sulaymān “the hero”, his father takes another book from a wooden box. Forty years have passed, but the memory is clear and the man still keeps the book as a precious thing. The author of the book is anonymous, but there are traces suggesting he was in contact with Sa’īd ‘Abd al-Qādir, a student from al-Azhar. The genealogy of the book and how it arrived from Egypt to the family and then to father’s hands is recounted in detail, as the man recalls his father telling him when he was a child.

Then there follows the account from the manuscript, a detailed third-person account of salient facts from the last years of the French campaign in Egypt. The first time, Sulaymān appears as the guy with the green eyes, a feature that distinguishes him from the Egyptians, in a conversation with other people from al-Azhar commenting on the cruelty of the French mandate. His thinking is extremely pure and

his speech is sentimental, perhaps excessively so, as he even declares that in his heart there is an immense love for all the people he has met in Egypt (Abū Šuqra 2016, 21).

As in *al-ʿImāma wa-l-qubbaʿa*, in this novel too the protagonist is involved in a love story and Sulaymān's desire to come back to Cairo is linked to the unconditioned will of marrying a friend's sister. However, the father of the girl will promise her to a boy who will prove to be an opportunist because when the French are approaching, he steals all of her possessions and leaves her in Cairo, while he departs to al-Minya (Abū Šuqra 2016, 131). Eventually, she tragically dies. Studying as a foreigner in al-Azhar, Sulaymān finds himself hosted and in contact with the most important personalities, the closest being sheikh al-Ġawsqī. His knowledge of Cairo and of the most eminent persons, will allow him to be proposed by Aga Yassin the assassination of General Kléber in return for his father's release (201), who had been incarcerated because he could not afford to pay his taxes to the Ottomans (177). During the negotiation, he even meets Ibrahim Pasha (176).

Sulaymān lives through the two Cairo revolts (Abū Šuqra 2016, 63, 222) and knows the violence of the French, which is carefully depicted by the writer (73, 180, 223). Napoleon has lost his human qualities (182), while Kléber is obsessed by victory (227). He is no less aware of the Ottomans' cruelty. However, the writer of the manuscript underlines that the French were the first to conquer Cairo, the Ottomans not counting because they did it in the name of God (165). Sulaymān considers Egypt as his country (*waṭan*, 76 and *balād*, 86) and a motive for his murderous act is the *ġihād* to free it (86). Kléber's murder is shown as a rational killing,<sup>14</sup> while the trial is considered a setup (251) where three innocents are found guilty along with Sulaymān. The manuscript ends with the image of Kléber's corpse being given a burial while Sulaymān's corpse is left for days on the pole to be eaten by birds (255).

The last chapter returns to the present, so to the restaurant and to the newspaper piece about the petition, which the man continues reading and then comments on, wishing that Sulaymān could come back to his country (*waṭan*) for which he sacrificed himself and be honoured there (Abū Šuqra 2016, 260).

Using the expedient of an existing book serving as an archive, like the newspaper quoted at the beginning, which is an extract from a real document, this story of Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī displays itself as true. However, one is brought to consider that such a manuscript with detailed descriptions of intimate dialogues, reflections and facts involv-

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<sup>14</sup> The French trial documents mention that Sulaymān killed Kléber with a dagger, while in this novel Sulaymān uses an awl (*miḥraz*), from which the novel's title comes.

ing both Sulaymān, Bonaparte, Kléber and some sheikhs, namely all the characters involved in the story, narrated by an external omniscient narrator is unrealistic, beyond being tedious for the unneeded quantity of details. In these regards, this novel deeply differs from *al-ʿImāma wa-l-qubbaʿa*, where the intertextual weave generates a sort of game sustaining the plausible existence of the manuscript.

Compared to chronicles of the time, and particularly to al-Ġabartī, many anachronisms emerge. Considerations on the facts that Ottomans were Muslim and so they did not count as invaders certainly compromise the truthful perception of Islam in the past. The use of *waṭan* intended as ‘country’ did not exist in al-Ġabartī, where it is used as ‘homeland’.<sup>15</sup> The exaltation of sheikh Sulaymān al-Ġawsqī seems more animated by a will to restore the image of this character and make a hero out of him – as Syrian propaganda is doing with programmes and articles – more than respecting the historical sources. And of course, Sulaymān too emerges as a hero. He is brave, respectful and determined, motivated both by the *ġihād* and his father’s release. The man’s reflections concluding the book could not more clearly manifest the adherence to the cause of the return of the body of the national hero.

## 5 Conclusions

The controversial image of Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī – the criminal, the victim, the hero – leads us to reflect on the role of history in shaping literature and, *vice versa*, on the role of literature in shaping history. From the first account, which was created within a few days after the fact, the events regarding Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī were narrativized, namely, they were ordered and composed in a way that, more than describing a past action, their emplotment aims at a purpose in the present (White 1980), the story of Kléber (and Sulaymān) becoming a direct tool for the French militaries to legitimize their violence, including Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī’s punishment, and to increase their authority in Egypt. Likewise, al-Ġabartī has used Sulaymān’s story to exalt the French authorities.

In the sixties, two singular stories appear. On the one hand, in “al-Ġarīma”, Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī becomes a symbol of the victim, while in Faraġ’s play, he symbolizes the hero. On the surface, the two descriptions seem opposed to each other. However, in both cases the narration about Sulaymān comes as a response to the present and

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<sup>15</sup> In his *History*, al-Ġabartī uses the noun “*waṭan*” twenty times, every time it opposes one’s “*waṭan*” to another Arabic country, where the person is at that moment (al-Ġabartī [1880] 1966).

serves to comment and criticize especially the present, but it can also apply to any autocratic regime. Faraġ's play, while criticizing Nasser's despotism, was entirely steeped in the regime's propaganda and for the first time created the idea of Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī, the Pan-Arabic hero. Zakariyyā Tāmīr sets his story in the present and uses an absurdist style. Faraġ's play, instead, is set in the past, but contains references to the present, conveying also a general contestation about the making of history and substituting Sulaymān's motives with new plausible ones. That message was so well delivered that some consider the play as a historical source and for others it is considered to be the cause of today's revival of Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī.

The two twentieth-century novels use the same strategy of the rediscovered manuscript, but they pursue different purposes. On the one hand, Ṣun'allāh Ibrāhīm inserts the story of Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī within a wider narration on Napoleon's campaign in Egypt, giving him enough space to deconstruct the narrative Syrian and Egyptian media have recently developed and taking instead the old colonialist story written by the French and al-Ġabartī, wherein Sulaymān is a fool. That move goes clearly against the present cultural politics of the Syrian regime. Moreover, like Faraġ, Ibrāhīm defies al-Ġabartī's narration, opposing another point of view, his apprentice's, and contests the idea of an absolute history, especially at the end, when he exposes the narrativization of past events. On the other hand, Dāwūd Abū Ṣuqra writes a novel entirely dedicated to Sulaymān. Published by the Syrian Ministry of Culture, *Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī, al-miḥraz wa al-'ayn* not only affirms the idea of Sulaymān as the national hero, but it also advocates for another historical character (Sulaymān al-Ġawsqī) as a new hero. In both novels, the response to the present propaganda could not be more direct.

If we are supposed to learn the lessons from the past - *historia magistra vitae* - from the story of Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī we can learn that consciously deleting and reconstructing the past according to today's need is a dangerous practice, simply because this has nothing to do with the past. In 2019, the rhetoric about Sulaymān the hero seems to be working, since a Syrian journalist defines Jules (Ġūl) Ġammāl - a Syrian military officer who was killed during the Suez crisis - a Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī of the twentieth century (Qadrī 2019). Who Sulaymān *really* was might be of little interest now. Studying who Sulaymān *is* today could help us in better understanding present-day society through the myths it needs.

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