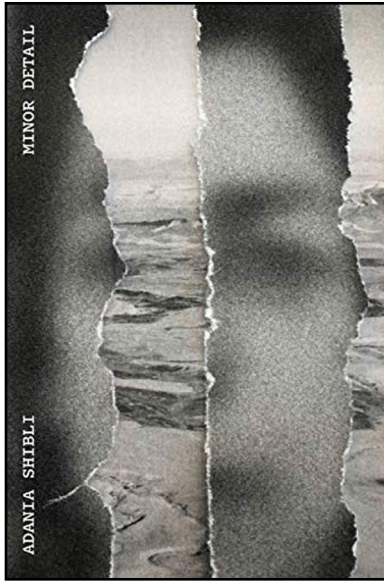


Minor Detail by Adania Shibli, trans. Elisabeth Jaquette. New York: New Directions, 2020. 144 pages. \$15.95 paper, \$9.99 e-book.

Reviewed by Isabella Hammad



In his essay on Franz Kafka, Walter Benjamin notes the double meaning of the word “unfolding”: “A bud unfolds into a blossom, but the boat which one teaches children to make by folding paper unfolds into a flat sheet of paper.”¹ Ordinary parables unfold in the second sense, where “it is the reader’s pleasure to smooth it out so that he has the meaning on the palm of his hand,” but Kafka’s parables unfold like buds into blossoms: multiplying in complications, more like poetry than allegory.² Adania Shibli’s recent novel *Minor Detail* shares something of Kafka’s parabolic strangeness—the brevity, the nameless characters, the initial suggestion of allegory, and the subsequent refusal to behave like one; the air of nihilism. While the novel’s two brief parts, set fifty-five years apart, seem as though they will speak to each other across the gulf of time in a way that provides resolution, by the final page the reader has in their hands only a repetition of violence for which it is clear no narrative will provide consolation.

Minor Detail opens with the bleak account of an Israeli military outpost in the Negev in 1949 as the nascent Israeli state annexes more territory in the south. An unnamed lieutenant is our protagonist, responsible for killing two Bedouins and capturing a third, a girl of ambiguous age, whom he and his subordinates rape and subsequently kill. The entire passage is rendered in meticulous, traumatic detail. Shibli pays as much attention to the light illuminating indentations in the sand and the rotation of the sun and stars as to the movement of the soldiers around the camp, as to the soap suds falling from the girl’s body or the lieutenant’s face as he shaves. Darkness has a solid presence, moving in and out of spaces. Smells and sounds penetrate or invade ears and noses. Perception is at once intensely localized and depersonalized, giving us the sense that we are observing the action askance. Sensory detail endows the passage with intense reality, and, although very short, this section has the feeling of an unbearable, interminable chronicle, paratactic, stripped of emotional content. The closest we come to psychology is the commander’s reaction to an infected insect bite on his leg that produces a revolting smell, for which he blames the girl.

The narrator in the second half of the novel is a woman living in the West Bank in 2004. While she is as meticulous as the previous, third-person narrator in recording sensory detail, this speaker additionally gives us a clear view of her internal life. She registers the changes in her emotional state, from fear to anxiety to agitation, to loneliness, to horror. She has read a newspaper article about the 1949 gang rape and murder at the Nirim outpost, and is struck by the event’s date, which is the same as her own birthday, twenty-five years later. Provoked more by this minor coincidence than by the crime itself, which, she states, is not particularly unusual when compared with what happens daily in “a place dominated by the roar of occupation and ceaseless killing” (60), she sets out in

search of further evidence beyond the testimonies of the soldiers in the newspaper article. She wants to access the truth of the matter from the perspective of the girl. What she intends to do with such insight is unclear. Perhaps she will write something. She heads to those hallowed places of authority and social order, where states maintain their narratives of legitimacy through the selection, ordering, and preservation of documents and artifacts: the museum and the archive.

This journey is no slight undertaking. As a West Bank ID holder, accessing Israeli military archives is fraught with danger and logistical difficulties that reveal the historical product of the book's first half: the violent dispossession of the native Palestinian population and the systematic control and erasure of their land and lives. Guiding us through the landscape of occupied Palestine, the narrator exposes the continuities of history and the realities of her life as a Palestinian in the militarized Israeli state. Images begin to bleed across the novel's two parts: a gasoline smell, a dog barking, an obsession with cleanliness, a spider on the wall, which becomes a spider of fear, crawling across her skin. The membrane between past and present is permeable. A terrible consonance of images—a hut, a mobile phone on a holster, a mirage, a group of camels—suggest a paranoid series of connections, haunting us with our recent memory of readerly-witness. We are filled with apprehension.

In the car, she compares two maps, one of Palestine before the Nakba, and an Israeli map of present-day roads, on which Palestinian villages marked in the first map have been “swallowed by a yellow sea” (81). And yet, even in the state that seeks to erase evidence of the Palestinian, minor details persist. Certain kinds of trees; laundry on a line; signs of life “furtively hinting” at the subaltern presence (74). These details elude the maker of the map and the archivist; to see them is to see beyond the narratives of official documents. Nevertheless, it is first to the Israeli Defense Forces History Museum that our narrator drives, with a borrowed blue ID card that allows her to leave the West Bank without a permit and a car rented in someone else's name, crossing barriers both military and psychological in search of—what, exactly?

What at first resembles a project of counter-memory in fact goes nowhere. Any hope that our narrator will conduct a contrapuntal reading of the state archive and so recover the lost voice of the victim peters out. In the museum she observes the soldiers' uniforms, the weapons, the bullets; the evidence and records of the state's creation, the victors' narrative of the Nakba, and concludes: “Official museums like this really have no valuable information to offer me, not even small details that could help me retell the girl's story” (79). Next, she visits the settlement of Nirim, named after the original outpost, but again discovers nothing that she might not have easily found out on her computer at home in Ramallah. When she finally encounters an elderly Palestinian woman who might actually remember the event, a potential bearer of oral history and therefore precisely the source of a counter-narrative she has been seeking, she misses the opportunity. She gives the elderly woman a lift in the car, but they sit in silence. Afterward, she is possessed by regret: “How clumsy! It was she, not the military museums or the settlements and their archives, who might hold a detail that could help me uncover the incident as experienced by the girl. And finally arrive at the whole truth” (103). She tries to retrace her steps but cannot find any sign of the woman.

This half of the book has the feel of a detective story, hunting for clues to unsilence the past. Examined in its historical context, however, it becomes clear that Shibli's narration actually suppresses much more than it reveals. The original *Haaretz* article from 2003 (in Hebrew, later translated to English), in which the Israeli military record of the events of 1949 were first made public, is extensive and shocking in its level of detail, including a great deal of direct speech leading up to the rape and murder and during

the investigation and trial afterward (by contrast, there are only two extended passages of direct speech in Shibli's novel, both of them monologues about Zionism). According to the article, in advance of the court case, the company commander himself dug up the girl's body from its shallow grave and collected some objects, including the khaki army shorts she was forced to wear, a necklace, a headscarf, and some hair. Four days later, they brought a doctor to examine her corpse, but it had already begun to disintegrate. Many of the culprits were still alive at the time of publication, among them Corporal Gideon, who testified at the trial but for the purposes of the article "declined to be interviewed."³

Shibli's previous two novels, *Touch* (2010) and *We Are All Equally Far from Love* (2012) showcase some of the same linguistic precision and concern for localized sensory perception that we see in *Minor Detail*. *Touch* is separated into sections titled "Colors," "Silence," "Movement," "Language," and "The Wall," and follows the experience of a child in occupied Palestine who hears but does not understand the meaning of the phrase "Sabra and Shatila," and whose understanding of the word "Palestine" is only that it is forbidden. Meaning here depends on dramatic irony. But Shibli also seems to suggest that broken knowledge might itself be a valuable kind of knowledge, one that is embodied, particular, and not abstract. The historical element of *Minor Detail* marks a departure from her previous work while displaying a continuity of sensibility. In their study of Franz Kafka, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari characterize "minor literature" as that in which "language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization."⁴ Kafka wrote in German, the major language of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in which, as a Jew in Prague, he was a minority within a minority. For a Palestinian writing in Arabic the "coefficient of deterritorialization" is different: Palestinians are not a minority in their homeland, but the Israeli state has downgraded Arabic as an official language as part of the 2018 Israeli Nation State Law. There is, then, a politics in being minor in this different sense: expressing the fractured knowledge of the disempowered in a language that has been marginalized by the state. To describe Israeli crimes partially but meticulously in the proscribed language. To stutter when the soldier pulls out a gun. The archives are in Hebrew; the testimonies of the soldiers are in Hebrew and the *Haaretz* article was originally in Hebrew; Shibli has written her account in Arabic.

The Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg has theorized that apparently marginal details can provide rich points of access to historical truth. In his 1980 essay, "Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method,"⁵ he hypothesizes that during the nineteenth century a "conjectural paradigm" silently developed in the human sciences. He begins with the art historian Giovanni Morelli's method of ascertaining forgeries: rather than looking at the central part of a painting, which a forger always copies with the most care, one should turn instead to the periphery, such as the eyes and ears of a portrait: here, in the margin, lurks the revealing error, the unconscious display of personality. Ginzburg links this both to Freudian symptomatology and to the fictional detective Sherlock Holmes's methods of lateral thinking, each of which rely on the revelations of the peripheral to unlock the mysteries of the central. Crucial in this essay for understanding Shibli's undertaking in *Minor Detail* is Ginzburg's methodological inquiry into "devalued" modes of knowledge, often discredited as "women's knowledge": the intuitive or irrational, that which is conjectural and without empirical program, such as, for instance, divination, or track-hunting. These disciplines run counter to the central operations of power and knowledge as administered and sanctioned by states. Ginzburg proposes a dialectical relationship between the margins and the center, between the micro and the macro, as an epistemological method. Ginzburg's essay itself is an exercise in this hybrid thinking, traversing disciplinary

borders with nonchalance, gleaning insights by drawing apparently irrational connections between different historical phenomena.

Shibli pushes the political implications of Ginzburg's method. On the one hand, she never, even conjecturally, gives us the perspective of the Bedouin girl; the girl only cries and babbles "incomprehensible fragments that intertwined with the dog's ceaseless barking" (34), her language communicating nothing beyond the demarcation of her difference from the Israeli soldiers. On the other hand, Shibli deliberately gives us a narrator who is not a very good investigator, at least not in the classical sense. She stammers, describes herself as "fragile" and "weak" (61), and is not eloquent, unlike the keeper of the archive at the Nirim settlement who speaks "in a voice so calm and clear, so untouched by stuttering, stammering, or rambling, that it feels as if he is smoothly unraveling a delicate thread, one which cannot easily be cut" (84). She circles "aimlessly like an agitated fly" (98), making decisions based on intuition or paranoia. We might include paranoia, and its more systematized form, conspiracy theory, among Ginzburg's devalued modes of knowledge. Popular discussion of the operations of power in the Global South are often discredited as conspiracy theory, despite the dense historical record of high-level conspiracies against both colonized and previously colonized peoples. Paranoia is an epistemological mode of the politically marginalized. Of the initial connection between the date of the crime and her own birthday, the narrator says: "one cannot rule out the possibility of a connection between the two events, or the existence of a hidden link, as one sometimes finds with plants, for instance, when a clutch of grass is pulled out by the roots, and you think you've got rid of it entirely, only for grass of the exact same species to grow back in the same spot a quarter of a century later" (60–61). In his endorsement, novelist J. M. Coetzee describes Shibli's narrator as "high on the autism scale."⁶ An evaluation of her psychological state, however, only functions to disparage her. In fact, her hypersensitivity is her strength: her obsession with details, her digressiveness and emotionality, and her decentered mode of looking make her the perfect Ginzburgian narrator, one with an "inability ... to identify borders between things, and evaluate situations rationally and logically, which in many cases leads me to see the fly shit on a painting and not the painting itself, as the saying goes" (59).

The ominous repetition of images across the book's two halves, and the sense of paranoia they invoke, are borne out by the finale where our narrator meets a shocking end. By playing upon and frustrating readerly expectations of finding evidence, Shibli has made a powerful point. To look for a smoking gun is to miss the larger picture. She wants us to see "the fly shit on [the] painting and not the painting itself." From the archive, we could learn that there was already a court case over the crime at the Nirim outpost, and that the culprits served jail sentences. But *Minor Detail* is not really about locating individual guilt, or the isolated experience of oppression; it is about the continuous structural violence of the Israeli state project. This is what our nameless narrator reveals. Had she succeeded in her mission to find a clue to the murdered girl's perspective, what would it have achieved, beyond the satisfaction of narrative resolution between the pages of a book? Knowledge of Israeli violence has not done anything to systematically change that structure, at least not yet.

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Endnotes

1. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 122.
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3. Aviv Lavie and Moshe Gorali, "I Saw Fit to Remove Her from the World," *Haaretz*, Oct. 29, 2003, <https://www.haaretz.com/2003-10-29/ty-article/i-saw-fit-to-remove-her-from-the-world/0000017f-db62-d856-a37f-ffe2fa5b0000>.
4. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, trans. Dana Polan, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 16.
5. Carlo Ginzburg and Anna Davin, "Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method," *History Workshop*, no. 9 (Spring 1980): 5–36, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4288283>.
6. "Reviews of *Minor Detail*," New Directions Books, accessed August 9, 2022, <https://www.ndbooks.com/book/minor-detail/#reviews>.

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