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THE AUTHOR

ROBIN OSTLE lectures in Arabic at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, U.K., where he is currently Chairman of the Middle East Centre. He has a B.A. and D.Phil. from the University of Oxford, and his principal research interests are in modern Arabic literature and modern Islam. He translated and edited Julius Wellhausen's *The Religio-Political Factions in Early Islam* and edited *Studies in Modern Arabic Literature*. He has written articles on modern Arabic literature for academic journals and encyclopedias.

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TOWN AND COUNTRY IN MODERN ARABIC LITERATURE

by Robin Ostle

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Dr. Robin Ostle, rapporteur for the recent UFSI conference on "Town and Country in Modern Arabic Literature," has written a UFSI Report summarizing the discussion. A videotape of a participants' discussion of the main conference themes is also available.

Ibn Khaldun is the most notable authority to have indicated in a complete and convincing manner that much of the history of the Near and Middle East revolves around the relationships between urban centers and their hinterlands.¹ Islam itself was born in an urban setting and sought subsequently to assert its control over the surrounding desert environment. The early centuries of Islamic civilization saw, on the one hand, the rejuvenation of old cities such as Jerusalem, Damascus, or Alexandria; but much more dramatically they also witnessed the rise of flourishing new centers of urban civilization: Kufa, Basra, Oayrawan, and those two most brilliant examples of medieval Arab city culture, Baghdad and Cairo. These were the oases which sought, often unsuccessfully, to impose administration and taxation upon their hinterlands. These were the centers of scholarship and religious learning where "official" Islam often took forms very different from the practice and organization of its non-urban varieties. They were the focal points of commercial activity, and the stages on which the wealthy sections of society could display the remarkable achievements of their

civilization. Not the least of these achievements was that of literature, for in the Islamic period Arabic literature has always been *bourgeois* in the strictly literal sense of the word. It depended very much on city cultures for its patronage and appreciation, finding there those milieux in which it could perform certain time-honored functions.

Naturally the tensions which surround the relations between cities and their hinterlands are in no sense confined to the Near and Middle East, either now or at any other time in history. But in this area they have always appeared particularly acute. If one drives out of Cairo in the direction of the Pyramids one can experience a sense of shock at the suddenness of the transition from town to hinterland, and this is only one example of many. Throughout the region, desert or semidesert frequently reach into the very perimeters of the middle eastern town. As brusque and as rapid as the topographical changes are the stark contrasts in the life styles of the people as one moves out of the urban center into the hinterland. It all looks like a very precarious relationship consisting more of oppositions and polarities than dovetailed interdependence. One can draw a map of the Islamic world in 1000 A.D. in the form of an *organigramme*, that means of expression so beloved of French bureaucracies. The dominant features of this chart would be concatenations of towns and cities linked by lengthy, tenuous trade routes extending as far west as Fez and Marrakesh and as far east as Bukhara, Samargand, and beyond. It looks like a structure which is fragile and brittle, and this was often the case. The system

could work only if the urban centers were strong enough to control the hinterlands in order to protect the trade routes. Only then could the flow of commercial commodities and taxes be maintained, without which the power of the urban centers would collapse.

The traditional dichotomy of Town and Country has a long history of representation in the literary traditions of Europe,² but in the Near and Middle East in the premodern period this type of dichotomy appears as Town and Desert. Thus it is the desert which is the setting for those values of chivalry by which notables and potentates dignify their persons and their positions, it is the desert which provides the wide open spaces for the nostalgic imaginations of the cloistered city dwellers, and this is the background against which the poet's amorous fantasies are played out in their most widely appreciated forms. It is true that poets such as Bashshar, Abu Nuwas, or Ibn al-Rumi sang to powerful effect of the pleasures of urban living, and they described the delights of civilized, manmade forms of nature, but they and those who wrote like them did not displace the predominant position of the archetypal desert *motifs* in Arabic poetry which persisted well into the twentieth century.³

These remarks are designed to reinforce the point that the relationships between city and hinterland in the Near and Middle East have long been fraught with tensions and ambiguities: the tensions are an inevitable result of each milieu seeking to dominate the other, and the ambiguities result from one milieu (usually the city) investing the other (the desert) with ideological values, despite the fact that the two are mutually incompatible, culturally and economically. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, both before and during the colonial period proper, additional dimensions are added to the ambiguities and contradictions. M. Gilson quotes the sense of deception felt by Gerard de Nerval faced by the transformations being imposed on the old city of Cairo. Writing to Theophile Gautier in 1843, de Nerval comments:

The spirit and needs of the modern world have triumphed over the city like death. In ten years time the

*European roads will have cut through at right angles the dusty and mute old town which now peacefully collapses on the poor fellahs.**

These external transformations of the urban scene are accompanied by equally extraordinary trends in internal decor and furnishing. De Nerval gives scathing descriptions of the interiors of Muhammad Ali's palaces:

furnished in the style of provincial social circles, with mahogany couches and armchairs, billiard tables...and portraits in oils of his sons dressed in artillery officers' uniform. The whole ideal of the country bourgeois.⁴

These are signs of a process which was to gather impetus as the nineteenth century progressed. Cities such as Algiers, Tunis, Alexandria, and Cairo became more and more islands unto themselves in relation to their hinterlands. To a certain extent this had always been the case, but now the degree of rupture and dislocation became exaggerated, verging on the ludicrous. These external and internal transformations of urban space went very much together with the modernization of the army, the wholesale translation of technical manuals, the reorganization of the bureaucracies, and perhaps most crucial of all, the radical reorientation of educational systems.

In the case of Egypt, while these processes were certainly reinforced by the colonial experience, they were initiated by the ruling circles of Muhammad Ali and his successors, long before the British Occupation. In the Ottoman context as exemplified by the city of Istanbul, the types of transformation which began to affect the external shape of Cairo and to mold its interiors in the nineteenth century, in the case of Istanbul extend well back into the eighteenth century.⁵

It is reasonable to suggest that the ruling classes in Egypt in the nineteenth century saw in the very shapes and symbols adopted by the modern European city yet another aspect of that civilization which had to be transplanted into European soil, if their country was to emulate the achievements of Europe. So the town planner and engineer Ali

Mubarak notes how the narrow streets of old Cairo represent a stage in urban development associated with insecurity and crime: the narrow streets, which could be guarded by gates closed at night, were the best protection against the thieves who prowled the dark unlit areas.

With progress, the old city is gradually transformed into wide avenues, squares, gardens and public parks, all bathed in the new security of modern street lighting. Thus the very shape of the city is the symbol of a society progressing from darkness and insecurity, into a new era of modernity represented by open spaces and light.⁶

Just as the topography and structure of certain areas of Egyptian society were being changed so radically, so literature experienced its own versions of external transformation: the old *maqama* form gave way to the modern burgher epic, the novel, and the late nineteenth century saw the rise of those other literary categories new to the area, the drama and the short story. These external transformations go alongside vitally significant thematic transitions. The old dichotomy in Arabic literature between Town and Desert gradually changes until it resembles more the Town-Country antithesis with which we are familiar in Western literature. The desert motifs do not disappear, but they cede pride of place to something which has much more in common with the countryside in the European sense.

In Egyptian literature the publication of Haykal's novel *Zaynab* in 1913 was a crucial landmark. With this book, the *fellah*, after almost consistent neglect throughout the Arabic literary tradition, assumes positively heroic dimensions and becomes the embodiment of virtues. It is no longer the desert but the *rif* which is to become one of the dominant motifs in Arabic literature. There is a ready explanation for this radical shift of emphasis: political power had passed away from the court circles and the Turko-Egyptian aristocracy, into the hands of the

*Translations of technical terms and titles in the order they appear can be found on p. 8.

liberal bourgeoisie, the new professional groups of doctors, lawyers, engineers, and administrators, many of whom were involved in the enthusiastic political activities of the early decades of the twentieth century in Egypt. Haykal himself was totally typical of this class. While many of them came from wealthy families whose position was based on land ownership, they were essentially products of the New Cairo. They were graduates of secular educational institutions, and many, like Haykal, completed their educations in France and England. Haykal and his contemporaries were dedicated to creating a sense of national community in order to combat the colonial presence and to construct a springboard from which the new nation state, aspiring to freedom and independence, would leap into a new and exciting future. Where did Haykal and those of like mind find the material from which to create the living symbols of such abstract ideas as "the homeland," "the people," "the nation"? Not in the desert, but of course in that milieu which contains the vast majority of Egypt's population—the *aryaf*.

Yet this whole situation is wracked with contradictions. Never had the dislocation between city and hinterland been more acute than that between New Cairo and the *aryaf*. At the same time the *aryaf* and its inhabitants became crucially important to Egyptian writers and politicians, the products of the New Cairo, as they struggled to construct new social and political identities for their community. The countryside was now a vital ideological necessity as a source of imagery for national authenticity. Yet rarely can the political and intellectual elite of the period have been less well equipped to come to terms with the countryside. They were prisoners of their intellectual formations, and on the whole quite unwitting conspirators in that network of international strategy which held Egypt in its toils. They had to face the contradiction that for them, the countryside was the haven of traditional values and virtues, and at the same time the refuge of ignorance and stagnation. In this labyrinth of ambiguity and unease, literature came into its own.

Haykal's *Zaynab* introduced the two elements which were to be seminal

for the subsequent development of literature in Egypt and other Arab countries in and around the Fertile Crescent: these were the pastoral or natural idyll, and satire, and together they expressed the aspirations and revulsions of Haykal's generation. In *Zaynab* it is the first which predominates: the long sustained passages of idyllic description of scenes of the Egyptian countryside and the heroic dimensions of the rural characters represent the author's dream visions of his society. The second element, that of satire, is somewhat muted but it is undeniably present: there is a sufficient grasp of the realities of life in rural Egypt to give one a strong sense of how severely circumscribed are the possibilities for individual freedom and liberty. Thus Ibrahim, whom Zaynab loves, is unable to avoid military service because of his humble social situation, and he is driven from the village and the girl he loves. Zaynab pines away and dies in final scenes of intense sentimental emotionalism. The double-edged message of Rousseau, that of natural idyll and social critique, is now firmly established in modern Arabic fiction. Town and Country are the dominant motifs through which the message will be conveyed.

The brilliant short story by Mahmud Tahir Lashin entitled *Hadith al-Qarya* (1927)⁷ is a perfect illustration of the dilemma which was coming increasingly to haunt much of the Arab World: how could the "civilized" elite relate the theories and visions of their liberal educations (obtained in their capital cities or in Europe) to the situation of their country as a whole, which had little or no point of contact with their "culture." The story treats a situation laden with contradictions, and appropriately its structure depends on a series of brusque contrasts and polarities. Foremost among these is the representation of the countryside as seen through the eyes of the narrator on the one hand, and as portrayed through the speech patterns and descriptions of the *fellahin* on the other. The city-dwelling narrator observes the countryside in the classical manner of the liberal bourgeois: he reacts to the endless vistas of verdure and natural beauty with intense sentimental identification: at the same time he is cut to the quick by the

sight of the peasants bent over their labors with hoe and sickle, sweating in the heat of the day, the women working alongside them. Here were disadvantaged fellow human beings whom the narrator is soon to exhort to seize their destinies in their own hands in order to throw off the chains of their rural poverty and degradation. The noble sentiments are cut brutally short when the narrator's friend, an absentee landlord, tells him not to be so childish and sentimental, for the fellahin are treacherous as wolves and cunning as foxes. The narrator continues to allow the images and sounds of the rif to play upon his mind and his emotions, and when the tones of a reed pipe begin to waft their melancholy and haunting tune over the night air, Lashin creates a parody of the liberal romantic in the countryside. The conflicting attitudes and scenes of mutual incomprehension are interspersed with suggestive symbols of light and shade: as the narrator ponders on the painful mysteries of the countryside, the scene is engulfed by the thickening shades of approaching darkness; once the fellahin and their champion the Sheikh have gained the moral victory over the two city dwellers, they move off into the darkness leaving the light with the two friends.

The incompatibility of Town and Country in the Egyptian setting broods throughout the whole story. The major element of representation is the countryside and the fellahin, while the presence of the town is expressed, paradoxically, by an absence of detail. It is the narrator who through his reactions and pious hopes personifies the values of that urban-based Egyptian elite who sought to apply the ideals of their education and political aspirations to the realities of the *aryaf*, largely unsuccessfully.

In the case of poetry, between the two world wars emphasis was placed primarily on the pastoral representation of nature which was the most frequent refuge of romantic poets. Taking their cue from the Utopian escapist writings of their leader Khalil Jibran, the *mahjar* (emigration) poets of North America saw in the symbol of the forest (*al-ghab*) a means of retreat from the "civilized" world to a

haven of purity which was contrasted implicitly or explicitly with the corruption of the city.⁸ The Arab romantic poets sought idyllic natural scenes in which they went through the novel experiences of heady lyrical subjectivity, a trend in literature which was one of the side effects of placing greater stress on the significance of the individual in his or her social and political context. Much of this romantic verse produced in the mahjar and in the Arab World was escapist and self-indulgent, and it was rare to find a voice such as that of Ilya Abu Madi recognizing the ultimate futility of the flight into Arcadia.

*Life in the wilderness has taught me
that I am everywhere bound to
the earth,
And I shall remain all my days in a
prison of clay, a slave to wishes, a
prisoner of desires.
I thought myself alone in the wilder-
ness, but found I had borne the
whole world with me.*⁹

At its worst this poetry descended to facile subjective escapism in which nebulous concepts such as *al-majhul* (the unknown) and *al-ghab* were accorded significance which they did not always deserve, and in which the theme of cultural alienation was cultivated consciously. Yet, in the hands of the Egyptian poet Abd al-Rahman Shukri (d. 1958) it could be a splendid artistic extension of the dilemmas which gripped not just individuals but whole societies.

The Tunisian poet Abu'l-Qasim al-Shabbi (d. 1934) was one of the most exceptional of the Arab romantics. He was influenced profoundly both by the mahjar poets and by the Apollo group in Egypt, and his work depends heavily on nature symbols among which the Jibranian *ghab* is particularly prominent. On the whole his sense of place is much more general than specific, and his nature symbols such as the forest, the mountains, the dawn, and the night, usually have the function more of abstract ideas than specific places or times. While his verse is intensely personal and subjective, it is rarely poetry of withdrawal; rather, it has a strong element of external validity rooted in his society at that particular time in its destiny.

It is as though the career of this individual, wracked by the most desperate physical and spiritual crises as al-Shabbi was, became a symbol for the sufferings and aspirations being lived by the majority of his contemporaries in Tunisia. One may hazard the suggestion that al-Shabbi was the most politicized of those poets who are usually thought of as Romantics, despite the fact that very little of his verse treats overtly political themes. It is the sum total of the poet's life and experience which one can relate symbolically and allusively to the state of his nation: the body politic was in a palsied state, just as his own body was in the grip of a fatal heart disease. Yet small groups of Tunisian nationalists still had faith and visions which transcended depressing, actual reality, just as al-Shabbi put constant trust in resurrection and new dawns.

One of his most famous poems, "Will to Live,"¹⁰ illustrates the extent to which his use of nature relies more on vast elemental forces or features of creation, rather than specific parochial scenes. Much of the poem consists of dialogue with the wind, the earth, the darkness, the forest, and avoids becoming too abstract through the rich variety of atmosphere and onomatopoeia. After a long winter in which the seeds remain locked beneath layers of fog, ice, and clay, when even the sky seems to be extinguished, the earth is riven by the life, power, and light of spring. The long period spent dreaming of light and life—it may have been a season or it may have been generations—finally is rewarded with glorious fulfillment. The end of the poem is a devotional incantation as the awakening seeds are blessed for their constant faith and rewarded with the earth and the heavens and everything in them. This poem looks forward to the work of al-Sayyab and Adonis in the 1950s, particularly when they make use of myths of fertility rites as symbols for the death and resurrection of their societies. al-Shabbi was no less than an impassioned prophet of eschatological visions with much in common with the Tammuz poets of later generations. Had he lived he would no doubt have come to know the same disillusion and disenchantment which have blighted the majority of their hopes.

As one moves further away in time from Haykal's *Zaynab*, so the element of satire and social critique in literature becomes stronger, and the countryside becomes less of a source of idyllic idealization. The novels of Tawfiq al-Hakim provide an appropriate example of this process: he had written his own version in novel form of the mood of romantic nationalism which led to the 1919 Revolution, namely *Awdaf al-Ruh* (1934), but it was with *Yawmiyyat Na'ib fi'l-Aryaf* (1937) that he returned to the recurrent obsession of Egyptian prose writers with the countryside. Now the idyll is considerably muted, and is overshadowed by biting satire against the folly of applying laws to peasants who have no understanding of the meaning of the laws or of their administration. Between the court officials and the fellahin there are worlds of difference in their codes of honor and their cultural mythologies. The contradiction that sustains the book is symbolized by the character of the peasant girl Rim. She is portrayed with great poetic sensitivity, a figure who reflects beauty and suggestive mystery, but all this is overshadowed by her unnatural muteness. It is not that she cannot speak but that she cannot communicate. She is quite inarticulate, and a natural victim of the maze of justice which surrounds her. Through the portrayal of Rim, al-Hakim reveals that he himself is no nearer to solving the dilemma the countryside posed for writers and for Egypt as a whole. He is essentially an outsider, observing the aryaf across the chasm which has been created by his own cultural formation and experiences: while the angle at which al-Hakim refracts his visions of rural reality is now much narrower than it had been in the work of Haykal, he still is using the countryside as a source of symbolism to express the cultural alienation of his intellectual generation.

The period under discussion thus far covers the approximate chronological span 1914-1939. In Egypt it was an age of idealism in the most literal and least constructive sense of the word. It was a time when the realities of situations were quite subordinate to the ideas which people formed about them. This was certainly true of the political

theories developed among the circles of secular liberalism in Egypt, and also true of the political institutions that developed fairly directly from them in the years after World War I. With hindsight it is now easier to appreciate the complex problematical nature of the colonialist-colonized experience, and to foresee the difficulties which would inevitably follow the transposition of a cultural heritage from Western Europe to a small, educated, governing elite in a country such as Egypt. Those who tried to realize the visions of state and society as they were conceived by Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid and his disciples were prophets rather than pragmatists. This was the fatal difference between these bourgeois liberals in Egypt and their intellectual idols from Britain and France in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Whether in literature, social thought or political theory, in Western Europe, if in some cases ideas had not developed directly from events, at least ideas and events experienced some form of interaction. There was an organic relationship between such things as art or the history of ideas, and wider social and economic realities. This type of relationship between art and society existed in the Arab Islamic world before the advent of colonialism. The colonial experience falsified the relationship to a considerable extent, or at least led to some exaggerated dislocations within it. A crucial factor in the distortion of the relationship was the New City which developed both before and during the colonial period. The New City was the focal point of symbols and aspirations which could have meaning and fulfillment only for a minute section of society. The consequent sense of betrayal and disenchantment was not slow to make itself felt in literature.

The ultimate transition from dreams of romantic symbolism to nightmarish visions of social reality is illustrated most graphically in novels based on scenes of urban life. In the 1940s, particularly in Egyptian literature, the city becomes the predominant setting for Arabic literature's versions of the "modern burgher epic" according to Hegel's definition, but the only epic dimension in these novels is the size and scale of some of them. Otherwise they are

quite devoid of anything which might suggest grandeur or the heroic. Urban life had formed the background of novels by al-'Aqqad and al-Mazini, and of Tawfiq al-Hakim's *'Awdatal-Ruh*, but in these novels it was clearly subordinate to the authors' real preoccupations: humor, romantic nationalism, explorations of different types of relationship between the sexes. City life, particularly among the lower sections of society, plays a much more direct role in the short story writing of Yahya Haqqi, and this leads (via *Millim al-Akbar* by Adil Kamil) fairly directly to the drug addiction, pimps, prostitutes, and poverty of the world of Neguib Mahfuz. If the real hero of Zaynab had been the idealized visions of the Egyptian *aryaf*, then in the novels of Mahfuz in the 1940s and 1950s it is Cairo which is the protagonist. The titles themselves are an indication of this: *al-Qahira al-Jadida* (New Cairo), *Khan al-Khalili*, *Zuqaq al-Midaqq* (Midaqq Alley). The human characters here are dominated by a milieu which is all-embracing, and while not strictly malevolent, it is a milieu which usually denies fulfillment to the characters. The sort of romantic happy ending by which Dickens used to transform many of his novels is unthinkable in the Cairene scenes created by Mahfuz.

The city during the classical period of the novel in Europe in the nineteenth century was a traditional symbol and setting for chronicles of tremendous social mobility. The drama and rapidity of the progress and rise of the heroes of Dickens or Balzac is paralleled only by the grandiose dimensions of their fall, which may entail a strong sense of tragedy or divine justice. So at the end of *Le Père Goriot* Rastignac, the archetype of the *parvenu*, can throw down the gauntlet to the whole of Paris, as the city lies at his feet, there to be conquered.

One will look in vain for a comparable career in the world of Mahfuz, despite the fact that all the classic elements are there: avarice, a desperate obsession with money, and a willingness to embrace all manner of immorality to achieve upward social mobility. The fatal difference is that the means of achieving this mobility are pathetically limited, and such as do exist

are so degrading as to preclude their lending any dimensions of grandeur or heroism to the characters involved. Hilary Kilpatrick observes in a study of *Zuqaq al-Midaqq*, "only the dead have anything material to steal,"¹¹ a fact recognized by Dr. Bushi, the dentist who steals dentures from the corpses in the cemetery before selling them to his patients. The lengths to which people would go to eke out the most pitiful of existences is illustrated by the ghoulish profession of Zita in the same novel, the deliberate mutilation of the bodies of poor people who will then be able to become beggars.

The protagonists of Mahfuz' books go to desperate and exaggerated lengths to transform their existences, and the end results mock the pathetic results of their endeavors. So Mahjub 'Abd al-Daim *inal-Qahira al-Jadida* begins with lofty ambitions and in the end can only gain a position in a ministry by marrying Ihsan, who is in fact the mistress of one of the higher officials, Qasim Bey. Needless to say the marriage is merely a convenient means of having Ihsan maintained, while Qasim's association with her continues. In *Khan al-Khalili*, Ahmad Akif is a symbol of those who have been persecuted and victimized by the lack of any opportunity for genuine social advancement. The hopes and ambitions he had nurtured in his youth give way to the depressing reality of a lowly bureaucrat who has no future to look forward to in his professional life or in his personal relationships. *Zuqaq al-Midaqq* chronicles the growing frustration of Hamida with her life in the alley and her determination to avoid the mundane fate which would be hers if she remained there. The only means of transformation available to someone in her position lay in the possibilities of sexual exploitation. As she gambles with this, her only asset, she comes under the control of Ibrahim Faraj, the pimp who runs a brothel patronized mainly by foreign soldiers.

One might think that the three volumes of the *Trilogy* would provide more than sufficient scope to present spectacular events which might have occurred in the life of a lower middle-class family in a period extending from 1917-1944. However, although changes naturally do take

place, none leads to any radical transformations in the fortunes or the lifestyle of the family. Indeed, if one follows the progress of a character such as Kamal, the son of al-Sayyid Ahmad Abd al-Jawwad, one is struck by the barrenness and the monotony that follow his all too brief flush of youth. Students of Mahfuz have often commented on the role played by fate as a *deus ex machina* device by which the sequence of events and the actions of characters are regulated. It is almost as though the author is suggesting that any significant change in the course of events or in the lives of the people in this environment is brought about more by divine providence than by any human agency.

The city, the classic setting for many of the great novels of Europe, was a symbol of social mobility, and in the European context as a symbol it was in no sense divorced from social and economic reality. Great Expectations could be realized. In the modern Arab world, the city is no less a symbol of social mobility and a focal point for ambitions and aspirations: it is the center of urban culture and education which has been the terminal point of constant drift from the countryside as rural dwellers went there often thinking they were doing so more for the sake of their children's future than for any immediate expectations of their own. But in this case the extremely powerful symbols are not supported by reality for the vast majority of people. The means whereby they may transform their circumstances according to their expectations simply do not exist.¹² Cities from Cairo to Casablanca are symbols of social mobility, but they are monuments to *immobilisme* for large numbers of their inhabitants. Most of Mahfuz's Cairene novels leave one with a strong sense of being blocked. It is impossible to transform one's fate by normal endeavor and action, and even abnormal striving ends in disaster and perdition. Ambition and reality are incompatible.

There is one notable exception in the prose literature of this period where the city is not the setting for nightmarish representations of unpleasant reality. This is *Qindil Umm Hashim* (1944) by Yahya Haqqi.¹³

Old Cairo has played such a part in the formative years of Ibrahim, the hero, that it leads ultimately to his spiritual reconversion after a period in which he had relied entirely on a scientific, rationalist philosophy. Here the city is an extremely positive symbol, and Haqqi provides one of the few examples in modern Arabic of an urban character in the most complete sense: one who identifies so strongly with the city that his whole being and personality fuse with the noises, smells, movements, and very fabric of Old Cairo.

The Cairene novels of Neguib Mahfuz correspond to the end of a particular political phase in the modern history of Egypt, namely the experiment in "liberal democracy" that ended in total failure. During the years following World War II, in Egypt and in other Arab countries the systems that had prevailed in the interwar period—the constitutions and their monarchies, the mandates, the protectorates—began to disappear with remarkable rapidity, Algeria being a tragic exception to the swiftness of this process. In most of these countries the transition to independence was accompanied by new political ideologies and slogans which revolved around derived forms of socialism and Arab unity. Many writers welcomed the new political departures with enthusiasm, and sought to distinguish their work from that of the previous discredited generations. A clear result of this tendency was a deliberate attempt to deromanticize portraits of life in the countryside. *al-Ard* (1954) by al-Sharqawi is the postwar equivalent of Haykal's *Zaynab*, and it makes strenuous attempts to avoid the natural idyll which was such a powerful motif for Haykal's contemporaries. But just as the fellahin in *Zaynab* were in many ways larger than life as they inspired the author's romantic dream-visions, so the fellahin in *al-Ard* are invested with positively heroic dimensions. They are full of drive, initiative, and progressive intentions, and above all they display an extremely strong sense of class solidarity. To this extent they are just as much symbols of an ideology as were their counterparts in *Zaynab*.

Artistically much more convincing is the creation by Yusif Idris of the peasant character Abd al-Karim in

his short story *Arkhas Layali* (1954):¹⁴ he is the prisoner of a situation dominated by poverty and overpopulation. He is perfectly well aware of the causes of his misery, but far from being able to take any action to do something about these causes, his existence is so restricted that he can only contribute further to them. Abd al-Karim is the typical literary hero of the postwar period of decolonization. Despite his frustration, he is definitely a member of a community and therefore experiences a certain solidarity in his poverty. Because the problem has been clearly stated and defined, the future is not entirely without hope.

Although the countryside is effectively deromanticized by the 1950s, it continues to be a focal point of idealization: romantic Liberalism is replaced by romantic Marxism, and the *aryaf* and the villages remain the guardians of values and virtues which are the imagined antithesis of the sin and corruption of the City. In fact the City is a highly appropriate scapegoat for the wreckage of yet another phase of shattered hopes and political *impasse*.

For most Arab countries the political reality that emerged after the long-awaited emancipation from colonial regimes was *étatisme* rather than socialism. A new era of Mamluk-type government begins as indigenous armies become the means to achieve and to maintain political power. The liberties of individuals are quite subordinate to what the regime decides are the needs of the state. The necessary institutions and bureaucracies are developed to insure that control shall be as absolute as possible. The newspapers and periodicals which were once the mouthpieces of nationalist movements maneuvering or struggling for independence, now have become the strictly controlled propaganda media of the regimes of the postwar Arab World, massively reinforced by radio and television. As literacy rates have increased over the past 30 years, so there have been increasing attempts to control what is written and what is read. Frenzied attempts are made to coerce the natural institution of literature to conform to a type of institution which is part of the state machinery. The City has provided both the setting and the means for this coercion of literature. At the

same time it has been greatly extending its control over the various categories of non-urban space within the nation state.

The revenge exacted by literature can hardly be described as sweet but it has been devastating in the intensity of its indictment. Badr Shakir al-Sayyab of Iraq, perhaps the greatest Arab poet of the post-war period, presents the City as the stage of an oppressive social and political order. Scenes of abject poverty, drunkenness, all manner of immorality and exploitation of human beings also include the agents of political tyranny—the spies, secret police, and the jailers. On the other hand his native village, Jaikur, surely the most famous place-name in modern Arabic poetry, is nothing less than Paradise Lost.¹⁵ In the words of one critic, "Jaikur, his home village which he has immortalized, appears on the scene in its verdant and sad beauty, not as the simple, one-dimensional symbol of the village versus the City, but as a deeper and more complex symbol of unattainable love, security, and fertility, versus the prevailing oppression, alienation and barrenness in City life."¹⁶ The work of the Egyptian Ahmad al-Mu'ti Hijazi is an elegy for all the victims of rural-urban drift, who found ultimate deception and betrayal in the seductive symbols of the metropolis. In place of promise and fulfillment, they found only loneliness, alienation, and a form of death in life:

*When I see men and women going
out silently
After spending two hours in front of
me during which
We did not exchange looks or see
different scenes,
When I see that life has no madness
And the bird of quietness flutters
over everybody
I feel as if I am really dead and lying
silently watching this dying
world. 17*

For Khalil Hawi of Lebanon the City is indubitably the villain which has portrayed and misled his society, and his accusations of the crimes committed by the City reach a strident pitch rarely approached by his contemporaries. It is clear that for him the City is the end of civilization rather than its ultimate achievement. Above all else he castigates the bastardized forms of culture

which have been created by Middle Eastern cities (in this case Beirut), and the manner in which they have fostered tawdry secondhand ideas and images which have led to nightmares of despair:

*We are from Beirut; we were born a
tragedy
with borrowed faces and minds;
the "idea" is born a whore in the
marketplace
and spends its life looking for vir-
ginity. 18*

The Syrian poet Adonis (Ali Ahmad Sa'id) proclaims the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah on the author and agent of the ills which afflict his world, although implicit in the destruction is a process of purification which will lead to a resurrection:

*Our fire is advancing towards the
city
To demolish the bed of the city.*

*We shall demolish the bed of the
city
We shall live and cross through
arrows
Into a land of perplexed trans-
parency
Behind that mask hanging from the
rock
Which turns around the whirlpool of
terror
Around the echo and the chatter.
We shall wash the stomach of day,
its entrails and its foetus,
And burn that existence patched
with the name of the city,
We shall reverse the face of
presence*

*And burn that existence patched
with the name of the city,
We shall reverse the face of
presence
And the land of distances in the
eyes of the city.*

*Our fire is advancing and grass is
born in the rebellious ember,*

*Our fire is advancing towards the
city. 19*

The majority of the works discussed have created representations of rural and urban space in terms of antitheses and polarities. The countryside is viewed by those who are essentially outsiders and who struggle to come to terms with it. They use it as a source of symbolism

but the extent to which they invest their symbols with idealism tells one much about the fundamental alienation of these authors from the arya and the fellahin. The city is rarely, if ever, idealized, but appears as the malevolent agent of the evil forces that dominate society. Modern Arabic literature has very little to say of genuine interaction and *rapprochement* between the two settings. A notable exception to this general situation is *Ayyam al-Insan al-Sab'a* (1968) by the Egyptian novelist Abd al-Hakim Qasim. The hero Abd al-Aziz is a genuinely transitional character in that he bridges the gap between the educated townsman and the illiterate fellah. The son of a peasant himself, he has gone to study in the city (Tanta, not Cairo!) and then subsequently returns to the village to support his family after the death of his father. He can no longer accept all the most traditional aspects of life in the village, many of which fill him with disgust and scorn; nor can he break away from the village to which he feels tied by genuine feelings of love and loyalty. He begins to frequent the village cafe, the point at which the urban influences are most prominent through the radio and the endless discussions of political issues. Almost in spite of himself Abd al-Aziz becomes part of a social scene which is full of frustration and a sense of deception. His speech degenerates into harshness and cursing on the same level as the other clients of the cafe. There has been a degree of coalescence between the city and the village, but the result is bitterness and lack of fulfillment.

In the final analysis one may suggest that the Countryside is taking revenge on the City in the Near and Middle East to the satisfaction of neither. Cairo is the largest urban agglomeration of the region. In the nineteenth century its dramatic topographical transformations proclaimed its role as a New City which would lead its society to take its rightful place in the ranks of progress, modernity, and economic well-being. In the Nasser era, further phases of topographical transformation took place as this capital city asserted its leading role in Arab socialism and in the global sphere of Afro-Asian affairs. These proud,

concrete symbols of successive ideological phases now have a crumbling, careworn air about them. The city heaves under the impact of millions of people it cannot employ, house, feed, transport, and whose effluent it cannot dispose of. Human beings squat in cemeteries making their homes in the cities of the dead.

The pall of pollution hangs heavy in the air. On public holidays the streets, squares, and parks disappear under the crush of thousands of people: the dress and general life-style of many of them belong more to the *aryaf* than to the *medina*. The most recent dramatic transformations of Cairo's topography are the

luxury hotels along the Nile waterfront, from which tourists can gaze at "the Third World" in insulated comfort, cleanliness, and air-conditioning. Is this indeed a City in anything but name?

(December 1982)

Translations Of Titles and Technical Terms in order as they appear in the Text

<i>Fellah</i>	Peasant	<i>al-Qahira al-Jadida</i>	(New Cairo), novel published 1946 by Neguib Mahfuz
<i>Magama</i>	A traditional Arabic prose genre written in rhyming prose	<i>Khan al-Khalili</i>	A famous quarter of Old Cairo, and title of a novel published by Neguib Mahfuz in 1945.
<i>Rif</i>	Countryside	<i>Zuqaqa-Midaqq</i>	(Midaqq Alley), novel published by Neguib Mahfuz in 1947
<i>Hadith al-Qarya</i>	(Village Story), Short story published 1927, by Mahmud Tahir Lashin	<i>The Trilogy</i>	Title of a series of three novels, published by Neguib Mahfuz 1956-57
<i>Mahjar</i>	Emigration. The name given to a group of Syro-Lebanese poets active in parts of North and South America in the early twentieth century	<i>Qindil Umm Hashim</i>	(The Saint's Lamp), novella by Yahya Haqqi, published in 1944
<i>al-ghab</i>	The Forest	<i>al-Ard</i>	(The Earth). Novel by Abd al-Rahman al-Sharqawi, published in 1954
<i>al-Majhul</i>	The Unknown	<i>Arkhas Layali</i>	(The Cheapest Nights), Short Story Collection by Yusif Idris, published in 1954.
<i>Awdat al-Ruh</i>	(Return of the Spirit), novel published 1934, by Tawfiq al-Hakim	<i>Ayyamal-Insan al-Saba</i>	(The Seven Ages of Man), novel by Abd al-Hakim Qasim, published in 1968
<i>Yawmiyyat Na'ib fi'l-Aryaf</i>	(Diary of a Country Lawyer), novel published in 1937 by Tawfiq al-Hakim	<i>Medina</i>	City
<i>Millim al-Akbar</i>	(The Great Millim), novel published 1944, by Adil Kamil		

NOTES

1. Ibn Khaldun: *The Muqaddimah* (Trans. Franz Rosenthal), London 1958, Vol. I, pp. 249ff.
2. See, for example, *The Country and The City* by Raymond Williams, St. Albans, Paladin 1975.
3. S. Moreh: "Town and Country in Modern Arabic Poetry from Shawqi to al-Sayyab," pp. 1-5. Paper presented to AUFS Colloquium on "Town and Country in Modern Arabic Literature," Rome, October 1980.
4. M. Gilseman, "Town and Country: Representations and Realities," pp. 1-2. Paper presented to the AUFS Colloquium on "Town and Country in Modern Arabic Literature," Rome, October 1980. See also Gilseman's recent book, *Recognizing Islam*, London 1982, p. 197.
5. B. Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*. R.I.I.A./Oxford University Press 1961, pp. 46-53.
6. B. Musallam, "Ali Mubarak and the Making of New Cairo," pp. 15-18. Paper presented to AUFS Colloquium on "Town and Country in Modern Arabic Literature," Rome, October 1980.
7. From the collection entitled *Yuhka Anna...*, first published in 1929.
8. See the poem "al-Mawakib" in Jibran Khalil Jibran, *al-Majmu'a al-Kamila*, Beirut 1964, pp. 353-364. There was a flourishing school of Arabic poetry based in New York from about 1913-1930. These *mahjar* poets had come to the U.S. mainly from Syria and Lebanon.
9. Ilya Abu Madi, "Fi'l-Qafr," *al-Jadawil*, New York 1927, pp. 29-31.
10. Abu'l-Qasim al-Shabbi, *Aghani al-Hayat*, Tunis 1966, pp. 240-244.
11. H. Kilpatrick, *The Modern Egyptian Novel*, London 1974, p. 79.
12. See the account by M. M. Badawi of Mahfuz's novel *Bidaya wa Nihaya* (1949) presented as an appendix to his paper "The City in Modern Egyptian Literature," delivered to the AUFS colloquium on "Town and Country in Modern Arabic Literature," Rome, October 1980.
13. Translated as *The Saint's Lamp and Other Stories*, Brill, Leiden, 1973, by M. M. Badawi.
14. This is the title story of the collection.
15. See al-Sayyab's poem "Jaikur wa'l-Medina," *Diwan Badr Shakir al-Sayyab*, Beirut 1971, p. 419.
16. S. K. al-Jayyusi, "Some Aspects of the Sense of Place in Modern Arabic Poetry," p. 26. Paper presented to the AUFS colloquium on "Town and Country in Modern Arabic Literature," Rome, October 1980.
17. From the poem "al-Mawt Fuj'a," in the collection *Lam Yabqa illa'l-tiraf*, Beirut 1965, p. 111. Translation by I. J. Boullata, *Modern Arab Poets 1950-1975*, Washington 1976, pp. 97-98.
18. From the poem "al-Majus fi Urubba," in the collection *Nahr al-Ramad*, Beirut 1962, p. 114, quoted in S.K. al-Jayyusi, "Some Aspects of the Sense of Place...", p. 31.
19. From the poem "al-Medina" in *al-Athar al-Kamila*, Beirut 1971, Vol. I, p. 482.