INTRODUCTION

In 1966, *The Smell of It,* a short novel by Sonallah Ibrahim,[1] destined to become one of the landmarks of modern Arabic literature, was published in Egypt at the author's expense. Printed on its back cover was a manifesto-like statement, signed by a group of young writers seeking to clear a space for their experimental writings within a generally conformist literary field. The statement read as follows:

> *If this novel in your hands doesn't please you, it is not your fault, but rather that of the cultural and artistic atmosphere in which we live, which through the years has been con-*

[1] Sonallah Ibrahim, *The Smell of It,* trans. Denys Johnson-Davies (London: William Heinemann, 1971). It appeared in Arabic under the title *Tilka l-rā'iha* (Maktab Yulyu, 1966).

trolled by traditional works and superficial, naïve phenomena. To break with the prevailing artistic environment which has solidified and hardened, we have chosen this form of sincere and sometimes painful writing. . . .

These names, which you are not familiar with, will present you with an art which also is unfamiliar. It is an art concerned overwhelmingly with the attempt to express the spirit of an age and the experience of a generation.[2]

One of those "unfamiliar" names affixed to the bottom of the statement was that of Abd al-Hakim Qasim, whose short stories had already appeared in a few progressive literary journals. It was not long, however, before Qasim's name became one of the most prominent in the Egyptian literary field, with the publication in 1969 of his first novel, *The Seven Days of Man,*[3] with which he reoriented the narrative on the Egyptian village.

As the manifesto clearly indicates, Qasim belonged to a generation of avant-garde writers, known to the Arab reader as the sixties generation. This is the generation that started off supporting the military coup led by General Gamal Abd al-Nasir in 1952, gradually became disillusioned with the increasingly authoritarian face of the "socialist" regime, and finally ended up in its detention camps. Not only did this

[2] The whole text of the statement is quoted in Sonallah Ibrahim's introduction to *Tilka l-râ'iha,* trans. Marilyn Booth in "The Experience of a Generation," *Index on Censorship* 16, 9 (1987): 19–22.

[3] Abd al-Hakim Qasim, *The Seven Days of Man,* trans. Joseph Norment Bell (General Egyptian Book Organization, 1989). It appeared in Arabic under the title *Ayyâm al-'insân al-sab'a* (Dâr al-kitâb al-'arabi, 1969).

generation bear the brunt of the confrontation with political power and the disheartening catastrophe of the Arab defeat by Israel in 1967, but it also had to struggle against the dominant aesthetic values of the time. Ironically, political confinement coupled with literary containment, if not total marginalization, led to a formidably innovative outburst that was to provide Egypt with most of its leading writers today, among whom Abd al-Hakim Qasim has left a unique imprint.

Like most of the members of this generation who redefined both socially and ideologically the profile of the Egyptian intellectual, Qasim was of a modest, rural background; for such as him, the new sociopolitical reality, brought about by the 1952 revolution, seemed to promise the possibility of a different future. He was born in 1935 in the small village of Mandara near the town of Tanta in the Egyptian Delta. Upon completing his high school education in Tanta, he moved to the capital during the mid-fifties where he took up small odd jobs.

For Qasim, as well as others, the move to Cairo was a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it meant intellectual growth and a chance for active political participation and the reshaping of the nation's history. On the other hand, it meant an alienating encounter with the urban "other," a nostalgia for a more familiar, rural self, total estrangement from the increasingly oppressive present, and ultimately mistrust of what the future might hold. Like many of his generation who shared the same dreams and disillusionments, Abd al-Hakim Qasim found himself arrested in 1960 for his in-

volvement in underground leftist organizations. He spent four years in a detention camp, where he managed to produce several short stories and the first draft of his extraordinary novel *The Seven Days of Man*.[4] It was only in 1965, one year after his release, that he completed the law degree that he had started before his detention.

Whereas the sixties produced the militant intellectual in the Egyptian cultural field, the seventies dictated exile as the only possible means of survival for many of these former militants. In the face of various repressive measures taken by President Anwar al-Sadat against both liberals and leftists who had sided with the student movement on the eve of the 1973 October War, some of Egypt's most prominent writers and critics were forced to leave the country.[5] Even though Qasim initially went to West Germany in 1974 by official invitation to give a series of lectures at the Free University of Berlin, he ended up residing there, with his wife and two children, until 1985. The general political climate in Egypt together with his opposition to the Camp David Accords were responsible for this long period of exile, during which he worked as a night guard, among other modest jobs, and

[4] Maria Stagh, *The Limits of Freedom of Speech: Prose Literature and Prose Writers in Egypt under Nasser and Sadat* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1993), p. 348. According to interviews with Stagh conducted in December 1988 and November 1989, Qasim was arrested on December 24, 1960, and sentenced to five years imprisonment by a military court in 1962. He was detained in al-Wâhât al-khârija and released on May 14, 1964, some days after Nikita Khrushchev's arrival in Egypt on an official visit. See also Stagh's case study of Abd al-Hakim Qasim (pp. 303–7).

[5] For more detailed information on this period, see Stagh, *Limits of Freedom of Speech*, pp. 98–102.

started a doctoral dissertation (which remained unfinished) on the underground movement in Egypt during the sixties.

Qasim's encounter with the West, however, had very little to do with what was described in his predecessors' writings. Taha Hussein, Tawfiq al-Hakim, and Yahya Haqqi, for instance, all prominent intellectuals and towering figures of the Egyptian cultural elite, had been formed in and by the West. Given the historical and material circumstances surrounding his departure, Qasim's experience of the West foregrounded its other face: the marginalizing, inhuman, and racist one. Hence the problematic search for a national identity that had characterized much of the writings of Qasim's predecessors becomes rearticulated and redefined in his work. Rather than upholding the Western "other" as a model to be followed in constructing a modernist identity, Qasim's experience in exile led him back to his Islamic roots, perhaps as a logical reaction to the devalorization to which he was subject.

Unlike the triumphant homecomings of the previous generation, Qasim's return to Egypt was an ailing one, marked by various unexpected, extreme positions that bespoke his crisis of identity. Upon his return, he began to write a column for the weekly *al-Sha'b,* organ of the Labour Party (the populist-Islamicist opposition), in which he attacked former fellow militants and writers; then he sought to be elected to Parliament on the list of the leftist opposition party al-Tajammu' but was defeated. Finally, he fell prey to a stroke that left him bitter, weak, and mildly handicapped. He died on November 13, 1990, leaving behind him three

novels; six collections of short stories, which included his novellas; one play; and an unfinished novel.

The successive appearance of Qasim's novels and collected stories during the eighties points not to periods of literary productivity but rather to his experience as a writer in exile: condemned in his own country, away from the public eye, and with few or no ties to local institutions or regional publishing outlets. The content, general structure, and style of Qasim's works further reflect his alienating stay in the West. The rupture with the homeland bred continuity in the narrative; with many texts centered on the young, maturing Abd al-Aziz, a Dedalus-like protagonist and haunting presence whose eye traces the various changes that beset his rural context, Qasim's work began to take on epic dimensions. The stories about Abd al-Aziz's village and people are interrelated and emphasize the centrality of rural society to Qasim's work, even during his years of exile. Narrated in a style that borrows its cadence and diction from classical and mystical Sufi texts, Qasim's work focuses, in many instances, on existential philosophical questions that reflect some of his own concerns while away from his homeland.

The Seven Days of Man, written early in Qasim's career, already maps out many of these characteristics. Its very title and structure echo the seven stages of Sufi rituals that, within the narrative, become successive chapters describing the intricate lives of the members of a Sufi order from the delta, who are preparing to go to the neighboring town of Tanta for their annual pilgrimage to the shrine of al-Sayyid al-Bad-

awi, one of the foremost "saints" in Egypt's popular Islam.[6] Likewise, the language of the narrative imitates, to a great extent, the rhythm and lexicon of the mystical texts that the Sufi group in the novel gathers to read and recite. It is through the loving gaze of the child Abd al-Aziz, son of Haj Karim, the prominent leader of the group, that we come to know this little village in *The Seven Days of Man*. Even though the gaze becomes more critical as Abd al-Aziz leaves the village for the city, the love and nostalgia for this aging, disintegrating world of the Sufi brothers never completely disappear. This nostalgia reemerges and continues to haunt Abd al-Aziz in many more tales by Qasim that draw on the mystical tradition for style and rhythm.

Hence the return to a literary and cultural past actually predates Qasim's nine years of exile. Such a return to a mystical heritage almost coincides with the unbearable Arab defeat of the sixties, thus pointing, perhaps, to an already existing sense of exile and alienation even within the homeland: an internal exile that sent many writers of this generation in search of experimental narrative forms and a new literary language through which they could give vent to their rebellion and sense of loss.

Many critics have rightly noted that Qasim's narratives on the Egyptian village distinguish themselves from a long history of representations of rural society in Egypt. Like a handful of writers of his generation—Mohammad Mus-

[6] For a detailed account of *The Seven Days of Man*, see Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1982), pp. 120–31.

tagab, Yahya Taher Abdallah, and Yusuf al-Qa'id, to mention only a few—he was able to resurrect the Egyptian village from the all-too-familiar "romanticism" and "social realism" that characterized the earlier decades of the century. The small village was no longer a pretext for the literary text, where arguments on social injustice, backward conditions, and class differences could be inscribed. Rather, the village became the very raison d'être of the text, its main protagonist, brought to life through the representation of its social fabric, its internal image and language. Not a static space anymore, the village was depicted through its transformations, its relationship to the city, its confrontations and frustrations with power, and, finally, its dreams and its mythologies. In all of this, Qasim's work offers a unique example of the radical differences that separate his generation's representation of the village from those of previous generations. The sixties generation were not the alienated intellectuals of the first half of the century, torn between their indigenous reality and the Western model, harsh critics of their time and space; nor were they the bards of a social realism that dominated the literary field with the advent of the revolution. Qasim's generation had different social and ideological trajectories: having distanced themselves from the European model and the slogans of the dominant ideology, they focused their attention on *what* to represent and *how* to represent it.

Naturally, such a questioning attitude toward existing representations of the "real" opened up several avenues of experimentation and innovation that, throughout the sixties and even beyond, allowed for the emergence of the marginal

within the literary text—socially, culturally, formally, and linguistically. The centrality of the members of the popular Sufi order to *The Seven Days of Man* is a case in point: rather than cast them in the dominant stereotype of the dervish (the Sufi disciple) as a half-crazed, asocial, and misfit individual, Qasim represents the "Brothers of the Path" as active members in the social and professional fabric of the village. Thus he restores to Sufism much of what it truly represented within the context of Egyptian society: an organized populist movement with its own historical institutions and rituals, more concerned with the inward, spiritual growth of the individual than the outward, social behavior that characterized the conformist and dogmatic face of Islam.

Al-Mahdi and *Good News from the Afterlife,* which constitute this volume, revisit and reshape many of Qasim's earlier concerns, whether they be ideological, cultural, or literary. Written in Berlin in 1977, *Al-Mahdi* is one of the most remarkable works by Qasim and is certainly a unique gem in contemporary Arabic literature. It was belatedly published in Beirut in 1984 with *Good News from the Afterlife* (also written in Berlin, in 1981), a less recognized but equally original text with regard to choice of subject matter, structure, and style.[7] Whereas *Al-Mahdi* exposes the dynamics of coercion and scapegoating in the world of the living, *Good News from the Afterlife* delves into the serenity and clear vision of the world of the dead. The disturbing questions that are raised by the

[7] Abd al-Hakim Qasim, *Al-Mahdi* and *Turaf min khabar al-âkhira* (Beirut: Dâr al-Tanwîr, 1984).

former text are, to some extent, confronted with in the latter, so that despite the evident differences between them, these two narratives may potentially be read as complements.

Through the profoundly moving story of the forced conversion to Islam of Awadallah, the umbrella maker, *Al-Mahdi* audaciously addresses the compromised position of a poor Coptic family caught between the rising popular, regimental power of the Muslim Brotherhood and the complicity and passivity of a more tolerant yet increasingly weak Sufi presence in rural Egypt. Even though the setting and context of *Al-Mahdi* are both local and culturally specific, this text succeeds in transcending its immediate boundaries through its sensitive reading of the universal dynamics of coercion, oppression, and hegemony. In the light of recent incidents in Egypt—the most shocking of which has been the 1994 stabbing of Naguib Mahfouz by a young Islamicist zealot—*Al-Mahdi* becomes a fearfully prophetic text that foresaw almost twenty years ago the dangers of excess.

Once more, it is through the critical yet distant and passive gaze of the young Abd al-Aziz that we meander through Qasim's mosaic-like text. The short juxtaposed narrative sequences that constitute *Al-Mahdi* allow for a vivid picture of life within a small hamlet that lies between the larger village of Mahallat al-Gayad and the neighboring town of Tanta in the delta. The initial scene introduces us to Ali Effendi, Abd al-Aziz's uncle and one of the Sufi brothers in the hamlet. Effendi speaks of the unifying, God-fearing impact that the teachings of the rising Muslim Brotherhood have had on the vying powerful families of Mahallat al-Gayad. The highly

organized, dogmatic, and very public Islamic power of the Muslim Brotherhood is then contrasted with the more intimate, mystical, private gathering of the Sufi order to which Ali Effendi belongs. The second narrative sequence opens with Master Awadallah's exodus, with his Coptic family, from the town of Tanta in search of work. From then on, the sequences alternate in telling how Ali Effendi stumbles upon Awadallah, takes him in, like a good Muslim, and naively surrenders him to the Muslim Brothers, who through their zealous religious fervor and oppressive, disarming generosity coerce him into converting to Islam. On the market day that the Muslim Brothers set for publicly announcing and celebrating in the hamlet Awadallah's conversion, Ali Effendi begins to feel responsible for the fate of a delirious, dying Awadallah whom he sees paraded as the "saintly" al-Mahdi through the streets of the crazed village. The text closes with the death of Awadallah just before his conversion, with Fula, his wife, making the sign of the cross over his dead body.

Peter Theroux's wise decision to maintain the Arabic title *Al-Mahdi* untranslated calls for a brief explanation. The word in Arabic literally means "he who is guided by God and can therefore provide guidance, show the way, or lead" (to the true faith). Further, the figure of al-Mahdi has historical and legendary significance not only within Islamic culture but within the Judeo-Christian tradition as well. For some Shia Muslims, the Imam or spiritual leader al-Mahdi has not died but is hidden and is certain to return in order to deliver and restore the Muslim faith and nation. This belief in a second coming associates al-Mahdi with the messianic

and the Christlike, as well as practices of scapegoating and crucifixions. The Arabic title consciously evokes all these associations, and the text itself proceeds to explode their irony, tension, and reversal through the Copt Awadallah al-Mahdi, who, during his last delirium before his public conversion, becomes Christ on his way to the crucifixion scene.

Whereas Al-Mahdi demonstrates a great economy of detail in depicting the intricacies of life in the village, *Good News from the Afterlife* meticulously renders the Islamic rituals that surround death, the descent into the grave, and the moment of judgment by the two angels Naker and Nakeer. Here again Qasim draws on formal Islamic teachings that animate the popular imagery as he dramatizes the judgment scene of the grave that supposedly awaits all human beings. However, rather than build on the popular, accusatory image of the angels, who are normally expected to list the sins of the deceased and their punishment, Qasim transforms Naker and Nakeer into sensitive ideologues and philosophers who debate questions of class, power, oppression, gender, and desire with the dead man.

The text begins with the grandson's journey through the alleys of the village to the beloved grandfather's house, where he rereads, with delight, the scrolls of their family tree, which traces back to the "saint" and founder of the village, Sidi Qutb. As the grandson contemplates the tree, he reflects on its mirror image underground and concludes that existence is twofold: half-apparent, half-hidden; half life, half death. The actual death of a neighbor in the village gives the

grandson occasion to participate in the funerary rituals, which the narrator goes to great lengths to describe. It is under the effect of a sunstroke that the grandson makes his journey to the underworld, where he descends into the neighbor's grave and envisions, as it were, with exquisite detail a replay of the neighbor's life, his encounter with Naker and Nakeer, and, ultimately, his judgment. All of these sequences provide further occasion for reflections on life and death, on the meaning of deeds and the meaning of judgment. The narrative sequences of the text bear subtitles of the entire process, beginning with death and proceeding to the grave, the two angels, judgment, and, finally, resurrection, insisting once more on the twofold nature of existence and culminating in the grandson's delirious statement at the end: "We are the ones who carry more death than life in our bodies. Only we know the news of the afterlife. We are the ones who can give life to the mortal world."

In both *Al-Mahdi* and *Good News from the Afterlife,* Qasim adopts an omniscient point of view, as he often does in many of his other works. This all-knowing position, constructed in the predominance of narrative passages over dialogue (especially in *Good News*), joins with a marked tendency toward repetition and a style that oscillates between the classical and the mystical idiom to provide the texts with a chilling stillness, almost a sense of permanence. It is perhaps appropriate that this occurs in two texts written in exile by a man seeking to resurrect and recapture the homeland, in both life and death. Today, Peter Theroux's careful and elegant English translation recasts these two very special narratives for a

much wider audience whom Qasim did not have the chance to know.

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