

Tarnopol, the protagonist's estranged but still lethally ascendant wife, Roth has created the quintessential bitch, his most telling study to date in draconian love.

The book takes the form of a pair of short stories, "Salad Days" and "Court-ing Disaster," by Peter Tarnopol, followed by "My True Story," his account of the matrimonial catastrophe that provided their raw material. The short stories, which in strictly artistic terms are more successful than the memoir, serve as evidence of Tarnopol's obsession with his hated marriage, an obsession from which he is unable to free himself even after Maureen's death, and are only fully intelligible against that background.

Tarnopol regards his marriage as a trap set for him not only by Maureen, who tricked him into believing she was pregnant, but in some sense by himself as well. Both he and Nathan Zuckerman, his persona in the short stories, fall victims to the notion, brought on by an excessive susceptibility to the influence of fiction, that only suffering validates existence, that life is significant only when it is intensely disagreeable. Hypnotized by the images of life as it appears in the works of their favorite writers, they are distrustful of happiness. Thus, they reject women they find desirable and with whom they might have been happy in favor of psychosexual cripples whose attraction lies in the misery they have endured and can inflict.

The women in the novel, in both the short stories and the personal narrative, reveal Roth's characteristic strength-in-weakness as a storyteller; they are roughly divisible into two types, identifiable as the Ones Who Got Away and the "Shiksas." The former are everyman's erotic fantasy and do not so much get away as they are wantonly thrown away by a protagonist temporarily blind to their value, while the latter are always either frigid or sexually repulsive and usually destructive of the hero's capacities as an artist. With variations, and sometimes in combination, these types appear over and over again in Roth's work.

Yet as types they are so powerfully drawn that one is embarrassed to describe them as such. This is especially true of Maureen, who is like something out of a nightmare. Her characterization is essentially two-dimensional—Roth makes no

attempt to be fair—but she is an incredibly effective monster, like a modern Medea seen exclusively from Jason's point of view.

There is a certain amount of fat in this novel—the account of Tarnopol's break with his analyst, with its endless back-and-forth over the patient's right to privacy, is pure self-indulgence and should have been drastically edited—but, in spite of this and the very real suffering of all its characters, *My Life as a Man* is a wonderfully funny book and possibly Roth's finest so far.

Nicholas Guild

ISMA'IL WALYY AL-DIN

Homos Akhdar

Cairo: Kitabat Mo'aserah, 1973.
Pp. 96. Piasters 10.

Homos Akhdar is the third part of Isma'il Walyy al-Din's trilogy *al-Gamalia* (the other two parts are *Hammam al-Malatili*, 1971, and *al-Aqmar*, 1972). *al-Gamalia*, an old district of Cairo, is the setting for this trilogy and the common thread that joins the three parts together. The characters of the novel are either representatives of the lowest social class who are doomed to live in this poor slum area, or else they represent those elements of the upper class who, for some reason or another, are attracted to this underdeveloped part of Cairo.

The protagonist of *Homos Akhdar* may be placed among the upper class. Badie'a, a divorcee in her early fifties is a lonely desperate woman whose adopted son was killed in a car accident; in this fashion she lost the only person who gave meaning to her life. Another reason for her desperation is the fact that—for political reasons—she is not permitted to lecture or publish anything concerning her field of research: the history of Cairo during the Fatimid era.

At the funeral of her son she meets a young undertaker to whom she feels attracted in spite of his poverty, vulgarity, and moral corruption. The master-servant relationship between the two de-

velops rapidly into a winter-spring love affair. This young man and his dissolute environment are her last hope for a "normal" life. Fathi, a mean opportunist, knows how to use and degrade her. His family—a greedy ill-reputed mother, a sister who earns a living as a prostitute, and another mentally deranged sister—exploit Badie's desperate situation. To escape this continuous humiliation, Badi'a decides to marry the young man and take him away from his miserable environment. On their wedding day Fathi dies in a car accident. Faced again with loneliness and desolation, Badi's collapses and loses her sanity.

There is no doubt that the author has succeeded in depicting the loneliness and desperation of the protagonist as well as in portraying the corrupted life and miserable environment of the young man. Since the story occupies only eighty-five pages, a close examination of the author's style and narrative techniques is challenging and rewarding. The author experiments with different techniques and consequently his story has no uniform style. After reading the first ten pages one gains the impression that the author is lost amidst these varied points of view. The omniscient narrator—indispensable to the majority of Egyptian novels—appears unjustifiably from time to time to stop the protagonist's stream of consciousness or to interrupt the indirect interior monologue; but he does not add any important element to the story nor does he help in widening the point of view. Undoubtedly these modernistic techniques enable the reader to discover the very inner life of the protagonist, but—due to their very limited scope—they do not shed any light on the thoughts, moods, and feelings of the other characters and especially of the young man. One would expect the narrator to fulfill this function—thus justifying his presence—but the author assigns him no such duty.

Considering the fact that most of the Egyptian novels acclaimed for their literary and artistic merits are influenced to a great degree by the French, English, and—to a certain extent—the Russian novelists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and that Egyptian writers have only recently started to experiment with modernistic narrative techniques, one would appreciate the situation of the young writer who attempts in the shortest time possible to

catch up with his contemporaries in Europe and in the Americas. Such overzealous attempts give rise to a few remarkable novels; however, they also account for the great number of novels and short stories whose literary and artistic merit are very questionable. Thankfully, in spite of its deficiency, Waly al-Din's novel belongs to the happy few!

S. Elkhadem

MARTIN LIGHT

The Quixotic Vision of Sinclair Lewis
West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue
University Press, 1975. Pp. 162.
\$6.50.

This book takes the very valid insight that Sinclair Lewis and some of his major characters are Quixotic, and attempts to push that insight as far as it will go in interpreting Lewis's works. It is at its best in the discussion of *Main Street*, for Carol Kennicott is undoubtedly Quixotic; she is a romantic who wants to conquer and reform the world and thinks that Gopher Prairie might be her opportunity. And, says Mr. Light, "At every thrust from Carol, a villager exposes his own foolishness or hypocrisy about education, economics, politics, religion. . . . Carol induces the community to expose itself" (p. 65). And the book is good on Arrow-smith, who is also obviously a Quixotic. And there is something of the Quixotic in *Babbitt*, too.

Lewis is at his best as a satirist of the vulgarity of *Babbitts* and *Elmer Gantrys*. What is troubling about Lewis is that his style is sometimes as vulgar as the speech he parodies. His writing is often embarrassingly bad—and yet "Babbitt" has become part of our language and Carol Kennicott and Elmer Gantry are almost archetypal figures in American literature. The truth is, as Mr. Light quotes Lewis saying, "Actually I like the *Babbitts*, the Dr. *Pickerbaughs*, the *Will Kennicotts*, and even the *Elmer Gantrys* rather better than anyone else on earth" (p. 125).