

etymological introduction to *Moby-Dick*. Much of what Mendelson says not only illuminates *Gravity's Rainbow*, but defines the entire genre of encyclopedic narrative, and Mendelson concludes his tour-de-force by showing how *Gravity's Rainbow* is a self-conscious encyclopedic narrative, placing it as the latest development in the history of the genre.

Perhaps the most original essay in this collection is Mathew Winston's "The Quest for Pynchon," an attempt to provide an introductory biography to this most secretive personality. Winston has brought together a great deal of information about his subject, Pynchon's efforts to the contrary, some of which will be essential to later studies of Pynchon's life and work. Other essays in the collection by Catharine R. Stimpson on Pynchon's early fiction, W. T. Lhamon, Jr. on *V*, William Vesterman on Pynchon's poetry, and Marjorie Kaufman and David Leverenz on *Gravity's Rainbow*, cannot be fully discussed here, but they furnish additional, informative views of Pynchon's work. All of the essays in this book are worth reading for anyone seriously interested in the explanation of Thomas Pynchon.

Taken together, these two books on Pynchon might be defined as exploratory. While neither displays the coherent view of Pynchon's work that remains to be written, both show the scope of his fiction as well as the acumen and insight any future critic of his work will have to possess in order to explain him adequately. It is quite possible that, as both books consciously or unconsciously imply, there can be no "coherent" view of Pynchon, no explaining him within any traditional critical boundaries. But the human need for order, of which Pynchon so eloquently speaks, will prevail, the attempts to explain Pynchon will be made, and those who wish to describe the order of Pynchon's world will need to do so with caution and sophistication: they will, doubtless, need these books at the starting point of their tour through Pynchon's landscape.

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## Despair, Madness, and Political Tyranny in *Three Contemporary Egyptian Novels*

This new book, translated and edited by Dr. Saad El-Gabalawy (Fredericton, N.B.: York Press, 1979), reveals the richness and subtlety of recent Egyptian fiction. The three novels in this collection—*From Travels of the Egyptian Odysseus* by Saad Elkhadem, *al-Karnak* by Najib Mahfouz, and *Hommos Akhdar* by Ismail Waly al-Din—represent a flourishing literature; they are deeply rooted in Egyptian culture, its history, and its recent political situations, yet each touches universal concerns. Obviously, political matters press for consideration in a country like Egypt, but each author is careful to present his analysis of Egypt's political fortunes and misfortunes in compelling stories. The novels derive their energy from interesting narrative and arresting characters; they acquire their resonance from complex form and symbolic logic. Not only do these novels

strikingly portray the modern world suffering cross-cultural lobotomy, but they also indicate that experimentation is not the preserve of the European novel. In each case form and content are finely balanced; whereas the world in each novel suffers from a lethargy of meaningful effort, the form of the books is a powerful reminder of positive value. In short, these three Egyptian novels deserve translation; they speak to us all.

All strong literature seeks translation by strong readers, and in Saad El-Gabalawy these three novels have the translator they deserve. Translating the texts is one task and El-Gabalawy's prose is clear and intense, but translating the spirit of the books is another task, a critical task. In his critical introduction to the novels El-Gabalawy not only translates for us cultural allusions unavailable to most English readers, but he also translates the universal themes presented by each author. The "Introduction" deals with the three novels in the order they appear, adopting basically a formalist method of critical comment. At times, however, El-Gabalawy offers intriguing snatches of phenomenological analysis. For example, when discussing the stream of consciousness technique of Elkhadem's fine novel, *From Travels of the Egyptian Odysseus*, El-Gabalawy warns the reader of the book's difficulties. Elkhadem's novel, he suggests, will reward the imaginative reader by turning him into an artist "who arranges the different pieces [of the disjunctive narrative] together" thus attaining "a feeling of triumph which naturally quickens response" (p. 9). This is tantalizing, and we could hear more about the relationship between these texts and their reader. Such a discussion is promising in the present context when texts reflecting an Arabic culture confront readers who represent such different perspectives. What can happen is a fruitful interchange of ideas and values, accompanied by a pleasant reminder that literature unifies the human imagination without unformalizing it.

The tone of the "Introduction" is appreciative. Clearly, El-Gabalawy admires the three novels. He communicates this not through effusive praise, but rather through pertinent evaluation. In describing Waly al-Din as a realist, El-Gabalawy conveys his sense of the novelist's ability: "By means of powerful suggestive strokes, he re-creates a vivid picture of this fascinating area [Old Cairo]" (p. 16). This does not mean, however, that the translator avoids criticizing. Although his comments on *al-Karnak* are generally positive, he does suggest—and rightly so—that the novel's "main flaw" is its didacticism, its "direct condemnation of despotism, using slogans and platitudes which will not stand the test of severe thought" (p. 13).

Because the "Introduction" treats each book separately there is little preparation for the similarities between the novels, a similarity that derives from their ambience rather than their technique or their ostensible concerns. On the surface each novel is strikingly dissimilar, and they might be classified loosely as comic/absurdist (*From Travels of the Egyptian Odysseus*), tragic/political (*al-Karnak*), and ironic/pathetic (*Hommos Akhdar*). Perhaps before clarifying the similarities between the novels, this classification should be explained. *From Travels of the Egyptian Odysseus* will be familiar to readers of English literature because of its strain of bizarre, if not black, comedy. We follow the thought patterns of the main character as he lies in a hospital bed in Philadelphia. His mental meandering, his quest to integrate his psyche, to feel "at home," encompasses his past, his present, and his future in which Detroit becomes his vision of Ithaca. The absurdity of the situation, however, arises from the fact that he suffers severe paranoia manifesting itself in his desperate fear that his wife Elizabeth plots with hospital authorities to kill him, and in his notion—whether real or imaginary remains a mystery—that he has a cancerous tumor the size of a

hazelnut on his brain. What amounts to sage and serious contemplation of his past and his country's difficulties is continuously interrupted by bouts of marvellously silly paranoia. Not all the comedy derives from our evaluation of the character's mental state. He too has a sure sense of humor. Take for example his description of the conversation in the first class section of a Cairo bus on the first day of the 1967 Six-Day War: "The crisis is over . . . America is scared and Israel is wetting its pants out of fear. The Vice-President is traveling abroad to explain everything. A masterstroke, no doubt. . . . Montgomery himself said that the Egyptian soldier is the best fighter in the world. No, sir, excuse me, it was Hitler who said that" (p. 35). That "No, sir, excuse me" is a nice touch of local detail. And there is fine comic irony in a situation that gives us a mind seeking liberation, a mind locked in a body ensconced in a hospital in Philadelphia, the "home" of American liberty.

*Al-Karnak* I have termed a "tragic" novel. This is the most unrelentingly political of the three novels, but it gains its greatest force from the effects of political tyranny on the hopes for love and relationship experienced by three of its characters. First there is the aging belly dancer and café owner, Qoronfola. Her dancing carries with it the metaphoric suggestion of harmony and hope, but we recall that her dancing days are long past. Her tragedy is not merely that because of her emotional attachments she cannot protect herself from the debilitating effects of political tyranny, but also that, like all of us, she grows old and with her passes an art and an era. Her days as an admired *artiste* are behind her, and her love for a young man must end sadly because of political events. But are Qoronfola's amours doomed by politics alone? The book ends with a new young lover for Qoronfola; the narrator, whose ability to grasp complexities of feeling is suspect anyway, wishes Qoronfola and her young lover "can attain purity and innocence." Such a wish is fine, but perhaps less than assured.

More clearly tragic is the fate of the novel's young lovers, Ismail El-Sheikh and Zeinab Diab. These two have known and loved each other since their childhood. Their love is innocent. Then come the secret police, incarceration, and demeaning treatment from the brutal Khaled Safwan. Both Ismail and Zeinab are imprisoned without reason, and the description of their treatment is the most powerful part of the book. Stripped from them is their human dignity. They both become political informers and they both suffer agonies of shame and guilt that can only destroy their relationship. For these young lovers there can be no "purity and innocence."

The third novel, Waly al-Din's *Hommos Akhdar*, brilliantly defines the malaise of modern urban living, its loneliness and despair, by describing the descent into madness of its main character, the intelligent and refined historian Badie'a. The book is ironic in the sense that it presents us with a world inimical to human values. In *al-Karnak*, love exists; the tragedy is that it constantly suffers defeat. Here, however, there is no love; only exploitation and falsity. The world of *Hommos Akhdar* is a world in ruins; shades of the prison house have darkened into the shadow of death. Even a marriage ceremony becomes a ritual of violence and violation. The central image of life in the book underlines the ironic tone: "In the court there was a cactus plant spreading in a dreadful shape like an octopus. They do not water it, but it keeps growing to instil fear in people's hearts. It lasts and we die, preceded by our loved ones" (p. 145). But "loved ones" in *Hommos Akhdar* are little more than possessions, things to secure our sense of meaning (see especially p. 164).

The three novels, then, differ; they range from the dazzling technical display (and wit) of Elkhadem's book to the profoundly disturbing atmosphere

of Walyy al-Din's novel. Nevertheless, as I said earlier, the novels share an ambience. Each contains a wanderer, or an exile. In *From the Travels of the Egyptian Odysseus* the mental wanderer and Egyptian exile seeks a refuge in Detroit; in *al-Karnak*, the café is "a perfect resting place for a wanderer" (p. 69); and in *Hommos Akhdar*, Badie'a feels exiled from her social class and from her professional colleagues and she drifts into madness. Madness forms a link between Elkhadem's novel and Walyy al-Din's, and all three suggest despair and madness are the product of political tyranny. This theme is least apparent in *Hommos Akhdar*, but even here there is a sinister reminder of how the state reacts to those who appear to threaten it. Because of what Badie'a says in a seminar, the political "pressure on her became increasingly cruel and hysterical" and ultimately drives her into deep depression and paranoia. We cannot protect ourselves from the politics of power no matter what our age or what our profession. Nor can we travel away from it; Odysseus, whether he is Egyptian or Greek or American, can only continue to search while struggling with his despair.

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## DAVID WATMAUGH

*No More Into the Garden*

New York: Doubleday, 1978. Pp. 207.

## JOAN BARFOOT

*Abra*

Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1978. Pp. 198.

Since Genesis man has preserved the myth of the garden, that secluded, ideal world that is a refuge from the ills of society. Two recent novels which employ the garden as a central image but in different manners and with different conclusions are David Watmaugh's *No More Into the Garden* and Joan Barfoot's *Abra*.

Watmaugh's novel tells the story of Davey Bryant: his childhood in Cornwall, education in London, travels in France and teaching and writing career in Vancouver. The theme of the novel is the loss of innocence which comes for Davey with the discovery of his homosexuality and his struggle to come to terms with his condition which takes the form of several distinct stages: initial aversion and shame, then avoidance and sublimation, next total indulgence and finally, in middle age, mature acceptance. The early stages of adjustment are characterized by escapist yearnings to return to a state of youth and innocence (the garden), and take the form in Davey's mind of his idyllic childhood in rural Cornwall described in terms that are highly reminiscent of Dylan Thomas: the sensuous pleasures of Christmas and the beauty of nature. It is only in the final stage that Davey realizes and accepts the fact that the garden