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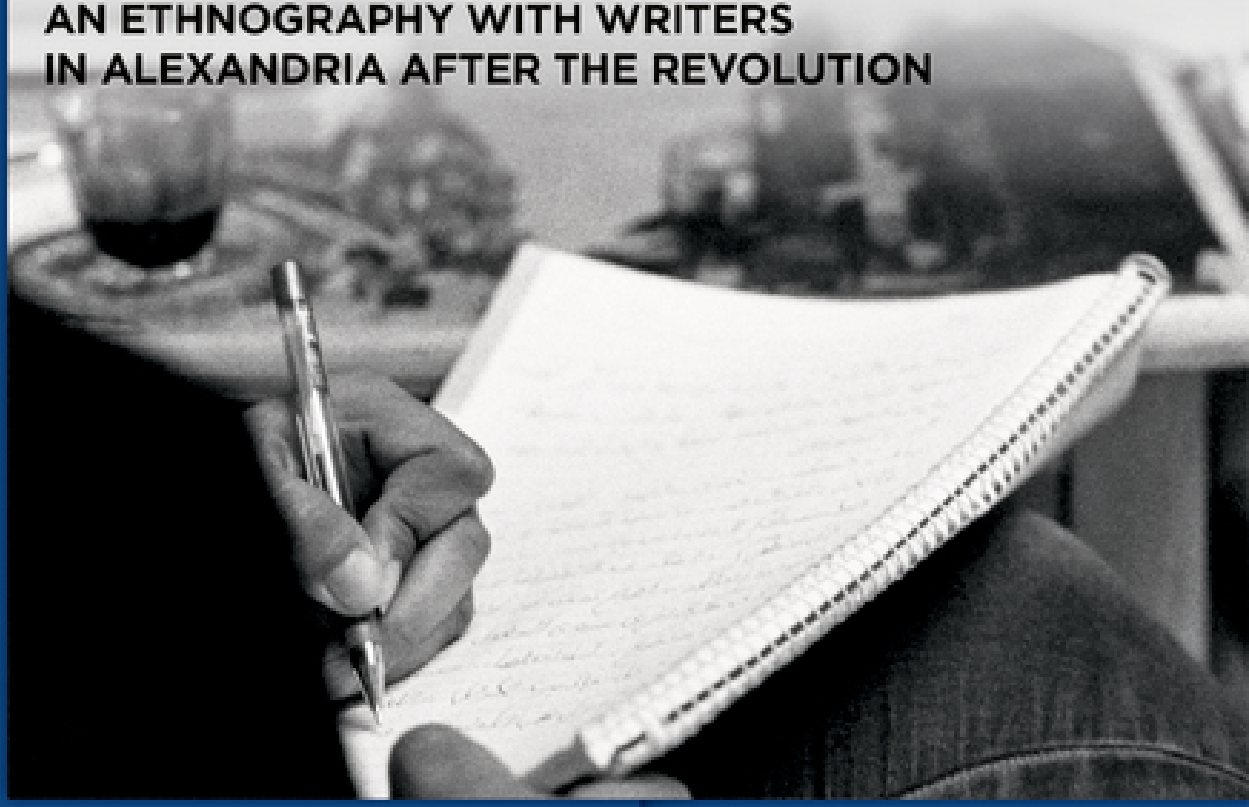
Samuli Schielke, Mukhtar Saad Shehata

SHARED MARGINS

AN ETHNOGRAPHY WITH WRITERS IN ALEXANDRIA AFTER THE REVOLUTION



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Shared Margins

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Herausgegeben von
Ulrike Freitag

Band 41

Samuli Schielke and Mukhtar Saad Shehata

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An Ethnography with Writers in Alexandria after the Revolution

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Cover image: Eman Salah writing in her notebook. Photo by Samuli Schielke, Alexandria, 2015.

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To Mahmoud Abu Rageh (1971–2018)

Contents

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The greatest thanks go to those whose names or pseudonyms appear in the book. We do not repeat them here one by one, hopeful that book itself may be the best form of recognition for them. In addition to those who are mentioned in this book by name or pseudonym, we thank the following persons for their support, hospitality, friendship, ideas, critical feedback, and suggestions in the course of the research, writing, and publication: al-Hajj Abduh Shehata, Adam Reed, Alexandra Schindler, Alia Mosallam, Alice Elliot, Amany Maher, Amr Khairy, André Chappate, Aymon Kreil, Bassem Abu Gweily, Belal Fadl, Bettina Gräf, Carl Rommel, Charis Boutieri, Dalia Farouq, Darci Sprengel, Denise Dias Barros, Dina Wahba, Florian Kohstall, Heike Liebau, Heimo Lattner, Henri Onodera, Howeida Saleh, Huda Bakour, Iskander Abdallah, Jakob Lindfors, Jennifer Peterson, Jessica Winegar, Karin Ahlberg, Kevin Eisenstadt, Khaled Fahmy, Laura Menin, Lubna Abdallah, Maged Makram, Mahfouz Agh Adnan, Mahmoud Barakat, Mahrous Shehata, Mamoun Azmi, Muhammad Saad Shehata, Mustafa Wafi, Nael Eltoukhy, Nayera Abdel Rahman, Norman Saadi Nikro, Paola Abenante, Paolo Gaibazzi, Pascale Ghazaleh, Rania Gheath, Rania Sultan, Rebecca Skreslet Hernandez, Richard Jacquemond, Sameh El Halawany, Senni Jyrkiäinen, Sertaç Sehlikoğlu, Shady Basyouni, Sonja Hegasy, Teresa Pepe, Ulrike Freitag, Waleed Alaa Eldin, Yahia Shawkat, Youssef El Chazli, Zizo Khadr, and Zuzanna Olszewska. Our apologies to all those we have inadvertently omitted.

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Mahmoud Abu Rageh, a wonderful and extraordinary thinker, storyteller, and historian of his native quarter of

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Nazla. He was among the people who gave the original inspiration for the writing of this book, and he is dearly missed.

Several institutions have hosted us in the course of this project: Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient has been Samuli's extremely supportive employer throughout the project, with funding provided by the German Federal Ministry of Research and Education. At the ZMO, Samuli's work and ideas were shaped by discussions with colleagues in the In Search of Europe research project (2010–14) and the Trajectories of Lives and Knowledge thematic unit (2014–19). The Berlin Graduate School Muslim Cultural Societies was Samuli's employer for one year from 2016 to 2017, and for eight months from 2018 to 2019 Samuli was employed part-time in the Comparative Anthropologies of Revolutionary Politics (CARP) project at University College London funded by the European Research Council. Mukhtar's graduate studies at the State University of Bahia were enabled by a scholarship by Programa de Pós-Graduação em Estudos Africanos, Povos Indígenas e Culturas Negras. The Alexandria branch of the Egyptian Writers' Union, El Behna Wekala, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Café al-Bawwabin, Fabrica, Gudran Association, Kunstraum Kreuzberg/Bethanien, and Studio El-Madina have welcomed us at various times for fieldwork, collaborative projects, and writing retreats. We are furthermore indebted to the numerous participants in events we attended and co-organised at these and other venues, and who provided us with valuable feedback and ideas.

Parts of this book and ideas that contributed to its shaping have been presented in different states of incompleteness at a number of lectures and conferences: Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (2011), General Public artspace (2011), University of North Carolina Charlotte (2011), Free University of Berlin (2012), Cairo University (2012), German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) Cairo (2012), Sabanci University (2012), University of Oslo (2013), Northwestern University (2013), Annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association (2012, 2013); 'In Search of Europe?' exhibition in Kunstraum Kreuzberg/Bethanien (2013–14), World Congress of Middle East Studies (2014), Biannual meeting of German Anthropological Society (2015), Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient (2015, 2016), El Cabina cultural space (2016), Leipzig University (2017), University of Heidelberg (2017), Jesuit Cultural Centre in Alexandria (2017), Bibliotheca Alexandrina (2017), Cambridge University (2018), Nonreligion+Secularity Research Network biannual conference (2018), Fluminense Federal University (2018), Conference of the Brazilian Association of Historians (2018), Czech Academy of Sciences (2019), CEDEJ, Cairo (2019), Alexandria Branch of the Egyptian Writers' Union (2019), and University of Amsterdam (2019). Some of the ideas presented in this book have also been shaped in courses taught by Samuli Schielke in Visual and Media Anthropology at the Free University of Berlin (2010–20), and in the

study circle 'Anthropological readings in our contemporary world' at Bibliotheca Alexandrina (2014–17). These events and the feedback we received at them have been extremely helpful in shaping our argument in this book.

The original chapter drafts were written over an extended period of time, and many of them have been previously published in different form. Chapter 1, 'Why write, and why not stop?' was written in 2019 and 2020 and has not been published elsewhere. Chapter 2, 'Infrastructures of imagination', and Chapter 3, 'The writing of lives', include passages from a working paper written in 2015 (Schielke and Shehata 2016) and an essay from 2020 (Shehata 2020), but those passages have been heavily revised, rearranged, and expanded for this book. Chapter 4, 'Can poetry change the world?' was written in 2013–14 and published in Arabic and English in 2014 and 2016 (Schielke 2014, 2016b). The version included in this book has been substantially revised and given a new beginning and ending. Chapter 5, 'Where is Alexandria?' was written as a first draft in 2013, then heavily revised in 2016 and published in Arabic the same year (Schielke 2016a). A short version was published in English in 2020 (Schielke 2020b). The version included in this book is a revised and extended version of the longer Arabic essay. Chapter 6, 'Writing on walls' was composed and published between 2017 and 2018 (Schielke 2018) and is reproduced in this book with some additions. Some of the images were previously published in Winegar and Schielke 2012. Chapters 7 'Is prose poetry a conspiracy against the Noble Qurʾan?' and 8 'The search for a clear vision' were written between 2017 and 2018 and form a pair. A theory-heavy version of Chapter 7 with a focus on secularity was published in 2019 (Schielke 2019); Chapter 8 is previously unpublished. The Introduction and the Afterword were written in 2020 and have not been published elsewhere.

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On names, pronouns, and spelling

Contrary to anthropological custom, most people appear in this book either with their real names or with their established pen names. As writers, they have an expressed desire to be recognised and known in that capacity. Passages where we speak about the lives of authors or quote unpublished texts by them while mentioning their names have been discussed and revised in agreement with them. Whenever we have not been able to reach the people we write about, or when mentioning them by name might have caused them embarrassment or problems, we refer to them with initials. These pseudonyms may or may not refer to their real initials.

This book has two authors. Some chapters are co-authored, while some are not. 'We' refers throughout the book to Samuli Schielke and Mukhtar Saad Shehata. In co-authored chapters, both authors appear individually in the third person as Mukhtar and Samuli. In single-authored chapters, 'I' refers to Samuli Schielke.

Colloquial Egyptian Arabic and most forms of written Arabic (there are some recent exceptions) use the male gender in pronouns, verbs, and nouns for both men and women. We have not changed this in citations and translations. Since there is no difference between masculine and feminine plural in English, some of the systematically male-gendered structure of collective terms in Arabic (such as masculine plural *kuttab* for feminine plural *katibat*, 'writers') is lost in translation.

There are many ways to represent Arabic in Latin letters: those that are standardised are not commonly used by Arabic speakers, while those that are commonly used by Arabic speakers are not standardised. In this book, we use a simplified version of the IJMES rules for Arabic transcription whenever applicable. For names of people, we use the Latinised spellings that are used by individuals themselves. Names of places are spelled following common use in Egypt. This results in some inevitable inconsistency, such as the determinate article ال that is usually spelled El in Egypt, but al- in IJMES transcription, and the vowels و and ي that are usually spelled o and e in Egypt, but u and i in IJMES transcription. Passages of Arabic poetry are reproduced in Arabic as they are originally spelled by their authors, not in Latinised transcription.

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List of illustrations

All photos by Samuli Schielke unless otherwise indicated

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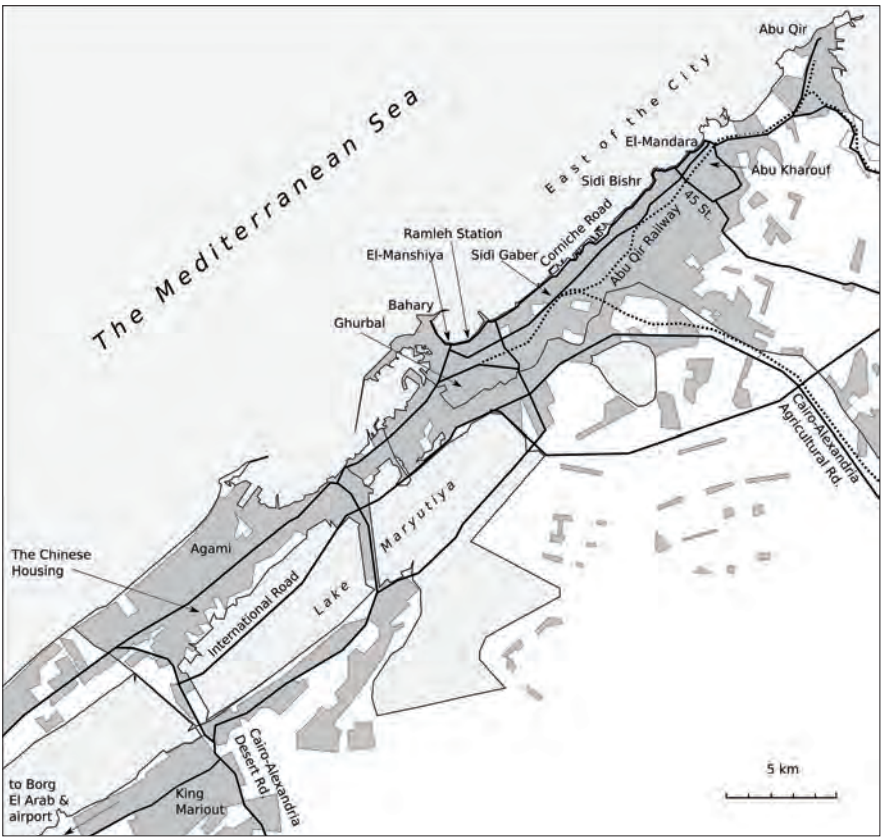

Image 1: Map of Alexandria, showing main roads and built areas in 2016. (Based on map data on Open Street Maps and Google Maps).

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Samuli Schielke

Introduction: Where is Literature?

Egypt's thwarted revolution of 2011 invited much scholarly and public interest in Egyptian creative expression (*ibdaʿ* in Arabic). There has been much well-deserved attention paid to artworks and music, slogans and poems, blogs and novels, and those producing or making use of them – especially in the context of the revolutionary uprising.[1] Much of this attention has been rather selective, however. International interest in contemporary Egyptian cultural production has been almost exclusively focused on Cairo, and has until recently tended to highlight specific scenes that harmonise with the tastes and desires of a liberal-left international audience. This bias has recently been somewhat balanced by accounts with a wider perspective that includes a greater variety of aesthetics, and sites other than Cairo (notably El-Chazli 2018; Jacquemond and Lagrange 2020; Sprengel 2020a, 2020c). Cultural production in Egypt is grounded in a plurality of configurations of aesthetics and politics, and most of it takes place outside the internationally visible cosmopolitan scene. If we want to understand how artistic and literary imagination may be part of social dynamics, including both changes and continuities, it is imperative to pay attention to that plurality.

This book tells of writers, writing, and literary milieus in Alexandria, Egypt's second city. Some of them lean towards international avant-gardes, while others are committed to more conservative styles. Some of them have supported the uprising, others have supported the regime, and many have done both. Few have been successful beyond their circles, and it is unlikely that readers who are not familiar with Alexandria's literary scenes will know them. This is a conscious choice. Stardom is rare and exceptional. Most writers gain at best a modest share of fame and success in the course of their careers. This book tells their stories.

The book is made up of two parts, which have different configurations of authorship, and together make a twofold argument. Research was conducted

1 With regard to literature, see Mehrez (2012); Colla (2012); Schanda (2013); El-Hajj (2020); and Jacquemond (2020). In the field of writing, bloggers in particular have gained significant attention (e.g. Hirschkind 2011; Jurkiewicz 2012; Pepe 2014). This is partly because blogging was instrumental in the shift of language and style that marked the first decade of the online era in Arabic writing that coincided with the 2011 uprisings. Blogs also provide a more durable record for study than other forms of online textual production. By the time of writing this in 2020, the short golden age of blogs was already over in Egypt, and blogs had become just one online medium among others, accompanied and overshadowed by more transient formats of social media (see Pepe 2014: 47).

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from 2010 to 2019 by an anthropologist and writer in collaboration: the anthropologist Samuli Schielke, who is the 'I' speaking in first person singular in this introduction and in the second half of the book, and the writer Mukhtar Saad Shehata, who together with Samuli is the 'we' speaking in first person plural in passages describing fieldwork throughout the book, and as the collective author's voice in the first half of this book.

The first half of the book, titled 'About writing' and co-authored by Samuli and Mukhtar, is an attempt to understand literature as a social practice between individual motivations on the one hand, and the supportive and limiting structures of societal and literary milieus on the other; together, these enabled the formations of certain literary voices and lives in Alexandria during the 2010s. Literary writing, we argue, has marginality as an at once enabling and limiting condition. It provides spaces of imaginary excess that may go beyond the taken-for-granted of a societal milieu, and yet are never unlimited. The shaping of imaginary and lived personae in this tension between idiosyncrasies and milieus is what we call the writing of lives.

The second half of the book, titled 'Writing about' and authored by Samuli while based on our shared fieldwork, explores some key themes of writing that we encountered – revolution, urbanity, religious faith, doubts, and certainties – and which all in one way or another address a life-worldly experience of plurality in absence of pluralism, where different ways of living, visions, and life, as well as corresponding literary aesthetics, coexist in conflict. The writers whom we met, and their writings, help us to think about literary imagination as part and parcel of such social conflicts and transformations, its role being neither one of resistance against power nor of guidance towards norms, but rather one of open-ended complicity.

Where is literature?

In his study of literary reading in Colonial Egypt, Michael Allan (2016) engages with a set of texts to argue against the assumption that there can be a world literature that is actually open to the world at large. Instead, Allan argues, 'literature' was a historically specific formation that was crafted and shaped in a colonial context, and that included some ways of writing and imagining while excluding others. The realm of world literature, according to Allan, is provincial and limited by the inherent secularity (in the sense of a differentiation of spheres of life that detaches imagination from the divine) of its imagination. In Chapters 7 and 8, I will question whether that world really is as secular as Allan depicts it to be.

However, I agree with him about the inherent provinciality of any definition of literature. There can be no neutral and conclusive definition of what is and what is not literature, because it is never just a genre of speech or writing, but first and foremost a social institution. Any shared idea of literature is therefore grounded in relations of power, including some and excluding others. Importantly, it always includes normative aspects: those involved in it have implicit and explicit ideas about what is good literature, what deserves to be considered literature, and what does not.

Therefore, this book does not ask what literature is: for our purposes, it is everything that people we met in our fieldwork considered to be literature. They disagreed on many accounts. Some people greatly appreciated writings that others considered to be ridiculously wanting. Some people wrote poetry that others did not recognise as such. Some writings we encountered, such as graffiti and social media, were located on the hazy fringes of literature, possessing some aspects of what people we met would consider literary quality, while lacking others.

Instead, this book seeks answers to a more descriptive question: where is literature? Literature as a social institution cannot be deductively defined, but it can be described in a historical context. Asking 'where' instead of 'what' also means that this book is not intended to be a critical overview of the best and most important literature from Alexandria. In fact, many prominent Alexandrian authors and their works are absent from it. Such an overview would require critical reading, analysis, and appreciation (as well as deprecation) of texts, highlighting some of them as more worthy of attention than others. In contrast, this book is based on a decidedly 'uncritical reading' (inspired by Adam Reed 2018) of texts, intersected with the subjectivities of their authors and readers, and the social relations and circulations that make up literary life. Whenever possible, authors' own interpretations of their texts are privileged, and their critical debates about other texts are drawn upon. I believe that this makes it possible to discover something about the societal grounding and relevance of literary writing that might be invisible in a critical reading.

This also means that we will not try to deconstruct, naturalise, or redefine key analytical terms that we have encountered and employed, because in our research context those terms are both emic and etic (that is, part of the language of the people whom we are studying, as well as the professional jargon of researchers). Such terms include literature and its Arabic counterpart *adab*, culture (*thaqafa*), and cultural production (*ibdaʿ*, also translatable as creative expression), all of which involve implicit and explicit normative claims and positionalities. As much as possible, we try to use these words with an awareness for their contextual meanings and implicit claims.

By doing so, this book aligns with a small but thriving academic subfield of anthropologies and sociologies of literature, writing, and cultural production, drawing notably upon Sayyid Uways (1991) on messages written on cars and carts in Egypt, Walter Armbrust (1996) on Egyptian twentieth-century modernism, Jessica Winegar (2006) on the rise of the private-sector art scene, Richard Jacquemond (2008) on Egyptian literatures of the twentieth century, Samia Mehrez (2010) on cultural politics in Egypt, Giedrė Šabasevičiūtė (2019a) on conservative literary circles in Cairo, and recent work about creative expression in Egypt collected in a roundtable edited by Darci Sprengel (2020b). On a comparative note, our work builds on the works of Pierre Bourdieu (1998) and Gisèle Sapiro (2014; Sapiro and Rabot 2016) on literary production in France, Michael D. Jackson (2013) on the existential grounds of writing, Khaled Furani (2012) on secularity and poetry in Palestine, Zuzanna Olszewska (2015, 2019) on literary scenes and social media of Afghan diasporas, Andrew Brandel (2016) on literary life in Berlin, and Adam Reed (2018) on literary reading in the United Kingdom. This book also draws upon recent approaches in literary studies that study texts with a closer attention to their context of production, circulation, and reading (Pepe 2014, 2019a, 2019b; Allan 2016). Many others are worth mentioning, and will be referred to in the course of the book.

This book makes two main arguments. The first is that literary writing can be understood as a limited excess of a social milieu's horizon of imagination, neither fully free nor fully contained; as such, it is grounded in sociality and thrives on various configurations of marginality. The second is that literature is complicit in, and helps us to understand, a condition of plurality in the absence of pluralism in urban lives and imaginaries in post-2011 Alexandria. These key arguments are grounded in an eclectic theoretical approach that draws on various academic theories, and most importantly, on several Alexandrian writers we spoke with who take the role of theoretical authorities; they are especially relevant to Chapters 1, 4, and 5.

A key analytical tension runs through the book: between social relations and structures on the one hand, and existential motivations and experiences on the other. Distinctions and competition are inherent constituents of literary milieus, which is why we have found it useful to think of literary sociality in terms of a competition for symbolic capital within a literary field, along the lines proposed by Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1998). Throughout the book, we draw upon on an adapted version of Bourdieu's approach: adapted because we consider focus on symbolic capital and power to be necessary but not sufficient. Writing is an essentially social practice that is made possible and limited by the milieus and the fields of power in which the writer acts in her or his capacity as a writer. This dimension can be well understood in Bourdieu's terms. But writers are also com-

monly nonconforming, exceptional figures who are drawn to the work of literary imagination for various reasons. Although Egyptian writers often hope to speak for society, they are seldom read and heard – with the exception of a handful of literary stars. Writers may be respected, but they are also considered foolish or even weird by their relatives and colleagues; only in exceptional cases do they gain wealth and fame. How do we understand the motivations and consequences of writing in a society where there are much more effective and profitable ways of finding success and recognition? This idiosyncratic, non-deterministic aspect requires the addition of a more existential approach that highlights intersubjective experience (e.g. Jackson 2013; Ram and Houston 2015). These two approaches – social capital and existential motivations – do not easily fit together, but we have found them both to be necessary in making sense of our fragmentary fieldwork.

Anecdotal evidence

Most scholarly works on literature primarily engage with texts. Following a widely shared methodological consensus in literary and cultural studies, they provide critical readings and analyses of writings in historical context. They usually do not try to trace authors' motivations and social lives. This book does the opposite. Its descriptions of writers and writing are based on long-term ethnographic research in literary circles, thereby highlighting those parts of literature that are less accessible to a purely textual study: personal and social relations, motivations and careers, networks and circulations, which together constitute literature as a social institution.

Studying literary scenes by means of ethnography requires methodological explanation. In 2015, I received a rejection letter to an application for a visiting researcher position I had hoped to use to complete this book. One of the reviewers found the project otherwise good but was unimpressed by the methodology:

> It lacks precision in describing exactly how the research is going to proceed apart from 'fieldwork' in collaboration with an Alexandrian novelist, making it difficult to assess whether the results will be obtained through rigorous research and analysis of data or merely from conversations and impressions of dubious anecdotal value (Reviewer 2).

The methodology section of my application was indeed sketchy, and the reviewer, a literary scholar based in Germany, was apparently not familiar with ethnographic methods. He therefore assumed that rigorous research cannot be based on conversations and impressions, but only on data of the kind that erases the

texture of conversations and social interaction in order to reduce it to calculable models.

In quantitative research, 'anecdotal' means that an interesting story does not yet prove that something is generally the case. In qualitative research, in contrast, anecdotes are where the knowledge is. While they do not tell us whether things generally happen so, they are indispensable for understanding how something has happened. Without a good measure of rigorous, anecdotal, qualitative evidence, we risk being left with blind correlations that we either do not understand or, even worse, misunderstand based on our prejudices and desires.

An anecdote is a short narrative that describes a one-time occurrence that happened (or is claimed by the narrator to have happened) to somebody in a specific time and place. Anecdotes entertain, but more importantly they also explain *how* something occurs. This book takes over 'anecdotal' as a positive identification and a programmatic stance, because it is the kind of knowledge it hopes to provide: textured explanations of how something took place in a specific place and time – explanations that make no claim for universal validity, but may turn out to be useful for the understanding of other contexts as well (Gallop 2002).

Thinking in an anecdotal way has two additional advantages that are relevant to this book. First, the anecdote as a narrative form provides common ground between literary narration on the one hand, and qualitative scientific knowledge in social sciences such as anthropology and sociology, and humanities such as literary studies on the other. This encounter of disciplines in a shared genre is useful for a book that is not meant to be simply a study *about* writers, but an ethnography *with* writers, drawing upon debates among writers as a source of potentially valid theoretical analysis.

Second, thinking of qualitative knowledge as anecdotal in a positive sense is closely aligned with the logic of ethnographic writing, a genre of scientific texts that develop interpretations and theoretical explanations based on the carefully recorded texture of conversations and impressions in a societal context. Ethnography as a genre of writing has had a somewhat problematic tendency to use what is called 'the ethnographic present', meaning a description of events that recurred in the past as if they would continue in a timeless present: an example is 'Aspiring writers of Alexandria frequent cafés of the old Downtown'. Anecdotes, in contrast, are bound to a specific time and are usually recounted in the past tense. This makes them a better narrative genre for describing and understanding a changing situation in which unpredictable transformation is abundant and normality is a rather remarkable accomplishment. That was indeed the situation while our fieldwork was taking place in Alexandria.

I considered studying writing for the first time in the autumn of 2007, after meeting my friend T. while he was working as a health inspector in a bakery in a

small town in the Nile Delta – an utterly boring and pointless job that I describe in another book (Schielke 2015: 171). After his shift, we sat down in a café across the street; he took out a notebook and began to sketch the outline of a poem. I had not known he was a poet, so I asked him what had inspired him at that moment. Nothing in particular, he answered; he was just holding the moment. And that was it. We finished our coffee and went off to take photos of toktoks (three-wheeled auto rickshaws common in rural areas and informal neighbourhoods of Egyptian cities). I did not record our discussion about the poem in my research diary, but the conversation remained with me.

At the time, I was becoming increasingly interested in the role of imagination in social processes. My wife Daniela Swarowsky and I were working on our documentary film *Messages from Paradise #1* (2009), about young Egyptian men's dream of migration juxtaposed with older migrant men's dream of return. We had just interviewed T. in his capacity as a man who dreamed of migration. Now, I had for the first time encountered T. in his capacity as a poet, and began to think about other dimensions of imagination. This process of thinking was further propelled by my friendship with Mukhtar, who at around the same time was working on his first novel. In 2009 and 2010, Mukhtar and I together produced a short narrative film about class and other boundaries (Schielke and Shehata 2010).

For more than ten years, dreams of a better life through migration and social mobility, and literary imagination as a conscious, learned practice and engagement became my two main research themes. The first theme, which had begun in 2007 with my collaboration with Daniela, eventually became the subject of a book of its own (Schielke 2020a). And yet the two themes were initially one, and my field notes refer to them as one project as late as 2016. Indeed, these two kinds of imagination do not stand alone, and while this book describes the crafting of fictional worlds, it is also very much about various dreams and aspirations for a better life.

In 2010, I decided to begin dedicated fieldwork on the subject of literature. I wanted to avoid Cairo, Egypt's literary epicentre, because I felt it could easily render everything outside it invisible. At the same time, I wanted my research to take place in a big city that could host a variety of scenes and tastes. I had already done some sporadic fieldwork in Alexandria, and thus the city became my new Egyptian home base. At around the same time, Mukhtar decided to stop working as a private tutor (the main source of income for teachers) and was looking for freelance jobs to make ends meet. I asked him to work as my research assistant on a project on literary imagination, and our formal collaboration began.

As a fieldwork team, we drew on conventional anthropological methods as well as some experimental ones. We conducted extended participant observation in four literary circles (which we describe in Chapter 2), paid shorter visits to

numerous other circles, attended literary events and book fairs, met between fifty and a hundred writers in informal conversations, and conducted life-story interviews with twenty-five of them. We used interviews sparingly, usually to initiate a long-term research relationship with people whom we might meet many times over the years after our initial interview. We read works or excerpts from works by people whom we met, and on several occasions we invited people gathered in a café or at literary events to discuss certain themes, in what could be considered an intermediary form between symposium and focus group interview. Some of this fieldwork we conducted together, some separately.

As well as being participant observers, we were also active participants in the city's literary and intellectual circles. During the time of our fieldwork, Mukhtar published two novels, a collection of short stories, and two anthologies, along with numerous essays. He also worked as an editor at Dar Kalima, an Alexandria-based publishing house that was active from 2013 to 2015, and as a freelance copyeditor for publishing houses based in Cairo. I participated not as a writer of literature, but as a photographer who had held two exhibitions, as a participant in intellectual circles who had two books and a handful of essays published in Arabic during the period of our fieldwork, and as the teacher of a study circle on anthropology at the Alexandria Library. We were both involved in an artistic and literary collaboration on the figure of the stranger in Alexandria, which was curated by Daniela Swarowsky for an interdisciplinary research and art exhibition in Berlin 2013 (Swarowsky et al. 2013). Thus, while we have tried to maintain an uncritical, non-judgemental approach in our research and writing, we have also been part of the literary circles, scenes, and divisions that we write about. Our positionality inevitably, and hopefully in part productively, colours our argument. Mukhtar's fraught relationship with the independent downtown scene gave us the critical distance to think about the political economy of literary circles, while his dislike for populist colloquial poetry meant we paid less attention to that scene than it might have deserved. My lack of nostalgic commitment to a beautiful Alexandria of the past made me more attentive to those parts of the city ignored by nostalgia, while my ignorance of Arabic literature in its variety and depth made us pay less attention to intertextuality than would have been good for us.

As researchers, our position in the scenes we frequented was special but not unprecedented. As a European foreigner, I could profit from what in Egypt is called 'the *khawaga* complex' (*ʿuqdat al-khawaga*). This is a specifically Egyptian version of white privilege, whereby whiteness is not naturalised as normal, but exceptionalised as something worthy of special attention, privilege, and also suspicion; *khawaga* refers historically to non-Muslim foreigners living in Egypt. Mukhtar had no access to *khawaga* privilege, but he could draw upon more pro-

found cultural capital that was based on his extensive knowledge of Arabic language and literature, and soon found himself placed in the role of critic during fieldwork. Unlike most other social contexts, literary circles have a ready-made legitimate role for researchers, which is that of literary critic. Although this made fieldwork easy, it resulted in a need to explain that we were searching to understand but not to critically select and appreciate, and also that we were not translators – a role we did not want to be identified with because it would have changed the terms of interaction in a way that would have not been ethical. Although this book does contain some translations, they are a side effect rather than a main aim of the project.

The actual fieldwork process was much more erratic and fragmentary than this summary suggests. It was repeatedly complicated, fragmented, and interrupted by historical and personal events.

We had originally planned for approximately six months of fieldwork, spread between 2011 and 2012, and concluding in around 2013 or 2014 when the funding for the research project would end. This plan was thwarted almost immediately owing to the 25 January uprising, which turned everybody's attention to revolution and politics. This was also a good time to study the literary and cultural scenes, because 2011 and the years immediately following witnessed an intense vibrancy of cultural life; but repeatedly, our attention and that of our interlocutors was distracted by non-literary events.

This is not a book about the revolution or revolutionary literature. It would in any case be difficult to define what counts as such, because some writing in praise of the revolution was rather counter-revolutionary in intent, and some radical writings that emerged later were structured by the revolutionary experience but did not mention it. And yet the 25 January uprising and the three-year stormy season that followed were, along with the period of authoritarian stabilisation that followed, the main historical context of our research. January 2011 cast its shadow across the 2010s in Egypt, and became an inherent although not always explicit part of literary currents and writings. But this was not the only thing of importance going on, and many of the processes we witnessed had already been taking place before 2011 – some for a decade, others for a century – and they have continued into a time when a generation of people is coming of age who are too young to have had 2011 as their key formative experience. And even when dramatic events were shaking the country, we attended many gatherings where people were discussing poetry, styles, techniques, and aesthetics as if there was nothing else going on around them.

Another major reason for fragmentary fieldwork was our private lives. In 2011 and 2012, we were able to conduct fairly long-term fieldwork despite the dramatic events taking place around us. In 2013 and 2014, I was busy with the *In Search of*

Europe? exhibition that presented the work of a larger research team in Berlin. In autumn 2014, I returned to Alexandria with the intention of a long fieldwork stay until the next spring, but weeks later Daniela was diagnosed with breast cancer, and I returned to Berlin. During the three years that followed, I visited Alexandria many times but always for short visits, and Mukhtar's role in the project grew from research assistant to independent fieldworker and co-researcher. From the beginning, we had spent long evenings after interviews or gatherings to discuss and analyse what we had experienced. From 2016, Mukhtar also became the co-author of parts of our research output, which now form Part I of this book.

The co-writing process was based on shared reflections and discussions, based on which I wrote a draft text in English, to which Mukhtar gave feedback and suggestions in Arabic, which we discussed together in Arabic, after which I would write a revised text, sometimes involving several rounds of discussion and revision. Because of our different backgrounds of training and knowledge, misunderstandings were common, and sometimes became a productive source. A key concept of this book, 'the writing of lives', was originally a misunderstanding that resulted from my attempt to translate the concept of life-writing (*kitabat al-hayat*) into Arabic. Life-writing is the broad category of writing that draws upon the writer's own life, such as autobiography. The writing of lives in this book became the reverse: kinds of living that are crafted in part through the practice of writing.[2]

The fieldwork we managed to do between 2010 and 2017 was fragmentary and full of gaps. Our exploration was never intended to give full coverage. In the spirit of ethnographic fieldwork that aims for depth rather than a panoramic vision, we consciously decided to focus on a handful of spaces and networks that welcomed us as researchers, while trying to keep an eye on their plurality and variety. However, the constraints of time have given us fewer opportunities to explore that plurality than we had hoped for. This means that many important sites of literary activity, even entire milieus, were only marginally part of our research or were omitted altogether. Important circles and scenes that would deserve to be discussed at length, but are not, include: Itlala ('look forward' or 'sunburst'), the most long-standing literary group in the city, established in the 1990s as part of the emerging literary avant-garde, and which continues to meet weekly at the Alexandria Library; public-sector cultural centres and regular literary clubs that meet at them; the Jesuit Cultural Centre; the Atelier d'Alexandrie; and foreign cultural institutions such as the Institut Français, Goethe Institut,

2 In a further complication, Mukhtar later shifted to using the term *kitabat al-hayat* in its standard sense of life-writing in his own work. To avoid confusion, we do not use the term life-writing in this book.

and the Russian Cultural Centre. There are countless other circles that are difficult to know about because they don't publicise their activities: groups of friends meeting at a café, university students organising around shared interests and passions, a constantly emerging and disappearing landscape of online networks, semi-private gatherings hosted by prominent or senior authors, groups dedicated to specific genres (such as horror, a vibrant scene), and many more. The most important gap in our fieldwork concerns commercial writing and publishing, and large-audience colloquial poetry. This gap is mostly because publishing and commercial networks are centralised in Cairo.

Our fieldwork ended abruptly in September 2017. Mukhtar moved to Brazil to study African Studies on a scholarship he had received there, and I put fieldwork entirely on hold after a recurrence of Daniela's illness and a prognosis that no longer included a prospect of recovery. For two years, the project was on ice, and both of us were absent from Alexandria.

Daniela passed away in June 2019. In the autumn of the same year, I returned to Alexandria for two visits. Those visits, along with a conference that Giedre Šabasevičiūtė and I organised in Prague in October 2019, inspired me to turn the many scattered notes and essays we had produced over the years into a coherent book. In February 2020, Mukhtar returned to Egypt but not to Alexandria, moving back to his family house in the village after a divorce. With the Covid-19 pandemic preventing travel, we could not meet to work on the book together. Instead, we kept up an online back and forth of feedback and critique based on my drafts. In the meantime, Mukhtar took the initiative to develop new online methods in order to inquire about writing in the absence of gatherings in person, and produced a YouTube series in which writers speak about their work; this is featured in Chapter 1.

Outline of chapters

Each chapter of this book answers a specific sub-question to 'Where is literature?'. The first part of the book, titled 'About writing' and co-authored by Mukhtar and Samuli, consists of three chapters that address writing itself as an activity. When and how do people become writers, and more intriguingly, how do some of them continue writing? If ideas of literature vary, then what do they entail, what enables them, and how are they distributed among literary scenes? What is the relationship between the cultivation of a literary voice and marginal, extraordinary settings? The second part of the book, titled 'Writing about' and authored by Samuli, locates writing in the urbanity and society of Alexandria

and Egypt. Chapter 4 asks what roles poetry and literary imagination may have had in the revolutionary process. Chapter 5 engages literary myths as theories of urbanity to help us understand what kind of a city Alexandria is, and what it is becoming. Chapter 6 explores how graffiti and social media have structured and commented upon urban and social worlds. Chapters 7 and 8 are each devoted to a single poet and reflect through conversations with them on the relationships there may be between poetic technique and imagination, and religious and moral stances. The afterword attempts to connect the two parts of the book by thinking about different roles for the writer that may be anticipated at a time when exile has become an increasingly common location of creative production.

Part I: About writing

Samuli Schielke, Mukhtar Saad Shehata

1 Why write, and why not stop?

Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan once said to Artah ibn Suhayyah:
'Will you compose some poetry today?' He answered:
'By God, I feel no emotion, I am not angry, I am not drinking,
I desire nothing. Poetry comes only with one of these things.'

Ibn Rashiq (d. 1065 or 1071 CE) on poetry

For as long as we can say, it has been a common practice of humans to tell stories and sing songs. There is no record of a human society without them. Since the invention of writing, some of these stories and songs have been recorded, and with the increasing spread of literacy and technologies that reproduce and circulate written texts, stories and poems have become increasingly associated with writing, while writing in turn has become associated with advanced and sophisticated culture. We – that is, the kind of people who would read a book based on academic research – have learned to take for granted that humans are drawn to writing and literature. And yet this attribute is not at all obvious. While stories and songs appear to be a shared feature of human societies, the crafting of stories and the composition of poems of the kind that are likely to be recognised by some (but maybe not others) as literature, in one sense or another, is exceptional. Few people are committed to doing this actively, and even fewer continue to do so for a major part of their lives. And only in extremely rare cases do some among the latter become known and read by a large audience. Writing – that is, the kind of writing that produces texts that are recognised as literary – thus requires explanation. Why would somebody engage in it?

This question stood at the beginning of the research that resulted in this book. It prompted answers that raise a different set of questions, which we will take up in the following chapters. However, it is necessary to begin with the 'why' question because it paves the way to this book's main story about the sociality and productivity of literature; something that shapes the lives of those involved in it.

Engaging in literary writing is not part of the conventional expectations and values that shape ideas of a good and normal life in Egypt. Literature – especially classical Arabic poetry – enjoys a high status in the symbolic hierarchy of school curricula, and in traditions of Islamic scholarship and developmental nationalism alike. But becoming a writer is something rarely encouraged by parents, friends, or spouses; and even when it is, it remains odd in other con-

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texts. Mukhtar grew up in a rural family where education was considered a main avenue of social mobility, and reading and writing were encouraged among his brothers (less so his sisters) and cousins. The literary interests that first evolved during his student years were therefore not viewed as peculiar at home although his parents were uneducated. But his colleagues, when he was working as an Arabic teacher in government schools, did not know he was a writer until much later. Among his colleagues, Mukhtar befriended Hamdy Mosa, a man of his age and, like him, a rural-urban migrant from the Nile Delta to Alexandria. They were friends for a year before discovering they shared a passion for writing and literature. In 2014, Hamdy told Samuli that a shared friend and former colleague of the two considered them crazy for going out to literary gatherings or sitting at home to write instead of investing all available time and effort in private tutoring, which is the main source of income for teachers in Egypt. 'Writing is not something that people in this society would speak about to their colleagues or even friends', Hamdy added. Many others have told us that their parents and families began to appreciate their literary activities when they published a book or won a prize because of the prestige it involved. Initially, however, they faced scepticism because they were spending time and energy on something that was not beneficial in the search for conventional social becoming: regular income, marriage, housing, religiosity, a good moral reputation, and markers of social status.

An urge to express

We repeatedly asked people we met in the course of our fieldwork why they wrote. Unsurprisingly, we received various answers. Some of them offered lengthy narratives that began with significant events and issues that inspired them to write literary text for the first time, and then traced the contours of their literary career. We return to one such narrative in the second half of this chapter. The most common, however, were answers that circled around an urge to express and explore emotions.

This urge is evident in the common genres of pre-literary and early literary writing.[1] People we met regularly described their first writings as *khawatir*, the recording of thoughts and ideas as they 'come to one's mind' (*khatar bal*), hence

1 Pre-literary is, writing that might be recognised as literature by some, but is not (or not yet) produced with the aim of circulation or recognition in literary channels, and that does not (or not yet) seek to meet the conventions of a specific literary milieu or genre.

the name of the genre. When employed by experienced writers, *khawatir* is a recognised literary genre of short essayistic or poetic reflections that depend on their sketchiness. For new writers, they often function as easily accessible 'not-yet literature', something that writers-to-be produce before they find a conscious technique and genre. *Khawatir* in this pre-literary sense was – and often still is – a mainly private form of writing that has the primary aim to give words to thoughts and emotions. With the rise of blogging and social media in the 2000s, *khawatir* have merged with autofictional blogs (Pepe 2019a) and social media posts. Because social media posts were a new form of writing during the first years of our fieldwork, we encountered much discussion about their potential to be a literary genre. Perhaps because they are too accessible and flexible (lacking genre constraints that allow critical appraisal and ranking), social media posts have mostly remained on the hazy fringes of literature (about which more in Chapter 6). But today they are without doubt a dominant and productive form of pre-literary and early literary text; and some established writers use social media posts as a conscious literary genre that is similar to *khawatir* and essays.

Moving on from *khawatir*, whether private or shared among friends or on social media, new writers tend to initially write in accessible genres and explore established themes. Colloquial poetry and short stories are the most common genres we have encountered. One example is the colloquial poetry of M.Sh. whom Samuli met in March 2012. They were introduced by M.E., who worked in the national Organisation of Cultural Centres and whom we had previously met at a literary meeting. M.Sh. was not active in literary scenes; his audience was mostly friends from his university years. His poems were in colloquial Arabic, always with a metre and rhyme. In line with mainstream contemporary colloquial poetry, they resembled song texts in their rhythm and length, and were highly subjective in tone. He recited to us three love poems: one about childhood love, another about forgetting and overcoming a love lost, and a third celebrating never-ending unhappy love (a long-standing genre of Arabic love poetry; see Khan 2019). They all shared the sentimental romance of longing, shyness, and search to overcome distance that is popular in Egypt. He also recited a series of religious quatrains (*rubaʿiyat*) that he had composed during the previous Ramadan, and which spoke of love for God and the Prophet, hope, worship, contentedness, and mercy. Finally, M.Sh. read us three revolution poems. Two of them celebrated the unity, power, and purity of the people and the revolution, and the third described his urge to join the demonstrations at Tahrir Square in Cairo during February 2011, while he was in Alexandria and unable to go to Cairo.

M.Sh.'s poetry is remarkably conventional in themes and form. It draws upon established and popular poetic techniques and images. M.Sh. seeks neither to experiment in form, nor to excel in the mastery of traditional techniques. Instead,

his poetry is primarily expressive: it is about communicating an emotion, be it unhappy love, the attempt to forget, the sense of hope and piety that prevails during the month of Ramadan, or the pride of revolution and the pull of Tahrir Square. It is not poetry that makes its audience wonder or to look at things from a different angle, but poetry that communicates the author's emotional condition – and M.Sh. told Samuli that this was indeed the meaning of poetry for him.

An urge to express being a primary motivation for writing was repeatedly and explicitly stated to us by writers we met. For example, participants at a writing workshop organised by Heba Farouk in 2016 (more about her in Chapter 3) all highlighted facets of the same urge. A., in her late twenties or early thirties and married with children, described her writing as tanfis, 'relief' or 'letting off steam', and as something worthwhile in its own right. M., in his early twenties, said he had started writing in order to express emotionally difficult experiences. They – and many others on other occasions – articulated to us an idea of writing as 'relief' and an expression of emotions that form within a person and search for a way out. This inside-outside tension is made explicit in an expression we frequently encountered: 'to bring it out from within me' (*atallaʿuh min guwwaya*).

Such writing has a clear affinity with a romantic theory of authorship, the gist of which is that the author's affective and subjective being and experience form the central, creative intersection through which literary insight and communication emerge (Brandel 2016: 3–5). According to a common shorthand that summarises this theory, literary writing means to 'bring out from within' (*yitallaʿ min guwwah*) the writer something that seeks to be articulated and communicated to others. The articulation of that something is neither autonomous nor separate from the social world; on the contrary, it is grounded in the knowledge and values of a society, and in literary and cultural traditions that a writer is familiar with through extensive reading and lived experience. However, the author's self is the creative nodal point that draws upon these traditions, read*ings*, and experiences and adds to them something original, creative, and new. This process is called *ibdaʿ* in contemporary Arabic, which can be translated as 'creative expression' or 'cultural production', depending on context.

This theory was a largely shared consensus among the Egyptian and Arab writers and academics who sent their video messages to a YouTube series produced by Mukhtar and Mohamed Ghanima during Ramadan in 2020 (Shehata and Ghanima 2020). It was a time when no literary gatherings were taking place and most writers and readers were stuck at home because of the Covid-19 pandemic; it was thus a golden hour of online literary sociality. While their styles and interests differed, the authors who participated in the series without exception drew upon two imperatives: the necessity to read extensively and to master traditions and techniques even if only to break them afterwards; and the imperative to produce

something original, creative, and new that would not simply imitate traditions or reproduce the anticipations of readers or the juries of literary prices. The figure of the author as an authentic, creative individual was so central that it required no explanation; it could be taken for granted by the producers of the series, as well as the writers speaking in the series and answering the questions posed by the producers, and also the audiences who watched the series and added their opinions in the comment sections.

This is not obvious; rather, it is a major historical innovation of the past two centuries. The anecdote about Artah ibn Suhayya that we placed as an epigram at the beginning of this chapter might be read in the spirit of romantic authorship: the poet could not compose poetry unless driven by an emotional urge or intoxication. But such a reading would be anachronistic, and indeed mistaken. The anecdote is told to us by Ibn Rashiq, an influential eleventh-century literary critic, as part of his discussion about the aims of poetry that would remain canonical for a millennium. Poetry, he says, can be categorised according to its aims or purposes (aghrad), each of which corresponds with specific formal and emotional conventions, and thus forms a genre of its own:

> Panegyric and invective go with desire, apology and asking for sympathy go with fear, yearning and delicate love poetry go with emotion, and invective, threat and hurtful reproach go with anger. (Ibn Rashiq 2013: 277)

Poetry in the classical Arabic definition is thus all about emotions. The author has to articulate these feelings in order to pass them on to an audience, which will reward the poet well for doing so – this being the gist of Artah ibn Suhayya's anecdote. But unlike the romantic idea of writers expressing their own emotions, in classical Arabic poetry they are not expected to arise from within the poets themselves, and their expressions are not expected to be new and original. Instead, authors draw upon available, established repertoires and genres to produce beautiful, eloquent, and poetic images that can evoke those emotions in their audiences – and often do so upon demand and payment by a prince or another sponsor. Ibn Rashiq cites an anonymous critic: 'The most difficult kind of poetry is elegy, because it is made neither with desire [for reward] nor with fear' (Ibn Rashiq 2013: 280). In other words, poetry is about evoking emotions in the audience rather than expressing those of the poet (Bauer 2003); and the emotions that poetry articulates and attempts to raise in the audience are consequently not to be confused with the motivation to compose poetry – which in the case addressed by Ibn Rashiq is a combination of the reward that a professional poet desires and the punishment he fears from his sponsor. As elegy must be produced free of charge, there is less of a motivation to compose it.

Contemporary and classical understandings of poetry and *adab*/literature share a keen interest in authorship, but in different ways. Older Arabic and Middle Eastern literary traditions depicted the poet as someone who communicated and evoked emotions and values that were already known to the audience. Consequently, early Arabic poetry is still understood today as 'the record of the Arabs' (*diwan al-ʿarab*), in other words, the assembled values, ideas, and knowledge of pre-Islamic Arabian peoples upon which classical Arabic Islamicate poetry and literary eloquence would in turn draw (Al-Jundi 1991). In his work on classical Arabic authorship and forgery, Abdelfattah Kilito (2001) argues that in that tradition, authors were valued not as the source of feelings and ideas, but as a source of authority: they authorised texts and ideas in a milieu of urban intellectual elites who had an aversion towards fiction (which was mainly located in the non-elite realm of fairy tales and epics), who held early Arabian eloquence in high esteem, and who viewed prophetic traditions with their authorised chains of transmission as the supreme form of prose text. This made forgery (that is, the attribution of one's own writing to a famous author from the past) extremely common and profitable. Today, in contrast, with authorship shifting from authority to subjectivity, forgery has been replaced by ghostwriting and plagiarism (that is, the attribution of one's own name to the writing penned by someone else) as the most profitable and prevalent forms of literary deception.

We cannot go into detail about the encounters between Arabic, Islamicate, and imperial Western traditions that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries resulted in novel formulations of *adab*/literature, formations of modernist and classical genres, and ideals of authorship and purposes of writing (but see Khouri 1971; Jayyusi 1977; Bauer 2003; Allan 2016; Kesrouany 2019; Pepe 2019b; and we will address the recent history of some envisioned social roles of the author in Chapter 2). For the moment, it is sufficient to say that during the time of our fieldwork, a romantic theory of authorship enjoyed a comfortable hegemony in all literary circles we frequented. This view has to be qualified, though, in order to not draw a misleading caricature of a dramatic break between an authentic past and a culturally colonised present. First, articulations of the romantic theory of authorship that are current in Egypt do not dispense with the importance of evoking emotions in an audience. Writers have frequently mentioned to us the importance of doing so (e.g. Alshimaa Hamed later in this chapter and Ashraf Dossouki Ali in Chapter 4), and readers have told us that they appreciate a certain author because of an ability to give words to feelings and experiences that they share. There has been a historical shift, but there is also historical continuity. Second, the romantic theory is not the only one in play, for the classical literary tradition remains powerful, even canonical in some circles. A modern education in Arabic literature and language conventionally takes pre-Islamic poetry as its

canonical starting point, regularly followed by classics of the first centuries after Hijra, including the poetics of Ibn Rashiq and his like. At another, more experimental, end of the spectrum, romantic authorship is occasionally contested by postmodern theories of intertextuality.

That said, the romantic theory of literature as original creative expression grounded in an author's subjectivity was so widespread across the literary milieus we frequented in our fieldwork that both conservative classicists (one of whom we will hear from in a moment) and postmodern explorers of uncertainty (one of whom is featured in Chapter 7) subscribed to it in a taken-for-granted way. It should thus not come as a surprise that the romantic theory of authorship also offers an easy entry point to literature for new writers who by definition are less experienced in purposefully evoking the emotions and imaginations of their audiences, and are therefore more likely to reproduce their subjective positionalities and sensibilities in their work.

'Something that has me in it'

A key productive tension of the romantic theory of authorship is that while it requires the author to be grounded in a tradition and a society by means of readings and lived experience, it also invites literary expressions that posit the self against conventions and constraints located outside, in 'society'. At the same workshop in 2016, O., who was the youngest among the participants and the one with the most conservative appearance, told us:

> I write to produce something that has me in it (*haga fiha ana*) in face of a life where everything else, from study to marriage and afterwards, is imposed upon me.

Something that has me in it: this phrase sums up the desire that literature should potentially be a place where individual feelings can be expressed, explored, and cultivated – in a society where social becoming tends to be understood as a fulfilment of requirements rather than an outcome of choices. This idea was elaborated in more detail by Mohamed Bahaa, a white-collar employee in Alexandria and a writer of colloquial poetry that is mostly highly subjective and romantic, and at times involves religiously irreverent and politically critical explorations. Approaching the age of thirty and feeling the pressure of marriage ever more strongly, he articulated to Samuli in a conversation in 2014 his frustration about the mixture of conventional pressures and political repression he felt:

> The other day I imagined looking at myself from the top corner of my room, and asking what I did this day. I realised that the only thing in a day I did for myself was smoking cigarettes.

Writing, he argued, was an attempt to keep a part of him alive that was not reduced to obligations and pressures. He pointed at his heart and said:

> There is this, and I want to insist that it is alive, and that it is good. Every day I write a few lines, just to prove that I can still write.

Writing for Mohamed Bahaa was therefore not just a way to vent his feelings, but also to keep them alive and to cultivate them in face of societal pressure towards normality, something that, in his view, leaves little space for ideas, feelings, and desires that exceed it. As an example of the spirit he hoped to maintain through writing, Mohamed Bahaa sent us a poem he wrote and published on his Facebook page as an end-of-the year reflection on 24 December 2016, titled #DecemberEndsOfThings. Written in colloquial Egyptian Arabic, with a fairly constant metre and a shifting rhyme (both mainstream features of contemporary colloquial poetry), the end of his poem reads as follows:

عندك صحاب بالكوم...
لو مت هيعيطوا ..لما القيامة تقوم...
عندك قصايد يامه في الحلوين....
و غزل يكفيكي سنين و سنين..
علشان كده متخافش من بكرة...
لو حتي شمس الدنيا جالها صداع..
فيه لسه شمس في صدري جاهزة تطل..
لسه القمر جوايا زي الفل....
و لسه قادر احتمل اوجاع!!

You have loads of friends...
If you die, they will cry ... when resurrection comes...
You have plenty of poems about the good ones...
And verses of love to suit your girl for years and years...
So don't fear tomorrow...
Even if the sun on the sky got a headache...
There is still the sun in my chest, ready to shine...
The moon inside me is still just fine...
And I'm still able to endure sorrow!

The romantic notion of individuality inherent to such writing might be equated with liberal and emancipatory ideals of individuality that resist the collective. And yet while this may be true of some writers, it is not true in general. The expressive urge and its alliance with the romantic theory of authorship do not necessarily or generally go against conventional expectations of social becoming and being, and they do not necessarily or generally result in expressions that would be in any way unconventional. They also only rarely rest on an idea of a contained and autonomous individual. In Mohamed Bahaa's poem, the romantic subject-voice of the poem is a relational one, connected by ties of love and friendship, shining rather than containing. New writers in particular often address quite conventional topics. The values they express are largely consensual. The problems they address are relational (such as romantic, filial, or religious love, and conflicts and emotional pain grounded in family lives) or collective (such as Palestine, patriotism, or revolution).

Instead of being a site of individualistic resistance per se, literature in the framework of the romantic theory of authorship can be better understood as one of those recognised social fields that, at least for people from families that value education and literacy, can provide legitimate means and techniques to articulate expressive urges of various kinds. These articulations may take conventional or radical, subjective or identitarian shapes – and often a combination of all of them.

This became evident in our encounter with Sheikh AbdelQader, a middle-aged schoolteacher and a preacher in Alexandria's active Salafi movement. He was one of Mukhtar's colleagues at school, and when he heard of our research project he happily agreed to participate. He received us in January 2013 at the Nour Party office in the popular neighbourhood of Abu Kharouf.[2] Sheikh AbdelQader has written since his youth, and composes decidedly conservative poetry in Classical Arabic. Religious faith, values, and struggles dominate his oeuvre. Love poetry is also part of his repertoire. There is also an undercurrent of emotional trouble related to his upbringing by a harsh father. He addressed this explicitly in the interview and implicitly in some of his poetry.

2 The Nour Party, established in 2011, is the main political organ of Egyptian Salafis and is dominated by the network al-Daʿwa al-Salafiya (The Salafi Call) that is based in Alexandria. Al-Daʿwa al-Salafiya has a record of quietism towards the Egyptian regime. In January 2011, its members distributed leaflets condemning participation in demonstrations. By the time of our interview, the Nour Party was an ally of the Muslim Brotherhood, but soon afterwards changed sides and aligned with the military establishment. It is the only Islamist party that was not banned in the wake of the 2013 coup d'état. See Decschamps-Laporte (2014).

Before the interview, Sheikh AbdelQader had prepared a six-page handwritten essay, in which he outlined what he saw as the most important motivations for engagement in creative expression (*ibdaʿ*). Each point was illustrated by a line of poetry that he had penned:

1. The love of creative expression among those with creative talents. [...]
2. The need to reinforce values and certainties as a marker of identity, broadcast to everybody with a clarity and force that makes their splendour evident. Regarding this point, I declare my identity in the poem 'The shining light' from my collection *A Call from the Depths of Darkness*, where I say:

أشرق النّور والإيمان منا — وانزوت لوعة الآلام عنا
قد حكى القرآن والسنة أنا — نحن جند الله بالإسلام قمنا

Light and faith shone brightly from us
agony of pain has left us alone
The Qurʾan and Sunna told that we are
the soldiers of God, and we rose for Islam

3. The explicit expression and release of hidden instinctive emotions, whether negative or positive. [...]
4. Creative expression as an outlet of negative emotions that a human may be unable to express, or would be blamed for even showing because of customs and traditions. [...]
5. Sometimes creative expression is a kind of excellent mental healing that helps to calm the harmful effects of anger and safeguards the self-esteem of those too proud to cry [by allowing them to express it in writing instead] [...]
6. Literary creative expression may be a way to break the wall of excessive embarrassment and modesty that some people suffer from or experience in some situations. [...] On this point, I said in a poem titled 'I saw her fate' in my collection of poems *Love Fills the Heart, and yet*:

أنا قد فهمت لكن — ولاهية بالنار
خانني زيف — بالآمال والأحزان تسلعني
وبالألحان — تجري وتسبح في دمي
بالألوان — وتلثمني على شفتي
أسكرني! — فتقتلني!

I did understand, and yet
Falsehood betrayed me
And with melodies
With colours
It intoxicated me!

while she played with fire[3]
with hopes and sorrows she stings me
she runs and swims in my blood
and kisses me on my lips
So she may kill me!

7. Creative expression can be a watchtower of thought and sentiment, from which the hopes of the present can look out to the past for lessons, or anticipate a conscious reading of the future based on the depths of thought or the light or revelation and inspiration. [...]
8. Creative expression can be for the defence and support of a cause, especially causes of public importance that form the conscience of the nation (*damir al-umma*). [...]
9. Creative expression may be a hymn of love to educate, or a song line to teach something that might otherwise be difficult to hold. [...]

Sheikh AbdelQader's outline brings together a remarkable variety of thematic blocks. He begins with the idea of 'creative expression for its own sake' (in his words in the interview and in point 1 of his essay), followed by an Islamic revivalist idea of the cultivation and promotion of a distinct and activist 'identity' (point 2, a word much used among the Salafi movement in Egypt). Then he moves on to a more elaborate romantic and therapeutic idea of literature as the expression of intimate feelings that would otherwise remain enclosed within the writer (points 3 to 6, forming the largest block in his outline); and concludes with the idea of literature as a vehicle of forward-looking imagination, political critique, and learning (points 7 to 9). Last but not least, he embedded these rather different ideas in the pedagogical genre of a systematic overview that is promoted by Egypt's educational system where he works.

Although Sheikh AbdelQader belongs to a religious movement that strives to live by the exact method of the Prophet's era, the reasons to write he presents are remarkably modernist, largely in line with the romantic theory of authorship. The classical taxonomy (outlined by Ibn Rashiq earlier) of purposes/genres (*aghrad*) such as love poetry, panegyric, invective, elegy, and so on, is absent in Sheikh AbdelQader's exposition. We do not know if he would have used the concept of creative expression (*ibdaʿ*) by his own initiative, for we mentioned it when we asked to interview him and he followed the lead of our question. In any case, he

3 The third person feminine in the poem is ambiguous, and could mean either a woman or the world (*al-dunya*, a conventional addressee of poetic laments). Conservative authors often intentionally employ this ambiguity, which allows them to lean towards romantic passion while at the same time staying on the safe side of sexual mores.

dealt with it as self-evident. But in contrast to such poets as Mohamed Bahaa, he represents a more conservative face of romantic authorship that is not at odds with society, and that strives for an alliance with God and a firm grounding in established values.

This remarkable yet unannounced coexistence of classical aspirations and modernist assumptions is also reflected in his style of writing. Sheikh AbdelQader's poetry is not as consistently classical as it may at first glance seem. Of the two passages of poetry included in our translation of his outline, the first one displays the classical elements of double verse, monorhyme and a constant metre, which conventionally fit its religious-identitarian theme.[4] The second one, in contrast, has the classical form of a double verse and a monorhyme – but in terms of rhythm, it is free verse (*shiʿr hurr*), playing with shifting rhythms instead of following a consistent metre.

From Sheikh AbdelQader, we learn that rather than thinking of the expressive urge and its alliance with romantic authorship as either resistant or conforming towards conventional social aims and norms, we should instead think of it as special, in the sense that expressive writing articulates and cultivates feelings and ideas that are posited outside or above (rather than only against) taken-for-granted structures and imaginaries of an ordinary life.[5] The classical appearance and the overall religious thrust of his poetry appear as a bridge, as it were, so he can combine his roles as a preacher who articulates divine truth and speaks to the moral emotions of an audience in search of guidance, and a poet who articulates subjective emotions and occasionally writes free verse. However, he did not present the two roles side by side, and in the interview he told us that poetry and preaching were distinct pursuits, one unlike the other. At the school where he worked, he shared his poetry with Mukhtar because he recognised a fellow

4 The taste of contemporary Islamist milieus for poetry has generally been decidedly old-fashioned, privileging classical double verse and references from early Arabic literary tradition (e.g. Creswell and Haykel 2015; Kendall 2016). This is typically also a genre requirement: identitarian and activist themes invite a classical form. See also Chapter 8.

5 Our point here builds on Samuli's argument in his earlier work about 'grand schemes' that are posited above and outside everyday life (Schielke 2015). Some anthropologists engaged in a critical conversation have interpreted the underlying juxtaposition between the ordinary and extraordinary as a liberal idealisation of the everyday as a site of resistance, combined with a denaturalisation of religious lives as exceptional (Fadil and Fernando 2015). Yet both in Samuli's earlier work as well as in our work with writers, quite the opposite is the case: the everyday rather stands for routine, unremarkable ways of living and relations of power, while exceptional activities and occasions may be seen as more true and valuable by those involved in them. Literature is a case in point of such an exceptional activity, be it from Sheikh AbdelQader's identitarian-pious point of view, or from Mohamed Bahaa's questioning-pious standpoint.

poet, regardless of the religious and political differences between them. He did not identify himself as a poet to a mutual colleague and friend who belonged to the same religious movement.

We also learn from Sheikh AbdelQader that there is usually more than one reason to write. The urge to express emotions and stances – of whatever kind – is a major motivation, but not the only one. We have repeatedly met people who regardless of their religious, political, and romantic commitments told us they were drawn to writing mainly through the experience of reading and the aesthetic pleasure involved in both reading and writing. Homes that encourage and value literacy and literature appear extremely influential in that regard. Many have also cited recognition and fame as a motivation, although few among those we met have gained more than a modest measure of it. The poet Ashraf Dossouki Ali (about whom more in Chapter 4) told us his literary career began with a poem he wrote in reaction to a fight at the football pitch. Experienced writers have on several occasions told us that they don't know why they write, and that it doesn't bother them. In Mukhtar's and Mohamed Ghanima's YouTube series on writing in spring 2020, the writers did not speak much about the motivations of writing, but instead about how to write and how to reach an audience. This is in fact well in line with the romantic theory of authorship. The romantic subject with its emotions, perception, and imagination is understood to be the nodal point of innovation. And yet the emphasis is on the crafting and communication of that innovation, not its beginnings.

In our conversation with Sheikh AbdelQader, beginnings were also only a minor part of the conversation. As soon as we turn our attention to people who continue writing literary texts over a longer period of time, the expressive and other origins of early writing become less central, and issues of communication, audience, technique, and recognition become more prominent.

Why not stop?

In October 2011, we met the poet Kamal Aly Mahdy and his friends who gathered regularly in a café in the neighbourhood of Abu Kharouf in the east of Alexandria. This was the first of five meetings we would hold with them over three years to discuss our research. They were a handful of men mostly in their forties and, like Kamal, mostly schoolteachers. They had all written poetry, prose, and literary criticism for years, and although few of them were known beyond their immediate circle, they considered themselves established writers by virtue of their continued practice.

We posed to them a question about the motivations and beginnings of writing, but the discussion quickly shifted to the problem of reaching an audience. This was inspired by an intervention by Hamdy Mosa, who argued that there was no 'why' to writing. Poetry, he claimed, is an inspiration (*ilham*), a form of revelation (*wahy*): 'Poets are forced to write. They come second only to prophets.' We were trying to explain the creative process; Hamdy insisted on mystifying it.

The idea of writing as a revelation and thus beyond explanation and training is common but contested, and others argued against Hamdy that the skills of writing and observation could and needed to be learned and trained. Yet the comparison of poets with prophets (a pertinent theme in 20th century Arabic literature, see Kesrouany 2019) struck a common chord among the men in the café. They all had something important to say, and saw themselves as called upon to communicate that something to an audience, which needed to hear what they had to say. In this spirit, Kamal replied to Hamdy with a theory of literature as communication. What matters, argued Kamal, was not the source of writing, but its capacity to move people; being able to move an audience would therefore become the motivation to write.

Kamal writes poetry in Classical Arabic in the modernist style of *taf'ila* (free verse in a metre) and has published several volumes of poetry over the years (Mahdy 2005, 2007, 2014). He has a regular circle of friends with literary interests, and is known in literary circles of the city. He had moved on from his initial motivations for writing long before. By the time of our meeting in 2011, being a poet had become a firm and long-standing part of his life and activities. He had accumulated the experience and skill to develop his themes and style over the years. He knew how to express himself; his urge was now to be heard and read. And that, the men in the café all agreed, was a major problem, because readership of poetry was so low, public-sector publishers were slow and had bad distribution, and poetry that did gain a wide audience was bad (according to their aesthetic standards). Following a long discussion about the problem of there being so many volumes of poetry published but not being read, Kamal argued: 'We have entered the question of things that are against creative expression (*ibda'*), its limits. Society kills it.'

Kamal's solution was to write for an unknown future reader. Writing, he argued, is like hiding a treasure of gold that someone may find one day. Mohamed Mahmoud, a teacher who wrote much but had never published, argued in contrast: 'Kamal has the motivation of hope, which he compares to the piece of gold left in the ground. I don't have hope. I just enjoy the moment of writing.' That thought brought him back to the original theme of our discussion, and he concluded: 'The motivations are different and personal; you can't explain them with one theory.' Even Hamdy, who has a liking for provocation

and controversy, agreed this time: 'The theme of the research needs to be more than the motivations to write.'

The three men were right. Not only are there many reasons to write, but there are also even more reasons to stop writing. When Kamal argued that society kills creative expression, he was probably not referring to any specific instance of censorship, but rather to the overall prevalence of other concerns that are more powerful. In the course of our research, we met numerous people who wrote for a short period of their life. Such periods were either related to age – youth and retirement being the most prolific periods – or dramatic societal events such as the 2011 revolution, which inspired some people we met to compose and circulate poems for the first and perhaps also the last time in their lives.

Among the former writers we met was H., a graduate of the al-Azhar religious university and a teacher of Arabic at the school where Mukhtar worked. In an interview in October 2011, he proudly recited to us classical poetry he had composed in his student years, but added that it belonged to a 'dreamful period' of his life that he had left behind, because adult life required 'realism'.

Zumurrod (her pen name) was active in Rewayat, an online forum of collaborative writing inspired by the popular fantasy and science fiction author Ahmed Khaled Towfik (1962–2018), and was one of the first participants in our research. When we met her in 2010 and 2011, she was a teacher at a private school and a highly productive writer of sentimental, melodramatic stories and novellas that she circulated among members of the forum, some of whom also met regularly offline in a small bookshop in Alexandria. She stopped writing and even reading in late 2011, when she got married and moved to join her husband in the United States, where she became a housewife and a mother. Several years later, she began to publish long social media posts that have a distinct literary quality, providing nuanced and witty observations of her neighbours in a North American suburb. As writing, they are more mature than her melodramatic early works, but she shares them with friends only, and has made no attempt to distribute them as literature to a literary circle.

The reasons for the withdrawal of H., Zumurrod, and countless others from literary practice are so obvious that they hardly require explanation. Work and family responsibilities simply take people's attention and change their routines and priorities. This is especially pronounced among women. In addition to the enormous workload of domestic duties, women in Egypt also often experience and observe a religiously motivated imperative to withdraw from public male attention. This makes entering literary scenes difficult to start with, and staying in them after marriage even more difficult.

The most interesting 'why' question about literary writing is therefore neither why some people write, nor why most of them stop after a while. Instead, the question is why some people don't stop.

When Kamal claimed that society kills creative expression, he used 'society' as a polemical placeholder for those societal forces that counter unconventional strivings and desires. Closer observation, however, indicates that the forces that enable creative expression are also societal.

M.Sh. whose poetry we discussed above, mentioned to Samuli that he had lately started to write less than he used to. He said that his movement towards writing had originally emerged through contact with a brother and uncle who were involved in poetry and music, and his participation in a workshop back in 2002. In his student years, M.Sh. said, he used to write almost daily. He had a constant urge to write, and he could always find peers to whom he could recite his poems. Ever since he completed his studies and started working in a construction company, he had less time. Now he spent all day at work and arrived at home late, and had less time for people and ideas. It was not so much a matter of time, he said, than of 'crystallisation' (*balwara*), of the coming together with people who inspire you, who enter into competition with you and thus motivate you, and who are your audience. Samuli asked if he got it right that the collective, social dimension is what makes writing fruitful, and M.Sh. affirmed this.

A., a man aged around forty from Mukhtar's home village whom Samuli met by coincidence at a social occasion in March 2012, developed this point in a more explicit fashion. He used to write and discuss poetry with his friends, but had stopped. He argued that there is a stimulus (*baʿith*) to be engaged in poetry, be it material or immaterial, and that the loss of social occasions for discussion, reading, and feedback, results in the 'immaterial stimulus' (*baʿith maʿnawi*) getting lost.

Writers may thus appear to be peculiar, even misfits from the point of view of the people around them, involved as they are in pursuits that promise neither likely monetary gain nor the fulfilment of one's obligations as a member of a family. And yet they also need a society, or a social circle to be more precise, that encourages, challenges, and pushes them to continue. The presence and activity of such circles, and one's ability and willingness to remain connected with them: these together form the main reason that made people we spoke with not stop. They make literature a functioning social institution, and enable some few people to become and remain active writers. Over time, they allow some beginners to transform expressive urges into conscious explorations and techniques, and into a recognisable literary voice. (They also produce and shape literary aesthetics and politics, alliances and enmities, which we discuss in Chapter 2.)

A winding path through milieus

In her research on conservative literary gatherings in Cairo, Giedre Šabasevičiūtė (2019a) argues that entering 'the milieu' (*al-wasat*) is the key threshold for claiming the status of a writer, and participation in gatherings and networks is key to maintaining and cultivating that status (see also Jacquemond: 172–178). In her work on an Afghan literary group in Mashhad, Iran, Zuzanna Olszewska (2015) highlights the role of personal master–apprentice relations, poetry criticism sessions, formal and informal gatherings, and shared lunches and outings that together train and shape poets as an 'interpretive community' and a 'community of practice' (Olszewska 2015: 123–124, citing Fish 1976; Lave and Wenger 1991). Such communities, or milieus as we call them following the jargon of Egyptian cultural scenes, also provide an answer to why – or, more specifically, how – some people in Alexandria do not stop writing, although there would be so many and obvious reasons to do so.

However, this answer cannot be given in a simple fashion – of either being or not being engaged in a milieu that provides the necessary feedback, support, and recognition to keep going. Literary careers, like human lives, are uneven, and evolve over time; they are precarious and require constant work, and they regularly include breaks, detours, and parallel paths. And failure is always an option. Even the question about what it means to stop can often be only answered in hindsight. H.I., whose life and work are discussed in Chapter 8, stopped writing for nearly fifteen years, but always considered himself to be a poet just waiting for the right occasion to start again – and eventually he did make his comeback. Instead of a model, therefore, we sketch out one particular writer's biography, in order to appreciate the many ways in which milieus and relationships may contribute to a writing career.

Alshimaa Hamed was one of our key interlocutors between 2011 and 2015. The cultural space and writing workshops she organised (and which we discuss in Chapters 2 and 3) were among our most important fieldwork sites. We conducted a life-story interview with her in March 2014, in the heyday of her activity and prominence in Alexandria's literary landscape. She was just about to publish her third collection of short stories, and had established herself as a key figure in a youthful literary scene open towards international avant-gardes and popular culture. Her career has been anything but straightforward, however, and has included lengthy periods of withdrawal and shifting milieus and allegiances.

Alshimaa was born in 1981 in Alexandria into a family committed to Sufism, the mystical tradition in Islam. In her description, her family appears as part of an established urban middle class, with moderate wealth and a history of higher education. Her story with writing begins with reading and her family home:

Samuli: The same question I [often] ask: How did you start writing? And why?

Alshimaa: I started writing when I was very young. A friend of my father was tutoring me [for school], and I liked the part with poetry and reading. I was at prep school. I said: Where can I get things like that? He loved reading. So he used to tell me: There is a thing called the book fair, you have to attend it, and go and look and get books. I started to acquire books thanks to that person. At our home we had a library of religious books, and we had the quatrains of al-Khayyam, and the complete poetry of Nizar Qabbani because Papa loved it, [... as well as] Yusuf Idris or Youssef El-Sibaʿi for example, which are considered classics. [...] So that was the beginning, it was the only thing there was. [...] And when I started acquiring books, I also started feeling that I wanted to tell stories; I wanted to write. Since my youth I have liked stories in general. By the way, I first wrote poetry. I was into the idea of the poet and the poetry and the star, and the simple idea that any beginner has who likes reading. So I wrote poetry. First I tried to learn classical prosody, and I totally failed, so I wrote *tafʿila* [modernist free verse with a metre], and all the people in the cultural centres were saying: You must learn prosody, and stuff like that. So I ended up writing short stories. With my friend whom I mentioned [before the interview], she and I were writing stories (*hawadit*) and telling them to each other in the room, the girls' room on the ninth floor [of our house]. It was a weekly meeting, a group of girls laughing and dancing and singing, and crying and sharing complaints.

Mukhtar: When was that?

Alshimaa: It was during secondary school.

So far, Alshimaa's story is a very common one, being typical of writers we have encountered: an educated home where reading is encouraged and available, significant persons who encourage reading, and a protected space of sharing and socialisation. Notably, Alshimaa also mentions venturing to formal literary spaces as a teenager, but finding the company of those of a similar age more rewarding at the time. However, the first steps of her literary explorations were abruptly interrupted by a dramatic life change:

Alshimaa: There was a period in the middle when I withdrew. I was far away from stories and all. I travelled to Australia and lived there for two years. It's a big story, Samuli. [...] My family are Sufis. I got married to the son of the sheikh when I was sixteen years old because of a vision. The Prophet came [to somebody in a dream vision] and ordered me to be engaged to [the sheikh's] son. When I travelled to Australia, I lived in Sydney, which was a very pleasant city for me, but I felt strangled in the home of that sheikh, and I couldn't do anything. [...] I wasn't able to write or to do anything at all then. I was just trying to get out of the situation in any way possible. And when I got out of it, I started to read a lot in Sufism, and I completely withdrew from writing. I wrote from time to time when I was angry: reflections, messages to the Lord, first-year college stuff, you know. I withdrew for two years.

On other occasions, Alshimaa told us more about her time in Australia – for example, that a video store in Sydney was one of her few outlets and helped her

to acquire a taste for Anglophone popular culture that was less accessible in the Egypt of the late 1990s. Even so, an early marriage would also have meant the early end of her literary career, had it not been for her ability to leave Australia and the sheikh's son and return to Egypt, where she entered university. There, her younger sister and a circle of friends brought her back to an engagement with literature:

> *Alshimaa*: Almost daily [...] we gathered after college at a café called Omar al-Khayyam, in front of Raml Station; whoever was done with their classes would join. We brought books and sat reading together, and discussing things. We sat and read our text to each other, giving and taking feedback. It was nice. And I began attending cultural centres, and I was shocked by the experience, and maybe also by the strong classicism, and [older writers] acting out of the role of the master who gives guidance on certain issues in the writing. Because I, or girls in general, were taking up certain issues in their writing: you write about your femininity, and about our body, and relationships and whatever. That was a cause of concern for some people. It was a bit rigid. I felt that those people were living in another world, writing outside the society to the degree that no one noticed them. The only exception was Ahmed Hemeida,[6] God have mercy on him. That guy was very objective, and he took his time with anybody who would give him a text to read, and he would analyse the text with him and tell him what was wrong and what was right in it. [...] And I started to write short stories. And the man [i.e. Ahmed Hemeida] had studied Arabic and was *developed*. He was a great guy, to be honest, and very cooperative with all people. [...] Few in that generation weren't mean. They [i.e. others than Hemeida] would tell you: The revelation descends upon us just like that. They make you feel as if they needed to exert no effort: it either comes to you or it doesn't come to you. That made one realise that no, you have to try and write. And we would go to symposiums in strange places. We were young and said to our mum: We're going to a symposium in El-Qabbari [an old working-class neighbourhood in the west of Alexandria], and she would say: What's this, a symposium at night? There were always crises around this story [with attending literary events]. But then I started to write with passion. And I was lucky to enter a couple of things: two important literary groups in Alexandria, and cultural workshops by al-Mawrid and the British Council by pure luck. Through Asil, which was a very important symposium, I got introduced to al-Kull, and the writers of al-Kull with their 1990s taste and distinct style, and the youth of Itlala which at the very beginning was meeting at the Young Muslims' Association because they could find no other place to hold their symposium. Among [the writers of Itlala] there were people of my age and younger, and they had a different idea in their mind about writing than [people at] Asil, and when they went to Asil their work got ripped in pieces, so they did something a bit different, something opposed.
>
> Mukhtar: When was that?
>
> Alshimaa: It was in 2002.

6 Ahmed Hemeida (1949–2012) nicknamed 'Gorky of Alexandria', was an influential author of short stories and novels, and active in the public-sector cultural scene of Alexandria (*Middle East Online* 2014).

Alshimaa's narrative of the second beginning of her literary career, which began during her second college year in 2000, is remarkably relational. Rather than telling us what she read and wrote, she tells us with whom she read, who gave her feedback, and where she found support and inspiration. Her sister and college girlfriends, an *ustaziya* (master–apprentice, see Olszewska 2015) relationship with Ahmed Hemeida, and her entry into groups and institutions of a newly emerging independent scene outside the literary conservatism of public-sector cultural centres, feature as the significant figures and turning points of the story. Such periods (often rather short) of intense activity and attendance in a literary scene – or as with Alshimaa several scenes – are characteristic of literary biographies, and an important part of the learning and finding of one's space and style as a writer (Jacquemond 2008: 172–178). Obstacles she faced were relational as well – such as her mother's objection to her attendance of events late in the evening far away from the family home (which constituted a breach of the gendered norms conventional in her social milieu).

Some aspects of her trajectory are connected to a specific time. Alshimaa entered literary scenes through the Writers' Union and public-sector cultural centres that dominated literary life in the 1990s, and then found more inspiration in Asil, a literary gathering that was influential around 2000 and brought together remarkably different literary tastes – often in open conflict. Asil was succeeded by groups such as al-Kull (about which more in Chapter 2) and Itlala, which emerged in the early 2000s and presented an aesthetic and institutional split from the cultural centres. International funders such as the British Council and al-Mawrid al-Thaqafi enabled international travel (in Alshimaa's case to Beirut for a workshop) and connections that would have otherwise been unavailable. Alshimaa's literary coming of age coincided with and was shaped by this generational and institutional shift. Importantly, it also took place just before the explosion of online communication and distribution; meeting in person to exchange and discuss books was still indispensable for literary initiation and learning in the 2000s, while a decade later much of the exchange and feedback had moved to online media.

In the years that followed, Alshimaa gradually grew from somebody shaped by the scenes to somebody searching to shape them in turn. The key threshold in this process was publishing.

> *Alshimaa*: I learned a bit from those, and I learned a bit from the youth of Itlala, and I found myself always not quite belonging to these or those, but I was a friend of all and attended symposiums every week, and went to all cultural centres and things like that. And after that I began to write something that has a distinct shape. It took me from 2000 until 2008 to publish. Before that, I didn't publish. I didn't even try to gather money to publish. I had my collection of stories and I wanted to publish it. Somebody told me, Alshimaa, there is a kind

> of competition, apply for it. It was by al-Mawrid [...] and I applied and the people liked my work. That was my first publication.

Al-Mawrid al-Thaqafi (Culture Resource), or in short al-Mawrid, is a cultural organisation that was founded in 2003; it was based in Egypt until 2017 when it was forced to move to Lebanon. It was one of the main distributors of international funding to emerging independent scenes of the 2000s. Alshimaa's lucky break was preceded by a longer search for a publisher. Publishers with a good name and proper distribution were and still are highly centralised in Cairo. She approached major private publishers instead of paying money to one of the many low-profile private publishers that might have allowed her to get her book out quickly and easily (and with no distribution). But she had not been successful.

> *Alshimaa*: Those days publishing and these things were very difficult for me. [...] And there weren't even any publishers outside Cairo. There was nothing, nothing. What shall I do? For example, I contacted Shorouk [a large commercial publisher] and they said, let us read it and we'll reply. And Merit [a leading literary publisher at the time]. I couldn't get anywhere. I didn't know anybody yet, I didn't even know Merit's address or anything. So it was by coincidence that there was an artist like Maher Sherif with whom I could cooperate on design and drawings. I asked him if I could publish [with him].

Alshimaa's first collection of short stories, *Sabahan maʿ finjan qahwa* (In the morning with a cup of coffee, Hamed 2008), illustrated and designed by Maher Sherif and financed by al-Mawrid, was published in 2008 in Maher's *al-Kull* book series that gave its name to the al-Kull group (about which more Chapter 2). A writer, illustrator, and book designer, Maher Sherif was and remains one of the key figures of the independent literary and cultural scene of Alexandria. Encounters and collaborations like this can turn somebody who knows nobody into somebody whom a few people know. Such encounters, by virtue of the skills, ideas, networks, and funds that become available through them, are a key condition for allowing the pleasure of writing to persist and evolve. They offer themselves as opportunities of transition through which a new writer may gradually grow into a professional one.

> *Alshimaa*: That was the first book, the first experience. So you asked in the beginning why I write. Every year I feel that new things are added to the question. The basic reason is I don't know, but when I write I feel like ... you know when somebody ... I don't know how to describe it ... [...] But honestly, I enjoy. Sometimes it feels like an orgasm in my head. It happens with some texts; you say: Wow, if I could write all texts like that, in the same state of mind; to the degree that sometimes I feel that I eat up my arm out of nervous tension while I write, and at the same time I'm very happy and when I'm done I say: If only I could write all my texts like this. Maybe it is these moments that I wait for, and with some texts I sit and wait for maybe three months. I keep the text in my mind, and do research or what-

> ever. When I begin to write it really is a fantastic human spiritual state of being. So I enjoy writing, and I've been like that for a while, and I felt that book was a turning point, I mean *In the Morning with a Cup of Coffee*. It cost five pounds, because of the grant, and people were buying it since it [only] cost five pounds. People who don't know me! I would see girls sitting by the sea or on the minibus reading it. That felt very strange. People whom I didn't know at all wrote to me, and maybe because its price was good, and people from provinces tried to contact me, from Tanta and from Sohag. So you find that somebody tries to get your phone number to tell you: You touched me with that book. And there was one, she was living in Germany, saying to me: *In the Morning with a Cup of Coffee* changed my life, and I couldn't believe that it's a first work. So there is a moment when somebody may read something you wrote and it touches him. So the idea is that I can touch a few people when I write.

Alshimaa's long narrative answer to a seemingly simple question reaches its conclusion with her first literary success. She did not mention her second book (Hamed 2010) that reached more readers than her first one,[7] nor her second marriage and the birth of her first child shortly afterwards, nor her writing workshops, nor the Fabrica cultural space that she had recently opened with her then husband Ahmed Salem – perhaps because they might have not added much to the two key insights she shared with us in conclusion.

The first insight is that she did not know exactly why she writes, and there could have been no single answer anyway, because there were new reasons emerging all the time. Those reasons were generally linked with milieus, people, feedback, and recognition. They were the resource and support that allowed her to start writing again after a period of withdrawal, to develop her own distinctive voice, and to publish in collaboration with key figures of an emerging independent literary scene. As long as new reasons to write keep emerging, it is easy to continue writing.

The second insight is that the inherent, at its best moments even orgastic, pleasure of writing appears deeply linked with the pleasure of feedback and recognition. That is the best reason not to stop; and yet it is not a lasting condition.

Alshimaa repeatedly mentioned the idea of touching a reader. In her narrative, it appears as the key experience of success and pleasure that makes writing worthwhile. It is also the theory of literary writing that she communicated to the participants of her writing workshops (about which more in Chapter 3): that a literary text is at its strongest not when it preaches or teaches, but when it is able to generate a 'light touch' (*lamsa khafifa*), a feeling or idea that affects the reader, and which they may relate to in different ways. This is a version of the romantic theory of authorship that constitutes a partial continuity rather than a break with

7 Based on reader responses on Goodreads: see https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/4431895.

earlier Arabic theories of authorship. The ability to touch readers in such a way is a fragile thing, however. It needs to be found again and built again, and the resources, networks, distribution, and energy to do so may be lost for a while or forever owing to an abundance of reasons that await around every corner.

Unlike in the interview, in life Alshimaa's story doesn't end there. At the time of our interview, she was trying to make a living exclusively from work related to literature and the cultural field: writing, workshops, and running Fabrica. It was a risky endeavour, and turned out not to be sustainable. Fabrica was closed the following year because it was not profitable (and had no funding), and Alshimaa had to take an office job to make ends meet. At around the same time, her second marriage ended with a divorce. In 2017, she moved to Cairo, remarried, and shifted much of her focus to music. She largely withdrew from cultural scenes following the birth of her second child, and by the time of writing this in 2020, it is not yet clear whether and when she may make a comeback as a writer. Since she has three published books and a small but faithful community of fans to build on, it is likely that she will – but it will require the right circumstances at the right time.

With milieus, relationships, sociality, and resources being so central to the ups and downs of literary writing – and also to how writers themselves describe their own trajectories – the question changes. Instead of asking why some people write, and why some among them don't stop, it becomes necessary to inquire how literary milieus work, and how in the Alexandria of the 2010s they contributed to different literary careers, different styles of literature, indeed different ideas of what literature is. That is the story of the following chapter.

2 Infrastructures of imagination

One often forgets that the poet pays court to his fellow experts more than to anyone else.

Abdelfattah Kilito, *The Author and His Doubles*

In the story that Alshimaa Hamed told of her literary becoming in Chapter 1, her writing and her career as a writer gained their shape through encounters, friendships, readings, institutions, and social circles. Literature in this sense is not only ultimately social, but it is also a material practice that is grounded in infrastructures and political economy. Books were available during her childhood because her family and friends of her family had experienced higher education, and she in turn was encouraged to attend university. A degree of material comfort enabled Alshimaa and her young female friends to gather at her house to read and discuss, and later the cafés near her university allowed gatherings outside the family home. Forms of living and socialising that were common in her social class allowed her to dedicate time to reading and writing. Public-sector and private publishing and distribution made books easily available, and this, in time, allowed Alshimaa to search for a suitable publisher for her works. Some venues – such as public-sector cultural centres – were too restrictive for her, but she embraced others – such as the funding and networks provided by al-Mawrid – to enable her literary career. In addition, as Alshimaa grew up, online communication became an increasingly important part of the infrastructure of literary imagination.

The necessity of such an infrastructure is largely shared among all writers we know. Books, be they printed or electronic, are an indispensable part of their literary careers. While the spoken word remains an important element, especially of colloquial poetry, all the authors we met recorded their works in writing, and read others' writings. Publication is a widely shared criterion of being recognised as a writer, and the printed book is the form of publication with the greatest prestige, even at a time when young people increasingly read and write via their phones and laptops. Encountering others, and both supporting and being supported, appear to be indispensable. At the same time, however, different writers seek to access distinct infrastructures and social groups. Just as Alshimaa moved from one circle to another as she travelled her path of literary becoming, others move in some circles and not others, are able to access some means of publication but not others, read some books but not others, compete for some sources of symbolic and economic capital but not others. At the same time, they subscribe to some ideas of authorship rather than others, and strive towards one set of literary aes-

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thetics rather than another. Imagination has a political economy, and different infrastructures resonate with different imaginaries.

How do such infrastructures contribute to the making of literary careers, sociality, and aesthetics? This question became increasingly pertinent in the course of our fieldwork. In this chapter, we attempt a partial answer to the question by describing some locations of literary sociality in Alexandria during the 2010s. Literature as a social institution, we argue, takes place primarily and foremost in milieus of like-minded people who encourage each other in a certain direction.

Between autumn 2014 and spring 2015, Mukhtar – on occasion accompanied by Samuli – regularly attended meetings in four literary spaces: the Alexandria branch of the Writers' Union of Egypt, a debating group called Mukhtabar al-Sardiyat (Narratives Laboratory) at the Alexandria Library, symposia at the El Cabina cultural space, which was run by an independent cultural association, and a writing workshop at Fabrica, a self-funded venue. It was a time of heavy-handed political clampdown on anything that resembled political opposition, and independent cultural spaces that often relied on international funding were also beginning to feel the pressure. Literary and cultural circles were still flourishing, but the cultural boom that had begun in 2011 was coming to an end. Two years later, both Fabrica and El Cabina had closed their doors.

As a novelist who had been born and brought up in a village and worked as a teacher in Alexandria, Mukhtar's literary trajectory had taken him from more accessible but in aesthetic terms more conservative circles, similar to the Writers' Union, towards more experimental but less accessible circles, which included El Cabina and Fabrica among their meeting places. He did not feel quite at home in either, however.

Mukhtar felt that the globally connected scene of downtown Alexandria, while open to the world and new ideas, was busy drawing visible and invisible social borders around itself. The scene was organised to a large extent around 'independent' (that is, independent from the Ministry of Culture) cultural institutions that relied on international and private funding, and its aesthetics followed global developments more closely. This was the cultural scene that foreign researchers and students living in and visiting Alexandria were most likely to know. Writers active in this scene were often internationally connected, and some of them had travelled abroad to residencies and literary festivals. Innovative genres such as the prose poem (*qasidat al-nathr*, see Chapter 8) and the graphic novel had been welcomed and developed in this scene.[1] Socially controversial texts

1 While caricatures and comics have a long history in Egypt (Sherif 2015), the graphic novel (*riwaya musawwara*) is a recent genre. *Metro* by Magdy El Shafee (2012, 2013) is usually described

(such as sexually explicit narration and unorthodox or irreverent takes on religion) were well represented in the symposia and workshops of this milieu, as were international theoretical debates. Some events and places that Mukhtar attended seemed connected with the wider world more closely than they were with some parts of Alexandria and Egypt.

This resulted in a class difference that Mukhtar, the son of a fisherman, sharply felt, although over the years he had successfully adopted a similar habitus. In intellectual and literary terms, he found these circles inspiring. They encouraged experimentation in style and themes, and in critical reflection, while few social and cultural taboos were recognised. Without regular contact with these circles, Mukhtar's own writing might have remained constrained by the conservative aesthetics of more provincial literary circles. But he was puzzled. To be open towards new ideas and aesthetics, was it really necessary to be socially exclusive at the same time?

In contrast, another regular site of our fieldwork was similar to the circles where Mukhtar's literary socialisation had begun. But also there, he no longer felt quite at home. At the Writers' Union, authors who were mostly past middle age cultivated the art of the laudatory speech, and celebrated each other as great poets and authors. Many of the independent circles were busy with critical exploration, questioning and pushing literary aesthetics a step further. The Writers' Union was comparably more committed to a canonised version of twentieth-century Egyptian modernism, where authenticity, progress, and national liberation are expected to go hand in hand, and artists and writers are imagined to act as a top-down 'conscience of the nation' (see Armbrust 1996; Jaquemond 2008). Testing the limits was less encouraged. The prose poem genre that was well established in the Downtown scene caused heated debates among regulars at the Writers' Union. While themes of writing presented at the Union varied from subjective to socially critical to patriotic, and narrative approaches from subtle to straightforward, 'offensive words' (that is, sexually explicit language) were explicitly unwelcome at the meetings.

Inspired by one scene but troubled by its tendency towards social closure, and having a good time in the other but uninspired by its tendency towards aesthetic closure, Mukhtar addressed this dilemma with Samuli, and we began to think more systematically about literary sociality.

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as the first Egyptian graphic novel. It was first published but immediately banned in 2010, and had its second Arabic edition in 2013. In a matter of five years, a small but innovative scene of authors and publishers of graphic novels emerged. Fabrica, where we did much of our fieldwork in 2014–2015, was among the first publishers of graphic novels in Egypt.

The most immediate and tangible level of sociality is what we call *circles*, the specific cultural and literary gatherings of like-minded people, often combining friendship and shared interests, and constantly in a process of fragmentation and formation. Any given author is likely to move in several circles but be more at home in some than in others. Circles can take the shape of regular gatherings, networks, formal literary groups (*gamaʿa adabiya*), and of the *shilla*, 'clique' (de Koning 2009; Morsi 2009; Kreil 2012: 113–115), a more or less closed group of friends who gather frequently and often encourage and assist each other in their professional and other pursuits. Circles typically come together and share in what we call scenes: assemblages of physical and virtual sites where cultural production is made possible and is encouraged: cultural centres, art spaces, cafés, organisations, online groups and platforms.

At a higher level of abstraction, we speak of the *milieu*: the wider social location that includes not just the literary space but also political and religious stances, generational experience, and the class socialisation of those involved. A milieu in this sense is neither a clearly marked social structure nor a continuous tradition. Rather, it is something like a sociological reading of the phenomenological notion of the lifeworld (or, alternatively, an existentialist reading of Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and social field): the coming together of specific formative contexts, traditions, powers, and materialities in intersubjective experience.

All these levels of sociality are to some sense exclusionary, and are defined against each other as well as against the wider social mainstream. This is reflected in the terms used. In the colloquial Egyptian parlance of the urban bourgeoisie,[2] the wider mainstream against which one searches for distinction

2 Today, the term middle class is used to describe so many different social strata and groups that we find it no longer helpful to locate people socially (although it does remain useful as a way to understand social aspiration, see Schielke 2012b). Poor people with higher education but few material means may see themselves as middle class, and so may rich and powerful people, including judges, military officers, and businesspeople. In Egypt, the English term *middle class* or *upper middle class* is commonly used to describe people who clearly stand above the middle income strata: they live in affluent neighbourhoods of major cities, have superior educational and economic capital, and come from families that earn their living in well-incomed positions in the public sector, white-collar positions in the private sector, business, and free professions – that is, people who in an older social scientific parlance would have been called the bourgeoisie. For the sake of clarity, we therefore speak of bourgeoisie to describe people from the above-described social stratum, and of the cosmopolitan class to refer to a sub-section of the bourgeois class who (or whose children) have been educated at international schools or abroad, and have the resources to participate in global forms of popular and consumer culture, including language and forms of socialisation. The cosmopolitan class includes the wealthiest 2 per cent (corresponding with the proportion of international schools, the most expensive category of education in Egypt), but also

is called *al-biʾa*, 'the environment'.[3] But *biʾa* also means social milieu, and this was the term Mukhtar used in his first conceptual sketch of literary milieus in Alexandria. Another Arabic term that could be translated with the word 'milieu' is more commonly used by writers themselves: *al-wasat*, literally 'the middle', 'the scene', or 'the milieu', specifically *al-wasat al-adabi*, the literary scene or milieu. Writers who frequent a specific scene regularly refer to it as *the* scene, which reflects the naturalisation of each scene's claim to represent good, proper literature. In colloquial use, *biʾa* is usually a term of exclusion, while *wasat* more likely involves claims to belonging or insider status. By using *circle*, *scene*, and *milieu* in English to respectively describe literary sociality, its material conditions, and its location in a wider context, we intentionally cross the semantic difference between *biʾa* and *wasat*. Sociality carries the duality of inclusion and mutual support, and exclusion and rejection of others. My *wasat* may be your *biʾa*.

The formation of scenes

Egyptian literature of the twentieth century posited an image of the author who is on the one hand a romantic genius producing from his or her authentic experience and inspiration, and on the other hand a committed citizen acting as a 'conscience of the nation' and as part of an 'army of the letters' (Jacquemond 2008: 18). During the early twenty-first century, this aspirational unity of aesthetic autonomy and nationalist commitment has increasingly been eroded (El Dabh 2016). It was never uncontested in Egypt, and different understandings of the role of the writer and the meaning and purpose of literature have competed for a long time (Jacquemond 2008). But the turn of the millennium witnessed growing splits within the literary landscape, which has become structured by three main poles: public-sector institutions and authors committed to a rather conservative version of twentieth-century modernist aspirations; a so-called independent cultural scene marked by more experimental and cosmopolitan aesthetics; and a thriving and increasingly professionalised market of best-selling fiction, self-help, and colloquial poetry.

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people who through diasporic or migratory histories have access to certain forms of a cosmopolitan habitus without a correspondingly high income or status.

3 As one part of a logic of distinction that defines cosmopolitan bourgeois or 'upper-middle' classes in contradistinction against things and people that are *shaʿbi* ('popular'), *biʾa* ('popular milieu'), *baladi* ('rural/local'), or *local* (used as an English loan word in Arabic) (Lagrange 2020: 27–32).

These splits are far from absolute, of course, and on closer examination it becomes evident that the literary landscape is made of a large number of small circles of friends, institutions with their usual crowds, and regular meeting places, all of which are in a constant process of fragmentation and rearrangement. But there are tangible polarising tendencies that correspond in a complex way with generational experience, class, political positioning, and other lines of division. These have been further magnified in the aftermath of 2011.

The tensions described here are not entirely new: they are partly inherent to the historical formation of contemporary Arabic literature. While literature in a wider sense of stories and poems is as old as the Arabic language, literature as an autonomous social field akin to the French and English senses of *littérature/literature* was established in Egypt in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in a process that built on but also transformed the older Arabic tradition of *adab*. Until then, *adab* had meant the command of refined manners and morals, as well as their transmission and teaching by means of stories, poems, and scholarship. Some scholars, notably Michael Allan (2016), have argued that the redefinition of *adab* as an equivalent of *littérature* in the early twentieth century involved a fundamental secularisation and silencing of the older tradition. Others, notably Teresa Pepe (2019b; see also Kesrouany 2019), argue that classical understandings were not silenced but rather absorbed into a reshaped understanding of modern Arabic *adab*/literature. She identifies three key conflicts that can be documented since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and remain central today:

- an elitist claim to provide critique and guidance towards proper use of language and correct understanding of matters of importance, in contrast to a thriving market of popular literature, which has often been looked down upon by authors who consider themselves the critics/gatekeepers of fine expression and proper conduct;
- a moralist understanding of *adab* as the learning of good manners and ethics, and a correspondingly pedagogical equation of socially conservative ethics and aesthetics, in contrast to tendencies towards artistic licence to provoke and break taboos; and
- an ideal of societal political engagement that educates the public, in contrast to tendencies to produce autonomous literary text and to raise questions rather than give answers.

From the 1950s until the 1990s, these different tendencies largely existed in one literary field that was dominated by the Egyptian state (Jacquemond 2008: 197). Commercial literature was often set apart by its circulation in cheap pocketbook series such as *Rajul al-mustahil* (Man of the impossible), a highly popular series

of action adventures by Nabil Farouk, which was published in 160 issues between 1984 and 2009 (Bawardi and Faranesh 2018); it was often mentioned to us as an early inspiration and reading experience by writers from several generations. Since the turn of the millennium, the rise and diversification of independent commercial publishing, the involvement of internationally funded non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in cultural production at around the same time (commonly referred to as 'NGO-isation'), and the rise of online streaming platforms in the 2000s (since then, the main medium of colloquial poetry) have provided infrastructures that, at least temporarily, have made it possible for different ends of this productive field of tension to become increasingly separate as scenes or milieus of their own.

Such diversity has become an established feature of publishing. Egypt has a vast landscape of public-sector publishers as a heritage of the Nasserist socialist period, with the most important among them being the Egyptian General Book Organisation: this commands a large infrastructure and distribution network, but also suffers from long backlogs of titles waiting to be published and varying quality. Many other public-sector outlets have great problems with distribution, and some writers we met told us they have seen entire print runs stored and never sold because of bureaucratic hurdles. In the wake of the liberalisation of the Egyptian economy since the 1970s, private publishers have gradually grown from a lowbrow competitor of prestigious public-sector presses to the dominant site for both high-end and large-audience publishing.[4]

When he was interviewed by Samuli in 2020, the novelist Mohamed Rabie from Cairo, who has worked as a literary editor for two high-end publishers, pointed out that private publishing has become increasingly professional and diverse in the past decade, with a number of publishers specialising in the production of commercial bestsellers in genres such as horror, detective stories, and self-help, while others seek and fewer gain recognition as high-end literary and non-fiction publishers. Only a few private presses have professional marketing and distribution, and even fewer are committed to the additional expenditure of a literary editor – a role that is still an exception in Egyptian publishing, and in Rabie's view the key mark of high quality for publishers who aim for what he calls 'big-time readers' who can afford to buy good books on a regular basis and care about quality.

4 Translation is an important exception because it requires significant funds in foreign currency: these are available to a number of leading public-sector presses and to high-end private publishers – which are able to acquire translation funds from abroad.

The vast majority of private publishers, however, make most of their revenue not from sales but from publishing fees. Often deprecatingly called 'stairwell publishers', indicating their lack of professionalism and infrastructure, small private publishers have proliferated, and they make it possible for anyone who has at their disposal the capital of 5,000 to 10,000 Egyptian pounds (in 2020 prices equalling about 275 to 550 euros) to publish a book that will probably have little to no distribution. This results in an extensive output of titles that are often full of mistakes, lack quality, and soon disappear into obscurity.

However, the division between professional and vanity publishers is far from clear, because publishers with a good standing sometimes publish books in exchange for fees, and many new publishers enter the market with the aim of generating revenue through sales, but fail to distribute their titles successfully. According to the novelist Nael Eltoukhy (2019), paying to publish is not necessarily a marker of low quality, but can be a stage in one's career. He had to pay to publish his first two books, and when he eventually received a contract where he was paid by the publisher instead of paying himself, he considered it a mark of being recognised as an accomplished author.

In all cases, selling books produced by their original publishers is only one channel among others for the distribution of literature. Piracy proliferates. Almost any successful book can be downloaded as a pdf document, and bestsellers are sold in bootleg prints on popular book markets. Outside the small landscape of professional publishers who make money by sales, the main means of distribution is authors themselves, handing out copies of their books as gifts for friends and peers, and to potentially important critics and translators. We always returned from symposia with a signed book or two.

Printed books remain a crucial status symbol of authorship across the literary spectrum, while at the same time younger Egyptians especially are reading and writing mainly via electronic media. Various online media (blogs and forums pioneering the field in the 2000s, and online news and publishing outlets, social media, and streaming platforms dominating throughout the 2010s) have provided flourishing and often transient platforms for literary publishing, reading, and debate. In contrast, most printed books only find a handful of readers, and it takes no talent to publish a book. And yet the material shape of the printed book – preferably accompanied by a handwritten dedication – carries an unbroken status. A book marks a person as an intellectual in the tradition of Egyptian modernism since the colonial era (Jacquemond 2008). And for all those who fail

to find a high-end venue for their manuscripts,[5] 'stairwell publishers' make it possible to buy that status.

The proliferation of private publishing and the rise of online media coincided with the internationally funded NGO-isation of parts of the cultural scene in the early 2000s. This has enabled the establishment and continuity of numerous independent cultural spaces, programmes and events, magazines and book series, and translations. This has been a contested process. Paranoid accusations of treason and of serving foreign interests have escalated since 2011. On a less paranoid note, writers not included in international circuits have questioned the literary merit of those who are. We have also encountered people working in independent institutions who have complained about funder bias, expressing their annoyance about international visitors and institutions trying to impose their interests and concerns on their Egyptian partners (see also Elnozahy 2020). This difficult relationship became the topic of a project that Daniela Swarowsky curated with Samuli, Maher Sherif, Aliaa Elgready, Ahmed Salem, and a group of writers (many of whom also are featured in this book), which resulted in the art exhibition *In Search of Europe?* in 2013 (Swarowsky et al. 2013). One of the absurdities we addressed in that project was that we were inviting Alexandrian artists and writers to participate in a critical discussion of the relationship with foreign funders – with funding from Germany and for a project curated and located in that country. And yet literature has faced the least pressure to comply with funder bias during the period of our research, thanks to the language barrier: most international partners and visitors simply did not know enough Arabic to impose their bias. Where funding institutions were involved in a selective or curating capacity in the literary field, such as al-Mawrid supporting two of Alshimaa Hamed's books, this work was done by Egyptian critics close to the cosmopolitan avant-garde and not by foreign visitors.

Initially, NGO-isation appeared to fit well into the Mubarak regime's combination of authoritarian rule with international investment and showcase pluralism. However, the 25 January revolution of 2011 showed that this was not the whole story. Between 2011 and 2013, Egypt witnessed a veritable cultural boom. Independent spaces mushroomed, most of them short lived. Concerts, lectures, and workshops were numerous and well attended, although funding was already scarcer than it had been before 2011, as political pressure against internationally funded organisations grew and 'foreign funding' became a paranoid accusation

5 Mohamed Rabie said that as a literary editor he would receive between one and two hundred submissions in a year, most of them of extremely poor quality, and only a couple of them would be published by the presses he worked for.

of treason. From summer 2013, when the military seized back power from the Muslim Brotherhood, the space for independent organisations became increasingly narrow, and it soon became evident that the new regime considered all kinds of social and cultural initiatives as potential agents of insurrection. Restrictive legislation and other measures against internationally funded NGOs in 2017, followed by a dramatic grab for control by state-aligned syndicates of artists, musicians, actors, and film-makers 2019, destroyed most of the briefly flourishing scene of independent initiatives (Anonymous 2020; El Tarzi 2020; Elnozahy 2020). However, the greater plurality of literary scenes and milieus that has emerged since the 1990s for the time being remains a feature of the landscape.

A provincial setting

A paradoxical answer to the 'where' question about Alexandrian literature is that literature is in Cairo, and to a lesser degree in various centres of power abroad. The commercial power of publishing and bookselling is almost totally concentrated in Cairo. This is so taken for granted that when he heard the recording of the interview in which Samuli asked Mohamed Rabie in 2020 about why this is so, Mukhtar laughed: 'Are you seriously asking that question?' Rabie replied: 'If you told me there was a publishing house in Aswan, I'd find it very strange.' Egypt is an extremely centralised state, and much of its economic activity and cultural life follow the logic of the state's centralisation. This makes publishing in Alexandria commercially unviable owing to the lack of distribution networks, and the public and critical attention that are concentrated in the capital city. Kalima, a publishing house we followed in our fieldwork that published Mukhtar's second novel (Shehata 2013), closed its doors in 2015 after only three years of activity because of a lack of revenue and increasing costs. Fabrica, an art space and publishing house established in 2013, closed its doors as an art space in 2015 and as a publishing house two years later. The same fate has awaited most publishing initiatives we know of in Alexandria. A handful of private bookshops with a literary and intellectual focus have been able to stay in business (those that do so are located in the bourgeois neighbourhoods of Roshdy and Kafr Abdou), but their visibility is low compared with the thriving second-hand and bootleg book markets located in Nabi Danial Street and Raml Station in downtown Alexandria.

From the point of view of young people (especially women) with cultural ambitions and a sufficient degree of bourgeois and cosmopolitan capital to pursue those ambitions, Alexandria often appears as a conservative and gloomy city with many restrictions and few opportunities. There is a long-standing and ongoing

brain drain from Alexandria to Cairo, and also abroad. Alexandrian writers who visit or work in Cairo describe it as a harsh and stressful city dominated by long working hours and dog-eat-dog competition, but at the same time it is the place where there are opportunities for work and income, where an intensity of networks and ideas can be found, and where there is more space for alternative ways of living. Few of those who leave for Cairo return. Another long-standing movement for work is towards the Arab Gulf states, which employ many Egyptians in the media and cultural sectors; some have gained powerful positions in publishing and cultural funding networks. Another international mobility current in the cultural sector consists of young and highly educated people, many among them formerly employed in NGOs or in freelance jobs in journalism or translation, who leave Egypt for Western Europe and North America mostly on student or freelance visas, or as refugees.[6] This originally rather small current has been amplified in some of the circles we studied, largely because of the period of heavy political repression since 2013.

In contrast to the many currents of mobility from Alexandria abroad, the literary scenes in the city are overwhelmingly national. In the scenes we frequented, non-Egyptians were rare enough to stand out. Alexandria Library, international cultural centres, and some independent institutions regularly hosted international visitors, but few stayed longer than for a particular event. There is a lively if small Libyan intellectual exile scene in Alexandria. Writers we met included those with Palestinian, Sudanese, Syrian, Indonesian, and Finnish nationality: some had arrived recently, while others had been born and raised in Egypt but had no prospect of gaining Egyptian nationality. The difficulty of securing permanent residence in Egypt adds to the transience of non-Egyptians. For example, the Syrian poet Emad Al-Ahmad, who in a short time gained a name in the cosmopolitan-independent scene in Alexandria (e.g. Al-Ahmad 2014), had to leave for Turkey in 2015 because of issues with his residence status. He now lives in Malta.

Online media have to some extent softened, even transcended, the local and national focus of Alexandrian literary networks. Some writers who later gained a name in the internationally connected avant-garde initially became known through their blogs in the 2000s (see Jurkiewicz 2012; Pepe 2019a). In the 2010s, blogs were gradually marginalised by social media, most importantly Facebook, which since then has become a practically indispensable means of publicity

6 Trajectories of mobility are strongly structured by class, which forces many poorer people who travel for work to apply for asylum for the lack of other means to stay, while people with better resources can live abroad with a student or freelance status although they may have left Egypt for primarily political reasons.

and communication, and is also often used for the publication and discussion of drafts. The limits of online communication and socialising are more fluid and usually less exclusive than, say, a gathering in a café. Online networks allow people who only rarely physically frequent cultural spaces to become at least partially involved in some of their activities. This has made communication across regional and national boundaries easier – and yet language, class, and ideological barriers have proved to be more persistent. And the tendency to fragmentation and the formation of smaller circles is shared by online and offline networks.

When opportunity arises, virtual networks also invite face-to-face encounters. Our very first fieldwork site in late 2010 and early 2011 was a regular gathering at a private bookshop that had emerged from the The *Rewayat* online forum inspired by Ahmed Khaled Towfik (1962–2018), a very influential and commercially successful writer of science fiction and horror. The forum had its peak of activity in the years before 2011, when it had a wide range of participants. The smaller circle of people who began meeting in person in Alexandria formed closer friendships and alliances, some of which continue by the time of writing this, in 2020.

Even in a time of mass emigration and online media, international connectedness remains a scarce resource in Alexandrian literary scenes. Travel and publication abroad and translation into foreign languages are therefore major sources of status. We assume that many of the writers who participated in our research did so partly because they hoped we would translate their work, although we kept telling people we are not translators. On one occasion, Samuli translated a colloquial poem into German for a research paper. Its author S., a poet well connected in Alexandria but not internationally, was very happy about the translation and asked Samuli to make a voice recording of it, which he did. S. circulated the translation on social media and received numerous congratulations and compliments for it. Samuli is not a native German speaker, and the translation was hardly up to the quality of the original, but this bothered nobody. There were in fact no German speakers among those who complimented S. for his poem being translated. Nobody asked us if and how the translation might reach a German audience (it probably did not). The less internationally connected writers are, the more translation is primarily a marker of status for them and only secondarily, if at all, a way to reach global audiences.

Language is a more complex issue. In poetry, a well-established division runs between Classical and Egyptian Arabic – each of which has specific connotations and symbolic status: colloquial is associated with accessible, down-to-earth, humorous writing, while Classical Arabic is linked with more highbrow or conservative uses. Owing to the declining quality of public education (and the dominance of English in upper-class private education), younger writers often barely master Classical Arabic grammar, and we often encountered works of prose that

fluctuate between colloquial and classical registers not as a conscious aesthetic strategy, but simply because the author lacked proficiency in Classical Arabic. While Classical Arabic enjoys high symbolic status as the language of national and religious traditions, it is not a marker of high social status in Egypt, where the global–local distinction is a cornerstone of class. English comes with higher social prestige, and in some intellectual and artistic scenes in Alexandria it is preferred as the language of intellectual conversation – to the disgust of those who have not mastered it. Some aspiring writers who socialise in the international educational sector also write in English (which along with French has some tradition in Egyptian literatures of the twentieth century, see e.g. Ghaly 1964), and yet Arabic clearly dominates at literary events and publishing: we have met many accomplished and internationally connected writers whose English is moderate at best. Translation into Arabic flourishes since the early 2000's, and is a major source of international connections in literary movements, although many readers complain about the poor quality of many translations.

Despite its relatively provincial nature when assessed against its large size as a city of over 5 million inhabitants (CAPMAS 2017), Alexandria has a lively landscape of reading, writing, and debate. The focus of our fieldwork has been on a range of literary scenes and spaces that owing to their lack of commercial opportunities largely stand on the elitist side of the first of the three formative tensions described by Pepe (2019b). This does not mean that the writers we met were elite, or even that their works were generally highbrow (many are strongly influenced by commercial literature), but they generally share a highbrow aspiration to write literature that is distinctive in one way or another. They differ greatly, however, with regard to the second and third tensions described by Pepe: moralism versus licence, and societal commitment versus aesthetic exploration.

These tensions were clearly linked with infrastructures and social circles during our fieldwork. In the following, we explore those linkages at four sites we regularly attended, and which are each linked with specific circles and a specific milieu.

The Writers' Union

Our most long-standing fieldwork site (from 2012 to 2019) was the Writers' Union, officially called The General Syndicate of the Writers' Union of Egypt, Alexandria Branch. This is a national institution, and as the name indicates, it is a self-administered syndicate that represents writers' professional interests. National and branch boards of the Union are elected by members in biannual elections.

To become a member, one must present at least two published books. Members pay a fee and are entitled to some modest services. The Writers' Union was once a dominant institution, but has gradually lost some of its importance as younger writers are less likely to join and attend its meetings.

Image 2: A symposium at the Writers' Union, November 2019.

The Alexandria Branch of the Union occupies a ground-floor apartment in Miami, a neighbourhood in the East of the City, the most populous part of Alexandria. The Writers' Union is part of a wider scene of public-sector institutions and social circles associated with them. Often those who frequent the Union are also active in literary events at public-sector cultural centres run by the Ministry of Culture, and a similar spectrum of literary currents and participants can be found at both. During our fieldwork, there were at least three main currents present at meetings of the Writers' Union.

The first current consists mainly of poets born in the 1960s and 1970s who represent an avant-garde wing in the Union. Two among them introduced us to the Union in the first place: Kamal Ali Mahdy and Ashraf Dossouki Ali, whom Mukhtar has known for a long time, and whom Samuli met through our meetings with Kamal's circle in a café in the nearby neighbourhood of Abu Kharouf (featured in Chapters 1 and 4). They both write modernist poetry in Classical Arabic, sympathise with literary innovation and exploration, and also feel at home in the public-sector spaces of the Writers' Union and cultural centres. They stand

in a tradition of the Writers' Union as a space where literary avant-gardes could struggle for power in the literary establishment – a tradition that is becoming weaker, however, as fewer young writers with such ambitions want to join the Union.

The second current consists of a variety of authors who stand in a more conservative tradition of twentieth-century modernism,[7] highlighting the idea of literary commitment that is able to guide society, and a moralistic vision that links literary imagination with a conservative understanding of *adab* as the cultivation and teaching of fine manners. Their works of prose are often based on straightforward narration, and their poetry tends towards either classical double verse or its colloquial counterpart *zagal*. Among the representatives of this current we encountered was the novelist B.S., originally from Palestine and living in Alexandria for decades. At a symposium dedicated to her work in 2015, she rejected experimentation and innovation in literature (attacking surrealism in particular), identified with an Arabic and anti-Western literary and political nationalism, and insisted on morally and politically committed literature that would only use polite and decent language. At the same time, she took pride in her knowledge of Russian and French classics, and took for granted modernist narrative genres such as the novel, which a hundred years earlier had been new innovations of partially foreign import. Not all writers in this conservative current are as straightforward in their rejection of experimentation, however. Others are engaged in explorations within the guiding limits of moral and committed literature, with an example being Gamal Kashhat (who appears in Chapter 5), who has experimented with speculative fiction and reflected on how science fiction could be put to work to find solutions to climate change.

A third current consists of new writers, most of them at retirement age. The retirement age in Egypt is low (sixty in most sectors, and early retirement is easily available in the public sector. Some men and women in their fifties and sixties who are financially secure can stop working, and when they find themselves with free time they are able to pursue literary interests. While younger new writers we met typically sought other sites of activity and rarely ventured to the Writers' Union, older writers were numerous at the weekly symposium. Their writings were often highly autobiographical, and the conflicts they addressed often

7 We speak of modernism in the sense of a cultural and political movement that links forward-looking independent arts with a top-down nationalist struggle for progress and development, an appropriation of Western cultural production and standards, and a search for national, religious, or other forms of authenticity. See Armbrust (1996); Jacquemond (2008).

related to family life, professional experience, and social engagement (see also Šabasevičiūtė 2019a).

A primary accomplishment of the Writers' Union is its ability to host a plurality of literary tastes and stances, and also degrees of experience and skill. This is further complicated by political differences between regime supporters (including former communists who became regime supporters in 2013 because El-Sisi and the military represented for them a nationalist and secular hope for rescue from Islamism) on the one hand, and regime critics (many of whom entertain various degrees of Islamist sympathies) on the other. A key task of the moderator of a symposium at the Writers' Union is to systematically downplay and evade these and other differences that could easily destroy a meeting. What keeps the Union together therefore appears to be neither aesthetics nor politics, but rather a generationally specific commitment to public-sector institutions and, for most but not all participants, a commitment to a tradition of twentieth-century modernism in which an elitist idea of the author is combined with a pedagogical and engaged view of literature.

Mukhtabar al-Sardiyat

Established in 2002, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina is the leading cultural flagship in the city. It hosts a large and varied cultural programme, from small workshops and symposiums to large concerts and readings by popular performers, as well as large conferences and an annual book fair. The Library, as it is usually referred to, stands directly under the authority of the President of the Republic and is the main beneficiary of international cultural and scientific funding in Alexandria. It is also a major employer in the cultural sector.

The Library hosts a number of autonomous cultural initiatives, among them two important literary circles: the Itlala literary group and Mukhtabar al-Sardiyat (the Narratives Laboratory). Mukhtar conducted fieldwork at al-Sardiyat from 2015 to 2017, occasionally accompanied by Samuli who returned there to attend a handful of events in 2019. Having had its first meeting on 29 December 2009, al-Sardiyat is one of the more long-lasting literary initiatives in Alexandria, and is closely connected with its founder Mounir Oteiba, who programmes and moderates all the events.

Al-Sardiyat is a debating club that meets weekly at the Alexandria Library, each time presenting and discussing a literary work by an invited author. The works presented vary greatly, ranging from traditional modernist narratives to more exploratory or experimental approaches. The group has featured well-

known authors enjoying national recognition (and occasionally Arab writers from outside Egypt) as well as young local writers presenting their first book. The format is always the same: an author reads passages from his or her work, two discussants give a critical reading of the text, to which the author is invited to respond, and the audience adds interpretations and comments. Mounir Oteiba moderates the discussion and adds his comments when he deems this necessary. The format of a critical debate (*munaqasha*) is well established in Egypt, and can be found in many settings, but unlike most places, which feature a variety of formats, al-Sardiyat is exclusively dedicated to this one, giving it a formal consistency that few other literary spaces possess.

The regular crowd at al-Sardiyat includes middle-aged and older people whose tastes and styles of critique and debate come close to those in the Writers' Union, as well as younger participants who had their first experiences of literary sociality in writing workshops held in independent spaces. Al-Sardiyat has also been able to attract many women writers of all ages, and Mounir Oteiba actively encourages their participation as authors and discussants. Al-Sardiyat is located in a recognised state institution and is embedded in a more formal, thus also more morally respectable, form of mixed-gender socialising than many independent spaces. Thus, it allows women writers to balance conservative social mores and the development of a public literary voice.

Image 3: Mounir Oteiba discusses narrative technique at Mukhtabar al-Sardiyat, November 2019.

Al-Sardiyat has been designed by Mounir Oteiba as a space that brings together different literary groups and tastes, and it is remarkably successful in that regard. It is the only literary gathering we attended that has regular crossovers in terms of participants and visitors with all the others we know. The organiser's motivation, to bring together and unite, is evident in the variety of authors and works discussed, and also in the style of debate, which carefully bridges the two contrary dimensions of literary critique: questioning and exploration, and a performance of recognition and status affirmation for authors.

The focus on critique gives al-Sardiyat a pedagogical aspect that is explicitly appreciated by some participants we spoke with. It is designed as a learning space where participants are encouraged to think about the why and how of literary themes and techniques, with the explicit aim to 'say something that has not already been said', in the words of Mounir at one of the meetings in November 2019.

This is the main difference between al-Sardiyat and events we attended at the Writers' Union and public-sector cultural centres. The latter focus more on recital and recognition, and pay less attention to innovation and the development of skill. The idea of writing as a trained skill that allows an author to say something new is aligned with a shifting ideal of authorship that has been promoted by literary avant-gardes since the 1990s. In Mounir's words (at a discussion in a café after a meeting in September 2019), there has been a historical shift from the writer 'as a sort of prophet with a mission and with supreme inspiration (*ilham*), to the writer as one among others who is observing, working, and asking'. The consequence, he argued, is that writers are better advised to forget inspiration, and instead recognise that talent needs to be developed and trained.

Mounir's ideas about writing and authorship stand in a productive tension with the explicit inclusivity and pluralism of al-Sardiyat. Such a combination is not easy to maintain. In other circles we know, inclusivity tends to go hand in hand with more conservative aesthetics, and avant-garde explorations need a degree of closure to thrive. Mounir Oteiba's presence is instrumental in creating a balance. By having the last word as the programmer and moderator of al-Sardiyat, he can run an inclusive programme to his own taste that otherwise might fall apart owing to aesthetic differences and power struggles.

El Cabina

El Cabina was a cultural space active from 2010 until August 2016, located in a technical building ('cabin', hence the name) at the back of the abandoned, and later demolished, Cinema Rialto in the downtown district of Raml Station. El

Cabina was run by the Gudran Association, an internationally funded cultural NGO that was established in 2003 and closed in 2018. It featured a library and a music studio, and a varied cultural programme of concerts, movies, exhibitions, intellectual and literary readings, and debates. Its period of activity coincides with the vibrancy of cultural life in the wake of the 25 January revolution, and its end corresponds with the gradual tightening of the grip over independent cultural institutions in the aftermath of the counter-revolution of 2013. We frequented events at El Cabina throughout its period of activity (some events we attended are featured in more detail in Chapter 5).

The audience that gathered at El Cabina's literary and intellectual events was varied in terms of age. There were usually many female participants, and many among the audience sported a bohemian or alternative habitus of the kind that was becoming increasingly popular, especially among young urban supporters of the so-called revolutionary current that emerged in 2011. Regular participants hailed from urban families but not just from the bourgeoisie; many of those active in running the events were in their thirties or forties, and originally came from the old popular (*shaʿbi*) quarters of Alexandria.

The poet Abdelrehim Youssef told Samuli in 2019 that when he and other members of Gudran designed the literary programme of El Cabina, they decided not to reproduce the format of an open weekly symposium (such as the one held at the Writers' Union) that by its nature is inclusive and thus of mixed quality. Instead, they chose dedicated meetings with selected authors of 'serious literature' (*adab gadd*), which in practice meant writers who were part of the internationally connected cosmopolitan avant-garde, including some newly emerging genres such as the graphic novel.

Events were focused on debate and critique. The mood and tone of address was much less formal than in most other spaces we attended. Instead of reading out a written study, discussants made improvised comments and asked the authors unscripted questions, engaging them in an open-ended conversation. There was thus an explicit and also embodied preference for the exploratory and questioning dimension of critique, and an aversion towards laudatory performances of critique as recognition. In terms of the second productive tension in Egyptian literature that Pepe (2019b) describes, the literary programme at El Cabina stood in between the ideals of autonomous text on the one hand, and the idea of writing as a critical, potentially committed practice on the other. In regard to the third tension, it certainly preferred licence to moralism. In terms of the first tension, elitism versus popular taste, it leaned towards highbrow aesthetics combined with an openness for some popular cultural styles that were part of the emerging alternative or 'independent' aesthetic. This latter element was especially pronounced in the venue's music programme.

Some people active in other literary scenes criticised El Cabina for reproducing and promoting the taste and works of a *shilla* and by so doing excluding outsiders. However, the reliance on *shilla* networks is a feature of all cultural circles in the city. It makes shared work possible, but it also generates limits to aesthetics and collaborations that are difficult to cross. What is an aesthetically ambitious selection of good literature for some, for others may appear as favouring the taste of one *shilla* over others. Abdelrehim acknowledged in hindsight that the literary programme's cutting-edge ambition occasionally functioned at the expense of outreach. However, readings of well-known authors such as Sonalla Ibrahim in 2011 attracted very large audiences; while the *Nuqaddim lakum* (We introduce to you) series on social theory was extremely popular despite its demanding content: it met with a demand from a sufficiently large sector of people for interpretations in theoretical terms of what was going on in their society.

Image 4: Amr Abdelrahman presents the work of Karl Marx at the *Nuqaddim lakum* (We introduce to you) series on social theory at El Cabina, October 2014.

El Cabina was a successful space, and yet its success was largely limited to a milieu for whose tastes and interests it catered. However, such a limited reach is a feature of almost all cultural sites in Alexandria, with the exception of the Alexandria Library. A degree of limitation makes a space attractive because it provides participants with a sense of comfort and ease, and programming they will appreciate. This made El Cabina an informal meeting point for a circle of writers

who had known each other for a long time, as well as musicians and other cultural practitioners who gathered there (Asfour 2020). Their network preceded El Cabina, and has remained active since its closure.

The literary and intellectual programmes at El Cabina were just one among the many projects undertaken by a circle of writers and other artists who have a taste for debate and experimentation, often combine literary with intellectual engagements, have participated in various shared projects, are often linked with the internationally funded independent cultural scene, and prefer to gather at al-Bawwabin, a small street café in downtown Alexandria that is known as a meeting place for writers and performing artists in the city (Youssef 2015). The oldest members of the circle were born in the 1960s and 1970s and were involved in the 1990s literary avant-garde, but it has continuously recruited younger members.

The first public manifestation of this circle was the literary group Al-Kull (Everyone), which gained some prominence in the 2000s. According to Abdelrehim Youssef, who entered the literary scene by this route in the early 2000s, *al-Kull* was originally the title of a book series edited and designed by the short story writer, literary critic, illustrator, and graphic designer Maher Sherif. Rather than being a coherent literary group, al-Kull was something like a trademark that was generated by Maher, who appreciates debate and difference and is known as an uncompromising literary critic. Consistent with his taste, al-Kull had no distinctive aesthetics other than its propensity for plurality and questioning.

Al-Kull ceased to exist as a literary identity in around 2010 without ever being properly dissolved. According to Abdelrehim, the most important aspect of the group was its members' collaborations, such as the journal *al-Mina* (The Harbour) of which a handful of issues were published in the mid-2000s. Another journal project, largely produced by the same circle, *Tara al-Bahr* (Sea View), was published in 2016–2017 and is featured in Chapter 5. By the late 2000s, some members of the circle joined the Gudran Association, which in a few years grew from a community project for a traditional fishermen's settlement into a key actor among independent cultural institutions which proliferated in the 2000s thanks to an influx of international funding. In 2008, Gudran opened an art space called El Dokan in a shop in the downtown district of El-Manshiya, followed in 2010–2011 by El Cabina at Raml Station, and in 2014 by Wekalet Behna, in an old office building in El-Manshiya, which was dedicated to visual arts and film. Gudran became an important employer in the cultural sector, employing at its peak as many as twenty-four people in different projects and spaces, mostly on part-time contracts. Abdelrehim Youssef and Omayma Abdel Shafy, who had published in the *al-Kull* series, became employees of the association, with the former working as a teacher and translator at the same time to make ends meet.

El Cabina closed in August 2016 when the lease for the space could not be extended. By this time, Gudran was running out of money, and it gradually stopped paying salaries. Funding had been approved by the Ford Foundation, but Egyptian authorities refused to release the funds. Gudran was finally dissolved by court order in May 2018: an administrative error connected with the receipt of funds provided an opportunity for measures to be taken against the association. This coincided with a restrictive new NGO law and similar measures against other NGOs in Egypt. Gudran's employees dispersed, some returning to their former commercial careers, others seeking freelance work in translation or cultural projects abroad. In September 2019, the court order was overruled on appeal, but Gudran's end was irreversible. Previous employee Omayma Abdel Shafy together with Basil Behna established Wekalet Behna as a private company, which focuses on hosting visual arts, archival research and alternative education (notably the Alexandria branch of the Cairo School of Liberal Arts and Sciences) within its premises at a time when outreach to the street is not feasible.

Fabrica

The independent cultural scene that flourished from the early 2000s until around 2015 was properly speaking only independent from the Ministry of Culture. Cultural production is always dependent, be it on private or public funders, or on markets in the case of commercial productions. When Samuli returned to Alexandria in autumn 2019, he found that numerous private cultural initiatives remained active or had been recently established in spite of the difficult circumstances. But their scope was more modest, their budgets were smaller, and their sources of revenue more heterogeneous (such as renting out spaces, running a café, and organising workshops, and often with organisers investing their own money from freelance income) than was the case at the beginning of the decade. Paradoxically, the independent institutions were now more independent because they were less bound by funder bias – but in turn they were much weaker.

Such private initiatives have a long history in Alexandria, but most of them have only lasted a short time. One of them, Fabrica, was a regular site for our fieldwork in 2014 and 2015. It was established in 2013 in the old bourgeois/middle-income district of Sporting, south of downtown Alexandria, as the private enterprise of its founders, the writer Alshimaa Hamed and the graphic designer Ahmed Salem. Unique in being a dedicated literary establishment, it featured a cultural space that simultaneously served as café and bookshop, while it also

operated as a publishing house with a focus on comics and offered a programme of writing workshops.

During our fieldwork in Fabrica in 2014 and 2015, Alshimaa Hamed (who told us about her early literary career in Chapter 1) ran a successful programme of literary events and writing workshops in the space, and turned it into the meeting place of a small circle of people with similar interests and attitudes (more about the workshop and some of its participants in Chapter 3). The crowd at Fabrica was younger than in any of the other places we frequented. Women were in the majority. With few exceptions, the participants came from the bourgeois classes of the city. Many of them had spent their childhood in the Arab Gulf states where their parents lived, and returned to Egypt to study.

Image 5: The entrance of Fabrica, March 2015.

The literary aesthetics of Fabrica were balanced between highbrow literary ambitions and what in Egypt is called *underground* (as an English loan word) or independent (*mustaqill*). The latter term has been used to describe cultural NGOs and self-organised theatre companies alike, but it also describes a genre of music from the 2000s to 2010s that combined Western rock and pop tunes with Arabic ones (Anonymous 2020; Asfour 2020; Sprengel 2020d), as well as other genres of global circulation that are mainly accessible to young people with cosmopolitan capital (through education at international schools or diasporic lives), such as

graphic novels and comics. The latter were at the heart of Fabrica's publishing activities thanks to Ahmed Salem's love for the genre.

Like many others of its kind, Fabrica was short lived as a cultural space. This was mainly owing to a lack of revenue. Alshimaa Hamed left Fabrica in summer 2015. The space remained active, but Ahmed Salem was compelled to close it later the same year, when he moved to Cairo to run Fabrica as a publishing house dedicated to comics. At the time of writing (2020), Fabrica still exists as a company, but Ahmed Salem has largely given up the publishing business, having returned to Alexandria and his original trade of graphic design.

While Fabrica did not last long, Alshimaa's literary circle had more staying power. Her original literary socialisation took place at the Writers' Union and in various other cultural centres, but after the publication of her first book, she became active in the emerging scene of independent institutions. Through writing workshops (the first of which was hosted by El Cabina) that started running in 2011, she formed a circle of her own, consisting mostly of young and female aspiring authors (about whom more in Chapter 3). After Alshimaa moved to Cairo, the circle she established remained as a network of friends, but appears no longer to be a primary site of active literary production and circulation.

In 2019, private cultural projects in the city were taking a more commercial and aesthetically inclusive approach. Some such as Tarh al-Bahr (established in 2015) have been able to remain active for several years thanks to commercial revenue. Some others have made use of spaces provided by the gentrification project of a real estate consortium at Fouad Street in the old up-market neighbourhood of Azarita. When Samuli met Ahmed Salem (who had returned from Cairo a couple of years earlier), the latter mentioned favourably Beram w Sayed,[8] a privately funded cultural space and café that was established at a prominent location in Raml Station in 2017. It and its like, Ahmed argued, were a new and successful version of what he and Alshimaa had tried with Fabrica. All these places appeal to a mixture of bourgeois and alternative-bohemian tastes, but they tend to be more inclusive than their predecessors in terms of their aesthetics and programming. Privately run places, it seems, have to be distinctive enough to attract an audience, but they cannot afford to be too demanding (Elnozahy 2020).

8 Named after the colloquial poet Bayram al-Tunsi and singer Sayyid Darwish, two of the most prominent cultural icons of early twentieth-century Alexandria.

Lines of division

In a working paper written and published during our fieldwork (Schielke and Shehata 2016), we described the social lives and divisions that structure literary life in Alexandria through a binary model of conservative versus avant-garde milieus, the first marked by public-sector institutions, and moralist and committed aesthetics, and the second by so-called independent institutions, with exploratory and experimental aesthetics. Some Alexandrian writers who read our paper (notably Mounir Oteiba and Ahmed Abdel Gabbar) criticised it for reducing the plurality of the city's literatures to just two scenes. Indeed, far from being divided into two separate camps, the literary landscape of Alexandria consists of a large number of literary circles or 'pockets' (Shehata 2020). Each of these produces and circulates its own aesthetic and social standards for good literature; at the same time, these numerous circles are grounded in a smaller number of milieus, which all share in a wider field of cultural production. Rather than being closed entities, these milieus can be best understood as intersections of lines of division, which we explore in more detail in this section.

Vast common ground extends across literary divides, making literature recognisable as a social institution despite its many internal divisions. Key genres such as classical and modernist poetry, the novel, and the short story are established or at least acknowledged in practically all literary scenes. While poetics is a more contested issue (see Chapters 7 and 8), the basic literary conventions of the novel and the short story remain largely consensual, and lines of division within prose genres are marked by other issues: the preference for established forms or experimentation, the idea of authorship involving moral authority or not, and the use or avoidance of explicit sexual language or themes. Performative formats such as the symposium (*nadwa*, see Chapter 3) are cultivated in similar shapes across the spectrum, and major events such as book fairs bring together authors and readers of all tastes. Mediums of recognition such as prominent publishers, critical essays, and literary prizes are sought in almost all circles, even while people in different circles have distinct ideas about which publishers are good, what critique should be about, and which prizes matter. There is also a widely shared national canon of major twentieth-century writers and the larger Arabic canon of moderns and classics. Alexandrian novelists who have gained national and international recognition – such as Edward Kharrat (1926–2015), Ibrahim Abdel Meguid (1946–), and Haggag Adoul (1944–) – are generally recognised and respected across the literary spectrum, even while their politics and aesthetics may be contested.

The most notable aesthetic line of division we encountered runs between experimental, globally connected styles and socially controversial themes on

the one hand, and the commitment to a conservative selection of the twentieth-century canon of national and world literature and a morally constructive ideal of literature's social role on the other.[9] This line of division largely – but not fully – aligns with two of the productive tensions outlined by Pepe (2019b): writers with a more conservative commitment to literary forms that were established in the twentieth century were also more likely to consider literature as a moral mission (the second tension according to Pepe), and to think of writers as organic intellectuals who could and should speak to the masses (the third tension according to Pepe). In contrast, globally connected writers with avant-garde ambitions in the early twenty-first century have tended to consider literature and literary pursuits as autonomous, thus searching to explore rather than to moralise and to guide.[10]

However, the categories 'conservative' and 'avant-garde' are unstable because they are subject to a constant generational transformation. Genres and aesthetics that are conventional today were once controversial and new – such as the free-verse poetics of *taf'ila* (for more on poetics, see Chapters 7 and 8). Claiming to represent the new against the old is an established and often tactical gesture in struggles for literary recognition and power (Šabasevičiūtė 2021). The careers of successful senior authors are often marked by a move towards the centre of institutional power with growing age and influence. State-affiliated cultural institutions have a long history of co-opting the critical and creative energy of the avant-garde. The Alexandria Library is quite successful in this regard. Last but not least, the competing aesthetic positionalities articulated along this line of division – or, to be precise, the specific aesthetics and people that occupied those

9 Twentieth-century Egyptian literature included some very experimental and controversial works, and much of it was closely linked with international literary currents. And yet the way in which the heritage of the twentieth century is reproduced and recognised in places such as the Writers' Union tends to highlight uncontroversial writing and nationalist commitment. Experiments are recognised once they have become established as part of the mainstream – as happened with the novel in the early twentieth century and free-verse poetry in the second half of the twentieth century.

10 This does not mean that political or social commitment would be alien to them. On the contrary, our period of research witnessed a dramatic intensification of politically engaged writing in the wake of the 25 January revolution, and even people who showed little political engagement before and after the revolutionary period were politicised. But the avant-garde ideal popular among their generation depicted the author as one among many, speaking from within the revolutionary crowd rather than preaching to the masses from above. It also promoted the ideal of autonomous text or 'pure literature', in the words of the internationally successful novelist of Alexandrian origin Nael Eltoukhy (2019), which would engage with issues of contention but not act as a mouthpiece for the author's stance.

positionalities in the historical moment of the 2010s – often shared a highbrow ambition to produce 'serious literature'.

A divide between highbrow and popular aesthetics and audiences was therefore very pronounced in our fieldwork, even if it was often unclear what fell into which category. While commercial literature ignored by highbrow literary critique has a long history in Egypt (Bawardi and Faranesh 2018; Selim 2019), the 2000s witnessed the emergence of bestseller novelists, including Ahmed Mourad (Jacquemond 2020), Ahmed Khaled Towfik, Nabil Farouk (Bawardi and Faranesh 2018), Alaa El Aswany, and Youssef Ziedan (currently the only bestseller author from Alexandria). The careers of Towfik and Farouk exemplify a shift in recognition: they started their careers as exceedingly prolific writers of quick and cheap pocketbook fiction, then gradually moved 'from the margins of literature to its center' (Bawardi and Faranesh 2018: 34). The career of Ahmed Mourad reveals the importance of active use of online media along with a close alliance with cinema and television production (Jacquemond 2020). The latter has been an established feature of Egyptian literature ever since the Egyptian movie industry began, with film and telenovela (*musalsal*) adaptations being the most important path through which works of literature can become known to a wider non-reading audience, and bring substantial financial profit for their authors (Jacquemond 2008).

Many writers we met looked down upon commercial literature. Cairo-based bestseller novelists such as Ahmed Mourad or Alaa El Aswany or popular colloquial poets such as Hisham El Gakh were often discussed with ridicule, in some cases with disgust – even by authors whose own writing was no more complex or demanding than that of the stars they deprecated. On occasion, people who had little chance of ever making money from writing proudly insisted that writing for money could not be real literature. Others were less adversarial, considering commercial literature to be something worth recognising for its own sake, and perhaps also helpful in encouraging young people to read, but nevertheless they clearly considered their own work and works of others they liked to be of a different category, that of 'serious literature'.

However, people who share highbrow ambitions might also consider each others' work cheap and popular rubbish, poor writing by beginners, or improper vulgarity. Only a fraction of all those who claim to belong to a literary elite are actually recognised in literary centres of power – by being published by a major publishing house catering to the cosmopolitan avant-garde, by being favourably reviewed and read by significant others, by being granted one of the many prizes funded by the Egyptian state or private sponsors in Egypt or the Gulf (each of which promotes different literary tastes), or by being invited to international

events, such as festivals in Europe for the cosmopolitan avant-garde or competitions and recitals in the Gulf for classical and popular colloquial poets.

In his work on the literary field, Pierre Bourdieu (1998) argues that the symbolic capital of the avant-garde and the economic capital of commercial literature stand in inverse relation to each other. The ability to dispense with economic profit is a requirement for recognition in what Bourdieu calls the 'legitimate field' of literary production, which draws its power and prestige from critical recognition rather than sales. But unlike in France (Sapiro and Rabot 2016), extremely few writers in Egypt are able to gain substantial financial profit from literature, and those few who do almost invariably live and work either in Cairo or abroad. In Alexandria, even writers who consciously employ an accessible, popular style usually only reach limited audiences, and most writers have a very small readership.[11] The main line of competition among the literati in Alexandria is not drawn between a 'legitimate field' of autonomous literary production for a restricted audience on the one hand and a wider field of mass production on the other; rather, it is mainly between people who write for different small circles, and who claim that they, rather than any others, are the 'legitimate field' of 'autonomous literature' (to use Bourdieu's terms).

The distinction between popular and highbrow is further complicated by the emergence of what may be called an independent or alternative aesthetic. A socially recognisable alternative habitus emerged in Egypt on a wider scale after 2011, associated with sympathy for the so-called revolutionary current, a class positionality on the bohemian fringes of the bourgeoisie, and a cosmopolitan competence in cultural styles and productions of global currency. In our fieldwork sites, avant-garde and alternative aesthetic stances often went hand in hand. However, because its distinction is based on cosmopolitan capital, alternative aesthetics is not posited in opposition to popular literature in the way of highbrow stances. The popularity of the bestseller science fiction and horror author Ahmed Khaled Towfik among some of our interlocutors who leaned towards an alternative aesthetic is a case in point. This independent or alternative taste has welcomed commercial venues and popular-class (*shaabi*) aesthetics alike (Sprengel 2020d), while its distinctiveness lies in the exploration of specific styles, genres, and lifestyles that are posited as explicitly different from a mainstream, whether this be defined in terms of aesthetics, politics, or class (Lagrange 2020: 19).

11 Typical print runs for works of literature run between 500 and 1,000 copies, and for most works (with the exception of prominent authors), the main channel of distribution remains authors themselves, who receive or buy copies from the publisher and give them to friends and peers free of charge.

While our fieldwork was taking place, these aesthetic divides were to an important degree linked with an institutional divide between public-sector, independent, and commercial institutions, which emerged in the wake of the professionalisation of private publishers and the onset of the NGO-isation of the cultural sector at the turn of the millennium.[12] In Alexandria, this development involved the migration of some writers into new scenes and spaces that were established in the mid-1990s and 2000s, along with new journals such as *Khamasin* and *al-Mina*. By 2020, parts of this divide have been crossed with the increasing pressure on independent institutions and a renewed vibrancy of some public-sector institutions. And even at its height, this divide was never complete. Well-funded cultural flagships such as the Hurriya Centre for Creative Expression (Markaz al-Hurriya li-l-Ibdaʿ) and the Alexandria Library draw audiences from across the cultural spectrum. They are also important providers of jobs for people who are otherwise active in independent spaces. All major book fairs are state sponsored. Major public-sector publishers such as the General Egyptian Book Organisation and the Organisation of Cultural Palaces remain points of first contact for writers connected with public-sector cultural institutions – and also for writers who lack the funds to pay for a private publisher. They also maintain a leading role in translated literature.

The third pole of the institutional divide – commercial institutions – is mainly located in Cairo. There, profit-based enterprises are at the heart of literary life, with a handful of high-end private publishers largely defining the scope of the internationally connected avant-garde in literature, another handful of professionalised commercial publishers manufacturing bestsellers, and many writers making their living as editors, proofreaders, or translators in those publishing houses. In Alexandria, a handful of bookshops and profit-based cultural spaces have been able to stay in business, but almost all literary publishers that were still active there in the early 2010s have gone out of business since then.

The tensions that mark the literary landscape in Alexandria bear striking similarities with those among Afghan poets in Mashhad, Iran, studied by Zuzanna Olszewska (2015). The poets in Mashhad were embedded in a productive tension of different forms of class, power, and symbolic capital, but were seldom polarised along the opposites of literary autonomy and commercial production. Rather, there was a generational shift from politically committed poetry of first-generation refugees to a plurality of styles in a continuum from committed to post-

12 This process has been best studied in terms of the art scene (e.g. Winegar 2006: 275–314; Elnozahy 2020).

modern writing among Afghans born and raised in Iran. The societal and political situation is in many ways different in Alexandria. Most Alexandrian writers in the early 2010s had not experienced exile, although things have shifted since then, and Nubians, Syrians, and Libyans living and writing in Alexandria today do have a shared experience of exile or diasporic conditions (see, e.g., Al-Ahmad 2014). And yet Olszewska's work draws attention to the ways in which politics (something that does not fit well into Bourdieu's model), relations with the state, gender, and generation interact with class relations and symbolic capital.

Similar attention is needed if we are to understand the structuring divisions of the literary field in Alexandria, for which the aesthetic and institutional lines of division sketched out here do not alone provide a sufficient account. The public sector is vast and encompassing. It offers a venue for a variety of literary productions, from older generations of avant-garde writers to classical and popular poetry, while at the same time promoting cultural policies of the state aimed at educating the public. Commercial private publishers have their highbrow and commercial niches, and are partly subsidised by translation funds from abroad. Political allegiances and enmities cross over aesthetic divisions, or can be downplayed to keep a milieu intact. Many aesthetic currents and institutional locations are associated with a specific generation and social class. To understand these specific locations, we need to consider a series of less clearly defined multipolar divides that also shape literary milieus.

Politics and religiosities mark the most outstanding multipolar divide in the literary landscape, involving different positionings towards revolutionary politics in 2011–2013, Islamist and secular ideologies, different views of the political regimes before and after the revolution, and various commitments to nationalism.

If, in around 2011, literature initially appeared to be a natural ally of rebellion (Schanda 2013), political divisions within the literary field became more evident after 2013, when prominent authors previously known for their oppositional stances rallied support for the new regime and the military leadership (Lindsey 2013; Azimi 2014). This move can partly be attributed to the long-standing antagonism between secular-minded literary intelligentsia and Islamist movements. But rather than uniting a secular literary field, it divided it further: between an often older guard of leftist nationalists committed to a Fanonian binary struggle for national liberation in which there can be no neutral position, versus often younger authors and activists who sought to articulate a third position against both the regime as well as Islamists.[13]

13 Frantz Fanon (2004) famously argued than in the struggle for national liberation there could be no third neutral stance. Egyptian leftists lending their support for Sisi's military regime have

Political and religious stances have the power to bring together a literary circle, but they can also contribute to its breakup. This is what happened to Hala ('condition' or 'case'),[14] a literary group that was initiated in 2009 by a group of poets from eastern districts of Alexandria and held its meetings mostly in cafés in those neighbourhoods. The group initially cooperated with the weekly literary symposium held at the social club al-Nadi al-Masri (more in Chapter 3). The two groups shared a similar conservative modernist aesthetic and a liking for colloquial poetry, but their cooperation ended largely for political reasons. Al-Nadi al-Masri was a politically loyalist space, while Hala was frequented by poets who were critical of the regime and sympathetic towards Islamist movements. In 2012, Hala fell apart owing to political differences that turned personal, but it continued as an informal gathering of some of its initiators, including the poet Hamdi Mousa (featured in Chapters 1 and 4). One of the group's former members ran a literary programme at the office of the Freedom and Justice Party (the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood from 2011 to 2013). The programme was disbanded along with the party after the counter-revolution in 2013, and the people active in it dispersed.

Some other circles have been able to contain major political divides even in times of extreme polarisation and oppression, largely by silencing them. Such successes are possible in contexts where the participants in a literary circle share enough important common ground to evade political differences. In the Writers' Union, where political differences are carefully and successfully silenced, that common ground includes proximity to state institutions and post-colonial militant nationalism, paths of personal and literary formation in public-sector institutions, and importantly age and generation. The twentieth-century modernist ideal of autonomy and commitment meant that writers commonly saw themselves as a critical, and often also oppositional, power vis-à-vis the government, yet at the same time were committed to the nationalist project of independence and development (Klemm 1998; Jacquemond 2008; Mehrez 2010: 78–82). The Writers' Union stands out as a gathering of people whose lives and fantasies are marked by the Nasserist state and its institutions, even if they may be ideologically pitted against it. Even after the decline of public-sector institutions, it remains embedded in a logic of statist power that in Egypt is referred to as *al-muʾassasa*, 'the institution'. This institutional sense of home is further enforced by a widely shared

often argued in strikingly similar terms, and have also insisted on the link between liberation and nationalism.

14 Members of the group translated their name as 'case' into English, but meant the condition or state of poetic inspiration.

moral and societal understanding of literature linked with moral guidance and commitment.

This leads to another important multipolar divide: institutional, generational, and class-based paths of literary formation. Those paths and their corresponding networks of friendship can be more important than aesthetics and politics. A good example is the Writers' Union's active minority of writers who promote more experimental aesthetics, often against sturdy opposition from members with more conservative tastes. They are young enough to have shared in the shift of the literary avant-garde of the 1990s from nationalist commitment towards a focus on ordinary life and the self (and the associated aesthetic shift towards prose poetry), and at the same time old enough to find themselves very much at home in public-sector literary institutions. In contrast, for many young writers from middle-income and bourgeois urban families who have come of age in a time of corrupt economic liberalisation and crumbling state institutions – many of whom gained a formative generational experience in the utopian moment of the 25 January uprising – the public sector no longer provides a self-evident framework for their literary strivings.

This generational shift, generational in the sense of societal cohorts that share a formative experience (Mannheim 1972), coincides with the rise of independent institutions and the proliferation of radical and alternative visions of life in the wake of the 25 January revolution. In consequence, the Writers' Union in particular has become dominated by older writers, and is increasingly disconnected from recent developments in the 'independent scene', while spaces such as Fabrica stood out as extremely youthful – the two founders of the space being almost the only people over thirty whom we met there. The youthfulness of Fabrica was linked with a class-specific socialisation of most of its young participants: they were educated in international and private schools, and many of them were raised in the Gulf where their parents worked.

The generational formation of working careers and social experience is paralleled by generational layers of intertextuality. Regarding Arabic literature from the classics until the end of the twentieth century, there is a largely (albeit not entirely) shared canon, but less so in terms of translated literature and recent Arabic literature. In all literary circles we frequented, world literature featured highly on the lists of authors' influential or favourite reading. Even the most outspoken literary nationalists in the Writers' Union took pride in their knowledge of translated literature and literary theory. They would most likely have read late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European prose (Russian classics featured prominently, thanks to the outstanding translation work of the Soviet Cultural Centres during the Cold War). Younger writers, in contrast, were influenced by more recent authors of global circulation (Haruki Murakami, Elif Shafak, and

Orhan Pamuk were among the prominent names mentioned to us in conversations). Only a few translated works were popular across generations, the most important of them being Gabriel García Márquez's *Hundred Years of Solitude* (2005).

Milieus at intersection

The intersections of these lines of division are what we call milieus: the productive coming together of aesthetics, institutions, politics, generations, and class trajectories. The shared formative ideals and experiences of a milieu provide a common ground for communication and mutual recognition. They also produce lines of division against others who can be critiqued and ridiculed for being old-fashioned, vulgar, unpatriotic, immodest, narrow-minded, or otherwise not real literati. In the specific historical circumstances of Alexandria's literary landscape after 2011, the lines of division sketched here merged to produce at least three to four key milieus that we encountered in our fieldwork.

The first milieu we encountered was that of public-sector institutions and authors who were committed to a rather conservative version of twentieth-century modernist aspirations (see Armbrust 1996), expansive in terms of literary aesthetics and politics, and held together by a generational commitment to public-sector institutions along with ideals of authorship that foreground moral guidance and commitment. This milieu continued to recruit younger members, but it was dominated by people past their middle ages. Of the circles mentioned here, the Writers' Union, the Hala literary group, and most gatherings we attended at cultural centres were located in this milieu. It was pluralistic enough to be home to writers with avant-garde aspirations and a critical relationship with state institutions. Mukhtabar al-Sardiyat was open towards this milieu but was not located in it. Instead, it occupied a middle ground between it and two other milieus.

A second milieu was linked with internationally or privately funded cultural institutions, cosmopolitan connectedness, a critical distance from state institutions that often translated into revolutionary politics in the period from 2011 to 2013, avant-garde strivings, and to some degree alternative lifestyles that are in Arabic often brought together in the phrase *mustaqill* (independent). This milieu was pluralistic in terms of age and generation, but was to some degree class-exclusive owing to the bourgeois location of alternative aesthetics. Unlike other milieus, it had a clear geographic location in downtown Alexandria. Of the circles we have mentioned, the group of people involved in al-Kull, El Cabina, and other projects were most clearly located in this milieu, while Fabrica was located in both this milieu as well as the third one we encountered.

This third milieu, which could also be described as two or more milieus, was linked with private and commercial productions and being able or striving to reach larger audiences. It had a largely friendly relation with public-sector institutions (especially the Alexandria Library), and was aesthetically inclusive and politically ambiguous. In generational terms, it was overwhelmingly youthful. It involved the circulations of various forms of commercial and popular literature, including specific genres such as horror, satire, and colloquial poetry. It was divided in terms of class and distinctiveness into at least two parts. One section had more cosmopolitan aesthetics, alternative lifestyles, and demanding tastes on literature and theory, and had more affinity with the second milieu. Fabrica was located in this, the more highbrow and cosmopolitan part. Another part was characterised by more mainstream or conservative aesthetics, less distinctive lifestyles, and had more affinity with the first milieu. Many of the private cultural spaces that survive in Alexandria mainly cater to the second, commercial-inclusive part, as do many large-audience events at the Alexandria Library.

Literary imagination and literary careers are guided and made possible by intersecting forms of socialisation, shared experiences, and relations of power – or what we call the milieu. In our ethnography, key formative contexts have been aesthetics and intertextuality, friendship and conflicts, class, urban landscape, religion, gender, and shared generational experiences. Through them – and against them – writers develop their specific literary voice and author persona. The power of such milieus is fourfold. First, they encourage and make possible certain expressions, aesthetics, and ways of relating to society and state. Second, they restrict movement beyond their productive limits. Third, they divide the literary landscape into specific scenes and circles that emerge as the result of political, aesthetic, generational, institutional, and personal differences. Fourth, by providing divisive lines of exclusion and distinction, they also encourage the crafting and cultivation of specific styles and traditions of living and writing that are marked by both what they are and what they are not.

It is important to remember, though, that these are intersections, not bounded entities. Individual literary careers often involve shifting trajectories through scenes and milieus. They often involve periods of movement at the margins, as a visitor rather than a convenor of literary life, searching and experimenting with aesthetic and techniques, as well as periods in which authors with sufficient success and name settle at the centre of a space or a network, and develop or build on an acquired style of writing. Metaphorically speaking, writers can join the nucleus of a literary circle on some occasions, and on other occasions act as electrons, orbiting and travelling between literary circles, attracted and repelled by them, and affecting them by their entrance and departure (Shehata 2020). This oscillation between roles and positionalities is not unlimited of course, for the

formation of writers in specific circles and milieus also structures their possible next steps. But it does give literary lives and milieus a more dynamic and unpredictable nature.

One example of such an oscillation is Alshimaa Hamed's trajectory across various circles to eventually become a central figure in a circle of her own for a few years, only to move on to another city and art form afterwards. Another example is the shift in Abdelrehim Youssef's attendance of literary events after 2016, from being a main organiser of events at El Cabina and almost constantly present at the venue, to being a freelance translator with no institution to run, who could therefore begin attending various literary gatherings out of curiosity, including those that he found aesthetically not to his taste but otherwise enjoyable. A third example is of Abdelrehim and Alshimaa, who both frequented the Asil group in around 2000 as new authors, where the much more senior writer Abdelfatah Morsi (whom we introduce in Chapter 3) was a frequent participant. During our fieldwork, Abdelfatah Morsi was active in a literary milieu that had little or no contact with the milieu Abdelrehim and Alshimaa were involved in; and yet they had once been part of the same circle and scene.

Openings and closures

A duality of inclusion and exclusion appears to be inherent to literary milieus. But different milieus have specific and different aspects of openness and closure, which have emerged in a specific historical configuration. The more at variance with the societal mainstream and with conservative values and aesthetics a literary milieu is, the more it needs social closure to survive. The more open and accessible towards various social milieus a literary milieu is, the more it needs institutional, aesthetic, or moral closure to be accepted. One form of closure appears to be a near universal feature, however: that against competing writers and circles.

All literary circles we attended were busy with distinguishing themselves from others. Competition and conflicts within circles were equally common, and often resulted in splits and the formation of new circles. Writing is grounded in sociality, but authorship is egocentric. Literary circles are often highly person-centred, and they come together and fall apart through relations of friendship and patronage, conflict and competition. Aesthetic, political, and personal dimensions of competition and conflicts are therefore often inseparable.

Not all rants and rivalry are about direct competition. Book fairs are among the few occasions when people with different literary tastes are likely to encoun-

ter each others' works, and they are therefore also annual occasions to mark the lines of one's literary taste by ridiculing others. The Cairo International Book Fair is regularly accompanied by viral photos on social media showing passages of poetry considered ridiculously bad or scandalously embarrassing in the view of those who circulate them. Works that gain such unfavourable attention are often first publications by young female authors who are to some degree outsiders to literary milieus. The ridicule of new writers at the book fair typically takes aim at those who lack experience and power and are therefore weak and easy targets for a collective *hafla* (literally 'party') or online shitstorm. Such collective ridicule allows those who participate in it to confirm their own sense of commanding good taste, at the expense of others with whom they are not in direct competition and who therefore cannot fight back.

Public ridicule can be extremely painful and damaging for the individuals exposed to it. However, it also keeps milieus and scenes intact by marking their aesthetic boundaries. Internal conflicts within milieus, in contrast, can result in collective splits as well as personal pain. In 2016, the downtown milieu around independent institutions was involved in one such internal conflict. A young playwright published a social media post in which he objected to the fact that an intellectual debate at an international cultural institute in Alexandria was going to be held in English although all participants knew Arabic. Both sides of the debate had their arguments (interestingly, both considered their preferred language to be more inclusive), but very soon arguments became irrelevant. Within a day and a night, the debate escalated into an increasingly confrontational *hafla* with ever more people involved, and accusations against the organiser of the event turned increasingly personal. The debate might have resulted in permanent damage, and certain people might have stopped talking to each other, had it not been for the intervention by K., who was well connected with people on both sides of the debate. We happened to be in a café listening to the point of view of someone who was vocally criticising the organiser of the event, when he received a phone call from K. – who was concerned because the debate was turning personal. He promised her he would tone down his remarks. The next day, all parties in the previous day's debate attended the event. This also showed courtesy towards the organiser, who was predictably distressed about the way the theme he had wanted to discuss had been sidetracked by the debate about language.

Conflicts thus appear at their fiercest *within* milieus – or at least this was the case in the 2010s, when different milieus drew on largely separate material resources and means of symbolic capital. With the distance between writers in terms of milieus increasing and the shared ground of readership, recognition, and resources decreasing, the heat of such conflicts decreases. Fierce enmity softens to annoyed ranting, and ranting to ridicule and joking. Although this can

still be extremely damaging towards those who are exposed to it publicly, from the point of view of those who engage in such ranting and ridicule, it implies a safer distance. This is not an entirely predictable process, however, because personal relations are so important. Just as people with otherwise similar literary tastes may fiercely reject each other's work for reasons of personal rivalry, they may also form alliances and support work that is quite different from theirs if they are connected by ties of friendship or patronage.

When we add the unpredictable and often destructive process of conflicts and competition to the movement of individuals between circles and a productive dialectic between openness and closure, the outcome is a landscape that is in constant transformation. New splits and new networks continue to emerge at an often rapid pace, and over longer periods, new institutions and generations gain shape. A question that remains is to what degree such fragmentary tendency is a constant feature of literature as a social institution, or whether it has increased.

The demise of literary groups with an explicit collective identity provides clues to the answer to this question. Richard Jacquemond (2008: 168–171) argues that between the 1960s and 1990s, literary groups formed as attempts by usually young authors to claim a space and a name for their writings against a preceding generation, and typically split when some of their members became successful enough to claim a name for themselves individually. They are thus both coherent and fragile. In the 2000s, literary groups came into fashion once more, according to Abdelrehim Youssef (in conversation with Samuli in 2019), partly aided by Egyptian literary journalists who were interested in covering them. But they went out of fashion almost overnight with the outbreak of the 25 January revolution. Throughout the 2010s, Alexandria had only one prominent and consistently active literary group, Itlala.

Since approximately 2011, at least three developments have made such collective identities less appealing. One important development is the movement of much of literary commentary and debate to online spaces, Facebook and Goodreads being the two most prominent platforms during the time of our fieldwork. Online sociality generates a less personal form of group coherence. Online encounters allow for a less intimate and personal engagement, while at the same time the architecture of online groups allows administrators to maintain coherence by single-handedly blocking members whose input they find disagreeable (Elsherif forthcoming). This development is paralleled by a general tendency towards the fragmentation of social life, lifestyles, and attitudes that was further amplified by the revolution. Authors of a younger generation appear to find somewhat less appeal in identifying with a group. Another important development has been the proliferation of new forms of offline literary sociality in dedicated cultural spaces and writing workshops (which we address in Chapter

3). The emerging culture of workshop learning in combination with easy private publishing has contributed to a shortening of the *ustaziya* (master–apprentice) relations with key senior writers who support and promote young writers joining the scene. In consequence, young authors may claim an independent stance at an earlier stage. All these developments are marked by a lower degree of coherence and group continuity, and a higher degree of fluctuation and individuality.

This shift is only gradual, however. The circle of friends that focused on key persons and shared projects in the 2000s that for a while became known as the al-Kull literary group still exists and remains active at the time of writing (2020), albeit without a trademark identity and with a partially different cast (some people have left the circle owing to conflicts or personal circumstances, and new ones have joined). New networks of writers without a collective identity continue to emerge from successful programmes such as Alshimaa Hamed's writing workshops in 2011–2015 (which we describe in Chapter 3) and Mounir Oteiba's Mukhtabar al-Sardiyat. Developing a literary style and approach, and gaining feedback, support, resources, and recognition are and remain fundamentally social affairs; and for all those writers whose readership is small (that is, almost all of them), the sociality of symposiums, coffee house gatherings, and online platforms is indispensable, as is the reliance on *ustaziya* relationships. Such sociality generally thrives on a degree of closure, exclusivity, and marginality, which is why in Chapter 3 we turn our focus to the productive shared margins that enable some people to engage in literary writing as a life-shaping practice.

3 The writing of lives

I escaped many times to imagination and daydreams, but imagination results in consequences that cannot be anticipated.

Howeida Saleh, *The Love of Girls*

In spring 2012, we met the poet Shaymaa Bakr in a café in eastern Alexandria, far from the literary epicentre of the city. She presented herself as someone who embraced and cultivated contradictions. Wearing a face veil but not minding about sitting in our male company and shaking our hands, she identified as a Salafi and an Islamic internationalist, and added that she writes about sex, desire, and discontent. She was an outsider to the literary circles of the city, but her poetry was close to the poetic mainstream produced today in the wake of the twentieth-century modernist avant-garde: combining metre and rhyme with a free verse structure, and often dominated by a subjective first-person voice. At the interview, she recited to us passages from her long poem 'Ruby on their embers' (Bakr unpublished), which circles around the themes of desire and temptation, and concludes as follows:

لا مرة فعلت ما أشاء
لا مرة شئت الذي فعلته
لا انهرت في جهرٍ
ولا ثبت في خفاء
لكنني حمدت فيَّ أنني
بقيت رغم محنتي
ياقوتة تلمع فوق
جمر
هؤلاء

Not once did I do what I wanted
Not once did I want what I did
I did not collapse in public
Nor was I steadfast secretly
But I praised myself for
remaining, in spite of my ordeal
a ruby glowing above
their
embers

https://doi.org/9783110726305-004

The poem's first-person narrator makes a point of cultivating ambivalence. She also insists on remaining something special in face of the demands and temptations of others. This was very much how Shaymaa Bakr presented herself as an author to us. Her conscious performance of idiosyncrasy, her determination to appear as a distinct individual and not as a member of a category or a group, drew our attention at a moment when our fieldwork was still circling around the question of writers' individual trajectories. Shaymaa Bakr, however, refused to tell us anything about that. We know very little of her – we are not even sure if she is known as Shaymaa Bakr by her colleagues and family.[1] All she let us know was that she worked as a teacher and that her economic and private situations were precarious. She kept different parts of her life strictly apart: 'Nobody at school knows what else I do.' Her face veil further underlined that gesture of separation. This was her specific solution to the tension between her declared intention 'to speak out loudly' and her other private roles in life.

Literary lives are often double lives to some degree. But to what degree such duplicity is comfortable or arduous, and whether the line that divides literary lives from others is sharp or gradual, depends on family and social circumstances, and to a major degree on gender. Men have more leeway, and they are more encouraged to embody different sides of themselves, living out different ideals and roles in different contexts. Women generally face stronger pressure to maintain the reputation of female virtue and modesty, which can be compromised by what they read and write, and who they socialise with and how. The intersection of different fields of life can have more disturbing consequences for them. At a symposium at a book fair in 2016, a young female author's reading was interrupted when a woman entered the tent with her two children, and loudly accused the writer on stage of seducing her husband and leaving her children fatherless. Apparently, her husband had entered a second marriage with the writer. A public scandal can be extremely damaging for a woman's reputation in Egypt, and the first wife exploited this vulnerability.

Some writers have tried to find an appropriate balance between the conflicting demands of literary, family, professional, and other aspects of their lives. Some (fewer) take a more radical path and consciously contest gendered ideas of modesty and privacy in their writing and public persona. Shaymaa Bakr chose a different kind of radical solution: keeping things strictly apart. Although she

1 Owing to the genealogical structure of Arabic names (first name followed by father's name, then grandfather's, then great-grandfather's, etc.) and the proliferation of nicknames, the difference between 'real name' and pseudonym is not clear cut in Egypt. It is common that the same person is known by different versions and combinations of their name in different contexts.

spoke with deprecation about literary circles, she was not fully an outsider to them. We had originally met her through another poet who had been active in the Hala literary group in eastern Alexandria. When Samuli met her again in spring 2013, she was in a hurry – on her way to present her poetry at a symposium in another city, thanks to an invitation by a senior relative who was supporting her literary career. But her literary sociality was something that she deliberately kept apart from the rest of her life.

How to write about such a writer? In her opinion, it was a questionable endeavour to start with. In that meeting with Samuli in spring 2013, she went so far as to contest the very idea of an anthropological study of writers and poets:

> Why do you as an anthropologist study poets? Anthropology should be about the whole of society. Poets are outsiders, they are exceptional and disconnected, they do not express or represent the society.

It is true that poets and writers do not express or represent society as a whole; but they do participate in the creation of what we call productive margins, that is, legitimate spaces of expression and exploration that to a limited extent exceed ordinary morals, conventions, and expectations. Such marginality is the productive condition of literary lives and the formation of literary voices. In this chapter, we study some shared margins where writing and literary lives can take place, and engage with some writers who in different ways have made use of the exceptional space of literature to craft a public persona and a way of living. Through that engagement, we try to provide some empirical answers to the chapter's central question: how literary imagination may participate in the formation and transformation of the lives of those involved.

Materialities of marginality

The media of communication, the spaces of encounter, and the social networks of literature that we discussed in Chapter 2 as 'infrastructures of imagination' are often at the same time extra-ordinary or heterotopic sites: extra-ordinary in the sense that they are marked by a temporary step out of the ordinary structures of living (Turner and Turner 1978; Schielke 2012c),[2] and heterotopic in the sense of a spatial distinction that marks them as special (Foucault 1986).

2 Such times are often discussed in social scientific scholarship as 'liminal', in reference to Victor Turner's (1974) and Arnold van Gennep's (1960) work on rituals of passage. Liminality

In his work on literary life in Berlin, Andrew Brandel argues that 'in Berlin [...] literature seeps into and emerges from within everyday life' (Brandel 2016: 170). In Brandel's ethnography, literature emerges as a form of life that permeates the urban fabric and suggests ways to live in it. Such co-presence is not entirely alien to our ethnographic experience in Alexandria, as we shall see in Chapters 4 to 6. And yet we are rather more sceptical about literature's productive capacity to seep into and emerge from within ordinary life. It can do so on certain occasions, but it does so with difficulty and at peril of rejection or disregard. Perhaps this is because of the different societies, political economies, and urban fabrics of Berlin and Alexandria; but we also argue that, even under favourable conditions, literature profits from a partial seclusion from everyday life. Under the rather unfavourable conditions that prevail in Alexandria, it urgently needs special times and places in which to evolve and survive.

Reading and writing involve a temporary withdrawal from other activities that pulls one into a parallel reality of sorts, even when one does so on public transportation or in one's home. In Alshimaa Hamed's narrative of her literary becoming, recounted in Chapter 1, she described writing as a cathartic state of being, arduous and fulfilling at the same time. For her, books were also an escape in which she took recourse during the two years of her unhappy first marriage in Australia. Books and the worlds of fantasy they entail may also invite one to search for spaces and gatherings where one can at least temporarily live aspects of a life that is inspired by the exercise of literary fantasy. Online media have expanded the scope and accessibility of parallel worlds of reading, writing, and exchange immensely, but they have not replaced face-to-face gatherings. In her account, Alshimaa repeatedly linked reading and books with protected spaces of sociality, such as a room where girls of the family could gather and a coffee house where she and her student friends would meet.

Coffee houses and (for a smaller section of people) bars are well-established social institutions for encounters that are neither part of the private space of the home nor formal environments of work and commerce – although of course much business is conducted in cafés and bars, and some people feel more at home in them than in their lodgings. It is therefore not surprising that certain cafés and

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involves a transition from one stage to another. This is not a defining feature of festive, religious, literary, and other recurring events, which commonly end with a return to everyday life much as it was before the event. Victor and Edith Turner (1978) therefore describe such occasions as 'liminoid'. With largely the same meaning as Turner and Turner, we prefer to use the term 'extra-ordinary', adding the dash to highlight the literal meaning of the term as something outside the usual.

(fewer) bars in downtown Alexandria are long-standing meeting points of literary circles, and also serve as key locations in which a younger generation can try to live out alternative lifestyles in a temporary heterotopia. One of the most visible and enduring effects of the cultural vibrancy following the 2011 revolution has been the proliferation of street cafés in downtown Alexandria that serve a mostly young, mixed-gender clientele, often with a hip alternative habitus. Walking on a weekend evening along Talaat Harb Street where there is one such concentration of cafés, one might for a moment believe that Alexandria is a liberal and open-minded city. But the young people who frequent these cafés mostly need to significantly adjust their comportment and behaviour when they return to their family homes; while street cafés in parts of Alexandria other than the seaside and the downtown still mostly do not welcome female customers.

Image 6: Gathering at Café El Hindi, one of the popular cafés with a bohemian touch in downtown Alexandria, after a class of the Alexandria branch of the Cairo Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences, November 2019.

Much of the fieldwork for this book has been conducted at cafés. Symposiums, workshops, and visits to book fairs are commonly, even typically, followed by a more informal gathering in a café, restaurant, or bar, depending on the preferences and financial means of the people involved. Important discussions take place, and relations of power and alliances are often shaped in these gatherings. It is also here that hierarchies of age and gender become more visible, something

that became especially evident when we attended the Cairo International Book Fair for fieldwork in 2017.

Held annually around the last week of January and first week of February, the Cairo International Book Fair is the single most important literary time out of the ordinary, and probably the only event that attracts writers from across all milieus. Until 2018, it was held in the grounds of the Cairo International Fair in Nasr City and drew very large audiences, peaking at 4 to 6 million in 2017.[3] In 2019, the book fair was moved to a new location in the 5th Settlement, a prestigious up-market suburb that has become a new hub of the Egyptian bourgeoisie in the past ten years; this resulted in slightly smaller numbers of attendance in a more glamorous setting (Fouad 2019; Šabasevičiūtė 2019b).

The Cairo International Book Fair is a sales-oriented event, and readers with literary, religious, intellectual, and other interests frequent it to buy books at discounted prices. Owing to the weak distribution system in Egypt, it is also the occasion when one can best find books by foreign publishers and small Egyptian publishing houses. Until the event moved to the 5th Settlement, it included a second-hand book fair, but this is now held near the Azbakiya Gardens, where Cairo's permanent second-hand book market is located. Book signings for new books at the fair as well as in the city proliferate while the fair is in progress. During our fieldwork in 2015 and 2017, it was a popular festival, with many tents and stalls of various sizes that drew huge audiences of authors and publishers, readers and strollers alike. It is probably the only occasion in Egypt where books and literature take centre stage in a mass social gathering.

For people living in Alexandria, going to the Cairo Book Fair is a costly trip that needs to be planned and organised. Most women living with their parents are not allowed to stay away from home overnight, and many other visitors cannot afford hotels. Therefore, many cultural spaces and literary circles in Alexandria chartered buses for one-day group visits. In 2017, we met three such groups: one organised by Tarh El Bahr, a private cultural space, another by Kilma, a youthful literary group with alternative and cosmopolitan leanings, and a third by the Alexandria branch of the Writers' Union. For those who travelled with these groups, the day trip was a short and intensive shared holiday. At least one of the groups combined their visit with sightseeing in Islamic Cairo. The amount of networking they could be involved in during a one-day trip was limited because most networ-

3 Four million tickets were sold. The higher figure is an estimate based on the vast number of free tickets that were distributed to students at schools and universities, among others (Farag 2018).

king events took place in the evenings, when most visitors from Alexandria were already on their way back home.

Image 7: Visitors from El Mansoura and Alexandria strolling through the Cairo International Book Fair, February 2017.

A smaller group of writers from the circle around El Cabina, who were well connected with the avant-garde circles of Cairo, had organised their trip privately. They had booked cheap hotel rooms in downtown Cairo and stayed for a weekend, which enabled them to participate in evening events. We stayed in the city for a week during the book fair, partly to give ourselves time for proper fieldwork, and also because we had books of our own to promote. The evenings provided a different book fair experience, with closed-circle meetings in cafés, restaurants, and bars, at which literary alliances in the capital and internationally were forged. During the day, the audience was overwhelmingly young, and men and women were equally represented. But when we gathered with Mukhtar's literary network in a popular grill restaurant one evening after the book fair, everyone present was male and almost all were over forty years of age.

If reading and cafés represent more ordinary forms of productive marginality (in the sense of being recurring and more easily embedded in daily routines), book fairs stand at the other end of a scale as intentionally extra-ordinary, festival-like events that allow their participants to dive into a different world for a day or for a weekend. Echoing Victor and Edith Turner's work on pilgrimage (Turner and Turner 1978) and Samuli's past research on *mulid* festivals in honour

of Muslim saints in Egypt (Schielke 2012c), book fairs are a special time apart during which different rules apply and people come together as a different kind of community, but after which a return to ordinary life must sooner or later follow. The relationship of marginal spaces and practices with ordinary lives remains ambiguous at both ends of the scale. To what degree and whether they may actively shape readers' and writers' lives more generally, or are shaped by their other commitments, or remain parallel and mutually unaffected, are open and empirical questions.

Between the more everyday practices of reading, writing, and conversing at home, online, and in cafés on the one hand, and once-a-year events such as the Cairo Book Fair on the other, there exists an important third space that shapes literary lives: the theatrical space of regular gatherings, most importantly symposiums and workshops. Because of their recurring and explicitly performative character, we have found them an especially useful space to search for some empirical answers to questions about the relationship of writing and life.

The symposium as life

The most important form of literary gathering is the symposium (*nadwa*). This is well established, shared by all milieus, and has a variety of specific formats, among them a critical debate (*munaqasha*) devoted to one or several authors, a book signing (*haflat tawqiʿ*) with a reading by an author, and an open evening (*umsiya*) where members of the audience are welcome to present their work. The specific style of address, degrees of formality and informality, whether critique focuses on questioning or on recognition, the kind of audience in attendance and how they interact with the speakers, and many other details of how a symposium is run are among the distinguishing markers of different literary milieus. These distinctions all rely on a shared performative genre, with authors appearing in that capacity in front of an audience.

When *adab* became literature in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Egypt, it was initially grounded in a socially more exclusive form of gathering: the *salon adabi*, the 'literary' or 'intellectual' or 'cultivated' salon, which brought together Middle Eastern and European traditions of upper-class gathering in the house of a host (Pepe 2019b). Individual patronage and invitation were cornerstones of the literary salon – and are today, for some still exist. A salon is typically hosted by an individual and often located in a private home or sometimes in a café, and its characteristic shape is that of a circle. In the course of the twentieth century and with the establishment of state-sponsored cultural centres and other

venues of a less private nature, the semi-private and informal salon has gradually been replaced by the more public and formal symposium as the dominant format of literary gathering. A symposium is marked by a podium or a desk where the speaker sits or stands facing an audience, accompanied by a moderator and possibly discussants. It is typically hosted by a dedicated cultural space, organisation, or group. This shift from one form to the other was not a dramatic break: the two formats stand in a historical continuity and a performative continuum – a continuum that, as we shall see, is also recognisable in more recent forms of gathering.

Image 8: A book signing (*haflat tawqi'*) combined with a critical debate (*munaqasha*) about a short story collection by Mohamed Abbady (right) at Fabrica in April 2014, with Alshimaa Hamed (left) moderating the discussion.

On 9 November 2014, at 7 p.m., we attended the weekly symposium of the Writers' Union, which was located in a ground-floor apartment in the Miami neighbourhood in eastern Alexandria. This is often devoted to an individual writer, but our visit coincided with an open poetry evening at which everybody in attendance was invited to present their work. The audience consisted of some fifteen people, all but one male. Most were over fifty. It was an intimate and friendly event where almost all people in attendance knew each other well, and yet the evening proceeded with great formality. Each speaker was formally introduced, and greeted the audience in a polite and eloquent way, often using Classical Arabic expressions such as *uhayyikum* (I salute you) that would never be heard in an informal

setting. Most of the poetry presented was in Egyptian colloquial Arabic, reflecting a general tendency in Egyptian poetry. It followed the modernist style of *taf'ila* for the most part, poetry that follows a metre or changing metres and has a free verse structure. Gaber Sultan, the most senior poet in attendance, gave comments and greetings to the participants in *zagal*, a traditional style of colloquial verse. There was a clear hierarchy of seniority and importance expressed in the order of appearance: the poets with the highest standing were the first to recite their work. All people in attendance had their turn on stage, and each speaker received friendly applause, regardless of how strong or weak their poetry was. There was no requirement to present new work, and some poets were asked by the audience to recite specific poems from their oeuvre.

Image 9: An open evening (*umsiya*) at Al-Nadi al-Masri, March 2014. One author after another recites from the podium on the right. The moderator, seated on the left at the table, introduces the speakers; the discussant, also at the table, comments on them in improvised verse.

Much attention was given to the fact that somebody's work had received a critical academic study (*dirasa*). Explicit literary criticism was largely absent, however. This was primarily because of the format of the evening; other symposia at the Writers' Union featured discussants who offered a usually charitable critical reading of the work presented. This was mainly a form of acknowledgement and appreciation, and was less focused on questioning and exploration (which was more prominent in some other scenes). At the open poetry evening in November 2014, studies were mentioned as a proof of quality, but were not read out as

they would be at events dedicated to a single author. More subtle forms of critique and recognition were of course constantly at work, in the way that certain qualities of particular works and authors received praise, in the way some writers were given and others were denied privileged attention, or even in gestures and tones of voice. A shared canon of ideal literary style was established and reproduced largely by means of affirmation, praise, and formal recognition. Great emphasis was also given to literary prizes. Egypt has a rich landscape of public-sector literary prizes that, even if low in monetary value, are an important part of the making of a *littérateur* in the conservative milieu. Prizes from the Arab Gulf states that come with substantial money and fame were highly appreciated by the writers in this gathering but were largely out of their reach.

Writers in all milieus (with the exception of a few commercially successful authors) usually distribute their works by hand. At this symposium, many of the participants had brought copies of their (often self-published) books, which they distributed to friends and colleagues. These copies would always be accompanied by a personal dedication that typically combined expressions of formal recognition and friendship. For example, the copy of a novel by Abdelfattah Morsi that Samuli was given that evening carries the dedication (in Arabic):

> Prof. Dr. Samuli Schielke.
> I dedicate this novel to you to be a bridge for friendship between us.
> Abdelfattah Morsi

Four characteristics distinguish this and other gatherings in the Writers' Union: an aesthetic and ideological commitment to the established repertoire of twentieth-century modernism, a shared socialisation in public-sector institutions with their emphasis on formal hierarchies and rituals, a preoccupation with formal gestures of mutual recognition, and a friendly and intimate atmosphere.

The friendly atmosphere notwithstanding, there is much competition between the authors, which becomes especially visible during the biannual elections of the board of the Union. But at most symposia, competition is consciously downplayed.

In the twentieth-century modernist vision that is largely shared at the Writers' Union, the author is an exceptional, ideal human being who expresses and exemplifies morals and commitment in a way that others can learn from. This vision is grounded in an older Arabic heritage in which *adab* means the cultivation of fine manners as well as literature (see Chapter 2; Pepe 2015). The symposium is an occasion at which that ideal can be lived out. On other occasions, writers often interact in ways that contradict this ideal – but this does not diminish the performative validity of the symposium as its enactment.

In spite of the often highly Bourdieuian struggle for distinction and symbolic capital that is so prevalent in literary milieus, the symposium is not simply a means to the end of symbolic capital. It is also an end in itself, one of the moments when writers most fully live a literary life. There is inherent pleasure involved in reciting and listening to literary texts, and also in the intimate and sophisticated gathering of like-minded people who mutually recognise and appreciate each others' mastery in cultivating that pleasure. A successful, enjoyable, and inspiring symposium is literary life at its best.

On a Thursday night in 2012, we visited the open poetry evening at al-Nadi al-Masri for the first time. Located in the eastern district of Victoria, this is a middle-income social club of the kind that proliferated in the mid-twentieth century, but has become rare since then. The symposium was an intimate and family-like event, and not by coincidence the literary section of the club called itself Bayt al-shuʿara', 'the house of poets', whereby 'house' could also be translated as 'home'. The favoured style at the poetry evenings was colloquial and (to a lesser degree) classical rhymed and metred verse, sometimes with musical accompaniment. Everybody in attendance was greeted by name and got their turn to speak on the podium (including Samuli, who had no poetry to recite and thus could only offer improvised words of gratitude and appreciation). The mood was very friendly, mixed with elaborate gestures of recognition and appreciation, and tea was served free of charge. We always thoroughly enjoyed our fieldwork at al-Nadi al-Masri.

On that evening, however, a conflict occurred. While a poet was reciting on the podium, somebody in the audience murmured a sarcastic comment, which the speaker heard. He fell silent, and refused to continue. Commotion followed as others tried to convince the speaker to continue. There was a tangible risk that the mood of the whole evening would go sour, and one of the older men in attendance called people to order, saying: 'We're here to enjoy!' (*Ihna hina ʿashan ninbisit*). The person who had interrupted the recital offered his apologies, which the poet on the podium accepted; and he finally continued his recital to everybody's appreciation and relief.

Murmuring sarcastic comments is common at gatherings that have a more critical aim, and would not cause such offence there. On the contrary, they fit with a shared mood of enquiry and questioning, and at best they might even add to the dramatic tension that marks an interesting critical debate. At al-Nadi al-Masri, doing so (or getting caught doing so) was out of place because it went against the grain of a gathering that had the explicit aim to provide pleasure and mutual appreciation through the shared engagement in poetry. Much serious effort went into creating this enjoyable, extra-ordinary yet recurring reality every Thursday

night, and it must therefore be recognised as an important literary accomplishment in its own right.

The relation of writing and life is thus often not about life in general. Rather, it involves the crafting of a specific persona and the accumulation of experiences, skills, and relations that are consciously marked as literary. The writing of literary texts and the crafting of a literary career in the social space of a milieu come together in what we call the writing of lives, that is, the crafting of ways of living and life trajectories through the practices of literary writing, reading and debate, and literary sociality. Writing, in this sense, is a technology of the self, as suggested by Michel Foucault in his later work on sexuality:

> Technologies of the self [...] permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault 1988: 18)

Foucault was interested in how the obligation to tell the truth in Christian confession contributed to a specific formation of the self, truth, and knowledge. Literary writing is usually quite different from Christian confession; and fiction has by definition a more complex relation with the question of truth. That said, the writing of fiction shares with Foucault's technologies of the self the ability to produce personae and trajectories – both fictional as well as materially enacted. But to what extent and with what consequences writers are able to craft those personae and trajectories is an open question. What relations do writers establish between the fictional and enacted lives that they produce and act out? What understandings of authorship and literary text do they pursue? What consequences do their pursuits have? The question of consequences and efficacy (and the possibility of unintended consequences and inefficacy) was not central for Foucault – in fact, it is a major blind spot in theories of self and ethics inspired by Foucault's work. And yet it is crucially important for understanding a field such as literature where success is an exception.

Here, Foucault's (1986) idea of heterotopia and Turner and Turner's (1978) idea of extra-ordinary times and gatherings, which we mentioned briefly earlier, are helpful in understanding how the writing of lives can be effective, even if it is not successful in a teleological sense.

At the weekly symposia of the Writers' Union and al-Nadi al-Masri, and in other events of their kind, participants in the gathering can actually be authors according to the image that they have sketched of themselves and for themselves. This does not mean they can be authors in these terms when and where they want. Being called a great poet by those around them may not make them great

poets in the eyes of others. They may not have anything like as much power to guide the nation as they hope. Their books may not reach readers. They may not be able to continue their literary careers for a variety of reasons. Underneath their performance of polite eloquence and mutual recognition may run deep lines of conflict and in-fighting. But none of this diminishes the effective reality of the performance in the special time and space of the symposium.

Marginality and exceptionality are thus not at odds with the idealism and pleasure of the symposium; on the contrary, they are necessary conditions for a successful literary life. For most writers in Egypt (in any milieu), literature is a parallel, separate life that they often consciously distinguish from their private and professional lives. For much of their lives, they are not primarily writers but busy with other things. Married people with children – women much more than men – often experience an acute competition of time and attention between symposia, meetings in a café, reading, debating, and writing on the one hand, and work and family responsibilities on the other. It is no coincidence that youth and retirement are the most common ages for literary activity. Some – fewer – people try to combine their literary and other lives, and succeed in doing so – be it by working in the cultural sector, marrying a partner active in the same cultural circles, or cultivating a bohemian, alternative lifestyle in a more systematic fashion.

That said, the boundary is never clear cut, and different writers address it differently. Shaymaa Bakr chose to draw the boundary as sharply as possible. Some others (to whom we turn next) have struggled to make more of their lives in line with the ambitions and ideals they strove for in their literary work. Yet others, including many of those who gather weekly at the Writers' Union, see their literary engagement as naturally different from other important things in their lives (such as work and marriage). For them, literary imagination is a possibility to cultivate and enjoy things that they see as outside and above conventional social expectations, while at the same time they strive for success in fulfilling those conventional expectations.

What we call the writing of lives thus takes place in an intersection of techniques of subject connected with literary expression, heterotopic spaces (such as cafés, symposiums, and imaginary worlds), and extra-ordinary times (such as times dedicated to reading, writing, and literary socialisation, but also life stages such as youth and retirement), in which such techniques may be tried and practised. But this is not yet an answer to the question raised near the beginning of this chapter: it is merely a conceptual grid. To understand how literary imagination may participate in the formation and transformation of the lives of those involved, it is necessary to take a closer look at how specific writers deal with the boundaries that enable literature, and how and with what consequences they may engage in the writing of lives along and across those boundaries.

Being Abdelfattah Morsi

After the symposium in the Writers' Union on 9 November 2014, a handful of men moved on to a nearby café. Among them was Abdelfattah Morsi, the author of at least twenty-six published novels as well as a number of other books (not counting unpublished works, of which he has at least ten). Abdelfattah Morsi was a well-known figure in Alexandria's literary circles although he has not gained wider fame. His novels are either self-published or distributed by public-sector presses. Although he was stunningly productive, it is difficult to find his books in bookshops. The books had print runs of 500 copies, and he distributed them to friends and peers.

Abdelfattah Morsi was born in 1942 and died in January 2017. By the time we got to know him, he lived as a widower and retired civil servant in relative material comfort between his two apartments in Alexandria and Cairo. Like so many other writers of his generation and milieu, he thought well of the Nasserist national project, was fiercely opposed to Islamist movements, and enthusiastically supported the current president, Abdelfattah el-Sisi. Born to a family of migrants from Upper Egypt in the popular district of Bakkous, he belonged to the generation that most profited from the social mobility of the Nasser era. He started as a worker in a sweets company while still at school. University education allowed him to move upward to administrative positions. In the following decades, interrupted by a period of migrant work in Iraq in the 1980s, he made a career in a public-sector industrial company where he rose to leading managerial positions before his retirement. In the 1960s and 1970s, he was active in a communist group, and spent two years in prison in the early 1970s for political reasons. His literary career began relatively late. During the political years of his youth, he had been writing short stories and theatre plays, but he only started writing novels in his late thirties. It took him more than ten years to find a way to publish his works. From 1993 onwards, he published at least one book every year. In 1995, he became a member of the Writers' Union. He frequented literary gatherings in Alexandria and Cairo and clearly enjoyed living the life of a man of letters, although he told us that he disliked the literary circles for being so much more competitive and dishonest than the world of underground political activism that he had known in his youth.

Abdelfattah Morsi was a talented storyteller and observer of social interactions. His novels draw upon personal experiences and are set in the streets and districts where he lived. His style is that of classic modernist realism, depicting personal and societal tensions and conflicts in linear narratives and often (but not always) providing moral resolutions and happy endings. In that, his work bears the mark of the modernist ideal, whereby the writer should be committed

to the national cause and at the same time an autonomous explorer of social and human conditions. (Jacquemond 2008: 223). Many of his novels are opened by an introduction in which he explains some of the intentions and aims of the text (Morsi 2008, 2009).

Morsi's novel *The Taste of Ash* (Morsi 2008, written in the mid-1990s), which we received from him that evening, is the coming-of-age story of a young man who grows up in a well-off merchant's family, discovers he is an adopted son,[4] joins a leftist movement at the university between the 1967 and 1973 wars, falls in love, studies the history of the city in a way that relates to the current events he lives through, enters a friendship with a politically committed poet that is disturbed by a secret police informer from their social circle, and in the end successfully completes his studies and marries the girl he loves. Firmly grounded in twentieth-century committed realism, *Taste of Ash* is carried by a linear narrative and skilfully set in its local and historical context. It presents a clear-cut cast of heroes and villains, as well as political rights and wrongs. Abdelfattah Morsi did not consider it one of his best works. He reflected that it is too short, lacking the space to develop the characters in a more complex manner. Other works of his are less explicitly marked by committed realism. His previously unpublished short story 'Reading the sand' (*'Ilm al-raml*, which means 'divination', but in the short story the reference to sand is presented literally), which he suggested to us as a representative example of his work, is a first-person meditation of a father who is compelled to take his family for an outing at the beach, but in his mind is immersed in metaphysical and scientific meditations about the universe.

> [...]
> Meanwhile, my wife keeps telling her usual stories. I lend my ear to the whispering of the air and water. Suddenly I think of thousands of words, hanging in the ether. They are spread from distant places, from beyond the line of the horizon, and rise to the satellites. And, thus, those many space stations spread out over our world and cover most of the surface of our planet that hasn't come of age yet.
> I see those words inviting me either to the face of Earth or to the edge of space. It shall be upon me alone to choose. So I feel the vast weight and misfortune of 'freedom', and anxious silence covers my face. My wife observes the shattered colour of my face, and interrupts her talk about the family and the neighbours and the child. She grows restless. Then she

4 Islamic law does not recognise adoption, which is why finding out about it can have devastating consequences. For example, an adopted son would be a non-relative of his adoptive mother, and should therefore not live together with her. The novel opens with this dilemma, but in the following course of the narrative, it is left unsolved and, in the end, the hero's relationship with his adoptive parents is fully reaffirmed.

> demands from me if I would like to return. I turn to her with a false cheerful smile on my face. She says:
> – Thus you are not up to the sea!
> [...][5]

'Reading the sand' fits into the vast common ground of contemporary prose; with its skilled exploration of the narrator's wandering mind, it might also be presented at a symposium of the downtown independent milieu without appearing different from its usual standards. At the same time, it does not offend any of the moral and aesthetic markers of more conservative literary aesthetics.

Interestingly, 'Reading the sand' also addresses the act of balance between imaginary explorations and a family life. Abdelfattah Morsi was a virtuoso master of turning that act of balance into an entertaining story.

As much as Morsi was committed to a twentieth-century ideal of committed yet autonomous authorship, he was also a unique character who broke many of the tacit lines of division that writers in his circles have been busy drawing. As we sat in the café, he began to entertain us with a wealth of stories and anecdotes from his life. In Egypt, men gathering in a café usually talk about everything – except their wives, families, and lives at home. This division between the café and the home is especially pronounced among writers, for whom their literary life is a special time set apart from their ordinary lives and obligations. Abdelfattah Morsi, however, showed very little hesitation in talking about his wife and children, his marriage, and his sex life – in such explicit detail that one of the men in the circle was clearly embarrassed.

During that evening, he presented different personae. In his stories and anecdotes, he was Abdelfattah Morsi the libertine hedonist who nevertheless knows to do the right thing. In his novels, in contrast, he is Abdelfattah Morsi the morally constructive modernist writer. Both personae, he said to us, tell the true story of his life: 'All my novels are from my life.'

In April 2016, we met him again in the same café with the intention of conducting a more formal interview. But he immediately took charge and turned our meeting into a three-hour session of entertaining anecdotes from his life and his novels, weaving them together in a way that afterwards made us wonder whether we should treat what he told us as an account of his life or as a piece of masterful storytelling. The two are never separate, of course, and Morsi was a virtuoso in playing with the ambiguities of life and fiction – and the ambiguities of his different lives.[6]

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5 For the full text, see Schielke and Shehata (2016).

6 On the unity of life and speaking about it, see Holstein and Gubrium (2000).

A good characterisation of this productive ambiguity is the cover of *The Taste of Ash*. Designed by the author, it shows a drawing of a woman dressed in 1960s or 1970s style walking along the street, while in the background is a photo of Morsi himself sitting at a café table and glancing at her.

Image 10: Cover of *The Taste of Ash* by Abdelfattah Morsi, designed by the author.

Abdelfattah Morsi was outspoken, even proud about living out different roles in his life:

> I started to live as many personae (*shakhsiyat*): the son of the Upper Egyptian, the worker, the student, the political activist, and later the novelist. All people live out many personae but they don't notice it.

By introducing us to more than one of his personae at once in the course of a literary and theatrical interview performance, he also showed that at least for him, the conservative aesthetics of the Writers' Union was not simply a straitjacket. Rather, it was a productive means through which he could channel his immensely productive storytelling talent and his extroverted character into an institutional form that was socially respected (literature), into a narrative genre that marked

his stories as different from his private life (fiction), and into an aesthetic style that could be appreciated by a conservative readership whose aesthetics are grounded in the binary of moral beauty and immoral ugliness.

Abdelfattah Morsi also made explicit two related but different ways of crafting lives and literary texts. On one level, he was involved in the writing of lives in a very explicit sense, weaving together the crafting of his social life – as an author and in other roles – with the telling and writing of stories largely based on his life. It is a success story, insofar as in his retirement he was able to live an enjoyable, perhaps even bohemian, life as a man of letters in material comfort and recognised by his peers and friends. Even his sudden death in January 2017 appears as if it were part of that crafted text of his life: he suffered a heart attack while socialising with his writer friends at the same café where we had met him.

Morsi was able to transform the marginality of literature with regard to ordinary life, from a margin in the sense of that which is excluded, to a margin in the sense of surplus or profit. As a productive margin, writing allowed him to turn his life experience, extroversion, and storytelling talent into an element of his success in life. He was among the few authors we have encountered who expressed no sense of alienation or isolation, but instead seemed to quite enjoy the playful combination of different lives – separate yet intertwined.

On another level, however, he has also produced an extensive oeuvre of literary texts that stand on their own. This oeuvre is not fully fictional; rather, it is somewhere between fiction and autobiography. It remains connected to the author in an explicit but selective way, while at the same time gaining the independence of a literary work. Such partly fictional, partly autobiographic texts, which Teresa Pepe (2019a) refers to as 'autofiction', are a specific outcome of what we call the writing of lives. They draw attention to the way authorship and text are connected in much contemporary Egyptian writing.

In the course of our fieldwork we noticed that participants in some symposia we attended used the term 'realism' to refer to subjective and autobiographic writing. Realism in this non-standard sense should not be confused with the tradition of realism in Egyptian modernist literature, which is a literary style and usually not autobiographical. Egyptian critics do not generally search for the alter egos of Naguib Mahfouz or Yusuf Idris in their works. In the framework of autofiction, however, realism is closely connected with subjectivity. Pepe studies autofiction produced by Egyptian bloggers who are mostly close to the cosmopolitan avant-gardes. In our fieldwork, we have observed a strong tendency towards autofiction among writers in more conservative or mainstream milieus. It is especially prominent among those who start writing in old age. This tendency allows writers such as Abdelfattah Morsi to engage in *a writing of lives* whereby their life experience feeds in a selective fashion into their literary persona, which they

can in turn skilfully and playfully – and sometimes provocatively – cultivate and enjoy in the productive margins of writing, symposia, and coffee house gatherings. The proliferation of autofiction adds a question mark, however, to the capacity of literature to produce works of imagination that exceed the author's own experiences, views, and stances. This was not an issue of concern for Morsi, but it certainly has been one for some others we met.

How to become a writer in many difficult steps

During our fieldwork in the private cultural space of Fabrica in 2014 and 2015, Alshimaa Hamed ran a successful programme of literary events and writing workshops in the space, and turned it into the meeting place for a small circle of people with similar interests and attitudes. From autumn 2014 to spring 2015, we participated in the second edition of her writing workshop *Intasir li-l-hikaya* ('Support the story'). Alshimaa Hamed introduced to Alexandria new training techniques that she had learned at a writing workshop in Beirut. Her career as a writing coach began with a workshop she held in El Cabina in 2011, followed by another in the privately organised cultural space El-Sandara the following year. With the establishment of Fabrica in 2013, she began to host her workshops there. Each ran for approximately half a year in weekly or bi-weekly sessions, and participants paid a fee. Additionally to her experience as a writer and her knowledge of new training techniques, her success as a coach relied crucially on her personal charisma. This personal dimension made Fabrica a literary space associated with an intimate circle of friends that gathered around her.

The writing workshop (*warsha*) as a pedagogical exercise in which literary techniques are learnt is a fairly recent phenomenon in Egypt, having emerged in the 2000s and become established by the 2010s. It has quickly become popular in line with a wider culture of short-term training-based learning. It is part of the partial neoliberalisation of education and labour markets in Egypt, whereby training in languages and various marketable skills can be more important than formal degrees, especially in the private sector.

Fabrica as a space and Alshimaa's workshop as a form of gathering were part of a new development in literary sociality. As a subscription-based event in a dedicated cultural space, the workshop was less private than a literary salon. At the same time, it was also less open and public than a regular symposium in a cultural centre would be. In some ways Fabrica resembled (and for a while functioned as) an upper-middle-class coffee shop where mixed-gender socialisation was made possible by class seclusion (De Koning 2009). As a form of gathering,

Alshimaa Hamed's workshop was strongly person-centred in ways that echoed the older tradition of the salon, but the techniques of learning reflected the recent spread of workshop-based training programmes. While Alshimaa's workshop and others of its kind relied on and reproduced master–apprentice (*ustaziya*) relations that have been crucial in all historical periods of Arabic *adab*/literature ever since the classics, the careers of apprenticeship were much shorter. Some of Alshimaa's former workshop participants were giving workshops of their own only a couple of years later, some even before publishing any literary works of their own.

During her time at Fabrica, Alshimaa Hamed brought together her private and literary lives more comprehensively than most writers do, but she did not write about her own life. Her short stories tell of estranged individuals who set out on dubious adventures – often of an erotic kind – and they end with neither narrative resolution nor a moral message (Hamed 2008, 2010, 2014).

Alshimaa is a decided feminist, supporting women in her circle in taking off the headscarf and encouraging people in her workshop to write about sexuality, desire, and ways of life that are not normative without judgement. At the same time, she clearly distances herself from the ideal of literature with a message. In a discussion in spring 2015, Alshimaa told Samuli that she does not believe there can be great collective movements any more. All movements are individual, she insisted, including the 25 January revolution that only brought together countless individual demands. Rather than commitment to a greater cause, she claimed that all she aims for is to 'touch the reader lightly'.

Alshimaa Hamed's take on literature is part of a general development of literary avant-gardes that since the 1990s (a decade that marked a collapse of the socialist and Arab nationalist utopias) gave increased attention to the self, ordinary life, and intimacy as fields that might still be worth a literary engagement (El Dabh 2016). The post-1990s literary avant-garde has since then produced some consciously experimental writing (also among participants of Alshimaa Hamed's workshops: Abbady 2013), but more often it stands in a continuity of the modernist tradition in terms of narrative techniques (in the field of poetry, the aesthetic split between different styles is more pronounced – see Chapters 7 and 8).[7] The

7 This trend has also involved a search for an alternative literary tradition. The 1990s avant-garde in Alexandria was busy rediscovering non-Arab Alexandrian authors such as Cavafy and Ungaretti. The early twenty-first century witnessed a sort of revival of some twentieth-century Egyptian writers who were excluded from the national canon, most notably Waguih Ghaly (?1927–1969), who wrote in English, narrated the early Nasser years from the critical point of view of an alienated cosmopolitan leftist (Ghaly 1964, 2013), and visited Israel as a journalist in 1968. This made him a unperson in terms of committed nationalist literature. But for many of today's

main shift in the field of prose is not in techniques but in moral and political framings. Many of the writers who have abandoned the idea of committed writing for the national cause often also consciously break the code of polite speech that is held in such high esteem in more conservative milieus (Pepe 2015). In such writing, a search to engage, even provoke, the reader comes together with moral-political stances that privilege difference and critique as virtues in their own right (Schielke 2015: 213–215). According to Pepe (2015), this is a reconfiguration rather than an abandonment of the figure of the *adib* and the tradition of commitment. But it does go against the grain of powerful societal sensibilities. In 2016, the Cairine author Ahmed Naji was sentenced to two years in prison for 'offending public modesty' after he published in a literary journal a chapter from his latest novel that contained explicit sexual scenes and language (Naji 2014; Jacquemond 2016).

Although critical of the twentieth-century version of literary commitment, circles such as those that gathered around Alshimaa in Fabrica were not unpolitical, nor were their writings. On the contrary, during the time of our fieldwork, these circles were frequently gathering points of people who shared the 25 January revolution as a formative political experience. Many of them were active in different revolutionary movements at the same time, and the general attitude of insubordination that was bred by the revolutionary experience was also present in their literary voices. But their politics of authorship, as it may be called, was often different from that of the twentieth-century tradition. For them, the ideal of the writer as the conscience of the nation who critiques and guides the masses and elites alike had less credibility than it had for earlier generations of writers. Instead, the author as envisioned by the turn-of-the-millennium avant-garde appeared to be a more subjective and alienated figure – or, in the case of authors whose work was more directly linked with their political stances, as somebody speaking from within the crowd of demonstrators, authenticated by participation rather than leadership.

In line with her own style of writing, Alshimaa in her capacity as a workshop trainer put emphasis on the skill to create fictional characters that were different from – even opposed to – how the writers saw themselves, and to do justice to those fictional characters within the logic of the narrative without becoming judgemental. The workshop was an exercise in creating autonomous fictional text rather than a fictionalisation of autobiographic experience. However the aim

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readers – especially those with cosmopolitan pro-revolution stances – Ghaly's critical depiction of the 1950s after the revolution of the Free Officers strikes them as extremely timely and closer to their sensibilities than committedly nationalist work from the same period.

of not being judgemental in writing contained a feminist moral message about female public voice and presence. More than the learning of narrative skills was involved.

Image 11: Alshimaa Hamed (on the right) at one of the workshop meetings, February 2015.

Alshimaa Hamed's workshop did not simply break with the tradition of modernist literary aesthetics. Rather, it worked towards a different articulation of that tradition. In one of the meetings, she let the participants read a short story by Yusuf Idris (1927–1991), 'the uncontested master of the realist short story' (Jacquemond 2008: 259; see also Allen 1994) and also a prime case of a nationalist pro-regime intellectual. The story 'Did you have to turn on the light, Lily?' (Idris 1998, 1978) tells of a sheikh at a mosque falling for Lily, a girl of ill repute from a popular (*shaʿbi*) neighbourhood. The task Alshimaa Hamed gave to the participants was to retell the story from Lily's point of view. This was difficult especially for some of the female participants, who found it hard to take the perspective of a woman who was in many ways the opposite of what they had spent most of their lives learning to be. The message of the exercise was clear: to learn from the mastery of Yusuf Idris, but also to free oneself from the moral and literary superego that compels the author to write her own ideal of public personhood into the characters and the narrative.

The writing workshops and the circle of friends that gathered around Alshimaa Hamed overlapped to a large extent. The workshop itself was attended

by a dozen people, most of them from bourgeois backgrounds. Between half and two-thirds of them were women. Most participants were students aged between eighteen and their early twenties. Their socialisation between urban Egyptian social mores and a global Anglophone bourgeoisie provided them with the means to desire something beyond the cultural and moral horizon of their families (see Peterson 2011).

Fabrica provided a double seclusion that generated a safe space to express and develop such desires: seclusion from the popular classes with their more conservative forms of socialisation (which would make mixed-gender friendships more difficult, for example; see de Koning 2009), and seclusion from the mainstream of the bourgeois classes themselves. No wonder, then, that some participants found it difficult to write from the point of view of Lily. She was opposed to their painstakingly cultivated social persona not only in terms of gendered modesty, but also in terms of class habitus.

The kind of *writing of lives* that the workshops at Fabrica encouraged most was about creating a space for expressions and ways of living that are seen by mainstream bourgeois society as immoral, useless, or marginal. The semi-private setting and the largely shared age and class position provided a degree of seclusion that was necessary to cultivate such expressions. Just as in the conservative–modernist public-sector milieu of the Writers' Union, independent spaces with cosmopolitan and alternative leanings such as Fabrica require walls that separate literary life from ordinary life. The principle of separation is similar, but the habitus that is being learned and reproduced is different in the two milieus. Symposiums at the Writers' Union emphasised formal mutual recognition as authors and concern with wholesome moralistic beauty of language – even if some writers' lives were more bohemian and counter-normative than their writings. Alshimaa Hamed's circle, in contrast, was a relatively protected space of exchange,[8] where visions of alternative lifestyles and ways of writing could mutually enforce each other, and where the participants could experiment with a safer version of public exposure.

But the separation is never complete, and a few among the workshop participants worked towards at least partially transcending it. Being a writer is an exposed public role par excellence, and many families are not entirely happy about their daughters developing literary inclinations. Women writers are more likely than men to be identified with the characters of their texts, which adds

8 Relatively but not entirely protected, for Alshimaa and the workshop participants were a critical audience, and this did make some participants hesitant to expose their writings to debate. Our presence as researchers added another layer of exposure.

another layer of moral pressure. For women, developing a literary voice is therefore often linked with a more general cultivation of an assertive stance.

This work of developing an assertive voice might be easily interpreted in terms of a liberal celebration of authentic self-expression and liberation in spite of social constraints. Some of the participants did indeed subscribe to such a reading. And yet, when one looks more closely, the careers of those who frequented Fabrica shows that that the search for an assertive voice and alternative lifestyles is not natural and instinctive. On the contrary, it requires learning, practice, training, a supportive milieu that provides one with the techniques of pursuing them, and a partially protected space of expression and experimentation. Learning to be a writer who tells stories without judgement and embarrassment is structurally not so different from the work of learning to be a God-fearing pious Muslim that has been described by anthropologists studying the Islamic revival (Mahmood 2005; Fadil 2011; Abenante 2015) – although the two are obviously not the same. And a few of the people attending the workshop in fact mastered both forms of cultivation.

Holding the microphone

Heba Farouk had participated in Alshimaa's previous workshop, and was a regular visitor at Fabrica during our fieldwork in 2014 and 2015. In a group interview with Alshimaa and some people from her circle in March 2014, she told us that writing and literature had been part of her life as long as she could remember. She had been inspired to take the step to publish her works by engagement with three literary circles: Mukhtabar al-Sardiyat (see Chapter 2), the Itlala literary group, and Alshimaa's workshop. The most important thing she had learned along her tour through a literary milieu, she said, was to distinguish between herself and her writing: 'This story is not me. This story expresses what is inside me, but it's not me.'

This was also the kind of writing she learned to cultivate in the following. Her first collection of short stories, *Venus and Masculine Plural* (*Venus wa-mim al-mudhakkar*, Farouk 2016), has a more subjective tone, while her second collection, *The Closed* (*Maghaliq*, Farouk 2018), which she wrote after the workshop, is populated by characters who are in no way her, instead being rather successful imaginary creatures – much as Alshimaa trained her and the others to craft them. The stories in her second collection are often dark and violent, and take place mostly far away from the familiar spaces of Alexandria – features that are not so common among other young female writers whose work we have engaged with.

One of the stories included in the second collection came third in the Ghassan al-Kanafani competition for short stories in 2015. The story, titled 'A bodily experience' (*Tajriba jasadiya*), tells of a prostitute who seduces and kills soldiers of an unnamed occupying army in an unnamed land. In its choice of a heroine who is clearly opposed to the public image of female virtue, the story is a good example of the kind of autonomous text that Alshimaa promoted. In its explicit political thrust, however, the story is more in line with engaged writing of the twentieth-century modernist tradition. It is no coincidence that it received a prize named after al-Kanafani, iconic representative of the 'literature of resistance' (*adab al-muqawama*) that has accompanied the Palestinian struggle for liberation ever since the defeat of 1948.

Heba had first ventured to literary circles in around 2010, and then withdrew for a while. In 2014, she described to us the outlook of her life before she took the decision of going public again with her writing:

> I felt that writing is not an essential thing in my life. The most I would do would be to work towards a normal life (*hayah tabiʿiya*), work and get married and I don't know what, the normal things that people do, and writing is something I do with myself.

After 2015, Heba was for a period highly active in various literary circles, attending meetings in Mukthabar al-Sardiyat, doing freelance work for Alexandria Library, and running writing workshops for children and adults (one of the latter is featured in Chapter 1), additionally to an IT related day job. Since we first met her, she has become very skilled in public settings, and she appears to enjoy it. This is not an easy pleasure in a society where so much of a woman's standing and reputation is based on a careful balance between modesty and elegance, where women's domesticity and invisibility is encouraged, and men frequently avoid mentioning their wife or mother by name in the company of other males because doing so would be indiscreet.

Heba Farouk said that she never had to struggle with her family about her literary interests and public visibility: she could take their support for granted. She also expressed no tension between religious values and literary engagements. On the contrary, she has pursued a religious education as an adult, and is actively involved in 'human development' (*al-tanmiya al-bashariya*), a movement that brings together Islamic cultivation of the self and neoliberal self-help training (Kreil 2015). At the same time, she expresses outspokenly feminist stances in her writing, and consciously and skilfully crafts herself as a public persona. On her Facebook account, she publishes free verse with a subjective, emotional tone in combination with photos (initially showing her, more recently including stock images that resonate with the mood and themes of the poems). In an interview

with Samuli in September 2019, she explained that she combined poetry with photos because the photos invited more likes and reactions. She did not publish her prose online. Her short stories were where her literary ambition was, and that ambition was linked with books, while she considered the poems online as more personal, subjective expression. At the same time, she carefully managed a distinction between public self-expression and private details. The specific causes of the sentiments she expresses online remain vague, and in the two interviews we conducted with her in 2014 and 2019, she carefully withheld information about her private circumstances. Instead, she pointed out how different situations required different roles from her, which she learned to cultivate over time:

> So I began to say that I'm a writer, I'm Heba. Of course the Heba who attends the religious institute has another shape; and at work it's a different business, someone very serious. Here one shape, there another shape. So writing for me, that was me: This is me, these are my thoughts. (Interview in 2019)

The move into literary scenes and the publication of her works turned writing from a private pleasure into a public role, a role that she has mastered and enjoys. In 2019, she no longer frequented literary circles with the intensity of the previous years, and more of her effort went to storytelling workshops for children. She could now rely on an accomplished repertoire of private, professional, and public roles. Being a writer was, according to Heba, the most authentic of her many roles, and yet it is unclear at the time of writing (summer 2020) whether Heba will continue her career as writer or whether children's workshops will be her main engagement. She told Mukhtar in a meeting in 2020 that in any case, she would not enter a marriage that would require her to give up her workshops and her writing – an issue that arises for many women. Her skill and pleasure in the public realm means that withdrawal is no longer an option for her. This shift is strikingly evident in two different stories she told us of her first public reading in 2010.

> At first, I couldn't read to people. I felt shy about reading out something I had written to a large number of people [...] There was a friend who encouraged me a lot. I feel that it was thanks to him. He told me, OK, if you don't want to read, I will read it for you, and he went [to the podium] and read.

> I participated [in a symposium] with a short story. I entered the lecture room and it was all guys, a lot of them. This happened in 2010. Anyway, I held the story in my hand, and I was going to just stand and read, and then somebody gave me the microphone. It was the first time I held the microphone, and it felt great, like, my voice is heard. I don't know why but my doubts were gone and it felt great.

In the first version, which Heba narrated in 2014, she was too shy to read out loud in front of the people, and a male friend needed to help her out. In the second version, which she told in 2019, she loved the microphone from the first moment. For us, it does not matter which version is more accurate. Instead, each is a narrative performance of a specific public virtue, of *writing of lives* in action.

Image 12: Heba Farouk speaking to the microphone at a critical debate of her first book at Mukhtabar al-Sardiyat, April 2016.

The microphone is an important element of literary gatherings, and is commonly used even in small spaces where the speakers' voice could be easily heard without amplification. More than simply amplifying the voice, the microphone is a performative device that transforms speech into public address. Speaking to a microphone implies embodying the public role of an author or orator, which gives one's words and presence a weight they might not otherwise have. In 2014, Heba told us a modest version in which her hesitance was in line with conventional ideas of female virtue: embodying shyness rather than assertiveness, and taking the role of a listener rather than a speaker. In 2019, she told us an assertive version in which her love at first sight with the microphone was in line with the confidence and skills she had gained as an author and workshop coach.

Heba's career shows that the project of crafting an assertive public role as an author does not necessarily have to go hand in hand with a secular-liberal set of values or with an autonomous text that has left committed modernism behind. Heba expressed a rather pious-liberal set of values – which is quite common

among people we have met – and her writing combines elements of autonomous and committed literary ideals. In addition, the more recent focus of her career on children's workshops indicates that the declared aims of literary training and projects of self-making do not predict the paths that result. Last but not least, she found it comparably easy to craft a public persona because her family was rather supportive of her striving. Others have told us stories that involve more struggle, pain, and tragic turns.

'I hate reality'

We first spoke at length with Sama (a pseudonym she chose for herself for this book) in 2014, when she was a recent university graduate in her early twenties. She had participated in Alshimaa's first *Intasir li-l-hikaya* workshop in spring 2014, where we had first met her. She and a friend of hers met us for an interview in a bookshop where Sama worked at the time. Although she was generally sceptical of literary sociality except for a select group of supportive friends, Sama had a high opinion of the workshop and the skills and confidence she had gained from it. It had contributed to her decision to publish her writings and to claim the public role of an author.

In the interview in 2014, she said that she had written since her childhood 'because I want to write', but only more recently had developed a desire to publish. She described herself as a dedicated, even obsessive, reader for whom literature and fantasy had a transformative power to craft and create life:

> So for example, a short time ago I had very difficult circumstances, and I was very depressed. I opened the laptop where I had a novel called *Kafka on the Shore* by Haruki Murakami. Somebody had told me that it's a good novel, so I started reading it. I became completely immersed in it. I sat reading for twelve hours and finished it the same day, it was about 500 pages. I read it as a PDF. And I forgot [my depression], so afterwards I felt that the book astonished me so much that it opened to me a new passage in life.
> [...]
> For somebody with limitations, like me who's prohibited from travel, books are the only consolation that remains, or what makes one see places one didn't see. With imagination, you can reach everywhere.
> [...]
> What made me engage with writing more, is that I feel that it's connected with creation, that you create something of your own; you'll have your own stories that are yours first of all. Another thing is that when you read a book [...] it opens for you, it opens for me the horizon here in my brain, and new cells emerge. I see the words, and what you are writing now, and the research you will do, and the books full of words to read, and which I write... All the words participate with a piece, with certain particles like the particles of the universe,

> in the events and destinies. So I feel that it has a relation with creation; and that you can create for yourself a new world with a different course of events. That's what made me … or that's the aim as I see it.

Sama's outspoken optimism about the creative power of literary imagination stood in a tension with the circumstances of her life. She comes from a religious and conservative, not affluent family, which was sceptical about her literary strivings and, as she indicated in the interview, did not allow her to travel outside Alexandria on her own. We met her occasionally between 2014 and 2017, during which time she had various jobs and spent much of her time outside her home, either by the seaside or in cafés in downtown Alexandria that welcome women as customers.

Sama has published two collections of short stories. Her stories are compressed and compact, describing situations that appear confusing at first and require the reader to think to understand them. Many of them come across as constellations, situations, series of interactions rather than classical narratives. They dispense with any attempt of realism, and in many of them, imagination itself is the main topic.

In 2016, she presented her first book at the Mukhtabar al-Sardiyat debating club at Alexandria Library. There she replied to a question from the audience about reality and realism: 'With regard to reality: I hate reality.'

And yet Sama was not trying to escape reality into a fantasy world. Instead, she struggled to change a reality she hated with the help of fantasy. In the interview in 2014, she cited a line from a Hollywood movie she had seen: 'We deserve happy endings.'

In January 2017, we met Sama for a new interview at one of the cafés she frequented in downtown Alexandria. She had replaced the conventional headscarf she used to wear with a very minimal scarf that barely covered her hair, a compromise between her desire to take off the hijab and her family's insistence that she wear it. Although more confident than in 2014, she kept a reserved distance. Mukhtar asked her about her personal circumstances. Sama answered that she was a totally different person at home than outside it, and that she did not want us to write about her private situation. But she did tell us that her family knew she was writing, and were proud that she had recently won a prize from the Ministry of Culture for her second book. She said that she was also happy they hadn't read the book because they wouldn't like it. Samuli mentioned that many writers are happy about having literature as a parallel life. Sama replied that she would rather live the literary way completely and independently.

A year later, Sama withdrew from public, stopped attending cafés and working, and closed her social media accounts. After a sequence of private

events, which she asked us not to write about, she was compelled to stay at home with her family and live by their rules. By the time of writing this in summer 2020, she has not made a comeback, but she has completed the draft manuscript of a novel, her first.

Keeping literary and other lives apart is often not a willing choice but a necessity. It can be intended as a temporary measure until it becomes possible to live out a life more widely in line with one's literary ambitions. Sama was consciously engaged in reading and writing as a technology of the self, and she was very outspoken about it. But her ability to realise the life she wanted to create through her engagement with literature was partial at its most successful, and turned out to be fragile and temporary. This is not to say that things may not change later in her life; rather that we cannot equate aims with outcomes.

Sama's attempt to create for herself a different life did not result in the happy ending she hoped for – or at least it has not done so yet – and yet it was effective and productive. The energy she invested into the attempt, and the reality of a temporary parallel life of independence that she accomplished for a while, imply that her vision of writing as a form of effective creation of a life must be taken seriously, while at the same time recognising that more often than not such creation can only prevail under protected, marginal circumstances, and is often precarious and temporary.

Self-determination is always a fiction in that it requires the strengthening of some bonds of support in order to challenge or overcome others. Among the writers we met, those with supportive families found it much easier to claim independence. Most importantly, as with all forms of striving and self-making, self-determination is an inherently partial process that often does not result in what one was originally striving for. Rather than simply producing literary texts that are separate from their writers, or dramatically transforming and liberating its practitioners, the alternative literary life that could be learned and lived in Alshimaa Hamed's circle added a layer of complexity and tension to lives structured by strands of class, respect, work, gender roles, different moral and spiritual ideals, a few moments of success, and many frustrations.

'It's a piece of me'

Predictably, many participants in Alshimaa Hamed's workshops did not stay active in literary scenes. And yet for some of them, experimenting with public presence and an assertive independent stance as an author has been productive beyond the heterotopic space and liminal time of the workshop.

In spring 2015, we interviewed one of the participants in the *Intasir li-l-hikaya* workshop. She felt she was profiting from the workshop enormously, yet was far from confident about seeing herself as a writer. One of the oldest participants in the workshop, she was born in 1980 to a well-off urban family. Her father was a judge sympathetic to the Islamist current, an intellectual of great learning who had a conservative vision of life. She spent much of her youth in the Gulf, where her father was working. The mother of a daughter who was in primary school at the time, she was working as a dentist in Alexandria. In the first interview we had with her, she said that she had started writing very recently, after the revolution. Her writings were usually very personal, recounting childhood memories and intimate feelings. In 2010, she was divorced from her husband, who also seized some of her property. She told us the traumatic and conflictual process of her divorce ran beneath all her writings, yet she was unable to write about it directly. Instead, the workshop inspired her to write about desire.

> Another thing I found out in the workshop is that my imagination is a bit lustful. I was very embarrassed that I write these things. How do you come to write these lustful things? So after the workshop I took the courage and started to write them. At least for myself. [...] I have a problem, you know, with what society will think. What will it say? To the degree that I have thought of adopting a pen name.

This turn was not unique, nor was her sense of embarrassment. Many young authors have a keen interest in writing about desire and sexuality, and Alshimaa Hamed's appreciation of erotic writing made Fabrica a good place to pursue that path. But doing so runs counter to Egyptian moral sensibilities about respectable mixed-gender interaction, according to which talk about sexuality and explicit sexual language should be limited to either homosocial gatherings (see Kreil 2012) or intimate situations.

In the interview, she told us that we should not use her real name in our publications. She had not published any of the texts she showed us. She would not even publish excerpts on her Facebook page because it was frequented by her colleagues and relatives. In her family, the very idea of going public with any kind of literary writing met with resistance. Her most recent writings, which she characterised as 'adults only', would be scandalous. In truth, her texts do not exceed the fairly conservative limits of what is considered an acceptable way to write about intimacy and sex in Egyptian literature, but she was referring to the sensibilities of her family and colleagues – not those of literary critics.

During the interview, she read us three texts she had recently written. She told us she had written each of them immediately the idea struck her mind. The following passage is from an untitled short story that suggested itself to her as she was putting on makeup.

> She throws an examining glance into the mirror while she presses her lips on each other in a circular motion to be sure that the lipstick covers them completely. She looks at her shining lips for a moment. How much time has passed with no lover kissing them? How much time will pass until she can cherish the taste of a kiss that will bring her back to life?
> She asks herself in the mirror: will this night be warmer with my eyeshadow? She smiles, enjoying the scent of her pretty lips.[9]

In contrast to the intended aim of the workshop, she did not produce autonomous fictional text. Her writing remained so much a part of her that she would not distinguish between herself and her texts—which made the idea of presenting herself as an author even more difficult: Because of this, she was uncomfortable with exposing her writings to literary critique even in the protected space of the workshop:

> The problem is that when I write a piece, it's a piece of me. [...] as if it were my arm. Imagine somebody putting my arm on the table and critiquing it: it's too long, there's too much, that hair should be removed. It's my arm! I like it as it is, with its length and hair and all.

Unlike Heba and Sama, who strove to produce autonomous literary texts, her writing remained an expressive dimension of her self, almost indistinguishable from her. She did not expect to become a professional writer, and she indicated that writing may be a passing stage in her life – as it is for the great majority of writers (Jacquemond 2008: 148–49).

However, as we worked on the first draft of a working paper (of which this chapter is a heavily revised and expanded version), we wrote to her asking whether she had chosen a pen name so we could use it in our paper. She replied:

> I agree with the publication of my full name. I'm proud that you have chosen me. My joy reaches the sky. Publish what you wish with my full name. I'm proud of the experiment and will not be ashamed of it.

Why did Eman Salah change her mind about associating her work with her name? The fact that we were writing about her in an international academic essay was probably a motivation. It was a recognition of Eman Salah as a writer, and of her writing as worth taking seriously. The fact that we were writing in English also maintained a protective layer between her and her family and colleagues. But our recognition alone would not have been enough. Rather, it was one part among many in a network of support that she sought and found in her striving to gain an independent stance in the difficult predicament of being a divorced

9 For the full text, see Schielke and Shehata (2016).

woman. And independence is never absolute: in practice, it means changing some forms of dependence for others. The writing workshop and the supportive circle around Alshimaa Hamed formed one part of that striving. The experience of the 25 January revolution was another important part. According to Eman Salah, it dramatically changed the way she understood her own life. Most importantly, perhaps, she was trying to emigrate from Egypt when we met her. Many young Egyptians from her generation and social class currently try to leave Egypt because they experience their homeland as unliveable in so many ways. Perhaps the hope and preparation for a new start abroad also provided a stronger motivation to experiment with the difficult stance of a public voice.

Image 13: Eman Salah writing in her notebook at one of the workshop meetings, February 2015.

In summer 2016, Eman eventually managed to move abroad for graduate studies on a United States-based two-year scholarship supporting women's leadership. She would have stayed there if she could have, but her visa could not be extended after her graduation, and she returned to Egypt with her daughter. After a period of disorientation after her return, she moved to Cairo for a job in an international organisation in 2019. Samuli met her there in September that year and found her in good spirits. She lived in Maadi, an affluent neighbourhood where a woman of her social class could live alone without inviting questions about her respectability. Her job was interesting and allowed her a reasonably comfortable living. But the job was not a permanent one, and while she definitely had moved forward in life in many ways, she found it very difficult to figure out what steps to take next.

Eman's exercise in 2014 and 2015 in experimenting with the voice of an author did not result in her claiming the status of a writer. Instead, it was one part among others of her search to overcome the trauma of her divorce and to claim the stance of an independent woman – a search during which she has taken recourse to a variety of heterotopic spaces and extra-ordinary temporalities, such as the intimate space of Fabrica, her time as a graduate student in the United States, and the privileged urban milieu of Maadi. Those opportunities would not have been available for somebody without her education and class, which is another reminder that the crafting of alternative lives that literature may allow is not only precarious and unpredictable, but also not easily available in the first place. Making competent use of the resources available to her when and where she could, she has been able to accomplish some of the independence she has been striving for – and yet so far has also fallen frustratingly short of providing herself with a sense of satisfaction or accomplishment.

Outsides of power

In his partly autobiographic study of writers and writing, the anthropologist Michael D. Jackson argues that literary writing fundamentally involves a search for wider horizons and other shores:

> Regardless of what we write, the very act of writing signifies a refusal to be bound by conceptual categories, social norms, political orders, linguistic limits, historical divides, cultural bias, identity thinking, and conventional wisdom that circumscribe our everyday lives. [... W]hat moves us to write (and read what others have written) is an impulse to broaden our horizons, to reincarnate ourselves, and 'satisfy our perpetual longing to be another'. (Jackson 2013: 2–3)

Something of this impulse was indeed present throughout our encounters with writers in Alexandria. But it did not result in writers freely gazing across open waters for other shores. Developing a wider horizon of the imagination requires resources, training, and support. No less work is required to limit and direct one's ideas to make them fit with the moral and aesthetic horizon of a social and literary milieu. We found writers thinking beyond some forms of convention and bias while reinforcing others. The search for imaginative freedom in arts and literature can be entirely compatible with the support of repressive military regimes: Egyptian writers have a remarkable record in this. Cultivating an openness to new ideas and tastes does not mean openness to different social classes and ways of life: indeed, it often even requires their exclusion. Also, it would be a fallacy to mistake literary writers for the voices of their society. Rather, their particular voices are structured by the specific social milieus they hail from, and at the same time depend on a productive position of marginality and idiosyncrasy. A more fitting description would be to consider literary writing—along with other forms of cultural production—as a productive surplus of imagination in a wider social milieu. It has a tendency to exceed the taken for granted of the societal mainstream, but is never unlimited.

Michel Foucault famously argued that knowledge is always constituted in a historically specific configuration of relations from which it cannot be detached (Foucault 2008) – an argument that since then has been abbreviated to 'there is no outside of power' in popularised accounts of Foucault's thought. The same might be said about literary imagination. Even in the most nonconformist circles, the ways of searching and learning ways to imagine, to write, and to live are structured by available techniques and resources, and networks of protection and patronage. But the effect of relations of power is not deterministic, at least not in a way that contemporary social sciences can perceive. In our fieldwork, we have encountered tangible correlations of generation, class, education, and institutional context with literary aesthetics and socialisation (although, owing to a lack of statistical data, we are not able to make quantitative statements). But we have also constantly encountered people who are in many ways peculiar in comparison to the (non-literary) people around them, and who make use of the institutional, class, and generational means of a specific literary milieu to cultivate and develop their idiosyncrasy in the marginal spaces and times of literary sociality – and possibly, in the public persona of the writer.

In another sense, then, there is always an outside to every form of discursive power, not in the sense of absolute unlimited freedom, but in the sense of a finite surplus of the imaginable that accompanies and exceeds every discursive formation. Marginality, in the sense of special times and spaces that are posited to some degree outside ordinary structures and values of social and private life, is

not an impediment but a productive, even necessary, condition for the cultivation of such a surplus.

Such outsides of power are never fully independent. The limited access to heterotopic sociality is especially visible with regard to gender relations. A senior male author such as Abdelfattah Morsi could move comfortably and playfully within spaces provided to him by the patriarchal and class privileges of senior, well-off men. Female authors, in contrast, have until recently needed to struggle with the marginalised position given to them as writers of 'women's literature'. The embodiment of the public voice of an author by a woman remains a significant accomplishment—and an especially difficult one for women who do not enjoy the privileges of urban careers and bourgeois education and habitus. And yet it has become visibly more accessible and possible than it was a generation or two ago (Jacquemond 2008; Shehata 2015; Youssef 2016). As we have seen in this chapter, remarkably many young women do strive to embody the public persona of the author with some success and recognition, along with searching to develop a more assertive stance in their lives. Writing as a technology of the self therefore does have the power to contribute to trajectories of life that otherwise might not be available. However, it can only do so in the framework of a supportive aesthetic, generational, and class milieu. Its long-term consequences remain beyond the reach of our ethnography.

The problem of writing and life thus concerns neither the possibility of an original, authentic voice that precedes cultural constraints, nor the teleological production of that voice by discursive registers. Instead, the simultaneous crafting of lives and texts, or what we call the writing of lives, is grounded in a productive coming together of socialisation and personal idiosyncrasies, experience and imagination, obsession and resources, and life and text in an aspirational path of becoming – with unpredictable results. Specific spaces and times that are marked as literary provide productive margins in which literature as a craft and communication can take place, and in which some people may learn and live literary lives. But they do so to various extents and with various consequences. They are productive – but of what cannot be known beforehand.

What writing does to writers is only one part of the story, and probably not the most important one. Most writers want to be heard and read by others, and not only by their closest peers. More often than not they hope to leave a trace, be it a piece of moral advice, a critical vision, an entertaining story, a surprising idea, or a light touch. They want to say something. The second part of this book follows that lead. The following chapters engage with writers who have something important to say about the world and the city they live in, the historical moment in which they found themselves, and their writings. The story begins with a question that appeared very pressing, and also rather promising, in 2011.

Part II: Writing about

Samuli Schielke

4 Can poetry change the world?

Don't reconcile

Amal Dunqul, *Don't Reconcile*

With this chapter, the theme of the book shifts from the process of literary writing and socialisation to the key themes of literary imagination and engagement that we encountered in our fieldwork. Authorship also shifts, from the co-authored 'we' of Samuli and Mukhtar in the first part of the book to a single-authored 'I' of Samuli in this second part – although the we of Samuli and Mukhtar as a fieldwork team continues to participate actively in the text. We as co-authors will make one more appearance in the Afterword.

In this chapter, the first of five chapters that explore a societal and literary condition of plurality in the absence of pluralism, I ask what power literary texts could actually have in social and political conflicts and transformations. It is not about all kinds of literary text and not about all kinds of transformation. The transformation I consider is the 25 January revolution, including its long aftermath, because it was the focal event around which almost all discussions and expectations on transformation during the first year of our fieldwork circled. I look specifically at poetry, because in the immediate event of the uprising it was the most prominent literary genre, because the work of one poet in particular stood out in discussions we had around the question, and because an important discussion that I will reproduce at length later in this chapter took place among poets and focused on poetry.

When I initiated the research for this book in autumn 2010, I expected it to be a rather unpolitical project about individual engagements with literary imagination. A few months later, that changed quickly and suddenly with the 25 January revolution. When I returned to Alexandria in March 2011, everything was political. Change was in the air, and literature seemed to be part of it.

On 11 March 2011, we were invited by Zumurrod (see Chapter 1) to meet her circle of writers and literary enthusiasts. They had originally met through the online forum Rewayat (see Chapter 2), and had started to meet occasionally at a private bookshop owned by one of the members of the circle. We wanted to ask them about the motivations, grounds, and experience of writing, but instead, they were busy asking themselves how writing can change the world, and what one could write about now.

They argued that social critique was a key theme in texts they had written and read in the past years, and this gave them the feeling that what they do is

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extremely relevant – and yet they did not know what to do now. Amr Ezz Eldeen, who had written three collections of social satire, said that he had been critiquing the system in its everyday implications, but now he wanted to find ways to build something new. Others echoed this feeling, and many said they did not know what to write.

The first half of March 2011 marked the end of the original revolutionary coalition and the initial revolutionary euphoria. Less than a week after our meeting, a referendum on constitutional amendments pushed by the temporary military leadership and supported by Islamist parties resulted in the collapse of the revolutionary coalition, and was followed by increasingly antagonistic and polarising struggles. But on that day, the mood was still optimistic and unity prevailed over divisions. The writers and readers gathered in the bookshop saw change happening, and argued that any writer wants to change the world even if only to a limited extent. Echoing the mood of the day, which was summarised in the widespread slogan 'begin with yourself', they also agreed that a writer first of all changes her- or himself. The question that remained open was how. Their own uncertainty at that moment shows how open the situation appeared then, and also how busy they were with more immediate and urgent action.

Numerous writers have told us that they practically stopped working in 2011, their energies taken by more immediate and activist pursuits. Much of what was written was bound to the moment, and widely considered to be of little literary value. It should be no surprise that the most successful (more or less literary) texts that were produced in 2011 were short and blunt: slogans, poems, songs, graffiti, social media aphorisms, political satire. Only years later has a more in-depth literary engagement with the revolution begun, its tone for obvious reasons much darker and more painful than the celebratory mood that prevailed during the first months.

While the revolution was not a good time to produce in-depth complex literary texts, it did result in an almost explosive flourishing of cultural life, reading, and bookselling. This involved the intense circulation of some literary texts, especially poetry, as part of the political struggles.

If optimism and unity prevailed in our meeting in March 2011, soon afterwards a more antagonistic struggle between different movements shifted the mood. Celebratory writing about the victory of the magnificent revolution began to sound suspect in the ears of those who insisted that the wrong people were winning and that the revolution must continue. This split reached its dramatic peak at the end of November 2011 in the Mohamed Mahmoud Street uprising against military rule. It was the formative event of the so-called revolutionary current that, in explicit opposition to the pragmatic electoral policies of Isla-

mist parties at the time, turned revolution itself into its main aim (Schielke 2015; Ryzova 2019). A shared spirit of struggle and rejection was the mood.

Reading Amal Dunqul in 2011

Among those who joined that revolutionary current was the previously mentioned satirical author Amr Ezz Eldeen, who had recently moved to Cairo to work as a teacher of Arabic for non-native speakers. One evening at the end of November 2011, I ran into him on Tahrir Square in the aftermath of the street battles of Mohamed Mahmoud Street. Amr and his friends were having a tea break on one of the green spaces in the square late one evening, and they had one book with them: the collected works of the poet Amal Dunqul (1940–1983), which they were reciting and discussing. Dark, bold, and determined, the poems of Dunqul seemed to have been written just for that moment.

Yet Dunqul, a communist, militant nationalist, and bohemian who cultivated the attitude of principled opposition in his life and literary work (Elreweny 1992), had himself expressed a rather sceptical vision about the power of poetry to make a difference. In 1975, he published the poem *From the papers of Abu Nuwas (Min awraq Abi Nuwas)* in which he let the Abbasid-era poet Abu Nuwas (c. 750–814; see Kennedy 2007) speak about the asymmetry between the power of the word and the power of money and violence. In one part of the long poem, Dunqul, who was famous for his use of Arabic, Islamic, Roman, and Hellenic history and myths, relates Islam's most powerful story of martyrdom: the massacre of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson al-Husayn and his followers in an ambush by the Omayad caliph Yazid ibn Muʿawiya:

كنتُ في الكربلاءْ
قال ليَ الشيخُ : إن الحسينْ
ماتَ من أجل جرعة ماءْ
....
وتساءلتُ كيف السيوفُ استباحت بني الأكرمينْ
فأجابَ الذى بصَّرتهُ السماءْ
إنه الذهبُ المتلألئُ في كلِّ عين
....
إن تكن كلماتُ الحسينْ
وسيوفُ الحسينْ

وجلالُ الحسينْ
سَقَطَتْ دون أن تُنقذ الحق من ذهب الأمراء
أفتقدر أن تنقذ الحق ثرثرةُ الشعراء؟
والفراتُ لسانٌ من الدم لا يجدُ الشفتين!

I was in Karbala
The old man told me: al-Husayn
died for the sake of a mouthful of water
... ...
I asked how the swords could prey on the noblest family
The one whom heaven had gifted with sight answered
that it was the gold that glittered in every eye
... ...
If the words of al-Husayn
and the swords of al-Husayn
and the majesty of al-Husayn
fell without saving the truth from the gold of the princes
How could the truth be saved by the babbling of poets?
While the Euphrat is a tongue of blood that does not find the lips!
(Dunqul 2005, 334; my translation).[1]

Of course poetry cannot change the world. Poetry is about the work of metaphors and symbols, the rhythm and music of language, and the play of mind, moods, and meanings. How could it possibly make any difference in a world where the power of the strongest prevails, where guns and drones speak loudest, and where brainwashing by mass media and blackmail by secret police are the most compelling forms of the spoken and written word?

And yet Amal Dunqul was not deterred from writing poetry that was strongly committed to national and revolutionary struggle. He left behind a powerful and innovative oeuvre that glorifies uncompromising struggle and combines it with a deep pessimism. In 1962, in the early years of his career, his poem *Spartacus' Last Words* (*Kalimat Sbartakus al-akhira*) caught the tragedy of revolutionary struggle in a way that has lost nothing of its validity today. Its opening lines take up the Biblical and Qur'anic story of Satan's fall from grace, and turn it into a symbol of tragic heroism:

1 Most of Dunqul's poetry is freely available online, as are many original recitations by the author.

المجد للشيطان .. معبود الرياحْ
من قال "لا" في وجهِ من قالوا "نَعَمْ"
من عَلَّم الإنسانَ تمزيق العدمْ
من قال "لا" .. فلم يَمُتْ،
وظل رُوحاً أبدية الألَم!

Glory to Satan, god of the winds
Who said 'no' to the face of those who said 'yes'
who taught Man to tear apart nothingness
He who said 'no', thus did not die
And remained a soul eternally in pain
(Dunqul 2005: 1; English by Suneela Mubayi 2012)

In 1976, still quite some time before Sadat's famous visit to Jerusalem and the Camp David treaties, Amal Dunqul took the murder of the pre-Islamic Arabian tribal leader Kulayb in 494 CE, which resulted in the forty-years-long Basus War (see Hoyland 2001) as the foil for *Don't Reconcile* (*La tusalih*), one of the most powerful anti-peace poems ever written. This is its beginning:

لا تُصالحْ
..ولو منحوك الذهبْ
ترى حين أفقَأ عينيك،
ثم أثبت جوهرتين مكانها..
هل ترى..؟
هي أشياء لا تشترى..

Don't reconcile
... even if they granted you gold
What if I gouged out your eyes
and replaced them by jewels...
Will you see?
These things cannot be bought...
(Dunqul 2005: 347; my translation)[2]

For a long time, Dunqul's work was appreciated only in small leftist and intellectual circles. His poems, written in modernist *taf'ila*, free verse with a recognisable

2 For other translations, see, e.g., Roters (2011), Hegazy (2007).

rhythm, are not as easily adaptable to be sung and memorised as popular colloquial poetry is. Strongly oppositional in content, they were also a thorn in the side of the Egyptian authorities. They were not forbidden, but they rarely received reviews or other mentions in state-controlled media. The situation changed quite suddenly with the outbreak of the 25 January revolution, which was accompanied by a revival of politically committed leftist poetry from the 1960s and 1970s (Colla 2020). Ahmed Fouad Negm's (1929–2013) witty and rude colloquial poems and songs in particular gained enormous popularity and circulation, and a few of Amal Dunqul's verses entered the corpus of revolutionary citations. While Negm's poetry with its commitment to colloquial orality was more suitable for songs and slogans, Dunqul's poetry was more likely to find its ways to graffiti, discussion circles, and quotes on social media (Roters 2011; Nicoarea 2013).

In autumn 2010, a graffiti artist sprayed a passage from *Spartacus' Last Words* on the seafront boulevard in Alexandria in protest against the expectation that Hosni Mubarak's son Gamal would soon follow in his footsteps:

لا تحلُموا بعالم سعيد
فخلف كل قيصر يموتُ: قيصر جديد!

Do not dream of a happy world
For behind every Caesar who dies, there is a new Caesar
(Dunqul 2005, 93; my translation)

As citations from Dunqul's works circulated (see images 14 and 15), they also gained independence from their original political context. In 2011 and 2012, the line 'Don't reconcile' – originally written in anticipation of a peace treaty with Israel – became a widely cited expression of determined struggle against the direct military rule by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, and was sprayed on many walls as a call to not give in and to make no compromises. 'We are those who said no' became the title of a social media group established in 2011 in reference to the constitutional referendum of March 2011.[3] The opening lines of *Spartacus' Last Words* were sometimes cited (although often without mentioning Satan) by proponents of a no vote in the constitutional referendum in December 2012. In short, Amal Dunqul became a key poetic voice of principled rejection in 2011 and its aftermath.

3 *Ihna illi qulna la'*, https://www.facebook.com/No4everythingisWrong.

Image 14: Graffiti in downtown Cairo featuring Rami al-Sharqawi, who was killed by security forces during demonstrations at the Council of Ministers on 17 December 2011, with a passage from *Spartacus' Last Words*: 'I hang from the morning's gallows / My forehead lowered by death / Because alive, I did not lower it!' (translation by Suneela Mubayi 2012). Photo by Shady Basiony Marei, April 2012. Reproduced with permission.

Image 15: Graffiti outside Alexandria University, photographed in October 2012, showing a portrait of Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi and the words 'Don't reconcile' (below the portrait in the middle) and 'Down with military rule' (on the left). It is signed (on the right) by 'the We Must campaign' (Hamlat Lazem), a small and short-lived leftist/liberal campaign.

Of course poetry does not change the world, and yet the sudden popularity and timeliness of Amal Dunqul's work in 2011 show that the question about poetry and change needs to be asked – the more so since many Egyptian poets and writers have been asking the same question. They have some interesting answers to offer.

The question must be posed in a different way

Poetry is the most popular genre of literature in the Arabic speaking world. People who may never have read a novel in their life nevertheless often memorise some lines of poetry, and may have composed some themselves. While the market and readership of books of fiction and poetry are small, popular genres of Arabic poetry enjoy wider circulation because they remain strongly grounded in the spoken word – and therefore are also often circulated through audiovisual media (see, e.g., Miller 2007; Colla 2020). During the time of our fieldwork, streaming platforms YouTube and Soundcloud, rather than books, were the main channels of distribution for mass-audience colloquial poetry. This is reflected in the way most current Arabic poetry continues to rely on rhyme and meter. More experimental styles of free-verse poetry exist and are produced and consumed in more dedicated literary circles, but poetry as a popular art remains strongly committed to a recognisable rhythm and language with a musical quality. Obviously, poetry has a strong link with music: pre-Islamic poetry and song were inseparable (Adonis 1990). Today, the borders between poetry and song are hazy, and some of the poets we met in Alexandria had also been successful as songwriters. But there is, of course, a material difference between the written and the spoken word, and some poems are better for singing, while others are better suited for reading and graffiti.

Poetry in the Arabic language has a long and magnificent history (Khouri 1971; Badawi 1975; Jayyusi 1977; Adonis 1990; Kennedy 2007). The oldest known Arabic poetry was in circulation long before the rise of Islam and was collected in written form in the first centuries of Islam. This 'poetry of the age of ignorance' (*al-shiʿr al-jahili*; Al-Jundi 1991) remains the ultimate standard of Arabic poetic expression today, and an Arabic literary education invariably begins with those first poets, then proceeding through the establishment of meters and genres, theories of rhetoric and poetics, the works of classical poets across centuries – and finally perhaps contemporary poetry. The poetry that is written or spoken in a place such as Egypt today, however, is different from that heritage. Contemporary poems are often short, and they seldom use the double verse of classical Arabic

poetry. They are also often strongly subjective, moved by a romantic theory of the author expressing her or his authentic self (see Chapters 1 and 8) – in contrast to classical Arabic poetry in which eloquence of expression was crucial while originality of meaning was not. An ever-larger part of contemporary poetry is in colloquial Egyptian Arabic, which differs from Classical Arabic in morphology and syntax, and also in rhetorical registers. As a result, there has emerged a divide between Classical Arabic as the language for more highbrow, more serious, and either decidedly conservative or decidedly avant-garde poetry (more about those in Chapters 7 and 8), and Egyptian Arabic as the language of more popular, more humorous, and more down-to-earth poetry. There are interesting exceptions to this distinction, an example being free verse in Egyptian Arabic, which was launched by a group of young writers in the 1990s and is associated with an avant-gardist literary aesthetic.

In any case, poetry has a strong presence in life, and many people quote it to express their feelings, to argue a point, or to make sense of a situation. On occasion, poetry has become intertwined with the language of political conflict and dissent.

In the winter of 2010–2011 and during the following spring and summer, a series of revolutionary uprisings shook the Arab world. They marked the beginning of a stormy season of political confrontations, chaotic shifts of mood and coalitions, and general societal turmoil. The early enthusiastic days were a poetic moment in two senses. First, poetic verses turned into chants and slogans were an important way to mobilise the uprisings and to express their demands (Colla 2012). Second, there was a poetic quality to the moment of uprising itself, which I tried to describe in an earlier work:

> A revolution is in itself a poetic event insofar as it is about taking the ordinary things, otherwise evident and transparent like the words of prose, and playing with them, wondering about them, not taking them for granted, putting them together in a new configuration. [...] If in ordinary days the work of fantasy precedes action by opening the space to think of alternatives, in the time of a revolution, action runs ahead of imagination and forms it. This was the original revolutionary moment: the birth of a sense that something to date unimaginable is in the process of being realised. (Schielke 2015: 180)

It all turned unimaginably more complicated, frustrating, and violent in the course of the following years. Meanwhile, the catastrophic failure of almost all those revolutions (with the potential exception of Tunisia) is now evident. The fantastic quality of those days seems, in hindsight, to belong to the field of fantasy. Or – a more disturbing thought – the fantastic quality of those days may in some way have contributed to the bloody mess that followed.

Writing about the poetry that was recited and produced during the first days of the Egyptian revolution, Lewis Sanders IV and Mark Visonà (2012) in rather celebratory tone describe poetry as 'the soul of Tahrir' and grant it the power to give shape and name to what was emerging in that moment. They also point out that the nation and the body of 'the people' (*al-shaʿb*) were at the heart of those poems that reflected and gave direction to a vision of the uprising in terms of national liberation and unity. It was an ambiguous direction though, and the openness of the claim to speak in the name of 'the people' made it available for revolutionary and counter-revolutionary slogans alike (Colla 2012). This nationalist grounding of the uprising – and its ambiguity – at first went unnoticed by many academics and media observers, who were paying perhaps too much attention to the Islamists, who at the time appeared to be the uprising's main winners. But religious politics, rather than uniting Egyptians, turned out to be so divisive that it provided the occasion for a counter-revolution in 2013 that was emphatically and explicitly framed by its supporters in nationalist terms as 'the people' against 'the terrorists'. The spirit of heightened nationalism and patriotic unity that was shaped in Tahrir in 2011 became, in 2013, the ground of faith for a new military regime that entered a violent confrontation to eradicate its Islamist contenders.

Many of the prominent literati of the capital emphatically sided with this nationalist turn, and in different ways supported the new military leadership and the brutal suppression of its opponents in the name of a 'war against terror'. Novelists such as Alaa El-Aswany and Sonallah Ibrahim and poets such as Abdel Rahman el-Abnudi and Ahmed Fouad Negm, who in 2011 had spoken out loud for the revolution, spoke out after summer 2013 for what they believed was a revolutionary cleansing of Egypt from anti-patriotic terrorist elements (CNN Arabic 2013; Lindsey 2013; Negm 2013; el-Abnudi 2014; Azimi 2014). On the other side of the struggle, less prominent poets sympathetic with the cause of the Muslim Brotherhood produced texts that gave words to their struggle, and sometimes also expressed their frustration about so many people turning into what they saw as 'slaves of the military boot'. Yet others took an outsider position, supporting neither military rule nor the Muslim Brotherhood, frustrated and marginalised in face of a destructive circle of confrontation and violence. Many poets who were associated with this third stance – notably the popular colloquial poet Mustafa Ibrahim (2013), whose fame was to a major degree linked with his participation in demonstrations and his poetry that spoke from within the crowd of protesters – fell into a lengthy period of silence or stopped addressing political topics, leaving

the stage of critical commentary to comedians such as Bassem Youssef and satirical writers such as Belal Fadl, who in turn were soon forced into exile.[4]

So when we ask whether poetry can change the world, it is a question that concerns an ambiguous change. There is no escape to the arrogant confidence of Jean-Paul Sartre (1949: 63–64) who in his call for engaged literature claimed that of course good literature and good cause were united. The question needs to be asked in a different way. What kind of relationship could the poetic word have with this world we live in?

Before 2011, a division between different ideals of authorship had gradually emerged. The twentieth-century modernist figure of the 'conscience of the nation' who was at once independent and committed to societal improvement and a tradition of *adab* (meaning both the cultivation of fine manners as well as literature in general, see Chapter 2; Jacquemond 2008: 10) faced increasing competition from a figure who was at once more ordinary, and more explicitly an outsider: a critical observer and explorer who stood in a tradition of literary imagination as a site of exploration and experimentation (Kennedy 2007). This split (which we discuss in more detail in Chapters 2 and 3) has a longer history (Pepe 2019b) and its spread has been far from even across milieus. And yet in 2011, it was for a moment thoroughly destabilised.

In this moment, interesting conversations took place in circles that could be described as the avant-garde wing of a conservative modernist milieu. Among people we met in these circles, questions about autonomous text and literary commitment, and roles and ethics of authorship appeared less as markers of positionality in the literary field and more as open questions for debate. In encounters at cafés in the East of the City, far from the internationally connected scenes and independent institutions of the downtown, we conversed with men (and one woman) who before 2011 had already been aesthetically and politically in an in-between position: between public institutions and politically critical stances, between openness to literary exploration and commitment to traditions, and between political leanings ranging from Islamist to leftist. They often brought together both ends of these tensions in idiosyncratic combinations. Their perspective was grounded in a wider section of the society that played a key role in the revolutionary process: a vast social class of urban inhabitants who are exclu-

4 Pioneer of a style of satirical writing that became popular for a short time before 2011, Belal Fadl (e.g. 2005) was an important third-current voice from summer 2013 until January 2014 through his column in the daily newspaper *Shorouk*, although his influence was more limited than that of the TV comedian Bassem Youssef (see Fadl 2014; *Mada Masr* 2014). For an overview of Belal Fadl's columns in Arabic, see http://www.shorouknews.com/columns/BilalFadl.

ded from the status and habitus of the bourgeois classes (often euphemistically called 'middle classes'), but who by the means of their education and their work as civil servants or salaried workers nevertheless manage to aspire, work, and live above the poverty line.

In a situation where questions about didactic purpose and poetic licence appeared more open ended than otherwise, many of the writers we met in eastern Alexandria in those days found themselves compelled to reflect on the relationship that literary writing might have with conflicts and transformations, be they political, social, spiritual, or intimate. One such discussion took place among a group of writers gathered in a café in the eastern outskirts of Alexandria; and it was Amal Dunqul in particular whose work they frequently mentioned.

A discussion with poets, where an answer begins to take shape

In October 2011, we met for a second time with a circle of friends around the poet Kamal Ali Mahdy in the east of Alexandria. All of them were male schoolteachers in their late thirties or forties. (The first of our meetings with them is featured in Chapter 1.) In those days, they used to gather in the small garden of a café on the outskirts of the low-income neighbourhood of Abu Kharouf to discuss politics, poetry, and life. Most of them were active writers, and some of them could claim a name in the literary circles of the city. Literature was for them not a profession but a passion, which they pursued as a sort of parallel life next to their ordinary lives as schoolteachers and fathers.

Our second meeting brought together the writers Kamal Ali Mahdy, Muhammad Mahmoud Mousa, Ashraf Dossouki Ali, and Hamdy Mosa,[5] and additionally N., who described himself as a passionate reader but not a writer, and Mukhtar and myself. This was a time when the future course of the Egyptian revolution was still unclear, when continued optimism was becoming mixed with increasing frustration and pessimism, and when many of the political divisions that would later pit people against each other had not yet taken full shape. All the men in the circle saw themselves as supporters of the revolution, but in the following years they have taken different paths in political matters.

The original topic of the discussion was poets' search for fame and immortality (continuing our discussion at the previous meeting that is featured in Chapter

5 For some of their published works, see Ali (2007, 2008, 2015); Mahdy (2005, 2007, 2014); Mosa (2012a, 2012b).

1), but the topic shifted when the effect of two poets on the Egyptian revolution was mentioned. One was Amal Dunqul, the other the Tunisian Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi (1909–1934) whose poem, *The Will to Live* (*Iradat al-hayah*), originally written in the context of an emerging Tunisian national movement, had become something of a refrain of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt.
In a meeting a week earlier, the poet Kamal Ali Mahdy had mentioned that Amal Dunqul had 'shaken up' society with his poetry and with provocative verses such as 'Glory to Satan' and 'Don't Reconcile'. Now, Kamal took up Amal Dunqul's poetry again to point out that good poetry can gain new life and relevance decades after it was written. This resulted in a discussion about poetry's capacity to move people and to change the world.

It was a long discussion, and I quote it almost in its entirety. Anthropologists often translate their ethnographic knowledge into the academic jargon that is in fashion and explain it with theories that are circulated by their academic peers. And yet we usually owe the best of our ideas not to the theories we read elsewhere, but to encounters in the field with people who have good theories of their own about their own situation. That evening in the café was one such encounter of inspiring conversation and generous sharing of ideas, and it provided two interesting theories.

> Kamal: The lasting genius of Amal Dunqul is that he shook up society and made a change in it. That is the genius that gave his work permanence. It is the genius of something nobody else had done, shaking up Egyptian society. ...
>
> Muhammad: I believe that poetry is like different seeds. Every seed sprouts and grows, flourishes and thrives in a specific soil. So when a poem finds specific conditions that suit it, it flourishes. When did the poetry of Amal Dunqul become famous? In the 25 January revolution, because he was a revolutionary. And a strong romantic poem can become famous if the society comes to a rest and the material conditions of life improve; then the poems in circulation will be romantic poems. Why is Amal Dunqul famous now? Why not five or six years ago? Why do we talk about him now? Because of the 25 January revolution.
>
> N.: When Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi said:
>
> إذا الشعبُ يوماً أراد الحياةْ فلا بد أن يستجيب القدرْ
>
> If one day the people will to live Then Fate must an answer give[6]

6 Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi, *Iradat al-hayah* (The will to live), English translation by Sanders and Visonà 2012: 229. This poem, which is cited in the Tunisian national anthem, is the source of the slogan الشعب يريد إسقاط النظام 'The people want the toppling of the regime', which follows the same metre as the poem and was originally coined in Tunisia in December 2010. It has been repeated

in the period of the French occupation [of Tunisia], that verse fitted very well. Then a period followed when it didn't fit. In the current period it fits very well again. So there does not need to be permanence, it depends on its period. Look and you see: the verse changes the world. Why? In this atmosphere, people are affected by it. They want change. They find this verse and are affected by it.

Muhammad: If the necessary conditions are there and the society rises up in revolution, then you will find the poetry of Amal Dunqul revived.

Samuli: Do you mean that the revolution is an occasion to read Amal Dunqul, but that Amal Dunqul did not cause the revolution?

Muhammad: No, he is not a cause of the revolution. But his poems were written in a revolutionary state of mind. So every time the people rise up in revolt, they will find a poem by Amal Dunqul that suits them. Otherwise, where was Amal Dunqul for the past thirty years when Hosni Mubarak ruled and there was no revolution? Nobody mentioned Amal Dunqul then.

Kamal: I mean that Amal Dunqul as a contemporary of the defeat of 1967 said something that shook up society.[7] He refused the reality. I don't mean that he was only protesting against the defeat of 1967 ... If he had lived in the days of the revolution [of the Free Officers] in 1952, he might have been against the revolution itself. And if he had lived before 1952 [during the monarchy] he might have been a revolutionary against the king, and so on. ... His genius is in the way he takes up rejection, and convinces us to join him in rejection, to go along with him in that direction.

Hamdy: I support what Kamal said, but I want to take it to another direction. The poet is an anarchist and a buffoon**.** He strives to establish himself and his character through difference and opposition. Amal did that. He demolished the traditional structure of poems and strove for a different vision altogether, new idea and new technique. Through difference and opposition he wants to say: 'I'm ingeniously different from the others.' With his genius he reached a different level and delighted the reader with his stance of difference. ... But poetry does not change the reality of society. I even say that the Qurʾan itself does not make a change. The Sublime and Exalted God is the one who makes a change. Let me tell you something. When I sit in a café and they play recitation of the Qurʾan on the loudspeakers, I'm well aware of the meaning of the verses, and I'm aware of commanding the right and forbidding the wrong – yet despite knowing all that I continue doing whatever I'm doing. Therefore the noble Qurʾan did not change me because the will to change by the Sublime and Exalted God was not there. And that is the highest book of all.

N.: That you didn't change is not the Qurʾan's fault. But it does change others.

---

in all uprisings in the Arab world since 2011. For a history of the poem's different readings and uses, see Colla (2012).

7 In 1967, the Arab armies of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan were defeated by Israel in a humiliating manner in the Six-Day War. This event became central to much of Amal Dunqul's literary work.

Hamdy: It changes others because it is accordance with the will of God.

N.: But everything is in accordance with the will of God.[8] If a car hit me now, would it not be in accordance with His will?

Hamdy: Look, maybe Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi didn't originally speak his verse as a political protest as we imagine. Maybe he was addressing a particular issue of social injustice. But when a revolution occurs, there is what rhetoric calls speech in accordance with the circumstance. In the circumstances of a specific time, that verse is in accordance with a specific mental state. Therefore it gained a dimension that wasn't imagined by Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi.

N.: A question if I may. Why did the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, include one like Hassan ibn Thabit in the work of *daʿwa*?[9] Hassan was just a poet, what did he change in the Islamic society so that the Prophet included him?

At this point, N. and Hamdy entered a detailed debate about what the role of poets was for spreading Islam in the age of the Prophet. Hamdy maintained that it was merely to react to poetic attacks (*hijaʾ*) against the Prophet, while N. detailed examples in which poets had compelled polytheists to recognise the supremacy of Islam. This prompted Hamdy to clarify his argument:

I say that something changes when it is in accordance with the will of God. I did not rule out the role of poetry in shaping life. But in light of the current culture of society, it is a relative change in the relation of one to a million.

N.: Currently or generally?

Hamdy: For a very long time. I gave you an example. The most eloquent books in existence are the Qurʾan and the Bible, that is, the divinely revealed books. They are the highest in poetic expression and wisdom. But the increase in the numbers of Muslims, Christians, and Jews is only proportional to the increase in the population of the world.

Ashraf Dossouky Ali: Maybe Hamdy raised an issue that belongs to the invisible realm (*ghayb*), which is beyond my power, and it is a different topic. But to get back to the discussion about creative production (*ibdaʿ*), one of the elements of creative production is *asala* (originality, authenticity), and the other is fluency and skill. … If you are an original (*asil*) poet or writer and you master your technique and your talent, and possess a vision, then you can initiate a change, and you can do it across time and space. There is a poet whose

8 Ashraf is making implicit use here of a Sunni Muslim theology of freedom and destiny according to which humans are free to act, but they act out the predestined will of God. According to this theology, human intention, cause, and effect are real, but they can only occur in accordance with the will of God, as Hamdy agrees in the following course of the discussion.
9 For his biography and poetry, see Hassan ibn Thabit (1994).

> capacity is limited to making a change in the framework of his tribe, or his nation in the modern era; and there is another poet who can claim to be universal, or global, and who can change others in a radical way. A radical change does not mean that it involves everybody. We say that the Egyptian people all went out in the 25 January revolution. But that does not mean 80 million Egyptians did it. Those who had a concern for the problem of change did. … If you are an original poet or writer, you are capable of addressing the supreme shared grounds of humanity. When I write a poem and it reaches a greater number of people, when it reaches the Egyptian, the European, the American, this means that I have been able to touch a shared human element that we all have, because we all descend from Adam. … As for a poet who does not initiate a change, he is one who only expresses his own self, his internal problems. But when he speaks about a problem that touches others, this means he is capable of reaching the shared ground of humanity.[10]
>
> N.: That's the question I want to ask. Why are poets right now unable to change anything? Is it the poetry's fault? Or is it the poets' fault?
>
> Muhammad: It's society's fault, a society that does not enable people to read. And politics has participated in alienating society from reading. The poet has ended up writing for himself.
>
> N.: Our society is useless. How else could someone like Hisham Al-Gakh have made it to fame?[11]
>
> Mukhtar: Hisham Al-Gakh is merely a vocal phenomenon, nothing more.
>
> N.: But he made it.

I have given this discussion so much space because the four poets provide key theoretical answers to the question that frames this chapter. The discussion boils down essentially to two theoretical answers. According to one theory, which is argued for in different nuances by Muhammad Mousa and Hamdy Mosa, we make recourse to words and ideas that convey the situation in which we are. If there is a revolution, then people revive revolutionary poetry to express their situation, but poetry itself has no power to initiate a revolution. Hamdy goes so far as to deny

10 With this argument, Ashraf follows the mainstream romantic theory of authorship that foregrounds the creativity and subjectivity of the author in combination with a skill based on traditions and canons, and the capacity to reach an audience. For more on varieties of romantic authorship, see Chapters 1 and 8.

11 Some years before 2011, Hisham Al-Gakh became very famous with a poet persona that displayed Upper Egyptian rootedness, and very straightforward colloquial poetry that addresses the worries and frustrations of ordinary Egyptians. Poets who moved in dedicated literary circles during our fieldwork commonly loved to hate Hisham al-Gakh and his populist style. For a translation of one of his poems, see Sanders and Visonà (2012: 27–28).

that divine revelations have the power to change people's minds. Such power, he argues, is God's alone and therefore beyond any worldly causality. Later the same evening, he added that poetry can affect individuals through the power of aesthetic pleasure, but that whatever change this may involve remains entirely on the individual level.

According to the other theory, which is argued more cautiously by Kamal Ali Mahdy and more strongly by N. and Ashraf Dossouki Ali, poetry does have the power to provide people with ways to feel and act. According to Kamal, Amal Dunqul's poetry unsettled values that have been taken for granted and also helped to establish the attitude of rejection as an affect and a moral virtue – something that was instrumental for the revolutionary process (see Schielke 2015: 191–215). N. and Ashraf go further and argue that poems can have the power to generate emotions and ideas in its audiences, to make the world appear in a different shape, and thus to provide inspiration for different actions on the world – a view that is also echoed in many scholarly takes on aesthetics and politics (e.g. Rancière 2004; Badiou 2005; Van Nieuwkerk et al. 2016).

While the poets in the gathering disagreed about the theoretical problem of the power and powerlessness of words, they unanimously agreed that in practice, poetry has less power than it should because people do not read and because only second-rate crap (such as the poetry of Hisham Al-Gakh) gains wide popular appeal. This is a characteristic predicament of all artistic and creative production: the more nuanced and sophisticated the creative production, the more it becomes a distinctive property of a dedicated and cultivated few and the less likely that it will reach wider audiences. Especially in Egypt, there is a stunning gap between the social and moral authority writers claim (and sometimes gain) and the actual readership of literary works (Jacquemond 2008: 6). Poetry that can shake up that which is taken for granted can only do so among those whom it reaches in the first place and who are interested in such play of mind. There are exceptions, however – rare occurrences such as the 25 January revolution when the avant-garde work of Amal Dunqul suddenly gained a wider audience. But even then, it was one-liners that reached public consciousness, not full-length poems.

Consequences

Inspired by this discussion, during the following days Mukhtar developed a theory to unite these two theories, to show how literary fantasy might indeed make a difference and why that power was always limited. The outcome was what he describes as a dialectical triangle of fantasy, dreams, and choices. In

this theory, fantasy (*khayal*, here in the sense of an imagination that is conscious about the non-reality of the imagined) is a space of freedom where one can imagine and explore ideas without having to consider their practical possibility or feasibility. One is not, however, free to have unlimited fantasies. This is therefore not a liberal theory in which people just need to dare to imagine something in order to pursue it. On the contrary, the scope of the imaginary is a scarce resource that is available to different people in different degrees. Fantasy, Mukhtar argues, is in turn linked with dreams (*ahlam*, here in the sense of imaginations that are linked with the expectation that they can and need to be realised). What at the level of fantasy was a play of mind, can be an ambition and a plan as a dream. Such dreams can be the ground of choices that people make and ambitions they pursue, that is, concrete actions that have a material effect and possibly change reality in one way or another. And that reality, in turn, is the ground that determines the scope of dreams and fantasies. But it is an unpredictable process, Mukhtar points out: the revolution was in part marked by the way some people were able to turn impossible fantasies into concrete actions, but these actions are not conclusive. They initiate a new circle of choices, dreams, and fantasy, and as long as the circle is not complete, we lack the scope of imagination to anticipate its consequences.

In light of this theory, it becomes clear that the question whether poetry can change the world was posed in a misleading way for two reasons. First, poetry is not separate from the world to start with, and therefore cannot have external causality. Instead, it is part of the world as it changes, with fantasies becoming the ground of dreams and actions, and actions and experiences feeding and limiting the scope of the imaginable. Fantasy, too, is a scarce resource. Second, the question has been posed in too megalomanic a fashion, as if only great and dramatic change would count. Such megalomania was compelling in Egypt in 2011. Talk about 'change' (*taghyir*) was in the air, and it did not mean just any change. It meant sweeping, fundamental, holistic transformation of humanity, politics, and society. This grand vision of change neglects processes where some things change but only for a handful of people; and it also neglects the possibility of change being destructive.

More often than not, the productive relationship of fantasies, dreams, and actions is limited to intimate, personal change and makes little or no difference to wider relations of power. As Amal Dunqul reminds us in *From the Papers of Abu Nuwas*, the gold of princes remains far more powerful than the babbling of poets. This is how Mukhtar saw the situation more than two years later when he (in a written message) shared with me his bitter frustration about the course of the events:

> Poets only make a change in their imaginary world that is parallel to the real world of frustration. There is no real change happening. If anything changes it is through force, deception, and manipulation. The dreamers and poets are simply used, their sweet words are spread to beautify the picture. Change is made by those with realistic interests. The poets and dreamers spearhead the change in a dream world that has no relationship with the real world, but they are being used [by the powerful for political ends]. The Muslim Brotherhood never liked Amal Dunqul. The revolutionaries never stopped dreaming. In no country has the military ever understood poetry and dreams.

This is the gist of Mukhtar's sceptical revision of his theory in January 2014: those who actually have the power to make a difference do not care about poetry, but they do know how to exploit sweet words to beautify their crimes. The original, authentic change that is involved in poetry only reaches a few crazy dreamers and remains in a parallel world.

This is, in fact, a widespread view among poets and writers I have spoken with, many of whom have always been rather sceptical about the idea that their writing could make a difference in society. However, they do think that writing can make a difference – for the writer. As we argued in Chapter 3, those most tangibly changed by literature are the literati themselves, along with those who search out their company because they are drawn to the world they embody. And even then, the change is seldom a straightforward realisation of an intended transformation.

The poet Shaymaa Bakr (featured in Chapter 3, and loosely connected with people in the Hala group at the time of our research) was especially explicit about the ideological, literary, and institutional in-betweenness that characterised many among the poets we met in the East of the City. A declared Islamic internationalist at the time, her literary aesthetics stood in the tradition of the twentieth-century leftist modernism of Amal Dunqul and his peers. Shaymaa Bakr as a poet displayed an overall critical attitude of nonconformity ('I'm against everything' she said on one occasion), which distinguished her from those writers with Islamic leanings who strove to contribute to moral and political projects of reform or revolution (see Chapter 8). Between 2011 and 2012, Shaymaa Bakr recorded her sceptical vision of the revolutionary dream of change in her poem *I Say* (*Aqul ana*), which she described to us as a 'rebellion against rebellion'. The following is my translation of a short passage from her much longer poem:

كان لابد أن نقبض الريحَ
لابد للشاة أن ترفض السلخَ
من بعد أن ذبحت
أن يموت لنا إخوةٌ..

فالقبور التي فُتحت..
سوف تـُنْبؤنا أننا لم نمت بعدُ
ومن القتل ما ليس يقتلنا
إنما لم يكن ينبغي
أن نربي الطموحَ ليأكلنا
كان لابد أن نشعل النارَ
في كل هذا الهشيم
ثم لا نسأل الوقتَ
أن يـُرجعَ الأرض خضراءَ
من ذا يصدق أقدامه لو ترنـّحَ..
لو جرَّبت خطوة
أن تغير إيقاعها
فوق نفس الطريق العقيم..

We had to grab for the wind
The sheep had to reject being skinned
after it was slaughtered
Brothers of ours had to die ...
so that the open graves ...
can promise to us that we haven't died yet
that there is killing that does not kill us
But we should not have
raised our ambition so that it can devour us
We had to set fire
to all the dry wood
without afterward demanding from time
that it may turn the earth green again
Who would trust his feet if he staggered
if one step
tried to change its pace
on the same futile road...

I Say is an interesting vision of the dilemma of those Egyptian revolutionaries who according to Mukhtar 'never stopped dreaming', who spearheaded the idea of change, contributed to a political rupture, but failed to realise any of their aims

and ends. Shaymaa Bakr points out that the problem is not just that they were defeated. More gravely, she tells us, their vision of radical change created a struggle that is structured so that it cannot be won. We set the dry wood on fire and expect earth to turn green again. We try to change the pace of our steps, but we are still on the same road. The revolutionary dreamers who indeed were inspired by crazy fantasies and unlikely dreams, transported some of those dreams from the closed circles of the dedicated few to the streets of Egypt. They failed, and yet they left their mark on history. Their struggle was effective but not liberating.

This is why I think it would be too optimistic to think of poetry and poets, literati, artists, and other dreamers and misfits as simply powerless when they face the sturdy power of oppression. It might even be too optimistic to think of them as useful idiots who unwittingly provide the powerful with an ideological cover. There is a third, more disturbing, possible consequence.

Kamal Ali Mahdy argued that Amal Dunqul taught Egyptians to consider rejection a virtue, a value in its own right in spite of likely or certain defeat. Only few Egyptians were actually affected, and the part played by Amal Dunqul's poetry may not have been particularly great. But those few belong to a radical political minority that, in the years following 2011, fashioned rejection as a political principle with important practical consequences. Their stance of a principled 'no' came with a radical vision of change as a value in itself, and implies a claim for uncompromising purity and struggle. They were by all counts far too weak to ever gain power, but they have been over and again able to stir the political situation and to disrupt the expected path of events. And more than once they have – sometimes unwittingly, sometimes quite willingly – helped more powerful forces to seize the day.

This is by no means unique to Egypt. Poetry, which includes songs and slogans derived from poems, has been strongly present in all the recent Arab uprisings. Some poetry – especially Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi's *The Will to Live* – has travelled across the Arab world and become ingrained in the language of protest and revolt (see Colla 2012). At the same time, revolt has proved to have ambiguous consequences: it may be liberating; it is very likely to be destructive. This is not a new insight, of course. Albert Camus argued in 1951 that philosophical rebellion is a fundamental human trait that over time results in real revolutions. But, he adds, the problem is that revolutions are, by definition, murderous (Camus 1991).

Amal Dunqul promised eternal torment to those who say no. But it is not only the torment of futility and defeat that Mukhtar expressed. It is the torment of consequences. Not without reason did Dunqul set *Don't Reconcile* in the historical event of a murder that unleashed a war of vendetta so deep and bitter that it continued for forty years. As the principle of rejection has entered the daily life of Egypt, it has also become part of a world where compromises are considered

treason and where confrontation appears as the only moral choice. Poetry, too, is complicit in the vicious circle of polarisation that hit Egypt after spring 2011.

Perhaps the most notable societal development in the wake of 25 January 2011 has been the intensification of processes of individualisation, fragmentation, and plurality in Egypt. In spite of heavy-handed efforts by the current regime to bring Egypt systematically under control in terms of cultural production and media, religious doctrines, and political and economic institutions alike, even now, ten years after the revolution, the enhanced fragmentation of ways and visions of life appears an accomplished reality in Egypt. The poetic and political affect of difference and rejection has been an unpredictable part of this process.

The role of literary imagination in societal and political transformations can thus be best understood as one of open-ended complicity. Any attempt to identify literature with resistance in a general manner is ultimately grounded in wishful thinking, or more precisely in a heavy-handedly selective vision that ignores all the literature and acts that do not fit into the kind of literature and resistance that one hopes to find. At the same time, literature is evidently not irrelevant. Otherwise, revolutions could do just fine without songs and slogans, and political and social movements could dispense with critical or inspirational stories.

Thinking of literature and literates as accomplices in societal and political developments of various kinds invites us to explore further specific themes and relations in which such complicity has been productive in the Alexandria of the 2010s. The exploration in the following chapters highlights two thematic complexes: urbanity (Chapters 5 and 6), and religious and spiritual commitments (Chapters 7 and 8). It begins with an outstanding and well-established theme in writings from Alexandria: the city itself.

5 Where is Alexandria?

The dream that was once planted into the consciousness of the city, will haunt it like a restless ghost, until it either takes material shape and returns to life, or this dream comes to an end and dies, or a new dream is invented.

Alaa Khaled, *Alexandrian Faces*

There are thus very likeable myths which are however not innocent.

Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*

The Chinese Housing

In March 2015, on one of my many journeys between Berlin and Alexandria, I landed at Borg El Arab airport west of Alexandria late at night. The airport is 50 km away from the city centre, but close to many thriving industrial areas, holiday villages, and up-market suburbs that have been built west of the city and on the North Coast in the past two decades. They are part of a general scheme by the Egyptian government to create new cities far from the old urban centres.

At the airport, I was picked up by my friend M., whom I have known since the days when he was still living in his native village in the northern Nile Delta. He has been living half an hour from the airport in the district of Agami on the western edge of Alexandria since 2009. Agami is known among the Egyptian bourgeoisie as a pleasant, traditional, and (formerly) exclusive beach resort (Abdel Gabbar 2013). M., however, lives 3 km away from the coast in an informally built area on a small hill right behind the Chinese Housing (al-Masakin al-Siniya), a neighbourhood of large public housing blocks. The area was built in the 1980s as company housing for public-sector companies by an Egyptian–Chinese joint venture.

For decades, the Chinese Housing was an area where poor and marginalised people lived, people who lacked the means to build a house of their own in an informal settlement. It had experienced periods of gang wars that forced the inhabitants to stay indoors for up to three days. Meanwhile, though, the neighbourhood had become calmer and the population more mixed. M. and I moved through the area with no sense of risk even late at night.

Two years earlier, an Egyptian employee at a foreign research institute in Alexandria had been shocked to hear that I frequented the Chinese Housing. She said that she was surprised I was still alive. For her it was a no-go area, definitely

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not part of her city. If anything, it was an anti-city neighbourhood that marked the boundaries of and threatened a bourgeois Alexandria, a cosmopolitan seaside city.

Image 16: The Chinese Housing, April 2016.

The next evening, I continued my journey on a minibus to the opposite end of the city, the neighbourhood of El Mandara in the east. El Mandara is where I lived during my stays in Alexandria as Mukhtar's guest until 2017. To avoid the congested roads along the seafront, the minibus took a detour inland via the International Road that crosses Lake Maryutiya on a landfill bridge, where the nauseating smell of pollution occasionally compels passengers to hold their noses. The road passed poor informal areas in inland Agami, the upmarket suburb of King Marriot, vast chemical and cement factory complexes, and the upmarket City Center shopping mall (not near the historical centre of the city). Finally, the minibus entered the city again along 45 Street, in what is known as the East of the City (Sharq al-madina). Approaching the end of the line, the minibus turned into smaller streets, passed the Faculty of Islamic Studies of the al-Azhar University, and finally entered busy Mallaha Street surrounded by shops, market stands, and congested by private cars, taxis, minibuses, and toktoks.

Eastern Alexandria is symbolically divided classwise by the Abu Qir suburban train line, the seaside being generally more well off and the inland being mostly poorer. I got out at a spot where this mythological division is a tangible

reality: at a minibus stop next to the railway line. On the other, wealthier side of the railway were the Muntazah Gardens (formerly the royal summer residence, now a public park), the Fathallah shopping mall, the Sheraton, and the beach. On the side I was on, the informal area of inland El Mandara began: construction has been ongoing since the 1990s, with fifteen-storey houses replacing older five-storey ones.

In Mukhtar's words, this is 'the ugly face of Alexandria'. It would indeed be difficult to find the Chinese Housing, the International Road, or inland El Mandara beautiful in any conventional sense. It is not simply the poor face of the city, however. The suburban crescent that surrounds the old coastal core of Alexandria is made up of poor, middle-income, and upmarket neighbourhoods alike. They provide homes and work for millions, and yet none of these would count as the real Alexandria in the media, literary, and scholarly accounts of the city – and many of the inhabitants of the suburban crescent would agree. When I asked M. what the real Alexandria is for him, he did not name the Chinese Housing where he lives, but rather the popular quarter of Bahary in the ancient centre of the city, his favourite site for outings with his family. Where, then, is Alexandria?

Alexandria has a reputation for being cosmopolitan – or having once been so, in a past *belle époque* when Europeans dominated the bourgeois districts of the city. That era is gone, but the reputation and romance of Alexandria live on. Western readers are likely to know Alexandria from the works of Greek, British, and other European writers who lived in the city, or more specifically in the European-dominated central districts of the city that still carry the material memory of that era. Readers of those works will remain largely ignorant, however, of the vast majority of the city's inhabitants, Arabic-speaking Egyptians, and of the neighbourhoods they inhabited. Arabic literature on Alexandria is only gradually finding its way into the canon of Alexandrian cosmopolitanism (see Hazem 2006; Kararah 2006; Starr 2009; Halim 2013). Historians and literary scholars have provided textured accounts that question the Eurocentrism of the myth of cosmopolitan Alexandria (Fahmy 2006; Zubaida 2011: 131–155; Halim 2013; Chiti 2016; Hanley 2017). And yet an ambiguous nostalgia for a bygone cosmopolitan era is also shared by many Arabic-speaking inhabitants of Alexandria today, in a time when the city has left that era behind and something rather different is emerging in a sweeping movement of urban erasure and expansion.

In this chapter, I trace a selection of contemporary afterlives of the myth of Alexandria as something different and better than the city that actually exists. The result is part ethnography of one specific literary milieu and part urban ethnography, where writers from that milieu provide the main theoretical inspiration. Which old and new myths of the city, I ask in conversation with them, are being crafted, questioned, or revised in such a moment, and what might they tell

us about the wider imagined and material locations of the city? How do specific neighbourhoods figure in those myths? What political and moral claims about the city are involved in them?

Questions about the city arose repeatedly and persistently during our fieldwork with writers in Alexandria. The city is a major theme for many of them, indeed one of the most important themes that we encountered. Some contemporary literary accounts of the city are fairly well known nationally and internationally, such as Ibrahim Abdel Meguid's (1999, 2005, 2013) *Alexandria Trilogy* and Alaa Khaled's (2012) literary work as well as his ongoing editorship of the journal *Amkenah* since 1990. There are many others who are less prominent but not less interesting. In the following, I engage with a handful of writers of the latter kind. All of them were at the time of the research more or less involved in the small, internationally connected and funded independent or avant-garde scene in the city, a scene that is open to the world but limited in its societal reach (see Chapter 2).

When such cosmopolitan circles become the breeding ground for an intellectual critique of nostalgia for the cosmopolitan, something important is going on. Equally important is the historical moment in which such a critique emerged: the aftermath of the 25 January revolution, which despite its political defeat transformed both the way many young writers and intellectuals see the world and city they live in, and the material shape of the city itself. It has since 2011 been subjected to rapid erasure and reconstruction in the course of a construction boom.

In this chapter, I work with concepts and ideas that I have encountered in my fieldwork, and consider them as theories that may provide valid answers to the inquiry. I nevertheless call those theories myths because that is the form in which they circulate: as narrative, dramatic structures that may be told in different words (Lévi-Strauss 1955), and that naturalise moral and political claims and relations of power (Barthes 1970).

In his literary exploration of Alexandria, Alaa Khaled evokes the dreaminess of an Alexandria haunted by its myths – but also points out that those myths may change along with the city:

> The dream that was once planted into the consciousness of the city will haunt it like a restless ghost, until it either takes material shape and returns to life, or this dream comes to an end and dies, or a new dream is invented. (Khaled 2012: 20)

Myths thus understood are compelling narrative structures that are to be judged by their power to inspire one to think and act along the lines they suggest. They have historical, political, and social lives worthy of attention (Chiti 2016), which means they are never separate from struggles and relations of power, as pointed

out by Roland Barthes (1970: 72): 'There are thus very likeable dreams which are however not innocent.' Following on from Khaled's, Chiti's, and Barthes' insights about the historicity and complicity of myths, I add that, when considered as social theories, some myths may also be better suited to providing guidance in a given reality than others.

Despite being highly mythologised, contemporary Alexandria is a rather ordinary city (El Chazli 2018), and its recent development is not remarkably different from so many other cities in the Global South that, in a short time, have transformed into vast conglomerates that have little in common with the cities they once may have been (AlSayyad and Roy 2005; Robinson 2006; Simone and Pieterse 2017). The nostalgia for a past colonial-cosmopolitan era is also a common feature of cities in the Global South (Bissell 2005; Newcomb 2017).

As Setrag Manoukian (2012) shows in his work on the Iranian city of Shiraz, talking about a city always involves highlighting some of its districts and neighbourhoods, and silencing others. Myths that purport to reveal a city's true location and values need to account for those locations and values that don't fit into the story: neighbourhoods and ways of living that are marked as not legitimately part of the mythologised city. I call them the *anti-city*. When I speak about 'the city' in the following, it is thus within the tension between the urban conglomerate that is too large for a textured account, my specific knowledge of some parts of it, and various myths that tell us what and where that conglomerate really is and ought to be – as well as what it is not and ought not to be.

Cyprus

For M., the real Alexandria is the old popular neighbourhood of Bahary, located at the tip of the peninsula where the historic centre of Alexandria lies. He knows Bahary inside out because many of the wholesale and retail shops in his trade are located in the narrow alleys of the neighbourhood. With its old bourgeois houses on the seaside facing the picturesque Eastern Harbour crowded by small boats, it is also a place where he enjoys taking a stroll with his family once or twice a year. In contrast, the Egyptian-Australian political scientist Amro Ali who has written much about the city in recent years (Ali 2010–2019), described in conversation with me the early twentieth-century bourgeois neighbourhoods of Camp Caesar, Ibrahimiya, Cleopatra, and Sidi Gaber a few kilometres further east as being for him the heart of Alexandria. Between these two areas lie the districts of Raml Station and al-Manshiya, which form the once European-dominated historical downtown (*wust al-balad*) of the city. This is today characterised by popular

cafés, lively shopping streets, and shoppers and flâneurs strolling in squares and streets that still bear the visible mark of bygone eras (Khaled 2012). For many writers and others who gather in the cafés located here, this is Alexandria proper. Holiday visitors from Cairo and the Nile Delta, in turn, spread along the more than 10 km long Corniche Road that follows the seashore – or, if they can afford them, the beaches of Agami and Mamoura further to the west and east, respectively. For them, that is Alexandria.

Whenever I ask people where the 'real Alexandria' is located for them, I typically get seaside replies. They differ in terms of class (as between M. and Amro Ali) and in terms of interests (between literati and summer guests), but there is wide agreement about the shore of the Mediterranean being Alexandria's proper location. And yet over the past hundred years, the city's inland links have proved more enduring.

Founded by Alexander the Great in 331 BCE, Alexandria today bears few visible traces of its long history. Contemporary Alexandria is a child of the trade expansion and industrial revolution of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Its rapidly growing population was mainly made up of migrants from upper Egypt, Nubia, and the nearby countryside, along with large numbers of European and Ottoman subjects who moved there. Alexandria of the colonial era was also a city of many inequalities marked by lines of nationality and class (Hanley 2017), and it could only last as long as the privileged position of foreign nationals lasted. Following the 1956 Suez Crisis, most Egyptian Jews as well as French and British citizens were forced to leave. The already dwindling Greek and Italian communities were allowed to stay, but the majority of their members gradually emigrated following the socialist nationalisation policies of the 1960s (Kazamias 2009). Alexandria became a city dominated by Arabic-speaking Egyptians of Muslim or Christian faith. They or their ancestors were once newcomers to the city, too, having arrived as rural to urban migrants in the city and having gone on to reproduce the plurality of Egypt within it.

The novelist Abdelfattah Morsi (see Chapter 3) argued in a conversation in 2014 that Alexandria is a city of recent arrivals: 'Those who arrived on the morning train claim to be the original Alexandrians towards those who arrived on the afternoon train.' A city 'left by the foreigners as a clean table for Egyptians to take over', Abdelfattah Morsi's Alexandria is a rootless conglomerate of individual lives without an authentic traditional society. For him, it is a city one cannot write about in the way Naguib Mahfouz wrote about Cairo.

And people keep arriving: rural to urban migrants and commuters, refugees from Syria and Libya, students from across the world studying at the Islamic al-Azhar university, Egyptian, Arab, and fewer Asian and Western tourists. But that mixture does not strike Western visitors and journalists as cosmopolitan. In

Alexandria, 'cosmopolitanism' is usually equated with urban coexistence across religious and ethnic lines, but not all coexistence counts. Alexandria's cosmopolitanism is mainly equated with Europeans and European-dominated quarters.[1] This Eurocentrism is notably reproduced in the way 'cosmopolitanism' is used in Arabic as a French/English loan word, *kuzmubulitaniyya*, although the concept would be easily translatable into Arabic (Raouf 2016).

No wonder, then, that anything that happened after the 1950s hardly counts in standard accounts of the city's assumed cosmopolitanism. Towards the end of the twentieth century, a new transformation of the city began, caused by rapid urbanisation and real estate development. Today, the most populous parts of Alexandria are no longer the old central districts, but the numerous new areas that have grown to the east, south, and west of the city. With few exceptions, the villas and small houses that once stood near the seafront to the east and west of central Alexandria have been demolished and replaced by high-rise buildings.

While the Alexandria of the seafront, with its Euro-cosmopolitan past, has been associated with holiday romance and images of a liberal Egypt open to the world, inland Alexandria has become known as a centre of Islamist activism since the 1970s. By the early 2000s, the purity-oriented Salafi movement became a main religious player in the city, competing with the Muslim Brotherhood for followers (Decschamps-Laporte 2014). The ahistorical vision of Salafism resonates well with the drive of real estate developers to demolish and build. Notably, both Salafism and real estate speculation are truly global movements for which national borders and identities are secondary. And yet, just like rural migrants and Syrian refugees, Salafis and real estate speculators also do not fit into the standard narrative of Alexandria's cosmopolitanism. The seaside cosmopolitan myth is a story of past grandeur and present decline, in which the contemporary city is not worthy of interest in its own right. Outside Egypt, it has been reproduced by concerned journalists (Traub 2014; Hadid 2016) as well as critical intellectuals – including Edward Said (2000) who, in a remarkable suspension of his otherwise critical perceptiveness, romanticised the privileged lifestyles of Alexandria's cosmopolitan upper classes.

It is not just foreign visitors who are drawn to such romantic melancholia, however. At a time when both twentieth-century secularist nationalist visions of a bright future as well as the material and cultural continuity of the twentieth-

1 While many historians tend to avoid the Eurocentric pitfall, recent historiography of Ottoman cities (e.g. Freitag and Lafi 2014) also tends to equate cosmopolitanism with the well-ordered urban coexistence of different ethnic and religious groups, and not with border-crossing lives or a sense of worldliness that would amount to 'citizenship of the world' of one sort or another.

century city were beginning to crumble, a new interest in cosmopolitan Alexandria before the 1950s emerged. Cultural circles in the city developed an increasing interest in non-Arabic heritage. Both Egyptian state institutions and international cultural organisations and funding bodies began to actively promote a usually depoliticised and sanitised vision of past glory. This vision is today also supported by social media pages that post photos of colonial, monarchy-era, and early republican Egypt, often accompanied by explicit words of praise for a beautiful past and denigration of the present (Ryzova 2014, Elsherif forthcoming).

Nostalgia is a way to critique the present by comparing it with an idealised past (Boym 2001). It can promote different interests and have different undertones of appreciation and critique. Government promotion of the cosmopolitan narrative goes hand in hand with a neglect, even rejection, of old urban centres in favour of new satellite cities in urban planning policies. For the state and its investor allies, a vague cosmopolitan nostalgia appears to be a useful sales pitch for the aggressive erasure of existing structures of urbanity. Liberal members of the urban bourgeoisie I have met often feel that a city that once was theirs has been taken from them by uncultured, backward, and fundamentalist rural migrants. For them, nostalgia for a glorified past is a claim to restore their domination. The nostalgia I have encountered among non-bourgeois Alexandrians, in contrast, has less to do with values and more to do with the loss of access to the sea and public spaces, congestion, and the disappearance of old neighbourhood structures. In any case, most of those who today marvel at the past beauty of the city only know its glorified past from media, books, and stories. This paradox is pointed out by Abdelrehim Youssef in a poem he wrote in 2003:

إسكندرية الجميلة
هربت منى للكتب
والتواريخ
والشوارع اللى ما أعرفهاش
وسابتلى إسكندرية المجرمة
اللى ما أعرفش غيرها

Beautiful Alexandria
escaped me into books
and histories
and streets I don't know
and left me with criminal Alexandria
the only one I know
(Youssef 2003; my translation)

And yet, no matter how counterfactual it may be today, the idealised association of Alexandria with beauty needs to be taken seriously as something that many inhabitants of the city strive for.

Regardless of their political and religious views, their origin and their class position, inhabitants of the city generally appreciate the sea, even if they only rarely manage to take a stroll along the seafront in their free time. On warm evenings, the Corniche becomes crowded with families, couples, groups of friends, and lone strollers. Many of them sit down and look out on the sea, towards the lights that can be seen on the horizon. I have been told that they are the lights of Cyprus.

Image 17: The seafront by Raml Station, October 2011.

Unromantic sceptics object that it is impossible to actually see Cyprus because it is more than 500 km away from Alexandria, and that the lights on the horizon belong to ships and fishing boats. I am not interested in whether it really is Cyprus they see. Instead, I am interested in the gaze itself of the night-time strollers as they look at the dim lights on the horizon. That gaze says something about the city's paradoxical location between a congested, segregated, and largely unappealing urban conglomerate stretching inland – where the vast majority of its inhabitants live and work – and the seaside as the mythological, value-laden location of the city where inhabitants and visitors can imagine and appreciate

Alexandria as something beautiful and magical, even if they only rarely manage to actually go there. The Cyprus seen by those strolling on the Corniche is an intimate part of Alexandria. Rather than firmly locating Alexandria as part of the Mediterranean world, however, the gaze toward Cyprus highlights the ambiguity of the Mediterranean Sea, having become a border that divides more than it is a means of communication that unites.

Image 18: The Mediterranean Sea during a winter storm, Miami, Alexandria, February 2012.

As a city mythologically located on the sea, Alexandria is also defined by the presence of borders right in its urban heart. The international border of the Mediterranean Sea is paralleled by the class boundaries that run between seaside and inland neighbourhoods, and between the many segregated suburbs even further inland. Those borders, in turn, establish the stranger or the Other as a key figure in the myths that can be told about the city. Explaining what and where Alexandria is typically involves some narration of the relationships of strangeness and alterity that structure the city and the specific spots where those relationships evolve – be they romanticised, as the 'cosmopolitan era' and the historical downtown that still embodies its memory often are, or scandalised, as the anti-city of the sub-urban crescent often is.

What makes literature interesting as a production site of such myths is that it often creates myths with a twist, myths that try to change the setup of the stories worth telling.

Ghurbal

This is the Alexandria into which the lawyer and poet Hamdy Zidan was born in 1972: the neighbourhood of Ghurbal, south-west of the historical downtown, one of Alexandria's old 'popular districts' (*ahyaʾ shaʿbiya*). His grandparents migrated to Alexandria from Upper Egypt in the first half of the twentieth century and settled there. His father was a wedding singer, and Hamdy became interested in literature and music at an early age. He describes the Ghurbal of his youth as his key inspiration, a society that was at once conservative and open-minded. It is a densely populated quarter of narrow streets laid out in a modernist quadratic grid. In his childhood, the houses had only two floors built of brick and a third floor built of tinplate and wood. Several families shared one floor or one apartment, with a shared kitchen and bathroom. Christians and Muslims, people from different parts of the country, all lived together. With the houses fully packed, life took place in the streets. According to Hamdy, there was a magic to the streets, paved with basalt blocks, with steps of iron and stone pillars: 'This quarter creates drama and debate. The place gave me the magic key to language.'

Hamdy enrolled at the university in 1990, weeks after Saddam Hussein's occupation of Kuwait, and shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was a time when the great ideas of socialism and Arab nationalism that had inspired so many writers and intellectuals were being shattered. At around this time, he became active in a literary circle that published the short-lived literary magazine *Khamasin*, which promoted a literary aesthetic that was close to daily life and language, and departed from the complex symbolism and ideological commitments of the preceding generation. Hamdy says that *Khamasin* carried the mark of the historical moment of shattered utopias. Enjoying 'the joy of detail', writing in simple style about ordinary topics,

> we saw that art is not an answer but a way to pose questions. The writer is not the original creator (*mubdiʿ*) of the literary work. Instead, he discovers the poetic condition (*hal*) in the streets. We did it in face of an established literature that had become bureaucratic not only in its institutions but also in style. We were not trying to save the world, but to save the self.

In the 1990s, Alexandria's literary life depended largely on the network of state-run cultural centres spread across the city. Conservative and avant-garde writers

gathered in the same places. In around 2000, a new, 'independent' scene began to emerge in quarters close to downtown Alexandria. Since the early 2000s, there has been a boom in new cultural and literary spaces in the city, accompanied by a division between public sector and 'independent' scenes, each with their accompanying aesthetic styles (discussed in Chapter 2). Hamdy and his friends were part of the NGO-isation wave. Throughout the 2010s, Hamdy was the director of the Eskenderella Association, which took as its task the documentation and revival of the city's urban history and memory, and which organised an annual festival in memory of the composer and singer Sayed Darwish (1892–1923) in his native quarter Kom El-Dikka.

Hamdy's career, from experimental young poet to NGO functionary, in combination with the literary shift from committed grand narratives to individualistic everyday observations, might be read as a neoliberal process of depoliticisation and privatisation. But in autumn 2011 in the wake of the 25 January revolution, things looked different. New spaces were opening and events being organised, and they usually gained good audiences. There was a spirit of opening and possibility, albeit anxious and precarious. As part of the fieldwork that Mukhtar and I had just begun, we were attending exhibitions and symposia in El Cabina, an independent cultural space that had opened months earlier. During the five years of its existence (2011–2016), El Cabina quickly developed into a meeting place for an internationally connected, politically pro-revolution, leftist or liberal or secular cultural milieu with distinctive avant-garde tastes.

On two occasions, Hamdy was involved. The first was a photo exhibition of private photographs collected by Maher Sherif (see Chapter 2), a writer and book artist of Nubian origin and along with Hamdy a founding member of the Eskenderella Association (later, their paths parted). The exhibition, titled *ʾAlbi album* (My heart is an album), presented family photos, mostly from the 1950s and the 1960s. The audience's attention was seized by photographs of women in fashionable swimming suits on the public beaches on the seafront of the city – something that today, after decades of Islamic revival, is only possible on socially exclusive private beaches. For the people who came to the opening, these images from 'the age of the swimsuit' offered a site to imagine a free, untroubled time before the Islamic revival with its gendered anxiety, a time when Egypt looked like a modern country much more than it does today (see also Ryzova 2014).

Looking at these images today, it is easy to forget that they mainly show the Egyptian urban bourgeoisie of the 1950s and, at best, the upwardly mobile urban inhabitants of the 1960s. Egyptian villagers lived under harsher material conditions than today (Abaza 2013). Daughters of city-dwellers may be more conservative today regarding their beach attire, but daughters of villagers have wider access to education, and are less likely to get married at the onset of puberty.

Nostalgia for the era of the swimsuit neutralises the history of class inequalities, many of which continued throughout the Nasser era despite its significant social mobility.

Image 19: Opening of the *'Albi Album* exhibition, El Cabina, 23 October 2011.

In a discussion during the opening, Hamdy argued that it was important to keep this memory alive but to remember that it was not a perfect time either. The nostalgia invested in such images, he pointed out, hides class society and poverty, and the foreign domination of Egypt before 1952. This critical note notwithstanding, Hamdy emphasised that the old Alexandria was something that needed to be preserved, remembered, and revived – with an awareness of its contradictions.

This was a point he made even more clearly at a symposium dedicated to his poetry that took place in El Cabina on 17 October 2011. Connecting the memory of his youth and childhood with his free-verse poetry in colloquial Egyptian Arabic, Hamdy outlined his literary and political vision of the city:

> I'm interested in the study of Alexandria as an example of the human condition that we live everywhere in the world – an example of pluralism, openness, tolerance. [...] Alexandria, starting with Alexander the Great, is a sentence that has no full stop, no definite end...

The real Alexandria for Hamdy was not the bourgeois and cosmopolitan districts on the sea, but the old popular quarters housing migrants from different parts of Egypt, living together in close spaces, but feeling that the whole city is theirs. It was this city – very much the city of his childhood, still remembering the colonial era, connected to a history and looking forward to a better future, rooted yet tolerant and open-minded – that Hamdy elevated to a moral principle that must live on, despite and against the powers that have since come to dominate the city. Hamdy's vision of the city did not exclude contradictions and conflicts, but he was convinced that twentieth-century popular-quarter Alexandria offered constructive solutions towards coexistence in spite of those contradictions, and therefore needed to be preserved, remembered, and revived.

Locating the myth of cosmopolitan Alexandria as an open city (in the sense of being open to the world and to difference) in its old popular quarters stands in a longer literary tradition that was established by Edward Kharrat (1993, 1999) and other Arabic writers (see Kararah 2006; Starr 2009; Halim 2013) before Hamdy's time. It is also reflected in M.'s appreciation of Bahary as the real Alexandria (although he is not a writer and reads little). According to Hala Halim (2013: 282–283), Arabic writing from Alexandria has developed the theme of Alexandrian cosmopolitanism in a decidedly different fashion than that adopted by most European writers, and at times even decidedly against it. But as Alaa Khaled (2012: 12–13) points out, even while that tradition locates cosmopolitan coexistence in popular quarters, it remains committed to the politically safe vision of a lost paradise, grounded in a sense of perpetual loss between a grim present and a golden past.

For Hamdy, a key theme in his vision is the relationship with the Other, especially the Christian and the foreigner. That relationship is at once fraught and attractive, as in his poem White desire (*Raghba bida*, Zidan 2013):

الست فرنسا
إللي بتلم شمع الكنيسة،
عشان تسيّحه في بيتها،
عشان تبيعه تاني لنفس الكنيسة
جارتنا المسيحية
عرفت ده لوحدي وأنا صغير،
من الصليب القش الأسود الكبير
إللي كان على صدر فستانها الإسود القصير،
وشعرها الفضي لون الشمع السايح
جارتنا الخرسا

صرخت لما الشمع المغلي اتكبّ عليها
صرخت .. وما حدش حس بيها
زي رغبتي المغلية في قلبي القش.

Lady Faransa[2]
who collects the wax at the church,
to melt it down at home, to sell it back to the same church
was our Christian neighbour.
I understood that on my own when I was little,
from the large black straw cross on
the chest of her short black dress
and her silver hair the colour of melted wax.
Our mute neighbour
screamed when the boiling wax spilled on her.
She screamed, and no one noticed her,
like my boiling desire within my straw heart.

I noticed a peculiar turning of tables regarding heritage and progress in these events. They took place in a cultural milieu that sees itself as progressive and in opposition to both a conservative religious current as well as the authoritarian system of the state. The prevailing tone was that of a cultural critique of the forgetfulness and destruction of history involved in the Islamic revival. A self-declared cultural and literary avant-garde was upholding remembrance of the past and connectivity with tradition, in opposition to a wave of religiosity marked by a characteristically modernist oblivion in place of history.

A claim to a tradition involves a claim to power. As Talal Asad (2014) has pointed out, traditions are not taken-for-granted continuities. Rather, they are the foundation and result of struggles for power to define, reproduce, and guard them. Hamdy's myth of Alexandria as a principle of openness located in Ghurbal rather than in the seaside districts is a way to wrestle some of the power of the cosmopolitan myth from the European bourgeois into Egyptian working-class hands. And yet it remains grounded in a specific, essentialised vision of what is and what is not Alexandria, and an accompanying claim by the urban intelligentsia to define the city. Although depicted by him as a principle of openness, Hamdy's Alexandria is not open in every direction.

2 Faransa, Arabic for France, was common as a Christian girl's name in the early twentieth century.

Abu Kharouf

A long discussion followed at the symposium. Among those asking questions was Mukhtar. He has a different relationship with the city: 'Maybe it is because I only moved to Alexandria seven or eight years ago, and I don't love it the same way.' He asked why the Alexandrian authors in the circle only write about the old Alexandria. He demanded a literature for and about the districts that were once small houses and gardens, and have now turned into 'a concrete jungle': El Mandara, 45 Street, Abu Kharouf. Mukhtar claimed that these places are never mentioned in the stories of the city, but that they are even sharper and harsher places than some of the ill-famed old quarters such as Gheit El Enab (for the latter, see Abdel Meguid 1999; Eltoukhy 2014). They, Mukhtar argued, are places that can and must be written about: 'Abu Kharouf can equal the Gammaliya of Naguib Mahfouz.'

Mukhtar was in this way claiming space for his own writing. At the time, he was sketching a novel (Shehata 2017) that would be located partly in Abu Kharouf and partly in Gheit El Enab.

Hamdy disagreed. He had actually lived in Abu Kharouf for more than ten years. There are writers from the bourgeois milieu who really do not know this side of Alexandria, but Hamdy knows it inside out. He argued that those suburbs are like a cancer attacking the city. In contrast to the plurality, openness, and rootedness that he identified as the characteristics of Mahfouz's Gammaliya (and his Ghurbal), Hamdy saw informal settlements such as Abu Kharouf as the very opposite of the idea of Alexandria. He claimed that they are 'like Kandahar' (drawing a comparison between the Taliban stronghold in Afghanistan and the power of the Salafi movement in Abu Kharouf), a place where social relations have collapsed, embodied by adolescents from the informal areas who come to fill Raml Station during the Islamic feasts to harass women and anybody who looks unusual.

If for Hamdy Alexandria was a dream of a better world, a memory to revive for the sake of a better future, for Mukhtar Alexandria was the shocking reality of a divided city in which some people attempt to revive the city's cosmopolitan age, while others want to transform it into Kandahar, a seaside city in which some people living in inland informal settlements have allegedly never seen the sea. After the reading in Cabina in 2011, he criticised the downtown intellectuals for the self-imposed isolation they create by celebrating the memory of old Alexandria and rejecting the concrete jungle. Doing so, he argued to me, they close themselves up in a small circle and, by rejecting the reality of the city, fail to reach out to the concrete jungle.

This is the Alexandria Mukhtar moved to in 2004, at the age of thirty: a government school in Abu Kharouf, a poor area with a large Christian minority, reputed to have high levels of crime and strongly influenced by the Salafi move-

ment. With his family (he was recently married), he moved to a small apartment in Asafra on the poorer, inland side of the railway line, and some years later to El Mandara further east, also on the poor side of the railway line but closer to the seafront and the upmarket areas, and better connected with public transportation. He did not move to Alexandria of his own accord. Born to a family of fishermen in a village in the northern Nile Delta, he lived for a short time in Cairo after his studies, then worked as a teacher in his village and later in Borg El-Arab. From there he was transferred to eastern Alexandria in 2004. For many years, Cairo was the city where he really wanted to live, and Alexandria as a whole was his anti-city.

In this time, Mukhtar wrote his first novel *No to Alexandria* (Shehata 2010). A psychological novel in the guise of a spy story, it tells of Saʿid (Arabic for 'happy'), a deeply unhappy man who establishes himself in Asafra in Alexandria but leaves it for Saudi Arabia as a migrant worker, then Afghanistan as a member of al-Qaʻida, and eventually Germany where his only true friends are spies set after him by various intelligence agencies. It is a story of many illusions, and Alexandria appears in it as a projection rather than a real city. In Mukhtar's home village, poor people go to public hospitals in Alexandria when they are seriously ill, which is why Alexandria is known as a city of no return, the city where one dies. For Saʿid, the main character in the novel, Alexandria is a city of no return because it is associated with memories so painful that he cannot live with them. It is not a dream, not a value to revive, but a dull reality of rural to urban migration mixed with nightmarish imaginaries of death and madness. Notably, it is located in the 'concrete jungle' of Asafra and Abu Kharouf.

In November 2014, shortly after Mukhtar had resumed work on his third novel (Shehata 2017), we took a walk through the alleys of Abu Kharouf where the novel is set. He knows the area well but told me that he never felt comfortable or safe there. He added that because he does not like the place, he was able to write about its contradictions and ambiguities, to describe and understand it in a way he could not do about his own village and family (the glorified subject of his 2013 novel *The Migration of the Sons of Saber*). The Abu Kharouf of his third novel, narrated between the recent past and the near future, is divided along confessional and class lines. In the near future of the novel, Christians and Muslims live in confessionally segregated compounds. Only the poorest are compelled to mingle. It is just fear and hatred that sometimes unite the divided inhabitants of the ugly face of the city. Relationships across lines of class and confession that form the narrative thread of the novel do not create a vision of openness and tolerance, but rather tell of love and friendship as something precious and exceptional in a world that actually does not allow such exceptions.

The house of Cavafy

The seaside myth of Euro-cosmopolitan Alexandria (which remains the hegemonic myth of the city) is also a story of living with difference. It tells a version of the narrative of a city open to the world and difference that highlights the character of the *khawaga*, Egyptian Arabic term for a non-Muslim European living in Egypt (Awad and Hamouda 2006; Mabro 2006). The *khawaga* is an ambiguous figure in Egypt, uniting post-colonial power, nationalist paranoia, tourist business, and a romanticised memory of social coexistence in the early twentieth century. The *khawaga* has lent his (male gendered) figure to the concept of 'the *khawaga* complex' (*ʿuqdat al-khawaga*), which describes the characteristically post-colonial relation of hegemony where people of Western origin are taken more seriously and treated with more respect, whether they deserve it or not. As time has passed, the Greek and Italian *khawaga* especially (who are not colonisers like the Englishman and not an enemy like the Jew, and who are culturally a bit more like 'us') have become socially more marginalised and at the same time increasingly sympathetic and interesting as literary characters (e.g. Sherif 2013; Hamed 2014).

In the 1990s, the circle of young writers around *Khamasin* developed an interest in the history of non-Arabic literature from Alexandria. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Alexandria had been home to many writers in Greek, Italian, and English. The most famous of them was the Greek poet Constantin Cavafy (Konstantinos Kavafis, 1863–1933) who lived most of his life in Alexandria. Today, his apartment near Nabi Danyal Street is a museum. He is well known in literary circles, and recently a graphic novel dedicated to his life was released in Arabic (Koraiem and Hamed 2015). Back in the 1990s, Hamdy Zidan and Khaled Raouf (who later became a theatre director and a translator of Greek literature into Arabic) were just beginning to discover Cavafy's traces in Alexandria. Trying to find his old home, they entered a nineteenth-century apartment building (later, it turned out that it was the house where Cavafy was born, not where he lived during his adult life). The inhabitants asked whom they were looking for. The young men explained that they were looking for the house of the poet Kafafis (Arabic pronunciation of Greek Kavafis), and were told that nobody with that name lived there. The poet was long dead, the young intellectuals explained. 'Why are you looking for him if he's dead?' the residents wondered with increasing suspicion. A woman mistook Kafafis for *kafatis*, a derogatory slang term for Christians: 'There are no *kafatis* here! Get out of here you *kafatis*, you thieves!'

Forty years after most of the *khawaga*s of old had moved out of the city, the search for Cavafy resulted in a comic misunderstanding that is telling of the changing times. The experience and problem of difference in Alexandria today only has a little to do with the *khawaga*. Instead, it is more closely related to tensions

between Muslims and Christians, Egyptians and Syrians, old and new migrants to the city, different religious movements and ways of life, well-off and poor people, old and new bourgeoisies, military and civilians, and political polarisation. In this network of contemporary divisions of the city, the evocation of cosmopolitan Alexandria – especially its seaside Euro-cosmopolitan variety, but also its inland old popular quarter variety – can be a gesture of closure against all those people and ways of life that contest and compete with the liberal and cosmopolitan urban utopia.

Cosmopolitan Alexandria is a very likeable myth, and there are good reasons why it is reproduced by writers who hope that their city might be more accommodating towards different ways of life – especially those that are not promoted by the Islamic revival or the real estate boom. Such ways of life are indeed precarious in Alexandria outside some protected niches. However, this is not an innocent myth. It comes with a political economy. It easily legitimates the privileges of the urban bourgeoisie and the Egyptian regime. It also allows European funding agencies and visitors to leave unchallenged the comfortable privileges they enjoy. This makes it a safe (and thus also potentially profitable) topic for national projects and international cooperation alike.

As a result, the myths of the city in this tradition have become populated by two kinds of strangers: those who fit into a vision of openness, and those who must be excluded, even destroyed, in order to safeguard that openness. It is no coincidence that many (albeit not all) people who sympathised with the cosmopolitan coexistence narrative joined forces in 2013 with militarist nationalism, and either tacitly accepted or openly supported the massacring of supporters of the deposed president Morsi. With their vision of moral and confessional purity and their strong grounding in popular neighbourhoods such as Abu Kharouf, the Islamists are easy to depict as the very opposite of the spirit of Alexandria as Hamdy sketched it. Seen from this point of view, they were the ideology of the anti-city, and they had to be excluded and destroyed.

The East of the City

The anti-city of the cosmopolitan myth, however, actually makes up most of the city. Alexandria as I have encountered it in the past years is a plural city, but not a pluralistic one. Hamdy's version of the real Alexandria as rooted in and open to difference, continuous between past and present, strikes me as more sympathetic, but I find Mukhar's version, which foregrounds the 'concrete jungle' and the break with the past it involves, closer to the city I know.

While public-sector cultural flagships including the Bibliotheca Alexandrina have engaged in nostalgic celebration of 'cosmopolitan Alexandria' (Awad and Hamouda 2006), a certain anti-nostalgic backlash has emerged in parts of the cultural scene. Interestingly, this backlash has been produced partly by the very same people who, twenty years earlier, spearheaded the attempt to reconnect their urban present with its past non-Arabic inhabitants and literatures (e.g. Raouf 2016). Paradoxically enough, it is being articulated by people who are internationally well connected and who read both English and Arabic literature and social theory (and some read French) – that is, people who would easily qualify as cosmopolitan on most counts.

Among them is Ali Al-Adawy, born in 1985 in the eastern suburb of Abu Qir, organiser of film and cultural programmes, writer and editor. Between 2014 and 2016, he and some of his friends were working to put together a research and film project about the East of the City (Sharq al-madina), which, in their view, has replaced the historical downtown of al-Manshiya and Raml Station as the centre of the city. The East of the City – especially the district of Sidi Bishr – represents an anonymous, consumerist, at once conservative and individualist form of urbanity influenced by Egyptian migration to the Gulf, the import-export business, the Islamic revival, and unrestrained real estate expansion. If the old central districts stand for what Alexandria may once have been, Sidi Bishr shows what it is now becoming, and quite literally so: the race to demolish villas and smaller apartment buildings and to build fifteen-storey high-rises in their place began in the East of the City around the turn of the millennium.

Since 2011, this demolition and construction boom has engulfed almost the entire city. Old popular quarters such as Bahary, Ghurbal, and others have been thoroughly transformed, a large portion of their older houses replaced by high-rises. In 2019 and 2020, the boom was brought to a temporary halt by heavy-handed government measures against private contractors (Morsi 2020). However, this has not stopped the gradual disappearance of the seafront. Beaches have applied admission costs for some time, following two decades of privatisation of public space. Until recently, however, viewing the sea had still been free of charge. Recently, exclusive public-private-partnered new projects on landfills are moving further east along the coast every year, making the sea increasingly inaccessible to the general public, since it is no longer visible from many parts of the Corniche (El Nemr 2017; HCCSR 2019).

Some urban activists try to document and protect urban architectural heritage. But with military, government, and private institutions competing towards generating maximum profit from construction and real estate, a progressive erasure of the city appears unstoppable. And with the gradual disappearance of

the sea shore behind resorts on landfill, Alexandria may one day no longer be a city by the sea for its non-privileged inhabitants.

In search of ways to overcome what he sees as an unproductive nostalgia in writing about the city, Ali turned to the work of Walter Benjamin. With funding from the Goethe Institut, he organised a workshop about 'Benjamin and the City'. Ali hoped that Benjamin's way of writing about Paris and Berlin (Benjamin 1991a, 1991b) might provide guidance for overcoming the cosmopolitan nostalgia, and for deconstructing any and all narratives of the city:

> The notion of the narrative of the city – be it an old and conservative narrative, or a contemporary one – is an ideological notion that constantly relies on the historical, political, social, and economic framework and context. It expresses the reality that it in a way produced despite all its attempts to disguise it. (Al-Adawy et al. 2016: 6)

The main outcome of the workshop was a small collection of essays that was presented in El Cabina on 10 March 2016. It was more contradictory than Ali might have been aiming for. The texts were evenly divided between two approaches: Abdelrehim Youssef, a teacher, poet, and cultural programmer at El Cabina, and Yasmine Hussein, a researcher at the Alexandria Library and photographer, had each written childhood memories with an eye for minute details and personal experiences, inspired by 'the dominance of the poetic' (in the words of Abdelrehim) in Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood around 1900*. Hager Saleh, a translator and MA student in history, and Hakim AbdelNaim, an actor and theatre director, produced more comprehensive critical engagements with the city. An expression that came up in the latter two texts was *al-madina al-zaʾila*, 'the perishing/non-permanent city', a vision of a city in a constant process of erasure. In the words of Hager Saleh:

> Thus, the city likes to show off its passing/perishing (*zaʾila*) cosmopolitanism. It hides its history and covers it with dust as if it were a disgrace that deserves to be erased, and then again boasts of it with insolence. The city persistently reinvents itself, carrying a new face in every era and hiding its old face under rubble. (Saleh 2016: 10)

A long discussion followed the presentation. Although it had not been a major theme of the workshop, a controversy about 'nostalgia or not' dominated the discussion.

The theatre director and manager of a performing arts NGO Ahmed Saleh claimed: 'Also today's writings were loaded with nostalgia, just like the writings of the past twenty years. What new does Benjamin offer?' Abdelrehim disagreed and pointed out that three of the five texts presented were critical of nostalgia; only his and Yasmine's leaned towards it. Hakim commented that Ahmed pro-

bably intentionally played the role of the provocateur. More important than nostalgia or not, he went on, was to question the classist aspirations of the specific nostalgia for a city by the sea. From what kind of societal configuration did that city emerge?

The poet and guest participant in the workshop Ahmed Abdel Gabbar defended a nostalgic relatedness to the past and its traces:

> Cavafy also didn't write of Alexandria of his age, but of the Hellenic era. That history is still present, under the earth. Kharrat's popular quarters and Durrell's Cecil Hotel are still there in the city you move in. While I speak, I see the ruins of the demolished Rialto Cinema. But it was there. Even if only in the layout of the streets, the traces remain with us. I see nostalgia positively, if it means that I know what I write about.

Hager countered: 'We are drawn to cosmopolitan longing because of its dramatic touch. Like classical tragedy, it is attractive.' Addressing the many historical periods of the city and its varying centres and dominant groups, she pointed out that the location of the city itself was constantly on the move: 'The city is not something solid.'

Mohamed Elshahed, editor of the *Cairobserver* magazine on urbanity and architecture in Egypt, insisted on a more complex picture. The way we speak about the past reflects the way we speak about the present and reproduces its blind spots, he argued. What is left out in the binary of the *khawagas* (as in Durrell) and the popular quarters (as in Kharrat), he argued, is the social history of Alexandria from the 1940s to 1960s, a period of major social mobility for urban inhabitants of Egyptian origin, when many rural migrants climbed into bourgeois society.

Abdelaziz ElSebaei, one of the founders of the Eskenderella Association who had left it in 2013 along with Maher Sharef, intervened to problematise what he called 'the passion for the city':

> It has become a sort of national disease. I'm not against engagement with the city. But we always try to reach back to times before us. Myself, I'm not as upset today as I was twenty years ago when an old house is demolished.

The presentation of the Benjamin workshop in March 2016 marked a departure from the nostalgic tone that had dominated the poetry symposium in 2011. Svetlana Boym (2001) argues that nostalgia may come in restorative and reflective varieties; and Ahmed Abdel Gabbar clearly claimed the contemporary usefulness of a reflective nostalgia in his comment. The critique of cosmopolitan nostalgia, however, equates it with a futile attempt to restore something that can no longer be retrieved, and probably was never really so beautiful in the first place. Such

critique is in line with an emerging shift from the binary towards the fragmentary in writings about the city, such as in Alaa Khaled's *Alexandrian Faces* (2012). The Benjamin workshop also coincided with other cultural events and publications in 2016 that balanced a reflective-nostalgic search for ways to remain connected to the city's twentieth-century history and the positive values it might represent on the one hand, with a demand to recognise the self-erasing, conflicted, and divided character of the city's present and past on the other. Events we attended included a history workshop curated by Aliaa Mosallam that highlighted social conflicts and radical politics in the early twentieth century (Nizar 2016), and a public debate on the curse and possible uses of nostalgia organised by Amro Ali in 2016.

What had changed? A generational shift is part of the story. Some participants in the Benjamin workshop, notably Hager Saleh and Hakim AbdelNaim, were young enough to have experienced their generational formation during the revolutionary period. But others had been active in the scene even before 2011; Abdelaziz ElSebaei was born in 1949. Nostalgia in all varieties is a reflection of the present against which it is posited, and the present had changed. For those who in 2016 questioned the nostalgia for old Alexandria, the recent events of the revolution provided a more pertinent nostalgic relation to the present. Theirs was now a more conflicted and combative longing for a future very recently lost, and the myth of an unchanging spirit of a true Alexandria appeared less helpful for providing orientation in the city and country in which they lived. By 2016, after a defeated revolution and a victorious construction boom, the topos of unsolved conflicts and permanent erasure had become more pertinent, and the nostalgic vision of connectedness and openness more difficult to maintain for some people (Faruq 2017).

In a short essay published a year later, Hakim AbdelNaim made explicit the link between his suspicion towards nostalgia and the trauma of the defeated revolution:

> All places are accompanied by trauma, by post-traumatic stress disorder, by an enormous affective experience that was not completed, that found no occasion to have a light ending, or even a heavy one but without a sudden cut, as if a person dies burning and remains in his final state, state of trauma… and who knows if he died of trauma or of heat? I detest longing and everything that has a relation with longing and everything that makes me feel that it is part of the longing I detest. I fear it and its closed circle. (AbdelNaim 2017)

And yet the critical rethinking of the city and its myths also shows remarkable continuities – personal, institutional, and thematic alike. The essays of the Benjamin workshop were published in the *Tara al-Bahr* magazine dedicated to literary, historical, and theoretical reflections about Alexandria. It was edited by some

of those who were present at the Walter Benjamin workshop – and mostly read by people in the same circles. Its authors include Khaled Raouf, Maher Sherif, and others, all of whom had previously played a major role in the literary rediscovery of non-Arabic Alexandria. It was made possible by a European grant for three issues (which the editors stretched to make four), and while it did not serve the Euro-cosmopolitan myth, it did converge with a donor interest in cities and urbanity. The same magazine also published the text just quoted by Hakim Abdel Naim – and the Arabic translation of an earlier version of this chapter (Schielke 2016a).

Image 20: Entrance to Mallaha Street in inland El Mandara, East of the City, March 2016.

Like Alaa Khaled's literary work and Aliaa El Mosallam's history workshops, *Tara al-Bahr* is also consciously aimed at producing a complex rather than a binary vision of the city. And yet by the virtue of its intensive concern with the city as its primary topic and focus, it, too, contributes to the mythologisation of Alexandria. It is a different myth, however. It tells of Alexandria as a perishing, non-permanent city of conflicts, fragmentation, and erasure.

The myth of the non-permanent city has the paradoxical advantage over the myth of the cosmopolitan city that it is more inclusive. It has space for both al-Manshiya and Sidi Bishr, both Bahary and the Chinese Housing. The myth of the non-permanent city is cosmopolitan in its own way, in the sense that it tells of the urban coexistence of difference. However, it highlights conflicts over harmony. I am definitely not impartial in this matter. Part of a wider shift in academic interest towards understanding Alexandria as an ordinary city in the present (El Chazli 2018; Jyrkiäinen 2019), this chapter and this book contribute to the narrative that highlights conflicts and erasure. With the publication of the Arabic version of this chapter in December 2016, it became a part of the conversation it addresses (see *Tara al-Bahr* 2017). And yet the issue at hand is not an opposition between a romantic fantasy of what Alexandria might once have been and a realistic recognition of what the city really is. The very question of what or where the city 'really' is is an exercise in fantasy.

Every claim to have located the city is the product of a certain politically and morally loaded work of imagination (Chiti 2016). Hamdy's rewriting of the cosmopolitan myth from the point of view of Ghurbal, Mukhtar's emphasis on the 'concrete jungle' of Abu Kharouf, even Ali's search to deconstruct the narrative unilinearity of 'the city' are all expressions and draft blueprints of specific urban mythologies where neighbourhoods, streets, and fictional characters embody specific affective, political, and moral visions and conflicts.

The Chinese Housing, once more

In June 2016, Omayma Abdelshafy, one of the editors of *Tara al-Bahr* magazine in which the essays of the Benjamin workshop had been published, reflected about the intertwining of telling of the city and imagining what it might be, in a free-verse poem she published on social media (reproduced here with my translation):

إسكندرية
الخيالية
التي لا توجد إلا في أوهامنا الصافية
تنتظرني
هناك
وفي قلبها نقطة واحدة من الحقيقة
أحبها
وأحن للعودة إليها
ليس للإسكندرية فضل فيها
لكنني تركتها هناك
حتى لا تنقطع صلتي بالمدينة
التي كنت أعتبرها امي أحيانا
لأنني غبية بما فيه الكفاية
لأكون ابنة لمدينة لم تُحك بعد
فقط
هي تتكون بالكامل من أحلام خالصة
وأساطير معقدة
تنافس الكثيرون لصناعتها
بخيال فقير
يليق بكل جمالها.

Alexandria
the imaginary one
that only exists in our pure illusions
is waiting for me
over there
in its heart a single drop of truth
I love it
and long for return to it
Alexandria has no power over it
but I left it there
so that I may not lose touch with the city
that I sometimes considered my mother
because I am stupid enough
to be the daughter of a city not yet told
Only
it is made up entirely of immaculate dreams

and complex myths
Many compete to craft it
with poor fantasy
that suits all its beauty.

In the discussion following the Benjamin workshop in March 2016, Amro Ali had suggested that 'the curse of Alexandria is that it's more powerful in imagination'. But what is the thrust of that imagination? Is it one of a 'crippling nostalgia' as Amro called it, or is there space for a forward-looking dreaming? In the final comment to the discussion, Mohamed Elshahed called for 'a nostalgia for the future, a radical vision. We live in a fascist era, so let's long for the future.'

Future is a tricky thing in Alexandria, however. If carbon emissions continue anywhere near the current rate and climate change goes on as predicted, large parts of the city will be submerged owing to rising sea levels by the end of the twenty-first century (Link et al. 2013; Stanley and Clemente 2017; Gebremichael et al. 2018). The parts of the city that are closest to the sea are higher and will be less affected, but most of the inland sub-urban crescent is built on former lakes and marshes, and will become uninhabitable. Alexandria will again be a city by the sea, but it will hardly be a beautiful sight. The future-oriented question about Alexandria is thus far more radical than the one debated at the meetings in El Cabina between 2011 and 2016.

The news about the next, perhaps most catastrophic, erasure in the long history of Alexandria's erasures is beginning to reach the city's inhabitants, thanks to dramatic online visualisations that show the vast stretches of land likely to be submerged and popular science television documentaries that list Alexandria as one of the cities likely to disappear in the near future. This issue was at the heart of a symposium on science fiction at the Writers' Union on 16 November 2019.

Gamal Kashhat opened the symposium by sketching the plot of the novel he was working on. This imagined what would happen if humans knew the date of their death, uniting science fiction with Islamic moral and eschatological imagination in an intriguing way. But his main concern was more mundane. He proceeded with a lecture outlining major names of Anglophone science fiction from the twentieth century, and emphasising the role of fiction in paving the way for scientific innovation. At the end of his talk, he showed a popular science documentary that showed, in rapid and dramatic succession, ten major cities likely to disappear soon. Among them was Alexandria. Gamal Kashhat concluded by calling for a kind of science fiction writing that could imagine ways to rescue Alexandria and the Nile Delta from sea level rise. Imagination and fiction, he proposed, could pave the way for scientific solutions, and therefore such science fiction – which

was yet to be written – needed to be brought to the attention of those in positions of responsibility, if possible even the President of the Republic. In the discussion that followed, there was an almost unanimous agreement on the urgency and necessity of such a pedagogical mission for science fiction to save the city.

A longing for the future echoes Ernst Bloch's (1980) 'concrete utopias': visions of a better world that include a plan of action or at least an expectation that they can be reached. For Bloch, Marxism provided the one true concrete utopia to strive for. For those who had gathered at the Writers' Union in 2019, the concrete utopia they sought to imagine was more of an engineering kind.

There is no agreement among Alexandrian writers I know whether crafting concrete utopias of the future is literature's task. Among those closer to the tradition of conservative modernism who tend to gather at the Writers' Union it may be. But even for them it is a contentious issue (as we saw in Chapter 4, where poets debated whether poetry can change the world). Writers active in circles of the downtown independent milieu such as those that gathered at El Cabina, in contrast, have shown more concern for critique and alternative ways of life in the present than for utopian visions for the future. Their concrete utopias appear to be either located in a nostalgic past or they are inspired by the transient utopian moment of the revolutionary uprising that in itself was a better world, even if it failed to change the future of the country. Their literary future visions, in contrast, tend to be a rather grim continuity of the present (Eltoukhy 2014; Shehata 2017), connected with a trend among some internationally recognised Egyptian writers that has been labelled 'dystopian fiction' (e.g. Towfik 2011; Eltoukhy 2014; Naji 2015; Rabie 2016) by Anglophone critics (e.g. Alter 2016).[3]

Utopias portraying a bright future are today more associated with the right, be they militarist nationalist fantasies of grandeur or Islamist promises of a moral society on the path to Paradise after death (each also having its own nostalgic past). Some of the concrete utopias that the Egyptian regime propagates, in the shape of nationalist prestige projects and new cities, including a new administrative capital, are all too similar to dystopian fictions of a country divided between secluded rich suburbs and an urban hell (Towfik 2011). They only promise a better future for the better off.

3 According to Nael Eltoukhy (2019), 'dystopian fiction' is not a self-chosen label, and he does not think of his work as dystopian. Rather, the label reflects a Western literary taste for a style, and for themes that have become quickly successful among non-Arabic readers and tend to be translated swiftly. Compared with the nostalgia for the Euro-cosmopolitan era among many Egyptian and foreign readers alike, this tells of an interesting shift in the interests and expectations of some non-Arabic readers.

Perhaps the question needs to be posed differently. Just as the sincere search for a concrete utopia by means of literature should not be mistaken for being naive, engagement with a contradictory present without a golden past or glorious future should not be mistaken for being nihilistic. Instead, its concrete utopias are located in space rather than in time, its moral striving focused on the possibility of alternative and parallel lives rather than a wholesale reform of society.

Omaima Abdelshafy's imaginary parallel Alexandria was remarkably devoid of details: a critical companion to the materially existing Alexandria rather than a vision of what it could be. The power of literary imagination of this kind is not to produce daydreams, but to give reality a twist. And while one should view utopias critically, one needs to be cautious about urban dystopias as well (Robinson 2010). There are also other useful visions around.

The Chinese Housing is built on a hill. It may be demolished one day, but it will not be submerged. In spring 2016, I went there again to visit M. He had made some progress. Since business in his original trade was bad and no improvement was in sight, he had opened a shop for household goods as the junior partner of a local trader. Business was acceptable, and he was feeling more at home than ever in the Chinese Housing; and yet he was disillusioned. He had put faith in the revolution in 2011, and voted for Islamist politicians in the elections that followed. In 2013, he had put faith in the military, which he by then considered the only institution that could lead the country. In 2016, he was positive that nothing had changed, and doubted whether any change could be expected in the near future.

M., along with millions of others, is part of today's Alexandria. He is a rural to urban migrant who built a house in an informal settlement. Although he sympathises with the Salafi movement and their vision of purity, he does not live that way. He says that in practice, the best he can do is approximately follow the right path without completely losing sight of it. M. is a conservative man who at the same time is open and attentive to different people and ideas. He has a strong entrepreneurial spirit, and is constantly in search for new opportunities. Despite living in what constitutes the anti-city for those who hold to the dream of cosmopolitan Alexandria, many of the values and attitudes he embodies are not so different from those held by the inhabitants of the mythological cosmopolitan city. He is subject to the powers that are transforming the city, but he is also crafting it towards his needs and values. He reminds us there is still more to tell about Alexandria.

Rather than dreaming of the Alexandria that might be, M. has been trying to imagine, in more pragmatic vein, what he may realise for himself and his family. He finds it difficult to imagine how things might change for the better. Repeatedly expressing the desire to migrate to the United States with his family to offer his

daughter a better future, he has been submitting an application for the green card lottery every year; but he also appreciates the opportunities he has been able to find around him.

The next time I met M. in autumn 2016, I showed him the Arabic translation of an earlier version of this chapter to check whether I had quoted him correctly and whether he agreed with the passages. He agreed, and added: 'For me, the Chinese Housing was like America.' He explained that when he moved to the area he did not like it much, and his wife (who grew up in the East of the City) liked it even less. But he found it full of opportunities and he learned to like it. Manshiya, with its established businesses and networks, was already occupied. It had no space for someone like him with no history and no connections. The Chinese Housing and the surrounding informal neighbourhoods, in contrast, were still becoming, not yet solid, not yet occupied, and therefore a place where one could find and seize opportunities. For M., it carried some of the mythological aura of the American Dream.

What makes M. an interesting theorist of the city is that he does not try to provide an overall theory of 'the city'. Instead, he has a handful of useful theories about different parts of the city, which he appreciates in different ways. His vision of Alexandria is not binary but rather plural, perhaps even pluralist. When asked, he was positive about Bahary being the real, authentic Alexandria. But he appreciates the Chinese Housing, Manshiya, and Bahary each for its own reasons: the first as a space of opportunities, the others as places for business but also for precious weekend outings, time out of the ordinary with his family or friends – each with different characteristics and qualities owing to their different shape and history.

Concrete utopias of the true, real city tend to pose and answer the question about where Alexandria is in a binary way. M.'s specific visions of different parts of Alexandria, in contrast, are not utopias but heterotopias, materially existing places that are qualitatively different from others – for better or worse (Foucault 1986; de Boeck and Plissart 2004: 254–258; Ryzova 2015). Heterotopias, too, carry the binary structure of mythology: they are 'other spaces' as opposed to an assumed normal, primary space. But it is a binary where the roles of 'real' and 'anti' are not firmly fixed. The downtown area and the seafront are heterotopias par excellence: areas associated with outings, shopping, a time out of the ordinary – and also counter-normative activities such as drinking in bars (see also Ryzova 2015). As a metaphorical America, also the Chinese Housing has heterotopic qualities – this time juxtaposed to Downtown as an established Old World. In similar way, Mukhtar's and Ali's writings and reflections about the East of the City evoke urban heterotopias that mirror (and are mirrored by) older forms of urbanity that are being erased. And while Hamdy's Ghurbal of his childhood

and the House of Cavafy (the one where the museum is, not the one from which Hamdy and Khaled were kicked out) can be elevated into embodiments of a concrete utopia of true Alexandria, they could also be regarded as heterotopic sites among others that mark the city's many imaginary locations.

Taking myths seriously as social theories means considering the possibility that some of them may provide a more likely to be true and helpful account of the realities they describe than others do. The essentialising utopias of an organic, true, better city that are evoked by cosmopolitan nostalgia in its popular-quarter and seaside versions alike need to be recognised for what they are: dreams of and strivings for beauty and ease of life, made only more compelling by their increasingly counterfactual character. However, anti-utopian myths of erasure and conflicts can provide a better orientation for understanding what kind of a city Alexandria is today, where it is, and in what directions it is moving.

In the following chapter about writings on walls, I therefore follow the lead of erasure, conflicts, and heterotopic sites, and look at graffiti and its social media avatars as expressions and traces of various ways to live in and claim urban space.

6 Writing on walls

It is noteworthy that the silent in any society, even if they may seem so, do not remain silent all the time. In one way or another, their voice arises from time to another. It rings out and rises towards horizon at prayer time, in invocations and mystical gatherings in the realms of mosques, churches and synagogues or outside them. It rings out and rises towards horizon in the football pitch, at nightclubs and bars, during the listening to songs, at sports matches, in jokes with political and societal content, in face of death, in letters sent to the dead, and even by means of writing and drawing in the toilets!

Sayyid Uways, *The Chanting of the Silent*

Outdoor walls of Alexandria are full of writings. Stencil graffiti, sprayed messages, painted advertisements, ballpen notes, stickers, and billboards create a mostly anonymous conversation of different messages struggling for space, mostly transient and at times poetic. In particular, political graffiti during and after the 2011 revolution became the site of an often uncivil debate made up of deletions, crossings-out, and changes to graffiti by others. But love messages, religious phrases, and advertisements also have important messages to tell.

The writings on the city's three-dimensional walls often mingle with the metaphorical walls of social media feeds as inhabitants of the city are engaged in poetic, transient conversations and commentary on their phones while they move through their city. Sometimes the different poetics and materialities of wall-writing converge when social media mimes reproduce or simulate photos of graffiti. In Alexandria today, both ways of writing on walls are common and productive of spaces and social relations in the city. These forms of everyday textual conversation and presence push the limits of conventional understandings of literary versus ordinary language. They also tell important stories about the coexistence of different visions and ways of life in a plural but not pluralistic city.

Literature has hazy borders with other fields of cultural production and with other forms of writing. People involved in literature we met were frequently involved in other forms of *ibdaʿ*, and only two of the cultural spaces we attended were dedicated to literature only. They were also involved, both as readers as well as writers, with texts that they would mostly not consider literature: personal messages, prayers, news and advertisement, shopping lists, paperwork, and more. Graffiti and social media are among the kinds of writing located somewhere along the hazy borders between literary and other texts. Because of the difficulty of meeting their authors, this chapter – unlike others in this book – foregrounds the writings and their connection with the specific times and

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places in which they appeared. Towards the end of the chapter, however, we will also encounter some people who circulate these texts. They will help us to better understand the literary dimension of some wall-writings.

Walls, writings, cities

The story of wall-writing I tell in this chapter begins with a single word that could be found on walls all over Alexandria in 2011: 'Leave' (image 21). When it was sprayed in January or February 2011, there was no need to say who the addressee was. The reference to the soon-to-be-deposed president Hosni Mubarak was clear, and the message was everywhere.

Image 21: 'Leave'. Kom El-Dikka, November 2011.

Writing on walls is as old as writing (and drawing on walls is older), and writing has a very long history in Alexandria and Egypt. The story might begin, if not with the invention of writing, then at least with the graffiti that was scratched on the walls of the upper platforms of the Alexandria lighthouse and reported in a collection of poetry written on walls from the tenth-century CE (al-Isfa-

hani 2000: 28–30).[1] The story might alternatively begin a millennium later with Alexandria's iconic wall-writer Gamal El-Dowaly (Khaled 2012; Abu El-Maʿati 2016), a dedicated fan of the Ittihad football team, who wrote and signed his messages on the walls of Alexandria between the 1980s and the 2000s; he even drew the regime's attention when he wrote on a wall of his intention to run for the presidency. Another beginning might be messages such as 'Would you accept it for your sister?' that warn youths on the Corniche against romantic encounters, and spread along the seashore when the Islamic revival gained societal dominance over the city and the country. Yet another beginning could be the line of poetry borrowed from Amal Dunqul that was sprayed on the Corniche in autumn 2010: 'Dream not of a better world / Behind every Caesar who dies is another Caesar.'

January 2011 is therefore an arbitrary starting point for a story of wall-writing in Alexandria, but there are two reasons behind it. The first is that it almost coincides with the beginning of my fieldwork in the autumn of 2010. I had developed an interest in the aspirational, moral, and political dimension of visible surfaces such as graffiti, stickers, and posters some years earlier (Schielke 2012a). When my fieldwork turned towards issues of text, language, messages, and communication, it was logical to continue to pay attention to writings on walls; however, I began to pay more attention towards graffiti as texts: slogans, announcements, denunciations, declarations of love, invitations, advertisements, lines from songs, or the marking of a space with one's name. What can these texts tell us about the claims, struggles, and strivings of the people who live in the city? What kind of relationship – if any – might there be between wall-writing and literary writing?

An important methodological and aesthetic choice that resulted from this research interest was that I shifted to working in black and white, consciously avoiding colour, which is usually the preferred method of photographing graffiti. I initially worked with a medium-format analogue camera, and later shifted to a faster-to-use analogue SLR camera. Restricting my vision to black and white and taking fewer pictures (owing to my reliance on film) was a way of training myself to be a reader of writings and walls rather than a spectator of graffiti.

The parts of Alexandria where I took my photos are broadly those areas of the city around which I would regularly move: El-Mandara, El-Asafra, and Miami in the east, the Corniche Road, Raml Station, El-Manshiya, and El-Shatby quar-

1 *The Book of Strangers* (*Adab al-ghuraba'*) is a unique collection of verses written as graffiti on walls. According to the English translators of the book, it was probably collected and composed by an anonymous late tenth-century author from Iraq who attributed his work to the famous biographer of poets Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani.

ters, the Abu Qir train line, and the Chinese Housing in Agami. I cannot present a representative survey of wall-writing, and indeed have never aimed for one; rather, my intention has been to document continuities and changes in messages on walls over time.

This leads to the other reason for beginning the story in January 2011. The revolutionary uprising of 25 January marked the beginning of an intensive and highly politicised period of wall-writing that tells a story of the struggles and shifts of mood in the city during and after the foiled revolution. The story of this chapter continues until the autumn of 2017 to include the depoliticisation that followed the establishment of El-Sisi's new old regime, as well as the ongoing societal dynamics that are reflected in wall-writing. It is important to note, however, that even at the height of the political contestation and its various expressions on walls, political writings never dominated: they mingled with a remarkably constant use of wall-writing for religious, romantic, personal, commercial, legal, and other purposes.

Some might be seduced into mistaking political graffiti for something more real and relevant, and into dismissing other themes of wall-writing as trivial or meaningless. In this photo essay, my premise is that all writing on walls is relevant and meaningful. Writing something on a wall implies a claim of relevance and reality. The search for work, real estate business, love stories, faith in God, and the claim that this is my street – none of this is trivial. The question is therefore what kind of story of life in a city these different, yet intermingling, writings can tell.

This story may be specific to Alexandria, but of course wall-writing is not. Wall-writing or word graffiti is a globally circulating and exceedingly accessible and plural form of communication (Northoff 2004, 2005). Alexandria is not fundamentally different from, say, Athens, New York, Cairo, or any other city insofar as various forms of graffiti appear to be a general feature of urban living. Around the world, stencilled graffiti, sprayed messages, painted advertisements, ballpen notes, scratching on mortar, stickers, and billboards create a discourse of various types of message struggling for space, mostly transient and at times poetic. There are regional and national differences in genres, of course: for example, forms of primarily visual graffiti and tags in which the content of the text becomes secondary or altogether illegible prevail in much of Europe and North America, whereas in Egypt, by contrast, wall-writing usually conveys a more or less clearly legible and intelligible message. The same is true of most street art in Egypt. Moreover, while genres travel with relative ease, the stories told by wall-writing are more situational, more specific to a place and time about which they provide an ongoing commentary (Karathanasis 2014; Tsilimpounidi 2015) – as in Alexandria during and after the uprising of 2011.

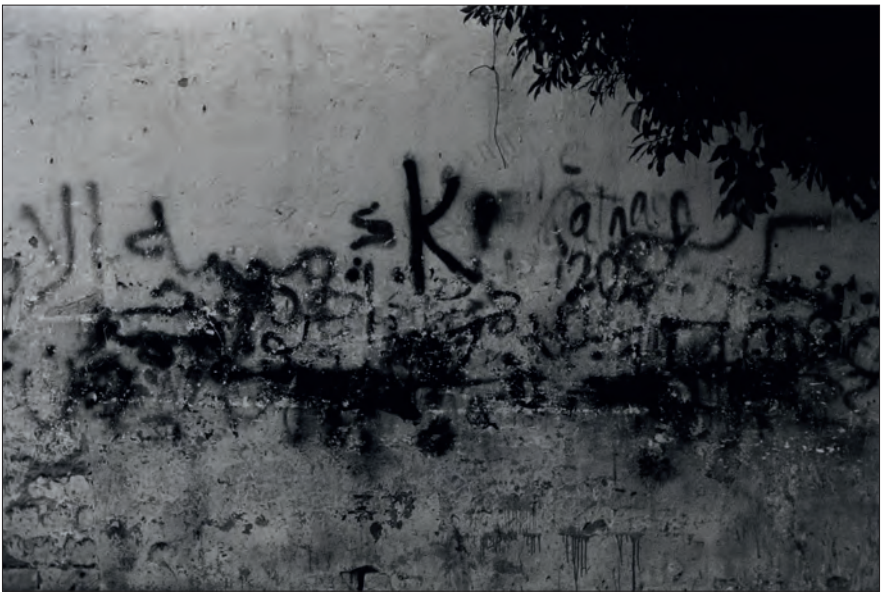

Image 22: Layers of wall-writings rendered illegible, Azarita, October 2016.

Outdoor walls are, of course, not the only medium for public writing. Homes, shops, and vehicles carry commercial advertisements as well as messages of a more personal nature. Thanks to the inspirational work of the sociologist Sayyid Uways (1999) who studied writings on cars and carts in the 1960s, Egypt has a tradition of academic and artistic interest in writings and signposts on walls and vehicles (e.g. Abdrabo 2018; Draz 2019; Samir 2020; Yousri 2020). However, interpreting them poses methodological and analytical problems. Wall-writings are ephemeral on several accounts. Their authors are usually unknown, they are usually short-lived, and erasures, alterations, and overwriting make them not only intertextual but often also illegible (image 22). This poses an analytical problem.

A textual analysis is of course possible, and can be successful. Uways's (1999) famous *Chanting of the Silent* provides striking insights into the public values and emotions that professional drivers and cart vendors expressed on their vehicles. Despite all the inspirational debt I owe to Uways (whose work is unfortunately little known among Anglophone researchers), I have not tried to reproduce his approach. Uways's work is rooted in a normative sociology of development, searching to identify negative and positive factors of development. Doing so has not been my concern – and who am I to decide what is positive or negative? Uways provides a systematic account that focusses on varieties of messages and the values they express, and pays less attention to materiality, time, and loca-

tion. I have not tried to be systematic. Instead, my main interest is in the texture of time, location, and materiality, and the urgent issues that writers express on walls.

Struggles and genres, alterations and transformations

Soon after the president stepped down in February 2011, a campaign of cleaning and beautification began. This was partly driven by a revolutionary desire to make the country one's own, but it also involved a somewhat counter-revolutionary erasure of signs and slogans relating to the struggle (Winegar 2016). Most anti-Mubarak graffiti were painted over in the months after February 2011 – sometimes not very carefully, as in image 23 where 'No to Mubarak' was left legible because whoever painted it over economised with the paint.

At the same time, a euphoric and opportunistic identification with 25 January resulted in the renaming of businesses: for example, a real estate agency on the Corniche in the East of the City called itself 'The Sons of 25 January Property and Furnished Apartments' (image 24).

Image 23: 'No to Mubarak' (erased), Raml Station, November 2011.

Image 24: 'The Sons of 25 January Property and Furnished Apartments. Tel. 0100 553274', Miami, February 2012.

As the initial euphoria faded, different voices began to compete for attention, and posters and slogans of Islamist movements rapidly gained visibility, while other, weaker movements (which after a while became known as 'the revolutionaries') tried to revive street protests. On 11 March 2011, I wrote in my research diary:

> Everybody who has something to say in Alexandria these days writes it on the wall: Death penalty for armed robbery, Revolution accomplished, Revolution continues, Unity of Christians and Muslims, Make Egypt an Islamic state, We are all Egyptians, Let's respect each other, Don't forget the Martyrs of the revolution... In Alexandria, a stronghold of the Salafis, there are remarkably many stickers demanding an Islamic state especially on the side streets, while the seaside Corniche road is marked by large wall paintings (made by volunteers and sponsored by the local administration and an advertisement agency) celebrating the revolution. It is a wild mixture of spontaneous expressions, political and religious movements pressing for their point of view, and the army and local administration riding the wave of the revolution to consolidate their power.

In the following months, new revolutionary wall-writings emerged calling for new demonstrations and an end to military rule. They proliferated especially at the sites of demonstrations such as Port Said Street, the University of Alexandria, and al-Qa'id Ibrahim Square. In September 2011, activists calling for street protests against military rule stencilled their slogan 'We'll be back' on a wall in downtown

Alexandria, together with the iconic portrait of the martyr Khaled Said, who was killed by policemen in the summer of 2010. Two months later, the Salafi Nour Party plastered the same wall with their election posters. Rather than covering over Khaled Said's portrait, they left him surrounded by bearded men (image 25).

During the summer and autumn of 2011, competition among different voices on the walls became more aggressive. Graffiti against the military rule of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (February 2011–June 2012) began to spread, and were repeatedly altered or sprayed over. Some graffiti were altered several times. A mural that was painted during the clean-up campaign in February 2011 originally read: 'The people and the army are in the service of Egypt'. Later, somebody added 'the police' (it is recognisable as an addition because it is sprayed while the rest of the text is painted) after 'the people and the army', after which somebody else crossed out both 'the army' and 'the police' and added 'killers' above 'the police' (image 26).

Image 25: 'We'll be back' (stencilled), 'Together we build Egypt. Nour Party' (election posters), Raml Station, November 2011.

Image 26: 'The people ~~and the army and *the police*~~ are in the service of Egypt', Corniche between Shatby and Sidi Gaber, November 2011.

Image 27: 'Egypt', Shatby, November 2011.

Unity among Muslims and Christians had been one of the slogans and powerful symbols of the January uprising, symbolised by the crescent and the cross, as in image 27, where they are placed above the word 'Egypt'. This message was sprayed at some time during autumn 2011, when sectarian violence against Christians was increasing. The wall had recently been whitewashed to cover earlier writings, and the paint began to flake quickly, eroding parts of the message. On 9 October 2011, Christian protesters were massacred by the military in Cairo. Shortly after the massacre, somebody tried to alter the message by scratching away the cross, but managed to leave only a minor mark. The outcome was unintentionally symbolic: both the cross and the attempt to erase it were left visible – until the entire wall was whitewashed again.

Other writings expressed grievances in the form of an appeal to the authorities for justice. A photocopied poster on the seafront in downtown Alexandria in November (image 28) was framed by four photographic portraits (counterclockwise from top right): 'the first deceased person'; 'the deceased wife'; 'the father and husband'; 'the surviving son'. The text in the middle reads:

> An appeal to all supporters of the weak who have lost their rights in this world. I only want justice. I call upon all gentlemen in positions of responsibility and the noble media of communication to report on lawsuit number 6216 of the year 2009, Second Chamber of Raml Court, Alexandria, to reopen the case, and to reveal the manipulation, lowness, and deception of justice involved in it. My question is: is the owner of the car, registration number 281 Private Cairo, really above the law? So far they have proved that they are above everything. Egyptian citizen al-Sayyid Gamal, tel. ... , profession: driver in the district of East Alexandria.

Yet other grievances were expressed in an absurd-poetic tone. In Port Said Street, a regular route of the protest marches in 2011, somebody had sprayed between political slogans: 'Oh my head' – which can mean 'you give me such a headache', 'I'm going crazy', or 'give me a break' (image 29).

Political wall-writings come and go, depending on the moment, the perceived urgency and the opportunity to write one's message in an open space. Private, commercial, legal, and religious messages are more persistent genres. In November 2011, shortly before the parliamentary elections, somebody sprayed 'I love you' over electoral posters of political parties in Sidi Gaber. Half of the name of the beloved is covered by yet another poster sponsored by a nearby mosque inviting people to the Eid prayer (image 30).

Image 28: Raml Station, November 2011.

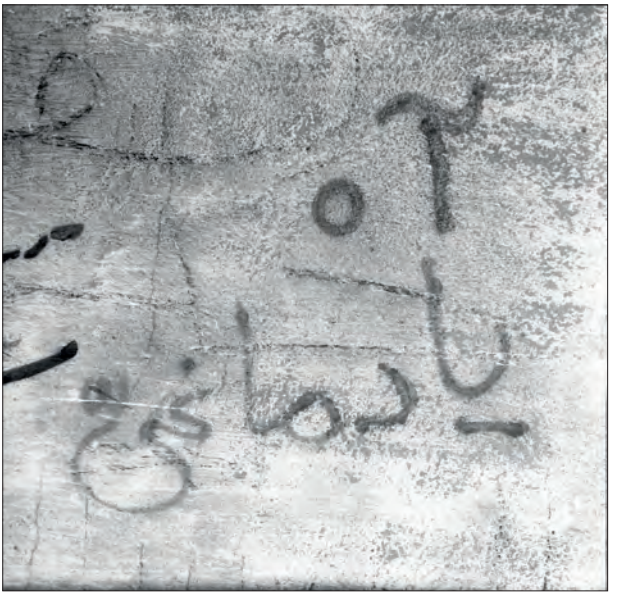

Image 29: 'Oh my head', Port Said Street, November 2011.

Image 30: 'I love you' (name partly obliterated), Sidi Gaber, November 2011.

Meanwhile, at the commuter train station of El Mandara in the East of the City, stickers and handwritten advertisements (image 31) offered natural healing, the services of a marriage registrar, and satellite dish installation, and looked for apartments. Below the ads, someone declared their allegiance to the Zamalek football club. In a period when the police were relatively absent and many social taboos had been shaken, illicit businesses also sometimes made themselves visible on the wall, making use of the comparatively safe guise of the English language (image 32).

Among the firmly established genres of wall-writing in Egypt are legal notices. Squatting enjoys a degree of legal protection in Egypt, which is why empty buildings and plots of land are usually marked by large messages such as 'Registered plot not for sale or partnership' (image 33). Parking prohibitions are a related and at times innovative genre. At a garage entrance in El Mandara, somebody had written: 'Garage: No parking, you shameless donkey' (image 34).

Image 31: 'Looking to buy an apartment for a suitable price', 'Looking to buy an apartment', 'Natural healing in homes', 'Marriage registrar', 'Satellite dish installation', 'Al-Zamalek', El Mandara Station, November 2011.

Image 32: 'Mistriss [sic] slave 010 5434267', Al-Qaʾid Ibrahim, February 2012.

Image 33: 'Mobile 0123760878. Registered plot not for sale or partnership', Kom El Dikka, March 2012.

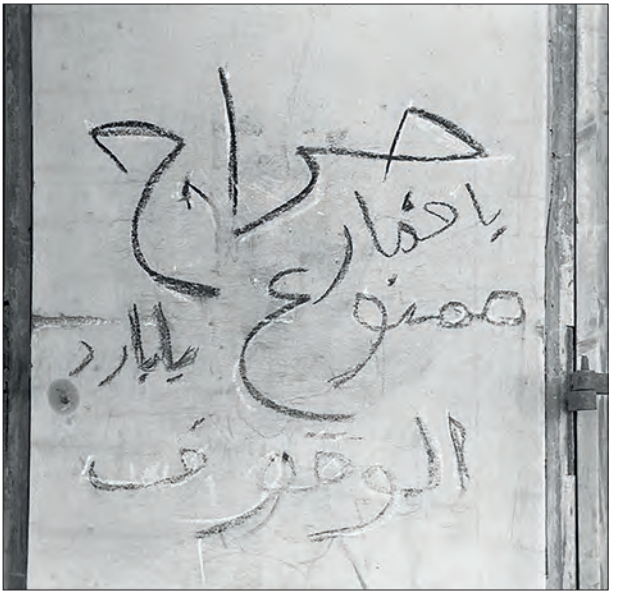

Image 34: 'Garage: no parking, you shameless donkey', El Mandara, November 2011.

Even more persistent and present are religious messages. In homes, shops, and vehicles, they identify the inhabitant or owner as a Muslim or a Christian. In streets and squares, the religious messages are almost exclusively Islamic. Some are large, monumental signs that dominate public spaces (image 37; see also Starrett 2010), others are small handwritten messages or prayers (image 35), and yet others are produced by more systematic poster, sticker, and stencilled graffiti campaigns (image 48). In 2014, handwritten or photocopied notes saying 'Did you pray for the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) today?' (image 36) proliferated quite suddenly all over Egypt. The campaign had no clear author, and was ostentatiously apolitical and consensual in the midst of an extremely polarised situation after the counter-revolution of 2013, but it did have political resonance as a moral or ethical message: it reminded Muslims of their commitment to the Prophet Muhammad, and related to the idiomatic use of 'pray for the Prophet!' as a way to call agitated people to calm down.

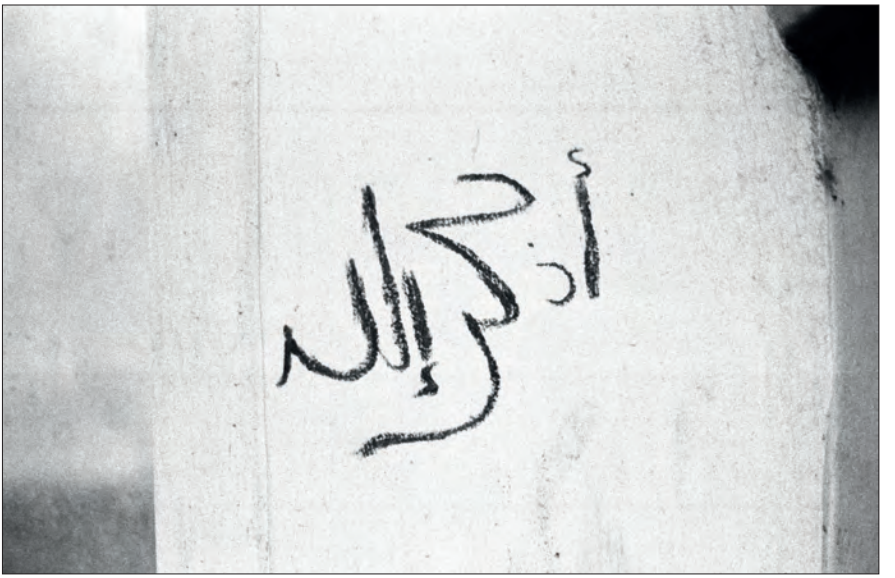

Image 35: 'Say the name of God', Raml Station, October 2012.

Image 36: 'Did you pray for the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) today?', Raml Station, October 2014.

Image 37: 'In the name of the All-Merciful God {Whatever good you may have, it is from God} This is the true speech of the Mighty God', Raml Station, February 2014.

Elaborate calligraphies of Qurʾanic verses are an important sub-genre of religious messages. They bring together protective, moral-ethical, and aesthetic dimensions. A Qurʾanic verse (image 37) on the wall opposite a café and sponsored by the owner reads: 'In the name of the All-Merciful God: {Whatever good you may have, it is from God.} This is the true speech of the Mighty God'.

Religious messages are usually clearly identifiable as either Islamic or Christian, almost never in combination. A peculiar odd one out was a banner on a deserted building (image 38), apparently stating a claim in a real estate dispute, the details of which I was not able to learn. It cites both the Bible and the Qurʾan in a gesture of defiance:

> 'If God be for us, who can be against us?' (Romans 8:31)
>
> 'And they schemed, and God schemed (against them); and God is the best of schemers' (Qurʾan 3:54)

Image 38: 'If God be for us, who can be against us?' (repeated once in clear text, then as calligraphy), 'In the name of All-Merciful God {And they schemed, and God schemed; and God is the best of schemers} This is the true speech of the Mighty God', Sidi Bishr, September 2017.

Some of the political wall-writings in 2011 and after were sprayed and stencilled by Alexandria's small scene of dedicated graffiti artists, who also created some of the murals that were painted on the seaward side of the Corniche shortly after Mubarak's resignation, and who later participated in other specially organised

and sponsored projects. Starting from mid-2011, a stretch of concrete wall on the inland side of the Corniche near Stanley Bridge became a prominent site of visually ambitious and often political graffiti by football ultras.[2] Most street art in Alexandria during that time was in fact produced by the ultras, and was very visible thanks to the prominent location of many murals along the city's main thoroughfares. Although the art of the ultras has attracted less international attention than the street art produced by the small circle of internationally acclaimed graffiti artists in Alexandria and Cairo (for a critical review, see Eickhof 2016), some of it has been included in canonical collections such as *Walls of Freedom* (Hamdy and Karl 2014). The ultras' murals often combined commitment to the club with revolutionary claims and themes – increasingly so after the massacre of seventy-four supporters of the Ahly Club in Port Said on 2 February 2012. With its use of English and its iconography of urban rebellion, a mural on the Corniche in Sidi Bishr in February 2012 (image 38) signed by the Ultras White Knights represents the style of the ultras' graffiti and murals from the period.

Image 39: 'ACAB' (All Cops Are Bastards). Signed: 'U.W.K 07' (Ultras White Knights 07), Sidi Bishr, March 2012.

2 On the rise and fall of the ultras movement in Egypt, see Bashir (2011); Close (2019).

Much like the writings that marked the sites of demonstrations, the art of the ultras also marked urban spaces, claiming mastery and ownership over them (see also Tsilimpounidi 2015; Selvelli 2016). The marking of spaces is, of course, not a prerogative of the ultras and other revolutionaries – parking prohibitions and legal notices do it too. And in the widespread genre of writing one's name on a wall, marking a space is the message itself. On a wall in Azarita, a certain Moʾmen wrote his name in several places (image 39) in 2016. He added no comment – his name was enough. Later, an unrelated stencilled advertisement was sprayed above Moʾmen's signature: 'Isaad's marriage, workforce and real estate services'.

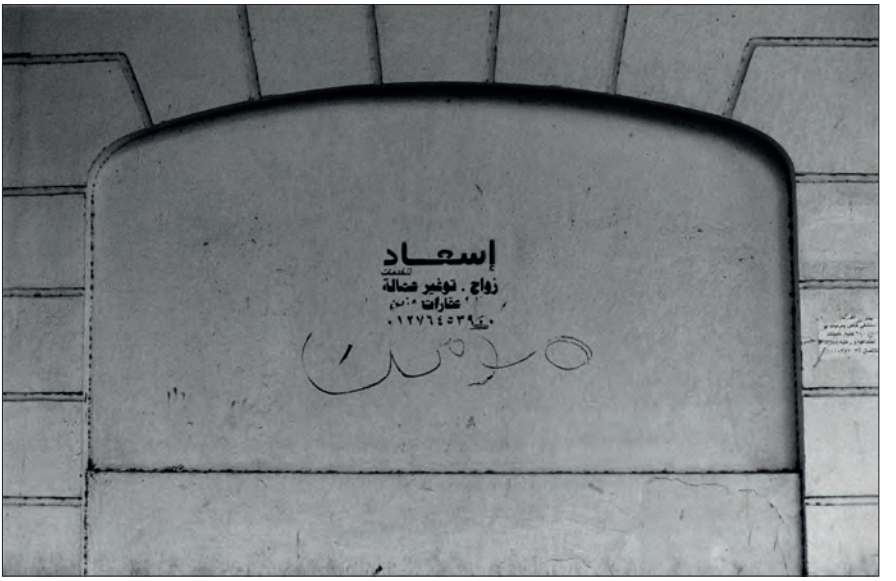

Image 40: 'Isaad's marriage, workforce and real estate services', 'Moʾmen', Azarita, October 2016.

As the political situation shifted, so did the politics of the messages on walls. The election of Mohamed Morsi as president was initially greeted by enthusiastic messages. In Miami in 2012 (image 41), a text sprayed on a roadside wall read 'Morsi 2012 God is great'. A shop to the right had the Egyptian flag painted on the wall with the words 'God is great. Morsi 2012. EYGPT' [sic, in Latin letters].

As conflicts and opposition to Morsi's rule arose, a veritable battle of wall-writings began. In the winter of 2012–2013, a stencilled advertisement message announced: 'Isolate your ceiling before the winter'. Playing with the double meaning of the verb *yiʿzil* (to isolate; to remove from office), somebody changed it into: 'Remove Morsi from office before the winter' (image 42).

Image 41: 'Morsi Morsi 2012 God is great', Miami, October 2012.

Image 42: 'Isolate ~~your ceiling~~ *Morsi* before the winter 01211174112', Raml Station, January 2013.

Supporters of Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood were actively spraying their messages as well. After the former presidential hopefuls Hamdeen Sabbahi and Mohamed ElBaradei had joined a National Front of Salvation, supporters of Morsi accused them of masterminding a campaign of wreckage, violence, and chaos. A message sprayed near Alexandria University (image 43) called for 'No to the Front of Wreckage and Destruction and Bankruptcy' and underlined its call with a prophetic saying that bans Muslims from looting and killing other Muslims: 'Your property and blood are inviolable'. Between the two messages stood a stencilled portrait message from another side of the struggle, calling for the release of the imprisoned revolutionary socialist Hassan Mustafa.

Image 43: 'No to the Front of Wreckage', 'No to the Front of Wreckage and Destruction and Bankruptcy', 'Free Hassan Mustafa', 'Your property and blood are inviolable', Shatby, February 2013.

Image 44: 'America spies on all humans through satellites (on every home)', El Mandara, January 2013.

In the polarised and paranoid atmosphere that evolved in 2013, it became increasingly difficult to distinguish between truth and lies. The general paranoia was also reflected in writings such as this one in El Mandara in January 2013: 'America spies on all humans through satellites (on every home)' (image 44).

After the military seized power in summer 2013, my photographs of wall-writing became fewer and more sporadic. Paranoia increased, and photographing in the streets raised suspicions. I shifted to using a smaller camera and took fewer and fewer pictures. I therefore have only a few images of the abundant graffiti by supporters of the Muslim Brothers protesting against the *coup d'état*. The few I have were mostly taken from a moving car, such as image 45 taken in spring 2014 in Sidi Bishr in eastern Alexandria, an area where pro-Morsi demonstrations were common and well attended in 2013 and 2014. Every protest would leave a dense trace of graffiti, which the city authorities would only manage to paint over after some delay. On the wall in image 45, slogans for and against Morsi and Sisi mingled with commercial ads and ultra slogans. Framed by the stencilled four-fingered Rabea sign of the Brotherhood supporters on the right and left, the messages read: 'Furniture transportation and lifting: winches and manual'; 'Football belongs to the crowds'; 'Morsi is my president'; 'Liar' 'Down with ~~Morsi~~ Sisi' '30/8' (date of a demonstration); 'Real estate agent'; 'CC is a killer'; and 'Traitor'.

Image 45: Sidi Bishr, February 2014.

CC, a phonetic abbreviation for then Minister of Defence and since 2014 President el-Sisi, was all over the walls in those days, in expressions of love and hate alike. In February 2014 in Sidi Bishr, a mural painted by a professional advertising company (covering a graffiti by ultras, traces of which remained above the mural) declared in English: 'I love you C.C.' and in Arabic: 'We love you El-Sisi and I hope you will be my president' (image 46).

On the opposing side of the struggle, countless rapidly sprayed messages accused CC of being a killer and a traitor. Despite systematic efforts to erase these messages, one accidentally made it on to a scene in a Ramadan soap opera that was aired in 2017. The video still (image 47) went viral on social media, causing major embarrassment to the channel and the production company (Almogaz 2017; Aljazeera 2017).

Because of increasing difficulty of photographing anti-regime slogans in particular, I do not have any photos of the political graffiti that would still occasionally emerge along the Abu Qir train line, such as a 2016 message that read 'Down with the illusion of stability and the dogs of Daesh in the Sinai' in a rhetorically cumbersome gesture of rejection aimed at the regime and its Jihadist enemies alike. I also do not have a single photograph of the once widespread 'Morsi will return', which has been painted over almost everywhere in the meantime. But in the public housing area of the Chinese Housing in the far west of Alexandria, a message sprayed in a side street in 2014 was still withstanding the passage of time

in 2017: 'Mohab will return, God willing'. (image 48) I do not know who Mohab is or where he went, but a friend who lives in the area claims that he was a local drug dealer who was imprisoned.

Image 46: 'Al-Mutamayyiz Advertisements, mobile 01220092941. We love you El-Sisi and I hope you will be my president. Egypt first. I love you C.C. With greetings from Your President's Support Campaign', Sidi Bishr, February 2014.

Image 47: 'Traitor C.C'. in a scene from the soap opera *The Sun Will Never Set* (*La tutfi' al-shams*). (http://urlz.fr/6dys, published 11 June 2017, viewed 23 July 2017)

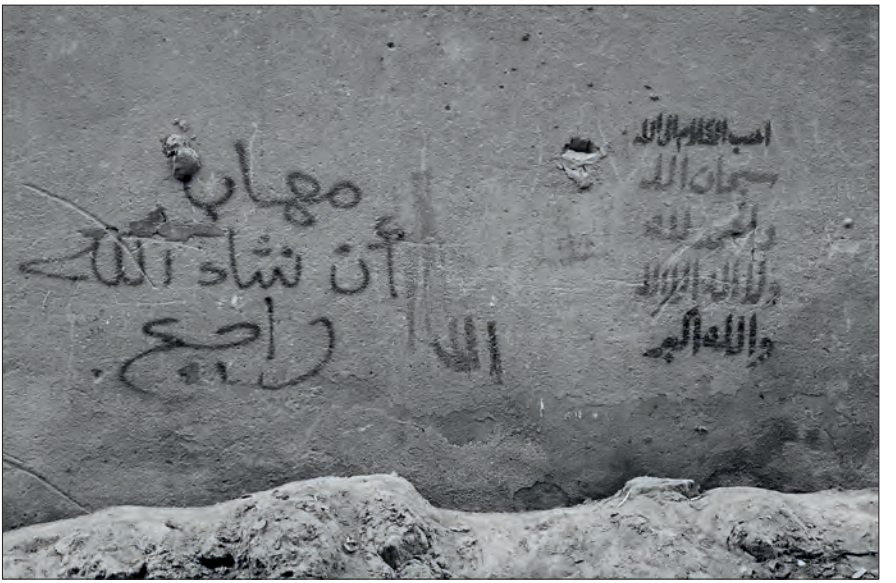

Image 48: Left: 'Mohab will return, God willing'; right: 'The speech God loves most: exalted be God; and praise to God; and there is no deity but God; and God is great', Al-Masakin al-Siniya, February 2017.

The writings from between 2011 and 2017 that are depicted here tell a contemporary history of a city that is plural, but not pluralistic. Sometimes messages live side by side in apparently peaceful coexistence. Sometimes they seem to simply ignore each other, an example being the message of love sprayed over electoral posters and then partially covered by another poster (image 30). Especially when it comes to politics, walls become a site for an uncivil debate of competing claims, erasures, and alterations.

Scratchings on mortar, 'spray and run' messages, stickers and posters, and elaborate murals spread messages, and also contribute to the aesthetic feel of a place. During the revolution and the struggles that followed it, the sites of protests were recognisable by the density of sprayed messages (as in image 45), and the state's imposition of its control was marked by whitewashing the walls again (as in image 23). In residential areas, the names of individuals cover many walls, with the simple message that this is so-and-so's street or that so-and-so and their friends were there. Working in a different sensory genre, Charles Hirschkind (2006) has described Islamic cassette tape sermons of the 1990s as an 'ethical soundscape' that made the call to craft oneself as a God-fearing person highly present and persuasive. Wall-writing works in a similar way, creating a presence of messages and moods. However, just as different sounds and moods constantly

mingle in the soundscapes of Cairo, which even at the peak of the Islamic revival in the 2000s were never exclusively dominated by pious messages, in a similar manner the walls of cities and villages host a visible, constantly changing presence of different values and struggles, some more pervasive and prevalent than others, but none exclusively dominant.

Poetry of open-air and virtual walls

Are these writings literature? Some have undeniable literary or poetic qualities, and even where they do not, they contribute to something akin to a poetry of open spaces – poetry in a wider sense, in that they restructure open spaces in imaginative and associative ways, and give them symbolic depth and complexity. But literature is both more and less than the aesthetic, imaginative work of words: it is an institutional field (Bourdieu 1998) in which certain forms of writing, speech, and reading are included, while others are excluded (Allan 2016).

The question is thus not whether wall-writing is literature or not, but how some wall-writing may become literature. Today, social media are instrumental to this process.

The writings on the city's three-dimensional walls often mingle with the metaphorical walls of social media feeds when inhabitants of the city engage in poetic, transient conversations and commentary on their phones while they move through their city. Sometimes, the various poetics and materialities of wall-writing also converge, such as when social media memes reproduce photos of wall-writing. During the intense days of revolutionary political contestation, photographs of expressive messages on walls were often shared and distributed to underline individuals' positions. Since then, messages on walls have become increasingly distributed online as out-of-context aphoristic texts. This growing online circulation of wall-writings has in turn inspired new ways of writing on open-air walls. As the mood has become more subdued and fearful in recent years, and political wall-writing has become rarer, a different genre has become more visible: poetic messages – often lines from songs by popular bands (image 49).

This is a decidedly hybrid genre that thrives on the interface between the virtual and open-air walls. Two young women I know from a village near Alexandria often post photos of wall-writing on their social media feeds, either as background images for their Facebook walls or as individual posts. They collect and save images on the Internet, where one of their main sources has been the Facebook site *Gudran/Walls* (https://www.facebook.com/godran.walls/). The site

had over 300,000 followers by the summer of 2020. It is administered by an Egyptian, but the wall-writings posted on the site come from a variety of locations. Some seem to be computer-generated. The writings are sometimes religious, philosophical, or political, but most importantly they are romantic. They often have clear literary ambitions, tending towards an aphoristic or poetic form. Many are also signed, thus laying claim to individual authorship.

Image 49: 'And I wonder how your fragrance spreads without your presence': a line from a song by Jadal, a Jordanian pop-rock band. To the right of the line is a stencilled advertisement for hearing aids. Corniche by Ibrahimiya, September 2017.

S., a university student in Alexandria in her early twenties, explained to me in 2018 why she often posted images of this genre of graffiti on her Facebook account:

> In my view, images of graffiti are better because everybody sees them and they communicate what people want to say, while posts are not seen by everyone, because images draw the attention of the eyes. [...] And besides, people interact more with an image than when you write text.

A., a university student in her late teens at the time, living between her village and Alexandria, saw the online images of graffiti as part of an emerging generational youth culture:

> In my opinion, I find them very useful, especially after the revolution and the spread of underground artists, and they also have a better future because most people of my generation are interested in this kind of writing.

The two women's appreciation of these hybrid messages – analogue turned digital, at once both writing and image – and their skill in dealing with them is a telling example of the transformation of written and visual culture in the digital age. The crossover between walls of brick, mortar, and wood, and digital walls is central to the attractiveness of the genre.

Just like three-dimensional wall-writings, their digital avatars are mostly anonymous. Additionally, they become decontextualised and delocalised. Images posted on *Gudran/Walls* always contain a transcription of the message because the handwriting may be difficult to read. Some of the writings are signed, but their circulated images are never dated and never localised, except incidentally through dialect and references to specific events. Their indexical and referential relations with specific persons, conflicts, or issues are entirely, or largely, severed. They are transformed into travelling aphoristic literary texts that are appreciated as such by those who circulate them. According to A.:

> The images I post are by unknown people, and I don't know what the motivation is behind the pages that upload them. ... I select them on the basis of the similarity between what is inside me and what is written. ... That is, I use these images to express what I don't know to write in a direct manner in a Facebook post.

For A., images of wall-writing work in a way that is similar to the memorised verses of poetry, songs, and proverbs that have been part of the culture of expression in different languages since time immemorial.

In this regard, the romantic sentimentality mixed with witticisms that prevails on *Gudran/Walls* and in the images S. and A. post, has something strikingly similar with the nostalgia and homesickness mixed with piety and counter-normative explorations alike that dominates the tenth-century collection of Arabic wall-writings *The Book of Strangers* (*Adab al-ghuraba'*, al-Isfahani 2000). The major difference is that the author of *The Book of Strangers* makes an effort to provide date and context for the verses he cites, while *Gudran/Walls* provides systematically decontextualised visuals. And yet they share a way of generating a non-narrative poetic map of stances, moods, and public emotions. As modern as social media may seem, the parallel to *The Book of Strangers* shows that in certain regards, the circulation of images and quotes draws upon an older tradition that predates romantic authenticity and electronic media. A millennium apart, verses and one-liners on walls cited in The Book of Strangers and *Gurdan/Walls* alike

communicate and promote emotions by being shared. Authorship is an optional extra.

This is not to say that social media would not also thrive on the idea of authentic expression. They do so as well, and yet remarkably much emotional communication on Egyptian social media relies on various kinds of ready-mades, such as memes, viral images, quotations, and prayers, which especially women, who must be highly cautious about their public image, can use to communicate emotions without revealing themselves in a compromising way. The outcome is often a carefully curated sentimental self-representation. In their wall-writing posts, S. and A. both appear as romantic, sentimental, committed to their parents and families, religious, and often ironical (image 50). A. also occasionally posts images that are explicitly political or socially critical, reflecting her more outwardly rebellious attitude (image 51).

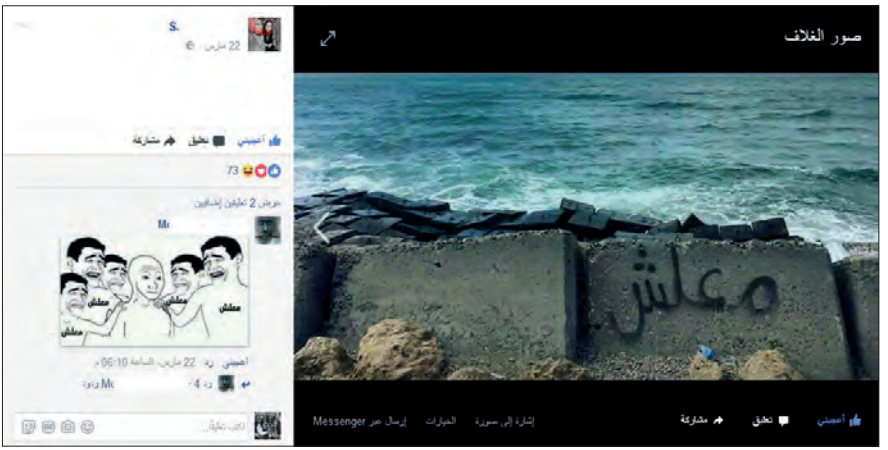

Image 50: 'Never mind' (an expression used in Egyptian Arabic as an excuse or to soothe somebody who is upset). In the comments section, M. has posted a caricature in which a person is surrounded by characters who all say 'Never mind'. The image was posted by S. on 22 March 2017; it was probably taken on the Alexandria seafront. Date, photographer, and original source are unknown.

Some of the images A. sent me from her private digital collection as examples were lines from songs by her favourite bands, such as the Lebanese group Mashrou Leila in image 51. While the images of these texts are delocalised for A. and others who circulate them, they resonate with knowledge of the entire song as well as the class habitus and world views associated with the artists and style of music. The music of Mashrou Leila in particular resonates with a liberal, even rebellious, attitude but importantly also with a bourgeois, cosmopolitan habitus

(or an aspiration for one, as it is for A.). But this is not the only story A. and her virtual wall have to tell, of course: a different selection of her online posts would show her as somebody who is very committed to her mother. Like the poetry that people have cited since time immemorial, the images people post in the digital age move in that productively ambiguous space where they are common popular culture and intimate expression at one and the same time, and may stand in contrast to other roles and expressions they cultivate, without necessarily entering into conflict with them (Abu-Lughod 1996).

Image 51: 'They sedated you in the artery and said: your apathy is good for the homeland': a line from Al-Watan (Homeland) by the Lebanese band Mashrou Leila. It was forwarded to me by A. on 21 July 2017. The photograph and original post are by Fares Abdallah, 23 February 2017; location unknown. (https://lc.cx/gTPQ).

Wall-writings can thus be literature when they participate in a poetic making of moods and space that relies on words and imagination, and – most importantly – when they are read and circulated in that capacity. But in another sense, they differ from the institutional meaning of literature, because 'literature' as a social institution has aesthetic, formal, linguistic, and other mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion, which wall-writing does not have.

Speaking out loud and remaining invisible

Writings on all kinds of walls – those made of mortar, brick, and concrete as well as virtual ones – combine disclosure, anonymity, and intimacy, and cross over the conventional limitations of both ordinary as well as literary language. This makes them interesting as historical witnesses of conversations that take place among inhabitants of a city.

Whenever I arrived in Alexandria during the years of my fieldwork there, I would take the minibus from El Mandara to El Manshiya and read the graffiti on the Corniche. Having read them frequently and knowing where to expect them, I also learned to read their absences. For me, this proved to be a good way to gauge a sense of the current mood and situation, because wall-writings told me about issues that would not make it into the news (such as love affairs and job ads), and because they contained voices I might not otherwise hear of people whom I might never meet.

The people whose messages on vehicles Sayed Uways (1999) studied in the 1960s were 'silent' in the sense of being subaltern. They were not among the hegemonic voices heard in late Nasserist Egypt. Unlike in Spivak's (1988) categorical claim about the subaltern being silenced, in Uways's work (which precedes that of Spivak by nearly two decades), the subalterns certainly do speak, and eloquently so – but they do this on the condition of their being invisible. I doubt, however, whether twenty-first-century wall-writers generally speak from the subaltern position in which Uways found drivers and vendors in the late 1960s. The music of Jadal and Mashrou Leila cited in images 27 and 29 speaks mainly to young people who either command or aspire to a cosmopolitan sense of global connectedness (see also Tsilimpounidi 2015). Rather than being a means of expression for people who are otherwise silenced, walls are better understood as a space that is accessible to subaltern and non-hegemonic voices, but not to them alone.

Wall-writing relies on the productive tension between speaking out loud and remaining invisible. This tension makes wall-writing a very effective means of communicating and contesting public moods and values, and also of expressing impolite or aggressive stances that may otherwise be censored. Wall-writing and street art therefore thrive in times of protest and conflict (Northoff 2004; Karathanasis 2014; Rolston 2014; Hamdy and Karl 2014; Tsilimpounidi 2015; Selvelli 2016). Their ability to mark and occupy physical space makes them even more potent as a means of conflict and contestation. The rise and decline of revolutionary graffiti in Alexandria and elsewhere in Egypt since 2011 is a case in point here, but wall-writing can also be, and is, used to legitimate those in power as well as for altogether different aims. This open-endedness towards different uses – both contrary and unrelated – makes wall-writings a helpful entry point among

others for understanding uneasy coexistence in a city that is connected by roads, railway lines, streets, and the circulation of people, goods, money, ideas, messages, and images, while at the same time divided by lines of class, demography, and religious and political faiths. Wall-writings express and make visible a plurality of stances and views, but also highlight the precarious, and at times explosive, nature of their coexistence.

7 Is prose poetry a conspiracy against the Noble Qurʾan?

But what they're saying is not poetry, right?

Member of audience at Tanta International Poetry Festival, 2015

At a gathering at the Writers' Union in Alexandria that we attended in 2014, a member of the Union seated among the audience claimed that 'prose poetry is a conspiracy against the Noble Qurʾan', and demanded a commitment to the discipline of metred and rhymed poetry. In his view, innovation in poetic technique was tantamount to a Western attack on Arabic language and Islamic values. This claim was challenged by others in attendance, and resulted in a lengthy debate. Given the close connection of classical Arabic language and eloquence with the Qurʾan and therefore Islamic faith and values, it is not surprising that Arabic poetics can become an issue of contention loaded with identitarian and moral claims. But what exactly is at stake? Why would somebody feel inclined to think that an international conspiracy is set to destroy Islam by promoting highbrow poetry that is only read by a few people?

The precariousness and explosivity of a hard-to-reconcile plurality of stances and views that I have outlined in earlier chapters is not restricted to public spaces and urban divisions. The conflicts that structure urban life often also seep into literary spaces and debates where they intertwine with literary aesthetics in ways that can have grave consequences for the people involved, and which therefore call for closer attention.

In this chapter, I focus on the work and story of one poet, Montaser Abdel Mawgoud in whose oeuvre prose poetry takes a prominent place. Around the same time as the above-described debate took place at the Writers' Union, he was facing personal threats and legal complaints in the school where he worked after some of his colleagues interpreted his newest volume of prose poetry as an attempt to rewrite religious scripture, which in their view was a dangerous heresy, even tantamount to unbelief. Montaser's story also opens the final part of this book where, over the course of two chapters dedicated to two poets, I try to understand the relationship between literary aesthetics, the cultivation of moral and ethical stances, and especially their relationship with different ideas about certainty and uncertainty.

In the context of contemporary Arabic literature, poetic technique is not simply a matter of aesthetic preference; instead, it can provide key insights into how literature contributes to the limits and transformations of societal and moral

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imagination in a specific historical and societal context. Two productive limits and – possibly – transformations are the focus of this chapter. The first concerns transnational and national social milieus and bubbles that allow the normalisation of a specific literary taste as an unmarked category of 'literature'. The second is about how the relationship between humans and God ought to be imagined, expressed in language, and lived.

In the preceding chapters of this book, we have shown that articulations of *adab*/literature that we have encountered in our fieldwork always include aesthetic as well as ethical commitments. The cultivation of *adab*/literature can thus encourage the crafting of conservative, pious, and authority-oriented attitudes, but also attitudes that go against the grain of conservative moral and religious sensibilities. In Arabic poetry since the twentieth century, a pattern has emerged linking classical poetics with conservative and God-fearing stances on life and politics, and experimental modernist and postmodern ones with leftist-nationalist, bohemian-cosmopolitan, irreverent, and secular stances. Why this is so requires explanation. Why does commitment to classical metres resonate with conservative perspectives? And what is the relationship between experimental aesthetics and postmodern cosmopolitan stances? Why would some people feel threatened and offended by experimental poetry that only circulates in the small bubble of avant-garde literary circles? Poets working in more mainstream styles may also face opposition and censorship when their poetry is understood to deal with religion in an irreverent manner or otherwise offend societal taboos and sensibilities. But prose poetry, a highbrow genre that reaches a limited audience, has the capacity to irritate conservative sensibilities because of both content and form. How can this be explained?

A short genealogy of genres and struggles

Poems form the oldest known layer of the Arabic textual tradition. Pre-Islamic poetry continues to inform Arabic poetic and rhetorical eloquence today and, alongside the Qurʾan, is a formative corpus of Classical Arabic language. The distinction between divine revelation and human poetry is as old as the Qurʾan. God states in the Qurʾan that His words are not poetry (Qur. 36:69; 69:41–42), and generations of Muslim learned specialists and poets alike have maintained aesthetic standards and practices that set the Qurʾan apart from human language. Classical Arabic poetry has a remarkable thematic range, including mystic devotion, romantic love, heroic epics, panegyrics, piety, and irreverence (Van Gelder 2012); it also has a largely constant form that today is known as ʿa*mudi* or 'colum-

nic' poetry – so called because of its double verse structure that in writing looks like two columns. *ʿAmudi* poetry is based on the millennia-old tradition of sixteen Arabic metres, and in its classical form is characterised by the closed semantic unity of the verse and a mono-rhyme that is maintained throughout the poem.

Before the colonial era, poetry was also a main medium of a tradition of cultivating a refined habitus known as *adab*. Armando Salvatore (2009: 198–200, 2016: 30, 123–125, 2019) argues that before its nineteenth-century reinterpretation as literature on the one hand and civilised habitus on the other, *adab* was a tradition of ethical cultivation that was distinct and, to a degree, independent of the tradition of *shariʿa*. Working on reading practices in early twentieth-century Egypt, Michael Allan (2016) instead appears to assume that *adab* and religious normativity were indistinguishable until the colonial era, and argues that *adab* was secularised in this period when powerful critics and readers divided its two inherent dimensions, the content and practice of cultivation, and its medium, poems and stories, into two distinct categories, which made it possible for the second dimension of *adab* to become a translation of the French *littérature*. Teresa Pepe (2019b) has questioned Allan's narrative of a secular division and break, and argues that contemporary Arabic *adab* as literature continues to carry much of the ethical underpinnings of the older tradition of *adab* as instruction.

Our fieldwork supports Pepe's argument. And whether one agrees with Salvatore's argument about a long history of a soft distinction, or with Allan's argument about the colonial introduction of a hard distinction, in any case, as part of *adab* (in both its classical and modern sense), some poetry has indeed been prone to become a site of language and imagination that is secular in the sense that it produces a differentiation between divine and human powers, between religion and its other; and also in the sense that it is established as an autonomous institutional field (Bourdieu 1998; Jacquemond 2008). Following Pepe, however, I find important to emphasise that this is only true of some poetry, and that the secularity of contemporary literature is far from complete and hardly hegemonic. The internationally prominent cosmopolitan niches of contemporary Arabic literature are indeed a rare stronghold of both political and life-worldly secularisms in an otherwise God-fearing part of the globe. But the secularity of literature has always been contested and incomplete at best, and the literary field's autonomy has been partial ever since its emergence in the early twentieth century (Klemm 1998; Jacquemond 2008). Even the literary avant-gardes – not to mention the mainstream – have not always been as straightforwardly secular as they are commonly depicted to be (Šabasevičiūtė 2018).

With regard to poetry, this means in concrete terms that since the twentieth century, innovations in technique have repeatedly resulted in debates and scan-

dals where proponents of more conservative aesthetics have seen Arabic and Islamic identity, faith, and values at risk.

A key historical turning point of contemporary Arabic poetry was the innovations introduced mainly by Iraqi and Levantine poets in the early to mid-twentieth century, which resulted in a new genre of metred free verse, today alternatively known as *tafʿila* (literally, poetic foot) or *al-shiʿr al-hurr* ('free poetry') (Moreh 1976; Jayyusi 1977). *Tafʿila* poetry has a structure of single verses of variable lengths, and a rhythm based on verse feet that can be repeated or varied. It can be composed with a mono-rhyme, variable rhymes, or without rhyme. This gives it a wider scope of formal variation than is possible in *ʿamudi* poetry, and yet at the same time it remains recognisably poetry for non-expert audiences because of the maintenance of the verse foot. Some consider *tafʿila* and *al-shiʿr al-hurr* different names for the same genre, reflecting mid-twentieth-century free verse that relies on a variable metre (e.g. Abdel Sabour 1972; Dunqul 2005; Fakhreddine 2016). Today, some others equate *shiʿr hurr* with free verse, that is, poetry that dispenses with a recognisable rhythm but maintains a verse structure.

Tafʿila/free verse was scandalous when it emerged. From the 1960s, conservative Egyptian critics were offended by some emerging poets' use of the new technique together with symbolism derived from the Qurʾan and pre-Islamic mythology (Moussa-Mahmoud 1996; Toorawa 2004). From the conservative critics' point of view, such poetic innovation threatened both Arabic language and Muslim faith. It was thus not form alone that caused debate; rather, specific poetic forms were associated with specific politics and ethics. However, this association only lasted until the once experimental form became established and popularised. Today, *tafʿila*/free verse with metre has become the mainstream form of poetry in Egypt. It is no longer clearly associated with any political or ethical stance in particular. Authors of free verse who once were controversial – such as Salah Abdel Sabour (1931–1981) and Amal Dunqul (1940–1983) – have been included in most (but not all, especially not schoolbook) versions of the Egyptian national canon of poetry. But the accusation lives on, now attached to prose poetry.

Prose poetry (*qasidat al-nathr*) emerged as a dedicated genre in Arabic in around 1960 in the literary circles of Lebanon and Syria, promoted in particular by Adonis and Unsi al-Hajj (Fakhreddine 2016). It has become increasingly popular in literary circles in Egypt since the 1980s and 1990s, but remains a distinctly highbrow and contested poetic form in comparison to the mainstream canonical understanding of poetry as 'measured and rhymed speech that points at a meaning' (Furani 2012: 4). Among Arabic poets and critics, there is little agreement about what constitutes prose poetry proper. One view defines it as all poetry that dispenses with a recognisable verse foot or rhythm (e.g. Furani 2012:

34, 212–213), distinguished from the metred free verse of *tafʿila*, and from classical poetry that relies on canonical metres and the double verse form. Others propose a stricter definition that distinguishes prose poetry from all poetry with the verse form, thereby creating a fourth, residual category of free verse without metre. According to the introduction to an anthology of translated and Arabic prose poetry (Al-Janabi 2015, referring to Bernard 1959), prose poetry is based on a prose paragraph that is brief, required for itself, and does not refer to what is outside it. In practice, however, few prose poems meet these strict criteria – including works by poets who subscribe to this definition.[1]

Whatever the definition, prose poetry remains the most controversial Arabic poetic form today. Unlike *tafʿila*, which merely adapts the canonical understanding of poetry, prose poetry seeks to transform it, and by so doing threatens to unsettle distinctions between genres of speech that have great political and religious significance (Fakhreddine 2016: 248). Non-specialist audiences often don't recognise it as poetry. Whenever authors of prose poetry venture to symposia and circles dominated by conservative tastes, this commonly results in heated debates, literary nationalist arguments about the unique character of Arabic language for which music and rhythm are indispensable, and claims such as 'prose poetry is a conspiracy against the Noble Qurʾan'. It is a travelling trope and has been around for some time. Khaled Furani cites a Palestinian poet who argued that an attack on traditional poetic forms was an attack on 'Arab *thawabit* (certainties)': 'You can destroy a people in one of two ways: its religion or its poetry' (Furani 2012: 86–87).

Much appears to be at stake. This is also evident in Egypt's prominent history, since at least the mid-twentieth century, of 'culture wars' in which Islamist movements and the state-sponsored al-Azhar University have been pitted against secular intelligentsias. Among early notable incidents was the scandal about Naguib Mahfouz's novel *Awlad Haratina* (*The Children of the Alley*: Mahfouz 1996; for context, see Shoair 2017) in 1959. It has been followed by numerous other prominent cases (Mehrez 2010). The state has played an ambiguous role, co-opting those same secularist intelligentsias in the name of 'enlightenment', presenting itself as a guardian of conservative values and faith, and exercising censorship and political oppression in a number of areas (Abaza 2010). Over the past years,

1 Montaser Abdel Mawgoud, whose work I discuss in this chapter, subscribes to this strict definition of prose poetry. His third volume of poetry – the one that got him into trouble – consists of prose paragraphs that few Egyptian readers would recognise as poetry, but which according to Montaser do not qualify as prose poetry proper because when read together they create a narrative whole, and because they are full of intertextual references to religious scripture.

there have been many media scandals, censorship cases, and lawsuits over 'defamation of religions' (*izdiraʾ al-adyan*).[2] Poetry and poetics thus have a contested history that resonates with key contested issues of societal values, faith, and political power in a way that appears to be linked with the 'problem-space' (Agrama 2012) of secularism and secularity. But what exactly is this link, and is the secularity of poetry and literature really the main factor behind their propensity to instigate scandals and conflicts?

A bubble of world literature

At the end of October 2015, the Tanta International Poetry Festival was held for the first time, bringing together poets from Egypt, other Arab countries, Europe, and Latin America. An initiative of the poets Mahmoud Sharaf from Tanta, and Montaser Abdel Mawgoud from Alexandria, the festival followed a new format for literature festivals, in which readings are not held in dedicated cultural spaces but instead go 'to the people' in schools, universities, cafés, and streets.

The organisers' aim of reaching a non-specialist audience was not easily accomplished. Few events had a substantial general audience. The Arabic poets in attendance all wrote either free verse or prose poetry. A poet from Cairo told me that at one of the better attended lectures at Tanta University, a student sitting next to him in the audience had commented to him: 'But what they're saying isn't poetry, right?' Controversy in the literary circles of Tanta had preceded the festival because some local poets had complained about being excluded from the festival. As a compromise, an event dedicated to young local poets was held on the last day of the festival, and it was well attended by the young poets and their friends.

In the years that followed, the Tanta Poetry festival has been more successful in bringing together different audiences and involving local literary circles. But in the first year, the attempt to bring avant-garde poetry into contact with a provincial city left the milieus involved largely intact. The invited guests from

2 Egyptian Penal Code § 98.I criminalises defaming or showing contempt (*izdiraʾ*) for 'heavenly religions', i.e. Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Often dubbed a 'blasphemy law' in English-language media, it sanctions public acts and expressions that offend religious sentiments and disturb social peace. With very few exceptions, sentences based on the law have been handed down for expressions that offend Muslim sensibilities (*Eshhad* 2016). The law is a prominent case of a secular legal norm that in practice guards the sensitivities of the followers of the majority faith (Mahmood 2009).

Egypt and abroad had a good time together and crafted networks and friendships. The Ministry of Culture had its representative event with pompous opening and closing ceremonies. Young local poets had their dedicated symposium. Senior local poets who were not invited to the festival could feel safely confirmed that the organisers did not value really good poetry. Few inhabitants of the city came into contact with the festival at all.

Two themes were conspicuously absent at the festival. The first was politics. Egyptian poets at the festival were divided into supporters and critics of the regime, and especially the latter avoided talking about politics. Another absence was more consensual. The poets at the festival largely shared a secular approach, be it in regard to their lifestyles, their politics, or the kind of poetry they produced. They employed poetic language in experimental ways that highlight human innovation, transformation, and uncertainty. Their poetry differed greatly from what Khaled Furani (2012: 66) has described as the traditional discipline of classical *ʿamudi* poetry – traditional not simply in the sense of sticking to old ways, but in the sense of a moral commitment to an assemblage of language, aesthetics, and divine power. This is not to say that prose poetry cannot be spiritual, even pious. The work of Montaser Abdel Mawgoud, to which I devote more attention later, certainly is. But the milieu of world literature that came together in an international poetry festival carefully dealt with religion as a non-issue.

Michael Allan (2016) argues that despite its striving to unite humanity, 'world literature' is a limited space, guarded by a fundamentally secular understanding of what counts as literature. According to Allan, the unmarked category of 'literature' is secular not simply because the literati are not very religious (although in the literary avant-gardes of Egypt this is also often the case), but because what gets recognised as world literature involves forms of reading and writing based on a this-worldly understanding of humanity – to the exclusion of reading and writing in a religious framework. However, while this may be true of Egypt's cosmopolitan literary avant-garde, it is not generally true of literature in Egypt. At literary events in more conservative scenes (highbrow and popular alike), an understanding of literature limited and guided by faith is common, even prevalent. This understanding can gain international recognition and financial success as well, mainly thanks to highly remunerated poetry competitions and prizes in the Arab Gulf states that often promote classical and mainstream poetic tastes.

'Literature' in the sense reproduced by international literature festivals and avant-garde milieus can most successfully maintain the illusion of its unmarked normality when its communicative bubble remains intact, protected from conversations and claims that may challenge or reject it. This doesn't mean that people in these circles are necessarily satisfied with it being so. The first edition of the Tanta International Poetry Festival was designed to move out of the bubble and

enter a conversation with wider audiences. However, this conversation had an avoidance of politics and religion as its precondition. Furthermore, paradoxically enough, the festival was a pleasant experience for most participants because the attempted conversation with wider audiences did not go very far.

This was even true between different groups of participants. Employees of the Ministry of Culture who were responsible for the logistics mostly cultivated a formal, pompous style of address that stood in a marked contrast to the understatement that most poets invited to the festival cultivated in their recitals. At one event, held at a private coffee shop and bookshop, a moderator from the Ministry of Culture presented the speakers through long speeches in rather overarticulated Classical Arabic with many ornamental expressions, quotations, and moral lessons. One of the poets she presented was S.F., an Iraqi living in the Philippines. His poetry was in Classical Arabic but void of ornament, and his style recital understated, intentionally close to ordinary language – which stood in in stark contrast to the moderator's style. In the discussion, he said that he found it difficult to identify as an Iraqi, and questioned whether Iraq really exists anyway. The moderator intervened in an apparent attempt to sooth him: 'It shall return! It shall return, God willing.' S.F. replied dryly: 'And if He wills not?' The sarcasm of his comment was lost on the moderator, who continued her carefully rehearsed performance. Afterwards, once left among themselves, invited festival participants poked fun at grammatical errors the moderator made in her Classical Arabic oratory.

Two quite different aesthetics and attitudes towards literature and language met but did not collide in this event. Their encounter caused some friction, but it was sufficiently softened by politeness during the event and by ridicule in private conversations after the event. But sometimes communicative bubbles burst. This can be troublesome, even dangerous, as became evident on one occasion.

On the second day of the festival, Mukhtar and I attended a workshop titled 'The state of poetry in Egypt', which had been organised by the Alexandria Library in conjunction with the festival. Montaser Abdel Mawgoud was among the participants. In an opening speech, H.S. from Cairo summarised the state of literary critique, supporting prose poetry as the poetic form that commands the openness necessary to give a literary account of a changing world. The next speaker, F.A. from the southern Egyptian city of Qena, argued on transformation as the key concept. When writing, he explained, you transform into a different being. He saw the main problem facing contemporary poetry as being the limited education of the audiences: because of the classical focus of university curricula, even literature students were unable to understand the poetry of Salah Abdel Sabour, who today is among the uncontested masters of modernist *taf'ila* poetry.

The debate might have well continued as a safe and well-worn debate among writers about how to deal with commercial popular culture and the limited societal reach of highbrow literature. But the discussion took a different turn through the intervention of two men who introduced themselves as professors at the al-Mansoura branch of the al-Azhar University. One of them questioned the principle of openness proclaimed by the speakers on the podium. Instead, he saw the problem of 'the overthrowing of identity'. 'Identity' (*al-huwiya*) in the Azhari professor's usage did not mean just any kind of identity. It is an established political and religious shorthand for the demand that Egyptian society, culture and politics must be clearly and firmly Islamic. The idea of openness and transformation without clear moral guidelines was for him tantamount to the overthrowing of the Islamic foundations of society and its values. He specifically took issue with prose poetry, questioning the need for poetic innovation: 'Does *ʿamudi* poetry lack the capacity to express some things, or is this the poet's shortcoming?'

A debate about identity followed. Dr M., the other of the two Azhari professors, intervened to link the question of identity with the question of the moral purpose and message of literature:

> For example, in writing about sexual harassment: if the poet writes of what is blameworthy, does he increase the vice (*radhila*), or does he present a critique and attack the vice?

The moderator of the session interrupted: 'Is that the role of poetry?'

> Dr M.: The creative producer (*mubdiʿ*) belongs to the elite of society. Therefore, if he writes about vice and leaves it at that, it is as if he reinforced it. Second, as related to Islam and openness/open-mindedness (*tafattuh*): the fault is not in the thing but how it is used. There is a difference between the affairs of religion (*din*) and this world (*dunya*). In religion there are certainties (*thawabit*) that do not change. But 'You are more knowledgeable about your world' [a saying of the Prophet Muhammad]. However, openness does not mean infringing on the certainties.

S.A., a poet from Cairo, got angry and tried to interrupt Dr M., while F.A. suggested we should think of identities as multiple:

> F.A.: Estrangement (*ghurba*) is something fundamental for the poet. Simply by writing, he is in a state of estrangement from his ordinary life, also language-wise. We carry tens of voices: all those I was influenced by but with whom I cannot speak. Identity is identities, elements; each element has its specifics. Some of them are fixed/firm (*thabita*).
>
> The first Azhari professor: Identity is fixed/firm (*thabita*); the shape changes.
>
> S.A.: What brought religion into this!?

The first Azhari professor: Are we not Muslims first of all?

S.A.: Not me! I'm Egyptian and I'm Muslim. Egyptian first!

F.A. did not support S.A.'s nationalist identitarian stance, but instead went on to argue that identity has moving and stable parts, and requires continuous struggle (which the Azharis found somewhat more agreeable), and insisted that humans have a 99 per cent shared human identity. But S.A., who had become very agitated, argued there was a link between language and alienation that came from two directions: from reciting the Qurʾan in a Gulf Arabic accent to youths writing in *Franco* (Arabic in Latin letters). 'Your identity is lost in the middle,' she concluded. H.O., a poet from the local literary scene of Tanta, joined the debate and gave a long presentation on literary concepts, relating them to Sufi and other religious concepts, and finally arguing in support of 'identity' and religion as a framework of truth and certainty: 'there are certainties (*thawabit*), such as that we are below on Earth and God is above us'. He was interrupted because participants from Alexandria and Cairo had to catch their train, and the workshop ended without conclusion.

Among the festival guests who stayed in Tanta, the discussion continued for a long while afterwards. Montaser described it as the worst symposium he had ever experienced. S.A. was furious: 'I run into such people [meaning the two Azharis] often and they always know how to ruin everything. Their presence was intended as a provocation.' F.A., in contrast, said that it was wrong to get so agitated. The reply should have been calm, without allowing the debate on *thawabit* and identity they opened to dominate the discussion: 'When it resulted in commotion, they won.'

The people who participated in this debate were not simply divided into religious and secular camps. The positions were more plural, including F.A.'s postmodern humanism, S.A.'s Egyptian nationalism, and H.O.'s search for a union of creativity and piety. The Azhari professors challenged two of the key implicit terms under which they could join in a friendly debate: first, the appreciation of literary expression and innovation as valuable in their own right, and second, the inclusion of soft religious identitarian claims and the exclusion of strong ones. The Azhari professors won, not in the sense that they would have convinced anybody of their stances, but in the sense that they broke the bubble of secular world literature in which nationalist and cosmopolitan, modernist and postmodern visions could coexist. To survive in a society where other sensibilities prevail, such visions need a selective audience and the exclusion of certain divisive issues. There are places where secular modes of reading of the kind ana-

lysed by Allan (2016) successfully silence other modes, but they are rarely found in Egypt.

The selectiveness and exclusiveness that are necessary to enable certain conversations evidently casts a shadow of doubt on the aspirations of modernist and postmodern avant-gardes for openness and communication with a generic humanity – aspirations that were clearly stated in the workshop. In this regard, I agree with Allan. But the Azhari professors did not challenge prose poetry because of its 'secular provinciality' (Allan 2016: 130). They took the demand for openness and open-endedness seriously, and rejected it because it would leave vice unchallenged and relativise the firm grounds of their project of revitalising and purifying Islamic identity.[3]

'More dangerous than those who call for unbelief'

Why would two professors of al-Azhar travel from a different city to an otherwise poorly attended literary workshop? They had come with the specific intention to meet Montaser. During a break in the workshop, they spoke with him and pressed him about his third poetry volume, which in their view was opposed to the Qurʾan. They demanded that he withdraw the work in a manner that he understood as a threat. He was so frightened by the encounter that he did not attend any public literary events for more than a year.

Born in 1973, Montaser Abdel Mawgoud has been active in the literary scene since the early 1990s, and while his work is not known to wider audiences, he has gained recognition in the avant-garde circles of Cairo and Alexandria, and has been invited to some literature festivals in Europe and Latin America. Until 2016, he worked as a teacher of Arabic and Islam in a government school,[4] and lived with his family in a low-income informal area in Alexandria. Writing has been his

3 This was not the last incident of its kind at the Tanta International Festival of Poetry. At the closing ceremony in 2020, a local poet in the audience objected to the form and content of poetry recited by the Alexandrian poet Amina Abdallah, and after the event, wrote a post on social media in which he accused her and the festival of conspiring against the Islamic faith and the Arabic language, and demanded a public apology. In contrast to Montaser, who did all he could to avoid public exposure and escalation, Amina Abdallah chose to publicly confront the accusations, which is in line with her long-term record as a poet who writes in explicit opposition to religious conservatism and conventional gender roles. For an account of the incident, see Mamduh 2020.
4 Arabic teachers are always also Islamic religion teachers in Egyptian government schools, which is telling of the intimate link between faith, doctrine, and language.

passion since his youth, and he has actively cultivated and developed his writing skills since his school years.

In 2012, Montaser released his third volume (*diwan)* of prose poetry titled *Thammat ashyaʾ lan yujarribaha (There Are Things He Will Not Try,* Abdel Mawgoud 2012). Written in a dense, poetic prose without a verse structure, the volume offers an imaginative retelling of key events from the Qurʾan and the Bible, featuring the interactions and (inner) struggles of heroes and anti-heroes of the scripture, starting with God, Satan, and Adam, and continuing to include many more in a poetic account of the relationship between humans, prophets, and the Creator. *There Are Things He Will Not Try* can be read as an invitation to put oneself into the position of the key figures of the Scriptures. For example, Satan's fall from grace is told from the point of view of an exchange of glances between Satan and Adam:

خلق الله آدم ونفخ فيه من روحه، بسجود الملائكة له وقف الأسير، نظر ناحية العرش، لم تمنعه حجب الضباب الكثيف أن يستشعر سعادة الرب، نظر ناحية الملائكة الساجدين فانتابه شماتة صغيرة متذكرا كراهيتهم له، ثم حجد آدم بنظرة طويلة وحين التقت الأعين قلب آدم الأسماء كلها بحثا عن اسم لأثر تلك النظرة في نفسه.

علم الأسير أن لن يستوقفه أحد، هبط مثقلا بفكرة خلوده. لم يخطط لشيئ بعد ولسبب ما تذكر قصره الرخامي وما فيه من شموع لن تشعل بعد اليوم.

.

> God created Adam and blew into him some of His spirit. As the angels bowed down before Adam, the Prisoner [i.e. Satan] remained standing. He looked towards the throne; the dense veils of mist did not prevent him from sensing the happiness of the Lord; he looked towards the prostrating angels, and a little malicious joy befell him as he remembered their hatred for him; then he cast upon Adam a long glance of rejection, and when their eyes met, Adam examined all names in search of the name for the effect of that glance on him.
>
> The Prisoner knew that no one would stop him; he descended, burdened with the thought of his immortality; he planned nothing yet, and for some reason he remembered his palace of marble and the candles in it that would not be lit after today. (Abdel Mawgoud 2012: 22; my translation)

Some poems contain direct intertextual references to the Qurʾan, such as the following poem about the encounter between Moses and al-Khidr. Their encounter as told in the Qurʾan (18:65–82), has been a major source of inspiration for Sufi thought and wider literary imagination (see Toorawa 2014), because in it Moses, representing prophecy and the Shariʿa, is given a lesson by God to acknowledge his ignorance of deeper truths that are known by al-Khidr. In the original version of the story, God sends Moses (Musa) to meet a servant of God more knowledge-

able than Moses.[5] Although he is told to ask no questions, Moses keeps asking and questioning al-Khidr's acts that seem unjustified and unreasonable to him, until al-Khidr reveals to Moses the hidden reasons that prove his acts righteous, and says 'this is the parting between me and you' (Qurʾan 18:78). The poem tells a slightly altered version. Qurʾanic phrases in the poem are in italics in the translation; they are not marked in the Arabic original.

عندما تلقى رجلا أوتي من العلم ما لا تستطيع عليه صبرا، فلا تسأله أن يعلمك، بل لا تسأله عن أي شيء... فقط اتبعه محافظا على مسافة تسمح لك بتنسم عبير رقته وهو يخرق السفينة، والانتباه لآلية الموحى إليه بقتل صبي كان سيرهق أبويه كفرا، فإذا ما استترت بنور تخليص الأعمال بمسبباتها الأولى؛ سبقته يداك إلى إقامة جدار كان نقضه هزيمتك وفوز قرية من اللئام، فيبس في وجهك ثم يخبرك معتذرا:... وهذا أيضا فراق بيني وبينك....

ثم يمضي بعباءة خضراء تزحم خيالك كلما تذكرت أرض مصر.

> When you meet a man blessed with knowledge *for which you could not hold patience*, do not ask him to teach you, and do not ask him about anything ... only follow him, maintaining a distance that allows you to inhale the scent of his graciousness while he makes a hole in the ship, and pay attention to the technique of the one inspired by revelation to kill a boy who w*ould have oppressed his parents with unbelief*; and once you gained insight into the light that justifies the acts through their original causes, your hands preceded his in building up a wall,6 the collapse of which would be your defeat and the victory of a village of lowly folks; and so he smiles cheerfully into your face and tells you in the way of an excuse: ... *This*, too, *is the parting between me and you*...
>
> Then he passes in a green cloak that besets your imagination every time you remember the land of Egypt. (Abdel Mawgoud 2012, 69; my translation)

5 The servant of God is not named in the Qurʾan but is identified as al-Khidr in Muslim traditions.

6 This refers to the third strange act of al-Khidr. When he and Moses arrive in a village where the inhabitants refuse to offer them hospitality, al-Khidr goes and restores a wall that is about to collapse, and does not ask the villagers for a wage. In the Qurʾanic text (Qur.18:82), he explains his act to Moses: 'And as for the wall, it belonged to two orphan boys in the town; and there was under it a treasure belonging to them; and their father was a righteous man, and your Lord intended that they should attain their age of full strength and take out their treasure as a mercy from your Lord [which is why the wall should be restored to stand until then]. And I did it not of my own accord. That is the interpretation of that for which you could not hold patience.' (Translation freely after Khan 1996; for the original verse and other possible translations, see The Qurʾanic Arabic Corpus, http://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=18&verse=82.)

On 23 February 2017, I met Montaser for an interview in an apartment in Alexandria to which he and his family had temporarily relocated to stay away from trouble.[7] He told me that his aim in the book had been 'neither to sacralise the sacred, nor to defame it, but rather to act upon the principle of [...] an aesthetic exploration of the religious heritage'. His aesthetic search turned out to be much more controversial than he anticipated, however.

Contemporary Arabic poets have often been drawn to Qurʾanic themes, forms, and phrases. When they have done so in ways that are not clearly devotional and reverent, this has repeatedly resulted in scandals. There is a widespread sensibility in Egypt and elsewhere in the Muslim world against any sort of playful or creative retelling of the Qurʾan, and an even stronger antipathy towards changing parts of it and attributing words to God (Wild 2001; Toorawa 2004). This sensibility is also widely shared among Egyptian Muslims who are not supporters of Islamist movements. However, Islamist groups have played a prominent role in Egypt's recent 'culture wars', which have involved many lawsuits and censorship cases. The most effective form of censorship is societal pressure. With the exception of members of the upper classes who can enjoy the luxury of seclusion and mobility, most Egyptians whose acts or writings are interpreted by others as heretical or as unbelief must continue to cope with conservative views within their family, at work, when they interact with their neighbours, when doing business, and when they take their children to school.

Because the distribution of contemporary experimental poetry is so limited in Egypt, the volume did not generate public controversy – although it received positive critiques in avant-garde literary circles, which usually encourage such imaginative explorations and experimental aesthetics. However, the volume did not stay inside this bubble.

I know of the following events from Montaser's and his wife's accounts of them. Aside of my short encounter with the two Azhari professors in Tanta, I have not been in contact with his detractors, because doing so might cause him additional harm. Until his departure from Egypt, Montaser consciously avoided making the issue public because he feared that it might result in criminal charges for defamation of religions against him.

Montaser had previously been criticised for his poetry by colleagues at the school who were close to the Muslim Brotherhood. They had taken issue with a reference to masturbation in his first volume and to Christian imagery in his second volume. He told me he anticipated similar criticism with regard to his third

7 Unless otherwise indicated, all interview passages with Montaser Abdel Mawgoud cited in the following are from the same interview.

volume, but expected no further consequences. However, after reading his third volume, the same colleagues accused him of distorting the word of God. They also submitted a complaint to the school administration, stating that his poetry offended God, angels, and prophets, and that his work as a teacher of Arabic and Islam therefore constituted a threat to children's minds. They must have passed on this message to others, for Montaser began to receive threatening phone calls from withheld numbers. His wife also received phone calls and was approached by people in the market who told her that her husband was an infidel (and thus, by Islamic law, not her husband) and that she should leave him or accept the consequences. In the neighbourhood where he lived, Montaser was once stopped by two men who told him he should renounce his book, that it would be permissible to kill him as an infidel, and that he should consider this the final warning. After that, he did not leave or enter his home in the company of his wife and children, used detours when he left or returned, and sometimes slept at work. He reported the threats to the police, but the officers in the station showed no interest in protecting him. In summer 2014, he managed to get transferred to another school, but the phone calls continued. In 2016, a new complaint was filed against him. Reacting to the pressure, he took unpaid leave from his work later that year.

Montaser's situation was aggravated by the fact that he does not belong to Egypt's well-connected bourgeoisie and could not afford to relocate to a more secluded neighbourhood or to find different work. He had powerful allies, however: an international secularist community of world literature that was connected with him through literary festivals to which he had previously been invited. Through these connections, he received a small scholarship that allowed him to temporarily relocate to an anonymous middle-class neighbourhood, and in December 2017, he was able to emigrate from Egypt to Norway with the help of ICORN, a programme that supports writers and artists at risk (Frantzen 2019).

These events began to unfold in autumn 2013, shortly after the civilian government of the Muslim Brotherhood had been overthrown by a military counter-revolution. Something about his book was so disagreeable to supporters of Islamist movements that in the middle of a military coup against an Islamist president, they channelled some of their efforts towards trying to persuade and intimidate the author of a volume of highbrow poetry. Montaser had supported the 30 June movement against the Muslim Brotherhood, but he did not support the military rule that rose to power afterwards. This was not a matter of politics in the guise of theology.

Montaser paraphrased the accusations made against his work:

> There were accusations, for example: 'Why do you rewrite the contents of the holy Scripture? Don't you like the original text? Do you want to offer an alternative text?' I told them:

> 'Not at all.' Other people said: 'You attribute fabricated words (*tataqawwal*) to God, that's wrong.' [...] Others said: 'There are certain passages where you differ from the text of the Qurʾan in an evident manner.' I told them: 'That's true, I differed from it in a clear manner but I didn't contradict it in a manner concerning the Sharia (*fi amr sharʿi*).'[8] I differed from it in the depiction of a historical event, which is the encounter of al-Khidr with Moses (Musa), peace be upon him. I employed an artistic technique in my poem with al-Khidr. You know the idea of the mirror in which you see things inverted. So in the text I constantly imagine that Moses does the opposite of what he did in the Qurʾan. I imagine that he didn't ask, I imagine that he acted before al-Khidr when building the wall. In the end they still come to the same conclusion. You did all you should, but still it ends with 'the parting between me and you', because that is the nature of things. If you want to learn, you will learn from more than one field. And I left the circle open.
>
> [...]
>
> Unfortunately, most accusations come from people who are not professionals in dealing with an artistic work, they are just teachers. So they believe that what is taught in prep and secondary schools is the peak of literary creativity, and that [what I write] is opposed to it. These are the same milieus that circulate the lie that prose poetry is a conspiracy against the Noble Qurʾan. When I asked a group of those people: 'Why do you say so?' – what was their interpretation? One of them offered a very strange argument. He said that the preservation of the columnic (*ʿamudi*) form in old Arabic poetry was intended by imams and scholars of law for centuries to avoid confusing poetry with the text of the Qurʾan, which is written in the shape of a prose paragraph (*kutla nathriya*). I of course said to them that the Andalusian poets who produced the *muwashahat* disjointed the structure of those poetic columns.[9] He said: 'No, there you are talking about something else, those are all virtuous imams like Ibn Hazm.'[10]

In these accusations, issues of form and content are closely intertwined. Playfully reimagining passages from the Scripture and showing angels, prophets, God, and Satan as complex characters was – from the point of view of conservative readers – a severe break with the respect and awe that worshippers should show towards the words of God. At the same time, the style and written shape of prose poetry also confused and threatened the distinction between poetry and revelation. This

8 *Sharʿ*, synonym of shariʿa, is used by Montaser here in the wider sense of normative practice, including worship and ritual as well as norms of human interaction that may be translated as 'law'.
9 *Muwashahat* (sg. m*uwashah*) is a style of poetry developed in medieval Muslim Spain. It uses changing rhythms and rhymes, combines classical and dialectal Arabic, and does not rely on the double verse and the canonical sixteen Arabic metres. Because of their formal variation and flexibility, Andalusian *muwashahat* have been drawn upon as inspiration and tradition by experimental Arabic poets of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.
10 Abu Muhammad Ali Ibn Ahmad Ibn Saʿid Ibn Hazm (994–1064 CE), author of the famous treatise on love *The Ring of Dove* (*Tawq al-hamama*, Ibn Hazm 1953).

enforced the impression that the volume is an attempt to rewrite divine revelation. A less explicit, but important contributing factor was the medium of a book that gave the poetry gravity and importance that the spoken word may not have (this was why Montaser was criticised by his colleagues for mentioning masturbation in his first volume, although he used words far less explicit than those that might be used, for example, in a men's gathering in a café).

In the interview, Montaser reiterated the common claim in avant-garde circles that most Egyptians do not know how to read literary works the right way (see Allan 2016). But his detractors did read his volume – in a way that they understood to be the right one. And although the accusation later escalated to that of unbelief, his colleagues initially accused him of subverting faith from within – which in their view was possibly even worse than unbelief:

> *Montaser*: One of the fundamentalists who gave the book a thorough reading said to me: 'The title itself is problematic. [...] 'There are things he will not try' – [...] do you mean the angel?'[11] I said: 'That's right.' He said: 'So you alter the word of our Lord and you want to say that the angels who are created from light can't do something and humans can do it?' I told him that I'm not altering the word of our Lord and that's really how it is, an angel can't do things a human can do, and vice versa. He told me: 'Like this, you are more dangerous than those who call for unbelief [...], because you try to destroy religion from within and with its own language.' I asked him: 'Are you serious?' He said: 'Yes indeed, and if you didn't realise this, you should ask our Lord for forgiveness [...], you are a sinner inadvertently, so withdraw the copies and burn them and forget that book.'
>
> *Samuli*: I really feel that that's what makes the poem so controversial, because it doesn't enter religion from outside; it takes the religious scriptures and stories and lives with them.
>
> *Montaser*: Yes, lives with them.
>
> *Samuli*: And when you look at the history of the Christian and Islamic religions, you always find the heretic (*zindiq*) more dangerous than the infidel (*kafir*).
>
> *Montaser*: That's right, although he [the heretic] is not an infidel.
>
> *Samuli*: Although he's not an infidel. That's because he's close to you and can confuse you and your certainty (*yaqin*) in a way an infidel can't.

11 The volume concludes with a narrative sequel of poems about an angel who is commanded by God to send a series of dreams to a human, whereby the human is eventually confirmed in his faith but the angel is left longing for the human's friendship. 'There are things he will not try' is the angel's recognition that there is a sphere of human freedom that he as an angel cannot share (Abdel Mawgoud 2012: 93).

> *Montaser*: That's right, and because he uses the same means (*asalib*) and language as you do. And that's what caused the problem.

Here, some clarification of terms is needed. Why call Montaser's poetry heretic and not secular? After all, a number of researchers (Asad 2003; Furani 2012; Allan 2016) have argued that contemporary poetic forms are inherently secular. In his ethnographic research with contemporary Palestinian poets, Khaled Furani (2012) defines the secular as a peculiar quality of modern states, power, and language that has less to do with how religious people are and what lifestyles they have, and more to do with the kind of position religion is relegated to in a world structured by ideas such as progress and freedom:

> The secularity of these shifts resides in what poets do with words [...], which profoundly resonates with the modern and contingent career of the secular as an ontology and epistemology of distancing from what or whom it anoints as 'religious'.
>
> [... T]he secular lives in the grammar of our modern being and forms, not only beliefs (theistic or otherwise), but also in conditions in which [...] experiences of the oneness of human action splinters into autonomous realms. (Furani 2012: 14–15)

Thinking in the terms proposed by Furani, the Tanta International Festival of Poetry was secular indeed. It treated religion as something distinct from literature, and avoided themes and discussions that might jeopardise that safe distinction. Montaser's third volume of poetry, in contrast, is something else, and something more dangerous. The volume clearly does not distance itself 'from what it anoints as "religious"' (Furani 2012: 14). On the contrary, it deals with divine revelation head on. Practically every page of it deals intimately with God, creation, and revelation. And rather than splintering human action into autonomous realms, the volume connects the conventionally separate realms of divine speech, and human poetry and prose.

Furani's idea of a oneness of human action that existed before secularism splintered it appears rather nostalgic, and would probably not withstand historical inquiry. And in any case, different ways to unite and divide were at work in Montaser's poetry, at the Tanta poetry festival, in the intervention of the Azhari professors, in the reactions of Montaser's colleagues to his work, and in the support he received through his international network.

In contrast to secularism (*ʿalmaniya*), which is a way to restrict or evade the social and political power of God-oriented faith, and also in contrast to (accused or actual) unbelief (*kufr*) or atheism (*ilhad*), heresy (*zandaqa* or *hartaqa*) means expressing or practising a faith in a way that others sharing the same faith find misguided, wrong, and dangerous. *There Are Things He Will Not Try* is an expli-

citly pious work written by a Muslim who explores the divine revelation recognised by Muslims. This is why it was understood as a heretical attack from within by some of its readers, which is a more offensive and exposed position.

In October 2019, I visited Montaser and his family in Norway, where they had moved at the end of 2017. I gave him a summary in Arabic of an earlier version of this chapter that had just been published (Schielke 2019). He had recently published his fourth collection of poems *Fi madih al-baladat al-saghira* (*In praise of small places*, Abdel Mawgoud 2019), and it was receiving a positive critical echo. In line with Montaser's striving to write prose poetry as a strictly self-containing genre, it is a less accessible and more abstract work than *There Are Things He Will Not Try*. Montaser pointed at the paradox (in his view) that his new collection contains far more dangerous ideas on religion than the previous one did, and yet he released the book with what he described as a conservative publisher in Jordan, and neither they nor anybody else objected. One of the poems (Abdel Mawgoud 2019: 24–25) imagines a new, peculiar, and unobtrusive religion that the narrator is invited to join; another (p. 40) reflects about faith, unbelief, indecision, and the terror of being able to make up one's mind; a third (p. 41) sketches a scene of resurrection where the resurrected question God instead of being questioned by Him. He argued: 'You can communicate more dangerous ideas in the context of a philosophical book like *In Praise of Small Places*.' And this indeed distinguishes heresy from philosophical thought experiments. *There Are Things He Will Not Try* addresses the heart of religious certainties and enters a dialogue with God, prophets, and Satan. Most gravely, it does so through an intertextual engagement with the Qurʾan. That is in itself far more heretic and dangerous than any ideas one may develop in a philosophical context and genre that maintains its separation from Scripture. Montaser's third diwan has more heretic potential, while his fourth diwan enjoys more secular leeway.

A postmodern heresy

The accusation that prose poetry is a conspiracy against the Noble Qurʾan is grounded in a suspicion that underneath the seemingly inoffensive secularity of the prose poem looms an abyss of heretical imagination. Experimentation in form appears as an invitation to a path of moral and theological error. Of course there is no real conspiracy; but form, morals, and theology are linked indeed.

In my reading of the work of Talal Asad (1986: 15), orthodoxy is not a given position, but a relationship of power where one side in a debate is able to establish its way to relate with God as correct, accepted, and authoritative. Conse-

quently, heresy is an unauthorised way to relate to God. Montaser's work is heretical (or heterodox) in the sense that it infringed on an intersection of sensibilities among conservative readers. On a theological level, it produces a poetic imagination of the human–God relationship that challenges its hierarchic nature, which goes against the grain of societally orthodox and doxic understandings of that relationship and its aesthetic dimensions. On a formal level, it infringes upon hegemonic lines of division between revelation and poetry, literary imagination and religious truth that are produced by both secular institutions as well as God-fearing traditions of reading and writing. These two dimensions together made Montaser's work more dangerous than unbelief in the opinion of one of his readers.

Heresy is not simply negative, however. It adds something new: a new perspective, new ideas, new ways of doing things, speaking, or feeling. It is not by coincidence that one of the concepts for heresy in Islamic vocabulary is novelty or innovation (*bidʿa*, see Fierro 1992).

There Are Things He Will Not Try has indeed the quality of moral and aesthetic novelty or innovation, insofar that it imaginatively adjusts and rethinks the way in which humans communicate with God. It transforms an authoritarian relationship of revelation between God the speaker and the human listener, into a dialogical relationship where humans have the power to influence the line of revelatory communication by means of their imagination. This imaginative move has far-reaching theological consequences. By empowering humans as participants in a dialogue with God, it unsettles sensitively guarded spiritual and societal certainties (*thawabit*) about how humans should relate to God – and by extension other humans. These include respect and awe for God's absolute authority over humans; a corresponding respect for divinely legitimated human authorities; a proper emotional state of gratitude, trust, and fear that humans should express to God; and moral norms regarding sexuality, gender, societal reproduction, rights and obligations, community relations, and the relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims. This is what Muslim Egyptians usually mean when they speak about certainties (*thawabit*). Importantly, *thawabit* do not refer to subjective certainty, which is *yaqin* in Arabic. *Thawabit* is the plural form of *thabit*, which means firm, fixed, and unchanging. *Thawabit* are objective certainties outside and independent of human deliberation. From a conservative or activist Muslim point of view, subjective certainty (*yaqin*) relies on God's objective certainties (*thawabit*) being beyond doubt, and is guaranteed and realised by humans' active submission to the power of God. This vision is not the prerogative of committed religious activists. It is a vast conservative societal mainstream that can go hand in hand with militarist nationalism, and it saturates most state institutions even when those institutions and their employees are simultaneously

involved in the secular practice of subjecting religion to the primacy of the nation state.

Furthermore, Montaser's poetic text is more than literary, in the sense that it strives to unite the languages and genres of poetry and revelation. This was explicit in the original working title of the volume, *The Bible Written by Me*, which Montaser had to change before publication because the publisher deemed it too controversial. In a conservative understanding, the division between revelation and poetry can be crossed in only one direction: the revelation can and should inspire and guide poetic imagination and language. Confusing this division means crossing it in both directions, so that poetic imagination can compete with theological reason, and poets can speak back to God and prophets. The gravity of this step is echoed both in the accusations of altering the scripture Montaser faced, as well as in his colleague's claim that poetry needed to be clearly marked as different from the Qurʾan.

Heretical Islamic ideas about humans, God, and prophecy have a history almost as old as Islam itself (Jumá 2007; al-Maʿarri 2016). Montaser's poetry carries echoes of that tradition, but it is more explicitly grounded in an international literary genre that was first developed by francophone authors in the nineteenth century and that spread through the network of secular world literature in the twentieth century (al-Janabi 2015). This is reflected in the names he referred to as sources of inspiration during the interview, which include internationally known authors of prose poetry in Arabic and foreign languages.[12] The heretical potential of his poetry is thus situated in a distinctly postmodern and cosmopolitan tradition. But unlike some other poets in this tradition, Montaser does not strive to marginalise religious scriptures and the power of God over humans in his writing. Instead, in *There Are Things He Will Not Try*, he connects a cosmopolitan postmodern tradition that has romantic and modernist elements with an Islamic one, and comes up with an altered mode of communication between humans and God.

Montaser told me that in his youth he began writing classical *ʿamudi* poetry but did not feel at ease with the genre: 'I always felt that there was a distance between me and it; this is not what I want to bring out from within myself.' In the early 1990s, he discovered prose, free verse, and especially prose poetry as forms in which he could express himself better:

12 He mentioned, among others, Yaser Abdel-Latif, Charles Baudelaire, Suzanne Bernard, Jorge Luis Borges, Max Jacob, Abdul Kader al-Janabi, Iman Mersal, Mohamed Metwalli, Abdel-Moneim Ramadan, Arthur Rimbaud, and Rifaat Sallam.

> I believe that prose poetry is connected with something important in the life of the modern human. In light of the explosion of knowledge and the communication revolution, who among us can count the things that are certain (*yaqiniya*) in our lives? You will find out that they are very few. And the more you read, the fewer the certainties (*al-ashyaʾ al-yaqiniya*) become; until you discover that this is the nature of the matters (*tabiʿat al-umur*); that the transient has become the constant now. It's natural that I know nothing. This is unlike in the old, classical eras when the world was clear and things were simple. [...] So prose poetry gives you the power or the virtue of dealing as a researcher with [your] creative work and the topics you speak about. In *tafʿila* and *ʿamudi* poetry, this is not the case. [In those genres] you have to have that firm (*thabit*) stock of certainty (*yaqin*) on which you build your poem. So prose poetry is always the child of doubt, the child of uninhabited territories; and over time, you discover that it's closer to our spirit and that our spirit really does not have that clarity.

Montaser turns uncertainty into a virtue in a distinctly postmodern gesture that he links with his argument that metric styles (classical and modernist ones alike) are part of an either solid or unidirectional world, and therefore require a 'stock of certainty'. For him, these genres 'have come to a dead end' because the world is changing in a way that requires different ways of writing. He does not, however, subscribe to a postmodern abandonment of authorship. On the contrary, he expresses a romantic idea of literature as an expression of the author's self (which is commonplace in contemporary Egyptian literature). He also expresses a vision of a qualitative progression from past to present that is modernist rather than postmodern. What does distinguish him from Egyptian and Arabic literary and political modernists, though, is his affirmation of uncertainty as a positive condition.

Contrary to some other poets in his circles, faith in God is a matter of great importance for Montaser, but he emphasises that faith, too, is open ended and subject to transformation:

> [I believe] that faith is a personal matter, that I craft it and it evolves together with my consciousness, and it is not a constant (*thabit*) dogma. My faith grows up with me and changes with me. Because of that, even these certainties (*thawabit*) [of faith] are in a continuing state of change.

Montaser seeks to explore without judgement the condition of uncertainty by means of aesthetics that are grounded in an ethos of constant renewal and innovation. And yet the idea of embracing uncertainty and exploring without judgement is enabled by a number of certainties and judgements. First and explicit is an underlying trust in the human capacity to adapt, adjust, and change, along with a positive moral valuation of change, uncertainty, and open-endedness. Second and less explicit is the global context of the rapid growth in human eco-

nomic activity that has provided material resources, technologies, and organisational forms that result in diversification, transformation, sophistication, and also destruction of human ways of life – a process that also provides the political and economic resources that international literary avant-gardes require in order to exist and thrive. Third and least explicit is the institutional trust invested in the cosmopolitan milieu of world literature that provided Montaser with the means and resources to develop his poetry in a way that gains support and feedback from significant others within the milieu.[13]

The historical narrative of movement from a certain to an uncertain world that informs Montaser's search for new means of expression echoes Khaled Furani's argument about prose poetry in Palestine. According to Furani, the secular-modernist imperative to look forward and leave behind the old marginalises traditional poetic techniques and their ethical and spiritual grounding. He paraphrases the secular-modernist stance:

> To be a citizen of the secular state of the world it is necessary to question the concept of meter and the practice of sound measurement that it enables. To persist in working with meter is to be enslaved by the past, to refuse to develop, and to refuse to be a poet of secular modernity. (Furani 2012: 80)

Furani argues (2012: 168) that an important outcome of this move is the increasing divide between literary specialists and wider audiences. While a more traditional understanding of authorship linked with classical forms places poets above their audience as providers of inspiration and guidance, a modernist, secular understanding places poets ahead of their audiences in time (as is made explicit in the word *avant-garde*), making communication between poets and wider audiences not only more difficult, but also less relevant from the avant-garde poets' point of view.

Furani's analysis resonates with Montaser's claim that the open-endedness and uncertainty of the contemporary world requires appropriate literary means, which classical aesthetics do not provide. Furani also helps to understand Montaser's relative lack of concern about reaching wider audiences. However, Furani's approach does not account for Montaser's precarious position in the face of accusations of heresy and unbelief. Neither does it help us understand why Montaser's third volume of poetry was fiercely rejected by some readers while his fourth book has caused no scandal.

13 For the way doubt and questioning are grounded in taken-for-granted certainties, see Wittgenstein (1969).

The heretical potential of Montaser's poetry is grounded in secular, postmodern forms of trust, some of which he states, while others are implicit. These forms of trust are much more precarious and limited in scope, however, than the image of all-pervasive and utterly powerful secularity Furani depicts. In Furani's ethnography, the literary avant-garde and prose poetry have become 'regnant' as part of 'the secular as a dominant presence' (Furani 2012: 13); they command hegemony to define what counts as poetry, thereby 'silencing the sea' of traditional metres. (The Arabic word for poetic metre, *bahr*, also means 'sea'.) In Furani's reading, prose poetry becomes a case study of an omnipresent secular hegemony imposing itself on the world. In regard to Egypt, however, claims about 'the secular' being dominant and naturalised to the degree that it is silent, natural, and inevitable do not match with reality. Some forms of secularity have arguably become successfully naturalised in Egypt, most importantly the nation state. But the partial and contested nature of secular institutions, not to mention the precariousness of secular faiths and life-worlds, is a far cry from silent domination. This is also true of poetry. In Egypt, unlike in Furani's fieldwork in Palestine, 'the sea' of rhythmic, rhyming poetry and its accompanying spiritual foundations is far from silenced. It roars loud and remains the regnant form of poetry except on a few avant-garde islands that only make up one part of what Furani calls 'the poetic scene' (Furani 2012: 87). This is in fact a widespread feature of Arabic poetry worldwide that sets it apart from many other languages where free verse has become effectively normalised. Furani's claim about the silent dominance of prose poetry thus appears somewhat polemical, glossing over the remarkable persistence of rhyme and metre in mainstream Arabic poetry.

Allan's (2016: 130) argument about the provinciality of the secular 'world' of world literature offers a more nuanced vision. However, he locates the power to define 'literature' in one specific milieu that he presents as successfully hegemonic. I cannot judge whether this was true of Egypt in the colonial era or not. But in any case, in twenty-first-century Egypt, 'the secular state of the world' (Furani 2012: 80) is a minority niche that enjoys the privilege of symbolic power and international connectedness but does not command comprehensive cultural hegemony. In the Egyptian Writers' Union, at most events of the Ministry of Culture, and in commercially successful colloquial poetry, literature remains connected with the ethical underpinnings of the classical concept of *adab* (Jacquemond 2008; Pepe 2015), and poetry remains intimately linked with the musicality of metre and rhyme.

The way metre is used has arguably changed. Today, the flexible and accessible genre of *taf'ila* dominates over the arduous mastery of classical prosody with its formal constraints that require a longer process of learning and apprenticeship. It is also more widely appreciated by non-expert audiences that may

find classical poems too heavy for their tastes. Furani describes *tafʿila* metred free verse as an intermediate form between the classical and prose poetry in Palestine (Furani 2012: 168). In Egypt, in contrast, *tafʿila* is not an intermediate; rather, it firmly and clearly occupies the centre. *Tafʿila* is the new dominant form of poetry in a society committed to nationalist progress, the commands of God, and a globally circulated popular culture at the same time. It comes in popular and highbrow varieties, in classical and colloquial Arabic, it is good for recital and reading alike, and it is recognised as poetry by almost everybody.

Consequently, although Montaser is well connected in the cosmopolitan scene, he explicitly describes himself as a marginal writer, not only in regard to mainstream tastes and social mores, but also in regard to the mainstream of Arabic modernism, which in his view continues to search for certainties – nationalist and developmental rather than religious, perhaps, but certainties all the same.

Early twenty-first-century Egypt is witnessing a progressive erosion of hierarchies and centre-periphery relations between high and popular culture.[14] Both the standards for good literature as well as the borders of literature and non-literature have become less institutionalised and clear than they were in the twentieth century. There is ample space for a plurality of genres, including prose poetry, both highbrow and popular colloquial free verse, classical *ʿamudi* poems, songs and rap, slogans and chants, jokes, aphorisms, social media posts, blogs, novels, short stories, journalism, sermons, self-help courses, film and telenovela scripts, talk shows, comedy, and more. This uneasy and often unfriendly plurality of cultural productions and styles has been accompanied by an increasing plurality of expressions of Muslim faith especially in urban bourgeois milieus since 2011. The political, militant, and Sunni scripturalist piety movements that dominated the first decades of the Islamic revival now mingle with neoliberal self-help-cum-piety media formats that make eclectic and effective use of commercial popular culture (Moll 2018); as well as alternative spiritualities in both traditional and eclectic Sufism – partly mediated by novels such as Elif Shafak's *40 Rules of Love* (Shafak 2012; Sedgwick 2017). More controversial views in circulation include rejection of the Sunni tradition by those who embrace Shia Islam, liberal hermeneutics, irreverent speech about God and faith, and also outright atheism or non-religiosity. Many other genres resist categorisation – among them Montaser's poetry, which resonates with Sufi spiritualities, liberal hermeneutics, and Sunni scripturalism alike. Some of these currents do not unsettle conservative mores

14 This development began in the late twentieth century (Armbrust 1996), and has been accelerated during the past two decades (Jacquemond and Lagrange 2020).

and understandings of humans and God – Sufism in particular is embedded in the clientelist structures of conservative Egyptian society, and has enjoyed regime support since 2013. Others are more likely to cause scandal – most importantly Shiʿa Islam and atheism, but also some postmodern attempts to reimagine the human–God relationship, such as that by Montaser Abdel Mawgoud.

But what about those who search for explicit, firm certainties? Do poets who work with classical and modernist techniques really enjoy a comfortable 'stock of certainties' as Montaser claimed? We have to be attentive to their side of the story as well in order to better understand some of the links between literary aesthetics, moral and ethical stances, and certainty and uncertainty. Therefore, the next chapter turns to the life and work of a poet who also describes uncertainty as a key characteristic of our time – but draws different conclusions from that recognition.

8 The search for a clear vision

I wonder, were you right then, or are you right now?
In whose interest is that change?

H.I.

In 2011, the first year of our fieldwork in Alexandria, Mukhtar and I met H.I., a man who proudly described himself as a poet – although he hadn't written anything for over ten years. H.I. was born in an Upper Egyptian village in the early 1970s. After completing his university education, he moved to Alexandria to work as a teacher of Arabic and Islamic religious education in a government school. He began writing at a young age. In 2002, he published his first volume of poetry. Then he fell silent as a poet. Every time we have met him since that day at the school, he has always told us: 'There is no clear vision.'

This chapter tells the story of H.I. and his poetry, and explores literary imagination and poetic aesthetics driven by an active search for firm certainties. It is the story of a difficult and at times confusing search for a clear vision in the context of Islamist movements that promote a utopian agenda of radical change but become involved in political arrangements and tactics in ways that can compromise their radical utopian purity. My argument in conversation with H.I. follows up directly from the argument I developed in conversation with Montaser Abdel Mawgoud in Chapter 7. There, I showed how a poetic search to explore and to think differently about spiritual certainties may offend powerful societal sensibilities. I also argued that a postmodern valorisation of uncertainty cannot be absolute; it depends on certainties and forms of trust that enable it. In this chapter, I argue that, conversely, a conservative search for certainty and clarity can involve much doubt and confusion. Its key points of friction lie elsewhere, however, as do the aesthetic and moral answers it strives to find. The different paths followed by H.I. and Montaser correspond with literary aesthetics and poetic techniques in important ways. And yet with their differences, they also share an important romantic common ground, and a structuring historical experience of defeated uprisings.

Struggle

In February 2012, we met H.I. for a first formal interview. He brought us his collection (*diwan*) of poems, mostly written in classical double verse. They have diverse topics, genres, and emotional tones. Religious-political *nashids* (hymns) mingle

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with conventional odes to father and mother, and melancholic lyrical explorations of the condition of living in an unclear and uncertain world. The book – or rather booklet – was published in a small print run, and has low-quality layout and printing. It has a price printed on the back cover, but it is unlikely that it would ever have been sold. Rather, it would be distributed by the poet himself – as it was at our encounter. H.I. proudly handed to us a copy, and accompanied it with a signed dedication.

In the course of the interview, he walked us through his *diwan*. His way of presenting his work was decidedly subjective and autobiographic: he told us about the circumstances and poetic choices of each poem, linking them with his youth, education, literary socialisation, and his time in prison.

H.I.'s influential readings include Arabic classics, especially from the Abbasid period, twentieth-century classicists, and some (fewer) twentieth-century modernists.[1] He also highlighted his religious education. He memorised the Qurʾan at a young age and read religious books extensively. He was not involved in Islamist organisations, but was very interested in religious matters and discussions. In accord with the romantic baseline of twentieth-century modernism, he highlighted the lyrical, subjective grounding of his poetry:

> All my poems are subjective, and I did not speak about the other, because I consider every verse of my poems a personal image of me, and a period of my life. If I want to refresh my memories, I look at my poems.

In his early poems, a melancholic tone prevails. The first lines of one of them, *Where is the way out? (Ayn al-mafarr)* is printed in part on the back cover of the *diwan*. It is the only poem in the collection that is not in ʿamudi double verse but in *tafʿila*, modernist metred free verse. It begins as follows:

تعالى..
تعالى لنحيا ظلام الليالي
ونغرق
خلف التخوم
ضباب يعيق الأماني
سحاب يزيد الهموم

1 He mentioned by name Ilya Abu Madi, Ahmad Shawqi, Hafez Ibrahim, Abu l-Qasim al-Shabbi, al-Tijani Yusuf Bashir, Fakhri Abu l-Suʿud, AbdelSalam Ayun al-Sud, Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, AbdelMuʿti al-Hamshari, and Fawzi al-Maʿluf.

وجوم.. وجوم
تعالى..
تعالى لننظر خلف الظلام
قبور الموتى
رفات البشر

Come...
come so we may live the darkness of the nights
and drown
beyond the boundaries
a haze holds back the aspirations
clouds increase the worries
gloom... gloom
come...
come so we may look beyond the darkness
the graves of the dead
the ruins of humans
[...]
(my translation)

In the early 1990s, around the time when he wrote this poem, H.I. became involved in the literary life of Alexandria, frequenting cultural centres of the public-sector networks. But his career among Alexandria's literati was suddenly interrupted in 1994.

The early 1990s were a violent time in Egypt, marked by an Islamist insurgency that was centred in Upper Egypt. The leading movement in that insurgency was al-Gamaʿa al-Islamiya, literally 'the Islamic group'.[2] The movement was involved in terrorist attacks and guerrilla warfare against the police, Christians, and tourists. The Egyptian regime fought the uprising heavy-handedly. A whole region was under curfew and restrictions of movement, while entire villages were demolished in acts of retaliation. The death toll of the insurgency exceeded 1,400. As many as 47,000 activists and sympathisers with the movement as well as uninvolved people were detained (Naguib 2009).

2 Despite the similarity of names, al-Gamaʿa al-Islamiya is not directly related to Jamaat-i Islami, a party founded by Abu Aʿla Maududi in British India in 1941.

H.I. was not involved in the group. However, the movement was spearheaded by university students and graduates from Upper Egypt, and as a university graduate from the region he became a collateral victim of a campaign of collective suspicion and punishment.

This resulted in a traumatic experience of six years in prison, the details of which H.I. asked us not to discuss in this book. Instead, he allowed us to cite three poems (in my translation) that he composed during the time, in chronological order of composition. Following H.I.'s request, I do not provide any context.

شباب الحق

يا شباب الحق هبوا وارفعوا الإسلام دينا
وابذلوا الخير ولبوا دعوة المختار فينا
يا شباب الحق صبرا سوف تنزاح الغواية
ويكون العسر يسرا قد بدا والحق غاية
لا تقولوا قد يئسنا يا شبابا قد تسامى
نحن جند الله لسنا نرتضي البغى إماما
يا شباب الحق هيا سطروا للحق بابا
وأزيلوا عنه غيا لفقوه وارتيابا
لا تقولوا طال ليل الكفر فينا واستبد
ورفعوا القرآن نورا كي يهد الكفر هدا
يا شباب الحق كونوا في الورى نور الهداية
وانشروا العدل وقوموا وارفعوا للحق راية
لا تظنوا الليل يبقى قد بدا نور الصباح
قد رأينا الحق حقا وانطلقنا للكفاح
يا شباب الحق سيروا في ظلال وارفات
وعلى النهج استقيموا كل وعد الحق آت
سوف يأتي النصر يوما ذات وعد الحق فينا
فاذكروا الرحمن دوما وارفعوا الإسلام دينا

The youth of Truth

Move, the youth of Truth and hold high the religion of Islam
Sacrifice for the right cause and search for the call of the chosen one among us
Be patient, youth of Truth the temptation to sin will pass
Hardship will turn to ease the aim of Truth comes to sight

Don't say: we despaired
We are God's soldiers and won't
Up, the youth of Truth
Purge it from fabricated
Don't say: the night of unbelief
Raise the light of the Qurʾan
Righteous youth, be
Spread justice and stand up
Don't assume that the night would last
We have truly seen the Truth
The youth of Truth, wander
Follow the straight path
One day victory will come
So always say the name of the Merciful

Oh youth that strives for victory
accept tyrants as leaders
mark a door for the Truth
errors and from doubt
is long and powerful upon us
to demolish unbelief to the ground
the light of guidance among mankind
and raise the flag of Truth
The morning light has just appeared
and moved out to the struggle
in blooming shades
every promise of Truth will come true
as Truth has promised to us
and hold high the religion of Islam[3]

العودة

[…]
كيف النجاة إذ الضلالة والتعنت عمنا
والخير أسدل ستره والشر أصبح ديدنا
من للمآسي والشرور ومن يداوي جرحنا
طفقت سهام الذل قذف من هناك ومن هنا
[…]

Return

[...]
How to find salvation, when corruption and wilfulness surround us?
When the good dropped its protection and the evil became our custom
Who brings tragedies and evils, and who heals our wound?
Arrows of disgrace began to hit from here and there
[...]

3 In addition to meaning truth and justice, *al-Haqq* is also one of the names of God. The poem is a *nashid* (hymn) for singing composed in a simple short-beat metre (فاعلاتن فاعلاتن or described in long (-) and short (˘) syllables: - ˘ - - / - ˘ - -) that is good for singing and easy to memorise in a situation where no means of writing was available.

نقوش في سراديب المحنة

[...]

فالأمير بيننا دِيننا وشرعنا
لا تخاطبه بلا إن تعالى أو جنى
واستبد أو ظلم
حوله طاف الخدم كلهم قالوا نعم
نحن نبتغي الرضا سيدي خلاك ذم
قال ما أراه تم
قد سوا تلك الرتب في الخشوع والأدب
والنياشين التي من نحاس أو ذهب
بارك الله الخطا
وامنعوا عن غيرنا كل خير عندنا
فامنعوا حتى الدوا عنه إن لم يأتنا
جاثيا على الركب

[...]

Carvings in the catacombs of ordeal

[...]

The commander among us is our religion and law
do not say 'no' to him when he is arrogant or criminal
nor when he is a despot or oppressor
Around him the servants gathered all of them said yes
we seek to be content my lord, you are free of blame
he said: what I see, happens
They were the same: those ranks in obedience and fine manners
and the military medals made of gold and copper
God bless the steps
And ban from others all good things we have
Even ban from him his medicine unless he comes to us
bowing on his knees

[...]

Silence

In 2001, H.I. returned to an ordinary civilian life, but his view of the world was shattered:

> I entered the prison with the feeling that people have principles, but at the end [...] I knew that interests are what moves people. No matter what a person's stance and appearances, he is ruled by private, personal interests. Everybody can become an oppressor and commit any crime you can imagine, and he can find a justification for his committing of the crime. Imagine the most recent parliament. We had books and pamphlets that declared that merely participating in elections was unbelief. And now they contradict themselves, and seats in the assembly and political positions became a part of religion. That's why I said in *Puzzled questioning*: 'In the name of principles and interests the traditions changed'. (باسم المبادىء والمصالح قد تغيرت السُنن) That's concerning the religious current that changed its face for the sake of interest, and that made me ask myself: I wonder, were you right then, or are you right now? In whose interest is that change?

Soon afterwards, H.I. published his volume of poems. It was a matter of great importance for him: 'the first thing I thought of'. Then he stopped writing for over a decade. In the interview in February 2012, he was still hopeful that the revolution would at least allow for a thorough critical engagement with the Mubarak era. He had hopes to republish his small *diwan*, this time accompanied with a documentation of the circumstances in which it was written, because when it was published in 2002, it had been politically not possible to do that.

After ten years of silence as a poet, he still proudly identified as a poet, and insisted that he would make a comeback. But the time was not right:

> Until now, there is no clear vision (*ru'ya wadha*), and I'm not able to see anything certain (*thabta*) so that I could know my point of view about it. So I can't write anything. [...] Now, worldly interests rule, so if I wrote now, I would write description of the nature or the sea. The impact of literature (*adab*) must be based on a clear message. If not, it will be mockery and not literature, it will be indecency (*qillit adab*).

H.I. explicitly understood *adab* as the intersection of narrative or poetic texts and the cultivation of a conservative set of fine manners. And while he repeatedly identified as a lyrical and subjective poet, he also insisted that the subjective grounding of poetry had to result in a message, a clear vision. And yet according to H.I., such vision was nowhere around. The absence of that vision appeared to be grounded primarily in his painful encounter with militant movements and their failure to act by the principles they had once proclaimed. He had not given up his principles. The movement had.

This became even more explicit in our next interview in January 2013. As we walked to a seaside cafeteria for the interview, we spotted graffiti calling for new demonstrations on the second anniversary of the revolution. H.I. commented bitterly: 'There was a revolution? All it has accomplished is public indecency.' As we sat down in the café, we asked if he had written anything new since our last meeting. He still had not:

> If I wrote, I would only be attacking, and that is not my nature, because I'm for peace. [...] I had a lot of faith in the revolution, but now the revolution has turned into indecent exposure (*il-thawra tilaʿit ʿawra*). If I would write, it would be with irony, not seriously. Especially if I spoke about the Islamic current in particular.

The timing of H.I.'s critique of Islamist movements is remarkable. The 25 January revolution had resulted in what in the winter of 2012–2013 looked like the golden hour of Islamist politics. An Islamist president had been ruling Egypt for six months, and at that moment it still looked as if he would consolidate his rule. And yet H.I. saw the revolution as a confusing failure. He repeatedly spoke about the absence of certainties (*thawabit*) and positive change, but when we asked him what such change would involve, he was vague: 'I dream of radical change of society. But it has become impossible in every respect.'

'Haze' (*dabab*) was another word he used in conversations with us for the lack of clear vision – a word he had already used in his early poem *Where is the way out?* In both his poetry and our encounters with him, H.I. emerges as a man in search of principles and certainty who at the same time has a keen sensibility for uncertainty. His search for clear vision, it seems, has made him especially sensitive to the haze of the world he lives in. This sensibility made him principled enough that he would not overlook the hierarchies and inequalities within a movement that claimed to liberate humans from the yoke of other humans through their exclusive submission to the power of God. It also made him too principled to accept the pragmatic power games of Islamist movements after 2011. Indeed, it made him too principled to take any stance at all when all stances seemed ultimately tactical and pragmatic.

Instead, he told us, he lived in the past. He had no new poetry, but he brought us a pile of manuscripts and a cheaply printed book from the time of his youth that documented his literary becoming. He showed them to us with a sense of pride and fondness, and began reciting poems from a hardback diary dated 1410 H (*c*. 1992 CE). They tell about hope in a better future turning into confusion, about lovesickness, nostalgia for childhood, and inspiration. Next, he showed us a school notebook written in a childish handwriting. With a mixture of joy and nostalgia, he went through the pages of the notebook, stopped to recite a poem

here and there. Often, he had to stop to read more carefully because the handwriting was not clear, passages had been crossed out or changed, or were out of metre. He told us:

> Reading them makes one remember oneself when one wrote them. I like more my younger self when I wrote about everything. H.I. has changed. The vision has changed. The young writer was freer and more mobile, with less social pressure on him. But when I read old poems, I am surprised. I read them in a different way now. I find things that were buried inside me. Especially when there is a long period between writing and reading, it is like having learned to swim, and then going to the sea for the first time in a decade.
>
> Mukhtar: With writing so important for you, how do you live without writing?
>
> H.I.: I live in remembrance of the past.

Comeback

In 2013, H.I. had described himself as a nostalgic man living in the past, but the poetry he wrote in his youth already has a distinctly melancholic, even nostalgic tone. Melancholy and a sense of uncertainty and doubt appear a constant aspect of H.I.'s writings, but never to the exclusion of the confidence that there is a greater divine truth to follow. H.I.'s doubts have never concerned the possibility and existence of divine certainties. Rather, his 'puzzled questioning' is about how to live by them in an uncertain world.

It took four years until we would interview H.I. again. Finally, we met him in February 2017, and he had good news. He had made his long-awaited comeback. He had started writing again, and frequented literary gatherings in public-sector cultural spaces such as the Writers' Union. He had also begun publishing his work on social media, and was preparing a new volume that contained new poems as well as some old ones.

At our previous meetings, we had talked much about politics. Meanwhile, the situation had changed. Now, a heavy-handed military regime was clamping down on all opposition, and especially hard on Islamist opposition. H.I.'s history put him in a precarious position. Mukhtar and I therefore carefully avoided discussing politics with him this time. Even so, he appeared worried and evasive. He appeared afraid to say anything even vaguely political, but he was very keen to speak about his poetry. This circumstance made us pay attention to poetics and aesthetics in a way that we might not have done otherwise. Just as we learned from Montaser about the experimental aesthetics of exploring a changing world,

from H.I. we learned about the aesthetic labour of searching for certainties in that same changing world.

We were curious to know what inspired him to start writing again, but he evaded our question. In the past, he had insisted that he would make a comeback only if he possessed a clear vision. Now, he still insisted there was no clear vision. And yet he had made a comeback, in terms of both writing and socialisation in a literary scene. Perhaps H.I. himself had no clear idea what had inspired him to write again; or perhaps he could give no answer that would be congruent with his insistence on clear vision as a condition to write. In the absence from an answer from H.I., Mukhtar suggested to me a likely answer: Facebook. Social media allowed him to act as a poet again, and to be recognised as one – which is inspiring. On the evening after our meeting, he posted online a photo of the three of us sitting in an up-market cafeteria not far from the sea in El Mandara, and soon received numerous words of appraisal from his online friends in the comments section.

He recited to us from memory one of his new poems, *Enchainment* (*Hadith al-qayd*, unpublished), a classical *ʿamudi* poem. *Enchainment* is written in the same metre as his above-quoted *Youth of Truth*, but it is more complex in several ways. Its imagery is more nuanced and ambiguous, and it involves the intentional display of formal virtuosity. The poem has a difficult mono-rhyme *-iq* and is written in a long (*tamm*) variety of the classical metre of al-Ramal, described in the Arabic notation system as فاعلاتن فاعلاتن فاعلات (Al-Wasil 2015: 62–66).[4] It makes use of the flexibility of the metre to create minor rhythmic variations within the poem, displayed here (from left to right) in a scheme of long (-) and short (˘) syllables:

-˘--/˘˘--/˘˘-	-˘--/-˘-˘˘/-˘-
-˘--/-˘--/-˘--	-˘--/-˘--/-˘-
-˘--/-˘--/-˘--	-˘--/-˘--/-˘-
-˘--/˘--/-˘--	-˘--/-˘--/˘˘-
-˘--/˘˘--/-˘-	˘--/-˘--/-˘-
-˘--/-˘--/-˘-	-˘--/-˘--/-˘-
-˘--/-˘--/-˘--	-˘--/-˘--/˘˘-
-˘--/-˘--/-˘-	-˘--/-˘--/-˘-
˘˘--/-˘--/-˘-	-˘--/˘˘˘--/˘˘-

4 In comparison, the above-cited *Youth of Truth* uses a shortened (*majzuʾ*) variety of the same metre, and has an easy rhyme *-a* that is also not maintained throughout.

أيها الساكن روحي ودمي — حائر وحدي تَعثَّر في الطريق
أين في الدنيا صديقي لستُ أدري — أم كلانا في أسى الدنيا غريق
يا ليالي العمر عرجاء الأماني — عاثرات لم يعد فيها بريق
يقظة بين أحلامي تراءت — والأماني سُكرُها ليس يفيق
سوف تمضين وأمضي بعدما — شربنا العشق صمتًا في الرحيق
طائرَ الأحلام ما عادت لنا — هذه الآمال والدنيا تضيق
هل نفيقُ العمر أم أنّا سنمضي — في طريق مُوحشٍ لسنا نفيق
يا عباب الصمت في درب الدجى — نفحة من سرّ ماضينا العتيق
فبقايا حلمنا الآتي سراب — رُبَّ حرٍ وهو في القيد وثيق

Oh dweller in my spirit and blood
I am at loss alone, stumbling along my path
Where in the world is my friend, I don't know
or are we both drowned in the grief of this world
Oh nights of lifetime with their lame longings
stumbling with no spark left in them
A moment of waking between the dreams made itself seen
while the drunkenness of the longings does not awake
You will pass and so will I after
we drink silently love's exquisite wine
Oh bird of dreams, these hopes
did not return us, while the world turned bleak
Will we awake to life or will we pass
on a desolate path without waking up
Oh torrents of silence on the trail of darkness
grant some of the secret of our ancient past
Thus the remains of our future dream are a mirage
Many a free man is firmly enchained

After reciting the poem to us, H.I. pointed at its melancholic tone, which in fact dominates his lyric poetry: a confusing wandering in darkness coupled with transient love and an illusion of freedom are contrasted with the divine certainties that dwell 'in my spirit and blood', glimpses of awakening (a repeated phrase), and a hope invested in 'our ancient past'. When he published it on his Facebook page a year later, he described it as a piece of 'mystical illuminations' (*tajalliyat sufiya*). Other poems in his new volume, such as those including a more explicit

moral or religious message (*waʿz*), and those in the genre of *nashid*, were more optimistic and confident in their tone.

The traumatic trajectory of H.I.'s life might mislead one to read this trajectory into his writing as a sequence beginning with optimistic *nashid*s of faith, hope, and struggle, and ending with melancholic laments of uncertainty and haze. But there is no such sequence. He has cultivated both genres throughout his career. This is a conventional part of the classical understanding of poetic skill to which H.I. subscribes: being a poet involves the command of classical forms, and the mastery of a repertoire of fixed genres and styles that each have their appropriate topics and emotional tones:

> Only a true poet can write *ʿamudi* poetry; [...] one needs to have studied and memorised, one needs to master many metres, not just one or two, and metres with a single verse foot as well as metres with several verse feet. One may master a variety of them, up to more than ten of the metres of al-Khalil. That's the one whom you can rely on as a poet.
> [...]
> I have written in fourteen metres. I consider the poetry [I have written in those metres] sound in regard to prosody, and the rhymes and rhythms are sound. But one is more at home in some metres rather than others. [It depends on] what I want to write: if I want to write lyrically, I find al-Wafir better than writing in al-Kamil. If I want to write something that contains a moral lesson (*waʿz*), al-Kamil is better for me, or al-Basit. If I want to write something where I demonstrate my skill [as poet], then I write in the metre of al-Tawil. [...] That is, I choose the metre that suits the mood I have.

H.I. grounded poetry in the mastery of different forms and techniques, which through the right rhythm and poetic images can 'reach the heart of the audience'. He considers classical prosody 'the original ground of poetry', but his oeuvre also contains poems in the modernist style of *tafʿila*. H.I. has also written some colloquial poetry, and he told us that he once wrote song texts for a singer. He expressed pride about his command of different genres, and argued that poets need to develop and to adapt to popular taste in order to be heard.

The parallel of committed *nashid* and melancholic lyrics is not unique to H.I. In summer 2018, I showed H.I.'s poetry to Giedrė Šabasevičiūtė who had studied the literary milieus of the influential Islamist writer and ideologue Sayyid Qutb (Šabasevičiūtė 2018). According to her, the same parallel is part of the oeuvre of Sayyid Qutb as well, and is also present in the works of other contemporary poets with an Islamic conservative approach. Mystical melancholy and puzzled search for elusive certainties are not an anomaly among Islamist poets and militants. On the contrary, they are part of the emotional repertoire of an Islamist activist vision of self and world. The melancholic, doubtful side of H.I.'s work does not deny his hope for a radical yet vaguely defined better Islamic future. Rather, the two seem to go well together.

Principled poetics of uncertainty

H.I. is a polite man, and knowing that our literary taste differs from his, he avoided offending our sensibilities. He was clear, however, about his rejection of experimental aesthetics:

> My aim is not to write poetry that brings a word from east and word from west in a surrealist or riddled manner. That's not clear. No, I concentrate on a specific thing I want to say, with neither content dominating over the form nor the other way around, so that the reader will grasp a specific thing, understand what I want to say. The modern direction in poetry, especially *taf'ila* poetry, is imaginations and intersections in images, and there is no meaning. Some poets of *taf'ila* whose work I have read, they come up with stuff; you understand every sentence they write, but try and find if there's a link between the beginning and the end of the poem? You won't find it. [...] When I read such a poem, what do I profit from it? Is there anything that reaches me?

That the early twentieth-century artistic and literary school of surrealism features as H.I.'s main aesthetic adversary (it did so also in the interview in 2012) tells how conservative his literary vision is.[5] Even the experimental aesthetics that he knows enough about to reject them are old. His knowledge of contemporary Arabic poetics ends with later twentieth-century modernist *taf'ila*. Prose poetry is too far from H.I.'s literary world to be an issue of contention for him.

H.I.'s decidedly conservative aesthetics are inseparable from his conservative moral and religious stances. Just as experimental aesthetics invite an exploration beyond the known that has moral consequences, so also conservative aesthetics invite a search for certainty and clarity. And yet the issue is not simply one of experimental uncertainty vis-à-vis conservative certainty. In a sense, the reverse is the case.

To understand how, it is helpful to compare the approaches of H.I. and Montaser Abdel Mawgoud (whose work was featured in Chapter 7). Both share a major concern for uncertainty. They often even use the same words to describe it. But their valuation of that condition, and the way the address it in poetry and life, are contrary.

Montaser argued that constant transformation and uncertainty are the new 'nature of things' that poetry needs to reflect in both form and content. His aim to explore a changing world without judgement was grounded in an underlying

5 We encountered surrealism as an aesthetic enemy in other conservative contexts as well. B.S. whom we briefly mention in Chapter 2, and who is not a supporter of the Islamist current, also took an explicit stance against surrealism.

trust in the human capacity to adapt, adjust, and change, and a positive moral valuation of uncertainty and open-endedness. H.I., too, recognises uncertainty as the prevailing key condition, but he sees it as a problem. In his lyrical work, he embarks on a melancholic search for a truth lost. His search is grounded in the mastery of classical forms on the one hand, and a conservative commitment to societal values and faith on the other. At the end of the interview in 2017, he explained why his (unpublished) new volume of poetry was called *Hymns of the Lost Dream* (*Taranim al-hulm al-da'i'*):[6]

> In the whole text you will not find a certain (*yaqini*) truth, except where I address religious aspects. Otherwise, you will find nothing certain (*yaqini*) except that we will die. So the dream is ... that the human being ... for example, societal progress, change. But is that change happening or not? God knows. That's why I called the book *Hymns of the Lost Dream*. [...] There is nothing real. It's exactly like a mirage. And that is what most of the poems of the volume speak about. It has political, and lyrical, and religious ones. But they also do not transgress the fundamental principles that I was brought up with.

H.I.'s lyrical work has an exploratory aspect that does not fit neatly into the ethical-pedagogical project of 'art with a purpose' that has been promoted by preachers and activists of the Islamic revival (Winegar 2016). But it is essential for him that his poetry has a sincere and meaningful message to the audience.

Both poets importantly link their poetic stances with their faith in the God of the Qur'an. But they express a different understanding about what kind of relation that faith is. For Montaser, faith is subject to rethinking and revision. For H.I., it is the one certain thing in spite of all confusion. These different forms of faith link in strong ways with poetic aesthetics. Contrasting Montaser's claim that traditional forms lead to a dead end in a changing world, H.I. argues that traditional forms need to be cultivated and mastered precisely because the world is changing and full of uncertainties.

This casts a different light on the postmodern idea of uncertainty as the cause and ground for open-ended exploration that was developed by Montaser Abdel Mawgoud in Chapter 7. For H.I. and others like him, the 'stock of certainty' evoked by Montaser in relation to established poetic forms is highly desirable but is not easily available. For one thing, it requires learning and cultivation – of both a technical and moral kind. Furthermore, a principled search for objective certainties (*thawabit*) and clear vision can make one more sensitive to uncertainties and doubts.

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6 By the time of writing in summer 2020, the volume is still unpublished because H.I. has not had enough money to pay for its printing.

Most other supporters of Islamist movements whom we have met during our fieldwork have not spoken of such deep crises of trust, although many have quite openly addressed various doubts and tensions they live with. Such tensions do not have to be an obstacle for activist striving – on the contrary, the experience of contradictions and failures can be motivating (Beekers and Kloos 2018), and meaningful struggle can in itself be the best way to maintain a sense (or illusion) of consistency (Ewing 1990). In comparison, H.I. appears exceptionally principled, which makes him also exceptionally sensitive of inconsistencies. Where others may see opportunities in a tactical battle, H.I. sees a confusion where right and wrong look suspiciously alike.

Some other people previously active in Islamist milieus whom we know and who have faced such deep crises as the one H.I. faced, have ended up abandoning not only the organisations but also their ideologies, some even their religious faith and identity. Their path appears out of the question for H.I. For him, the contrast he perceives between principles and politics has discredited politics but not the principles.

Not so paradoxically, then, H.I. appears more doubtful than Montaser. Uncertainty is a problem for him, troubling but also productive. He keeps exploring it in his lyrical work. It appears as a constant line in his oeuvre from the early 1990s until 2017. And he explicitly affirms its importance. Puzzlement, confusion, and uncertainty thus appear as a productive conflict that sharpens his sensibilities and vision – and because of his highly principled ambitions, he sees haze.

A romantic common ground

H.I.'s trajectory and oeuvre are an important reminder that conservative aesthetics, ethics, and politics are often not simply based on a taken-for-granted stock of certainties, but rather can involve much uncertainty, doubt, and work towards certainties that are not easily had. They are also a reminder that one of the most important and compelling critiques towards Islamist movements is not that they are too rigid and radical, but on the contrary that they compromise their radical promises. Last but not least, they are a reminder of a longer history of political violence that marks the lives and imaginations of so many contemporary Egyptians. The 25 January revolution did not emerge from out of nowhere after a decades-long period of calm: it was preceded by other uprisings. But the uprising of the Gamaʿa al-Islamiya in the 1990s was so violent and devastating that non-Islamists rarely if ever think of it as a predecessor of 2011, and even former or present

supporters of militant Islamist movements seldom remember it in heroic or nostalgic colours.

However, my account of our encounter with H.I. is not yet complete. As it stands, it is too binary to be true, juxtaposing H.I. the doubtful conservative traditionalist with Montaser the curious and experimental postmodernist, as if these were the only alternatives and as if they did not share much. Other chapters of this book show that there are many more – and more likely – options. Furthermore, the two men and their works have important features in common.

Between the two authors, there are vast literary mainstreams of commercial and highbrow novels, and colloquial and modernist poetry, which neither call into question key societal and spiritual certainties, nor lament the lost vision of radical religious politics. H.I. and Montaser are both outsiders to these mainstreams, their positions extreme and their aesthetics unpopular (one too experimental, the other too classical). They should therefore not be taken as exemplary for anything but themselves. Rather, they mark the limits of the literary mainstreams. And by so doing, they help us appreciate the common ground they share.

First, they share a generational experience and class position. Born in the early 1970s, they are almost exactly the same age. They both come from provincial locations (H.I. from a village in Upper Egypt, Montaser from a town in the Nile Delta) and moved to Alexandria in their early adulthood. They have the same educational degrees, and until 2016, they did the same work as teachers of Arabic and Islam in government schools. Even their early literary socialisation was similar – both were initially introduced to classical forms and twentieth-century modernism, and had their first encounters with literary scenes at cultural centres and the Writers' Union in the early 1990s. Only from there did their paths take different routes. Montaser went on to become an experimental poet active in the emerging independent scene, and gained national and international connections with like-minded people. H.I. might have continued on the path of a part-time writer recognised and appreciated by peers in the public-sector scene, but this path was interrupted, with traumatic consequences. Later, H.I. recovered a degree of material stability as a schoolteacher, while the stability of Montaser's life was shattered and he had to emigrate. Today, the two men's positions and stances are different in many ways, but their trajectories are within a range available in their social milieu and generation. They do not belong to different worlds.

Second, while they both have an experience of marginality and oppression – for different reasons and by different powers – they also share a confidence about being part of the proper field of literature, and search to be heard and recognised in that capacity.

H.I.'s work would almost certainly not be appreciated in the internationally connected avant-garde that helped out Montaser when the latter got into trouble.

And yet H.I. did not complain to us about marginalisation. He spoke about oppression. He is marked as an outsider by politics, not by his aesthetics. In fact, he does not feel at all marginalised vis-à-vis the literary scene. When he started writing again in around 2014, he also started frequenting symposiums, and has since then re-established his old network with writer friends from his younger years. H.I.'s vision and knowledge of literature are structured by a bubble that confirms its own centrality as representing unmarked 'literature'.

Montaser, in contrast, enjoys the privilege of proximity to the international network of secular avant-gardes that have opened for him possibilities of travel and translation that are inaccessible to H.I. But while H.I. expresses no sense of antagonism towards the society in which he lives – in fact, he is explicitly pro-society, a supporter of conservative values that he sees embodied by Upper Egyptian society in particular – Montaser has found himself repeatedly at odds with his society, of which he is explicitly critical. He had to leave his work, home, and finally his country not because he feared oppression by the state, but because he feared his neighbours and colleagues at work. And while his poetry was heavily contested by the latter, he found support and confirmation from people in the literary scenes he frequented, which allowed him, too, to understand himself as part of unmarked 'literature', as opposed to schoolteachers and religious radicals who, in his view, do not know how to read a literary work.

Literature today is a vast social institution that can encompass contrary approaches and mutually exclusive claims. Controversies and attempts at censorship proliferate, and mutual non-recognition is the order of the day, and yet in the past couple of decades at least, no literary milieu has been successful in dominating others. Only some of them are likely to gain recognition in Europe and Northern America as 'world literature', only some produce texts that may be recognised and supported as poetry by conservative Arabic-speaking networks, and only some provide opportunities for commercial success. And so on. Together, they allow their participants to make claims to status and authority, to demand that their voice is heard, and to enjoy a limited freedom to act and think in unusual, even strange, ways – but it is a freedom demarcated by real and hard limits of violence, as H.I.'s years in prison and Montaser's forced emigration remind us.

Third, the two men share what I call a romantic literary subjectivity. And it is not only them: a romantic theory of the author-subject is an important common ground that unites otherwise highly different, even mutually opposed ideas and ways of literary production in Alexandria and Egypt in the early twenty-first century.

The key idea of romantic subjectivity is that a person's experience and subjective positionality are the ground from which literary texts, artistic positions, and also political stances emerge. It is so commonplace today that it becomes

best recognisable in historical comparison (which we provide in more detail in Chapter 1). Arabic poetry has paid great attention to authorship as long as written records can tell, and the names of early Arabic poets are transmitted along with their works. Contemporary readers may read the love poetry attributed to Majnun Leyla as an expression of his subjective feelings and positionality in a tribal society that would not allow for his marriage with Leyla (tellingly, though, Leyla's voice remains unheard in the story). And yet the poetry attributed to Majnun probably consists of works by different authors who worked on the same theme (Khan 2019). Throughout the history of pre-modern Arabic poetry and *adab*, it was common that writers would attribute their works to other, more famous, authors, or claim them to be translations instead of original works. Authorship was about authority rather than originality, and authority could be borrowed or forged (Kilito 2001). The idea that a literary text would need to be authentic in the subjective sense of being grounded in an experience, feeling, or reflection by its author was secondary at best.

In contrast, the vast majority of the writers we have encountered in our research and featured in this book, including Montaser Abdel Mawgoud and H.I., consider writing and authorship as something inseparable from their individual subjectivity. This is most explicit in decidedly subjective texts, such as H.I.'s lyrical works. In our interviews in 2012 and 2017, H.I. repeatedly used the phrase 'true suffering', which prompted Mukhtar to ask him:

> Do you mean that every creative producer (*mubdi'*) has to suffer in order to be one?
>
> H.I.: Well, he can also suffer from happy things; it's not just suffering from pain, but something you live and become one with, something you communicate with on a strongly emotional level.

In addition to being a reality in his life, suffering for H.I. appears as a poetic and ethical sensibility that allows him to recognise and communicate the condition of uncertainty and unclarity he faces. He elevates suffering to a poetic capacity to 'communicate on a strongly emotional level', which also means that the ground of that communication is his subjective experience and vision of the world. This is notably not a liberal idea of an autonomous and authentic self: H.I.'s valuation of suffering as a source of communication is a case in point of a highly subjective individual position that is not bounded, not autonomous, but rather receptive and exposed to divine and human powers. This does not make it less individualistic and romantically subjective, however, highlighting as it does his unique capacity to translate a specific suffering into a meaningful communication.

Montaser's poetry is not dominated by his biography the way H.I.'s is, and when he discusses his works he does not attribute them to specific events in his

life. On the contrary, he consciously strives to produce autonomous texts that can stand by themselves, that are not extensions of his ego or superego (similar to the approach promoted at Alshimaa Hamed's workshop in Chapter 3 where Montaser was once a guest speaker). And yet in the interview in 2017, Montaser told us he had abandoned classical and early modernist poetic forms because they were not 'what I wanted to bring from within me', thus implying a link between experimentation and subjective expression. Montaser also argued that his spiritual explorations in his third volume of poetry, *There Are Things He Will Not Try* (Abdel Mawgoud 2012), are indeed his own, that is, they are the outcome of an individual and individualistic search where his subjective position towards God, revelation, and language results in a new arrangement of the relationship. This is also explicit in the original working title of the volume, *The Bible Written by Me*. Last but not least, in his third volume, Montaser systematically depicts God, prophets, and angels as romantic subjects: unique and sensible, driven by a combination of interiority and experience. This was controversial not because such romantic subjectivity would be alien to even the most conservative readers, but rather because he broke a dividing line that bans the faithful from imagining God, angels, and prophets in the same ways in which they may ordinarily imagine humans who are not prophets, saints, religious heroes, or leaders.

Thus, our exploration that began with our abandonment of the question of individual motivations to write (in Chapter 1) and therefore compelled us shift our focus to literature as a social and relational practice, has finally brought us back to the issue of individuality – but now not as something taken-for-granted, but rather as a peculiar historical artefact that is shared by writers and writings of an era across the spectrum, even when they may be different in numerous other ways.

Samuli Schielke, Mukhtar Saad Shehata

Afterword: On exiles and alternatives

This book's meandering ethnographic exploration of Alexandrian writers and literary scenes ended with a reflection about the common ground of romantic subjectivity that is shared by two poets who may seem to have little in common. However, the romantic common ground of authorship that is so widespread in Alexandria today is not only about subjective expression; it also equally involves the talent and skill to communicate, to have an effect. In a literary and social world where plurality more often than not does not imply pluralism, what may such communication entail, and what might its effect be? In this afterword we reflect on that question through an engagement with two recent theoretical inspirations, combined with our own trajectories after the end of our fieldwork.

In September 2017, we both left Alexandria to take different directions. Mukhtar, who had lived permanently in Alexandria since 2004, migrated to Brazil as a graduate student after separating from his wife. Samuli, who had been moving back and forth between Berlin and Alexandria since 2010, settled permanently in Berlin to stay close to his wife who was sick. Samuli returned to Alexandria on two visits in autumn 2019, and Mukhtar moved back from Brazil to his native village in spring 2020. Owing to the Covid-19 pandemic and other developments out of our control, we were not able to meet. In consequence, instead of spending long evenings debating in Mukhtar's living room as we had done during our fieldwork, we became involved in long online chats about the book manuscript between 2018 and 2020. And as our lives and careers took a turn away from Alexandria, our networks and ideas became more affected by Egyptian and Arab exiles in Europe and the Americas.

We were part of a trend. Egypt was experiencing a major emigration of highly skilled people with intellectual and artistic interests. This emigration was related to an increasingly widespread sense among them of life in Egypt being too repressive, the opportunities too limited for them to stay. But as people moved abroad, their anxieties and traumas travelled with them. A part of the sense of exile that we encountered among people from this class is a painful sense of privilege mixed with disconnection: a sense of confusion that results from enjoying a pleasant gathering of like-minded spirits abroad while knowing that back at home, tens of thousands are in prisons, often with fabricated charges or no charges at all, and that the life of ordinary citizens is cheap. It involves knowing that staying away from politics is not a safeguard either. While we were writing this in summer 2020, a moralist media and legal campaign in Egypt against young female influencers on the social media platform TikTok resulted in two-year prison senten-

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ces and public shaming for a number of women for 'offending Egyptian family values'. Even intentionally banal commercial entertainment is not a safe haven in post-2013 Egypt. As soon as one gains a significant audience, be it for politics or for product placement, one becomes a potential target. From the vantage point of an exile, one can be concerned, angry, and frustrated about such and other developments – but also safe. The price of that safety is disconnection. And yet for many, it is not only a price, but also an accomplishment.

Berlin became a particularly hip spot for what Samuli only half in jest calls the bohemian Arab exile (*al-manfa al-bohimi*). People in that scene regularly mastered a cosmopolitan habitus and connectedness that were rather rare in Alexandria. They were involved in sophisticated academic and activist debates, and many were highly politicised. They attended parties that aligned with Berlin's reputation at the time as the capital of Europe's hip nightlife. At a party (not a hip and extravagant one, though, just a gathering at home of a kind that is held in Alexandria as well) hosted by a young Egyptian scholar in Berlin in 2019, Samuli became involved in a discussion about literature with someone who had moved from Egypt to Berlin, and who argued that he had stopped reading Arabic literature because he found God guarding and limiting the authors' scope of imagination, which he didn't like. This confused Samuli. He recognised the idea of a religious framework of the imagination from his encounters with conservative scenes, but he had not previously thought – as his conversation partner did – that writings of the cosmopolitan avant-garde shared that framework, if in more implicit ways. Samuli was at the time reading scholarship that described contemporary Egyptian literature as essentially secular, while the person he met at the party described it as not secular enough to be interesting for him.

Of course, this conversation tells us more about the kind of parties Samuli attends in Berlin than it tells us about Arabic literature. But then we have argued throughout this book that the kind of parties people attend is an important part of literature.

In an influential and much-discussed essay published in January 2019, the political scientist Amro Ali (who moved back to Alexandria from Australia after completing his PhD, and who has been a frequent visitor in Berlin) proposes that the Arab community in Berlin must claim a voice and a mandate as the provider of new narratives and alternatives that can benefit the city and the Arab world alike. Amro Ali is highly inspired by the thriving liberal-leftist Arabic speaking intelligentsia that has gathered in Berlin, making use of its political freedom and plurality, networks, and affordable rents it offers (affordable when compared with Beirut or London, not compared with Alexandria). At the same time, he is troubled by the tendency of Arab intellectual circles towards seclusion and self-sufficiency that results in good ideas and productions being 'hurled into a void'

(Ali 2019: 6) and lost in 'a black hole' (p. 13). In his view, Arab intellectuals in Berlin have potential for much more: 'Berlin will need to be actively thought of and treated as one critical hub and safe space to reconstruct alternative narratives and futures' (p. 12). To do so, Amro Ali calls the cosmopolitan intelligentsia of Arab origin in Berlin to act as organic intellectuals who speak with, to, and perhaps also for a wider society – a conscience of the nation of Berlin, as it were, not so unlike the self-understanding of twentieth-century Egyptian nationalist modernism (see Chapter 2):

> The intellectual exile body will need to forge an intimate relation with café staff, barbers and other occupations critically positioned within common social spaces. The 'antiquated' flyer will hold more weight than a Facebook post as the mere act of handing it to someone restores an invaluable human transaction that makes bonding and togetherness more realisable than what social media can offer.
> It would be a delusion of utter proportions to think the mosque and church have no place in this endeavour. Any project to live out one's secular fantasies is doomed. There needs to be a move beyond the spaces of smoke-blowing chatter over Foucault versus Deleuze and the echo chamber it entails. This is not a matter of merely tolerating faith because it is deeply rooted in the Arab community. Rather, it implies coming to terms with the constructive role faith can play in an increasingly alienating environment and, therefore, that it needs to be better framed and understood rather than overlooked by intellectual currents.
>
> [...]
>
> The Arab author is simply one manifestation of the same political spectrum that produced that barber. The author just happens to be one of the most visible, most political, most clearly articulated expression of Arab grievances. Yet the author should not forget that he or she developed, consciously or not, from the same background and reservoir as the rest of society and the upheavals of the Arab Spring. This is where they draw their strength and legitimacy from; and this society has a very large reservoir of pain, unhappiness, confusion, and uncertainty. But when the intellectuals and activists not only recognize the futility of separation from that background, but also return to and engage with it, not as shewerma-buying customers but as citizens-in-exile in an ever-expanding conversation with moral obligations, the securing of a steadfast future is aided. (Ali 2019: 13–15)

The forward-looking narrative that Arab Berlin can offer according to Amro Ali's vision, is to keep alive, cultivate, and spread the pluralist, loving, and democratic potentials that were released but defeated in the uprisings of 2011. The Arab intellectuals gathered in Berlin can, according to Amro Ali, help Arab societies gradually recover from the violent authoritarian powers that rule it, and they can also help Germany heal itself from its own rising wave of right-wing nationalism.

The problem of self-referentiality and a lack of outreach that Amro Ali identifies, is also something that Mukhtar recognises among his own literary networks, especially those that hail from his native village. The literary circles and

milieus that we analysed in Chapter 2 have a tendency to generate small and solid echo-chambers or what Mukhtar in a recent essay (Shehata 2020) calls 'cultural pockets'. Those pockets often give their participants a sense of accomplishment and skill, with the consequence that writers who move out of such pockets into wider networks are for the first time exposed to a harsher kind of critique that is about questioning and not about praise and recognition – with the result that they resentfully withdraw to their safe spaces of mutual recognition again. In contrast to the highly educated bourgeois-cosmopolitan scene in Berlin that Amro Ali writes about, Mukhtar's concern is with rural and provincial intellectuals and writers who, socialised in supportive pockets with their closed sets of values and standards, move to Alexandria or Cairo where they experience the challenge of plurality and critique as a personal threat and offence – a regrettable waste of talent and opportunity. While Amro Ali and Mukhtar look at different social classes, they share a concern about what they see as effective self-marginalisation of writers and intellectuals that prevents them from being heard by a larger audience, and from developing their own voice and ideas in a way that could be useful or inspiring for others.

And yet, from what Samuli knows from his time among some of the bohemian-bourgeois Arab exiles, most of them have little connection with mainstream Berlin – be it ethnically German, Arab, or other. They are not in Berlin because of Berlin, but because it is a safe haven, a hub for the like-minded who might not be able to live and debate as they can, if not in Berlin. For some people, such as Samuli's conversation partner about literature at the party, Berlin provides a rare chance to finally live out a secular fantasy – so why the hurry to give up that hard-fought fantasy? The author and the barber may have a refreshing conversation about concerns they share, but both of them are also likely to hold some very divisive stances that could put a quick end to the conversation. If the barber is skilled in his profession, he will know how to entertain a good conversation with his customer without raising issues that would hurt. It is easy as long as the two don't know each other too well. The Arab intellectual community in Berlin, as far as Samuli has encountered it, thrives on a peripheral contact with the many mainstream societies (Arab and others) of the city, and yet it could not survive in full exposure to them. Such exposure would drain people's energies and resources, because they would be constantly busy explaining, legitimising, and adapting themselves. It would be the end of Berlin as a safe space.

We have long debated among ourselves whether self-marginalisation by writers and intellectuals is a problem or a productive condition. Mukhtar tends to see it more as a problem, Samuli more as a productive condition. We agree on the description of the condition, however – a description that is provided in the eight ethnographic chapters of this book. Alternative visions and ways of life or

unusual, strange ideas, values, and tastes cannot survive in full exposure to the societal mainstream. Even fairly conventional and conservative ideas thrive on a degree of outsider position, some luxury of time and space apart that allows authors to play with and develop them (Chapter 1). Turning them into literary text means, by definition, to give them a safe space that is marked as outside the ordinary (as we described in Chapter 3). That space is nevertheless not hermetic; on the contrary, it invites an audience to engage with it. The audience must be willing to engage with those strange ideas on their own terms, however, otherwise the authors may either remain unheard (as in Chapter 4) or face grave consequences (as in Chapter 7).

If we look at those special places and times as accomplishments in their own right, a different image emerges, one where the sense of shortcoming involved in 'marginal' is replaced by the sense of improvement involved in 'alternative'. Seen that way, literary and intellectual engagements are not about acting as the conscience of a nation, as it were, but about crafting imaginary and material lives on a small but effective scale.

This idea echoes an emerging interest in Egypt, especially among liberal-bourgeois intellectual, literary, artist, and activist circles, towards alternative lives and lifestyles. From that direction also comes the other theoretical inspiration we engage with in this afterword. In December 2019, after a break of five years, a long-awaited new issue of the influential non-periodical journal *Amkenah* (according to its subtitle 'concerned with the poetics of places'), edited in Alexandria by Alaa Khaled and Salwa Rashad (2019a), was released. The theme of the new issue was 'alternative lives'.

Combining photo essays, literary texts, travel writing, theoretical essays, and interviews, the issue presents a map of alternative communities and social projects, long-distance travels, pilgrimages and mountain hikes, bohemian and artistic careers in Egypt and abroad. On the pages of this volume at least, a privileged and recurring location of such alternative lives in Egypt is in the desert, where some try their hand at alternative ecological farming and tourism, others go mountaineering, and yet others undertake a pilgrimage to the remote Sufi shrine of Sidi Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili in the far south-east of Egypt. Cities and rural communities in the Nile valley also feature in the volume, but articles about them are fewer in number and more pragmatic in tone, less carried by a sense of fascination.

In Alaa Khaled's and Salwa Rashad's (2019b) literary and photographic travel journal of the southern Red Sea region that opens the volume, Alaa Khaled meditates on the openness and the non-binary relation to time and existence he sees embodied in nomad lives of the Ababda and Bishariya ethnic groups. The desert and nomadic lives become a site to imagine a life beyond the binaries that

divide society from nature, centres from peripheries, past from present – a more authentic, immediate way of being that, according to Alaa Khaled, can provide an alternative to city life and its political and societal conflicts. It is alternative not as opposed to something, but as a parallel, other reality that is constructive (as ideally expressed in farming and community projects) rather than antagonistic in nature, echoing the theme of heterotopic spaces that we develop in Chapters 3 and 5 of this book. In the introduction to the volume, he develops the same idea in more conceptual terms:

> Maybe 'hope' was in the past put into the service of impossible 'utopias', which want to be released upon earth; thus in the past, the alternative was exemplary, and carried within itself the seed of its own transience, for it was searching for a paradise on earth. Perhaps now, 'the alternative' has liberated itself from this utopia, and has become free and planless about its paths and choices, lacking a centre that would guide its choices, running as it does after a 'hope' wherever it may find or feel it. Perhaps the old and new projects and experiences collected in this issue are one part of a map of this 'errant hope' and its journeys. [...]
>
> The alternative in this elusive age we live in, is not the marginal, and does not carry the ambition to smash the centre or to take its place. [...] The alternative neither contradicts nor resists; instead, it encompasses in order to live and persist. (Khaled 2019: 7)

The turn to search for alternative lives and places is linked with an interesting historical shift in the spiritual self-positioning of a section of the urban intelligentsia. It is no coincidence that the shrine of the medieval mystic Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili plays such an important role in the emerging landscape of alternative travel in Egypt – alongside the more pleasure oriented beach resorts in Dahab and Nuweiba. The spiritual radiance of the Sufi shrine is enhanced by its exotic location in a remote mountain range inhabited by nomadic people from an ethnic minority. The widespread appreciation of twenty-first-century intellectuals for the non-binary, non-rationalist ecstasy of Islamic mysticism stands in a contrast to intellectuals of past generations, who more often saw in the same Sufi shrines a source of backwardness and error. The sociologist Sayyid Uways (1998), who with remarkable perceptiveness studied the letters sent or brought in the 1960s to the grave of the legal scholar Imam Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafiʿi (d. 820), also insisted that the visitors were ultimately mistaken and misguided in their hope to reach the Imam al-Shafiʿi through their letters. Many among the current cosmopolitan intelligentsia, in contrast, actively embrace mysticism – some from the distance of uncommitted fascination and exploration, others by actually joining the mystical path in the guidance of a spiritual leader.

Also in more worldly terms, writers and intellectuals from the same alternative-bourgeois milieu appear less likely than their predecessors to try and act as

a conscience of any nation, and more likely to search and create something valuable among a circle that is willing to share in the attempt. In a conceptual essay included in the same issue of *Amkenah*, the anthropologist Amal Idris-Haroun (2019) points at the paradox of that move: the circle is also the shape of power in capitalism based on circulation, and as much we may seek to overcome the oppressive power of the global economy, our alternative lives, too, take the shape of chosen circles that exclude what does not fit into them.

Alternative lifestyles tend to be romantic by default – not necessarily in the sense of romantic subjectivity, but in the sense that they are driven by a longing for something more immediate and humane than capitalist production-consumption processes, governmental power, and urban anonymity. However, the paradox is that such longing becomes possible only with the material and energy resources provided by precisely those processes. It is not the point of view of the few remaining nomads of Egypt; it is the point of view of highly educated city-dwellers with cosmopolitan connections who have the means to desire something they miss in their urban lifeworlds and see (or hope to see) realised in nomadic lives. That vision renders invisible the history of internal colonisation of desert regions by the Egyptian state – especially the Sinai, and more recently, the disputed border territory of Shalatin and Halayeb in the southern Red Sea region – which has made those regions now increasingly accessible for urbanites searching for alternative lives.

Amro Ali's proposal to make Berlin the hub of a new narrative and mission embodied by organic intellectuals, and the visions of alternative lives and lifestyles collected by Alaa Khaled and Salwa Rashad on the pages of *Amkenah*, may at first seem to be as far apart as their respective metonymic locations: the cosmopolitan urbanity of Berlin and the mountainous desert of the Red Sea region. And yet pilgrimage to Sidi Abu al-Hasan and ecological farms and vacations in South Sinai are in a sense not so unlike Kreuzberg, the heart of left-wing multiculturalism in Berlin. The realities and possibilities they represent are all marked by their being different from a wider mainstream, however defined. They are bound to specific times, places, and groups of people that are in various ways extra-ordinary. While Amro Ali struggles with their resulting insular tendency and hopes to overcome it, Alaa Khaled and the authors of the new issue of *Amkenah* rather embrace it.

This productive tension has an important recent history: the 25 January revolution, which failed in changing the regime, but succeeded in creating temporary revolutionary heterotopias that live on as political myths – and by so doing has also made islands of alternative lifestyle more attractive. At the same time, such alternative islands are also among the few possible paths left: ten years after the uprising, they remain possible and to some degree safe because they don't chal-

lenge dominant relations of power, while attempts at wide-scale societal or political mobilisation will now very likely result in exile, imprisonment, or death.

No matter whether authors have the explicit aim to offer critical questioning or concrete utopias (as in Chapter 5), literature as a social space is much more prone to generate heterotopias, that is, special spaces out of the ordinary, than it is to communicate with the society widely. Very few literary texts accomplish the latter feat. And yet this is not to say that heterotopias would be ineffective, lost, wasted in a black hole. What if we instead think of the lives and writings that are produced in rural literary pockets, in the various circles and scenes in Alexandria we studied, and in the bohemian-bourgeois exiles in Berlin as an accomplishment? They would be a dubious accomplishment for sure, one that comes at the price of various layers of exclusion and seclusion. But they are an accomplishment all the same, a landscape of alternative lives that are effective not because they may or may not heal Egypt, the Arab world, or Germany, but simply because people who entertained them have indeed generated real alternative lives for themselves – even if only partially, only at specific times at marked spaces, and with many frustrations.

No matter what its intentions may be, one of the things literary writing most reliably produces are alternative lives in shared margins – although those lives generally are much more precarious, partial, and short term than those described on the pages of *Amkenah*. The parallel worlds of reading, writing, and socialising (Chapters 1, 2, and 3), the political affects cultivated in revolutionary poetry (Chapter 4), the competing myths of the city (Chapter 5), the moods generated and the claims marked by wall-writing (Chapter 6), and the search to embrace or overcome the condition of an uncertain world (Chapters 7 and 8) – all these are effective realities that have emerged from literary explorations. At the same time, these realities repeatedly, almost systematically, fall short of what those who entertained them would have expected – fame and recognition not gained, an independent life not accomplished, a reform of society not completed, a regime not overthrown, claims to public space made but not kept, ways of living in a city lost to construction projects, new ways of thinking not appreciated by conservative audiences, old ways of thinking not recognised by avant-garde critics, and the path towards certainty lost in haze.

The problem of alternative lives is not simply the question of their realisation or non-realisation. The striving to live one – be it in fictional texts, in the safe spaces of literary meetings, or in full exposure and confrontation with the social mainstream – in itself effectively produces an alternative life. The problem is that many are disappointed because they expected that other life to be happy, or long-lasting, or world-changing, or in other ways up to their ambitions – while in reality it simply is what it is: other. In that capacity of otherness, it can in turn

also 'seep into' (to follow the wording of Andrew Brandel 2016: 177) ordinary life, and become its ambiguous companion or accomplice.

Thinking of imaginary explorations and their practical pursuits as an effective if elusive and transient reality that simply is what it is also means that those explorations and pursuits are under no circumstances innocent (just as it would be mistaken to assume that they generally involve resistance against hegemonic powers). They are possible through available material and cultural resources, means of privilege and mobility, circles and pockets of mutual encouragement. There is no exemplary innocence nor universal inspiratory power, because every expression is enabled by strings of complicity. Attempts to accomplish such an impossible feat are worthy of attention, however, because they may result in something else, something less exemplary and less far-reaching and yet not meaningless nor insignificant. An ambitious attempt to change the world by speaking truth to power leaves a dent, as it were, in the world, while truth may not win. A pilgrimage to Sidi Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili may leave the pilgrim's prayer unanswered, and yet it does something to the pilgrim and, with luck, may leave a trace in the readers of the travel account.

We, too, know the pull of the south-eastern desert. In February 2017, we undertook a journey – a pilgrimage, a literary exploration, a tourist trip, something of those in combination – to the shrine of Sidi Abu al-Hasan (Shehata 2019). After a hazardous car ride in the night, we arrived at the site, which we found almost empty because it was a working day and not the pilgrimage season. The next morning, we gathered at the shrine. Each of us had come with urgent worries at the back of our minds, but sitting in the realm of the sheikh, we found that we had no questions to ask. If the journey had seemed to have a purpose before we undertook it, once we arrived, we found that it was its own purpose and outcome.

Image 52: The homeward journey begins after a pilgrimage to Sidi Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili, Humaythara, February 2017.

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