

NEGOTIATING MODERNITY: *AN IMAM IN PARIS*

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B.A., Colorado State University, 2009

A thesis submitted to the

Faculty of the Graduate School of the

University of Colorado in partial fulfillment

of the requirement for the degree of

Master of Arts

Program of Comparative Literature

2013

This thesis entitled:
Negotiating Modernity: *An Imam in Paris*
written by Jenna Allen
has been approved for the Comparative Literature Program

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

Allen, Jenna (M.A., Comparative Literature)

Negotiating Modernity: *An Imam in Paris*

Thesis directed by Professor Jillian Heydt-Stevenson

This thesis explores questions surrounding the necessity of travel in pursuit of knowledge, cultural negotiation as a continuous and interactive process, as well as the strong bond with one's own culture that is indispensable to a successful negotiation. I analyze the 1834 travelogue *An Imam in Paris* in terms of the extent to which its traveler-author al-Ṭaḥṭāwī can interact with French culture in an improvisational way while remaining connected to his home culture. Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī figures as the site and agent of a negotiation with French knowledge with the aim to incorporate it into Cairo's identity as a world power reborn. He surmounts the limiting perspectives of either French modernity or Egyptian traditionalist superiority, offering instead a vision of a blended future. I conclude this travelogue has strikingly contemporary implications as it helps refute current social and political discussions asserting the incompatibility of Middle Eastern and Western cultures.

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Part I: The Tradition and Innovation in al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's Travel Account

The French in Egypt: An Egyptian in France

Stressing the relation between education and travel, the Prophet Muḥammad urged his followers to “[s]eek knowledge, even if it is in China.” In 1826, the Egyptian government took this religious exhortation to heart and sent forty-four men of various backgrounds not to China, but to Paris with instructions to acquire the treasures of European scientific knowledge and return home to enrich their country. Sent to accompany these students and oversee their spiritual health, the imam Rifa‘a Rāfi‘ al-Ṭaḥṭāwī meticulously documented their five-year stay, recording everything he learned about the city and her inhabitants. Published in 1834, *An Imam in Paris* is, like its author, a physical manifestation of an inquiry into possible combinations of Arab-Islamic tradition and French modern sciences and knowledge, an investigation into the extent to which a traveler can interact in improvisational and spontaneous ways while still remaining connected to his home country. It refuses both the conservative claim of the total self-sufficiency of Arab-Islamic civilization and the incompatibility of Western knowledge and values, as well as the Napoleonic dreams of a Gallicized Egypt subsumed into the French Empire and culture. *Imam* posits a traveling Arab-Islamic subject, a singular representative of his community, who is both the site and agent of an interactive negotiation with French modernity. Nineteenth-century Paris is the site where a single Arab-Islamic identity is refracted, multiplied, and refocused, paving the way for a traveler who can potentially become the ideal subject with both an Arab-Islamic cultural identity and modern technological skills to urbanize Cairo and facilitate the rebirth of Egypt as a world power.

Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt was the shock that induced the local realization that Egyptian civilization needed re-evaluation and restructuring if it wanted to be a world player,

and so the question of cultural translatability and the necessity for the East to subsume itself into Western structures reappears repeatedly over the course of the history of French-Egyptian relations, even well into the twentieth century with Taha Husayn who claimed unambiguously that “Egypt does not belong to the East, but to Europe and the West. Culturally, the Egyptians must work together with Europeans” (Attar 68). Initially, though, reaction to French culture was distinctly hostile. Historian al-Jabarti’s first-hand account of the invasion quite understandably presents a nonnegotiable, total rejection of the military presence masquerading as liberation, but subsequent explorations of cultural commensurability reflect a more sustained and open effort. As Shaden Tageldin writes, “Egypt too was taking the measure of Europe and pondering its (in)commensurability to the European while Europe was measuring it” (122). We see a shining example of this kind of measuring of Europe in al-Ṭaḥṭāwī’s travelogue. Al-Jabarti recorded the attempt of Bonaparte to express French thought in Arabic terms in Egypt, and, almost thirty years later, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī records his attempt to express French culture and civilization in France via Arabic in a reflexive attempt at re-articulating and refracting French knowledge. Napoleon demanded that Egypt accommodate French interest, but al-Ṭaḥṭāwī wanted to negotiate with modern Europe for the sake of Egypt’s future. That is, the questions become, for al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, to what extent is French knowledge useful to Egypt, technologically and socially? How can it be adapted to fit Egyptian, i.e. Arab-Islamic needs? Can Arab-Islamic structures express secular French knowledge while remaining true to their own traditions and history? Though Napoleon’s troops spent only four years trying to hold Egypt, the social and cultural reverberations of their *mission civilisatrice* in the Middle East have echoed ever since. It was with al-Ṭaḥṭāwī and his travelogue that a mutually beneficial negotiation of the two cultures began in earnest.

In the twelve years since Daniel L. Newman's translation and publication of the first English translation of *An Imam in Paris*, Anglophone scholars have finally begun to show a glimmer of interest in the figure widely considered to be the forefather of Egyptian nationalism, an educational reformer, a prolific writer and translator, and a leading figure in the nineteenth-century intellectual modernization and reformation of Egypt, known as *al-Nahḍa* ("the Awakening"). A graduate of the religious university al-Azhar in Cairo, the 25-year-old al-Ṭahṭāwī began writing *Imam* during the five years he spent in Paris (1826-1831) with a group of 44 Egyptian students tasked by their viceroy, Muḥammad Ali, to learn the French sciences necessary for Egypt's modernization. Finished in 1834 after al-Ṭahṭāwī's return to Cairo, his book was quickly translated into Turkish and disseminated widely through the Ottoman Empire, earning him a prominent position in Muḥammad Ali's government, where he led efforts in education reform and translations of European texts. As a historical figure, he certainly stands as a crucial arbiter of Western and Eastern cultures, and it is that aspect that has been the focus of recent scholarly efforts. Myriam Salama-Carr has examined how al-Ṭahṭāwī's negotiates conflicting discourses of modernity and tradition through his use of parallels between French and Islamic civilizations to connect and familiarize the other's values and experiences; for instance, she draws attention to the way the imam describes the Seine in comparison to the Nile, and the different types of Parisian roads in comparison to Cairene roads, thus asserting the similarities rather than the dissimilarities between the two cultures. Shaden Tageldin has explored issues of universality and translatability in *Imam*, observing the subtle ways al-Ṭahṭāwī begins to question his belief in Arabic linguistic superiority. Tageldin argues that the imam gradually reinscribes French as the new universal dominant, due to his belief that the simplicity and clarity of the French language make it more readily translatable than the intricacies of Arabic, and therefore it

affords more advantages in terms of pure communication of knowledge. Analyzing the poetic moments in *Imam*, Tarek el-Ariss argues that its literariness has heretofore been overlooked in scholarship. Influenced by Benjamin's concept of the alienation and shock of modernity, el-Ariss perceives fragmentation and dissonance as the primary expression of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's experience with modernity. With respect to the excellent arguments of these recent efforts, I will argue in contrast that al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's grapples with modernity in terms of an open dialogue wherein he is neither subsumed into Parisian culture, or entirely detached from it, but engaged in improvisational intercultural interchange.

An Imam in Paris and Classical Arabic Travel Writing

The formal features of *An Imam in Paris* constitute a remarkable example of the conspicuous tensions between the rigid literary tradition of the Arabic travelogue (the *riḥla*) and the book's attempt to introduce modern elements of content and style into these established conventions in order to open a space for a modern Arab-Islamic subject. As an example of this, the Arabic title in itself reveals a conversation between tradition and modernity, one which echoes the larger argument of the book itself as a dialectic relationship between the two while reflecting an inclination toward modernity. The title's rhyming prose frames al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's argument as one which has its roots in a specific cultural and linguistic history, while also introducing an element of Gallicization. Nigel Leask has observed that one of the central themes of Romantic travel literature is the "dialectical relationship between antiquity and modernity" (2) in French and British travel literature of the era. He claims that Western travelers were motivated by a desire to gain control over the ancient past in order to move into the future. Similarly, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī believes Egyptians must first master the history of Arabic literary and religious knowledge before beginning on the path to modernity. Thus we see in the title a perfect example

of this dialectic. The full title of al-Ṭahṭāwī's account is *Takhlīṣ al-ibriz fī talkhīṣ Bārīz aw al-dīwān al-naḥīs bi-tīwān Bārīs* (Extraction of Gold in an Abridgement of Paris, or the precious *dīwān* in the *tīwān* of Paris). In his text this is the only example of the convention of prose implementing rhyme (*saj'*; an indicator of good literary style). Despite the fact that the *riḥla* was not considered a literary form, al-Ṭahṭāwī uses it strategically to simultaneously give his account literary legitimacy and to demonstrate his affiliation to his Home as he introduces more radical elements. One of these radical elements appears when he transliterates "Paris" in two different ways: *Bārīz* and *Bārīs*. He does this in part for rhyming purposes (*Bārīz* rhymes *al-ibrīz* and *Bārīs* rhymes *naḥīs*), but as al-Ṭahṭāwī implies during his account, the choice between the two orthographies has larger implications: "I believe that the most appropriate way to write it is with an *s*, even though the reading of the word with *z* is widespread among non-French-speakers" (163). The argument he puts forth contests that Arabic writers should write it with an *s* because it more accurately represents the name of the city as the French people pronounce it; that is, he is arguing for a Gallicization of Arabic geography, by which he subtly introduces a French worldview into an area currently under linguistic negotiation. This makes the title's inclusion of both spellings a clever nod to al-Ṭahṭāwī's position as an intermediary for the fluidity of Arabization and Gallicization, but since the Arabized spelling comes first and the Gallicized second we can see a move from tradition to modernity, privileging the latter while recognizing the presence of the former.

In addition to the rhymed prose, there is another traditional feature of al-Ṭahṭāwī's *riḥla* that undergoes tentative modifications, namely the religious justification of the journey, which draws from Qur'ānic sources but reveals itself to have secular implications in order to accommodate modernity. According to Newman, a central characteristic of the *riḥla* style is a

continuous linear narrative divided into clear chronological stages from preparation for and justification of the departure to the return (26). Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, from the beginning, carefully demarcates the conventional organization of his book (“an introduction, with several chapters; the core of the book, which contains several essays, each of which is subdivided into sections [...] and an epilogue” [106]) and a listing of his religious justifications for the student mission, which, coming from an imam, seems to have unusually secular implications. It is here that we first see the imam’s religious tradition start to give way under the weight of his love for European sciences. For example, as justification, he cites a *ḥadīth* commonly invoked by Islamic travelers: “Seek knowledge, even if it is in China.” Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī explains that the meaning of this is “that one should travel to acquire knowledge. In short, there is no harm in travelling to a place where a person’s faith is not in danger, particularly if it involves an advantage of this kind” (115).

Another way in which he rethinks the traditional Arab travel account has radical implications: his goal is “the dissemination and widespread distribution of the sciences and arts” (115), with an emphasis on “widespread,” that is non-exclusive, freely-distributed knowledge among the *people* of Egypt, not just a few politicians and religious leaders. He does this in several ways, first by introducing colloquialisms and instances of Egyptian dialect rather than Classical Arabic, unheard of in scholarship at the time. And though he is careful to eulogize al-Azhar, his alma mater, as “the place of enlightenment which is a paradise of science with low-hanging fruit, a garden of knowledge filled with full blooms” (103), he is not interested in its privileged, educated men, its *‘ulāma*. Instead, he wants to touch the minds of the wider population. As I mentioned above, with the notable exception of the title, he avoids the traditional rhyming prose which relies on ornate rhetorical embellishments and imagery; in

contrast, in writing the book, he claims he “[follows] the path of terseness, while pursuing simplicity of expression so as to enable all people to arrive at its water basins and visit its gardens” (106). This is why, for example, he often uses the colloquial Egyptian dialect in places where there already exists a decent Classical Arabic equivalent (see Newman’s footnotes on 105, 112, 141). The fact also that he wrote it in Arabic instead of Turkish, the language of the Ottoman Empire, which still nominally ruled Egypt, indicates his disinterest in an elitist readership. This stylistic choice contrasts his constant praises of his patron, the viceroy Muḥammad ‘Ali, who was functionally illiterate in Arabic and who could only read the account once translated. Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī wrote his account with the people of Egypt specifically in mind, not his patron, not his mentor, Hasan al-‘Aṭṭār, not his French mentors Silvestre de Sacy and Edme-François Jomard; he did not even write it for himself alone, but for the people whose lives he wanted to improve with European sciences.

French Technical Knowledge and the Rebirth of Cairo

I want now to shift to a more specific discussion of the chief objective of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī’s student mission—to acquire knowledge of Western sciences. The particular type of education to be embarked upon is not one which leads to an abstract self-improvement, knowledge for its own sake, but to very particular material improvements in the sciences that will modernize Egypt’s political, economic, and civil infrastructures: “If only Cairo were maintained and amply provided with the means of civilization, it would surely be the queen of cities” (174). These means of civilization and these “sought-after sciences and skills” which Egyptians must seek in France, he later lists as falling under fifteen categories, among which are civil organization, hydrology, chemistry, natural history, engineering, political science, and translation (117). His discussion of these sciences is made more complex by the fact that he explains them within French structures

of knowledge, writing they are “presented in the way that the Franks [...] record, conceive, and establish them” (106). That is, these skills the French developed are understandable only according to Frankish (read: non-Islamic) practices and concepts; as he suggests, one must take into account the origins of a thing to fully understand it. Thus, by re-situating knowledge necessary to Arab-Islamic improvement in the land of the unbelievers, outside the walls of al-Azhar (the religious university which was the heart of Egyptian intellectual life), al-Ṭaḥṭāwī makes a radical move which threatens the Islamic belief in its complete self-sufficiency. Though he couches this move in religious terms, he is suggesting that the knowledge Egyptians need is secular, and that, in fact, secular knowledge is, in order to revive Arab-Islamic civilization an *indispensable* complement to al-Azharite knowledge.

During his stay in Paris, the imam focuses much of his energy on discovering which sciences and technologies are the most needed at home, and how the accomplishments of the French and the developments found in Paris can serve as a model for Egyptians and Cairo. Before he explains what knowledge Egypt lacks, he carefully praises his nation’s long history of education and intellectual development, both which have culminated in what we might call an Arabic humanities:

Syntax, inflection, prosody and then vocabulary

Then derivation, poetry and composition

Also semantics, rhetoric, calligraphy, rhyme and

history—this is how one counts the sciences of the Arabs (187)

These skills, as the culmination of Egyptian intellectualism, as well as the focus of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī’s university education at al-Azhar, provide the basis for Egypt’s excellence in “rational sciences” (111), but he remarks that the intellectuals during the Ottoman occupation “neglected all of the

philosophical branches (*al-'ulum al-ḥikmiyya*), and so they needed Western countries to acquire what they did not know” (111). Newman notes that *al-'ulum al-ḥikmiyya* also translates to “positive sciences,” which together with civil organization, form the backbone of the knowledge that the imam contests is necessary to Egyptian progress, and that they “need” the West to complement what Egypt already knows. Calling them “underdeveloped or non-existent” (117) in Egypt, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī composes a list of necessary areas of study which consist of two general categories: natural sciences (botany, chemistry, medical sciences, etc.) and civil organization (civil engineering, hydrology, international relations, military organization, etc.), assisted by a lesser category devoted to the translation and publishing of books as a means to distribute this knowledge.

Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī offers Paris as an example of how these skills, once applied assiduously to an urban environment, can materially improve conditions. Though the basic environment and resources of Paris are favorable, he emphasizes that it is what people have done with it that has transformed it from merely promising into great:

[I]f it were not for the Parisians’ sagacity, skill, excellent organization and their commitment to the interests of their country, their city would be worth nothing at all. [...] If only Cairo were maintained and amply provided with the means of civilization, it would surely be the queen of cities, the pinnacle of the cities of the world, and thus live up to the widespread colloquial saying of its people that Cairo is “the mother of the world” [...]. (173-174)

As with the French, the Egyptians have already demonstrated their erudition, which is visible in their rich tradition of humanities and analytical thinking; further, Muḥammad Ali’s patronage of the student mission and the ongoing urban developments in Cairo verify their commitment to

improvement. As al-Ṭaḥṭāwī observes, if the leaders encourage scientific developments, they will inspire the people to do the same: “in any period the sciences do not spread except through the support extended by the ruler to his people” (113). Thus Egypt, with its wisdom and devotion to development, already has half of what it needs, lacking only “the means of civilization”: skills (technical know-how) and organization (both civil and political). If Cairo acquires these, and combines them with her superior sagacity and expertise in the humanities, she will surpass even Paris in terms of greatness and become the “queen of all cities.” Egypt’s raw materials are splendid, but they need to be forged on the anvil of modernity.

In order to justify his general argument that modern scientific knowledge that will bring Egypt into the future, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī looks at the Musée d’Histoire Naturelle as empirical evidence that Western positive sciences can nurture and make Egyptian lives flourish. According to al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, one laudable quality of the French is their willingness to extend beyond their traditions in the pursuit of scientific knowledge and, perhaps echoing the Prophet Muḥammad’s injunction to “seek knowledge even in China,” admires their intellectual pursuits: “[t]hey are in no way prisoners of tradition. Rather, they always wish to know the origin of things, while seeking proof to support it, to the extent that the common people among them can also read and write and, like others, penetrate deep matters” (177). Tradition, when it remains rigid, can imprison, and so one must be willing to bend it and even go beyond it to acquire scientific knowledge, to know “the origin of things” and to find “proof to support it”; the best example of this French intellectual impetus to search for origins via empirical data is the aforementioned Musée d’Histoire Naturelle, which al-Ṭaḥṭāwī describes with marked enthusiasm:

The most useful thing for the natural sciences in the city of Paris is the royal garden, which is known as the *Jardin des Plantes* [*Musée d’Histoire Naturelle*]. This is where all

the foreign exotic things known to man are kept. In its soil, they grow all domestic plants and apply themselves with great skill and wisdom to ensure they thrive in their environment. [...] There are also various species of live animals—both exotic and domestic, tame and wild. For instance in this place you can find [...] the giraffe from Sennār, Indian elephants, [and] Berber gazelles [...]. There is also a room called the *Salle d'Anatomie [comparée]*, which contains a collection of mummies, i.e. embalmed cadavers, and other bodies. This room also contains part of the corpse of the late Shayk Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī, who martyred himself by assassinating the French general Kléber [...] and was then himself killed by the French when they occupied Egypt [...]. (263-264)

The central horticultural image of this passage, the flourishing garden of both domestic and exotic life, recalls his aforementioned description of al-Azhar as the “garden of knowledge filled with full blooms” (103), and draws a parallel between the Egyptian university and the French museum, thus presenting both as legitimate purveyors of education. However, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī suggests rather subversively that the two are not quite equal in that al-Azhar contains only domestic knowledge, but the museum contains “all the foreign exotic things” as well as “all domestic plants.” That is, French sciences encompass more of the world, more empirical data, than their Egyptian counterparts, and this gives them “great skill and wisdom” to cultivate these blooms that represent knowledge. The passage also offers two images of Egyptian immigrants in the context of positive sciences: the Sennār giraffe and the corpse of al-Ḥalabī. This giraffe, Zarāfa, was the enormously popular “bel animal du roi” who had been presented to Charles X as a gift from Muḥammad Ali Pasha in 1826, attracting nearly 500,000 visitors in her first six months in Paris (Davidson). Zarāfa represents a successful immigration story; she is an Egyptian who travels to Paris via Marseilles, just like al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, and she enjoys remarkable success as a

part of the museum, side by side with other exotic immigrants like the Indian elephants and the Berber gazelles. A cynical interpretation would point to the way the museum reduces the exotic to commodifiable and consumable goods for the public, but al-Ṭaḥṭāwī presents the museum as proof of the possibility of Egyptian lives to *thrive* within the framework of positive sciences.

Yet juxtaposed to the garden's fecund life, the cadavers within the space introduce the complementary element of death. Life and death as the sum of human experience are contained in this space of knowledge as testament to the universality of French positive sciences. It would be difficult to ignore the tantalizing detail of the identity of al-Ḥalabī, who stands as a witness to the violent rejection of foreign invaders in his homeland. Certainly he could also represent a reappropriation of dangerous Egyptian bodies in order to assimilate them. However, I contend that al-Ḥalabī's body reads to al-Ṭaḥṭāwī as a mark of respect on the part of the French toward a man who was their enemy, in the sense that they have placed the corpse of a man widely respected by his countrymen where it can be recognized and accounted for in French structures of understandings of the world. Though the assassin was put to a most gruesome death by French soldiers, he was first granted a trial, a "nicety that astonished El-Djabarti [al-Jabarti]" (Strathern 413) and other Egyptians, who, if nothing else, respected the French justice system. Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī himself offers praise of the "astounding justice" (135) in the city, as well as the peoples' sense of honor, swearing that the French political systems and morals "more closely resemble the Arabs than the Turks or other races" (365); high praise indeed from an imam! So it seems that while the cadaver may be evoking a moment in French-Egyptian relations that was far from harmonious, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was born the year al-Ḥalabī died, a fact which lends the imam a temporal and psychological distance between himself and the assassin, separating al-Ṭaḥṭāwī from an emotionally-fraught historical moment. That the cadaver and the Sennār giraffe both reside in the

Musée d'Histoire Naturelle is evidence that the celebratory and the tragic aspects of French-Egyptian relations can be reconciled. This potential for reconciliation is further borne out by the Aesop-esque fable that al-Ṭahṭāwī recounts about the Musée d'Histoire Naturelle (originally the king's garden):

In this garden, a famous event took place once. One of the lions was injured and its keeper entered [the cage] together with a dog, which went close to the lion and licked the latter's wound. The wound healed, and a friendship developed between the lion and the dog. The lion's heart was filled with love for the dog, who would always return to visit his friend; he fawned on him and looked at him as if they were real friends. When the dog died, the lion became ill because they were separated, and so they put another dog with him in order to examine the extent to which he had grown used to the situation. The dog consoled him for the loss [of his predecessor] and remained with him. (264)

The story transparently presents an allegory of an unlikely friendship that lasts a lifetime, with Egypt as the injured lion and France as the loyal, affectionate dog(s) nursing Egypt back to health, paving the way for a positive transnational relationship. But why *two* dogs? A lion and a dog developing a friendship is an anomaly. A lion forming a friendship with two different dogs indicates the potential for affinity with all dogs. Less obscurely, as representatives of their respective countries, if al-Ṭahṭāwī develops a friendship with even one Frenchman, it opens the possibility for close relations with all Frenchmen. Bonds between two individuals opens the possibility for attachment between two nations. Like all relationships, though, the harmony does not last forever, and there is inevitably conflict.

Part II: Interacting with the French

Conflict in the Land of Enlightenment

Although in the Musée d'Histoire Naturelle, the “lion” and the “dog” find harmony, conflict with others or with the self offers much of what is memorable in *Imam*. Open friction in the direct interactions between al-Ṭaḥṭāwī and Parisians appears rarely in *Imam*, so when he does address it his personal anecdotes the reader takes notice and his improvisational strategies to navigate through these moments of conflict become clear. Exchanges of cultures, as Mary Louise Pratt theorizes, are negotiated and improvisational in nature, an idea I have found useful. She calls the space for these transculturations “contact zones”:

The term “contact” foregrounds the interactive, improvisational dimensions of imperial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by accounts of conquest and domination told from the invader’s perspective. A “contact” perspective emphasizes how subjects get constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats the relations [...] in terms of co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, and often within radically asymmetrical relations of power. (8)

Travel writings in particular are excellent examples of these kinds of cooperative constitutions of relations, wherein the traveler assumes the role as cultural arbiter; thus as C.W. Thompson notes in his book *French Romantic Travel*, travel writing becomes “the site of cultural production, the place where cultural unity-in-diversity is posited, planned, or promoted...” (17). Often though, the inverse appears and the site of cultural production becomes the place where discord-in-diversity takes center stage. Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī certainly experiences this failure to unite in a scene where he faces quotidian racism on the streets of Paris:

As for their wine houses, they are innumerable. There is not a single district that is not teeming with those places. It is only the lowliest of people who gather there, the riff-raff with their women. [...] Yet, despite their state of drunkenness, they generally do not cause any real harm. One day, it happened that as I was walking along a street in Paris a drunk shouted at me, “Hey, you Turk!”, and grabbed me by my clothes. I was near a confectionary shop, so I entered with him and sat him down on a chair. I then jokingly said to the proprietor of the shop, “Would you like to buy this man for some sweets or candied nuts?” To which the owner replied, “Here things are not like in your country where you can dispose of the human species at your will.” My only retort to this was that I said, “In his current state, this drunken person is not part of the human race.” All of this took place while the man was sitting down on his chair, oblivious to everything that was going on around him. I left him in that shop and went on my way. (225)

This anecdote bears testament to his capacity to navigate past the initial ugliness of a moment of xenophobia and its darker allusions to larger social, cultural, and economic tensions, and relegate them to a peripheral position with regards to “normal” or “common” behavior of the population. Yet though he seems to dismiss the encounter, simply stating that he “went on [his] way” and continued his day, the fact that he remembered it so clearly and chooses to relate the story in a book which deliberately avoids inflammatory topics (surely evidence of xenophobia in the population would be considered incendiary to people in Egypt) belies the emotional shock and trauma that he must have felt when face-to-face with intolerance in the land of Enlightenment.

The most striking aspect of this anecdote is the objective, detached tone of the narration, which serves to reinforce al-Ṭahṭāwī’s attempt to maintain a civil tone during this conflict, refusing to give in to provocation. The strain in the confrontation between the imam, the drunk,

and the storeowner is palpable, yet al-Ṭaḥṭāwī chooses not to embellish the story with his emotional reaction to the threat of the drunk or the store owner's insinuation that "Turks" are barbarian slavers. Though the imam avoids particularly affective language, we can see his emotional turmoil when he describes his response to the insult as "[his] only retort" suggesting a shock and an inner struggle that attempts to understand and process the hateful barb in a moment of cultural contact.

Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī codes the interaction as deviating from normality or commonness in Paris, which allows him to discuss the incident without fearing that his readership would take it as a condemnation of racial discord in the city. Though the imam claims drunks "generally do not cause any real harm," when the man initially grabs him, the reader fears that this may be the exception to "generally," but instead the potential violence is deflected when he enters a confectionary shop in order to avoid the drunk. As Jan Whitaker has described, nineteenth-century confectionary shops were not just places to buy sweets, but were often restaurants appealing to a distinctly upper-class clientele. The rumbling threats of violence dissipate in a place of pleasure and pleasantries, for after all, the characters are not in a lowbrow wine-house for "riff-raff," but a confectionary shop! The very possibility of violence is defused as the imam tries to turn this racist incident into a comedy. Yet despite his attempts to deflect this violence, the proprietor reinforces the violence with his threat, quite obviously not amused by the comedy al-Ṭaḥṭāwī is directing in his shop.

I would suggest the jarring moment of cultural discord on al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's part, when he asks the proprietor a joking question, is an example of a failed cultural negotiation which reveals more profound cultural tensions. The proprietor's defensive response to the joke suggests that, while a foreigner's presence might have been tolerated in the shop, a foreigner who is witty

would not. Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's mistake is initially having made a joke, for this distorts the economic dynamic of Franco-Arab commerce and contributes to the scene as illustrating deeper cultural concerns. That is, on one hand, the joke is funny because al-Ṭaḥṭāwī inverts the shop owner-client relationship, rendering the client a seller and the owner a buyer. Yet on the other hand the commercial relationship between an Arab and a French confectioner is not so simple, if we consider that the majority of the raw material for the sugary treats in the confectionery shop would have been expensively imported from the Middle East. The very possibility for French pleasure comes from the East, an origin betrayed (conveniently) by the fact that the Arabic word *sukkar* gave French and English their words *sucre* and *sugar*, respectively. The exchange thus plays out economic conflicts in the sense that the proprietor's defensiveness reveals a Western resentment for an Eastern monopoly which makes its confections and pleasure possible, for in one verbal assault, the owner accuses the Eastern trade system, and by default al-Ṭaḥṭāwī as well, of being morally degenerate. This accusation, grounded in popular perceptions of the Middle East's links with the trafficking and barbaric disregard of human bodies, strikes me as provocative considering France had been a significant trafficker of humans to its colonies since the seventeenth century, abolishing slavery in 1794 under Robespierre, re-instating it in 1802 under Napoleon, and then finally obliterating it completely in 1848 under the Second Republic, nearly two decades after al-Ṭaḥṭāwī had returned to Egypt. This is the tangled mess of overwrought economic and social relations undergirding the joke's apparently simple façade.

A historical discussion about the state of slavery in France at the time of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's stay is thus the commercial subtext of the exchange, which then shifts into a more philosophical subtext about conflicting ideas of what makes one human. Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's poorly spoken French is betrayed by his awkwardly constructed phrase "drunken person," which reveals his ongoing

education as manifesting on even a linguistic level. Yet what makes the response even more interesting is the way he declares that a human is not human when he is drunk. Considering the Muslim proscription against alcohol, it is tempting to see al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's concept of "humanity" as religiously founded, but the fact that he adds "in his current state" is telling. That is, an average Frenchman, in his normal sober state, is human, regardless of whether he is Muslim or not (we assume he is not). The imam's concept of humanity is therefore a secular one. In order to decipher his definition of "human," if it is not tied exclusively to religion, we then ask, what generally changes in a person when he becomes drunk? We answer: he primarily loses his capacity for inhibition, critical thinking and judgment, and controlled movement. These, then, inverted, are perhaps the characteristics al-Ṭaḥṭāwī considers necessary to the status of "human": a body capable of thinking, judging, and behaving according to social norms. Contrasted with this, is the proprietor's notion of humanness which is perhaps a bit more liberal than al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's. The proprietor in his condemnation of human trafficking earlier and his consideration that the drunk is human, suggests that the French notion of humanity is more linked to a natural state of being, not one linked to intellectual capacity. Similar to the quarrel's commercial aspect, this philosophic battle also fails in that the combative nature of the exchange precludes the possibility of an authentic cultural give-and-take in this moment.

Ultimately, though, the mounting stress disperses with al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's unhindered exit. The debacle is superficially stripped of its importance when it is contrasted with the ignorant drunk calmly sitting in the shop as the foreigner and shop owner butt heads. The end of the aggression relieves the pressure of the story, redirecting the reader's attention from the culture clash to the now diminished hostility of the drunk. That al-Ṭaḥṭāwī simply leaves the store is certainly an indication of his good judgment in recognizing an unresolvable situation, and although he may

never have been in any actual danger, still the physical hostility we do see (as he is grabbed and then re-insulted) is disturbing, even though he is allowed to continue on his way. Cultural disagreement and conflict do not preclude peaceful resolutions of each person going his own way. I do not intend to reduce this to a simple “agree to disagree” moment, but there is a sense, I contend, that even when an intercultural dialogue fails on an individual level, it does not constitute a total failure. Cultural arbitration is a continual process that is necessarily characterized by improvisational and repeated interactions, which sometimes, of course, fail. That al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was capable of recognizing that and going on his way, while still not condemning the larger society as xenophobic, is an indication of his great skill as an arbiter.

Refractions of Identity

In the confectionary shop, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī relies on his wit and sensibility to maintain equilibrium against an unforeseeable shock, but he often also relies on other resources in moments of emotional destabilization, namely the profound wisdom of his homeland exemplified in its poetry. Often in al-Ṭaḥṭāwī’s observations, we see a palpable sense of wonder and excitement when he experiences exotic Frankish novelties, which he puts into conversation with communal Arab-Islamic understanding in order to interrogate them. Frequently he uses poetry to reconcile his past knowledge with his present experience. He engages in what Roger Célestin has referred to in his study of exoticism as a “triangular trade”: a three-way mediation between a subject, the Exotic, and his Home (also referred to as Center or Audience) wherein the critical question becomes: “to what extent can a [...] subject represent a foreign subject without automatically producing the extremes of exoticism, that is, without eliminating himself, and without eliminating the subject of his discourse” (8)? Though Célestin’s study argues for the practice of exoticism as a strategy which finds its fullest form in Western fields, he allows for the

possibility of non-Western subjects to engage in the same triangular trades, which is what I propose is happening in *An Imam in Paris*, particularly in his first experience with the disorientating wonder of mirrors in a crowded coffeehouse in Marseilles:

The first wonderful thing on which our gazes rested was a magnificent coffee house. We went in and saw that it was extraordinary both in terms of appearance and arrangement. [...] When I entered this coffee house and sat down there, it felt like being in a huge bazaar because of the huge number of people there. When a group of people appeared both inside and outside, their faces appeared on all sides in the mirrors, and one could see the multiplicity of people walking around, sitting and standing. One thus got the impression that this coffee house was a street, and I realized that it was an enclosed coffee house only because I saw our multiple images [reflected] in the mirrors. I became aware that all of this was due to the peculiar properties of the glass. In our country, the mirror usually duplicates the image of one person. [...] Because of the great number and size of mirrors on the walls in Frankish dwellings, they tend to multiply a single image from all sides and corners [...]. (156-157)

For al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, what elicits the exotic is the initial lure of illusory similarity between the Egyptian and the Frankish which reveals differences which must be reconciled with his Center, his cultural reference point. He suggests that Egypt and France have surface commonalities when he observes that “Alexandria is both a sample and model of Marseilles” (136) and when he writes that Paris and Cairo are “each of them a bride to [him]” (163); thus he at times attempts to bring the cultures closer together, but at others, as in the coffeehouse, they seem to resist resemblance, and his surroundings take on an exotic tint. This movement from cultural closeness to exotic-ness also bears out in his visit to the coffeehouse when he describes it as “like being in

a huge bazaar” and therefore the two points of Exotic and Home momentarily overlap, but they quickly are seen to be false equivalents as al-Ṭaḥṭāwī’s experience continues. Newman notes that coffeehouses in Egypt at the time were considered to be suitable only for the dregs of the lower classes, so the wider respectability and allure of cafés and coffeehouses in France would have struck the imam as rather astonishing. Small wonder then, that of all the sights in a bustling, burgeoning port like Marseilles, he would choose to focus first on a coffeehouse—something which also exists in Egypt, yet is so remarkably different. The exotic begins suggest itself in the “extraordinariness” of the coffeehouse’s “appearance” and “arrangement,” that is, the customs that go with it, from the ordering of beverages to the role of the (female!) owner, to the way the coffee is served with sugar on the side, to the fabric on the chairs, etc., but what appears to be the most compelling feature is the quantity and size of the mirrors and the disorienting experience of seeing a crowd of reflections where he only expected one.

In order to emphasize the personal experience of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī in the crowd, I want to digress for a moment to explore another of the general characteristics of the *riḥla* genre which al-Ṭaḥṭāwī employs particularly in this passage: the relegation of companions into the background to foreground the author-narrator as the sole actor in his environment. As Newman writes,

Any companions on the journey are present implicitly and never play an active role, i.e. they are never seen to intervene, to act upon the travel experience which is the sole remit of the authors-narrators. In most cases the authors’ travel companions remain anonymous. The use of the first person plural may denote a collection of individuals, but only one observer and *actor*, i.e. the author-traveller-narrator. (2001: 26, original emphasis)

The tension between the individual narrator as sole actor and the implied presence of companion-travelers appears in the way al-Ṭaḥṭāwī swings from the first person plural to the first person singular. “We went in and saw” acknowledges the existence of others, but he quickly refocuses when he makes himself the only one to act within the scene: “When I entered [...] and sat down,” “I realized,” “I saw our multiple images,” and “I became aware.” He thus negates the value of other experiences and cultural negotiations and establishes *his* experience as *the* experience in a contact zone. By offering himself as the representative of the voices of other travelers and their experiences, the imam claims the singular subject of Rifa‘a Rafi‘ al-Ṭaḥṭāwī as the embodiment of his whole community, of *all* Arab-Islamic subjects. He is The Arab-Islamic Subject and therefore, he becomes *the* locus of Arab-Islamic negotiations with France.

Paradoxically, though al-Ṭaḥṭāwī claims to focus many Arab subjects into a single locus, he experiences in the café a kind of explosion of plurality when he looks in the mirrors, causing spatial disorientation as well as a fracturing of his apparent singularity. Despite his often very precise descriptions, there is some ambiguity in his account with regards to whether he is conflating the mirrors on the wall and the clear window-glass of the shop, which may also be reflective. The Western reader is left to sort out the precise décor of the shop. I would argue that this particular confusion can be addressed by imagining he is referring equally to reflective window glass as well as looking-glass mirrors on the wall, as well as the reflections of people outside the shop in the mirrors inside it. Assuming this confusion on his part would explain why he refers to seeing the reflections of people inside *and* outside the shop (“When a group of people appeared both inside and outside, their faces appeared on all sides in the mirrors”) and why he is momentarily uncertain whether he is inside or outside (“I realized that it was an enclosed coffee house”). I do not intend to suggest that Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was incapable of recognizing

the difference between windows and mirrors or between inside and outside, but glass windows would be novelties for al-Ṭaḥṭāwī since they were not *de rigueur* in Egypt, as Napoleon's savants noted during his invasion, referring to the windows they found as "les fenêtres à grillage du pays," openings covered with decorative grills and sometimes accented with glasswork:

Les fenêtres de la maison [...] offrent cette particularité, qu'outre le grillage qui en occupe l'ouverture, elles sont encore fermées par des volets. Nous devons ajouter que presque toujours, dans les maisons des gens riches, les baies de fenêtre sont fermées intérieurement par des châssis garnis de vitres; mais, dans la plupart des autres maisons, cette fermeture n'existe point, et l'air extérieur pénètre librement dans les appartemens [sic]. (348)

Considering al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's modest background, one would expect him most habituated to the latter window described—an opening in the wall that allows for free circulation of the air, suggesting an experience of space that doesn't strictly delineate outside from inside and allows some movement. This perhaps offers an explanation as to why his disorientation does not occur until he realizes the coffeehouse is fully enclosed, and not part of the street and the crowd of pedestrians.

The spatial element confuses him, but he also experiences, as I mentioned above, the momentary non-distinction of self and others, singularity and multiplicity. As al-Ṭaḥṭāwī suggests, an Egyptian looking in a mirror expects to see only one person, but the placement of French mirrors that cause a *mise-en-abyme* "multiply a single image from all sides," leading the traveler to see himself from many new perspectives. When al-Ṭaḥṭāwī looks into a French mirror, he expects to see his singularity, his one-ness, but he quite literally sees himself from a different angle, multiplied. Thus the act of looking at himself by way of an exotic object contests

his singularity, the presumed wholeness of his Arab-Islamic subjectivity. Similarly, Tarek el-Ariss reads the scene in terms of absence and fragmentation wherein “[t]he mirrors detach the signifier (the image) from the signified (al-Ṭaḥṭāwī’s identity or self)” and al-Ṭaḥṭāwī describes the fragmentation by “externaliz[ing] [...] the ‘I’ as the locus of identity [...] [and] address[ing] his reflection in the third-person singular” (n.pag.) in the poetry that follows the anecdote. Yet el-Ariss does not take into account al-Ṭaḥṭāwī’s sense of wonder and pleasure in his experience. Perhaps instead of speaking of fragmentation, a word that seems nostalgic for a mythic wholeness, we can speak of the dizzyingly infinite identities that open to al-Ṭaḥṭāwī when he looks in the *mise-en-abyme* of mirrors in the café. The duplication and elasticity of his self has an element of pleasure—a mark of a truly curious and open mind, and a well of creativity.

As evidence of his mental and cultural suppleness when the exotic proliferates his possible identities, he becomes even more creative, reorienting (re-Orient?) himself with his Center via its poetry, which for him, represents all Arab-Islamic knowledge to date. He asserts that one strength of Arabic poetry is its ability to communicate scientific information: “many scientific books [...] have been written in verse” (338), implying that poetry is not just a vehicle for emotional truths, but all truths. As an author, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī has understandably very distinct opinions about the predominant function of writing, given that he sees it as a way to temporally connect knowledge across the ages in order to serve as a reference point for his role as cultural arbiter. He argues, “The craft of writing is the greatest use among all nations as it is the soul of all social intercourse, the present manifestation of the past and the organization of the future; it is the messenger of the will and constitutes half of what has been witnessed” (340). For al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, then, to write means not just to relate the past to the present, but to “manifest” the past in the present. Thus, as the Arabic author composes his book, he not only acknowledges his culture’s

poetic history, but merges it with the present, thereby transforming poetic history into the poetic now, creating a reservoir of literary allusions which are always-already present during his travels. Poetry is ubiquitous in *An Imam in Paris*, from cover to cover. There are over 120 citations of it in the account's 277 pages, and all, save one, are of Arabic origin. (The exception is a passage from Joseph Élie Agoub, reputed to be the first Egyptian poet of French expression. He was one of al-Ṭahṭāwī's teachers, and his work *La lyre brisée* was, incidentally, al-Ṭahṭāwī's first translation, published in Paris.) Of al-Ṭahṭāwī's cornucopia of poetic digressions of varying relevancies during his account, some are amateur poems written by the author and some are by poets from the Golden Age of Arabic poetry like al-Ḥarīrī, al-Saftī, Abū Nuwās, but the majority are from unnamed poets drawn from the vast sea of Arabic verse whose waves appear to represent a source of communal knowledge, consolation, contrast, and understanding during al-Ṭahṭāwī's voyage.

Newman suggests the poetry is presented as a testament to his "Arab-ness" and his belonging to the group, but I would argue that the citations also have another function— they serve as a well of communal knowledge he can look to for guidance in times of crisis. Immediately after his anecdote about the coffeehouse, he reproduces four stanzas of Arabic poems featuring mirrors. The first stanza he quotes is presented anonymously, perhaps because of forgetfulness on al-Ṭahṭāwī's part or more likely because he assumed that his reader would recognize it. In either case, it underscores the nature of Arab poetry as *shared* knowledge which, once it enters the community pool does not necessarily belong to one person or one author. Though he starts with an unattributed poem, al-Ṭahṭāwī identifies several poets and scholars in the following stanzas, including himself: the author of the second stanza is al-Ṭahṭāwī himself; the third is by Ibn Sahl, a Golden Age mathematician and optics engineer credited with the first

discovery of the law of refraction for mirrors and lenses, which is framed within a quote by his mentor al-‘Aṭṭār; and the last is by the Golden Age poet al-Ḥarīrī. The preponderance of figures from the Golden Age of course points to the period of time when Arab-Islamic civilization was in its fullest bloom, a reminder for him of what it could be once again, if only it were cultivated. It is to this glorious reference point that al-Ṭaḥṭāwī connects himself, al-‘Aṭṭār, to the unattributable poem which represents the larger community, demonstrating the omnipresence of Arab-Islamic knowledge and culture. Disparate, individual observations and writings come together, each contributing to a whole body of knowledge. His literary education allows him to connect with these past and present intellectuals and thereby contribute to cultural constructions of understanding by introducing new information as he translates the Western world for Egypt. Engaging in a Célestial triangular trade between French exoticism and his Arab-Islamic heritage, he always has his Home ready for every situation where he interacts with the Other.

The Modern Muslim and the Question of Conversion

Having his Home at-hand proves most useful for al-Ṭaḥṭāwī when it comes to the biggest hurdle he faces in his simultaneous disposition toward improvisation and tradition. He admits he feels deeply apprehensive about Muslims, under the influence of non-believer lands, who convert from Islam, an apprehension grounded in the assumption that a man who severs himself from his religion severs himself from his Home. Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī ponders the question of whether or not a Muslim is spiritually endangered in a Western context, a topic fraught with history traced back to Napoleon’s invasion. Optimistically, though, and as testament to his elasticity as a traveler and intellectual, he concludes that Muslims can be Westernized without losing sight of their homeland, and further, that these hybrid Westernized Muslims are vital to a bright Egyptian future. Though al-Ṭaḥṭāwī praises the Frankish countries and their peoples as representing “the

highest degree of proficiency in mathematics, natural sciences and metaphysics, in regard to both their theoretical foundations and various branches” (110), he contends there are aspects of their culture which would lead a faithful Muslim astray. The imam argues that a deep understanding of Islam is a Muslim’s strongest shield against the potentially corrupting French language and philosophy: “It is therefore necessary for anyone wishing to delve into the French language, which includes some philosophical elements, to be well versed in the Qur’ān and the *sunna*, in order to prevent him from being misled by this and his belief from weakening, and lest he should lose his footing” (255-256). Thus an unwavering loyalty to and belief in his culture and religion will inculcate al-Taḥṭāwī against Paris, “where the night of unbelief has no morning” (256), and the parts of French philosophy that are “twist[ed] and defend[ed] in such a way that they appear to be true and credible” (255).

The background of the issue of conversion in French-Egypt relations is fraught with questions of authentic French conversion to Islam and Islamic conversions to Christianity. In 1798, Napoleon landed in Alexandria, an auspicious site for this meeting of France and Egypt, for the city itself seemed to naturally blend East and West. It had been built during the conquest of Alexander the Great, Napoleon’s obvious role model, who conquered Egypt in part by his clever strategy of promoting himself as Egyptian. When building his modern city, Alexander aimed to blend East and West, architecturally and culturally. His success at creating a unique expression of the two cultures can be seen, for example, in the Kom el-Shoqafa catacombs in Alexandria, whose interior is decorated with carvings and statues, some featuring figures with heads carved in the Greek style and their bodies in the Egyptian style, others with the Egyptian gods’ heads and Greek bodies. Alexander’s successful military occupation of Egypt arose from his ability to not just exert military strength, but to insinuate himself into the local spiritual

culture and use it to justify his military conquest. The people of Egypt hailed him as a pharaoh, a divine ruler. It is this total acceptance that Napoleon blithely anticipated in Alexander's city, but the Egyptians' attitudes toward Western conquerors had changed over the past two millennia. By the late eighteenth century, the West and East enjoyed healthy economic ties, but their cultural relationship had become estranged. Thus when Napoleon arrived, visitors and travelers aside from the occasional emissary were relatively rare on both sides. Tracing Arab-Islamic attitudes toward Europe historically, Daniel Newman cites Bernard Lewis, a historian of Islam, in demonstrating that since the isolationist medieval period, both peoples had remained profoundly uninterested in each other, due to their "conviction" of the "finality, completeness, and essential self-sufficiency of their civilization" (qtd. in Newman 8), in spite of the occasional conflicts such as the Muslim conquests in Andalusia and the Crusades. Both the Arab-Islamic world and Europe were each convinced of their cultural superiority, yet there was still economic need for trade, so their interactions were mainly focused on simple exchanges of goods, which required fairly minimal cultural contact. With this history in mind, we can speculate that the Egyptian population of Alexandria must have been stunned by the arrival of not just French soldiers, but Napoleon's legion of savants, armed with drawing tools, measuring devices, and microscopes, intent on recording the whole of observable Egypt.

If the soldiers and savants were a surprise, the flyers written in Arabic they distributed to the local population were more so, for they made a shocking application to the powerful Sheiks and Imams: "tell your nation that the French are also faithful Muslims" (al-Jabarti 41) and asserted that General Bonaparte and his soldiers had come to liberate their Muslim brothers from the tyrannical rule of their exploitative Mamlūk overlords:

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. There is no god but God. He has no son, nor has He an associate in His Dominion. [...] O ye Egyptians, they may say to you that I have not made an expedition hither for any other object than that of abolishing your religion; but this is a pure falsehood and you must not give credit to it, but tell the slanderers that I have not come to you except for the purpose of restoring your rights from the hands of the oppressors and that I more than the Mamlūks, serve God—may He be praised and exalted—and revere His Prophet Muḥammad and the glorious Qur’ān.

(40)

Alexander’s influence on the French general is evident here. As historian Paul Strathern comments, “Like Alexander the Great before him, [Napoleon] intended to absorb the religion of the people over whom he would rule” (5). His promised conversion to Islam reads as dubious at best, since his secretary mentions that Napoleon’s copy of the Qur’ān was classed in his personal library under “Politics” (Bourrienne 120) and cynically observes that “[i]n India he would have been for Ali, at Thibet for the Dalai-lama, and in China for Confucius” (154). However, unlike Alexander, Napoleon would carve no statues of Egyptian bodies with French heads. He would, instead, establish the Institut d’Égypte in a palace of a Cairene bey; Bourrienne explains: “The objects of the Institute were the advancement and propagation of information in Egypt, and the study and publication of all facts relating to the natural history, trade, and antiquities of that ancient country” (152). The 167 savants that Napoleon had brought with him were separated into four groups: mathematics, physics, political economy, and culture, and they began to measure the pyramids, map out the land, engineer civil improvements, attempt to decode the Rosetta Stone, etc. Functioning as a prototype of modern think-tanks, the Institute strove to develop a new infrastructure to accommodate French interest in the country (Strathern 191). Thus we see

that Napoleon's goal was to measure, quantify, and instrumentalize Egypt and all it contains in an attempt to establish French cultural dominance. Cultural knowledge became a tool not for mediation and negotiation between cultures, but for the establishment of new power structures. That is why al-Jabarti, the historian who produced a first-hand account of the French occupation, takes deep offense to the blatant political anglings of the aforementioned flyer, mercilessly deconstructing the way the French attempt to express themselves in Arabic by grammatically and logically eviscerating "the incoherent words and vulgar constructions [...] [of] this miserable letter" (42). He asserts the link between flawed expression and flawed truth: "The word *muṭma'in* should be *muṭma'inan* because it is *ḥāl* (circumstantial expression), and converting it to the nominative (*raf*) incorrectly is an indication of their state, and their insignificance" (47). In short, the inability of the French to convincingly address an Arabic-speaking audience reveals the falseness of their claims to Arab-Islamic fraternity. When a French subject expresses himself in the language of the Qur'ān, his words are nonsensical. Al-Jabarti does not allow that it could even be possible for a Westerner to express himself authentically in the holy language, going so far as to suggest that the French are essentially irreligious: "[T]hose people are opposed to both Christians and Muslims, and do not hold fast to any religion" (47).

Although it would be easy for al-Ṭaḥṭāwī to buckle under the weight of the linguistic and military history of Napoleon's invasion, as a traveler he shows inspiring courage in producing a measured response, clearly more liberal than, for example, al-Jabarti's. There is no doubt al-Ṭaḥṭāwī shares this belief in Frankish irreligiousness, observing their only-in-name Christianity, and explaining that the priests are considered "as if they were the enemies of light and wisdom" and that there are so few religious people in Paris that "they are of no consequence" (252, 253). We see him thinking more generously than al-Jabarti, though, in regard to the possibility of

Frankish mastery of Arabic, asserting that “the idea that foreigners do not understand Arabic when they do not speak it as well as the Arabs is without any foundation” (189). He cites the famed Orientalist Silvestre de Sacy’s writings on Arabic poetry and sciences as flawed but “eloquent,” demonstrating “great ability,” “great insight,” and “powerful refutations” (190, 191). Thus for al-Ṭahṭāwī, the barrier which prevents the French from genuine conversion to Islam is not linguistic in nature as al-Jabarti implied, but hinges entirely on their irreligiousness and their Napoleonic utilitarian attitude toward religion. As an example of this, he cites the famous public conversion of Jacques-François Menou, the last commander-in-chief in Egypt:

[He] took control of Egypt after the death of general Kléber and embraced Islam in Cairo—falsely it seems. He took the name of ‘Abd Allāh, and married the daughter of a *sharīf* from Rosetta. When the French left Egypt, he took her with him and when they arrived in France he reverted to Christianity and exchanged the turban for the European hat. (159-160)

The decision to take the name ‘Abd Allāh (“servant of God”) and marry a Muslim woman appears to al-Ṭahṭāwī as an act of political subterfuge and worthy of contempt in its commodification of Islam an entity disposable as an article of clothing.

Though he dismisses the possibility of genuine French conversion, al-Ṭahṭāwī does choose to carefully weigh the question of Muslim conversion to Christianity, which he asserts is a form of both spiritual and physical self-destruction. The fear of such conversion is apparent as he reports he met converted Christians in Marseilles: “It is rare to find a Muslim among those who left with the French: some of them have died, whereas others have converted to Christianity—may God protect us from that!” (159). Doubling conversion with death (implying they are the same thing) in the two examples he gives of Muslims who converted to Christianity,

he asserts the convert perishes as a result of his action: “When [the French] left [Egypt], [‘Abd al-‘Al] followed them, and remained a Muslim for about fifteen years, after which he converted to Christianity—may God protect us from that!—because of his marriage to a Christian woman. Shortly afterwards, he died” (159). He also cites the example of Menou’s wife who remained a stout Muslim in France, until her husband persuaded her to convert: “It is said that, in the end, she became a Christian, and died an infidel” (161). While the first example clearly points to a direct correlation between conversion and death, the second is less explicit, yet the syntactic closeness of “became a Christian” and “died” nevertheless suggests a strong link; her religious death coincided with a social death, evidenced by the fact that after her conversion there appears to be nothing worthy of mention in her life until her death. The complete breaking with one’s religion (and culture, for both ‘Abd al-‘Al and Menou’s wife left Egypt) is tantamount to suicide.

So if conversion leads to death, how does a noble Muslim fortify his traditional past and identity enough to successfully combine them with modernity without allowing them to disappear completely? Secondly, what would the function of this hybrid Muslim with Western skills be in an Egyptian future? In response to questions like these, al-Ṭahṭāwī mentions an interesting Egyptian living in Marseilles, serendipitously named Muḥammad, the most Islamic appellation possible.

[T]here was a man who also dressed like the Franks. His name was Muḥammad. He was fluent in a language other than Arabic, of which he knew very little. I asked him about his hometown in Egypt, to which he replied that he was from Asyūt, from a family of *sharīfs*. [...] The French had kidnapped him when he was very young. He said that he remained a Muslim, and that he was familiar with religious matters [such as the formulae]. “There is only one God, and Muḥammad is His Messenger,” and “God is generous.” It is strange

how, listening to his words, I expected a lot of good from him. His face truly revealed the mark of the *sharīfs* of Asyūt. If what he told me is true then he is one of the sons of al-Sayyid Ḥurayz b. Sīdī Abī 'l-Qāsim al-Ṭaḥṭāwī [...]. The fame of Sīdī Abū 'l-Qāsim al-Ṭaḥṭāwī does not escape those who know him [...]. Many of the *sharīfs* of the Ottoman Empire trace their lineage to the aforementioned Sīdī Ḥurayz. (161)

Here he presents a Muslim who has been able to remain true to Islam, despite being physically and linguistically far from the cradle of his home. Gallicized by force, Muḥammad remains deeply attached to the religion of his childhood home: he wears Frankish clothing, yet keeps his Islamic name; he is largely ignorant of Arabic, yet knows the religious formulae; he was kidnapped while very young and taken from Egypt, yet knows his hometown and the names of his family members. It is tempting to speculate the degree of affinity al-Ṭaḥṭāwī felt for Muḥammad, when we consider their shared biographical details. Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was born in Ṭaḥṭa, some 60 kilometers from Asyūt, Muḥammad's hometown, the capital of their district. Both were born into a family of *sharīfs* and therefore of noble lineage (tracing all the way back to Muḥammad the Prophet) and sharing a direct ancestor in Sīdī Abū 'l-Qāsim, a famous fourteenth-century mystic saint. It is precisely the noble piety of Muḥammad's background that has enabled him to remain distinctly Muslim despite Western influences. By drawing attention to Muḥammad's genealogical and geographical ancestry, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī suggests that Egyptian-ness and Muslim-ness are essentialist: they travel with him and Muḥammad and can never be taken from them, no matter where they travel. Though the Westernization was violent in its initial form for Muḥammad, it is this particular blend of a noble Islamic past and a Western future that gives him such potential for greatness. If a face suffused with essential nobility and a natural piety based solely on child's knowledge of prayers provides the basis for great expectations for

Muḥammad's future, al-Ṭahṭāwī's noble family and Azharite education would point to even greater potential for success. Thus Westernization is a powerful draught that, if measured judiciously and carefully examined before consumption, can remedy an ailing Arab-Islamic civilization with minimal long-term side effects.

Temptations of the Flesh and Chaste Admiration

Though al-Ṭahṭāwī struggles with the question of conversion, at no point does he seem genuinely *tempted* by Christianity. His abstract apprehensions on that account seem suddenly facile when finds himself face-to-face with the unrelenting physical temptations of female bodies in the City of Love, and so he invents rhetorical strategies in order to maintain a distance from Western culture's most seductive siren song, one which could persuade a young Muslim to critically separate himself from the path of Islamic moral virtue and propriety. Considering al-Ṭahṭāwī was a young unmarried man of twenty-five when he first arrived in Paris, it is not surprising that one aspect of the Western world that he tries to measure the most judiciously is the beauty of women. He struggles with the question of how to resist temptation. This fits nicely into the larger issue of cultural negotiation: for example, it suggests that one can admire a culture without succumbing to what, according to the home values, is immoral, just as one can resist a lovely woman. As al-Ṭahṭāwī argues, "nothing prevents a healthy disposition from admiring something that is beautiful with chastity" (148). His emphasis on chastity (abstinence from unmarried sexual activity), should not be taken to mean celibacy (an abstinence from marriage and all sexual activity), for he believes the latter breeds immorality: "[o]ne of the most dreadful traits in the land of the French—or indeed in all Catholic countries—is the prohibition of marriage for the clergy, irrespective of their rank or title. Celibacy increases their sinfulness and moral depravity even more" (253). Thus al-Ṭahṭāwī's insistence on "chastity" (*'afāf*; the root of

the word suggests abstinence, decency, modesty, purity, shyness) suggests a relationship with the object of one's desire as one which presupposes the possibility of marriage. In Arab culture, the state of marriage, as a social act which attests to one's place in a community, guarantees health and morality. Thus, any encounter with beauty that does not culminate in marriage and consummation must remain chaste. Thus it is precisely because a marriage between Islam and the "unbelief" of France is impossible¹ that al-Ṭaḥṭāwī must remain innocent in his pleasure as voyeur in Paris. And he very determinedly asserts his chaste nature:

I have deep desire for every being filled with beauty

without fearing my youthful passion

Doubts about love I have none

Yet chastity is my nature (148)

"Desire" in the Arabic text is rendered as a verb (*aṣbū*; to bend toward, to feel sensual desire) and shares a root with "youthful passion" (*ṣubūw*); their root *ṣabawa* suggests the idea of behaving like a child, youthful zeal, or childish infatuation, which then implies al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's desire will disappear with age and maturity and thus its threat to his moral fiber is transient. While he signals his desire for all kinds of beauty, foreshadowing later lengthy passages describing women's bodies, he also soothes his readers' worries by promising not to consummate his longing with French immorality. He initially establishes a link between chastity in cultural and in sexual experiences when he describes Egypt and France as feminine figures, claiming, for instance, that land of the Franks "is the bride among all regions" (105) and

¹ This follows a long tradition in literature wherein the joining/unifying of nations is posited via the metaphor of marriage in both French and British eighteenth and nineteenth-century literature: for example in Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent*, many works of Sir Walter Scott, Sidney Owenson's *The Missionary* and the *Wild Irish Girl*, and in some of Chateaubriand and in Mme de Stael's novels. It should be noted that most authors problematize this metaphor.

alluding to Cairo as “the mother of the world” (174) who he hopes will become the “queen of all cities” (174). Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī makes the link explicit in a poem of his:

If I were to have a final divorce from Paris

it would only be to return to Cairo

Each of them is a bride to me –

however, Cairo is not the daughter of unbelief! (163)

The metaphor here of the wedding ceremony is important in that not only are Paris and Cairo women, they are al-Ṭaḥṭāwī’s brides, and the crucial distinction between a bride and a wife is the act of consummation. In the poem, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī explores the possibility of consummation with his brides, and he clearly chooses the Muslim spouse, Cairo. As much as he is enchanted by her beauty, he must avoid joining with Paris because as the daughter of unbelief (not just non-Muslim, but atheist) she is irreligious and therefore an inappropriate object for his gaze. So while he obviously admires Paris, considering he has positioned her as his bride, her groom maintains a respectful distance because he knows her “unbelief” would lead him to immorality.

Despite his bravura in his poetry, he obviously difficulty in maintaining sexual and moral purity when face-to-face with living, breathing women in Paris. I would like to argue that he deals with this issue by devising a strategy of alternating praise and severe and uncharacteristically misogynist criticism that enables him to distance himself from his desire. Avoiding sexual temptation is trying for him in Paris, partly because “the hearts of most people in France, whether male or female, are in thrall to the art of love. Their amorous passion is an aim in itself since they do not believe that they serve any other purpose” (221). In a place where desire becomes an end in itself, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī must gird himself against temptation, for, as we recall, he associates “consummation” with France (and its women) with self-destruction. He

quips that in Paris, “[i]t is rare to have a short period of time during which no-one has killed himself, especially for reasons of [...] lovesickness” (179). So for all that he enumerates the virtues of the French women, declaring they are “paragons of beauty and charm” (184), “nice and amiable company”(184), and have “great literary ability [...], extraordinary [skills in] correspondence” (192), and “passion for knowledge” (221), he disapproves of the power the women seem to exert over the men. In one uncharacteristically misogynistic observation, he laments that “the men are slaves to the women here, and under their command, irrespective of whether they are pretty or not” (181). Aside from the casual discrimination in the quote, we see the men are slaves to their women, in part, of course, to their devotion to amorous passion, but also because of their unquenchable thirst for self-gratification, evidenced by the enormous amounts of money they spend on “personal pleasures, [the gratification of] diabolic urges, and on entertainment and games; [...] [T]hey exceed all bounds” (180). One of the central expressions of these “diabolic urges” closely linked to sexual desire that he appears quite taken with is fashion. He notes that fashion is a manifestation of their “love of change and alternation in all things” (177). The French are drawn to fashionable clothing like moths to a flame, for though they are friendly with strangers, they are even more so “particularly if the stranger is wearing precious clothes” (179). Yet though he points to a general Parisian love of fashion, he appears not to breathe a word about men’s clothing, focusing entirely on the visual seduction of women’s fashion and the shaping of their bodies:

French women’s clothes are very pretty, but there is a certain immodesty about them especially when they wear their most expensive garments. [...] [O]nce the belt has been put on, the waist is so slim that one can hold it in both hands. [...] One of their habits that cannot be condoned is that, contrary to the wont of Arab women, they do not let their hair

hang freely. On hot days they tend to uncover parts of their bodies, removing any garment between the head and their breasts—sometimes they even show a bare back. At evening dance parties the ladies' arms are bare. Yet this is not considered indecent by people of this country. However, they never show their legs and always wear stockings, especially when they go out into the street. In truth, their legs are not exceptional at all and the following words of the poet do not really apply to them:

*I have not forgotten him, as he got up freely showing his
leg, as white as a shiny pearl*

Do not wonder if in him I found my resurrection

Indeed the resurrection is the day of the discovery of the leg (226-227)

Such a passage demonstrates how thoroughly al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's ambitious plan for chastity in the face of Gallic seduction is empirically tested and he succeeds to a certain extent by the juxtaposition of admiration and dismissive criticism ("their legs are not exceptional at all"). Despite the initial signal that their clothes are "immodest," al-Ṭaḥṭāwī devotes a great deal of text to the details of his observations of them and the bodies implied underneath. There is an intense sensual tone to his description of their feminine body parts and the accentuated narrowness of their waists to the exaggerated fullness of the haunches, as well as a disrobing of the female form as he explains which parts they expose on hot days. The tone of admiration and the physicality in his words betrays not-so-chaste feelings as he describes the size of their waists in terms of hands, implying an invitation to touch that he seems keen to accept.

As he moves in to make physical contact with their bodies, he shifts gears and begins to justify the bareness of the bodies, defending them as not indecent according to their own standards, introducing a sort of moral relativity that attempts to diminish the vulgarity of their

dress. By introducing a level of moral relativity, he attempts to distance himself slightly from the vulgarity of their bodies' sweltering sensuality. He further increases the distance by moving from what is revealed to what is concealed: their legs (because they are quite plain and unremarkable anyway). He further criticizes their overworked hairstyles (he cannot "condone" them) which he believes inferior to Arab women's free-flowing hair. The abrupt flippant criticism and downplay of their physical charms, namely their legs and hair, make it seem as if al-Ṭaḥṭāwī has suddenly realized he was no longer "chastely" observing, and tripped over his own feet while hurrying to retreat. He redirects his desire for Western beauty to a more appropriate Egyptian beauty, whose free-flowing hair is more beautiful. Additionally the word "resurrection" in Egypt, *qiyama*, puns on "erection," giving the poem a distinctly erotic tone; in the context of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's quotation, the verse represents a re-direction of his sexual desire away from the French women. Yet the irony of the poem lies in the masculinity of the leg's owner, so that when he searches the Arabic poetic tradition for a reference to the sensuality of the leg, he quotes Ghaylan ibn 'Uqbah, a pre-Islamic Bedouin poet. For al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, homosexual desire is among the most degenerate feelings, and he earlier praises the French for their apparent marginalization of homosexual desire; he asserts that "[o]ne of the praiseworthy aspects of their nature, and one they truly have in common with the Arabs, is the fact that they do not have any propensity towards the love of boys or the celebration of its pursuit" (181). In light of his condemnation, it seems perplexing that at the moment he is trying to find a more appropriate object of desire, he summons an image of a masculine leg, which, according to his own words, is also sinful. If the chances are slim that he intends to seek refuge in homosexual desire, we can at least posit that he tries to seek refuge in a decidedly homosocial relationship between men, which was the primary source of companionship available for an Arab man in the nineteenth century. But there remains a

confusion in his words that seems to indicate the difficulty of navigating sexual morality and chastity. Each time he approaches the female bodies in an unchaste way, he critiques them to open a more appropriate distance. There is a distinct sense of movement in al-Ṭahṭāwī's attraction and repulsion regarding the female body, which echoes the larger movements of his dance with the city of Paris itself as he negotiates his desire for Parisian cultural beauty with Egyptian cultural norms in order to not compromise his moral and religious beliefs.

Conclusion: Parting Words

An Imam in Paris charts al-Ṭahṭāwī's exploration of the social and intellectual terrain of Paris, as he fashions radical notions about to what degree a Muslim may be "modernized" without subsuming himself wholly into Western structure, and the prominent role a hybrid modernized Muslim can play in the creation of a stronger Egypt, urging her into a prominent global political position. Unfortunately, as Western hegemony has historically gone to great lengths to conceal and marginalize counter-discourses from the East, until very recently scholarship on *An Imam in Paris* has relegated al-Ṭahṭāwī's account to obscure footnotes and fragments in favor of the more familiar soliloquies of European Romantic travelers like Chateaubriand or Lamartine; recent efforts, however, including my own work, reclaim *An Imam in Paris* as an alternate perspective on the culture clash of the nineteenth century wherein an Eastern subject takes measure of the West and thereby inverts the historical emphasis on Western eyes gazing on Eastern subjects.

I have argued that al-Ṭahṭāwī's account claims the individual and communal agency to negotiate with the West, as he reacts in a very unique and personal way, inventing strategies for cultural arbitration as he goes along which allow him to strengthen his bonds with his home country while remaining open and elastic to new ideas; whether he encounters racism on the

street, or sees in a mirror reflections of more than he anticipated, or ponders the fate of an emigrated fellow countryman, or even gazes with longing at the face of a beautiful woman, he remains remarkably measured, thoughtful, curious and discerning. He participates enthusiastically in every cultural exchange, often overwhelmed by wonder, or sometimes struck by disorientation or surprise, aided greatly by his extraordinary capacity to adapt and improvise. I have argued that the most valuable aspect of this travel account is the way it presents al-Ṭaḥṭāwī as actively exploring and negotiating with Parisian culture while maintaining a strong sense of self and without standing apart from it as a voyeur, but immersed in it and living in it. Though *An Imam in Paris* was relegated to a historical footnote in Western scholarship for over a century, I contend it deserves recognition as a striking account of a successful meeting of the Middle East with Western Europe. Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's open and tentative exploration of his own cultural struggles have strikingly contemporary implications today, for the same basic questions are endlessly posed about whether Islam and modernity are commensurable, or if Islam must be completely secularized as a prerequisite for a healthy relationship with the West. *An Imam in Paris* reminds us that these questions are not a phenomenon of the twenty-first century, but have been explored for centuries and we need only look to similar accounts to help us break the solipsistic cycle of meaningless hand-wringing in contemporary rhetoric about how to secularize the Middle East. If we, like al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, get up and get moving, and travel to while maintaining a curious and flexible mind and engaging in free exchanges of ideas, we will realize cultural negotiation is and always will be an ongoing process that should never be abandoned.

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