

The Sword and the Pen: Egyptian Musings on European Penetration, Persuasion, and Power

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In “Globalism and Its Discontents: Notes of a Wandering Scholar,” an essay recently published in the Modern Language Association’s *Profession 1999*, Ihab Hassan argues for the “truth of the text”—of literature generally—in a “postmodern” world of fragile self-definitions and incendiary geopolitics, a world that he sees as wracked by “globalization” and “localization,” by ironic pluralism and outraged particularism (Hassan 1999:59). Sent by the Egyptian government to the United States in the 1940s to complete a doctorate in electrical engineering and return to build the Aswan High Dam, Hassan turned his back on Egypt and engineering and became a U.S. scholar of English literature instead.¹ “My first languages were Arabic and French,” he writes,

but English is my best, my most richly felt language. In this, I am like the millions who make English the most widely, if not natively, spoken tongue in the world—and in so doing alter it. How did English become the lingua franca of earthlings (to the constant

¹ We might say that Oscar Wilde predicted Ihab Hassan. Reviewing the work of Manmohan Ghose, a nineteenth-century Indian anglophone poet, Oscar Wilde—the foremost Anglo-Irish cultural critic of the (last) fin-de-siècle—wrote: “His verses show how quick and subtle are the intellectual sympathies of the Oriental mind, and suggest how close is the bond of union that may some day bind India to us by other methods than those of commerce and military strength!” (Wilde 1968).

More keenly, perhaps, than most Victorian thinkers, Wilde recognized the political import of the propagation of English literature in colonial India. Hailing as he did from an Ireland long dominated as much by the King’s English as by acts of English Parliament, he was acutely aware of the power of cultural imperialism. He knew that the arts were the arms by which India would be won.

I thank Catherine Gallagher for pointing out to me that Wilde’s Irishness is not inconsistent with his seeming “celebration” of the power of English literature to annex India. As an Irishman, Wilde is well-positioned to predict the means by which England will achieve its colonial designs in India; from the experience of Ireland, he knows that cultural penetration is a most effective imperial weapon—precisely because, by comparison to trade monopoly or military force, it appears so deceptively benign. To this I would add that Wilde’s strategic use of the pronoun “us,” suggesting his self-inclusion in the British empire that seeks to colonize India, not only points to England’s absorption of his Irish identity, but also forecasts England’s likely absorption of India.

chagrin of the French government)? Military, economic, technological power, which Britain and the United States imperially, serially exerted? The presumed ease of the language itself, which nonetheless ambushes so many foreign speakers by its capricious spelling and arbitrary pronunciation? Something about “Anglo-Saxon” institutions, ideas, attitudes, no less than “Anglo-Saxon” navies or microchips? I can offer some personal anecdotes in lieu of historical narratives. [Hassan 1999:61]

Invoking the Goethean concept of elective affinities to explain his decision to study English literature, Hassan makes the adoption of English a question of almost erotic “chemistry”—or alchemy. (Goethe’s notion of “elective affinities” is one of various borrowings from the language of chemistry used, in late-eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century European Romanticism, to explain the mysterious ways of love; Stendhal’s “crystallization” is another.) With one mouth, Hassan conjures the specters of navies, microchips, and other agents of imperial rule; with the other, he banishes the ghosts, denying the possibility that the attractions of English might have something to do with its associations with power—military, economic, technological, institutional, and ideological. What motivated him to adopt the colonizer’s idiom—as, in his words, his “best” and “most richly felt” language—was neither the British education of his Egyptian childhood nor a youthful fascination with the devil-may-care swagger and drawl of the American GIs prowling World War II Cairo, Hassan insists, but rather his attraction to English’s seductions:

Somehow, some way, I became cathected then on both the language and the literature of England, and detestation for the English colonizer—technically, Egypt was only a “protectorate”—could not vitiate my elective affinities. How many writers, I wonder, from Morocco and Tunisia to India and Indonesia, have been drawn to foreign tongues? Is affinity the hidden face of imperialism, as power is its open face? [Hassan 1999:61]

No doubt one can (and should) debunk the presumed innocence of Hassan’s “English”—and the presumed freedom of his turn to English for English’s sake—as a too-facile explanation of a far more calculated process of European cultural penetration in the non-Western world. In the perceptive words of Laura Nader, such a “notion of culture and behavior as consensual” often is simply “convenient both for colonizers...and even for those colonized who actively constructed their self-presentation” (Nader 1994:84). Still, Hassan’s question hits a raw nerve in postcolonial relations between the West and “the rest.” Not only does he suggest that beauty plays at least as large a role as brutality in the workings of imperialism, he also argues that such beauty might not, after all, operate in the service of colonial politics, but as a lure with few ideological strings attached—attractive enough, indeed, to induce “voluntary” surrenders of power to love. *Is affinity the hidden face of*

imperialism, as power is its open face? Hassan's question about the way colonial hegemony works haunts us.

Arts, Arms, and the Annals of European Colonialism

It haunts us because, in fact, arts often *are* aligned with arms in the annals of European colonialism, words preceding or accompanying or following weapons as instruments of conquest. Edward Said says as much when he defines Orientalism as a constellation of relationships that allows the West to exercise positional superiority over the East, and above all as

a discourse that is by no means in direct, corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the exchange with power political (as with a colonial or imperial establishment), power intellectual (as with reigning sciences like comparative linguistics or anatomy, or any of the modern policy sciences), *power cultural* (as with orthodoxies and canons of taste, texts, values), power moral (as with ideas about what "we" do and what "they" cannot do or understand as "we" do). [Said 1979:7, 12; emphasis added]

But it haunts us even more profoundly because, for all the magical power Hassan accords European culture (problematically, I might add), his attention to the cultural magnetism of the colonizing process grants—strangely enough—a certain *agency* to colonial subjects in determining the course Europe's imperial project would take. For too often analyses of the process by which Europe colonized much of the globe between the sixteenth and the twentieth centuries focus on technology as the force that realized imperial designs. When studies do engage the role of other intellectual forces in the colonizing process, they sometimes regard (with a dazzled eye) what they presume to be the incredibly persuasive power of European ideas in colonial domains, as if those ideas exercise an irresistible spell, peculiar to them *alone*, on all who come in contact with them. Witness Said's problematic assertion in *Orientalism*, amended in his later book *Culture and Imperialism*, that the "scientist, the scholar, the missionary, the trader, or the soldier was in, or thought about, the Orient because he *could be there*, or could think about it, with very little resistance on the Orient's part" (Said 1979:7). Even Timothy Mitchell's otherwise remarkable study of the process of colonization in Egypt subscribes, on some level, to the notion that European manipulations and "mischief" somehow duped nineteenth-century Arabs into acceptance of Western institutions and ideas (Mitchell 1993). Ignored is the equally mysterious process by which the mind of a colonial subject, or a person whose land is threatened by colonial domination, comes to accept those ideas as truths. Also ignored is the colonized world's stubborn conviction (epitomized in the words of Gandhi) that the West lacks "spiritual civilization," a conviction that stymies

the wholesale acceptance of not just European technology and material culture, but also European philosophy and cultural artifacts (Gandhi 1922:30–39).² (Note that even the West, in the early years of eastward territorial expansion, was not always so confident of the potency of its ideas: French observers during Napoleon’s occupation of Egypt were not necessarily sure that their science had truly impressed their Egyptian interlocutors (de Bourrienne 1993:156–57).³)

Such mystification of European colonialism, which tends to deny the critical assessment—and equally strategic assimilation—of Western ideas and institutions by the colonized peoples of much of the globe, is deeply linked to what Laura Nader calls “the *positional predicament* of a Western anthropology which excludes observation *on the West* by other cultures and which may be part of an effort to manage a certain relation with the Western ‘Other’” (Nader 1994:84). To this European and U.S. refusal to see itself turned “Other” in an Arab or African or Asian or Latin American mirror, Nader opposes an anthropological paradigm that “allows for the Other’s Other” (Nader 1994:85) and recognizes that “the ‘other’ is not mute, in either direction” (Nader 1989:4).

² Gandhi attributes the loss or gain of India to Indian, not British, agency.

³ Witness the following account by Louis Antoine Fauvelet de Bourrienne, private secretary to Napoleon:

The art of imposing on mankind has at all times been an important part of the art of governing; and it was not that portion of the science of government which Bonaparte was the least acquainted with. He neglected no opportunity of showing off to the Egyptians the superiority of France in arts and sciences; but it happened, oftener than once, that the simple instinct of the Egyptians thwarted his endeavours in this way. Some days after the visit of the pretended fortune-teller he wished, if I may so express myself, to oppose conjuror to conjuror. For this purpose he invited the principal sheiks to be present at some chemical experiments performed by M. Berthollet. The General expected to be much amused at their astonishment; but the miracles of the transformation of liquids, electrical commotions, and galvanism, did not elicit from them any symptom of surprise. They witnessed the operations of our able chemist with the most imperturbable indifference. When they were ended, the sheik El Bekri desired the interpreter to tell M. Berthollet that it was all very fine; “but,” said he, “ask him whether he can make me be in Morocco and here at one and the same moment.” M. Berthollet replied in the negative, with a shrug of his shoulders. “Oh, then,” said the sheik, “he is not half a sorcerer.” (de Bourrienne 1993: 156–57)

This account of Napoleon’s efforts to show off French scientific prowess to the Egyptians is noteworthy both for its suggestion of the place of such efforts in overall designs to impose French power on other peoples and for its representation of (at least seemingly) unimpressed Egyptians, shrewdly foiling French pretenses to superiority by demanding impossible feats from French scientists.

And thus Hassan's question leads me, via Nader, to questions of my own. Do we, in attributing the outcome of Europe's protocolonial, colonial, and postcolonial encounters with the Arab world, Africa, and Asia to technological and material power, subscribe uncritically to what is quite possibly a "Western" mythology of technology's importance or centrality? And when we do recognize that other forms of knowledge, including sociopolitical ideas and literary canons, "count" in the assertion of Europe's positional superiority over other regions of the globe, why do we fail to accord as much attention to the *reception* of this knowledge by Arabs, Africans, and Asians as we do to Europe's dissemination thereof? Still larger, categorical questions loom: Why do we tacitly assume that "knowledge" is the province of the post-Enlightenment West, and that "belief" (evacuated from post-Enlightenment Western culture) remains the province of the East? Why continue to frame the encounter of East and West as one in which Western "knowledge" (inevitably) conquers Eastern "belief"? I ask: How does an Eastern culture define the relationship between knowledge and belief, and how does it deploy that definition in encounters with a Western culture premised on the presumed triumph of knowledge *over* belief?

The Case of Egypt: Al-Tahtawi's Takhlis

To explore this question, I take the case of Egypt at the turn of the nineteenth century. The French forces of Napoleon Bonaparte occupied Egypt for only three years, from 1798–1801; in the wake of his expulsion by a coalition of Ottoman and British forces, Muhammad ʿAli, an Albanian officer within the Ottoman ranks, became Egypt's governor—paying nominal allegiance to the Sublime Porte in Istanbul, yet operating quite independently from it. Egypt had just eluded long-term French colonization; it would not fall to British rule until some eighty years later, in 1882. Yet Egypt's leadership and intelligentsia consciously participated in a *cultural* extension of Napoleon's military incursion.⁴

⁴ English colonial administrators in India recognized the potential colonizing power of Muhammad ʿAli's project. Consider this: When Thomas Macaulay and Charles Trevelyan argued that British literature could civilize India as Greek and Latin had civilized England, they cited none other than Muhammad ʿAli, "Pacha of Egypt," as a model for the "enlightenment" they wished to promote. Macaulay had gone to India in 1834 to serve as a member of the Supreme Council of India, the executive council of governor-general Lord William Bentinck and the extension of the British Crown in Bengal at the time. His "Minute on Education in India," an address of 2 February 1835, marked a turning point in the debate on the future of British pedagogy in India—a debate that pitted Anglicists (who believed that funds for education in Bengal should be allocated to the teaching of English and the Indian vernaculars) against Orientalists (who sought to promote instruction in Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian). In this address, Macaulay cites Egypt as "a parallel case" to India: Suppose that the Pacha of Egypt, a country once superior in knowledge to the nations of Europe, but now sunk far below them, were to appropriate a sum for the purpose of 'reviving and promoting literature, and encouraging learned natives of Egypt,' would anybody infer that he meant the youth of his pachalic to give years to the study of hieroglyphics, to search into all

Convinced that Egypt must grasp the secret of European power, Muhammad ʿAli instituted secular systems of education in European letters and science, relegating traditional Arab-Islamic learning to the background. Under the supervision of Rifaʿa Rafiʿ al-Tahtawi (1801–1873), an Azharite imam and scholar then only twenty-five years old, the first delegation of Egyptian students traveled to France, consisting primarily of officers interested in the military sciences and technology. (During the 1820s, Muhammad ʿAli also dispatched a group of twenty Egyptians to study at Joseph Lancaster’s Central School in London (Mitchell 1993:69).) Unlike the officers in his charge, al-Tahtawi had broad intellectual interests, in the humanities as well as the sciences. He had been a student of the great eighteenth-century Egyptian intellectual Hasan al-ʿAttar (1766–1838), who declined an initial invitation by Muhammad ʿAli to lead the Egyptian delegation and recommended the much younger al-Tahtawi, his brightest student, in his stead.

Al-ʿAttar’s biography itself sheds considerable light on al-Tahtawi’s intellectual formation. The older cleric had been in extensive contact with members of Napoleon’s expedition in Egypt earlier in the century and, in 1800, had authored a rhymed prose narrative (*maqama*) on the French presence in Egypt, considered a very early and important example of modern Arabic literary realism (Gran 1979:89–91). The author of more than fifty books in an astonishing range of fields—from philology, rhetoric, and poetry to astronomy, geography, and medicine—al-ʿAttar was a divergent thinker among Egyptian intellectuals of his day. According to social historian Peter Gran, his intellectual independence was driven, in part, by the collapse of the Egyptian economy during the 1790s. Older scholars, who “continued to live from their trade, their landed wealth, and whatever gifts they received,” disregarded the implications of this socioeconomic upheaval (Gran 1979:81). Economic comfort translated, for them, into intellectual complacency. But al-ʿAttar, who received little help from his teachers and faced an economic climate that sharply curtailed merchant patronage of scholarly pursuits, was inclined to think critically. Thus he resurrected, elaborated, and in some cases amended neglected or poorly understood classical Arab-Islamic treatments of literature and literary history, sociopolitical and religious history, and medicine (Gran 1979:82). So remarkable was al-ʿAttar’s reinvigoration of a long-standing tradition of Islamic rationalism that, Gran argues, “most of what is regarded as European influence” in al-Tahtawi’s writing “came from his association with al-ʿAttar” (Gran 1979:185). Writes Gran:

the doctrines disguised under the fable of Osiris, and to ascertain with all possible accuracy the ritual with which cats and onions were anciently adored? Would he be justly charged with inconsistency if, instead of employing his young subjects in deciphering obelisks, he were to order them to be instructed in the English and French languages, and in all the sciences to which those languages are the chief keys? (Macaulay 1887: 171).

This necessarily revises sharply the view of al-Tahtawi as an innovator bringing back ideas from France. One need only know that he read Ibn Khaldun with al-[◌]Attar, possibly even the work of al-[◌]Attar in which the latter used Ibn Khaldun as a model[,] to understand how he could find Montesquieu to be the Ibn Khaldun of the West, to regard Lord Chesterfield's *Letters to His Son* as *maqamat*, to prefer republicanism to absolute monarchy....His taste in science in Paris was quite Islamic; he liked observatories, which al-[◌]Attar had pointed out in his scientific writings were central to later Islamic science. [Gran 1979:185]

What Gran's account suggests is the intellectual sophistication, breadth, and cosmopolitanism with which al-Tahtawi—thanks to the tutelage of al-[◌]Attar—approached French learning when he arrived in Paris in 1826. Moreover, Gran shows that al-Tahtawi's habits of thought—and his taste for rationalist history and sociology, for essentially “democratic” forms of government, for fresh literary forms, and for scientific inquiry—were not simply the fruit of his encounter with Europe and Europeans, but deeply rooted in Islamic traditions of learning. Such a premise is important, for it underscores the fact that al-Tahtawi went to Paris armed with the Islamic intellectual apparatus necessary to critically evaluate French knowledge. Equally, Gran's premise undercuts the force of Europe's “civilizing mission” and those postcolonial discourses that (wittingly or unwittingly) uphold that mission by granting European ideas and institutions the power to penetrate, unquestioned, the lands of colonized Arabs, Africans, and Asians.

Al-Tahtawi remained in Paris five years, from 1826 to 1831. In 1834, he became the head of a new institute in Cairo devoted to large-scale translation of European works into Arabic; that year, he also published *Takhlis al-Ibriz fi Talkhis Bariz (An Extraction of Gold in the Summary of Paris)*, the first modern Arab travelogue of European life.⁵ The book is actually far more than an account of an Egyptian scholar's five-year sojourn in Paris. Running to almost four hundred pages, it is also a richly detailed ethnography of early-nineteenth-century France—its letters, science, political and cultural institutions, manners, mores, and habits of everyday life—by an Egyptian who positions himself as a participant-observer in French

⁵ Al-Tahtawi published his best-known literary translation, of François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon's *Les Aventures de Télémaque*, in 1867. Mitchell (1993:75) discusses the political significance of this translation. Hafez (1993) discusses the influence of the translation on the work of 'A'isha al-Taymur, one of Egypt's first women novelists. She derived the temporal structure of an 1890s novel from al-Tahtawi's translation of Fénelon, grafting a European novelistic form onto the centuries-old Arabic episodic narrative genre of the *maqama*. Her's was a creative synthesis reflecting the hybridization of Arabic and European literary forms in Egyptian letters at the turn of the twentieth century.

society. As Sandra Naddaf observes in her comparative study of al-Tahtawi's description of a French café in *Takhlis* and Edward William Lane's description of a Cairene café in *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1836), "al-Tahtawi ultimately distinguishes himself in this work as a mediator between two ever-changing though mutually exclusive semiotic codes," an ethnographer who can read not only the obvious zone of difference that separates two cultures but also the elusive zone of similarity that links them (Naddaf 1986:76). Moreover, it is a literary meditation, and in many ways a strategic one, on the politics and psychodynamics of East-West cultural encounter in an era of European colonial expansion. By reading closely key portions of al-Tahtawi's account, we can surmise that it is, perhaps, not the scholar's translation of French scientific and technical manuals that would most profoundly change Egyptian culture over the course of the nineteenth century, but his exposure to texts imparting a competing system of institutions and values—philosophical, literary, and linguistic.⁶ But more important, we can see that if al-Tahtawi—lured by affinity, that hidden face of imperialism—

⁶ In article 4, chapter 5 of *Takhlis*, al-Tahtawi recounts the progress of his education in the French language during his journey to and subsequent stay in France, and details the French-language books he read—in a range of disciplines—with various tutors (al-Tahtawi 1993:299–306). Here is a telling passage:

Books on Various Arts: I read a book on the science of French logic with Monsieur Choilet and Monsieur Lomonry, and several selections of the book *La Porte-Royale*...and another book on logic called the book of Condillac, in which he altered the logic of Aristotle. And I read with Monsieur Choilet a short book on minerals and translated it. And I read many books of literature, among them Noël's collection, and several selections from the collected works of Voltaire and the collected works of Racine and the collected works of Rousseau—specifically his *Persian Letters* [sic; Montesquieu, not Rousseau, is the author of *Lettres Persanes*, the book to which al-Tahtawi refers here], in which he presents the difference between the literatures of the *ifranj* and the Persians [*al-^cajam*]. And more than anything else, they [the *Persian Letters*] resemble a scale in which Western and Eastern literatures are weighed [and presumably compared; *wa hiya ashbahu bi-mizan bayna al-adab al-maghribiyya wa al-mashriqiyya*]. I also read, on my own, English correspondence authored by [Lord] Chesterfield for the upbringing and education of his son [*li tarbiyat waladihi wa ta^climihi*], and many French *maqamat* [al-Tahtawi's word probably refers to the French *contes*, tales or short stories], and altogether I read, indeed, many of French literature's celebrated works....

And I also read, with Monsieur Choilet, two sections of a book called *The Spirit of Laws* [*L'Esprit des lois*], whose author is famous among the French and known as Montesquieu, and it resembles, more than anything else, a balance in which legal and political schools of thought are weighed... He is nicknamed among them 'the Frankish Ibn Khaldun' [*Ibn-Khaldun al-ifranji*], just as Ibn Khaldun is also said by them to be 'the Montesquieu of the East' [*Montiskyu al-sharq*] or 'the Montesquieu of Islam.' And in this vein I also read a book called *The Social Contract* [*Le Contrat social*; *aqd al-ta'annus wa al-ijtima^c al-insani*], whose author is known as Rousseau, and its meaning is great. [al-Tahtawi 1993:302–3; translation mine]

ends up equivocally embracing French knowledge. To French “secular” reason, he continually opposes an Arab-Islamic counter-knowledge that insists on a fundamental unity of reason and belief.

Between Reason and Belief

In an important chapter titled “An Account of the Advancement of the People of Paris in the Sciences, the Arts, and Manufacturing, and an Account of Their Organization, and an Elucidation of That Which Relates to This,” al-Tahtawi writes:

That which is clear to one who contemplates the state of the sciences and the literary arts or humanities and manufacturing in this age in the city of Paris is the fact that human knowledge has spread and attained [many] facets in this city, and that there cannot be found, among the thinkers of the *ifranj*, those who match the thinkers of Paris—nor, for that matter, among the thinkers of the advanced [peoples], this being also clear. The accurate critic must say: “Indeed, most of the scientific arts whose effects are apparent by experience, these thinkers’ knowledge of them is solid, and their mastery of them is indisputable.” As the words of one revered thinker attest: “Matters are [defined] by their completion; and acts by their ends; and manufactured objects by their durability.” [al-Tahtawi 1993:255; my translation]

Clearly, al-Tahtawi is impressed by French science and technology; by French studies in history, geography, and languages and literatures; and by the institutions and infrastructures that support these forms of learning—so impressed that he seems ready to grant the superiority of French society over others: “[T]here cannot be found,” he tells us, “among the thinkers of the *ifranj* [i.e., Westerners], those who match the thinkers of Paris—nor, for that matter, among the thinkers of the advanced.” Empirical observation—of the tangible results of scientific investigation, of the palpable quality of material craftsmanship—demands recognition of French scientific excellence, he insists. He is equally astonished by the pace of French inquiry, discovery, and “progress”:

The superiority of these Christians [*nasara*] over others [*‘amman ‘adahum*] will become apparent to you, and in this you [will] see the lack in our country of many of these [sciences], and that the prestigious mosque of al-Azhar in Cairo, and the Umayyad mosque in Damascus, and the Zaytuna mosque in Tunis, and the Qarawiyyin mosque in Fez, and the Bukhari schools and the like are all prominent in the traditional sciences [*al-ulum al-naqliyya*], and some of the rational sciences, such as the Arabic sciences, logic, and [logic’s] like among the mechanical sciences. In the city of Paris, the sciences

advance each day; indeed, they are always on the rise. Not a year passes without their discovering something new; every year they might discover several new arts, or new industries, or devices, or accessories... [al-Tahtawi 1993:259; my translation]

But al-Tahtawi always evaluates France's "advancement" against the core premises of its philosophical thought, and toward the latter, his attitude is divided at best:

As for most of the sciences and the theoretical arts, these are known to them to the fullest extent of knowledge, but they have some philosophical beliefs that transgress the law of reason [*qanun al-'aql*], by comparison to other nations—yet they misrepresent (or distort) and fortify these so that their truth and accuracy appears such to humankind.... [T]hey are more learned than others because of their long-held knowledge of the secrets of machines, and their invention thereof. [al-Tahtawi 1993:255; my translation]

So much for the irresistible power of European reason to captivate the minds of non-European intellectuals and their peoples, a power that, ironically enough, both canonical and postcolonial studies of the lands that came under Western domination between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries sometimes grant the Enlightenment project. Indeed, far from accepting at face value the claims French philosophy might make on him, al-Tahtawi sees in its modes of argumentation and reasoning a good deal of sophistry and deception. He is perceptive enough to recognize that the French might marshal so-called "evidence" to make distortions or misrepresentations of fact appear as persuasive truths. Even more significantly, al-Tahtawi's critique of French philosophy does *not* align French philosophy with reason, then proceed to pit—against Western "reason"—the force of Arab-Islamic "belief." French thought, he argues, "*transgresses* the law of reason," while Islamic thought, he implies, calls on the human to *exercise* reason: first, to deduce the existence and omnipotence of God—to read the universe for signs of God's supreme intelligence—and second, to govern the earth justly as God's vicegerent. Knowledge and belief are inseparable here.

If al-Tahtawi is skeptical of the truth claims of French philosophy, he is equally critical of those of French newspapers (for which he uses the term *al-jurnu*, an Arabic transliteration of the French *journaux*). French papers are little more than cliques; he writes:

[F]or every group, in its point of view, represents an ideological tendency [*laha fi ra'yiha madhabun*], [and] each day strengthens and defends and supports it. And there is nothing whatsoever in the world more deceitful than newspapers, especially in the case of the French,

who do not shun lying except insofar as its being a disgrace. And in general, the writers of newspapers are worse in their ways [*aswa' halan*] than poets are in their courtesies and loves. [al-Tahtawi 1993:275; my translation]

As in his critique of French philosophy, al-Tahtawi invokes a distinctly Islamic register here, this time to interrogate the truth-value of newspapers—a novel feature of French political and cultural life. His comparison of news reporters to poets—a comparison in which reporters, incidentally, fare the worse—targets an Arab and Muslim readership aware of the Qur'anic opposition of poetry to prophecy, in which poetry is conventionally allied with deceit and prophecy distinguished by its uncompromising truth.

Al-Tahtawi's language recalls Laura Nader's observation that "while Westerners may think of Islamic, Indian, or Chinese civilizations in the past tense, members of these societies see their civilizations as part of the present, even if a spiritual present. In their rhetoric they thus continue to compare themselves as positionally superior to the barbaric West, even if the West is technologically superior" (Nader 1994:89).⁷ Whereas, in the opening paragraph of this crucial chapter of *Takhlis*, the "advancement of the people of Paris" seemed to encompass something more than progress in the sciences and manufacturing—seemed to embrace, equally, the cultivation of literary arts or humanities and manners, mores, and social proprieties (all implied by the Arabic phrase, *al-funun al-adabiyya*)—suddenly French "progress" becomes reduced to nothing more than a "long-held knowledge of the secrets of machines."⁸ Al-Tahtawi's analysis of what he views as the paradoxical coexistence in France of material sophistication and philosophical sophistry continues in this vein:

And it is known that knowledge of the secrets of machines is the strongest aid to manufacturing; however, they [the French] have, in the philosophical sciences, erroneous and misleading "fillers" in contradiction to all divine books [i.e., the books of all revealed religions], and on these ["fillers"] they bring to bear evidence difficult for a person to refute. There will come to us many of their [heretical]

⁷ Comparison-as-control often seems to be the rhetorical strategy of the dominated or of those conscious of the possibility of their domination, who use it to wrest control from the "alien" power that threatens to subjugate them (Naddaf 1986:73–83).

⁸ I am indebted to Laura Nader for reminding me that with the phrase *al-funun al-adabiyya*, al-Tahtawi might be referring not just to the literary arts or humanities, but also (given the double meaning of *adab* in Arabic) to the larger sphere of manners and mores. Indeed, al-Tahtawi does intend several different senses of the term.

innovations [*bida'*]; of their absurdity we will be forewarned, God—may He be exalted—willing. [al-Tahtawi 1993:255–56; my translation]

At every turn, a profound ambivalence toward the validity of French reasoning bisects al-Tahtawi's attraction to the sciences and arts of France. Notice how, in this passage, he again concedes French superiority in the arena of the mechanical, but checks this valorization with the charge that French philosophical ideas are interpolations ("fillers") to divine texts, contravening the contents of the Torah, the Bible, and the Qur'an (these are the revealed books that al-Tahtawi most likely refers to here). Even as he criticizes French philosophies as *bida'*, using the Islamic term for innovations defensible neither by recourse to religious texts nor by logical inference therefrom, he acknowledges their force. Once more the French are said to have the ability to produce "evidence difficult for a person to refute": a reference to the power of French philosophy to attract and persuade.

But French ideas are also said to have the power to *penetrate*: "There will come to us many of their [heretical] innovations; of their absurdity we will be forewarned, God—may He be exalted—willing," al-Tahtawi writes, revealing his keen intuition of the potential force of European cultural imperialism. Perhaps because Muhammad ʿAli put him in charge of a mission whose very purpose was to mine French ideas for Egyptian application, al-Tahtawi writes as a warner, predicting with uncanny accuracy the inexorable march into Egypt of the arts and artifices of European thought, hand in hand with the "secrets of machines." Yet, significantly, the outcome of the march of European knowledge and power on Egypt is not, in al-Tahtawi's formulation, a magically self-fulfilling prophecy, and not one to be decided on the basis of French design alone. For it is on the agency of Egyptians, on their ability to discern the "absurdity" of French philosophy or their failure to do so, that al-Tahtawi claims French ideological power depends.

It is precisely because al-Tahtawi recognizes in French ideas the twin powers of persuasion and penetration—however "unreasonable" those ideas might actually be—that he exhorts the Egyptian who intends to study the French language to first "acquire a solid grasp of the Book and the *sunna*," the Book here referring to the Qur'an, and the *sunna* to the body of traditions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad:

We say here that books of philosophy are altogether filled with many of these [heretical] innovations.... Thus, at this time, it is necessary for one who wishes to study in depth the language of the French, which includes something of philosophy, to acquire a solid grasp of the Book [*al-kitab*] and the *sunna*, so that he will not be made arrogant by this [study of French language and philosophy], nor

slacken in his belief—otherwise his certainty will be lost. And I have said, combining praise of this city with its censure:

Is there any abode like Paris? The suns of knowledge there are never absent.

Yet the night of unbelief has no morning—truly, this is strange! [al-Tahtawi 1993:56; my translation]

Between the lines of this passage from *Takhlis*, the French language—the vehicle of expression for French ideas, and a construct that itself “includes something of philosophy,” as al-Tahtawi so astutely remarks—emerges as a grand seducer, tempting the Egyptian student who masters it into the abyss of lost belief. What replaces belief is sheer arrogance, born perhaps of the French-speaking Egyptian’s awareness that he possesses—if not a language that constitutes cultural capital by virtue of its association with a power militarily superior to his country’s own—then at least the “different,” with all the sociocultural distinction from other Egyptians that difference implies. If the Egyptian student does not arm himself with a solid knowledge of the key texts of the Arab-Islamic tradition before confronting the lure of French, al-Tahtawi argues, he is sure to lose his religious certainty (and behind religious certainty, I would read cultural identification). Once again, the power of the European “different”—which is another way of saying the lure of the European “Other”—is such that it can captivate the mind of the Egyptian visitor, but it depends, for its force, on the “potential Westerner’s” shaky awareness of and adherence to his *own* cultural heritage.⁹

Having criticized the perceived “irrationality” of French philosophy and warned of the seductions of both French ideas and French language, al-Tahtawi is quick to reestablish equilibrium by reminding us that he has written of Paris in terms that balance praise and censure. Two lines of poetry encapsulate the Egyptian traveler’s ambivalent attitude toward the city, and do so strategically. The opening rhetorical question, “Is there any abode like Paris?”, sets the tone for the passage, equal parts bedazzlement *and* bemusement. This bifurcated mood persists in two observations, the first a commendation of the unflagging spirit of inquiry al-Tahtawi notes everywhere in Paris (“The suns of knowledge there are never absent”), the second a caveat quenching the light of this European knowledge with a reminder that such knowledge coexists with “the night of unbelief,” which no sun can ever transform into morning. The coda, echoing the amazement and bemusement of the opening, registers the frustrating impossibility of reconciliation. Al-Tahtawi’s parting words, “Truly, this is strange!”, hold, in a kind of chemical suspension, the attempt to grapple with the oxymoronic marriage of knowledge and unbelief that Paris represents

⁹ I borrow Laura Nader’s use of the term “potential Westerners” (Nader 1989:5).

for him. He recognizes the possible value of French knowledge, however “strange” its exclusion of belief might appear to his Azharite eyes, yet he indicts that knowledge nonetheless, invalidated as it is (in his view) by the “night of unbelief [that] has no morning.” Al-Tahtawi links the schism he witnesses between reason and belief in France to the divorce of religious learning from “rational” scholarship there, a rupture implicitly contrasted with the identity of religion and reason in the Arab-Islamic intellectual tradition of his native Egypt:

...Do not imagine that the French scholars are priests [*qusus*], since priests are scholars [*‘ulama’*] in religion only, [though] occasionally there may be someone among the priests who is also a scholar. As for he who is called a “scholar,” he is one who has a knowledge of the rational sciences [*al-‘ulum al-‘aqliyya*], which, in its totality, is the science of law [judicial forecasting, *‘ilm al-‘ahkam*] and politics.

And the scholars’ knowledge in the branches of Christian religion is really negligible, so if it were said in France: “This person is a scholar,” it would not be understood from this that he is a scholar of his religion, but that he knows one of the other sciences. [al-Tahtawi 1993:258–59; my translation]

Redrawing the Lines of Battle

If Paris’s dubious philosophies and suspiciously partisan reportage incline al-Tahtawi to temper interest in French science with skepticism of French reason, history gives him all the more reason to question the ethical soundness of the intellectual enterprises he witnesses. Approximately halfway through his discussion of the progress of the people of Paris in the sciences, arts, and manufacturing—and in the middle of an exhaustive description of the zoo, botanical gardens, and other attractions he sees in Paris’s Jardin des Plantes—al-Tahtawi gives us this account:

And in the Jardin des Plantes [*bustan al-nabat*] is a pavilion called the Anatomy Pavilion [*riwaq al-tashrih*], and within it are all the mummies [*al-mawami*]—that is, embalmed, preserved corpses—and the like in the way of corpses.

In this pavilion are some parts of the corpse of the late shaykh Sulayman al-Halabi, who was martyred for his assassination of the French general Kléber—and the French fought for him [Kléber] during the days of their domination of Egypt [*fi ayyami taghallubihim ‘ala misr*]. And there is no power and no strength save in God, the most High, the most Great. [al-Tahtawi 1993:263–64; my translation]

Despite its matter-of-fact tone—unbroken until al-Tahtawi's final assertion, emotional *and* political, of God's sovereignty over all human power, no matter how mighty—the passage attests powerfully to the strange sensation the young Egyptian must have felt when he chanced upon the history of the recent French occupation of Egypt mummified and placed on display, the body of an Egyptian resister of the Napoleonic occupation turned into an artifact in a French museum.

It is the strategic detail of the passage, and its equally strategic placement within al-Tahtawi's larger narrative, that convey the full force of his horror. First, the detail: Al-Tahtawi very deliberately tells his Arab reader that "some parts" of al-Halabi's corpse are on display in the pavilion, pointing (with a gesture so subtle it could go unnoticed) to the dismemberment of al-Halabi's body, and by extension to the barbarism of victorious France—which, for all its vaunted science and justice, cannot see the body of an executed man to a decent burial. Second, the placement: Significantly, the story of al-Halabi's body comes immediately after a tale of the illness of a lion in the garden's zoo. To cure the lion, al-Tahtawi reports, the zookeeper sends a dog into the lion's cage; the dog licks the lion's wounds and cures him, and thereafter an unshakable bond forms between the two animals (al-Tahtawi 1993:263). The French are so intrigued by this display of affection among animals that when the favorite dog dies, they test the effect of a new dog on the lion (apparently the lion's attachment to his late canine savior makes him love all dogs henceforth).

Al-Tahtawi's pairing of these stories is hardly accidental. By a single stroke of the pen, he depicts the irony of a people concerned with the welfare of animals, yet inattentive to the dignity of other human beings; contrasts the assistance and affection animals can bestow upon one another with the (implied) inhumanity of the French; and mocks the never-ending passion among the French for scientific experimentation, accompanied as it is by moral callousness. Deploying quite brilliantly the textual device of juxtaposition, al-Tahtawi manages to maintain the dispassionate voice of a participant-observer, yet register derision and outrage.

Indeed, the specter of imperial domination in all its potential forms—technological or intellectual or cultural—is never far from al-Tahtawi's mind as he goes about Paris, visiting its parks and gardens and cafés, its libraries and institutes. Toward the end of *Takhliṣ al-Ibriz fī Talkhiṣ Bariz*, in a chapter titled "On the Art of Writing," al-Tahtawi begins to muse over the relative effectiveness of the sword versus the pen, essentially comparing the power of arms to that of the arts, just as Ihab Hassan would some one hundred and sixty years later:

And the poets have debated the superiority of the sword versus the pen, then the pen of composition versus that of accounting. Al-Mutanabbi [*sic*; the actual author of the lines was Abu Tammam] pointed to the superiority of the sword with his words:

The sword is more truthful in its tidings than books; in its cutting edge is the line between seriousness and play—

White blades [*bid al-safa'ih*], not black pages [*saha'if*, with a play on “reputations,” the other sense of the word]: on their surfaces are the elucidation of doubt and uncertainties.

And al-Suyuti pointed, in *Kitab al-Awa'il*, to the superiority of the pen to the sword, when he said:

Writing [*al-katb*] pinned down the vagaries of words [*al-kalim*]; and script [*al-khatt*] stitched together solitaire wisdoms [*al-hikam*].

With script every scattered [word or wisdom; *muntathir*] was ordered, and every ordered [word or wisdom; *muntazim*] arranged.

And imposed upon the sword—so that you know it—was the worship of the pen.

And the debate was raised in *History of Nations* [*Tarikh al-Duwal*] by Ibn al-Kurdabusi, with his words: “Two things constitute the king’s supports, and his duties: The sword, and the pen. And the second is more advanced than the first.” And he proved this. What is clear is that on this matter could be said what was said in the two writings [al-Suyuti’s and Ibn al-Kurdabusi’s?]: that the skill of composition is greater, but the skill of accounting is more useful. So it could be said that the sword is greater than the pen, but the pen is more useful. [al-Tahtawi 1993:358–59]

Al-Tahtawi ends, as he begins, on a note of ambivalence. In his invocation of an ode by the ninth-century Syrian poet Abu Tammam¹⁰ (which al-Tahtawi mistakenly attributes to another poet, al-Mutanabbi) we can hear a coded call to Egyptians to read (and heed) the lessons of the French sword in Egypt, from Napoleon’s occupation some thirty years earlier. For his citation of al-Suyuti, two possible interpretations hover in the balance. The verses might intimate that the French derive as much force from books as from arms, and thus warn the Arab world

¹⁰ Interestingly, al-Tahtawi invokes a poet whose startling (and sometimes overwrought) metaphors were the subject of fierce controversy among ʿAbbasid rhetoricians. The word these rhetoricians used to describe Abu Tammam’s “new” style was *badiʿ*, a term derived from the same root as *bidaʿ*, the very term al-Tahtawi elsewhere uses to describe the wrongheaded or “heretical” aspects of French innovation that might enter Arab-Islamic culture along with more “right-minded” change.

to take stock of French thought. But they also offer the hopeful (perhaps protonationalist?) suggestion that Egypt, if armed with a pen as agile as those of the Arab poets of yesteryear, could master even the mightiest French sword. And finally, the compromise of Ibn al-Kurdabusi, to which al-Tahtawi gives a nod of ratification, confirms the victory of the pen over the sword. But al-Tahtawi tempers that triumph with the sobering suggestion that the pen triumphs, if it is French, because it is useful—and will triumph, if Egyptian, only if equally utilitarian.

This passage, then, weighs not only the relative efficacies of arts and arms, but also the relative values of creativity and utility: the category of the pen is by the very end broken down into the finer distinctions, into its composing and accounting varieties. Here comparison seems to end in compromise—favoring not the sword, Abu Tammam so valorizes (although al-Tahtawi concedes it may be “greater” than the pen), nor the poetic pen al-Suyuti celebrates, but the useful pen, aligned with the “skill of accounting.”

The Lure of the “New”

Have French books, in the end, convinced al-Tahtawi—if not of the primacy of military might—then perhaps of the need to exploit the pen more for its sheer instrumentality and less for its rhetorical eloquence? Has the French regime of truth, al-Tahtawi’s critical and strategic ambivalences toward it notwithstanding, on some level supplanted its Arab-Islamic corollary? This is not a stretch of the imagination: earlier in *Takhliis*, al-Tahtawi writes of the simplicity and linearity of the French language (as opposed to the complexity of Arabic) as an important enabler of French advancement in all fields of knowledge (al-Tahtawi 1993:256–7).¹¹ Yet elsewhere in

¹¹ Here is the relevant passage:

And among the many things that aid the French in advancement in the sciences and the arts is the ease of their language and all that completes it, for indeed the learning of their language does not require extensive study. It is possible for any person who has the aptitude and true gift [for languages], after learning it, to read any book whatsoever, since there is essentially no ambiguity in it [that is, in the French language], for it is not obscure. And if a teacher wanted to study a book, it is not necessary that he analyze its words at all, for its words are self-explanatory. In general, the reader of a book does not need to correlate its words to other, extrinsic rules from another field, unlike the Arabic language, for instance. Indeed the person who reads a book [in the Arabic language] in one of the sciences needs to correlate it to all the tools of language, and to specify its expressions to the degree possible, and to imbue an expression with meanings far beyond its surface meaning.

As for the books of the French, there is no such thing in them, for their books rarely have commentators or marginal glosses (footnotes), though they occasionally cite some light commentaries to round out [*takmilan li-‘ibara*] an expression with a restriction of its meaning... So the base texts [*al-mutun*] alone are at once sufficient for an understanding of

the book, he also argues for the superior arrangement of the Arabic language, citing as proof of its “naturalness” the fact that most languages—even French—revert to a right-to-left arrangement of characters in the writing of numbers, which al-Tahtawi takes to be originary signs. Their rationality—and the language of numbers—was identified with Arabic first, and French second (al-Tahtawi 1993:357–58).¹²

their meaning. If a person, then, begins reading a book in any field of knowledge [*ilm*] whatever, he is left free to understand the issues of this field and its principles, without the entanglement [*muhakat*] of words; thus he can devote all his energy to research in the subjects of this field, and to nothing but the uttered and the understood, and to all that he can infer from these—any more than this is a waste of time. For instance, if a person wished to read [a text in] the science of accounting, he would understand from it that which pertains specifically to numbers—without paying attention to the grammatical analysis of expressions, to the execution of that which it includes in the way of metaphors [or figurative language], and to the objection that an expression [in the text] could support word-play, or that it may be devoid of such; [or] that the author placed such-and-such [word] before [others in a syntactical construction], and that had he placed it after, it would have been better; [or] that he used the letter *fa*’ in the place of *waw*, and the reverse would have been better...and the like. Therefore, the French are naturally inclined toward the acquisition of knowledge and eagerly desire knowledge of all things, and for this reason you see that all of them have a wide-ranging knowledge, generally, of all matters. This is not unusual with them, so that if you were to speak to him [a Frenchman], he would speak to you in the language of scholars, even if he is not one, and for this reason you will find most of the French investigating, and debating some very difficult scientific/intellectual [*ilmiyya*] issues. Their children are also like this; indeed, they [the French] are brilliant beyond description from their childhood, and any one of them is [just] as the poet said:

He passionately loved high meanings as an adolescent;

And he deflowered the arts’ firstborns/virgins as a newborn child.

For if you should happen to talk to a young person past the childhood years about his opinion on such and such, he will answer you—rather than by saying, “I don’t know the root [*asl*] of this matter”—with something to the effect of, “The judgment of a thing is secondary to its conception,” or close to that. Indeed their children are consistently well-qualified for learning and achievement, and they receive a great education. This is [true] of the French across the board. [al-Tahtawi 1993:256–7]

¹² On the art of writing, its logic, and its history, al-Tahtawi has this to say:

It is the art known as the expression of intention via specific marks called characters of the alphabet or characters of the dictionary [*mu^hjam*], and most of the alphabetic characters are in agreement in all languages and begin with the letter *alif*—except in the case of the Ethiopians [i.e., of the Amharic language], where the letter *alif* is the thirteenth. And the craft of writing is highly useful in all nations, and it is the spirit of social relations, the bringing [near] of the past, the planning of the future, the vehicle for [conveying] intention [*rasul al-murad*], and half [the act] of observation [*nisf al-mushahadati*]. Further, the Arabs and the Hebrews and the Syrians [i.e., speakers of Syriac] write from right to left, and the Chinese write from top to

Or does the passage signal an intellectual shift away from art for art's sake—art that pins down the vagaries of words, script that stitches solitaire wisdoms—and toward a more motivated art? Such a shift would forecast the one that actually swept Arabic literature (thanks, in part, to the influence of al-Tahtawi's translations) over the course of the nineteenth century, precipitating a decline in elaborate verse forms and the rise of the politically inflected genre of the modern Arabic novel (Hafez 1993; Moosa 1997).

All these are speculations. Significantly, al-Tahtawi refuses to pin the forces of technology and art, utility and creativity, sword and pen, to signifiers such as "France" or "Egypt." Deliberately, he seems to leave the outcome of the cultural encounter of Occident and Orient he chronicles in flux, at play—resisting, in a fleeting moment of comparative consciousness, the temptations of "difference," and thereby resisting (if even for a moment) co-optation by French culture. Indeed, the al-Tahtawi of *Takhliis* notes and highlights—sometimes with consummate subtlety—the similarities that link European and Arab-Islamic life and thought as often as he underscores the philosophical and ideological gulfs that separate them. While I have focused more on al-Tahtawi's oppositional posture here than I have on his equally interesting and significant attempts to forge equivalences across cultures (Naddaf 1986), I would argue that al-Tahtawi's comparative consciousness—the habit of thought that writes an equal sign, or perhaps the analogic sign of the ratio, between cultures—is hardly inconsistent with the critical posture he also strikes in *Takhliis*, a

bottom, and the *ifranj* from left to right. So which is fitter by nature: writing from right to left, as the Arabs and others aforementioned with them write, or the reverse, as the *ifranj* write? Among that which proves the former [interpretation] is the arrangement of numbers. For they are arranged, naturally, and they begin from the right [and proceed] to the left, so that the ones (which constitute parts of the tens) are to the right of the tens, and the tens likewise in relation to the hundreds, and these likewise in relation to the thousands. And if numbers were the foundations for other things—that is, fundamental elements on which [human] natures agreed despite the differences among their owners—this would prove that their contradiction [i.e., the contradiction of the arrangement of numbers] is a contradiction of the origin, yet the antithesis [that is, the origin] has proven true, and this is the end result [*wa thabata naqiduhu, wa huwa al-murad*]. The *ifranj* tried and brought to bear [this right-to-left mode of] reading and writing on the reading of numbers and their writing only; they demonstrated, by so doing, the conformity of their method with nature. With all the more reason it can be said that writing from top to bottom is contrary to the law [*li-muqtada*] of nature. And it is said that the Arabs knew writing in the time of our master Job, upon him be peace, and that a dispute had broken out over whether the alphabetic characters were divine creations or human coinages, and that on the second opinion [that is, on the interpretation of the letters of the alphabet as human inventions] a dispute had erupted over to which community the coinages belonged. So some said that they were the inventions of the Syrians [i.e., speakers of Syriac], or the inventions of the ancient Egyptians. The first [hypothesis] gained the upper hand; on that basis, the alphabet was transmitted from the Syrians to Greece, with the evidence that the Greek characters are exactly like the Syriac, except that they are reversed [to read] from left to right. And from the people of Greece the Romans took their characters. (al-Tahtawi 1993: 357–58)

posture that questions European culture's claims to positional superiority over his own. To undercut the ethos of cultural supremacy, after all, one must be able to suspend the notion of radical difference and imagine relationality.

And yet, for all his apparent resistances in *Takhlis*, al-Tahtawi might have succumbed, already but secretly, to the lure of the new, drawn by the affinity Ihab Hassan called the "hidden face of imperialism." For by mid-century, the man who had warned against the wholesale importation of French philosophical innovations in *Takhlis* would supervise the translation of the French civil code and oversee its implementation as Egyptian law, and his thought would play a pivotal role in the Westernization of political and educational systems in Egypt.¹³

Thus al-Tahtawi's career compels us to ask why a man trained to think openly—but critically—by one of the most independent Egyptian minds of the eighteenth century, Hasan al-^cAttar, might end up adopting and adapting French ideas and institutions perhaps too openly and not critically enough. Why does he uphold indigenous notions of reason, belief, knowledge, and culture and yet, in a certain sense, enable European norms and forms to eclipse (rather than augment) these? According to Peter Gran,

there are differences between the generations of al-^cAttar and his students which perhaps contribute to the discussion of our larger problem of transition. The students of al-^cAttar continued the neoclassicism, but having lacked a contact with the more broadly creative and less-regimented life of the eighteenth century, they greeted life in the reform period with a certain optimism in the unfolding progress of humanity. Al-^cAttar did not. [Gran 1979:185–86]

¹³ Interestingly, al-Tahtawi was also trapped between conflicting Egyptian reactions to his ideas in *Takhlis*, reactions that mirrored the contradictory desire of the Egyptian state, under Muhammad ^cAli and his successor, ^cAbbas I, to at once implement those European institutions that would secure its domestic and imperial power but suppress any new European—or longstanding Arab-Islamic—revolutionary ideologies that contact with Europe might foment or rekindle. So threatening were al-Tahtawi's anti-absolutist sentiments to ^cAbbas's regime that, as Matti Moosa explains,

in 1849 he was appointed as a principal of an elementary school in the Sudan. Although the pretext was that his services were badly needed there, in reality he was being exiled to that country by the Viceroy Abbas I. A slanderer had intrigued against al-Tahtawi and reported to the Viceroy some of al-Tahtawi's revolutionary ideas in *Takhlis al-Ibriz*. Wronged and humiliated by his exile, al-Tahtawi, who could not openly criticize an unjust ruler, resorted to fiction to express his indignation and to attack despotism indirectly. (Moosa 1997: 6)

Gran's analysis implies that al-Attar—whose critical consciousness was essentially formed in the pre-colonial years of the eighteenth century, who knew Egypt before the French invasion of 1798 had irrevocably changed it—could see that the possibility of transformation and renewal is intrinsic to Arab-Islamic culture and not extrinsic to it, that the new may or may not signify “progress” any more than the old automatically signifies “backwardness” or the extant automatically signifies stasis, that stepping “backward” or running in place might be equally valid ways of moving “forward.”

A deeper examination of al-Tahtawi's life and writings, then, might help us answer the question that looms largest in this analysis of the nineteenth-century (post)colonial French-Egyptian encounter: Under what conditions does the acceptance of another culture's “positional superiority” occur? If the interpreters of “East” and “West” overlook similarity—and I am not sure they always do (they may see and suppress it, or recognize and relegate it to the background)—do they do so because “difference” is more alluring, because the “new” beckons so seductively?

Both al-Tahtawi's *Takhliis* and his overall intellectual career suggest that the very appeal of novelty, of “Otherness,” depends in the first place on a perception of difference, rather than similarity, between Europe and the Arab world. This observation raises the question of whether lapses of comparative consciousness—which “make us victims of the bounds of thinkable thought” (Nader 1994:86)—actually prepare the ground for cultural imperialism by encouraging hyperbolic constructions of difference whose very novelty, in turn, can attract the mind into colonization. When the subject of imperial or neoimperial domination convinces him or herself that a phenomenon is “new,” as al-Tahtawi begins to do at certain moments in *Takhliis*, he or she ruptures the time of locality and the space of globality. The local is divided from and against its history (or histories); equally, the local is sundered from the global, surrendering the world-space to powers that claim, by virtue of their unparalleled spirit of “innovation,” the right to engineer a New World Order (this despite the fact that these powers are no less local than the zones of so-called “tradition”). That rupture of time and space is, I believe, the seed of the cognitive dissonance that pits indigenous “tradition” against foreign “modernity”—that makes the colonized mind see modernity as a force extrinsic to the native sphere rather than a possible extension and elaboration of the “old” on a single, unbroken continuum. When the peoples of the Arab world, Africa, and Asia fail to see potential antecedents or analogues of the “novelty” of modernity within their “home” cultures, renewal becomes the province of the European. And colonial (or neocolonial) hegemony is not far behind.

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