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Prefiguring Egypt's Arab Spring: Allegory and Allusion in Aḥmad Khalid Tawfīq's Utopia

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Science Fiction Studies

Published three times a year (March, July, November)

by SF-TH Inc. at DePauw University

#127 = Volume 42, Part 3 = November 2015 • \$30.00

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Science Fiction Studies was founded in 1973 by Richard Dale Mullen (1915-1998) and is endowed by his estate. *SFS* gratefully acknowledges the additional support it receives from DePauw University, Trent University, and the University of California, Riverside.

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Prefiguring Egypt's Arab Spring: Allegory and Allusion in Aḥmad Khālid Tawfīq's *Utopia*

Prolific Egyptian author Aḥmad Khālid Tawfīq (b.1962) is best known in his home country and in the Arab world for his series *Mā Warā' al-Ṭabī'a* [The Paranormal, 1993], a collection of fantasy-horror novels, and *Fāntāziyā* [Fantasia 1993], in which an Egyptian housewife uses a dream-generating computer to live in various fictional worlds.¹ In 2008, Tawfīq took a different and decidedly political turn with his sf novel *Yūtūbiyā* [*Utopia*]. A very good English translation was published in March 2012, during the Arab Spring protests; this opened up Tawfīq's work for the first time to a larger Western audience.²

The novel gives us two problematic and unappealing but consistent and vivid young male characters, one a rich ignorant sociopath and the other an impoverished intellectual fool, thrown together in the dystopia that is Cairo in 2020 after the end of the petroleum economy. In reading science fiction, however, we must always be conscious of how depictions of other worlds reflect upon our present world. Tawfīq's Egypt represents a cognitively plausible extrapolation from current conditions; it is dominated by class inequality, corruption, and brutality. Taking into account the intellectual character's repeated literary references, we can learn to read *Utopia* less as the tale of two psychologically realistic characters and more as the tale of the class differences in Egyptian society. This enables us to understand the indictment of Egypt's intellectual class that lies underneath the novel's surface narrative. Understood this way, *Utopia* reflects upon the conditions that in a few years would lead to the street protests of 2011-12; it also shows, well before the fact, that such protests would only lead to further consolidation of power by the authoritarian regime.

Utopia and Sf. *Utopia* takes place in 2020 and the narrative is divided into five sections.³ The odd-numbered sections are entitled *al-Ṣayyād*, "The Hunter," and are narrated by a young man who refuses to give his name. He is an inhabitant of the titular utopia, an enclave on the Mediterranean coast where Egypt's elite have sealed themselves off from the masses and protect themselves with American troops. The first section describes the ennui and anomie suffered by golden youths such as the Hunter—and I will refer to him as the Hunter, because neither he nor Tawfīq gives another name—to whom everything is given free of charge. When sex and drugs no longer give even the appearance of satisfaction, the Hunter decides to emulate some of his fellows. Their rite of passage is to sneak out of Utopia, travel to Cairo, and walk among the masses, who are referred to by both Utopians and themselves as *al-'Aghyār*, an unusual choice of word for "the Others."⁴ The purpose of

such a journey is to hunt and kill an Other and take a hand or other body part as a trophy. But at the end of the first section, the Hunter and his companion Germinal botch the job.

The second and fourth sections are entitled *al-Farīsa*, “The Prey/Quarry,” and are narrated by Jābir (“Gaber” in the translation, as this is the Egyptian pronunciation), a university graduate who has failed to find employment and runs with a street gang as a means of protecting his sister.⁵ Gaber steps in to rescue the Hunter and Germinal; he continues to protect them even when his own gang becomes suspicious. He justifies this by repeatedly saying that he is a better person than either the gang or the Utopians: unlike either group, he does not act on the instinct to control and dominate. He goes to great lengths and puts himself in considerable danger to find his guests a way back into Utopia, all while delivering a series of object lessons about inequality, most of which the Hunter openly mocks. Once back at the gates of Utopia, the Hunter cheerfully murders Gaber; when the Others begin to besiege Utopia in the final pages, the Hunter is the first of his generation to leap to man the guns.

According to Darko Suvin’s well-known definition, science fiction is “a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment” (*Metamorphoses* 7-8). The estrangement—a form of defamiliarization that confronts a set normative system with a point of view or look implying a new set of norms—is here the physical separation of the upper classes into a separate walled city and the actual presence of American troops, rather than merely the US’s material support of the Egyptian military.⁶ *Sf* differs from other estranged genres in that the defamiliarizing element is cognitively based: the *novum*—that is, Suvin’s term for what differentiates an *sf* novel from a realist one (*Metamorphoses* 64)—is clearly intended to decenter us while remaining part of a cognitively plausible reality. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay glosses the *novum* as

a historically unprecedented and unpredicted “new thing” that intervenes in the routine course of social life and changes the trajectory of history. The *novum* is usually a rationally explicable material phenomenon, the result of an invention or discovery, whose unexpected appearance elicits a wholesale change in the perception of reality. (5-6)

The *novum* of *Utopia* is a substance called “biroil” in the translation and *bāyrūl* in the Arabic text.⁷ It is said to have been discovered by American scientists in 2010 and has replaced petroleum as a fuel source. The text provides no details on what biroil is, how it was discovered, how it is produced, or why it is an effective substitute for petroleum. It is a liquid fuel and for some reason is transported to Utopia across the desert instead of via the sea—the Others hijack a caravan of it late in the novel. Biroil is not a well-formed *novum*, but it is cognitively plausible. The reflection of Egyptian society it creates is well thought out and articulated to the otherwise ignorant

Hunter in the text. The captain of the American Marines who guard Utopia tells him:

"Only then was it possible for us to forget the Middle East and stick our tongues out at the oil sheikhs and tell them what we really thought of them. They can drink their oil if they want, but getting biroil has its price!"

"Was that when you [pl.] bought all the Egyptian antiquities?"

"Yeah. The Egyptians didn't have anything to sell except the past, and we bought it. We paid for it in the biroil that Utopia and communities like it monopolise. A fifty-year contract that provides you with all the biroil you need to live. How do you suppose those cars and planes of yours move?" [1:3] (28-29)

Someone more curious than the Hunter might wonder why the Egyptians did not simply buy the biroil with money, but the Hunter gets to find out anyway when hiding in Gaber's hut. Gaber explains to him the unintended and, for Egypt, catastrophic, consequences of the world's no longer needing petroleum:

"Suddenly, the dam broke: Tourism was no longer capable of feeding all those mouths.... As for the Gulf countries, their oil petered out or was not needed after the appearance of biroil, and they kicked out their imported labor force. So the economy became burdened by a crushing weight, and services for the poor disappeared because the state wiped its hands completely of the responsibility for them, and privatised everything." [3:2] (97-98)

There is a compelling logic to Gaber's description of the collapse given the contribution to the Egyptian economy of remittances from foreign workers. According to the International Organization for Migration, in 2010 about two million Egyptians (out of 85 million total) lived in other oil-producing Arab countries, and they sent home approximately 4% of Egypt's GNP in remittances.⁸

This in itself might be too little for its absence to be truly catastrophic, but another 20% of Egypt's GNP comes from petroleum exports,⁹ so it is cognitively plausible that the replacement of oil with biroil could send the economy into enough of a death spiral that the rich would find it preferable to segregate themselves. And, of course, *Utopia* is sf, so the future Egypt described in the text needs to be understood as a reflection of and on the Egypt that existed in 2008 when Tawfiq published it: the nation cannot feed itself and has to live on tourism and the questionable largesse of the oil-producing nations while most Egyptians tend to occupy low-skilled jobs and the wealthy elite has already segregated itself.¹⁰ The income inequality of contemporary Egypt is only exaggerated, not invented, as Gaber continues his explanation:

"The second [poor] society is only important as a consumer market, nothing more. Even if it suffers poverty, the density of its population makes everything possible. If each one of us buys one olive, then the olive-seller will become a millionaire.... [It used to be] Gulf money (before it dried up), Israeli know-how and cheap Egyptian manual labor." [3:2] (98)

But the unintended consequence of the end of the petroleum economy is that nobody needs that labor anymore. The Egyptian masses can no longer produce anything worth buying: their only options are to work as servants for the Utopians—and to be raped and beaten by the Utopians, as several examples in the text make clear—or to try to survive by wits or brawn in the accelerated Darwinism of greater Cairo. No middle class exists because Egypt no longer produces anything; the Utopians are able to maintain their dominance because they monopolize the import of critical products. The Hunter's father's stock in trade is medicine: those among the Others able to sell their bodies or labor as servants have to pay an indirect tithe to him in order to acquire the medication they need—or else make do with folk remedies.

Tawfiq and *The Time Machine*. Gaber, in his role as the one person among the poor who reads books, addresses his fellows in an interior monologue: "I warned you [pl.] a thousand times. I told you about the theories of Malthus ... and the prophecies of Orwell and H.G. Wells. But all you do is get high on hashish and cheap liquor and pass out" [2:3] (78). Some of these writers are more applicable than others: while Malthus's ideas certainly apply in a society operating at a population level well over the carrying capacity of its environment,¹¹ Orwell is best known for writing about the consequences of totalitarianism, while Gaber's Cairo is characterized by the total absence of any rules or authority.

Dropping Wells's name, by contrast, is more appropriate. An easy comparison to make would be between Tawfiq's *Utopia* and Wells's *A Modern Utopia* (1905)—and not only because of their titles. Both have narrators who impose a great deal on their texts, and both use the device common to utopian fiction of viewing society through the eyes of a newcomer. But there are more differences than similarities between the two works. Tawfiq's is clearly fiction, while *A Modern Utopia* is a work of philosophical speculation. *Utopia* describes a dystopia wrought by ever-increasing income inequality, while Wells's hypothetical economic system makes every effort to prevent the accumulation of great wealth, even going so far as to mandate confiscatory inheritance taxes: "and whatever he has not clearly assigned for special educational purposes will—with possibly some fractional concession to near survivors—lapse to the State" (*Modern Utopia* 86). The narcissistic sociopathy of the Hunter, by contrast, is enabled by his knowledge that he is the only heir to the tremendous fortune his father has extracted from the Egyptian masses. The all-encompassing World State of Wells's utopia is impossible in Tawfiq's version of Egypt, where the government has abandoned its responsibilities to its citizens.

A better comparison would be to *The Time Machine* (1895), given the dimorphism between the Utopians and the Others: in Cairo, the Hunter and Germinal have to hide out during the day because they are too physically attractive to be plausibly disguised as Others. The resemblance between *The Time Machine* and *Utopia* becomes still clearer when we read the Hunter's description of Utopia as a land of well-tended gardens perforated by secret

entrances to underground passageways, while Gaber's gang haunts the abandoned tunnels of Cairo's subway system. We can use physical appearance as our guide here and deem the Utopians the Eloi and the Others the Morlocks, and then Tawfiq's primary innovation is that it is the Eloi who hunt the Morlocks—and for sport, not food. Or we could use moral character as our guide and deem the Utopians the Morlocks, who “farm” the Eloi/Others, not for food but, again, for sport.

The ambiguity between the two perspectives lends nuance to the linkage between *Utopia* and *The Time Machine*; and if we examine both works' approach to the division between classes, it becomes evident that Tawfiq's presentation of the issue engages closely with that of Wells. But *Utopia* shifts the terms of the class conflict to take into account both Egypt's current status as an exporter of labor rather than goods, and the effects of more than a century of increased mechanization.

The Time Machine has often been read as a meditation on devolution and the gradual waning of the vigor of the human species. Suvin and other critics also acknowledge another common reading of *The Time Machine*, and one more productive in reading *Utopia*: an allegory of the relationship of labor to capital.¹² The inversion in Wells's novel that shocked contemporary readers was that the Morlocks, the lower classes, would farm the Eloi, the upper classes, for food. Leon Stover, in his annotated edition of the 1895 first edition of *The Time Machine*, goes to great lengths to demonstrate Wells's commitment in the text to a particular position on the relationship between capital and labor: that of Fabian socialism rather than its Marxist counterpart. Stover argues that the statue of the Sphinx, plus the drawing thereof embossed on the front cover of the first edition, link *The Time Machine* to the nineteenth-century English social reformer Thomas Carlyle, whose works addressed the threat posed to social order in the burgeoning movement of organized industrial labor. Carlyle's essay “The Sphinx” (1843), whose prose schoolchildren were required to study, uses the figure of the Sphinx from classical mythology as an image of managing the working classes. Carlyle's point in using the Sphinx is that the question of how to control the laborers is a life-or-death one for upper- and middle-class British society: to give the wrong answer would be fatal, just as it was to the Sphinx's riddle. Stover writes, intermittently quoting Carlyle:

Idle factory owners, an “Unworking Aristocracy” of mere investors, are at fault in permitting Labor to organize itself with “ape's freedom” in pursuit of sectarian class interests at the expense of social duty.... The “Organization of Labour must be taken out of the hands of absurdly windy persons [trade unionists], and put into the hands of Industrial Leaders” (Stover 3)

This is the answer to the Sphinx question for Carlyle and in Stover's formulation for Wells: the Eloi and Morlocks are a failed society and represent the decline of humanity because the captains of industry are no longer there to bridge the gap between effete, idle aristocrats and workers who will do the bare minimum at the first opportunity.

Capital and Labor. Tawfiq's Egypt differs from Carlyle's England—and Wells's reflection on it—in that there is effectively no industrial labor to be done. Other than as servants or prey, or at best a consumer market, the Utopians have no use for the Others, whereas the capitalists of Victorian England had to negotiate with their workers lest their factories lie idle. Such work as exists is piecemeal; Gaber uses this as what he hopes will be an object lesson for the Hunter. When the Hunter is hiding out in Gaber's shack, Gaber tells him he has to earn his daily bread; when the Hunter offers him money, Gaber says: "I want you to help me" [4:2] (128). He leads the Hunter across town to a dismal square, where a temporary chicken disassembly line has been established. Freshly slaughtered chickens have been brought from outside Cairo, and the desperate Others are allowed in to pluck feathers or render the meat:

"Clean or de-bone?" I asked the guy from Utopia, as I pulled out my knife.

He looked at me in confusion, his face contorted with disgust, so I explained, "Are you going to cut the stomach and pull out the innards, or are you going to strip the bones from the meat?"

"I can't do either."

I looked around me to make sure that no one would hear me. "No one lives here without working. Filthy work. Taboo [*ḥarām*] work. Illegal work. It is what it is. The important thing is that you work." [4:2] (129)

Knowing full well that he will be murdered by the other Others at one word from Gaber, the Hunter gets to work. Gaber thinks, "It ... would have delighted Mr Henry Ford, whose genius in inventing automobile assembly lines in the last century was endlessly praised" [4:2] (129), but in fact there are quite significant differences between this workplace and Ford's River Rouge plant. As they work, Gaber whispers:

"When we're done, we'll go out the back door, and we'll get our wages [*na 'khudhu naṣībanā*]. About one chicken for each one of us. Where do you think we get meat? This party isn't held every day. There are days when they have enough people, and we're not allowed to work at all. [4:2] (130)

Ford's workers were paid in cash, by the hour, and were treated comparatively well because Ford needed them to buy his cars. Assembly-line workers knew when they would work and how much money they would make. Here, by contrast, the work is irregular and contingent, not always available, and the workers are paid a pittance in kind, not in money. This is one of the very few instances where the English translation fails to do its Arabic original justice. The Arabic text uses the words *na 'khudhu naṣībanā*, literally "take our share," where *naṣīb* denotes a share or allotment: wages or salary would be *rātib*, which comes from a root denoting to arrange things or set them in order—precisely what has not been done among the Others (Cowan 375-76, 1136-37). Ford's workers were able to buy his cars on the installment plan, because their work was valuable to Ford, the archetypal captain of industry whose views spawned another form of capital/labor relations.¹³ The Others in *Utopia* have no such leverage and can therefore be exploited to the point where

they are lucky if they get to eat; their only other options are servitude or prostitution. Carlyle's England produced things because technology had not yet progressed to where the owners could dispense with labor; Tawfiq's Egypt produces nothing but occasional chicken parts, as all of the goods monopolized by the Utopians are imported from elsewhere.

And again, *Utopia* is sf, so the last thing we should do is read his description of Egypt in 2020 as fanciful; rather, we should consider it as a reflection of the real Egypt of 2008, one that was characterized by increasing income inequality and corruption, and declining industrial production and government services. Like many of the other postcolonial Arab nations, Egypt in the heyday of Gamal Abdel Nasser had been a statist society, with the government providing employment and price-controlled staples to its citizens. As a result of financial troubles due to rapidly increasing population, in 1991 the government of Hosni Mubarak was compelled by international banking authorities to engage in "free-market" reforms (Hinnebusch 160-61). The life experience of Tawfiq's cohort has been one of consistently declining standards and consistently increasing consumer prices, in addition to rising income inequality, corruption, and violent repression.

Tawfiq uses dogs as metaphorical figures to suggest this decline. Gaber refers to members of his class as "son of a -" or "son of a bitch" [*ibn kalb*]. This is a common Arabic insult, literally "son of a dog" in English, but more severe because, in Egypt and other Islamic cultures, a dog is taboo, *ḥarām*, literally "forbidden" but in fact closer to "ritually unclean," the way that pigs and pork are in both Judaism and Islam. Gaber does not deliver the Hunter and Germinal over to his gang, even though it is clearly in his best interests to do so, because he does not want to be like the other sons of bitches—he can maintain the illusion that he belongs to a different class, one with some autonomy.

But in fact, I don't want bloodshed. I don't want people killed.

That's the sticking point for everything: the sole proof I have that I am still human, and haven't turned into a hyena. In that regard, I'm superior to them. I'm superior to my family and neighbors. I'm superior to what I was yesterday.

I don't want bloodshed. I don't want people killed. [4:1] (119)

A hyena [*dab`*] is both a canine and a scavenger, doubly *ḥarām*. Insofar as we can ascribe Gaber's actions to the motivations of a psychologically realistic character, I would argue that he is motivated by the desire to retain his humanity in the face of the *ḥarām*-ness of what his culture has become. Yet near the beginning of Gaber's first section as narrator, he describes the lead-up to a rumble between his gang and another in the subway tunnels. On the way there, he describes the darkened subway tunnels: "I think that people enjoyed this public project [the subway] for fifty years at least. After that, it became a shelter for stray dogs. Then, there were no longer any stray dogs. There was no longer anyone but us" [2:1] (59).¹⁴ The brawl begins when the rival gang's leader holds up "the carcass of a giant dog" [2:1] (64). This insult cannot be tolerated—but not for the traditional reason:

An empty stomach drives a hungry man insane. After all this effort, how could the dog we'd spent three days ambushing be snatched from us?

When would we be able to find another dog? There were no longer any dogs in the streets at all. No cats. No rats.

The intoxicating smell of grilled meat in the ruined buildings and joking around with puffs of hashish. And [my sister], who hasn't tasted decent [*muhtarama*] food for a month? All of this would have been waiting for us if we hadn't come across this son of a bitch. [2:1] (64)

This puts a completely different spin on "sons of dogs." The proximate cause of a bloody gang fight, in Egypt, is dog meat, now such a luxury for the Others that half a dozen adults spend three days hunting it. And keep in mind that a dog is *harām*; so while many Westerners will feel squeamish at, say, East Asians eating dog, there is another order of magnitude in the disgust with which one of Tawfiq's Egyptian readers would greet this scene. It is also not slaughtered in the appropriate ritual manner, which adds another layer of potential disgust and thus extremity to the situation.

We now know that there are no stray dogs left in the tunnels because *they have all been eaten*. Cats and rats are not technically *harām* for eating, though most Egyptians would be made queasy by the idea. Things are so dire that dog meat has now become respectable, *muhtarama*, which shares the linguistic root *ḥ-r-m* with *harām* (Cowan 201-202)¹⁵ and so indicates the complete reversal of the normal order of things that the Cairo of 2010 and 2020—and thus, implicitly, the real-world Cairo of 2008—has undergone. Take away foreign remittances and Egypt cannot even maintain its long-held cultural dietary standards—or, indeed, even basic nutrition. The Others are sons of dogs—and this implies not only their untouchable nature, but also their status as something less than foodstuffs.

Gaber and the Red Death. Before introducing the Hunter to exactly how the Others get hold of meat, however, Gaber concludes his internal monologue about how this version of 2020 Cairo came to be; and here at least he echoes Wells quite clearly. He quotes statistics that most rapists are unemployed, drawing from this the general conclusion that:

The crime of rape is really a crime by an entire class of society. Not to mention, of course, the dissolution of the middle [*wuṣṭā*] class that, in any society, plays the role of graphite rods in nuclear reactors: they slow down the reaction and, if it weren't for them, the reactor would explode. A society without a middle class is a society primed for explosion.

That is exactly what happened; but the explosion didn't do away with the wealthy class. It decimated what remained of the middle class, and turned society into two poles and two peoples.

Only the wealthy class realized that there was no life for it unless it became completely isolated, following the same logic behind medieval castles [*qilā` al-qurūn al-wuṣṭā*], when rulers would hold decadent parties while pestilence decimated the sea of poverty outside. *The Masque [qinā`] of the Red Death*, where did I read a story with that title, and when? And who wrote it? I don't remember [4:2] (125)

Gaber makes a nice play on words in the Arabic passage by linking the vanished middle class with the medieval castles—the “castles of the Middle Ages” in Arabic¹⁶—and uses the rather odd metaphor of nuclear power when the world is now powered by biroil. His argument explains the literal rather than merely figurative seclusion of the upper class; they are afraid of potential violence and want to make sure they stay out of the way of the metaphorical radiation destroying the Others.

The literal seclusion is echoed in the story Gaber references, Edgar Allan Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death* (1843). The text of *Utopia* uses *qinā`*, which means a mask or hood and does not generally have the connotation of a masked ball: dancing and mixed-gender events are Western imports (Cowan 928). In the very short Poe story, a prince and his retinue seal themselves off in a palace to isolate themselves from the titular plague that is ravaging the lower orders outside. Yet just before midnight, a figure masked as a plague victim enters the palace. The prince pursues it through the rooms, but drops dead before he can assault it; the rest of the revellers then perish of the plague.

The *Masque* is often read as a musing on the inevitability of death or the return of the repressed (though this is anachronistic); and of course the allegorical class-based reading is evident from a first glance, just as it is in *Utopia*. H.H. Bell, Jr., among many others, condemns the prince for his lack of feeling for his subjects (101). This might lead us to conclude that Tawfīq has used the story to hint that the power structure is vulnerable. The Prince in this reading would represent Hosni Mubarak and the secluded Utopians, with the different rooms in the palace suggesting the different groups among the privileged classes. The implied argument would then be that the privileged are not safe from the “plague” of the masses, no matter how many barriers might be erected—Utopia is, after all, riddled with tunnels through which Gaber claims the Others come to steal from the Utopians. But the end of the novel appears to refute this reading: no Others actually penetrate Utopia in the text, and the threat the Utopians face is a frontal assault on their gates that is no real threat to them at all.

Patricia H. Wheat tries to redeem the prince, arguing that “his supposed pride is best seen as a protective mask, a mask of indifference with which he tries to shield himself from death” (51). This might lead us to argue that the prince represents Gaber, in his role as representative of the intellectual classes in the labyrinthine slums of Cairo; then the argument of *Utopia* becomes more explicitly political. Gaber's intuition of his own death then becomes an argument that the intellectual class, insofar as it remains a secluded “class,” cannot drive social reforms. In fact, the death of the intellectual class is *required* to drive social change, and thus Gaber's effective suicide in helping the Utopians has the added effect of enraging the masses sufficiently to rise up.

Other critics have noted the contradiction inherent to the story's narrative—if everyone dies, who is left to tell the story?—and use this as the entry into their analysis. Leonard Cassuto points out that *The Masque of the Red Death* is the only one of Poe's tales of horror that uses first-person rather

than third-person omniscient narration, and that this is the key clue to understanding that Death himself is the narrator (319). David R. Dudley disagrees with Cassuto, noting the reference in the story to Victor Hugo's play *Hernani* (1830),¹⁷ and arguing that

The importance of the narrator's ambivalent exterior/interior status is that it allows him deviously to 'overlook' the fact that he should have died at the end of the story... [which] is a *vanitas* tale, a *memento mori*. More specifically, it is about the failure of art to stave off death. (172)

And this, I submit, is the reason Tawfīq has Gaber make the reference to the story in this particular way: Gaber, like Poe's narrator, is suspended between death and life in a manner that renders *Utopia* paradoxical. Gaber mentions several times in the text that he will be dead in two days, one day, etc., as the narrative progresses. And he does die at the appointed time: after knocking Gaber out with a rock, the Hunter uses a knife stolen from the chicken disassembly line to cut Gaber's throat—though not in the approved ritual manner. The Hunter takes nothing from Gaber other than his arm as a trophy, and clearly cares nothing for Gaber's perspective except insofar as it allows the Hunter the opportunity to return home, so we are left to wonder precisely how the second and fourth sections of *Utopia* come to us. Gaber should not have the opportunity to speak to us at all, and yet he does, and in doing so he mentions *The Masque of the Red Death*. We can therefore, through the lens of the Poe story and criticisms thereof, wonder whether Gaber's sections of *Utopia*, which call him "prey," represent not so much the return of the repressed but rather the failure of art—or in Gaber's case, intellectualism—to transcend the death-in-life that is the lot of the Others. This reading of the story does not supplant so much as add nuance to the second reading above: the intellectuals seclude themselves from the masses while retaining the power to drive social change, but fail to realize that they too are cut off from the majority of Egyptians.

Revolution and the Intellectual. If we were to make the claim that Gaber is the Red Death or its equivalent, we would have to ignore the record of the final two sections of *Utopia*, which present a consistent and detailed record of Gaber's complete failure as a revolutionary or even as an agent of vengeance. Gaber is well aware that turning the Hunter and Germinal over to his gang would be the best option for both him and the Others as a group but he refuses, for two reasons. First, he does not want to be a son of a dog like his peers: he believes that the intellectualism that sets him off from them makes him a better person than either his peers or the Utopians. He repeats the phrases "I don't want to be like them" and "I'm not a son of a dog" at multiple places in the text. Secondly, he is unimpressed with his gang's inchoate plan to steal some biroi and thereby deprive the Utopians of their air support.¹⁸ After hearing about it for the thousandth time, he says "You think you're fighting the English in one of those old black-and-white films. Knock off this chatter and think about how we're going to find us a new dog" (141).¹⁹

He loathes the Utopians for obvious reasons and detests his own people for their weakness and lack of organization.

In the novel's final section, narrated by the Hunter, Gaber helps him and Germinal to escape onto a bus full of night-shift workers heading to Utopia. But Gaber makes them get off in the desert, where he leads them to a hidden door:

"Tunnels!" he replied "From the beginning there were secret tunnels by which we could enter Utopia to steal what we wanted.... [This one leads to] the heart of Utopia. Next to that big mall, whose name I've forgotten."

"Elite Mall."

"Yes. Where people like you prowl about like hyenas [*dibā`*] looking for a victim." [5:2] (160)

Gaber leads them to the ladder going up and the moment he turns his back the Hunter knocks him out and kills him without an instant's remorse. The Hunter's actions, and his perspective, may lead us to consider the relationship of *Utopia* to another sf classic, Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962). Alex and his droogs are superficially similar to the Hunter and Germinal in that both consider mindless violence against the defenseless to be the chief pleasure in life. But the parallel is inexact: Alex, though the conditioning to which he is subjected does not work, *does* learn empathy or at least what it is like to be a victim, and in the final chapter (not included in early US editions of the novel) grows up a great deal. The Hunter, by contrast, repeatedly mocks Gaber's attempts to induce empathy and reacts to victimization not with renewed perspective but with increased violence and mockery. Moreover, Alex's one virtue is his love for high culture: he appreciates Beethoven and disdains trashy pop music. The Hunter, while well-read for a Utopian, has nothing but contempt for culture; even the relatively few translations in the English text of the epigraphic lyrics of the "orgasm music" that the Hunter loves reveal it to be aggressively banal and devoid of depth or nuance. Alex finds culture inspirational, even if the inspiration is to engage in more violence; the Hunter's perspective on culture is one of the few things he says that *isn't* aggressively banal:

The sheep that thinks becomes a danger to itself and others.... Culture isn't a religion that links hearts and joins them together. In fact, it probably divides them because it informs those who have been wronged about the horror of the injustice they are suffering and tells the lucky ones what they can lose. [3:2] (101)

Though it is the Hunter—someone with a clear interest in maintaining the power structure—who says this, we can see in this quotation further evidence of Tawfiq's political point: the intellectual class is part of the problem in twenty-first-century Egypt. Once the Hunter has killed Gaber, we may legitimately wonder how it is that someone who thinks of himself as the Cassandra of the Cairo slums, the only guy with books in his hut, can be so consistently outwitted by an impulsive, rapid psychopath. The world of *Utopia* may be cognitively plausible, but Gaber as a character becomes increasingly

less so as its narrative unfolds. He simply does not have the survival instinct to be the one to bring some kind of vengeance into the sealed castle. And while he claims that his fellow gang members recognize him for his education, he does not lead them. He dismisses their plan, but by the time it works he is already dead. So he cannot use his knowledge of Wells to lead an army of Others up into Elite Mall and fall upon the Utopians like the Morlocks on the Eloi, or perhaps the other way round.²⁰ Instead, the Hunter gets to fire a machine gun into a crowd of Others who are using makeshift weapons to storm a heavily fortified position.

The text has the good sense not to give the outcome of the battle, because it is a foregone conclusion. Without a Gaber who actually uses his knowledge to help his fellow Others instead of satisfying his sense of moral superiority by helping the Utopians, it is the Utopians who have everything but numbers. Dudley's reading of the Poe story is more applicable, then, to Gaber's situation than is Cassuto's: Gaber as a character is not vengeful Death, but rather an example of the consequences of a refusal to sink below a self-assumed moral or intellectual level even when the situation clearly requires it. Let us, then, regard Gaber not as an individual so much as a representative of his class: the university graduates who cannot find work in Egypt but who at least in our world can travel to the Gulf and teach or clerk. An allegorical reading of *Utopia* might then understand it as a criticism of, or perhaps advice to, that intellectual class: insofar as you refuse to give up your self-image as some kind of elite and understand the struggle as inevitably violent, messy, and one in which you are vastly outnumbered by the uneducated poor, any attempt at revolution will only consolidate power in the hands of the real elite.

The evaporation of the middle class, the seclusion of the intellectuals, the sociopathy of the elite, and the disorganization of the masses or their domination by thugs really did cause Egypt to overheat two years after the publication of *Utopia*, during what would come to be called the Arab Spring protests. And if we consider how the power struggle in Egypt has so far played out as of the time of writing (August 2014), we can see that much of what Tawfiq warns his peers about in *Utopia* has come to pass in the real world.

The Arab Spring came to Egypt on 25 January 2011; these original protests were in large part driven by educated Egyptians using social media. But while the masses were quickly drawn into the protests, most ordinary Egyptians got their news not from Facebook like the intellectuals but from the Muslim Brotherhood, which for decades had been working to deliver social services to impoverished Egyptians in the face of severe repression (Ghonim 123).²¹ Within less than three weeks, longtime president Hosni Mubarak was forced to resign. In the presidential election runoff in June 2012, intellectuals were forced to choose between Islamist Mohammed Morsi and a regime insider. Morsi was ultimately deposed on 30 June 2013 by the old regime, and in May 2014 former regime stalwart Abdel Fattah el-Sisi was elected president by a wide margin. So while the facts on the ground are much more complex, the executive summary of the Egyptian revolution would read that the Internet-

savvy college graduates were squeezed out of any meaningful role in the revolution at every step in the process and ended by having to support regime insiders in both presidential elections. The intellectuals were able to drive the initial debate but withdrew from the conflict in the face of intimidation.

The Internet makes no appearance in *Utopia*, but the cell phone provides a key plot point. At the moment Germinal and the Hunter are first apprehended as Utopians, one of the Others snatches the Hunter's mobile from his pocket. Germinal does not have hers with her; the text does not explain why. Once Gaber has taken the two Utopians to the relative safety of his hut, it would be a simple matter for him to swap the Hunter's money or drugs for a working phone, then let them call for help—but he does not. Instead, he dirties up the two of them and takes them on a tour of the slums, where Germinal sees a phone for sale. She swipes it and tries to dial out, not understanding that no phone would be sold with a working SIM card in Cairo. Gaber extracts them from the angry crowd and compels them to continue their tour.

Why does Gaber go to such great lengths to prevent them from calling out? It would, after all, be much safer for Gaber, as long as he was well away from the helicopter full of American Marines when it arrived. We might argue that Gaber wants to do things his way: to demonstrate that technology is not the solution to every problem and cannot be relied upon in times of crisis. Tawfiq's political point here then becomes that technology and social media fail to organize people effectively, especially when those people are so impoverished that Internet access, the *sine qua non* of the Egyptian intellectual class, is well outside their hierarchy of immediate needs. Relying on technology always excludes the very class of people needed to bring about major social change.

In Gaber's words, the intellectuals did not want bloodshed; but neither the Brotherhood nor the regime was quite so reluctant. Insofar as Tawfiq has a prescription for Egyptian intellectuals, this would appear to be that they need to work with the masses to create some kind of plurality support for democracy—or devolve to a choice between theocracy and despotism. If we read *Utopia* allegorically, the street gang plays the role of the Muslim Brotherhood: tellingly, Tawfiq makes them into simply a gang of thugs with no religious convictions that would survive an encounter with a large and delicious dog.

But *Utopia* has much more to recommend it than political allegory: it works as science fiction should, using a cognitively plausible if undeveloped *novum* to reflect modern Cairo in its dystopian 2020 equivalent. It is very well-written: in Arabic, its narrative flows very well and demonstrates that the modernized Classical Arabic that is used for literature, and is to the Cairene dialect as Shakespeare is to standard colloquial English, can be vivid, and light, and not at all ponderous or creaky like so many other works of even twenty-first-century Arabic literature. Tawfiq's long experience as a writer of popular fiction serves him well in crafting a narrative that not only reads well,

but also points out the structural flaws in Egyptian society and holds his fellow intellectuals responsible for not doing enough to address them.

NOTES

1. The author's name is transliterated into English in several different ways, as is often the case for Arab authors. I have given his name here in the standard transliteration system, but his last name is often found online and in print as Towfik or Tawfik.

2. Cited passages in this article are from the translation unless otherwise noted. Since the digital version of the English translation is quite a bit easier to come by than the print edition, I have marked citations with sections and subsections in brackets and page numbers from the Arabic edition in parentheses. The translation is generally quite faithful to the original, but only about half of the epigraphs at the beginnings of subsections have been translated.

3. Many of the online reviews claim that it is 2023, but the text states 2020 quite clearly.

4. Normally, the human plural of "Others" would be *al-'ākharūn*. The word *al-'aghyār* is a coined plural of *ghayr*, which means "other" in the sense of "Cairo, Alexandria, and others." But the primary use of *ghayr* is the same as the English prefixes *non-*, *un-*, *in-*, etc: it is a noun used as a negation particle. *al-'Aghyar* is a non-human plural, and to a native speaker of Arabic the word would have the connotations of inhuman or somehow nonexistent Others. Moreover, *ghayr* is cognate to the word for "jealousy," so a native speaker reading *Utopia* would regard the Others as jealous, as well.

5. They are "Predator" and "Prey" in the English translation, without the "the." I have chosen "the Hunter" here because it is a more literal translation and more in keeping with his character: a predator hunts for food, but the Hunter hunts for thrills and trophies.

6. The USA has consistently given well over a billion dollars a year to the Egyptian military. This amount was \$1.3 billion in fiscal 2014. See U.S. Department of State.

7. This is a nonsense word, similar enough in sound to *bitrūl*, "petroleum," to ring familiar, but devoid of other meaning. A *bāy* is a Turkish title of nobility used for centuries in Egypt, roughly equivalent to "Sir", but *rīl* is meaningless, and at any rate the title goes after the name in Arabic rather than before.

8. See International Organization for Immigration Cairo.

9. See Atlas of Economic Complexity.

10. The phenomenon of Egyptians having to migrate to the Gulf due to lack of employment opportunities in Egypt is so well-known that it comes into play in the *al-Kitaab* series of Arabic language textbooks, where the main characters' uncle had to go to the Emirates to find work, leaving his family behind.

11. The text makes repeated references to the scarcity and poor quality of food among the Others.

12. See, for example, Hume (38-43) and James (48-51).

13. Contrast this view of Ford to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932); Huxley was the grandson of the T.H. Huxley whose work so influenced Wells.

14. This should make us skeptical of Gaber's claim to be the only one who reads; the Cairo subway first opened in 1987 and, since he states directly that it closed with the founding of *Utopia* in 2010, his estimate of the time frame is off by half.

15. The link between the two words is that a respectable person is someone whom it is forbidden to disparage.

16. It should be noted that Egyptians, like many Arabs, often look back fondly on the Middle Ages, as during that period the balance of power between Islam and Western Europe was firmly on the side of the Muslims.

17. The play was notable in its day for breaking the unities of time and space, and for its exceptionally baroque plot. The character Hernani accepts a death sentence in order to display his honor (Houston 53).

18. The text makes repeated mentions of helicopters full of American Marines who will descend at the first hint of an uprising among the Others; the novel opens with the Hunter witnessing the Marines shooting a nameless Other (though this may very well be a foreshadowing of what the Hunter *will* see when he helps repel the assault at the end of the novel). Such helicopters also rescue Utopians who get in trouble while seeking to hunt the Others for sport; the Hunter and Germinal are surrounded too quickly and Germinal's phone is snatched away before they can call for aid.

19. The British occupied Egypt from 1882 to 1952.

20. According to the people whom the Hunter overhears, the crowd of Others is particularly inflamed by Gaber's death at the hands of those to whom he had extended hospitality. But were Gaber to have advised the leaders of the crowd, the Others might have reaped much more tactical success.

21. The *New York Times* review of Ghonim's book pegs the percentage of Egyptians in 2008 who were "Web users" at 13.6 million, or roughly 15% of the population. See Vargas.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Ahmad Khālid Tawfiq's 2008 novel *Yūtūbiyā* [*Utopia*] in light of the many literary allusions made by one of its narrators. The novel throws two problematic and unappealing but consistent and vivid characters together in the dystopia that is Cairo in 2020 after the end of the petroleum economy. Tawfiq's Egypt represents a cognitively plausible extrapolation from current conditions—class inequality, corruption, and brutality. We can learn to read *Utopia* less as the tale of two psychologically realistic characters and more as the tale of class differences in an extrapolation from Egyptian society. This opens up to us an understanding of the indictment of Egypt's intellectual class that lies underneath the surface narrative. *Utopia* reflects upon the conditions that in a few years would lead to the street protests of 2011-12; it also shows, well before the fact, that such protests would only lead to further consolidation of power by the authoritarian regime.