

17 Fading trust in the Nahḍa

Three Middle Eastern utopias

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This chapter: Like the preceding Chapter 16, this chapter too aims at a historical overview. The time span covered – from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century – is roughly the same, and so is also the general trend described, as it follows a development “From ‘Upswing’ to Crisis and Demise” (as indicated in the title of Part VI). The number of sample texts looked at, however, is much lower now – only three –, and therefore also the intervals between them are considerably longer – half a century (or a bit less) here, as compared to one or two decades in Chapter 16. As a consequence, this chapter is, on the one hand, less ‘fine-tuned’ than the preceding. On the other, the essay’s ‘spot light’ approach will hopefully allow us to see the broad lines of historical development more clearly. The texts discussed are three quite well-known short utopias: Faṭḥ-‘Alī Ākhund-zādah (Fatali Akhundov)’s *Setāregān-e ferib-khorde* (“The Deceived Stars”) of 1857, Muṣṭafā Luṭfī al-Manfalūṭī’s *Madīnat al-sa‘āda* (“The Happy City”) of 1907, and Yūsuf Idrīs’s *Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt* (“Farahat’s Republic”) of 1954, and the genre studied – utopia – has been chosen because it has *per se*, as an essentially ‘modern’ genre imagining alternative worlds, a close affinity to the Nahḍa as a huge ‘utopian’ project that always had the creation of another better world in mind. As we will see, the evolution of the genre in the Middle East is very similar to that of its Western predecessors, or counterparts, and it is also closely related to our book’s main theme, emerging subjectivity. We will first deal with a *spatial* utopia, a variety of the genre that does not yet care about agency in time and history but can be read as an indicator of secularisation where a formerly *heavenly* paradise becomes imagined as a paradise *on earth* – a precondition for the appearance of the subject as acting in and upon the world. In a next step, we will be able to observe the *subjectivisation* of the genre where typically first-person narrators travel around in the world and happen to discover, in a remote place, an alternative better world, an expression of the emerging subject starting to move around in the world and to interact with it as its object. (It is certainly no coincidence that a novel with such a plot – Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* -- was one of the first European texts to be translated into Middle Eastern languages.) When

the Nahḍa has gained momentum, also the next phase, that of *temporalisation*, can be observed. It corresponds to a subject that has become fully aware of its agency in the world and its capability to change things – and the course of history – by working towards a better future. In the long run, however, the overall optimism gradually fades away, with former utopian visions increasingly turning into pessimistic *dystopias*.

Like in Chapter 16, it could be interesting to submit the texts discussed below to a Componential Analysis according to the Falkian model. The dates of publication – 1857, 1907, and 1954 – suggest a reading of Akhundov’s “Deceived Stars” as a document of “Reproductionism”, while al-Manfalūṭī’s “Happy City” is likely to express a “Creativist” worldview, and Idrīs’s “Farahat’s Republic” was probably still written under the influence of the spirit of “Spatism” (not yet “Tempism”).¹ But these are only guesses, and only a thorough analysis would be able to substantiate these initial hypotheses or prove them wrong.

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17.1 Introduction

It is a well-established fact in utopia theory that the imagined worlds of utopias always are closely related to the real world in which they are produced, that they ‘mirror’ this world, ‘reflect’ it, or ‘answer’ to it, and that utopias thus have a ‘front’ and a ‘reverse side’.² Theories of the genre also seem to agree that utopias typically appear at the threshold of new periods, in times of transition in which an old order of things is increasingly felt to be dated and in need of substitution with a new one, and that they in this way are excellent indicators of fundamental changes in the world view of a given society.³ There is also broad consensus that, in the West, the emergence of the genre has to be seen as a function of the dawn of what is usually called Modern Times,⁴ an ensemble of processes that began to gain momentum during the Renaissance, with its shift of attention from the divine to the earthly and its humanist turn, processes also that later were enhanced by Enlightenment with its belief in reason and the possibility of progress, first

¹ For an overview of the “period formulas”, see above, end of introductory section of Chapter 16.

² Cf. Wilpert 2001b, 865b (“Gegenbild der Wirklichkeit”), Voßkamp 1996, 1931 (“Antwortcharakter”).

³ Cf. Wilpert 2001b, 866a.

⁴ Cf. Vieira’s statement that “[t]he concept of utopia is no doubt an attribute of modern thought, and one of its most visible consequences” – Vieira 2010, 6.

morally and then, with industrialisation advancing, also technologically. Connected as they are to these developments, Western utopias thus are always in themselves expressions of the fundamental process of secularisation that is characteristic of modernity: as visions of ‘paradises on earth’ (or other places of the concrete, scientifically accessible or imaginable world), they replace the medieval religious idea of a Paradise that may wait for humankind at the end of all time, somewhere in an unspecified and unspecifiable ‘heavenly’ sphere.

No wonder then that the emergence of the utopian genre in the Middle East was fostered by similar conditions, albeit considerably later. First examples of utopian texts can be encountered in the middle of the nineteenth century,⁵ i.e., in a period in which the Middle East underwent radical change due to its increased integration into global economy, the experience of a cultural-civilisational and in larger parts also military superiority and hegemony of the West, and Middle Eastern societies’ reactions to these challenges, consisting, among other things, of a set of wide-ranging reforms, initiated by the state and implying the secularisation of key sectors of learning and life in general, as well as an intensified engagement with the ideas of the French Revolution, itself a ‘child’ of Enlightenment. In the Ottoman context, the period is usually addressed as that of the *Tanzimat*, i.e., “(re-) organisation, reforms” (< *tanẓīmāt*, pl. of Arabic *tanẓīm*, verbal noun of *nazzama* “to put in proper order, rearrange”, from *niẓām* “system, order”). In the Arab(ic) context, the most common term is less political-administrative than the Ottoman one but rather stresses the cultural perspective: the so-called *Nahḍa* is the age, or movement, of a cultural “revival” or “resurgence”, an “upswing”

5 I am not counting here texts like al-Fārābī’s (872–950) *Fī mabādī’ ārā’ ahl al-madīna al-fāḍila* (on this, cf. Barbaro 2013, 43), Ibn Ṭufayl’s (1105–1185) *Ḥayy b. Yaqẓān* (ibid., 33), or the story of “Abdallah the Fisherman and Abdallah the Merman” (from the *1001 Nights*) which sometimes are mentioned as early ‘predecessors’ of the utopian genre in Arabic literature. Although all of these have utopian elements, the first is a religious-philosophical treatise, the second imagines human perfection, both building heavily on the philosophical heritage of late Antiquity; and the third is an “inverted reflection of society on land” where “almost everything is different [...]”. However, the story is not really setting out a political programme. It offers something that is wonderful because it is strange, not something that is wonderful because it is a blueprint for the ideal of life in society” (Irwin 1994, 212). – In a similar vein, also Giritli ‘Alī ‘Aziz Efendī’s (1749–1798) *Muḥayyelāt* (written 1796–97, first printed 1852) cannot be counted as utopian even though they are not only fantastic, but also rather ‘modern’. – All these texts can be regarded as what Vieira 2010, 6, calls “pre-figurations of utopia, as they lack the tension between the affirmation of a possibility and the negation of its fulfilment”. Therefore, they are “allotopias” rather than utopias.

(from *nahaḍa* “to rise, get up”), often also translated as “renaissance” or “awakening”.⁶

And no wonder also that utopia in the Middle East, too, reflects the situation in the *real* world and that the development of the genre can serve as an indicator of social, political and ideological change and Middle Eastern societies’ attitude towards the project of *tanzimat/nahḍa/modernity*.⁷ The fact that “modernity” was not yet ‘there’ in the Middle East of the nineteenth century made it into a utopia in the very literal sense of the word – it had “no place” (Greek *où + tópos*) yet in the region –, and the strive for “modernity” was essentially the ensemble of attempts to make the modernist vision come true,⁸ an utopia that, like in the West, was no religious, heavenly paradise any longer but an essentially secularised vision.⁹ Given the integral unity between literature and society, an analysis of utopian fiction from the nineteenth century until now will allow us to describe the destiny of the modernist project in the Middle East at large.

6 Cf. the title of George Antonius’ classic, *The Arab Awakening* (1939) (here with a focus on the political and nation-building). Another classic on the era, written by Albert Hourani, is more concerned with the intellectual-cultural dimensions under the title of *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* (1962).

7 The essentially realist dimension of Middle Eastern utopia, i.e., its ultimate rootedness in and constant reference to *contemporary* reality, could not prevent the genre’s overall marginalisation within modern literature as a whole. This is due to the fact that, “[a]long most of the twentieth century, the dominant canon of Arabic prose focused on the [non-utopian, more overtly] realist novel as the primary, ‘authentic’ form of expression, whereby writers and intellectuals deployed their formative, educational function to the nation. The canonization of this prevalent view has obscured to some degree the importance of more imaginative, ‘utopian’ (in a broad sense) writing attempts [...], as it also excluded other literary forms” – Lauri 2019, 121, referring also to Samah Selim’s statement that “[r]ealism is enshrined, in both Europe and the Arab world, as the canonical foundation of all literary modernities” (Selim 2003, 110).

8 Cf. Habermas 1997 (“Modernity: An Unfinished Project”). – As Pernau 2018, 65, rightly observes, modernisation and progress formed part of a universalistic model of development (“universalistische[s] Entwicklungsmodell”), so that it always seemed possible for the ‘not-yet-developed’ to recover lost time and catch up with the ‘civilised nations’. Vieira speaks of an “optimistic worldview” grounded on “a global theory of evolution” (2010, 10) and also underlines the fact that “historical progress was believed to be inevitable” and therefore “affected not only the utopist’s country, but all nations. The utopian project thus took on a universal dimension” (ibid., 11).

9 An indicator of the secular character is the fact that the ultimate purpose of the utopias is (human) *happiness*, not beatitude or religious bliss in recompense for compliance with the divine orders.

17.2 The utopian genre in the West

In the West, the development is characterised by four main traits, each of which is indicative of major ‘events’, or stages, in the history of Western man’s relation to the project of enlightenment and modernity:

- Early utopias in general are ‘*spatial*’ utopias.¹⁰ They imagine a counter-world somewhere, in another place (often an island or a remote country or planet), as something desirable, but without assigning it a place on a developmental timeline that would be assumed to be universal, valid for the whole of mankind, nor elaborating on ‘how it felt/feels/will feel’ to live in such a world. This step can be seen as the immediate successor of Christian Paradise, a secularisation of the religious vision: Paradise has been desacralised, but has still kept its former timelessness and ‘objectivity’ (in the sense that it is too remote and still so much beyond reach that it is hard to imagine a human being to ‘live’ it, ‘feel’ it, experience it in concrete detail).
- This changes towards the end of the seventeenth and in the early eighteenth century. While utopias until then have remained rather abstract ideas, they become more accessible and ‘tangible’ now, worlds that the human subject can be imagined to experience.¹¹ Important indicators of this fundamental shift, the *subjectivation* of the genre, are the preference of *first-person narrators* and the organisation of utopias as *travel narratives*. Typical representatives of this stage are the so-called Robinsonades, a sub-genre that, as can be guessed from the term, goes back to Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), a work that owes its overwhelming popularity to the fact that utopia here suddenly is presented as a world that, despite its remoteness, is in human reach, and as the concrete experience of a living subject.¹²
- Yet, utopias that have been subjectivised in this way are still not necessarily imagined to represent a stage in universal history that mankind can or necessarily will reach some time in the future if the present continues to develop as it seems to develop. This step, the *temporalisation* of utopias in which hitherto spatial-static (though perhaps subjectivised) models of a perfect order of things are assigned a place in future history and the *process* of *creating* such an ideal order comes in the focus, is effected in Europe from the last third of

¹⁰ Voßkamp 1996, 1932–34, mentions, for instance, Thomas Morus’ *Utopia* (1516), Tommaso Campanella’s *Civitas Solis* (written 1601, first printed 1623), or Francis Bacon’s *Nova Atlantis* (publ. posthum 1627) as examples of such ‘spatial utopias’.

¹¹ Voßkamp 1996, 1935 ff.

¹² Voßkamp 1996, 1936, speaks of a strong “Bindung an einen konkret vorstellbaren Ich-Erzähler, so daß die Entdeckung des neuen Landes als Erfahrungsprozeß dargestellt werden kann”.

the eighteenth century onwards, forming part of the fundamental transformation that is essential to what Reinhard Koselleck called the European “saddle period”.¹³ Due to increased secularisation as well as the development of the sciences and the belief in history as a *process* and the possibility of *progress*, attention during this stage shifts from *perfectio* to *perfectibilité*.¹⁴ According to Voßkamp, the beginning of this stage in European utopian writing is marked by Louis-Sébastien Mercier’s (1740–1814) *L’an deux mille quatre cent quarante, rêve s’il en fut jamais* (“The Year 2440...”,¹⁵ 1770), the first utopian novel that is set in the *future*.¹⁶ Vieira reserves the term “euchronia” for this type of utopias in which “the utopian wish give[s] place to hope”.¹⁷

- From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, in the West the place of the utopian genre that until then had expressed confident belief in the progress of humanity and the perfectibility of society is increasingly taken by pessimistic, *dystopic* visions.¹⁸ Initially triggered by the experience of the negative consequences of technological progress during the age of industrialisation – an exemplary novel in this context is Samuel Butler’s (1835–1902) *Erewhon* (1872)¹⁹ – the transition from utopia to dystopia is further enhanced and completed by the traumata of World War I²⁰ and World War II,²¹ both of which

13 Voßkamp 1996, 1932. – Cf. also Vieira 2010, 9 who states that the shift from spatial utopias to what she calls “euchronia” (see end of paragraph above, and fn. 17) marks the transition, in Europe, from Renaissance to Enlightenment: “In the Renaissance, man discovered that there were alternative options to the society he lived in, became aware of the infinite powers of reason and understood that the construction of the future was in his hands. In the Enlightenment, man discovered that reason could enable him not only to have a happy life, but also to reach human perfection”.

14 Voßkamp 1996, 1938. – According to Vieira 2010, 10, the idea of “infinite human perfectibility” was first expressed, in Europe, by Anne-Robert Turgot in his lectures at the Sorbonne in 1750, then further developed by the Marquis de Condorcet in his *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795), which emphasised man’s important role in this process.

15 In a contemporaneous English translation, the year of the title was altered: *Memoirs of the Year Two Thousand Five Hundred*, translated by W. Hooper, London 1772.

16 Voßkamp 1996, 1938; Vieira 2010, 10–11. – On the novel, cf., e.g., Jeschke 2009.

17 Vieira 2010, 9.

18 Cf. the chapter entitled “From hope to disbelief and despair: satirical utopia, anti-utopia and dystopia”, in Vieira 2010, 15–18.

19 The title represents the word *nowhere* in reverse, in this way turning *ou-topia* into its contrary.

20 Cf. the emergence of key texts of the dystopic genre like Yevgeny I. Zamyatin’s *Мы* (We, written 1920–21, English translation 1924) or Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932).

21 Cf., e.g., George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945) or *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) both of which appeared shortly after the end of World War II.

catastrophes of mankind that shake the very foundations of the previous belief in the character of Enlightenment and modernity.

17.3 Three Middle Eastern utopias

The following contribution consists of a close reading of some selected Middle Eastern utopias with the aim of finding out whether or not the genre developed along similar lines as in the West. As we will see, this question can *grosso modo* be answered in the affirmative, although the genre emerged much later and its history thus is considerably ‘condensed’ and, perhaps, the chapter less ‘closed’ than in the West yet.²²

My analysis will cover three famous pieces of utopian fiction, written by prominent authors from the Middle East at three different periods, in this way assuming some kind of representativeness and generalisability. All along this journey through a bit more than a century, I will also try to show that Middle Eastern utopian thinking obviously developed, by and large, along the same lines that have been described for Western utopias.

The texts that will form the basis of my analysis are:

- Mirzā Faṭḥ-‘Alī Ākhundzādah (Fatali Akhundov, 1812–78)’s “The Deceived Stars” [abbrev. *DS*] (*Setāregān-e ferib-khorde* / *Aldanmış Kevakib, Hekayati-Yusif şah* / *Обманутые звёзды*) is from the middle of the nineteenth century (1857), i.e., the beginnings of reformism in the region; it can be considered as one of the earliest pieces of ‘modern’ Middle Eastern fiction in general;²³
- Muṣṭafā Luṭfī al-Manfalūṭī’s (1876–1924) “The Happy City” [*HC*] (*Madīnat al-sa‘āda*) was produced half a century later, in 1907, i.e., in a time when modernisation was already far advanced and the reform-minded effendis, the new secular-educated elite, had gained considerable self-confidence, but were still denied political participation; it is the early twentieth century, where the longing for radical change has intensified during the past decades but the melancholic *fin de siècle* mood is still prevailing and the longed-for

²² While positive utopias have become very rare in the West, the genre seems to re-emerge and blossom for some time, every now and then, in the Middle East. The recent utopia of the ‘Islamic State’ was preceded, in the 1990s, by utopias imagined by Islamist writers of the *adab islāmī* / *İslamī edebiyât* movement, cf. my essay “Islamist *belles lettres* – Bourgeois and Secular” (Guth 2006), with further references.

²³ Briefly on the author: *KLL*³ s.v. – Quite detailed CVs are available from the Russian and Azeri Wikipedia entries (“Ахундов, Мирза Фатали” and “Mirzə Fətəli Axundov”, respectively). – Unfortunately, the story of the “Deceived Stars” itself is not discussed in any of these references.

- radical social-political change still seems out of reach for many (although World War I, which will bring the collapse of the old empires, is close);²⁴
- in contrast, “Farahat’s Republic” [FR] (*Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt*, 1954) by the Egyptian Yūsuf Idrīs (1927–1991), written again roughly half a century after al-Manfalūṭī’s “Happy City”, stems from the earliest years of the new Egyptian Republic, shortly after the take-over of the Free Officers and the “great leader”, Gamāl ‘Abd al-Nāṣir (Nasser), generally a period of euphoric optimism and belief in the feasibility of progress, but – as we will see – questioned as such by the writer.²⁵

Let us have a closer look now at the individual novellas!²⁶

17.3.1 Mirza Fatali Akhundov, “The Deceived Stars”

Ākhundzādeh/Akhundov’s “Deceived Stars” tells the story of the poor saddle-maker Yusof who, for a short time in the beginning of the sixteenth century, is put in the place of the Safavid Shah (who has been warned by his astrologers that a big calamity is to come over the one sitting on the Iranian throne); the idea is to save the real Shah and let the misfortune hit the saddle-maker, a simple and pious, but also very smart ‘man from the street’ of peasant origin, also known to be

²⁴ On the author: de Moor 1998a and, in some detail, Starkey 2010 and Pagani 2020. – *Madīnat al-sa‘āda* is treated briefly by Deheuvels (as “un petit texte fort curieux”) in id. 2007, 222–23, 226, and in Barbaro 2013, 47, as well as Pagani 2020. For more detailed studies, see Deheuvels 2004 and Lauri 2019. For the latter, “all the basic elements typical of the ‘Western’ utopian genre are present in [this] story” (123) and it seems to be “so prototypical at first reading that it could be taken as a writing exercise in the genre” (124). This is certainly true if one takes as basis for comparison Vieira’s description of “a literary tradition which [...] relies on a more or less rigid narrative structure: it normally pictures the journey (by sea, land or air) of a man or woman to an unknown place (an island, a country or a continent); once there, the utopian traveller is usually offered a guided tour of the society, and given an explanation of its social, political, economic and religious organization; this journey typically implies the return of the utopian traveller to his or her own country, in order to be able to take back the message that there are alternative and better ways of organizing society” – Vieira 2010, 7.

²⁵ For a concise overview of author’s life and work, cf., e.g., the entry “Yūsuf Idrīs” in www.britannica.com. For more detailed studies, see Ryberg 1992, with further references.

²⁶ Quotations will be in English, with inline page numbers referring to the respective translation’s reprint in my anthology, *Literary Visions* (Guth, ed. 2019), while the original text will be given in the footnotes, quoted from the editions indicated in the References. Abbreviations: *SFKh* = *Setāregān-e ferib-khordeh*, *MS* = *Madīnat al-sa‘āda*, *JF* = *Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt* / *DS* = “The Deceived Stars”; *HC* = “The Happy City”; *FR* = “Farahat’s Republic”.

a critic of the shah and ‘the system’ of hypocrites and liars, etc. While the real Shah ‘Abbās I is in hiding, Yusof seizes the opportunity of his being the new emperor to abolish all that he thinks isn’t as it should be in the country. For a short time, he is able to establish just rule and do away with exploitation, poverty, religious constraints, unjust death sentences, torture, etc. He also reduces the palace’s expenses, distributes grain to the poor, abolishes bribing, establishes a just and meaningful system of taxation, creates secular courts (taking large parts of jurisdiction away from the mullahs), and has roads and bridges repaired, caravanserais, schools, and hospitals built and irrigation canals digged. However, when “a new golden era had (just) come to Iran” (DS 35), larger parts of the population, not accustomed to just and mild rule, mistake this for timidity and weakness on Yusof’s side. The monotony of well-being makes them think of further shortcomings, and soon a mutiny breaks out. As the expected calamity does not happen and Yusof stays alive, Shah ‘Abbās’s ex-entourage, all dismissed by Yusof, now join the “ungrateful urban rabble” (DS 37), march on the palace and take over again. Yusof has disappeared. The new old elite urge the previous ruler to leave his hideout, and Shah ‘Abbās is reinstalled. After only a short time, everything is as it was before, and “despotism, cruelty and fanaticism” (DS 38) remain unchallenged for the remaining fourty years of the Shah’s rule.

The text is set in the early sixteenth century and told from a third-person perspective as if the events had happened in real life. What does this and the type of utopian state that the text presents to its readers, tell us about the author’s approach to the modernisation project?

Firstly, we can say that we are still at the very initial stage of the reform project, a stage where the utopia of a radical change is still very idealistic and rather abstract – as readers, we do not get much more than a few slogans (of which “prosperity and modest well-being for everybody” perhaps are the most important alongside with the call for “justice”²⁷). Although it is presented as something that *had* been real for a short time in the past, the author does not seem to believe in the project’s *future* feasibility himself because he tells the story of a people that is not mature enough and, thus, time is not ripe yet. Evidently he is at a loss as to what else he could do than simply present an alternative system as something that once upon a time *had been* reality, for a short moment in history

27 For *‘adl* as the term that preceded that of *ḥurriyya* as a translation of the French *liberté* in early nineteenth century Arabic renderings and discussion of concepts of the French Revolution, cf. B. Lewis 1967/2012b (art. “Ḥurriyya”, in *EI*²).

at least, but then everything returned to how it had been before.²⁸ As we have seen above (Introduction), utopia theory calls this a ‘spatial’ utopia that is not temporalised yet. The author does not assign his vision a place on a timeline of human progress and overall development, although he names a concrete period – early sixteenth century. At the same time, Akhundov’s *Deceived Stars* is also a utopia that does not show signs of subjectivation yet. The narrating subject has neither lived the “saddlemaker shah”’s ideal state himself nor does he tell the reader anything with regard to the effect that the knowledge about Yusof Shah’s interim rule made, or makes, on himself. The third-person narrator is (in Gérard Genette’s categorisation) a “heterodiegetic” instance here who is neither involved in the events himself nor would serve, with the help of free indirect style, as a focaliser of Yūsuf Shāh’s or some other protagonist’s subjective experience. Due to both, the lack of temporalisation and the lack of subjectivation, Akhundov’s utopia project therefore remains little concrete and little internalised – as if it were a mere experiment of thought, a nice and interesting story that is worth considering, but still not much more.²⁹

17.3.2 Muşţafâ L. al-Manfalûţî, “The Happy City”

Things look different half a century later. In al-Manfalûţî’s “Happy City”, the (first-person) author-narrator tells the reader about a beautiful dream he recently had:³⁰

²⁸ According to Wilpert 2001b, 866, utopias located in a distant past, even if clearly referring to the state of affairs prevailing in the author’s present, have a lower potential to arouse conflict with those in power.

²⁹ In this respect, *SFKh/DS* is similar to other utopian narratives with largely abstract ‘ideological-philosophical’ features, like, for example, Fransis Faṭḥallāḥ Marrāsh’s *Ghābat al-ḥaqq* (“The Forest of Truth”, 1865), characterised by Sadgrove 1998 as “a vision of a dream world, describing an ideal state of spiritual freedom in constant war with a kingdom of bondage; [...] a fantastic blend of European ideas (the advantages of peace, the importance of liberty and equality) and a personal Christian belief in universal love” (see also Deheuvels 2007, 221), or Farāḥ Anṭūn’s *al-Dīn wa-l-‘ilm wa-l-māl aw al-mudun al-thalāth* (“Religion, Science, and Money, or: The Three Cities”, 1903), termed a text uniting “discours idéologique, description du réel, [et] critique éthique de socio-politique” by Deheuvels (2007, 225), heavily influenced, among many other ideas, by freemasonic thought (cf. *ibid.*, 229).

³⁰ Deheuvels (2007, 225) holds that the “awakened sleeper” (*dormeur éveillé*) is a “veritable *topos*” of the literature of the period, a fact he sees directly related to the basic idea of the Naḥḍa itself, given that the term means “awakening, revival” (*éveil, renouveau*). The motif was already used more than forty years before al-Manfalûţî by Marrāsh in his *Ghābat al-ḥaqq* (see n. 29). – The dream motif as such can be counted among the many “marked references to the Classical

One day, he – he himself (a first marker of a subjectivised approach³¹)! – traveled to a remote region, beyond a huge desert and high mountains, and was transported by a fabulous giant bird (reminding of the Rokh of the *1001 Nights*)³² to a place where he spotted “green-banked watercourses and clustering cottages beside great castles” (HC 79).³³ He descended from where the bird landed, and arrived in a city where everybody was happy³⁴ because everything – political system, distribution of resources and wealth, education, social cohesion, etc. – was organised completely differently from how it was done in the narrator’s home country, Egypt.³⁵ The protagonist is led around by a wise old man – looking “like the inhabitant of Mars of some astrological fantasy” (ibid.)³⁶ – who also explains to him the philosophy behind doing everything this way, not otherwise. As a reader, we do not only get these explanations but also, as a contrast, the narrator’s questions and comments, which, explicitly or implicitly, describe the corresponding deplorable state of affairs back home.³⁷ The narrator is especially impressed by the natural piety – the people are not Muslims, but “true monotheist”s (HC 80)³⁸ who

Arabic literary tradition” observed by Lauri 2019, 116 and 121 (and by others before him); see also section “Traditional Elements”, ibid., 124–25. – There do not seem to be any specific reflexes of Islamic(ate) *political* utopias; for the latter, see al-Azmeh 1990.

31 Deheuvels thinks that also the just mentioned motif of the dream that transports the narrator to a utopian place is in itself such an indicator of subjectivation because it connects “le destin individuel et celui des civilisations” – Deheuvels 2007, 225.

32 While the bird reminds of Rokh, the immense mountain is “easily recognizable as the liminal mountain of Qāf of the classical Islamicate tradition” – Lauri 2019, 123.

33 Translations by Nevill Barbour (see References, s.v. al-Manfalūṭī) are often quite free. Here, the original has: رأيت على البعد خطوط الخضرة حول سطور الماء ، ورأيت المنازل والقصور (MS 66).

34 On ‘happiness’ as a secular concept, cf. note 9, above.

35 The features that al-Manfalūṭī assigns to the ideal society of the Happy City are very much reminiscent of those of classical European ‘spatial’ utopias as described by Voßkamp 1996, 1933 f., e.g., a general community of property, totalitarian reign (as answer to anarchic chaos in the real world), or the rational(ist) character of the future system.

36 شيخ ... أشبه الأشياء بما يتخيله فريق الخياليين من علماء الفلك في صور سگان المریخ (MS 66). – For Deheuvels 2004, 357, this phrase is probably the earliest reference to ‘science fiction’ in Arabic literature. In line with this assumption, Lauri 2019, 125 thinks that it serves as “a marker that we are no longer in the realm of marvelous tales [evoked by the initial dream motif, the giant bird, and the huge mountain]. The ‘Martian’ appearance [...] introduces the second, longer utopian visit section, where more ‘modern’ utopian dimensions feature prominently”.

37 Cf. what has been said about the “front” and “reverse sides” of utopia in the first paragraph of this study.

38 الموحدين الصادقين (MS 67).

venerate God out of gratitude for what He grants them.³⁹ The guest realises that this simple but genuine and sincere way of believing and worshipping is very different from what he knows from the “learned theologians”, “philosophers” and “self-appointed mystics” (ibid.)⁴⁰ back home. On the guided tour through the city he cannot but repeat his admiration for this people’s achievements: “nicely planned” “broad streets”, “houses spaced without jostling”, each with “its own gay garden” (HC 81),⁴¹ et cetera. However, more than at the material achievements, the author-narrator marvels at the people’s general morale: they are very modest, “satisfied if they have a house to sleep in, enough land to support themselves and an animal to carry their heavy loads” (ibid.).⁴² Moreover, everybody works hard for the community’s benefit.⁴³ They receive education not in schools, but at home, at the workshops and on the field while living and working, which is also why the Happy City has “no science apart from practical activity” (HC 82).⁴⁴ In this society, there is no oppression and therefore no need to demand freedom either. Instead of a ruler, the inhabitants only need an arbitrator (ibid.)⁴⁵ and there is no need for a police because, as the guide explains, “we are all his (i.e., the arbitrator’s) police”⁴⁶ and his staff in so far as he has need of us to enforce his decisions” (ibid.); the community can also do without prisons because criminals

39 For more on al-Manfalūṭī’s depiction of the ideal religion, cf. Lauri 2019, 126-8, with further references.

40 In detail, the original has: والْمَدِّيُّ وَالْوُدِّيُّ ، الفقهاء الذين ينفقون أعمارهم في الحيز والاستحاضة ، والحدث الأكبر والحدث الأصغر ، و(...)الكلاميين الذين يسهرون الليالي ويقرّحون المآقي في عينيّة الصفات ، والجوهر والعرض ، والحدث والقدم ، والدور والتسلسل ، و(...)المتصوّفة الذين يحاولون أن ينازعوا وغيريتها ، (...) الله في مشيئته ويجاذبوه قدرته ويغالّبوه على أمره ونهيه ويتزاحمونه في لوحه وقلمه ، (MS 67).

41 فرأيت شوارعها فسيحة منتظمة ، ومنازلها متفرّقة غير متلاصقة ، وقد أحاط بكلّ منزل منها حديقة زاهرة (MS 67). – Lauri 2019, 128 thinks “the reader would think of a modern-looking grid city. Manfaluti may have had in mind the urban renovation of Downtown Cairo under Khedive Ismā‘il, modeled upon Haussman’s Paris [as suggested by Deheuvels 2004, 362]”.

42 حسب الرجل مَنّا بيتٌ يأوي إليه ومزرعةٌ يستغلّها ودابةٌ تحمل أثقاله (MS 67).

43 Deheuvels 2007, 226 speaks of “une organisation socio-économique égalitariste”. Lauri 2019, 131, too, notices the “deeply egalitarian” character of al-Manfalūṭī’s utopian society and agrees with Pagani 2020 and Deheuvels in that this may be a reflex of European utopian socialism (Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, Robert Owen, etc.). On the latter’s “euchronia”, cf., e.g., Vieira 2010, 12.

44 إِنَّا لَا نَعْرِفُ عِلْمًا غَيْرَ الْعَمَلِ (MS 68). – For Deheuvels 2007, 226, the educational system is “assez ‘rousseauiste’”. – Cf. also Lauri 2019, 129, who describes it as “eminently empirical and practical in focus, aiming at productive work”.

45 لَنَا حَكَمٌ لَا حَاكِمَ (MS 68). – On al-Manfalūṭī’s ideas about governance, cf. Lauri 2019, 130-32.

46 كُلُّنَا جُنْدُهُ (MS 68).

are “sufficiently punished by public opinion and the blame of the rest” (ibid.).⁴⁷ When the narrator and his guide have finished their tour through the Happy City, the narrator lies down to sleep – only to awake again at home, in Egypt, lamenting the fact that the here-and-now is so different from what he has just seen in his dream.

As already indicated above, this novella shows very clear signs of an increased subjectivation. The narrating subject – now significantly a first-person narrator – presents the *journey* through the Happy City as his own experience:⁴⁸ although it was only a dream, he, the *homodiegetic* narrator, travelled there and saw everything in this dream *himself*, walked around in the city with his own body and built up an active and rather concrete relation to the alternative model by *asking questions* to his guide and *comparing* the ideal he saw to the far-from-ideal contemporary Egypt he comes from. Through this dialogic approach,⁴⁹ also the subject’s *reasoning* activity is underlined.⁵⁰ Yet, although there is subjectivation and concreteness – which is generally interpreted as an indicator of an increased internalisation of the project of modernity by the Middle Eastern subject (see above) – there is still, like in Akhundov’s *Deceived Stars*, no temporalisation yet.⁵¹ Al-Manfalūṭī’s utopia presents the ideal world as existing in another place (far behind the desert and a high mountain chain), but although it is not located in the past (as Akhundov’s “saddlemaker” state) but in the author’s present, it still lacks the idea of *perfectibility*; it imagines a society in the state of *perfection*,

47 حسب المجرم عندنا عقوبة أن يتفق أهل المدينة على احتقاره والزراية به ، وإن أحننا ليؤثر أن يتخطفه الطير ، أو يسقط هليه كسف من السماء قبل أن يرى نفسه بغياً إلى قومه صغيراً (MS 68).

48 The travel motif – a marker of a subjectivised utopia, as we saw – is identified by Deheuvels as a typical feature of “plusieurs de ces textes [utopiques de la Nahḍa]”. Like Marrāsh’s *Ghābat al-ḥaqq*, al-Manfalūṭī’s *Madīnat al-sa’āda*, or Faraḥ Anṭūn’s *al-Dīn wa-l-‘ilm wa-l-māl* (see n. 29, above), all of them combine “récit de voyage jusqu’à une zone où [...] le protagoniste parvient en une terre inconnue dont il décrit la population et le système de société qui le caractérise” – Deheuvels 2007, 226.

49 The “dialogic structure” as an important element of the “narrative sequence” is observed also by Lauri 2019, 124.

50 With this, al-Manfalūṭī’s *Madīnat al-sa’āda* shows clear similarity to utopias from European Enlightenment, cf. Wilpert 2001b, 866.

51 Nor does al-Manfalūṭī’s utopia exhibit all the features that may be realised in subjectivised spatial utopias. Unlike Defoe’s Robinson, for example, al-Manfalūṭī’s protagonist is not very active: he simply walks around, observes, and talks to the sheikh. In contrast, Robinson has to make an effort to *survive*, then *creates* his own new world, *re-establishes* order after the chaos of shipwrecking, etc. The only *process* that is described in *The Happy City* is that of travelling (or rather passive voice: being transported) there and intellectually appropriating it by asking questions, receiving answers and commenting on these. Thus, while the individual in Defoe’s novel is a “Subjekt der Geschichte”, al-Manfalūṭī’s protagonist is no such shaper of history yet.

but it does not give the reader a hint as to whether there is a chance that contemporary Egyptian society one day may reach the same level of happiness, and if so, *how* one may get there: it is highly significant that, according to the story, the only way of being transported from the here-and-now to the idyllic⁵² ideal state is by *dream* and, within the dream, with the help of a *fantastic* bird!⁵³

17.3.3 Yūsuf Idrīs, “Farahat’s Republic”

Another forty years later, in “Farahat’s Republic” by Yūsuf Idrīs, we can observe another stage in the development of the genre (and, concomitantly, of the Middle Easterners’ attitude to the modernist project). While Akhundov’s *Deceived Stars* and al-Manfalūṭī’s *Happy City* still present their alternative societies as something desirable, i.e., as positive utopias, Yūsuf Idrīs’s story marks a point of transition between utopia and dystopia, and with dystopia to a rather skeptical, if not even pessimistic view of the modernisation project.⁵⁴ This is clearly reflected in narrative structure. While the two earlier examples were rather ‘simple’, straight-forward narratives, *Farahat’s Republic* is of a much higher complexity. In the story, the vision of an ideal “republic” (*jumhūriyya*) that a petty police officer named Faraḥāt has put down in form of a film script is *embedded*, as a story-within-the-story, in a description of everyday routine at a police station in a popular quarter of a larger city, probably Cairo. Sergeant-Major Faraḥāt is annoyed by having to deal with petty criminals and the complaints of so many people whom he all considers uncivilised and whose causes he tends to regard as fake or pointless. The scene and Faraḥāt’s interaction with the clients are observed and described from

52 With this feature, al-Manfalūṭī’s text comes close to the anacreontic utopias that flourished during the European 18th century as “escapist” imaginations of a better world (Wilpert 2001b, 866b, speaks of utopian “Fluchtwelten”) for an emerging, but politically still powerless bourgeoisie. The situation of the Arab *efendiyya* on the eve of the First World War obviously was similar.

53 Deheuvels 2004, 363, even went as far as calling *Madīnat al-sa’āda* a “regressive utopia” (though for different reasons: for him, not the lack of temporalisation is decisive but the author’s “clinging to pre-modern models” which makes it lose “its force as an agent of critical reflection and change”, as Lauri 2019, 124, summarizes Deheuvels’ view. I agree with Lauri in rejecting the idea of a quasi-nostalgic “regressiveness”; at the same time, I see that al-Manfalūṭī’s utopia lacks the dynamics of a temporalised approach. In my view, it is this lack, rather than the author’s references to the classical tradition, that produces the “unrealistic tone” that one may get “at a first reading” (as Lauri 2019, 132 has it). Thus, unlike in the “allotopias” of the classical tradition where the imagined other world is just marvelous, full of wonders (see above, p. 378 with fn. 5), in *MS/HC* there is clearly a tension of political-social relevance between the depicted ideal and lived reality.

54 Cf., however, Ryberg 1992 with a rather different reading, cf. esp. 67 and 139–42.

the perspective of a first-person narrator, evidently a leftist intellectual (an alter ego of the author?⁵⁵) and temporarily detained himself. The narrator manages to draw Farahāt into a conversation, in the course of which the latter begins to tell him about the film scenario he has written:

One day, a poor but upright Egyptian is rewarded by a super-rich Indian tourist for his unusual honesty: he has returned to the Indian owner a precious diamond which the latter had lost in the street. The Egyptian is too modest to accept money in reward, so the Indian buys him a lottery ticket. Thanks to this ticket, the Egyptian becomes a millionaire. He invests the money into profitable enterprises – first a cargo boat, then two ships, and so on, constantly enlarging his economic ‘empire’ – , ending up as the owner of “all the factories in Egypt” (FR 214)⁵⁶ and an employer of millions of fellow-countrymen. He provides housing for the workers – “real homes [...] with gardens and balconies and everything laid on – chicken coops, rabbit hutches, the lot” (FR 215)⁵⁷ – and pays them justly, so that everybody also can afford decent clothing and enjoy the many facilities of the work-and-live complexes the Egyptian creates: cafés, parks, cinemas, etc. “As for police, there weren’t any – just a constable who [...] would have a kiosk all made of glass, [...] and a small office” (ibid.).⁵⁸ The wealthier the owner gets the more he also invests into modern machines, which gradually take over most of the physically exhausting work in factories or in the fields – irrigation, threshing, fertilising, cotton gathering... Electricity is introduced everywhere, and infrastructure constantly improved and expanded and schools provided for learning “to read and write and [...] get to know (one’s) rights and duties” (FR 216).⁵⁹ After a certain time, however, he loses interest in his modernisation project and gets bored with it. Consequently, one day he announces, over his own radio station, that “he was giving it all up” (ibid.).⁶⁰ Here, the narrative returns to the here-and-now, letting both the first-person narrator as well as the reader without a clue as to how the script may end and the further future look like.

55 Ryberg thinks that revolutionary intellectuals in Idrīs’s stories usually are “Projektionsfiguren des Autors” – Ryberg 1992, 120.

56 المهم إنه جه يوم عليه امتلك فيه مصانع مصر كلها (JF 23).

57 سكن ... بيت ... بجنينة بيلكونة وحاوي مما جميعه حتى فيه عيش الفراخ والأرانب ومش بس كده كان (ibid.). ما يخدش من عرق العامل حاجة

58 ...وبوليس مفيش بوليس ... العسكري ... له كش قزاز في قزازة في وسط الشارع ، ومكتب صغير (ibid.).

59 يقرأوا ويكتبوا ويعرفوا اللي لهم من اللي عليهم (JF 24).

60 أعلن في المكرفون أنه متنازل عن جميع (ibid.). – In Ryberg’s reading this means that he transferred his property and sovereignty to the people (“Zu guter Letzt tritt der großkapitalistische Wohltäter, seines Reichtums plötzlich überdrüssig, seinen gesamten Besitz an das Volk ab”, Ryberg 1992, 96).

In this story, which, as mentioned above, was published shortly after Gamāl ‘Abd al-Nāṣir had started to work on the realisation of his vision of a new Egypt, we have, for the first time in our collection of sample utopias, a temporalised utopia:⁶¹ the “republic” that the petty police officer Faraḥāt sketches in his film scenario is not only shown in its perfection but also in its perfectibility in that it describes, step by step, the way how Egypt one day (in the future) might reach such a state of perfection – the idea is that, yes, it *would* need some start-up help, but as soon as such a grant would be at a smart, benevolent and patriotic entrepreneur’s disposal it would almost be a self-propelling thing. As in the other two utopias, the main goal is economic prosperity and everybody’s well-being and, hence, happiness, achieved through a just and equal distribution of wealth and the modesty of both the ruler and the ideal state’s subjects.⁶² Given the story’s date of publication, it is quite safe to assume that Faraḥāt’s utopian republic actually is meant to mirror ‘Abd al-Nāṣir’s idealistic vision of an Arab socialism,⁶³ and it is highly significant that subjectivation in this story is not achieved, as in al-Manfalūṭī’s case, through a first-person narrator who experiences the ideal state himself; rather, Faraḥāt tells the story of Egypt’s quick and comprehensive modernisation under the leadership of a benevolent ruler from a third-person perspective so that the utopia itself remains largely vague and unspecific and is not experienced by a contemporary subject (although the protagonist of the

61 Due to limitations of space, Faraḥ Anṭūn’s voluminous *al-Dīn wa-l-‘ilm wa-l-māl* of 1903 (see above, n. 29) is not included in the present overview. Had it been included, it would have taken the position between al-Manfalūṭī and Idrīs because, typologically, the novel belongs to the group of temporalised utopias. It displays a – as Deheuvels (2007, 228) calls it – “tendance millénariste” in that it builds on a 3-stage model of history (Golden Age > Decay > Reconstruction, in this case building an ideal socialist society), and the last stage is set in the future where the main hero arrives from the actual present. The whole narrative also bears the imprint of freemasonic thinking, a fact that is mirrored not only in the symbol of the destroyed and re-erected Temple, but also in the novel’s topography where the three cities of Religion, Science and Money are situated at the edges of a triangle with, at its centre, a garden containing the statue of the founder of the original, once harmoniously united city, shaykh Sulaymān (= Solomon!), a topography that mirrors the freemasonic triangle with the all-seeing eye of God (the Eye of Providence) in its centre.

62 With these features (order, manageability, elimination of incalculability, security of projected life-trajectories under the conditions of an equally distributed common wealth, etc.), Faraḥāt’s ideas about human happiness resemble very much those of the early, ‘spatial’ utopias in Europe – Voßkamp 1996, 1936, speaks of the “static ‘happy order’ of disciplined subjects” (das statische Ordnungsglück disziplinierter Subjekte).

63 Cf. also the fact that Faraḥāt (like Nasser) comes from Upper Egypt and that he has (like Nasser) a big nose (“I saw him then purely as Upper Egyptian: a nose as big as that of Ramesses”, *JF* 13/ *FR* 205).

story-within-the-story, the benevolent Egyptian, clearly is more active than al-Manfalūṭī's narrator and definitely could qualify as a "Subjekt der Geschichte"⁶⁴ – yet, we do not get *his* first-person narrative...). In contrast, what is subjectivised is the experience of *listening* to Faraḥāt's *telling about* his utopia – this is what the imprisoned intellectual and first-person narrator has to deal with at the police station. So here, the subject's engagement is with the *narrative about* the utopian vision, not the utopia itself. The fact that the author, Yūsuf Idrīs, lets Faraḥāt tell his highly naive and idealistic story in a setting that is absolutely contrary to the officer's imagined future world creates a sharp – almost tragic – ironic contrast which, we can assume, was meant as a critical questioning, or even ridiculing, of Nasser's way of telling people stories about a better future.⁶⁵ From the intellectual first-person narrator's perspective, the transition from the actual state of affairs to a better future remains completely unclear: in *Faraḥāt's* vision, the utopia is already temporalised; the *intellectual individual*, however, experiences the transition as un-mediated by concrete steps of gradual perfection: like in al-Manfalūṭī's story, he is being transported from the ugly here-and-now to an ideal state only by means of a dream or, in this case, a film scenario, i.e., a fictional account. Therefore, the meta-perspective Yūsuf Idrīs introduces in this story pinpoints essential deficits in 'Abd al-Nāṣir's modernisation project: the author makes clear that this project is highly naive and vague, and although it pretends to follow a plan of development it actually is nothing but an unrealistic dream.

17.4 Conclusion

In the history of the utopian/dystopic genre outlined above, the critical questioning of utopian visions can be considered a first step in the transition from utopia to dystopia. In Europe, the first signs of this shift become visible in the last third of the eighteenth century already, while the massive break-through of dystopia happens only more than half a century later when the widespread belief in 'easy', linear progress is lost in the course of massive industrialisation and concomitant

⁶⁴ See above, note 51.

⁶⁵ Although the contrast is noted also by Ryberg 1992, 140, it does not affect her reading of *JF/FR* as an expression of the author's belief that a harmonious, egalitarian, 'socialist' society was feasible and 'Paradise on earth' soon could be hoped for (ibid., 67, 96). In a similar vein, Ryberg observes that, as part of the state's system of repression ("Teil des staatlichen Repressionsapparats"), Faraḥāt (like the cruel torturer in *al-ʿAskārī al-aswad* "The Black Soldier", 1961) is a rather negative protagonist; nevertheless, she thinks that the sergeant's naïve utopia corresponds to a 'romantic socialist' (140) optimism on the author's side.

misery etc. In the Middle East, corresponding disastrous experiences that completed the early doubts in the modernisation project seem to have been especially the shock of the lost June 1967 war, the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war, the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan and the Israeli invasion in Beirut, etc. Since then, like in the West, dystopia seems to prevail.

In spite of the overall trend, however, more optimistic utopia has not completely died out and is reemerging every now and then under certain conditions.⁶⁶ The latest case seems to have been the vision of an Islamic State that militant groups sought to establish in the Middle East. Their vision was preceded by that of less violent Islamist activists, such as the Turk Ali Nar, during the 1990s President of the “World League of Islamic Literature”,⁶⁷ or Islamist women’s literature, etc.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Cf., e.g., Szyska 1995 on utopian writing in Nasserist prison and laicist Turkey.

⁶⁷ On his utopian novel “The Bee Island” (*Anlar Ülkesi*, 1994), cf. my own study, Guth 2006.

⁶⁸ Cf., e.g., Furrer 1997 and 2001.

