

Al-dunyā aḡmal min al-ḡanna by Ḥālīd al-Birrī (2006)

A memoir and a journey through national imaginary

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Al-dunyā aḡmal min al-ḡanna (“This world is more beautiful than paradise”) by the Egyptian writer Ḥālīd al-Birrī is a memoir—firstly serialized in 2001, and then republished as a volume in 2006—recounting the author’s militancy in the fundamentalist group *al-ḡamā’a al-islāmiyya*, for around five years.

While scholars have referred to this book, generally, as a historical source and as a documentary about the activities and strategies adopted by *al-ḡamā’a al-islāmiyya*, I will attempt here an analysis of the text as a memoir, in dialogue with both the Twentieth Century life-writing tradition in Egypt, and the memoir global tradition. Under this perspective, I will discuss some tropes and discourses developed by the author. In particular, I will analyze how the author develops through this legitimizing genre themes as the quest for identity, the building of a new “self,” the relationship between the self and the Nation, represented through a tight network of cultural and literary references.

Keywords: Arabic memoir, Ḥālīd al-Birrī, *Al-Dunyā aḡmal min al-ḡanna*, Egyptian contemporary life writing, jihadism.

1. Introduction

When it appeared in 2006, *Al-dunyā aḡmal min al-ḡanna* (“This world is more beautiful than paradise”)¹ by the Egyptian author Ḥālīd al-Birrī² caused a significant stir in the media, because of the sensitive content narrated in it. The book—a memoir written in first person—is the account of a period of militancy in the fundamentalist group *al-ḡamā’a al-islāmiyya*. After having entered the group in 1986

¹ Al-Birrī (2009). The book appeared in 2001 in a serialized version, in the periodical *al-Nahar*. The translation in French has been done from this serialized version, and the translation into Italian has been done from the French translation. The passages I quote in this article have been translated by myself, and the page numbers are referred to the Arabic re-edition by Dār al-Mīrit (Al-Birrī 2009). A translation of the book is available in English (2009): *Life is more beautiful than Paradise. A jihadist’s own story*. Translated by Humphrey Davies, AUC Press.

² Al-Birrī (Khaled al-Berry) is an Egyptian novelist and journalist born in 1972. He studied medicine at Cairo University and moved to London after graduation. His second novel is *An Oriental Dance*, which was nominated for the Arabic Booker Prize.

when he was only fourteen, the author parted from it, following an experience of two months in jail in 1990, when he was in his second year at university.

The book follows a paradoxical structure, in that it is constructed like a slow and laborious initiation into a closed community with exclusive characteristics, the *ǧamā'a islāmiyya*, to evolve in a reintegration into the external world, once the initiation was achieved. Such paradoxical trajectory is exemplified by the titles of the five chapters which make up the book, where “Paradise” (chapter 1) appears as the first one and “This world” (chapter 5) as the final one, going through the other chapters “A God just for me,” “Revelation,” “Sedition.” The chapters are subdivided into minor units which have no titles.

Despite the great success among the readership, and the accuracy of the information reported in the book³, little or no interest has been shown by literary critics or academics. Scholars indeed have referred to it as having little more than documentary value (Meijer 2014: 200-202), providing a personal account of the expansion of Islamic fundamentalist movements in the Egypt of the 80s and 90s (Maestro 2013: 117-154).

The purpose of this study is twofold: first, the book will be framed in the autobiographical subgenre of the memoir and the formal aspects that relate it to this genre will be highlighted. Secondly, it will be seen how this memoir can in turn be read as a personal journey into the ‘Egyptian national imaginary,’ expressed through a network of cultural and literary references. In this article, my understanding of “Egyptian national imaginary” is based on the studies of Richard Jacquemond (2008) and Samah Selim (2004), who have highlighted how, between the two world wars, Egyptian literary history was strictly intertwined with the political one. Literary forms such as the novel (*riwāya*) and the short story (*qiṣṣa qaṣīra*), in fact, have served in that time as a sounding board for ideas of political unity and national identity, while the literary space worked as a creative space for elaborating the national project.

In particular, as underscored by both Jacquemond and Selim, a specific form of literary realism, based on the representation of the Egyptian social landscape and of a variety of Egyptian characters helped the national *intelligentia* in spreading the idea of a “national literature.” Therefore, a selected range of novels structured around these issues, following a long process of evaluation by critics and national cultural institutions, and considering readers’ opinions, are then consecrated “canonical novels:” in this article I will show how Ḥālid al-Birri succeeds in narrating a story of personal growth

³ The editorial story of the book is recounted by the author’s “Preface” in the English translation (Al-Berry 2009: ix)

and emancipation from jihadist militance that also passes through the recovery of the national literary heritage and through the ‘repossession’ of these foundational literary works.

2. An Arabic memoir: global models, Egyptian ancestors, and the specificity of *Al-dunya aġmal min al-ġanna*

The term memoir indicates a form of life-writing, which owns a set of peculiarities, and must be considered as a different form from autobiography (Couser 2012: 8-10). Among the differences between memoir and autobiography according to Couser, there is that the first is less understood as a literary enterprise, and often is performed by non-professional writers. In particular, “contemporary memoir has been a *threshold genre* in which some previously silent populations have been given voice for the first time” (Couser 2012: 12). This is the case of Ḥālīd al-Birrī, who became a journalist and a novelist after the publication of this first memoir.

Memoirs are generally written from the perspective of the author as an adult, who narrates his life in his own terms. Moreover, memoir can take the form of confession, apology or - as in the case under study here - of the coming-of-age narrative, focusing often on a period of life that has been perceived as difficult, or distressing by the author, instead of narrating the entire life story.

This form of life writing has been practiced intensively in the 20th century Egypt by intellectuals (such as Salāma Mūsa, who wrote *Tarbiyyat Salāma Mūsa*, 1947), politicians (as the politician, intellectual and writer Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal, who wrote *Muḍakkirāt fī l-siyāsa al-miṣriyya*, published posthumously in 1978),⁴ artists (as the painter Inji Efflatoun, who recorded in a series of tapes her memoirs, posthumously published as *Muḍakkirāt Injī Aflaṭūn. Min al-ṭufūla ilā al-sijn* and published in 2014), men of faith (see for instance *Muḍakkirāt al-da‘wa wa-l-dā‘iya* by Ḥasan al-Bannā, 1950). A particular vein of the memoir in the Arab context is linked to the experience of traveling (Anishenkova 2014: 17), from post-*nahḍawī* authors (see for instance the last volume of Ṭāhā Ḥusayn’s autobiographical project—*Muḍakkirāt*) to the authors of the Sixties vanguard (see for instance *Al riḥla. Muḍakkirāt ṭālība fī Amrika* by Raḍwā ‘Āšūr).

In his *memoir*, al-Birrī’s bases himself on both the heritage of the memoir as a global genre, and on the Egyptian tradition of life narrative, quoting from *Les Confessions* by Rousseau, as well as from Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn and Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm. The book is eclectic and erratic, it encompasses various registers and contents within the same section or the same page. Religious

⁴ On Haykal’s *Muḍakkirāt* see Romano (2019).

precepts flowing from the teachings of the masters of the group, theoretical questions relative to the *ǧamā'a*, autobiographical digressions on the most influential members follow each other uninterruptedly. Often, he proceeds using the technique of flashback or combining several parallel stories without any mediation. If it was not for the constant reference to the school years which mark the lifetime of the main character and which come one after the other, sometimes the reader would find it hard to understand. Even within the same narrative unit, the temporal element of the various situations recalled is incoherent, so much so that sometimes we find the verbal form devoted to expressing the past time (*māḍī*), sometimes we find the verbal form *muḍāri'*, which is the non-past mood.

In general, the descriptive parts⁵ or those where the author especially intends to underline the emotional tension are for the vast majority in the present, whereas the interactions with others (members of the brotherhood, family members, etc.) and the dialogues are framed within a past time. To cite but one example: in the reconstructing of the frenzied moments which immediately precede the arrest of Ḥālid, the tense used is present. A vividness of language having the aim of leading the reader to fully enter the actions as they happen is associated with this choice of time. The narrator refers to the security men, who are waiting for him at the university exit, using the words “those dogs,” as if wishing to render the thoughts of that time without any mediation. Another characterizing feature of the writing of al-Birrī is the tendency not to report annotations regarding the mood of the subject, consciously creating the effect of an almost anodyne chronicle of facts that happened in the past and which, no less, have marked his life in a most incisive way.

3. The historical context and the *Jamā'a Islāmiyya's* way of working

The memoir begins in 1982 in Asyut, just one year after the assassination of Sadāt, within a still incandescent national context marked by riots and reprisals which involved the entire national territory. The narrator describes himself as a pre-adolescent who, day after day, is surprised by the changes in his own body and who turns towards society in search of reference points which are alternatives to those offered by his own family:

I was fourteen. My voice was beginning to change, it was becoming deeper. There were other things in life that were beginning to change, I had abandoned the hug of my childhood by then, which allows us to be weak, which comforts us and lets us cry [...]. My consciousness and my relationship

⁵ See for instance the description of the Mosque *al-Raḥma* which is completely at the present tense. Al Birrī 2009: 59-60.

with the world could no longer ignore the society I was living in. I was like that society, now. It too had a grave voice and a moustache. It too had no time for weak knees (Al Birrī 2009: 16).

It can be noted, ever since the initial pages, how early adolescence marks an opening up of the individual in relation to society and, in parallel, a closing up of the same person as regards the family environment. The conflict between generations, as several critical studies pointed out, represents an important *topos* of the Arab modern autobiography, and a shared feature among many Egyptian novels written in the early Twentieth century (Van Leeuwen 2000: 189-206).

In the case of Ḥālīd, we can speak of a real process of transference (in psychoanalytic terms) of family functions to the group of brothers, as the same author will have the opportunity to observe many times during his narration. (Al Birrī 2009: 65). The family context where Ḥālīd grew up may be defined as secular lower middle-class, judging both from the few observations the author addresses to the ideological context in which he grew up before meeting the *ḡamā'a*, and from the concerns expressed by family members when the young man will decide to externalize, also by his physical looks, his militancy in the Islamist group (Al Birrī 2009: 21-22).⁶ The course of the achievement of the self in the story of Ḥālīd is, therefore, intimately tied to a history of hardening of his relationship with his own family and with the cultural, political, and ideological trends inherited from it.

The conflict with the family of origin is a leading *trope* with the Arab memoir and coming of age plot, both in the pre-modern autobiographical tradition (Reynolds 2001: 36-71) and in the modern Egyptian novel (Paniconi 2023: 47-51) the family is held up as a negative model to distance oneself from. Therefore, the account traced by al-Birrī is following a recognized and well-known narrative pattern when it shows how the youth is slowly but surely encouraged by his new community (the brothers of *al-ḡamā'a al-islāmiyya*) to attend places and adopt the same language of the brotherhood. Some of these places, like the mosque, make up part of the previous experience of the subject, who nevertheless appears to rediscover its centrality both in reference to his own daily experience and in reference to the urban space.

The “recruitment” system and the creation of a sense of affiliation put into play by the group are carried out, according to the description that al-Birrī gives us, in three phases: initially, the youth involved in the activities and in militancy is surrounded by attention and human warmth, in such a way that he is persuaded to find the *ṣayḥ* as spiritual and human guides who will never leave him on

⁶ “I was used to repeat the slogans and the stereotyped expressions such as “the united Arab people,” or “the Arabs are known for their pride, glory, and generosity.... I was used to listen to the speeches of Ḡamāl ‘Abd al-Nāṣir or the patriotic songs by ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Ḥāfiḡ” (Al Birrī 2009: 21-22).

his own. The first contact the author forges with the members of the community goes via the Šayḥ Ṭāriq, a representative of the brotherhood who acts as a reference point in a society that, too, is overwhelmed by swirling change and for which the subject feels a new sense of belonging (“Šayḥ Ṭāriq was so affectionate and thoughtful towards the others that every word he spoke seemed pregnant with meaning, it led you to love him and with him every word he pronounced, every idea in which he believed” (Al-Birrī 2009: 29).

Further on, we will read how the Šayḥ used not to intervene directly with pieces of advice, injunctions or whatever to change the habits of the boy. Rather, he prefers to act in his everyday life proposing an active collaboration within the group:

Sometimes I didn't go to Šayḥ Ṭāriq's lessons because of a film or a match on TV. Šayḥ Ṭāriq seemed to have understood and he asked me to prepare a report on what Islām says about playing music, and to explain it to my colleagues in class. In all sincerity, I answered the Šayḥ I would have found the work unpleasant since I loved music and I would never have been able to imagine giving it up. “Who asked you not to listen to it?” answered the Šayḥ. Just look for the aḥādīṭ and the verses of the Qur'an that speak of music and look at how the scholars have explained them and let us know. Then, in order to help me in the job, he gave me a copy of *Talbīs Iblīs* (Deceit of Iblis), a book which deals with the stratagems to which Iblis, Satan, went to tempt humanity [...]. Continuing to listen to the songs of Mayāda al-Ḥanāwī,⁷ I was leafing through the pages of the book and making notes of the various sections on a piece of paper. Then, I prepared a summary wherein I held that listening to songs was *ḥarām*, and that whoever had listened to a woman singer, upon the Day of Judgment, would have been poured into his ear *al-ānuk*, which means molten lead [...]. After I had finished the report, the Šayḥ Ṭāriq complimented me for the goodness of my writing and he praised the effort I had put in. However, he warned me that now since I knew the topic I had greater responsibility, and the judgment of God would have been harder on me if I had continued in my disobedient ways on purpose (A- Birrī 2009: 29-30).

In a completely analogous way, the Šayḥ, makes the youth “aware” of the pronouncements of Islam against those who look at images (from real life, by photographic reproduction or by video) of half-dressed women. In this case, too, Hālid ends up by “making his decision” (Al-Birrī 2009: 31) and renounces watching his favorite TV shows. Later, the narrator tells us in various episodes how, at the end of this initial phase of the recruitment, he found himself fully involved in the activities of the group without even being aware of the fact (“The person doesn't know when he first laid step into the *ǧamā'a*. He doesn't know where the way begins and neither does he know when he's halfway along,” Al-Birrī

⁷ Mayāda al-Ḥanāwī is a Syrian singer. Born in October the 8th, 1959 in Aleppo, she interpreted all kinds of traditional Arab songs and performed in several prestigious music halls all over the Arab world.

2009: 33). When he discusses his new habits and his acquired ritual practices, the narrator reiterates this fundamental unawareness:

I pray, I fast, I learn the Qur’ān. Who can say the opposite? Even doing all this, I don’t consider myself a member of *al-ġamā’a al-islāmiyya*. I never thought I had taken this path (Al-Birri 2009: 35).

The second chapter, “A God just for me,” opens with a wide-ranging description of the *Masġid al-raḥma*, destined to become the cornerstone of the new life of the protagonist who starts by spending the intervals between one prayer and another there, reading and chatting with his brothers, and taking his afternoon siesta there. In this chapter, on the contrary, that which we may define “the second phase” of the involvement of Ḥālīd within the group is to be found. This stage is characterized by the learning of the sources of the doctrine on the one hand, and on the other by the carrying out of a certain number of rituals which have the function of getting a role to play within the group for him (Al-Birri 2009: 88).

As far as the first aspect is concerned, the protagonist develops the awareness of his own “ignorance,” precisely within the frequent discussions with the brothers, with regard to, both the practices of the cult and the more general questions which are placed at his door by the spiritual leaders.⁸ As for the progressive assumption of responsibility of the boy in the group, it must be noted how this goes in hand with a persistent sense of the inadequacy of the protagonist, which will last for the whole experience of militancy in the *ġamā’a*.⁹ A fundamental moment in the path of the protagonist is when the young boy, as is the case every year, returns to the hometown of his father, in the Egyptian countryside, for a summer holiday. The usual holiday in the countryside and the cyclical finding there, during his growing up years, the places, the company, the games and the summer habits are another literary *topos* of twentieth-century Egyptian autobiographical and fictional literature, a motif that is deeply linked to the symbolic significance of the Egyptian countryside in the context of the raising modern Egyptian nationalism (Selim 2004: 91-126).

In al-Birri’s narrative, the summer holiday represents a chance for the youth to reflect on his new condition as a member from an “external” perspective compared to the context of the little town of Asyut. In the beginning, the return to the “childhood” habits, indeed, seems to tempt him to leave

⁸ See for instance Al-Birri (2009: 61), where the author relates about the *šuyūḥ* lecturing him about the sources of the Islamic doctrine.

⁹ About the structure, the mechanisms of recruitment and the way to enhance the involvement of the new elements in the group see for instance Zayyāt (2005: 129-140).

everything, making him think of “not wanting that life with his brothers” (Al-Birrī 2009: 67). Later, however, the young boy pauses, reflects and decides, on the contrary, to abandon the house in the countryside, as if, interrupting the reassuring routine of the seasonal holiday in the village of his father, he puts an end to all temptation or impatience as regards that “new” life made of overwhelming responsibility and interpersonal relations with which, probably, the distractions and the atmospheres of the countryside could no longer live in harmony.

That which was going on inside my head had been the fruit of the action of the devil who suggests choosing transitory well-being to the detriment of eternal Grace in the afterlife. The vain pleasures of this world grow gigantic before our very eyes, so much so that we convince ourselves we cannot do without them. In a year I’ll be sixteen, the same age as Usāma Ibn Zayd when he took the lead of the army of Muslims in the final battle which saw the Prophet himself take part in. And I am here thinking like the children playing football or going fishing.

I decided to cut short my holiday and go back to Assyūt. There was no life without the brothers. That one which I loved most was Šayḥ Maḥmūd Ša’īb who was just three years older than me when he went into prison for the assassination of Sadāt. Three consecutive years he spent there [...] When he was released, he was arrested on-and-off, never more than a month or so. Anyway, every time he came out, he was stronger, a real hero, who always managed to preserve his sense of modesty (Al-Birrī 2009: 68-69).

The passage illustrates how, within the protagonist, the trepidation for greater involvement begins to take shape and how, at the same time, he begins to select figures of reference among the leaders who surround him all the time trying to equate his own inabilities to their example. In the following passages, wanting to sanction the total overcoming of the little intolerance of this new life in the *ǧamā’a* coming to the fore, the author asks himself what exactly is enriching about watching films, listening to the songs of ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm (a real icon of Egyptian national popular music and a much-loved artist in Ḥālid’s family) whose love stories are but mirages (*wahm*) like fairy tales. The narration goes on to list the books of the exegetical tradition to which the young man will draw close in this phase of his journey (*al-kutub al-turāṭīyya*), all the time characterized by a “mnemonic” approach to the texts which were to be learned by heart. Some, remembers the author, are written in rhyming prose precisely so they may be easily assimilated by the students (Al-Birrī 2009: 72).

The third phase of the interaction between the protagonist and the group of Islamic extremists witnesses the expression of opinion, if not the displaying of that “new person,” as the author himself refers to it, which for some time was finding form within him. The making of the self, as we see in the passage that follows, is reflected in the narration like an integrated and complimentary movement onto that of “objectification” of an external world (in this case, the family that tries to make a stand)

which will soon reveal itself to be too weak and which gradually will accentuate its total non-involvement in the new life of its adolescent son:

Whenever I put on one of those perfumed oils that were sold outside the Mosques, my mother showed her face of disgust at the smell and my sister joked about it. Then, however, things continued to go on as usual and nobody expected me to take a bath and wash away that smell.

The religious music cassettes, which I had a collection of by this stage, didn't meet with the tastes of anybody in the house. For my mother, they represented things belonging to an unknown period. Even if she had put on the veil after the birth of my brother (1980), the third child, she was never religiously observing, and she didn't pray. She had finished studying in 1979 and was twenty-eight years old, so, she lived during that time women students wore miniskirts. It was her who transmitted the idea to me that cinema was part of our life when she would go with us children to see shows. From her did I inherit my love for 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Ḥāfīz.

[...] My mother was never involved in this new world of mine and I never tried to involve her, except for those questions where religion intersected male pride of the adolescent I had become. So, I would have got angry if she went out onto the balcony wearing house clothes which might become transparent in the sunlight or if she took something off the washing line without first having covered her hair (Al Birrī 2009: 68-69).

Ḥālid, having by now entered into this third phase of affiliation and reciprocal acknowledgment with the militant group, decides to change his clothing and substitutes his clothes, of what we may call "Western" style with certain elements of style and clothing of the brotherhood: a light blue *ḡallabiyya* and white *sirwāl*.

I decided to wear a short *ḡallabiyya* like those worn by the brothers [...]. My father got really upset at this. Wearing this was an answer to my relationship with the *ḡamā'a* and with my brothers for me. I wanted to be like them. Some of them still marveled at why I hadn't yet fully adopted the Islam way of dressing – something which went together with a certain feeling of disgust of mine when we ate together with our hands all from the same dish (Al-Birrī 2009: 80).

The *ḡallabiyya* infuriates Ḥālid's father, for it displays this new identity the son has been building. Choosing to wear it, the boy would have accepted the risks of being recognized in the streets of Asyut, and even being detained or interrogated by police. Again, the weak complaints of the family are not enough to stop the youth who sanctions his new individuality with these exterior signs (the perfume, the beard that he decides to grow, the clothing). The process of integration in the new environment of *al-ḡamā'a* is still a long one (as we can assume from the disgust that Ḥālid still feels in the act of sharing meals with brothers in the ritual way) but the wearing of traditional dress is, in the eyes of the protagonist, a sign to the external world, whose transmission cannot wait anymore.

4. Definitions and redefinitions of the subject: from the militancy in the ǧamā'a to the experience of prison

The protagonist's process of individuation¹⁰ through striking paradoxes: on the one hand the young man develops a new concept of *ruǧūla* (virility) and tries also to inform himself of that which might be a licit and acceptable ideal of femininity in Islam, through the study of cheap information material which bears titles like *Naṣā'ih li-l-mar'a al-muslima* (advice for the Muslim woman). At the same time, however, he does not give up the old habit of spying on the movements of the young girl in the next house from the balcony, who usually changes her clothes near the window, coming in and going out of her room in her underwear (Al-Birrī 2009: 79).

Participation in the actions of the ǧamā'a is structured around principles and obligations which are more and more defined: a principle upon which Hālid often returns is *al-sam'u wa-l ṭā'a* (lit.: listening and obedience), a precept according to which the fellow-brother completely places himself at the will of his spiritual fathers and under whose scrutiny the youth begins to deeply investigate his every analysis where he always finds inadequacy at the base. Contextually, he begins to take exercises in pronouncing the *ḥuṭba*, i.e. the religious sermon pronounced by the imām at the *zuhr* (noon) congregation prayer on Friday, going up against various failures in front of the community of brothers, until such time as he is able to recite one before his principal point of reference, the Ṣayḥ Maḥmūd. The narration encompasses the current and most widespread precepts in the group and in many areas, he refers to the community of the ǧamā'a as "us," which may leave today's reader surprised and disoriented about the real stance of the author on that fundamentalist organization.

The question of the stance of the author towards his own experience in this group is still an open question, if we consider that many translations of *Al-Dunya aǧmal min al-ǧanna* in foreign languages pursued their own agenda by manipulating, in certain cases, the text. These translations often indirectly and on an extra-textual level resorting to notes and introduction, have indeed transmitted a reading of the text as the document of a definitive separation from the whole system of radical Islam.¹¹ On the contrary, we believe the narration of al-Birrī, although it describes the process of final detachment from this extremist group, allows also a more complex reading. Sometimes a sense of

¹⁰ The "individuation" process in Jung's theory of personality is a broader process than that of coming of age. It concerns the detachment from the world of objective reality as the center of existence and the finding of a new dimension in which the subject can be contemplated. For a study on the uses of Jung's theory of personality in literary criticism see Sugg 1992: 9- 38.

¹¹ One example is the Italian translation. See Al Berry (2002), a shortened version from the French translation.

empathy arises with some aspects of the *ğamā'a*, as if his writing wanted to conserve that good this process of initiation gave him:

The *ğamā'a* opened my eyes to new horizons of rebellion against middle-class education which I had known at school and at home allowing me to immerse myself into other social classes, placing myself into the logic of an annunciation that doesn't belong to any one social class in particular (Al-Birrī 2009: 144).¹²

On the one hand, the young man seems to be completely integrated in the ideological dimension of his new community, seeking the same models and pursuing common aims. In a private talk with a friend, for instance, the protagonist confesses that, in this phase, his desire to become, in the future, a *šahīd* “martyr” (Al-Birrī: 131). Notwithstanding the great caution that the *ğamā'a* places upon itself following the Gulf War, among those figures of reference to the young man increase those of other young *šuhadā'* whose biography and actions are curtly mentioned. On the other hand, however, the young author does but compare himself to these men and aspires to martyrdom only to be “disappointed” in his will (Al-Birrī 2009: 166-167):

I wasn't completely detached from money yet, from the idea of health and from myself [...]. I simply wasn't able to do without the world. [...]. Did this not mean that maybe a part of me did not believe in the afterlife? A boy who I knew who, from time to time, came to the Mosque of al-Raḥma, underwent great change during this time. All of a sudden, he began to fast and when he came to prayer started to cry as soon as he heard the Qur'an. I felt an authenticity and a sort of profound incrimination in his voice. I wished for that voice, I wished it was mine, it would have raised me up from many things. I would have freed myself from the prison of my body, then would I have inflicted a mortal blow on this enemy of mine, turning him into a warrior exactly like what happened to the martyrs and the most active brothers (Al-Birrī 2009: 169-170).

It is during this phase of his militancy that he manages to be more directly involved in the actions pertaining to the university, in the services the group of the *ğamā'a* offered there and in the activities of propaganda aimed at the student body. Following a series of small actions perpetrated in the University of Asyut, at last, the chance for Ḥālīd to distribute leaflets, while other brothers would have pronounced their sermons in sync. Ḥālīd executes his duty till the security forces and the police begin to pour inside and at the doors of the university and a message from the same *ğamā'a* suggests that he flee in that the police were looking for exactly him. Strangely, the youth cannot take the warning

¹² The author comes back to the relationship between the Islamic extremism's worldview and the social class they are from also later, in his memoir, see for instance Al-Birrī (2009: 216-217).

seriously and he is convinced that the police are not so determined to arrest him. After having waited for a few hours in a lecture hall and after having attempted to fake his exit from the building in a crowd of students, the young man is arrested and brought to jail (Al-Birrī 2009: 174-176).

The experience of prison is brief – he spends about two months there – but intense. Just as the experience of militancy for Ḥālid is passed under a certain sense of fundamental “inadequacy” when compared to the “mission,” whose completion always seems a craved-for but unreachable objective, so too the experience of prison passes for the young man under a sense of frustration. In other words, Ḥālid has, in jail, glaring proof of his own “marginality,” within the complicated architecture of the Islamic organization. Yet again, therefore, it is a paradoxical situation to go with the future re-definitions and changes in the subject, changes that only towards the final pages of the book, let us predict a complete separation from the group.

For all the experience of jail, the presence of other members of the *ǧamā'a* in his cell as well as practicing the faith, reinforced with supererogatory prayers and fasts, are rather a precious support for the young man. The gradual and bitter coming to an awareness of his own marginality within the *ǧamā'a* itself, therefore, does not draw him away from it, but it will become part of the experience of Islamic radicalism in all its complexity. The narration retraces the rhythm of an expanded timeframe, taking every breath for itself: the narrator passes on from the minute description of the ways meals are taken, to the description of the habits and ways of doing things of all the various cellmates, to the often exhausting chronicle of the continual movements to various prison institutions to be interrogated.

Among the moments of most emotional tension, there are the descriptions of those moments when the protagonist assists, even though he is blindfolded, at the torture of brothers during the interrogation and he gets ready to undergo the same treatment. Nevertheless, even though he is the subject of violent and degrading behavior (Al-Birrī 2009: 188, 191) by the guardians, the young man is never tortured. Torture, paradoxically, ends up representing, in his eyes, an ideal point, a moment of “recognition” where there is implicit a certain degree of merit and importance too, just like the sacrifice of the *šahīd* had meant the ideal performance in carrying out his militancy within the *ǧamā'a*. Even in this case, though, “the wait” for the torture, the wait for a declaration of “recognition” by the police was disappointed (“when we pass on to important things, I am invisible”) (Al-Birrī 2009: 187). Therefore, the story of militancy and apprenticeship included in *Al-dunyā aǧmal min al-ǧanna* takes the form of a cyclical paradox, where the young hero passes through the following phases: training - illusion - delusion and awareness of his own marginality.

Even in the extreme experience of psychological and physical pain, in the, at times, unbearable condition of the privation of freedom, privacy and dignity, prison is nevertheless a place where the process of individuation going on in the young man undergoes an acceleration. Certain dimensions and necessities of man that were before unthinkable are “revealed” to the consciousness of the protagonist: among which, for example, the need for the word and human contact through the word. Paradoxically, it is right after being brought to one of the most feared detention centers, the prison of Lazugli (Lazogly), that he has occasion to weave the more interesting and “educational” relationships with some fellow brothers of the *ḡamā’a*, even managing to take up his studies again in jail (Al-Birri 2009: 210-211).

Release and reinsertion into the indifference of the world leave the youth bewildered. Taking up normal life again goes through some simple gestures and some logical and mental “exercises,” like those of forcing himself to “find the right name to things,” as if those few weeks spent in prison had created a rupture in the system of meanings normally adopted in everyday life. Even following release, the youth keeps in touch with the brothers right after his return, by way of visits and he continues to go to prayer and some of the brothers visit him regularly to support and sustain him in this phase (Al-Birri 2009: 227-229). The first sign of “breaking away” from the group is the act of shaving his beard, even if this gesture answers more to a physical need for “freedom” on behalf of the main character and it is told as a gesture that is not premeditated, but simply as the result of an extemporaneous decision (“I didn’t know what would have happened later, but I felt the need of tasting freedom;” Al-Birri 2009: 233).

Just as during his time in prison, the protagonist does not bear any resentment towards the *ḡamā’a* or any rethink concerning his activist past, so too following release, the reasons and the ideological aims for the acts of the *ḡamā’a* are never called into question. Rather, it is his very own place within this project as well as his having, or not, earned a “merit” in his complicated operational context to be up for discussion. Affiliation to the brotherhood, as we have seen, has placed the young man in the condition of denying all cultural reference points which are the most familiar to him and amid which he grew up. Frequenting the *ḡamā’a islāmiyya* has led him from listening to pop music or traditional Arabic music to listening to recorded sermons, from comic strips to reading the Qur’ān, Ibn al-Ḡawzī and Sayyid Quṭb. The latter, in particular, is very often quoted as one of the favorite authors in the text

as a pan-Islamist reference, and who seems to go step-by-step with bringing the youth closer to the brotherhood.¹³

In the period following prison, on the contrary, references to texts of religious content disappear and there is a gradual recovery of the texts of the twentieth-century Egyptian secular narrative tradition. This recovery also translates, even visually, into the scene where Hālid, about to move into the empty apartment of his sister, goes back to the house of his parents and recovers the novels of Maḥfūz, the diaries of Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal,¹⁴ the dramas of Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm in the attic (Al-Birrī 2009: 248). All these books recovered by the hero belong to the national narrative canon, of which the young Hālid reappropriates to rebuild his identity and forget the phase of jihadist militancy.

5. In conclusion: why can *Al-dunya aġmal min al-ġanna* be read as a journey through national imaginary?

The separation from the Islamic extremism is described as a very gradual process, encouraged by the choice, taken by the family of the young man and not objected to by him, of his transfer to Cairo into the empty apartment which was his sister's. The narrator talks of a year marked by great solitude ("I found nobody with whom I shared anything") but he decides to spend the summer, anyway, in Cairo. In his brief return to Asyut, he meets two brothers along the road and he hides from their looks (Al-Birrī 2009: 245). He goes about with girls again and the places of everyday life in Cairo completely change and become the Corniche, the Maktabat Mubārak, opened in 1995 and near the university building, the British Council center in Cairo, where the protagonist hires out movies and books and finally the cinemas where he goes to frequently again also in order to cultivate some interests to share with the girls that he has the fortune to know ("I wanted to recuperate everything I had lost as regards worldly culture;" Al-Birrī 2009: 247).

In Cairo, he totally regains the study dimension, he gets to know another reference figure, Ḥassan, who involves him in a "literary club" (Al-Birrī 2009: 67). and a worry about passing the exams comes out again. Inside the university context, Hālid will never again mention his militancy, even if this will

¹³ Sayyid Quṭb is quoted in several passages (Al-Birrī 2009: 73, 204) but the passage where the young hero is explicitly referring to him as a model is focused on the volume *Ma'ālim fi-l ṭarīq* (The milestones) Quṭb wrote in jail. Taking inspiration from him, the young protagonist, in jail, takes comfort in writing letters to his family and in writing commentaries and reports about the prison life, and encouraging the other prisoners to do the same (Al-Birrī 2009: 204).

¹⁴ He refers explicitly to the juvenile memoir by Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal, *Muḍakkirāt al-ṣabāb*, published posthumously in 1996 (Paniconi 2014).

come to the surface from time to time in talks with his peers, often leaving him confused, and as if in a state of suspension:

I said to my university friend that Maḥfūz was a genius writer but from an Islamic point of view he was outside the precepts of religion. And he didn't agree with me and asked "What does kāfir mean?" I didn't answer. In truth, I was sorry I spoke in that way. It was hard to explain a viewpoint without unveiling my knowledge, without making the most of it in this regard. The connection with religion had become a great, big question mark in my life (Al-Birrī 2009: 253-354).

Another big decision was developed during this time too. A decision that the narrator reports without giving any explanation, rather, underlining the effect that this had on everyday life, on a time which once was compressed (between demanding study and militancy) and now was expanding:

my time expanded whenever I decided, at the beginning of the sixth and last year, that even if I had completed my studies, I would not have become a doctor. I started to work as an apprentice journalist in the sports section of al-Ahrām, thinking that journalism was the job that was closest to that which was my dream, to become a writer or an intellectual (Al-Birrī 2009: 251).

In this epilogue, there is a sort of revelation that allows us to think of a full "reverse gear" inside the making of the self, and of a definitive substitution of the behavioral and cultural models of the young man. In the rare expressions of opinion, the main character gives us his aspirations in the pre-activist phase it is never mentioned that his dream is that of being a writer. On the contrary, he speaks of himself as a rather weak reader. The idea gathers momentum following his release and appears to be intimately tied up with those new readings the author takes up thanks, also, to his new group of acquaintances: among others, we remember Sartre, considered by Ḥālid's new friends as an author out of fashion ("they told me I was 40 years late;" Al-Birrī 2009: 252), the essay *On Liberty* by Mill and the above mentioned *Les confessions* by Rousseau,

which opened up the golden doors of the autobiography genre, that genre which encompasses the experiences of man, from the pain that wears him out to the joy that makes the heart sprout wings," but which condensates them between front and back covers. These two extremes open up right in front of me, managing to contain my own personal experience (Al-Birrī 2009: 256).

It is noteworthy to underscore how this memoir – notwithstanding its naïveté and tendency to progress by jumps and juxtapositions – knowingly places itself in continuation with a well-defined Egyptian autobiographical tradition. It can also be assumed that al-Birrī uses the form of the memoir and its recognized status inside literary tradition to legitimizing his own book.

In particular, one of the “recovered” texts picked up by the young man before moving to Cairo, it is said, are the juvenile diaries of Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal. It is noteworthy now to remember that among the first readings that the intellectual Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid, mentor of Haykal, suggested to the young man when he was still specializing in law in Paris, there was precisely the treatise of Mill *On Liberty*, together with *Heroes and Hero Worship* by Carlyle as well as the writings by Herbert Spencer (Paniconi 2014: 303-307). Not only: in his juvenile diaries Haykal mentions extensively *Les confessions* by Rousseau, who in the words of Haykal himself

tells us of his life, day after day, and the story of his family. When faced with the beauty and the beautiful structure of this style, the reader feels a strange joy going through him, just as if he was pervaded by musicality and felt from time to time the need to read out loud in order to rock the ear with this melody (Haykal 1996: 102).

A particular point that Haykal (1996: 102) underlines is that “Rousseau was born poor and spent his youth as a vagabond. It would never have been possible for him, not even if he forced himself, to imagine the level he landed later. And this without ever considering himself to be superior, or better, than others.” Like Haykal therefore, almost a century later, al-Birrī, takes Rousseau’s *Confessions* as a point of reference for his own daily practice of writing, considering it not just as a record of past experience, but also as an initiation experience to the world of art and beauty. In recognition of his new aesthetical and cultural paradigms, the young man seems to wish to reformulate a renewed idea of the self which goes hand-in-glove with a “rediscovery” of a cultural context, which is secular, liberal, and national but strongly globalized as well and which had been put to the one side during the phase of Islamic militancy. Such a rediscovery, it has to be reaffirmed once more, does not present itself as the radical negation of the militancy experience and prison, rather, on the contrary, as the gradual elaboration of this experience, which is in a way “preserved” and highlighted by the genre of the memoir, felt as perfectly legitimate in its modern and Egyptian tradition.

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