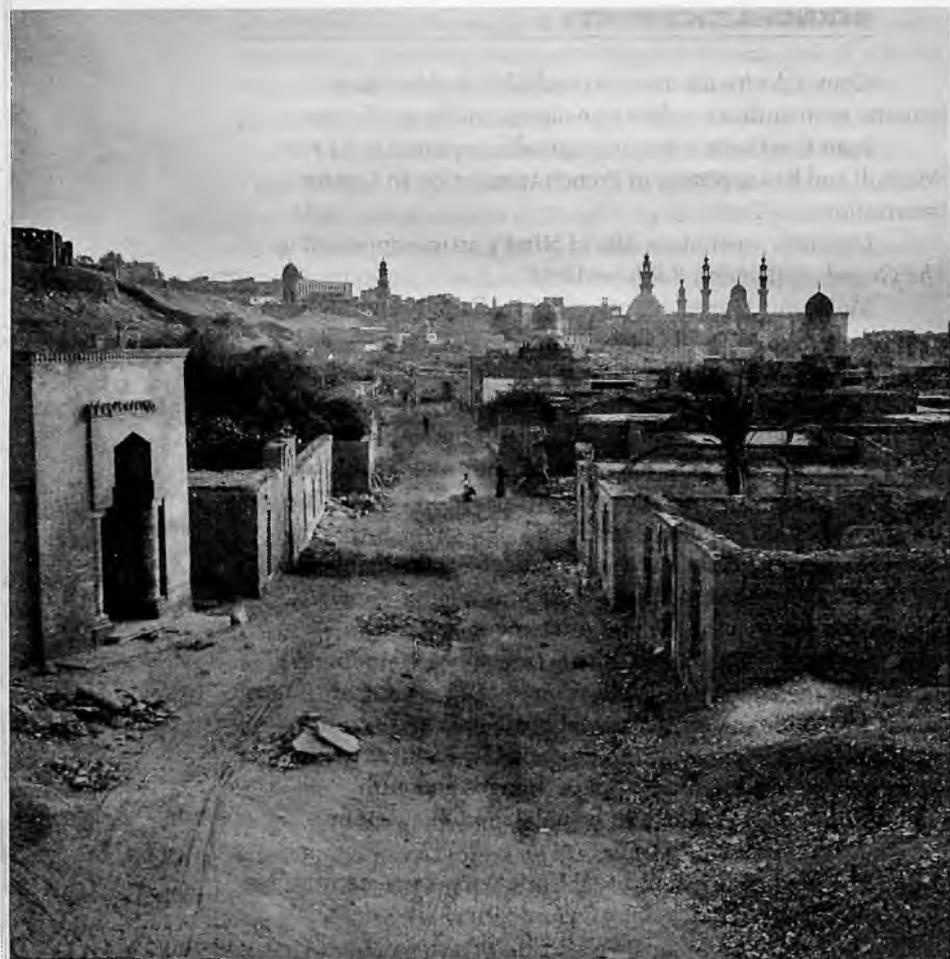


JUAN GOYTISOLO

City of the Dead



City of the Dead, Cairo: Pictures by Bernard Guillot

JUAN GOYTISOLO

City of the Dead

Translated from

the Spanish

by Peter Bush

“**T**he city
rules over vast
territories and
fertile lands,

is brimming with inhabitants and can be proud of its beauty and splendour. A meeting-point for travellers and itinerants, a place for weak and strong, where you can take your pick of men who are foolish and wise, serious or light-hearted, complaisant or stupid, humble or noble, blue-blooded or plebeian, unknown or famous. Its citizens pound back and forth like the waves of the sea, hardly fit into its seemingly narrow confines, though they be broad and capacious. It enjoys eternal youth and is ever watched over by the star of good fortune.”

Ibn Battuta d.1377

Description of Cairo

I

WITH A LOOK like that of the scrawny, furless, grimy, whimpering cat, abandoned in the gutter amid the rapid procession of legs and the deafening noise of traffic—whose squalid corpse we shall inevitably stumble across hours or days later, the victim of some vehicle’s brutal power or of a more insidious form of urban aggression—from his precarious perch

on the inhospitable road island of pavement slabs and stones, alone in the flux of implacable chaos, the old man's hazy, almost veiled gaze runs over the metal walkways packed with people, the human tide rushing to attack the buses, the pedestrian army confronting the din of screeching engines, the incessant bustle of an entire people that, with efficient economy of movement, takes advantage of the scarce space conceded to bodies to rush frantically after the usual places of rest or activity, calculating perhaps like the abandoned animal, through bleary eyes and shadows, the reprieve it greedily enjoys, the breathing space destiny has granted to its precarious existence in an urban keep. Pavements have disappeared, the ground is crumbling on all sides, drivers respect neither lights nor policeman's whistle, a megalopolis cruel to the infirm and the aged, a city without pity, master, his eyes tell me, eyes now blurred as they meet with the insistence of mine; merciless, yes, *bidun rahma*.

Why did I communicate for a few moments in silence with that old man, that particular old man, before plunging in turn into the river of cars and selfishly abandoning him to his uncomfortable refuge? It all began several hours ago: the plane has flown over the island of Crete and is heading south, towards the Egyptian coast. From my window in the non-smoking area I have spotted God the Father indolently stretching out on the cottony eiderdown of a cloud: he seems in a good mood, is having fun with his cherubims and graciously points the pilot in the right direction like some mischievous, bantering car-park attendant who has just pocketed his tip, straight on, keep straight on. By nightfall I am in Midan al-Tahrir: the taxi drives across the huge residential areas of Heliopolis and Masr al-Gedid, heads up the avenue separating the university mosque of al-Azhar and the famous Khan Khalili. From the loathsome motorway raised up on two levels in a futile attempt to ease the traffic flow, I fleetingly contemplate, as in a slide-show, the unmeasurable sprawl of the catastrophe below hidden by the advertising hoardings for Coca-Cola, Seven Up and Marlboro: decrepit housing,

buildings walking a tightrope, balconies on the point of collapse, domes held up by a miracle, dust, dirt, poverty, clothes spread out to dry, children hanging out of windows, faded advertising posters, terraces covered in shacks, chicken-runs, rubbish, pigeon lofts, aerials, herds of goats.

Violent images of a city's distorted face with its wrinkles, scars, glazed eyes, bruises, sores, black eyes, sticking-plasters, patches, broken teeth, dislocated jaws, whilst my taxi drives towards the Ezbekiya gardens, above Midan al-Ataba, between buildings whose splendour has faded and worn. The turrets and balustrades of a rococo edifice seem to have softened and melted like icing! On the dome of the old Tiring department stores, four titans effortlessly hold aloft a glass terrestrial globe which has shed its panes of glass like withered petals.

The air-borne motorway has finally turned into the hurly-burly where, bumper to bumper, hundreds of vehicles give vent to their owners' impatience with piercing blasts on the horn. Pedestrians apparently accept the situation, too exhausted and weak to rebel against the perennial acoustic assault, the violence of traffic in a state of shock. If Sir Richard Burton observed a century and a half ago that the lively gestures and exchanges of the people of Cairo might lead a foreigner to the mistaken belief that they were always within an ace of coming to blows, nowadays gesticulating is a necessity imposed by the unbridled ferocity of the traffic. The traveller who assails a taxi-driver, clings to his window, demands the presence of a policeman, challenges the edgy bustle of the crowd, insists on an on-the-spot fine for the man who, he maintains, has insulted him, mimes a silent scene, shut out by the din and uproar. We must get on!

The journey to the hotel takes on a dreamlike quality, is swathed in a cloud of fantasy. The multitude hanging on the doors of trams and buses reflects the frenetic growth of a city that in ten years has gone from seven to fourteen million souls. Excavations for the underground railway have opened up the monster's entrails, generating fractured drains and noxious floods, intensifying the general, irremediable confusion. In the

centre, drivers attack the crossroads like fairground dodgem cars. A tanned, weasel-faced policeman waving his puppet arms to no avail, tries to halt a powerful Mercedes that drives right round him transforming his frustrated attempt at interception into a tardy, reluctant gesture of authorisation. My taxi has stopped next to him and I observe at leisure his threadbare uniform and bulging crotch, his would-be air of authority, the cynical expression of an impotent ruler over chaos. The human bunches hanging from the carriages of the Helwan train have crashed into those coming from the opposite direction: six dead! Not a single building in Cairo has fallen down this week though fifty per cent of them are in a state of ruin. But the city is still not Calcutta, the rats have not yet invaded the houses, beggars and cripples do not yet display their horrible stumps in hotel entrances, nor are they whipped out of sight by uniformed porters, people are not yet dying on the pavements, walking skeletons do not yet proffer their lifeless hands or force the foreigner afraid of treading on them to jump to one side. My arrival at the hotel where I was to stay was merely an interlude in this initial vision of al-Qahira—literally, the Victorious—into whose omnivorous, emetic belly, I shall stride minutes later. The city that absorbs me is the ubiquitous, unleashed monster described by Edward Jarret in his excellent novel. For a few hours my gaze will be that of the old man sheltering on the traffic island: the disillusioned lucidity of someone who knows his sentence and is calculating the time left before he is obliterated.

II

IN THOSE INEFFABLE Egyptian television serials, destined to stifle and dull the intelligence and sensitivity of Arab peoples, the directors carefully fashion the ideal ambience in which the plot will unravel: enormous apartments, modern offices and shops, peaceful gardens and walks the silence of which will be broken at most by whimpering couples or soothing bird song. Ordinary people have been unceremoniously expelled from

those empty, hermetic spaces. Nothing indicates the proliferating human warren of the city: just shots of a deceptively clean river, private parks, avenues as bourgeois and exquisite as the characters' cars and houses. A utopia, drug, or fantasy, a need to compensate for the cramped, promiscuous life of millions of people condemned to overcrowding in their lives as well as in the street? Do these women, men, children, old people who buy, sell, bet, work, eat and sleep on packed pavements nourish their dreams of a better life on the vision of those spacious rooms with showy furniture covered in grotesque fabrics whereon the dolls of the day strive to prove to them 'that the rich also cry' with grimaces and mimicry that would make the worst provincial actor in Spain blush with shame? I decide to walk in the opposite direction along the al-Azhar avenue where I drove by taxi the previous evening and follow the capricious inspiration of my footsteps along the side-streets of al-Ghuriya, on the way to Khan Khalili. The television counterpoint to the urban mass through which I cut a path, which I dodge as best I can, and which I inevitably knock and bump into, is suddenly sharply recalled, glaringly confirmed: a carpenter and two apprentices are putting the last touches to a paradigm of television furniture, one of those gilded armchairs, covered in plush or red velvet, with curved backs and huge seats, purpose-built, one could say, to greet stout bourgeois beholds, jubilant pontifical buttocks. As I turn my smitten gaze away from the purple throne I exultantly discover dozens of others lining up. The whole street is manufacturing tawdry furniture whose natural destination will be the lounges, repeatedly displayed on television, in the villas and apartments of the new class enriched by 'the opening-up', the *infatih*! On subsequent days, as I roam the poor districts of al-Muski and Bab al-Jal, on every corner I discover new specimens of this armchair, whose unmistakable style, I dub Louis XXVI to distinguish it from the other Louis: the beneficiaries of Sadat's unbridled opening-up of the economy would easily confuse the dynasties of Pharaohs with the list of our Gothic kings!

Hardly have I got over my discovery than I must step to

one side to give way to a funeral cortège: the first of those I will have an opportunity to witness later during my stay in the City of the Dead. Friends and relatives of the deceased take turns to transport the coffin on their shoulders with a swaying, almost dance-like rhythm; at the rear women rigorously dressed in mourning also accompany the bier but without gesticulating or wailing. Minutes later, by the door to a mosque, I come across another funeral retinue in which women mourners seem to rival and spur each other on to greater moaning and sobbing. I am now on the outskirts of al-Azhar and, through the pedestrian subway, I reach Khan Khalili and the vast, well-tended esplanade next to the Hussein Mosque. On the terrace of one of the cafes, from my seat amongst the narghile 'drinkers'—in Egypt and Turkey, the same verb means both drinking and smoking—I can comfortably observe the spectacle of the multitude going in and out of the sanctuary, the door of which has been sheathed in a black canopy on the occasion of the celebration of the *milad*, the Prophet's birthday.

The square is closed to traffic and parked vehicles, but after a brief discussion and a tip to the wardens, some taxi drivers get the privilege of driving up and stopping next to the mosque. I notice straightaway that the passengers are newly-weds accompanied by a small number of friends and relatives. An old Cairo custom requires a ritual photo of the betrothed in the entrance to the Hussein Mosque. The girls, daubed with rouge, kohl and lipstick, look like models in Pronuptia sales items: skirts with long or half-length flounces, gauze head-dresses, spotlessly white stockings and shoes. The men sport modest off-the-peg suits and clumsily fiddle with their bow-ties. Policemen, soldiers, passers-by tirelessly watch fresh taxis arrive, the toing and froing of the boys who open the car-door for the fiancée with her sprig of flowers, the groups of hired singers, the swarm of photographers ready to immortalise that moment of joy. The small groups rapidly follow each other and the pretty, young bride can point a brief withering look of contempt at an elder, less well-endowed companion. The mosque porter, a young man in a white tunic with black

turban and beard, waits leaning on his broom-handle, next to the marble lobby where the betrothed must take their shoes off before visiting the temple. His mission is to zealously clean the dust from in front of the bride's feet in exchange for a tip. This labour, the exclusive rights to which he defends with might and main, obliges him to push the dirt from one corner of the doorway to another throughout the day as new candidates for a photo turn up, but—and this is vital—without ever removing it completely, as its existence is indispensable to the completion of his task. Broom in hand, he hurriedly sweeps the corner where the bride steps, energetically repelling the dust to the opposite side, and reverses the operation when the next group arrives. Thanks to a quantity of mobile if constant dust, the wily fellow never ceases to tuck away 25 or 50 piastre notes, perhaps even a pound note, into the depths of his coat pocket with an expression of humble, entranced bliss. His presence in the midst of fiancés, relatives, morons and photographers, clasping his emblematic broom like some fairy-tale witch, turns him into a character in a comedy by the Quintero brothers or in *The Barber of Lavapiés*.

In any case, the spectacle of plebeian weddings in the Hussein Mosque makes a pleasant contrast to the pompous nouveau riche ceremonies in the Hilton or Sheraton. As I had occasion to witness on a previous visit to Cairo, caricature there soars to unexpected heights, whilst never attaining the redeemable vulgarity of kitsch: the wedding cohorts processed slowly to the light of fake beacons, applauded by a hired gang of waiters and lackeys; a film director shoots the different episodes of the festive event—the obligatory close-up of the bride's jewels—that will be shown later on video to visitors to the newly weds' sitting-room, furnished, of course, with Louis XVI fauteuils. The pious, bearded sweeper would indeed introduce a bright splash of colour. But the closed world of worthies—refractory and hostile to contact with ordinary people—does not readily allow this kind of intrusion.

As I walk back to my hotel along the crammed streets of al-Muski, I mull over the reasons for my already longstanding love of Cairo: unlike European or North

American cities, where one grows old at life's edge, reduced to a robotic state with semi-atrophied feelings, a short stroll through the insect-like bustle in the centre puts the traveller into immediate contact with the roots of life. Within a few hours I have seen dozens of weddings and two funeral cortèges! My sense of smell, blunted in cities subjected to anaesthetising scepticism, gradually comes back to life, aroused by the violence of the odours! No matter if the scent of flowers, spices or cedar wood mingles with that of excrement or rubbish. I am alive, I am walking around a medina where everything happens in the light of day and something is happening all the time. Is the degradation of the urban space—public works' trenches, aerial motorways, clapped-out yet over-laden buses—just a mirage? As Sami Na'ir, one of its recent visitors perceptively asks, doesn't this apparent dislocation, self-destruction and decay perhaps constitute "a perpetual, cunning exercise in the redistribution" of its materials? Sinking down to get a firmer base, falling apart to rise up, sicking up its detritus only to devour even more, doesn't Cairo, excessive and cruel, ragged and magnificent, feed, century after century, on the marrow of its children in a perennial, mocking exercise in self-consumption? I re-read Ibn Battuta and his political diagnosis of the city: "The military tyrannise; the poor people suffer; but the powerful are not disturbed and the machine works as best it can."

Is there a better way to sum up the history of the last 50 years? I have yet to climb the spiral staircase up Ibn Tulun's minaret to enjoy the perfection of a mosque which can only be compared in the elegant purity of the lines to the Kutubia in Marrakesh, yet the city has already reconquered me. Destroyed, ruined, burnt, tentacled phoenix, mantis religiosa, Cairo seems to have discovered the secret of a continually renewed cycle which mingles life and death until they are fused.

If the cemetery is the city, as Larra said, we will have to go right to the heart of the necropolis to explore its sources of life.

III

THE SAME IMPRECISION concerning the name of Egypt – known by its offspring both as Barr Masr and Bilad Masr and its capital city—called indistinctively al-Qahira or more simply, Masr—also surrounds the siting of the legendary City of the Dead. Whilst Burton situates it in the Bab Masr cemetery, my tourist guide locates it in Qait Bey and keenly advises against visiting for reasons of decency. Cairo has in fact had for centuries four remarkable Muslim cemeteries as well as the Coptic cemeteries and a Jewish one: Bab Masr, Qait Bey, Bab al-Wazir and al-Khalifa, or Imam Sha’fi. The latter, equally dubbed the southern cemetery or Bab al-Qarafa, has today more in common than the others with the features of a residential necropolis. Although I have leisurely trawled the mausolea, tombs and funeral pavilions of Bab Masr and Bab al-Wazir, the number of Cairenes established there is relatively small and, in some areas of the latter, almost insignificant.

Qait Bey, famous for the splendid mosque to which it owes its name, is a special case. The population of the urban centres settled in this cemetery and the people who traditionally looked after the pantheons increased dramatically twenty years ago with the massive influx of refugees from the left bank of the Suez Canal, fleeing at the time from merciless Israeli bombing raids. This usurpation, ratified by the impotence of the authorities, turned the cemetery into a city which presently boasts more than half a million inhabitants: with its mosques, schools, hospital, administrative buildings, markets, it constitutes an autonomous quarter whose precarious living conditions are expressed in a melancholy succession of overcrowding and poverty. In the square adjacent to the eponymous mosque—in a somewhat unreal setting of small stalls selling lupins and a ghostly, home-made roundabout—a handful of writers and artists whom I am unsure whether to describe as populist or accursed meet up in the afternoons at a cafe to inhale the smoke of narghile (*chicha*), fortified, to be true, with small cubes of hashish.

Qait Bey, or the North Eastern cemetery, in spite of its

appeal to the casual visitor—hundreds of mausolea, sometimes built with stones of the Pharaohs, raising to the purest November sky their wonderful smooth or fluted domes—resents the avalanche disintegrating its former social coherence and funeral traditions. The invasion of foreigners has been brutal and incapable of assimilation: the unclear frontier between the living and the dead has to a large extent lost its seductive, exciting ambiguity.

Ever since my arrival in Cairo, after carefully taming the urban space, I preferred to head to the southern cemetery, whose perimeter, approximately five kilometres long by a maximum two kilometres wide, extends, at the foot of the Citadel of Muhammed Ali and the lookout points of al-Muqattam, from the continuous hullabulloo of Bab al-Qarafa to the quasi desert of the residential districts of al-Basatin (The Gardens). Described for centuries by foreign and indigenous writers, it was carefully drawn by Edward William Lane, amongst others. Ibn Battuta stopped there and sketched a picture which, despite the passage of time, has not entirely lost its flavour: "At Misr (Fustat or old Cairo) one can see the cemetery of al-Qarafa, famous for its holiness. (...) it belongs to the hill of Muqattam, which, according to divine promise, will be one of the gardens of Paradise. In al-Qarafa the inhabitants of Cairo erect beautiful chapels, surrounded by walls, that look like houses. They build residences close by and support readers who night and day melodiously recite the Koran. Some individuals construct *zawiyas* and *madrasas* next to the mausoleum. They spend Thursday night and Friday there with their wives and children and walk in procession around the famous tombs. They also usually spend the night there from the 14th to the 15th of Shaaban, whilst traders offer a wide range of repast."

The City of the Dead has today a population of almost a million souls. They are born, grow, reproduce, multiply, age and die in the silent, condescending company of the deceased: it is a large minority, but a minority nevertheless who have taken refuge in the ancestral domain of death and developed, as I will have the opportunity to experience myself, a cultural and

social life of their own, with its own norms, customs and rituals. I have not just seen burials in al-Khalifa: throughout an increasingly sweet, intoxicating sojourn, I attended weddings, parties, celebrations of circumcision and betrothal, family get-togethers, street football games. What began as an adventure and a challenge to myself, was gradually transformed into a haven, a yearning for possession: gradual appropriation of a space in which, thanks to the hospitality of the living and the immediacy of the dead, I finally felt tranquil and experienced a delicate merging of peacefulness, harmony and benevolence.

IV

IN MODERN Western society the thought of daily coexistence with death arouses a feeling of anguish and rejection. Our death rites are reduced to mere pretence: incapable of bridging the gap opened between the objective certainty of its mortality and the inner desire for some form of survival, our tormented consciousness cannot have recourse as in days of yore to the assimilating beliefs and ceremonies of backward communities. Death is no longer accepted religiously or culturally as an integral part of our existence; it is a clandestine event behind the backs of the deceased and his social milieu. In cities like New York or Paris one can live for years without experiencing its troublesome intrusion. An efficient strategy of camouflage has whisked it out of sight, cleansed it from our language. Worse still: human beings have been deprived of their right to experience it as the natural consequence of biological mutation. Stripped of its aura of dignity, the corpse is set out like a dummy, an object of painful wrangling between family and rapacious funeral parlours. This illusory denial changes cemeteries into arenas of anxiety and terror, which the living penetrate furtively and run from at top speed: burials are a hollow social act, the momentary disturbing effect of which is diluted in inane bustle. A well-marked frontier separates necropolises from the rest of the urban space and transforms them into ghettos or ghostly shrines. The price individuals pay for this shameful covering

up of death is revealed in their inner vulnerability and ostrichlike attitude to the brutality of their condition: as in other terrains, the return of what has been cast out insidiously contaminates the substance of our lives.

To become acclimatised to a cemetery like al-Khalifa is a healthy apprenticeship in the course of which the neophyte gradually sheds his worries and prejudices. Hardly glimpsed on my last visit to Cairo, it has symbolised in my eyes ever since the most distant boundary of unhappiness: the last most wretched suburb of a city whose monstrous growth condemned its children to disputing and snatching their territory from the deceased. After weeks of assiduous trawling, my impressions and ideas about it were reversed. The City of the Dead is a colourful, fascinating urban sprawl bursting with life, with districts ancient and modern, humble and aristocratic: the comfortable residences of the upper and middle classes run alongside enclaves and areas where poverty moves one to indignation. Traditionally inhabited by families settled next to their dead or by guardians of other people's mausolea, its population multiplied over the last decades with the arrival of tens of thousands of Nubians forced to abandon their lands submerged by the Aswan Dam and with a growing number of Cairenes fallen victim to the housing crisis and the unbearable promiscuity of the slum districts. As I soon saw, a great number of the settlers in al-Khalifa feel privileged and are proud to live there. In spite of the insufficient and haphazard urban infrastructure—the almost general absence of drainage, running water and, sometimes, electric light—they enjoy a space beyond the aspirations of millions of their co-citizens piled together in the housing blocks in the centre.

If, in contrast to Qait Bey, there has been only sporadic illegal occupation of pantheons, the laws of the property market impose their regulations in every transaction of sale, purchase or rental: speculation has sent sky-high the prices of the new mausolea built for the bourgeoisie who became wealthy under Sadat. The concession of a lease or the safe-keeping of a pantheon fetches very high sums, beyond the means of most families. On one of my walks through

al-Khalifa I came across the address of an estate agent, but my attempts at extracting a list of prices from him shattered against the wall of his stubborn suspicion: although I introduced myself as a Moroccan traveller in search of a home I was unsuccessful in sweeping aside his distrust of my hidden intentions. On the plots situated at the foot of Muqattam, it costs some 3,000 Egyptian guineas to excavate an underground tomb and the land is sold by the foot, as in housing developments in Guiza and Masr al Gedid. However, a good number of the mausolea in al-Khalifa remain empty and can be examined at leisure through the bars of the outer gates.

The pantheons I just peered into and those I entered at the invitation of their residents represent a varied range of styles and eras. Generally they comprise a stone-slab courtyard surrounded by those whose doors face onto a covered lobby or lead to an arcaded portico almost always decorated with verses or quotations from the Koran. Sometimes, the tombs are raised to floor level and crowned with funeral memorial stones or steles; others are hidden away in vaults whose architectural design, as I discovered later, corresponds to the one formed on the upper level by the home of the living; a narrow lobby at the foot of the stairs and two separate rooms for the corpses of both sexes. The patios are usually decorated with baskets of flowers and evergreen plants, and the walls display beautiful green tiles and Kufic inscriptions.

The wrought iron gates to other mausolea open onto gardens with a wild, abandoned look. The autumnal impression of decrepitude and negligence, the product of the perennial cycle of the splendour and decline in bourgeois families, is intensified by those monuments erected to the eternal glory of their dead. The contrast between the original magnificence and the present state of ruin is a diaphanous illustration of this implacable process of degeneration which has always moved me as it has other writers. In one I glimpsed from the outside, someone had left a plate of reeds on top of a tomb—I am uncertain whether for its occupant or for all the wandering souls in the cemetery.

The precinct of inhabited pantheons makes up for the

loss of this serenity through strange signs of life: clothes are hung out to dry across the arcades, gas stoves smoke, chickens peck and pets rest next to the tombs or cenotaphs. The majority of custodians or tenants I met originated from al-Said, and stood out from their northern compatriots by virtue of their blackness and handsome features. Open and hospitable, the Nubians willingly invite strangers into their homes and offer them a glass of tea. Their progeny are usually numerous and their wives with faces uncovered hover discreetly in the background. The men work as bricklayers or stone masons either building or repairing pantheons, but there are also many taxi-drivers, office-workers and clerks whose jobs oblige them to leave the cemetery. Many youths are unemployed and live on the iron solidarity of the clan. Nevertheless, in these mixed areas of the cemetery, poverty never goes beyond the limits of what is tolerable.

The spectacle of twilight in al-Khalifa offers an impressive array of colourful, violent contrasts. Weak and bloodless, the sun appears to be bled white, behind the reddened silhouettes of minarets and mosque domes. The atmosphere is soaked in a strange luminosity. The terrestrial sphere repeats its round with a population that also rotates: the difference between living and dead, in parallel superimposed layers in the mausolea, gradually fading into the shadows is merely a question of time and degree.

V

THE BURIAL CEREMONY in al-Khalifa has changed very little from the ones described by Edward Lane. The body of the deceased, carefully washed with soap and water, is wrapped in a *kefen*, a green or white shroud, before removal to its resting-place in an open coffin, usually covered over with a piece of linen. The eyes have been closed; ears and nostrils plugged with cotton wool; jaws tied with string to stop the mouth falling open on the journey; ankles strapped together; hands decorously laid on the chest. When the cortège leaves home

and starts off, the faithful recite surahs from the Koran, relatives and friends run after the bier and take it in turns to carry it on their shoulders at a lively pace, as if in a relay race. This good deed, or *hasana*, is highly praiseworthy, and everybody, including mere onlookers, reveals a desire to participate in order to enjoy the spiritual benefits. After the obligatory visit to one of the numerous mosques in al-Khalifa and the prayers of the imam, the retinue walks or drives—depending on the distance to be covered and the social status of the deceased—to the mausoleum or tomb where he will be buried. The women walk behind and sometimes burst out wailing and lamenting. Generally, upper-class burials are silent and restrained. One of my occasional companions, to whom I commented on this fact, retorted ironically that the rich don't cry because they inherit money and property; the poor do because they are only left debts and expenses.

Thanks to my friend Ahmed, a master builder specialising in the construction of pantheons, I managed to examine the inside of one that had yet to enter service. A steep, narrow staircase, to be covered later with a stone slab, led to an underground granite sepulchre, oblong-shaped with a vaulted roof, comprising three rooms, a small lobby and two side-rooms, the entrances to which were adorned with Koranic verses and a simple indication as to the sex of their future occupants. On the outside, a similarly oblong-shaped cenotaph is usually set above the hypogea with the memorial stones or steles decorated with lines from the Koran, stone turbans and the name and titles of the deceased. Ahmed explains to me that the corpses are deposited in the vault in the place corresponding to them, facing right towards the *qibla*. The funeral chambers must be spacious enough to allow the soul of the dead to be visited and examined by two angels named Maqir and Munkar. On the first night, the soul experiences the tension and anguish of their questioning, and it is consequently called *Lailat al Wahda* or Night of Solitude. Then, after the interrogation is complete, it flies to the home of the just or the sinful to await the final judgement. According to other popular beliefs, the nomadic soul will wander

throughout forty days, at the end of which mourning it may be bid a definitive farewell on the occasion of the *Gumaa al-Arbaain*.

On Fridays, the City of the Dead presents a striking spectacle of life and movement. A good number of Cairenes come to pray for their relatives and eat and rest in the pantheons. The sepulchres of those who have recently died are decorated with flowers or palm fronds. Some families set up a kind of canvas awning in the street, where the men receive condolences from their friends and drink a leisurely glass of tea. Whilst the bourgeoisie, in shirt and tie or bejewelled, take refuge inside their mausolea, poor people usually spread themselves, their table-cloths and tea pots out by the side or on top of the tombs, welcoming inquisitive strangers and eager for distraction.

If the angels evoked by Ahmed only show themselves to the deceased, the goblins and demons that populate the cemetery do not always scorn the company of the living. One of my guides pointed out their wandering nocturnal presence in the area around Sayida Nafisa: they touched and even embraced the solitary walker, but vanished immediately God's name was invoked aloud. In the precinct of the pantheon looked after by his father, he added to convince me, that one had taken up residence in the depths of a well. As I showed an interest in seeing the hiding-place, he took me to visit its keeper. Leaning on his crook, the old man hobbled up to the outer gate with a weighty bunch of keys. He was in his seventies and had an extraordinarily expressive face: his eyes shone astonishingly brightly and, after studying the body of his questioner, seemed to disappear into infinity. Once informed of my whim—I confess that the idea of an exclusive interview with his demon was extremely attractive—he led me into a dirty, poky corner, where a collection of objects was piled up; on the stone bench there was a circular hole covered over with a metal lid. He lifted it up and shouted down; the din echoed and resounded in the well for almost a minute. After making sure of the impact of this, he covered over the hole and, before taking me inside the mausoleum, locked the door to the

cubby-hole inhabited by the *afrit*. By night, he told me, he also closed the pantheon from the inside, to stop the demon from slipping through and disturbing his sleep. After a long struggle with his keys, the entrance was opened and we were in a kind of spacious, vaulted chapel in the centre of which was a large marble slab bare of decoration. The old man showed me the mass of blankets where he slept, and invited me to share it with him if it appealed. I agreed and his face betrayed no sign of surprise.

Didn't my rest at his side perhaps satisfy the dark object of my desire? Was there any better cure or antidote against the anguish accumulated by the inevitable intrusions of Thanatos in my daily life? Did the fears that flourished insidiously under the wing of sleep—suffering, sickness, cancer, AIDS, old age—have a place within a mausoleum?

The motorways that gripped the City of the Dead were awash with cars. Cairo could be glimpsed in the distance with its lights and bustle, millions of people living the agony of their struggle to survive and I was enjoying, was able to enjoy with the old man a blissful, almost miraculous moment of peace. The journey through the dark night would become by his side more certain than the light of the midday sun. Down secret steps quite unintentionally I had discovered once again in the cemetery the mysterious fusion of St John of the Cross and Islam.

VI

OBSIDIAN APPROACHES to the City of the Dead reserve for the besieger even—the Muslim besieger from elsewhere—infinite surprises. The profound internal coherence of the necropolis is revealed not suddenly but gradually, through successive perceptions and insights. Next to the areas of mausolea with patios and gardens are others where familiarity and immediacy with the deceased evoke even more powerfully the stubborn survival of millenary traditions. This promiscuous connivance is shot through with ancient customs of the Nile. The contiguity and unity of destiny between the

shadows and their ephemeral guests create bonds of complicity beneficial to both: the dead lose their profile of atavistic terror; the living are integrated into a world that will inexorably be theirs, but strengthened and soothed by such fruitful coexistence. Like other monotheistic religions, Islam has compromised with the pagan customs rooted in the peoples converted to its doctrine and has opted to assimilate them. The paintings and hieroglyphics on the hypogea of the Pharaohs reveal the daily life of the deceased with their relatives and servants. The expression on their faces is never sad: on the contrary, they appear radiant and calm.

Everything recalls the most pleasant aspects and scenes of life on earth: freed from his body, the deceased passes into his *ka*, that immaterial form or shadowy double that prolongs the human personality awaiting reincarnation. In its subterranean universe, the sleepwalking soul disposes not only of food and drink but also the usual domestic comforts. The funereal inspiration of al-Khalifa has reflected from its beginning this ideal of bliss and harmony: the structure and conception of its hypogea is a palimpsest of the ancient beliefs of the Pharaohs. In upper Egypt and in rural areas, Nubians still place a symbolic offering of a loaf and a jug of water next to their tombs.

The sepulchres that jostle in the neighbourhood of the Al-Qadriya district merge imperceptibly with wooden pavilions destined for family leisure and brick-built houses bristling with television aerials. The inhabitants of these mixed areas hang out their washing to dry between memorial stones and steles, little children play at perching on top of them, hens peck around them, and the sight of a goat tied by a leg to the cenotaph of some scholar—whose tomb is crowned with an emblematic turban—does not shock too greatly. The sepulchres, like the houses, tend to be ochre in colour; but there are also plenty of lemon greens, and I have spotted some yellows, whites and oranges (only blue is rigorously excluded). Whoever zigzags amongst them hoping to lose himself discovers at every turn the remnants of previous visitations: rabbit hutches, pigeon lofts, flocks of sheep, a taxi waiting for

its driver to have lunch, insolent Dodges and Volvos, a broken chassis. On the roof of a three-storey building, an extravagant advertisement for Canada Dry broadcasts the virtues of refreshment to a vast assembly of corpses. (Can the multinationals have decided to extend their range of influence into the after-life?) The house-facades of those who have been on the pilgrimage to Mecca are brightly painted: naive drawings outline the boat or plane in which the owners travelled, the odd camel or palm tree, the black canopy hanging over the Muslim sanctuary of the Kaaba. At a bend in the street, fifty-odd people are celebrating with yuyus and applause the wedding of two children from the cemetery: the bride is also sporting her Pronuptia model, and a taxi will not fail to take her and her husband for the compulsory photograph of the happy couple in front of the Hussein Mosque (I can already imagine the comic sketch sweeper in his customary choreographic stance, energetically scattering the dust!).

The images of destitution in the poorest parts of the cemetery are quite similar to those I observed beyond its walls in the course of my stay in Cairo. The shops selling State-subsidised goods—oil, soap, beans, lentils, etc—are under continuous siege from the mass of people who subsist thanks to official ration coupons. At the entrance to the mosque of Sayida Nafisa, the giving of alms to the needy by benefactors who sometimes come from smart residential areas in Mercedes provokes a riot: a flurry of women wrapped in black veils falls upon the driver charged with distribution, they knock into each other; one of the women in mourning falls stunned to the ground in the midst of the uproar, but quickly picks herself up, like a footballer who realises that his big pretence of injury has not attracted the referee's attention and that the game is going on without him. As a general rule, the inhabitants of al-Khalifa manage to endure their poverty with remarkable dignity: beggars are rare and the majority of families who invited me into their pantheon-houses reproachfully rejected my clumsy attempts to thank them for their welcoming glass of tea by leaving them a note. When I later got to know Ahmed and his

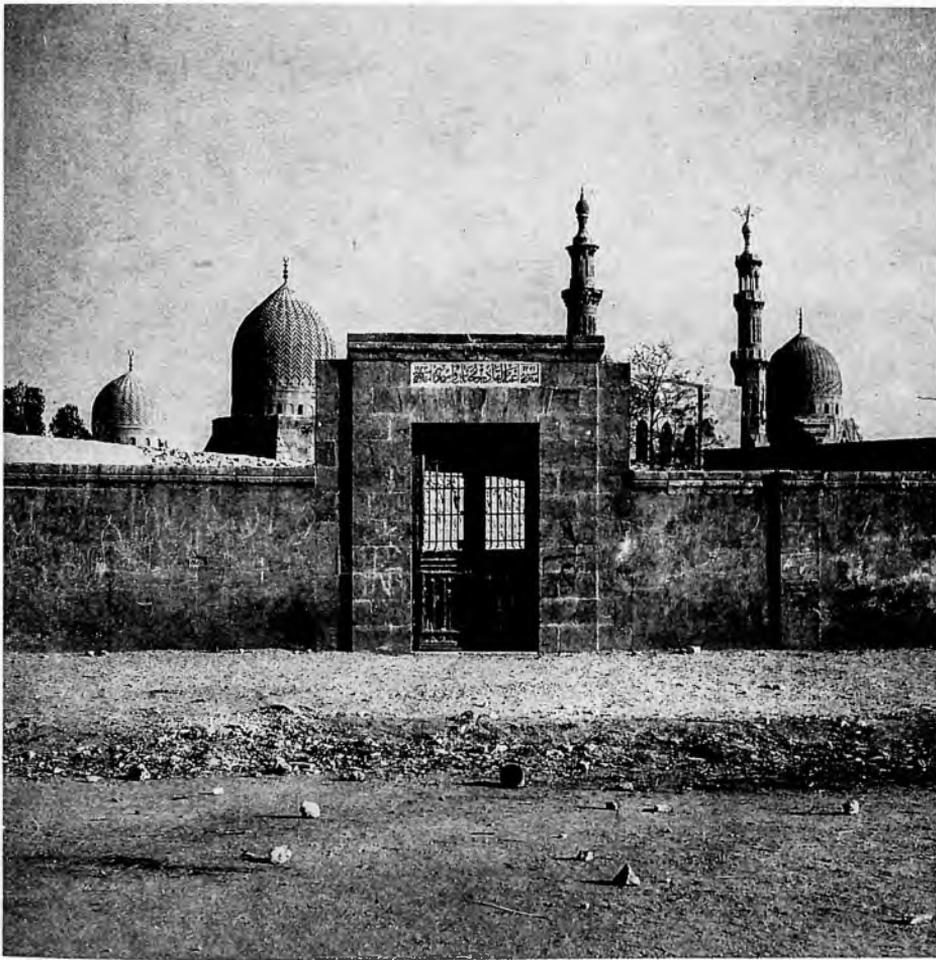
family, the generosity with which he responded to my presents showed me the lengths to which the pride and nobility of a modest family of Nubians would go. My final evenings with them touched me to the quick, bowled me over: all my preconceptions about life in the cemetery were swept aside. If, as Jean Genet wrote, "la solitude des morts est notre gloire la plus certaine", the solitude that the inhabitants of the cemetery shared with the dead endowed my hosts with supreme moral beauty: their love for their neighbour glowed without expecting anything in return, as if awareness of the absolute equality of men before death had abolished with its stark, elementary simplicity the odious barriers of power and money.

VII

"WILL YOU EVER return to Cairo?", I mutter to myself on the flight back, after noting that God the Father is again enjoying a siesta with his cherubim on the eiderdown of clouds. When, how, why?

To be present as the monster ever devours itself, as it implacably gulps down its children? To spy on the final hecatomb, the violent explosion of its entrails? To applaud the burning of the palaces of the great? To be an impotent witness to the harsh survival of a people? To sink into a Louis XVI armchair and watch the latest concoction on television?

At any rate, to keep my promise to Ahmed. To get a taxi on leaving the airport and ask the driver to take me to al-Khalifa. A bedroom, a patio, a garden: my familiar, hospitable pantheon in the City of the Dead.



City of the Dead, Cairo: Tomb of Sultan Qatbai

JUAN GOYTISOLO

City of the Dead



City of the Dead: Mausoleum and home



the Dead

JUAN GOYTISOLO

City of the Dead



Southern aspect, City of the Dead