

BOOKS

Satan's Work and Silted Cisterns

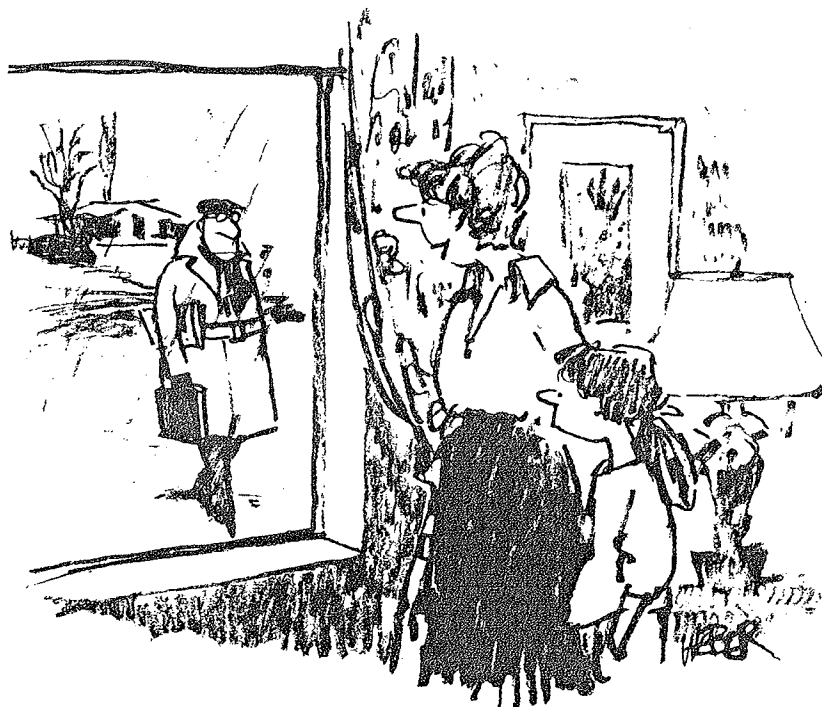
THE most fabulous geological event since the explosion of Krakatoa surely was the discovery of oceans of petroleum beneath the stark and backward Muslim realms of the Persian Gulf. Sheikhs whose wealth was previously measured in horses and camels soon ranked with the world's richest men; dusty remotenesses like Kuwait and Bahrain and Saudi Arabia became able, with scarcely a dent in their national revenues, to shower all the blessings of an advanced welfare state upon their sparse populations. According to the *World Almanac*, the highest per-capita income on the planet belongs not to the United States or Sweden or Japan but to Qatar. The Western view of this global caprice is expressed by our resentful caricatures of dollar-glutted sheikhs and by our nervous protective naval presence in the Persian Gulf. The Arab view receives less publicity; "Cities of Salt," a novel by Abdelrahman Munif (translated from the Arabic by Peter Theroux; Random House; \$18.95), performs a needed service in dramatizing the impact of American oil discovery and development upon an unnamed Gulf emirate in the nineteen-thirties. It is unfortunate, given the epic potential of his topic, that Mr. Munif, a Saudi born in Jordan, appears to be—though he lives in France and received a Ph.D. in oil economics from the University of Belgrade—in-sufficiently Westernized to produce a narrative that feels much like what we call a novel. His voice is that of a campfire explainer; his characters are rarely fixed in our minds by a face or a manner or a developed motivation; no central figure develops enough reality to attract our sympathetic interest; and, this being the first third of a trilogy, what intelligible conflicts and possibilities do emerge remain

serenely unresolved. There is almost none of that sense of individual moral adventure—of the evolving individual in varied and roughly equal battle with a world of circumstance—which, since "Don Quixote" and "Robinson Crusoe," has distinguished the novel from the fable and the chronicle; "Cities of Salt" is concerned, instead, with men in the aggregate. Its focus might be described as sociological, and its sociological point as the single, insistent one that Arabs are discomfited, distressed, and deranged by the presence of Americans in their midst. In over six hundred pages repeated illustration of this point wears thin.

The book begins by evoking the oasis of Wadi al-Uyoun, "an outpouring of green amid the harsh, obdurate desert." It is, for most of its residents, a kind of Eden: "Wadi al-Uyoun was an ordinary place to its inhabitants, and excited no strong emotions, for they were used to seeing the palm trees filling the

wadi and the gushing brooks surging forth in the winter and early spring, and felt protected by some blessed power that made their lives easy." Births and deaths, the arrival and departure of caravans, the seasons of rain and drought make a rhythm of events that is timeless; when three white foreigners, escorted by two marsh Arabs, camp on the edge of the village, curiosity runs rampant, and the strong emotion of dread enters the breast of Miteb al-Hathal, a patriarch of the Atoum tribe:

He sensed that something terrible was about to happen. He did not know what it was or when it would happen, and he took no comfort in the explanations offered him from all sides. The very sight of the foreigners and their constant activity all day, the instruments they carried around, the bags of sand and stones they had amassed after writing in their notebooks and drawing symbols on them, the discussions that lasted from sundown until after supper and the writing that followed, the damned questions they asked about dialects, about



"Oh, good. Here comes Daddy, to bring us to our senses."

tribes and their disputes, about religion and sects, about the routes, the winds and the rainy seasons—all these caused Miteb's fear to grow day by day that they meant harm to the wadi and the people.

He confides to his son Fawaz, "They said, 'Wait, just be patient, and all of you will be rich!' But what do they want from us, and what does it concern them if we get rich or stay just as we are? . . . They're devils, no one can trust them. They're more accursed than the Jews." His unease drives him to address the emir: "By God, Your Excellency, we were as happy as we could be before those devils came along. But from the first day they came to our village life has been camel piss. Every day it gets worse." Miteb is foremost but far from alone in his agitation: "Fear gripped the wadi. The men grew more rash and nervous, and Miteb was considered indispensable—if he absented himself from the wadi a single day to sleep in Zahra the people missed him acutely; only he was capable of saying everything, of expressing their innermost thoughts." Increasingly, the oasis dwellers feel blighted by this lawless visitation from the outside world. The American oil prospectors sunbathe in their shorts in view of the women fetching water; the affront is hardly greater when, a little later, the entire village is bulldozed into rubble. Miteb al-Hathal takes to the desert to wreak some ill-defined vengeance, and Fawaz, who has been itching to leave the oasis anyway, goes to work for the oil company as it builds its port in the seaside town of Harran.

In Harran, there is more of the same: on the American side, construction and revelry; on the Arab, puzzlement, depression, and hard labor. The cruellest cut seems to be not that the American houses have fences and swimming pools, or that the emir becomes obsessed by such devils' toys as a telescope and a radio, or even that the American bosses drive the Arab workers right through the heat of summer, but that, occasionally, like a voluptuous mirage, a white boat appears offshore, laden with nearly naked white women. "The women were perfumed, shining and laughing, like horses after a long race. Each was strong and clean, as if fresh from a hot bath, and each body was uncovered except for a small piece of colored cloth. Their legs were proud and bare, and stronger than rocks. Their faces, hands, breasts, bellies—

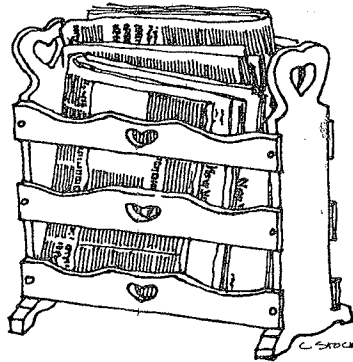
everything, yes, everything glistened, danced, flew." (What is happening, actually? Would thirties costumes look so scanty, even to Arabs? These women seem clad in the sixties minimum. Also, at another point the Americans anachronistically seem to produce tape recorders—"small black boxes, which they pressed whenever they got into a conversation.") The women come ashore and dance and entwine with the Americans while the Arabs of Harran look on in an astonishment beyond words: "The men were mostly quiet now and slightly dizzy, feeling sharp pains throbbing in certain parts of their bodies. Some cried out, and most of them wished that they had never come to see what was transpiring before them." During this long and shameful night, one of the Arab men announces out of the darkness, "Say what you want, but I'm afraid we've lost our world and our faith."

The Harran section continues for four hundred more pages, but the moral has been stated: the invasion of the oil exploiters has cost the native population its world and its faith. The money that petroleum brings the populace is no consolation: "True, the company was paying them now, but the next day workers paid out again what they had received. Prices went up every day, and their savings declined." Ibn Naffeh, one of Harran's spokesmen for Islamic righteousness, announces, "Foreign lands are corrupt, and foreign people bring corruption, and money corrupts worst of all." Another such seer, a healer called Mufaddi, refuses to work for money, and proclaims, "Money enslaves, it subjugates, but it never brings happiness." The Americans themselves, their wild women and useless money aside, have infuriating personalities. Invited to a

feast, they "looked and behaved like small children"—asking endless questions, taking many photographs, speaking Arabic with funny accents, and showing a pathetic inability to eat with their hands correctly. They are not invited to a wedding because they would have turned it into "an orgy of interviews and picture taking." On the job, they are "cruel" and "tough and bigoted." "At first the Americans had laughed and slapped them on the shoulders. Now they did not look at them or if they did, spat out words that could only be curses." They awaken self-hatred, resentment, and fear in the workers. As Ibn Naffeh says, "The Americans came and the demons came with them. Anyone who drinks their water or eats of their provisions will have a demon enter him."

The maledictory rhetoric of Ayatollah Khomeini is nothing new. In "Cities of Salt," the boat full of shining and laughing women is "Satan's ship," and the American projects are "Satan's work," culminating in "Satan's pipe project." The novel's language strains in trying to capture the peculiarly intense mental states induced by the advent of modern Western enterprise and mores. "The people were overwhelmed with pity and fear; these were obscure but powerful emotions." After the staunchly religious Mufaddi dies, "babies cried all night, as though afraid or in pain." A man with a grievance against the oil company feels "an urge to weep or scream. He had to do something to keep from falling down dead." He is "burning with anger, no, not only anger; it was mingled with something as black as pitch and oozy thick as old blood that had not dried yet."

This undrying wound is the loss of tribal and village unity, of effortless interaction and mutual consideration. "In spite of the crowds and the endless influx of new people"—as Harran grows—"each man became a world unto himself. Dealings between people from different and perhaps mutually hostile places were wary and full of apprehensions." Urbanization detaches and renders deaf. "Harran was no one's property, no one's city. So chaotic and crowded had it become that everyone asked and everyone answered, but no one heard or understood." As sociology, this has its interest, but it doesn't animate the characters. A few of the Americans receive names (Henderson, Middleton, Blackie, Fatso),



but they remain indistinguishable. Miteb al-Hathal stays out in the desert, a mere rumor of redemption from the demons. The Arabs in the foreground are rarely seen from within but live mainly in the gossip of others and the author's gossipy, regretful voice; they are not so much persons as reputations. In a village, no one needs to be described, since everyone is known. Only slowly, as the novel settles into Har-ran and the town becomes more corrupt and crowded, does Abdelrahman Munif begin to give us what we can recognize as characterizations, with physical descriptions:

His face was like that of a child, with its bold eyes, loud, innocent laugh and large, gleaming white teeth, and his slim, lanky body seemed carved from smooth stone or wood.

But such visualizations, and portraits of such outsiders as the truck driver Akoub the Armenian, begin to clarify the picture too late: the novel's people and events are seen as if through a sandstorm, blurred by a hopeless communal grief and sense of affront. Some authorities, too, were evidently affronted: the jacket flap tells us that "Cities of Salt" has been banned in Saudi Arabia. The thought of novels being banned in Saudi Arabia has a charming strangeness, like the thought of hookahs being banned in Minneapolis.

ANTON SHAMMAS, the author of "Arabesques" (translated from the Hebrew by Vivian Eden; Harper & Row; \$16.95), shows no lack of sophistication in the ways of the literary West: his novel about Palestinians is intricately conceived and beautifully written, with epigraphs from Clive James, George Bernard Shaw, and John Barth. A crisp, luminous, and nervy mixture of fantasy and autobiography, it has not one but two heroes called Anton Shammas and a number of scenes set in Iowa City, during a session of the International Writing Program. Yet this elegant example of postmodern baroque, like Abdelrahman Munif's long and muffled quasi-oral tale, repels our attempts to enter it wholeheartedly; we feel we are not getting out of the book nearly as much emotionalized information as the author put into it. Something gets stuck. Is the stickiness to be blamed on our lack of familiarity with the Arab world? Munif's Muslims seemed, until the

demonic modern world scrambled their souls, familiar: they were the noble cuffed savages admired by T. E. Lawrence, Wilfred Thesiger, and other doughty British travellers. Shammas's people are of a type we rarely hear about: Palestinian Christians. Shammas himself is a walking paradox: a non-Jew who considers himself an Israeli, a poet in both Arabic and Hebrew, and a columnist in two Hebrew-language newspapers. He has told the *Times* that he feels he has more in common with the average Israeli than with the average Palestinian or Arab living in Jordan. One wonders how long he can maintain his balancing act in a land where, as of now, Palestinian Arabs are assassinating officials who are perceived as collaborating with the Israeli authorities. Already, for having presumed to chide the beloved mayor of Jerusalem, Teddy Kollek, in a newspaper column, he has received death threats, and graffiti spelling "Arab vermin" have appeared on his apartment building. At present, Shammas—in his book-jacket photograph a studious-looking young man pensively scratching his ear—resides in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where he has a Rockefeller Fellowship in Middle Eastern literature; a note on the translation tells us that he helped Vivian Eden produce this smooth English version of his "very allusive and layered kind of Hebrew with equally complex Arabic resonances, especially in the rhythm section."

We expect, perhaps, a Palestinian novel to be about the present Palestinian problem, much as some foreigners feel that an American novel has a duty to grapple with our race problem or the horrors of capitalism. But "Arabesques" is fundamentally nostalgic: its most affecting scenes render the narrator's childhood experiences in the small Galilean village of Fassuta, and its principal narrative thrust is toward the past, toward the unravelling of the tangled past lives of the boy's parents, aunts, and uncles. There is war in the background, but much of it is the war to drive out the British before 1948, and some of it is the old and still continuing civil/religious war in Lebanon, where Anton's mother comes from and her family, the Bitars, still live. There is scarcely a Jewish character in the book, nor is Jewish clout felt until the epilogue, wherein an Israeli demolition expert is called in, by Uncle



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