

with eight other items, most of them shot in Lyon. And all this was done within the lifetimes of some still surviving people.

Chardère explained that various special exhibits run continually—I saw a good one of still photography by someone new—and that there are always film series in progress. The current series is on the subject of actors: the poster features Brando and Garbo. He showed me the very inviting small screening room downstairs, with comfortable scarlet-upholstered seats that, he says, are filled almost every day for the film programs.

Then Chardère loaded me with posters and postcards, pamphlets and brochures, and put me in the car that he had summoned to take me back to my hotel—a good distance because the institute is in an outlying district. (Called Monplaisir. Ah, those Lyonnaises.) This is my note of thanks.

Since then, I've been thinking of that day less as a trip to a museum than as a visit to some people whom I was too late to catch. The richness and generosity of the villa itself seem to reflect the warmth of the people who lived there. What excitement those rooms must have known in those days when a new age was in birth. I felt that I had sensed it during

my visit. Fanciful, of course, but that's what fancy is for.

A screenwriter sends a letter of objection to my point in a recent piece about the scarcity of good scripts as against the plenitude of good acting and directing. This man isn't making the usual case that there are good scripts out there that aren't being done—something that playwrights also charge. He says, and I saw the film he's speaking of, that after the script is written, a lot of other hands reach in to mess it up, and the writer gets blamed. I'm sure that this is true in many instances, and I'm also sure that, for critics, there's nothing to be done about it. All we can go by is the credit as given. Anything else would lead to rumor-mongering and to other unfairnesses in other directions.

I once praised a director for a certain shot, and he told me that his assistant had suggested it. So, every time we say, "The direction is by X," we ought to be saying, "The direction is attributed to X." The same pattern applies to writers. But to use that pattern every time would be unfair when it isn't true, and anyway it's too clumsy. All I can add is that, whoever is responsible for the current screenplays of the world, most of them are dreadful. •

The Oil Encounter and the novel.

Petrofiction

BY AMITAV GHOSH

If the Spice Trade has any twentieth-century equivalent, it can only be the oil industry. In its economic and strategic value, as well as its ability to generate far-flung political, military, and cultural encounters, oil is clearly the only commodity that can serve as an analogy for pepper. In all matters technical, of course, the comparison is weighted grossly in favor of oil. But in at least one domain it is the Spice Trade that can claim the clear advantage: in the quality of the literature that it nurtured.

Within a few decades of the discovery of the sea route to India, the Portuguese poet Luis de Camões had produced the *Lusiads*, the epic poem that chronicled Vasco da Gama's voyage and in effect

AMITAV GHOSH is the author most recently of *The Shadow Lines* (Penguin).

conjured Portugal into literary nationhood. The Oil Encounter, on the other hand, has produced scarcely a single work of note. In English, for example, it has generated little apart from some more or less second-rate travel literature and a vast amount of academic ephemera—nothing remotely of the quality or the intellectual distinction of the travelogues and narratives produced by such sixteenth-century Portuguese writers as Duarte Barbosa, Tomé Pires, and Gaspar Correia. As for an epic poem, the very idea is ludicrous: to the principal protagonists in the Oil Encounter (which means, in effect, America and Americans on the one hand and the peoples of the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf on the other), the history of oil is a matter of embarrassment verging on the unspeakable, the pornographic. It is perhaps the

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one cultural issue on which the two sides are in complete agreement.

Still, if the Oil Encounter has proved barren, it is surely through no fault of its own. It would be hard to imagine a story that is its equal in drama, or in historical resonance. Consider its Livingstonian beginnings: the Westerner with his caravan-loads of machines and instruments thrusting himself unannounced upon small, isolated communities, deep within some of the most hostile environments on earth. And think of the postmodern present: city-states where virtually everyone is a "foreigner"; admixtures of peoples and cultures on a scale never before envisaged; vicious systems of helotry juxtaposed with unparalleled wealth; deserts transformed by technology and military devastation on an apocalyptic scale.

It is a story that evokes horror, sympathy, guilt, rage, and a great deal else, depending on the listener's situation. The one thing that can be said of it with absolute certainty is that no one anywhere who has any thought either for his conscience or his self-preservation can afford to ignore it. So why, when there is so much to write about, has this encounter proved so imaginatively sterile?

On the American side, the answers are not far to seek. To a great many Americans, oil smells bad.

It reeks of unavoidable overseas entanglements, a worrisome foreign dependency, economic uncertainty, risky and expensive military enterprises; of thousands of dead civilians and children and all the troublesome questions that lie buried in their graves. Bad enough at street level, the smell of oil gets a lot worse by the time it seeps into those rooms where serious fiction is written and read. It acquires more than just a whiff of that deep suspicion of the Arab and Muslim worlds that wafts through so much of American intellectual life. And to make things still worse, it begins to smell of pollution and environmental hazards. It reeks, it stinks, it becomes a Problem that can be written about only in the language of Solutions.

But there are other reasons why there isn't a Great American Oil Novel, and some of them lie hidden within the institutions that shape American writing today. It would be hard indeed to imagine the writing school that could teach its graduates to find their way through the uncharted firmaments of the Oil Encounter. In a way, the professionalization of fiction has had much the same effect in America as it had in Britain in another imperial age: as though in precise counterpoint to the increasing geo-

graphical elasticity of the country's involvements, its fictional gaze has turned inward, becoming ever more introspective, ever more concentrated upon its own self-definition. In other words, it has fastened upon a stock of themes and subjects each of which is accompanied by a well-tested pedagogic technology. Try and imagine a major American writer taking on the Oil Encounter. The idea is literally inconceivable.

It isn't fair, of course, to point the finger at American writers. There isn't very much they could write about: neither they nor anyone else really knows anything at all about the human experiences that surround the production of oil. A great deal has been invested in ensuring the muteness of the Oil Encounter: on the American (or Western) side, through regimes of strict corporate secrecy; on the Arab side, by the physical and demographic separation of oil installations and their workers from the indigenous population.

The Trench

by Abdelrahman Munif
translated by Peter Theroux
(Pantheon, 554 pp., \$25)

Cities of Salt

by Abdelrahman Munif
translated by Peter Theroux
(Vintage, 627 pp., \$12.95 paper)

It is no accident, then, that the genre of "My Days in the Gulf" has yet to be invented. Most Western oilmen of this generation have no reason to be anything other than silent about their working lives. Their experience of the Middle East is culturally a nullity, lived out largely within portable versions of Western suburbia.

In some ways the story is oddly similar on the Arab side, except that there it is a quirk of geography—of geology, to be exact—that is largely to blame for oil's literary barrenness. Perversely, oil chose to be discovered in precisely those parts of the Middle East that have been the most marginal in the development of modern Arab culture and literature—on the outermost peripheries of such literary centers as Cairo and Beirut.

Until quite recently, the littoral of the Gulf was considered an outlying region within the Arab world, a kind of frontier whose inhabitants' worth lay more in their virtuous simplicity than in their cultural aspirations. The slight curl of the lip that inevitably accompanies an attitude of that kind has become, if anything, a good deal more pronounced now that many Arab writers from Egypt and Lebanon—countries with faltering economies but rich literary traditions—

are constrained to earn their livelihood in the Gulf. As a result, young Arab writers are no more likely to write about the Oil Encounter than are their Western counterparts. No matter how long they have lived in the Gulf or in Libya, when it comes to the practice of fiction they generally prefer to return to the familiar territories staked out by their literary forebears. There are, of course, some notable exceptions (such as the Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani's remarkable story "Men in the Sun"), but otherwise the Gulf serves all too often as a metaphor for corruption and decadence; a surrogate for the expression of the resentment that so many in the Arab world feel toward the regimes that rule the oil kingdoms.

In fact, very few people anywhere write about the Oil Encounter. The silence extends much further than the Arabic- or English-speaking worlds. Take Bengali, a language deeply addicted to the travelogue as a genre. Every year several dozen accounts of travel in America, Europe, China, and so on are published in Bengali, along with innumerable short stories and novels about expatriates in New Jersey, California, and various parts of Europe. Yet the hundreds of thousands of Bengali-speaking people who live and work in the oil kingdoms scarcely ever merit literary attention—or any kind of interest, for that matter.

As one of the few people who have tried to write about the floating world of oil, I can bear witness to its slipperiness, to the ways in which it tends to trip fiction into incoherence. In the end, perhaps, it is the craft of writing itself—or rather writing as we know it today—that is responsible for the muteness of the Oil Encounter. The experiences that oil has generated run counter to many of the historical imperatives that have shaped writing over the last couple of centuries and given it its distinctive forms.

The territory of oil is bafflingly multilingual, for example, while the novel, with its conventions of naturalistic dialogue, is most at home within monolingual speech communities (within nation-states, in other words). Equally, the novel is never more comfortable than when it is luxuriating in a "sense of place," reveling in its unique power to evoke mood and atmosphere. But the experiences associated with oil are lived out within a space that is no place at all, a world that is intrinsically displaced, heterogeneous, and international. It is a world that poses a radical challenge not merely to the practice of writing as we know it, but to much of modern culture:

to such notions as the idea of distinguishable and distinct civilizations, or recognizable and separate "societies." It is a world whose closest analogues are medieval, not modern—which is probably why it has proved so successful in eluding the gaze of contemporary global culture. The truth is that we do not yet possess the form that can give the Oil Encounter a literary expression.

For this reason alone, *Cities of Salt*, the Jordanian writer Abdelrahman Munif's monumental five-part cycle of novels dealing with the history of oil, ought to be regarded as a work of immense significance. It so happens that the first novel in the cycle is also in many ways a wonderful work of fiction, perhaps even in parts a great one. Peter Theroux's excellent English translation of this novel was published a few years ago under the eponymous title *Cities of Salt*, and now its successor, *The Trench*, has appeared.

Munif's prose is extremely difficult to translate, being rich in ambiguities and unfamiliar dialectical usages, and so Theroux deserves to be commended for his translations—especially of the first book, where he has done a wonderful job. He is scrupulously faithful to both the letter and the spirit of the original, while sacrificing nothing in readability. Where Theroux has intervened, it is in what would appear to be the relatively unimportant matters of punctuation and typography. (He has numbered each chapter, though the Arabic text does not really have chapters at all, but merely extended breaks between pages; and he has also eliminated Munif's favorite device of punctuation, a sentence or paragraph that ends with two period points rather than one, to indicate indeterminacy, inconclusivity, what you will ...) These changes are slight enough, but they have the overall effect of producing a text that is much more "naturalistic" than the original. One day a professor of comparative literature somewhere will have fun using Theroux's translations to document the changes in protocol that texts undergo in being shaped to conform to different cultural expectations.

The Arabic title of Munif's first novel has the connotation of "the wilderness" or "the desert," and it begins with what is possibly the best and most detailed account of that mythical event, a First Encounter, in fiction—all the better for being, for once, glimpsed from the wrong end of the telescope. The novel opens, appropriately, on an oasis whose name identifies it as the source, or the beginning: Wadi al-Uyoun, "an outpouring of green in the harsh, obdurate

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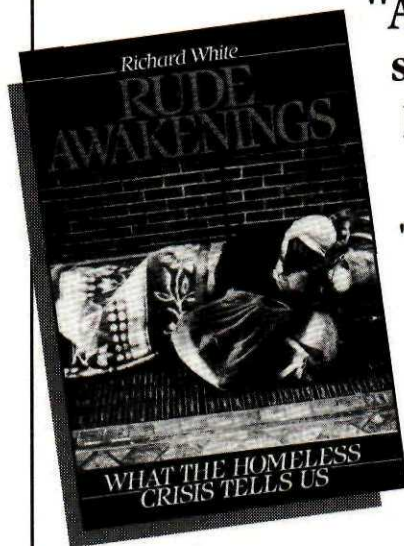
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desert." To the caravans that occasionally pass through it, as to its inhabitants, the wadi is an "earthly paradise," and to none more so than one Miteb al-Hathal ("the Troublemaker"), an elder of a tribe called al-Atoum:

Left to himself to talk about Wadi al-Uyoun, Miteb al-Hathal would go on in a way no one could believe, for he could not confine himself to the good air and the sweetness of the water ... or to the magnificent nights; he would tell stories which in some cases dated back to the days of Noah, or so said the old men.

But unsettling portents soon begin to intrude upon this earthly paradise. One evening at sunset, one of Miteb's sons returns from watering the family's livestock and tells his father of the arrival of "three foreigners with two marsh Arabs, and they speak Arabic"—"People say they came to look for water." But when Miteb goes to find out for himself, he sees them going to "places no one dreamed of going," collecting "unthinkable things," and writing "things no one understood," and he comes to the conclusion that "they certainly didn't come for water—they want something else. But what could they possibly want? What is there in this dry desert besides dust, sand, and starvation?"

The people of the wadi hear the foreigners asking questions "about dialects, about tribes and their disputes, about religion and sects, about the rocks, the winds and the rainy season"; they listen to them quoting from the Koran and repeating the Muslim profession of faith; and they begin to "wonder among themselves if these were jinn, because people like these who knew all those things and spoke Arabic yet never prayed were not Muslims and could not be normal humans." Reading the portents, Miteb the Troublemaker senses that something terrible is about to befall the wadi and its people, but he knows neither what it is nor how to prevent it. Then suddenly, to everyone's relief, the foreigners leave, and the wadi settles back, just a trifle uneasily, to its old ways.

But soon enough the strangers come back. They are no longer just unspecified "foreigners" but Americans, and they are everywhere, digging, collecting, and handing out "coins of English and Arab gold." Their liberality soon wins them friends in the wadi, but even the closest of their accomplices is utterly bewildered by their doings: "nothing was stranger than their morning prayers: they began by kicking their legs and raising their arms in the air, moving their bodies to the left and right, and

then touching their toes until they were panting and drenched with sweat." Then a number of "yellow iron hulks" arrive, adding to the bewilderment of the wadi's inhabitants: "Could a man approach them without injury? What were they for and how did they behave—did they eat like animals or not?" Fearing the worst, the people of the wadi go to their emir to protest, only to be told that the Americans have "come from the ends of the earth to help us"—because "There are oceans of blessings under this soil."

The protests are quickly suppressed, Miteb and other troublemakers are threatened with death, and before long the wadi's orchards and dwellings are demolished by the "yellow iron hulks." After the flattening of his beloved wadi, Miteb mounts his "white Omani she-camel" and vanishes into the hills, becoming a prophetic spectral figure who emerges only occasionally from the desert to cry doom and to strike terror into those who collaborate with the oilmen. As for Miteb's family and the rest of the wadi's inhabitants, they are quickly carried away by passing camel caravans. A number of them set out for a coastal settlement called Harran ("the Overheated"), where the new oil installations are to be built, a "cluster of low mud houses"—a place evidently very much as Doha and Kuwait were only a few decades ago.

The rest of Munif's narrative centers upon the early stages of Harran's transformation: the construction of the first roads, the gradual influx of people, the building of the oil installations, the port and the emir's palace. Working in shifts, the newly arrived Arab workers and their American overseers slowly conjure two new townships into being, Arab Harran and American Harran. Every evening, after the day's work is done, the men drift home

to the two sectors like streams coursing down a slope, one broad and one small, the Americans to their camp and the Arabs to theirs, the Americans to their swimming pool, where their racket could be heard in the nearby barracks behind the barbed wire. When silence fell the workers guessed the Americans had gone into their air-conditioned rooms whose thick curtains shut everything out: sunlight, dust, flies, and Arabs.

Soon Harran no longer quite belongs to its people, and the single most important episode in the building of the new city has little to do with them. It is the story of an R-and-R ship that pays the city a brief visit for the benefit of the Americans living in the yet-unfinished oiltown:

The astonished people of Harran approached [the ship] imperceptibly, step by step, like sleepwalkers. They could not believe their eyes and ears. Had there ever been anything like this ship, this huge and magnificent? Where else in the world were there women like these, who resembled both milk and figs in their tanned whiteness? Was it possible that men could shamelessly walk around with women, with no fear of others? Were these their wives, or sweethearts, or something else?

For a whole day and night, the inhabitants of Harran watch the Americans of the oiltown disporting themselves with the newly arrived women, and by the time the ship finally leaves "the men's balls are ready to burst." This event eventually comes to mark the beginning of the history of this city of salt:

This day gave Harran a birth date, recording when and how it was built, for most people have no memory of Harran before that day. Even its own natives, who had lived there since the arrival of the first frightening group of Americans and watched with terror the realignment of the town's shoreline and hills—the Harranis, born and bred there, saddened by the destruction of their houses, recalling the old sorrows of lost travelers and the dead—remembered the day the ship came better than any other day, with fear, awe, and surprise. It was practically the only date they remembered.

The most sustained wrong note in *Cities of Salt* is reserved for its conclusion. The novel ends with a dramatic confrontation between the old Harran and the new: between a world where the emir sat in coffeehouses and gossiped with the Bedouin, where everybody had time for illness else and no one was ever so ill that they needed remedies that were sold for money, and a universe in which Mr. Middleton of the oil company holds their livelihoods in his hands, where the newly arrived Lebanese doctor Subhi al-Mahmilji ("physician and surgeon, specialist in internal and venereal diseases, Universities of Berlin and Vienna") charges huge fees for the smallest service, where the emir spies on the townspeople with a telescope and needs a cadre of secret police to tell him what they are thinking. "Every day it's gotten worse," says one longtime resident of Harran, pointing toward the American enclave: "I told you, I told every one of you, the Americans are the disease, they're the root of the problem, and what's happened now is nothing compared to what they have in store for us."

The matter comes to a head when a series of events—a killing by the secret

police, sightings of the troublemaking Miteb, the laying-off of twenty-three workers—prompts the workers of Harran to invent spontaneously the notion of the strike. They stop working and march through the town chanting:

... The pipeline was built by beasts of prey.
We will safeguard our rights.
The Americans do not own it.
This land is our land.

Then, led by two of Miteb the Troublemaker's sons, they storm the oil installation, sweeping aside the emir's secret police and the oil company's guards, and rescue some of their fellow workers who'd been trapped inside. And the book ends with an unequivocal triumph for the workers: the half-crazed emir flees the city after ordering the oil company to reinstate its sacked employees.

It is not hard to see why Munif would succumb to the temptation to end his book on an optimistic note. His is a devastatingly painful story: a slow, roundabout recounting of the almost accidental humiliation of one people by another. There is very little bitterness in Munif's telling of it. Its effectiveness lies rather in the gradual accumulation of detail. Munif's American oilmen are neither rapacious nor heartless. On the contrary, they are eager, businesslike, and curious. When invited to an Arab wedding, they ask "about everything, about words, clothing and food, about the names of the bridegroom and his bride and whether they had known each other before, and if they had ever met... Every small thing excited the Americans' amazement." It is not through direct confrontations that the Harranis meet their humiliation. Quite the opposite. Theirs is the indignity of not being taken seriously at all; of being regarded as an obstacle on the scale of a minor technical snag in the process of drilling for oil.

Better than any other, Munif's method succeeds in showing us why so many people in the Middle East are moved to clutch at straws to regain some measure of self-respect for themselves; why so many Saudis, for example, felt the humiliation of Iraq's army almost as their own. But in fact the story is even grimmer than Munif's version of it, and the ending he chooses is founded in pure wish-fulfillment. It probably has more to do with its author's own history than with the story of oil in the Gulf.

Abdelrahman Munif was born in 1933, into a family of Saudi Arabian origin settled in Jordan. (He was later stripped of his Saudi citizenship for

political reasons.) He studied in Baghdad and Cairo, and went on to earn a Ph.D in oil economics at the University of Belgrade—back in the days of Titoite socialism, when books written by Progressive writers always ended in working-class victories. Since then Munif's working life has been spent mainly in the oil industry in the Middle East, albeit in a rather sequestered corner of it: he has occupied important positions in the Syrian Oil Company, and he has served as editor in chief of an Iraqi journal called *Oil and Development*.

None, in other words, is in a better position than Munif to know that the final episode in his story is nothing more than an escapist fantasy. He must certainly be aware that the work forces of the international oil companies in the Arabian peninsula have never succeeded in becoming politically effective. When they showed signs of restiveness in the 1950s, they were ruthlessly and very effectively suppressed by their rulers, with the help of the oil companies. Over the last couple of decades, the powers-that-be in the oil sheikhdoms (and who knows exactly who they are) have followed a careful strategy for keeping their workers quiescent: they have held the Arab component of their work forces at a strictly regulated numerical level, while importing large numbers of migrants from several of the poorer countries of Asia.

The policy has proved magically effective in the short run. It has created a class of workers who, being separated from the indigenous population (and from each other) by barriers of culture and language, are politically passive in a way that a predominantly Arab work force could never be within the Arab-speaking world—a class that is all the more amenable to control for living perpetually under threat of deportation. It is, in fact, a class of helots, with virtually no rights at all, and its members are often subjected to the most hideous kinds of physical abuse. Their experience makes a mockery of the human rights rhetoric that accompanied the Gulf war; the fact that the war has effected no changes in the labor policies of the oil sheikhdoms is proof in the eyes of millions of people in Asia and Africa that the "new world order" is designed to defend the rights of certain people at the expense of others.

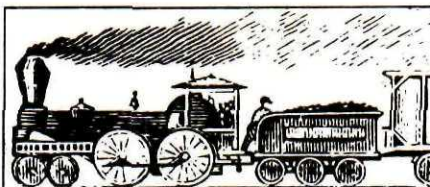
Thus, the story of the real consequences of the sort of political restiveness that Munif describes in *Cities of Salt* is not likely to warm the heart quite as cozily as the ending he gives his novel. But if Munif can be accused of naïveté on this score, he must still be given

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credit for seeing that the workplace, where democracy is said to begin, is the site where the foundations of contemporary authoritarianism in the oil sheikhdoms were laid.

Today it is a commonplace in the Western media that aspirations toward democracy in the Arabian peninsula are a part of the fallout of changes ushered in by oil and the consequent breakdown of "traditional" society. In fact, in several instances exactly the opposite is true: oil and the developments it has brought in its wake have been directly responsible for the suppression of whatever democratic aspirations and tendencies there were within the region.

Certain parts of the Gulf such as Bahrain, whose commercial importance far predates the discovery of oil, have long possessed sizable groups of businessmen, professionals, and skilled workers—a stratum not unlike a middle class. On the whole, that class shared the ideology of the nationalist movements of various nearby countries such as India, Egypt, and Iran. It was their liberal aspirations that became the first victims of oil's most bizarre, most murderous creation: the petro-despot, dressed in a snowy *dishdasha* and armed with state-of-the-art weaponry—the creature whose gestation and birth Munif sets out to chronicle in the second volume of the *Cities of Salt* cycle, *The Trench*.

Unfortunately *The Trench* comes as a great disappointment. The narrative now moves away from Harran to a city in the interior called Mooran ("the Changeable"), which serves as the seat of the country's ruling dynasty. With the move to the capital, the focus of the narrative now shifts to the country's rulers.

The story of *The Trench* is common enough in the oil sheikhdoms of the Arabian peninsula: it begins with the accession to power of a sultan by the name of Khazael and it ends with his deposition, when he is removed from the throne by rival factions within the royal family. Munif describes the transformations that occur during Sultan Khazael's reign by following the career of one of his chief advisers, a Syrian doctor called Subhi al-Mahmilji (who earlier played an important part in the creation of the new Harran). The story has great potential, but Munif's voice does not prove equal to the demands of the narrative. It loses the note of wonder, of detached and reverential curiosity, that lent such magic to parts of *Cities of Salt*, while gaining neither the volume nor the richness of coloring that its material demands.

Instead Munif shifts to satire, and the

change proves disastrous. He makes a valiant attempt—not for nothing are his books banned in various countries in the Arabian peninsula—but satire has no hope of success when directed against figures like Sultan Khazael and his family. No one, certainly no mere writer of fiction, could hope to satirize the royal families of the Arabian peninsula with a greater breadth of imagination than they do themselves. As countless newspaper reports can prove, factual accounts of their doings are well able to beggar the fictional imagination. Indeed, in the eyes of the world at large, Arab and non-Arab, the oil sheikh scarcely exists except as a caricature; he is the late twentieth century's most potent symbol of decadence, hypocrisy, and corruption. He pre-empted the very possibility of satire. Of course, it wasn't always so. The compulsions and the absurdities of an earlier generation of oil sheikhs had their roots in a genuinely tragic historical predicament. But those very real dilemmas are reduced to caricature in Munif's Sultan Khazael.

Even where it is successful, moreover, Munif's satire is founded ultimately upon a kind of nostalgia, a romantic hearkening back to a pristine, unspoiled past. It is not merely Americans from the oil companies who are the intruders here: every "foreigner" is to some degree an interloper in Harran and Mooran. As a result, Munif is led to

ignore those very elements of the history of the oil kingdoms that ought to inspire his curiosity, the extraordinary admixtures of cultures, peoples, and languages that have resulted from the Oil Encounter.

Workers from other parts of Asia hardly figure at all in Munif's story. When they do it is either as stereotypes (a Pakistani doctor in *Cities of Salt* bears the name Muhammad Jinnah) or as faceless crowds, a massed symbol of chaos: "Once Harran had been a city of fishermen and travelers coming home, but now it belonged to no one; its people were featureless, of all varieties and yet strangely unvaried. They were all of humanity and yet no one at all, an assemblage of languages, accents, colors and religions." The irony of *The Trench* is that in the end it leaves its writer a prisoner of his intended victim. Once Munif moves away from the earliest stages of the Oil Encounter, where each side's roles and attributes and identities are clearly assigned, to a more complicated reality—to the crowded, multilingual, culturally polyphonic present of the Arabian peninsula—he is unable to free himself from the prison house of xenophobia, bigotry, and racism that was created by precisely such figures as his Sultan Khazael. In its failure, *The Trench* provides still one more lesson in the difficulties that the experience of oil presents for the novelistic imagination. •

The Gentleman as Hero

By P. N. FURBANK

Trollope: A Biography by N. John Hall

(Oxford University Press, 581 pp., \$35)

Chameleonism in a literary biographer, it could be argued, is a vice, and those famous "sympathies" between biographer and subject, of whom it is said admiringly that the prose of the one can hardly be distinguished from the prose of the other, are a snare. It is bad tactics, and a fault of taste, to be epigrammatic in a life of Oscar Wilde or mellifluous in a life of Walter Pater.

The rule would certainly seem to apply in the case of Anthony Trollope, for reasons that reach deep into his life and his character. For he was a signal example of a self-made, or "twice-born," man. The

central theme of his *Autobiography* is how a wretched and slovenly idler took an iron grip on himself and developed a bent for, and a delighted addiction to, thoroughness and regularity; how a misfit found his salvation in turning himself into a well-running machine.

There was a price to pay for this mechanization, but it was not altogether the expected one. It had no hardening effect on his heart and feeling. He remained a truculent but tenderhearted man. But it caused him, a very intelligent person, to dismiss an enormous number of things as not to be talked about, or even thought about. On a few

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