

AN ARABIAN MASTER

THE PREMATURE DEATH of Abd al-Rahman Munif on 24 January 2004 brought to an end the career of not only a major Arab novelist but also one of the most remarkable figures of contemporary world literature. It is difficult to think of another writer, in any language, whose life experience and literary enterprise has the same kind of dramatic range—or whose writing remains under posthumous ban in his homeland. Among Middle Eastern societies, the Saudi kingdom has notoriously been in the rearguard of any kind of modern culture. Yet this is the society that was to produce, however indirectly and involuntarily, one of the most advanced and incendiary writers of the Arab world, politically active as militant or technician across five countries, author of fifteen novels—including the most monumental of all modern narratives in Arabic—and another nine books of non-fiction. It will take some time for the scale and detail of this achievement to be fully registered. But an interim account is overdue.

Munif's father was a Saudi caravan trader from Najd who travelled widely in the Middle East, establishing homes in Syria and Jordan as well as Arabia; his mother was an Iraqi from Baghdad. He was born in Amman in 1933, the youngest son in the family, a few months after the first concession to the Americans to explore for oil was signed by Ibn Saud in Riyadh, an event to which he linked his own fate. For the arrival of the Americans heralded the beginning of the end of a world in which merchants like his father could roam freely in the Arab lands, unhindered by borders or politics. Soon after Munif's birth, his father died. The family remained in Jordan, where he was brought up largely by his Iraqi grandmother, while his elder brothers took up their father's trade, and provided for the household. Munif has left us a vivid description of his childhood in Amman, where he went first to a *kuttab* for traditional learning of the Qur'an, before being admitted to an elementary school

next to the headquarters of Glubb Pasha, the British commander who largely ran the Transjordanian state for the Hashemite dynasty under the Mandate.¹ Political events pressed on the boy from the start. Among his first memories were the mysterious death of Ghazi, king of Iraq, in 1939, and the pro-Axis—because anti-British—sympathies of most ordinary people in Amman during the Second World War. In his early teens, he witnessed close-up the disastrous Arab–Israeli war of 1948, and the catastrophe that befell the Palestinians at the hands of Zionist forces with the complicity of the—now formally independent—Jordanian monarchy; events that made a profound impression on him. In the summer, he would spend his holidays with the Saudi side of the family in Najd.

In 1952 he obtained his baccalaureate and went to Baghdad to study law. At Baghdad University he found an intense political ferment. The campus teemed with political groups covering the whole spectrum from communists to the pro-British conservatives, with many shades in between, and Munif became an early member of the Ba’th Party, establishing himself as one of its most cultured and trusted cadres.² His Saudi nationality made him a prized figure in a movement of pan-Arab ambitions, providing him from the start with an advantageous position in its germinating organization. In 1955 Nuri al-Said’s regime signed the Baghdad Pact with Britain, Turkey, Iran and Pakistan, unleashing a wave of protests in the region, and Munif was banished from Iraq for his political activities before completing his university education. Moving to Egypt, he arrived in Cairo in time to witness Nasser’s nationalization of the Suez Canal and live through the Anglo-French-Israeli invasion of 1956. A year later he obtained his degree in law, and in 1958 won a Ba’th Party scholarship to Yugoslavia, where he studied the economics of oil at Belgrade University, completing a doctorate in 1961. Arab nationalist fervour was at its peak and the nationalization of the oil industry in Iraq

¹ He describes these years in *Sirat Madinah*, Beirut 1994, his partly fictionalized memoir of Amman, of which an English translation was published as *Story of a City: A Childhood in Amman*, London 1996. A fuller account can be found in a book-length interview in which Munif also provides details on his controversial and thorny relationship with the Iraqi Ba’th Party: Maher Jarrar, *Abd al-Rahman Munif wa-l-‘Iraq* [Abd al-Rahman Munif and Iraq], Beirut 2004.

² Munif’s intellectual and political orientations were closer to those of the Communist Party at the time, but he vehemently opposed their acceptance of Israel, and slavish adherence to Moscow’s line. His strong nationalist sentiments and views on Palestine led him to reject the CP and instead join the Ba’th, in which he was a critical and radicalizing influence.

was high on the agenda of the Ba'th. The party was preparing cadres who could run the industry in years to come, and Munif clearly saw his future in this field.

Upon his return to the Arab world, Munif worked for the Ba'th Party head office in Beirut for a year or so. When, in the spring of 1963, the Ba'th came to power almost simultaneously in Iraq and Syria, he was critical of the brutality of the Ba'th coup and its aftermath in the former. This led Salih al-Sa'di's government to deny him entry to Iraq when he needed it most, having recently been stripped of his Saudi nationality as a threat to the kingdom.³ In the autumn, when a counter-coup ousted the Ba'th regime in Iraq, he went to Syria, where the party held on to power, and worked in the Oil Ministry for a decade (1964–73). But it seems that his years in Yugoslavia had radicalized Munif, endowing him with too much sceptical humanism and questioning intellectualism to be a good party member. Gradually becoming a discordant voice in its ranks, he resigned from the Ba'th in 1965. But he remained committed to a revolutionary transformation of the Arab world. In the years after the searing Arab defeat in the Six Day War and the crushing of Palestinian resistance by the Jordanian monarchy in 1970, he wrote his first book, a well-documented study of the future of the oil industry. Published in Beirut in 1972, it laid out many of the basic policies later pursued by the Iraqi Ba'th.⁴

Literary debut

In the following year Munif published his first novel, *Trees and the Assassination of Marzuq*.⁵ Coming to fiction late, when he was almost forty, he could draw on first-hand knowledge of political life in several Arab countries, and an intimate experience of certain kinds of

³ Thereafter travelling on Algerian, Yemeni or Iraqi passports.

⁴ The original title in Arabic: *Mabda' al-Musharakah wa-Ta'mim al-Bitrol al-Arabi* [The Principle of Partnership and the Nationalization of Arab Oil], Beirut 1972. The book seems to have been published either independently by the author or by the Party, for it has no recognizable publisher. Its first part surveys the history of American penetration of Arabia and the Gulf and the political context in which the oil companies were forced—after much resistance—to accept the principle of partnership. The second part of the book is devoted to a study of the history of the Iraqi oil industry, and suggests how the latter stands to benefit from a much more radical approach, bordering on nationalization.

⁵ He completed the novel in the spring of 1971, and it appeared in 1973.

revolutionary organization and their outcomes. By this time, the scene had darkened nearly everywhere. In Syria, the radical anti-imperialist wing of the Ba'ath leadership had been ousted when Hafez al-Asad toppled Salah Jedid, in an epilogue to the Jordanian Black September, and a more repressive regime installed. Nasser, after a vicious persecution of the Egyptian Left, had expired while publicly embracing King Hussein. Such was the immediate background to Munif's earliest works of fiction, architecturally characterized by a striking dualism. *Trees and the Assassination of Marzuq* opens with two strangers meeting on a train in an unnamed Arab country.⁶ The first, Ilyas, is an ordinary man who has lost his orchard in a gamble and the woman he loved in childbirth, and with them all traditional bearings and peace of mind. Descending into the alienated world of hired labour, as a waiter, hotel worker, street vendor, he clings to the hope that a better life is still possible at the next station of his life, that a kinder woman and more beautiful trees can yet be found. His fall is representative of the destruction of a rural community and its way of life that had become the experience of so many ordinary Arabs, but Munif does not exonerate him from responsibility for his plight, as the contradictions in Ilyas's narrative multiply to reveal an ingrained mentality of defeat, which thrives on accepting fate and attributing blame for it to others.

The fellow traveller to whom he tells his story is, by contrast, an intellectual, setting out to serve as interpreter to a French archaeological mission looking for clay tablets in the desert of a neighbouring country. Mansur too is a product of loss, formed by a catastrophe on a larger historical scale, the Palestinian *nakbah* of 1948. Conscripted to fight in one of the Arab armies against Israel, he saw at first hand the spirited enthusiasm of the young soldiers of the time, and cannot come to terms with the way in which the disaster has been absorbed by the surrounding regimes. 'I understand that we are defeated once, I understand that we are defeated a hundred times, but what I cannot understand is that we conceive our defeats as victory'. Like many Arab intellectuals Mansur

⁶ With the notable exception of his last, Munif's novels rarely designate the country in which they are set, even where the reference is clear. As he once put it: 'If, for example, we discuss the political prison in a confined territory such as Iraq or Saudi Arabia, it seems as if we are exonerating other places or as if political prisons do not exist in these places, especially when we know they exist from the Atlantic to the Gulf. Thus I consider the generalization of this subject is the ultimate specificity': interview given to *L'Orient Express* in 1999 under the title 'Crisis in the Arab World', and translated in *Al Jadid*, no. 45, 2004.

then goes on to spend several years studying in Europe, before returning to teach history at a university, which from the outset he wants to do with a difference—‘certainly not the history of the kings, hucksters or pimps who try to look like roosters, but of simple people who went unnoticed, whose names no one mentioned in a book, or bothered to inscribe on a piece of marble’. This approach to the past does not endear him to the authorities, particularly when he draws the attention of students to the farcical way in which Faisal was crowned King of Iraq in 1920. Mansur’s questioning of the legitimacy of the Arab regimes, his exposure of the rampant corruption and lies that dominate public life in the Arab world, and above all his reminders of the constant Arab failure to check the Zionist colonial project, make his brand of history lethal and inadmissible. He is interrogated and dismissed. After three years of unemployment, poverty, humiliation and excessive drinking, he is granted a passport to go into exile—a condition that would become one of Munif’s most frequently recurring themes.⁷

The interaction between these two retrievals of the past, each narrative woven with stray reminiscences and repeated digressions, gives a sharp questioning edge to the novel as it probes the sensitive question of continuous Arab defeat from the perspective of the insider. The university teacher is no more able to master his fate than the farmer. Typically, Mansur cannot reconcile private life and public roles; unable to take the Belgian girl he loved in Europe back with him, he also refuses to stay in Europe for her, and is then no more successful with an Arab woman at home. Personal and political failings reflect each other. The conclusion of the novel takes the form of a third-person report by a journalist. On learning that his principled friend Marzuq has been murdered by the regime at home, Mansur tries to shoot himself in the mirror, and ends up in a mental asylum. But what becomes of his contemporaries is worse.

⁷ ‘To be an exile means that you are an accused person from the outset. Never mind the nature of the accusation or from where it emanates, the important thing is that you acquired an ambiguous status whose explication results in more and varied accusations. You accept this ambiguous status and act accordingly as an ambassador for a cause and a people, even though no one has nominated or empowered you . . . You escaped prison and restrictions in your land, but you become an invited guest in another land, and this makes you undesirable, an incessant question that begs an answer and a bargaining chip in a political and cultural game beyond your control’. Abd al-Rahman Munif, *Al-Katib wa-’l-Manfa: Humum wa-Afaq al-Riwayah al-’Arabiyyah* [Writer and Exile: Issues and Perspectives on the Arabic Novel], Beirut 1992, pp. 85–7.

As he tells an old comrade who has become one of the beneficiaries of the new regime: 'I trust that previous generations were better than ours, for as soon as our generation took the stage, it descended into corruption, chicanery, nepotism and kleptocracy. It is the ugliest of generations, but it does not recognize this'. *Trees and the Assassination of Marzuq* can be read as a lesson in the alternative history for which Mansur suffers exile, its narrative discourse undermining every official version of the past and present of the Arab world since the time of the Mandates.

Prison fiction

The positive reception of the novel encouraged Munif to leave his dreary job in the Oil Ministry in Damascus and move to Beirut, working as a journalist. He arrived with an unpublished second novel, *Sharq al-Mutawassit* (East of the Mediterranean), which Munif held back from publishing for three years. Its subject was political torture and imprisonment, a theme that would become one of the most prevalent in modern Arabic literature, and had already produced a certain body of fiction.⁸ Munif's novel, however, was of exceptional power and ambition, aspiring to write the ultimate political prison in all its variations, for it takes us to seven political prisons and lives with its hero in them for five years, during which there is scarcely any kind of torture he does not suffer. An epigraph from Pablo Neruda speaks to the need never to forget such suffering.

In a nameless Arab country, a corrupt tyranny arrests and imprisons all who would challenge it, and then tortures its prisoners to force them to betray their comrades and recant their beliefs by signing a document of complete submission to the authorities, with a putrid justification destroying their self-respect and freedom. The acceptance of such a document is represented in the novel as being synonymous with death, and its selection as the starting point of the narrative charges it with a deep sense of shame and remorse. The story recounts the life of Rajab Isma'il,

⁸ In Egypt, Yusuf Idris had published *Al-'Askari al-Aswad* [The Black Policeman] in 1960, and Sun'allah Ibrahim *Tilka al-Ra'ihah* [The Smell of It] in 1966; in Morocco, Abd al-Karim Ghallab had written *Sab'at Abwab* [Seven Gates] in 1965; in Iraq, 'Abd al-Rahman al-Rubay'i's *Al-Washm* [Tattoo] appeared in 1972. Later contributions to this genre include Naguib Mahfouz's *Al-Karnak* [Karnak, 1974] and Sun'allah Ibrahim's *Najmat Aghustus* [The Star of August, 1974] from Egypt; Turki al-Hamad's *Al-Karadib* [Karadib, 1998] from Saudi Arabia; and 'Aliyah Mamduh's *Al-Ghulamah* [The Young Woman, 2000] from Iraq.

a man from a simple background whose family invest their dream of a better future in his education, sharpening his sense of duty to work for social change. While still a university student he joins a clandestine organization, and as soon as he graduates is arrested and sentenced to eleven years' imprisonment. The novel consists of six chapters alternating between two first-person narratives, one told by Rajab as he fights for his sanity and honour, the other by his sister Anisa, together with whom he had once hoped to write a novel.

In prison Rajab, regularly visited and encouraged by his mother, steadfastly endures every brutality without renouncing his beliefs or uttering a word that might help his jailers hunt down others. But after five years of resistance, his mother dies, a number of his trusted colleagues sign the shameful document, the woman he loves abandons him and he is afflicted by a rheumatic disorder that enervates his resolve. Anisa, taking over the right of visitation, weakens his will yet further as she reports the vivid life outside. To secure his release, he signs the disgraceful document, and leaves for treatment in Europe with an exit visa granted in exchange for collaboration with the authorities—a promise to inform on former comrades abroad. By the time he reaches France he is virtually a spent man. But a doctor who had fought in the Resistance helps him recover his health and sense of worth, telling him 'you need to preserve your anger and fight back. If you succumb to grief and remorse, you'll be defeated as a man and finished as a cause'.

To redeem himself, Rajab decides to write a novel that will reveal the true extent of the atrocities occurring east of the Mediterranean, and to travel to Geneva to submit detailed testimony to the Red Cross of the different types of torture suffered by political prisoners in his country. But when he learns Anisa's husband Hamid has been arrested because of his own failure to file reports on militants abroad, he sends his testimony to Geneva by post and goes home. The police are waiting for him. After taking Rajab back to prison, they release Hamid. Three weeks later, Rajab returns blinded and broken, and within a few days is dead. Barely a week passes before Hamid is arrested again, held responsible for leaking the circumstances of Rajab's death to a newspaper abroad. In a final scene Anisa discovers her son 'Adil collecting empty bottles and filling them with petrol in order to destroy the prison and release his father.

The optimistic note, passing responsibility for a continuation of the struggle to the next generation, is not carefully wrought into the narrative, coming as much of a surprise to the reader as to the mother. But the power of the novel lies in its bleakness, and the delicate balance it holds between the fate of the prisoners and the lot of those outside, rather than in this weak ray of light at the end—or even its suggestion that the writing of a fiction could be an effective weapon against political oppression, which in the world it depicts must seem like wishful thinking. Like many novelists' early works, *East of the Mediterranean* promises more than it delivers, but it has a freshness and ferocity that have made it the most enduring and popular of all Munif's works. He was himself conscious of some of its limitations, writing in an introduction to its twelfth reprint that 'I was aware of dealing with a taboo subject, political prison, and practised restraint and self-censorship throughout its composition'. Written in a spare, staccato prose, the novel aims at a violent precision, whose only concession to formal experiment is its alternation of narrative voice.

A year after moving to Beirut, Munif published a much slighter fiction, *Qissat Hubb Majusiyyah* (A Magian Love-Story), that is a clear anomaly in his oeuvre. Its theme is one of the perennial concerns of modern Arabic literature, the incurable fascination with the Occident, and the tale relies on a standard ploy of the genre, an Arab student in Europe—usually male, but recently also female—embroiled with one or more Europeans of the opposite sex. Munif's student narrator has several such love affairs, of varying depth and length, but becomes obsessed with his one object of an unconsummated desire, a married woman whom he meets at a mountain resort. There the exchange of a few looks is enough to ensnare him and ignite an unappeasable passion. The novel is hopelessly romantic and works only as a metaphor for a deep fascination with, and the impossible acquisition of, the Occident. Its appearance was rapidly eclipsed by the publication of *East of the Mediterranean*, which Munif gave to the printers the following year, and whose public impact was deep and immediate.

Forms and politics

Munif's emergence as a major Arab writer at the time of the October War of 1973 and the ensuing oil boom coincided with a shift of political and cultural power in the Arab world from its old centre to the emerging

peripheries.⁹ The stripping of his citizenship by the Saudi monarchy had, if anything, enhanced rather than reduced his cultural capital and sense of identity. Now paradoxically he was perceived as a Saudi, at the time when his country was at the peak of its power and prestige, for the chronic unpopularity of the House of Saud in the Middle East was temporarily suspended in the wake of the oil embargo it imposed in 1973. The emergence of a talented and progressive writer from this famously backward part of the Arab world was treated with surprise and delight. A new literary atmosphere had been developing since 1967, liberating Arabic literature from traditional narrative bonds to enable a more modernist sensibility, in which a polyphony of contending voices tended to undermine the authority of plot. The internal cohesion of the novel came to depend more on the internal memory of the text than any causal logic of progression from the past, and the individual hero gave way to the antihero, or to an elaborate network of relationships in which all characters attain equal importance in their struggle to make sense of an absurd world, which features in this fiction as a kind of epistemological maze.¹⁰

Munif's relationship to this wave of modernism, from which he benefited, was ambivalent. He was aware of its appeal and relevance to the time, and learnt from it, but never embraced it as wholeheartedly as many of his contemporaries. For them, the Arabic novel was called on to undergo a radical transformation into what Adorno once called a 'negative epic'. For, as Adorno put it, 'if the novel wants to remain true to its realistic heritage and tell how things really are, it must abandon a realism that only aids the façade in its work of camouflage by reproducing it'.¹¹ This is not an adage Munif ever quite accepted. He experimented

⁹ Another beneficiary of this shift was the Sudanese writer 'al-Tayyib Salih, whose *Mawsim al-Hijrah ila al-Shamal* [Season of Migration to the North, 1968] was greeted enthusiastically, as were Palestinian poets like Mahmud Darwish, who gave the gloomy post-1967 scene some hope. The same shift was also behind the instant success of Munif and the very positive, often exaggerated, reception of his work. Munif himself stressed the significance of the Six Day War for his own writing: 'The defeat of 1967 pushed me toward the novel not as a means of escape but of confrontation. It had an unforgettable effect: to see such a vast area as the Arab world—with all its enormous clamour and slogans—crumble and fall, not just in six days but a mere few hours'. Interview in *Banipal*, October 1998.

¹⁰ For a consideration of the ways in which the Arabic novel reacted to social and cultural changes with a series of new textual strategies of modernist inspiration, see Sabry Hafez, 'The Transformation of Reality and the Arabic Novel's Aesthetic Response', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 1994, pp. 93–112.

¹¹ Theodor Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, New York 1991, p. 32.

freely with devices of plot and narrative figuration, where he could be very bold, and had nothing of *verismo* in him. But he still aimed at representations of reality that were readily intelligible to Arab reading publics, not least his Saudi compatriots, unfamiliar with more radical modernist conventions.¹² Was the wide popularity he thereby eventually gained as an author also a weakness? Naguib Mahfouz once said that when he was writing *The Cairo Trilogy* he knew that he was using an outmoded style, but felt the set of experiences he wanted to depict dictated it.¹³ Intuitively, Munif—a generation younger, whose principal forms were far less traditional—probably felt something similar, controlling or adapting his impulses towards formal innovation to the historical purposes at hand.

In 1975, after publishing *East of the Mediterranean*, Munif moved to Iraq to work in the Office of Economic Affairs of the Revolutionary Command Council (1975–81). These were years when the Ba’th regime, benefiting from a vast increase in oil revenues after 1973, was modernizing the country rapidly in a Progressive Front with the Communists. While there is some uncertainty about his role in Baghdad at this time, it is clear that he was trusted for his Ba’thist past. He was made a member of the prestigious Pan-Arab leadership of the international Ba’th confederation, put in charge of the influential monthly *al-Naft wa-l-Tanmiyah* (Oil and Development), which was lavishly financed by the government, and published a sequel to his earlier study of the oil industry, *The Nationalization of Arab Oil*.¹⁴

Knowing Munif well, as I did, it is hard to imagine this insightful intellectual and avid reader of literature as an insider to a Ba’thist regime in power. He appeared rather an eternal exile, whose independent mind, deep-rooted values, self-doubt and constant questioning would be anathema to party discipline. His reserved demeanour and fastidious manners in society were often mistaken for coldness and emotional incapacity. In fact, they were the products of years of clandestine political activity and a necessary defensive mechanism to protect himself and guard his time. If anything was deeply ingrained in him, it was an acute sense that he

¹² The leading Syrian writer and critic, Sidqi Isma’il, criticized Munif for a ‘rudimentary realism’ and ‘documentary representation of the life and spirit of the masses through the mind of an intellectual’, clashing with what was essentially a ‘novel of ideas’, in his introduction to *Trees and the Assassination of Marzuq*.

¹³ See Sabry Hafez, *Najib Mahfuz: Atahaddath Ilaykum* [Interviews with Naguib Mahfouz], Beirut 1973.

¹⁴ *Ta’mim al-Bitrul al-‘Arabi*, Baghdad 1976.

had started his literary career late and had wasted valuable years, making him determined to safeguard the primacy of his writing. He once told me that literature was his passion all along and that he was regularly accused of distracting his comrades from their political tasks by inciting them to read too much of it.¹⁵ Yet there is no doubt that the long political experience and wide knowledge of the region he gained from years of clandestine party work gave his writing a pan-Arab relevance and maturity, along with a sense of detachment, that would help to make him so widely renowned.

Huntings

In Baghdad, Munif combined his official duties with a prolific output as a writer, producing three novels and co-authoring a fourth. The first of these, *Hin Tarakna al-Jisr* (When We Abandoned the Bridge, 1976), already showed his restlessness and capacity for formal reinvention. The novel consists in its entirety of a long monologue by a lonely hunter, Zaki Naddawi, whose only companion is his dog. Every day he goes out into the forest, where the only person with whom he exchanges a few sentences is another old hunter, before returning home with his game. The novel takes us through many of his hunts, which take place throughout the seasons, and in several different climates. But his inner thoughts always return to a bridge on which he once worked as a soldier. Constructed but never used, it was then abandoned—metaphor for the Arab armies that were built but retreated without honour in the struggle against Israel. Wherever the chase takes him, he remains haunted by the fact that men neither crossed the bridge nor destroyed it before they withdrew. Like all hunters he dreams of the ultimate game, the imaginary bird which he calls the ‘queen-duck’. On a moonlit night he finally sights his quarry, and brings it down. Wading into the water to retrieve it, he finds only the ugliest of owls—symbol, in Arabic culture, of doom and misfortune. The futile hunt of the individual ends by reproducing the collective defeat against which his whole memory is a protest.

Coming close on the heels of this story, *al-Nihayat* (Endings, 1977) could appear in one way a companion piece, since it too tells the tale of a solitary hunter and his dog. But it is quite distinct as an enterprise, looking forward to aspects of the world portrayed in *Mudun al-Milh* (Cities of Salt).

¹⁵ See Abd al-Rahman Munif, *Zakirah li-l-Mustaqbal* [A Memory for the Future], Beirut 2001, p. 50.

For here the setting is the desert, and the conflict is not only between a traditional community, living precariously on the edge of hunger, and modern urban rapacity, but between nature itself and human misuses of it, of which the villagers themselves are not innocent. Structurally, *Endings* represents a much more radical break with standard narrative conventions than *When We Abandoned the Bridge*. The novel takes place at the time of a prolonged drought in the desert, which threatens the existence of a community that is depicted quite impersonally. Now completely dependent on game for survival, its members need more than ever the ability of the outsider who is their best huntsman, the enigmatic 'Assaf, who has always tried to persuade them not to kill off surrounding species by over-hunting. Knowing the desert intimately, 'Assaf exemplifies a bedouin ethos marked by a deep respect for nature and a sense of the strict limits to be put on the use of its valuable resources. He is willing to put his unique skills at the service of the community, but not to uphold the privileges of a few at the expense of the many, since 'hunting is created for the poor who do not have their daily bread'. Yet when a group of crass sportsmen arrive from the city in cars for a shoot, he consents to guide them, and when a terrifying sandstorm engulfs the party, sacrifices his own life to save those of the sportsmen whom he disdained. With his death, the novel abruptly shifts register. At an all-night vigil, in which the whole village participates, fourteen disturbing fables are recounted by the mourners, each treating of birds or animals and all ending with their abrupt destruction or disappearance—some taken intertextually from the classical Arabic of Al-Jahiz.¹⁶ The funeral of the hunter becomes an act of collective catharsis, releasing the villagers to work together on a dam to secure them against future droughts. In its sharp discontinuity of structure, mosaic use of short stories, and poetic impersonality of tone, *Endings* remains one of the most advanced fictions in contemporary Arab literature.

Coup-struck Tehran, oneiric Baghdad

Displaying once again his versatility, Munif followed this experimental work by writing a realist novel of political intrigue, *Sibaq al-Masafat al-Tawilah* (Long Distance Race, 1979). Yet it too contains anticipations of Munif's *chef d'œuvre* of the next decade, for if *Endings* presages the

¹⁶ Abu 'Uthman 'Amr ibn Bahr (c. 776–868), known as al-Jahiz, 'the goggle-eyed', was the greatest prose writer of classical Arabic, an author of encyclopaedic erudition and acuity, who left behind some two hundred works.

traditional ways of the desert portrayed in *Cities of Salt*, the subject of *Long Distance Race* is the arrival of the American empire of oil that will obliterate them. The setting of this prelude to his great theme is Iran, not Arabia, and the race is between the British, the waning imperial power in the region, and their new rivals, the Americans. The narrative time is 1951–53, the years of the rise and fall of Mossadegh's government, and the place—unmistakeable, if never stated as such in the novel—is Tehran. The novel opens with the nationalization of the oil industry and is narrated by Peter McDonald, an employee of the Iranian oil company. But this is merely his cover—in reality he is an agent of British intelligence, which selected and trained him in Zürich, then sent him to Beirut before dispatching him to Tehran. In Beirut, he has picked his accomplices and pawns for his work in Iran: 'Abbas, a feudal politician and former minister, Shirin, his intelligent, beautiful and wanton wife, and Mirza, a military man with intelligence credentials and wide experience in subversive operations. Shirin becomes Peter's mistress, but is later quite willing to trade him in for his American counterpart when she senses that her lover is losing ground. But his most important ally is Ashraf Ayatullah, specimen of a new breed of Iranian youth, educated in the West and convinced that their future lies with it, deaf to the 'language' of the old man in power and his rhetoric of national independence and social justice. The old man, presiding over a loose coalition of progressive forces, has no strong party behind him. But his enemies are highly organized: on the one hand the Shah with the Americans behind him, on the other the British smarting from the nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company.

Prefaced by quotations from Churchill and T. E. Lawrence, the novel traces the competition between the declining colonial power and the ascending empire, played out under the watchful eye of an unnamed but ever-present Soviet menace to the north. Peter is full of contempt for the Americans, 'pigs with golden collars around their necks, who never do the right thing at the right time'. The two predators share only their condescension towards the peoples of the Middle East in general, and Iranians in particular—the British viewing them as sullen ingrates, the Americans as primitives in need of civilizing by the United States. As they foment rival plots to topple a democratically elected government, we are shown the inner mechanisms of corruption and subversion that culminate in the violent ouster of Mossadegh, leaving the leader of the Free World, rather than the Mother of Parliaments, in charge. The novel ends

with the sunset of the former hegemon, as Shirin throws an extravagant party for the victors of the coup, bidding her old lover farewell with a mixture of nostalgia and scorn.

By the time *Long Distance Race* appeared in 1978, the political situation in Iraq had deteriorated, as Saddam Hussein became de facto ruler of the country, repressing not only the Communists but any alternative centres of power within the Ba'ath Party itself, before assuming the presidency the following year. Privately, Munif is said to have told friends that the Iraqi regime was now little better than the Saudi. Certainly, an ominous pall hangs over the city of Baghdad in the novel he went on to co-author with the Palestinian writer Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, *'Alam Bila Khara'it* (*A World without Maps*), which appeared in 1982. Jabra, a generation older than Munif (1920–94), was a distinguished writer of more psychological bent, a translator of Shakespeare and Faulkner into Arabic, who had long been a towering intellectual presence in Baghdad. The friendship between the two left a deep mark on Munif, and produced that most unusual of full-length fictions, a collaborative work.¹⁷

A World without Maps offers a fresco of a huge city that has descended into obscurity and chaos. Its authors dub it 'Ammuriyyah, but there is no mistaking the topography and details of Baghdad, whose metamorphosis from the calm town of a near past, with still rustic values and tribal bonds, into a frenzied metropolis in constant flux, heartless and impenetrable, is graphically depicted. We are plunged into a world of perpetual mutation, whose ruling force is disorientation, outgrowing any attempt to survey it. The impact of a bewildering transformation of space on the most basic modes of human existence and interaction thus at one level commands the imagination of the book. The writer at the centre of the novel, 'Ali Najib, is himself professionally concerned with problems of urbanization, which are always viewed dialectically, rather than purely negatively. The city is associated with the tomb: it buries the characters' past, hides their origins, entombs rural life and tribal ethics. But it is also a womb that offers shelter from an often merciless nature—the chosen

¹⁷ It is not, however, the first experiment of its kind in modern Arabic literature. In 1936 Taha Husain and Tawfiq al-Hakim co-wrote *Al-Qasr al-Mashur* [The Bewitched Palace], which among other things seeks to purge the creative process of its authorial tyranny, allowing characters to question the motives of their creators, and rebel against them. This novel is not only the precursor of *A World without Maps*, but one of the operative subtexts of the latter's fictional world, where there is, on one level or another, a constant dialogue with its structures and themes.

habitat of modern humans, yet also their most hated prison. In this representation, there is no doubt which of these identities is dominant: the novel is full of satirical comments on 'Ammuriyyah and the idea of the metropolis itself. At another level, a world without maps is also, inevitably, one in which any political direction has been lost. Hopes and ideals have vanished along with every landmark.

Here, much as in Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, where the creative process alone can retrieve the past, it is only by the act of writing that the inscrutable city can be probed. The protagonist of *A World without Maps* is engaged in writing a novel about 'Ammuriyyah, the metropolis in which he lives and whose fictitious nature is disclosed to the reader from the outset. His two previous novels, analysed and discussed by various other characters, are also about the life of the city. We thus have two novelists writing about a novelist who wrote two novels and is writing a third in the course of the text, while at the same time participating in the life of the fictitious city they are creating. Deliberately, this triple framing makes it as difficult to follow the plot of *A World without Maps* as it is to live in the disorienting grip of the proliferating city. The result is a highly complex form that involves the devices both of a jigsaw puzzle and a maze. The former is used to assemble, piece by piece, the real life story of Najwa al-'Amiry, lover of 'Ali Najib and wife of a friend, whose elusive relationship with the protagonist mirrors his efforts to fathom the mystery of the city and humanize it. The latter composes what can be called the detective plot of the story: the enigma of Najwa's murder, introduced at the beginning of the novel, which remains unsolved at its end. In the absence of any cartography, no clarification is possible: her death will be as indecipherable to her lover as the city is to its inhabitants, doomed to remain in the grip of its maze.

The Saudi quintet

A World without Maps was published in Beirut in 1982. A year earlier Munif had left Iraq. His departure from Baghdad in 1981 came after the unleashing of the war against Iran in 1980, at the apogee of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship. A sympathetic portrait of popular forces in a fictional Tehran was by now no more acceptable to officialdom than a disturbing vision of their absence in an imaginary Baghdad. In these circumstances Jabra persuaded Munif to abandon active political life and devote himself entirely to literature. The experience of writing a novel

together with the older man, who was not only much more widely read but a gifted teacher, as well as an established author and critic, had plainly changed Munif, increasing his self-confidence and scope as a writer. For his subsequent work is marked by a startlingly new range and depth that probably owes much to the lengthy critical discussions that must have accompanied the joint creation of 'Ammuriyyah, and fired Munif to conceive his own geography of the imagination—a parallel world like Hardy's Wessex or Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha.

For this he needed quiet and distance. On leaving Baghdad, Munif did not relocate to Damascus or Beirut, but moved with his family and his savings to France, taking up residence in Boulogne, near Paris, where many a famous exile had passed his days. There Munif wrote his quintet, *Cities of Salt*. Originally planned as a trilogy, the complete work took seven years to write, and at two thousand five hundred pages is the longest novel in modern Arabic literature. Epic in scale and ambition, it depicts the traumatic social transformation that came about with the discovery of oil, wrenching traditional desert communities into exploited and oppressed urban populations, and nomadic tribal rivalries into centralized police states. In one sense, it can be—and often is—read as a huge canvas of the brutalities of modernization and its devastation of customary ways of living. The novel seeks to capture the nature and rhythm of a pastoral world that has now been largely swept away, to record its practices and relations, its popular lore and moral beliefs, its forms of memory and of solidarity, and to show what becomes of them once petroleum is extracted from the sand: the enormous leap from traditional desert life, with its bedouin ethos and cosmic sense of time, to the frenzies of consumerism and conflicts of class and wealth in ultra-modern cities. It depicts the arrival of modernity in these conditions as inseparable from the proliferation of tyranny, and oil riches as an evil feeding corruption, greed and human weakness. We watch the crushing of the life of the desert, with its freedom, independence and dignity, under the wheels of a repellent juggernaut.

But though there is a powerful sense of loss in the novel, which mourns the destruction of a world Munif half-knew as a boy, *Cities of Salt* is far from a simple threnody for tradition. With two technical works on the economics of oil and years of engagement in the Ba'th cause behind him, Munif was scarcely a foe of mineral wealth or modernity as such. It is the cruelly perverted form that modernization has taken in the

Arabian peninsula that is the commanding subject of the quintet, and that gives the work its remarkable form. For in the foreground is a tribal saga—the story of the feuding tribes of Arabia and the triumph of one particular tribe over the others through treachery, violence, manipulation of religious dogma and the enlisting of foreign support; and of how the feuds continue within the triumphant tribe, once it has achieved a monopoly of power.¹⁸ Saudi Arabia is the only country in the Arab world that is named after a family. Munif, demolishing the historical lies on which this dynasty has based its legitimacy, etches a savage portrait not only of its brutality, perfidy and hypocrisy, but of its consistent servility to foreign overlords and sabotage of any moves to economic or political independence in the Arab world. From beginning to end, the House of Saud stands revealed as a dependent of imperial suzerains—first Britain and then the United States. Behind the tribal saga lie the Western empires of oil and their role in thwarting any progress in the region.

Munif's great novel is composed with an extraordinary formal freedom. Each of its five volumes has a different narrative structure, unlike any of the others, and their sequence breaks apart any conventional chronological order. Unifying them is an utterly distinctive tone, at once acerbic and poetic, delivered in an impersonal third person, charged with irony and figural intensity. Generally short, vivid sentences, at times veering close to aphorisms, alternate with terse dialogues in actions that unfold to a kind of epic voice-over. The story—or succession of stories—is told with a continuous energy that seems to belie the huge length of the whole work, and with gifts of metaphoric imagination capable of throwing up images of arresting power or beauty. Aiming at a 'middle language' between classical and colloquial Arabic, Munif was himself not entirely satisfied with the style he arrived at. But as a vehicle for fusing history and fiction on the grandest scale, it is strikingly effective.

The title of the quintet—not of the first volume, as in English—is a judgement: the Cities of Salt built by a grotesque dynasty in the Arabian desert, where oil will one day give out, are barren pillars of artifice destined for ultimate dissolution. To recount the history of the kingdom that created them, Munif devised an original solution to the problem of balancing fact and fiction in his novel. At one level, the narrative of *Cities*

¹⁸ For a detailed study of this novel as a tribal saga, see Amina Khalifa Thiban, *Transformation and Modernity in the Desert Tribal Saga: Cities of Salt*, PhD thesis submitted to soas, University of London, 2004.

of *Salt* is a faithful reproduction of the main episodes and landmarks of Saudi history, from the turn of the century to the time of the first oil shock—in effect, a gigantic historical *roman à clé*, in which the successive actual rulers of the kingdom and their familiars, with the thinnest of disguises, are the principal *dramatis personae*. But all these figures and events are transposed by Munif's peculiar modes of storytelling into a semi-mythopoeic register, so that the reader is never left in any doubt that this is a work of highly-wrought fiction, as well as an eerie report of political realities. The extreme twisting of time in the novel further distances the direct data of history from their imaginary correlates. The first volume of the quintet covers what in real time are the years from 1933 to 1953. The second deals with historical events between 1953 and 1958. The third reverses to the equivalent of 1891 and ends around 1930. The fourth moves forward to the years between 1964 and 1969. The fifth, which is divided into two parts, first doubles back to 1920–35, and then shifts to 1964–75.¹⁹ The reasons for such a complex structure have been much debated, as have its aesthetic merits. The effect, however, of its switchbacks, overlaps and disjunctures is to estrange the annals of Saudi despotism for the less expected purposes of fiction.

Camels to Cadillacs

The opening volume of *Cities of Salt*, entitled *'al-Tih* (The Wilderness), begins in a pre-modern and pre-national time in the oasis of Wadi al-'Uyun, where a bedouin community lives in traditional simplicity and unity with its surroundings, and seeks to record the forgotten social history and popular geography of Arabia. Into this setting there suddenly

¹⁹ The historical events behind these dates were as follows. In 1891 the Saudi tribal leader Abd al-Rahman was driven from his lands by the Rashidi. In 1902 his son Abd al-Aziz, founder of the modern Saudi state and later often known in the West as Ibn Saud, retook Riyadh, and by 1930 had conquered all of the area of today's Saudi Arabia. In 1933 Abd al-Aziz granted the first oil concession to what would become Aramco. The first oil fields were pumped in 1938; a pipeline to Dhahran was completed in 1950; the first strikes in Dhahran occurred in 1953. In the same year Abd al-Aziz died, and was succeeded by his son Saud, who had saved him from an assassination attempt in 1935. Saud was deprived of his power by his brother Faysal in 1958, attempted a comeback in 1962, and was finally forced to abdicate and driven into exile in 1964, when Faysal seized the throne. Saud died in 1969. Faysal was in turn assassinated by a nephew in 1975. The only significant modification of this chronology in the quintet is the compression of Saud's loss of power in 1958 and his eviction in 1964 into a single coup by Faysal, depicted from different angles at the end of the second and in the middle of the fifth volumes.

appears a small group of Americans, with a strong recommendation from the local emir to the pragmatic elder Ibn al-Rashid, on a mysterious mission which they never explain to the local people. They are resisted by the fiercely independent Mut'ab, who instinctively suspects them. In his understanding of a harsh—yet also beautiful—environment and respect for its natural rhythms, Mut'ab is a more developed and mythologized version of 'Assaf, the hero of *Endings*.

But he is also a fighter and prophet, whose forebears defended the oasis against the Turks as he will against the Americans, who are bent on destroying the oasis in search of oil. When their yellow tractors finally tear up its trees, he vanishes on his camel into the desert, entering legend as a mythic figure in collective consciousness, and the scene moves to the coastal town of Harran where the Americans need to build a port and a pipeline to the wells they have drilled. There the uprooted bedouin are tricked into becoming exploited construction workers, as the emir presides over the growth of a company town and a class society, enforced by police thugs. When a selfless local healer is murdered by the latter, a strike breaks out, the police open fire but cannot quell the workers, and the emir departs. The entire action of the novel, based on the first discovery of oil in Ayn Dar in the early thirties through to the first strikes in Dhahran in the early fifties, is delivered in the style of an oral storyteller, recounting the fate of a community rather than a set of individuals. New characters enter and old ones disappear in a relay that minimizes, without abolishing, the significance of personal identities. These are features of *'al-Tih* that drew a famously crass comment from John Updike, who announced: 'it is unfortunate that Abdelrahman Munif appears to be insufficiently Westernized to produce a narrative that feels much like what we call a novel. His voice is that of a campfire explainer'—and one denigrating Americans with 'the maledictory rhetoric of the Ayatollah Khomeini' (sic) to boot.²⁰

²⁰ No parody of Western ignorance and condescension could better the ineffable remark with which Updike concluded his review: 'The jacket flap tells us *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': *Odd Jobs*, New York 1991, pp. 563–67. Martin Amis characteristically gawks with admiration at these fatuities, in his own inimitable tone: 'You have only to look at the bibliographical lead-ins to feel your lower lip tremble: "*Cities of Salt*, by Abdelrahman Munif, translated from the Arabic by Peter Theroux. 627 pp"—627 pages! Yet Iron John dispatches that one'—*New York Times*, 10 November 1991.

In the second volume of *Cities of Salt*, the optic abruptly alters. Where *'al-Tih* offers an impersonal panorama of sociological changes over two decades, *'al-Ukhdud* (The Trench) zooms in to a few highly coloured years of political history, in which the Saudi dynasty itself—almost entirely off-stage in the first volume—becomes the focus of the narrative, against the background of the transformation of the tribal seat of Riyadh ('Muran') into a modern capital. Here the form of the novel is a court intrigue, and the spirit of the story—which runs from the sudden death of the founder of the Saudi kingdom, Abd al-Aziz ('Khuraybit'), in 1953 to the coup that ousted his son Sa'ud ('Khaz'al') in 1958—closer to Suetonius than Cowper or Scott. The title of *The Trench* alludes to the Qur'anic verse in which the infidel ruler of Mecca casts believers into a pit of fire: 'Self-destroyed were the owners of the trench, of the fuel-fed fire, when they sat by it, and were themselves the witnesses of what they did' (lxxxv, 4–7). The religion that consumes the inhabitants of Muran is the vicious modernity of a petro-despotism, fusing tribal structures with tanks and secret police, gargantuan corruption with political oppression, avid consumerism with ferocious bigotry and hypocrisy. Here too popular life produces those who resist this world, but the central character of the novel concentrates all that is worst in it—the Syrian doctor Subhi al-Mahmalji, modelled on the real-life figure of Rashad Pharaon, who was long a key political adviser and crony of the dynasty. Driven by greed, ambition and vain pretension, Subhi amasses a fortune in land speculation, helps set up the intelligence apparatus of the regime, and supplies his daughter to the bestial appetites of the Sultan—a minutely observed portrait of King Sa'ud—as his latest fifteen-year-old wife. Just as the marriage is celebrated, a palace coup packs ruler, daughter and doctor off into exile.

Tracking the dynasty

Munif planned a third volume, but found the themes he wanted to address exceeded the scope of a single novel, producing three sequels instead of one, published simultaneously in 1989. Of these only the first, *Taqasim al-Layl wa-l-Nahar* (Variations on Day and Night) has been translated into English. It recounts the rise to power of Khuraybit, the historical Abd al-Aziz, with the backing of the British over his tribal foes in Arabia, this time in a narrative style closer to that of a mediaeval Arabic chronicler than that of a popular storyteller, with frequent allowance made for different speculations or versions of events in circulation at the time. Comparable to Subhi in structural position within the novel, which is set

in the epoch preceding *The Trench*, is the English agent and adventurer Hamilton—a fictional double of St John Philby, with an admixture of T. E. Lawrence—of whom Munif draws an unforgettable portrait.

With *al-Munbatt* (*The Uprooted*), we revert to the destiny of the exiles of *The Trench*, as the evicted Khaz'al settles with his entourage into gilded impotence in Baden-Baden, his health failing, while Subhi is cast out, his daughter commits suicide and his wife and son abandon him for America. The shortest and most concentrated of the quintet, *The Uprooted* presents once again a shift of register, as it traces the descent of Subhi—once odious, now almost tragic—towards madness, and Khaz'al towards death, in a style not unlike a psychological novel of a more classically European type. It ends with the Chekhovian image of a groom speaking to one of Khaz'al's horses after his death; the only being left with whom communication is possible in the solitude that remains. Finally, *Badiyah al-Zumulat* (*The Desert of Darkness*) concludes *Cities of Salt* with a dramatic bifurcation: 'The Memory of a Distant Past', recounting the youthful years of the future King Fanar (i.e. Faysal) under his father, and the way he was robbed of the succession when his brother Khaz'al saved his father from an assassination attempt he had staged himself, in order to become the heir; followed by 'The Memory of a Recent Past', which shows in detail the way Fanar eventually toppled Khaz'al, in the coup of which we get only a parting glimpse in *The Trench*, and went on to create an ever more vigilant and ruthless despotism himself, before being finally cut down by a younger American-educated member of the tribe.

As befits any monumental work, *Cities of Salt* has earned its share of criticisms, some more founded than others. A legitimate reservation about the quintet is its tendency to idealize the bedouin past with a romantic nostalgia as a serene and well-ordered way of life, and to leave open the suggestion that the peculiarly distorted and corrupted forms of state and society created by oil wealth can be equated with modernity as such, overlooking its real gains and benefits. Less justified is the complaint of certain Arab critics that Munif peoples the later volumes of the quintet excessively with historical figures, to a point where too many characters in the novel stand for real characters outside it—some going so far as to claim that Munif essentially reproduces Aleksei Vassiliev's landmark history of Saudi Arabia in fictional form.²¹ This charge is grossly unfair. *Cities*

²¹Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, London 1998. The Russian original appeared in 1982, the Arabic translation in 1986.

of *Salt* teems with vividly created characters, ordinary people like Mut'ab al-Hadhdhal, Mufdi al-Jad'an, Shamran al-'Utaybi, Salih al-Rashdan and Shaddad al-Mutawwi', courageous opponents or tragic victims of the disaster it depicts, as well as containing brilliantly rendered portraits of those who in historical fact engineered and profited from this disaster. The novel offers a powerful account of the emergence of the Saudi security state, and the neo-colonization of Arabia that accompanied it, but is not a mere encoding of these developments. Rather it constructs a fictional universe of remarkable imaginative coherence that is a passionate cry against what Munif once called the trilogy of evils afflicting the Arab world—rentier oil, political Islam and police dictatorship—and a profound call for justice and freedom.²²

A hospital in Prague

On completing *Cities of Salt*, Munif returned—now freed from earlier restraints—to the theme of his first novel with *Al-An Huna aw Sharq al-Mutawassit Marrah Ukhra* (Here and Now, or East of the Mediterranean Again, 1991), a more comprehensive, sophisticated and tightly focused work than its predecessor. In the twenty years separating the two novels, political prisons had proliferated in the Arab world, their evil technologies intensified and cruelty attained new levels of barbarism. The setting of *Here and Now* is a hospital in Prague where ex-political prisoners are sent by their parties for treatment, to seek a cure for their bodies and souls. The hospital, however, is no isolated cosmos, but a locus of contending forces in which external political powers are also at work. The Czech doctors and nurses form part of its dynamics as much as the one-time prisoners, their visitors and opponents, and often appear to be pawns in a complex game of cynical politics. The two major protagonists, Tali' al-'Urayfi and 'Adil al-Khalidi—the one from Muran, the other from 'Ammuriyyah—are both leftists who have spent years in jail. In Part I, 'Adil recounts their common experience after being released from prison. Part II is given over to Tali''s voice, and the papers he leaves 'Adil after his death. In Part III 'Adil takes over again after the death of Tali', as if his experience is the mirror image of the other, or its continuation. The two experiences criss-cross each other to offer a picture of what one might call the universality of prison experience in the Arab world. Tali''s death lends special weight to his testimony, which seeks to instil not fear of the atrocities he catalogues, but admiration of the capacity of

²² 'Crisis in the Arab World', *Al Jadid*, no. 45, 2004.

human beings to withstand them. Urging that anger be directed against the condition of political incarceration itself, he notes that mass apathy and passivity have a share of responsibility for oppression and corruption in the Arab world. His death signifies the end of a certain kind of socialist idealism.

The general continuity and cohesion of the novel comes from 'Adil, who offers a more sophisticated outlook. From the stream of visitors and political luminaries who flock to his hospital bed and seek his approval or merely his opinion, we get a much wider sense of the Arab political spectrum than could be gleaned from Rajab's rather vague oppositional views in *East of the Mediterranean*. But these visitors all suffer from the common illusion that exiles are capable of changing dire realities at home. 'Adil has no time for such self-deception, telling them it is one of the reasons for the ebb of revolutionary struggles in the Arab world, the persistence of tyrannies and loss of popular hope for change. Characteristically, exile politics not only sells short the sacrifices of comrades still in prison, but breeds intrigues and hypocrisies that are the antithesis of what liberation really requires—genuine democracy, regular capacity for self-criticism and acknowledgement of errors, a loyal sense of collective organization and refusal of factionalism. 'Adil's insistence on the need to oppose logic to terror, human beings to political deities, falls on deaf ears. Heedless, his listeners continue as before with their tragicomic coffee-table rivalries, ferocious exchange of accusations and insults, and dismal jockeying for petty powers or favours. It is from the sterility of this scenery that 'Adil's vision of what another Arab politics could and should be like draws all its force for the reader.

Here and Now appeared in 1991. By this time Munif's savings had dried up, and he was forced to leave Paris, which he reluctantly did; he was to spend the rest of his life in Damascus. By now he was a celebrated author in the Arab world, writing prolifically on literary, intellectual and political matters, producing some eight volumes of essays on them over the next decade. But the principal work of these years was his final novel, *Ard al-Sawad*, 'The Dark Land'.²³ If *Cities of Salt* is Munif's tribute to

²³ *Ard al-Sawad*, literally the Black or Dark Land, is the old name for Iraq used by the Arabs who conquered it in 651 AD—some say because they reached it at dusk, or the shadows of the dense palm groves made the land dark; others because they were astonished by the contrast between its lush fertility and the parched yellow desert from which they had come. Munif plays on the ambiguity of phrase.

Arabia as the land of his father, this is his homage to Iraq as that of his mother, to whom it is dedicated, along with Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, with whom he had dreamt of writing it. The novel was clearly motivated by the ordeals of Iraq at the time of its writing, suffering from the tyranny of a ruthless dictator and crippled by the callous sanctions of the 'international community'. As such it can be read as a fictional message to the Iraqi people on how to deal with foreign designs and spare the country impending catastrophe.

Finale—duel in Iraq

In form, *Ard al-Sawad* is not a pendant to *Cities of Salt*. It belongs to a different genre, the historical novel proper. Nor is its architecture similar. For although published in three volumes, which appeared together in 1999, running to some fourteen hundred pages, it is difficult to call it a trilogy, since its narrative flows continuously from chapter 1 in the first volume to chapter 133 in the third. Where *Cities of Salt* is essentially a twentieth-century epic covering eight decades (1902–75), and depicting a contemporary world from its origins to the threshold of the present, *Ard al-Sawad* is set far back in the early nineteenth century, and deals with a concentrated span of just five years (1817–21). The space of the novel is also much tighter. Where *Cities of Salt* takes its characters far afield outside Arabia, from Beirut, Damascus, Amman and Alexandria to Geneva, Baden-Baden, Paris or New York, *Ard al-Sawad* never leaves Iraq, where the action is set essentially in Baghdad, with some events in Kirkuk and Sulaymaniyah, and on the lower Euphrates. Its character-system is also quite distinct. Real historical figures appear as such, amidst a throng of invented ones, as in the classical historical novel described by Lukács, if with the inversion he had already noted in the thirties—actual political actors taking the leading roles, and fictional characters the lesser ones.

Comprising three outlying provinces—Mosul, Baghdad and Basra—of the Ottoman Empire, Iraq had been ruled since the early eighteenth century by a series of *mamluk* pashas of Georgian origin, technically governors responsible to the Sultanate in Istanbul, but in practice virtually independent rulers. Munif's novel revolves around the struggle for control over the region between the ablest of these, Dawwud Pasha, and the British Resident in Baghdad, Claudius Rich, in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Iraq was in economic decline, torn by sporadic revolts in the north against the

central power in Baghdad, subject to Iranian pressures from the east and Wahhabi incursions from the south (Karbala was sacked in 1801), and the object of British designs as a way-station to India. In Egypt, by contrast, the great military commander and administrator Muhammad Ali (1804–45)—of Albanian origin—had set about building a modern state capable of defying European and Ottoman intentions, in due course crushing Wahhabi pretensions in Arabia too.

A generation younger, the remarkable figure of Dawwud Pasha was a more cultivated and civilian counterpart, a widely read scholar who spent years studying with the eminent Jaylani, but proved himself a master politician in his rise to power in Baghdad.²⁴ After a brief background, the novel opens as Dawwud, now installed as governor, embarks on a programme of reform to construct a strong modern state capable of resisting British manoeuvres in Iraq, which were laying the ground for its colonization. Influenced by the example of Muhammad Ali, but well aware that the peoples of *Ard al-Sawad* were for historical, cultural and geographical reasons very different from the Egyptians—forming a complex mosaic of discordant ethnic, religious and tribal groups, shaped by a harsh continental climate and unpredictable floods—he sets about unifying the country, dispatching his janissary commander, Sayyid ‘Ulaywi, to bring the north under control, and quelling the continual feuds between neighbouring tribes that had been draining the region’s resources. He develops industry and agriculture, modernizes education and promotes trade, turning Iraq during his time into a prosperous commercial entrepot where European and Indian goods are widely distributed; in this period, the population of Baghdad doubled.

Ranged against Dawwud is Claudius Rich, the prototype of a long line of flamboyant colonial adventurers—among them Lawrence, Henry McMahon, Percy Cox, Philby, Glubb and Gertrude Bell—instrumental in fastening British imperial control on the Arab world. Boasting of a command of Arabic, Persian and Turkish while still a boy in Bristol, Rich was gazetted into the East India Company at the age of seventeen, and spent three years travelling in Egypt, Syria, Palestine and Turkey before proceeding to Bombay where he married the daughter of the British

²⁴ Dawwud Pasha (c. 1774–1850), who came to Baghdad as a Georgian slave-boy at the age of ten, ruled Iraq from 1817–31. He later went on to govern Bosnia (1833–35) and Ankara (1839–40) before ending up as guardian of the shrine at Medina (1840–50), where he died and was buried.

governor and was appointed by him Resident in Baghdad at the age of twenty-one.²⁵ He landed with his bride in Basra in 1808, and over the next nine years built up a position of formidable power from his base in the Residency in Baghdad. Unlike Dawwud, Rich never liked Iraq or its people. His main interest in the region was to bring it under the control of the British Empire, as a market for British goods and concessions, and—as a more personal sideline—to amass the largest possible collection of its antiquities (coins, gems, tablets, codices) and dispatch them to Britain. In these years of weak governors and often chaotic conditions, he acquired many friends and allies in policy-making circles in both Baghdad and Istanbul, not to speak of employees and spies from the Jewish and Christian minorities in Iraq, enabling him to control the local incumbents or even appoint or remove them from behind the scenes.

Then and now

With the arrival of Dawwud Pasha, however, Rich more than met his match: a leader with a historical project and a politician unwilling to play second fiddle to anyone. A clash between them was inevitable, and the novel brings the two characters to life through its graphic account of the various plans and counter-plans which each of them launched against the other. Munif's portrait of the Englishman is the most fully fleshed-out and vividly realized representation of a colonial adventurer in modern Arabic literature. Rich is a product of the invigorating surge of imperialism that whetted the British appetite for the Arab world in the wake of Napoleon's expedition to Egypt. His exaggerated sense of himself and the power of the country he represents, his 'orientalist' disdain for Arabs and overstated claims of linguistic fluency, his clandestine intrigues and ostentatious processions through Baghdad, unfurl before us. Pitting his youth and his skills at the British art of divide and rule against the long experience of the Pasha, he uses every weapon at his command to bring Dawwud down, from venal sex to financial blackmail, from arranging trade blockades at Basra to create food shortages to suborning the governor's top military officer, Sayyid 'Ulaywi.

²⁵ For a biography by his grand-niece, see Constance Alexander, *Baghdad in Bygone Days: From the Journals and Correspondence of Claudius Rich, Traveller, Artist, Linguist, Antiquary and British Resident at Baghdad, 1808–1821*, London 1928. Munif's novel, which is based on thorough historical research, raises doubts about the extent of Rich's linguistic achievements: the two translators he employed play important roles in the narrative.

The third historical character in the novel, this commander cuts a tragic figure. After many successful battles in the service of Dawwud, he develops his own power base in the north, drawing on English money and Iranian support, but in his arrogance over-reaches himself, conspiring with Rich against the Pasha in 1818. Eventually arrested and tried for treason, he is condemned to death. With 'Ulaywi's execution, the schemes of the Resident finally crumble. Driven out of Baghdad, in his last months Rich continues to hover near the lost object of his desire, before despair takes its toll and he succumbs to an epidemic in Shiraz.²⁶

This political drama is never, however, isolated from the popular life of the time, whose depiction lends the novel its specific texture and verve. Many of the ordinary characters in the narrative are as vivid and rounded as the main historical protagonists: the regulars at al-Shatt Café, the singer Thamir al-Majul from the south who becomes a private performer for Sayyid 'Ulaywi, the Jewish madam Rujaina and her bevy of girls, the simple Badri who rises to become a military aide to the Pasha. The struggle for power at the top is not fully possible without the involvement of so many ordinary people, who are caught up in every step of its development. We see the pervasive impact of Dawwud's reforms in daily life through the customers of al-Shatt Café, as well as through the career of Badri, who is a direct beneficiary of them before falling victim to 'Ulaywi's conflict with the Pasha. His love for Najmah, one of Rujaina's girls, and abortive marriage to Zakiyyah, which leads by a masterly twist of the narrative to his death, take us to the inner landscape of popular existence in Baghdad. Around it extends a vibrant sociological reconstruction of the life of the city, with its streets, cafés, brothels, markets, offices, festivities, domestic space, and rival centres of power in the Pashalik and the Residency. The interplay between this affectionately recreated world below and the harsh exigencies of the struggle above is one of Munif's finest achievements. *Ard al-Sawad* is by far the best Arabic novel on Iraq. Its publication in the last year of the century made a fitting conclusion to Munif's career as a novelist.

But it was not his last word as a writer. In 2000, soon after its appearance, he told an interviewer: 'The present sufferings of the Iraqi people could move a heart of stone. It is a suffering that, besides its cruelty and injustice, gives an indication of the Dark Ages through

²⁶ See Alexander, *Baghdad in Bygone Days*, pp. 263–92, and Rich's own accounts of his trips to Kurdistan and Persepolis.

which we are living, in which a blind superpower attempts to impose its hegemony on the rest of the world. This merits opposition all the world over'. His own contribution was a study of Iraq from the British occupation of 1917 to the Anglo-American occupation of 2003, *Notes on History and Resistance*.²⁷ In it, Munif recalled the great uprising against Britain in 1920 and ended with the infamies of the us and its returned collaborators—'the most ignominious and shameless opposition in the world, a collection of kiosks selling lies and illusions'—as another resistance was igniting against them.

²⁷ *Al-Iraq: Hawamish min al-Tarikh wa-l-Muqawamah*, Casablanca 2004.