

OUT OF EGYPT – IHAB HASSAN'S CONFIDENTIAL CRITICISM

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-In 1986 Southern Illinois University Press published the autobiography of the well-known American literary critic Ihab Hassan. It is not surprising that a renowned critic chose to make his own life the subject of one of his books. In no other country are so many life-stories, memoirs and other first person nonfictional accounts published as in the USA. The desire to make the details of one's own life publicly known is shared by writers, critics, actors, musicians, social activists, politicians, spouses and children of various celebrities and even criminals. William Dean Howells's statement at the beginning of this century that autobiography is "the most democratic province in the republic of letters"¹ remains true at the end of the same century.

Cynics explain the continual flourishing of this genre by suggesting that many authors of autobiographies (often ghost-written) try to capitalize on their popularity or notoriety and write largely for profit. It seems, however, that the real reasons have more to do with the American literary tradition as far back as the 17th century, when many soul-searching Puritans and other settlers wrote numerous diaries, journals, spiritual autobiographies, narratives of captivity and travel accounts. These various writings record the inner life of the authors and document their experience in the new land. This tradition has been continued in the following centuries and resulted in many "immigrant autobiographies" which presented various versions of their authors' "making it" in America, different versions of the American Dream.

It was quite natural that one of the major American literary critics – himself an immigrant who arrived in America at the age of twenty one – decided to tell the story of his life and join other famous critics such as Alfred Kazin, Malcolm Cowley and Norman Podhoretz, who had done the same earlier. What seemed puzzling, however, was the fact that Hassan's autobiography entitled *Out of Egypt* was published by the university press in the

¹ W. D. Howells, "Autobiography, a New Form of Literature", *Harper's Monthly Magazine* 107 (October 1909), p. 798

Crosscurrents series of books devoted to new literary scholarship, new phenomena in literature and new critical approaches. The decision to include an autobiographical work in this particular series suggests that *Out of Egypt* is an unusual autobiography and its innovations go beyond the traditionally delineated limits of the genre.

While it may seem puzzling that an autobiographical work has been included in a critical series, it is by no means surprising that Ihab Hassan chose to seek expression in autobiography. Hassan's two earlier books – *Paracriticisms* (1975) and *The Right Promethean Fire* (1980) – were characterized by a growing tendency to increase the personal character of discourse and both stressed the role of the living author. Another tendency in these two books is the author's gradual abandoning of the realm of literature for the sake of more general notions such as consciousness, civilization or science. These two tendencies were announced earlier in 1971 in Hassan's study of postmodern literature *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, where the critic wrote in the introduction:

Clearly, we still stand in the domain of literature. Yet we must also move onward, to a personal fate closed finally by mortality, and a collective destiny unknown to children of the old earth or new moon. Literature does not suffice.²

In spite of this statement, however, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus* remains well within the limits of literary criticism, both with regards to its subject matter and the form of the book.

Paracriticisms is a significant step forward. Commenting on the original form of the book, Hassan writes:

I am not certain what genre these seven pieces make. I call them paracriticism: essays in language, traces of the times, fictions of the heart. Literature is part of their substance, but their critical edge is only one of many edges in the mind. I would not protest if they were denied the name of criticism.³

Hassan eagerly rejects here the literary critic's stance and stresses the subjective and personal character of the book:

In these essays I write neither as critic nor scholar – nor yet impersonate poet, novelist or playwright – but try to find my voice in the singular forms that speculation sometimes requires.⁴

Elsewhere the critic asks: "What exactly lies beyond criticism? The erotics of participation? The perpetual effort of self creations?"⁵ suggesting that all criticism is to some extent personal. Hassan clearly subscribes to Henry

² Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, Oxford University Press: New York 1971, p. IX

³ Ihab Hassan, *Paracriticisms*, University of Illinois Press: Urbana 1975, p. XI

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. XI

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24

Miller's views (discussed in Hassan's earlier book *The Literature of Silence*). Commenting on Miller's autobiographical writings Hassan notices: "For /Miller/ writing is autobiography and autobiography is therapy, which is a form of action upon the self".⁶ Hassan, though critic rather than fiction writer, follows a similar principle.

The pronoun "I" appears in *Paracriticisms* throughout the book, both in the preface and in the essays included in it. The work, however, does not resemble traditional subjective criticism if only because there is hardly any continuity or linear development in it. All the essays included in the book differ from each other in subject and style and contain, besides the author's own speculations, extensive quotations from other writers.

The form of *Paracriticism* differs from Hassan's earlier works and the author's interests change or – rather – become more inclusive. While still discussing literature, commenting and quoting from it, Hassan makes remarks (or rather asks questions) about culture and imagination or – to be more precise – about the change and expansion of human consciousness which, as the critic claims, we have been experiencing in the recent decades. Hassan insists that important questions are no longer literary questions and adds – to many critics' dismay – that even the humanist culture "is becoming a small part of our culture, and criticism a smaller culture still".⁷

Hassan probes these questions in his following book *The Right Promethean Fire*, where the subtitle *Imagination, Science, and Cultural Change* names the range of his interests. The form of the book is similar to that of *Paracriticisms*. Instead of traditional chapters the reader encounters a combination of chapters, interchapters, frames, epitexts, intertexts, quotations from the author's previous works (which Hassan calls self-antologizing or self-plagiarism) and quotations from other critics and writers together with various typographical experiments.

The presence of the self-reflective and autobiographical element is more conspicuous here than in the previous book. A significant part *The Right Promethean Fire* is drawn from extensive entries from the journal Hassan kept while working on the book. This journal, writes Hassan, "avows a degree of subjectivity", whose function is to "modify the incantatory obstructions of the Promethean theme".⁸ At the same time autobiographical passages enter in a sophisticated interplay with the remaining elements of the book, illustrate certain statements, and question or add meaning to others. In both books Hassan experiments with various forms of discourse and wants to step outside the existing conventions both on the level of form and ideas.

⁶ Ihab Hassan, *The Literature of Silence*, Alfred A. Knopf: New York 1967, p. 9

⁷ *Paracriticisms*, p. XIII

⁸ Ihab Hassan, *The Right Promethean Fire*, University of Illinois Press: Urbana 1980, p. XVII

Out of Egypt – appropriately called by Jerome Klinkowitz a “personal imaginative self study”⁹ – though belonging to a different genre is a continuation of these experiments. It continues them in the sense that there Hassan probes the same problems and asks the same questions that were asked in the previous books. Similarly *Out of Egypt* shows the same intertextual quality that we could witness in the two previous works. What makes it different from *Paracriticisms* and *The Right Promethean Fire* is the dominating presence of the personal, autobiographical element. Unlike some other autobiographies of critics or writers, *Out of Egypt* is not a mere literary exercise, nor is it a self-advertisement or a narcissistic self-examination. It is rather yet another attempt by Hassan to present his vision of the changing civilization – this time through an even more personal and universal medium.

Contrary to what might be expected, *Out of Egypt* covers only those years the author spent in Egypt, that is the first twenty one years of his life. The later period, the years of “making it” in America are barely mentioned. The most typical features of immigrant autobiographies, then, such as depiction of the author’s struggle to win a respectable position in the new society or of the clash between different cultures, are absent here. The book is indeed about the author’s getting *out of* Egypt rather than coming *into* America. The title “out of Egypt” (with its obvious Biblical references) is repeated several times throughout the text of the autobiography. For instance, discussing his decision to join the Faculty of Engineering of the University of Cairo rather than starting a career at the Royal Army Officers School, Hassan writes: “Though its course would last fully five years, the degree, I consoled myself, would lead me out of Egypt. Out of Egypt!”¹⁰ Every time the author refers to his leaving the country he uses the word “escape”: “as I escaped Egypt” (18) or “my Great Escape from Egypt”. (87) All this implies the author’s great determination to abandon the country he was born in and leave behind all the years spent in it.

Equally meaningful as the title is the very beginning of the autobiography:

On a burning August afternoon in 1946, brisk wind and salt of the Mediterranean on my lips, I boarded the Abraham Lincoln at Port Said and sailed from Egypt, never to return. (p. 1)

While many autobiographies begin with their authors’ coming into the world, Hassan’s life story begins with what he considers to be the most crucial event in his life – in a sense the author’s second birth. “Never to return” is repeated more often in the course of the narration and together with the other phrase “out of Egypt” functions almost as a refrain in the book. The author makes it

⁹ Jerome Klinkowitz, *Rosenberg Barthes Hassan. The Postmodern Habit of Thought*, The University of Georgia Press: Athens, Georgia 1988, p. 118

¹⁰ Ihab Hassan, *Out of Egypt*, Southern Illinois University Press: Carbondale 1986, p. 67. (The following references will be introduced parenthetically in the text).

evident that he has never wished to go back to the country of his youth and has no desire to see it again.

Hassan’s leaving Egypt and entering America – the brief scenes which respectively begin and end the book – constitute a frame for the autobiography. The remainder of the book, in terms of the autobiographical content, explains his decision to get out of Egypt. Hassan describes there how all the consecutive events from his life prepared him for the decision and how he methodically and rigorously tried to plan his “Great Escape”.

From the very beginning of the book the author stresses that he has never felt particularly attached to the country of his birth. Hassan writes: “I was born on 17 October 1925, in Cairo, Egypt, and though I carry papers that solemnly record this date and place, I have never felt these factors decisive in my life”. (p. 2) The author describes the house he was born in as “tall and glum” and adds that “its grill, its narrow doors and blank shutters, seemed always closed against /his/ gaze as if holding some riddle”. (p. 2). The sense of confinement expressed here is one of the important motifs of the autobiography. The atmosphere of estrangement, isolation and detachment dominates the book. The young Hassan does not feel emotionally attached to the country’s history, tradition or religion. He writes: “The Sphinx, *Abu’l Hol* (Father of Terror) ... inspired no fear in me nor stirred ancestral memories” (p. 2), similarly another symbol of Egypt, the Great Pyramid “seen with boyish eyes ... offered no promise except that I might some day clamber up its jagged edge and so claim an end to my puberty”. (p. 2) Equally insignificant are the ancient Gods of Egypt: “Amon, Horus, Set, Hathor, Nu, Mut, Khnum, Anubis, Isis, Osiris: they all haunt the world’s museums” writes Hassan but then immediately adds “in our house they lived only as carvings on lacquered chairs.” (p. 3)

At a time when seeking one’s ethnic roots and taking pride in ethnicity are so much in vogue, Hassan expresses views contrary to these trends:

Roots, everyone speaks of roots. I have cared for none. Perhaps, in my case, they were too old and tangled; or perhaps they withered early from some blight, which I have long ceased to mourn. Looking as a child at these ancestors chiseled in stone ... I bore away no kinship feelings. (p. 4)

Hassan feels a stranger in his country and notices that he is even perceived as such by his fellow countrymen. He confesses:

I do not know how to “speak Egypt” any more. For I was even there, even then, a stranger: in my native land young beggars on the Cairo streets followed me crying, “*Baksheesh, ya khawaga* /Mr. Foreigner/, *baksheesh*. (p. 2)

Equally significant is the scene where Hassan, an otherwise excellent student, fails his Arabic at school. The headmaster, upset and surprised, asks him with

reproach: "Why, my son? Are you *rumi* (Greek or Roman, any foreigner really)?" (p. 62)

Egypt, where Hassan feels so estranged and alien, is remembered and even now perceived by him as a hopeless land, immersed in corruption and poverty, a place which offers no chance for change, growth and progress:

After a revolution, a presidential assassination, four wars and a tripled population growth within half a century, what has really changed there beyond some streets and squares renamed? What profound political or cultural reforms? (p. 14)

or elsewhere: "The story of the royal family encapsulates that of Egypt itself: prodigal, corrupt, cruel sometimes, flashing in rare moments of splendor:" (p. 41) The Egypt of Hassan is a backward place where life is slow, monotonous and never changes:

In the countryside, fellahs continued to draw water from the Nile with their *sakiah*, *shadoof*, *tambour*. In the provincial cafés, *el kary* recited in sing-song the Koran, and the old storytellers recounted the epic of Abu Zayed El Hilali. ... And in the desert, the bedouins maintained their ancient feuds, burying each other alive in the sand – or burying their children only to the neck as a cure against rheumatism. (p. 92-93)

For Hassan Egypt is a country on which the sun "has set, perhaps never to rise again." (p. 112)

The author finds the gloomy, hopeless reality of Egypt unbearable. For a short time he tries to find refuge in Islam and when this fails wants to join an officer school and together with other idealistic and radical officers "cut off the rot of Egypt". (p. 67) These, however, are only short episodes in Hassan's life, which do not affect his decision to leave the country rather than lead a quixotic fight against its corruption and backwardness.

Unlike many authors of immigrant autobiographies who show at least ambivalent attitudes towards their mother-countries, Hassan shares no such feelings. He writes, for instance: "I had not been born ... to miss my home" (p. 97) and elsewhere, as if surprised with the intensity of his emotions records: "As I escaped Egypt on the Abraham Lincoln ... I thought of my father, my mother, my uncles, and why I had so fiercely longed to leave them all behind". (p. 18)

It is interesting that while showing no sympathy for his mother-country Hassan often writes about his warm feelings for other – more open – cultures and societies, and especially for the Anglo-Saxon culture. Writing about his childhood Hassan characterizes it as "a palimpsest of styles, babel of tongues" and adds: "French and Arabic were my first languages, but I liked far more another which I now write." (p. 3) The first prize he ever gets at school is a desk calendar and writing pad bearing an inscription "For Excellence in English". Hassan's sympathy for the English language extends to the speakers of the language and is not even tempered by the fact that at the time of his

youth Egypt was occupied by the British. The first memories of the colonizers were by no means hostile:

True, the phrase *El Ingileez* would sometimes catch my ear, carrying some hint of menace or obloquy. But as a child I had no aversion to the English itself, nor to its native speakers who sometimes visited our house. (p. 21)

At one point, risking a possible accusation of pro-colonial sympathies, Hassan boldly asks:

Still I wonder: had Britain brought illiteracy and disease to Egypt in the first place? Did it impose poverty on the fellah for millenia? Who makes imperialism possible? And how healthy, free, or affluent are Egyptians thirty years after their liberation? (p. 25)

The author feels an even more intense sympathy for Americans whom he first met towards the end of the Second World War. During that time Hassan was one of many young men who

consumed Coca-Cola, devoured the *Reader's Digest*, affected Ray Ban aviator glasses, and gawked at all those gangling, loping, gum-chewing, foot-propping GIs who began to appear in Cairo. (p. 27)

Hassan's decision to leave Egypt and find his home in America was certainly not caused by his sympathy for the "gum-chewing GIs", yet his positive attitude to Americans and their language – something many immigrants would be willing to admit – made him work on his escape plan even more eagerly. Hassan's life became totally subordinated to one aim: getting out of Egypt. All of his decisions were undertaken with the escape plan in mind. He joined the Faculty of Engineering only because he hoped this would give him an opportunity to leave for America and to find a job during the first years of his stay in the new country. With the self-discipline of a Benjamin Franklin Hassan gets down to work. He writes:

I turned to work sensing that my Great Escape from Egypt depended on professional achievement more than on existential quests. If I graduated with distinction, the Ministry of Education might award me a fellowship to study abroad. (p. 87)

He devotes all of his time to study, sacrificing all pleasures, and living an austere and disciplined life:

In the last two years at the university, I consecrated myself to work, schooldays and holidays, mornings, afternoons, nights. To my distress, I discovered that my mind had become lax, my calculations careless, my solutions slapdash. I set about to reverse this trend, practicing logarithms at dawn till I could feel my brain purr like a balanced, well-oiled rotor. (p. 93)

Hassan, a humanist at heart, has to make an even greater sacrifice. In order to have more time for work, he has to put aside literature – his greatest passion. He writes: "After each reading orgy, bitter self-reproof. Electronics, not literature, will bring my release, I argued. Once out of Egypt, I could read what

l willed.” (p. 95) Not yet an American, Hassan already accepts the features invariably associated with Americans – hard work and pragmatism.

The author of *Out of Egypt* has no doubts or regrets about the most important decision of his life. He refuses to go back to Egypt even as a tourist and the only place he is willing to call “home” is Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where he currently lives. Just like many other immigrants, for several years Hassan is haunted by a recurrent dream (the famous immigrant syndrome) in which he is compelled to go back to Egypt. While never intending to go back, he occasionally tries to imagine what his life in Egypt might have been. He finds it impossible and only occasionally comes close to this vision. He writes:

in our travels, passing through some distant, provincial town – Kwangju, Lublin, Djikili, Jinan, Tromsø – I have a sudden, dreadful intuition of what it must mean to exist there, from birth to death, feeling the blood, the years, leak away. (p. 108)

Hassan is confident that he made the right choice. Towards the end of the autobiography, this “psychological exile”, tries to sum up his reasons for emigration – although these seem to be well explained in the course of the narration. He writes:

What, then, had I really hoped to discover in America? It was not holiness: rather, scope, an openness of time, a more viable history. I also looked for some private space wherein to change, grow; for I had not liked what I foresaw of my life in Eternal Egypt. And so I left – no, fled – detesting all arguments from the blood and suspecting the force of my own destination. Always, though, I sensed that something other, larger, than myself was at stake, as if my selfish hejira could still evoke a small, wry smile in heaven. (p. 107)

Hassan’s desire to break out of confinement, his desire to search for a new life, new horizons, desire for change and readiness to explore the unknown are among the elements of the new consciousness he was describing in his two previous books. In many ways, Hassan’s life is an illustration of this new consciousness as related in *Paracriticisms* and *The Right Promethean Fire*.

But this not the only way in which *Out of Egypt* is a continuation of his previous writings. Just like the two earlier books, Hassan’s autobiography is not based on a uniform flow of thoughts and linear narration. Instead of traditional autobiographical account, characteristic of, for example, such classics of life-writing as Alfred Kazin’s *A Walker in the City* or Frank Conroy’s *Stop-Time*, this book is told in fragments, short scenes and arguments. For Hassan, as for Donald Barthelme and other post-modernists, fragments are a favourite mode of expression.

Out of Egypt includes a great number of such fragments: short autobiographical entries along with brief selections from the diary the author kept in Munich where he was working on his book, short essays on various subjects, quotations from books of various writers and from his own works. The Munich diary entries constitute a base from which the author’s memory travels to the past. At the same time the Munich sections include all kinds of

meta-textual remarks (also present in Hassan’s previous works) and comments on the autobiography in progress. There, the author expresses his doubts concerning the genre itself and the veracity of the story he is working on. For instance, he includes a scene in which his wife Sally reads a just finished page from the autobiography where Hassan tries to describe his mother. After reading her husband’s notes Sally asks, “How was your mother *really*?” (p. 31), which is followed by Hassan’s comment: “I do not answer, knowing that reality of my parents, long dead – dead to me perhaps before they entered their grave – must evade me.” (p. 31) Elsewhere, following several pages long description of the political situation in Egypt, students’ unrest, clashes with the police and his own involvement in it, Hassan writes in another Munich entry:

I continue to construct this “autobiography” block by fictive block, like a pyramid raised by treacherous slaves. Can my shaky edifice commemorate those Egyptian students dead in the street? Do my words re-colonize the fellah, who will never read them, as do all these learned books I read? (p. 48)

The Munich passages reflect the author’s cautious tone – characteristic of Hassan’s previous books – as well as his doubts about the purpose and real meaning of his autobiography. Hassan will tell the reader about an event from his childhood and then immediately expresses his doubts as to how much of what he said should be trusted.

The writer is well aware of the limits of autobiography or all writing for that matter and already in the preface writes: “Veracity? I know something of the cunning of desire, duplicity of memoration. Against these, we can only summon the will to authenticity, in mutual trust”. (p. x) Hassan knows that human memory is selective and can be deceiving and he thinks it proper to constantly remind his reader about it. He writes of the “dubious private recall” (p. 12) and admits that much of what he could have written about eludes him. He is far from all-inclusiveness or completeness. At the same time, however, through admitting his shortcomings or possible failures, Hassan manages to produce a more honest and trustworthy autobiography than many other writers who claim to remember their childhood and adolescence in every single detail.

Hassan is equally careful about drawing conclusions and making authoritarian statements. His critical (or paracritical) writings are characterized by the presence of many questions, some of which are supposed to encourage the reader to undertake an intellectual effort and enter into polemics with the author, but which at the same time express the author’s own doubts. Similar questions are present in *Out of Egypt* and make the tone of the book both inquisitive and cautious. The reader is asked to ponder some of the questions, to share the author’s doubts, and to meditate along with him.

Besides the two intermingled planes of the autobiography proper and of the Munich diary, *Out of Egypt* includes brief essays and interludes on such subjects as ideology, evolution, knowledge and travel. These are usually introduced by various associations that the author makes while working on his autobiography. For example: the description of Ramadan is followed by the autobiographer's discussion of hedonism versus puritanism, Flaubert's description of the Pyramids follows Hassan's own remarks on those ancient monuments, and the scene in which he describes watching "King Kong" in an Egyptian cinema makes him include a short philosophical essay "On the Beauty of the Beast". A description of a scene provokes a digression, which in turn leads to another scene. In *Out of Egypt* scenes and different types of discourse mingle, the narrative planes overlap and create new meanings. The author himself describes it in the following way:

two streams of time flow through my mind: one of recollections that find their source in an Egyptian childhood, the other an abstract, laconic gloss on my life in America. The two streams now surge through our months in Munich, months of work, music, sensuous pleasures, of *lived* time moving in still another stream. All three, in confluence, enter this book, a fourth stream still, or perhaps a shoaly river itself made of many currents. (p. 38)

The book abounds not only in various forms of discourse and narrative planes; Hassan also makes the reader aware of the multiplicity of voices speaking in the book. This is perhaps best exemplified by one of the interludes where "Autobiographer" is interviewing "I.H." about some details from "I.H.'s" school times. The short puzzling scene makes the reader reflect on the ambiguous status of the narrator-protagonist-autobiographer and thus makes him also participate in the theoretical disputes argued by the many scholars analysing this genre.

In this brief but complex autobiography the author's life itself is only one of his many interests. Writing about himself Hassan wants to communicate something (or equally often to ask questions) about the world, humanity, its passions and desires – the very problems he has been probing for over two decades. The critic who has been discussing the transformation of human consciousness – quite appropriately – lets the reader see what his own evolution consisted of. In this way Hassan's autobiography becomes an interesting supplement to his other volumes of criticism. It offers an indirect commentary on the opinions voiced in his critical works as well as illustrates and elucidates several of his theses.