

**The Ambivalent Image of the City in Modern Arabic
Poetry as Possibly Influenced by English Romanticists:
A Comparative Study of Selected Poems**

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Summary

The city in the Arabic poetic tradition was on the whole favorable or positive, while in the European poetic tradition the image of the city was, often enough, ambivalent. Poetic Arabic ambivalence, as found primarily in the work of Ahmad Abdul-Mu'ti Hijazi and Salah Abdul-Saboor, marks a change which may be attributed to the influence of Wordsworth and T.S. Eliot. Historically, the ambivalence did not prominently emerge in Arabic poetry before Arabic poets of the Apollo school translated Romantic poetry in the 1930s, and Lewis Awad translated T.S. Eliot in the 1940s, which may suggest a possible influence.

Before the 1960s in Egypt, the typical Arabic poet expressed their love for the city as representing the *homeland*. Poets exiled by the British occupation authorities spoke nostalgically of their childhood days in their home towns, and Egypt was subliminally their city. To define our terms, the rise of the concept of the city (the Greek *polis*) in Europe must be examined in relation to its Arab counterpart. This paper will focus on Wordsworth's and Hijazi's image of the city as a *prima facie* case for the validity of the putative influence suggested in the title.

Keywords:

Ambivalent, City, Eliot, Hijazi, Image.

مفارقة صورة المدينة في الشعر العربي الحديث باعتبارها تأثرت بالصورة
الرومانسية في الشعر الانجليزي: دراسة مقارنة لقصائد مختارة

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ملخص البحث باللغة العربية:

إن صورة المدينة في التقاليد الشعرية العربية كانت مواتية أو إيجابية بشكل عام، بينما في التقليد الشعري الأوروبي تظهر صورة المدينة، في كثير من الأحيان، كصورة متناقضة. هذا التناقض الشعري العربي، كما هو موجود بشكل أساسي في أعمال أحمد عبد المعطي حجازي وصلاح عبد الصبور، يشير إلى تغيير قد يُعزى إلى تأثير الشعارين "Wordsworth" و "Eliot".

تاريخياً، لم يظهر التناقض بشكل بارز في الشعر العربي قبل أن يترجم الشعراء العرب في مدرسة أبولو الشعر الرومانسي في ثلاثينيات القرن الماضي، وقام لويس عوض بترجمة "إليوت" "T.S. Eliot" في الأربعينيات، مما يشير إلى ترجيح تأثرهم بالصورة الرومانسية للمدينة في الشعر الانجليزي.

في مصر وقبل الستينيات، أعرب الشاعر العربي النموذجي عن حبه للمدينة باعتبارها تمثل الوطن. فقد تحدث الشعراء المنفيون من قبل سلطات الاحتلال البريطاني بحنين إلى أيام طفولتهم في مدنهم الأصلية، وكانت مصر هي مدينتهم بشكل لاشعوري. يناقش هذا البحث ظهور مفهوم المدينة في أوروبا فيما يتعلق بنظيرتها العربية، مسلطاً الضوء على صورة المدينة عند كل من "Wordsworth" و"حجازي" محاولاً اثبات حقيقة التأثير بالشعراء الرومانسيين الانجليز كما جاء في عنوان البحث.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

مفارقة، مدينة، "إليوت" "Eliot"، "حجازي"، صورة.

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Introduction

The broader focus of this study is, of course, too vast for an academic paper in comparative literature; restricting the number of poets to one or two on each side, and further, confining the poems to a limited illustrative selection, should make the topic less unwieldy. A *prima facie* case for the validity of the putative influence suggested in the title is the fact that the city in the Arabic poetic tradition was on the whole favorable or positive, while in the European poetic tradition the image of the city was, often enough, ambivalent. Poetic Arabic ambivalence, as found primarily in the work of Ahmad Abdul-Mu'ti Hijazi and Salah Abdul-Saboor, marks a change which may be attributed to the influence of Wordsworth and T.S. Eliot. The question of influence is always hazardous to assume, still too risky to presuppose, but for the fact that historically the ambivalence did not prominently emerge in Arabic poetry before Arabic poets of the Apollo school translated Romantic poetry in the 1930s, and Lewis Awad translated T.S. Eliot in the 1940s, which may suggest a possible influence.

Before the 1960s in Egypt, the typical Arabic poet expressed their love for the city as representing the *homeland*. Poets exiled by the British occupation authorities spoke nostalgically of their childhood days in their home towns, and Egypt was subliminally their city. To define our terms, the rise of the concept of the city (the Greek *polis*) in Europe must be examined in relation to its Arab counterpart. This paper will focus on Wordsworth's and Hijazi's image of the city.

Early Cities

It is a commonplace that the rise of the city as a social structure, with a recognizable political system, appeared in river valleys of the ancient world, notably in Egypt (the Nile Valley) and in today's Iraq (the valley of the Euphrates and Tigris) and in China (the Yellow River and the Yangtze). According to Emery's

Archaic Egypt (1961), the unification of Upper Egypt with Lower Egypt in 3100 B.C. by Narmer (or Mena), was preceded by various efforts to establish settlements which developed into small towns which over time acquired proper city functions (p. 12). A century prior to this, Sumeria (Sumer), Babylonia and Assyria in Mesopotamia (Iraq today) had created both cities and conurbations. By the age of pyramid-builders, after 3000 B.C., many cities had been created both in Egypt and Mesopotamia to fulfil the needs of rural communities, organize trade and local industries, and establish credible defense forces. The villages which had begun to appear 7000 years ago (Emery 76) mainly to manage the agricultural and trade business had developed into city-like structures which differed drastically from the old tribal system which structurally relied on kinship. The main factors which affected this transformation were the need to bolster Egyptian military power in the region by creating schools, both civilian and military, and organizing what we call, in today's parlance, logistics. (38) This is believed to have helped Thutmose III to carry out his seventeen military campaigns over twenty years. During his rule (1453-1425 B.C.), he captured 350 cities from the Euphrates in the north to Nubia in the south. This aspect of the rise of the city as both concept and practice is dealt with in general books on the history of empires, such as Arnold J. Toynbee's *A Study of History* (12 volumes, 1948-1961). For understanding the case of the Egyptian empire, one may consult James H. Breasted's *Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt*, 1912, and his earlier *A History of Egypt, from the Earliest Times to the Present*, 1905. Most (relatively) recent books on this topic do not change much of Breasted's findings, or, for that matter, Toynbee's theory of challenge and response in connection with the rise and fall of ancient empires as civilizations, and the role played by the concept of the city within each.

The role of the city in these early empires had contributed to the centralization of power and the growth of the influence of the religious establishment. The old tribal system of gaining power (through kinship) was replaced with various degrees of status,

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based on occupation and, later, on class. The old forms of communal leadership were replaced by powerful religious institutions, and by kingships that drew power from them. The city as the centre of these powers grew. Within this general framework of government, the Greek *polis* model emerged. It is thought that the difference between the *polis* (plural: *poleis*) and the oriental city systems was due to geographic factors, probably initiated by the natural division of Greece into mountains and islands. Arabic writers and readers may be familiar with the evolution of Greek city-states, and with names such as Athens, Sparta, Thebes, Corinth, and Delphi. Throughout the history of Greek civilization, its golden age in 500-327 B.C., individual cities were distinguished by a high level of intellectual and cultural activity, which continued during the Hellenistic period (327-27 B.C.) and well into the Roman period in the next few centuries.

The City-State

A major feature of the development of the Greek *polis* is therefore its emergence as a *city-state*. The old city system had to be modified, and enlarged, to accommodate the new forms of kingships acquiring magical powers and important religious functions. The “various degrees of status” mentioned above were determined by belonging to groups of temple priests, presiding over well-developed institutions, and working in association with the rising kingships as instruments of social control. The thriving economy of some of these city-states led to their being threatened by the less prosperous ones, and by wars being waged, now as invasion, now as defence. The expansion of the *polis* system was in effect a continuation of the earlier Greek city system where a professional army was created, and wealth was a means of power, and the introduction of taxation. The rise of wealthy landowners who could raise credible fighting forces led to the creation of Greek aristocracies. As the social structure of Greece in the Hellenistic period still maintained the earlier division of labor, and

the old class system controlling civic offices, and maintaining the position of such aristocracies at the top of the social ladder, a new factor, introduced in the period's 'golden age', emerged. This was none other than the Greek philosophy and the great learning of the intellectuals. The old social system based on having an aristocracy monopolizing government functions, laborers and slaves, apart of course from the army, was being questioned. In the air was a call for a more egalitarian system of government: with the weakening of the aristocracies, something akin to democratic rule emerged. The nascent democracy, where egalitarianism took the form of 'electing' persons capable of representing the populace, required further elections creating communal leaderships. The rise of the Roman Empire, following the victory of Octavian, who called himself Augustus Caesar (Shakespeare's Octavius Caesar), did not change much in terms of the Greek *polis*, but the Pax Romana initiated by Octavian meant more centralization of power in Rome, and by the 4th century A.D., each city would be regarded as representing the Christian power of Rome.

In Arabia, where wealth and power relied on commerce, nomadic life prevailed. In Arabia Felix, today's Yemen, the exception appeared in the city-state of Najran, situated north of its present location. Adopting Judaism in the fourth century, then Christianity in the fifth and sixth centuries, the city became what is today called *Madinat* in Arabic. The Arabic word literally means "owing its structure to a firm system of government", that is to say, a 'state', even in miniature. All other settlements were called *Qaryat*; in Semitic languages, the word is affined to *Kiryat*, which in Hebrew means: campus, complex, city or town. References in the Qur'an to such places (or locations) as *Qaryat* occur 57 times, while *balad* and its cognates occur 19 times. With the exception of *al-Baqarah* and *Al-Imran*, all the suras containing the latter were revealed in Mecca. Also revealed in Mecca were 10 suras containing references to *Madinat*, 13 times all told. Of these, three suras revealed in *al-Madinat* refer to that very city (the old Yathrib) 4 times; the rest are Meccan and tell the stories of old prophets who had lived in "medinas", as typical in structure to the

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Greek *polis*. There we hear the stories of Moses, Joseph, Lot, Salih, and the encounter between al-Khidr and Moses. The historical use of *Madinat* sets it apart from all other uses of *Qaryat* and *balad*. As mentioned, of the total count, 89, only 13 go to *Madinat*, 19 to *balad*, and 57 to *Qaryat*.

In the Middle Ages, the distinction of the Greek *polis* as a city was maintained. It was common in England to restrict the description of 'city' to any human settlement that had a cathedral: though this was the case before the Reformation, the distinction seems to continue. However, the growth of wealth, and the rise of mercantile capitalism, tended to reduce the city's religious character throughout Europe, bringing in material factors which, especially in the sixteenth century, revealed some of the baser instincts of mankind. The ills of such early capitalism led to vices not so prominent in the previous settlements. A major factor was colonialism, leading eventually to imperialism. European powers employed their navies in occupying foreign lands, using ruses, chicanery and prevarication in dominating other peoples. Large cities became centers of commerce and some of the worst qualities of man when driven by greed, self-interest and hypocrisy. The history of London in the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries, as dealt with in the literature of this pre-modern period, exhibits the change of the city from the old center of economic and military control, to an early place where baser human instincts proliferated. Geographic explorations encouraged adventurers to try their luck in occupying foreign countries in America, Asia (India) and Africa. By the 18th century, certain ports in England had grown into huge cities, such as Bristol, which became a transit post for the Blacks 'hunted' in West Africa, to be further transported to the American colonies in the Caribbean and in mainland America.

The city-states continued in Europe. In Renaissance Italy, major cities still had the old character of statehood, such as Venice, Florence and Genoa. These were places where science and the arts

developed and eventually influenced art and thought in Europe. Towards the end of the 18th century, philosophers and poets in England could feel the difference between their own and the Italian cities. Especially during the Napoleonic wars in the early 19th century, the fear of invasion by the Spaniards was replaced by the fear of invasion by the French: in confronting a foreign enemy, English cities consolidated their position as parts of 'Great Britain' in a state which 'rules over the waves.' However, philosophers and poets were not oblivious to the seeds of mercantilism in the greater cities. The city was still a mercantile hub, beneficial to trade, but detrimental to the higher qualities of man, hence the ambivalence.

Ambivalence

War, or the threat of war, may have helped to create a single state out of the many city-states, but wars are expensive. Consequences of wars, for both victor and vanquished, can be socially obnoxious. Poets in the late 18th century were keenly aware of the gathering clouds of the French Revolution (1789) in terms of, especially, egalitarianism. Just as the plebeians in ancient Greco-Roman cities demanded equality with the ruling and wealthy aristocracy, people in England began to rebel against the mercantile cities which were dominated by the powerful and rich potentates. From the despotic Elizabethan and Jacobean rule, through the fanatical Cromwellian revolution in the mid/late 17th century, poets lamented the loss of the old agrarian life (Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village*) while others rebelled against the materialistic, mechanical concept of religion by reviving spiritual values (William Blake). Both tendencies were combined in Wordsworth's and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* (1798-1805), which advocated the rule of nature (both physical nature and the pristine nature of humanity), and of the imagination. Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner* explicitly called for the revival of the spirit, love and redemption. Wordsworth portrayed some of the victims of city life who had been recruited to fight (*The Discharged Soldier*, and the retired sea captain, narrator of *The Thorn*) as well as life in the countryside. His famous dictum was, "God made the country, man made the city."

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As the term ‘ambivalence’ indicated, the rise of the city was both *welcomed* in terms of being representative of the new power acquired by the state, and *resented* as the result of exercising man’s lowest instincts, namely the interest in material wealth and social position, to the almost total disregard of the truly human values of “kindness and of love.” (“Tintern Abbey”, 1798). “The world is too much with us late and soon;/Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers” (1807) and Wordsworth in the preamble to *The Prelude* (1805), celebrates his liberation from the city as a house of bondage “where [he] had long pined” (*Prelude* 1-7). However, his general portrayal of London, the metropolis of Great Britain, accommodates both virtue and vice. His impression of London, as a stranger, is first given in almost neutral terms. Sarcastically referring to the crowded dwellings as ant-hills, he says

Rise up, thou monstrous ant-hill on the plain
Of a too busy world! Before me flow,
Thou endless stream of men and moving things!
Thy every-day appearance, as it strikes-
With wonder heightened, or sublimed by awe-
On strangers, of all ages; the quick dance
Of colours, lights, and forms; the deafening din;
The comers and the goers face to face,
Face after face; the string of dazzling wares,
Shop after shop, with symbols, blazoned names,
And all the tradesman's honours overhead:
Here, fronts of houses, like a title-page,
With letters huge inscribed from top to toe,
Stationed above the door, like guardian saints;

There, allegoric shapes, female or male,
Or physiognomies of real men,
Land-warriors, kings, or admirals of the sea,
Boyle, Shakspeare, Newton, or the attractive head
Of some quack-doctor, famous in his day.

The general image of London may be neutral in tone, even with a touch of frivolity, but Wordsworth is keen to portray examples of city life in men and women he encounters. The overall description of the *polis* is common in modern Arabic verse about the city: both Hijazi and Abdul-Saboor are careful to describe the Cairo they belong to (1968 and 1969 respectively). Soon enough, Wordsworth provides us with scenes of city life which force him to rethink the reality of that outward show:

I heard, and for the first time in my life,
The voice of woman utter blasphemy-
Saw woman as she is, to open shame
Abandoned, and the pride of public vice;
I shuddered, for a barrier seemed at once
Thrown in, that from humanity divorced
Humanity, splitting the race of man
In twain, yet leaving the same outward form.

Twain

The key word is surely the “barrier” which the city erects between two parts of humanity—two *sections*—one, the pure, pristine, is to be found in the very nature of man, clearly observed in villages and the rural landscapes of the poet’s early childhood; the other is to be noticed in the city. The former is spoken of in glowing terms in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) and *Poems in Two*

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Volumes, 1807. The latter is given in detail, when the poet talks about London in *The Prelude*, 1850, Book VIII. If the division was easily discerned, the ambivalence would be too obvious, but then the poet uses the hedging term “seemed” as though to have second thoughts about the putative split. During the so-called “great decade” (1798-1807), we come across contrasting images of life in the city, sometimes forming “clusters” this way or the other but often enough ambivalent. In 1798, he writes

To her fair works did nature link
The human spirit that through me ran,
And much it grieved my heart to think
What man has made of man.

Four years later, Wordsworth elaborates the idea of both the “twain” having “the same outward form.” Having given examples of life in the city, he concentrates on what man has made of man in the city. He focuses on the way in which city life deprives men of basic human traits, enticing them to be ambitious, dissembling, self-centered or keen on self-regard. This is how he sums it up:

I glance but at a few conspicuous marks,
Leaving a thousand others, that, in hall,
Court, theatre, conventicle, or shop,
In public room or private, park or street,
Each fondly reared on his own pedestal,
Looked out for admiration. Folly, vice,
Extravagance in gesture, mien, and dress,
And all the strife of singularity,
Lies to the ear, and lies to every sense-
The Prelude, 1850, VII, 573-581.

As the title of his first volume of verse suggests, Hijazi's city (Cairo) is "heartless" (مدينة بلا قلب). The centerpiece is a poem entitled "Which is the Way?" where the speaking voice belongs to a young villager trying to find his way to the mosque of Sayyida Zeinab, a descendant of Prophet Muhammad. The mosque is located in a square, a corner of which is turned into an *ad hoc* kitchen where the hungry loafers and destitute persons – old and young, men and women – are given bowls of broth and other victuals. Charitable people are always there to provide the place with ready meals, especially designed to satisfy the hungry. For a hungry and impecunious villager, visiting Cairo for the first time, the shrine is therefore more than a "sacred place", it is a source of nourishment and a life-saver. His search for this shrine inevitably causes him to communicate with city people, getting the initial shock of obtaining an answer from a man who never bothers to look at him. He walks on until nightfall, becoming increasingly aware of the contrast between people in the village and those in the city: the latter are self-centered and hurry about their own way, never caring to communicate. By Line 56 in the Arabic text (see the Appendix) the visitor recognizes the significance of the silence which distinguishes city people – the "barrier" splitting the "race of man" in Wordsworth. The visitor says:

People about seem absent-minded
They know not one another,
But there's one gloomy figure
Maybe, like me, a stranger.
Can't he speak at all?
Can't he greet me in passing?
What a friend in dismay
Almost cursing all the way!¹
(56-63)

¹ All translations by M. Enani (forthcoming)

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This recalls Wordsworth's feelings of alienation as he goes "forward with the crowd" and often says "unto myself, 'The face of every one/That passes by me/Is a mystery!'" (*The Prelude*, 1850, VIII 25-7). Like the many children who die in Wordsworth's poetry of the 'great decade', a child is killed in the city square in Hijazi's *A Boy Killed*. The difference is that this boy is anonymous, separated from humanity by being unknown and uncared-for. Here is part of the main body (for the full text, see the Appendix)

Death in the square came down with a bang;
Vehicles blew their horns and stopped.
Whose son is he, they asked,
But nobody answered.
Only this one here knows his name.
"Oh, poor child!"
Someone said,
But the sad man fled.
Eyes looked at one another
Still no one had an answer.
People in the city are numbers...

The anonymity of the boy is what the city does to its inhabitants, breeding anomy. This is what Wordsworth and Hijazi believe is the effect of city life where material things preoccupy men: buying and selling. "The world is too much with us, late and soon,/Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers: Little we see in Nature that is ours/We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!" (Wordsworth, Sonnet 33). Substituting material gain for natural objects is handled in Hijazi in terms of *action* in a city

street where a peasant boy tries to sell lemons at an insignificant price to passers-by and motorcar-riders in a city street. The poem is a tour de force, and the symbolic power of the action is rarely found in Arabic poetry. Here is part of the poem:

A basketful of lemons
Left the village at dawn.
Until that dammed hour
They were all green,
Fresh with dewdrops,
Swimming in waves of shade.
In their green slumber
They were the birds' brides.
Oh! who frightened them?
What hungry hand picked them at dawn,
Carried them in the morning twilight
To streets, choked and congested,
Incessantly moving feet and motorcars
Powered by petrol burning.
Poor lemons!
Nobody enjoys your fragrance,
The sun dries up your dewdrops,
The swarthy boy still runs,
But can't reach the motorcars,
"Twenty a penny," he shouts,
"For one penny get twenty!"

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The lemon poem is distinguished by the alienation of the lemons, as symbols of nature's bounty in the indifferent hustle and bustle of a city street. Their fragrance is lost in the choking fumes of "petrol burning", though the boy continues to run after the cars in the hope of selling some. The whole scene is one of action – practically all movement from beginning to end. It is a strange kind of movement which continues unabated but with little hope of success: even if bought by some motorist or another, the lemons will have lost their original life. Scorched by the ruthless sun, they lose their dew and their fragrance, overwhelmed by the "petrol burning" fumes, so that the lemons are about to lose their identity. As though intent on giving the lemons another belonging in the city, the little boy runs as fast as he can, trying to 'lodge' the lemons in one of the speeding cars, a symbol of the city, but fails. Having lost their belonging in the village, the lemons, though technically now in the city, fail to belong to it. It is the anomie of city life that emerges from the oscillation of belonging – or, perhaps, belonging and non-belonging at once.

Hijazi elsewhere makes use of the possessive pronoun 'my' in producing such a paradox. He gives us a brief dramatic poem, with a modicum of movement, in which the protagonist shows how apparent belonging in the city can be the opposite. This persona, possibly the same as the speaker in "Which is the Way" cited above, is a poor lodger in the city who therefore calls it "my city", but is so impecunious that he cannot pay the rent. The poem has a circular pattern: it begins with the answer given by the persona to the night-watchman (a policeman on patrol), then portrays the situation leading to the night-watchman's question: "Who are you?" followed by the answer given in the opening line. The repetition of the opening line in the end changes the meaning in the typical way irony is built up: the line reverses the purport of the initial apparent positive statement, as though a negative sense emerges: "is *this* I, is this *my* city... hardly!"

In his analysis of this poem's translation into English, Enani examines the rich texture of the lines, considering the deployment of the images and their connotations (*Literary Translation: Theory and Practice*, in Arabic 1997, pp. 18-34), confirming the significance of the ironic structure. His handling of the multiple way in which the situation reflects the persona's state of mind is adequate insofar as his purpose is to reveal the intricacies of the Arabic words when one seeks their equivalents, and he does point out the ironic tone. However, one may elaborate on the way Enani analyzes the irony, as shown above, by noting how in a holistic approach to the poem, it appears to be based on a double, rather than a single, ironic tone. The duality appears in the two ways the poem may be read. Here is the text:

This is I, and this my city.
At midnight
The vast square and walls are a hill
Appearing to disappear behind a hill!
A leaflet in the wind circled 5
Then landed in the alleys.
A shadow melts away,
Another extends.
The eye of a tiresome intrusive lamp
On his beam I trod 10
As I passed on
A sad tune reverberated in my heart,
No sooner started than suppressed.
"Who are you, there?
Who are you?" 15
The stupid guard is unaware of my plight;
I have been kicked out of my room today
Am become lost and nameless. 18
This is I and this my city.

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The first and perhaps ‘logical’ reading, producing the first irony, is to read the poem as ending with Line 18. This means that the initial situation wherein the action takes place is the simple statement consisting of lines 1 and 2. As ‘focalizer’, the protagonist renders his situation as he moves about in *his* city at midnight. Moving in the vast space among the buildings of the city, he feels hemmed in by one hill after another. His eye catches small things as they move inertly around him: the leaflet could be a scrap of paper or a tree leaf being circled about by the wind, and the shadows, melting away or extending, are the persona’s own as he passes by the lamp-post. In other words, the protagonist is on his own and the intrusive “eye” of the lamp (as rendered by Enani) could equally mean ‘curious’ or ‘inquisitive’ (فضولي); “treading” on the light (as though a material thing) evokes his feeling of loneliness or, in the context of the situation, non-belonging anywhere. The sad tune reverberating in his heart is the expression of such a feeling, but even this is interrupted by the city’s guard whose job it is to ensure its safety by keeping ‘strangers’ out.

The guard’s question consists of two lines, the first ends in the original Arabic with a vocative article (Ya/يا) normally rendered as “O” followed or not by a noun (a name etc.) In Shakespeare it is followed by “Stand and unfold thyself!” The guard cannot name the figure now emerging in the lamplight: realizing it is an unknown person, the guard utters the climactic question: “Who are you?” (line 15) The denouement is given in the last three lines with an impressive end-focus on *nameless*. The guard is prepared for the man’s loss of name by his loss of identity: his separation from his room has meant his loss of that physical part of the city he could call his. *His* city has dislodged him; he is now powerless like the small leaf bandied up and down, circling in the air above a maze of alleys before settling in no specific place; and he is equally as ‘unreal’ as his shadow that melts away or extends as he passes by.

Thus, this 'first' reading seems to convey the ambivalence (or paradox) adequately enough in advancing through the action and the imagery from the original statement of identity (This *is* I) and belonging (this *my* city) to a negation of both. However, the poem does not end there. By repeating the initial line, an unobtrusive irony is suggested: This centers on the implication that being kicked out of his room is tantamount to 'unbeing', or being lost as an individual with an identity ensured by belonging somewhere. He feels the loss to be real, and namelessness as the work of the city. Hence, the final line must be read as ironical, forcing one to reinterpret its occurrence in the beginning. Whichever way one chooses to read the poem, the potential double irony adds a depth to the handling of Hijazi's ambivalent stand.

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Appendix

1. The Way to the Shrine (أين الطريق)

“O kind old man! Tell me the way—
The way to the Mosque of the Lady.”
“Turn a little to the right, my boy,
Then to the left,” said he,
Never looking at me.

I walked, O night of the city,
With a sad quivering sigh,
Dragging worn-out feet
To the Lady’s street.
I had no money,
To starvation hungry,
With no company,
As a baby begotten in sin and dumped;
The passers-by never notice the baby
Or even show pity.

To the devotees of the shrine
I drag my worn-out feet
While the city lights joyfully shine,
A rainbow in the street!
Words in neon lamps caught my eye;
A kebab restaurant, nearby,
A feeble breath of air
Of the approaching autumn
Played with the lock of a cloud’s hair
Casting a shadow of dismay.

On her bare shoulder, as though
Made of agate and mother-of-pearl,
Slipped the dress of the girl,
A transparent tissue of utter finesse
Bespeaking joyfulness.

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A knight, a tall stalwart figure,
Looking like an ancient victor
Rested his arm on the arm of that maiden
With a bright sunny complexion
Whilst my arm clung to the basket-bag
Containing my tattered rags.

People hurry on about,
Caring for naught;
Their shadows successively proceed,
Taking no heed
Even if a tramway car passes along
Amongst the throng;
They aren't perturbed.
But I fear the tramway,
Every stranger fears the tramway.
A winged motorcar then crossed,
With a front as broad as Destiny's chest,
Carrying people, laughing happily,
With teeth as white as light, brilliantly,
With heads sideways turning
And faces as radiant as flowers shining.
Having crossed, the motorcar looked too far away
Before vanishing.
Perhaps it's now on the Lady's street,
While I continue to drag my worn-out feet.
People about seem absent-minded
They know not one another,
But there's one gloomy figure
Maybe, like me, a stranger.
Can't he speak at all?
Can't he greet me in passing?
What a friend in dismay
Almost cursing all the way!

What's his destination?
What's his story?
If only I had any money!
No! I shall never come again
Without money.
O Cairo!
You, with domes in surfeit built,
Each with a blasphemous minaret:
An atheist.
Naught am I here,
As the dead sea,
Or a vision transient,
Dragging my worn-out feet but still intent,
On reaching the Lady sacrosanct.

2. From "Farewell"

The streets of the big city
Are abysmal fires, regurgitating
The flames swallowed at midday.
Woe be to him who only knew her sun scorching
Her buildings and hedges, buildings and railings,
Squares, triangles and glass panelings!
Woe be to him whose night is empty,
Whose holiday
Brings no company!
Woe be to him who's not been in love, ever;
Time to him is perpetual winter.

3. A Boy Killed

Buzzing, death in the square rang
Coming down with a bang.
But as a shroud, silence prevails, all of a sudden.
A green fly now comes down from a sad cemetery,
With fluttering wings, to a boy killed in the city
No tears were shed by a lamenting eye.

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Death in the square came down with a bang;
Vehicles blew their horns and stopped.
Whose son is he, they asked,
But nobody answered.
Only this one here knows his name.
“Oh, poor child!”
Someone said,
But the sad man fled.
Eyes looked at one another
Still no one had an answer.
People in the city are numbers:
A boy’s come, another is dead.
The breast subsided,
The hand that had bit the dust withdrew
In terror two eyes look into space through
But lidless remain.

The leg, once homeless, now can rest
When carried in a white ambulance nearby.
Over the spot where the blood was not dry
Hovered the green fly.

4. Lemons

A basketful of lemons
Under the sharp ray of the sun,
In doleful tones cries the lemon boy:
“Take twenty for a penny!
For one penny, take twenty!”

*

A basketful of lemons
Left the village at dawn.
Until that dammed hour
They were all green,
Fresh with dewdrops,

Swimming in waves of shade.
In their green slumber
They were the birds' brides.
Oh! who frightened them?
What hungry hand picked them at dawn,
Carried them in the morning twilight
To streets, choked and congested,
Incessantly moving feet and motorcars
Powered by petrol burning.
Poor lemons!
Nobody enjoys your fragrance,
The sun dries up your dewdrops,
The swarthy boy still runs,
But can't reach the motorcars,
"Twenty a penny," he shouts,
"For one penny get twenty!"

*

A basketful of lemons
Under the sharp ray of the sun
Caught my eye at once.
I remembered the village.