

Between Orientalism and Post-modernism:

Robert Irwin's Fantastic Representations in *The Arabian Nightmare*

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Robert Irwin, British historian and scholar of medieval Arab history, born in 1946, has a long academic as well as creative pedigree. After reading Modern History at Oxford University, he gained his Ph.D. from the School of Oriental and African Studies in Bloomsbury, where he studied the history of the Near East and Middle East between 1967 and 1972. He taught at the University of St. Andrews until 1977. Since then he has produced six novels: *The Arabian Nightmare* (1983), *The limits of Vision* (1986), *The Mysteries of Algiers* (1988), *Exquisite Corpse* (1995), *Prayer-Cushions of the flesh* (1997), and *Satan Wants Me* (1999). Besides his output, Irwin wrote a chronological survey, *The Middle East in the Middle Ages: The Early Mamluk Sultanate (1250-1382)* (1986). Subsequently he has produced a series of scholarly books for a general readership: *Islamic Art* (1997), *Night and Horses and the Desert: The Penguin Anthology of Classical Arabic literature* (1999). His most recent works are *The Alhambra* (2004) and *For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and Their Enemies* (Allen Lane, 2006). Since he ceased to be a full-time academic, Irwin has variously taught Arabic and Middle Eastern History at the universities of London, Cambridge, and Oxford. He is also director of a small publishing company and currently Middle East and Islam editor of *The Times literary Supplement*, having written extensively for the journal on these subjects for twenty years. His recent book *For Lust of Knowing* attracted considerable media attention because it is intended as a rebuttal of Edward Said's influential *Orientalism* (1978) as well as a defense of traditional Orientalist scholarship. Taking selections from Irwin's prolific output this essay examines his seminal novel *The Arabian Nightmare*, which will be read against his more recent non-fiction works *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* and *The Lust for Knowing*, since these texts are closely interconnected, besides representing Arab or Islamic culture. Mamluk culture was Islamic, but Turkish rather than Arab in terms of ethnicity. *The Arabian Nightmare* is a special kind of historically based fantasy, probably best classified as historiographic metafiction, especially given that while the novel is presented as an entertaining fantasy, it is nevertheless grounded in Irwin's own research into the Mamluks and story-telling, offering a knowing and deep implicit analysis. As the title suggests, *The Arabian Nightmare* is a self-reflexive ironic meditation upon *The Arabian Nights*, a collection of stories still highly influential in Europe, but held in rather low esteem in Arab culture today. Irwin does not parody or pastiche particular stories, but rewrites the methods of *The Arabian Nights*. This mixture of popular fantasy with learned intertextuality represents a form of postmodernism. In chapter 3 of *Strategies of Fantasy* (1992) Brian Attebery explores postmodernist examples of Fantasy, examining the ways in which such texts perpetuate illusions to eventually violate them, adopts/exaggerates outmoded conventions, and de-center the individual. All of the techniques that Attebery suggests as typifying Postmodern Fantasy are utilized by Irwin in *The Arabian Nightmare*.

Irwin frequently engages in allusion and multi-layered meaning and structure. At one level *The Arabian Nightmare* is a travel novel which tells the story of a young English pilgrim from Norwich, Balian, whose caravan travels through Cairo on its way to the St. Catherine Shrine in the Sinai and eventually to the Holy Shrines of Jerusalem. Unexpectedly, upon his arrival in the city of Cairo, Balian finds himself, or believes himself to be, pursued both during his waking and sleeping hours by an odd range of wraithlike creatures; consequently, he starts to be severely afflicted by a kind of insomnia, which seems to assume a series of incessant narcoleptic episodes giving

him daily nightmares. In such a horrific state of mind, the young Balian cannot discriminate between dreams or reality as he unconsciously tumbles downwards through portals of a kind of "haunted" sleep in worlds caught within worlds. Irwin utilizes the unique vulnerability to the world of the subconscious and the unconscious that occurs within the dream state, "sleep is essentially a state of *disinterestedness*. Sleep thus unlocks the trap-door in the floor of consciousness, and memories arise from the depth to perform 'in the night of unconsciousness a great danse macabre'" (Hadfield 15). Instead of tackling his religious mission of visiting "St Catherine's ... 'out in the desert, there [where] one can find peace'" (Irwin, *Arabian* 62), Balian is drawn to a journey into the schizophrenic territories of the mind, where phantoms replace reality in the pervading darkness of medieval Cairo, a mysterious place that haunts the labyrinths of its streets promising the strangers dreams without awakening and flights without escape. The novel touches on an intricate yet puzzling web of dreams and imaginings that transmit an Oriental ambience spectacularly shifting between magical erotic adventures and a dry sense of humor. The author is well on his way to exoticize the bizarreness of the Oriental undertaking, "a process of reinterpretation of the world that uses disjointed, unexpected terms to make the familiar appear strange and to allow a feeling of elsewhere to merge in the midst of 'here'" (Urbain 147). It is difficult to summarize the plot, since part of its effect is to confuse the narrator, indeed, the reader, about what is true, what is dream, and what is fiction. The novel opens precisely on 18 June 1486 during the Sultanate of Qaitbay. Qaitbay is a historical person, but Balian, together with most of the other characters is fiction. The name of Balian however, suggests the earlier Crusader Balian of Ibelin (c. 1140-93), whose name was used widely in European noble families.

The Western world has long had a fascination with the Orient that provoked Edward Said to begin his book *Orientalism* with a major ontological contention: "The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (1). This notion of the Orient as a "European invention," as Said suggests, is certainly present within the representations of Arabia and North Africa of early to mid-twentieth century Western writers such as Wilfred Thesiger and Paul Bowles, whose texts reconfigure these areas as being among the locales of "romance, exotic beings," and in the process they contribute to the formation of a "monomyth" of the Orient in which a partisan aesthetic comes to dominate all else.

However, as Irwin himself has suggested, "the pace of Orientalist scholarship is extremely slow, its fields are broad and few people work in them" (Irwin, "Introduction," *Middle East* n.p.), and indeed it is not until the late-twentieth century that this supposedly realist "monomyth" of the Orient starts to be challenged by writers such as Irwin, who seeks to subvert and deconstruct the aesthetic heritage of earlier Western writers representing and documenting the Orient through the use of more overtly fantastical techniques; as Lucie Armitt argues in *Theorising the Fantastic* (1996), "now we can look at the fantastic as a form of writing which is about opening up subversive spaces within the mainstream rather than ghettoizing fantasy by encasing it within genres" (3).

In 2006 Irwin produced an intended rejoinder to Said's *Orientalism* entitled *For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and their Enemies*. Here he explores a counterargument to that of Said, by proposing that Orientalists throughout the ages can be just as accurately seen as individuals positively thirsting for impartial knowledge about the East and its peoples. Irwin argues that Said's *Orientalism* has many fallacies and factual inaccuracies which have contributed to a preventable degree of conflict between West

and East: "the shrillness and defensiveness of most of the attacks on Orientalists are both depressing and unnecessary" (330).

Significantly, the various techniques Irwin employs in his fiction to achieve this "opening up" process are varied and significant. Perhaps foremost amongst these methods is the introduction and foregrounding of an overtly fantastical element within presentations of the Orient. It is usual to find Oriental iconography permeating gothic, fantastic, and latterly science fiction literary texts. The poetics and politics of a Western or an Orientalist perspective on the East seem to speak to science fiction's traditional concerns with colonization and cultural contact with the alien Other. Said's comments that Orientalism ultimately reveals more about the fears and desires of the hegemonic culture also help situate the allegorical capacity of science fiction's extrapolations and are useful in contextualizing Sartre's views of the fantastic in literature: "It manifested our human power to transcend the human. Men strove to create a world that was not of this world" (58). Thus Irwin creates a reassertion of the differentness of the Oriental space, disallowing any notion that the Western world has fully absorbed its Eastern Other: "I am more interested in giving the English reader a taste of the authentic strangeness of the medieval Arab past, and its sheer alienness" (Irwin, *Night and Horses* x). He succeeds in so doing in the pages of *The Arabian Nightmare*.

In her influential *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008), Farah Mendlesohn suggests that "fantasy succeeds when the literary techniques employed are most appropriate to the reader's expectations of that category of fantasy" (14). However, while science fiction and fantasy often transport the reader into a setting almost entirely divorced from reality, Irwin's texts always maintain a link to the "real" world, "the narrator deflects the reader's disbelief by confessing to his own and by making explicit the impossibility of understating the tale in rational terms" (Jackson 28). This combines with an appropriation of a more traditional narrative style that at once radicalizes the subject whilst avoiding the complete exteriority of science fiction, following in the tradition of a particular type of Western fiction in which "contemporary magical realist writers self-consciously depart from the conventions of narrative realism to enter and amplify other (diverted) currents of Western literature that flow from marvellous Greek pastoral and epic traditions to medieval dream visions" (Zamora and Faris 2), and as such, Irwin's work is oriented much more towards the magical realist forms employed by writers such as Angela Carter, Salman Rushdie, and Jeanette Winterson. Yet, whereas such writers radicalize their own surroundings, Irwin uniquely shifts his authorial gaze onto the previously Romanticized space of the Orient, namely Cairo during the medieval era, thereby fulfilling Marguerite Alexander's assertion in *Flights from "Realism: Themes and Strategies in Postmodernist British and American fiction* (1990), when she argues:

Where the nineteenth-century English novel and the twentieth-century realist novels that have succeeded it fed and continue to feed off the aspirations of their readers, modern and postmodernist fiction has more often found inspiration and justification for change in the broader intellectual climate. (7)

"Romantic Orientalism"—sometimes referred to as "Oriental Exoticism" or "Oriental Fantasy"—is the frequentness of some familiar constituents of Asian, particularly the Middle East of the Arab world, and North African exotic locales, mythical and famous peoples, religions, philosophies, and arts. What concerns us here is Orientalism, which denotes the "strangeness" of the Other via the literature and art of the time, as it was becoming increasingly popular. The Orientalism found in British Romantic literature originates in the first decade of the nineteenth century and coincides with the earliest translations of *The Arabian Nights* into English by Jonathan Scott (1811), Edward Lane (1838-41), John Payne (1882-84), and, most notoriously, Sir Richard Burton (1885-88). Antoine Galland had earlier translated *The Arabian Nights* into French, which was published between 1704-17. The eminence of *The*

Arabian Nights stimulated Western writers to create a new genre, the Oriental tale. Oriental tales represent exotic settings, bizarre happenings, melodramatic events, characterization, and emotion. It is as though the "otherness" of the Oriental settings and characters provided a kind of escapist fantasy for the readers from the stereotypical supposedly staid Victorian Britain.

In particular, *The Arabian Nights* establishes Arabia as a fantastical and exotic landscape: "once more I saw the evening star hanging like a solitaire from the pure front of the western firmament; and the after-glow transfiguring and transforming, as by magic, the homely and rugged features of the scene into a fairy-land" (Burton xxiii). This statement taken from Burton's preface to his text establishes a series of important concepts of Arabia as Other that would come to proliferate within later writing about the area. This interplay suggests that from its origins in *The Arabian Nights*, the Orientalist narrative, rather than being a kind of "immersive fantasy" (Mendlesohn 13) in which the events of the narrative take place within their own essentially self-contained world, in fact, draws on some elements of what Mendlesohn describes as the "liminal text" (13). In the liminal text, Mendlesohn suggests, "we are given to understand, through cues to the familiar, that this is our world," but rather than enter into this separate world "the fantastic leaks back through the portal" into our world (23). Consider that in this quote from Burton's text firstly there is a dually romanticized presentation of the area as a primitivist and fantastic, "magic" idyll. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, Burton considers the gaze of the Westerner, which orders and shapes the geographical reality of "East" into something ideological, but is itself affected by what it sees. Such complications are perhaps behind Mendlesohn's surprising omission of *The Arabian Nights* from her otherwise comprehensive dissection of the genre; nevertheless, they point to many of the issues that Irwin's writing engages with.

In *The Mysteries of Algiers* (1988), Irwin deconstructs this concept of otherness. He presents both an imperialist view, "their [French colonialists] blood and their faith have given them the right to rule over the Arabs" (58), whilst also presenting an anti-imperialist perspective which works to undermine colonial notions of civilization:

The European peoples have had to suffer in order to attain to reason and obedience. Now it is time for the others to follow in our footsteps. Civilization is not a fun palace. It is indeed a miserable affair. Yet they have asked for it and we must respond to their request. (16)

Irwin suggests that one of the worst aspects of imperialism is its capacity to limit the individual's freedom to prescribe identity by enforcing a particular grand narrative upon them: "we have deprived the Arab of his dignity, and of the most fundamental aspect of that dignity, his right to choose" (36).

Irwin attempts to disrupt this process by introducing an overtly Marxist narrative in *The Mysteries of Algiers*. However, as in the case of his handling of imperialist ideology, he presents a multitude of differing, sometimes opposing, views. The character of Philippe seems to embody a Marxist stance, "colonialism is the last gasp of the crisis of capitalism" (97), yet at times Irwin seems to be parodying the ideology of Marxism, in particular the notion of the pure proletariat: "I welcome the opportunity to experience the hunger and hardship of the oppressed. Hunger and hardship of the oppressed. I throw myself down to kiss the scorching sands" (78). At times Irwin seems to infuse Philippe's Marxist rhetoric with a certain amount of ideological incongruity, which works to complicate the narrative of Marxism and, perhaps, ultimately suggest the impossibility of the monolithic ideal:

Objectivity it is a good thing. Class envy is one of the greatest forces for good in the world. Hatred is the engine of change. It is good to hate the rich, the powerful and the successful, and though I have thrown in my lot with the oppressed, still I am forever contaminated by my former association with the oppressing class. (85)

In summary, *The Mysteries of Algiers* shares a motif common to much of Irwin's fiction, that of criticising the partisan nature of grand narratives, evident within the cautionary words of Philippe at the end of the novel:

What is going on in Algiers and throughout the world is not a football match, where everyone, playing or watching, is either for the French or for the Arabs and one cheers and waves the rattle without thinking. History is not a football match and it is history alone that I support. (190)

In *The Arabian Nightmare*, Irwin inverts the supposedly "traditional" relationship between East and West as instead of focusing upon Western superiority and the West's fear, revulsion, and intrigue towards the East, the novel reminds the reader that the power relationship was once one of Eastern superiority over Western "backwardness," particularly in respects of the Turkish Empire, and thus interacts with Irwin's assertion that "Occidentalism focuses on politico-religious hatred of the West in the 20th and 21st centuries" ("Books" 29). Although the novel opens with a vivid and pungent description of the suffering Christian pilgrims carving their way to their caravanserai in the city of Cairo, where "they entered a world of stench and darkness" (13), the surrounding confines of the old Cairo, with their stench and disease are all claustrophobic and frightening alarms culminating in "the aim of misleading the unwary [pilgrims]" (67). Moreover, the military, brutal, and historical images are brought to the pilgrims' minds about the evil city of Cairo, which is described as

the Great Whore, the many-gated city, from out of which the armies of Mohammedanism ride out to bring pestilence and the sword to Christian lands. It is there that the Black Pope of the Saracens keeps his court and knots his net to encompass the destruction of Christendom, and from there that he directs his army of assassins, heretics and poisoners to our destruction. (12)

The English explorer Bertram Thomas, in his book *Arabia Felix* (1932), mentions this fanatical view of the Arabs: "the religion of these desert men, at least in practice, is fanatical and exclusive. From time to time they hold it virtuous to enforce Islam with the sword" (xxiv). Thomas's and Irwin's view of the fanatical Muslims is an allusion to the heyday of the Moslem armies that conquered major parts of the globe, especially after the Prophet Mohammed's death in CE 632, when his homeland, the Arabian Peninsula, had been submitted to Islam. This Islamic Oriental dictatorship over the Western Christian land in that historical era bringing "pestilence" and "destruction" to "Christendom" is an overt challenge to Said's *Orientalism*, which proposes a Western domination over the Orient. Veronica Schanoes's suggestion that the inclusion of "real" historical events and personages into otherwise fantastical narratives "is generative of insights into the nature of historical writing" (236) seems particularly pertinent here, with Irwin's novel offering a counter narrative to Said's text.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* spawned a generation of scholarship on the

denigrating and dangerous mirage of "the East" in the Western colonial mind. But Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, in their book *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies* (2004), argue that "the West" is the more dangerous mirage of our own time, and the idea of "the West" in the minds of its self-proclaimed enemies remains largely unexamined and woefully misunderstood. *Occidentalism* is their investigation of the demonizing fantasies and stereotypes about the Western world that fuel such hatred in the hearts of others (5-6). Irwin interacts with the notion of Occidentalism in *The Arabian Nightmare* through his representation of the plight of the early Christians under the Muslim reign. The following scene of the Christian pilgrims, entering the entrails of Cairo, being disparaged by the local inhabitants, may offer a clue:

From above again, inside the buildings, behind the wooden lattices, came the shrieks of women mocking the Europeans, while in the street itself Arab children jostled the convoy and made incomprehensible signs with their hands. The Europeans picked their way through all this with great care. They came as supplicants and existed on sufferance. (14)¹

Irwin writes in the wider Bakhtinian tradition, incorporating historical discourse into a non-realist novel, and through this mix explores issues such as cross-cultural writing in the context of fiction. This involves conscientious research to verify certain elements of the Orient including characters, settings, and events. Working under this historical notion of fiction, Irwin brings to our mind the glorious zenith of the Mamluk sultanate, which was the greatest power in the fifteenth century as it witnessed a maritime piratical warfare between Christians and Muslims. Irwin represents this decisive Muslim-Christian era by employing a leap of his historical imagination to bring such an era to life, an ability that has won him much praise. Jane Jakeman interviewed Irwin and praised his ability to take the reader away from the present world to live alternatively and vividly in a different world, made only possible by his historical expertise and research as he might be considered "one of the few people in the country, probably in the world, who can pick up a medieval Arabic document and read it like today's *Sun*" (12).

While Irwin seems to be writing in the Bakhtinian tradition of historical fiction, he also appears to be aware of the conventions that Bakhtin proposes for the novel, challenging the philosopher's view that many novelists "do not even see or recognize the philosophical roots of the stylistics (and linguistics) in which they work ... they utterly fail to see behind their isolated and fragmented stylistic observations and linguistic descriptions, and theoretical problems posed by novelistic discourse" (267). While Bakhtin's concept relates particularly to nineteenth-century novels, twentieth-century post-modernity witnessed a shift towards a more knowing and introspective fiction, which Irwin seems to typify. In particular, Irwin seems aware of the Bakhtinian idea that the novel, "having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads" (276). Like Bakhtin, Irwin realizes that the novel does not have the privilege of existing in a social or temporal vacuum, and thus, rather than dealing with the novel in this way, he seeks to highlight and explore through dialogizing conventionally separate forms.

The alienating and "horrid" atmosphere of the city of Cairo and its people continues in *The Arabian Nightmare* as the narrator warns the visitors of Cairo: "*though the inhabitants [of Cairo] may welcome the foreigner with a smile, beware, for they are all charlatans and liars. They will cheat you if they can*" (11, emphasis in the original). Thus

the novel provides an instancing of David K. Danow's assertion that "magical realism manages to present a view of life that exudes a sense of energy and vitality in a world that promises not only joy but a fair share of misery as well" (67).

Representations of the dream state recur in magical realist novels, and "Fantasists know that the true function of dreams isn't escapism, but as a training ground for the literal" (Palwick 15). It could be suggested that dream and reality constitute the two poles of the human condition, and it is through the charm of these poles that magic is born. As Andrew M. Butler has explored it, Sigmund Freud's theories, while nearing a hundred years old, still form the predominant prism through which to analyze the significance of dreams. Freud proposed that dreams are a product of the unconscious mind, though he believed that throughout our sleeping state we know that we are dreaming in the same way we know that we are sleeping. The relationship between the reality of waking and sleeping is a problem that intrigued Freud, who argues:

Dreams, as everyone knows, may be confused, unintelligible or positively nonsensical, what they say may contradict all that we know of reality, and we behave in them like insane people, since, so long as we are dreaming, we attribute objective reality to the contents of the dream. (*Historical* 397)

Irwin's narrator also explores the possibilities of dreams in *The Arabian Nightmare* and in so doing embodies Rosemary Jackson's notion that dreams and literary fantasies share the same hybridized genesis: "like dreams, with which they have many similarities, literary fantasies are made up of many elements re-combined, and are inevitably determined by the range of those constitutive elements available to the author/dreamer" (8). As such, the dream forms the perfect metaphor for expressing those elements and forces which act in our waking life but which we remain unaware of at an ideological level:

Dreams are like the sea; they sweep in to cover the brain in little waves and then withdraw, but the waves ripple out from something that is always there, the World of Images, the Alam al-Mithal. Instead of waiting for the waves to cover you in a fixed daily rhythm, you may, if you wish, swim out to explore their deeps. (Irwin, *Arabian* 100)

Irwin depicts a world in which dreams are becoming "aspects of the sleeping brain talking to itself and one should not eavesdrop" (Irwin, *Satan* 38), and thus he represents an unconscious life or a subconscious self that cannot be accessed in daily life but which nevertheless exerts influence over the self and thus the world that humans have created around themselves. For Irwin's characters, however, this unconscious world is often not merely present in the neutral dream, but manifests itself in the darker, more malevolent force of the nightmare, and, as such, the novel occupies a particular place amongst novels of fantasy and magical realism. John E. Kennard suggests:

The novel of nightmare is fantasy in the sense that it often presents us with events which are not possible given the present state of human knowledge. It often employs the realistic methods of characterization. It is fantasy also in the sense that it draws attention to its own pattern. The novel of nightmare is usually a fable; that is, to use John Peter's definition, it gives the impression that the author began with some initial thesis or contention he wished to embody in concrete terms. (13-14)

It appears that Irwin uses nightmares in this manner to disrupt what he saw as

the previously romanticized image of the Orient in Western literature. The more time the character Balian spends in Cairo, the more his nightmares become disorientating, overwhelming, and traumatic under any condition by which they are caused, and it becomes clear that he may be afflicted by The Arabian Nightmare, upon which the creativity of the book is best summed up:

The Arabian Nightmare is absence and terrible, monotonous and yet horrific. It comes to its victims every night, yet one of its proprieties is that it is never remembered in the morning. It is therefore the experiencing of infinite pain without the consciousness that one is doing so. It is pure suffering, suffering that does not ennoble or teach, pointless suffering that changes nothing. (32)

The mysterious sense of this nightmare begins with the events happening with one of Balian's fellow pilgrims, a Venetian painter called Giancristoforo, who has a dull book that merely is composed of some shabby, thumbed, and loose pages threaded together in a tattered manner. The book is written in Arabic but also contains some scribbled notes written in Italian by an anonymous author. As a matter of interest, Balian seizes the chance to look at a peculiar note, which reads:

He [the person who scribbles the paragraphs] said, "Beware of the Ape!" He said also, "Some people say that every skull contains within itself its own sea of dreams and that there are millions upon millions of these tiny oceans"... He said also, "When we sleep we are learning to come to terms with death."... He said also, "Large areas of brain are empty. They have never been crossed by man."... He said also, "One should take care to forget unimportant dreams."...He said also, "He who is a coward in his dreams will be one also in his waking life." (22, emphases in the original)

Reading this note does not surprise Balian, but what surprises him is the arrest of Giancristoforo by the Mamluk officers, who drive him to the city's big citadel. Although Giancristoforo once tells Balian that he resents "the Saracen lands, the land of illusion and illusionism, the kingdom of the greasy palm and shifty eye" (17), Balian ignores such talk as an excuse for arrest, yet he thinks a more serious reason may be behind it, which he cannot understand. Balian himself is afraid of the arrest, too, as his religious pilgrimage becomes a mission with a double purpose, political and religious:

Since taking the vow, over a year ago in England, to go to St Catherine's in the Sinai Desert and thence to the Holy Land, he had received a commission at the French court. He was to use his pilgrim guise to travel through the Mamluke lands as a spy, observing the numbers of the Mamluke soldiery, the strength of their fortifications and other features of interest. (15)

Fortunately, Balian is not arrested by the Mamluk officers, but unfortunately he is arrested by an assortment of nightmares and dreams which make him lose himself in both insomnia and narcolepsy during the midnight hours while he wanders the narrow streets of Cairo. These recurrent dreams and nightmares provide the first symptoms of the possibility of catching the Arabian Nightmare. The following dream is a vanguard of those forthcoming nightmares coming to Balian:

A flash of teeth. Things seemed to shimmer a little in the limp air... The silence intensified until, paradoxically, it became a buzzing in the ears The ground shook slightly. Then he [Balian] saw that it was life that pulsed in the earth, the bricks and the trees and forced its way upwards in great roaring flames of energy that lengthened into tongues of umber, black and green. The whole universe was burning up around him in ecstasy. The roaring was inside his head. And blood. He awoke and it came jetting out of his nostrils. His mouth was full of blood too, some

of it overflowing in thin dribblets down his chin. (28)

This horrid oozing dream of Balian happens immediately after he experiences his "vivid memory" (28), while he and his fellow pilgrims are entering the inward area of Cairo. Upon dismounting his horse's back, Balian is shown a note in a book by the caravan's guide, whom Balian is unable to see fully, as his face is obscured by the murky weather of Cairo. The note reads:

There are some who hold that talking about it, even thinking about it, it is enough to attract it and simulate its attacks. For this reason we do not name it. But even this may not be enough. Therefore I advised that no one should read this book unless he is already aware of what it is, and let those who know forget it if they can.

(28, emphasis in the original)

The reader is dazzled by the pronoun "it" as it refers to something yet unknown, but for Balian, who has the dream of "[a] flash of teeth," it has just been known that "it" is the horrible fascination of Alam al-Mithal, which is now explained to Balian by a magical and villainous figure named the Father of the Cats, who embodies the idea of Freud's pre-scientific or historic theory that explains, "the existence and activity of superhuman spiritual forces precisely by the inexplicable nature of the phenomena of dreaming" (Freud, *Interpretation* 61). The Father of the Cats is claimed to be the master of sleep and the key owner of Alam al-Mithal. The Father of the Cats explains this world to Balian:

Clearly you are no longer in the world of reality, a world which is governed by the laws of God and logic. No, you are in the Alam al-Mithal, which, being interpreted, is the World of Images or Similitudes. With your co-operation, we hope to teach you to stamp your will on the Alam al-Mithal and, of course, even before that, to diagnose your sickness and discover the root of the bleeding. You should know that if we do not come here first, something much more unpleasant would have. (55)

Balian enters another Oriental yet illusive world from the Western one he has just come from, it is the suffering world of the "sleeping East" (151), where the only figure that can presumably help him to escape is the Father of the Cats, but whether the Father can help him or not is still an enigmatic point in the novel. Moreover, to complicate things further for Balian, matters get worse in Cairo after rumors are spread that a vicious murderer is on the loose in the city. At this point Balian is introduced to a cast of characters in the Alam al-Mithal, all of whom hover between reality and unreality, and represent the "Cairo of nocturnal fantasy and the real city" (105). Those characters who live around an area called Zuweyla Gate include the Father of the Cats, Fatima the Deathly, and the seductive prostitute from hell, Zuleyka. Consequently, Balian is thought to be afflicted by the Arabian Nightmare, which the Father pretends to cure him of. Under this peculiar nightmare, Balian is gradually driven out of his consciousness to enter a world of his real and imagined selves where he becomes progressively unable to distinguish his dreaming state from his waking one.

The confusion Balian experiences is conveyed by the story being told by several different narrators in turn, yet the major narrator is the Oriental storyteller, who purports to be the dirty Yoll. The narrator, who is unreliable, is a Cairo storyteller from the fifteenth century, who takes the novel forward in an important line, explaining that "*for a long time I used to go to bed early*" (11, emphasis in the

original). From this statement we feel that any forthcoming tale in the book is to be a fantastical "bedtime" story, but unfortunately Yoll, who seems to be a decently stable landmark, dies at a most perplexing moment "*and I did not intend it to be the story of my death*" (231, emphasis in the original). The death of Yoll marks a move away from the common-sense assumptions concerning the nature of narrative; the character who was believed to be the narrator should not die in the course of the novel under the rules of realism, and as such the manipulation of narrative form is highlighted in *The Arabian Nightmare*. Irwin can be seen to be engaging in the sort of post-modern game that Marguerite Alexander discusses in *Flights from Realism*.

While in the late-twentieth-century British and American non-realist novel fiction have become wilder, more extravagant, less constrained by the commonplace and common sense, there is running parallel to this—often in the work of the same novelists—a new scrupulousness, some would say over-scrupulousness, about the use of fiction at all. This manifests itself in a variety of "metafictional" techniques— interruptions into the narrative flow by the writer to remind the reader that this is indeed fiction; an insistence on the unreliability of the narrative voice. (13)

The tangle of mythic tales continues with oracular commentary from a cast of ghostly creatures, all of whom differ greatly from the way they seem to be, upholding Wendy B. Farris's belief that "metamorphoses are a relatively common event [in fantasy] They embody in the realm of organisms a collision of different worlds" (178). The fascination continues as these creatures represent a consequence of dreams provided by the author's playful technique on the nature of illusion and reality. The following dream of Balian is peculiar:

A man lay quivering on the bed beside him. He appeared to be sinking in the mattress. As soon as he saw that Balian was awake, he began to cry in a thin voice, "Help me up, help me up," The creature was up, though, and it hopped round the room continuing to squeak. It had to hop. It had one leg, one hand, one eye, half a head and half a torso. (70)

This mythical creature is "Shikk al-Insaan," meaning "the half part of a human" (70), as Zuleyka, who usually interprets Balian's dreams, tells him. This mythical creature seems to be a prolific form of "an uncertain creation" (71) of the author's image of fantasy, which leads one to imagine what the other half of the Shikk look likes. The fantasy of this creature continues as Balian is told by Zuleyka that this mythical creature "comes from the China Sea or, it is said, from the woods of Yemen. The latter opinion is more correct" (71). What is interesting about this creature is that "Africa is [the place] where his other half lives" (71), and while he uses his right hand to eat, according to the Arab habit, he does not have a left hand to wipe his buttocks, and consequently he "is forever looking for men to enslave them in their dreams and make them perform this task for him" (71).

Irwin uses his knowledge of the *Arabian Nights* to shift our attention to follow a tale that seems to become ever more contorted and complex, almost after the fashion of the "Chinese box" puzzle (113). Magical realist fiction "often cater[s] with an unidirectional story line to our basic desire to hear what happens next" (Faris 163); the suggestion that the story of *The Arabian Nightmare* is constantly being further and further removed from conscious reality is convincingly put by the ever convoluting depictions of dreams within dreams; the ambiance of the story is also added to by the

evocation of the mystifying medieval ambience of Cairo itself. All of which serve as the perfect catalyst for an Oriental mystery that weaves a web of spells to be enjoyed only by those who like less straightforward narratives.

Irwin employs certain images through different stages at the novel in order to hold its fragments together and yet to increasingly play with the reader's understanding of the characters and their places in the disentangling plotlines of the book. This technique of perplexing storytelling is well known among Arab *qasasyoon* (oral storytellers), who go further in narrating their stories in a manner that renders their listeners lose logical track of what is happening to an extent of confusion, and that is ultimately a part of the Oriental oral storyteller's plan of his story narration. Irwin's interlude of "the Tale of the Talking Ape" (175) provides a clue to such a technique as the interlude gets complicated in three successive full chapters: "The Interlude Concluded" (184), "The Interlude Concluded Continued" (193), and "The Conclusion of the Continuation of the Interlude's Conclusion" (213). In these chapters, a recurrent tale happens, but with different people in different times. The tale oscillates round the story of a poor man guided to a lush garden where he meets a beautiful young lady and is greeted by an ape who has the tongue of humans. The ape and the lady perform sexual intercourse in the presence of the poor man, who is later asked by the lady to perform the same intercourse or better, but the witty poor man challenges the lady with a riddle that reads, *"I ask thee for the seven already named. They err not, cannot be forgotten, are both old and new. Whoever walks in them walks in both life and death"* (179, emphasis in the original). The riddle fascinates the lady, who stands year after year unable to solve it, but eventually the riddle is unraveled by the talking apes somewhere. The riddle's solution, incidentally, is "the seven days of the week" (191).

The riddle was originally made by a lady who befriended a magical ape created by an enchantment put upon a Christian sorcerer who once met and challenged Iblis (Satan) in a desert near Damascus (186). The perplexing moment of the tale happens as the riddle is recited by that lady to the magical ape, by the magical ape to his Christian master (216), by the Christian master to a beautiful lady who declines to marry him (185), and finally by a poor man, Mansour from the time of Caliph Haroun al-Rashid, who hears it from the Christian master and challenges the lady, who seduces him in Baghdad (176).

As the interlude is concluded and the riddle is unraveled, the novel goes back to its original protagonist, Balian, who is being locked into the labyrinthine city of Cairo by various factors. Every attempt Balian tries to make to leave the city fails, because the wraithlike creatures lead him into a confusing maze within the city's underworld with an ever changing appearance:

The real city was perhaps elsewhere, a world of private interiors, etiquette and familial duties guarded by the huge nailstudded double doors, the porters watching from their benches and the lattices of *meshrabiyya*, thousands of secret beds and gardens. The appeal of beggars, the cries of street vendors, the military orchestras: these were public voices. (80)

Balian grows uneasy, believing that "everybody, whomever he serves, seems to conspire to prevent [him] leaving Cairo. Everybody plays games with [him]" (161). This disappointed state of mind leads him to think that his flight from Cairo will be never ending since "there were no choices at all" (165).

The multitude of answers presented to the riddle's tale confuses the reader, and,

further, the fact that these mythical stories are consciously presented as unfinished suggests that they are not the author's own stories, but part of a larger continuing oral tradition. Yoll, the exclusive storyteller of these tales tells us that he cannot finish them as they are getting too disorganized: "*How embarrassing. I seem to be making a real mess of this story. I feel sick with shame and fatigue and thank God that no rival master from the Qasasyoon was present to witness it at all!*" (213, emphasis in the original). Yoll's statement suggests that escape may be the breaking out of the interlinked nature of such tales. The "nesting" of tales continues infinitely, spiraling downwards into a conclusion based upon confusion and madness, as Irwin himself suggests: "All my novels are about madness of one kind or another---obsession, delusion, drunkenness" (Jakeman 12). This is especially relevant when we know that "the Ape of God" (Irwin, *Arabian* 186) is the true narrator of the story, as he tells Balian at the end of the novel "'wake up,' said the Ape. 'I want to tell you another story. But first, give me a drink. I am exhausted'" (266).

But Satan cannot finish a story, which is one of his deceptions against mankind the narrator dislikes: "it is certainly true that Iblis delights to torment mankind Iblis wished to illustrate the strangeness of fate.... In Iblis's eyes, man's life has no meaning. Therefore, Iblis wished to give it at least a pattern" (219). However, in *Satan Wants Me* (1999), Irwin provides us with a solution to overcome Satan's malice towards human kind, suggesting that, "If you are going to get anywhere in Satanism you have to get used to the idea, ... It is an integral part of making the dark forces work for you" (11). With the Satanic dreams of Balian, Irwin provides us with one of the most terrifying and disturbing visions of Hell, an endless suffering without the relief of any final redemption.

It can be argued that those aspects of the novel that may make a reader feel uncomfortable are the very means by which Irwin achieves his aim of de-centering the Western gaze, such that Irwin can be seen to be utilizing the techniques of the post-modern movement for his own particular aims, since, as Alexander argues,

[t]he postmodernist novelist has re-drafted the contract between writer and reader along lines which many readers of more conventional fiction find unfavourable to themselves. A recurring theme of late-twentieth century fiction is treachery enacted between individuals, obscurely at work within society and, more generally, the treacherous nature of appearance. (3)

Near the end of the novel we get an interchange that can be read as emblematic of the subversion of the Western gaze, substituting the idea of magic as a metaphor for the "unreal" romanticizing of the East by the West

Magic is absurd. It is a system of thinking that does not work and does not get one anywhere ... it works, but it does not get one anywhereBut it is very beautiful. Magic is an art which pleases the eye and the ear ... There is poetry in the pentagram and invocation. They seem to promise but cannot fulfill infinite bliss. (263)

Irwin parallels *The Arabian Nights* by a suggested didactic function, warnings or messages of moral value for those who read them, but instead creates a fiction that is itself more akin to magic, always promising enlightenment, never finally being that simple. For Irwin, magic often overrides all else, as the narrator of *Satan Wants Me* suggests: "Magic is the Highest, most Absolute, and most Divine Knowledge of Natural Philosophy, advanced in its works and wonderful operations by a right understanding of

the inward and occult virtue of things" (5).

Believing in the powerful influence of magic and the fantastic, Irwin forges a link between the literature of medieval Eastern countries and that of twentieth-century Western postmodernism, as such embodying the notion, which has been suggested before in modernism, that in the late twentieth century the "Real literature" has seen a revitalization of the fantastic on a scale unprecedented in this century of scientific discoveries (Muchnic 4). Indeed, such a fusing of the fantastical with the "historical" is not surprising given Jim Casey's point that "postmodernism's central system of knowing affirms the impossibility of knowing anything for certain" (118). Irwin infuses his uses of many of the devices of post-modernism—an unreliable narrator, confusion of levels of reality, and a blurring of what is within the book and outside it, with the old tales of medieval Cairo in order to destabilize what had become a Western comfort zone concerning the East, and the belief that its mysteries had all been unraveled and that it could be completely known and understood by its Western observers.

Note

¹ Occidentalism seems to be a theme that has intrigued Irwin to the extent that he returns to it in his journalistic writing; he notes in a journal article that "In Mamluk times, the commonest targets of mob violence in Cairo and Damascus were Christians and Jews" (Irwin, "Political Thought" 247).

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