

The Detective as Conscript

*Tawfiq al-Hakim and Driss Chraïbi
on the Margins of the Law*

In theory, the Egyptian Tawfiq al-Hakim and the Moroccan Driss Chraïbi make strange bedfellows. The former is best known as the pioneering modernizer of Egyptian theater, the latter as the author of *The Simple Past* (*Le passé simple*), a novel whose critique of both French cultural imperialism and Arabo-Islamic patriarchy rocked the Moroccan cultural scene during that country's struggle for independence from the French protectorate.¹ Less known, however, is each author's career as a writer of detective fiction. In the world of Arabic literary studies, al-Hakim's 1937 *Diary of a Country Prosecutor* (*Yawmiyyât Na'ib fî al-Aryâf*) has already been recognized as an example in the genre,² and Chraïbi's series of novels from the 1980s featuring the wily Moroccan Inspector Ali also, for the most part, obey the rules of engagement. Writing in different languages and different national contexts, separated by almost fifty years of history, al-Hakim and Chraïbi might seem like an odd pair with which to begin this study. What, then, does reading them together yield?

For one thing, both al-Hakim's *Diary* and Chraïbi's 1981 *Une Enquête au pays* (*Flutes of Death*, hereafter *Enquête*) were written at times of historical and political disillusionment in Egypt and Morocco. Interwar Egypt was a particularly bleak political landscape for reform-minded thinkers like al-Hakim. Fewer than twenty years earlier, in March of 1919, mass demonstrations had united Egyptians behind an independence movement with the populist hero Saad Zaghloul as its figurehead. It was a formative moment for writers of al-Hakim's generation, one in which an end to Britain's thirty-seven-year protectorate seemed near. The Egypt of al-Hakim's 1937 *Diary*, however, looked vastly different. A series of agreements and capitulations, including the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936, had failed to effect

Britain's complete withdrawal from the country.³ What began as the "revolution of 1919" had quickly "transmuted into a domestic, Egyptian political struggle" between the Wafd—Zaghoul's party—which demanded complete and unconditional independence, and the Liberal Constitutional Party, which sought to stabilize relations with the British and "restore public order" in the wake of ongoing mass demonstrations.⁴ Isma' il Sidqi, who served as prime minister from 1930 to 1933, had revised the constitution and redrafted electoral laws to suppress suffrage and bolster the authority of King Fuad's palace, thereby "ushering in the most repressive period of government Egypt had ever known."⁵ The reforms championed by Wafd leaders—free elections, free press, and freedom of assembly—had been coopted and manipulated by Sidqi's cynically named "People's Party" (Hizb al-Sha'b), which, among other forms of repression, conscripted peasants and political prisoners to shout chants in support of government-backed candidates in the elections of 1931.⁶ In short, everything the Wafd had stood for in 1919 seemed a farcical caricature of itself by 1937, including the secular, modern legal system in which al-Hakim was employed at the time.⁷ It was a period in which, as the public prosecutor who serves as the narrator of *Diary* puts it, "'justice' and 'the people'" were little more than "phrases whose only purpose is to be written on paper and delivered in orations, like many other words and abstract concepts that don't really exist."⁸ There is a cynicism to *Diary*, in other words, that is alien to al-Hakim's earlier, more famous, and largely Romantic-nationalist novel *Return of the Spirit* (*'Awdat al-Rūh*). It is what Egyptian critic Ghali Shukri has called a work of "critical realism" in which "Egypt is not merely an eternal, metaphysical idea," as in *Return*, but rather "a reality filled with tragedy and shame."⁹

The Moroccan political situation to which Chraïbi responds in *Enquête* was similarly bleak, but for different reasons. When the Parisian publishing house Seuil brought out this first of Chraïbi's Inspector Ali novels in 1981, reports of King Hassan II's massive human rights abuses in Morocco were just beginning to reach the international community. It was the peak of what would subsequently be known as the "Years of Lead" (*les années de plomb* in French, or *sanawāt al-raṣāṣ*, in Arabic),¹⁰ which were generally said to begin with Morocco's independence from France in 1956 and to end with the death of King Hassan II in 1999.¹¹ Forced disappearances, political imprisonments, arbitrary detentions, torture, and murder at the hands of the judicial police (*police judiciaire*) were among the many brutalities faced by thousands of Moroccans who voiced opposition of any kind—"Marxist, Islamist, nationalist, Sahrawi, feminist, Amazigh/Berber activist"—to the regime of Hassan II.¹² The most detailed accounts of torture in Morocco's secret detention centers didn't begin to reach the Moroccan public until the late 1990s, with the death of King Hassan, the release of thousands of former prisoners, and the consequent (albeit incremental) decrease in former prisoners' fear of speaking and writing publicly about their experiences.¹³ Nevertheless, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, even as Chraïbi was penning his satirical novels from the relative

comfort of exile in France, the French press was circulating a slow but steady stream of letters and testimonials smuggled out of prisons and torture centers in Morocco, documents testifying to physical torture, psychological abuse, and death at the hands of the Moroccan police.¹⁴ While writing *Enquête*—a novel centered on two police officers—Chraïbi would certainly have been aware of the horrors inflicted on his countrymen by their own police forces. As in interwar Egypt, “democracy,” “justice,” and “legal reform” were little better than facades erected by the Moroccan regime in this context. Like *Diary*, then, *Enquête* lampoons officers of the law, revealing their self-claimed defense of “progress” and “civilization” to be little more than a mask for authoritarian violence.

In addition to the similarities between their respective historical and political contexts, however, al-Hakim’s *Diary* and Chraïbi’s *Enquête* also illuminate and speak to each other for another reason. Both novels center on the misadventures of what I am calling the “detective as conscript,” the native officer of the law caught between two ways of seeing, seeking, and being in the world: the communal, colloquial one of his native upbringing, and the isolating, official one of his legal education and police training. The detective at the heart of each novel has been forcibly severed from the community around him, compelled to occupy the position of investigating subject and to transform those around him into the mute, inert objects of his investigation. Yet, as this chapter will illustrate, in both novels the severance is incomplete. The ontological split between narrating subject and narrated object is not rigid but porous, and it is never fully realized in either text.¹⁵ Rather, despite each character’s police training, still his contact with rural others—the fellahin or peasant-farmers in al-Hakim’s “countryside” (*aryāf*) and the *paysans* or Amazigh tribe in Chraïbi’s remote Atlas Mountain “village” (*pays*)—causes images and echoes of his pre-police self to bubble to the surface of his memory. Each narrator consequently experiences his legal training not as a process of enlightenment and acculturation but rather as a violent severance or cutting, a quite literal amputation from the body politic, on the one hand, and an incomplete graft of Western “civilization,” on the other.

The specificity of the rural elsewhere summoned by the novels’ respective titles makes them notoriously difficult to translate into English. The “country” or “countryside” that Abba Eban’s *Diary of a Country Prosecutor* might evoke for English-language readers likely differs greatly from the vast farmlands of the Nile Delta summoned to the minds of Egyptian readers by al-Hakim’s *aryāf*. Likewise, the French *pays* has connotations for French readers that are lost even in the literal translation “An Inquest in the Countryside,” to say nothing of Robin Roosevelt’s *Flutes of Death*.¹⁶ Like *baḥṭh*, the French *pays* connotes a number of contradictory meanings, from the hyperlocal “village, canton, province” to the much larger “nation, country, homeland,” as in *mourir pour son pays*, “to die for one’s country.”¹⁷ For immigrants to France, *le pays* can also mean “homeland” or “country of origin,” often referring to previously colonized territories of the French Empire,

and thereby implicitly equating formerly colonized nations with quaint, simple “villages” stuck in a romanticized past. The *pays* in Chraïbi’s title is thus simultaneously a “backwater,” a “village,” and the entirety of “Morocco” itself. The author has returned to “his country” (*son pays*) to write the novel, just as Chief Mohammed and Inspector Ali, the novel’s protagonists, must journey from the city to the “village” (*pays*) for their investigation. The same is true for al-Hakim, who both physically, for his job in the state legal apparatus, and imaginatively, via his novel, returns to the *rif* after a period of education abroad in Europe.

Each novel thus offers a meditation on the messy, tangled subjectivity of a newly enfranchised native class in interwar Egypt and in post-Protectorate Morocco, subjects acculturated in cities but born and raised in rural places. In al-Hakim’s case, this social group is the *effendiyya*: the teachers, doctors, architects, lawyers, and judges—many of them from poor or rural backgrounds—whose self-styled modern identities shaped the country’s new state institutions and its emergent nationalist discourse.¹⁸ But unlike contemporary authors of the period, like Yahya Haqqi, al-Hakim refuses to end his tale with the seamless melding of native authenticity and Western-style modernity that is the hallmark of the *effendi*.¹⁹ Rather, with his characteristic dark humor and dry wit, al-Hakim dramatizes the spectacular failure of imported Western legal systems and procedures when practiced in the Egyptian *rif*, while at the same time allowing supposedly irrational, backward others (such as the semi-mad, poetry-spouting Shaykh Asfur and the mysterious peasant girl Rim) to not only shape the plot of the novel but also to exercise a hold over truth, albeit a different form of truth than the one sought after by state-mandated procedures of legal, police, and forensic detection.

Chraïbi, meanwhile, focuses on the intermediary class of government functionaries who emerged in the wake of French colonialism—Moroccan inspectors, officers, deputies, commissioners, servants, secretaries—and who, in his words, seemed “forever caught between the new masters of the Third World and the people.”²⁰ Inspector Ali embodies this intermediary class of functionaries standing between the “police chiefs” at the very top of society and the rural, Amazigh others at the very bottom. By simply continuing to exist, by refusing to recognize or acknowledge the officers who attempt to “know” them through police interrogation, Shaykh Asfur, in *Diary*, and Hajja, Raho, and the entire Aït Yafelman clan in *Enquête*, mount a passive resistance to the unsuitability, at best, and inhumanity, at worst, of the supposedly more humane modern legal and juridical regimes in each context. They refuse to become the objects of the state’s aspirational all-knowing gaze; and the legal officers, al-Hakim’s Prosecutor and Chraïbi’s Inspector Ali, find themselves caught between different forms of truth—different methods for creating and legitimating it—both of which they understand, and neither of which has a complete hold over them. I use the phrase *forms* of truth deliberately here, since in all cases, al-Hakim and Chraïbi wed specific narrative forms to specific truth

effects. Al-Hakim's prosecutor is forced to measure the distance between the formulaic, state-mandated language of the legal case files he must produce by the ream, which dull his mind, and Asfur's quasi-gnostic poetry, which stirs vague flickers of recognition in his soul; Chraïbi's Ali knows from the outset that his superior officer's interrogation tactics are doomed to fail when used on the Aït Yafelman, yet he is caught off guard by the glimmers of recognition that draw him to Hajja, the clan's matriarch, as a stand-in for his own mother and the tales she told him as a child.

Despite the echoes of alternative forms of truth that percolate into their conscious minds, however, neither al-Hakim's prosecutor nor Chraïbi's Inspector Ali is ultimately able to fully return to the community from which his legal training has alienated him. *Diary* ends with the prosecutor throwing up his hands in resignation, consigning unsolved case files to the dustbin of Egyptian history in a tone of "bitter mockery" (*sukhriyyah*, a term that will later be important to Yusuf al-Qa'id's take on the *rif*) and sarcastically proclaiming to his associate: "There! Are you happy now? That's it, we're done, we've solved all the crimes!" (*D* 134; *Y* 192). Likewise, at the end of *Enquête*, despite having been overcome by his memories of an alternate, Amazigh creation myth that his mother told him as a boy, Ali ultimately becomes only what the villagers expect him to be: "a solemn, thoughtful, efficient being. A real chief" (*E* 214). Neither al-Hakim nor Chraïbi privileges the "middle way" of Isma'il in Yahya Haqqi's famed story, "Umm Hashim's Lamp."²¹ For them, the middleman—prosecutor, native policeman—is always a conscript in conflict.

Borrowed from anthropological theory, the notion of the "conscript," as I am using it here, begins with Stanley Diamond's "conscripts of civilization" and makes its way through Talal Asad's "conscripts of Western civilization" before arriving at David Scott's "conscripts of modernity."²² The idea, throughout, is that colonized or enslaved individuals who take up European Enlightenment discourses to demand "secular, democratic, independent states responsible for their own national development" (in Asad's reading of India) or liberation and natural rights (in Scott's reading of C. L. R. James's Toussaint Louverture) do so not in acknowledgement of those European discourses' innate moral or civilizational superiority but simply because the violent impositions of colonialism and the modern state have limited the choices available to them.²³ They are not, in Diamond's formulation, volunteers into modernity's project but conscripts to its order, which has obliterated the epistemological, social, and political choices previously available to them.²⁴ Understanding modernity in the Foucauldian sense described by Scott—as "a positive structure of power, a historical formation of certain constitutive and productively shaping material and epistemological conditions of life and thought"—allows us to turn the focus away from individual agents (even agents of resistance) and onto the social, historical, and material circumstances conditioning their actions.²⁵ Chraïbi's Inspector Ali

and al-Hakim's prosecutor "could not choose *not* to be modern" (or Western, or West-looking); rather, their worlds had been "coercively reorganized by the material and epistemic violence of a modern regime of power and forcibly inserted into a global order in a state of subordination and dependence."²⁶

As they recognize and dramatize the constrained options available to their protagonists, however, al-Hakim and Chraïbi also take advantage of fiction's imaginative capacities to leave open the possibility of subjects at the margins of the nation and the law, figures who remain illegible to and undocumented in the ledgers of the modern state. Both the Aït Yafelman, in Chraïbi's text, and the murder victim's sister-in-law Rim, in al-Hakim's, escape the prying eyes of the police and the author both, disappearing from the public eye and from the text of the novel itself. In this way, both al-Hakim and Chraïbi also address what D. A. Miller has called the "entanglement between the nature of the novel and the practice of the police," the link between the documenting, identifying, surveilling tactics of the state and those of novelistic discourse.²⁷ Yet, unlike the authors examined in Miller's study, al-Hakim and Chraïbi—as colonized or formerly colonized writers—recognize the link between laying bare the everyday lives of their peasant characters and producing knowledge about them. Their novels thus self-consciously dramatize this tension between realist authorship and police work. Even as they stage their protagonists' entanglement in the web of conscription and detection, they allow certain characters to flee from the novel's all-knowing gaze. When Inspector Ali returns to the Atlas Mountains at the end of *Enquête* as "Chief Ali," the Aït Yafelman have disappeared. And when called on to authorize an autopsy of Rim's body at the end of *Diary*, the prosecutor simply declines to carry out this act of cutting open and laying bare. Neither *Diary* nor *Enquête* attests the actual existence of figures outside modernity's reach; rather, simply in imagining the possibility of "primitives" unconscribed into the violent epistemic reordering of social and individual life, al-Hakim and Chraïbi register their protests to that order, loosening its hold and allowing their readers to imagine, if only in fantasy, its relativity, its contingency.

By withholding solutions to the mysteries they dramatize and by focusing instead on the divided subjectivity of the postcolonial detective himself, both *Diary* and *Enquête* teach their readers a new way of seeking after truth. These novels do more than merely reflect the historical and social situations that produced them. By dramatizing those eras' methods for producing and legitimating truth, and by staging these methods' failure when confronted with alternative, "native" forms of truth-making, *Diary* and *Enquête* demonstrate their awareness of how novel writing—an occupation of the intellectual class—can participate in state surveillance, but also how it can provincialize, bracket, and thereby destabilize (if not dismantle) the state's monopoly on truth. They do so by interrupting the narrative flow of the realist novel with inscrutable mystical poetry, matrilineal myth, and other unruly literary forms.

PERFORMING THE AUTHORITY TO KNOW

One of the central ways that both *Diary* and *Enquête* frame and interrogate the production of truth is by dramatizing the investigative hubris of their detective-protagonists. The prosecutor in *Diary* and Chief Mohammed in *Enquête* view themselves as much more than detectives. To them, “investigation” (baḥṭh/*enquête*) is more than a method for solving mysterious crimes. It is, rather, a way to deduce truths about the world in which they live and the people who populate that world. They transform legal power into metaphysical and philosophical authority, using their observation of clues to uncover truths lurking deep within the human soul. Their performance of detection thus becomes a performance of the authority to know. Yet both texts also satirize this tendency among conscripted officers of the law, mocking the hubris of the newly enfranchised native class and revealing the barbarism lurking behind the detective’s civilized exterior.

Diary begins when its narrator—an unnamed figure referred to only as “the prosecutor” (*al-nā’ib*)—is awakened in the middle of the night to investigate a shooting in a remote village.²⁸ The victim turns out to be a man named Qamar al-Dawla Alwan.²⁹ At first, the prosecutor assumes this will be a case like hundreds of others, unsolved and unsolvable, thwarted by multiple forms of peasant recalcitrance and marked *ḍidd majhūl*, “culprit unknown.” However, midway through the prosecutor’s suspect interrogations, the village’s wandering holy man Shaykh Asfur offers this cryptic, poetic clue: “Seek out women, there you’ll find / the cause of all turmoil” (Y 20). Following the shaykh’s advice despite himself, the prosecutor is led to a new suspect: Rim, the victim’s sister-in-law. As soon as the prosecutor sees her, he is struck by her mysterious beauty. Suddenly, the case of Qamar al-Dawla takes on a different significance: “There was now nothing on my mind except the image of that girl in her black frame, and her secret which I had so far failed to uncover. Her secret was the key to the entire case, and I was impelled to unearth it by an urge quite unconnected with my work. I also wanted to know” (D 31; Y 26).

This “desire to know” and “uncover” Rim’s secret—a desire that exceeds the bounds of his professional training—motivates the narrator throughout the rest of the book. It is no accident that it was inspired by a snippet of poetry uttered by the wandering holy man Shaykh Asfur, that saintly “friend of god” whom the police bring along on every investigation,³⁰ “a strange man who wanders aimlessly by night and day, sleepless, eternally humming the same songs, mouthing stray words, uttering predictions which win the credence of simple folk” (D 18; Y 8–9). Oddly, Shaykh Asfur also seems to be addicted to mystery, in whatever form it takes; it just so happens that, in the modern setting of al-Hakim’s novel, there is no mystery more thrilling than the “police incident” (*ḥādīthah*, pl. *ḥawādīth*). “Nothing gives the man more pleasure than going out to investigate incidents [al-khurūj ilā ḥawādīth] with the Legal Officer and the police. Whenever he hears

the horn of the Ford van blowing in the distance, he follows it wherever it goes, like a dog following its master to the chase" (D 18; Y 8). Left out of Eban's English translation is the police officers' call to Shaykh Asfur: "Get in, Shaykh Asfur! [There's been] an incident [*hādithah*]!" (Y 8). The "incident" or "occurrence" is both a crime and a tear in the normal fabric of life. True to his status as a friend of God, the shaykh is called to follow every unexplained phenomenon. And true to his status as an effendi, the prosecutor is called to co-opt the shaykh's popularly accepted form of knowledge—the poetic, mystic, endless questing of *ma'rifah*—and transform it into his own, authorized, established form of knowledge, *ilm*.

The prosecutor's pursuit of Rim's mysterious truth, however, is endlessly thwarted by the annoyances of rural life and the backwardness of rural people. Indeed, as a Cairo-educated interwar rural reformer, al-Hakim's narrator constantly measures the sights, sounds, and smells of the countryside against a European standard and finds the former sorely lacking. He complains about being stationed in a rural outpost far from the "lights, noise, and cabarets" of Cairo, in this place where there are no buildings except the "little hovels" in which the fellahin live "like worms," and whose "dusty brown color was suggestive of mud, manure, and the dung of cattle" (D 53). He also laments what he calls "deficiencies of character from which the Egyptian peasant suffers, in addition to his many bodily, mental, and social ills"—deficiencies that, to the narrator's mind, make the peasant incapable of grasping the "up-to-date regulations and procedures" governing modern, positivist law (D 103, 101). He describes rural Egyptians as plagued by "sheer incapacity and diffidence arising from a long tradition of slavish work at agriculture" (D 104). They "can hardly be relied upon for judgment or discernment of any kind" as witnesses in legal cases, since "their eyes have been consumed by trachoma since childhood and [their] mental faculties have been left to decay under the rule of so many governors of all races" (D 100). He ultimately compares them with "monkeys," "worms," and "chameleons" (D 51, 81, 53, 110).

These and other unsavory moments of essentialism in *Diary* have led many critics to denounce al-Hakim's contemptuous attitude toward the Egyptian lower classes (especially the fellahin), both in *Diary* and in his other fictional and non-fictional writings.³¹ Many have even read *Diary* as an autobiographical text, and thus also understood the prosecutor's opinions about the fellahin as veiled expressions of al-Hakim's own views.³² From their diffident, passive natures to their base, animalistic characteristics, the fellahin are decisively *other* to the narrator of *Diary*, as they were—in a different way—for Muhsin, the narrator of al-Hakim's earlier novel, *Return of the Spirit*. Yet despite the shift in tone between these two works, there is something common to both al-Hakim's earlier pharaonic nationalism and his more dehumanizing brand of essentialism: both perform a very particular, specialized mode of knowledge production about the countryside and its inhabitants.³³ The village, its harvests, and the particular "character" of the fellah—these are things to *be known*, and to be known by experts with specialized training like the

legal officer himself. The legal officer must not only read stacks of mind-numbing case files; he must also “read” the peasants who surround him, diagnosing their bodily, mental, and character deficiencies and—most importantly—recording them in his diary, the very *Diary* we are reading. The diary, in turn, becomes a place “to speak freely” not only about “crime” and “[one]self,” but also about “*all living beings*” (*D* 14, emphasis added), to record truths about the village that only a refined man of letters like the prosecutor can piece together. And yet his desire for solitary moments in which to record his reflections—to let his pen “roam through dream-pastures”—is endlessly thwarted by the constant demands of his work (*D* 69). Reading about such trivial cases as “the exchange of abuse between Sitt al-Dar and her neighbor Kataif,” “situation reports about a donkey which had run away from outside a house,” and about “a sycamore branch which fell on the head of Haj Habbab’s goat” is, the prosecutor informs us, taking a toll not only on his “poor physique and frail constitution” but also on his “sensitive temperament” and “refined sensibilities” (*D* 125, 60). In a humorous intertwining of form and content, the Arabic phrase for “refined sensibilities”—*diqqat al-ḥass wa riqqat al-shu‘ūr*—has the lilt of rhymed prose (*saj‘*), which itself has historically appealed to a particular kind of refined literary sensibility.

Diary thus proves to be less a record of Tawfiq al-Hakim’s personal opinions about the fellahin or his work as a country prosecutor and more a metafictional commentary on what I call ways of seeking—on seeking after and finding (or not finding) truth, as well as the various procedures involved in this search and the forms of power it is used to authorize. Al-Hakim transforms the novel into a dramatization of reading and writing as processes, thereby framing and destabilizing the truth effects of both. Rather than investigate murders, identify culprits, and generally perform his role as a public servant, the prosecutor must instead spend his days replying to petty grievances filed by countless peasants employing countless public scribes (*‘ardahāljiyyah*), who turn a profit from the peasants’ illiteracy and the new legal order. He therefore deems “official” writing excessively formulaic but still recognizes it as a necessary ill if he wishes to secure his job and the social status that comes with it. “The Report is the be-all-and-end-all in the eyes of higher authority,” he notes. “It is the only evidence testifying to the accuracy and skill of the Legal Officer. Nobody worries, of course, about the mere apprehension of the criminal” (*D* 21; *Y* 12). Seasoned by his elders in the profession, the prosecutor now cares more about the length, structure, and form of his report than he does about the victim himself, remembering the criticism he once received from a superior officer after turning in a solved case of murder written up in merely ten pages. “Next time we will be more careful about the weight!” he remembers affirming to the incredulous superior. Now, years later, the case of Qamar al-Dawla is no different: “The victim no longer concerned us, now that we had crammed our Report full of his particulars, so we left him wallowing in his blood” (*D* 22; *Y* 13).

In contrast with official writing, which he knows ultimately goes nowhere and does nothing, it is by writing about the peasants in his diary (and in *Diary*) that the prosecutor performs his ability—indeed, his authority—to know them. At several points in the novel, this ability to know exceeds the merely legal and extends into the realm of the human itself. The legal profession, the prosecutor writes, is constantly “placing before us human souls whose uncharted territories [*majhilahā*] we are supposed to explore, and whose innermost secrets we are supposed to expose” (*D* 64; *Y* 78). Here, again, is that “unknown territory,” that *majhūl* we encountered with Amina on her Cairo rooftop in Mahfouz’s *Palace Walk*, the same *majhūl* who will be listed as the “unknown culprit” in endless unsolved case files marked “*ḍidd majhūl*,” a legal shorthand with metaphysical connotations in Arabic. (It is also the title of a short story by Mahfouz, which I read in chapter 3.) The prosecutor is a soul explorer, a secret uncoverer, a penetrator into occulted worlds; he moves beyond merely observable facts in an attempt to deduce and express “the truth about the feelings lurking in the depths of the human soul” (*Y* 23). Despite his complaints about the fellahin and the rural setting to which he’s been banished, then, the legal investigator relishes the opportunity to observe, analyze, and gather new facts about the victims and defendants in his cases, deciphering the realms of the mind and the soul. Al-Hakim consciously and conspicuously dramatizes this relish, linking it with literary writing itself.

Nowhere is this hubris of decipherment clearer than in the following passage, where the narrator admonishes his young assistant about the nature of legal observation, deduction, and knowledge:

I pointed out to my assistant that our profession was full of material for study and observation, so that as long as he lived he ought not to go about with his eyes closed. A Legal Officer is a little king in his own tiny sphere: if he understands everything in this kingdom, observes everything, studies people’s natures and instincts, he can thereby come to know that larger kingdom which is his own country, and even understand the wider world of humanity itself. (*D* 104; *Y* 143)

Here it is clear that the legal officer has no concern for the actual, day-to-day lives of the fellahin under his jurisdiction. To him, the peasants are mere objects for “study and observation” (*al-baḥṭh wa-l-mulāḥaẓah*), perhaps even test subjects for projects of social improvement.³⁴ To study people is to know them, and to know them is to exercise a certain sovereignty over them—to transform oneself into a “little king” (*ḥākīm*) and the objects of one’s gaze into a “kingdom” (*mamlakah*). Hercule Poirot himself, when asked about his profession, replies arrogantly, “‘I am a detective,’ . . . with the modest air of one who says, ‘I am a King.’”³⁵

In this admonishment from the prosecutor to his young assistant, I read not a veiled expression of al-Hakim’s own attitudes toward the countryside and the fellahin but a parodic stylization of the refined, modern effendi and his voracious drive to know.³⁶ Al-Hakim writes power back into the relationship between the effendi

and the fellah, the enlightened author and the rural objects of his knowledge. Even as the rest of the novel inundates the reader with unsavory characterizations of the fellahin written in the narrator's voice, the peasants—as Samah Selim argues—interrupt this hegemonic discourse with their own colloquial objections, their own linguistic forms of resistance.³⁷ But the prosecutor's language also interrupts itself and stammers, troubling its own claims to authority. The passion for “study” and “observation,” which he attempts to inculcate in his young assistant, is laced with a covert acknowledgement of these processes' entanglements with power and monarch-like dominance, inherited from Europe and practiced by a newly enfranchised native intelligentsia. Through this covert acknowledgement, al-Hakim reveals the extent to which power and its exercise in the Egyptian countryside is a performance, a kind of legal drag. I use “drag” deliberately here, since various other peasant characters also recognize power as a contingent performance enhanced by and premised on attire.³⁸ When the wives of the police chief and the district judge publicly exchange insults from the roofs of their houses, for example, in a scene of comic insult or *radah*,³⁹ each dons her husband's official attire to “enrage her rival.” “You don't have any escort worth mentioning, just a shabby old rag-and-bone man with dyed hair,”⁴⁰ the wife of the police chief shouts while wearing her husband's cap and uniform, complete with crown and star; “but the police chief has a post full of guards and soldiers under our command.” The judge's wife, in response, descends to her husband's room, dons “his official red sash over her dress,” and returns, shouting: “You certainly have command of a couple of miserable guards. But who else is there in the whole town who can lock people up and hang them and say, ‘The court has decided’ . . . ?” (*D* 62–63).⁴¹ Like drag performers, these women recognize a radical contingency in the exercise of juridical power over life and death, “in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary.”⁴² Their performance may not, in itself, constitute a political revolution, but it does call into question the *reality* of juridical power, making it unclear how to distinguish the real from the unreal. “And this is the occasion,” Judith Butler writes, “in which we come to understand that what we take to be ‘real,’ what we invoke as naturalized knowledge . . . is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality.”⁴³

It is Shaykh Asfur, however, who perhaps most obviously parodies the prosecutor's sincere vision of the legal officer as a “little king.” After emerging from a “thicket at the edge of a field”—itself a figure of dense unknowability—to join the legal officer, the police chief, and the others headed to the scene of the crime, he “got into the Ford van with the air of a man entering a Rolls Royce, first plucking a twig . . . and carrying it as though it were a royal scepter” (*D* 18; *Y* 9). Once the small town's preeminent keeper of mysteries and penetrator into the unknown, Shaykh Asfur has been stripped of his social power by the imposition of the modern legal system, which had to displace his forms of knowledge as irrational if it wished to establish a monopoly over truth. Al-Hakim, true to his vision of modernity's

messy, incomplete, uncomfortable transplantation into colonial Egypt in *Diary*, maintains Shaykh Asfur's presence as a persistent reminder of the old meanings of words like *majhūl* ("unknown"), *ḥaqq/ḥuqūq* ("truth" but also "rights"), *baḥth*, and other terms incompletely co-opted by and conscripted into the new legal system, rather like the prosecutor himself.

Driss Chraïbi, too, is concerned with the arbitrariness of power's outer trappings among a newly enfranchised native intelligentsia—in his case, a whole class of "chiefs" who, despite the departure of the French, "only had a single politics: to keep everything for themselves, to keep chewing away on their 'chief-ness'" (*E* 131; *F* 91). Chraïbi situates Inspector Ali within an intermediary class of government functionaries who, in the post-colonial situation, stand somewhere between these "chiefs" and the "slaves" at the bottom of the social ladder: "The French had gone, but the slaves stayed behind—porters, domestics, secretaries, little intermediaries forever jammed between the new masters of the Third World and the people" (*E* 131; *F* 91). Where al-Hakim's parody of the effendi-*cum*-prosecutor parodically stylizes this figure's performance of the authority to know, Chraïbi's parody of the "new masters of the Third World" is directed squarely at Chief Mohammed in *Enquête*. The chief does everything systematically. He sees himself upholding logic, coherence, and even thinking itself against the lawless and "primitive" Aït Yafelman clan. "To think, to cogitate cleanly, firmly, to shield the spirit of initiative against the winds and the tides, against the primitiveness of this countryside [*bled*] and its infernal heat—this was his lot" (*E* 147; *F* 101). More than merely "thinking" (*penser*), the chief "cogitates" (*cogiter*), invoking the Latin of the European Enlightenment and the Cartesian "cogito, ergo sum" to give his thoughts dignity and legitimacy. Indeed, his frequent recourse to Latin rhetorical terms—including "sine qua non," "curriculum vitae," "in petto," "primo . . . deusio . . . tertio . . . quarto . . ." "illico presto," "ex abrupto," "ad hoc," and so on—are but one piece of his fervent display of enlightened rationality (*E* 148, 163, 89, 151–52 *passim*). He upholds these methods against the "primitive" logic of the Imazighen—the "lullabies bathed in legends that crude, uneducated grandmothers once sang" (*E* 161). The chief even wants his thoughts to operate like the administrative paperwork of the state, "laid out in order of importance, classified in different-colored folders" (*E* 159; *F* 108).

With his reverence for administrative procedures, the chief also views police work as the peak of civilizational achievement, far exceeding any other form of cultural production or civil service. Unlike factory laborers, schoolteachers, deputies, or even ministers, police chiefs "have the cerebral faculty to really think, cogitate, and conceptualize" (*E* 96–97; *F* 65), according to the chief. He aims to structure his own interrogation of the peasants into four movements like a "classical symphony" (*E* 97; *F* 65). Here, too, as in *Diary*, the detective does much more than merely collect clues and solve mysterious crimes. His investigative work becomes almost identical with the ability to know and understand the human and the unseen. Chraïbi's parody of Chief Mohammed is quite explicit here, whereas

al-Hakim's framing of the intellectual-*cum*-legal officer is more subtle. In both cases, however, the police officer is a tongue-in-cheek stand-in for the intellectual class as a whole, which performs its authority to know the peasants it investigates, interrogates, and objectifies.

Yet in both texts, this very same "authority to know" quickly dissolves when it takes a rural, subaltern populace as its object. For all his praise of Western-style bureaucracy and civilization, as well as his belief in the greasy shine of *officialité* (officiality or official-ness),⁴⁴ still the veneer of logic, organization, and progress that Chief Mohammed carefully crafts in *Enquête* rapidly dulls under the influence of conversation with the Aït Yafelman. In their very simplicity and ignorance, these "paysans" repel the chief's conventional tactics for commanding submission, and this imperviousness nearly drives him mad. To conduct his investigation in secret, for example, the chief speaks only in French with his subordinate Inspector Ali, assuming (correctly) that the Aït Yafelman understand nothing of this colonial language. Yet the Aït Yafelman, far from being intimidated by the chief's superior knowledge, instead describe his French as a kind of sickness, a "raclement de la gorge" (raspy throat), a "râlement" (hoarseness) induced by demon possession (*E* 45–47). In his frustration, the chief loses all semblance of "civilized" behavior:

The chief was falling apart, little by little, despite himself, overcome by a *force majeure*, abandoned by civilization's trappings, its taboos and interdictions, professional duty, and even the super-ego so dear to Freud; he was shaking, stomping his feet, and hammering the ground with his boots . . . The chief of police flailed his arms like an epileptic windmill and babbled in all the languages known to him: in his mother tongue, in French, in English, in poker-game American, beerhall German, in Wolof, in all the civilized languages whose insults he had perfectly assimilated. He was like the Third World man who, aside from some cultural refuse, had absorbed from the West all the detritus of its values and gotten some armaments in the deal. He was evidently a long way from any form of ratiocination, and could do little more than low like a cow . . .

—Curses upon your pagan race! . . . I'm going to screw you, whore and daughter of a whore! . . . Oukc'est mon fusil que ch't'écrahouille les clous à coups de crosse? I'm going to blow your balls off you son of a bitch! . . . Bigger off! . . . Kleb des chiottes! . . . Schweinhallouffhund! . . . Banderkatolikouyouun! . . . (*E* 46; *F* 32)

Here the chief's behavior and speech are governed not by Cartesian logic, symphonic harmony, or the prohibitions of Freudian "superego," but by "anarchy" and "force majeure." "Civilization" quickly devolves into "colère" (rage) and even "coprolalie" (coprolalia) (*E* 89).⁴⁵ Even as the chief consistently demands correct speech from his subordinate, Inspector Ali—"esplique, articule, cause français" ('splain it, articulate, speak French), "arrête de t'exprimer en bouillie et en purée" (stop spouting broth and purée), "parle correctement" (speak correctly), "tu ne fais que 'charabier'" (you do nothing but spout gibberish), and so on—his own speech quickly devolves into obscenity (*E* 43, 95, 18, 100). He invokes the police practices

of the West in the name of law and order, but the only elements of the Occident to which he can truly lay claim are its “cultural refuse.” Very quickly, discursive thought becomes a bestial “lowing.”

Crucially, Chraïbi uses language—and specifically the linguistic cacophony and ridiculous portraiture displayed above—to lay bare the violence behind the chief’s conventional methods of obfuscation. Chraïbi not only interrupts the standard French of *Enquête* with interjections in formal and colloquial Arabic (*fushā* and *dārijah*) throughout; he also disrupts the idea of “standard French” *itself* by compiling a veritable lexicon of French words for mispronunciation—words with which the language has historically policed its borders.⁴⁶ With its numerous terms for accented and “incorrect” pronunciations of French—not only by formerly colonized peoples, but also by those who now fall within the ambit of hexagonal French identity (Bretons, Alsatians, Provençaux, etc.)—Chraïbi’s language also dismantles the idea of pure French.⁴⁷ In this context, we could point in particular to the word *charabia*, one of the chief’s many insults for Ali’s incorrect French (*E* 18). From *charrar*, “hissing” or “stuttering,” in the Auvergnat dialect, the term is originally borrowed from the Spanish word *algarabía*, “gibberish” or “babble,” which is itself borrowed from the Arabic *al-gharbiyyah*, “Western language,” referring to the North African dialects of Arabic, which are substantially different from Eastern dialects and thereby virtually incomprehensible to Eastern Arabic speakers.⁴⁸ With these and other terms, Chraïbi exposes the French language itself as already unstable and self-interrupting, imbued with derivations from numerous dialects and Mediterranean languages, including an Arabic that makes its way from North Africa to Occitania through Spain. The irony, of course, is that *charabia* was originally an Arabic word used to mock a Western—*gharbī*, that is, North African—way of speaking Arabic, not the other way around.

Language’s inconsistency with itself is also at the heart of a key scene in al-Hakim’s *Diary*, in which the prosecutor’s “desire to know” is revealed not as a superior level of civilized inquisitiveness but as a violent, merciless drive, a kind of butchery. At one point in the novel, the prosecutor remembers the first autopsy he ever witnessed in the countryside—an ultimately unsuccessful one that failed to uncover the bullet in the body of a shooting victim. Through the subtle integration of terms from Egyptian Arabic,⁴⁹ al-Hakim breaks down the supposedly rigid divide between the scientific methods and procedures of the forensic pathologists and the “savagely,” “backwards” practices of the “medical barbers” whom these pathologists have supposedly replaced:

With both hands, [the forensic pathologist] removed all the brains that were in the skull until he had emptied it like a clean, metal bowl. He then divided this brain into four parts and gave one to each of his assistants, ordering them to look carefully for the bullet. So they began to knead this substance, which is said to be the source of all human eminence, until they had reduced it to a liquid paste like *muhallabiyyah*.

“This is the human brain!”

I whispered these words to myself, and the caution that had seized me at first began to disappear, bit by bit. My nerves hardened, and my feelings relaxed. There awoke in me a strong curiosity (*ḥubb istiqlā'*) and a desire to have the entire body opened up before me so that I could look inside it . . .

We had to get results, come what may. Here was a murdered man—surely there must be a bullet. The doctor set to work in real earnest and some impatience, running his scalpel all over the body. I stood behind him, watching and saying:

“Cut here! Tear him open!”

I was seized by a strange fever and lost all human feeling. “Show me his lungs!” I started shouting to the doctor. “Show me his intestines! Show me his gall-bladder!” etc. etc. The doctor did not hesitate for a moment; he made an incision from the chest to the lower abdomen and took out the heart, then the intestines, dictating all the while . . . “Despite careful examination, no bullet was found.” . . .

As we finished the operation and departed, I was astounded by the reversal that had occurred in my soul. I, a man of genteel sensibilities, could see this butchery, this dismemberment—indeed, even demand its continuation—without so much as trembling! And what a disillusionment it was! . . . No—we ought never to see ourselves from within. (Y 170–71)

For a scene that is supposed to be the pinnacle of science and forensics, al-Hakim's autopsy is surprisingly full of Egyptian expressions. The narrator compares the dead man's skull to a “metal bowl” (*sulṭāniyyah*) of the type used to serve stewed fava beans, and the word he uses for “kneading” or “smearing” the brain is the Egyptian verb *yulaghwaṣūn*, as though the brain were food in the hands of a messy child. Finally, when all is said and done, the brain comes to resemble *muhallabiyyah*, a popular rice pudding. Al-Hakim reveals these supposed “men of science” as little better than the peasants they deride as lowly, primitive, backward creatures. The scientists are sorcerers conjuring miracles, ravenous knowledge seekers cleaning out their soup bowls, children smearing and kneading the human brain like rice pudding.

Whereas the acquisition of knowledge about the human body “from the inside” might have delighted the prosecutor earlier in the text (remember: “if the Legal Officer understands everything in this kingdom . . . he can thereby come to know that larger kingdom which is his own country, and even understand the wider world of humanity itself”), in this scene the prosecutor experiences the same “drive to know” as a form not only of “disillusionment,” but also of violence, “butchery” (*jazar*), “dismemberment” (*taqī'*), even as a “strange fever” and a “loss of all *human* feeling.” His “hardened nerves” and “relaxed feelings” impel him, ironically, to greater violence, just as the doctor's fierce insistence on logical cause and effect (“Here was a murdered man, surely there must be a bullet!”) drives his botched autopsy forward. The side of mankind that our narrator has seen “from the inside” is thus not only the inner organs of the murdered man. It is also the “inside” of his own rational intellect—the violent impulses hidden beneath his

“genteel,” “civilized” exterior (*raqīq al-ḥass*). “Human beings,” as the German philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno famously wrote, “purchase the increase in their power with estrangement from that over which it is asserted.”⁵⁰ Knowledge of nature—this “curiosity” or, literally, “love of discovery” (*ḥubb al-istiqlā*), which overcomes the narrator in this scene—is a form of domination over it. This explains why, at least for Horkheimer and Adorno, “Enlightenment is totalitarian,” because—in language that echoes al-Hakim’s bodily imagery in this passage—it “amputates the incommensurable.”⁵¹ In this scene, the prosecutor recognizes himself as a (narrative) subject endowed with a domineering, “feverish” drive to know and the extent to which his “curiosity” is not a naturally occurring superior disposition with respect to the world,⁵² but a learned fascination with investigating and uncovering, cutting open and laying bare.

Both al-Hakim and Chraïbi thus reveal the “barbarism” lurking behind the refined and civilized sensibilities of the prosecutor and the police chief alike—and, by extension, behind the supposedly refined and civilized legal system imposed by colonial modernity in both contexts. Not only do their investigative tactics ultimately fail to arrive at the truth, but the parodic dramatization of these tactics’ disintegration frames the operations of power, dethroning those native, metropolitan officials who assume superiority over their rural others. Instead of cultivating sympathy for the police officer, then, as in the conventional police procedural, both al-Hakim and Chraïbi transform the cop into an object of ridicule—a lowing, flailing idiot; a dismemberment-crazed butcher. They make visible the violence that legal and juridical claims to objectivity portray merely as a matter of banal but necessary procedure for arriving at truth. At the same time, neither Chraïbi nor al-Hakim completely tears down or lambasts the native-son-turned-officer. On the contrary, central to the intrigue and suspense of both texts is the detective’s status as an incomplete conscript in whom there still lurk the traces, however vague or indistinct, of filiation with the communities he has been trained to police.

INCOMPLETE CONSCRIPTION

In dramatizing their protagonists’ status as native detectives in colonial legal systems, both *Diary* and *Enquête* turn once again to language. Specifically, each protagonist is caught either between two different languages (French and Arabic) or between multiple registers of the same language (colloquial Egyptian and formal, technical Arabic). Thus, in Chraïbi’s text, Inspector Ali’s upbringing as the child of impoverished public oven workers, combined with his training as a would-be soccer player, his experience as a street thug, and his subsequent transformation into a police inspector, have made him a veritable polyglot, having “a slang vocabulary capable of making even a Moroccan’s hair stand straight on end” and “singing the *Internationale* in Arabic as well as he could the Palestinian national anthem, or

the Polisario rally" (E 121; F 85). Likewise, in the same autopsy scene from al-Hakim's text examined above, the narrator understands the colloquial Egyptian wailings of women in mourning as well as he does the technical, scientific terminology of the forensic pathologists conducting the examination. The conscripted detective's status as awkward intermediary is thus also staged through his incomplete assimilation to any single language or register, as he stands suspended between two modes of expression, the first an alienating formal education that has nevertheless granted him access to higher social status and greater material gain, the second a well-loved but irrecoverable familial, communitarian, even pious vocabulary and identity. In both works, the heteroglossia of the novel form invites simultaneous recognition and distance on the part of readers familiar with the spectrum between the colloquial and the formal. The medical, legal, and police argots meant to supplant the irrationality and backwardness of the colloquial, oral, folk forms are once again revealed to be barbarous in their own ways, having alienated the native detectives from their national brethren and, ultimately, also from themselves.

For an illustration of these linguistic dynamics in each text, let me return briefly to *Diary* first, to a slightly earlier moment in the same autopsy scene examined above. The prosecutor describes how the shooting victim's family has wrapped him in a shroud and carried him from the field where he was found back to their house, "surrounded by women wailing, shrieking, and befouling their faces with mud" (D 119; Y 167). These same women look on as the medical and legal professionals cut open their male relative in the courtyard of their own home:

The doctor passed the scalpel over the dead man's head and dictated to the clerk: "Scalp removed" (by which he meant the scalp of the head, of course).

At this we heard the shrieks of the women . . . Amidst the confused sounds I discerned a warm, high-pitched voice which ripped at my heart: "Oh Father, oh tree in whose shade we once sheltered!" [Yaa shagara wi-midallilnaa yaa buuyaa!]

It was followed by another voice, equally as high-pitched and warm, mixed with sobs and bitter tears: "Oh Father, and after your last meal of the fast!" [Ya-lli kunta khaarig bi-suḥuurak fii baṭnak yaabaa!]. . .

[The doctor] went on dictating:

"Bullet wound four centimeters long."

He groped for the bullet, but without success. Taking a saw from his tool case, he began to saw the skull at the forehead, to make an opening in the head, but he was unable to break through. So he took up a small hammer from among his instruments and began to knock on the saw, as though he were opening a box of sardines. One of the women heard this sound and, looking through the roof, beheld this hammering on the head of the father of the family and the master of the household. She buried her face in her hands, exclaiming, "The name of God protect him!" (Ism-alla 'alayh!)

This expression shook me and I found something strange in its effect. This old woman still thought her man was there in all his human personality, just at the moment when I began to doubt it. (D 119–20; Y 168)

Here the prosecutor is torn between the technical, official Arabic register used by the doctors, which he understands perfectly well, and the fervent, colloquial language used by the female relatives of the murdered fellah, which “rips at his heart” and “shakes him” to the core. He parenthetically explains that the pathologist’s expression—*farwah*, which can mean “pelt,” “hide,” or “fur” in Arabic—refers in this context to *farwat al-ra’s*, the “scalp,” thus illustrating his knowledge of the scientific, anatomical uses to which Arabic terms with older resonances have recently been put. At the same time, the moaning of the women affects him emotionally—it is no accident that this language is feminine and colloquial, the language of the private home as opposed to the public sphere. It may be tempting to read the women’s complaints in this scene as a kind of traditional, female, Islamic piety diametrically opposed to the secular rationalism of the doctors. Yet Khaled Fahmy’s social history of autopsy in nineteenth-century Egypt invites us to view things differently. Perhaps the women’s mourning “should not be judged as a reactionary response . . . to the proven benefits of modern science,” but rather “should be seen as representing the reaction of common people to the encroachments of the modern state on private life,” encroachments that “[were] most deeply felt in connection with death, when the dead ceased to belong to their families and communities and, instead, were appropriated by the state, which decided how, when, and where they were to be buried.”⁵³ The prosecutor is caught between the women’s desire to claim, mourn, and bury their relative on their own terms, and the medical professionals’ scientific desire to locate the bullet, solve the mystery, and thereby not only fulfill their professional purpose but reconfirm their monopoly on truth. In light of the way the autopsy is conducted, the women’s cries start to seem less like a case of hysteria to the prosecutor and more like a form of protest against the dehumanizing practices of the modern state.

If this scene from *Diary* offers a short and partial glimpse into the minds of those outside the state’s ambit, Chraïbi’s *Enquête* focuses at even greater length on elaborating what I call an “autochthonous alterity,” a fantastical, imaginary alternative subjectivity bound neither to the ledgers of the state nor to the practices of Islamic piety, but one that is built on a timeless attachment to the primal elements of earth and sun. Raho and Hajja, the patriarch and matriarch of the Aït Yafelman family, embody this alterity, this “cult of the earth” most explicitly in *Enquête* (E 40). “Transmitted to Raho,” the novel’s omniscient narrator reports,

from generation to generation, across religions and cultures, as though all human enterprises were sieves allowing what was essential in life to filter through despite themselves, there was the antique tradition where the elements dominated: earth, water, air, fire. Everything else was ephemeral. (E 82–83)

The “cult of the earth” is transmitted “par voie orale” (orally) and has little need for written language at all. In this way, Chraïbi resolves (at least superficially, fictionally) the vexed question of “language choice” in postcolonial Maghrebi

writing, inventing a world and a worldview in which written language is altogether irrelevant.⁵⁴

Nowhere in *Enquête* are the features of Chraïbi's fantastical, autochthonous alterity clearer, however, than in one of the novel's final scenes. The Aït Yafelman have just killed Chief Mohammed, and they now have their sights set on Inspector Ali. Raho commands Ali to bury the chief, informing him that a council of village elders will soon decide whether to kill him or spare his life. As Ali digs, the villagers around him play a chilling "hymn of the dead" on drums and "desert flutes" (*najj*), and this music summons forth timeless memories in him. Despite his best efforts to suppress them, "he vaguely recognized the profound and 'earthy' inflections that he had once loved so well. Where, and in what past existence had he heard them?" (E 198). Flashes of memory have already interrupted his investigation earlier in the novel: he sees elements of his own father in Raho, and of his mother in Hajja.⁵⁵ Yet the novel culminates here when the memory of a story his mother told him as a child interrupts and overcomes both Ali's mind and the text of the novel itself. The tale is an alternate creation myth transmitted matrilineally for generations. It recounts the story of "the earthly life of men," from a time before religion, civilization, and the state, "long, long ago, before time itself" (E 211). In this time before time, human beings were the original inhabitants of a paradise on earth, while the gods of the sky were a wicked and vengeful tribe. The gods so coveted the earth that "*they had depleted the stars . . . burned up the moon and the sun,*" and, having nothing left in the sky for themselves, came down to earth intending to exploit it and enslave its inhabitants. To do this, they brought with them "*what they called the law,*" embodied in the holy books of the Jews ("*des Youdis*"), the Christians ("*des Nazaréens*"), and the Muslims ("*le Coran des islamiques*").⁵⁶ They enslaved mankind first to these pieties, and then to the concepts of "progress" and "civilization." Very quickly, these "gods" come to resemble the Maghreb's many centuries of colonizers:

*And thus it was that [the people of the earth] began to work for their masters like slaves, building houses and cities, making machines and more machines of which they had no need. And their descendants continue on and on, taking pains and exhausting hopes in the void. It will never end. Because the gods boiled our minds, they mixed their language of lies and magic with ours, they erased our memory of ancient times . . . so much so that the man of this earth will never be happy with his lot. And, when they perceived that their books were worn out like dry figs and that they could no longer get anything from them, or next to nothing, then they invented another stratagem: progress, civilization. (E 207)*⁵⁷

From invaders belonging to various monotheistic religions with their holy books, to the scientists, technicians, and politicians of colonial and postcolonial modernity, the people of the sky, in this tale, have severed earth's inhabitants both from the earth, their "*mère nourricière*" (*nourishing mother*), and from each other.

Simultaneously environmentalist, anticapitalist, and mystical, this alternate, matrilineal myth of origins—as it surfaces involuntarily in Ali’s mind—offers him a way out of his police training and into the autochthonous world of the Aït Yafelman. He spends the rest of the night attempting to reconnect with this myth of origins, and to prove his innocence in the hopes that the villagers will spare his life.

Yet, although the considerable amount of space devoted to this alternate creation myth in *Enquête* seems to promise the possibility of its return in Ali, Chraïbi ultimately withdraws that possibility. Neither the memory of his mother’s tale nor his trickster’s facility with words end up saving the inspector from the Aït Yafelman.⁵⁸ Instead, only his insistence on the durability of *paper* in the hands of the government convinces the Aït Yafelman to spare his life. “Sure, agreed,” he insists in one last ruse, “they could dismantle the old buggy into bits and pieces and sell them all over the Sudan . . . And of course they could bury the corpses, his and Chief Mohammed’s . . . But how would they eliminate the papers at Headquarters, down there, in the capital of the cops and the government? Documents and mission orders die hard” (*E* 212; *F* 141). The ruse eventually works. Soon after, the Aït Yafelman gather around Ali, asking him what he will do to “eliminate the government’s papers.” And he, “such a joker in life, such a variety artist in his everyday language (and in his mind),” transforms from the novel’s trickster into the original target of its satire: “He knew what they expected him to be: a serious, sensible, efficient being. A true chief” (*E* 214–15). The possibility of returning to the Aït Yafelman’s “culte de la terre” has been eclipsed.

This ending should perhaps come as no surprise, however, given how thoroughly Chraïbi records and documents this autochthonous alterity on the pages of *Enquête*. Through omniscient narration and free indirect discourse, the narrator of *Enquête* has given the reader not merely a glimpse but an expansive and detailed blueprint of Raho’s and Hajja’s views on the world. A great deal of the novel’s narrative energy has been dedicated to recording, chronicling, and enumerating these views. And thus it seems these characters were never truly “illegible,” never truly “outside” state discipline to begin with. Chraïbi recognizes and acknowledges his own authorship as yet another form of surveillance. The novel’s omniscient narrator explicitly satirizes the inhuman procedures and practices of the postcolonial Moroccan state, yet through the very act of novel writing, he also self-consciously constitutes the Aït Yafelman as objects of knowledge. Raho and Hajja are deeply and intimately known, put on display by none other than Chraïbi himself. The success of Chraïbi’s “enquête” for nonreified forms of identity is thus also its failure: it has uncovered the tales that might have otherwise remained buried in Ali’s memory, yet in exposing these tales to the light of a reading, intellectual public (or, in the chief’s preferred phrase, “des *insectuels*”), it has also become the very document, the very kind of “mise-en-carte” to which it sought an alternative.⁵⁹

The situation is much less tangled in al-Hakim’s *Diary*. The reader is never invited to imagine the prosecutor relinquishing his position of legal authority and

rejoining the fellahin; there is no matrilineal myth of return here. Nevertheless, like Chraïbi, al-Hakim does maintain a fantasy of inscrutability and alterity to the prosecutor's investigative tactics, incarnated in two specific characters: the mysterious peasant woman Rim (the murder victim's sister-in-law), and the quasi-mystical friend of God Shaykh Asfur. Rim frustrates the prosecutor's ability to know and expound on fellahi life in particular and on humanity in general. In many ways, she is a prototypical country beauty, the central actor in a national romance much like her predecessor, the titular character of Muhammad Husayn Haykal's 1913 *Zaynab*, or her many successors, including Zohra, the inscrutable heroine of Naguib Mahfouz's 1967 novel *Miramar* (*Mīrāmār*). She is the feminized figure for the nation whom the novel's narrative subject is trying to know and possess as object.⁶⁰ But the prosecutor's fascination with her is motivated less by love or lust than by her defiance of his investigative tactics, her sphinxlike resistance to being known. He is convinced that she is hiding a "secret" that will be "the clue to the entire case" (Y 26). The precursor of many future inscrutable Egyptian peasant girls, she also prefigures J. M. Coetzee's barbarian woman as viewed through the eyes of his imperial magistrate: "So I continue to swoop and circle around the irreducible figure of the girl, casting one net of meaning after another over her . . . What does she see?"⁶¹

Before the prosecutor in al-Hakim's *Diary* can uncover Rim's secret, however, her corpse is found in a nearby irrigation canal. It is yet another mystery for the prosecutor to solve, but this time he uncharacteristically resists attempting to uncover the truth behind the case. Rim offers him the remembrance of a time when he might have reflected on her mysterious beauty not as "the key to a case," something to be instrumentalized in the pursuit of knowledge, but rather as "a sweet creature," a "marvelous image" (Y 172–73). She is not, like the other fellahin, an object for observation, study, and social improvement, but what Mohammad Salama, writing of a different feminine figure in al-Hakim's oeuvre, describes as "a receding telos, a pursuit and never a fulfillment."⁶² As the prosecutor returns to Rim's file to write "the usual formulation" at the bottom—"We order an autopsy of the corpse"—he suddenly "becomes aware of the horror in these words—yes, for the first time I found them horrible" (Y 173). Ironically, Rim, the novel's great inscrutable figure, is the only character who allows the prosecutor to see the "atrocious," "horror," and "heinousness" (*faẓā'ah*) embedded within his desire to "uncover," "reveal," (*istijlā'*) and "penetrate" (*naḥḥ*) the secret she conceals, reminding him of the first-ever autopsy he experienced, before his years in the legal profession hardened his sensibilities (Y 26). Indeed, as he realizes in this passage, it is a horror that the dry, bureaucratic, "official" language he is constantly scribbling on the pages of legal reports is specifically designed to conceal. In the end, Rim's "secret" dies with her, escaping the prying eyes of the prosecutor, his report, and the reader of *Diary* all at once. Like the Ait Yafelman in *Enquête*, Rim holds out the promise of a subject whose truth cannot be deduced through the

state's formulaic legal procedures. Her truth lies elsewhere, in the pursuit itself, rather than in its fulfillment.

Shaykh Asfur embodies yet another form of native resistance to state-mandated ways of seeking. Like Rim, Asfur also holds the "key to the case" of Qamar al-Dawla, but in his own way. "There's no doubt that Shaykh Asfur now knows all the secrets of the case," the prosecutor thinks to himself at one point, after realizing Rim has escaped from the police chief's custody with Asfur's help. "But will he ever reveal anything to us? He himself is a locked mystery . . ." (Y 78). That Shaykh Asfur's ways of seeking are related to but distinct from police detection is evident from his intimate friendship with the police: he accompanies them on hundreds of investigations to track down criminals. "He was almost regarded by the police as one of the family" (Y 87). Fearing for his professional and social status, the prosecutor repeatedly worries that Asfur knows more about the novel's main mystery than he does, and indeed it is Asfur who provides the major clues in the case of Qamar al-Dawla, hinting through his poems that the prosecutor should "seek out women," thus drawing him to Rim, and later implying, through a poem about hunting for fish—"the first one was a slippery cod / the next a turbot fair / the third, a creature graced by God, / became the sailor's snare"—that the case involves multiple murders (Y 84). Asfur turns out to be right: Qamar al-Dawla's shooting was preceded by the strangling of his wife, whose body was dumped in the canal several months ago (a story the prosecutor confirms through yet another comic scene of exhumation and autopsy at a local cemetery), and it is followed by the murder of none other than Rim, his wife's sister, whose presumably drowned body is also found in the canal at the end of the novel. The prosecutor, in other words, is not wrong about Asfur: the mad shaykh knows the mystery behind the case, but his allusive, poetic way of speaking defies the truth-seeking methods used by representatives of the modern legal system like our narrator.

The relationship between the two forms of truth is epitomized in a key scene of interrogation between the prosecutor and the shaykh. Approaching the edge of his frustration, the prosecutor demands of Asfur, "Who are you?" The man looked at me like he hadn't understood the question. I repeated it to him with violent emphasis. 'I'm . . . I'm Asfur,' he replied. 'I glean grains above the earth and worship the Lord below it [Alquṭ al-ḥabb fawq al-turāb, wa-a'bud al-rabb taḥt al-turāb]' (Y 83).⁶³ The seeming illogic of these words belies their rhetorical richness in Arabic; as with all of Asfur's utterances, the form has its own meaning. The morphological parallelism between the two pairs of clauses (alquṭ al-ḥabb, a'bud al-rabb; fawq al-turāb, taḥt al-turāb) highlights the antithesis in the meaning ("above the earth," "below the earth"), just as the paronomasia between the rhyming *ḥabb* and *rabb* also underscores their contrasting meanings (the humility of gleaning grains, the worship of an all-powerful God). There is meaning to these words, but it is not the meaning sought by the prosecutor's formulaic legal questions, "Who are you?" and "What is your profession?" Through his poetic reply, Shaykh Asfur advises the prosecutor

to look for great significance in humble places, and to not become too arrogant about his social power as a legal officer, since it is often the grain-gleaners—that is, poor, mad beggars like Asfur—who draw closest to God and, by extension, a more all-encompassing truth. Asfur’s language itself resists the logic of the state and its authorized practices for producing truth while at the same time offering another, more metaphysical truth, couched in the figure of the fisherman, whose work hunting fish is not unlike the detective’s hunting answers (or the Sufi’s hunting unity with the divine). Asfur is “that ‘secret’ giving us glimpses of the occulted world,” and each “remains a perpetual, eternal puzzle we can never fully grasp . . .”⁶⁴

By engaging with persistently inscrutable figures like Rim and Shaykh Asfur, Raho and Hajja, the conscripted native detectives at the center of Hakim’s *Diary* and Chraïbi’s *Enquête* become disenchanting with the modes of investigation and objectification in which they have been trained. They recognize the extent to which their investigative tactics of “seeking,” “investigating” (*enquête*), “uncovering” (*istijlā*), and “knowing” (*ilm*) have forcibly and violently severed them from the objects under their investigation—namely, the others who might have constituted a community, a public. And thus both narrators, suspended between worlds, implicitly understand the bleakness of their narrative individualism, the desolation and isolation of a “refined sensibility.” In al-Hakim’s scenes of dissection and disinterment, and in Chraïbi’s scenes of primordial involuntary memory, in the prosecutor’s repeated attempts and failures to “decipher” Rim and Shaykh Asfur, and in Chief Ali’s failure to find the Aït Yafelman when he returns to their *pays* in the final chapter—in all these moments, I read a simultaneous provincialization of the state’s knowledge production and a validation of the supposedly “backward,” “uncivilized” practices it claims to replace. Even if both novels also recognize and acknowledge the irrecoverability, possibly even the unreality, of those practices, they still invite them into the text as a potentially destabilizing, disruptive force. Even as they acknowledge, with Foucault, Miller, Mitchell, and others, that there is no “outside” to modern power, they still gamble that it is worth imagining a line of escape, even if only as an irrecoverable trace, an undissected body.

CONCLUSION

Responding to very different moments of political disillusionment and rural suffering, both al-Hakim and Chraïbi turn to detective fiction. They do so not to offer distraction or “mere entertainment,”⁶⁵ but rather—quite the contrary—to draw their readers’ attention ever more urgently to the legal and juridical obfuscations that have made this suffering possible. The central character in this drama is the conscripted detective, the native officer of the law who, despite his police training, nevertheless feels a continued affinity with those he must police, even if returning to their ranks is also impossible for him (“he cannot choose *not* to

be modern”).⁶⁶ Incompletely conscripted, these detectives stand in less as figures for the reader than as figures for the author, and particularly for the Arab author working in a colonial or postcolonial context.⁶⁷ Al-Hakim and Chraïbi find themselves caught between the desire to investigate poverty and reveal injustice and political corruption at its root, on the one hand, and the knowledge that the man of letters—the effendi, the *insectuel*, and, by extension, the prosecutor, the chief—in his hubristic claim to represent the real, is little better than a cop. In their hands, the Arab poetics of investigation restructures the novel as a space for imagining other potentialities of the subject—not a logical, all-knowing detective, but a comically defeated cop, thwarted by the pesky persistence of practices on the margins of the modern, which draw their vitality from alternative claims to history and memory. Their detectives are forced to cultivate a relationship with the *majhūl*, the unknown, unknowable realm proper to mysterious beauties, mad shaykhs, and earthy autochthones.

By dealing with questions of epistemology, al-Hakim and Chraïbi intervene in intellectual debates that, at the times of their respective writings, extended far beyond the pages of novels and literary magazines. The place of postcolonial Moroccans in the independent nation’s police apparatus; the prestige or nonprestige of different languages, classes, and ethnicities in the national community; the similar levels of brutality encountered in the French-colonial and royal post-colonial regimes—these were all questions of great urgency at the time of Chraïbi’s writing, and he plays with the linguistic certainties that French and Moroccan readers might have taken for granted. Al-Hakim also engages fictionally, imaginatively, and critically in debates about legal, juridical, and medical transformations to Egyptian governance, while at the same time refusing to consign earlier forms of knowledge and seeking to the dustbin of progressive history. Al-Hakim and Chraïbi dramatize modernity not as the triumphant fusion of native authenticity with Western science but as an incomprehensible, arbitrary imposition of violence for the rural others whom the law takes as objects of reform, improvement, and humanization. For al-Hakim and Chraïbi, the “investigation” or *baḥṭh* structure at the heart of the detective plot offers an opportunity to explore the fragmented, self-interrupting identity of the colonized or formerly colonized investigator—a stand-in for the real-life intellectual class in both contexts. For the authors in the next chapter, by contrast, the genre offers the potential for a new politics of literary form—one which forges communal action through the judicious deployment of scandal, shock, horror, revulsion, and other affects associated with “sensation fiction.”