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Dying Universals at the End of Empire. Models of Masculinity in Alexandrian Literary Sources (1910s–early 1920s)*

Abstract

This article examines idealised models of masculinity in Alexandrian literary texts of the 1910s and early 1920s in Arabic, French, and Italian. It intends to contribute an insight into Egyptian cosmopolitanism from a discursive perspective, through the lens of literature and with a focus on Alexandria. Instead of embracing a theoretical vision of cosmopolitanism, it seeks to reconstruct the horizons of belonging as they emerge from Alexandrian sources in different languages of the so-called "cosmopolitan epoch." The masculine heroes in the sources are meant to be universal and, in some cases, exemplary. Yet they reach universality by erasing particularities, before choosing or accepting death. They die without having offspring. Their universality will be questioned from a gendered perspective, but also in terms of nationality and social class. National and social boundaries will emerge under the claims of universality. Then, the nihilistic paths of the heroes will be linked to the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the anxieties it brought about. In the 1910s and early 1920s, the Ottoman horizon in Egypt was receding before the national one was filled with meaning. Moreover, this process occurred under colonial rule. Nihilistic universality can be regarded as a response to such a complex phase, when belonging either to a declining empire or to a fragile nation-state may have seemed equally hopeless.

Keywords

Masculinity, Universality, Cosmopolitanism, Late Ottoman, Egypt

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Introduction

Historians (Jacob 2011; Khouloussy 2010) have highlighted the tension between nationalist thought and the embodiment of masculine norms in semi-colonial Egypt. They have searched in the press for the projections of the ideal citizen, investigating the normative aspect of masculine representations. They have explored gender identity as an "evolving cultural product akin to language and the narrative operations of literature" (Horlacher 2015: 5). Their work is in line with a broader trend to analyse discursive constructions of masculinities in cultural productions, not only in the press but also in fiction (Hobbs 2013; Horlacher 2015; 2018). More recently, the focus on literary masculinities has been applied to the Middle East (Kahf and Sinno 2021).

This article is also concerned with discourses on masculinities in semi-colonial Egypt and pursues such concern through a focus on literature. While approaching imaginations that go beyond the national framework, it limits its scope to Alexandria. It does not posit nationalist discourses as a starting point or a system of reference. Instead, it seeks to reconstruct the system of reference from the sources. It analyses idealised models of masculinity in some Alexandrian literary texts of the 1910s and early 1920s in Arabic, French, and Italian. Such texts shape ideal masculinities that are heteronormative yet non-reproductive. Their masculine heroes do not have offspring. In some cases, they consciously take ascetic paths. They accept or even choose death, which seems to be the only way to give meaning to life. Despite that, these models are meant to be positive and, in some cases, exemplary. Finally, at odds with the current view of cosmopolitanism as inclusive of difference, these masculine heroes of the 1910s and early 1920s reach universality by erasing particularities, before embracing death.

What do these masculine models say about the horizons of belonging in late Ottoman, semi-colonial Alexandria? How universal are these masculine universals, in terms of both nationality and social class? Before tackling these questions, the trajectories of their authors will be discussed, to reflect on the porosity or the rigidity of social and national boundaries in Alexandria during the so-called "cosmopolitan" epoch.

Four Authors in "Cosmopolitan" Alexandria

This article analyses works published between 1913 and 1922 by four men living in Alexandria, namely Jean-Léon Thuile, author of the novel *L'Eudé-*

moniste (“The Eudemonist”), in French; ʻAbd al-Raḥmān Shukrī, author of the three books *Kitāb al-iʻtirāf* (“The Confession”), *Kitāb al-thamarāt* (“The Fruits”), and *Ḥadīth Iblīs* (“Word of the Devil”), in Arabic; Enrico Pea, author of the play *Giuda* (“Judas”), in Italian; and Georges Cattaui, author of the poetry collections *La Dévotion à l’image* (“Devotion to the Image”) and *La Promesse accomplie* (“The Fulfilled Promise”), in French.

The existence of a production in European languages, notably French, as well as in Arabic points to the multilingual character of literary life in late Ottoman Alexandria. While multilingualism characterized the city as a whole, this does not mean that all literary circles were multilingual and all authors mastered more than one language. Similarly, multilingualism does not imply that Arabic, on the one side, and European languages, on the other, easily mixed in cultural life. In line with a well-established trend among historians of Egypt, discussed notably by Will Hanley (2017), this article does not start from an idealised, pre-conceived view of cosmopolitanism. It rather seeks to reconstruct how population mixing worked in very specific environments at specific times. A closer look at the trajectories of the four authors under study will show to what extent they met across languages, communities, and social barriers.

Jean-Léon Thuile (1887–1970), a French novelist, is the brother of the better-known Henri (1885–1960), who wrote poetry and essays. The Thuile brothers spent their early childhood in France, before moving to Cairo and then Alexandria, where their father had been appointed “chief engineer” at the port. They became engineers too, while taking up literary writing. They enriched the book collection initiated by their father in their home in Mex, on the western outskirts of Alexandria. On Sundays, they received *literati* in what would become a prominent literary salon in town (Livi 2013). Despite parallel trajectories, the Thuiles do not enjoy the same recognition: Henri has attracted the interest of Francophone literature scholars; Jean-Léon is usually mentioned in connection to Henri or as a friend of Alexandria-born Italian poet Giuseppe Ungaretti.

It was indeed Ungaretti who put the Thuiles and Enrico Pea (1881–1958) in touch. Despite his modest origins, Ungaretti attended the École Suisse Jacot, a renowned Francophone school in Alexandria. Through his Francophone education, Ungaretti was the link between the Thuiles, members of the Francophone middle class, and Enrico Pea, an Italian of the lower class. Unlike Ungaretti, Pea was not born in Alexandria but in a small Tuscan town in the Apuan Alps. He left school at an early age to support his family, becoming a

blacksmith's apprentice, a shepherd, a mechanic, and a ship's boy. He migrated to Alexandria in 1896, initially working as a mechanic, before a job incident led him to start his business, trading wood, marble, and wine. He launched an anarchist circle called *Baracca Rossa*, in a room located above his home and warehouse, in Sainte Catherine district. What we know from Pea's memoirs is that at *Baracca Rossa*, which also hosted a library, Pea completed his education and started writing. There he also met Ungaretti, who had anarchist views at the time (Pea 1949: 17–18, 212). The Thuile-Ungaretti-Pea connection should not lead to hasty conclusions on the porosity of socio-cultural boundaries in Alexandria: while Pea did visit the Thuiles in Mex (Pea 1949: 25), no sources suggest, to my knowledge, that the Thuiles ever set foot in Pea's house or circle.

It was at their salon that the Thuiles met Alexandrian cultural actors, especially Francophone ones, among them Georges Cattaui (1896–1974). He was born in Paris to an Egyptian Jewish family of the upper class. His prominent relative, Yacoub Cattaui Bey (1800–83), was "a senior administrator in the Egyptian government and a confidant of viceroys and khedives."[1] The Cattaui grew in influence through marriages into other prominent Egyptian Jewish families, such as the Rolo, the de Menasce, and the Suares. Like other heirs of such families, Georges Cattaui was educated in France and in French. After attending high school in Paris, he studied law at École Française du Caire from 1914 to 1917 (Danzi 2002: 121). Like some of his cousins from the de Menasce branch, he converted to Catholicism (Lazagna 2010). He spent the years of the Great War mainly in Alexandria and started writing poetry. At the time, Jean-Léon Thuile was no longer in Egypt, having returned to France in October 1914 (Livi 1988: 52). Ungaretti, in France since 1912, had joined the Italian army. Pea, on the other hand, seems to have left Alexandria only at the end of the Great War. Henri Thuile had also remained in town. His Mex salon was flourishing. Thuile and Cattaui may have continued spending time there while also meeting at the European bureau of Sultan—and then King—Fouad, where they both worked (Livi 1988: 55). A text written by Thuile is dedicated to Cattaui.[2] And a letter that Thuile sent him in 1924 also attests to the connection between the two.[3]

The only author of this corpus whom I cannot place directly in touch with the others is 'Abd al-Raḥmān Shukrī (1886–1958). On the one hand, this is not surprising. Scholars have shown how Alexandrian "cosmopolitanism" was compartmentalised, due not only to class but also to cultural privilege in semi-colonial

Egypt. Exchanges within European or Europeanised milieus did not imply the same porosity between European and Arab milieus, and that was true for both the socio-cultural elite (Halim 2013) and the anarchist constellation (Gorman 2010). Moreover, I can merely uncover written connections, seeing oral exchanges only if documented retrospectively in a written form. The fact that I cannot prove a direct connection between Shukrī and the other authors does not mean that such a connection did not exist. While Pea and Thuile did not read Arabic, and Cattaui's French education might have implied neglecting it, Shukrī did master European languages. Since his childhood, he had read books in Arabic, English, and French found in the family library in Port Said. He was born there because his father, an officer who had joined the 'Urābī revolt, had been exiled to the city. In 1900, Shukrī moved to Alexandria to attend Ra's al-Tīn high school. He then attended Law School (*Madrasat al-ḥuqūq*) in Cairo, from which he was expelled for a poem in support of Mustafà Kāmil's nationalist movement. After a study mission in England, Shukrī settled again in Alexandria in 1912, working as a teacher at his former high school. He became a leading figure on the Alexandrian Arabic scene, before establishing himself on a national level—alongside Ibrāhīm 'Abd al-Qādir al-Māzinī and 'Abbās Maḥmūd al-'Aqqād—as one of the leaders of *al-Dīwān* poetry movement (Ostle 1970).

At some point between 1912 and 1914, Thuile, Pea, Cattaui, and Shukrī may have been in Alexandria at the same time and heard of one another's literary efforts. The four shaped models of masculinity in the framework of nihilistic views of universality. Such models will be studied one by one in the next paragraphs, before being contrasted to their feminine others. Then, their degree of universality will be questioned, in both national and social terms, in the hope of contributing an insight into Egyptian cosmopolitanism from a gendered perspective.

Jean-Léon Thuile and the Eudemonist

As previously mentioned, Jean-Léon Thuile is the forgotten brother. The two novels he wrote are almost impossible to find. Yet such rarity is not representative of an initial lack of circulation since Thuile himself, later in life, disavowed his novels and destroyed them.[4] The novel under study, *L'Eudémoniste*, written in Alexandria in 1912 and published in Paris in 1913, was also considered lost (Basch 2007).[5]

The title *L'Eudémoniste* comes from the Greek words *eu*, "good", and *daimòn*, "spirit". They merge into a neologism in line with the Greek philosophical con-

cept of *eudaimonia*. *Eudaimonia* indicates the human attempt to be as happy as possible in earthly life. It takes on different meanings in the Stoics, for whom moral strength is the key to happiness, or in Aristotle, who also relates happiness to external factors (Taylor 1998). Jean-Léon Thuile seems to rely on the Stoic meaning of *eudaimonia* as elaborated by Arthur Schopenhauer. *L'eudémoniste* is the story of a man who strives to remove every obstacle in his way to absolute happiness. In line with Schopenhauer's view, happiness is equated with the elimination of suffering, achieved by reducing the will for life.[6]

At the beginning, Thuile's Eudemonist seeks happiness in physical well-being. He focuses on sports and hygiene, "functioning more than acting" (Thuile 1913: 12). He indulges in narcissistic pleasure, finding joy in "passing his hand on his wet forehead, his burning nape, delightfully touching his soft limps" (Thuile 1913: 15). A sudden illness exposes the fragility of this view. With physical vigour lost, the hero focuses on mental development, although not on getting an education, "which never tempted him" (Thuile 1913: 41). He turns instead to philosophy, reflecting on the meaning of life. He adopts ascetic practices, neglecting his body to cultivate virtue. When even this path reveals its weakness, he fully embraces vice, patronising "infamous cabarets," where he accomplishes "unnameable acts" in the company of drug-addled men and "pugnacious, bloodthirsty women" (Thuile 1913: 95, 112). Yet this way of life does not lead to happiness either. Eventually, his conscience speaks to him: "Your suffering comes from your mistake. For you have sought me through my forms and imperfections, and believed that I am the negation of virtue, the negation of vice, the negation of the positive and of myself. But I am more than a negation. I am Happiness. And my name is Plenitude, that is, Nothingness and Death" (Thuile 1913: 133). After such recommendation, the hero plunges into inaction, fleeing from vital needs. His only active endeavour is the act by which he ends his life by hanging himself: "To abolish life is to abolish misery, which is its fate, and death, which is its achievement" (Thuile 1913: 179). In this view, voluntary death is the active response to passive death, to which life would lead.

Through his individual path, the Eudemonist is meant to be a universal model. This is achieved, first, by denying the fictionality of the novel; then, by emphasizing the exemplarity of the hero. Thuile presents his book as the account of a real trajectory and himself as "a simple biographer" (Thuile 1913: 74). Exemplarity is constructed in terms of ordinariness, or the lack of salient qualities: the hero has "a limited fund of knowledge and a rather mediocre

education. That is why his example is universal" (Thuile 1913: 75). In line with this denial of distinctiveness, Thuile refuses to disclose the Eudemonist's origins, language, nationality, and city of residence. He justifies such refusal as the will to respect a "cosmopolitan" existence: "He led his existence under a cosmopolitan name. But I will not consider what can be extraneous to him, like the homeland of his fathers and his atavisms. [...] As soon as he became aware of his individuality, he sought to challenge as much as he could anything not directly belonging to him. He considered himself too peculiar to accept any other's heritage (Thuile 1913: 7–8). Even the name of the Eudemonist is unclear. Named Antony Baden within the novel, he is indicated by the letters C.Z. in the dedication, which supposedly refers to the same person.[7] The impossibility to connect the Eudemonist to a specific background is, for Thuile, what makes him universal.

'Abd al-Raḥmān Shukrī and M.N., the Author of the *Confession*

Shukrī's national fame as a poet has diverted attention from his prose production, as from his participation in Alexandrian cultural life in the 1910s, notably in a group named *Shallālāt,* after the garden that hosted its gatherings. To my knowledge, there are no direct sources on *Shallālāt*. Later testimonies point to the informal character of the group, which was not a movement but a series of exchanges on literature and life, often marked by nihilistic views (al-Qabbānī 1972: 35–41). A form of nihilism is also present in Shukrī's Alexandrian production. In 1916, three of his prose works were published: *Kitāb al-iʿtirāf* ("The Confession"), *Kitāb al-thamarāt* ("The Fruits"), and *Ḥadīth Iblīs* ("Word of the Devil"). Some of the chapters, however, had appeared in the press in 1911 and 1912, which should prevent simplistic claims about some univocal influence of Thuile, who published *L'eudémoniste* in 1913, on Shukrī.

Like Thuile, Shukrī presents his works as philosophical accounts that contain life lessons. *Kitāb al-iʿtirāf*, in particular, portrays a masculine figure similar to *L'Eudémoniste*. Shukrī claims to have found a manuscript with the *Confession* of a young Egyptian man, whom he briefly met before his disappearance and whom he indicates only by the initials M.N. In the introduction, Shukrī immediately discloses the fate of his hero: having tried, unsuccessfully, to tame urban civilization, M.N. comes to hate humanity and flees. He leaves his *Confession* behind, with a letter recommending that it be published one

year after his disappearance (Shukrī 1916b: 7). It is rumoured that M.N. exiled himself in the African desert, living among "savages untouched by culture" (*ula'ika al-waḥshiyyīn al-juhalā'*) (Shukrī 1916b: 9). Some say that the savages have eaten him; according to others, they worship him like a god, seeing in his apathy the marker of deity. After the introduction, Shukrī claims to give space to the *Confession*. M.N. speaks in the first person, through chapters corresponding to stages of life ("childhood recollection," "flowers of youth"), but also to facets of human experience ("success tools," "suicide thoughts") and even reflections on literature.

We are far from an autobiography. M.N. does not talk about his family, origins, city of residence. We can suppose that he comes from a Muslim background because he describes himself as a child, during *laylat al-qadr*, reflecting on what to ask from God (Shukrī 1916b: 19). Unlike the Eudemonist, M.N. is interested in literature and an author himself. He recalls the egocentric joy when his first poem was published in the press and the disappointment at negative critiques (Shukrī 1916b: 22). For the rest, the account bears a philosophical tone, closer to aphorisms on life than to a life account.

Despite the acknowledgement of life pleasures, M.N. fails to give sense to life. He considers the smallness of humans on Earth, an insignificant planet in a tiny solar system in the recesses of the universe, and concludes that the head of an individual is no more important than "the cells of ants" (Shukrī 1916b: 87). A chapter titled *Biqā' al-naw' wa-ta'āsat al-fard* ("Permanence of the species and misery of the individual") states in an aseptic tone that the individual is a tool wielded by fate, which is not concerned with human fortune or misfortune. In Shukrī, fate (*al-qaḍā'*) is a force above human beings, with its own rules. Like Thuile, Shukrī seems to have been influenced by Schopenhauer, whom he studied during his stay in England, from 1909 to 1912, and to whom he devoted, in the 1940s, a series of articles in *al-Muqtaṭaf* (Bayūmī 1996).

If fate governs life, the only escape is death, which M.N. embraces in a more titanic but also more ironic way than the Eudemonist, being either devoured or venerated as a god. Shukrī's irony about religion reaches its peak with *Ḥadīth Iblīs*, where wisdom comes from the devil. Shukrī claims to have had discussions with the devil and invites readers to judge him contentwise, for he can cast an instructive eye on humanity from his position detached from human contingencies. In a sort of parody of Dante, the devil guides the author through hell, showing him afterlife suffering, and when the author disapproves, he retorts: "And what are your religions if not a big hell?" (Shukrī 1916a: 41).

In parallel, in a sort of parody of al-Muwayliḥī's *Ḥadīth 'Isà bin Hishām*, the author guides the devil through Cairo markets, letting him comment on poverty and vice (Shukrī 1916a: 23). Alongside comments on mankind, references to contemporary Egypt mark the text.

I will argue that, in a way that may seem paradoxical, Shukrī's writing of nothingness is committed literature, intended to awaken Egyptian society. In the introduction to *Ḥadīth Iblīs*, Shukrī stresses that a nation weakened by centuries of despotism, equated to a long sleep, can only fail in the quest for material things if it does not wipe out, in the mind of its inhabitants, all the faults of the past (Shukrī 1916a: 7).[8] A chapter on "Transition phases" ('*Uṣūr al-intiqāl*), in *al-Thamarāt*, explains: if a country goes through a phase of transition, it must withdraw from the crowd in order to get "a truthful, general view" (Shukrī 1916c: 73). Withdrawal is necessary because past miseries "leave in the human soul a trace which prosperity can gradually delete, but never completely" (Shukrī 1916c: 74). In *al-I'tirāf* it is said that Egypt is going through such a phase and M.N. is the specimen of the young Egyptian: "The qualities of the young Egyptian are those of M.N., author of the *Confession*, for the young Egyptian in the current social situation of our nation is powerful in hope, but also in despair [...]. This is because our social circumstances arouse great hope, and great despair, and I find a strong link between the social circumstances of the nation and the mindsets of its individuals. The young Egyptian is extremely distrustful, a quality for which Egyptians are well known, and this is due to the long periods of despotism that Egypt has endured. They have ingrained this legacy in the mind of individuals, because despotism breeds distrust" (Shukrī 1916b: 1).

Enrico Pea and Judas

Pea's masculine model is Judas, or a new version of him. The figure appears in a play in Italian, *Giuda*, written in Alexandria in the 1910s and published in Italy in 1918. While setting the plot in Jerusalem before the Passion of Jesus, Pea juxtaposes Judas Iscariot and Judah Maccabeus, merging the two into a single man. He manipulates biblical references to shape the character of a legitimate king who has lost his throne. Unlike that of Jesus, Judas' throne is earthly. He is the only child of late king Ircanus, deposed by Herod in collusion with the Romans. His mother is a Jewish woman who struggled to preserve the "Maccabean lineage" and Judas must redeem the Jews from their slavery to Rome. At the beginning, Judas is unaware of his identity, yet he manifests

physical vigour, including sexual appetite, and hunger for power. Once his identity is revealed, the High Priest incites Judas to guide his people strongly and wisely, hoping to get rid of both the Romans and Jesus. But Judas has strength, not wisdom. Rushing to foment an anti-Roman rebellion, he provokes the arrest of John the Baptist and he is himself wounded in a struggle. "It is your haste, Judas, your thirst. Your fever, your recklessness bars you the way," says the High Priest. Judas dies of his wound.

In his memoirs, published in 1949, Pea says that, back in Alexandria, he was obsessed with Judas, who represented for him human heroism, beyond cowardice and bigotry (Pea 1949: 84). Judas was, for him, the embodiment of the anarchist values promoted at *Baracca Rossa.* Little is known of *Baracca Rossa*, on which I could not find direct evidence.[9] Later accounts, including those by Pea, bear a strong negative bias. They follow Pea's (re)conversion to Catholicism, with the condemnation of his anarchist period and the works it inspired, especially *Giuda*. Like Thuile with *L'Eudémoniste*, Pea came to disavow *Giuda*. In his memoirs, he constructs a binary: Italy and faith, on the one side; Egypt and heresy, on the other, with *Giuda* at its peak.[10] Yet Pea's memoirs shed light on the genealogy of *Giuda*: through Ungaretti, Pea obtained the support of Jean-Léon Thuile, who agreed to write the poetry lines (Pea 1949: 19–22). Although this collaboration did not materialise, the heroisation of Judas is in line with *L'Eudémoniste*. No sources fully clarify the chronology and extent of the exchanges between Pea and Thuile. According to Pea, it was Ungaretti who introduced him to the Thuiles, which places their first encounter between 1906 (the year Pea met Ungaretti) and 1912 (the year Ungaretti left Alexandria).[11] Since *L'Eudémoniste* was written in 1912 and published in 1913, we can suppose that such exchanges played a role not only in the conception of Pea's play but also in the genesis of Thuile's novel.

However, Pea wrote the play on his own and in Italian. *Giuda* was performed in Forte dei Marmi in August 1918 and was rather appreciated by the audience, but targeted by censorship (Pea 1940: 10). The censor's cuts were so many that Pea ignored them, for they would have made the play unperformable (Pea 1940: 9). This led to the performance being forbidden, at least in the province of Lucca and at outdoor venues. *Giuda* was brought to indoor theatres in Pisa, Livorno, Venice, and Genoa, still prompting harsh criticism for its content (Pea 1940: 10). The version published in 1918 by Libreria della Diana (Pea 1918), and kept in a few libraries in Italy, might be the uncensored one.[12] Although Judas has quite a limited role in it, he sometimes refers to Jesus as one of the

"magicians" or "the preaching bastard," "the bastard," "the Redhead" (Pea 1918: 17, 19, 24). Similarly, the High Priest in *Giuda* once calls Jesus "that bastard, false prophet, doctor in magics" (Pea 1918: 8). A press cutting, unfortunately missing the date and name of the newspaper, mentions that offences such as "the redhead, the magician, the bastard" were the main target of the censor's cuts.[13] In any case, offences are not the chief aspect of the play. Pea heroizes Judas by disregarding the gospel account about his betrayal of Jesus, which never occurs in the play. Pea's Judas is a rival of Jesus, whom he considers too weak to lead the Jews, but he does not betray him, does not take corrupt money, and does not hang himself. Pea describes his death in terms closer to poetry than stage directions: "Judas dies on a stone, composed, supine. He stands like a sculpture on a funerary pedestal" (Pea 1918: 30). Judas is morally triumphant even if materially defeated: "the icon of a humanity doomed to struggle, often with self-destructive effects" (Guidotti 2010: 69).

Georges Cattaui and the Generation of Sacrifice

For Georges Cattaui, the idealised vision of masculinity is embodied by an entire generation that died on the battlefields. Right after the Great War, Cattaui published in Cairo two booklets in French—*Devotion à l'image* ("Devotion to the Image," 1918) and *Lève-toi, Pentaour!* ("Rise, Pentaour!", 1921)—mostly written in Alexandria. They were followed by a broader poetry collection that integrates and completes them: *La promesse accomplie. France,* Égypte*, Judée* ("The fulfilled promise. France, Egypt, Judea"), published in Paris in 1922.

With the subtitle *France, Egypt, Judea*, Cattaui announces the sublimation of his multiple belongings—Egyptian birth, Judaism, French education—into unity, through a process that, while being individual, is meant to be a universal model. The Great War, with its wake of ruin, is its trigger. Standing as a herald of the fulfilled promise announced in the title, Cattaui addresses the whole of humanity: "Humans, your hands are full of blood. Come to me. Listen" (Cattaui 1922: 11). He announces that resurrection will come from the "swarm of the dead" of the Great War (Cattaui 1922: 82). In a section entitled "The Double Face of Janus," Cattaui (1922: 83) presents those dead as both unaware victims and redeeming heroes, at the same time prey to the "appetite of the earth" and the "Host" of salvation. Unable to suppress a sense of horror at these shattered lives, Cattaui sublimates them through the Christian notion of sacrifice, alluding to consecration and communion, in line with his own conversion to Catholicism.

At the same time, he borrows Judaic elements: God is sometimes called

Adonai and the invitation to abandon idol worship is frequent. Even more relevant is a Jewish affiliation in political terms, closer, at least in its premises, to Zionism. Several passages discuss the "Return" to "Mother Judea" (Cattaui 1922: 29). Others echo the plan of regeneration through manual work of the first kibbutzim: "Brothers in Israel, born under the same sign / We shall sow and plough the earth" (Cattaui 1922: 30). There is even a more overtly ideological allegiance, "To the Dead of Tell Hai," which celebrates Yosef Trumpeldor, a Zionist activist killed in 1920 in the Jewish settlement of Tell Hai, in northern Galilee, during clashes with the Arab population. In line with the Zionist rhetoric of the time (Assis 2021), Cattaui makes him a tragic hero: one of the "valiant men of Israel," "as strong as lions," who brought back to life the legacy of Judah Maccabeus, and on whom "the pioneers of Israel" should weep (Cattaui 1922: 74).

Yet Cattaui does not embrace Zionism in the univocal sense that the term is attributed retrospectively, in which the establishment of a Jewish national home is solely identified with the creation of a nation-state.[14] Indeed, Cattaui's political messianism does not revolve around Israel, but around France. France is portrayed as "the eldest daughter of the Church," which embodies Catholicism through a line of historical figures in which Cattaui sees the perfect conjunction between political skills and moral rectitude. With the Great War, France appears as both the threatened motherland ("France was also your bleeding mother") and a superior entity ("France will accomplish its holy mission") (Cattaui 1922: 86, 80). It is for France that the "Generation of sacrifice" went to war and consciously embraced death (Cattaui 1922: 11).

Thanks to these men, France will continue to be, for Cattaui, the apex of human civilisation. Such Francophilia elevated to the rank of religion counterbalances a nihilistic view, which can still be found in *La promesse accomplie*. In "Unity" (the closing section) and "Becoming" (the last poem), the conjunction with the universe is achieved—physically—through the maggots that eat up the corpse, mixing it with the earth, and—metaphysically—through a rebirth halfway between Christian resurrection and metempsychosis: "My rotten body will be eaten by worms, / But from me shall spring the finest harvests, / And when I am born again in new flesh, / A little of me will already be in the universe" (Cattaui 1922: 98).

According to Ulrich Beck (2006), cosmopolitanism stems from the acceptance of otherness and thus of multiple belonging. In a cosmopolitan view, each identity coexists with the others in a non-hierarchical relationship, while

holding its own peculiarity. Universalism, on the other side, erases differences and englobes otherness within sameness, thus constructing unity. From this perspective, none of the four masculine models analysed—the Eudemonist; M.N., the author of the *Confession*; Judas; and the Generation of sacrifice—is cosmopolitan; not even the Eudemonist, whose "cosmopolitan name" is the outcome of the systematic erasure of individual peculiarities. They are all, rather, universalist. Yet, as we will see, even their universality can be questioned: first, of course, from a gendered perspective; then, in terms of national belonging and social class.

Feminine Others

The four figures under study represent idealised visions of humanity equating universal and masculine, which is not surprising among male authors in the 1910s, in Egypt as in Europe.[15] Moreover, apart from Judas, these "over-men" take ascetic paths, which hides gender dynamics under philosophical language. However, female figures do appear in these literary works, which enables us to examine masculine models by contrasting them to their feminine others. As gender scholars show, masculine and feminine do not exist in isolation, but give meaning to each other through social interactions and discourses (Ghannam 2013). By bringing gender dynamics back into the picture, we can deepen the analysis of masculine universals. I will argue that, in the four cases, feminine others accentuate, through their weaknesses, the strength of male heroes.

The Eudemonist is absorbed, at the beginning, by the cult of his body. He makes love as a bodily activity deprived of emotional attachment: "He was too convinced of his own perfection for his brain to impose the need for a complement" (Thuile 1913: 21). Similarly, without emotions, he gets married at age 23 to a 19-year-old girl described as lacking physical and intellectual qualities. While not happy, marital life is not sad either. It is a social convention that the hero formally respects, while devoting himself to bodily training. The spouses are described as two opposite poles. The husband, as previously observed, has no clear name and no elements linking him to a specific background. For Thuile, he embodies universality since he could be any man. The indistinct nature of the male hero is opposed to a very identifiable female counterpart. The Eudemonist's wife has, indeed, a name and a background: Susanne Despréaux comes from a modest environment; she is the youngest of seven children; their father, a civil servant, is the breadwinner for the family; her brothers have doubtful sources of income. Susanne's life is described according to the

gendered clichés of the epoch. While living "in the shadow of her husband," she is not unhappy: "A woman's unhappiness is then so limited, so full of distractions that it hardly counts, when it is real" (Thuile 1913: 22, 24). Susanne strives to follow in her husband's footsteps, undertaking his habits but always too late, once the man has already acknowledged their futility. Her ill-timed efforts make her a disturbance. Marked by so many specificities, and unable to overcome them, Susanne is the non-universal partner of a universal man, one of the contingencies that he must overcome.

In *Giuda* too, the partner of the hero is an obstacle on his path. Pea shapes a binary between a good and a bad woman, to eventually erase the difference between the two. Rebecca, the High Priest's daughter, is Judas' fiancée. She is a virgin with no life experience, whom Judas never takes seriously. He is attracted to Marianna: married, beautiful, provocative. Her affair with Judas stirs Rebecca's jealousy. Rebecca denounces Marianna, who then coincides with the biblical character of the adulterous woman caught by the scribes and the Pharisees. Hearing that Jesus rescued Marianna from stoning, Judas suspects that the two also have an affair. This stirs Judas' jealousy too and hinders his already limited capacity to weave strategies. Ultimately, Rebecca's denunciation prompts a chain of events leading to Judas' death. Judas comes to fear the woman "who looks like a child and is a cunning female" when it is too late (Pea 1918: 23). Yet, before dying, he even forgives her. At the end, the virgin and the adulterous woman are two sides of the same, deceitful femininity.

In Shukrī's works, there are no prominent female characters. M.N., the author of the *Confession*, has no feminine counterpart. Love, seen as a romantic feeling causing more suffering than happiness, is disembodied. In *al-Thamarāt* too, femininity is hardly present. It is a remote Egyptian image, associated with traditions upheld by the wives of the peasants (*fallāḥīn*) (Shukrī 1916c: 8). But it is also the quintessence of narrow-mindedness, as in the following claim: "most people are like women. If you want to please women, just tell them what they want to hear" (Shukrī 1916c: 54). Yet, in *Ḥadīth Iblīs*, a woman of a different kind briefly appears. The author and the devil see her in a miserable room, taking care of her child who is starving. Her husband comes home and wants to lie in bed, occupied by the body of the boy who has by then died. When he rushes to get rid of the corpse, she reacts: "'No', she said. 'I won't step aside as long as I live'. Then her husband jumped on her, but she held on, pushed him away from her with a push that threw him on the ground, so he got angry" (Shukrī 1916a: 32). Ultimately, the angry husband stabs her to death.

Yet the woman, despite being a victim, is granted agency and moral stature, at least as a protective mother. The devil comments: "This is the meaning of life. Fate (*al-aqdār*) harms the criminal, who harms the innocent".

As we have seen, in Thuile and Pea, feminine figures are a disturbing presence on masculine paths. In Shukrī, they are remote references, or a mother within a social fresco. In Cattaui, neither the feminine nor the masculine is embodied by single individuals. Apart from the brief celebration of Trumpeldor, masculinity is a collective body, made of the soldiers who died for France. Similarly, femininity is embodied in the feminisation of superior entities, such as the Earth or its apex, France. France is half-way between a spiritual mother and a bride: made strong by the antiquity of its culture, but needing to be inseminated to last. Cattaui describes masculine sacrifice in terms of pollination, insemination, fecundation. The dying masculine body, half-son and half-groom, gives life to the feminine entity and hope to the whole.

Male Universals?

In this corpus, universality is not feminine. It is, instead, clearly presented as masculine. Yet, while examining the degree of universality of these masculine universals, some restrictions emerge in both national and social terms.

Shukrī makes national restrictions explicit: M.N. does not represent every young man, but every young Egyptian man. Social boundaries appear more discreetly: M.N. has published at least one poem in a newspaper, discusses ancient and modern Arabic literature but also Byron, Shelley, Shakespeare, and other European authors. He talks about the role of literati in society. We do not know what he does for a living, but he does not show economic concerns. His reflections on foreign domination, but also on scientific progress, echo the preoccupations of the Egyptian *effendiyya*, the new middle-class elites' men who distinguished themselves from both the advocates of unrestricted westernisation and "the world of the *awlād al-balad*, the traditional folks" (Ryzova 2014: 75). I will argue that the term "young" (*shābb*), used by Shukrī, defines less an age group than a generation in sociological terms: men sharing similar experiences with education, career prospects, conflicts with the old class of politicians and bureaucrats. M.N. is an Egyptian *effendi* of the *Nahḍa*, the period of clash-encounter with Europe in the Arab world. He sees his country caught in-between rising nationalism and persistent colonialism and he resorts to a narrative of Egyptian authenticity that depicts a seemingly homogeneous Egyptian identity, while reproducing systems of power that exclude the peas-

antry and the urban poor (Selim 2019: 2–10).

Anxieties about the future of semi-colonial Egypt also mark, from different perspectives, the other sources, revealing the not-so-universal tendencies behind the claims of male universalities. In Thuile, social boundaries are clearer than national ones. His Eudemonist, Anthony Baden, has an office job and time enough to train every day. The Eudemonist's wife is the daughter of a civil servant. Baden and wife belong to the middle class, in opposition to the shady gatherings of lower classes, which are described with salience. Within the boundaries of the middle class, their environment seems to be unproblematically multi-national: Anthony Baden marries into the Despréaux family, as if English/German-sounding and French-sounding names did not make any difference. The author links "cosmopolitan" to the irrelevance, if not the suppression, of origins and nationality. Yet no Arabic-sounding name appears in the book, which gives the impression of an emptied Alexandrian backdrop, where semi-colonial middle-class privilege remains even in the absence of the colonised. As Deborah Starr notes, European cultural productions in Egypt sought to inscribe Europeanised foreign minorities into Egyptian history, "making the cosmopolitan native." At the same time, they tended to erase the Arab presence, although Egyptians have always outnumbered foreigners even in Alexandria (Starr 2009).

In Cattaui, nationality is not discussed, but national allegiance is clear: the soldiers who died for France represent the ideal man. Yet specific socio-cultural features qualify these soldiers. They are those "who put the sword before the book" (Cattaui 1922: 12), not before the shovel. They were "thought to be more dilettantes than soldiers," which implies some education, but also freedom enough to undertake unpaid artistic occupations. They were "prophesying Universal Peace" but firmly resorted to war, "apostles and martyrs of a consented sacrifice" (Cattaui 1922: 17, 14). While Cattaui does not talk about voluntary enrolment, the stress is on consent as "an act of will" (Cattaui 1922: 15). Uneducated peasants or workers, or those reluctant to leave, can hardly be part of this picture even if they showed courage in war.

Distrust of lower classes also marks Pea's retrospective disavowal of *Giuda*, condemned not only as blasphemous, in religious terms, but also as a threat to social order. *Giuda* is discarded as the outcome of the "Babel of Egypt" that Alexandria once was, in contact with the "international mob" of *Baracca Rossa*, "notorious for the excommunicated and subversive people, from all corners of the world, who gathered with plans to rebel against society and against God"

(Pea 1949: 26, 192). In other words, Pea disavows what scholars would define as "vulgar cosmopolitanism" (Hanley 2017: 27–52): daily exchanges and conflicts between ordinary people—newcomers and natives—in popular areas of port cities. However, the play *Giuda* of 1918 never shows such an endorsement of multiple belonging, mixed spaces, and popular classes. In the play, Judas is the inheritor of a throne, willing to free the Jews from the Roman yoke. He criticises Jesus for his lack of patriotism. Pea seems, instead, to make of Judas a leader with a (failing) ambition to found a nation-state.

Conclusion

The four male heroes reveal tensions between universality and social distinction and between universality and national belonging. Moreover, all can only reach universality when they die. Thuile leads his Eudemonist through annihilation and calls the process "cosmopolitan." Shukrī describes a similar path, although he uses nothingness as a tool to awaken Egypt. In Pea's play, Judas cannot but fall in the struggle to free his people. And Cattaui's soldiers die so that France, and thus humanity, live. Masculine figures are heroised through death. Their posterity is spiritual, since they have no offspring. The rebirth of the whole implies their self-destruction. Yet, instead of speculating on some very Alexandrian pessimism, we can place this trend, first, in a broader context.

Fin-de-siècle classics present anxieties about life and universality. In *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy portrays landowner Levin reading Schopenhauer and reflecting on life, until he realises that since life has in store nothing but suffering and oblivion, he must either give sense to it or shoot himself. In Dostoevsky's *Demons*, Kirìllov declares that killing oneself is the highest expression of free-will: it means being alone in universal history, becoming God without inventing God. Russian novels, in full translation or abridgements, circulated in Europe as in Egypt. Even if no quote, in the books under study, points to them, we can suppose that they were popular enough for our authors to, at least, know of their existence. And the same can be said for Nietzsche's Übermensch ("over-man"), who attempts to give meaning to earthly life by giving up social conventions and human contingencies.[16] Finally, there is evidence of a direct connection to French writer Maurice Barrès. Cattaui opens *La promesse accomplie* with the dedication: "To Maurice Barrès, through whom I recover unity in myself, in my race and in mankind". In May 1914, Barrès undertook one of his trips to Egypt and the Levant, establishing contacts in Francophone

circles (Barrès 1923). Before his radical French nationalism, his plea for an uncompromised individualism, as in *The Cult of the Self*, had marked two generations in Europe (Weber 1975). And, it seems, some in Egypt too.

The four masculine models are in line with the preoccupations of their time. If not Alexandrian, their specificity is linked to the declining age of empires and the anxieties it brought about. In the 1910s, the Ottoman horizon in Egypt was receding before the national one was filled with meaning (Chiti 2017). Facing the end of the Ottoman Empire, some cultural actors feared the fragility of the Egyptian state confronted with colonial presence. Others worried about the status of Europeans or non-Muslims in a post-Ottoman context, or in an independent Egyptian nation-state. At the time, Europeans and non-Muslims might have felt that Egypt was not their homeland anymore; for Egyptians, that it was not their homeland yet. Some resorted to universality to make sense of such a complex phase. Yet, their universality was not filled with a positive sense of belonging. It was, instead, universality by default. These people claimed they could live anywhere because their homeland was nowhere. As other historians show (Jacobson 2008; Tamari 2011: 3–88), the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the Great War led to such claims of nihilistic universality, where belonging to the world meant not to belong anywhere on earth and where the future was regarded as hopeless.

A further nuance can be made about Cattaui, who published right after the Great War. As Amit Assis notes, this period was marked by the daily encounter with death during the conflict, which drew a hermeneutical horizon where "death was a starting point." Feeling its inevitability, the young generation sought to dedicate life to a valuable cause: a quest for redemption through engagement, from within hopelessness (Assis 2021). Cattaui's view can be inscribed in this horizon. A Jew born in Ottoman Egypt under British rule, Cattaui did not root his political messianism in the late-Ottoman *yishuv* of Palestine, which was also under the British at the time and whose survival might have seemed uncertain. He did not endorse the creation of a new state either, but the defence of an existing one, France, where Jews were to find their place. Even his conversion to Catholicism, in this view, comes as the natural outcome of the allegiance to France: not the denial, but the universalisation of Jewish identity.

In the four cases under study, the empire—Ottoman and/or colonial—seems to have imposed itself as the immediate framework for political imagination. Its crisis did not lead to the straightforward identification with a nation-state,

but to universal disaffiliation, in Thuile; national awakening through nothingness, in Shukrī; a shattered dream of national liberation, in Pea; and the dream of a French empire of humanity, in Cattaui. Their masculine models are dying universals within the horizon of a dying empire.

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Notes

1 - Rafaat S., "The House of Yacoub Cattaoui", 1994, http://www.egy.com/judaica/94-04-02.php, (last accessed on 10 September 2024).

2 - Thuile H., *La Fête d'Ajami*, "Henri Thuile. L'homme, l'œuvre, les témoignages. Numéro spécial de L'Égypte nouvelle," 11 April 1925, pp. 57–61.

3 - Library of Geneva, Georges Cattaui Collection, Ms.fr.5158, f.47–48 Cattaui's correspondence.

4 - In a 1961 letter to Ungaretti, Thuile explains that "there must be no more than twenty copies left in the whole world" (Livi 1988: 86). I translate into English all the quotes in French, Arabic, and Italian in this article.

5 - The two copies I found are kept respectively at Institut de France, in Paris, and at the Rare Books and Special Collections Library of the American University in Cairo.

6 - Schopenhauer develops this reflection in *The World as Will and Representation*, published in German in 1818 and constantly reworked.

7 - C.Z. might be the initials of Costantin Zograffo, an Alexandrian of Greek origin, friend of the Thuiles, who committed suicide (Livi 1988: 15–16). Enrico Pea mentions him later as "Nicola Zografo," describing his tendency towards annihilation (Pea 1949: 40). However, nothing in *L'Eudémoniste* points to this person.

8 - It is the Platonic myth of the cave, which also appears in Sura XVIII of the Koran. In 20th-century Egypt it became a metaphor for the awakening of the nation after a long sleep, identified with epochs of foreign domination. This myth was made famous by Tawfīq al-Hakīm in his 1933 play *Ahl al-kahf.*

9 - Pea Archives at Fondazione Primo Conti contain scarce sources on the Egyptian phase, while offering a broader view of Pea's work in Italy.

10 - After his (re)conversion, in the 1920s, Pea wrote two new plays: *La Passione di Cristo* ("The Passion of Christ") and *L'Anello del parente folle* ("The Ring of the Mad Relative"). There he celebrates the mission of Christ and condemns Judas, his betrayer (Pea 1940).

11 - Livi indicates 1911 as the probable year of the first encounter between the four, without explaining why (Livi 1988: 10).

12 - I compared two copies from different collections (D'amico and Salvini) at Museo-Civico Biblioteca dell'Attore in Genoa. Angela Guidotti (2010: 8) compared the copy of Biblioteca Arcivescovile in Pisa to one in possession of Pea's family. The four copies bear the same text.

13 - Boni, Umberto, "Il Giuda al Teatro Apuano – Forte dei Marmi", s.n., s.d. The press cutting is part of "Silvio D'Amico Collection" of Museo-Civico Biblioteca dell'Attore in Genoa.

14 - Before the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Zionism did not necessarily envisage the establishment of a separate political entity. It was a movement of "return" to Palestine, where the Jewish presence could be likened to a *millet*, in an Ottoman framework (Talbot 2016).

15 - Simone de Beauvoir questions the equation between masculinity and universality in her book *The Second Sex*, first published in French in 1949 and considered a founding text of feminist thought.

16 - Nietzsche developed the concept of the Übermensch in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* published in German between 1883 and 1885 and translated into English and French in the 1890s.

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