

in sheer breathlessness, they ceased – divested almost entirely of the voluminous wrappings with which they had begun the dance – dusky models of the Eastern Venus, whose priestesses they were! – Neze flung to each of them a purse of gold, as her parting benison.

Edwin de Leon, *Askaros Kassis the Copt*, 1870, pp. 104–5

In his book on Cairo, H. de Vaujany gave a report on the current position of the dancers in Egypt. As with many other writers, the introduction of a subject concerning women was the signal for a switch in linguistic style – from staid prose to purple passage.

Compared to what they were in the past, it must be acknowledged that today the *almehs* have fallen from their earlier position; they have come down to the rank of the most vulgar courtesans. Wanting to preserve the morals of the people of the Delta, and particularly in the capital, Abbas Pasha exiled the *almehs* to Upper Egypt. The public singers at Qeneh, Luxor and especially Esneh certainly do not merit the title of *almehs*. Mingling with *ghawazi* (dancers) you will see by turn the same women singing and dancing one after the other or in groups of two or four. Their song is monotonous, slow, singularly primitive and absolutely foreign to musical ideas in our countries, yet it has an indefinable charm. Indeed, its monotony is its strength; in the course of time it submerges the soul in a kind of ecstasy and lulls it into a deep reverie. . . .

The small number of *almehs* still in Cairo are much more reserved than those of Upper Egypt; they live in areas which are rarely frequented by foreigners. It is only by chance that foreigners will see them at parties given by rich Egyptians. The dancers (*ghawazi*) are as rare in Cairo as are the *almehs*; they can be met beyond Siout at Qeneh. But, under European influence, they have lost their unique style; they no longer execute their dances with all the necessary accessories; in the presence of women they show much more restraint in their movements.

Egyptian dance has no resemblance at all to dance as we know it in Europe; it consists of a succession of poses, contortions, gestures, which have only one aim – to express or provoke voluptuous feelings. The dancers usually wear silk robes of gaudy colours, where reds and yellows harmonize with bright greens and sky blue; their