

MIMESIS

INTERNATIONAL

LITERATURE

n. 5

ESTERINO ADAMI, FRANCESCA BELLINO
AND ALESSANDRO MENGOZZI

OTHER WORLDS
AND THE NARRATIVE
CONSTRUCTION
OF OTHERNESS

MIMESIS
INTERNATIONAL



This book has been published with the financial contribution of the Department of Humanities, University of Turin.

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www.mimesisinternational.com
e-mail: info@mimesisinternational.com

Isbn: 9788869770951
Book series: *Literature* n. 5

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P.I. C.F. 02419370305

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ALIENATION, THE FANTASTIC,
AND ESCAPE FROM HISTORY
Majīd Ṭūbiyā's Short Stories
in the Egypt of the Sixties

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When the new generation of Egyptian writers appears on the literary scene of the mid-1960s, they introduce themselves as subverters of the literary establishment.¹ “It is only natural therefore for earlier agents within the field, who have acceded to various dominant positions, guardians and propagators of certain symbolic values, to combat the new arrivals” (Mehrez, 2000: 267). These narrators,² with their antagonistic force, have

1 Modern Egyptian narrative emerges in a few decades during which writers take part in the production of a national identity, in the commitment against the British protectorate, and in seeking political and ethical foundations for the building of a new Egypt. It is a young literature, matured at the dawn of the 20th century, on the one hand based on Western narrative and on the other taking on new features fit for the Egyptian milieu, which it addresses. Over a period of sixty years the Egyptian literary canon acquires its form with narrative texts that have as a fundamental premise the search for truth and for representation of reality. These works are among the cultural steps on a historical path culminating with the 1952 coup, the overthrow of the monarchy and the expulsion of the British from Egypt. The following decade sees the full affirmation of Realism. The Egyptian canon, gradually established since the early 20th century, develops interest in the lives of ordinary people and is no longer linked to the literary models of classic and pre-modern traditions. The world now appears to narrators as a whole represented by the individual with direct observation, experience, and study of details. The different literary trends which follow one another, from Romanticism to historical fiction, up to Realism, define a set of shared symbolic values and form the tradition of modern Egyptian narrative which takes into consideration high culture, namely cultural heritage, education, knowledge of the classics, Arabic and otherwise.

2 An accurate survey of contributors of short stories printed in the literary magazine *Gallery 68* is given by Kendall (2006: 234–238); among the numerous names cited we remember: Yaḥyā al-Ṭāhir ‘Abd Allāh,

a significant role in the development of contemporary fiction, so much that even today the so-called “writers of the Sixties” are a reference point for the 2000s’ authors.³

The 1960s witness major projects of industrialization, natural resource exploitation, public education expansion, but also see the abolition of many political activities, the stifling of oppositions and the limitation of some freedoms essential to democratic life;⁴

Ibrāhīm ‘Abd Allāh al-‘Āṭī, Ibrāhīm Aṣlān, Muḥammad al-Biṣāṭī, Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī, Ghālīb Halasā, Khalīl Sulaymān Kalfat, Idwār al-Kharrāt, Ibrāhīm Mansūr, Yūsuf al-Qiṭṭ, Muḥammad Ḥāfiẓ Rajab, Yūsuf al-Shārūnī, Bahā’ Ṭāhir, Majīd Ṭūbiyā.

- 3 A new generation of narrators emerges at the beginning of the 2000s. Their narratives express the more recent changes Egypt has undergone, especially in urban contexts. One of the most singular writers, Aḥmad al-‘Āydi (b. 1974), who has got among his mentors a writer of the 1960s, Ṣun‘ Allāh Ibrāhīm, connects the two generations by saying “after all we are like in the 1960s, at war. Today, we are in a time of unofficial, undeclared war. Now it is our regime to be against our people” (Caridi 2006, my translation), and in his novel *An takūn ‘Abbās al-‘Abd* he writes, paraphrasing the famous definition of the 1960s generation “we are a generation without masters”, expressed by Muḥammad Ḥāfiẓ Rajab, in *al-Jumhūriyya*, Oct., 3rd 1963, p. 13 (Kendall, 2006: 144), “Egypt had its Generation of the Defeat. We’re the generation that came after it. The ‘I’ve-got-nothing-left-to-lose generation’. We’re the autistic generation, living under the same roof with strangers who have names similar to ours” (Alaidy, 2006: 36).
- 4 In the first decade of the Revolution, the political parties are abrogated; a crisis within the ruling group, the Free Officers, occurs, and the first President of Egypt, Muḥammad Najīb, is removed from the scene; a socialist experiment starts. In the same period, a number of political initiatives directly concern cultural environments; we recall that in 1954 purges against several teachers at the University of Cairo are launched. In 1956, the regime begins to create a system of institutions aimed at monitoring and mobilizing intellectuals, among which is the Higher Council of Arts and Letters; in 1958, the Ministry of Culture is established. In the same period, the state institutions of the Radio and Theatre are expanded. In 1960, the State Television is founded and the press is nationalized. The following year the film industry and much of the editoria are nationalized, too. In 1962, the National Action Charter is promulgated: a single party is defined in the context of building a socialist society, regardless of class struggle, with a single trade union. The intellectuals, for the most part, do not provide the philosophical and ideological support required by the regime and the cultural

in that moment a vanguard of narrators and poets turn away from the Realism that has characterized the literature of the previous period, in particular in the 1950s, ranking break with narrative modalities they no longer deem fit for the Egyptian societal evolution. Modernism bursts into literature. Its task is “to express the complexities of this epoch, and to illustrate – one might even say, without prejudging the issue, to discover – the radical changes in the national attitude towards reality” (Hafez, 1976: 68).

The new generation resumes the work of the Experimental current⁵ that in the 1950s developed a sensibility for existentialist problems, opposing its narratives to Realism. Neither supported nor encouraged by critics (Ferial Barresi, 1977: xvii), the experimental writers leave a legacy assumed by younger narrators when in 1961 the intellectuals’ crisis is evident.⁶ With them are also some major writers of the previous generation – Najīb Maḥfūz and Yūsuf Idrīs – reflecting the permanent state of crisis in the 1960s using different techniques and instruments: indirect critics to society; bare representation of reality; use of a poetic style to render the characters’ frustration; depiction of reality’s relativity; minimalist approach to illustrate the human world; resort to history, tales, and fables to enlighten the decadence of the present; use of realistic narrative strategies (Hafez, 1975).

personalities supporting it. Between March 12th and July 14th, 1962, a memorable debate occurs on the main Egyptian newspaper, *al-Ahrām*.

- 5 Anxiety, alienation, and more broadly existential problems are faced by the Experimental current which includes, among its exponents, Yūsuf al-Shārūnī, Idwār al-Kharrāṭ, Faṭḥī Ghānim, ‘Abbās Aḥmad, and Badr al-Dīb.
- 6 Ḥasanayn Haykal, editor-in-chief of *al-Ahrām*, requests that Marxist journalist Luṭfī al-Khulī uses his newspaper to host the debate about the lack of a Revolution theory and a supposed crisis of intellectuals. On the whole, the debate does not reach a comprehensive and deep understanding of the real causes and possible solutions. Besides, in this era of protest and criticism in respect to Nasserism and to the cultural circles supporting it, the establishment must face the rebellious vision of a new generation, which often endures censorship and repression, and the detachment of some prominent writers.

As in the early 20th century, young narrators⁷ propose a new narrative culture and change the modes of reading reality. The representation of the “whole” through an extensive organization of its components gives way to fragmentation: “the emerging creativity adopts fragment as residue, as a still smoking ruin after the destruction” (Avallone, 2012: 19, translation of the author). In doing so, some narrative practices are recovered from traditional storytelling; for instance irony and the fantastic, which are rooted in classical and pre-modern Arabic literature, are significant in the 1960s and constitute specific traits of story writing. Fables and legends in the classical period and popular prose texts in the post-classical age provide materials of fantastic nature and legendary narratives. *Siyar sha‘biyya*, *maghāzī*, *khurāfāt*, and ‘*ajā’ib*, together with *Arabian Nights*, constitute a wide and rich source of stories populated by imaginary, supernatural, and miraculous characters and events. Furthermore, popular narratives, such as *Arabian Nights*, but also canonical works, like al-Hamadhānī and al-Ḥarīrī’s *Maqāmāt*, and Abū l-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī’s *Risālat al-ghufrān* are often typified by a considerable irony that is, with parody, one of the more common techniques employed in satire (Scott Meisami and Starkey, 1998).

Draz considers irony as the main structural principle of the new narrative forms emerging in the second half of the 1960s. According to him, the “dominant”, with the meaning given by Roman Jakobson, namely “the focusing component of a work of art, which rules, determines and transforms the remaining components”, shifts “from the mimetic approach of modern social realism, to an ironical metafictional approach” (Draz, 1981: 137). His study of four Egyptian works leads him to analyze irony and the fantastic as fundamentals of the structure of tales, both ruling

7 The avant-garde of the 1960s includes also some older writers, such as Idwār al-Kharrāṭ (b. 1927) and Yūsuf al-Shārūnī (b. 1927), who were already active in the Experimental current. Al-Shārūnī publishes his first collection of short stories, *al-‘Ushshāq al-Khamsa*, in 1954, and al-Kharrāṭ releases his, *Ḥiṭān ‘Āliya*, in 1958 (Ferial Barresi, 1977: xvi).

the development of “The Bulge-Eyed” by Majīd Ṭūbiyā,⁸ one of the short stories this paper aims to present.

Revealing reality through the fantastic

The stories of Majīd Ṭūbiyā, who, like other young writers, finds his own space on the literary scene partly thanks to the avant-garde magazine *Gallery 68*,⁹ is an example of the content and form changes occurring in those years. Through the four short stories here selected – “Vostok reaches the Moon”, “The Bulge-Eyed”, “Five unread newspapers”, and “The following days”¹⁰ – the author highlights some critical aspects of the post-revolutionary Egypt making use of the fantastic. The first season of Nasserism ends ruinously¹¹ with the failure of pan-Arabism, socialism, and a strong Egyptian political and military role in

8 Majīd Ṭūbiyā (b. 1938) was born in Minya, Upper Egypt, into a Coptic Christian family. He completes his early studies in his hometown and enrolls at the University of ‘Ayn Shams in Cairo (1956), where he graduates in mathematics (1960). He gets a teaching post in a secondary school in Minuf and in the same period starts to cultivate his interest in Western theatre and cinema, which become a real passion, leading him to leave his job and to graduate in screenplay (1969) and direction (1972) at the Film Institute in Cairo. He works at the Superior Council for Arts and Humanities and at the Secretariat of the Ministry of Culture. His literary career starts in the late 1950s. In the mid-1960s, he begins to publish in the magazines *Rūz al-Yūsuf*, *Ṣabāḥ al-Khayr*, *al-Majalla*, and *Gallery 68*. In 1965, his short story “Vostok reaches the Moon” appears in *al-Majalla* and in 1967 it gives the title to his first collection published with a preface by Suhayr al-Qalamāwī. In 1966, the short story *al-Makāmīr* is awarded best subject for the cinema and becomes a film with the title *Ḥikāya min baladinā*. In his long literary career, he has published many novels and collections of short stories.

9 *Gallery 68 (Jālīrī 68)* is an independent magazine with a pivotal role in the literary scene of the late 1960s, published between April 1968 and February 1971 (Kendall, 2006).

10 “Fūstūk yaṣīl ilā l-qamar” (1965), “al-Jāḥīzūn” (1970), “Khams jarā’id lam tuqra” (1970), “al-Ayyām al-tāliya” (1972).

11 The defeat of the 1967 war against Israel is an event that marks the history of the Arab world, inflicting a deep wound on moral, political and territorial levels. The disappointment, the awareness of the collapse

the Arab area. In the 1960s, the Egyptian State corresponds to an autocracy, while oppressive political control and repressive measures pervade society. The Revolution's utopia, which continues to be transmitted through the official cultural circles, gives way to a dystopia. The regime allures part of the intellectuals and supports the emergence of many cultural institutions, magazines, and newspapers. For their part, the intellectuals take varying stances, from the conservative type, climbing to higher positions, to subversion. The latter attitude is assumed by Majīd Ṭūbiyā who creates narratives showing an inversion of the rules which dominate the mimetic representation of reality.

The short story "Vostok reaches the moon", written in 1963 and published in 1967, is considered a milestone in the author's literary career. For the first time Ṭūbiyā uses the fantastic and he does it embodying in a terrible monster all the upsetting elements afflicting the protagonist, a truck driver oppressed by a continuous noise that accompanies him at work and along the roads, where he observes a sore mankind similar to the animals scattered in the countryside.

So many strange creatures everywhere. They had never looked like this before. The duck fluttering in the roadside canal to escape the August heat. The cows ceaselessly grazing. The buffalo roped to the water wheel. The dogs ran alongside barking, to back away and loll out their tongues in frustration. The sheep, its head bent down with anxiety like a family man wondering how to buy those clothes for his children. And people. So many human beings, doing different things. One busy with his waterwheel. Another just eating and eating. Others who followed him with curses because of the smoke from his exhaust. The sad man who sat and ruminated, his finger tracing something in the dust. The naked ones who had stripped off their clothes to swim in the canal. (Tobia, 1977: 370)

The monster never leaves him, not even in the poor cheap home he rented in front of the railway where trains clank past. It even took possession of his children.

of ideals championed by the Revolution triggers a crisis that deeply affects literature also.

He even passed into the bodies of the children so that they spoke so loudly, even if there was total quiet, that he was forced, in spite of the heat, to cover his head with the pillow, not only to hide his ear-drums from this ever-persistent monster but also to get to sleep (Tobia, 1977: 371).

In an age when Egypt has entered a series of modernization and industrialization campaigns, technology appears in two respects: it has a power set against the man who lives in nonstop contact with the machine, but it is also a vehicle for hope, dream, escape on the road to the future and especially towards the quiet, the liberation from modern society's gears.

The policeman shouted. Two snakes came out of his mouth. Their fangs sank into the driver's eardrums. [...] And the car accelerated till the road shook. And the clatter was so intense that instead of dying as it rose in the air it hardened into the shape of a bottle out of which the monster sprang with hammer and dagger and a malevolent grin. To float slowly and surely down till he was slipping through the broken side-window and sitting on the seat beside him. [...] The pain was tremendous. If only he had brought some cotton he could have stuffed his ears. He could have hidden his ear-holes from this monster. But no, the doctors wouldn't allow him to. (Tobia, 1977: 368–369)

By inventing a monstrous creature, the writer gives a concrete form to the fears agitating human consciences and places this short story in a contemporary narrative culture which is very prolific now, in the 21st century, and was similarly popular in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s in both written literature and filmic narrations, especially in Western societies. In a representational approach, the collective nightmares originated by a *surplus repression*, in a Marcusean sense, namely a force exercised beyond the necessary to adapt the individual to a social system (Marcuse, 2001: 22), are shaped as monsters especially in historical moments of rapid cultural, social, political, economic, and moral changes (Levina and Bui, 2013: 2). A passage from *Collected papers of Herbert Marcuse* is pertinent to Ṭūbiyā's mode of interpreting reality.

The technological processes which propel mechanization and standardization of production tend to eliminate individual autonomy from a vast area in which much of its force was previously spent; and this force could be released in a yet uncharted realm of freedom beyond that of necessity. Man would then exist as an individual to the extent to which he is eliminated from the mechanized work-world; his freedom would be autonomy over the apparatus of production and distribution. (Marcuse, 2001: 50)

In our text freedom is chased by resorting to a promising modernity; while alienating technology is personified in a monster, the liberating one is emblematically represented by Vostok (“the Orient” in Russian), a type of spacecraft launched into space by the Soviet Union for the first time in 1961.¹² As in the other three stories, next to the basic theme of alienation a collective imagination emerges; it is produced by a proto-globalization of information and culture, through radio, television, cinema, photography, newspapers, and literature, all means interacting in this epoch of rapid and significant changes.

The story opens with a slogan which is written on the back of the truck:¹³ “Have a good trip to the moon, Vostok!”. On the slogan’s plate there is also a painting, “a little rocket nosing its way to the moon whose happy smiling beamed out from its fringe of radiant flowers” (Tobia, 1977: 368). The formula chosen by the character shows a faith not placed in transcendence but in modern technology. He seems to look positively at technological progress which opens an escape to another world – “Even if there were a monster on the moon I’d rather face him than this one here who’s after me every-where” (372) – and to oppose

12 The space age begins in the second half of the 1950s with the launch of the Soviet satellite Sputnik 1 followed by the Mercury project, for human exploration in space, launched by NASA. The 1960s are dense with space programs that culminate with the moon landing in July 1969. The race between Americans and Russians for the conquest of space is part of the broader framework of the Cold War and has a strong media impact, with repercussions in the collective imagination and narrative culture of the time.

13 Typically, Arab drivers carry amulets or miniatures, which are replicas of holy places and texts, in their travel cabin, to invoke divine protection.

to traditional religious beliefs, when choosing the ‘have a good journey’ formula – “The owner had wanted to put something quite different: *O Lord Who granteth secret grace. Save us from all we fear*. But he hadn’t budged and the owner had to agree” (368). Ironically the protagonist faces a supernatural being that gives him no respite, tangible as much as a living creature, and at the same time echoing the folk tales’ genius living in a bottle¹⁴ – [...] a bottle out of which the monster sprang” (369), “The coward. He’s gone. Gone back into the bottle” (371).

Space travel is matter of discussion between the driver and a porter, and later between the driver and a hitchhiker. In one situation the author includes references to historical background – the American and Russian race to conquer space –, and in the other to imagination – American films of science fiction populated by monstrous creatures.¹⁵ In both cases the desire for peace, represented by the moon, emerges: “Is it too much to ask? Just a quiet home. Anywhere. Even in the moon” (372). The story ends with a link to this leitmotif: the protagonist, because of an accident with his truck, is hospitalized; when he wakes up he finds himself in a place of total silence and sees doctors in white coats moving their lips without uttering a word. He then asks whether Vostok has reached the moon.

14 The motive of a spirit imprisoned in a bottle recalls some tales of the *Arabian Nights* and the Brothers Grimm’s fable “Der Geist im Glas”.

15 The 1950s see a real explosion of science fiction, which is widely spread not only through novels, pulp magazines and comics, but also thanks to the film industry, especially the American one. Enthusiasm for the aero-spatial achievements together with the desire of exorcising the anxieties related to the Cold War, and the fear of the atomic bomb are ingredients of the collective emotional background when Holliwoodian and independent films tell space exploration stories or imminent dangers of alien invasions and final cataclysms. Of the large cinema production in those years, we mention some significant titles: *The Thing from Another World* and *When Worlds Collide* (1951); *The War of the Worlds* (1953); *Creature from the Black Lagoon* and *Them!* (1954); *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956); *The Blob* and *The Fly* (1958); *The Day of the Triffids* (1963). In the 1960s, science fiction cinema passes to more sophisticated literary modes with the New Wave arisen in British milieu.

Ṭūbiyā's narrative meets the requirements indicated by Todorov as necessary for defining the fantastic.¹⁶

First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character [...] Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as "poetic" interpretations. (Todorov, 1975: 33)

Metamorphosis as an escape from reality and history

The topic of discomfort, psychological suffering, alienation, and escape from society is also central in a short story published by Ṭūbiyā in 1970, under the title "The Bulge-Eyed". Here the fantastic is generated through metamorphosis, which has a pronounced critical force and is a theme dear to Western literature, recalling in particular Franz Kafka's novella "The Metamorphosis".¹⁷

An autodiegetic narrative shows the protagonist walking along the bank of the Nile in one of the most crowded stretches in the modern heart of Cairo, approaching the water, entering it to continue until he completely immerses himself, or better, until the river itself acts against the protagonist: "I went on: the water came up to my thighs, to my waist" (Tubia, 1988: 80). The suicide leaves behind him a chaotic city which lasts moving, emitting lights, with shadows and sounds that are more and more confused. The only clear and impressive image is that of bulge-eye men persistently staring at him, at the point of penetrating, with their gaze, even the water. Human figures and shapes of

16 Todorov's definition has been recently questioned. However, it provides a basic theoretical description of the fantastic that is adequate to interpret our texts.

17 The story, published in 1915, is an allegory of man's alienation in modern society. It tells the isolation and lack of communication in the life of Gregor Samsa, a travelling salesman who one morning wakes up transformed into a beetle.

bridges and buildings overlooking the Nile serve as background to the protagonist's last decision, while near and distant memories materialize, in a disordered sequence, until the metamorphosis starts: the individual completely gives way, lets his body go, wrapped and seeped by water, first resting on the river bed and then floating towards the Delta. He makes the absurd act of continuing to tell, now dead, his journey. Hence narration enters a paradoxical dimension, a performative contradiction which is the core of the fantastic's *mise-en-scène*. "Every work of art sets up its own ground of rules. The perspectives that the fantastic contradicts are perspectives legitimized by these internal ground rules" (Rabkin, 1976: 4–5).

The hero's trip takes place without hurdles: when entangled in the vegetation of the river banks he meets a guard ready to free him and to let him go; an old Muslim, who is doing the ritual ablutions with the intention of praying in a *zāwiya*,¹⁸ observes him for a long time and then recites some verses of the Koran over his dead body, without restraining him; when he remains a prisoner in a fishing boat's nets, the captain and his crew throw him into the sea, after saying a Christian prayer. The departure from the human world does not meet any hindrance, raising only fast pious acts. When the narrator's body begins to decompose a new event occurs, stopping the flesh corruption: a fish unintentionally swallows him. The metamorphosis is completed, his and the fish's become one flesh.

There, inside the fish, I saw the umbilical cord of my mother... Its intestine began to secrete strange juices and acids. Soon I had completely dissolved and been absorbed into the body of the fish. (Tubia, 1988: 87)

Later on the fish-man is caught and cut into pieces, boxed to be sold. Ironically, the last step is in the dish of a man with bulging eyes, one of those who the narrator, conscious until the last moment of his unnatural new life, felt persecuted by and tried to escape from committing the extreme act of suicide.

18 Small mosque, prayer room.

Clearly, influences of Western literature and thought on Ṭūbiyā's narrative are considerable. Some key points of Albert Camus' philosophical thought, concerning the idea of the absurd, occur. Choosing not to live his life the narrator stops his rebellion and passes from a total rejection of a system, and its incomprehensible rules, to accepting his own limits. He can't afford to live the absurdity of his human condition and neither revolt against it. Yet, the absurdity of human condition cannot be avoided. A state of death lived in full consciousness, an extraneousness aware of the world, a reflection on himself and a search for a familiar world which can be explained, do not allow the subject to put an end by death to the absurd, but rather, the latter proposes itself again in a paradoxical way. It is worth mentioning that Camus and Becket were translated in Arabic in the mid-1960s, and that the Existentialism had already been introduced to the Egyptian readers through literary reviews, first of all the influential *al-Kātib al-miṣrī* (*The Egyptian writer*), in the 1940s, with critical articles on the works of Kafka, Joyce, Sartre, and Camus (Kendall, 2006: 56). In 1965, an interesting article on the 'absurd', entitled "al-Lāma'qūl fī adabīnā al-mu'āṣir", is published in *al-Majalla* (*The review*) (al-Shārūnī, 1965).

Yūsuf al-Shārūnī, dans son article *L'absurde dans notre littérature contemporaine*, rapporte deux tentatives qui annoncent, selon lui, dix ans avant la publication de l'ouvrage de Ḥarrāt¹⁹ l'évolution que devaient provoquer les écrivains des années 1960. (Ballas, 1978: 113)

These tales of the fantastic are therefore a part of a wider context, Arabic and worldwide, which responds to the man's anxieties in the modern era.

The fantastic in the twentieth century presents an interior next world, psychopathological and unconscious. It draws on the culture and society of his time, shows the loneliness and anxiety of man in front of the technological world, often denouncing its excesses or parodying its

19 Idwār al-Kharrāt was one of the leading members of the magazine *Gallery 68* as translator of Western authors, critic, and sponsor of young writers.

habits. To be considered by the contemporary world, the fantastic does not aspire to the emotional use of its elements, but to a meditation on nightmares and tensions of the modern man. (Zangrandi, 2011: 9, my translation)

The individual, disoriented and intimidated by an incomprehensible and absurd logic governing the mass society systems, ends up with not controlling forces which make ordinary situations unreal. For instance, some analeptic passages sketch the narrator's relationship with bureaucracy and retirement procedures: these are excerpts from a conversation with an officer who refuses his retirement request, as not justified by an advanced age; the employee is only thirty-one years old, while claiming to be more than one hundred.

“Sir, I wish to retire.”

He laughed:

“That’s a good joke.”

“Sir, I am totally serious.”

[...] “Here Sir, is an official request for retirement on pension, with all the necessary fiscal stamps attached...”

The director opened my job file angrily and took out my birth certificate:

“This proves you are not yet thirty [sic]! So how can you want me to pension you off?”

[...] “Sir, I know myself best. I am telling you the truth so why don’t you believe me?”

“Birth certificates don’t lie.”

“But I am made of flesh and bones, blood, iron, salts, cells, veins, lungs, a heart, ears, hands, a nose, eyes, a mouth... How can you call all these liars, and believe a little bit of paper with some ink on it?” (Tubia, 1988: 82–85).

In a metaphorical narration by images the metropolis and its symbols dominate the suicide: the panoramic tower, the crowded bridges, and the television building before which he decides to enter the Nile, as if to signify a rebellion also against the media and the lack of expression freedom.²⁰ When he is already in the

20 The Nasser period is affected by the paradox that literary and artistic production is strictly controlled but explicit censorship is relatively rare

water a piece of newspaper covers his mouth, then his nose and eyes, before he can pull it off, a reference recurring to media censorship. When he goes down under water different levels of consciousness are awakened. Memories and feelings come back to mind. It is an interior monologue²¹ in which the hostile world of modernity contrasts with the coziness of familiar life during childhood.

I immersed my ears and recognized the sound of the water, and the sounds of my father blowing his nose in the morning: the slap of my mother's slippers; Sayyid, our neighbor, whistling, thin and melodious, and Nabil calling for me... the school bell... "Sleep, sleep my love, and I kill you a brace of doves." (Tubia, 1988: 81–82)

The water revives memories of maternal womb and of his mother's premature death, suggesting a cut of roots, an estrangement in respect to life prior to his alienation from society as a mature man.

The staring eyes on the bank continued their examination of me... I saw myself in my mother's belly, inside the womb; it contained strange things: entrails, cells, blood, strange juices, tissues, arteries, veins... and a protruding eye... political seminars, jet boom, a donkey's braying, and a computer... (Tubia, 1988: 83)

Estrangement, cut roots, escape from history that runs its course leaving on the margins victims unable to adapt to the system: this is the Egypt portrayed by Ṭūbiyā.

(Jacquemon, 2008: 43). Press and media are considered as instruments to promote the Revolution and Arab socialism. In the first years of the regime a censors' office is established at the Ministry of Information and in 1960, when editoria is nationalized, government-appointed boards are created to control publications. Then the Martial law of June, 5th 1967 empowers the state in respect to the media's activities with the aim of preserving security and public order (Jones, 2015: 723–724).

21 Among the most innovative narrative techniques adopted by the writers of the 1960s are the interior monologue and stream of consciousness, both drawn from Western modernism.

Speaking through death

Similarly to “The Bulge-Eyed”, “Five unread papers” is built around a performative contradiction. The main character is already dead when his narration begins. The corpse is discovered; actions, words and thoughts of housemates, a door attendant, a police officer, and a doctor represent the main plot, alternated with flashbacks interrupting the logical flow of events’ report. That outlines the profile of an immigrant from Upper Egypt arrived in Cairo, first guest of a neighbour, then client of a boarding-house, and finally tenant in the building where he dies, all situations in which the hero never feels integrated into the urban environment. The same door attendant considers him different from the other tenants.

The stream of images passing through the protagonist’s conscience proposes again Cairo’s streets noise. The clamor of people and the roar of vehicles are essential components in the individual’s alienation and are represented by irony – which is the dominant narrative process used in this short story – as entering physically into the narrator’s body (into his ear!).

[...] I moved to a hotel in Clot Bey Street. I chose it because it was cheap... From the very first moment there something strange happened: my ear grew and grew and workers came and extended the tramlines into it, so that the tramcars drove into it with their bells, the screeching of their wheels, their drivers swearing at the donkey-cart men, and their conductors rowing with the passengers... Fleets of these tramcars drove into it with their bells, the screeching of their wheels, their drivers swearing at the donkey-cart men, these trams went into my head, never to return. (I hung a sign outside my ear saying «No Entry», but it didn’t help). Frequently the electric cables would touch, and spark and crackle in my head! So I changed the position of the bed and slept with my right ear to the street (because it’s hard of hearing). (Tubia, 1988: 73)

The analectic processes make childhood memories reappear: the links with his native village and family (his mother baking bread, his father sorrowful over the death of a mango tree,

children buying dates from a peddler),²² and his desires, his first sexual experiences with a woman. Life in Cairo is such not to offer close relationships he still looks for, though in vain, in other countrymen immigrants and in the people he meets. The only friend seems to be the door attendant who calls him “the good”, whose words are reported at the end of the story echoed by an aphorism of the protagonist’s father.

In distress, the hall porter cried:

“It’s the good ones who go!”

My father answered tenderly:

“He who is good and does good deeds goes to heaven where there are rivers of honey. But he who is bad and does bad deeds, goes to hell, the most miserable of fates.”

This puzzled me enormously. I did not want a miserable fate, nor did I want to go to hell, because I would hate to burn forever... However, at the same time I wasn’t enthusiastic about heaven because I don’t like honey. (Tubia, 1988: 77)

A narrator’s comment follows, closing the narration and suggesting the effectiveness of the fantastic in moving the character from a paradoxical situation towards a new perception and a search for consciousness.

Now I know full well where I am... And I have a strong inclination to tell what I know... Except that I am afraid of the consequences... For here too... (Tubia, 1988: 77)

Building a new utopia

Among the stories selected, “The following days” is the only one where the escape from a dystopian society leads to the rebuilding of a new utopia, through a voluntary detachment and

22 The link with the local reality, urban and rural, is a notable trait of Ṭūbiyā’s and other writers’ narrative in the 1960s, a fact that is opposed to the negative evaluation of mere imitation of Western literature given by some critics.

abandonment of every norm previously followed. The narration starts setting the action in a dystopian totalitarian society, unjust and irrational, apparently timeless but certainly representative of the current system. With a brief preamble, a narrator introduces his and the protagonist's departure from an exhausting urban reality towards a place of peace, where to recover. The initial dialogue between the narrator and a doctor, who advises convalescence to the female character, suggests that the story is set in an oppressive climate: the doctor whispers and recommends keeping his voice down.

The succeeding scene opens with a landscape unfolding before the two fugitives' eyes: a lonely shoreline, wild but peaceful, relaxing. They sleep in a wooden hut on the beach, where they discover a rusty old railroad which trains no longer pass along. In the monotony of gestures, images and sounds that typifies their vacation, some flashbacks offer a metaphorical depiction of the city.

My mind strayed to the arches of the city.

A dwarf had built them to his own short height and they were very low: a low arch at every few paces, and in every street I had to bow each time I passed beneath one, or my head bumped the vaulted ceiling. Whenever I saw a man with a hunched back I said to myself: this is a citizen of the city of low arches. (Tubia, 1988: 95)

And later on:

A time had come... in those former days... when she had decided she would not bow below the arches of the town. Her head became a mass of cuts and bruises. She kept walking, her head held high, hitting the roves of the arches until she fell unconscious. They laid her on a stretcher, in which fashion she passed beneath many arches. The doctor said – the doctor whispered – that she needed to convalesce for a while in a remote place, empty of people... (Tubia, 1988: 96)

In the convalescence place some mysterious events occur, contradictory in respect to the actual reality the narrator is still able to discern during the first few days, while the female character

soon turns towards a utopian dimension. The transit of a train and the breaking of a clock are the key elements determining the fugitives' acknowledgement of being in a new promising scenario. Their optimistic vision culminates in the final conquest of nature and time.

I was woken suddenly by a very loud noise. As I became aware of things around me, I knew – without the slightest doubt – that the noise was the sound of the train passing... now it's going into the distance... at this moment it's far away... I made no attempt to go out to see it. The sound was so clear it left no room for doubt.

I reached for the watch under my pillow. I wanted to know the time this night-train passed. But the time was a little after ten precisely. I recalled the time problem and the difficulties we had encountered during the daytime, trying to remember the name of the day on which we were living. What was today called... and tomorrow... and the following days?

[...] Hence yesterday, the day when the storm occurred, becomes storm day... and the following day, the day I became aware that the watch had stopped, is watch day, or awareness day... and so on.

[...] "And let it also be the first of the month... and with it we shall start drawing up our calendar". (Tubia, 1988: 98–100)

When Ṭūbiyā writes this short story, utopian and dystopian narratives are not new to Egyptian literature, as some modern authors have developed in their works the contrast between ideal societies and oppressive social systems by resorting to the representation of possible, imaginary, generally future, worlds (terrestrial and not). Such literature clearly evidences the distortions of the new societies produced by modern-day changes. Farah Anṭūn's novel *al-Dīn wa-ʿilm wa-l-māl: al-mudun al-ṭalāt* (1903), the short play *ʿAjalat al-ayyām* and the single episode *Dunyā al-ḥamīr*, both by Yūsuf ʿIzz el-Dīn ʿĪsā who broadcast them by radio during the 1940s, together with Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm's works *Riḥla ilā al-ghād*, a drama published in 1957, and "Fī sana malyūn" (1947), a short story, are some examples of works which criticize the existing political and social systems through fantastic futuristic interpretations found as well in Western authors such as George Orwell, Aldous Huxley and H.G. Wells.

While the foundations of an Egyptian science fiction are laid in the 1960s with the publication of three landmark novels written by Muṣṭafā Maḥmūd (*al-'Ankabūt*, *Rajul taḥta al-ṣifr*, and *al-Khurūj min al-tābūt*), by means of a quasi-filmic narrative Ṭūbiyā realizes stories based on fantasy, according to the Freudian meaning (Freud, 2010), which are a powerful synthesis of the contemporary crisis. What he writes is nothing else but daydreams arisen from a condition of privation that is not only personal but also generational.

At the end of this paper, we cannot do without dwelling on the fact that several Western authors have been cited, either with reference to Majīd Ṭūbiyā or to the general Egyptian literary milieu. Influences of other cultures are undeniable and, in the 1960s, they are matter of a debate contributed to by supporters and detractors who consider the new writers innovators or instruments of Western imperialism. The more hostile critics “levelled accusations of blind imitation and stirred up fears of encroaching foreign cultural hegemony” (Kendall, 2006: 140). Moreover the 1960s generation is perceived as working as a means of rupture with the realistic culture (literature, cinema, theatre, art) which has been committed in the Revolution’s promotion for a decade. Nevertheless, this avant-garde is writing reality in a new way, proposing form and content novelties and innovations to express the contemporary age malaise by techniques created abroad but processed in the Egyptian context, giving birth to a narrative culture still relevant today.

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