MOVEMENT IN MAḤFŪẒ'S *THARTHARA FAWQ AN-NĪL**

Tharthara fawq an-Nīl (Chatter on the Nile), published in 1966, which the Swedish Academy's Nobel committee cited as exemplary of Najīb Maḥfūẓ's work, is the author's seventeenth novel. The phase of which it forms part,[1] hailed by many as Maḥfūẓ's most accomplished, has been characterized as a move away from an interest in man and society as global issues and toward the private world of the individual as he struggles to find meaning in an essentially meaningless society and universe. But this is not the whole truth: the complex fabric of society is still very much a concern of Maḥfūẓ's but seen, now, through the lens of the individual, more often than not the rebel or the outcast, the character who finds himself alienated or out of place. In this novel, Maḥfūẓ takes us onto a Cairo houseboat, moored to the bank of the Nile, where most of the novel is to take place. Significantly, however "action", actual movement, only takes place off the houseboat.

Anīs Zakī, the novel's main character, is a civil servant who lives *gratis* on the houseboat in exchange for duties he performs as a *walī an-niʿam* (manager of delights, benefactor) though the houseboat proper is tended by a guardian by the name of ʿAmm ʿAbduh, a very big, quiet and, for the most part, mysterious man. It is to this houseboat that a number of Egyptian intellectuals escape, to smoke hashish, to revel and, presumably, to forget the world of which they are trying so desperately to purge themselves. One day, one of the members of the group, Ragab, a film star, brings Samāra Bahga, a journalist, to the houseboat. She apparently wishes to write about Ragab and his côterie. Later in the novel, Anīs happens upon Samāra's diary and, without revealing his source, shares her views about the different group members. This provokes and fuels discussions about the country and about personal tribulations. These conversations are interspersed with Anīs's frequent reveries, almost all of which are journeys into the past.

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[1] *al-Liṣṣ wa-ʾl-kilāb* (Cairo 1961) (The Thief and the Dogs, Cairo 1984),
as-Summān wa-ʾl-kharīf (Cairo 1962) (Autumn Quail, Cairo 1985),
aṭ-Ṭarīq (Cairo 1964) (The Search, Cairo 1985),
ash-Shahhādh (Cairo 1965) (The Beggar, Cairo 1986),
Mīrāmār (Cairo 1967) (Miramar, Cairo 1978).

Late in the novel, the group decides to go for a ride in Ragab's car. Anīs is reluctant but consents to go along, perhaps at Samāra's gentle, and welcome, nudging. The trip is a disaster. The pyramids, their stated destination, are never reached because an innocent pedestrian is killed as a result of Ragab's carelessness at the wheel. Moreover, the uninspected corpse is left by the roadside. When they return to the boat, Anīs is consumed with guilt about the hit-and-run and threatens to go to the police but in the the closing passage of the novel we find him still on the houseboat, in a reverie that is assisted, no doubt, by the laced coffee provided him by ʿAmm ʿAbduh.

In the following pages I shall try to show that the thrust of this novel is not simply, as many critics claim, a surface portrayal of the demise of the intelligentsia's commitment to Egypt and its affairs but also a presentation of struggle between action and inaction, between movement and stasis, between progress and stagnation.

Goerge Lukács, in discussing the nineteenth-century novel, sees an emerging relationship between soul and reality that is essentially, even necessarily, inadequate: an inadequacy, he explains, "that is due to the soul's being wider and larger than the destinies which life has to offer it". He continues:

> ... here the tendency is to avoid outside conflicts and struggles rather than to engage in them, a tendency to deal inside the soul with everything that concerns the soul.[2]

Anīs Zakī, educated, cultured and frustrated, condemned—perhaps doomed—to the inadequate and fruitless life of a civil servant, is such an individual, forced by circumstances, or perhaps by default, to turn inward. Anīs's employer captures him thus:

> *ʿaynāka tanẓurāni ilā ʾd-dākhil lā ilā ʾl-khārij ka-baqiyya khalqi ʾllāh.*[3]
>
> Your eyes look in inward not outward like the rest of God's creatures.

This employer is, moreover, just another cog in a machine to the workings of which Anīs is inextricably and unhappily bound. Their workplace is described in the following uncharitable terms:

> *al-ḥujrah aṭ-ṭawīlah al-ʿāliyatu ʾs-saqaf makhzan kaʾīb li-dukhān as-sajāʾir. al-malaffāt tunʿimu bi-rāḥati ʾl-mawt fawqa ʾl-arfuf.*[4]
>
> The long, high-ceilinged room is a dispirited storehouse of cigarette smoke. The files upon the shelves delight in the comfort of death.

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[2] Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel* (Cambridge Mass. 1971), 112-3.

[3] Najīb Maḥfūẓ, *Tharthara fawq an-Nīl* (Chatter on the Nile), Cairo 1966, 9. Hereafter, all citations will be from this edition. All translations are my own. An English translation has not yet appeared.

[4] *Ibid.*, 5.

The incongruence of this administrative hole and the freedom of the houseboat to which Anīs and his friends turn for refuge is only heightened by the similarities, subtly, uncannily drawn by Maḥfūẓ. Whereas the office is filled with cigarette smoke, the houseboat permeates with the smoke and ash of the waterpipe; whereas the files upon the shelves delight in the comfort of death, the characters in the houseboat not only speak of it but shall have cause to face it head-on, as it were. Although the office represents movement, it is stagnant, dispirited. Although the houseboat represents stasis and torpor, it is wafted by Nile breezes and buoyed by the nourishing current of the river.[5] What makes its position so tenuous, of course, is the ease with which it can be cut loose.[6] Such a fate is too awesome for the group to contemplate. As Muṣṭafā says, all is well as long as the ropes and chains are sound.[7]

Movement and motion are almost a threat to the group and its security. But, ironically, it is "movement" that announces the arrival of the newcomer Samāra: the movement of the gangplank. And it is movement that surrounds the houseboat: the leaves of the trees, the current. Movement occurs, too, in the following passage where, out of the blue, Anīs asks:

—limādha tūjad ḥarakah?
fa-ʾltaqaw naḥwahu mutawaqqiʿīn mufājaʾatan mā, wa-saʾalahu Muṣṭafā:
—ayy ḥarakah taʿnī walīya ʾn-niʿam?
fa-tamtama wa huwa yuwāṣil ʿamalahu:
—ayy ḥarakah[8]

—Why is there movement?
They turned toward him, a little surprised, and Muṣṭafā asked him:
—What movement do you mean, O benefactor!?
—Any movement
he mumbled, without interrupting the work at hand.

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[5] *Ibid.*, 35: *yawman sa-naḥtamilu la-nā miyāh an-nīl shayʾan jadīdan yastaḥsinu ʾallā nusammīhi*, "One day the waters of the Nile will bring us something which it will be better not to name".

[6] For Mattityahu Peled, "it suits fiction in the ironic mode to depict the world as an ark tied to the shore by a string which can conceivably be cut off any moment": *Religion, my own: the literary works of Najib Mahfuz*, New Brunswick and London 1984, 235. Arguing that *Chatter on the Nile* is written in an ironic mode, Peled cites Frye in suggesting that "its heroes are inferior in power or in intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration or absurdity". I suggest that, if anything, we are looking in, not down, and that the bondage is the shackling of the individual and his or her inability to "move".

[7] Maḥfūẓ, *Tharthara*, 56.

[8] *Ibid.*, 135.

The movement that does seem to have some meaning for Anīs is that of the waterpipe:[9]

al-ḥaqq anna ʾl-gūza tadūr.[10]

The truth is that the waterpipe goes round

la-shayʾa hunā tadūr bi-yaqīn wa-huwa yaʿrifu hadafahu illā ʾl-gūza.[11]

Nothing goes round with certainty, knowing its destination, but the waterpipe.

There is even mention of movement in the context of Anīs's report to his superior entitled *mudhakkirah ʿan ḥarakat al-wārid khilāla shahr mārs marfūʿah ilā ʾs-sayyid mudīr ʿAmm al-maḥfūẓāt*, "Report on the Import Activity [movement] during the month of March submitted to the General Manager, Records Department":

lā ḥarakah albatta fī ʾl-ḥaqīqah. ḥarakah dāʾiriyyah ḥawla miḥwar jāmid, ḥarakah dāʾiriyyah tatasallā bi ʾl-ʿabth. ḥarakah dāʾiriyyah thamratuhā al-ḥatmiyyatu ʾd-dawār.[12]

In reality, no movement at all. Circular movement around a fixed axis, circular movement delighting in mockery. Circular movement whose inevitable outcome is vertigo.

Even the action of writing the report is not action at all: Anīs writes completely unaware that his fountain pen has run out of ink and is merely scratching out invisible words onto the page. He is looking "inward".

Ever inward looks Anīs, but also ever backward. The drug-induced stupor in which we perpetually find him is only the first level of escape: his escape is also into the past, *his* (interpretation of the) past. For Halim Barakat, though, Anīs's concern with the pharaohs, instead of with "the contemporary ones", is a form of self-censorship.[13] But he goes on to suggest that this is typical in the character of a type of work he calls "non-confrontational". The main problem facing such a "contemplator" (as opposed to an "actor") is, in Lukács's words, "the problem of how his rhapsodically retiring or hesitant behaviour can be translated into action".[14] Maḥfūẓ presents us with a rebel who, for no clearly articulated

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[9] It is in this connection that Shukrī ʿAyyād has gone so far as to say that the waterpipe is a character on the houseboat. See Laṭīfa az-Zayyāt et al, "Tharthara fawq an-Nīl li-Najīb Maḥfūẓ", *al-Ādāb*, (October 1966), 69.

[10] Maḥfūẓ, *Tharthara*, 79.

[11] *Ibid.*, 135.

[12] *Ibid.*, 10.

[13] Halim Barakat, *Visions of social reality in the contemporary Arab novel*, Washington D.C., 1977, 17.

[14] Lukács, *Theory*, 116.

reason, wants for the first time to take action, to assert some morality.[15] What Maḥfūẓ is doing with Anīs's turnaround—and surely he has succeeded—is to establish a set of circumstances that will reveal "the point at which such a character's *being-there* and *being-thus* coincides with his inevitable failure".[16] It is this desire for action and this failure to act that is so ably reflected in the treatment of movement, action and motion.

Barakat further faults Maḥfūẓ for turning tragedy, the failure to act, into some sort of a comedy. He overlooks the possibility that this is perhaps not what Maḥfūẓ wants. Surely the novelist is unambiguous in his desire to confuse the serious with the comic:

> *ʿayb hādha ʾl-ʿawwāma annahu lā yuʿraf bi-hā ʾl-jidd min al-hazl. al-jidd wa-ʾl-hazl ismān li-shayʾ wāḥid.*[17]
>
> The problem with this houseboat is that you can't tell the serious from the comic. The serious and the comic are two names for one and the same thing;

and in his desire to fuse the comedy and absurdity:

> *...aʿnī ʾl-mahzalah awi ʾl-lā-maʿqūlah wa-kilāhumā shayʾ wāḥid*[18]
>
> ...I mean comedy or absurdity: they're both one and the same thing.

For Jamal Chehayed, the action and the movement so needed by the 1966 Egyptian intellectual is negated by the hashish, the "héros principal". But what Chehayed is primarily concerned with in *Chatter on the Nile* is time. Time, which he considers the most important aspect of the novel, impacts upon the order and movement of the narrative and upon the creation of an irreality.[19] That it is perceived as virtually absent is borne out by sentiments such as the following:

> *laysa fī ʿawwāmatinā zaman.*[20]
>
> In our houseboat, time does not exist;

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[15] Perhaps it is his desired rapprochement with Samāra, the young, attractive journalist who is invited to the houseboat. That one of the themes of the novel is love or, more appropriately, failed love, finds evidence in several passages throughout the novel but nowhere is it more succintly addressed than in Laylā Zaydān's comment to Anīs: *law istaʿmalta ʾl-ḥubb ka-mubtadaʾ sa-tansā ḥatman al-khabar!*, "If your were to use love as the topic of a sentence, you'd definitely completely forget the predicate!" (20).

[16] Lukács, *Theory*, 116.

[17] Maḥfūẓ, *Tharthara*, 126-7.

[18] *Ibid.*, 133.

[19] Jamal Chehayed, *La conscience historique dans les romans Rougon-Macquart d'Emile Zola et les romans de Nagib Mahfouz*, Damascus 1983, 180-1: Mais le roman où l'irréel atteint son plus haut degré, c'est *Babillage sur le Nil*. Ici l'irréel se dissocie d'une révolution utopique, d'une fixation sur un père mythique, ou d'une recherche de l'Absolu, comme ce fut le cas dans les romans précédents; il est recherché en lui-même.

[20] Maḥfūẓ, *Tharthara*, 98.

ayna ʾl-makān wa-ʾl-zamān?[21]

Where are time and place?

Chehayed, whose work deals with historicity and the historical in the novels of Zola and Maḥfūẓ, does an excellent job of analysing *Chatter on the Nile*—a novel he characterises as exhibiting a feeling of bitterness and failure. For him, the historical dimension of a work becomes especially meaningful if it is coordinated with time; it is through its conception of time that its worth can be determined.[22] The rejection of linear time

> implies an attachment to time not limited by a period or by a calendar. The reins that reality fastens to our conception of Time are non-existent in his dreamlike universe where hashish is a stimulant for dreams. The Dream is escape in the face of reality, and liberated time is an evasion of linear time.[23]

The evocations, then, of all the historical figures—prehistoric man, Nefertiti, Cleopatra, the Mamlūks, Julius Caesar, the early Caliphs, the pre-Islamic Arabs—are a device to escape temporal constraints. I would take this a step further and suggest that such temporal blurring and such antics are not simply a device for escape from reality but also a wish to violate the laws of motion. If this flight into the past is possible *without* movement and action, if past and present can be fused, then there is no need for further movement, forward or otherwise, because the present becomes contingent on and reliant upon the past, a past that is rich and virtually inexhaustible. Anīs Zakī has no trouble, for example, making Samāra and the eleventh-century al-Maʿarrī contemporaries:

> *wa-qad lakhkhaṣa dhālika ʾl-maʿarrī fī bayt lā adhkuruhu wa-lā yuhimmunī an adhkurahu. kāna aʿmā fa-lam yara samāra wa-hiya muʿāṣirah lahu.* (66)
>
> al-Maʾarrī summed this up in a line of verse which I don't recall and which I have no interest in recalling. He was blind and did not see Samāra even though she was contemporary with him.

But time is not the hero in *Chatter on the Nile*: to my mind, there is no hero. Anīs is an almost-hero, one whose struggle is not only to pit himself against the constraints of an uncharitable society, to deal with the superficiality of his companions, to grapple with the impenetrable mystery of the past and, indeed, of ʿAmm ʿAbduh, the enigmatic "centuries-old" guardian, but also to overcome the shackles of time.

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[21] *Ibid.*, 121.

[22] Chehayed, *La conscience*, 151.

[23] Chehayed, *La conscience*, 154: implique un attachement au temps non limité par une mesure ou un calendrier. Les brides que la réalité attache à notre conception de la durée sont inexistantes dans cet univers onirique, où le haschich est un stimulant de la rêve. La rêve est une fuite devant la réalité, et le temps libéré est une évasion du temps linéaire.

Many writers have observed that the most obvious symbol in *Chatter on the Nile* is that of the houseboat itself.[24] Anīs, in a poetic reverie, has this to say of his houseboat:

> *laysa ka-ʿawwāmatinā shayʾ al-ḥubb laʿbah qadīmah bāliyah wa-lakinnahu riyāḍah fī ʿawwāmatinā, al-fisq radhīlah fī ʾl-majālis wa-ʾl-maʿāhid wa-lakinnahu ḥurriyyah fī ʿawwāmatinā, wa-ʾn-nisāʾ taqālīd wa-wathāʾiq fī ʾl-buyūt wa-lakinnahunna marāhiqah wa-fitnah fī ʿawwāmatinā, wa-ʾl-qamar kawkab sayyār jāmid wa-lakinnahu shiʿr fī ʿawwāmatinā, wa-ʾl-junūn maraḍ fī ayyi makān wa-lakinnahu falsafah fī ʿawwāmatinā wa-ʾsh-shayʾ shayʾ ḥaythumā kān, wa-lakinnahu lā-shayʾ fī ʿawwāmatinā.*[25]
>
> There is nothing like our houseboat. Love is an important and venerable pastime but just sport on our houseboat. Depravity is contemptible in the colleges and institutions but freedom on our houseboat. And women are a custom and a document in the homes but they are young bodies and temptation on our houseboat. And the moon is an orbiting sphere but poetry on our houseboat. And madness is a disease anywhere but it is philosophy on our houseboat. And a thing is a thing wherever it may be but it is nothing on our houseboat.

For him it is not a symbol but rather a world in itself, a world that only satisfies conditions imposed by its own logic. Houseboats do appear in other works of Maḥfūẓ. There is one in the *Trilogy* (*Thulāthiyya*) to which ʿAbd al-Jawād goes at night to seduce a young woman. It represents a refuge, a liberation, an escape from censuring and restricting society, but it is also a symbol of evil, perhaps even of depravity. This does not seem to be the case with the houseboat of *Chatter on the Nile*, where it is the land, specifically the road, which represents "evil". In *The Thief and the Dogs*, (*al-Liṣṣ wa-ʾl-Kilāb*) the protagonist travels often from the apartment of his girlfriend or from the home of his shaykh to Raʿūf's villa on the Nile, and these trips become symbolic voyages between good and evil but in *Chatter on the Nile* this trip will be the one the characters take in Ragab's car. The Nile, then, does not represent hostility and danger or evil but the river does tend to be mentioned at night and death is often associated with it in one way or another. With the passing of one of the nights Anīs says *laylah ukhrā tamūt*, "another night dies".[26] In this light, the characters of the novel do not merely represent the general moral decline and powerlessness of the petite bourgeoisie vis-à-vis a governmental machine that denies the individual his individuality and the non-conformist his

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[24] Peled, *Religion, my own*, 235, for example where he calls it "a symbolic ark floating on the water representing a little world" and points to the possible link between Maḥfūẓ's choice of a boat in light of the "ready association of ark and the mythological mortuary voyage of ancient Egypt".

[25] Maḥfūẓ, *Tharthara*, 120.

[26] *Ibid.*, 15.

liberty, and their escape to the houseboat is not just flight to a symbol of evil and unconscious away from a good world. If there is any primary symbolism at work in *Chatter on the Nile*, it is, to my mind, that of movement versus stasis, inaction versus action, attachment versus detachment. The land represents government and modern Egyptian society, a stagnant monolith whose desires for change and for progress are represented by the desire to move forward. Anīs escapes this and seeks refuge in the houseboat where the converse is true: those who gather there are not in and of themselves stagnant—they are fecund minds—but they crave the peace of stillness, of no-motion, either because they are unwilling or, more likely, unable to cope with the burden of movement, progress. The abortive nature of the road trip is ample confirmation of this. The houseboat is a unique place because it is at once unmoving, moored to the land and connected to it by a gangplank,[27] at once wholly on the water, the river flowing beneath it, forever moving. The contrast between land and houseboat is also cleverly brought out through the use of language. The director of Anīs's office, Samāra and ᶜAmm ᶜAbduh, in their different ways representatives of the land, all speak in a rational, imageless way: ᶜAmm ᶜAbduh is always terse and to-the-point,[28] the director uninteresting, and Samāra very scientific in her observations and rational in her comments. The best examples of the contrast is in the closing page, a veritable gem of non-communication:

wa-qālat lahu:
—innaka lam taᶜud maᶜī
fa-qāla muḥaddithan nafsahu:
—aṣl al-matāᶜib mahāra qird!
—mā kāna yanbaghī ᶜalayka ʾan tashraba ʾl-qahwa
—taᶜallama kayfa yaṣīr ᶜalā qadamayn fa-ḥarrara yadayhi.
—hādha yaᶜnī annahu yajibuʾan adhhaba
—wa-habata min jannati ʾl-qurūd fawqa ʾl-ashjār ilā arḍi ʾl-ghāba
—suʾāl ākhir qabla ʾan adhhaba: a-ladayka khiṭṭah li ʾl-mustaqbal idhā taᶜazzamat al-ʾumūr?
—wa-qālū lahu ᶜud ilā ʾl-ashjār wa illā aṭbaqat ᶜalayka ʾl-wuḥūsh
—a-tastaḥiqqu maᶜāshan munāsiban idhā lā samaḥa ʾllāh raft?
—fa-qabaḍa ᶜalā ghuṣn shajarah bi-yad wa-ᶜalā ḥajar bi-yad wa-taqaddama fī idhr wa huwa yamuddu baṣarahu ilā ṭarīq lā nihāyah lahu.[29]

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[27] For Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction*, Syracuse, 1982, 102, the houseboat "is moored to the land which in this case may be considered as the haven of a brutal reality".

[28] Although ᶜAmm ᶜAbduh is the general factotum of the houseboat he, in many ways, represents land-ness: he is portrayed repeatedly as the reason for its stability. See below.

[29] Maḥfūẓ, *Tharthara*, 191.

She said to him:
—You're not coming with me.
And he said, speaking to himself:
—The root of the trouble is the monkey's adeptness!
—You shouldn't have drunk the coffee.
—He learned how to stand on his feet and so liberated his hands.
—This means I have to go.
—And he dropped from the monkey's paradise above the trees to the jungle below.
—One last question before I go: Do you have any plans for the future if things get difficult?
—And they said to him: return to the trees or else wild animals will surround you.
—Do you have enough to live on if, God forbid, you're sacked?
—So he grasped a branch in one hand and a rock in the other and went forward cautiously, looking into the distance of an unending road.

That the government, the land, is impersonal, "rational" and bereft of interest in people, only truly concerned with industry and progress, is in evidence throughout the novel. This can be gathered from the general atmosphere of Anīs's work-place or from the following dismissing comment of Ragab's:

fa-ʾd-dawlah munhakimah fī ʾl-binā' wa-ladayā mā yushghiluhā ʿan izʿājinā.[30]

the state is caught up in building and has enough to distract it from bothering us.

And further, when Samāra asks the group about its concern for and attachment to the world around them:

a-lā yuhimmukum ḥaqqan shayʾ yadūru ḥawlakum?[31]

Truly, does nothing of what goes on around you matter to you?,

Muṣṭafā answers with:

mā dāmat al-fanātīs bi-ḥālah jayyidah, wa-ʾl-ḥibal wa-ʾs-salāsilah matīnah, wa-ʿamm ʿabduh sāhiran wa-ʾl-gūza ʿamira, fa lā hamma lanā...[32]

As long as the cisterns are in good shape, and the ropes and chains sound, and ʿAmm ʿAbduh vigilant at night, and the waterpipe full, then we haven't a care...

Earlier he had said:

fa-inna ʾd-dunyā lā tuhimmunā ka-mā innanā lā nuhimmu ʾd-dunyā...[33]

the world is of no interest to us just as much as we are of no interest to it...

[30] *Ibid.*, 34.
[31] *Ibid.*, 55.
[32] *Ibid.*, 56.
[33] *Ibid.*, 22.

The characters on the houseboat want to distance and dissociate themselves from the government and society in general. Muṣṭafā Rāshid comments to Samāra:

> *laʿallaki taqūlīna li-nafsiki innahum miṣriyyūn, innahum ʿarab, innahum bashar, thumma innahum muthaqqafūn, fa-lā yumkinu ʾan yakūna hunāka ḥadd li humūmikum, al-ḥaqq innanā lā miṣriyyūn wa-lā ʿarab wa-lā bashar, naḥnu lā nantamī li-shayʾ illā hādhihi ʾl-ʿawwāmah.*[34]
>
> Perhaps you'll say to yourself: they're Egyptians, they're Arabs, they're human, and they're cultured, so there can be no limit to their concern. The truth is we are not Egyptians, not Arabs, and not human; we depend on nothing but this houseboat.

Their flight from social responsibility is not so much a desire to be free of responsibility but to be free of society itself. Society is cramping them—requiring movement, action, progress—and they want to "leave" it. Its allure, though, as the road trip will show, is irresistible.

Although I have suggested that the water does not represent evil, I do think it may represent death, the ultimate voyage or perhaps the ultimate suspension of motion. The water would seem, in Bachelard's words, to communicate with all the powers of night and of death. It is a type of destiny, a vain destiny of fleeting images, of a dream "that cannot be... but which can metamorphose endlessly the substance of being".[35] Maybe the houseboat itself is death. Bachelard asks the brilliant question: "Was not death the first Mariner?"[36] The death imagery is reinforced by the association of the houseboat with the Night-Sea Crossing (what Peled called the "mortuary voyage") through the watery depths of the inferno. We can inevitably tie this to the most mysterious of the symbols in *Chatter on the Nile*, that of the whale, whose presence has been satisfactorily interpreted only by Ali Jad. For him it is a symbol of hope, purposefulness and of the triumph, interestingly enough, of life over death. That the whale and death are connected is unequivocally expressed by Anīs:

> *lā khawf min al-gharaq mā dāma ʾl-ḥūt fī ʾl-māʾ.*[37]
>
> There's no fear of drowning as long as the whale is in the water.

After the road accident the whale disappears once and for all. And it does seem to do so, as Jad suggests, "at the moments of Anīs's moral despair and retrogression, and appea[r] at the time of his determination to pull

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[34] *Ibid.*, 55.

[35] Gaston Bachelard, *L'Eau et les rêves*, Paris 1942, 23: qui ne s'achève pas mais... qui métamorphose sans cesse la substance de l'être.

[36] Bachelard, *L'Eau*, 100: La Mort ne fut elle pas le premier Navigateur?

[37] Maḥfūẓ, *Tharthara*, 33.

through''.[38] The possibility that both the water and the houseboat represent life-giving and regenerative forces may thus be entertained. The ark is, after all, both heart and womb, and the river, though it can represent oblivion, also represents fatality and the creative power of nature. At any rate, the whale is testimony to Maḥfūẓ's creative use of a symbol no matter what is represents; life, death, or Anīs's consciousness grappling with the ''meaning of life'', both his own and of life in general.

Other instances of death in the novel include the sinking of another houseboat, due to the negligence of its guardian;[39] the death of a pious man;[40] the joke that Anīs cracks that ʿAmm ʿAbduh will bury them all;[41] and the fall of a woman from a building.[42] Uncannily it is ʿAmm ʿAbduh who informs the group of these deaths: the group will not in turn reveal their misdeed to him. The woman, it turns out, commited suicide, something Anīs prescribes for his friends and himself while sitting beneath a tree by the side of the road, far from the haven of his houseboat:

> *wa-limādhā lam nantaḥir?*[43]
>
> Why did we not commit suicide?

to which Ragab replies:

> *kunnā nuḥāwilu ʾl-ḥubb*[44]
>
> We were trying to love!

These words are uttered shortly before the hit and run. As I have suggested the trip, i.e., movement, is an attempt on the part of the characters to deal with the outside world, but to no avail. All they succeed in doing is participating in the killing of someone and abandoning him on the road. Their reactions seem to have been rehearsed, so complete is their inability to deal with it:

> *—yajibuʾan nahruba*
> *wa-rakibahum ṣamt marīḍ fa-ʾstadraka:*
> *—huwa ʾl-ḥall al-waḥīd.*

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[38] Ali B. Jad, *Form and Technique in the Egyptian Novel, 1912-1971*, London 1983, 28. The whale is also a symbol for the mystic *Ship of Life*: on this, see J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. Jack Sage, New York 1962, 370.

[39] Maḥfūẓ, *Tharthara*, 114. This is one of the many references that emphasise the importance of ʿAmm ʿAbduh in the major scheme of things.

[40] *Ibid.*, 99.

[41] *Ibid.*, 99. By which he means either that he will live longer than them all or, perhaps, be the death of them.

[42] *Ibid.*, 75.

[43] *Ibid.*, 150.

[44] *Ibid.*, 150.

qāla khālid:
—yajibuʾan nahruba, huwa ʾl-ḥall al-waḥīd.

fa-qāla ʿalī as-sayyid:
—yajibuʾan nahruba...[45]

—We have to flee...
A sickly silence fell upon them and he added:
—It's the only solution.

Khālid said:
—We have to flee, it's the only solution...

Then ʿAli as-Sayyid said:
We have to flee...

This accident points to the failure of the houseboat group to face responsibility, even at a time when they most need to do so—which failure drove them all to the houseboat in the first place—and their inability to separate reality—death, murder, killing—from self-preservation, cowardice, fear and their own version of reality. The act of violence, the human sacrifice if you will, is an apotheosis which forces the group to deal with "reality" as it is, not as they fashion it.

Perhaps death is an inevitable outcome of this journey, as, in Bachelard's words, "Death is a journey and journey is a death".[46] Anīs has a premonition of this:

kull shayʾ yaḥmilu ʾan yaḥdutha fī ṭarīq saqqāra.[47]

Anything might happen on the way to Saqqāra.

His reluctance to leave the houseboat to go on this trip and the anger which later causes Ragab to bellow that he will contact the police himself perhaps convinces us that, as Bachelard puts it,

> We do not leave well, boldly, completely, except by following the thread of water, the current of the great river. All the rivers meet the River of Death. Only that death is fabulous. Only that departure is an adventure.[48]

Only the houseboat can provide this adventure.

The trip and murder mark the change in Anīs. He was not at all keen on leaving the houseboat in the first place but he does not panic or act

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[45] *Ibid.*, 153, 4.
[46] Bachelard, *L'Eau*, 102: la mort est un voyage et le voyage est une mort.
[47] Maḥfūẓ, *Tharthara*, 146.
[48] Bachelard, *L'Eau*, 102: on ne part pas bien, courageusement, nettement, qu'en suivant le file de l'eau, le courant du large fleuve. Tous les fleuves rejoignent le Fleuve des morts. Il n'y a que cette mort qui soit fabuleuse. Il n'y a que ce départ qui soit une aventure.

like a lost child when he is out in the world. Rather, he ignores it and sleeps, asking about the world around him, "How long do we stay in this prison?" (*ḥattā matā nabqā fī hādha ʾs-sijn?*).[49] It is a change that I believe begins with his prophesy that anything can happen out there. Now, we find Anīs wanting to call the police. He is so determined that he even gets into a fight with Ragab about doing so. But the novel closes with Anīs still on the houseboat, and we do not know whether he will ever contact the authorities. Maḥfūẓ leaves us, then, with Anīs facing "the fundamental ethical problem—the question of necessary and possible action".[50]

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[49] Maḥfūẓ, *Tharthara*, 150.
[50] Lukács, *Theory*, 116.

AL-ᶜAQQĀD'S HARDY: ESSAYS AND TRANSLATIONS

ᶜAbbās al-ᶜAqqād's essays on Thomas Hardy, written over a span of thirty-four years, display a particularly strong admiration for the English writer. We have available eight substantial articles (totalling about fifty pages in all), which make for some contribution to an appreciation of Hardy. These are in order of their first appearance: "*Azyāʾ al-Qadar*" ("Costumes of Fate") (8 April, 1927); two essays among seven written under the rubric "*Al-Shiᶜr fī Miṣr*" ("Poetry in Egypt: 6, 7") (10, 17 June, 1927); three essays written following Hardy's death in January 1928, "*Tūmās Hārdī 1*" ("Thomas Hardy I") (20 January, 1928), "*Tūmās Hārdī 2: Shuhratuh wa Tashāʾumuh*" ("Thomas Hardy II: His Fame and Pessimism") (27 January, 1928)," *Tūmās Hārdī 3: Ārāʾ fī Shiᶜrih wa Munāqashah li Hādhihi l-Ārāʾ*" ("Thomas Hardy III: Views on His Poetry and a Discussion of These Views") (3 February, 1928); an essay-preface to his volume of poetry "*Aᶜāṣīr Maghrib*" ("*Sunset Hurricanes*") (1942); "*Ashᶜar Shuᶜarāʾ al-Gharb fī l-Qarn al-ᶜIshrīn*" ("The Most Poetic Poet of the West in the Twentieth Century") (15 February, 1961).[1] There are also incidental remarks on Hardy here and there. Each of the essays has some importance in its own right, and taken together, they reveal a deep intimacy with Hardy. Al-ᶜAqqād shows a much greater familiarity with the poetry than with the fiction. Without claiming to exhaust the essays, one may sum up the main thoughts that each conveys.

The first essay, "*Azyāʾ al-Qadar*" ("Costumes of Fate"), as is apparent from the title, dwells on the typical in Hardy's work: a fatalism which developed into a doctrinaire position. It comes close to being an apologia for Hardy. Al-ᶜAqqād incorporates into the essay his translation of Hardy's "Nature's Questioning", "To The Moon", "The Blinded Bird", and "Let Me Enjoy". He uses these interpolated translations and their fatalistic nuances to amplify and extend his comments on the absurdity of fate. The poems could indeed have been written by al-ᶜAqqād himself. (We may note in this connection that the paramount importance al-ᶜAqqād accords to the theme in Hardy coincides with the critical disposition that underlies many of the studies at the time—this is the

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[1] The first six essays are collected in *Sāᶜāt bayn al-Kutub* (*Hours Among Books*), Cairo, al-Nahḍa Bookshop: 1968, pp. 88-92, 128-137, 257-271; the seventh in *Khamsat Dawāwīn li l-ᶜAqqād* (*Five Dīwāns by al-ᶜAqqād*) Cairo, al-Hayʾah al-Miṣriyya li l-Kitāb: 1973, pp. 90-97; the eighth in *Yawmiyyāt*, Vol. II, Cairo, Dār al-Maᶜārif: 1973, pp. 386-388. Throughout, the translation of the text is my own.