

To be sure, his hero assumes that the maelstrom is a metaphor for a classical economic depression written by a nineteenth-century American economist! The irony is trenchant on the part of Vaculík, who knows better than his hero. Poe is probably, to Vaculík, the classic type of the misunderstood artist, profligate, decadent, always in debt and in disgrace, a perpetual outcast from society. Vasek-Vaculík is evidently in search of a saving "barrel" of ratiocination, such as that which Poe's hero uses to extricate himself from the ultimate, return to land, and communicate the experience to others. Vasek's own private whirlpool image is reinforced by the turntable episode, the drowned guinea pig, and his own drowning fantasies.

Lest we miss the point, Vasek even editorializes about the writer's plight. He consciously resists the notion of art as neurosis or alienation from society: "Writing is healthy only when it is a pastime, a hobby, recreation for the writer or the reader, or a livelihood" (p. 27). But it soon becomes clear that he, as much as his American predecessor Poe, reflects the situation of the disprized, displaced artist. As Poe begins in ratiocination and ends in terror, so Vasek-Vaculík begins in pure enjoyment and ends in nightmare.

Like many Eastern European writers (Polish experimental dramatists, for example), Vaculík must tread carefully. He cleverly uses the stratagem of writing over bureaucratic heads by using an apparently safe American frame of reference. But the initiated reader is free to draw his own conclusions.

Philip Roth is to be applauded for a fellow artist's generosity and perceptiveness in bringing this pungent, often acerbic, but always humane little book to the attention of English-speaking audiences. Resembling the guinea pigs themselves, this "tale of the grotesque" is a well-crafted and chiseled miniature. Its serious purpose, however, is to remind us of our own littleness in the great scheme of things, and of the need for fellow-feeling and tolerance of even the smallest created beings. With Vaculík, in fact, we reach a state of empathy where we seem able to hear what George Eliot has called "that roar which lies on the other side of silence."

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## Literary Experiments in Elkhadem's *Tajarib Laylah Wahidah*

Following his remarkable works of fiction, *Ajniha Min Rasas* ("Wings of Lead") and *Rijal Wa Khanazir* ("Men and Pigs"), Saad Elkhadem (al-Khadim) has written a novel, *Tajarib Laylah Wahidah* ("Experiences of One Night") which he rightly describes as a "modernist" story.<sup>1</sup> The book clearly reflects what is now called "the tradition of the new." It is experimental, formally complex, elliptical and allusive, containing elements of decreation as well as creation. The author's striking technical innovation in Arabic modes of narrative expression indicates total rejection of chronological form and freedom

from static conceptions of realism. Presumably, the powerful influence of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce guides Elkhadem in his use of "the stream of consciousness," seeking to record the random and apparently illogical flow of impressions passing through a character's mind. But in his adoption of this technique, there is no slavish imitation of certain models, since he makes of it a fresh weapon in the struggle against intrusive narration.

The central character in the novel is a writer-journalist suffering from mental and creative sterility, while striving desperately to find an exciting story or gripping topic to fill the blank pages on his desk and meet the deadline of the magazine. In terms of time, his internal monologue embraces one night of drifting notions, with the mental action or inertia taking place in his office first, then at the bar close by where he drinks in isolation until he almost loses consciousness. Within this framework, the author records the atoms falling upon the mind of his nameless protagonist, apparently following the actual flow of thought with its paradoxes and irrelevancies. Theoretically, the aim is inclusiveness. But, in practice, Elkhadem develops selective principles and personal structural procedures. Disconnected association is heightened and ordered by the passionate yet rational mind which conceives and controls it. The "heap of broken images" and the abrupt shifts from reflection to reflection, seem deliberately intended to create a significant pattern. In a sense, there are all the elements of order in violent disorder; anarchy can be regarded as the main design of the book. Through active participation, the reader becomes artist who arranges the different pieces together and thus attains a feeling of triumph which actually quickens response.

The mind is at first baffled: here are names but hardly persons, and statements in a sequence but with scarcely any logical or narrative connections. This bafflement is functional: the reader is being given notice to look for something other than what he ordinarily expects from traditional novels. The element of uncertainty and speculation is, of course, perfectly in order at the beginning. The pivotal character is seen at a heightened moment of crisis under the pressure of time, exploring distant recollections in the hope of finding a worthwhile experience in "the dark recesses" of oblivion (p. 5). In his approach to various experiences, the facts are obviously colored and distorted by his emotion and thought. The memory disintegrates, releasing its hidden treasures and removing the artificial barriers between the past and the present. As an artist, Elkhadem attempts to comprehend the reality of the moment through shifting particles which accentuate the lack of stability or permanence. The state of flux in the novel reveals the energies beneath the rational mind's abstraction of life and art in terms of logic and order.

Fleeting allusions by the protagonist to his prudish and neurotic wife recurrently float to the surface, providing a semblance of continuity in the chaotic fragments. These casual references are interspersed and interwoven in the fabric of the novel, so that they constitute a kind of refrain which contributes to structure. For instance, "Beware of writing anything that might cause you trouble with the censor or your wife" (p. 8).<sup>2</sup> "My wife occasionally tells lies. I lie to her all the time. With such a woman deception and cheating become essential and legitimate weapons" (p. 15). "Before marriage I used to keep a large bottle of cognac at home. Everything has changed since I married into that conservative family" (p. 62). "Even the wedding night was grim and ugly . . . She cried when I undressed her" (p. 84). These allusions are subtly blended with associations of his premarital adventures: the defeating

experiences with prostitutes; the love affair with Karen which ended in suicide because of his treachery, the Bohemian life in Paris and London; the mating of strangers with the Swedish tourist in Vienna; all the degrading moments of casual sex.

In the process of thinking aloud, the solitary character reveals the workings of his mind in the area of literary creation. The reader's attention is focused on this professional writer's frequent references to the form and function of the novel. These related but fragmentary acts of perception appear to be structurally organic, when threaded together side by side: "I shall easily find the proper form"; "you have caught the germ of committed literature"; "is the function of literature to excite and entertain?" (p. 6); "innovative style . . . sequence of complex images . . . stream of consciousness" (p. 8); "I shall describe this meeting through the third person"; "why shouldn't I convey his ideas directly without the need for narrator or commentator?" (p. 10).

Further, "the reader wants conventional novels with well-defined beginnings and ends"; "I may resort to dialogue occasionally"; "classical Arabic is sublime and exhausting, the colloquial style is common and hackneyed" (p. 11); "The novel is the closest genre to the sensibilities of common people, so it should be simple and interesting for local consumption. . . . Beware of philosophizing and depth. You must include some comic elements and farcical situations" (p. 16); "My books lack suspense and excitement" (p. 18); "It seems I'm only capable of trivia and superficialities" (p. 26); "Do you blame the reader for failure to understand your intention? . . . Doesn't the writer have the right to portray and narrate without committing himself to a certain goal or principle? . . . Writing is an art and art is a game which depends more on temperament and haphazard intuition than method and careful design" (pp. 30-31).

There are also flashes of insight into the dilemma of writers in Nasser's Egypt, often leading to intellectual and artistic prostitution out of fear and oppression: "What he said about freedom and justice may cause him troubles with the authorities" (p. 5); "the country being what it is, all who groped into the intellectual jungles around us have lost their way; those who approached the philosophical swamps besieging us have drowned in them . . . I have seen writers who prefer the eraser to the pencil and orators asserting that silence is gold" (p. 31); "The editor rejects everything except stories about the struggle of the working class, the heroism of the little man, the revolutionary tide and class conflict, the alliance of capitalism and imperialism . . ." (p. 68).

It is difficult to resist the temptation of suggesting that Dr. Elkhadem seems to be closely observing his own mental operations as a novelist and critic in Egypt many years ago. However, though now remote from the actual scene, he is able through occasional glimpses to depict vividly the intellectual and literary climate there, to live in the mind of the contemporary Egyptian writer, recording its subtle vibrations with happy accuracy. In the book he achieves what may be described as a form of relativistic objectivity. On the one hand, he appears not to enter into the work at all, observing the stream of the pivotal character's consciousness with complete impartiality. Yet at the same time there is that uniformity of style which insists that the novel is the action of a single comprehensive mind. The protagonist and the other characters moving about on the stage of his personality and seen through his eyes, exist only as the author's mind selects and arranges the material for them, without passing judgements. In consequence, a basis for evaluating the varieties of experience can be found within the book itself. Each experience assumes

value when examined impartially in its relations with the rest. The characters are measured against each other, not against any outside standard. The method adopted by the novelist enacts a finely achieved poise between objectivity and engagement.

It should also be noted that against the background of free association, Dr. Elkhadem introduces several scenes and tales which provide the reader with the sense of safety derived from coherent and rational systems of thought and behavior. The short stories included within the framework of the novel are logical and consistent enough to satisfy the reader's irritable desire for fact and certainty. In effect, the common reader in the Arab world, who lacks training in new modes of literary expression, needs this kind of relief to sustain interest and overcome lethargy. There is, for instance, the scene of Ahmed Effendi who rushes absentmindedly to the bomb shelter during a German air raid on Alexandria and forgets his son in the shop, while his wife is screaming hysterically and hitting him on the head with her wooden slipper. This is followed a little later by a satirical playlet which portrays the hypocritical and opportunistic manager of a factory in the public sector, preparing a ludicrous show in obscene haste to impress the deputy minister coming to visit the plant. In depicting such scenes, Elkhadem has a keen eye for the farcical and grotesque, exposing the corruption, inconsistency, irrationality and egotism of human nature through subtle suggestion and brilliant dialogue. Different variations and possibilities of each story in terms of form and content are explored by the central character in his desperate attempt to prepare material for his page in the magazine.

The book ends on a note of hallucination and incoherence, which suggests the total disintegration of rational meaning: "My feet are sinking in the sand. A cold wave drags me to the middle of the ocean. Hordes of mad ants run in my veins. They all stand in rows in front of the mosque. . . . Sami was fired from the police department for his misconduct and sexual perversity. . . . I haven't washed my body for more than a week. How should I know that they will strip me naked in public? Karen wipes away her tears and laughs at my father's joke. The scent of incense fills the place" (p. 102f). Thus, under the "magical" effect of brandy in the bar, the protagonist ultimately crosses the line between the conscious and the subconscious minds.

This is a highly significant work of art which derives its main strength from the writer's critical awareness of literary "modernism," his vast knowledge of different cultures as well as his sensitive perception of the Egyptian milieu, enhanced by depth of thought and clarity of vision.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Saad Elkhadem, *Tajarih Laylah Wahidah* (Fredericton: York Press, 1975).

<sup>2</sup>This translation and subsequent ones are mine.