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NARRATIVE POLYPHONY AND PERSPECTIVE EFFECTS IN TAYEB SÂLIH'S SEASON OF MIGRATION TO THE NORTH

Salah NATIJ¹

Abstract

In this study, we propose a critical reading of *Mawsim al-hijra ilā l-shamāl*, a reading through which we attempt to show how Tayeb Sâlih succeeds in instituting a narrative strategy that allows him to achieve two almost antinomic operations: communicating to the reader a strong message and a very clear worldview while constructing a narrative universe according to the principle of narrative polyphony and multiple points of view. Indeed, the reader of *Mawsim al-hijra* can easily see how this novel is structured in the form of a double functioning, dividing the space of the narrative into two worlds of humanity and values, each with its own logic of perception and judgment of things and events. On the one hand, there is the world of Mustafa Said, a dramatic world, which constitutes the subject-core of the novel but which is assumed and perceived as such only by the narrator. On the other hand, it is the narrator, in fact, who leads us to perceive and grasp the dramatic character of the hero's life. We will try to show how the narration exercises here a meta-communicative function, in the sense that it is not satisfied with reporting and exposing the facts to us but also tries to awaken in us a specific sensibility capable of arranging the facts in the symbolic form of a drama. On the other hand, the text transports us from time to time into the world of some other characters (the people of the village), showing them leading their lives, simply and spontaneously, in the climate of a subjective, if not naive, totality.

Keywords: Narrative perspective, Arabic novel, Tayeb Sâlih, *Mawsim al-hijra ilā l-shamāl*, Season of Migration to the North

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INTRODUCTION

In 1967, when *Mawsim al-hijra ilā l-shamāl* by the Sudanese writer Tayeb Sālih (1929-2009)² was published, Arab critics were both astonished and pleased. There was astonishment, no doubt, because it was not believed that the Arab novel could give birth to a novel work so innovative both by the tone printed on the old theme of the relationship between East and West and by the narrative technique implemented. And so we have come, with good reason, to see and greet in Tayeb Sālih the emergence of a new genius of the Arab novel³.

In the study that we present here, we propose a critical reading of *mawsim al-hijra ilā l-shamāl*, a reading through which we will try to highlight the way in which, in this novel, Tayeb Sālih has established a narrative strategy that allows him to achieve two almost antinomic and contradictory operations, maintaining them in a balance that makes the power of this novel: communicating to the reader a strong message and a very clear vision of the world, while building a novelistic universe according to the principle of narrative polyphony. But before attempting to show how this narrative polyphony is deployed, we must first recall the event structure of the novel.

The events that *Mawsim al-hijra ilā al-shamāl* presents to us take place both in England and in a small village in Sudan. After a long stay in England, where he studied, the narrator returns home to his native village. He spends some time savoring the joy of finding his family and the happiness of rediscovering the country which, implicitly compared to Europe, inspires him with security and a deep sense of meaning.

After "two months of happiness spent in the country", the narrator will meet a character whose recent arrival and establishment in the village intrigues everyone, to the point that the villagers regard him with a mixture of respect, suspicion and fear. It is this character, called Mustafa Said, who, for one evening, entrusts the narrator of the novel with the story of the experiences and events he lived in England. Through this account, we learn that following his primary education in Sudan, Mustafa Said was sent to Cairo to pursue secondary education, and then to England to complete his higher education. In England, Mustafa Said made brilliant studies, participated in the intellectual life of London and, especially, made female conquests. Four of these relationships ended in tragedy: three of the young women, Ann Hammond, Sheilla Greenwood and Isabella Seymour, committed suicide, and the fourth, Jean Morris, was killed by Mustafa Said himself, after having married her. Thus he was tried and sentenced to seven years in prison. On his return to Sudan, he settled as a simple peasant in a small village where he married and shared the life of the villagers. It is in this village that he met the narrator from whom we learn the whole story.

The obligatory way in which we have just presented and summarized the eventful universe of *Mawsim al-hijra* is likely to give the impression, especially to those who have not read the novel, that there is only one character in the space of the narrative, Mustafa Said. This

² In this study, we will refer to the second edition of *Mawsim al-hijra ilā l-shamāl*, Beirut: Dār al-Awda, 1969. For translation, we will make use of the English translation, *Season of Migration to the North*, Oxford, Heinemann, 1991. From now on, to refer to these two editions, we will use, respectively, *Mawsim* and *Season*.

³ This is the very title of a study that Rajā' al-Naqqāsh devoted to *Mawsim al-hijra* when it was published in Arabic. Rajā' al-Naqqāsh, "al-Ṭayyeb Ṣālih: 'abqariyya riwā'iyya jadīda. In *Udaba' mū'āsirūn*, 1971. Also Hasan al-Mnay'ī, "mawsim al-hijra ilā l-shamāl".

prejudice is both legitimate and significant: it is significant because it allows us, in a very instructive way, to discover already how each time we make the summary of the content of a given novel, we are always led to privilege certain segments of the story to the detriment of others, to emphasize certain events of the plot while leaving others in the shade. We thus discover, on closer examination, that it is not the content of the story that the summary informs us about, but above all the way in which the text of the novel has, as it were, traced out a reading itinerary to which, in making the summary, we have only succumbed. This shows that the type of vision that the reader can have of the objects represented in the universe of the novel is very dependent on the way in which, through the chain of deployment of the text, he has had access to the seizure of these objects⁴. It is in this precise sense that we will speak here of textual perspective games and narrative strategy: we call textual perspective games the whole of the narrative efforts that the text deploys with a view to guiding the reader towards a determined (or, at least, aimed at) mode of assembling and combining the units of narrated experience, and thus also towards a determined form of comprehension⁵. This means that we start from the hypothesis that it is the process of narration that, through the different levels of organization of the narrative, animates and orchestrates the units of experience presented by the text, in a way that aims at making them a network of inter-conditioned contexts of meaning. It must be recognized that if we say this about the possible functioning of a novelistic text, it is because we anticipate the presence of the reader as the instance of actualization of the meanings of the text. Indeed, the segments of a novelistic text could only constitute islands of non-communicating meaning, like Leibniz's monads, if they were not taken in charge and mediated by the consciousness and memory of the reader.

The reader of *Mawsim al-hijra* can easily see how this novel is structured in the form of a double functioning, dividing the space of the narrative into two worlds of humanity and values, each with its own logic of perception and judgment of things and events. On the one hand, there is the world of Mustafa Said, a dramatic world, which constitutes the subject-core of the novel but which is assumed and perceived as such only by the narrator. It is the narrator, in fact, who leads us to perceive and grasp the dramatic character of the hero's life. We will try to show how the narration exercises here a meta-communicative function, in the sense that it is not satisfied with reporting and exposing the facts to us, but that it also tries to awaken in us a specific sensibility capable of arranging the facts in the symbolic form of a drama. On the other hand, the text transports us from time to time into the world of some other characters (the people of the village), showing them leading their lives, simply and spontaneously, in the climate of a subjective, if not naive, totality.

⁴ It should also be pointed out that the aesthetics of summarization here have a certain similarity, from the point of view of reception, with the act of translation. It is, in fact, a question of two literary activities which, at the same time as they work to bring the text within the reach of the reader, insidiously trace out a reading itinerary, pre-structuring a horizon of reception, proceeding, so to speak, to make the future receiver available to a form of interpretation and understanding of the text.

⁵ We must point out that the point of view that we adopt is inspired by the theses of the Aesthetics of reception developed by the school of Constance in Germany. We are inspired especially by the work of Wolfgang Iser to whom belongs the merit to have elaborated a theory of the literary reception which gives to the perceptive and imaginative activity of the reader a central place in the process of construction of the fictional universe. Hence his concept of implicit reader that he defines as being "the whole of the internal orientations of the text of fiction so that the text is simply received [...] The text becomes a reality only if it is read in conditions of actualization that the text must carry in itself, from where the reconstitution of the sense by others" (Iser, 1985, p. 70). Also, of the same, "The fiction in effect". It is about a special number of the *Poétique* 39 (1979) devoted to the *Reception Theory in Germany* in which we find the contributions of the other members of the School of Constance.

We can therefore speak of two narrative planes superimposed to form, in *Mawsim al-hijra*, the structure of the novel:

I) the plane where a set of facts is presented to us from a perspective that could be said to be (simply) thematizing;

II) the plan where the narrative becomes more complex and intense, in the sense that it is no longer content, as in the previous plan, to thematize and expose the objects narrated, but at the same time tries to problematize them.

Thus, we can say, anticipating a little, that the (simply) thematizing narrative is deployed in order to allow the problematizing narrative to be realized as such, i.e. to give a specific tone to the dramatic charge of the facts concerning the hero Mustafa Said.

However, at the point of intersection of these two perspectives that we have just distinguished, and as if situated on a level that dominates them both, using both the semiotic effects of their divergence and their complementarity, a third narrative perspective develops: it is a narrative orientation that we will attempt to treat under the title of III) mythologizing perspective.

Thematic perspective

What characterizes this type of narration at first sight is a kind of strategic objectivity: in this mode, we learn what certain characters do and say, what their current gestures and postures are, but we learn all this without more, that is to say, through what is shown to us in this way, we do not have any clue that would allow us to know what the instance of narration "thinks" itself about the world shown. The situation of enunciation that the act of narration entails is here reduced to the bare essentials, it is stripped of all subjectivity and all explicit commitment of the narrator. In this way, the narrator gives himself the possibility of speaking about the contexts of experience of certain characters by treating them in the mode of "they do...", "they are...", "they...", etc.

We encounter this tendency to simple thematization especially in the passages where the narrator reports on "the people of the village". Indeed, from the very first pages of the text, in which the narrator describes the circumstances of his return home, the people of the village are already present. This first appearance will allow the narrator to put these characters on the front of the stage in order to "expose" them to us, by giving them an identity and a form of discourse, by situating them in a particular social and intellectual space, in short, by constructing for them a world that is specific to them.

Thus, on his return from England, the narrator was overwhelmed by the questions posed to him by the villagers:

أسئلة كثيرة رددت عليها حسب علمي. دهشوا حين قلت لهم أن الأوروبيين، إذا استثنينا فوارق ضئيلة، مثلنا تماماً، يتزوجون ويربون أولادهم حسب التقاليد والأصول، ولهم أخلاق حسنة، وهم عموماً قوم طيبون (7) (Mawsim, p. 7)

"As best I could I had answered their many questions. They were surprised when I told them that Europeans were, with minor differences, exactly like them, marrying and bringing up their children in accordance with principles and traditions, that they had good morals and were in general good people" (Season, p. 3).

This initial characterization of the people of the village, under the sign of naivety, innocence and (sympathetic) ignorance, aims at building a stable background that will serve, for us, readers and possible receivers, as a process of understanding, to which we will appeal each time we meet these characters in the continuation of the story. In this order, we have already integrated the idea according to which these characters form a universe of life that it is not a question of judging, nor of criticizing, but only of understanding in what it is and

as it is. The summary of the questions asked is in fact a qualifying summary of the kind of discourse that these characters are capable of conveying, a discourse that, given the restricted nature of its repertoire, presents all the symptoms of a non-discourse, if not an anti-discourse, that inspires avoidance and silence: all the clues and allusions that the text provides about the people of the village tend to make them characters that are almost excluded from its communication space. They are there, but nothing more. And it is no coincidence that the character to whom the text confers the role of provoking Mustafa Said into revealing his story is not a member of the village community, but a newcomer (or returnee) whom Mustafa Said did not know before. Indeed, we know that the hero Mustafa Said had already spent a few years in the village before meeting the narrator. The question that the reader is entitled to ask here is: what prevented the hero of the novel from telling his story to this or that character among those who lived with him in the village before the narrator returned? Nothing, even the narrator's own insight, allows us to understand satisfactorily why Mustafa Said was suddenly willing to confide his story to someone he had only just met. Another question to be asked is in what sense the sentence with which the hero Mustafa Said begins to tell his story to the narrator should be understood:

سأقول لك كلاماً لم أقله لأحد من قبل. لم أجد سبباً لذلك قبل الآن (Mawsim p. 21)

"I shall say things to you I've said to no one before. I found no reason for doing so until now" (Season, p. 17).

By having his character say that he had no valid and sufficient reason to tell his story until now, the text gives us to understand, on the one hand, that it is thanks to the narrator, and only thanks to him, that we could learn the hero's "slice of life" in London, and that, on the other hand, the people of the village, by virtue of the fact that they did not know or could not represent the slightest reason to narrate, are characters somehow devoid of any force likely to generate or precipitate events in the society of the novel. This eventual and communicative ineffectiveness is further highlighted by the text when it tells us the circumstances in which the narrator comes to realize that Mustafa Said has a past that is not without interest: let us recall that they were drinking that evening when Said, "in a clear voice, with a perfect accent," began to recite a poem in English. Only the narrator was able to recognize the seriousness of the game. As for the other characters, they were not able to realize the meaning and seriousness of what had just been recited:

كان محبوب مشغول يضحك مع بقية من في المجلس، فلم ينتبه لما حدث (Mawsim, p. 18)

"Mahjoub, busy laughing with the rest of the people in the gathering, did not notice what had occurred" (Season, p.15).

This means that only the narrator was able to identify what had just been recited as a poem and, moreover, as a poem that fits into a precise intertextuality: This means that only the narrator was able to identify what had just been recited as a poem and, moreover, as a poem that fits into a precise intertextuality:

فجأة سمعته يتلو شعراً إنكليزياً بصوت واضح ونطق سليم. قرأ قصيدة وجدتها فيما بعد بين قصائد عن الحرب العالمية الأولى (Mawsim, p. 17)

"Then, suddenly; I heard him reciting English poetry in a clear voice and with an impeccable accent. It was a poem which I later found in an anthology of poetry about the First World War" (Season, p. 15).

It thus turns out that in order to perceive the poem and to identify it as necessarily referring to a possible story, the people of the village would be called upon to draw on a fund of knowledge to which, by virtue of their status in the text, they had absolutely no access.

The tendency to simple thematization becomes even more explicit when the people of the village appear in the narrative only in the form of pictures to which the narrator merely

draws our attention, as if to make us believe that we are discovering them at the same time as he is:

وسمعتهم يقهقهون، فميزت ضحكة جدي النحيلة الخبيثة المنطلقة حين يكون على سجيته، وضحكة ود الرئيس التي تخرج من كرش مملوء بالطعام دائماً، وضحكة بكري التي تأخذ لونها وطعمها من المجلس الذي يكون موجوداً فيه، وضحكة بنت مجذوب القوية المسترجلة (Mawsim, p.74).

"I heard them guffawing with laughter and made out the thin, mischievous laugh of my grandfather when in a good humour; Wad Rayyes's laugh that issues forth from an ever full stomach; Bakri's that takes its hue and flavour from the company in which he happens to be; and the strong, mannish laugh of Bint Majzoub" (Season, p. 51).

Note that it is not the characters themselves who are presented here, but only their laughter. Knowing that he is helped by an already established background, the narrator dares to use this metonymy both to distance himself even more from the people of the village and to make the reader a little complicit in this attitude of distancing. The presentation in the metonymic mode, unlike that which would have as its support direct or participatory observation, has that characteristic that it presupposes and calls for the use of the imagination, but an imagination whose horizon of inspiration is, paradoxically, of an extreme narrowness. This narrowness manifests itself especially through the type of mental and cognitive operation that is thus solicited in the reader. Indeed, as the mechanism of metonymic signification is essentially based on the process of association of already existing images, the reader is not called to explore a region of the reality unknown to him, but to redeploy the system of evidences and familiarities that he holds about this reality. Thus, as can be seen in the following passage, the laughter that comes from inside the house was enough, as semiotic data, to allow the narrator to add:

تخيلت جدي جالساً على فروة صلاته وفي يده مسبخته من خشب الصندل، تدور في حركة دائية كقواريس الساقية. وبنت مجذوب وود الرئيس وبكري، أصدقاؤه القدامى، يجلسون على تلك الأسيرة الوطنية، التي لا تغلو أرجلها عن الأرض أكثر من شبرين. ارتفاع السرير عن الأرض، في زعم جدي، من الغرور، وقصره من التواضع. بنت مجذوب متكئة على كوعها، وفي اليد الأخرى سيجارة. ود الرئيس كأنه يخرج الحكايات الخبيثة من أطراف شاربيه. وبكري يجلس وحسب (Mawsim, p. 74-75).

"In my mind's eye I see my grandfather sitting on his prayer-mat with his string of sandalwood prayer beads in his hand revolving in ever-constant movement like the buckets of a water-wheel; Bint Majzoub, Wad Rayyes and Bakri, all old friends of his, will be sitting on those low couches which are a mere two hand-spans off the floor. According to my grandfather, a couch raised high off the floor indicates vanity; a low one humility. Bint Majzoub will be leaning on one elbow; while in her other hand she holds a cigarette. Wad Rayyes will be giving the impression of producing stories from the tips of his moustaches. Bakri will merely be sitting" (Season p. 51).

If the sound of laughter has thus allowed the narrator to access the scene so easily and to represent it in almost all its details, it is because laughter allows here what Sartre calls knowledge by image, namely that "dans l'acte même qui me donne l'objet en image se trouve incluse la connaissance de ce qu'il est" (Sartre, 27). That is to say that the image of men and women laughing acts as a total semiological unit, in the sense that it allows us to learn at the same time the phenomenon of laughter and what the people who laugh do. It is thus almost a signal that we are dealing with here rather than a complex sign, which shows the state of "rudimentarity" in which the text tries to present the people of the village to us. The world of these people seems so reduced in its principles of organization and functioning, so simple and transparent in its content, so anchored in monotony, that all the forms under which we can imagine it or guess its configuration, at a given moment, come back, as if by determinism, to coincide completely with what it really is. It is undoubtedly this feeling that the narrator sought to share with the reader, by adopting the process of representation, and especially by showing the world of the people of the village as being an absolutely predictable and transparent world. One might be tempted to see in this orientation of the

text a simple deprecatory staging of the flatness of the villagers' way of life. This interpretation is only possible, however, if one adopts a reading perspective that is both epidermal and literal, that is, a reading that would be satisfied with the raw data relating to the villagers' lifestyle, without attempting to grasp both its deep aesthetic meaning and its social significance. Indeed, to understand the true meaning of this attitude of the story towards the people of the village, it is necessary to situate ourselves on another level, in this case the aesthetic level. On this level, the "chatting" sessions that the narrator's grandfather and his friends regularly hold can no longer appear to us as proceeding from a simplistic way of approaching life, but as having to do with what Simmel calls an "ethic of sociability", that is to say, an ethic, "in which the subjective individual as well as that which possesses an objective content vanish in the service of the pure form of sociability" (Simmel, p. 130). In other words, if these people seem indifferent to the quality of the content of what they say and tell each other, content that can strike by its banality, it is because what is important for each of the participants is not to say something positive, interesting and sensational, but to mark his presence, contributing to the construction of a communion in the conversation. Thus, neither the words of Wad Rayyes nor those of Bint Majdoub, evoking the sexual performances of her different husbands, are perceived by the group as rude or ridiculous, but simply as amusing, funny, and this because the primary purpose of the entire speech situation is not to produce an effect of seriousness, but to create a framework, a sociable atmosphere, where the discussion and the exchange of words come to assume a playful character. From all this emerges a sense of carelessness, spontaneity, and even gratuity, gratuity whose significance we perceive, with even more intensity, through what the narrator says of the party that he and his companions had spontaneously organized and lived in the middle of the desert:

وصفقتنا وضربنا الأرض بأرجلنا وحممنا بطلوقنا ، وأقمنا في قلب الصحراء فرحاً للاشيء [...] عرس بلا معنى ، مجرد عمل يائس نبيع أرتجالاً كالأعاصير الصغيرة التي تنبع في الصحراء ثم تموت (Mawsim, p. 116-117).

"We formed ourselves into a large circle into which some of the younger men entered and danced in the manner of girls. We clapped, stamped on the round, and hummed in unison, making a festival to nothingness in the heart of the desert [...] A feast without a meaning, a mere desperate act that had sprung up impromptu like the small whirlwinds that rise up in the desert and then die" (Season, p. 77-78).

It is a spontaneity which participates in a glimpse of a deeper form of life, not to say a more authentic one, because it forges its concrete rationality, that is to say its principles of functioning and organization, only according to its own needs and according to its most intimate concerns.

The question arises, however, whether this appreciation of the villagers' way of life is the result of an objective motivation, independent of any subjectivity, or whether it is simply the expression of a kind of romantic desire leading the narrator to flee the harsh dramatic reality of his hero's story and to seek refuge in a supposedly calmer world.

By examining the physiognomy of the narrator's gaze on the people of the village, and especially on his grandfather, we will notice first of all that this gaze is impregnated with a certain nostalgia, nostalgia for everything that draws the substance of his identity and the sole cohesion of his own life, as opposed to everything that is heteronomous, and therefore identity-fragile. The cohesion of life is what, in the eyes of the narrator, the grandfather is the unshakeable symbol:

تمهلت عند باب الغرفة وأنا أستمرئ ذلك الإحساس العذب الذي يسبق لحظة لقائي مع جدي كلما عدت من السفر. إحساس صاف بالعجب من أن ذلك الكيان العتيق ما يزال موجوداً أصلاً على ظاهر الأرض. وحين أعانقه أستنشق رائحته الفريدة التي هي خليط من رائحة الضريح الكبير في المقبرة ورائحة الطفل الرضيع. وذلك الصوت النحيل المطمئن، يقوم جسراً بيني وبين الساعة القلقة التي لم تتشكل بعد، الساعات التي استوعبت أحداثها

ومضت، وأصبحت لبنات في صرح له مدلولات وأبعاد. نحن بمقاييس العالم الصناعي الأوروبي، فلاحون فقراء، ولكنني حين أعانق جدي أحس بالغنى، كأني نغمة من دقات قلب الكون نفسه (Mawsim, p. 77).

"I lingered by the door as I savoured that agreeable sensation which precedes the moment of meeting my grandfather whenever I return from a journey: a sensation of pure astonishment that that ancient being is still in actual existence upon the earth's surface. When I embrace him I breathe in his unique smell which is a combination of the smell of the large mausoleum in the cemetery and the smell of an infant child. And that thin tranquil voice sets up a bridge between me and the anxious moment that has not yet been formed, and between the moments the events of which have been assimilated and have passed on, have become bricks in an edifice with perspectives and dimensions. By the standards of the European industrial world we are poor peasants, but when I embrace my grandfather I experience a sense of richness as though I am a note in the heartbeats of the very universe" (Season, p. 52).

The grandfather is the immovable point in time, the unalterable proof of the efficiency of certain values, and, as such, he represents a landmark that is both safe and reassuring. Note especially the words the narrator uses to evoke the mixture of perfume that the presence of the grandfather inspires in him: "mixture of mausoleum and infant perfume". The grandfather thus presents himself as realizing the symbiosis of the tomb and the cradle, the point of mouth between death and life, between the past, the present and the future. In short, for the narrator, the grandfather symbolizes a type of society based on solidarity between generations, a solidarity that allows life to take root in a field of richer and deeper meanings.

It turns out that the thematizing narrative attitude is not one of malice but of tenderness and sympathy. It aims in particular at integrating the village characters into the horizon of meaning that ensures the story told has the desired significance.

It remains, however, to point out that this perspective is rather contrary to the narrative orientation dominating the whole novel, an orientation strongly marked by the presence of the instance of narration in the form of an "I" well engaged and well involved in the events he reports. We will come back to this.

Problematizing Perspective

From the moment the narrator began to take an interest in the hero-character Mustafa Said and to grant him narrative primacy in the order of the story, his way of addressing the reader changed diametrically:

لا أعلم تماماً ماذا أثار فضولي، لكنني تذكرت أنه يوم وصولي كان صامتاً (Mawsim, p. 6)
 "I do not know what exactly aroused my curiosity but I remembered that the day of my arrival he was silent" (Season p. 3).

As the narrative develops, this curiosity will gradually take the form of an obsession taking hold of the narrator and making him an instance of another thickness, since he will no longer be there only to report and tell, but also, significantly, to wonder about the true identity of the hero⁶. The consequence of this situation is that the reader now has the impression that the narrator has completely turned away from him to deal more with his own worries and states of mind. It is undoubtedly as if to anticipate this possible reaction of the reader that the narrator hastened to say:

لكن أرجو ألا يتبادر إلى أذهانكم، يا سادتي، أن مصطفى سعيد أصبح هوساً يلازمي في حلي وترحالي (Mawsim, p. 65).

⁶ For the notion of character, see Hamon, 1977.

"But I would hope you will not entertain the idea, dear sirs, that Mustafa Sa'eed had become an obsession that was ever with me in my comings and goings" (Season, p. 45).

From the point of view of reception, this means that the reader is now in a position of quasi-jealousy with regard to the type of relationship that has been established between the character and the narrator, so that his understanding of the facts narrated can only be achieved on the basis of the answers to two questions that he would be led to ask himself: on the one hand, why does the narrator show himself to be obsessed in such a way with the mystery that the character Mustafa Said represents for him? And, on the other hand, what could be the history, so confused, so mysterious, of this character? Thus the attitude of the narrator comes to be itself perceived by the reader as constituting a context of meaning integral to the text, i.e. as a unit of experience susceptible of deciphering and interpretation, and whose comprehension is thus made indispensable for the access to the universe of the narrative.

In the analysis of the first narrative plane, the one to which we have given the name of thematizing perspective, we were able to see how the attitude adopted by the narrator consisted in directing the reader's activity of comprehension towards the assumption of a position of distant observation and contemplation with regard to the events narrated. The notion of thematizing perspective that we have used refers to a narrative situation where the instance of narration did not have to mark its presence, given that the contexts of experience shown (the people of the village) were presented as speaking for themselves. In this second narrative plane, on the other hand, the instance of narration is constantly present, physically and morally, because the textual perspective here is based both on the unpredictability of the hero's conduct and on the problematization of his living space and environment. The principle of unpredictability, associated with the problematizing narration, organizes this second plan in a form that requires the reader's special attention, an attention that obeys an alert structuring. For, the reader now knows that the true identity of the hero, given the complexity of his semiological status, will not be revealed by chance, but through a process of intensified expectation. This situation has become an integral part of the conditions of reception and comprehension because the meaning inherent in the hero's story is no longer given directly to the reader, but is mediated and taken over entirely by the narrator's restless consciousness. Although he can defend himself, the latter, being already affected by the story he tells, will gradually sink into disarray and anxiety, as the shadow of the missing hero drowns his existence. As a result, he only takes responsibility and feels guilty under the eyes of the reader; he has the impression that the tragedy of Mustafa Said has penetrated his life, thus making him a new victim:

وأنا أعلم الآن أنه اختارني أنا لهذا الدور. لم تكن صدفة أنه أثار حب الاستطلاع عندي، ثم قص علي قصة حياته غير كاملة لكي أكتشف أنا بقية القصة. لم تكن صدفة أنه ترك لي رسالة مختومة بالشمع الأحمر، إمعاناً منه في شحذ خيالي، وأنه جعلني وصياً على ولديه ليلزموني إلزاماً لا فكاك منه، وأنه ترك لي مفتاح متحف الشمع هذا لا حد لأنانيته وغروره (Mawsim, p.156)

"There was no doubt of that, and I now know that it was me he had chosen for that role. It was no coincidence that he had excited my curiosity and had then told me his life story incompletely so that I myself might unearth the rest of it. It was no coincidence that he had left me a letter sealed with red wax to further sharpen my curiosity, and that he had made me guardian of his two sons so as to commit me irrevocably, and that he had left me the key to this wax museum. There was no limit to his egoism and his conceit" (Season, p. 102-103).

The story has thus undergone such a strange metamorphosis that it is no longer solely that of the hero but also that of the narrator, who has become a solitary character, whose only partner is his monologue:

انني أبتدى من حيث انتهى مصطفى سعيد، إلا أنه على الأقل قد اختار وأنا لم أختار شيئاً [...] أنا الآن وحدي، لا مهرب لا ملاذ، لا ضمان. عالمي كان عريضاً في الخارج، الآن قد تقلص وارتد على أعقابيه حتى صرت العالم أنا ولا عالم غيري (Mawsim, 135).

"I begin from where Mustafa Sa'eed had left off. Yet he at least made a choice, while I have chosen nothing [...] Now I am on my own: there is no escape, no place of refuge, no safeguard. Outside, my world was a wide one; now it had contracted, had withdrawn upon itself until I myself had become the world, no world existing outside of me" (Season, p. 90).

If the narrator is thus seized by a feeling of extreme solitude, it is undoubtedly because he comes to realize that the knowledge that he has of his character is not of a quantitative order, but qualitative, it does not have to do with the details of the biography, but with a kind of empathic comprehension which makes that, suddenly and spontaneously, one feels as if in communion with another. This kind of intuitive communion gives at the same time to the narrator the feeling of being irreplaceable in his role of confidant, of being designated for this task by the will of an indiscernible destiny. Hence a mixture of pride, jealousy and frustration: at the same time as he considers himself as a chosen one, to whom the merit of having understood the hero well belongs, there is in the narrator, buried, but which makes from time to time surface, like an impression to be in permanent existential duel against, what is worse, an almost ghostly adversary:

ها أنذا أقف الآن في دار مصطفى سعيد أمام (باب الحديد) باب الغرفة المستطيلة المثلثة السقف الخضراء النوافذ. المفتاح في جيبتي وغريمي في الداخل على وجهه سعادة شيطانية لا شك؟ أنا الوصي والعاشق والغريم (Mawsim, 136).

"Here I am, standing in Mustafa Sa'eed's house in front of the iron door, the door of the rectangular room with the triangular roof and the green windows, the key in my pocket and my adversary inside with, doubtless, a fiendish look of happiness on his face. I am the guardian, the lover, and the adversary" (Season, p. 90).

The motivation to narrate seems to proceed for the narrator not from an act of choice, but from a task assumed and carried out by him as a necessity of existential salvation. Indeed, it seems that, for him, to narrate is to continue the fight against the hero, while knowing and recognizing in advance that the latter has definitively won the victory over him. At the same time, one senses that his attitude in this sense is marked by the dilemma involved in the question he seems to ask himself: what to do? Should he resign himself to being only the shadow of a disappeared hero or should he refuse and denounce this situation of mystification, at the cost of losing the privilege of being a confidant?

The narrator is unable to find a clear-cut answer to this question. The fascination⁷ that the image of Mustafa Said exerts on him is so strong that he seems to be unable to have anything but an ambivalent attitude towards him. There are even situations of action where we witness an attempt by the narrator to identify himself totally with the hero of the story he is telling and to merge with him in a kind of communion of destiny. This is the case in the drowning attempt that closes the novel. This drowning attempt, although it was only

⁷ This position in which the narrator of *Mawsim al-hijra* finds himself is reminiscent of the situation of Marlowe, the narrator of Joseph Conrad's *In Heart of Darkness*. In Marlowe, we have a typical example of what an ambiguous relationship between a narrator and his hero can do in the world of fiction. If Kurtz exerts such a power of fascination on Marlowe, a mysterious power, it is because both the reasons for the fascination and the fascinated mind have the same origin, namely Marlowe's own imagination, an imagination that has gradually allowed itself to be dominated by the desire for heroisation that it has itself generated. For a reading of *In the Heart of Darkness*, see especially Peter Brooks 1980. Also, Todorov, 1978.

carried out in the dream mode of the nightmare⁸, is rich in meaning. It fulfills indeed the function of a kind of magic ritual of purification by which the narrator tries to kill definitively in himself the ghost of the disappeared hero who continues to haunt him⁹. However, insofar as the narrator could not or did not want to go through with his desire for total communion in the same way of dying, in that he only entered the waters of the Nile and came out of them, one can say that this simulation of drowning represents, through the same character, a death and a resurrection, the accomplishment of a destiny and the symbolic rescue of an ideal whose image is perhaps judged compromised by the suicide. This drowning is thus susceptible to two different but complementary interpretations: either one sees in it only the narrative aspect, and one then considers it as proceeding from the will of the narrative to complete and close the biography of the hero, by endowing it with a significant death; or one takes into account only the allegorical effect that it develops, and one will then be led to interpret it as a gesture that the narrator desperately implements in order to symbolically give birth to a new type of hero, a hero capable of grasping himself and of saying:

. (Mawsim, p.170) سأحيا لأن ثمة أناس قليلين أحب أن أبقى معهم أطول وقت ممكن ولأن علي واجبات يجب أن أؤديها
"I shall live because there are a few people I want to stay with for the longest possible time and because I have duties to discharge" (*Season*, p. 111).

Not only does the text thus extend the meaning of the hero's drama to the semiotic space of the narrator, but it has also, in so doing, reinforced in the reader the perception of the existence of a gap between the world constituted by the hero and the narrator and that of the other characters. Now, it is in virtue of this rupture that it is given to the text, on the one hand, to make of the narrator a character reduced to live the story in solitude and to promote, on the other hand, this state of solitude to the rank of a psycho-moral crisis¹⁰. It is the same of the incident of the poem recited by Mustafa Said. This poem does not have an informational function (that could have been the case if the reader had already been in possession of the essential of the history and that it missed only some additional details) but strategic. Through this incident, the text aims to direct the reader towards the construction of a particular type of hypothesis, hypotheses that will have as their substance the dissociation of the meaning of the hero's life from the village environment. Here again we have a metonymy: the poem recited in English. However, it is a metonymy whose foundation is not of a material nature, as was the case for laughter¹¹, but intellectual: it is not based on concrete experience (for example: laughter allows one to "represent" a group of people telling each other anecdotes), but on a universe of meaning, experience and

⁸ In the preface to the first french translation of *Mawsim al-hijra*, entitled *Le Migrateur* (Trad. Fady Noun, Paris: Sindbad, 1972), Jacques Berque emphasizes this attempt at drowning, rightly calling it a "metaphorical death."

⁹ In his reflections on the notion of the narrator, Walter Benjamin highlights two fundamental roles that the event of the character's death plays in narrative processes: on the one hand, "death is the sanction for everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death.", on the other hand, "the nature of characters in a novel cannot be presented any better than it is in this statement, which says that the " meaning" of their life is revealed only in their death" (Benjamin, 151 and 156).

¹⁰ As K. Stierle: "The subject becomes for himself his own theme generally insofar as his usual and assured relations with the collective instances, from which the subject can conceive himself above all as subject, have become problematic, uncertain, doubtful" (Stierle p. 436).

¹¹ As a physical experience and as an interpretable sign, laughter here refers to a sphere of possible activities and practices whose nature and extent are limited, and therefore accessible to our intuitive knowledge, as they tend to coincide with our experiences of laughter-provoking situations in general. As such, then, laughter, by means of its own sonority, constitutes a transparent semiological unit, in the sense that it seems to have a quasi-onomatopoeic relationship with the universes of objects that it evokes.

knowledge (poetry, England, the First World War). This universe of meaning fulfills a double function: it roots the hero's life in a very elaborate historical and intellectual intertextuality on the one hand¹², and, on the other hand, it announces and deepens the distance between the experiences lived by the hero and the daily life of the villagers.

Now, and this is where the real strategy of the text appears, the distance, marking the two forms of humanity thematized by the novel, becomes, at the level of reception, a factor of complementarity, allowing the reader to have a deep understanding of the objects narrated. Indeed, as raw objects of the narrative, the universe of Wad Rayyès and that of Mustafa Said constitute, a priori, two worlds that could be said to be contrarotative; they are, so to speak, linked to each other by their profound dissimilarity. On the level of reading and reception, on the other hand, the cleavage between these two worlds becomes a condition for each of them to receive, dialectically, the meaning that belongs to it precisely and fully. In other words, the reader-receiver is led to understand, on the one hand, that under the sun of the people of the village, as if by fate, all the possibilities of life are submerged and governed by a principle of organization founded on ignorance and immobility. But as soon as, on the other hand, this same reader has plunged into the life of Mustafa Said, he will discover the authentic meaning of the contrast, and, by the same token, he will grasp, in retrospect, that neither immobility is a natural quality, nor ignorance is an endogenous factor. In short, he understands that learning and change are not impossible. In this sense, the reader has the example of Hasna, the hero's widow: she revolts against tradition and kills Wad Rayyès, who wanted to marry her against her will. If this act of revolt could have taken place, it is because, by a kind of acculturation, Hasna had integrated into her personality another form of sensitivity, thanks in particular to the knowledge and experiences she had been able to acquire while living alongside her husband Mustafa Said: ولكن الحقيقة أن بنت محمود قد تغيرت بعد زواجها من مصطفى سعيد. كل النسوان يتغيرن بعد الزواج لكنها هي خصوصاً تغيرت تغيراً لا يوصف. كأنها شخص آخر. حتى نحن أندادها الذين كنا نلعب معها في الحي، ننظر إليها اليوم فنراها شيئاً جديداً، هل تعرف؟ كنعاء المدن (Mawsim, p. 104).

"It's true, though, that Mahmoud's daughter changed after her marriage to Mustafa Sa'eed. All women change after marriage, but she in particular underwent an indescribable change. It was as though she were another person. Even we who were her contemporaries and used to play with her in the village look at her today and see her as something new — like a city woman" (Season, p. 69-70).

The character of Hasna, sublimated, thus constitutes in the universe of the novel a junction point between the world of the hero Mustafa Said and the world of the other villagers: through Hasna, the world of Mustafa Said bursts into the daily life of the villagers, leading them to ask new questions, giving at the same time place to a sphere of events and meanings where the two worlds finally had the opportunity to intertwine and to fertilize each other.

Mythologizing perspective

Speaking of the circumstances of the death of Mustafa Said, the hero of the novel, the narrator tells us, in a kind of monologue:

إذا كان مصطفى سعيد قد اختار النهاية، فإنه يكون قد قام بأعظم عمل ميلودرامي في رواية حياته. وإذا كان الإحتمال الآخر هو الصحيح، فإن الطبيعة تكون قد مننت عليه بالنهاية التي كان يريدها لنفسه. تصور عز الصيف في شهر يوليو العتيد. النهر اللامبالي فاض كما لم يفيض منذ ثلاثين عاماً.

¹² We can say the same thing about Mustafa Said's library, which the narrator inventories: "Books on economics, history and literature. Zoology. Geology. Mathematics. Astronomy. The Encyclopaedia Britannica. Gibbon. Macaulay Toynbee. The complete works of Bernard Shaw Keynes...", *Mawsim al-hijra*, p. 138; Season, p. 91.

الظلام يصهر عناصر الطبيعة جميعاً في عنصر واحد محايد ، أقدم من النهر ذاته وأقل منه أكثر أثراً هكذا يجب أن تكون نهاية هذه البطل¹³.
(*Mawsim*, p. 71)

“If Mustafa Sa’eed had chosen his end, then he had undertaken the most melodramatic act in the story of his life. If the other possibility was the right one, then Nature had bestowed upon him the very end which he would have wanted for himself. Imagine: the height of summer in the month of fateful July; the indifferent river has flooded as never before in thirty years; the darkness has fused all the elements of nature into one single neutral one, older than the river itself and more indifferent. In such manner the end of this hero had to be” (Season, p. 48).

Summer, the month of July, the river which, for the first time in thirty years, almost goes into a trance. Nature participates, bringing mystery and darkness. All these elements aim to build a climate and circumstances almost "epic" for the death of the hero. Indeed, Tayeb Saïd's novel is textually organized in order to produce a precise aesthetic effect: as we can see from the passage quoted, the text aims to construct an aesthetic space in which the main character, Mr. Saïd, will gradually be perceived as an almost mythical personality. Thus, to begin with, the narrator speaks of his character's life in terms of a "novel" (*riwāya*), i.e., by presenting it as a second-degree fictional complexion, a kind of shattered, fragmented mystery that cannot be reconstructed, that escapes the narrative itself, and the latter, in trying to grasp it and reveal all its details, thereby finds both the reason for its development and the principle of its productivity.

In order to understand the strategy of the text at this level, we propose to distinguish two narratives in the novel: the first is the one developed by the narrator. In this narrative, we learn about the existence of the hero and everything that has happened in the village. Because it comes from the main narrator, we call this narrative the encompassing narrative. We also have a second narrative, the one that the hero himself conducted to tell the events of his life in England. This is a reported narrative, and can therefore be called an encompassing narrative. Of course, the novel contains other micro-narratives, to which we shall return. For the moment, let us deal with the two narratives mentioned and try to show how their joint implementation constitutes what we can agree to call the specific "mythology" of *Mawsim al-hijra*.

After the mysterious disappearance of the hero, the narrator will try throughout the story to make us believe that the character Mustafa Said might be nothing more than an illusion. This is what can be seen in this passage:

أحياناً تخطر لي فجأة تلك الفكرة المزعجة أن مصطفى سعيد لم يحدث إطلاقاً، وأنه فعلاً أكذوبة، أو طيف أو حلم، أو كابوس، ألم بأهل القرية تلك، ذات ليلة داكنة خانقة، ولما فتحوا أعينهم مع ضوء الشمس لم يروه (*Mawsim*, p. 50).

“Occasionally the disturbing thought occurs to me that Mustafa Sa’eed never happened, that he was in fact a lie, a phantom, a dream or a nightmare that had come to the people of that village one suffocatingly dark night, and when they opened their eyes to the sunlight he was nowhere to be seen. Occasionally the disturbing thought occurs to me that Mustafa Sa’eed never happened, that he was in fact a lie, a phantom, a dream or a nightmare that had come to the people of that village one suffocatingly dark night, and when they opened their eyes to the sunlight he was nowhere to be seen” (Season, p. 35).

All the maneuvers of the text now work to make the disappeared character an "abstract voice" that haunts the narrative and runs through it. In fact, from the third chapter of the novel, each time the narrator speaks of the hero, now disappeared, he does so only by quoting and repeating the fragments of narrative through which the latter had revealed the

¹³ *Mawsim*, p. 71.

episodes of his life in England. Thus, a passage from page 34 is repeated on page 143; a sequence from page 37 is repeated both on page 95 and on page 159-60; a passage from page 47-48 is repeated on page 142; finally, a passage from page 63 is repeated on page 98. These repetitions serve here to amplify, reinforce and make omnipresent this "abstract voice" of which the text speaks. The encompassing narrative functions in part as an echo of the encompassed narrative. It is an interweaving in which the repetitions are intended to fulfill two parallel functions: on the narrative level, the repetitions participate in the overall strategy of the novel, a strategy that aims to root the narrator's speech in the space of a realistic verisimilitude that borrows the elements of its style from what we can call a semblance of narrative orality: the aesthetic and technical importance of the semblance of orality is linked to the fact that the narrative seems to develop not for the readers, but for the "listeners" represented in the universe of the story. Thus, from the very first sentence of the novel, the narrator begins his narrative in these terms, which are very revealing of the attitude he intends to adopt towards the reader:

عدت إلى أهلي ياسادتي بعد غيبة طويلة (Mawsim, p. 5).

"It was, gentlemen, after a long absence — seven years to be exact, during which time I was studying in Europe — that I returned to my people" (Season: p.7).

The function of this phrase here is to challenge and bind us, as audience and not as readers, to a narrator-teller. The text is strewn with marks that testify to the constancy of this narrative orientation of the story. Thus, for example: "I was offended, yes, I admit it to you (gentlemen), I was offended when I heard him laughing at the top of his voice"; "I will not hide from you, (gentlemen), that I had a moment of hesitation"; "but I hope, gentlemen, that you do not have in mind the idea that Mustafa Said has become an obsession for me.

In all these passages, the narrator pretends to address a community of listeners, whom he sometimes does not hesitate to take as judge and witness. It is an invitation to enter the intimate space of the narrator, to recognize the story he tells as a story he has lived himself, and thus also to perceive and live the whole reading situation as a situation of speaking and listening. The implementation of the technique of repetition reinforces even more the semblance of orality, in particular by allowing the narrator to take on the role of the truthful, "trustworthy"¹⁴ transmitter, telling the story of the hero by using formulas such as:

"he said ...", "I still hear him say", "did not he say", etc.¹⁵

In terms of textual functioning, these repetitions participate in the establishment of a circular self-referentiality within the novel, a self-referentiality whose aim is to install the reader in a continuous and unsatisfied search for the truth: the text thus produces a story, that of Mustafa Said, to which it refuses (or pretends to refuse) to give the status of a stable and objective set of events. As a result, the encompassed narrative is maintained and sustained in the form of an enclave of facts and meanings condemned to subjectivity and

¹⁴ We use this expression in a somewhat different sense than Wayne C. Booth gives it a somewhat different meaning in his classification of types of narrators. For Booth, in fact, a narrator is said to be "reliable" when he speaks or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (and) unreliable when he does not (W.C. Booth, 105). Booth tends to conceive of the narrator as an entity that can work on its own behalf, independent of the aims of the text and sometimes even against its aims. But this can never be the case. For even when the narrator shows some signs of being at odds with the dominant orientation of the text, even then, this should not be interpreted as anything other than part of the overall strategy of the narrative, and acting under the authority of its purposes.

¹⁵ We must ask ourselves whether the text is not trying to make use of the process of *isnād* by transforming it into a narrative technique. In classical Arabic texts, especially those dealing with Islamic tradition (*Hadith*) and historical texts, the function of the *isnād* is based on a constant concern to link statements to their original authors.

floating: they can only be the object of an intersubjective experience of reading and interpretation by being quoted each time; a way for the text to say that they are inseparable from their original vocal support.

We thus have two orders: on the one hand, the order of the narration, aiming at reinforcing the realist artifices and, by this very fact, at founding the communication between the narrator and the reader on the basis of a spatial and psychological contiguity; on the other hand, there is the order of the text, functioning according to the principle of redundancy, a redundancy that serves less to reveal the truth of the facts than to disseminate their centers of provenance: by quoting each time the words of the disappeared hero, the text allows itself to make the voice of this one return under a more and more "abstract" form, and thus each time other. The voice of the hero haunts the whole text, to the point that the encompassed narrative drowns out the encompassing narrative, a drowning out which, as we shall see, transforms the realistic orientation of the novel, giving it a mythical or at least mythologizing resonance.

It is not by chance that the hero appears at the beginning as an enigma and disappears as a mystery: it is because from the start, *Mawsim al-hijra* is meant to be a novel of research, with the will to engage us in a reading enterprise where it is not the characters and the events in themselves that count, but the type of perception we can have of them. Thus, as soon as the story of Mustafa Said is mentioned, the narrative constantly reminds us that it could be a sham:

هذا المصطفى سعيد لا وجود له. انه وهم، أكذوبة. وأنتي أطلب منكم أن تحكموا بقتل الأكذوبة ... هذا زور وتلفيق. قتلتها أنا. أنا صحراء الظمأ. أنا لست عطياً. أنا أكذوبة. (Mawsim, p. 36-37)

"It occurred to me that I should stand up and say to them: "This is untrue, a fabrication. It was I who killed them. I am the desert of thirst. I am no Othello. I am a lie. It occurred to me that I should stand up and say to them: "This is untrue, a fabrication. It was I who killed them. I am the desert of thirst. I am no Othello. I am a lie" (Season, p. 27).

Note that it is the hero who says this about himself. The reader, on the other hand, knows that Mustafa Said is not a mere illusion, and this is thanks to the encompassing narrative with which he has already familiarized himself by learning that Mustafa Said is a "person" who had led a somewhat eventful life in England. At a higher level of the text's functioning, this statement of the hero is recuperated to produce a more complex meaning: the work of the text gives the character the possibility to qualify himself as a pure lie, which seems a priori to go in the direction of an invasion of the whole narrative by the hero's personal ideological system. However, we must not forget that if the text satisfies the desire of its character in this way, it is because it "knows" that what it concedes in this way in an internal way, that is to say at the level of the structure of the narrative, it is going to recover it at the level of the reading. In other words, the character's deceptiveness will never have the opportunity to constitute the semiotic core of the text, that is, its final truth, but only an element in the chain of meanings that will arise under the action of reading. It is in this perspective that we must understand the implementation by the text of other peripheral narrative segments: we want to talk about those micro-stories that the narrator had collected from characters who knew the hero or heard about him.

First of all, we must emphasize the fact that through these testimonies, Mustafa Said appears as a character whose true identity everyone thinks they know, but in talking about him, like a rumor, everyone is in fact only projecting their own fantasies. Thus, for one of the characters, Mustafa Said is the "prophet al-khidr" (Season, p. 73). According to another character, he is a figure of the university who was "the most well-known student at Gordon College, better known than the members of the first eleven, the prefects of the boarding

houses, those who spoke at literary evenings, those who wrote in the wall newspapers, and the leading actors in the dramatic groups” (*Season*, p. 41). According to a young lecturer in Khartoum, “Mustafa Sa’eed was the first Sudanese to marry an Englishwoman, in fact he was the first¹⁶ to marry a European of any kind. I don’t think you will have heard of him, for he took himself off abroad long ago. He married in England and took British nationality. Funny that no one remembers him, in spite of the fact that he played such an important role in the plottings of the English in the Sudan during the late thirties. He was one of their most faithful supporters. The Foreign Office employed him on dubious missions to the Middle East and he was one of the secretaries of the conference held in London in 1936. He’s now a millionaire living like a lord in the English countryside” (*Ibidem*).

All these testimonies are thus reported to be immediately denied. It is for this reason that the narrator hurries to add:

وسمعت نفسي أقول دون وعي، بصوت مسموع: مصطفى سعيد ترك، بعد موته، ستة أفدنة، وثلاثة بقرات وثوراً، وحمارين، وإحدى عشرة عنزة، وخمس نعجات، وثلاثين نخلة، وثلاثاً وعشرين شجرة بين سنط وطلح وحرار، وخمساً وعشرين شجرة ليمون ومثالها برتقال، وتسعة أرادب قمح وتسعة ذرة، وبيتاً مكوناً من خمس غرف، وديوان، وغرفة واحدة من الطوب الأحمر، مستطيلة الشكل، ذات نوافذ خضراء، سقفها ليس مسطحاً كبقية الغرف ولكنه مثلث كظهر الثور، وتسعمائة وسبعة وثلاثين جنينها وثلاثة قروش وخمسة ملاليم نقداً (Mawsim, p. 59-60).

“Without realizing it I found myself saying out loud, ‘On his death Mustafa Sa’eed left six acres, three cows, an ox, two donkeys, ten goats, five sheep, thirty date palms, twenty-three acacia, sayal and harrar trees, twenty-five lemons, and a like number of orange, trees, nine ardebs of wheat and nine of maize, and a house made up of five rooms and a diwan, also a further room of red brick, rectangular in shape, with green windows, and a roof that was not flat as those of the rest of the rooms but triangular like the back of an ox, and nine hundred and thirty—seven pounds, three piastres and five milliemes in cash” (*Season*, p. 41-42).

The meticulous precision with which the narrator makes the inventory of the goods left by the hero, the meticulously enumerative and descriptive style that he adopts to do so, aims at deriding and ridiculing the testimonies that he had just collected by considering them as participating in a work of fabrication. This informs us that these testimonial accounts do not have an informational value here, but an indexical one. In other words, these testimonies are not intended to enrich our knowledge of the hero, but, on the contrary, to lead us to doubt the reliability of the one we thought we had until now. These testimonies are thus intended to show the reader how what we have learned about the hero so far is rather intended to reveal the fallibility of our modes of perception and judgment. The narrator expresses this spirit of the story well when he says:

يا للغرابة. يا للسخرية. الإنسان لمجرد أنه خلق عند خط الاستواء، بعض المجانين يعتبرونه عبداً وبعضهم يعتبرونه إلهاً. أين الاعتدال؟ أين الاستواء؟ وجدي بصوته النحيل وضحكته الخبيثة حين يكون على سجيته، أين وضعه في هذا البساط الأحمدى؟ هل هو حقيقة كما أزع أنا وكما يبدو هو؟ هل هو فوق هذه الفوضى؟ لا أدري¹⁷ (Mawsim, p. 111).

“How strange! How ironic! Just because a man has been created on the Equator some mad people regard him as a slave, others as a god. Where lies the mean? Where the middle way? And my grandfather, with his thin voice and that mischievous laugh of his when in a good humour, where is his place in the scheme of things? Is he really as I assert and as he appears to be? Is he above this chaos? I don’t know” (*Season*, p. 108).

¹⁶ Let us notice through this narrative sequence the reminiscence of this formula of "the first who..." or "the first to...", a formula which presents a certain kinship with the one we find in the discourse of Arab historiography, such as al-Tabarī's chronicle. Here, as in al-Tabarī, the use of this formula seems to respond to the desire to construct a founding figure, in the image of figures from the myth of origins and founding heroes. See Mircea Eliade, p. 1971.

¹⁷ *Mawsim*, p. 59-60.

This reflection of the narrator confirms what we said above, namely that it is not by their contents, that is to say by their contribution in substantial knowledge, that the testimonies count in the text, but above all by the fact that they put us in a position to notice how our perception and our judgments on the others are, in the extreme, influenceable by what we are for ourselves. In other words, what the text offers us through these testimonies are not simply objects to be learned, but elements intended to serve as contexts for reading experiences in which we can become aware of the way the text works: it is a play of perspectives and points of view. Indeed, when the narrator says: "a man is considered by some fools as a slave and by some others as a God", and especially when he goes so far as to question his knowledge of his own grandfather, he clearly poses the problem of the points of view and of the failures of the perceptive modes that serve as their supports. What needs to be emphasized, then, is the fact that the last passage quoted came in response to the other passage, containing the testimonies, to serve as a meta-textual slant: the testimonies become concrete examples that the text highlights to support its thesis on the difficulty of defining and judging the Other. The text thus functions by "reflecting"¹⁸ itself in a permanent way. Reflexivity which is in fact as much an effect as a factor of interdependence between the text and its reading. We thus notice that as the narration develops, as it gains in density and becomes multiple, instead of helping us to know the character better, instead of allowing us to reach the world of this last one and to seize its contours, it moves us away from it even more. The universes of sense to which the process of reading gives place, are in this way deeply marked by a floating of meaning: what, on the level of the narrative as textual linearity, is rather a tendency to produce and to accumulate information, that is to say to "tell always more"¹⁹, becomes, on the level of the reading, a factor of weakening and ambiguity of the semiotic status of the real. This weakening is all the more reinforced that the activity of the reading takes place in an environment made of contrasts and derision, in the sense that the story of Mustafa Saïd draws its meaning at the same time mythical and dramatic from the fact that it has for background and for horizon two spaces of life and very different speech: On the one hand, there is the village, the simplicity of daily life, intellectual platitude and even sometimes a few touches of mediocrity; on the other hand, there is the West, the world whose ideology and claim to dominance Mustafa Saïd wanted to challenge. However, this history refers to its background and its horizon according to the same principle and under the same sign, namely the incommunicability or, if one

¹⁸ Dällenbach, 1977.

¹⁹ This observation goes against Paul Ricoeur's axiom, borrowed from Frank Kermode, according to which "to develop a character (of the character), one must tell more". P. Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, 172. See also 175 where, in relation with this axiom and under its dependence, Ricoeur writes: "The person, understood as a character of the narrative, is not an entity distinct from his "experiences". On the contrary: he shares the dynamic identity regime proper to the story being told. The narrative constructs the identity of the character, which we can call his narrative identity, by constructing that of the story told". We must make two critical remarks about this axiom, formulated in this way: firstly, to assert that to develop the character of a character, it is simply enough to tell more, is to support a thesis that can only claim a certain validity insofar as we would be dealing only with novelistic texts whose narrativo-semiotic strategy is based on the principle of linearity, that is to say, fictional narratives developing in the mode of a non-problematic, accumulative and semiotically increasing process of meaning production. It is impossible for this to be the case for all novels. Secondly, to say that by constructing its own identity, the story told constructs at the same time and at the same time that of the character, is, in our opinion, to establish a parallelism and a correlation that cannot resist the confrontation with examples of novels whose aesthetic power is rather due to the existence of a certain dissonance between the process of the development of the story and that of the formation of the identity of the character: correlative to the accumulation of narrative data, i.e. the multiplication of facts that make the narrative a relatable story, we witness a phenomenon of increasing rarefaction of the clues that are of a nature to define the identity of the character. It is what occurs with the authors of the New novel, and notably Robbe-Grillet. It is also the case of certain novels of Nabokov, like *The Invitation of a Beheading* or *Invitation to a Beheading*. See, for Nabokov, Maurice Couturier, 1993, 186 and seq.

wants, the impossible inter-comprehension²⁰, because of ignorance, on the one hand, and because of hypocrisy²¹, on the other.

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²⁰ According to Tayeb Salih, if "the world of Moustafa Said intervenes and poisons the life of the village, it is to remind the villagers of a crime they did not want to mourn", quoted by Satti, 1974.

²¹ The denunciation of Western ideology is expressed in particular through the criticism of the colonialist reason and especially through the thematization of the figure of Othello. Indeed, if Moustafa Said evokes and summons the name of Othello on several occasions, it is undoubtedly because he considers the past adventure of this character as constituting an experience that he himself must both meditate on and overcome: He must meditate on it insofar as it already contained all the ingredients of the intercultural relations of which he feels himself to be the victim today, and he must go beyond it, in the sense that to avoid that his present situation is simply the place of recurrence, repetition and reproduction, he must anticipate the course of history, go ahead of the events and, if necessary, provoke them, by adopting an attitude refractory to the complacency and the hypocrisy. And this is what he has tried to be and do throughout his life as a character in a novel.