YŪSUF ZAYDĀN'S LITERARY AND IDEOLOGICAL PROJECT ON RELIGION AND VIOLENCE

MARCELLA RUBINO[*]

The Egyptian writer Yūsuf Zaydān is part of the tradition – dating from the age of the Naḥḍah *– of intellectuals as "educators of consciousness". Since then, faced with a national narrative controlled by political or religious power, Arabic literature has often revisited history with the aim of restoring – through the freedom offered by fictional discourse – the truth overshadowed by official history. Yūsuf Zaydān's work aims at creating both a new self-awareness and a new perception of the Other within Egyptian society. His project, which is both ideological and literary, revolves around the issue of religious violence in a broad sense. It appears in particular in the historical novels* 'Azāzīl *(2009) and* al-Nabaṭī *(2010), where he tries to show the continuum linking some currents of Christianity to Islam, with the aim of showing that current conflicts are simply the result of political choices.*

Introduction

Yūsuf Zaydān (1958) has been known on the Arabic literary scene since the publication of his novel *'Azāzīl* in 2008. This work has been the subject of a number of critical analyses. Most literature about Zaydān focuses on this novel and consists in short critical reviews. Only a few studies on this novel were published between 2013 and 2019. These deal with different issues: the politics of historical fiction in Egypt, the gender approach, the problematics of identity and an original ecocritical study on objects in the novel. Thus, for example, Mohammad Salem Al Mostafa interprets the novel as «an interesting and provocative dramatization of the dynamics of gender by which women's identity is constructed in the Egyptian patriarchal culture» (Al Mostafa 2016: 38). Ahmad M.S. Abu Baker has dedicated two articles to Zaydān's novel *'Azāzīl*: the first one deals with the question of the tormented identity of the main character and the process of rethinking and reshaping it (Abu Baker 2015). The second one examines the function of natural objects in the novel, applying the ecocritical theory (Abu Baker 2016).

As for us, we think that, beginning with this novel, the author has built a real project that is both literary and ideological. This article aims to present the main features of this project. The latter revolves around the issue of religious violence in a broad sense and surfaces first and foremost in the histori-

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[*]   Université Paris 1, Panthéon Sorbonne.

cal novel *'Azāzīl* where Zaydān brings forward both the violence of Christological quarrels during the 5th century and the intolerance of the Egyptian Church towards those who were labelled as heretics. Then, to deal with the issue of religious violence seems a fundamental goal in the novel *al-Nabaṭī* (The Nabatean, 2010), where Islam is presented as a religion forcibly imposed on believers, in which submission and allegiance to a leader seem more important than faith and belief in a new holy message. The author's project also surfaces in the following novels, but we will limit our analysis to these two major works.

To approach Zaydān's work, we must first situate it within its geographical and cultural context. Since the *Nahḍah*, especially after the work of Ǧurǧī Zaydān (1861-1914), the father of the historical novel, the critic analyzed the role of novelists in the construction of the nation (Dupont 2006). Fayṣal Darrāǧ underlines the evolution of the historical novel in the modern Arab world, from being the place for legitimization of a nationalist political project at the end of the 19th century, to being the place of an «alternative History» (*tārīḫ badīl*), whose mission is to correct the version of History coming from religious and political authorities (Darrāǧ 2004). In his book *Entre scribes et écrivains: le champ littéraire de l'Egypte contemporaine*, Richard Jacquemond describes very precisely the role of Egyptian writers as conscience of the nation (Jacquemond 2003: 113-134). In Egypt, writers have generally assumed the role of parallel historians of their society: Naǧīb Maḥfūẓ, Ǧamāl al-Ġīṭānī, Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm, Ibrāhīm ʿAbd al-Maǧīd, Salwà Bakr, Bahāʾ Ṭāhir, Muḥammad al-Mansī Qindīl, ʿAlāʾ al-Aswānī and many others have told *their story* of Egypt. Among them, scholar and novelist Yūsuf Zaydān has recently provoked a huge debate and controversy about his historical novels and essays[1].

Yūsuf Zaydān was born in Upper Egypt. He graduated in Literature from the University of Alexandria. He was initially interested in Islamic Philosophy and Sufism, to which he devoted most of his research; he began his career as a novelist in 2007, and quite rapidly became well known in the Arab world, in particular with the publication of his second novel, *'Azāzīl*, which in 2009 won the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF) – also known as the "Arab Booker". He also published *Ẓill al-afʿā* (The Snakes' Shadow) in 2007, *al-Nabaṭī* in 2010, *Maḥāll* (Places) in 2012, *Guantanamo* in 2014, *Nūr* in 2016 and *Furduqān* in 2018. Starting from his second novel, *'Azāzīl*, all the works of this author are centered on the relationship between religion, politics and violence in History.

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[1]   To get an idea of the scale of the debate in Egypt and in the Arab world, see the articles by Salwà Bakr, ʿAbbās Bayḍūn, Bahāʾ Ǧāhīn, Sayyid Maḥmūd and Ḥamdī Abū Ǧulayyil, and the pamphlets by Anbā Bīšūy, ʿAbd al-Masīḥ Basīṭ Abū ʾl-Ḫayr and Nīqūlā Lūqā Bībāwī, cited in the references.

1. The Main Features of Zaydān's Project

In a collection of articles published in 2013 under the title of *Matāhāt al-wahm* (Labyrinths of Illusion), Yūsuf Zaydān defines what seems to be the objective of his novels and essays through this manifesto: «I'm just asking questions and calling for reflection, for meditation. I only aspire to provoke in the minds the desire to study, and to know, hoping to get them out of the prison of passions and illusions» (Zaydān 2013a: 42). Thus, Zaydān attributes to himself the noble role of the writer in charge of educating the spirits, elevating them to an increased awareness and knowledge of their History, and moving them away from what he calls "illusions" (*awhām*).

'Azāzīl tells the story of Hībā, a monk from Upper Egypt who, in the 5th century of our era, decided to undertake a journey to the funding places of Christianity and the elaboration of Christian dogma, to seek the truth of the message of Christ. He first went to Alexandria, capital of Hellenistic culture and seat of one of the major Eastern Churches; then to Antioch (south of present-day Turkey), Jerusalem, Ephesus (Greek city of Asia Minor on the eastern Mediterranean), to finally settle in a monastery near Aleppo. Throughout his journey, an imaginary character accompanies Hībā: Azazeel ('Azāzīl), the Devil, who encourages him to put in writing the experiences he has lived and the events he has attended. Hībā is witness to the historic passage from a period of cohabitation and religious pluralism to another where Christianity stands out as the only official religion of the Byzantine Empire and violently persecutes pagans and heretics. In particular, *'Azāzīl* calls into question high-ranking figures of the Coptic Church in the 4th and the 5th centuries, for their role in the persecution of representatives of other religious streams.

The critic Saba Mahmood shows how this novel is a model of freedom of thought and aims to emphasize the political function of religion that justifies violence (Mahmood 2013). Like Saba Mahmood, Frédéric Lagrange wondered about the interferences between fiction and History in Zaydān's *'Azāzīl*. The French scholar proposed an analysis of the relationship between the reconstruction of History operated by Zaydān in this novel and the contemporary context in Egypt (Lagrange 2014). This article goes in the same direction as that of Lagrange's analysis but proposes to study this novel and *al-Nabaṭī* as a coherent whole.

The protagonist of *al-Nabaṭī*, Māriyah, is a young Coptic woman who is married in the 6th century to a Nabatean, Salāmah, with whom she moved to a city in the north-west of the Arabian Peninsula. In the Nabatean community, she discovers the religious syncretism that characterizes this region just before the advent of Islam. At that time, polytheism, Judaism and Christianity cohabit peacefully. The religion of Muḥammad puts an end to this plurality, imposing itself very quickly, by war and conquest, as the new dominant faith, with the Arabs first, and the conquered people after.

In these two novels, Zaydān challenges the myths and narratives that are deeply rooted in Egyptian and Arab societies. He seems to wish to deconstruct a mytho-history imposed on the masses by political and religious elites. Zaydān's project is rooted in two main notions that are also literary devices. Firstly, he introduces the concept of *muṭṭasal turāṯī* (heritage's continuum), which he defines as a set of common features between the three monotheistic religions (especially Christianity and Islam). He also emphasizes the age of commercial and friendly relations between Egyptians and Arabs before the rise of Islam. Secondly, he tries to unveil mechanisms that unleash religious violence and to reveal their political causes. His historical novels, his treatise *al-Lāhūt al-ʿarabī wa uṣūl al-ʿunf al-dīnī* (Arab Theology and the Origins of Religious Violence), published in 2009, and all the articles he published in 2013, represent a single project: in a time when sectarian conflicts and civil strife intensify and in a context of increasing political instability, the struggle against extremisms becomes more visible.

2. The Links between Christian Culture and Arabo-Islamic Culture

al-Lāhūt al-ʿarabī is clearly a pedagogical piece: Zaydān exposes his theory of *muṭṭaṣal turāṯī*: «Through this new term of "Arab theology" that I propose here for the first time, I say that there are fundamental points […] that unite the heritage of the two great religions: Christianity and Islam, or even […] the three great religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam that are, in my opinion, three manifestations of the same religion» (Zaydān 2009: 17-18).

His theory is based on an overarching theological perspective that exposes the convergence between Eastern Christianity and Islam, in particular with regard to the notion of God and the divine nature of Christ:

> It wasn't strange that for Egyptian Orthodoxy and Greek Christianity Jesus and God were the same person. Contrary to the mythological trend from ancient Egypt and Greece, which deifies man and humanizes God, religions that preceded Christianity in the Arabian Peninsula and the Fertile Crescent posited gods above the world of men and saw them as completely separated from it (Zaydān 2009: 82).

According to this theory, the link between Islamic and Christian culture is achieved through "Arabness":

The first circle represents Christian heritage (including also Judaism), which has lasted centuries; the second circle represents Arabness, located between two eras, the pre-Islamic and the Islamic one. This element does not refer to a religion, but to an ethnic, linguistic and geographical element including

also the Fertile Crescent. The third circle represents the Islamic phase where Arabness appears and emerges thanks to the new religion. Thus, the crossing between Christian and Islamic heritage is done through the common Arabness. The latter constitutes the key to the relations of interdependence and similarity that exist between the three religions of the Book. It is in this Arab region of contact that Christian and Muslim theologies were born, at two different periods, from a common cultural background. This theory comes to shed new light on the debates triggered by the novel *'Azāzīl*:

> At this time [i.e. after the release of *'Azāzīl*] it was difficult for many [people] to accept my ideas and visions on the continuity between Christian and Islamic heritage [...]. Most people accused me of being hostile to the Coptic heritage. [...] I see in the Coptic period a historical phase of the heritage of Egypt and the region. One necessarily needs to study the Coptic tradition if one wants to understand the following phases (Zaydān 2009: 17).

Thus, Zaydān rejects the accusations against him of fomenting interfaith conflicts in Egypt. On the one hand, he builds a theory establishing a close relationship between some currents of Christianity and Islam; on the other hand, he emphasizes the antiquity of the relations between Egyptians and Arabs to illustrate his theory of "heritage's continuum".

2.1. The Relation Between Nestorianism and Islam

In the novel *'Azazīl*, the hero Hība is travelling with Azazeel, the devil, a kind of *alter ego* who makes him write about the events he witnesses at a time in which «the foundations of the Faith were shaken» (*ihtazzat arkān al-diyānah*) (Zaydān 2008: 15; Ziedan 2012: 7). Hība becomes friends with Bishop Nestorius, a character chosen by Zaydān quite purposefully. Indeed, Nestorius has developed a doctrine in which Jesus Christ is not of divine nature but a man to whom God appeared in order to convey His message through him, giving him a prophetic and miraculous character. This doctrine was deemed to be heretical by the ecumenical council of Ephesus that established the Christian orthodoxy in 431 AD. Among the various currents of Christianity, Nestorianism is the closest to Islam, for both the Muslim vision of Jesus Christ and the role of prophecy. Thus, the character of Bishop Nestorius in *'Azāzīl* embodies the link between Christian and Islamic culture:

> "Master, do you believe that Jesus is God, or is He the messenger of God?"
> "The Messiah, Hypa, was born of man, and humans do not give birth to gods. How can we say that the Virgin gave birth to a god and how can we worship a child a few months old, just because the Magi bowed down and worshipped him? The Messiah is a divine miracle, a man through whom God appeared to

us. God became incarnate in Him to make of Him a harbinger of salvation and a sign of a new age of mankind" (Zaydān 2008: 47; Ziedan 2012: 33).

Nestorius insists here on the absurdity of the identification between Christ and God, while in other passages he links his thought to an Antiochean theological tradition which would be in opposition to the Egyptian theological tradition:

> I understand, Hypa, the significance of your studying theology in Alexandria and I know everything they taught you there, and everything they told you about Arius and his opinions, which they consider heresy. But I see the matter from another point of view, the Antioch point of view if you wish to describe it as such. I find that Arius was a man full of love, honesty and spiritual power. [...] As for what he said, I see it as merely an attempt to purge our religion from the beliefs of the ancient Egyptians about their gods, because your ancestors also believed in a holy trinity, made up of Isis, her son Horus and her husband Osiris, by whom she conceived without intercourse. Are we reviving the old religion? No, and it is not right to say of God that He is the third of three. God, Hypa, is One, unaccompanied in His divinity. Arius wanted our religion to worship God alone. But he sang a song which was unfamiliar in his time, recognizing the mystery of God's manifestation in Christ but not admitting Christ's divinity, recognizing Jesus the son of Mary, a gift to mankind, but not recognizing any divinity other than the one God (Zaydān, 2008: 53-54; Ziedan 2012: 38-39).

Nestorius is presented in the novel as both a fervent advocate of Arius' theses[2], and as a convinced antitrinitarian. Thus, in the historical reconstruction proposed by Zaydān, Nestorianism represents an *ante litteram* form of Islam. This idea appears strongly in the pages of *'Azāzīl* in which Nestorius defends his doctrine in the face of accusations made by Cyril of Alexandria (Alexandria's famous bishop at the time of the Council of Ephesus):

> Nestorius began to repeat what I already knew, how he believed it was wrong to call the Virgin Mary *Theotokos*, because she was a saintly woman but not the mother of God. [...] The Lord is perfect, as it is written, so how could He take the form of a child, when the Virgin Mary was a human who gave birth from her immaculate womb by a divine miracle. [...] God endures in His eternal everlasting perfection. He is the only One, neither He is born nor does He die (Zaydān 2008: 245-246; Ziedan 2012: 203-204).

How not to see in this passage an echo of the famous verses of sura *al-Nisā'* (Women):

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[2]   Originally from Cyrenaica, this priest and Christian theologian establishes a hierarchy between the Father and the Son. He was a disciple of Licinius and Origen and was fought by Bishop Alexander of Alexandria, then condemned by the Council of Nicea in 325 AD. His disciples are called the "Arians" and his doctrine is "Arianism".

> O followers of the Book! do not exceed the limits in your religion, and do no speak (lies) against Allah, but speak the truth; the Messiah Jesus, Isa son of Maryam, is only an apostle of Allah and His Word, which He communicated to Maryam and a spirit from Him; believe therefore in Allah and His apostles and say not: Three. Desist, it is better for you. Allah is only one God: far be it from His glory that He should have a son[3].

Other elements in the novel also insist on the close relations between Christianity and Islam: in particular the link between Christian and Islamic mysticism, and the deeply rooted relations between Arabs and Egyptians.

2.2. *The Christian Monastic World and the Sufi World*

In *'Azāzīl*, Zaydān (who, as we mentioned earlier, devoted most of his life to the study of Sufism) also highlights the similarities between the Christian monastic world and Sufism. Both the lifestyles and objectives of these two religious currents are presented as very similar by the author. For Zaydān, mysticism represents a general transreligious, even non-religious, tendency of human beings who conceive of the relationship with the transcendent as belonging to the intimate relationship between man and the divine. This tendency aims at the gradual rapprochement with the divine, independently of the ways in which one decides to reach it. Thus, according to Zaydān, «everyone has his way to God» (*kull wāḥid la-hu sabīl ilà 'llāh*) and «the Right Way has many forms» (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm la-hu anmāṭ kaṯīrah*) (Zaydān 2013b: 234-235).

Thus, Hībā expresses the wish to practice asceticism and transcend the material world. In the same way, towards the end of the novel, after the Council of Ephesus which condemned Nestorius, the abbot of Hībā's monastery speaks to the monks, addressing Hībā in particular. His words could be pronounced by a Sufi sheykh:

> Children of the Lord […] I have seen many of you distressed by what happened in Ephesus, that your faith was shaken and your hearts perturbed […]. But our way, we monks, has nothing to do with problems of theology and the arguments between the heads of the churches. Those flare up from time to time, and then die down, so let them be. In the meantime we have our way, which we have chosen with the help of the Lord […]. We have renounced the clamour of the world, and we know the Virgin in our hearts, not through the words of the theologians or their sects […]. We have a way to God which is not defined in any written creed or by any special words. The monastic life has a mystery which transcends words, rises above language and is too subtle to articulate. (Zaydān 2008: 362-363; Ziedan 2012: 302-303)

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[3]   Qur. IV:171 (*The Holy Quran* 197?: 155-156).

The figures of Christian ascetics mentioned in *'Azāzīl* recall those Muslim mystics to whom Zaydān devoted many years of research. Both monasticism and Sufism were born in reaction to the secularization of the clergy, the establishment of religion as a state religion, and the moral laxity of society. The veneration of God practiced by the mystics is based on love. Ibn 'Arabī, the great Sufi sheykh of the 13th century, says in a famous verse that love is his religion and his faith (*al-ḥubb dīnī wa īmānī*). While people adhere to different religions in whose name they continue to kill each other by asserting the superiority of one over the others, according to the mystics, the only foundation of religion is love. This idea allows them to admit that everything participates in the veneration of God, even the other religions, apostasy and atheism; for example, it is said in sura *al-Ḏāriyāt* (The Scatterers): «I have not created the jinn and the men except that they should serve Me» (*wa mā ḫalaqtu al-ǧinn[a] wa 'l-ins[a] illā li-ya'budūn[i]*)[4].

Zaydān's novels include many figures of mystics. In spite of their heterogeneity, all have in common the practice of a religiosity in direct relationship with God, and outside politics. Their attitude is deeply human, detached from the world, universal, and not necessarily related to a religion. In *Dawwāmāt al-tadayyun* (Whirlwinds of Religious Practice), Zaydān thus speaks of Sufism: «Sufism consists of meditation, contemplation and deepening of the knowledge of the soul as a mirror of the world. In this sense, lovers, revolutionaries and artists are also Sufis» (Zaydān 2013b: 236). It is this attitude, whatever its matrix, that Zaydān opposes before anything else to that of violence.

2.3. Relations between Arabs and Egyptians

In his second historical novel *al-Nabaṭī*, the author insists on the fact that the relations between Arabs (the Nabateans in the novel) and Egyptians are deeply rooted in history. *al-Nabaṭī* is the story of migration of the young Māriyah, Egyptian Jacobite (Coptic), from her native land, Upper Egypt, to the North of the Arabian Peninsula. Married to a Nabatean named Salāmah, she follows her husband and discovers a new frightening world, as 7th century's Arabia is the theater of religious wars, political conflicts, and the cradle of a new religion which will spread across the region. Māriyah mentions the fact that relations between Arabs and Egyptians go back thousands of years: «We, in the village, know the language of Arabs and they know our language. They have come to the market place for thousands of years» (Zaydān 2010: 25). At the same time, before the marriage, the Arabs say, speaking about Māriyah: «We will be for her the best protectors and she will stay among us, cherished and honored for we are cherished and honored in our own country. We can but honor her for she is the daughter of our Egyptian

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[4]   Qur. LI:56 (*The Holy Quran* 197? : 173).

grandmother Hagar, mother of all Arabs» (Zaydān 2010: 24). Further in the novel the narrator says: «The Arabs protect the monastery near which they have their encampment, since they have the same religion as we do, and they are good people who fear God» (Zaydān 2010: 170).

Indeed, Jewish and especially Christian Arabs had been present for a long time in Egypt. The latter were mostly Melkites and Nestorians. An important Melkite community was established in Elath, from which, according to the same Zaydān, they would have facilitated the access of Muslims during the conquest of that country: «And when the time to conquer Egypt comes – which will surely happen soon – the Jews will mobilize with the Nabataeans and other Arabs living in Egypt, to facilitate the entry of Muslims into the country, where they will continue afterwards to live in safety» (Zaydān 2010: 350). Coptic and Arab historians also mention the fact that the cruelty of Alexandria's last archbishop, Cyrus the Caucasian also named "al-Muqawqis", towards the local population, especially the Jacobites (the Copts), was such that the victims of his rule probably did not put up too strong a resistance to new Arab conquerors. Furthermore, the historian Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam (9th century) suggests that agreements between Muslims and Christians had already been signed before the conquest, through the mediation of Ḥāṭib b. Abī Balta'ah (Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam 1914).

Based on Arabic historiography (in particular Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam) and Coptic historiography (John of Nikiu's [7th century] chronicle), Zaydān therefore tries to restore a balance between two competing versions of the circumstances that led to the conquest of Egypt, in order to give another vision of the relations between Christians and Muslims in Egypt.

3. Religion, Politics and Violence

The mechanisms and seeds of religious violence constitute the other central theme of Zaydān's work. The author aims to show that, in a system of thought postulating a unique truth such as that of monotheisms, the negation of the legitimacy of the Other necessarily entails a recourse to violence. However, the violence of the scriptural discourse could have remained a symbolic violence, but it becomes effective violence from the moment it is put at the service of politics. In this regard, the author also highlights the convergence between Christianity and Islam. In *'Azāzīl* as in *al-Nabaṭī*, he insists on the fact that the reasons for religious violence are political: they are rooted in power struggles within the highest levels of society, but their consequences are inflicted upon the entire community of believers. The relationship between religion and politics appears in the two novels, through the actions of some characters. This is the case of *'Azazīl* with two influential figures of the Coptic Church, Cyril of Alexandria and his uncle Theophilus. In a conversation between Hībā and Nestorius, the latter emphasizes the po-

litical role of these two figures: «Those are people of power, not people of faith, people of profane cruelty, not of divine love» (Zaydān 2008: 185; Ziedan 2012: 151).

Zaydān tries to show, throughout this novel, the constant overlap between religion and politics, thus attributing to the latter the main responsibility for the violence perpetrated in the name of Christ. In *al-Lāhūt al-'arabī*, like in the novels, violence is presented as the only means of establishing a new religion or a new orthodoxy. Zaydān explains that religions, and orthodoxies, can be established only by force. Regarding Islam, for example, he clarifies the political reasons that accompanied the conquests, including the fact that Arabs used the religion that hatched in their territory to create a real State and make it powerful. Thus, from the foreword of *al-Nabaṭī*, the author introduces the reader into a universe of violence. He refers to a *ḥadīṯ* reminding that the Prophet won thanks to the fear that God provoked in his enemy: «We pray and salute his prophet of the tribe of 'Adnān, whom God made overcome by the fear he instilled in the enemy, while he was still a month away from him» (Zaydān 2008: 9)[5].

In this novel, Māriyah's husband Salāmah has converted to Islam out of interest, the same way he had become a «Christian according to the necessity of the moment» (*masīḥī 'alà hawn*) (Zaydān 2010: 186). Once the new religion is established and its believers become dominants of the region, Salāmah has no choice but to comply with them, to convert and form political alliances.

3.1. The Exclusion of the Other

According to Zaydān, the symbolic exclusion of the Other postulated by monotheisms results in an exclusion of the Other led by violence. In *'Azāzīl* as in *al-Nabaṭī*, the destruction of the polytheistic past is used to establish the new orthodoxy. Thus, in *'Azāzīl*, Cyril reminds the believers that they are in the midst of a "holy war" (*fitnah*), then he pronounces a discourse inciting them to purge Alexandria of pagans:

> Children of God, friends of the living Jesus. This city of yours is the city of the Almighty Lord. Mark the Apostle settled here, on its soil lived fathers of the church, the blood of martyrs flowed here and in it the foundations of our faith were built. We have purged it of the Jews, who have been expelled. God helped us to expel them, but the remnants of the filthy pagans are still raising strife in the land. They spread iniquity and heresy around us, and intrude insolently on the secrets of the church [...] But, soldiers of the Lord, the Lord

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5   The *ḥadīṯ* is quoted by Ibn Ḥanbal (1999a: 471-472, n. 2742; 1999b: 165-166, n. 14264; 1999c: 451-452, n. 22137): «I was conquered by the fear [that was thrown at my enemy] at the distance of a month», that is to say, «a month before I met him».

will never consent to that […]. So, children of the Lord, free your land from the defilement of the pagans, cut out the tongues of those who speak evil, throw them and their wickedness into the sea and wash away the mortal sins. Follow the words of the Saviour, the words of truth, the words of the Lord. Know that our Lord Jesus Christ spoke to us his children in all times when he said: Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. (Zaydān 2008: 151-152; Ziedan 2012: 122)

In the same way, in *al-Nabaṭī*, Māriyah evokes the destruction of Kaaba's idols: «The Prophet of Muslims entered Makkah triumphantly. A month later, he besieged Ṭā'if, destroyed the Ka'bah of the chief goddess al-Lāt, killed the great priest and took by force the Black Stone» (Zaydān 2010: 310).

However, religion-related violence does not result only in physical violence but can also result in a verbal attack aiming at the excommunication of the adversary. *'Azāzīl* is entirely built around the quarrels between followers of the various doctrines and the anathemas which they use in order to discredit their opponents. Thus, Cyril and Nestorius accuse each other of being non-believers, until the Council of Ephesus condemns Nestorius' doctrine for heresy. In *al-Nabaṭī*, the author also dwells upon the quarrels between Jacobites and Melkites in 7th century Egypt.

3.2. The Rejection of Violence: the Example of the Nabataean

The contradiction between the holy message and the practice of violence is strongly emphasized. This contradiction appears repeatedly in *'Azazīl*, and finds its clearest expression in *al-Nabaṭī*, with the character of the Nabataean, Salāmah's brother; this character represents the mid-ascetic prophet who, while taking part in the life of the community, preaches a simple life, that is close to nature, peaceful and independent of political interest. Thus, the Nabataean is surprised by the contradiction between the Koranic message and the violence of early Islamic conquests: «In a quiet morning meeting, they came to him with a parchment on which the Koran of Muslims was written, so he looked at it for a long time, then he looked at the distant hills, then stood up saying, as if talking to himself: he comes up with this and sheds blood?» (Zaydān 2010: 309). In the same way, the Nabataean refuses to have his «prophetic message» used for political purposes: «The Taghlib […] need a prophecy to fight under his banner […]. They said to my brother: we will believe in you if you show us, during the war, the Revelation that calls for war […]. He apologized saying that his prophecy was not yet completed» (Zaydān 2010: 324-325).

Conclusion

Zaydān's work is particularly fascinating because of the radical character of his arguments served by his narrative techniques and because of the context in which they are produced.

Although in his novels Zaydān takes the reader to other parts of the Arab world (Bilād al-Šām, Arabian Peninsula), it is clear that his ultimate goal is Egypt, a country where sectarian tensions are reaching an acute phase. His two heroes, Hībā and Māriyah, are Egyptian and their vision allows him to build another perspective of Egyptian history.

The focus on these two narrators and protagonists conveys a clear idea of the audience targeted by the author. Māriyah is isolated and a stranger (*ġarībah*) in a world in which she suddenly fell after her marriage her marriage to the young Nabataean Salāmah, and her doubts seem to be a symbol of the way in which, according to the Zaydān's views, younger generations should look at History. Hībā also embodies skepticism towards world events, as the devil Azazeel requires him to put those events in writing, so they do not get lost for future generations. The Egyptian reader is, without doubt, the main recipient of this author.

Zaydān's target reader is expected to have the same attitude of doubt and skepticism over the events surrounding him/her. A critical insight becomes possible through the literary device of internal focalization, a term coined by the French theorist Gérard Genette to define a narrative where all information presented reflects the subjective perception of that information by a certain character (Genette 1966). Thus, the literary text manages to create a distance vis-à-vis political and/or religious authorities and their dogmas, founding myths, as those authorities strive to fuel conflicts and consolidate their power and legitimacy. Yūsuf Zaydān's work seems to aim at creating both a new self-awareness and a new perception of the "Other" in order to overcome the sectarian divisions within Arab societies in general and Egypt in particular. Indeed, his narrative techniques seek to challenge people's beliefs and to revisit History in order to put forward a vision of society that overcomes discord and violence and is based on a rational and critical basis.

The issue of Zaydān's reception is fundamental. Since the publication of *'Azazīl*, the author has been very controversial in the media, and he presented himself quite straightforwardly as a social actor involved in the political life of contemporary Egypt. The proliferation of debates on television, the numerous critical articles or pamphlets about the author's writings led to what might be called a "Zaydān phenomenon".

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