«COUNTLESS PLAGUES, WANDER AMONGST MEN; FOR EARTH IS FULL OF EVILS»: A NEW AGE OF HUMANITY WITHOUT HOPE IN DYSTOPIAN NOVEL *ʿUṬĀRID* BY MUḤAMMAD RABĪʿ

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The 2011 revolutions boosted the speculative fiction genre in Arabic literatures. In Egypt, the consecration of a new authoritarian regime in the aftermath of the demonstrations' bloody repression buried any hope for liberty, and gave space to a strong feeling of disillusion. Muḥammad Rabīʿ's novel ʿUṭārid *(2014), an anticipative dystopia which takes place in 2025 Cairo, ratifies the revolution's failure, and depicts an Egypt that has sunk into extreme violence, without any chance of a better future. The revolution opened Pandora's jar: not only does calamity reign, but evil has become the norm. Moral considerations disappear in Rabīʿ's post-revolutionary Egypt: in this tormented new world, there is no accountability for horror. In this article, I will investigate the dystopian construction of post-revolutionary space, characters, and time as a new syncretic intake on the myth of Pandora: evil roams on earth, giving way to an anhistorical, earthly hell inhabited by restless souls who did not deserve their punishment, with no hope for better prospects.*

The disillusionment following the violent political repression of the 2011 Arab revolutions encouraged several contemporary authors to write anticipation novels, such as Egyptian writer Muḥammad Rabīʿ's (1978) third novel[1], *ʿUṭārid* (Mercury), published in Arabic in 2014, and translated into English in 2016[2]. This dystopia follows the journey of Colonel Aḥmad ʿUṭārid, a former police officer who joins the ranks of a relatively obscure resistance, and aimlessly slaughters civilians from the heights of a tower with a sniper rifle. Set in eerie Cairo, the narration time shuttles back and forth between

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1 His first novel *Kawkab ʿAnbar* (Amber Planet, 2010) received in 2011 the Sawiris Cultural Award in the emerging writer's category, and his second novel, *ʿĀm al-tinnīn* (The Year of The Dragon, 2012), was enthusiastically received in Egypt and elsewhere.

2 Muḥammad Rabiʿ, *ʿUṭārid*, Dār al-Tanwīr, al-Qāhirah 2014. The novel was shortlisted for the 2016 International Prize for Arabic Fiction, and was then translated into English (Mohammad Rabie, *Otared*, Translated by R. Moger, AUC Press, Cairo-New York 2016), and into French with the eloquent and Rimbaldian title *Trois saisons en enfer* (Mohammad Rabie, *Trois saisons en enfer*, traduit par F. Lagrange, Actes Sud, Arles 2021).

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2011, 2025, and 1063. These three years represent as many parallel historical realities, and the 2011 disastrous Egyptian revolution can thus be considered as the opening of Pandora's jar: the boiling tensions suddenly and brutally erupted, causing calamities to go rampant among humankind in the capital. Henceforth, «countless plagues, wander amongst men; for earth is full of evils»[3]: a new age of humanity, akin to the Iron Age depicted by Hesiod in *Work and Days*, begins in Cairo. Rabīʿ's dystopia ratifies the uprising's failure, and envisages a bleak future for Egypt, as the country sinks into extreme violence with no chance of improvement or redemption: social and moral considerations disappear in *ʿUṭārid*, where brutality has become the norm. Cairo's inhabitants are aspirationless and seem to wander in search of their own death, for their revolutionary ideals were not only defeated, but also proved vain. This time, no more hope is left at the bottom of Pandora's jar. Rabīʿ once declared to American translator Elisabeth Jaquette: «I think hope is a myth we created to live out our lives and get through the day»[4]. In *ʿUṭārid*, the Egyptian writer debunks Pandora's optimistic story by interweaving the myth of the five ages with the myth of hell, both as a theological and a literary construct, indifferently referring to the seven levels of the *Ǧahannam* in the Qurʾān and the nine circles of Dante's *Inferno,* as well as syncretizing Islamic Hell with the Ancient Greek or Egyptian Underworlds. Consequently, post-revolutionary Cairo is portrayed not as a new Iron Age bound to fade away, neither as a final hell inscribed into an eschatological temporality. Rabīʿ represents an earthly hell, stripping "*Under*world" and "*After*life" of their meanings. In this article, I will acknowledge the dystopian construction of post-revolutionary space, characters and time as a new intake on the myth of the Iron Age which abandons all hope for the future. I will first study Rabīʿ's historical incursion into dystopia, between the myth of Pandora and a contemporary dire political situation. I will then consider Cairo as a hellish surveillance space alienating characters from their everyday life to immerse them into an earthly hell. And after exposing the abolishment of morality, of the idea of good and evil, of reward and punishment in this earthly hell, I will finally examine how this trap-city is taken out of both human and theological temporality to become an anhistorical hell.

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[3] Hesiod, *Works and Days*, in *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica*, Translated by H.G. Evelyn-White, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1914, p. 9, l. 100.

[4] "The Waking Nightmare: Post-Revolutionary Egyptian Dystopias", panel organized by Elisabeth Jaquette with the writers Basmah ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, Ganzeer, and Muḥammad Rabīʿ, during London's Shubbak Festival, July 16th, 2017, available at: https://soundcloud.com/the-british-library/the-waking-nightmare-post-revolutionary-egyptian-dystopias.

I. A New Dystopian Turn in Arabic Novel: No Hope Left at the Bottom of Pandora's Jar After the 2011 Revolutions

The 2011 revolutions brought about significant changes in the Arab literary field, inaugurating the rise of anticipation novels, be it ominous science fictions[5], disastrous post-apocalyptic stories or gloomy dystopias[6]. These genres used to be neglected and disdained by some Arab writers who were already seeking legitimacy on the international scene, because they belong to non-canonical, popular literature, usually known as paraliterature. However, contemporary authors claim anticipation novels to envision the bleak fate of their countries after the revolutions – which have further exacerbated some already dire political situations – and to represent the dreary future of post-revolutionary states. Dystopias, in particular, represent imaginary places and times where everything is as bad as it can be, and distressing societies where rebellion ineluctably leads to submission. Egyptian author Muḥammad Rabīʿ, comparing his novel to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), considers the failed revolutions as "a catalyst" to the emergence of dystopian novels – along with the invasion of some countries in the Arab world by American-led troops, the so-called refugee crisis, and the far-reaching legacy of colonialism. In the novel, 2025 Cairo is occupied by the Knights of Malta, a mysterious foreign army. All this generates the impeding belief that «a catastrophe is going to happen»[7]. In *ʿUṭārid*, then, the writer imagines a terrible future to discuss what would happen «if Egyptians were suppressed to the maximum level possible»[8]. Otherwise said, the miscarried revolutions amount to a disaster akin to the opening of Pandora's jar, marking the beginning of a new era plagued by countless calamities.

In Egypt, the consecration of ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ al-Sīsī's new authoritarian regime following the demonstrations' bloody repression buried hopes for liberties. It gave way to a disillusion echoed, in the contemporary novelistic production, by a strong sense of pessimism, cynicism, and nihilism. Critic Walaa' Said accurately explains that the scarce dystopian novels produced prior to the revolution[9], under Ḥusnī Mubārak's regime, still displayed a con-

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[5] A. Barbaro, *La fantascienza nella letteratura araba*, Presentazione di I. Camera d'Afflitto, Carocci, Roma 2013.

[6] Rawad Alhashmi, *Paradigms of Power in Postcolonial Translation: Dynamic Transformation of Arabic Dystopian Novels*, in "Interventions, International Journal of Postcolonial Studies", 25, 6 (2023), pp. 805-827, available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1369801X.2022.2157307?src=&journalCode=riij20.

[7] *How Mohammad Rabie fits horror into his novel 'Otared'*, interview with Muḥammad Rabīʿ, 11/03/2018, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yVNzOFV2sJY.

[8] *Ibid*.

[9] See for instance Aḥmad Ḫālid Tawfīq, *Yūtūbiyā* (Utopia), Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation, Doha 2008, which was reread in the light of 2011 as a novel heralding the revolution.

fident reformist purpose, perceptible in their structure: «those texts have open-endings unlocking the bleak narratives to possible hopeful impulses»[10]. These early works belong to the "critical dystopias"[11] subgenre, in which a better fate for mankind is imaginable, and hope conceivable. Yet, 2011 was a substantial game-changer. Dystopian novels written in the aftermath of the revolution depict a society characterized by unparalleled and unsurpassable violence, a brutality completely devoid of meaning which reaches a point of no-return. The revolution did not open a new horizon of possibilities, but pushed the country over the edge of the precipice, annihilating any aspiration to a better future. As opposed to the hopeful open-ended dystopias of the pre-revolutionary era, the structure of *ʿUṭārid* leaves no room for improvement. The novel ends with the public execution of Farīdah, a prostitute playing the role of the potential love interest of the main character, whose body is butchered and whose limbs are given away to a frenetic crowd screaming, masturbating, and finally attacking, killing, and eating each other. The novel unravels with a final massacre bringing everyone down, piling disfigured faces upon faces, and dismembered bodies upon bodies, acknowledging the ultimate utter disappearance of any humanity. Before 2011, state violence in Egypt was mostly hidden behind the cell walls of arrested activists and the gates of overcrowded prisons, thus kept under the lid of Pandora's jar somehow. The January revolution inaugurated a new epoch in which superlative violence irrupts into the public space. This bloody outburst translates in *ʿUṭārid* as reiterated graphic, sordid descriptions of torture, rape, killings, and butcheries: Rabīʿ masters the art of horrific hypotyposis, which ultimately exceeds the limits of representation.

It is a new «dystopian turn», to quote Tom Moylan[12]: the dilution of political optimism goes one step further. In *ʿUṭārid*, the question is no longer to read some hope for the future and to consider the depicted society as a looming menace to be avoided through reforms, but to represent the ineluctability of the horror. Incidentally, Fatima Vieira, who argues that dystopias aim to provoke despair in readers in order to engage them to prevent a horrible future, wrote: «Dystopias that leave no room for hope do in fact fail in their mission»[13]. But in the new wave of Arabic dystopian novels, Pandora's jar has been shattered into a thousand pieces, and there is no hope left, no way

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[10] Walaa' Said, *Dystopianizing the "Revolution": Muḥammad Rabīʿ's* ʿUṭārid, in S. Guth; T. Pepe (eds.), *Arabic Literature in a Posthuman World*, *Proceedings of the 12th Conference of the European Association for Modern Arabic Literature (EURAMAL), May 2016, Oslo*, Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden 2019, p. 197.

[11] The expression was coined by L.T. Sargent in his article *The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited*, in "Utopian Studies", 5, 1 (1994), pp. 1-37, and it was further theorized by R. Baccolini and T. Moylan in their edited book: *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, Taylor and Francis, New York-London 2003.

[12] T. Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, Routledge, New York-Abingdon 2000.

to save anything, because any political engagement is doomed to fail and, thus, is vain. This idea echoes Muḥammad Rabīʿ's declarations on *ʿUṭārid*: «The question I was asked a lot is: "Is there any hope in *ʿUṭārid*?" No! The main theme of the novel is that we aren't in the actual life we are living in, but in hell»[14]. The author recalls that people have not learned anything from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and that there may be nothing to learn from dystopias forevermore.

Dystopian novels written in the aftermath of the failed revolution contributed to undermine the overused, romanticized and depoliticizing expression of "Arab Springs", by abandoning any idea of budding or rebirth to come in any foreseeable future: the revolution did not open a horizon of possibilities, but produced a black hole, annihilating any aspiration to a better future, which could only be a chimera[15]. This meltdown inspired many of Egypt's most prominent contemporary writers[16] to stage a futuristic, and often willingly dystopian, Egypt. Incidentally, it is no wonder if most of those authors had to leave ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ al-Sīsī's Egypt to settle abroad, more or less voluntarily. This is the case of Muḥammad Rabīʿ, who moved to Berlin where he opened the Arabic bookstore Khan Aljanub in September 2020 with Rašā Ḥilwī and Fādī ʿAbd al-Nūr.

Thereby, Muḥammad Rabīʿ uses dystopia to counter any idealization of the revolution, while also stripping it of its ideological side. He exposes the uprising as a cynical set of self-interests, mocking the retrospective celebration of the «Marters of the reverlooshun»[17] of 2011. The revolution is no longer a question of claims and ideas, a revolt of common people, but a matter of bruised flesh, instrumental – yet without any clear purpose – to some. Rabīʿ lowers all things to a raw materialism, and mostly to necrosis. Everything is doomed not to disappear – which would be yet another euphemistic way of narrating the failure of the revolution–, but to be destroyed: it is about exposing the bodies and corpses in their butchering; they must become stigmata. In *ʿUṭārid*, we are dealing with an aspirationless, devastated world.

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[13] F. Vieira, *The Concept of Utopia*, in G. Claeys (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2010, p. 17.

[14] *How Mohammad Rabie fits horror into his novel 'Otared'*, cit.

[15] L. Polverini, *La science-fiction arabe, ou l'ère du désenchantement post-révolutions*, in "Slate.fr", 03/05/2020, available at: https://www.slate.fr/culture/les-autres-mondes/science-fiction-arabe-ere-desenchantement-apres-revolutions-printemps-2011.

[16] Such as ʿIzz al-Dīn Šukrī Fišīr, with *Bāb al-ḫuruǧ* (Exit Door, 2012); Basmah ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, with *al-Ṭābūr* (The Queue, 2013); Nāʾil al-Ṭūḫī, with *Nisāʾ al-Karantīnā* (Women of Karantina, 2013); Muḥammad Rabīʿ, with *ʿUṭārid* (2014); the "infamous" Aḥmad Nāǧī, with *Istiḫdām al-ḥayāh* (Using Life, 2014), and later with *Wa ʾl-numūr li-ḥuǧratī* (And Tigers to My Room, 2019); and also, on the cartoonists' side, Ganzeer, with his graphic novel *The Solar Grid* (2016-2020).

[17] Mohammad Rabie, *Otared*, cit., p. 72.

II. Cairo Upside Down: Mirror of an Earthly Hell Haunted by the Characters

Technically, this dystopia takes place in Cairo, Egypt. The numerous toponyms conjure familiar urban landmarks, such as the Muǧammaʿ al-Taḥrīr or Burǧ al-Qāhirah, and anchor the novel in real-life Cairo. One can easily trace the itinerary of the characters in the novel, as the latter is punctuated with precise geographical notations, giving the reader a feeling of familiarity, as long as this reader is already familiar with Cairo. Besides, the translated versions of the novel are accompanied by a map of the Egyptian capital. Yet, dystopian Cairo becomes a horrendous imaginary space insofar as the writer transforms the city into a place of unprecedented physical and psychological violence constantly experienced by the passers-by, a place of surreal torment akin to fiction. The feeling of uncanniness provoked by this odd familiarity as well as by this discrepancy between the appealing verisimilitude of the city layout and the appalling inconceivability of the horrors happening within its borders powerfully raises the question of dystopia, with all its ambiguities: Are we really confronted with a purely fictional space? Or are we in a horrendous space that, inspired by actual Cairo, is dystopian in the sense that even if it never existed, such place could exist one day? Though horrific, Rabīʿ's Cairo remains plausible[18].

After the symbolical opening of Pandora's jar, Muḥammad Rabīʿ literally brings hell on earth: in *ʿUṭārid*, the evil-plagued world merges with the underworld. However, when the writer depicts a hellish Cairo, he purposely abolishes any spatial distinction between heaven, hell, and earth, or even between the various layers or circles of hell, to create an indistinct place where everything is turned upside down and becomes topsy-turvy, thus causing a loss of reference points. Colonel Aḥmad ʿUṭārid contemplates with indifference that in Cairo the dead outnumber the living, that tombstones are just like any other stones, and that zealous priests are in the same circles as mass murderers. He moves from one marginal space to another, as they become common places: swarming tunnels turned into gigantic mass graves, a disused tower, a brothel, a drug laboratory. Aḥmad ʿUṭārid only enters public space when he is likely to fade into the crowd and remain anonymous – and significantly wears a mask to hide his face. At the beginning of the novel, we see him enter a suspended tunnel, in order to avoid checkpoints:

> For those like me with no papers, the inside of the bridge was the only way to move between Cairo's two halves, despite the risks. You could lose your money and your possessions. You could lose your life. But crossing over the

[18] On the coexistence of fiction and non-fiction, see E. Chiti, *"A Dark Comedy": Perceptions of the Egyptian Present between Reality and Fiction*, in "Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies", 16 (2017), pp. 273-289, available at: https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/jais/volume/docs/vol16/v16_09e_chiti_273-289.pdf.

> bridge was impossible. For me, the checkpoints were traps. […] It was like the place was upside down, lit by windows in the floor rather than in the walls or ceiling. For a moment, I forgot that I was walking in a tunnel suspended in the air[19].

In the original text, the Arabic word used to describe the tunnel is *al-baṭn*, the belly. Although Robin Moger regrettably erases the metaphor in his English translation, Frédéric Lagrange spins it in the French edition, using the word *boyaux* (guts)[20], which obviously echoes the bridge's shape and suggests that the city has become a living organism, digesting an entire population considered as excretions.

Paradoxically, in dystopian Cairo, death is not below the ground but above it; the trap does not lie in the confinement but in the open air. When the area is clear, one risks dying. What is visible is perishable, as shown by ʿUṭārid's bird's eye view: he scans every passer-by from the panoptic heights of the Cairo Tower before shooting at them; as he only sees the world through his Buddha mask and the scope of his rifle[21]. The protagonist sometimes falls into a mythical dimension where he appears as an omniscient narrator and an omnipotent character akin to a god: «I was immune, protected by height, distance, and my mask. I was an ancient Egyptian god with a borrowed face, whose true features no man could ever know, do what he might. A Greek god, full of contempt for the world that he'd created – killing whomever he chose, deserting whomever he chose, sleeping with whomever he chose, impregnating whomever he chose»[22]. ʿUṭārid's demiurgic delirium, swollen with religious syncretism, is linked to his relationship to Cairo's space, which remains highly ambivalent: highly perched in the heavens, he is a god, but back in the streets, he is no more than a vulnerable tormented soul. On the whole, Cairo has become a waste land, a place of desolation where mountains of garbage stand alongside piles of corpses. This apocalyptic cityscape, insofar as it becomes the everyday setting, implies a process of normalization of horror: in Rabīʿ's world, death is no longer an event, it is a setting. It does not move the plot forward, it frames it. The degradation of

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[19] Mohammad Rabie, *Otared*, cit., pp. 41, 46.

[20] «Je n'avais pas d'autre solution que de passer par le ventre du pont. Quand on était un sans-papiers comme moi, c'était la seule manière de traverser le fleuve depuis le côté ouest vers la partie orientale : par le boyau intérieur du pont du 6-Octobre, en courant le risque de se faire dépouiller ou même assassiner. Mais il était hors de question de passer par la surface, les points de fouille étaient un piège pour les gens de mon espèce». Mohammad Rabie, *Trois saisons en enfer*, cit., p. 48.

[21] «For ten years, I'd held that rifle, gazing out at the world through scopes for hours on end, and after a brief struggle had surrendered to the temptation to spy on people. And I'd shot four of them». Mohammad Rabie, *Otared*, cit., p. 36.

[22] *Ibid*., pp. 60-61.

values is embodied in the very materiality of the city and is visible through the characters' trajectory.

A city is commonly represented as an aggregate of small territorialities, each bearing its own specificities, yet all part of an organic whole, depending on the others. However, Rabīʿ opposes this common imagery to the picture of a Cairo where people do not circulate and cross ways anymore – at least not without risking their lives. Why is this? In 2025, Cairo is a city under foreign occupation – an almost invisible army, the Knights of Malta, seized power on March 3, 2023[23] – and has been divided into sectors belonging to different factions that sow terror, rather than establishing order. West Cairo, which stretches as far as Ǧīzah, is presented as «the lion-hearted sector the occupier had never managed to enter»[24]; East Cairo is an occupied zone; and in the middle, Zamālek Island, which was destroyed «during the violent bombardment that set the streets and spacious parks aflame», is «completely empty: no residents, no civilians»[25] – except for a few operatives from the resistance, including the narrator, ʿUṭārid. Yet, this geographical partition of the city does not symbolize a moral partition, with the aggressors on one side, the resistance on the other, and lawlessness or a confrontation zone in the middle. On the contrary, these sectors testify to a common chaos. The hell described by Rabīʿ is neither in concentric circles like that of the Greeks, nor a multileveled hell like that of the Qurʾān: it is an absolute, extreme version of hell, where evil is everywhere, and intensely equal. It affects indifferently adults and children, and, above all, it does not know any innocents anymore.

As can be expected from both dystopias and the depiction of hell, nature is almost absent. Anticipation novels commonly take place in urban settings[26], far from nature, which is paradoxically associated with humanity – or at least, with the best part of humanity. Indeed, ʿUṭārid kills the minister of the Environment with a shot to the head, right after he killed the minister of Culture. In her article *Environment and Climate Change in Contemporary Arabic Dystopian Fiction*[27], Teresa Pepe mentions that Ǧazīrah Island (another name for Zamālek district) is the only space that has been partially pre-

[23] The date coincides with the resignation of Mubārak's last prime minister, Aḥmad Šafīq, who was replaced by ʿIṣām Šaraf on March 3, 2011. This latter was given the task of forming a new government. Soon after, the date chosen by the Knights of Malta to call for the return of civil servants to work is January 25, 2025, which naturally echoes January 25, 2011, the day the Egyptian revolution began.

[24] Mohammad Rabie, *Otared*, cit., p. 23.

[25] *Ibid*., p. 22.

[26] For an in-depth reflection on the unusual transposition of Southern cities into a science-fictional future, see A. Madœuf; D. Pagès-El Karoui, *Le Caire en 2015 et en 2023 : deux dystopies anticipatrices ? Les avenirs funestes de la capitale égyptienne dans* Tower of Dreams *et* Utopia, in "Annales de géographie", 709-710 (2016), pp. 360-377.

served from human contact – not from human destruction. After the departure of the inhabitants due to massive bombings, the vegetation grew wildly, and it is said to have resisted «annihilation»[28]: «Many birds had built their nests here, as though our former presence had denied them life and stability. Our existence as peaceful urban citizens, our life on this earth, had ultimately been an impediment to that of the plants and birds, while the artillery was their friend: they lived in harmony with the falling shells, the bullets of the warring sides»[29]. The mention of nature in *ʿUṭārid* does not serve the conventional ecocritical approach – common in dystopias – attributing the destruction of the environment to excessive human intervention, such as pollution or wars. Rabīʿ conveys a vision of the apocalypse that comes to redefine human ontology. Strictly speaking, it is not human action that is accused of the previous decline of nature, but the very essence of humanity: vegetation adapts to shells and bullets, i.e. the material serving one of the most destructive human actions which may exist, yet suffered until then from the mere «existence [of humans] on this earth»[30]. There is something rotten in human contact, which makes everything wither in its path. The only possible thriving in this hellish world would thus be that of fauna and flora, but it is a life devoid of any political meaning. As Teresa Pepe points out: «However, the plots of these works show that resurrection from the apocalypse does not entail a new positive beginning»[31].

In *Works and Days*, Hesiod follows the episode of Pandora's jar with a description of the five successive ages of humanity, which are moving towards an increasing desolation. The transition from the Golden Age to the Iron Age, which is supposed to be our contemporary age, implies that earth no longer spontaneously provides food to humans, who no longer live in peace and agreement with nature. Although *Works and Days* is quite unlikely

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[27] T. Pepe, *Environment and Climate Change in Contemporary Arabic Dystopian Fiction*, in "MECAM papers", 2 (September 29, 2022), pp. 1-11, available at: https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/publications/contributions/environment-and-climate-change-in-contemporary-arabic-dystopian-fiction.

[28] Muḥammad Rabīʿ, *ʿUṭārid*, cit., p. 28. In his translation Moger uses the expression: «the plants […] that had defied oblivion» (Mohammad Rabie, *Otared*, cit., p. 26), which seems to be a misreading of the text, since this amounts to considering vegetation in the human frame of reference of memory and testimony, while human presence can only testify to an obliteration.

[29] Mohammad Rabie, *Otared*, cit., p. 26. This kind of new Garden of Eden that is growing certainly does not refer to any sort of harmony between humans and nature, while pointing to the blossoming of nature in contact with the tools of extermination of humanity.

[30] T. Pepe, *Environment and Climate Change in Contemporary Arabic Dystopian Fiction*, cit., p. 6.

[31] *Ibid.*

to be Rabīʿ's primary inspiration[32], the writer assimilates the post-revolutionary period to a new Iron Age, but suggests in passing that even when peace prevailed, humans never managed to achieve a harmonious relationship with nature: the opening of Pandora's jar was not as decisive as one could think, because before evils roamed free on earth, they were already deep-rooted into humans. Significantly, the narrator insists on the fact that it is not the city that has changed, but the way of inhabiting it, or rather, of haunting it. In the third chapter, ʿUṭārid finds himself in ʿĀbidīn neighbourhood, and notices with placid astonishment:

> No changes worth mentioning to the apartment blocks and buildings. The cars were the same and the crowds no smaller. But the people were less familiar. Incessant cries rent the air. Squabbles were breaking out in every street, outside every shop, a stream of insults let loose to amuse, to humiliate, to threaten. Fights with fists and knife thrusts. I counted four men puking on the pavement, then stopped counting. I saw someone lying on the ground, blood running out from beneath him. No one went over to cover his body. Back in the day, someone would borrow a newspaper and cover the body with it, holding it down with small stones around the edges, and any blood there was would be enough to stick the paper to the corpse. Now they left the dead body exposed to all and sundry[33].

«Back in the day» means before the revolution, which, just like the legend of Pandora, unleashed misfortunes on the earth, to the point of making it a mirror of hell: Cairo's inhabitants are now damned souls, whose lamentations appear as expiatory pious wishes, and whose vociferations as the mark of their torments. However, the objection carried by the expression «Back in the day, someone would […]»[34] does not presume a lost Golden Age ante-2011, for it assumes that the brutality was already there; it was simply covered by a veil of modesty and a sense of dignity that are long gone now.

Ultimately, Colonel ʿUṭārid's interactions with other characters are very limited, but his relationship with his major, John Muḫtār, nicknamed "the Saint" (*al-Qiddīs*), is particularly symbolic. The major's name carries in itself a whole program, as the title of *muḫtār* literally means "the chosen one", whereas "John" refers to the apostle who wrote the *Book of Revelation*, also known as the *Apocalypse of John*. Unsurprisingly, the Saint appears as a guide figure who accompanies ʿUṭārid on an initiatory journey – the revelation

[32] Rabīʿ is much more fed, in his own words, by the book of *Ecclesiastes* and John's *Book of Revelation*. See Maḥmūd Ḥusnī, "*Uṭārid"… al-Lāhūt ḥīna yakūn ʿadamiyy*[an], in "Madà Maṣr", 24/4/2016, available at: https://www.madamasr.com/ar/2016/04/24/feature/ثقافة/عطارد-اللاهوت-حين-يكون-عدميًا/.

[33] Mohammad Rabie, *Otared*, cit., pp. 47-48.

[34] According to the original Arabic text («kunnā nafʿalu ḏālika sābiq[an]», Muḥammad Rabiʿ, *ʿUṭārid*, cit., p. 48), a more accurate translation would be: «previously, we were used to do like that», which better conveys the idea of a habit, albeit a lost one.

ʿUṭārid reaches is precisely that hell already lies on this earth, and that hope is dead, and even worse, that hope is deadly[35]. Here again, syncretism infuses the text, since the Saint also evokes the reasonable figure of Virgil, who guides Dante (ʿUṭārid) to the Underworld: the catabasis will indeed take place, since they will both step into the earth's bowels, after climbing Mount Muqaṭṭam, on the outskirts of Cairo, in a movement of ascent and then descent to the Underworld. The scene takes place in the first third of the novel, in chapter 7, when the Saint guides ʿUṭārid to a drug manufacturing laboratory to show him how a new drug, called *karbūn*, is produced:

> We went down steps carved out of the stone behind the platform [a mastaba, which is actually an ancient Egyptian funerary edifice], and I saw a hollow, like a narrow little valley, into which the Saint walked with me following after, and then, as if by magic, there was a brand new door set into a sandy, yellow rock wall. The Saint knocked, the door was opened, and we went in. […] We were underground, the walls and ceiling of solid Muqattam rock, rough to the touch – the roughness of age and immutability. I was now properly lost in the network of impossibly narrow shafts[36].

We are in an isolated, sacred place, and for as long as the descent lasts, ʿUṭārid and the Saint enter briefly into an enchanted universe, with its magical doors, its endless underground galleries, and it is no wonder if one gets lost in them. The scene implicitly refers to the mythical labyrinth (Frédéric Lagrange makes full use of the metaphor in his translation, using the term *dédale*), which incidentally adds to Dante's reference a slight nod to Theseus, in such a way that it might be read as an interweaving of ancient myths with one another[37]. This way post-revolutionary Cairo is pulled out of its referentiality to build a multi-dimensional mythological universe. Very quickly, however, ʿUṭārid and the Saint find the usual guards armed with Kalashnikovs.

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[35] During the eighteen days of the Taḥrīr Square 2011 revolution, hope is ultimately compared to the bullets mowing the demonstrators down: «Many souls had been claimed that day, and many had been injured by birdshot that stung the skin and lodged beneath it. [...] Hope roamed through the crowds in the streets, reaping them, chewing them up, and spitting them back out in a state of joy. They glimpsed only the fringes of their torment and thought it glory». Mohammad Rabie, *Otared*, cit., p. 156.

[36] *Ibid*., pp. 103-104.

[37] It is actually a recurring feature of Rabīʿ's work. In his fourth and latest novel, *Tārīkh ālihat Miṣr* (History of the Gods of Egypt), published in January 2020 by Dār al-Tanwīr, al-Qāhirah, the author recounts a fantasmatic history of the myths of Ancient Egypt that echoes with sharp irony the contemporary authoritarian period. Even in *ʿĀm al-tinnīn*, Mubārak was portrayed as a pharaoh.

III. From the Waste Land to Moral Desolation: A "Punishment" Devoid of Meaning

In *Works and Days*, Hesiod describes the Iron Age following the opening of Pandora's jar as follows:

> Father will not be like-minded with sons, nor sons at all, nor guest with host, nor comrade with comrade, nor will the brother be dear, as he once was. They will dishonour their aging parents at once; they will reproach them, addressing them with grievous words – cruel men, who do not know of the gods' retribution! – nor would they repay their aged parents for their rearing. Their hands will be their justice, and one man will destroy the other's city[38].

Hesiod's world is quite similar to ʿUṭārid's: it is a world where social order has disappeared. All manners of community ties have been broken, social responsibility toward others no longer exists, and justice has been abolished. The human, degraded, post-Golden Age era described by Hesiod becomes the post-revolutionary epoch represented by Rabīʿ, still human, all too human. As for the revolution itself, it is very much alike the Golden Age: merely a myth. Still, the calamities released by Pandora's jar were a righteous punishment inflicted by gods to punish men's *hybris*. Yet, by 2011 the narrator notes: «No one realized that what had happened and what would happen thereafter was preordained, that the hell they lived in was perfectly normal, was in fact a hell that recurred elsewhere and often, and that all these things were a punishment»[39]. The word *qiṣāṣ* (punishment)[40] is used in Arabic to refer to the law of retaliation ("an eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth"), which is the last minimal law of reciprocity uniting humans. But in Rabīʿ's novel, bad deeds are committed outside any sense of measure, and crime grows without limits; namely, the punishment is no longer proportionate to the sins of the evildoers. The problem raised by Rabīʿ is: without any promise of a better world to come, nor a hellish punishment to come, what shall we think of the atrocities committed? How to handle violence, if it is not a price to pay for one's sins? How can we address violence if it is not

[38] Hesiod, *Works and Days*, cit., p. 103.

[39] Mohammad Rabie, *Otared*, cit., p. 54.

[40] Muḥammad Rabīʿ, ʿ*Uṭārid*, cit., p. 144. One may regret the fact that Moger did not read behind the term *qiṣāṣ* the implicit reference to the law of retaliation, which is completely absent from the English translation. Conversely, Lagrange makes it explicit in his French version, by writing: «[…] tout ce qui s'était passé et tout ce qui se passerait se résumeraient à ça : œil pour œil, dent pour dent» (Mohammad Rabie, *Trois saisons en enfer*, cit., p. 166). This is symptomatic of the differences in translation methods used by the two translators, as Moger prioritizes an idiomatic translation that captures the overall meaning, while Lagrange focuses more on a semantic translation that is likely to be particularly faithful to the text's silences.

considered a consequence of one's sins?; «[…] and the solution? That we depart this world in expectation of another, less full of torment – of a hell less full of torment than this world. At least in hell we would know that we were being tormented, would be certain that we were paying the price for our sins here, and that this price would be paid out in the end, and that better lay ahead – all contrary to what we'd seen today and knew for a fact: that worse was to come»[41].

Outside of any coherent system of punishment and reward, the hellish world of *ʿUṭārid* represents random, arbitrary sentences, where the main character can innocuously think: «I was about to embark upon indiscriminate mass murder»[42]. Significantly, this new hell torments everyone, both the deserving and the underserving, which leads to suffering and death being stripped of meaning. Likewise, everyone can play the part of the Islamic guardians of hell and tormentors. The danger is no longer only from the prying ears of the civilian-disguised intelligence's officers (*muḫābarāt*), who would target dissidents; it is everywhere, and threatens to haphazardly descend upon everyone. Crimes of villainy, summary executions and mass killings have become commonplace, and punctuate every character's movements in the city. The incessant identity checks, carried out by the police as well as by ordinary citizens, have established the reign of terror, and justify exactions at the slightest doubt[43], or at the slightest desire. Here lies a mutation of the Egyptian surveillance society, which no longer attacks acts or speech, but the mere *existence* of individuals who live as though they were punished for the sole crime of being: being in the street is itself a provocation, and this generalized surveillance reshaped the city, which saw an increase of shady spaces. The raw materiality of the disfigured bodies everywhere is paradoxically not exclusive of the idea of "spectral lives" mobilized by Judith Butler in her crucial work *Precarious Life* (2004)[44]. Walaa' Said reuses with great relevance the Butlerian concept of derealization of lives considered without value, which takes on its full meaning in the context of the Egyptian counter-revolutionary repression, and even more so in the Rabīʿan deluge of violence, in which corpses vanish, anonymous, insignificant: «Within this discourse, exerting violence against those spectral bodies or even killing is considered not a crime; it never happens»[45].

[41] Mohammad Rabie, *Otared*, cit., p. 101.

[42] *Ibid*., p. 102.

[43] «They caught the thief in the street. That's what they thought him: a thief. Because he hadn't any ID. He was beaten and tortured […]. By the time they put the noose over his head, he'd been dead for several minutes. He felt nothing when they strung him from the lamp post. They would leave him like that for hours until someone came at night to cut the rope and the body fell to the ground». *Ibid*., p. 159.

[44] J. Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Verso, London 2004, p. 34.

[45] Walaa' Said, *Dystopianizing the "Revolution": Muḥammad Rabīʿ's* ʿUṭārid, cit., p. 195.

This blurring of retribution is explained during the aforementioned catabasis. Accompanied by the Saint, ʿUṭārid discovers the origin of *karbūn*, the drug he keeps ingesting before he goes on his killing spree: it is obtained by burning small scarabs, which obviously refer to the scarabs of Ancient Egypt symbolizing rebirth. *Karbūn* is precisely what allows the characters to survive in the midst of horror, because it induces a state of dissociation in those who consume it. They abandon their inner individuality, and especially the social and moral considerations that go with it, to focus solely on the superficial, material aspect of reality:

> To put it simply, you turn into two people: you're completely sunk in darkness – no imagination there, no hallucinations, colors, or memories; you forget everything, you won't even remember your name – and on the other hand, your body and mind engage perfectly with the world around you. […] Anything that happens after you've taken it won't fix in your memory […]. Karbon users never make mistakes at work […]. If hash is banned in the workplace, then karbon's a positive requirement – these days, it's the only reason to be good at your job[46].

The very term *karbūn* arguably refers to the idea of duplication, a black-and-white transfer, an alternative form of reality that blurs the boundaries between the authentic and the false, the inner truth and the outer copy, just as carbon copying enables. But the work ʿUṭārid has to be good at is extermination[47]. *Karbūn* drug thus allows the characters to escape the event and, furthermore, deprives them of any critical reflection on their actions, which they are led to carry out mechanically. The horror is built into the routine of the workers carrying out their tasks, and escapes any emotion, any judgement, to fit into a logic of efficiency alone – and it works, except for fugitive glimpses, when the world seems to double. If we leave aside the diegesis for a moment, the novel might appear in this sense as a metaphor of post-revolutionary depression, and *karbūn* as an antidepressant, which allows one to cope with the world[48].

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[46] Mohammad Rabie, *Otared*, cit., p. 120.

[47] His activity was already suggested by his name, ʿUṭārid, which in Arabic refers to the planet Mercury, but more significantly to the Greek psychopomp god of the same name, who guides recently deceased souls to the afterlife.

[48] In her article *Dystopianizing the 'Revolution': Muḥammad Rabīʿ's* ʿUṭārid, cit., p. 207, Walaa' Said offers a very relevant reading of the representation of revolutionary failure in the novel: «Four years after the 25th of January, 2011, *ʿUṭārid* is published as introspection on the event and its effects and as an expression of anger and entrapment. This sense of entrapment stems from the fact that the matrix of the authoritarian regime is as unshakable as the theological idea of hell. So lives will continue to be ungrievable as long as ʿUṭārid and his likes are not held accountable; this desolate realization crashes, in turn, the potency of resistance».

IV. Afterlife: An Anhistorical Hell

The moral annihilation represented in *ʿUṭārid* stems from a new take on the Iron Age associated to hell: «Maybe we'd see the world differently if we knew we were in hell for ever»[49], argues the narrator. In Rabīʿ's dystopia, the world before the failed revolution was not a Golden Age, as this myth has been debunked. The complex temporal structure of *ʿUṭārid* negates the idea that there would be a teleological beginning and an end to the torment inflicted on the living, and therefore a meaning to their suffering. The characters are not sure there will ever be a conclusion to their pain: «You have died, and been judged, and fallen here, into hell. Where you shall be tomorrow, I know not; another hell, or paradise. […] He who lives today is in hell or heaven, forevermore or for a time – and hope there is none»[50], predicts a prophet in the penultimate part of the book. Hell is possibly forevermore in Rabīʿ's dystopia.

There is a period of the novel that I have barely mentioned: that which suddenly throws the reader back to 1063. The title chosen by the French editor makes it clear enough. The novel introduces us to "three seasons in hell" (*Trois saisons en enfer*) sliced through three dates: the obvious 2011, the projection of 2025, and more curiously, a flashback to 1063, also known as the year 455 of the Hegira. What happens then? Historically, it is the period of the Fatimid caliphate in Cairo (969-1171), characterized by a strong political instability and several episodes of famine[51]. Intertextually, it refers, as Rabīʿ points out in the "Acknowledgement" section of the Arabic version, to Ibn ʿAbī 'l-Dunyā's (823-894) book *Man ʿāša baʿd al-mawt* (Those Who Lived After Death). In this short Islamic thanatology[52], primarily meant to encour-

49 Mohammad Rabie, *Otared*, cit., p. 102.

50 *Ibid*., p. 211.

51 Through the account given by Yāqūt Ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Rūmī (1178-1229) in *Kitāb muʿǧam al-buldān* (Dictionary of Countries), 1065 is known as the beginning of a seven-year long famine of «biblical dimensions» (the expression is by R. Ellenblum, *The Collapse of the Eastern Mediterranean: Climate Change and the Decline of the East, 950-1072*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012, p. 29), during which part of the population had to resign itself to eat human flesh in order to survive. In *ʿUṭārid*, the prophetic character of Ṣaḫr al-Ḫazraǧī refers to that episode as follows: «He said: "After I am gone, you will see seven years of darkness in which everything will perish before your eyes. You shall grow hungry and eat the flesh of dogs, then you shall die and devour one another's corpses, then you shall despair and eat your children"» (Mohammad Rabie, *Otared*, cit., p. 213). It is worthy to note that the return to the past already occurs under the sign of projection. Besides, the devouring of children, which is a motif running through the novel, is not without echoes of Greek mythology: once again, the myths intertwine and unravel with each other.

52 L. Armstrong, *Ibn Abī l-Dunyā (d. 281/894) on Death and Dying*, in Bilal Orfali; Nadia Maria El Cheikh (eds.), *Approaches to the Study of Pre-modern Arabic*

age piety, the prolific Baghdadi religious scholar recounts a series of anecdotes involving deceased who briefly come back to life to bear witness to the other world. Ṣaḫr al-Ḫazraǧī, whom Rabīʿ summons back in his own novel, is one of the characters mentioned in this anthology. The way this character reappears is consistent with the model identified by Leah Kinberg in her in-depth analysis of the intermediate state between death and Resurrection – namely the *barzaḫ* – in Ibn ʿAbī ʾl-Dunyā's work, according to which «the dead emerge from the grave, […] telling about the fate of […] dwellers»[53]. This setting aims to oppose the temporality to the eternality, by giving a hint of what is likely to await the living in the Afterworld. Yet, the pious, educational, and entertaining purposes of these anthologies on death are deflected in Rabīʿ's rewriting of the tale. In *ʿUṭārid*'s diegesis, there is some kind of hallucinatory interlude, in which Ṣaḫr al-Ḫazraǧī, appearing as a prophet figure, whips up the crowd to announce, once again, that hell has wrapped up the earth. The novel takes an epic turn at this point, and we witness scenes of collective possessions, terrible battles, and resurrections. What is the meaning of this return to the past, which, despite its chronological anteriority, appears as a repetition of history? It seems that it should be read as a kind of apocalyptic variation, aiming to abolish human temporality and correlatively to blur the reference to the revolution of January 2011.

In Ibn Abī ʾl-Dunyā's theology of death, and more generally, in the Islamic eschatological literature, the dead return to earth, or at least communicate with the living, through dreams[54], voices or proper apparitions, to warn them of what death is; in Rabīʿ's novel, the dead return to earth to warn people that they are already, indeed, in hell. In 1063 Ṣaḫr al-Ḫazraǧī makes thus the same announcement that ʿUṭārid makes in 2025, except that it took ʿUṭārid some time to figure out that he was actually in hell[55]. This revelation is a major paradigmatic twist, which confirms what has been suggested so far in the novel: it means that knowledge can no longer imply any reflexive consideration on secular piety, moral or any kind of individual and community improvement, since the Last Judgment already happened. This absence

Anthologies, Brill, Leiden 2021, pp. 189-209.

[53] L. Kinberg, *Interaction between This World and the Afterworld in Early Islamic Tradition*, in "Oriens", 29/30 (1986), pp. 292-293.

[54] J.I. Smith, *Concourse between the Living and the Dead in Islamic Eschatological Literature*, in "History of Religions", 19, 3 (1980), pp. 224-236.

[55] In ʿUṭārid's case, Revelation is not tied to the appearance of a prophetic figure who would enunciate the hidden truth, but to the direct manifestation of horror on earth: it is thus through the very events and landscapes that he becomes aware of his condition, which is that of a damned. This materiality of the evidence of hell is found for instance through the transformation of the Nile, which suddenly appears as a bloody version of the Styx: «the Nile flowed by, but it flowed in hell: red, and black, and blue, the hues of blood, and shit, and dead flesh». Mohammad Rabie, *Otared*, cit., p. 275.

of a secular world preceding the Afterworld definitely acts the impossibility of any progression, that is to say, in fact, the rigorous impossibility of a revolution, as it places the characters into eternity – shall they follow an initiatory journey, it could not change the world in which they evolve. The two worlds merge in horror, plain and blank. Hell is the space of infinite time, it is therefore circular, and can only re-enact history. This is precisely how the tortured are subjected to eternal torment. And indeed, ʿUṭārid's last words, at the moment when he finally fully understands his condition, are: «And I saw that hell was eternal and unbroken, changeless and undying; and that in the end, all other things would pass away and nothing besides remain. And I knew that I was in hell forevermore, and that I belonged here»[56].

This layering of temporalities, or rather this negation of temporality, also shapes the conception of space. The episode of Ṣaẖr's curse and resurrection is, just like the other parts of the novel, punctuated by a progression through the city of Cairo, which is in fact a procession. The crowd moves towards Bāb al-Barqiyyah (which is located near al-Azhar Park, where ʿUṭārid goes several times), and finally arrives at Mount Muqaṭṭam (where the laboratory of *karbūn* is located in 2025). While the same places reappear, the city's toponymic hypertrophy paradoxically comes to refer to its disembodiment: Cairo is a city that teems above all with what is projected onto it; a city of misfortunes and damnation. This complex link between temporality and space thus signifies a form of uprooting of space from its very place and dehistoricizes the events: Cairo is an image more than a territory, and the revolution a symbol more than a moment. As a place of revolution, Cairo becomes an allegory of chaos, and its characterization has an apophatic dimension.

Even though the city is criss-crossed with checkpoints and street names tracing the itinerary of each character, its precise descriptions destroy its own reality. When West Cairo is bombed, the narrator remarks with clear-sightedness: «I saw thousands standing by the Corniche, watching the bombardment of West Cairo with an extraordinary lack of emotion, as though it were some imaginary city being bombarded in sound and light on a movie screen»[57]. Cairo, thus, has become a space of fiction.

To conclude, we can say that Cairo first appears as a trap-city closing in on its inhabitants, a space of permanent surveillance, utterly hostile, where every open street as well as every hidden corner is a potential ambush. This space, both obstructed and infinite, duplicates the loss of moral landmarks that affects the post-revolutionary Egyptian society imagined by Rabīʿ. Soon, however, this Cairo becomes a kind of mirage-city, absorbed by myth and fiction. The city finally re-enacts the question that ʿUṭārid repeats throughout the novel: Are we on earth, or already in hell? From a desocialized space, the Egyptian capital changed to a dehistoricized and deterritorialized

[56] *Ibid*., p. 341.
[57] *Ibid*., p. 113.

space. In the myth of Pandora, hope remained in the jar, after countless plagues escaped from it to harass humanity. In ʿ*Uṭārid*, nonetheless, hope is undoubtedly the most terrible of plagues, which allows all the others to be perpetuated, as it leads us to believe that the situation could evolve, and thus, perhaps, improve. Yet, not only does it turn out to be illusory, but it also appears to be the source of calamity, as it is the hope for revolutionary freedom that gives rise to chaos.