GODLESS IMMORTALITY:
AL-HAMSHARĪ’S SHELLEY, DANTE
AND ISLAMIC NILE LEGEND

In his explanatory note to Shāṭī‘ al-ʿA’rāf1 (The Shore of al-ʿA’rāf), the Egyptian poet al-Hamsharī (1909-1938) describes the thematic landmarks of the 306 lines of the poem as follows: al-ʿA’rāf is a place between Paradise and Hell; but here in the poem it means an imaginary shore between Life and Death.

After the Poet has died the Muse takes him in her magic boat across the Sea of Time to that shore. The Poet relates what he sees in his journey, the phantasmagoric happenings in the realm of Death until he reaches the Shore of al-ʿA’rāf. At the far horizon in that Sea, there stands a shape of a ruined palace with dark openings through which the water of the Sea of Time disappears in the unknown nothingness. This dark shape is the Tomb of the Nights in which, during Life, remains are buried. As he watches this scene a spectacular procession of magical boats led by one in which an angel is playing on a lyre, passes by. This angel is Life guiding the Elements of Existence, e.g., Beauty, Evil, etc. The procession passes by across the Sea of Time, and disappears in the darkness of the Palace, which is the Tomb of the Nights. Then Nothingness and Silence are all there is in the scene.

The main images therefore, are: the Sea, the Night, the Silence, and the Void.


It is an original work. When you read it you feel it is very much a fluent Arabic poem. Yet there are many influences in it: from English and Italian poetry, especially Dante, as well as from Arabic legend. Where are these ‘influences’?

In the introduction to Memory, the poet awakes on the Ship of Memory sailing on the ‘Sea of thought’. The image is identified with Love, the operative spirit of his pursuit [lines 1-36]. Then the poet plunges into the experiences, first in the Ships of Death, then in the Poet’s Paradise.

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1 Apollo, Vol. I, No. 6 (Feb. 1933), 627-45.
I. Al-Hamsharī and Shelley

In its skeletal structure the visionary theme of Shātī' al-Āfrāf is similar to that of Alastor: or the Spirits of Solitude, particularly the part [lines 205 ff.] which begins with the Poet-protagonist’s decision to ‘overleap the bounds’ [line 207]. Urged to death, he embarks on a frail ‘little shallop’ [line 299] which drifts on ‘the dark and ruffled waters’ [line 319], through cavernous passages and whirlpools. For some time the Poet continues his quest on foot until he comes to the edge of the vast mountain overlooking a void, the threshold of mortality.

Lo! where the pass expands
Its stony jaws, the abrupt mountain breaks,
And seems with its accumulated crags,
To overhang the world: ...

... whilst the broad river,
Foaming and hurrying o’er its rugged path,
Fell into that immeasurable void
Scattering its waters to the passing winds.

[lines 550-570]

Thematically, al-Hamshari’s voyage through the gates of death, to the limits of mortality, is similar in outlines to the Poet’s venture in Alastor. In Shelley’s poem, the protagonist describes the stream in a ‘dazzling wave’:

— ‘O stream!
Whose source is inaccessibly profound,
Whither do thy mysterious waters tend?
Thou imagest my life. Thy darksome stillness,
Thy dazzling waves, thy loud and hollow gulfs,
Thy searchless fountain, and invisible course
Have each their type in me:

[lines 502-8]

Al-Hamsharī addresses Time:

O, Time! Slow down! Where do I tend? Lost on these waves / On a broken wing, hurt by ruffled waters in dark nights / In a rough Sea, where storms roar lamenting quiet suns’ light / Storming it, embracing waves, rushing away never to return.

[lines 37-40]

We know that, as al-Hamsharī proceeds to the Poet’s Paradise, he rejects it. This is no paradisiac state. The real object of his quest is the absolute knowledge of the roots of imagination.

The Poet refuses to stay in the paradise; and accompanies the Muse into a more mysterious region than before. The poem [lines 93-183] is the