TWO SHORT STORIES FROM TUNISIA*

Introductory Note

The art of the short story in Tunisia today presents a picture of great variety, in respect of style, of subject-matter and treatment. Between the extremes of, on the one hand, the work of such writers as Muḥammad al-Ṣahbī al-Ḥājjī, who present a straightforward plot and narration, and on the other of such writers as al-Nāṣir Ṣajāb, who are interested in mental states and experience rather than narrative, there is a varied spectrum of literary achievement represented by such diverse writers as ‘Alī al-Dū‘ājī (Ṣahirat minhu al-layāli), al-Bashīr Khārif (Masbūmah al-fujjī), Muṣṭafā al-Ḥāfīsī (Al-Qanṭarab biya al-hayāt) and ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Dardūrī (Thartharah tajribiyah; Lawḥat min qaryati, etc.).

A Tunisian critic 1 speaks of a contemporary school of Tunisian short story writers (and claims indeed that its roots can be traced back to the Thousand and One Nights), but this suggests a uniformity of approach to the genre by Tunisian writers which does not really exist. 2

We present here translations of two short stories by two of the most interesting of contemporary Tunisian writers.

The first of these, Al-Abāṣī yatbatī‘ub al-zaman, is by al-Nāṣir Ṣajāb, who is at present a member of the Faculty of Arts in the University of Tunis. In this story the narrative describes the unnamed hero getting out of bed in the morning, going to his office and there learning that he has been sacked, but these episodes are merely incidental to the main purpose of the author, which is to portray a man’s mental struggle with Time. Another recent story by al-Nāṣir Ṣajāb which illustrates his preoccupation with mental states and mental oppression is his Maḥāṣṭat madinat al-zalām. 3

The second story, Al-Safar wa’l-hajr al-muḍinī, by Muṣṭafā Madā‘īnī is a sample of ‘narrative as nightmare’; it recalls the work of writers in other Arab countries such as George Sālim 4 and Hāni al-Rāḥib. 5 The story begins as a straightforward

---

* We should like to record our thanks to the Cultural Attaché of the Tunisian Embassy, London, for supplying us with a number of biographical data concerning some of the Tunisian writers mentioned in this article.

2 Unless we arbitrarily exclude certain types of short story as belonging to the genre of the ‘non-story’ (al-lāqiṣṣah), as does ‘Ashūr, ibid., p. 114.
3 An English translation of this story by the present writers has appeared in Contemporary Literature in Translation, No. 19 (1974), pp. 19-21.
4 Cf. his short stories Al-Sādd wa’l-tilāl and Al-Fandūq al-kabīr.
5 Cf. his story Al-Wuḍū'.
narrative, only to change into something like the re-telling of a menacing dream, and similarly ends inconclusively without satisfying the expectations of the reader.

Both these stories appeared in the leading Tunisian literary journal, *Al-Fikr*, which appears monthly, and contains new poetry, fiction, criticism, and occasional long articles on modern philosophy, the Arabic language and other themes.

I. Sensations Devoured by Time

by al-Nāṣir Rajab

*Threshold of Sensation*

The illusory moment of Time is quietly pounded to nothing under the pressure of your thoughts. The scent of the night dissolves into a rank dampness in your nostrils—the scent of night and objects. The scent of cyclic Time. All of them produce in you a reflected sensation. The scent of tobacco-smoke which you force into your lungs. Mocking objects which push your head against the wall of anxiety’s sleeplessness. The illusory moment is split and distracted seconds gush forth from it, moistening your throat. The fragile moment of Time is torn to shreds, and you feel a fleeting excess of tranquillity, of temporary eternity. Objects dance in front of your eyes, and you make no effort to prompt your consciousness. You close your eyes in exhaustion, loathing the darkness. You bestir yourself. You rise from your bed listlessly. You open the window. You look down below, and in front of you is the panorama of the street which is waking up, crowded with life and replete with eternal contrasts. Your features are twisted in disgust—with aversion and pity. You shut the window and the scent of life which had begun to breathe outside dissolves and disappears in the silence which envelops you—in the dumbness which ties the tongue of objects around you. Even the legs of the bed do not groan when you flop down on to it.

‘I perceive that Time passes like a silent arrow, therefore I exist’. All realities are silent, dumb, and the wish to search for reality is a dreadful desire, the prompting of a relentless lust.

The rays of the new morning pour through the window, being reflected on the floor of the room, forming a beam of light. You put out your hand. You take hold of the beam with your fingers. The beam is real, actual. But grasping it is unreal, like your sensation of the conscious current of Time pressing upon you from within yourself. This current passes quickly, to leave your consciousness a desert without dimensions, without depths. Then you discern nothing but a fine thread twisted round your neck as though it were trying to strangle you. And you forget all about the sunbeams, tossing them into unconsciousness.