

## ESSAY

# Palms behind the Smog: Strange Energies in *Mawsim al-hijra ilā al-shimāl* (Season of Migration to the North)

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The Sudanese writer al-Tayyib Salih (1929–2009) arrived in London in February 1953, two months after the Great Smog of London (4–10 December 1952), whose toxic aftermath led to an estimated twelve thousand deaths (Corton 284). A legacy of London's industrial revolution and the result of smoke from domestic carbon burners, factory chimneys, and workshops combining with periods of dank cold, the "Great Killer Smog" was followed by periods of severe air pollution throughout 1953. Smog filled the newspapers and was the subject of an ongoing debate in Parliament (298). The National Health Service distributed protective masks to those with underlying health problems (299). In short, smog would have been one of Salih's first impressions of London, through both its immediate presence in cold, dark streets and the increasingly urgent discourses surrounding it. Ultimately, smog propelled the first Clean Air Act, in 1956, a harbinger of the global environmentalist agenda.

In *على الدرب مع الطيب صالح* ('*Ala al-darb ma' al-Tayyib Ṣāliḥ; On the Road with al-Tayyib Salih*), a series of autobiographical interviews with Talha Jibril, Salih refers to this smog:

وصلت إلى لندن في شتاء عام 1953. عند وصولي لسعني البرد، واحسست بزمهرير داخلي... فاجأتني هذا الطقس، فقد جئت من منطقة حارة، وهأنذا أصل إلى منطقة باردة جداً. كانت هناك سحابة من دخان اسود فوق سماء لندن، هذه السحابة نتيجة اختلاط دخان الفحم الحجري مع الضباب وهو ما يطلق عليه الانجليز كلمة "smog" ونظروا للاستعمال الكثيف للفحم الحجري في تدفئة المنازل خلال تلك الفترة، فان السواد كان يغطي سماء لندن باستمرار. (qtd. in Jibril 51)

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I arrived in London in the winter of 1953. The cold stung me. I felt a shivering frost across my insides. The climate surprised me. I had come from a hot region, and here I was in a very cold region. A cloud of black smoke covered the London sky; a mix of carbon dust and fog. The English call this “smog.” Because of the dense usage of coal to heat houses at the time, the London sky was constantly covered in blackness.<sup>1</sup>

Salih describes the winter this way:

(113) شتاء من أفضع الشتاءات التي عرفتها انكلترا

one of the worst winters England has known.

His sense of social alienation is bound up with these conditions, which form part of a significant, even formative, nexus of climate and energy aesthetics in his fiction, spanning geographies and essential to the tense emotional world he weaves through syntax, imagery, character, plot, and intertextuality.<sup>2</sup> Shifting between extremities and anomalies of heat, cold, flooding, and aridity, as well as motion and stillness, Salih’s writing entangles inner and outer states, establishing the physicality of the human as one element amid a wider unsettled whole, a global mixture of snow, sand, coal dust, disease, water, and petroleum. Energy, above all, is a central theme within his writing. He himself describes his characters as “طاقات” (*tāqāt*; “energies”), a term that comprises the new material and technological energies that animated the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the rapid processes of social and political change they brought, and the sublime, spiritual energy never fully absent from Salih’s writing (qtd. in Jibril 120).<sup>3</sup> Across his oeuvre, these energies stand in productive tension, alternating between an uneasy celebration of the new era of industrial technology and a vision of a larger totality, which appears at times to be meaningfully and divinely guided and at others to be heedless, amoral, and liable to chaos. Underscoring all is a consciousness of potentially apocalyptic shifts and a sense of finiteness torn between the sublimation of Sufi annihilation (*fanā*) and the disorientation of rapid technological advances and transformations.

In exploring these dimensions in his most famous novel, موسم الهجرة إلى الشمال (1966; *Mawsim al-hijra ilā al-shimāl*; *Season of Migration to the North*), I build on studies that explore American Cold War imperialism in his writing (Holt), its emphasis on physical affect (El-Ariss) and on unseen “systems” structuring human and nonhuman life (Samatar, *Nonstandard Space*), and its decentralizing of the human in an “Anthropocene poetics” (Fekadu).<sup>4</sup> Entangled with the novel’s post-colonial critique, I propose, is a specifically ecological dimension structuring its noted uncanniness (see Al-Halool). I suggest a reading of Mustafa Sa‘id—a character of multiple, baffling aspects—as what Salih, drawing on the German philosopher of history Oswald Spengler (1880–1936), refers to as “Faustian man” (*Tayeb Salih Speaks* 33), a figure driven by the processes of channeling, storing, and consuming energy that mark technological modernity, yet also as a character who uncannily transforms into something nonhuman, caught within the wider energies of the industrializing world. Mustafa embodies the “doom” of Spengler’s “Faustian Culture,” a concept Spengler devised during the bitter aftermath of the First World War in his book *The Decline of the West*, as “energies” became “distinctly technological” and geared toward large-scale warfare (Frye 299). Mustafa must, I argue, be understood not merely as the phantom avenger of colonial traumas but as a herald, announcing the demise of imperial powers and embodying unease in new regimes of extractivism, energy, and consumption.

Mustafa thus represents a figurehead for the wider turn of modern Arabic literature to the spectral, uncanny, and apocalyptic, as it registers changes in energy regimes and land usage. Literary works from the *nahḍa* (“Arab renaissance”), which marks the beginning of industrial modernity in the region and a global shift to fossil fuel, are shaped and haunted by new mobilities, forces, and pressures. In structurally experimental novels from the 1960s on, narratives open onto larger-than-human expanses in the form of riddles and mysteries as the human becomes lost within complex force fields. Reading novels of the ensuing decades through the

lens of ecological experimentation provides nuance to both the predominantly sociopolitical readings that have dominated their reception and assumptions about the widespread absence of energy anxiety, ecological concern, and oil in Arabic and world literature during the twentieth century. In the writing of recognized environmentalist thinkers like ‘Abd al-Rahman Munif and Ibrahim al-Kuni, and others such as Imil Habibi, Huda Barakat, and Salih himself, who have been read primarily through other prisms, setting shapes character and determines plot through dark, haunted ecologies and strange energies that prompt both heady optimism and intense anxiety.<sup>5</sup> These writings represent a forerunner to the recent dark ecological turn of literary criticism and the formalization of discourses around global warming and the Anthropocene, refusing what Stacey Balkan and Swaralipi Nandi term the “stark invisibility of energy systems, along with the Indigenous communities removed in the interest of extractivist networks of accumulation that have long powered cities in the Global North” (2–3).

### Nile Agriculture and New Technologies

That such a charged agricultural and energy consciousness shapes Salih’s writing is unsurprising, given that Salih hails from a farming community that tills a narrow strip of land paralleling the Nile banks. His idyllic childhood love of this landscape echoes across and beyond his fiction, and he stresses the formative effects of his years of labor, tending livestock, collecting dates, and digging and sowing fields (Jibril 34). Motivated by his farming background, Salih began studying agricultural science at Khartoum University but soon abandoned it in favor of literature, beginning his path toward smog-ridden London and a fictional project invested in the land of his home country (44).

The 1950s was a turning point not just for Salih but also for Sudanese agriculture, the most important source of revenue in Sudan. In preceding years, drought and the effects of desertification had led many to migrate north to Egypt or south to the Gezira (Jibril 24). Simultaneously, agriculture

had been rapidly mechanized under the Anglo-Egyptian condominium (1899–1956), aiming to mitigate seasonal precarity and develop cotton as a cash crop. Managing the Nile’s annual fluctuations was particularly important. The Sennar Dam, completed in 1925, formed the foundation for the Gezira Scheme (*mashrū‘ al-jazīra*), which remains one of the largest irrigation projects in the world. As Harry Verhoeven remarks, “The Gezira scheme was the jewel in the crown [of British imperialism], both in hard material terms and as a modernist symbol of how British mandarins envisaged civilisation through the control of water and labour” (59). It was emblematic of a high-modernist, centralized, and top-down approach to Sudanese agriculture, initiated under the Albanian-Ottoman governor of Egypt Muhammad ‘Ali (1769–1849) and continued by the British and post-Independence governments (42). Sudan was envisioned as a dry, famine-ridden land, but, if redeemed through technology, a potential breadbasket of the region.

The Sennar Dam is briefly mentioned in *Mawsim* as the narrator takes the train from Khartoum to El-Obaid in the south, experiencing the fleeting sensation of crossing “هوة سحيقة ليس لها قرار” (“a vast bottomless abyss”; Salih, *Mawsim* 58; *Season* 54). Such moments, which Wail Hassan terms the quintessential “Salihian moment” of being “outside the boundaries of time and place,” are frequent in *Mawsim* and are most often connected to the resurgence of repressed colonial traumas (73). These moments, however, also reveal with tantalizing brevity spaces of dramatic ecological transformation. The railway line on which the narrator travels crosses the dam itself, giving an impression of the abyss forty meters below. Going north in the 1920s, Mustafa similarly passes Wadi Halfa, whose old town would be destroyed by flooding in 1964 during construction of the Aswan High Dam. In both moments, train travel combines with abyssal visions and previsions of monumental, high-modernist irrigation schemes. As Sofia Samatar suggests, the train itself also forms an important part of the novel’s aesthetics of “partial snapshots” (“Verticality” 31) and “what David Harvey calls ‘time-space compression’” (30), conveying the

disorientation of technological modernity as it transforms the ecology of the land. Together, the train, steaming back and forth; the Nile, on which water pumps putter; and the novel's other formative energies evoke momentous shifts in what Timothy Mitchell terms the "flow of fossil energy," whether coal or oil, and its profound interconnection with imperialism (18).<sup>6</sup>

Salih was, however, by no means opposed to technological transformations. His sojourn in London coincided with a turning point in smog management, as energy use shifted from coal to petroleum, then perceived to be a cleaner, more salutary form of energy.<sup>7</sup> His description of his time as a civil servant in Qatar further suggests a pragmatic optimism in the potential for channeling oil wealth for good. He arrived in Doha in 1974, at the beginning of the oil boom, which, according to Salih, was a period of building, growth, and economic flourishing (see Jibril 64, 67). In what follows, I explore tensions between the heady promise of new energies in his work and the overwhelming speed that threatens to derail plot, character, and community, focusing on how characters' emotions and trajectories become entangled in networks of climatic and technological extremes. My discussion tracks the entanglements of different forms of material energy through the novel, from coal to petroleum, solar, and hydro, and how they chart a shift from the murky remains of coal-powered imperialism to the seemingly optimistic new energies of nation building and the shadowy hints of oil-driven neo-imperialism.

As one example of the reading I propose, the "ضباب" ("fog") and "ثلج" ("ice"; Salih, *Mawsim* 5; *Season* 1) that the narrator of *Mawsim* evokes at the novel's start to express the disorientation of his Sudanese homecoming, may be read as an echo of the physical disorientation of London smog in winter. Yet more resonantly, Mustafa Sa' id murders Jean Morris on an uncannily familiar glacial London night:

ذات مساء داكن في شهر فبراير. درجة الحرارة عشر درجات تحت الصفر. المساء مثل الصباح، مثل الليل داكن مكفهر، لم تشرق الشمس طيلة اثنين وعشرين يوماً. . . في ليلة مثل هذه تحدث الأعمال الجسيمة. هذه ليلة الحساب . (164–65)

It was a dark evening in February, the temperature ten degrees below zero. Evening was like morning, morning like night—dark and gloomy. The sun had not shone for twenty-two days. . . . On a night such as this, momentous deeds occur. This was the night of reckoning. (162)

The line "evening was like morning, morning like night" mirrors descriptions of smog by London journalists from the 1920s, when Mustafa was there. Articles from that time in *The Times* and the *Evening Standard* described "a day of darkest night" and a city that appeared "as if the sun had never risen" (Corton 241, 260). As Mustafa makes his way to Jean, whom he will ultimately murder, he evocatively conjures these conditions. So too does he conjure the dystopic and crime genres that developed around them in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Britain, exemplified by the urban gloom of Dickens, fictionalized and filmic iterations of the Jack the Ripper story, and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), which, like *Mawsim*, plays on the uncanniness of the doppelgänger or alter ego (Corton 124). As Christine Corton comments, smog in literature was linked to poverty, moral degradation, and the spectral (271). In Salih's *Mawsim*, it mirrors the torrid inner state of Mustafa as he walks feverishly, dripping sweat in the freezing air (*Mawsim* 165; *Season* 162). As he stalks the city streets, his ambiguous social status in Britain and Sudan—accepted yet anomalous, and set apart by his speed and energy—becomes bound up with the conditions. The scene, toward the end of the novel, therefore forms an important piece of its climate consciousness, whereby Mustafa is linked to extremes of weather, energy regimes, and motion, as though his emotions and conduct reflect the upheavals of modern industrializing societies as they struggle to manage volatile geographies, whether in Britain or Sudan. As Salih has stated, the original impetus behind *Mawsim* was "to write a straightforward thriller, a thriller about a crime of passion" (qtd. in Amyuni, Introduction 15). The "straightforward thriller" subsequently became a cutting critique of Orientalist discourse and an expression of postcolonial malaise. Echoes of it nonetheless remain in

the unease of industrialized London. Overarching all is a sense of fragility and finiteness, captured by reference to the Islamic “ليلة الحساب” (“night of reckoning”; Salih, *Mawsim* 165; *Season* 162).

Elsewhere in the novel, though, Britain is described in pastoral terms: the lush motherland of empire. From a train window, Mustafa marvels over the green, misty view of the neatly ordered countryside:

هذا عالم منظم، بيوته وحقوله وأشجاره مرسومة وفقاً لخطة. الغدران كذلك، لا تتعرج، بل تسيل بين شطآن صناعية. (31)

This is an ordered world; its houses, fields, and trees are ranged in accordance with a plan. The streams too do not follow a zigzag course but flow between artificial banks. (27)

The land that Mustafa admires is subject to the centralized planning that would allow large-scale production, while the artificial banks he admires bespeak the canals so crucial to the Industrial Revolution and through which coal first began to circulate in large quantities.<sup>8</sup> Later, he eulogizes the rhythmic change of the British seasons (39; 36), while the novel’s narrator discovers drawings of English country “مناظر” (“scenes”; 153; 151) in his secret room in Sudan, alongside pencil sketches of scenes from the Sudanese village. As these examples suggest, order, predictability, and clemency are celebrated through the romanticizing gaze of both Mustafa and the narrator, who frequently crafts descriptive landscapes of Wad Hamid, the Sudanese village on the bend of the Nile where most of the novel takes place. Yet unease becomes apparent through the freakish extremities that bind Sudan and England equally. Mustafa tells his story of a freezing London night on what is repeatedly described as “ذات ليلة مظلمة قانطة” (“a dark and torrid night”; 56; 52) in Wad Hamid. He later disappears into the Nile on another “ليلة قانطة” (“torrid night”; 49; 45) during a year of particularly high floods. Just as Mustafa extols the virtues of managing nature, so is his narrative subsumed within and interrupted by anomalous climatic forces.

Interruption of the romantic pastoral is, I suggest, formative to the novel’s uncanniness, which previous scholarship has identified with anxiety over technological modernity, the material legacy of British colonialism, and the neocolonialism of America and independent Sudanese governments (Holt 82; Fekadu 265). Samatar aptly comments that *Mawsim* is situated in “an oppressive global modernity, and the strategy that exposes it is the uncanny” (*Nonstandard Space* 88). Specifically, the uncanny exposes the raw energies that motor global modernity, bringing new speed to life and narrative fiction, but that are also uneasily apprehended as Faustian pact, leading to imbalance and collapse. As Patricia Yaeger comments, we must “contemplate literature’s relation to the raucous, invisible, energy-producing atoms that generate world economies and motor our reading” (307). With its latent smog and its constant movement north and south, by way of train, steamer, and truck, *Mawsim* provides a case in point. So, too, does it speak to the dark turn of ecocriticism developed through the work of Timothy Morton, Taylor Eggan, Amitav Ghosh, and others. Looking to Freud’s description of “*das Unheimliche*” as “that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar” (*Uncanny* 124), the “familiar” is understood as the reemergence of the nonhuman within human consciousness and culture from a previous state of invisibility, no longer merely the passive object of human machinations. Literary imaginings of home or landscape are problematized and the materiality and contingency of the human emphasized. Ghosh, for example, evokes the sudden, uncomfortable consciousness of the “energy that surrounds us, flowing under our feet and through wires in our walls, animating our vehicles and illuminating our rooms” (5). Morton suggests the uncanniness of living through global warming, in which the homeliness of familiar, seasonal weather gives way to “weird weather, this global warming weather” (55). Eggan proposes to “[open] ecology to a Freudian logic” (12), tracing the “proliferative materiality” of texts (173), where the structures of home break down into “ghostliness and fragmentation” (203).

In what follows, I trace Salih's parodic forays into romanticism and their uncanny interruption, and his use of Faustian archetype in depicting Mustafa. I then turn to literary intertexts from Arabic literary *turāth* ("heritage"), specifically poetry, the Qur'an, and Sufism. Through this heritage, Salih navigates a world of changing energies, exemplified most clearly in the novel's desert journey, which offers a powerful vision of cosmic, Sufi-inspired balance on the one hand and chaos, indifference, and disruptive modern energies on the other. This tension, I argue, underlies Salih's broader literary project, from the proposed title for his first collection of short stories, *الحركة والسكون* (*al-Ḥaraka wa-l-sukūn; Movement and Stillness*), to his two-part novel, *بندر شاه* (*Bandarshāh; Bandarshah*), and his final short story, "يوم مبارك على شاطئ أم باب" ("Yawm mubārak 'alā shāṭi' Umm Bāb"; "A Blessed Day on Umm Bab").

### Troubled Landscapes

The unnamed narrator of *Mawsim* is a young Sudanese man who, as the novel opens, has returned from Britain, where he has been studying for seven years, and is addressing an unspecified group of gentlemen to apprise them of events following his return. Initial idyllic description of his return to tribe and family is swiftly interrupted by the enigmatic Mustafa Sa'ed, who has become an integral part of the farming community in his absence. After the narrator hears Mustafa recite perfect English verse while Mustafa is drunk one night, his uneasy obsession grows, and, confronting him, he finds himself singled out to receive Mustafa's confession of his time in Britain in the 1920s and 1930s. Relaying his amorous adventures, murder of his wife Jean, and trial in the Old Bailey, Mustafa takes over the narrative. Soon after that he disappears, believed to have drowned in the Nile, and leaves the narrator with responsibility for his second wife, two sons, and material possessions. The novel ends with catastrophe, as Mustafa's widow, Husna bint Mahmud, is forced into marriage with the elderly Wad al-Rayyis and, after he attempts to rape her, kills first him and then herself.

Forced to crisis point, the narrator wades into the Nile, contemplating his own drowning at the novel's end. Thus culminates a novel of crisis and disintegration, deeply engaged with past traumas of the colonial period. Yet the novel is future-oriented too, opening onto the abyss of the present. Throughout, the narrator's attempts at clarity, control, and calculation are threatened by the cliff edge of chaos, embodied by the strange energies of Mustafa and exemplified midway through the novel when the narrator is strangely compelled to list, in precise detail, what Mustafa left following his death:

مصطفى سعيد ترك، بعد موته، ستة أفدنة، وثلاث بقرات وثوراً، وحمارين، واحدى عشرة عنزا، وخمس نعجات، وثلاثين نخلة، وثلاثا وعشرين شجرة بين سنط وطلح وحرار، وخمسا وعشرين شجرة ليمون ومثلها برتقال، وتسعة أراب قمح وتسعة ذرة . . .  
(Salih, *Mawsim* 59)

On his death Mustafa Sa'ed left six acres, three cows, an ox, two donkeys, ten goats, five sheep, thirty date palms, twenty-three acacia, sayal and harrar trees, twenty-five lemon, and a like number of orange trees, nine ardebs of wheat and nine of maize. . . .

(*Season* 56)

The narrator's dinner companion, another returnee from Britain, responds to these words, spoken "دون وعي" ("without realising it"; 59; 56), with the equally strange question of whether the narrator is Mustafa's son. The incident represents one of several instances where deliberate thought is overtaken by subliminal forces and the ghosts of troubled history. Yet this dialogue also reveals a desire to calculate and control the land and its energies, compensating for the narrator's deep sense of uprootedness, caused both by his travels to England and by the changes he perceives upon his return. It forms the uncanny double to the narrator's more pastoral landscape descriptions, which, as Sarah Fekadu comments, are imbued with his need for "realignment with the social environment" (265). These descriptions intersperse action and dialogue and appear at the beginning and end of chapters, bookending Mustafa's story of his time in Britain and Mustafa's subsequent disappearance, as though reanchoring the narrator in

familiar terrain. Sitting beneath an acacia tree by the Nile, the narrator frames modernity as part of a natural order, as though in filmic panorama:

من مكاني تحت الشجرة، رأيت البلد يتغير في ببطء. راحت السواقي . وقامت على الضفة النيل طلمبات لضخ الماء، كل مكنة تؤدي عمل مائة ساقية. ورأيت الضفة تتقهقر عاماً بعد عام أمام لطمات الماء، وفي جانب آخر يتقهقر الماء أمامها. وكانت تخطر في ذهني أحياناً أفكار غريبة. كنت أفكر، وأنا أرى الشاطئ يضيق في مكان، ويتسع في مكان، أن ذلك شأن الحياة، تعطي بيد وتأخذ باليد الأخرى. (Salih, *Mawsim* 8–9)

From my position under the tree I saw the village slowly undergo a change: the water-wheels disappeared to be replaced on the bank of the Nile by pumps, each one doing the work of a hundred water-wheels. I saw the bank retreating year after year in front of the thrustings of the water, while on another part it was the water that retreated. Sometimes strange thoughts would come to my mind. Seeing the bank contracting at one place and expanding at another, I would think that such was life: with a hand it gives, with the other it takes. (*Season* 4–5)<sup>9</sup>

The narrator belies any sense of unease over the new pumps and shifting waterscapes that were a central feature of agricultural mechanization in the 1950s. The passage's balanced syntax of disappearance and replacement, contraction and expansion, and give-and-take echoes the Nile's ebb and flow, naturalizing the new energies at work, while phrases like “راحت السواقي” (“the waterwheels went”; 8–9; my trans.) and the later reference to how “جاءت مكنت الماء” (“the water pumps came”; 51; my trans.) remove human agency from installation of these new technologies. Neatly precluding any lingering unease, the narrator's maxim of give-and-take—“such was life: with a hand it gives, with the other it takes”—mimics the Nile's ebb and flow, belying the more drastic, human-made changes to the river that can be gleaned between his words: “I saw the bank retreating year after year in front of the thrustings of the water, while on another part it was the water that retreated.”

Yet the notion of the landscape changing “slowly” soon clashes, in the novel's broader ecology, with the speed with which Mustafa is

associated. The narrator's “strange thoughts”—which, by most metrics, are not particularly strange at all—anticipate the far more unsettling implications of Mustafa's swift trajectories. As Fekadu comments, “modernity, in the form of industrialization and the extraction of natural resources, has found its way even into the remotest parts of the Sudan, thus tempering any attempt to romanticize the natural landscape” (263). While the narrator attempts to “repress” this reality (Fekadu 264), stating again and again that he knows the land, uncanny realizations undermine this conviction. The narrator's moment of obsessive listing may therefore be read as a last attempt to tie Mustafa to the basic facts of land ownership and agricultural production. The romantic descriptions through which the narrator attempts to rediscover the land he has returned to, and the person he was upon his departure for England, are consistently disrupted by Mustafa and the wider force fields of industrial energies he embodies. So the narrator must instead fall back on the basics of the possessions that Mustafa bequeathed him (another eerie echo of Jekyll and Hyde, in which Jekyll similarly leaves Hyde all he owns). Literary language has failed to naturalize the land, which must instead be contained through number.

In these passages Salih evokes, parodies, and interrupts romanticism—which Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy calls “an English tradition of natural description that expects nature to please, a tradition that lives in the word ‘landscape’ and its associations with painting and the picturesque” (624)—and refuses the possibility of homecoming, both postcolonial and ecological. As Samah Selim suggests, such descriptions of “the peasant and the landscapes of the countryside” were emblematic of modern Arab nationalist discourses, specifically in Egypt of the 1940s and 1950s (91). Upriver, in the Sudan of the 1960s, the impulse to romanticize the landscape is disrupted as phantoms disturb the serene confluence of human consciousness and nonhuman landscape, making Salih's a key early voice in the dark ecological turn of the Arabic novel, in which unease over the land coincides with literary experimentalism and the resurgence of jinn, ghouls, and

phantoms. Salih himself suggests that his use of magical realism is a significant break from dominant realist trends of the time, compelled by the nonrationalist, Sufi, and folkloric cultures of Wad Hamid (al-Tayyib 56). In *Mawsim*, however, fantasy more compellingly conveys the uncanny resurgence not just of colonial traumas but of the unknown implications of new technologies, motions, and energies. While phantoms do not feature explicitly, Mustafa himself becomes an anomalous, even nonhuman, presence traversing a newly industrialized world.

### A Novel of Energy

In one of the culminating scenes of *Mawsim*, continuing the tone and theme of the crime-of-passion thriller, the narrator rifles through Mustafa's secret room, looking for clues to unravel his mysterious persona and shed light on the murder Mustafa committed amid the dark smog of London. Finding an issue of *The Times* from 26 September 1927, he ponders its significance:

انها الصحيفة الوحيدة فيما يبدو. هل وجودها هنا له أي مدلول؟ أو انها محض صدفة؟  
(Salih, *Mawsim* 152)

It appeared to be the only newspaper. Was there any significance in its presence here or was it here by mere chance?  
(*Season* 150)

The articles he peruses present a series of seemingly random occurrences, but all are connected by the new flows of fossil fuels and the imperial projects they permitted. A heady world is envisioned in which the promise of new discovery coincides with the anxiety of a strange and never fully controllable new world. He reads, for example, of Blue Persian cats for sale, elephants from Rangoon walking from the docks to the zoo, a man sent to prison for stealing bananas, heavy rains in Switzerland, a cattle breeder gored by his own bull, and Captain Scott's *Discovery* returning from the Southern Seas.<sup>10</sup> The newspaper's leading article alludes to oil:

المقالة الافتتاحية عن معاهدة جدة التي وقعها سير غلبرت كليتين بالنيابة عن بريطانيا العظمى والأمير فيصل عبد العزيز آل سعود نيابة عن أبيه ملك الحجاز ونجد ومحبياتها.  
(152)

The leading article was about the Treaty of Jeddah which was signed by Sir Gilbert Clayton on behalf of Great Britain and Prince Feisal Abdul-Aziz Al Saud on behalf of his father, the King of the Hejaz and of Nejd and its dependencies. (150)

The 1927 Treaty of Jeddah recognized the sovereignty of the Al Saud family in the Arabian Peninsula, providing the political stability that permitted serious oil prospecting in the 1930s. Whether or not this article, and the newspaper more broadly, hint at episodes from Mustafa's life between his departure from England in the early 1940s and arrival in Wad Hamid in 1948,<sup>11</sup> they link him to new energy economies, emphasized by rumors of his work in the Middle East for the Foreign Office and his declaration that, as a child,

العالم الواسع أراه في دروس الجغرافيا، كأنه رقعة شطرنج. (26)

I viewed the vast world in the geography lessons as though it were a chess board. (22)

As Elizabeth Holt suggests, "American Cold War cultural imperialism" and its entanglements in petroleum are therefore important contexts for the novel (70). For Holt, *Mawsim* is torn between pragmatic acceptance of this new order and an underlying unease. This is particularly manifested through Mustafa's associations with energy, as the novel describes the harnessing of energy, both human and nonhuman, and its resistance to control.

Critics such as Samatar have suggested the underlying narrative energy of Salih's fiction: "If the energy of *Wedding* is directed toward making a fragmented world whole, and the energy of *Season* toward unmaking a diseased world, the primary project of *Bandarshah* is to illuminate the role of narrative in the world-making process (*Nonstandard Space* 130)." Salih himself describes his characters in terms of energies:

ثم هناك حوار بيني وبين نفسي، فإذا كان هناك من يتابع ما أكتبه على قلنته، سيجد الصور نفسها، أغلبها يميناً وشمالاً وأحياناً أنفياً وتارة أثبتتها... .



لذلك ستلاحظ أن مصطفى سعيد ذهب مع الأمواج . . . الناس تقول إلى أين ذهب، هذا ليس مهماً، فبعد سنوات أو قبل ذلك الله أعلم، يخرج ضوء البيت من البحر. وكأنما الطاقة نفسها ظهرت بشكل آخر وفي مكان آخر. . . .  
هذا هو المهم . . . المهم أن الطاقة تظهر من جديد . . . .

(qtd. in Jibril 120)

There is a dialogue within myself, and anyone who follows the little that I write will find the same, recurring visions. I turn them to the left and to the right, sometimes I banish them and sometimes I restore them. . . .

Thus, you notice that Mustafa Said went with the waves. People ask: Where did he go? It does not matter. Years later or earlier, only God knows, Daw al-Bayt comes out of the river, and it was as if the energy itself reappeared in a different form and another place. . . .

That is what matters. . . . What is important is that the energy reappears. . . .

In *Mawsim*, the repeated noun طاقة (*tāqa*) is suggestive equally of productive energy and its destructive twin: that which exceeds bounds, evoked through the collocation “ما لا يطاق” (*mā lā yuṭāq*; “the unbearable”), which itself is found in the Qur’anic invocation of God: “لا تحمّلنا ما لا طاقة لنا به” (“Do not lay upon us what we have no power to bear”; Qur’an 2.286).<sup>12</sup> This dichotomy parallels that of the Freudian life and death instincts, whose influence Salih has acknowledged in his writing of the novel (Amyuni 15) and whose own theorizing was prompted by Freud’s perception of humanity’s unprecedented new state of control over nature. For Freud, this control was to be celebrated, the “fulfilment of an age-old longing” (*Civilization* 26), yet it also reveals a dark paradox within civilization, in which the more material ease humanity enjoys the more aware it becomes of the fatal, structuring conflict within it, between productive, life-affirming instincts and destructive death drive.

In *Mawsim*, this dichotomy resonates with the fear that humanity might lose control of the productive energies it has unleashed. In all his guises, as farmer, member of the Agricultural Project Committee, and economist, Mustafa is marked by productiveness on the one hand and the unpleasantly unexpected on

the other, frequently associated with words using the root *f-j-ʿ*, denoting “surprise.” His unnatural energy produces unusual yields, hinted at in the commercially inflected way he describes his “عينة من ثمر الحقل” (“sample from the fruit of the field”; Salih, *Mawsim* 11; *Season* 7), brought in while all the other workers are slumbering, and his blunt non sequitur about how

بعض فروع هذه الشجرة تثمر ليموناً، وبعضها تثمر برتقالاً. (19)

[s]ome of the branches of this tree produce lemons, others oranges. (15)

Both moments appear jarring, momentarily shifting focus from the drama of Mustafa and narrator to the new ways that Mustafa discusses and works the land.<sup>13</sup> Mustafa’s association with energy is similarly conveyed through his participation in the Agricultural Committee, where he urges the need for “فوضى” (“order”), without which there is “فوضى” (“chaos”; 16; 12). His participation is observed by the narrator as an injection of energy: “وفجأة رأيت مصطفى يهب واقفاً” (“Suddenly, I saw Mustafa jump to his feet”; 16; 12). Calling for fair water distribution, Mustafa is widely recognized as having enriched the committee. Yet he refuses to become its leader, and this refusal is bound into his self-apprehension as a source of potential destruction, anchored in his portrayal through energy regimes and the Faustian literary archetype, in which productivity and intensity, and chaos and doom, go hand in hand.

### Faust, the Tragic Technic

In several interviews Salih has referred to the presence of “Faustian man” in his novels, describing both Mustafa and Bandarshah as “strong characters that want to confront the forces of nature” (*Tayeb Salih Speaks* 33):

[B]oth are Faustian characters displaying human arrogance. . . . They are characters whom I do not like for they cause a lot of conflict, because the germ of destruction is inherent in their original formation. They are active and operative characters. The

European Man is Faustian compared to the Arab Muslim. These characters want to destroy the purity of the Universe. (33–34)

Salih's evocation of Faustian man refers, as he later specifies (40), to the writing of Spengler concerning the advance of northern civilizations obsessed with "perpetual motion," consumption, and energy (Spengler 94). Numerous resonances with Spengler's Faustian culture, outlined in *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (1918–22; *The Decline of the West*) and *Der Mensch und die Technik* (1931; *Man and Technics*), can be traced within Mustafa. Spengler describes the "hard races" of the North, "with intellects sharpened to the keenest, and the cold fires of an unrestrained passion for fighting, risking, thrusting forward" (78). For Spengler, Faustian man is a "slave of his thought" (30) and "a foe to everyone, killing, hating, resolute to conquer or die" (78). Above all, Faustian man is concerned with harnessing "the forces of inorganic Nature—the invisible energy manifested in all that happens" (83). Mustafa, too, is depicted through his cold intellect, his irrevocable march north, and his trajectory of conquest and death, setting him alongside Faust, who has long been understood as "one of the archetypal manifestations of modern Western experience" (Werres 2), embodying "technology-driven progress as part of a diabolic design to destroy our planet's equilibrium" (13), going back to the Industrial Revolution, when "men entered into a Faustian bargain with the machine" (13).

Salih plays with the Faust archetype and its tragic conventions in various ways, from portraying Jean Morris as Mustafa's Mephistopheles to imagining Western education as Mustafa's version of manipulating the material world. His childhood brilliance comes at the expense of joy—a devilish compromise that sets him apart and denies him happiness—and he presents his early education in physical, chemical terms:

ما ألبث أن أركز عقلي في مشكلة حتى تنفتح لي مغالقتها، تذوب بين يدي كأنها قطعة ملح وضعتها في الماء. (Salih, *Mawsim* 26)

No sooner had I set my mind to a problem in arithmetic than its intricacies opened up to me, melted away in my hands as though they were a piece of salt I had placed in water. (*Season* 22)

Mustafa exemplifies what Marshall Berman calls the Faustian "long-haired boy"—an intellectual non-conformist, a marginal and suspicious character.<sup>14</sup> Berman continues, "In all versions [of the Faust story], too, the tragedy or comedy comes when Faust 'loses control' of the energies of his mind, which then proceed to take on a dynamic and highly explosive life of their own" (38). Like Faust's, Mustafa's trajectory appears both tragic and comic, and the narrator describes his confession in bathetic terms as his "مهزلة" ("farce"; Salih, *Mawsim* 156; *Season* 154). As with Faust, the victims of Mustafa's Faustian pact, in which intellectual brilliance comes at the expense of belonging and meaningful relationships, extend beyond himself, to the women of Britain and Sudan and to the social order of Wad Hamid.

The uncontrollable "energies" to which Berman refers are, however, a more attenuated presence in the novel, as Mustafa is associated with new energy regimes, hinted at in his defense lawyer's argument that it was not Mustafa who killed his lovers, but "جرثوم مرض عضال أصابهما منذ ألف عام" ("the germ of a deadly disease that assailed them a thousand years ago"; 36–37; 33). As Susan Stanford Friedman comments, this statement problematically removes Mustafa's agency, "buying into the myth of the colonized victim and denying him the dignity of free will and moral responsibility for his actions" (231). It also, however, entangles the "noble hero" of Faustian tragedy with wider forces, "the germ of a deadly disease" that, through reference to the "thousand years," is suggestive of Faustian culture, whose "spring" Spengler traces to the medieval period and whose winter he pinpoints in the nineteenth century (Frye 299). Mustafa's actions—however purposeful Mustafa claims them to be—are therefore bound up with this wider culture, making him both a victim of the colonial order and a harbringer of Faustian demise.

Mustafa might even be understood, in these terms, and at certain distinct moments of the novel, as a dispersed, shifting nonhuman force, evocative of what Morton terms a “hyperobject”: “things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans. . . the very long-lasting product of direct human manufacture, such as Styrofoam or plastic bags, or the sum of all the whirling machinery of capitalism” (2). Our experience of hyperobjects is, as Morton suggests, inherently uncanny, and Salih compellingly articulates such an uncanniness through the portrayal of Mustafa. Specifically, the uncanniness of wider force fields resonates through the three semantic fields most consistently linked to him: the fantastical, mechanical, and elemental.<sup>15</sup> In different ways, these fields associate Mustafa with sudden and unpredictable energies that are difficult to harness and control. Through often incongruous similes and metaphors, Mustafa transforms into a novelistic pulse of energy, a precursor to the recent posthuman turn in Arabic literature. Prominent in Arabic fiction and scholarship on it, this turn explores the ontological destabilization of the human through transformations to or entanglements with the nonhuman (whether animal, monster, or cyborg).<sup>16</sup> While most scholarship has traced this turn to conditions of war, particularly the 2003 American-led invasion of Iraq, *Mawsim* suggests another origin in narratives motivated by changing energy regimes.

### Fantastical, Mechanical, Elemental

Mustafa is repeatedly portrayed as acting “كأنه يسابق الزمن” (“as though he were racing time”; Salih, *Mawim* 126; *Season* 129), his speed testing the boundaries between human and nonhuman. From the first, he is shaped through excess motion. He spends his adolescence “في المشي مسافات طويلة” (“going for long walks”; 55; 52), and while in Britain he travels by car “بسرعة رهيبية” (“with terrifying speed”; 145; 142) between Oxford and London. As Anne Hammond relinquishes the wheel to embrace him before stopping at a pub, the pair evoke the Roaring Twenties as much as the “foggy twenties” of smog-ridden London (Corton 242), equally steeped in changing

energy regimes. Later, as he moves by train and across continents, Mustafa continues to be associated with energy expenditure, initially through his use of new transport technologies but then, progressively, through his association with the raw forces of light, movement, and water, and his ultimate disappearance in the swelling waters of the Nile.

Mustafa, and the effect he has on the narrator, is referred to as a “جن” (“genie”; 58; 55), “عفريت” (“afreet”; 18; 14), and “طيف” (“phantom”; 58; 55). Critics interpret these references through the novel’s intertextuality with ألف ليلة وليلة (*Alf Layla wa-layla; The Thousand and One Nights*) as an invocation of traditional storytelling, a critique of Orientalizing discourses, and a depiction of colonial traumas (Holt 83; El-Ariss 106). Yet they also conjure the disturbances of new energies in the plot. Particularly, they gesture toward petroleum, which, in the terms made famous by Ryszard Kapuściński, has evoked in twentieth-century culture something of the dark undercurrents of fairy tales, as well as their heady promise of sudden wealth and transformation (35). Within modern Arabic literature, the compelling connections between oil and jinn are frequently imagined through metaphors of magic lamps, wealth, and curses. In *Mawsim*, Richard, an employee in the Ministry of Finance, accuses the Sudanese of believing in oil as a “خرافة” (“fairy tale”):

انكم كالأطفال تَؤمِنون أن في جوف الأرض كنزاً ستحصلون عليه بمعجزة، وستحلون جميع مشاكلكم، وتقيمون فردوساً. أو هام. أحلام يفضة. عن طريق الحقائق والأرقام والاحصائيات، يمكن أن تقبلوا واقعكم وتتعايشوا معه وتحاولوا التغيير في حدود طاقاتكم.

(Salih, *Mawsim* 63)

Like children you believe that in the bowels of the earth lies a treasure you’ll attain by some miracle, and that you’ll solve all your difficulties and set up a Garden of Paradise. Fantasies. Waking dreams. Through facts, figures, and statistics you can accept your reality, live together with it, and attempt to bring about changes within the limits of your potentialities. (*Season* 59)

In these neocolonial terms, Richard stresses the importance of “طاقات” (“potentialities,” but literally “energies”) in moderation. Mustafa, in contrast,

represents the unbounded speed and excess of an oil boom, and the narrator introduces his memory of the conversation by referring to how Mustafa spectrally reappeared in his life as “جن أطلق من سجنه” (“a genie who has been released from his prison”; 58; 55). Throughout *Mawsim*, Mustafa is described with the *idhā al-mufāja’a* (“idha of surprise”) construction, فإذا ب, which roughly translates to “and suddenly there was” (for example, “فإذا هو مصطفى” [“and suddenly there was Mustafa”; 11]). This construction is a stock feature of *The Thousand and One Nights* and compounds the references to him as a genie or an afreet, channeling the poetics of *The Thousand and One Nights* and the “energy of unpredictability,” which, Marina Warner observes, is generated by the presence of jinn within its tales, working within the larger designs of fate (44). A particularly resonant moment comes when, drunkenly discussing Mustafa’s secret room, the narrator’s childhood friend Mahjub suggests that

مصطفى سعيد هو في الحقيقة نبي الله الخضر. يظهر فجأة ويغيب فجأة. والكنوز التي في هذه الغرفة هي كنوز الملك سليمان حملها الجن إلى هنا. وأنت عندك مفتاح الكنز. (Salih, *Mawsim* 110–11)

Mustafa Sa’eed is in fact the Prophet El-Khidr, suddenly making his appearance and as suddenly vanishing. The treasures that lie in this room are like those of King Solomon, brought here by genies, and you have the key to that treasure.

(Season 107)

As Holt remarks, “It is as though the wealth accumulated through colonial financial schemes and previous imperial expeditionary prospecting in gold mines might have been the work of capitalist genies” (83). To this might be added the prospective wealth of oil, promising everything but equally liable, as the narrator suggests, to bring nothingness or destruction. While not explicitly about oil, Mahjub’s words evoke the poetics of precarity, of the sudden appearance and disappearance of great wealth, that characterizes the broader ecological unease of the Arabic novel in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. The legendary Islamic figure al-Khidr, ordained to come at the end-time, features in

many of these novels. His name signifies “the Green, the Ever-living,” “whose feet bring fertility to the land” and who can locate water below ground (Khairallah 111; see also Wensinck). Like Mustafa, al-Khidr conjures an energy both productive and potentially destructive. And such, indeed, would oil prove to be in Sudan. While prospecting had already begun in the early 1960s, when Salih was writing *Mawsim*, petroleum was not commercially developed until the late 1990s, but it remained a source of tension between North and South and a key factor in the Second Civil War (1983–2005).<sup>17</sup>

Reinforcing the ominousness of this fantastical field is Mustafa’s comparison to tools, machines, and stores of energy, exemplified by his repeated references to himself as “القرية المنتفخة” (“an inflated waterskin”; 30; 26) and “الفوس المشدود” (“a taut bow”; 32; 28). Suggestive of the colonial stereotypes that Mustafa performs in Britain, these references convey an anxious inevitability, as he fulfils the fate imposed on him by the “racist, imperialist discourses” that define him (Samatar, “Verticality” 29). They also, however, anchor him within the semantic field of raw motion and energy, continued through other, less colonially inflected images, as when he describes himself as

شيء مكور من المطاط، تلقيه في الماء فلا يبتل، ترميه على الأرض فيقفز (Salih, *Mawsim* 24)

something rounded, made of rubber: you throw it in the water and it doesn’t get wet, you throw it on the ground and it bounces back. (Season 20)

Mustafa’s brain, meanwhile, is compared to a sharp knife, cutting with cold effectiveness, and a wondrous machine, consuming things like “أسنان محراث” (“the teeth of a plough”; 26; 22). He is reviled by a girlfriend as an “آلة صماء” (“an unmoving machine”; 32; 28) and described by the narrator as though he were “شيء ميكانيكي” (“something mechanical”; 18; 15). Through each image, he blurs the boundaries between meaning-making humanity, heedless force, and the products of humanity’s evolving technologies: knife, plough, machine, robot.<sup>18</sup> While Tarek

El-Ariss sees him as an “an archaic hunter and creature of hell, waging a war of retribution against British colonialisation” (93), he also conveys devilish, Faustian energy and a disconcerting vision of the future, underscored by Spengler’s identification of the demise of Faustian man in the nineteenth century, of whom Mustafa therefore represents the last, chaotic gasp.

Elemental images similarly convey an uncanny sense that Mustafa’s human persona is changing into something nonhuman. Describing his emotionlessness, Mustafa suggests that he is as cold as a field of ice (*Mawsim* 26; *Season* 22), that his chest is cast in rock (30; 26), and that the sea roves back and forth within his ribs (31; 26–27). Gazing at his hands, the narrator describes the sensation of having suddenly descended from a mountain into a valley (12; 8). Most strikingly, Mustafa likens himself to forces of waves, heat, and light:

فأنا لا أنوي بك شراً، إلا بقدر ما يكون البحر شريراً، حين تتحطم السفن  
على صخوره، وبقدر ما تكون الصاعقة شريرة حين تشق الشجرة  
نصفين. (45)

I mean you no harm, except to the extent that the sea  
is harmful when ships are wrecked against its rocks,  
and to the extent that the lightning is harmful when  
it rends a tree in two. (41)

Later, he questions,

هل الشمس شريرة حين تحيل قلوب الناس إلى صحارى تتعارك  
رمالها... (47)

Is the sun wicked when it turns the hearts of millions  
of human beings into sand-strewn deserts...? (43)

Through these and similar references, Mustafa’s characteristic emotionlessness, which has been interpreted in previous scholarship through his entrapment in Orientalist tropes (Hassan), failed individuation (Siddiq), and debilitating postcolonial anxiety (El-Ariss), may also be read through his embodiment of uncanny energies, as human emotion and intent dissolve into sea and desert. In the plot, too, Mustafa is subsumed within the Nile,

which, the narrator ponders, represents a particularly fitting end for the tragic, Faustian hero:

تصور. عز الصيف في شهر يوليو العتيدي. النهر اللامبالي فاض كما لم  
يفض منذ ثلاثين عاماً. الظلام يصهر عناصر الطبيعة جميعاً في  
عنصر واحد محايد، أقدم من النهر ذاته وأقل منه اكتراثاً. هكذا يجب  
أن تكون نهاية هذا البطل. (71)

Imagine: the height of summer in the month of fateful July; the indifferent river has flooded as never before in thirty years; the darkness has fused all the elements of nature into one single neutral one, older than the river itself and more indifferent. In such manner the end of this hero had to be. (67)

From coal, petroleum, jinn, and kinetic energy, *Mawsim* moves to the “indifferent” energy of Nile, desert, and “neutral darkness,” changing the human from a creature who channels energy and makes meaning into a creature dissolved in oblivious force fields. This may be read as a novelistic depiction of the Sufi vision that Salih outlines in an interview: “man’s relationship to the universe is as a small atom is to many atoms. I think that this is the Arab Sufi’s view of man’s relationship with the metaphysical world” (*Tayeb Salih Speaks* 26). This mystical vision, expressed in quantum terms, reflects Sufi understandings of the divine “Truth” (*al-haqq*) as simultaneously “one and many” (*al-wāḥid al-kathīr*), a unifying presence behind material multiplicity. As elaborated by the great Sufi master Ibn al-‘Arabi (1165–1240), creation is understood as divine self-manifestation or theophany, whereby “God becomes visible only in the forms of his epiphanies (*mazāhir, majalli*), which compose what we call the universe” (Corbin 197). Creation, in this understanding, is an ongoing and dynamic process, the “pre-eternal and continuous movement by which being is manifested at every instant in a new cloak” through “perpetual coming into being and renewal” (200). Expanding this notion into an atomic vision, Salih combines spiritual and scientific discourses, indicating a productive tension in his writing between the benign balance of the mystical “unseen” (*‘ālam al-ghayb*) and the unheeding, potentially chaotic and destructive world of atoms, in both of which the human is

decentered. This comes to a climax in the narrator's desert journey, which brings the language of poetry, Sufism, and the Qur'an into dialogue with that of petromodernity, solar power, and motion sickness. In contrast to romanticism, these intertexts from Arabic *turāth* are not obviously critiqued or parodied, and, in contrast to Faustianism, they do not infuse the novel with anxious speed and a sense of finality. They are presented as a potential alternative to detached rationality and emotionless logic but remain ambiguous, providing moments of sublime uplift while clashing with strange new energies that underscore the literary fragility of those moments.

### Beyond the *Aṭlāl* ("Traces"): Poetry, Car Sickness, and Solar Power

Like many representatives of the Faustian archetype, Mustafa struggles against his fate, refusing his role as a calculating machine. During his trial, Sir Arthur Higgins suggests that he propagated a system of economics based on love not figures (Salih, *Mawsim* 39; *Season* 35), while Richard reviles him for failing to act as a proper economist should, namely as

أداة، آلة، لا قيمة لها بدون الحقائق والأرقام والاحصائيات. (61)

an instrument, a machine that has no value without facts, figures, and statistics. (58)

In the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, the context for these statements, economics was emerging as a discrete social science, and the abstract notion of a national economy was crystalizing, based on the need to manage large-scale agriculture and global forms of exchange. Mitchell suggests how in the context of British-occupied Egypt the development of economics coincided with the portrayal of human agency as isolated from wider forces rather than as "the product of a series of alliances in which the human element is never wholly in control" (10). Mustafa, as a narrative presence, profoundly disturbs this notion, both becoming a nonhuman force himself and deliberately breaking from the economic model of the independent human agent.

Mustafa's various acts of writing, whether plans for the Agricultural Project Committee, books on

economics, or poetry, testify to the competing drives of abstract calculation on the one hand and the recognition of a wider, nonrational whole on the other. In Mustafa's poem, which the narrator discovers in his secret room, human emotions of love and hate, and the material remains of a place of prayer, are eroded by wind and engulfed in silence, while a lone traveler is depicted amid dust and smoke (Salih, *Mawsim* 155; *Season* 153). In the poetry of Abu Nuwas (756–814), which Mustafa recites at Oxford, war, as a mechanism of human control and mastery, is escaped in a blissful garden, filled with light, wine, life, and the awakening earth (145–46; 144). Both suggest a vision of poetry paralleling that of the Syrian poet Adonis, who pitted the homogenizing effects of technology, the "uniformity and sameness which gave life itself a mechanical dimension," against poetry, which affirms "movement, ebullience and variation" (Adonis 112). Through all Salih's writing, and for his two main characters in *Mawsim*, poetry represents a means of shifting to an expansive vision of the world, incorporating new energies and mechanisms.

The ten chapters of *Mawsim* have themselves been compared with "cantos in a long poem" (Abu-Haydar 53). These cantos are, however, also markedly shaped through the varying motions of petromodernity, whether donkey rides interspersed with slow conversation, the narrator's tortured steamboat trip from Khartoum following Husna's and Wad al-Rayyis's deaths, or the train journeys of Mustafa and the narrator. Each mode conjures different poetics, intertexts, and ecological apprehensions. While the train is linked to Western intertexts of romanticism, crime, and suspense—similar, in this respect, to smog—the desert journey by truck in chapter 7, which, as As'ad E. Khairallah suggests, is "the main episode for the understanding of the basic vision of both narrator and author" (96–97), is bound up with the pre-Islamic *qaṣīda* (lengthy, traditional poem) and the structuring sections of *nasīb* ("amatory prelude"), *aṭlāl* ("traces"), *raḥīl* ("desert journey"), *wasf al-nāqa* ("camel description"), and *madīḥ* ("praise").<sup>19</sup>

Applying traditional poetic motifs to the Bayuda Desert in Sudan, the chapter channels the physicality

and raw consciousness of the pre-Islamic Bedouin *qaṣīda* while also unsettling them through new pace and energies. As with earlier romantic descriptions, it represents an attempt to draw petromodernity into traditional and, in this case, oral form. References to the *qaṣīda* tradition are explicit as the lorry is several times eulogized in place of the traditional camel (Salih, *Mawsim* 112; *Season* 110), and the driver becomes assimilated to his mount: “امتداد للمكنة التي يديرها” (“merely an extension of the machine in his charge”; 112; 110). The narrator at one point languorously observes:

السيارة أيضاً شقيت الماء والبنزين والزيت، وهي الآن ساكنة راضية  
كمهرة في مراحتها. (115)

The lorry too was nourished with water, petrol and oil, and now there it is, silent and content like a mare in her stable. (113)

The new rituals of petromodernity are harmoniously evoked while at the chapter’s end the passengers form a party, equipped with radio and car lights, echoing the community *madīh* with which the *qaṣīda* typically concludes.

Yet the intertextual relationship to the *qaṣīda* can also be jarring. The narrator decides to travel by truck rather than steamer because it is faster, and he feels an inexplicable need to hurry (*Mawsim* 108; *Season* 105). Yet, despite depicting this “اختصار الطريق” (“shortest way”; 108; 105), the chapter drags. Its language becomes increasingly fragmented in a stream of consciousness that incongruously re-creates the monotony of automobile travel in its physical and psychological specificities, depicting rational thought disrupted by heat and the jolting road. Scenes from Mustafa’s narration return to haunt the narrator, along with memories of his own recent experiences. Interspersed with this are popular sayings and a prophetic hadith: “كالمُنبت لا أرضاً قطع ولا ظهراً أبقى” (“Like someone marooned in the desert who has covered no distance yet spared no mount”; 112; 109). The hadith is a warning to those who achieve little through the excesses of their striving, whether in piety or profit seeking, yet nonetheless consume and exhaust

their surroundings. Amid the lorry’s overburdened wails, the narrator compares his own condition to that of the “مُنبت,” as the lorry becomes his spent “mount,” rushing forward on the “shortest way” yet going nowhere.

Far from a transformative rite of passage or transformation of consciousness, as the *qaṣīda* has been interpreted (see Stetkevych; Sperl), this chapter portrays the human becoming dissipated into a wider whole. From the beginning, the landscape, where “لا شيء يغري العين” (“[there is] nothing to entice the eye”; Salih, *Mawsim* 108; *Season* 105), refuses the imposition of human meaning, and time blurs into an indistinguishable whole—the opposite of the romantic descriptions in which Mustafa and the narrator contemplate their surroundings and construct pleasing “scenes” while remaining safely distinct from these scenes on the banks of the Nile or in a train carriage. Internal thought becomes fragmented into “نتف” (“scraps”), like “الأعاصير الصغيرة” (“small whirlwinds”; 109; 106). Dialogue and images from the wider plot are scattered through the narrator’s thoughts, and the central drama of Mustafa is sundered as the narrator’s mind is exposed to the energies of the nonhuman world:

عقل الانسان ليس محفوظاً في ثلاجة. انها هذه الشمس التي لا يطاق  
تذوب المخ تشل التفكير. (109)

Man’s mind is not kept in a refrigerator. It is this sun which is unbearable. It melts the brain. It paralyzes thought. (106)

Mustafa’s face is lost amid “أزيز محركات السيارة” (“the roar of the lorry’s engine”; 109; 106), and the narrator becomes convinced that his lovers were killed not by him but by sunstroke (113; 111). Syntax itself breaks down as the narrator describes how “الشمس واضحة وضوح الشمس” (“the sun is clear, as clear as the sun”; 114; my trans.), emphasized in Arabic through the *maf’ūl muṭlaq* (“absolute object”), in which the adjective “واضحة” (*wāḍiḥa*; “clear”) is followed by its verbal noun, “وضوح” (*wuḍūḥ*; “clarity”). Traditionally, the verbal noun would add clarification and emphasis, but here it brings only a sense of circling, stagnant thought,

and anxiety, as though one sun may not coincide with another.<sup>20</sup> And the sun is not just any sun, but the sun in the context of petromodernity, compounded by the lorry's fragmenting roar and movement.

As evening comes, meaning is reformulated. The sun is defeated by sudden technological optimism: "سنهدم وسنبني وسنخضع الشمس ذاتها لإرادتنا" ("We shall pull down and we shall build, and we shall humble the sun itself to our will"; 115; 113). This is followed by a party, animated by a transistor radio, beeping horns, and the arrangement of cars in a circle to illuminate the dancers in a blaze of light, which, the narrator ponders, must be the first such light that patch of desert has witnessed (116; 114). Yet this optimism is fragile and effervescent. The celebration is for "لاشيء" ("nothing"; 116; 114), and it leaves nothing behind:

أزت المحركات، وتحولت الأضواء من المكان الذي كان قبل لحظات  
مسرح أنس، فعاد إلى سابق عهده، جزء من الصحراء. (117)

The engines revved up and the headlights veered  
away from the place which moments before had  
been an intimate stage and which now returned to  
its former state—a tract of desert. (115)

Within the perspective of its intertextual relationship to the *qaṣīda*, this empty tract evokes the tradition of the *aṭlāl*, in which the opening lines of the *qaṣīda* depict the poet standing melancholically over the remnants of his beloved's abandoned encampment, lamenting the relentless passage of time and the obliteration of the human order within the vast desert. In *Mawsim*, however, there is no lament following emptiness. Like his great idol, the 'Abbasid poet of wine Abu Nuwas, Salih was skeptical of an overabundance of nostalgia embodied in the *aṭlāl* tradition. In 'Abbasid courtly circles it was a contrived remnant of Bedouin life. In Salih's writing it risked becoming a paralyzing, all-encompassing force:

وحين بدأت الكتابة وجدت أن هناك عنصراً طاعياً على كتاباتي وهو  
نوستالجيا أي الحنين إلى الوطن . الحنين إلى عالم أحس بأنه ينقرض  
رغم أنني أسعى أن لا أنجرف مع هذا التيار حتى لا يتحول ما أكتب إلى  
وقوف على الاطلال . . . . (qtd. in Jibril 15–16)

When I began to write, I realized that the element of nostalgia—longing for the homeland—held great sway over my work. Longing for a world that I could sense disappearing. But despite this I strove not to be swept up in this feeling, and not to transform my writing into a weeping over traces. . . .

In keeping with these words, the desert journey in *Mawsim* takes strange comfort in the annihilation of human meaning, drama, and nostalgia, interspersed with fleeting moments of energy—submitting the sun to human will and illuminating the desert with a blazing light. All are subsumed within a greater whole. As Samatar puts it, "the reverberations grow into a piercingly loud roar and a vivid brightness in which everything is obliterated" ("Dear Tayeb Salih"). The evocation of the *aṭlāl*, then, goes beyond nostalgia to a vision of more seismic obliteration, entwined in the different energies and motions that structure the novel.

Through echoes of *qaṣīda* imagery, reinforced by references to a desert caravan by Mustafa and the narrator throughout the novel, *Mawsim* is driven by forward movement, whether evocative of humanist progress, the spiritual ascent of the Qur'anic "straight path" (*sirāṭ mustaqīm*), the Sufi spiritual way (*ṭarīqa*), or the *qaṣīda*'s rite of passage. The desert journey, the "shortest route," exemplifies this, combining the languages of prophecy, poetry, and petromodernity. Yet it also problematizes these paradigms, as the search for clarity is frustrated by the sickness of rapid movement, questioning the literal pace of change and the energy appropriate to fuel this change. The unprecedented blazing light of the cars is suggestive of the sublime, yet it is also anchored in physical energies, representative of other powerful conflagrations across Salih's work, from the illuminated, gothic, and demonic citadel of *Bandarshah* to the oil wells of his final short story, sublime yet disquieting, iridescent and destructive, just like the figure of Mustafa.

Unlike Salih's earlier novella, *عرس الزين* (*Urs al-zayn; The Wedding of Zein*), *Mawsim* has tended not to be read for its engagement with Sufism or the Qur'an. Yet the desert journey, drawing on Qur'an, hadith, Sufism, and poetry, crystallizes the allusive, spiritually inflected quality of the narrator's voice,



present from the first page, as the narrator tunes into the sound of the wind (*rīḥ*) and its differing melodies in palm leaves and wheat fields. Constantly threatening to spirit his attention away from human realms or obliterate these realms altogether, as wind does in the sandy desert, *rīḥ* later echoes in the verb *rāḥ* (“went or disappeared”), used to describe the disappearance of the waterwheels from the banks of the Nile, and more generally evokes the noun *rūḥ* (“soul” or “spirit”), an otherworldly force that, unlike the *‘afrīt* embodied by Mustafa, evokes an all-encompassing, potentially healing, presence. Thus, the novel moves between the uncanny and the spiritual, which are anchored and ultimately joined in visions of precarious, finite ecologies. Overarching the novel’s landscapes, characters, and events is a constant apprehension of imminent endings, whether the “night of reckoning” of Mustafa’s murder or the later reference to the earth as “سوداء مبسوطة” (“black and level”), ready for “الحدث القادم” (“the coming event”; Salih, *Mawsim* 130; *Season* 129). This sense of the end-time is profoundly rooted in the Qur’an, where, as Norman O. Brown writes, “[t]he moment of decision, the Hour of Judgment, is not reached at the end of a line; nor by a predestined cycle of cosmic recurrence; eschatology can break out at any moment” (166). For Anna Gade, this imminent Qur’anic apocalypticism lends itself to a powerful form of environmentalism:

[T]he Qur’an . . . contains rich, detailed, and unique imagery of the natural world under transformation to new environmental conditions: not only the sudden trumpet blast and chaos of the Last Day and “sun darkening,” “stars falling,” “mountains unmoored” . . . but the eerie, incremental changes that precede it to mark the start of the chain of inevitable events, such as pregnant camels left standing in the pasture, “beats gathering” (the meaning of this is said to be ambiguous in tradition), water in the seas catching on fire, and a buried infant coming to life and calling out to the living from within the earth. (111)

These comments are richly generative for reading Salih’s depictions of energy and ecological (un)consciousness, and their characteristic uncanniness. In

both *Mawsim* and his broader oeuvre, a creeping perception of ecological precarity arises from changed landscapes; the literary and religious traditions on which Salih draws to evoke them; and his strange visions of humans as crashing waves, erupting demons, and heedless automata.<sup>21</sup>

In this essay, I have argued for the ecological dimensions of *Mawsim*’s structuring uncanniness as the novel incorporates changed energy ecologies into the consciousnesses and trajectories of Mustafa and the narrator and shapes its narrative through them. The new energies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries lie just beneath the surface of the novel’s social and political critique, emerging to the fore in moments of jolting surprise. Haunted by rapid forward movement and the potential chaos it brings, the central character of Mustafa is interconnected with atoms of carbon and petroleum and stores of energy both contained and released, as he shifts from human to jinn, machine, and vast ocean. Mustafa’s and the narrator’s experiences are further shaped through literary intertexts that similarly invest the land with meaning, from romanticism to Faustian archetype and from *qaṣīda* to Qur’an. Salih draws on and parodies these intertexts in disconcerting manners, as the “night of reckoning” is combined with smog-ridden murder, Faust with erupting jinn, and car sickness with Sufi journey. Through these poetics, *Mawsim* portrays the new flows of energy that bind Sudan and England in the past, present, and future, and indicates a turn within Arabic literature to a literary experimentalism grounded in the land, marked by strange new energies, and profoundly aware of imminent material endings.

## NOTES

1. All translations from Jibril are mine.
2. Salih’s aversion to smog echoes that of other immigrants at the time—for example, the Afro-Caribbean writer Samuel Selvon, discussed by Corton (282). A noteworthy comparison in nineteenth-century Arabic literature would be to Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq’s (1804–86) depiction of the city in his travelogue,

19. The narrator, for example, finds the beginning of a story in Mustafa's secret room, written from the perspective of a passenger on the Birmingham-London train, in which the narrator refers to a "كتاب لنغايو مارش" ("book by Ngaïo Marsh"; Salih, *Mawsim* 154; *Season* 152), a crime writer who herself drew on both trains and smog for literary effect.

20. The published English translation—"the sun [is] as bright as it proverbially is" (Salih, *Season* 111)—somewhat obscures the strange symmetry of the construction.

21. In this respect, the roots of Salih's Faustianism may also be traced to the Tunisian author Maḥmūd al-Mas'adī, whose play *السد (al-Sudd; The Dam)* draws Faustianism into the context of Sufi creativity and apocalypse and whom Salih cites as a major influence. See Omri viii, 73–104. Space does not allow adequate discussion of this play here, but I address it in my monograph in progress.

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6. See also Barak's notion of "coalonialism" (3–5).
7. See also Salih's review of Arthur Gaitskell's *Gezira: A Story of Development in the Sudan* (1959), where Salih lauds both the book and the project it describes ("Mashrū").
8. On the flow of coal through British waterways, see Mitchell 13.
9. For commentary on this passage as both fatalistic and optimistic, see Lowry 185.
10. The articles that Salih does not list are also interesting. Echoing the novel's emphasis on extreme weather, and juxtaposing Mustafa's mention of stable, artificial riverbanks, one news item talks of recent torrential downpour and subsequent flooding of the Thames. A news in brief also refers to the launching of an oil tanker for the Venezuela Gulf Oil Company.
11. See the time line Hassan constructs for Mustafa's life, alongside historical events in the Sudan (184–85).
12. Mahjub is described as a "طاقة فعلة" ("real power"; Salih, *Mawsim* 101; *Season* 98) in the village, while Mustafa muses in his diaries that "نعلم الناس لنفتح آذانهم ونطلق طاقاتهم المحبوسة. ولكننا لا نستطيع أن نتبنا بالنتيجة - الحرية" ("[w]e teach people in order to open up their minds and release their captive powers. But we cannot predict the result"; 153; 151). For discussion of the development in usage of *tāqa* as the Arabic translation for "energy," see Barak 217.
13. Mangoes, oranges, grapefruits, and bananas were introduced to the region in the 1950s and 1960s (Jibril 23).
14. For more on uses of the Faust legend in modern Arabic literature, see Hsia.
15. El-Ariss refers to the overlapping "registers of disaster, myth, and technology" in *Mawsim*, summed up in the person of Mustafa (107).
16. See Guth and Pepe for the editors' foreword and the collected articles that follow, which situate this turn within a post-2011 context.
17. The Sudanese-British author Jamal Mahjoub's *Navigation of a Rainmaker* (1989) explores the imbrication of oil, American meddling, and civil war, and offers intriguing comparisons with *Mawsim*.
18. See also Samatar, who notes, "Jean Morris . . . has something of the automaton about her. Her motivations are inexplicable" ("Verticality" 20).
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**Abstract:** This essay argues for the primacy of energy as an impetus in the writing of the Sudanese author al-Tayyib Salih. Taking his most famous novel, موسم الهجرة إلى الشمال (1966; *Mawsim al-hijra ilā al-shimāl*; *Season of Migration to the North*), as a case study, it explores the significance of climatic factors and of changes to energy regimes in the novel's plot, characterization, intertextuality, and postcolonial critique. Through the character of Mustafa Sa'īd, it argues for a posthuman impulse in the novel, as Mustafa uncannily transforms from Faustian archetype to a fantastical, nonhuman force. It concludes by shifting to alternative forms of energy within Salih's writing, as the spiritual energy of the Sufi "unseen" meets the unheeding world of atoms, supercharged with new energies in the modern era.