Long Paddock

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Jad El Hage, *The Myrtle Tree*

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The Myrtle Tree is Jad El Hage's third novel, his second in English. Published in 2007, the novel's style and subject matter – the very temperament of its language and structure – presents quite a contrast to his earlier novel *The Last Migration* (2002). In fact the contrast is so great that it is easy to forget that the same author wrote both works. Where, in the earlier novel, the narrative is informed by a more personalized dilemma of existential crisis, drawn through a masculinist pathology of desire, *Myrtle Tree* fashions an ethic of community, exploring the terms by which communal solidarity is burdened, and ultimately shattered, by the disintegrating effects of the Lebanese civil war. The contrast also involves how *The Last Migration* structures a diasporic geography of physical movement and emotional management of distance, where in the *Myrtle Tree* the action largely takes place in a small, fictional Lebanese village called Wahdeh.

In thinking of El Hage's two novels I couldn't help recalling Camus' *The Outsider* and *The Plague*, especially as the latter concerns itself with themes of ethics and community. Despite its critical influence and popularity, I always feel that Camus' first published novel is composed in a rather clumsy fashion (his first novel, the posthumously published *A Happy Death*, is significant in this respect – abandoned for the same reasons), whereas with the later *The Plague* one has a sense of a writer who has better managed to develop the craft of narrative composition. In fact *The Outsider* doesn't really work as a short story (if we take Maupassant as a standard), and we could say that the very abruptness of the narrative – the stuttering, episodic composition – probably worked well for the existential analytic it announced and became celebrated for. Similarly, the largely personalized focus of El Hage's *The Last Migration* is informed by an episodic structure that betrays a lack of maturity in developing the craft of narrative. With Camus, *The Plague* represents his ability to sustain a story over the longer form of the novel. The same can be said about *The Myrtle Tree*, which is more than twice the length of El Hage's earlier novel.

We can also gauge this contrast by comparing the principle characters of El Hage's novels – Ashraf and Adam. In *The Last Migration* Ashraf's characterization is limited by his unreflective obsession to control the love object he positions as the potential of his self-realization. This will to possession prevents him from considering how the women he is romantically involved with have their own needs and interests, and how the articulation of their preoccupations could refract his approach to them. But his recuperative gestures prevent him from learning more about himself and his

pathological dilemmas. By contrast Adam has a healthy relationship with his wife Yousra, who is presented as a thoughtful, wise decision maker, and whose practical approach to problems helps him to put things in perspective. He also has a thoughtful relationship to his daughter, Mariam, always trying to see things from her childish point of view, trying to consider how she processes the traumatic events of the war, as it affects the village community.

The decisions Adam makes for himself seem to always be influenced by the needs of others, in the sense that such needs impinge on the well being of his family, his relatives, and the village community at large. But this is not because he is a weak or indecisive character. Indeed, Adam comes across as a person of remarkable intelligence, consideration, and foresight. This is demonstrated in the early pages of the novel when Murshed Effendi visits the village to speak with Adam's Uncle, the "Hakim", about setting up a military training program for the inhabitants, ostensibly to protect the village from the ever-encroaching war. The Hakim – a dentist and part-time medical practitioner, as well as village counselor – is called away for an emergency. Alone with Murshed's obstinate argument for the militarization of the village, Adam is careful to articulate an alternative, keeping within the spirit of the Hakim's own thoughts on the matter. Against Murshed's logic – "if you don't pull the trigger, the enemy will" (19) – Adam remains unconvinced, reflecting to himself: "I was unimpressed by his words and had no intention of being caught by his hook. As far as I was concerned, people were accountable for what they did, not for who they were. You don't choose your place of birth or the sect you're born into. You choose your deeds" (19).

In fact this reflective passage defines the way in which El Hage's treatment of the war avoids privileging sectarian or religious references, as it is more concerned with how people are constrained to choose and act, rather than interpret events and their outcomes as a result of particular identities or allegiances. The names of his principle characters – such as Sana, Rameh, Zahi and Faour, Yousra and Mariam – are somewhat neutral, in that they could be found among the various sects of Lebanese Christians, Muslims, as well as Druze. I found this ploy quite refreshing, as it helps the novel to approach an understanding of the Lebanese civil war without the ideological baggage that often frames or else informs its historical significance. The war, of course, has been a staple theme for many Lebanese novelists emerging from its traumatic experience. But rarely has it been treated from the point of view of village life, as Beirut has usually been the primary site of action, especially for writers such as Elias Khoury, Hanan El Sheikh, Rashid Daif, Etel Adnan, and Mai Ghoussoub.

Another example I can give to demonstrate the way in which Adam's personal decisions are contingent on how they effect the interests and dilemmas of others concerns the family's decision to go to Cyprus and apply for emigration to Australia, where his sister lives. At first, Adam doesn't like the idea, as he regards it as an abandonment of the village, especially his dream to resurrect the olive press. Yousra is keen to leave, and tries to convince him: "The future has no room under our roof; we can barely cope with the present…Thousands of people are leaving the country every day. They're no better or worse off than us. In fact, many have no one on the other side to help them. They manage, they find help. What matters is getting out" (226). His daughter's comments leave him wondering if Yousra would even leave without him: "'I don't want to die, Baba. I want to go to Australia. Mama said people don't die in Australia'. 'What else did she say?' 'She said everyone should go to Australia because it's big and it doesn't have many people'. I had no idea that Yousra was promoting Australia as the Promised Land. 'Am I going too?' I teased Mariam. 'Don't be silly! Of course you are'".

Adam's resistance is broken down when he unwittingly finds himself trying to convince his mother that she should also go to Australia, where she could join her

daughter Hawwa and other grandchildren. Adam reflects to himself: "Saying this, I realized that even I, 'the guardian of the last bastion' as Yousra described me, was preaching departure" (234). His decision, then, to go to Australia is deliberated through his concern for the well-being of others, rather than what he may believe is best for himself. The communal ethic informing El Hage's novel revolves not only around Adam, but also other characters such as Rameh and Faour, who stand between village locals corrupted by the war (primarily Nimer, also Abu Takka and Abu Janjoul), and those who try to go on as usual.

A central event and turning point in the novel is when Abu Takka and Abu Janjoul decide to shoot the village dogs, mostly strays that hang around the village square. This senseless act figuratively represents Wahdeh's loss of innocence, sliding into the senselessness of the civil war as a whole. Crazed and egging each other on, Abu Takka and Abu Janjoul lose control, as the latter chases a dog over a wall and into a gorse bush:

Abu Janjoul struggled with the half-dead dog. It was crazed with pain, covered with wounds and frantic to escape. By the time someone got a ladder and pulled him out, Abu Janjoul was unrecognisable: scratched all over, bloodied and wet. The humiliation brought out the worst in him. He opened fire wildly, piling round after round into dead and dying dogs, pausing only to change magazines. Abu Takka took his cue from his chief and also went beserk… (128).

Adam's grandmother (*Sitti* in Arabic) had some affection for the dogs, and used to feed them. Her benevolence and spiritual wisdom defined Wahdeh's capacity to welcome strangers with hospitality and forbearance. She dies as the dogs are slaughtered, while another nearby village decides to send a few bombs over to Wahdeh, thinking that the shooting was aimed at them. The Hakim, Adam's uncle and son of Sitti, carries his grief into the village streets, and walks straight into an explosion. The narrative processes these events as somehow symbolic of the country's woes, captured by a poet's lament as the funeral procession makes its way to the village cemetery:

The sudden death of two simple villagers had become the tragedy of the motherland. There was some truth in this, when Zaghloul sang that the Hakim had been Wahdeh's mind and Sitti its spirit. With both of them gone, what would become of us? And what would become of a whole country that was losing both mind and spirit? (140)

In this way El Hage manages to tell the story of a particular village, a story which comes to represent the madness, in some respects the innocence, as well as the opportunism, of the war as a whole, a war which has yet to be adequately assimilated by Lebanon's public culture. In reading the novel, particularly after the summer war of 2006, I was all the more struck by the way in which El Hage's narrative crafts a story of how the civil war spread itself through the country, as well as the ambivalence with which it was received and processed at the level of the community, threatening the village's continuity in respect to its ability to maintain a productive connection to the land. This point was made early on when the Hakim addresses Murshed effendi: "And if we don't harvest, the crops will rot, the village will be infested with rats and foxes, the terraces will crumble. Generations of hard work will be washed away in a season. This land is dear to us, sir. Our fathers had to grind the rocks to make it fertile" (14). Again, El Hage's concern is with the viability of the community, the way in which it can reproduce itself through social exchange, which has some bearing on how it can maintain its relationship to the land, its livelihood.

Adam, to be sure, does carry an obsession, concerning his dream to renovate and revitalize the village olive press – described by Yousra as "a deserted temple…thirsty for celebration" (79) – which used to be the passion of his father. This obsession relates to his barely articulated concern to maintain the memory of his father, with whom he shares a silent dialogue: "I can hear you urging me on. I can feel the strength of your

arms in mine, the power of your chest is warming my lungs. You're walking with me, and your dream is now my dream, only updated" (76). For Adam, renovating and reactivating the press would help to maintain the social and economic well-being not only of himself and family, but also the village.

From his father he also carries a pacifist orientation inspired by Mahatma Gandhi (a picture of whom hangs in the olive press), a conviction that violence never really leads to any constructive outcome, "that non-violence can defeat a whole empire" (17). At one point he reluctantly gives away his father's cherished Winchester rifle to Rameh, because he has stopped hunting. Adam defends his pacificism by telling Murshed effendi: "I'm not into labels…I just can't see the point of a war about beliefs or ethnic groups" (19), which is consistent with the novel's overall ploy of avoiding sectarian references, or at least refusing to define actions and events according to sectarian allegiances, as I mentioned above. El Hage skillfully contrasts this pacifist stance with the inevitability of being dragged into the violence of the war, especially when Adam has to go to Beirut to undertake the difficult task of processing some paperwork through one of the ministries. "After five days in Beirut, I became a full citizen of war", he says of this experience (151). Considering the final pages of the novel, one wonders if Adam's pacificism was too idealistic.

But in the final pages of his novel El Hage also explores the theme of the motivation for writing, through the character Faour, who had earlier provided the narrative with selections from his letters and diaries. Faour tells Adam that he had burned much of what he had been writing, as he felt that it was too ego-centric: "But it wasn't *writing*", he says with emphasis, "I was exorcising my ghosts and parading my ego in a carnival of words" (276). In his writing he explored his relationships, especially to his father, and as it turns out his writing was motivated by his desire to break the paternal bond. He realizes that this was futile, his fixations akin to "a shipwreck stuck in the bottom of the sea", flashing up as memories that refuse to be appeased: "So why write if there's no salvation, no redemption? Why write at all", he tells Adam (277). In response Adam asks Faour why he burdens his writing with such obsessions, pointing out that writers shouldn't try to solve all their problems through the craft of writing: "Why don't you just write what you know and feel, the best way you can, instead of trying to reshape the world with your pen"? (278)

I couldn't help reading this exchange on the value of and motivation for writing as El Hage's reflections on his own work, in respect to the contrast between his earlier novel *The Last Migration* and *The Myrtle Tree*, as I outlined in my opening remarks. And yet the novel as a whole, like other novels engaging memories of the civil war, suggests that perhaps Lebanon's public culture should further develop its capacity to re-member the war not as an event that can be neatly accounted for by either ideological or realist approaches, but rather as a consideration of the many aberrant stories silenced by the amnesia that tends to define its historical significance. Like the work of other contemporary Lebanese Australians writing novels in English – such as Abbas El-Zein and Loubna Haikail – *The Myrtle Tree* can be regarded as a constitutive site for an exploration of relationships between memory, storytelling, and history.