

I began to read
the novels of
Naguib Mahfouz
in 1956 when
I was a student
in Cairo.

He was then attracting the interest of critics after years of silence and neglect. Arabic literary criticism had been imprisoned by Marxist analyses and categories and the idealisation of literature, as part of the nationalistic expansion whose space and horizons had been drawn by Nasser. When I first saw Naguib Mahfouz on a bus going to Aguza, I found his expression at once both very familiar and alien to the great concepts that sought to explain his novels in the light of social class and the morality of the petty bourgeoisie. He was chatting with someone in the bus, smiling without trace of self-importance or mannerism. I didn't consider approaching him because it seemed to me that we had already conversed through his stories and novels.

On returning to Morocco I continued to follow his abundant writing. He had become for me, as for many Arabs,

the voice which expressed those things that haunted our minds. In his fiction, he gave them form and elaboration. The more the horizons seemed to close in on us, the more we waited for what Mahfouz's pen would bring. His voice inevitably expressed our own preoccupations. I have continually asked myself how he manages to debate issues of the day, as well as questioning the meaning of existence and our relationship to sexuality, death and religion.

I eventually met him in 1973 during another visit to Cairo. I telephoned him, introduced myself and asked for an appointment. He invited me to join him at Groppi's where he was to meet a journalism student from the American University of Cairo. When I arrived we spoke for a while before the student came. Then she began asking questions. One, I remember, concerned democracy under the Nasser regime. His answer seemed to me unfair to Nasser and so I asked him for and received permission to express my own opinion. The interview, subsequently published, included the opinion I had voiced. The familiarity that I had felt from the moment of our first meeting increased, but I made no attempt to see him again because I knew that in his writing Mahfouz hid nothing: everything that he felt or imagined was shared with his readers. One only had to listen for a short while and to observe his particular smile to be won over by this authentic Egyptian. Held in the grip of imaginary worlds, his astonishing itinerary had led him from the old quarters of Cairo to the fame of the Nobel prize.

In preparation for my second meeting with him, I re-read most of his novels. I thought about how I might spare him boredom or repetitiveness, because journalists had attacked him with all sorts of imaginable questions. I wanted to get away from the classifications and characteristics applied to his novels (realism, neo-realism, symbolism, *etc*), as well as from projections that had been made in the heat of social and political struggles. I wanted to consider his enormous literary production – more than thirty novels and fifteen collections of stories – as a whole cloth of fiction, inspired both by the here-and-now and by history, prolonging earlier fictions, such as

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1001 Nights and accounts of voyages. How does one read these 'possible worlds' that flow from Mahfouz's imagination without reducing them to concepts and categories? We have to show their kaleidoscope patterns continually renewing colours and shades and revealing the romanesque quality of Egyptian society in its diversity and its complexities.

After thinking about the matter, I came to Mahfouz with several questions, and suggested that they provide points of departure for a re-reading. I based my questions on the literary representation of the space of Cairo in his novels; on the Trilogy, insofar as it provides the framework of the problematic that has dominated his vision; on the problem of disillusion; and on the appearance of the critical spirit in the 1950s – the period of the reconstruction of Egyptian society, of the disruption of the inner hell and the passionate search for a meaning.

In addition, Mahfouz's relation to language deserved attention: in my opinion, he had never managed in the novels to express the real diversity of a single language, to show clearly the different perspectives of narration and the contrasts between world views of personages and groups.

In January 1989, during the Twenty-first International Book Festival in Paris, I met with Naguib Mahfouz twice; because of his fatigue, the meetings were relatively brief.

MB Let me begin with the Trilogy. It seems to me that your earlier work was a search for the right tone to respond to the increasing complexity of the social space of the novel of the 1930s and 1940s. I consider *al-Qahira al-Jadida* (1945), *Khan al-Khalili* (1946), *Zuqaq al-Midaq* (1947) and *Bidaya wa-Nihaya* (1949) as approaches to the space of Cairo, surveys of its transformations through detailed accounts of certain neighbourhoods or social groupings. I also think that in the Trilogy your attitude as a novelist is elaborated by the formulation of a classical problem, *ie*, the contradiction between the generality of political and ideological discourses, on the one hand, and the diversity of reality in all of its

manifestations, on the other.

NM I totally agree with the reading you propose because my aim is not to retell history. I recognise my perspectives of events, and I'm aware of how they're infiltrated by ideology; indeed the latter may erase the very traces of the former. That's what the questions which the protagonist, Kamal Abd al-Jawad endlessly asks are about: that confusion and the shaking of people's values and criteria. I didn't at all want to write the history of this period. What I tried to do was to bring together the signs of disquiet, to survey the breakdown of people's behaviour and relationships. It's always the present which preoccupies me, and if I do make an effort to unravel the roots of the past, it doesn't, as such, interest me in the same way.

[Naguib Mahfouz had completed the Trilogy before the 1952 revolution, but it was not published in serialised form in the magazine al-Risala al-Jadida until 1954. He chose a historical framework which began with the 1919 Revolution in order to create a tie between the history of Egypt and that of a middle class Cairene family, that of Ahmad Abd al-Jawad. But this framework is only an artificial scaffolding for the problem which has preoccupied him since then. On the basis of 'material' culled from history, social analysis, autobiography and the 'family novel' (in the Freudian sense) Mahfouz weaves themes and spaces, combines the quotidian and the reflected upon; and he does this in relation to the secrets of existence – problems of religion, sexuality, death. The Trilogy is perhaps the first work in Arabic to formulate the problem of the novel; and the personage of Kamal Abd al-Jawad remains the literary incarnation of a problematic hero, closely tied to the consciousness of the author, to preoccupations with his social class, to intellectual and cultural questions of his period. This self-questioning continually haunts Abd al-Jawad: "What is true and what is not? What connection is there between reality and that which goes on in our heads? What is the value of history?

What connection between Aida, the beloved wife, and Aida, the pregnant wife? And myself, who am I?"]

MB There is a group of your novels like *al-Lis wa-l-Kilab* (1961), *al-Summan wa-l-Kharif* (1962), *Tharthara Fawq al-Nil* (1966), *Miramar* (1967), *al-Karnak* (1974), *al-Hubb Taht al-Matar* (1973), *Yawma Qutla al-Za'im* (1985), as well as the collections of short stories like *Taht al-Mizala* (1969) in which a well-defined attitude predominates: what we may call 'disillusion' and restitution of criticism, the ironic observation and recuperation of echoes of 'public rumour'. In these novels you have recourse to a diversification of narration in terms of variety and complexity. How do you now see these texts? Do you think that you grasped the principal changes that have taken place in the depths of Egyptian society?

NM Your description of this group of my novels may be correct, but none of them fails to aspire to go beyond realism. When I want to be a reader of my own novels or, to be more precise, when I recall them (because I don't re-read them), I become aware of having been divided between two preoccupations: a strong interest in reality and an interrogation – an elucidation of the latent forces behind reality. I can't claim to have succeeded at this at all times; and perhaps I haven't really integrated these two elements except in *Hikayat Haratina* (1975) and *Malhamet al-Harifish* (1977). With regard to my ability to render the profound changes that have taken place in Egypt, that's a question which I leave to the critics.

*[Although Naguib Mahfouz portrays a model of the Egyptian clerk crushed by the weight of bureaucracy and despite his efforts to avoid any conflicts with those in power, some of his stories and novels include a criticism of disorganisation, corruption, nepotism and opportunism. This has caused him certain difficulties, for example with *Awlad Haratina* (1959) which continues to be banned in Egypt and *Tharthara Fawq al-Nil* which provoked the furore of Marshal Abd al-Hakim Amir. But Naguib Mahfouz has known how to adapt himself to different regimes and, as an Egyptian friend has remarked, he has never been judged nor poisoned. On the contrary, he has often been crowned with honours on the part of the state.]*

MB There are other texts, which concern one's private

hell, the suffering that comes from searching for a meaning to life. In particular, I think of al-Sarab (1948), al-Tarik (1964), al-Shahhadh (1965), 'Asr al-Hubb (1980), Qalb al-Layl (1975), Afrah al-Qubba (1981), Hadrat al-Muhtaram (1975). In these novels, reality is presented through questions about the self of the characters, and the individual becomes linked to the social; but the uneasiness of the person remains predominant. It is as if there is a movement from the concrete to the abstract. What do you think of this reading?

NM The answer is implied in your question. I can accept the general lines of your analysis.

[I sense in these novels that it is as if Mahfouz is turning inside out the principal characters of his other novels. Questions about the self appear unexpectedly in order to undermine the coherent structure and to open the way to doubts, to instincts, to the stirring of emotions. It is as if Mahfouz's insistence on creating a balance between the rational and the irrational, between the social and the personal, momentarily disappears in the face of the bursting forth of dramatic situations: 'Umar the protagonist of al-Shahhadh – lucid, stable, a believer, a militant – is taken by surprise by the absurd, destroyed by questions repressed by his self; he breaks his fetters, and he experiences whatever he can in order to rediscover a lost equilibrium. But he finds no consolation: sex does not restore the flower of his youth, the family does not bring him out of his inner exile, struggle does not give him a way of rising out of himself.]

MB I've noticed that your use of language began to take on its specific characteristics with al-Qahira al-Jadida, and that it came full circle with the Trilogy. With al-Lis wa-l-Kilab, a second cycle begins with regard to the construction of phrases and in poetic concentration and economy of expression. To be sure, this change is tied to a change in artistic construction and in form. Nevertheless, it seems to me that it does not achieve narrative and architectural complexities. In the novels that you've written since the Trilogy, the multiplicity of perspectives, of voices and visions, doesn't take literary form in a multiplicity of 'languages'.

NM The lack of differentiation of levels of language which you speak about seems to me to flow from the fact that most of the characters in these novels are of the educated class, especially in *Miramar* to which you have made allusion. Nonetheless, there was perhaps a certain variation between, for example, the language of Sarhan al-Buhayri, the employee of the yarn company, and that of Zahra, the servant who has fled from the countryside to escape a marriage with an old man.

Language is an unconscious process in which I try to make the person conform to the situation. Perhaps I succeed at times in this matter, but the only way in which I become aware of this is from the opinions of others (and I follow assiduously what the critics have written about my novels). What I can assure you is that I've always had an unconscious desire to develop the language that I learned and 'inherited' in order to adapt it to the new period which you've made allusion to. And there's no doubt that I've benefited from the interest paid recently to the domain of language, both in regard to the novel and to other literary genres. I don't know whether I've succeeded, or lost my way.

MB A striking linguistic feature attracts one's attention in your recent novels: the use of a sufi vocabulary, particularly by characters from a religious background or the elderly who take refuge in meditation and memory. Is the use of the sufi vocabulary connected with a mystical experience or an intuitive vision?

NM I prefer to say that my use of this language is the consequence of the suffering which life imposes upon us. Suffering leads some people to make a way of life from sufism and, at the same time, a way of surpassing life. Insofar as I'm concerned, it can't bring me to that degree of 'rapture' with life. It would be more exact to say that I consider recourse to sufism as a pause during which I rest from tiredness and the preoccupations of life. And during that pause, I give myself over to meditation and to dialogue with the universe and with things. I feel a great need for this sufi pause during the agitated and accelerated way of life which oppresses the spirit and one's

nerves, to the point that we can no longer tolerate the very people who are closest to us. No, I'm not a sufi, but I've been marked by the sufi way, and I've been marked by its language which is so penetrating.

MB Your relation to sufism isn't limited to language.

An essential idea repeats itself in more than one of your works: the longing to attain that difficult equilibrium which is summarised by a sentence you wrote: "Man must at one and the same time passionately love life and free himself from his enslavement to it" (*Yawma Qutila al-Za'im*, page 56). Is this a utopian ambition or something from within your own experience?

NM As I've already told you, I consider my excursions into the territory of sufism a spiritual promenade, and not a way for living. But the promenade has left its traces, and I've tried to take advantage of them in my personal life. When someone reaches such an equilibrium, he hopes that others will do the same. True, I consider the passion for life natural and necessary, on condition that one doesn't become a prisoner. You ask me how that is possible. Let me give you an example: the love of money is something essential and intrinsic to our lives. We are able to acquire what is necessary by means of work and licit profit. Yet when money becomes the supreme object of one's existence, it leads to a squandering of those values which are our honour and our equilibrium. That's why I insist on the necessity of re-enforcing that inner conviction so that we hold onto a minimum of willpower and liberty in regard to material things and possessions.

MB During discussion of your work organised at a recent Paris Book Fair, we heard two contradictory opinions: the first claims that in your novels there has been a withering away of form since 1967; the other claims that what has taken place is a breakdown of content rather than form, because, following the defeat of 1967 and the shaking of the social edifice, you found yourself faced by what seemed an emptiness. What do you think of these interpretations?

NM All I can say is that when I've an idea, it itself – once ripened – finds the form that suits it. I can't envisage a

world of art without suitable form. Moreover, I don't undertake its realisation until I feel that it has taken form and shape. Critics have the right to consider that some of my stories or my novels lack any particular form, or that their form is loose. Nonetheless, I don't share their point of view. It is my right to break with familiar forms because things, relations, situations have been modified radically since 1967, and we feel a confusion of factors and values. Why shouldn't I search for a form which corresponds to these new facts? Yet maybe it's a matter of a fleeting moment or simply of hallucinations, as some people think. For me the question resides in the nature of content and the formalisation which it requires.

MB I think that much of your work conceals a comic dimension. I think in particular of Tharthara Fawq al-Nil, of the story of "al Sakhan Yughanni" published in the collection Khammarat al Qitt al-Aswad (1969), and the construction of al-Maraya (1972) and of Hadith al-Sabah wa-l-Masa' (1987). What is the place of this playful element in your writing?

NM The comic element makes it possible to create a certain artistic ambiguity. I think that the role of art in society and in people's lives is to provide pleasure. And all elements that make it possible to bring about their pleasure are part of a literary creation. The material that an artist disposes of forces him to have much craftiness and cunning and energy so that he can extract from them wisdom or utility; he also needs to have recourse to amusing, pleasant or witty elements. That allows a literary or artistic work to produce a humanistic feeling which sharpens our consciousness of essential values – those like love, justice and decency.

[When I saw Mahfouz on television playing the qanun (sitar) with such evident joy, an idea which has always haunted me in reading his texts came back to mind: something about him reminds me of the 'secret wound' that Genet speaks of in his beautiful text about Giacometti. Not only because secrecy surrounds his private life and characterises all of his behaviour (for more than ten years he kept secret from his mother and his friends the news of his

marriage and fatherhood!); but also because one finds in his work recurrent themes which appear in different guises and lay lightly over a 'secret wound' which is always concealed. Naguib Mahfouz is a kind of painter who draws sketches in the form of stories and novels in pursuit of the right form: thus that impression of repetition and similarity. Yet, his works are brimming with capricious attitudes, with ironic and absurd laughter.]

MB In your message to the Nobel Prize Committee you said: "Perhaps you ask yourselves how this man, coming from the Third World, found the time to write these stories?... Luckily, art is generous and benevolent; offers to each person the means adequate to the expression of his feelings." I wonder: what is the role of art and writing in Third World societies overwhelmed by problems of poverty, social inequalities, the absence of democracy?

NM I think that what we call material and spiritual problems are stimulants to writing, at least where I'm concerned. If my own world had been exempt from problems and suffering, I wouldn't have been able to write what I've written.

MB Thus, writing for you is a refuge.

NM I leave that to you to answer, but I don't think that I would have written had I not been surrounded by problems and questions.

MB Isn't there a contradiction between literature and the morality which you insisted upon in your message to the Nobel Committee and which you linked to the world's responsibility?

NM It's difficult for me to imagine an art which contradicts morality. What's morality? To my mind, it involves ideas, behaviours, attitudes necessary to a society for it to maintain itself and to progress. Sometimes art seems bent on destroying morality, but if one thinks about it, one observes that in fact it calls for a new morality tied to the needs of a society. For example, the poetry of Abu Nuwas is generally described as licentious; in reality it's a call for a new morality, a revindication of liberty and a rejection of prohibitions.

[Mahfouz's view of the relation between literature and morality has been expressed in response to a question of Rashad Rushdi in the review al-Hilal "Every novel is an ensemble of forms of behaviour, every form of behaviour is a moral movement and every literature carries within itself a specific morality. At times a writer believes in the principles of his society, he forges his characters according to his understanding, and with respect to a pre-established morality to which he adheres. Another writer will feel closer to new moral values, and his novel will seem immoral or totally atheistic while in fact he is advocating a new morality. That is the reason why I consider the authors of The Portrait of Dorian Gray, or Fleurs du Mal and Lady Chatterley's Lover, as 'moral' writers."]

MB In your speech at Stockholm you spoke of the *Intifada*, the revolt of stones in the West Bank and Gaza, as being among the great problems which torment our contemporary consciences. What does the Palestinian cause and the present revolution mean for you?

NM There's no doubt that what is happening in Palestine represents a national catastrophe for the collectivity of Arabs. I compare it to natural catastrophes which mobilise the world's conscience and awaken it to solidarity and support. The Palestinians' cause is a just one, and that's what leads people to take their side and demand that justice be rendered to them. But I think that the Arabs alone are incapable of resolving the Palestinian question adequately, because the idea of total liberation is unrealistic and doesn't take into consideration the interests and positions of the United States and the Soviet Union. That's the reason that I tend to favour posing the question as we do when confronted by a natural catastrophe: how to limit it and go beyond it so that life can return to a normal course? Historical examples are abundant.

MB But circumstances are different with regard to Israel: it's an aggressive state, founded on terrorism, racism and religious mythology. The *Intifada* has removed the masks and revealed the mythical image of Israel that has currency among Jews and international public opinion.

NM We can't combat the Israeli mythology without ourselves possessing analogous myths. What interests me most of all is reaching a practical solution. War won't bring that about. Thus, it's necessary to negotiate. That is an opinion which I've always expressed. Indeed, I declared it five years before Sadat went to Jerusalem. With regard to the Intifada, that's a concrete reality. It expresses the deep aspirations of the Palestinian people.

MB Let us imagine that you are now beginning your literary journey. What path would you take and what questions would shape your books?

NM My itinerary wouldn't be very different from the route I've taken because the same problems still exist – with some differences of intensity and complexity. The goal which I've pursued hasn't changed and may be summarised by a question which repeatedly comes to everyone's lips and pens: how can we reconcile our heritage and modernity? But if I had to do it again, there wouldn't be a literal transcription of the past; change has touched people, events, time, space, and those are the factors which renew art and literature.

On the way to Cairo, the taxi driver whom I had met the previous day told me the sequel to a story which we had both witnessed. A blind man, a woman who was accompanying him and a young man got into the car with us at Maydan al-Tahrir. They had argued loudly amongst themselves before asking if it was possible to drive them to a village not far from Cairo. The driver now told me: "After you got out, it appeared that the blind man was the imam of the Omar Makram mosque situated behind the Hotel Shepard and that the young man had stolen the chandeliers of the mosque. The blind man had him followed and succeeded in having him apprehended. He was looking for a car to take him to the thief's house to recover the objects."

The taxi driver spoke spontaneously, knew how to use his tongue; his story lacked neither originality nor attractiveness: "Listen. He might've stolen from the rich to

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provide for the House of God. But to steal from the House of God!"

I felt as if I was still in Naguib Mahfouz's world, a world inspired by people's stories and the echo of public gossip penetrated by a vocabulary of religion and everyday needs. I thought of a sentence by Mahfouz in one of his novels: "Those on the top prostitute themselves and those on the bottom beg." I also thought about the salon he held every morning at 7 am in the Ali Baba cafe at Maydan al-Tahrir where I had met him two days before and about some lines from his latest novel, Qashtamar, which concerns the good-old-days and the horrific space of today's Cairo: "What is left of old Abbasiyya? Where have the fields and the gardens gone? Where is the palm tree and its 'majlis' (congregation) and the forest of prickly pear trees? Where are the houses with their gardens? And the serails, the citadels, the beautiful women? What do we see today other than jungles of reinforced concrete and rows of crazy automobiles? What do we hear, other than noise and din? What surrounds us other than heaps of rubbish?"

Nostalgia, elegy, disapproval of this 'other time' which devours and metamorphoses everything... But is not this monster of its time a point of departure for the Egyptian and Arab novel announced since the 1960s by Edwar Al-Kharrat's splendid story "Fi al-Shawari"? A renewal enriched and extended by dozens of novels and stories by authors of the 1970s and 1980s. These writers neither mourn nor regret the past. They are searching for a way to merge into this monster of our time, to internalise it by means of images and signs, weaving with words kaleidoscopic fictions in order to dispel the solitude of the voyage and the traveller's disorientation.

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