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The Humanist in the Alleys

Fouad Ajami

Fouad Ajami teaches at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and is the author, most recently, of *The Foreigner's Gift: The Americans, the Arabs, and the Iraqis in Iraq* (Free Press).

I.

It was inevitable that Pharaoh would give the great writer a military funeral. By the time of Naguib Mahfouz's death a few weeks ago at the age of ninety-four, the novelist who had never had a tender thought for the military officers and their regime--who years earlier, when these officers were still young and full of perfect certitude, had written a novel in which a character standing for these men plunges to his death from a bridge over the Nile after disgrace had overwhelmed him--was to be claimed by the strongman of the military regime. Before the end came for Mahfouz, the gentle man with aquiline features became what he had never bargained for: national property, the Nobel laureate of the Arabs, called on by ministers of culture and hailed by the organs of the regime.

Back in 1994, Mahfouz was stabbed in the neck by an apprentice electrician, a young Islamist who had never read a line of his work. He survived, but his writing hand was paralyzed. The regime assigned him a security detail, and the old (and safe) hedonism of his life, its erstwhile freedom, was now clearly behind him. Here, for a mediocre and philistine government that had smothered the cultural life of the land, was the perfect prop: the old, frail man with failing eyesight, hard of hearing, protected from further danger by the policemen and the undercover agents of the military autocracy.

The ordinary people of Cairo, who peopled and nourished this man's fiction, whose lives and guile he had depicted with such masterful simplicity for well over six decades, gave him their own funeral, far away from the mighty. "Farewell, Shakespeare of the Arabs" read a banner held aloft by a simple middle-aged man, an Egyptian Everyman. In a country with a darkening cultural landscape, in a place where hanin (yearning and nostalgia) for the past had come to express a despair over the country's present, Mahfouz was a link to all that Egyptians held dear about themselves--to an idea of Misr, Egypt, as a place of tolerance, as a land across continents that harmonized contending truths.

It wasn't just that the Nobel Prize had been given to one of their own. They were proud of it, to be sure, for they were by their own admission a people given to the "khawaga complex"--a feeling of inferiority before the foreigner, the white man. But more to the point was Mahfouz's fidelity to the simple, small bourgeois life of Cairo's alleyways. He was unspoiled; he was, in the way of his city, a creature of habits and routines. Until the boys of darkness struck in 1994, and he had to duck under armed guard into hotels secured by the police, he frequented the same coffeehouses, bought his papers from the same vendor, hung around with the same friends. No man was as free of affectation as this modest and decent man. There was a shilla of friends around him, a band, a gang. They called themselves the harafish, the rabble or the riffraff; but I can report that they flattered themselves, for when I spent some evenings with them, they proved to be a tame lot. They were writers and film-makers and elderly actors. They were aging men who spoke sentimentally of the carousing and the ribaldry of some distant past. They remembered an orderly land; they talked of literary feuds now of no consequence to an Egypt choking on failure and need, physically overwhelmed in a metropolis bursting at the seams.

Mahfouz was born in 1911. His country had a population of eleven million people then. He died in a country of some seventy-five million people. The Cairo of his birth was a graceful city of seven hundred thousand; today it is home to nearly twenty million people. No country could bequeath culture and learning to such numbers, or accommodate them in the world. The grace of the land, its old rhythm, has been routed, overwhelmed. And Mahfouz's characters wept for it all. In *The Day the Leader Was Killed*, a fictionalized account of Anwar al-Sadat's assassination, a middle-aged man, clearly standing in for Mahfouz himself, ponders his shrunken house amid the high-rise buildings and the sprawl of the ever more congested city, and weeps for his "pygmy of a house, by a river which itself had changed, which had lost its splendor and glory and is no longer capable of anger. Oh, how numerous are the cars, how large the fortunes, how bitter the poverty, and how many beloved ones had departed from the world."

This physical desolation, the crowded land pressed to the limit: they are a break with all that Egypt had known in the cozier bourgeois world of Mahfouz's youth. In *Echoes of an Autobiography*, a bewitching work of startling vignettes published in 1995, the writer's double, an aimless wanderer, happens on a man alone playing a flute in homage to the beauty of the world. "It would be great if the people got to hear your melodies," the wanderer tells the flutist. But the flutist knows his people and knows what had become of Egypt. "They are busy quarreling and weeping," he answers.

A country that had hitherto prided itself on its protean identity--Europe

beginning at Alexandria, the Arab-Islamic world at Cairo, Africa at Aswan-- and had willingly jumbled faith and worldliness was overwhelmed by a single simple absolute. "The land, the land is full of bigotry," one of Mahfouz's older characters laments. And in the face of this purity, the wanderer--Abd Rabbo, or Servant of God, is the sly name given to him by the novelist--still insists on the oneness of faith and play, and on the meandering ways of the world. "I was walking along the road by the cemetery on my way back from the tavern," Abd Rabbo says. "A voice came to me from the grave and asked me, `Why have you stopped visiting us and talking with us?'" He answers, "You only love talking of death and the dead and I have wearied of all that."

Sheik al-Azhar and the Mufti of the Republic were certainly present at Mahfouz's funeral--the man's celebrity decreed it; but the writer had suffered his share of grief at the hands of the custodians of religion. It wasn't just the attempt on his life in 1994 by a religious fanatic. (The writ that declared his blood halal, permissible, was issued by the "blind sheik" Omar Abdel Rahman, who would carry his bigotry from the oasis town of Fayyoun, on the edge of the Western Desert, to Brooklyn and Jersey City, remarking that Salman Rushdie would never have dared to write *The Satanic Verses* had Mahfouz been killed for writing his great novel *Awlad Haretna*, a controversial work published in serial form in *Al-Ahram* in 1959.) The official religious institution, Al-Azhar, had stopped well short of a call to murder, but its custodians nonetheless proscribed *Awlad Haretna*.

In this work (translated into English under the title *Children of Gebelawi*), Mahfouz played with fire. The angelic Mahfouz was no angel after all. He knowingly pushed into forbidden territory--both religious and political. The custodians of religious and political orthodoxies understood the allegory. In this immensely rich and subversive work, a god-like figure, Gebelawi, establishes a great dominion; the quarter where Gebelawi's writ runs is the world in miniature. Gebelawi has gardens and power and property; he rules but he is not seen. No one in this cowed neighborhood contests his power. But then Gebelawi--in a clear allusion to the death of God in the modern world--dies, and his dominion is bequeathed to his son Adham, or Adam. Adham is the son of a slave woman, and his older siblings quarrel with Gebelawi's choice. Gebelawi has his way because Adham, he decrees, knows the names and the habits of the quarter, and can whip it into submission.

In the rest of the story we read of Adham's betrayal, and the heroic but doomed attempt of three prophets-- stand-ins for Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad--to change the ways of men and to rescue the quarter from the rule of petty tyrants. The people pray and endure their fate--this is at once the strength of Mahfouz's characters and their paralyzing weakness--and wait for a deliverance that never comes. The surface tranquility of this

quarter is a sham. Qassem, the prophet Muhammad's double, had tried to dispense justice, Mahfouz wrote; he shared the war booty and the treasure. There was not much of it, but it was distributed with a measure of equity. Yet his heirs played havoc with the world and fought over his legacy, and the tyrants had their way with the hara, the quarter. Greed devoured everything, and in the coffeehouses poets and storytellers told of better days and dreamed of salvation. An old man bent by the years, a drunkard, agitates in a loud voice for a return to "the way things were under Qassem." One of the futuwwa, the bullies, beats the old man savagely.

The dreams of human improvement atrophy in this place; nothing remains of the great reformers. The three prophets become mere "names and songs sung by the poets of the coffeehouses under the gaze of people given to despair and surrender." Magic and drugs and superstitions take hold of the neighborhood. A redeemer turns up, a secular man with secular amulets and new tricks promising to give justice, but he is betrayed and buried alive by the overseer of the neighborhood and his policemen. So everything fails: the wisdom of the prophets, the secular talismans. This was 1959, and the Nasser regime read the work as an attack on the religious institutions, and of course on the secular rulers, the military officers hoarding power for themselves. Mahfouz bent to the pressure; it was no use, he said, to offend Al-Azhar. He would refrain from publishing this piece of fiction in book form. Eight years later, it was published in Beirut, but the controversy swirling around it never disappeared.

II.

"Most Egyptians neither fear nor dislike thieves. But they do have an instinctive dislike for dogs," a man on the run from the police, a character by the name of Said Mahran, says in *The Thief and the Dogs*, which appeared in 1961. No one was fooled: Mahfouz's dogs stood for the forces of the autocracy of Gamal Abdul Nasser. Spare and dark and unsentimental, *The Thief and the Dogs* gave voice to Mahfouz's disenchantment with the military class, and with the opportunism of the functionaries of the regime who had broken the society and turned it into a dominion of their own.

In this novel, Said Mahran, a petty thief who had been betrayed by one of his men, is let out of prison on the anniversary of the Revolution of the Free Officers. He is released into a world re-made by that revolution. The man who betrayed him has become the head of Said's old gang; he is married to Said's wife, and he has custody of Said's beloved young daughter. No one is waiting for him; he is released with nothing but his blue suit and his gym shoes. In prison, he had lived on the dream of revenge--against the man who had betrayed him, against his former wife. And he yearned for his

daughter. But his daughter, an impressionable schoolgirl, spurns him, and his old nemesis, Ilish, has by now become a big man in the criminal world.

In his despair, he recalls an old friend he had known, one Rauf Ilwan, back then a "young peasant with shabby clothes, a big heart, and a direct and glittering style of writing." Rauf has risen in the world; he is one of the new men of this Nasserite revolution. He has become a celebrated and successful journalist; he lives in an elegant villa by the Nile. "How had Rauf managed it? And in such a short time! Not even thieves could dream of owning a thing like that.... You are indeed a mystery, Rauf Ilwan, and you must be made to reveal your secret."

In those old days Rauf had been a firebrand, and Said probes him across this new barrier of wealth and ease. "The news astounded us in prison. Who could have predicted such things. No class war now?" The man of this new order understands his old friend's mind. "Let there be a truce. Every struggle has its proper field of battle." Back when they were younger men, before the revolution had given him his new means, Rauf had preached a different doctrine: a revolver, he once told Said, is more important than a loaf of bread, "more important than the Sufi sessions you keep rushing off to the way your father did. What does a man need in this country, Said? He needs a gun and a book; the gun will take care of the past, the book is for the future. Therefore you must train and read." It had been legitimate to steal, to "relieve the exploiters of some of their guilt."

The encounter ends badly, and Said returns at night and breaks into Rauf's villa. But Rauf is waiting for him. He lets him go with a warning, and Said now has another account to settle with this man living in a "mansion of steel." Luck fails the ill-starred thief. He bungles an attempt on the life of the former underling who had taken from him his wife and his daughter; instead he shoots and kills an innocent tenant who had moved into his old nemesis's home. He finds shelter in the home, and in the arms, of Nur, a "lady of the night." He becomes something of a journalistic sensation as the papers write about his exploits. Rauf's paper is particularly relentless, for the journalist wants him out of the way, wants his own past buried and done with. But failure sticks to Said: he botches an attempt on Rauf's life. This was his one chance to make the world right, for a "world without morals is a universe without gravity." He had imagined himself telling the papers why he killed the journalist. Instead, he reads about Rauf explaining how he had known Said so many years back, how he had tried to help him build a new life. He learns that yet another innocent victim has fallen: Rauf got away unscathed, but his bawwab, his doorman, was killed. He is visited by the spirit of the doorman, and he hides in shame, but the spirit complains that "millions of people are killed by mistake and without due cause."

The world closes in on Said: after a night of torment he waits in vain for Nur to return at dawn. When she does not turn up, he suspects that perhaps she has succumbed to the reward offered by the police. He turns up at the home of Sheik Ali al-Junaydi, a Sufi teacher of his father's, a kind and wise old man. He finds him leading his followers in prayer and chanting. "Memories came drifting by like clouds. He remembered his father, Amm Mahran, had swayed with the chanters, while he, then a young boy, had sat near the palm tree observing the scene wide-eyed. From the shadows emerged fancies about the immortal soul, living under the protection of the Most Compassionate." He thought also of his little daughter, in his arms, "speaking her first wonderful baby words." He felt his revolver, giving him the consolation that he might still find a way out, and that perhaps for the first time "the thief would give chase to the dogs." He flees the sheik's house, and flees the neighborhood besieged by the police. He makes his way to the cemetery by the desert's edge, by Nur's flat. In the distance he hears the tracker dogs bark. "It was hopeless now to think of running away from the dark into the dark." The treacherous scoundrels had gotten away with it all. The dogs are closing in, and a triumphant voice calls on him to surrender. He chooses to fight. The shooting starts, he is surrounded. "Slowly the silence was spreading until the world seemed gripped in a strange stupefaction."

In truth, Mahfouz had never kindled to the revolution of Nasser and his fellow conspirators. "The Revolution has stolen the property of a few and the liberty of all," a man of the old order laments in *Miramar*, a rare work that the writer set in Alexandria, published on the eve of the Six Day War. The hooliganism of the revolution, the rise of men like Rauf Ilwan, the virulence of the New Men against all the progress that came before their ascent to power--all this was deeply offensive to a man of Mahfouz's sensibility. He was forty in 1952, when the revolution had taken place. He was nearly a decade older than the coup-makers, and this had made all the difference. The true and first political love of this man was the bourgeois revolution of 1919, when Egypt erupted against British rule, and Egyptian nationalism felt the stirrings of pride and dignity. This was in its way a springtime of nations--the collapse of empires, the claims of new nationalisms. Mahfouz fondly recalled, in deep old age, watching the demonstrations of 1919 from behind the window shutters in the old Cairo neighborhood of Jamaliyya, where he was born. He saw British soldiers gun down demonstrators; he recalled his illiterate mother attaching her thumbprint to a nationalist petition.

The Egyptians were not able to evict the British overlords, but they forced on them some major concessions. In early 1922, Britain renounced her protectorate over Egypt; then came the proclamation of Egypt's

independence as a sovereign monarchy and the drafting of a constitution. The hero of this period--and no doubt the idol of Mahfouz--was the political leader Saad Zaghlul, the icon of Egyptian nationalism. "As a student in secondary school, I started buying newspapers to keep track of Saad's news, to read his speeches. I would read these speeches as though I was reading works of composition and art. When Saad Pasha Zaghlul died on August 23 in 1927, that was the worst day of my life. My whole being was taken by love for this leader." This devotion to Zaghlul--Mahfouz compares it to the stirrings of first love--and to the revolution of 1919 suffuses Mahfouz's work. His magnificent Cairo Trilogy, published in 1956 but completed on the eve of the revolution of 1952, pays tribute to the glorious hopes of 1919. Fahmi, a young character who carries Mahfouz's own aspirations, says that the stirrings of that time called up before his eyes "a new world, a new home, a new people, all bursting with vitality and zeal." Fahmi is willing to die for the homeland, for "faith is stronger than death, and death more honorable than humiliation."

In *Amam al-Arsh*, or *Before the Throne*, an inventive work of fiction written in 1983, Mahfouz persists with his first love. In this novel, Egypt's rulers, from Mina to Sadat, turn up before Osiris, the chief deity of Egyptian mythology. It is a courtroom setting, and Egypt's rulers are here for history's verdict. Osiris is flanked by Isis, acting as a counsel for the defense, and Horus, as a court clerk. All the greats--Ramses II, Akhenaton and Nefertiti, Muhammad Ali, Zaghlul, Nasser, and Sadat--are here to tell of their accomplishments and to receive the judgment of history. They get to cross-examine one another, and the lucky ones are invited to join the ranks of al-khalidun, the immortals. There is no sentimentalism in Mahfouz, but Zaghlul is treated with tenderness. Mahfouz has him entering the court with great dignity. A man of attractive features, he tells of his modest birth, his studies at Al-Azhar, his struggle against the British, his exile by British authorities to the island of Malta, his second exile to the Seychelles, his fidelity to home and country. "You united the Egyptians as I have united their kingdom. Thus you are my friend and my successor," Ramses II says. Isis gives him her boundless enthusiasm: "Let the gods bless this faithful, great son who proved that Egypt is a force that is never conquered and never dies." Osiris gives him a fitting judgment: "You are the first native Egyptian who ruled the land since the Pharaonic age. You came to power by the people's will. This is why I grant you the right to sit among the immortals of your forefathers."

A writer formed by the liberal currents of the interwar years was not destined to admire Nasser's revolt. Mahfouz dreaded the simplifications. The animus of the new military class toward the bourgeois revolution of 1919, toward the interlude that had formed Mahfouz and given him his most

cherished memories, deeply offended him. He was a liberal and a pluralist in the best sense of those terms. He drew an essential distinction between his animus toward British rule in Egypt and his love of English letters and Western culture. He was a novelist, and his choice of craft told it all: the novel was a Western form, not an Arab one. Poetry was the beloved voice of the Arabs, and the great poets were the genuine immortals of Arab lore. It is said that the first successful attempt at an Arab novel was completed in 1911, the year of Mahfouz's birth, by Muhammad Husayn Haykal, a work titled *Zainab*. The Western canon in fiction was his inspiration; he had prepared for his calling as a student at the university. He was exceedingly well read; he immersed himself in Western philosophy and Western literature. Mahfouz was not a mimic man, nor did he concern himself with the paralyzing worry over authenticity. A man who spends decades at the same coffeehouses, with the same friends, has no reason to worry about authenticity. A Nobel laureate who sends his daughters to Stockholm to accept the prize for him is a man at ease with his own world.

After Mahfouz's death, the obituaries declared him the great Arab novelist. Fair enough, as far as it goes; but his identity as an Arab was idiosyncratic, to say the least. He visited another Arab country only once, in 1963, when he spent three days in Yemen. That trip was made under duress, ordered by the chief of staff of the armed forces, Abdul Hakim Amer. Yemen was then a battleground between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and an official delegation was sent to Yemen to show the flag. It did not take the writer long--just those three days--to recognize that the adventure in Yemen was doomed, that the Egyptians in Yemen were too far from home and would not prevail. And that was it: he never traveled to Arab lands again. He wished the Arabs well, but his fidelity was to Egypt.

There had been a strong intellectual current during Mahfouz's youth, known as pharaonism, which had ensnared some of Egypt's best minds. It stressed the unbroken connection between ancient and modern Egyptians. It drew a sharp distinction between Egypt and the neighboring lands. On some subliminal level, it no doubt closed the gap between Muslims and Copts. But Mahfouz did not worship at the shrine of the "Egypt of 5,000 years." He never visited the ancient temples in Luxor and Aswan. He had no urge to see the pharaonic monuments. Two or three of his earliest novels were set in ancient Egypt, but they were allegories. His canvas, his universe, his love, was Cairo, al-Qahira, the City Victorious, founded in the latter years of the tenth century as a city of Islam, at first a Fatimid (Shia) city, then a city that carried the truth of Sunni Islam. But here things were harmonized: a Sunni city whose most beloved mosque is named after Imam Hussein, Shiism's iconic martyr, and whose most vibrant traditional neighborhood is named for Zainab, Hussein's faithful sister and the bearer of his cult, is a city that can

blend conflicting truths. The great Cairene writer was not a provincial; he merely found a whole world in a single city. He never traveled to upper Egypt: in a country identified with the Nile delta and with the peasantry, he was unwilling to visit the countryside. Relatives had taken him to Fayyoun, not far from Cairo, when he was a boy, but a week later, at his insistence, they were to bring him back to the city he loved.

III.

Mahfouz neither gloated over the defeat of Nasserism in 1967 nor hid from its verdict. He had seen it coming. The rot of Nasserism was the subtle theme of several of his novels. Yet the military weakness of the regime genuinely shocked him. He would speak of it again and again, and he would let his characters give voice to it. After the defeat in the Six Day War, there came a period of nihilism and despair. From *Mirrors*, published in 1972: "When the thing happened on the 5th of June 1967, he was shocked and overcome with confusion. He would roam the coffeehouses and the salons as though it were Judgment Day. 'Was our life a mirage, an illusion?' he asked.... No one has gone mad, no one had committed suicide, no one was overcome by a stroke or a heart attack. I must go mad or commit suicide." A young man sees the only way out: emigration. This was new for a people who had hitherto dreaded leaving the "valley" of Egypt for foreign lands. "Man is basically a traveling being, and the homeland is only the place that guarantees you happiness and prosperity. That is why the elite few dare travel, while the backward people stay behind." An older relative rebukes him: "You want to travel toward civilization instead of nurturing it on your own land." The old man is brushed aside.

Mahfouz's incomparable ear for his country's talk, his clear sense of his homeland's temptations, is best captured, I think, in the chatter of a Cairo coffeehouse in *Al-Karnak*, published in 1974 but clearly written before the October War of 1973. All that would play out in Egypt in the years to come is foreshadowed in this long passage:

There was but one dominant discussion at Al-Karnak: Day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, we had no other topics to discuss. Exhausted by boredom one of us would say: let us choose another topic. We would show enthusiasm for that suggestion, raise some topic, deal with it with carelessness and then go back to our old topic, devouring it and devouring us, without interruption and with no end:

--"The war, there is no option but war."

--"No, it is the Fedayeen's struggle."

--"A peaceful settlement is also possible."

--"The only possible solution is that which is dictated by the great powers."

--"Negotiation means surrender."

--"Negotiations are a necessity. All the nations negotiate--even America and China and Russia and Pakistan and India."

--"Peace means that Israel would dominate the entire area."

--"Why should we fear peace? Were we swallowed up by the English and French?"

--"If the future proved that Israel is a 'good state' we would coexist with her and if it proved the reverse we would eradicate her as we eradicated the crusaders' state before."

--"The future belongs to us. Look at our numbers and our wealth ..."

--"Our real battle is a civilizational battle. Peace is more dangerous to us than war."

--"Let us then demobilize the army and rebuild ourselves."

--"Let us declare our neutrality and ask other states to recognize it."

--"What of the Fedayeen? You ignore the real catalyst in the situation."

--"We have been defeated and we must pay the price and leave the rest to the future."

--"The real enemy of the Arabs are the Arabs themselves."

--"Everything depends on the unity of the Arabs in the effort."

--"Half the Arabs ... were victorious on the fifth of June [1967]."

--"Let's begin then with the internal situation. There is no escape."

--"Great. Religion, religion is everything."

It was no great surprise that Mahfouz was enthusiastic about Sadat's peace

with Israel. He had seen its urgency, and pined for it, even before Sadat made his way to that noble conclusion. Not out of love for Israel, to be sure: Mahfouz was an Egyptian, and he simply wanted a deliverance for his homeland. His characters sought a break from the pan-Arab burden. It did not matter to him that he would be censured by the unions of Arab writers for his Arab deviationism, and that Arab intellectuals--in Beirut and Ramallah and Algiers and London--would rebuke him. He had the verities of Cairo's alleys. He loved his neighbors, he knew them and pitied them, he wanted them spared ruinous wars. He owed his serenity to his Egyptian heart. It sustained him when "the street" and the unions of hack writers condemned him for his support of the peace. He paid no heed to those who said that the Nobel Prize had been granted to him not so much for his art but for his politics; that other luminaries of Arabic literature--the Syrian poet Adonis, the Egyptian playwright Yusuf Idris--deserved the prize more. He brushed all this aside. After all, the great award had come his way when he was in his late seventies. He had toiled as a civil servant--in the great bureaucratic society that Egypt has been since time immemorial--until the mandatory retirement age. He had his art and his friends and his coffeehouses, and in this world he was truly at peace.

It was no mystery to Mahfouz that this new peace with Israel would be unloved. To make this peace, Sadat had to glorify the October War of 1973, and claim it as his and Egypt's great victory, so as to move away from the shadow of the legendary Nasser. But glories and victories were not the material of Egyptian history. So the cunning land would take the peace and reject the peacemaker. Mahfouz circled this riddle of his country's capriciousness in *The Day the Leader was Killed*, a short work of fiction published in 1985 and built around Sadat's assassination four years earlier. In that work, a shrewd Mahfouzian character, Alwan Mohtashami, notes the cruel irony that Nasser in his defeat was more beloved than Sadat. His own grandfather once told him, Alwan narrates, that theirs was a people who felt "more comfortable with defeat than with victory. We have been so used to defeat that its rhythm has taken hold of us. That is why we loved the sad songs and the heroes the martyrs.... Gamal was the martyr of the fifth of June. But this vain, victorious man has strayed from the normal course of things. He brought us new feelings we were not ready for. He asked us to change the melody we have been used to for generations. He thus aroused our wrath and resentment. He then claimed the victory for himself, exaggerated it, leaving for the rest of us poverty and corruption." Mahfouz called on Sadat's widow in the aftermath of this book, and explained that he had never meant the work as an indictment of Sadat or a justification of his assassination. It was art, he said, the writer's license, literature made out of what was said in the land of Egypt.

IV.

It is dark in Mahfouz's world. This is the Mahfouzian paradox: the juxtaposition of the joy and lightness of the man himself with the utter hopelessness of his fiction. In the fiction, all the bourgeois verities come tumbling down. Men and women are trapped, and Mahfouz offers no way out for them save forgetfulness, perhaps, and old age. The women betray the men, and the men are scoundrels. The men betray what they proclaim to cherish. Young country women come to the city and lose their way, surrendering to lust or to sweet promises. It is a bitter and veritably Sisyphean existence, with failure playing out under watchful eyes.

Consider Zohra, in *Miramar*, a lovely young fellaha, who turns up at an Alexandria pension called *Miramar*, having fled her native village in search of freedom. Mariana, an old Greek innkeeper shipwrecked in this town--the first revolution of 1919 had killed her husband, and the revolution of 1952 had driven out her people--offers Zohra work and a new home. She gives her the opportunity to learn to read and write. In this world of fixed hierarchies, she spoils her by giving her dreams beyond her station. But *Miramar* is a boarding house, and there turns up on the premises one Sarhan el-Beheiry, a young man of the new order. He is taken by Zohra and offers to marry her the way the early Muslims used to marry, without a contract and without witnesses, for "God is our witness." Lust for Zohra, though, would yield to this man's love of advancement. He takes "her heart and her honor" and proposes marriage to Zohra's middle-class teacher. Sarhan el-Beheiry loved the workers at the mill. He lusted for the lovely peasant woman, but wanted the easy life. He spoke well of the revolution, as the best of a bad lot: "Some people don't like the Revolution. But look at it this way: what other system could we have in its place? If you think clearly, you will realize that it has to be either the communists or the Muslim Brotherhood. Which of these lots would you prefer to the Revolution?" Greed tempts this man and then destroys him: a scam for some easy money goes wrong, he commits suicide, and the peace of Mariana's pension is shattered as the boarders go separate ways and Zohra leaves, sure that she will find a better place.

But the most memorable of Mahfouz's women is surely Hamida, the doomed heroine of his novel *Midaq Alley*, from 1947. The pretty girl of the alley, she strays, seduced by the lure of a life without "household drudgery, pregnancy, children and filth." A pimp offers her the promise of a life like that of "the film stars." She crosses from the alley to New Street. "She heard him call a taxi and suddenly he opened the door for her to enter. She raised a foot to step in and that one movement marked the dividing point between her two lives." A life of prostitution awaits her. Abbas, a good simple boy of the alley who had loved her, tracks her down. She wishes to use him to

avenge herself against her seducer. But Abbas falters; he plunges into a group of British soldiers at a bar, where he comes upon Hamida in their midst. As a childhood friend who had come with him freezes in terror, he is beaten to death. The tale ends with the alley's strength, the alley's curse: "This crisis too, like all the others, finally subsided and the alley returned to its usual state of indifference and forgetfulness. It continued, as was its custom, to weep in the morning when there was material for tears, and resound with laughter in the evening. And in the time between, doors and windows would creak as they were opened and then creak again as they were closed."

If there is truth in the conventional notion of Mahfouz as holding up a mirror to his country, the image in the mirror was decidedly not pretty. This son of Egypt was unillusioned about his country. He saw it for what it was: a hemmed-in land, suffocated by poverty, its bourgeoisie brittle and uncertain, and close to the abyss. Mahfouz's is a ruthlessly material world--stark and pitiless, driven by need and desire. God visits this world, but not convincingly, as men and women think of Him and His mercy mostly when they falter, when they are undone by calamity or by their own greed, or when they are led astray by the force of their own desires. God forgives, but His creatures suspect that they are on their own, subject to the writ of the rulers and the money men and the bullies. Men stalk and prey on women, and the women return the favor. It is harsh in Mahfouz's alleys. Men and women survive; there is even grace and gossip in the evening, on the rooftops and in the coffeehouses; there are hilarious storytellers and charming rogues--but the pimp is never far from the comely girl, and he has a way of knowing when she is ready to sink. There is order in this universe, but it hangs by a slender thread.

Mahfouz offered his country no consolation. He was not a nationalist disguising his country's blemishes or adding it with false escape. He never worried about how he would be read in distant lands. Egypt was the canvas on which this man of sublime talents drew his unforgettable portraits of impossible lives. Readers came to him looking for Egypt and its political condition, its mind and its moods. For this reason, he has been read also as a social historian of his country. (For this I, too, must plead guilty, having for three decades used his fiction in that way.) But there runs through his output--well over fifty works of fiction--a different, and more universal, concern. He gave voice to it in paying tribute to an Israeli scholar, Sasson Somekh, who had done a huge amount of work on Mahfouz, and who understood--this is what Mahfouz appreciated so much--that at the heart of his fiction lay not Egypt's modern history, but something even grander: man's battle with time.

On the day of Mahfouz's death, a young Iranian-American author and journalist, Afshin Molavi, left a message of condolence on my answering machine in New York. I was a little startled. I was not a friend of the great Cairene, only his devoted fan and bewitched reader, who picked up his novels when I was a boy in Beirut and have recalled, for so many years, his unforgettable characters. I had been privileged to spend some time in his company. But the message was, in a humble way, not at all inappropriate. It reminded me of an essay, a eulogy of the great Isaiah Berlin, written by Leon Wieseltier in these pages in 1997. "'When a sage dies,' says the Talmud, 'all are his kin,'" Wieseltier wrote, and this was to be the unifying theme of his essay. Even those who did not know the sage directly, who did not study under him, were under obligation to mourn him, to rend their garments for the departed. In Cairo, but also far beyond it, there should be mourning for Naguib Mahfouz. We were, many of us, his kin. And he was the last of a breed. Now there is only the barren soil of the autocratic land; there is Pharaoh, and his court, and his military funerals.

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