Contents

Preface ix
Acknowledgements xiv
Transliteration and Translation xvi

PART ONE THE NOVELIST, HIS WORLD AND HIS WORKS

1 The Emergence of the Modern Egyptian Novel 3
2 Najib Mahfuz and His Cairo 17
3 The Works of Najib Mahfuz 56

PART TWO RECURRENT IMAGES, PERSISTENT IDEAS

4 Rational Man, Rebellious Devil 99
5 Home and Homelessness 115
6 Absent Father, Persevering Mother 119
7 One Vision, Three Narrative Modes 123

PART THREE MAHFUZ AS POLITICAL CRITIC

8 A Cunning Art 129
9 The Courtroom of History 144

PART FOUR WHAT'S IN A NAME

10 Personal Names in Fiction 159
11 A Note on Egyptian Personal Names 165
12 Two Early Short Stories 168

13 Khan al-Khalili 174
14 Al-Qahira al-Jadida 182
15 The Beginning and the End 192
16 The Cairene Trilogy 198
17 The Thief and the Dogs 226
18 The Beggar 236

PART FIVE THE MASKS OF REALITY, THE ENIGMA OF NAMES

19 Names and Remembrance 253
20 Mahfuz's Enigmatic Name 256
21 Names and Language 261
22 Mahfuz as Allegorist 268
23 Mahfuz and the Secret of Being 272

Bibliography 279
Index 289

Preface

I have been a faithful reader of Najīb Maḥfūẓ's works for many years. I discovered him in 1963, when, as a newly appointed lecturer at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, I was looking for novels to use as material for a course on contemporary Arabic literature. As my background was principally in medieval Arabic, and my knowledge of modern writers stopped with the generation of Taha Husayn, I started to read contemporary Arab authors with whom I was unfamiliar. The first Egyptian novelist I tried was Najib Mahfuz, and before I was half-way through *Bidaya wa-nihaya* ("The Beginning and the End," 1949) I told myself with satisfaction: "This is really a good novelist." I was impressed by the narrative power of the novel, by the realistic descriptions of Cairo and its people, and, above all, by the humane spirit which pervaded the book. Much to my regret, this book was too long for my first-year students, and my continued search brought me to the much shorter *al-Liss wa'l-kilab* ("The Thief and the Dogs") published twelve years later, which I loved and which I have never ceased to admire. From this point on, I tried to get hold of as many of Mahfuz's books as I could. At the time – that is, before 1967 – books printed in Arab countries could be obtained in Israel only through Blackwell, Brill or Luzac, the famous Oriental book-dealers of Europe. I have tried to read everything Mahfuz has published and have used many of his novels and short stories in courses I have taught.

Mahfuz's stories awoke in me an immediate sense of recognition and shared values, even friendship. Here was a person I wanted very much to meet and talk to, but at the time there was little prospect of our ever meeting. At the end of 1970, I sent a copy of my first pub-

lished article on Mahfuz to the author himself. Because of the political circumstances and the absence of direct postal services between Israel and Egypt, I sent the letter via an Israeli colleague on sabbatical in England. Together with the article I enclosed three lines of medieval Arabic poetry:

> Tell a friend whom God has not allowed me to meet
> that although I have not met him, I do meet him
> And that my gaze is turned upon him
> though his abode is far from mine
> God knows, I do not recall him to mind
> for how can I recall him, if I have never forgotten him.

A couple of months later I received Najib Mahfuz's generous reply, which he concluded as follows:

> I was profoundly moved by the verse you chose with such sincerity and affection, and I can find no better response than this verse by [the medieval poet] Mihyar:
>
> Remember us, as we remember the days of our friendship
> how often memory brings the departed near.

In 1979, on my first visit to Cairo, I finally met Najib Mahfuz and was able to enjoy his hospitality.

Since 1932, when the twenty-one-year-old Mahfuz published his first short story, he has produced more than fifty volumes of novels, short stories and plays, in addition to many screenplays and articles. This is virtually a library, within which there is a great variety not only of genre and theme, but also of literary style. Mahfuz has moved from classical nineteenth-century realism to more modern forms of narrative. He has been the subject of a multitude of book-length studies and innumerable articles in both Arabic and Western languages. Three of the books which have appeared in English deserve special mention. The earliest and best known of these is Sasson Somekh's *Changing Rhythm* (1973), which presents a systematic study of Mahfuz's novels up to 1966, and includes a postscript reviewing his publications between 1967 and 1971. The two most recent books on Mahfuz in English are Rasheed El-Enany's *Naguib Mahfouz* (1993),

a comprehensive and perceptive study which includes chapters on Mahfuz's works in the 1970s and 1980s, and Michael Beard and Adnan Haydar's valuable collection of articles, *Naguib Mahfouz: From Regional Fame to Global Recognition* (1993).

Why then another book? Great writers can be read in many ways which are not mutually exclusive. In this book I present my own reading, and attempt to illuminate some areas of Mahfuz's work and personality which have so far been overlooked. My approach is one of close reading of the text – a product, no doubt, of my philological training in classical Arabic and my study of medieval Islamic texts. This book is based primarily on analysis of Mahfuz's works in terms of their linguistic and literary sources. His writings are not only the subject of my research, but also my main interpretative instrument: Mahfuz's works cast light upon one another. Mahfuz's biography and the historical and social background, interesting and important as they are, take second place here. I do not regard literary works as symptoms of an author's psychological development, nor do I view biography, as such, as an explanation of art. A writer's biography is, however, always of interest to his readers as context and support for interpretation, and I have therefore included a fairly long and detailed biography of Mahfuz in Part One of this book.

It is remarkable that knowledge of Mahfuz's life remains limited. Students of Mahfuz are obliged to rely primarily on the interviews he has given, in which he has very carefully protected parts of his biography and concealed his more personal feelings, insisting that a writer should reveal himself only through his art. Thus, all those who have written about Mahfuz, including myself, must rely essentially on the same published sources. There are, therefore, no major differences between my description of Mahfuz's life and those which have appeared in earlier books. Close scrutiny of Mahfuz's interviews, including some of the less well known among them, has, however, enabled me to cast light on a number of previously obscure points. I have attempted to emphasize those aspects of Mahfuz's biography which are particularly relevant to his writing, and have specifically dwelt on those details which I believe to be at the root of certain distinctive traits in his art (such as his unadmitted hostility towards his father and his attitude to his own name).

Part One opens with a brief chapter on the emergence of the Egyptian novel and Mahfuz's literary forerunners. Its third chapter, "The Works of Mahfuz," surveys the writer's literary output from its earliest beginnings to his most recently published works. I have paid particular attention to Mahfuz's early stories; though far less accomplished than the later novels for which he is famous, these stories help us understand the moral and intellectual attitudes which underlie everything he wrote.

Mahfuz, like other great novelists, creates his own universe. Many of those who have written about him refer, indeed, to "the world of Najib Mahfuz," but the contents of this world have not been sufficiently defined. Over the years, Mahfuz has developed a unique imaginative vocabulary and a Mahfuzian iconography which, once identified and interpreted, leads to a better understanding of his works. Some basic terms in his fictional topography – *ḥāra* ("neighborhood") and *khalā'* ("wilderness") – have been explained by Rasheed El-Enany, but, on the whole, his vocabulary of images has been insufficiently explored. Part Two of the book, "Recurrent Images, Persistent Ideas," is devoted to this topic.

I found it helpful to pursue recurrent themes in Mahfuz's works; one such theme which attracted my attention was his consistently critical portrayal of fathers. As it turns out, this motif in Mahfuz's fiction has its roots in his personal experience, a fact he has tried hard to conceal in his interviews. At various points throughout the book, I indicate how Mahfuz's criticism of the father extends beyond specific fictional cases and, through his use of allegory, assumes political and religious dimensions.

Politics are of great interest to Mahfuz. This has been recognized by most of his critics, and openly admitted by Mahfuz himself. Yet one of the most conspicuous of his political concerns – his attitude to Nasser – was ignored by researchers for many years. Part Three, "Mahfuz as Political Critic" – a revised version of an article I published in 1989 – addresses this issue and examines the various forms of allegory which Mahfuz uses to express his political views. Besides political sensitivities, which may have deterred scholars from delving into Mahfuz's political allegories, there may have been an additional factor at work: the low esteem in which allegory has long been held

by many literary scholars. This attitude is a legacy of the Coleridgian romantic view, which regards symbolism as artistic and exalted, and allegory as inferior and mechanical – and thus, unworthy of a major writer. For Najib Mahfuz, however, allegory is an extremely important literary mode. To overlook allegory is to shut oneself off from an essential dimension of Mahfuz's work.

The most idiosyncratic expression of Mahfuz's predilection for allegory is his use of allegorical names. This aspect of Mahfuz's work, which has been largely ignored, has its roots in the writer's personal experience. When I first read Mahfuz's stories I was struck by the care with which he selected names for his characters. The author's special attention to names is to be found everywhere in his work, but, while its presence is unmistakable, its meaning and intent are neither clear nor uniform. This phenomenon aroused my interest in the names of Mahfuz's characters in general. I found that in many cases where there seemed to be no obvious analogy between name and character, further inquiry revealed that Mahfuz, with meticulous care, had loaded the name with a hidden message, to be decoded by the attentive reader. I realized that Mahfuz's choice of meaningful names was more than just a literary device: it was related on the one hand to his experience with his own name, and on the other to his philosophy of language. In Part Four of this book, "What's in a Name," I offer an interpretation of Mahfuz's use of names in six of his major works and two of his early stories.

When I put together the textual findings and the biographical data, the fragments combined to form a clear, intelligible picture. In Part Five, I summarize and tie up my main themes and arguments: Mahfuz's special interest in names and naming, the peculiar story of his own name, his attitude to his father and to the patriarchal order, his allegorical approach, and his philosophy of life.

My exploration of Najib Mahfuz's world continues; nevertheless, I feel I have reached a stage at which I want to share my understanding of Mahfuz's works and the pleasure I took in interpreting them with both the specialist and the general reader.

CHAPTER 4

Rational Man, Rebellious Devil

In this and the following two chapters, I propose to explain some important aspects of Mahfuz's conceptual world by analyzing several interrelated themes which occupy a central place in his works. These are embodied in certain literary images which recur with remarkable persistence.[1]

Let us begin our examination of Mahfuz's vocabulary of images by way of one of his short stories: "The Other Face" ("*al-Wajh al-akhar*"), published in the collection *Taht al-mizalla* (1969). The narrator is a famous educator telling the story of his long friendship with two brothers, one a police officer and the other a criminal, both of whom he has known since childhood. His sympathies, quite understandably, lie with the policeman. The struggle between the brothers reaches its climax when the police officer is appointed chief of police in the city where his criminal brother operates. The narrator tries in vain to arrange a reconciliation between the two. Eventually the police kill the criminal. When the narrator hears of his death he is deeply distressed, and sinks into a state of moral and emotional confusion. His value system has been turned upside-down and he realizes that, whereas in the past he has regarded the police officer as the ideal hero, he has now come to view the slain criminal as his

[1] Jabir 'Asfur has called attention to the fact that, while critics often use expressions such as "Mahfuz's world" or "Mahfuz's vision," these terms have so far been insufficiently analyzed and have been given no precise meaning. Jabir 'Asfur, "*Nuqqad Najib Mahfuz*," in Ghali Shukri (ed.), *Najib Mahfuz: Ibda' nisf qarn*, (Cairo, 1989), pp. 238–43.

ideal. He announces his decision to abandon education for art. The subject of his first painting is to be a nude woman. He says that reason has failed him, and that he now prefers to act destructively and madly.[2]

Let us consider more closely the characters and motifs in this story, which is really an essay in the fictional mode on the conflict between human passions on the one hand and social order on the other. In the fictional structure of the story the narrator, *qua* educator, is presented as having attempted to mediate between the two brothers. Mahfuz hints a number of times that the conflict between the two is actually a struggle between two aspects of the human personality which pull in opposing directions.[3] The very name of the story, "The Other Face," suggests this notion of inner ambivalence. Speaking of the criminal brother, the narrator says to the policeman, "He is not a creature of another species. He is a captive of those passions which we have undertaken to repress." The policeman answers, "That is the difference between civilization and barbarity." The conflict between the brothers represents a problem of universal dimensions; it is concerned with the very foundations of civilization. The policeman describes his brother in the following terms: "a mad storm, an uncontrollable eruption, a raging bull." On the other hand, the policeman is referred to as characterized by rationality (*'aql*). When pronounced by the criminal brother, however, "rationality" sounds like a vice rather than a virtue.

To clarify this point further, we may quote here a brief conversation in which the narrator informs the criminal that his brother, the police officer, would like to see him.

> [The criminal:] Damn it! He is, as they say, the very model of reason, and with time he's probably become even more obnoxious.
>
> [The narrator:] His wish [to meet you] undoubtedly stems from good motives.

[2] "I have wasted my life in the company of rational people" (*laqad ada'tu ayyami fi suhbati 'l-'uqala'*), *Taht al-mizalla*, p. 64.

[3] The narrator says: "A curious reality dawned on me: they have been fighting each other all their lives even from the cradle . . . Each of them is soon going to find out that he has been fighting his own flesh and blood, in other words, a part of himself"; ibid., p. 59.

[The criminal:] Ever since the cradle he has wanted to do away with me.

[The narrator:] He wanted you to follow the same path in life as he did.

[The criminal:] Reason ... equilibrium ... order ... diligence ... morality. In my eyes he's the very symbol of death.

Unbridled passions are often referred to as "madness." This attribute is ascribed a number of times to the criminal brother. Once the narrator has shifted his preference to the criminal, he declares that he has chosen to abandon the company of rational people and become a madman. He says, "I shall turn away from those who are rational and respectable, and let the whirlpool sweep me away. Let them be happy and useful, and let me be mad and destructive and may Satan accept me."

In Mahfuz's works the sexual instinct ranks foremost among those elements which defy rationality.[4] Some of the offences ascribed to the criminal are connected with sex (pimping, sexual assault, etc.). In the final scene, which dramatically demonstrates the narrator's conversion, we see him stepping towards his model, the nude woman.

On the day the criminal is killed, the narrator suffers a sudden inflammation in one of his legs, which leaves him with a limp. This infirmity seems to suggest that with the criminal's death the narrator's very person has been injured. Hinting that the struggle between the two brothers may actually have taken place in the mind of the narrator, Mahfuz has him say: "We were three and we were one." In this dramatic story of ideas we are faced with a system of concepts and symbols aligned in two contrasting sets: order, rationality and the police on one side; primeval instincts and passions, crime, madness and nudity on the other. Satan, too, appears as an enemy of order; in the final scene of the story the narrator exclaims: "Let Satan accept me!"[5] This, as we shall presently see, is a point of great significance in the symbolical language of Mahfuz.

Let us now pursue our investigation by examining the central mo-

[4] Cf. the role of the dancer in Mahfuz's early story *"al-Sharr al-ma'bud"* ("Evil Worshipped"), see above, pp. 63–64.

[5] *Taht al-mizalla*, p. 64