Naguib Mahfouz is the most important Arabic fiction writer of this century. Born in 1911, his long and prolific writing career represents the evolution of the novel genre in Arabic literature. His books are a rich record of the tragic tensions attendant on a nation’s quest for freedom and modernity. In 1988 he won the Nobel Prize for Literature.

This is the only comprehensive study of Mahfouz’s achievement. Rasheed El-Enany presents a systematic evaluation of the author’s life and environment; local and foreign influences on him; elements of his thought and technique and the evolution of his craft. While each work is discussed individually, emphasis is laid throughout on elements of continuity in his work, whether thematic or aesthetic. In particular, Dr El-Enany challenges the traditional classification of Mahfouz’s work into four chronological phases—historical, realist, modernist and indigenous or traditional. It is demonstrated that elements of these forms recur throughout Mahfouz’s varied and experimental writings.

This book is the story of Mahfouz’s rejection of Western moulds of fiction to express his own vision of man and society through forms inspired by the traditional arts of storytelling in Arabic.

Rasheed El-Enany is Lecturer in Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter. He is the translator of Mahfouz’s Respected Sir (1986) and also The Caravan or ‘Ali Janah al-Tabrizi and his Servant Quffa by Alfred Farag (1989).
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The pursuit of meaning

Rasheed El-Enany

London and New York
For my son, Sami
He was overwhelmed by a feeling of having been the victim of a heinous aggression—a conspiracy against him by fate, the law of heredity and the class system.... He appeared to himself a wretched soul standing alone against these forces combined. His wound was bleeding and no one was there to tend it.

_Palace of Desire_ (p. 347)
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A new book on Naguib Mahfouz has long been overdue. All existing studies, whether in Arabic or English, were written at a time when the novelist was still at the height of his energy and inventiveness. Thus the last twenty-odd years of his creative life (specifically since the late 1960s) which saw his imagination take new turnings and some of his most important works written have remained largely unresearched and the link unestablished between the two halves of his \oeuvre. The last two decades have also seen a steady increase in the realization of the originality and human significance of Mahfouz’s work in the West—a realization which culminated in the award of the Nobel Prize for literature to the author in 1988. Today, with virtually half his novels in English translation alone, several more currently under contract, and with translations being published on a wide commercial scale as opposed to the narrow semi-academic circulation of a few years ago, the need for a fresh and thorough evaluation of the novelist’s achievement (and one which addresses itself as much to the general reader as to the specialist Arabist) is all too apparent. This book, it is hoped, will be seen as an endeavour in that direction.

Critics have tended to classify Mahfouz’s work into three chronological phases (historical/romantic, realistic/naturalistic and modernist/experimental), and more recently they have added a fourth, usually labelled ‘the phase of indigenous or traditional form’ (marhalat al-shakl al-asil aw al-turathi)—the products of which I will choose to refer to subsequently in this book as ‘the episodic novels’. This approach may have served a purpose while the author’s development was still an ongoing process, namely to draw a demarcation line each time he broke
new aesthetic or formal ground. However, now that his achievement is near complete, such an approach based on chronology alone would seem somewhat artificial, and it has not been adopted here. The very variety and unpredictability of the aesthetics of his work has in fact always defied neat classification. Thus critics and academics who happily talked for long about a romantic/historical phase of his work tucked away tidily at the beginning of his career must have been taken by surprise to find him writing historical novels again forty years later and this time without a trace of romanticism. Again the so-called modernist phase of his work is unanimously demarcated at *The Thief and the Dogs*, while *The Cairo Trilogy* is seen as the peak of his realistic phase. In fact, an intricate symbolic pattern (as will be shown), extensive use of the internal monologue, an intense heightened prose (especially in Part II), and a complex agonized sensibility (Kamal’s) all go to endow *The Trilogy* with the right to claim a place under ‘the modernist phase’ as much as it has always enjoyed one under the ‘naturalistic/realistic’ label for other considerations. To give yet another example, Mahfouz’s indulgence in episodic writing does not begin until the 1970s, but is the much earlier *Children of Gebelawi* not an episodic novel? Indeed, is not *Midaq Alley*, too, episodic in its own way? Nor should we forget that throughout ‘the episodic phase’ proper, Mahfouz continued to write non-episodic novels as well.

These and other reflections have encouraged me to disregard the principle of absolute chronology in my examination of the author’s work in favour of groupings of units within it which, in my opinion, have emphasized our sense of the elements of coherence and continuity in his thought. Chronology, however, has been preserved whenever it was found not to be in conflict with this scheme of things. Any classification is bound, nevertheless, to have an element of arbitrariness in it. Single works may qualify under more than one class, but in the end a choice has to be made. One problem I faced was where to place *Before the Throne*. Few works can be more ‘episodic’ and fewer still can be more ‘historical’. My preference was to examine it in the context of the rest of the historical novels, rather than that of the episodic ones. In the end, however, any such disparities of organization will be consumed in a sense of the ultimate oneness, across single works and whole phases, of the novelist’s
vision—something I have tried always to remember in the course of this study. With regard to the short stories and the plays, I have chosen not to mix these with the novels, devoting to them an independent chapter at the end. I have, however, attempted to underline the strong thematic and aesthetic link between the two groups both in that chapter and via cross-references in the notes throughout. In my survey of the short story collections I have abided by the chronology of their publication.

As every writer will know, an important factor in a book of a prescribed length is allocation of space to individual subjects of discussion. In the present instance, individual novels often tended to claim their own worth of space within the prescribed limits. Hence the relative length of my discussions of works like The Trilogy and Harafish. On the whole I have felt that the novels of the 1970s and 1980s which have received scant consideration so far ought to be treated generously. Similarly, a feeling that some of the old novels of the 1940s (e.g. Midaq Alley) were ripe for reappraisal dictated again a relative liberality in allocation of space. If this has resulted in some stinginess towards the novels of the 1960s, my only consolation is that other scholars and critics have treated them lavishly, no less in English than in Arabic—a fact that a glance at the bibliography at the end of this monograph should not fail to confirm.

I have given preference here to the popular French-based spelling of the novelist’s name (as it appears on the covers of his translated works) over the transliterated version usually favoured by Arabists. To avoid confusion I have stuck to the popular spelling even in my transliteration of titles of Arabic sources citing the author’s name. I have, however, felt obliged to maintain the transliterated version of the name where I quote titles of English sources using it. Another choice of convenience and in deference to readers not conversant with Arabic is my adoption both in the text and its notes of the titles of all published translations of Mahfouz’s novels and my rendering in English of the titles of those works as yet untranslated. Arabists, however, will be able to establish what the original titles are through the briefest glance at the bilingual list of works at the end. Finally, I must point out that all quotations from Mahfouz’s work are my own direct translations from the Arabic originals (even where published translations exist) and that all
Now for a few expressions of gratitude. It was my friend and colleague Professor Aziz al-Azmeh who first suggested that I should write this book. To him, for this and much else, my first thanks go. I also wish to record my grateful appreciation to all my colleagues in the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter for allowing me a generous study leave without which the writing of this book would have taken much longer. I would like to acknowledge with gratitude the help (always forthcoming) that I have received over the years from Mr Paul Auchterlonie, the Arabic specialist librarian at the University of Exeter Library, who has also compiled the index for this volume, Miss Heather Eva, director of the inter-library loans section at the same library for running an excellent service, Mrs Aleya Serour at the American University in Cairo Press for providing me with useful bibliographic information on Mr Mahfouz’s works in English translation, and Mrs Sheila Westcott for typing the text of this book and rendering valued assistance over the years in many other ways. The greater part of this book was written in Riyadh where I spent the period of my study leave. To Professor Fatma Moussa-Mahmoud at King Saud University (formerly Professor of English at Cairo University), for her treasured friendship and generous hospitality towards me and my family, for granting me free access to her private library and bringing to my attention several sources on the subject that otherwise might have escaped my notice, I would like to express the deepest affection and gratitude on my own behalf and that of my family. To Mr Abd al-Aziz Muhammadayn (also at King Saud University) and his family, for their spontaneous friendship and countless kindnesses and help throughout our stay in Riyadh, my family and I will always be their debtors. Finally, to my wife Wafaa and my children for their love and support, and for virtually relinquishing every claim on my time during the many months it took to produce this volume, I owe more than I can say.

I am also grateful to the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies for permission to use sections of my article ‘Religion in the Novels of Naguib Mahfouz’ (BRISMES Bulletin, vol. 15, 1988, pp. 21–7), E.J.Brill for permission to use sections of my

Rasheed El-Enany
Exeter, June 1992
On 11 December 1911, in al-Jamaliyya quarter in the heart of the old city of Cairo Naguib Mahfouz was born. Though he only lived there up to the age of 12 (in 1924 his family moved to the then new Cairo suburb, al-ʿAbbasiyya), there is a sense in which we can say that he has never left Jamaliyya, or in other words that it has always lived in his mind and consequently in the creations of that mind. Most of the novels of his early realistic period are set in Jamaliyya, notably *Midaq Alley* and *The Cairo Trilogy*, while in later works such as *Children of Gebelawi, Fountain and Tomb, The Epic of the Harafish* and many others, though not mentioned by name and not recreated with the same meticulous detail as before, Jamaliyya continues to haunt his work in various mantles of disguise and lends to it many of its typical characters and physical assets. The *bara* (plebeian street/quarter) with its warring *futuwwas* (thugs) and their gangs, its mystery-enveloped *takiyya* (dervish-house), its *qabw* (dark vault or arch which once housed a city gate), its ancient *sabil* (drinking-fountain), its shops, its café and the adjacent *qarafa* (cemetery)—all these components which make up the distinctive features of much of Mahfouz’s work in the past twenty years originate in the old quarter of Jamaliyya whose images were indelibly impressed on the novelist’s consciousness during his childhood years.

Jamal al-Ghitani, a well-known novelist in his own right and a confidant of Mahfouz, who also grew up in Jamaliyya and remained emotionally bound to it ever after, has retraced the steps of Mahfouz’s characters in the quarter and attests that ‘*Khan
al-Khalili, Midaq Alley and The Trilogy are accurate documentations of the features of the area during the period of their events’. Mahfouz himself stresses the importance of Jamaliyya, or ‘the bara world’ as he refers to it sometimes, as a source of inspiration for his work throughout his creative life: ‘It seems to me that [a man-of-letters] must have a tie with a certain place or a certain object to form a point of departure for his emotions.’ He admits that Jamaliyya was reflected in his work and goes on to add that even when he started to treat issues of an intellectual or symbolic nature, he still went back to Jamaliyya for his background. ‘What really moves me is the bara world,’ he proclaims. ‘It is my favourite world.’ Mahfouz’s dependence on the bara world as a background for his fiction and a medium for rendering his vision of man and society has noticeably increased in his old age, particularly from the mid-1970s onwards. He explains this aptly:

With the advancement of age one realises that his origin is his true refuge…. In the tumult of this strange world, one takes refuge in his childhood, in the security of his past life. This explains my nostalgia for the bara and [my use of it] as a source for the Epic of the Harafish…

During Mahfouz’s childhood the bara was very different from what it is today. Today a bara or back street in Jamaliyya or elsewhere in Cairo is exclusively inhabited by the lower classes of society. During the author’s childhood however, the bara was in a sense a model of the Egyptian society. He tells us that in those days all the classes of the Egyptian people were represented in it from the very rich to the very poor and that blocks of flats where whole families lived in single rooms with common facilities stood in close proximity to majestic mansions surrounded by gardens. This strange composition of the Egyptian bara (which according to Mahfouz survived until the 1930s) can certainly explain his frequent use of the bara as a comprehensive model of society and indeed of humanity at large in Children of Gebelawi and many later works.

One of the main features of the bara as Mahfouz knew it in his boyhood was the futuwwa, a character type that was later to play a major symbolic role in his fiction, notably Children of
Gebelawi and Harafish. In his memoirs, recorded by Ghitani, he tells us that in those days every quarter or hara had a futuwwa and goes on to describe some of the great battles of the warring gangs to which he was an eye-witness. Elsewhere he defines the part played by the futuwwa at the time as not to ‘oppress’ the hara, but to ‘protect it’. Significantly, he goes on to add that ‘as with some rulers, the protector sometimes turned into a usurper’. Mahfouz often speaks with unconcealed admiration about futuwwas. He describes one of them whom he was able to watch at close quarters in his capacity as café-owner and manager after retirement from thuggery in the following terms: ‘He had an awesome appearance; he resembled a party leader or a big general. He was quite a character! Very gallant and possessing an attractive personality! A [true] knight!’ The novelist also emphasizes the nationalist role played by the futuwwas during the popular uprising against the British occupation in 1919 as well as their part in supporting the Wafd, the nationalist anti-British, pro-democratic party, in general elections. Mahfouz is indeed happy to admit the symbolic part played by the futuwwas in his fiction. He argues that in Children of Gebelawi ‘they stood for brutal force’, while in Harafish they were more ‘like rulers, sometimes just, sometimes oppressive’.

Another feature of the hara which was to figure centrally in his work, especially Fountain and Tomb and Harafish was the takiyya. He refers to it briefly in his memoirs: ‘there was also a takiyya inhabited by Persians or [perhaps] Turks whom we used to see from a distance.’ Those mysterious strangers with their enigmatic songs made an impression on the budding consciousness of the author which apparently continued to haunt him until it found artistic expression much later in his life in the works mentioned above.

Mahfouz’s childhood observations and experiences in Jamaliyya were not, however, confined to the local scene, for in 1919 when the author was only 7 years old, the quarter, together with the rest of the country, was engulfed in a popular uprising against the British. It was in those days that the author probably first came to experience the meaning of nationalist feeling. About the events of that period he says:

From a small room on the roof [of our house] I used to see the demonstrations of the 1919 revolution. I saw
women take part in the demonstrations on donkey-drawn carts.... I often saw English soldiers firing at the demonstrators.... My mother used to pull me back from the window, but I wanted to see everything.  

From his elementary school opposite al-Husayn Mosque, he was able, he tells us, to see the bodies of the dead and the wounded laid on the ground. ‘You could say’, he proclaims, ‘that the one thing which most shook the security of my childhood was the 1919 revolution.’

There is no exaggerating the lasting effect that those public events had on the awareness of the young boy, Mahfouz. For the rest of his life, as his works attest, he was to remain a child of that golden era of the national struggle and a spiritual follower of the liberal, democratic principles of the Wafd Party which inherited the revolution. The events of 1919 are widely recreated and affectionately celebrated in a great many of Mahfouz’s novels, and especially in *The Trilogy*, as will be shown later in this book.

*Fountain and Tomb*, as an autobiographical *Bildungsroman*, is another major work where Mahfouz remembers the 1919 revolution at some considerable length. Tales 12–16, 18–19 and 23 are entirely devoted to the revolution out of a total of seventy-eight episodes in which the more salient memories and impressions of the novelist’s early childhood are recollected. All the main events of the revolution from its eruption to the death of its leader, Sa’id Zaghlul, in 1927 are covered by the tales. What is particularly interesting about the account in *Fountain and Tomb* is that it is given through the highly excited and only half-comprehending consciousness of a child. Reading the book’s account of the revolution we cannot help but see it as the reduction to its raw emotional elements of the elaborately recreated scenes in *Palace Walk*, the first part of *The Trilogy*.

*Mirrors* is another semi-autobiographical work where ostensibly personal memories of the 1919 events are recalled, though less extensively Thani in *Fountain and Tomb*. Of particular interest here is the episode of ‘Anwar al-Halawani’ where we can recognize without much difficulty what must have been the real-life origin of the character of Fahmi ʿAbd al-Jawwad in *The Trilogy* I. The viewpoint here, like that later used in *Fountain and Tomb*, is that of a child. Here is how he describes the murder of Anwar,
the son of a neighbouring family and, like Fahmi, a student at the Law School at the time of the revolution:

That morning I learnt that our neighbour Anwar al-Halawani had been killed in a demonstration with a Bultilet fired by an English soldier. Thus I came to know for the first time the meaning of the act of ‘murder’ in a real-life experience rather than through fairy tales. I also heard for the first time about the ‘Bultilet’ as one of the achievements of civilization.18 And again there was a new word, ‘demonstration’ which required a great deal of explanation. It was perhaps also then that I first heard about the representative of a new human race in my little life: the Englishman.19

I have quoted Mahfouz earlier as saying that the events of 1919 could be said to have been what most shook the security of his childhood.20 A review of the information available on the novelist’s childhood (whose source is largely himself) appears to confirm that he grew up in a secure and stable family environment, nor did his immediate family seem to be directly affected by the public dramas of 1919 in any calamitous way. The main sources about the author’s childhood are to be found in The Trilogy (especially the character of Kamal CAbd al-Jawwad) and Fountain and Tomb, a fact which the author has repeatedly admitted.21 Mirrors is another significant source, though to a lesser extent than the other two. Finally there is his own direct, personal account given in interviews.

The author describes his childhood in the following terms:

I grew up in a stable family. The atmosphere around me was one which inspired the love of parents and family…. The family was a basic, almost sacred, value of my childhood; I was not one of those who rebelled against their parents or rejected their authority.22

The sentiment expressed in his last statement is one which was to stay with Mahfouz translated into the wider context of respect for authority, moderation and a preference for gradual political and social reform, rather than outright revolution—all of which are values which clearly emerge from the totality of the political themes in his work, as I hope this study will later show.
The author tells us that although he was the seventh and last child in a family which already had four boys and two girls, he was virtually deprived of natural fraternal relationships. This was, he informs us, because the youngest of his brothers was ten years older than himself:

I did not have the kind of brother or sister that I could play with, go out with, or confide my secrets in. There was between me and them the kind of barrier which existed between a child and his parents…. Because of this, friendship played a very important role in my life from a very early age. It provided the necessary substitute for the missing fraternity.²³

One must observe here that his last statement is amply substantiated in his two most autobiographical works, *Mirrors* and *Fountain and Tomb*, where sketches of scores of friends, albeit touched up for artistic purposes, are to be found. Mahfouz himself has a comment to make on the influence of the absence of this relationship from his childhood on his fiction. ‘For this reason,’ he tells Ghitani, ‘you can notice that I often portray in my work the relationship between brothers; it is because of my deprivation of it. This is obvious in *The Trilogy, The Beginning and the End* and *Khan al-Khalili.*²⁴

The author describes to Ghitani the family house in which he grew up in Jamaliyya. The description seems largely to tally with that of the house of the Ahmad CAbd al-Jawwad family in *The Trilogy*. He also tells us that the house is associated in his memory with play, particularly on the roof where house provisions were stored, poultry raised and various potted and creeping plants grown.²⁵ In this connection, readers of novels like *The Trilogy, Khan al-Khalili* and *The Beginning and the End* will recall how the roof figures as an occasional scene for family gatherings and the secret assignations of lovers. Mahfouz also says that, in addition to the roof, he used to play in the street with the children of neighbouring families.²⁶ Memories of those young friends and their common street adventures are affectionately recreated in both *Fountain and Tomb* and *Mirrors.*

About his parents Mahfouz does not say much and about his brothers and sisters he says next to nothing. He is at pains, however, to dissociate his parents from the most famous couple of his
creation, Ahmad ʿAbd al-Jawwad and Amina of The Trilogy. He stresses that the fearful character of ʿAbd al-Jawwad is not modelled on his father, but the head of a neighbouring family in Jamaliyya whom he used to visit as a child with his mother. He describes his father as having been ‘old-fashioned’, but in possession of a gentle temperament. Unlike ʿAbd al-Jawwad, he spent most of his evenings with his family. He used to be some sort of book-keeper or accountant (we are not told exactly) in the civil service until he took early retirement to manage the business of a merchant friend of his. Mahfouz’s account of his father appears, however, to contradict that of Adham Rajab, a lifetime friend of his who knew him well during his adolescent years. Mr Rajab states that the author’s father was so strict with his family that the young Mahfouz’s friends were never able to visit him at his home. He says that the writer’s eldest brother was also strict and surmises that the character of the fierce patriarch Ahmad ʿAbd al-Jawwad in The Trilogy must have been based on those two models. When faced with these revelations in 1970, Mahfouz accepted them as true. Surprisingly, however, he was a few years later to contradict himself in the manner explained above.

The novelist emphasizes that patriotism was one basic value which he picked up from his father in his childhood:

My father always spoke enthusiastically about our national heroes…. I grew up in a home where the names of Mustafa Kamil, Muhammad Farid and Saʿīd Zaghlul were truly sacred…. The strong emotion with which my father spoke about political figures would make you feel as if they were his personal enemies or friends. My father however was no exception here; this was the public spirit which dominated the country during my childhood.

Much of this public spirit and of the infiltration of national politics into the life of the average Egyptian home the reader will immediately recognize in The Trilogy.

Religion was another important value in Mahfouz’s family, whereas culture was absent: ‘You would not have thought’, he tells an interviewer, ‘that an artist would emerge from that family.’ Mahfouz painfully fails to elaborate on what he calls ‘the purely religious climate at home’ during his childhood. On what it was like and what his response to it was he leaves us totally in
the dark. To answer these questions we have to go to Kamal in *The Trilogy* whose gradual disenchantment with religion is described at great length. It is interesting to note here that, while the value of nationalism (in which were also embedded the values of liberalism and democracy) was one that he nurtured and upheld all his life, that of organized, prescribed religion was one which he was to question and finally reject as he reached intellectual maturity.

Of his mother Mahfouz tells us that she was of a ‘somewhat nervous temperament’ and that there was little that she shared with the character of Amina in *The Trilogy*. Unlike Amina, and the women of her generation generally, she appears to have enjoyed a considerable amount of freedom. Interestingly, he tells us of her passion for ancient monuments. He remembers that when he was as young as four she would take him to look at the Pyramids and the Sphinx or the Museum of Antiquities, and especially to the Mummies Room. This piece of information is illuminating when we consider that the author was later to develop a strong interest in Ancient Egyptian history and that his first three novels were to be devoted to the subject.

Around the year 1924, when Mahfouz was 12 years old, the family moved to ‘Abbasiyya, ‘but I remained attracted to Jamaliyya, always hankering back for it’, says the novelist. He also tells us that the suburban quarter they moved to in the twenties was very different from today’s over-crowded ‘Abbasiyya:

The ‘Abbasiyya of old times was lush with greenery and had few buildings. Houses were small, consisting only of one storey and each surrounded by a garden, while open fields stretched as far as the horizon...and the silence was deep.

Next to Jamaliyya, ‘Abbasiyya appears to be the only other place to have made a permanent claim on both Mahfouz’s consciousness and his art. All other Cairene districts that serve occasionally as background for action in his novels are there only in their capacity as realistic detail. The same is also true of his descriptions of the Alexandrian scene as in *Autumn Quail, The Search, The Beggar* and *Miramar*. It is only when he evokes Jamaliyya and ‘Abbasiyya that he seems most at home and that we feel that we are in communion with some part of his innermost
soul. Again, it is only evocations of Jamaliyya and ‘Abbasiyya that are employed symbolically in his work to stand for more than their immediate realistic reference. While to Jamaliyya he owes his many recreations of the *hara* with its traditional features, he has the old ‘Abbasiyya lying on the edge of the desert to thank for his evocative descriptions of the *khala’* (open space, emptiness, wasteland). In works like *Children of Gebelawi* and *Harafish*, to name but two, he annexes the *khala’* of ‘Abbasiyya to the *hara* of Jamaliyya to form his unique Mahfouzland which stands for all the world and all history. In this personalized world-picture, *khala’* is the scene for murders and clandestine burials and bloody warfare among rival gangs—it is the scene where some of the wildest human passions are set and where the inner loneliness is enhanced by the emptiness outside. But paradoxically, *khala’* is also a place of refuge from the brutality of the world, of soul-searching, of communion with the vast and mysterious universe above, and of visions of goodness and reform. To ‘Abbasiyya and the many friends he made there during his adolescence he is also indebted for a great number of the fifty-five character vignettes that constitute *Mirrors*. In his old age, the novelist’s nostalgia for the ‘Abbasiyya that is now extinct, the youthful days that are now in the distant past and the human relationships that time or death has severed appears to grow ever more agonizing—an agony that he has given expression to in his latest novel to date, *Qushtumur* (1988) and in a powerful short story entitled ‘Half a Day’, both of which are desperate and pained attempts at capturing again through feats of memory times and places past.

But above all Mahfouz owes to ‘Abbasiyya one of the most powerful and mystifying experiences of his life which was to be recreated with corresponding intensity in the story of Kamal’s unrequited love for ‘Ayda Shaddad in *The Trilogy*. The germination of this key experience in the novel was apparently a quite brief and uneventful encounter in Mahfouz’s early youth, but one which has in an inscrutable, almost mystical, way had a strong hold on the author’s consciousness for the rest of his life. In his memoirs he tries to rationalize the experience in the following terms:

*In ‘Abbasiyya I experienced true love for the first time. It was an abstract relationship because of age and class*
differences. There was actually no form of communication whatsoever [between the two parties]. Had this happened, the experience would perhaps have not acquired much of [the halo] that I bequeathed on it. The effects of this relationship were later to appear in the experience of Kamal ʿAbd al-Jawwad’s love for ʿAyda Shaddad in *The Trilogy*.40

Mahfouz’s rendering of this personal experience in *The Trilogy* was not, however, his first. His attempts at domesticating this wildly painful experience in art form go as far back as the 1940s. I refer here to a short story with the title ‘A Moment’s Dream’ included in the writer’s first collection.41 The story is naively written and structurally weak, but the circumstantial evidence in it leaves us with no doubt that it probably was the author’s earliest attempt at achieving catharsis through art. The story is an account of a fleeting encounter between a young scientist and a beautiful young woman—an encounter that consisted in nothing more than the exchange of glances, but one which left the protagonist desperately and obsessively in love and without hope of fulfilment.

Even after the later, maturer and more complex rendition of the experience in *The Trilogy*, Mahfouz’s feelings still apparently needed further purgation, for he comes back to the subject in the episode entitled ‘Safa’ al-Katib’ in *Mirrors*. This episode, written when the author was nearly 60 years old and more than forty years removed from the experience, shows him still haunted by it and still unable to explain it. Written in intense, poetic language, the account must, however, be seen as the most factual and least fictionalized of his renderings of this key experience of his life. He often describes the encounter in near-mystical terms: ‘As soon as my eyes caught sight of the girl’s face, I embraced one of life’s bursting secrets.’ And again:

I saw her in the carriage for a few seconds no more but that was enough for me to lose all will-power and to find myself flung in a new phase of evolution…. I knew how a man could wander away while being there and be wide awake in his sleep, how he could be lost in solitude Hamidst the crowd and make a companion
of pain. I [also knew] how a man could penetrate to the roots of plants and the waves of light.\textsuperscript{42}

The episode ends with the narrator in his old age wondering what had become of his love. His words echo with a pain that has not quite subsided:

Whatever might have become of her and whatever others might have thought of her, did she not have the right to know that she had been worshipped like a goddess in a temple? And that she had once unleashed in a certain heart a life that still throbbed from time to time with her memory?\textsuperscript{43}

EDUCATION AND INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCES

Mahfouz’s education, in common with his generation, began at the \textit{kuttab} (Qur’an School) where he learnt religion and the principles of literacy before he joined the primary school.\textsuperscript{44} The novelist recalls briefly his experience at the \textit{Kuttab} in \textit{Fountain and Tomb}, but rather than telling us about the educational system, he seems more interested in tracing the beginnings of his nascent sexuality through describing his feelings towards one of the girls there.\textsuperscript{45} (In fact, the evolution of the young protagonist’s sexuality is a central theme in the book.)\textsuperscript{46} About Mahfouz’s primary and secondary school education, however, we face a dearth of information concerning the nature of the educational system and its effects on him. Apart from two anecdotal episodes in \textit{Fountain and Tomb} (Tales 21 and 22) and a substantial number in \textit{Mirrors} of sketches of school friends and teachers, and recollections of sit-ins and anti-government demonstrations during the 1920s, there is not much else to know. Significant additional enlightenment, however, can be obtained from the author’s account of Kamal’s childhood and adolescence in \textit{The Trilogy} (Parts I and II).

In \textit{Fountain and Tomb} the author tells us how he discovered ‘reading’ at the primary school when a friend lent him a detective story to read. From that time on he became addicted to reading.\textsuperscript{47} During the primary stage and the early years of secondary education he moved on from detective stories to historical and adventure novels, all read in translation. He mentions the names
of Sir Walter Scott and Sir Henry Rider Haggard in this connection. He started writing during school holidays while he was still at the primary school. His method was to rewrite a novel he had read, adding in some details from his own life. As he advanced through his teens he discovered Mustafa al-Manfaluti (1876–1924), the Egyptian sentimentalist whose prose style influenced whole generations of educated Egyptians during the early decades of the century. After Manfaluti comes what he terms ‘the period of the awakening’. During that period he came to read what he calls ‘the innovators’. Among these he enumerates the names of Taha Husayn (1889–1973), Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad (1889–1964), Salama Musa (1888–1958), Ibrahim al-Mazini (1889–1949), Muhammad Husayn Haykal (1888–1956), and (at a slightly later stage) Mahmoud Taymur (1894–1973), Tawfiq al-Hakim (1898–1987) and Yahya Haqqi (1905–92). To these writers he admits his indebtedness for his ‘emancipation from the traditional way of thinking…the attraction of [his] attention to world literature, [providing] a new outlook on classical Arabic literature’, as well as offering him models of the short story, the novel and drama. Taha Husayn’s famous book Fi al-Shicr al-Jahili (On Pre-Islamic Poetry) (1926), which questioned the validity of received opinion on both Islam and literature associated with it, and caused a literary and political uproar at the time, is described by Mahfouz as the book that had the greatest influence on his intellectual development. To him the book was ‘an intellectual revolution which elevated reason, giving it priority above tradition’. The enthusiasm with which Mahfouz speaks about this book should come as no surprise, as his own work was later to reveal a strong rationalist sense, consistently ‘elevating reason above tradition’.

Apart from Taha Husayn, there are two other Egyptian writers whose ideas appear to have appealed to and influenced the intellect of Mahfouz during its formative years. The first is Salama Musa whose secularist, socialist and evolutionist outlook on life can be found in almost every book that Mahfouz has written during more than sixty years of his creative life, and whose passion for Ancient (as opposed to Islamic) Egypt can be traced in the novelist’s early Pharaonic short stories and novels. Some of Mahfouz’s very early writings were printed during the 1930s in Al-Majalla al-Jadida (The New Review) published by Salama Musa. Also
published by Musa was Mahfouz’s first novel, *The Game of Fates*, and prior to that his translation from English of a book on Ancient Egypt. In his memoirs Mahfouz recalls his brief personal acquaintance \textsuperscript{51} with Musa during his undergraduate years and recreates their encounter in chapter 13 of *The Trilogy III* relegating his own part to A mad Shawkat rather than Kamal (his usual persona in the novel) and changing the title of the magazine published by Musa to ‘*Al-Insan al-Jadd*’ (The New Human Being). Elsewhere, Mahfouz admits, ‘From Salama Musa I have learnt to believe in science, socialism and tolerance.’\textsuperscript{52}

The second writer is \(^{c}\)Abbas Mahmud al-\(^{c}\)Aqqad whose enquiries into the principles of aestheticism and other philosophical issues appear to have helped push Mahfouz in the direction of selecting philosophy as the subject to study for his first degree. He tells us that during his secondary education he excelled in mathematics and the sciences and that the assumption had always been that at university he was going to study either medicine or engineering. That was until he started to read the philosophical articles by \(^{c}\)Aqqad and others, then:

> Philosophical questions began to stir deep inside me… and I imagined that by studying philosophy I would find the right answers for the questions which tormented me …that I would unravel the mysteries of existence and man’s fate.\textsuperscript{53}

Thus he joined King Fu’ad I University (now Cairo University) as a philosophy student between the years 1930 and 1934. The agony which his final choice caused to his father is briefly remembered in Mahfouz’s memoirs\textsuperscript{54} and unforgettably recreated in the famous scene involving Kamal and his father in chapter 4 of *The Trilogy II*.\textsuperscript{55}

During his secondary school years he started also reading classical Arabic literature. He mentions by way of example *Al-Bayan wa al-Tabyin* by al-Jahiz, *Al-Amali* by al-Qali, *Al-\(^{c}\)Iqd al-Farid* by Ibn \(^{c}\)Abd Rabbih and *Al-Kamil* by al-Mubarrad. He mentions also how he used to imitate the style of these sources in his compositions at school, much to the delight of his ‘turbanned’ Arabic teachers. The effect of these classical readings has in fact survived his school days and can be observed in the propensity in his early short stories and novels towards cliché
and flowery outdated style. More positively, the effect of this early (and thenceforth ‘intermittent’, as he puts it) contact with classical Arabic has been to endow his Arabic style throughout his career with a purity of phrase and a correctness of grammar and structure which evaded many later outstanding writers (e.g. Yusuf Idris (1927–91)). He tells us that as he matured he turned more towards classical poetry and mentions in particular the names of al-Maʿarri, al-Mutanabbi and Ibn al-Rumi. It must have been much later that he indulged in reading sufi (mystical) poetry, the effects of which can be spotted in his fiction from the 1960s onwards. In a later interview he gives indeed the names of Hafiz Shirazi and Rabindranath Tagore as his two favourite poets.

After graduation in 1934, Mahfouz’s intensive readings in philosophy, we are informed, continued as the author started working towards an MA degree. His chosen subject, according to one statement, was ‘the aesthetic theory’ [sic]. Elsewhere, however, he contradicts himself and gives the subject as ‘Sufism in Islam’. His intellectual reaction to his philosophy studies has been recorded in a number of articles that he published in a variety of magazines and newspapers throughout his undergraduate years and for several years thereafter. Mahfouz has always regarded those articles (most of them written when he was in his early to mid-twenties) as juvenilia and refused to have them collected and republished, which remains the case to date. Thanks to the effort of one scholar, however, we now have a full bibliographical list of those early articles, a classification of their content, as well as an attempt at analysing them for the roots of the author’s thought.

The list comprises forty-seven articles written between 1930 and 1945, well over half of which deal with philosophical and psychological subjects. The late Professor Badr points out the prominent place that the thought of the French philosopher Henri Bergson occupies in those articles, and expounds briefly Bergson’s ideas on the duality of body and spirit and his elevation of intuition over scientific reasoning as a way of knowing, arguing that these ideas are necessary for the understanding of Mahfouz’s work. While Badr fails to pursue the Bergsonian connection any further in the course of his unfinished study, his generalization will indubitably prove rewarding in a future study of influences on the author. One can think of many substantiations in Mahfouz’s
fiction of the duality of matter and spirit and man’s struggle to evolve from the bonds of the first to the freedom of the latter (Sabir’s schism in *The Search* between his two lovers is perhaps the most clear-cut example in Mahfouz’s *œuvre*).

Bergson’s influence on Mahfouz has indeed been tremendous and far exceeds Badr’s suggestions. The philosopher’s most telling impact on Mahfouz’s thought was probably in the sphere of his ideas on time and memory. Bergson’s notion of ‘duration’, of time as a continuum, a perpetual flux (as distinguished from the spatialized, measurable conception of time), lies at the very foundation of *The Trilogy*. There is little doubt either that Mahfouz’s concept of time as ‘representing the evolutionary spirit of man’, central again to *The Trilogy* and probably the only source of philosophical optimism in the author’s entire corpus, is drawn from Bergson’s notion of ‘creative evolution’. Nor has Mahfouz’s fascination with Bergson’s thought been a transient one. Far from being limited to *The Trilogy*, it is to be found also in *Children of Gebelawi*, *Harafish* and *Nights of the Thousand Nights*; in other words, in all those works which portray the evolutionary flux of history and the perpetual tug-of-war between the forces of moral progress in life and those of the baser instincts. On the individual (as opposed to collective) level, Mahfouz’s obsession with the dichotomy between the unity and perpetuity of mnemonic time and the discreteness and transience of spatialized time (such as we see in *Qushtumur* and the short story ‘Half a Day’) is yet another manifestation of the enormous power of Bergson’s influence on Mahfouz. In respect of notions of time, Bergson’s influence on Mahfouz was indeed reinforced by that of Marcel Proust, whose own *A la recherche du temps perdu* (much admired by Mahfouz) was itself influenced by Bergson’s ideas.

Another Bergsonian notion active in Mahfouz’s creations is perhaps that of the ‘two moralities’. Bergson defines two sources for morality, one based on ‘intelligence’ and the other on ‘intuition’. It is the second one which concerns us here since it finds ‘its expression not only in the creativity of art and philosophy but also in the mystical experience of the saints’. The mystical (or *Sufi*) experience has been a key one in Mahfouz’s work from Radwan al-Husayn in *Midaq Alley* to ‘Ali al-Junaydi in *The Thief and the Dogs*, ‘Umar al-Hamzawi in *The Beggar*, and ‘Abdullah al-Balkhi in *Nights of the Thousand Nights*. Mahfouz’s attitude
to his mystics is, however, ambivalent, for while they are shown as humans with an impeccable superior morality, their ‘sainthood’ is depicted as a personal achievement of little relevance to society or humanity at large, as I hope I will show later in the discussion of the above-named and other works. Suffice it to say here that of all Bergson’s notions, it is this last one that Mahfouz appears to embody in his work only in order to reject it.

Mahfouz’s MA in philosophy was never to be completed and within two years of graduation his orientation towards philosophy was deflected in the direction of literature. Interestingly, this is graphically reflected in his choice of subjects for his last eight published articles between 1936 and 1945—they all dealt with literary and artistic themes, whereas earlier, philosophical themes were dominant. Thus a harrowing conflict in Mahfouz’s mind between philosophy and literature which had lasted for the period of those two years was brought to an end, much to his relief, in favour of the latter. Philosophy in its basic sense as the search for meaning in life remained, however, central throughout Mahfouz’s work.

Having decided to abandon the study of philosophy for what was to become a lifelong devotion to literature, the novelist had much ground to make up. He drew on a general guide to world literature, namely *The Outline of Literature* by John Drinkwater to help him in planning his reading and selecting material. The book’s method consisted in reviewing world literature down the ages and across nations, which afforded Mahfouz an overall view rather than immersing him in the literature of any one period or nation. Because he started late, as he puts it, he had to be selective, confining himself to the main figures, and then only to their best known masterpieces. He also began with the modern period, occasionally going back to earlier periods. His medium was English and, to a much lesser extent, French: he read Proust in English, but Anatole France in the original. Later in his life he came to depend on Arabic translations as they began to be more common.

Mahfouz has over and again given his interviewers an account of the writers he admired and the works which most impressed him. His list is long and varied and is proof of an overriding orientation towards Western culture. I shall quote one of his accounts at length. His comments on writers and works are
fascinating in their uninhibited spontaneity. Often, however, they are revealing about his own inclinations and writings:

The writers who influenced me are the ones I liked. I liked Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, Chekhov and Maupassant.... Of modernist writers I liked Proust and Kafka. As for Joyce...he was just a writer that you had to read... *Ulysses* was a terrible novel, but it created a trend.... In the theatre I liked Shakespeare immensely.... Both his grandness and ironies entered my soul and made me feel at home with him.... Next to Shakespeare I liked Eugene O'Neill much and also Ibsen and Strindberg. In the contemporary theatre I was truly shaken by Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. As for Chekhov's theatre, I found it flaccid and boring. In American literature I rate Melville's *Moby Dick* among the world's greatest novels if not *the* greatest. Out of Hemingway's work I only liked *The Old Man and the Sea*. His other work left me surprised at the fame he has acquired. I did not like Faulkner; he is too complicated. I also liked Dos Passos, but none of them has written a *Moby Dick*.

I very much admire the all-encompassing outlook in CoNurad's *Heart of Darkness*. The novel offers a very realistic story but contains at the same time a broad universal view. This is what I have been trying to do in my latest novels [NB interview was given in 1973].

As for the latest trends, the Angry Young Men etc., you could say that their influence has not gone beyond the surface of my skin. *Le roman nouveau* is rubbish. It is as if you were saying, 'life is boring therefore I will write for you an equally boring novel'. The fact is that any expression of the boredom of life must be entertaining.... In poetry I was fascinated by Shakespeare, Tagore and Hafiz Shirazi; they are the closest poets to my soul.70

Elsewhere he informs us that he owes his training in the realistic tradition to its later developers rather than early masters:

I got to know realism through contemporary writers like Galsworthy, Aldous Huxley and D.H.Lawrence. After these I was no longer able to read Dickens. Nor
was I able to read Balzac having already read Flaubert and Stendhal.71

To the Russian masters mentioned above he adds the name of Gorky, but deems him of a lower rank. His fiction, he argues, is parochial and too dependent on the message it contains.

Asked in yet another interview on the Western writers who most influenced him he lists three names as his first choice: Tolstoy, Proust and Thomas Mann. He regrets that since reading \textit{War and Peace} and \textit{A la recherche du temps perdu} early on in his life he never had the time to go back to them again. His fascination with \textit{War and Peace} is understandable in the context of his own authorship of another great novel dealing with the effect of social and political upheaval on the lives of individuals, i.e. \textit{The Trilogy}. It is worth noting here that Mahfouz does not give another famous saga novel, viz. Galsworthy’s \textit{Forsyte Saga} (thought by many commentators to have been an influence on his own \textit{Trilogy}), any special rating as a great novel. He lists Galsworthy, however, among the authors he has read, as we have seen in an earlier quotation. Equally interesting is Mahfouz’s dismissal of Charles Dickens as an author he could not read in spite of the obvious affinity observed by many critics between a novel like \textit{Midaq Alley} and the typical Dickensian world. On the other hand, we can understand his fascination with Proust’s \textit{A la recherche}…in the light of his own unrepeatable obsession with the theme of observable time versus time in memory. If one is to see a pattern in Mahfouz’s comments on writers from whom he learnt his profession, we may be able to say that he, perhaps subconsciously, tends to play down the influence of those whose achievement has been equalled or surpassed in his own work, while he continues to hold in charmed esteem those, like Tolstoy and Proust, whose attainments are deemed unrepeatable. In another interview he describes Shakespeare, Kafka, O’Neill, Shaw, Ibsen and Strindberg as writers ‘whom he liked to the point of adoration’.

Mahfouz has often repeated that when he started writing his realistic novels in the 1940s he was well aware that realism was already a spent force in Europe and that he had already read Proust, Joyce, Lawrence and other contemporary modernists. When it came to writing, however, he argues, he felt that since the novel was still a nascent form in Arabic without an established tradition in realism, he could not move straight away from
romanticism to modernism: the Arabic novel and his own experience as a novelist in the making had to go through the natural stages of evolution. This contention of Mahfouz’s can withstand enquiry. We can indeed see modernist influences in the heart of his realistic phase, such as the occasional use of the stream of consciousness technique and his early experiment with the psychological novel in *Mirage*. Another piece of evidence that supports this contention is the fact that the moment Mahfouz felt that he had mastered the techniques of realism and exhausted their potential, that is by writing *The Trilogy*, he was to cast realism behind him and plunge into the deep and turbulent waters of modernism.

One of the inconsistencies, however, in Mahfouz’s comments on his work is his persistent denial of the influence of the naturalist school on the realistic phase of his corpus. The persistence of his denial is in fact a reaction to an equally persistent and unanimous recognition by his critics of this influence in his work. Critics often cite the characters of Nafisa from *The Beginning and the End* and Yasin from *The Trilogy* (a list which can certainly be expanded) as salient examples. Mahfouz, on the other hand, admits reading a lot of Zola and his followers, but insists that in his work ‘heredity’ is of no consequence and that the effect of ‘environment’ reigns supreme. However, he seems to contradict himself when he argues in the same breath that Nafisa’s poverty (environment) in addition to her ugliness (heredity) helped shape her life. Elsewhere he proclaims that all considerations, social, psychological and *biological* (my italics), influence his characters.72 Mahfouz’s denial of naturalistic influence on his work cannot therefore withstand the testimony of his own fiction or, for that matter, his own conflicting statements on the subject. His attempt at denying this influence stems, I believe, from a concern that stressing the hereditary connection in his fiction might result in overshadowing the supreme importance of social and political conditions in shaping human behaviour, a belief that lies at the heart of his work. Another significant element here is the fact that all these denials of naturalism were made by Mahfouz at a time when he had moved out of his realistic phase and when heredity had in fact stopped playing any role in his fiction. It was as if, having outgrown a particular concept, he wanted to go back and obliterate it from his literary past.

Two influences which Mahfouz is, however, happy to admit
are those of James Joyce in his use of the internal monologue on the one hand and surrealism and the theatre of the absurd (whose influence can be spotted in some of his short stories and one-act plays written in the aftermath of the Harab defeat in the 1967 war with Israel) on the other hand. He insists, however, that blind imitation has never been the case with him; that all the techniques he borrows are modified to suit his purposes and clearly stamped with his own artistic insignia. With regard to his use of the internal monologue he has this to say:

The internal monologue is a method, a vision and a way of life; and even though I use it, you cannot say that I belong to its school as such. All that happens is that I sometimes encounter a Joycean moment in my hero’s life, so I render it in Joyce’s manner with some modification.73

He also plays down the influence of the absurd on his work. He argues that the absurd outlook on life maintains that it is meaningless, whereas for him life has a meaning and a purpose, and that though his work might have given in to an absurd moment in his own or his nation’s life, his was a sense of absurdity that was ‘rationalized, explicable and subdued’, unlike the European brand, which was total and absolute.74 Mahfouz sums it all up in connection with the question of influence when he proclaims, ‘I have not come out of the cloak of any one writer, nor can I be stood under the banner of any one technique’.75

On the question of the influence of earlier Egyptian novelists, Mahfouz is again conservative if not dismissive. With the exception of Jurji Zaydan, he makes no mention of Syrian pioneers like Burus al-Bustani and Franss al-Marrash. Of Tawfiq al-Hakim’s Awdat al-Ruh (The Return of the Spirit, 1933), he says that he found it more akin to drama than to fiction, Taha Husayn and Abbas al-Aqqad, he maintains were ‘thinkers’ whose concern with the novel was only secondary.76 He admits, however, that Taha Husayn’s novel Shajarat al-Bu’s (Tree of Misery, 1944) was instrumental in focusing his attention on writing a saga novel. It was after reading it, he tells us, that he went on to read more of the same, namely Galsworthy’s The Forsyte Saga, Tolstoy’s War and Peace and Thomas Mann’s Buddenbrooks before he wrote his own Trilogy.77 Asked on one occasion to clarify a statement
he had made earlier in which he said that he had been influenced by the Egyptian novelists Ibrahim al-Mazini and Yahya Haqqi, he gave this rather loose definition of influence: ‘When I say that I was influenced [by a certain writer] what I mean is that I liked [his work]. My assumption is that I am influenced by the writers I like.’78 His attitude towards the question of influence on himself by earlier Harab novelists is eloquently summed up in his pronouncement: ‘There was no legacy of the novel [in Arabic] that I could depend on.... I arrived on a scene that was nearly empty. It was incumbent on me to discover things and to lay the ground by myself.’79

Finally, no review of the intellectual influences that helped formulate the thought and art of Mahfouz is complete without mention of science. Belief in science, in conjunction with socialism, as a major force in shaping modern society and the future of mankind is at the very centre of the novelist’s work. His preoccupation with science was demonstrated as early as his first two realistic novels, *Khan al-Khalili* and *New Cairo*, to reach a climax in *Children of Gebelawi*, where science is shown to inherit the traditional role of religion in reforming human society. His readings in science for the layman go back, he tells us, to his early youth. He mentions such subjects as biology, physics, anthropology and the origin of matter, and admits that his readings in science have had a tremendous effect on his thinking.80

Mahfouz, as we have seen, is careful to fight off any suggestion of influence in the sense of imitation, especially in connection with Western writers and schools. He is nevertheless happy to articulate his admiration for European culture and his belief in the inevitability of the triumph of its values. He is also at pains to establish a historic affinity between it and Harab culture. His views in this respect are indeed reminiscent of those expressed earlier by Taha Husayn in his controversial book *Mustaqbal al-Thaqaafa fi Misr* (The Future of Culture in Egypt), published in 1938. Mahfouz argues that:

Our culture is very close to European culture. This is because they both are based on common foundations. For its part, European culture is based on both the moral principles of the Bible and the modern science inherited from the Greeks. The same is also true of
Arabic culture, the difference between the Bible and the Qur’an being here of no consequence as the latter maintains that it embraces both the Bible and the Gospels. The moral values are thus the same. As for the Greeks, we know that the Harabs translated the Greeks and studied them…. Both our culture and that of the West belong in fact to one family.\textsuperscript{81}

Again in a reference to European culture in the context of a discussion of the permanently hot issue of foreign influence and cultural identity, he announces unequivocally, ‘I believe that there is no escape from the supremacy of the more efficient culture, and this can only be for the good of mankind, and not otherwise.’\textsuperscript{82}

These relatively recent and overtly expressed views have their testimony in the totality of Mahfouz’s work where the traditional values of modern Europe such as secularism, social liberalism, parliamentary democracy, socialism and belief in science are glorified.

More recently, however, the author’s intellectual stance vis-à-vis this question seems to have shifted. In an interview given in 1987, he argues that in the past he used to believe that modern (European) civilization was the only viable one by dint of its being an assimilation of all past civilizations—Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Greek, Roman and Harab; and that as such it ought to be the universal civilization of mankind. More recently, he goes on to say, he came to believe that different civilizations upheld essentially different world views. He feels this has caused his enthusiasm for Western civilization to shift towards an enthusiasm for a universal human need such as science, which in turn can be used in the service of the world view of one’s own culture. Mahfouz concludes by describing his present position as an eclectic one which seeks to benefit from the entire human legacy.\textsuperscript{83} This shift in his thinking remains, however, at the theoretical level. It probably has come too late in his life to be able to be substantiated in his work. One may argue nevertheless that his movement in the last fifteen years or so away from the European mould of the novel towards a more indigenously inspired form is a mark of his waning fascination with all things Western, but one would have to make the reservation here that the divergence is more in form than substance.
POLITICAL BELIEFS AND SYMPATHIES

Politics has been a major concern of Mahfouz throughout his creative career, a fact he himself emphasizes: ‘In all my writing, you will find politics. You may find a story which ignores love, or any other subject, but not politics; it is the very axis of our thinking.’\(^8^4\) Highly politicized in his thinking and writing though he is, he has never been politically active in the formal sense of joining a political party or occupying a political office under any of the many regimes that his life has spanned. His political awareness started blossoming, as we have seen, at the rather early age of 7 with the eruption of the 1919 revolution. This awareness must have matured during his high school and university years in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The national struggle during that period had two objectives which were closely related, namely independence from the British and the establishment of true democratic government in the face of absolutist monarchy. During the years up to the 1952 coup led by Jamal ʿAbd al-Nasir (Nasser) (1918–70), this national struggle was led by the Wafd Party which had arisen from the ashes of 1919. The Wafd was, by and large, the conscience of the nation and the focus of its political hopes. Mahfouz evinces great sympathy for the party and its leaders in his novels dealing with that period (especially *The Trilogy*). His sympathy for the Wafd, however, never took an official form. According to him, he only participated as an individual in ‘general popular actions like demonstrations and strikes…no matter how dangerous these were’.\(^8^5\)

Another political movement active at the time was socialism, whose ideas were attractive to intellectuals though it lacked both a popular base and a recognized political organ. It cannot be doubted that socialist ideals must have claimed Mahfouz’s soul from very early on in his youth.\(^8^6\) The influence of socialist thought figures very strongly in his first two social novels (*Khan al-Khalili* and *New Cairo*) and has continued ever since. Parallel to this sympathy for socialism was an antipathy towards Islamic fundamentalism as expressed by the Muslim Brotherhood, a considerable political force in the 1930s and 1940s with a strong organization and a not insignificant power base among the people. Unlike socialism, which is idealized in Mahfouz’s work, Islamism is critically delineated and finally rejected as unsuitable for modern
times. The two models are revealingly contrasted in the two novels mentioned above and again in *The Trilogy*.\(^87\) Mahfouz’s distaste for religious fundamentalism has not waned with time. In his memoirs he does not mince his words when he proclaims in the course of reviewing political forces active on the scene during his youth: ‘the ones I hated from the beginning were the Moslem Brothers.’\(^88\) In his semi-autobiographical work, *Mirrors*, he draws a very negative portrait of a prominent leader of the movement, viz. Sayyid Qu b (1906–66),\(^89\) whom he knew personally in his youth at a time when Qub had shown more interest in literary criticism than in active religious fundamentalism (Qub was in fact among the first critics to draw attention to the budding talent of Mahfouz in the mid-1940s).\(^90\)

It must, however, be emphasized that in spite of Mahfouz’s firm belief, amply demonstrated in the corpus of his work, in socialism as the only way forward for his society, he cannot be pigeon-holed as a Marxist in any tight definition of the word. He asserts that he does not consider himself a Marxist despite his immense sympathy for Marxism. He admits that he has his doubts about the Marxist theory as a philosophical system, but goes on to list aspects of Marxism which he would like to see applied in human society. His words amount to a political credo and merit quoting in full.

I believe:

1. that man should be freed from the class system and what it entails of privileges such as inheritance…etc;
2. that man should be freed from all forms of exploitation;
3. that an individual’s position [in society] should be determined according to both his natural and acquired qualifications;
4. that recompense should be equal to need;
5. that the individual should enjoy freedom of thought and belief under protection of law to which both governor and governed should be subject;
6. in the realization of democracy in the fullest sense;
7. in the reduction of the power of central government so that it should be restricted to [internal?] security and defence.\(^91\)

Central to the understanding of the Bultik of Mahfouz’s work from the beginning of the 1960s to the present day is an adequate grasp of his attitude to the 1952 revolution, a subject on which
he has spoken outside the scope of his fiction with a profuseness which is only paralleled by his extensive preoccupation with it in his creative writing. 1952, the year when Mahfouz had completed the writing of The Trilogy, heralded an uncharacteristic stalemate in his creative life: he was to stop writing until 1957, when he started work on Children of Gebelawi. Since that time he has had to explain many times the reason for those five silent years. In answer to untiring critics he argued that he felt that the society he had been writing about for years had changed overnight and that many of the social ills which had moved him to write were remedied by the new regime. There is no reason to doubt the truthfulness of this remark in so far as it applied to the early years of the revolution. But as the years went by and the shortcomings of the Nasser era began to make themselves felt, one critic’s remark that Mahfouz, ‘rather than finding nothing to say...was unable to say what he wanted to’ rings true. This seems even more the case when we look at the content of what the novelist began to say when he had recovered and summoned to his assistance the tools of his art. His first novel after the silent period, Children of Gebelawi, was an allegorical lamentation on the failure of mankind to achieve social justice and to harness the potential of science for the service of man, rather than his destruction. Masked in allegory though it was, the novel could hardly be seen as the offspring of an intellect basking in a sense of revolutionary fulfilment. The publication of his next novel, The Thief and the Dogs in 1961, shows in unequivocal terms that his disillusionment with the revolution was complete. Almost all the novels of the 1960s can in fact be seen as a barrage of bitter criticism aimed at a revolution that has abjectly failed to deliver the goods.

Such, then, was the extent of Mahfouz’s disillusionment with the 1952 revolution during its heyday in the 1960s and even before its crowning failure in the shape of the 1967 defeat in the war with Israel. His criticisms were unsweetened and often hit the mark and it is common knowledge now that some of his novels written during that period would not have seen the light if it were not for the influence of Muhammad Hasanayn Haykal, confidant of Nasser and editor at the time of the Cairo daily Al-Ahram (where Mahfouz serialized his novels). The publication of his work and that of others of a similar critical nature may indeed have been a calculated attempt to use it as
a safety valve and to give a semblance of tolerance towards criticism.  

It must be stressed, however, that Mahfouz’s quarrel with the 1952 revolution has never been over principles; it was rather over its practices which failed to live up to its principles. He proclaims in an interview given in the relatively freer climate of 1973 (three years into the era of Anwar al-Sadat (1918–81)):

There is no doubt that the declared aims of the 23 July [1952] revolution would have been to me and to my entire generation very satisfactory only if they had been carried out in the spirit in which they were declared…. I wanted nothing more than true socialism and true democracy. This has not been achieved.  

Following the military debacle of 1967 and Nasser’s death in 1970 Mahfouz’s onslaught on the revolution rose to a crescendo in The Karnak (1974), a bitter condemnation of the repressive techniques of the police state and their destructive effect on the dignity of the individual and hence the nation as a whole. 

The novelist’s ambivalent attitude towards the 1952 revolution can perhaps be best illustrated by two separate passages from Mirrors. Here is the first passage (from the sketch titled ‘Adli al-Mu’dhdhin’) in which the narrator/protagonist of the novel (a persona for Mahfouz) expresses his early enthusiasm for the revolution:

I felt for the first time in my life that a wave of justice was sweeping away without a let up the deep-rooted rot and I wished that it would stay on its course without hesitation or aberration, and for ever remaining pure. (p. 250) 

Further on in the book in the sketch entitled ‘Qadri Rizq’, the narrator draws a portrait of a member of his group of friends who belonged to the Free Officers’ Movement which carried out the 1952 coup. The character, which is obviously meant to be representative of the top echelons of the revolution, is portrayed critically but with unmistakable affection. Here are the closing lines of the episode:

Qadri Rizq is counted among the sincere and respected men of the revolution. He may be difficult to classify
in accordance with universal principles, but he can be described accurately in the light of the Charter. He believes in social justice as much as private ownership and individual incentives, in scientific socialism as much as religion, in nationalism as much as pan-Harabism, in the legacy of the past as much as science, and in a popular base as much as absolute government. Nevertheless, whenever I see him walking in with his limp and his remaining eye, my heart beats with affection and admiration.

(p. 345)

The revolution here is ridiculed as a mixture of conflicting social and political principles, while the officer’s deformities (dating from the Suez War) are obvious symbols of the revolution’s shortcomings. The evident affection is, however, proof of the ambivalence in Mahfouz’s attitude towards the rule of Nasser: consistently he has shown himself to be equally aware of both the positive and negative sides of the experiment.

Apart from his fiction and interviews there is another major source for the novelist’s views on the Nasser period and indeed on his political, economic and social views generally. By this I mean the current affairs column he has been writing weekly in *Al-Ahram* ever since the mid-1970s. A large selection of these short articles has appeared recently in three volumes under the titles: *Of Religion and Democracy, Of Culture and Education* and *Of Youth and Freedom*. In this weekly column and for the past fifteen years or so not a single anniversary of 23 July 1952 has passed without remembrance of the many horrors together with the many achievements of the revolution. There we can also catch glimpses of Mahfouz’s nostalgia for the glorious days of the Wafd Party in his repeated celebrations of the anniversaries of its leaders Sa’id Zaghlul and Mustafa al-Nahhas (1879–1965). In those columns we can again trace his support for the democratization process begun by Sadat and his wholehearted espousal of the establishment of peace with Israel and the normalization of relations between the two states. The volumes make tedious reading on the whole but are priceless for the direct insights they afford us into those ideas of the writer which are usually more carefully disguised in his fiction.

Mahfouz, as we have seen, was born into a lower-middle-class
Cairene family and his work has remained very much the product of this fact. The background for his fiction is always urban: mainly Cairo and occasionally Alexandria; the countryside has no place in his world. His fiction, on the other hand, is inhabited by members of his own class; their progress within society, their loves and hates, ambitions and frustrations, both private and public, are vividly recreated there. The aristocracy, the upper middle class, the working class and the peasantry form no part of his customary scene and when individuals from those groups make an occasional appearance in his fiction, they are usually portrayed from outside and through the eyes of the petit-bourgeois protagonist, their importance being drawn solely from their relationship with him (a striking example is to be found in Miramar where the peasant heroine Zahra is at the centre of the action, yet the novel is told from four points of view, of which not one is hers).

Thus Mahfouz has been labelled by critics (and perhaps rightly so) as the novelist of the small bourgeoisie. It is a label that he appeared to resent at first, but has since become resigned to. In recent interviews he has professed his ‘bias’ for the small bourgeoisie, which he views as ‘the candidate for the salvation of humanity’. The upper bourgeoisie, he explains, is arrogant and seeks to control and exploit the people. The proletariat, on the other hand, is equally intent on usurping power from its exploiters. Only the small bourgeoisie with its middle stance between the extreme positions of the classes above and below itself is capable of recognizing the advantages and faults of both sides and evolving an order viable for everyone. Mahfouz goes on to illustrate his point in interesting, if somewhat eccentric, terms:

A good small bourgeois rejects the shortcomings of the upper bourgeoisie such as exploitation and love of power at the same time as he admires its inclination towards knowledge, art and refinement of manners. On the other hand he is also aware of the vices of the proletariat forced upon them by poverty, but he is equally aware of their genuine mettle and the fact that they represent the majority. No wonder then that the small bourgeoisie produced Socialist Democracy which combines the best in Liberalism and Communism. Such
was the case in history too. For religions whose prophets were kings or princes like Akhenatunism and Judaism failed to spread widely, contrary to Christianity and Islam whose prophets belonged to the small bourgeoisie—a carpenter and a small merchant respectively.\textsuperscript{105}

\section*{THE NOVELIST AS CIVIL SERVANT}

Like many of his characters Mahfouz was a civil servant.\textsuperscript{106} From the year of his graduation (1934) to his retirement (1971), he served in a wide variety of government departments in various capacities and under different political regimes. Thus Mahfouz was not able to devote himself entirely to literature until he retired from service at the age of 60. ‘What a waste!’ is one’s first impulse, but in fact it was quite the opposite. Mahfouz’s fiction is profoundly indebted to his civil servant career for an infinite variety of types, individuals, plots, settings, images, symbols, atmospheres—he has admirably succeeded in finding a metaphor for the human condition in the drab world of the small Egyptian civil servant.\textsuperscript{107}

In 1934 he joined the administration of King Fu’ad I University (now Cairo University) as a clerk (there, for instance, he picked up the model for Ahmad ‘Akif, the eccentric hero of \textit{Khan al-Khalili}). In 1938 he moved to the Ministry of Religious Endowments, where he worked as parliamentary secretary to the minister. The variety of claimants there that he came in contact with in his official capacity ranged, according to him, from descendants of the Ottoman Sultan, ‘Abd al-Hamid, to poor Egyptian paHasants. Those claimants of \textit{waqf} (religious endowment money) and their stories were later to provide his fiction with a great many characters and situations, most notably the eccentric protagonist of \textit{Heart of the Night}. In 1945 he was transferred to al-Ghuri Library in Jamaliyya at his own request, thereby returning to work in his birthplace, which was to remain a permanent spiritual refuge for him and a fathomless source of inspiration for his art. His duties at the library appear to have been so scant as to allow him, on the one hand, to wander in the area and spend time in its cafés, watching human types and imprinting pictures of places on his memory and, on the other
hand, to indulge in major reading projects—it was at that time, he tells us, that he read Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* (in English translation). From there he moved on, still in the service of the Ministry of Endowments and still in Jamaliyya, to manage the Good Loan Project—apparently an interest-free loan scheme for the destitute. It was a period of his life that he enjoyed fully—he spent whole mornings, he informs us, chatting with lower-class women who came to apply for loans. But it was not totally idle chatter; many of those women have later come to populate his fiction, especially in the realistic phase.

The early 1950s brought Mahfouz’s connection with the Endowments to an end and saw him move to the seemingly more appropriate sphere of information and culture. For the next twenty years or so of his civil servant’s career (all served under the regime of Nasser’s revolution) he was to occupy fairly influential cultural posts: secretary to the Minister of National Guidance (i.e. information); director of the Film Censorship Office; director-general of the Film Support Organization; adviser to the General Organization for Film Industry, Broadcasting and Television; chairman of the board of directors of the same; and finally, adviser to the Minister of Culture. When he retired in 1971 at the age of 60, he was invited to join the host of distinguished ‘writers emeriti’, as it were, at *Al-Ahram* newspaper, which systematically attracted to its exclusive pages the cream of Egyptian writers as and when they became free from their official occupations. The last novel he serialized in *Al-Ahram* was *Qushtumur* in 1988. He has also contributed a short weekly column on topical, mostly non-literary issues for the last fifteen years or so. It is an observation worth making that human models drawn from the milieu of the first half of his career have mostly populated the corresponding half of his output, i.e. from *Khan al-Khalili* up to *Children of Gebelawi*. Novels written after that seem to have drawn mainly on the environment of the second half of his career. Here we meet many intellectuals, professionals and high government officials in contrast with the lower and lower-middle classes of his earlier work. However, this division is by no means rigid, for models of the earlier half have continued to cross this imaginary barrier all the time, and increasingly so since the mid-1970s when, with works like *Fountain and Tomb* and *Harafish*, it became apparent that Mahfouz was experiencing nostalgia for his old world.
From the late 1940s and up to the early 1980s Mahfouz worked as an occasional freelance film scenarist. Altogether he has written the scenarios for twenty-five films, many of which are today counted among the classics of the Egyptian cinema industry. Significantly though, there are to date some thirty-four films based on his own work, for none of which did he write the scenario himself: he would not interfere with the adaptation of his own work for the cinema. Though he originally started writing scenarios as a way of supplementing his income, the experience was to have an influence on his literary style, particularly in his use of the montage technique and flashbacks which began to feature noticeably in his work from the 1960s onwards.

Mahfouz is a prolific writer. To date he has published thirty-five novels and fourteen collections of short stories and plays, in addition to three collections of his journalism and one translation. Though his first novel was published in 1939, his fame and esteem were to grow slowly and it was not until the publication of The Trilogy in the late 1950s that he was hailed as the unrivalled master of fiction in the Arabic tongue. In 1970 he was awarded the State Prize for Literature. Though Mahfouz was first translated into the main languages of the world in the 1960s, interest in him in the West remained largely confined to orientalists and students of Arabic, while publication of translations of his work was mainly in the hands of academic and small-circulation publishers. Nevertheless, by the late 1980s the strength of his reputation among learned circles in the West as a writer with a universal human appeal and a lifetime’s achievement was such that he was awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1988, thereby becoming the first Harab writer to win this international seal of literary approval.

A PERSONAL SKETCH

Mahfouz remained a bachelor until the age of 43—for many years he laboured under the conviction that marriage with its restrictions and commitments would hamper his literary future (compare Kamal’s bachelorhood in The Trilogy!). His prolonged bachelorhood gave him the opportunity to know many women, all of whom, he tells us, were later to appear in his fiction. In
1954, however, his defences against marriage collapsed and he has since enjoyed a happy and stable marriage which has produced two girls. Mahfouz has always jealously defended his privacy against the curiosity of the media. The onslaught in the wake of the Nobel prize was, however, too fierce to resist and it was only then that journalists and cameras were admitted to his house and the public were allowed a glimpse of his family life. When he got married he moved from the family house in Abbasiya to an apartment overlooking the Nile in Jiza where he still lives. It is worth noting that the Nile did not play a major role in his fiction until some time after his move to the neighbourhood of the old river. Full recognition of the effect of this change of habitat on the creative imagination of Mahfouz appeared in his 1966 novel, *Chatter on the Nile*.

In all his life Mahfouz has been out of Egypt only twice: once to Yemen and once to Yugoslavia—both visits being on short, official missions. He had very much wished to travel to Europe and study in France in his youth in the manner of Tawfiq al-Hakim and other Egyptian writers, but there was no opportunity. European literature as well as European social and political thought have had a tremendous influence on his intellect, as we have seen. One wonders how this influence would have been tempered or, for that matter, enhanced through direct, prolonged contact with Western culture. As he grew older and more established and opportunities became available, he had become too set in his ways, too enslaved by a routine of work and life to care to disrupt it. This was so much the case that when he was awarded the Nobel prize he refused to travel to receive it in person.

No account of Mahfouz is complete without mention of the *maqha* (café) and the important role it played both in his life and in his fiction. In his youth, in common with men of his generation, the café acted as a social club—much like a public house in Britain. There personal and literary friendships were forged and many intellectual, heart-searching discussions took place; proof of which we find in the many café scenes involving Kamal in *The Trilogy*, to give but one example. In maturer years, Mahfouz used the cafés of Cairo (and Alexandria in the summer) as literary salons where he met his literary peers and where scores of young aspiring writers came to listen to him and debate intellectual
issues with him. There is hardly a novel by Mahfouz in which
the café does not represent a significant part of the scene, and
there are several in which the café is the most important element
in the setting. Two of them actually have as their titles the names
of the cafés where the action unfolds: The Karnak and
Qushtumur. At least the first of these is known to be closely
based on Maqha Urabi, a favourite haunt of Mahfouz in Abbasiyya.

Critics of Mahfouz agree that he is a skilful literary architect
with a great feeling for structure and the almost geometric
organization of material. This literary quality reflects his personal
temperament, the daily fabric of his life over many decades
having been as tightly structured and the details of its pattern as
carefully organized as if it had been one of his own novels. In
fact, Mahfouz’s legendary reputation for self-discipline, ruthless
control over his time and total subservience to the force of habit
all make a mockery of the conventional image of the artist as a
bohemian animal.

Mahfouz habitually sought to alleviate the sense of horror
that interviewers confronted him with over this matter by simply
explaining it as a by-product of the necessity of combining a civil
servant’s life with a creative writer’s: he had to organize the second
half of the day so carefully to have the time to read and write.
This was even more the case as a chronic allergy in the eyes rendered
him incapable of writing from April to the end of the summer, so
that he only had the winter months for his creative pursuits. He
also makes little of what he calls ‘the luxury of inspiration’ and
confesses that once an idea was past the thinking stage (which
could go on for years, as in the case of The Trilogy), nothing
would stop him from sitting at his desk for two or three hours
every evening until the work was completed. He writes the first
draft quickly and spends a longer time over revision and rewriting.
He maintains that the revised text is often substantially different
from the first one, though the central idea usually hardly changes.

Rigorously disciplined and readily dismissive of romantic ideas
about the creative process though he is, he still happily describes
his first conception of a work in terms of a ‘tremor’ that may be
triggered by a place, a person, a relationship or some form of
meditation. He then goes on to add that ‘the embryo then begins
to grow and evolve, governed only by irrational laws (or so it
seems)—laws of the imagination, of the aesthetic sense and of
emotion’. He goes so far in this mystical denial of conscious intent on the writer’s part as to say that it is to his critics that he owes most of his knowledge about the aims and ideas of his work.\textsuperscript{115} Asked what he wanted to say in the totality of his work, he answered:

It may be that I did not mean to say anything, but only drew comfort from making certain motions and emitting certain noises in a certain order which gave a semblance of purpose and signified, as it should of necessity, certain things. But if those things had been firm and clear, I would have preferred to present them in a different manner. Believe me—art is but the creation of life.\textsuperscript{116}