

Sasson Somekh

NAGUIB MAHFOUZ: TIME AND MEMORY

Sasson Somekh was born in Baghdad, Iraq, and arrived in Israel in 1951. He received his Ph.D. from Oxford University in 1968, and since 1969 he has been professor of Arabic Literature at Tel Aviv University, where he is the incumbent of the Halmos Chair of Arabic Literature. He has been a visiting professor at Princeton University and New York University, and from 1995–1998 he served as Director of the Israeli Academic Center in Cairo. He has published several volumes of research on Arabic literature, with special reference to Egyptian writers (Naguib Mahfouz and Yusuf Idris, among others), as well as three volumes of translations of modern Arabic poetry into Hebrew. He is currently engaged in writing a study of the history of the retranslation of the Hebrew Bible into Arabic in the nineteenth century.

In my book, *The Changing Rhythm: A Study of Najib Mahfuz's Novels*, I devoted several pages to the treatment of time in the works of the Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz (b. 1911), especially his Cairo



Naguib Mahfouz on one of his daily walks on Cairo.

Trilogy.¹ I tried to demonstrate that there is a salient correlation between the pace of life portrayed in these works, on the one hand, and their structure and style, on the other. When the rhythm of social life is slow, or perceived as being slow, the narrative style is relatively slow, and vice versa. The “narration time” in the Trilogy becomes shorter and quicker with the passage of time. Following the incursion of modern modes of life into Cairene society, the latter volumes of the Trilogy (and Mahfouz’s subsequent novels) become demonstrably smaller in size.²

In the following paragraphs, I would like to discuss the problem of memory or remembrance with regard to the different protagonists in Mahfouz’s novels: What are the most characteristic forms in which our writer structures the different modes of memory? Is there a “diachronic” explanation for the appearance or disappearance of one form or another?

In Mahfouz’s vast and rich literary output, it is possible to distinguish several modes of representing memory, three of which seem to me to be most significant. I shall designate the first mode as *historical* or *objective*. Many of Mahfouz’s major novels, notably his Trilogy, have the nature of semi-autobiographical fiction, drawing many of their details from the life of the author, his family and his friends. Memories are crucial in the characterization of the protagonist. For example, Kamal, the main character in the Trilogy, starts out as a perceptive boy of ten at the beginning of the first novel, *Bayn al-Qasrayn*. By the end of the last novel, *al-Sukkariyya*, he has developed into a frustrated, unmarried intellectual of around forty. Memories fill his life in the second and third volumes of the Trilogy, but they are separated from the present moment. The impact of past events and memories on the emotional and psycho-

logical development of other characters is also evident, but the memories represent a reality that is dead and buried.

There are certain dates or historical moments around which Kamal's recollections (and those of many of Mahfouz's other major characters) seem to center, together forming a distinct historical pattern, a structure of history characteristic of what I would describe as a concerned Wafdist. These dates are connected with the history of the Wafd (Nationalist) party and its founder, Sa'd Zaghloul. The dates that recur most frequently in Mahfouz's early works, up to the 1950s, are 1919 – the year of the revolution led by Zaghloul, which ultimately gained him the premiership; 1924–1925 – the years in which Zaghloul lost ground and was forced out of the government through the collusion of royal and British colonial interests; and, most poignantly, 1927, the year Sa'd died. Another important date, also related to the history of the Wafd party, is February 2, 1942, the day on which Nahhas, Zaghloul's heir to the leadership of the party, was returned to the premiership, this time thanks to the interference of the British. In the mind of our protagonist, this event signals the end of the Wafd as a true national and progressive party. In the Trilogy and in several other novels by Mahfouz, it marks "the end of history."³

These historical events are not necessarily separated from the private histories of the protagonists. The day Sa'd returns from exile (April 8, 1919), a day on which the whole nation rejoices, a horrible tragedy befalls Kamal and his family: his brother Fahmi, a law student, is killed in the course of a

peaceful demonstration welcoming the returning leader.⁴ Similarly, on the day that Sa'd dies, three members of Kamal's family, a brother-in-law and two nephews, meet their death from typhoid.⁵

Another set of dates is added in Mahfouz's later works: 1952 – the young officers' revolution; 1967 – the Six-Day War; and still later, 1973 – the October war; 1979 – the



Mahmoud Mukhtar's statue of Sa'd Zaghloul (1853–1927), situated by the Kasr al-Nil Bridge, Cairo.

Camp David accords, and finally 1982 – the death of Anwar Sadat. Such novels as *Miramar* (1967) and *al-Bāqī Min al-Zman Sā'a* ("Only an Hour is Left")⁶ serve as excellent illustrations of the employment of

these clusters of dates in a systematic way, although they are viewed artistically from afar, or, to borrow the words of Mira Rosa Menocal, as components of a "detached developmental narrative."⁷ The same applies to the 1985 novel *Yawma Qutila al-Za'im* ("The Day the Leader Was Killed").

This historical pattern of memory is to be found not only in Mahfouz's traditional, realistic novels, but also in a series of works published in the 1970s and 1980s whose artistic structure can be described as pseudo-autobiography. In contrast to the semi-autobiographical novels discussed above, whose mode is easily recognized by the reader as fiction (whether the narration is first-person or third-person), a work of pseudo-autobiography aims (with varying success) to create the impression that it is not fiction but truly autobiographical or memoiristic. It presents, as it were, the author's own memories, although some of the names may have been changed in order to avoid embarrassing the people in question. In fact, though, these works use the writer's own biography only as a skeleton, which he covers with a mixture of fact and fiction. Mahfouz's first work written in this fashion is *al-Marāya*,⁸ published in 1972. In 1982 he published two similarly structured "novels": *Sabah a-Ward* ("Morning of Flowers") and *Qushtumur* (the name of a cafe in Cairo). In these three books, the same clusters of dates and historical events that recur in Mahfouz's earlier works constitute the grid that underlies the memory of their protagonists. As before, past events are autonomous and detached from the present moment.

The second type of memory that I would like to discuss in this context may be termed *mystical memory*. It is absent from the present moment and yet integrated into it. The characters in question are unable to remember some or all of the details of their past experience, yet their present existence is dominated and motivated by that very experience. This type of memory informs several of Mahfouz's short stories, mainly those written in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The style of these stories is blatantly non-realistic, at times bordering on the absurd. Noteworthy among them is a long short story entitled *al-Rajul Alladhī Faqada Dhākiratahu Marratayn* ("The Man Who Twice Lost His Memory").⁹

The main protagonist in this story is a young man who appears out of the blue at a small hotel in Cairo. He has lost his memory, forgotten his identity and remembers

nothing about his personal history. He is allowed to reside in the hotel, and before long marries the proprietor's daughter. It transpires, however, that his wife and father-in-law know him only too well. In the past he had been married to the same woman, but at some point he had embezzled the hotel's money and run away with another woman.

The plot of this story is complex, fast-moving and crowded with events and sudden turns. However, the main story is halted every now and then – four times in all – while the scene of action shifts to the top of a mountain. Here we meet two men, a master and a subordinate working for him as a messenger or spy. In each of these intervals, the subordinate reports to his master about our protagonist, after which the master instructs the subordinate concerning future action. These two mystical men may impress one as conducting from

afar some kind of psychological experiment on the topic of memory. Alternatively, the master represents the Omnipotent, who is testing our protagonist to find out whether he will accomplish "the assignment" (*al-muhimma*) despite his amnesia. In one of these episodes, we read the following dialogue:¹⁰

Master: Hasn't he been thinking about his unknown past?

Messenger: He has no time for that. However, he once told his wife that if he should regain his memory, he would discover that he had been a millionaire's son. But she repudiated him by saying that he was dreaming of a hidden treasure, just like her father.

Master: When do you think he'll resume his thinking about his origin?

Messenger: What origin, sir?

Master: How can you be so stupid?

Messenger: O.K., sir. It all depends on how successful he is in carrying out his assignment.

It would seem that our protagonist is capable of remembering, if he so wishes. In his case, memory is shapeless and unworded, probably like that of an animal. He is, after all, expected to accomplish the mission with which he was entrusted. However, memory in the proper sense is absent from his mind in his present existence.

The third and last type of memory that I would like to point out is dynamically integrated into the present moment. I will call it the *synchronic* type of memory. The work that I have selected to illustrate this type is a short novel entitled *Ḥikāyāt Ḥaritnā* ("Tales of



Naguib Mahfouz with the author in Cairo, 1990.

Our Alley”),¹¹ published in 1975. It consists of seventy-eight short episodes or anecdotes representing scenes from the life of the narrator-protagonist (this novel, too, can be classified as pseudo-autobiographical), from childhood to maturity. The tone of voice in these stories is far less “objective” than in the novels of the first type, and historical dates, though they are present, do not punctuate the text. Some of the anecdotes have a rather mystical character; in episode no. 58, for example, an apocalyptic darkness engulfs the alley in the middle of spring, in the wake of a series of fierce battles among the local thugs. Some anecdotes appear to be autobiographical, especially those telling the story of the narrator’s childhood and early boyhood.

The most interesting feature of the narrative structure of *Hikāyāt Ḥaritnā* is that there is no separation between memory and experience, between past and present. When a historical figure like Sa’d Zaghoul surfaces in the novel, he is presented indirectly, not through a narrator in a specific moment, but through the timeless consciousness of the protagonist, a young boy in this case. Episode no. 23 is precisely such a text. The boy suddenly wakes up from sleep to find his entire family plunged into grief. It turns out that Sa’d is dead. The child retreats to his room, shocked to the core:

One morning I am awakened with sudden harshness. A dark grip grabs and jerks me from the land of dreams. A flood of jangling noise engulfs me. My hair stands on end with horror: voices wail in the hall. Terrible thoughts rip at my flesh and the

specter of death rises up before my eyes. I jump out of bed and dash to my closed door, hesitate a moment then throw it open to face the unknown. My father is seated, my mother leans against the sideboard and the servant stands in the doorway. They are all crying. My mother sees me and comes to me. “We scared you ... Don’t be afraid, son.” Through a dry throat I ask, “What ...?” She whispers hoarsely in my ear, “Saad Zaghoul ... May he live on in you!” I cry from my soul, “Saad!” I go back to my room. Gloom hangs everywhere.¹²

This episode, along with the greater part of the novel, is written in the *historical present*; that is, the form *yaf’al* is used to narrate past events, replacing the more common *fa’ala*.¹³ The historical present is not a common feature in Arabic narrative style, or at least it was not common in 1975, when the book first appeared. Its use in this work accentuates the sense of unity between memory and current experience. By using *yaf’al* to express past or narrative modes, Mahfouz injects into this novel a quality reminiscent of the Proustian modes of treating past experience as part and parcel of the current moment.

Notes

1. S. Somekh, *The Changing Rhythm: A Study of Najib Mahfuz’s Novels*, Leiden 1973. The three volumes of the Trilogy are *Bayn al-Qaṣrayn* (1956), *Qaṣr al-Shawq* (1957) and *al-Sukkariyya* (1957). In the Doubleday English translation these volumes are entitled *Palace Walk* (1989), *Palace of Desire* (1991) and *Sugar Street* (1992).
2. *The Changing Rhythm*, pp. 130–132.
3. On the significance of Mahfouz’s Trilogy in portraying historical awareness see Israel Gershoni, “Between Ottomanism and Egyptianism: As Reflected in Najib Mahfouz’s *Bayn al-Qaṣrayn*,” *Asian and African Studies*, 17 (1983), pp. 227–263.
4. *Bayn al-Qaṣrayn (Palace Walk)*, ch. 70.
5. *Qaṣr al-Shawq*, ch. 44.
6. See my article, “The Essence of Naguib Mahfouz,” *Tel Aviv Review*, 2 (Fall–Winter 1989), pp. 244–257. An English translation of *Miramar* appeared in 1980.
7. Maria Rosa Menocal, *The Shards of Love: Exile and the Origin of Lyrics*, Durham 1994.
8. Published in English as *Mirrors* (English transl. by Roger Allen), Minneapolis 1977.
9. The story is included in Mahfouz’s book, *Hikaya Bilā Bidayā Wa-la Nihaya* (“A Story with No Beginning or End”), Cairo 1971.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 232 (my translation).
11. Published in English as *Fountain and Tomb* (English transl. by Soad Subhy, Eassam Fattouh and James Kenneson), Washington, D.C., 1988.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 23; Arabic, p. 50.
13. See my *Genre and Language in Modern Arabic Literature*, Wiesbaden 1991, pp. 33–34.