

INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORY OF THE
PETTY KINGS BY ADONIS*

A greeting to Gamal Abdel Nasser, the
first modern Arab leader who worked
toward ending the age of the petty kings
and beginning another age.

The face of Jaffa is a child/Shall the withered tree thrive? Has the Earth
become part of the image of the Virgin?/Who there convulses the East? The
beautiful tempest has come but the beautiful ruin has not/A fugitive voice.../

There was a head suspended talking deliriously, clouded in Fustat in the
presence of the troops calling out I am the Caliph/ They were in a frenzy they
prepared an ambush for the face of Ali/ It was a child and it was white or
black, Jaffa, its trees and its sons and Jaffa.../ They piled up, they rent apart
the face of Ali/

The blood of the sacrificial victim is in the divining arrows, say: cemetery,
do not say: my poetry was a rose and became tears.

There is nothing between the slaughter
and the rose except a thread of sun, say: my ashes are a line of poetry and
Ibn Abbad sharpens the sword between the head and the head,
and Ibn Jahwar is dead.

There was nothing in the beginning
but the root of a tear/ I mean my country.

* In 1970, Manshūrāt Mawagīf (Beirut) published a two-poem collection by Adonis
entitled *Waqf bayna ṛ-ramād wa ṛ-wad* [A Time between Ashes and Roses]. The first
poem in that collection is entitled *Maqaddīma li-taṛṛīkh mulūk al-ṛawāṛīf* ['Introduction to
the History of the Petty Kings], the other *Ḥadhāḥaḥaḥa ḥma* ['This, Is My Name]: a
translation of the latter is forthcoming in *JAL*. *Maqaddīma li-taṛṛīkh mulūk al-ṛawāṛīf* then
appeared again in a collection edited by the Egyptian poet 'Abd al-Muṛṛī Ḥijāzī entitled
Kitābāt ṛāḥa qabr 'Abd al-Nāṛīr [Writings upon the Grave of Nasser] published by Dār al-
'Awda (Beirut) in 1971. Dār al-'Awda also published a reprint of *Waqf bayna ṛ-ramād wa
ṛ-wad* in 1971 and again in 1972, accompanied this time by a third poem, *'Qabr min aḥli
New York* ['A Grave... because of New York']. So far only *'Qabr min aḥli New York* has
piqued the interest of English language translators [for my translation of *'Qabr min aḥli
New York*, see *JAL* XXI-2 (1990), pp. 43-56]. Here, then, is a translation of *Maqaddīma
li-taṛṛīkh mulūk al-ṛawāṛīf*. For an excellent French translation of this poem, of which I
was, alas, unaware when doing mine, see 'Prologue à l'histoire des rois des tâṛīfā' [pp.
39-45] in Adonis, *Tombeau pour New York* suivi de *Prologue à l'histoire des rois des tâṛīfā* et
de *Ceci est mon nom*, translated by Anne Wade Minkowski (Paris: Sindbad, 1986 [La
Bibliothèque arabe]).

And the expanse of time was my thread—I ruptured and in the Arab greenness
I drowned my sun/ Civilization is a stretcher and the city

is a pagan rose—
a tent:

so the story begins or so the story ends.

And the expanse of time was my thread—I myself connected the stellar chasm
and I wrote the city

(wherever the city was trickling and wherever its

just as the alphabet spills
Babelian wall was lamentation), I wrote the city

not so that I may bandage a wound

not so that I may arouse the mummies

but so that I may arouse Constantinople.../ the blood

unites the roses and the ravens/ so that I may cross the bridges

and so that I may bathe the grieving faces

with the hæmorrhage of the times.

And I wrote the city

just as the prophet goes to death/ I mean my country

and my country is the echo

and the echo and the echo...

The *bā*² hid her head, and the *jīm* is a lock of hair, perish perish

alif is the first letter, perish perish

I hear the *hā*² sobbing and the *rā*² is like the crescent moon¹

immersed dissolving in the sands

perish perish

O bloodied one, congealing flowing like deserts of speech

O bloodied one, weaving calamity and weaving darkness

perish perish

The magic of your history has ended.

Bury its despicable face and its dotish inherited property.

¹ *Bā*² *jīm* *alif* *hā*² *rā*² (b, j, a, h, r). The meaning of these letters is a mystery. Their choice may be random or they may perhaps be pictographic: e.g. '*rā*²' is like the crescent moon' (a favorite device of the Indo-Muslim poet Ghālib). The letters may have mystical or numerological significance. 'Alī, mentioned on the first page of the poem and again throughout, is said to have been the father of '*ilm al-ḥāf*', that branch of knowledge which encompasses all the methods of divination based on the letters of the alphabet. This knowledge is, moreover, said to have been transmitted to his descendants, in the form of a book, descendants which include Mūsā al-Kāzim and Ja'far al-Šādiq, who is mentioned a few pages later.

And forgive and pardon
you gazelle-horns...you wild-antelope eyes.

I am confused, every time I see you, my country,
in a picture,

I carry you on my forehead, between my blood and my death: are you
a graveyard
or a rose?

I see you as children, their
bellies clamoring, listening prostrating
to the shackles, wearing
for each whiplash...a graveyard
or a rose?

You killed me you killed my songs
are you a carnage
or a revolution?

I am confused, every time I see you, my country, in a picture...

And Ali requests the light, and leaves
carrying his murdered history from hut to hut:
“they notified me that I have a house
like my house in Jericho
that I have brothers
in Cairo, that the limits of Nazareth are
Mecca.
How can knowledge transform into a shackle?
Is it for this reason that history refuses my face?
Is it for this reason that I do not see
an Arab sun on the horizon?”

Oh, if you only knew the comedy
(call it the Caliph's sermon or call it a gala)
it has two directors
one sharpens the gullotine
one wallows in the dust...if only you knew the comedy.

Where did you steal away? How?
Into the siege of the slaughter-trenches...what, were you butchered?

See now how you've ended up and yet the comedy has not ended
you have died like all the others
like time sobbing in the lungs of the forefathers

like clouds breaking their rainbow doors
like water drowning in the sand or eternity breaking
the neck of the lark.

You were like the others, you ended and the comedy did not
you were like the others—deny the others.

They began from there, begin from here
near a child who is dying
near a house that was demolished and which
other houses occupied and usurped.

And begin from here
from the moans of the streets from their suffocating odor
from a country whose name is becoming a graveyard
and begin from here
just as the calamity begins or as the thunderbolt is born.

You died? See, you have become like thunder in a womb of thunderbolts
absolving as thunderbolts absolve
look now how you have liquefied and how you have been resurrected.
You have ended but the thundering has not.

I know, the tent's shadow was your sole possession, and in it were rags,
and sometimes there would be water, sometimes a loaf of bread,
and your children grew up in a flock.
You did not give up hope, you shook off the dust, you became the dream,
and the springs can be seen in the huts along the Jordan or in Gaza and
Jerusalem, they burst upon the street even though it is a funeral ceremony,
leaving it like a wedding-feast

and your all-encompassing voice is like a sea
and your fleeing blood is like a mountain
and whenever the Earth carries you to her bed
you leave two streams of your gushing blood
for the lover, for the follower, twice over.

The face of Jaffa is a child/ Shall the withered tree thrive? Has the Earth
become part of the image of the Virgin?/ Who there convulses the East?/ The
beautiful tempest has come but the beautiful ruin has not/ A fugitive voice...!

The past has ended and yet is not at an end (why does the past end and
yet is unending?)

dāl is a frame that sorrow fractures (why does the past end and yet is unending?)

qāf is imminent nearer still.

I ask for water and it gives me sand
I ask for the sun and it gives me a cave.

A master, you? Will you remain
a master? A slave? You will remain
thus. It gives me a cave while I ask for a sun. Moreover, why
has the past ended and yet is not at an end? Why this Earth, that unravels
dispirited days, this monotonous Earth?

A master, you? You will remain
a master. A slave? You will remain.
It changed the picture but the picture shall remain
It changed the banner but the banner shall remain

...in a map that extends...etc,²
where the lingering master enters on page 1 riding an animal the size of a
gallows, transforming into a statue filled with public spaces. And the justice
cleans (or used to clean) her buttocks with women all around her entering
spears and chewing the palace-incense and the men registering the beats of
the women's hearts as a debit to a time crumbling like a scrap of paper between
the fingers where

kāf trembles beneath a dissenting nucleus of penetrating light
kāʿ is a history roofed with corpses and the vapor of prayers
alif is a gallows moist with a muddy light
bāʿ is a knife that scrapes off the meager human skin and makes it into a
sandal for two heavenly legs in a map that extends...etc.³

A tree bearing change and
exodus in the light is seated in Palestine and its branches are openings/ We
listened to its festivals we read with it the constellation of legends/ Soldiers
and judges roll down as bones and heads, resting as a dream rests, forced
to emigrate/ Dragged into the wilderness...

² 'In a map that extends': a phrase used by Nasser in his book *Falsafat al-Iharah* (The
Philosophy of the Revolution), where he articulates his ideas of pan-Arabism.

³ The letters *kāf wāʿ* *alif bāʿ* spell the word *kāib* (book).

search for buttocks, but conceal yourselves” or “is movement in the step or in the path?”

And the way is sand above which arcs the wind and the step is time, smooth as a pebble...

Where he stopped on the side of the deed, he affixed the book like the birthmark on his forehead and he drew a helmet of angels on his lips and his ears, he began to thrust his fingers and his teeth in a large bowl of speech extending the length of his ears and his hair fell and changed, and time rose in order to become outside time and what they call the homeland sits on the edge of time trying to fall. “How is its detention achievable?” asked a shackled man and a harnessed spectre, the answer did not come to him but another shackle came to him and a crowd like the powdered sand began to divide up a stretch the extent of *lām mīm alif⁶* or the size of *šād ‘ayn yā⁷ hā⁷ kāf⁷* flowing in it, weaving banners and carpets and streets and domes, and building a bridge that can be crossed by the last to the first...

Where the tank crossed and where it sat on the word, not a letter moved, it took to flight and perhaps its wings became long across a child and he asked about the word and a thorn appeared in his throat and dumbness began to crawl toward his tongue...

on a map that extends...etc, where “the enemy is oppressing though they are suffering losses, and spreading though they are being butchered, and lasting though they are checked, until they return to a degenerate flag and a voice that is dreading and every king is busy with the blocking up of his holes, ...and when good fortune increases and the aide of the pious king asks for al-Andalus, for the return of a pure island-province and Spain falls in his hands, hé is content with apologies and condolences and says that war has its ups and downs and in your blamelessness is suffering, ...and the enemy is still pouncing upon them and still contending with them and the murderer is still calling on them time and again until he has made them tired of their own dignity and scared them away from their homes and mounted them one on another and exterminated them through murder and captivity, come what may...”

⁶ The letters *lām mīm alif* spell *līmā* (why). Moreover, they are the same letters that appear at the beginning of the second *sūrah* of the Qur’ān, *al-Baqarah* (the Cow), to which mystical significance is attached.

⁷ The sequence of letters *šād ‘ayn yā⁷ hā⁷ kāf* produces nothing intelligible. It is, however, the reverse of the sequence of letters which occurs at the beginning of the nineteenth *sūrah* of the Qur’ān, *Maryam*.

In a map that extends...etc,
the well-known history that cooks the sultan on a fire refused to remember
a poet...and the rest follows,
in a map that extends...etc,

a time between ashes and roses is coming
everything shall perish in it
everything shall begin in it.

...And I sing of my own downfall, I have not beheld myself again other than on
the margin of history in a cipher/ I shall begin, but where? From where? How
can I have my soul and in what languages? This one who suckles me betrays
me/ I shall vindicate her and live on a cipher of time that has died. I walk along
a cipher of a time that has not come

though I am not alone

...this gazelle of history opens my insides/ The river of slaves surges on, no
prophet remains
but that he became a brigand, no god remains/ We arrive discovering
bread/ We discovered a light leading toward the earth, we discovered a sun
coming from a fistful, bring your axes let's carry God like an elder who has died,
let's open a path for the sun other than minarets, for the child a book other than
angels, for the dreamer a source other than Medina and Kufa/ Bring your axes

I am not alone...

...the face of Jaffa is a child/ Shall the withered tree thrive? Has the Earth
become part of the image of the Virgin?/ Who there convulses the East?/ The
beautiful tempest has come but the beautiful ruin has not/ A fugitive voice.../

They emerged from the ancient books where the fundamentals are mangled
and they came as seasons come,
the ashes embrace their opposite,
fields walk upon fields:

no, not from the time of the setting of the stars.

It is the time of disclosure that has come and of the convulsion of minds.
(Beirut, 1970)

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THE NATURE AND USES OF THE FANTASTIC
IN THE FICTIONAL WORLD OF
NAGUIB MAHFOUZ

In a recent interview Naguib Mahfouz maintains: "The writer may employ fantasy, but he always has an eye to reality. I belong to this type of writer. I may invest my work with abstract dimensions, but this is only to get to the heart of reality. I, therefore, believe that unrealistic literature does not exist" (Faraj, 1986: 20). Mahfouz's notions coincide with Apter's thesis that "fantasy is essential to the author's various purposes, which must be understood not as an escape from reality but as an investigation of it" (Apter, 1982: 2). Similar views¹ are held by Kathryn Hume when she contends that the representation of reality in literature can be considerably enhanced by the interaction of the "mimetic impulse" and the "fantastic impulse" (Hume, 1984: xii). Hume points out other primary functions of fantasy that are particularly relevant to our study of the nature of and the various roles played by fantasy in the writings of Mahfouz. Fantasy, she argues, can enter a work of art as a direct expression of "authorial vision", a medium of "commentary upon reality" (84), and, finally, as an artistic device dictated by the "demands of the genre" (12).

It is mainly along these lines that this paper examines the fantastic elements in two of Mahfouz's major works: *The Epic of the Riff-Raff* (1977) and *The Nights of the Thousand and One Nights* (1982). It is of interest to note at the outset that both of these two works belong to a particular phase² in the course of the development of Mahfouz's literary career, a phase in which his writings are characteristically inspired by indigenous sources, such as *The Arabian Nights* and Sufism. This accounts for the distinctive native flavour of the fantastic elements in the two novels under consideration.

The Epic of the Riff-Raff begins with a spiritual Sufi scene underlining Mahfouz's peculiar concern to draw on indigenous material in weaving

¹ In the same vein Scholes also maintains: "Fabulation, then, means not a turning away from reality, but an attempt to find more subtle correspondences between the reality which is fiction and the fiction which is reality. Modern fabulation accepts, even emphasizes its fallibilism, its inability to reach all the way to the real, but it continues to look toward reality" (Scholes, 1979: 8).

² For a full description of the different phases of Mahfouz's literary career, see, Malak Hashem, "The Sense of an Ending in *The Day the Leader was Killed*," in *Naguib Mahfouz Nobel 1988, Egyptian Perspectives: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Cairo, General Egyptian Book Organization, 1989), pp. 203-4.