THE DECONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF IN NAGIB MAHFUZ'S MIRRORS

In A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature (1969), Leo Bersani discusses "the deconstruction of the self" in modern literature, the contrast between the artist's notion of "a distinct and coherently unified personality" and the fragmentary reality that life and experience actually bring into being. Indeed, Bersani goes so far as to ask for "an art which mocks our faith in psychological coherence" (313) — presumably because he believes we are now mature enough to function free of that old illusion. The subjects to which Bersani devotes his attention include Racine, Flaubert, Stendahl, Lawrence, Emily Bronte, and Rimbaud; he might have attended also to Nagib Mahfuz's Mirrors (1971-2; 1977), though the work is well out of the area which he chose to study. Less well known than the celebrated Egyptian realist's Midaq Alley and Miramar, Mirrors is nevertheless one of the most interesting experiments in literary form and character study that has come to us in recent decades and a further illustration of the issues that have interested Bersani. As Rosemary Jackson says, in discussing Bersani, the mirror is "a frequent motif in literature, as a metaphor for the production of other selves." And it is, to return to Bersani, "a spatial representation of an intuition that our being can never be adequately enclosed within any present formulation—any formulation here and now—of our being" (208). Where (and when) a fictional character is seen through mirrors, the psychological integrity of that personality is challenged, and questions about the techniques used in such a sophisticated method of character-portrayal inevitably arise.

Mahfuz himself has denied that Mirrors is a novel (Arabic rīwāya) and appropriately so, since the work consists of fifty-five personality sketches which only in the most general way relate to a common theme or share a common plot. The subjects are Egyptians, both male and female, drawn for the most part from the professional classes, a great diversity of individuals rarely linked for long by common interests or activities. Nor can these sketches be called short stories either, since few—if any—depict a single moment or action which embodies some particularly significant meaning for those involved. Indeed, many of these short sketches cover several decades in the lives of their subjects, even moving

1 Boston: Little, Brown, 5.
from an individual's childhood to old age. To unify this tenuous material Mahfuz employs several ingenious literary devices. A substantial number of the figures who appear in *Mirrors* were members of the same group of Abbasiyya schoolboy friends, long before the action of the book, and they have kept in touch across the years. As a result, numerous cross-references are made throughout the sketches to other characters and other times. Many of these figures are attracted to certain meeting places such as university and government offices, the salons of various academicians, and, of course, Fishawi's cafe. Some important characters move easily in several different circles. Moreover, certain themes recur—the social role of the academician, the place of the Wafdist in modern Egypt, the attractions of Communism, women and sexuality. Such issues are used ingeniously both to provide a unifying focus and also to suggest the diversity of views held by various individuals. As the principal figures of the sketches are linked, in one way or another, with each other and with these ideas, we are confronted with constantly shifting images of both the ideas and the individuals who discuss them. The characters, then, as Roger Allen has shown in two articles published in *Muslim World*, are mirrors of contemporary Egyptian thought and values. *Mirrors*, says Allen, is "an attempt by Mahfouz to express his views on Egypt's history during his own lifetime through the medium of fiction, albeit a thin filter" (26).

In a few cases, the subject of a certain sketch is mentioned only once, but the more important figures appear frequently; there are over a dozen references to Ibrahim Aql; about as many to Mahir Abd al-Karim, Salim Gabr, and Zuhair Kamil; even more to Abbas Fauzi; over twenty to Rida Hamida and to Ga'far Khalil, etc. Not all of these references are significant, but in many cases the individuals involved are discussing important issues or are linked with important events, or are being discussed by other important people.

However, the most important unifying element in *Mirrors* is provided by the narrator, the otherwise unidentified "I" who is somehow involved in each of the sketches. Roger Allen summarizes what we learn about the narrator from the text and on this basis suggests that he represents the author himself. The most interesting insights into his personality come to us through his responses to the figures he meets, as he is mirrored in them, or projects himself onto them, or finds a part of himself derived from them, and it is this somewhat different sense of "mirrors" that I want to pursue here. And since what we learn about the narrator is so

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