

Bureau of Missing Persons

Metaphysical Detection and the Subject in Jabra Ibrahim Jabra and Naguib Mahfouz

The question is the story itself, and whether or not it means something is not for the story to tell.

—PAUL AUSTER, *CITY OF GLASS*

Such suffering is part of the cure!

—NAGUIB MAHFOUZ, “ZAABALAWI”

Up to this point, I have focused on the peregrinations of “classical detection” as conducted by investigators both official and unofficial, private and public, in select fictions from Egypt and Morocco. This chapter and the one that follows, however, begin a new section on the uses of the “metaphysical detective story” in works from Lebanon, Egypt, and the Palestinian diaspora.¹ These are texts that, in the words of Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, “subvert traditional detective-story conventions—such as narrative closure and the detective’s role as surrogate reader—with the intention, or at least the effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot.”² Like Edgar Allan Poe, Jorge Luis Borges, Paul Auster, and others examined in Merivale and Sweeney’s study, Arab authors, too, have frequently zeroed in on the element of mystery, puzzle, or enigma (*lughz*) at the heart of detective fiction, using the unknown, missing story of the crime as a metonym for the great unknown or the absent, occulted world (*‘ālam al-ghayb*), with all the religious connotations these words imply. In novels and short stories that predate the postmodern works of writers like Paul Auster, Umberto Eco, and Thomas Pynchon—sometimes by decades—Arab authors also assume a “flamboyant yet decidedly complex relationship to the detective story,” using the mystery plot to question elements of classical detection, including “the hermeneutic strategies of

rendering meaningful those signs which are unintelligible to others . . . the epistemological method of discovering truth by questioning sources of knowledge; and the adept detective's triumph over the dangerous Other."³ Just as Poe depicts C. Auguste Dupin's ratiocinative powers as an astounding, awe-inspiring form of divination,⁴ so too the authors of Arabic metaphysical detective fiction summon the lexicon of mysticism to draw attention to the search itself, rather than the truth it uncovers.

This chapter brings together works by two writers known more for their status as litterateurs and intellectuals than for their experiments with metaphysical detective fiction. The first, the Egyptian Naguib Mahfouz, has gained fame as the Arab world's first and only Nobel laureate in literature to date, recognized mainly for his *Cairo Trilogy* (1946–52), which I discussed briefly in the introduction. As Mahfouz became increasingly associated with his realist masterpiece, being hailed as “the Dickens/Balzac/Zola (take your pick) of Cairo,” his later experiments with form, genre, and voice, particularly in the novellas and short stories from the 1960s, languished in obscurity, especially where Western readers of his works in translation were concerned.⁵ Yet these novels stage an important shift in Mahfouz's narrative poetics. Why did this great realist chronicler of Egypt's modern history suddenly turn to novels of crime and seeking? And why are Sufi characters, themes, and lexicons so central to these later novels, short stories, and novellas? Sasson Somekh has argued that “Egypt could have had its foremost detective writer in Mahfouz,” and many others, including the author himself, have acknowledged Mahfouz's lifelong interest in detective stories.⁶ Other critics have noted the important role that Sufi themes and concepts play across his oeuvre, particularly in the novellas and short stories of the 1960s.⁷ Yet no scholar has attempted to analyze these two features—the Sufism and the noir, the spiritual and the detective-style seeking—together.

The second writer, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, is best known as a Renaissance man of Arabic letters, a prolific essayist, poet, painter, translator, art critic, and novelist whose vast oeuvre chronicles both his own experiences as an uprooted Palestinian and the debates of an entire generation struggling to understand the place of the intellectual, the legacy of the Nahda, and the value of modernity and tradition in a postwar, post-colonial Arab world. *The Ship* (*al-Safinah*, 1970) is arguably Jabra's most famous novel; polyphonically narrated by a series of Iraqi, Palestinian, and Italian characters as they float through time and space on a cruise ship crisscrossing the Mediterranean, it firmly established Jabra's reputation as the Arab world's foremost novelist of ideas.⁸ Yet Jabra's later novel, *In Search of Walid Masoud* (*al-Baḥth 'an Walīd Mas'ūd*, 1978),⁹ borrows equally from the mysticism and the mystery at the heart of metaphysical detective fiction, beginning as it does with the disappearance of the titular Palestinian character and staging its characters' ongoing and ultimately fruitless “search” to discover the truth behind that disappearance (what Tzvetan Todorov calls the story of the crime).¹⁰ The novel itself, then, is both the open-ended “search” for Walid Masoud conducted by all its

characters, on the one hand, and the systematic “research project” or “study” that its sociologist frame narrator, Dr. Jawad Husni, vows to write about him, on the other.¹¹ In between, we tend to learn more about the characters doing the searching than we do about the absent Palestinian,¹² but we also learn a good deal about what it means to “search” more generally, what tools various characters with different backgrounds marshal to conduct their searches, and how the unsolvable mystery defies those tools and thereby calls their effectiveness into question. Whether engaging with the scholarly methodologies of psychology, sociology, and history, the ancient practices of astrology, tasseography, and hunting, or the artistic practices of oil painting and poetry writing, the characters in *Walid Masoud* dramatize what it means to seek knowledge in different ways, and what it means to have one’s methods overturned by a particularly enigmatic object.

What brings the Egyptian master of realism and the Palestinian doyen of intellectuals together? Both Jabra and Mahfouz experimented with a specific form of metaphysical detective fiction, which Merivale calls the “gumshoe gothic,” the story that engages with “Missing Persons, rather than Dead Bodies,” and in so doing subverts from the very beginning the function of forensic evidence at the heart of classic detective fiction. These stories “deal with . . . a person sought for, glimpsed, and shadowed, gumshoe style, through endless labyrinthine city streets, but never really Found—because he was never really There, because he was, and remains, missing. One was . . . only following one’s own self.”¹³ In Mahfouz’s novels and short stories, as well as in Jabra’s, there is a gumshoe but no criminal; likewise, the “triadic multiplicity of detective, criminal, and victim is reduced to a solipsistic unity,” as the search to know and understand an Other merely sinks the detective further into his own subjectivity.¹⁴ Mahfouz and Jabra use the plot-level search as a figure for the seeker’s loss of confidence in his own identity, his boundedness as a subject, and his ability to know others.

Yet there are several ingredients to the Arabic metaphysical detective stories I read in this chapter that distinguish them from their Western counterparts. They share with Poe and others a skepticism concerning the hard distinctions between science and religion, logic and mysticism, ratiocination and divination that gained traction in Europe during the nineteenth century. But, as writers engaging with the physical, institutional, and epistemic violence of colonialism, their critique is aimed not only at the West but also at the modernizing project of the Arab Nahda—the “awakening” or “revival” from cultural decline (*inhiṭāt*) that began in the nineteenth century. Through military, administrative, juridical, and educational reforms gleaned from educational missions to Europe and the translation of European scientific publications and textbooks, Nahdawi intellectuals—an emergent bourgeoisie or *effendiyya*—sought to “meet the challenges raised by national independence movements in provinces of the Ottoman Empire, and to catch up with the increasingly powerful West.”¹⁵ Mahfouz’s skepticism about the Nahda’s cultural and intellectual project is evident as early as the *Cairo Trilogy*: the journey of its

protagonist Kamal away from faith and toward secular literary “enlightenment” is shown to be painful and fraught with perils. Jabra’s skepticism about the same project, by contrast, is harder to discern. His voluminous essays on topics in Western aesthetics (especially British Romantic poetry), his signal translations of key English literary works, and his criticism’s continual focus on the importance of visionary individualism all paint the portrait of a latter-day Nahdawi, modernizing Arabic literature and culture through a healthy dose of well-translated English literature and criticism. I argue, however, that the poetics of Jabra’s *In Search of Walid Masoud* tell a different story. As a succession of narrators try and fail to grasp the truth about their absent Palestinian friend, a series of authorized disciplines and methodologies for deducing truth inherited from the Nahda are also shown to fail. At the same time, Walid’s own papers and documents reveal a history of dabbling in Christian mysticism, and the characters’ contacts with him—whether in person or on paper—increasingly come to resemble experiences of mystical ego death. The metaphysical detective novels of Mahfouz and Jabra, in short, target the same Enlightenment as Poe’s short story, but in its transplanted form as the Arab Nahda, whose repercussions—including a sense of civilizational inferiority, a rejection of centuries-long literary traditions, and a devaluation of popular forms of religion and cultural practice—lasted long into the twentieth century.

In another crucial difference from Western metaphysical detective stories, the elusive and enigmatic figures pursued in Arabic “missing persons” narratives were not completely unknown to their initial Arabic reading audiences; they were, rather, recognizable character types drawn from premodern and popular Arabic literature and culture. Poe purposefully designs his man of the crowd to be paradoxical and unclassifiable, simultaneously ragged and rich, carrying both “a diamond and a dagger.”¹⁶ Mahfouz’s elusive shaykhs, by contrast—especially Zaabalawi, in the eponymous 1961 short story, Sayyid Sayyid al-Rahimi in *The Search* (*al-Ṭariq*, 1964), and even Shaykh Mutawalli ‘Abd al-Samad in the *Trilogy*—would have been recognizable to Arab publics as “friends of God” (*awliyā’ Allāh*, sing. *walī Allāh*), much like Tawfiq al-Hakim’s Shaykh Asfur in *Diary of a Country Prosecutor* (see chapter 1). Mahfouz seizes on the same kind of resistant unknowability figured by Poe’s man of the crowd, but he ties this unknowability to a specific figure in the Egyptian cultural imagination. By modern standards, the friend of God is considered a vagrant, a charlatan, a swindler, sometimes even a drunk or drug addict, but by much more long-standing social conventions, these very qualities bring him closer to God, and he thereby imbues the atmosphere around him with holiness and transcendence—spiritual cures for modern ills. Jabra’s Walid Masoud would also have been recognizable to Arab reading publics as a figure for the miraculously productive, visionary Palestinian intellectual, simultaneously embodying all the metaphysical symbolism of the early Christian “desert fathers” (as well as Jesus himself) and the related qualities of the fedayee: self-sacrifice, asceticism, conviction, elusiveness, shape shifting,

otherworldliness.¹⁷ In sum, it is not that the enigmatic figures in Mahfouz's and Jabra's works "refuse to be read";¹⁸ it is that they embody truths to which modern ways of seeking have become inhospitable.

But what kind of truth do Zaabalawi, al-Rahimi, Masoud, and other missing persons in Arabic metaphysical detective stories embody, if not the truth offered up by scientific analysis? I have found one possible answer to this question in Friedrich Nietzsche's "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," and in Paul de Man's reading of one key sentence from that essay: "What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions."¹⁹ Interrupting Nietzsche's sentence before it can arrive at its pithy final formulation, de Man's analysis highlights the difference between metaphor and metonymy, on the one hand, which imply "that truth is relational" and allow for "the possibility of definition by means of infinitely varied sets of propositions," and anthropomorphism, on the other hand, which "is not just a trope but an identification on the level of substance." Anthropomorphism "freezes the infinite chain of tropological transformations and propositions into one single assertion or essence . . . no longer a proposition but a proper name."²⁰ Just as Nietzsche sees in the "concept" the sedimented and worn residue of a once vibrant and living sense perception, so de Man sees this same movement from truth to falsity reenacted in the rhetoric of Nietzsche's sentence itself. "Truth is a trope; a trope generates a norm or value; this value (or ideology) is no longer true. It is true that tropes are the producers of ideologies that are no longer true."²¹ The truth that Zaabalawi, Sayyid Sayyid al-Rahimi, and Walid Masoud represent, then, could be described as the truth of metonymy and metaphor, of infinitely varied propositions before they have hardened into a proper name.

But there is another, perhaps more apt, answer to the question I posed above. Both Nietzsche's essay and de Man's reading of it deliberately suppress the divine implications of an "infinite chain of tropological transformations,"²² which, in another time and place, might simply have been called "God" and, in certain Islamic traditions, might also have been called "language" or, specifically, the Arabic language, the language of the Qur'an. The quests for "missing persons" in Mahfouz's and Jabra's narratives, then, might be better equated with the narrator al-Harith ibn Hammam's continual search for the "eloquent rogue" Abu Zayd in al-Hariri's *Impostures* (*Maqāmāt*). Al-Harith wanders from town to town searching for "some inspiring oratory," following what Michael Cooperson has called "a thwarted reflex of a spiritual search," much like Christians in late antique Egypt would seek out the Desert Fathers in search of "a word," meaning "a memorable summation of some spiritual precept."²³ Abu Zayd, meanwhile, is both a master of disguise and a masterful manipulator of words; he uses the Arabic language for

the very worldly purpose of “swindling money out of the gullible narrator,” but in so doing, he transports the narrator and anyone else who happens to be present to the peaks of marvel and awe.²⁴ “The most economical explanation for [Abu Zayd’s] vaporous indeterminacy,” Cooperson writes, “is that he is Arabic itself . . . He is the language of God in the world of men. And that language is so powerfully in excess of material reality that it overwhelms the agreed-upon relationship of word and object.”²⁵ Melding Cooperson’s reading of al-Hariri’s *Impostures* with Merivale’s theory of the gumshoe gothic, we might say that in the works of Mahfouz and Jabra examined below, the characters’ painstaking searches for and fleeting encounters with the mysterious figures they seek also overwhelm the agreed-upon relationship between person and identity—between the possible infinity of their humanity and the proper name, address, and identity card to which modern regimes of truth have confined them.

The term *metaphysical* thus suits novels like Jabra’s *In Search of Walid Masoud* and Mahfouz’s *The Search*, since these works paradoxically revive questions of religious tradition and faith even as they conform to Georg Lukács’s characterization of the novel as the “epic of a world abandoned by God.”²⁶ Their narrators may momentarily experience mystical self-loss and ego death through their pursuits of and encounters with mysterious others, but in the end they remain atomized individuals caught up in their own concerns who are thereby cut off from any kind of collectivity. The fleeting feeling of simultaneous ego death and infinitude they experience is, if not illusory, at least unproductive, part of an endless cycle of pursuit represented in the form of the narratives themselves, which all end precisely where they began—with the narrator’s resolution to “find” the mysterious Other, thus sending him “back to the same old vortex.”²⁷

The theory of the metaphysical detective novel has helped me identify and delineate the features of a trend I see across Arabic works of fiction from several national contexts but, to be clear, I am not arguing that these Arabic fictions exemplify an essentially Western paradigm. Part of what I read in these works by Jabra and Mahfouz is a reinscription of the history of pious, mystical “seeking”—Islamic or Christian—into the novel concerned with an unsolved, infinite search. I find in their works not the failure of the Nahda and its modernizing projects but a chronicle of the coloniality in those projects’ aspirations, as well as their encounters with older, local, and popular practices of truth making and truth using—in other words, local epistemologies inconsistent with the objective aspirations of secular philosophy and science. I read these novels, therefore, not as a validation of native irrationality against Western rationality but as explorations of the irrationality and contradiction on which the Enlightenment and Nahda projects were themselves premised, by means of an engagement with and exposure of the tropological, rhetorical, and figurative qualities in supposedly rational, scientific approaches to truth. Mahfouz and Jabra do not destroy or “move beyond” the figure of the Arab intellectual but they do frame and destabilize his hubris, and this framing in

itself allows readers to imagine other subjects who, in fleeing the textual labyrinth, might make a new postcolonial reality.

FORMING INTELLECTUALS: JABRA AND THE
POLITICS OF VISIONARY INDIVIDUALISM

Where *Walid Masoud* constitutes, in my reading, the exception to the rule of Jabra's otherwise near-religious devotion to the figure of the visionary, Romantic individual throughout his career, Mahfouz's *Cairo Trilogy*, and particularly *Palace of Desire* (*Qaṣr al-Shawq*), when read against the grain, proves to be as skeptical of Nahdawi intellectual hubris as the later novellas and short stories of Sufi noir. This section offers a history of Jabra's lifelong commitment to the Arab intellectual as visionary individual and the politics behind this commitment; the subsequent section will examine Mahfouz's career-long skepticism of this figure and his sense of the losses entailed in its formation.

As an essayist, poet, artist, and translator, Jabra has come to epitomize the figure of the intellectual for many subsequent Arab writers and intellectuals. An Assyrian-Palestinian of extremely humble origins,²⁸ he emerged during the 1950s and 1960s as one of the Arab world's most recognized and prolific thinkers. Raised mostly in Bethlehem, Jabra subsequently graduated from the Arab College in Jerusalem, read English at Cambridge University, returned home to teach at the Rashidiya secondary school in Jerusalem, and—after the 1948 Nakba drove him into exile—proceeded to become a professor at the Teachers' Training College in Baghdad.²⁹ Through no small feat of self-cultivation, Jabra transformed himself over the course of his life from a barefoot schoolboy roaming the fields outside Bethlehem into one of the Arab world's preeminent scholars, critics, and literary innovators. By the time Elias Khoury wrote his Palestinian epic *Gate of the Sun* (*Bāb al-Shams*) in 1998, the association of Jabra with intellectual refinement had become a given of modern Arabic literature and culture. "I love Jabra," that novel's narrator confesses, "because he writes in an aristocratic way, with well-chosen, beautiful sentences. It's true that he was poor as a child, but he wrote like a writer."³⁰

Jabra's early role as intercultural thinker and champion of visionary individualism can be observed in his numerous essays from the 1950s and early 1960s—essays and lectures on such topics as British and American Romantic and Modernist poetry,³¹ the "free verse" movement (*al-shi'r al-ḥurr*) in Arabic,³² and Iraqi fine art,³³ as well as his own paintings and translations of foundational works such as Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and Whitman's "Song of Myself," to name only a few.³⁴ His passion for the British Romantics during this period goes some way to explaining why he continued to carry the torch of visionary individualism at a time when pan-Arabist, socialist, and "committed" aesthetics were sweeping the Arab world. In the 1957 essay "al-Ḥurriyyah wa-l-Ṭūfān" (Freedom and the flood), he spoke out against

commitment (*al-iltizām*) as the primary criterion of aesthetic judgment in modern Arabic literature. Committed literature, in his view, “is focused on politics more than it is on the human being [*al-insān*], and it focuses on abstract collectivities rather than individuals.” For this reason, it “simplifies and fragments the key question of literature,” which, “as we can see from our study of poetry, theater, and narrative from ancient times to the present,” is not that of the collectivity but that of “the human being.”³⁵ This and other essays from Jabra’s oeuvre hew toward the “personalism” in modernist Arabic aesthetics that Robyn Creswell has connected with Charles Malik, the American University of Beirut professor, and his mentee, the Lebanese poet and critic Yusuf al-Khal, one of the co-founders of *Shi‘r* magazine, to which Jabra was a frequent contributor. “Personalists argued for the spiritual dignity of the human person, threatened by the rival materialisms of capitalism and communism,” Creswell writes, and “for Arab modernists too, the person is a hero of negative liberty, a lyrical ‘I’ that floats free from the claims of all ideological collectives.”³⁶ This apoliticism was and is, of course, its own form of politics, as Creswell also shows—a feature of late modernist and early Cold War liberalism seeking to establish an international consensus of “militantly anti-Communist, aggressively internationalist, spiritually engaged” intellectuals and cultural producers “chiefly concerned with negative freedoms.”³⁷ “Al-Ḥurriyyah wa-l-Ṭūfān” and other essays from the 1950s and 1960s illustrate how thoroughly Jabra’s *explicit* poetics aligned with this late modernist, anti-Communist liberalism.³⁸

Jabra’s defense of the visionary individual is nowhere clearer than in his novels from this period, particularly *Hunters in a Narrow Street* (1960).³⁹ Written in English, it chronicles the experiences of a young, Cambridge-educated, Christian Palestinian exile named Jameel Farran as he copes with the experience of the 1948 Nakba and adjusts to his new life as an English professor in Baghdad—a social, cultural, and political landscape as “other” to him as it probably was to the first English-language readers of Jabra’s book. Jameel’s past life in Palestine echoes through his current reality in his new city; as he remembers the catastrophic events of the Nakba, readers of *Hunters* are also told a history that, at the time the novel was published, was scarcely being written in English. The charming Jerusalem love story unfolding between Jameel and Leila Shahin is suddenly interrupted by “violent explosions,” which jolt readers out of romance and into history:

Jewish terrorists had been killing the British for several years, blowing up government offices, army barracks, officers’ clubs. Now they had started on the Arabs. United Nations [*sic*] had recommended splitting Palestine in two, and the terrorists were determined to achieve the bloody dichotomy. Barrels of T.N.T. were set off in market squares, killing about fifty people at a time, and now it was the beautiful white and rose stone houses of the Arabs they were after. (*H* 8–9)

This same history will bring Jameel’s love story to a gruesome end: following the Jewish terrorists’ destruction of the Shahin’s house, Jameel discovers his beloved’s

severed hand protruding from the rubble, “with the engagement ring buckled round the third finger” (*H* 10). The image is clunky and melodramatic, like much of *Hunters*, but it drives home the novel’s condemnation of the Nakba and the Western regimes that enabled it.

The novel goes on to stage the many debates of Arab modernity—West versus East, tradition versus modernity, custom versus innovation, desert versus city, art versus technology, and so on—among the poets, intellectuals, students, activists, bourgeois characters, and even the rare foreigners among whom Jameel finds company in Baghdad. The commitment- and Communist-minded poets Abdul Kader Yassin and Kareem serve as foils for the liberal, visionary individualism touted by Jameel and his Bohemian poet friends Adnan Talib and Husain Abdul Amir (*H* 77). Towfiq al-Khalaf is the Bedouin cloak- and cartridge belt-wearing incarnation of the desert Arab, a mouthpiece for the traditionalist argument that Arab authenticity lies in the desert, that “civilization means deterioration,” that art and bourgeois love are “the poisonous exhalation[s] of the vast swamp that so-called civilization is,” and that the only remedy is to live “the genuine way of Arab life,” which, for al-Khalaf, is characterized by riding camels, sleeping in tents, and reviving the oral culture of the ancient Arabian peninsula (even though he comes from a wealthy metropolitan family and holds a law degree) (*H* 82–85). Faced with the same problems of postcolonial modernity, Imad Nafawi, a conservative upper-class professor and tyrannical father-jailer to Jameel’s young student and love interest Sulafa, prescribes “mosques and police stations, the fear of God and the fear of authority” as “the only medicine for our sickness” (*H* 102). Above all, it is the customs of sex, gender, marriage, and love that loom largest in the plot of *Hunters*. Jameel denounces the cloistering of young women like Sulafa, and he is horrified by the honor killing of the young servant Azima by her brother in the novel’s sixth chapter. “We live in cities and yet we follow the law of the desert,” Adnan explains in response to Jameel’s shock at Azima’s murder. “We’re caught in the vicious meshes of tribal tradition” (*H* 46).

Yet despite the obstacles he faces—the prospect of an arranged marriage between Sulafa and Towfiq al-Khalaf to settle a tribal dispute, the love triangle he creates with Sulafa’s aunt Salma—it is Jameel who ultimately emerges triumphant, his love for Sulafa vindicating the earlier loss of Leila and, more importantly, marking the first signs of the old Arab social classes’ demise, as they, along with the “backwards” customs they represent, perish. “Rubeidi was slipping,” Jameel notes in the novel’s final chapter. “A whole order of things was slipping” (*H* 230). As he waits for Sulafa to turn twenty-one so that she can elope with him, and as the novel’s other characters “impale themselves on rows of political and social swords,” Jameel calmly observes “crows and kites [flying] over the palm groves of a slowly refurbished land” (*H* 232). Like these birds, Jameel—the Palestinian Christian humanist, the Arab English professor, the “savior,” the “successful peace negotiator” (*H* 196, 203)—flies free of the pesky “political and social swords” that

trouble his Iraqi friends, committed to nothing but romantic love. His act of removing Sulafa from the conservative social customs of traditional marriage is his contribution to this slow refurbishing, this push toward modernity—or so the novel implies.

Like “Freedom and the Flood” and other essays from this period in Jabra’s career, then, *Hunters* explicitly champions negative liberties, the “freedom from” political commitments, social customs, and religious beliefs that allows exilic intellectuals like Jameel to soar above the restraints of tradition and collectivity. *Hunters* also contains a telling monologue about the role of Christianity in Jameel’s enlightened subjectivity—one worth quoting at length for the echoes it will find in Jabra’s later characterization of Walid Masoud. While remembering the immediate aftermath of the Nakba, Jameel recalls a conversation with his priest. “I can’t understand the West,” Father Isa says. “It is supposed to be Christian. Look what it is doing to Christians and to the land of Christ.” Jameel responds by asking the Father how exactly he thinks about Jesus Christ.

Father Isa was alarmed . . . “My son, I don’t know what you mean by your question. He is the Lord of Light, the Redeemer, the Comforter—”

“Very good, father. But I think of Christ as a man walking our streets with a haggard face and beautiful hands. I think of Him standing barefooted on our cobbles and calling all men to His love and His peace. I think of Him here, in these very streets and hills and houses and hovels. For me Christ is a part of this place. But how do you suppose they think of Him in the West? Do you suppose our Christianity is like theirs? When they sing of Jerusalem do you think they mean our own arched streets and cobbled alleys and terraced hills? Never. Christ for the West has become an idea—an abstract idea with a setting, but the setting has lost all geographical significance. For them the Holy Land is a fairy land. They have invented a fanciful Jerusalem of their own and made it the city of their dreams . . . What does it matter to them if our houses are destroyed, if a thousand Leilas are blown to bits and our city gates are turned into shambles? They’ve stolen our Christ and kicked us in the teeth . . .

“For fifteen hundred years Christianity has been exclusively European. What have we, Arabs, Asiatics, Levantines, to do with it? We originated it, but the Greeks and the Romans took it away from us. All we have left of it is an antiquated set of rituals to which we have contributed nothing in a thousand years. What creative, civilizing part has our Christianity played in the midst of a Moslem world? . . . We have never enjoyed the full benefit of belonging to our fatherland—don’t you hate the term ‘religious minority,’ the survival of which is always to indicate the tolerance of the ‘religious majority’?—nor have we distinguished ourselves by the creation of some great or even different civilization out of our different faith. Europe has always been afraid of the Moslem East, but the Christians in it, always looking out towards Europe until their necks have ached, have earned no more than its benign contempt. That is why the West will let Jerusalem fall into ruins under the hoofs of Zionist terrorists.” (*H* 16–18)

Several positions on Arab modernity, Christianity, and Palestinian history intertwine here. First and foremost, Jameel offers a clear condemnation of the West, not only for its status as colonizer but also for having “stolen *our* Christ” and transformed him from a real-life, everyday Jerusalemite into “an abstract idea,” completely removed from his proper geographical setting and community—that is, Palestine. Jameel similarly condemns Western Christianity’s abstract understanding of the Holy Land as a “fairy land,” the “city of their dreams.” By the second paragraph, however, it is also clear that Jameel accords a special transformational, “creative,” and even “civilizing” role to Christian Arabs, even if they have thus far failed to fulfill that role in modern history. His condemnation of “Arab, Asiatic, Levantine” Christians for having become mired in “an antiquated set of rituals” is laced with the conviction that it is Christian Arabs who have the most potential as agents of transformation in the Arab world. That Christianity originated in Bethlehem and Jerusalem is no accident for Jameel Farran; it is the landscape itself that imbues the place with transformational potential. Like Jabra refusing the denomination of “refugee,”⁴⁰ Jameel refuses the denomination of “religious minority” for Levantine Christians. And, like Jabra’s passionate defense of individual expression in “Freedom and the Flood,” Jameel’s politics in this passage also align with the Christian theology-influenced liberalism of Malik, whose call for Western revolution was in fact “a call for the West to rediscover itself in the East as the historical fountainhead of Christianity.”⁴¹ For Jabra as for Malik, Eastern Christians, and Palestinian Christians in particular, have a special role as mediators between East and West. They are the leavening agents capable of absorbing, translating, and implementing the best, most “civilizing” features of Western modernity without compromising Arab authenticity or alienating their Arab confreres.

Many of these same ideas find their echoes in *Walid Masoud*. In the chapter titled “Walid Masoud Remembers the Hermits in a Distant Cave,” the titular Palestinian character narrates his young fascination with Christian hermits. “It is the pious hermits who came closest to being prophets,” he remembers the priest instructing him, including Saint Jerome, Saint Anthony, and Simeon Stylites (*ISWM* 86). When Walid’s young friend Sulayman invites him to put these ideas into practice by running away from the monastery and taking up residence as hermits in a cave outside Jerusalem, Walid happily agrees, seeing this adventure as the fulfillment of what he calls his “mysterious dreams.” In those dreams, he tells Sulayman, “I see myself flying in the sky like an eagle, soaring and swooping through the valleys . . . If we go and become hermits, can we change mankind, change the world?” (*ISWM* 87). As they did for Jameel Farran at the end of *Hunters*, birds stand for negative liberty in this chapter of *Walid Masoud*. To soar free from all political commitments is to achieve the potential to “change mankind, change the world.” During their adventure, however, the boys are sorely disappointed to discover that God does not in fact send down bread and water to sustain them, despite their fervent prayers. Instead, it is an old man on a donkey who comes to find them

(*ISWM* 98–99). The priests, their parents, and the entire monastery school ultimately chastise the children for their young and naïve act of faith. It is presented in the text of *Walid Masoud* as both an example of Walid’s Christian piety, even as a young boy, and of the holiness that inheres in the lands around Bethlehem and Jerusalem themselves.

This experiment with hermitism is reprised in the novel’s sixth chapter, “Walid Masoud Writes the First Pages of His Autobiography.” There, Walid recalls the notion of rebellion, the desire to “change the world into love,” that so preoccupied him as a child in Jerusalem. As in the story of Jesus, Walid’s desire to change the world is inspired by the poor and humble Jerusalemites around him, people who on feast days would pray, “forget their poverty,” and mill through the busy streets, “laughing, crying, and arguing with each other.” “Whenever I conceived of the earth changing,” the older Walid now writing the autobiographical pages remembers in a famous passage, “I’d feel a pleasant shudder deep down inside me. It wasn’t the way politicians bring about change . . . but that of rebels not yet familiar with theories and revolutionary planning; and the kind of change such rebels aspire to has no connection at all with mere change in governmental systems and class conflict” (*ISWM* 131). Once again, “change” here goes far beyond secular, worldly systems of economic and political governance. It is, rather, what Walid calls “absolute love and freedom,” which compels the rebel to “reject laws and customs that were found to be incompatible with [it].” And once again, the bird returns as a figure for negative liberty. “It was as though I had to be rid of everything, of every relationship, and float like an unknown bird in unknown heavens; and, within the setting of my isolation from everything, I would actually, paradoxically, be in touch with my love of everything” (*ISWM* 131). Walid Masoud here continues and extends the vision of intellectual freedom articulated by Jabra in his anti-*iltizām* essays, but the fictional character adds a christological dimension absent from Jabra’s nonfictional writings. “I soon realized all this would involve suffering . . . The rebel, then, has to be crucified as well, and his victory will be in his crucifixion” (*ISWM* 131).

In common with Jameel Farran, Walid, in these pages from his autobiography, links transformational, civilizational change with the landscape of Palestine itself. If Jesus forever altered the course of history, he seems to assert, it is at least in part because he came from this place, these mountains, these hills. Walid “retained [the] obscure sense that those mountains of ours contained forces that could change the world” (*ISWM* 131). In fact, this character reiterates Jameel Farran’s view that it is precisely *because* Christianity has been uprooted from the geography of Palestine and transplanted to Rome that the religion has lost its “creative, civilizing” power. After studying for some time at the Santa Maria Dolorosa monastery in Milan, Walid realizes that Italy will not allow him to “find the logic that would justify my dream, the dream I hadn’t been able to understand in the cave in Wadi al-Jamal,” site of his childhood hermitage. Where what he had envisioned was “to change the profundities, those things whereby mankind would be created anew,”

he discovers that the institution of the *Roman* Catholic Church has transformed Christianity into “a means of maintaining the world as it is, not changing it” (*ISWM* 139). Amid the marching and military displays of Mussolini’s newly recruited fascist armies, “this Arab boy from Palestine” envisions a different kind of change. “The Messiah didn’t use weapons,” he reminds an Italian friend who has urged him to join the armies if he is so committed to change. “Look what He managed to do with just twelve poverty-stricken disciples . . . In two or three centuries He changed the world. But then the aging Roman Empire came along, and took over Christianity and absorbed it. So change came to a halt” (*WM* 139). The roots of change—and, by extension, of modernity and modernization—are Christian, for Walid Masoud, just as they were for Jameel Farran. But they are also Christian-*Palestinian*, linked to the physical landscape where Jesus was born, lived, and preached among the poor. “Here I was in a strange country,” Walid says of Rome, “where I couldn’t respond to the people and their problems, only to the pictures, statues, and music, because I felt that they all pointed to my country, to Bethlehem, Jerusalem, and Tiberias, to Palestine with its plains and mountains and springs” (*ISWM* 140). According to Walid Masoud himself, Palestinian Christians, by virtue of their very marginality, their so-called “minority” status, possess a powerful potential to change the Arab world, to free it from the customs and history that hold it back, just as Jameel freed Sulafa from her father’s tyrannical cloistering in *Hunters*.

Yet there is a crucial difference between the way this Eastern-Christian liberal individualist ethos is presented in *Hunters* and the way it surfaces in *Walid Masoud*. The former novel is narrated in the first person by the very character who holds these views. Jameel Farran controls the entire narrative, and at its end he emerges as triumphant as any Romantic hero. In *Walid Masoud*, the narrative situation is quite different. The novel is polyphonically narrated by numerous characters and includes testimonies from Walid’s Iraqi friends Jawad Husni, Ibrahim al-Hajj Nawfal, Maryam al-Saffar, Tariq Raouf and his sister Wisal Raouf (the first auditors of his mysterious tape-recorded monologue), as well as others written by Walid himself as draft chapters in his autobiography. Still other chapters are narrated by family members and friends from Palestine, including Issa Nasser, a Palestinian carpenter who knew Walid as a child in Bethlehem, and Marwan Walid, Walid Masoud’s fedayee son.⁴² Taken as a whole, and given the numerous references to folders, papers, correspondence, and journals left in the custody of its sociologist frame narrator Dr. Jawad Husni,⁴³ the novel’s structure suggests that what we have in *Walid Masoud* are not the private meditations of the characters who originally listened to Walid’s tape-recorded final monologue at a garden party held by the architect Amer Abd al-Hamid,⁴⁴ but rather a selection from the various primary sources compiled by Jawad. The book is not only a “search for” Walid Masoud but also a “study about” him (the dual meaning of the word *baḥṭh* in the novel’s title).⁴⁵ What we are told about Walid is thus “really threefold,” as

Vladimir Nabokov reminds us: “shaped by the teller, reshaped by the listener,” and “concealed from both by the dead man of the tale.”⁴⁶

In light of this formal conceit, we must remember that the “pages from Walid’s autobiography” that elaborate the details of his liberal individualist ethos are explicitly *framed* by the novel’s larger narratives of disappearance and searching. They are merely a few sheets among the “seas of paper” that fill Dr. Jawad’s office with “their own form of silent roar” (B 364). “Silent roaring” is a fitting description for the writings of a liberal, humanist intellectual in an era of politically committed aesthetics. Where *Hunters* proclaims, *Walid Masoud* frames. While several characters are ultimately convinced that Walid did indeed run off to join the fedayeen (and many critics have followed them in this conviction),⁴⁷ it is impossible to know what exactly happened to Walid—whether he actually joined the fedayeen, achieved his vision of change, or wrested any reality from his youthful dreams of flying as free as a bird. We cannot know for sure if Jameel’s prophecy will be fulfilled by Walid’s action, if “an entire order of things” does indeed end up “slipping,” or falling, through the diplomatic interventions of the visionary Palestinian (H 230). This uncertainty, I wish to argue, is precisely the point of *Walid Masoud*, and what distinguishes it from Jabra’s earlier fictional and nonfictional works.

If *Walid Masoud* is not the same sort of paean to Palestinian Christian, liberal humanist individualism as *Hunters in a Narrow Street*, what is it? How, if at all, does *Walid Masoud* revise or frame Jabra’s earlier convictions, and what does this framing achieve? I would argue that any analysis focused only on the character of Walid Masoud—particularly as an autobiographical parallel for Jabra himself—misses a crucial aspect of this text. Walid Masoud is not a stable entity; he is not, in de Man’s words, a “proper name.” He is, rather, a series of tropological associations, “an infinitely varied set of propositions.”⁴⁸ He is, thus, a figure for truth itself, in the dialectical movement between material and abstract, empirical observation and scientific concept. Attempting to solve or decipher the mystery of his disappearance deflects attention away from the actual material collected in *Walid Masoud*: a chain of testimonies, papers, poems, paintings, letters, and memoirs that could, theoretically, stretch into infinity. There is, indeed, an element of infinity to *Walid Masoud*, since its frame narrator Dr. Jawad ends the novel precisely where he began, by “promising more” (ISWM 276). “Now I’ll begin my study in earnest,” he writes in the novel’s last paragraph, as though the book we have just read were merely a draft or sketch, one of an infinite number of possible manuscripts.⁴⁹ Infinite, too, are the novel’s reflecting mirrors, since, in writing about Walid Masoud, these characters only ever seem to unearth truths about themselves.⁵⁰ Jawad compares his research with “traveling inside mirrors” (ISWM 277; B 365). When Walid’s onetime rival Kazim Ismail accuses him of being the scion of a “hidden” or “extinct” aristocracy, “a bourgeois individual who uses humanism as a cover to hide his own class’s fears of downfall,” his sister Samira reminds him with a laugh that “if Walid had said the same thing to me about you, I might have believed it” (ISWM 49).

Walid Masoud is a dramatization not so much of the pleasure in solving, then, as the rapture of seeking. Every character who comes into meaningful contact with Walid seems to have a mystical story about the encounter. Ibrahim al-Hajj Nawfal, an art critic and occasional leftist from an upper-class Iraqi family, describes how, at their first meeting, Walid “looked like a hermit; there was something monkish about him” (*ISWM* 236). In an oft-quoted passage, Ibrahim paints Walid as a Christlike redeemer of the Arab world from ignorance and stagnation, “the kind of Palestinian who rejected, pioneered, built, and united (if my nation can ever be united) . . . a scholar, architect, technocrat, rebuilder, and violent goader of the Arab conscience.” The English translation, though excellent, loses the tropological, enumerative grammar of the Arabic original, which strings together a series of morphologically rhymed active participles (*asmā’ af‘āl*, sing. *ism fā’il*) to create Ibrahim’s portrait of Walid:

فوليد انما هو ذلك الفلسطيني الراض، الرائد، البياني، الموحد (إذا كان لأمتي أن تتوحد)، العالم، المهندس، التكنولوجي، المجدد، المحرك للضمير العربي بعنف. (B 322)

Described elsewhere in the novel as an “activist” (in both Arabic, *al-rajul al-fā’il*, and transliterated English, *al-aktivist*) (*ISWM* 267; *B* 349), here Walid literally becomes a series of active participles: of first-form verbs (*al-rāfiḍ*, *al-rā’id*, *al-bānī*), followed by second-form verbs in the same structure (*al-muwahhid*, *al-mujaddid*, *al-muḥarrrik*). His most important task, we are told, is “to foster the new spirit based on knowledge, freedom, love, and a revolt against looking back—all this as a means of achieving the complete Arab revolution.” In Ibrahim’s eyes, Walid becomes a “self-sacrificing” prophet, a saint (*ISWM* 244). Another character observes that whenever Ibrahim visited Walid’s house, “he looked as though he’d been on a pilgrimage to a saint’s shrine (*ziyārat waliyy*) or met some legendary hero” (*ISWM* 49; *B* 68–69). The portrait Ibrahim paints, in other words, is colored by his own romantic notions about exilic Palestinians; it is not a faithful representation but a mediated perception.

Maryam al-Saffar, meanwhile—one of Walid’s many lovers—also describes her contact with Walid as a kind of mystical experience.⁵¹ The chapter she narrates focuses on a particularly climactic moment during their first romantic encounter at Walid’s house in the mountains outside Beirut. After a night of lovemaking, Maryam suddenly jumps up and runs from the bedroom into the exterior garden. Barefoot and naked, she circles the trunks of trees, cuts her feet on sharp stones, and eventually grabs a heavy rock, which she lugs inside the house and presents to Walid. “My pagan body,” she recalls, “unsheathed before the wildness of the star-studded night, pierced all things, and all things in turn pierced it. What was this passion? Annihilation? Or being, an utterly violent being?” (*B* 227; *ISWM* 170). Maryam’s scene in the highly symbolic “garden” leads to a mystical, “pagan” loss of the self—indeed, the self’s “annihilation” (*talāshin*, “becoming nothing”)—as it merges with the “things” around it in a chiasmus whose form intertwines with

its meaning (“pierced all things, all things in turn pierced it”; *yanfudh fī al-ashyāʾ kullahā, wa-tanfudh al-ashyāʾ kullahā fīh*). The addition of the “stone” or “rock” also symbolically ties this particular mystical experience to Jerusalem, which Jabra describes elsewhere in his oeuvre as a “city of rock” and site of the Dome of the Rock.⁵² Loving Walid brings Maryam—significantly named for the Virgin Mary—into ever-closer contact not only with the concrete, tangible, rocky territory of Jerusalem but also with a quasi-mystical experience of the world and all its inanimate “things.” The young Wisal Raouf, another of Walid’s lovers, describes a similar ego death and infinity in her romantic encounters with Walid: “I used to be aware of myself as a separate entity, as something affected by forces external to it with which it wasn’t merged in any way. Yet, with Walid came the peculiar discovery that I was totally merged, transforming, meshing, and emerging as a completely different person from before . . . Time and again, the illusion came to me that Walid was actually me” (*ISWM* 199).

Nowhere is the absent Walid’s mystical and supernatural effect on others clearer, however, than in the chapters narrated by Jawad Husni. Our frame narrator begins his “study” by relying on his training as a sociologist, collecting evidence in the form of oral testimonies, letters, and documents, “trying to take all the elements back to square one, to compare part with part, to establish where the gaps are, to look for the lost pieces to fill them” (*B* 364–65; *ISWM* 277). Yet he soon realizes that the methodological and rhetorical constraints imposed by his discipline are far from adequate to his purpose. “What am I supposed to write?” he exclaims at one point. “Don’t you know that the sociological point of view rots the imagination at the root? For ten years they train you to view man as a societal phenomenon, and then there you are at the end of it all, totally incapable of looking at him as a discrete, unique person, whose strength of character lies in his mind, in the cells of his brain” (*B* 82; *ISWM* 61). The visionary individual defies the logic of quantitative, sociological, historical analysis. In the end, even as Jawad resolves to finally write his “study,” he also questions whether he’ll ever reach a conclusion. “Can there ever be a definitive conclusion about any event in life, let alone a man’s life as a whole?” (*ISWM* 288; *B* 378). As with any mystical quest for truth and unity, “definitive conclusions” are beside the point. Working on his book-length study of Walid thus becomes more than merely an intellectual, professional, or academic pursuit for Jawad; it is an almost religious passion, one that requires monastic solitude and, every so often, rewards him with moments of ecstasy and rapture:

When I enter my office alone, I shut the door and exclude my family, my friends, and people in general. The universe is united in a small room, as densely packed as a forest, surging in waves like the sea. I’m at one here too; I ignite, I’m fired, I circle in rotating heavens like a piece of the sun that’s broken off. I feel my way through an unknown universe at once horrifying and wonderful. Yet, the only way I can express any of all this is through a feeble phrase here and an even more feeble phrase there . . . When were words bits of chaff, of flame, of rapture, like those that would come

to me during the trances that thrust me around and dashed me in pieces just so as to reassemble me, then smashed me in pieces once more, so as to reassemble me once more, and so on ad infinitum? (B 364–65; ISWM 277)

Jawad finds a simultaneous “oneness” and “dashing-to-pieces” in his study, a mystical destruction of the self not in the sublimity of nature but in reading and solitary study. Yet the natural world is not entirely absent from this scene. Jabra’s poetic use of the cognate object (*mafa’ūl muṭlaq*) invites the natural elements of “sea” and “forest” into even closer contact with Jawad than the English similes in the above passage let on: Yatawaḥḥad al-kawn fī ghurfah ṣaghīrah, muktazzah iktizāz al-ghābah, mā’ijah mawjat al-baḥr—literally, “Existence is at one in this room packed with the packedness of a forest, waving with the waviness of the sea.” As a productive and sought-after destruction of the self combines with a feeling of oneness with the universe, Jawad’s contemplation of Walid’s life and work transforms him from a self-serious sociologist to a rapturous quasi-mystic. Walid lives here in the “ad infinitum,” in the “infinite chain of topological transformations” before it has frozen into an anthropomorphism, a proper name.⁵³

Reading *Walid Masoud* as a metaphysical detective novel, a “missing persons” narrative, reveals its exceptional status among Jabra’s extensive oeuvre. The novel does not dramatize the triumph of exilic liberal humanism, as *Hunters* once did, so much as it stages that ethos’s ties to the pursuits of Christian mystics and holds it just outside the grasp of characters and readers alike. At a historical moment in which Arab intellectuals and cultural producers were looking for definitive answers (to the mystery of the Arab forces’ defeat in the June War, among other things), *Walid Masoud* reenchants the search with the otherworldliness of dreams, memories, and mystical annihilation/permanence (*fanā’/baqā’*). Yet the novel is also conscious of its status as a closed circle, a vicious cycle, an inescapable Möbius strip. Ibrahim al-Hajj Nawfal nicely captures this problem in the chapter he narrates:

I noticed something about Walid. Theoretically, his mind was wide open, and he refused to adhere to any one intellectual school (such as Marxism) that would assist him by channeling his energies in increasingly integrative directions. Instead, he imposed on his thinking a circular motion, which may have taken him up in a spiral toward some noble goal, but which also failed to provide him with a complete springboard for all his powers. He seemed very much like a bird with huge wings, flying around in a big hall and eventually bumping against the ceiling unable to break through to the sky beyond. (ISWM 237)

Atomization and isolation are the flipside of the liberal-humanist coin. Ibrahim tempers and reinterprets the figurative significance of the bird that elsewhere in Jabra’s oeuvre symbolizes aesthetic autonomy and negative liberty. The bird does not transcend political and religious commitments but merely collides with itself in vicious circles. The visionary individual striving to “change mankind,

change the world” is also alone in his tree. This critique of atomized subjectivity also surfaces in a passing description of the passengers from *The Ship*: “Transistor radios in every hand blared out all kinds of music—each one a tiny world of its own, establishing its individuality and its incompatibility with everything else.”⁵⁴ So too are Jawad, Maryam, and Walid tiny worlds of their own, incompatible with everything else. The mystical pursuit is not a line but a circle; the labyrinth of the visionary Arab modernizer has no exit.

FROM PALACE WALK TO SUFI NOIR:
MAHFOUZ’S MISSING PERSONS

In contrast with the differences between *Hunters* and *Walid Masoud*, which mark a shift in Jabra’s politics of literary form, I argue that all of Mahfouz’s works, from the *Trilogy* through the philosophical quest novellas and stories of the 1960s, give form to the skepticism and loss entailed in the departure from faith and the subsequent search for nondivine truth. While the later novels may break with the realist style of the *Trilogy*, the struggle and search for truth in the absence of faith, amid a slew of conflicting philosophies and seemingly random occurrences, remains the same across the middle part of Mahfouz’s oeuvre. This section will look first at Mahfouz’s more explicit “missing persons” narratives from the 1960s—specifically, the short stories “Culprit Unknown” (*Ḍidd Majhūl*) and “Zaabalawi” (*Za ‘balāwī*) from the 1962 collection *God’s World* (*Dunyā Allāh*) and the 1964 novel *al-Ṭarīq* (*The Way*)⁵⁵—then illustrate how these works serve as continuations of, rather than divergences from, the mystical, asymptotic truth seeking dramatized specifically in the second volume of the *Trilogy*, *Palace of Desire* (*Qaṣr al-Shawq*).

Of all Mahfouz’s writings, the short story “Culprit Unknown” most closely follows the conventions of a detective story. Narrated in the third person limited, it begins with a detective, Muhsin ‘Abd al-Bari, facing down both a gruesome murder and a puzzling crime scene. The body of a retired teacher, Hasan Wahbi, has been found brutally strangled in his bed overnight, in the well-to-do neighborhood of Abbasiya. Yet nothing else is out of place: no valuables missing, no broken windows or forced locks, no signs of struggle. Detective Muhsin tries his best to follow the empirical principles of his profession: “This had definitely been a crime, without a doubt,” he thinks to himself, “and every crime has a criminal” (an affirmation of cause and effect reminiscent of Tawfiq al-Hakim’s prosecutor at his first autopsy: “Here was a murdered man—surely there must be a bullet”).⁵⁶ Detective Muhsin reminds himself of the steps usually followed in a police investigation: identify the motive, interview potential suspects and witnesses, and develop some conjectures, “trying to resist his own subjective reactions as much as possible” (*MK* 3:142). Even after a thorough forensic investigation and an exhaustive series of interviews and interrogations, however, he comes no closer to solving the mystery. “The man’s murder was a puzzle that boggled the mind” (*MK* 3:144).

Feeling defeated “in a way he never had before,” he tries to distract himself by reading. “He loved reading Sufi poetry,” we are told, “especially the work of Sa‘di, Ibn al-Farid, and Ibn al-‘Arabi,” a pastime so rare among police officers that he “tended to hide it even from his best friends.” When he is eventually forced to label Hasan Wahbi’s murder file “case closed, culprit unknown” (*didd majhūl*), his readings in Sufi texts give him a new perspective on this formulaic legal phrase. “Unknown!” he said to himself. . . . “This really is the great Unknown!” (MK 3:144). In “Culprit Unknown,” therefore, echoes of the infinite and divine continue to resonate in Arabic words like “unknown” (*majhūl*) that have lately been used for more mundane juridical purposes. It is only because he reads Sufi poetry that Detective Muhsin picks up on this multivalence, “the language of God in the world of men . . . so powerfully in excess of material reality that it overwhelms the agreed-upon relationship of word and object.”⁵⁷ This same multivalent “unknown” recurs later in the story, when another body is found strangled in bed, with no signs of struggle, no evidence, and no discernible motive for the crime. Detective Muhsin finds himself “facing down the same murderous puzzle that had defeated him only a month earlier . . . staring straight into the unknown, with its silence, strangeness, mystery, cruelty, absurdity, and bitter mockery” (MK 3:144).

Like descriptors of the “unknown,” bodies also accumulate as the story continues, but there is no discernible connection between the victims, no specter of a motive, and no progress toward knowledge on the part of Detective Muhsin. Abbasiya is gripped by terror, perplexed by “the nature of this danger that advanced indiscriminately and took people by surprise, without distinguishing between old and young, rich and poor, male and female, healthy and sick, or between a house, a tram, and the street” (MK 3:147). It slowly becomes apparent that the criminal is death itself—that is, the mystery, unpredictability, and inevitability of death in life. True to the conventions of the metaphysical detective story, the roles of killer, victim, and detective start to blur together for Detective Muhsin ‘Abd al-Bari. “I’m the real victim of all these crimes!” he thinks to himself at one point; then, in the very next paragraph, he says, “The only suspect in this case is me!” (MK 3:147). Even his pregnant wife’s kind words fail to comfort him; he begs her to leave the neighborhood, fearing for her safety and peace of mind. Facing down his despair, Detective Muhsin is once again

seized by a desire to flee into the world of his Sufi poetry, where there was quiet and eternal truth, where all lights dissolve into the higher oneness of being [*wahdat al-wujūd*], where there was comfort for the troubles, failures, and futility of life. Isn’t it amazing that both a worshipper of Truth and a ferocious criminal could belong to the same life? We die because we waste our life in petty concerns. There is no life, no deliverance for us, unless we aim for Truth [*al-haqq*] and nothing else. (MK 3:147)

Sent on a worldly quest for the “truth” (*haqīqah*) behind a series of murders, armed with nothing but the empirical, procedural tools of police “investigation” (*tahqīq*,

“truth-establishment”), and colliding endlessly with the failure and inefficacy of these tools, Detective Muhsin seeks comfort in a different form of truth—eternal Truth, to be found in the “oneness of existence” (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), a phrase specifically associated with the writings of Ibn al-‘Arabi,⁵⁸ whom Mahfouz’s narrator mentions explicitly as one of the protagonist’s favorite writers. For Ibn al-‘Arabi, the term *wujūd* captures both the essence and the existence of God; it is “a philosophical term equivalent to the name ‘Allah.’”⁵⁹ Its presence in this passage thereby makes it difficult to translate. *Wujūd* does mean “existence,” and it has been used in the Arabic philosophical tradition in contrast with “essence” (*shay’iyyah* or “thingness,” for Ibn Sina) and with the “nonexistent” and the “possible” (*al-ma’ dūm* and *al-mumkināt*, for the Mu‘tazili school).⁶⁰ But *wujūd* is also the nominal form of the verb *wajada*, “to find,” so that *wujūd* also means “finding,” and something that is *mawjūd* is “found”—as one might “find” a killer. Ibn al-‘Arabi’s ultimate goal was to illustrate the paradoxical idea that all things are one with God, but that God transcends all things. On the one hand, created things are “radically dependent, mere manifestations of God’s true being”; thus God is identified with existence itself.⁶¹ On the other hand, God is also associated with nonexistence, since the things God has not yet created are “at first contained within Him as non-existent and then brought forth” through *nafas al-Raḥmān*, “the breath of the Merciful,” a phrase from the hadith implying that “creatures are released or breathed forth after being pent up or constrained, held back from existing.”⁶²

The presence of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s metaphysics makes “Culprit Unknown” highly dialectical: existence is always coupled with nonexistence, and death with life. Mahfouz literalizes the paradoxes of this metaphysics with a plot twist: amidst all the murder around him, Detective Muhsin’s wife gives birth at a nearby hospital. After returning to the world of his investigation, the detective feels “something like vertigo,” as the Sufi lexicon invades his worldly murder investigation yet again:

Life extinguished by an unknown noose, becoming nothing. But it was something, without a doubt, something precious. Love, poetry, and a newborn child. Hopes whose beauty knows no bounds. Existence in life . . . just existence in life [*al-wujūd fi al-ḥayāt*]. Is there a wrong that needs righting? When would it be righted? The vertigo intensified, as when waking suddenly after a deep sleep. (MK 3:147–48)

Detective Muhsin ‘Abd al-Bari and all the residents of Abbasiya are plagued by the mystery of inexplicable death, which claims lives without any humanly discernible logic, and which cannot be arrested or prosecuted. Yet Detective Muhsin himself witnesses the very process of creation described by Ibn al-‘Arabi: his newborn child goes from “non-existence” to “existence,” inhaling the “breath of the All-Merciful” even as the rest of his life is consumed with anonymous victims making the opposite, inexplicable journey into death. Retranslating Mahfouz’s passage with this theological lexicon in mind, we might instead write, instead of “existence in life,” “God in life . . . nothing more than God in life,” the every-

day miracles and terrors of life and death. Far from seeking justice for a series of gruesome murders, Detective Muhsin is coming to terms with the mysteries and paradoxes of God's simultaneous existence and non-existence in the world we know as human beings. And far from writing a thrilling detective story, Mahfouz is in fact writing a philosophical, metaphysical parable.

If "Culprit Unknown" is a metaphysical parable parading as a detective story, "Zaabalawi," from the same volume, is just the opposite: a tale of questing explicitly saturated with the lexicon and themes of Sufism yet equally critical of the police, specifically of the spiritual "sickness" caused by the policing of modern subjectivities and identities. Plagued by what he calls "that sickness for which no one has a remedy," a sickness which causes "all paths to close before me" and "despair to surround me," an unnamed first-person narrator sets out to find Shaykh Zaabalawi, a man he heard about in a popular song from his childhood and remembers his father describing as a "true friend of God" (*MK* 3:155)—that is, "a holy person, often a paragon of virtue [or] miracle worker memorialized in hagiography and shrine visitation."⁶³ Like a good gumshoe, the narrator embarks on a series of visits that lead him from the palaces of Cairo's Garden City to the crumbling façades of Umm al-Ghulam and al-Tambakshiyah, alleyways and neighborhoods around Islamic Cairo. Throughout this journey, the city of Cairo itself becomes reanimated and reenchanting, just as, for the sometime detective fiction writer G. K. Chesterton, the detective's urban pursuit once transformed "every twist of the road" into "a hieroglyph" or "a finger pointing to . . . the meaning of the mystery."⁶⁴

Beginning with Shaykh Qamar, a judge in the religious courts who now has an office in the well-to-do neighborhood of Garden City (popular with foreigners since it was built—and named—by the British), the narrator of "Zaabalawi" then consults a "neighborhood shaykh" in Islamic Cairo, who encourages him to "seek help from his rational mind" and proceeds to draw out a detailed map of the neighborhood around al-Husayn Square. The shaykh stresses the importance of looking carefully in "cafés, recitation circles, mosques, prayer rooms, and around al-Husayn's tomb [al-Bāb al-Akhḍar]," since Zaabalawi "could be mixed in among the beggars in these places, and you'd never recognize him" (*MK* 3:156). However, it is only when he leaves his "rational mind" (*al-ʿaql*) behind and plunges into the world of art and artists that the narrator begins to draw closer to Zaabalawi. A calligrapher named Hassanein describes the shaykh as a "man of mystery" whose presence permeates everything he has ever drawn (*MK* 3:157), while an oud player named Shaykh Gad fondly remembers Zaabalawi inspiring one of his most famous melodies with a line of poetry by famed Egyptian Sufi poet of love and wine, Ibn al-Farid (*MK* 3:158). The quest reaches its climax in the narrator's encounter with Hagg Wanas al-Damanhuri, "a man of private means," who he is told to look for at a local bar. After finding him, the narrator realizes he is "in the presence of a hardened drinker" (*MK* 3:158); in fact, the Hagg refuses to discuss Zaabalawi unless the narrator shares a bottle of wine with him. (That mysticism transcends

sect or creed for Mahfouz is evident from this character's name, which implies unity between the Muslim honorific "Hajj," the Coptic Christian saint's name Wanas, and the land of the Nile delta itself—the regional capital Damanhur.) The narrator drinks with the Hagg to the point of passing out, falls into a dream, then awakens surprised to find that his hair is wet. "Did someone see me in this state?" he asks Hagg Wanas in embarrassment, using the Sufi term *ḥāl* for "state" or "condition."⁶⁵ "Don't worry," the Hagg assures him. "The man who saw you is a good one. Haven't you ever heard of Shaykh Zaabalawi?" (*MK* 3:158–59). Only on losing his conscious mind does the narrator approach—without ever attaining—his cure.

"Zaabalawi" has been widely described as a kind of Sufi quest narrative, and it is not difficult to see the narrator's "visits" to various secular, religious, and artistic authorities as a series of stations or stops (*mawāqif*, sing. *mawqif*), or alternately "states" (*aḥwāl*, sing. *ḥāl*) on the path toward annihilation and enlightenment in divine permanence.⁶⁶ Less often discussed, however, are the story's numerous references to Zaabalawi's fraught relationship with the police. Several characters accuse Zaabalawi of "charlatanism" (*al-dajal*) and advise the narrator to seek his cure with a (real) "doctor" (Mahfouz uses the Arabized English word *duktūr*) (*MK* 3:156). The musician Shaykh Gad also describes how Zaabalawi used to be easier to find, since he "lived in a place that people knew" and occupied a social position "akin to that of political rulers." Now, by contrast, "the world has changed," and Zaabalawi is instead "chased down by the police on accusations of charlatan-ism" (*MK* 3:157–58). Once considered holy, Zaabalawi is now not only mad but also criminal—and criminally elusive—just as in "Culprit Unknown," the police hunting for the serial murderer concentrated their suspicions on "outcasts, deviants, and madmen, as is the fashion these days" (*MK* 3:146).

The rather lengthy description of the narrator's final dream in "Zaabalawi" has also, surprisingly, remained off the radars of Mahfouz's critics; yet the sudden appearance of the "police" at its end merits further attention (*MK* 3:159). After drinking three glasses of wine, the narrator describes losing first his "will," then his "memory," and then any sense of the "future." He falls out of worldly time and ultimately loses his sense of identity and self. Yet, as he awakens, the self comes barging back in, accompanied by none other than the police:

There was an extraordinary sense of harmony between me and my inner self, and between the two of us and the world, everything being in its rightful place, without any conflict, irregularity, or discord. In the whole world there was no reason for speech or movement, for the universe moved in a rapture of ecstasy. This lasted but a short while. Then I opened my eyes, and consciousness struck me like a policeman's fist. (*MK* 3:159)

What the dream seems to have facilitated for the narrator is a kind of mystical ego death. He has lost his sense of separation, as a self, from the world around him. "Harmony" comes not only from being at peace with one's own "self" or "soul"

(*nafs*) but also with “the world”—that is, the “lowly, mortal” world, *al-dunyā*, as opposed to the infinite “hereafter,” *al-ākhirah*. There is no need for movement or speech because it is not humans who move the world of “being”; rather, it is “a rapture of ecstasy” that does so. And yet, when the narrator of “Zaabalawi” leaves the world of the dream and regains consciousness, it is the “police” who arrive as a simile, and it is the “policeman’s fist” that violently puts him back in his place as a subject. Whereas the protagonist of “Culprit Unknown” sought to “find” (*wajada*) a mysterious serial killer, and this seeking expanded his sense of what it means to be “found” (*mawjūd*) and what exactly constitutes “presence” or “existence” (*wujūd*) in a world where death and life not only coexist, but coconstitute one another, the narrator of “Zaabalawi” seeks to *lose* himself through healing contact with a “friend of God,” a figure whose holiness and grasp on truth are related to his changingness, his defiance of the fixed addresses and identities mandated by modernity (and maintained by the “policeman’s fist”). Unlike Zaabalawi, however, the narrator escapes the prying eyes of the state only fleetingly, in a *hāl* brought on by the drunken loss of the self but ended by the “policeman’s fist.” The story ends where it began: with the narrator’s conviction that “yes, I must find Zaabalawi” (*MK* 3:160). Neither the reader nor the narrator ever truly “find” Zaabalawi in this story; he is not a stable entity, not a “single assertion or essence,” but a figure for truth as trope, “an infinite chain of topological transformations and propositions” that no closed text, no short story, can locate, contain, or define.

Published in 1964, two years after the collection which included “Culprit Unknown” and “Zaabalawi,” *al-Tariq* reads like an extension of these short stories, as it follows yet another anguished male protagonist, Sabir, on an ultimately failed search for his father, a man named Sayyid Sayyid al-Rahimi.⁶⁷ Mahfouz overtly thematizes the semantic instability of the word *baḥth* itself between the novel’s beginning and its end. In the first chapter, just before she sends Sabir off to search for his father, his mother—an Alexandrian madam named Basima ‘Umran—recalls long periods of contemplation in prison during which she realized that it was not her profession but her approach to mothering Sabir that caused their joint ruin. She “loved her son with all her strength” and used her ill-gotten money to buy him a lavish home, sheltering him from the seedy underworld of her work. But what she once saw as protection she now realizes was mere coddling, preventing Sabir from carving his own path—*tariq*—through life. “I convinced myself that it’s not right for me to insist on keeping you, protecting you, because it’s not in your best interests . . . The government took you away from me the day they confiscated my money; I no longer have the right to possess you either” (*T* 11). In trying to shelter Sabir from what she considered an immoral and sinful life, Basimah has, ironically, only further mired him in that life, since she prevented him from acknowledging and working through its realities, leaving him subject to the rumors and derisions of others, which he subsequently internalized

as the truth about himself. Basimah sends her son to “search” for his father in this context:

“Don’t judge me. Instead, get ready to search [*li-l-baḥth*] for him . . .”

“To search?!”

“Yes, I am talking about a man to whom I was a wife thirty years ago, but now I no longer know anything about him . . .”

“Mother, what is the meaning of all this?”

“The meaning is that I’m directing you toward the only way out of your dilemma.”

“Maybe he’s dead.”

“And maybe he’s alive.”

“Should I waste my life searching for something before knowing for sure that it exists [*wujūdh*]?”

“But you won’t know for sure that it exists unless you search.” (*T* 12)

As in “Zaabalawi,” Basimah prescribes “searching” or “seeking” (*al-baḥth*) as the cure for Sabir’s spiritual illness, his obsession with the lowliness from which his mother tried and failed to protect him. For Sabir, “seeking” is a waste of time unless it leads to “finding”—*wujūd*—which, as we learned from “Culprit Unknown,” is also, for Ibn al-‘Arabi, “a philosophical term equivalent to the name ‘Allah.’”⁶⁸ For Basimah, however, the value of the search is not in the “finding” (*wujūd*) or the “God” with which it presumably ends but in the potential for cultivating Sabir’s independence. “Under his protection,” she promises him, “you’ll find respect and dignity, and he will liberate you from the shame of relying on any other creature to set up a life of hustling and crime for you. In the end, you’ll attain peace of mind” (*T* 16). These three terms—respect, dignity, and peace of mind—become the bywords of Sabir’s journey throughout the rest of the novel.

In a way, Basimah was right: “searching” for his father quite literally leads Sabir to “peace of mind”—specifically, to Ilham, the young woman at *The Sphinx* newspaper who helps him place a wanted ad in search of al-Rahimi. Only she—this “inspiration,” as her name implies—has the power to dislodge his otherwise “fixed ideas about the opposite sex,” a group he views, thanks to his experience in the Alexandrian underworld, as “a series of savage, seductive creatures seeking unprincipled passion” (*T* 43). Even though this was very much his habit with the girls in Alexandria, Sabir doesn’t want to undress Ilham in his mind. “Stripping her naked was not wise,” the narrator tells us in free indirect discourse,

because her magic did not reside in any particular location; it radiated like moonlight, and it had an unknown dimension on which his hopes hung as on the abode of his father. He would not realize his happiness with her as he had with the others, that is, through acrobatics and rapacious words, scandalous acts and barbarous, insolent playfulness. She was something rare. And in just a few hours, she had revealed another nature within him, given things a new flavor [*dhawq*] he had never tasted before. (*T* 43–44)

The “unknown” from “Culprit Unknown” and *Palace Walk* resurfaces here—in the “unknown dimension” (*jānib majhūl*) of Ilham’s “magic”—as does a connection between this woman and Sayyid Sayyid al-Rahimi. Both promise Sabir an exit from the prison of the identity he has built for himself, assuming that, because his mother was a prostitute, he too is destined for a life of crime and hustling. Mahfouz’s Arabic is again alive with Islamic polysemy too: “tasting” (*al-dhawq*) is another word from the Sufi lexicon, “one of several terms often employed as a virtual synonym for unveiling [*al-tajallī*]” in Ibn al-‘Arabi,⁶⁹ and often theorized as a prelude to or “foretaste” of *wajd*, the overwhelming experience of divine presence.⁷⁰ It is not so much a life *with* Ilham as one modeled after her example that offers Sabir the promise of “respect, dignity, and peace of mind” he associates only with Sayyid Sayyid al-Rahimi. “She is like his father in the way she sees him, and in being a dream difficult to realize. As for Karimah,” the young wife of the octogenarian ‘Amm Khalil, who owns the Cairo hotel where Sabir stays, “she was a living extension of his mother in the pleasures and crimes she inspired” (*T* 90). He says to Ilham what he cannot say to himself: “It seems to me that I didn’t come to Cairo to look for Sayyid Sayyid al-Rahimi, but rather to find you. Sometimes we run toward a specific destination, then on the way [*fi al-ṭariq*] we stumble on something we soon come to believe is the true destination” (*T* 86).

Still, although he implicitly acknowledges both Ilham’s “rarity” and the “other nature” she has “revealed” in him (*kashafat*, a synonym for *tajallī* in Ibn al-‘Arabi’s work), and although he recognizes her, early on, as the “true destination” of the baḥth on which his mother sent him, Sabir cannot accept the goodness of this alternate path, because it contradicts with the image he has built of himself. The depraved identity he has created becomes a prison for his otherwise infinite soul:

Just as he hid his polluted nature under a façade of strength, so too he hid it by violating good morals to make his past the rule, rather than the shame-filled exception of his life. For this reason, Ilham, even if she had risen like a fire in his life, had also stirred up his fears and his convictions, shaking the foundations of the world he had built for himself and in which he felt secure. In truth, he could only forget his torment in Karimah’s fire, kindled in the darkness after midnight. (*T* 74)

Sabir clings to his passionate relationship with Karimah and agrees to be the protagonist in her murder plot because it confirms his “fixed ideas” about himself: that he is fit for nothing but a life of crime, that he is from slime and to slime he must return. If Ilham is a “clear sky promising safety,” Karimah is “a heavily clouded sky, warning with its thunder, lighting, and rain, but also the sky of beloved Alexandria” (*T* 85), the familiar rather than the great unknown. Like Sabir, Karimah has “wallowed in the mud for a long time, and they understand each other even when they are far apart” (*T* 88). He rejects the path he has found in Ilham—precisely the “peace of mind” his mother envisioned for him—to fulfill his own prophecy about himself.

Sabir's plot-level "search" for his father, then, represents the first meaning of *baḥṭh* that Mahfouz mobilizes in *al-Ṭarīq*. But in the novel's last chapter, the author also activates another resonance of this word when Sabir, who has spent the entire book engaged in one kind of search, becomes the object of another: the "investigative report" (*baḥṭh*) one magazine conducts with "a group of distinguished thinkers" regarding his case (*T* 166). In this report,

a university professor discussed the unequal marriage between 'Amm Khalil and Karimah, considering it the real root of the crime. A journalist said that poverty was the culprit, since it had tempted Karimah's first husband to sell her to her second; he described Karimah as a martyr of class warfare and its distinctive characteristics. A social services professor criticized Sabir's upbringing in the embrace of a madam and the traces this past must have left in his psyche. A psychology professor claimed Sabir was afflicted by a father-love complex and that his criminal drive could be explained in two important ways: first, he found in Karimah a substitute for his mother, so he fell in love with her, and second, his sociopathy drove him toward vengeance, so he murdered the hotel owner as a symbol of power and attempted to confiscate his money just as the government had confiscated his mother's. A shaykh and man of religion said that the question was, at its core, one of lost faith. If Sabir had spent one tenth of the time he spent searching for his father searching for God instead, God would have destined him for all he aspired to attain from his father, both in this world and in the hereafter.

Sabir read all these comments in fatigue and confusion, then dismissed them with a shrug of his shoulders. "But nobody has found out whether Karimah was telling the truth or lying," he said to himself, "or whether al-Rahimi exists, or not." (*T* 167–68)

Mahfouz here offers us something other than a play on worldly and metaphysical seeking like those we encountered in "Culprit Unknown" and "Zaabalawi": this second *baḥṭh* is a commentary on reading and literary analysis themselves. He knows, even as he writes, that his stylistic pivot from epic realism to metaphysical allegory will occasion a series of academic experts to weigh in with their chosen metanarratives. University professors, journalists, Marxists, psychologists, and men of religion all come under fire in this passage, not so much for the falsity of their methodologies as for the conviction with which they practice them, the confidence with which they turn the explanation of truth into a profession. In the wake of its publication, many literary critics offered up precisely the readings of *al-Ṭarīq* that Mahfouz parodies here. Rasheed El-Enany assumed the position of the "shaykh and man of religion," arguing that "Sabir's search for his father on the realistic level is nothing short of mankind's search for metaphysical truth (or the Father who is in Heaven) on the symbolic level," and thus the reader is tasked with moving, unidirectionally, from "the characters and events grounded in reality" to "the higher level of meaning."⁷¹ Mahmud al-Rabi'i, meanwhile, posed as the "psychology professor" when he underscored the

parallels between *al-Tarīq* and *Oedipus Rex*.⁷² But in performing their knowledge and expertise, both Mahfouz's fictional experts and his real-life critics ironically dodge the actual questions at the heart of Sabir's case, which are both ontological and epistemological. Was Karimah lying, or not? And, more importantly, "does al-Rahimi exist or not?" Or, alternatively, "had anyone ever found al-Rahimi, or not" (in *kāna al-Raḥīmī mawjūdān am lā*)? Here, again, is Ibn 'Arabi's word for "existent things," *mawjūd*, entities "which exist on any level or in any world which is envisaged."⁷³ In seeking to "explain" the mystery of Sabir's behavior, in other words, these "men of thought" fail to find the truth.

Instead of pathologizing Sabir or identifying al-Rahimi with one or another transcendent meaning, we might turn instead to the more literal meanings of the text: the descriptions Mahfouz *does* provide of this mysterious figure. In this same final chapter, we are told that Ilham hires a lawyer named Muhammad al-Tantawi to defend Sabir in court. On their second meeting in prison, al-Tantawi brings Sabir news of al-Rahimi. It comes secondhand—from a curious figure whom the lawyer introduces as his neighbor in Heliopolis. "Have you ever heard of the journalist who used to sign his daily column 'the Age-Crossing Journalist'?" he asks Sabir, then answers his own question: "Of course not, he stopped working twenty years ago . . . He used to be my teacher in law school, and he's one of the most learned people I know when it comes to the sharia" (*T* 172). It turns out that this mysterious, blind journalist—this expert in both secular and Islamic law—knows al-Rahimi, or at least "knows" him in the way the calligrapher Hassanein and the musician Shaykh Jad knew Zaabalawi. The journalist tells al-Tantawi, and then al-Tantawi tells Sabir, that al-Rahimi "had only one pastime in this world: love" (*T* 173). When Sabir asks al-Tantawi if his journalist friend ever heard al-Rahimi speaking about his marriage to Basimah 'Umran and how she subsequently left him, al-Tantawi replies: "In the life of a man like al-Rahimi, people are as numerous as days; you can never know who was the one leaving, and who was the one left behind" (*T* 173). The journalist (his name, we've now learned, is Burhan, or "proof" in Arabic) has told al-Tantawi that al-Rahimi married nearly all his companions, that he "practiced love in all its forms, from the sexual to the platonic (*al-jinsi wa-l-'udhrī*), with every kind of woman, old or young, married, widowed, or divorced, poor or rich . . . he even made love to servants, garbage collectors, and beggars!" (*T* 173–74). Even more significantly, al-Rahimi endlessly travels "from town to town and continent to continent," never remaining in a single place for more than a few days (*T* 174). Al-Rahimi's caution even drives him "to adopt a number of different names and identities" in the course of his travels, to avoid being tracked down by any of his jilted lovers or, more importantly, by "the laws of the state" (*T* 174–75).⁷⁴ When Sabir asks about al-Rahimi's family, al-Tantawi tells him the man has "no family in Egypt" and that his father was "an emigrant from India" who made his millions "selling spiritual beverages" (*T* 175). The last al-Tantawi has heard, al-Rahimi was "on his way to India, and he gave my friend the book *How to Keep Your Youth for a Hundred Years* and an elegant case of aged wine" (*T* 178).

In conversation, al-Rahimi apparently told Burhan, “I roam from continent to continent as your fingers roam across your moustache . . . You haven’t lived until you’ve circled the world practicing love.” He then drank to the point of intoxication and “sang a love song he had learned from a tribe in the Congo” (*T* 178–79).

In these passages describing al-Rahimi, Mahfouz’s Arabic is once again alive and fluid with Islamic polysemy. Although *mukhaḍram*—the adjective with which al-Tantawi’s journalist friend signed his anonymous articles—can simply mean “old” or “aged” in Arabic, it more commonly refers to a person who lived both before and after the advent of Islam, in other words, in both the pagan and the early Islamic eras (hence my imperfect rendering, “age-crossing,” in “the Age-Crossing Journalist”). That al-Rahimi is both *mukhaḍram* and has familial ties to India tells us he is perhaps not necessarily the embodiment of the monotheistic God, but a figure for *darshan*, a word from the Sanskrit *drish*, “to see,” meaning “the eye-to-eye contact between an iconic divinity or divine personage and the devotee or worshipper” that “can by itself confer grace upon a seeker and result in a spiritual benefit.”⁷⁵ Rabindra Ray calls *darshan* “a point of departure, not a form of encyclopedic ultimate knowledge”; its practice names “a process that continually amends its viewpoint in order to illuminate the path of action”⁷⁶—an apt description for the stubborn, futile search for “respect, dignity, and peace” dramatized in *The Search*. Likewise, when al-Tantawi claims, of al-Rahimi’s many love affairs, that “it is impossible to know who was the one leaving, and who was the one left behind,” the Arabic—man al-hājir wa man al-mahjūr—plays on subject-object permutations of the same root, *h-j-r*, “to leave,” implying that it is impossible to know whether al-Rahimi is the subject or the object of any action, impossible to fix him into “a proper name.”⁷⁷ *H-j-r* is also the verb from which *hijrah*, the Prophet Muhammad’s journey from Mecca to Medina, is derived, implying that al-Rahimi the *mukhaḍram* might have sided with the pagans of Mecca who derided and persecuted Muhammad, but that he might also have followed the companions who adopted the Prophet’s monotheism. Furthermore, in translating the “different kinds of love” that al-Rahimi is said to have practiced into English, “sexual” certainly captures the Arabic of *jinsi*, but “platonic” utterly fails to translate the multiple historical and poetic resonances of ‘*udhrī*, the word Mahfouz uses here. ‘Udhri poetry is associated with the Arabian tribe of ‘Udhrah, who, in the Umayyad period, became famous for their elegiac amatory verse, which “expressed passionate desire for an unattainable beloved, chastity and faithfulness until death.”⁷⁸ For its variations on the theme of endless, impossible approaches to the beloved, ‘Udhri love poetry is also widely understood to have influenced Islamic philosophy and mysticism.⁷⁹ We might thus say that al-Rahimi practiced both “worldly” and “otherworldly” forms of love, love of attainment and love whose passion derives from nonattainment, nonfulfillment—that is, *shawq*. With this surrounding context, it also matters that al-Rahimi is said to have made his millions selling not “alcohol”—Mahfouz could very easily have written *al-kuḥūl*—but “spiritual beverages,” *mashrūbāt rūḥiyyah*, and that the last we see of him, he is drunk and

singing a love song from a Congolese tribe, the Congo as this Cairene author's admittedly problematic figure for remoteness and difference. Unlike Sabir, who denies even the "foretaste" (*dhawq*) of "divine presence" (*wajd*) offered to him by Ilham's "inspiration" (the translation of *ilhām*), al-Rahimi has passed the Sufi waystation of "tasting" and entered the realm of "drinking" *shurb*, which, for the philosopher al-Sarraj, was that much closer to "drinking to one's fill" (*rayy*).⁸⁰ As in "Zaabalawi," drunkenness enables the mystical loss of the self or ego and its dissolution into all-encompassing love, which Mahfouz literalizes by characterizing al-Rahimi as a world-traveling lover, fathering more children than he can keep track of. Similarly, the only man to "see" or know anything about al-Rahimi, in the end, is Burhan—"proof"—who is, ironically, blind.

The form of these passages thus mirrors their content: just as al-Rahimi himself, like Zaabalawi, exceeds the bounds of fixed, mortal identities, so too Mahfouz's Arabic crosses this isthmus, a property embodied in *mukhaḍram*, in *hājir/mahjūr*, in *'udhrī*, in *mashrūbāt rūḥiyyah*.⁸¹ Mahfouz's fiction consistently plays with Arabic as the language of the divine in the world of men, always overflowing the bounds of fixity and identity. Sayyid Sayyid al-Rahimi eludes the very limiting notions of self and subject to which Sabir makes himself a prisoner.

From "Culprit Unknown" to "Zaabalawi" and *al-Tariq*, Mahfouz's novels from the 1960s consistently depict modern subjectivity as a kind of imprisonment, linking the search for missing persons to the search for the self's annihilation, and using the dark, gritty tropes of noir and crime fiction to set the scene for a mystery that proves more metaphysical than empirical. But while the style of these later novels certainly separates them from the *Trilogy*, their narrative arcs as endless searches inextricably link them with the earlier tome, and specifically with its second volume, *Palace of Desire*. Both sets of work play with the Arabic language, as Mahfouz deliberately and conspicuously uses key terms from the metaphysical and epistemological lexicon of Sufism to characterize these twentieth-century philosophical searches not as secular-scientific divergences from the paradox-laden "way" or "path" followed by the friends of God but as continuations of it.

Already, the title of the *Trilogy*'s second volume, *Qaṣr al-Shawq (Palace of Desire)*, tells us we are entering the world of a lover's asymptotic pursuit for a beloved who remains unattainable by definition. The "desire" in *Palace of Desire* loses a good deal of *shawq*'s layered Islamic and mystical history. In the tradition of speculative Sufism, *shawq* "expressed both a longing for the beatific vision in the Hereafter and a psycho-spiritual sentiment of yearning as part of a complex mystical love theory . . . concerned with the interiorization of piety . . . a focus on the *bāṭin*, the life of the soul, rather than on the *zāhir* of public faith."⁸² *Shawq* is characterized by "introspectiveness and total absorption in the object of love. The lover turns away from reality towards an idealized form of his imagination, which occupies his mind to such an extent that even the presence of his real beloved cannot gain his attention. He prefers death to fulfillment."⁸³ It is difficult to think of a better description for

Kamal, the protagonist of the *Trilogy*, in the midst of his love for Aïda Shaddad, the sister of his good friend Husayn and the radiant light around which all of Kamal's experiences hover in the second volume of the *Trilogy*.

To understand the shawq that saturates *Qaṣr al-Shawq*, however, we need to take a brief detour to examine another love object and "missing person" at the heart of the previous volume in the *Trilogy*, *Bayn al-Qaṣrayn (Palace Walk)*. If Jesus is the "missing person" around whom Jabra builds *In Search of Walid Masoud*, al-Husayn ibn 'Ali is the hollow core around which the entirety of Mahfouz's *Trilogy* revolves. A grandson of the prophet Muhammad famously martyred in the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE, al-Husayn is revered by Muslims all over the world, but particularly in Cairo, where the mosque, mausoleum, and square bearing his name and sometimes said to house his decapitated head are still the bustling center of the area around al-Azhar Mosque and University. In the eighth chapter of *Palace Walk*—the first for which Kamal serves as focalizer—Mahfouz describes the very particular place al-Husayn occupies both in Kamal's young heart and in his day-to-day life, as one of many sights (and sites) he passes on his way home from school. For the young Kamal, al-Husayn is the possibility of infinity and immortality in a finite, mortal world. Kamal's "youth and upbringing," we are told, "had fated al-Husayn to be an inexhaustible stimulus for the imagination and emotions of his heart" (*MK* 2:350). The young Kamal is not "taught to revere" al-Husayn, as the English translators of *Palace Walk* have it;⁸⁴ rather, this Muslim saint is the locus, the "stimulus" (*mīthār*) of his imaginative and emotive capacities. It is not the saint's status in the Prophet's bloodline that grants him a special place in the boy's "heart," however (and the "heart," *qalb*, is key to this and every other passage pertaining to al-Husayn over the 1,300-page course of the *Trilogy*). "Kamal's knowledge of the Prophet and his life . . . did not explain his soul's constant hunger to hear that life story repeated and embellished with the noblest stories and the deepest faith." Rather, something else—some other mysterious force—is at work here. "It reached the point where al-Husayn's story, across the centuries, found in Kamal a loving, passionate, faithful, sad, tearful listener" (*MK* 2:350). It is the shawq—the "longing for beatific vision in the hereafter"—of piety that saturates Kamal's relationship with al-Husayn. The only thing that comforts the boy is knowing "what was said about the martyr's head after it was separated from his pure body: no dwelling on earth would satisfy it except for Egypt, so it arrived there, pure and praising God, then laid to rest where his shrine now stands" (*MK* 2:350). No matter how many times Kamal hears the tale of this Islamic saint's martyrdom, his soul hungers for yet more repetitions, yet more embellishments; no matter how many times he passes by al-Husayn's shrine in a single day, going to or coming from school, the sight of its walls and minaret still call out to his soul and bring harmony to his heart:

How often he stood near the shrine, dreaming and thinking, wishing his vision could penetrate the depths to gaze upon the beautiful face which, his mother assured him,

had resisted the vicissitudes of fate with its divine secret, preserving its health and beauty to illuminate the tomb's darkness with the light of its blaze. When he couldn't find a way to realize his wish, he contented himself with the secret conversations he carried on during his long pauses there, eloquently expressing his love, complaining to al-Husayn about his young worries . . . Although his habit of passing by the mosque morning and evening had somewhat lessened the strength of its effect on him, still, as soon as his eye fell on the shrine, Kamal would recite the fatiha for it, even if he did so multiple times in one day. Indeed, custom could not uproot the joy of dreams from his breast; the sight of the lofty walls still harmonized with his heart, and its high minaret still emitted a call that his soul was quick to obey. (*MK* 2:350)

For young Kamal, truth lives here, in the mysterious, secret impenetrability of this shrine, and in the impossibility of verifying, through empirical knowledge, whether al-Husayn's head has truly remained young and beautiful through some "divine secret." Infinite and unverifiable, an "inexhaustible resource" of stories, emotions, wishes, and dreams, communicating not with the rational mind but with the soul and heart, al-Husayn seals and verifies truth by withholding (rather than explaining) mystery. Just as the story of al-Husayn's courage, faith, and martyrdom inspires the same level of fervent emotion no matter how many times Kamal hears it, so too the presence of al-Husayn's shrine in his neighborhood offers a constant, daily reminder of the interpenetration of worlds and times, the coexistence of local drink sellers and sweet shops with infinity and magic.

Qaṣr al-Shawq, by contrast, introduces us to a very different Kamal. The magic and infinity of al-Husayn have completely departed from his heart. In the fifth chapter of this second volume, he recalls his reaction upon first learning, from his Islamic history teacher, that "the shrine of al-Husayn is a symbol, nothing more" (*MK* 2:618). Whereas his commonsensical friend Fu'ad al-Hamzawi took this news with equanimity and ease, Kamal

was like someone staggering from the shock of the blow that had struck at the core of his heart; he cried for a specter that had vanished and a dream that had disappeared. Al-Husayn was no longer their neighbor, and in fact had never been their neighbor, not for a single day. What had become of the kisses he'd imprinted with such trust and passion on the door of that shrine? What would become of his pride in proximity, his pleasure in propinquity? Nothing, nothing had come of all that, nothing remained but a symbol in the mosque and a desolation, a disappointment in his heart. That night he cried until his pillow was soaked through. (*MK* 2:618)

The "heart" (*al-qalb*) is once again central to this passage. Much of Kamal's identity is built on his family's proximity to that mosque and mausoleum. To lose al-Husayn is to lose the sense of otherworldly, inaccessible meaning and truth that has anchored his young life; it is a loss of innocence common to every coming-of-age story yet given a Cairene twist in Mahfouz's novel, which anchors this fall from grace both in the specificity of Islamic piety and in the physical space of

the ancient quarter al-Gamaliyya, which—like Kamal—finds its heart anchored in al-Husayn's shrine.

Despite this disillusionment, however, Kamal has not entirely lost his penchant for worshipful devotion in *Palace of Desire*; he has simply replaced one object of veneration with another, and one Cairo neighborhood with another. When the reader first encounters him in this volume, he is lying in bed, addressing a lyrical six-page inner monologue to a young woman we later learn is Aïda, sister to the significantly named Husayn Shaddad (one Husayn gives way to another). That Aïda has replaced al-Husayn as the object of Kamal's worship is evident from the very first time the novel describes Kamal visiting her family's mansion (*qaṣr*, literally "palace") in Abbasiya. Kamal feels both "pleasure" (*i jāb*) in this quarter of Cairo, owing to the bourgeois neighborhood's "cleanliness, its layout, and the relaxing quiet that reigned over its residences, all qualities unknown to his bustling old neighborhood," as well as "a love and esteem that bordered on worship [*al-taqdīs*]," because Abbasiya was "the homeland of his heart, the dwelling place for his love's inspiration, and the abode of his beloved's palace [*qaṣr ma 'būdathihi*]" (MK 2:655). Where once Gamaliyya housed both mundane and otherworldly sites, now Abbasiya embodies both civilized modernity (cleanliness, quiet, an orderly layout) and "worship"—Aïda is not only Kamal's *maḥbūbah* (object of love) but his *ma 'būdah* (object of worship). The word *'ābid*, "worshipper," also figures prominently in the lexicon of Ibn al-ʿArabi, where it signifies "everything other than God, that is, the cosmos," while the "worshipped," *al-ma 'būd*, is "that which is named God."⁸⁵ "All of this quarter's landmarks, sights, and roads," the narrator of the *Trilogy* informs us, "were connected, in [Kamal's] mind, with thoughts, emotions, and fantasies that, taken as a whole, had become the core of his life and the juncture of his dreams. Wherever he turned his face, there was something calling his heart to prayerful prostration [*sujūd*]" (MK 2:655–66). Kamal's pious heart, once so anchored in al-Husayn's quarter, has a new locus in Aïda, her mansion, and the aristocratic quarter named for the khedive. Lest we miss the implications of Kamal's very literal change of heart, Mahfouz offers us this explicit parallel, in Kamal's description of the Shaddad family mansion:

With its two floors, the palace seemed from the outside like a great, lofty building . . . This view was printed on the page of [Kamal's] soul; its greatness held him prisoner, and the signs [*āyy*] of its stateliness enraptured him; he saw its grandeur as but a trivial token of its owner's worth; its windows appeared in his eyes, some closed, others with wide-open drapes, and he saw in their aloofness and concealment that which symbolized the value, modesty, abstinence, and mystery of his beloved; they were meanings [*ma 'ānin*] confirmed by the extensive garden and the desert stretching out to the horizon, presenting here or there a distant palm tree, a hyacinth vine climbing a wall, braids of jasmine scaling another, challenging his heart with memories that tangled over their heads like fruits, assailing him with words of love, pain, and worship. They all became appearances of the beloved [*tallan li-l-ḥabīb*], a breath

of her spirit and a reflection of her features, all of them emitting—since he knew the palace’s family had lived abroad in Paris—an atmosphere of beauty and dreaminess that harmonized with his love’s loftiness, sanctity, and splendor, its anticipation of the unknown . . .

It was no small thing for his fluttering heart to walk through this great mihrab, to tread on a surface her feet had trod before him; he almost stopped out of reverence or extended his hand to the wall of the house to seek its blessing, just as he once had at the tomb of al-Husayn, before learning that it was nothing but a symbol. (MK 2:656–57)

Kamal reads Aïda’s posh Abbasiya palace as one might read a holy text: its outward signs (*tulûl, zawāhir*) are tokens or hints of its ineffable inner meanings (*ma’ānī, bawāḥin*), especially the transcendent qualities of his beloved and her family.⁸⁶ Here again, as in the description of Amina in her rooftop garden, Mahfouz plays on the inherent polysemy of Arabic as both the language of men and that of the Qur’an. The palace’s “greatness” (*jalāl*) is also a frequent descriptor for God (“held dear and revered,” ‘azza wa jalla); its stateliness is revealed in “signs,” or *āyy*, also the word used for “verses” of the Qur’an; and these signs “enrapture” Kamal—*taftinuhu*—literally testing his faith with temptations. Most importantly, Kamal views the entire property as a “mihrab”—a prayer-niche facing toward Mecca that is a feature of every mosque—and he has to catch himself not to perform the same rites of worship he once did at the tomb of al-Husayn.⁸⁷ The Shaddad mansion, a figure for the ineffable Aïda herself, literally reorients (or rather, *de*-orients) his desire, his shawq, his longing for and enslavement to the divine. This passage also notably embeds many of the terms and figures first associated with Amina in her garden of pious, affective knowledge—jasmine and hyacinth, worship and love, mystery and the unknown—with Kamal circumambulating the Shaddad mansion.

Kamal is most certainly a “seeker” in *Palace of Desire*, then, even if the person he is after shifts from the Muslim saint whose shrine finds its home in Islamic Cairo to the French-educated young woman whose palace sits stately in Abbasiya. He is the seeker who, like Detective Muhsin, Sabir al-Rahimi, and the narrator of “Zaabalawi,” is bound by shawq, by impossible love. We soon learn that this love entails much more than mere attainment of its nominal object, Aïda. His love for her is explicitly bound up with his educational pursuit of what he calls “knowledge,” “truth,” and “the cultivation of thought.” In a famous and much studied scene ten chapters earlier in *Palace of Desire*, Kamal’s father—the domineering, fear-inducing al-Sayyid Ahmad Abd al-Jawad—confronts him about what college he plans to enter and what he wants to do with his life. He is dismayed when Kamal declares his intention to enter the Teachers’ Training College and, fearful for his son’s future, suggests Kamal consider law school instead. Here Kamal is forced to admit to himself that “there were desires in his soul which required careful scrutiny if their aims were to be made plain,” and that “he wasn’t even convinced he would grasp them at the Teachers’ Training College, but still thought this institution the

shortest path to understanding them.” That the word Kamal uses for “desires” here is the plural of *shawq*, *ashwāq*, gives us a hint to what follows these comments in the same, lengthy passage of free indirect discourse. In part, yes, these desires had been stirred by “scattered readings” in literary criticism, sociology, and religion, as well as popular sources like the epic of ‘Antar and the *Thousand and One Nights*.

But it was also true that he delighted at the presence of a strong bond connecting the [Teachers’ Training] College to his heart and, more precisely, to his love. How? There was no cord tying his “beloved” [*ma būdah*] to law or economics, but there were cords—however thin and invisible—between her and religion, spirit, creation, philosophy, and other related forms of knowledge that tempted him to drink from their springs, in the same way that she was linked to song and music, through secrets he might glimpse in a moment of musical transport and the munificence of ecstasy. He found all of this within himself and believed in it ardently, but what could he say to his father? (*MK* 2:607)

Although much critical attention has focused on Kamal’s election of the humanities and liberal arts over a more practical education in law or economics, this passage makes apparent for the first time in this volume how integrally Kamal’s pursuit of “knowledge” and “thought” is linked to his pursuit of Aïda. Both love objects are substitutes for the martyr al-Husayn and all the significance he once embodied for Kamal—that taste of divinity and ineffability, of “religion, spirit, creation, philosophy,” living and breathing in the everyday world of Gamaliyya. Aïda, in short, has become Kamal’s religion. He is a shaykh pursuing the *fiqh* of Romantic love.

But just as Amina’s epistemological panorama was edged with *majhūl* in *Palace Walk*, so too Kamal’s reverence for Aïda and the “mysterious world of thought” he wishes to pursue in his studies is laced with fateful blindness. Mahfouz hints at Kamal’s impending fall with a brief glimpse inside al-Sayyid Ahmad’s head. As Kamal is speaking, his father examines his appearance, and suddenly, as the narrator jumps from Kamal’s to al-Sayyid Ahmad’s mind, the father sees his son, “as if for the first time,” noticing his abnormally large head and nose, his thin build and his absurdly long neck. “Isn’t it likely,” he thinks, “that he’ll fall prey to someone like me who searches for defects to make the butt of his jokes?” (*MK* 2:608; *CT* 590). This is precisely what comes to pass fourteen chapters later, when Kamal finds himself alone for the first time with Aïda in the Shaddad mansion gazebo. Whereas Kamal “took great pains to study his beloved as though seeking to fathom her secrets and print her features and symbols upon the page of his imagination” (*MK* 2:689), Aïda chides him for not having started to grow out his hair. “Don’t you realize that your head is very large?” she says (*MK* 2:691). Soon she is staring at his nose and laughing. “I’ve just remembered some hilarious things I read in a famous French play,” she tells him with haughty cruelty. “Have you read *Cyrano de Bergerac*?” (*MK* 2:691). Kamal’s father has foreseen precisely the derision to which

his son's absurd appearance and penchant for romantic worship (even in supposedly secular love) will subject him.

Yet despite this cruel treatment at Aïda's hands, Kamal does not revere her any less. On the contrary, her derision only makes him a more devoted worshipper, and it is in the terms of Islamic worship that Mahfouz describes the boy's reaction to her cruel words. "He had to accept this pain with Sufi resignation [*taslīm Ṣūfī*], just as a worshipper accepts divine decree with the utmost belief in its justice, no matter how harsh, knowing that it issues from a perfect, complete beloved [*ma'būd*] with no suspicion in any of his attributes or acts" (*MK* 2:691; *CT* 754). Like a Sufi, Kamal has dedicated himself to chronicling and naming the many types of pain to which his love has subjected him, including "the pain of separation, the pain of forbearance, the pain of leave-taking, the pain of doubt, the pain of despair," as well as "pains that can be borne, pains that are even sweet, and pains that won't rest no matter how many sighs and tears he offers up to them" (*MK* 2:692), a list that reads almost like the table of contents for a manual of Sufi practice in asceticism. Mahfouz even refers to Kamal's experience in love as a form of religious education. "It was as though he had loved in order to study the encyclopedic *fiqh* of pain [*li-yatafaqqaḥ fi ma'jam al-alam*]" (*MK* 2:692). Kamal may have chosen to study the liberal arts at school, and to socialize with the aristocracy in the palaces of Abbasiya rather than with the working class in the coffeehouses around al-Husayn Square, but his heart is still grounded in al-Gamaliyya, with its rich history of Islamic scholarship, its human interpretation (*fiqh*) of divine law (*sharī'ah*). Kamal depends on this unattainable love for his very existence, as he once built his world on the inaccessible "divine secret" of al-Husayn's magically preserved and holy head.

Immediately following their meeting in the gazebo, however, Kamal's ultimate disappointment in love begins. In the very next chapter, Hasan Salim, a member of Kamal's friend group with an even higher class status than Husayn Shaddad, reveals to Kamal that Aïda is "in love" and, specifically, is in love with him, Hasan Salim. What's worse, Aïda has begun ignoring Kamal, sometimes acting outright hostile toward him. When Kamal confronts her in the gazebo about this harsh treatment, he discovers that Hasan Salim has twisted the words from their conversation about Aïda into scandalous lies about Kamal, and try as he might, he cannot convince her of their untruth. Still, even after yet more cruel treatment, Kamal continues to worship his "beloved." Three chapters later, he still makes a "pilgrimage" (*yaḥajj*) to visit Abbasiya every evening at sunset, and he still "circumambulates the mansion" (*yaṭūf bi-l-qaṣr*) as one might circumambulate the Kaaba in Mecca, "temporarily sated with contemplation of the shrine (*maqam*) and reviewing his memories" (*MK* 2:714). In this same chapter, he is surprised, after a long separation, to see Aïda leaving the house. He follows her and, now having nothing left to lose, breathlessly confesses his love. But, as in the conversation with his father nineteen chapters earlier, Aïda brings his lofty aspirations crashing back down to

earth when she asks him “what comes next?” (MK 2:717). Although Mahfouz’s narration has followed Kamal for almost eight hundred pages at this point, making us sympathetic to his view of things, now, seeing him momentarily through Aïda’s eyes, we glimpse the absurdity of his romantic reverence. She asks him “what he wants”; out loud, he stammers, “I want . . . I want you to give me permission to love you.” Aïda can’t help but laugh at this response. “You bewilder me. It seems to me that you even bewilder yourself [*tuhayyir nafsaka*].” For the first time, Aïda is not wrong or cruel; Kamal does exist in a perpetual state of “bewilderment,” or *ḥayra*, another term from Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Sufi lexicon that Mahfouz reanimates in this all-important scene. “To find God is to fall into bewilderment [*ḥayra*], not the bewilderment of being lost and unable to find one’s way, but the bewilderment of finding and knowing God and of not-finding and not-knowing Him at the same time.”⁸⁸ In the passage above, Aïda speaks more truthfully than either she or Kamal realizes. As a “seeker,” Kamal truly does live in a state of “bewilderment” when it comes to his love, his quest, which for now has taken a divinized version of Aïda as its object. His very name embeds the idea that he moves beyond mere “completion” as a creation of God (*tamām*), toward “perfection” through worship and revelation (*kamāl*)⁸⁹—a “perfection” we glimpsed several hundred pages earlier, when the *Trilogy’s* narrator described Amina’s world as one whose “merits . . . were not confined to the melodies of life,” but were “supplemented and perfected by worship [*yukammiluhā bi-l-‘ibādah*]” (MK 2:343).

Forced to consider “what he wants,” then, Kamal reflects on Aïda’s question: “He hadn’t answered because he doesn’t know what he wants. Would it be wrong to say he longs for communion in love [*wiṣāl*], the communion of spirit with spirit, and to rap on the secret’s locked door with an embrace or a kiss?” (MK 2:718). What Kamal seeks is *wiṣāl*, yet another “technical term of Sufism” borrowed from early love poetry and signifying “an amorous relationship which one accuses the other of not respecting, rather than union as such.”⁹⁰ As this term passes from love poetry into the writing of Sufi thinkers, it carries the traces of unrequited love to the quest for divine union.⁹¹ Kamal is often considered in opposition to Mahfouz’s later protagonists, all of them mystic-type figures questing after truths that remain just out of their reach. Here, and throughout the passages chronicling the nature and saga of his love for Aïda, however, we can see that Kamal too is a “seeker” after divine union, tragically confusing the divine with the worldly, replacing al-Husayn ibn ‘Ali with Husayn and Aïda Shaddad.

One final mention of al-Husayn’s shrine, and its loss, is worth mentioning here. On the night of Aïda’s marriage to Hasan Salim, after the main celebrations have ended, Kamal and his friend Isma‘il Latif walk and converse on the street outside the mansion. In response to Kamal’s offhand question about how much longer the festivities are likely to go on, Isma‘il notes that they will have to wind down soon, so the newlyweds can get some sleep before departing for their honeymoon, then corrects himself. “But who’s ever slept on their wedding night? . . . Don’t let Hasan’s reserve

mislead you. He'll be leaping and bouncing like a stallion until dawn" (*MK* 2:752). At this, Kamal marvels at yet a new, distilled form of pain, "the essence of pain, the pain of pains," "not from losing your lover, for you never aspired to possess her, but because she has descended from the heights of her heaven, because she has dirtied herself in the mud after a rich life led above the clouds, because she allows her cheek to be kissed and her blood to flow! And her body to be degraded, worn out in common service" (*MK* 2:752; *CT* 872). Rather than enlighten Kamal or soften the blow of this confrontation with Aïda's humanity and susceptibility to sexual desire and possession, Isma'îl Latif's words only deepen Kamal's despair, his sense of the emptiness at the heart of an existence he once believed to be enchanted by contact with infinity, unknowability. And once again, al-Husayn surfaces as the central figure for this emptiness: "Behind the veil of sacrality before which you've always prostrated yourself, your whole life, they'll be cavorting like children. Why does everything seem so empty! Mother . . . father . . . Aïda . . . al-Husayn's tomb as well . . . ah, what fierce pain!" (*MK* 2:753; *CT* 873). Kamal simultaneously longs to confront the reality of bodies having sexual intercourse and recoils from the thought of such a confrontation, clinging to the idealized, holy image of Aïda that he has created for himself (much as Sabir clung to the prison of the criminal identity he also built for himself). When Kamal and Isma'îl go their separate ways, Kamal only advances a few yards before turning around. He slips into the darkness of the desert that surrounds the Shaddad mansion—an appropriate place for a mystical worshipper to contemplate the light and mystery of his spiritual beloved:

Worship won't be of any use tonight, since it knows nothing of selfish desires. He had never aimed for Aïda; as for Hasan Salim, he was from a different sect for whom worship was not required. Thus Kamal stood, tormenting himself in the desert, while over there kisses like any others known to human beings were exchanged, and sighs overflowing with sweat and swooning caused blood to trickle out and a nightgown to fall away from a mortal body, like this mortal world with its empty hopes and frivolous dreams. Go ahead and cry over what seems to you the abasement of the gods, and may your heart be filled with the tragedy. But where will the beautiful, amazing feelings that illuminated his heart for four full years go? They were not a delusion or the echo of a delusion; they were life's life, and even if circumstances control the body, what power can take possession of the spirit? Let the beloved [*al-ma' bûdah*] remain his object of worship [*ma' bûdatih*]; let love remain his torture and his refuge, bewilderment his diversion, until he stood before the Creator one day and asked Him about the enigmas of things that perplexed him . . . Ah, if only he could contemplate what was behind that window, if only he could uncover the secret to the secrets of his existence. (*MK* 2:755; *CT* 876–77)

Kamal's contemplation of Aïda is saturated with both the figures and the technical lexicon of Sufism. Kamal is torn between the infinity of worship (*al-ibâdah*)—which, as we have seen, he wholly identifies with love—and the hateful worldliness of the self, the ego (*al-nafs*, in the phrase "worship knows nothing of selfish

desires,” wa khalā al-‘ibādah min maṭālib al-naḥs). Kamal recognizes that he never wanted to marry or possess Aīda; what he wanted was to worship her, preserve her place in the inaccessible, lofty “sky” with which she is consistently associated throughout *Palace of Desire*.⁹² His desire is not lust, but longing—shawq. Just as in this passage Kamal stands in a dark desert contemplating a light behind a window, light and radiance as figures for divine illumination also saturate early Sufi works dealing with shawq.⁹³ What Kamal wants is not union in marriage, but communion in “arrival”—*wiṣāl*—the dissolution of the ego which, paradoxically, leads to its eternal presence (*baqā*). In a state of shawq, to attain the object of one’s love is to evaporate, to lose the defining relationship of one’s existence. It is not the possession of the love object but the yearning for it that teaches piety and the abnegation of the “self” or *naḥs*, also a key term in this passage. Similarly, given that Kamal associates his quest for Aīda with his search for knowledge, truth, and beauty, it is not in the attainment of, but rather in the endless questing after, truth that Kamal’s life—and the lives of Mahfouz’s other protagonists, and Jabra’s characters—comes to have any meaning. Hasan Salim knows nothing of these mystical paradoxes, for he comes from a different “sect” that does not require worship as one of its tenets. Kamal, by contrast, holds to his “standing”—his *mawqif*—in the desert, clinging to the infinity of his lover’s passion even as he mourns its worldly demise, a pious moth circling the lamp in the niche of Aīda’s palace.

This scene in the desert is the often overlooked backdrop to a more famous scene from *Palace of Desire*—one in which al-Sayyid Ahmad confronts Kamal about the article he’s written on Darwin’s theory of evolution.⁹⁴ Mahfouz makes Kamal’s disillusionment with religion inextricable from his disappointment in love: his heart is said to be “filled to bursting with pains—the pain of disappointed love, the pain of doubt, the pain of a dying faith” (*MK* 2:762). At the prompting of his father’s questions, Kamal is forced to ask himself why he had written his article on Darwin’s theory of evolution in the first place. “It was as if he wanted to announce the death of his faith to everyone,” the narrator tells us. “But I am not an unbeliever, I still believe in God; as for religion . . . where is religion? It’s gone! Just as the head of al-Husayn is gone, just as Aīda is gone, just as my self-confidence is gone” (*MK* 2:762). The successive losses of Kamal’s young adult life here, again, all gesture back to the original loss of al-Husayn. Having overcome what he here calls “legends and fables,” there is a recurring emptiness, a void at the center of Kamal’s existence. “Our father Adam!” he laughs to himself. “He’s no father of mine. Let my father be an ape, if that is truth’s will [*in shā’a al-ḥaqīqah*]” (*MK* 2:763). Here “truth” (*al-ḥaqīqah*) has quite literally replaced “God” (*Allāh*) in the Arabic expression *in shā’a Allāh* (“if it is God’s will”), reflecting in miniature Kamal’s disillusionment with the imaginative stories of his youth and his turn to science as the optimal path to truth. Significantly, though, these are both linked to Aīda’s cruelty: “If I were really from a prophetic bloodline, she would not have mocked me so murderously!” (*MK* 2:763).

While it might seem that Kamal's idealistic piety will die with this relinquishing of religion and embrace of science, this change later proves merely to be a further permutation of that idealism. "Truth"—*al-ḥaqīqah*—has now replaced al-Husayn ibn 'Ali and Aida as the object of Kamal's material and metaphysical pursuits. "He secretly promised his mother that he would dedicate his life to spreading God's light, for wasn't it identical with truth's light? Of course it was, and with his liberation from religion, he would be closer to God than he had been when he believed in Him, for what is true religion if not science? . . . If prophets were sent forth today, they would choose science as their message" (*MK* 2:764). Kamal "still believes in God," but God is now to be embodied only as "truth," and specifically as "scientific truth," the prophecy of the present, the rupture leading from a "superstitious past" to an "enlightened future" (*MK* 2:764). Later, Kamal's friend Isma'il Latif points out the hypocrisy in this view: "Even after your conversion to atheism, you still believe in 'truth, goodness, and beauty,' and you wish to dedicate your life to them. Isn't this what religion calls for?" (*MK* 2:767). Nevertheless, Kamal still affirms—in his mind—that the choice between Aida and living an exalted life (*al-ḥayāt al-sāmiyyah*, literally a "heavenly life") is false, because "behind every ideal, I always see a glimmer of Aida" (*MK* 2:767). Kamal's life leaps from idealism to idealism, from Islamic piety to romantic reverence, and now to a new faith—one in science itself. Yet every idealism is buffeted by winds of disappointment: as Yaseen Noorani writes, he "lives the fall of Aida all of his life."⁹⁵

Having passed through a series of stations on his journey to knowledge and completeness, including "love communion" (*wiṣāl*), "bewilderment" (*ḥayrah*), and "impossible longing" (*shawq*), it seems inevitable that Kamal should end up seeking drunkenness in a tavern on the Cairo street Wajh al-Birka, just as the narrator had to drink to "find" Zaabalawi in "Zaabalawi," and Sayyid Sayyid al-Rahimi made his fortune selling "spirit beverages." Rather than using alcohol to muster the courage to "investigate woman"—that is, to have sex with a prostitute and thereby confront the reality of his own body and of Aida's, the stated goal of this journey—Kamal searches instead for a new ideal. "Aida is gone," he thinks, "so I must create another Aida embodying all of the meanings she symbolized" (*MK* 2:770).

Three major paragraphs chronicle Kamal's drunkenness (*MK* 2:771–72), and their tone once again mimics Sufi style, seeking figurative language to capture the essence of this drunkenness: "an inner music played by the spirit, to which ordinary music was, by comparison, like the peel of the apple compared to its fruit" (*MK* 2:771). No single metaphor can encapsulate this sensation; drunkenness is a form of music so transcendent that it itself needs a figurative explanation (the apple and its peel). Concatenated metaphors lead to beautiful bewilderment; again, Kamal could be writing a treatise on Sufi practice: "What could be the secret of this golden liquid that creates such a miracle in only a few moments? Perhaps it purifies life's stream of all foam and sediment, releasing its suppressed current,

just as the first time it released complete freedom and pure ecstasy; this is the natural feeling of life's thrust when it is liberated from the body's noose, society's shackles, history's memories, and fears for the future: a pure, clear music dripping with delight and inspiring delight" (MK 2:771). The "secret" of drunkenness, in other words, is a glimpse of the infinite—a music that is both saturated with and generating "delight" or "rapture" (*tarab*). Here, Kamal returns to the question he posed earlier, and the narration subtly slips in a first-person possessive pronoun for the first time: "Something like it has visited my spirit [*rūhī*] before, but when, how, and where? Ah . . . I remember . . . it was love! The day she said my name, 'Hey Kamal.'" But again, this feeling cannot be contained either in a single metaphor or in a single narrative voice, as we shift from first to second person: "You were drunk without knowing what drunkenness is; admit that you're a longtime drunkard, that you've spent lifetimes kicking up a racket on the path of wine-drunk love, paved with flowers and sweet herbs" (MK 2:771–72). Kamal has come to the tavern trying to forget Aïda, but earthly wine has only called her simultaneous status as his "beloved" and his "enslaver" (*ma 'būdah*) to his mind all the more forcefully—indeed, it has almost put him through a reversion, as he rewinds through all the pain she inflicted to find his love as a pure "dewdrop," not yet muddied by reality. "Love and get drunk, or get drunk and love"—this could easily be the motto of Zaabalawi or Sayyid Sayyid al-Rahimi in *al-Ṭariq*.

The language of this passage grows increasingly recondite as Kamal's drunkenness progresses. It is difficult to say who speaks, and of what, in these lines, but a familiar image draws us back from drunken abstraction to Kamal's memories: "As for the strands of black hair hanging over her forehead, they were a Kaaba toward which all the drunkards in all the taverns of love and divine presence [*wajd*] oriented themselves" (MK 2:772). Earlier in this volume, when Kamal roamed the desert outside the Shaddad family mansion, he felt the place itself to be holy—a "great mihrab" where he was tempted to prostrate himself in prayer, to graze a door with his hand or his lips. Here, however, Aïda herself has become a Kaaba, the focal point not only for Kamal's prayers, but for all love-drunk worshippers. If Aïda's house is a "mihrab," it points to Aïda herself, who here becomes the Kaaba in Mecca.

In a highfalutin philosophical speech he subsequently makes to Isma'īl—this time speaking out loud rather than in internal monologue—Kamal affirms that

this ecstasy is the secret of life and its lofty goal; wine is nothing but its harbinger, the tangible example we've been given for it. How can we make life a form of perpetual ecstasy, like the ecstasy of wine but without resorting to wine? We won't find the answer in debate, productivity, fighting, or exertion, all of those are means but not ends. Happiness won't be achieved until we free ourselves from using all means and allow ourselves to live a rational, spiritual, pure life, unmuddied by any troubles; this is the happiness for which wine gives us a model [*mithāl*]; all work is a means to reach this happiness, but as for the happiness itself, it is not a means to anything . . . (MK 2:772; CT 911)

No matter how many hundreds of pages of life, history, and generational change transpire in the *Trilogy*, Kamal cannot relinquish either the “idealism,” *‘ālam al-mithāl* (MK 2:606), or the language of inner and outer meanings, *zāhiriyyah* and *bā‘iniyyah*, in which he was raised. Wine is a signifier whose referent is happiness, yet it is perpetually absent so long as wine remains the means. Only in transcending the logic of means and ends, Kamal asserts here, does happiness arrive. Of course, this is all framed in dialogue, and Isma‘il laments Kamal’s speech as a terrible buzzkill. “You’re the worst . . . I was hoping you’d be a charming, witty conversationalist in your drunken ecstasy, but you’re like a sick man who only gets worse the more he drinks” (MK 2:772).⁹⁶

Isma‘il’s comment illustrates the extent to which Kamal’s journey is not a path Mahfouz prescribes, not a tale of secular liberalism triumphing over first-order religious and political desires, but a cautionary tale of spiritual “sickness” like the narrator’s in “Zaabalawi,” or Sabir’s in *al-Tariq*, of endless torment and encyclopedic pains, inescapable wandering in a vortex of retreating truths. From this relatively early point in his career, Mahfouz seems to recognize liberalism’s negative liberty as painful atomization—the misery of subjective isolation from any form of social, political, or familial collectivity. My reading of *Qaṣr al-Shawq* thus diverges from the critical consensus that Kamal Abd al-Jawad, the *Trilogy*’s protagonist, is the “embodiment of liberal progressivism,” leading “a promethean struggle against family, faith and ignorance in a quest to achieve freedom and independence from social constraint.”⁹⁷ While certainly supported by abundant evidence both from the text itself and from Mahfouz’s nonfictional writings on liberal politics and philosophy, such a characterization of the *Trilogy*’s protagonist neglects a key feature of Kamal’s story: it follows the mode of tragedy, rather than that of liberal individualist romance. It is, in David Scott’s terms, not a story of “overcoming, of vindication,” of “salvation and redemption . . . depending upon a certain (utopian) horizon toward which the emancipationist history is imagined to be moving,” but of “a man . . . obliged to act in a world in which values are unstable and ambiguous . . . and the relationship between past, present, and future is . . . a broken series of paradoxes and reversals.”⁹⁸ These paradoxes and reversals are as concatenated in Kamal’s life as in that of any colonized subject. Although Kamal’s mind does triumph over the religious and political commitments that might have ensnared him, the price of this victory is endless wandering and incurable loss, as the flipside of “freedom from” commitments turns out to be endless loneliness, and an inability to descend from the world of ideals.

Shawq is Mahfouz’s distinctly Islamic-Arabic-Egyptian figure for what Scott, borrowing from Northrop Frye and Hayden White, calls tragedy. Lest we forget the disillusionments and losses that have engendered this transformation, Kamal’s imaginative childhood relationship with al-Husayn ibn ‘Ali resurfaces—yet again—in this chapter chronicling his first experience drinking alcohol. Isma‘il Latif wishes their old friend Husayn Shaddad, long since departed for Europe, were there in the bar with the two of them, to witness the pious Muslim Kamal

‘Abd al-Jawad’s first glass of whiskey. “Where is Husayn to witness this scene for himself?” Isma‘il asks. In Kamal’s mind, however, the question echoes with double meaning: “Where is Husayn? Where?” (MK 2:770).

THE LIMITS OF SUFI SOCIALISM

With these admittedly voluminous readings under our belts, let me clarify: I am not arguing that the “true” or “real” meanings of Mahfouz’s works reside only in their Islamic resonances; nor should reading these books become merely a process of sleuthing out, identifying, and compiling the Sufi terms and passages therein. To read in such a way would be to miss the alternative methods of seeking truth—and, for our purposes, the alternative ways of reading—which Mahfouz dramatizes, again and again, in all his works, from the epic realism of the *Trilogy* to the condensed mysteries of “Zaabalawi,” “Culprit Unknown,” and *al-Tariq*. Rather, the readings above, focused on the “missing persons” at the heart of these selected texts by Mahfouz, illustrate two seemingly obvious but previously unremarked features of the author’s poetics. First, Mahfouz consciously and deliberately played with the thematic, formal, and epistemological conventions of detective fiction in much the same way as writers like Poe, Borges, and Auster did, using the genre as a way to “ask questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot.”⁹⁹ Stories like “Culprit Unknown” and “Zaabalawi” blur the roles of detective, criminal, and victim, for example, thereby interrogating the boundedness of subjectivity on which modern modes of identification and policing depend. *Al-Tariq* also questions “the epistemological method of discovering truth by questioning sources of knowledge.”¹⁰⁰

In many ways, however, Mahfouz’s interest in these epistemological and hermeneutic questions transcends the conceits of the detective plot alone. His “metaphysical detective stories” are, in many ways, more metaphysical than detective stories, and this brings me to my second point. These readings from “Culprit Unknown,” “Zaabalawi,” *al-Tariq*, and *Palace of Desire* also illustrate how subtly, cunningly, and persistently Mahfouz, like Jabra, plays on the expansive polyvalence of key Arabic terms, making the double nature of the Arabic language itself both the recurrent theme and the formal conceit of his works. Mahfouz’s Arabic keeps the (metaphysical, Islamic) past alive in the (scientific, “enlightened”) present, creating unlikely and surprising juxtapositions, as between detective fiction and Sufi parable, police investigation and mystical seeking. Whatever the writer himself may have said about his literary creations or what was meant therein (and I acknowledge his voluminous essays on the importance of political liberalism), the references to *shawq* and *dhawq*, *ittiṣāl* and *infiṣāl*, *al-tariq* and *al-wujūd*, together summon a world of seeking that these novels and short stories simultaneously deem “past” and at the same time mine for epistemological resources distinct from those bequeathed by science and empiricism. In a 1960

interview, Mahfouz once clarified that, in *Children of the Alley* and other works, he was calling for “Sufi socialism”—that is, “looking to God” (al-taṭallu‘ ilā Allāh, also “waiting for” or “anticipating God”). “As long as profit exists,” he says, “the profiteer will be evil, the profited-from will be miserable, and the relation between them will be one of hatred and resentment. In such a relationship, there can be no looking to God.”¹⁰¹

Mahfouz’s coupling of Sufism with socialism is curious, however, particularly in light of the alienation and atomization suffered by all his protagonists who “seek” in these short stories and novels. Kamal’s passionate shawq for truth and beauty alienates him from every possible form of collectivity and community, including family, marriage, political organizing, and organized religion. Sabir, too, in *al-Tariq*, turns away from the revelations and inspirations offered by Ilham—the model of how to live life without a father, the offer of a small amount of capital with which to start a business—to pursue the impossible dream of his father. The narrator of “Zaabalawi” is also, in a sense, self-absorbed, trapped in an identity he wishes to overcome, but not by banding together with others. These Sufi characters have very little “sociality,” let alone “socialism.” Mahfouz offers us many things: a critique of liberal individualism not as triumph but as tragedy, a dismantling of “science” as yet another religious credo of which to be skeptical, an emotional geography of Cairo that takes al-Husayn’s shrine as its beating heart and Abbasiya as its mysterious undoing, and a reanimation of the Arabic language as a model for transcendence and plenitude, in opposition to the strict lines and bounded identities of modernity. But, in the absence of any real communitarianism or collectivity, he does not give us socialism, Sufi or otherwise.

Like Jabra, then, Mahfouz also fails to write his characters out of their own vertiginous subjectivities, giving them only fleeting, paradoxical moments of mystical self-loss and union with the world. The detectives, investigators, and “seekers” in these works either remain prisoners of their own minds, continue to be baffled by the mysteries of existence, or succumb to a liberating (but temporary) annihilation. But they are never given over to others. Despite their fascination with the promise and potentiality of the mystical, then, neither Mahfouz nor Jabra ever fully arrived at a narrative erasure of the modern, liberal subject. The task of imagining other voices, devising new literary forms for representing new collectivities and social struggles, was taken up by other authors hoping to meld the Arabic novel with popular genres like the *Thousand and One Nights* and the “narrative ballad,” or *mawwāl*. Writing both before and after Mahfouz and Jabra, the Egyptian Fathi Ghanim and the Lebanese Elias Khoury used the conventions of metaphysical detective fiction in a different way: not to stage an individualized, endlessly deferred, cyclical quest for meaning, but to eclipse the literary detective’s relevance entirely, giving voice instead to the “nonliterary” others who would otherwise have fallen under his critical, private “I.”