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### The 2016 Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature

#### Address by Adel Esmat

I learned much from the conversations of Naguib Mahfouz and his way of thinking and way of life, almost more than I learned from his artistic production, though I had been fully enriched by his works and their atmosphere since early youth. Early in the 1990s when I began to write in earnest, his biography helped me. Since then, I used to imagine him and pose the question that baffled me to him. Whenever I ran into an artistic problem, I would leave what I was doing and walk in the streets of Tanta, imagining him and his way of thinking, and I would ask him: How can I deal with the matter? At the end of the conversation I used to hear his ringing laugh as he said: "I never knew anything but work."

As time passed I was able to recall him and have long conversations with him, and I dare say that I saw him lost in thought for a few moments before saying: "Do you know what made me go on and not despair? I considered art life, not an occupation; when you consider it an occupation, you can only think about reaping the fruits . . ."

I created this scene so many times that I imagined it to be real, part of my own memories. This conversation is the most important for a writer whose nature and sensibility did not conform to the mood of Cairo or journalism. I tried so much to follow this advice but I could not; one wants to see the effects of one's work, to identify its image. There must be a mirror that reflects a trace of its truth, though the mirror of the writer is the readers and critics, and the crises of our country have led to a decrease in the number of readers, and criticism has also declined and is motivated by the critic's conscience or his interests. In this case, how can an emerging writer know the truth of what he writes?

I tried to overcome the problem thus: I told myself, If you are content with living in a small city and working as a librarian and building a house and having children, and, at the same time, want to write novels, you must make a considerable effort to make writing like breathing, a tool that you may use directly whenever art beckons to you. Then I began a long exercise to make writing the tool for contemplation and understanding. I wrote what came to mind: every scene and tale, I wrote my dreams and my friends' dreams. I wrote scripts for the events that drew my attention in the newspapers. This all happened with the purpose of entrenching writing in my life and not with the intention of producing artistic works. I knew from the beginning that art is difficult. I used to tell my friends that if a person made a habit of writing two pages about the sea for ten days, surely on the eleventh day, he will see the sea differently. I don't know how I came up with this certainty.

Often efforts do not go to waste. In the end, they reap understanding and acceptance of a person's capabilities and circumstances, and dissociate from our intention and become an important endeavor in themselves. Whenever I encountered a problem, I drew a map for it, tracing its roots and ramifications; just a game to lighten my burdens. Whenever an impression loomed, I asked: can it be evoked in words? Whenever a memory loomed, I took a piece of paper and saw how I could trace its contours, from the moment of its appearance as a real event to its manifestation now in memory.

As the years wore on, the papers accumulated, and I was lost in them and did not know how I could put them in order or make use of them, but sometimes it was to no avail.

One winter day I was standing in the kitchen waiting for the water to boil to make my coffee. I noticed that the shawl hanging on the balcony overlooking me was moving in a particular rhythm with the movement of the wind. I imagined that it had a certain presence with its own way of life. I left the coffee and wrote a page that resembles a prose poem about a shawl fluttering in the wind. This page

remained for I don't know how many years among the drafts until Yusuf Tadrus came and drew upon it in his contemplations of art.

After more than a quarter-century since that beginning, writing became an essential exercise, and after I used to make a considerable effort to sit and write, language and the imagination eluding me, I fell under the spell of this muse whom I tried in all ways to entice to make her stay with me for a few hours. She now shared my life, asking me to leave everything and devote myself to her. She wants to replace life. Things come to a head again, and I sense that I strayed far, and that writing is one of the exercises that helps us to live, and that cannot be replaced with love or walking or sitting in front of the sea or visiting family and spending a Friday morning at the café. After this crisis our relationship became stable, less intense and calmer. We became like old friends, who can separate sometimes, certain that we will never part.

Whenever I think of what I went through, in the way that I have presented, I feel it is thanks to the words of Naguib Mahfouz about art as an occupation and art as life, as though they have seeped into my senses, changed to be in harmony with my circumstances, sensibility, and leaning towards solitude. I became a friend of Naguib Mahfouz though I never met him. His biography brought him closer to me and was a factor that helped in creating his specters: he was an Egyptian civil servant like me and others, afflicted by woes when his phone breaks down in his apartment in Alexandria and he searches among his acquaintances for someone to help him repair his line. Or when a pipe bursts in his house in Cairo, and he spends his day vexed, and his rigid routine is disrupted. He is close to the heart, his life resembles our own, and his features resemble ours, but he possessed what many of us lack: organization, precision, and patience.

Each year during the month of his birthday I read one of his works. In 2011, I had my own celebration of his centennial. I summoned scenes from his biography and wrote a story entitled "I Saw Naguib Mahfouz," and I spent the rest of the day in the company of his novel *Qushtumur (The Coffeehouse)*. And now it so happens that my conversation with him takes the form of a real event. There he is, rising beyond his absence, just as he does here each year, saluting me, and conferring upon me his medal which will remain with me for as long as I am here on earth, a souvenir of our conversations, and perhaps the beginning of others.

Finally, I thank those who selected my novel for this prize: you have awarded me a moment of joy, for which I was most in need.

Many thanks to everyone.

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