

The office as a universe – the mystic experience as the initial spark of a civil servant's career:

The beginning of a text by Naguib Mahfouz and its translations.

(Arabic Text: Hadrat al-muhtaram. Kairo, 1975 pp. 3-6. Engl transl. *Respectable Sir* by Rasheed al-Enany London, 1986 and severals times. German transl. *Ehrenwerter Herr* Übers. v. Doris Kilias. Zürich, 1996. S. 5-7. The following discussion refers to these translation, albeit with some emendations).

The principal element of the introductory passage of the novel "Respected Sir" (Hadrat al-muhtaram) is no doubt the language, which is charged with symbolism and enriched with technical terms from the tradition of Islamic mysticism. This intrusion already indicates the intended discrepancy between the apparent subject of the novel, "the career of a petty bourgeois as civil servant" and its deeper meaning, which the author elaborates with all stylistic and literary devices, from haughty irony to sarcasm and cynicism; the author then deliberately crosses the border of cynicism to reach the climax of tragic insight (into the meaning of life, the futility of ambition etc.) and hence paradoxically enter the very sphere, from which these alien linguistic devices originate.

1

انفتح الباب فترأت الحجرة مترامية لانهاية. ترأت دنيا من المعاني والمثيرات لا مكانا محدودا منظويا في شتى التفاصيل

Translation: *The door opened to reveal an infinitely spacious room: a whole world of meanings and motivations, not just a limited space buried in a mass of detail.*

Übersetzung: *Die Tür wurde geöffnet und die Amtsstube in ihrer grenzenlosen Weite bot sich dem Blick dar, sie bot sich dem Blick dar als ein Universum von erregender Bedeutungsfülle, nicht als ein begrenzter Raum, der in der Summe seiner vielfältigen Einzelteile aufgeht (sich erschöpft).*

Commentary: Threefold repetition and enhancement: to come into view, but in diminishing formulations: *The office*. A popular stylistic device in Arabic, with the longest element at the end
Variations in translations: *Meaningfulness significance: consequence. / Bedeutungsfülle: Bedeutungsschwere* Attempts to translate an Arabic plural, which, as often in Semitic languages, does not refer to numbers, but is meant as an enhancement: *meanings = meaningfulness, consequence*. At the same time, the sum of *meanings* stands for God.

Note the determination: the text knows no introduction: **The** door takes the reader straight into the place and situation. "**The** door was opened"; the European reader inevitably thinks of Kafka's novella "The Law"; what serves in the latter as unequalled ending, N.M. uses as a beginning right into the heart of the matter; yet, as we shall see, with the same fruitless outcome. The civil servant's striving for professional success is marked by unpredictable coincidences, which undo his planning; such that, exactly when he is about to achieve his aim, the personal value, which had been spurring and inciting his ambition, breaks apart.

Hugra - Dunya (*room - world*) as paradoxical contrast viz. the sign of a "limited personality": He to whom the office becomes a limitless space, defines himself by this very action as y very limited personality; but not through the factual nature of the thing - for the mystic the room can become the universe; cf. al-Hallaj, who can perform the pilgrimage around the table in his room; price of the room in M. Montaigne and B. Pascal - but thanks to the aim and significance of the matter.

2

أمن بأنها تلتهم القادمين وتذيبهم.

T: *Those who entered it, he believed, were swallowed up, melted down.*

Ü: *Er glaubte fest, daß sie jeden, der einträte, verschlingend in Nichts auflöse.*

C.: A paradoxical compilation of introductory phrases from accounts of ascensions and descents into hell; such as Dante's "abandon every hope, ye who enter". At the same time it is an allusion to the end of earthly existence and the beginning of a new, mystical one.

3

لذلك اشتعل وجدانه وغرق في انبهار سحري. فقد أول ما فقد تركيزه

T: *And as his consciousness caught fire, he was lost in a magical sense of wonder.*

Ü: *Natürlich stand er nun in flammender Leidenschaft und versank in zauberhafter Verzückung. Zum allerersten Mal verlor er seine Orientierung in Raum und Zeit / Bewußtsein, Orientierungspunkt zu sich selbst / vergaß er wo er war - geriet er in Ekstase .*

C.: The mystical experience, the dissolution of the personality into space, the *unio mystica*.

Wigdan, Talbiya und Tarkiz are - also- mystical expressions. But in Arabic these specific terms are not different from colloquial speech - such as "Entwerden" through unusual morphological devices on the proper vocabulary, or "unio mystica" through its distinct foreign origin. Like all technical language in Arabic, the mystical one is likewise indistinct from the vocabulary of everyday speech. Our difficulties in translating the text in the seminar clearly showed this; one needs to raise one's awareness for the implied connotations in order to be able to interpret such meanings in the text.

4

نسى ما تافت النفس لرؤيته، الأرض والجدران والسقف. حتى الإله القابع وراء المكتب الفخم

T: *He forgot what his soul yearned to see - the floor, the walls, the ceiling: even the god sitting (my correction) crouching behind the magnificent desk.*

Ü: *Er vergaß, was er selbst zu sehen sich sehulich gewünscht hatte, den Fußboden, die Wände, die Decke, selbst die kauernde Gottheit hinter dem mächtigen Schreibtisch.*

C.: نفس "nafs" in connection with the verb تاق "tāqa" as powers of the soul, which can long and desire, but also as replacement of the relative pronoun "self". Note again the hard contrast in **crouching deity** as well as, in terms of content, the pathetically small objects of ardent desire *floor, walls ceiling*, the concrete spatial expression of the *limited* man, who is the protagonist. As in numerous further instances in this novel, this as an occurrence of a *disrupted mystical experience*: an impressive and credible first *essor* is followed by a crash into ironically distorted banality, or even ridicule (final passage of the novel in ch. 38 again shows this with the hardest possible contrast).

5

وتلقى صدمة كهربائية موحية خلقة غرست في صميم قلبه حبا جنونيا ببهجة الحياة في ذروتها الجليلة المتسلطة

T: *An electric shock went through him, setting off in his innermost heart an insane love for the gloriousness of life on the pinnacle of power.*

Ü: *Ein neues Leben spendender, erschaffender Schlag traf ihn und pflanzte tief in seinem Herzen besinnungslose Liebe zum Leben in Freude auf dem Gipfel der Macht.*

C: We can again observe a stark contrast: mystical, unconditioned love and devotion is confronted with discipline and power, in this case quite concretely the power over subordinates, whereby this power itself in a paradoxical way embodies the limitations of the minute powers of a civil servant. A further motif: the Islamic ruler who "asks for good and repels evil" is brought in: vague ideas about power upon achieving the goal: religion is the world, the state the breath of God on earth; civil service is service to God.

6

عند ذلك دعاه نداء القوة للسجود، وحرضه على الفداء, ولكنه سلك مع الآخرين سلوك التقوى والابتهاال والطاعة والأمان.

T: *At this point the clarion-call of power urged him to kneel down and offer himself in sacrifice. But he followed, like the rest, the less extreme path of pious submissiveness, of subservience, of security.*

Ü: *Dabei hörte er den gebieterischen Ruf, sich niederzuwerfen, die Aufforderung zur Selbstaufopferung, doch äußerlich verhielt er sich ganz wie die anderen, war voll demütiger Ehrfurcht und vertrauenden Gehorsams.*

C: The protagonist's tension between within and without, which pervades the entire novel and is revealed - to put it bluntly - as hypocritical; but is eventually overcome, by failing to reach the ultimate goal (career) and obtaining in return a real human, albeit unfulfilled, relationship. The following image of a newborn infant, which needs to shed many tears before it can dictate its own will, fits awkwardly in the context of the other images.

7

كالوليد عليه أن يذرف الدمع الغزير قبل أن يملأ إرادته

T: *Many childlike tears he would have to shed before he could impose his will.*

Ü: *Wie bei einem Neugeborenen war es nun an ihm, Tränenfluten zu vergießen, um letztlich seinen Willen zu diktieren.*

C: As a chapter of life, the entry into civil service becomes - in analogy to the spiritual rebirth of the mystical novice - a second birth, and thus rightly appears at the beginning of the novel. Similar to the compilation of vocabulary from different rhetoric styles, we find here a stylistic contrast on the level of images: The sublime vision alluding to the ecstasy of the unio mystica is followed by an efficient, yet trivial image from everyday life, which evokes the tyrannic obstinate child and his means of power, his tears. Allusions and paradoxes are interwoven: already the image of "tears", it is only through nights full of tears (the condition of the novice in phases of crisis, failure and fatigue) can the goal be attained. But here they are "tears, which dictate the will", hence "helpless child as tyrant through blackmailing for pity" etc. But above all they prove the (feigned?) insight of the civil servant in his helpless minuteness in front of "God", and the (petty) acknowledgement of his means of power. Characteristically, the starting point sounds authentic and sincere - smallness of man in front of God and the universe - but the logical consequence of such mystical insight is deliberately avoided through an escape into trivialities; it is here, in everyday life, that the infinite space of the universe is overcome, though at the price of complete devaluation: this is the entire plot of the novel in a nutshell.

8

وتلبية لاغراء لا يقاوم خطف نظرة من الإله القابع وراء المكتب

T: *Yielding to an irresistible temptation he cast a furtive glance (he **snatched, grabbed** a glance) at the divinity hunched behind the desk.*

Ü: *Einem unwiderstehlichen, vom göttlichen Willen / Gesetz diktierten Impuls Folge leistend **erhaschte** er einen Blick der kauernenden Gottheit hinter dem Schreibtisch.*

C.: Deliberate break and interlocking of discrepant stylistic planes, as are also found in Hölderlin: **tunkt** ihr ins heilig-nüchterne Wasser (Winter); the famous "couvercle" of Baudelaire, alongside a (partial) repetition of certain elements (crouching deity, desk) according to Arabic rules of style. At the same time this first - furtive! - glimpse is but a first piece of the holy goal to be attained - the presence and attention of the divine (cf. connoted meaning of the title Hadrat al-muhtaram).

9

ثم خفض البصر متحليا بكل ما يملك من خشوع

T: *Then lowered his eyes with all the sweet humility he possessed.*

Ü: *Dann senkte er seinen Augen, die süße, alle ihm zur Verfügung stehende Demut ausstrahlten.*

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