

Warriors for Civilisation: Naguib Mahfouz, Andrei Tarkovsky, Tu Weiming and their Western  
Counterparts

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Signature of candidate

Jonathan Keir

15/5/2014

*There is only one law in the universe, whether we choose to call it sacred or secular, and it is this law which is the foundation of order and justice in society. [...] It is the nobility of the soul which allows us to understand what the universe is.*

Naguib Mahfouz

*In light of the infinite laws or the laws of infinity which lie beyond our reach, God cannot not exist. GOD is a word to comfort human beings, who struggle to feel the essence of the beyond, the unknown, the unknowable. In a moral sense, God is love. In order for people to live without harming others, there needs to be an ideal, an ideal in the sense of a spiritual, moral conception of law. Morality is inside us.*

Andrei Tarkovsky

*Confucian humanism [...] is not a form of secular humanism, but a humanism that entails both naturalist and spiritual dimensions. [...] A person so conceived is an observer, appreciator, partner, and co-creator of the evolutionary, indeed the cosmic, process. Human responsibility must be expanded from the self, community, nation, world, nature, and ultimate, to the 'great transformation' of the cosmos.*

Tu Weiming

*Matthew Arnold, in his classic collection of essays Culture and Anarchy (1869), famously described culture as 'a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world.' [...] It is my belief that culture in this sense [...] points always towards the transcendental. [...] And when we lose our sense of that thing [...] all human life is cast into shadow. We approach the point at which even the St. Matthew Passion and the Rondanini Pietà have nothing more to say to us than a shark in formaldehyde. That is the direction we have taken. But it is a direction of drift, a refusal to adopt the posture that is inherent in the human condition, in which we strive to see events from outside and as a whole, as they are in the eyes of God.*

Roger Scruton

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My family, and in particular my mother Gail and grandmother Doreen, for their unconditional blessing and decades of sacrifice on my behalf.

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## Introduction: Genesis, Overview and Defence of the Project

*The thing that stayed in my mind was simple. It was the image of someone inadvertently damaging the thing they love because they fail to recognise it. In the magnificent lecture room, I had witnessed the hurling of javelins. But what had been hit? My fear was that, thinking that the idea of civilisation was a threat, the speakers had launched their darts. But my suspicion was that something precious was hidden in the bushes; that seen more clearly, the idea of civilisation might turn out to be something we need and love.*

John Armstrong, *In Search of Civilisation: Remaking a Tarnished Idea* (2009)

This doctoral project began as a vague desire to contribute to what primatologist Frans de Waal has called the challenge of our century: 'globalisation for a tribal species'<sup>1</sup>. I was first sure that Naguib Mahfouz would be a part of it; his sublime Arab wisdom and good humour could not have been more relevant after the terrible events of September 11, 2001 and the wars which followed them. The reality of a growing Sinosphere also encouraged me to include a Chinese element; initially, I had considered working on the reception of Naguib Mahfouz in China, but when I chanced upon the work of New Confucian philosopher Mou Zongsan and his heir Tu Weiming in the course of my Chinese studies, the parallels with Mahfouz were so striking that I felt compelled to pursue them. Then, when the European Union doctoral programme to which I was accepted gave me the chance to spend a year in Russia, I considered adding a Russian dimension; in another accident of fate, I found Andrei Tarkovsky addressing the same civilisational themes as Mahfouz and the New Confucians, and decided to profit from my time in Russia by exploring these themes further.

This project, however, also inserts itself squarely into contemporary Western debates on religion and multiculturalism. If multicultural experiments and the postmodern relativist ideologies which accompanied them have failed, can we create a single global culture comprised of, in Matthew Arnold's immortal phrase, 'the best that has been thought and said in the world'? Is this what the humanities should be busy doing? And if so, what should we include? For sheer

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<sup>1</sup> See Frans de Waal, 'The Evolution of Empathy', [http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/the\\_evolution\\_of\\_empathy](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/the_evolution_of_empathy), 1/9/2005. For a broader discussion of the 'globalisation for a tribal species' theme, see Frans de Waal, *The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society*, (Broadway Books, 2010).



demographic and geopolitical reasons, any canon deprived altogether of Arab, Russian or Chinese voices would be a non-starter. This thesis aims to show that it is possible to find, close to our time, Arab, Russian and Chinese voices which harmonise with each other as well as with certain contemporary strands of Western humanism. Whether this common civilisational bedrock can or should form the basis of an emerging global civil society is a question which does not go beyond the scope of the humanities; the three men studied, as well as their Western counterparts, all agree that it should, and strongly argue that, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century more than ever, it *must* if we are to have any common future at all.

Opposition to the Global Ethic Project, particularly in Europe, is loud: we should learn to respect differences, the 'otherness' of the Other, if we are to consider ourselves civilised. Naguib Mahfouz, Andrei Tarkovsky, Tu Weiming and their Western counterparts all show that civilisational unity, belief in a single Moral Law, need not mean ruthless imperialism or boring uniformity; the Moral Law contains within itself the respect for plurality and disagreement so necessary for healthy individual and communal life without justifying passivity in the face of immoral behaviour. It is not only when we subscribe to the wrong moral law, but moreover, our warriors argue, when we throw out the idea of a Moral Law altogether - one dictated in our human hearts and elaborated in human rather than heavenly scripture - that civilisation stagnates and regresses; leaving people alone may indeed be a major moral step up on invading and enslaving them, but such an ethic of non-interference in the lives of others, such exaggerated respect for the nevertheless important idea of 'negative freedom', falls short of a higher humanistic ideal: namely, a global republic of letters in which ideas are debated openly in a climate of respect for truth and in which the 'best that has been thought and said' is sought by all, a society in which individuals want, like Confucius himself, to teach and learn simultaneously out of love for the fragile human civilisation to which they belong.

The thesis consists of four parts: an initial chapter on contemporary Western debates around the 'civilisation' theme; a chapter on Mahfouz (though with extended references to the Western debates discussed in the first chapter), focusing on his Nobel Lecture and newspaper columns written for *Al Ahram* newspaper over the last three decades of his life (in which the Arabic word *hadara* - 'civilisation' - recurs countless times) followed by readings of the novels *Akhenaten: Dweller in Truth* (1985) and *Arabian Nights and Days* (1982); a chapter on Tarkovsky, in which his seven films are discussed in chronological order with reference to the civilisation theme established in the first two chapters and complemented by translations of previously untranslated Russian Tarkovsky criticism as well as Tarkovsky's own diaries; and a final chapter in which Tu Weiming's 'anthropocosmic' vision of human civilisation is introduced into the discussion.

The broad argument can be summarised as follows: the humanities are not social sciences and should not be treated as such. Instead, they provide access to a participatory form of knowledge

which no sociological or anthropological theory could ever reproduce. Explanation is no substitute for experience in this sphere: art or literature or philosophy or even music are not forms of knowledge which can be made useful to society via private discussions at élite conferences, in the way that biology or computer science can – I need only know how to use a computer rather than understand exactly how it works - but must rather take hold in the minds of as many people as possible. What exactly is this 'participatory knowledge' for the warriors we will examine? I would summarise it as 'civilisational awareness', a feeling of belonging to a single community which extends beyond one's present-day tribe to encompass not only all of currently existing humanity but past and future generations as well, and which in fact extends beyond the human community to include all living and even all non-living things, and indeed all the way to Heaven itself. Such a civilisational awareness is diametrically opposed to the philistine, mercantile, frankly imperial logic of the 'machinery'-dependent *homo economicus* so memorably derided by Matthew Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy*; like Arnold, the 'warriors for civilisation' presented in this thesis, while largely preferring the word 'civilisation' - *hadara*, *tsivilizatsia*, *wenming* - in their respective languages (Arnold preferred the word 'culture' but also said he was happy to accept synonyms<sup>2</sup>), seek to set up a defence against the philistine 'anarchy' which ensues when imperial instincts, in the absence of 'civilisation' or 'culture' (Arnold's 'best that has been thought and said in the world'), are inevitably indulged. Mahfouz was relatively optimistic, at least by the time of his 1988 Nobel Lecture, about our collective progress as a species in the direction of 'civilisation', arguing that empire-building 'has become a worn out pride the mention of which modern conscience, thank God, feels uneasy about'<sup>3</sup>. Tarkovsky's defence of culture, meanwhile, assumed an increasingly apocalyptic tone in the years before his death from cancer in 1986: humanity as a whole urgently needed to recover a thirst for spirituality and sacrifice and to combat the prevailing philistinism of the day before it was too late: 'the meaning of art is in the search for God in people, the search for the Way for people'<sup>4</sup>, he says, before arguing that modern art has lost touch with this Arnoldian quest for perfectibility, a battle in which, for Arnold as for the 'warriors for civilisation' presented here, including the Confucian Tu Weiming ('morality is not only a means of preserving the community; it is also the very reason why the community is worth being organised in the first place.'<sup>5</sup>), culture and religion – or at least an honest, post-literalist, ecumenical theology - are the closest of allies.

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2 See Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1869, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/4212/pg4212.html>, pp. 195-196.

3 Naguib Mahfouz, 'Nobel Lecture (1988)', [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1988/mahfouz-lecture.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1988/mahfouz-lecture.html) (accessed 23/10/11)..

4 Andrei Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog: Diaries (Martyrolog: Dnevnik)*, (Istituto Internazionale Andrej Tarkovskij, 2008), p. 433.

5 Tu Weiming, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 68.

Some critics have objected to the use of the apparently anachronistic terms 'warriors' and 'civilisation' in my title, arguing that the words have become synonymous with precisely the philistine imperialism which the three men studied, as well as their 'Western counterparts', spent their lives opposing. I nevertheless believe that the title *Warriors for Civilisation* reflects the unashamedly determined attitude with which our chosen subjects defend their humanistic creed in their respective oeuvres (the hero of Tarkovsky's first film, to cite just one example, was himself a boy soldier fighting for justice against a wicked and 'uncivilised' enemy) and with which our discipline must now defend itself if it is to survive in a globalising world in which the study of narrowly national canons is being rendered obsolete and the place of the humanities itself in schools and on university campuses is under threat from a variety of institutional enemies. The greatest enemy of all, however, may lie within, in the very idea that nothing is worth fighting for and that zealous attachment to values of any kind is dangerous, an idea, bordering on an ideology, preached either directly or indirectly by many humanities departments around the world, which have abandoned the Arnoldian quest for human perfection and embraced instead – often under the umbrella known as Theory – the idea that difference itself is the only value worth celebrating. This debate – namely, whether 'fighting for civilisation' is part of the problem or part of the solution – is addressed in our first chapter.

A broader criticism of the project, moreover, concerns the attention to similarity rather than difference among the three warriors and their Western counterparts: by stressing the similarities between an Arab novelist, Russian film director and Chinese philosopher, I have been accused of 'neutralising', or at least trying to neutralise, differences between them. The very prevalence of such a criticism, however, really only proves the point I make in my first chapter about the widespread fetishisation of difference and the reflexive scorn for even the attempt to unite or 'make same' within the humanities academy. I would rather have thought that the fact that Mahfouz, Tarkovsky and Tu have anything meaningful in common at all given their diverse backgrounds was more extraordinary than any of the myriad differences I could have reported back from my time in the field. I don't pretend to hide these differences, and address them where I think they are relevant to my comparison or to the contemporary European context in which I am conducting it – Mahfouz's views on freedom of speech, Tarkovsky's attitude to female artists, Tu's strident environmentalism – but I am simply not willing to assume *a priori* that the inevitable differences between three such different thinkers – formal as well as cultural and aesthetic (we are, after all, dealing with a novelist, a film director and a philosopher) - are more important than the overwhelming similarity of moral vision I believe I have uncovered through the privilege of sustained direct contact with their work. I would stress, to those for whom it were not already obvious, that I am arguing for a radical 'similarity' rather than an absolute 'sameness' of vision among them; critics have pointed out that the

meaning of core concepts such as 'truth' and 'unity' which recur in the work of all three warriors as well as their Western counterparts varies, as if this were some kind of knockout blow to my entire project rather than an inevitable result of it. All successful attempts at truth, unity, or Arnoldian moral perfection by any other name will inevitably turn up different corners of it, for the source – God or Heaven or Love, as our warriors variously call it - is inexhaustible.

Other frequent misunderstandings have concerned my attempt to allow Mahfouz, Tarkovsky and Tu to 'stand in' for Islamic, Orthodox and Confucian civilisations respectively. I would repeat, however, that my goal has simply been to show that one can find figures from within each tradition – or at least one major and relatively contemporary figure from each, arguably the most prominent global ambassadors of Arab, Russian, and Sinic high culture respectively of the last 50 years - who, through a kind of magic coincidence, agree radically with each other about most of what matters. My goal has most certainly *not* been to show that all voices claiming to be 'Islamic', 'Orthodox', or 'Confucian', let alone 'Western', are essentially reducible to one another; on the contrary, part of the point of juxtaposing my three warriors in three consecutive chapters rather than trying to treat them all at the same time was to build a cumulative picture which emerges through each of the chapters to create, by the end, an intimate whole which is nevertheless greater than the sum of its parts. Together, our Western warriors, Mahfouz and Tarkovsky give us a new Tu Weiming; this does not mean that the Tu Weiming chapter cannot be read on its own, but rather that the reader will appreciate it in a fuller way if she has digested the Western warriors, Mahfouz and Tarkovsky first. This structural decision also partly explains the fact that the Tu chapter is the shortest of the four; rather than repeat material from previous chapters unnecessarily, I decided instead to begin each chapter in the spirit in which the previous one leaves off and to build, implicitly as well as explicitly, material from the earlier chapters into each new one, while nevertheless endeavouring to allow each chapter to remain entirely readable on its own. This relatively unorthodox approach also allowed me to be consistent with the view of the humanities and humanities 'research' presented in the first chapter and in turn by our respective global warriors.

I have also been criticised for not offering more background on my three warriors, for example on the historical and political context of Mahfouz's output, in particular under Nasser, or the roots of Tarkovsky's concept of sacrifice in the Russian literary tradition in general and in Dostoyevsky in particular, or more detail of the Communist and Maoist assault on Confucianism and the politics of the Chinese Communist Party's recent embrace of Tu and his New Confucian creed. My reply to this criticism is simply to say that any one of these contextualisations would deserve an entire thesis on its own, and that my primary goal has been to provide a picture of a moral vision which could be of use in our present and immediate future rather than to write an intellectual history of the recent past. If Anglo-American departments of Philosophy are routinely

divided into 'History of Ideas' and 'Problem-Solving' groupings, I would extend that distinction to the humanities in general, and, without in any way disdaining the noble philological attempt to document the History of Ideas, confirm that this project was firmly conceived as a Problem-Solving one (namely, De Waal's problem of 'globalisation for a tribal species'). I have nevertheless endeavoured to offer a minimum of context to allow the relatively uninitiated reader the chance to involve herself in the main argument without discouraging her from seeking further background for general edification should she so desire it, and on the contrary, hoping to kindle enough interest to encourage her to do so where she might otherwise not have bothered.

While I have been accused of not offering enough general historical and cultural context for my warriors' work, I have also simultaneously been criticised for offering too much specific biographical detail. My brief forays into Mahfouz's and Tarkovsky's love lives, such as they are, are intended as explorations of apparent contradictions between the life and the work of the two artists, contradictions which, if confirmed as genuine, would throw the entire moral vision they present into jeopardy by exposing its hypocrisy. Only amoral artists get to live as they please and to have their biographies interpreted separately from their art; it quite obviously matters that moralising artists at least aim, in their daily lives, to achieve the ideals of moral truth and unity that they preach: the very assumption that artistic criticism and biography are entirely independent from each other suggests that one has already made up one's mind that there can be nothing moral or unifying about art in the first place. If I have avoided entering into the details of Tu's biography, it is partly out of respect for the living and partly because I did not find any apparent contradictions between the life and the work worth commenting on. Nevertheless, this thesis is in no sense an attempt at biography or hagiography; once again, the goal is to elucidate the broadly similar civilisational vision of our warriors in a problem-solving spirit relevant to our day, and I have called on biographical resources where necessary to achieve that.

The problem of reining in the sprawling scope of this project, however, goes beyond questions of biography. Each of my three warriors would have deserved multiple theses on his own, and I was thus inevitably faced with the task of deciding which parts or aspects of their total output to focus on. In the case of Mahfouz in particular, with nearly three dozen novels, more than a dozen short story collections, hundreds of interviews and over a thousand newspaper articles to choose from, it was simply not possible to cover it all, particularly after having made the decision to read him primarily in Arabic. The decision to focus on his newspaper articles and his novels *Akhenaten: Dweller in Truth* and *Arabian Nights and Days* boiled down to the following: the repeated use of the word *hadara* or 'civilisation' in dozens of his newspaper articles; his reference to Akhenaten as the first monotheist, and hence as the father of this *hadara*, in his 1988 Nobel Lecture; and his claim

that *Arabian Nights and Days* was the novel of which he was most proud.<sup>6</sup> The fact that these sources were all from Mahfouz's less-studied mature period following the assassination of Sadat, when he was already approaching his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, also adds a modicum of internal coherence and originality to the partial portrait I build of him, although again, reference to earlier and more familiar works such as the *Cairo Trilogy* and *Children of Gebelawi* is made where such recourse elucidates or advances the civilisation argument which is my central concern.

In the case of Tarkovsky, seven films were a much more manageable oeuvre with which to grapple, and since each of those films addressed the civilisation theme in its own unique way, I thought it proper to devote a chapter, albeit brief, to each. The decision to skip over the entire oeuvre at the expense of delving into greater detail on one or more of the films engendered the wrath of the film studies community, who at more than one of the universities where I presented my project complained that I treat as merely incidental the fact that Tarkovsky employed and in many ways revolutionised the medium of film. My reply to these critics is again to say that my primary focus is the civilisation theme, and that I raise formal issues to the extent that they inform that particular discussion instead of trying to take on the sprawling world of Tarkovsky scholarship in general. I also heavily cite untranslated Russian secondary sources, both to advance the civilisation theme and to bring these sources to English-speaking audiences for the first time, and conclude with an analysis of a series of excerpts from Tarkovsky's diary which also address the civilisation theme and show that his life was not as much a betrayal of the civilisational principles he professed as certain recent portraits have endeavoured to show.

Though not quite as prolific as Mahfouz, Tu Weiming nevertheless presented a similar challenge insofar as a good portion of his output is in Chinese, and insofar as the English portion of his oeuvre covers too much ground for me satisfactorily to synthesise or summarise it while still having time adequately to address the civilisation theme which is my main concern. Tu's colleagues at the Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies at Peking University were generous enough to gift me with a copy of his 2010 collection of essays entitled *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity: Essays on the Confucian Discourse in Cultural China* when I visited in 2013, and I found the essays, drawn from across the span of his oeuvre, to be an ideal synopsis for my purposes, in particular the 90-page 'The Confucian Way' and the shorter essays 'Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality', 'Chinese Philosophy: A Synoptic View' and 'Sociality, Individuality and Anthropocosmic Vision'. While I also address other New Confucian sources and scholars and other works by Tu himself, my goal was once again to avoid opening too many distracting side doors from the central

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Mohamed Salmawy, 'Bad News About *Arabian Nights and Days*!' ('Layālī 'Alf Layla... wa al Ḥabar al Aswad!') and <http://www.almasry-alyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=314314>, 17/10/2011 (accessed 3/3/2012).

civilisation theme which I extract, albeit quickly and roughly given the time available, from the imposing body of Tu's work.

But perhaps the biggest criticism of all of this project has been my reluctance to define what, exactly, my warriors mean by 'civilisation'. The most prominent of my Western warriors, Peter Hitchens, perhaps comes closest to a pithy definition when he says that 'love is the opposite of power', and that 'the human race', unless it turns in the direction of love and away from the imperial logic of old, 'will find itself doing very great and serious harm to itself over and over and over again in generation after generation after generation'.<sup>7</sup> All my warriors are engaged in this intergenerational anti-imperial struggle: Mahfouz dramatises it most famously in *Children of Gebelawi* and *The Harafish* but also, as we address directly, in his depictions of Akhenaten and Shahriyar and again in his 1988 Nobel Lecture; the heroes of Tarkovsky's films, from Ivan to Andrei Rublev, Kris Kelvin, Alyosha, the Stalker, Gorchakov and Alexander are all, as we will see, directly engaged in it; and Tu and his Confucians are above all teachers, tamers of imperial lust and advocates of a form of self-cultivation which is rooted in *ren* or fellow-feeling. Without this turn away from the instincts of empire and towards a form of *ren* we would, in the view of Hitchens and my three warriors, 'be missing civilisation completely'.<sup>8</sup>

My reluctance to define 'civilisation', then, has to do with the inexhaustible nature of the love or *ren* on which it is based, and the infinite forms that such fellow-feeling can take and which the humanities, in their glorious variety, depict and engender. The humanities, my warriors argue, are engaged in the ongoing, inexhaustible search for this love and in the celebration and sharing of the purest forms of it we can find, and constitute above all a profession of faith in the power of this love to improve and rescue us. It is extraordinary that such a view has seemingly become so extraordinary within humanities circles, but such is the institutional reality in which this thesis has been written; it seemed high time to remind frequently cynical Western proponents of alternative models of humanities study that voices from the Arab, Orthodox and Confucian worlds, as well as a growing number of voices from within, are calling for a return to the unfashionable Arnoldian model of culture as 'the best that has been thought and said in the world' and to the study of a stock of civilisational knowledge which can act as a bulwark against empire rather than, as is so often asserted of the best of our culture, as an inevitable tacit apology for it.

One leading voice in this battle is John Armstrong, whose 2009 book *In Search of Civilisation: Remaking a Tarnished Idea* seeks to restore the word 'civilisation' to its rightful place in our language – as a synonym of love rather than empire - and to return it to its 'native centre' in

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7 Peter Hitchens, 'Love is the Opposite of Power', <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FKUrFP3ys9w>, 22/2/14.  
8 Hitchens, 'Love is the Opposite of Power'.

'the arts and humanities'.<sup>9</sup> In the same problem-solving spirit which has inspired this thesis, Armstrong asks, 'What *should* our idea of civilisation be? We are not merely passive receptors of existing strategies of thinking. Philosophy is the project of discovering and creating the ideas we need.'<sup>10</sup> Armstrong himself then describes as a key element in the civilising process 'the attempt to make what is best also what is shared'.<sup>11</sup> This seems to me as good a definition of the 'civilisation' our warriors defend as any other, perhaps only rivalled by Armstrong himself when he describes civilisation as the narrow way between the Scylla of barbarism and the Charybdis of decadence: 'Barbarism is strength without sensitivity; decadence is sensitivity without strength.'<sup>12</sup> The word 'warriors', it is hoped, is not too strong a term to describe these quixotic unifiers of strength and sensitivity celebrated by Angus Kennedy in his 2014 book *Being Cultured: In Defence of Discrimination*. Kennedy picks up from where Armstrong left off and defends the importance of 'sharing the best' in the hope that we will freely, as autonomous individuals, arrive at 'civilisation' together:

Freedom without any limits – at least the limit of self-discipline – is indeed anarchy, and culture without standards is undistinguished and meaningless. But tell people where to ride their horses to and they are not free. Use culture as a tool and it is no longer an idea we can ride towards – no longer an end but a means. [...] The autonomous individual, while free, submits himself to his own laws. Won't we all go in different directions? No, because when we act to improve ourselves, strive toward our best selves, we do act in our own interest. But that interest, while it is of course a self-interest, is equally a shareable interest. [...] Culture is one way of bettering oneself. It is also, and importantly so, something that helps us recognise our own human freedom and acts as a reminder that some things are better than others.<sup>13</sup>

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9 See John Armstrong, *In Search of Civilisation: Remaking a Tarnished Idea*, (London: Penguin, 2009), Chapter 2, 'Wider and Wider Still'.

10 See Armstrong, *In Search of Civilisation*, Chapter 2, 'Wider and Wider Still'.

11 See Armstrong, *In Search of Civilisation*, Chapter 3, 'The Clash of Civilisations'.

12 Angus Kennedy, 'Matthew Arnold's Error: The State is Bad for Culture', [http://www.spiked-online.com/review\\_of\\_books/article/matthew-arnolds-error-the-state-is-bad-for-culture/14909#.U05mQRybFwd](http://www.spiked-online.com/review_of_books/article/matthew-arnolds-error-the-state-is-bad-for-culture/14909#.U05mQRybFwd), 11/4/2014.

13 Kennedy, 'Matthew Arnold's Error'. Kennedy's broader argument is that Arnold defends state coercion in the sphere of culture:

In the end, Arnold, a classic liberal, was forced, despite his faith in individual reason and free thinking, to come down on the side of society – against the individual – and the use of the state as an engine of culture to shape and direct the people into an organised and harmonious whole. If freedom had to be sacrificed so the 'sweetness and light' of culture could lift as many from darkness as possible, so be it.

This argument about Arnold's apparent pessimism regarding the power of culture to speak for itself, while interesting on its own terms, will not concern us directly here (Terry Eagleton will also make essentially the same criticism of Arnold in the coming chapter); suffice it to say that Arnoldian ideas, such as I present them, merely provide



It is in precisely this spirit of 'sharing the best' that I have chosen to bring together the work of Naguib Mahfouz, Andrei Tarkovsky, Tu Weiming and their Western counterparts for the first time, returning to an idea of 'civilisation' which, like Armstrong's, is about more than tribal belonging – the Huntington 'clash' thesis - or narrowly material progress, and which focuses above all on the 'art of living' and creation of genuine 'spiritual prosperity'<sup>14</sup> in the belief that such wealth exists and can be spread via the humanities.<sup>15</sup>

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the inspiration for our discussion and do not constitute the subject under discussion itself. A brief and partial defence of Arnold against Kennedy's charges nevertheless seems warranted here: Kennedy appears to be forgetting that no culture at all can be transmitted without the prior coercion of children via education.

14 Parts Three and Four of Armstrong's *In Search of Civilisation* are headed 'Civilisation as the Art of Living' and 'Civilisation as Spiritual Prosperity' respectively.

15 A brief note regarding translation policy is also worth including here. All translations from non-English sources are my own unless otherwise stated. Instead of clogging my text and footnotes with original citations from the languages I have quoted from, ranging as they do from French and Spanish to Arabic, Russian and Chinese, I have opted instead to preserve the flow of the English text. Readers with the means or inclination to compare my English renderings with the original source material cited are strongly encouraged to do so.

## 1) Western Warriors

### *1.1 The Culture Wars*

*Once the defence of the humanities is made to rest on the 'culture' they transmit, they become vulnerable to deconstruction. One can summon any number of theories — the Marxist theory of “ideology,” or some feminist, post-structuralist, or Foucauldian descendant of it — in proof of the view that the precious achievements of our culture owe their status merely to the power that speaks through them, and hence that they are of no intrinsic worth. In this way the whole idea of culture as an autonomous sphere of moral knowledge, one that requires learning, scholarship, and immersion to enhance and retain, is cast to the winds. On this view, instead of transmitting culture, the university exists to deconstruct it, to remove its aura. The university’s purpose is to leave the student, after three or four years of anxious dissipation, with the view that anything goes and nothing matters.<sup>16</sup>*

Roger Scruton

Permit a series of short personal anecdotes here to situate the discussion to follow. In my first year as an undergraduate at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, in 2000, the Philosophy Department, where I was studying, was torn down to make way for library expansions and a new business school designed to attract fee-paying international students. We were moved from our historic villa at the geographic heart of the university to the fifth and sixth floors of a nondescript 10-storey office block which the university had leased 500 yards down the road.

Five years later, in 2005, postgraduate students were invited to present their work to a university-wide audience in a corporate-sponsored quest for outstanding research. If I recall correctly, there was a \$5000 prize for the Faculty of Arts division. My exploration of the links between Borges's fiction and his love life, along with other projects like it, did not make it past the first round; the eventual winner in the Arts Faculty was a presentation on the ways in which local art could be exploited to grow the New Zealand economy. Even bastions of humanism like Italy and France, where I have spent the majority of my time as a graduate student, are witnessing dilutions and vocationalisations of curricula on an unprecedented scale as a result of European Bologna reforms. The inaugural address for new graduate students at the European University of St.

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<sup>16</sup> Roger Scruton, 'Scientism in the Arts and Humanities', <http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/scientism-in-the-arts-and-humanities>, Fall 2013.

Petersburg, Russia, where I spent the fourth semester of my PhD programme, was delivered by the CEO of a Swiss tobacco company, a major corporate contributor to the university's endowment.

Should we care, or perhaps even applaud? Terry Eagleton, a vocal critic of the capitulation of universities in the Anglophone sphere to market forces, gives us reason for pause by sketching some 'momentous developments in culture over the last hundred years' in a 2012 debate with Roger Scruton. Eagleton argues that culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century lost its independence from the productive economy and thereby its critical distance as an arbiter of social practices. The wider consequence of this integration of culture into the mundane sphere of economic production was a loss of faith in the power of culture to act as a surrogate for, or companion to, religion; in Eagleton's words, 'the idea that the arts will save us, which in some ways is the theme of modernism, is gradually discredited'.<sup>17</sup> The idea of a global literary canon, which had once promised to 'distill our deep, shared values'<sup>18</sup> and enshrine our belonging to a universal and eternally self-perfecting human community, gave way to an essentially philistine conception of literature and the arts as an obstacle to the economic and political self-realisation of hitherto marginalised identity groupings and as part of the problems of economic and social injustice rather than part of the solution to them. No longer trusted as a universal human inheritance capable of morally improving all those who came into contact with it, culture became instead 'the very language in which political demands were framed and articulated, which meant that culture could no longer take the high ground'; from being regarded as a collection of 'the best that has been thought and said in the world' and a route to human self-realisation and perfection, culture is for us today 'what people are willing to kill for, or die for', which for Eagleton means not the 'pre-Raphaelite brotherhood' or other potential symbols of a universal cultural canon, but rather local questions of 'religion, identity, community, ethnicity, lineage and so on'.<sup>19</sup>

In many respects, this chapter is less interested in exploring the reasons for the loss of faith in the power of 'literature' or the humanities to act as a surrogate religion, or as a 'marvellously portable way to carry a deep consensus of values'<sup>20</sup>, than it is in rebuilding this faith by setting the tone for the deep consensus of values I uncovered among sources as seemingly disparate as Naguib Mahfouz, Andrei Tarkovsky and Tu Weiming. Nevertheless, any academic text must deal squarely with the institutional context in which it is written, even as it aims to shape that context for future generations. The influence on the humanities of the view of culture as 'part of the problem' has been enormous and, as my 'Western warriors' will argue, both morally and materially disastrous; in recent years, however, a growing number of practitioners of the discipline, some of whom will be

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17 Terry Eagleton, 'Terry Eagleton in Conversation with Roger Scruton', *Intelligence Squared Debate*, 13/9/12, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOdMBDOj4ec> (accessed 17/12/12).

18 Eagleton, *Intelligence Squared Debate*.

19 Eagleton, *Intelligence Squared Debate*.

20 Eagleton, *Intelligence Squared Debate*.

introduced here, have returned to the older, Arnoldian view that only the humanities – culture as an inheritance of a 'best that has been thought and said in the world' - could inspire people to care about distant others and care better for proximate others, and to re-engage in the energetic quest for human perfection that Arnold thought was intrinsic to culture and which Stephen Fry calls 'the eternal adventure of trying to discover moral truth in the world'<sup>21</sup>. Culture, then, on the Arnoldian view, is the key to everything: individual meaning, social justice, and ultimately the survival of Pascal's universal man, the intergenerational human entity who 'exists always and learns continually', and whom Arnold himself took for granted as a unit of concern even as he refused to admit that individuals, including generations of 'philistines' imprisoned in the 'machinery' of material wealth and unexposed to the surpassing majesty of the cultural realm, should ever be 'sacrificed' for it.<sup>22</sup>

Arguably the most prominent 21st-century proponent of a neo-Arnoldian turn in Anglosphere humanities has been Martha Nussbaum. As a graduate student in classical Greek literature, Nussbaum grew tired of her professors' obsession with formal textual detail at the complete expense of the moral dilemmas at play in, for example, Sophocles.<sup>23</sup> Having left classical scholarship formally behind, Nussbaum then navigated her way between the Scylla of an analytic philosophy uninterested in emotions and the Charybdis of a continental philosophy unconcerned with empirical evidence in search of an interdisciplinary interzone which would allow her simultaneously to tackle the ethical dilemmas of Greek tragedy on a personal moral level and questions of law and justice on a social level.<sup>24</sup> Such efforts remain, however, the exception rather than the rule, and humanities departments remain caught in an existential crisis as the noose tightens around their neck. Unable to justify their utility to business as incubators of entrepreneurial or managerial thinking, humanities departments have developed a hermetic, pseudoscientific language of textual analysis and cultural critique widely ridiculed by the very scientists they are seeking to emulate with their obtuse terminologies in a desperate bid to survive by sounding important, a scandal most famously uncovered by physicist Alan D. Sokal in his 1996 hoax article 'Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformational Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity'.<sup>25</sup> Yet the quest for moral truth, if that is indeed what the humanities are ultimately about, cannot be a science in the same way that physics is a science; I do not need to know how to build a hi-tech computer in order to use one – only a few people need to understand the complex language required

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21 Stephen Fry, 'Stephen Fry on Catholicism', <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NL5WVecNdhk> (accessed 17/12/12).

22 See Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, pp. 33-35.

23 See Martha Nussbaum, 'Conversations with History', <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qy3YTzYjut4>, 31/1/2008 (accessed 24/10/12).

24 Nussbaum, 'Conversations with History'.

25 See Alan D. Sokal, 'Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformational Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity', *Social Text*, nos. 46-47, Spring/Summer 1996, pp. 217-252.

to do so - but the whole point of the search for moral truth is that it matters only insofar as people everywhere can understand, and are exposed to, the language in which it is conducted. There will be a group of people who devote their lives to it, but their job is not primarily to communicate with other specialists, as scientists do in complex scientific papers; their primary job is to popularise their findings so that ordinary lives can in some way be improved. Otherwise, the social utility, and justification for public funding, of such endeavours is precisely zero, and the humanities are reduced to a parlour game for idle élites. Having lost their self-confidence as defenders of civilisation after a century of, in Eagleton's words, 'capitalist attack', the humanities are now caught in a death-spiral of shrinking student numbers and shrinking funding.<sup>26</sup> The prospects for humanities graduates the world over are dire; the dream of a tenured position and a salary commensurate with the years of effort required for doctoral and post-doctoral study more resembles the long odds of a professional football contract than the natural progression through one of the traditional professions. Supply ludicrously outweighs demand, and demand is shrinking with every passing year.

Jacques Derrida, one of the chief culprits and obfuscators of our Theory-laden age, was nevertheless right, though hardly alone, when he traced the etymology of the word 'professor' back to the profession of a faith.<sup>27</sup> Once upon a time, humanities scholars believed that the arts could save people, or at least improve them, and spent their lives proselytising from their lecterns and cosy university chairs. What happens when the professors lose faith in what they are doing, as we have seen in the humanities over the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and on into our own, is that everyone else eventually does too. Fortunately, the odd cry for civilisation is still audible in humanities departments behind the ebbing but still high tide of deconstruction and identity politics. Eagleton's opponent in the 2012 debate cited above, Roger Scruton, is one such voice, and worth quoting at length for the purposes of this chapter:

What is culture, why should we teach it now, and how can we teach it? This is very important for people in the humanities, because that is how we define our subjects. Terry Eagleton teaches literature, which is a part of culture. I teach philosophy, in particular those aspects of philosophy that border on the arts. There is no point teaching them if I don't think there is something to be learned. But what exactly? I think there are two contrasting views: [...] I defend a view of culture which aspires to

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26 One recent feature squarely to address the so-called 'crisis' in humanities education is the *New Republic's* appropriately named 'Humanities Deathwatch' series, including, in one prominent recent example, Gordon Hutner and Feisal G. Mohamed's 'The Real Humanities Crisis is Happening at Public Universities', <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/114616/public-universities-hurt-humanities-crisis>, 6/9/13.

27 See Jacques Derrida, 'The Future of the Profession or the University without Condition', in *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader*, (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

be a form of wisdom that is to be imparted to people, that is to say, something which contains elements of knowledge which they wouldn't otherwise acquire and which is imparted in its own particular way, not as the sciences are, but in another way. It is this other way which is difficult to define. But there are those who teach in universities, in humanities departments, who see culture as something quite different: as part of the ideology of the ruling class, or the ideology of a particular social order. The purpose of teaching it is not to impart it, but on the contrary to undermine it, or to expose the powers that secretly advance behind it. This second approach started what I think of as the culture wars: wars between those people who regarded their role as teachers of culture as one of imparting a form of wisdom, a form of knowledge that would not only be useful for the student but part of the continuity of the social order to which the student belongs, and those who see their primary duty as one of debunking, deconstructing, or showing the 'structures of domination', to use the Foucauldian idiom, that lie behind our ways of thinking, our ways of speaking, and our ways of enjoying the art and music of our civilisation. The origin of this second view is, I think, the Marxist theory of ideology, which became prominent not at the time Marx wrote, but much later, in the Frankfurt School in Germany between the wars, and of course in France in 1968, under the influence of people like Foucault. [...] I think it is very important to reaffirm another vision of culture as something not only worth imparting but also as containing knowledge. The kind of knowledge that it contains is not, like scientific knowledge, a collection of facts and theories, and when people start thinking of culture in terms of theory, it is largely because they are taking the Marxist approach of debunking it by finding the explanation of it. I think of culture as a form of practical knowledge, something that gives you a sense of what to do, what to feel, how to be towards other people in a community, in ways that will enhance your own social and emotional competence. I think this is what you learn from literature, and I think in particular you learn it from music, an aspect of culture so often overlooked. The greatest achievement of our civilisation, if you leave religion and science to one side, has been music, a continuous tradition of reflection through articulate sound on what it is to be human, and a constant attempt to take that reflection further, to build abstract structures in which nevertheless we see mirrored our own emotional nature as rational and social beings. This great achievement is something which can be imparted to the young, and it changes their lives. It changes their way not only of thinking about the world but of seeing each other. Nothing can be done to enhance this enculturation by giving

a Marxist theory of where it all came from; here is something you impart by encouraging young people to love it, and to find reflected in it all that is best in themselves. That is, I think, what a real cultural education should be: imparting that kind of self-knowing and reflective conception of why one is the sort of thing one is, and how to find it mirrored in the world around you.<sup>28</sup>

While Eagleton goes on to defend Marx and his later followers against some of these charges, arguing that access to culture is an important socialist concept and that Marx himself can be regarded as a humanist who, like Arnold and 21st-century cosmopolitans such as Thomas Pogge, saw individual self-realisation as inextricably linked to collective or communal flourishing everywhere<sup>29</sup>, Scruton's key point remains: culture is imparted with love when enthusiastic teachers who profess a faith in their material actually put cultural products in the hands of their students, not when they force students to learn a prior set of 'critical tools' or 'scientific instruments' with which to understand and 'decode' them. The debate about what to include in this canon should be continually waged in an open university setting, as one generation of 'professors' inspires a new generation of students with their faith in their material.

If professorial authority in the humanities has been eroded as professors themselves have lost their sense of mission, and if fewer students are attracted to the humanities in the first place given increased emphasis on science and business studies all across the globe, it is not hard to imagine that the kind of cultural knowledge that Scruton talks about – difficult to measure though it is - is being rapidly lost. In a free society, however, adults cannot be forced to read or listen to difficult but ultimately edifying cultural products. Without investment in the *formation du goût* of the young, the wisdom – the knowledge - of Averroës or Bach or Confucius or whoever one regards

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28 Roger Scruton, 'Terry Eagleton in Conversation with Roger Scruton'.

29 While Eagleton savagely attacks Arnold as a defender of unjust class relations, for example in the 2012 Firth Lectures at the University of Nottingham (Terry Eagleton, 'Culture and the Death of God', Firth Lectures 2012, University of Nottingham; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zmmRsvIfEVI>), and defends the Marxist revolutionary spirit against what he, in my view unfairly, regards as the empire-justifying conservatism of Arnoldian thought, Eagleton's defence of Marx's humanism in *Why Marx Was Right* (Yale University Press, 2011) fits perfectly with the Arnoldian idea, developed in this chapter and recovered in the work of Mahfouz, Tarkovsky and Tu, that all self-realisation or 'salvation' is necessarily communal and that one therefore has a responsibility for all that happens in the world. On the other hand, Arnold-champion Roger Scruton, in a 2012 lecture on moral relativism delivered in Budapest ('Roger Scruton on Moral Relativism', Common Sense Society, Budapest, 25/1/2012; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15BXyvMU80Q>), actually denies the claims of distant strangers on us beyond mere respect for negative freedoms. Thomas Pogge, meanwhile, argues in a more Arnoldian (and also, on Eagleton's reading, a more 'Marxist') spirit, and most famously in 'Cosmopolitanism and Sovereignty' (*Ethics* 103, 1992, pp. 48-75), both that individual 'persons' are ultimate units of concern and that 'this special status has global force'; namely, 'persons are ultimate units of concern *for everyone*', or in other words, 'everyone is a unit of concern for everyone else'. There may be little that one can practically do, Pogge claims, for the inhabitants of a distant village, and it may make sense to concentrate international political reform on local and regional institutions capable of making meaningful improvements in people's lives, but the broad humanist thesis regarding the communal nature of all individual self-realisation stands.

as wise will eventually be lost, not in the sense that the libraries or servers where such wisdom can be found will no longer be maintained (although this may also be the eventual result), but in the sense that a majority of people will live their lives without ever coming into contact with such wisdom. Clive James brilliantly diagnoses and actively opposes this spreading 'cultural amnesia' in his 2007 book of the same name<sup>30</sup>, while Eagleton warns that 'the end of the humanities'<sup>31</sup> is coming precisely at a time when questions of cultural identity – 'what people will kill or die for' – are being radically reevaluated in the light of rapid technological development and globalisation. Eagleton summarises the status quo as a 'stalled dialectic' between the global and the local:

Culture which has been narrowly nationalistic isn't really able to make much headway in a globalised world. On the other hand, a purely rootless, postmodern cosmopolitan culture doesn't seem able to speak to certain deep demands and needs in people where they are. We're living in a kind of misalignment of the global on the one hand and the local on the other. The more rootlessly global and brittly cosmopolitan people become, the more other people are going to retreat to their mountain hideouts and say, 'This is my patch.'<sup>32</sup>

Scruton, however, responds that the only culture worth defending is already a post-nationalistic one based on Renaissance and Enlightenment values:

The high culture that we've been talking about has not really been national, or nationalistic. I had an education in which I was brought up on the sacred books of the ancient Hebrews, the Greek New Testament, the Latin literature of Rome, the Greek epic, the *Thousand and One Nights*. There is nowhere in this where you can really pin it down to a particular national inheritance. This is part of the great achievement of Europe, that it has erected this high culture as a critical apparatus which enables us to put our national histories in question if we need to.<sup>33</sup>

In other words, for a small, privileged group exposed in youth to the 'professors' of faith in high culture, cosmopolitanism is more than a weak glue; it comes to form part of the very core of their being. The challenge of humanities education, its very *raison d'être* in a globalising world fraught

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30 See Clive James, *Cultural Amnesia: Necessary Memories in History and the Arts*, (W.W. Norton, 2007).

31 See Terry Eagleton, 'The End of the Humanities', University of Notre Dame Public Lecture, 24/4/2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ANa4srh5Xww>.

32 Eagleton, 'Terry Eagleton in Conversation with Roger Scruton'.

33 Scruton, 'Terry Eagleton in Conversation with Roger Scruton'.



with sectarian strife and local power struggles, is, or so our warriors will argue, precisely the diffusion of professorial enthusiasm for a global literary or cultural canon. Although dilemmas of loyalty will always remain to define our lives, an awareness of the fullest possible range of human experience and the broad civilisational context of our daily decisions is a prerequisite for moral action; only literature, or in a broader sense culture, can offer this unfathomably broad panorama in a 'portable' way.

Nussbaum is right when she suggests that a globalising world is one in which the dilemmas of Greek tragedy – choosing between a mother and a father, or between family and the state – are multiplied. The capacity for moral as well as immoral action facilitated by our increased wealth and ability to travel is quite literally mind-boggling, and our choice of causes often arbitrary. The question of moral truth becomes more urgent, not less, as our possibilities for moral and immoral action increase. At the same time, however, if we believe in moral truth, it cannot have changed much in recent millennia. Military historian Victor Davis Hanson argues that the search for such timeless moral truth has largely stopped within the Western academy and that doctrines of multiculturalism and appeasement of violent totalitarianisms - the kinds of postcolonial guilt complexes that have stopped many Western humanities professors from professing any faith in the idea of a universal civilisation or moral truth at all in recent decades – have gained the upper hand in Western élite circles and pose a threat to the continuity of civilisation itself. Hanson argues instead for the maintenance of a 'symbiotic relationship' between security and freedom, defending the superiority of the Athenian solution ('we throw open our city to the world, and never by any alien acts exclude foreigners from the opportunity of learning or observing') over the closed Spartan alternative, arguing that the Athenians were 'just as ready to encounter every legitimate danger' and that 'although the eyes of an enemy may occasionally profit' from such liberality, the decision to trust 'less in system and policy' than in the 'native spirit' of citizens had been a cornerstone of Western civilisation, 'with us from the beginning'.<sup>34</sup> A vital aspect of this 'native spirit', however, is a reluctance to self-censor, a Socratic willingness to examine one's beliefs critically and publicly through open, frequently adversarial dialogue; in Hanson's view, 'there is a collective mood in the West that is self-censoring, is not self-reflective, and has had a deleterious effect on free expression'.<sup>35</sup> He traces the origins of this self-censorship back to a widespread feeling of survivor guilt among Western populations at the end of the colonial era:

Many Westerners find explanations of Western material superiority based on

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34 Victor Davis Hanson, 'In Defence of Liberty', 6/3/2008, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_NtAWoBrvoc&feature=g-vrec](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_NtAWoBrvoc&feature=g-vrec) (accessed 1/9/12).

35 Hanson, 'In Defence of Liberty'.

cultural superiority chauvinistic; one of the ways you relieve this contradiction within yourself - I guess we could call it Western guilt - is, in the abstract, on things that you don't think are absolutely essential to your own life, to make concessions. You censor yourself. [...] What is the psychological satisfaction of this? You don't have to make any great sacrifice in your own life. You don't have to give up the cocoon of Westernism when you can do it in the abstract. Some of the fiercest critics of Western civilisation find these abstract outlets of expression, which they feel, in the short term, don't endanger their own privilege.<sup>36</sup>

The longer-term consequence for Hanson of such a spurning of the idea of a 'best that has been thought and said in the world' in favour of an empty, self-censoring, multiculturalist embrace of identity politics on behalf of marginalised groups is that we 'lose the precious symbiosis between security and freedom'. To illustrate his point, Hanson offers the controversial example of Muslim integration in Europe:

In theory, it wouldn't matter how many Muslims came if they became good Europeans. That's not happening for two reasons; the European left is multicultural, that is, they don't believe in themselves. They can't argue that Europe is better than the alternative. They have no concept of the history or appreciation of the Renaissance or Enlightenment. They don't see themselves as exceptional; so then why should people who come see them as exceptional? [... Muslim immigrants to Europe] want to escape the autocracy of the Middle East, the poverty; they come to the West, and they are given freedom, but then they resent the fact that they are unequal. They want instant parity, because that's what they're told the EU does; then the EU says, 'Well, we gave them all this money, we give them all these entitlements so long as they don't come into our neighbourhoods, why are they angry? [...] The problem is insoluble.'<sup>37</sup>

What role can literature or culture play, if any, in solving these problems? Fairly obviously, co-existence in a finite environment entails material sacrifice; I want to eat, but to the extent that I also want other people to eat, I will leave enough and as good for others. Culture enables this sacrifice

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<sup>36</sup> Hanson, 'In Defence of Liberty'.

<sup>37</sup> Victor Davis Hanson, 'The New Old World Order', <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=go8uMp-gUsY>, 14/10/10 (accessed 31/8/12).

by reminding us of a shared, universal humanity; when we engage socratically with foreign interlocutors, both we and our interlocutors have a chance of being improved, and when we read a contemporary Arab or Chinese author, we are forced to confront the fact, otherwise absent in our everyday lives, that millions of people we have never met live, breathe, love and suffer like us on the same planet. The logic of free-market liberalism, now the bread and butter of education systems across most of the world, encourages the student to believe that markets best solve most if not all human problems, and that, historically, the rise of manners and morality is connected with trade anyway: you need to be nice to your client if you want him to buy your wares. But what if a free market for some or most material goods is necessary, but not sufficient, to sustain civilisation, especially in our globalising century? As Hanson suggests, we may be unaware of the longer-term dangers of self-censorship in the name of guilt complexes and narrowly economic interests. More than this instrumental reasoning, however, is it not in some sense the case that moral engagement, identification with the thoughts and feelings of others, is the goal of life, its own reward, and that we teach this to our children in the hope that they will be happy, and know God, or God's contemporary secular equivalent? This concept of civilisation perhaps sounds as if it belongs more in the 16<sup>th</sup> than the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but does it not remain true? Is it not precisely this faith that the majority of Western humanities 'professors' have lost? This thesis explores the views of three non-Western 'warriors' and, in the remainder of this chapter, a series of 'Western counterparts' who seek to remind us of this threatened civilisational heritage.

Meanwhile, Scottish historian Niall Ferguson, a self-confessed 'empirical thinker' with little time for groundless philosophising, has arguably done more than anyone to redefine the meaning of the word 'civilisation' in English in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In *Civilisation: The West and the Rest*, Ferguson explains the rise of Western civilisation to global dominance after the Renaissance in terms of six 'killer apps' – economic competition, the scientific revolution, private property rights and the rule of law, modern medicine, the birth of the consumer society, and the work ethic - and points to recent evidence of rapid improvements in living standards in East Asia and other BRICS economies brought about by the 'downloading' of most or all of these 'apps' to suggest that religion, or 'culture', religion's surrogate, plays no real role in the march of civilisation.<sup>38</sup> Just as the myth of Western racial superiority has been gradually discredited, so too, Ferguson argues, has the idea that Christianity or Protestantism or the Western literary canon are necessary for civilisation been exposed for what it is. Contrary to Max Weber's famous thesis about the link between Protestantism and people's willingness to work, Ferguson claims that Protestantism's real contribution to modern history was to increase literacy rates, thereby freeing

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38 See Niall Ferguson, *Civilisation: The West and the Rest*, (Penguin Press, 2011).

millions of people for more productive economic activity. Non-Protestant nations eventually worked this trick out, and are now, to Ferguson's chagrin, out-educating the West and churning out more productive generations of workers.

It would be absurd, however, to suggest that these six 'killer apps' can rest on anything other than a strong bedrock of moral values. Ferguson himself says as much:

I have a personal philosophy but I'm always trying to modify it. [...] I've never had any religious faith. I have, however, a profound belief that, as a basis for ethical conduct, the Ten Commandments are pretty good, and that actually, the monotheisms, and particularly Christianity, offer a really quite good guide to how to live well. By well, I mean to live morally. It's very hard for an atheist to invent, from first principles, a good ethical basis for behaviour, because actually, in the natural state, human beings don't behave well; they're quite strongly tempted to behave badly. We're evolved in ways that actually encourage bad behaviour. We're designed to kill strangers, we're designed, in fact, to steal, and so it's very important that there should be an ethical framework within which we live. My dilemma is that I don't really believe in any divine policeman or any afterlife payoffs, but I do believe that we should live well.<sup>39</sup>

As a cold-eyed human scientist rather than a humanist bathed daily in the 'sweetness and light' of Arnoldian high culture, Ferguson regards himself as 'instinctively a Hobbesian - in other words, I think that the state of nature is pretty ugly and that civilisation is all about trying to rein our natural impulses in'.<sup>40</sup> He nevertheless concedes that he is 'prepared to be argued out of that'; if somebody can persuade him that 'human beings in fact innately have a preference for order and social cooperation rather than killing one another, and that their killing one another is the exception rather than the norm', then he will 'certainly listen, and be prepared to be convinced'.<sup>41</sup> Surely the role of the humanities, of culture, is precisely to do this job of convincing, to provide the 'ethical basis for behaviour' which the monotheisms as literally interpreted no longer provide, to give people a reason not to kill each other and steal from each other and to respond instead to the better angels of their nature, to become more fully themselves. While many still believe in the power of civilisation to

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39 Niall Ferguson, 'Niall Ferguson on Belief', [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B64q2\\_Crq-Y&feature=relmfu](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B64q2_Crq-Y&feature=relmfu), 23/4/12 (accessed 13/7/12).

40 Niall Ferguson, 'Niall Ferguson on Belief'.

41 Niall Ferguson, 'Niall Ferguson on Belief'.

improve individuals and society – Steven Pinker, author of a book titled precisely *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011), is one prominent recent example<sup>42</sup> - Eagleton and others suggest that this hope is no longer real, and that we have lost our faith in culture's power to save or improve us.

Postmodern philosophy and art are at least partly to blame for this loss of faith, paradoxically because they distort, in ways we will see below, the original Socratic idea of an 'examined life' by turning it into a narcissistic end in itself, much as Arnold's philistines made ends out of wealth accumulation and physical exercise. And yet, in its original formulation, the Socratic call to look within is motivated not first and foremost by a dandyish and self-regarding 'curiosity' – a largely pejorative, effete term in the lexicon of Arnold's day<sup>43</sup> - but by social concerns, a care for the fate of a civilisation of which one is an organic part. Costica Bradatan praises Bettany Hughes for reminding us of this in her book *The Hemlock Cup: Socrates, Athens and the Search for the Good Life*; Hughes's Socrates 'practiced his philosophy in a day-to-day context', revealing its essence in 'the way he relates to the other guests', 'acutely observing', and engaging with them in a way which is 'immediate, comradely, corporeal, concrete, flirtatious, fond'. Socrates, 'drinking, chatting, eating around a low dinner-table on a warm Athenian night', reveals himself as a 'philosopher of the people, someone who did not divorce the physical from the metaphysical', or personal from social salvation.<sup>44</sup>

Niall Ferguson is emphatically *not* suggesting that we can do without the Socratic spirit, or that his 'killer apps' can survive without a hunger for moral truth which must be coached in us. It is not the business of a humanist to question the validity of Ferguson's widely praised historical scholarship, but rather to provide the coaching that he himself calls for by illustrating that certain forms of self-sacrificing behaviour are better or truer than others. Philosophy endeavours to show this by rational argument; literature, as well as the more holistic forms of philosophy such as one finds in the Confucian tradition, go a step further by actually implanting love in the hearts of readers in a direct, uncontrollable, inevitable way. This form of knowledge, what Nussbaum calls 'love's knowledge'<sup>45</sup>, is utterly unmonetisable, but, to the extent that it exists, no less real than other empirical knowledge.

Ferguson, for his part, stresses that knowledge gained through love in the form of free association - 'institutions established by citizens with an objective other than private profit' - is central to his vision of 'civilisation' or what he also calls 'the black box labelled civil society', and that the rapid decline of free association in the Western world in recent decades ought urgently to be

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42 Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, (Viking Books, 2011).

43 See Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, pp. 5-7.

44 Costica Bradatan, 'Philosophy as an Art of Living', <http://lareviewofbooks.org/article.php?id=1166&fulltext=1,14/11/12> (accessed 5/12/12).

45 See Nussbaum's *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, (Oxford University Press, 1992).

reversed.<sup>46</sup> Though hardly alone in this (left-wing luminaries like Noam Chomsky have made careers out of making the same point), the distinctly right-of-centre Ferguson argues that positive social change – rights for ethnic and sexual minorities, say – comes from grassroots organising, and only at the end of a long struggle becomes codified in law. The same could be said, in reverse, of the humanities, now struggling to hold onto their place in universities and the public consciousness because of a decline in the reading and study of serious literature among the general adult public – itself largely a form of free association – consistent with the decline in other forms of free association over the last 40 years in the Western world. Here we are close to the loss of cultural knowledge lamented by Scruton: as fewer and fewer people are exposed to 'love's knowledge' through direct contact with literature, music, art, philosophy and serious criticism and journalism, the less likely they are to want to cooperate with each other, or sacrifice for one another, or refrain, in the name of a higher moral or civilisational ideal, from exploiting one another. Even thinkers as hard-headed and groundedly 'empirical' as Niall Ferguson imply that the humanities must be part of the solution.

Before we get to the solution, however, it behooves us at least to sketch this seemingly inexplicable loss of faith in the humanities, in 'culture', and in the very concept of 'civilisation' itself over the last century. Scruton argues in his debate with Eagleton and elsewhere that the humanities are threatened by the virus of postmodern Theory on the one hand – 'theory about that for which there can be no theory' in his felicitous phrase - and science, particularly neuroscience and evolutionary biology, on the other.<sup>47</sup> Yet in the end, the problem is one and the same: namely, treating the humanities as 'sciences' rather than participatory practices in which the practitioner achieves knowledge through a certain kind of moral attention. 'It is the nobility of the soul which allows us best to apprehend the universe,' Naguib Mahfouz once said in an interview<sup>48</sup>; this is not a scientific hypothesis to be tested, although it remains an empirical claim. Mahfouz's life's work consisted in convincing people of the truth of this claim through his own writing by effecting a moral change for the better in his readers. Unlike the empirical claims of science, however, including the human sciences, which remain more or less valid whether we like them or not, truth in the humanities is entirely dependent on what we as moral beings feel. A claim like Mahfouz's is true to the extent that people believe it to be true; the humanist is powerless in the face of the true sociopath. As humanists, however, we can all agree that true sociopathy is both worse for individuals and society as a whole, and associate freely to encourage outcomes which engender what we consider to be healthy moral development for ourselves and the people in our care: a broad

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46 Niall Ferguson, 'Reith Lectures 2012', <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01jmxsk/features/transcript>, 10/7/12 (accessed 13/7/12).

47 See Scruton, 'Scientism in the Arts and Humanities' for a concise and recent summary of this position.

48 See Francka Mouloudi's film *Naguib Mahfouz: Passage de Siècle*, (Harmattan, 1999).

humanistic education. This kind of commonsense approach, however, is regarded with routine suspicion by both active defenders and unconscious inheritors of postmodern Theory, and we need to understand why, and how this state of affairs came about.

The story could of course be traced back much further, but it makes sense for our purposes to begin with Marcel Mauss and Emile Durkheim and the rise of the human sciences in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, for it is at precisely this point that the humanities were first directly challenged by science, as religion had been by the Enlightenment.

### *1.2 From Mauss and Monet to Postmodern Relativism*

However obvious it may seem, it is worth stressing that the founders of the social sciences were themselves humanists who were deeply concerned with the fate of human civilisation; they viewed their empirical work as a part of, and as a justification for, a larger civilisational project in an age of globalisation. Here is Marcel Mauss:

Religions are born in the form of sects. A new religion, however transcendent or controversial it may be, is always formed in the heart of another. It sometimes aims only to reform [the existing religion], to bring it back to the purity of the initial revelation. This is the case of the religions produced by Christianity. More often than not, when it is born, the new religion opposes itself to the mother religion in the form of a sect; even when it does away with most of the old notions and most of the old rites, the new religion does not deny the old, it simply wants to introduce modes of behaviour and collective thought that it considers better. Thus neither Jesus nor Paul detach themselves completely from Moses, the Buddha and the Jina do not deny the reality, if only phenomenal, of the gods of Brahmanism. At the beginning, the new religion bears the stamp of its sectarian origin. [...] Religion, as with all social phenomena, is in a constant state of becoming; the number of possible fragmentations and innovations, failed and viable, of which it is possible is likely undefined. The sect is the natural product of the functioning of religion.<sup>49</sup>

[...] It doesn't seem right to say that legal codes and customs have always and everywhere been independent of religious law. Except in our Western societies,

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49 Marcel Mauss, 'General Remarks on the Theory of Religions ('Généralités sur la théorie des religions'), 1905, in *Oeuvres (1. Les Fonctions du Sacré)*, (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1968), pp. 98-99.

everywhere religion, law and morality are narrowly intertwined.<sup>50</sup>

[...] Let us pause to consider the idea of a *common fund, a general inheritance of societies and civilisations*. In our opinion, this is what the idea of 'Civilisation' corresponds to: a limit of fusion. [...] This idea of a growing inheritance, of an intellectual and material fund shared by an ever more reasonable humanity, is, we sincerely believe, founded in fact.<sup>51</sup>

Mauss's disciple, Emile Durkheim, takes this faith in an *acquis commun* or common inheritance even further:

[Religious] dogma, taken literally, is, it has often been said, unsustainable; but why should we hold so to the idea of literal expression? Words have no meanings by themselves; it is up to the spirit to seek the essence. Even the most sacred text must be interpreted. [...] Once the believer had been authorised by Luther to interpret [the Bible], she was pushed to put her own thoughts where godly thoughts had once been, and soon saw nothing more than symbols in even the most central doctrines, even in the idea of revelation itself. Christ and the miracles now do nothing more than stand in for the Divine; why then wouldn't God Himself be seen as a symbol? And indeed, we have come to see God as the personification of the moral ideal. Is it not clear that such a doctrine is philosophical and no longer warrants the name religion? If Christ is not a God, why pray to him, why see in his words the full and final words of the truth? Because he was a man of extraordinary genius? It goes against the continuity of history and the idea of progress to see in one man, even a superior man, the expression of all centuries.

But beyond the dogma, taken literally or interpreted symbolically, there is something in religion which seems to survive critique and keep us believing: morality. Morality developed within religion, which served as a protective envelope for it. Will the need for such protection remain forever? [...] Fear [of God] is a pathological sentiment which has nothing moral about it. As for love, religions have corrupted it by claiming it for God alone. This mystical love detaches individuals from the world and from themselves, rendering them indifferent to all that surrounds them and leaving them in a state of disillusionment and disinterest. Today this inert

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50 Marcel Mauss, *Oeuvres (1. Les Fonctions du Sacré)*, 1902, p. 128.

51 Marcel Mauss, 'Theory of Civilisations ('Théorie des civilisations'), 1929, in *Oeuvres (2. Représentations collectives et diversité des civilisations)*, (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1974).



and contemplative love is being replaced by an active and living love of family, humanity and the ideal. As for prayer, that great auxiliary of religious piety, nothing shows that it is indispensable. Through love and charity, action will take the place of prayer; the nirvana in which the [religious] spirit drowns itself in sterile exaltation will be replaced by thought and philosophical reflection with concrete benefits for all concerned. In other words, what will remain of religion is the metaphysical and philosophical instinct, the love of inquiry, free inquiry.<sup>52</sup>

Durkheim here makes an empirical prediction, albeit with limited historical and sociological evidence, about the future moral unity of a post-religious global age. Implicit in this claim is the positive role of sociology and the other human sciences, as well as continued free, Socratic exploration in humanities disciplines like philosophy and literature, in inspiring this predicted moral improvement.

Fellow social science pioneer Norbert Elias also concludes that civilisation both is, and ought to be, heading in one direction only: towards global integration based on a single monopoly of physical and moral force. It is only when all human beings, not just a privileged few, are able to achieve a happy marriage between their role in an inevitably highly differentiated social order and their personal strivings – a marriage made possible by a mixture of moral education and legal constraint - that we can begin to speak of 'civilisation'.<sup>53</sup> In other words, after a long process of education, in which fear plays an unavoidable role – we will see how the young Mahfouz and the young Tarkovsky were both terrified of retribution for their petty sins – the morally mature adult comes to see that life in a highly differentiated modern society, with all the rights and responsibilities that this entails, is the highest form of existence. If Elias stresses the importance of sticks – the state's monopoly on violence, the authority of parents and teachers<sup>54</sup> – he also recognises that the carrots provided by the humanities have a role to play in this ongoing process of socio-moral development. When Elias talks about the urgency of an 'identification of the individual beyond her borders' and 'our identity at the level of humanity'<sup>55</sup>, he is referring to the same process

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52 Emile Durkheim, 'The Future of Religion' ('L'Avenir de la religion'), 1914, in *Oeuvres (2. Religion, Morale, Anomie)*, (Paris: Editions de Minuit), pp. 153-156.

53 See in particular Norbert Elias, 'The Society of Individuals' ('La Société des Individus') (1939), in *The Society of Individuals (La Société des Individus)*, (Fayard, 1991), trans. from the German *Die Gesellschaft der Individuen*, (Frankfurt, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1987), p. 43.

54 See in particular Norbert Elias, *On the Process of Civilisation (Le dynamique de l'Occident)*, trans. from the German *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* (1969 (1939)), (Calmann-Lévy, 1975), pp. 189, 301-303, 312-313, 314, 317-318.

55 Norbert Elias, *La Société des Individus*, 1987, pp. 298-301.

that pioneering comparatist H.M. Posnett championed in his 1886 classic *Comparative Literature: the triumph 'of individual over communal life', or of cosmopolitanism over tribal identity*.<sup>56</sup> However much modern communications technology may yet improve, and however much global trade may force individuals into ever more complex webs of interdependence, even an anthropologist like Elias implicitly recognises at least an ancillary role for the humanities in accelerating this vital expansion of conscience to embrace ideas of universal human rights. But more than this, his very work as an anthropologist is quite openly inspired by his own identification 'beyond his own borders' and 'at the level of humanity', itself the result of the humanities education he received.

Consider, then, the enormous difference between the humanistic faith of Mauss, Durkheim and Elias in their common civilising mission and the paralysing relativism of their heir, Claude Lévi-Strauss:

If we judge the accomplishments of other social groups in terms of our own, we would in certain respects be forced to acknowledge their superiority; but in doing so we give ourselves the right to judge them, and therefore to condemn all those ends which do not correspond to those of which we approve. We implicitly grant a privileged position to our own society, to its customs and norms... Under such conditions, how could our [ethnographic] studies claim to be scientific? To obtain any kind of objectivity, we must refrain from all judgments of this type.

[...] Behind the abuses and the crimes, we therefore seek the unshakable base of human society. Ethnographic comparison contributes to this quest in two ways. It shows that this base cannot be found in our civilisation; of all societies observed, it is surely the one that is furthest from it. [...] Rousseau believed that the form of life that we today call neolithic was the closest empirical approximation. One can agree with him or not, but I am rather inclined to agree that he was right.

[...] Other societies are perhaps not better than ours; even if we are inclined to believe it, we have no means at our disposal to prove it. Knowing that for millennia man has only managed to repeat himself, we achieve a nobility of thought that, beyond all repetition, gives our reflections the undefinable grandeur of a beginning.<sup>57</sup>

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56 See H.M. Posnett, *Comparative Literature*, (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1886), p. 20.

57 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, (Plon, 2008 (1955)), pp. 442-454.

After two world wars and a rapidly expanding awareness of its own colonial crimes, it is hardly surprising that a new generation of Western intellectuals would adopt *en masse* the kind of openly self-loathing, anti-progressive, Year Zero stance on display here. On the one hand, the desire to understand the 'structure' of the world through free empirical inquiry more or less remains in Lévi-Strauss, behind the guilt; on the other, the desire to create a new, more advanced 'civilisation', the belief that positive moral advancement is even possible, has died. Lévi-Strauss arguably represents, or at least coincides with, the beginning of the shift from civilisation-building to civilisation-undoing, to 'debunking' and 'unmasking', described by Eagleton and lamented by Scruton. Lévi-Strauss's structuralism was, however, only the beginning: Derrida's deconstruction, Foucault's poststructuralism, Lyotard's postmodernism, and ultimately the united pantheon of 'Theory' - the aforementioned names plus a handful of others (Adorno, Lacan, Deleuze, Agamben et al.) would all take the 'unmasking' motif even further to reveal a naked wasteland of amoral power behind every attempt to educate, to discipline, to 'civilise'. By this point, all concern for empirical evidence, in the rapidly developing fields of evolutionary biology and neuroscience in particular, had perished in the dark vacuum of this prior nihilism of power. We will return to these themes, and to Theory and its legacy, in due course.

This decline of faith in civilisation, or better, in the power to civilise, can be traced through the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century art as well. Nobody tells this story with the same flair and insight as Robert Hughes, whose main thesis in his iconic book and television series *The Shock of the New* is precisely that art has lost its ability to act as a guide to behaviour, to 'save' or 'improve' people. Now more than 30 years old, and written on the cusp of the 'postmodern turn', *The Shock of the New* remains a rollicking chronicle of civilisational decline.

Although World War One was clearly the first nail in this coffin, Hughes argues that something of the old spirit of faith in the transformative power of art nevertheless survived the war. For all its faith in the power of art, however, the Dada movement signified, as the 1968 movement also would, 'the desire to go back to scratch, the impossible project of starting culture all over again from the beginning, uncontaminated by the language of the elders'.<sup>58</sup> By 1980, however, even this faith - the original spirit of Berlin Dada in the '20s with its hope of 'changing society rather than amusing it' - had been extinguished: 'as far as today's politics are concerned, art aspires to the condition of muzack: it provides the background hum for power.'<sup>59</sup> World War Two, with its Nazism and Stalinism, had intervened to make virtually all forms of civilisational 'improvement' and collective identity-fashioning through art taboo. Hughes quotes Hitler's chief architect Albert Speer: 'When Goethe [...] saw the Roman Arena in Verona, he said: 'When people who are of different

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58 Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, BBC/Time-Life Films, 1980 ('2. The Powers That Be').

59 Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '2. The Powers That Be'.

minds are in such a surrounding, pressed together, they all get unified to one mind.' I think this was the aim of [my grandiose plans for Berlin], not what the small [individual] man will feel personally.<sup>60</sup> If there could be 'no poetry after Auschwitz' as Adorno preposterously suggested, it was because the consensus was that the horrors of Auschwitz had been caused by an excess rather than a lack of civilisational zeal; what now mattered most was to leave people alone with their beliefs and feelings rather than to 'invade' them with one's own. In Isaiah Berlin's famous formulation, 'negative freedom' – the freedom 'from' – was now the supreme goal of politics. All forms of 'positive freedom' – the right 'to' certain goods, such as Arnold's 'best that has been thought and said in the world' – were now viewed with suspicion in the liberal democracies, and for largely understandable reasons: the abuses of the concept of 'positive freedom' were still painfully fresh in the memory.

The very last vestiges of Victorian faith in moral progress, and the role of art in this progress, were, so the story goes, torn down in an orgy of negativity in 1968. The last major artist to reflect the lost wholeness, the 'sweetness and light' of prewar Western civilisation and Arnoldian culture at its best, was, for Hughes, Henri Matisse: 'Nowhere in the span of his work do you feel a trace of the alienation and conflict to which modernism consigned us.'<sup>61</sup> The Arnoldian faith in perfectibility survives unscathed in Matisse ('Matisse loved pattern, and through it, he gives you the illusion of a completely full world'), and would go on informing his work even after World War Two had 'killed the classical Mediterranean'.<sup>62</sup> Matisse's 'The Swimming Pool' (1952) was 'his farewell to a subject which had been one of the tests of an artist's virtuosity since the 15th century: the human animal in energetic movement, the body stripped of its guilt.'<sup>63</sup> This is not at all to suggest that Matisse lacked a fully-developed conscience or sense of the moral unity of the civilisation which made such free juvenile play and happiness – Arnold's 'sweetness and light' - possible. On the contrary, between 1947 and 1951, 'Matisse was continuously busy with what he called the last stage in an entire lifetime of work, the apex of an immense, sincere and difficult effort', which Hughes also describes as 'probably the last major work of art that Catholicism would be able to evoke in our century': the Dominican chapel in Vence.<sup>64</sup> The anachronistic nature of the project 'wasn't a question of style; it was a matter of a complete attitude towards life and how to live it and how to sustain human relationships which came out of the 19th century and which, for thousands of people, was wrecked by the last world war.'<sup>65</sup>

Hughes's real point here is that, after Matisse, and in the aftermath of the two world wars,

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60 Albert Speer, in Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '2. The Powers That Be'.

61 Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '3. The Landscape of Pleasure'.

62 Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '3. The Landscape of Pleasure'.

63 Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '3. The Landscape of Pleasure'.

64 Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '3. The Landscape of Pleasure'.

65 Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '3. The Landscape of Pleasure'.

victimhood and the unhealthy self-absorption that go with it were now unavoidable for Catholics and Protestants alike: the Western world as a whole, including 'post-Freudian America'<sup>66</sup> with its unhealthy attachment to guilt, was unable, as Matisse was, to forget the horrors of its two great wars and colonial enterprises, to confess and move on, and to recover its old faith in moral unity and progress. The kind of meditation required for art, as Hughes puts it, 'needs pleasure and not pain', or a normal, happy upbringing rather than a traumatised, deprived one; art, and the taste for art, 'come from the centre of the self and not from its disturbed edges', or as Flaubert put it, 'art is a luxury; it requires calm, clean hands'.<sup>67</sup> By 1968, this was impossible; Hughes's broad explanation why can be summarised in the following terms: world wars and colonial guilt had left millions of Western parents traumatised, and in a postwar reiteration of W.H. Auden's famous 1939 rhyme 'I and the public know / What all schoolchildren learn, / Those to whom evil is done / Do evil in return'<sup>68</sup>, subsequently left too many of their offspring improperly loved, 'spoilt' in the proper sense, feeling stifled and in need of 'escape', a heaven that they found in newly available sex, drugs and rock-and-roll rather than in the best of the Western civilisational heritage, which had been inadequately bequeathed to them. Such narcissistic victimhood is, as Hughes argues here and as Mahfouz in particular will also show (Tarkovsky's Ivan is a heroic exception to this rule) as old as warfare and trauma itself:

The wish for absolute freedom is one of the constants of intellectual life, and in France it amounts to a tradition. [...] It seeks spontaneity, but is doomed to failure when it runs up against the real world. Its enemies are priest, cop, bureaucrat, boss, and censor. But it's too high-brow to have a broad base; it breathes the air of privilege, and is self-indulgent. Generally, workers don't like it, and socialists reject it as impractical, which it is. It is the product of young middle-class people fed up with their assigned social role. The last time it surfaced in France was in May 1968, but the time before that, it took a more complicated and aesthetic form, and called itself surrealism.<sup>69</sup>

Just as the surrealists had, in Max Ernst's formulation, sought to fight the madness of the century's dictators with their own brand of madness, the 1968 generation sought to oppose all attempts to promote active values with their own negative, 'debunking' ontology. Hughes stresses the lingering effect of surrealism on sixties culture, unbeknownst to those participating in it, who thought their

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66 Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '3. The Landscape of Pleasure'.

67 Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '3. The Landscape of Pleasure'.

68 W.H. Auden, 'September 1, 1939', <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15545> (accessed 4/3/14).

69 Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '5. The Threshold of Liberty'.

calls for 'freedom' from tradition and civilisation were new - 'the old contracts torn up in a new way'.<sup>70</sup> The key was simply 'being yourself, whatever that self might be. [...] The word went out that art is me, me, me. But is the self, that great sacred cow of our culture, automatically interesting?'<sup>71</sup> The sixties were like the twenties, 'a dandyistic theatrical revolt, based upon a cult of youth', in which 'old Dionysus' was trying to reassert himself amid 'nattering about hobbits and cosmic consciousness'.<sup>72</sup> The link between the sixties and surrealism lay, for Hughes, in 'the illusion that youth was truth', and in the idea that 'by finding reality intolerable, one became a prophet'.<sup>73</sup> This Dionysian narcissism 'loves everything that is contrary, extravagant, and free', and is 'a very durable spirit, hard to exorcise'.<sup>74</sup>

In the final episodes of *The Shock of the New*, Hughes explores the trendy ideas that 'after World War Two, reality had outstripped art', that 'there was no testimony art could give that would rival the photographs' of Auschwitz, and that 'there were few who believed that art could carry the burden of major social meanings anymore'.<sup>75</sup> The modernist optimism of the likes of Paul Klee, whose central theme was 'the garden of paradise, all life composed under the eye of natural order', and Vassily Kandinsky, who thought 'a new age of spirit was coming', gave way to Francis Bacon's 'cannibal's world from which all moral relationships had been erased'.<sup>76</sup> In a postwar, post-television, 'me' age, 'indifference becomes our second skin; everything the camera give us is slightly interesting, not for long, just for now'.<sup>77</sup> The artist who dramatised this condition, and who 'became a famous artist by proclaiming that art can't change life, whereas others once did by loudly giving the impression that it could', was Andy Warhol.<sup>78</sup> Whereas the Renaissance idea of fame had retained a self-sacrificing, moral, even chivalrous connotation, the postwar cult of celebrity in which Warhol so prominently participated was in fact 'the most cunning form of dandyism'; Warhol's 'baleful mimicry of advertising without the gloss', a mere repetition of 'sameness within glut', had lost all touch with the 'discrimination within abundance' which had been 'the essence of Monet's painting' less than a century before.<sup>79</sup> Yet 'like a radioactive isotope', Warhol's self-regarding, openly entrepreneurial art 'had a half-life: boredom became boring'.<sup>80</sup>

As boring as Warhol-inspired modern art would become, however, there would be no going back: nobody extracted 'the essential information for the conduct of their lives from looking at

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70 Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '5. The Threshold of Liberty'.

71 Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '5. The Threshold of Liberty'.

72 Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '5. The Threshold of Liberty'.

73 Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '5. The Threshold of Liberty'.

74 Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '5. The Threshold of Liberty'.

75 Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '6. The View from the Edge'.

76 Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '6. The View from the Edge'.

77 Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '6. The View from the Edge'.

78 Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '6. The View from the Edge'.

79 Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '6. The View from the Edge'.

80 Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '6. The View from the Edge'.

paintings anymore.<sup>81</sup> This, for Hughes, was the beginning of the end: 'The pop-art idea that the medium is the message boils down to the idea that it doesn't really matter what art says,' and once art 'gives up its claims to seriousness, it's shot', for 'even in a culture which is split as disastrously in as many ways as ours has, the problems of choice, taste, and moral responsibility for images still remain. In fact, they get harder.'<sup>82</sup> By abdicating that responsibility in an orgy of selfish negativity in the 1960s and 1970s, the avant garde as we had known it 'sank'.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, for Hughes,

the famous 'radicalism' in '60s and '70s art turns out to have been a kind of dumb show, a charade of toughness, a way of avoiding feeling. I don't think we are ever again obliged to look at a plywood box or a row of bricks and think, 'This is the real thing, this is the necessary art of our time'. [...] The fact is that anyone *except* children can make such things, because children have a kind of direct, sensuous and complex relationship with the world around them that modernism in its declining years was trying to deny. That relationship is the lost paradise that art wants to give back to us, not as children but as adults. [...] The basic project of art is always to make the world whole and comprehensible, to restore it to us in all its glory and its occasional nastiness, not through argument, but through feeling, and then to close the gap between you and everything that is not you, and in this way to pass from feeling to meaning. This is not something that committees can do; it is not a task achieved by groups or movements. It is done by individuals mediating in some way between a sense of history and an experience of the world. This task is literally endless, and so although we don't have an *avant garde* anymore, we are always going to have art.<sup>84</sup>

On the one hand, modernism accelerated the shift 'from communal to individual life' that Posnett and others both predicted and welcomed, but on the other, it threatened to cut the individual off completely from the vast global civilisational inheritance - 'the best that has been thought and said' - that was meant to take the place of the local tribe. While in the 15<sup>th</sup> century 'painting was one of the primary, dominant forms of public speech' the task of which was to make the Christian message 'vivid and tangible and credible' and to 'insert the legend into the life of the people who gathered' in churches so as to 'strengthen their faith, alter their beliefs, and so compel behaviour', and while art retained this 'didactic purpose', showing people 'what values to adopt' right up to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>

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81 Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '7. Culture as Nature'.

82 Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '7. Culture as Nature'.

83 Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '7. Culture as Nature'.

84 Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '8. The Future That Was'.

century, by the 1960s the 'whole issue of the use of public art' was in question.<sup>85</sup> The avant garde died with Warhol because 'if art doesn't embody values, then it can't act as a conscience, and that was what the avant garde set out to be'.<sup>86</sup>

By 1980, however, 'nobody [felt] threatened by works of art the way that Dumas felt threatened by Courbet'.<sup>87</sup> Dumas had 'used the kind of language that societies use to protect themselves and to punish offenders' and which no artist in a philistine society could hope to inspire.<sup>88</sup> The new 'could only shock if it was underwritten by the old'; a loss of belief in the idea that 'it matters what art says' led to the idea that 'modern art owed nothing to the past and was actually opposed to all tradition', an idea which Hughes describes as 'nonsense, but durable nonsense'.<sup>89</sup> Nazism and Stalinism had accelerated this retreat to the 'nirvana of boredom' which 'museum-dependent minimalist art' had offered; indeed, such art was the 'exact opposite of the fantasies of action and involvement that political art held out'.<sup>90</sup> But this rejection of the horrors of totalitarian ideology took the form of a rejection of the very idea of human perfectibility through social engagement at all, an idea which was central to Arnold's definition of culture as a marriage of the desire to act with the constant need to refine our motives for action.<sup>91</sup> Hughes argues that 'the real field of modernist experience lies somewhere between dumb mass propaganda on one hand and the silences of a dying avant garde on the other'.<sup>92</sup> The difference between Nazi propaganda and the work of a universal and great artist like Matisse is that the experience of it 'is not collective'; 'in front of a Matisse, you do not hear the chant of surging millions. You hear one voice carefully explaining itself to one person, the interested stranger, yourself'.<sup>93</sup>

Art, then, in a post-tribal age, does not engage 'in the old collectivities: religion, nation, history', as William Rubin puts it in his interview with Hughes, but rather grasps after the higher collectivity of a global republic of letters in which all relationships are between free and equal individuals. In the words of Hilton Kramer, whom Hughes also interviews, art 'prepares the educated segment of a society to question the values that have been handed down, and creates a kind of ferment which prepares the way for vast political change. Its role is to create a model of dissent'.<sup>94</sup> With this, we are back to Eagleton and Scruton, where we started. Somehow, the primacy of this 'dissent model' for art, Eagleton's idea of 'culture as critique', has been challenged since 1968

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85 Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '8. The Future That Was'.

86 Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '8. The Future That Was'.

87 Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '8. The Future That Was'.

88 Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '8. The Future That Was'.

89 Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '8. The Future That Was'.

90 Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '8. The Future That Was'.

91 See Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, p. 8.

92 Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '8. The Future That Was'.

93 Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '8. The Future That Was'.

94 See Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, '8. The Future That Was'.



by an apparent 'model of dissent' *par excellence*: Theory. How did something so radically committed to critiquing 'power' end up destroying, as Warhol and the art market destroyed the *avant gardes*, the humanities as they were traditionally known, and colluding with the very market forces which were happy to see Arnoldian high culture marginalised?

It is not altogether difficult to understand why dogmatic and logically self-contradicting ideas like 'Everything can be deconstructed' and 'Everything is power' should become so popular a generation after the Second World War and in the dying days of European colonialism. Unable to compete with the 'greatest generation' when it came to martial valor or self-sacrifice, postwar Western teenagers rebelled and, aided by the dubiousness of the cause in Vietnam, affirmed their own superiority by affirming that all possible wars were acts of aggression and therefore wrong, and that all calls to self-sacrifice were sublimated power games. A Copernican shift in the understanding of history and culture was envisaged; inspired by too-easy slogans like Benjamin's claim that 'every document of civilisation is also a document of barbarism', the 1968 generation sought a total break with the 'dead white men' of the past, and to erect a culture of free, self-indulgent love based simultaneously on two parallel ideas: that others have no right to impose their brand of 'civilisation' on the individual, as parents and Nazis and rigid social institutions, including schools, universities, prisons and psychiatric hospitals had done, and that, correspondingly, the individual has no right to impose her brand of 'civilisation' on others.

After decades of colonial brutality and two cataclysmic world wars caused by an excess of totalitarian collectivism, the emergence of such a self-regarding, patricidal philosophy represented a breath of clearly needed fresh air. It was not, however, without serious longer-term consequences. Rather than line up with those who claimed that Western humanism had actually saved Europe and the world from even greater trauma in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the 1968 generation threw their chips in with the masters of suspicion – Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and their heirs – and sought a total overhaul of curricula everywhere. Everything in the old 'dominant cultures' of Western Europe and North America was now worthy of suspicion and deconstruction; little care was given to whether the precious baby of our Renaissance and Enlightenment heritage would be thrown out with the bathwater of postcolonial cultural revolution. A new language was sought, one which would give the revolutionaries enough freedom to say what they wanted while at the same time bathing their pronouncements on the relativism of all things in an aura of scientific authority. The opaque but profound-seeming prose of Adorno, Barthes, Deleuze and the other Pantheon members fit the bill perfectly: to demand greater clarity and ease of comprehension, let alone to disagree outright, was to declare oneself stupid and reactionary.

In 'The Theory Generation', Nicholas Dames summarises the experience of Theory as that of

'being spoken over rather than spoken to'.<sup>95</sup> As if suffering from a lack of sound parental discipline following the trauma of war, the 1968 generation sought parental guidance and reassurance from gurus they could not fully understand but who spoke to their simultaneous desires for freedom and self-esteem: we who have not endured war have nevertheless traversed the prose of the Theorists, who tell us, or seem to tell us, that you, parents, are not better than us, are in many ways worse, and no longer have the right to tell us what to read or what to do. By 1980, Theory had all but conquered humanities departments in the United States and Europe; few have explored the consequences of this revolution in more detail than Bruce Bawer:

[The] inability of many young Americans to express a simple or even grammatically coherent thought, in Bawer's view, owes to a variety of academic fads that in the early 1980s captured the American university. One was postmodernism, of course, which traced its roots to the great anthropologists, but from which, alas, was derived a form of crude cultural relativism that achieved the ignominious trifecta of insipidity, incoherence, and blithe ignorance of a philosophical literature treating the idea of relativism from the Sophists to, at the very least, G. E. Moore. From this followed the conclusion that values, such as individual liberty, were not universal, and as the Canadian poet David Solway put it, that we must perforce believe that "[t]here are no barbarians, only different forms of civilised men."

[...] The chief objective of an education in the humanities today, Bawer argues—with abundant anecdotal evidence to support the claim—is to appreciate that life is all about hegemonic power and to use 'theory' to uncover its workings. Depending upon their sex, skin color, or sexual orientation, students are asked to accept as axiomatic that they are either the unconscious instrument of such power or the repository of its collective grievance and victimhood.<sup>96</sup>

The whole thrust of Theory-inspired identity politics – that one is first and foremost a victim (or perpetrator) – is hostile to the older humanist ideal enshrined in the Great Books canon of the 1950s and dating back to the Renaissance and Enlightenment themselves, namely that we are all potential inheritors of the best of an unfree and unequal past. While the Theory revolution in Western humanities departments has indeed coincided with major progress for ethnic and sexual minorities

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95 Nicholas Dames, 'The Theory Generation', <http://nplusonemag.com/the-theory-generation>, 24/10/12 (accessed 26/10/12).

96 Claire Berlinski, 'Is the Enemy Us?: Review of Bruce Bawer, *The Victims' Revolution: The Rise of Identity Studies and the Closing of the Liberal Mind*', <http://www.city-journal.org/2012/bc1123cb.html>, 23/11/12 (accessed 28/11/12).

as well as women, it is not altogether clear just how much of a role Theory itself can be said to have played in these positive developments. As Martha Nussbaum writes of notorious Theory-acolyte Judith Butler, echoing Hanson on the problem of self-censorship,

many feminists in America are still theorizing in a way that supports material change and responds to the situation of the most oppressed. Increasingly, however, the academic and cultural trend is toward the pessimistic flirtatiousness represented by the theorizing of Butler and her followers. Butlerian feminism is in many ways easier than the old feminism. It tells scores of talented young women that they need not work on changing the law, or feeding the hungry, or assailing power through theory harnessed to material politics. They can do politics in the safety of their campuses, remaining on the symbolic level, making subversive gestures at power through speech and gesture. This, the theory says, is pretty much all that is available to us anyway, by way of political action, and isn't it exciting and sexy?

In its small way, of course, this is a hopeful politics. It instructs people that they can, right now, without compromising their security, do something bold. But the boldness is entirely gestural, and insofar as Butler's ideal suggests that these symbolic gestures really are political change, it offers only a false hope. Hungry women are not fed by this, battered women are not sheltered by it, raped women do not find justice in it, gays and lesbians do not achieve legal protections through it. Finally there is despair at the heart of the cheerful Butlerian enterprise. The big hope, the hope for a world of real justice, where laws and institutions protect the equality and the dignity of all citizens, has been banished, even perhaps mocked as sexually tedious. Judith Butler's hip quietism is a comprehensible response to the difficulty of realizing justice in America. But it is a bad response. It collaborates with evil. Feminism demands more and women deserve better.<sup>97</sup>

Those sympathetic to Theory will, like their Salafist brothers in victimhood when it comes to their own sacred texts, no doubt view these summary dismissals of all that Theory hath wrought as unfair and, by some margin, insufficiently nuanced. Unfortunately for these critics, my goal here, I must say thankfully, has not been to engage with the arguments of the leading Theoreticians one by one (as Nussbaum so patiently does with Butler in the outstanding article the conclusion of which is cited here), but simply to trace, as briefly as possible for our purposes, the rise of Theory in the

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97 Martha Nussbaum, 'The Professor of Parody', <http://www.akad.se/Nussbaum.pdf>, copied from *The New Republic Online*, 22/2/99.

Western humanities and the death of the grand narrative of Civilisation in the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, before moving on to propose, or at least contribute to, a possible antidote.

Over the last decade, indeed, and perhaps partly in response to the shock of September 11, 2001, postmodern Theory has finally begun to lose some of its hold on humanities education in the Western world. Dames argues that 'by the end of the 1990s, the easy equation that Theory gave you—realism is a tool of capitalist rationality, a product and not an imaginative artifact, a tool of the *status quo*—had the feel of a truism', and that a response was 'already underway'<sup>98</sup>. Even the partially Theory-sympathetic Eagleton's 2003 book *After Theory* was engaged in a serious reevaluation of the whole Theory phenomenon; Eagleton was now willing to laugh, in John Mullan's words, at 'all those earnest undergraduates (and lecturers) attaching the same arguments about sexual transgression to whatever they are studying' and writing 'uncritical, reverential essays on *Friends*' where earlier generations had been writing 'uncritical, reverential essays on Flaubert'.<sup>99</sup> Nevertheless, for those who were caught up in the middle of the Theory revolution, rather than those of us who were educated through its death throes, there was no doubt much to identify with and much to love about the Theorists – Dames cites the examples of Jonathan Franzen (Swarthmore '81), Jeffrey Eugenides (Brown '83) and Jennifer Egan (Penn '85) as novelists who have reviewed their 'Theory Years' with one degree of nostalgia or another – but we must nevertheless share Dames's conclusion that, some time around the turn of the century, Theory was 'was no longer the key to all the world's things, but rather just another thing-in-the-world'.<sup>100</sup>

There is not yet, however, a post-postmodern consensus on what the humanities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are for. In the next section I will attempt to sketch such a consensus by drawing on a wide range of recent sources which aim to reconnect the humanities with their old civilising mission.

### *1.3 Beyond the Postmodern: Towards A New Unifying Vision of the Humanities*

One response to the 'postmodern moment' of the 1990s has been to embrace hard, empirical science as a possible saviour of the humanities. New terms like 'literary Darwinism', 'neurohumanities', 'neurophilosophy' and so on have entered humanists' vernacular over the past decade. Whatever reservations one may have about the limits and even reductive dangers of possible neurological or evolutionary explanations of humanism, to deny that the *attempt* to understand our humanistic selves empirically is itself highly worthwhile is to remain trapped in the kind of wholesale

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98 Dames, 'The Theory Generation'.

99 John Mullan, 'What Terry Did Next', <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/nov/29/highereducation.news,29/11/2003>.

100 Dames, 'The Theory Generation'.

scepticism and relativism about knowledge which characterised the humanities in the 'postmodern moment' of the 1990s and which led *The Times* to print an article entitled 'Can Neuro Lit Crit Save the Humanities?'<sup>101</sup> Whatever the solution to the humanities' crisis, however, it is clear that science – good science – can only be an ally in our quest for humanistic understanding, even if one remains committed to a humanism which is not itself a science. Arnold himself thought so, and defended a 'true scientific passion' even in people of 'culture' who strive above all for moral perfection: 'the very desire to see things as they are implies a balance and regulation of mind which is not often attained without fruitful effort'.<sup>102</sup> The more we know about neuropsychology, in other words, the better we will be able to understand what is psychologically and morally possible for human beings, and this knowledge will inform our humanistic judgments. It is at least partly because much of the work of Freud and Lacan in psychology, for example, has been proven to be empirically false or superseded by more recent work that literary critics must stop relying on them as critical authorities. It clearly behooves humanists and literary scholars, therefore, to keep abreast of developments in the human sciences in particular to the best of their ability, no mean feat in a world of exponential knowledge growth.

A good deal of recent work in the humanities, however, has tried to show that science can never be sufficient for humanism even as it remains deeply necessary, and that the humanities are a discipline apart, and not merely a source of data for empirical analysis (although they are also that). Massimo Pigliucci is one prominent voice in the debate about consilience; he argues that distinguishing clearly between science – the desire to understand the world on its own terms – and the humanities – the desire to achieve moral or spiritual perfection through some kind of praxis or informed action – might actually 'reflect a natural way in which human beings understand the world and their role in it'.<sup>103</sup> Pigliucci is clear that this is not 'a suggestion to give up, much less a mystical injunction to go beyond, science. There is nothing beyond science. But there is important stuff before it: there are human emotions, expressed by literature, music and the visual arts; there is culture; there is history.'<sup>104</sup> Pigliucci concludes that this respect for the autonomy of the humanities from science is 'a more humble take on human knowledge than the quest for consilience, but it is one that, ironically, is more in synch with what the natural sciences tell us about being human.'<sup>105</sup>

We nevertheless live in a world where, entirely rightly in a time of economic crisis as well as

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101 See Alissa Quart, 'Adventures in Neurohumanities', <http://www.thenation.com/article/174221/adventures-neurohumanities?page=full#>, 7/5/13.

102 Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, p. 7.

103 Massimo Pigliucci, 'Who Knows What', <http://www.aeonmagazine.com/world-views/massimo-pigliucci-on-consilience/>, 8/10/12 (accessed 16/10/12). For a similar argument, see also Maria Konnikova, 'Humanities Aren't a Science: Stop Treating Them Like One', <http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/literally-psyched/2012/08/10/humanities-arent-a-science-stop-treating-them-like-one/>, 10/8/12 (accessed 18/8/12).

104 Pigliucci, 'Who Knows What'.

105 Pigliucci, 'Who Knows What'.

in any other, publicly funded academic disciplines must justify their existence as a concrete social good. Few academics have done more to justify the humanities to the wider public in recent years than Harvard Professor Elaine Scarry. In 'Poetry Changed the World: Injury and the Ethics of Reading', Scarry asks the simple question 'What is the ethical power of literature? Can it diminish acts of injuring, and if it can, what aspects of literature deserve the credit?'<sup>106</sup> Scarry's three-part answer echoes Niall Ferguson's aforementioned claims about the link between literacy and civilisation and also draws on Steven Pinker's work on declining violence rates, but ultimately goes much further to reserve a special role for literature itself. She argues that 'the dispute structure of poetry from Homer forward helps to nourish three arenas of disputation in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries whose purpose—at least in the parliaments and law courts—is diminution of injury.'<sup>107</sup> Together with the development of the novel form in Europe in subsequent centuries, which Scarry argues is a development of the 'dispute structure' of poetry insofar as 'all that has happened is that the factual side has fallen away and we are presented only with the counterfactual', the legacy of such a literary culture, which Scarry uncovers in Eastern as well as Western traditions, is a requirement 'to think counterfactually, to think the thing that one does not oneself hold to be the case.'<sup>108</sup> Such a culture allows not just for 'the recognition that there are multiple points of view, two sides to every coin, but also the chance to practice, and thereby to deepen and strengthen that recognition'.<sup>109</sup>

But it is beauty itself which is above all central to Scarry's vision of what the humanities are for:

Beautiful artworks and poems are, according to Pater, the surest way to bring about “this quickened, multiplied consciousness” and hence to fold 200 (or perhaps 2,000) years of perception into an ordinary lifespan, which in Pater’s case was 55 years.

But though the ethics of reading can surely include the benefits to the reader herself, our focus here is on the way other, often unknown, persons are the beneficiaries of one’s reading. There are at least three paths by which beauty contributes to this outcome.

First, beautiful things (whether poems, mathematical equations, or faces)

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106 Elaine Scarry, 'Poetry Changed the World: Injury and the Ethics of Reading', [http://www.bostonreview.net/v2/BR37.4/elaine\\_scarry\\_poetry\\_literature\\_reading\\_empathy\\_ethics.php](http://www.bostonreview.net/v2/BR37.4/elaine_scarry_poetry_literature_reading_empathy_ethics.php), July/August 2012 (accessed 1/8/12).

107 Scarry, 'Poetry Changed the World'.

108 Scarry, 'Poetry Changed the World'.

109 Scarry, 'Poetry Changed the World'.

have attributes—such as symmetry, vivacity, unity—that anticipate those same, but much more difficult to achieve, attributes in the realm of justice. Symmetry is at hand in, for example, the meter of a poem, and provides inspiration and guidance for the centuries it will take to bring about symmetry in the realm of justice—whether it is John Rawls’s justice as fairness, which requires “the symmetry of everyone’s relations to each another”; or Plato’s aspiration for a symmetry between crimes and punishments, which we are still a very long way from; or Hume’s symmetry between expectations and their fulfillment.

Second, beauty interrupts and gives us sudden relief from our own minds. Iris Murdoch says we undergo “an unselfing” in the presence of a beautiful thing; “self-preoccupation” and worries on one’s own behalf abruptly fall away. Simone Weil refers to this phenomenon as a “radical decentering.” I call it an “opiated adjacency,” an awkward term but one which reminds us that there are many things in life that make us feel acute pleasure (opiated) and many things in life that make us feel sidelined, but there is almost nothing—except beauty—that does the two simultaneously. Feeling acute pleasure at finding oneself on the margins is a first step in working toward fairness.<sup>110</sup>

If, as Scarry suggests, 'feeling sidelined', feeling that one's own bodily interests are somehow less important than those of beautiful others, or at least not more important, is a 'first step' towards fairness and justice, then a free-market society can only be said to function fairly or justly if its citizens are first educated to 'feel sidelined', to feel that their own material and psychological fulfilment are not the ultimate goal of existence, and that higher civilisational values are real. To summarise Scarry, citizens of a civilised community must be educated in beauty, as well as 'dispute' and 'empathy'. Scarry spells out some of what this means for the humanities as a social institution, arguing that 'shifts in ethical behavior require a sea change across wide populations of readers'.<sup>111</sup> The corollary of this is that, far from debunking or destroying inherited cultural traditions, 'the main work of the humanities is to ensure that books are placed in the hands of each incoming wave of students and carried back out to sea.'<sup>112</sup> Nevertheless, the true humanist's Arnoldian zeal to turn book-learning into real-world 'diminution of injury' impels both teachers and students alike to go further and to make clear 'the lines of responsibility to real-world injuries and the call to that work

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110 Scarry, 'Poetry Changed the World'.

111 Scarry, 'Poetry Changed the World'.

112 Scarry, 'Poetry Changed the World'.

that is embedded in the three key features of literature.'<sup>113</sup>

Another prominent American humanist who wholeheartedly shares this robust, injury-reducing vision of the humanities is Anthony T. Kronman. In Kronman's view, the humanities really *can* and *do* improve both individuals and society, even if the bulk of humanities 'professors' have lost their faith in what the humanities do. Kronman specifically blames the rise of the 'research model' for obscuring the primary task of a university education in the humanities; after leaving university to pursue a career as an activist, Kronman realised that he 'missed reading - for which I now had almost no time - and the aimless conversations of college life that the hard realities of my organising work discouraged', and upon returning to university, was lucky enough to enrol in a course in existentialism taught by Nathaniel Lawrence:

At the heart of the seminar was the question of how best to live, of what to care about and why, the question of the meaning of life. [...] The seminar became the centre of everything I did that fall, in class and out. Partly it was because the readings were deep and enlightening, partly because I discovered I could keep up with my more advanced classmates and even make a contribution or two, partly because Professor Lawrence's wisdom and kindness enveloped us all. But mostly it was because I made a discovery in that class that has been a central conviction of mine ever since. I discovered that the meaning of life is a subject that can be studied in school.<sup>114</sup>

Kronman argues that the vocationalisation of universities has deprived humanities teachers of 'the unique authority they once enjoyed as guides to the meaning of life', and that 'only the humanities have had the inclination and ability to provide such guidance'.<sup>115</sup> It is precisely this deeper commitment to moral perfection as well as curiosity for its own sake (or for the sake of narrowly economic development) which sets the humanities 'apart from the natural and social sciences and defines their special contribution to the work of higher education'.<sup>116</sup> The loss of faith in this ideal after the Second World War left 'a void' into which 'the political ideas of the 1960s and 1970s entered - the ideas of diversity and multiculturalism, and the theory that values are merely disguised acts of power'.<sup>117</sup>

By contrast, for the current, post-postmodern generation of American humanists, which

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113 Scarry, 'Poetry Changed the World'.

114 Anthony T. Kronman, *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life*, (Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 2-5.

115 Kronman, *Education's End*, pp. 134-135.

116 Kronman, *Education's End*, p. 135.

117 Kronman, *Education's End*, p. 135.



includes Scarry and Kronman as well as Martha Nussbaum, the question of the meaning of life is central to the question of order and justice in society, and it therefore matters deeply to the health of a society how citizens answer it. In *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defence of Reform in Liberal Education* (1997), Nussbaum identifies three core capacities for 'global citizenship': 1) the Socratic ability to examine one's life and beliefs critically (i.e. 'what are your reasons for believing what you believe?'), which is necessary for a political culture which goes beyond soundbites; 2) knowledge of the world, including the geography, history, literature and language of other countries as well as one's own, not to mention scientific knowledge and an openness to empirical evidence in order to make sound moral reasoning – the examined life - possible; and 3) cultivation of the moral imagination ('putting yourself in the shoes of another').<sup>118</sup> Nussbaum worries aloud about the global over-emphasis on vocational education and about future 'nations of docile engineers who won't know how to examine the claims of a political leader', citing the example of Gujarat as the Indian state with simultaneously the least humanities-friendly education system and most authoritarian political culture.<sup>119</sup> Learning to express reasons honestly, publicly and respectfully is, Nussbaum reminds us, a complex skill requiring years of practice, not just science education and lessons in corporate order-following, important though these things also are in a complex modern society. Of course, to reduce the humanities to a social good while ignoring their benefits for individuals is to miss the prior point that individuals have a right to know 'the best that has been thought and said in the world' in the first place, and nobody could be said to be more aware of this than Nussbaum herself; books like *Love's Knowledge* (1992) are celebrations of literature's power to connect us to our true selves via empathic connections with others and the work of others.<sup>120</sup> But in recent years Nussbaum has focused on the link between humanities education and global justice, the question of 'why love matters for justice', the subtitle of her latest book<sup>121</sup>, and on concrete ways of improving the lives of the world's less fortunate.

Michael Sandel is another contemporary American humanist who reminds us that the right to a humanities education, the right to access 'the best that has been thought and said in the world' and thereby to cultivate a concrete conception of individual virtue, is directly connected to the quest for justice in society, and that it is meaningless to talk about one without reference to the other. Sandel argues that freedom of expression matters not only because 'government should be neutral with respect to the content of people's speech and respect the fact that it is the speech of a freely

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118 Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defence of Reform in Liberal Education*, (Harvard University Press, 1998).

119 See Martha Nussbaum, 'Humanistic Education and Global Justice', [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A\\_IR1CID3Ns](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_IR1CID3Ns), 19/9/2010.

120 Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, (Oxford University Press, 1992).

121 Martha C. Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*, (Harvard University Press, 2013).

choosing self', as postwar liberals have affirmed, but moreover because engagement in public deliberation 'makes us better' and 'enables us to develop our human capacities more fully'.<sup>122</sup> Sandel calls this 'an Aristotelian defence of freedom of speech because it does refer to a certain conception of the good life and maybe even virtue'.<sup>123</sup> The central point is not, as the traditional liberal position has it, that freedom of speech is 'an instrument to enable each individual to have a say and therefore get what he or she wants from public policy', although it may also, as a happy by-product, achieve such ends; the point is that deliberating freely in a public setting is itself character-building: 'when we concern ourselves with public affairs, and when we take responsibility for the fate of the community as a whole, we exercise human faculties that would otherwise lie dormant'.<sup>124</sup>

In other words, the traditional liberal ideal of a neutral state which does not try to impose any conception whatsoever of the good life on its citizens is itself a denial of the value of the humanities either as a public institution or as a private right: the negative freedom to choose one's own conception of the good life, however morally flawed that conception may be, trumps the positive freedom to access 'the best that has been thought and said in the world' and the freedom to use that humanistic knowledge to further the cause of justice in society. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the rapid atrophy of the humanities in Western universities has coincided with the 'end-of-history' triumphalism of the champions of liberal democracy; to believe that the state has no business trying to cultivate virtue other than a passive liberal respect for the negative freedoms of others, to deny that individuals themselves have a right to learn about virtue or that society benefits from a virtuous citizenry, is to fall prey to the very brand of postmodern moral relativism that not uncoincidentally accompanied the victory of Western liberalism in the Cold War.

The idea that individuals everywhere should be left to pursue merely vocational or local educations and to develop their own conception of the good life without any formal access to the store of civilisational knowledge represented by the best of the global humanities has been challenged since the turn of the century by two major global crises: more recently, a financial crisis widely blamed on the moral failings of the world's political and business élites, most of them Western; and a cultural crisis in the Islamic world, which resulted in a wave of global jihadist violence most spectacularly brought to the world's attention on September 11, 2001. With the latter crisis, the old liberal paradox of how to tolerate the intolerant has been forced back to the top of political philosophers' agendas, with a broad consensus of opinion agreeing that the kind of extremism represented by Osama bin Laden and his followers simply cannot be coexisted with. While the violence of the 'war on terror' has been a central pillar in the strategy of Western liberal

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122 Michael Sandel, in 'Michael Sandel and A.C. Grayling in Conversation',

<http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/michael-sandel-ac-grayling-transcript/#.UY4MOBzfZwc>, 10/5/13.

123 Sandel, 'Michael Sandel and A.C. Grayling in Conversation'.

124 Sandel, 'Michael Sandel and A.C. Grayling in Conversation'.

democracies' reaction to the wave of terror attacks, there has also been a recognition in policy and intellectual circles of the need to win the 'hearts and minds' of the global Muslim community, which has in turn forced a re-engagement with theological questions once thought to be irrelevant in a postmodern 21<sup>st</sup> century world.

The first publicly prominent manifestation of the Western intelligentsia's collective return to the theme of religion was the so-called New Atheist movement, led by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, journalist Christopher Hitchens, and psychologist Sam Harris. It is both criminally negligent and existentially dangerous, these men argue, for children to be left in the care of religious leaders whose literalist interpretations of sacred texts have been proven to be absurd by modern science; global civil society has an obligation to protect the right of children to access 'the best that has been thought and said in the world', and thereby also to protect itself from messianic, apocalyptic ideologies which, if allowed to fester in the intellectual slums and ghettos of the world, may cause exponentially more destruction than ever before in coming decades as their militants gain access to ever more advanced weaponry. We will have occasion to return to the pioneering work of these three gentlemen in due course; for now, suffice it to say that the second phase of reaction to 9/11, coinciding with the financial crisis of 2008 and some long-overdue civilisational navel-gazing by Western intellectuals, has forced many to question the very foundations of the liberal capitalist order, and to wonder aloud whether some form of public religion, purified of archaic literalisms and updated for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, may in fact be necessary for both individual flourishing and social cohesion.

In Germany, even candidates as unlikely as Jürgen Habermas and Peter Sloterdijk are now asking whether the myth of the isolated postmodern individual, the ideal citizen of a market society, may have run its course. Habermas, for all his insistence that 'the now well-studied history of the "invention" of national consciousness by historiography, the press, and school curricula during the nineteenth century, in view of its horrible consequences, does not provide an inviting example' of collective identity-fashioning in Europe and beyond in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, nevertheless now argues that the genesis of the postwar European dream is rooted in a distinctly Christian, if secularised, conception of human dignity.<sup>125</sup> Sloterdijk, meanwhile, although he does not think that literature can play the civilising role it once did and that the humanist project has failed, nevertheless now seeks in his work to reinstate a 'grand narrative' of faith in something beyond mere individualism.<sup>126</sup> Meanwhile, Italy's most prominent public intellectual, Roberto Benigni, has been busy in recent

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125 Francis Fukuyama and Jürgen Habermas, 'The European Citizen: Just a Myth', <http://theglobaljournal.net/article/view/695/>, 18/5/2012 (accessed 20/11/12).

126 Joshua Mostafa, 'Sphere Theory: A Case for Connectedness (Review of *Bubbles* by Peter Sloterdijk)', <http://lareviewofbooks.org/article.php?type=&id=855&fulltext=1&media=>, 21/8/12 (accessed 23/8/12).

years touring his country reading Dante and celebrating the heroism of the very 19th-century nation-builders and defenders of a single Italian high culture and curriculum of precisely the kind that the entire postwar intellectual class in Europe, including Habermas and Sloterdijk, have been so routinely suspicious.<sup>127</sup>

In Spain, theological authorities like Andrés Torres Queiruga are now publicly proclaiming that 'up-to-date theologians do not believe in miracles', and that, in an age when both Hebraistic and Hellenistic wisdom – or in other words, religion and high culture, for Arnold the two sides of the coin of human perfectibility – are under threat from the 'new cultural paradigm' of philistine capitalist globalisation supported, at least until recently, by postmodern relativist ideology, 'we run the risk of not really being understood'.<sup>128</sup> Theology, moreover, 'still does not have adequate categories for dealing with the dialogue between religions, which was an unthinkable form of transcendence prior to the advent of globalisation'.<sup>129</sup> Nevertheless, in a burst of genuine optimism, Queiruga observes that 'both 21st-century theology and the lived experience of an enormous number of male and female believers is fostering this dialogue and aiming for a new and fraternal coexistence'.<sup>130</sup>

In France, the great survivor of the country's poststructuralist and postmodernist intellectual experiments, Alain Badiou, is now insisting, in not un-Christian language, that 'love is not a contract between two narcissists. It's more than that. It's a construction that compels the participants to go beyond narcissism'.<sup>131</sup> At 75, Badiou now feels assured that 'the women I have loved I have loved for always' and that 'solving the existential problems of love is life's great joy'.<sup>132</sup> Politics, far from mere liberal 'tolerance' and multicultural 'respect' for people's 'otherness' and negative freedoms, is in fact an extension of the loving relationship: 'Real politics is that which gives enthusiasm. Love and politics are the two great figures of social engagement. Politics is enthusiasm with a collective; with love, two people. So love is the minimal form of communism'.<sup>133</sup> This bottom-up approach to community-building is consistent with the old humanist project described as 'dead' by Eagleton, and diametrically opposed to the attempts of Habermas and others to fashion a European community out of unenthusiastic pragmatism and a commitment to divided sovereignty rather than a single

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127 See in particular Benigni's breathtaking homage to the heroes of the Italian Risorgimento in San Remo in 2011: Roberto Benigni, 'Exegesis of a Hymn' ('Esegesi di un Inno'), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=73xWk8zfuU8>, accessed 9/6/2011.

128 Andrés Torres Queiruga, 'Up-to-Date Theologians Don't Believe in Miracles' ('Los teólogos actualizados no creemos en milagros'), *El País*, 14/4/12, p. 41.

129 Queiruga, 'Up-to-Date Theologians Don't Believe in Miracles'.

130 Queiruga, 'Up-to-Date Theologians Don't Believe in Miracles'.

131 Stuart Jeffries, 'Alain Badiou: A Life in Writing', <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2012/may/18/alain-badiou-life-in-writing>, 18/5/12 (accessed 4/6/12).

European identity.

In Britain, Peter Hitchens, brother of the late Christopher, has waged a lonely and poignant public battle to preserve his country's Christian heritage against what he calls the 'century of the self'. The word 'civilisation' features prominently in Hitchens's work; in his view, Britain has been in civilisational decline since the decision to go to war in 1914 and the subsequent loss of Christian faith among both ordinary Britons and their ruling élites. Hitchens describes himself politically as 'someone who believes that liberty depends on conscience, and that if people behave themselves, they don't have to be oppressed by law or government', and that 'ultimately, humans are under God', or in other words, a single Moral Law: 'If you believe that there is a Moral Law, then you would be failing in your duty if you didn't try to persuade other people to adopt it. [...] To do nothing would be feeble and irresponsible.'<sup>134</sup> Hitchens argues, not at all differently from his avowedly atheist brother Christopher, that this Moral Law is discoverable inside ourselves, in conscience, and that it may be accessed *through* critical engagement with canonical texts but not *in* the texts themselves; his passion for the humanistic canon of his own childhood, in which Scripture as well as the Book of Common Prayer and hymns played a central role along with Shakespeare and the Romantic poets as well as other English and European classics, is rivalled only by his dismay at its replacement by a 'state multiculturalism' which has destroyed Britons' faith in their own civilisational heritage. Debating the causes of the 2011 London riots which shocked the world, Hitchens argued that 'it isn't a matter of governance; it's a matter of culture. We have been dismantling in our society something much, much more important than money. Money doesn't actually, despite Mrs. Thatcher's apparent belief in this, make the world go round. Money doesn't hold societies together.'<sup>135</sup> The key to social harmony and individual flourishing is, for Hitchens, 'morality, people's willingness to behave well towards their neighbours without being coerced into doing so.'<sup>136</sup> What is required to fight the cultural crisis responsible for the London riots and the general decline of British society is a 'cultural and moral determination of the kind which current and previous governments have lacked, which academics have lacked, which teachers have lacked, which policemen have lacked, and which, in general, our society has lacked, and which need to be put back in if we are to have a civilisation.'<sup>137</sup>

The key to a moral education for Hitchens is a humanistic education, an engagement with 'what our ancestors knew' and a determination to pass down civilisational wisdom to the next

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132 See Jeffries, 'Alain Badiou: A Life in Writing'.

133 See Jeffries, 'Alain Badiou: A Life in Writing'.

134 Peter Hitchens, 'Five Minutes with Peter Hitchens', [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-iyGpj9\\_0hU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-iyGpj9_0hU), 10/12/12.

135 Peter Hitchens, 'Cambridge Union Society Debate', 6/10/11, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=za1aUrQUqOM> (accessed 21/8/12).

136 Hitchens, 'Cambridge Union Society Debate'.

137 Hitchens, 'Cambridge Union Society Debate'.

generation in the belief that this process of transmission – 'the furnishing of new minds with beauty' to paraphrase Hitchens himself - ultimately matters more than our own pleasure or material prosperity.<sup>138</sup> Although Hitchens stresses the non-negotiability of a Christian, or more accurately, Protestant, Church-of-England relationship with the inner God of conscience, he also points out that the very thing worth defending about this 'English' culture is its universality and 'openness'; he argues for a 'serious dialogue' with Muslims in which, socratically, Muslims are invited into locals' homes but in which the British should 'also not be cowardly about what we believe'.<sup>139</sup> As Hitchens puts it, 'that's certainly the way I feel in defending my faith; I'd much rather have an honest assailant who says 'I don't agree with you' than somebody who grovels. [...] A dialogue between us is much to be desired, but it has to be an honest and a robust one.'<sup>140</sup> The situation of virtual apartheid in which local and Muslim communities live, for example, in the Pennine towns in the north of England, 'is catastrophic if you want to have a society which performs the basic function of a civilisation – that is to say, an organisation of human beings in which it is possible to be effectively unselfish.'<sup>141</sup> Despite his apparent desire to overcome the 'solitudes' of the contemporary cultural landscape and to create a single civilisation based on conscience and genuinely free, Socratic debate and exchange, Hitchens's pessimism regarding the future of a Britain he regards as in terminal decline coincides with his contempt for the European project as a whole and his clinging to a Christian vocabulary in an era when a new, more globally inclusive humanism is clearly in order. At his best, however, Hitchens boils his religion down to faith in the importance and possibility of justice:

From our side of the argument, what we say is that if we desire justice for ourselves, we also desire it for other people, and likewise, if we desire it for other people, we require it of ourselves and we bring it upon ourselves. And on the basis of that, we construct, with some difficulty, with a certain amount of historical knowledge, in the case of some of us with an enormous amount of scientific knowledge of the universe, a belief which helps us to discover, insofar as it is possible, what it is we ought to do and how it is we ought to live, in the belief that there is justice, there is hope [...] and that our actions have a significance beyond what we immediately do. [...] This is why, after many, many years of not believing in God, I came round to the view that I

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138 See Peter Hitchens, 'Poetry on Question Time', <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L8ZlguWXo7k>, 14/6/12.

139 Peter Hitchens and Ibrahim Mogra, 'Is Islam or Christianity the Best Future for Britain?', [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPn-\\_S-0wGk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPn-_S-0wGk), 2/4/13.

140 Hitchens, 'Is Islam or Christianity the Best Future for Britain?'

141 Hitchens, 'Is Islam or Christianity the Best Future for Britain?'

would choose to do so and act as if there is a God. God is the principal opposition in our society to lawless, ruthless power – to the bully, to the autocrat, to the despot, to the criminal, to the person who treats his neighbours like dirt.<sup>142</sup>

Atheists like Peter's late brother Christopher argue that there is something servile and immoral about choosing to behave morally only because 'God' commands it. But once God has been fully and finally reduced to a concept of Moral Law innate in us, what's the difference? What both Peter and Christopher are saying is that we should act well for its own sake, and try as hard as we can to find out what 'acting well' means in practice, in the belief, cultivated through contact with beauty, that 'our actions have a significance beyond what we immediately do' and beyond direct material costs or benefits to our own selves. What Peter and Christopher Hitchens disagree about, fundamentally, is the historical role of the monotheisms in this 'moral awakening'; Peter argues that they have acted primarily as a glue, Christopher as a yoke. Surely the answer is both, or rather, first one and then the other. The idea of 'acting well', however much we may disagree about what acting well concretely means, is nevertheless a single concept which was made possible by the rise of Platonism and syncretism in Greece and monotheism elsewhere – including, as we shall explore, Confucian China, with its belief in a single 'sky' and single 'mandate of Heaven' - and which could, our 'warriors for civilisation' will all be arguing (and Tarkovsky most vividly with his nude pagan scenes in *Andrei Rublev*), never have arisen in a truly polytheistic culture governed by multiple competing deities. That the monotheistic traditions would come in for serious rational scrutiny was inevitable because they themselves, even and perhaps especially Islam (as we will see in greater detail in our chapter on Mahfouz), called for it; both New Atheists like Christopher Hitchens and contemporary 'as-if' God-defenders like Peter Hitchens are heirs to this tradition, the common enemy of which is not the pluralism which inevitably results from an aggregation of serious attempts to 'live well', but the relativism which insists on a multiplicity of gods and a denial of the possibility of 'living well' or 'living better' in the first place.

Just as European intellectuals have been busy reevaluating Europe's Christian heritage over the past decade and aiming to salvage the kernel of moral and civilisational truth from Christianity's chequered centuries of gradually declining cultural dominance on the continent, so too has the civilisational legacy of Judaism been the subject of serious public and scholarly debate, with most controversy surrounding the work of Jan Assmann. Evaluating Assmann, Richard Wolin writes that, according to a number of critics, 'biblical monotheism represents a significant ethical breakthrough' in the history of civilisation, 'providing a normative basis for the idea of universal human

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142 Peter Hitchens, 'The Oxford Union God Debate', <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VnIH4gomOqc>, 21/12/12.

brotherhood—a characterization diametrically opposed to the "exclusionary" mentality that Assmann considers predominant.<sup>143</sup> Assmann instead throws his lot in with 'postmodern pluralism', which he regards as a 'desirable, 21st-century epistemological corollary to the spirit of ancient polytheism'.<sup>144</sup> Wolin, meanwhile, argues that 'whereas ancient polytheism sanctified the injustices of fate—humanity's entrapment in the world as it is—the Mosaic religion protested against that condition and its moral inadequacies. The covenant at Sinai represents the promise of an elevated life: a moral life'.<sup>145</sup> This covenant need not entail a dualism based on some form of implausible revelation, but rather introduces into the world 'the idea that the moral life is something that must be achieved by a demanding process of existential reorientation and conversion. It "alienates" men and women not from the world as such, but from the world conceived as a locus of oppression and injustice'.<sup>146</sup>

Although Assmann wrote in 2008 that 'monotheism itself pushes us to go beyond the logic of exclusivity and the language of violence', he has mostly sought in his work to denigrate the 'exclusionary' logic of Judaism and the other Abrahamic monotheisms while affirming a 'pluralistic' or polytheistic alternative.<sup>147</sup> In *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (1997), Assmann describes what he regards as a 'positive reconfiguration' of ancient Egypt during the Renaissance and Enlightenment, which sought 'emancipation from ecclesiastical dogma' by depicting Egypt as 'the ultimate fount of biblical monotheism and as providing an evidentiary historical basis for Spinoza's heretical pantheism'.<sup>148</sup> Wolin argues that Assmann's work aims to show that 'this historiographical reassessment represented a conscious attempt to ruin the sacred truths by demonstrating that Western monotheism had its origins in pagan practices and rituals'.<sup>149</sup> While such a rebranding may indeed have helped, to however limited an extent, to 'defuse Christianity's eschatological, sectarian zealotry' by weakening Christian faith on the European continent, this attempt to paganise Christianity's roots by associating them with Egypt overlooks the fact that monotheism had existed in Egypt too during the reign of Akhenaten; Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*, for example, which argues that 'the historical Moses was in fact a disaffected Egyptian priest who imposed monotheism on the Jews once it had been banned in ancient Egypt following the reign of Akhenaten', is one prominent if highly contested canonical work which makes this association.<sup>150</sup>

Whatever one's views on Spinoza or the historical accuracy of the arguments of Assmann or

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143 Richard Wolin, 'Biblical Blame Shift', <http://chronicle.com/article/Biblical-Blame-Shift/138457/>, 15/4/13.

144 See Wolin, 'Biblical Blame Shift'.

145 Wolin, 'Biblical Blame Shift'.

146 Wolin, 'Biblical Blame Shift'.

147 Wolin, 'Biblical Blame Shift'.

148 Wolin, 'Biblical Blame Shift'.

149 Wolin, 'Biblical Blame Shift'.

150 Wolin, 'Biblical Blame Shift'.



Freud – indeed, Assmann has been widely 'accused of providing an overly sanguine and harmonious portrait of interstate relations among the proponents of ancient polytheism (Babylon, Assyria, and so forth)' - the attempt to 'demonstrate that Western monotheism had its origins in the nature-centered religion of ancient Egypt'<sup>151</sup> rather than in the distinction between life as it is and life as it should be risks missing the wider point, dramatised so effectively, as we shall see, by Naguib Mahfouz, that Akhenaten himself made an ethical distinction of his own 'between justice and injustice, what is and what should be, mere life versus life led according to principle'<sup>152</sup> – a distinction retained by the likes of Spinoza and Andrei Tarkovsky for all their apparent 'pantheism' - and sowed the seeds of monotheism in the region by insisting on the existence of a single Moral Law for the first time. For all that we can agree with Assmann that 'a cultural semantics of religious intolerance' promoted by the Abrahamic monotheisms at their literalist worst has been and continues to be a violent threat to civilisation, we must also recognise that, in Akhenaten – or at least the Akhenaten dramatised in our time by the likes of Naguib Mahfouz (this Akhenatenian 'warrior prototype' will be outlined in the Chapter 2) - we have an Egyptian precursor to Moses who was not an amoral 'nature-worshiper' given to 'worldly corruption ("the fleshpots of Egypt") and soulless idolatry' as ancient Egyptians have been stereotypically portrayed to be in the West down through the centuries, but rather a proto-Enlightenment figure committed to the very concept of a single Moral Law which has driven, and continues to drive, Western civilisation, and indeed all possible civilisations, despite the ever-present threat of polytheism, of which the postmodern relativism embraced by Assmann is but the latest historical example.

It is not the case, therefore, that we need to go back to the worst of Egyptian polytheism – against which Akhenaten himself rebelled – in order to recover, or finally accede to, the best of our civilisation, but rather to recognise that the universal civilisational impulse – the impulse to distinguish between what is and what should be - which took root in Judaism and Christianity and eventually led to the Western Renaissance and Enlightenment, was first felt in Egypt by Akhenaten, and survived in the 'East' of the Abrahamic world in the form of Islam; Naguib Mahfouz, indeed, described himself as a 'son' of these two civilisations – Pharaonic and Islamic - who then went on to drink the 'nectar' of Western civilisation. But there will be a great deal more to say on Mahfouz in the next chapter.

For now, the focus is the West, and its battle to recover its faith in the concept of civilisation after decades of relativist assault. The Arab Spring of 2011, centred precisely in Egypt, provided Western intellectuals with another golden opportunity to miss an opportunity; one notable

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151 Wolin, 'Biblical Blame Shift'.

152 Wolin, 'Biblical Blame Shift'.

exception, who has written extensively on the West's 'feeble'<sup>153</sup> response to events in Egypt and throughout the Arab world – and most recently, in Syria - has been Timothy Garton Ash. Like Nussbaum and other humanist 'warriors' of his generation, Garton Ash has been busy in recent years using his humanism not just as an excuse for narrow academic research but simultaneously to defend the cause of justice in the spirit of Arnoldian praxis.<sup>154</sup> As Ash asks rhetorically, 'if the Responsibility to Protect does not extend to the catastrophic manmade situation in Syria, what is it for?'<sup>155</sup> Comparing the West's responses to Yugoslavia, Syria and Congo, Ash argues that 'on the worst and most shameful interpretation, this suggests that the life of an Arab is not worth as much as the life of a European. And let's not even mention the life of an African.'<sup>156</sup>

Officially, the current leader of the Western world, Barack Obama, portrays himself, as we shall see further, as a direct spiritual descendant of Mahfouz's Akhenaten and a defender of humanitarian interests everywhere:

The non-violence practiced by men like Gandhi and King may not have been practical or possible in every circumstance, but the love that they preached - their faith in human progress - must always be the North Star that guides us on our journey. [...] So let us reach for the world that ought to be - that spark of the divine that still stirs within each of our souls. [...] And yet, I do not believe that we will have the will, or the staying power, to complete this work without something more - and that is the continued expansion of our moral imagination; an insistence that there is something irreducible that we all share. [...] The one rule that lies at the heart of every major religion is that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Adhering to this law of love has always been the core struggle of human nature.<sup>157</sup>

In practice, however, the nation-state system makes it impossible even for a leader as civilised as Barack Obama to regard, or 'love', citizens of other nations as equals although Obama knows that 'there is nothing weak - nothing passive, nothing naïve - in the creed and lives of Gandhi and King', he is nevertheless bound by the terms of his oath of office: 'As a head of state sworn to protect and defend my nation, I cannot be guided by their examples alone. I face the world as it is, and cannot

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153 See Timothy Garton Ash, 'IQ2 Interview', <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOgJt518tDo>, 26/5/11.

154 See, for example, Garton Ash's global free speech initiative at [freespeechdebate.com](http://freespeechdebate.com).

155 Timothy Garton Ash, 'Syria: What's Coming Over Us' ('Siria: Lo que nos viene encima'), [http://elpais.com/elpais/2013/04/26/opinion/1366973086\\_762888.html](http://elpais.com/elpais/2013/04/26/opinion/1366973086_762888.html), 27/4/13.

156 Ash, 'Syria: What's Coming Over Us'.

157 Barack Obama, *Nobel Lecture*, [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/2009/obama-lecture\\_en.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2009/obama-lecture_en.html), 10/12/09.

stand idle in the face of threats to the American people.<sup>158</sup> A remark attributed to Obama in early 2013 – 'I did not get re-elected to intervene in Syria'<sup>159</sup> – says it all about the state of Western civilisation in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: for all their humanism, elected officials are bound not to universal principles but to the particular, and often selfish, concerns of their local electorates, making sacrifice and compromise on an international level in the wider name of 'civilisation' all but impossible. If local electorates are not willing to sacrifice at least some of their material prosperity in the name of a higher Moral Law, then their elected representatives will be limited in their ability to act morally.

From the logic of President Obama's 'Akhenatenian' pronouncements, it follows that the humanities are not politically neutral; they are part of a concrete conception of the good life which takes seriously the idea of a single Moral Law, even if we will always disagree about the content and application of that Law. While we may agree that democratic elections are, at every level from local to regional to global, the best and fairest way of choosing governments, that is not the same as saying that the state has no interest or business, between elections, in educating its citizens to think and behave morally, as Obama himself repeatedly tries to do in his public pronouncements. If we take seriously the idea that civilisation, and even democracy, rests on a foundation of widespread public commitment to a Moral Law, then the humanities become an indispensable public good, prior in a sense to democracy itself. Democratic decisions to slash humanities funding or to promote the teaching of doctrines hostile to humanism thus come to be viewed as a threat to the democratic order of a society in the same way that overly tolerant democratically-approved policies towards, say, Islamic extremism or neo-Nazism are. The question whether to enshrine protection against the democratic erosion of humanist values in a state's constitution or whether to insist on a total separation of church and state – or in the post-Enlightenment world, of humanism and state – thus remains as current as it did in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Martha Nussbaum, for example, has called for a '21<sup>st</sup> Century Enlightenment' which recognises the absolute centrality of a humanities education to democratic citizenship and the emergence of a global civil society; her 2010 book *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* is a passionate and renewed plea for more direct student engagement with the Socratic tradition and Socratic method, more knowledge of the world's civilisations and religions and more critical engagement with them, and generally more attempts at empathy, especially in those cases where empathy is most urgent and most difficult.<sup>160</sup>

The European Union today faces precisely this crisis of faith in humanism and in the

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158 Obama, *Nobel Lecture*.

159 See Robert Fisk, 'Robert Fisk Talks to Al Jazeera About Latest Developments in Syria', <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2frNaLspPRs>, 5/3/13.

160 Martha Nussbaum, 'On 21<sup>st</sup> Century Enlightenment', <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vY7TWiZILt4>, 16/12/10.

very concept of a Moral Law traceable back through the European Enlightenment and Renaissance to early Islam, the rise of Christianity in Rome, the ancient Jewish heritage and even to the monotheism of Akhenaten in Egypt. Citizens of individual EU member-states overwhelmingly oppose transfers of wealth between members in the name of European unity and justice, let alone costly interventions in the Arab world or elsewhere, whatever civilisational ideals may be at stake there. As the euphoria of Cold War victory and the perceived 'end of history' wears off amid a prolonged economic crisis played out in the shadows of rising authoritarian powers, European humanists like Timothy Garton Ash seem unable to encourage voting publics to embrace yet more sacrifice in the name of higher moral truth or perfection. And in an age when the world hurtles toward collective environmental and military disaster, Ash's rhetorical question, 'If we can't make Europe work, what hope has the world got?'<sup>161</sup> assumes a poignancy and urgency of an apocalyptic degree.

One European intellectual to address the European identity crisis on precisely these high-civilisational terms, and on the eve of the financial crisis when everything about Europe was still 'pretty on the surface', was Portuguese essayist Eduardo Lourenço:

The essence of French culture, that which has conferred to it, almost since Abelard, a role apart in the cultural history of the West, has been its sustained attempt, down through the centuries, its pugnacious effort to create a structurally secular civilisation. The great revolution – the only one that deserves the name – was nothing but the logical conclusion of this long odyssey. (...) Devoted to the gods of a pseudo-universalism, a cosmopolitanism without a centre, [our] culture could offer nothing that would compare to the inheritance of Montaigne, Voltaire, or Victor Hugo, French because universal, and universal because French. If no other culture finds itself today in a position to take up and pass on the mantle of this inheritance, of a universalising vocation because neither ethnocentric nor theocratic, but secular and for this very reason democratic, then [our culture] is already, before even being born, a mere economic and political structure, a form perhaps still pretty on the surface, but hollow underneath.<sup>162</sup>

Once upon a time, literary France was a window into this 'anti-utopian utopia' or 'open society',

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161 See Timothy Garton Ash, 'Fragility of the Global System', <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RWK3heyb3Sg>, 17/3/13.

162 Eduardo Lourenço, *Disenchanted Europe: Towards a European Mythology (A Europa Desencantada: Para Uma Mitologia Europeia)*, (Lisbon: Gradiva, 2005), pp. 19-20.

‘Europe’ *par excellence*, the true Europe, the Europe we have all lost. In this Europe reigned ‘a universalising vocation, universalising because it is neither ethnocentric nor theocratic’, a vocation with complex historical roots – Greek, Jewish, Roman, Christian - but culturally open and secular, and an enemy of the imperial model of economic and cultural hegemony. This openness does not equate to a negation or dilution of identity, personal or national, but is rather the *sine qua non* of such identity. Here we have one of the main contradictions in Eduardo Lourenço’s heterodox philosophy: there can be no meaningful identity without a full and unconditional acceptance of other people, but no meaningful identity is *just* an acceptance of difference. The most we can say is that ‘Europe’ is a result of two parallel processes: one of closure in oneself, in local traditions and histories, and a second, which derives and grows out of the first, of openness and curiosity towards the foreign. What counts is the energy with which the individual oscillates between these two processes.

For Lourenço ‘European’ heroes come in many forms: Salman Rushdie, Sheherazade, Walt Whitman, maligned ‘orientalist’ scholars, Goethe with his mythic image of the divan, Averroës, Milton, Portuguese Jesuits (because ‘no one applied themselves with greater conscience and energy to the task of breaking out of the “European” mindset and becoming another, so that God could be everything in everyone’<sup>163</sup>), Bartolomeu de las Casas (for his ‘glorious defence of the Indians’<sup>164</sup> against the Spanish empire’s machine of domination and cruelty) and Pablo Neruda, bard and creator of a new, mythically secular continent. The most curious example is perhaps that of the Jesuits, precursors of the modern secular warrior in their urgent determination to open up to the other for the sake of their cause; this example shows how the ‘secularism’ so dear to Eduardo Lourenço is built not in a historical or spiritual vacuum but on the remains of obsolete ethnocentric and theocratic myths (like those of Catholicism, in the case of Jesuits, or the nationalistic myths of the Portuguese discoveries created by Camões). Studying these historical roots is a vital part of our continual attempt to recognise and transcend ‘the ghosts of our imagined identity’ and to recognise the ‘divine spark’ even beyond our own tribe.

Still, in Eduardo Lourenço we find more than a simple mythification of poetry or literature, even if he goes so far as to call literature ‘the spiritual driving-force of modernity’<sup>165</sup>. His humanism is more than this: as early as *Time and Poetry* (1974), we learn in his essay ‘The Humanist Despair of Miguel Torga and the Young Generation’ that his goal is not simply to love literature the way we loved the old gods, but to allow and even to love the despair of poets who don’t allow themselves the luxury of believing in literature without critically questioning themselves about the good it can

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163 Eduardo Lourenço, *The Death of Columbus: The Metamorphosis and End of the West as a Myth (A Morte de Colombo: Metamorfose e Fim do Ocidente como Mito)*, (Lisbon: Gradiva, 2005), p. 55.

164 Lourenço, *The Death of Columbus*, p. 104.

165 Lourenço, *The Death of Columbus*, p. 52.

do; this is the ‘mythical dialectic of our modernity’, as one of his other essays from this volume is entitled. Any mythology of the Creator-Poet – the myth of Orpheus, for example – must somehow avoid hardening or degenerating into mythomania. Only ‘when it is maintained within reasonable limits’ can this humanism ‘create a climate of attention and love for works of art that, since it isn’t blind, is the paradigm example of the natural courageous exercise of human understanding’.<sup>166</sup> For Lourenço, the true ‘critical act’ is always an act of love, and lays the foundation stone of a ‘Europe’ that needs no other justification than that of the mutual invention of existence in which all love consists.<sup>167</sup>

On Lourenço's utopian 'European' continent, it is conscience alone, sharpened by study of the humanities, which ensures that Europe makes it through the horrors of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century 'intact'. Perhaps more than anyone else, it is Antero de Quental who embodies Lourenço's European dream. ‘There is no one in our literature, not even Camões, who could be considered so universal a poet as Antero,’ Lourenço writes in *Antero or The Intact Night* (2007).<sup>168</sup> Antero and the Portuguese 'Generation of 1870' learned 'something new' – to 'think against themselves' and 'to put themselves in the shoes of the Other'.<sup>169</sup> But the so-called ‘secular saint’ of the 1870 generation also embodies, in his ‘scandalous and tragic’ suicide, the failure of socialism; we have all been born, like Fernando Pessoa, ‘on the ruins of the Anterian dream’.<sup>170</sup> Lourenço, however, sees in Antero a sign of a new conscience, a new faith in the ‘intact night’ of a modernity that, in Antero's readers if not in Antero himself, survives the death of the old certainties and the old hopes, and will go on to found his ‘Europe’. This ‘unfinished and unappeased quest for the Absolute, undertaken knowingly’ forms what Joaquim de Carvalho famously called ‘Antero’s spiritual drama’, and this struggle for faith in a Moral Law, faith in the centrality of conscience and empathy to the good life, Lourenço argues, is still our drama too.<sup>171</sup>

The humanities' function, in this context, is precisely to bolster faith in conscience, in the existence of a Moral Law. Rational argument and philological 'research' is only a part of this process; both literature and literary criticism produce knowledge 'in another way', as Roger Scruton said, 'even if that way is difficult to define'. To reduce academic work in the humanities to the 'research model' of the sciences, the very degradation lamented by Kronman, is to deny the

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166 Eduardo Lourenço, 'The Humanist Despair of Miguel Torga and the New Generations' ('O Desespero Humanista de Miguel Torga e o das Novas Gerações'), in *Time and Poetry (Tempo e Poesia)*, (Porto: Inova, 1974), p. 92.

167 See, for example, José Gil and Fernando Catroga, *The Tragic Essayism of Eduardo Lourenço (O Ensaísmo Trágico de Eduardo Lourenço)*, (Lisbon: Relógio D'Água, 1996) for a detailed discussion of these and related themes in Lourenço's work.

168 Eduardo Lourenço, *Antero or the Intact Night (Antero ou a Noite Intacta)*, (Lisbon: Gradiva, 2007), p. 137.

169 Lourenço, *Antero or the Intact Night*, p. 97.

170 Lourenço, *Antero or the Intact Night*, p. 123.

171 See Joaquim de Carvalho, *Antero's Spiritual Evolution (Evolução espiritual de Antero)*, (Seara Nova, 1929); <http://www.joaquimdecarvalho.org/artigos/artigo/107-Evolucao-espiritual-de-Antero-/pag-1> (accessed 23/1/14).

possibility of this empathic, disputational or aesthetic magic - to return to Scarry - in the first place; Martin Amis was surely right when he joked that criticism is preparing to quote the bits you like, or in other words, condensing the magic of a work of art so that the reader of the criticism may experience the essence of the work under review *plus* the critic's own contribution to the field of knowledge opened up by engagement with the original. The point of humanities 'research' is not only to clarify or summarise what an author or artist has said, but to pick up the ball you have been thrown by the author or artist and run with it oneself.

Contact with the works of Naguib Mahfouz, Andrei Tarkovsky and Tu Weiming has felt like nothing if not an enormous simultaneous opening-up of knowledge and invitation to take their pioneering work further. Hopefully this thesis will stand alone as a piece of 'academic research' in which I try to show that all three men, in radically different cultural contexts, and along with their Western counterparts whose work I have briefly sketched in this section, defended the existence of a single Moral Law the content of which involves a love for the idea of civilisation and a willingness to sacrifice oneself in the name of civilisation, in the manner of Socrates ('the man who gave up life itself for the pursuit of the argument'<sup>172</sup>) and Jesus in the Western tradition; but I would be lying if I said that I was prompted to write this thesis only out of a desire to tell the philological truth about what the authors actually said; this project unashamedly started out of a *belief in the content* of what they said, and in a desire to build on their work by juxtaposing them for the first time and constructing out of that juxtaposition a single narrative which could serve both as an example in its own right of Lourencian Europeanism - of 'going out into the world' as the Jesuits did and trying to universalise the Moral Law through direct contact and critical engagement with other cultures - and as a lesson to Europe and Western civilisation as a whole from Islamic, Slavic and Confucian civilisation simultaneously. Beyond that, the ultimate goal is to create a blueprint for a 21st-century global civil society, one based on a solid humanist foundation of bricks drawn from as many civilisational heritages as possible. To attempt any less would be to contradict the very message I have had the privilege of studying in each of its respective local forms.

The central pillar of all these civilisational forms, indeed, is love – a love rooted in conscience and exercised under the purview of reason, to be sure, but love no less. It is no surprise that as Western intellectuals try to recover from the deleterious reign of Theory and its sado-masochistic insistence on the irreducible 'otherness' of other people and the repressive nature of lifelong marriage, love between two people as traditionally conceived by Western civilisation survives mainly at the margins of society, and most notably in the gay and lesbian community in its struggle for equality and marriage rights. Among defenders of the gay marriage cause, none puts the

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172 See Martha Nussbaum, 'Humanistic Education and Global Justice', [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A\\_IR1CID3Ns](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_IR1CID3Ns), 19/9/10.

case more eloquently or relevantly for our purposes than Andrew Sullivan. Sullivan defends the idea that homosexuals may be even more monogamous and committed to the idea of lifelong marriage than heterosexual people now are; after being forever denied the right to commit publicly to another person through marriage, the homosexual community - 'the 3.5%' as Sullivan calls them - now wishes to argue that this form of exclusive, eternal commitment is the highest realisation of our adult humanity and a microcosm of human 'civilisation' in the most humanistic sense of that word. For Sullivan, sex is only a comparatively small part of this metaphysical, civilisational equation; what matters is the transcendental commitment to one being beyond oneself. We desire and deserve it for ourselves, Sullivan implies, and we all ultimately want to do it ourselves if we are properly educated and prepared for it, on the condition that we are free to choose when and with whom, and free, it should go without saying, not to commit to anyone if some other calling commands our full attention.<sup>173</sup>

Among contemporary Western intellectuals, Sullivan's traditionalist position finds surprising support in the form of Slavoj Žižek, who for all his faults agrees with Marx that 'you don't simply dissolve marriage; divorce means that you retroactively establish that the love was not the true love'.<sup>174</sup> Nussbaum goes further in the direction of dramatising the dilemmas faced by a person who must balance the practical demands of family with public responsibilities to civilisation, but even for Nussbaum, intimate family relations are a microcosm of the morally healthy person's wider commitment to civilisation as a whole<sup>175</sup>: the loved one enshrines the civilisation to which one has developed an intense attachment via a long humanistic education and is therefore worthy of ultimate sacrifice.

Without denying, therefore, the centrality of marriage and family to Western civilisation, and on the contrary affirming it, the post-postmodern generation of Western 'warriors for civilisation' is busy, à la Badiou, trying to reestablish lifelong marriage as the template for an empathic consciousness eventually capable of embracing the whole of humanity. While we are concerned with solving the problem of 'globalisation for a tribal species', and while even Slavoj Žižek has admitted that 'the big question today is how to organise to act globally, at an immense international level, without regressing to some authoritarian rule'<sup>176</sup>. we will see that Mahfouz's Akhenaten, for example, combined the ideal of commitment to his wife and commitment to public service 'at an immense international level' in much the same terms that Barack Obama so publicly does today; in

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173 See Andrew Sullivan and Douglas Wilson, 'Is Civil Marriage for Gay Couples Good for Society?', <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XhxtVaoLjY>, 4/3/13.

174 See Decca Aitkenhead, 'Slavoj Žižek: Humanity is OK, but 99% of People Are Boring Idiots', <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2012/jun/10/slavoj-zizek-humanity-ok-people-boring>, 10/6/12 (accessed 11/6/12).

175 See in particular Martha Nussbaum, 'Beauty and Consolation', <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IuQj5jQLCb4>, 24/9/11.

176 See Aitkenhead, 'Slavoj Žižek'.



Obama's own terms, it is possible to love one's wife more than anything and at the same time 'to see the world through the eyes of those who are different from us—the child who's hungry, the steelworker who's been laid off, the family who lost the entire life they built together when the storm came to town'.<sup>177</sup> Indeed, for Obama it is precisely his love for his wife which gives him the ongoing energy to broaden his 'ambit of concern and empathise with the plight of others'; in such a family climate 'it becomes harder not to act, harder not to help'.<sup>178</sup>

Jeremy Rifkin makes the race to global empathy the urgent theme of his book *The Empathic Civilisation* (2010).<sup>179</sup> For Rifkin, only empathy can save humanity from impending environmental catastrophe and possible extinction. One needn't share Rifkin's ecological pessimism, however, or disagree with critics like Paul Bloom on the importance of reason as well as the 'gut wrench' of empathy when it comes to making moral decisions and forming social policy to think, as Barack Obama does, that 'the world needs more empathy'.<sup>180</sup> Empathy matters first and foremost because it makes individuals better, and connects them to truth inaccessible by other means. This is part of the faith 'professed' by humanities scholars, forgotten in the West in recent years but now being recovered by the 'warriors' mentioned in this chapter and an army of others.

Empathy, however, is only part of the humanistic creed; even sociopaths are capable of it. Words like love, conscience, marriage, rights, sacrifice, truth, even reason, must be believed in too. This cluster of concepts adds up to what I call simply 'civilisation', or what Arnold called 'culture' even if he said himself that the choice of word matters little<sup>181</sup>; what matters is that the humanities be seen as the study of this single overarching Law, and as the the active attempt to bring us all closer to it in our daily lives. As such, and only as such, they deserve their place at the heart of the modern university. Such departments would differ from the Theology departments which dominated the medieval university primarily because they would no longer attempt to stifle or ignore scientific enquiry, for true humanism by definition has nothing to fear from science or the expression of empirically reasoned arguments, and on the contrary requires them. The remainder of this thesis is an attempt to persuade the unpersuaded more by example than anything else, as art can sometimes do; but it is also a narrowly academic attempt to show that the concept of 'civilisation' rooted in a single Moral Law and envisaged as a unifying power for our century is, whatever one happens to think of it, in no way a Western invention promoted by armies of neo-imperialist Western intellectuals; faith in it is professed just as eloquently, if not more eloquently, by Islamic, Orthodox

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177 Barack Obama, in Paul Bloom, 'The Baby in the Well',  
[http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2013/05/20/130520crat\\_atlarge\\_bloom](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2013/05/20/130520crat_atlarge_bloom), 20/5/13.

178 See Bloom, 'The Baby in the Well'.

179 Jeremy Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilisation: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis*, (Tarcher, 2010).

180 See Bloom, 'The Baby in the Well'.

181 See, once again (c.f. Note 2), Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, pp. 195-196.

and Confucian voices too. Claude Lévi-Strauss and his heirs were wrong, dangerously wrong, to suggest that we have no means of comparison and no right to say so. But before we finally get to these non-Western voices and engage in what will hopefully be viewed as fruitful comparison of them with each other and with their Western counterparts, there remain some contemporary Western sceptics of moral and civilisational progress whose claims ought briefly to be addressed.

#### *1.4 Beyond Animal Mysticism: Warriors for a New Global Civilisation*

Even those openly hostile to the idea of civilisational progress nevertheless recognise that the theme of civilisation looks set to dominate 21<sup>st</sup> century intellectual life. For all its flaws, Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilisations' thesis marked perhaps the beginning of the end of post-Cold War Western triumphalism and the realisation that we will have no choice but to face our Abrahamic, Confucian and other brothers and sisters on an increasingly level economic, political, military and cultural playing field. The broad question of how individually and collectively best to negotiate this potential minefield of cultural misunderstandings, resource wars and general unprecedented cheek-by-jowl living made possible by mass migration and the Internet demands the urgent attention of everyone; humanists the world over will have a leading role to play in how this 'globalisation for a tribal species' plays out.

Not all humanists, not even all those freed from the worst rhetorical excesses of postmodern Theory, agree on the possibility or desirability of constructing a new global civilisational narrative out of the best available constituent parts. Some recalcitrant pessimists, perhaps most prominent among them John Gray, argue that the call of civilisation is itself the problem, a Siren's call leading to cyclical reiterations of barbarism and no real moral progress. Time after time, Gray argues, myths of progress have ushered in periods of unconscionable brutality and instrumentalisation of human individuals; if we were to judge the idea of civilisational progress on its empirical and historical merits, Gray concludes, we would be forced to throw it out: 'the difference between advances in science and advances in civilisation is that the lessons that are learnt in ethics and politics are invariably lost and forgotten.'<sup>182</sup> Although Gray admits that 'things have improved in many respects in the last hundred years', a dangerous myth has accompanied such progress, namely that 'the long-run impact of the growth of human knowledge is to make the world, human life, more civilised'.<sup>183</sup>

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182 John Gray, 'On Progress', <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jmRBHCclzZk>, 9/4/2013.

183 Gray, 'On Progress'.

Contrary to the Arnoldian perfectibility thesis which underlies his definition of culture and his commitment to the idea of a continually evolving 'best that has been thought and said in the world', human beings for Gray remain stuck in a Sisyphean historical condition: 'new knowledge produces new forms of civilisation and new forms of barbarism.'<sup>184</sup>

One can believe in the 'fragility of civilisation', however, as Gray does and indeed as Mahfouz, Tarkovsky and Tu all do, without assuming that there has been no civilisational progress whatsoever or that civilisational progress has been shown to be historically impossible. Mahfouz's *Children of Gebelawi*, to cite the most relevant and prominent example for our purposes, is a dramatisation of the repeated intergenerational loss and regaining of ethical knowledge, knowledge which is always prone to oblivion but which is ultimately refined and built upon with every iteration. The difference between Gray and our 'warriors for civilisation' is faith in the idea of civilisation-building; while Gray assumes that those who are not energised and thereby incorporated into any civilisational project are invariably barbarically eliminated by it (he cites Joseph Conrad's experiences in the Belgian Congo) and retreats instead into an anti-civilisational mysticism, our 'warriors' all affirm that, for all the crimes committed in the name of civilisation, the goal of civilisation itself remains a noble one.

Instead of civilisation, indeed, Gray opts for what he calls 'the silence of animals', a position brilliantly encapsulated by Simon Critchley as a 'fusion of his quasi-Burkean critique of liberalism, underpinned as it is by a deep pessimism about human nature, with a certain strand of Taoism'.<sup>185</sup> Critchley argues that, for Gray, 'what has to be given up is the desperate metaphysical longing to find some anchor in a purported reality'; the way to do this is to realise that 'the highest value in existence is to know that there is nothing of substance in the world. Nothing is more real than nothing. It is the nothingness beyond us, the emptiness behind words, that Gray wants us to contemplate'.<sup>186</sup> In this 'strident defense of the ideal of contemplation against action' which Critchley wrongly describes as unfashionable, Gray asks us to give up our utopian longings, whether 'daydreams such as a new cosmopolitan world order governed by universal human rights', the idea that 'history has a teleological, providential purpose that underwrites human action', the 'Obamaesque delusion that one's life is a narrative that is an episode in some universal story of progress', Arnoldian or 'Arendtian fantasies of idealized *praxis*', or general 'liberal ideas of public engagement and intervention' as forms of the good life, and instead admit that such fantasies merely 'provide consolation for killer apes like us by momentarily staving off the threat of

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184 Gray, 'On Progress'.

185 Simon Critchley, 'John Gray's Godless Mysticism: On *The Silence of Animals*', <http://lareviewofbooks.org/article.php?type=&id=1722&fulltext=1,2/6/13>.

186 Critchley, 'John Gray's Godless Mysticism'.



science, not a finding'.<sup>192</sup> Although 'the materialist assumption works really, really well—in detecting and quantifying things that have a material or mechanistic explanation', the problem is that 'the success has gone to the materialists' heads. From a fruitful method, materialism becomes an axiom: If science can't quantify something, it doesn't exist.'<sup>193</sup> The bravery of Nagel's book, Ferguson argues, lies in his insistence that 'we know some things to exist even if materialism omits or ignores or is oblivious to them. Reductive materialism doesn't account for the "brute facts" of existence—it doesn't explain, for example, why the world exists at all, or how life arose from nonlife'.<sup>194</sup> Above all, materialism is of limited use to us when it comes to 'the fundamental beliefs we rely on as we go about our everyday business: the truth of our subjective experience, our ability to reason, our capacity to recognize that some acts are virtuous and others aren't'.<sup>195</sup>

If, as we have agreed, the humanities are not sciences, but rather have everything to do with 'our capacity to recognise that some acts are virtuous and others aren't', and if, as we have agreed, belief in moral and civilisational progress remains a choice that reasonable, reasoning people armed with 21st-century educations can freely and in good conscience make, what follows? What in our century should those committed to virtue and progress via the humanities be labouring after? Beyond the eternal call of virtue and progress, the risks of climate change, apocalyptic war and environmental degradation, which need no elaboration here, add an existential urgency to humanists' labours. Along with primatologist Frans de Waal, with his call for us to take up the urgent challenge of 'globalisation for a tribal species' in the coming century, New Atheist spokesman Sam Harris has argued that 'it has long been obvious that we need to converge, as a global civilisation, in our beliefs about how we should treat one another':

How can we persuade all of the people who are committed to silly and harmful things in the name of "morality" to change their commitments, to have different goals in life, and to lead better lives? I think that this project is actually the most important project facing humanity at this point in time. It subsumes everything else we could care about — from arresting climate change, to stopping nuclear proliferation, to curing cancer, to saving the whales. Any effort that requires that we collectively get our priorities straight and marshal massive commitments of time and resources would fall within the scope of this project. To build a viable global

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192 Andrew Ferguson, 'The Heretic', [http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/heretic\\_707692.html?nopager=1](http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/heretic_707692.html?nopager=1), 25/3/13.

193 Ferguson, 'The Heretic'.

194 Ferguson, 'The Heretic'.

195 Ferguson, 'The Heretic'.

civilization we must begin to converge on the same economic, political, and environmental goals.

Obviously the project of moral persuasion is very difficult — but it strikes me as especially difficult if you can't figure out in what sense anyone could ever be right and wrong about questions of morality or about questions of human values.<sup>196</sup>

Nagel and Harris converge in their calls for universal moral education, a universal humanities curriculum to sit alongside the specialised scientific educations which have made the astonishing technological progress of the last century possible. In precisely the same vein, Lee Siegel stresses that it is 'intimate introduction' to works of literature and art, mere loving exposure to 'the best which has been thought and said', which makes this moral education possible, rather than formal, philological, 'scientific' literary study. Siegel traces the growth of the modern humanities in the 19<sup>th</sup> century out of classical Greek and Latin study on the one hand and Bible studies in church on the other, 'the necessary other half of a full education' as enshrined in Arnold's marriage of the Hellenistic and Hebraistic in *Culture and Anarchy*. Although more modern sources of humanistic knowledge were gradually introduced into the canon 'with the waning of religious authority' and with a view to 'ministering truth to souls parched for higher meaning', the most modern such source, Siegel argued, remained Shakespeare.<sup>197</sup> The advent of literature departments in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century did little, initially, to alter this balance, for such departments 'consisted mostly of philologists who examined etymology and the history of a text'.<sup>198</sup> It was only after World War Two that, in America at least, 'the study of literature as a type of wisdom, relevant to actual, contemporary life, put down widespread institutional roots'.<sup>199</sup> The GI Bill allowed such studies to reach their 'zenith' around the time that Kronman wrote of his life-changing existentialism class in the early 1960s, before 'the very popularity of literature in the university' allowed 'tendentious pedants of various stripes' to 'accelerate the academicisation of literary art'.<sup>200</sup> In Siegel's view, it was the Vietnam War rather than any hangover from World War Two which facilitated this acceleration: the 'purposeless bloodshed' of Vietnam 'made all authority suspect', and 'that was when teaching literature acquired an especially intense ideological fervor, when university radicals started their long (and fruitless) march through academic institutions armed with that fig leaf for mediocrity

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196 Sam Harris, 'A New Science of Morality, Part 3', <http://edge.org/conversation/a-new-science-of-morality-part-3>, 17/9/10.

197 Lee Siegel, 'Who Ruined the Humanities?', <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323823004578595803296798048.html>, 12/7/13.

198 Siegel, 'Who Ruined the Humanities?'

199 Siegel, 'Who Ruined the Humanities?'

200 Siegel, 'Who Ruined the Humanities?'

known as "Theory".<sup>201</sup> The humanities in general, and the English major in particular, have been in 'slow decline' ever since.<sup>202</sup>

Siegel is robustly certain that 'literature changed my life long before I began to study it in college and then, in a hapless trance, in graduate school', filling him as it did with 'a beauty that repelled the forces that were making me sad'.<sup>203</sup> Alas, 'once in the college classroom, this precious, alternate life inside me got thrown back into that dimension of my existence that vexed or bored me. Homer, Chekhov and Yeats were reduced to right and wrong answers, clear-cut themes, a welter of clever and more clever interpretations.'<sup>204</sup> It was the confusion of the humanities and social sciences, the myth of 'interdisciplinarity', that was the source of the problem: 'Books that transformed the facts were taught like science and social science and themselves reduced to mere facts. Novels, poems and plays that had been fonts of empathy, and incitements to curiosity, were now occasions of drudgery and toil.'<sup>205</sup> In Siegel's straightforward formulation, 'every other academic subject requires specialised knowledge and a mastery of skills and methods. Literature requires only that you be human. [...] Why does Hector's infant son, Astyanax, cry when he sees his father put on his helmet? All you need to understand that is a heart.'<sup>206</sup>

Echoing Scarry, Siegel argues that it is literature's 'sudden, startling truth and beauty' which 'make us feel, in the most solitary part of us, that we are not alone, and that there are meanings that cannot be bought, sold or traded, that do not decay and die.'<sup>207</sup> Siegel inexplicably calls this experience 'socially and economically worthless'<sup>208</sup> when in fact, as Scarry, Nussbaum and others have shown, a just and prosperous communal life may be impossible without it. Nevertheless, Siegel longs for a return to the days in which literature was merely 'a part of everyday life' for adults, and to achieve this end, he argues for the return, at high school if not also at university, of 'the literature survey course, where books were not academically taught but intimately introduced—an experience impervious to inane commentary and sterile testing.'<sup>209</sup> Although not everyone will major in the humanities at university, and many will go on instead to 'search for a cure for cancer, and things like that', properly humanistically educated individuals will nevertheless know how to turn to art and literature 'when they are touched by inexpressible yearnings the way they will eat when they are hungry.'<sup>210</sup>

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201 Siegel, 'Who Ruined the Humanities?'.  
202 Siegel, 'Who Ruined the Humanities?'.  
203 Siegel, 'Who Ruined the Humanities?'.  
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210 Siegel, 'Who Ruined the Humanities?'.

If we accept the claim about the innate power of literature, when properly introduced, to educate and to civilise, the question then becomes: which books, in our century, should be 'intimately introduced' to facilitate the moral and political progress that Nagel argues can only be 'realised in the collective lives of millions' and to lead us towards Harris's convergence 'in our beliefs about how we should treat one another', so that we might actually make a fist of de Waal's 'globalisation for a tribal species'? A commonsense answer to this question would include Islamic, Orthodox and Confucian voices as well as Western ones, for these are, in demographic terms, among the major civilisational forces of our time, and any canon which excluded any or all of these cultural heritages would be dooming itself to charges of specifically Western neo-imperialism rather than the charges of global neo-imperialism which all attempts to build a global literary canon inevitably face. This commonsense realisation was the starting point for this thesis. But the wonderful discovery of my research has been the radical convergence of the civilisational representatives I have chosen with each other and with the Western voices for civilisation I have variously invoked here. The exercise of comparison itself has been the strongest evidence I could have hoped for to support faith in the idea of a Moral Law, and I hope this shows through; while mysticisms of animal silence exist across the globe, Islam, Confucianism and Orthodox Christianity all have modern representatives more than capable of holding their own with the best of Western civilisation.

Warriors for civilisation within the academy, however, face serious institutional opposition. One delicious microcosm of an example is NYU Abu Dhabi, initially envisaged as an oasis for 'the best that has been thought and said in the world' in a region for so long deprived of access, but now hijacked by those who despise the very concepts of 'convergence', 'world literature' and 'the best that has been thought and said' in the first place. Jacques Lezra proudly tells this tragic story as one of victory for the 'comparatist method'; drawing extensively from the NYU Abu Dhabi experience, Lezra argues in his 2012 article 'The Futures of Comparative Literature' that Comparative Literature must seek to distinguish itself entirely from World Literature in the battle for survival in 21st century humanities programmes. 'World Literature' for Lezra is 'a notion unmistakably conditioned on one side by a colonial, elitist imaginary at work when Goethe was conceiving the term, and on the other by the tendential creation of forms of universal equivalence associated with global capitalism': in short, 'the worlds of Comparative Literature are not the world of "World Literature"'.<sup>211</sup>

As a defender of World Literature in the 21st-century university and a fierce opponent of the relativism that Lezra and departments of Comparative Literature continue to promote 45 years after

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211 Jacques Lezra, 'The Futures of Comparative Literature', *Wenyi Lilun Yanjiu*, no. 2, 2012 (<http://complit.uoregon.edu/events/images-ev/50th%20anniv/futuresofcomplit.pdf>), p. 89.



1968, I would like to say that I at least agree that we would all be better off if 'Comparative' and 'World' Literature, as Lezra defines them, were left to lead entirely separate institutional lives. Both unashamedly promote values which cannot co-exist with each other; may the worthier discipline win the hearts and minds of the public. Lezra and I also agree that Comparative Literature departments 'make nothing happen'; but while Lezra argues that 'continental philosophy' or Theory was 'excluded from departments of philosophy in the United States' and found an 'exile's home' in departments of Comparative Literature where it was 'perceived to have no disciplinary and, more importantly, no social consequences'<sup>212</sup>, I would rather argue that the content of Theory-laden 'cultural studies' syllabi is itself largely responsible for this spiralling irrelevance in the first place. While ordinary people can understand, or at least imagine, what world literature – the study of the world's best literature – is and why it might matter for people to be exposed to 'the best that has been thought and said in the world', comparatists like Lezra have nothing but scorn for the very concepts of 'best' and 'world', and seek to build a house out of pure 'negativity' and 'difference', concepts which are incomprehensible to all those without advanced degrees in continental philosophy, and downright disgusting to many of those who do have them. There is a direct connection between this incomprehensibility and the irrelevance of Comparative Literature and its practitioners; a discipline which faces such a challenge continually to explain and justify itself will quickly lose customers among the wider public.

Lezra, meanwhile, singles out the United Arab Emirates as an important front in the battle for a more humane 21st century global order. In dreaming up the idea of a liberal arts college in Abu Dhabi, however, the Emir was, in Lezra's view, stuck in the 19th century with such an Arnoldian view of the humanities as the study of 'the best that has been thought and said in the world'. Instead of 'pursuing, by means of the study of cultural universals, "total perfection"',<sup>213</sup> the NYU people to whom the Emir entrusted his eminently sensible and understandable project smashed it:

When the curriculum at NYU Abu Dhabi was developed, however, it took a surprising angle on this Arnoldian story. The notion that there is a 'best that has been thought and said in the world' has turned out to be controversial both within and outside of the academy – as decolonisation, the opening of canons, on up to the so-called culture wars and the theory wars of the past twenty years have shown. In the place held by this cultural superlative, by this notion that 'the best which has been thought and said in the world' exists as such, and that if it exists it is accessible, and

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212 Lezra, 'The Futures of Comparative Literature', p. 84.

213 Lezra, 'The Futures of Comparative Literature', p. 83.

that if it is accessible it is teachable, and that if it is teachable its teaching is desirable – in this place a different value was installed. [...] A humanities core [was] built around topics and notions drawn from the field of Comparative Literature. Comparativism, in short, stepped into the controversial spot where reference to ‘the best that has been thought and said in the world’ had stood.<sup>214</sup>

In place of a single global community based on common values refined through the ongoing practice of the humanities, we are led to a world, actively desired by Lezra, in which the only certainty is that there is that there is no moral certainty, and that there is more than one world. This ‘comparativist’ dream, in my view a nightmare, ‘can produce, or at least model, a civil society whose juridical frame is neutral with respect to differences. It can attend to and produce a wholly different sort of world than the one Arnold envisions, a world that is not one.’<sup>215</sup> Lezra then embarks on a history of Comparative Literature as a discipline oppressed until the end of the Cold War, only now freed to fulfil its world historical mission of ending the empire of oneness born at the dawn of monotheistic civilisation in both Europe and Asia and surviving right down through the European Renaissance and Enlightenment and on into our 21st century global flux. Rather than build a new global super-civilisation out of the best of our respective civilisational inheritances, Lezra’s goal is to replace the very concept of civilisation with postmodern difference, to situate the discipline of Comparative Literature ‘at the heart of an enterprise oriented both toward an alternative future – alternative to the disasters of monoglot European national culture, which seems always to produce friend-enemy distinctions – and away from a specific past.’<sup>216</sup> The attempt to build a single global civil society in the 21st century is, for Lezra, an unjustifiable extension of previous nation-building exercises. He prefers a rejection of the very concept of national unity on any level, even and especially a single global level. The challenge is not to get everyone to agree on ‘the best that has been thought and said in the world’, or even to engage in open debate about what ‘the best that has been thought and said in the world’ might be, but rather to get everyone to agree that there is no such thing as the best that has been thought and said in the world’ in the first place, that the only truth is that there is no truth, and that therefore, anything goes, and nothing matters, except the fact that nothing matters. This is an intellectual, moral and historical dead-end actively desired by people who, like Lezra, despise human civilisation in all its historical forms and believe that the very concept of ‘civilisation’ as something to be loved and treasured, as something worth contributing to and worth living and dying for, is primitive and barbaric and wrong.

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214 Lezra, ‘The Futures of Comparative Literature’, p. 83.

215 Lezra, ‘The Futures of Comparative Literature’, pp. 83-84.

216 Lezra, p. 84.

Ordinary people, thankfully, are largely immune to this virus precisely because it is couched in such inaccessible language and divorced from their concerns. It is the insecure, partially educated adolescent for whom the Sirens' call of postmodern negativity is dangerous, on whom the arrogance and certainty of the true relativist acts as a charm. It requires a certain maturity and humility to admit that our parents and forefathers may have been right about *some* things, even as they were so obviously wrong about so much; the baby of civilisation must not be thrown out with the bathwater of human stupidity and barbarism we have all inherited. Without such maturity and humility, without the courage to admit that we are part of something – one big thing – beyond ourselves, we end up in a desert of pure meaninglessness, in which hope itself is by definition extinguished. Comparative Literature as Lezra defines it embraces this nihilism; World Literature fights to save the flame of civilisation before the moral relativism so loved by political leaders everywhere because it allows them to do what they want (contrary to Lezra's view of the unholy alliance between World Literature and 'global capitalism', it is the *comparatists* who have the charge to answer) engulfs our universities, our media, and our free selves, and prevents a global republic of letters from ever emerging.

If NYU Abu Dhabi stands as a microcosm of the Arab world's struggle to access 'the best that has been thought and said in the world', Tu Weiming's new Institute of Advanced Humanistic Studies at Peking University provides a more promising model. Inaugurated in 2010 with research centres devoted to 'Communication Between Civilisations' and 'Religions Around the World and the Universal Ethics', among others, the IAHS promises to take up de Waal's challenge where others have so far feared to tread. But we will have much more to say on Tu Weiming and his efforts to unite Abrahamic and Confucian civilisations in our final chapter. In the West, meanwhile, the work of Fred Dallmayr on civilisational dialogue and convergence remains an important scholarly reference. Dallmayr's famous 2003 article, 'Cosmopolitanism: Moral and Political' celebrates the work of Martha Nussbaum and German theologian Hans Küng to build a universal ethics while also giving the fairest hearing imaginable to postmodern sceptics of the project such as Michel Foucault and Luce Irigaray, concluding that, whatever one's views on convergence and difference in the moral sphere, the need for a 'global political *praxis*' remains. Dallmayr's arguments are worth exploring briefly here.

Taking Küng's 1991 book *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic* and the 1993 'Parliament of the World's Religions' in Chicago as the starting points for his discussion of post-Cold War attempts to build a single Global Ethic, Dallmayr quotes Küng's clear views on the urgency of convergence: 'No survival without a world ethic. No world peace without peace between the religions. No peace between the religions without dialogue between the religions. [...] The one world in which we live has a chance of survival only if there is no longer any room in it for spheres

of differing, contradictory, and even antagonistic ethics.<sup>217</sup> As Dallmayr concludes, 'the upshot of [these] considerations is that globalization cannot be limited to political, economic, and cultural domains but must be above all a normative enterprise'<sup>218</sup>. K ng's hand in the 1993 Parliament's 'Declaration toward a Global Ethic' is highlighted by Dallmayr, the other signatories of which affirmed K ng's basic position that the global ethic is 'new only in application, not in basic inspiration' and that the common set of core values to which the best of the world's religions have historically aspired have 'yet to be lived in heart and action'<sup>219</sup>, or in other words, yet to be globalised via contact with other civilisational versions of the same core moral truth.

Dallmayr then revisits some of Nussbaum's early arguments for 'moral globalism', 'world citizenship' and 'cosmopolitan moral education' laid out earlier in this chapter before moving on to the postmodern critics of the enterprise. Dallmayr himself voices his own concerns regarding an apparent 'sameness of treatment' in the cosmopolitan enterprise which is somehow 'morally deficient by extending recognition to fellow beings only in the respect in which they are identical with ourselves.'<sup>220</sup> Although Nussbaum and others including Kathryn Schulz<sup>221</sup> have argued repeatedly that the much-beloved 'Do unto others' Golden Rule of folk morality is deficient on precisely these terms, and argued for empathy as a way of moving meaningfully beyond it to less selfish forms of moral engagement, nevertheless, even such attempts at empathy for Dallmayr are 'egocentric' in the sense that they 'appropriate or reduce the alter to the rational self (or ego), instead of recognizing the distinct otherness of fellow beings.'<sup>222</sup>

Dallmayr's claim here cuts to the heart of the entire debate. Is it really 'egocentric' or 'morally deficient' to wish oneself and others to uphold a single set of universal values? Dallmayr quotes Foucault on the importance of the process of 'moral self-formation' and the limits of mere rule-following for a full ethical life, but then reminds us that Foucault himself did not believe in an ideal process of moral self-formation at all. The disagreement between Nussbaum and Foucault on the legacy of Diogenes the Cynic shows us what is at stake here:

Curiously, Foucault's later texts appeal precisely to the same set of mentors invoked by Nussbaum in her defense of universal rules: the Cynics and Stoics, and above all Diogenes the Cynic. Like Nussbaum's writings. *The History of Sexuality* refers to the

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217 Fred Dallmayr, 'Cosmopolitanism: Moral and Political', *Political Theory*, Vol. 31, No. 3. (Jun., 2003), pp. 423-424.

218 Dallmayr, 'Cosmopolitanism: Moral and Political', p. 424.

219 Dallmayr, 'Cosmopolitanism: Moral and Political' p. 425.

220 Dallmayr, 'Cosmopolitanism: Moral and Political', p. 429.

221 See Kathryn Schulz, 'What is it about *Middlemarch*?', <http://www.vulture.com/2014/01/rebecca-mead-revisits-george-eliot-middlemarch.html>, 13/1/14.

222 Dallmayr, 'Cosmopolitanism: Moral and Political', p. 429.

'scandalous' behavior of Diogenes and his habit of confounding public and private spheres of conduct. However, far from figuring as the exemplar of a universal reason captured in invariant rule systems, the accent here is placed on Diogenes as teacher of moral self-formation and 'performance criticism' - a criticism directed at the homogenizing and 'normalizing' rule systems of society.<sup>223</sup>

For Foucault, it is 'homogenising and normalising rule systems' which are always and everywhere the enemy, whatever their content happens to be, and whatever the potential benefits of such systems, including the Socratic, empathetic, self-cultivating one envisaged by Nussbaum, happen to be. Dallmayr argues that moral globalists like Nussbaum 'summarily denounce [...] a group of contemporary thinkers often loosely grouped under the rubric of "postmodernism" and united by 'their opposition to "foundationalism," which is another word for a homogenizing universalism'<sup>224</sup>, and by a 'Nietzschean or post-Nietzschean antifoundational zeal' which 'takes the form of a radical reversal celebrating particularism or dissensus for its own sake', and argues that 'matters are rarely that simple'.<sup>225</sup> Sometimes, however, they really are; no one on the convergence side of the debate, not even Peter Hitchens, is arguing that moral authority should not always and everywhere be questioned by feeling, reasoning moral agents. But the reason why such feeling and questioning matters in the first place is because we care about the well-being of ourselves and those around us on whatever terms we care; the choice, a deeply political one as Dallmayr himself reminds us, is about whether we want to accept the challenge of trying to make everyone care in the same way, which will surely involve both giving and taking – quite literally taking, from 'the best that has been thought and said in the world' - or whether instead we want to celebrate the very fact of not caring in the same way by denying the very idea of a 'best that has been thought and said' in the first place.

For the time being, the Arab Spring and its fervent protagonists, which Naguib Mahfouz did not quite live to see even as he did so much to make it and them possible, provide more hope and inspiration than any number of privileged Western humanities professors on either side of the debate about civilisation and convergence. Yemeni activist Tawakkul Karman, the youngest ever recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011, echoed in her acceptance speech both the tone and content of Naguib Mahfouz's 1988 Nobel Lecture with an insistence on *hadara*, civilisation, and its role in our century:

Mankind's feeling of responsibility to create a decent life and make it worth living

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223 Dallmayr, 'Cosmopolitanism: Moral and Political', p. 430.

224 Dallmayr, 'Cosmopolitanism: Moral and Political', p. 429.

225 Dallmayr, 'Cosmopolitanism: Moral and Political', p. 430.

with dignity, has always been stronger than the will to kill life. Despite great battles, the survival of the human race is the clearest expression of mankind's yearning for reconstruction, not for destruction, for progress, not for regression and death. This tendency is strengthened day after day with all available means of communications, thanks to the rapid and astonishing development of information technology and the communications revolution. Walls between human societies have fallen down and the lives and destinies of societies have converged, marking the emergence of a new phase, a phase where peoples and nations of the world are not only residents of a small village, as they say, but members of one family, despite differences in nationality and race or in culture and language. All the members of this one family interact in all corners of our planet and share the same aspirations and fears. Despite all its missteps, humanity will go on in its march towards what is 'beneficial to the people' and will make different cultures, identities and specific characteristics of civilisations come closer to each other on the road towards positive convergence and interaction, both in taking and in giving. Thus, understanding will gradually replace dispute, cooperation will replace conflict, peace will replace war, and integration will replace division.<sup>226</sup>

Even in her moment of personal triumph, Karman does not forget her humble place in the millennial world-historical march of *hadara*: 'the Nobel Prize did not come only as a personal prize for Tawakkul Abdel-Salam Karman, but as a declaration and recognition of the whole world for the triumph of the peaceful revolution of Yemen and as an appreciation of the sacrifices of its great peaceful people.'<sup>227</sup> She also calls on the world to act in Yemen on the side of justice: 'the democratic world, which has told us a lot about the virtues of democracy and good governance, should not be indifferent to what is happening in Yemen and Syria. [...] All of that is just hard labour during the birth of democracy which requires support and assistance, not fear and caution.'<sup>228</sup> In perfectly Arnoldian language, Karman expresses her 'hope for a better future for mankind will always drive us to speak noble words and do noble deeds. Together, we will push the horizons, one after another, towards a world of true human perfection.'<sup>229</sup>

Toleration of difference for difference's sake only takes one so far; in the end, one must choose for oneself whether one believes in human perfectibility, in the possibility of moral and

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226 Tawakkul Karman, 'Nobel Lecture', [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/2011/karman-lecture\\_en.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2011/karman-lecture_en.html), 10/12/2011.

227 Karman, 'Nobel Lecture'.

228 Karman, 'Nobel Lecture'.

229 Karman, 'Nobel Lecture'.

civilisational progress, or not. While generations of Western intellectuals from anthropologists like Claude Lévi-Strauss down to the likes of John Gray in the present have done all they can to persuade the world of the personal and collective dangers of embracing utopian ideologies and universal codes of human rights and moral conduct and of the general need to 'stay out' of other people's lives and refrain from moral judgment, Arab activists like Tawakkul Karman prescribe precisely the empathy and convergence that Western warriors for civilisation like Martha Nussbaum and others introduced in this chapter also advocate. The three 'warriors for civilisation' to whom this study is dedicated will all do the same. Matthew Arnold himself summarises the spirit of the remaining chapters, and of the current one, when he says that

there is a view in which all the love of our neighbour, the impulses towards action, help, and beneficence, the desire for stopping human error, clearing human confusion, and diminishing the sum of human misery, the noble aspiration to leave the world better and happier than we found it,—motives eminently such as are called social,—come in as part of the grounds of culture, and the main and pre-eminent part. Culture is then properly described [...] as having its origin in the love of perfection; it is a study of perfection. It moves by the force, not merely or primarily of the scientific passion for pure knowledge, but also of the moral and social passion for doing good. [...] And because men are all members of one great whole, and the sympathy which is in human nature will not allow one member to be indifferent to the rest, or to have a perfect welfare independent of the rest, the expansion of our humanity, to suit the idea of perfection which culture forms, must be a general expansion. Perfection, as culture conceives it, is not possible while the individual remains isolated: the individual is obliged, under pain of being stunted and enfeebled in his own development if he disobeys, to carry others along with him in his march towards perfection, to be continually doing all he can to enlarge and increase the volume of the human stream sweeping thitherward; and here, once more, it lays on us the same obligation as religion.<sup>230</sup>

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230 Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, pp. 8, 13-14.

## 2. Naguib Mahfouz

### *2.1 Warrior for Monotheism*

*I am the son of two civilisations that at a certain age in history have formed a happy marriage. The first of these, seven thousand years old, is the Pharaonic civilization; the second, one thousand four hundred years old, is the Islamic one. [...] Pharaonic civilisation [...] was guided for the first time to the existence of God. [...] Islamic civilisation [...] called for the establishment of a union between all Mankind under the guardianship of the Creator, based on freedom, equality and forgiveness.<sup>231</sup>*

Naguib Mahfouz

Monotheism is a necessary condition for civilisation: welcome to the radically un-postmodern world of Naguib Mahfouz. God exists, and we can all find Him, or at least get closer to Him, if we know where to look. Chinese Arabist Lǐ Chēn puts it as well as anyone when he says that Mahfouz is not as interested in the traditional historical or scriptural evidence for God's existence as he is in the 'moral evidence'.<sup>232</sup> Mahfouz never repudiated his allegiance to Islam, but his was no literalist faith; indeed, Mahfouz's Islam looks a lot like heresy, and is widely condemned as such by Islamic literalists. In an interview with Ahmad As-Shahawy, Mahfouz aligns himself with the Pakistani poet and intellectual Muhammad Iqbal; for Iqbal, as Mahfouz quotes him, 'prophecy in Islam reaches its final plenitude in the realisation of the need to do away with prophecy itself.'<sup>233</sup> Such a development implies, for Iqbal, 'a realisation of the impossibility of a continued existence dependent on this leash; in order to reach a full understanding of Islam, one must leave the leash behind, and come in the end to rely on one's own means alone.'<sup>234</sup> Mahfouz takes this to mean that 'a human being should not live waiting for a new revelation, or depend on a means of knowing which resembles revelation in its automaticity and comprehensiveness, but should rather limit the scope of possible

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231 Naguib Mahfouz (hereafter NM), *Nobel Lecture* (1988),

[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1988/mahfouz-lecture.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1988/mahfouz-lecture.html) (accessed 23/10/2011).

232 Lǐ Chēn, 'Mahfouz on the Side of Life' (Hongyang Jiji Rensheng de Mahafuzi), *Modern Arabic Literature and Mysticism (Alabo Xiandai Wenxue yu Shenmizhuyi)*, (Beijing: Shehui Kexue Chubanshe, 2000).pp. 169-170.

233 NM, in Ahmad Shahawy, 'Naguib Mahfouz: Don't Subject Apostates to Trial; The Men of Al Azhar Have a Responsibility to Dialogue with Them' (Lā Yuhākīmūn al Munḥarifin Dīmiyyan, bal 'ala riḡāl al Azhar 'an yuhāwirūhum'), *Nisf ad-Dunya*, 1/10/2006, p. 96.

234 NM, 'Don't Subject Apostates to Trial'.



knowing to her conscience and instincts alone.<sup>235</sup> One may rightly ask whether the English word 'monotheism' is an appropriate translation of this 'faith', especially in the context of a New Atheist breeze currently blowing through the Anglosphere which defines God as precisely the leash that Mahfouz believes Islam was the first to overcome; but whether Mahfouz's case for humanistic self-reliance can be described as 'theistic' or not, it is definitely 'mono-': there is a single Moral Law discoverable by immersion in a life of both contemplation and action, and we enjoy intimations of heavenly perfection when we conform to this law. Monotheistic civilisation is everything to Mahfouz because without it, the moral chaos of polytheism and relativism, most famously depicted by Mahfouz in *Children of Gebelawi*, reigns.

In order to contextualise, for our contemporary debates, Mahfouz's simultaneous reverence for monotheistic civilisations and denial of the absolute or inimitable truth value of the revelations on which those civilisations would seem to be based, we could do worse than to cite Peter Gordon from 2011:

Every culture begins by holding certain truths as sacred and virtually unquestionable. Still [...] it is difficult to see how anything in human experience could be permitted to remain wholly immune from rational scrutiny. It follows that, as reason expands its reach, the contents of our religious heritage must undergo a trial of rationalization. The ideas that a civilization once considered beyond scrutiny must eventually be re-fashioned into propositional claims that are susceptible to criticism. Habermas calls this process 'the linguistification of the sacred.'" A good illustration (and one that Habermas endorses) is the transformation in world religions that Karl Jaspers described as the 'Axial Revolution', when cultures in the Near and Far East began to re-conceive their divinities as no longer immanent but transcendent beings, who articulated the society's sense of the highest good in principles or commands. Plato's idea of a Good beyond Being is one example; the monotheistic idea of God as author of the revealed law is another. But once these ideals were drawn into human discourse, they were exposed to rational reflection. We may have begun by imagining the divine as the sole source of our moral codes, but when we were awakened to the possibility that these codes can be challenged, our capacity for self-direction eventually outstripped our original experience of religious awe. The critique of the sacred therefore turns out to be the original model for the ongoing historical drama by which humanity came to understand itself as author of its own fate. Religion and Enlightenment are not eternal foes, since religion serves as

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235 NM, 'Don't Subject Apostates to Trial'.

reason's point of departure. But the departure is necessary.<sup>236</sup>

To attack revealed religion as primitive and backward is therefore to miss the point that we owe it everything; Mahfouz's thesis about the first emergence of monotheism in ancient Egypt may or may not be historically accurate, and may or may not have parallels in China or elsewhere, but what matters above all is that the seed of moral unity has been planted; it is now up to us to protect this flower of civilisation and pass it on to future generations, because God's law itself commands it: 'The developed world and the Third World are but one family. Each human being bears responsibility towards it by the degree of what he has obtained of knowledge, wisdom, and civilisation.'<sup>237</sup>

Mahfouz's faith, then, is less a direct faith in God than a faith in the power of civilisation to bring us closer to God; social and political conditions may bring us closer to, or alienate us from, the Divine Essence, and we must strive always to improve them. In a 1976 article entitled simply 'Faith', Mahfouz stresses the social conditions which make an Arnoldian belief in human perfectibility easier, thereby creating a virtuous circle in which moral improvement across whole populations becomes possible. This 'faith' is 'created from the humanity of the citizen' in a climate of 'fair balance between rights and duties', 'respect for the citizen's beliefs and allegiances' and 'a consensus that 'the State is labouring on behalf of a broad base in order to ease suffering and promote flourishing'.<sup>238</sup> In such a climate, the 'flame of faith' provides 'a light for consciences, a fuel for thought and power for the will'.<sup>239</sup> In the absence of such a climate, faith atrophies, as Mahfouz's own did following the 1952 revolution and Egypt's fall into corruption under Nasser, and again following the *naksa* of 1967.

The inescapable social and political dimension of Mahfouz's monotheism, its decidedly *un-*monastic character, behooves us to put to bed, or at least to put into context, the widely held view that Mahfouz was some kind of neo-Sufist. Chinese critics - chief among them Lǐ Chēn - have been especially determined to push this angle, with interestingly flawed results. Lǐ's overarching interest in Islamic mysticism is no doubt at least partly responsible for the general over-emphasis on Mahfouz's Sufism among Chinese scholars. 'The most important thing to notice about the world's religions is that they point to the world's unity, and do away with ethnic differences,' Lǐ quotes Mahfouz as saying, but already in Lǐ's introduction Sufism is advanced as the key to this unity: 'For Sufists, God is not the end of some chain of logical reasoning, nor is He the idealised product of

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236 Peter Gordon, 'What Hope Remains?', <http://www.tnr.com/article/books-and-arts/magazine/98567/jurgen-habermas-religion-philosophy?passthru=MThiMTY2YTY2NDNiY2MyYjFjOGU3NGQyMzI0MWZkYzI>, 14/12/11 (accessed 19/12/11).

237 NM, *Nobel Lecture*.

238 NM, 'Faith' (*Al Īmān*), *AlAhrām*, 8/3/1976.

239 NM, 'Faith'.

social research; He is the best of what we feel in our hearts and perceive in the world around us. [...] Sufism's sense of good and evil, of conscience, guides us to the existence of God.<sup>240</sup> Lǐ could so easily have drawn parallels with Confucianism here; among contemporary neo-Confucians, Tu Weiming, for example, stresses the primacy of self-cultivation over concern for others in essentially the same terms as Mahfouz here - you can't help others if you don't have the heart for it - but the discussion is limited, artificially to suit Lǐ's purposes, to Sufism and the immediate Arab context of Mahfouz's world. Nevertheless, Lǐ is clear that Mahfouz's commitment to the 'moral unity' of the world is not dependent on 'religious' faith in any literal sense: 'He is not keen on any of the historical evidence for God's existence, but rather is interested in Sufism's experience of the moral evidence.'<sup>241</sup> This is, however, more than a little misleading; Lǐ partially contradicts himself here, and in his later conclusion, by quoting, in the first section of his chapter on Mahfouz, a key passage which shows Mahfouz was, at bottom, no kind of Sufist: 'real Sufism rejects life. I could never reject life, and I do not promote hatred of life. I have always loudly advocated deep immersion in life.'<sup>242</sup> Although Sufism, according to Mahfouz, is 'good and gentle' and 'only rejects life for lofty spiritual reasons', he is unequivocal about its overall inadequacy as a moral teaching: 'I use my readings in Sufism as a kind of rest, and regard them as beautiful poetry. But I do not in any sense live what they advocate.'<sup>243</sup> He says essentially the same thing again in a 1992 interview with Charlotte El Shabrawy: 'I love Sufism as I love beautiful poetry, but it is not the answer. Sufism is like a mirage in the desert. It says to you, come and sit, relax and enjoy yourself for a while. I reject any path which rejects life, but I can't help loving Sufism because it sounds so beautiful... It gives relief in the midst of battle.'<sup>244</sup>

Lǐ's emphasis on the role of Sufism in Mahfouz's work is therefore largely misplaced; the 'battle' to fulfil one's full moral nature, to be the best one can be as a social animal, is ultimately worth more to Mahfouz, just as it is to Confucians, than the mirage of meditative repose, and alone can provide true fulfilment or access to higher realms of being. Far from convincing the reader of Mahfouz's Sufism, Lǐ is much more convincing when he suggests simply that Mahfouz 'believes in both God and humanity', and that he 'does not view metaphysical questions in absolute terms, but shows how, in essence, they all have a social dimension, and are all fundamentally tied to this

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240 Lǐ, 'Mahfouz on the Side of Life', p. 170.

241 Lǐ, 'Mahfouz on the Side of Life', pp. 169-170.

242 See Lǐ, 'Mahfouz on the Side of Life', p. 171.

243 See Lǐ, 'Mahfouz on the Side of Life', p. 171.

244 Charlotte El Shabrawy, 'Interview with Naguib Mahfouz', *Paris Review*, Issue 123, Summer 1992.

world.'<sup>245</sup> This exploration of the social dimension of human perfection is made possible by Mahfouz's 'full use of literature's capacity as a "cunning art"', with which, in the course of his œuvre, he 'describes from every possible angle the relationship between God and humanity, humanity and the function of faith and religion, and other similar questions.'<sup>246</sup> Li gets even closer to the heart of Mahfouz when discussing an episode from the work dearest to Mahfouz's heart<sup>247</sup> (and to which we will return in detail): *Arabian Nights and Days*. In this novel, Mahfouz 'again reiterates the importance of the nobility of one's spirit and morals for realising ideals', and 'raises the idea that it is only by overcoming selfish desire and purifying one's soul, building faith in the power of acting for the benefit of others, that one can achieve happiness, and reach the horizon of spiritual perfection.'<sup>248</sup> Or again, quoting Mahfouz's 1977 novel *The Harafish* (1977): "The doors of the temple are forever open wide to those of childlike purity, those with angelic hearts, those who struggle on behalf of others."<sup>249</sup>

Li is interested in what he calls 'the edge of union between humanity and God' in Mahfouz. Li's problem is that he sometimes does more than walk this line; he can't resist occasionally crossing it for the purpose of explicating the Islamic mysticism which is his core concern. If he doesn't cross it on p. 186, when he talks about 'overcoming one's own selfish longings and concerning oneself oneself with others' happiness as a necessary qualification for entry into the doors of God, for union with God'<sup>250</sup>, he certainly does when discussing the drunken episode from Mahfouz's short story 'Zaabalawi': 'The loss of consciousness symbolises the loss of self, the attainment of the edge of selflessness. In his drunken hour, he enjoys feelings of unrivalled wonder... His joy is none other than the feeling of union with God, what Buddhism calls *fǎxīchōngmǎn*.'<sup>251</sup> This parallel with Buddhism is an extremely rare reference by a Chinese critic of Mahfouz to a Chinese cultural context. It is also the wrong time to be drawing such a comparison; Mahfouz's interest in mysticism is, as we have seen, strictly as a leisure activity. To

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245 Li, 'Mahfouz on the Side of Life', p. 172.

246 Li, 'Mahfouz on the Side of Life', p. 172.

247 Mohamed Salmawy confirmed this to me in person when we met in Cairo in 2011 but has also said so repeatedly in writing, for example here: Mohamed Salmawy, 'Bad News About *Arabian Nights and Days*!' ('Layālī 'Alf Layla... wa al Ḥabar al Aswad!'), <http://www.almasry-alyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=314314&IssueID=2291>, 17/10/2011 (accessed 3/3/2012).

248 Li, 'Mahfouz on the Side of Life', p. 185.

249 Li, 'Mahfouz on the Side of Life', p. 186.

250 Li, 'Mahfouz on the Side of Life', p. 186.

251 Li, 'Mahfouz on the Side of Life', pp. 186-187.

make this comparison, but to fail to make any comparison whatsoever with Confucianism and its calls to 'unite heaven and earth' (*tianrenheyi*) through ceaseless social engagement, is to risk missing the point of Mahfouz's entire oeuvre.

The fourth and final part of Lǐ's essay, unpromisingly titled 'The Special Nature of Mahfouz's Sufism', even goes so far as to make the claim that Mahfouz can be regarded as some kind of neo-Sufist: 'the knowledge of life, philosophy of action, continual progress, ending of man-made tragedies, making of the world into Heaven, selfless public spirit of Islam and so on contained in Mahfouz's writings can all be regarded as part of his modern interpretation of Sufist ideals.'<sup>252</sup> For Lǐ, it is primarily Sufism on which Mahfouz draws to call for the 'moral renewal' of Egyptian society and the Arab world at large.<sup>253</sup> Yet in the end, even Lǐ realises that 'Mahfouz is not a Sufist, but has a deep understanding of his Islamic and Sufistic cultural inheritance. It is only because of this that he is able to provide a modern interpretation of the spirit of Sufism.'<sup>254</sup>

Another Chinese scholar to have inherited Lǐ's preoccupation with Mahfouz's Sufism is Xuē Qìngguó. Xuē's short but incisive 2008 paper 'Mahfouz's Mystic Quest' draws directly on Lǐ's pioneering work in Chinese studies of Mahfouz. Like Lǐ, Xuē starts off making some questionable and misleading claims about Mahfouz's Sufism, such as when discussing a drunken episode from Mahfouz's *Echoes of an Autobiography*. For Xuē, 'the tragedy of the Sufist experience' consists in the realisation that 'one cannot rely on temporary intoxication to free oneself from human suffering.'<sup>255</sup> Yet surely Sufism as commonly understood, and as understood by Mahfouz, is the *affirmation* of the possibility of mystic union, not, as Xuē affirms, the tragic realisation of its transience. Mahfouz's attitude to Sufi mysticism matches his attitude to drunkenness as expressed in *Echoes of an Autobiography*: 'The transports to lofty wonder could not have lasted long. They were merely the special effects of a drunken state; human life cannot be one long drunken purple patch. Thus, when the narrator emerges from his stupor, his ills and afflictions are much as before.'<sup>256</sup>

Xuē is nevertheless right about the role of Sufist characters in Mahfouz, seeming, in her description, to contradict her earlier 'tragic' definition of Sufism: 'in many Mahfouz novels, the characters representing passive Sufist ideals are blindly immersed in the quest for absolute truth and meditation over metaphysical concepts; they are cut off from the world, and

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252 Lǐ, 'Mahfouz on the Side of Life', p. 189.

253 Lǐ, 'Mahfouz on the Side of Life', p. 189.

254 Lǐ, 'Mahfouz on the Side of Life', p.194.

255 Xuē Qìngguó, 'Mahfouz's Mystic Quest' ('Shenmi de Xunzhao'), *Waiguo Wenxue*, vol. 1, 2008, p. 20.

256 Xuē Qìngguó, 'Mahfouz's Mystic Quest', p. 20.

evade their earthly responsibilities.'<sup>257</sup> Although these Sufi characters 'do not lack wisdom and knowledge', they are 'always slightly out of step with the times', and 'in depicting these characters, the author does not shy away from ridicule or criticism.'<sup>258</sup> Like Lǐ, however, Xuē comes to a robust conclusion about Mahfouz's moral vision despite her misleading claims about the role of Sufism in Mahfouz's work: 'By working to resolve social tragedies, the tragedy of existence can perhaps itself be resolved or lightened. Ultimately, such work can give life meaning, making it worthwhile for us to go on living.'<sup>259</sup> Rather than invoking God at every turn as an excuse for our own vices and shortcomings, Mahfouz's brand of Islam reminds us that 'the expectation of fathers and gods is not that we unnecessarily search for them, but that we work, act, create; that we turn God's world into Heaven on Earth.'<sup>260</sup>

In the course of her article, however, Xuē also raises the spectre of atheism that haunts even serious Mahfouz criticism, particularly in the Arab world. The sheer length and creative energy of Mahfouz's 'pessimistic period' under Nasser - the paradigm text of which is *Children of Gebelawi* (1959) - has led many critics, and even many of Mahfouz's personal friends, to conclude that Mahfouz was at bottom an unbeliever, or that at best, as Xuē puts it, 'Mahfouz's quest stories all have some things in common: they all prove the existence of the target of the quest, but they all deny the possibility of a meeting'.<sup>261</sup> In his 2006 obituary to Mahfouz, for example, Muḥammad Al Bāz recounts that, in the days following his death many people, 'not just writers loosely associated with him or unwanted intruders at his table, but friends who considered themselves on intimate terms with him and lived with him and spent a long time in his neighbourhood', told him that, 'by the way', Mahfouz was 'an unbeliever'.<sup>262</sup> For Al Bāz, the fact that many of Mahfouz's protagonists 'failed to find God' was a reflection of 'the intellectual and psychological state in which Naguib himself lived'; despite his 'calm demeanour', Al Bāz reports that Mahfouz was 'full of worries and anxieties', a sufferer of some kind of post-metaphysical stress disorder: 'his feeling of lost justice led him to search for the lord of justice, but it seems that his journey tired him out, drained him, exhausted him. He returned from it with his will broken, and never recovered a thirst for revenge.'<sup>263</sup> How completely this misunderstands the man, especially

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257 Xuē, 'Mahfouz's Mystic Quest', p. 21.

258 Xuē, 'Mahfouz's Mystic Quest', p. 21.

259 Xuē, 'Mahfouz's Mystic Quest', p. 22.

260 Xuē, 'Mahfouz's Mystic Quest', p. 22.

261 Xuē, 'Mahfouz's Mystic Quest', p. 21.

262 Muhammad Al Bāz, 'Was Naguib Mahfouz an Unbeliever?' ('Hal Kāna Naḡīb Maḥfūz Mulḥīdan'), *Al Faḡr (Supplement)*, 4/9/2006, p. 34.

263 Al Bāz, 'Was Naguib Mahfouz an Unbeliever?', pp. 34-35.

in his later decades: even at the height of his pessimism during the Nasser years, Mahfouz was far from 'broken' in his quest for justice. Looking back on *Children of Gebelawi* (1959) following the attack on his life by extremists in 1994, Mahfouz suggests that the novel, which dramatises the struggles of Moses, Jesus, Muhammad and a modern scientist for social justice, is less pessimistic about God than many, including his attackers, asserted. The work was not, as his attackers and other critics who had 'obviously not read the novel' supposed, an attempt to supplant the wisdom of the Qur'an by attempting to rival it as a 'religious text', but was rather 'a literary work dealing with the struggle between Good and Evil'.<sup>264</sup> The book 'did not include any daring transgression of the Divine Essence, or any slur against the Abrahamic religions', but rather 'presented a vision of Good and Evil and affirmed that religion saved Humanity from injustice and that Science is capable of promoting human progress provided that it does not stray from the principles of religion'.<sup>265</sup> Although the final 'prophet' in the novel is a scientist who comes after Muhammad, this bold narrative decision is an affirmation of Mahfouz's view of the Qur'an as above all a call, the final Abrahamic call, to self-responsibility and hard, empirical study. The novel finishes, in Mahfouz's words, 'by affirming the importance of faith in the existence of the Divine Essence, and by arguing that life is built on science and the principles of religions'.<sup>266</sup> Moreover, Mahfouz 'affirmed in the novel that religion played an important role in the development of Humanity and in defending human beings from injustice'.<sup>267</sup>

Mahfouz's path to faith, however, was by no means straightforward, as he himself freely admitted. In a 1989 interview for which the editors chose the title 'After a Tough Period of Doubt and an Arduous Journey of Reason, He Proclaimed His Faith... and His Belonging to the House of Islam', Mahfouz traces his spiritual journey:

I imbibed Islam - initially, and mixed as it was with myths and distortions - from the environment into which I was born. When I became a young man, and I started to subject everything I encountered to my powers of reason, I had no choice but to reject these myths and distortions and filter them out of my worldview, but I fell into a big error of reason, namely that I thought that these myths and distortions were an integral part of religion, and that I was filtering out part of the essence of religion itself. There was a period of doubt in my life, and I expressed that in many of my

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264 NM, in 'Abd al-'Azīz Maḥmūd, 'The Novel Which They Punished Me For Affirms the Importance of Faith in the Existence of the Divine Essence' ('Riwāyatī allatī 'āqabūnī 'alayhā tu'akkid 'Ahammiyyat al Īmān fī Wūḡūd al Dāt al Illāhiyya'), *Al Aḥram*, 27/10/1994.

265 NM, 'The Novel Which They Punished Me For Affirms the Importance of Faith in the Existence of the Divine Essence'.

266 NM, 'The Novel Which They Punished Me For Affirms the Importance of Faith in the Existence of the Divine Essence'.

267 NM, 'The Novel Which They Punished Me For Affirms the Importance of Faith in the Existence of the Divine Essence'.

stories, and especially in the *Trilogy*, which depicted the crisis of a generation which grew up with religion and the Islamic heritage. For me, the truth of religion got mixed up with the myths, and so as I learnt more about life and subjected more of life to my critical faculties, there was a clash between the faith I had inherited and the reality of my life. I am proud of my faith and my belonging to the House of Islam, which I entered after a period of doubt, and I came to identify with it with conviction, spurning all the myths that were incompatible with its majesty. I can truly say that I did not come to believe in this religion through mere inheritance from my forefathers, but rather after a wide-ranging study of different doctrines and theories and ideas, and even of the religion itself, and in the end I found myself completely convinced by Islam. My faith - Praise Be to God - is a faith based on personal conviction and not an aping of others... Islam contains within itself all the components for the building and success of nations. It calls for work, honesty, hygiene, clean hands, and stands against oppressors and hypocrites and corruptors. But some - who unfortunately seem pious - put all this to one side, and call for an exaggerated adherence to certain formalities, and I think the threat posed by these people to the Islamic nation and to Islam itself is not less serious than the threat posed by those who call for a casting of the whole religion to one side.<sup>268</sup>

As we will see in detail in the course of this chapter, reform based on reason, science and conscience is inscribed into Mahfouz's vision of Islam; as counter-intuitive as it may seem in an age in which 'Islam' has come to be represented by those calling for 'an exaggerated adherence to certain formalities', this spirit of reform is, for Mahfouz, the essence of Islam itself, and our stairway to heaven. The reform process is described by Mahfouz as an eternal struggle between 'tradition and existing law' on the one hand and the forces of reform and 'freedom' on the other, in a quest for an 'ever-deepening humanity' (*insāniyyatun a'maq*): 'Out of the struggle between these two forces society progresses, changes, and new horizons open before it for hearts and minds and wills. This is truly an eternal struggle, a continuing battle, and we do not wish for an end to it or a truce or a peace.'<sup>269</sup> It was this ongoing struggle for perfection which 'lifted Humanity out of caves and to the conquest of space. May conservatives fulfil their duty and may freedom live forever.'<sup>270</sup>

Mahfouz would have felt right at home at an important 2005 debate between prominent New Atheists Stephen Fry and Christopher Hitchens, for despite his professions of allegiance to

268 NM, in eds., 'Naguib Mahfouz: After a Tough Period of Doubt and an Arduous Journey of Reason, He Proclaimed His Faith... and His Belonging to the House of Islam' ('Ba'da Fatrat Šakk Qāsiya wa Riħla 'Aqliyya Šāqqa, Yaħharu bi Īmānihi... wa intimā'ihi lil Islām'), *Al-Akhbar*, 12/7/1989.

269 NM, 'A Holy Battle' (Širā' Muqaddas'), *Al Ahrām*, 27/2/1992, p. 9.

270 NM, 'A Holy Battle'.



Islam, Mahfouz arguably belongs more on the side of New Atheists like Fry and Hitchens than in the ranks of their religious opponents.<sup>271</sup> Fry on the Enlightenment is a distinct echo of Mahfouz on Islam and the 'eternal struggle' for reform and civilisational improvement: 'Simply to say that there is a religious world and a secular world, and that the two are enemies, is hopeless. It seems to me that the greatness of our reason - if it is great - is that it can accommodate and teach and enlighten.'<sup>272</sup> Just as Mahfouz views the struggle for cultural perfection as intergenerational and eternal, so too does Fry argue that the Enlightenment 'should not be considered to be over - it's a project that will never end, after all' - and that 'the understanding of the human heart, the understanding of the universe, the understanding of all the things that surround us is a mission, a project we each in our lifetimes embark upon and will never finish, and the next generation will too.'<sup>273</sup>

For all his apparent Abrahamic or 'Hebraistic' credentials, Mahfouz is equally well understood as an heir to the Hellenistic half of Arnoldian 'culture'. Like Fry, Mahfouz embraces the Promethean myth according to which 'whatever is divine is in us as humans'; just as Islam is threatened by those who preach an 'excessive adherence to certain formalities' at the expense of new human discoveries, so too has organised religion in Europe, in Fry's words, 'become a feeble and anemic nonsense because we understood that the fire was within us, not in some idol on an altar - whether it was a gold cross or a Buddha or anything else.'<sup>274</sup> Christopher Hitchens, during the same debate, makes a similar attack on revealed religion as 'the highest form that wish-thinking takes', and as 'the highest form that that cheap, narcissistic and solipsistic ambition takes.'<sup>275</sup> Echoing Marx, who argued that the ongoing criticism of religious tradition made possible by the forces of reason and reform 'has plucked the flowers from the chain, not in order that men shall wear the chain without any consolation, but so that they may break the chain, and cull the living flower', Hitchens states unequivocally that 'the history of our civilisation has been that it starts when theocracy ends. There are no exceptions. Only when people separate the church from the state [...] can art or science or philosophy have a chance.'<sup>276</sup>

Mahfouz, it would seem in this context, is best understood as a modern-day Averroës, a believer in a 'divine spark' for whom art, science and philosophy ought not just to be given 'a chance', but vigorously promoted as the very core of religion. Robert Pasnau contrasts Averroism with the Ghazalism which eventually gained prominence in the Islamic world

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271 See Stephen Fry and Christopher Hitchens, 'Blasphemy Debate', 2005 *Guardian Hay Festival*, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcS-IKNF2XY&feature=BFa&list=SPCB3F94348E081FF6&lf=list\\_related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcS-IKNF2XY&feature=BFa&list=SPCB3F94348E081FF6&lf=list_related), accessed 25/12/2011. We will return to this debate in more detail in Chapter 2.5 when the theme of blasphemy is addressed directly.

272 Stephen Fry, 'Blasphemy Debate'.

273 Fry, 'Blasphemy Debate'.

274 Fry, 'Blasphemy Debate'.

275 Christopher Hitchens, 'Blasphemy Debate'.

276 Hitchens, 'Blasphemy Debate'.

and prevented the European Renaissance and Enlightenment from happening there. In the *Decisive Treatise*, Averroës 'argues at length for the value of philosophy: not just that it should be permitted, but that its study is, in fact, required for those who would truly understand religion. To ban philosophy would be 'a wrong to the best sort of people and to the best sort of existing things'.<sup>277</sup> In his defence of the Averroëan spirit of Islam at its best, Pasnau takes aim at Abū Hamid al-Ghazālī, who a century earlier had 'urged Muslims to set aside secular learning in favor of a Sufi-influenced program of spiritual purification'.<sup>278</sup> In his 'opposition to the great earlier figures of Islamic learning such as al-Fārābī and Avicenna, who had been at the forefront of incorporating Aristotle's philosophy into the Islamic worldview', Ghazālī sought to 'tear down that whole edifice of learning founded on Greek philosophical thought, and to put in its place the sort of spiritual practices promoted by Sufism'.<sup>279</sup> To show that he meant it, Ghazālī, like a parodied Sufi character in a Mahfouz novel, 'famously acted on these principles when, at the height of his own academic career, he abandoned his distinguished position as professor of theology in Baghdad, and devoted the next decade to a life of ascetic meditation'.<sup>280</sup>

Mahfouz makes his adherence to Averroism and his rejection of Ghazalism abundantly clear in his Nobel Lecture; indeed, Averroism is presented as the spirit of Islamic civilisation itself: 'I will introduce that civilization in a moving dramatic situation summarizing one of its most conspicuous traits: In one victorious battle against Byzantium it has given back its prisoners of war in return for a number of books of the ancient Greek heritage in philosophy, medicine and mathematics'.<sup>281</sup> This openness of Islam to all forms of human wisdom is 'a testimony of value for the human spirit in its demand for knowledge, even though the demander was a believer in God and the demanded a fruit of a pagan civilization'.<sup>282</sup>

We will have occasion to explore further the ancient Egyptian roots of Mahfouz's monotheism when we turn our attention to Mahfouz's 1985 novel *Dweller in Truth*, where particular attention will be paid to the 'first monotheist' Akhenaten and his religion of universal love. The goal of this first section, however, was to construct a base-camp from which to explore Mahfouz's vision of civilisation, and to establish the underlying moral unity or 'unicity' of the Mahfouzian worldview, the faith in a Divine Essence discoverable through hard moral work in the face of the obvious presence of random evil in

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<sup>277</sup> Robert Pasnau, 'The Islamic Philosopher Who Gave Us Modern Philosophy', *Humanities*, vol. 32 no. 6, Nov.-Dec. 2011, <http://www.neh.gov/news/humanities/2011-11/IslamicScholar.html> (accessed 30/11/11).

<sup>278</sup> Pasnau, 'The Islamic Philosopher Who Gave Us Modern Philosophy'.

<sup>279</sup> Pasnau, 'The Islamic Philosopher Who Gave Us Modern Philosophy'.

<sup>280</sup> Pasnau, 'The Islamic Philosopher Who Gave Us Modern Philosophy'

<sup>281</sup> NM, *Nobel Lecture*.

<sup>282</sup> NM, *Nobel Lecture*.

the world (Fry offers the unforgettable example of 'plate tectonics destroying children'<sup>283</sup>). Of all the summaries we could dream up for this muscular, 'grown-up' monotheism, none would serve us better than this one from Mahfouz himself in 1993:

It is one world, despite its differences and contradictions and gradations: One World. Its races and nations are in dialogue, and its problems and hopes and sufferings are being exchanged via various means of communication. It cannot be kept hidden from any of its children that there has been stunning progress in some areas and deplorable retardation in others. We may therefore say that optimists have as much right to be optimistic as pessimists do to be pessimistic. Meanwhile, life continues on its way without turning its gaze from the goals of victory and triumph. We often dwell on injustice and oppression, aggression and selfishness, but we should also think of the mutual aid, the loans, the sharing of expertise and knowledge and the defence of human rights with hearts and tongues and sometimes even hands. Still, the Third World must believe that its role is more than merely to wait and hold out its hand and beg people of science and expertise. It has more to offer than mere population numbers and raw materials, and has established that it is capable of sacrifice and redemption, and that it possesses the will and knows the Highest Example, and is sustained by a heritage which sanctifies moral values, science and work. It must kindle in its spirit the best of what it has in order to set out on the neverending path of life. And it should know that it is living in the age of a new flood, and that only those endowed with faith and science and a determination to work to immortalise existence will make it onto the Ark. Woe unto those who remain underdeveloped.<sup>284</sup>

## 2.2 *Warrior for Conscience*

*As for Pharaonic civilization I will not talk of the conquests and the building of empires. This has become a worn out pride the mention of which modern conscience, thank God, feels uneasy about. Nor will I talk about how it was guided for the first time to the existence of God and its ushering in the dawn of human conscience. [...] Gone now is that civilization - a mere story of the past. One day the great Pyramid will disappear too. But Truth and Justice*

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283 Fry, 'Blasphemy Lecture'.

284 NM, 'The Next Flood' ('Ṭūfān min Ġadīd'), *Al Ahram*, 16/12/1993, p. 9.

*will remain for as long as Mankind has a ruminative mind and a living conscience. [...] In the olden times every leader worked for the good of his own nation alone. The others were considered adversaries, or subjects of exploitation. There was no regard to any value but that of superiority and personal glory. For the sake of this, many morals, ideals and values were wasted; many unethical means were justified; many uncounted souls were made to perish. Lies, deceit, treachery, cruelty reigned as the signs of sagacity and the proof of greatness. Today, this view needs to be changed from its very source. Today, the greatness of a civilised leader ought to be measured by the universality of his vision and his sense of responsibility towards all humankind. [...] I would not be exceeding the limits of my duty if I told them in the name of the Third World: Be not spectators to our miseries. You have to play therein a noble role befitting your status. From your position of superiority you are responsible for any misdirection of animal, or plant, to say nothing of Man, in any of the four corners of the world.*<sup>285</sup>

Naguib Mahfouz, Nobel Lecture

For Mahfouz, there is no getting beyond good and evil; there is a single Divine Essence and a single Moral Law which we discovered at a certain point in our civilisational development, one which demands an abandonment of imperial selfishness and an embrace of humanitarian altruism. Mahfouz, indeed, is the anti-Nietzsche, an antidote to all that Nietzsche's perspectivism and anti-moralism have wrought in 20th century Western philosophy and society. This chapter is conceived as an exploration of the fertile Mahfouz-Nietzsche nexus, one which has inspired several Mahfouz critics, including Lǐ Chēn. Once again, Lǐ's errors will enlighten us, and lead us to a deeper understanding of Mahfouz's concept of civilisation. For reasons which will become clear in due course, this journey will also entail a brief detour through Nietzsche's reception in the United States.

Lǐ rightly believes that Mahfouz saw the fundamental mistake made by large chunks of humanity as "putting one's destiny in God's hands. Mahfouz's view runs counter to both religious doctrine and secular understanding, and clearly blends religion, science and socialism".<sup>286</sup> From here, however, Lǐ makes an extraordinary and unwarranted leap to Nietzscheanism: 'Mahfouz's view is not different from Nietzsche's "God is dead"; both intend to make humanity live and think

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285 NM, *Nobel Lecture*.

286 Lǐ, 'Mahfouz on the Side of Life', p. 178.

in a society which does not rely on God.<sup>287</sup> Despite the fact that Mahfouz and Nietzsche are about as different from each other as two thinkers could possibly be - Mahfouz believed that conscience, the empathic connection with others and a commitment to reducing their suffering, was necessary for civilisation and the key to higher experience, while Nietzsche believed precisely that conscience, worrying about suffering at all (one's own or that of others), was the enfeebling cancer at the heart of civilisation and an obstacle to human progress towards the superhuman - Li's main point would seem to be the fairly uncontroversial one that Mahfouz believed in morally motivated activity rather than passive faith in God or a withdrawal into a life of private meditation as the path to human perfection. The parallel with Nietzsche, however, is extremely misleading; one is a hyper-moralist, the other an anti-moralist.

At bottom, the quarrel between Mahfouz and Nietzsche concerns suffering; the Nietzsche of *The Genealogy of Morals* and *Beyond Good and Evil* thought that conscience was a deplorable product of our fear of suffering, a primitive psychological 'leash' to be cast off when we learnt to accept even the most horrific forms of suffering as a necessary and desired part of the carnival of life. Nietzsche's two most famous doctrines - the Superman and the Eternal Recurrence - are best understood as two sides of this same life-affirming coin; even if life turns out to be a boiling inferno of pain - or perhaps just as bad, an endless and pointless repetition of what we have already experienced - we should be brave enough to affirm even these nightmare scenarios. Nietzsche goes so far as to suggest that 'suffering is a necessary stage on the way to ultimate pleasure', and that 'pleasure and pain may be "so knotted together that whoever wants as much as possible of the one, must also have as much as possible of the other"'.<sup>288</sup> The ethics that Nietzsche derives from this pleasure-pain binary - be willing to maximise pain in order to maximise pleasure - leads straightforwardly to unspeakable horrors if it is admitted. While Nietzsche is not the Marquis de Sade - he does not advocate causing pain to others in order to gain pleasure for oneself - he does call on us to have the courage to seek out opportunities for maximum pain for ourselves in order to maximise our own pleasure. And if you think this is what humans should be, then that is likely to affect how you treat other people; there may be a tacit understanding and respect among Supermen, but no friendship or solidarity or humanitarian sympathy in the traditional sense of these terms.

Mahfouz, by contrast, has no trouble affirming that some forms of suffering are well worth avoiding, and that civilisation protects us from them and elevates us above them. It is only able to do so, however, because individuals discover a Moral Law inside themselves which emanates directly from the Divine Essence and adapt their behaviour accordingly. As we have seen, Mahfouz

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287 Li, 'Mahfouz on the Side of Life', p. 179.

288 See Walter A. Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, (Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 272.

thinks that this Moral Law must constantly be relaborated, in individuals and then in society as a whole, in a dialectical struggle between tradition and freedom. Mahfouz and Nietzsche do agree that blind obedience to tradition is a dangerous threat to individual and social health, but they do so for opposite reasons: for Nietzsche, tradition (i.e. the Christian tradition) must be done away with because it keeps people enslaved to their fear of suffering, while for Mahfouz, it is precisely because we are called by the Moral Law inside us to minimise suffering in the world that we should be alive to its presence in novel and unexpected forms, and not get stuck blindly following rules formulated in the past and complacently assuming that these rules work just as well to reduce suffering and promote flourishing and justice in the present.

Some of this may seem, to committed Nietzscheans, unfair to their hero. There are indeed times when Nietzsche – an unrivalled master of self-contradiction - sounds almost Mahfouzian in his moral demandingness, perhaps never more so than here in *The Gay Science*:

**The intellectual conscience.**—I keep having the same experience and keep resisting it every time. I do not want to believe it although it is palpable: the great majority of people lacks an intellectual conscience. Indeed, it has often seemed to me as if anyone calling for an intellectual conscience were as lonely in the most densely populated cities as if he were in a desert. [...] I mean: the great majority of people does not consider it contemptible to believe this or that and to live accordingly, without first having given themselves an account of the final and most certain reasons pro and con, and without even troubling themselves about such reasons afterward: the most gifted men and the noblest women still belong to this 'great majority'. But what is goodheartedness, refinement, or genius to me, when the person who has these virtues tolerates slack feelings in his faith and judgments and when he does not account the desire for certainty as his inmost craving and deepest distress. [...] To stand in the midst of [...] the] whole marvellous uncertainty and rich ambiguity of existence without questioning, without trembling with the craving and rapture of such questioning; [...] that is what I feel to be contemptible, and this is the feeling for which I look first in everybody. Some folly keeps persuading me that every human being has this feeling, simply because he is human. This is my type of injustice.<sup>289</sup>

We know that Nietzsche eventually threw his arms around a horse in Turin because he couldn't bear

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289 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff, (Cambridge University Press. 2001 (1882)), pp. 29-30.

to see it suffering; it is hard, and not our purpose here, to know whether this was Nietzsche returning to his true philosophical roots or falling into the madness which would soon consume him. What matters is that Nietzsche made his name in the West as an 'anti-Christ' or 'anti-conscience' figure, and that his legacy has been such that it would scarcely be an exaggeration to describe the Nietzsche we have inherited as the enemy of the 'conscience' that the Abrahamic monotheisms defend, the enemy of the very divine spark inside us all that Mahfouz went to his grave defending.

For the purpose of introducing Mahfouz's concept of civilisation, it will be worth exploring just a little further Nietzsche's ambiguous reception in the United States. Not everyone, indeed, agrees that Nietzsche's legacy has been quite so 'anti-Mahfouzian'; Ross Posnock certainly makes the case for a benign, 'Mahfouzian' Nietzsche in his review of Janet Ratner-Rosenhagen's *American Nietzsche*, aligning Nietzsche with Emerson and the American pragmatists. 'The time was ripe: how thrilling it must have been for Americans long shackled to the agonised conscience of Puritan rectitude, the yoke of the genteel,' Posnock writes of Nietzsche's arrival in the United States.<sup>290</sup> While H.L. Mencken described Nietzsche's Superman as a 'Dionysian aristocrat' of 'absolute and utter individualism', theologian and Baptist minister George Burman Foster saw a direct line from Jesus to Nietzsche: 'despite the philosopher's hatred of Christianity, Jesus and Nietzsche would have been friends, for Jesus too was a 'revaluator of values' and 'lived dangerously'.<sup>291</sup> For Foster, 'Christianity had to be reinvented for the new century, its absoluteness and otherworldliness irreconcilable in a world 'where the fixed had yielded to flux'. Ratner-Rosenhagen concludes that for Foster, Nietzsche is "a saviour who teaches man to find the saviour in himself".<sup>292</sup>

Contrast this with Adam Kirsch's take on the same book. Kirsch makes the vital point that Nietzsche's metaphysical scepticism is one thing, but that his moral scepticism, and his active loathing of the 'agonised conscience' as a vehicle for reducing suffering in the world, is entirely another; one can, like Richard Rorty or Mahfouz, affirm that individual conscience is real and good without a slave-like adherence to revealed religion: although 'Ratner-Rosenhagen shows how Nietzsche provided the inspiration for Rorty's controversial view that philosophy's search for stable, objective truths was misguided—a hunt for something that did not exist', Rorty was able to 'give up the idea of objective truth' without succumbing to Nietzsche's 'unstoppable fall' into moral nihilism and the self-sufficiency of the Superman, arguing that 'people should continue to fight for

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290 Ross Posnock, 'American Idol: On Nietzsche in America (A Review of *American Nietzsche: A History of an Icon and His Ideas* by Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen)', <http://www.thenation.com/article/164321/american-idol-nietzsche-america?page=full>, 5/11/11 (accessed 12/11/11).

291 Posnock, 'American Idol'.

292 Posnock, 'American Idol'.

social justice even while acknowledging that justice, like truth or goodness, is an essentially meaningless term'.<sup>293</sup> The American intelligentsia's ability to import elements of Nietzsche 'without becoming Nietzschean', Ratzen-Rosenhagen argues, allowed them to maintain a post-metaphysical philosophy that nevertheless kept its 'humanistic promises', at least until 'the rise of the postmodern, radically relativist 'French' Nietzsche of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida' in the 1970s.<sup>294</sup> We will have occasion to explore the relationship between Mahfouz and the 'postmodern, radically relativist French Nietzsche of Foucault and Derrida' soon; for now, labouring the point about Nietzsche's ambiguous reception in the United States has served the purpose of throwing Mahfouz's unambiguous defence of conscience into the starkest possible relief: while Mahfouz advocates continual moral reform and improvement, he does so from a base of faith in the power of reason and conscience to arrive at Truth. Our earthly laws are eternally subject to reform, and Mahfouz, like Posner's Nietzsche (and Emerson, Rorty and company), regards them not as metaphysical but as agreed upon and revisable. However – and this is the central point of this chapter – there is something un-Rortian and unrevisable and uncontingent and absolute about the Moral Law inside us. The kind of 'Dionysian individualism' that Mencken attributes to Nietzsche - which Kirsch translates as the 'admiration of conflict and conquest' - simply has no place in Mahfouz, who, not least as a colonial subject whose early work and lifelong values were forged in the furnace of British imperialism, had no admiration for self-centred imperialism whatsoever. It is precisely because we are right to fear certain forms of suffering and humiliation caused by Dionysian individualism and conflict and conquest that the Moral Law commands us to prevent them from happening. The Nietzschean response to suffering in the world - embrace it at all costs! - fails in the end, not necessarily because it is not humanly possible but because it is not desirable. As Dante, Milton and countless others in both Eastern and Western canons have affirmed along with Mahfouz, the result of such illusory 'freedom' from fear and conscience is diabolical solitude. Conscience brings us closer to each other as well as to God, and ultimately gives us more of a connection to the universe than Satanic pride, allowing us to understand better 'what the universe is'. If Mahfouz chose a life in literature - and we will explore Mahfouz on the how and why of his life in literature in a later chapter - it was because he shared this dream of communion with Ivorian poet Bernard Dadié:

#### My dream

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293 Adam Kirsch, 'America's Superman: Review of *American Nietzsche* by Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen', <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2011/11/america-nietzsche-rand-rorty-adam-kirsch/>, Issue No. 189, 16/11/11 (accessed 22/11/11).

294 Kirsch, 'America's Superman'.



is not to be  
a solitary giant  
in a marble castle  
a luxury-class traveller.

[...]

My dream

is

to be

with you

Tonight.

Forever.<sup>295</sup>

This being with, or being in, others is ultimately only possible if you accept the absolute necessity of both rights and responsibilities; the contents of these rights and responsibilities will need constant re-elaboration over time, but the process of re-elaboration itself – possible thanks to what Mahfouz calls 'a ruminative mind and a living conscience' – is as old as civilisation itself; indeed, it is one of civilisation's very pillars. If you fear nothing, or believe that nothing should be feared, then rights and responsibilities - the feelings of other people, even your own feelings - can mean nothing to you. This diabolical, imperial pride is the very negation of civilisation for Mahfouz; indeed, as we will have occasion to explore if only briefly, a good portion of his oeuvre is spent chronicling the deleterious effects of such pride on individuals and societies.

One final aspect of the Mahfouzian defence of conscience worth exploring is the relationship between reason and conscience. Reason, though necessary for civilisation, is not strictly sufficient; or perhaps better put, it is only through exposure to a wide range of life experiences via literature and culture that reason realises that it is not enough: 'Reason is the greatest gift which has been granted to Humanity.' Mahfouz wrote in 1991, and 'humanity must realise that it has not been granted it for other than what it was meant for, but in order that it may be a guiding light in life. [...] Indeed, there are spheres for which there is no other trick to gain entry than conscience and sensibility and suggestion.'<sup>296</sup> It is in precisely this ancillary sense that Mahfouz goes on to use reason - self-aware of its subordination to the Moral Law of 'general humanitarian responsibility' - as the yardstick for measuring civilisation: 'As for the rest of life - social, political, economic, environmental issues and so on - we must depend entirely on

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295 Bernard Dadié, 'Mon Rêve', [http://scans.hebis.de/17/81/11/17811150\\_toc.pdf](http://scans.hebis.de/17/81/11/17811150_toc.pdf), p. 77 (accessed 7/3/2012).

296 NM, 'The Guide in Darkness' ('Al-Muršid fī al-Ẓilām'), *Al Ahrām*, 5/12/1991, p. 7.

reason.<sup>297</sup> The world in general, and Egypt in particular, needs 'a scientific research programme and policy planning and a comprehensive push for development, one based on specialisation and culture, and which avoids capricious preferences through objectivity and a willingness to leave outdated ideas behind.'<sup>298</sup> Such a development programme should be elaborated 'in a climate of total freedom, in which there is no pressure on how the programme is conceived or implemented other than the pressure of general humanitarian responsibility and freedom for the individual as regards her opinions and destiny.'<sup>299</sup> As a useful shorthand, Mahfouz concludes, without contradicting his stated views on the primacy of conscience, 'we can measure the degree of civilisation of a given society by the prominence of the role of reason and the respect for reason in that society'.<sup>300</sup>

To help us better to understand Mahfouz's defence of reason in the service of conscience and the contemporary relevance of his vision, it will be worthwhile to conclude this chapter by returning to Peter Gordon on Jürgen Habermas. While Mahfouz concludes that reason exposed to 'civilisation' (literature and culture) can free itself from the illusory freedom of infernal pride, Gordon paints us a Habermas who is slightly less sure of himself:

Habermas would eventually conclude that his teachers (Adorno and Horkheimer) had backed themselves into a pessimistic corner: their condemnation of the 'instrumental reason' that had culminated in Auschwitz left them helpless when it came to explaining the validity of their own critical efforts. What they called 'the dialectic of Enlightenment' ended in a totalizing critique of reason as such. [...] What is 'missing' is the genuine unity of a world reconciled with itself, a world that is rational not merely in promise but also in substance. [...] What Habermas actually meant, it seems, was far more modest: reason is fallible, and as such it should not dismiss the possibility that religious traditions may bear invaluable gifts. [...] Against the intolerance of a secularism that is dogmatically certain of its independence from religion, and against the intolerance of a religiosity that is no less certain that it retains exclusive ownership rights on human morality, Habermas prudently — but on theoretically defensible grounds—refuses to take sides.<sup>301</sup>

Mahfouz, we can by now clearly see, goes a crucial step further than Gordon's Habermas: it is not merely that 'reason is fallible, and as such it should not dismiss the possibility that religious traditions may bear invaluable gifts'; it is that reason *is* the invaluable gift that religious traditions

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297 NM, 'The Guide in Darkness'.  
298 NM, 'The Guide in Darkness'.  
299 NM, 'The Guide in Darkness'.  
300 NM, 'The Guide in Darkness'.  
301 Gordon, 'What Hope Remains?'.

bear us from our civilisational past. Civilisation - the ongoing dialogue 'between tradition and freedom' - matters more than anything to Mahfouz because it sustains our faith in reason by simultaneously pushing beyond it: it is literature and culture, the life of the 'ruminative human mind' and the 'living human conscience', that alert us to the Divine Essence by 'cunningly' unlocking for us 'spheres of conscience and sensibility and suggestion' unavailable to 'instrumental reason' alone. From there, Mahfouz paradoxically argues, humanity's faith in itself as a single, united, post-imperial entity – and with this faith, faith in human reason to produce scientific and social progress - are likely to flow in a virtuous cycle.

### 2.3 Warrior for Socialism

*Religion and socialism are my two core concerns. [...] Regardless of how much we depend on pure reason, we still see before our eyes a Heaven which blocks our line of sight, and we still long to uncover the things behind Heaven. [...] The reason why Communism aroused my sympathy was the social justice represented in the idea 'From each according to ability, to each according to need'. This is a standard for humanity's interaction with itself, and would, if implemented, turn us into a single, noble global family. We need to do plenty to get there. I do not, however, believe that one needs to hold a strictly materialist view of the world, or deny the existence of God, to believe in this vision.<sup>302</sup>*

Naguib Mahfouz

A Chinese critic will once again introduce us to a key front in Mahfouz's battle for civilisation. It is in discussing the theme of socialism in Mahfouz that a handful of Chinese critics come closest to an internationalist or ultra-Arabist reading true to the spirit of the Mahfouzian oeuvre. While several of these Chinese articles crudely present Mahfouz as an honorary member of the Chinese Communist Party and common enemy of Western imperialism, Lù Yíwěi's 'The *Cairo Trilogy* and Mahfouz's Faith in Socialism' (2009) provides a more nuanced and balanced account. Lù describes Mahfouz as

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302 See Lǐ, 'Mahfouz on the Side of Life', pp. 171-172.

a 'lifelong socialist, highlighting the importance of Mahfouz's university studies in philosophy and his relationship with liberal reformer Salama Moussa in the development of his socialist ideals.<sup>303</sup> The remainder of the article is then spent examining precisely what those socialist ideals were.

The vision Lù offers us is a human rights-based vision, an international rather than a merely Arab or Egyptian socialism. 'Independence is not the final goal,' Lù quotes Mahfouz as saying; 'it is merely a means to achieving constitutional, economic and general human rights.'<sup>304</sup> Nor is the Maoist solution the answer: 'In fact, as far as I am concerned, Marxist concern for social justice, its thoroughgoing humanism, and its privileging of science are all praiseworthy. I do not share, however, either its authoritarianism or its materialism.'<sup>305</sup> Lù goes on to paint Mahfouz in essentially Fabian socialist terms; the main thing distinguishing Mahfouz from a British socialist, however, is the spiritual background. Lù rushes to label this an Islamic background: 'Like the majority of Arab socialists, Mahfouz's love of religion and adherence to Islamic cultural tradition are embedded in his socialism, so he is unable to make the step to becoming a materialist and fully-fledged revolutionary.'<sup>306</sup> It is only at the end of Lù's article that we get a clear endorsement of Mahfouz's socialism: 'Mahfouz's true goal is [...] comprehensive, healthy human development, justice for all of humanity, universal love, harmony, culminating in freedom of the soul. This is indeed a lofty humanist goal.'<sup>307</sup>

In concrete terms, then, Mahfouz was a democratic socialist; after the horrors of Lenin and Stalin and the venality and corruption of Brezhnev and his cronies, the fall of the Soviet Union was an unambiguously good thing, just as the fall of the Chinese Communist Party will be ('I think that there is only one human destiny, and that what happened in the Soviet Union will happen in [China]'<sup>308</sup>). None of this Sino-Soviet tyranny, however, ever had anything to do with the true, democratic spirit of socialism. Just as there is no contradiction between God and Reason in Mahfouz, nor is there any contradiction between socialism and democracy. The end of the Cold War offered an unparalleled opportunity for this synthesis, and provoked a spate of enthusiastic articles from Mahfouz begging his readers to heed the call of 'civilisation' (*hadara*). The best of these articles is arguably the 1993 article 'Freedom and Justice', in which Mahfouz gets

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303 Lù Yíwěi, 'The Cairo Trilogy and Mahfouz's Faith in Socialism' ('Cong Kailuo Sanbuqu Kan Mahafuzi de Shehuizhuyi Xinyang'), *Waiguo Wenxue Yanjiu*, vol. 12, 2009, p. 60.

304 See Lù, 'The Cairo Trilogy and Mahfouz's Faith in Socialism', p. 60.

305 See Lù, 'The Cairo Trilogy and Mahfouz's Faith in Socialism', p. 61.

306 Lù, 'The Cairo Trilogy and Mahfouz's Faith in Socialism', p. 62.

307 Lù, 'The Cairo Trilogy and Mahfouz's Faith in Socialism', p. 62.

308 Raġā' Al Naqqāš, 'Naguib Mahfouz: Pages from His Memoirs and New Light on His Life and Work' ('Naġīb Maḥfūz: Ṣafahāt min Muḍakkirātihi wa 'Aḍwā' Ġadīda 'ala Ḥayātihi wa 'Adabihi'), (Cairo: Mu'assisat al 'Ahrām, Markaz al 'Ahrām lil Tarġama wa al Našr, 1998), p. 260.

very excited about the victories of left-wing parties in Poland and Greece:

The Communists won with democracy and not with oppression and force, and will govern in the shadow of democracy and under its observation, and not through tyranny and oppression and the confiscation of freedom and the violation of human rights. The door will remain open for a devolution of power; the word of the People is Highest. Thus does Democracy continue to reign; the new Communism is a democratic Communism, one which aims to unite socialist justice and democratic freedom. Perhaps this is the very order which will come to shape the New World Order. Can we deny that even the strongest bastions of liberalism have been influenced by Socialism, and that their governments are engaged in providing a wide array of services to their peoples in the spheres of health and education? East and West are sharing their advantages with one another for the good of all peoples, and with every passing day the certainty grows that Humanity cannot do without two great values: Freedom and Social Justice.<sup>309</sup>

In Mahfouz, then, the struggle for social justice is one with the struggle for democratic freedom. Faith in democracy is the social corollary of faith in God: just as faith in God leads to a flowering of reason, science and progress, faith in democracy leads to a flowering of social justice. The imperial logic which eternally threatens the spread of monotheism and conscience is directly linked to the anti-democratic logic which survived even beyond the French Revolution, and which has inhibited the spread of socialism:

Perhaps tyranny in ancient times had some justification, for People Power had not yet made itself felt, and society was divided into two classes: the class of kings and emirs, and the slave class. The kings granted themselves absolute power and complete authorisation to act in all matters without recourse to anyone, making all decisions as they saw fit, whatever the consequences. With the development and spread of religions and democracy, the powers of the common people began to grow, but even in the early days of capitalist democracy, the lower classes got smashed. When you read the novels of Charles Dickens, you discover that this system knew no mercy. [...] The French Revolution had a big role in establishing the principles of freedom, democracy and human rights throughout the whole world, and awakening the peoples of the world from their slumber. [...] A democratic system is the best

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309 NM, 'Freedom and Justice' ('Al-Ḥurriyya wal'Adl'), *Al-Ahram*, 18/11/1993.

system for the life of Humanity; even if it throws up the odd mistake, it is the only system capable of righting itself on its own, the only system which gives the people the right to hold their rulers accountable and to review their performance, and even to replace them if necessary, as happened with US President Nixon.<sup>310</sup>

Mahfouz's faith in democracy as the motor of socialism extended even to Egypt; the fact that as many as 80% of the Egyptian population was illiterate did not imply that they could not be trusted with the power freely to elect their own government. Mahfouz may even have been the first to coin the phrase 'Democracy is the solution!' later famously and repeatedly used as a revolutionary rallying cry by Alaa al-Aswany in his articles for the newspaper *Al Masry Al Youm* following events in Egypt in January 2011; when writing in praise of India in 1997, Mahfouz argues that 'if it were not for democracy, India would have disintegrated some time ago, what with its plurality of races and religions and languages, and all the contrasts and differences in customs and traditions that this plurality implies.'<sup>311</sup> Without democracy, indeed, 'the very unity of India as a nation may have been threatened; just as Pakistan separated from it, so too might other mini-states have broken off for each religion and language.'<sup>312</sup> India provides a model both to the world as a whole - 'it was democracy that united the country,' and by extension will one day unite the diverse peoples of the Earth in some form of global democratic order – and, in the meantime, to countries like Egypt in particular: 'the message which India is sending to every Third World country is this: Democracy is the solution. It has also established the groundlessness of the idea that democracy is unsuitable for underdeveloped countries.'<sup>313</sup> After all, 'India is a proverbial example of a developing country grappling with illiteracy and poverty and backwardness perhaps even more desperately than others, but through democracy it has consolidated and developed. Hail to India and its great experiment.'<sup>314</sup>

An important question to ask at this point is whether, as it may thus far appear, Mahfouz really thought that democracy was not only necessary but also sufficient for social justice and the realisation of socialist principles. For Mahfouz, faith in God is arrived at through conscience, and only then consolidated in reason; surely the same would have to be said of his faith in democracy. Just as it is reason allied to conscience which tells us that religious freedom is a universal human right, at one with the Divine Essence and the Moral Law, so too must it be reason allied to conscience which tells us that democratic freedom is a universal human right. However, as

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310 NM, in *Al Naqqāš*, pp. 264-265.

311 NM, 'Dialogues with Mohamed Salmawy: India' ('Al Hind'), *Al Ahrām*, 16/10/1997.

312 NM, 'India'.

313 NM, 'India'.

314 NM, 'India'.

Aristotle already knew and warned, there is no guarantee that the citizens of a democracy will vote with their consciences. In the end, the Mahfouzian call is for more than democracy: it is a call for socialism, a socialism of which democracy is but one integral part. Once conscience and reason have established the necessity of democracy, the individual of faith must nevertheless labour incessantly on behalf of conscience in order to ensure that socialist principles are actually realised within the democratic system. It is certainly not as if socialism flows from democracy as a matter of pure procedural justice.

We will return to Mahfouz's views on rights to healthcare and education - the twin bastions of a socialist conscience concerned with human suffering and human flourishing - and to Mahfouz on human rights generally in a later chapter. The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to Mahfouz and markets. We have already seen how, in a democratic system, even an idealised one in which all citizens were devout followers of conscience, there would remain, for Mahfouz, an eternal and healthy disagreement between conservatives and reformers about how best actually to ensure both core rights and general well-being. The question of the role of markets - how free they should be, what there should and should not be markets for - is thus for Mahfouz an essentially empirical rather than an ideological one, to be answered democratically through the regular exercise of collective reason at elections in which political parties are free to present more or less market-friendly policies. In a 1981 article, Mahfouz makes the scope of his pragmatism clear by comparing civilisation to a ship: 'It is our right to disagree with one another; indeed, disagreement is a natural part of life and a symbol of freedom and creativity', and 'it is our right to struggle and debate, and for each faction to aspire to the realisation of its vision', but it is 'above all our right and our responsibility to remember the origin, the base, the ship; everything is permitted, except that the ship be allowed to sink, or get stuck before it has set off on its journey.'<sup>315</sup> Mahfouz certainly changed his views on markets over the course of his lifetime, and this journey is worth briefly tracing, not least because it illustrates the most unfortunate consequence of his decision to avoid overseas travel, namely an overreliance on a perennially unreliable Egyptian media. As early as 1930, Mahfouz was writing about socialism as the 'theory of the future', but he was 'identifying with British (Fabian) socialism and not Marxism-Leninism. This was because news of the Communist Revolution was forbidden in Egypt; our information about it was scant, and we didn't know what was going on in Moscow.'<sup>316</sup> Although Mahfouz rightly attributes this information gap to the British occupation – the colonial authorities did what they could to prevent news of socialist revolution in Russia from spreading among the Egyptian people – the media situation improved little after 1952: one party line was merely exchanged for another, In the deep of the Cold War

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315 NM, 'We Were Born Egyptian' (Naḥnu Nawlidu Miṣriyyīn'), *Al Aḥram*, 23/7/1981.

316 NM, in *Al Naqqāṣ*, p. 255.

(1976) and after more than two decades of pro-Soviet propaganda in Egypt, Mahfouz seems caught in a thick fog, buying the official Egyptian government line about the virtues of central economic planning behind the Iron Curtain: 'There are living examples of faith and its effects in our modern life. It is the driving force behind the revival of the Soviet Union, which has managed to carve out in 50 years what Europe took 300 years to achieve. It is the power behind the rise of the People's Republic of China...'<sup>317</sup> By the end of the Cold War, however, the fog has cleared, and Mahfouz recognises that hi-tech Western economies are, broadly speaking, the models to be emulated: 'I think the Arab world can benefit from these global developments and go with the prevailing trends around the world towards democracy and a market economy and the adoption of modern technology and scientific methods.'<sup>318</sup>

In a 1997 article entitled 'The Social Role of Capital', Mahfouz makes his support for a mixed economy even clearer; private capital is here to stay, and we need to make sure that it is put to the best possible social use:

In our modern society, the role of private capital has grown considerably beyond mere aid for the needy to become one of the fundamental resources for a comprehensive process of development in society, especially when we have already chosen the path of the free market, in which the government does not have a monopoly on all forms of activity. In this context, private capital should assist with the financing of scientific research, for example, and with the renewal of artistic and cultural activity, not to mention healthcare, the building of hospitals, and so on. I would say that capital has been a part of our lives for a quarter of a century or so now, and that it is time for its social role to be fixed to match its growing economic role. All financial institutions should insert a clause into their budgets protecting the public interest, and aligning the various facets of their social activity with it.<sup>319</sup>

It may be tempting to conclude that Mahfouz's primitive understanding of Western financial institutions could not possibly offer us a way out of current or future economic crises. This would be to fail to do justice, however, to Mahfouz as a social thinker. About the underlying moral crisis at the heart of a global economic system which has institutionalised greed at the expense of core socialist values, Mahfouz indeed had plenty to say. The Mahfouzian justification of free markets is a socialist one; it has nothing whatsoever to do with the 'greed is good' motto with which we have

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317 NM, 'Faith'.

318 NM, in *Al Naqqāš*, p. 261.

319 NM, 'Dialogues with Mohamed Salmawy: The Social Role of Capital' (*Al-Dawr al-Iġtimā'iy lil-Ra's al-Māl*), *Al Ahrām* 20/11/1997.



grown familiar. If the empirical evidence tells us that markets are more effective than central planning when it comes to securing positive outcomes for large numbers of people, then so be it; Mahfouz is not ideologically opposed to decentralisation even in healthcare or education if this decentralisation makes everybody better off. This does not, however, free the individual from the bonds of conscience, and the responsibilities that our equal membership of the human community entails.

For all this, and despite his university background in philosophy, Mahfouz was neither a political philosopher nor an economic theorist; his concern as a novelist and public intellectual was first and foremost the diffusion of a conscience - a faith in a single Divine Essence and a single Moral Law - that will lead people to care about more than their own material advantage and superiority (and those of their tribe) and to view Humanity as a 'single, noble global family'. When he says that 'we need to do plenty to get there', he is referring first and foremost to the prior moral challenge of getting people to care in this global way; once people have the welfare of the whole of Humanity (and beyond) in their hearts, debates about how best to maximise and distribute that welfare will continue to rage eternally between conservatives and reformers, centralisers and free-marketeters, and rightly so, but the battle for civilisation will essentially be in safe hands.

Mahfouz's centrist pragmatism regarding markets is perhaps best summarised in a 1992 article entitled 'Cultural Independence', in which he argues that a free market for culture - necessary in a free society - does not imply that government has no role to play in promoting certain forms of culture. Indeed, culture 'develops and consolidates itself in the age-old struggle between the Highest Example and commercial demands in a climate of freedom and without imposed decisions'<sup>320</sup>. This does not imply, however, the disappearance of the State, which retains an influential and active role. Mahfouz goes on in this article to cite examples of government promotion of culture beyond the central one of establishing institutes for the 'scientific' study of literature and the arts to include: protecting heritage sites; promoting artistic and literary prizes to encourage production useful to the state and the uncovering of new talent; supporting writers' and artists' unions; free speech legislation and generally defending the rights of writers and artists to express themselves; sponsoring cultural events and festivals, and so on.<sup>321</sup> However, Mahfouz is equally clear that 'there will be no free life for art, literature or thought until they are free from state supervision'.<sup>322</sup> In other words, government has a duty to provide, or ensure a basic provision of, education and artistic freedom, and may even act as a sponsor of certain forms of culture, but ultimately has no business trying to regulate the culture market by force.

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320 NM, 'Cultural Independence' ('Al-Istiqlāl Al-Ṭaqāfiyy'), *Al Ahrām*, 29/10/1992, p. 9.

321 NM, 'Cultural Independence'.

322 NM, 'Cultural Independence'.

In the end, the goal is a pragmatic 'Just Freedom' in accordance with the Divine Essence and the Moral Law, as the 1992 article of the same name makes clear: 'In recent times, the State has expanded to the point that it has become Everything. It is security, defence, education, healthcare, transport, agriculture, industry and culture, Everything. Everything.'<sup>323</sup> The corollary of this over-centralisation is that 'the people's role has diminished to Nothing.'<sup>324</sup> With the end of the Cold War, however, 'the wind of democracy is blowing through our climes, the scent of free activity is wafting through our spirits, and there is enough to promise a return to responsibility, and an end to passivity and laziness.'<sup>325</sup> Mahfouz goes so far as to call this 'return to responsibility' the 'road to salvation', providing the 'impetus' needed to fight endemic problems 'which defy our hopes', such as terrorism, drugs, pollution, corruption.'<sup>326</sup> While government should 'remain dominant in strategic industries', as well as remain 'responsible for education and health, a guide for values and culture, and a force of resistance against social and environmental scourges, within the scope of which fall the fight against unemployment and poverty', the idea that government can solve all social problems on its own belongs in the dustbin of history, along with the idea that individual freedom is a threat to the social order: 'Freedom and respect for human rights will never strike out against justice, and we will not kill freedom and dignity in the name of justice or by recourse to oppression and tyranny and official terrorism.'<sup>327</sup> This lesson of hope - and of the power of faith in the Moral Law and the Divine Essence to realise itself over time - is the very lesson that Mahfouz draws from the endurance of the Russian people through the worst of Soviet tyranny:

Human nature is more powerful than any theory and stronger than any Iron Curtain. Time was not wasted in vain with this [Soviet] experiment; there were heavy spiritual, moral and economic costs associated with it to be sure, but humanity gained a valuable lesson which it will not forget, namely that it should monitor its surrounding reality with empirical observation and study, and that it should not let itself be held hostage to the past or to the opinion of any one individual, however attractive it may seem. Whoever said 'Where there is life there is hope' was right. [...] If the Soviet experiment had arisen in a democratic system and been born in a climate of freedom, it would have benefitted from ongoing criticism of its economic and philosophical foundations, and would have developed admirably, free from all the problems which plagued it. Communism could be the last failed experiment in

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323 NM, 'A Just Freedom ('Hurriyya 'Ādila'), *Al Ahrām*, 13/8/1992, p. 9.

324 NM, 'A Just Freedom'.

325 NM, 'A Just Freedom'.

326 NM, 'A Just Freedom'.

327 NM, 'A Just Freedom'.

the life of Humanity if nations resolve to pursue freedom, democracy and respect for human rights, and share their experiences in a free, humanitarian climate. [...] We must not forget this happy moment in human history, in which freedom won a decisive - and we hope eternal - victory, and the rule of oppression suffered a defeat that we likewise hope is eternal. We must not forget the heroic role played by the Russian people on both the positive and negative sides of this experiment, and we must remember always their sacrifices for human civilisation.<sup>328</sup>

#### 2.4 Warrior for Internationalism

*I believe there is another way to compare civilisations, namely by taking an ordinary individual at random from the collective, a person embodying all the strengths and weaknesses of that civilisation; in the end, this person will be the most loyal testament to that civilisation, testament to it in the vision of the universe and life and people that she carries with her, in her degree of physical, mental and spiritual health, in the extent to which her heart beats in happiness or misery, in the amount of creative and moral energy she possesses, and last but not least, in her degree of readiness to love and respect others and the quality of her intercourse with them, even if they differ from her in colour, language, religion or all three.<sup>329</sup>*

Naguib Mahfouz, 'The Meaning of Civilisation' (1981)

Henri Bergson was arguably the single biggest Western philosophical influence on the young Mahfouz, an influence to which many Mahfouz scholars - most notably Rasheed El Enany - have rightly devoted substantial critical attention.<sup>330</sup> Nowhere, however, can we tie Bergson to Mahfouz more directly, or more importantly for our purposes, than in the Bergsonian distinction between 'open' and 'closed' societies elaborated in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932).<sup>331</sup> For Bergson, 'closed' societies based on obedience and duty - in essence, fear - must give way to 'open'

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328 NM, 'The Russian People' ('Al-Ša'b al-Rūsiyy'), *Al Ahrām*, 26/9/1991, p. 7.

329 NM, 'The Meaning of Civilisation' ('Ma'na al-Ḥaḍāra'), *Al Ahrām*, 16/7/1981, p. 7.

330 See, for example, Rasheed El Enany, *Naguib Mahfouz: The Pursuit of Meaning*, (London: Routledge, 1993).

331 Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (*Les Deux Sources de la Morale et de la Religion*), in *Oeuvres Complètes*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1970, 1st ed. 1959), p. 1059.

societies based on love and empathy. Bergson was adamant that this transition from Hobbesian to Humean 'sources of morality and religion' required a moral genius of the kind that Mahfouz attributed to, among others, Muhammad ('As for Islamic civilization I will not talk about its call for the establishment of a union between all Mankind under the guardianship of the Creator, based on freedom, equality and forgiveness. Nor will I talk about the greatness of its prophet. For among your thinkers there are those who regard him the greatest man in history.<sup>332</sup>). Civilisation for Mahfouz is by definition 'open', its history a struggle of internationalist impulses against tribal and imperial instincts.

Mahfouz inherited from Bergson the idea that universalist impulses are transmitted to society through the high example of moral leaders: 'sure of themselves, because they feel in themselves something which is better than them, they reveal themselves as great men of action,' wrote Bergson of his open society heroes.<sup>333</sup> 'What flows inside them has descended from on high and aims, through them, to reach other men: they feel the need to spread outwards from themselves what they have received, in a spirit of love'.<sup>334</sup> In return, this love 'acts in such a way as to make them loved for who they are, ensuring that, through them and for them, other men will allow their souls to open up to the love of humanity.'<sup>335</sup> *Children of Gebelawi* is the most famous Mahfouzian dramatisation of the power of this Bergsonian moral leadership, and of the fragility of its example: after brief periods of flowering, the message of one great moral leader after another is lost to the dustbin of history, and thuggery and fear gradually return to reign in the alleys. *Children of Gebelawi*, and indeed all of Mahfouz's middle period, is characterised by a certain degree of ambiguity and pessimism; we will argue, however, in Chapter 2.9 that *Dweller in Truth* (1985) is the definitive Mahfouzian statement of faith in the durability of the message of civilisation as it is transmitted from Akhenaten to Meri Moun. Throughout the Mahfouzian oeuvre, however, Egypt - and more often than not, the narrow alleys of Cairo - is the microcosm in which this universal struggle plays out. Why would such an avowedly internationalist author focus so much of his attention on one piece of land? One reason is that a young Mahfouz was convinced, most notably by James K. Breasted, that internationalism and conscience had actually first arisen there. Breasted's *The Dawn of Conscience* (1933) exerted an even more obvious influence on Mahfouz than Bergson's *The Two Sources of Religion and Morality*, first and foremost by encouraging Mahfouz to see beyond Egypt's contemporary struggles and to take the long, and hence the more optimistic,

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332 NM, *Nobel Lecture*.

333 Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, p. 1059.

334 Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, p. 1059.

335 Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, p. 1059.

view of human civilisational development. 'The most fundamentally important thing in the developing life of man has been the rise of ideals of conduct and the emergence of character, a transformation of human life which can be historically demonstrated to have begun but yesterday,' Breasted writes of the 'dawn of conscience' and the 'Age of Character' which was ushered in with it.<sup>336</sup> The shallowest foray into prehistory reveals at once that 'man began as an unmoral savage'; how was it possible, then, that 'he ever gained any moral dictates or eventually submitted to the moral mandate when once it had arisen? How did a world totally without any vision of character rise to social idealism and learn to listen with reverence to voices within?'<sup>337</sup> Echoing Mahfouz's Nobel Lecture some fifty years later with its celebration that, 'thank God', imperial values are losing their hold on humanity, Breasted wonders how, 'over against the visible and tangible advantages of material conquests [...] did it eventually happen that there arose the first generation of men with comprehension of unseen inner values?'<sup>338</sup>, a question taken up directly by Mahfouz in *Akhenaten: Dweller in Truth* and to which we will return in greater detail.

The Christian Breasted also provided Mahfouz with a model with which to confront his own doubts about Islamic revelation. At a certain point in his inner development, Breasted began to question the code of morals he had inherited, 'but it was a long time before I raised the interesting question: How has my own realisation of this imperfection arisen? Where did I myself get the moral yardstick with which I discovered this shortcoming in the Decalogue?'<sup>339</sup> The initial reaction was one of shock; the discovery of his own inner moral faculties marked 'a dark day for my inherited respect for the theological dogma of "revelation"'.<sup>340</sup> Breasted's orientalist studies also led him to the conclusion that the 'Age of Character' had begun not with the Hebrews but rather with the ancient Egyptians: 'our moral heritage therefore derives from a wider human past enormously older than the Hebrews, and it has come to us rather *through* the Hebrews than *from* them.'<sup>341</sup> The subsequent comforts of religion – summarisable as 'faith' - thus come to form the icing on the cake of human existence, a kind of reward for moral self-cultivation rather than the cause or purpose of it, and available only to those who recognise in revelation the paradoxical need to 'do away with revelation itself' and to engage in the moral activity which made Abrahamic revelation possible in the first place:

The rise of man to social idealism took place long before the traditional

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336 James K. Breasted, *The Dawn of Conscience*, (1933), <http://www.goldenageproject.org.uk/dawn.php#forword> (accessed 5/10/11).

337 Breasted, *The Dawn of Conscience*.

338 Breasted, *The Dawn of Conscience*.

339 Breasted, *The Dawn of Conscience*.

340 Breasted, *The Dawn of Conscience*.

341 Breasted, *The Dawn of Conscience*.

theologians' 'age of revelation' began. It was a result of the social experience of *man himself* and was not projected into the world from the outside. The fact that the moral ideas of early men were the product of their own social experience is one of profoundest meaning for thinking people of today. Out of prehistoric savagery, on the basis of his own experience man arose to visions of character. That achievement which transformed advancing life, human or animal, on our globe was one from a characterless universe, as far as it is known to us, to a world of inner values transcending matter - a world for the first time aware of such values, for the first time conscious of character and striving to attain it. With that achievement man had discovered a new country, but he had not yet explored it. The discovery itself was an incomparably more difficult achievement than the subsequent explorations. The discovery is a recent event and the explorations have consequently but just begun. They are an unfinished process which must be continued by us - by every generation.<sup>342</sup>

This passage from Breasted helps us to explain why Mahfouz focused his energies on Egypt: not because, or not primarily because, he felt 'at home' there, but because he felt that he 'had discovered a new country, but had not yet explored it'; in other words, there was more than enough 'social experience' in the alleys of Cairo to keep a single internationalist busy for a lifetime. For Mahfouz, as for Eduardo Lourenço, shiny foreign capitals tell us relatively little of the progress of human civilisation; the alleys of Cairo are a more accurate thermometer. Internationalising those alleys - or in other words, bringing moral leadership to them - is as urgent a civilisational challenge as any other, a challenge to which Mahfouz ultimately devoted his life. The relentlessly and unashamedly moralising tone of Mahfouz's weekly column for *Al-Ahram* over the last three decades of his life is a direct reflection of this civilising mission, even more direct than his fictional output itself. The central goal of this mission was to 'internationalise' the sentiments of an isolated Egyptian readership chronically prone to sectarian myopia and pride and thirsty for international recognition. At times, this internationalism required a paradoxical focus on the local, as Mahfouz explained in an interview entitled 'We Haven't Yet Achieved the Local: How Can We Think About Achieving the Global?':

Literature presents human experience; the main thing is that the experience be honest and deep. If it achieves this result, well, there's no need for any other experience.

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342 Breasted, *The Dawn of Conscience*.

Literature must give everything; the writer must give what he is best placed to give; there is no bigger mistake in literature than seeking breadth at the expense of one's own expertise, and venturing to write about things of which one has only a superficial understanding. That's not a good way to go about it... for example, visiting a foreign country and writing a novel about that country; how can you write a novel about this country without drinking deep its spirit? That's why I cited Hardy for example, and Faulkner too, who always wrote about a single village in the American south. [...] All of his protagonists, male and female, were from this one village. [...] I am truly a man of limited horizons, and I write about what I know, without pretensions.<sup>343</sup>

If the prior goal of Mahfouzian internationalism was to create a sense of Egyptian national identity rather than to aim directly at international integration, it was primarily because Mahfouz, born into a fierce anti-colonial struggle, understood that international integration was literally meaningless without a prior community of independent, free-thinking individuals and nations. As we have seen, independence for Mahfouz was a means rather than an end: 'Independence is not the final goal.[...] It is merely a means to achieving constitutional, economic and general human rights'<sup>344</sup>. If the degree of civilisation of the international community can best be measured by taking, for example, the average Egyptian citizen and measuring 'the quality of his intercourse with those who differ... in colour, language, religion, or all three', then it makes sense to concentrate on developing the character of that citizen, developing a sense of independent identity denied under colonialism, an identity from which to build healthy relationships with others. Mahfouz's first phase of fiction - his dramatisations of ancient Egypt, and his realistic depictions of Cairo life culminating in the *Cairo Trilogy* - is best understood as an attempt to make Egyptians proud of themselves, to give them a stable base from which to understand, and quite literally to join, the rest of the world. Having spent the first part of his life laying the cultural foundations for this integration, Mahfouz shifted focus in the second part of his life towards making this integration a reality (without at any stage forgetting how fragile Egyptian independence and identity was). In one newspaper article after another from the 1980s on, Mahfouz calls on Egyptians to stand up and take notice of the best that the world can offer them, in the best tradition of Islamic openness to foreign learning stretching back to the time of Muhammad himself ('perhaps the first import was from the time of the Prophet himself, the most

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343 NM, 'Conversation with Aḥmad Muḥammad 'Atīyya: We Haven't Yet Achieved the Local: How Can We Think About Achieving the Global?' ('Lam Naṣil Ba'd 'ilā al-Maḥalliyya, wa Kayfa Nufakkir fī al Wuṣūl 'ilā al-'Ālamiyya?'), *Al-Iḍā'a wa al-Tilfisyūn*, 31/1/1984.

344 Lù, 'The Cairo Trilogy and Mahfouz's Faith in Socialism', p. 60.

prominent example being the trench, which was an idea of Persian origin<sup>345</sup>). The real flowering of this 'open society', however, came centuries later, with the coming of the 'Ages of Enlightenment' and their 'translations of Greek, Persian and Indian philosophies and sciences. Leaders found encouragement in the Qur'an with its calls to empirical observation, meditation, and the seeking of knowledge [...] and in the hadith "Seek knowledge even in China"<sup>346</sup>. Indeed, all great civilisations have been pragmatic enough to import ideas from outside: 'It is not a question of importing or exporting but above all of what Humanity needs to support its development in the direction of Progress. This applies equally to ideas and creeds on the one hand, and finance and consumer goods on the other.'<sup>347</sup> Instead of fearing and loathing the West, Arabs should be rushing to embrace the best it has to offer:

Western civilisation is the wealthiest and most advanced human civilisation in terms of intellectual and material achievements and humanist values. This does not make it a perfect civilisation free from faults, but it does retain a unique place in history. This might have been enough for it to be welcomed everywhere with open arms, but people - especially in the Arab world - violently disagree about its legacy, perhaps for some of the following reasons:

1. They regard it as a foreign civilisation.
2. They find it difficult to forget its dark history of crusades and colonialism.
3. They fear that certain Western ideas may invade the sphere of Islam.
4. They are uneasy about obvious contradictions in certain values.
5. They are partial towards their own civilisation and refuse to except that Time has overtaken it.
6. They fear the threat that Western civilisation poses towards the environment and life on Earth with some of its industrial methods and destructive inventions.<sup>348</sup>

Mahfouz replies to each of these in turn:

First: I do not agree that it is a foreign civilisation insofar as it was born from all previous civilisations, and especially Greek and Islamic civilisation. It is like a giant

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345 NM, 'Imported Ideas' (Al-Afkār al-Mustawrada'), *Al Ahrām*, 10/5/1976, p. 11.

346 NM, 'Imported Ideas'.

347 NM, 'Imported Ideas'.

348 NM, 'The Call of Civilisation' ('Nidā' al-Ḥaḍāra'), *Al Ahrām*, 2/4/1992, p. 9.



corporation to which the whole of Humanity has contributed; it is more Humanistic than specifically 'Western'.

Second: I do not deny its dark history, but I also know that its evils arose in certain specific historical and economic circumstances; we shouldn't overlook the positive side, and we should hope for an ever greater triumph of these positive values.

Third: The fear of its impact on the sphere of religion is entirely ungrounded...

Fourth: There is no doubt that some of its values are a cause for distress and aversion, but we are free, and no one is forcing us to adopt that which is not compatible with our firmly held principles.

Fifth: Openness to modern civilisation does not mean the abandonment of our ancient civilisation; it is a process which involves marrying the two, generating the new, and allowing our civilisation to thrive.

Sixth: I am not unaware of the dangers that threaten life on our planet, but I have not yet lost hope in our ability to right our destiny through science and wise judgement.

Let us welcome life in a way befitting those who are sure of themselves, those who seek the Highest Example.<sup>349</sup>

Rasheed El Enany argued in his 1993 book *Naguib Mahfouz: The Pursuit of Meaning* that the later Mahfouz was in the process of shifting towards a less Western-friendly and more pluralistic worldview. After quoting Mahfouz's belief that 'there is no escape from the supremacy of the more efficient culture, and this can only be for the good of mankind, and not otherwise', Enany goes on to argue that Mahfouz eventually 'came to believe that different civilisations upheld essentially different worldviews. He feels that this has caused his enthusiasm for Western civilisation to shift towards an enthusiasm for a universal human need such as science, which in turn can be used in the service of the world view of one's own culture.'<sup>350</sup> I do not, however, see any contradiction between Mahfouz's glorification of Western civilisation and his call to embrace the best of all civilisations, or any real change of heart regarding the unicity of civilisation itself; it is extremely misleading of Enany to suggest that 'Mahfouz came to believe that different civilisations upheld *essentially* different worldviews' (italics mine), for as we have seen, Mahfouz is no cultural relativist: Mahfouzian *hadara* is a single, unitary concept. What Mahfouz does go on to stress, however, is

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349 NM, 'The Call of Civilisation'.

350 Rasheed El Enany, *Naguib Mahfouz: The Pursuit of Meaning*, p. 22.

that developing countries like Egypt might do well to follow the examples of other developing countries, like India (as we have seen), Cold War Japan, and - in the spirit of the *hadith* quoted above – 21st-century China:

I fondly followed President Mubarak's visit to China. It is a genuinely great country, to which the world owes one sixth of its entire population. The Chinese are the purveyors of an astoundingly successful experiment in progress and civilisation, moreover, from which we must take inspiration. For we have lived since the time of Mohamed Ali thinking that progress is the exclusive property of the West. We kept up with what was happening in Europe, sent our children to receive an education there and perused all that was available to us of its cultural products. The truth, however, is that knowledge of Eastern cultures would have been more beneficial. China, for one such ancient culture, has chosen paths to progress not available to the West, for all the latter's glory. It is, moreover, a country with circumstances similar to ours: economically, socially, politically, historically. [...] This makes its achievements more pertinent to the Egyptian environment than those of the West. Of all the news that has reached us from China since the president's visit, I was particularly interested in the information that progress is taking place there with such remarkable speed that those who accompanied the president on his previous visit, in 1999, saw a radically different country on their return. The 21st century does not belong to the United States alone. We must understand this and diversify our sources, gleaning all the benefit that we can.<sup>351</sup>

Here, in 2002, a 90 year-old Mahfouz is still busy trying to 'internationalise' his beloved Egypt, for this internationalist path is the path of civilisation itself. The sight of China on the rise appears to have filled the nonagenarian Mahfouz with regret that he himself had failed to cultivate the kind of knowledge of Eastern cultures that he had acquired of Western culture through his extensive reading of Western philosophy and literature. While Enany goes on to say that this 'shift in his thinking' has 'probably come too late in his life to be able to be substantiated in his work'<sup>352</sup>, one can easily picture the 20-something Mahfouz engrossed in Bergson and Breasted in the 1930s ploughing into the study of Chinese and the reading of Confucius if he were a twenty-something today.

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351 NM, 'China and Us' ('Naḥnu wa al-Ṣīn'), *Al Aḥram*, 31/1/2002.

352 Rasheed El Enany, *Naguib Mahfouz: The Pursuit of Meaning*, p. 22.

## 2.5 Warrior for Human Rights

*I do not say with Kant that Good will be victorious in the other world. Good is achieving victory every day. It may even be that Evil is weaker than we imagine. In front of us is an indelible proof: were it not for the fact that victory is always on the side of Good, hordes of wandering humans would not have been able in the face of beasts and insects, natural disasters, fear and egotism, to grow and multiply. They would not have been able to form nations, to excel in creativeness and invention, to conquer outer space, and to declare Human Rights.<sup>353</sup>*

Naguib Mahfouz, Nobel Lecture

We have seen that Mahfouzian civilisation is built on the twin foundations of pragmatism and faith in an underlying Moral Law (indeed, the second commands the first). We have also seen how this Law commands both socialism and internationalism, or at least a commitment to the socialist ideal 'from each according to ability, to each according to need' applied internationally to Humanity as a whole. Disagreement about how to achieve this noble goal - for example, whether through a preponderance of decentralised markets or centralised bureaucracy - is both inevitable and healthy, but Mahfouz is unequivocal that a baseline of rights - to vote, to education and literacy, to healthcare and freedom from hunger, to free expression - is a necessary part of civilisation, and he vigorously applauded the development of international Human Rights Law in the course of his lifetime. It is nevertheless true that Mahfouz spent more time taking 'Human Rights' for granted than he did arguing for what they were or why they were useful. This could largely be explained by the fact that the *absence* of Human Rights in Egypt - democratic rights, rights to education and healthcare, rights to social security, rights to free expression - was so obvious and so urgent that there was no point for Mahfouz to waste time on empty philosophising about what did and did not deserve to be counted as a Human Right. This apparent impatience with - or ignorance of - debates about the nature of Human Rights should not obscure the fact, however, that Mahfouz's views on the subject were extremely nuanced, and are still relevant to contemporary debates.

One prominent sceptic of the contemporary Human Rights culture that so excited Mahfouz

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353 NM, *Nobel Lecture*.

is a man whose name has already been mentioned: John Gray. Gray's scepticism regarding human rights is clearly expressed in his review of Samuel Moyn's *The Last Utopia*, where he attacks the 'cosmopolitan vision of universal humanity', the prevailing contemporary view that 'the prominence of rights is the almost-inevitable conclusion of a long process of moral development' from Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian origins on through 'the English Civil War, the French and American Revolutions, various antislavery movements, the Second World War, and the struggles against colonialism and racism.'<sup>354</sup> Whereas natural law theorists from Locke to Kant and beyond argued that 'rights were dictates of natural law, which had to be obeyed because they emanated from God', Gray dismisses the human rights agenda as 'impossible even in theory, for there are ethical and political conflicts that admit no single, right solution', and accuses defenders of human rights of 'nurturing the sickly dream of a time when the intractable dilemmas of ethics and politics will be overcome, transcended in an empire of law.'<sup>355</sup> The problem with the human rights project as Gray sees it is that it aims to 'place certain basic freedoms in a realm of constitutional law where they are beyond any possibility of political attack. [...] At the back of the rights movement is a vision of an ideal constitution that could in principle be installed everywhere.'<sup>356</sup> This desire to do away with the struggles of politics once and for all is 'utopian' for Gray because 'all the panoply of rights will not stop a government from violating the most basic protections when political elites—along with most people—support such encroachments, or simply do not care.'<sup>357</sup>

It is telling that Gray takes for granted that the Lockean and Kantian position, which is also the Mahfouzian position - that Human Rights are 'dictates of Natural Law' - is not even worth taking seriously. Yet the fact that there may be myriad ways of securing specific rights (e.g. to healthcare, education) and myriad decisions to be made about how to use scarce resources to protect as many rights as possible does not mean that rights and the Moral Law do not exist. Mahfouz himself argued, as we have seen, for a 'constant battle' between conservatives and reformers, and did not by any means dream of 'an ideal constitution which could be installed everywhere' and applied eternally. Despite his commitment to Human Rights and a single Moral Law, Mahfouz was not dogmatically committed to a centralised civilisational bureaucracy based on a single, immutable founding document, and even, in his pragmatism, admitted the possibility of regional civilisational autonomy:

There has always been competition and confrontation and opposition between the world's different civilisations, both in our unipolar age of one global Superpower and

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354 John Gray, 'What Rawls Hath Wrought', 16 December 2010, <http://nationalinterest.org/bookreview/what-rawls-hath-wrought-4570>, (accessed 12/11/2011).

355 Gray, 'What Rawls Hath Wrought'.

356 Gray, 'What Rawls Hath Wrought'.

357 Gray, 'What Rawls Hath Wrought'.

in past multipolar ages. What we must avoid is that the relationship between civilisations becomes a clash. What we are most in need of now is intercivilisational dialogue. The world is smaller than ever before; we are finding for example that the Internet has opened all windows on the world. [...] This may well help with dialogue between civilisations. Why insist on the 'clash' thesis? It is true that there will be competition between all these civilisations, but such competition is welcome: may the best rather than merely the strongest survive. For no matter how strong a given civilisation is - militarily, economically, or politically - it will not be able impose its customs and way of life on any foreign people, unless that people is themselves convinced by the superiority of the incoming civilisation. If they are so convinced, then the incoming civilisation is welcome, because it shows that the new civilisation is superior to what was there before. There is no compulsion in the competition between civilisations, and such competition should not be allowed to reach the level of a clash, because if it reached the level of a clash, that would be proof of the fact that it was not yet a struggle between civilisations, but rather a political struggle, a quite different matter. Civilisation has no path but dialogue, persuasion and more persuasion, and the result will be one of the following: either one civilisation will prevail because it is best and most persuasive, or there will remain a situation of friendly understanding between sister civilisations. For there will always be scope for such plurality in art, ideas and customs.<sup>358</sup>

Despite appearances, Mahfouz and Gray in fact share a faith in pragmatism and the transformative power of the present. Like Mahfouz, Gray agrees that 'we would be better off if we put an end to our obsession with endings. Humans are sturdy creatures built to withstand regular disruption. Conflict never ceases, but neither does human resourcefulness, adaptability or courage.'<sup>359</sup> Although we inevitably 'look forward to a future state of fulfilment in which all turmoil has ceased', it is in fact the case that 'living in fear of the end is as stultifying as living in hope of it. Either way our lives are spent in the shadow of a future that's bound to be largely imaginary.'<sup>360</sup>

The real difference between Gray and Mahfouz, however, is Gray's obvious lack of faith in civilisation beyond individual fulfilment and the 'animal silence' of private mysticism outlined in Chapter 1: 'The task that faces us is no different from the one that has always faced human beings - renewing our lives in the face of recurring evils. Happily, the end never comes. Looking to an end-

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358 NM, 'Dialogues with Mohamed Salmawy: Clash or Dialogue?' ('Sirā' 'am Hīwār?'), *Al Ahrām*, 8/5/1997, p. 11.  
359 Gray, 'What Rawls Hath Wrought'.  
360 Gray, 'What Rawls Hath Wrought'.

time is a way of failing to cherish the present - the only time that is truly our own.<sup>361</sup> Mahfouz, by contrast, feels himself acutely to be a member of an intergenerational community which, in Pascal's memorable phrase, 'exists always and learns continually', and must continue to do so. Burdened with the responsibility of passing on the fragile flame of civilisation to future generations, Mahfouz's pragmatism is in the service of something he holds to be true, beyond the present and beyond himself. Mahfouz would undoubtedly have recoiled from Gray's embrace of meaningless 'animal silence'; whereas Gray aims entirely to do away with 'the faith that the future can be better than the past', and worries that 'when we look to the future to give meaning to our lives, we lose the meaning we can make for ourselves here and now'<sup>362</sup>, Mahfouz argues, as Tarkovsky will argue even more explicitly in the next chapter, that any meaning we could make for ourselves alone would be meaningless; that the future – even the future we will not personally see – is an intimate part of ourselves, and that working to improve it for others – for example, by continually elaborating and improving human rights norms – gives meaning to our lives. Mahfouz's tolerance, however, of those who would openly and tastelessly attack this faith - the very heart of his vision of civilisation - has its limits. It is a truism that every civilisation has its tenets, and that even a civilisation which values free speech, for example, has to deal with those who would seek to use speech to shut free speech down. Mahfouz's views on free speech will be an exemplary case study of his pragmatism regarding Human Rights generally.

Mahfouz had plenty to say about the international diplomatic incident involving the publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and the subsequent fatwa issued by Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989. After a series of misunderstandings and misquotations, Mahfouz definitively clarified his position in the article 'The Truth About the Article I Didn't Write About Salman Rushdie' (1993): 'The freedom of the writer or intellectual is necessary, and one can choose to respond through debate and dialogue,' Mahfouz argues, but 'I think there must be a distinction between freedom of thought and blasphemy. Thought and creativity are debated, whereas blasphemy is judged in a court of law; if a writer is free to say what she wants, those who are harmed have the right to defend themselves and their creeds.'<sup>363</sup> Mahfouz opposed Ayatollah Khomeini's *fatwa* calling for Rushdie to be killed because 'it was issued without giving the other side a chance to defend himself, and also because, in the end, Rushdie showed his repentance in a meeting with the Egyptian Minister of Religious Endowments.'<sup>364</sup> Worst of all in this episode was not Rushdie's book, but the Iranian refusal to accept Rushdie's apology, a reaction which was

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361 Gray, 'What Rawls Hath Wrought'.

362 Gray, 'What Rawls Hath Wrought'.

363 NM, 'The Truth About the Article I Didn't Write About Salman Rushdie' ('Al Ḥaqīqa Ḥawla al Maqāl al-laḏī lam aktabhu 'an Salmān Ruṣḏī'), *Akhbar al Adab*, 26/12/1993.

364 NM, 'The Truth About the Article I Didn't Write About Salman Rushdie'.

'contrary to the teaching of Islam, because Islam is a religion of tolerance and grants even the apostate the opportunity to repent. The Prophet Muhammad - Peace Be Upon Him - did not waste the blood of those who opposed him or attacked him.'<sup>365</sup>

In order better to understand the spirit of this response, it will be useful here to return to the 2005 debate on blasphemy between Stephen Fry and Christopher Hitchens introduced in the first chapter. Fry and Hitchens discuss the outrage of the Sikh community in Britain following the staging of a sensitive play:

Fry: There's a very dreary and typical comment people made about the Salman Rushdie *fatwa* - a very British kind of thing - 'Well, it's a rather dreadful kind of book, isn't it?', as if that is of any relevance.

Hitchens: The crime is in those who close the theatre, not those who demand it be closed. The Sikhs claim to be universalists - how can you be offended 'as a Sikh'?

Fry: Because they were offended as a people, not as a religion.

Hitchens: Narcissism.

Fry: Yes, but... You can offend a Jew in two ways: you can offend a Judaic Jew if you wish to by being incredibly rude about Judaic religion, though not many rabbis are likely to be offended... But there's also the idea that a Jew could be a person, who could be Sigmund Freud, who could be an atheist - Karl Marx - and you attack the rights of those people. And I think the Sikhs, in an excess of excitability - I don't mean that to sound patronising - felt that it offended them as a people, not the tenets of their religion, which they probably didn't consider in that. They just felt, 'Hang on! We need to be counted as well. We live in Birmingham, we're part of a community, we want our community to be "respected"... They weren't having a theological debate about the play and whether it went against Sikhism - as Christopher says, you almost by definition can't (i.e. because it considers itself to be universal).

Hitchens: Yes, but Jews used to protest very much about productions of *The*

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365 NM, 'The Truth About the Article I Didn't Write About Salman Rushdie'.

*Merchant of Venice*, for example. They said, 'It makes us feel uneasy and uncomfortable'. They don't do that because they feel much more secure in England - it has taken quite a long struggle.

Fry: That's exactly what I'm saying.

Hitchens: We hope that this will eventually be true of Sikhs, but they're not going to do it by impersonating the worst of the old Jewish self-pity.<sup>366</sup>

Mahfouz, who self-identified as a Muslim and spent his life trying, indirectly at least, to get his people and culture, and the Third World in general, 'counted' on the international stage, clearly felt that *The Satanic Verses* disrespected his 'community', as Fry says. We may agree or disagree with Hitchens that, in the Sikh case, this amounts to 'narcissism' and 'self-pity', but for Mahfouz, the real concern is for the health of civilisation itself, and in this case, for a Western civilisation which fails to take Muslims and Muslim contributions to civilisation seriously, reducing them to mere caricatures. This anxiety is best reflected in his 2006 response to the Danish cartoon scandal; Mahfouz believed that the Danish editors involved, as representatives of a Danish culture which has 'distinguished itself for its humanism and civilisation', ought to have known better.<sup>367</sup> 'What happened hurt the feelings of all Muslims, and above all of moderates who have been calling for years for the necessity of openness to the Other and for dialogue between civilisations and the coexistence of religions.'<sup>368</sup> The problem here is not Muslim self-pity, but Western ignorance and arrogance; the Danish cartoon scandal weakened the argument of self-confident Muslims who believed their civilisation had something serious to offer the Western world and *vice versa* because 'the Other now looks capable only of mockery, and to be uninterested in dialogue and coexistence'.<sup>369</sup> Much as Tariq Ramadan criticised a French magazine in 2011 for printing similarly two-dimensional and unfunny images of Muslims<sup>370</sup>, Mahfouz wondered whether the effect of publishing such trivial images of Muhammad would not be to push Muslims 'to oppose and challenge this "infidel West" which does not respect religions or their symbols, and to ask themselves: "How can we build a dialogue with them?" [...] Such is the reaction that this shameful

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366 Fry and Hitchens, 'Blasphemy Debate'.

367 NM, 'Dialogues with Mohamed Salmawy: Two Regrettable Incidents!' (Ḥadīṭātān Mu'assifatān!), *Al Ahram*, 10/2/2006.

368 NM, 'Two Regrettable Incidents!'.

369 NM, 'Two Regrettable Incidents!'.

370 See, for example, 'Tariq Ramadan vs. Alain Finkelkraut', [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5UKU7zJ\\_gmg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5UKU7zJ_gmg), 8/11/11.



incident, which should never have happened, has provoked.<sup>371</sup> Even if a magazine or newspaper remains free, both in theory and in practice, to publish what it wants, we must ask why it would want to publish such things in the first place; the Moral Law commands respect for other people - not for the views they hold, but for their right to hold views, and above all for their right to belong to a human community in which views are openly debated by people who take each other seriously. Without mockery among friends and equals, relationships may struggle for health and vitality, as in the Confucian example to be cited in Chapter four of playing a single boring note on a zither; but a relationship in which one side is capable *only* of mockery is no longer a relationship among equals. Speech which reflects a lack of respect for this 'community' or 'ship' on which we are all aboard is contrary to the spirit of civilisation itself, and may, as Gray himself suggests, warrant restriction or even punishment in certain contexts ('If neo-Nazism could be countered in the countries where it is reemerging by curbs on free expression and political association, would it be wrong to impose such limits? The answer depends [...] on the effectiveness of the restrictions.'<sup>372</sup>).

There is, we may conclude, a distinct Humean quality to Mahfouz's pragmatic endorsement of Human Rights, as Martha Nussbaum's colleague Amartya Sen shows us. Like Mahfouz, Hume stressed 'the central role of information and knowledge for adequate ethical scrutiny, and the importance of reasoning without disowning the pertinence of powerful sentiments'.<sup>373</sup> Hume was also consumed by 'such practical concerns as our responsibilities to those who are located far away from us elsewhere on the globe, or in the future'; with rapidly expanding trade and communications technology, Hume felt keenly 'the growing need to think afresh about the nature of justice, as we come to know more about people living elsewhere, with whom we have come to develop new relations', and stressed, like Mahfouz, the importance of reason allied to moral sentiment in an ever more crowded world.<sup>374</sup> While worried that 'people very often are too guided by self-interest in their thinking about justice' and that 'avidity alone, of acquiring goods and possessions for ourselves and our nearest friends' might well be 'insatiable, perpetual, universal, and directly destructive of society', Hume also believed that there could develop a "'moderation and abstinence" based on a reasoned understanding of the mutual dependence of people on each other' combined with the ongoing 'progress of human sentiments':

[Hume] points out, for example, that people 'pull the oars of a boat by common convention for common interest, without any promise or contract,' and that their

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371 NM, 'Two Regrettable Incidents!'.  
 372 Gray, 'What Rawls Hath Wrought'.

373 Amartya Sen, 'The Boundaries of Justice', <http://www.tnr.com/article/books-and-arts/magazine/98552/hume-rawls-boundaries-justice?page=0,0&passthru=ZjFiNjg3ZWl4ZTIwMWFkYThiNTRiY2M3OGYzY2MzNGQ>,

14/12/11 (accessed 30/12/11).

374 Sen, 'The Boundaries of Justice'.

sense of justice is developed by thinking in 'company and conversation'. The connection between reasoned ethics and the “progress of human sentiments” may help to explain the emergence of the so-called 'anti-globalization' movement as a search—despite its misleading name—for a new global ethics with rapidly expanding economic globalization. [...] The search for more justice in the global world can also benefit from the Humean admonition about the need for empirical knowledge, particularly—in this case—about what works and what does not work (a subject that is central to contemporary development economics). This applies not only, say, to different forms of aid and assistance, but also to the role of education and health care in advancing development, including economic progress. Empirical understanding is also relevant for assessing how the market economy works, what it achieves and what it does not. If the economic crisis of 2008 is at least partly a reflection of being misled by the pure theory of infallible markets, it brings out sharply the practical importance of real knowledge about how markets can be expected actually to work.<sup>375</sup>

Like Hume, Mahfouz remained optimistic concerning the 'natural progress of human sentiments' towards universal humanistic sympathy in the light of developments in communications technology and trade in goods and ideas. Declarations of Human Rights enshrine this optimism and represent a high point of human civilisational development rather than, as Gray suggests, dangerous utopian wishfulness. But as for Hume, Mahfouz saw nothing inevitable or inexorable about the advance or even the survival of universal rights; not only do the humanities have a role to play in enlarging and maintaining the sympathies which make talk of universal rights possible, but, as we will explore further in the next chapter, it is only with the hard work of reason – including scientific reason - that this sympathy finds meaningful expression in the world, thereby ensuring the survival and spread of Human Rights themselves.

## 2.6 Warrior for Science

*It is a world full of harm, and rarely do we find news to cheer us. Perhaps our happiest children are almost all in one environment - the scientific*

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375 Sen, 'The Boundaries of Justice'.

*environment. For in this total darkness, lights shine in centres of research, promising always to add to knowledge and to discover new truths and to challenge diseases and other plagues.*<sup>376</sup>

Naguib Mahfouz

After five chapters in which the importance of science to Mahfouz's vision of civilisation has been repeatedly stressed, a sixth chapter devoted exclusively to science may seem almost superfluous. It would not be possible, however, to overestimate the status accorded by Mahfouz to the scientific enterprise. In a sense, science is synonymous with civilisation itself: 'Western civilisation is not a foreign civilisation. It was indeed born in foreign circumstances and among foreign tribes, but in both historical and tangible terms, it is a humanistic civilisation above all else - humanistic in its origin and humanistic in its goal,' Mahfouz tells his local Egyptian and Arab readers, before offering what he regards as the most prominent example of this humanism: 'I do not deny that there are local characteristics in any civilisation which tie it to its environment and which may be abhorred and rejected by the rest of Humanity, but beyond these it is humanistic in its goal, a project aimed at the hearts and minds of all. The most important example of this is science and its applications.'<sup>377</sup> As Mahfouz's article 'The Great Nation' (1991) further makes clear, the spirit of science is international: science is leading us to 'spectacular horizons of knowledge and accomplishment in the direction of horizons of progress, enlightenment and power between the Earth and outer space, affecting humans, animals, plants and even inanimate objects'.<sup>378</sup> Although we face common dangers such as 'pollution, drought, disease, drugs and terrorism', and although 'each nation has its share of progress and exposure to risk in accordance with its degree of civilisation and is called to address its problems by all means available within the limits of its energies and talents', we are nevertheless living through a period which 'distinguishes itself in that it is tending towards convergence and union; the good and the bad are being shared around and are flowing through everyone, without regard for borders'.<sup>379</sup> In an age in which secrets 'rarely stay secret for long', we have an unprecedented opportunity to share the good as well as the bad, and science is a key part of this exchange: 'We are in the era of open-source knowledge, of international trade and the global economy, and of dialogue between nations leading to convergence in values enshrined in the idea of

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376 NM, 'Good Morning World!' ('Ṣabaḥ al-ḥayr 'ilā al-'Ālam!'), *Al Aḥram*, 16/10/1994.

377 NM, 'Western Civilisation' ('Al Ḥaḍāra al Ḡarbiyya'), *Al Aḥram*, 16/4/1992.

378 NM, 'The Great Nation' ('Al Waṭan al Kabīr'), *Al Aḥram*, 7/11/1991, p. 7.

379 NM, 'The Great Nation'.

Human Rights. We are meeting more than ever in international institutions and conferences.<sup>380</sup>

'Knowledge without borders', indeed, is a core principle of Mahfouzian civilisation; in the end, knowledge is not dangerous, and what matters is to face the dangers and challenges that surround us, and to use the knowledge we acquire through open exchange of ideas across borders – however unsettling such knowledge may be – to further other civilisational values. Consider Mahfouz on cloning:

In fact I am against those who oppose cloning, not only in Egypt but in developed countries themselves. Science should never be treated in this way; we should never fear negative consequences of any scientific discovery. On the contrary, our duty is to leave scientists completely free to do their jobs, to make discoveries, and there is nothing at all to be afraid of in this. If such experiments were successful on crops and plants which God created, why should they not succeed on animals too, or on humans? Perhaps the result will be that we end up cloning not just creatures that have the same characteristics as another creature but are also free from this creature's congenital defects. This is scientific progress which we should not be trying to quarantine. There is nothing in it which goes against religion at all. [...] Whoever engages in cloning is herself one of God's creatures. God Almighty knows that humans are capable of cloning humans, and created them on that basis. Human cloning is not, therefore, contrary to the Divine Will or a challenge to it.<sup>381</sup>

For Mahfouz, no scientific idea, however apparently heretical or inimical to received wisdom, is a threat to faith or civilisation; what matters is to deal honestly and nobly with the reality we discover around us, in accordance with the Moral Law. Even the study of the Moral Law itself can, and indeed should, as Sam Harris and Jonathan Haidt have suggested, be informed by empirical inquiry: despite the fact that - as the likes of Thomas Nagel and (as we will see) Ronald Dworkin among our Western warriors argue - its source ultimately remains beyond rational and empirical scrutiny, for Mahfouz one important 'side' of the scientific project is concerned with 'thought, art, politics and social relations'<sup>382</sup>. Contrary to appearances, Darwinism and its social scientific derivatives - most notably evolutionary psychology - pose no threat to Mahfouzian civilisation; already in the *Cairo Trilogy*, Mahfouz showed that he was entirely comfortable with the theme of evolution and its possible moral consequences; after arousing his father's anger by publishing an article on Darwin in the *Balagh Weekly* magazine, Kamal, whose intellectual trajectory was modelled on Mahfouz's

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380 NM, 'The Great Nation'.

381 NM, 'Cloning' (*Al Istinsāh*), *Al Ahram*, 3/4/1997, p. 11.

382 NM, 'Western Civilisation'.

own<sup>383</sup>, eventually sees the light:

Why had he written his article after all? He had hesitated for a long time before sending it to the magazine. But it was as if he wanted to announce publicly the death of his old form of faith. For the last few years it had resisted the storms of doubt unleashed by contact with al-Maarri and al-Khayyam, until science with its iron fist assailed him. This blow had been decisive! But he kept saying to himself: 'I'm not an unbeliever, I still believe in God! [...] Enough suffering and temptation! I will never again be the prisoner of illusions! [...] Give me light at all costs! Our father Adam? I have no father! Let my father be a monkey if the truth demands it.'<sup>384</sup> [...] Now, if he wanted to write, he would have to fall back on the weekly political review that would escape the curiosity of his wafdist father. As for his mother, he could already quietly promise her that he would be devoting his life to spreading the light of God. For after all, wasn't that actually the case? Without doubt! Distancing himself from religious dogma, he would be closer to God than if he were enslaved to it! For as a key to the mysteries and grandeur of the universe, there is no true religion but science! If the prophets returned today, they would choose science to convey their message! Thus he awoke from the slumber of myth to face the bare bones of reality, ending the storm during which he had tried to crush ignorance on his way to his goal, breaking from a past of darkness to embrace a future of light. The paths of Science, Goodness and Beauty opened the Way to God; it was through them that he would say goodbye to a past of unsubstantiated dreams, false hopes and infinite suffering.<sup>385</sup>

The Moral Law commands attention to empirical detail; such contact with reality leads to constant revision even in the realms of cosmology and ethics themselves. It is hard to see Mahfouz disagreeing, for example, with the premise of James Rachels' classic *Created from Animals: The Moral Implications of Darwinism* (or with Tu Weiming's similarly post-anthropocentric, 'anthropocosmic' vision to be discussed in Chapter 4). Rachels argues that 'Darwin's theory does not entail that the idea of human dignity is false', but rather that 'Darwinism undermines both the idea that man is made in the image of God and the idea that man is a uniquely rational being'.<sup>386</sup> Since

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383 See NM, 'Dialogue with 'Abbās al Aswānī' (Ḥiwār ma'a 'Abbās al Aswānī)', *Akhbar al Adab*, 3/9/2006, p. 30. Of the extent of the correspondence between the young Mahfouz and Kamal, Mahfouz says 'I shared Kamal's intellectual crisis, but not his emotional one.'

384 NM, *The Cairo Trilogy (La Trilogie)*, trans. Philippe Vigneux (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1993), p. 964.

385 NM, *The Cairo Trilogy*, p. 967.

386 James Rachels, *Created from Animals: The Moral Implications of Darwinism*, (Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 4.

human life after the advent of Darwinism is freed from the 'moral effluvia' of a 'discredited', anthropomorphic metaphysics and is 'no longer regarded with the kind of superstitious awe which it is accorded in traditional thought', Rachels believes that 'the value granted to nonhuman life will be increased' and that 'reconstructing morality without the assumption of man's specialness leaves morality stronger and more rational. It leaves us with a better ethic concerning the treatment of both human and nonhuman animals.'<sup>387</sup> It is equally hard, given Mahfouz's already cited views on science and progress, to imagine him dissenting from Michael Gazzaniga's views on free will: 'neuroscientific experiments indicate that human decisions for action are made before the individual is consciously aware of them. Instead of this finding answering the age-old question of whether the brain decides before the mind decides, it makes us wonder if that is even the way to think about how the brain works.'<sup>388</sup> This is just one of Gazzaniga's examples; 'the list of issues where neuroscience will weigh in is endless,' he argues, not least because 'human knowledge can't help itself in the long run. Things slowly, gradually become more clear. As humans continue on their journey they will come to believe certain things about the nature of things and those abstractions will then be reflected in the rules that are set up to allow people to live together.'<sup>389</sup>

Beyond the infinite adaptability of the Mahfouzian vision of civilisation to new empirical evidence, however, the question of the plausibility of the vision itself - the utopian question - remains. While Mahfouz's idea of civilisation is a normative vision of what could be and not a descriptive vision of what is or necessarily will be, it must nevertheless be psychologically and sociologically possible if it is to be of value to us. In true Popperian spirit, the most we can say is that it has not been proven to be impossible; indeed, a good deal of contemporary research would tend to support the broad thesis of the possibility of progress towards a vision of respect for human rights, socialist internationalism, and conscience. Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature* is one prominent recent source of evidence for the non-utopian quality of the Mahfouzian vision, as Carl Zimmer argues in his review of Pinker's book, citing 'civilisation's effect' on human nature: 'Steven Pinker's great achievement is to weave these trends into a much larger pattern of reduced violence, greater empathy and, indeed, a comprehensive civilising process,' Zimmer says, quoting Nils Petter Gleditsch of the Peace Research Institute in Oslo, Norway.<sup>390</sup> 'As the rise of civilisation

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387 Rachels, *Created from Animals*, pp. 4-5.

388 Michael Gazzaniga, in Gareth Cook, 'Neuroscience Challenges Old Ideas About Free Will: Interview with Michael Gazzaniga', <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=free-will-and-the-brain-michael-gazzaniga-interview>, 15/11/11 (accessed 22/11/11).

389 Gazzaniga, 'Neuroscience Challenges Old Ideas About Free Will'.

390 See Carl Zimmer, 'Human Nature's Pathologist', [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/29/science/human-natures-pathologist.html?\\_r=2&src=day&pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/29/science/human-natures-pathologist.html?_r=2&src=day&pagewanted=all), 28/11/11 (accessed 8/12/11).

gradually changed the ground rules of society', Zimmer says of Pinker's argument, 'violence began to ebb. The earliest states were brutal and despotic, but they did manage to take away opportunities for runaway vendettas.'<sup>391</sup> A quantum leap in this civilisational process was made possible by the invention of movable type: 'when people used their powers of language to generate new ideas, those ideas could spread. "If you give people literacy, bad ideas can be attacked and experiments tried, and lessons will accumulate," Dr. Pinker said. "That pulls you away from what human nature would consign you to on its own."<sup>392</sup> One easily imagines Mahfouz as a fan of Pinker's work, as much for the empirical method as for the humanistic impulses and conclusions.

In the end, however, Mahfouz was a humanist defender of science rather than a scientist himself, in many ways the Matthew Arnold of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Arab world. In Arnold's famous words, 'the more that the results of science are frankly accepted, the more that poetry and eloquence come to be received and studied as what in truth they really are,—the criticism of life by gifted men, alive and active with extraordinary power'.<sup>393</sup> Both Mahfouz and Arnold looked to culture to provide a way of relating, in Arnold's words, the 'results of modern science' to 'our need for conduct, our need for beauty'; as Roger Kimball puts it, 'This is the crux: that culture is in some deep sense inseparable from *conduct*—from that unscientific but ineluctable question, "How should I live my life?"'<sup>394</sup> Mahfouz, however, goes a step further, resembling no one in contemporary debates about the the relationship between science and morality more than Sam Harris. As Harris points out, the question 'How should I live my life?' may not itself be a scientific question, but we desperately need up-to-date scientific information and a healthy dose of the empirical spirit to help us answer it. When we open ourselves to this information, what we find is the urgency of the need to create a viable global civilisation. It will not be idle to rehearse Harris's arguments from Chapter 1, according to which 'we can look at the world, witnessing all of the diverse behaviors, rules, cultural artifacts, and morally salient emotions like empathy and disgust, and we can study how these things play out in human communities, both in our time and throughout history', examining these phenomena 'in as nonjudgmental a way as possible and seeking to understand them. We can understand them in evolutionary terms, and we can understand them in psychological and neurobiological terms, as they arise in the present. And we can call the resulting data and the entire

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391 Zimmer, 'Human Nature's Pathologist'.

392 Zimmer, 'Human Nature's Pathologist'.

393 See Roger Kimball, 'The Two Cultures Today', <http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/-The-Two-Cultures—today-4882>, February 1994 (accessed 9/10/11). The quote is taken from Arnold's 1880 Rede Lecture at Cambridge (<http://aleph0.clarku.edu/huxley/comm/19th/Arnold.html>), and is repeated in his 'Literature and Science' lecture in America in 1883 (<http://homes.chass.utoronto.ca/~ian/arnold.htm>).

394 Kimball, 'The Two Cultures Today'.

effort a "science of morality".<sup>395</sup> Although for many scientists this purely descriptive project would 'seem to exhaust all the legitimate points of contact between science and morality — that is, between science and judgments of good and evil and right and wrong' – Harris argues that there is another, even more important project to which science can find a way to contribute: 'it has long been obvious that we need to converge, as a global civilization, in our beliefs about how we should treat one another. It subsumes everything else we could care about — from arresting climate change, to stopping nuclear proliferation, to curing cancer, to saving the whales.'<sup>396</sup> Beyond mere neutral description of the world and accumulation of knowledge for its own sake, 'any effort that requires that we collectively get our priorities straight and marshal massive commitments of time and resources would fall within the scope of this project. To build a viable global civilisation we must begin to converge on the same economic, political, and environmental goals.'<sup>397</sup> What matters to both Harris and Mahfouz, as it mattered to Arnold, is not merely the essential task of describing the world, including ourselves and our moral impulses, as faithfully as we can, but the even greater task of maximising human flourishing in a world full of challenges old and new. For all his love of science and his robust defence of its civilisational value, Mahfouz chose literature rather than science as his calling. We will recount the adolescent background to Mahfouz's career choice, and the battles he waged on behalf of literature throughout his adult life, in the next section.

## 2.7 Warrior for Literature

*How did the man coming from the Third World find the peace of mind to write stories? Fortunately, art is generous and sympathetic. In the same way that it dwells with the happy ones it does not desert the wretched. It offers both alike the convenient means for expressing what swells up in their bosom. In this decisive moment in the history of civilisation it is inconceivable and unacceptable that the moans of Mankind should die out in the void. The human mind now assumes the task of eliminating all causes of destruction and annihilation. And just as scientists exert themselves to cleanse the environment of industrial pollution, intellectuals ought to exert themselves to*

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395 Sam Harris, 'The New Science of Morality', [http://edge.org/3rd\\_culture/morality10/morality.harris.html](http://edge.org/3rd_culture/morality10/morality.harris.html) (accessed 21/11/11).

396 Harris, 'The New Science of Morality'.

397 Harris, 'The New Science of Morality'.



Literature for Mahfouz is the realm of 'feeling', and is distinct from philosophy or journalism because it constructs feelings rather than (merely) logical arguments; civilisation without conscience - without a certain type of feeling - is impossible. It goes without saying that such feelings have a social dimension, and must be conjured through education and culture; they do not arrive from the sky without civilisational effort. Literature is the 'cunning art' which, if it does not make conscience and civilisation possible, at least sustains them over time, returning us to the wellspring of the Divine Essence through contact with the feelings of others, feelings in which we recognise ourselves and our common connection to the Divine Essence and Moral Law. Literature is, *par excellence*, the province of those who are 'sure' of themselves, 'seekers of the Highest Example'; this example ultimately communicates itself through feeling allied with reason, not reason alone. Journalism is 'a rational form of writing which tackles society and its problems from all angles, essentially through reason rather than conscience and lived experience or artistic innovation'; although both literature and journalism both 'depend on words', in journalism 'these words are used in the service of reason', while 'in literature they are an end in themselves to the extent that they bring feeling with them.'<sup>399</sup>

Mahfouz's journey to literature, and to the novel in particular, is worth briefly recounting here, and is well told by Mohammed Faṭḥī in 'How Was the Novelist in Naguib Mahfouz Born?' (2006). Faṭḥī asks us to imagine a young Naguib inspired by his mother's passion for ancient Egypt encountering Salama Moussa's celebration of ancient Egypt as the cradle of human civilisation and of the enduring link between ancient and modern Egypt. According to Moussa, the history of Ancient Egypt was 'not the history of Egypt alone but of the world's first civilisation, and when we study it, what we are studying are the first human moves towards the existence of a culture of farming, the birth of religions, governments, laws and morals.'<sup>400</sup> It was no surprise when a young Naguib chose to translate James Baikie's book *Ancient Egypt*, or that Moussa helped him publish it (curiously, Baikie also seems to preempt Mahfouz's eventual career choice when he says that 'it is good for one to choose a career for oneself such as writing, and to live happy in one's native

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398 NM, *Nobel Lecture*.

399 NM, 'Literature and Journalism' (Al 'Adab wa al Ṣaḥāfa'), *Al Aḥram*, 22/8/1996.

400 Muḥammad Faṭḥī, 'How Was the Novelist in Naguib Mahfouz Born?' ('Kayfa Wulidat al Riwa'ī fī Naḡīb Maḥfūz?'), *Al Qāhira*, 5/9/2006, p. 9.

land').<sup>401</sup> Fathī then goes on to talk about why the adolescent Mahfouz chose to study philosophy at university:

Naguib was moved to read the respected authors of the period - Taha Hussein, Al-Aqqad, Salama Moussa etc... and he found that the reason for their acclaim could be traced back to their thought rather than their narratives (even though they all wrote stories). Their writings stirred intellectual and philosophical questioning in Naguib, and led him to imagine that the study of Philosophy at university would enable him to respond to the questions which were then tormenting him. 'I imagined I would find out the secret of existence and the destiny of humanity', Mahfouz explained. 'Whenever someone advised me to enter the Faculty of Law or Medicine so that I could become a judge or doctor, I would say to myself, "Why would I care about becoming a judge or doctor? I'm after the secret of existence here.'<sup>402</sup>

Fathī also mentions how Mahfouz's generation was the first to be exposed to Western philosophy and literature at university, and about how Moussa published both his philosophical essays and short stories while he was still a university student, before moving on to address the break with philosophy and the embrace of literature, and specifically novel-writing, as a career in 1936.<sup>403</sup> Among other factors, Fathi cites Mahfouz's position as the youngest (and only) son in his family, which made him especially good at observing and listening to others and avoiding conflict with power, as well as his experience of the public controversy surrounding the publication of Taha Hussein's *Pre-Islamic Poetry*, which pushed him away from the adversarial world of public intellectualhood and into the oasis of literature (where, conceivably, he could hide his own ideas in his characters).<sup>404</sup> Once he had finally made the choice of literature over philosophy, Mahfouz said that he was overcome 'by a deep and unparalleled calm'.<sup>405</sup> But the real reason was that literature - the 'universal point of view' as Fathī calls it - which allowed him to 'play the whole piano' of human possibility, was the logical end of his philosophy studies, and not just because, as Fathī suggests, philosophers agree that the circle/sphere is the only shape without sides, or that he simply didn't like taking sides or challenging authority at all (he would, of course, go on to write hundreds of articles and opinion pieces as well as fiction), but because the moral and social dimension of philosophy eventually came to trump the metaphysical dimension.<sup>406</sup>

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401 See Fathī, 'How Was the Novelist in Naguib Mahfouz Born?', p. 9.

402 Fathī, 'How Was the Novelist in Naguib Mahfouz Born?', p. 9.

403 Fathī, 'How Was the Novelist in Naguib Mahfouz Born?', p. 9.

404 Fathī, 'How Was the Novelist in Naguib Mahfouz Born?' p. 9.

405 Fathī, 'How Was the Novelist in Naguib Mahfouz Born?' p. 9.

406 Fathī, 'How Was the Novelist in Naguib Mahfouz Born?' p. 9.

Indeed, in 1936, after 'a terrible spiritual struggle', Mahfouz the philosophy graduate decided on a life in literature (and ultimately prose fiction) rather than philosophy, attributing his choice to the lack of a novelistic tradition in Arabic and his sense of responsibility to the 'Umma' or Islamic nation to help build one, but also to the simple fact that 'the novel was the artistic form I found myself in'<sup>407</sup>. Fresh with enthusiasm for ancient Egypt and Egyptian nationalism, Mahfouz famously set out to write the entire history of ancient Egypt in novel form, but 'when my readings, especially in modern literature, began to broaden and deepen, my enthusiasm for historical novel-writing waned'.<sup>408</sup> This exposure to modern literature led to a realisation that 'the business of novel-writing was more urgent and profound, and that the novel can have an influential role in treating social issues and considering people's concerns and problems. From here I headed into the realist novel.'<sup>409</sup> Eventually, however, further reading in Western literature highlighted the limits of realism: 'Literature by its very nature is symbolic; even realism must be characterised by a degree of symbolism and uncertainty, provided that it does not reach the level of vagueness and ambiguity and mental fatigue for the reader.'<sup>410</sup> Indeed, 'black-and-white, straightforward literature in which the reader is given everything in a simple and straightforward way leaves the reader's imagination idle, and does not give him the opportunity for reflection and analysis.'<sup>411</sup>

Ironically, however, the highest form of literature for Mahfouz was not novelistic prose at all, but poetry ('in my view, poetry is the soul of literature'); he considered the novel a form of history, history as a branch of art, art as a unified whole which could only be studied as such, and poetry as the highest form of art.<sup>412</sup> Still, Mahfouz says, 'every art form has its distinguishing characteristics. I consider myself a reader, fan and connoisseur of poetry. I tried writing some myself, and if I'd had the Muse I would have continued with the experiment.'<sup>413</sup> The words 'poetry' and 'feeling' come from the same root in Arabic; the poet is the 'one who feels', and by extension, the one who transmits feelings to others. This is not to say, however, that the novel (or the short story or the play - Mahfouz says there was no particular reason why he ended up writing more novels and short stories than plays<sup>414</sup>) is without value as a vehicle for putting us into the shoes of others and thereby leading us into the deepest, most intimate parts of ourselves. Like Manzoni, however, Mahfouz's choice of prose was partially dictated by a sense of sociolinguistic

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407 NM, in Raġā' Al Naqqāš, *Naguib Mahfouz: Pages from His Memoirs and New Light on His Life and Work* (*'Naġīb Mahfūz: Ṣafahāt min Muḍakkirātihi wa 'Aḍwā' Ġadīda 'ala Ḥayātihi wa 'Adabihi'*), (Cairo: Mu'assisat al 'Ahrām, Markaz al 'Ahrām lil Tarġama wa al Našr, 1998), p. 53.

408 NM, in Naqqāš, *Naguib Mahfouz*, p. 54.

409 NM, in Naqqāš, *Naguib Mahfouz*, p. 54.

410 NM, in Naqqāš, *Naguib Mahfouz*, pp. 55-56.

411 NM, in Naqqāš, *Naguib Mahfouz*, pp. 55-56.

412 NM, in Naqqāš, *Naguib Mahfouz*, p. 58.

413 NM, in Naqqāš, *Naguib Mahfouz*, p. 58.

414 NM, 'Dialogues with Mohamed Salmawy: Why the Novel?' ('Limāda al Riwāya?'), *Al Ahrām*, 26/10/1995, p.

responsibility: Arab civilisation needed a unified language fit for dialogue with other civilisations, a base from which to build bridges to the modern world. This act of synthetic linguistic creation would not have been possible without (alongside long hours walking in Cairo's streets and sitting in Cairo's cafés) a long journey into the canonical past of Arabic literature. Mahfouz tells the story of his relationship with 'The Heritage' in a 1996 article of the same name: it was his contact with the Arab literary tradition which led him

to an initial level of understanding which allowed me to grasp the meaning of culture at a very early age. Arab Islamic literature was the first component in my cultural makeup. I read the Qur'an, the Sunna, and literary classics like the Book of Songs. I remember I had a book called 'The Best of the Literature of the Arabs', a collection of excerpts from earliest pre-Islamic times up to the modern age, including al-Manflūṭī and al-Barūdī. I was deeply influenced by all of this, and there is no doubt that it had a fundamental influence in helping me to find my literary voice. [...] I was a defender of *fuṣṣḥa*, and I wrote the most difficult thing of all - the realist novel - in it. How could a poor village boy be made to speak this classical language? Many of my readers did not know whether the characters in my novels were speaking in *fuṣṣḥa* or dialect. [My] *fuṣṣḥa* developed to the point that it became a language suitable for the present age, and suitable for the novel in particular. [...] My readings in the Arab canon were the main factor which helped me in this. Some people may imagine that it is enough for someone who chooses to write novels to study the development of this literary genre in literatures where the novel had developed to a more advanced stage than it had in Arabic literature, and it is true that while we have the *Tales of the Arabs* and the *Thousand and One Nights* and popular epics, all this combined does not match the richness of our poetry. Thus, in my adherence to the Arab canon, it was as if I was embarking on writing poetry rather than novels.<sup>415</sup>

Despite his modesty about his own poetic gifts, Mahfouz, we can conclude, saw himself as owing his primary literary debt to Arab poets. As he said in his Nobel Lecture, however, his inspiration then went global, or at least, as far as the West: 'it was my fate, ladies and gentlemen, to be born in the lap of these two [Pharaonic and Islamic] civilizations, and to absorb their milk, to feed on their literature and art. Then I drank the nectar of your rich and fascinating culture. From the inspiration of all this - as well as my own anxieties - words bedewed from me.'<sup>416</sup> Of all Western influences on

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415 NM, 'Dialogues with Mohamed Salmawy: 'The Heritage' ('Al Tūrāt'), *Al Ahrām*, 18/7/1996, p. 11.

416 NM, *Nobel Lecture*.

Mahfouz, none was more profound, and certainly none more significant for our purposes, than Proust. Mahfouz admitted that 'Marcel Proust's great masterpiece *In Search of Lost Time* had a profound effect on me', and although 'one needs a great deal of patience and endurance to get to the end of its 5000 pages', it was nevertheless worthwhile to do so at least once in one's life: 'the amazing thing about it is that the end of the book contains a call to reread from the beginning, and at the very end, you find at last the key to the story. But regrettably I didn't reread it because life is short.'<sup>417</sup>

Mahfouz himself viewed his *Arabian Nights and Days* (1982), a continuation of the 'Proustian' *Thousand and One Nights*, as his best piece of literary art.<sup>418</sup> Like Borges, Mahfouz was irresistibly attracted to the infinite possibilities of narrative, the very infiniteness of narrative itself; the furious Mahfouzian passion for narrative was a symptom of his primal, undying thirst for the source, the Divine Essence itself. As in Plato, however, the source contains within itself a message of social responsibility, an imperative to turn one's back on the light and return to the cave. There is no right answer to the question of how many times one should reread Proust, of how much nourishment in feeling one needs on any given day to be able to fulfil one's earthly responsibilities: although we all need regular contact with the source, to spend one's entire life rereading Proust or the *Thousand and One Nights* would be to miss the point of literature. While we recover ourselves in the most intimate part of other people via sustained contact with their art, Mahfouz might have wished to add, 'To what end? For battle.' These and related themes will be explored further in our discussion of *Arabian Nights and Days*.

The vertiginous Proustian or Borgesian aspect of literature, however, is part of the broader 'meaning of culture' which Mahfouz first sensed as a boy reading the Arab classics. An important part of this 'meaning of culture' is that patience and endurance have their rewards, both for the individual and for society; it is through sustained intimate contact with 'the heritage' that such values are passed down. While Mahfouz certainly took for granted that education in literature and art - in the compulsory, you-have-no-choice-about-this sense of the term 'education' - was part of any acceptable package of Human Rights, and that forcing children to learn to read and write, firstly, and then to learn about their civilisational 'heritage' was necessary and good, we have also seen that he abhorred government attempts to control the market for culture, and favoured an open debate between conservatives and reformers in all facets of social life. Mahfouz therefore accepted as inevitable that the virtues of patience and endurance required for Proust would always be in

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417 NM, 'Dialogues with Mohamed Salmawy: French Masters' (*Al 'Asātiḍa al Faransiyyūn*), *Al Aḥram*, 4/6/1998, p. 11.

418 See, as already cited, Mohamed Salmawy, 'Bad News About *Arabian Nights and Days*!' ('Layālī 'Alf Layla... wa al Ḥabar al Aswad!'), <http://www.almasry-alyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=314314&IssueID=2291>, 17/10/2011 (accessed 3/3/2012).

relatively short supply, and that there would always be two kinds of 'world literature' - a quantitative world literature based on global sales figures (of which the paradigm examples given by Mahfouz are Agatha Christie and Harry Potter), and a qualitative world literature based on 'depth of feeling' or universal literary value. On the one hand, critics have a social responsibility to engage with what is popular, simply because it is popular: 'widely distributed works of art have an influence on a mass audience which exceeds the influence of art produced for élites, and therefore the neglect of such works by critics means that there are works that have a strong influence on large numbers of people but are completely ignored by those responsible for debating their merits.'<sup>419</sup> While Mahfouz is clear that 'this must not be allowed to happen',<sup>420</sup> there is nevertheless a second sense in which World Literature is 'concerned with value'; the title World Literature 'applies to literature which, if it were translated into any of the world's languages and shown to any group of intellectuals and critics in any country, would lead them to conclude that it contained something worthy of literary regard.'<sup>421</sup> Popularity is irrelevant, for indeed 'publication is not the measure of value here; such literature may not be published and may not be known outside its country of origin because for one reason or another it has not been translated'.<sup>422</sup> Such anonymity 'does not preclude the possibility that it may be World Literature in the true sense of the term because it contains all the characteristics of world literature in its quality and sophistication.'<sup>423</sup> Dostoyevsky is one possible example of a 'world author'; even though he is 'a provincial author in the sense that he takes the reader with him through the streets of old Moscow with its characters and problems', his status as a world author 'is attained through the literary characteristics of the work itself, and does not depend on the place where the events in it unfold. "World literature" is essentially an artistic label rather than a geographical one.'<sup>424</sup>

It is true that Mahfouz had more pressing things to worry about in the sphere of culture in his native Egypt - alarming rates of illiteracy, for example - than the number of Egyptians reading Dostoyevsky or Thomas Mann; it is almost beside the point to ask whether a pragmatist like Mahfouz believed that a single canon of 'world literature' should eventually be taught in schools everywhere. What he did stress, however, was that there could be no global status, no intercivilisational podium to aspire to without a prior sense of local civilisational identity, an identity denied to Egyptians by colonialism and then by their own mistakes. Mahfouz relentlessly

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419 NM, 'Dialogues with Mohamed Salmawy: Art and Mass Appeal' ('Al Fann wa al Ğamāhīriyya'), *Al Ahram*, 17/7/2003, p. 12.

420 NM, 'Art and Mass Appeal'.

421 NM, 'Dialogues with Mohamed Salmawy: Universality in Literature' ('Al 'Ālamiyya fī al 'Adab'), *Al Ahram*, 21/12/1995, p. 11.

422 NM, 'Universality in Literature'.

423 NM, 'Universality in Literature'.

424 NM, 'Dialogues with Mohamed Salmawy: Definitions of Universality' (Muwāṣafāt al 'Ālamiyya'), *Al Ahram*, 28/12/1995, p. 11.

encouraged Egyptians to think about cultivating their own garden before they worried about whether the rest of the world was watching them and paying them enough respect:

People are constantly asking me, 'Has art reached a level in our country qualifying it for global recognition, and if not, when and how will it get there?', as if we had solved our local cultural problems, as if there remained not a single shortcoming worthy of reflection and debate, and as if all we have left to worry about or think about is global recognition and immortality. [...] Perhaps our unique position between three continents is what leads us to think in this way. [...] And perhaps our ambition to excel is worthy of sympathy in itself. But we should always remember that a solid building is built on sound foundations, that perfecting the inside must come before dreams of the outside, and that before we train for world championships in boxing, for example, we should save millions from schistosomiasis and hookworm and stomach worms, that before we can play a leading role in the world we must erase poverty, ignorance, tyranny and corruption, and that before we can have candidates for the Nobel Prize we must free 80% of our people from illiteracy... We must learn how to read, how to see, and how to hear.<sup>425</sup>

Mahfouz certainly felt that Arab literature deserved more recognition on the world stage, and had been denied it chiefly because of a lack of quality translation; the priority, however, was to get the house of Islam in order. For the time being, he argued in 1994, 'the future of Arab civilisation should be built on the twin pillars of Islam and dialogue with other civilisations'<sup>426</sup>. If the reform of the house of Islam could be achieved, Mahfouz was ever optimistic about the outcome of this dialogue, and about an eventual convergence of canons: while on the one hand genuine international recognition 'is not attainable without a worthy degree of depth, comprehensiveness and humanism combined with a loyal keeping to one's own authenticity and vision of self', this 'difficult equation' is 'solved every day with the emergence of new world literature, and in the end this process is facilitated by the oneness of human nature, our common origin and destiny, and our common hopes, dreams and sufferings.'<sup>427</sup> Mahfouz's life's work was to cultivate a local garden of feeling, never aiming at global recognition for global recognition's sake, but mindful always of the grand civilisational purpose of his labours. And why all this effort, all the long years of patience and endurance as a reader and writer, if not to inspire others to do likewise, to give others access to the

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425 NM, 'Art and World Politics' ('Al Fann wa al Siyāsa al 'Ālamiyya'), *Al Ahrām*, 30/4/1981, p. 7.

426 Mahfouz is thus quoted by the editors of *Al Ahrām* in a posthumous article for which they, and not Mahfouz, chose the title 'The Future of Arab Civilisation is One Based on Islam', *Al Ahrām*, 8/11/1994, p. 18.

427 NM, 'The Universality of Arab Literature' ('Ālamiyyat al Adab al 'Ārabī'), *Al Ahrām*, 28/10/1993.

'meaning of culture', the source, the Divine Essence, and to encourage them to make their own original addition to the 'heritage', to the story of civilisation itself, much as he himself had done in *Arabian Nights and Days* by continuing the story of the *Thousand and One Nights*.

## 2.8 Warrior for Love

*Love is like death. You hear about it all the time, but you only know it when it's present.*<sup>428</sup>

Naguib Mahfouz

We will have occasion to explore Mahfouz on love in detail in the next section, where I will argue that the relationship between Akhenaten and Nefertiti depicted in *Akhenaten: Dweller in Truth* is the mature Mahfouz's paradigm of the monogamous, self-sufficing bond of love on which civilisation ultimately rests, and which is a microcosm of civilisation and the Divine Essence itself. Mahfouz's journey to this mature view, however, is worth recounting from its innocent pre-pubescent beginnings through a testosterone-fuelled youth and on into a sea of practical mid-life obstacles.

Nowhere does Islam permeate the Mahfouzian worldview more than here. Before his first love story at the age of thirteen, the burden of conscience imposed by Islam in all matters sexual was already apparent: up to that point, 'my relations with girls did not go beyond tickling which sometimes went too far. These innocent excesses clashed with my religious sentiment, which was then at its most intense, to the point that I would ask for forgiveness from God on a daily basis. I lived in constant agony from the pangs of conscience.'<sup>429</sup> Mahfouz would eventually outgrow the idea that the Qur'an was a literal code of sexual ethics, just as he would outgrow the idea that the Qur'an was a literal guide to anything; but the idea never left him that sexual energy was something that the Moral Law demanded we control. This did not mean that Mahfouz had any less difficulty than the next man when it came to controlling it; indeed, it seems impossible to imagine the author of the following passage from the *Cairo Trilogy* as anyone other than one who had experienced this degree of sexual frustration first-hand:

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428 NM, in Rasheed El Enany (ed. and intr.), *Naguib Mahfouz: Harvest of the Word (Nağīb Maḥfūz: Haṣād al Qawl)*, (Cairo: Al Mağlis al Hay'a al 'Āla Lil Ṭaqāfa, 1997), p. 102.

429 NM, in Naqqāš, p. 105.



When Yasmine left the house, he naturally knew where he was going, because he went there night after night. [...] He had the habit of raising his eyes – but not his head – on the lookout for action behind the windows, in search of passing forms. [...] He never got to the end of a street without feeling a kind of vertigo from having overused his eyes, so incurable was his passion for the women who crossed his path. From the front, he undressed them with his gaze, from behind he followed their mobile curves with unrelenting enthusiasm. He remained in a hypercharged state, like a bull foaming at the mouth, to the point where he lost control of himself and was no longer able to keep his desperation from showing. [...] His carnal energy reigned so violently over his leisure that it left him without a single instant of repose. The flames of desire constantly kindled his senses and fired the furnaces of his being, like a demon taking control of him and leading him by the nose, but a demon he did not want to be rid of and from whom, on the contrary, he begged ever more.<sup>430</sup>

Mahfouz himself admitted that, for long periods of his youth, 'the way I looked at women was purely sexual, with no role for emotions or feelings, even if it was sometimes mixed with a vague respect'; this only began to change when, already well into adulthood, he began 'to think about marriage and stability'.<sup>431</sup> That he was able to conceive of a monogamous future at all, however, was at least partly to do with his first real experience of all-consuming love. After the family moved from al-Gamaliyya to al-Abbasiya, a 13 year-old Mahfouz fell for a 20 year-old girl from a prominent local family, a girl somehow different from all the others (she wore Western clothes and seemed Westernised in her mannerisms); Mahfouz took advantage of regular street soccer games to steal glances up to her balcony. This continued for an entire year, until the girl was married off and forced to leave the neighbourhood. Mahfouz was to see her again, however, on the street at Saad Zaghloul's funeral. This chance encounter, with all the symbolism it must have had for a young, grieving nationalist like Mahfouz, left him dreaming like a madman for years.<sup>432</sup>

Eventually, however, the madness faded; despite the immense power of certain faces on our imagination, when we think and write about such superficial obsession, Mahfouz says, sooner or later we come to see it in its true dimensions, and the process liberates us to begin anew, and to continue the quest for a true human bond. Mahfouz had first known this bond with his mother:

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430 NM, *Cairo Trilogy*, pp. 114-115.

431 NM, in Naqqāš, *Nqguib Mahfouz*, p. 106.

432 NM, in 'Maḥfūz fi Maḡālisihī', *Akhbar al Adab*, 3/9/2006, pp. 10-11.

My mother had a major role in my life. In our day, the mother ran the house and was not employed outside it, and her bond with her children was strong. The husband went out to work, and so was more often than not at the margins of his children's existence, especially in the early years, and only really made an appearance in times of crisis. The mother was everything; I received love from my mother which remains with me beyond my ninetieth birthday. But my mother's role was not just emotional; it was also educational. She loved visiting ancient tombs and ruins; I visited the Egyptian Museum with her dozens of times, and likewise the Pyramids and Sphinx, and I would stand before them all in a state of amazement. In this spirit we also visited all the Coptic sites together, and I have a very clear memory of the Coptic Church of St. George, which we visited many times. My mother had a wandering spirit and a love of knowledge. I didn't know where this love came from; she knew of the renown of these places and chose them carefully, taking me with her from the time I was four or five years old. [...] When I came to the age of reason, I found that my brothers and sisters had all grown up, married and left home. There was no one left at home besides my mother and me, especially after my father died when I was ten. I was over fifty when my mother died, married with children, but I still felt truly orphaned.<sup>433</sup>

Mahfouz's decision eventually to get married was not a straightforward one; having chosen to embark on a literary career in his twenties. Mahfouz was not sure whether his prior commitment to his craft required, in theory or in practice, a monastic refraining from marriage. In the end, however, the need - both emotional and practical - became apparent to both mother and son: 'when my mother's age advanced to the point that her health began to fail and she became incapable of bearing the large burdens I had expected of her, I began to feel lonely, and she began to realise that I needed to get married.'<sup>434</sup> Thus began a long motherly campaign of bride-searching. Mahfouz rejected one candidate after another on the grounds that he was in no way willing to compromise his writing for the petty bourgeois keeping up of appearances that they would be expecting of him. Indeed, as he told an interviewer decades later, 'I would not be disclosing a secret if I said that I never thought I would get married. I figured that my love for literature, to which I had decided to devote all my time and attention, would preclude it.'<sup>435</sup> Eventually, however, Mahfouz became convinced that he

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433 NM, 'Dialogues with Mohamed Salmawy: Mother' ('Al 'Umm'), 18/9/2003, p. 12.

434 NM, in Naqqāš, p. 108.

435 NM, in Naqqāš, p. 107.

could have his cake and eat it; although his marriage to Atiyatallah 'was a marriage of convenience, in the sense that I chose a wife suitable for my circumstances', and despite the fact that 'there had been no history of love between us prior to our wedding', Mahfouz decided that he was 'in need of a wife who could provide me with a relaxed atmosphere which would help me with my writing and would not disrupt my life', as well as someone 'who understood that I was not a social person, that I didn't like paying visits to people and didn't like them paying visits to me, that I would be devoting my entire life to literature. I found this understanding and these characteristics in Atiyatallah.'<sup>436</sup>

It is interesting that Mahfouz preferred to keep his family life largely separate from his literary life and intellectual friendships. He never asked either Atiyatallah or his daughters Fatima and Umm Kulthoum for help with his writing ('their views tended to be impressionistic rather than specific, which was no good to me on a literary level'<sup>437</sup>); they would read his books along with everyone else when they were published, and watch the film adaptations on TV. Mahfouz expressed a kind of nostalgic disillusionment that his daughters seemed more interested in Western culture than in the Arab heritage he had first absorbed, but by all accounts, he seems to have encouraged them to follow their interests rather than shoving that heritage down their throats, and to have provided the three women in his family with the kind of emotional, educational and practical support that a hardworking husband and father in a culture where a certain degree of male aloofness is the norm could reasonably have been expected to provide.<sup>438</sup>

If Mahfouz never achieved with Atiyatallah or his daughters the degree of intellectual or educational bond he achieved with his mother or literary friends (from Salama Moussa and Tawfiq al-Hakim early in his life through to Mohamed Salmawy and Gamal al-Gheitany at the end), there is nevertheless absolutely no doubt that the gratitude-infused 'feeling' that Mahfouz describes when recounting his years of marriage to Atiyatallah deserves the name of 'love': 'now, after all these years, I cannot deny the truth that my wife Atiyatallah put up with a lot from me, and helped me to keep up the strict discipline which I imposed on my life,' Mahfouz said towards the end of his days.<sup>439</sup> 'She provided me with an atmosphere which allowed me to devote myself full-time to my writing, and she tried with all her might to keep anything which might have disrupted me or

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436 NM, in Naqqāš, p. 106

437 NM, in Naqqāš, *Naguib Mahfouz*, p. 107.

438 See, for example, 'Mahfūz fi Mağālisihī', p. 11. Mahfouz's contracted biographer, Raymond Stock, is set to provide the first intimate biography of Mahfouz in any language, with extensive cooperation and support from both Mahfouz's daughters. While Stock has been reluctant to provide details ahead of the book's forthcoming publication, he did tell an interviewer in 2011 that 'Naguib Bey was indeed perhaps the kindest, most affable, most benign, most tolerant – and also one of the most unwaveringly productive – human beings one could ever hope to meet, a unique blend of *basata* (openness) and *indibat* (discipline).' (See 'Q and A with Naguib Mahfouz Biographer Raymond Stock', <http://arablit.wordpress.com/2011/12/14/qa-with-mahfouz-biographer-raymond-stock-on-the-authors-work-archives/>, 14/12/11). Such is the picture that Mohamed Salmawy, who was kind enough to give me an hour of his time in Cairo in 2011, also painted for me in powerful and personal colours.

439 NM, in Naqqāš, *Naguib Mahfouz*, p. 109.

interrupted my thoughts at bay.<sup>440</sup> For this sacrifice, Mahfouz was convinced that 'if anyone gets priority treatment in where they end up, my wife is at the front of that queue. May God reward her with all that is good.'<sup>441</sup> It may seem a bit glib for a writer who has taken advantage of a wife's good nature for decades to rely on God to repay his debts for him, but I think to react this way would be to miss one of the central points of the Mahfouzian oeuvre: pragmatism is not a sin, even, and perhaps especially, in love. It may be true that Mahfouz lived in a society where the savage exploitation of women by sons, husbands and fathers was, and continues to be, the norm, but this does not preclude the possibility that a married couple can find an equilibrium where one person's job is primarily to allow the other to do theirs, or where one plays a more hands-on role in the raising of the children. Mahfouz was adamant that this need have nothing to do with gender, and that men and women have exactly the same rights and responsibilities; although Mahfouz believed that 'the beauty and dignity of a woman is not complete without a certain degree of modesty'<sup>442</sup> prescribed by religious tradition, his depictions of male 'beauty and dignity', the paradigm example of which is his depiction of Akhenaten in *Dweller in Truth*, are no less conservative. 'The most important thing for modern woman is that she obtain an education and the right to work as she sees fit, and that along with her modernity she conserve her commitment to the Moral Law,' Mahfouz writes of women's rights and responsibilities, before arriving at a gender-neutral conclusion: 'There is no doubt that we are now in a stage where we are returning to [...] values that have been absent from our lives,' Mahfouz writes in a fit of optimism in 1985, and that 'we are now in a stage where we are rejecting corruption and carrying out a revolution against it by means of a return to virtue, and this promises good things.'<sup>443</sup> This may sound chauvinistic (as well as overly optimistic concerning the future of Mubarak's Egypt), but the truth is that Mahfouz expected no less 'modesty' from men than he did from women; the culture of polygamy defended in the Qur'an may have made economic and social sense in the time of the prophet, but it can no longer be said to do so (Mahfouz addresses this theme time and time again in his oeuvre, most famously in the *Cairo Trilogy* itself); moreover, polygamy as a justification for male sexual licence has always been a non-starter in Islamic civilisation, for even though customs may change as the forces of conservatism and reform wage their eternal battle, what matters is that the Divine Essence be transmitted through meaningful bonds between people, whether between a mother and child, between a husband and wife, or indeed, between anyone. This Essence, as Mahfouz's own successful marriage shows, is transmitted over time through reciprocal acts of generosity and associated feelings of gratitude.

We will see in the next section, through the example of Akhenaten and Nefertiti, how

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440 NM, in Naqqāš, *Naguib Mahfouz*, p. 109.

441 NM, in Naqqāš, *Naguib Mahfouz*, p. 109.

442 NM, in S. Qāsim Ġawda, 'The Hijab Phenomenon' ('Zāhirat al Hiġāb'), *Āḥir Sā'a*, 26/6/1985.

443 NM, 'The Hijab Phenomenon'.

Mahfouz argued for an enduring monogamous bond as the microcosm of civilisation. As Mahfouz's own rigid commitment to his art shows, however, it is possible to maintain other priorities within the confines of a marriage, in the Obamaesque manner of his Akhenaten: Akhenaten's love for Nefertiti was complete, but he still found the time to try to change the way the Empire was run. Nefertiti, meanwhile, came to adopt the same social goals as her husband, not out of some servile obedience to Akhenaten's will, but because she herself sensed the transcendent importance of those goals.

This does not mean that homosexuality, divorce, or sex before marriage, for example, have no place in Mahfouzian civilisation; indeed, there are very good modern arguments why all these make sense (moreover, Mahfouz's portrayal of Akhenaten as overtly androgynous suggests that he was not interested in reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes<sup>444</sup>). But the eternal goal is to ensure the transmission of the Divine Essence; sexual desire wedded to this purpose becomes something far stronger than mere wandering lust. Any society should debate the sexual arrangements that best suit its circumstances in a climate of freedom, in which individuals are nevertheless free to make the sexual arrangements they see fit; but the point of this freedom is that it allows us to know the Divine Essence through meaningful reciprocal bonds with other people, in which both sacrifice and gratitude will eventually play a role. In this sense, Mahfouz's first love was not a mature love because it did not entail such feelings, and was based solely on the fancies of imagination.

To put all this into contemporary perspective and to remind us of Mahfouz's close affinity with the Western warriors presented in Chapter One (and here, most notably, with Andrew Sullivan), it will be useful to consider a 2011 essay on gay marriage, 'Working Arrangement', by Justin E.H. Smith. First and foremost, Smith reminds us that Mahfouz's views on the need for love within marriage are, like the rest of Mahfouz's post-tribal, post-imperial, internationalist thought, radically modern, for as Smith points out, 'until the past two hundred years or so, there simply was no presumption that marriage should be motivated or sustained by love'.<sup>445</sup> Rather, marriage was viewed as a primarily demographic project (much as it remains in contemporary, homophobic Russia), and as such 'the gender of the units of exchange was a nonnegligible factor in the determination of who should be exchanged with whom. A family simply could not afford to give its

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444 Critics will be quick to point out, and have been with me, that Akhenaten is still clearly male, and that androgynous gods and demigods purportedly combining the best of both genders are nevertheless almost universally depicted as male. Whatever one's position in this wider archeological and gender-political debate, however, Mahfouz's humble goal, as we will see in the next section, is to contrast Akhenaten's universal 'moral beauty' with the swarthy but blindly imperialistic masculine power of the likes of Horemheb and to come down firmly on Akhenaten's side, while at the same time championing Nefertiti's universal 'moral beauty' over other more stereotypically seductive female forms (Tadoukhepa, Mout Nedjemet etc.).

445 Justin E.H. Smith, 'Working Arrangement', <http://www.laphamsquarterly.org/essays/working-arrangement.php?page=all>, 21/12/11 (accessed 24/12/11).

son to a fruitless union with another family's son.<sup>446</sup> Smith argues, however, that in modern liberal democracies this tribal demographic imperative is replaced by the view of marriage as a form of freely chosen contract employment; indeed, 'when marriage comes to be seen as a line of work, by contrast, and when individuals are seen as free to choose their own vocation, then it correspondingly transforms into a gender-neutral institution', one in which 'the genders of its members cease to matter.'<sup>447</sup> At one point, Smith even goes so far as to speak of 'the economic contract that is heterosexual marriage', and sees no reason why such contracts should not be extended to homosexuals as well.<sup>448</sup> Mahfouz, in stark contrast, defends the possibility that modern, 'civilised' marriage is about more than economics. Indeed, to insist on viewing married couples as 'employees' is to miss the entire point of marriage as a socially meaningful: it is precisely because, out of sheer human generosity and goodwill, one commits to fulfilling certain responsibilities to another person, whether this turns out to be in one's future economic interests or not, that marriage can have any meaning at all in a post-tribal age. Like a young Mahfouz, Smith seems unable to conceive of any 'feelings' or 'emotions' in a marriage beyond the merely sexual; all else is wage enslavement and drudgery. 'In a world in which marriage is a sort of work, and in which work is conceived as something that we variously succeed or fail at depending on the strength of our characters and the rectitude of our choices—in such a world it is no wonder we find so many people who believe they have, themselves, failed to attain happiness.'<sup>449</sup> To many unhappily married 'workers', Smith argues, homosexuality provided a model for an alternative mode of existence: 'it was precisely same-sex desire's position outside of the marital work-unit—in a word, gay *freedom*—that made the label "gay" seem so fitting in the first place.'<sup>450</sup> But as Andrew Sullivan showed us in the first chapter, homosexuals may crave the intimacy of marriage as much as heterosexuals do (or even moreso, because it has always been denied to them), an intimacy which Smith all but dismisses as peripheral to the real economic nature of marriage. There is no doubt that sustaining a marriage is 'hard work', and economic costs are a part of this equation; but the real 'hard work' in a marriage is the moral work of keeping oneself strong and healthy not just for oneself but also on behalf of someone else. One may not receive economic benefits for this 'work' but, to paraphrase Plato on justice, it is its own reward. Nowhere is it written in Mahfouz that one must devote 100% of one's labours to a single other, but a life of alternate giving and receiving, in accordance with the principle 'from each according to ability, to each according to need' which Mahfouz so enthusiastically endorsed, is both the only path to civilisation and the only path to

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446 Smith, 'Working Arrangement'.  
447 Smith, 'Working Arrangement'.  
448 Smith, 'Working Arrangement'.  
449 Smith, 'Working Arrangement'.  
450 Smith, 'Working Arrangement'.

individual happiness and salvation. It is right that Mahfouz insisted that his wife respect his prior commitment to his literary labours, but Atiyatallah was repaid not only by the myriad small generousities and sacrifices which she herself attributed to her husband<sup>451</sup>, but also by the love and heart-felt gratitude he came to bear her over the years. If one is blind to the unique possibilities for intimacy that this type of long-term union provides, then frankly, one is blind to idea of love itself.

Mahfouz eventually gets to the moral root of Yasine's 'incurable disease' in the *Trilogy* when he depicts him trying to rape Umm Hanafi. The problem with sexual desire unbridled by heartfelt concern for others is not only that it leads you to impinge on their rights; it is that it cuts you off from the Divine Essence itself. In Kantian terminology, the other becomes a means, not an end in herself, a mere function of one's own ego. Mahfouz's point about love seems to be that it – and, indeed, civilisation, of which intimate love is a microcosm – only begins where this instrumentalisation of the other ends; it is right that the other respond to our desires as best she can given her physical limitations and other social responsibilities, but we must be ready to do the same with her; when we do, we discover something beyond ourselves. The libido is, or has the potential to be, a base from which to explore the other and reconnect with this Divine Essence, but it can also trap us inside ourselves. The Abrahamic religions all depict Hell as the place of utmost solitude, a place where love is not possible, and where the libido finds no satisfaction. Dante's Lucifer, frozen in the ice at the bottom of Hell, is the personification of this nightmarish state. Part of the Abrahamic religions' condemnation of homosexuality, as well as sex outside marriage, derived from the idea that it was selfish and anti-social, and oriented towards one's private pleasure alone. The Mahfouzian attitude to sex undoubtedly owes much to this traditional Abrahamic picture but also reflects his Enlightenment pragmatism and respect for open debate between conservatives and reformers: in principle, anything goes sexually, as long as conscience and the feelings of others – *all* the others implicated in a sexual act (children, other sexual partners, friends etc.) – are as much a part of the equation as one's own desires. Mahfouz had very little to say about homosexuality – he spent his entire life in a society in which it was not openly discussed – but would doubtless have been forced to accept the modern evidence that homosexuality is innate and is not the socially corrosive and corrupting force it has traditionally been thought to be. It goes without saying, however, that the same moral constraints that apply to heterosexual sex also apply to homosexual sex: the other's feelings and desires are of equal importance to one's own. Self-serving promiscuity and 'immodesty' are as dangerous and corrupting of homosexuals as they are of heterosexuals and

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451 As the world eagerly awaits the publication of Stock's biography for more detailed evidence of Mahfouz's qualities as a husband, we can nevertheless cite an interview with Atiyatallah herself featured in a documentary on Mahfouz by the American University in Cairo in honour of what would have been Mahfouz's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday: 'We love each other. Actually, he is an ideal husband and father; he respects our opinions and fulfils our needs' (see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bHpFIk2KN3I>, 24/10/11).

society at large. Despite spending his whole life in a society where homosexuality was strictly taboo, Mahfouz would have understood the most persuasive contemporary calls for gay marriage in the West and around the world more readily than Smith ever could; whereas Smith speaks of 'the utility of the domestication of gayness, at a historical moment when marriage, if reserved for the straight alone, seems on its way to extinction', and 'at a moment when the consumerist *status quo* is growing rapidly more sophisticated in its strategies for co-opting any social force—whether political, musical, artistic, sexual—that had hitherto lain outside it'<sup>452</sup>, Mahfouz affirms, along with Andrew Sullivan, that marriage - the public swearing of long-term responsibilities to another person - is indeed a human right; it is the very emblem of the social responsibility and emotional reciprocity through which we all access the Divine Essence, and is nothing short of a microcosm of civilisation itself. How we choose to distribute this responsibility and reciprocity - whether to invest most of our effort in marriage and children or spread it over a wider social cause - is up to us, and will depend at least partly on the circumstances in which we find ourselves. In practice, we are limited in the number of people we can love. But love we must.

## 2.9 Mahfouz's Warriors

### 2.9.1 The Warrior Prototype: Akhenaten

*'He has left this lower world to reign in the heart of eternity, and I will join him one day. He will know that I am innocent and will grant his forgiveness, seating me to his right on the throne of Truth.'*

*The sweet voice died out, exhausted by the effort of speaking, and my host remained silent, sad but majestic in defiance of her circumstances. I said goodbye with an infinite respect and went away in spite of a physical desire to stay on, my heart overflowing with painful thoughts tinged with the irresistible fragrance of Beauty.*

*When I returned to Saïs, my father welcomed me keenly and bombarded me with questions about my odyssey. Our conversation went on for days and days, each question leading to another. I told him everything, except two facts which I kept to myself: my growing love of the sacred songs and my profound admiration for the beautiful recluse.<sup>453</sup>*

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452 Smith, 'Working Arrangement'.

453 NM, *Akhenaten: Dweller in Truth (Al 'Ā'īš fī ql Ḥaqīqa)*, (Cairo: Dār al Šurūq, 2009 (1985)), p. 157.



Mahfouz made clear in his Nobel Lecture that Akhenaten was, for him, the father of human civilisation, the father of us all:

As for Pharaonic civilization I will not talk of the conquests and the building of empires. This has become a worn out pride the mention of which modern conscience, thank God, feels uneasy about. Nor will I talk about how it was guided for the first time to the existence of God and its ushering in the dawn of human conscience. This is a long history and there is not one of you who is not acquainted with the prophetic Akhenaton.<sup>454</sup>

Akhenaten, however, was himself the culmination of centuries of civilisational effort; Mahfouz's 1983 novel *Before the Throne*, a prelude to *Akhenaten: Dweller in Truth* (1985), traces this history, and then goes beyond it to evaluate the legacies of Egypt's subsequent leaders right down to Sadat. To understand the Akhenaten of *Dweller in Truth* (the Arabic title makes no mention of Akhenaten), it will be necessary to examine Mahfouz's prior characterisation and evaluation of Akhenaten in *Before the Throne*. This terrain has already been expertly traversed by David Pinault in 'Pharaoh Akhenaten as Messenger of God' (1995); we will follow Pinault through *Before the Throne* before embarking on our own reading of *Akhenaten: Dweller in Truth*.

Thus did Akhenaten appear before the throne for judgement:

There entered a man in whose face were blended both feminine and masculine qualities. With him there entered a beautiful woman...

Thoth, scribe of the gods, read aloud:

'The two of them inherited the realm and its power... He brought about a religious revolution and called people to the worship of a new god, a single god.

'He abolished the old religion and its gods, proclaiming love, peace, and equality among all humankind. From within, the realm became exposed to disintegration, weakness and corruption. Likewise Egypt's foreign empire became exposed to loss and destruction.

'The realm was brought to the verge of civil war. The king fell; and a counter-

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454 NM, *Nobel Lecture*.

revolution did away with his revolution. Chroniclers and kings effaced his era from history and considered it an era of evil that had torn apart Egypt's civilisation and all but annihilated it.<sup>455</sup>

Pinault offers some important historical background to this description; in describing Akhenaten as 'a pacifist and monotheist who proclaimed 'love, peace, and equality', Mahfouz reflects the idealising appraisals of Akhenaten offered by an earlier generation of scholars such as Breasted (1905) and Weigall (1923)', while seemingly ignoring 'more recent criticisms by revisionists like Redford (1984), who emphasises the violence, the intolerant cruelty, and the totalitarian tendencies of the Amarna Age, in which Akhenaten had proclaimed himself sole mediator between the Egyptians and the divine sun-disk'.<sup>456</sup> The depiction of Akhenaten as a man in whose face were blended both 'feminine and masculine qualities' also illustrates 'Mahfouz's awareness of the enigmatically androgynous quality of the relief-carvings and statuary surviving from the Amarna Age that depict the heretic-king', and of the two broad scholarly camps on this androgyny: on the one hand a mere 'depiction of a pituitary gland malfunction, as the result of a "congenital ailment", in Bedford's terms, "which made him hideous to behold", with an "effeminate appearance"; or on the other a deliberate 'iconographic program' in which Akhenaten 'was shown as both male and female and as part of what Aldred called 'a deliberate attempt to create a hermaphrodite - the mother and father of mankind'.<sup>457</sup> Whatever Mahfouz's take on the historical evidence, however, it is clear from the language he puts in Akhenaten's mouth that he wants to draw an implicit link between Akhenaten's Aten-cult and his own embrace of Islam: 'Since childhood I had been diligent in study, filling my soul with knowledge and divine wisdom. Then there descended upon my heart inspiration from the heavens, together with the light of the one god and the call to worship him. I consecrated my life to that; and when I came to the throne I consecrated my realm to the same goal.'<sup>458</sup> As a result of opposition from avaricious clergymen who 'thirsted for rank and for the enslavement of both Egypt's peasants and the subject-peoples of the Empire's realms', there began 'a savage struggle between my message of fight, on the one side, and on the other side the darkness of ignorance and of old traditions'.<sup>459</sup> Nevertheless, Akhenaten's 'spiritual *jihad*' was 'never touched by weakness. I did not consent to the use of violence or coercion.'<sup>460</sup> Nefertiti, likewise, uses the same vocabulary: 'My lord, what he says is true. We waged the *jihad* of heroes, until the forces of evil

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455 NM, *Before the Throne (Amāma al 'Arš)*, (Cairo: Maktaba Misr, 1983), in David Pinault, 'Pharaoh Akhenaten as Messenger of God: The Use of Islamic Theological Vocabulary in some Recent Novels by Naguib Mahfouz', *Edebiyat: The Journal of Middle Eastern Literatures*, 6.1 (1995), p. 24.

456 Pinault, 'Pharaoh Akhenaten as Messenger of God', p. 24.

457 Pinault, 'Pharaoh Akhenaten as Messenger of God', pp. 24-25.

458 See Pinault, 'Pharaoh Akhenaten as Messenger of God', p. 25.

459 See Pinault, 'Pharaoh Akhenaten as Messenger of God', p. 25.

460 See Pinault, 'Pharaoh Akhenaten as Messenger of God', p. 25.

destroyed us.<sup>461</sup> As Pinault concludes, 'the wording of Akhenaten's speech [as well as Nefertiti's] (*ḡihād, da'wa, waḥī al samā', nūr al 'ilāh al wāḥid*) is drawn from the religious vocabulary of Islam'.<sup>462</sup> Extrapolating, for novelistic effect, from 'the monotheistic tendencies perceptible in Aten-worship', Mahfouz describes Akhenaten 'as if the pharaoh were a *hanif*, a Muslim *avant la lettre* who, like the Quranic Abraham, lived before the time of Muhammad but nevertheless fought polytheistic idolatry and preached to his people the worship of the one god.'<sup>463</sup>

Pinault points out that Mahfouz was 'not alone among contemporary Egyptian authors in describing Akhenaten in terms of Islamic monotheism'. In particular, he cites the work of Antun Zakarayya and his use of the terms *tawḥiid* ('making one', the Arabic word for Islamic theology or 'the art of making the world, or God, into one', or as Pinault puts it, 'the assertion of God's oneness') and *širk* ('associationism', or 'the sin of ascribing divine partners to God') in relation to the Aten-cult.<sup>464</sup> In the end, however, Pinault argues, 'Naguib Mahfouz's portrait of Akhenaten's life in *Before the Throne*, for all that he associates the pharaoh with Islamic prophethood and the call to *tawḥiid*, is not entirely uncritical. Once the monotheist has finished describing his mission and his life to those assembled in the Hall of Justice, his words receive a sharp reply.'<sup>465</sup> Indeed, the judgments of Imhotep, Tuthmosis and Menes - 'all of whom, in this novel, are rewarded for their earthly careers with thrones among the Immortals' – paint us an Akhenaten who was 'a failed leader, an inflexible dreamer unskilled in balancing the ideals of universal love with the necessary use of brute force in achieving these ideals'.<sup>466</sup> While on the one hand 'Mahfouz respects this idealism, as he demonstrates by having Akhenaten and queen Nefertiti awarded seats with the other Immortals once their testimony is concluded', on the other, 'our author has also informed us, partly through his biographical sketches of Cheops, Djoser, and Menes, what he considers to be the best attributes to be hoped for in a political leader': namely, on Pinault's account, strength wedded to pragmatism.<sup>467</sup> 'For all Akhenaten's good intentions, Mahfouz implies, the visionary, in his preoccupation with controversial religious reforms, had allowed Egypt to fall into chaos, its borders threatened, its

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461 See Pinault, 'Pharaoh Akhenaten as Messenger of God', p. 25.

462 Pinault, 'Pharaoh Akhenaten as Messenger of God', p. 25.

463 Pinault, 'Pharaoh Akhenaten as Messenger of God', p. 25.

464 See Pinault, 'Pharaoh Akhenaten as Messenger of God', pp. 25-26. Pinault also cites as examples of contemporary Egyptian interest in the figure of Akhenaten the 1981 play *Akhanatum* by Ahmad Suwaylim which 'implicitly compares the pharaoh's mission to the Egyptians with Muhammad's preaching to the *Jahiliyya* Arabs of Mecca ("I shall tell you an old tale, set on the banks of the Nile... a tale of *tawḥiid*, of the assertion of God's oneness, which took place before any prophets had made their way here.") and Egyptian government plans for a 'Museum of Monotheism', 'to be built as a joint German-Egyptian venture and to be located near Minya, not far from Amarna, where the capital of the Aten-cult had once been situated. According to this announcement, this project would "result in a pyramid-shaped building exhibiting 1500 artifacts related to the development of monotheistic thought" and would give special attention to Akhenaten.'

465 Pinault, 'Pharaoh Akhenaten as Messenger of God', p. 27.

466 Pinault, 'Pharaoh Akhenaten as Messenger of God', p. 27.

467 Pinault, 'Pharaoh Akhenaten as Messenger of God', pp. 27-28.

administration weakened by corrupt opportunists, its people hungry and on the verge of civil war.<sup>468</sup>

Pinault contrasts Akhenaten's idealism and passivity with Horemheb's pragmatism and willingness to use force: 'disaster was only averted when power was taken by Horemheb, a military general who had formerly been counted among Akhenaten's followers. Once installed as pharaoh, Horemheb abolished Atenist monotheism and restored the worship of Amun and the Egyptian pantheon.'<sup>469</sup> Horemheb claims that in 'liquidating definitively the rule of Akhenaten', he was 'putting the public good above my personal feelings'; although he had been a trusted member of Akhenaten's court and had loved him 'more than any man I had ever known', he was unable to stand idle as Akhenaten 'refused to take my advice concerning the necessity of punishing the corrupt within the country and dispatching military expeditions to tame the rebels in the far reaches of the Empire'.<sup>470</sup> In the end, for all his personal attachment to Akhenaten, Horemheb 'loved Egypt more'. Pinault concludes that the comparison between Akhenaten and Horemheb in *Before the Throne* is unflattering to Akhenaten and throws into relief Mahfouz's view that 'love and religious vision are not sufficient qualities in a leader; in a world prone to corruption and violence, a ruler must be willing to use force (as were Djoser and Menes) to ensure order. *Tawḥīd* alone will not do as a political program.'<sup>471</sup> Pinault then argues that the same contrasting portraits of the two leaders are reproduced two years later by Mahfouz in *Dweller in Truth*; as in *Before the Throne*, Akhenaten is 'portrayed as a visionary preacher whose speeches are laced with Koranic vocabulary', and as an 'inflexible idealist, given to dogmatic assertions such as 'there's belief and unbelief, and there's no middle ground between the two!', while the military officer is depicted as a blunt pragmatist who loved Akhenaten while detesting his policies for their intolerance and impracticality.'<sup>472</sup> Pinault's conclusion is worth reproducing in full for our purposes:

Of the two rulers, Mahfouz makes it clear whom he prefers: Akhenaten's rigid idealism brought Egypt almost to ruin, while Horemheb's tough-minded realism restored the land to prosperity and order. Mahfouz's preoccupation with the attributes of the ideal leader offers a key, I would argue, to understanding the themes at work in other novels he has authored. The world depicted in many of his stories - *Zuqaq al-Midaqq*, *Miramar*, *Layal Alf Layla* - is one in which the average person is well-meaning but weak and continually beset by temptations of appetite: the desire for food, for sexual gratification, for control over others. Those who usually come to power in such a world are precisely those people who are most unscrupulous in

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468 Pinault, 'Pharaoh Akhenaten as Messenger of God', p. 28.

469 Pinault, 'Pharaoh Akhenaten as Messenger of God', p. 28.

470 Pinault, 'Pharaoh Akhenaten as Messenger of God', p. 28.

471 Pinault, 'Pharaoh Akhenaten as Messenger of God', p. 28.

472 Pinault, 'Pharaoh Akhenaten as Messenger of God', p. 28.

gratifying these appetites. Given these tendencies of human nature, what sort of leader should rule over us? Mahfouz gives his clearest answer in *Awlad Haratna* (*Children of Gebelawi*), where he offers an allegorical comparison of the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions. Moses was scrupulously just and was forceful enough to defeat the tyrants oppressing his people; yet he proved too harsh and unforgiving in administering the Jews. Jesus, on the other hand, offered love and forgiveness for all; but his pacifist approach lacked sufficient muscle to triumph over the brute powers ranged against him. Therefore his mission ended in failure (and one should note, his dreamy idealism finds its physical correlative in Mahfouz's portrait of Jesus' gently innocent facial features and asexual manner of conduct, depicted unflatteringly as lacking manly qualities. This recalls for the reader Mahfouz's references to the hermaphrodite appearance of that other idealist Akhenaten). In *Children of Gebelawi* only one leader combines both strength and mercy in perfectly balanced proportions: the character allegorically representing the prophet Muhammad. Hence, in Mahfouz's view, the superiority of the Islamic over the Christian and Jewish message.<sup>473</sup>

This is, in my view, a dangerous conclusion, and one which ignores completely the fact that, after Muhammad, a scientist-prophet leads the community in *Children of Gebelawi* to unprecedented heights. Moreover, to view Akhenaten as a proto-Jesus, and Horemheb as a superior proto-Muhammad, is to miss the deeper point of *Akhenaten: Dweller in Truth* and the message of civilisation contained in the whole Mahfouzian oeuvre as I have endeavoured to present it so far: Mahfouz is not primarily concerned with the 'attributes of the ideal leader'; his deeper concern, well enshrined in Nefertiti's description in *Dweller in Truth* of Akhenaten's dream 'that the people as a whole should live in truth'<sup>474</sup>, is the survival and prosperity of civilisation itself, which requires a marriage of monotheistic faith and pragmatism *in all people* and which, despite appearances, was first consummated in Akhenaten, not Horemheb. While the first 'dweller in truth' necessarily lacked practical experience in civilisation-building - as the very first pioneer of 'civilisation' in the true, post-imperial sense of the word, he had no 'heritage' to draw on by definition (as Akhenaten himself admits in *Dweller in Truth*, 'I am a child taking my first steps in the realm of the One'<sup>475</sup>) - he nevertheless manages to transmit the purity of his faith and the goodness of his intentions to posterity; just as the 'one god' 'appeared to my spirit enveloping it with its tenderness and filling it

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473 Pinault, 'Pharaoh Akhenaten as Messenger of God', pp. 28-29.

474 NM, *Dweller in Truth*, p. 150.

475 NM, *Dweller in Truth*, p. 21.

with light and song<sup>476</sup>, so too did Nefertiti transmit this same unmistakable beauty and truth to Meri Moun. By extension, Meri Moun - Mahfouz - transmits this spirit: the flame of civilisation. If *Arabian Nights and Days* is the novelist's novel, the one dearest to Mahfouz's own heart as an artist, *Akhenaten: Dweller in Truth*, I will argue, equally enshrines Mahfouz's determination to pass on the flame of civilisation as it was passed down to him.

Rasheed El Enany is another of the handful of critics, and arguably the most influential, to have addressed the figure of Akhenaten and the largely neglected *Dweller in Truth*, although he too takes the side of Horemheb over Akhenaten. In *Naguib Mahfouz: Reading Between the Lines* (1995), Enany situates Mahfouz's return to ancient Egyptian subject matter by recalling Mahfouz's 1977 claim to be a 'novelist of the present' ('there is a distinction to be made among writers between writers of the past, writers of the present, and writers of the future. When I thought about myself, I found that I was a writer of the present. I don't like writing about the past, and I don't enjoy making prophecies about the future'), and by informing us of Mahfouz's stated view that 'my experiments with historical novels failed from a historical point of view because I kept turning the past into the present', thereby reminding us that the author of *Akhenaten: Dweller in Truth* was in search of timeless wisdom valid for the present rather than historical accuracy *per se*.<sup>477</sup> That said, however, the novel's narrator, Meri Moun, is rightly described by Enany as a model historian, a 'seeker of truth' examining all points of view before making a judgement (in the end, however, as we will see, it is the 'feeling' of Nefertiti's beauty which convinces him, and us, his readers, of Akhenaten's legacy). Enany, however, ultimately falls into the same trap as Pinault, arguing that Akhenaten lacked the pragmatism necessary to win Mahfouz's unconditional endorsement as the father of civilisation:

There is no doubt that Mahfouz paints an idealised picture of Akhenaten [...] as a prophet calling Humanity to a religion based on love and peace and the spurning of hatred and rivalry and hostility. But he also depicts him as a ruler who neglects the business of government and indulges in metaphysical speculation, sowing discord among the sons of his land through his fanaticism for a religion which does not leave space for other religions, and dragging his nation to destruction at home and abroad despite the goodness of his intentions. [...] When Akhenaten's commanders confront him about the deteriorating situation in the country, he asks them for their suggestions, and Horemheb, the Leader of the Guard, replies: 'There is no solution save the announcement of freedom of religion...' But Akhenaten is deaf to this

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476 NM, *Dweller in Truth*, p. 21.

477 NM, *I'm Talking to You ('Atahaddat 'ilaykum)*, (Beirut, Dār al 'Awda, 1977), p. 96.

secular liberal call and continues with his policy of insisting on a single creed and the arbitration of the unseen in Earthly affairs... This, in our opinion; is the essence of Mahfouz's message to the reader. [...] 'Dweller in Truth' is an ironic title; Akhenaten is a mere 'dweller in illusion' or 'absence' or 'fantasy' or whichever synonym the reader prefers. In other words, Mahfouz wants to say that the truths of religion are one thing and the truths of the everyday world another, and that nation-states are not built on religious fanaticism but on freedom of religion and equal rights and responsibilities. [...] This novel is a message from Mahfouz to extremist religious groups, and is his response to growing calls for the application of Islamic law in the face of all other considerations, as well as his warning from the pages of history against heading in the direction of a destiny which is known.<sup>478</sup>

I will argue, however, through a close reading of the novel, that Mahfouz's title is far from ironic, and that although Akhenaten is doubtless guilty of mistakes, the spirit of his civilising enterprise lives on, and it is this spirit which must above all, for Mahfouz, inform our present. If Enany misses this larger point, however, Ahmed Mohammad Atiya reminds us of Mahfouz's overarching esteem for the figure of Akhenaten in his 1985 review of the novel, tracing Mahfouz's interest in Akhenaten back to Breasted and *The Dawn of Conscience*, and also mentioning other possible influences. Breasted, indeed, described Akhenaten as the 'first internationalist revolutionary' and 'the first seeker of the Highest Example'; Fouad Shabal, meanwhile, in his book *Akhenaten: Pioneer of a Revolution in Culture* describes Akhenaten as 'the first child of the human race to realise the unicity of God', and as 'the leader of the first revolution in history which extended to all aspects of culture and spiritual life', while Immanuel Velikovsky, in his book *Oedipus and Akhenaten* (1950) described Akhenaten 'the first monotheist'.<sup>479</sup> This pioneering image is, as Mahfouz's 1988 Nobel Lecture intimates and as we will now see in more detail, the one our author and warrior really had in mind.

## 2.9.2 Akhenaten: Dweller in Truth\_

*Essential truth, istina, is one of the few words in Russian that doesn't rhyme with anything. It doesn't carry any verbal associations, standing alone and*

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478 Rasheed El Enany, *Naguib Mahfouz: Reading Between the Lines (Nağīb Maḥfūz... Al Qirā'a mā bayn al Suṭūr)*, (Beirut: Dār al Ṭil'iyya, 1995), pp. 20-21.

479 Aḥmad Muḥammad 'Aṭīyya, 'Naguib Mahfouz: Searching for the Truth in His New Novel About Akhenaten' (Nağīb Maḥfūz... Bāḥiṭ 'an al Ḥaqīqa fī Rīwāyatīhi al Ġadīda 'an Iḥnātūn'), *Al Qāhira*, no. 2, 1985, pp. 28-29.

*distant with only a vague insinuation of the root of the verb 'to be' in the dark recesses of its immemoriality. The majority of Russian writers have expressed a tremendous interest in trying to discover the exact whereabouts and basic properties of this truth. [...] Tolstoy aimed straight for it. [...] Social codes are temporal; Tolstoy was interested in the eternal demands of morality. The true moral principle that he establishes is this: love cannot be exclusively carnal because then it is selfish, and being selfish, destroys instead of creating. That is why such love is sinful. To throw his thesis into the starkest possible relief, Tolstoy, with an extraordinary burst of imagination, depicts and places side by side two loves: the carnal love of Vronsky-Anna (in thrall to their emotions, deeply sensual but ill-fated and spiritually sterile), and the authentic love – Christian, as Tolstoy calls it – between Levin and Kitty, which maintains all the wealth proper to any sensuality, but which remains balanced and harmonious within an atmosphere of responsibility, caring, truth and domestic happiness.<sup>480</sup>*

Vladimir Nabokov

## **Chapter 1: 'The Root of the Story' (Aṣl al Ḥikāya)<sup>481</sup>**

It is worth repeating at the beginning that the Arabic title of Mahfouz's original omits all mention of the name Akhenaten – the novel is entitled simply *Dweller in Truth* (*Al 'Ā'īš fī al Ḥaqīqa*). As we have seen, this was an epithet attributed to the historical Akhenaten; as he is also the novel's main protagonist, it is logical to assume that the title refers to him (Mahfouz's translators have certainly thought so, with no apparent objection from Mahfouz himself). Nevertheless, from the first chapter, the narrator Meri Moun imagines himself as a 'dweller in truth'; animated by a 'sacred desire, reminiscent of the north wind' - namely 'to know everything about that city and its master, the tragedy which tore our nation apart and destroyed our empire' – Meri Moun sets out to follow in his father's footsteps, and takes his father's advice to 'be like History, which lends an ear to all voices,

480 Vladimir Nabokov, *Course of Russian Literature (Curso de Literatura Rusa)*, trad. Maria Luisa Balseiro (Barcelona: Zeta, 2009 (1981)), pp. 268, 279.

481 As my discussions of *Dweller in Truth* and *Arabian Nights and Days* follow a chapter-by-chapter path, and as these chapters are, with a couple of exceptions, relatively brief, I have chosen to cite only longer or vital quotes here in the footnotes in the interest of maintaining the flow of the text. Given the brevity of most of the chapters, all unreferenced citations should nevertheless be accessible in the original text without undue difficulty. All quotes drawn from outside the chapters under discussion are nevertheless referenced.



without taking sides with anyone, and then delivers the truth clearly as a gift to those who reflect on the evidence': 'I was delighted to be freed from inertia and to be heading into the stream of history, for which we know no beginning and which will not come to an end, and to whose course every person of substance adds a wave derived from the love of the eternal truth.'<sup>482</sup> Even if Akhenaten remains the 'dweller in truth' to which the title refers, Mahfouz asks us to consider, from the very beginning, the way such 'truth' is transmitted from one generation to the next. Meri Moun is the indispensable link between Akhenaten and us, the one who, through his honest labours as a historian committed to the empirical evidence, will save the flame of civilisation from oblivion.

## Chapter 2: The High Priest of Amon

The first of Meri Moun's witnesses, the High Priest of Amon, enshrines the best and worst of the 'imperial' tradition which, in Mahfouz's words, 'modern conscience, thank God, feels uneasy about'. Everything in Thebes - bastion of Amon, god of the empire - 'breathed glory and stability' upon Meri Moun's arrival, and in particular the temple of Amon itself, with its verdant gardens and giant pillars. The High Priest rejoices that the 'protector of Egypt', Amon, has regained his rightful place as 'master of the gods' and that the priests of Amon have recovered their 'full sovereignty' after Akhenaten's 'disastrous' reign. Amon is the god who 'liberated our valley through the fist of King Ahmosis, extended our northern and southern borders, as well as our eastern and western borders through the fist of Touthmosis III. He is the god who leads those who believe in him to triumph and humiliates those who betray him'.<sup>483</sup> The High Priest's unequivocal loathing for Akhenaten is immediately apparent; replying to Akhenaten's claim that the Egyptian people might respond to something other than brute force and subjection to Amon and welcome into their hearts the sun-god Aton, who 'rises everywhere' and whom 'every human being can adore without shame', the High Priest is certain from the beginning that this is a 'woman's vision, which could have disastrous consequences':

He invented a god after his own image, weak and androgynous, which he imagined as Mother and Father at the same time and to which he gave a single function: love. [...] He drowned himself in a swamp of madness, and neglected his royal duties while those loyal to the empire and our staunchest allies fell under enemy blows.

They begged him for help, but he never came to their aid, and this led to the downfall

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482 NM, *DIT*, p. 7.

483 NM, *DIT*, p. 9.

of the empire and the ruin of Egypt.<sup>484</sup>

The High Priest goes on to describe how Akhenaten's faith went beyond sun-worship to arrive at a worship of the universe's 'unique and indivisible' 'sole creative force'. After a subsequent encounter in which the High Priest warned Akhenaten of Amon's powers of vengeance, Akhenaten replied: 'I am a child crawling in the realm of the One, a bud coming to blossom in his garden. [...] Beyond that, I will not worry about anything.'<sup>485</sup>

The High Priest attempts to paint Akhenaten as a self-absorbed dreamer who avoids his moral responsibilities, but the very ambiguity and cautious self-awareness of Akhenaten's reply here contrast sharply with the High Priest's arrogant conclusion that he has delivered the truth to Meri Moun 'without decoration and without distortion'<sup>486</sup>. We will soon see that there are multiple other versions of this story from which we, the readers of posterity, will have to deduce the 'truth'.

### Chapter 3: Aÿ

Nefertiti's father Aÿ, entrusted with the young Akhenaten's education, stresses from the beginning of his testimony the importance of the early death of Akhenaten's older brother Touthmosis in the development of young Akhenaten's character and faith:

The more beautiful of the two boys died early, while the other one, the strange one, survived. This death shook the child profoundly. He cried for a long time, and each time that the memory of his brother came back to haunt him, he cried again.

'But he was faithful to the temple of Amon!' the child complained to me. He followed all the incantations and exorcisms, and he died anyway. Why don't you, the learned one, the sage, bring him back to life?'<sup>487</sup>

This early contact with the arbitrary realities of life (Fry's 'plate tectonics destroying children') led to an early interest in adult matters: 'his intellect was prodigious from an early age, as if he had been born with the brain of an adult priest,' Aÿ recounts. 'Such was his miraculous perspicacity that I found myself debating with him as an equal while he was still only ten years old. His enthusiasm poured out of his mouth like a hot spring. From his fragile shell of a body exploded an iron will.'

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484 NM, *DIT*, p. 13.

485 NM, *DIT*, p. 21.

486 NM, *DIT*, p. 25.

487 NM, *DIT*, p. 27.

This will expressed itself in one direction in particular: 'he pursued his religious studies with a passion exceeding all expectation, to the point that they got in the way of his accession to the throne. He never accepted an argument without serious discussion, and did not hide his scepticism regarding many received truths and teachings.'<sup>488</sup> This scepticism descended to outright cynicism regarding Thebes, city of Amon and of empire: 'Thebes! You say it is sacred, when it is nothing but a refuge for greedy merchants, a den of vice and immodesty. Who are these great priests, Master? It is they who exploit the weak through superstition, oblige the poor to donate part of their meagre incomes, and seduce virgins in the name of mercy!'<sup>489</sup>

When Aÿ tried to convince Akhenaten that these priests were reliable sources of support for the throne, Akhenaten replied that 'there is no dignity in a throne built on lies and immorality'<sup>490</sup>. Then, when Aÿ reminds Akhenaten that it was Amon who led his grandfather to one military victory after another, Akhenaten claims not to understand how 'a god can command the slaughter of his own creatures'. Amon is the 'god of the priesthood', while Aton is the 'god of the sky and the earth'. Life is more than a battlefield; a 'sacred joy' is 'buried in the heart of our lives'.

Then Aÿ recounts Akhenaten's mystic experience as Akhenaten recounted it to him:

'Master, the truth has appeared! [...] I was alone just before sunrise. [...] A living being took over the darkness and beckoned in salute. A good, calming light began to shine inside me, and I saw all beings known to existence in congress before my eyes, whispering congratulations to one another, shaken by the joy of the moment, and ready to accept the truth before them. And I said to myself: Finally I have triumphed over death and suffering.'<sup>491</sup>

Despite what could only be described as a religious experience, Akhenaten's father accuses him of atheism (*kafr*) just as religious extremists in Mahfouz's Egypt accused Mahfouz, a fellow believer in a single Divine Essence, of being an unbeliever (*kāfir*) for the simple reason that he did not share *their* orthodox brand of faith. This dangerous exuberance when it comes to calling people unbelievers, rife in contemporary Egypt and contrary to Islam as interpreted by Mahfouz and younger liberal Egyptian authors like Alaa al Aswany, is Mahfouz's main target here, not, as Rasheed El Enany maintains, the exuberance of Akhenaten; there is something naggingly true, and decidedly *un-solopsistic*, about Akhenaten's creed, Mahfouz seems to want to suggest, despite its potentially painful short-term consequences for the society to which he introduced it. Although

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488 NM, *DIT*, p. 28.

489 NM, *DIT*, p. 28.

490 NM, *DIT*, p. 29.

491 NM, *DIT*, p. 31.

Akhenaten made the step of 'enforcing' his new religion above all others, we will see that there is no actual evidence in the novel that he resorted to violence or intimidation to do so. The evidence, indeed, points the other way; Akhenaten's creed is a far cry from religious intolerance in Mahfouz's Egypt, and if anything represents the primitive beginnings of an antidote to it.

Of his daughter Nefertiti, Aÿ tells Meri Moun that she, like Akhenaten (and, lest we forget, like a young Mahfouz as well), had a prodigious intellect and a particular passion for theology (*tawhīd*, or 'making one'), and was the first to declare belief in Akhenaten's god, who delivered her from her 'painful perplexity'. Akhenaten, his heart 'seduced' and liberated by the *muwahhida* Nefertiti to the point that he sought no further sexual intrigues and became, as Nefertiti herself quotes him, 'a *muwahhid* in love as well as religion'<sup>492</sup>, soon had a liberating effect on the Egyptian people as well:

He sought out his subjects in town squares and in the fields and, to their amazement, showered affection on them when they were doubtless expecting to be forced to kneel before a powerful god who would look down on them or refuse to look at them at all. He invited men of religion to talk with him wherever he went, and was quick to denounce their creeds and to condemn rituals which involved the offering of human sacrifices. He spoke openly of his one god, the force pulsing at the heart of all existence, the creator of all things alike, who did not discriminate between foreign shepherds and Egyptian nobles. He also called for love, peace and joy, affirming that love was the law of life, peace the goal, and joy the gratitude of the created towards their creator. He provoked amazement and wild emotions everywhere.<sup>493</sup>

Akhenaten applied the 'law of love' to his private affairs as well, according his protection to the harem he inherited from his father but refusing to take pharaonic advantage of it. In public, he became, in Aÿ's judgement, the most popular pharaoh of all time, until the empire began to crumble: 'I certainly cannot minimise the losses that were inflicted on our nation because of him. She lost her empire, and was beset by infighting. [...] But I admit to you that I cannot rid my heart of love and admiration for him.'<sup>494</sup>

Aÿ and the High Priest of Amon represent the positive and negative poles of opinion to which all subsequent testimony will to a greater or lesser degree belong. As we will see, however, with each iteration, the positive, idealist pole – Aÿ's pole – will gain in strength and credibility

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492 See Nefertiti's testimony, NM, *DIT*, p. 145.

493 NM, *DIT*, p. 36.

494 NM, *DIT*, p. 45.

relative to the negative, realist pole, culminating in Nefertiti's testimony in the final chapter and Meri Moun's endorsement.

#### Chapter 4: Horemheb

Meri Moun's initial description of Horemheb mirrors his description of Thebes in Chapter 2, aligning him from the beginning with the realist pole at its best ('Of average height and a robust constitution, Horemheb exuded force and honest determination.'). As Akhenaten's childhood companion, Horemheb tried his best to respect the prince's status as heir to the throne, but found himself secretly disdaining Akhenaten's 'weakness' and the 'striking femininity of his face and body'. One episode from Horemheb's days of conquest in the service of Akhenaten's father tells us most of what we need to know about him:

When the prince greeted me, pleased to see me returned safe and sound [from the campaign], I invited him to inspect the prisoners, who were lined up, basically naked, and weighed down by their chains. He spent a long time looking at them, and they were begging him for compassion with their eyes as if they had guessed the weakness in the depths of his gaze.

[...] 'You are a criminal, Horemheb!'

Such was the prince, first in line to the throne. Nevertheless, he offered me his friendship, even his love. He tried to convert me to his ideas but I was never influenced by them; they rather seemed to me to be voices from another world.<sup>495</sup>

To accuse Akhenaten of a lack of pragmatism in applying his idealism is one thing; not even to be able to entertain such idealism, however, is entirely another, and a more serious failure of moral imagination than any pie-in-the-sky pacifism. When Horemheb claims to be interested in religion only 'insofar as it is a tradition in our country', Akhenaten, Hitchens-like, accuses him of narcissism and solipsism: 'You worship only yourself, Horemheb. [...] Have you never wanted to penetrate the secret of existence?!'. 'I know how to repress such desires,' Horemheb bitterly replied.<sup>496</sup> After more misogynistic abuse of Akhenaten, Horemheb is nevertheless forced to marvel at the 'secret force' and 'unbreakable will' of his 'friend', which, 'like a tongue of flame borrowed from a secret source, allowed him to fight his most powerful adversary, the clergy, and to break the most entrenched

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495 NM, *DIT*, p. 49.

496 NM, *DIT*, p. 50.

traditions like sorcery and exorcism'.

The clash of ideologies between Akhenaten and Horemheb boils down neatly to Bergson's distinction between open and closed societies. Like a Japanese samurai, Horemheb speaks of his 'faith in duty' and 'loyalty to his country', and then, like a Hitler ranting against cosmopolitan Jews, accuses Akhenaten of internationalist impulses that 'reflect a blind anarchy bubbling in the brain of a man born padded in extravagance'. For all his bravery and 'determination', Horemheb transplanted to a contemporary Egyptian context is made to look more like a semi-literate anti-Semitic Egyptian nationalist than the pragmatic moderniser of the House of Islam that Enany and Pinault makes him out to be.

Mahfouz ends this chapter, as he ends most of the 'realist' chapters in the novel, with a claim that acts retrospectively to discredit the testimony of the witness: Horemheb is 'sure' that Nefertiti abandoned Akhenaten to save her own skin. We will see, and above all feel, in Nefertiti's testimony that this is the opposite of the truth.

## Chapter 5: Bek

The sculptor Bek, fellow childhood companion of Akhenaten, recalls the 'friendly familiarity' with which the prince always treated him. Meanwhile, however, 'the truth was what he lived for, and he died on the path towards it. Intimations of the unseen spread through his spirit from an early age.' Akhenaten himself lovingly urged Bek to 'pursue your studies to mastery so that you can be my man in the field of artistic creation'<sup>497</sup>, although Bek goes on to stress Akhenaten's own passion and aptitude for sculpture in particular and his patronage of the arts in general as a 'vehicle for truth' and social reform. Bek's *engagé* Akhenaten is both a political opponent of the sclerotic - a 'swimmer in the sea of the uncharted' - and an artist in his own right, an 'indulger in truth's ecstasy'.

Bek's praise at times assumes a tone of undue bias towards a friend, but the chapter ends with three pieces of evidence that underscore the overall reliability of his testimony: first and foremost, his judgement of Nefertiti, to be retrospectively corroborated in the final chapter ('my queen was not the opportunist her enemies made her out to be') and his insistence on the 'noble love' she shared with Akhenaten ('their union [was] the living symbol of a god at once father and mother'); second, Bek's Akhenaten echoes Mahfouz himself. Here is Mahfouz in the Nobel Lecture: 'it may even be that Evil is weaker than we imagine. In front of us is an indelible proof: were it not for the fact that victory is always on the side of Good, hordes of wandering humans would not have

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497 NM, *DIT*, p. 60.

been able [...] to grow and multiply. [...] The truth of the matter is that Evil is a loud and boisterous debaucherer.' Now here is Akhenaten to Bek in a novel written by Mahfouz just a couple of years earlier: 'Good is never defeated, and evil never wins an outright victory, but we only see a fleeting moment of total time. Old age and death throw up a screen between us and the truth.'<sup>498</sup> There is even more circumstantial evidence for a direct affinity between Mahfouz and Akhenaten to come in Bek's testimony. Although Bek is overly categorical and obviously partial in his appraisal of Akhenaten's difficult last days ('just as he never betrayed his faith, he never trampled on his noble law of love') – indeed, gouging out the eye of Nefertiti's statue when she inexplicably abandoned him hardly seems a gesture of noble love (though as a sign of his ongoing faith in the eternity of their union, Bek tells us, he leaves the other eye intact) – we are nevertheless reminded that Akhenaten gives up all the material advantages of an inherited empire in favour of a higher moral law, 'dedicating himself entirely to the truth and to defying the forces of evil, selfishness and greed'. This brand of self-sacrificing anti-imperialism is precisely what Mahfouz so urgently advocated in his Nobel Lecture and elsewhere.

The third and final piece of evidence which lends credibility to Bek's testimony concerns Nefertiti's jealous half-sister Mout Nedjemet (a delightful specimen that Meri Moun will meet in a later chapter). Following Mout Nedjemet's rejection of Bek's marriage proposal, Akhenaten's enigmatic one-line consolation for Bek is as follows: 'Like a predator, she is waiting for the moment to strike, on the lookout for her prey'. This follows just a couple of lines after Akhenaten explains to Bek why he refused to use force to defend his empire of peace and love: 'criminals do not hesitate to find a thousand pretexts to satisfy their blameworthy desire for power and blood'. The juxtaposition of these two images associates Mout Nedjemet with the imperial lust that Akhenaten and Mahfouz spent their lives combating. We will have occasion to verify Mout Nedjemet's sad criminal desires when Meri Moun pays her a visit in a later chapter.

## **Chapter 6: Tadoukhepa**

We meet Tadoukhepa, the child-bride of Akhenaten's father and veritable soul sister of Mout Nedjemet, 'surrounded by 300 slaves'. Herself an obvious victim - uneducated, forced to marry an old man and to depend entirely on her physical charm – she lashes out against the man who inherited his father's harem only to reject her in favour of Nefertiti:

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498 NM, *DIT*, p. 64.

'Would you like to give me a son?', Akhenaten murmured.

'It is my duty, master,' I replied, fighting my revulsion.

A look of grief flashed over his face.

'My first and only duty is to find love,' he said.

'Do you want love from me, Master?', I asked bravely.

He rubbed the back of my hand affectionately.

'I don't want to impose love on you.'

He kissed my forehead and left the room as he had entered it. [...] The women [of the harem] thought that Nefertiti had already taken over most of the pharaoh's heart.<sup>499</sup>

While one might have expected Tadoukhepa to be grateful to find herself freed from her sexual responsibilities to a man she found physically repulsive, her victimhood is such that she is capable only of angry, cynical projection: 'in truth he was a strange creature, neither man nor woman, ravaged by a feeling of inferiority and humiliation'. Moreover, Tadoukhepa concludes, 'by preaching love, he stirred hatred and corruption in people's hearts, and ended up destroying the nation and wrecking the empire. Nefertiti, his able wife, encouraged him in his madness so as to get hold of power and to satisfy her libertine impulses in the arms of her lovers.'<sup>500</sup> Tadoukhepa then goes even further, accusing Akhenaten of impotence and incest, and Nefertiti of further scheming, though her only authority for these claims are the other chattering women of the harem. She even finds time at the end of her interview with Meri Moun for one last insult: 'If she hadn't known how to please him, she would have added to the miserable ranks of the Theban prostitutes.'

Tadoukhepa's obvious jealousy of Nefertiti colours her testimony to such an extent that one comes almost to doubt it in its entirety. Mahfouz shows himself to be an astute psychologist of victimhood here; just as Amina in the *Cairo Trilogy* is the one who reacts the most angrily to the flouting of tradition by her daughter-in-law (the very tradition which made Amina a prisoner in her own home), Tadoukhepa heaps her scorn not on the system which forced her into sexual slavery in the first place, but on those who would seek to lighten her burden. The tragic inability of victimised people (and peoples) to understand the message of universal love and 'gratitude to the creator' preached by Akhenaten and Mahfouz is a central theme of the novel: the only hope is an open society which reverses the cycle of victimhood and allows the flame of civilisation to be transmitted through love. Mahfouz also suggests, however, that there is no way of forcing someone like Tadoukhepa to feel gratitude; hers is a disease, an emotional blindness that may only be curable

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499 NM, *DIT*, p. 68.

500 NM, *DIT*, p. 69.



with generations of civilisational effort. Just like Horemheb, she is unable even to hear Akhenaten's message.

## Chapter 7: Toutou

Mahfouz follows up Tadoukhepa's negative assessment of Akhenaten with another critical testimony. Toutou, right-hand man for the High Priest of Amon, exudes the same quiet arrogance of power we have seen in the other imperial realists so far, delivering his version of events to Meri Moun 'without the slightest hesitation'.

Toutou first shows us that the priests of Amon tolerated apparent freedom of religion under Akhenaten's father Amenophis III not because such tolerance was part of their creed, but because it was in their material self-interest to do so:

[Amenophis's] powerful ancestors had established a new policy with us, the clergy of Amon. They recognised his power, his virtue and his superiority over the other gods, but they also accorded their protection to priests of other divinities so as to guarantee their loyalty and to establish among all the priests of the empire an equilibrium which affirmed the power and independence of the throne. We didn't like this policy but we didn't speak out or rebel against it, because it did not affect our prestigious position.<sup>501</sup>

Just as Tadoukhepa is quick – too quick – to accuse Akhenaten of a lifelong inferiority complex, so too does Toutou leap to nasty conclusions about the 'cockroach who believed himself to be a lion': 'he did not equal his predecessors in either strength or wisdom. He was conscious of his weakness and of the repulsive nature of his androgyny, and no one is more daring or malicious than a being humiliated by low origins and consumed by hatred.' In the end, 'he decided to do away with all divinities so that only his own image remained.'<sup>502</sup> Once again here, Mahfouz shows us that those who are first to point the finger and accuse others of jealousy, ambition and an inability to love are precisely those least capable of love and gratitude themselves. Akhenaten's creed is an absolute non-starter for Toutou:

He imagined himself capable of remaking the world according to his own fancy. He

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501 NM, *DIT*, p. 71.

502 NM, *DIT*, p. 72.

lived in a world of his own creation, and he built it in such a way that it had no relationship whatsoever with reality, with its own laws and traditions and people, and he appointed himself as its god. [...] That was why it all came crashing down at the first proper clash with reality. [...] As for Nefertiti,] it is true that she was a woman of strong character, superior intelligence and immense beauty, but she was, like him, riddled with ambition, and pretended to adopt his religion while in reality she was just as twisted and nasty as he was. I am convinced that she did not love him – that would have been impossible for her – but rather aspired to absolute power and despotism.<sup>503</sup>

Toutou is yet another conservative unwilling or unable even to entertain Akhenaten's worldview. Desperate to rid the empire of the 'heretic', he prays to his god Amon (who allegedly 'comes to the cries of the poor') for Akhenaten to come to a bloody end. When the High Priest of Amon refuses to help with his regicidal plans, Toutou finds his chest 'boiling with hatred', 'convinced that an unpunished crime will sanctify the offence in people's unconscious, shake their faith in divine justice, and favour a recrudescence of evil'.

This is not far from Mahfouz's view that faith in justice, and faith in the Divine Essence in general, is best promoted by just social outcomes. The social processes which lead to these outcomes, however, must also be just; all alleged 'heretics' and despots must be allowed the right to defend themselves before judgement can be passed (as happens in *Before the Throne*, and as did not happen with the Iranian *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie). Reflex vigilante punishments of the kind Toutou advocates here are a sign of a reactionary unwillingness to engage in the 'holy battle' with reform that Mahfouz associates with civilisation: rather than playing his proper civilisational role as a noble defender of 'tradition', Toutou suggests that all opposition to conservative orthodoxy must simply be squashed by whatever means available. This, Mahfouz suggests, is the truly self-centred worldview.

## Chapter 8: Tii

After two chapters of vitriolic aggression towards Akhenaten and Nefertiti, Meri Moun opens the next chapter with a strong piece of evidence that the psychological problems attributed to Nefertiti which would be explicable in terms of a lack of decent mothering are unlikely to be true. If, as

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503 NM, *DIT*, pp. 74-75, 76.

Orwell and others since have put it, everyone beyond middle age has the face he deserves, then Tii, mother to Mout Nedjemet and stepmother to Nefertiti, whose 'delicate traits radiated health despite her sixty years', looks like a decent person before we even start. Indeed, as Meri Moun says, 'when Nefertiti became queen, she chose Tii as the first lady of her entourage. If she had not loved her, she would not have done so. This showed that Tii had showered Nefertiti with care and affection, and had never been a "stepmother" to her in the common sense of the term.'<sup>504</sup> What Tii's affection for Nefertiti *does* explain is the wild jealousy that will be on show when Meri Moun meets Mout Nedjemet in the next chapter: 'between [Nefertiti] and Mout Nedjemet there arose the usual quarrels and conflicts between two young sisters, but Nefertiti always had the higher ground – I can't ever remember her being in the wrong – and she would always make up with her younger sister the way an adult does with a child'. Moreover, 'when it came to their education, Nefertiti was so far ahead that I began to fear irreparable consequences for my daughter.'<sup>505</sup> Whatever responsibility Tii may have for letting her daughter fall into a pit of jealousy and hatred, she at least shows the innocence of her intentions. While she admits 'perhaps to sharing the silent jealousy of Mout Nedjemet' when all eyes fell on Nefertiti's beauty and grace, she consoled herself 'by thinking that if Nefertiti were to marry, that would leave the way open for her half-sister, and allow her to shine in all her splendour'.

Contrast, moreover, Tii's measured tone with the proud certainty of the realists we have met. Concerning Nefertiti's abandonment of Akhenaten and the circumstances of Akhenaten's death, she tells Meri Moun: 'You will hear contradictory accounts, and everyone will assure you of the truth of his version when it is merely his own fancy.' The version Tii herself provides, however, will be corroborated by Nefertiti's own testimony. Of Akhenaten, she draws the conclusion Mahfouz wants his reader to draw: 'We lived beside an exceptional man.'

## **Chapter 9: Mout Nedjemet**

Thin, beautiful and intelligent, Mout Nedjemet appeared 'distant' to Meri Moun from the first instant; he was somehow certain that there existed 'an unbridgeable distance' between them, as if - we may speculate - she inhabited some infernal circle and were condemned to remain cut off from civilisation. Here she is, jealously and self-pityingly lashing out before Meri Moun has even got himself properly seated, accusing Nefertiti of atheism (*kafr*) and much more besides:

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504 NM, *DIT*, p. 78.

505 NM, *DIT*, p. 79.

We were foreordained to share the tragedy of Akhenaten the renegade. [...] I had misgivings about him from the beginning, and my feelings and judgement were borne out by events. Nefertiti had a different view, which surprised the family, but not me: she always loved making head-turning pseudo-challenges to tradition and having storms of debate swirling around her. There was no doubting her intelligence, but she was neither honest nor loyal, and this was what lured her to the cult of Aton and led her to prefer Aton over Amon, and ultimately to abjure her faith in all the gods [*kafr li ġamī'at al Āliha*] and declare faith in a god we had never heard of.<sup>506</sup>

Compare Akhenaten's elliptical, blink-and-you-miss-it one-line denunciation of Mout Nedjemet ('like a predator, she is waiting for the moment to strike, on the lookout for her prey', he says to Bek) to the barrage of abuse launched here by Mout Nedjemet in front of a perfect stranger before he has even properly sat down. There is much more to come:

I had occasion to see the heretic for the first time at the celebration of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of [his father's] reign, and I was stunned by the uncanny congruence of his perverse ideas and his totally out-of-proportion, thin and ugly physical form. Don't take seriously any talk you hear of the noble love that united the hearts of Akhenaten and the great royal wife Nefertiti, because I know her through and through, and I know the ideal she dreamed of with all her heart, and it bears no relation whatsoever to the ugly hermaphrodite weakling she married. They claimed to be dwelling in truth, but he was living in his own mad world, and she was living a life of lies and deception, and loved only power and the throne.<sup>507</sup>

Then she rehearses the rumours she heard in the harem (and believed) about Akhenaten's impotence and his incestuous relationship with his mother (on the contrary, as we will see, it seems that Akhenaten had a very healthy relationship with his mother) and Nefertiti's unrelenting lust for the likes of Horemheb. The image of the world's unlikeliest couple - the gay nerd and the voluptuous slut - is wheeled out again by the very sort of person least likely to understand the generous nature of their love. Mout Nedjemet inadvertently shows that Tii did her best to hide the truth of Nefertiti's effortless physical, intellectual and moral superiority, kindly exaggerating her daughter's virtues and minimising her obvious failings. But such truths cannot ultimately be hidden despite the best intentions. Mout Nedjemet then goes on to play the world's smallest violin, 'sacrificing herself' and

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506 NM, *DIT*, p. 84.

507 NM, *DIT*, p. 85.

her interests – though still managing to live in an entire wing of her father's palace – for the sake of the nation, conspiring with Toutou and Horemheb to defend Egypt from the two 'nutjobs'. As for how to dispose of these two obstacles, any means would do: 'Everything is permitted to save the empire!' she cries to Horemheb, in a concise summary of her nasty politics.

The 'great mystery' concerning Mout Nedjemet, Meri Moun tells us at the beginning of the chapter, is that she never married. One feels as though one knows why by the end of Meri Moun's meeting with her, but to go into judgemental detail about Mout Nedjemet's inferiority complex would be to miss the entire point of Mahfouzian civilisation. Such imprisoning jealousy is, for Mahfouz, a cancer at the heart of civilisation: the person stuck brooding on her value relative to others, quick to denounce others and draw attention to herself, is not free to think of how best to help other people or contribute to the collective; indeed, she is not thinking about 'civilisation' at all. It is no coincidence that the internationalist revolutionaries in this story are those with the strongest emotional links to individual people (Bek and Akhenaten, Tiï and Nefertiti etc.). From the beginning, Meri Moun senses that Mout Nedjemet is 'distant', incapable of such affection.

## Chapter 10: Merire

'It's nice to see at least one person worrying about [the truth]', Merire tells Meri Moun by way of a greeting. 'The divine voice has fallen silent and the temple has been destroyed, but Time has not yet said the last word.' Mahfouz is virtually begging the modern reader to capture his civilisational message here (recall Mahfouz's claim to be a 'novelist of the present'). It is we, the modern reader, who give the whole story its *raison d'être*, we who provide the hope that the flame of civilisation kindled by Akhenaten can survive by capturing the message hidden in this story; 'time has not yet said the last word' on Akhenaten precisely because we are still hearing his story.

'His love penetrated my heart in a way that nothing had done before. [...] His youthful voice still resonates in my chest,' the former High Priest of Aton tells Meri Moun of Akhenaten. The key event in the development of Akhenaten's hypertrophied conscience is also identified by Merire as the premature death of Touthmosis: 'his elder brother's death inflicted a deep wound in his conscience that he perhaps did not recover from until he suffered an even greater wound with the death of his beloved daughter Miketaton'. After complaining to Merire that Touthmosis 'will never return again to this existence', Akhenaten 'declared an eternal war on weakness, nastiness and sadness' in honour of his lost brother.<sup>508</sup> There is no hint of jealousy here, only sadness. Akhenaten

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508 NM, *DIT*, p. 93.

was self-aware enough to look in the mirror and see, as Merire quotes him as saying, 'neither force nor beauty' in his own reflection, but instead of dwelling on the cards he had been dealt and on his own apparent inferiority to the 'beautiful' Touthmosis, he sought out an existence on a higher plane, a plane which would allow him to do justice to his brother.

Merire also shows us that Akhenaten's policy on freedom of religion was more benign than his opponents made out, less an opposition to a plurality of religious song in the cultural marketplace than an opposition to the state-sanctioned venality and corruption of the established clergy: 'he announced his faith to his entourage, but did not voice his opposition to the other gods until later on, and this he did gradually', in contrast to genuine religious extremists, 'announcing his disbelief in false gods first, then abolishing them [as pillars of the state], and subsequently distributing their assets to the poor'.<sup>509</sup> Concerned that his duties as pharaoh would interfere with his devotion to his god, Akhenaten is assured by Merire that, on the contrary, he will be able to serve his god all the better. 'You speak the truth, Merire,' Akhenaten concludes. 'Just as [my predecessors] made human sacrifices of the poor, I will sacrifice to my god the forces of evil, breaking the chains that they have kept on the wrists of the powerless'.<sup>510</sup>

Speculating, as all his supporters at some point do, that Akhenaten may have been assassinated, Merire nevertheless consoles himself, and returns the contemporary reader to the centre of the action, by saying that 'he is not dead, he cannot die, he is the eternal truth, hope renewed, and he will triumph sooner or later'. Then, in a final gesture of goodwill and generosity to Meri Moun, he offers him the book of sacred chants that will, by the end of the novel, be exerting a 'growing' charm on our narrator: 'Read them, young man, may they nourish your truth-loving heart. For you have not undertaken this particular journey for no reason.'

## Chapter 11: May

May's loathing for the 'woman trapped in a man's body' is hardly surprising for a proud general charged with defending the confines of the empire. His short, hate-filled testimony adds little to the picture already painted by other 'realists' so far - Akhenaten was a 'heretic' and a 'bastard' who 'humiliated' the real men of the empire with his pacifism, while Nefertiti was an opportunist 'born to be a prostitute' – except for his observation concerning Akhenaten's relationship with his mother: 'many wondered what the secret root of this tragedy was. I tell you now that the root of it all was the heretic's physical and mental feebleness,' May quickly concludes, adding that 'his mother spoilt him

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509 NM, *DIT*, p. 94.

510 NM, *DIT*, pp. 95-96.

rotten, and this caused a pathological vulnerability, only exacerbated by comparison with his superior playmates like Horemheb, Nakht and Bek. He hid his feelings of shame behind a thin veil of feminine modesty and camp frivolity.<sup>511</sup>

We do not see much in the novel of Akhenaten's relationship with his mother Tī. Note the similarity, however, between the names Tī and Tīi, Nefertiti's stepmother, who we do meet; it is almost as if Mahfouz wants to suggest that the 'truth' discovered by Akhenaten and Nefertiti emanates, or rather evolves, out of the same generous ancestral source. The glimpses we do get of Tī herself are courtesy of the High Priest of Amon and Aÿ (and, soon, from Nefertiti). When the High Priest of Amon confronts Tī about her young son's dangerous intellectual trajectory, she defends him: 'he is aspiring to all forms of wisdom, in complete innocence.' Aÿ goes into more detail:

Tī was from a respectable [plebeian] Nubian family, and she showed herself to be a woman of greater force and wisdom than Hatshepsout herself. As her husband was unfaithful to her, and because of the death of her elder son Touthmosis, she poured all of her affection onto her frail prodigy, and perhaps went beyond the conventional role of mother to become for her son a dear friend (*ḥabība*) and a teacher as well.

[...] In reality, she wanted her son to be instructed in all the religions of the nation.<sup>512</sup>

The parallel with Mahfouz's own mother and her special relationship with her son, explored earlier, is striking. Aÿ then goes on to colour this picture slightly, adding that Akhenaten and his mother came to disagree about the role of religion in politics (Tī dreamed of 'putting religion in the service of politics, for the good of Egypt', while Akhenaten 'refused to put religion in the service of anything whatsoever'). Aÿ, the most ambiguous of Akhenaten's defenders (not even Meri Moun can make his mind up about him at the end of their interview), argues that Tī was corrupted by power and 'came to love the throne more than love itself'. He fails to prove this point. What he does help to establish, however, is the quality of Tī's relationship with her son in his early, formative years, the very intimacy of which provided fuel for the rumour mill for Akhenaten's enemies (though such rumours of incest remain utterly unsubstantiated). Mahfouz shows us in this novel through the example of Nefertiti and Tīi that the decisive bond in a child's life need not be with its biological mother, but he does suggest, as elsewhere in his oeuvre, that the intimate intergenerational bond established in early childhood is a *sine qua non* of civilisation. For May, however - a diehard fan of closed-society, duty-based relationships along the lines of the imperial military model he

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511 NM, *DIT*, p. 101.

512 NM, *DIT*, pp. 27-28.

represented - such intimacy is merely synonymous with femininity, weakness and corruption.

## Chapter 12: Mahou

Mahou was chosen by Akhenaten to be his chief of police: 'may your weapon from now on be a mere accessory. Civilise the people with love, as I have taught you. Those whom love does not civilise will be civilised with more love.'<sup>513</sup> Note that Akhenaten does not tell Mahou to throw his weapon away; it is to remain on him as a symbol of the 'muscle' required to build civilisation. This weapon therefore remains a last resort in theory; it is just that, in practice, Akhenaten does not believe that recourse to arms has ever really worked in human affairs. He tells Mahou so: 'sometimes only the sword can defeat evil!' Mahou argues, but Akhenaten replies that 'they have been repeating that since the beginning of time, and have they done away with evil?' [...] When will humanity see East and West under one light?!<sup>514</sup> Mahou, however, shows us that Akhenaten was not advocating a utopian, lawless society; what he defended instead was a system of punishments that was both just and therapeutic (Mahfouz had no interest in debates concerning the relative merits of rehabilitation and 'punishment for punishment's sake'; in the end, they amounted to one and the same thing): 'when we arrested thieves, we returned all stolen goods to their owners, gave the thieves work to do in the fields, and transmitted our message of love and peace'. As far as murderers were concerned, 'we sent them to work in the mines, where they could earn a living while meditating on their lot, and in their free time we taught them the new religion.'<sup>515</sup> True to his creed, Mahou tells us, Akhenaten mixed with common people unguarded, showing the same faith in the goodness and judgement of ordinary people that Mahfouz himself preached in his defence of democracy. Mahou himself was the son of peasants, humble in his demeanour, and chosen by Akhenaten on that basis:

He looked at me for a long time, until I felt his gaze in my blood and respiration.

Then he asked me:

'What's your name?'

'Mahou.'

'Where are you from?'

'From the village of Fina.'

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513 NM, *DIT*, p. 105.

514 NM, *DIT*, p. 107.

515 NM, *DIT*, p. 105.



'What is your family's trade?'

'We are peasants.'

'Why did Horemheb choose you for the royal guard?'

'I don't know.'

'He only chooses the bravest.'

My heart pulsed with joy but I didn't say anything.

'You are a sincere young man, Mahou. [...] Would you accept my friendship?'<sup>516</sup>

The truth knows no class boundaries, Mahfouz suggests here. Any duty based on social hierarchy can only legitimately arise from mutual acknowledgement of a higher power; the 'immense honour' Mahou feels when he is offered Akhenaten's friendship is not the feigned honour of the duty-bound soldier, but the true honour one feels in the presence of 'the source of joy' and 'the very essence of goodness and purity', as Mahou describes his experience. Nefertiti too was for Mahou 'beauty and majesty in female form', and according to his testimony modestly resisted the vulgar advances of Horemheb, May and the man we will now meet: Nakht.

### **Chapter 13: Nakht**

In the alternating but ultimately divine-comedic structure of the novel, Nakht represents Satan's last and strongest stand. Displaying the appearances of an open mind and the inklings of a self-critical spirit, Nakht asks himself, after Akhenaten's passing, 'what kind of man my master, the one they call the heretic, really was'. Ultimately, however, he condemns himself, not only by betraying Akhenaten, but also by condemning Nefertiti (who, we have just learnt, refused to have sex with him) as an 'insatiable opportunist', and generally by failing to take either of them seriously.

Nakht starts his testimony by offering a claim which, if true, would be damning for Akhenaten:

I was, like Horemheb and Bek, one of his childhood companions, and whatever one might have said about his feebleness, his femininity and his strange physical presence generally, he won our affection and compelled our admiration with the power of his intelligence and his precocious maturity. But there was a flaw in his

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516 NM, *DIT*, pp. 103-104.

character that I discovered before the others, and that was that the affairs of the real world had no importance for him, and aroused nothing but boredom and unease in his heart.<sup>517</sup>

Note Nakht's pride at discovering Akhenaten's 'tragic flaw' 'before the others'. It soon becomes clear, however, that the dissatisfaction with 'the real world' that he attributes to Akhenaten is less a dandyish *ennui* than a noble frustration with the pointless following of obsolete customs common to adolescents of every generation: 'he cast mocking aspersions on his father's everyday life, the solid core of which revolved around the sacred traditions of the throne, such as waking up at a preset time, bathing rituals, breakfast, prayer, meeting with his ministers, visiting temples... 'What slavery!' he would mutter.<sup>518</sup>

Akhenaten appears here as a kind of anti-Confucius; where Confucius advocated a return to neglected ancestral traditions and rituals in the name of moral renewal, Akhenaten sought to break away from the traditions and rituals of the past. These are, however, two sides of the same civilisational coin: Akhenaten was not opposed to rituals and temples *per se* (he went on to establish his own); he simply wanted to ensure that such rituals and temples served a higher purpose than lining the pockets of a corrupt élite. It is the purpose (or lack thereof) of such rituals, not the rituals themselves, which determines their value. It is precisely because Akhenaten is committed to achieving good 'in this world' (like Mahfouz in his Nobel Lecture) that he devotes all his energy to his new religion, which, as we have seen, he views as an antidote not only to death, but to earthly evil as well. Nakht, however, would have none of this: 'on the one hand he mocked our traditions, like a spoilt child who takes pleasure in rebellion and breaking precious objects, and on the other he aspired to discover the secret of the universe and to triumph over death.' In the end, however, the 'spoilt child' was kidding himself: 'he had a fertile imagination, so fertile that he ended up an unknowing prisoner to it. [...] I had no doubts about his sincerity, just as I had no doubts about his delusion. He was sincere because that was his nature, but the voice he heard was not the voice of his god; it was the beating of his own heart.'<sup>519</sup>

We are less than two pages into Nakht's testimony here. While Akhenaten's other realist critics leap into their verdicts immediately, Nakht hides his behind a thin veil of pseudo-objectivity, condescending sympathy and faint praise in the finest traditions of Satanic rhetoric. Here he is, lying shamelessly to his childhood companion in order to save the empire: "There is no doubt that your god is the god of truth,' I said to him, 'and if you build a temple to him in every province, he

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517 NM, *DIT*, p. 109.

518 NM, *DIT*, pp. 109-110.

519 NM, *DIT*, p. 110.

will triumph in the end, but leave the people with their gods, and save the nation the ills of a sectarian war! [...] Self-defence is a right which is not incompatible with love or peace.'<sup>520</sup> This last claim is not *prima facie* implausible (using a nuclear weapon to stop a meteorite from destroying the earth, for example); Akhenaten himself asks Mahou 'not to sacrifice his precious existence' in his policing duties and to keep his weapon on him as an absolute last resort. But Nakht is too eager to take up arms: when Akhenaten refuses to resort to violence to save the empire, Nakht tries to mount a campaign of his own against him, only to face decisive opposition from May and the High Priest of Amon, who had schemes of their own, and whom he qualifies as calculating opportunists. Nakht takes their opposition to his plan very badly, and ends up 'convinced that they were only thinking of their own interests, that Egypt was lost, hostage to a bunch of criminals, and that the responsibility for her ruin lay with all of us, allies and enemies of Akhenaten alike, although least of all with Akhenaten himself, 'who of all the actors involved had perhaps the clearest conscience and the purest intentions'.<sup>521</sup>

Nakht's betrayal is the most serious of all because he shows that he has the makings of a 'living conscience'; like the other realists in this story, however, he tragically lacks moral imagination: he is unable to take Akhenaten's universalist, post-imperial creed seriously even for a moment. 'This is a tale of deceit, innocence and eternal sadness,' he concludes, as if the scheming realists were on one side, the innocent 'spoilt child' Akhenaten on the other, and a helpless Nakht stuck in the middle watching the ruin of Egypt. Yet it is precisely Nakht's inability, and the inability of others like him, to realise his own moral blindness, to open his heart to Akhenaten's creed at least in theory before joining him in practice, that makes the realisation of Akhenaten's dream for the 'real world' for the time being unrealisable.

## Chapter 14: Bantou

Mahfouz ties up the loose ends of the secondary plot concerning Akhenaten's death by having Meri Moun meet Akhenaten's doctor Bantou. Having been allowed to see Akhenaten one last time, and having been assured by him that he was in perfect health, Bantou leaves 'convinced that the doctor chosen to replace me would assassinate him'. Sad to be leaving his master alone in the hands of murderers, Bantou is kindly reminded by Akhenaten that he is not alone, and that his enemies are wrong to 'imagine that my god and I are defeated'. Akhenaten, then, doesn't care about being murdered himself, and that is why the novel is not ultimately a murder mystery: he probably *was*

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520 NM, *DIT*, pp. 112-113.

521 NM, *DIT*, p. 114.

murdered, but Mahfouz is not primarily concerned about that. What matters is that the truth survive, that the legacy of faith in a single Moral Law be passed down to the next generation via the historian Meri Moun. Just as a parent would willingly sacrifice himself for his child because the child's survival is more important than his own, Akhenaten comes to love the future of civilisation more than his own life: 'The one true god will triumph and beam joy into the world, and we humans will bear the yoke of our petty miseries,' he tells Bantou.

Bantou also dispels the rumours that Akhenaten was a hermaphrodite ('he was definitely a man, capable of having sex and of reproducing') and that he had an incestuous relationship with his mother ('mere slander'). The underlying reason for this hatred, Bantou plausibly concludes, was not Akhenaten's physical or moral inferiority, but rather the contrary: 'the problem was that he was nobler than the average human being. [...] He made people acutely aware of their own mediocrity, and challenged them in an unprecedented way. That is why they attacked him with such deplorable rage and bestial hatred.'<sup>522</sup>

## Chapter 15: Nefertiti

Nefertiti is not Beatrice: she is not the cause of Akhenaten's faith or salvation (his faith, as we have just seen, survives her abandoning him), but rather one of its pleasant effects. Nor was Akhenaten Nefertiti's saviour; as she recounts (after praising Meri Moun's father), she did not need one:

I was born and raised in a climate of love for the truth and for the world thanks to the wisdom of my father Aÿ. I did not suffer from the absence of my mother, who died before I was a year old, because I found in Tiï a spirit overflowing with tenderness; and she became for me a second mother rather than a stepmother, and gratified me with a happy childhood. Her wisdom was such that the birth of my half-sister Mout Nedjemet did not change her disposition towards me. She raised us as two loved and loving sisters; and if my subsequent successes produced their share of jealousy and animosity between us, it was only much later on. Tiï remained equal in her affections for us, at least outwardly, and I thanked her for that when I had the chance by making her the first lady of my entourage.<sup>523</sup>

The legend of the child prodigy Akhenaten which filtered down to a young Nefertiti through her

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522 NM, *DIT*, p. 122.

523 NM, *DIT*, p. 126.

parents 'came to exercise an irresistible attraction' on her. 'Born to be a priestess' with her 'love of motherhood and earthly glory', Nefertiti found herself 'attracted to the supreme being like a butterfly to the light' when she overheard her father singing one of Akhenaten's chants, the very same chant that Akhenaten was still singing when Bantou visited him for the last time. Faith took possession of Nefertiti's 'entire being'; she was the first person to take Akhenaten's new creed seriously:

'What do you think of the voice he has heard?' I asked [my father].

'Nothing at all,' he coldly replied.

'Could he be lying?'

[...] 'He never lies,' my father conceded after a short pause.

'The voice is real then!'

'Perhaps he was dreaming,' my father hesitantly suggested.<sup>524</sup>

Nefertiti then recounts how, on the night she met Akhenaten, Mout Nedjemet objected to her staring at him. Nefertiti 'could not forget' what her sister, in a 'fit of jealousy', said to her: 'You've fixed your target! Now you've reached it!' This was not because Mout Nedjemet was in love with the actual Akhenaten, but because she coveted the throne ('My worst fears are confirmed! He is sickly and mad!' Mout Nedjemet says to Nefertiti the day after meeting him). Contrast Mout Nedjemet's claim that Nefertiti tried to 'throw herself' at Horemheb with Nefertiti's own testimony of that evening:

There was only one person I wanted to see, the one who had guided me to the light of the truth. In the great hall I saw several men with whom I could have traversed, for better or worse, the ocean of life: Horemheb, Nakht, Bek, May and several others, but in reality my heart beat only for my love. I admit that I was unexpectedly shocked by his physical appearance – I had imagined him as a statue of light, but I found him skinny, fragile, far from the man of my dreams. I soon got over my deception though, overcoming his pitiable form and focusing on the spirit contained in it, the one which God had chosen for His love and message, and secretly swore to it my eternal loyalty.<sup>525</sup>

When called before Tīī (Akhenaten's mother) to discuss the subject of marriage – it is telling that Tīī's 'intuition' leads her to choose Nefertiti for her son – Nefertiti is 'paralysed by gratitude'. Like Tīī, Tīī is not perfect, but as we have seen, she made the miracle of Akhenaten possible through her

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524 NM, *DIT*, p. 129.

525 NM, *DIT*, p. 130.

love. By depicting Akhenaten and Nefertiti in a better light than their basically good-hearted but all-too-human mothers (Tī is depicted as conservative and controlling, Tīi as prone to the odd bout of jealousy), Mahfouz is displaying his characteristic optimism that the flame of civilisation grows in strength when transmitted from one generation to the next. Tī eventually gives the heretic couple her blessing: 'You deserve to be punished, but you also compel my admiration! So live out your destiny, both of you, as you see fit, and may the will of the gods be realised!'

Faced with the prospect of a wedding night with a man she found physically repulsive, Nefertiti frankly admitted her disgust to Meri Moun, and at first didn't know what to do: 'there was nothing he hated more than lying.' Luckily, Akhenaten did not force her either to lie or to reveal the uncomfortable truth, but waited patiently for her to arrive at desire, which she did during his absence in the provinces: 'I missed him wherever I went, and at all times of the day and night. I had never imagined that he would come to occupy such a place in my life [...] not only as a spiritual master, but as a husband and lover as well.'<sup>526</sup> Nor was this secret inner transformation lost on Akhenaten: 'At last, you love me as a husband!' he beamed on his return, leaving Nefertiti amazed at his sensitivity. This sensitivity extended to all questions of conscience, and even to his relationship with his father. 'I didn't love him as I should have,' he confides to Nefertiti upon his father's death, as if apologising for the adolescent sarcasm Nakht refused to forgive, and reconciling himself to the value of tradition without giving up his determination to fight evil in the present. Akhenaten's sensitivity and patience with Nefertiti – his faith in the power of love to win in the end – was mirrored in his patience with his entourage. 'I don't doubt that a few of them were as sincere as I was,' Nefertiti says, 'but History will show that most of them were lying [in their professions of faith], or that their faith was not strong enough to warrant sacrifice'; throughout all this, Akhenaten's 'lucidity did not desert him, and he saw what was hidden in their hearts, but he remained convinced that only love could bring them to his side, and that in time they would trade their shallow faith for a more complete faith, in the image of our conjugal experience.'<sup>527</sup>

When Akhenaten embarked on his campaign to close the old temples and seize the assets of the clergy, Nefertiti asked him: 'Won't that lead you to resort to violence, you who preach peace and love?' Akhenaten replied that he would not be resorting to violence and would merely be redistributing the clergy's assets to the poor, without punishing anyone. Having done so, the new pharaoh and his spouse began walking unguarded in the streets of the new capital, 'breaking down the imaginary barriers between the people and the crown': 'we got to know almost all our subjects, some by sight, others by trade or even by name; love overcame the old fears, and the sweetest of the

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526 NM, *DIT*, p. 141.

527 NM, *DIT*, p. 145.

sacred chants resounded.<sup>528</sup> Aÿ, worried that such a mingling of sacred and profane would discredit the crown, is told by Nefertiti: 'we are dwelling in truth, father.' Or again, when she tells Meri Moun about Akhenaten's plans for the provinces: 'when their spirits are purified, their ears will finally open themselves to the divine voice, and everyone will dwell in truth!' she quotes him as saying, before concluding: 'such was his dream, that people everywhere dwell in truth.'<sup>529</sup>

Nefertiti then recounts the end of Akhenaten's reign, her attempt to save his life by abandoning him, her subsequent attempts to see him again, Mout Nedjemet's scheming for the throne, and her refusal to leave the ruined capital, 'my husband and my god'. In the end, denied access to the outside world and to her husband, she recovers her faith in her god and her faith in civilisation to bring this god to triumph after her time: 'I resigned myself to my solitary existence, sad and without hope. I lost all sense of time, and absorbed myself in painful reflections and incessant prayer until my faith in my god returned intact despite everything – nay, I was now sure that the final victory would be his even if only after a long wait.'<sup>530</sup> And she felt sure that Akhenaten, whom she knew 'better than anyone', had died alone with the same thoughts in his head, 'happy before his god'.

### 2.9.3 *The Warriors of Arabian Nights and Days*

*Russia will not find its salvation in mysticism or asceticism, but rather in advances in Civilisation, Enlightenment and Humanism. Far from empty sermonising, Russia needs [...] an awakening of its people to a sense of human dignity, [...] to rights and laws which conform to common sense and justice.*<sup>531</sup>

Belinski, 'Letter to Gogol' (1847)

Here we will follow in reverse order the procedure employed for *Dweller in Truth*, plunging first into a chapter-by-chapter reading of the novel before offering, in our final section on Mahfouz, some brief concluding remarks on 'the significance of Shahriyar's journey'.

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528 NM, *DIT*, p. 150.

529 NM, *DIT*, p. 150.

530 NM, *DIT*, p. 156-157.

531 Quoted by Vladimir Nabokov in the context of his critique of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Course of Russian Literature*, p. 193.

## **Chapter 1: Shahriyar**

Actually it is not Shahriyar but Sheherazade's father Dandan who first occupies centre stage in the novel: Dandan's 'fatherly heart' is petrified that Shahriyar will murder his storytelling daughter. Luckily for Dandan, Shahriyar is already a changed man: "'justice," said the sultan, as if remembering his victims, "may be achieved through various means, including both the sword and forgiveness. God has his wisdom.'" Sheherazade made this access to the Moral Law possible for Shahriyar: 'her stories are a divinely sanctioned magic,' he says. 'They reveal worlds which call for introspection.' Rather than murder, it is marriage which is on Shahriyar's mind.

## **Chapter 2: Sheherezade**

Sheherezade, however, can smell only blood on Shahriyar's hands: 'Arrogance and love cannot live in the same heart.' Dandan is portrayed as a 'hypocritical' servant of the sultan's power, and he is clearly thinking less of the future of civilisation than of his own daughter's safety when he flatters Shahriyar in Chapter One and, here in Chapter Two, urges his daughter to accept Shahriyar's marriage proposal by saying that 'love can also work miracles'. In Dandan, nevertheless, the flicker of civilisation is present, and he wishes to pass it on to his daughter in amplified form; it is he who sends his daughter to be educated with Sheikh al-Balji (whom we are about to meet), and he who concludes, when his daughter agrees to be 'patient' after the sheikh's example: 'what a good teacher and what a good student!'

## **Chapter 3: The Sheikh**

As always, the details hidden at the beginning and end of Mahfouz's chapters are not accidents. Chapter Three begins as follows: 'Sheikh Abdullah Al Balji lived in a modest house in the old part of town. His visionary gaze remained profoundly engraved in the hearts of his disciples.' Immediately we have a portrait of a socially engaged man of religion whose humble door was always open to seekers of the truth, not a self-absorbed whirling dervish or cave-dwelling ascetic. Nevertheless, there is something vaguely unsettling, almost jarring, about the sheikh's unflappability ('no piece of news could perturb the sheikh's state of calm; the happiness in his heart



neither increased nor decreased'); contrast this with Mahfouz's own anguished statements about world poverty and global conflicts in his Nobel Lecture ('Our great poet Abul-'Alaa' Al-Ma'ari was right when he said: "A grief at the hour of death/ Is more than a hundred-fold/ Joy at the hour of birth.") and elsewhere. In this chapter, the sheikh is visited by his 'friend' Abdul Qadir Al Mahini, a medical doctor who is interested in 'what is good for the world', and who cannot bear to see his beloved city in the hands of thieves and murderers. 'With what force we attach ourselves to material things!' is the sheikh's enigmatic response, as if theft and murder, in the grand scheme of things, do not really matter. The sheikh thanks God that happiness and sadness do not 'touch him' in this material way, and laments the fact that he has failed to lead the doctor, who continues to respond viscerally and personally to the injustices of the world, further along the 'path' towards the supposed horizon of spiritual perfection. The doctor claims to be a 'believer' too, but insists on 'following premises and conclusions' even though, the sheikh argues, the intellect should arrive at a thoroughgoing awareness of its own insufficiency; we have seen, however, that Mahfouz insisted that feeling, and not reason, ultimately lead us to a sense of reason's limits. Here we are in the thick of the 'philosophy versus literature' debate that characterised Mahfouz's own intellectual development; about all that is certain at the end of this labyrinthine chapter is that, as the doctor says to the sheikh, 'if Sheherezade had not been your disciple, she would not have found stories to distract the sultan and ultimately to dry up the flow of blood.' The sheikh's stoic faith in a higher Moral Law is a necessary source of inspiration for generations of disciples who have not been exposed to religious tradition or who have got lost in the minutiae of everyday struggles, but it is not sufficient for civilisation: the doctor's passionate, engaged concern for the health of his city, and his almost journalistic determination to monitor injustice and to find solutions to it, are just as important. Ultimately, however, it is the storyteller Sheherezade, and neither the sheikh (philosopher/priest) nor the doctor (journalist/scientist), who holds the magical key. Thus Mahfouz himself embarks on a series of tales inspired by Sheherezade's own, and which, when woven together into the fabric of this novel, will form the work of art of which Mahfouz was most proud.

#### **Chapter 4: Princes' Café**

In this short chapter, we meet the cast of characters who will feature in the adventures to come. All social classes are represented – the café serves to bring them all into friendly contact without dissolving the status differences between them - and all are united in their gratitude to Sheherezade, who has saved their virgin daughters from the sultan's murderous clutches. Attention then turns to Simbad, who has decided to travel: 'I'm sick of these alleys and this neighbourhood, and I'm also

sick of shifting furniture without any hope of seeing anything new. There is another life out there; the river joins the sea, the sea extends into the Unknown, and the Unknown gives way to islands and mountains, living beings, angels and demons. It is a magic call that I cannot resist.<sup>532</sup> Nur Al Din crosses class boundaries to wish Simbad well ('we sat side by side in the prayer room to receive instruction from our master Abdullah Al Balji'), and Dr. Abdul Qadir Al Mahini gives Simbad the community's blessing, although he reminds him not to commit the sin of Dante's Ulysses, who dreamed of a 'world without people' and of private, socially useless knowledge beyond the ocean. The Doctor urges Simbad instead to come back, like Plato's philosopher to the cave, and share his knowledge with future human beings: 'Go with God, but keep your senses sharp, and record all the amazing things you encounter, as God himself commands.'<sup>533</sup> Still, Ragab the doorman will miss him: 'How sad it is to be separated from you, Simbad!'

## Chapter 5: Sanan Al Gamali

Here we embark on the first tale, the tale of Sanan Al Gamali. The first character we meet, however, is the genie Qumqam, who identifies himself as 'a genie from the city', a first clue that he is one of the good guys, a genie on the side of civilisation (the association between the 'city' and 'civilisation', which we saw with the description of the sheikh Abdullah Al Balji and his humble abode, will continue right up to the very last line of the novel). Qumqam insinuates himself into Sanan's conscience ('If it hadn't been more than a dream, why did it worry him more than reality itself?'), encouraging him to kill the neighbourhood's corrupt governor. Sanan loses interest in the affairs of the community, and resolves to fulfil Qumqam's apparent wishes as if he has no choice about it. But on the way, Sanan inexplicably rapes and kills a young girl, unleashing a witch-hunt in which further innocent people are harmed. When Sanan tries to blame Qumqam for the atrocity ('If you hadn't burst into my life, I would not have found myself involved in crime'), Qumqam reminds Sanan that he is lying: 'Only you are responsible for your crime.' Desperate to escape his predicament, Sanan does everything except what he should do, namely refuse Qumqam's request to kill the governor and begin a process of 'reflection and repentance' that Qumqam argues is still possible for him. When Qumqam promises Sanan salvation if only he will kill the governor, an exhausted Sanan accepts instead of resisting. Having fulfilled the deed, Sanan complains to Qumqam that he did not expose his thoughts clearly enough to him. 'I exposed them clearly enough for a thinking person,' Qumqam replies. 'On the contrary, I gave you a chance for salvation which is

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532 NM, *Arabian Nights and Days (Layālī Alf Layla)*, ((Cairo: Maktab Mişr, 1982), p. 11.

533 NM, *AN&D*, p. 12.

rarely given to a living being' (c.f. the discussion in Ch. 3.6 of the officer's sacrifice with the grenade in Tarkovsky's *The Mirror*). Qumqam challenged Sanan because he saw his capacity for goodness; Sanan, however, let Qumqam down; he felt that Qumqam had played an 'unworthy trick' on him, and could not understand why he had been chosen to take responsibility for the state of the neighbourhood. But Qumqam says there is no running away from such social responsibility: 'It is a public covenant which an honest person must not ignore. Indeed, it depends first and foremost on people like you, who are not empty of good intentions.'<sup>534</sup>

Sanan had a conscience and was not a sociopath, but he failed to be the moral 'hero' that Qumqam called him to be by refusing the order to kill the governor. Sanan, indeed, crumbles under the pressure and commits a hideous crime. Even if the governor deserved some form of punishment, the energies unleashed in Sanan by Qumqam's apparent 'licence to kill' prove uncontrollable; Sanan's thirst for 'blood justice' is as dangerous as his blind obedience to Qumqam's authority. He may agree that the governor is unjust, but his passion for violence goes beyond justice; the licence to kill the governor is used as a pretext for other crimes. Sanan remains tragically blind to his own moral responsibility, insisting on his victimhood until the very end, and failing to respond to the call of civilisation, the call of the 'genie from the city'.

## **Chapter 6: Gamasa Al Bulti**

Like Sanan Al Gamali, Gamasa Al Bulti, the chief of police, is another morally mixed character, capable of both conscience and barbarism: 'In his heart, there was space for emotions but also for cruelty and greed,' the narrator tells us. While he dreams of a city with a just governor, one in which honest people do not have to 'go hungry', he is selfishly relieved that at least his superiors are worse than him: 'How light his scales were compared to those of the great sultans!' Singam, Qumqam's genie associate, visits Gamasa and offers him essentially the same deal as the one offered to Sanan by Qumqam, but is more explicit in his condemnation: 'If they call you to do good, you say that you are unable, and if they call you to do evil, you rush to do it in the name of duty.' When the 'oppressive presence' of the genie leaves him, instead of receiving the visit as a wake-up call from his conscience, Gamasa feels only a burning desire to 'escape' from conscience and civilisation. Worried for his social position, he decides to bury the secret of the genie's visit, and to continue on his merry way, 'not devoid of good feelings and echoes of religious sentiment, but neither worried about practising corruption in a corrupt world'. Gamasa Al Bulti tries to convince Singam that his

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534 NM, *AN&D*, p. 34.

mind is exercised 'entirely in the service of his duty', but Singam replies that this is an 'excuse which takes the humanity out of the human being'. Again, Gamasa justifies his corruption by saying that his criminal earnings are mere 'crumbs fallen from the table of the powerful', but for Singam, this is 'an ugly excuse'. Gamasa then goes on the offensive, accusing Singam of trying to deceive him: 'You want to deceive me to realise your secret dreams of power and authority!'

Eventually, Singam's message penetrates him, but only partially: 'Singam had convinced him that he was a contemptible human being. His only consolation had been that he was the strong arm of the state. But his sword was blunt, and security had crumbled.' Gamasa soon reaches rock bottom: 'what authority did he have left?! He was a thief, a murderer, a defender of criminals and a torturer of the honest. He had forgotten God until a genie had reminded him of His existence.'<sup>535</sup> Desperate for a solution to his predicament, and desperate to share the secret of the genie's visit, Gamasa goes to see Sheikh Abdullah Al Balji, who refuses to listen to Gamasa's story, insisting that whatever difficult decision Gamasa has to make, he must make it himself, and 'only for the love of God'. In a wave of 'fervent and mysterious emotion which made him feel his own solitude', Gamasa opts for the path of murder, listening not to the voice of God but to his own pride: 'he had faced the most dangerous situations in his life with extraordinary valour and a daring which had not faltered in the face of anything.' With the deed done, he enjoys a feeling of 'calm and serenity' for a time, but will end up paying for his sin.

## **Chapter 7: The Doorman**

Gamasa somehow survives his own execution, but finds himself transformed into a bearded Abyssinian that no one recognises, while his old severed head is displayed in public for all to see. He gets a job as a doorman (Ragab remembers that his 'first friend' Simbad is in foreign lands, and decides to help this stranger out; 'God is generous and merciful'), and tries to help his struggling family out even though they do not recognise him. This state of affairs naturally causes Gamasa a great deal of pain and frustration, but in the end, pride and victimism are transformed into gratitude:

Without forgetting that he had miraculously escaped death, he decided to follow the path of devotion to the end. He found his joy in his creed and, in his solitude, gave thanks to God. He would address his old head on display and say: 'May you remain as a symbol of the death of the evil which toyed with my spirit for a long time.' [... ]

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535 NM, *AN&D*, p. 51.

The man who had died had to stay dead, out of respect for those he loved. He had to get used to his death and concentrate on his new life as Abdullah the doorman and not Gamasa Al Bulti, and to find gratification in work and devotion.<sup>536</sup>

The Gamasa/Abdullah character is the central character in the novel, and goes a step further than the sheikh on his spiritual journey: he lets the state of the world penetrate him, and channels his frustration with injustice into social action:

His work often led him into the houses of his former acquaintances, and into the mansions of the élite and ruling class – a world of apparent piety and secret corruption. This led him to reflect on his own state and on the state of the people, disturbing the purity of his spiritual peace. The sense of discomfort stayed with him as if invading his limbs and disrupting their functions. He said to himself that just as the planets move in harmonious alignment, so too should the affairs of humanity. He wondered anxiously:

'Have I remained miraculously alive to work as a doorman?!'<sup>537</sup>

Concerned to make the best of himself, Abdullah visits the sheikh, who reminds him that 'everything is in proportion to one's aspiration', and that very few people 'continue the journey to the state of love'. When Abdullah suggests that humans need to receive love and tenderness as well as give it, the sheikh only repeats his claim that 'everything is in proportion to one's aspiration'. Abdullah does not get what he is looking for from the sheikh; he goes away and discusses the sheikh's cryptic claim with Fadil Sanan, also one of the sheikh's former students, and concludes that 'prudence', or concern for the state of the world, is 'part of the highest aspiration'. Resolving to fight, through targeted assassination, the corruption he has witnessed in the houses of the rich and powerful, Abdullah 'set out like a dart on his lofty struggle, as he imagined it, calling on his old strength but this time harnessing it in the service of an unyielding, pure will'. But something is still not right, and Singam visits him to remind him of this, and to suggest that he is still a prisoner to his old feelings of pride. Abdullah 'cannot sleep' after this visit: 'he had not stopped trying to weigh up the death of Ibrahim Al Attar, how much it was motivated by genuinely lofty motives, and how much by resentment and a desire for revenge.' In the end, however, 'God's path was clear, and there was no place for resentment or pride anywhere along it; indeed, such feelings would destroy the

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536 NM, *AN&D*, pp. 63-64.

537 NM, *AN&D*, p. 64.

path from its very source'.<sup>538</sup>

## Chapter 8: Nur Al Din and Dunyazada

In this chapter, the 'bad genies' Sajrabut and Zarmabaha – according to Qumqam, 'nihilism and evil' incarnate - burst into the story, kindling in the hearts of the humble Nur Al Din and the royal Dunyazada (Sheherezade's sister) a mutual and seemingly impossible love. Just as Akhenaten works his way into the very sinews of Mahou's respiration, so too does Nur Al Din wake from his dream with Dunyazada's whispers 'repeating themselves at the rhythm of his breath'; 'nihilism and evil', alas, are capable of such illusory transports. Nur Al Din was also a student of the sheikh, who had told him that he was one of the few fit for 'the path of divine love'. Nur Al Din recalls these words, but decides not to tell the sheikh about his dream, fearing that the sheikh would not understand: 'How lost one feels without a guide!' Nur Al Din laments. Dunyazada, for her part, is lost in a self-absorbed, evil-inspired passion:

'Where are you, my love? How did you come to me? What is your secret? What keeps you apart from me? Is it that my beauty did not captivate you as yours captivated me? Does the fire which burns in my soul not touch you? Do you feel no compassion for my torment? Don't you find it hard to live without my love and my passion for you?'<sup>539</sup>

Nur Al Din, meanwhile, begins to sense that, despite his helpless yearning for Dunyazada, salvation may be at hand: 'the strange experience that he had lived seemed to exclude all room for hope, but at times he thought he could hear the whisper of an extraordinary truth that would be revealed to him when God saw fit.'<sup>540</sup> Mahfouz then introduces the millionaire Karam Al Asil into the mix. Karam had an 'ample mansion, a wife, and dozens of female slaves', but 'he did not have their hearts'. With his money, he could 'change destinies, but he could not alter the forms of the world'. Karam's eye falls on Dunyazada, and he 'suffers at the thought' that he 'may not be able to buy her'.

Sujrabat and Zarmabaha move to organise Karam's wedding with Dunyazada, but Zarmabaha worries that 'good may sneak into the story where we least expect it'. Qumqam and Singam, meanwhile, look on helpless, following the thwarted lovers' monologues 'with profound

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538 NM, *AN&D*, p. 81.

539 NM, *AN&D*, p. 101.

540 NM, *AN&D*, p. 102.

sadness': 'look at the havoc wreaked by space and time!', Singam says to his friend, to which Qumqam replies: 'the sighs of mankind have been caught since ancient times in the river of sorrows between the planets.'<sup>541</sup> Moved to action, they send Sahlul, the angel of death, to 'carry out a mission' in the service of good. Sahlul frees Abdullah the doorman from the lunatic asylum where his hitherto murderous creed had temporarily led him. In search of a new direction after his miraculous escape, Abdullah remembers a dream of 'a being without identity, whose purpose is beyond all universes, but who thinks and reflects. Liberation has not come to you without reason'.<sup>542</sup>

Nur Al Din and Abdullah soon meet, and Nur Al Din tells Abdullah the story of his hopeless love. While Abdullah suggests that 'the love of God makes all the others superfluous', Nur Al Din replies that he is 'a believer and sincere in his devotion', but still 'has love for God's creatures'. Indeed, after this meeting with Abdullah, Nur Al Din concludes: 'it was clear that he was an ascetic'; Nur Al Din, on the other hand, 'had not been created for asceticism, but rather for the love of God exercised in the world, and that was why he had distanced himself from the sheikh Abdullah Al Balji.'<sup>543</sup> Shahriyar, keen to know more about the lives of his subjects, then crosses Nur Al Din's path disguised as a foreign traveller. 'Moved by the generosity' of Shahriyar and his travelling companions, Nur Al Din invites them to his 'humble home', where the company 'gets to know each other via the heart, which is the way with generous people', and Nur Al Din shares his story. 'With patience and engagement you will reach what you desire,' the Sultan and his companions assure him, wishing him comfort from God.

Upon his return to the palace, Shahriyar was consumed by the urgency of Nur Al Din's predicament; Sheherezade had 'never seen the sultan so excited', but could still not bring herself to trust him with Dunyazada's secret. In the end, it is Abdullah who reveals Nur Al Din's identity to Dunyazada, and even suggests a plan for them to escape together, thus revealing himself to be more than the remote ascetic Nur Al Din had believed him to be and thwarting the best-laid plans of Sajrabut and Zarmabaha. But the evil genies' work is not done; Abdullah returns to his murdering ways by killing Karam Al Asil, and although 'peace and happiness' temporarily reign in the community with the marriage of Nur Al Din and Dunyazada, this mirage of justice and stability has been forged on the foundations of Abdullah's 'ostentatious and proud' crime.

## **Chapter 9: The Adventures of Ugr the Barber**

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541 NM, *AN&D*, p. 110.

542 NM, *AN&D*, p. 112.

543 NM, *AN&D*, p. 114.

Ugr is one of many lustful, nosy, poor simpletons to populate Mahfouz's world for whom the reader nevertheless comes to feel real human warmth and sympathy. Mahfouz's message, here as elsewhere, is that with a little help and patience from human civilisation, there is hope for such people. Although Abdullah initially tries to stop him ('your mind is corrupt; that's why you won't listen to me. [...] You're a know-nothing descended from know-nothings'), Ugr is led by his own dreams of 'women, wealth, food and drink' into an illicit relationship, full of food and carnal fun, with two sisters. All goes well until he finds one of the sisters murdered in bed beside him. Ugr is unsure whether he might somehow be responsible; for a time, the cadaver hovers over his conscience and disrupts his carnal appetites. But this sobering effect does not last long; he is soon trying to turn the situation to his advantage, ignobly blackmailing his way to money and women and kidnapping a hunchback along the way. In the end, however, he realises he will have to let the hunchback go ('He had no alternative left but to take possession of his promised spouse and escape with her on the first boat to begin a new life in a faraway land, a life of riches, love, and repentance.'). Despite these inklings of conscience, Ugr is not yet able to overcome his own sense of entitlement and to take responsibility for what he has done: 'he told himself that he was not a bad man, and that he had been forced into scheming by his deprived and weakened state. God had given him a poor man's lot and a rich man's tastes. How was he to blame for any of that?'<sup>544</sup>

His ruses uncovered, Ugr finds that 'feelings of security had vanished from his world and the lamp of hope had gone out. Although he was Qamar's husband, she was further away than the stars. He was rich but threatened with death.' Abdullah saves Ugr from decapitation at the hands of the local authorities, and at long last intervenes not through murder but by supplying information to the Sultan. Shahriyar punishes the real offenders firmly but fairly and confiscates all of Ugr's ill-gotten assets, but otherwise leaves him free. 'The Sultan has changed,' Dandan now feels safe to affirm. 'He has turned into another person, full of religious sentiment and a sense of justice'. Sheherezade, however, remains unconvinced: 'Part of him still cannot be trusted, and his hands are still stained by the blood of the innocent.' As for Ugr, he has at last made the transition to gratitude and civilisation: 'the joy of salvation made him forget his material losses. He immediately rescinded his marriage with Qamar and headed towards [Abdullah ...], expressing his gratitude thus: 'I am indebted to you for life, my kind guardian.'" Above all, Abdullah has learnt that murder is an absolute last resort, and that there are more civilised and fruitful ways to fulfil his mission to 'cleanse humanity of moral pollution'.

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544 NM, *AN&D*, p. 148.



## Chapter 10: Anis Al Galis

The next chapter begins with Dandan and Shahriyar debating the ways of justice:

'Violence,' Shahriyar said, 'must remain as one of the means at the disposition of the Sultan.'

Dandan thought about this for a while and then carefully replied:

'Wisdom, not violence, is what Your Majesty intends.'

The Sultan let out a laugh which pierced the silence of the night.

'You are nothing but a hypocrite, Dandan. What did [Abdullah] say? That if the head is sound, the whole body remains healthy, since both integrity and corruption come from the top.'<sup>545</sup>

Zarmabaha watches this debate about justice 'pursued by a sense of boredom'. Singam joins Qumqam in letting Zarmabaha know the score: 'the earth shines with the light of its Lord. [...] Gamasa Al Bulti [Abdullah] and Nur Al Din, the man in love, live in this light night and day. Even Ugr has stayed in his shop and repented for his transgressions. As for the murderer Shahriyar, an impulse to follow the path of righteousness is invading him...'<sup>546</sup> Sajrabut, however, sends a beautiful woman, Anis Al Galis, to try to disrupt proceedings. Ugr is one of the first casualties ('my desire for repentance has been smashed, and the arrow of eternal torment has penetrated me'). As one man after another (with the notable exceptions of Abdullah and Nur Al Din) ruins himself in the quest for Anis's love, Qumqam and Singam look on helpless, lamenting the fact that they are 'not allowed to help the weak'. But Sahlul, the angel of death, reminds them: 'God has given them something better than anything you can give them: reason and a soul.' Such temptations as Anis Al Galis, however strong, bend but do not force the will. The point of life, Mahfouz wants to show, is to deal well with such obstacles to pleasure and flourishing when they arise, not to try to avoid such obstacles completely. Struggle (ḡihād) is the only path to God and happiness; there may only be one law in the universe, but it is not always easy to follow. This is just one reason why the Mahfouzian vision of 'one law' is not as 'boring' as Zarmabaha lamented: there is nothing boring about trying to resist Anis Al Galis, and plenty of satisfaction to be gained from doing so in the name of something higher.

One after another, the men sacrifice themselves on the altar of passion, giving up their fortunes, their responsibilities, their families, their honour, and even their clothes to the insatiable

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545 NM, *AN&D*, pp. 156-157.

546 NM, *AN&D*, p. 157.

man-eater Anis, until the apparently 'mad' Abdullah shows up at her house unannounced, trying to solve the mystery of all the missing men:

Could she lure him into her trap? She moved languidly. For the first time, her face did not have its usual irresistible effect. It seemed that she was a temptation only for the sane, not the mad. [...] 'Don't you like all this beauty?'

'I see only walls within which the age-old plague breathes.'

It was time for her to undress, as she had done with the others. But she surrendered, powerless, before his invading madness. All her tricks and strategies were in vain. [...] Her slim figure decayed and her grace and elegance left her. With amazing speed, she disintegrated, turned to smoke, and disappeared without a trace.<sup>547</sup>

Abdullah shows further evidence of moral transformation from eager murderer to just neighbourhood watchman when dealing with the men he has rescued: 'I will not save you from punishment, but I have chosen one which will be useful for you and will not harm those who follow God.'

## **Chapter 11: Qut Al Qulub**

This chapter begins with Abdullah meeting his double, who asks him why he has started pardoning sinners instead of murdering them: 'I saw them with their hearts full of shame, after having experienced human weakness. [...] Woe to the people who live under a governor who knows no sense of shame!' In other words, while it is impossible and unjust to forgive those who are not sorry for their crimes, one should ideally forgive those who genuinely repent and feel 'shame' for their sins, those who realise that they have let down something more important than themselves; this spark of conscience will be cultivated, not crushed, by wise leaders, who have themselves known the full force of 'shame' and experienced gratitude for being forgiven and will therefore distinguish between true and fake repentance.

Qumqam, Singam and Abdullah are then forced to watch 'the fall of those who had repented' as corruption once again spreads rapidly through the community. The chief of police Al Muin ibn Sawi, one of those caught in the trap laid by Anis Al Galis and brought to shame, rapes and almost

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547 NM, *AN&D*, pp. 172-173.

kills Qut al Qulub, the favourite slave of the governor Suleiman Al Zaini, whose jealous wife is also behind the plot. When Shahriyar finds out, he exclaims: 'Al Muin and Gamila, the wife of Al Zaini, should be executed!', showing that the old bloodlust that Sheherezade so fears and loathes still runs through his veins. But 'the anger suddenly vanished. Perhaps the image of Al Muin's naked flight' from Anis's house, 'pursued by feelings of sin, flashed through his mind. Perhaps he felt that Al Zaini and Al Muin were good men despite everything, although he removed them both from their posts and confiscated their assets, sentenced Gamila and Al Muin to be whipped, and gave Qut Al Qulub ten thousand dinars in compensation.'<sup>548</sup> When Shahriyar asks Qut al Qulub if there is anything else he can do for her, she asks him to pardon Al Zaini. Shahriyar accepts her petition.

## Chapter 12: Aladdin

We begin this chapter with Abdullah and Shahriyar, the two central characters in the novel, in the foreground. We first find Abdullah begging for forgiveness and justice; Singam tells him that he and Qumqam want 'the same'. Zarmabaha laughs in the background, while Shahriyar tells Dandan that 'incessant whispers' fill his head and leave him perplexed.

Next we meet Aladdin, son of Ugr and Fatuha. Ugr tells us that Aladdin has 'the beauty of Nur Al Din'. 'The lord will protect you from evil,' Fatuha tells her son. The amulet she has given him will ensure that he 'will not follow in his father's footsteps'. Ugr casts his wife a scornful look but says nothing because he knows he deserves no better; both his mother's love and his father's repentance make Aladdin possible. Once again, Mahfouz shows his optimism for the future of civilisation: if the parents have the divine spark in them, it will take flame in the children.

Aladdin inspires all those who cross his path to exclaim: 'May the Great Creator bless you.' His friend Fadil Al Sanan invites him regularly to his house, but like a young Mahfouz, Aladdin makes up excuses to avoid contact with the women of the house ('his teenage blood boiled with lust, fighting against his creed and the religious education he had received at the Quranic school'). Fadil calls him 'worthy of the words of God which are hidden in your heart', and asks him: 'What do you feel when you see all these people wallowing in sin?' 'Sadness and regret,' Aladdin replies, but for Fadil, this is not enough; Aladdin should feel 'anger' too. This debate plays itself out over the course of the chapter.

Aladdin then meets the sheikh Al Balji. The sheikh extends, as if to a starcrossed lover, a 'secret invitation' to Aladdin; Aladdin wordlessly receives it and comes to join him. The sheikh

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548 NM, *AN&D*, p. 186.

shares the following *hadith* with Aladdin: 'The corruption of learned men is caused by foolishness; the corruption of princes, by injustice; and the corruption of the poor, by hypocrisy.' The sheikh implores Aladdin not to become 'an accomplice of demons'; such accomplices are 'leaders without education, learned men without virtue, and poor men without trust in God'. Aladdin strives to understand these cryptic words, but the sheikh tells him to be patient, and, in a burst of proto-anthropocosmic enthusiasm (c.f. Tu Weiming's 'anthropocosmic' vision of civilisation introduced in Chapter 4), assures him that they are 'only the beginning of a mutual acquaintance with a view to the stars' (*mā hiya illā bidāyat ta'āruḥ 'ala mašhad min al-nuḡūm*'). The sheikh partially, though alas only momentarily, redeems himself here, showing himself to be a social being rather than an emotionally aloof ascetic devoid of a social role. He reminds Aladdin that his 'door is always open'. While Ugr ungenerously suggests that Aladdin is 'only a barber with religious impulses' and should not go beyond his station, Fatuha is pleased with Aladdin's new acquaintance.

Fadil once again expresses to Aladdin his anger at the behaviour of the ruling élites, suggesting that people like Aladdin and him are 'instruments of God' who can do good and eradicate evil. Aladdin finds himself caught between his loyalty to Fadil, a vengeful soldier in the army of God who calls Aladdin to take action against corruption, and the sheikh, who calls him to prayer and meditation (without, however, telling him to quit his day job: the sheikh only accepted students who worked). Slowly, Aladdin finds himself pulled into the sheikh's orbit ('he who satisfies himself with the ephemeral will be overcome by sadness when what pleases him comes to its end. All is vanity except the One.'). But Aladdin is still very attached to Fadil; he feels much better when the sheikh assures him that Fadil is a good young man whose righteously angry creed 'corresponds to his aspiration'. In the end, however, for the sheikh 'the sword is one creed, love is another', and 'blessed is he who manages to turn his heart from things to the lord of all things'. Although he recognises Aladdin's goodness and marries him to his daughter Zubaida, when Aladdin is murdered by the jealous new chief of police, the sheikh shows no emotion whatsoever, and can only remind Zubaida to be 'patient', telling the ridiculous story of a man who was trapped in a hole and, instead of calling out to passers-by to be rescued, prayed only to God, who 'saved him from death with death'. This is not the Mahfouzian creed; while Fadil does not go far enough in his quest for truth and fails sufficiently to question his own motives for violent action, the sheikh goes too far, forgetting that only 'feeling', a visceral love for the flesh and blood of civilisation, can give us access to certain aspects of the Divine Essence. Although Mahfouz argues that people like the sheikh are very useful guides for the young and uninitiated in civilisation and can therefore play an important social role, in the end the best men respectfully take their distance from such teachers, as Dante does from Virgil, and get on with the business of civilisation-building (by force if necessary) in the tradition of Don Quijote, whose sword, Cervantes explicitly argues, is at least symbolically

necessary for the defence of any republic of letters (c.f. Mahou's symbolic sword in *Dweller in Truth*). Mahfouz is interested in cultivating the middle path between Fadil's bloodlust and the Sheikh's aloofness, a path represented elsewhere in the novel by Nur Al Din (the 'man in love') and Abdullah, and here by Aladdin. Shahriyar, meanwhile, is battling to find this path, and attention will now turn back to him.

### **Chapter 13: The Sultan**

In one of his undercover nocturnal forays into the life of his people, Shahriyar discovers a lavish banquet with singing slaves ('inside me the tongue of passion says that I love you') in which a mock court serves as the after-dinner entertainment. Ibrahim, the former water-boy and now the husband of Gamasa Al Bulti's widow, spends his new fortune entertaining the marginalised and dispensing imaginary justice, a justice which is 'impossible in the real world'; it is he who plays the role of Shahriyar in the mock trial as the real Shahriyar looks on in astonishment: 'I give thanks to God that he has helped me to repent after I had immersed myself in spilling the blood of the innocent and pillaging the assets of Muslims. He is truly generous with his pity and forgiveness.'<sup>549</sup> Shahriyar accuses Ibrahim of having 'lost his mind to hashish' for having decided to 'create an imaginary kingdom where we could all be equal'; Ibrahim himself agrees that this must be the case. Nevertheless, the island created by Ibrahim is not an egalitarian paradise (remember the singing slaves); it resembles more the dream of the 'hypocritical poor' against which the sheikh rightly warned. Instead of using his new-found treasure for investment in real social development, Ibrahim and the marginalised poor who flock to his parties waste money enjoying themselves, eating and drinking too much, and taking refuge in cheap, imaginary justice (c.f. Mahfouz's *Adrift on the Nile*). While they may have 'bought' themselves 'an incalculable happiness', they have failed to convert themselves into truly decent men, and seem unaware of the hypocrisy of asking for justice while themselves failing to behave justly.

Shahriyar, however, moved by sympathy for Aladdin and the thirst for justice he finds among the crowd in attendance, decides to reopen the investigation into Aladdin's death.

### **Chapter 14: The Cape of Invisibility**

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549 NM, *AN&D*, p. 208.

In this chapter, the bad genies set their sights on Fadil Sanan. An unknown foreigner offers Fadil a cape which will make him invisible when he wants, and which he can use 'for anything except what your conscience dictates'. Fadil follows the stranger's nihilistic reasoning that 'there are many things which are neither good nor bad', and eventually accepts the gift on the grounds that he has nothing to lose and 'nothing to fear' from it.

Fadil thus finds himself in the dangerous and antisocial situation where he can 'see faces he knew without them being able to see him'. He continues to ask himself what the point of having the cape is if he can do no good with it, until he decides to break the pact and use the cape to murder a man he believes deserves it. Unfortunately, the man he murders turns out to be the upstanding twin brother of the target. Fadil plunges into a spiral of guilt and violent self-loathing, begins drinking and committing horrific crimes. Abdullah, who had always greeted him with a friendly handshake, now ignores him, seemingly perceiving that 'the devil was hiding under his skin'. Eventually, Fadil realises that he has 'turned into a dead man': 'From that day on, there was no life for him except the life of the cape. He was like a spirit condemned to wander in darkness, unable to visit anywhere except the provinces of frivolity and evil, and deprived of the power to repent and the chance to do good.'<sup>550</sup> Fadil loathes his 'state of non-existence', but seems unable to do anything about it. When the sheikh is asked to explain the crime wave rocking the community, he says simply that 'we lack faith', the 'true faith' which is 'rarer than a unicorn'; the community, Mahfouz wants to suggest – the sheikh included – is somehow responsible for failing sufficiently to cultivate this spark in people like Fadil.

Luckily, Fadil has received just enough of a spark to begin the process of saving himself. A 'ray of light' eventually appears ('for the first time, Fadil reacted against his desperation, surprising himself, and he wondered if there was still any room left for reflection and repentance'), upon which the owner of the cape appears and asks him: 'Have you still not cured yourself of your old infirmity?' A battle of wills ensues, until finally Fadil tells the owner of the cape ('they will tear you to shreds!') to 'leave him in peace' ('I know what awaits me better than you do'), thereby exposing himself to humiliation and judgement at the hands of the community. He accepts his execution with 'a firm step, a calm face, and humble resignation', begging Sahlul, the angel of death, only 'for justice'.

## **Chapter 15: Maruf the Shoemaker**

Maruf finds himself in poverty and married to Firdaus Al Urra, 'a greedy glutton with a bad character, a strong and violent woman': 'between his day job and his marriage, [Maruf's] life was hell. Not a single day went by without him receiving blows or insults, while he was left to tremble before her in fear and humiliation'.<sup>551</sup> While he dreamt of escape, Maruf felt like a 'prisoner, just as Fadil Sanan had been a prisoner of the devil'. One night, he takes some drugs and heads to the Princes' Café, where he tells his friends 'the truth' (a lie) that he has found Solomon's ring. Called by his mocking friends to produce a miracle, Maruf unexpectedly finds himself levitating above them. Reminded by his friends not to forget them and by Al Zaini not to forget God, Maruf heads home to find his wife waiting for him, 'smiling at him for the first time in years'. Emboldened by his newfound power, Maruf tells his wife to 'go to hell', and smiles himself 'for the first time in a long time' when he finds that he has his humble abode to himself. Although he may have been justified in throwing his wife out, the vengeful pleasure with which he does so is, we know by now, a bad omen. As Maruf tries to understand why he has been given this strange power, he finds that everyone is treating him with newfound respect and extending invitations to him, causing him to 'smile proudly as a man in control of his situation'. Shahriyar soon summons him, and Maruf repeats, to his own great surprise, his diabolically inspired feats of levitation. Only then does the bill arrive: Maruf is told that he must kill the sheikh Al Balji and Abdullah if he wants to keep his powers. This deal left Maruf in 'hell' (*ġaḥīm*) once more ('Would he kill [Al Balji and Abdullah]? He coveted wealth, but he was also a decent and weak man, and a believer in God.'), and his thoughts turn to 'escape' with his new wife and his money. There is to be no getting away, however; Maruf and his wife are arrested trying to escape. Nevertheless, Shahriyar recognises the relative nobility of Maruf's struggle to avoid collaboration with the devil, and, in a radical experiment, appoints Maruf Governor of the neighbourhood.

## **Chapter 16: Simbad**

Maruf asks to have Nur Al Din as his personal secretary and Abdullah ('Abdullah the Just') as his chief of police. To Dandan's surprise, Shahriyar accepts Maruf's petition ('we are venturing into a new experience'). The Princes' Café is then greeted with Simbad's return; the patrons are overwhelmed by emotion and by a desire to hear of Simbad's adventures abroad. The sheikh Al Balji, Simbad's former teacher, shows himself to be the exception to this rule; although Simbad longs to share his stories with him ('you will find things to like in them'), the sheikh is 'only worried

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551 NM, *AN&D*, p. 231.

about one thing' ('he who has known God is indifferent to everything which is not Him') – a final proof, if one were needed, that the sheikh is emphatically *not* Naguib Mahfouz. Shahriyar, on the other hand, wants to hear what Simbad has 'learnt while travelling, what knowledge you have obtained, and how you have used that knowledge'. The most important thing Simbad has learned is that 'people are deceived by illusion; they think it is the truth, but there is no salvation for us until we set foot on firm ground': indeed, he says, 'we must use the senses and the intelligence God has given us. [...] I have also learned that one should not sleep when one needs to be awake, and that where there is life there is hope.'<sup>552</sup> Simbad goes on to tell the sultan that food and sex are 'a fuel when consumed in moderation but a danger when consumed excessively', and that 'it is dangerous to carry on outmoded traditions' such as those involving human sacrifices. Nevertheless, Simbad shows himself capable of abandoning a pregnant wife and killing a nasty old man, and of employing too-easy excuses to justify his self-serving behaviour. Shahriyar 'sighs' and exclaims: 'How much enslaves us in this world!' Still, Shahriyar concludes: 'you have seen wonders of the world that no other human being has contemplated, and you have learnt numerous lessons. Enjoy, therefore, the wealth and wisdom that God has apportioned to you.'<sup>553</sup>

Simbad's tales stir Shahriyar to reflect further on the vanity of earthly power and glory, and to 'curse' everything from 'emitters of pernicious legal decrees' to 'gold pillaged and wasted on wine', 'fancy turbans and furniture', 'empty hearts', and 'the sarcastic laughs of the universe'. While Sheherezade reminds him that Simbad's stories come from 'the same source' as her own, Shahriyar can take no more stories:

Wisdom [...] does not get passed down like a crown. [...] Do you know why I have kept you close to me? Because I found in your loathing for me the lasting torment that I deserved. What saddens me now is that I think I deserve an even greater punishment. [...] Cry, Sheherezade, for it is better than lying. [...] The palace belongs to you and your son, who will govern the city one day soon. It is I who must leave, and assume the burden of my bloody past. [...] For ten years, I have lived torn between temptation and duty. I remember even if I pretend to forget. I try to think of myself as sophisticated while I lead a libertine existence. I act and then I repent. I take one step forward and then another step back. And I am tormented all the time. The time has come for me to listen to the call of salvation, the call of wisdom.<sup>554</sup>

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552 NM, *AN&D*, p. 253.

553 NM, *AN&D*, p. 256.

554 NM, *AN&D*, pp. 257-258.



While Sheherezade laments that Shahriyar is abandoning her 'just as her heart is opening to him', Shahriyar insists that 'he will never return to seek out human hearts again'. Although this seems a sheikh-like waste, Shahriyar feels that, for the time being, he has no choice. To his credit, however, his last thought is not for himself at all: 'Go and fulfil your obligation, Sheherezade. You have educated the father; now you must prepare the son for a better future.'<sup>555</sup>

Simbad, meanwhile, gets itchy feet once more. While the sheikh counsels Simbad to embark instead on a spiritual course whose goal is 'to arrive at a single preoccupation' and 'to prepare for death', Simbad tells the sheikh that he is 'not that kind of believer' and that the calls of conscience 'come from a thousand and one wonderful places', while Dr. Abdul Qadir Al Mahni, a voice of reason, decency and social engagement throughout the novel, tells the sheikh that Simbad is obviously a 'born traveller' and that the sheikh should wish him well. 'Go in peace, and come back loaded with diamonds and wisdom, but don't repeat your mistakes,' the doctor tells him.

## **Chapter 17: Those Who Weep**

The final chapter recounts Shahriyar's adventures after leaving the palace. He finds himself absorbed in a dream-state which promises him youth, wealth, the queen of his dreams and 'a forty-day wedding' ('I am nothing more than a slave of your majesty,' Shahriyar tells the woman, who replies: 'No, you are my companion in love and my companion on the throne.'). In this tempting but ultimately sadistic and diabolical nightmare-kingdom ('imperatives do not exist here except in love'), the queen assures Shahriyar that he 'will only know true happiness when he completely forgets the past'. This is, we have learnt, the opposite of the truth in Mahfouz's world. In a reversal of the Eden-myth, Shahriyar escapes the garden of temptation by opening the only door that was sadistically forbidden to him, only to find himself cast back to the wilderness of Earth, and greeted by 'Abdullah the Just', who reveals to him the message of the entire Mahfouzian oeuvre: that truth, while seemingly 'necessary', cannot be found by escaping from a felt engagement with the human community. The novel ends with Abdullah the Just 'heading for the city' to fulfil his role as chief of police.

### *2.10 The Significance of Shahriyar's Journey*

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555 NM, *AN&D*, p. 259.

*We must always bear in mind that art is a divinely sanctioned game. Literature, true literature, is not to be ingested as a concoction which might be good for the heart or the head, the mere stomach of the soul. Literature has to be taken and broken into pieces, undone, ground down; only then will you smell its divine fragrance in your hand, chew it and turn it on your tongue with relish, and only then will you appreciate it in its just measure, with its broken down and crushed constituents reassembled in the soul to reveal the beauty of a unity to which the reader has contributed some of her blood.*<sup>556</sup>

Vladimir Nabokov

Just as Rasheed El Enany misses the civilisational point of *Akhenaten: Dweller in Truth*, so too does he completely ignore the character of Abdullah in his 1995 review of *Arabian Nights and Days*, focusing instead on Shahriyar, and even there, failing to understand the significance of Shahriyar's journey:

Mahfouz draws the portrait of Shahriyar with great care, showing in a gradual and convincing way his transformation from bloodthirsty tyrant into just leader, and finally into a disoriented man who gives up power and embarks on a long quest for the meaning of existence – an evolution which seems to reflect the evolution of humanity from primitive times right up to the complexity of conscience in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The moment of truth in Shahriyar's life comes when he hears Sinbad recounting his extraordinary travels: he realises the horror of his former life. The art of the storyteller has exercised its cathartic effect. Shahriyar deems himself unsuited to government. He abdicates and sets out in search of his own salvation, leaving behind him – oh the irony – a Sheherazade who is beginning to love him and does not want him to leave. At the end of his quest, Shahriyar enters Paradise, but soon breaks a heavenly law and finds himself back on Earth. Thus the cycle of sin (motivated by the desire to know) and punishment is completed. Note here an important omission from the biblical account: there is no serpent, no evil, no woman. Shahriyar's fall is his own fault; Mahfouz wants to convince us that the responsibility

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556 Vladimir Nabokov, *Course of Russian Literature*, pp. 207-209.

for human choices rests on nothing other than the will power of each individual.

Shahriyar returns to Earth, but his soul remains tied to Heaven, to the ideal world he has seen with the eyes of his spirit.<sup>557</sup>

Beyond 'reflecting the evolution of humanity from primitive times to the complexity of conscience in the 20<sup>th</sup> century', Shahriyar's journey serves only to throw Abdullah's even greater journey into starker relief. The 'paradise' which Enany describes Shahriyar entering is in fact an 'illusion' of precisely the kind against which Simbad warns, and for which all the stories leading up to the final chapter prepare us. It is to Shahriyar's credit that, like Maruf, he recognises in some vague sense that there is something not right about this offer of bliss and tries to escape through the only available door. At the end of the novel, moreover, we have no idea whether, as Enany claims, Shahriyar's heart remains 'tied to the sky' or whether, as seems much more likely, he will follow Abdullah back to the city and return, like a Platonic philosopher returning to the human cave, to the task of civilisation-building, or at the very least remain in self-imposed purgatory in the city's deserted environs until he is ready to do so.

Assaad Cherif Omar gets much closer to the essence of Mahfouz when he compares the treatment of the *Thousand and One Nights* in 'Fantasy and Tradition in Two Texts by Jorge Luis Borges and Naguib Mahfouz'.<sup>558</sup> Omar quotes Borges as sharing the same views as Mahfouz on the purpose of literary creation ('my stories, like those of the *Thousand and One Nights*, aim to move [conmover] and not to persuade'), before suggesting that 'it is as if Mahfouz had made his own the following lines from Antonio Machado: "After living and dreaming/ Comes that which matters most:/ Waking."<sup>559</sup> In the thirst for narrative inspired by the *Thousand and One Nights* and common to Borges and Mahfouz, Omar finds proof that 'the confluence of tastes and mutual influences continues, and will keep continuing, because it is a law of life; the meeting of three worlds: Europe, America, and the Orient.'<sup>560</sup> In the remaining two chapters, as our attention shifts from Mahfouz to Andrei Tarkovsky and Tu Weiming respectively, Mahfouz will continue to echo through these distant worlds; indeed, all three warriors along with their Western counterparts exercise a 'mutual influence' on each other in accordance with the 'law of life' which Omar so eloquently describes.

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557 Rasheed El Enany, 'Mahfouz and the *Thousand and One Nights*' ('Mahfouz et les *Mille et Une Nuits*'), 1/6/1995, [http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/mahfouz-et-les-mille-et-une-nuits\\_798797.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/mahfouz-et-les-mille-et-une-nuits_798797.html) (accessed 20/3/12).

558 Assaad Cherif Omar, 'Fantasy and Tradition in Two Texts by Jorge Luis Borges and Naguib Mahfouz' ('Fantasía y Tradición en Dos Textos de Jorge Luis Borges y Naguib Mahfuz'), *Revista del Instituto Egipcio de Estudios Islámicos de Madrid*, no. 26, 1994, pp. 179-185.

559 Omar, 'Fantasy and Tradition in Two Texts by Jorge Luis Borges and Naguib Mahfouz', p. 184.

560 Omar, 'Fantasy and Tradition in Two Texts by Jorge Luis Borges and Naguib Mahfouz', p. 184.

### 3. Andrei Tarkovsky

*The present is what we suffer, the future what we hope for, and the past what we cherish, both bitter and sweet.*<sup>561</sup>

Naguib Mahfouz

#### *3.1 The Pillars of Tarkovskian Civilisation*

Andrei Tarkovsky (1932-1986) is a generation younger than Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006), but achieved the full extent of his global fame in the 1970s and 1980s, around the time that Mahfouz's patient labours were beginning to be recognised outside the Arab world (culminating in the 1988 Nobel Prize). Tarkovsky, whose father Arseny was arguably the finest Russian poet of his generation and a translator of Oriental literatures, decided to pursue the new medium of film after 18 months of undergraduate Arabic study. Despite his struggles with Soviet censors, which limited his output to a mere seven films and eventually forced him to emigrate to Europe, and despite his eager embrace of the best of global high culture from Shakespeare<sup>562</sup> to Daoist music and beyond, Tarkovsky remained a dedicated Russian and even a dedicated Soviet, though one unwilling and unable to shake his roots in pre-revolutionary Russian Orthodox religion and spirituality and the rich 19th-century Russian literary and philosophical tradition embracing such names as Pushkin, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky and Ilyin.

The continuity of Orthodox civilisation, and its specific role in defending 'civilisation' as a whole from barbarism, is dramatised by Tarkovsky in the central scene in his autobiographical film *Zerkalo (The Mirror)*, the fourth of his seven films, where Ignat, the son of the protagonist, is asked

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561 NM, in Francka Mouloudi, *Naguib Mahfouz: Passages de Siècle*, (Harmattan, 1999) (film).

562 For a taste of Tarkovsky's particular obsession with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, a play which he staged in 1977 with Anatoly Solonitsyn in the main role, see Viktor Filimonov, *Andrei Tarkovsky*, (Moscow: Molodaya Gvardia, 2011), pp. 296-300. For an even more concise summary of the Hamlet theme in Tarkovsky, see Lyudmilla Boyadzhieva, *Andrei Tarkovsky: Life on a Cross (Andrei Tarkovsky: Zhizn' na Kreste)*, (Moscow: ANF, 2012), p. 233: for Tarkovsky, Hamlet's greatness resides in his reluctance 'to accept the laws of this world, to give up his moral aspirations and become a common killer'. In other words, like Mahfouz's Akhenaten and Wolin's Moses, Hamlet feels the pull of the world as it should be – a world in which violence is only ever a last resort - over the world as it currently is, where revenge is used, just as it is by several characters in Mahfouz's *Arabian Nights and Days*, as a pretext for bloodthirsty and immoral slaughter. The unique twist which Tarkovsky adds to Shakespeare's play by having Hamlet rise from the dead frees him, in the words of A. Obratsova (see Filimonov, p. 299), 'from the burden of awareness of his unwitting participation in a world of vice and lawlessness, unavoidable in the historical situation in which he found himself. Striving for the moral improvement of society, he above all wanted to raise the spiritual value of each individual and continues even now to nurture this dream, which becomes a reality. [...] The end of the play attempts to convey the idea of a collective burst towards moral perfection' inspired by Hamlet's pioneering leadership.

to read aloud from Pushkin's 1831 letter to Chaadaev by a 'timeless' teacher:

There is no doubt that the Schism separated us from the rest of Europe, and that we did not take part in any of the great events that shook the European continent, but we nevertheless had our own world-historical role. Russia: its vast lands absorbed the Mongol invasion. The Tatars too retreated to their deserts, and Christian civilization was saved. [...] Although I am personally very attached to the Emperor, I do not admire all that I see around me [...] but upon my honor, I would not for anything in the world want to change our country or have a different history than the history of our ancestors, such as God gave it to us.<sup>563</sup>

Even at the heart of his most autobiographical film, Tarkovsky, via recourse to Pushkin, defines Russia's greatness in terms of its world-historical role: it is the world as a whole and the survival of civilisation which matter. All seven of Tarkovsky's films, the last of which, *Sacrifice*, was released in the same year as Mahfouz's *Dweller in Truth* (1985), are a desperate attempt to remind the world of the existence of moral and spiritual values, indeed of a single Moral Law, in an era of rampant individualism, relativism and materialism. The central theme of Igor Evlampiev's brilliant and untranslated 2001 study *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, from which we will have the privilege of drawing liberally in this chapter, is precisely Tarkovsky's inheritance of the 19th-century Russian philosophical and spiritual tradition which stressed the ideas of 'deep truth' (*istina*) and 'the oneness of everything' (*vseedinstvo*). This distinctly un-Soviet commitment to prerevolutionary Russian ideas heavily indebted to Orthodox Christianity left Tarkovsky intellectually marginalised inside the Soviet Union; though unappreciated in the Soviet Russia he finally emigrated from, Tarkovsky nevertheless became, like Mahfouz, a standard-bearer in the West for a brand of thinking recognisably committed to values of truth and unity which Western intellectuals themselves largely abandoned during the final decades of the Cold War.

There is no evidence that Mahfouz and Tarkovsky knew, or even knew of, each other. Tarkovsky did enrol to study Arabic at university, but gave up after a year or so when he realised how difficult it was going to be. Mahfouz, as we have seen, repeatedly praised the bravery of Soviet citizens and their sacrifices for the socialist experiment in which he, like Tarkovsky, in principle believed even as he criticised its horrific failures and democratic shortcomings. And of course Mahfouz was heavily influenced, as Tarkovsky was, by contact with the work of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. But the central starting point for comparison between Mahfouz and Tarkovsky, the

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563 See Andrei Tarkovsky, *The Mirror (Zerkalo)*, Mosfilm, 1974.

details of which we will be exploring in this chapter, is that, just as the West began to embrace the relativist ideas of poststructuralism and postmodernism in the 1970s and 1980s, arguably the best-known and best-loved representatives of Arab and Russian high culture in the West - Mahfouz and Tarkovsky respectively - were simultaneously preaching grand narratives of civilisational unity and progress in the face of apocalyptic Cold War threats to the survival of the planet and humanity as a whole.

Whether it means importing the best from elsewhere or taking pride in one's own civilisational heritage, what matters more than anything to both Mahfouz and Tarkovsky is civilisation itself, and its survival 'on their watch', to use a military metaphor worthy of our warriors, into the next century. All seven of Tarkovsky's films dramatise precisely this readiness for sacrifice in the name of civilisation: Ivan gives up his life to resist Nazism in *Ivanogo Detstvo*; Andrei and Boris fight medieval ignorance and barbarism to spread the word of God in *Andrei Rublev*; Kris redeems humanity by engaging in civilised dialogue with the Ocean in *Solaris*, even risking his own mental health to do so; the Stalker risks death in order to bring the necessary magic of the Zone to jaded modern meaning-seekers; Domenico burns himself alive in the name of humanity at the end of *Nostalgia*; and Alexander burns his own house down in order to protect his son and the rest of humanity from a nuclear apocalypse in *Sacrifice*. And perhaps the most important example of all comes, as we have seen, from the structurally central scene in *Zerkalo* in which Ignat quotes Pushkin's letter to Chaadaev on Russia's indispensable role in the history of civilisation and the sacrifices it has made in its name.

All this sacrifice, however, is only made possible by love, or transcendence of the self. To be willing to die for a cause is to love that cause more than one's own life; it is diametrically opposed to the *homo economicus* view of man as a rational egoist. For Tarkovsky, the goal of moral education and the high-point of civilisational development is an overcoming of material and self-prolonging appetites in the name of love, a willingness to lay down all that one has so that the group as a whole or certain individuals within it can survive. Tarkovsky's critics have pointed out that he struggled to live up to this lofty ideal in his own life, repeatedly preferring to indulge expensive appetites and abandoning his own family in his quest for artistic recognition and fulfilment. As we will see, however, Tarkovsky's diaries reveal a man with a hypertrophied conscience, painfully aware of his own shortcomings, generous to the point of weakness in his dealings with those closest to him but susceptible to the wiles of his self-centred second wife Larisa and constantly struggling to balance the demands of work and family. Before we explore Tarkovsky's elaborations of the civilisation theme in each of his seven films, it behooves us to explore in greater detail the man, his life, and his capacity for the love and sacrifice and faith in 'the unity of all things' which are the pillars of his concept of civilisation.

### 3.2. *Life on the Cross?*

Lyudmilla Boyadzhieva's 2012 biography of Tarkovsky, *Andrei Tarkovsky: Life on a Cross*, comes close to outright character assassination. From the beginning, Boyadzhieva is only willing sarcastically to acknowledge the apocalyptic urgency of the Tarkovskian oeuvre: 'He knew unreservedly: the world, in order to survive, needs a new *homo sapiens*, formed under the spell of Great Art, High Culture and inviolable spiritual values, [individuals] guided only by moral laws and oblivious to all kinds of material blessing sought by the lowly body.'<sup>564</sup> Boyadzhieva's insistence on Tarkovsky's mind-body dualism, however, confuses his championing of spiritual sensitivity (*dukhovnost'*) over vulgar end-in-itself materialism with contempt for the physical dimension of spiritual striving: on the contrary, Tarkovsky's attention to the physical hues of his characters' moral development is arguably unmatched in the history of cinema. From the sinuous purity of Ivan and Boris in Tarkovsky's early films to the otherworldly beauty of Hari in *Solaris*, the stoic sensuality of the young Maria Ivanovna in *Zerkalo*, the portrayal of the Stalker's lithe traversing of the Zone, Gorchakov's brooding honesty in *Nostalgia* and Maria's rustic charms in *Sacrifice*, the body is – for where else could such transformations take place? – the site of discipline and improvement, and only 'low' insofar as it is also, by definition, the site of excess and depravity, perhaps most memorably embodied by the raving Adelaide in *Sacrifice*. Evlampiev's insistence on *istina* and *vseedinstvo* in Tarkovsky comes much closer to the mark than Boyadzhieva's positing of a hyper-Platonic distinction between lowly body and lofty soul, and Boyadzhieva's criticisms of Tarkovsky, cast as they are in the light of this distinction, suffer for it even as they warrant being taken seriously by any would-be hagiographers.

Boyadzhieva's central charge is that Tarkovsky, in pursuit of 'higher' truths, neglected the physical and social realities of his own existence: 'he created new worlds made up of often rationally inexplicable elements, exploring phenomena and feelings all but alien to himself – sacrifice, compassion, love.'<sup>565</sup> The charge of dualism soon rears its head again in Boyadzhieva's analysis: 'the paradox of Tarkovsky's cryptically complex personality consisted in the fact the he existed simultaneously as if in two different realms, thereby acquiring a kind of 'dual citizenship': in the material and spiritual worlds'.<sup>566</sup> This distinction allows her to pursue her personal charges against a man whom she nevertheless regards as a talented artist: 'in the loftier spheres one finds the

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564 Lyudmilla Boyadzhieva, *Andrei Tarkovsky: Life on a Cross (Andrei Tarkovsky: Zhizn' na Kreste)*, (Moscow: ANF, 2012), p. 9.

565 Boyadzhieva, *Life on a Cross*, p. 11.

566 Boyadzhieva, *Life on a Cross*, p. 11.

sources of a unique gift, at the same time as the real-life, fleshly plane determines the special characteristics of a nature which does not befit the gift and which often works against it.<sup>567</sup> Yet if one views Tarkovsky's struggle as one not of overcoming the material in favour of the spiritual but rather one of uniting the material and spiritual planes in a single unity – whence the odd juxtapositions of political and personal events in, for example, *Zerkalo* – Tarkovsky's life and sacrifices for his art, which eventually included the painful process of emigrating and abandoning his children, begin to make more sense and to have more dignity than Boyadzhieva can give them. Tarkovsky, indeed, revered his country, in spite of all the negative trappings of the brand of socialism which had developed there - 'the idiocy, the cruelty, the deceit and general climate of hostility' – and wanted to be "' understood by his native land" and to be looked after and honoured by it'; he nevertheless 'came to be seen as extraneous and undesirable' by Soviet authorities 'with their keen nose for all that was "foreign"' and was forced to seek asylum in order to pursue his Arnoldian mission, described by Boyadzhieva as 'the task of perfecting humanity'.<sup>568</sup> In this description, however, Boyadzhieva betrays her total lack of sympathy for Tarkovsky's Arnoldian project, arguing that in 'giving over all his spiritual and creative forces' to this task, he merely indulged in megalomaniac fantasies and 'considered himself a Messiah'.<sup>569</sup> Boyadzhieva also harshly criticises Tarkovsky's 'messianic' unwillingness to compromise on his artistic goals for the benefit of the 'broad Soviet public', which 'did not have the cultural resources to feel at home in the world of Tarkovsky's films, lacking both the intellectual capital and aesthetic discernment necessary to appreciate such difficult material': in Boyadzhieva's harsh assessment, Tarkovsky 'did not set out to entertain people, or even to interest them. He was afraid of even the tiniest drops of sentimentality or humour leaking into his films', and as such, was adamant that 'watching one of his films would be a painful operation, almost as painful as the process of making it. Only afterwards could a person, having been led to the depths of self-knowledge by her teacher, change something in herself, and in turn change a world mired in lowly materiality.'<sup>570</sup> Boyadzhieva's cynical dualistic analysis, however, threatens to obscure the apparent fact that Tarkovsky, who as we will see calls in his diary for the coming of a new moral Messiah with persuasive powers beyond any he attributed to himself, only considered himself a 'Messiah' to the extent that anyone with moral beliefs feels a duty to act on those beliefs and argue for them in public; that he failed fully to live up to them, as he himself freely and repeatedly admitted, only puts him in the illustrious company of any serious person. The total unwillingness to compromise artistically, to condescend to the tastes of the market, represents a commitment to a qualitatively different kind of activity from market-driven

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567 Boyadzhieva, *Life on a Cross*, p. 11.

568 Boyadzhieva, *Life on a Cross*, pp. 11-12.

569 Boyadzhieva, *Life on a Cross*, p. 12.

570 Boyadzhieva, *Life on a Cross*, p. 12.



entertainment; one may question the tactics, and many have, but the commitment to high culture – to a 'best that has been thought and said in the world' irrespective of prevailing tastes - as a unifier and improver of humanity is unquestionable.

Boyadzhieva's main charge is that Tarkovsky's obsession with civilisation in the highest, 'best-that-has-been-thought-and-said' sense not only blinded him to the profound effects of his behaviour on concrete individuals, but actually blinded him to the existence of these individuals altogether: 'In his real life the secret of love was unknown to him. In the sense of sacrifice or self-sacrifice, he didn't love anyone – neither his friends, nor his colleagues, nor his children, nor the women in his life.'<sup>571</sup> With reference to women in particular, Boyadzhieva also quotes, though without referencing it, one of Tarkovsky's many tragic and self-injuringly misogynistic claims regarding female spiritual autonomy: 'a woman does not have her own inner life and nor should she have one. Her inner world should be entirely absorbed in her man's inner world.'<sup>572</sup> From this shocking premise, Boyadzhieva deduces an unpleasant conclusion: 'not knowing how to love, he was unable to distinguish the true from the obviously false in the romantic domain.'<sup>573</sup> Although 'he declared the importance of loyalty and extreme honesty in relationships between men and women', he was nevertheless himself 'an unreliable, cheating partner', and it was 'his destiny to deceive and be deceived'.<sup>574</sup> Boyadzhieva not unreasonably points us to the central problem with Tarkovsky's chauvinistic worldview and its tragic consequences for his life: 'a woman, ready to give up her life for her persecuted martyr, could never become a necessary pillar of his life or a Muse, and would never have her feelings reciprocated'.<sup>575</sup> Instead of ending up with an intellectual and spiritual equal, Tarkovsky in his married life 'ended up in the role of the victim, a puppet in the hands of a stronger, self-serving partner. As a result – a marriage with a woman who destroyed him. Arguably the worst of all the traps which Destiny prepared for Tarkovsky was the meeting, and subsequent long years, with Larisa Kizilova, later Madame Tarkovsky.'<sup>576</sup> We will have occasion to explore the details of Andrei's relationship with Larisa in the course of this chapter, but suffice it to say at present that Tarkovsky's view, repeatedly expressed and utterly unjustified, on the female inability to lead independent intellectual and spiritual lives, significantly reduced his odds of finding love. Nevertheless, at least one woman, Natalya Bondarchuk, managed to get past this prejudice and to introduce Tarkovsky to the possibilities of heterosexual love between intellectual equals. The reasons why Tarkovsky decided to return to Larisa deserve careful consideration, both for the light they shed on Tarkovsky himself and because the decision represents, or so I will argue, the major

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571 Boyadzhieva, *Life on a Cross*, p. 13.

572 See Boyadzhieva, *Life on a Cross*, p. 13.

573 Boyadzhieva, *Life on a Cross*, p. 13.

574 Boyadzhieva, *Life on a Cross*, p. 13.

575 Boyadzhieva, *Life on a Cross*, p. 13.

576 Boyadzhieva, *Life on a Cross*, p. 13.

turning-point in Tarkovsky's life.

Boyadzhieva's biography describes in detail Tarkovsky's marital infidelities and the flimsy artistic excuses provided for them, his betrayal of two of his closest friends - Anatoly Solonitsyn and Olga Surkova - in their hours of need, and a generally capricious temperament which made life close to impossible for those working with him. Yet Tarkovsky also inspired love and forgiveness from those who might otherwise have complained at poor treatment. Natalya Bondarchuk, the star of Tarkovsky's third film *Solaris*, undisputably finds herself at the top of this long list. Her 2013 play at the Bulgakov Museum in Moscow, *Meetings on Solaris*, narrated the love story of a lifetime, and in doing so has done much to rescue Tarkovsky's artistic and personal legacy from the damage done by Boyadzhieva's overwhelmingly unflattering biography. Bondarchuk herself narrates to one side as photographs of Andrei and a younger version of herself flash across the background screen behind the actors playing Tarkovsky and Bondarchuk - Anton Afanasiev and Sofia Torosyan - onstage. What initially appears as a guileless exercise in self-promotion and narcissism soon reveals itself to be something quite other: an aging woman's attempt to recover and communicate the most important event in her life in the belief that something of universal significance is contained within it (not for nothing is Bondarchuk's book on her affair with Tarkovsky, on which *Meetings on Solaris* is based, titled *The Only Days*). At the centre of the play is the figure of Hari, Bondarchuk's character in *Solaris*; in the film, Kris Kelvin's dead wife Hari is resurrected in neutrino form by the alien Ocean in a bid to penetrate Kelvin's conscience and establish contact with humanity. Initially, the neutrino Hari is seen by Kris as a mere copy of his wife, but as he comes to realise her utter dependence on him, he finds himself declaring that the neutrino Hari is now 'the real Hari', and that he is ready to sacrifice everything for her. This transition is not portrayed as a betrayal, but rather as a continuation of the one true love in Kris's life. Through this love, the neutrino Hari is able to realise herself as a human being and eventually to overcome her dependence on it.

Tarkovsky, Bondarchuk argues in her narration, played the role of Kris Kelvin in her own life, quite literally creating her as an adult human being. After periods when it was physically unbearable to be separated from him and a 'sinful' suicide attempt when she realised he would not be leaving Larisa to be with her, Bondarchuk finally 'learnt to live without' Tarkovsky, and went on to find love with the star of Tarkovsky's first two films, Nikolai Burlyayev, to whom she remains married. Yet just as Kris Kelvin's love for the neutrino Hari constitutes a continuation of his love for his dead wife and not a betrayal, so too does Bondarchuk portray her love for Burlyayev as a continuation of the flame for Tarkovsky, seeing not malice but rather destiny in Tarkovsky's final decision, and 40 years on, choosing to celebrate the brief moments of true happiness they shared together rather than burning them as fakes.

If the story ends with a happy marriage for Bondarchuk, it is less clear that it did for

Tarkovsky. The scenes of torment Bondarchuk choreographs onstage when Andrei meets her in later years reflect a desperately unhappy and trapped soul wondering if it hasn't made an unforgivable error. For if Tarkovsky's central role in Bondarchuk's life is made plain by Bondarchuk herself, all the evidence presented in Bondarchuk's play suggests that she was also the closest thing in his life to true love, and that he let her go out of fear: fear of abandoning another wife and child. The figure of Larisa, indeed, haunts the play as it haunts the second half of Tarkovsky's life; this hands-on, pragmatic and at times frankly demonic woman was to all appearances the opposite of everything Tarkovsky valued in his art and philosophy. Betrayal, manipulation and hysteria seem to have been the only constants with Larisa; though not altogether obvious in Bondarchuk's play, a picture emerges from sources to be cited below of a venal woman who used her practical skills to take advantage of an impractical man prone to attribute guilt to himself. Tarkovsky was clearly afraid to hurt someone so emotionally fragile - his diary entries repeatedly refer to 'poor Larisa' - and he frankly needed her practical support, but this was not love as he had known it with Bondarchuk, or even with his first wife Irma, whom he later regretted leaving.<sup>577</sup> Still, I wanted confirmation of this suspicion from Bondarchuk herself, and she was kind enough to give me half an hour of her time after the final night of *Meetings on Solaris* on June 26. I didn't record the interview as I was hoping for some off-the-record insight. I was not to be disappointed.

One particularly memorable moment from the play was the scene in which Larisa tells Natalya to forget about the affair with Andrei, that in the grand scheme of things it was 'unimportant'. This heartless pragmatism helped drive Bondarchuk into her suicidal rage in the first place: how could anyone, let alone Andrei's wife, dare to suggest that the most important event in her whole life was 'unimportant'?! Yet 40 years on, even Bondarchuk conceded to me that Andrei and Larisa deserved each other, and that 'everyone in the end gets the partner they deserve'. She stressed the practical aspect of Larisa's appeal to Andrei: he was virtually incapable of doing anything for himself. The neurotic side of Andrei, well portrayed in the play by Anton Afanasiev, was also brought home to me by Bondarchuk, and was well summarised by Tarkovsky himself in a diary entry from the days of *Solaris*: 'I am not a saint or an angel, but an egoist who fears more than anything in the world the suffering of those whom he loves'.<sup>578</sup> A man like that is going to have a very hard time indeed leaving a woman like Larisa, although if the portrayal of the hysterical and utterly selfish figure of Adelaide in his final film *Sacrifice*, a character which Bondarchuk herself confirmed was modelled on Larisa, is anything to go by, Tarkovsky had indeed realised the score by the end, even if he was too sick and too stuck to admit it openly to himself or to do anything about

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577 See Paola Volkova, *Andrei Tarkovsky: Nostalgia*, (Moscow: Zebra E., 2008), p. 343.

578 Andrei Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog: Diaries (Martyrolog: Dnevnik)*, (Istituto Internazionale Andrej Tarkovskij, 2008), p. 40.

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More than unpublished gossipy detail, Bondarchuk provided me with the proof I needed as a would-be presenter Tarkovsky's civilisational vision: a sense of the man's fundamental goodness. The sacrifices for art were never made lightly, and many of the betrayals in Andrei's life were attributable to Larisa's malign influence or the dishonesty of the betrayed parties themselves. But Bondarchuk made no excuses for Andrei's weaknesses either; what matters to her 40 years on is that they shared brief moments of true happiness together in between the other peripheral nonsense, moments that are, to paraphrase Philip Larkin, 'what will survive of us'. True love like this does not guard itself jealously but shares itself as widely as it can, for it belongs somehow to all of us even as it belongs to the lovers alone; this is what Tarkovsky, the great believer in the spiritual unity of human civilisation, taught Bondarchuk, and what she herself now wants, quite openly, to pass on to younger generations (her affection for Sofia Torosyan, who played her younger self, and the other young cast members of *Meetings on Solaris* was evident both onstage and off). Where I had expected caution and evasion, I found frank, open warmth: 'Tell me what you need to know', Bondarchuk began our interview by saying, and she did not hold back. When I asked why she never worked with Tarkovsky again after *Solaris*, she replied matter-of-factly: 'Larisa would never have allowed it.' The contrast between the two women, and the tragic consequences of Tarkovsky's choice of Larisa, had never been more apparent to me.

Although Boyadzhieva fails to do justice to Andrei's soft side in his dealings with Larisa, to her credit she does not exonerate Larisa either, and indeed provides excruciatingly detailed evidence of her selfishness; even Andrei's falling out with close friend and associate Olga Surkova is ultimately made to look like Larisa's doing. Surkova herself confirms this, though not without a bitter recrimination of a man whom, by all accounts, she loved unrequitedly:

Indeed, I idolised the great and persecuted artist with a childlike enthusiasm for many long years. Oh how typical this is in Russia!: unselfishly and recklessly given aid to the pure and absolute Truth. Tarkovsky was surrounded by people like this, people who almost deified him and who were ready to serve not only the man himself, but even his family, all in the name of St. Art. They were ready to help not only on the filmset, but even at home, with domestic business, organising orders of scarce groceries, coming up with cheap materials for the construction of his country house, paying for furniture in instalments, and generally running all kinds of trifling errands. This gave meaning and nobility to the lives of each of us, the chosen members of his inner circle. And then when I was chosen by the Master from among all these people for the most honourable task of creative collaboration – well, it

wasn't fit to dream of greater happiness than that!

But for the most part, and gradually, I grew out of this brand of sophomorically enthusiastic admiration for the 'Great Artist', whom I had met while I was still a film student. This 'growing up' proceeded as the glaring contradictions between the lofty and 'selfless' spiritual values espoused by the director and their 'everyday practice' became apparent to me. I then decided to separate these two spheres of the artist's existence: I decided to concentrate on his work and ignore the domestic side of his life.

His films, snapshots of time, bear traces of a wearying and often unsuccessful battle with himself, an inability to contain the rust which gradually corroded his soul and which foully parades itself on the screen. His films, indeed, are uniquely interesting as objective evidence of this struggle.

For a long time I didn't notice, or couldn't, didn't want to see the traces of this erosion, which is so visible on the screen and which explains to me today Tarkovsky's unique artistic and human destiny. We were friends – or rather, Tarkovsky bestowed his friendship upon me – and I so wanted just to believe in and love the ideal, even if it meant shutting my eyes to everything. 'Oh, it's not hard to deceive me; I happily deceive myself all on my own...'<sup>579</sup>

No portrait of Tarkovsky can afford to ignore such intimate testimony; people who aim for public impact rarely fail to incur private costs for their ambition, costs which Tarkovsky may indeed have transferred to Surkova. But even Surkova, by the end of her book, finds it in her heart to forgive him: 'The best twenty years of my life were linked with this family and this man, Andrei Tarkovsky. Did he more than unfairly take advantage of me? So what if he did? None of this matters anymore; he was what he was, and all those of us who were close to him loved him for it.'<sup>580</sup> Even Surkova herself suggests that the cancer which fully and finally killed their relationship was Larisa, not Andrei or his cancer; the extraordinary story of a visit to Italy to see Larisa, at Larisa's own insistence, while Andrei was filming *Sacrifice* reveals a scheme to sabotage Surkova's marriage and generally to undermine her self-confidence.<sup>581</sup> Surkova, who never again saw Andrei or Larisa, has 'never been able' to understand the meaning of Larisa's invitation and subsequent behaviour, although she provides evidence that Larisa was involved, more or less directly, in Andrei's decision to publish the book *Printed Time*, substantially edited and even rewritten by Surkova, without citing

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579 Olga Surkova, *Tarkovsky and I: A Pioneer's Diary*, (Moscow, Zebra E. 2005, (2002)), pp. 12-13.

580 Surkova, *Tarkovsky and I*, pp. 30-31.

581 See Surkova, *Tarkovsky and I*, pp. 433-445.

Surkova as co-author.<sup>582</sup> Did Larisa plan to humiliate and immiserate Surkova, a woman she must have suspected of romantic involvement with her husband, by whispering in her husband's ear? To absolve Andrei of all responsibility is to deny the man the very moral agency he spent his life defending; yet perhaps, just perhaps, his fear of offending Larisa was rooted in knowledge of her extreme fragility and insecurity, and his loyalty to her may have been, in part, a recognition of her need, if not for him, then for something urgent which no one could ultimately provide. To view Andrei's favouring of Larisa and her expensive appetites over the chaster, loftier calls of Bondarchuk and Surkova as a mere acknowledgment of his need for the practical help in which Larisa excelled, from the kitchen to the film set to the studio boardroom, would be to deny Andrei the sensitivity to emotional detail in which his films are bathed and which friends and children less betrayed than Surkova, and even Surkova herself, knew and loved. The likeliest explanation of Andrei's failure to leave Larisa and his insistence on taking her side despite repeated infidelities, hysterics and general emotional dishonesty is simply an inability to inflict suffering on someone so apparently vulnerable. That Tarkovsky could not see through Larisa's act, or saw through the act all too late with his portrayal of Adelaide in *Sacrifice*, is the great tragedy of his life, but it reflects a person far from incapable of attachment to concrete individuals; paradoxically, he was unable to believe enough in his own civilisational ideals to do the only thing they demanded: give up his ludicrous ideas regarding female spiritual autonomy, divorce Larisa and start again with someone capable of actually loving him and worthy of his own love. The traumatic experience of a first marriage breakup, and the effect of a further rupture on his sons, must also have been an important, if not decisive, factor.

Tarkovsky's other great betrayal, documented by Boyadzhieva and mentioned by Surkova, concerns Anatoly Solonitsyn, the actor who starred in four of Tarkovsky's seven films and with whom Tarkovsky maintained, if not a friendship, at the very least an intense professional and personal relationship bordering on a master-disciple dialectic. Tarkovsky failed to visit Solonitsyn as he was dying of cancer in Moscow, and, when it became apparent that Solonitsyn's condition was terminal, went ahead to cast Oleg Yankovsky in *Nostalgia* after having promised Solonitsyn the role just as soon as he was better. Both Boyadzhieva and Surkova remind us that Tarkovsky, for all his admiration of Solonitsyn's talent, felt that he had failed to nurture it and was at least partially responsible for his premature ill health. 'Solonitsyn built his life with no respect for his own talent. In his life he played the role of a kind of idiot, and led an irresponsible lifestyle. Artists should not live like that! They have a mission to fulfil,' Boyadzhieva quotes Tarkovsky as saying.<sup>583</sup>

Did Andrei fear the sight of his dying friend, unwilling to believe what he knew to be true

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582 See Surkova, *Tarkovsky and I*, pp. 478.

583 Boyadzhieva, *Life on a Cross*, p. 254.

about the severity of his condition? Had he lost patience with a man he had spent a decade and a half trying to help? Did he really believe, as he was overheard saying, that those who get cancer deserve it? Or was he simply too busy to call in? Solonitsyn, if Boyadzhieva is to be believed – she provides no footnotes - certainly took the snub very personally indeed:

Leaving long-term for sunny Italy, Tarkovsky did not deem it necessary to visit Solonitsyn or to comfort his terminally ill friend even with false assurances that he would be better in time for shooting.

Comforting a dying man is a tedious task, particularly for someone like Tarkovsky, who distinguished himself neither for his spiritual warmth nor for the generosity of his feelings.

In one of his many interviews, the director said in passing: 'Freedom does not exist as a choice; freedom is a spiritual state.' This may be a wonderful position when defending artistic principles, but if it extends to liberation from personal obligations of charity and sacrifice, it is flawed, and indeed borders on an anarchic disregard for moral norms. He headed abroad, without saying goodbye to his favourite actor, his 'talisman', in full knowledge that he would probably never see him again.

When Solonitsyn was told that Tarkovsky was already filming in Italy with Yankovsky, his legs were already paralysed. He asked his nurse to take down a photo of Tarkovsky from the wall and never got off the couch again. 'He drank all my blood,' he mumbled. Solonitsyn died short of his 47<sup>th</sup> birthday.<sup>584</sup>

It would be the task of a biographer – and a new biography is indeed called for - to improve on Boyadzhieva's broad thesis concerning her subject. I have suggested that there are reasons to take her less flattering conclusions seriously, as well as those of Surkova, without necessarily regarding them as definitive, and apportioning at least some of the blame, where blame is indeed to be apportioned, to Larisa and to aspects of Andrei's character which reflect an excess of sensitivity and sympathy, and at worst misogynistic prejudices typical of his time and place, rather than the borderline sociopathy that Boyadzhieva depicts.<sup>585</sup> Nevertheless, the purpose of this section has

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584 Boyadzhieva, *Life on a Cross*, p. 255.

585 As George Scialabba says of Saul Bellow:

Some people were saying, "Really, how can anyone think *Herzog* or *Augie March* is a great novel when the women characters are just there for the man to feel betrayed by, or impressed with his flair?" Well, yes, that's an aspect of the book, and I'm glad that feminism has made me notice that kind of thing. But that doesn't mean that in *Augie March* Saul Bellow didn't practically invent a whole new prose style for American fiction. So yes, they have flaws, but I'm still capable of enjoying the books despite those flaws. (Lindsey Gilbert, 'What Are Radicals Good For? An Interview with George Scialabba',

been to introduce a man less likeable, and less liked, than either Naguib Mahfouz or Tu Weiming who nevertheless, through a felt engagement with the world through art, arrives at similar conclusions concerning the importance of civilisation and the urgency of the need to defend it – along with the high culture that transmits it from one generation to the next - in an age of apocalyptic weaponry and widespread moral decline caused by a loss of faith in 'deep truth' and 'the unity of all things'. After tales of sordid betrayal which could not, alas, not be told, Tarkovsky's straightforward love for his children, his love for his native Russia, and indeed his deep unselfishness and love for 'all things' will shine through the films he sacrificed so much to make, and also through the diary he kept in the last 15 years of his life, which we will address in turn.

### 3.3 Ivan's Childhood (1962)<sup>586</sup>

Tarkovsky's first feature film, *Ivanogo Detstvo (Ivan's Childhood)*, is at once the least Tarkovskian of Tarkovsky's seven feature films – he inherited the project from another director - and the first iteration of the civilisation theme which runs through his subsequent oeuvre; Tarkovsky's three student productions, in particular *The Steamroller and the Violin* (1961), are recognisably the work of the same man, but will not warrant our attention here.<sup>587</sup> Ivan, whose childhood and family are destroyed by the Nazi invasion of Russia, refuses to be kept out of battle despite his age, and eventually lays down his life in defence against an aggressor which, as 12-year-old Ivan himself argues in the film, has completely lost touch with its high cultural tradition. Tarkovsky took to the project not least because he was Ivan's contemporary: 'Ivan is my brother! I was the same age when the war started. I am living out HIS life. [His story] recounts what could have happened to me.'<sup>588</sup>

That Ivan is the victim of evil, and a sufferer of what our century refers to as post-traumatic stress disorder, is beyond question; yet Ivan's heroism consists precisely in the fact that he circumvents Auden's famous law: he does not allow the evil done to him to make him do evil in return. Like the Confucian sage we will meet in Chapter 4, he meets malice with neither malice nor kindness but rather with justice and uprightness (as Tu's Confucius himself asks, 'If you meet malice

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<http://bostonreview.net/us/scialabba-interview-intellectuals-radicals, 20/11/13>).

586 Just as for Chapter 2.9 (dedicated to Mahfouz's *Dweller in Truth* and *Arabian Nights and Days*), citations from dialogue in the films under discussion in each of the next seven sections are not routinely footnoted (in order to avoid unnecessary clogging of the text). Please see the Bibliography for reference information for each film.

587 For more discussion of the place of *Ivan's Childhood* in Tarkovsky's oeuvre and the genesis of the project, see Igor Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky (Xudozhestvennaya Filosofiya Andrey Tarkovskogo)*, (St. Petersburg: Aleteia, 2001), p. 11.

588 Boyadzhieva, *Life on a Cross*, p. 110.



with kindness, what will you meet kindness with?'). No lesser Western critic than Jean-Paul Sartre, however, saw in Ivan an inability to love: 'Ivan is a prisoner of cruelty. This cruelty gets inside him. The Nazis killed him when they killed his mother and shot the inhabitants of his village. He remained physically alive of course, but at the same time, in this irreparable moment, he saw his whole future blotted out.'<sup>589</sup> Sartre goes so far as to insist that Ivan 'proves unable to break out of the war-death nexus; in order to live, he must now live in this cruel world. When he engages in military activity, he frees himself from all fear, but then a new anguish takes hold of him.'<sup>590</sup> Describing him further as the 'little victim', Sartre argues that Ivan 'knows what is required of him: war, blood, revenge', and that 'love is a permanently closed road for him.'<sup>591</sup> Yet Sartre seems entirely to miss the point of Ivan's sacrifice: the desire to avenge the deaths of his loved ones has not an ounce of gratuity about it. Rather, Ivan's love, in particular for his mother, drives his quest for justice, relegating everything else, including 'the whole evil of the world' - which was, in the view of A. de Baecque as well as Sartre, 'enclosed in his being'<sup>592</sup> - to the background. Simonetta Salvestroni, who saves her treatment of *Ivanogo Detstvo* for last in her 2007 book *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky and Russian Spiritual Culture*, takes precisely this view of motherly love as Ivan's north star *in spite of* the tremendous evil which befalls him. Commenting on the motif of the well in the film, Salvestroni argues that Ivan's 'mother's words about the star have a real effect on the dreaming boy. A light shines even in the depths of the well – in other words, in the black world of the war – because past, present and future are all embedded in the deep core of any human being.'<sup>593</sup> The light at the bottom of the well, moreover, 'is the light seen by a person who has understood the essential: the oneness of past, present and future. This light is fuelled by the love of others and by a spirit of self-sacrifice and selfless dedication.'<sup>594</sup> Although Ivan 'does not share his dearest memories with anyone', he nevertheless 'finds ways to express these feelings in his dreams, in games, and also in his choice of profession, a choice which he defends with all his might by refusing to be sent off to a military academy away from the front.'<sup>595</sup> Despite his suffering, Ivan 'interacts meaningfully and vigorously with the adults around him', and is moreover 'governed by a sensitivity only aggravated by the traumas he has experienced.'<sup>596</sup> Ivan, of course, is not actually alone; his mother, though dead, remains with him through his trauma; her example and her love even alert Ivan to the suffering of others. While the other soldiers ignore the written plea of the eight children butchered at the hands

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589 See Simonetta Salvestroni, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky and Russian Spiritual Culture (Filmy Andreyi Tarkovskogo i Russkaya Dukhovnaya Kultura)*, (Moscow: St. Andrew's Biblical Theological Institute, 2007), p. 113.

590 See Salvestroni, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky and Russian Spiritual Culture*, p. 113.

591 See Salvestroni, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky and Russian Spiritual Culture*, p. 113.

592 A. de Baecque, *Andrei Tarkovskij*, (Paris: Editions de l'Etoile, 'Cahiers du cinema', 1989), p. 54.

593 Salvestroni, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky and Russian Spiritual Culture*, p. 214.

594 Salvestroni, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky and Russian Spiritual Culture*, p. 214.

595 Salvestroni, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky and Russian Spiritual Culture*, p. 214.

596 Salvestroni, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky and Russian Spiritual Culture*, p. 214.

of the Nazis, Ivan incorporates their suffering into his own thirst for justice:

Not one [of the other soldiers] pays any attention to the writing on the wall which so struck the boy. He meaningfully illuminates the message several times with his light when he is on his own thinking about the war: 'There were eight of us. Not one of us was older than nineteen. Avenge our deaths.'

At precisely this point something important happens inside [Ivan]. The experience of suffering caused by the loss of all that was dearest to him does not allow him to remain indifferent and immobile before the suffering of others. When Galtsev returns to check on him during a bombing raid, he finds the boy calm and determined. With the moment of crisis averted, Ivan gets to his feet and replies to Galtsev in a mature and confident voice: 'I am not afraid.'

[Ivan] is the first of Tarkovsky's heroes who is able to bring himself to the point of sacrifice in the hope that future generations will be able to live in a better world, one without the kinds of grief and loss which were visited on him. This outlook is close to that of the artist Andrei Rublev, who after a long period of silence realises that his calling is to 'bring happiness to people'; close to that of the protagonist of *The Mirror* on the threshold of death, close to that of the Stalker, who risks his life for the sake of his mission; close to Gorchakov, struggling with his candle to cross the swimming pool; and close, too, to Alexander in *Sacrifice*.<sup>597</sup>

Tarkovsky's recourse to documentary footage at the end of the film serves to situate Ivan's personal suffering in the broader economy of Russian and human suffering during the Second World War, but ultimately the story of Ivan is one of a triumph of love and civilisation over malice and barbarism: the function of the documentary footage is 'to go beyond the individual experience of the protagonists and to situate it in the wider context of the sufferings of this whole generation. This technique will be used again later in *The Mirror*.'<sup>598</sup> Concluding on a wholly positive note, Salvestroni argues that 'Ivan, like Gorchakov and Alexey in *The Mirror*, recovers in the moment of death what he had lost. The music of Ovchinnikov leads us back to a bright and happy world. We return to the state of affairs at the beginning of the film, as if the war had never happened.'<sup>599</sup>

*Ivanogo Detstvo* testifies to the power of motherly love to transmit universal moral values and faith in the unity of all things in spite of the obstacles presented by war; even Ivan grudgingly

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597 Salvestroni, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky and Russian Spiritual Culture*, pp. 214-215.

598 Salvestroni, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky and Russian Spiritual Culture*, p. 216.

599 Salvestroni, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky and Russian Spiritual Culture*, p. 216.

admits that a German writer 'from 400 years ago' might have something to offer the world despite the fact that the current generation of Germans is busy burning books and disgracing itself. Much as Mahfouz's *Awlad Haratna (Children of Gebelawi)* dramatises the transgenerational struggle of civilisation to keep the hounds of war and evil at bay, *Ivanogo Detstvo* shows that even an enemy as thoroughly evil as Nazism can be resisted if those resisting it have a heritage of love and morality to call on.

### 3.4 Andrei Rublev (1966)

Although Igor Evlampiev sees signs of the influence of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian philosophical and spiritual tradition in *Ivanogo Detstvo*, an essentially Soviet-commissioned film, he takes *Andrei Rublev* as the start of the Tarkovskian oeuvre proper, and the 'key' to all that comes after it. For Evlampiev, it is the idea of *vseedinstvo* which is central to the tradition which Tarkovsky inherited, and central to Tarkovsky's 'artistic philosophy'. Although Tarkovsky did not, Evlampiev argues, conduct a formal study of this tradition – from Solovev's idea of *bogochelovechestvo*, the perfect union of man and God, to Karsavin's idea of *zhertvovanie*, the need to sacrifice oneself 'to the world and all people' as Jesus did, and beyond - its central thrust formed the 'bedrock' of his own philosophical outlook.<sup>600</sup> Evlampiev traces the history of this tradition from its beginnings down to its misappropriation by the Soviets, starting with the 'the principle which is present in essentially all Russian philosophers from P. Chaadaev to S. Frank and L. Karsavin: the idea of *vseedinstvo*.'<sup>601</sup> With its long history in European philosophy, 'originating in the philosophy of Plato', reaching its 'first clear expression in neo-Platonism', then becoming 'a fixture of Christian mysticism' and finally 'a feature of the grandiose systems of German idealism – the systems of Schelling and Hegel' - Russian philosophy, 'beginning its rapid development in the 1830s, took onboard the ideas of all these movements, fusing them with a native and extremely old Russian cultural constant: namely, the pagan notion of the magical oneness of the world, the relationship of everything with everything else.'<sup>602</sup> Evlampiev then explains how the essence of *vseedinstvo* in Russian philosophy is the drive towards 'a state in which the fragmentation [of the world], the alienation of its various elements from each other, is overcome. If this state of 'all-unitedness' could be realised, the world would form a harmonious whole, each tiny element of which would be imbued with a unique meaning and a

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600 See Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 11.

601 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 11.

602 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 11.

unique beauty.<sup>603</sup> The Soviets got this idea of sacrifice for unity backwards; indeed, 'Meyer's reasoning about the need for acts of sacrifice (both voluntary and compelled by fate) in the life of every individual can be seen as an attempt to reflect on and offer a kind of justification for the order which emerged in Soviet Russia between the 1920s and 1940s and consigned millions of people to a painful death or a slavelike subsistence.'<sup>604</sup>

While no lesser Russian writer than Vladimir Nabokov railed against *vseedinstvo* as yet another meaningless 'big idea', preferring instead Tolstoy's novelistic attention to moral detail and the precise contours of the moral unity to which Tolstoy, as a *de facto* part of this tradition, subscribed<sup>605</sup>, even Nabokov inherited, as Tarkovsky did, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian intelligentsia's disdain for the related concept of *poshlost'*. Ivan Ilyin defined as *poshloe* 'any existence wholly subordinated to superficial material well-being, deprived of a sense of the mystery of life' (Evlampiev also asks us to 'recall that precisely this word is employed by the travelling doctor at the beginning of [*The Mirror*] to describe the wrongness of our contemporary lives').<sup>606</sup> In his later writings Ilyin 'insisted on emphasising that *poshlost'* by its very nature means the absence of deep religious feeling, the feeling through which the intact existence of God and His "candle-glow" in every earthly object reveal themselves to us.'<sup>607</sup> Evlampiev then quotes Ilyin directly on *poshlost'*, detecting therein a distinctly Arnoldian disdain for its philistine qualities:

'True religiosity,' writes Ilyin, 'is a feeling that a human being fits in with all the things and events and relationships in her life, thereby remaining in God's light [...] and finding in everything a corresponding godly light. This godly light is the main thing in everything, the most important, the most valuable, the most prominent, and everything is made meaningful, profound and sacred by it; without it everything is empty, miserable, trifling, unmeaningful and void. For this emptiness and baseness, for this meaninglessness and weakness, the Russian language found a name over a hundred years ago, and created a special concept for it: *poshlost'*. [...] *Poshlost'* takes the business of life and the things of the world as if no sacred existential mystery lived in them. It regards things not in their main essence or from their main essence;

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603 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 11.

604 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 15. This perversion of the Orthodox ideal of sacrifice is directly comparable to the perversion of Confucianism by Mao according to Tu Weiming: one's willingness to sacrifice even one's nearest and dearest for the cause of revolution, of being able to 'bear' *even their* suffering. The true Confucian ideal elaborated by Mencius, meanwhile, involves an extension of the *inability* to bear suffering outwards from self and family to embrace, eventually, the entire cosmos. It is in precisely this sense that, as we will see in more detail in Chapter 4, the Confucian Way is described as 'a heavy burden indeed'.

605 See in particular Nabokov's *Lectures on Russian Literature*, (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002), for a discussion of moral unity in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*.

606 See Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 174.

607 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 174.

it takes the inessential in them, quite as if there were nothing essential at all in them.<sup>608</sup>

While Ilyin clearly 'has in mind the canonical Orthodox tradition and a canonical understanding of the relationships between man and God', and Evlampiev reminds us that 'the religiosity which is undoubtedly present in Tarkovsky's worldview is a long way from dogmatic Church Christianity'<sup>609</sup>, Tarkovsky's critique of materialism, both the dialectical materialism of Marxism-Leninism and Western consumerist materialism, is launched in precisely these 'anti-*poshloe*' terms, beginning in earnest with *Andrei Rublev*. The 'way' to truth and unity is to follow the example of Jesus the man, independent of revelation, and to pass the flame of sacrifice on to others, as Boriska does through his sacrifices to rebuild the town bell destroyed by barbarian invasion, thereby physically reigniting in Rublev, by the sheer power of his moral example, the desire to serve and sacrifice for human civilisation by fulfilling his talent for icon painting and spreading the light of God in the medieval Russian darkness surrounding him. Indeed, 'the transformation brought into the world by Boriska's work is not full and final – it needs to be continued', not just by Andrei Rublev but by us, and ultimately by everyone committed to the Arnoldian idea of human perfectibility: 'Boriska's sacrifice needs to be taken up by people who, committing themselves in turn to their own voluntary acts of sacrifice, following the path of the cross on their own, dying and coming back to life in their own versions of the Calvary, take sacrifice even further and make the world even better.'<sup>610</sup> Evlampiev then describes in detail how Tarkovsky achieves this Arnoldian goal in the final frames of the film, where we see 'how Andrei Rublev symbolically takes up Boriska's sacrifice in order to continue the work of Jesus and all those who followed him'.<sup>611</sup> Not for the only time in the Tarkovskian oeuvre, there is an important difference between the screenplay and the finished cinematic product: 'in the script, Andrei finds Boriska on a muddy road; in the film, Tarkovsky adds some characteristic touches to this scene: Boriska walks through an area full of instruments of torture, and falls on a stake which is likely designed for torture and execution.'<sup>612</sup> Evlampiev interprets this episode as 'Boriska's last steps on his path to the Cross; when Andrei bends down next to the crying boy and lifts him up, we have before us an image created by Tarkovsky which corresponds exactly to the iconographic tradition of depicting the mourning of Christ.'<sup>613</sup> The film does not end here, however; the colour snapshots of Rublev's immortal icons, including 'The Transfiguration', 'The Resurrection of Lazarus', and 'The Trinity', create 'an image of the enlightened and harmonious world which

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608 See Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, pp. 174-175.

609 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 175.

610 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 118.

611 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 118.

612 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 118.

613 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 118.

appeared to Andrei at the end of his path to the Cross and his Calvary and up to the end of his life itself, and which culminated in true resurrection and immortality.<sup>614</sup> Nevertheless, the final image in the film is Jesus himself, 'the image of sacrifice'; for Evlampiev, Tarkovsky's civilisational message here is unambiguous: 'If people renounce their foreordained purpose and renounce Jesus, the images of a perfect world will remain only images, only the dreams of an artist lifted temporarily above the tragic prose of life.'<sup>615</sup> The film thus ends with a clear call to arms: 'the fate of Jesus – the man, not the god – is a reflection of the deepest essence of Being. The rain running over the icon of the Saviour and the final shots of an earthly harmony emphasise the unseverable unity of personal destiny and the destiny of the world, and show that the way of Jesus is the only path to transforming the world.'<sup>616</sup>

Responding to criticism that the film was 'cruel and dark', Tarkovsky was adamant: 'I don't find that. If anything it was faithful [to the period], or at least tried to express our connection with Rublev's era.'<sup>617</sup> The burst of colour at the end of the film, Rublev's legacy to posterity, is a triumph over cruelty and darkness, a triumph which Tarkovsky wants to show is made possible by Boriska's sacrifice and the spontaneous feelings of love which Boriska's efforts on behalf of civilisation ignite inside Rublev. This, the path of civilisation still recognisable to us centuries on, is what unites Rublev's epoch with our own and with what Evlampiev repeatedly describes as the 'world of eternity' beyond, or rather inside, the 'world of time'.

Natalya Bondarchuk, for her part, describes the effect of the film in general, and the 'bell episode' in particular, on her own destiny:

I doubt that any work of art had such a painful and beautiful effect on me as *Rublev*.

In the 'bell' episode I was struck by the image of the boy-creator, almost a child, feeling the truth. For me this became a symbol of Tarkovsky's entire *œuvre* and his faith in beauty and perfection. Squeezing effort from the large collective of people who worked with him, Tarkovsky led them forward, working towards his bell. The thin, brooding face of the actor Nikolai Burlyayev enshrines in itself all the power and vulnerability of the creating artist. The image of the young man, the bell master, remained forever in my soul, and we can say that the work of Tarkovsky determined my future fate, joining me as it did to my future husband.<sup>618</sup>

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614 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 118.

615 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 118.

616 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 118.

617 See Volkova, *Andrei Tarkovsky: Nostalgia* p. 207.

618 Natalya Bondarchuk, 'Meeting on Solaris', in M.A. Tarkovskaya (ed.), *On Tarkovsky (O Tarkovskom)*,

(Moscow: Progress, 1989), p. 152. In an analogous spirit to Bondarchuk, Marina Tarkovskaya, Tarkovsky's sister and editor of this volume, stresses on p. 10: 'I embarked on collecting this volume of reminiscences out of a feeling

*Andrei Rublev*, indeed, for all Tarkovsky's painstaking attempts to recreate physically the dreadful poverty and ignorance of the time, is neither a 'historical' nor a 'biographical' film<sup>619</sup>; much as Mahfouz creates an idealised Akhenaten for openly moralising and contemporary nation-building purposes, so too does Tarkovsky seek to create a figure recognisable as the soul of modern Russia, the soul which saved conscience-based civilisation from the plundering Mongols and Tatars in medieval times and which, as depicted in *Ivanogo Detstvo*, ultimately defeated Nazism.

To critics accusing him of historical inaccuracy, Tarkovsky replied that he had 'added a lacquer to reality, in order to preserve hope'.<sup>620</sup> The goal was 'a return to national memory, to the beginnings, the sources, the wellspring'.<sup>621</sup> But just as Mahfouz's goal with his explorations of the glorious Egyptian past and his calls for 'independence' were primarily to secure universal rights and values in the present, so too Tarkovsky's 'system of values lived in him independent of the themes of Old Rus or national memory'<sup>622</sup>. Jesus, Boriska and Rublev are important examples, but that is all they are; the past matters because of its connection with the present and especially the future, not for its own sake. This is the very meaning of these men's sacrifice; it is only because they believe in the 'world of eternity' and the ultimate unity of all things – past, present and future - that their sacrifices for the future of civilisation make sense.<sup>623</sup>

Some, including the head cameraman on *Andrei Rublev*, Vadim Yusov, who described the years spent working on the film as 'the best years of our lives, the best days and hours'<sup>624</sup>, regarded Tarkovsky's decision to tell his own story, or rather the story of his mother's sacrifice for him, in *Zerkalo (The Mirror)* as 'an incomprehensible and unpleasant attempt to draw undue attention to himself'<sup>625</sup> rather than as an unselfish attempt to make his own contribution to 'the best that has been thought and said', to leave behind his own 'corner of the truth' for the future. Tarkovsky himself explains his self-sacrificing impulses, from *Andrei Rublev* to *Zerkalo* and beyond, in 'The Artist in Old Rus and Modern Russia', with reference to the opening scene in *Andrei Rublev*: 'the episode with the flying man was a symbol of bravery,' he says, 'in the sense that creation demands complete self-sacrifice of a person. Whether a person wants to fly before it is possible, or to erect a bell

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of love for my brother and a duty to preserve his memory.'

619 See Lev Anninsky, 'Andrei's Apocalypse', in Y.A. Yaropolov (ed.), *Unknown Tarkovsky: The Stalker of World Cinema (Neizvestnyy Tarkovsky: Stalker Mirovogo Kino)*, (Moscow, Eksmo, 2012), p. 124.

620 Anninsky, 'Andrei's Apocalypse', p. 128.

621 Anninsky, 'Andrei's Apocalypse', p. 139.

622 Anninsky, 'Andrei's Apocalypse' p. 142.

623 Mahfouz, for all his insistence on being a 'novelist of the present', also shared this view of the radical unity of past, present and future, as the quote chosen to introduce this chapter suggests: 'The present is what we suffer, the future what we hope for, and the past what we cherish, both bitter and sweet,' he says in his interview for the 1999 French documentary *Passage du siècle* ([http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x34wrl\\_naguib-mahfouz-passage-du-siecle\\_creation](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x34wrl_naguib-mahfouz-passage-du-siecle_creation)).

624 Vadim Yusov, 'The Best Years of Our Lives', in Yaropolov (ed.), *Unknown Tarkovsky*, p. 44.

625 Yusov, 'The Best Years of Our Lives', p. 44.

without knowing how to do it, or to create an icon, they all require that the person die for her creation, disappear in her work, give all of herself.<sup>626</sup> Indeed, the slipperiness of identities in *Zerkalo*, with fathers becoming sons and wives mothers, and the attempts to insert, again via documentary footage, the sufferings of the Spanish Civil War, the dramas of the Communist revolution in China, and not least the Second World War further suggests that Tarkovsky's goal was not to 'draw undue attention to himself', but rather to insert this humble family story into the immense wider unity in which it was lived, to the point where the protagonists all but 'disappear' inside it but for the sparks of inspiration and civilisation they, like Boriska and Rublev, leave behind.

Tarkovsky embarked on *Andrei Rublev* precisely because these Jesus-inspired sparks of civilisation were being not only forgotten but actively suppressed in Soviet Russia. Although the likes of Alexander Meyer took advantage of the 19th-century Russian philosophical tradition's emphasis on self-sacrifice to justify sacrifices under communism, Tarkovsky's film was, to put it mildly, not entirely palatable to Soviet authorities hungry for easily digestible realist patriotism; *Andrei Rublev* marked the beginning of Tarkovsky's long battle with Soviet film bosses which limited his output to a mere seven films and, after *Stalker*, finally culminated in emigration. Tarkovsky's interest in recovering the glories of Russia's pre-revolutionary past, and in stressing the parallels between the contemporary Soviet Union, pounded by Nazism, and the humbled, ravaged Russia of Rublev's time simply did not fit the Communist progress narrative at all; as Salvestroni points out, Tarkovsky preparing for *Rublev* found himself in an analogous situation to Boriska, trying to recover a tradition dying all around him: 'like Boriska, who did not receive from his dying father the secret of bell-making and was therefore forced to go blind in his quest to "bring people happiness", so too Tarkovsky lived in a world which had all but buried its artistic and cultural traditions and banned, at least officially, access to its spiritual sources.'<sup>627</sup> Salvestroni also highlights the fact that 'when *Andrei Rublev* was made and distributed, religious literature was hard to get, and there were practically no fora for discussing such themes'; although 'the sale of the Gospels was banned under Soviet law, as well as the writings of the Church fathers and the religious literature which had abounded in the personal libraries of Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoyevsky and other writers', Tarkovsky nevertheless found a way to familiarise himself with the Bible, repeatedly citing it in this film and others.<sup>628</sup> Salvestroni nevertheless stresses just how much civilisational wisdom Tarkovsky could not possibly have been able to access: 'he had a strong thirst for Truth, Beauty, and Goodness,

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626 See Salvestroni, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky and Russian Spiritual Culture*, p. 12 (taken from Andrei Tarkovsky, 'The Artist in Old Rus and Modern Russia' ('L'artista nella antica Russia e nella Russia moderna'), *Il Dramma*, 1/1/1970).

627 Salvestroni, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky and Russian Spiritual Culture*, p. 13.

628 Salvestroni, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky and Russian Spiritual Culture*, p. 13.



a trinity about which Church fathers and theologians had written so much but whose writings would scarcely have been known to a director in the 1960s.<sup>629</sup>

Salvestroni's fine treatment of *Andrei Rublev* goes on to trace Rublev's own spiritual development, possible only 'after years of seclusion and training within the safe walls of the monastery' and then a first-hand experience of suffering and guilt in the 'real world', leading 'to a deep understanding of reality which later lights up his masterpieces'.<sup>630</sup> Nothing under the sun comes from nothing; like Rublev in his monastery, Tarkovsky did have a direct adolescent connection to Russia's deep Orthodox roots, and that connection was primarily literary rather than philosophical or theological: Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Pushkin. Salvestroni argues that Rublev's words to Theophanes the Greek about the Russian people are 'close to the words of Pushkin in his letter to Chaadaev which are read aloud in *The Mirror*. They link the figure of Christ, accompanied by a few frightened and confused disciples, with the figure of the artist and his role.'<sup>631</sup> Tarkovsky himself tells us what this role is:

The aim of art is to dig up and loosen [one's] soul, to make it capable of turning to Good. When coming into contact with a great work of art, a person starts to hear the same call which prompted the artist to make it in the first place. When there is a real link between the work of art and the spectator, she experiences a deep and cleansing spiritual shock.<sup>632</sup> [...] All my films in one way or another are about how people are not alone and are not abandoned in an empty universe, but are rather linked by countless threads to the past and the future, and that the fate of each person is linked with the world and the path of humanity as a whole.<sup>633</sup>

For Salvestroni, 'we see precisely this process in action in the final episode of the film – "The Bell". Here Rublev witnesses the exhausting labour of a boy who, going by intuition, devotes himself to the task of continuing a lost tradition and making a bell.'<sup>634</sup> Kirill, Rublev's once-jealous rival, also drives the unequivocal message of Boriska's sacrifice home:

Indeed, it is none other than Kirill who is on his knees begging Rublev to start painting icons again.

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629 Salvestroni, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky and Russian Spiritual Culture*, p. 13.

630 Salvestroni, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky and Russian Spiritual Culture*, p. 19.

631 Salvestroni, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky and Russian Spiritual Culture*, p. 26.

632 Andrei Tarkovsky, *Printed Time (Zapechatlennoe Vremya/Scolpire nel Tempo)*, (Milano: Ubulibri, 1988), p. 141.

633 Tarkovsky, *Printed Time*, p. 326.

634 Salvestroni, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky and Russian Spiritual Culture*, p. 33.

'I am a worm. You have got your talent from God. Don't commit the sin of wasting it.'

In this episode Kirill, Boriska and Rublev influence each other's fate and help each other to complete their various missions. The mission of two of these three is to 'bring people happiness'. Kirill's bitterness over his lack of talent gives way, after a long ordeal, to humility and quiet unselfishness, allowing him to complete his modest, but necessary, task: to stir up his once-hated brother and force him to rethink his sin of not making full use of God's gift. [...] Rublev comes to see [the truth of this] when contemplating Boriska's struggle.<sup>635</sup>

Rublev has learnt, with a combination of prior education, adult suffering and Boriska's inspiration, to overcome his self-centred and reclusive dwelling on the past and to embrace the 'world of eternity' and the civilisation of which he is a part: 'You've seen yourself that everything's fine, so what's the matter with you? Come on, let's get out of here, you and me. You can make bells, and I'll paint icons. [...] Just think what a holiday this is for people! You've brought them so much happiness; what are you crying for?'

### 3.5 *Solaris* (1972)

In his bid to Goskino for the *Solaris* project, Tarkovsky wrote: 'the storyline of *Solaris* is powerful, intense, full of unexpected twists and arresting collisions. We are certain, above all, that the film will enjoy commercial success.' Nevertheless, the sci-fi thrills and spills of the film would in no way replace the moral message of *Ivanogo Detstvo* and *Andrei Rublev*: 'these people from the future represent the ideal of moral purity to which our descendants should aspire in order to achieve victory on the path of perfecting reason, honour and moral character [*npravstvennost*].'<sup>636</sup> Perhaps only in Chekhov's *Three Sisters* do we find, in the Russian literary canon, such open concern for the moral and material fate of the species, for what the world will look like 'in a thousand years'. For all Tarkovsky's interest in cosmic processes and civilisational themes, however, it all starts, as the film does, at home, on Earth, around the hearth. In the words of Boyadzhieva, 'the Earth is the starting-point for all that happens in the film. It is the homeland, the source of human passions, our highs and lows.'<sup>637</sup> Nevertheless, 'in the film the symbol of modern earthly civilisation is the long journey

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635 Salvestroni, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky and Russian Spiritual Culture*, p. 34.

636 See Boyadzhieva, *Life on a Cross*, p. 178.

637 Boyadzhieva, *Life on a Cross*, p. 182.

through the labyrinth of motorways which was shot in Japan. In contrast to this industrial world there is the world of living nature, of peaceful human existence.<sup>638</sup> For all his modern scientific and extraterrestrial adventures, Kris Kelvin and his conscience ultimately return to reconnect with his father's house and surrounding garden, where he began the film. His affair with the neutrino Hari, itself a continuation of the one true Earthly love in his life, far from distancing him from his family, actually leads him back to it, to a realisation that all is connected in conscience: 'the beloved woman, who had died on Earth, returns to Kris, in order to give him the chance to understand that the basis of all cosmic law is the observance of moral standards. He follows his conscience; having gone through Hari's death and resurrection, he no longer wants to destroy [the new Hari] even though he knows that she is made up of neutrinos.'<sup>639</sup> This discovery of truth and unity in conscience frees Kris to overcome his fear of death and personal annihilation. Evlampiev describes this overcoming of death as 'one of the most important thematic lines in the film': 'in the prologue to *Solaris* Kris's father's house appears as the unshakable foundation of the local earthly world, a form of order which maintains itself only thanks to the efforts of its owner. Not by chance is the house itself rooted in history, in the past', for as Kris's father himself says: 'this house is similar to my grandfather's house; I liked it a lot, and your mother and I decided to build one like it.'<sup>640</sup> Kris's father and his sister Anna are 'the true keepers of the house, and take responsibility for the whole miniature world associated with it.'<sup>641</sup> On the one hand, this effort to maintain a house over time seems futile: 'the incompleteness of the earthly world is most clearly shown by the fact that the house, built by human beings as the basis of their existence and a stronghold of their efforts to transform the surrounding world, is exposed to the forces of time; sooner or later it will die.'<sup>642</sup> On the other, however, 'human beings have the strength to fight against time and the destruction that it brings; they are able to rebuild their houses and in so doing to conquer death, if only indirectly.'<sup>643</sup> Although Kris's father's house is only 'simulating a continuation of life' and is 'not identical to its grandfatherly prototype', there is nevertheless 'a chance for human beings – of which they are not yet fully conscious - to overcome death in its very essence and to abolish its absolute metaphysical significance. Precisely this overcoming is one of the main themes of *Solaris*.'<sup>644</sup> The way to achieve this absolute overcoming of death is through an absolute identification, via conscience, with everything in one's life-path through a simultaneous felt attachment to past, present and future. While this process starts with attachment to the family home, it ends with 'feeling responsible for

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638 Boyadzhieva, *Life on a Cross*, p. 182.

639 Boyadzhieva, *Life on a Cross*, p. 184.

640 See Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 186.

641 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 186.

642 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 187.

643 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 187.

644 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 187.

everything that happens in the world'; after initially trying to dispose of the inconvenient and unsettling neutrino Hari, Kris eventually 'starts to treat her like his own resurrected wife'.<sup>645</sup> This is precisely what Snawt and Sartorius, 'who still look upon these "guests" as merely part of a hostile and foreign world and do not recognise them as part of themselves, as a "continuation" of their own selves in the infinite realm of being, are incapable of doing.' Hari herself tells them so in the Library: 'I think Kris Kelvin has been more consistent than either of you. In inhuman conditions he has behaved humanely, while you act as if none of this concerns you, treating your "guests" – as it seems you like to call them – as something foreign, when in fact they are related to your very selves.' Evlampiev concludes that Kris 'gradually changes his entire system of ideas about himself and his place in the world', and comes 'to reject his earlier conviction that human beings and the surrounding world are in absolute opposition to each other and his feeling that humans are somehow "superior" to nature, and becomes aware of his responsibility for all that happens in the world and his guilt before it'.<sup>646</sup> *Solaris* charts Kris's path from narrow-minded scientist, committed to investigating a world external to himself and gaining control over that world, to morally engaged cosmic citizen. At the beginning of the film, 'the feeling of responsibility for the small world around his father's house does not exercise a decisive pull on Kris's soul. He sees this feeling as merely a part of his relationship with his father and considers it meaningful only in the narrow context of family politics'.<sup>647</sup> Kris's real energies flow in another direction entirely: 'a single conviction, indeed a single faith, reigns in his heart: faith in scientific reason, aimed at a final understanding and conquest of the world. Convinced of the greatness and power of human reason, he gives his total service to its ideals and challenges, chief among which (whether he consciously realises it or not) is the achievement of domination over the infinite expanse surrounding us'.<sup>648</sup> Tarkovsky, however, will explore in *Solaris* (and later in *Stalker*) the possibility that observational instruments and narrowly empirical methods, for all their amazing discoveries and all their success at improving our material lot, may not be enough to penetrate the deepest mysteries of the cosmos; conscience may have a role to play. In *Solaris*, this position is represented by Burton, who tries to persuade Kris not to act immorally in his dealings with the Ocean and argues that 'knowledge is only true knowledge when it is based in moral feeling [*npravstvennost*']'. At the beginning of the film, Kris misunderstands the role of *npravstvennost*' in science, regarding it as a 'sub-region of the truth, as second-order knowledge about the desirability or otherwise of the application of new scientific discoveries'; on this view, an immoral application of science is 'tantamount to an "incorrect" or "inexpedient" application, a result of incorrect or incomplete reasoning about moral truth. The

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645 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 205.

646 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 205.

647 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 193.

648 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, pp. 193-194.

possibility of such immoral applications of scientific knowledge ought not to stop the scientist on her path towards exact knowledge.<sup>649</sup> On the surface, this view of the relationship between science and morality looks Arnoldian enough: the union of the purely scientific and the moral forms of truth 'gives the absolute truth, in the context of which error is no longer possible'; but the goal is a philistine, imperial one rather than a properly civilised one: namely, in Evlampiev's words, the achievement of 'dominion over all that surrounds [us]'.<sup>650</sup> For Burton, by contrast, '*npravstvennost*' is not a "sub-discipline" of reason, but a sphere of the soul utterly distinct from reason which defines all that is most important in human beings and at the same time connected to a certain vital dimension of reality as a whole which reason cannot penetrate.<sup>651</sup> The truly Arnoldian marriage of morality and science represented by Burton's position means, in contrast to the prevailing philistine view, 'subordinating reason and all its methods and forms of domination over nature to a deeper capability: a direct, individual, and responsible approach to existence, with all its strange, unrationalisable calls and voices.'<sup>652</sup> Burton's discovery of this 'vital dimension of reality' ends up 'overturning all of his established beliefs'; 'in the service of scientific reason and scientific truth, which relegates all that is purely personal and 'all-too-human' to a subordinate status, Burton comes up against the need to regard precisely the personal as the key to understanding the laws under which non-human cosmic forms exist.'<sup>653</sup>

Kris only starts to realise the wisdom of Burton's advice once he gets to Solaris; there, he finds Sartorius feverishly conducting a range of hideous experiments, tragically oblivious to the Ocean's responsiveness to human emotion: 'Now we should only be thinking about our duty,' Sartorius says in a sermonising tone. 'Duty to whom?' Kris asks. 'To the truth.' 'That means, to people.' 'That's not where you search for truth.' After these words, 'Sartorius looks away from Kris, looks straight ahead, at us, and, nodding in the direction of the station windows behind which Solaris rises and brilliantly shines, adds in the tone of a man who has found what he is looking for: 'That's where you search for truth!'<sup>654</sup> Even Kris's close friend and colleague Gibarian, although he recognises that the Ocean's effect on him is not to provoke madness but rather to activate 'something connected with conscience', takes Sartorius's view that the only bearable solution to the mystery of the Ocean is to bombard it with radiation. For Evlampiev, Gibarian's inability to take up the moral challenge posed by the Ocean is a result of physical and emotional isolation on Solaris and of distance from the warmth of civilisation. Gibarian did not have anyone to prepare or accompany him on his arduous journey, and ended up committing suicide; his role in the film is

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649 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 195.

650 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 195.

651 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 196.

652 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 196.

653 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 196.

654 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 201.

precisely to provide Kris with the support he himself never had: along with other 'eternal' figures in the Tarkovskian *œuvre*, like Asafiev and the two mysterious women in *Zerkalo*, Gibarian is for Evlampiev 'eternal in the context of being as a whole and continues to exist in "other worlds"'; moreover, 'even after death Gibarian is tied to the world in which Kris exists, and is capable of influencing it. Tarkovsky stresses the equal moral status of Kris and Gibarian and the interwovenness of past and present with a series of subtle brushstrokes', including the life-size video recording of Gibarian's final message to Kris with its 'sharp sound and the voice of Sartorius, calling on Gibarian to open the door. Kris turns quickly towards the door of his own room, as if these sounds from the past had been transferred into his present.'<sup>655</sup> Evlampiev then points out that 'exactly the same device is used to underline the interwovenness of past and present during the earthly prologue, when Kris watches the tape with the recording of Burton's meeting with the commission. Kris and his aunt ask questions as they watch, to which the participants in the meeting taking place on screen in turn respond.'<sup>656</sup> Just as the recording of Burton's meeting is in black and white, Gibarian's message is also deprived of colour 'ostensibly for the same reason', namely that, like Burton, 'he finds himself in a situation of absolute despair and hopelessness.'<sup>657</sup> Alone on *Solaris*, unable to confide in either Snawt or Sartorius, 'an experience of unbearable moral suffering as a result of some secret buried deep in his soul - visible only to him and suddenly presented to him in all its shameless nudity - causes [Gibarian] to lose touch with the natural "fabric" of life, and with other people.'<sup>658</sup> His desperate suggestion to bombard the Ocean with radiation acts as a *reductio ad absurdum* of Sartorius's argument, allowing Kris to see a truth that Gibarian could not see for himself:

Now, sitting in his room in front of the empty screen on which Gibarian has just pronounced his last words, Kris fully and finally realises the untruth of Sartorius's position, or in other words the wrongness of his own position until he arrived at the station. The light of the unearthly day out of the station windows becomes for him a faded, meaningless grey with nothing to say about the true nature of the powerful 'being' in whose captivity they find themselves on this planet. [...] The fear and confusion felt by Kris upon witnessing the 'resurrection' of his dead wife already themselves bear witness to just how unbelievable and beyond the bounds of all he thought conceivable or plausible his situation has become. The main problem with our clear-headed, rational consciousness is its extreme sureness of itself and its

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655 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 202.

656 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 202.

657 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 202.

658 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 202.

inability to understand that there is always room in existence for the absolutely new, the absolutely foreign in comparison with all that is familiar and expected; all feeling of the mystery of existence is absent from it. Returning to an earlier concept, we could call this type of consciousness *poshloe*, sliding over the surface of things and incapable of recognising the inexhaustible depth hidden in them.<sup>659</sup>

The ability to overcome *poshlost'* and to 'wish for the impossible' is a vital antidote to bland scientism, and may be rewarded in this life as well as the next; Kris's deepest 'impossible wish' – to see his dead wife again – is in fact granted by the Ocean as a reward for his faith in possibility: 'the whole story of Kris and Hari's relationship in the station shows the battle between two sides of his personality and the eventual victory of the deeper, more sensitive incarnation, capable of wishing for the impossible, over the "lighter", more superficial character, who considers his main achievement a slavish obedience to the laws of necessity.'<sup>660</sup> Without this faith in possibility, faith in the possibility that the world is more than a 'hostile environment' to be conquered and is rather some kind of organic, enduring unity, there can be no self-sacrifice (for Tarkovsky, lest we forget, the highest of human gestures), as Evlampiev once again peerlessly explains:

Life is a mystery, and everything that happens in it happens for the first time and demands responsible decision-making in the here-and-now and not on the basis of pre-formed stereotypes. There is only one rule or principle: human beings are responsible for all that happens to them and around them, and should act as if no one besides themselves is capable of solving the problem before them: to save everything that needs saving, to bring harmony to all that requires harmony, to give a shot at life to all that is dying around them. And they should do all of this without thinking of themselves or their own future; the only justifiable position in this world is one of self-sacrifice. We are called not to rule over existence, but to submit voluntarily to it and to sacrifice ourselves. Only by so doing, even if it involves suffering and death, will we be able to achieve a relative harmony with the world, and thereby with ourselves, since the world is the only basis of true human nature, and does not form a hostile outside to that nature.<sup>661</sup>

The Russian tradition, and never more famously than in Dostoyevsky, often tends to portray the

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659 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, pp. 203-204.

660 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 206.

661 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, pp. 207-208.

need for self-sacrifice in terms of guilt rather than faith or love, or in other words, in seemingly negative rather than positive terms. As an heir to this rather unsmiling Orthodox Christian tradition, Tarkovsky makes much of guilt in his films and certainly suffered from it acutely in his own life, and in *Solaris* too the link between self-sacrifice and guilt is made clear as Kris faces up to Hari's suicide and his unexpected chance to make amends: 'not only does Hari become a new person by interacting with Kris, or rather becomes human in the first place, but Kris also is changed by his experience. A feeling of guilt is now at the heart of his new relationship with the world.'<sup>662</sup> Gradually, as if in a Dostoyevsky novel, 'the rational arguments showing the uselessness of this feeling and its inability to influence the laws of necessity lose their power for him'; moreover, 'the awareness of his guilt towards Hari, and in a wider context, towards all people and all of existence, becomes the main constituent of his character, complementing his feelings of love for his resurrected wife.'<sup>663</sup> Since 'only an act of self-sacrifice can match the act at the root of one's guilt and bridge the "gap" introduced into existence by the guilty party', Kris decides to sacrifice himself, 'giving up his whole past life for the "ghost", the "guest" that Snawt and Sartorius are ready to destroy with highly sophisticated equipment'.<sup>664</sup> While Sartorius is disgusted by Kris's ritual gesture in the Library, 'it is precisely this decisive step by Kris which saves the human occupants of the station; by offering his past and his memory in "sacrifice" to the Ocean, Kris strives to ensure that a thin thread of understanding extends between human beings and this eerie embodiment of the Unknown.'<sup>665</sup>

Far from a useless distraction from present reality, guilt is the necessary corollary of love, a force which binds us to the past, present and future of the cosmos and provides evidence for the existence of a Moral Law. It is through guilt that the neutrino Hari shows herself to be human, as she comes to understand that Kris's life 'in this new world, with her around, infinitely loving him, infinitely dependent on him and immortal, will be too much for him.'<sup>666</sup> By asking Sartorius to destroy her with the help of his machines, Hari's 'act of self-sacrifice' tells us that 'she already has her own internal dimension, her own "I", which is independent of Kris's "I" and indeed is a continuation, and not simply a copy, of the earthly Hari's "I"' ('am I similar to her?', Hari asks of her earthly counterpart, to which Kris replies: 'No, you *were* similar, but now you, not she, is the real Hari.').<sup>667</sup>

For Evlampiev, the ultimate Tarkovskian 'sacrifice' is to 'being' itself, although he goes on to explain what he means by this: 'for Tarkovsky, man's "rootedness", his belonging not only to time

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662 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 206.

663 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 206.

664 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 207.

665 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 207.

666 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, pp. 218-219.

667 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 219.



but also to eternity, was always beyond doubt'.<sup>668</sup> Nevertheless, Tarkovsky shows us in *Solaris* and in his later films that the centuries-long strivings of human civilisation, as enshrined in the central library scene in *Solaris* and in our stores of high culture, are the main source of connectedness to the sphere of eternity in which 'being' resides. *Solaris* reminds us of the possibility that we may one day be able to connect to this 'sphere of eternity' via contact and moral engagement with extraterrestrials; the role of plants and animals, in particular dogs, in *Zerkalo*, *Stalker* and *Nostalgia* will remind us of the possibilities of extending the eternal sphere of moral connectedness to other Earthly creatures and even to the Earth itself. Nevertheless, it is the islands, quite literally, of civilisation which sprout up in the Ocean at the end of the film as a direct result of Kris's self-sacrifice which make Kris's self-sacrifice tangible to us and justify his long absences from home. Kris returns home to his father, full of guilt, to beg forgiveness, but we are made to understand that Kris's odyssey has been no mistake, that all is well and as it ought to be, and that he has made a 'giant leap for mankind' into the sphere of eternity through his sacrifice to the Ocean and the neutrino Hari.

### 3.6 The Mirror (1974)

*Zerkalo* (*The Mirror*) will again juxtapose the personal and the cosmic in an effort to generate the energy necessary to catapult the viewer into the 'sphere of eternity', this time via a combination of Tarkovsky's own autobiographical journey and the world-historical events, including space exploration, which accompanied it. Although significantly shorter than the two preceding three-hour Tarkovskian marathons *Andrei Rublev* and *Solaris*, *Zerkalo* is arguably the most experimental and least accessible for the lay viewer of his seven films, as images of a Russian *dacha* give way to documentary footage of the Spanish Civil War and the rise of Chairman Mao as well as dream-like sequences featuring timeless ghosts and a repeated conviction that nature sees all, hears all and feels all. Although Tarkovsky places mirrors all the way through the film to dissuade us from any too-easy conclusions about what the title may refer to, it is clear that we have an attempt in *Zerkalo* to draw a portrait of the artist as a young man, to show that the artistic temperament emerges through contact with the world and other people, and that the journey of the self begins when one looks, really looks, as Alyosha does towards the end of the film, at oneself in the mirror. This kind of responsible introspection is made possible by the discovery of other people and their capacity for love and sacrifice; it is no coincidence that this culminating 'mirror' scene in *Zerkalo*, set to

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668 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 223.

dramatic classical music, takes place while Alyosha waits for his mother to pawn her jewellery so that she can feed him and just before she is forced, by way of payment for what is more an act of charity than commerce on the part of the doctor's wife, to kill a chicken against her will so as to spare Alyosha the responsibility. This late afternoon visit to the doctor's wife sticks in Alyosha's memory because it coincides with his first realisation of debt, and with that realisation come his first feelings of moral responsibility as an autonomous human being and member of a wider community. Though these feelings start with his mother, they by no means end there; they eventually extend to mother Russia, distant war victims, animals, and even nature as a whole. The film is a confused and confusing but nevertheless powerful attempt to show that all these levels of life or modes of being are connected in a higher unity, and that we as individuals owe an allegiance to this unity in all its forms. It is by showing this depth and breadth of sympathetic resonance that Tarkovsky aimed to thank his parents for all they had given him; at the public première of *Zerkalo*, Andrei's father Arseny wept in surprise and awe before his son's simultaneous filial gratitude and artistic generosity.<sup>669</sup>

At the centre of this expansive vision of sympathy and identity, however, as Evlampiev rightly points out, is the question of time and the individual's view of herself as a temporal and temporary member of something trans-temporal and trans-generational. The dual role of Marina Terekhova, who plays both wife and young mother in the film, as well as the repeated appearance of Tarkovsky's own mother Maria Ivanovna and confusing similarities between father and son, not to mention visits from seemingly undead 'guests', create an atmosphere in which who is who is both unclear and, in the grand scheme of things, irrelevant. Evlampiev, whom we will be quoting extensively on *Zerkalo* both to introduce his important contribution to scholarship on the film to an English-speaking audience for the first time and to bring to life an otherwise frankly impenetrable film, ties all this back to the prerevolutionary Russian philosophical tradition and the idea of *vseedinstvo*. Arguing that 'the central problem in the film is the problem of time, its essence and its meaning for human beings', Evlampiev recovers 'elements of continuity' with the pre-revolutionary Russian philosophical tradition and with Chaadaev and Karsavin in particular: 'in a world where all is united [*vseedinyy*], however, there is no space and time, since space and time, according to Chaadaev, separate the elements of existence from each other, and are signs of a deviation of reality from its state of *vseedinstvo*.'<sup>670</sup> For Karsavin, meanwhile, 'the soul is not only temporal, but also "omnitemporal", covering all possible time and including all that exists, has existed or will exist. In this sense, the concept of "omnitemporality" is different from the concept of eternity; the former is richer than the latter, since the latter excludes all that is temporal from itself and opposes itself to

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669 See Boyadzhieva, *Life on a Cross*, p. 226.

670 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, pp. 120-121.

time.<sup>671</sup> Karsavin and Tarkovsky 'share a single view of the role of human beings in existence', one which will accord perfectly with the Confucian view of human beings as 'centres of relationships' to be introduced in the next chapter; namely, they regard 'human beings act as a centre for the "crystallisation" of *vseedinstvo*, points from which relationships develop, transforming an imperfect unity into a perfect one'.<sup>672</sup> The Arnoldian commitment to perfectibility through *praxis* is also, Evlampiev argues, present in both Karsavin and Tarkovsky: 'love, as well as contemplation aimed at gathering the world and its meanings up within the life and mind of the individual, and ultimately the individual's self-sacrifice to the world therefore all have a special role to play in transforming the imperfect world.'<sup>673</sup> Indeed, for Evlampiev's Tarkovsky, the desire to perform good works common to all morally healthy individuals must, just as Arnold stresses in *Culture and Anarchy*, be informed by 'right understanding':

It is important to stress that in order to act 'effectively' and to have a positive impact on the state of the world, an individual must have the right understanding of herself and her place in the order of things. Only if she can achieve this can love become a truly metaphysical act of overcoming the divisions of existence rather than simply a momentary flash of desire: an act of worshipful co-contemplation – an objective joining with the secret meanings of existence - and not a subjective distraction for the imagination; an act of sacrifice – transformation via resurrection – rather than an irresponsible act leaving no trace in the memory of future generations. Above all a person should understand herself and 'cultivate' herself in her own internal spiritual world. Andrei Rublev is engaged in precisely such 'self-cultivation' in Tarkovsky's film on him, although we can only guess at what is going on inside him; in *Andrei Rublev* our attention is turned to the external forms of the relationship between the individual and the world, the active result of a long period of introspection and self-questioning.<sup>674</sup>

In *Zerkalo*, however, we have, quite literally, a turning of attention back on the autobiographical subject itself. For Tarkovsky, this process of artistic self-discovery also meant the complex task of distinguishing himself as an artist from his father while incorporating his father's poetry into his art; in the end, Tarkovsky's very awareness of his father's uncontested greatness as a poet helped, rather than hindered, the forging of his own identity. The content itself of Arseny's poetry, featured

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671 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 123.

672 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 123.

673 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 123.

674 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 124.

in *Zerkalo*, certainly helped Andrei overcome this 'anxiety of influence':

I'm not running, there is no death on Earth.  
Everyone is immortal. Everything is immortal. We don't need  
To fear death at seventeen  
Or seventy.  
[...]  
The great-grandfather and the grandson share a single table.  
[...]  
I'm happy with my own immortality,  
That my blood will flow from century to century.

Evlampiev's analysis of the poem helps us to understand how Andrei, far from being crushed by the weight of his father's artistic gifts, finds liberation and identity in them: 'in the form of the poem we find expressed the same conviction concerning the "multi-dimensionality" of human existence which we find repeatedly expressed among the leading exponents of Russian philosophy from Dostoyevsky to Karsavin.'<sup>675</sup> In this tradition, 'the true essence of a human being is not limited to what is revealed to her and in her during the limited period of her own stay on Earth. Each individual, in the fullness of her being, binds and encompasses within herself all planes of existence and all layers of history.'<sup>676</sup> Among other things, this conception entails that 'the process of "gathering" and "cultivating" oneself should include reviewing not only one's own past, but history itself and the whole temporal dynamic of life, both that which is near to us and that which is unimaginably far away. For the apparent limitations of being human prove illusory, and each of us is as infinite and eternal as the world around us.'<sup>677</sup>

*Zerkalo*, then, charts Andrei's own journey to world-historical awareness – in other words, self-awareness - from his mother's love and sacrifice, his father's poetry, his discovery of the place of Russia in the world, and the 'eternal' nature of the civilisational struggle of which Russia has been a part. Evlampiev's treatment of this process is worth reproducing in full for an English-speaking audience:

The most significant and obvious thematic sphere in the film is the autobiographical story of the 'author-protagonist', interconnected as it is with the fates of his closest

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675 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 131.

676 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 131.

677 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 131.

relatives: his mother and father, his ex-wife, his son. A second sphere, however, also widely explored in the film, concerns the world history through which the protagonist lived, depicted with the help of a variety of documentary footage. Finally, a third sphere extends to History as such, the entire history of humanity, a sense of belonging to which is also necessary for the full self-realisation of any individual. This sphere is explored in the film through elements of the cultural heritage of humanity amongst which the protagonists live and which permeate their way of life.

According to the initial script the film was to include a scene entitled 'Dawn on the Kulikovo Battlefield', which Tarkovsky had also intended to incorporate into *Andrei Rublev*. As we can see from the screenplay for *Zerkalo*, the scene was supposed to go right in the middle of the film and form its thematic core, bringing together all three of the aforementioned spheres, linking the autobiographical story with the history of the [Russian] people and the history of humanity as a whole. It seems that Tarkovsky finally realised, however, that even if it would have made his philosophical conception clearer, the insertion of a purely historical episode would somehow have ruined the artistic integrity of the film, and he thus decided against it. In order to express the oneness [*edinstvo*] of the individual and History, he used a less straightforward and more refined technique: this oneness was depicted via recourse to works of World Culture, which appear in the film in their original forms (painting and music from the great masters of the past), and reflected in the very appearance of the protagonists (the similarity of Maria Ivanovna to Maria Lebyadkina, the heroine of [Dostoyevsky's] novel *Demons*, as well as her similarity to the young woman in the portrait by Leonardo da Vinci; the parallel between Ignat, burning branches outside his house, and Moses, to whom the Angel appears in the form of a burning bush; the similarity of the landscape in the scene at the firing range with landscapes from Bruegel etc.).

Instead of the scene depicting the Battle of Kulikovo, Tarkovsky opted in the end for another alternative (missing from the script), which becomes the culminating centre of the whole film: the 'appearance' of a mysterious woman to the young Ignat, who asks him to read a passage from Pushkin's famous letter to Chaadaev, in which he talks about the world-historical destiny of Russia. Without breaking out of the visual or thematic lines of the film, this scene contains within itself a highly complex meaning and adds significant philosophical weight to the film as a whole beyond what we find in the screenplay. The original scene would only have conveyed the individual's belonging to History, the oneness of the individual and human history as

a whole, while the scene which made it into the film gives us more: it shows us that the destiny of an individual person, the wider contemporary history through which she lives, and the history of bygone days all have equal status in the context of the 'world of eternity' and that any one of them can make an appearance in any of the others, showing a person what her destiny is, helping her to understand the meaning of life and to carry out her mission in it. In its content, this scene is very similar to the scene in *Andrei Rublev* when Theophanes appears to Andrei. Here too, Tarkovsky depicts the irruption of the 'world of eternity' into the 'world of time', the convergence and union of all levels of being made possible by the action of individuals.

The scene begins with Ignat on his own in his father's new apartment. However, even before his mother's sudden exit, the 'dissolution' of the present into eternity already begins. Natalya (played by M. Terekhova, who also plays the young mother of the main protagonist) drops her bag, and when they both bend down to collect what has fallen out of it, Ignat gets an electric shock from one of the coins, and has the strange feeling that what is happening has already somehow happened to him before. 'It's as if I've already picked up money like this. And yet this is the first time...', he says. The dropping of the bag, caused by his mother's rushed inattention, carries a clear symbolic meaning related to the leitmotif of tripping which is repeated in all Tarkovsky's films and which represents the difficulty of trying constantly to improve oneself, the difficulty of moving to a new form of life or a new sphere of existence. [...] In this case the 'vectors' of the two protagonists' movements are heading in opposite directions: Natalya is trying to 'catch up' with passing time, to be in step with the present, and she interprets the delay as an unfortunate mistake; while for Ignat, the event becomes a gateway to the sphere of eternity.<sup>678</sup>

The corollary of this 'sphere of eternity' is what Evlampiev calls 'the deep unity of people': the possibility of moral transmission, a passing on of the civilisational flame from one generation to the next: 'a child becomes an adult by finding himself in debt to what the people around him do (consciously or unconsciously) for him, to the fact that those around him find themselves 'reflected' in him and the fact that their 'reflection' stays in him as a part of his own self.'<sup>679</sup> In the first part of the film, Evlampiev argues that the main protagonist is engaged in the 'attempt to establish in himself the form of his young mother and to understand this form as the living basis of his own

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678 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, pp. 131-133.

679 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 138.

individuality', and concludes that 'the influence of his mother on him was so comprehensive and profound that all the events in her life (especially those that determined her, and his, fate), even without his willing it or participating in it, find themselves reflected in his personality, and became a part of his life.'<sup>680</sup> This influence was only heightened by the fact of his father's leaving, which 'forced Alexey's mother to face the fact that she was alone, and led her to the decision to sacrifice herself for her children.'<sup>681</sup> As Alexey came gradually to realise the extent of his mother's loss and sacrifice, the event of his father's leaving became 'the basis of his whole relationship with the world and the leitmotif of all his memories of his own past, for it was precisely this event which allowed him to understand the importance of his mother's role in his own development.'<sup>682</sup>

Tarkovsky also opens up the possibility of the cosmos's sympathetic resonance with all this human suffering and responsibility through the leitmotif of wind, beginning with Maria's encounter with the travelling doctor in the film's first scene. The unity of each individual's moral strivings in a 'sphere of eternity' is also illustrated through wind, which 'can be seen as a symbolic designation of the "border" between the "world of time" and the "world of eternity"'.<sup>683</sup> The repetition of the wind motif towards the end of the film contributes to an overall effect of 'movement printed in eternity, not the natural movement of earthly nature, but the reaction of nature to human effort, to internal movements of the human spirit', as was the case with the doctor in the opening scene as he contemplated a future with the 'interesting' woman he had just met.<sup>684</sup> Evlampiev also suggests a possible connection with the film's enigmatic title: 'the image of the mysterious gust of wind is a symbol of the two forms of specular reflection, a reflection in the world of nature of human emotional impulses and a reflection of earthly existence as a whole (both the individual and the world) in eternal being or the "world of eternity"<sup>685</sup> ; in summary, these gusts of wind are 'a translation into nature and the surrounding world of a momentary burst of feeling in a person's soul.'<sup>686</sup> Likewise, Evlampiev argues, 'the sudden eruption of fire – fire in the rain! - is a reflection, breaking its way into the world, of the spiritual upheaval' through which Maria Nikolaevna was then living.<sup>687</sup> Tarkovsky throws this suffering into stark relief with the use of 'an alarming red-yellow colour which seems to come out of herself, a fire burning in her own soul which has a sinister effect on the verdant and humid harmony around her'.<sup>688</sup> Nevertheless, after overcoming the radical disharmony and disunity of the fire episode – which occurred in the same year (1935) as her

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680 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 138.

681 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 138.

682 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 138.

683 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 145.

684 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 145.

685 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 145.

686 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 139.

687 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 139.

688 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, pp. 139-140

husband's leaving (as we are told by Maria herself) – Maria Nikolaevna restores this harmony by assuming the responsibility of sacrifice for her children, a move made possible for Evlampiev's Tarkovsky because 'a person's choice of the path of sacrifice in life frees her from the shackles of ordinary existence and brings her out into the wide ocean of being to a point where the "world of time" and the "world of eternity" unite'.<sup>689</sup> Moreover, 'whoever the person is, she stands on a level footing with the inhabitants of the "world of eternity"'; this is precisely why we see the same 'mysterious woman-angel' with Maria Nikolaevna as later appears to Ignat, 'determining his fate', and who 'will also be with Alexey at the moment of death. Taking Alyosha's sister by the hand, she effectively helps his mother to take her first steps on the path of the cross, just as the peasants helped Jesus in the "Russian Calvary" scene in *Andrei Rublev*.<sup>690</sup>

If this 'sphere of eternity' is a heavenly harmony, Tarkovsky also shows us what the absence of this harmony looks like through scenes of war and, closer to home, his mother's experience working as an editor for Stalin's state publishing giant. The publishing house scene, in which Maria rushes to correct a spelling mistake which could have 'terrible' consequences, ends with her colleague Liza telling her that she is a selfish drama queen who is sure to make her children's lives a misery. Liza ends her tirade by quoting the opening lines from Dante's *Inferno*, as if to reinforce the message made clear enough by the underground, mechanised setting and long corridors that there is something hellish, 'recalling a prison, concentration camp or torture chamber', both for Maria Ivanovna personally and for Russian society as a whole, under Stalin: 'in this oppressive atmosphere each human step, each movement requires an enormous effort; with barely noticeable movement of the camera, Tarkovsky creates a distinct sense of physical weight, which slows the characters down'.<sup>691</sup> The deeper problem, however, is that 'harmonious interaction is impossible here; people don't understand each other, fail to say what they mean, make mistakes, argue, cry, and try to get away from each other'.<sup>692</sup> In the end, 'not even the basic requirements of life can be satisfied here; that which is normally useful to people becomes a weapon for new forms of torture. When Maria Nikolaevna goes into the shower and starts washing herself, the water runs out, and all she can do is to laugh in despair and then cry'.<sup>693</sup> While an ordinary existence is consumed by the search for the 'Divine Word' or Moral Law insofar as it 'holds the key to perfection and harmony among all things', here in the publishing house scene 'a hellish word holds sway, bringing punishment, suffering and death. There is never any getting away from this word; it has no absolute meaning in

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689 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 140.

690 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 140.

691 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 149.

692 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 149.

693 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 149.



either the "world of time" or the "world of eternity", and the Divine Word gets lost here.<sup>694</sup>

Tarkovsky also takes the Spanish Civil War as a paradigm of cosmic disharmony, showing scenes of children wrenched from their parents and then depicting the deracinating effects of forced separation from one's home on Spanish exiles in Russia. Evlampiev cleverly draws the parallel between these unfortunate Spaniards and Alexey himself:

The central space in the Spaniards' memory is occupied by the tragic events of their childhood: their separation from their homeland. Just as Alexey's father's abandoning of the family and the disaster this causes in his mother's life becomes the vantage point from which he assesses his own life and reflects on his own personal fate, so too does the Spaniards' childhood tragedy become a reference point for defining themselves and their place in the world. It is not just a thing of the past, and is more than a mere memory; it has entered their flesh and blood, poisoned their souls, causing a need endlessly to resolve the problem of the foundation of their existence.<sup>695</sup>

Likewise, 'the tragedy of Alexey's mother, reflected in his soul and entering into his personality, made him an obnoxious person, constantly entering into conflict with those around him, even those closest to him – his mother, his wife, his son.'<sup>696</sup> In precisely the same way, 'the childhood tragedy of the Russified Spaniards, the tragedy of irrevocable separation from their homeland and their loved ones, made them strange people, incapable of normal, conflict-free relationships with each other and with the world.'<sup>697</sup> The Spaniards, indeed, are an example of failed globalisation: 'they dream of Spain, talk and think constantly about it, but they have already lost their understanding of its spiritual essence', as shown by the episode with the unnamed Spaniard impersonating a *matador*.<sup>698</sup> As the older Luisa bitterly concludes: 'The windbag – he was in Spain and he didn't understand anything.' The same Spaniard slaps his daughter in the face merely because she manages successfully to complete a Spanish dance move: 'They taught you and taught you and nothing worked, and now it turns out that you can do it!' At the end of the scene, Luisa 'gets up and leaves, unable to listen anymore to these conversations about Spain and the past which lives in them but which cannot co-exist harmoniously with their present circumstances.'<sup>699</sup>

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694 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 149.

695 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 151.

696 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 151.

697 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 151.

698 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 151.

699 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 152.

Yet Tarkovsky, following Dante, believes in the transforming power of human spiritual effort, of an honest facing up to one's own 'demons' and the demons ruling the society around one, and in the possibility of acts of nobility and sacrifice in even the most desperate situations. In fact, such situations as those faced by Luisa and the other Spaniards may provide the best possible opportunities for meaningful sacrifice; even though she has lost touch with her homeland, Luisa decides to stay in Russia because her 'husband is Russian and children are Russian'. Another opportunity for sacrifice in the film is provided by the cruel trick of the war orphan Asafiev, who launches a practice grenade at the officer charged with training child soldiers during Russia's battle with Nazism. Far from a meaningless act of defiance or mere tasteless prank, Asafiev's fake grenade in fact provides the officer with a unique opportunity to do something very meaningful indeed: he spontaneously throws himself on the grenade in an effort to save the children nearby. Evlampiev connects 'the hesitation and nervousness evident in the instructor's speech' with 'the motif of stuttering in the prologue, where we see a teenager who, with the help of a hypno-therapist, tries to overcome his condition, to speak – to take possession of the Word which opens the door to existence as a whole and the unity of meaning in things.'<sup>700</sup> Just as the teenager in the prologue succeeds, with the help of a hypnotherapist, in the brave and difficult task of speaking, the army instructor is given a chance to recover his true human voice by Asafiev, described by Evlampiev as 'another messenger from the "world of eternity"', whose 'orphan status serves as a kind of evidence of his "timeless" origin'.<sup>701</sup> While 'the test to which Asafiev puts the instructor seems cruel and meaningless', it nevertheless 'gives him a chance to fulfil the true goals and values of human life. Given a tough choice by Asafiev – to watch in horror as the children around him die or to sacrifice himself for them - the instructor unhesitatingly chooses self-sacrifice.'<sup>702</sup>

Just as Maria Ivanovna is moved by the death of Liza, who had been so cruel to her, so too is Alexey's fate tied to that of the the war orphan Asafiev – much as Tarkovsky himself had identified with Ivan in *Ivanogo Detstvo* – as both are left clutching what appears to be the same bird. While Evlampiev argues that it is useful to view Asafiev as another guest from the 'sphere of eternity', another being forming one body with Alexey and the officer, the deeper point is that all human beings have one foot, so to speak, in eternity, and are all, even the most victimised and cruel, linked there. In this way, a fully realised human being feels at home in any company, any century, even in the depths of the Russian war effort, as Tarkovsky shows by playing his father's poem over the top of muddy, miserable footage from the war:

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700 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 154.

701 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 154.

702 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, pp. 154-155.

There is no death in the world.  
All are immortal. Everything is immortal.  
You live in a house – and the house does not collapse.  
I take any century,  
I will go into it and build a home in it.  
That's why your children are with me  
And your wives are at one table.  
The great-grandfather and the grandson share a table too.  
The future shines now,  
And if I raise my hand,  
All five beams will remain with you.

Evlampiev associates this transtemporal spirit with Jesus:

The image of a single Path common to all humanity is shown in the scene depicting Soviet soldiers crossing the Sivash during the Second World War. This documentary scene is the longest of all those shown in the film, and caused surprise among the first spectators to see the film for its strange – unheroic and somehow timeless – depiction of war. But this is precisely the effect that Tarkovsky sought. For him, war is only one manifestation, however cruel, of a central law of existence, according to which the destructive forces which prevail in the world can be tamed and the imperfection of the world to some extent 'corrected' through a human act of sacrifice, a voluntary following of the destiny of Jesus Christ. The slow-motion, drawn-out scene takes place somehow outside of historical time and outside the earthly sphere, in eternity, as the movement of the soldiers carrying ammunition, weapons and some rustic wooden structures allows for only one ready comparison – the path of Jesus to the cross, now the common and shared lot of all people.<sup>703</sup>

Tarkovsky also tries to make essentially the same point in a different, more personal way with his twin deployment of a bird in the film:

The image of the bird clutched in a human hand is repeated twice in the film, and it is clear that there must be a deep inner correspondence between the two scenes. At the

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703 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 156.

end of the film, a dying Alexey takes the apparently injured bird into his hand, and lifts it up, as if trying to get it to fly. The most banal (and therefore least likely) explanation is to suppose that the bird which Alexey tries to 'let go' is his soul, which separates from his body at the moment of death. But this explanation leaves entirely to one side that which is clearly emphasised by the director: namely, that the bird on the bed next to Alexey is in as much pain as Alexey himself. We see what difficulty it has breathing, how it trembles with discomfort.

[...] The bird also serves as a symbol of the thirst for connection when it flies onto [Asafiev's] head in the very place where all the meanings of existence and of human life converge. In this place, time joins eternity, the Earth forms one with the sky, and human beings achieve the heights of angels; here, the deep sources of all ages and all human events can be found, and here, human beings take full responsibility for all that happens in the world.<sup>704</sup>

Returning to compare the instructor's sacrifice with that of Alexey's mother, Evlampiev concludes that 'both these tragic events, showing the level of people's interconnectedness and the degree of their responsibility for each other, are reflected in Alexey's soul and exercise a decisive influence over his destiny. The former laid the foundations of his personality, while the latter helped him to understand his purpose in life.'<sup>705</sup> That this message of responsibility and sacrifice assumes prophetic dimensions is emphasised by Tarkovsky's choice of Pushkin's poem *The Prophet* to open the screenplay: the artist receives a message from other people, from earlier 'prophets' – including, in Tarkovsky's case, his own mother and father - and then transmits this message to future 'prophets' in a magical and necessary process; just as the subject of 'The Prophet' is 'precisely the kind of higher intervention in our lives that makes prophets of us, mediators between Heaven and Earth', so too is this intervention 'the main theme of *The Mirror*, since we find at the heart of the film two episodes which depict the arrival of messengers from the "world of eternity" to Alexey and his son.'<sup>706</sup> Evlampiev then links this theme to Tarkovsky's views on the role of artists, who 'become intermediaries uniting the temporal and eternal in their lives and their work', and without whom 'humanity would lose its understanding of its higher purpose and its path to achieving that purpose'.<sup>707</sup> Just as for Mahfouz, however, the content of this 'prophecy' is at bottom a straightforward call to self-cultivation and self-responsibility, as Alexey discovers in the earring-pawning scene, when 'a fierce determination is born within him in response to the sudden

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704 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, pp. 157-158.

705 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 159.

706 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 159.

707 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 159.

realisation of his mother's obvious helplessness.<sup>708</sup> While on the one hand Alexey's staring into the mirror while his mother tries to sell her earrings represents the moment of his realisation of his own independence, on the other he 'comes to understand the complexity and tragic contradictions of the world – so beautiful and good in some of its aspects and so unpleasant and wicked in others.'<sup>709</sup> The doctor's wife, not uncoincidentally played to perfection by Larisa after Tarkovsky wisely refused to give her the role of Maria, may have created a 'wonderful homely environment' for her family, but admiration 'gives way to an acute sense of injustice in Alyosha's heart for the fact that destiny can bestow such comfort and calm on the undeserving doctor's wife while at the same time leaving his own mother deprived of even the merest crumbs of happiness and spiritual harmony'.<sup>710</sup> Moreover, Evlampiev concludes, 'in this very moment of insight into the contrast between the possible harmony and completeness of the world and its current state of deep imperfection, Alyosha realises his calling as an artist'.<sup>711</sup>

This moral struggle to spread the sphere of harmony in a world of potential darkness gives meaning to the details of each individual's personal story, as the very end of the film, in Evlampiev's view, underlines: 'here, not just symbolically but really (in the sense of a reality not confined to a single sphere but encompassing existence in its entirety), the beginning and end of the protagonist's life merge into one, time merges into eternity, and all the events [in Alexey's life] find their absolute meaning and fuse into an inseparable whole.'<sup>712</sup> At a time when humanity, locked in a nuclear-framed Cold War, appeared to have lost its faith in this potential wholeness and to be careering towards apocalypse, Tarkovsky felt an urgent need to paint his own self-portrait, not in order to save himself or the details of his life from oblivion, but precisely in order to show that he was a product, one among centuries of products, of an infinitely more important civilisation which made his personality possible and which makes all morally self-conscious personalities, all members of the 'club of eternity', possible. Without dodging the aspects of his personality which made him selfish, difficult and insecure – Alexey's wife gives full voice to these in the film - but rather, incorporating these apparent flaws openly into his narrative, Tarkovsky gives us a truly modest autobiography, one which shows its subject striving to realise the best of himself but ultimately indebted to a network of other selves who made his own prophetic and public form of self-cultivation possible as well as defining the contours of that struggle. Just as Maria Ivanovna overcomes abuse and misfortune, surviving the hell of abandonment by her husband and the scorn of the society around her (embodied in the publishing house scene) and sacrificing herself for her children, so too does

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708 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 172.

709 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 177.

710 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 178.

711 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 178.

712 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 182.

her son face his own personal demons, learning from her example and other examples of sacrifice and seeking the broadest, worthiest sacrifice he can through art, an art which creates not for its own sake or to celebrate its own maker, but to convey an eternal, or at least trans-generational and trans-millennial, message for which one is merely a flawed and short-lived receptacle.

### 3.7 *Stalker* (1979)

It is no surprise that Frederic Jameson, the godfather of postmodern criticism, heaped scorn on Tarkovsky in general, and on *Stalker* in particular: Tarkovsky's message of civilisational unity and moral truth was laughable to him. Although Jameson claims that his objection to Tarkovsky is 'not so much to the religious content' as to Tarkovsky's 'artistic pretentiousness', he nevertheless dismisses Tarkovsky's 'grandiose mysticism' and describes *Stalker* as a 'lugubrious religious fable'.<sup>713</sup> Jameson concludes that 'the deepest contradiction in Tarkovsky is then that offered by a valorization of nature without human technology achieved by the highest technology of the photographic apparatus itself. No reflexivity acknowledges this second hidden presence, thus threatening to transform Tarkovskian nature-mysticism into the sheerest ideology.'<sup>714</sup> Tarkovsky's alleged 'nature-mysticism', however, is not nature-mysticism at all, but rather, as we have seen and will see further in *Stalker*, a dynamic faith in the power of human civilisation to complement nature and to bring Heaven and Earth together in a higher moral unity. The Stalker's mission is to improve his charges by bringing them into contact with the Zone, a place which will force them to confront themselves and to behave in a self-critical, morally responsible way if they are to survive.

This moral imperative applies just as acutely to the Stalker himself, who by the film's end has realised that the promised 'room' in the Zone is a mirage, and that the real work of life is, as for Plato's philosopher, to turn back from the light of a Promised Land and to spread the light, briefly glimpsed, to those stuck with their backs turned in the darkness of the human cave. Tarkovsky's use of colour in the film also points us in this direction: not only is the final scene in the Zone a shot of the three men in a cave looking out over the Promised Room and the light formed by the reflection of the rain on the surface of the water in it, the black-and-white scene of domestic misery from which the Stalker is desperate to escape at the beginning of the film also gives way, by the film's end, to colour images of the Stalker as a family man struggling to raise a deformed daughter in an almost post-apocalyptic environment. With this eternal moral light - brought back from the Zone in

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713 See Robert Bird, 'Gazing into Time: Tarkovsky and Modern Cinema Aesthetics', <http://people.ucalgary.ca/~tstronds/nostalghia.com/TheTopics/Gazing.html> (accessed 13/12/12).

714 See Robert Bird, 'Gazing into Time: Tarkovsky and Modern Cinema Aesthetics'.

the form of a good-natured dog - the genius of the Stalker's daughter, whom the Stalker had previously perceived as a nightmarish obstacle to his own self-realisation inside the Zone, reveals itself as she makes an extraordinary technological breakthrough: telekinesis. Progress in meaningful human knowledge, Tarkovsky argues again in *Stalker*, is only possible when we embrace our moral responsibilities and pass on the best of ourselves to those around us.

The Zone is also a reminder, however, of the universe's limitless capacity to surprise us. Although there is absolutely nothing new in this – if the Greeks didn't say it first, David Hume reminded us in the 18<sup>th</sup> century that we cannot be sure *a priori* that the sun will come up tomorrow, and epistemologists closer to our time, like Karl Popper, remind us that our empirical knowledge can always be falsified by new data – Tarkovsky lived through a period of remarkable confidence in the power of technology, nowhere moreso than in Soviet Russia. The Zone calls into question all we thought we knew about knowledge in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and constitutes a space where progress is only ever aligned with moral behaviour. In this lies the 'hope' of the Zone, its necessity for human beings in the age of nuclear weapons: the hope of justice. While Evlampiev argues that in *Stalker*, 'faith in the possibility of preserving harmony in the earthly world disappears (and indeed the whole idea of harmony disappears from Tarkovsky's worldview)'<sup>715</sup>, I would sooner argue that *Stalker* is a logical extension of the concerns raised in Tarkovsky's first four films: sacrifice, intergenerational solidarity, love and justice, all enshrined in the idea of civilisation and the need to protect it. If the world of *Stalker* is a fiercer, darker world, this only heightens the imperative: seek the Moral Way.

All three heroes in the Zone reject the opportunity to enter the room where their wishes will be fulfilled. Vera Shitova argues that this is 'because these desires are almost certainly pathetic, selfish and base', and goes on to argue that they 'return from the Zone just the same as they were when they arrived in it'.<sup>716</sup> Yet the Stalker at least (lest we forget, the film's central protagonist) has by the end realised – or we, the spectators, realise this *through* him even if he himself stops short of a full realisation himself - that his heartfelt desire to be useful, to give people what they need, can be fulfilled by engaging with his family, who love him, as well as by bringing people to the Zone. The Writer and Professor allow the Stalker to see what he had not yet seen, and which is the only 'message' of the Zone: any room which could fulfil one's desires, even if it really existed, could bring, like Nozick's Experience Machine, only temporary pleasure and not lasting happiness, for lasting happiness requires constant moral engagement, both self-cultivation and real-world effort.

Boyadzhieva also argues that the protagonists do not enter the room because they realise that

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715 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 226.

716 Vera Shitova, 'Journey to the Centre of the Soul', in Y.A. Yaropolov (ed.), *Unknown Tarkovsky*, p. 201.

their souls are not clean enough ardently to desire a better world.<sup>717</sup> While the Stalker does indeed complain to his wife after leaving the Zone that, for the Writer and Professor, 'every movement of their souls is billed' and that 'they only think about how to get more for it', he himself has seen beyond such egocentric calculations to a world in which other considerations matter. Whereas the Writer asks himself what the point of writing is if no one will read him in 100 years, and whereas the Professor is cynically bent on destroying the Zone to ensure that nobody's deepest desires are fulfilled and his own skin and 'calm' are thereby protected, the Stalker is committed to a higher code of honour: a code of service, in which the desire for direct personal salvation via God is dismissed as selfish, and the desire to save civilisation via sacrifice remains.

Evlampiev, for all the knots he ties himself in by trying to argue that Tarkovsky had lost faith in God by the time he came to *Stalker*, nevertheless concludes that 'in the world of Tarkovsky's films God is "born" only via human beings. He is "constructed" through their spiritual strivings, which bring together the surrounding universe.'<sup>718</sup> These strivings, however, go well beyond introspective navel-gazing or a renunciation of community: 'spiritual cultivation which presupposes the self-sufficiency of the individual shows itself to be no longer possible, since, by getting caught up in herself the individual loses herself and her contact with existence.'<sup>719</sup> While Tarkovsky in no way rejects the primacy of self-cultivation, he promotes 'an essentially different idea of it' from what we might expect: namely, that 'a person should not cut herself off from the world, but rather follow its rhythms and currents, even when they seem absurd or dangerous; a person should therefore try to change these rhythms and currents so that they take on a more meaningful form and become positive and creative rather than destructive and lethal.'<sup>720</sup>

The Writer, on the other hand, even if he pretends briefly to share Tarkovsky's vision of art as 'unselfish', is in the end, in contrast to both Tarkovsky and his Stalker, interested only in 'finding himself', and at any price:

Not by chance after passing successfully through the 'dry tunnel', the Stalker and the Writer achieve a deeper understanding of themselves; we then have the central scene in the film, where they both formulate (first inarticulately, then articulately) the true reasons for their coming to the Zone.

During an unannounced stop decided on by the Stalker, all three protagonists lie on the ground amidst a series of puddles, and the Writer returns to discussing the meaning of his journey. 'I don't care about humanity,' he says, continuing his endless

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717 See Boyadzhieva, *Life on a Cross*, p. 241.

718 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 248.

719 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 249.

720 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 249.



argument with the Professor. 'Of all the people in the world I am only interested in one person: me. Am I worth something, or am I a piece of shit, as so many others are? Suppose I go into the Room and return to our godforsaken city a genius. But a person writes because he tortures himself, doubts himself; the whole time he needs to prove to himself that he is worth something. And if I find out for sure that I'm a genius, why would I write then, what the hell for? ... In any case all this technology of yours, all these bombs, wheels and other boring artifacts, designed so that we can work less and eat more, all these are crutches and prostheses; while humanity exists to create works of art. This at least is unselfish, as opposed to all other human activity... great illusions, visions of absolute truth!'

The Writer's true goal in coming to the Zone consists in trying to find himself.<sup>721</sup>

Nevertheless, there is the suggestion that by the end of their arduous journey through the Zone, both the Writer and Professor have made some limited measure of moral and spiritual progress, even if it is not nearly enough to satisfy the Stalker: the pair's very survival in an environment which has proven so lethal for the immoral is the strongest evidence of all for this hypothesis. While the Writer may have begun to understand the selfish and ultimately empty nature of at least some of his longings, achieving a vague intimation of 'the horizon of spiritual perfection' by the end of his time in the Zone, the Professor with his bomb, which is apparently designed to save human civilisation from the threat of 'all these unrealised emperors, great inquisitors, *führers* of all kinds, and other such benefactors of the human race' who might have their wishes fulfilled by the Zone, realises that his weapon is rendered powerless by the Zone itself; the Professor arguably stays out of the Room and refuses to detonate his bomb because he realises that 'against the true causes of evil and chaos no bomb, no matter how many kilotons, can be effective.'<sup>722</sup> The moral of the film, for Evlampiev, resides in the fact that 'the saving of existence, and of the whole of humanity, depends on how quickly people can come to this new understanding of the world, give up their false ideals and false relationship with reality.'<sup>723</sup> Tarkovsky is clear that only the moral leadership of the Stalker, his courage and faith and honest desire to be useful, can pull the simultaneously self-absorbed and reason-drugged masses of our modern world, represented in the film by the Writer and Professor respectively, out of their dangerous moral and spiritual emptiness. The challenge inherent in this new understanding of the world is that since it 'sets itself in opposition to reason's claims to

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721 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 254.

722 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 257.

723 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 258.

definitive superhuman knowledge, it can only become accessible to people through their own individual earthly efforts, and cannot be impressed on the brain in the same way as generally accepted scientific truths.<sup>724</sup> The three men's journey to the Zone is an allegory of this urgent process: the Stalker can offer advice on how to behave, but in the end it is the Zone who reads the hearts and minds of those who enter her and judges them accordingly, and it is this judgment which matters.

Towards the end of the 1970s, Tarkovsky began to worry more and more that this moral and political progress, realisable only 'in the brains of millions' to paraphrase Thomas Nagel, was taking too long; in *Stalker*, he develops the specifically apocalyptic Cold War theme we had seen in incipient form in *Solaris* and *Zerkalo*: we must cultivate ourselves now, *en masse*, if there is to be any future for us as a species at all. Evlampiev sees this as a thematic shift from a man for whom God had died rather than as a logical extension of the idea of a divinely inspired Moral Law (or simply as its application to present-day circumstances), arguing that 'in *Stalker*, Tarkovsky talks less about the possibility of making the world more perfect and harmonious (in comparison with its present less than perfect state) than he does about saving the world from a definitive disintegration, of saving it from total death even if in a less than perfect state.'<sup>725</sup> While 'the apocalyptic theme - the idea of a universal catastrophe leading to a full and final destruction of all that is meaningful and whole in existence and the definitive reign of chaos and absurdity - first appears in full force in *Stalker*', Evlampiev argues that in Tarkovsky's final two films 'it will become the main theme.'<sup>726</sup> I see no reason, however, why this 'apocalyptic turn' in Tarkovsky should constitute an either/or; it is surely perfectly consistent with the views on moral cultivation and potential harmony expressed by Tarkovsky in his earlier films and even in *Stalker* itself. Evlampiev himself actually shares this view, even if he confuses himself and his readers by at times pretending he doesn't and by insisting that 'God is dead' in *Stalker*. On the contrary, God is, while deprived of the authority of revelation, still as alive as ever:

Despite the many things that distinguish it from his earlier films, *Stalker* in its own unexpected way rehearses the main themes of *Andrei Rublev* in a new light. The only path to the saving of the world and human beings was shown by Jesus Christ, the Teacher. The Jesus theme, his biography as an example of self-sacrifice and of the master-student relationship, appears with a new force in *Stalker*, although in a less obvious and direct form than in *Andrei Rublev*. We have already stressed that

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724 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 258.

725 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 258.

726 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 258.

Tarkovsky was a long way from traditional Christianity, and his interpretation of the story of Jesus clearly illustrates this. For Tarkovsky Jesus is a man and only a man; the meaning of his story is not that he brought people a promise from God, but that as a man he proved capable of an earthly feat which showed all people the path to salvation.<sup>727</sup>

Evlampiev introduces into his discussion, unhelpfully and unnecessarily in my view, the Heideggerian concept of 'Being' as the object of post-Christian service where I would prefer 'Civilisation', or at least some version of Tu Weiming's 'anthropocosmic vision' for that civilisation as we will discuss it in the next chapter. Terminological debates aside, however, Evlampiev's evaluation of *Stalker* is understandable enough to the lay reader unsteeped in Heideggerian arcana: 'in the story of Jesus the most important part is not the final moments of his life, since in trying to imitate them there is a big risk of self-deification, but rather the patience and methodical discipline of the teacher's vocation.'<sup>728</sup> Moreover, 'the work of Jesus is alive and evolving, as long as there are students of his work, and as long as it is passed on through inconspicuous earthly service and a smooth transition from teachers to students.'<sup>729</sup> This process of transmission 'is not affected by whether Jesus was a perfect human being; indeed, some of his closest disciples were a long way from being perfect (we need think no further than Peter).'<sup>730</sup> While the goal may be individual perfection, the most important thing is 'the adoption of a respectful willingness to take up one's section of the Path', an intergenerational awareness which 'already involves a person in a higher calling'; even if she 'retains the imprint of her ineradicable imperfection, she can still in turn pass on what she has achieved to her students, so that they can make their own contribution to that common task which Jesus began and which is capable of saving everything and everyone.'<sup>731</sup> Evlampiev concludes that 'this, in particular, is what Tarkovsky's film is about'.<sup>732</sup>

This common civilisational project may indeed require precisely the sacrifice of the 'self' to which the Writer was so attached; rather than striving to 'find oneself' or 'be happy', for Evlampiev's Tarkovsky 'the realm of "religion", of true faith, involves coming down to Earth as it is and trying to correct its imperfection'.<sup>733</sup> In this sense, 'a violation of ethical laws is not a failing to live up to some "sublime" set of divine commandments, but rather an inability to recognise that the most important thing for a human being is not his own "subjective" existence or his own individual ends,

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727 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 259.

728 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 260.

729 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 260.

730 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 260.

731 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 260.

732 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 260.

733 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 261.

but existence itself, existence as such.<sup>734</sup> This may require compromise and even outright sacrifice: 'if in order to keep this existence from falling into a state of chaos and absurdity one is asked to sacrifice one's ethical self-righteousness, one is obliged to do so.'<sup>735</sup> The Zone, with its mirage of a 'Wish Fulfilment Room', offers a necessary reminder to people, in a world short on reminders, of this higher Moral Law:

'There's nothing else left for people on Earth,' the Stalker cries to the Professor, who has brought his bomb into the Zone so as to blow up the 'Room of Desires'. 'This is the only place where people can go if they have nothing else left to hope for.'

Although when she gets there a person does not get her wishes fulfilled, the hope which remains alive in her does not die, and actually gets stronger insofar as she gets more than simple wish fulfilment: she understands that all her previous desires were mirages and only cut her off from herself and the true meaning of her life. Here [in the Zone] one learns to desire from scratch, and the new desires will not be at all similar to the old ones.<sup>736</sup>

Whereas the Writer is stuck asking plaintively why he can't personally live forever, the Stalker has grasped the intergenerational meaning of life and civilisation, accepting the lessons of his 'Teacher' in the stalking trade, such as they were, and going further, in the end desperately hoping that someone, somewhere, somehow, will take up the mantle in a world sliding, or already slid, into a 'chaos' of self-centred materialism and unbelief: the idea of the Room of Desires is that 'a person, upon reaching it, should realise the emptiness of her former life and renounce all that she formerly put under the heading of "desires"'.<sup>737</sup> In contrast, 'if she does not understand the need to transform her own essence and her own existence and enters the Room anyway, she will truly get her wishes fulfilled – the genuine deep-rooted wishes of a soul which is wrongly oriented in the world – leading to a collapse of all she knows and ultimately to death.'<sup>738</sup>

The Stalker himself can, by the end of the film at least, be seen as a teacher desperately in search of students in a decaying social edifice well represented by the station bar where the travellers' journey begins and ends. Following their return from the Zone, in a conversation with his wife, the Stalker utters some 'very harsh words about his two fellow travellers', which Evlampiev argues 'do not refer to them (not least because they contradict other not less honest statements by

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734 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 261.

735 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 261.

736 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, pp. 262-263.

737 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 267.

738 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 267.

him) but to people in general, to the whole surrounding human zoo, built on a foundation of technological reason and physical power.<sup>739</sup> While we have already argued that the Writer and Professor do indeed represent, with their respective faiths in self and reason, the contemporary 'human zoo' at large, and that the moral progress they achieve in the Zone is limited, Evlampiev goes so far as to argue that the Stalker, in his final journey into the Zone, 'in fact fulfilled his life's work – he finally found a student that could go further than his own teacher.'<sup>740</sup> Evlampiev argues that this exemplary 'student' is in fact the Writer, who has 'become another person while navigating the Zone, similar to the Stalker - in fact, he has himself become a Stalker.'<sup>741</sup> While there is some limited evidence for this, including the Stalker's wife's positive reaction to the Writer in the bar when they return from the Zone (she praises the apparent humanity and warmth he shows towards dogs), it is ultimately unclear whether the Writer stays out of the Room more for the admirable reasons Evlampiev suggests or primarily because of the self-centred fear he expresses throughout; a more measured conclusion would be to say that the Writer and Professor show, by successfully navigating the Zone under the Stalker's guidance, that there is a modicum of hope for the 'human zoo' at large, but that the painfully slow nature of their moral progress leaves the Stalker exasperated and Tarkovsky nervous about the future of humanity in the post-nuclear age, where moral leadership of the kind supplied by the Stalker is in such dangerously short supply.

Although Boyadzhieva exaggerates when she says that the Stalker's wife is the only character in the film 'capable of love'<sup>742</sup>, this love is the Stalker's final unequivocal hope. Although he refuses to take his wife into the Zone for fear that she, too, will fail fully to understand, we see at the end of the film, whether Tarkovsky's Stalker can or not, that she already understands him and his mission, even if he is unwilling to share this mission with her in the way that Akhenaten and Nefertiti shared theirs (and here we come very close to the tragic flaw in Tarkovsky's conception of conjugal relations which prevented him from conceiving of a truly shared mission and equal relationship). The Stalker's wife loves her husband and believes thoroughly in him, sacrificing herself to him and regretting none of the bitterness and solitude that he has caused her with his dangerous forays into the Zone; it is no coincidence that it is the daughter of this couple who shows the will necessary for true human discovery, a will not forged by dreams of self-sufficiency and personal immortality but by the 'fire' of collective inspiration and action, as we see in the poem which inspires her to telekinesis:

I love your eyes, my friend,

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739 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 267.

740 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 267.

741 Evlampiev, *The Artistic Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 267.

742 See Boyadzhieva, *Life on a Cross* p. 242.

With their flaming playfulness, miraculous,  
When you raise them suddenly  
And as if in a heavenly prayer  
Draw a brief circle.  
But there is a stronger charm;  
The eyes cast down,  
In minutes of passionate kisses,  
And through the lowered lashes,  
The sombre, faint glow of determined ardour.

The triumphal music from a bygone century which accompanies the breakthrough to telekinesis provides a backdrop of ancestral cheering and a reminder of the deep intergenerational effort and civilisational energy which has gone into producing this precious new prodigy.

### 3.8 *Nostalgia* (1983)

With *Nostalgia*, Tarkovsky, now an emigrant in Western Europe, turned his attention to a specifically Western form of spiritual crisis, addressing his own alienation from Western culture's preoccupation with the individual self. Russia, with its long tradition of viewing itself as a 'bridge between East and West' and only reluctantly as part of Europe, is represented in *Nostalgia* by Gorchakov, a poet who feels entirely uneasy about Italy and its 'beauty' even as it comes to form part of him; the film's memorable closing scene, in which Gorchakov sits with his dog against a half-Russian, half-Italian backdrop, is explained thus by Tarkovsky: 'at the end I put a Russian house within the walls of an Italian cathedral in an artificial montage. This models the internal state of the protagonist, which has not let him live in harmony, or rather a newfound integrity marrying Tuscan hills and the Russian countryside.'<sup>743</sup> This new 'house', half-Russian and half-European, is nevertheless, as Tarkovsky intimates, missing something; Daoist music makes its appearance in the film as Tarkovsky openly begins to seek solutions from beyond the confines of Christendom: 'while making my latest film *Nostalgia*, which I shot in Italy, I met with Daoist music from around the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. I have it in the film. What astonishing music! I don't mean its apparent formal qualities; on the contrary, the whole point of it is that it disappears, dissolves.'<sup>744</sup> Tarkovsky argues further that

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743 See Boyadzhieva, *Life on a Cross*, p. 265.

744 Andrei Tarkovsky, 'The 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the Artist', *Iskusstvo Kino*, no. 4, 1989, p. 98.

'this is a kind of introvertedness in Eastern spirituality which is expressed in its music, a sort of spiritual implosion, where the individual draws the entire surrounding world into herself, as if breathing in the whole world in the spiritual sense.'<sup>745</sup> Tarkovsky, and by direct extension Gorchakov, for all their education in Russian and Western classics, are not fully at home in them, and seek inspiration from the East; as Tarkovsky once told an interviewer, 'for me, for example, countries like Thailand, Nepal, Tibet, China or Japan have always been closer to my spirituality and interiority than France or Germany, as strange as that may seem.'<sup>746</sup> Although Tarkovsky 'understood' Western culture and 'knew it well' and was, 'at the end of the day, a Westerner myself, educated not only in Russian culture but in Western culture more generally', there was nevertheless 'a common spirit, a deep common creed' which linked him and other Russians 'even more intimately with the East.'<sup>747</sup> When asked in 1986 'how have you resolved the problem of your 'I' in the West?', Tarkovsky the emigrant was even more explicit: 'I haven't managed to at all yet. For me Eastern civilisation is more attractive, with its focus on interiority and the desire to get beyond oneself, rather than the aggressive Western striving to express one's feelings as if they somehow mattered.'<sup>748</sup> Without arriving at envy of other cultures – this is the man who quoted Pushkin approvingly on Russia's irreplaceable role in the history of civilisation in the central scene of his autobiographical film - he had nevertheless 'always felt a strong pull from the allure of Eastern culture, where people are ready to offer themselves, so to speak, as gifts to the whole of creation.'<sup>749</sup> In the West, by contrast, another philosophy reigns: 'namely, to assert oneself and draw attention to oneself. This always struck me as dreadfully irritating, naive, and animal-like. The philosophy of the East has always had a magical effect on me and with every passing year it grows stronger.'<sup>750</sup>

It is regrettable that Tarkovsky's main contact with 'Eastern civilisation' came in the form of the Daoism on display in *Nostalgia* and the Japanese Buddhism we will see in *Sacrifice* - two essentially marginal (though trendy in the West) brands of Eastern spirituality when compared with the central (but long marginalised in the West) Confucian tradition – but we will have more to say on this in Chapter 4 (suffice it to say here that Tarkovsky, like Mahfouz, seems to have been largely ignorant of Confucianism and the ways in which it would have made a nicer fit with his ethic of sacrifice than either Daoism or Buddhism). Tarkovsky the emigrant's central concern, however, is *Western* civilisation's inability to take the idea of 'civilisation', and sacrifice for it, seriously:

Here in the West, people are particularly concerned about their own selves. If you tell

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745 Tarkovsky, 'The 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the Artist', p. 98.

746 See Nikolai Boldyrev, *Stalker, or The Works and Days of Andrei Tarkovsky*, (Ural L.T.A., 2002), p. 323.

747 See Boldyrev, *Stalker*, p. 323.

748 See Boldyrev, *Stalker*, p. 323.

749 See Boldyrev, *Stalker*, p. 323.

750 See Boldyrev, *Stalker*, p. 323.

them that the meaning of human existence lies in sacrifice for something higher, they will probably laugh and not believe you, just as they won't believe you if you tell them that people are not born to be happy and that there are much more important things than personal success or individual material prosperity. No one, it seems, believes that the soul is immortal!<sup>751</sup>

Just as Matthew Arnold's England had been consumed by a passion for coal and faith in the power of money over culture as a route to human perfection, Tarkovsky argues that the same philistinism has now conquered the entire Earth: 'the East was closer to the Truth than the West, but the West has eaten the East with its material claims to a better life.'<sup>752</sup> Western 'romanticism', Tarkovsky argues, is partially responsible for this: 'Compare Eastern and Western music: the West cries, "This is me! Look at me! Listen to how I suffer, how I love, how unhappy I am, how discerning I am! I! My! To me! Me!"; the East, meanwhile, 'doesn't say a word about itself! Complete dissolution in God, Nature, Time. Finding oneself in everything! Hiding everything within oneself! This is what Daoist music and China gave us 600 years before the birth of Jesus.'<sup>753</sup> Tarkovsky then asks himself the difficult question: 'But why, then, did this grand vision not win out? Why has it collapsed? Why has the civilisation founded on this base not reached us in the form of a completed historical process?'<sup>754</sup> Tarkovsky's only response is to say weakly that 'physical resistance is sinful by the very essence of Eastern logic.'<sup>755</sup>

Gorchakov in *Nostalgia* is utterly uninterested in his beautiful Italian translator Eugenia, who struggles to understand why she cannot find a man to satisfy her, and is fascinated instead by Domenico, who ends up burning himself alive in the name of humanity. Eugenia has completely failed to understand that there are 'things more important' than her own happiness, whereas Domenico, for all his appearance as a madman – for Tarkovsky, such believers could only appear mad in the West in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – has found something that Gorchakov, a Russian in Europe with a largely European education, is struggling to find within himself: the courage of his civilisational convictions. Gorchakov's carrying of the candle for Domenico represents an act, however trivial and symbolic, of sacrifice, a 'crossing over' to the house of truth – half-Western (Italian) and half-Eastern (Russian) - in which he can finally, with his timeless dog, enjoy a moment of symmetry and harmony. Indeed, for all Tarkovsky's embrace of the Far East, in the end it is Russia which comes to stand in for an Eastern civilisation which has, in our time,

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751 See Boldyrev, *Stalker*, p. 323.

752 See Boldyrev, *Stalker*, p. 324.

753 See Boldyrev, *Stalker*, p. 324.

754 See Boldyrev, *Stalker*, p. 324.

755 See Boldyrev, *Stalker*, p. 324.



largely capitulated to Western materialism. As Nikolai Boldyrev argues, "Tarkovsky dreamed of a "third way" for Russia. He saw that few in the West understood, or even wanted to understand, the essence of Russia and Russian people. The West was too complacent in its materialistic interpretation of "spiritual life" to be interested in any "third way".<sup>756</sup> As late as 1985, Tarkovsky was telling interviewers: 'I strongly believe in Russia's spiritual resources, the great spiritual forces which lie hidden in our country, and I think they are capable of having an impact on the course of civilisation as a whole.'<sup>757</sup>

Gorchakov, then, is a kind of universal man and an idealised self-portrait of Tarkovsky himself, a man Western enough to appreciate the best of European art, architecture and (Christian) civilisation, but also a standard-bearer for the kind of cosmos-embracing values which have been lost in the West and which were once embraced in the East but which now risk being lost there as well. For Boldyrev, 'this is, in essence, the main theme and the main conflict in *Nostalgia*: the opposition between East and West in the protagonist's soul and his quiet, daydream-like edging towards Eastern "overcoming", fleshly material self-sacrifice (through his brotherly union with the "exemplary" Domenico) for the sake of the invisible city and the world.'<sup>758</sup> Although there is plenty to like about living materially well or standing up for the rights of individual people – Tarkovsky himself was keen on both and does not in any way celebrate Domenico's selfish imprisonment of his family, for example – when such concerns with utility and rights are merely self-centred they cannot lead to human fulfilment. When asked Eugenia's 'How can I be happy?' question by an audience member at an American lecture, Tarkovsky unambiguously replied:

I find your question simply laughable! [...] For a start, you need to ask yourself why you're alive in the world. What is the meaning of your life? Why have you appeared on Earth at precisely this time? What role has been set aside for you? Sort all this out. Understand that human beings were not born for happiness at all. I think we were born to bear the burden of hard work. Life was given to us for spiritual growth, so that we could perfect ourselves morally. I don't understand at all who said we ought to be happy. People can't live with only self-centred pragmatic goals, even if they live in a very well organised state. If they do, they simply degenerate. Christian love begins with love for oneself, but such love entails not egoism but rather a capacity to sacrifice oneself for the sake of the next person. [...] Of course, it would be absurd to suggest that one could or should make suffering her goal. Sacrifice as such should

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756 Boldyrev, *Stalker*, p. 324.

757 See Boldyrev, *Stalker*, p. 324.

758 Boldyrev, *Stalker*, p. 322.

not feel like a conscious giving up of something; it's a matter of achieving readiness for sacrifice as a natural spiritual state.<sup>759</sup>

For Shitova, Gorchakov and his 'Teacher', Domenico, succeed in this self-overcoming and in identifying with a collective entity which brings them into contact with Truth: while modern Europe endures with 'the old stones of its culture, its comfort, the constrained tone of its ideological and political struggles, its people broken by unbelief and horror in the face of a nuclear apocalypse' and left merely with 'the exposure of nerves, tiredness of oneself, loneliness, the grinding complexity of relations with others', Gorchakov 'carries and carries his candle'; meanwhile, in Rome, in front of the statue of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius on his horse, Domenico 'shouts his words of prophetic warning at the indifferent crowd, a call for unity (to the sound of Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony, with the powerful refrain "Unite, millions!"), and douses himself in gasoline before burning like a torch.<sup>760</sup>

'Strange people, strange acts?' Shitova asks. 'Yes, but behind each of them lies an intolerable agony of involvement in the woes of our wide world, a desire to change even a symbolic something in it and in oneself by overcoming alienation from oneself.'<sup>761</sup> Shitova puts in this same category of strange self-overcomers the hero of Tarkovsky's final film, *Sacrifice*.

### 3.9 Sacrifice (1985)

According to Shitova: 'Alexander, the hero of *Sacrifice*, also carries out a ritual of his own: he calmly, almost supernaturally prepares the destruction of his big, beautiful home, offering it as a sacrifice in an effort to save the world from fiery nuclear annihilation.'<sup>762</sup> 'Is he mad?' she asks. 'Yes and no, because the overcoming of the terror which had disfigured him is a move which brings him liberation.'<sup>763</sup> Although Alexander himself will soon die, he 'leaves behind a son who overcomes his inability to speak by saying "in the beginning there was the Word", and who continues to water the parched tree which will one day be green with health.'<sup>764</sup> Just as Gorchakov finds more to interest him in Domenico and his sacrifice than in Eugenia and her self-centredness, so too is Alexander's young son more attracted by his father's mixture of respect for Christian tradition ('in the beginning

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759 See Boyadzhieva, *Life on a Cross*, pp. 278-279.

760 Shitova, 'Journey to the Centre of the Soul', in Y.A. Yaropolov (ed.), *Unknown Tarkovsky*, pp. 203-204.

761 Shitova, 'Journey to the Centre of the Soul', p. 206.

762 Shitova, 'Journey to the Centre of the Soul', p. 204.

763 Shitova, 'Journey to the Centre of the Soul', p. 204.

764 Shitova, 'Journey to the Centre of the Soul', p. 204.

there was the Word') and samurai warrior spirit (not least evidenced by Alexander's choice of costume for his act of ritual sacrifice) than his mother's hysterical egoism. In stark contrast to the spiritual purity – old-fashioned Christianity with some dashes of Eastern flavour – enshrined in the tree by the water where father and son commune and exchange the flame of civilisation, we have the house, its merely ornamental Western high cultural contents and the decadent, self-centred behaviour of its inhabitants, most notably of Alexander's wife Adelaide. In his bid to the Swedish Film Institute, Tarkovsky explained his central goal thus: 'the film will be about the following: if we do not want to live like parasites off the body of society and enjoy the fruits of democracy, if we do not want to become conformists and blindly consuming idiots, then we are obliged to give up a lot.'<sup>765</sup> Without a readiness for sacrifice of the kind made by Alexander, Tarkovsky argues, a vibrant democratic order is impossible: 'only when you know that you are ready to sacrifice yourself can you have an impact on the overall process of life. The price, as a rule, is our material wealth. One must live as one says [one should], in order that the principles one expounds become more than idle chatter and demagoguery.'<sup>766</sup> By the end of Tarkovsky's life the apocalyptic nature of the nuclear threat in particular made this readiness for sacrifice and moral self-cultivation all the more urgent: 'we live in a crucial period in the history of our planet and should recognise that this is a pivotal era. A great deal depends on people themselves. Now is a decisive moment, and we must act and understand why this action is necessary.'<sup>767</sup> Such understanding is achievable only through art, the main task of which is 'the resolution of the spiritual crisis reigning all over the world'; Tarkovsky describes art as 'the most selfless of all human activities' because it responds to 'society's need for something which stimulates spiritual development and develops a sense of self within the individual, encouraging her to strive for distinction and humaneness'.<sup>768</sup>

The self-evident proposition that co-existence on a crowded, nuclear-capable planet will only be possible if *everyone* comes to regard the survival of life or civilisation beyond themselves as more important than their own physical survival, and that this will only be possible if we are willing to sacrifice at least some of our material well-being all of the time and even all of our material well-being some of the time, will paradoxically require a commitment to moral self-discovery and painful truth-finding that no one, unaided by 'the best that has been thought and said', is ready to undertake. Alexander confronts the material and cultural excess with which he has surrounded himself, and comes to see his privilege for what it is – a call to responsibility and sacrifice - whereas Adelaide, for all her bourgeois comfort, has never enjoyed a true humanistic education, and is utterly incapable of even beginning the path to self-cultivation, consumed as she is by her hysterical

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765 See Boyadzhieva, *Life on a Cross*, p. 290.

766 See Boyadzhieva, *Life on a Cross*, p. 290.

767 See Boyadzhieva, *Life on a Cross*, p. 292.

768 See Boyadzhieva, *Life on a Cross*, p. 292.

fear of personal annihilation. If, as Natalya Bondarchuk and many others have stressed, Adelaide is to some degree at least based on Larisa – Layla Alexander Garrett, the actress who plays Adelaide in the film, said of her hysterical scenes that 'the most frightening thing is that this was not some fantasy concocted by the director; reality stood behind it, and he experienced it all in his own skin'<sup>769</sup> – we must ask ourselves once again why Tarkovsky stayed with such an obviously self-centred woman, and why he felt it necessary to make a film about it.

In Tarkovsky's diaries, which we will turn to in more detail in the next section, Larisa is almost always introduced as 'poor Larisa'. Although she was a wonderful solver of the kinds of practical problems for which Tarkovsky had an almost pathological incapacity, she was, as we have already intimated, a person in grave need of emotional support and guidance. If Tarkovsky was on the one side attracted by her ability to deal with the practical realities of daily life and afraid of the consequences of leaving her, he was also arguably drawn back, time and again, to the challenge of 'educating' her, of saving a soul, of doing *something useful for someone* like the Stalker, of freeing her from her obvious insecurities and opening up the moral, humanistic view of life in which one's own material concerns lose their absolute animal significance. Tarkovsky's portrayal of Adelaide and her relationship with Alexander in *Sacrifice* are a testament to his total failure in this regard; even Alexander comes to see the pointlessness of engaging with Adelaide anymore and concentrates all his hopes and energies on his son (Tarkovsky also dedicated the film to his son, not Larisa). Even when Alexander has burned the family house down, Adelaide is visibly more concerned for the house than for the welfare of her husband, but Alexander is not surprised or worried by this; it is merely proof of what he already knows: his wife does not, and has never, loved him, and indeed is incapable of loving anyone or sacrificing for anyone. Adelaide wanted a man who would give everything to her and for her, but was unwilling and unable to reciprocate, and unable to understand that true love consists not in seeing the loved one as a unique end-in-herself, as Adelaide herself wishes to be seen, but rather as a microcosm of a wider goodness flowing through the universe and to whom one chooses, for reasons of destiny as much as anything else, to ally oneself, in principle for life, in a wider common cause.

Did Tarkovsky feel that he owed Larisa for the practical help she gave him? Did he feel sorry for her and wish to 'educate' her, thereby making himself feel useful and 'necessary'? Did he really believe that it was impossible for a man and a woman to have a relationship based in spiritual equality rather than a master-student dialectic, or that women could never take a fully autonomous role in the civilisational enterprise, living it instead through the men in their lives? Women like Natalya Bondarchuk and the director Larisa Shepitko, described by Bondarchuk to me as

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769 See Filimonov, *Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 430.

Tarkovsky's 'spiritual twin' and the creator of films every bit as 'Tarkovskian' as those here covered, should surely have put paid to this ludicrous and outdated notion, even as Larisa (Tarkovskaya) lent evidence to it from day to day. Whatever the reasons, and for all the suffering it caused him ('there are things more important than happiness,' Tarkovsky probably said to himself), he stayed with her, and in his own way 'loved' her, as Bondarchuk stressed to me in no uncertain terms; but the figure of Adelaide forces us to ask, even if we cannot fully answer (to repeat: a thorough intimate biography of Tarkovsky is desperately needed), the question of how Larisa, a seemingly venal, vindictive and unloving woman, came to occupy such a central place in the life of a man committed to diametrically opposed values and who appeared, by the end at least - if the depiction of Adelaide is any measure - to have understood her moral and psychological condition to be untreatable.

At the very least, we can say that Tarkovsky understood and was deeply preoccupied by the direct link between the state of our intimate personal relationships and the perilous state of the nuclearised Cold War world; the solution to the latter could only be arrived at by hard work on the former, which in turn could only happen if individual moral self-cultivation, culminating in the recognition of the ultimate spiritual goal of readiness for sacrifice, were to become the global norm. 'My film is called *Sacrifice*,' Tarkovsky says of his last work, 'and shouldn't readiness for sacrifice indeed be our natural spiritual state?'<sup>770</sup> In the film, Tarkovsky 'raises the question of the importance of personal responsibility and personal faith, a faith which takes responsibility for the destiny of the world and opposes itself to the general irresponsibility reigning everywhere.'<sup>771</sup> Something extraordinary is now required to oppose this 'general irresponsibility' before it is too late: 'now only a genius can save humanity – not a prophet, but a genius who formulates a new moral ideal', one which calls for self-cultivation and which could, in principle at least, convince everyone. 'Where is this Messiah?' Tarkovsky asks.<sup>772</sup> Boyadzhieva uncharitably argues that Tarkovsky saw himself in the Messiah's role, when deep inside himself he must have felt that if he could not even convince his own wife, the only possible Messiah would somehow have to come from his son's generation (hence the dedication of the film 'to my son Andryusha, in faith and hope'). For Maya Turovskaya, meanwhile, *Sacrifice* marks the end of Tarkovsky's evolution 'from confession to sermonising, from sermonising to sacrificial action'. Although the old Tarkovskian themes – 'home, family, intergenerational identity' – recur, for Turovskaya there is in *Sacrifice* a new and open determination to 'influence reality and even to change it, as with the words and deeds of a Messiah', and the film itself is best understood as a 'magical' attempt to effect this spiritual change<sup>773</sup>. I would argue,

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770 See Boyadzhieva, *Life on a Cross*, p. 293.

771 See Boyadzhieva, *Life on a Cross*, p. 293.

772 See Boyadzhieva, *Life on a Cross*, p. 293.

773 See Filimonov, *Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 417 as well as Turovskaya's own *7½: The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky*, (Moscow, Iskusstvo, 1991), p. 181.

however, that this desire to be useful is nothing new in Tarkovsky, and was present as early as *Andrei Rublev* if not from his earliest student days.

Nikolai Boldyrev comes closer to the novelty of *Sacrifice* when he suggests that 'the house in which Alexander wanted to hide from the world appears as a fragile illusion'; the hero makes a breakthrough, 'finding a new quality in his soul', and is no longer a victim of 'the circumstances of a mad world', but rather a 'spiritual warrior': thus does Alexander 'save his young boy, whose destiny defines the tone of the film'.<sup>774</sup> Even here, however, there is little which distinguishes Alexander from Tarkovsky's *Rublev*, or even his *Ivan*; if there is any discernible change in theme from *Ivanogo Detstvo* to *Sacrifice*, it is only insofar as Tarkovsky's consciousness of the apocalyptic threat facing humanity in the nuclear age, and of the even greater urgency of the need for spiritual transformation towards moral truth in which he had more or less from the beginning believed, has grown. This faith has nothing whatsoever to do with revelation, Christian or otherwise, but rather with action: as Tarkovsky himself says, 'I think that a person who is ready to sacrifice herself can be considered a believer.'<sup>775</sup> For the others in the house, Alexander 'is a broken man, although in fact it is utterly clear,' Tarkovsky adds, 'that it is precisely he who will be saved. Alexander sacrifices himself, but at the same time drives others to sacrifice too.'<sup>776</sup>

Viktor Filimonov offers arguably the best analysis of Tarkovsky's final film, even going so far as to suggest that *Sacrifice* was the final nail in the coffin of Soviet tyranny and its creator the 'final communist': 'Tarkovsky's final work appears as a symbol of the end of decades of homelessness for Russian socialism. It raises the idea that the artist was sent into the world, on the back of our orphanhood, to search for a spiritual home uniting nature and human beings.'<sup>777</sup> Filimonov laments that 'nothing similar has been possible in the post-Soviet period in such a simple and brilliantly frank form. Tarkovsky was the last communist, a successor to precisely those Russian geniuses, such as Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky', who, like Matthew Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy* and at around the same time, 'were able to feel the force of the religious idea at a time when it appeared of dubious relevance', battered on all sides by philistine materialism of one form or another.<sup>778</sup> Filimonov, indeed, praises *Sacrifice* for the 'nakedness' of its religious feeling, 'meaningful for several generations of our countrymen who embraced the temptation of the idea of "happiness for all"'.<sup>779</sup> In *Sacrifice*, 'all that remains is a mad act of unverified faith in a meaning which will be unavailable precisely to you as you contemplate your own approaching non-existence on Earth. And then, perhaps, we have for the first time in the history of our cinema an individual drama of universal

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774 Boldyrev, *Stalker*, p. 329.

775 See Filimonov, *Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 418.

776 See Filimonov, *Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 418.

777 Filimonov, *Andrei Tarkovsky*, pp. 422-423.

778 Filimonov, *Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 423.

779 Filimonov, *Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 423.

scope, as if it were the tragedy of a whole nation.<sup>780</sup> This is why, Filimonov concludes, 'beyond the whole "global problematic" of this film, we should see it as part of Tarkovsky's intimate diary, the final (earthly) pages of his spiritual autobiography'.<sup>781</sup>

Filimonov also reproduces, in full for effect, Alexander's plea to Heaven, in which he begs God to save his 'children, friends, wife, Victor' and 'all those who feel the coming of the end, and are afraid not for themselves, but for those around them' from a war after which there will be 'no winners and losers, no cities, no villages, no grass, no trees, no water in the springs, no birds in the sky': 'I will give You all that I have, only make everything as it was before, like this morning, make the war go away. [...] Help, God, and I will do all that I have promised,' Alexander begs. Even if humanity contains armies of blind, self-centred Adelaides, the show simply must be allowed to go on! Alexander burns down his house, in all its European decadence, in a bid to avoid the looming tragedy of an aborted global civilisation. To do so, he calls on *all* the civilisational resources he possibly can in a bid to recapture its monotheistic essence: 'the interweaving of pagan magic and Christianity is born of the feeling of the redundancy of [contemporary] European high culture' and a desire 'somehow to recover the evangelical myth' in a context where it can no longer survive on its own; 'for the hero of the film, as for its creator, not only prayer but also magic are needed to stave off the terror which is engulfing him.'<sup>782</sup> The participatory knowledge of culture – Arnold's 'best which has been thought and said in the world' - is precisely what provides this 'magic' unattainable by other means: in his desperate bid to save humanity, 'Tarkovsky marshals the support of a world culture created over thousands of years of history and prehistory, starting from its mytho-ritualistic origins.'<sup>783</sup>

Filimonov is also right to weave into his analysis Andrei's acute guilt at having 'sacrificed' his own family to pursue his art both at home and, in the end, abroad: 'Andrei effectively abandoned his material earthly home; he was entirely absorbed with the "house of culture", with his own art, and sacrificed his relationships with his sons and blood relatives for it.'<sup>784</sup> Still, without wanting to give up his broader mission and instead doing his absolute best to incorporate his children into the intergenerational civilisational struggle, Tarkovsky sought 'salvation in an act – meeting his fears and turning the meeting into a sacrificial act, a public declaration of repentance before his son, all the while affirming his choices: "in the beginning (after all) was the Word."<sup>785</sup>

Tarkovsky is not the Messiah, but rather a man who recognises that he represents a culture and civilisation in crisis, who must sacrifice himself and his home to make room for a new

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780 Filimonov, *Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 423.

781 Filimonov, *Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 423.

782 Filimonov, *Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 430.

783 Filimonov, *Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 430.

784 Filimonov, *Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 432.

785 Filimonov, *Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 432.

generation which, instead of closing itself off within the self-regarding walls of decaying Western high culture, will rediscover 'the Word' by looking outward from Europe and creating a new global cultural synthesis for a new century:

The century which gave rise, so to speak, to the décor [of the house] is, according to the logic of the film, exhausted. It has reached a crisis point, at which death, burial and rebirth in some new unforeseen form now await it. Along with [the décor] Alexander, as the bearer of the high spiritual values of European culture, must also die and be transformed. This is the essence of his sacrifice in the face of a global catastrophe. [...] And these are the very laws, recognised by the artist himself, by which we ought to judge him.<sup>786</sup>

### 3.10 Warrior or Monster? The Verdict of the Diaries

*In light of the infinite laws or the laws of infinity which lie beyond our reach, God cannot not exist. GOD is a word to comfort human beings, who struggle to feel the essence of the beyond, the unknown, the unknowable. In a moral sense, God is love.*

*In order for people to live without harming others, there needs to be an ideal, an ideal in the sense of a spiritual, moral conception of law. Morality is inside us.<sup>787</sup>*

Andrei Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*

Tarkovsky, like Mahfouz, was a man of One Law. This law, discoverable inside oneself, requires spiritual and introspective effort to be discovered and applied:

It is possible to save everyone by saving oneself. In the spiritual sense of course. ... Instinct alone will not save us. [...] Is a person's destiny really just the iteration of an endless process, the meaning of which she does not have the power to understand? People, despite everything – cynicism, materialism – believe in infinity, in

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786 Filimonov, *Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 433.

787 Andrei Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog: Diaries (Martyrolog: Dnevnik)*, (Istituto Internazionale Andrej Tarkovskij, 2008), p. 27.



immortality. Tell them that not one more human being were to be born on Earth, and they would put a bullet in their heads. [...] To recognise the mortality of our flesh [and to sacrifice] in the name of the future, in the name of immortality: [...] if humanity is capable of that, then all is not yet lost. There is still a chance.<sup>788</sup>

Sacrifice of self for the future of civilisation: the essence of the Tarkovskian creed. He needed practical help proselytising, however, and this Larisa provided ('When Larochka isn't around, I always have unpleasant things to deal with,' reads a typical diary entry from 1971<sup>789</sup>). The creed, though updated for the apocalyptic context of the Cold War and showing flashes of Cold War-era cultural globalisation with its nods to Daoism and Akira Kurosawa, owed much to the Russian philosophical and spiritual tradition, and arguably more to Tolstoy than to Dostoyevsky; for all Dostoyevsky's influence on the adolescent Tarkovsky and all Tarkovsky's desire to read 'everything by Dostoyevsky and everything about him'<sup>790</sup>, ultimately Tarkovsky seems to have shared Vladimir Nabokov's conclusion that Dostoyevsky was better read once than twice ('I reread *The Idiot*; [...] I found it boring somehow'<sup>791</sup>), whereas Tolstoy was the gift that kept giving ('a selfish person cannot read Tolstoy and love him; he is inimical to her'<sup>792</sup>). Tarkovsky's choice of medium - film - was also an attempt to update the tradition of truth, both to reach a broader audience and to show that, while film was in no way 'truer' than earlier media, it was at least 'on the same level with the other arts, [...] equal to music, poetry, prose and so on'.<sup>793</sup>

There is little point defending Tarkovsky from charges of sexism - when asked to define the 'organic nature of women' in 1974, for example, he replied 'submission, abasement in the name of love' while the 'organic nature of men' was 'artistic creation'<sup>794</sup> – but the tragic consequences of this prejudice for his own life have been rehearsed here already and do not, in my view, constitute a decisive blow against his 'One Law' creed: in the end, both men and women have to learn that, when it comes to the future of civilisation, all must adopt a posture of 'submission, abasement in the name of love' and all must be ready to engage in 'creative' acts of sacrifice as the need for them arises. This process of spiritual purification may at times require an isolation which appears selfish and may even *be* selfish from the point of view of one's nearest and dearest, as the following vitally important diary entry from 1977 attests:

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788 Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, pp. 32-33.

789 Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 54.

790 Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 17.

791 Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 87.

792 Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 155.

793 Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 107.

794 Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 109.

I see with ever more clarity the need to change my life, to reorganise it somehow, revise it. I need to start living from scratch. What do I need for that? Above all to feel free and independent. To believe, love. To give up this current world of routine – too pointless – and live for the sake of the future world. But where? How? I have responsibilities to my nearest and dearest – to my children, my parents, Larisa. This is the first hurdle, the first obstacle.<sup>795</sup>

The need for communion with the ideal world may appear stronger in Tarkovsky than in Mahfouz – who argued tirelessly for an ethic of social engagement over detached mysticism - if we forget that Mahfouz, as a writer, organised countless hours of solitude for himself, whereas Tarkovsky, both professionally and personally, was more often 'stuck' with other people. In the end, however, one tired diary entry does not change the fact that Tarkovsky's Moral Law, like Mahfouz's, primarily involved service to other people, and to family first and foremost, even as it required a modicum, even a fairly large modicum, of private self-cultivation. An approving 1978 diary reference to an unlikely source – Schopenhauer – reminds us of Tarkovsky's ultimate rejection of solitude as a creed: 'the equal passing of time in all our heads shows more than anything else that we are all immersed in the same dream, and moreover, that all those who have this dream are a single united being.'<sup>796</sup>

Tarkovsky quotes Tolstoy himself in a diary entry a few months later: 'Just as we have thousands of dreams in our lives, so too is our life one of thousands of lives into which we enter from that more authentic, real, true life from which we leave upon entering this life, and to which we return when we die. Our lives are one of the dreams of that truer life, and so on to infinity, up to a final true life: the life of God.'<sup>797</sup> Tolstoy links this to a certain interpretation of the Buddhist idea of karma, which consists in the idea that 'the good and evil of our future lives will depend precisely on our efforts to avoid evil and do good which we have made in this life.'<sup>798</sup> Commenting on the meaning of Tolstoy's call to action, Tarkovsky writes, employing essentially the same image as the image of Gorchakov crossing the swimming pool with his candle: 'The struggle between good and evil will exist for as long as human beings exist in their earthly existences. People need to swim to the opposite shore, otherwise they drown. Human beings have existed for so long and we still doubt the most important thing – the meaning of our own existences. That's what's so strange.'<sup>799</sup> Civilisation must be strengthened, Tarkovsky argues, if we are to protect this fragile flame of moral

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795 Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 175.

796 See Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 183.

797 See Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 185.

798 See Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 185.

799 Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 186.

truth; the strengthening process starts at home with a call to self-cultivation, and requires one to be hard on oneself, to demand better of oneself, as Tarkovsky repeatedly does in his diary, as in this episode of self-flagellation from 1979: 'All the time I am convinced that I am not living right. And that everything I do is false. Even when I act well, it seems that I do it to *seem* better.'<sup>800</sup> This spirit of critical self-flagellation must then be extended to one's tribe and nation and the heroes of its pantheon, together with a willingness to see one's own nation as part of a broader civilisational struggle, as Pushkin could and Dostoyevsky couldn't: 'Dostoyevsky didn't believe in God, although he wanted to. He had nothing to believe with, but he wrote about faith. Pushkin is above all others because he did not attribute to Russia an absolute meaning.'<sup>801</sup>

Tarkovsky repeatedly affirmed that he 'did not believe in death', although he meant primarily by this that the person guided by the Moral Law sacrifices herself to posterity without regard for the possibility of what Nabokov calls 'The Impossible Human Surprise' of a life after death. Although he quotes Nabokov's *The Gift* ('I am convinced that unlikely surprises await us. It's a shame that we can't imagine that to which we have nothing to compare. Genius is a negro dreaming of snow.'<sup>802</sup>), the possibility of personal 'salvation' or personal surprises is entirely beside the point, as his unexpected comment on the Nabokov quote illustrates:

If I am to speak about what I see as my calling, well, it is to reach the absolute by striving to raise the level of my craft. [...] I want to preserve a level of quality. Like Atlas bearing the Earth on his shoulders. He could have simply let it fall because he was tired. But he didn't let go of it, and somehow held onto it. By the way, the most amazing thing about this myth is not that he held on for a long time, but that he didn't give up when he was deceived.<sup>803</sup>

The sacrifices for artistic mastery are not a Pascalian wager on a possible future payback but a kind of magic, Atlas-like gesture of selfless service to future audiences with no thought of possible recompense. The Tarkovskian genius is not a person who can imagine snow having never seen it, but rather a moral genius who can serve for no other reason than love of service to others.

This need to serve, and to improve oneself for service, ultimately explained the decision to emigrate, as illustrated by the following entry from 1979:

I know that I am a long way from perfection, to put it mildly, and that I wallow in sin

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800 Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 195.

801 Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 204.

802 See Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 208

803 Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 208.

and imperfection without knowing how to fight against my own pathetic nature. I know only one thing: that living as I have lived so far, working so appallingly little, experiencing endless negative emotions which do not help but rather hinder the feeling of the oneness of life which is necessary for work, at least from time to time – I mustn't live like this anymore. I am afraid of such a life. I don't have enough time left to waste it.<sup>804</sup>

Note again the insistence on the need for 'wholeness', stability and love in order to forget oneself in work and realise one's potential as an artist. Only a 'complete personality' can make the call to sacrifice in which all art, for Tarkovsky, consists; an incomplete or traumatised one will be preoccupied with its own sufferings, often out of a simple and justifiable thirst for private justice, instead of being preoccupied with one's own shortcomings – conscience - out of a desire better to serve others. Art, in the public sense, is above all the responsibility of the lucky, the privileged, the 'whole', because such 'great' personalities are most capable of the sacrifice in which 'true' love consists: 'in order truly to love a person – a mother, a wife, the mother of one's children, a man – one must be a whole personality, in other words a Great human being. [My mother-in-law] Anna Semenovna is one, my mother was another, my grandmother too. [...] So were the wives of the Decembrists. Love is truth. Falsehood and truth cannot go together.'<sup>805</sup> Tarkovsky unexpectedly associates this 'greatness', however, with the courage to realise that 'anything can happen', that our scientific knowledge is all inductive and falsifiable. Just three lines before the above quote, we read in his diary: 'if I were to be asked what convictions about life keep me afloat (if it is possible to be 'kept afloat' by one's convictions), I would say: first, that the world is unknowable, and (consequently) second, that EVERYTHING is possible in our unlikely world. It seems to me that the first entails the second, or the second the first, I'm not sure which.'<sup>806</sup> The meaning of life is therefore not to search for stability in a world in which anything is in principle possible, but rather to erect a personality strong enough to embrace an ethic of sacrifice in the face of this potential chaos. Tarkovsky was therefore committed, if not to the idea of free will, then at least to a Moral Law which transcends all possible brain states and which is, in an almost Cartesian sense, a source of ultimate, unalterable stability in which all life has its meaning. If 'matter' is the sphere of the empirical, in which anything can happen and in which we face Hume's unresolvable Problem of Induction, there nevertheless remains a sphere of 'self-knowledge' which, though dependent on 'matter' and brain states, nevertheless transcends them to occupy the realm of *istina*, the realm of

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804 Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 245.

805 Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 368.

806 Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 368.

truth and love even if the brain states which make them temporarily possible could be smashed at any time by outside forces beyond our control. Tarkovsky summarises this philosophy with the following words: 'The main thing is that self-consciousness is not material. The result of its action, yes, but it is not itself matter.'<sup>807</sup> 'Faith' is therefore the belief that this one aspect of self – the moral aspect, or what Tarkovsky often calls the 'spiritual' dimension of selfhood – is in fact transcendent even though it appears as trivially changeable as the ultimately unknowable, chaotic universe in which it finds itself.<sup>808</sup> In other words, 'the world exists for us and is evaluated by us, by our consciousness. Is it possible to get outside individual consciousness for a new, non-subjective evaluation of reality? They say that it isn't. But for some reason I believe that it is.'<sup>809</sup>

To stress the point about the difference between the empirical and spiritual realms, Tarkovsky approvingly quotes a Dutch Professor of Zoology: 'that a scientist is a Christian does not make him a better or worse scientist. If the study of science destroys religious faith, then we must bravely add that it destroys false faith, or better yet, false religion.'<sup>810</sup> Although Tarkovsky clearly does not embrace science as a moral obligation with the insistence that Mahfouz does, but rather spends much of his time warning against the perils and moral costs of scientism in modern society, this reflects the fact that Mahfouz's Egypt and Tarkovsky's Russia found themselves at radically different stages of scientific and civilisational development rather than any meaningful difference of opinion on the relationship between science and religion: both could do good, and the former was not, in itself, any threat to the latter, but rather a possible forum for moral sacrifice in the service of the latter. Modern art, for Tarkovsky, had entirely lost this sense of mission, reducing itself to a science or 'method of disharmony' when the whole artistic and humanistic enterprise has nothing whatsoever to do with 'method' or 'disharmony' or 'unwholeness': 'in a word, the meaning of art is in the search for God in people, the search for the Way for people. I absolutely do not admit the idea of modern art, or what calls itself modern art, because it is soulless. It has turned from a search for the Divine Essence to a demonstration of method.'<sup>811</sup> The very idea of an art decoupled from monotheistic religion is suspect: 'Analysis, dismemberment, the subsequently happily expressed idea of disharmony (if that is even possible – the IDEA of disharmony) – all this contradicts the essence of artistic creation, the essence of the demiurge.'<sup>812</sup>

In the end, and for all that Dostoyevsky himself was incapable of the faith he himself prescribed and did not enjoy the requisite 'wholeness' of character, the meaning of art and life for Tarkovsky is to be found precisely where Dostoyevsky says, namely, in sacrifice: 'and so, human

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807 Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 406.

808 This is precisely the view of Ronald Dworkin, presented in my conclusion.

809 *Martyrolog*, p. 409.

810 Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 417.

811 Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 433.

812 Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 433.

beings on Earth strive for an ideal which stands in opposition to their animal nature. When a person fails to live up to this law of striving for the ideal, or in other words when she fails lovingly to sacrifice her own 'I' to people or to another being [...] she suffers and calls this state of suffering sin.<sup>813</sup> Survivor guilt is an inevitable part of this balanced whole: 'thus, human beings should constantly experience this suffering as a way of compensating for the failure to fulfil the heavenly covenant, namely sacrifice. This is how the earthly balance is maintained. Otherwise the world would be meaningless.'<sup>814</sup> Tarkovsky sought to unite East and West in this harmony of meaning achievable through the cultivation of a spirit of sacrifice: 'the East is what remains of the true ancient civilisations, as distinct from the West, which is the centre of a mistaken, tragic, technological civilisation. [...] It is precisely because Russia finds itself between East and West that it feels an essence here which is different from the lethal and mistaken Western way.'<sup>815</sup> Tarkovsky here comes close to dismissing the idea of importing the best of Western science and learning as defended by Mahfouz, but ultimately, this is a question of stress and accent: nobody could wish for other people to live poorly. Although Western science and learning have brought about tremendous improvements in living standards for millions of people, a civilisation truly based on 'I want, I demand, I desire, I ask, I suffer'<sup>816</sup> is not a civilisation at all, and true civilisation must be defended from such a 'wrongheaded' idea of welfare. As pithily summarised by Alexander Herzen from a 1982 Tarkovsky diary entry, 'aristocratism is unhappiness'.<sup>817</sup>

In the end, even to want salvation for oneself is for Tarkovsky to remain a prisoner to such 'aristocratic' and self-centred values, as this diary entry just weeks before his death in 1986 makes clear one final time: 'someone wanted to SAVE HIMSELF and suddenly felt a traitor, a Great Sinner opposing himself to everyone else, himself to life.'<sup>818</sup> We must all make room for the great show of civilisation to go on, and be willing to get out of the way without self-pity when the time comes for us to sacrifice ourselves once and for all. Tarkovsky thus ended his life much as Muhtashami Zayid, the octogenarian hero of Mahfouz's *The Day the Leader Was Killed* (1981) ended his: 'perhaps I have lived longer than I was due? Have I perhaps played a role without knowing that I was going to complicate things so much [for my grandson]? It is time for me...'<sup>819</sup>

Four passages stand out, however, from Tarkovsky's diary above all the others, and reveal a man tragically caught between loyalty to flawed loved ones and loyalty to the great civilisational

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813 See Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 462.

814 See Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 462.

815 Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 464.

816 Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 464.

817 See Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 424.

818 Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 594.

819 Naguib Mahfouz, *The Day the Leader Was Killed (Yawm Qatl al-Za'im)*, (Cairo, Dār Miṣr lil-Ṭibā'a, 1985), p.

ideal he had cultivated within himself thanks to a 'feeling of personal freedom'<sup>820</sup> passed on to him by his loving parents and which had allowed him to overcome the ordinary concerns of the modern, self-centred individual and to recover the best of bygone cultural traditions. The first of these passages covers the death of Anatoly Solonitsyn in 1982:

Tolya Solonitsyn died on Friday. They say that he was already doing much better with his tumor but had heart problems. The ambulance took him away and gave him an injection. Then some careless doctors were discussing his condition in a neighbouring hospital room. He heard them and cried. Poor Tolya!

That night I had a long dream about Stalin. Young and dark-haired. I had a long talk with him about the importance of upholding tradition.<sup>821</sup>

For all Solonitsyn's human flaws, Tarkovsky did not, contrary to Boyadzhieva's deeply unflattering portrayal of this episode, in the end lack the heart to suffer on behalf of a friend who was not ready to die. Nevertheless, Tarkovsky's love for the lost Solonitsyn, who had failed in Andrei's eyes to live up to his artistic responsibilities and to make the most of his prodigious talents, only redoubled the urgency of the need for others to remain 'true to the traditions' of Russian spiritual humanism. Stalin, a greater failure than a thousand Solonitsyns, clearly stands in here for Tarkovsky's lost friend.

The second and third passages take us back, one final time, to the great enigma of Tarkovsky's life: Larisa. This entry also dates from 1982: 'I want us to live in a nice comfortable apartment (for Larisa's sake). I want her to relax, enjoy herself, and to the extent that it is possible, to get treatment. It's hard work for her to live with me. But did I really not know what she was like before we got married?'<sup>822</sup> Although Larisa did not make it onto the list of 'Great' individuals which included Tarkovsky's mother as well as Larisa's own, Tarkovsky nevertheless considered her worthy, for many long years, of being spoilt and of deserving all the things that the truly moral person has learnt to live without. Natalya Bondarchuk described this to me as 'love' of a kind, but 'love' is not the right word for it. In truth, Tarkovsky never quite managed to bring himself to believe fully in what, in spite of all Larisa's practical skills, was ultimately a matter of indulgence of someone less than fully deserving of such attention and sacrifice:

Larisa should have come back from out of town over a week ago, and she hasn't even

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820 See in particular Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 464.

821 Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 434.

822 Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 396.

called once. What's she doing there? Why doesn't she come to Moscow? I don't know...

God, how terrible everything is. Cats [of jealousy] are scratching in my soul, and I'm supposed to be thinking about 'my work'...

How burdensome, pointless and boring it is to be alive!

I have to change everything! I have to change my life, throw everything out, except the chance to serve that which I have been called to serve. I need to gather my manhood and cast off all that gets in the way of this service.<sup>823</sup>

For all the practical help she may have provided, Larisa stood between Tarkovsky and his commitment to the Moral Law and to the ethic of service and sacrifice in which he believed right up to the very end of his life. Meddling Soviet authorities were not the only major reason for Tarkovsky's inability to produce more than seven films in his 25-year career.

That Tarkovsky was able to produce as much as he did, however, was a testament to the deep civilisational strength and stability, the eternal flame of morality, passed down from early childhood from his older relatives. After concluding an anecdote about his dead grandmother with the words 'that's my grandmother for you!', Tarkovsky realises in a diary entry the following day, 9 May 1981, after rereading the previous day's entry, that 'I didn't write "was" in the last sentence. But then it occurred to me that this wasn't an error.'<sup>824</sup>

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823 Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 368.

824 Tarkovsky, *Martyrolog*, p. 323.



#### 4. Tu Weiming

*The unity of humankind is rich, varied and diverse. Indeed, the 'great unity' (datong) is inspired by the life-force of 'harmony without uniformity' (heerbutong).*

Tu Weiming, 'The Confucian Way'

##### *4.1 Confucianism and the Moral Law: Tu's Confucian Way*

Tu Weiming (1940-) smashes the prejudice, so prevalent outside China, that Confucianism is a philosophy of obedience to authority, a recipe for a closed rather than an open society and for unintrospective rule-following rather than moral self-cultivation via conscience (what Tarkovsky in Russian calls *nравственность*<sup>825</sup>). Unfortunately Confucianism, when applied in the real world, has often produced dully hierarchical results; indeed, it was the chronic perversion of Confucian doctrine which led whole generations of Chinese intellectuals to turn their backs on the Confucian tradition in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Tu Weiming belongs to a second generation of 'New Confucians' whose goal is to rejuvenate the Confucian tradition by recovering within it the kernel of universal moral truth on which Chinese civilisation has, at its best, been based. His essay 'The Confucian Way' retraces the millennial history of Confucianism, presenting along the way an account of human flourishing which forces us to take seriously the idea of a single Heaven and a single Mandate of Heaven or Moral Law discoverable inside ourselves. 'Should our pluralistic society deliberately cultivate shared values and a common ground of human understanding?'<sup>826</sup>, Tu asks at the beginning of his essay, to which the answer will be an emphatic 'yes', both because the Moral Law is a reality on which we *can* and *should* converge despite our individual differences, and because the costs of failing to converge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century could entail the extinction of our own and countless other species.

The Confucian Way is first and foremost characterised by 'lofty pragmatism': 'when Confucius was asked, 'Should one not return malice with kindness?' he replied, 'If you return malice with kindness, what will you return kindness with? Therefore, return malice with uprightness

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825 See *Martyrolog*, p. 27.

826 Tu Weiming, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity: Essays on the Confucian Discourse in Cultural China*, (New Delhi, Centre for Studies in Civilisations, 2010), p. 209. All quotes drawn from this volume are from the essay 'The Confucian Way' (pp. 209-308), unless otherwise stated.

(justice), but return kindness with kindness.<sup>827</sup> For Mencius, likewise, the 'great man' or 'profoundly moral person' 'aims only at what is right'.<sup>828</sup> This law emanates from only one source: 'Heaven as a source for moral creativity [...] and ultimate self-transformation features prominently throughout the Confucian tradition. In this sense, all major Confucian thinkers are profoundly religious.'<sup>829</sup> It would be a grave mistake, however, to assume that such a law can be grasped with anything less than full, honest effort. Quoting from the *Doctrine of the Mean*, Tu argues: 'only those who are absolutely sincere can fully develop their nature. If they can fully develop their nature, they can fully develop the nature of others.'<sup>830</sup> This process of self-realisation, however, does not stop at the edge of the human community, or even at the community of sentient life: 'If they can fully develop the nature of others, they can fully develop the nature of things. If they can fully develop the nature of things, they can assist in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth. If they can assist in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth, they can thus form a trinity with Heaven and Earth.'<sup>831</sup> This doctrine of the radical oneness of Heaven and Earth is summarised in the four characters *tianrenheyi* ('Uniting Heaven and Humanity Harmoniously as One'). Confucius himself, after a lifetime of moral self-cultivation, achieved, or at least approached, this ideal state: 'at fifteen I set my heart on learning; at thirty I firmly took my stand; at forty I came to be free from doubts; at fifty I understood the Decree of Heaven; at sixty my ear was attuned; at seventy I followed my heart's desire without overstepping the line.'<sup>832</sup> Tu is careful, however, to show that this state of moral 'truth-dwelling' in no way extinguishes one's critical and, in particular, self-critical faculties:

It would be misleading [...] if the transcendent dimension of the Confucian project were interpreted to mean that the course of culture, or the Way, would eventually prevail on its own. Confucius made it explicit: 'It is the human that can make the Way great, and not the Way that can make the human great'. At the same time, as a mere human mortal, he also realised how difficult it was to live up to the demands of the Way of Heaven, and he was the first to admit his own shortcomings in this regard:

There are four things in the Way of the profound person, none of which I have been able to do. To serve my father as I would expect my son to serve me:

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827 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 209.

828 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 209.

829 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 214.

830 See Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 215.

831 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 215.

832 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 257.

that I have not been able to do. To serve my ruler as I would expect my ministers to serve me: that I have not been able to do. To serve my elder brothers as I would expect my younger brothers to serve me: that I have not been able to do. To be the first to treat friends as I would expect my friends to treat me: that I have not been able to do.

The tension and conflict between his sense of mission – that he was entrusted by Heaven to transmit the Way – and his sense of deficiency 'in practicing the ordinary virtues and in the exercise of care in ordinary conversation' generated a dynamism in Confucius' 'earnest and genuine effort' to learn fully to be human. This dynamism made him an inexhaustible student and an untiring teacher: 'To remember silently [what I have learned], to learn untiringly, and to teach others [what I have learned] without being wearied...' What drew people to this teacher was a quiet charisma embodied in his daily interactions with students. There was no prophetic claim of privileged access to the divine. Nor was there any suggestion of noble birth or superior native intelligence. Yet, he aroused the devotion of his followers with the magic quality of his sincerity and authenticity.<sup>833</sup>

Just as Mahfouz and Tarkovsky abandoned all claims to revelation as a source of their moral authority, relying instead on the sheer force of their art as a medium to allow the deeper truth of the Moral Law to speak through them, so too does Tu identify a 'magic' charisma as the ultimate justification for Confucian truth-claims. This charisma, however, originates in a process of cultural initiation and transmission without which no human individual can embark on the Way at all. This process ideally begins in the family home; although Confucius' father died when Confucius was only three years old, he was 'instructed first by his mother and then by a host of other teachers, [and] distinguished himself as an indefatigable student in his teens'.<sup>834</sup> In this way, Tu argues, 'Confucius inadvertently initiated a great tradition in East Asian education: the exemplary teaching, often through oral transmission, of the mother. The centrality of the mother as an educator in Confucian learning is widely recognised but seldom analysed.'<sup>835</sup>

The overwhelming desire of a person having received such a civilisational heritage is to spread the message of truth as widely as possible:

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833 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 280.

834 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 222.

835 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 222.

Before Confucius, aristocratic families had hired tutors to educate their sons, and government officials had instructed their subordinates in administrative and bureaucratic matters, but he was the first person to devote his whole life to learning and teaching for the purpose of transforming and improving society. All human beings, he believed, could benefit from self-cultivation. He inaugurated a humanities program for potential leaders, opened the doors of education to all, and defined learning not merely as the acquisition of knowledge but also as character-building. The spiritual value of this seemingly secular humanistic enterprise lies in its implicit faith that ultimate self-transformation in ordinary human existence is not only possible but practicable.<sup>836</sup>

A corollary of this 'dwelling in truth' is a spontaneous desire to share all that one has with the world, not out of a narcissistic desire for attention but rather out of its opposite, to the point that Tu argues that 'our feelings, thoughts, and ideas are not necessarily our private properties. While they are intensely personal, they need not be private; they are often better thought of as shared public goods.'<sup>837</sup> When we embrace such a view of our own mental states, in which they are no longer merely viewed as inalienable ends in themselves destined to die with us but as a potential part of something much larger, we find that 'the willingness to share empowers us to generate a dynamic process of interchange, first with members of our family and, then, with our neighbourhood community, and beyond. This broadening process is central to the Confucian project of self-cultivation.'<sup>838</sup>

The responsibility to look inward is universal; as the *Great Learning* tells us, 'from the Son of Heaven to the common people, all, without exception, must take self-cultivation as the root'.<sup>839</sup> Mencius argues that what we find when we look inside ourselves are the beginnings or 'sprouts' of a 'heart which cannot bear the suffering of others'; the task of moral self-cultivation is to extend this feeling of 'unbearability' outwards from ourselves and our nearest relatives until it accedes to the realm of truth where 'all the ten thousand things are there in me. There is no greater joy for me to find that, on self-examination, I am true to myself.'<sup>840</sup> Tu brilliantly characterises Maoism as the opposite of this move towards greater 'unbearability', arguing that the essence of the Maoist creed was precisely a willingness to 'bear' the suffering even of one's closest relatives in the name of the

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836 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 223.

837 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 212.

838 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 212.

839 See Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 212.

840 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 229.

revolution, an utter perversion of the Confucian civilisational heritage.<sup>841</sup>

This expansion of the sphere of moral concern is in no way, however, to be confused with doctrines of universal love of the kind made famous in China by Mozi: 'Mo Tzu advocated "universal love", but Mencius [also first educated by his mother] contended that the result of the Moist admonition to treat a stranger as intimately as one's own father would be to treat one's own father as indifferently as a stranger.'<sup>842</sup> Just as malice must be met by justice rather than kindness so that kindness can be met with kindness, so too must the desire to identify and 'dwell in truth' with 'all the ten thousand things' not obscure one's prior moral responsibilities to family, city, nation, species and so on. Although the Moists were concerned about 'pervasive injustice' and 'organised themselves into military units to bring about love and peace through self-sacrifice'<sup>843</sup>, their creed proved unable to win the hearts and minds of posterity because it lost touch with the intimate source; instead, 'the Confucians opted for a long-term solution to the collapse of the Chou Dynasty through commitment to education as character-building. They believed that one could attain true nobility through self-cultivation and inner enlightenment.'<sup>844</sup>

At no point, however, did this process entail an ascetic cutting oneself off from society, as the Taoists advocated. The Taoists, indeed, 'advocated a total rejection of human civilisation, which they believed to be the source of spiritual pollution'.<sup>845</sup> The commitment to real-world action, to Mahfouzian socialism and Tarkovskian sacrifice, is a feature of what Tu calls 'Confucian humanism' as far back as the *Analects* itself:

While Mencian moral idealism may have prevailed over Mohist collectivism and Yangist individualism, the Confucian project, despite its having a formidable defender in Xunzi, was seriously challenged by the Daoists. In the *Analects* Confucius is reported to have encountered hermits, such as the Madman from Chu, who urged him to abdicate his social responsibility, sever relationships with the human community, and abandon the world. Since the disintegration of the political system, like a torrential flood sweeping the entire world, could not be stopped, any attempt to change the inevitable process of history would be an exercise in futility. What the hermits proposed was a course of action advocated by virtually all major ethico-religious traditions: to cultivate a spiritual sanctuary outside the lived world here and now. The Christian kingdom of God or the Buddhist 'other shore' are

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841 See Tu Weiming, 'Dialogue with Francis Fukuyama', <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LP3RjmvMOs&feature=youtu.be>, 21/2/12.

842 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 227.

843 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 217.

844 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 217.

845 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 217.

exemplifications of this universal transcendental breakthrough. Confucius' existential choice to try to repossess the Way by working through the human community as it was constituted represents an anomaly.<sup>846</sup>

Tu goes on, however, in his usual conciliatory way, to celebrate the contributions of Taoism to the Confucian civilisational heritage. For centuries, indeed, while Confucianism was 'the orthodoxy defining the life orientation of the cultural elite', it nevertheless 'coexisted with many other currents of thought – Taoism, Legalism, Yin-Yang Cosmology, theories of the Five Phases, and a variety of folk beliefs in the Chinese philosophical and religious landscape.'<sup>847</sup> Tu argues that this 'inclusiveness' is not some sort of historical accident but is rather a 'distinctive feature' of Confucian humanism itself, 'symbolising a deliberate effort to accommodate seemingly incompatible systems of ideas in a correlative worldview'.<sup>848</sup>

How can a civilisation-renouncing Taoism ever be reconciled with a civilisation-affirming Confucianism? Tu explains how:

On the surface, Zhuangzi's *Dao* transcends humanity, rightness, ritual, and music and is definitely anti-humanist and un-Confucian, but in a deeper sense what Zhuangzi aspires to is true enlightenment, in which all formalistic structures are relegated to the background to make room for great knowledge and profound virtue. This is perhaps the main reason why Confucian scholar-officials throughout Chinese history have found Zhuangzi's self-image a standard of inspiration:

Alone he associates with Heaven and Earth and spirit, without abandoning or despising things of the world. He does not quarrel over right or wrong and mingles with conventional society. [...] Above, he roams with the Creator, and below he makes friends with those who transcend life and death and beginning and end. In regard to the essential, he is broad and comprehensive, profound and unrestrained. In regard to the fundamental, he may be said to have harmonised all things and penetrated the highest level. ...

Daoism was ostensibly a critique of Confucian humanism but, since it was taken absolutely seriously by the Confucians, it became gradually absorbed in the

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846 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, pp. 193-194 ('Chinese Philosophy: A Synoptic View').

847 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 239.

848 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 239.

Confucian responses themselves. As a result, we witness the Daoist transformation of the Confucian tradition and the emergence of a tender-minded Confucian humanism.<sup>849</sup>

Just as Mahfouz and many of his characters were in constant dialogue with Sufism, and Tarkovsky and his heroes, most notably Andrei Rublev, pass through an ascetic phase before arriving at the idea of sacrifice for community, so too has Tu's Confucian humanism 'strengthened itself for battle' after many centuries of contact with Taoism and, subsequently, Buddhism. After describing the six-century-long 'introduction, domestication, growth and appropriation of a distinctly Indian form of spirituality' in the form of a Buddhism inherited largely 'via Taoist categories', as well as the profound influence of Buddhism on Taoist 'institutions and practices', Tu goes so far as to conclude that 'the spiritual dynamic in medieval China was characterised by Buddhist and Taoist values.'<sup>850</sup> In order to return Confucianism to the heart of Chinese cultural life, marginalised Song neo-Confucians were forced to formulate 'a creative response to the Buddhist and Taoist challenge and an imaginative reinterpretation and reappropriation of classical Confucian insights.'<sup>851</sup> Taoism and Taoist-derived Buddhism were, like Sufism, worth taking seriously because they were in an important sense monotheistic rather than polytheistic, believing as they did in the ultimate 'oneness' of the Way or Moral Law even if they prescribed un-Confucian ascetic renunciation of community. Confucianism and Buddhism also shared a preoccupation with suffering, even if they essentially prescribed opposite solutions to the problem: an extension of self and the 'inability to bear suffering' to cover all the ten thousand things versus an ascetic renunciation of selfhood and attachment to the ten thousand things, the perceived cause of suffering. Returning to Mencius, Tu argues that 'learning to be human is primarily the extension of sympathy and empathy. Since commiseration is boundless, it can, at least in principle, fill up the distance between Heaven and earth. We can, as human beings, embody the myriad things in our sympathy and empathy.'<sup>852</sup> This recognition of the Moral Law has profound implications for socialisation: 'when Mencius says that the way of learning is none other than the quest for the lost heart-mind, he means that the recovery of our depleted commiseration takes precedence over all other forms of education.'<sup>853</sup>

This policy of moral education also constituted a 'strategy for social reform' which aimed to 'change the language of profit, self-interest, wealth, and power' - regarded as a reflection of immutable human nature by, for example, Legalists like Han Feizi - into 'a moral discourse with

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849 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, pp. 195-196 ('Chinese Philosophy: A Synoptic View').

850 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 239.

851 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 239.

852 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 190 ('Chinese Philosophy: A Synoptic View').

853 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, pp. 190-191 ('Chinese Philosophy: A Synoptic View').

emphasis on rightness, public-spiritedness, welfare, and exemplary authority'.<sup>854</sup> This language was emphatically not, however, the language of pie-in-the-sky utopianism: 'Mencius was not arguing against profit. Rather [...] he urged [the feudal lords] to look beyond the horizon of their palaces and to cultivate a common bond with their ministers, officers, clerks, and the seemingly undifferentiated masses.'<sup>855</sup> Xunzi would take this 'public-spiritedness' a step further, to the point where, in an ancient echo of Norbert Elias, he says that 'a cultured person is by definition a fully socialised participant of the human community who has successfully sublimated his or her instinctual demands to further the public good'.<sup>856</sup>

Far from the vision of slavery it seems, this prioritising of politics aims to move 'beyond collectivism and individualism' as they had existed in China in their respective Moist and Yangist forms and to serve both individual and public welfare:

Mozi insisted that, for the sake of peace and love as willed by Heaven, people ought to sacrifice their private interests. [...] The opposite view was held by Yang Zhu, an advocate of radical individualism. Yang argues that since nothing is more valuable than what we are as individuals, the preservation of what we are endowed with ought to be the highest guiding principle for action. Mencius finds fault with both approaches. Mohist universal love thwarts the establishment of the parent-child relationship and Yangist self-centredness makes the maintenance of political order [as well as true self-fulfilment] impossible. The Confucian alternative is a middle path in which the self as a centre of relationships can serve as a foundation for the politics of community. [...] A salient feature of Confucian thinking, as interpreted by Xunzi, is the primacy of the political order. Politics is seen as an integral part of the ritual process through which the moral community comes into being. The purpose of politics is to provide a wholesome environment for human flourishing. The way of the sage-kings, as contrasted with the dictatorship of the hegemon, is openness to new ideas, receptivity to different voices, and hospitality to all human beings. Its political style is communal, participatory, and democratic. The underlying tone, vibrating with the sympathetic resonance of contented people, is poetic.<sup>857</sup>

In order to reappropriate this powerful - if by their time aging and marginalised - Confucian tradition, Song Dynasty neo-Confucians did their best to insist that the core of the Confucian

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854 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 227.

855 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, pp. 227-228.

856 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 231.

857 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, pp. 192-193 ('Chinese Philosophy: A Synoptic View').



message was timeless. One of Tu's favourite examples of the timelessness of the Confucian 'principle' is provided by Lu Hsiang-Shan (1139-1193): 'Sages appeared tens of thousands of generations ago. They shared this heart-mind; they shared this principle. Sages will appear tens of thousands of generations to come. They will share this heart-mind; they will share this principle. Over the four seas sages appear. They share this mind; they share this principle.'<sup>858</sup> This principle is not, however, on Tu's interpretation an irresponsible or merely 'animal' basking in the rays of the One: 'Lu's unequivocal assertion that "the affairs of the universe (*yüchou*) are my affairs; my own affairs are the affairs of the universe" may appear to be an unbridled romantic statement about forming one body with the universe. Implicit in this *seemingly* idealist faith, however, is a moral imperative'.<sup>859</sup> Fulfilling this imperative, according to Lu, will require a courage not to be acquired overnight: first, we must realise that 'this principle existing throughout the universe is hidden from nothing and nothing can escape from it'; once we make this realisation, Lu asks, 'how can we be selfish and disobey principle?'<sup>860</sup> Encouragement in the right direction can be found in Mencius: 'first build up the nobler part (the "great body") of your nature then the inferior part cannot overcome it.'<sup>861</sup> The costs of failing to engage in this lengthy process of self-cultivation are heavy indeed: 'it is because we fail to build up the nobler part of our nature that it is overcome by the inferior part. In consequence we violate principle and become different from Heaven and Earth.'<sup>862</sup>

While Lu's insistence on principle and 'nobility' is a direct echo of Mahfouz's claim that 'it is the nobility of the soul which allows us to understand what the universe is', and while his insistence on the millennial continuity of human sagehood and civilisation is a direct echo of Tarkovsky and earlier Russian moralists like Chekhov, whose heroes are preoccupied with human existence 'a thousand years from now', the insistence of Chang Tsai (1020-1077) on the need to extend one's sphere of moral concern 'beyond what is seen and heard' could also have come from Tarkovsky himself or from Russia's greatest playwright, who argued that 'people of culture [...] are sympathetic not only to beggars and cats; their heart aches for things they don't see with the naked eye'.<sup>863</sup> For Chang, likewise, 'the heart-minds of ordinary people are limited to the narrowness of what is seen and what is heard. The sages, however, [...] regard everything in the world to be their own selves. This is why Mencius said that if we exert ourselves to the utmost, we can know nature and Heaven.'<sup>864</sup> The scope of this exertion is no joke: 'Heaven is so vast that there is nothing outside of it. Therefore the heart-mind that leaves something outside is not capable of uniting itself with the

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858 See Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 249.

859 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 249.

860 See Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 249.

861 See Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 249.

862 See Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 249.

863 See Gary Saul Morson, 'Chekhov's Enlightenment', <http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/Chekhov-s-enlightenment-7471>, November 2012 (accessed 4/11/12).

864 See Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 245.

heart-mind of Heaven.<sup>865</sup> In practice, this means more than mere scientific observation; just as Arnold stresses that culture goes beyond observation to embrace our natures as moral beings, so too Chang argue that the Confucian Way involves constant moral reflection on what is observed: 'Knowledge coming from seeing and hearing is knowledge obtained through contact with things. It is not knowledge obtained through our moral nature. Knowledge obtained through our moral nature does not originate through seeing and hearing.'<sup>866</sup> Chang's definitive statement here of the difference between the sciences and the humanities, and of the former's ultimate subordination to the latter (for all the latter's extraordinary usefulness), was not really new to Song neo-Confucianism; Tu traces it right back to Confucius himself:

Confucius was deeply concerned that the culture (*wen*) he cherished was not being transmitted and that the learning (*hsüeh*) he propounded was not being instructed. [...] The community that Confucius created through his inspiring personality was a scholarly fellowship of like-minded men of different ages and backgrounds from different states. They were attracted to Confucius because they shared his vision and took part in varying degrees in his mission to bring moral order to an increasingly fragmented polity. This mission was difficult and even dangerous. The Master himself suffered from joblessness, homelessness, starvation and, occasionally, life-threatening violence. Yet, his faith in the survivability of the culture he cherished and the workability of his approach to teaching was so steadfast that he convinced his followers as well as himself that Heaven was on their side. When Confucius' life was threatened in K'uang, he said:

Since the death of King Wen [founder of the Chou Dynasty], does not the mission of culture (*wen*) rest here in me? If Heaven intends this culture to be destroyed, those who come after me will not be able to have any part of it. If Heaven does not intend this culture to be destroyed, then what can the men of K'uang do to me?<sup>867</sup>

Note that, as for Mahfouz's Akhenaten, it is the survival of 'culture' (*wen*) and civilisation – in modern Chinese *wenming* - which matters absolutely to Confucius, rather than his own survival or even the survival of his own name. Indeed, like Mahfouz's Meri Moun, 'by defining himself as a

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865 See Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 245.

866 See Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 245.

867 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 258.

transmitter and as a lover of antiquity, Confucius made it explicit that a sense of history was not only desirable but also necessary for self-knowledge.<sup>868</sup> This awareness that we are 'embedded in our human-relatedness' to those who came before and will come after us is vital for the 'continuous self-transformation of our body and mind' that allows us, 'through our sociality', to 'realise ourselves as witnesses of the Mandate of Heaven.'<sup>869</sup> Just as Mahfouz in *Before the Throne* places the leaders of Egypt on trial for their behaviour, so too does Confucius assume 'a godlike role in evaluating politics by assigning ultimate "praise and blame" in history to the most powerful political actors of the period.'<sup>870</sup> Such political engagement reflects 'an existential choice to participate in the human fellowship, even though the thought of detaching himself from the world was not only a real possibility but also a persistent temptation'.<sup>871</sup>

In the end, however, Confucius represents one of

two significantly different approaches to life. The hermits Ch'ang-chu and Chieh-ni opted to abdicate their social responsibility and 'flee the world altogether'. [...] They perceived with an ironic detachment people like Confucius who made desperate, and always abortive, attempts to right the wrongs of the world. They themselves, not unlike Thomas More with his Utopian view of the mundane world, determined that politics had degenerated to the point of no return. [...] But for Confucius, it was precisely the nature of the times – the turmoil and disorder – that called for political engagement rather than detachment. [...] His audacious personal assumption of the moral responsibility to change the world, to 'repossess the Way', aroused much excitement, and also much suspicion. [...] The seemingly contradictory description of Confucius' critical awareness of the impracticality of putting his Way into practice, and his self-conscious resoluteness to carry it out with all his heart, perceptively captures the spirit of the Confucian project. By inextricably linking his own fortune with the whole world, even though he realistically understood that he could do very little to prevent the world from being swept away by a torrential flood, he still chose to do the best he could to show the Way of avoiding such an impending disaster. [...] However bleak the immediate situation may have appeared to him, he believed the Way could still prevail in society, and even in politics, through education. In any case, he saw the great task of 'repossessing the Way' as a Heaven-ordained moral

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868 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 273.

869 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 273.

870 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 273.

871 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 276.

imperative and a spiritual calling, not to be denied whatever the odds.<sup>872</sup>

Tu, indeed, is adamant – like Mahfouz, who argues that 'there is only one Law in the universe, whether we choose to call it sacred or secular' – that 'the dichotomy of sacred and profane is quite alien to the Confucian tradition', and that 'it is misleading to characterise Confucian humanism as "secular"', because 'Confucians believe that the meaning of human existence is realised in ordinary daily 'practical living'', and therefore 'not only regard the secular as sacred but experience Heaven through the dimension of the human heart-and-mind'.<sup>873</sup> Tu's view of the relationship between secular and sacred in Confucianism differs from that of the great Western populariser of Confucian ideas, Herbert Fingarette, who argues in his *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (1972) that 'it is not only conceivable but also imperative to understand the Confucian person as a thorough social being to the extent that there is a total absence of interiority (inner dimension)'.<sup>874</sup> Although Fingarette's 'notion of the "secular as sacred" is so pleasing to the Confucian ear' because it 'appears to be a definitive rejection of Max Weber's characterisation of the Confucian ethic as submission to the status quo of the existing political order', namely as 'a kind of secular humanism diametrically opposed to the faith-generated Protestant ethic and thus devoid of the salvific potential for changing the world motivated by a transcendent vision'<sup>875</sup>, Tu judges Fingarette's privileging of ritual propriety (*li*) over felt humanity and empathy (*ren*) to be 'unconvincing': 'Confucian education – learning to be fully human – without reference to the psychodynamics of self-cultivation is unthinkable. [...] Confucian humanism without *ren* as its core value easily degenerates into ritualism'.<sup>876</sup>

Nevertheless, Tu more sympathetically concludes, 'Fingarette's powerful and subtle argument for the idea and ideal of *li* is most appealing'<sup>877</sup>. Moreover for our purposes, in tackling the problem of translation of Confucian ideas into European languages, Fingarette, writing in 1972, argues persuasively that although 'the specifically Christian element has disappeared in recent translations, often the European background assumptions remain. Even where European ideas do not infect the translation, it is Buddhist and Taoist thought – now so much more familiar to Western scholars – which colours the rendering'.<sup>878</sup> The problem with these 'infections' is that 'the Buddhist

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872 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 277-279.

873 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 283.

874 See Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 326 ('Sociality, Individuality and Anthropocosmic Vision').

875 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 326 ('Sociality, Individuality and Anthropocosmic Vision').

876 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, pp. 326-327 ('Sociality, Individuality and Anthropocosmic Vision').

877 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 326 ('Sociality, Individuality and Anthropocosmic Vision').

878 Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*, (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 1972), p. viii.

ideas, however different from European ideas in so many respects, share with the latter certain fundamental biases: they favour the individualistic and subjectivistic view of man. It is individual mind, the inner life and reality of the individual, which is focal in understanding man as viewed throughout the main course of Buddhist and European thinking.<sup>879</sup> The translations may have improved in the last 40 years, but Fingarette's point about Confucian spirituality as bound up with a freely chosen *sacrifice* of self in the name of a higher social goal – ritual propriety – remains: 'the (spiritually) noble man is one who has laboured at the alchemy of fusing social forms (*li*) and raw personal existence [...] *Li* is the fulfilment of human impulse, the civilised expression of it – not a formalistic dehumanisation.'<sup>880</sup> Or as Tu unsurpassably expresses it: 'our aspiration to know Heaven and our longing to be united with Heaven are grounded in our obligations to our fellow human beings. Personal salvation, unless it involves one's family, society, country, and the whole world, is analogous to the situation of the hermit who has fled the world, one-sided and of limited significance.'<sup>881</sup> Confucius himself stresses that 'all salvation is necessarily communal. [...] A man of humanity, wishing to establish his character, also establishes the character of others, and wishing to enlarge himself, also helps others to enlarge themselves.'<sup>882</sup>

We will soon have occasion to expand on what Tu calls his 'anthropocosmic' vision for 'communal salvation' and a 21st-century global civil society founded on a common Global Ethic, but before we do, it behooves us to cover briefly the ground traversed by his New Confucian predecessors and inspirations, most notably his teacher Mou Zongsan.

#### 4.2 Mou Zongsan and the 1958 Declaration

*Another feature of Mou's thought system is its promulgation of Confucianism as the teaching that would facilitate the formation of a global culture or world creed and enable different cultures to coexist peacefully and with respect for one another. Mou and the other joint authors spelled this out clearly in the concluding section of 'Wei zhongguo wenhua jinggao shijie renshi xuanyan' ('Declaration on Behalf of Chinese Culture Respectfully Announced to the People of the World') (1958), a document retrospectively construed by many scholars in Taiwan and the mainland as the 'manifesto' of the New Confucian*

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879 Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*, pp. viii-ix.

880 Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*, p. 7.

881 *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 284.

882 *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 284.

*movement. Mou and the other joint authors were of the view that the Western domination of the world by force and Westerners' lack of both respect for and sympathetic understanding of Chinese and other non-Western cultures did not bode well for world peace. The declaration presented their basic stand regarding Chinese culture and its reconstruction and expressed their hope that the spiritual resources of Confucianism would contribute to the formation of a spiritual world creed to facilitate world peace. In Daode de lixiangzhuyi [The Idealism of Virtue] (1959), Mou portrays the Confucian concept of ren (empathetic compassion) as the fountainhead of human values, the springboard for a healthy vision of the future of humanity, and the cure for what he perceives as the spiritual ills of the modern age. This is a bold assertion, given that Confucianism has yet to reestablish a strong foothold in mainland China. Du Weiming, the best known of the North American New Confucians, has discussed some of the hurdles that have to be overcome and the steps that have to be taken in order to transform Confucianism into a teaching with global significance. In this regard, he thinks that Confucianism must not remain confined to the Chinese and East Asian cultural settings and that Confucians should strive first of all to engage in dialogues with members of other religions and to formulate a Confucian approach to world problems.<sup>883</sup>*

N. Serina Chan, 'What is Confucian and New About the Thought of Mou Zongsan?'

Mahfouz's view that metaphysical experience is only possible through moral experience and ultimately through moral agency, and Tarkovsky's view that moral agency ultimately trumps metaphysical experience, represent uniquely fertile interpretations of the Abrahamic religions for our times, and of Islam and Orthodox Christianity in particular, not least because they *prima facie* correspond to the views espoused by Mou Zongsan, Tu Weiming and other New Confucians. This movement can be traced back to 1958, when a group of Confucian thinkers got together to resurrect their moribund creed for the modern age in the form of a public declaration. Like Mahfouz, these New Confucians presented an account of 'culture' and civilisation which 'opposed Marxist

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883 N. Serina Chan, 'What is Confucian and New About the Thought of Mou Zongsan?', in John Makeham (ed.), *New Confucianism: A Critical Examination*, (New York, Macmillan, 2003), pp. 157-158.

materialism vehemently<sup>884</sup> without rejecting the noble egalitarian principles of socialism in general; just as Matthew Arnold united the Hebraistic and Hellenistic under one umbrella, the New Confucians in N. Serina Chan's words 'looked at both culture and history through religion', as the words of the declaration itself show: 'we hope that the people in the world who study Chinese culture do not think that the Chinese people emphasise only the external regulation of practical interpersonal behaviour for the maintenance of social and political order.'<sup>885</sup> The Confucian Way is above all a path towards a deeper form of civilisation; the world 'should instead pay attention to the notion of the unity of heaven and human beings in Chinese culture and to the religious faith in the way [of heaven] shown [by the Chinese people] in their moral praxis.'<sup>886</sup> To ignore this faith in oneness is to ignore the fact that 'this learning of the mind and human nature is precisely the core of Chinese learning and Chinese thought. Moreover, within this learning lies the real reason why there exists in Chinese thought the doctrine of unity in virtue of heaven and human beings.'<sup>887</sup> Chan's Arnoldian summary of Mou's New Confucian call to arms is that 'the religious-cum-cultural spirit of a people drives the production of their culture'.<sup>888</sup>

This New Confucian view that virtue unites us with Heaven corresponds directly to the Mahfouzian claim that the 'nobility of the soul gives us the highest sense of what the universe is'. It is important to note that these are empirical rather than theological claims; what is asked for is not faith in a historical miracle or transcendental being, but honest introspection about what has made us happiest and what promises to make us happier still. There is no *a priori* reason why we should all agree that virtue rather than vice should be the tonic; the entire *raison d'être* of Mahfouz's fictional and non-fictional oeuvre, as well as Tarkovsky's films and the philosophical writings of generations of Confucian thinkers down the ages to Tu Weiming in the present, is to wage war on behalf of civilisation by convincing the public that virtue really *is* the ticket and is not the humourless bore it is so often portrayed to be. As Mou himself says: 'some people don't like to talk about morality. [...] The crux of the matter is why one should be afraid of morality. Fear of morality indicates that one has a problem'; the whole point of moral self-cultivation for Mou is to bring us closer to the Arnoldian goal of perfection: 'people nowadays tend to think that morality restrains. They therefore dislike morality and dislike Song-Ming Neo-Confucians, who had a very strong moral consciousness. The truth is that morality is not for restraining people. Morality is for liberating and fulfilling people.'<sup>889</sup>

In their eagerness to recover and export their own dying cultural tradition, the early New

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884 N. Serina Chan, 'What is Confucian and New About the Thought of Mou Zongsan?', p. 133.

885 See Nyanying Serina Chan, 'The Thought of Mou Zongsan', PhD Thesis, Centre for Asian Studies, University of Adelaide, 2009, p. 255-256.

886 See Chan, 'The Thought of Mou Zongsan', p. 256.

887 See Chan, 'The Thought of Mou Zongsan', p. 256.

888 . See Chan, 'The Thought of Mou Zongsan', p. 256.

889 Mou Zongsan, *Nineteen Lectures in Chinese Philosophy (Zhongguo zhexue shijiu jiang)*, (Shanghai, Guji Chubanshe, 1997), pp. 78-79.

Confucians systematically underestimated the contributions of other cultures to this universal project. Chan does an excellent job of explaining how the authors of the declaration, and Mou in particular, essentialise, and indeed dichotomise, 'Chinese' and 'Western' culture in their search for a global creed based on 'the unity in virtue of Heaven and humanity' (*tianrenhede*). As well as criticising Western culture's imperialist and expansionist tendencies, the authors attacked 'the "forward-going" (*yi wang zhi qian*) instrumentalist mentality of Westerners' which had 'led to an excessive stress on the intellect. The imbalance, they claimed, had resulted in a lack of caring about other peoples' suffering and a contentious, controlling and restless approach to life, which had thwarted the development of a world culture'.<sup>890</sup> Just as Arnold laments the philistine British attachment to mere 'machinery' in *Culture and Anarchy*, Mou worried that prospects for a genuine Global Ethic 'would only worsen if Western culture continued to lead humanity in an endless chase after better "instruments"'.<sup>891</sup> Mou, however, Chan argues, appears to ignore or be unaware of the existence of Western brothers-in-arms in this struggle; the New Confucian declaration was 'administered in an overflowing moral condescension' and called for 'Westerners to learn from China's "learning of the mind and human nature"' as if such arguments had never been made in the West.<sup>892</sup> Chan describes this blind spot, which extends not just to Western culture but to other non-Western cultures as well, as 'a conceptual vestige that Mou and many other Chinese intellectuals retained from the historical context of Western imperialism'.<sup>893</sup> Only with the second generation of the New Confucian movement, headed by the wisdom-hungry Global Ethic founder Tu Weiming in the United States, did this posture shift towards taking as well as giving.

A quick parallel might be drawn here between Mou and Mahfouz, the reluctant traveller who only very late in life recognised the possibility that 'cultural China' might have something real to offer. Likewise, Mou was unable to explore Islam in any meaningful way in his lifetime or to chance upon Mahfouz's 'New Islam', which is really an updated version of pre-Renaissance Averroean Islam just as New Confucianism is a return to the core of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism. The word tragedy would not be too strong to describe the fact that Mou (1909-1995) and Mahfouz (1911-2006), quite literally simultaneous admirers of Western science and democracy and defenders of a deeper, global concept of civilisation rooted in their own experiences of Western imperialism and chance discoveries of their own indigenous cultural and religious heritages, could not meet in their lifetimes: we feel we have done a service by juxtaposing them here for the first time. The details of Mou's neo-Kantian, neo-Buddhist New Confucianism, however, interest us less than his general emphasis on *ren* and moral agency which inspired a generation of New Confucian scholars,

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890 Chan, 'The Thought of Mou Zongsan', p. 258.

891 Chan, 'The Thought of Mou Zongsan', p. 258.

892 Chan, 'The Thought of Mou Zongsan', p. 258.

893 Chan, 'The Thought of Mou Zongsan', p. 259.



of whom Tu Weiming is the most prominent contemporary example. Chan's synopsis of Mou's thought is nevertheless worth reproducing for the many parallels with Mahfouz in particular that it suggests. Try substituting, in the following passage, 'Islamic' for 'Confucian', 'Sufism' for 'Buddhism', 'Arab' for 'Chinese', and 'Mahfouz' for 'Mou':

Mou [...] opposed Marxist materialism vehemently. Additionally, he was highly critical of the strong positivistic influences from the West and its accompanying preoccupation with what is external and verifiable. He maintained that Chinese culture has to be reconstructed scientifically and democratically, but that such reconstruction has to be founded on Confucian moral values for it to be spiritually rooted and enduring. Along this line, he believed that an important mission of Chinese intellectuals in modern times is to elucidate clearly mainstream Chinese and Western thought systems and to reconcile and harmonise the two.

[...] Mou [...] believes that there are universal truths and values that can be appreciated by the entire humanity, but that no one culture expresses all of these truths and values. Rather, each culture tends to express in its particular way some of these truths and values, and cultures enrich one another by offering different paths to the realisation of universal truths and values. In this regard, he is of the view that Chinese culture has tended to focus on life as a whole and emphasise moral values that nurture and settle life, while Western culture (along the Greek tradition) has tended to focus on nature and emphasise theoretical reason and knowledge about the external world. The modern age, in Mou's eyes, has been marked by an excessive dominance of Western values. On the one hand, he is highly positive about Western values as expressed in the building of modern national states, the development of science, and the realisation of democracy. He firmly upholds these as values that should be adopted by China. On the other hand, he is adamant that these values have been unchecked and pushed to the extreme, resulting in excesses, imbalances, and calamities to humanity. He disapproves of Western imperialism and vehemently condemns Marxism.<sup>894</sup>

Like Tarkovsky, moreover, Mou laments that modern people have become spiritually ill in that they are oblivious to their inner source of truth, value, and moral creativity and are concerned mainly with what feels good and what is technically right and socially conforming rather than with what is

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894 Chan, 'What is Confucian and New About the Thought of Mou Zongsan?', pp. 134-135.

rational and moral'.<sup>895</sup> While Kant, for Mou arguably the paradigmatic 'Western' thinker, 'insists upon the separation between God (the transcendent) and human beings' and 'maintains that only God possesses intellectual (transcendental, non-sensible) intuition and has knowledge of the noumenal world', Mou 'expounds the unity of the transcendent and the immanent using the "two-tier mind" paradigm'.<sup>896</sup> Although, in keeping with centuries of Confucian tradition, Mou borrows liberally from 'major Buddhist paradigms' in building his philosophical system, 'he also draws a clear distinction between Confucianism and Buddhism in terms of the content of thought'.<sup>897</sup> Chan argues that Mou regarded Confucianism at its best as 'the great, central, and orthodox "perfect teaching" that addresses ontological creativity squarely and positively and provides a transcendental basis for moral cultivation', while regarding Buddhism at its best as but a "perfect teaching" of deliverance (from transmigration, suffering, and so on) that fails to address morality and ontology in the true and proper sense'.<sup>898</sup> Indeed, for all the doubts about his Confucian credentials, there is no doubt that Mou remains an heir to the central pillar of Confucian thought: following Mencius, Mou argues that 'the virtue of humane benevolence (*ren*) is rooted in fellow feeling', and that 'the scope of this humane benevolence is such that it would not be wrong to say that it represents real life itself'.<sup>899</sup> The Confucian challenge is to embody this reality in one's daily life: 'if one is able to extend this fellow feeling outward in a continuous stream, it will take the essential best of everything it flows through, culminating finally in a meeting and becoming one with Heaven'.<sup>900</sup> For Mou, as for Mencius, the call of this Heaven is first heard when one realises that others can feel and suffer; this leads to the birth of conscience or 'moral consciousness' (*daode yishi*) and an accompanying sense that, like Heaven itself, one cannot rest from one's responsibilities. The virtue of *ren* thus has two key characteristics: *jue* (feeling) and *jian* (action), the very same characteristics as Arnoldian 'culture'. *Jue*, Mou explains, 'does not refer to sensory perception or sensation, but rather to a feeling of concerned pity, referred to in the *Analects* as an 'uneasy feeling' (*bu'an zhigan*), and by Mencius as a 'compassionate heart' or 'a heart that cannot bear the suffering of others'. Without such *jue*, 'we might as well call the heart a piece of indifferent wood'; indeed, 'a person may have good business acumen, but may still be, for all his intelligence, indifferent to the suffering of others. That is because true *jue* is a feature of the moral mind, and it is only through *jue* that one can hope to enjoy a fully developed human heart'.<sup>901</sup> The other characteristic of *ren*, *jian*, which might be translated as 'enduring health' or 'tireless vigour', is linked by Mou to the pre-Confucian fragment

895 Chan, 'What is Confucian and New About the Thought of Mou Zongsan?', p. 135.

896 Chan, 'What is Confucian and New About the Thought of Mou Zongsan?', p. 141.

897 Chan, 'What is Confucian and New About the Thought of Mou Zongsan?', p. 147.

898 Chan, 'What is Confucian and New About the Thought of Mou Zongsan?', pp. 147-148.

899 Mou Zongsan, *The Special Character of Chinese Philosophy (Zhongguo zhexue de tezhi)*, (Taipei: Taiwan Rensheng Chubanshe, 1963), p. 43.

900 Mou, *The Special Character of Chinese Philosophy*, p. 43.

901 Mou, *The Special Character of Chinese Philosophy*, p. 43.

*weitian zhiming, yumu buyi* ('The Mandate of the Only Heaven: Ever to the Rice Field'). *Jue* is only the start, a precondition for *ren*: the cultivation of *ren* begins in earnest when *jue* is put into practice with *jian*: a person of noble character (*junzi*) 'realises that she must try to join Heaven in her own tireless activity.'<sup>902</sup> This fusion of *jue* and *jian* is, in so many words, the task of our first two warriors and their Western counterparts. Just as Mahfouz ultimately disagrees with Kant ('I do not say with Kant that Good will be victorious in the other world. Good is achieving victory every day,' he writes in his Nobel Lecture) and argues, like Mou, that social engagement is ultimately superior to detached meditation, he and Tarkovsky smash the idea that *tianrenhede* ('the unity in virtue of Heaven and humanity') is a non-Abrahamic or uniquely Confucian contribution to global civilisation. This is good news for global integration and bad news for Chinese nationalism; but despite Chan's valid point about the postcolonial Sinocentrism of the drafters of the 1958 declaration, it is hard to see them or their foremost son, Tu Weiming, being anything other than happy to discover surprise allies in an essentially common struggle.

#### 4.3 Taking Up Mou's Mantle

Tu, indeed, continues the legacy of Mou and the 1958 generation and aims to 'domesticate' Confucianism both in the West and around the world in a way that the first generation of New Confucians simply could not. An important part of this task involved establishing the link between the Global Ethic and domestic ethics in the Confucian tradition and rebranding the oft-maligned Confucian virtue of filial piety. The language Tu uses to do so, however, could have been drawn from our other 'warriors for civilisation':

Filiality so conceived is certainly more than familial obligation and personal affection. To serve one's parents and make them comfortable is only to 'nourish the mouth and belly' (*yang k'ou-t'i*). Unless one can also honour one's parents in one's moral rectitude, public service, and ethical leadership, one cannot be said to have 'nourished their will' (*yang-chih*). In this sense, the maintenance of an ancestral line is not merely the biological prolongation of the life of a family. Rather, it signifies the continuation of a personality ideal exemplified by the forefathers of the ancestral line and the transmission of cultural values created by its outstanding members.<sup>903</sup>

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902 Mou, *The Special Character of Chinese Philosophy*, p. 43.

903 Tu Weiming, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness*, (Albany: State University of

More explicitly, Tu argues that 'the Confucian position asserts [that...] morality is not only a means of preserving the community; it is also the very reason why the community is worth being organised in the first place.'<sup>904</sup> Echoing Mahfouz on the 'eternal holy battle' between tradition and freedom, we discover in Tu that 'what [New Confucianism] envisions is not merely a moral community, definable in terms of harmonised social relations. Nor is it the approximation of a moral theology, laying claim to clear and certain knowledge of the moral law.'<sup>905</sup> The Moral Law itself is more dynamic than this, and is best understood as 'a form of metaphysics which advocates that the ultimate reality is perceivable and realisable in the moral life of every person because human nature is potentially a genuine manifestation of that reality'.<sup>906</sup> Naturally, however, 'there is no guarantee that, with his heavenly endowed nature, each human being can effortlessly form a complete union with Heaven. Moral self-cultivation is required to actualise that ideal.'<sup>907</sup> It is true that this moral self-cultivation, of the exact kind advocated by Mahfouz and Tarkovsky, implies a certain 'way of being religious', which Tu memorably describes 'as *ultimate self-transformation as a communal act and as a faithful dialogical response to the transcendent*'.<sup>908</sup> In other words, one must strive to improve oneself out of a sense of responsibility to one's transgenerational community, and an optimism regarding the possibilities of engagement with a higher Moral Law one discovers within. Tu rightly describes this view as unfashionable: 'the Confucian conviction that a person's self-cultivation is the root of social order' is 'predicated on a holistic vision of human self-transcendence that the compartmentalised methods of psychology, sociology, or theology which are characteristic of academic "disciplines" in modern universities are grossly inadequate to grasp'.<sup>909</sup> Rather than regarding our private lives as emptily private and 'secular', as Western liberal democracies invariably do, the Confucian 'conviction that what we do as ordinary citizens within the confines of our private homes is socially and politically important and what we do as public servants performing our roles and functions in the mundane world is religiously significant reflects a deep concern for "the secular as sacred"'.<sup>910</sup> Moreover, writes Tu for a Western audience, 'in the post-Machiavellian, Hobbesian, Marxian and Freudian age, it is extremely difficult to imagine that there is or ever can be an organismic unity that underlies the person, the community and the transcendent'.<sup>911</sup> Even to suggest it is to risk seeming quaint or mad: 'any insinuation that these

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New York Press, 1989), p. 45.

904 Tu, *Centrality and Commonality*, p. 68.

905 Tu, *Centrality and Commonality*, p. 70.

906 Tu, *Centrality and Commonality*, p. 70.

907 Tu, *Centrality and Commonality*, p. 70.

908 Tu, *Centrality and Commonality*, p. 94.

909 Tu, *Centrality and Commonality*, p. 94.

910 Tu, *Centrality and Commonality*, pp. 94-95.

911 Tu, *Centrality and Commonality*, p. 95.

connections are still whole may give the impression of a prelapsarian worldview, a worldview that can still be imagined but is no longer viable as a spiritual and intellectual option for the sophisticated modern mind.<sup>912</sup> Yet this return to a 'prelapsarian' *tianrenhede* worldview, indeed its global export, is precisely what Tu, Tarkovsky, Mahfouz and their Western counterparts call for in their work.

The core of this worldview for Tu is, as for Mou, trust rather than contract. Although he does not intend for a moment to 'challenge the doctrine of individualism which has inspired generation after generation to search for autonomy, independence and dignity, or the concept of an all-mighty God which continues to be informed by sophisticated theological argumentation', Tu wants instead to remind his sceptical Western reader that 'the concept of organismic unity is predicated on an inclusive humanist vision', and that it is 'desirable to establish fruitful communication with the transcendent through communal participation. Only in extraordinary circumstances, such as the case of Ch'ü Yüan, who was the only sober person in a drunken multitude, can we appeal to Heaven directly'.<sup>913</sup> By extension, the injured party who appeals to the justice system for redress of a breach of contract ought not to think of herself as 'facing Heaven alone as an isolated individual without reference to [her] community', for such a direct appeal has 'grave consequences for the community as a whole as well as for the individual. It must be undertaken with extreme care and even a sense of tragedy'.<sup>914</sup> In short, 'the fiduciary community, as a defining characteristic of Confucian religiosity, is not governed by social ethics devoid of reference to the transcendent. On the contrary, the community based on trust rather than contract is itself a sacred confirmation that human nature is ordained by Heaven'.<sup>915</sup> Whatever usefulness contracts may have for the preservation and smooth functioning of social life (and Tu repeatedly stresses the importance of the 'legal constraint'), it is minor beside the trust engendered by the feelings of 'organismic unity' one discovers in virtue. For Confucians, marriage is the microcosm of this unity<sup>916</sup>, since the best marriages, like that of Mahfouz's Akhenaten and Nefertiti, are outward-looking as well as loving and equal: 'in a

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912 Tu, *Centrality and Commonality*, p. 95.

913 Tu, *Centrality and Commonality*, pp. 95-97.

914 Tu, *Centrality and Commonality*, p. 97.

915 Tu, *Centrality and Commonality*, p. 98.

916 See for example Xinzhong Yao, *Confucianism (El Confucianismo)*, trad. Maria Condor, (Madrid: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 206-207:

In the *School Sayings of Confucius (Kongzi Jiayu)* the following observations on the Way of human beings are attributed to the Master:

Among men, government is highest. Now, 'to govern' means 'to be noble'. In olden times the love of others was the highest form of government. Among the ways of expressing this love for others, rites were the highest. To fulfil these rites, veneration was of the utmost importance. Of all forms of veneration, the great rite of marriage was the highest.

The logical conclusion is therefore that 'love and veneration are the roots of government'.

prescriptive sense, love and affection between husband and wife are taken for granted. The focus is then on the precautionary measures pertinent to such a relationship for the purpose of human flourishing. [...] The danger of excessive indulgence between husband and wife is a cause for concern.<sup>917</sup> Despite the uses and abuses of Confucian doctrine down through the centuries to justify nepotistic, male-dominated, and of course heterosexual conjugal arrangements, Tu is clear that the doctrine itself is entirely predicated on the inward work of moral self-cultivation common to all<sup>918</sup>; a healthy conjugal relationship is the central link in a network of outwardly expanding relationships of which only a self-cultivating individual is truly capable: 'inward reflection involves not only the choice of the self over others as the primary focus for learning but also a critical sense of developing the true self rather than the private ego'.<sup>919</sup> This privileging of self-cultivation 'does not lead to self-centredness (nor does it lead to individualism), for it is never meant to be an isolated quest for spirituality devoid of social relevance.'<sup>920</sup> Returning to Mencius, Tu concludes that 'the purpose of the inner decision to know our true self is to 'recognise the great body' in us: the 'great body' (*ta-t'i*) is contrasted with the 'small body' (*hsiao-t'i*); it 'refers to the true self that can form a unity with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things.'<sup>921</sup> The 'Great Body' (*dati*) inside us is the inner reflection of the 'Great Unity' (*dahe*) of civilisation outside us envisaged by Confucianism, uniter of kingdoms under the banner of trust. Confucius himself insisted that 'trust is the only basis on which the state can survive and prosper', since 'death has been with us since the beginning of time, but when there is no trust, people have nothing to support them' (*Lunyu*, 12, 7).<sup>922</sup> This 'positive assertion of human-relatedness' is summarised by Tu as follows: 'In order to establish ourselves, we must help others to establish themselves; in order to enlarge ourselves, we must help others to enlarge themselves.'<sup>923</sup> This spirit of trust 'provides the basic foundation for building an ethics that is applicable to cultures and religions throughout the world'<sup>924</sup>. Unfortunately, Tu sees on the horizon of the 21<sup>st</sup> century a 'new world order which is diametrically opposed' to such trust-building; nevertheless, 'the 'Great Unity' is neither utopian nor romantic' but rather 'a reasonable, enlightened, humane, and practicable way of envisioning a truly functioning global community.'<sup>925</sup> Tu reiterates this underlying New Confucian pragmatism in his appraisal of the legacy of New Confucian

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917 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 264.

918 For a contemporary Islamic theological perspective which takes the same view of the primary role of self-cultivation within marriage, see Tariq Ramadan, 'Marriage and the Family in Islam' ('Le mariage et la famille en Islam'), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SLok8th5w-g>, 25/9/2012.

919 Tu, *Centrality and Commonality*, pp. 117.

920 Tu, *Centrality and Commonality*, pp. 117.

921 Tu, *Centrality and Commonality*, pp. 117-118.

922 See Yao, *Confucianism*, p. 350.

923 Tu Weiming (pref.), in Martin Lu, Rosita Dellios, R. James Ferguson (eds.), *Toward a Global Community: New Perspectives on Confucian Humanism*, (Gold Coast: Bond University Centre for East West Studies, 2004), p. xii.

924 Tu, *Toward a Global Community*, p. xii.

925 Tu, *Toward a Global Community*, p. xii.

pioneers Qian Mu, Tang Junyi and Feng Youlan as well as Mou Zongsan: 'they were obviously convinced that their cherished tradition had a message for the emerging global village; they delivered it in the most appropriate way they knew.'<sup>926</sup> The underlying spirit of the declaration, indeed, was pragmatic as well as 'prophetic': 'they did not wish merely to honour their ancestors but also to show that they cared for the well-being of future generations. As such they were not only retrieving the tradition, but also reappropriating it for contemporary circumstances.'<sup>927</sup> While the first generation of New Confucians could arguably have done more to engage in dialogue with the outside world instead of issuing a unilateral declaration, and while they may at times have been guilty of 'longing for a lost world' of hopelessly romantic unity, they nevertheless 'discovered a new vitality and a persuasive power in the tradition' and encouraged a generation of scholars, including Tu himself, to reengage critically with it and to make it relevant for a contemporary global audience.<sup>928</sup>

One figure in the Confucian tradition that Tu singles out for repeated attention is Wang Yangming (1472-1529), and in particular Wang's 'Inquiry on the Great Learning':

The great man regards Heaven and Earth and the myriad things as one body. He regards the world as one family and the country as one person. As to those who make a cleavage between objects and distinguish between self and others, they are small men. That the great man can regard Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things as one body is not because he deliberately wants to do so, but because it is natural to the humane nature of his mind that he do so. [...] When we see a child about to fall into a well, we cannot help a feeling of alarm and commiseration. This shows that our humanity (*ren*) forms one body with the child. It may be objected that the child belongs to the same species. Again, when we observe the pitiful cries and frightened appearances of birds and animals about to be slaughtered, we cannot help feeling an 'inability to bear' their suffering. This shows that our humanity forms one body with birds and animals. It may be objected that birds and animals are sentient beings as we are. But when we see plants broken and destroyed, we cannot help a feeling of pity. This shows that our humanity forms one with plants. it may be said that plants are living things as we are. Yet even when we see tiles and stones shattered and crushed, we cannot help a feeling of regret. This shows that our humanity forms one body

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926 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 385 ('The Ecological Turn in New Confucian Humanism').

927 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, pp. 385-386 ('The Ecological Turn in New Confucian Humanism').

928 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 386 ('The Ecological Turn in New Confucian Humanism').

with tiles and stones.<sup>929</sup>

Tu concludes that 'these examples clearly indicate that 'forming one body' is not a romantic idea about unity, but a highly differentiated sense of interconnectedness.'<sup>930</sup> Wang does not deny that 'when [our minds] are aroused by desires and obscured by selfishness, compelled by greed for gain and fear of harm, and stirred by anger, we will destroy things, kill members of our own species, and will do everything. In extreme cases, we will slaughter our own brothers, and the humanity that forms one body will disappear completely.'<sup>931</sup> However, for Tu this means that 'the more we are able to move beyond our self-centredness, the more we are empowered to realise ourselves.'<sup>932</sup> Even more importantly, however, 'moving beyond selfishness into an ever-expanding network of relationships enables us to fully realise the full potential of our humanity, for our self-realisation is personal and communal rather than egoistically private.'<sup>933</sup> This public responsibility to perfect oneself is summarised in the Confucian tradition in the expression *tianming*, or Mandate of Heaven: 'as Heaven's partners, we are individually and communally entrusted with a sacred mission. To borrow Herbert Fingarette's felicitous phrase, our mission is to recognise "the secular as sacred" [and to] transform our earth, body, family, and community into the emanations of Heaven's inner virtue (*de*)'.<sup>934</sup> An even more 'felicitous' summary of Tu's worldview reads as follows:

Since the community as home must extend to the 'global village' and beyond, the self in fruitful interaction with community must transcend not only egoism and parochialism, but also nationalism and anthropocentrism.

[...] In shifting the centre of one's empathic concern from oneself to one's family, one transcends selfishness. The move from family to community transcends nepotism. The move from community to nation transcends parochialism, and the move to all humanity counters chauvinistic nationalism. While 'the project of becoming fully human involves transcending, sequentially, egoism, nepotism, parochialism, ethnocentrism, and chauvinist nationalism', it cannot stop at 'isolating, self-sufficient humanism'. If we stop at secular humanism, our arrogant self-sufficiency will undermine our cosmic connectivity and constrain us in an

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929 See Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 385 ('The Ecological Turn in New Confucian Humanism').

930 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 385 ('The Ecological Turn in New Confucian Humanism').

931 See an alternative version of Tu's paper 'The Ecological Turn in New Confucian Humanism', in *Toward a Global Community*, p. 17.

932 Tu, 'The Ecological Turn in New Confucian Humanism', in *Toward a Global Community*, p. 17.

933 Tu, 'The Ecological Turn in New Confucian Humanism', in *Toward a Global Community*, p. 17.

934 Tu, 'The Ecological Turn in New Confucian Humanism', in *Toward a Global Community*, p. 17.



anthropocentric predicament.<sup>935</sup>

Moving beyond anthropocentrism without losing touch with one's ancestors and descendants, without forgoing the prior human ties which bind us to family, nation, and then to the intergenerational ideas of 'civilisation' and culture which our two previous 'warriors', Mahfouz and Tarkovsky, so tirelessly defended, is a task which Tu assumes with equal gusto. He calls it his, or Confucianism's, 'anthropocosmic vision'.

#### 4.4 Tu's Anthropocosmic Vision

In his essay 'Sociality, Individuality and Anthropocosmic Vision', Tu takes on the most sophisticated of the postmodern liberal philosophers, Richard Rorty, and his 'ironist' insistence on a plurality of versions of the good life and the need for 'respect' for such plurality in a modern democratic society, a refraining from trying to 'impose' one's version of the good life on others. Tu rightly argues that such a denial of even the possibility of moral truth and unity, and the subsequent radical separation of the public and private spheres that such a denial entails, is antithetical to the Confucian project: 'Richard Rorty, from his ironist postmodern perspective, argues for the incompatibility of self-realisation and social service. If Rorty were right, the Confucian project would necessarily fail.'<sup>936</sup> The Confucian position on the so-called 'public-private distinction' in liberal political philosophy is clear: 'self-cultivation is profoundly personal but not inevitably private. Conceptually and experientially, it is a serious flaw to confuse the personal with the private. Although the personal is a matter of the heart, it can be publicly accountable.'<sup>937</sup> It is precisely through a sharing of the personal that our feelings, and those of our interlocutors, 'can be properly channeled or substantially enriched'; the stakes of such openness extend to the very purpose of existence itself: 'although Confucians do not tap transcendental symbolic resources and do not practice otherworldly asceticism, they are deeply concerned about the ultimate meaning of life', and this concern leads to the conclusion, echoing Norbert Elias, that 'it is not inconceivable that while in contemporary social life we cannot but divide ourselves into multiple social roles, we can still cherish the vision of "organic unity" as a source of inspiration for our personal identity'.<sup>938</sup> This embrace of a concrete

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935 Tu, 'The Ecological Turn in New Confucian Humanism', in *Toward a Global Community*, p. 19.

936 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 329 ('Sociality, Individuality and Anthropocosmic Vision').

937 Tu, 'Sociality, Individuality and Anthropocosmic Vision', p. 329.

938 Tu, 'Sociality, Individuality and Anthropocosmic Vision', pp. 329-330.

vision of the good life need not lead to the authoritarian outcomes so often witnessed in Confucianism's actual past; indeed, 'the democratic spirit', Tu argues, 'can also be realised in a Confucian community with an emphasis on family ethics', and moreover, 'we can also maintain that the persistent effort to integrate ourselves in a holistic environment is more congenial to human flourishing than the uncritical acceptance of the assertion that self-realisation is relentlessly private, subjective, and unsocial.'<sup>939</sup> In other words, the postmodern abandonment of 'the persistent effort to integrate ourselves in a holistic environment' and the adoption of an 'ironic' stance towards morality in a complex world – the preference for bare minimum standards of 'respect for difference' over active moral education and an attempt to create 'organismic unity' across ever wider chunks of humanity and beyond – is a choice, and ultimately a lazy and dangerous choice; while Tu rightly asks 'the critical question of whether or not the vision of "organismic unity" is practicable in our lifeworld today' and argues that 'if we can only show that it is imaginable but "simply structurally impossible" as a practical idea in our ordinary daily existence, [then] it has merely historical rather than contemporary significance'<sup>940</sup>, he emphatically insists on this 'contemporary significance' by returning to the timeless Confucian example: 'the promise that humanity in its all-embracing fullness is realisable prompts a sense of mission, requiring a total commitment' of the kind demonstrated by Confucius himself ('the profound person cannot but be broadminded and resolute, for the burden is heavy and the way is long. He takes humanity as his personal vocation; how can we say that the burden is not heavy? He does not let go until he dies; how can we say that the road is not long?').<sup>941</sup>

The central question for Tu in his debates with postmodern ironists like Rorty concerns the concept of 'respect for difference'. Just as Mahfouz celebrated the eternal 'holy battle' between the forces of tradition and reform in an open society, Tu argues that in 'the ideal society [...] referred to as the Great Unity' in Confucian thought ('an imaginary fiduciary community infused with public-spiritedness'), the 'harmonisation of differences, far from being uniformity, is synchronisation of divergent agencies.'<sup>942</sup> Refusing to disagree or to question other people's conceptions of the good life leads to insipid solitude, and is ultimately less respectful than engagement with them. Accepting the idea that moral truth could come from anywhere, including one's apparent enemies, is more respectful than denying the possibility of anyone having access to it and of adopting an ironist's essentially polytheistic stance to the whole question of right and wrong, better and worse. Tu illustrates this point with reference to the pre-Confucian figure of Ran Qiu ('what his lord declares acceptable, he also declares acceptable'); as the pre-Confucian fragment puts it, 'this is like trying to

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939 Tu, 'Sociality, Individuality and Anthropocosmic Vision', pp. 330-331.

940 Tu, 'Sociality, Individuality and Anthropocosmic Vision', p. 331.

941 Tu, 'Sociality, Individuality and Anthropocosmic Vision', p. 335.

942 Tu, 'Sociality, Individuality and Anthropocosmic Vision', p. 339.

season water with water; who would be willing to eat it? It is like playing nothing but a single note on the zither; who would want to listen to it?'<sup>943</sup>

The Moral Law itself commands 'respect for difference', and Tu is surely not wrong when he says that 'a major challenge confronting the human community is to harmonise, and respect difference at all levels'<sup>944</sup>. Such respect paradoxically requires, however, a prior commitment to the idea of a Moral Law and a willingness to express one's views publicly when one believes the Moral Law has been contravened. Such a willingness to concern oneself with 'everything that happens in the world', including, for example, with what happens in other people's bedrooms, does not in any way represent a desire to 'impose' one's views on others – the Moral Law cannot be 'imposed' by definition - but rather a healthy commitment to the idea of 'organismic unity' or Great Unity which is central to the civilisational legacy of Confucianism as well as other Axial Age civilisations and all but the most literalist of the monotheisms. Tu goes to great lengths to stress that 'Confucians - Confucius in particular - recognised the importance of the legal constraint: the law'; but self-interested 'contractual' thinking alone will not do, for the individual or for the collective: 'law is a preventive measure; law cannot itself generate a sense of shame, and without a sense of shame it is difficult to develop some kind of moral character. The legal constraint is a minimum requirement for order in any society, but it certainly falls short of a maximum realisation of human potential.'<sup>945</sup> The Great Unity of human civilisation, indeed, goes beyond secular law to symbolise 'a most cherished form of life in which self and community, despite the inevitable danger of alienation and the intractable realities of compartmentalisation, are not irreconcilable opposites.'<sup>946</sup> In so doing, the Great Unity opens itself to the beyond of itself, to all the ten thousand things, and in this way, it presents an alternative to human civilisation's dealings not only with itself, but also with nature. Tu describes this as the 'ecological turn' in New Confucian humanism at a time when 'for the survival and flourishing of the human community it is vitally important to harmonise the relationship between the human species and nature.'<sup>947</sup> This does not mean an end to technology or science - on the contrary, many if not most of our current ecological problems require extremely hi-tech scientific solutions - but it does mean a shift away from an instrumental attitude to the world around us.

It is clear, however, in his essay 'Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality', that Tu is an enthusiastic supporter of 90% of the legacy of the Western Enlightenment, which he describes as

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943 Tu, 'Sociality, Individuality and Anthropocosmic Vision', p. 338.

944 Tu, 'Sociality, Individuality and Anthropocosmic Vision', p. 337.

945 See Tu Weiming, 'Dialogue with Francis Fukuyama',  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LP3RjmvymOs&feature=youtu.be>, 21/2/12.

946 Tu, 'Sociality, Individuality and Anthropocosmic Vision', p. 339.

947 Tu, 'Sociality, Individuality and Anthropocosmic Vision', p. 339.

'the most dynamic and transformative ideology in human history'<sup>948</sup>. Indeed, 'virtually all major spheres of interest characteristic of the modern age are indebted to or intertwined with this mentality: science and technology, industrial capitalism, market economy, democratic polity, mass communication, research universities, civil and military bureaucracies, and professional organisations.' Even in the sphere of morality itself, the Enlightenment has bequeathed to us an unrivalled patrimony: 'the values we cherish as definitions of modern consciousness – including liberty, equality, human rights, the dignity of the individual, respect for privacy, government for, by and of the people, and due process of law – are genetically, if not structurally, inseparable from the Enlightenment mentality.'<sup>949</sup> Nevertheless, Tu adds, 'it seems self-evident that both capitalism and socialism subscribe to the aggressive anthropocentrism'<sup>950</sup> of this mentality, and that 'the human desire to become the measure and master of all things is still the most influential moral discourse in the political culture of the modern age'.<sup>951</sup> Against the Confucian ideal of seeking knowledge for the sake of moral self-improvement and the subsequent moral improvement of human civilisation in its dialogical relationship with Heaven, Tu contrasts the 'dark side of the modern West', the 'unbound Prometheus', the 'Faustian drive to explore, to know, to conquer, and to subdue', which has now been 'fully embraced as the unquestioned rationale for development in East Asia' and elsewhere.<sup>952</sup> Tu invites us to rethink the Enlightenment heritage in the context of Confucian and other civilisational calls to unity: 'we need to explore the spiritual resources that may help us to broaden the scope of the Enlightenment project, deepen its moral sensitivity, and, if necessary, transform its genetic constraints in order to realise fully its potential as a worldview for the human condition as a whole.'<sup>953</sup> Tu proposes a supplement to the Golden Rule of global folk morality (which he prefers in its negative but still ultimately self-centred formulation 'Do not do unto others what you would not want others to do unto you'), which would consist of 'the positive principle "In order to establish myself, I have to help others to enlarge themselves." An inclusive sense of community, based on the communal critical self-consciousness of reflective minds, is an ethicoreligious goal as well as a philosophical ideal.'<sup>954</sup> The need to overcome some of the alienating binaries of modern 'Western' thought and to return to older, more venerable forms of spirituality is as palpable in Tu as it is in both Mahfouz and Tarkovsky:

The exclusive dichotomy of matter/spirit, body/mind, sacred/profane, human/nature,

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948 Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 112 ('Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality').

949 Tu, 'Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality', p. 112.

950 Tu, 'Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality', p. 112.

951 Tu, 'Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality', p. 113.

952 Tu, 'Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality', p. 113.

953 Tu, 'Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality', p. 114.

954 Tu, 'Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality', p. 114.

or creator/creature must be transcended to allow supreme values, such as the sanctity of the earth, the continuity of being, the beneficiary interaction between the human community and nature, and the mutuality between humankind and Heaven, to receive the saliency they deserve in philosophy, religion and theology. The Greek emphasis on rationality, the Biblical image of man having 'dominion' over the Earth, and the Protestant work ethic provided necessary, if not sufficient sources for the Enlightenment mentality. However, the unintended negative consequences of the rise of the modern West have so undermined the sense of community implicit in the Hellenistic idea of the citizen, the Judaic idea of the covenant, and the Christian idea of fellowship that it is morally imperative for these great traditions, which have maintained highly complex and tension-ridden relationships with the Enlightenment mentality, to formulate their critique of the blatant anthropocentrism inherent in the Enlightenment project.<sup>955</sup>

Western philosophy, too, when not infected with the polytheistic relativism of so many of its continental forms, has succumbed to an analytical dryness which confuses the cool empirical method of the hard sciences with standards of philosophical rigour. Tu passionately argues that his 'love' for Confucianism is a philosophical and personal strength, not a weakness, although he faced severe criticism early in his career from American analytic philosophers who had already fully internalised the idea that philosophy could no longer be about love at all and that truth was utterly external to love.<sup>956</sup> Although Tu celebrates a 'spiritual turn' in Western philosophy in the form of communitarianism, a closer cousin of Confucian 'spiritual humanism' than either Marxist materialism or liberal 'irony' regarding forms of the good life, he nevertheless highlights the contemporary relevance of a 'second kind of spiritual resource [...] derived from non-Western, axial-age civilisations, which include Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia, Confucianism and Taoism in East Asia, and Islam.'<sup>957</sup> Just as Mahfouz stresses the essential oneness of Islam and its Western monotheistic cousins, so too does Tu argue that 'Islam should be considered an essential intellectual heritage of the modern West because of its contribution to the Renaissance.'<sup>958</sup> Regrettably, 'the current practice, especially by the mass media of North America and Western Europe, of consigning Islam to radical otherness is historically unsound and culturally insensitive. It has, in fact, seriously undermined the modern West's own self-interest as well as its

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955 Tu, 'Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality', p. 115.

956 See in particular Tu's 'Dialogue with Charles Taylor', <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3-ZnkCC0Jc>, 11/6/2011.

957 Tu, 'Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality', p. 115.

958 Tu, 'Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality', p. 115.

own self-understanding.<sup>959</sup> At the same time, and without wishing to neglect the spiritual resources of 'primal traditions' including 'native American, Hawaiian, Maori, and numerous tribal religious traditions'<sup>960</sup> and their 'deep experience of rootedness'<sup>961</sup>, Tu argues that 'as both beneficiaries and victims of the Enlightenment mentality, we show our fidelity to our common heritage by enriching it, transforming it, and restructuring it with [... the] spiritual resources still available to us for the sake of developing a truly ecumenical sense of global community'.<sup>962</sup> He then unsurprisingly places Confucian spiritual resources at the heart of this struggle:

Human beings are metaphysical beings with the highest aspirations not simply defined in terms of anthropocentric ideas but characterised by the ultimate concern to be constantly inspired by and continuously responsive to the Mandate of Heaven. [...] Learning to be human in the Confucian spirit is to engage oneself in a ceaseless, unending process of creative self-transformation, both as a communal act and as a dialogical response to Heaven. This involves four inseparable dimensions – self, community, nature, and the transcendent. The purpose of learning is always understood as being for the sake of the self, but the self is never an isolated individual (an island). [...] Therefore, the profound significance of what we call primordial ties – ethnicity, gender, language, land, class, and basic spiritual orientation – which are intrinsic in the Confucian project, is a celebration of cultural diversity (this is not to be confused with any form of pernicious relativism). [...] There is a recognition that each one of us is fated to be a unique person embedded in a particular condition. [...] The spiritual resources which sustain [Confucians include] cultivating themselves, teaching others to be good, 'looking for friends in history', emulating the sages, setting up cultural norms, interpreting the Mandate of Heaven, transmitting the Way, and transforming the world as a moral community.<sup>963</sup>

This transformation, in our time, involves asking, and answering in the affirmative, the question 'Should our pluralistic society deliberately cultivate shared values and a common ground for human understanding?'. Tu argues that 'an alternative model of sustainable development, with an emphasis on the ethical and spiritual dimensions of human flourishing, must be sought'.<sup>964</sup> In words which could have been drawn directly from Mahfouz, Tu concludes that 'the time is long overdue to move

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959 Tu, 'Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality', p. 115.

960 Tu, 'Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality', p. 116.

961 Tu, 'Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality', p. 117.

962 Tu, 'Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality', p. 118.

963 Tu, 'Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality', pp. 122-123.

964 Tu, 'Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality', pp. 124-125.

beyond a mind-set shaped by instrumental rationality and private interests. As the politics of domination fades, we witness the dawning of an age of communication, networking, negotiation, interaction, interfacing, and collaboration.<sup>965</sup> Summarising his anthropocosmic vision, Tu takes us on the journey of self-cultivation which must be completed by each individual if we are collectively to achieve the meaning of our lives:

We begin with a quest for true personal identity, an open and creatively transforming selfhood which, paradoxically, must be predicated on our ability to overcome selfishness and egoism. We cherish family cohesiveness. In order to do that, we have to go beyond nepotism. We embrace communal solidarity, but we have to transcend parochialism to realise its true value. We can be enriched by social integration, provided that we overcome ethnocentrism and chauvinistic culturalism. We are committed to national unity, but we ought to rise above aggressive nationalism so that we can be genuinely patriotic. We are inspired by human flourishing, but we must endeavour not to be confined by anthropocentrism, for the full meaning of humanity is anthropocosmic rather than anthropocentric.<sup>966</sup>

Nor does this process stop at the edge of the cosmos: 'no matter how successful one is in the sociopolitical arena, the full measure of one's humanity cannot be accommodated without a reference to Heaven.'<sup>967</sup> Rather than seeking enlightenment in the investigation of exotic cosmic phenomena, as Sartorius does in Tarkovsky's *Solaris*, we must, if we want 'to make ourselves deserving partners of Heaven', follow Kris Kelvin's example and remain 'constantly in touch with that silent illumination that makes the rightness and principle in our heart-minds shine forth brilliantly.'<sup>968</sup> Tu contrasts 'exclusive' forms of post-religious secular humanism, which make human beings 'the measure of all things' and justify the instrumentalisation of all that is non-human, with 'inclusive' Confucian humanism, in which 'humanity in its all-embracing fullness "forms one body with Heaven, Earth and the myriad things". Self-realisation, in the last analysis, is ultimate transformation, that process which enables us to embody the family, community, nation, world, and cosmos in our sensitivity.'<sup>969</sup>

Although Tu stresses that this inclusive Confucian humanism has particular 'practical

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965 Tu, 'Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality', p. 125.

966 Tu, 'Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality', p. 125.

967 Tu, 'Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality', p. 126.

968 Tu, 'Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality', p. 127.

969 Tu, 'Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality', p. 127.

significance for facing the current ecological crisis<sup>970</sup>, we would add, without for a moment disagreeing, that Tu's 'anthropocosmic vision' helps us face other crises too, and in particular for our purposes, the identity crisis of the 21st-century humanities. Tu's is a vision utterly consistent with, for example, George Scialabba's view that canonical humanities texts 'are a superior kind of pedagogy; they touch chords deeper in one's psyche than most other experiences from which one might learn moral lessons' and are therefore 'profoundly political'<sup>971</sup>; or with Mark Bauerlein's lament that defenders of the humanities 'affirm, extol and sanctify the humanities, but they hardly ever mention any *specific humanities content*. [...] In a word, the defenders rely on what the humanities do, not what they are.'<sup>972</sup> Tu's anthropocosmic and ecumenical vision for the humanities – a simultaneously political and religious vision as well as a humanistic one – is based on the same faith in the oneness of the Moral Law, and in the possibility of transmitting that law via contact with 'the best that has been thought and said in the world', which we find in Mahfouz, Tarkovsky and their Western counterparts, perhaps most notably in Tu's case in the work of his ecumenical colleague Hans Küng and their common Global Ethic Project run between Tu's Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies at Peking University and the Global Ethic Institute at Küng's University of Tübingen, both of which occupy, at least for now, symbolically central places on their respective university campuses. Whether this attempt to reinvigorate the humanities as a gateway to moral truth and a single global Moral Law succeeds will depend on how many new Meri Mouns and Mahfouzes, how many new Rublevs and Boriskas and Tarkovskies, and how many new New Confucians and Tu Weimings such humanities programmes can inspire.

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970 Tu, 'Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality', p. 127.

971 George Scialabba, in Lindsey Gilbert, 'What Are Radicals Good For? An Interview with George Scialabba', <http://bostonreview.net/us/scialabba-interview-intellectuals-radicals>, 20/11/13.

972 Mark Bauerlein, 'What Dido Did, Satan Saw and O'Keefe Painted', <http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/What-Dido-did—Satan-saw---O-Keefe-painted---7728>, November 2013.



## Conclusion: Warriors for Civilisation

*Once you have taken a decision, which can only be based on the belief that there is justice in the universe, and that it applies to you - once you have asked for justice to apply to you - then you have created within yourself a need to see justice of the same kind everywhere. Also, by asking for justice for other people, you desire it for yourself; this immensely complicated dialectic [...] begins in the mind where you feel increasingly impelled by this understanding to see every decision that you take and every action that you take in this light. I have found that it makes more sense... I have found it practically the case that if you believe that this is a purposeful universe with justice built into it and eternity therefore unavoidable, and act accordingly, then it responds to your 'punching the buttons' much more meaningfully than if you assume that it's an enormous cosmic car crash in which nothing has any explanation and there is no justice and no eternity and that death is the end. [...] I can't see any reason for me to change my mind, and I have been encouraged greatly by all that I have seen. [...] The artistic, the musical, the literary, the poetic, rather than the mathematical, provide, not the proofs of it to me because there are no poetic proofs as there are mathematical proofs, but provide very strong arguments for maintaining it, and I think it's the most important discovery I've ever made.<sup>973</sup>*

Peter Hitchens

Three men working in unrelated cultural contexts in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, whose work survives and whose legacies evolve to this day, drew essentially the same conclusion about what civilisation is and why it matters. 'Civilisation' for Nagtardu (shorthand for Mahfouz, Tarkovsky and T(D)u) is as Peter Hitchens puts it an organisation of individuals which allows them to realise their highest natures by being unselfish. Although the point of this thesis was not to choose a single Western representative of this view but rather to show that a whole raft of contemporary Western intellectuals also subscribes to it, we might also propose the shorthand Nagtar Dutchens (a play on Terry Eagleton's 'Ditchkins') to represent the four legs of the argument.

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<sup>973</sup> Peter Hitchens, 'Head2Head with Matthew Stalden', <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LirrUUxZmI4>, 22/7/13.

Mahfouz privileges conscience, Tarkovsky sacrifice, Tu self-cultivation, and Hitchens and company a brand of stoic unselfishness, and each chooses his own means of argument (literature, film, philosophy, journalism), but Nagtar Dutchens is clear that the humanities are not sciences or (only) suppliers of data to the sciences, but a discipline entirely apart, a political discipline aimed at promoting a vision of the good life that could be described as religious, or at the very least one which smashes the distinction between secular and sacred, church and state, and rejects the purported neutrality regarding conceptions of the good life on which modern liberal democracies are founded. The attempt to create a cosmopolitan world order through reason alone is doomed to failure because reason alone takes one only so far. Although Tu stresses that there is no 'leap of faith' in Confucianism but rather a 'refined spontaneity of inner feelings' which leads one to the unselfish principle of the 'continuity of being'<sup>974</sup>, the versions of monotheism presented by the other three members of our Nagtar Dutchens quartet are, as I have endeavoured to stress, so deprived of all reference to revelation, and so committed instead to the idea of moral self-cultivation, that Nagtar Dutchens can simply do away with the Abrahamic concept of the 'leap of faith' altogether and embrace Tu's Confucian metaphor.

One prominent Western intellectual to have headed in precisely this direction in recent years, and one not yet mentioned (in a spirit of saving the best for last) is a man with unrivalled liberal credentials: Ronald Dworkin. After spending a lifetime espousing liberal neutrality with regard to conceptions of the good life, Dworkin's late work defends the idea of a 'religion without God' under the banner of a 'moral monism'. As Moshe Halbertal puts it (and to put it mildly):

Dworkin's affirmation of the independence and the inevitability of morality runs against dominant contemporary modes of thought. Moral independence is fiercely denied by the fashion in naturalism, which holds that we can provide an exhaustive explanation of the moral realm through evolutionary biology and the structure of our mind. Morality is thus not independent; it is something that ought to be reduced to facts about ourselves. Dworkin's insistence on moral inevitability and necessity clashes also with the widespread postmodern argument that our moral convictions are ideologically constructed structures that serve power elites—that they are culturally dependent, with no objective value. [...] Liberal thinkers maintain a suspicious attitude toward religion because of its inherent tendency to monistic absolute truths that seem in conflict with pluralistic free politics. But in a world in which religion maintains its salience and even increases it, the closing of that

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974 Tu Weiming, 'Embodied Knowledge', in *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*, p. 376.

suspicion gap might be a good idea. What is so fascinating about Dworkin's last book is that it does not share this initial distance from the religious temperament, though it refuses to depart from its original liberal outlook affirming an objective and unified moral realm. He is well aware of the conflicts between religious fundamentalism and liberalism, but he expresses a hope that his objective unified convictions, which put human dignity at their center, will somehow converge with the religious world.<sup>975</sup>

It is dangerous to suggest that Nagtar Dutchens stands for this 'religious world', representing the traditions of Islam, Orthodox Christianity, Confucianism and Western Christianity respectively; Mahfouz is regarded as an atheist by millions of believing Muslims who not only haven't read his novels but couldn't read them; Tarkovsky 'the emigrant' with his less than traditional Orthodox views remains a marginal figure in Russian cultural life; Tu Weiming and his New Confucian creed have only just been officially embraced on the Chinese mainland after an entire Communist and Cultural Revolution designed to eradicate the last vestiges of Confucian backwardness from the land; and Peter Hitchens and those like him are both too religious and not religious enough for a Western public mired in liberal-conservative culture wars but basically given over to what Slavoj Zizek in a rare spark of meaningful genius defines as 'slightly enlightened Buddhist hedonism'<sup>976</sup>, in which the state is no longer calling on the citizen to sacrifice herself or to live for others, but rather encouraging her to pursue her own pleasure, her own 'conception of the good life', as long as she refrains from 'imposing' her views on others. The central question on which all the members of Nagtar Dutchens agree, including liberals like Ronald Dworkin, is that some conceptions of the good life are better than others, and that there is a 'best that has been thought and said in the world' that can lead us to embrace the best in ourselves if only we are exposed to it and can freely engage with it. Anyone who thinks this way would be in dereliction of duty if, as Peter Hitchens says, she failed to try to get people everywhere to adopt this way of life and to follow this Moral Law by trying to put her in front of these cultural products.

The humanities, for Nagtar Dutchens, are about this project of persuasion, this mission for moral improvement the core of which is realising one's own ultimate insignificance, getting us to feel what Elaine Scarry calls the 'opiated adjacency' of being in the presence of beauty and to live

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975 Moshe Halbertal, 'Can You Have Religion Without God?: Ronald Dworkin and a Religious Worldview for Secularists', <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/114898/ronald-dworkins-religion-without-god-reviewed-religious-worldview>, 26/10/13.

976 Slavoj Zizek, 'Most of the Idiots I Know Are Academics', <http://www.newstatesman.com/ideas/2013/10/slavoj-zizek-most-idiots-i-know-are-academics>, 8/10/13.

for the ideals of justice and sacrifice which such beauty stirs.<sup>977</sup> Recognising that groups within society have been victimised and deserve better treatment is of course - of course - part of this project, but identity politics and victim studies do not exhaust the options for a humanistic education and indeed risk obscuring the central point of one, at least according to Nagtar Dutchens: namely, to cultivate a sense of belonging which extends outwards from the self, the family and the tribe to cover, in Tu's 'felicitous' phrase, the whole 'anthropocosmic' shebang of existence itself.

Tolerance, or putting up with views you aren't accustomed to or don't like, is part of this anthropocosmic picture for two reasons: first, because the 'eternal holy battle' between 'tradition and freedom' (liberals and conservatives) so celebrated by Mahfouz allows for the emergence of new moral truth (and the recovery of old moral truth) and for the democratic evolution of our temporal laws in conjunction with scientific and social developments; and second, because there is no way to force people to *be* moral anyway. You can try to force them to *act* unselfishly, to be sure, and there are plenty of situations where laws are needed to force individuals to act unselfishly even when they otherwise wouldn't or don't want to (even Confucians like Tu stress the importance of the 'legal constraint'), but the ultimate point of a humanities education is that it is good for individuals by making them unselfish *to themselves*. If we fail, as believers in this Moral Law, to offer a humanities education to the next generation, we not only fail to make society more harmonious for our own benefit; we moreover fail in our duties to the human individuals who could benefit from such an education. As adults in a democratic society, Nagtar Dutchens argues, we have a responsibility to decide what this 'best that has been thought and said' is and to pass it on to future generations. What those future generations do with it will of course be up to them, but once our sphere of moral concern extends to those future generations, as Nagtar Dutchens tells us it should and will if we cultivate our moral faculties, there is no getting away from the responsibility of maintaining a canon and getting that canon taught.

I said in my introduction that there were geopolitical reasons for my choice of warriors; anyone who wanted to convince the whole world of something would do well to consider the makeup of that world. But 'world literature', as Mahfouz in particular points out and as the other members of Nagtar Dutchens agree, is a question of quality; by putting forward candidates from heavily geopolitically represented communities in our time, my aim is not to exclude other voices from Brazil, India or much smaller countries. In the end, Mahfouz, Tarkovsky, Tu and their Western counterparts ought to be judged by posterity on their own terms, independent of the urgency of the

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977 Elaine Scarry, 'Poetry Changed the World: Injury and the Ethics of Reading', [http://www.bostonreview.net/v2/BR37.4/elaine\\_scarry\\_poetry\\_literature\\_reading\\_empathy\\_ethics.php](http://www.bostonreview.net/v2/BR37.4/elaine_scarry_poetry_literature_reading_empathy_ethics.php), July/August 2012 (accessed 1/8/12).

political challenges we currently face. These universal civilisational terms are the terms on which they themselves wanted to be judged, just as Mahfouz judges his Egyptian leaders in *Before the Throne*; if I have neglected the historical and philological context of these three men's work in order to focus on its wider message, I trust the reader will understand why, and will understand that this is what each of these three men would have wanted.

This thesis juxtaposes for the first time arguably the most prominent, at least in the West, high cultural representatives of the Arab, Orthodox and Sinic worlds respectively of the last fifty years; the fact that I have uncovered such a deep harmony of vision, and one so relevant to our current Western predicament, is a kind of bonus. That none of these men represents God-like perfection in the realms of anthropocosmic unselfishness and love does not, in and of itself, represent a decisive argument against their vision of a Moral Law. Indeed, the whole point is that the only form of argument we have in this realm is argument by example. Even if the example is less than pure – and we may wish to seek out the purest examples – the kernel of charisma and truth can still be salvaged from it. Tarkovsky, for example, shows us how Jesus's message can survive even when Jesus is regarded as a mere mortal and even when his disciples are no match for him morally; if the flame of civilisation survives in them and they pass on what they can, to the best of their ability, then it is up to us to be better and go further than them, further even than Jesus himself.

The civilising missions inaugurated by Akhenaten, Confucius, Jesus and Mohammed, to which Nagtar Dutchens are modern heirs, were all inaugurated by exemplary men committed to the idea of a single Moral Law; in our time we have an unprecedented opportunity to unite these missions into a single global mission, and as Nagtar Dutchens stress over and over again, we may need to achieve this unity if we want civilisation to survive at all. This will mean a spirit of both giving and taking which, we hope to have shown, is part of them all; not an imperialistic giving or a gutless giving up of everything we hold dear, but a commitment to the best, and the idea of a best, wherever it may be, as Mahfouz's favourite *hadith* 'Seek knowledge even in China' reminds us. When we do so – and as no generation before us has had such means to do – we discover, as I have had the immense good fortune to discover, that the best everywhere, or at least the best of four great civilisations, agree: there is One Law governing all of civilisation, and the meaning of our lives consists in trying to uphold this law and defend this civilisation. From Mahfouzian *hadara* to Tarkovskian sacrifice and Tu's anthropocosmic vision, the best of three great non-Western civilisations echo the efforts of Peter Hitchens and company to combat 'selfism', the idea of 'absolute personal autonomy' and a perversion of the best of the Western Enlightenment which has, according to Hitchens, become 'the most powerful cause in modern civilisation' (c.f. Zizek's 'slightly enlightened Buddhist hedonism') and which 'hates the idea that there may be a God and any

absolute source of law or goodness'.<sup>978</sup> The likes of Hitchens and Ronald Dworkin would seek to place limits on this sphere of individual autonomy by appealing to a higher sense – indeed, a 'religious' sense - of communal identity which, paradoxically, grounds the very individual human rights, also loudly championed by Mahfouz and Tu, which allow each of us, in Dworkin's words, 'to count for one and no more than one'. Michael Rosen summarises Dworkin's position – essentially the position of Durkheim a century earlier as introduced in Chapter 1 ('there is something in religion which seems to survive critique and keep us believing: morality...') - in the following terms:

What is it about the individual whose life would otherwise be sacrificed for the collective good that makes the sacrifice wrong? To say that she or he has a right not to be put to death in order to save others is just to put a name to the problem. We also need, it seems, a satisfying reason why—something about the victim that explains why he or she has a value that overrides instrumental calculations about the greatest good. It is at this point that religious-sounding vocabulary tends to slip back into the discussion. [...] As Seneca once wrote, 'I do not obey God; I agree with him.' So, Dworkin argues, any reasonable religion must acknowledge the priority of value over the will of the Deity. But in that case, the supernatural narrative of creation, revelation and prophecy that surrounds the moral teachings of religion is dispensable. Dworkin still wants to call his attitude 'religious' because, although he does not believe in the existence of God, he 'accepts the full, independent reality of value' and hence rejects the naturalistic view that nothing is real except what is revealed by the natural sciences or psychology.<sup>979</sup>

At a certain point in his 'religious' defence of individual rights, however, Dworkin faces the fact that, like our other warriors, he has no more arguments to summon:

I will not have convinced some of you. You will think that if all we can do to defend value judgments is appeal to other value judgments, and then finally to declare faith in the whole set of judgments, then our claims to objective truth are just whistles in the dark. But this challenge, however familiar, is not an argument against the religious worldview. It is only a rejection of that worldview. It denies the basic tenets of the religious attitude: it produces, at best, a standoff. You just do not have the

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978 Peter Hitchens, 'The Selfists Strike Back', <http://hitchensblog.mailonsunday.co.uk/>, 12/4/2014.

979 Michael Rosen, 'Beyond Naturalism: On Ronald Dworkin', <http://www.thenation.com/article/178330/beyond-naturalism-ronald-dworkin?page=full#>, 11/2/14.

religious point of view.<sup>980</sup>

In his late-life religious turn, Dworkin comes to resemble, of all the warriors for civilisation mentioned in these pages, none more than his virtual contemporary, the renegade Catholic theologian Hans Küng. In a sermon marking his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday in Tübingen in 2008 titled 'The Good Battle Fought', Küng restores the honour of the word *Kampf* in German, describing life as 'a constant battle' (*ein ständiger Kampf*) and seeking strength in the examples of Jesus and St. Paul in particular, though by no means exclusively, to achieve the goal of this battle: namely, the Arnoldian goal of 'human perfection' common to all our warriors for civilisation.<sup>981</sup> Like Mahfouz's Shahriyar, Tarkovsky's Stalker and Tu's sage in the face of the Madman from Chu, Küng's St. Paul resists the promise of personal bliss – just as Arnold calls the person of culture to resist the illusion of 'a perfect welfare independent of the rest' of humanity and to remain 'obliged, under pain of being stunted and enfeebled in his own development if he disobeys, to carry others along with him in his march towards perfection, to be continually doing all he can to enlarge and increase the volume of the human stream sweeping thitherward' – and returns from the Platonic light to the hard happiness of the human cave:

If you read his relatively few letters, you will see that Paul announced and defended his message, his Gospel, often with warrior-like emotion and strong rhetoric. [... But] as far he himself was concerned, although he saw death as entirely to his advantage because he would be, as he wrote to his Philippians, 'with the Lord forever', he nevertheless, for the sake of the human beings for whom he was the bearer of the message, wanted to live longer and to work more.<sup>982</sup>

Although Küng - like Dworkin, Hitchens and our three main warriors - has no arguments to convince the committed 'selfists', his faith in the moral unity and purpose of the world has allowed him to 'live a better, more meaningful life than I could have had without this hope': 'The solution which was quoted and practised already in Paul's time of the conscienceless man of pleasure – "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" – is in the long run no consolation and no support.'<sup>983</sup> Opting instead for the Pauline solution – 'I fought the good fight, stayed the course, preserved the faith' - Küng turns his gaze away from the promise of a merely personal, partial paradise and back to the

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980 See Rosen, 'Beyond Naturalism'.

981 Hans Küng, 'The Good Battle Fought' ('Den guten Kampf gekämpft'), in Karl-Josef Kuschel and Stephan Schlensog (eds.), *Hans Küng: Up Close (Hans Küng: eine Nahaufnahme)*, (Münich: Piper Verlag, 2008), p. 145.

982 Küng, 'The Good Battle Fought', p. 148.

983 Küng, 'The Good Battle Fought', p. 150.

battle of securing the present and future of human civilisation: 'Understand all that I have said, my dear friends, absolutely not in terms of the consolation of any possible afterlife, but as a call to the here and now in a show of joy before life itself.'<sup>984</sup>

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984 Küng, 'The Good Battle Fought', pp. 150-151.



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