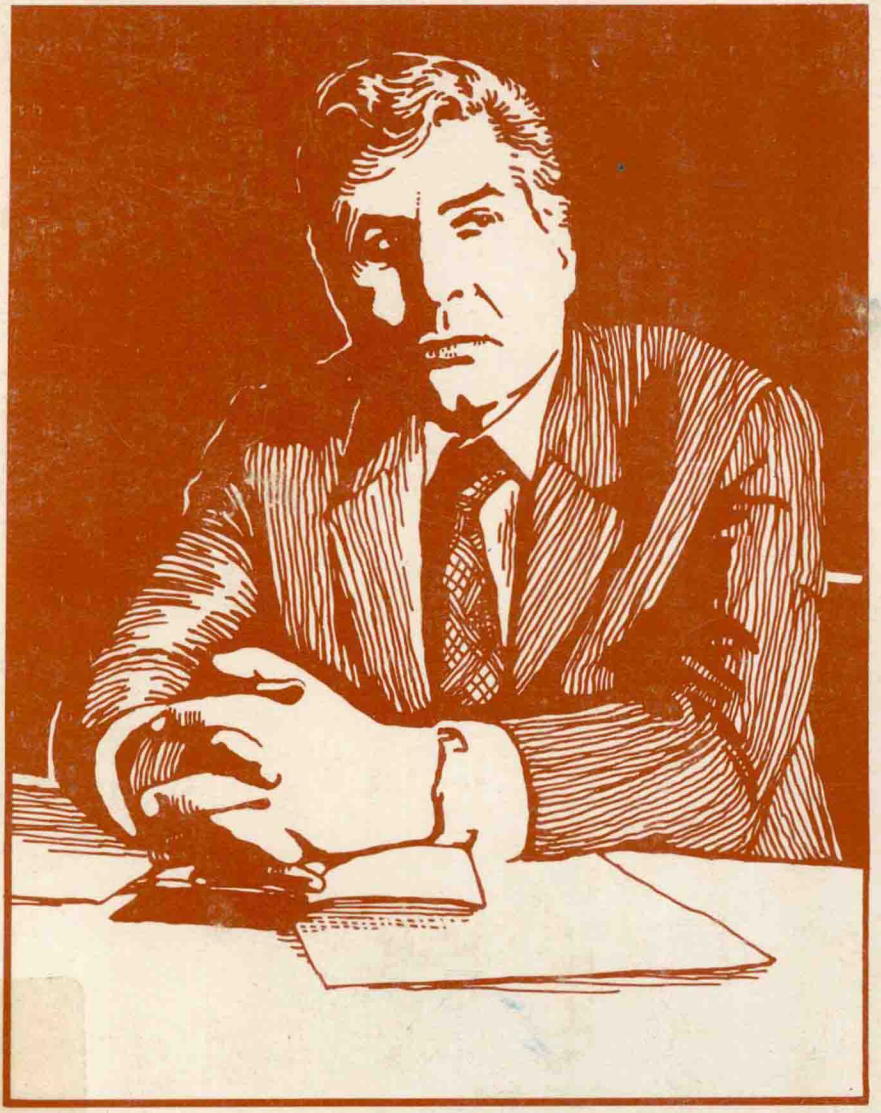
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON YUSUF IDRIS



Edited by Roger Allen

An Original by Three Continents Press

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Essays by Contributors are gratefully acknowledged at the end of essay concerned. In a few cases we have been unable to contact authors and/or publishers concerned: we shall appreciate information from parties concerning their possible rights.

Preface

Yusuf Idris was one of the most illustrious litterateurs in the Arab World in recent times. So prolific and varied was his output — especially during the 1950s and '60s — it is hardly surprising that the compiler of a volume of critical studies such as this finds himself confronted with an *embarras de richesses*. Several volumes of a size equal to the present one could have been compiled, each filled with excellent and varied critical studies of his work at different periods in his career. This volume is an anthology; in other words, a work that through the process of selection has made critical judgments of its own.

As the contents page that precedes makes clear, the arrangement of this collection is essentially generic, with separate sections devoted to the short story — of which Idris was the acknowledged master — the novel, and the drama. In each section an attempt has been made to include some critical studies that adopt a more general perspective and others that focus on particular works or (in the case of the short story) collections of them. These sections devoted to particular genres are preceded by a short biographical section; the first segment gives a brief outline of the author's life; the second is somewhat unique: a piece written by Idris himself in English, sent to the editor of this volume, and published here for the first time, in which he describes in poignant detail the circumstances in which he grew up. The work finishes with a bibliography of works of and about Yusuf Idris written in English.

In selecting these "critical perspectives" I have tried not only to choose studies that analyze a representative set of Idris's output but also to strike a balance between studies originally written by critics in the Arab World and others written by Western specialists on modern Arabic fiction and drama. It is my hope that this juxtaposition of works by Arab and Western critics devoted to one of Egypt's most distinguished litterateurs may be an appropriate symbol of the ever increasing links between practitioners of literature studies in the two regions that have characterized recent decades. Idris himself, a participant in several literary conferences and seminars in the West, served as a personification of such contacts and aspirations. In what was to be his final telephone conversation with me, he expressed his delight that an increasing number of Western readers were

being made aware through translations of the thriving short story tradition in the Arab World, particularly in view of the problematic status of the genre in the West. With that thought in mind, may I conclude by expressing the hope that this collection of essays may stimulate more readers of English to explore the many fascinating and disturbing worlds that Idris's fictions create.

ROGER ALLEN
Philadelphia
April 1992

EDITORIAL NOTE

No attempt has been made to reconcile the differences in (or absence of) transliteration system used in the selections that follow. However, the bibliography, including a listing of Idris's works, does adhere to the Library of Congress sytem. For the general reader it may be useful to know that, under that system, the author's name appears as Yusuf Idris. For those interested in the pronunciation of the name, the closest approximation might be represented by "Yoosef" (with emphasis on the "yoo" syllable) Idress (with emphasis on the "drees" syllable and with the "s" pronounced as "s" and not as "z"). Where footnotes in the original versions of the studies included here do not contribute to the particular context of this anthology, they have been omitted.

Contents

A Biographical Sketch

Yusuf Idris was born in May 1927 in the village of Al-Bayrum in the Nile Delta of Egypt. His early childhood and schooldays seem to have been one of the unhappiest periods in his life, as he himself outlines in the next segment of this collection. In 1945 Idris moved to Cairo to begin the study of medicine at Cairo University. Alongside his academic studies, he participated vigorously in the student movement which was an integral part of the political turmoil during that much troubled period in modern Egyptian history leading up to the Revolution of 1952; these activities led Idris to be jailed for brief periods in 1949 and 1951. In this latter year Idris graduated, and the completion of his medical training and internship at Qasr el-Aini Hospital coincided with the transforming events of the Egyptian Revolution. He opened a medical clinic in Cairo and for a time served as medical inspector for some of the poorest districts of the capital city, a function that provided him with a wealth of information for his short stories. In fact, he was to maintain his connection with medicine until 1967 when he finally quit medical practice.

Idris's career as a writer was divided between creative writing — in the genres of the short story, novel, and play—and journalism. Beginning to write short stories as a student, he was encouraged by several literary figures, not least among whom was the famous poet, Ibrahim Naji (d. 1953), to publish his early efforts in newspapers in the early 1950s. His first collection, *Arkhas Layali*, was published in 1954 and was an instant success. It was followed over the next five years or so by a positive flood of creativity: several short story collections, two novels, and three plays. The realism, the instinctive artistry, and the creative use of language in these works, all aroused considerable critical interest in Egypt and beyond.

During the 1960s there is a detectable shift in Idris's approach towards a more symbolic and surrealistic mode, a trend which allowed him creatively to explore some of the more disturbing philosophical and societal issues that were preoccupying his mind, but which also, as he himself acknowledged with characteristic frankness, provided the vehicle for the expression of unpalatable truths within a society in which writers who transcended certain boundaries of political expression would find themselves penalized. The 1960s also witness the performance of Idris's most famous play, *Al-Farafir* (1964), written in the wake of a series of articles published in the monthly magazine, *Al-Katib*, in which he challenges the

received history of drama in the Arab World and advocates the search for indigenous dramatic genres. The play was a tremendous critical success as a performed play, but the nihilist implications of its content—at least insofar as they reflected on the course of the Egyptian Revolution—were sufficiently troubling for performances to be stopped.

While it is hardly surprising that Idris was unable to maintain the creative pace established in the 1950s, it is during the 1960s that one becomes aware of some of the factors that contributed to the diminution in output that was to characterize the last two decades of his life. The fits of depression to which he was prone became more common and of longer duration. The effect of the June War of 1967 was as profound on Idris as it was on a host of other writers in the Arab World. In the 1970s he had severe heart problems that were partially resolved by a major operation in London in 1976. But, if his health often deprived him of the necessary time and concentration needed for the composition of creative fiction, it was his journalistic activity that consumed much of his energy. During the 1960s he wrote a series of articles under the title "Yawmiyyat" for the newspaper, *Al-Jumhuriyyah*, and in 1969 his name was added to the illustrious cadre of writers who produced columns for *Al-Ahram*, a list that already included Tawfiq al-Hakim, Najib Mahfuz, and Lewis 'Awad. Idris now became a regular contributor to the columns of Cairo's most famous newspaper, commenting on a wide variety of issues, local and international, personal reminiscences and more public harangues; collections of his articles penned over the years have appeared under such titles as *Bi-Sarahah Ghayr Mutlaqah* (1968) and *Shahid 'Asrihi* (1982?). The appearance of a piece of fiction by Idris now became a rare event, and the final decade of his life sees the publication of just three small collections of short stories: *Uqtulha* (1982?), *Ana Sultan Qanun al-Wujud* (1983?), and *Al-'Atb 'Ala al-Nazar* (1987).

For the final two decades of his life Idris continued to be dogged by poor health. It was clearly something that weighed on his mind as someone trained in medicine; it was, no doubt, a contributing factor to frequent bouts of severe depression. There can be little doubt that this state of affairs caused him considerable frustration in his professional and personal life, some of which is reflected in his own account that follows. It may perhaps also help to explain, at least partially, the outburst of rancor with which he greeted the announcement of Najib Mahfuz's winning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1988. Idris was not the only Arab author to comment negatively on Mahfuz's "worthiness" to receive such international recognition, but the intemperate nature of Idris's comments gave more than a hint of a personality that was partially reflecting its own inner conflicts through a bitter attack on the work of another great Egyptian writer of fiction whose personality, training, career, and societal focus were so utterly different from that of his own. The award in 1988 of the Saddam Husayn Prize in Literature to Yusuf Idris (shared with the Palestinian novelist, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra) can hardly have served as sufficient recompense in the quest for that international recognition that he believed his works to deserve.

Idris died on August 1st, 1991 in a London hospital while being treated for a brain haemorrhage. With his death, modern Arabic literature lost one of its most creative and controversial figures. In the realm of the short story in particular his contributions show an innate gift for capturing within the compact and allusive world created by that genre a wealth of human experience and emotion, one that is quintessentially Egyptian and yet, at the same time, of universal significance and appeal.

Yusuf Idris on Yusuf Idris

EDITOR'S NOTE: In 1982 I was contacted by the editors of World Literature Today *(University of Oklahoma). They asked whether I thought Yusuf Idris would be willing to serve on the Jury for the Neustadt Prize in Literature awarded by the journal each year. I suggested that they write to him in Cairo and provided his address at the Al-Ahram Building on Al-Galaa Street. Nothing was heard for several months, but, in the hope that he would be able to attend the conference at which the prize was to be awarded, the editors went ahead with the publication of the article that I had agreed to write on Idris for the journal (see* WLT *Vol. 55 no. 1 [Wint. 1981]: 43-47). Idris eventually sent a letter apologizing for his tardy reply and regretting that he would not be able to come.*

Several months later (a gap that is explained by Idris himself below) the journal and I received a copy of a statement in English that the editors of the journal had requested that he send as a preliminary to his arrival. The text of that statement [dated 15//11/1983], revised by the editor, is the text that now follows. It was composed and typed in English, and, as Idris notes in an accompanying letter, he resorted to his "second language" because he felt "it was a 'must' to enable me to feel perhaps that I am writing about somebody else." I trust that readers of this anthology will share my feeling that, while this volume is intended as a collection of critical articles about Yusuf Idris's writings, this document written by Idris himself is an appropriate, indeed poignant, introduction to the articles that follow, and is of considerable value not only because it is a unique piece of the author's writing but also because it affords some valuable insights into his background and motivations.

With regard to the editing process that I have followed, I can only refer to the text of Idris's letter:

> If you find the language awful, the style strange, and in my view not literary at all, pardon me. It was the best I can do. That is why I give you full authority not to publish it or to use another writer-editor to shape it into good English or even to publish it as it is, with such an explanation including the contents of this letter.

Those readers of this collection who are familiar with Yusuf Idris's style and narrative techniques may notice, I hope, that I have made every effort to preserve

as much as possible of the intrinsic "Idrisian" features of his original English text (which is by no means as "strange" as his letter might seem to imply) and indeed to retain some of those colorful phrases that are so much a part of his style.

I did not get the sensation all that often, but, when I did, I really felt that I had to be the most miserable child on earth. I had left my original family—my father, mother, and sisters, a family I scarcely even knew—and went to my grandmother's house (my mother's mother, that is, whom they call "Sitti" in Arabic) in order to start going to school. I was six years old at the time, a very thin, pale little boy who rarely smiled, so much so that I cannot recall anything that made me laugh at this stage of my childhood. Never did I have that euphoric feeling that comes with being alive, a young, fresh human being living on this earth.

At that time my father was working as a specialist in the cultivation of arid land. Such lands would originally have been part of a series of lakes in the extreme north of the Nile Delta. Every year after the summer flood the Nile water would deposit its rich supply of silt on the soil; lakes would then dry out and be irrigated and re-irrigated until they were ready for cultivation. Since this kind of work requires huge numbers of workers and large amounts of funding, only big foreign companies or the government were able to take it on. The government would only employ civil servants for the job, but companies used experts like my father. He had originally been a student at the Al-Azhar Mosque-University [in Cairo], but had quit in order to spend some time as an apprentice before becoming a self-made technocrat typical of that particular period in Egyptian life. Having gained a high reputation in his job he became a "Ma'mour," a senior official who would direct, inspect, and govern a huge area of land along with its sizeable population.

I grew up as the Ma'mour's son, in other words, more or less the crown prince in a petty kingdom. I remained far removed from modern civilization, living in a huge house that was surrounded by a large garden. There were plenty of servants, and those huge-breasted teenage peasant-girls were more than willing to "play" with me and even offered to reveal to me their most intimate female secrets. For, even though I was extremely young, it seemed they found satisfaction in having sex with the one and only real "prince" they knew. This little prince was able to lord it over a people consisting of children, both young and old, bossing them about, chasing them, doing whatever he liked with them; no one would have dared to raise a finger or even an eyebrow in protest. Quite the contrary, they would regard my acts of aggression as a sign of favor, a honorable gesture to be cherished.

But this status that I enjoyed never spoiled me. In fact, I felt a great deal of pity towards them; it was as though human beings are originally created without any sense of class distinctions, something that only comes later as part of the "cultural environment." When I compared my life with theirs—and I was always comparing, I used to sympathize with their plight. These folk were the poorest stratum in Egyptian society: peasants from the very lowest echelons of the peasantry, with no original village to serve as home, no family, no name, nothing; just the residue

of broken tribes and families, homeless vagabonds, yet heads of households; anything but respectable citizens.

I have spent the whole of my life harking back to those few months in my childhood. I can still recall spending time with my own family, the house, the way of life, my father as I used to see him at that time emerging from the distant horizon like a sudden vision, to the accompaniment of the far-off braying of the "Rokouba." This was the name given to the large donkey my father used to ride; it's a type that is only used for riding because no other kind of animal can do the job; even horses are totally unsuitable in this kind of area which is full of ditches, small canals, and very tiny bridges. My father would come home, sweating profusely from the onslaught of the summer sun. The fact that he wore European dress did not help, of course; it made him look just like a foreigner, albeit a sunburned one. I used to throw myself at him immediately and try to put my tiny arms around his waist, inhaling deeply the smell of his sweating body as it blended with the odor from his clothes and the Eau de Cologne that he insisted on using throughout his life. I gazed at him with almost the same degree of reverence as the poor peasants and workers. My love for him was so great that I used to burst into tears whenever I remembered him. Even though he was large and sunburned and his wrinkled face always wore a serious expression, he was the kindest and most loving man I have even known.

By contrast my mother was much younger. She was much more beautiful than he; in fact, at the time of their marriage she was by far the most beautiful girl in our village. Her family was much poorer than his, and that accounts for his marrying her in spite of the difference in their ages and the fact that he had been married twice before. Young, beautiful, and healthy, she was and perhaps still is one of the most aggressive characters I have ever known. As a Middle-Eastern man, my father was anxious to have a son. The other two wives were unable to do the job for him, and so he selected a virile [sic] young girl, hoping that she could provide him with the son he so desperately wanted. That she did. One month after the marriage she was pregnant and later gave birth to a boy. What a day that was for her poor family and also for my father's family who had been opposed to such an incompatible marriage from the outset, not least because my father's other two wives were relatives of theirs. However, the happiness was to last no longer than two months. The child died from "summer diarrhoea," a dehydrating illness that is responsible for almost ninety percent of infant mortality in Egypt. There was a huge quarrel over who was responsible for this unhappy ending to such a happy story. The result was a divorce.

This was an event that made my father blame himself for the next four years. As far as my mother was concerned, it was even worse; she held him responsible until the very last moment of their life together. The problem was that my father seems to have discovered too late that he had divorced a woman with whom he had fallen deeply in love, perhaps for the first time in his life. For four whole years he kept trying to negotiate for a remarriage, a process which led my father to write his entire estate over to his wife's name.

After their remarriage, my mother was pregnant again in less than a month. This time it was me. The household effects, clothes, perfumes, and jewelry that she demanded from either Cairo or Paris, they were all brought to her by a husband who absolutely adored her and who was now virtually humiliating himself in the process. Eventually I was born. Every single person, in her family, his family, the whole village, in fact the entire estate where my father served as director, everyone was concerned about the fate of this newborn child, a child who happened to have green-colored eyes and the fair complexion of the children of "khawagat," the name given to foreigners in Egypt. Two months after my birth, the crisis began. I refused to nurse. My mother had an abscess on her breast which made her unable to feed me. Artificial milk had hardly been heard of, and so wet nurses were brought in. I got severe attacks of summer diarrhoea and colic. They tell me that for three whole months, while my mother remained sick with her abscess, the pain made me cry day and night. I was handled by nearly every female relative, yelling and screaming all the time. Death hovered over me all the time. The stars of the night witnessed a strange sight, as my female relatives would remove the head-coverings that they wore in the Islamic fashion, leaving their heads exposed as they begged God to spare my life.

Unfortunately this summer diarrhoea is a kind of virus infection of children's bowels, and even now there is no specific treatment for it. My family resorted to all kinds of medicine in order to treat the condition, including such traditional Arabic cures as burning the central part of my scalp with a red-hot iron bar. The big scar is still up there, looking almost like a skullcap.

Till today, no one can say how I didn't come to die, just as nobody knows how I come still to be alive. In any case, I did not die. I survived, and my father could not have been happier. My mother was happy too. Not only did she have me, but went on to produce five other brothers and two sisters, all of whom lived. And with that progeny all my father's reservations regarding my mother disappeared. He surrendered to her whims unconditionally, giving her not only love, care, and attention, but everything she wanted, money, jewelry, even ready cash.

When I reached school age, a problem arose. My father's home and workplace was far from any school or town, and so I had to go and live with my mother's family in our original village. There was a primary school in the nearby town of Fakous in Sharqiyya Province, the one between the Suez Canal and the Eastern branch of the Nile in the Delta. I can still remember the trip from my family home to the village. It was only about 25 miles, but it still took a whole day from six in the morning till nighttime. The only way to travel was by donkey; there were no buses, railways, or anything else. It was not merely a long journey for me; it was a one-way trip. It took me away from my family for ever and deposited me in an entirely different community and atmosphere. From now on, I had to live as a stranger among strangers, an orphan whose parents were still living, yet totally out of reach. And from this point on, I remain for most of my life in a state of profound nostalgia, needing a family of my own, a father, a mother, a brother or a sister.

My grandmother's house, my "Sitti," was a wide, mud-brick peasant house in which no less than 25 grown-ups lived, ate, slept, and existed. My grandmother, grandfather, their sons and daughters, relatives near and distant, men and women working for this large family that depended for its livelihood on renting land from small landowners in order to cultivate crops and taking one third every year, this was the household in which I lived. I had come to one of the very poorest families in the village. Had I grown up since my childhood in such a family environment, I would not have noticed the dreadful difference between this life of poverty and the life of comfort I had enjoyed in my father's house. However, now it seemed to me that I had gone down the social scale, from the rank and family status of a crown prince to the level of the ordinary peasants and workers over whom I had been able to lord it in my previous home. This huge change was abundantly obvious all the time, added to which was the fact that I was alone, the only child in fact below the age of ten, living among a group of grown-ups the youngest of whom was at least twenty-five. Deprived of my father's and mother's presence and protection, I found myself compelled to live with the ugly reality of poverty. All of us thirty people used to sleep together in a single large room which they called the "oven" room since it contained the oven that was used for baking bread. Its hot top provided the only place for sleeping in winter and even during the heat of summer. For the first several weeks I couldn't sleep at all. The room was swarming with flies, cockroaches, and a variety of bugs and reptiles. There was a huge din of groans and snores, crying sometimes, and attempts at sexual congress. Everything repulsive and inhuman seemed to be gathered together in this small, totally dark room, unventilated except for a tiny hole somewhere in the ceiling. The top of the oven was actually so high up that, when lying on it, I could reach up and touch the palm branches that were split and laid side by side to form the roof, looking just like the ribs in a corpse's chest viewed from the inside.

Whether I was still asleep or not, I had to wake up by five o'clock in order to get ready for the awful trip to school. The water was usually freezing cold. I would shiver as I got dressed, then swallow some maize, bread, and Greek cheese made in the house (although without the slightest trace of cream in it), and then, still shivering, I would start my walk to school. That used to take me between one and a half and two hours. I would arrive in the very worst shape, only to face "inspection" by the school-masters and to be found to have dirty shoes or hair or nails. For that I would be punished with between ten and thirty strokes of the cane on the back of my hand from the angry school-master; I was always guilty of some crime or other. I was deprived of real parents who could understand what school was all about, and no one in my new large family had ever been to school. I was never given any money and so never managed to supply myself with books, notepads, or anything needed for school. For all these things I would always be punished. I was even punished for my clothing. My mother was always extremely mean with money. She wanted any penny or millieme to be saved and saved till it turned into a pound, then a hundred pounds. She would then be able to buy another acre of land in her village and rub the fact into the face of her landless and

impoverished family. All this had to be done by my father, of course, and it was always in her name. As a result, when it came to buying books and clothes for school, she usually chose the very cheapest things on the market: summer suits for winter time, and winter suits for summer time. My well-dressed schoolmasters would get very upset when they saw me wearing a white suit and white Clarke summer shoes, completely plastered in winter mud. They would drag me out of the morning line in order to demonstrate how untidy I was and how stupid my parents were. They used to insult me and my parents in front of the entire school. This was even more humiliating than being beaten. On the way home I would take the same route, crying bitterly to myself and only pausing in order to look up and shout to God: "Where are You?" Truth to tell, my shouts were primarily addressed to the sunburned, wrinkled face of my father with its kindly expression.

If you are born and raised in poverty, you never really feel what it is to be poor. But if you are dropped into a state of poverty from the social heights in which I had grown up—and, in my case, without any help or warning, you find yourself removed from a neat table around which you gather with your closest relatives, father, mother, sisters and brothers, a happy gathering that eats separately but clustered around a delicious, rich and cozy meal prepared by a mother. Instead you find yourself in a place where there is just one large, round piece of wood (laughingly called a "table") around which gather thirty, and sometimes more, people to fight over the food with grimy fingers. And what "food" it actually was! Soup made of grass from the fields and rice. Meat, and tiny pieces of it at that, was only served on the major feasts of Ramadan and Kourban Bairam, and on other religious occasions. Most of the time, I lost out on the battle to grasp a handful of rice, mostly because I would indulge in daydreams about the table at my own home and especially the kind of food we would eat there, sometimes specially cooked for me by a caring mother.

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It may sound strange, but this is the way it really happened. I have been asked to write a sketch about myself as a writer. For an entire year and without any apparent reason I have been procrastinating. This year I decided to do it, still postponing things even as I decided to start work. I started and found myself returning to that area of my life that I have always tried to avoid remembering, my earliest childhood. I wrote several pages and then stopped. I tried again, but was obliged to stop again. This time, the cause was a severe migraine that attacked me several times a day. I was examined by doctors who said that there was no apparent reason. I tried to ignore it so as to fulfill my promise on schedule, but the migraine got worse and worse. I had to stop again and to lie down in bed for a while. I seemed to be physically sick. One month later now and apparently cured of my illness I can think of no other cause for the onset of these migraines than my sudden decision to face my childhood, something that lurked in my subconscious memory as a spot labeled "taboo"; almost as though it carried a sign saying "Very painful memories; no trespassing."