Essays in Arabic Literary Biography 1850–1950

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Introduction

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This is the third (and last) volume in a series devoted to the biographies of renowned Arab littérateurs. The three volumes have been organized into the following periods[1]:

Volume 1: 950-1350
Volume 2: 1350-1850
Volume 3: 1850-1950.

While it will be noted that these "periods" are indeed the product of a process of periodization, a favorite activity of historically-based scholarship, it is important for readers of the series to be aware that, as Series-Editor for the volumes, I have selected these chronological subdivisions on the basis of criteria that pay less attention to the more political and dynastic phenomena that have often dictated the organization and subdivision of historical studies devoted to the Arabic-speaking regions, literary-historical studies having been in most cases no different from other foci of historical accounts. By contrast, the principles applied in establishing these timeframes for the four volumes have endeavored to be more reflective of changes in intellectual and cultural milieus and, almost deliberately, to transcend the more traditional historical boundaries of many previous studies of the Arabic literary heritage.

In brief, such previous and more traditional approaches to periodization have identified: (a) a pre-Islamic era (up to 622 CE); (b) an era of Muhammad and the four "Rightly-Guided" caliphs (622-660); the Umayyad dynasty of caliphs (660-750); the Abbasid dynasty (750-1258), often subdivided into two or three sub-periods, and ending with the Mongol sack of Baghdad; a "period of decadence" (1258-1798), sometimes also subdivided into "Mamluk" and "Ottoman" periods, the preferred dividing line being 1516, the Ottoman capture of Cairo; and a "modern period," from 1798 (Napoleon's invasion of Egypt) until whatever the present may be at the time of writing the work in question. Without going into unnecessary detail (at least, in this context), this process of historical periodization has the obvious virtue of linking cultural trends with often cataclysmic processes of political transformation (although it manages to ignore both the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and of Granada in 1492). But the negative aspect of such an approach lies in the fact that the continuities of the literary tradition and the emergence and transformation of literary genres tend to be subordinated to a logic dictated by non-literary criteria. Thus, while it has to be admitted that the "divides" reflected in the subdivisions of the four volumes of this series are, in a sense as "artificial" as any others in their designation of "breaks" rather than "continuities," I would suggest that they do nevertheless serve as more effective boundaries to the development of literary trends than the more traditional ones briefly described above that rely mostly on other principles.

With regard to the time-period of this fourth volumes in the series, it will immediately be observed that its period of coverage stops at the year 1950, thus focusing in the main on the earlier phases in the development of what is generally known as a "modern" tradition of

1 It should be noted that a previous volume devoted to the earlier period, 500–950, was published under different circumstances: see *Arabic Literary Culture 500–950*, ed. Shawkat Toorawa and Michael Cooperson, Dictionary of Literary Biography series no. 311 (Detroit: Thompson Gale, 2005).

Arabic literature and, in more political terms, on the pre-independence and/or colonial period in most of the Arabic-speaking regions. This is a deliberate decision on my part, in that the last half-century (I am writing these words in the summer of 2007) has witnessed both creative writing and literary scholarship developing in ways that suggest that not only would the identification of 40 authors for a post-1950 volumes be an extremely difficult, indeed controversial, task, but also the very generic and geographical diversity of the Arabic-speaking region would render modes of organization other than the chronological one adopted in these four volumes more appropriate. I should also stress that the selection of authors for inclusion in this volume—a difficult task in any case—is based on the "floruit" period of the authors concerned. Just to provide one example, and one that I realize from my own scholarly interests will be controversial enough, the name of Najīb Mahfūz—the Egyptian Nobel Laureate in Literature of 1988 is not included among those discussed in this volume, because, even though he was born in 1911, I would submit that his "floruit" period belongs in the post-independence phase of Egyptian and Arabic literature. It is obviously an aspiration of the present writer and his colleagues to see the volumes of this current project continued into a further set of volumes devoted to the immensely rich tradition of Arabic literary creativity during and following the eventful decade of the 1950s and particularly the many important developments that have followed the so-called "*al-naksah*" (the setback), the June War of 1967, an event that had the most profound impact on the community of intellectuals throughout the Arabic-speaking world.

These volumes then present to their readers biographical and critical essays on some 120 authors who number among the major figures in the tradition of Arabic literature. As will always be the case when a selection has to be made, other major figures have had to be omitted, not least because these volumes have strived, to the extent possible, to represent the geographical breadth of the region within which Arabic literature has been created and disseminated.

Precedents and Problems

In view of the alternative modes of periodization that have just been discussed, it is already obvious that the use of 1850 as a beginning date for the current volume marks a different approach to the chronology and sequence of Arabic literary production in the 19th and 20th centuries. 1850 is the mid-point in a century that witnessed great changes within many regions of the Arabic-speaking world, but, as recent scholarship has tended to suggest (that of Edward Said being the most prominent), great changes also in the ways in which the Western world regarded the region and its peoples. As Thomas Bauer has clearly demonstrated in a recent article devoted to the problems of traditional literary historical approaches and, in particular, the relationship between the modern and its precedents (*Mamluk Studies Review*, 9.2 [2005]: 105-32), European interest moved from a fascination with the exotic and different, a trend forwarded, if not triggered, by the image of the culture fostered by the widespread availability of translations of *A Thousand and One Nights*, to more specifically focused colonial initiatives aimed at the protection of commercial interests (the British in India, for example) and the importation of what were considered "superior" cultural values to regions and cultures that were viewed as "backward" and thus in need of "reform" (and, in many regions, of evangelism as well). Bauer goes on to suggest that the identification of a "decadent" period of Arab and Islamic culture preceding the 19th century is not the result of any indigenous scholarly process that set out to analyze elements of continuity and rupture within the intellectual milieus involved, but rather was imposed from the outside; indeed the very notion of such a break in the Arabic literary tradition was to become a very important means whereby to justify this kind of European colonialist logic. What serves to confuse the picture even further is that several Arab cultural historians who were among the most prominent intellectuals, especially in Egypt, during the formative years of the process of modernization—Ahmad Amīn (d. 1954) and Tāhā **Husayn** (d. 1973), for example—traveled to France to study their own culture within a very different academic milieu and

returned to their homeland to reproduce the above European attitudes to their pre-modern cultural history in their own works.

The highly questionable validity of these literary-historical premises has been explored in some detail within the articles of Volume 2 of the present series, devoted to the "pre-modern" period in question (albeit with chronological boundaries different from those usually applied). However, as we move towards a discussion of the mid-19th century as the starting-point of this volume and the relationship of its trends to what went before, it seems useful to identify, as Bauer does in his article cited above, some of the literary trends that cast doubt on the ascription of "decadence" to the period in question, not least because many of those same trends are prominent features of the initial phases of the post-1850 period.

To begin with, there is a delight in all literary genres in exploring, and indeed playing with, the lexical and rhetorical dimensions of the Arabic language: cryptograms in poetic form that use the numerical value of the graphemes of the Arabic alphabet to produce lines of poetry that add up to the year of its composition (or, more appropriately, the birthdate of the ruler of the time, panegyric still occupying the position that it has held for many centuries as the most widespread and profitable poetic genre), and elaborate exercises in rhyming, cadenced prose (the Arabic term is *saj'*) whereby the prestige narrative form of the *maqāmah*, originally developed in the 10th century CE, is used for variety of purposes—depictions of the life of the populace, veiled criticism of political and religious figures, moral and homiletic wisdom, and sheer entertainment. There is, particularly among the increasingly important secretarial class within the chancelleries of the court, a continuing interest in compilation of information and anecdote of astonishing variety and of manuals prepared by members of this class for their peers and successors devoted to every aspect of the scribal profession and its adjuncts. There is also evidence of a wide variety of performance-media that may be termed "dramatic." These range from scripts of actual plays, to the enactment of religious rituals (particularly among the Shi'a populations), to puppet performances and shadow-plays; it is only within a context in which one demands the existence of a building called a "theater" and the acceptance of a particular dramatic work as being part of a literary canon that it is possible to claim that the pre-modern Arabic-speaking regions had no tradition of drama. Finally, among these general features we can point to the existence of a number of works that indicate a narrowing of the large chasm that traditionalist scholarship had established between "elite" and "popular" literature, the dividing line being mostly based on assessments of the "probity" of different levels of the Arabic language, between *al-lughah al-fushā* (the more correct language), the level with the Qur'ān itself as its inimitable model, that is characteristic of (required for) any ascription of cultural value on the one hand, and *al-lughah al-dārijah* (or *'āmmiyyah*), the language of the plebs on the other. Robert Irwin (in his introductory survey, *The Arabian Nights: a* companion [London: Penguin Books, 1995] has done an excellent job in making scholars aware of the large amount of literature (including the types and themes mentioned above) composed or compiled during this pre-modern era that uses one of a large variety of medial levels of language between these two poles.

It is clear, I trust, that the trends just mentioned are merely a small part of a period in Arabic literary history (c. 1150-1850), the first centuries of which Bauer is prepared to term "one of the apogees of Arabic literature" (p. 129). It is equally clear that, from a critical and esthetic stand-point, the values implicit in the continued publication and popularity of these types of literary expression reflect modes of appreciation and assessment that are widely at variance with those that have been applied to Western literary works over several centuries. While acknowledging (and regretting) the failure of much Western scholarship to engage with such critical differences and their implications for literary-historical evaluation, I have chosen here merely to identify these particular aspects of that "pre-modern" era since they are precisely those that are encountered by the earliest representatives of the century that is our concern in

this third volume in the series. They thus serve both to counter many traditional (and mostly Western-inspired) attitudes to the periodization of Arabic literary history and to indicate those elements of continuity that link the post-1850 period to its antecedents.

"Al-Nahdah"

The Arabic term *al-nahdah* implies a process of moving in an upwards direction; it is the preferred term to describe the process of cultural change—albeit within widely variant chronological frameworks—that took place within the Arabic-speaking regions during the 19th century and well into the 20th. It is often linked to the European notion of "renaissance," but I hope that by now it is clear that the linkage between the European and Arabic concepts of that term cannot in any way be considered analogous. The European renaissance, at least as a broadly-based literary-historical concept, is part of an assessment of the development of European culture that succeeds in tracing continuities; even the so-called "Middle Ages" (or even, "Dark Ages") become interesting objects of study as being sites of alternative cultural priorities and critical values that lead into other eras to which a higher cultural value has been ascribed. As noted above, such is not the case with the example of Arabic literary history, in that the pre-modern period (at least, the 16th-18th centuries, and often more than that) is considered so lacking in value (and thus so under-studied) that few, if any, elements of continuity have been identified or agreed upon (to be fair, there are a few examples, as in Peter Gran's significant contribution to this debate, *The Islamic Roots of Capitalism*, 1979). Some significant Arab intellectuals living through this very process had occasion to question the parameters that seemed to be implied and applied in the coinage of the term. One such is the Lebanese poet, short-story writer, and critic, Mīkhāʾīl **Nuʿaymah**[2], who spent the early part of his career until the 1930s in the United States:

> *I've often wondered what we mean by the word nahdah. Do we mean that we were not paying attention, but now we've woken up? Were we flat on our backs, but now we've stood up? Or that we were walking at the back of the procession of life, whereas now we're in the middle or even close to the front? As we move one step at a time, how can we know whether we're moving forwards or backwards, or just staying where we are?* (Nuʿaymah, *Fatāwā*, cited in *Akhbār al-Adab* 217 [7 Sept. 1997]: 15)

In response to questions such as these, the above-mentioned Tāhā Husayn, who might be dubbed "Egypt's school-teacher" on such matters, suggests to his contemporaries that they perform a huge chronological leap-frog over seven centuries of Arabic literary production and search for the values needed for the development of their sense of national and cultural identity in the glorious classical heritage of the 11th century CE and earlier.

This 19th century movement of cultural change in the Arabic-speaking world, widely known as "*al-nahdah*," thus needs to be seen on its own terms rather than in any kind of comparative framework. It can be conveniently viewed as a combination of two separate trends: one that involves a search into the past, and a second that seeks to examine and imitate those values that are being imported from Europe, particularly in the wake of the series of colonial incursions that begin with France's annexation of Algeria in 1830. As will already be obvious, however, the analysis of this twin process of research and assimilation is already heavily tilted in one direction, in that the search into the indigenous past is heavily colored by the posture of the critical communities of the region towards their own immediate past and its cultural achievements (or lack thereof).

In what follows I will discuss these two cultural movements, that in their initial manifestations appear to be entirely separate and discrete but that gradually come to participate as contrasting poles in a joint enterprise of modernization.

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2 Authors whose names are indicated in bold print are the subjects of biographical articles in this volume.