THE POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD: PARAMETERS AND PRELIMINARIES

INTRODUCTION

Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period is the latest, and probably the last, of a series of volumes entitled *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, the first of which was published in 1983. While it is the latest, its subject matter is not the most recent period in the Arabic literary heritage; the publication date of the volume devoted to that topic, entitled *Modern Arabic Literature* (ed. M. M. Badawi), precedes that of this volume by several years. The current work thus finds itself challenged to find a place in the midst of an organizational matrix that has already been established, in one way or another, by the other volumes in the series. Before proceeding with a discussion of the rationale for this volume, I propose to step back and consider some of the ramifications that have inevitably resulted from not only the subject matter of this volume but also the principles that have been adopted in its preparation as part of this series of works devoted to the Arabic literary tradition.

The term 'post-classical period' has not been frequently used in order to delineate a specific period in the development of the heritage of Arabic literature. Its use as the title of this volume is intended as a form of shorthand for what might otherwise have been dubbed (were it not for the cumbersome nature of the result) 'the post-classical and pre-modern period'. In other words, this substantial central segment in the history of Arabic literary creativity suffers the fate of everything that is characterized by being in the 'midst' (as I noted above). As concepts, middle age, the Middle East and the Middle Ages are all defined by what lies on either side of them; one might suggest further that all these terms (and others like them) are also characterized by an extreme imprecision regarding their boundaries (as any middle-aged person will happily admit).

At this point it needs to be acknowledged that an alternative title to the one we have selected already exists. The Western scholarly tradition has assigned this period of Arabic literary history its own label, namely 'the period of decadence', a term that Arab writers describing the same era have dutifully

translated into its closest Arabic equivalent, *ʿaṣr al-inḥiṭāṭ*.[1] As a topic of critical investigation, 'decadence' serves, needless to say, as a conduit to a number of potentially fascinating areas of research. In the analysis of several world cultures, such research has indeed produced important insights into the processes of literary creativity and of the continuity of the tradition. However, in the case of the Arabic and Islamic heritage, the application of this label to a substantial segment of the cultural production of the region seems to have resulted in the creation of a vicious circle, whereby an almost complete lack of sympathy for very different aesthetic norms has been converted into a tradition of scholarly indifference that has left us with enormous gaps in our understanding of the continuities involved. Such attitudes could be illustrated by a host of citations from works on various aspects of Arabic and Islamic culture, but the following is a representative sample:

> The doors to the Islamic world were closed after the Crusades; parts of it began to consume others. Muslims simply marked time. In the realm of learning, there was just the rehashing of some books on jurisprudence, grammar, and the like; in crafts, there was no creativity and none of the old perfection; in tools and military skills, things were simply modelled on the old days . . . It was all killed off by the prolonged period of tyranny. Knowledge consisted of a formal religious book to be read, a sentence to be parsed, a text to be memorised, or a commentary on a text or a gloss on the commentary; there was only a small representation of the secular sciences, something to be made use of solely in order to know the heritage of the past.[2]

The writer here is the prominent twentieth-century Egyptian intellectual Aḥmad Amīn (1886–1954). He admittedly belongs to a generation of writers who found themselves confronting all the dilemmas implicit in a process of cultural transformation that accompanied and followed the rapid importation of Western ideas and values to the colonized countries of the Middle East. Even so, I would suggest that these remarks are an accurate indication of the pervasive attitudes among both Western and Middle Eastern scholars towards the period that is the topic of this volume.

   In the sections that follow, I will first examine the problematics associated with any attempt to compile a volume such as this, namely the writing of literary histories in general and Arabic literary history in particular. I will

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[1] Robert Brunschvig dates this development in Western attitudes to the Islamic world to the latter half of the seventeenth century. See 'Problème de la décadence', in *Classicisme et déclin culturel*, pp. 29–51. At the conference of which this volume is the proceedings, the great Swedish orientalist Nyberg asked a series of extremely pertinent questions: 'What is cultural decadence? How do we measure its features? Is it the misery of the masses? Depreciation of economic measures? Lack of progress in the arts? Servile imitation of outmoded fashions that continue with no real driving force, thus stifling other creative forces? Do we have any kind of yardstick with which to measure such things? We Europeans are perpetually haunted by this notion of evolution. Is it a given that Islamic culture can be similarly measured?' (tr. from the French, p. 48).

[2] Amīn, *Zuʿamāʾ al-iṣlāḥ*, p. 7.

then consider the corollaries of that investigation which have served as the organizing principles of this volume, and lastly discuss the reasoning behind the choice of contents.

LITERARY HISTORY: METHODS AND ISSUES

Any analysis of developments within a particular literary tradition will of necessity involve a process of fusion, of compromise even, between the organizing principles of two scholarly disciplines, those of literature and history. Earlier examples of historical surveys of the literary traditions of the Middle East share organizing principles with those of other world areas, in that the compromise just alluded to is tilted fairly heavily in the direction of history. The list of contents of such classic works as Edward Browne's *Literary History of Persia* (1902–24) or R. A. Nicholson's *A Literary History of the Arabs* (1907) point to a mode of organization that links the literary heritage to a historical framework based on the dynastic succession of caliphs, sultans and other categories of ruling authority. Within such a framework the creative output of the littérateur is placed firmly and squarely within its historical and social milieu, and the literary text is utilized to illustrate the linkage – often close – between literary production and the activities and priorities of the ruling elite.

During the course of the twentieth century, scholarly debate inevitably led to changes in approach to the study of both these major disciplines. As an example of just one of the catalysts for such a process of change, we can refer to what one might term the 'linguistic revolution' engendered by Ferdinand de Saussure's (d. 1913) *Cours de linguistique générale*, a work which led, among many other developments, to the radical distinction between '*langue*' (the system of language) and '*parole*' (the actual usage of the language by its speakers – with an emphasis on 'speech') and to the equally important dichotomy between the diachronic and synchronic approaches to the study of phenomena, the first implying an analysis through time and the second across time. Thus, alongside the more annalistic approaches to the study of history that use dates, dynasties and the succession of ruling elites as their organizing matrices, specialists in history are now just as likely to make such topics as plague, peasantry, the city, monetary supply and the impact of the wheel the organizing factors in their research and publication. Within such a framework the logic of time is, needless to say, always at least implicit, but as part of a synchronic approach it ceases to be the primary organizational focus. In literature studies, the New Critics advocated a radical concentration on the text itself and its interpretation, to the relative exclusion of all other considerations. Not unnaturally, this led in turn – at least initially – to a relative diminution of interest in the author of the work (and especially in his or her 'personality' or even 'soul');

a continued involvement in such an approach was tarred with the brush of the term 'intentional fallacy'. More recently, some trends in literary criticism have focused on the relationship of the text and its interpretation to the process of reading. And, to conclude with a development that may be seen as combining the results of developments in the twin fields of history and literature, research on the nature of different types of discourse and on the function of narrative, not to mention challenges to the veracity of 'facts' and 'sources', has engendered some interesting notions whereby history, biography, autobiography and fiction all come to be seen as exercises in the composition of narrative texts, with as many features of similarity as of difference. In giving these few illustrations of research areas that serve to illustrate the processes of change within the humanistic disciplines during the course of the twentieth century, I need to emphasize that the scholarly environment being discussed is not one that has involved the substitution of one approach for another (however much the advocates of a particular vogue may have wished for such), but rather a gradual process of change and adaptation. What is clear is that developments in the study of both history and literature have inevitably had a considerable impact on the methods of literary history.

The lengthy and complex process whereby a systematic attempt has been made to render research in the humanistic disciplines more 'scientific', mostly through the elaboration of 'theory', has provoked much scholarly debate; Denis Donoghue's account of developments in the literary sphere borrows a phrase from a poem of Wallace Stevens, *Ferocious Alphabets* (1984). As the study of history and literature has participated in this process, each discipline has developed its own theoretical corpus that strives to provide a rationale for the modes applied by the profession to its subject matter. In this process literary theory has come to be seen as the explanation (and often, justification) of principles applied to the interpretation and evaluation of texts (literary criticism). It is within such a context that the role of literary history has needed to be re-examined; the significantly named journal, *New Literary History*, is just one of many projects in that direction.

The concentration of literature studies on the text and its interpretation has led to an emphasis on the notion of genre and the problems associated with its use. Thus, while Benedetto Croce warns that genres have no useful function within the realm of aesthetics, Northrup Frye reminds his readers that, when the function of genres is to clarify affinities rather than to classify (and thus to exclude), they are of considerable value to literature scholarship.[3] The process of 'clarifying affinities' among literary texts that appear to share

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[3] Benedetto Croce, *Estetica* (1902), cited in Adams, *Critical Theory Since Plato*, pp. 726–35; Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 247.

features in common – for example, the novel, the prose poem and the drama – automatically leads to the investigation of the organic processes of change whereby genres are transmuted into other forms and new genres emerge (the prose poem being just one modern example). It is, of course, a primary purpose of research into generic transformation to investigate the *continuities* that link genres and their processes of development to each other, and it is in this context that such investigations confront the principles applied in older modes of literary-historical scholarship, most especially that of 'periodization' (for which Arabic now uses the term *taḥqīb*).[4]

Frye reflects the traditional rationale for periodization:

The history of literature seems to break down into a series of cultural periods of varying length, each dominated by certain conventions.[5]

Scholars in quest of an organizing matrix within which to survey the riches of the Arabic literary tradition as a whole have been able, like their colleagues specializing in other world traditions, to identify 'a series of cultural periods', but the 'conventions' that have been marked as dominating characteristics of each period have tended to be based on (or at least to include) the dynastic principles that we noted above; in other words they seek to categorize the literary output from without rather than within. The first great divide is one sanctioned by Islam itself: the one that distinguishes the Islamic era (beginning with the first year of the Hijra calendar, AD 622) from what precedes it. Whatever may be the artistic value attached to the poetry of the earliest era in literary activity in Arabic, the greatest quality attached to the period on the broader cultural, and particularly religious, plane is its status as precedent – the society of pre-Islamic Arabia and its language of public communication provide the context into which the Koranic message is revealed. The entire period that follows the Hijra is in fact the 'Islamic era', but it is broken down into sub-periods: the time of Muḥammad and the early ('rightly guided') caliphs (622–60); the Umayyad dynasty (660–750); and the Abbasid dynasty (750–1258), an era of five centuries that is often further subdivided into two or three periods – 1258 is the date of the sack of Baghdad by the Mongols. The period that follows is the subject of the present volume, and, as noted above, the centuries between 1258 and 1798 (the latter being the date of Napoleon's invasion of Egypt) have been conveniently labelled the 'Period of Decadence'. However, the pattern of dynastic labelling provides an alternative to this further undivided period of five centuries of literary creativity, by identifying the

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[4] Among recent publications on this topic are: *Ishkāl al-taḥqīb* and *Kitābat al-tawārīkh*, both ed. Muḥammad Miftāḥ and Aḥmad Bū-Ḥasan.
[5] Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, pp. 28–9.

Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1516 as the dividing line between a 'Mamluk' period (the name of the ruling dynasty in Egypt and Syria) and an 'Ottoman' period. Lastly, the use of 1798 as a starting point for a 'modern' period breaks away from the dynastic pattern and presents the concept of 'modernity' as a mode for the examination of the role of the West as a major catalyst in the changes that had such an enormous impact on the regions of the former Ottoman empire and which, in the wake of the Second World War, became the independent states of today's Middle East.

In broad outline it is this schema that has been adopted (and adapted) by *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*. The first volume covers the first two eras that we have identified, 'to the end of the Umayyad period'. The second and third concern themselves with the Abbasid period; because of its length the material is subdivided, but on topical rather than dynastic principles: the first is devoted to belles-lettres, while the second brings together discussion of a wide variety of other topics that in the narrower modern definition of the term 'literature' are considered to be 'non-literary'. As with the schema above, the volume devoted to the modern period breaks away from the dynastic principle, and its contents are organized around the processes of generic development. The next volume in the series is devoted to the literary output of the Iberian Peninsula during the Islamic period; it marks a further breakaway from the dynastic principle in that the use of geography as a mode of organization serves to illustrate the unique qualities of that region as a cultural 'melting pot' through its multilingual communities and its contacts with both Europe and the Islamic East but at the same time has the disadvantage of separating off discussion of the writings of Arab littérateurs in Spain who affect and are affected by developments during both the Umayyad and Abbasid periods (and beyond). And into the midst of this series of volumes and principles *The Post-Classical Period* is now to be fitted.

DECADENCE AND MIDDLE AGES

As part of a discussion of periodization in Islamic history, Marshall Hodgson examines the implications of the term 'modern' in the context of a discussion of the 'ancient-medieval-modern' matrix that determines the framework of so much literary-historical writing.[6] We have already noted above that the concept of modernity brings into play an element of not only time but also evaluation (the assumption being, one supposes, that the present time on which all historical perspective is of necessity based represents the most advanced stage in human development towards which the movement of 'modernity' constantly strives). In this context, the substitution of the terms

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[6] Hodgson, *Rethinking World History*, pp. 283–4.

'classical' and 'decadent' (or 'dark' in the European context) for 'ancient' and 'medieval' makes this evaluative element yet more explicit. Decadence implies a process of falling away, of decline, and thus by implication brings the opposing concept of 'rise' into a clearly evaluative matrix of cultural change, that of rise and fall which has been beloved of many historians of European cultures. In this particular model, a 'classical' era is a time period in the distant past during which the cultural ideals of the group (in more recent centuries, frequently coterminous with the concept of 'nation') are established and illustrated through their exploration in artistic form, thus including literature. The result is a series of values, norms and forms (the 'classes' from which the term itself is derived) that are to serve as models for emulation by later generations. Within the governing matrix that we outlined earlier, such an era has, of course, to come to a close, and that process is usually linked on the political level to a process of fragmentation of authority and in the cultural sphere to a state of moral decline to which the term 'decadence' has often been applied. Adopting the wave image implicit in this rise and fall model, we may suggest that the temporal breadth of the 'trough' represented by such a dark or decadent period is not determined by internal factors but rather by the process of 're-rise' which is identified in retrospect (in other words, from within the 'modern') as marking the beginning of those intellectual trends and movements that foster the development of 'modernity'. As Norman Cantor suggests, albeit in a thoroughly iconoclastic fashion, the identification of a temporally defined 'classical era', with all its canonical connotations, mandates a process of *Inventing the Middle Ages*, and some form of 'renaissance' becomes thereby an implicit feature, a process of change (of 'rebirth') whereby the 'Middle' period ends and the 'modern' period begins. Within such a framework, the 'decadent' period is evaluated at both ends: a 'fall' leads to a descent from the ideals of classicism to something implicitly inferior, while the 'rise' of a renaissance (and the Arabic term *al-nahḍa* is a literal translation of the process of upward movement) promises something better. The following characterization of European culture, admittedly dated but nonetheless symptomatic, may serve as an illustration of this type of historical analysis and of the values that lie behind it; it is the opening of the chapter, 'Darkness and Despair', from a work entitled *The Eighteen Christian Centuries* by the Reverend James White:

The tenth century is always to be remembered as the darkest and most debased of all the periods of modern history. It was the midnight of the human mind, far out of reach of the faint evening twilight left by Roman culture, and further still from the morning brightness of the new and higher civilization.[7]

[7] Reverend James White, *The Eighteen Christian Centuries* (New York, 1862), p. 219.

Moving from the theoretical to the more concrete, we may suggest that, whereas the historian of literature needs to be concerned with the forces involved in these processes of change – in other words, with continuities and discontinuities – the prevailing models of cultural history tend to provide us with divides, with endings and beginnings. The year 1258 which traditionally marks the close of what has been designated the Abbasid period was clearly an important turning point in a particular region and from certain points of view. However, a perusal of the two volumes of *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature* devoted to the period reveals some of the problems associated with the use of such a date and the principles lying behind it. Neither volume devotes much attention to the thirteenth century or even the twelfth, suggesting that, at least in the cultural sphere, the processes of change that may have occurred need to be sought in a different and probably earlier period. At the other end of our yet to be defined temporal spectrum the adoption of the year 1798 as a dividing point (which, in any case, is only valid for the case of Egypt) begs the question as to what indigenous cultural forces may have been at work during the eighteenth century in various regions of the Ottoman empire. The volume of *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature* devoted to the modern period, *Modern Arabic Literature*, elongates our area of potential concern even further in that it chooses not to concern itself in any detail with the precedents to the period that is its primary concern and identifies the year 1834 as the beginning of its first era.

All these issues, theoretical and practical, combine to suggest that the temporal purview of *The Post-Classical Period* needs to be of some seven centuries' duration, from approximately 1150 till 1850, thus incorporating discussion of not only the literary output of the central period itself but also the cultural continuities that link it to what comes before and after. In what follows, therefore, we will examine in turn some of the factors associated with the processes of change that make our period both 'post-classical' and 'pre-modern' before investigating some of the organizing principles that will govern our investigation of the lengthy era that lies chronologically in between.

TO POST-CLASSICAL FROM CLASSICAL

In a relatively rare invocation of the term 'post-classical' in the context of Arabic literature studies, Claude Cahen identifies a period beginning in the mid-eleventh century (as part of his discussion of historical writing), one that was 'marked . . . by a break in continuity owing to political upheavals, which not only altered frontiers but gave power to an aristocracy with no knowledge of tradition or even, in some cases, of the Arabic language'.[8] The upheavals he

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[8] See *CHALRLS*, p. 216.

refers to involve a breakdown in the central caliphal authority, the beginnings of which may be seen as dating from an earlier period when the Abbasid caliphs began to rely on Turkish troops. With the weakening of the caliphal administration in Baghdad, the Shia Buyid dynasty first stepped into this perceived power vacuum in Baghdad (in 954) and later the Saljuq Turks (from 1055), thus completing a bifurcation process whereby they represented a secular centre of authority, while the caliph remained as a religious figurehead. This dispersal of power in and around the Abbasid capital of Baghdad was reflected in other regions of the Islamic empire. Exploiting the lack of centralized power, governors who had been appointed to administrative regions converted their offices into a series of local dynasties. The vastness of the Islamic domains and the extent of the diffusion and variety within them is aptly symbolized by the existence in the tenth century of three separate caliphates, in Baghdad, Cairo and Cordoba.

While this decentralization of authority marks a clear departure from the organizational ideals developed during the earlier history of the Muslim community, it was at the same time a boon to intellectual life, in that the existence of so many centres of power and influence were sources of patronage for scholars and littérateurs. Indeed, two scholars, Adam Mez and Joel Kraemer, have written studies that characterize the era beginning in the tenth century as one of 'renaissance'.[9] In quest of forces that may have instigated such developments, they and other scholars identify as an important factor the measures that were forced upon the community of traditionalist religious scholars by the need to bring about reconciliation and indeed to innovate in the aftermath of the shock inflicted by the institution of the *miḥna* (inquisition). The introduction of this examination process during the reign of the Caliph al-Ma'mūn in 833, whereby scholars and holders of official posts would be cross-examined regarding their beliefs, was indeed the insertion of something radically new into the life of the intellectual community of Islam, in that, as Tarif Khalidi notes, 'quite apart from its momentous political and sectarian implications, [it] was an invasion of privacy and an assertion of power of the royal will over individual conscience on a massive scale'.[10] In the wake of the cancellation of the *miḥna* in 848, a principal means whereby traditionalist scholars sought to secure the acceptance of their own notions of proper Islam was through the establishment of educational institutions in which a systematic curriculum of study would be put in place to train and certify those who would henceforth be appointed to positions from which judgements and opinions would be

[9] Mez, *The Renaissance of Islam*; Kraemer, *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam*. See also the comments of Wolfhart Heinrichs in Drijvers and MacDonald (eds.), *Centres of Learning*, p. 120.
[10] Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, p. 112.

sought. Students who completed the curriculum at these colleges (the subject of two detailed studies by George Makdisi) were awarded 'the professional licence to teach and to profess legal opinions'.[11]

During the Buyid era (from 945 till the mid-eleventh century) the tasks of retrospection and systematization, both of which were elaborated within the framework of challenges posed to traditional modes of thought by the availability of the fruits of Hellenistic scholarship, galvanized scholarly activities. The process was enhanced by the proliferation of power centres – in Rayy, Aleppo, Cairo and Cordoba, for example – which ensured that the products of these efforts would also reflect the enormous variety of the Islamic world and the increasingly cosmopolitan outlook of its scholars and littérateurs. In Baghdad itself, the munificence that the caliph could bestow on those who contributed to the administration and enlightenment of the court had long since been emulated by that of his ministers and other court officials; the case of the Barmakī family, who served as ministers to Hārūn al-Rashīd, is only the most famous among many examples. Beyond the capital itself, the career of the renowned poet al-Mutanabbī (d. 965) is emblematic of the opportunities that were available to a preternaturally gifted poet who, abundantly aware of the value of his own talents, would travel from one court and power centre to another in quest of patronage and reward. Much the same can be said about the life and travels of the great prose writer and controversialist Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d. 1023). One of al-Tawḥīdī's places of employment, the court of Rayy, may serve as an illustration of the stimulating intellectual environment that such centres could engender: in residence at various times were al-Tawḥīdī himself (as a lowly secretary), the historian Miskawayh (d. 1030, who also served as librarian), the philosopher al-ʿĀmirī (d. 992), the great stylist Abū'l-Faḍl ibn al-ʿAmīd (d. 970) and 'al-Ṣāḥib' ibn ʿAbbād (d. 995), a politician, patron of the arts, and also a writer and scholar of note.

As we seek to identify linkages and continuities that connect the earliest phases of our lengthy period to what precedes them, the above paragraphs attempt to survey, albeit with a reckless brevity, some of the features and personalities that contribute to what has been variously dubbed a golden age and a renaissance. In this context two of the littérateurs we have mentioned, al-Mutanabbī and al-Tawḥīdī, may be seen as serving a useful Janus-like function. Both of them are abundantly aware of the literary heritage to which they are the heirs: with al-Mutanabbī it is the great poetic tradition of Arabic from its beginnings to the radical imagery of his predecessor, Abū Tammām

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[11] George Makdisi, 'Inquiry into the Origins of Humanism', in Afsaruddin and Zahniser (eds.), *Humanism, Culture, and Language*, p.23. For more detailed analyses, see Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges*; and his, *The Rise of Humanism*.