CHAPTER 1

An essay on precedents and principles

In this chapter I will make use of several of the terms found in the title and subtitle as conduits for a brief discussion of the book's aims and methods.

'Arabic' announces clearly the language in which the literary materials that constitute my primary topic have been composed, but the dual significance of the Arabic equivalent of that adjective, '*ʿarabī*' – referring to both a language and its people – also introduces the notion that this work will be one of 'translation' in the most literal sense: I will be attempting to 'carry' one literary tradition 'across' cultural boundaries into the milieu of English-speaking readers at the onset of the twenty-first century and, more particularly, the comparative framework of world literature studies. For most of the period under consideration (the sixth century CE till the present), the relationship between the Arab-Islamic world and the West has been one of almost continuous confrontation, with a concomitant and anticipatable obfuscation of some unpleasant truths on both sides. The Crusades and the reconquest of Spain leading to the fall of Granada in 1492, for instance, both of them traditionally recounted as glorious episodes in the history of Western Europe, take on a quite different significance if viewed from outside such a context. With this background in mind, it is the purpose of the second chapter of this book to provide an environmental, linguistic, and historical context for a series of discussions of the literary genres in Arabic.

Dictionary definitions of 'literary' (linked to the field of 'literature') refer initially to anything that is written about a particular topic, but, alongside this broad definition a more limited one has been developed, reflected by the entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'writings whose value lies in beauty of form or emotional effect'. The aesthetic dimension of that definition links the concept closely to that of the French term, 'belles-lettres', one that is often employed in English writing on the topic of literature. While in contemporary critical writings the Arabic

word for 'literature', '*adab*', is essentially coterminous with the concept of 'belles-lettres', it has arrived at that meaning via an interesting route, one that begins with something very akin to education and manners before being used to describe the varied activities of those important contributors to the cultural values of Arab society who have for many centuries been dignified by the designation *udabā'* (sing. *adīb*) – practitioners, preservers, and teachers of *adab*. The development of this concept, *adab*, is itself a primary topic of the fifth chapter.

Having linked the discussion of 'literature' and '*adab*' in this way, I might perhaps place them both into a single context by drawing attention to the way in which recent intellectual trends in Western literary theory and criticism have challenged some of the notions connected with the belletristic approach to the topic, particularly insofar as the privileged position of the literary text, the question of evaluation, and the concept of canon are concerned. In the trans-cultural context of this book on Arabic literary genres and its organising principles, there is perhaps an irony in the fact that the variety of texts and topics which today are potentially subject to critical analysis within the realm of Western literature studies is such that the resulting scenario tends to reflect, albeit by way of different criteria, the very same generic and topical breath that interested the *adīb* during the classical period of Arabic literature.

The title of this book avoids the use of the term 'history'. During the swirling debates over issues of literary theory in recent times, the notion of literary history has been both challenged and refined. Between the variety of approaches that have emerged from this process the present work seeks to strike a balance, one that will privilege the literary dimension over the historical. The chronological dimension will always be implicit. The difference that I hope to establish can be illustrated by considering the organising principles applied in many other works on this topic in Arabic and other languages, and in particular the method of periodisation that, *mutatis mutandis*, has been applied in most cases.

The first great temporal divide is one that constitutes an important aspect of Islamic history: that between the Islamic and pre-Islamic periods, the latter being also referred to as the 'period of ignorance' (Arabic, *Jāhiliyyah*). Here a period of indeterminate duration is defined by its status as antecedent. The denomination 'Islamic' can be applied in theory to the entire period from 622 till the present day, but is usually used to describe the literary activity of the lifetime of the Prophet Muḥammad and the first four caliphs. Following this, a new principle

takes over, that of the period during which a particular dynasty held actual or nominal sway: firstly, the Umawī, for which Western scholarship has retained the term 'Umayyad' (complete with its Westernised Greek suffix); and then the ʿAbbāsī, similarly termed 'Abbasid'. Even before the end of the era termed 'Abbasid', the areas reckoned to be within the 'Dār al-Islām' (region of Islamic dominion) had fragmented into a large number of smaller hegemonies, each controlled by a succession of dynasties that provided sources of patronage for littérateurs. In the context of an examination of various approaches to the organisation of literary historical writing, the case of al-Andalus (as the Iberian Peninsula was called during the period of Islamic (Moorish) rule) and the fact that its literary riches have mostly failed to be integrated into a collective vision of the Arabic literary tradition may be considered emblematic of the problems raised by methods that place more emphasis on non-literary criteria (such as geography and dynastic history). The issues become even more difficult when it comes to addressing the period which roughly spans the thirteenth to eighteenth centuries, an era designated by yet another kind of title, 'the period of decadence'. Here a combination of factors, among them the rule of large parts of the region by non-Arabic speakers and a perceived preference among the implied audience for Arabic literary works for aesthetic norms considerably at variance with our own, has led – at least until relatively recently – to a widespread ignorance of five centuries of creativity in Arabic aptly reflected in the title generally applied to the period. Beyond the clear problem of our lack of knowledge about such a substantial time-period, there is also the fact that any assessment about the nature of the changes that occurred during the nineteenth century, generally gathered together under the heading of 'modernisation' – involving an encounter with the West and a revival of the heritage of the past, is rendered difficult, or even impossible, by the fact that the real circumstances of the 'pre-modern' remain unclear. Thus, while renewed contacts with the Western world have clearly played a major role in the developments that have taken place in the Arabic literary tradition during the 'modern period' and the 'revival' that brought it about, there is still room for a good deal of discussion about the relative importance of different factors during its earliest phases.

The principal point to be made following this discussion of traditional modes of periodisation of Arabic literature is that they have no internal consistency. Even so, I have to note that the majority of previous surveys, penned by distinguished scholars such as Goldziher, Nicholson, Gibb,

Blachère, Huart, Brockelmann, and Nallino, make use of these principles, and acknowledge with gratitude that such works often brought important Arabic literary texts to the attention of Western readers for the first time and, with their wealth of information about writers and trends, clearly illustrated the central role that literature played and continues to play in Arab society.

As we consider the issues involved in different approaches, there is one crucial and enormous gap in our knowledge of Arabic and Islamic studies in general that needs to be identified from the outset: a sizeable and by definition unquantifiable percentage of Arabic manuscripts on all topics from the early periods of Islamic history remains unpublished and, in some cases, uncatalogued. It is such a context that the shelf-lists of a Baghdādī book-seller, ibn al-Nadīm (*d.* 990), collected into his famous book, *al-Fihrist*, offer us, through listings of titles that we do not possess, a clue as to the extent of what we are missing. Beyond such regrettable realities as these that stem from a variety of causes (not the least of which is that the field has so few practitioners), we can point out that these earlier accounts of Arabic literature are predominantly concerned with the writings of a literate élite that was almost exclusively male. Recent research into women's writings during the last two centuries suggests that a lively tradition of literature existed behind the closed curtains of the women's quarters, but that, at least till now, the products of such exchanges have not entered the public domain.

A concentration on the writings of this same élite has led to another interesting circumstance involving attitudes, namely the entire question of the significance of popular literature. For, while the Western world became completely fascinated by the narratives of the *Thousand and One Nights* and the fantastic worlds that they invoked following the publication of Galland's translation into French at the beginning of the eighteenth century, most Arab critics have ignored not only them but also the many other collections of popular narrative since they are not considered to be part of the literary canon. The situation has been changing more recently, however, with the advent to the educational and cultural institutions in the region of social scientific studies and especially folklore.

An Introduction to Arabic Literature should thus be seen as an attempt to present an alternative approach to the production of a survey of Arabic literature. It begins with the text that holds an especially privileged position within Islam and Arabic, namely the Qur'ān. In giving prominence

to the Qur'ān, as divinely inspired text, as linguistic yardstick, and as motivation for the need to record the pre-Islamic poetic tradition in written form, we acknowledge its central place in almost every aspect of the development of Arabic language and literature.

The three chapters that follow are surveys of the development of the genres of poetry, belletristic prose and narrative, and drama. As noted above, the linkages between the genres of Arabic literature, the concept of *adab*, and the terms used to describe their analogues in Western literary traditions, are rarely exact. To cite just a single example: within the realm of narrative, the concept of *adab* admits of categories (travel narratives and biographies, for example) that have not generally attracted the attention of literary critics in the Western world.

The final chapter moves away from the literary texts themselves to consider the tradition of criticism that has existed alongside them from the outset. The distinction between the two may seem relatively clear in a modern context, but in earlier times the linkages between them, and indeed between the analysis of the Qur'ānic text and the development of criticism, are particularly close.

In recent years several nations have attempted to reflect the political and economic ramifications of what is often termed a 'global vision' in new or revised national educational curricula. A frequent component of such plans and their reception is the inclusion of more materials that deal with non-Western cultures. It is with a conscious awareness of the need for an introductory work for a general, non-specialist readership that I have written this book. I have tried to stress the continuity of the Arabic literary tradition and thus have sought as many occasions as possible to provide illustrations of the linkages that connect present and past; this is particularly the case in the introductory section to the chapters on specific genres where features of the great tradition of the past are mirrored in a present-day instance or debate. I might add that, in several of the chapters, I have deliberately made use of the introductory section to recount some of my own experiences with Arabic literature and littérateurs in the region itself; my hope is that those accounts may exemplify the considerable increase in contact with Arab littérateurs and critics which, in my view, is a major and desirable feature of recent Western scholarship. In the interests of readability, I have restricted such academic conventions as footnotes to the very minimum, listing references – where necessary – in parentheses within the text itself. The Guide to Further Reading lists only the most significant works in the field and

concentrates on studies in English; sources in other European languages are included only when none is available in English (a not infrequent occurrence in many subfields).

But clearly the greatest difference lies in the fact that *An Introduction to Arabic Literature* is intended as an introductory survey. In trying to capture the riches of so vast a literary tradition in so restricted a space, I have been aware that the risks are considerable, since what is left out will always exceed what is included by a large margin. However, if readers of this work find themselves tempted to explore the literary heritage of Arabic in more detail and, dare one hope, in the original language, then this work's task of 'translation' will have been achieved.

CHAPTER 2

The contexts of the literary tradition

INTRODUCTION

The Arab League, Arab nationalism; Arabic numerals, Arabic literature; the Arabian Peninsula, the *Arabian Nights*. The English language makes use of several epithets to describe the people, language, and region whose literary creativity is the topic of this book. The Arabic language itself, by contrast, has a single word, *ʿarabī*, an adjective derived from what must be one of the earliest words in the history of the language, *ʿarab*, originally used to describe the nomadic peoples in the central regions of what is now termed the Arabian Peninsula. Quite how far back the existence of the *ʿarab* can be traced is difficult to say, but a group called the *ar-ba-a-a* are cited as components of an army in cuneiform inscriptions dating from as early as 853 BC. At the end of the 1950s the same word, *ʿarab*, was used by Jamāl ʿAbd al-Nāṣir (Nasser), the President of Egypt, when he proclaimed in a speech that 'from the Atlantic Ocean to the Arabian Gulf we are Arabs'.

In this chapter I will provide a series of contexts that are intended to serve as background for the investigations of the genres of Arabic literature that follow. Firstly I will discuss two particular contexts within which the literary tradition has been created, developed, and recorded: the physical and the linguistic. A more diachronic approach will then be used for an overview of the historical background against which the literary texts were produced; it will be subdivided into two parts, a first that looks at rulers and the changing patterns of authority, and a second that examines some of the intellectual debates against the background of which Arabic literature has been composed.

THE PHYSICAL CONTEXT

The pre-Islamic poet, Labīd, includes the following lines in the opening section of his famous *Muʿallaqah* poem:

Sites dung-stained and long abandoned after times of frequentation,
with their changing seasons of peace and war,
Fed with spring rains of the stars, hit by the thunder of a heavy
rainstorm or fine drizzle,
Falling from every passing cloud, looming dark in the daytime and with
thunder resounding at eventide.

The effect of rain on a desert environment is truly remarkable; the transformations that it brings about are immediate. While water – its presence or absence – was a very practical aspect of life within the desert existence of the earliest poets, it has been a potent image for the modern poet as well, one of fertility, of potential, of revolution. Labīd's twentieth-century successor, the Iraqi poet, Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb (*d.*1964), devotes a poem to rain ('*Unshūdat al-maṭar*') which evokes the imagery of the earliest poetry in the cause of his country's liberation:

On the night of departure how many tears have we shed,
and then, for fear of reproach, pretended it was rain . . .
Rain . . .
Rain . . .
Since our childhood, the skies
were always cloudy in wintertime,
and rain poured down,
but every year, as the earth blossomed, we stayed hungry,
Never a year went by but there was hunger in Iraq.
Rain . . .
Rain . . .
Rain . . .

And, as desert-dwellers know only too well, water, this same essential, life-giving resource, can also have a potent destructive force. The flash-floods of the *wādī* (stream-valley) can bring sudden death, a fate that is depicted with telling effect both at the conclusion of another *Muʿallaqah* poem from the earliest period of poetry, that of Imru' al-Qays, and in the fate of the hero's mother in the novel, *Nazīf al-ḥajar* (The Rocks Bleed, 1990) by the Libyan writer, Ibrāhīm al-Kūnī (*b.* 1948).

The tension between these dualities of aridity and moisture, of death and birth, has been a constant in the Arab world for the entire period represented within these pages. The text of the Qurʾān itself shows an obvious concern with the rigours of daily life in the way it depicts Paradise as a well-watered garden. This struggle to survive in such a delicate ecological balance continues to affect the lives of people who live in large areas of the Middle East and has a substantial effect on patterns of homogeneity within particular areas and nations. Thus, a nation such

as Egypt, whose people cling to the fertile Nile Valley region, will tend to possess a greater sense of identity than one like the Sudan or Algeria, where geographical factors and sheer distances will serve to create real and psychological barriers.

While the coastal regions of the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Gulf, have always served as a base for wide-scale regional commerce, reflected in the famous Sindbad cycle from the *Thousand and One Nights*, the seas of the Middle East do not appear to have roused the interest of Arab littérateurs to any great extent. Perhaps as is the case with English literature, it needed the concern of an islander, the Sicilian ibn Ḥamdīs (*d.* 1132) who later travelled to Spain, to produce Arabic poetry depicting the sea. In the main, however, it is the land that has served as a major means of identity for the Arab people; the fate of the Palestinians, with their annual 'Day of the Land', is a potent contemporary symbol of that sentiment of long vintage.

The other primary geographical feature of the region is mountains. Northern Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, and the Maghrib, for example, possess mountain ranges that have played a major role in the cultural life of their people. Mountains are often akin to cultural breakwaters, in that they can afford refuge to minority groups. The Atlas Mountains of the Maghrib have served to create a large divide between those living on the coastal plain and the mountain dwellers; in this case differences of language – Berber, French, and Arabic – only compound attitudinal differences created by different means of subsistence (animal herding and agriculture) and widely variant types of education and culture. In Yemen and Lebanon, they have provided lines of separation between different religious and political groupings, as twentieth-century conflicts in both regions have convincingly demonstrated.

This wide expanse of territory that constitutes the Arab world, with its variety of geographical and climatic features, is peopled by citizens of many nations who speak Arabic and thus trace their linguistic and cultural origins back to the Arabian Peninsula. Many of the predominant themes depicted in the literature of the pre-Islamic period – the power of community, encampments, travels, horses, camels, palm-trees – continue to resonate in the minds of Arab littérateurs. The texts of the Qur'ān and prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*) are filled with references to the image of the palm-tree; the latter source enjoins mankind to 'honour the palm-tree which was created from Adam's own clay'. Relics of this aspect of the pre-Islamic way of life endure in colourful ways: the system of metrics devised by the great scholar of al-Baṣrah, al-Khalīl ibn

Aḥmad (*d.* 791), uses the term *bayt* (tent) for the line of poetry, and *sabab* (tent-rope) and *watad* (tent-peg) for the segments of an individual foot. The ancient virtue of *ṣabr* (tolerance of adversity, endurance) was often invoked by the vagabond (*ṣu'lūk*) poets of the pre-Islamic period in their taunts levelled at the 'soft' life of the tribe, and has since been cited often to explain a willingness to 'bide one's time': in the case of the Crusaders, for example, who were eventually ejected after centuries of occupation. Yet another such traditional virtue is that of hospitality, a quality that, as any visitor to the Arab world knows, remains as prevalent and forceful as ever.

When the great social historian, Ibn Khaldun (*d.* 1406), wrote the Introduction (*Muqaddimah*) to his book of history, he proceeded to develop a cyclical theory of civilisation that was based on the traditional tribal virtues of the Bedouin, some of which we have just mentioned: courage, endurance, and, above all, group solidarity. His model at the time envisaged two elements – desert culture and civilisation, with the former continually replacing and invigorating the latter. The growth of cities in the Arab world, and especially the emergence of the great Islamic centres – al-Baṣrah, Baghdād, Cairo, Qayrawān, Fez, and Cordoba, for example – as sources of religious debate and intellectual dynamism, was to have a major impact on both urban and provincial life, frequently to the detriment of both. Cairo, the capital city of Egypt, is perhaps the most extreme example of this, in that fully one quarter of the inhabitants of the entire country live within the city's boundaries. But people still leave the countryside and pour into the cities; and this is just one type of migration. The discovery of oil and the vast wealth that it has brought to the countries of the Gulf region has led to the migration of huge numbers of workers in search of a living wage.

There are two particular 'lenses' through which the Western world examines the Middle East that need to be identified; not so much to avoid their use as to admit the limitations that they impose. The first involves treating 'the Arabs' and 'Islam' as monoliths, and indeed often to fuse the two into one. To be sure, the majority of Arabs are Muslims, but there are significant communities of Arabs who are not – the Maronites of Lebanon and the Copts of Egypt, for example. On the other hand, many Muslims are not Arabs; Iranians, for example (whose Persian language is a member of the Indo-European family), Pakistanis, and large communities in Malaysia, Indonesia, and China. But, beyond these points of information, there lies the assumption that the peoples of a region as diverse in history and culture as the one that we have just