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World Literature, Republics of Letters, and the Arabic Literary System: The "Modernists" in the Defendants' Bench—A Review Article

While preparing for publication the manuscript of my book, which offers a theoretical framework for the study of modern Arabic literature,[1] I read Muhsin Jassim al-Musawi's *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters: Arabic Knowledge Construction* and two sequential articles by him on the same topic in the *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*,[2] in addition to four articles in the same journal referring to his theses[3] and one response to all of them by al-Musawi.[4] I also had checked review essays in English and Arabic on the book published before my present essay was sent to the editor in its final version.[5] Unlike al-Musawi's book, his two sequential articles bear in their subtitles the term "Arab Modernity." In addition, whereas the "Islamic Republic of Letters" in the title of his book is qualified as "Medieval," the reader can hardly ignore the relevance of

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A review article of *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters: Arabic Knowledge Construction* by Muhsin Jassim al-Musawi (Notre Dame, IN, 2015).

[1] Reuven Snir, *Modern Arabic Literature: A Theoretical Framework* (Edinburgh, 2017).

[2] Muhsin Jassim al-Musawi, "The Republic of Letters: Arab Modernity? (Part I)," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 1, no. 2 (2014): 265–80; "The Republic of Letters: Arab Modernity? (Part II)," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 2, no. 1 (2015): 115–30. See also al-Musawi's earlier article on the topic, "The Medieval Islamic Literary World-System: The Lexicographic Turn," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 17 (2013): 43–71.

[3] Stefan Helgesson, "Tayeb Salih, Sol Plaatje, and the Trajectories of World Literature," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 2, no. 2 (2015): 253–60; Tarek El-Ariss, "Let There Be *Nahdah!*" *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 2, no. 2 (2015): 260–66; Francesca Orsini, "Whose Amnesia? Literary Modernity in Multilingual South Asia," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 2, no. 2 (2015): 266–72; and Debjani Ganguly, "Polysystems Redux: The Unfinished Business of World Literature," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 2, no. 2 (2015): 272–81.

[4] Muhsin Jassim al-Musawi, "The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters as World Model," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 2, no. 2 (2015): 281–86.

[5] For review essays of the book, see Mohammad Salama, "Bridging the Gap: A Review Essay of Muhsin al-Musawi's *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters*," *SCTIW Review* (19 November 2015): 1–6; Kristina Richardson's review essay in *Journal of Arabic Literature* 47, nos. 1–2 (2016): 209–13 (the general editor of the journal is al-Musawi himself); Dana Sajdi's review in *Journal of Early Modern History* 20, no. 2 (2016): 589–92; Marilyn Booth's review essay in *Journal of Islamic Studies* 28, no. 3 (2017): 382–86; and Elizabeth Lhost's review essay in *Reading Religion*, a website published by the American Academy of Religion (AAR) (19 May 2017). See also, in Arabic, Shīrīn Abū al-Najā's review essay in *Al-ḥayāh* (28 February 2016).

al-Musawi's arguments to modernity. Moreover, the articles clearly recall various literary themes and cultural arguments examined in the book, even if in a more developed and sophisticated manner. Because of the theoretical gist and drive of al-Musawi's book and articles, and due to his declared ambition to contribute to better understanding of Arabic literature in its historical development, his contributions are important not only for the study of pre-modern Arabic literature, but for the study of modern Arabic literature as well. In my new book, I explain the significance of the uninterrupted continuity of Arabic literature from ancient times until the present day, in fact since the emergence of the Arabic language—long before the Arabic poetry known to us emerged in the fifth century.[6] Apart from the otherwise significant addition of the subtitle "Arab Modernity," there is so much overlap between al-Musawi's aforementioned studies and my own that I was initially tempted to change the title of my book to *The Modern Arabic Republic of Letters.* Both of our scholarly projects offer general frameworks for the investigation of Arabic texts[7] in their various contexts—including the relationship of these texts with literary works produced in other languages—albeit in different periods and based on varying methodologies and theoretical conceptions. However, I soon became aware of significant differences between al-Musawi's work and my own, differences that in the end led me to decide against changing my book's title, though not because I did not think that the term "republic" did not fit the theoretical framework presented in my book, as it will be clear in the following pages.

In *Modern Arabic Literature,* I argue that Arabic literature can be more adequately analyzed as a historical phenomenon when conceived of as a system that replaces the search for data about material aspects of literary phenomena with the uncovering of the functions that these aspects have. Arabic literature has been postulated to constitute a system or polysystem—a heterogeneous, multi-stratified, and functionally structured system-of-systems—kept in motion by a permanent struggle between canonical and non-canonical texts and models. The evaluation of the systems of successive periods springs from the oscillating movement between the periphery of the system and its center (here I could employ, instead of "system," the term "republic" as this term would be explained below). Such a system is inclusive and consists of all *literary* texts regardless of

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[6] Snir, *Modern Arabic Literature,* 182–93. As for the linguistic situation among the Arabs before the rise of Islam, see the significant contributions of Jan Retsö, such as *The Arabs in Antiquity: Their History from the Assyrians to the Umayyads* (New York, 2003), 591–99; and "What Is Arabic?" in *The Oxford Handbook of Arabic Linguistics,* ed. Jonathan Owens (Oxford, 2013), 433–50.

[7] Only *literary* texts in my study as I have defined them (Snir, *Modern Arabic Literature,* 8–9). Al-Musawi does not clarify the character of the texts that he has investigated besides their having been written in Arabic.

any hierarchies of value, namely, all texts that in a given culture or community have been imbued with cultural value—something which allows for higher levels of complexity and significance in the way they are constructed. Each text forms a system and at the same time is an element of a larger system, which is itself, in turn, a part of the greater system of the Arabic literary environment. That is to say, in each given period, a given text is placed at a particular point in the Arabic literary system according to its synchronic relative value. Diachronic value is assigned to the text by its paradigmatic position in the succession of synchronic systems, which acquire retrospective significance. Here, as previously indicated, my analysis avoids as much as possible any personal subjective evaluative assessments, at the same time reflecting the values and judgments of the relevant communities toward their literary texts in different stages and periods. Sociocultural distinctions of text production in the proposed system are conceptualized in terms of literary stratification: canonized versus non-canonized texts. By canonized texts, I mean literary works that have been accepted by dominant circles within Arab culture, that have become part of a community's historical heritage, and that have entered into its collective memory. Conversely, non-canonized texts are those literary works that have been rejected by the same circles as illegitimate or worthless and that are often in the long run forgotten by the community. This means that canonicity is not seen as an *inherent feature* of textual activities on any level, although canonicity in Arabic literature depends in general—but not always—on the language of production: *fuṣḥá* (the pan-Arab standard language) is the basic medium of canonized texts, whereas *ʿāmmīyah* (local dialects) is that of non-canonized texts. In addition, it means that, if not from the synchronic point of view, certainly from the diachronic perspective, we obviously lack the ability to explore most of the non-canonized texts that were created, and certainly not all of them.

In my book, I propose three categories of investigation for modern Arabic literature. The first is the investigation of the literary dynamics in synchronic cross-section—potential inventories of canonized and non-canonized literary texts in three sections: texts for adults, texts for children, and translated texts for adults and children. The resulting six subsystems—three canonized and three non-canonized—are seen as autonomous networks of relationships and as interacting literary networks on various levels. The internal and external interrelations and interactions between the various subsystems need to be studied if we wish to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the modern Arabic literary system. The second category consists of the study of the historical outlines of the modern Arabic literary system's diachronic intersystemic development, namely, the need to refer to the changes and interactions with various extra-literary systems that have determined the historical course of Arabic literature since the nineteenth

century. The space between the text, its author, and the reader is understood as constituting both an economic environment (e.g., literary markets, publishing, distribution) and a sociocommunicative system that passes the meaning potential of the text through various filters (e.g., criticism, literary circles, groups, salons, public opinion) in order to concretize and realize it. All spaces related to literary production and consumption should be considered. For example, in order to determine the general characteristics of the historical development of Arabic literature from the start of the nineteenth century, we should look at the interaction of literature with extra-literary systems such as religion, territory, nation state, language, politics, economy, philosophy, gender, electronic media, Internet technologies, and social networks, as well as with other foreign literary and cultural systems. Finally, the third category is intended to concentrate on the historical diachronic development that each genre underwent and on the relationships between the various genres. Since literary genres do not emerge in a vacuum, the issue of generic development cannot be confined to certain time spans; emphasis must be put on the relationship between modern literature, on the one hand, and classical and medieval literature, on the other. Crucial in this regard is the concept of periodization, that is, how one is to delimit and define "literary periods." The complete study of literary dynamics in historical, diachronic development requires an analysis of every genre and subgenre separately, of the interrelationships and interactions between the genres, and of the interrelationships and interactions between the genres and the subgenres.

In my book, I raised as well several points for discussion concerning al-Musawi's studies, particularly those referring to the topics discussed in my book. Here, I want to look more closely at al-Musawi's scholarly project in the context of relevant theoretical contributions and within the framework of the study of Arabic literature in general. Al-Musawi opens the introduction (*khuṭbat al-kitāb,* "Preliminary Discourse") to his book as follows:

> This book argues that the large-scale and diverse cultural production in Arabic in the post-classical era (approximately the twelfth through the eighteenth centuries) was the outcome of an active sphere of discussion and disputation spanning the entire medieval Muslim world. I explore this production over a long temporal stretch and across a vast swathe of Islamic territories. My focus is on the thematic and genealogical constructions that were of greatest significance to the accumulation of cultural capital, which, I argue, constitutes a medieval Islamic "republic of letters."[8]

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[8] Al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 1.

In his conclusion, al-Musawi explains that his medieval Islamic republic of letters "implies an umbrella—literary world-systems that existed across Asia and Africa."[9] In what follows, I will further develop and expand upon some of the points that I made in my book in addition to new ones.

1. General Theoretical Contexts

Al-Musawi's use of the term "republic of letters" *(république des lettres)* relies on the meaning of the term established in two books: Dena Goodman's *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment*[10] and Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters.*[11] Coined by Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) to indicate a network of intellectuals who create and sustain cultural exchange,[12] this term is used by al-Musawi to refer to "a conceptual framework, an edifice, to account for a literary world-system in which Arabic functions as the dominating language." However, al-Musawi is careful to state that "its appropriation in this book entails no equation between Latin and Arabic in relation to national languages."[13] Casanova's conceptions are mentioned throughout al-Musawi's book in a mixture of hidden gratitude (probably for inventing the attractive title for her book and, then, for enabling him to use it in his project) and visible disagreement (emphasizing his own post-colonial non-Eurocentric theoretical conceptions). That is why we frequently encounter in al-Musawi's study utterances indicating that Casanova's model of world literature cannot be applied to "Arabic knowledge construction" but, at the same time, we see him refer to her model's parameters to delineate the Islamic world—although in the latter case, some of these references are inapposite—for example, Cairo is compared to Paris as the Greenwich Meridian of literature, and Arabic is compared to Latin in relation to national languages. However, anyone who has read Casanova's study would see that al-Musawi deals

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[9] Al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 305.

[10] Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, 1994).

[11] Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters,* trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA, 2004).

[12] See also the project "Mapping the Republic of Letters" at the Stanford Humanities Center (Stanford University); the following is from its website (http://republicofletters.stanford.edu/index.html, accessed 30 October 2017): "Before email, faculty meetings, international colloquia, and professional associations, the world of scholarship relied on its own networks: networks of correspondence that stretched across countries and continents; the social networks created by scientific academies; and the physical networks brought about by travel. These networks… facilitated the dissemination and the criticism of ideas, the spread of political news, as well as the circulation of people and objects.… [The project] aims to create a repository for metadata on early-modern scholarship, and guidelines for future data capture."

[13] Al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 9.

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only superficially with her conceptions without delving deeply into her arguments, or even, sometimes, without fully comprehending their meanings and implications. He would also see that al-Musawi overlooks the many insightful studies and critical reviews written about Casanova's book following its original publication in French (1999), its translation into Arabic (2002), and especially after its release in English by a distinguished publisher (2004). Without referring to these studies and reviews and the in-depth contributions in this regard to various literary and cultural systems, any attempt to use her conceptions is inadequate and not satisfactory.

Casanova's study and the notion of a "republic of letters" captured the attention and interest of a range of scholars with regard to their approaches to the study of literature and the production of literary value, all of them treating culture as a field, a structure, or an economy. Drawing on the language of politics, it reminds us that this is a field constituted by power and competition, a hierarchical structure. The study was praised by Bill Marx as "a marvelously stimulating look at the realpolitik of world literature and the authorities who run the marketplace of ideas."[14] Perry Anderson refers to it as "path-breaking":

> Here the national bounds of Bourdieu's work have been decisively broken, in a project that uses his concepts of symbolic capital and the cultural field to construct a model of the global inequalities of power between different national literatures, and the gamut of strategies that writers in languages at the periphery of the system of legitimation have used to try to win a place at the centre. Nothing like this has been attempted before.[15]

Others approached Casanova's study from various critical angles, some even arguing that her theory was erratic and implausible.[16] In brief, Casanova's point of departure is that, historically, the study of literature in the *modern* era has been dominated by nationalism. She believes that while we have been encouraged to think of literature exclusively in terms of *national* literatures, this approach is increasingly at odds with the realities of a *globalizing* world. As might be expected, she more or less ignores the question of official nationalism, which is one way of accounting for her avoidance, as Nergis Ertürk correctly observes, for example, of

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[14]Bill Marx, "Review of *The World Republic of Letters,*" *Words without Borders* (n.d.), http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/book-review/the-world-republic-of-letters (accessed 30 October 2017).

[15]Perry Anderson, "Union Sucrée," *London Review of Books* 26, no. 18 (2004): 18.

[16]For important critiques of Casanova's model, see Christopher Prendergast, "Negotiating World Literature," *New Left Review* 8 (2001): 100–21; *Debating World Literature,* ed. idem (New York, 2004); and the special issue of *New Literary History* entitled "Literary History in the Global Age" (39, nos. 3–4 [2008]).

Turkey and Turkish literature.[17] Thence, her book is dedicated to moving beyond nationalism in literary study and looking instead at how all books and authors participate in what she thinks of as a *world literary system.*[18]

Casanova (and Franco Moretti even before her[19]) tried to theorize the literary field as one global phenomenon and to propose new structures of interaction between literature and history.[20] Casanova's central hypothesis, as she argues at the very beginning of her book, "is that there exists a 'literature-world,' a literary universe relatively independent of the everyday world and its political divisions, whose boundaries and operational laws are not reducible to those of ordinary political space." The world literary space is autonomous and "endowed with its own laws,"[21] and the aesthetic map of the world does not overlap with the political one. Casanova describes a Darwinian literary market, where, in the battle for survival, outsiders crash in while insiders fend off challenges to their authority: "It is the competition among its members that defines and unites the system while at the same time marking its limits," and "not every writer proceeds in the same way, but all writers attempt to enter the same race, and all of them struggle, albeit with unequal advantages, to attain the same goal: literary legitimacy."[22] She deals with the transnational literary market and with the critical discourse on world literature as an autonomous, transnational, unipolar system ruled by the literary Greenwich Meridian.[23] Casanova discusses the concept of "symbolic and literary

[17] See Nergis Ertürk, "Those Outside the Scene: Snow in the World Republic of Letters," *New Literary History* 41, no. 3 (2010): 634. Cf. Snir, *Modern Arabic Literature,* 160–74.

[18] The last emphasized term demonstrates the irrelevance of Casanova's conceptions to the literary texts and activities al-Musawi deals with in his book.

[19] Franco Moretti, *The Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to García Márquez,* trans. Quintin Hoare (London, 1996).

[20] See also Silvia L. López, "Dialectical Criticism in the Provinces of the 'World Republic of Letters': The Primacy of the Object in the Work of Roberto Schwarz," *A Contracorriente* 9, no. 1 (2011): 69–88.

[21] Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters,* xii and 350, respectively.

[22] Ibid., 40. Cf. *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature: From the European Enlightenment to the Global Present,* ed. David Damrosch et al. (Princeton, 2009), 335.

[23] On the concept of world literature and the various positions, see the following selected publications: Ernst Elster, "Weltlitteratur und Litteraturvergleichung," *Archiv für das Studium der Neueren Sprachen und Literatur* 107 (1901): 33–47; idem, "World Literature and Comparative Literature (1901)," trans. Eric Metzler, *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 35 (1986): 7–13; Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 54–68; David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton and Oxford, 2003); *Other Renaissances: A New Approach to World Literature,* ed. Brenda Deen Schildgen et al. (New York, 2007); David Damrosch, *How to Read World Literature* (Chichester, 2009); idem, *Teaching World Literature* (New York, 2009); Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London, 2013); *World Literature: A Reader,* ed. Theo D'haen et al. (London and New York, 2013); and Ganguly, "Polysystems

capital" on an international scale, asking what the components of literary capital might be: literacy rates and prizes, numbers of books published and sold, numbers of publishers and bookstores, judgments, and reputations. Language would be a major component of literary capital: "Certain languages, by virtue of the prestige of the texts written in them, are reputed to be more literary than others, to embody literature."[24]

Scholars have attempted to explore the implications of Casanova's book with regard to specific local literatures, exactly as al-Musawi has tried to do with Arabic literature, but most of them did it with much more attentiveness to its conceptions. Peter Kirkpatrick and Robert Dixon, for example, grapple with the notion of "world literature" and its meaning for Australian literary studies. While they frequently allude to Casanova's views, their book presents a far more pluralistic vision of *literary community.* They attempt to juxtapose "world literature" with the very different forms of "community" created by writers' circles, little magazines, and the like. They acknowledge the "slippage" between these two concepts: while the term "community" suggests *shared values and interests,* the "republic of letters" draws on the language of politics, reminding us that this is a field constituted by

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Redux," 272–81. One of the definitions of world literature excludes any evaluative judgments or hierarchies of value, namely, "all of the world's literature, without pronouncing on questions of quality and influence" (D'haen, *World Literature,* xi). On Arabic fiction and world literature, see Tetz Rooke, "The Emergence of the Arabic Bestseller: Arabic Fiction and World Literature," in *From New Values to New Aesthetics: Turning Points in Modern Arabic Literature,* ed. Stephan Guth and Gail Ramsay (Wiesbaden, 2011), 201–13. On Arabic poetry and world literature, see Huda Fakhreddine, "The Aesthetic Imperative: History Poeticized," in *Manifestos for World Thought,* ed. Lucian Stone and Jason Bahbak Mohaghegh (London and New York, 2017), 147–54. On how Arabic literature has been introduced into world literature anthologies, see Omar Khalifah, "Anthologizing Arabic Literature: The Longman Anthology and the Problems of World Literature," *Journal of World Literature* 2 (2017): 512–26. On extending the paradigm of world literature beyond hegemonic global centers and attending to the trajectories that shape "literature in the world," see Helgesson, "Tayeb Salih, Sol Plaatje, and the Trajectories of World Literature," 253–60. On world literature and the demise of national literatures, see Claus Clüver, "The Difference of Eight Decades: World Literature and the Demise of National Literatures," *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 35 (1986): 14–24; idem, "World Literature—Period or Type? In Response to Horst Steinmetz," *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 37 (1988): 134–39; idem, "On Using Literary Constructs: In Response to Zoran Konstantinovic," *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 37 (1988): 143–44; Zoran Konstantinovic, "Response to Claus Clüver's 'The Difference of Eight Decades: World Literature and the Demise of National Literatures,'" *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 37 (1988): 141–42; and Horst Steinmetz, "Response to Claus Clüver's 'The Difference of Eight Decades: World Literature and the Demise of National Literatures,'" *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 37 (1988): 131–33.

[24]Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters,* 17.

power and competition.[25] Hayden White refers to Casanova's attempt to ground her history of literature in an idea of "literary temporality" and the way in which modern literature, originally identified with politics and nationalism, managed, "through a gradual accumulation of autonomy, to escape the ordinary laws of history." This allows her to define literature "both as an object that is irreducible to history and as a historical object, albeit one that enjoys a strictly literary historicity,"[26] but White points to the ambiguity in her use of the word "literary" and raises questions about the difference between "*literary* history of literature" compared to "*historical* history of literature."[27] Most criticism of Casanova, however, has referred to the book's claims for creating a method of canonicity for world literature, and thus has predictably focused on her neglect of certain authors and genres. The most thorough engagement with her work can be found in the collection edited by Christopher Prendergast.[28]

There is almost nothing of the above discussion in al-Musawi's study or articles. Although he acknowledges Casanova's work as an inspiration, al-Musawi does not take the book's theory as a point of departure either as a conceptual focus or even as a thesis to be rejected. It seems that what greatly captured al-Musawi's interest was Casanova's attractive title; otherwise, it is difficult to understand how he ignores even what could have served his arguments quite well.[29] Good examples for dealing with theoretical conceptions of world literature with regard to Arabic literature can be found in four studies, one published before and three after the publication of al-Musawi's book. The first is Nadia Al-Bagdadi's article in which she discerns three distinct phases and types of globalization: (1) *Oikumenical globalization* of late antiquity to the end of the Abbasid period; (2) *Expanding globalization* of the imperialist age of the late eighteenth to the twentieth century; and (3) *Dispersal globalization* of the current age. Confining literary movements to these three forms of globalization is a simplified scheme of more complex historical developments, Al-Bagdadi says, but "the heuristic advantage, however, opens up historical and theoretical perspectives on literacy, literature,

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[25] *Republics of Letters: Literary Communities in Australia,* ed. Peter Kirkpatrick and Robert Dixon (Sydney, 2012), v.

[26] Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters,* 350.

[27] Hayden White, "'With No Particular Place to Go': Literary History in the Age of the Global Picture," *New Literary History* 39, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 738–39. In addition, White offers Ami Elias' insights in her book *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction* (Baltimore, 2001).

[28] Prendergast, *Debating World Literature.*

[29] Such as the hope Casanova expresses at the very end of her book that her study will be a "critical weapon in the service of all deprived and dominated writers on the periphery of the literary world" in their struggle "against the presumptions, the arrogance, and the fiats of critics in the center, who ignore the basic fact of the inequality of access to literary existence" (Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters,* 354–55).

and interpretation at the interface of crossing cultures and civilizations. It will suffice here to sketch out the three phases with regard to the question under consideration."[30] Unlike Al-Bagdadi's, which does not refer at all to Casanova's conceptions though she deals with issues mentioned in her book, the other three studies discuss directly these theoretical conceptions as related to Arabic literature, with full awareness of their complexities. Rebecca Carol Johnson uses Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq's (1804–87) semi-autobiographical fictional travel narrative *Al-sāq ʿalá al-sāq fī mā huwa al-fāryāq* (Leg upon leg concerning that which is al-fāryāq) (1855) in order to examine critically world literature paradigms that see literary modernity as the entrance into world literary space's zones of equivalence. Providing many examples from the book, she argues that literary modernity does not appear as a world of literature that Arab authors entered, but as a world they accumulated in their texts by re-aggregating literary history as a collection of texts, translations of texts, and readings of translations of texts:

> The worldedness of literary reference in al-Shidyāq's sense is not one that supplants or is in conflict with national or local identifications. Nor is it universal style, form, or reason in disguise. He gathers styles, forms, and reasons—"connects the disconnected"—into an unstable archive of modernity that cannot be positioned within a single or uniform genealogy. Through a series of productive misreadings—by incorporating European modes and genres into his work as European, by creating fractured and heterogeneous audiences within his text, and by bringing Arabic literary standards to pass judgment on European texts—al-Shidyāq creates an aggregated global literary sphere and reminds us that the "world" in world literature is not a given; it must be manufactured, and from a particular and historically contingent location. In doing so, al-Shidyāq shows us how to take modern Arabic literature out of filiative or vertical narratives of development, and instead situate it within a larger network of transnational or horizontal associations that are embedded in, but not bound by, the material interactions that accompany them.[31]

Madeleine Dobie examines Casanova's theory, as well as those of Fredric Jameson and Franco Moretti. Focusing on the case of Algerian literature, she argues that narratives of world literature have tended to overemphasize the center-pe-

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[30]Nadia Al-Bagdadi, "Registers of Arabic Literary History," *New Literary History* 39, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 448–49.

[31]Rebecca Carol Johnson, "Archive of Errors: Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq, Literature, and the World," *Middle Eastern Literatures* 20, no. 1 (2017): 44–45.

riphery divide, neglecting other geographies of production and circulation. Guided by a logic of mimesis, theories of world literature have often "derived their definition of literature from the western canon and then sought equivalents and tributaries in the rest of the world." They "approach non-western literature as an offshoot or extension of European culture and make little effort to explore other cultural forms or alternative sites of production and reception."[32] It is interesting that neither Johnson nor Dobie refers to al-Musawi's book although it is unreasonable that they were not aware of its appearance and its direct relevance to their studies—one can by no means rule out that the reason is not disconnected from what will be argued below concerning al-Musawi's influential and prestigious status in the scholarship of Arabic literature. Another study, by Marie Thérèse Abdelmessih, does not mention explicitly Casanova's conceptions but refers to theories of world literature as well as to al-Musawi's arguments about the epistemological shifts effected by the vocational cultural practices such as in rituals, recitations, slogans, odes, songs, banners, and colors, while elaborating upon them in their several epochs of the Islamic republic of letters. However, when dealing specifically with world literature, she avoids referring to the gaps in al-Musawi's understanding of the principles of the relevant theories maintaining that "the formation of a universal canon should be founded on a cross-cultural reading of mainstream and peripheral literary models from world literature, while engaging critics and scholars from the North and the South in the process of theorization." She concludes that

> Restricting epistemology within a classical heritage or narrowed vocational practices related to an exclusive geographical location impedes access to a global dialogue. Rethinking critical approaches to Arabic initially requires rereading Arabic from a comparative perspective of distinct practices, within their continual intra-regional exchanges. Decolonizing the vocational from centralization, as well as hegemonic epistemic limitations, would enable scholars of Arabic to participate in the debate and address problems of global canon formation.[33]

In the following, I will refer to al-Musawi's study in the context of available scholarship on Arabic literature, and from time to time, when relevant, I will refer to world literature's theories and conceptions.

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[32] Madeleine Dobie, "Locating Algerian Literature in World Literature," *Middle Eastern Literatures* 20, no. 1 (2017): 87.

[33] Marie Thérèse Abdelmessih, "Rethinking Critical Approaches to Arabic Comparatively, in a 'Post' Colonial Context," *Interventions—International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 20, no. 2 (2018): 205, 206–7 respectively.

2. Terminology

For a study considered to be, as Suzanne P. Stetkevych writes in her endorsement of al-Musawi's book, "the starting point for a new generation of scholarship" on pre-modern Arabic literature, the intelligible use of terms and the appropriate justifications for the use of each term are crucial. That is why it is important to clarify in detail what makes the term "republic of letters" suitable, besides its decorative attractiveness, as an "umbrella term"[34] in a study on *Arabic* literature. Moreover, if the term's appropriation, according to al-Musawi himself, "entails no equation between Latin and Arabic in relation to national languages," one has to ask what justifies the borrowing of this very term from a specifically "literary world-system," where the relationship between the major language (=Latin) and the national languages is fundamental.[35] Casanova's conceptions, which are indebted to world-systems theory as developed by Fernand Braudel and his concept of an "economy-world," and especially to Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of literature as an autonomous social field in which competition for symbolic capital in the cultural field supersedes yet also mirrors the wider competition for power,[36] make a case for an international theory space, which has developed its own standards, canons, and values operating separately from national literary systems. According to Dena Goodman, the "French Republic of Letters rose with the modern political state out of the religious wars of the sixteenth century, out of the articulation of public and private spheres, citizen and state, agent and critic." The basics of this Republic were established in the "Parisian salons, from which networks of social and intellectual exchange were being developed to connect the capital with the four corners of France and the cosmopolitan republic." Its aim was "to serve humanity and [its] project was Enlightenment."[37]

However, apart from brief references to both studies in his "Preliminary Discourse" and some quotations from Casanova's book in subsequent pages, nowhere does al-Musawi provide any coherent explanation for the shared views and conceptions between either Goodman's or Casanova's concepts of republic of letters and his own. At the same time, in justifying his focus on rhetoric, in a visible

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[34] Al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 305.

[35] Some of al-Musawi's statements regarding the comparison between Arabic and Latin are obscure and ambiguous. Take, for example, the following: "Although Arabic remained a language of conversation and discussion among writers and scholars, *it was so only in the shadow of other empires and city-states;* hence, it cannot be compared to Latin. Its relation to other competing and challenging vernaculars is a dialectical one, *a record of give and take,* but also as the most recognized by scholars from non-Arab regions" (al-Musawi, "The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters as World Model," 283 [my emphasis]).

[36] Pierre Bourdieu, *Les règles de l'art: genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris, 1992); and *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field,* trans. Susan Emanuel (Cambridge, 1996).

[37] Goodman, *The Republic of Letters,* 2, 52 respectively.

attempt to imitate the authors of the post-classical or pre-modern period,[38] al-Musawi refers to the Arabic translation of the term "republic":

> The recourse in rhetoric to indirection, or *laḥn al-qawl* (i.e., implicitness), and to *taʿrīḍ* (dissimulation, connotation, concealment) signifies the other side of written and verbal transactions in this *jumhūr* (majority) of littérateurs, which is the basis for Arab and Muslim modernists' application of the term *jumhūriyyah* (i.e., republic). In this verbal domain, the root and conjugation of the verb *jamhara* also connote dissimulation. Hence, both verb and noun are loaded in Arabic in a binary structure, negation, or *taḍādd* (based on opposites or contrasts—*aḍdād*), implying both revelation and concealment.[39]

Al-Musawi implies here that the etymology of the Arabic term for "republic" is relevant to his conception of the "republic of letters" and that, since "both verb and noun are loaded in Arabic in a binary structure, negation, or *taḍādd*," is also relevant to it. Al-Musawi, however, does not further elaborate on his claim. The original meaning of the verb *jamhara,* from which the term *jumhūrīyah* ("republic") is derived, is "[to collect] together a thing or earth, or dust." The same verb also denotes dissimulation: thus, *jamhara ʿalayhi* (or *lahu* or *ilayhi*) *al-khabara* means "he acquainted him with a part of the news, or story, and concealed what he desired or meant," or "he acquainted him with a part of the news, or story, incorrectly, or not in the proper manner, and omitted what he desired or meant."[40] In *one* source only, there is a view that the verb *jamhara* is of the category *aḍdād,* which is to say that it is a *ḍidd* (plural: *aḍdād*), the Arabic term for a word with two basic meanings with one meaning being the opposite of the other (i.e., a contronym): thus, *jamhar lak al-khabara jamharatan* means "he acquainted you with a minor part of the news and concealed its main part."[41] However, this is *not* an obvious case of the category of *aḍdād,* since *jamhar* in its main meaning, from which the word *jumhūrīyah* is derived, as well as in its marginal meaning, does not connote a meaning and its total opposite such as, for example, the word *jawn,* which means both "black" and "white," or *jalal,* which means both "great" and

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[38]Hereafter, the terms "post-classical" and "pre-modern" are in general used interchangeably. On what makes that period both post-classical and pre-modern, see Roger Allen, "The Post-Classical Period: Parameters and Preliminaries," in *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period,* ed. Roger Allen and D. S. Richards (Cambridge, 2006), 8–17.

[39]Al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 2–3.

[40]E. W. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (Beirut, 1968 [1865]), s.v. *jamhar.*

[41]ʿAbd al-Wāḥid Abū al-Ṭayyib al-Lughawī, *Kitāb al-Aḍdād fī Kalām al-ʿArab,* ed. ʿIzzat Ḥasan (Damascus, 1963), 182.

"small," or *ḍidd* itself, which ironically has the contrary meanings "opposite" and "equal."[42] On the other hand, it is not clear at all what the benefit is to al-Musawi's argument for the "republic of letters" if "both verb and noun are loaded in Arabic in a binary structure, negation, or *taḍādd.*"[43]

In any event, al-Musawi writes about a period when the term *jumhūrīyah* did not exist and the terms concerning literary and cultural activities were different from those that have been used since the late nineteenth century (see my discussion of the term *adab* below). Thus, there is a need to clarify the terms al-Musawi uses throughout his study, such as "cultural production" and "cultural activity," as well "literary production," "literary life," and "literary value." The aforementioned term "literary world-system" is also used without clear definition, sometimes by an indirect allusion to Casanova's arguments or to an interpretation of one of her book's reviews.[44] In my recent book, I explain what I mean by terms such as "literary system," "literary text," and "culture,"[45] among others, and my definitions evidently differ from those of al-Musawi such as they are—and they are, as I have been arguing, rather vague.

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[42]Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon,* s.v. *ḍidd.*

[43]In an interview with the Arabic press before the publication of his book, al-Musawi referred to its title as *Jumhūrīyat al-adab fī al-ʿaṣr al-Islāmī al-wasīṭ* (*Al-sharq al-awsaṭ,* 22 January 2013), but after its publication he preferred to translate it as *Jamharat al-ādāb fī al-ʿaṣr al-Islāmī al-wasīṭ* (*Al-khalīj,* 30 June 2015). He justifies the use of *Jamharat al-ādāb* for "republic of letters" by arguing (wrongly!) that the term alludes to the contrary meanings of *jamʿ wa-tafrīq* ("joining and separating") (*Al-bayān,* 30 June 2015):

لأن جمهر تعني الجمع والتفريق، وهي أصل للجمهوريّة كمفردة توازي ما درج عليه الفرنسيّون، فدلالتها ديمقراطية لاسيّما أنها تشتمل على الضدّين، وتتيح عبر الجمع والتفريق، الاحتجاج واختلاف الرأي والجدل والمناقشة. وبالتالي، إحياء الفضاء العام اللازم لتنامي الظواهر المختلفة مؤسساتيّاً ومعرفيّاً

In a review of the book, Shīrīn Abū al-Najā translates its first part as *Al-jumhūrīyah al-Islāmīyah lil-ādāb* (*Al-ḥayāh,* 28 February 2016). Casanova's book was translated into Arabic by Amal al-Ṣabbān as *Al-jumhūrīyah al-ʿālamīyah lil-ādāb* (Cairo, 2002).

[44]Al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 89, where al-Musawi bases his argument on a partial and inaccurate quotation from Joe Cleary, "The World Literary System: Atlas and Epitaph," *Field Day Review* 2 (2006): 202. In an article published two years before he published his book, al-Musawi refers to Casanova's arguments but only mentions Cleary's review in a footnote. The article opens with two sentences about the "major restructuration and hence proliferation of the literary world-system" that are "motivated and driven by the corporate effort of grammarians and writers, an effort that in the case of English drew impetus from a sustained privileging of literature in a self-assertive nationalism" (al-Musawi, "The Medieval Islamic Literary World-System," 43). Cleary mentions "the efforts of men of letters, grammarians and lexicographers" (Cleary, "The World Literary System," 202), but in a different context. It is debatable as to how al-Musawi actually "applies" this, in the next sentence, to the medieval and pre-modern Islamic cultural world-system, when he argues "that grammar, lexicography, and literary production assume *even more significance* as evidenced in the massive production and demand" (my emphasis).

[45]See Snir, *Modern Arabic Literature,* 2–3; 4; 11, n. 11; 2–3, respectively.

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3. Temporal Spaces and Borders

Al-Musawi's book refers to the "postclassical era (approximately the twelfth through the eighteenth centuries),"[46] but one has to wonder about the uniformity of this long time span and the assumed difference between it—or a section of it—and between other periods such as the eleventh and nineteenth centuries. For example, the essential characteristics of *literary* production in Arabic did not dramatically change between the tenth and twelfth centuries. Furthermore, in Chapter 2 al-Musawi deals with the tenth-century encyclopedic work *Ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ* (The brethren of purity), considering it the "prototype for an Islamic republic of letters"[47] and thus complicating the issue of the temporal spaces and borders of his imagined "republic." In any event, before the late nineteenth century, modern literary conceptions had not as yet penetrated Arabic literature, and therefore it is important that the particular characteristics of the "twelfth through the eighteenth centuries" and how they can be distinguished from those of other periods, both previous and subsequent, be fleshed out. Here, theoretical studies dealing with periodization, as mentioned above, may help as well as contributions by other scholars of Arabic literature who have dealt with this issue. For example, in the introduction to *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period* (2006), Roger Allen, the most prominent and experienced contemporary scholar in the field of Arabic literature, eloquently explains in detail why the volume he edited with D. S. Richards treats "the vast period between approximately 1150 and 1850 as a separate entity."[48] In addition, in my recent book, I deal with the topic of periodization from a *literary* point of view, and the parameters I use to distinguish between periods may also be relevant to al-Musawi's research project.[49]

4. Territorial, Physical, and Metaphorical Spaces

Casanova's book, on which al-Musawi relies, is concerned with what one might call the "geopolitics of literature." In his review of the book, Terry Eagleton writes the following:

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[46] Al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 1.

[47] Ibid., 15.

[48] Allen and Richards, *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period,* 20. For a review article of the book, see Thomas Bauer, "In Search of 'Post-Classical Literature': A Review Article," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 11, no. 2 (2007): 137–67. And see as well the response of Salma Khadra Jayyusi, whose article in the book was described by Bauer (p. 159) as falling "far short of scholarly standards" (Salma Khadra Jayyusi, "Response to Thomas Bauer," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 12, no. 1 [2008]: 193–207).

[49] See Snir, *Modern Arabic Literature,* 176–81.

> Literary works, so it claims, are never fully intelligible in them-selves; instead, you have to see them as belonging to a global liter-ary space, which has a basis in the world's political landscape, but which also cuts across its regions and borders to form a distinctive republic of its own. Like geopolitical space, this literary republic has its frontiers, provinces, exiles, legislators, migrations, subor-dinate territories and an unequal distribution of resources. It is a form of intellectual commerce in which literary value is banked and circulated, or transferred from one national currency to an-other in the act of translation … like the political sphere, too, the republic of letters is wracked by struggle, rivalry and inequality be-tween the literary haves and the have-nots. There are "peripheral" or "impoverished" literary spheres … Such underdeveloped pockets are poor in literary capital, lacking publishers, libraries, journals and professional writers. Dominating their cultural resources is Old Europe, with its literary capital located firmly in Paris.[50]

Al-Musawi refers to Cairo of the post-classical era as the literary capital of the medieval Islamic republic of letters—a "cosmopolitan" city by virtue of its place and by virtue of its being a "nexus that witnesses a dialogue among schools of thought, scholastic controversies, scientific achievements, poetic innovations and shifts in expression, the massive use of prose for statecraft, and soaring heights of Sufi poetry that simultaneously derive and refract worldliness from common tropes."[51] In addition, "the influx of scholars, poets, travelers, and entrepreneurs continued markedly into the nineteenth century and played a significant role in giving the city its cosmopolitan features." Scholars from all over the Islamic world "settled in Cairo or at least stopped there for a while. Others were satisfied with an imaginary stopover, which was sustained and given shape through Sufi

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[50] *New Statesman,* 11 April 2005, http://www.newstatesman.com/node/198469 (accessed 30 Octo-ber 2017).

[51] In his review of al-Musawi's book, Mohammad Salama argues that "one of the book's persua-sive arguments is that we give Egypt, especially Cairo, its long overdue literary recognition that Casanova assigns exclusively to Paris" ("Bridging the Gap," 2). However, it seems that al-Musawi does not see Paris and Cairo as competing on the same track; he argues that Cairo "stood to the postclassical Islamic world *as* Paris stood to Europe" (al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 7 [my emphasis]). In his over-praising of al-Musawi's book and wholesale adoption of his arguments, Salama attributes to al-Musawi several achievements and accomplishments that the latter had never wished or intended to realize. For example, Salama writes that al-Musawi criticizes Casanova for resorting to "Eurocentric statements" and then quotes a sentence by al-Musawi regarding Paris (p. 2) which can by no means be understood as critical of Casanova. Salama's review of the book, which lacks critical perspective, is typical of most if not all the reviews of al-Musawi's studies during the last two decades (see below).

networks and an innovative reliance on the antecedent tradition of poetry and writing." Additionally, Cairo escaped destruction and as "a safe enclave, it functioned in a way similar to its multiplying compendiums and lexicons."

However, can we *truly* consider Cairo to be a "cosmopolitan space," as al-Musawi argues, against the backdrop of his own argument that following the fall of Baghdad the "Arab center could not hold for long"? Al-Musawi does admit that the emergence of "an alternative center in Cairo was accepted, but not as wholeheartedly as had been the case with Baghdad."[52] Here, the status of Paris in Casanova's model, from which al-Musawi drew his inspiration to refer to Cairo as cosmopolitan, is very important. In Casanova's view, because of its long accumulation of literary prestige and its relative freedom from political concerns, Paris serves as the Greenwich Meridian of literature, which "makes it possible to estimate the relative distance from the center of the world of letters of all those who belong to it."[53] Casanova and Moretti have tried to establish new paradigms that recreate a globalist literary discourse and a systematic apparatus that can render a literary world comprehensible while distancing itself from the discourse of postcolonial studies. The aim, as Silvia L. López correctly mentions, is to "reinstate models of a global understanding of literary production that have in the long run a depoliticizing effect, be this achieved through the adoption of an empirical Darwinian model of the evolution of literary forms or through the redeployment of the concept of literary autonomy, this time with all the clocks set to the Greenwich Meridian."[54] Cairo, however, can by no means be considered as the Greenwich Meridian of Arabic literature during the post-classical or pre-modern period.

For Casanova's republic, the central hypothesis is that "there exists a 'literature-world,' a literary universe relatively independent of the everyday world and its political divisions, whose boundaries and operational laws are not reducible to those of ordinary political space."[55] In short, it has its own specific politics. That being said, the "literature-world" is not, as Joe Cleary explains in his review of Casanova's book, "some free-floating cosmopolitan cultural zone that transcends or is independent of political space either." It has "its own capitals, its own core and peripheral cultural regions, and its own laws of canonization and capital accumulation."[56] We can measure the power, prestige, and volume of linguistic and literary capital of a language not in terms of "the number of writers and readers it has, but in terms of the number of cosmopolitan intermediaries—publishers, editors, critics, and especially translators—who assure the circulation of texts

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[52] Al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 6–7, 45–46, 51, 71, 25, and 132, respectively.

[53] Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters,* 88.

[54] López, "Dialectical Criticism," 70.

[55] Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters,* xii.

[56] Cleary, "The World Literary System," 199.

into language or out of it." In addition, "the great, often polyglot, cosmopolitan figures of the world of letters act in effect as foreign exchange brokers, responsible for exporting from one territory to another texts whose literary value they determine by virtue of this very activity."[57]

Theoretical research on the topic of cosmopolitanism has seen significant developments during recent decades, including its use in relation to the Middle East; this has been shown concerning Alexandria as a cosmopolitan city at the turn of the twentieth century and concerning subsequent periods, such as the developments and changes following the "cosmopolitan turn" and the intensified globalization during the last decades.[58] It is assumed that there is a need for certain urban, social, and cultural dimensions for a city to be considered as cosmopolitan or for a global society to have cosmopolitan features. Also, as it has been proven in various societies, cosmopolitanism in general, certainly in the pre-globalization world, is the product of very limited periods, certainly not of long periods of six or seven centuries.[59] Such was the case, for example, with Baghdad after its establishment in 762, when the city enjoyed, for a limited time span, a pluralistic and multiconfessional atmosphere with multicultural ethnic and religious gatherings of Muslims, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, pagans, Arabs, Persians, and various other Asian populations. That cosmopolitan atmosphere was inspired by the leadership of the caliph al-Manṣūr (r. 754–75), who from Baghdad propagated an open and multicultural policy toward religious minorities.[60] The political, religious, and cultural supremacy of Baghdad as the center of the flowering of al-Manṣūr's Islamic empire encouraged and inspired the multicultural environment not only in the city itself, but also throughout other cities, close and remote alike. A contemporary text describing typical gatherings that would take place in the southern city of Basra in the year 156 (772–73) may serve to illustrate such a pluralistic environment (the fact that those gatherings were held in Basra, the site of the production of the aforementioned encyclopedic work *Ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ,* which was depicted by al-Musawi as a "prototype for an Islamic republic of letters," is not a coincidence):

> Khalaf ibn al-Muthannā related: Ten persons used to meet in Basra regularly. There was no equivalent to this gathering for the diversi-

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[57]Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters,* 21.

[58]Snir, *Modern Arabic Literature,* 267–69. And see now also David Tal, "Jacqueline Kahanoff and the Demise of the Levantine," *Mediterranean Historical Review* 32 (2017): 237–54, where the author connects cosmopolitanism with the term "Levantinism."

[59]Cf. Snir, *Modern Arabic Literature,* 267.

[60]Françoise Micheau, "Baghdad in the Abbasid Era: A Cosmopolitan and Multi-Confessional Capital," in *The City in the Islamic World,* Salma K. Jayyusi (gen. ed.) and Renata Holod et al. (spec. eds.) (Leiden, 2008), 219–45.

ty of the religions and sects of its members: al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad—a *sunnī* (Sunni), and al-Sayyid ibn Muḥammad al-Ḥimyarī—*rāfiḍī* (Shiite), and Ṣāliḥ ibn ʿAbd al-Qaddūs—*thanawī* (dualist), and Sufyān ibn Mujāshiʿ—*ṣufrī* (Khārijī), and Bashshār ibn Burd—morally depraved and impudent, and Ḥammād ʿAjrad—*zindīq* (heretic), and the exilarch's son—a Jew, and Ibn Naẓīr—*mutakallim al-naṣārá* (a Christian theologian), and ʿAmrū the nephew of al-Muʾayyad—*majūsī* (Zoroastrian), and Rawḥ ibn Sinān al-Ḥarrānī—*ṣābiʾī* (Gnostic). At these gatherings, they used to recite poems, and Bashshār used to say: your verses, O man, are better than *sūrah* this or that [of the Quran], and from that kind of joking and similar things, they declared Bashshār to be a disbeliever.[61]

Not in its literary heritage, and nowhere in the historical chronicles of Cairo, could we find any text related to similar pluralistic "cosmopolitan" gatherings.[62] Notwithstanding the fact that the glorious and multicultural cosmopolitan image of Baghdad concealed a day-to-day reality of a city which suffered from all kinds of difficulties and troubles, just like any other medieval city, its cosmopolitan na-

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[61]Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-Islām wa-wafāyāt al-mashāhīr wa-al-aʿlām, ḥawādith wa-wafāyāt 141–160H,* ed. ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Salām Tadmurī (Beirut, 1988), 383. For another version of this episode, see Jamāl al-Dīn ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-nujūm al-zāhirah fī mulūk Miṣr wa-al-Qāhirah* (Cairo, 1930), 2:29 (= 1992 edition, 2:36–37). On that liberal cultural atmosphere, see also Yāqūt, *Muʿjam al-Udabāʾ* (Beirut, 1991), 3:242–44. On the atmosphere of freethinking in Basra and on the participants in such gatherings, see also Ibn Warraq, *Why I Am Not a Muslim* (Amherst, NY, 2003), 254–56. Ibn Warraq (b. 1946) is the pen name of a secularist author of Pakistani origin and founder of the Institute for the Secularization of Islamic Society; he believes that the great Islamic civilizations of the past were established in spite of the Quran, not because of it, and that only a secularized Islam can deliver Muslim states from "fundamentalist madness." On an open debate in the classical Muslim world, which included Jews, see Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Ḥumaydī, *Jadhwat al-muqtabis fī Tārīkh ʿUlamāʾ al-Andalus,* ed. Ibrāhīm al-Abyārī (Cairo and Beirut, 1989), 1:175–76; Walter J. Fischel, "'Resh-Galuta' (*Raʾs al-Jālūt*) in Arabic Literature," in *Sefer Magnes* (English title: *Magnes Anniversary Book*), ed. F. I. Baer et al. (Jerusalem, 1938), 181–87; Duncan B. MacDonald, *Development of Muslim Theology, Jurisprudence and Constitutional Theory* (Lahore, 1960 [1903]), 194; Salo Wittmayer Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (Philadelphia, 1957), 5:83–85; and Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis under Early Islam* (Princeton, 1995), 113, and the references in n. 71.

[62]The closest text we found is about the Fatimid vizier of Jewish origin Yaʿqūb ibn Killis (930–91), a gifted administrator and a lover of Arabic belles lettres who wrote books on Islamic law and the Quran; he used to hold weekly Tuesday gatherings, *majlis* sessions, at home and provided stipends for scholars, writers, poets, jurists, theologians, and master artisans participating in them. Fridays he would convene sessions at which he would read his own works (Mark R. Cohen and Sasson Somekh, "In the Court of Yaʿqūb ibn Killis: A Fragment from the Cairo Genizah," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 80, nos. 3–4 [1990]: 283–314).

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ture remained in the Arab cultural imagination for many centuries to come, but was not for a long period a reality on the ground. For example, European travelers visiting Baghdad during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries reported that several of its quarters were neglected, although the city was still at the time a center of commerce with an international atmosphere, where three main languages (Arabic, Persian, and Turkish) were spoken. Even during the 1920s and 1930s, as well as during the 1960s, Baghdad was known for its remarkable religious tolerance, multicultural atmosphere, and ability to bear witness to the peaceful coexistence of all of its inhabitants,[63] but this was for very short periods.

Also, al-Musawi argues that the pervasive Islamic consciousness that takes the Arabic language as its pivotal point seems more important here than a metropolitan-peripheral demarcation:

> Under precarious and ever-shifting politics, centers at any given time may be replaced by other centers, and scholars are compelled to develop their own counterstrategies in a vast Islamic domain where theological studies hold sway. Thus, the issue of centers and peripheries is secondary in relation to cultural activity.[64]

Apart from the premise that the very use of the term "republic of letters" demands the adoption of the center-periphery binary, it seems unlikely that the issue of centers and peripheries could be "secondary in relation to cultural activity" in any "republic of letters." Studies of the hierarchy of cultural activities indicate that the idea of any literary or cultural system is based on the hypothesis that, although the activities within a periphery, any periphery, essentially differ from those at the center, all cultural activities should be taken into account—those of the center as well as those of the periphery.[65] According to Casanova's study, Paris established itself as the center, namely, as the city with the most literary prestige on the face of the earth: "The exceptional concentration of *literary* sources that occurred in Paris over the course of several centuries gradually led to its recognition as the center of the *literary* world."[66] Quoting this very sentence, al-Musawi writes that "such description is no less applicable to Cairo; it stood to the postclassical Islamic world as Paris stood to Europe,"[67] but no scholar of Arab-Islamic

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[63]Diane Duclos, "Cosmopolitanism and Iraqi Migration: Artists and Intellectuals from the 'Sixties and Seventies Generations' in Exile," in *Writing the Modern History of Iraq: Historiographical and Political Challenges,* ed. Jordi Tejel et al. (Hackensack, NJ, 2012), 391–401. See also Reuven Snir, *Baghdad—The City in Verse* (Cambridge, MA, 2013), 5–8.

[64]Al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 2.

[65]As proposed in Snir, *Modern Arabic Literature,* 35–99.

[66]Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters,* 54 (my emphasis).

[67]Al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 7.

civilization can testify to that. Moreover, al-Musawi does not refer only to *literary* texts and activities, for he states that his "interdisciplinary critique conforms to a contemporaneous definition of the term *adab,* one through which aesthetics, the sciences, and crafts of professions transform the cultural landscape at the same time as they undergo ruptures and shifts."[68] In Chapter 6, al-Musawi refers to an ancient definition for the same term that was offered by Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm Ibn al-Akfānī (d. 1348) in the translation of George Makdisi (1920–2002):

> *Adab* is a field of knowledge by virtue of which mutual understanding of what is in the minds is acquired through word-signs and writing. The word and writing are its subject-matter with respect to their communication of ideas. Its benefit is that it discloses intentions in the mind of one person, communicating them to another person, present or absent. *Adab* is the ornament of the tongue, and of the finger tips. By virtue of *adab,* man is distinguished from the rest of the animals. I have begun with *adab* because it is the first element of perfection; he who is devoid of it will not achieve perfection through any of the other human perfections.[69]

Al-Musawi adds the following:

> The term *adab* refers to both a field and a practice, meaning that there is a littérateur, *adīb,* who is distinctly different from the "scientist" or *ʿālim,* especially when both terms can be inclusive of all learned people … Throughout the course of Islamic history and before the advent of a European modernity, the term *adab* as literature was inclusive of poetry and prose but not restricted to them. Its semantic field included refinement and good manners, in the tradition of the notion of *belles lettres,* while at the same time partaking of an all-inclusive network of knowledge with no specific boundaries. It was only with the arrival of European modernity through colonization or incorporation that *adab* became institutionalized as a term referring specifically to literary writing, a process mediated through colleges fashioned after French and British models, all the way to the Higher Teachers' Colleges in Egypt and later Baghdad. Those colleges also happened to include among

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[68] Ibid., 14.

[69] George Makdisi, *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West* (Edinburgh, 1990), 93. It is quoted from Ibn al-Akfānī's *Kitāb irshād al-qāṣid ilá asná al-maqāṣid,* ed. Maḥmūd Fākhūrī et al. (Beirut, 1998), 18. Cf. al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 180–81, where Makdisi's translation is quoted, according to al-Musawi, "with some editorial changes" (369, n. 7), which, in my view, are unnecessary.

their graduates the most influential literary figures associated with literary modernity.[70]

Unlike Casanova, and because there is no equation between *belles lettres* and *adab* in its pre-modern sense, al-Musawi argues that the pre-modern Islamic republic is not merely *literary.*[71] With respect to *adab* in its *modern* sense—the *literary* dimensions of cultural production—one can perhaps agree that Cairo in the modern period, at least during the first half of the twentieth century,[72] stood in relation to the Arab world as Paris did to Europe. However, there is no consensus among scholars regarding Cairo as the *literary* center throughout the time span of the post-classical Islamic era, particularly against the backdrop of the fragmentization of the Arab literary center after the fall of Baghdad.

Also, it is difficult to write about any "republic of letters" in the post-classical era without being aware of several significant studies in the field of world literature, including Janet Abu-Lughod's *Before European Hegemony.* In her book, Abu-Lughod deals with the formation of a "world system" in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, referring to the network of contacts from northwest Europe to China across the Middle East and India. This system consisted of eight subsystems; the Middle East was a geographic fulcrum with strategic world cities like Baghdad and Cairo. They stood out "as dual imperial centers, but their linkages through overland and sea routes tied them selectively to an 'archipelago' of hinterlands."[73]

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[70] Al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 181–82 (for other references and indications for the term *adab,* see also 369–70, n. 7). See also George Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh, 1981), 79, 214, 306–7, 309; and the numerous mentions in Makdisi, *The Rise of Humanism* (see index). On *adab* and the tradition of Islamic encyclopedic writing, see Elias Muhanna, *The World in a Book: Al-Nuwayri and the Islamic Encyclopedic Tradition* (Princeton, 2017), 7–11, 38–42.

[71] It is important in this regard to mention the view that the Arabic concept of *adab* carries much the same sense as eighteenth-century French literature: "learning and good breeding" (D'haen, *World Literature,* 321).

[72] See Reuven Snir, *Arabness, Jewishness, Zionism: A Struggle of Identities in the Literature of Iraqi Jews* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 2005), 75, n. 192. See also the findings that came out of a special project initiated by the Egyptian magazine *Al-risālah* in 1936: writers from all over the Arab world were asked to report on the state of the "literary life" *(al-ḥayāh al-adabīyah)* in their region. This report was published in successive issues *Al-risālah;* most of the reports mentioned the central status of Egypt in Arabic culture and the marginality of other regions (cf. Snir, *Modern Arabic Literature,* 151n, 168n, 246n).

[73] Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System, A.D. 1250–1350* (New York, 1989), 14. And see now the important book of Michael Allan, *In the Shadow of World Literature: Sites of Reading in Colonial Egypt* (Princeton, 2016), and the insightful review of it by Hoda El Sharky in *Journal of Arabic Literature* 48 (2017): 327–49.

5. The Corpus

Unlike the body of texts investigated in Casanova's model, the "extensive corpus" of texts that al-Musawi examines "through various lenses"[74] and the potential texts that he considers as belonging to his "republic" do not include only *literary* texts, as we have just seen from the latter's definition of the term *adab.* Notwithstanding my view that, like Plato's ideal republic, a republic of letters is something that can only exist in literature,[75] when the texts al-Musawi deals with are *literary*—whatever definition of the term is adopted—they are in fact largely limited to what I describe in my book as non-canonical literature.[76] Indeed, because of the diglossia that exists in the Arabic language, there is no doubt that literary production in *ʿāmmīyah* should be an important part of the Arabic corpus in any "Islamic republic of letters." Such non-canonical production has unfortunately been largely ignored by most "canonical" scholarship, and from this point of view, al-Musawi's study is very important against the backdrop of traditional scholarship, especially in its refusal to ignore literary texts in *ʿāmmīyah* within their relevant contexts. Arabic underwent, as al-Musawi correctly writes, "some of its most serious transformations … in the form of nonclassical modes and practices" as well as the "upsurge of the so-called *ʿāmmī* (colloquial) poetry." And, "There was an equally large production of works of *lesser merit* over these centuries, which were intended to nourish a broad populace in quest of knowledge." No less important is the awareness that these activities "are no less foundational for cultural capital than the belletristic cultural tradition" and that, along with bringing canonical works into communal use, poetry and rhetoric "are no longer the monopoly of the elite."[77] The cultural creativity of the "street" (quotation marks in the original) and popular responses to literature are mentioned as "part of this vibrant encounter and unfolding" within the "republic of letters" and are contrasted with the literary production of "scholars and other elites."[78] This "cultural creativity" refers to popular performances in public urban spaces such as markets, mosques, hospices, and colleges, as well as Sufi *dhikr,* mourning rituals, festivities, and epics (along with an increasing awareness in compendiums of such activities).[79] All

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[74] Al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 8.

[75] Partly because, as Jacques Derrida argues, literature can be thought of as being "the institution which allows one to *say everything, in every way*" ("This Strange Institution Called Literature: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, in *Acts of Literature,* ed. Derek Attridge [London, 1992], 36).

[76] Snir, *Modern Arabic Literature,* 65–89.

[77] Al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 7, 11 (my emphasis), 50, and 166–67, respectively.

[78] Ibid., 9, 43, and 62.

[79] Ibid., 17–18, 48–50, 79, 120, 270–72, 298–303.

these activities allude to the "democratization of space as a central characteristic of the republic of letters" and the "increasing power of the Arab-Islamic street."[80] Also, the "street," understood as the language of the common people, "made its way into the writing and compilations of highly recognized scholars and poets." The "street" is "the stage on which the body and its physiological expressions in terms of eating and drinking practices are given free rein, which takes them far beyond normative conservative restraints."[81] According to al-Musawi, the republic of letters transcends the boundaries of learned scholars and reaches into the very fringes of society:

> Nonclassical poetic subgenres, especially the ones with street registers, cover the lands of Islam from Andalusia and North Africa to Mosul in the North of Iraq and bring into circulation words, images, and rhythms that also raise serious questions regarding the efforts of current scholarship to assign specific geographical and territorial locations and identities to popular literature.[82]

Also, the republic of letters "was forced to expand its parameters so as to host the street, and it did so in the relative absence of the court, whose role as a literary and cultural center had diminished since the decline of the caliphate."[83]

Unfortunately, no chapter of al-Musawi's book focuses on the genres *zajal* or *muwashshaḥ.* Also, various popular cultural activities of the period, such as the semi-theatrical forms of entertainment, should have been mentioned.[84] One of the literary works included in the non-canonical corpus that al-Musawi examined is the *Thousand and One Nights,* on which he had already published extensively.[85]

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[80] Ibid., 43 and 119–20, respectively. On "street poetry," see 263–70.

[81] Ibid., 245 and 286, respectively.

[82] Ibid., 134.

[83] Ibid., 263.

[84] See, for example, Shmuel Moreh, *Live Theatre and Dramatic Literature in the Medieval Arabic World* (Edinburgh, 1992); and Reuven Snir, "Al-ʿanāṣir al-masraḥīyah fī al-turāth al-shaʿbī al-ʿarabī al-qadīm," *Al-Karmal: Abḥāth fī al-lughah wa-al-adab* 14 (1993): 149–70. In his book, al-Musawi mentions incidentally and cursorily the assemblies and memorial processions and practices to commemorate the tragedy at the Battle of Karbalāʾ in 680, which "possessed sufficient resilience to resist elite censorship or repression," and scholars tend to regard them as being separate from literary culture. Brief mentions are also made of several popular epics (pp. 48–50) and of *khayāl al-ẓill* (puppet shadow theater) (p. 26).

[85] See, for example, *Scheherazade in England: A Study of Nineteenth-Century English Criticism of the Arabian Nights* (Washington, DC, 1981); *Alf laylah wa-laylah fī naẓarīyat al-adab al-inklīzī* (Beirut, 1986); *Mujtamaʿ alf laylah wa-laylah* (Tunis, 2000); *The Islamic Context of the Thousand and One Nights* (New York, 2009); and *Al-dhākirah al-shaʿbīyah li-mujtamaʿāt alf laylah wa-laylah: Al-sard wa-marjaʿīyatuhu al-tārīkhīyah wa-ālīyatuhu* (Beirut, 2016). On the growth of modern Arabic fic-

But al-Musawi uses these stories only for thematic purpose, such as for "a testimony to the power of knowledge." When referring to their "successful entry into Europe," he should have noted that their entry into Europe would later be the cause of the gradual change of their status in the Arabic literary system.[86] The emergence of popular genres and the achievements of the "street" poets and writers in the post-classical era justify the rejection of the Orientalist discourse regarding the decadence and decline of Arab culture during this period.[87] That very Orientalist discourse reflects the paradigm that sees political changes as pivotal in their effects on cultural life. For example, the destruction of Baghdad in 1258 by Hulagu has been unjustifiably engraved on the Arabs' memory as the fundamental reason for what was seen as the destruction of their great medieval civilization and the cause of its cultural stagnation until the renaissance *(nahḍah)* in the nineteenth century.[88] Prompted by European Orientalists, Arabs placed emphasis on the descriptions of the killing of many of the local scholars and men of letters by the Mongol army, the demolition of cultural institutions, the burning of libraries, the throwing of books into the Tigris, and the using of these books as a bridge to cross the river. While I was writing the introduction for *Baghdad—The City in Verse* (2013), I encountered many such texts in historical narratives and literary histories, as well as in a variety of other sources in both poetry and prose. Furthermore, modern Arab officials have used the devastation caused by Hulagu for their own "patriotic" aims, one prominent example of this being the late Egyptian president Gamāl ʿAbd al-Nāṣir (1918–70). In another example, a high-level Syrian government official was even quoted as saying, "in deadly earnest," that "if the Mongols had not burnt the libraries of Baghdad in the thirteenth century, we Arabs would have had so much science, that we would long since have invented the atomic bomb. The plundering of Baghdad put us back centuries."[89]

The emphasis laid by al-Musawi on non-canonical literature is a very fresh approach to the scholarship of Arabic literature—my book provides the rationale and reasoning for the inclusion of non-canonical production from the point of

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tion against the background of the increasing interest in *Thousand and One Nights,* see also al-Musawi's *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel: Debating Ambivalence* (Leiden, 2003).

[86] Al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 12 and 12, 311, respectively. On this, see also the references in Snir, *Modern Arabic Literature,* 91n, 93n.

[87] Al-Musawi mentions briefly, without any detailed elaboration, popular epics such as *Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan, Al-amīrah Dhāt al-Himmah, Al-sīrah al-hilālīyah,* and *Al-Ẓāhir Baybars* (p. 50); the colloquial *mawwāl* (p. 96); and the *zajal* (p. 126).

[88] On this, see Allen, "The Post-Classical Period: Parameters and Preliminaries," 13: "[W]ithin a literary-historical context the year 1258 cannot serve as a useful divide … the most significant processes of change in that context belong to an earlier period."

[89] On Hulagu's destruction of Baghdad and what has been engraved in the Arabs' collective memory, see Snir, *Baghdad,* 26–31.

view of aesthetic legitimization as well as from the standpoint of the actual people who are constituent of Arab culture.[90] Nevertheless, the "layered structure," according to al-Musawi, which held together the "seemingly disparate modes of writing, rewriting, compilation, revision, commentary, and disputation in nearly every field of knowledge,"[91] seems to be incomplete and unbalanced, as there is paradoxically almost *no mention* of what was considered in the pre-modern period to be *canonical* poetry and prose. This absence in such a study that aspires to explore "the large-scale and *diverse* cultural production in Arabic in the postclassical era" (my emphasis) is unjustifiable, certainly when it is expected to inspire the new generation of scholars of pre-modern Arabic literature. A brief look at the contents of *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period* (2006) reveals the wealth of "elite poetry" and "elite prose" that existed side by side with "popular poetry" and "popular prose."[92] Thomas Bauer's contributions in this regard are extremely important.[93]

6. The "Revolutionary Vernacularizing Thrust"

Al-Musawi argues that the concentration of scholars, authors, and copyists in Cairo and other Islamic centers valorized Arabic but also prompted what he calls, borrowing Casanova's words, the "revolutionary vernacularizing thrust" noticeable throughout the Islamic world. Al-Musawi refers to that "thrust" as making

> heavy use of lexical transmission, appropriation, and transference of Arabic grammar, rhetoric, and poetics. National languages also brought into Arabic their own distinctive traits … Arabic itself underwent some of its most serious transformations, in the form of nonclassical modes and practices that were theorized by several prominent scholars, and in the upsurge of the so-called *ʿāmmī* (colloquial) poetry. Hence, in spite of linguistic divergence, a common Islamic literary, theological, and symbolic field emerged that warrants the present discussion of an Islamic republic of letters. The

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[90] See Snir, *Modern Arabic Literature,* 14–19.

[91] Al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 8.

[92] Allen and Richards, *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period,* v–vi. See also Allen, "The Post-Classical Period: Parameters and Preliminaries," 17–21.

[93] See, for example, Thomas Bauer, "Mamluk Literature: Misunderstandings and New Approaches," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 9, no. 2 (2005): 105–32; and idem, "In Search of 'Post-Classical Literature,'" 137–67. See also a special issue of *Annales Islamologiques* (49 [2016]) under the title "Arabic Literature, 1200–1800: A New Orientation," edited by Monica Balda-Tillier and Adam Talib.

massive production that *has unsettled Arab modernists* attests to this cultural space.[94]

I will refer below to al-Musawi's campaign against the "modernists," which "necessitates" his argument that "the massive production [has] unsettled Arab modernists," and only concentrate here on his approach to the "vernacularizing thrust." Casanova, while engaging the prior work of Benedict Anderson on nationalism,[95] speaks of the "revolutionary vernacularizing thrust of capitalism" as the first stage in the genesis of a *world literary space* that "saw the exclusive use of Latin among educated men give way first to a demand for intellectual recognition of vulgar tongues, then to the creation of modern literatures claiming to compete with the grandeur of ancient literatures."[96] The second major stage in the enlargement of the literary world, according to Casanova, corresponds to the "philological-lexicographic revolution" that saw the appearance in Europe of new nationalist movements associated with the invention or reinvention of national languages and the creation of popular literatures. The third and final stage was the process of decolonization, which marked "the entry into international competition of contestants who until then had been prevented from taking part."[97] Almost nothing of these three stages exists in al-Musawi's analysis of the genesis of world *Islamic* literary space. Here, it is instructive to refer to Abdelfattah Kilito's important observation regarding the importance of understanding the literary output of the post-classical period on its own terms, because it is relevant in the present context:

> To us it seems more appropriate to regard Arabic poetics on its own terms and so to avoid treating the subject as some kind of deviation from a model realized in other times and under other skies. The governing principle should be derived from characteristics that are intrinsic to it, not those of works from some other poetics.[98]

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[94] Al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 7 (my emphasis).

[95] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York, 1991), 39.

[96] Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters,* 47–48.

[97] Ibid., 48.

[98] Abdelfattah Kilito, *Les séances: récits et codes culturels chez Hamadhani et Hariri* (Paris, 1983), 136; translation according to Allen, "The Post-Classical Period: Parameters and Preliminaries," 20. For the Arabic translation, see Abdelfattah Kilito, *Al-maqāmāt: Al-sard wa-al-ansāq al-thaqāfīyah,* trans. ʿAbd al-Kabīr al-Sharqāwī (Casablanca, 1993), 114. Cf. Christina Phillips, "An Attempt to Apply Gérard Genette's Model of Hypertextuality to Najīb Maḥfūẓ's *Malḥamat al-Ḥarāfīsh,*" *Middle Eastern Literatures* 11, no. 3 (2008): 297. For the need for "homegrown modernity" and the issue of extroversion and introversion, see Helgesson, "Tayeb Salih, Sol Plaatje, and the Trajectories of World Literature," 253–60. See also Ronit Ricci, *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and*

In this regard, the experience of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., concerning black discourse of criticism is illuminating:

> The Western critical tradition has a canon, as the Western literary tradition does. I once thought it our most important gesture to *master* the canon of criticism, to *imitate* and *apply* it, but I now believe that we must turn to the black tradition itself to develop theories of criticism indigenous to our literatures.[99]

7. The Role of Sufism

Al-Musawi frequently mentions the challenge posed to dominant ways of thought through the agency of Sufism because it "involved a liberated sensibility in a loving God's universe" and because it was "a challenge to official schools of thought since it disturbs and unsettles their paradigms of self-righteousness and dogma."[100] Also, "Sufi terminology strips language of its denotative role and sets it free. Words and nature leave their signifiers behind and assume new life in the soaring of the liberated Sufi experience, which may be seen as a partial anticipation of *postmodern musings on madness and poetry.*" Sufi orders as well "turned Sufism into *a poetic enterprise and practice in a God-loving universe … its* significance for the republic of letters extends even beyond its deconstruction

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the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* (Chicago, 2011). Unlike al-Musawi, who posits his analysis as a counter-narrative to the European impact on Arabic literary modernity, Ricci deals with the inter-Asian travels of Arabic and brings into focus an Arabic cosmopolis in south and southeast Asia, underscoring as well "the power of literature to create, enable, and sustain far-reaching transformation" (Ronit Ricci, "World Literature and Muslim Southeast Asia," in *The Routledge Companion to World Literature,* ed. Theo D'haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir [London and New York, 2014], 504. Cf. Ganguly, "Polysystems Redux," 278–79). See also Thomas Bauer's suggestion concerning the need to "listen patiently to Mamluk authors and carefully analyze their texts, to elucidate their own aesthetic standards, and judge their texts by this rather than apply a yardstick of heroism that does not match the participational aesthetics of the Mamluk middle class" (Thomas Bauer, "'Ayna Hādhā min al-Mutanabbī!': Toward an Aesthetics of Mamluk Literature," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 17 [2013]: 21–22. Cf. Bauer, "In Search of 'Post-Classical Literature,'" 144). In her review article of the aforementioned Allen and Richards, *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period* (2006), and Khaled al-Rouayheb's *Before Homosexuality in the Arabic-Islamic World 1500–1800* (Chicago, 2005), Hilary Kilpatrick emphasizes "the need to abandon modern concepts that stand in the way of understanding the texts and contexts of the period under discussion, and to analyse perceptively the terms used by the people of the time" ("Beyond Decadence: Dos and Don'ts in Studying Mamluk and Ottoman Literature," *Middle Eastern Literatures* 12, no. 1 [2009]: 78).

[99] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Editor's Introduction: Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985): 13.

[100] Al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 78–79.

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of the prosaic and the mundane; for its striking freedom and newness in vision and illumination also necessarily downplay structures of authority and power." [101] Because I have extensively written on the intersection between Arabic literature and Sufism from the latter's rise until the second half of the twentieth century, [102] I can say here that one must distinguish between the role of early Sufism in reviving Arab society and culture, the various literary genres included in this revival, and the negative phenomena later attributed to Sufi orders, especially in the premodern period.

8. Identitarian Markers in the Makeup of "Modernity" and the *Naḥḍah* Project

In a follow-up article to his book, al-Musawi refers to three socio-communal markers of formative presence in the makeup of "Arab modernity" and its concretization in the nation-state: first, "the use of a poem from the medieval period to provide the structure and syntax of the Arab national flag in the fight for independence from the Ottomans"; second, "the reclamation of the Mamluk terms of parity between state administration and the role of the intelligentsia"; and third, "the generation of lexical conversation and lexicographic production with deep roots in both genealogical tradition and rhetorical ancestry." According to al-Musawi, these three instances "are strongly linked to identitarian politics and hence also raise questions regarding the complexity of the so-called Awakening *(naḥḍah)* project, with its many preoccupations, concerns, methodologies, and conspicuous appropriations from colonial culture." Al-Musawi shows how these three markers were deployed in the Arab world at the end of the nineteenth century against a landscape most often "grounded in negativity, shrouding the period in concepts of decadence and loss, blotting it out as unfortunate anticlimax to an otherwise golden age." [103]

The fact that these three "identitarian markers" from the pre-modern period are reproduced in the nineteenth century by intellectuals that contributed to the Arab "awakening" by no means implies *any* overall attitude toward the

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[101] Ibid., 142–43 (my emphasis) and 309 (my emphasis), respectively.

[102] See, for example, my following studies: "Sufi Elements in Modern Arabic Poetry 1940–1980" (in Hebrew) (Ph.D. thesis, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1986); *Rakʿatān fī al-ʿishq: Dirāsah fī shiʿr ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Bayyātī* (Beirut, 2002); and *Religion, Mysticism and Modern Arabic Literature* (Wiesbaden, 2006). On the Sufi experience and on "musings on madness and poetry," which are not necessarily postmodern, see Reuven Snir, "The Poetic Creative Process according to Ṣalāḥ ʿAbd al-Ṣabūr," in *Writer, Culture, Text: Studies in Modern Arabic Literature,* ed. Ami Elad (Fredericton, NB, 1993), 74–88.

[103] Al-Musawi, "The Republic of Letters: Arab Modernity? (Part I)," 272. More details about these markers appear on pp. 272–80.

pre-modern period. On the contrary, these intellectuals found themselves drawn to leading conceptualizations and tropes that "differ in a significant way from the dominant disparagement of the [pre-modern] period" *only because they were glancing unbiasedly toward their past heritage,* choosing and picking what they considered suitable for their contemporary needs. That is why I utterly disagree with al-Musawi's abstruse or simply superfluous argument:

> Unless we are willing to conceive the consolidated and intense conversation at the turn of the nineteenth and early twentieth century between religious thinkers, secularists like Faraḥ Anṭūn and Yaʿqūb Ṣarrūf, and journalists and writers as being a site of vigorous national awareness, we are bound to overlook not only the permeation of the culture of the middle period into the "modernity" project, but also the relevance of the politics of the medieval Islamic republic of letters. Even when seemingly subdued, that earlier cultural tradition, with its many paradigmatic and axial categories, continued to inform the modernity project and at times unsettle its excessive internalization of Western orientations. [104]

This is a one-sided and unbalanced reflection on the culture and politics of "the medieval Islamic republic of letters" and their relevance to the "modernity project" at the turn of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, which unnecessarily overemphasizes the "unsettling" of the "excessive internalization of Western orientations." The most current research on the period has by no means challenged the conception that the "modernity project" used *all means at its disposal* without distinguishing between various orientations and periods.

9. Lexicons and Translation

Referring to the just-mentioned "lexicographic production with deep roots in both genealogical tradition and rhetorical ancestry," in Chapter 3 of his book al-Musawi writes about the "lexicographic turn in cultural capital." The diligence shown by scholars during the nineteenth century in their pursuit of lexicography and the deep roots of their production in both genealogical tradition and rhetorical ancestry are presented against the backdrop of massive lexicons and encyclopedic dictionaries composed across the Islamic lands during the pre-modern period. The scholarly and academic neglect of this "lexicographic turn," according to al-Musawi, speaks to an "educational failure":

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[104] Al-Musawi, "The Republic of Letters: Arab Modernity? (Part I)," 275.

> The textual archeological archive, visible at its clearest in its lexical component, is usually bypassed in modern academic discussions, not only inside the Arab world but also in Western academies that instead are exclusively focused on periodicals, narratives, and text-based disciplines. People tend to forget that the lexicographical presence presupposes not only grammatical and linguistic knowledge, but also a full-scale corpus of aural and literate culture.[105]

Al-Musawi's attitude toward lexicographic production, however, is by no means consistent. Referring, for example, to Edward William Lane's (1801–76) efforts in producing his lexicon, al-Musawi writes that the "purpose and expediency" behind these efforts could not have been lost on Arab intellectuals and scholars:

> What could be more conducive to *imperial expansion* than the training of its personnel in Arabic and to have *empire philologists* on demand to explain and justify means and notions of *command, control, and ultimate takeover*? … The *empire* generates its interests through a lexical mapping that preserves *verbal utility* in the colonized lands through a pragmatic use of native languages under the positivist drive. In the colonial production of lexicons and their implementation in teaching colonial personnel, *the defining criteria involve utility and interest.*[106]

Against the background of this negative attitude toward the author of one of the best Arabic-English dictionaries in scholarly research, the lexicographic efforts of "early advocates of Arab modernity" to bring Arabic into "the domain of the struggle for independence" are described by al-Musawi in the most favorable terms:

> The link between these initiatives and the earlier lexicographical movement that was so noticeably strong in the middle period is the new emphasis on social groups, their use of language, and their actual practices … From Buṭrus al-Bustānī and al-Shartūnī to Fāris al-Shidyāq and Father Anāstās Mārī al-Kirmilī [*sic*!] and beyond, *the lexicon now became more or less a verbal reconstruction of the nation. In a deft and highly conscious systematization, verbal roots with meanings relevant to nation building increase in number in keeping with needs and priorities.*[107]

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[105] Al-Musawi, "The Republic of Letters: Arab Modernity? (Part II)," 116.

[106] Al-Musawi, "The Republic of Letters: Arab Modernity? (Part I)," 278 (my emphasis).

[107] Ibid., 279 (my emphasis).

This Manichean distinction between the wicked "colonial production of lexicons" and the blessed "verbal reconstruction of the nation" is so biased and one-sided from the academic scholarly point of view that al-Musawi's far-out conceptualizing could not possibly induce any change in the current certitude of serious scholars that Lane's dictionary is irreplaceable, certainly as compared to other relevant dictionaries, among them those mentioned by al-Musawi himself (although Lane died before completing it and the sections completed by his nephew, after the root QD, are not on par with the rest of the book).[108] In line with the post-colonial, or better post-scholarly character of the way al-Musawi discusses this issue, one can be sure that if instead of Edward William Lane the name here had been Anwar Walīd Labadī, he would have never dare utter any critical remark against this dictionary or its author. Exposing another important scholar to the danger of being labeled as an "empire philologist" who should be considered part of "the colonial production of lexicons and their implementation in teaching colonial personnel," I will quote what A. J. Arberry (1905–69) wrote about Lane's dictionary:

> Lane's *Lexicon* is a work of such fundamental importance and of such matchless excellence that praise for it is quite superfluous … It is certainly true to say, that every work produced in this century relating in any way to Arabic studies has drawn heavily upon the *Lexicon*. It is a sufficient tribute to its unique greatness, that to this day it remains supreme in the field of Arabic lexicography: *no scholar or group of scholars has produced anything to supplant it.*[109]

Al-Musawi develops the evil/good dichotomy into what he describes obscurely as "an ironic twist of fortune" whereby paronomasia and antithesis establish a presence in imperial rhetoric, the word *empire* (i.e., lexicons) being put into the service of a world empire, and the word *qāmūs* ("dictionary") itself grew genealogically over time and became "no longer only a container of lexis, but rather a *generator of identity and nationhood.*"[110] However, there is another dimension to this false Manichean distinction, and it concerns al-Musawi's xenophobic attitude toward non-Arab philologists, since this is the only reason for which Lane is described as an "imperial" opportunist, whose scholarly criteria involve nothing but "utility and interest." Had al-Musawi troubled himself to read Lane's scholarship without such prejudices, he would have discovered the great difference

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[108] Arab scholars as well referred to the great merits of Lane's dictionary; see, for example, ʿAdlī Ṭāhir Nūr, *Al-mustashriq al-kabīr Edward William Lane* (Cairo, 1973), 237–54.

[109] A. J. Arberry, *Oriental Essays: Portraits of Seven Scholars* (London, 1960), 116 (my emphasis).

[110] Al-Musawi, "The Republic of Letters: Arab Modernity? (Part I)," 279 (my emphasis) and 280 (my emphasis), respectively.

between Lane, for example, and Richard Burton (1821–90), the translator of the first unexpurgated English version of *Alf Laylah wa-Laylah* (1885–88), who projected, according to Rana Kabbani, every imaginable kind of sexual perversion onto the Orient using the *Arabian Nights* "to express himself, to articulate his sexual preoccupations" as well as to "serve as an occasion for documenting all manner of sexual deviation." Moreover, his fascination with the *Arabian Nights* "was greatly enhanced by the fact that they upheld his own views on women, race and class."[111] On the other hand, Lane was by no means what al-Musawi calls an "empire philologist," as he never offered his services "to explain and justify means and notions of command, control, and ultimate takeover," and his lexicon did not serve to teach "colonial personnel" with the defining criteria involving "utility and interest." Lane explained his decision to translate the *Arabian Nights* as follows:

> I consider myself possessed of the chief qualifications for the proper accomplishment of my present undertaking, from my having lived several years in Cairo, associating almost exclusively with Arabs, speaking their language, conforming to their general habits with the most scrupulous exactitude, and received into their society on terms of perfect equality.[112]

Accordingly, he even saw fit to "domesticate" and "sanitize" the texts of the stories, removing or changing "objectionable" tales and anecdotes—thus rendering them "so as to be perfectly agreeable with Arab manners and customs."[113] Against the negative attitude of al-Musawi toward Lane, certainly inspired by Edward Said's campaign against the "Orientalists," Lane included,[114] here is how Leila Ahmed concludes her study of Lane's life and works and of the British ideas of the Middle East in the nineteenth century:

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[111]Rana Kabbani, *Europe's Myths of Orient: Devise and Rule* (London, 1986), 7, 60–61, and 48, respectively. On the association of the Orient with sexual fantasies, see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London, 1985 [1978]), 190; and Derek Hopwood, *Sexual Encounters in the Middle East: The British, the French, and the Arabs* (Reading, UK, 1999), 180–82. Cf. Snir, *Modern Arabic Literature,* 94.

[112]E. W. Lane, *The Arabian Nights' Entertainments* (New York, 1914 [1859]), 1:xii.

[113]Ibid., 1:xvii. Cf. Sandra Naddaff, "The Thousand and One Nights as World Literature," in D'haen, Damrosch, and Kadir, *The Routledge Companion to World Literature,* 489–90.

[114]Although Said credits Lane as a scholar who used his residence in Egypt "for the specific task of providing professional Orientalism with scientific material," he does not hesitate to write that "[Lane's] identity as counterfeit believer and privileged European is the very essence of bad faith, for the latter undercuts the former in no uncertain way" (Said, *Orientalism,* 157–58 and 161, respectively). For a more balanced attitude toward Lane, see Mansour M. A. Dhabab, "Representations of the Western Other in Early Arabic Novels (1900–1915)" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Leeds, 2005), 56–59.

To disclose a living culture to the members of another, to disclose it so as to show its ways and beliefs as entirely intelligible, to respect, in the presentation of these, their intrinsic validity—to the extent that a native of that culture can assent to the general accuracy of the presentation—is a formidable achievement. It is the more formidable, and the more urgent, in relation to a people and a culture respecting which the author's native culture, as is the case with the Europeans and the peoples of the Near East, possesses a rich and assorted heritage of myths, legends, and emotively highly charged and often hostile traditions. And although the dissipation on [the] literary level of many of the myths and legends relating to the Arab world by no means automatically entailed the eradication of emotional and imaginative attitudes and habits pertaining to it—habits, some of them, ingrained over centuries and so remarkably pertinacious—Lane's work created for his compatriots a clearing within which such attitudes could not easily and openly flourish, and equipped them with the means to thrust further back the darkness. [115]

The issue of translation presents another example of al-Musawi's biased methodology. In his campaign against the "modernists" (to which I will refer in detail below), al-Musawi dedicates long sections to the 1920 preface by Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (1889–1973) to the Arabic version of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's (1749–1832) *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers,* translated from the French by Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Zayyāt (1885–1968), [116] as well as to the issue of translation in general. [117] Referring to Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's preface, al-Musawi writes about the implications of negativism, "as they lead to a *deliberate negligence* on the part of some *nahḍah* scholars to overlook significant and in fact groundbreaking contributions to the theories of translation as laid down by al-Jāḥiẓ, for example." Furthermore, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, to whom al-Musawi refers in the aforementioned quotation, "may be excused for his indiscriminate critique of some nineteenth-century verbosity that sounds jarring enough to those acquainted with Abbasid and European-informed prose writing, [but] there is little reason to justify his *repression* of the Abbasid source on translation." [118] How al-Musawi reached this "insight" is very instructive and may

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[115]Leila Ahmed, *Edward W. Lane: A Study of His Life and Works and of British Ideas of the Middle East in the Nineteenth Century* (London and New York, 1978), 199.

[116]Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Ālām Werther,* trans. Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Zayyāt (Beirut, 1968 [1920]).

[117]Al-Musawi, "The Republic of Letters: Arab Modernity? (Part II)," 121–30.

[118]Al-Musawi, "The Republic of Letters: Arab Modernity? (Part II)," 115 (my emphasis) and 121 (my emphasis), respectively.

give us an illuminative hint about the prejudiced motives of his campaign against the "modernists." The great "sin" of Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, according to al-Musawi, is that in his aforementioned preface he did not mention al-Jāḥiẓ's contributions to the theories of translation. Reading the preface, one cannot understand how several sentences therein, whose general aim is to praise al-Zayyāt for the translation of the book, could have led al-Musawi to build such a house of cards. The preface *was not written for the scholarly community,* but rather for a wider readership, and it was not meant to be a scientific introduction to the book. As it was a popular preface addressed to the common reader, any discussion about theories of translation would have undoubtedly been a troublesome distraction.

10. Extroversion-Introversion and the Impact of "Colonial Modernity"

In his response to al-Musawi's contribution in the "Forum on Literary World Systems" of the *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry,* Stefan Helgesson argues that the crucial theoretical question raised by al-Musawi's study concerns tensions between extroversion and introversion. He summarizes al-Musawi's argument as follows: the *Nahḍah* scholars should have been more introverted—instead of adopting the values and ideals of the European enlightenment, the deep time of the Arab republic of letters when "monographs, massive lexicons, and encyclopedic dictionaries" were produced across the lands of Islam, the writers in question could have supplied the *Nahḍah* with the basis for a homegrown modernity.[119] According to Helgesson, an *attentiveness* to the dynamic relationship between extroversion and introversion affords the most promising theoretical point of departure for a world-literary study that remains alert to the diversity of literatures in the world and yet evades the risk of reifying national or linguistic provenance. Enlisting two examples to illustrate his argument—the Sudanese writer al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ (Tayeb Salih) (1929–2009) and the South African writer Sol Plaatje (1876–1932)—Helgesson concludes his essay with the following:

> What we are learning as we extend the paradigm of world literature beyond hegemonic languages and global centers of (cultural) capital is the inherent potential of reconfiguring the problem not just from within any given geohistorical location, or, for that matter, through a recognition of the diachrony of reception as a "thick" history in its own right, but ultimately by *attending to the combined,*

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[119] Helgesson, "Tayeb Salih, Sol Plaatje, and the Trajectories of World Literature," 254.

contradictory, and proliferating trajectories that shape literature in the world.[120]

Al-Musawi's response to this engagement implies a misunderstanding of Helgesson's argument:

> For a cultured society, Arabic was "cosmopolitan" and universal, even when rulers were not necessarily bound to this practice. Hence, Stefan Helgesson's point is valid in trying to navigate between "extroversion and introversion" *as a third space between one model and another.* No culture can have its world systems or universal and cosmopolitan spread without this reach-out in regions other than its hinterland; the Arabic model with its Afro-Asian multiple centers had its knowledge construction and cultural capital beyond ethnicity and boundaries. Hence, it was wider than any of its components and more complex than regional or city-state formations.[121]

Helgesson talks about attentiveness to the "combined, contradictory, and proliferating" trajectories of the extroversion-introversion dynamics as a theoretical point of departure for a world-literary study, presenting al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ and Sol Plaatje as good examples. Al-Musawi refers to "a third space between one model and another." Helgesson speaks neither about spaces between models, nor about "reach-out in regions other than its hinterland" but simply about the means of scholarly approaches to the literatures of the world at large.

In her own response to al-Musawi's contribution, Francesca Orsini writes that the echoes of al-Musawi's arguments can also be found in South Asian scholarship and public debates, many of which are over the impact of "colonial modernity" and the issue of the "amnesia" that afflicted intellectuals and scholars. The summation of her comments is as follows:

> [M]ore productive than a *critique of modern intellectuals and their "amnesia,"* or a historical narrative about the inevitable rise of the juggernaut English (or French) and the obliteration of everything else in their wake, is to be wary of *single-strand and monolingual historical narratives* (Arabic existed in a multilingual world, too), and conceive of space, whether local or further flung/wider, as the

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[120] Helgesson, "Tayeb Salih, Sol Plaatje, and the Trajectories of World Literature," 260 (my emphasis).

[121] Al-Musawi, "The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters as World Model," 285 (my emphasis).

"multiplicity of stories so far," and attend to those stories and the different configurations they produce.[122]

Referring to pre-modern periods described as "dark middle ages" of "religious and cultural oppression," Orsini argues that the consolidation of colonial power in India, for example, ended the age-old power of Sanskrit learning to shape Indian intellectual history. Instead of responding to Orsini's main argument, or paying attention to the difference between the colonial role in India and that in the Muslim world, where it failed to erode the status of *fuṣḥá*, al-Musawi's response implies, to say the least, a misunderstanding of Orsini's meticulous arguments:

> While, as Francesca Orsini argues, Sanskrit flourished on the eve of colonialism, and continued to do so for some time, *Arabic had struggled to sustain its circulation among rhetors, grammarians, poets, jurists, and philosophers*. From the twelfth to the end of the eighteenth centuries, Arabic was the language of lettered societies. But what Sheldon Pollock argues *can be applicable when we try to account for dissemination and limit*. For a cultured society, *Arabic was "cosmopolitan" and universal, even when rulers were not necessarily bound to this practice*.[123]

One can hardly follow the rationale of al-Musawi's response, in which everything becomes mixed and confused. Orsini argues that, due to the multilingual and multicultural nature of the world and due to the fact that no single language was completely hegemonic, the early modern Indian story could also be told as a story of the *persistence* of the high languages of Sanskrit and Persian in particular, and in fact the story of the wider dissemination of Persian well into the colonial period. Al-Musawi refers to Sheldon Pollock's "argument," which is irrelevant to Orsini's engagement—she mentions Pollock's scholarship in regard to "Sanskrit knowledge systems on the eve of colonialism" as a "cosmopolis" that was eroded in the historical process of "vernacularization" only to offer an example of a pre-modern system similar to al-Musawi's pre-modern republic. When al-Musawi

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[122]Francesca Orsini, "Whose Amnesia? Literary Modernity in Multilingual South Asia," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 2, no. 2 (2015): 272 (my emphasis). Orsini attributes "the *multiplicity* of stories so far" to Doreen Massey's definition in *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005, p. 9 [my emphasis]). From the three propositions Massey offers in order to make the case for an alternative approach to space, the first refers to space as "the product of interrelations," the second understands space as "the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity," while the third asserts that "perhaps we could imagine space as a *simultaneity of stories-so-far*" (p. 9 [my emphasis]. On p. 89, Massey writes that "any 'simultaneity' of stories-so-far will be a distinct simultaneity from a particular vantage point").

[123]Al-Musawi, "The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters as World Model," 284–85 (my emphasis).

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insists on presenting Arabic as always being "cosmopolitan and universal"—something with which no serious scholar can agree—he misunderstands Pollock's conception as well. Much more important, following Shu-Mei Shih[124] Orsini refers to the "technologies of recognition" that "selectively and often arbitrarily confer world membership on literatures." Those technologies are "mechanisms in the discursive (un)conscious—with bearings on social and cultural (mis)understandings—that produce 'the West' as the agent of recognition and 'the rest' as the object of recognition, in representation."[125] Here, al-Musawi could have used these technologies as analytical modes to support his argument "with respect to the need to explore other formations of world systems beyond the specific models that scholars of European literature have presented,"[126] but he failed to do so. All in all, Orsini's response implies a strong reservation about al-Musawi's campaign against the "modernists" (see below): in her words, it is a "critique of modern intellectuals" and their "amnesia," which regretfully causes al-Musawi to sink, in her words, into "single-strand and monolingual historical narratives."

Both Helgesson and Orsini mention issues in world literature that need considerably more reflection and exploration, whereas al-Musawi avoids delving into the same significant issues and does not refer to the new turn toward world literature in the last decade, which in some measure was a result of a disciplinary crisis in American comparative literature in the second half of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s. In the same regard, one can find an excellent survey in Dennis Sobolev's recent study, where he analyzes the problems of the textual volume of the corpus under investigation and the cross-cultural translation, the conceptual reflection and the principles of taxonomization, the sociologically oriented reshaping of literary studies and research methods, the problem of "cultural regions," and the homogenization and reification of the objects of study. According to Sobolev, the resultant theoretical complications and unsolved problems seem to outweigh the contribution of the school of world literature to the understanding of literary texts, processes, and structures. He underscores the necessity of returning to the disciplinary self-reflection of comparative literature,

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[124]Shu-Mei Shih, "Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition," *PMLA* 119, no. 1 (2004): 16–30; reprinted in D'haen, *World Literature: A Reader,* 259–74.

[125]Shih, "Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition," 16–17. Orsini identifies those technologies as "ignorance, distaste, and indifference," but in fact, these may be the result of the five modes of recognition that Shih refers to as belonging to the academic discourse and the literary market: the return of the systematic, the time lag of allegory, global multiculturalism, the exceptional particular, and postdifference ethics.

[126]Al-Musawi, "The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters as World Model," 282.

the reappraisal of its basic questions and tasks, as one of the major goals of the study of culture at the present moment.[127]

11. Culture, Scholarship, and Accountability

Al-Musawi's book was nominated for the 2016 Sheikh Zayed Book Award for "Arabic Culture in Other Languages" because "it presents a compelling argument against the commonly held opinion that Arabic literature, since the glorious peak of the Abbasids, has somehow failed to be modern, and instead became locked in conventions that were stultifying and rarefied, created only for a small circle of initiates who were themselves censored and censuring."[128] In his endorsement of the book, Roger Allen writes that al-Musawi's study refutes "the orientalist-inspired notion of a 'period of decadence' in the Arabo-Islamic cultural heritage … With al-Musawi's work, the medieval Arabo-Islamic 'slough of despond'—to cite Bunyan's well-known English phrase—can, one hopes, be forever laid to rest."[129] And al-Musawi is generally right in his rejection of the paradigm that sees political changes as pivotal in their effects on cultural life (although one may reject his decisive relevant statements).[130]

Scholarship aside, however, one cannot ignore al-Musawi's sharp critical attitude throughout many sections of his book toward those he calls "Arab and Muslim modernists" or "architects of [Arab] modernity," who, in his words, failed to dissociate the "political disintegration" from "the ongoing cultural dissemination and exchange across the Islamic world."[131] He accuses them of misreading their past, of falling back "on a series of negations and denials of [its] merit," and of internalizing the "European Enlightenment disparagement of the Middle Ages

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[127] Dennis Sobolev, "The Concept of 'World Literature' and its Problems" (in Russian), in *Noscere est comparare: Komparativistika v kontekste isotricheskoi poetiki* (Comparative literature in the context of historical poetics), ed. Olga Polovinkina (Moscow, 2017), 20–53.

[128] According to http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=75978 (accessed 17 July 2016). Al-Musawi did not win the award.

[129] Allen elaborates on what he terms the "decadence paradigm" in "Transforming the Arabic Literary Canon," in *New Geographies: Texts and Contexts in Modern Arabic Literature,* ed. Allen et al. (Madrid, 2018).

[130] Al-Musawi argues that there was no cultural decline but only "political disintegration": the six centuries of political upheaval and loss of a specific or unitary Islamic discourse, according to al-Musawi, "pose a number of challenges to any positivist claims. *Undaunted by this upheaval,* cultural production and its multiplicity across large swathes and times require systematic reading to uncover significant epistemic shifts that should take us beyond a blanket disparagement of an age of decadence and stagnation" (al-Musawi, "The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters as World Model," 282 [my emphasis]).

[131] Al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 11 (see also 144).

… in their zealous duplication of a seductive Europe."[132] The failure to connect effectively with the rich culture of the past and to establish emotive and cultural links with the Muslim populace, according to al-Musawi, can "easily induce *architects of regression* to involve regions and peoples in schisms and disorder."[133] Al-Musawi also holds the "modernists" *accountable for the failed education system* in the newly emerging *Islamic* nation-states because of the "depreciation of pre-modern Arabic cultural production," which "amounts to a substantial disengagement from a tradition that was much needed for the promotion of education and culture in the newly emerging *Islamic* nation-states."[134] In short, the experienced reader, certainly any scholar of Arab culture, has the feeling that al-Musawi functions here not only as an unbiased scholar and literary critic, but as an active participant in Arab cultural life and, moreover, as an integral part of the Arab-Islamic community in what is presented as the struggle against Western powers and their "internal collaborators."[135]

Unlike most Western scholars of Arabic literature, even those of Arab origin, al-Musawi could be seen as somewhat "justified" in the effacement of the borders between research and participation in a culture. Al-Musawi is now an integral part of the international Western community of scholars and critics of Arabic literature that warmly adopted him and, moreover, made him one of its doyens, perhaps the first one. Born in al-Nāṣirīyah in Iraq in 1944, and having obtained his Ph.D. from Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia, Canada, in 1978, al-Musawi now holds the prestigious Chair for Arabic Literature at Columbia University. Since 1999, he has been a member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Arabic Literature* (*JAL*), the only professional journal dedicated to the study of Arabic literature, and in recent years he has been serving as its general editor. Before moving to the West, physically, metaphorically, and spiritually, al-Musawi had

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[132] Ibid., 5, 308–9, and 15, respectively.

[133] Ibid., 11 (my emphasis).

[134] Ibid., 45 (my emphasis).

[135] More than forty years earlier, al-Musawi published a book on Iraqi oil, the struggle with the oil companies, and "the great robbery of the Iraqi people's treasures" (Muḥsin Jāsim al-Mūsawī, *Al-nafṭ al-ʿirāqī: Dirāsah wathāʾiqīyah min nanḥ al-imtiyāz ḥattá al-taʾmīm* [Baghdad, 1973]; the quotation is from p. 7). One can sense the parallel lines, according to al-Musawi, between the material and spiritual robbery of Arab-Islamic treasures (cf. al-Mūsawī's following publications: *Al-thawrah al-jadīdah: Dirāsāt taḥlīlīyah fī al-siyāsah wa-al-iqtiṣād wa-al-fikr* [Beirut, 1973], 5–10; *Al-istishrāq fī al-fikr al-ʿarabī* [Beirut, 1993]; *Al-nukhbah al-fikrīyah wa-al-inshiqāq: Qirāʾah fī taḥawwulāt al-ṣafwah al-ʿārifah fī al-mujtamaʿ al-ʿarabī al-ḥadīth* [Beirut, 2001]; and *Al-naẓarīyah wa-al-naqd al-thaqāfī: Al-kitābah al-ʿarabīyah fī ʿālam mutaghayyir, wāqiʿuhā, siyāqātuhā wa-bunāhā al-shuʿūrīyah* [Beirut, 2005], 63–69. Al-Musawi plans to publish a monograph entitled *Arab Modernists' Struggle with the Past* [according to al-Musawi, "The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters as World Model," 282]).

been for more than two decades an integral part of the literary, cultural, and academic Arab life and its *jumhūr* of littérateurs, sensing its vibrant rhythm and vivacious beating heart, feeling its pains, and looking for ways to push it forward. As an active writer, he published five Arabic novels, and as a scholar, he published numerous scholarly books and articles in Arabic. He taught at major Arab universities such as Baghdad University, Amman National University, Sanʿa University, Tunis University, and the American University of Sharjah. Also, he played a dominant role in government cultural institutions in Baghdad during the regime of Ṣaddām Ḥusayn (1937–2006),[136] serving as the director of the publishing house Dār al-Shuʾūn al-Thaqāfīyah al-ʿĀmmah, the president of the board of directors of another publishing house, al-Adīb al-ʿArabī, and the editor-in-chief of the journal *Istishrāq*. He also served as the editor-in-chief of *Āfāq ʿarabīyah* in Tunis.

But who are those "modernists" whom al-Musawi holds accountable for the failed education system in the newly emerging Islamic nation-states? And with whom does al-Musawi debate, sometimes less as an unbiased critic and literary historian and more as an active proponent with a very clear agenda for the present and particularly for the future? In his "Preliminary Discourse," al-Musawi mentions Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (1889–1973), Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Zayyāt (1885–1968), and Salāmah Mūsá (1887–1958) who, in his words, "have long internalized a European Enlightenment discourse and looked with suspicion and distrust in the past and its massive accumulation in cultural capital."[137] At the end of Chapter One, al-Musawi refers to the "hasty conclusions of the kind often encountered in the writings of many Arab and Afro-Asian modernists," but, apart from the three names mentioned above, all of them Egyptian, he did not mention other names of those "many."[138] In one place in the book he mention the Lebanese Christian Jurjī

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[136] Al-Musawi's brother ʿAzīz al-Sayyid Jāsim (1941–91) was executed in prison upon the orders of Ṣaddām Ḥusayn (for his profile, see al-Musawi's book *Reading Iraq: Culture and Power in Conflict* [London, 2006], 144–46. On his views, see the same book, which is dedicated to his memory). Al-Musawi himself, who served in his various positions in Iraq under Ṣaddām Ḥusayn, was accused, for no fault of his own, of collaborating with the regime, even after the murder of his brother (see the reactions of readers to a report on al-Musawi, especially comments 2 and 7, at http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/07/14/157569.html [14 July 2011] [accessed 16 February 2017]).

[137] Al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 5.

[138] Ibid., 58. In an article al-Musawi published before the release of his book, he referred to the Iraqi poet Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb (1926–64) as a "modernist" as well (al-Musawi, "The Republic of Letters: Arab Modernity? [Part I]," 268). In an interview before the publication of his book, al-Musawi argues that the project of the Arab *Nahḍah* had failed because of "the rupture between the rural areas *(rīf)* and the city, namely, the intellectual started to deem himself above his roots and despise them, like what Ṭāhā Ḥusayn has done in *al-Ayyām* (*The Days*)" (https://www.alaraby.co.uk/portal [21 October 2014]). For an earlier version of al-Musawi's accusations against the "modernists," see al-Musawi, "The Medieval Islamic Literary World-System," 51–52.

Zaydān (1861–1914),[139] who was active mainly in Egypt, but he does not mention, for example, great Lebanese "modernists" such as Buṭrus al-Bustānī (1819–83) and Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq (1805–87). In what follows, I will respectfully disagree with al-Musawi's position. I will do so not as a proponent of any agenda, of course, but as a student of Arabic literature who has read most, if not all, of his writings and those of the "modernists" he named in his recent work.

I previously mentioned the unjustifiable attitude of some Orientalists to premodern Arabic literature at large as a "period of decadence," but nowhere could I find in the writings of al-Zayyāt, Mūsá, or Ḥusayn the sweeping statements al-Musawi attributes to them, as for example that the *whole* "literary output of the medieval Arab and Islamic nation-states is *ineffectual.*"[140] Feeling that literary sensibility should be altered in order to enable an overhaul of Arabic literature, they indeed rejected some literary values of the post-classical period, but they did so following previous writers who had in various ways already expressed their criticism of the state of the culture in their own era. One of these writers was Yūsuf al-Shirbīnī (1591?–1688), whose *Kitāb hazz al-quḥūf bi-sharḥ qaṣīd Abī Shādūf* (Brains confounded by the ode of Abū Shādūf expounded)[141] is a humorous ac-

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[139] Al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 111.

[140] Ibid., 5 (my emphasis). In a detailed note, al-Musawi quotes publications by the "modernists" in an attempt to prove that they "looked with suspicion and distrust at the [medieval Arab, and Islamic] past and its massive accumulation in cultural capital" (324, n. 10). Sahar Ishtiaque Ullah duplicates al-Musawi's arguments, accusing the "modernists" of "misreading of a massive corpus of evidence and at worst a deliberate neglect of an incredibly vast undertaking of post-classical literary production" ("Postclassical Poetics: The Role of the Amatory Prelude for the Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 3, no. 2 [2016]: 203–25). Checking closely the references in the aforementioned note by al-Musawi, it is difficult to find how the relevant writings could support these sweeping arguments; suffice it here to mention Salāmah Mūsá, *Al-tathqīf al-dhātī aw kayfa nurabbī anfusanā* (Cairo, 1947), 75–80; idem, *Mā hiya al-nahḍah* (Beirut, 1962), 137–41; Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, *Al-khiṭāb al-ʿarabī al-muʿāṣir: Dirāsah taḥlīlīyah naqdīyah* (Beirut, 1982), 34–38; as well as what is cited in Allen, "The Post-Classical Period: Parameters and Preliminaries," 14–15. One can find citations of Arab intellectuals who found themselves confronting the dilemmas of the cultural transformation that followed the interaction of the Arab world with the West (see, for example, Aḥmad Amīn, *Zuʿamāʾ al-iṣlāḥ fī al-ʿaṣr al-ḥadīth* [Cairo, 1965], 7. Cf. Allen, "The Post-Classical Period: Parameters and Preliminaries," 2). However, even these citations should not be taken literally, but as another indication of the decline of the Arabs' cultural self-image and the huge gap between the august status enjoyed by Arab culture in the Middle Ages and its feeble modern counterpart (see Snir, *Modern Arabic Literature,* 232–37).

[141] See Yūsuf al-Shirbīnī, *Kitāb hazz al-quḥūf bi-sharḥ qaṣīd Abī Shādūf* (*Brains confounded by the ode of Abū Shādūf expounded*), vol. 1, ed. Humphrey Davies) (Dudley, 2005); and Yūsuf al-Shirbīnī, *Yusuf al-Shirbini's Brains Confounded by the Ode of Abū Shādūf Expounded* (*Kitāb hazz al-quḥūf bi-sharḥ qaṣīd Abī Shādūf*), vol. 2, trans. Humphrey Davies (Dudley, MA, 2007). On al-Shirbīnī's work, see al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 147–74. See also Mattityahu Peled,

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count of the lifestyles and habits of speech of peasants during the period of Ottoman rule in Egypt in a mixture of genres, styles, and diction. Writing that this work "plays havoc with a solid canon that staunchly adhered to verisimilitude and truth, while at the same time enrolling in its ranks jurists of disputable and unreliable knowledge," al-Musawi himself refers to its "dashing satire on elitism, pedantry in scholarship, and the compendious and commentarial surplus, and its biting irony directed toward certain religious circles and sham Sufism."[142]

Referring to the "modernists" as the "reluctant heirs" of the medieval body of knowledge, al-Musawi argues that their "disillusion with [that] cultural production was primarily informed by a European discourse but was also driven by a misreading of the compendious and commentarial effort of the period." He explains that they

> could not discern the significant redirection of cultural capital to escape imitation, while simultaneously assimilating ancient and classical knowledge. In fact, by appropriating and classifying these sources rather than duplicating them, postclassical scholars and littérateurs embarked on what Pascale Casanova terms a "diversion of assets."[143]

Some observations are necessary here regarding the way al-Musawi understands the meaning of the term "diversion of assets": First, his argument that a "seductive Europe" was the root of all evil and the driving force behind the "modernists" in their role as "architects of regression" who internalized the "European Enlightenment disparagement of the Middle Ages" does not, to say the least, do Arab culture any justice. Kilito's aforementioned call "to regard Arabic poetics on its own terms" and "to avoid treating the subject as some kind of deviation from a model realized in other times and under other skies" should guide us here as well. In a short, brilliant essay, Tarek El-Ariss refers directly to al-Musawi's thesis, including the latter's argument about the *Nahḍah* as "the other appellation for Arab modernity,"[144] while suggesting that the *Nahḍah* texts be freed from the *Nahḍah* as a "'modernity' project" and from "the dominant narrative of rise and decline, and from their intertextual and ideological dependency on European modernity as a model to be borrowed or resisted." El-Ariss argues that the *Nahḍah's* "civili-

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"Nodding the Necks: A Literary Study of Shirbīnī's *Hazz al-Quḥūf*," *Die Welt des Islams* 26, no. 1 (1986): 57–75; Ṭāhir Abū Fāshā, *Hazz al-quḥūf bi-sharḥ qaṣīdat Abī Shādūf* (Cairo, 1987); and Mohamed-Saleh Omri, "*Adab* in the Seventeenth Century: Narrative and Parody in al-Shirbīnī's *Hazz al-Quḥūf*," *Edebiyât* 11, no. 2 (2000): 169–96.

[142] Al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 83 and 96, respectively.

[143] Ibid., 5.

[144] Al-Musawi, "The Republic of Letters: Arab Modernity? (Part I)," 265.

zational practices could not be reduced to notions of civilization associated with Orientalism as [a] system of othering and cultural superiority." Instead, he refers to it as "this potential, this vague thing that everyone is practicing without knowing what it looks like or whether it will be achieved or not or to what end." Moreover, it is a speech act: let there be *Nahḍah!* Therefore, there is a need to decolonize the *Nahḍah* and "allow it to make its own meaning, however contradictory and inconsistent with historical narratives and ideological critique."[145] Second, the term "diversion of [literary] assets"[146] is used by Casanova, following the poet and critic Joachim du Bellay (1522–60), to refer to the redirection of "the gains of Latinist humanism—a vast collection of knowledge derived from translation and commentaries on ancient texts" to the profit of French, a language that was less "rich." As a result, by the time of Louis XIV France reigned as the "dominant literary power in Europe."[147] Nothing similar to that happened in what al-Musawi considers as the medieval Islamic republic of letters if only for the simple reason that, to use Casanova's words, the gains of Arab classical humanism, though they helped other Muslim nations consolidate their cultures, were by no means used to the benefit of another single specific language in a way that would result in the establishment of a new dominant literary power to replace Arabic. Furthermore, even if we adopt al-Musawi's use of Casanova's conception, as far as I know no "modernist," certainly not al-Zayyāt, Mūsá, or Ḥusayn, decried those works that successfully assimilated ancient and classical knowledge while redirecting cultural capital to escape imitation. They rightly decried texts that, in al-Musawi's words, failed in the act of "redirection of cultural capital to escape imitation." If there is any blame to be leveled against the "modernists," it is their elitist attitude toward the popular cultural production consumed by the masses, which in turn caused them to decry and even to ignore popular texts and activities.[148] According to the conceptions adopted in my studies, and in this respect I completely

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[145]El-Ariss, "Let There Be *Nahdah!,*" 261, 264, 265, and 266, respectively. In his response to El-Ariss' intervention, al-Musawi does not refer directly to El-Ariss' major arguments regarding the *Nahḍah,* but mainly reiterates his accusations against the "modernists"—those "prominent intellectuals [who] thought of themselves as leaders of thought like the European Enlightenment figures, locating themselves in that European moment of a century earlier, cutting themselves doubly from their immediate history and the challenge to the age of reason brought about by the rising imperial culture of nineteenth-century Europe" (al-Musawi, "The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters as World Model," 281). On the *Nahḍah* and modernity, see also Tarek El-Ariss, *Trials of Arab Modernity: Literary Affects and the New Political* (New York, 2013).

[146]Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters,* 54. Casanova uses as well the terms "diversion of literary wealth" (p. 46), "diversion of [literary/symbolic] capital" (pp. 53, 99, 157, 235, 284), and "diversion of resources" (p. 233).

[147]Ibid., 53–54.

[148]Ṭāhā Ḥusayn opposed the dialects in literature; see Snir, *Modern Arabic Literature,* 28–31.

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agree with al-Musawi, texts and activities of this nature should be considered as an integral part of any cultural system.

In a passionate apologetic section entitled "The Fight for Culture: Compendiums and Commentaries,"[149] al-Musawi denounces the "modernists" for their tendency to negate rhetoric as superfluity and denigrate the tradition of commentaries and compendia in the pre-modern Arab-Islamic period.[150] Emphasizing the importance of the tradition of *shurūḥ* ("commentaries"), *dhuyūl* ("supplements"), and *ḥawāshin* ("marginal notes")—"a paper empire, of words on words, and *kalām ʿalā kalām* (metadiscourse)"[151]—which flourished during the post-classical period, al-Musawi takes refuge in Michel Foucault's (1926–84) *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (French: *Les mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines*) (1966).[152] After Foucault, al-Musawi quotes Michel de Montaigne (1533–92): "There is more work in interpreting interpretations than in interpreting things; and more books about books than on any other subject; we do nothing but write glosses about each other." Foucault comments on de Montaigne's words: "These words are not a statement of the bankruptcy of culture buried beneath its own monuments; they are a definition of the inevitable relation that language maintained with itself in the sixteenth century." Al-Musawi argues that Foucault's analysis is an attempt to define commentary and gloss as the infinite proliferation of the interpretation that justifies what Foucault describes as the "sovereignty of an original text." It is the text "that offers its ultimate revelation as the promised reward of the commentary." Thus, it is the "interstice occurring between the primal Text and the infinity of Interpretation" that accounts for the proliferation in interpretation, commentary, and gloss, which take writing to be a substantial part of the "fabric of the world."[153] Al-Musawi relies as well on Jorge Luis Borges' (1899–1986) idea of "a minutely drawn map that negates the original" and Christine Brooke-Rose's (1923–2012) argument that "disclaiming rhetoric is itself a figure of rhetoric."[154] He suggests that the "strikingly widespread recourse to compendiums, the rise of the polymath, and the vogue of *shurūḥ,* of explications of an original text, all suggest a process in which designated classification

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[149] Al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 97–103.

[150] Ibid., 98–99, 118.

[151] Cf. Rashīd Yaḥyāwī, *Al-kalām ʿálá al-kalām fī al-turāth: Madākhil li-maqāṣid al-taʿrīb wa-al-tadyīn* (Amman, 2015).

[152] Al-Musawi relies on Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (Paris, 1966), 38–46 ("The Writing of Things").

[153] Al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 98–99. The quotations are from Foucault, *The Order of Things,* 45. For an earlier version of these arguments, see al-Musawi, "The Medieval Islamic Literary World-System," 51–52.

[154] Al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 118.

and centers of institutionalized knowledge were being undermined."[155] In short, arguing that the "lengthy pre-modern era remains relatively understudied, especially in terms of what Brinkley Messick associates with a 'calligraphic state,'"[156] al-Musawi makes use of texts by Foucault, Borges, and Brooke-Rose in defense of the tradition of commentaries and compendia of the pre-modern Arab-Islamic period.

These texts, however, by no means support al-Musawi's arguments. First, it seems that Messick's "calligraphic state" is irrelevant to al-Musawi's arguments. Messick traces "connections between the literary processes behind the constitution of authority *in* texts and the social and political processes involved in articulating the authority of texts." The types of text involved in Messick's research activity, intended to contribute to the specific history of Yemen, are basic manuals of shariʿah jurisprudence and their commentaries.[157] Second, there is a substantial difference between sixteenth-century European commentaries according to Michel de Montaigne and the *shurūḥ* tradition.[158] Moreover, the "modernists" voiced their criticism in real time when they were endeavoring to change the face of Arab culture and save it from what they considered to be the negative phenomena of the pre-modern tradition; al-Musawi's criticism of them is possible *thanks* to their efforts. Third, Yūsuf al-Shirbīnī's aforementioned *Kitāb hazz al-quhūf bi-sharḥ qaṣīd Abī Shādūf* would not have parodied, in the words of al-Musawi, "an ongoing and firmly established *shurūḥ* tradition"[159] unless that tradition had seemed *at the time* to be superfluous in essence. That is why, even according to al-Musawi, al-Shirbīnī "dislodges the entire practice of these commentaries, not only by creating a distance between a hilarious ode and the commentator, but also by giving himself the freedom to poke fun at many practices that are normally buttressed by serious material or apocryphal detail."[160] And fourth, examining the few critical surveys of *Arab* scholars in the nineteenth century of contemporary literature, such as that by the Syrian Jurjī Murquṣ (1846–1912), we find that their opinion of the poetry of the time, which is an extension of the pre-

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[155] Ibid., 132.

[156] Ibid., 98.

[157] Brinkley Morris Messick, *The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society* (Berkeley, 1993), 1–12.

[158] For a discussion of the trends of "compilation and elaboration" in the post-classical period against the backdrop of what had preceded them, see Allen, "The Post-Classical Period: Parameters and Preliminaries," 8–13.

[159] Al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 158.

[160] Ibid., 153.

vious century, was not high.[161] And this was many years before the emergence of the "modernists"!

All in all, al-Musawi speaks assertively against the "modernists" and about their "wholesale" and "sweeping" "resistance," "rejection," and "denigration" of their past and its "cultural values" and "intimidating cultural capital."[162] Additionally, in one section, referring to Casanova's book and one of the in-depth reviews of it, he finds fault with the "modernists" for the following failure:

> What is lost on modernists is a simple premise expressed by Casanova in her *The World Republic of Letters*: "It is necessary to be old to have any chance of being modern or of decreeing what is modern." In a review of her book, Joe Cleary puts this point as follows: "Only countries that can claim a venerable and distinguished historical stock of literary capital get to decree what is and is not 'fashionable' in literary terms."[163]

The context of Casanova's aforementioned "premise" is her argument that "the ability to decree without fear of challenge what is or is not 'fashionable,' in the domain of haute couture and elsewhere, permitted Paris to control one of the main routes of access to modernity … Paris managed to sustain its position—at least until the 1960s—as the center of the system of literary time." Only then, Casanova adds the following:

> The temporal law of the world of letters may be stated thus: *It is necessary to be old to have any chance of being modern or of decreeing what is modern.* In other words, having a long national past is the condition of being able to claim a literary existence that is fully recognized in the present.[164]

In his review of her book, Joe Cleary refers to Casanova's argument, but unfortunately, al-Musawi in the quote above does not cite Cleary's full text, which runs as follows:

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[161] See Hilary Kilpatrick, "Modern Arabic Literature as Seen in the Late 19th Century: Jurji Murqus's Contribution to Korsh and Kipichnikov's *Vseobshchaya Istoria Literatury*," in *Studying Modern Arabic Literature: Mustafa Badawi, Scholar and Critic,* ed. Roger Allen and Robin Ostle (Edinburgh, 2015), 91–92. Cf. the instructive anecdote told by Ṭāhā Ḥusayn about his interview with Shukrī Bāshā, the sultan's *chef de bureau (raʾīs al-dīwān al-sulṭānī),* regarding the change in Arabic poetic sensibilities (Snir, *Modern Arabic Literature,* 159).

[162] Al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 9, 11, 14, 24, 97–98.

[163] Ibid., 11–12. See also 111–14: "A number of things that are lost on most modernists … The enhanced devotion to rhetoric that has engendered so much negative criticism against the so-called age of superfluity" (p. 114. See also 135, 142–43, and 159–62).

[164] Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters,* 89–90 (emphasis in the original).

> In other words, only countries that can claim a venerable and distin-
> guished historical stock of literary capital get to decree what is and
> is not "fashionable" in literary terms. But, since what constitutes
> up-to-dateness or the literary present is constantly changing—"the
> only way in the literary world to be truly modern is to contest the
> present as outmoded—to appeal to a more present present, as yet
> unknown, which thus becomes the newest certified present." [165]

In his attack against the "modernists," al-Musawi argues that they did not un-
derstand what Casanova describes as the "temporal law of the world of letters,"
namely, the condition of being able to claim a literary existence that is fully rec-
ognized in the present as having a long national past. But Cleary adds that this
is because "what constitutes up-to-dateness or the literary present is constantly
changing," and here he quotes, with some inaccuracies, Casanova's statement in
a section entitled "What Is Modernity?" that "the only way in the literary *space*
to be truly modern is to contest the present as outmoded—to appeal to a *still*
more present present, as yet unknown, which thus becomes the newest certified
present." [166] In other words, contrary to what al-Musawi attributes to the "mod-
ernists," *they did exactly what Casanova recommends*—they tried to contest the
outmoded present by appealing to another present in order to make it "the newest
certified present." Moreover, when Casanova speaks about the "fashionable" in
literary terms, she is only referring to *belles-lettres.* [167]

Another charge al-Musawi levels against the "modernists" is that they adopted
a basic equation between secularism, on the one hand, and humanism and mod-
ernism, on the other. [168] And here, al-Musawi expresses his opposition to the argu-
ment presented by Hamid Dabashi that Arab humanism "remained canonical in
its commitment to the imperially imposed language of the Arab conquerors and
their tribal racism." [169] Al-Musawi has reservations about defining Arab human-
ism as necessarily being tied to conquest and gain:

> The republic as the dialogic space for poetics and politics claims
> its freedom from power as the condition for its humanist conver-

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[165] Cleary, "The World Literary System," 199–200. The quotation is from Casanova, *The World Re-
public of Letters,* 91.

[166] Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters,* 91. The words in *italics* are those in which Cleary does
not quote Casanova accurately.

[167] See the aforementioned anecdote told by Ṭāhā Ḥusayn about his interview with Shukrī Bāshā,
the sultan's *chef de bureau (raʾīs al-dīwān al-sulṭānī)* (Snir, *Modern Arabic Literature,* 159).

[168] Al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 310–11.

[169] Hamid Dabashi, *The World of Persian Literary Humanism* (Cambridge, MA, 2012), 79–80 (quoted
in al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 54. See also 40, 46–47, and 54–57).

sations. Hence, the use of Arabic and the spread of a culturally oriented Islamic identification in no way negate the racial manipulation of genealogical divides to ensure privilege in times of conquest.[170]

Reading carefully the relevant texts and scholarship, Hamid Dabashi's included, and closely examining and analyzing al-Musawi's aforementioned argument leave no doubt that this charge is totally unjustified but for lack of space I will not elaborate here on this topic.

12. Cognitive Dissonance and Common Fallacies

Having been a student of Arabic literature for the last 45 years, and having read almost everything written by the major Arab thinkers and writers in the formative period of modern Arabic literature, I am greatly disturbed by al-Musawi's unjustifiable and biased campaign against the "modernists." But, much more than that, I am very dismayed by the *almost complete and utter silence of the entire academic community involved in the study of Arabic literature,* whose major scholars, as revealed in their published works and as I know them from firsthand knowledge, very much appreciate these "modernists" that al-Musawi labels "architects of regression." Communicating with various scholars, both distinguished and young, I could not find even one who does not have serious reservations regarding al-Musawi's campaign, about which, unfortunately, no scholar has so far dared to write, with the exception of Marilyn Booth, who writes as follows.

> Such wholesale dismissal of these individuals' bodies of thought, which are not monochromatic, along with dismissal of a presumably larger group labelled simply as 'modernists', does not do justice to the nuanced—if at times ambivalent—relationship that many Arab intellectuals of the past two centuries have had to the past that al-Musawi excavates. *Even those modernists (as a group they are memorably called 'architects of regression' [p. 11]) who embraced intellectual heritages of western Europe and saw this as the road to their own societies' modern future did study and honour their own past*—its 'middle' period as well as that of the earlier 'golden age'.[171]

Some reviewers of *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters: Arabic Knowledge Construction* could not avoid making critical comments, even if extremely cautious: as already shown in brief above, under the polite cover of praise, Tarek El-

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[170] Al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 56.

[171] *Journal of Islamic Studies* 28, no. 3 (2017): 385 (my emphasis).

Ariss presented significant counter-arguments, mostly between the lines. Tipping her hat to the author "for his erudition and Herculean capacity for tackling multitudes—perhaps hundreds—of authors and voluminous texts," Dana Sajdi writes that "one cannot be but in awe" of al-Musawi's project, but she indicates that he "bites off more than he can chew, or perhaps more than he is able to share with his readers." Among the gaps in the book, for example, the reviewer mentions that "the book's employment of the 'republic of letters' seems to be a ploy to reconcile two frameworks that do not necessarily fit: on the one hand, an open premodern world-system … and Mamluk imperial consolidation and centralization," on the other. Also, al-Musawi ignored significant contributions by scholars such as Janet Abu-Lughod or cited others without using them: "Had the various contributions of Khaled al-Rouayheb and Nelly Hanna been integrated, as opposed to merely cited, into the book, some of the observations about the later period would have been different."[172] Elizabeth Lhost writes that "the author's tendency to re-articulate his position, relative to Casanova, in seemingly every chapter hinders his ability to replace the tired narrative of European ascendance—which tends to discredit Arabic literature from the medieval period altogether—with an engaging account of his alternative vision, or to provide the reader with a sense of the rich textures, delightful details, and fascinating tidbits that populate the literature he praises."[173] Charles Burnett writes that al-Musawi takes terms and concepts from Pascale Casanova and Michel Foucault but one is left to draw his own "conclusions as to how the Islamic 'Republic of Letters' differs from the early modern European phenomenon with the same name. Al-Musawi provides plenty of material on which to make these comparisons. Yet, in the last analysis, the value of his book is not so much that it argues for a European-style 'Republic of Letters' in the Islamic area, as that it draws attention to the richness of Islamic literature in a neglected period, and describes its themes, its continuities and ruptures, and its distinctive characteristics."[174] The other scholars mentioned above who expressed reservations toward al-Musawi's arguments (i.e., Helgesson, Orsini, and Ganguly) are not part of the scholarly community of Arabic literature, and they did so in spite of being unfamiliar with the relevant scholarship.

    This unfamiliar academic "silence" in the scholarship of Arabic literature could not conceivably occur in the scholarship of any other literature whatsoever, wherein its founding fathers were defamed in such an aggressive manner and with such unbalanced and biased scholarly theses being generated. But, and I can testify to this from my own personal experience of several decades, the scholar-

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[172] *Journal of Early Modern History* 20, no. 2 (2016): 591.

[173] *Reading Religion,* website published by the American Academy of Religion (AAR) (19 May 2017). http://readingreligion.org/books/medieval-islamic-republic-letters (accessed 16 October 2017).

[174] *Erudition and the Republic of Letters* 2, no. 3 (2017): 353.

ship on Arabic literature is a "special case," more especially against the backdrop of the waves of pressure generated in Middle Eastern scholarship by Edward Said, who together with Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha have come to be seen as what Dennis Walder calls "the three police officers of the postcolonial."[175] Said's *Orientalism* (1978), together with his academic reputation and total immunity from criticism whatsoever by *all* scholars of Arabic literature—a blind worship of a god-like scholar not to be found among any other similar international scholarly communities of *critics* of any other literature—as well as Said's nationalist Palestinian agenda, have left a deep imprint on the scholarship in the field. One of the consequences is the "generous" attitude toward Arab scholars and academics by the Western scholarly community—a generosity colored by a compulsion to apply less rigorous critical judgment to them. Unlike, for example, Israeli-Jewish scholars in the field of Arabic literature who have been collectively suffering from the effects of the BDS (Boycott, Divest, Sanction) movement, even if they fiercely oppose Israeli governmental policy, Arab scholars are immune to any criticism save for very rare cases.[176] It is only in this light that I can at all understand how some of al-Musawi's slander and defamatory statements against great Arab intellectuals were published several years ago, so far without almost any significant response, even though al-Musawi presents arguments that are unacceptable in academic scholarly discourse. For example, more than once al-Musawi refers insultingly to the "modernists" as using straw man arguments:

> Although *nahḍah* intellectuals needed a *straw man to justify their call for transformation and discontinuity with the [pre-modern] past*, they could not bypass some of its landmarks—that being the case with lexicons, for example. Entrenched in between, they either come up with *illogical proposals and selective categorizations* or end up by indulging in a sweeping denial of any cultural significance in the cultural production of the past five centuries … If the study of the Abbasid past produced significant readings and discussions, they were primarily intended to problematize other questions, such as the ninth–tenth century translation movement from the Hellenistic tradition. In other words, the seeming *nahḍah* espousal of an Abbasid Golden Age (750–978), with its widely proclaimed indebtedness to Greek philosophy and science, partially duplicates

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[175] Dennis Walder, *Post Colonial Literatures in English: History, Language, Theory* (Oxford, 1998), 4.
[176] Such as Thomas Bauer's aforementioned critique of Salma Khadra Jayyusi's article in *Mamlūk Studies Review* 11, no. 2 (2007): 137–67.

a comparable proclaimed European filiation with a Greco-Latin tradition.[177]

And, again, in the same article:

> [Ṭāhā Ḥusayn] needs to prove his thesis that the West leads the Enlightenment and hence the cultural dependency of Egypt. Another is *a latent desire to repress sources of power in an Arab/Islamic cultural tradition in order to use the recent past, the Mamluk and premodern periods, as his straw man, to be beaten and dismissed as unwanted past*, an awkward memory to be dumped forever in order to align consciousness with an enlightened Europe that has put its medieval past behind. As a leading figure in the *nahḍah* movement, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn is the sum-up of anxieties, contradictions, and achievements that happen to be a translational interstice.[178]

And in another article:

> Arab modernists show an enormous anxiety that is common in periods of transition, especially under the impact of British and French cultural achievement. The desire to be their Other, the European, and the need to retain native magnanimity drove them to the classical past of an Abbasid empire, a Golden Age, a lighthouse that justifies importation of a colonial culture in times of regression and decadence that the recent past signifies for them in terms similar to what the Middle Ages signify to the Enlightenment.[179]

Reading al-Musawi's recent studies closely and exploring his arguments against the background of his scholarly and other activities before and after his moving to the West, several points seem to be in order:

First, notwithstanding his proven academic and scholarly excellence, during the last two decades al-Musawi has been enjoying exclusive privileges no one else has had in the scholarship of Arabic literature. The only explanation for that *immunity* is that he is an Arab scholar publishing in English in a scholarly community characterized by a culture of confrontation and suffering from a specific "cognitive dissonance"[180] known from other similar communities.[181] Most, if

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[177] Al-Musawi, "The Republic of Letters: Arab Modernity? (Part II)," 117–18 (my emphasis).

[178] Ibid., 127 (my emphasis).

[179] Al-Musawi, "The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters as World Model," 283.

[180] According to Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford, 1957), especially 1–31.

[181] See, for example, my studies about the Palestinian authors writing in Hebrew in Israel such as "'Hebrew as the Language of Grace': Arab-Palestinian Writers in Hebrew," *Prooftexts* 15 (1995):

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not all, of those who comprise the international Western scholarly establishment of Arabic literature,[182] which prides itself on being pluralistic and leftist-liberal-oriented, hold postcolonial allegiances and are in general eager to be generous toward the literary and scholarly production of the "other"—the subject of their investigation, in this case Arab writers and scholars—avoiding as much as possible voicing any disparaging or critical attitude toward them. Among the dozens of reviews written on al-Musawi's many books, one cannot find even one with any significant reservations, without enveloping them in a lot of praise and flattery. At the same time, just for comparison, as an Israeli-Jewish student of Arabic literature, together with my colleagues, we frequently suffer from the results of BDS activities,[183] but also from other exclusionary actions and operations not related to the boycott against Israel. For example, we are not on the list of scholars who deserve to be invited to conferences or participate in scholarly projects, to be members of editorial boards, to write reviews, or who are simply worthy to be mentioned in their publications. The latter exclusion is backfiring on them because a scholar who is writing on a specific topic and does his best to avoid mentioning a book or an article published on the very same topic only damages his own reputation as a true scholar. Surprisingly, or perhaps not, scholars *in the Arab world,* Palestinians included, are eager to cooperate with us in all scholarly fields, while Western scholars, or Arab scholars adopted by the Western establishment, with only a few exceptions (Roger Allen is a towering example), are hesitant, to say the least, in their connections with Israeli-Jewish scholars.

Second, al-Musawi presents contradictory arguments without being exposed to any criticism. For example, he writes about the "paradoxical intersection" that leaves the *Nahḍah* intellectual in a liminal space, in perpetual trial, even when "voicing triumph and targeting others with sardonic sarcasm as Ḥusayn did in his seminal autobiography, *The Days.*" According to al-Musawi, "autobiography signals unease, not contentment. Otherwise, how can we understand the massive growth of autobiographical writing?" But immediately afterwards, al-Musawi mentions that "this autobiographical stream speaks of an unverified belief in

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163–83; and "'Postcards in the Morning': Palestinians Writing in Hebrew," *Hebrew Studies* 42 (2001): 197–224.

[182] I use the term "scholarly establishment" advisedly. As much as a political establishment is based not on merit but on power, so "scholarly establishment" refers not just to elements within the scholarly community but also to the power relations that structure it. It is that hegemonic group in a community's scholarship that has succeeded in establishing its authority over all other groups (cf. Reuven Snir, "Synchronic and Diachronic Dynamics in Modern Arabic Literature," in *Studies in Canonical and Popular Arabic Literature,* ed. Shimon Ballas and Reuven Snir [Toronto, 1998], 93).

[183] See Snir, *Modern Arabic Literature,* 274 n.

one's role, a mastery of one's fate, worth communicating and circulating widely to help justifying one's role for posterity." The following is also unintelligible:

> Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's struggle against his blindness and the limits it imposed on his life generated a search for a larger vision, more comprehensive and encompassing, to involve the liberation of a nation … *Biographical, autobiographical, or narrative accounts signify a self writ large to account for communal or national issues.* As a significant threshold to nation, the act of narration provides us also with conditions of possibility and estrangement. *The Days* of Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, for example, could not become so seminal for subsequent writing without its power to incite, invite, and demarcate venues for self-dependency, sovereignty, and acclamation of Orientalists' knowledge and methods in approaching and even reading Arabic.[184]

Third, on the whole, al-Musawi's arguments against the "modernists" suffer from certain common fallacies. For example, they use ad hominem attacks and resort to offensive remarks that should scarcely be found in respectable scholarly and academic discourses: the "modernists" are the "architects of regression," the "reluctant heirs" of the medieval body of knowledge, and their arguments are nothing but "wholesale" and "sweeping" "resistance," "rejection," and "denigration" of their past and its "cultural values" and "intimidating cultural capital"; and they misread their past, and falling back "on a series of negations and denials of [its] merit," they internalize the "European Enlightenment disparagement of the Middle Ages … in their zealous duplication of a seductive Europe." Moreover, al-Musawi, who accuses the "modernists" of using straw man arguments, as seen above, himself uses such arguments. He frequently attributes to them distorted weaker arguments, misrepresenting their positions, only to "successfully" defeat them. It seems that al-Musawi is so aware of his undisputedly strong position among scholars of Arabic literature in the West, and is so certain that no one will dare to make any critical comments about his arguments (and he is right if we go by the reviews written during the last twenty years on his publications, including the book discussed in the present article), that he has allowed himself what no scholar would dare. This is undoubtedly a specimen of the "argument from authority" fallacy.

13. Conclusion

Muhsin Jassim al-Musawi's *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters: Arabic Knowledge Construction* is a thought-provoking book and an eye-opening study for

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[184] Al-Musawi, "The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters as World Model," 283 (my emphasis).

scholars of Arabic literature. His campaign against the "modernists," however, acts as an incentive to ponder al-Musawi's motivation as being more than just scholarly in nature. He refers to the "Islamic constellation of knowledge as a movement with its own identifiable features and regenerative processes that *could have nourished the present and led it safely out of wars, disasters, and colonial incursions.*" And he alludes to the "complexity, diversity, and magnitude of medieval cultural production, which has daunted modernists and their counterparts in the West and caused them to fall back on a series of negations and denials of merit." Among the accusations he levels against the "modernists" is that they deprecated certain "Islamic practices" considering them to be "regressive and hence not conducive to progress and modernity."[185] In alluding to Jean Le Rond d'Alembert's (1717–83) "Preliminary Discourse" that accompanied the first volume of Diderot's *Encyclopedia of Arts and Sciences* (1751), al-Musawi's "Preliminary Discourse" is instructive; it shows that he is not satisfied with academic investigations of the past alone, as seen from the fact that his sequential articles on the topic have the phrase "Arab modernity" in their subtitles. In this regard, the final lines of his *Conclusion (Al-khātimah)*[186] are illuminating because they speak not only on the past but on the present and the future as well:

> Hence, the long-established Western equation between secularism and humanism needs to be challenged whenever it is applied outside the specific domain of a European Renaissance. *Only through better engagement with this past, with rigorous interrogation of its successes and failures, can modernists build up a sustainable view of the present and thus be at peace with themselves.* Diversity and dissent constitute a marked feature of Islamic culture, one that valorizes and invigorates a republic of letters with its many conspicuous or discrete worlds in what amounts to no less than seismic *Islamica.*[187]

I disagree with al-Musawi when he accuses the "modernists" of "a substantial disengagement from a tradition that was much needed for the promotion of education and culture" and of failing to engage with their past and build up "a sustainable view of the present." It is a simplification of the challenges the "mod-

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[185] Al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 306 (my emphasis), 308–9, and 310, respectively.

[186] In his *Khuṭbat al-kitāb (Preliminary discourse)* (pp. 1–20) and *Al-khātimah (Conclusion)* (pp. 305–11), al-Musawi imitates, mainly through the wording of the titles he selects, the style of the post-classical Arabic writers as well that of Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, who was until 1759 co-editor with Denis Diderot (1713–84) of the *Encyclopédie* (*Encyclopedia of Arts and Sciences*) (1751–72), one of the largest collaborative ventures of the republic of letters (see al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 323, n. 2, as well as pp. 103 and 144).

[187] Al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters,* 311 (my emphasis, except for the last word).

ernists" faced at the time. A brief look at the articles that Ṭāhā Ḥusayn published in the Egyptian press over a period of almost sixty years gives a completely different picture.[188] Last, but not least, one should notice that al-Musawi has defamed *only* Egyptian and *only* dead "modernists," those that cannot respond to his arguments; he ignores many Christian "modernists," based on the parameters he set up, as well as those who are still active. That is why, in concluding the *Khātimah* (Conclusion) of the present review article, I will now quote some lines by the Syrian poet ʿAlī Aḥmad Saʿīd, better known as Adūnīs (b. 1930), perhaps the greatest of all contemporary Arab "modernists" (which does not mean that I agree with everything that Adūnīs writes![189]), and unlike the false accusations leveled by al-Musawi against al-Zayyāt, Ḥusayn, and Mūsá regarding their attitude toward the pre-modern period,[190] the following lines are undoubtedly sweeping:

<div dir="rtl">

منذ سقوط بغداد وقيام السلطنة العثمانيّة،

تحوّل الدين إلى مجرّد أداة عنفيّة لخدمة السلطة.

لا نجد، على سبيل المثل، في تاريخ السلطنة العثمانيّة كلّها، على مدى أكثر من

أربعة قرون، مفكّراً عربيّاً واحداً، أو فنّاناً واحداً، أو موسيقيّاً واحداً، أو شاعراً واحداً، أو عالماً واحداً.

هكذا كان لا بدّ من مجيء أتاتورك للأتراك،

ومن أن تبدأ حركة النهوض العربيّ.

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Since the fall of Baghdad and the establishment of the Ottoman Sultanate,
Religion has become only a harsh tool in the service of authority.
We do not find, for example, throughout the history of the Ottoman Sultanate, during more than
    more than
Four centuries, even one Arab intellectual, or one artist, or one musician, or one poet,
    or one scientist.
That is why it was necessary that Atatürk would come to the Turks,
And that the Arabic renaissance would start.[191]

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[188] See *Turāth Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: Al-maqālāt al-ṣuḥufīyah min 1908–1967* (Cairo, 2002). Of the numerous articles that refute al-Musawi's accusations, I will mention only two: an article published in *Majallatī* (1 June 1936) entitled "Tanẓīm al-*Nahḍah*" (Organizing the Renaissance) (pp. 419–23); and another article published in *Musāmarāt al-jayb* (18 January 1948) entitled "Mushkilat al-lughāt al-ajnabīyah" (The issue of foreign languages) (pp. 610–11).

[189] In fact, I agree with most of the arguments put forth in Thomas Bauer's aforementioned review of Salma Khadra Jayyusi's theses (Bauer, "In Search of 'Post-Classical Literature'").

[190] In a recent article, al-Musawi discusses Salāmah Mūsá's conceptions in an appropriate and balanced manner, and more importantly, with more thorough scholarship with regard to the "modernists" than he does in his book reviewed here (Muhsin Al-Musawi, "Postcolonial Theory in the Arab World: Belated Engagements and Limits," *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 20, no. 2 [2018]: 174–91).

[191] Adūnīs, "Madārāt: Lafẓ yuwaḥḥid wa-ʿamal yubaddid," *Al-ḥayāh,* 29 May 2015.