of linguistics, who yet is denied the full authority that should have been his due. Having fallen almost into oblivion after his death in 1932, scholars such as Tim Couzens, Stephen Gray, and Brian Willan made use of their structural privilege as white, anglophone academics in South Africa and the United Kingdom in the 1970s to insert him into what was then the emergent, revisionist historical narrative of South Africa.[24] This highly successful, if not always uncontroversial, act of retrieval is of course also a part of Plaatje's world-literary trajectory: a mode of performative extroversion enabling a fine-grained, introverted appreciation of his achievements.

As we broach the question of world literature from these vantage points, sheer textualism or sheer aestheticism become impossible alternatives. But it would be equally misguided to refuse to take Plaatje's own faith in the values of print, the vernacular, verbal art, Shakespearean drama, and narrative seriously. What both Plaatje and Salih demonstrate are the thoroughgoing entanglements that shape the work of writers in a world that is already connected *and* stratified. The "problem" of world literature, in Moretti's well-known phrase,[25] is no less urgent today than fifteen years ago. 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, contradictory, and proliferating trajectories that shape literature in the world.

Let There Be *Nahdah*!

Tarek El-Ariss
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This essay examines the movement of Arab national and cultural revival known as nahdah *(meaning renaissance or awakening) as a speech act and a performance involving a* nuhūd *(rising) and an uncertain practice of civilization (*tamaddun*) that seek to bring about a culture of knowledge. Contesting its treatment as a*

24 Besides Willan's book, see for example: Tim Couzens, " 'The Dark Side of the World': Sol Plaatje's 'Mhudi'," *English Studies in Africa* 14.2 (1971): 187–203; Tim Couzens, "Introduction," in Sol T. Plaatje, *Mhudi* (London: Heinemann, 1978), 1–20; and Stephen Gray, *Southern African Literature: An Introduction* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1979).
25 Moretti, 55.

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homogeneous project of modernity that rose and fell and as a historical period with clear epistemic breaks, it argues that nahdah *civilizational practices could not be reduced to notions of civilization associated with Orientalism as system of othering and cultural superiority. This approach frees up* nahdah *texts 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.*

Keywords: *nahdah*, performance, trial, civilization, renaissance

The *nahdah* (meaning renaissance or awakening) is a movement of Arab national and cultural revival from the early nineteenth to the early twentieth century that is little known outside of intellectual circles even in the Arab world. Models of nationalism and secularism as well as Islamic revival are attributed to *nahdah* thought and institutions such as linguistic reform and the practice of translation; the emergence of new literary genres such as the novel; the periodical press, journalism, and a new publishing industry; professional associations and salons; and a new education system. Traditional scholarship has generally attributed the *nahdah* to Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798, which has been represented as the shock that awakened Arabs from their cultural and political slumber after four hundred years of Ottoman rule. Although George Antonius[1] coins the word *awakening* in 1938, defining the *nahdah* as a vigorous shedding of tradition and autocratic rule, Albert Hourani[2] and Hisham Sharabi[3] point out that the *nahdah* was in fact a reaction to a European political onslaught, which exposed the cultural and technological retardation of the Ottoman Empire. Perceived as an age of enlightenment meant to bring about progress and civilization resulting from the circulation of books and ideas, technological modernity, and accelerated exchange with or direct borrowing from Europe, the *nahdah* was compared to the European renaissance. Following the renaissance's humanist legacy, the *nahdah* contributed to the forging of a modern subjectivity through debates about individual rights and freedom, aesthetics, political participation, and the nature of authority.

Nahdah debates and cultural production render some of today's debates (Islam and democracy, tradition and modernity, the veil) déjà vu at best. Topics that are discussed in media and public contexts today have been engaged with thoroughly and more interestingly since more than a hundred years ago. Women's veiling has been the subject of books and controversies from Huda Shaarawi (1879–1947) in Egypt to Nazira Zeineddine (1908–1976) in Lebanon, who engaged with philosophy, individual rights discourses, and Islamic jurisprudence, debating the views of such thinkers as Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873). Education policies and the relation to the humanities have been engaged with in institution building projects in 1920s Iraq. Thus, when examining the current landscape, contemporary

1 George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement* (London: H. Hamilton, 1938).

2 Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* (*1798–1939*) (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

3 Hisham Sharabi, *Arab Intellectuals and the West: The Formative Years, 1875–1914* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970).

nahdah scholars have a strong déjà vu feeling, wondering why are these debates unresolved, returning, and persisting despite their exhaustion during the *nahdah*.

Current *nahdah* debates and concerns assume that the *nahdah* never really took place, or, if it did, it didn't really stick. Another interpretation is that the *nahdah* rose and fell. Along those lines, many scholars interpret the collapse of the *nahdah* with the Nakba of 1948, that is, with the permanent entrenchment of colonialism and imperialism in the Arab world despite nineteenth-century cultural revival, educational reform, and national consciousness. The *nahdah* thus follows in the footsteps of Arab cultural but also political achievements and demise. From this perspective, the *nahdah* is something to be revived or lamented as a "modern" golden age that held the promise of Arab universalism, democracy, human rights, and nation building. But is this model of the rise and fall and resurrection of the *nahdah* accurate? Is it the only way to rethink the *nahdah*?

In addition to the recurrence of *nahdah* debates, we are witnessing today multiple usages of the *nahdah* as a term. How many *nahdah* political parties (in Tunis, for example) do we have in the Arab and Islamic world today? Are we living in a second or third *nahdah*? Are the 1990s, with their inauguration of the satellite and digital age, the new *nahdah* foreground that should have been embodied in the so-called Arab Spring? The *nahdah* appears like a haunting or a boomerang that makes us question what it means for the *nahdah* to have taken place. The *nahdah* seems like the revenant in the Derridean sense, always coming back but never fully actualized. This state of the *nahdah* therefore requires a different set of interpretive tools and analytical trajectories that decolonize the *nahdah* and liberate it from the historical narrative of rise and decline.

Scholarly works on the *nahdah* have crossed many milestones in recent years.[4] Muhsin al-Musawi's intervention in this issue has shown how the *nahdah* needs not be imagined as a break with the past, brilliantly introducing an Islamic republic of letters that transcends imagined epistemic ruptures and showing how lexical and literary traditions and conceptualizations of the nation portray a more dynamic understanding of what the *nahdah* is and how it was delineated. Even if 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."[5] al-Musawi elaborates on the work of scholars from historians to literary critics who are rethinking the limits and scopes of the *nahdah*. al-Musawi argues that there is no real break between Mamluk or premodern and modern, especially in the conceptualization of the nation, thereby reading this dynamic relation between the *nahdah* and what precedes it against Taha Hussein (1889–1973) and Salamah Musa's (1887–1958) desire to disconnect, break, and overcome the past from the 1930s onward.

4 The examples are too many to list, but I mention here the works of Khaled Fahmy, Yoav Di-Capua, Marwa Elshakry, Samah Selim, Orit Bashkin, Lital Levy, Kamran Rastegar, Thomas Bauer, Muhsin al-Musawi, Omnia El Shakry, Marilyn Booth, Ziad Fahmy, Ussama Makdisi, Jacob Wilson, Shaden Tageldine, Michael Allen, Elizabeth Holt, Jeffrey Saks, Ghenwa Hayek, and others.

5 Muhsin al-Musawi, "The Republic of Letters: Arab Modernity?" Part I, *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 1.1 (2014): 265–80, 275.

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Though al-Musawi's thesis makes perfect sense, one still finds, when reading *nahdah* texts, a "desire" for a break, an imagined break that becomes as important to the *nahdah* as the historical accuracy of the break conceived in Foucauldian terms. This leads us to rethink the break as performative and not historically accurate or epistemologically conclusive when considered, as al-Musawi does, from the perspective of the lexical and conceptual tradition that ties in Abbasid, Mamluk, Ottoman, and *nahdah* cultural production. Does the *nahdah*, therefore, consist of an attitude, a position, a posture that has more to do with the forging of the *nahdah* scholar and writer rather than a reflection of a clearly delimited time period?

The answer lies in al-Musawi's formulation itself, his questioning of the *nahdah* as "modernity," keeping modernity in quotation marks when referring to the Arab "'modernity' project." I take this calling attention to "modernity" as a signal to rethink modernity as being, more or less, a homogeneous project that has risen and fallen and that could be revived (1990s, the present, etc.). To accept that there is such a unified project would be to accept the kind of break with the past that al-Musawi deconstructs in his contribution. The *nahdah* is porous, according to al-Musawi, both as a time period and as a set of beliefs, genres, and practices. This points us in the direction of the *nahdah* as a question, as a conceptual framework that needs to be reexamined beyond the limiting understanding of what the *nahdah* was and whether it happened at all, and if it did, what shape it took. To think the *nahdah*, therefore, is to question the question, and consider that the *nahdah* is a project that is never fully realized as *a* project. Rather, it consists of a series of projects and practices that intersect and clash. To say "project," however, is to imagine it as lacking although it is not meant to be whole, one with itself, and actualized.

Decentering the *nahdah* as a unified and homogeneous project along those lines, I have argued elsewhere that we need to examine the *nahdah* as a series of trials and accidents (as a potentiality) that are associated *with* but could never be reduced *to* the Arab encounter with Europe from the nineteenth century onward.[6] Although these historical frameworks are important, they are not sufficient as we seek to understand the *nahdah* better, to recognize its fluctuations and contradictions and movement beyond these historical confines. Just as al-Musawi is using the republic of letters to cut through periodicity and epistemic closure, it is necessary to read *nahdah* writings and positions as *nahdah*-like, as processes involving literary and political performances that continue to unfold in the Arab world today. In this sense, the *nahdah* doesn't only designate one specific cultural development or a fixed historical period that started in the nineteenth century and collapsed in 1948 with the loss of Palestine and the eventual rise of fundamentalism as some claim, but rather as a series of positions, styles, and poses that are not homogeneous or coherent.

Though there is a strong sense among many *nahdah* authors that they are living in a new age and undergoing revival, *nahdah* texts, ideas, and models that could be attributed to this new age vary greatly. Overall, the *nahdah* is associated with an enlightenment ideal of knowledge. The term *nahdah* is derived from the word *nahaḍa*, which means to rise or stand up vigorously. Starting in the 1850s, authors

6 Tarek El-Ariss, *Trials of Arab Modernity: Literary Affects and the New Political* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

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such as Butrus al-Bustani (1818–1893) suggested that the Arabs were slowly emerging from their decline (*inḥiṭāṭ*) and ushering in civilization (*tamaddun*).[7] In his journal, *al-Jinan*, al-Bustani states: "the Arab nation… is advancing to a fine stage in the stages of civilization and knowledge."[8] In this sense, the *nahdah* refers to an age of renaissance in relation to that which preceded it, namely an age of torpor, sleep, or even death. This framework has contributed to the perception of the *nahdah* as that which put an end to a previous age characterized by political and cultural slumber under an Ottoman rule and dating back to the fall of Baghdad to the Mongols in the thirteenth century.

In his famous lecture on the state of Arabic culture in 1858, Butrus al-Bustani discusses schools, presses, and the general state of learning in the Levant and Egypt that are contributing to the spread of civilization. Identifying problems and emphasizing success stories, al-Bustani, the founder of *al-Madrasa al-Wataniyya* (National School) in Beirut, discusses the ways in which cultural acquisition and learning are the only means to overcome sectarianism and achieve unity and enlightenment. For al-Bustani, the *nahdah* as awakening or renaissance is a speech act, designating a mood and involving a performance, a *nuhud* (rising). Al-Bustani's lecture captures the performativity of the *nahdah* as that which is meant to bring about enlightenment and achieve the public good. In his lecture, al-Bustani performs, points and gestures, encourages, invigorates, threatens, and warns. The lecture involves metaphors that embody movement (as in cultural progress) using such expressions as "we are able to raise our heads up high given our current accomplishments," "If the bridle binding these publishing houses were released and their presses were to run with their full strength," and "release of the mind's reins and the will's bridle."[9] The image of horses running without inhibition is key in capturing the state (or desired state) of Arabic culture at the time. The printing presses running like horses bring together animal force and industrialization as necessary components of the *nahdah* in the speech. Comparing it to the engines of the printing presses, running like horses, al-Bustani's image, which foregrounds futurist discourse on speed and culture in the age of mechanicity, is a call for riding, for embracing the power and the times. Let there be *nahdah*!

Many of al-Bustani's contemporaries believed that a new age is now upon them. This translated into a personal and financial investment, an impetus to donate money among local communities to create schools, to conduct experiments, to write about microbes, and to engage in comparative reading of European art and pre-Islamic poetry. There is a series of acts, interventions, and performances arising from peer pressure as well that are trying to bring about the *nahdah*, make it happen. The *nahdah* is 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. It is a question of faith, an engagement in the communal affairs that require time and effort that these

7 Butrus al-Bustani, "Lecture on the Culture of the Arabs (1858)," *The Arab Renaissance: A Bilingual Anthology of Nahdah Literature and Culture (1707–1937)*, ed. Tarek El-Ariss, trans. Stephen Sheehi (New York: Modern Language Association Book Series, *Texts and Translations*, 2016).
8 Butrus al-Bustani, "Al-Jinan (1870)," *The Arab Renaissance*, ed. Tarek El-Ariss, trans. Elizabeth Holt (New York: Modern Language Association Book Series, *Texts and Translations*, 2016).
9 Al-Bustani, "Lecture."

nahdah thinkers and writers are practicing. With this in mind, we need to rethink the *nahdah* not so much as a historical period with clear or unclear epistemic breaks but rather as a process, a trial, as a condition of possibility and a state of mind that cuts through historical periods.

The *nahdah* for these thinkers and activists was tied to civilization, refinement, *adab* (culture, literature), and the achievement of civilization. "Civilization" (*tamaddun*), which has been a contentious issue that marked the European Orientalist discourse at the time, is key to understanding exactly what is meant by *tamaddun* for *nahdah* authors and thinkers in the mid-nineteenth century. Al-Bustani and his peers were practicing *tamaddun*, which was in the air, by writing, founding schools, and editing journals. These *nahdah* authors were practicing the *nahdah* as civilization, trying it on, writing in a new language in order to actualize it and bring about this culture of knowledge. This does not mean that they are *mutamaddinin* (civilized), endowed with the sense of certainty and superiority that postcolonial theory identified in their European counterparts as part of its critique of Orientalism. Engaging in this civilizing process does not amount to a civilizing mission, and not Orientalist or self-Orientalizing. In this sense, the notion of civilization is not absolute or equivalent to that of the West.

Understanding this non-equivalence, which is often missed by contemporary *nahdah* scholars, should inform our comparative practice and make us rethink the current and prevalent approach that tries to deconstruct notions of *nahdah* sexuality, literature, and education. A focus on the meaning of concepts in the Western context, as they have been studied, analyzed, and critiqued, will miss the usage and their practice in the Arabic one, preventing acts of recoding and translation, trial and error, and contradiction and inconsistency. The interpretation and the critique of the *nahdah* have to exist somewhere in between these two conceptual and linguistic registers, in between the performative and the conceptual.

Engaging the *nahdah* as trials and accidents, however, needs to be distinguished from Salamah Musa's and Taha Hussein's later definitions of the *nahdah*, which align more clearly with the internalized Orientalism that al-Musawi and other scholars discuss, wherein the *nahdah* is presented as a clear ideological project that they are confidently enacting as a sign of their modernity, superiority, that they now know with certainty, and in so doing limiting and interrupting the *nahdah*'s play. When approaching the *nahdah* with this clear view, when the *nahdah* is actualized and defined by Hussein, Musah, and contemporary *nahdah* scholars, then there is nothing to learn from the *nahdah*, which has now been foreclosed, defined, and fully formed. Insisting on the *nahdah* as this suspended space of trial and performance is essential to understanding it. *Nahdah* could be understood only through uncertainty. It is in the speech act, the bodily gestures, unstable genres, texts, and models that the *nahdah* needs to be engaged.

The importance of *nahdah* as trials and potentiality is necessary to free up the *nahdah* text from the *nahdah* as a "modernity" project through which that text becomes meaningful—and the only way that the text becomes meaningful. When we examine the function of literature during the *nahdah*, we find theories of the novel in Khalil Baydas (1875–1949) and Farah Antun (1874–1922) proclaiming that literature is meant to elevate and produce the moral subject, the subject of *adab* that is currently

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the topic of many scholarly works.[10] But if we read these texts closely, if we read deconstructively and comparatively, we realize that what is preached doesn't correspond to what is produced, that there are radical discrepancies between intention and writing, between theory and practice.

It is at the intersection of public discourse on the *nahdah* and *nahdah* practices (writing, activism, editing) that the reading and *nahdah* research needs to take place. This opens up *nahdah* texts for reading and analysis, giving them their rightful place in Arabic literary studies. Thus far, these texts have been reduced to representation of discursive and political forces stripped of these kinds of particularities wherein dissonance, performance, and play occur. This requires that we read the texts and read them in all their differences and fluctuations, suspending the engagement with these works through the lens of *nahdah* rise or decline, Western influence or Arabic tradition, break or continuity. To decolonize the *nahdah* is to allow it to make its own meaning, however contradictory and inconsistent with historical narratives and ideologies of critique.

Whose Amnesia? Literary Modernity in Multilingual South Asia

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The debate over the impact of British colonialism and "colonial modernity" in India has hinged around questions of epistemic and aesthetic rupture. Whether in modern poetry, art, music, in practically every language and region intellectuals struggled with the artistic traditions they had inherited and condemned them as decadent and artificial. But this is only part of the story. If we widen the lens a little and consider print culture and orature more broadly, then vibrant regional print and performance cultures in a variety of Indian languages, and the publishing of earlier knowledge and aesthetic traditions belie the notion that English made India into a province of Europe, peripheral to London as the center of world literature. Yet nothing of this new fervor of journals, associations, literary debates, of new genres or theater and popular publishing, transpires in Anglo-Indian and English journals of the period, whose

10 See selections from Khalil Baydas, "Stages of the Mind (1924)," *The Arab Renaissance: A Bilingual Anthology of Nahda Literature and Culture (1707–1937)*, ed. Tarek El-Ariss, trans. Spencer Scoville and Farah Antun (New York: Modern Language Association Book Series, *Texts and Translations*, 2016). "The New Jerusalem," *The Arab Renaissance*, trans. Ghenwa Hayek.

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