

## The Republic of Letters: Arab Modernity? [Pt. I]

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*This reading rewrites the nahḍah, as the other appellation for Arab modernity, and interrogates it through a postcolonial critique. The nahḍah is usually addressed in terms of the encounter with Europe, the indebtedness to and engagement with the Enlightenment discourse at the turn of the last century. I dispute more commonplace negativist readings of the past by nahḍah scholars and direct attention instead to other competing trends that enhanced significant identitarian politics. I also unearth the reasons behind the loudly pronounced negativism, its pitfalls and failure to map out a comprehensive field of an enormous knowledge that unfolded in compendiums, commentaries, lexicons, encyclopedias, along with separate monographs. I apply the term republic of letters to this specifically loaded scholarly interaction, one that preceded and heralded other configurational sites in Europe. A community of scholars over centuries and across the Islamic lands emerged between the twelfth and eighteenth centuries that could have furnished “Enlightened” modernists with some different understanding and critical theoretical approach to the encounter with Europe and the colonial and postcolonial state of affairs.*

**Keywords:** *nahḍah*, republic of letters, constellations, centripetal metropolis, Muslim elite, *Qamūs*, macrogenres, Marṣafī, identitarian politics, symbolic capital, encounter, epistemic shift, *siyāsah*, E. W. Lane, Ibrāhīm al-Yāzījī, Enlightenment, Arab revolt, Arab flag, Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Hillī

“There is no question which we might simply ask, without knowing of past things that are preserved in the question and spur it.”

Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), 54

“Say to whoever denies successors any advantage and assigns precedence to ancients/that the ancient was once modern: and this modern will remain ancient.”

Master Buṭrus al-Bustānī, the cover motto for the lexicon *Kitāb muḥīṭ al-muḥīṭ*

“I am restoring to our silent and apparently immobile soil its rifts, its instability, its flaws; and it is the same ground that is once more stirring under our feet.”

Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Random House, 1994), xxiv

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One of the basic paradigms defining the Arab *nahḍah* or the less popular *yaqḏah* (viewing it here as an umbrella term for modernity, or “awakening,” since the early nineteenth century, broadly 1811–1950s) is its unease with the Arab/Islamic past. Apart from the structural negativism that recurs within an underlying justification for change, some prominent *nahḍah* intellectuals in Egypt and the rest of the Arab world emulate their European “Enlightenment” counterparts who turned their back on the premodern era [Middle Ages] in their headlong espousal of progress under the guise of rational philosophy and empirical reasoning.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, prominent and influential intellectuals such as the Egyptian Salāmah Mūsā (1887–1958) go so far as to suggest vaulting more than five hundred years of premodern and medieval Islamic history in exchange for an internalized post-Renaissance version of Europe.<sup>2</sup> He argues, “Arab readers need the Western Enlightenment for their Eastern minds.”<sup>3</sup> Early on in his polemical discourse, *Māhiya al-nahḍah* (What is the Awakening?), he expresses his fear that we may “fail to defeat medievalism in our life.”<sup>4</sup> The “doyen of Arabic literature” as Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (1889–1973) is called, made no secret of his rejection of the period in question, dismissing its literature as “decadent” and “dead.”<sup>5</sup> Commenting on the attitude of late nineteenth and early twentieth Arab liberals, the late Moroccan intellectual Muḥammad ‘Ābid al-Jābirī (1936–2010) concludes that this Arab liberal (Salāmah Mūsā) “remains completely silent about the Arab past, because it is never part of his preoccupation; hence he resolutely distances it.”<sup>6</sup> Before focusing on the complexity of Arab and Islamic modernities, however, we need perhaps to introduce the subject of their disparagement and unease. Here a preparatory exploration of the textual community of the middle and premodern periods in Arab/Islamic history (1250–1811)<sup>7</sup> is appropriate, especially in terms of the reconstruction

1 For more on modernity and its strategies of counter-balancing its negativism, see Jonathan Culler’s use of Walter Benjamin, Robert Jauss, and Hugo Friedrich, “On the Negativity of Modern Poetry: Friedrich, Baudelaire, and the Critical Tradition,” in *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, eds. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (New York: Columbia University, 1989), 189–208, esp. 201. Matei Calinescu argues that the “modern artist ... [is] torn between his urge to cut himself off from the past ... and his dream to found a new tradition, recognizable as such by the future.” See Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 67. Baudelaire says, “Modernity is the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art, of which the other half is the eternal and the immutable.” *Ibid.*, 48. From among Arabs who echoed the concept of a much needed rejuvenation through Europe was Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Zayyāt, “Ḥī al-Adab al-‘Arabī,” *al-Jadīd* 1.2 (February 6, 1928): 19–20. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn has already drawn on the need in his preface to al-Zayyāt’s translation of Goethe’s *Werther*. See Muhsin al-Musawi, *Islam on the Street* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), 8. See also Shaden M. Tageldin, “Proxidistant Reading: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of the *Nahḍah* in U.S. Comparative Literary Studies,” *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 2.3 (Fall 2012): 240.

2 See Salāmah Mūsā, *Al-Tathqīf al-dhātī* (Self-Teaching; Autodidactus; Cairo: Maṭba‘at Dār al-Taqaḍum, n.d.); in Muḥammad ‘Ābid al-Jābirī, *Al-Khiṭāb al-‘Arabī al-mu‘āṣir* (Contemporary Arabic Discourse; Beirut: Dār al-Ṭalīḥ, 1982; reprint 1986), 36.

3 Salāmah Mūsā, *Mā hiya al-Nahḍah* (What is the Revival? Cairo: Dār al-Jīl, n.d.), 130.

4 *Ibid.*, 10.

5 Ṭāhā Ḥusayn’s article appeared in *al-Jadīd* (1930); reprinted in *Akhbār al-adab* 186 (February 2, 1997), 30. Cited by Roger Allen, “The Post-Classical Period: Parameters and Preliminaries,” in *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period*, eds. Roger Allen and D. S. Richards (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 14, 15.

6 Muḥammad ‘Ābid al-Jābirī, *Al-Khiṭāb al-‘Arabī al-mu‘āṣir* (Contemporary Arabic Discourse), 36.

7 First date refers to the Islamic calendar; followed by the Christian era. For a study of the past, see Muhsin al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters* (Notre Dame University Press, forthcoming). For dating

of knowledge. In what follows (Parts I and II), I will examine this reconstruction as exemplified by specific cases that happen to distinguish the makeup of a literate culture, its sites of correspondence and discussion, and thereby establish “a republic of letters.”<sup>8</sup> This use of the term *republic* is intended as an appellation for a community of scholars and readers across the Islamic lands who happened to interact, correspond with one another, hold meetings and debates, and establish a repertoire of texts in encyclopedic or commentary form. Much larger and productive than the French encyclopedia project that invoked the term *republic of letters*,<sup>9</sup> configurations and constellations of post-classical (i.e., medieval and premodern) Islamic knowledge over a number of centuries and well into the eighteenth century complemented, built on, and far exceeded in their diversity, scope, geographical range, and target their basis established in the late Umayyad and Abbasid eras. At the same time, it must also be acknowledged that, along with this corpus and amid drastic disruptions of a political and cultural nature, there is an equally enormous production of less merit that was meant to nourish a broader populace in quest of knowledge. Muslim elite treatment of the recent past tends to discount the masses and hence also the denigration attending that medieval/premodern writing addressing these publics. Thus, the study of past culture is a study of societies and their political economies. This relationship with a cultural past assumes great importance in our search for a better understanding of movements, attitudes, and concepts because culture provided shared codes that were not lost on either the *khawāṣṣ* (elite) or the *‘āmmah* (the common public),<sup>10</sup> especially in that volatile climate run not only by dynasties of differential interests in and engagements with culture but also by less conspicuous powers on material and intellectual levels. Let us remember that narrative literature leaves us a massive record of tyrants and rulers who turned into helpless beings in the presence of a revered shaykh or a prominent scholar.<sup>11</sup> The fact that we are left with an enormous corpus of these narratives, voluminous histories, compendiums, biographical dictionaries,

the Mamluk period, see ‘Abduh ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Qalqīlah, who argues the case for these historical limits in terms of rule: Al-Mu‘izz Aybak al-Turkumānī ruled Egypt in 1250, and Tūmān was defeated by the Ottomans in 1517. See *Al-Naqd al-adabī fi al-‘aṣr al-Mamlūkī* (Literary Criticism in the Mamluk Period; Cairo: Maktabat al-Anjilū al-Miṣriyyah, 1972; based on his 1969 dissertation), 11 and fn 1. See also ‘Umar Mūsā Bāshā, *Tārīkh al-adab al-‘Arabī: al-‘aṣr al-Mamlūkī* (The History of Arabic Literature: The Mamluk Age; Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1989), 29–39. The new Wālī of Egypt in 1805 was Muḥammad ‘Alī Pasha (March 4, 1769–August 2, 1849). He eliminated the Mamluk leaders in 1811. Inviting them to the Cairo Citadel in honor of his son, Ṭusūn, he got them trapped and murdered.

8 The French scholar Pierre Bayle (d. 1706) coined the phrase *republic of letters* or *République des Lettres* at the end of the seventeenth century indicating a community or network of intellectuals, like a “republic,” who were able to create and sustain an intellectual and information exchange through correspondence, circulation of epistles, poems, books, and journals, assemblies, such as the Arab *majlis*, and so on. See Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters, A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 2, 15.

9 Writing to Ya‘qūb Ṣarrūf in 1920, Mayy Ziyādah referred to the correspondence between Voltaire (d. 1778) and Jean le Rond d’Alembert (d. 1783) with respect to their *Encyclopedia* project that brought many European intellectuals on board and was seen as evidence of a “republic of letters.” See B. Khaldi, *Egypt Awakening in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Palgrave, 2012), 11; Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters*.

10 Many books come under titles dealing with both publics; al-Qāsim Abū-Muḥammad al-Ḥarirī’s (1054–1122) *Durrat al-ghawāṣṣ fi awḥām al-khawāṣṣ* (The Diver’s Pearl in the Delusions of the Elite) is one.

11 Such instances will be mentioned in due course.

treatises of every sort, and treasure troves of poetry and correspondence testifies to a republic of letters of an exceptional feat.

Current use of the term, usually associated with Pascale Casanova's *World Republic of Letters*, merits some attention not only to decenter the latter's conceptualization but also and primarily to direct attention to traditions that antedate and perhaps problematize the global application. Casanova's *World* runs counter to national communities, for Paris as the locale and armature of this republic is the one to accrue, recapitulate on, and also deliver recognition, a case that is seemingly proved not only by cultural imports from the metropolitan center worldwide but also by its assimilation of other works from excolonies and cultural peripheries.<sup>12</sup> The idea of a culturally gravitating centripetal metropolis obviously partakes of both material and cultural circumstance as was the case earlier with Baghdad, where the symbolic power of the city as the central pivot of Islam was on hold even as its contribution went into decline before the eventual downfall as a result of the Mongol invasion in 1258. In this case the notion of a symbolic capital derives from the caliphal order that leads a reputable jurist and judge like the Egyptian ibn Duqmāq to bewail the city's fall as something universal.<sup>13</sup> Before discussing the emerging role of Cairo, it is worth remembering that for modernists the fall signifies consequent "negligence" and stagnation. Indeed, no less of a modernist than the Iraqi leading poet Badr Shākīr al-Sayyāb (d. 1964), addresses the fall of Baghdad to the Mongols (1258) as the dividing line between light and darkness, power and weakness, and fertility and sterility. While addressing the Algerian fighters as the ones bringing regeneration to a dying *ummah* (nation) he specifically dwells on the fall of Baghdad as follows:

From the darkness there descended on our dwellings  
A swarm of locusts, scorching them. It was as if the waters of the Tigris, where [the swarm of locusts] turned black  
Testified to it with blood and ink.  
Was it not its judgment that had so stunned the pregnant women  
That they gave birth to naught but ashes?<sup>14</sup>

The fall of Baghdad as a massive turning point in Islamic geographies has its socio-political and cultural dimensions. The symbolic failure and fall turned the Islamic nation upside down, and many contending centers appeared that claimed legitimacy and

12 Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise. (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2004). On this point, see Thomas Austenfeld, who sums the point as follows: to "attain recognition, she argues, writers must be granted a space in this imaginary republic, and in order to be recognized as innovative—her key criterion of excellence—writers must be legitimized by being 'consecrated' in Paris, the tolerant world-center of literature since the late 16th century, either through translation into French or by recognition of 'the authorities.' Her bold claim, in other words, is to declare Paris 'the Greenwich meridian' of literary recognition." *South Atlantic Review*, 71.1 (Winter 2006): 141–44, esp. 142.

13 Ibrāhīm b. Muḥ. B. Aydamr b. Duqmāq, *al-Jawhar al-thamīn fī siyar al-mulūk wa al-salātīn* (The Precious Stone in the Conduct Accounts of Kings and Sultans) (Ṣaydā: al-Maktabah al-ʿAṣriyyah, 1999), 223.

14 Hussein N. Kadhīm, trans. and analysis, "Rewriting 'The Waste Land': Badr Shākīr al-Sayyāb's 'Fī al-Maghrib al-ʿArabī,'" *Journal of Arabic Literature* 30.2 (1999): 128–70, at 141.

leadership through culture or force. For an actual accommodation of writers and writings from all over the globe, Cairo came to occupy a place of honor throughout the thirteen and fourteen centuries, according to two prominent contemporaries of the Mamluk period, al-Qalqashandī (d.1418) and ibn Khaldūn (d.1406). Although the latter surmise is commensurate with Casanova's assessment of the role of Paris, it obviously exposes at the same time the pitfalls involved in a generalized equation that would link the interdependency of the print industry and the rise of a "world republic of letters." The middle and premodern periods in Islamic history may illustrate failures in economy and politics but not backwardness and stagnation, a point that Peter Gran strongly engages with.<sup>15</sup> The actual achievements in cultural production in terms of written culture are problematic enough to raise questions about Eurocentric totalizing constructs in the form of structuralist polarizations. During the period under consideration, monographs, massive lexicons, and encyclopedic dictionaries were composed across the Islamic lands, along with an active quest for knowledge and the rise of individual library collections and archival repositories. Although medieval and premodern Islamic culture attests to Casanova's stipulation concerning the unsustainability of an equation between political/economic growth and cultural prominence, it also disputes her definition of the world republic of letters in terms of a post-Renaissance Europe. Even if we accept the term as involving a constellation of collaborative knowledge, the periods under consideration offer us the opportunity for further consideration of such umbrella terms.

Cairo of the middle and premodern period was more of an epicenter for a combination of material production and symbolic capital, however. The nature of growth and its shifting body politic place us squarely within a cosmopolitan 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 invert worldliness in common tropes. Indeed, Cairo was the witness to a cosmopolitan culture that was partly its own, but also and to a large extent forced on the city by virtue of place. Situated at the crossroads to Mecca, Africa, the Mediterranean, Syria, and eastern Asia, all the way to the borders with China that ibn Baṭṭūṭah (d. 1369) would reach and describe, Cairo was a place, but not an identity. What was its own and what was brought to the place and its people involves and defines its makeup at that particular historical intersection, one in which another, non-Arab presence enforced its presence while acclimatizing itself to the accommodating Islamic space. Fighting its way between its own populations and its Arab and Afro-Asian communities, especially the Maghribi component, and the superimposed Mamluks and Ottomans, City-Victorious, as its name signifies, comes out cosmopolitan but also as an Arab/Islamic metropolitan epicenter.

### **The Arab/Islamic Modernity Complex: The Burden of the Past?**

It stands to reason then to argue that a return to an early period, albeit with different understanding and methodology, cannot be warranted unless there

15 See Peter Gran's significant contribution to the study of capitalist economy in mid-eighteenth century Egypt, Peter Gran, *Islamic Roots of Capitalism, Egypt, 1760-1840* (reprint of 1979 edition; Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1998), xv.

is a pressing need, a need that pertains to structures of knowledge in relation to colonial and postcolonial imperatives, including identitarian politics.<sup>16</sup> The plan for my current project therefore questions first modernity sites that propagate a wholesale rejection of the cultural values of the premodern and Mamluk periods. It also seeks to reveal a transitional oscillation that exists among another segment of Arab and Muslim literati, one that operates between an edgy and shy approval and occasional expressions of denial of any worthwhile production of the periods under consideration. Secondly, it attempts to uncover omissions that reside in rhetorical disclaimers of modernity and instead to construct a counter-mapping of a textual terrain involving conflict, contestation, and struggle.<sup>17</sup> I leave out the issue of the nation-state, and the invented secular/religious paradigm, until some other occasion. The process will follow an interdisciplinary critique that conforms to a contemporaneous definition of the term *adab* in the middle period, one through which aesthetics, as well as sciences and crafts or professions, transform the cultural landscape at the same time as they undergo ruptures and shifts. As it stands, the second part of present intervention will engage with specific sites of scriptoria, and especially lexica, rhetoric, and epistles concerning disputation or argumentation, as being dynamic forces in the fabric of discussion and reading communities, of forums of governance and authority, and of common or street life.<sup>18</sup> Within such a framework specific subgenres are utilized as examples and cardinal points for the synthesis of basic premises.

### Disputing the Antipodes of Modernity<sup>19</sup>

As a majority of Arab modernists are habitually trapped in a feeling of subordination to an Enlightenment disengagement with a medieval European past,<sup>20</sup> the Mamluk and Ottoman periods are, more often than not, treated in corresponding medieval terms despite their different historicity and referent; they are consequently dismissed as the fall from grace, a dark descent into the abyss of backwardness and deterioration.<sup>21</sup> Modernity itself harbors within it a latent subordination to mimetic representation, which in turn suspects the underlying linguistic base of the rhetorical fecundity traceable to that earlier period. Taken together, and read against the writing of even such well-balanced intellectuals as Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Zayyāt (d. 1968),

16 On Edward Said's explorations of the dangers for the Third World readers of the internalization of the Western imperialist philological machinery "for the establishment of identitarian truth-claims around the world," see Aamir R. Mufti, "Orientalism and the Institution of World Literatures," *Critical Inquiry* 36.3 (Spring 2010): 458–93, esp. 462.

17 On modernity disclaiming rhetoric, see Christine Brooke-Rose, "Whatever Happened to Narratology?" *Poetics Today: Narratology Revisited I* 11.2 (Summer 1990): 283–93.

18 These issues receive a detailed and more focused study in my *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters*.

19 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), 53.

20 Goethe's "old straw of habits" in reference to the European Middle Ages comes to one's mind, especially as Matthew Arnold who was almost contemporaneous with the Arab early modernists was enthusiastically committed to the "great destabilizer" of Western culture. See Muhsin al-Musawi, *Anglo-Orient* (Tunis: Centre de Publication Universitaire, 2000), 143.

21 We should remember that ibn Khaldūn paved the way for this kind of critique, which was picked upon by nationalist thinkers like Michel Aflaq and Quṣṭanṭīn Zurāiq who thought of pre-Islamic times as rich with a latent power that needed the message of Islam to resurrect it and move it forward to reach its peak in the Abbasid period.

the translator of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Werther* (1920) and editor of the most popular intellectual forum, the magazine *al-Risālah* (1933–1953), there is in literary historiography a range of possible responses to the past: an Oedipal repudiation of literary fathers; a self-conciliatory stance heralding a rebirth; and a more assiduous commitment to unearthing the legacy of the middle and premodern period.<sup>22</sup>

The complexity of this uncertain recognition of what is clearly a massive cultural output and the denial of its significance is all the more apparent when read against a positive gamut of counter-engagements in the contexts of lexicography, national discourse, and nation building. In other words, under the impact of the encounter with Europe and the continuing effort to carve a way out, there is more than one inventory of evidential traces to be found on the colonial subject. Salāmah Mūsā's categorical rejection of the past five centuries or so can be offset by Shaykh Muḥammad 'Abduh (d. 1905) and many of his disciples, as well as by the members of the émigré Pen-League (*Al-Rābiṭah al-qalamiyyah*) in the early 1920s in the United States and Lebanon, with their willingness to discriminate between assimilation, imitation, and independence.<sup>23</sup> Against Salāmah Mūsā's tide and his sweeping denial of medieval and premodern culture, there are some significant contributions to a revolutionary politics and poetics that lie at the very base of the modernity project. The Egyptian Shaykh Ḥusayn al-Marṣafī (1815–1890), a solid scholar who was to have a substantial impact on many trainees in Arabic sciences, constructs his *al-Wasīlah al-adabiyyah* (The Literary Method) on a selective reordering of Arabic and its sciences, but in his *Risālat al-kalam al-thamān* (The Epistle of the Eight Key Words) he also acknowledges the power and influence of the encounter with Europe insofar as new conceptualizations of polity and statehood are concerned. In 1881 he writes: "In this epistle I request readers' acutest attention and care so as to understand everything mentioned and to reconsider it in order to be sure of its meanings. In this epistle I address the most intelligent youth of these times ... in which I have explained words currently in use and circulation among people; words such as nation, homeland, government, justice, oppression, politics, freedom, and education."<sup>24</sup> Indeed, in this short but significant text (along with other similar ones), a new textual territory is laid down and begins to take shape, a new register grows and inserts itself in a wider cultural script that had already witnessed the contributions of the Syrian (Lebanese) Buṭrus al-Bustanī (1819–1883), the Lebanese-Iraqi Anastas al-Karmalī (1866–1947), and many others. It involves an engagement that commonly betrays certain flaws in its uneven transactional encounter. National recognition of the need for Europe is often proclaimed along the image of a glorious golden age, usually Abbasid with Baghdad as the center that is rhetorically shored up. Even the urgent quest for a confrontational revivalist movement that set the tone for a national political discourse carries within it

22 See how this repudiation creeps in his *Tārīkh al-adab al-'Arabī* (1928), which is on the whole a well-balanced account of literary history. Jurjī Zaydān's criticism takes its lead from social and political circumstances, specifically in the Arab East, as Egypt and Syria were engulfed by "backwardness and corruption." *Tārīkh Ādāb al-lughah al-'Arabiyyah* 4.6: 11.

23 See for instance Mīkhā'il Nu'ayma's significant questioning of the term *nahḍah* in Roger Allen's "The Post-Classical Period ...," 15.

24 Shaykh Ḥusayn al-Marṣafī, *Risālat al-kalam al-thamān*, ed. Aḥmad Zakarīyā Shalāq. (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣriyyah al-'Āmmah lil-Kitāb, GIBO, 1984), 61.

the scars of an encounter with the Ottomans and Europe. Conversely, it is within the context of quest that an underlying “political unconscious,” perhaps an undercurrent, reverts to the relatively recent past of the middle period rather than to the heyday of the Abbasids in (ninth and eleventh centuries). Standing opposition to a commonly held belief in an imaginary substratum of Abbasid ancestry, specific engagements strove instead to establish a text-based extraction from within the density of the middle period. Drawing on its rhetorical fecundity and specifically its exceptional statist and social/communal markers in statecraft, poetics, and rhetoric, less outspoken participants in the *nahḍah* project found themselves drawn to a number of leading conceptualizations and tropes that differ in a significant way from the dominant disparagement of the period under discussion. In their exceptional presence amid striding espousals of a European enlightenment politics, these conceptualizations markedly carve another differential space in state formation. I would like to draw attention to these because they also work against the common premise that the *nahḍah* movement is necessarily confined only to Cairo, which was admittedly an epicenter for cultural and urban advancement and growth throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

### Flag, Statecraft, and Language

From among these particular markers, I will now cite the following three instances of formative presence in the makeup of “modernity” and its concretization in the nation-state: firstly, 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, a flag that would continue to function ever after until perhaps the resurgence of globalization and its systematic recourse to power to dismantle such countries as Iraq (since 1991); secondly, the reclamation of the Mamluk terms of parity between state administration and the role of the intelligentsia; and thirdly, the generation of lexical conversation and lexicographic production with deep roots in both genealogical tradition and rhetorical ancestry. These three instances are strongly linked to identitarian politics and hence also raise questions regarding the complexity of the so-called Awakening (*nahḍah*) project, with its many preoccupations, concerns, methodologies, and conspicuous appropriations from colonial culture.

These identitarian markers were, however, deployed in the Arab world in particular at the end of the nineteenth century against a landscape of disparagement by literati. The posture encountered most often is grounded in negativity, shrouding the period in concepts of decadence and loss, blotting it out as unfortunate anticlimax to an otherwise golden age.<sup>25</sup> Even Sulaymān Khaṭṭār al-Bustānī, a discerning

25 Gabriel Piterberg, “Tropes of Stagnation and Awakening in Nationalist Historical Consciousness: The Egyptian Case,” in *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East*, eds. Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 42–61; Paul Sedra, *From Mission to Modernity* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2011) and Usama Maqḍisi, *Artillery of Heaven: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007). As a site of complexity and difference, we can direct attention to such variegated response in the following: the renowned Syrian scholar Muḥammad Kurd ‘Alī argued that Muslim and Arab intellectuals had long entertained the need for rising from decadence; there is also a counter discourse that argues otherwise. See his articles in *al-Muqtabas*, vol. 1 (1906): 432–33 and vol. 2 (1907): 620–21. For an opposite argument, see the following article in *Al-Hilāl*, 1939 by ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Bishrī, in “Muhimu al-adīb fī al-Sharq an yakūna adībān

scholar, pioneering comparatist, and multilingual translator, *littérateur*, editor, and poetic translator in full of Homer's *Iliad* in 1904, concurs with the dominating reading of the period as one "of decadence and imitation." He qualifies his sweeping statement, however, with a mention of "the ember that every now and then emits a spark to generate a poetic talent," mentioning in the process the names of ibn Nubātā al-Misrī (d. AH 768/AD 1366), ibn Ḥajar (d. 852/1448), the Ottoman Turk 'Abd al-Bāqī al-Ma'rūf, ibn Ma'tūq al-Mūsawī (d. 1676), and 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (d. 1731), from within the premodern period.<sup>26</sup> Many late-twentieth-century scholars have been arguing exactly the opposite, and clear-sighted efforts have begun to expose the failures of this hurried but common judgment. My focus here on middle and premodern legacies in the combined "macrogenres" of a cultural archive and the practice of epistolary art, rhetoric, and literary criticism,<sup>27</sup>—as being basic to the middle and premodern construction of knowledge—intends no apologetic reading, nor does it add more to what Thomas Bauer and others have been convincingly exposing as servile duplication of the response of European modernity to medieval times.<sup>28</sup>

For the first exception to the sweeping disparagement of the middle/premodern period, I have in mind the fourteenth-century Iraqi poet, scholar, rhetorician, and merchant, Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Ḥillī (AH 677–750/AD 1278–1348/1349). This mention might not raise or generate curiosity on our part as readers were it not for the so-called Arab Revolt (1916–1918) in the Ḥijāz and other parts of the Arab region against the Ottomans, led by the Meccan Sharif Ḥusayn (AH 1270–1350/AD 1854–1931). Its flag

Sharqīyyan" (How Disturbing for a *Littérateur* in the East to be an Oriental *Littérateur*; the title can delude one to read it as the "mission of . . . to be . . .") where he argues: "By God, the greatest of our Eastern *littérateurs* and the grandest cast their eyes only to the West, and think only through the West, and depict what they find in a Western style; nay, their nerves get relaxed and open up only to what reaches them from there. They were thrilled by Western civilization and fascinated by its beauty; and Western thought closed their mind to any other; thus no space is left in their mind to explore the East, to check out its literate scape and to dig deep for its hidden treasures. . . ." *Al-Hilāl* (1939): 117–19, esp. 117. The renowned scholar Zakī Mubārak writes in specific identitarian politics of domination that jointly reflect on a politic of Egyptian ascendancy and European colonialism. In "Mustaqbal al-adab al-'Arabī" (The Future of Arabic Literature), he argues: "It is a shame for Egyptians to admit their being disciples to the West while sublimated to mentoring the East." See *Al-Hilāl* (1939), Special Issue, 129–31, esp. 131. In *Yaqqat al-fikr* (Awakening of the Mind; Cairo: Maktabat al-'Ādāb, 1986), the reputed dramatist, novelist, and essayist Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm suggests a different line, one of openness to cultures. In an article of 1946 titled "Tabī'atunā nahwa al-shabāb" (Our Responsibilities toward Youth), he argues: "The harm in my old thoughts and opinions derives from the fact that they dispose the young to erect prisons and fortifications from their Eastern spirituality and the remains of their Egyptian civilization that isolate them from global thought, and prevent them from a daring and powerful participation in the common human intellectual activity. Upon this participation they'll perhaps stop seeing in Western culture and foreign civilizations monsters that threaten to snatch away their souls!" 107–13, esp. 109.

26 Sulaymān Khaṭṭār al-Bustānī produces Homer's *Ilyad* in 1904, Arabized in verse, with a historical and literary explanation (*Ilyādhat Hūmīrūs: mu'rrahah nazman wa-'alayhā sharḥ tarikhī adabī*; Miṣr: Al-Hilāl, 1904). *Dār a-Ma'ārif in Sousse* reprint, n.d. is used, 161.

27 As well defined by Martin Irvine, these include: the lexicon, the gloss or commentary, the compilation, the library, and the encyclopedia. See *The Making of Textual Culture: "Grammatica" and Literary Theory, 350–1100* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 426.

28 See Thomas Bauer, "Mamluk Literature: Misunderstandings and New Approaches," *Mamluk Studies Review* IX, 2 (2005): 105–32, esp. 106; his "In Search of 'Post-Classical Literature': A Review Article," *Mamluk Studies Review*, XI, 2 (2007): 137–67, esp. 142–45; and also his "Communication and Emotion: The Case of Ibn Nubātāh's Kindertotenlieder," *Mamluk Studies Review* VII (2003): 48–95, esp. 74–75.

was no more than a reinstatement in design and color of al-Ḥillī's verse, which won instant success in synthesizing syntactical and emblematic features that have given form and shape to most Arab national flags.<sup>29</sup>

### A Text for a Nation-State

This example fits into a larger picture involving writings that claim nationalism or reflect on the past as a possible source for governance and statecraft. The poem in the flag converses with many preoccupations, such as the one that brings al-Ḥillī's contemporary and close associate, the Egyptian acute critic, scribe, and illustrious poet ibn Nubātah al-Miṣrī to the center of attention at the turn of the century, 1900. Indeed, his epistle "Risālat al-sayf wa al-qalam" (The Epistle of the Sword and the Pen) generated others, including a seeming recension by his disciple and fellow Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ṣafadī,<sup>30</sup> and led to contrafactions and duplications. I am specifically referring here to an otherwise inexplicable reproduction of ibn Nubātah's epistle,<sup>31</sup> by no less than the prominent Syrian/Lebanese linguist, poet, critic, and nationalist Ibrāhīm al-Yāzījī (1847–1906), whose ode calling on Arabs to rise in revolt was already a household word.<sup>32</sup> It is this poem that Georges Antonius credited with invigorating an Arab national awakening.<sup>33</sup> Al-Yāzījī was prolific, meticulous, and sharp. His articles on the Arabic language and his scathing criticism of colonial efforts to uproot culture through the Latinization of the Arabic alphabet were influential in confronting both Turkification and colonial schemes. But the act of reproducing ibn Nubātah's debate as an exemplary rhetorical "deviation" in his journal *Al-Diyā'* (The Light; 1900)

29 See Muhsin al-Musawi, *Reading Iraq* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006, 63, 164 and fn 108. The verse reads as follows: "White are our deeds (we are good and generous); black are our battles (they make our foes grieve); our fields are green (we are affluent not needy); and our swords are red (we are cavaliers and knights who defeat their enemies)." The poem that opens with a plea for a female addressee to "ask the sharp edged stout lances of our great feats/ and get the attestations of swords if we ever fail their expectations" refers to the Zawrā' battle (Al-Zawrā' is also one of the sobriquets for Baghdad), after his tribe, which made up the population of the city Ḥilla, rose, "like one man" and fought a battle against their enemies who killed his uncle in his own mosque. He was among the frontline fighters, and they achieved a glorious victory.

30 A discussion of these that evidentially build on ibn Nubātah's is by G. J. van Gelder, "Conceit of Pen and Sword," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 32.2 (1987): 329–60 and Adrian Gully, "The Sword and the Pen in the Pre-Modern Arabic Heritage: A Literary Representation of an Important Historical Relationship," *Ideas, Images, and Methods of Portrayal: Insights into Classical Arabic Literature and Islam*, ed. Sebastian Günther (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 403–30.

31 It appeared under this title in a reprint by Ibrahim al-Yāzījī, from *Khizānat al-adab* (The Ultimate Treasure Trove of literature), by ibn Ḥijjah al-Ḥamawī (d. AH 837 /AD 1434), ed. Kawkab Diyāb, vol. II, 217–38; in *Al-Diyā'* (1900), vol. 6, 68, reprinted in Ibrāhīm al-Yāzījī, *Abḥāth lughawīyah: al-lughah 'unwān al-ummah wa mir'at al-ḥawāliḥā* (Linguistic Research: Language Is the Identity of a Nation and the Mirror of Its State), ed. Yūsuf Qazmā Khūrī (Beirut: Dār al-Ḥamrā', 1993), 184–91. Ibn Ḥijjah included this in his *Sharḥ* (mistakenly called *Khizānat al-adab*) as "Risālat al-sayf wa al-qalam." See *Khizānat al-adab wa-ghāyat al-arab*, 1, p. 360. There is a further note on this misunderstanding.

32 In 1868 the Lebanese Ibrāhīm al-Yāzījī's ode "Tanabbahū wa istafiqū ayyuhā al-'arabū" ("awake, O Arabs, and arise") was popular enough to catch fire everywhere. See George Habib Antonius (d. 1942), *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement* (London: H. Hamilton, 1938). On this "famous ode," of 1879, see also Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1962; reprint 1983), 277.

33 George Antonius used this line as the epigraph for his book, *The Arab Awakening*, to argue the case for Arab struggle for independence from the Ottomans.

is noteworthy.<sup>34</sup> A revivalist movement was already under way, one that involved the contributions of many great scholars and eminent intellectuals, including Shaykh Muḥammad ‘Abduh, the Grand Mufti of Egypt and an eminent scholar and reformist, who had edited many classics, including Badī‘ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī’s (d. AD 1007) *Maqāmāt* (Assemblies), and ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib’s (d. AD 661) abridged *Nahj al-balāghah* (translated into English as *The Peak of Eloquence*). But al-Yāziji’s reproduction of a short epistle as a debate between the pen and the sword seemed to have another dimension to it.

The debate ends up as a balanced discussion of each side’s merits and probable drawbacks. The sword and the pen, the military and the art of writing, the pairing is brought together in a process of reconciliation that does not negate difference. In ibn Nubātah’s time, both military and administrative skills had to coordinate with each other in the makeup of a state, despite the fact that chancellery protocols and rules usually granted the lords of the pen more recognition.<sup>35</sup> Does the same logic apply to the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Arab world? Are intellectuals called upon to coordinate their efforts with other organized or institutionalized powers, especially after some eminent poets like the Egyptian Maḥmūd Sāmī al-Bārūdī (d. 1904) and learned dignitaries participated in ‘Urābī Pasha’s revolt in Egypt (1881) and simmering popular uprisings in the Hijaz, Iraq, and other places?<sup>36</sup> 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 Farah Anṭūn and Ya‘qūb 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. Around that time (the second half of the nineteenth century), the keen interest in the formation of nation-states, the encounter between Islam and Europe, the enhanced presence of religion in society, and the investigation of principles of Islamic governance were already being diligently pursued in journals and open forums, including Shaykh Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā’s (d. 1935) *al-Manār* (The Minaret, 1898), Fāris Nimr’s (1857–1951) and Ya‘qūb Ṣarrūf’s (1852–1927) *al-Muqtataf* (The Chosen, 1876–1952), Jurjī Zaydān’s *al-Hilāl* (The Crescent, 1892–), and Farah Anṭūn’s (1874–1922) journal *al-Jāmi‘ah* (The Congregational Site; i.e., a word-play on the concept of the university and compendium).<sup>37</sup> The last of these publications had as one of its goals an aspiration to break down paradigmatic divides

34 According to ibn Hījjah, ibn Nubātah used it as “A witty deviation from the usual, in praising what others condemn or condemning what others praise.” See Pierre Cachia, *The Arch Rhetorician or the Schemer’s Skimmer*, 129.

35 More on this point is in al-Qalqashandī, see Adrian Gully’s references, “The Sword and the Pen ...,” 411–12.

36 The Egyptian poet Maḥmūd Sāmī al-Bārūdī was one of the leaders of the ‘Urābī Revolt of 1881. See Mounah A. Khouri, *Poetry and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 12–36.

37 It was originally called *Al-Jami‘ah al-Uthmāniyyah* (The Ottoman Confederation) but changed to a monthly publication under the abridged *Al-Jāmi‘ah*, and was inconsistently published. Only five issues were published in 1902, six in 1903, and two in 1904. After moving to New York it was irregularly published between 1906 and 1909.

in the construction of modern knowledge. The reproduction of that Mamluk epistle cannot have been a passing whim, and especially not on the part of such a committed grammarian, philologist, and poet as Ibrāhīm al-Yāzījī. No matter how much cultural weight we accord this reproduction, it is at least worthy of note as evidence of a continuing cultural relevance and permeation of works of the Mamluk era. Above all, it is not as “decadent” and superfluous as some modernists have suggested, they being scholars who, in Thomas Bauer’s neat observation, are only duplicating the European enlightenment’s own revulsion at its own medieval times, leading to the subsequent colonial sense of superiority vis à vis other cultures.<sup>38</sup> Along with this sense of subservience, there is almost certainly a concomitant lack of familiarity with the corpus of knowledge involved. Confounding productivity with superfluity, these historians or critics have failed to notice the way in which Mamluk scholars from inside and outside the chancery had also renounced the excessive resort to specific rhetorical devices, embellishments, and figures of speech, a point that will be my focus in due course.<sup>39</sup>

### From Word Empire to World Empire

The third exception to the decadence paradigm is of a more lexical nature. One might pose the question as to how we are to explain the fervor that attended *al-Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ* (The Encompassing Lexicon) by Fīrūzabādī (d. AH 817/AD 1415) in the nineteenth century.<sup>40</sup> Why would such an eminent littérateur, the Syrian-Lebanese “master” Buṭrus al-Bustānī (1819–1883), choose to place his own dictionary, *Muḥīṭ al-muḥīṭ* (The Encompassing Ocean), in genealogical succession to the earlier lexicon, and why would the shrewd writer Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq (1804–1887) compose his own take on the same lexicon in his exhaustive *al-Jāsūs ‘alā al-Qāmūs* (Spying on the dictionary [The Encompassing lexicon]; i.e., detecting its faults). “Master” Buṭrus al-Bustānī and al-Shidyāq were both considered to be among the most important and dynamic contributors to the “awakening” in the Arab east; their impact went far beyond the region to extend to many Islamic lands and also the so-called *Mahjar* (diaspora, particularly in the Americas). Their cultural bridges extending back into the past traverse the fields of philosophy, theological discourse, and lexical explorations and compilations. The ways in which they made use of their journals and other publication and circulation venues were positioned at the dynamic intersection of transformation and change. Indeed, their sustained struggle to negotiate the balance between past and present—the legacies of the Arab past and Europe—should be able to dislodge once and for all the prevalent paradigm of disparagement for the pre-modern. Before and beyond the question of linguistic mediums that were suggested by renowned Orientalists and approved later by Salāmah Mūsā (1887–1958) and

38 See Thomas Bauer, “Mamluk Literature: Misunderstandings and New Approaches,” *Mamluk Studies Review* IX, 2 (2005): 105–32, esp. 106; and his “In Search of ‘Post-Classical Literature’: A Review Article,” *Mamluk Studies Review*, XI, 2 (2007): 137–67, esp. 142–145.

39 See Qalqālah, 426–36.

40 Also known as El-Firuz Abadi or al-Fīrūzabādī, 1329–1414. His first *Qāmūs* made use of his predecessors, along with the Andalusian philologist ibn Sīdah (d. 1066) and Sāghānī (d. 1252), and was abridged in *al-Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ* (The Encompassing Ocean; i.e., the comprehensive dictionary). The dictionary elicited more responses and led to other compilations including the voluminous *Tāj al-‘arūs* and Buṭrus al-Bustānī’s (1818/1819–1882/1883) *Muḥīṭ al-muḥīṭ* (1867).

other modernists, the drive toward modernity in the earlier phases of the Arab and Islamic revival took the issue of lexical exploration extremely seriously and as a countermovement to the Ottomans and colonial education policies. The confrontation with French and British colonial policies in education and the press was for a long time focused primarily on the body of native and national languages. Despite the enhanced efforts at translation involving primary texts in Arabic, Persian, and other Eastern languages vigorously pursued by well-known Orientalists throughout the second half of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth, the colonial administration specifically targeted native and national languages in order to dislodge their main domain in Qur'anic and religious studies and communication, as seen particularly in French policies in Algeria. Whence comes the significance of the lexical bridge back to the middle and premodern periods.

All this may help to explain the diligence shown by scholars in their vigorous pursuit of lexicography during the nineteenth century in Lebanon/Syria, Egypt, and Iraq in particular. In those regions print made it possible to discuss, reissue, abridge, modify, and improve on the voluminous lexicons that had already been compiled by scholars and linguists of the middle period in particular.<sup>41</sup> It needs to be recalled that lexicographic production had traversed both times and borders, bringing together, for example, the Andalusian 'Alī ibn Ismā'īl ibn Sīdah (1007–1066) and the Tunisian ibn Manzūr (d. AH 711/AD 1311), not to mention the illustrious lexicographers, grammarians, and linguists of Baghdad, Aleppo, Cairo, and Zabīd in Yemen.<sup>42</sup> Reaching its zenith in Mamluk times, the lexicographical endeavor manifests a commitment and philological skill and knowledge outside the court and chancery; it is an arduous individual pursuit pure and simple, one that conveys a sense of belonging to a rich culture and language, a verbal empire that concocts and inspires an intellectual and philological efflorescence. There is more to this effort than the traction that it obviously presents, however.

This same effort and production testify to the loss of the transparency of old times when word and signified are one and the same, when people used to speak the language with an understanding that rarely eludes others. Not until the early Umayyad period (AH 41–132/AD 661–750) did the Islamic world wake up to a loss of touch with language, the need to learn Qur'anic recitation, enunciation, and even meaning. Only levels of eloquence can distinguish one from another. The advent of drastic changes in politics, economy, cultural production, urban expansion, and statehood brings about a growing disparity between signifier and signified, a process whereby representation takes over in order to account for a new materiality. Grammar steps in, as does al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī's (AH 100–170/AD 718–786) pioneering lexicon and prosodic system, as a means of codifying writing and poetry that was once a popular mode of oral communication. What Michel Foucault traced in Europe as an epistemological shift from a sixteenth century to a seventeenth century order of things can be applied to a pre-Islamic and early Islamic advent, an era before the shift to

41 See more on the role of some scholars, Mohammed Sawaie, "Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi and His Contribution to the Lexical Development of Modern Literary Arabic," in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32.3 (August 2000): 395–410; and Adrian Gully, "Arabic Linguistic Issues and Controversies of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," in *Journal of Semitic Studies* XLII, 1 (Spring 1997): 75–120.

42 On Zabīd as a center for jurisprudence, Sufism, and piety, see ibn Baṭṭūṭah, vol. II, 367–68.

another almost statist Islam in which epistolographers as *kuttāb* master language as discourse to be molded, gauged, and fitted according to prerogatives and also requirements. In Foucault's words, "The peculiar existence and ancient solidity of language as a thing inscribed in the fabric of the world were dissolved in the functioning of representation; all language had value only as discourse."<sup>43</sup> No wonder then (and in an era long before the topic of Foucault's analysis) that the "secretary" at the Umayyad court, 'Abd al-Ḥāmid al-Kātib (d. 749 CE), wrote to his coprofessionalist bureaucrats admonishing them to be like the *sā'is* (stableman, groom, driver of animals) in managing a wild animal until it is tame and controllable. He concludes thus: "In this description of *siyāsah* (noun from *sāsa*, nominative *sā'is*; the running of an order, its politics), there is instruction for those persons who are to oversee people, manage them, and share experience and life with them."<sup>44</sup>

Disciplined and codified, Arabic gradually functions as discourse that necessarily invites dictionaries, lexicons, and grammatical compendiums. The functional armature is no different from the ones that imperial regimes need to communicate with their subjects. The purpose and expediency behind Edward William Lane's (1801–1876) efforts in producing his lexicon for the British Empire and the metropolitan center could not have been lost on Arab intellectuals and scholars.<sup>45</sup> Although Lane could have carried out the project on his own, it was nevertheless of great service to the empire. 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 East India Company (1600–1874) and its military and commercial apparatus, a company heavily involved in empire, had already made its plans to have trainees in Arabic through studying and reading the *Arabian Nights* as a model text conjoining instruction and entertainment, in a mixed language of standard writing and colloquial Arabic. Edward William Lane had these interests in mind, and his lexicon was not a mere antiquarian whim. He worked on the lexicon through a careful study of al-Zabīdī's (d. AH 1205/AD 1790) *Tāj al-'arūs* (The Bride's Crown), as the container not only of al-Fīrūzabādī's (1329–1414) *Al-Muḥīt* (The Ocean) and ibn Manẓūr's (d. AH 1233/AD 1312) *Lisān al-'Arab* (The Language of the Arabs) but also of his further improvement on both through extensive traveling, correspondence, and communication with visitors. With such an acquired mastery of Arabic words and expressions, the imperial staff could embark on a learning experience consolidated by academic institutions that were established for this specific purpose. Programs at major universities and institutions were in dire need of an Arabic/English lexicon. 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. In an ironic twist of fortune and in a seemingly fortuitous outcome whereby paronomasia and antithesis

43 *The Order of Things*, 43.

44 See 'Abd al-Ḥāmid al-Kātib, "Risālah ilā al-kuttāb," in *Rasā'il al-bulaghā'* (Epistles of the Rhetoricians), ed. Muḥammad Kurd 'Alī.

45 See Geoffrey Roper, "Texts from Nineteenth-Century Egypt: The Role of E. W. Lane," in *Travelers in Egypt*, eds. Paul and Janet Starkey (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001), 244–54.

establish a presence in imperial rhetoric, the word *empire* (i.e., lexicons) of the Islamic middle period was put to the service of a world empire.

In their effort to bring Arabic into the domain of the struggle for independence, early advocates of Arab modernity found no greater challenge than to update and abridge the great achievements of their ancestors, especially as they were tightly organized in the middle period. In 1869, the Lebanese Master Buṭrus al-Bustānī, drawing on Fīrūzabādī's *Qāmūs* that had become popular in abridged form as *Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ*, produced a two-volume lexicon, *Muḥīṭ al-muḥīṭ* (The Encompassing Ocean). He later produced an abridged version, *Quṭr al-muḥīṭ* (Diameter of the Ocean). Although amended with many additions and corrections, it remained popular for some time. It was followed by Sa'īd al-Khūrī al-Shartūnī's (1849–1912) *Aqrab al-mawārid fi fuṣaḥ al-'Arabīyyah wa-al-shawārid* (The Nearest Sources in Standard Classical Arabic and Loan Words) in 1890 (a third volume in 1894, with recapitulations and corrections). Along with that lexicon, he published another arranged thematically, *Kitāb najdat al-yarā':wa-huwa mu'jam qamūs murattab 'alā abwāb al-ma'ānī* (The Book of Rescue: a lexicon arranged in terms of meanings; 1905). Along with other significant contributions to the art of writing, al-Shartūnī was also the compiler and editor of the collected poetry of a prominent seventeenth-century poet, *Dīwān Shihāb al-Dīn al-Mūsawī al-ma'rūf bi-ibn Ma'tūq* (1617–1676). His lexicon was followed by a more popular one aimed at learners of the language, in particular by Father Louis Malouf in 1908, which he named *al-Munjjid* (The Rescuer).<sup>46</sup> 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. Those had been shunned in earlier dictionaries that take the Bedouins and their “authentic” and “genuine” use and pronunciation as central to further variations or conjugations carried out by poets in particular. From Buṭrus al-Bustānī and al-Shartūnī to Fāris al-Shidyāq and Father Anāstās Mārī al-Kirmilī 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. This is what Buṭrus al-Bustānī has to say, for example, in explaining *awṭān* or homelands: “the love for the homeland is faith,” a maxim that he used as the slogan for his journal *al-Jinān* (1870–1886). Indeed the members of the Egyptian Academy for Arabic (named for King Fu'ād al-Awwal) were to lay great emphasis on this foundational principle in order to cement the bond between language and nationhood. The justification had already struck root in translations from European scientific scholarship.<sup>47</sup> In his introduction to *Qāmūs al-naḥḍah*, Ismā'īl

46 AUB commissioned 'Abdullāh al-Bustānī in 1930 to issue another dictionary, which he named *al-Bustān* (the Orchard), which he abridged into *Fākihāt al-bustān* (The Bounties of the Orchard). The awakening lexicographic fervor continued in the unfinished German Fischer's Oxford-like dictionary, Ismā'īl Maẓhar's *Qāmūs al-Naḥḍah* (The awakening dictionary) with its appropriation of newly used technical and scientific terms, and *al-Mu'jam al-wasīṭ*, which was authorized by Ibrāhīm Madkūr and collated by Ibrāhīm Muṣṭafā and others. The significance of the latter is its inclusion of the professional languages of different groups and its opening the door to *qiyās* (analogy).

47 Marwa Elshakry, “Knowledge in Motion: The Cultural Politics to Modern Science Translations in Arabic,” *Isis* 99, 4 (December 2008): 701–30.

Mazhar explains his undertaking as necessarily conditioned by a double bind: the need on the one hand to engage “modern Western civilization” and, on the other, the effort to “revive and resurrect transmitted sayings to reconcile borrowing ... with the preservation of our Arabism which can be sustained only through language.”<sup>48</sup> The word *qāmūs* (dictionary) itself grows genealogically over time to connote enormous semantic, semiotic, and linguistic fields that encompass grammar, logic, and thought. It is no longer only a container of lexis, but rather a generator of identity and nationhood; hence the unabating circulation of the term through the unsevered link with the abundance of the ocean (as used in the title “Qāmūs” and “*Muḥit*”) and the functional genealogical growth. Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq’s enterprise is not merely to “spy” on the *Qāmūs* (i.e., Fīrūzabādī’s dictionary) and detect its omissions, but primarily to establish correct genealogies among the family or network of no less than thirty well-known lexicons. He questions the authority of some renowned jurists, historians, grammarians, and polymaths such as Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. AH 911/AD 1505) who, for some reason, omits the mention of the African (i.e., Tunisian) ibn Manẓūr, whose voluminous lexicon *Lisān al-‘Arab* is cited as exemplary. Al-Shidyāq himself was no ordinary figure among *nahḍah* intellectuals, and his discerning critique of the *Qāmūs* has to be read against imprecise interpretations of the presence of language in the modernizing project.<sup>49</sup>

48 Ismā‘īl Mazhar, *Al-Nahḍa Dictionary* (Cairo: Renaissance Bookshop, n.d.), two volumes; vol. I: preface, n.p.

49 For some detailed readings of the recapitulations, corrections, and improvements on each of these as carried out by grammarians and scholars at the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth century, see ‘Adnān al-Khaṭīb, *Al-Mu‘jam al-‘Arabī* (1966; amended edition, 1994; Beirut: Maktabat Lubnān, 1994), 51–54.