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Bridging the Gap:

A Review Essay of Muhsin al-Musawi's The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters

Muhsin J. al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters: Arabic Knowledge Construction*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2015, 480 pp., \$46.00 US (pbk), ISBN 9780268020446.

*and may you visit many Egyptian Cities
to gather stores of knowledge from their scholars*

– C.P. Cavafy, *Ithaka*

Muhsin al-Musawi's *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters* is, above all, a response to contemporary theories of modernity and modernism in all their various amnesias towards world literary history—which he sums up under the heading of *Khutbat al-kitab* (Preliminary Discourse) and emphasizes in *Al-Khatimah* (Conclusion). Al-Musawi sees this “essentialism” everywhere: in Casanova's *World Republic of Letters*, beginning with “decentering the latter's conceptualization of a Europeanized world-system but also, and primarily, in traditions that ante-date the European model and perhaps problematize a global application of the term” (12); in deconstructing Arab and Muslim modernists who believe that “the literary output of the medieval Arab and Islamic nation-states is ineffectual,” and who “have long internalized a European Enlightenment discourse and looked with suspicion and distrust at the past and its massive accumulation in cultural capital” (5); in questioning “contemporary sources that propagate a wholesale rejection of the cultural values of the postclassical period” (14); and, finally, in those who “uncover the omissions in the rhetorical disclaimers of modernity and instead...construct a counter-mapping of a textual terrain involving conflict and struggle” (14).

Rather, like Foucault and Jameson who denounce continuity and transcendental historiography in favor of periodization and radical historicization, even as they differ in their assessment of Marxism, al-Musawi posits a “political unconscious” of a different kind in evaluating the Arab-Islamic literary tradition. He concludes that a flourishing and grandiose medieval Islamic republic of letters not only in fact *existed* prior to Casanova's

Parisian model, but that, for all its ebbs and flows, is also a remarkable advancement of knowledge whose horizons we are just beginning to fathom. Such a position is bold in its strict adherence to, and subsuming of, a considerably rich postclassical and premodern corpus of literature falling under the umbrella of a medieval Islamic republic of letters. Al-Musawi criticizes Casanova, for instance, for resorting to Eurocentric statements such as: “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.”¹ After putting al-Musawi’s book down, the reader realizes that this statement concerns Casanova alone and *not necessarily the entire world*.

Because of the manner with which he dismisses much of the current intellectual discourse on Medieval Arabic literature, one is struck by al-Musawi’s categorical critique. However, a more patient reading reveals that his intent is not so much to expose a Manichaean perniciousness as it is to show a sense of *ennui* with reductionism in general. This is exactly what makes *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters* a book of great erudition and insight. Certain Arab modernists have pointed to ‘*asur al-inhītat* (epochs of decline) in medieval Arabic literature. To some, the end of the Abbasid Golden Era signaled the beginning of deterioration in literary and artistic taste, which is allegedly said to have beset Arabic literature for centuries until a new Arab *Nahda*, Renaissance, emerged in aftermath of nineteenth century colonial modernity, with its focus on *ihyaa’ al-turath* (resurrecting tradition) and a new and distinct literary identity. But most often, as al-Musawi’s study suggests without stating so directly, some modern/colonial emphasis has dialectically been on mourning the loss of an early Islamic glory (i.e. Abbasid and Umayyad) and on yearning for a cultural integration and a perceived harmony that once existed. Al-Musawi’s critique of Casanova’s world literature thesis is therefore a timely intervention, since it exposes both the dialectical nostalgias of Arab modernists and their obsessions with beginnings as well as the Eurocentric monopoly of world literature. One of the book’s persuasive arguments is that we give Egypt, especially Cairo, its long overdue literary recognition that Casanova assigns exclusively to Paris (7).

In the eight chapters of his study, al-Musawi examines, through a series of provocative questions, how medieval Arabic literary knowledge was constructed. Could there be centers without peripheries? Could those centers shift, say, from Cairo to Damascus, to Baghdad to Khwarazm, to Isfahan to Samarqand? If so, what languages dominated these centers and what linguistic tendencies caused them to shift? Why Arabic, and not Persian? Why were compendiums and lexicons made in Cairo and nowhere else? What are the implications of these matters on *adab* and ‘*ilm*? What tools do we need to locate cognitive and epistemological shifts, Foucauldian or otherwise, in this massive discourse? What roles do historic debates among speculative theologians (Ash‘arites) and rationalists (Mu‘tazilites) play in articulating literary shifts across time, especially the forging of relationships between *i’jāz* and *majāz* and the role of rhetoric in this theological battle? What internal and external forces (e.g., doctrine, patronage) dictate that certain authors (e.g., Ibn Wahb, al-Sakkākī, al-Qazwīnī, al-Taftazānī) take sides in those debates? When, and why, did prose and poetic compositions turn towards a conversational style, allowing the pervasiveness of *tawriyah* (double-entendre) and the blend of street-language with standard Arabic, thus resulting in book-length studies in rhetoric, method, and theory by the likes of al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil, al-

¹ Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, 46-47 (as quoted in al-Musawi, 7 fn15).

Sakkākī, al-Qazwīnī, al-Qalqashandī and Ḥillī, al-Zamakhsharī and al-Waṭwāt, among many others? How did criticism shift from the word to the world, including society at large, as we see in Ibn Hijjah, or the critique of elitism, which culminates in al-Shirbini's *Ḥaṣṣ al-Qubuf*?

The innovation of this study lies not in the choice of its topic—for many have addressed it—but in its robust examination of medieval themes and intellectual ventures, as it were, in conversation with modern and contemporary theories. The book is also pioneering and timely in transcending traditional single-author scholarship on classical and medieval Arabic, while avoiding both atomization and the traditional line-by-line analysis of the Arabic literary tradition.

While al-Musawi still examines certain texts closely, he intertwines sub-text, text, and context in a way that reveals subtle textual nuances without losing sight of the text's place in history. Take for instance his provocative analysis and contextualization of Yusif al-Shirbin's *Kitāb Ḥaṣṣ al-Qubuf bi-Sharḥ Qasid Abi Shaduf* (Brains Confounded by the Ode of Abu Shaduf), where al-Musawi traces the trend of parodying the then fashionable practice of *sharḥ* (explicatory compendium) that accompanies the ode, as far back as Safī al-Dīn al-Ḥillī, especially the encomiums to the Prophet. The irony of the contrafaction, al-Musawi observes, illustrates a remarkable disparity between the metropolitan elite and an impoverished countryside (147-153). Furthermore, *Ḥaṣṣ* becomes a text that symptomatizes the age of *shurūḥ* and *hawāshī*, and reflects historical signs of increasing readability and marketability of books. The need to define a lexicon, a compendium, a gloss, the market for abridged versions of *'uyun al-kuṭub* (prominent classics), all this reflects a growing readership with a high demand for *shurūḥ*. This demand finds some of its roots in the theological renaissance of medieval Islam and the ardent search for genealogical starting points in classical exegetical texts, including books on grammar, rhetoric, logic, et cetera.

The scope of al-Musawi's study and the wealth of references alone merit the commendation of all Arabists and non-Arabists alike. No comparable study exists in any language, save perhaps for a few voluminous studies of the history of Islam using the traditional "classical," "medieval," and "modern" categories. The most renowned of those studies in English scholarship is Gustave E. von Grunebaum's *Medieval Islam: A Study in Cultural Orientation*.² Von Grunebaum's approach rules out reference to political history, but ascertains the position of Islam and Arabic *belles lettres* in the medieval world and its significance. Von Grunebaum also excludes the study of the economimesis of the Islamic Caliphate at its various stages (houses), as well as its variegated connections to the construction and production of medieval Arabic literature.

By way of contrast, al-Musawi's *is* an interpretation of the social structure as molded by prime loyalties (the centrality of the chancery, court poetry, etc.) cherished by a relentless Arabist, and to some extent, Islamicist "spirit," which constitutes the republic. This is what gives al-Musawi's book its distinct authority. While von Grunebaum devoted two chapters on "The Body Politic," he somehow thought it best to "rule out the narration of political history beyond barest skeleton" and opts instead to locate Islam on the map of the so-called medieval world, especially in relation to Christianity and the Human Ideal (Chapter 2 "Islam in the Medieval World" and Chapter 7 "The Human Ideal"). Conversely, al-Musawi's study addresses those difficult issues directly and goes on to question all Eurocentric positioning of Medieval Islam by boldly borrowing Casanova's "the world republic of letters" nomenclature, which is famously applied to France, and forcefully redeploys it to the

² Gustave E. von Grunebaum, *Medieval Islam: A Study in Cultural Orientation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946).

investigations of a similar if not primordial spirit in medieval Islam. In contrast, von Grunebaum's volume ends with a vexing chapter entitled "Creative Borrowings: Greece in the 'Arabian Nights,'" in which he claims that there is a troubling imitative element in *Arabian Nights* thereby implying it owes a "debt" to Greece, a criticism he attempts to soften with the modifier "creative borrowing." In contrast to von Grunebaum's thesis, al-Musawi's findings reveal an Islam, far from borrowing, creatively or otherwise, that played a substantial role in mapping out that very medieval world.

While it is somewhat digressive to comment on Casanova's book and von Grunebaum's thesis on *Arabian Nights*, on which al-Musawi's unrivaled record of publication and authority in the field rests, it is worth mentioning *en passant* that Casanova's Paris indeed derived numerous of its eighteenth and nineteenth century themes from Arab-Islamic sources, especially following Antoine Galland's voluminous translations of *Alf Alayla wa Layla* (A Thousand and One Nights) from 1704-1717. Not only did the *Les mille et une nuits* inspire eighteenth century French authors, but the text also became a nucleus for the "creative borrowing," to use von Grunebaum's language, of a future generation of Parisian authors and artists, including Crébillon *fiils* (1707-1777), Denis Diderot (1713-1784), Montesquieu (1689-1755), and Voltaire (1694-1778), among many others.³

If we accept al-Musawi's intriguing argument for a medieval Islamic republic of letters, with its shifting centers and peripheries across time and space, its successive communities in Asia and Africa, its intertextual as well as intratextual dynamics, and its trans-centennial conversations, then it must follow that lexicography and grammar, which must have kept the Arabic language intact throughout those centuries, would play a major role in maintaining this textual republic across ages than is made available in al-Musawi's study. This is crucial for one important reason. Despite the reasonable temptation to expand Casanova's thesis to the Islamic world, *ilm al-Nahw* (the science/field of grammar) is quite distinct from the characteristic syntactical development of French, whose replacement of vulgar Latin only took place in the sixteenth century. This is a critical linguistic difference between Arabic and French that al-Musawi's thesis readily invites and which he might have expanded on more emphatically.

At the very least, European historicism, as Edward Said has aptly remarked, is less concerned with absolute origins than with beginnings. It was only in 1539 when French was made an official language of administration and court proceedings in France—but not of philosophy, which continued to be written in Latin until Descartes insisted otherwise. It took a couple of centuries for French to become standardized and to enjoy the status of the language of "high culture" throughout Europe. This, however, is not the case with Arabic, especially when it comes to the origin of the language, its phonological, morphological, and syntactic development. Al-Musawi is right to argue that with al-Sakkāki's (d. 1228) *Miftah al-ulum* (Key to the Sciences), scholarly attention shifted to grammar "as pivotal to the rhetorical enterprise" (219). However, since the middle of the first *hijri* century, Arab grammar has established itself as pivotal to critical literary analysis and as the backbone that held the Arabic speaking Muslim world together regardless of time and space. In fact, the argument that the medieval Islamic republic of letters was enriched by a turn towards a more conversational style in narrative writing and poetry, theorized as a blend of street-language with a standard written one (Chapters 5 and 8), might put the republic at risk of losing itself to a colloquialism that may not have survived the test of time. A valid question here would

³ See Robert Irwin's "Children of the Nights," in *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), Chapter 10, 237-292.

be how Arabic knowledge construction across six centuries could have survived and maintained its status without an almost immutable and standardized syntax. Take for instance, the work of Ibn Quzman al-Andalusī, one of the most renowned poets of his era, who opted to compose his poetry in the colloquial dialect of medieval Andalusia, which gained him immediate popularity. Even today, Ibn Quzman's text remains one of the most intractable compositions in Arabic because of its colloquialisms and oblique cultural allusions, as well as lexical infelicities. The linguistic deviations of Ibn Quzman's text still awaits a well-versed and specialized literary historian to illuminate it. The same is true of impenetrable and defamiliarized works like Ibn Danyal al-Mawsili's *Tayf al-Khayal* (The Spectrum of the Shadow) and Safi al-Din al-Hillī's *al-'Atil al-Hali wa al-Murtagbas al-Ghali* (The Inoperative Operational and the Inexpensive Valuable)

Throughout this exhaustive study, al-Musawi remains faithful to his main thesis. What he is rightly protesting is the rigid "institutionalization of literature as a specific pursuit aimed at the canonization of certain names and texts, which would serve in the long run as landmarks in literary nationalism and discreet legitimization of imperial power and acumen" (305). A product of an Enlightenment project gone awry, à la Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Casanova's amnesiac model provided legitimacy to colonial reason and is precisely what must be confronted for a more objective assessment of the constellation of knowledge available in Medieval Islamica. Protests such as these can seem startling in that they draw attention to a double erosion exercised on the body of medieval Arabic literature; however, some of al-Musawi's conclusions seem drawn a bit too sharply. For instance, he establishes a parallel between the construction of knowledge in medieval Islam—particularly street poetics in Sufi *khankas* and *zawayas*—and Herder's concept of the nation state, which obviously corresponds, in his view, to a "popular" spirit of the nation (5, 50, 119). Surely, there is an anachronism at work here. Gibb's musings on the development of *adab*⁴ could have reinforced al-Musawi's argument of an Islamic republic of letters in this context, specifically the latter's terse section, "In Pursuit of *Adab*." Furthermore, the assumed formulaic and thematic concatenation of Sufi poetics from Umar ibn al-Farid to 'A'isha al-Ba'unīyya could have been made more complex, especially the latter's unique use of "light" imagery from the Quran and Hadith and her brilliant innovation of *al-takhmīsat* in prophetic *madīh* poetry. The same holds true for the engaging yet abruptly concluded reference to theological and exegetical debates, leaving the reader hungry for more insights on these important yet largely unexplored areas of classical and medieval Arabic literary thought.

In fairness, it should be pointed out that the book's ambitious cross-centennial thesis dictated that al-Musawi choose and prioritize his battles carefully in a study nearing 500 pages in length, which makes such minor gaps all the more forgivable. The end result is the best study I have read of medieval Islamic *belles lettres* and the most cogent critique of "the ages of decline" and Eurocentrism theses in a single blow. He has expertly interrogated the rigid categorizations of Arabic literary history and the exclusivist assumptions of amnesiac Europeanism which pervade such historical accounts, thus exposing Arab modernists' manipulation of tradition as well European biases to forge their own "republics." He does not stop there. Al-Musawi generously offers us a diverse model of cross-generational dialogues thereby putting the validity of such theoretical forays to the test by illuminating

⁴ See H.A.R. Gibb's *Studies in the Civilization of Islam*, eds., Stanford J. Shaw and William R. Polk (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962). See in particular his Arabic sections, *Khawātir fil- Adab al-Arabī* (Reflections on Arabic Literature), *Bad' at-Talīf al-Nashri* (The Beginning of Prose Composition), and *Nashet al-Insha* (The Development of Literary Style), 219-241.

significant links and exchanges largely obfuscated in both academic and popular discourses. What the discipline needs now is an integrated theory that unifies such utterly unconnected bodies of literature. Missing is a model that gives us a critical vocabulary responsive to the massive corpus of medieval (and classical) Arabic belles lettres, its diverse genres and subgenres. Al-Musawi's encyclopedic grasp, his remarkable energy and intellectual profundity in *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters* has helped immeasurably to close this gap.

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