

Poets in Prose: Genre & History in the Arabic Novel

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*Novelists in many literary traditions have come to terms with the distinctiveness of their art form by thinking about poets and poetry. The need to differentiate the novel from poetry is especially pressing for Arab prose writers because of poetry's preeminent status in that literary corpus. Many twentieth-century Arab intellectuals have valorized the novel as the representative genre of modernity – whether conceived as an absent ideal or the epoch of consumerist capitalism – while situating poetry as a backward element of contemporary life. But poetry has also offered prose writers such as Muhammad al-Muwaylihi, in *A Period of Time*, and novelists such as Tayeb Salih, in *Season of Migration to the North*, a way to reflect on the ambivalences engendered by modernity and the experience of colonialism. This tradition of using the novel to meditate on historical rupture and the fate of poetry continues into the present, even as poetry's relation to political and intellectual life becomes increasingly tenuous.*

“A great poet of history” is Lukács’s somewhat curious judgment of Sir Walter Scott, and especially his portrayal of the Scottish Highland clans. Lukács is echoing Heinrich Heine’s praise for the English novelist, which he quotes: “Strange whim of the people! They demand their history from the hand of the poet and not the hand of the historian.”¹ Until he published *Waverley* in 1814, Scott was in fact best known for his verse. It was his long narrative poem *The Lady of the Lake* (1810) that spurred the Highland Revival after selling twenty-five thousand copies in eight months. But Lukács also means something more pointed by calling Scott a “poet.” As he emphasizes again and again, Scott’s greatness lies in his “tragic” sense of historical necessity, his clear-eyed view of the clans’ inevitable destruction despite their gallantry (as compared with the nostalgic or moralizing views of Hugo and the Romantic “elegist of past ages”). And it is Scott’s totalizing representation of popular life that constitutes, for Lukács, “the only real approach to epic greatness.”² Lukács’s terms, *tragic* and *epic*, suggest the difficulty of identifying what is truly new about any literary genre. Attempting to make a case for Scott’s pioneering efforts as a novelist, Lukács keeps turning him into a classical poet.

The passage from poetry to the novel is also a theme of Scott's fiction and essays. In *Waverley*, he converts genre difference into a narrative sequence, casting oral poetry as an art form of the heroic but ultimately doomed past, and the novel as the quintessential genre of modern life. Early on in Edward Waverley's introduction to Highland society, he attends a banquet accompanied in Homeric fashion by a recitation of Mac-Murrough, the family *bhairdh*. Though Edward cannot understand the Gaelic words, he is impressed by "the wild and impassioned notes" and the way the poet's "ardour" communicates itself to his audience. Flora, the chieftain Fergus's sister, later explains that the recitation of "poems recording the feats of heroes, the complaints of lovers, and the wars of contending tribes, forms the chief amusement of a winter fireside in the Highlands. Some of these are said to be very ancient, and, if they are ever translated into any of the languages of civilized Europe, cannot fail to produce a deep and general sensation." Flora promises to recite her own English translation of Mac-Murrough's verses, asking Edward to follow her into a picturesque landscape of craggy rocks, mossy turf, and a waterfall.

I have given you the trouble of walking to this spot, Captain Waverley, both because I thought the scenery would interest you, and because a Highland song would suffer still more from my imperfect translation were I to introduce it without its own wild and appropriate accompaniments. To speak in the poetical language of my country, the seat of the Celtic Muse is in the mist of the secret and solitary hill, and her voice in the murmur of the mountain stream.³

Like many eighteenth-century thinkers, from William Jones to Johann Gottfried Herder, Scott figures oral poetry as the typical art form of primitive cultures; it is a discourse of the passions, addressed to an equally impassioned audience.⁴ As Flora's performance suggests, it is also a circumstantial genre, dependent for its inspiration and effects on the immediate scenery and, ultimately, on one's comprehension of its language. While translations of ancient verses might impress a European audience – as the Ossian forgeries proved – all translation of this poetry is necessarily "imperfect," if only because it is displaced from the local powers of the Celtic Muse. Literary scholar Ian Duncan has noted that in Scott's historical novels, "the hidden spring of history becomes visible . . . in the difference between social and economic systems that marks the transition between developmental stages: in other words, in the difference between cultures, ways of life."⁵ In *Waverley*, the communal, passionate, and circumstantial nature of poetry plays a historical foil to the essentially individualized, reasonable, and universal genre of the novel, whose narrative paradigm is henceforth fixed as one of inexorable modernization. As Lukács suggests, Scott's delimiting of poetry's powers gives new responsibilities to the novel: the epic task of narrating a collective experience, the tragic task of analyzing the workings of necessity.

Thinking about poets and poetry is one way that novelists have historically come to terms with the distinctiveness of their own art. And the relegation of poetry to a premodern epoch, whether in sorrow or satisfaction, is a trope that has crossed borders and eras. In an essay published in 1945, the Egyptian novelist and later Nobel Prize winner Naguib Mahfouz announced, “The novel is the poetry of the modern world.” Mahfouz’s *Cairo Trilogy* (1956–1957) would become the preeminent example of the historical novel in Arabic, a suite of fictions set largely in the interwar period that tells the story of Egypt’s unsteady progress toward national liberation. The *Trilogy* hews closely to the genre strictures identified by Lukács: a detailed representation of popular life; cameos by real personages; a dynamic sense of social contradictions; and a clear narrative of progress (along with a reckoning of its costs). In his essay, Mahfouz argued that the modern age – “the age of science, industry, and truth” – could only be captured in prose, the medium of reason. Poetry, an imaginative art burdened by a long history of formal conventions, belonged to an earlier “age of myth.”⁶

The felt need to differentiate oneself from poets is perhaps especially pressing for Arab prose writers, if only because of poetry’s preeminent status in that literary tradition. An early, more openly antagonistic version of the modern novelist’s anxiety is legible in the Quran itself, which tells us that Muhammad’s speech, though evidently inspired by invisible sources and occasionally formed of rhymed utterances, “is not the speech of a poet [*sha’ir*].”⁷ As Islamic scholar Navid Kermani writes, “No objection plagued the Prophet as much, and none of his opponents’ arguments is as vehemently rebuffed in the Quran, as the assertion that he was a poet.”⁸ The prophet was not a *sha’ir* because his source of revelation was divine, while the poets’ source of inspiration was commonly understood to be djinn. The prophet’s words were true, while poets were liars, “who wander in every valley and say what they do not do.”⁹

Despite this Quranic anathema, poets did not disappear with the arrival of the new dispensation. *Al-shi’ir diwan al-‘arab*, “Poetry is the archive of the Arabs,” is a saying conventionally attributed to Ibn ‘Abbas, a cousin of the prophet. It suggests that poetry survives as the record of Arabs’ significant deeds – the feats of heroes and the wars of contending tribes – as well as the epitome of their art. An eighth-century man of letters, Ibn Qutaybah, enumerated its excellencies in terms that presage those of Flora: “Poetry is the source of the Arabs’ learning, the basis of their wisdom, the archive [*diwan*] of their history, the repository of their battle lore. It is the wall built to protect the memory of their glories, the moat that safeguards their laurels. It is the truthful witness on the day of crisis, the irrefutable proof in disputes.”¹⁰ Given this history, it is no surprise that Arab novelists were as eager to distinguish their art from poetry as they were to channel its special powers. Confirming Mahfouz’s claim about the reversal of genre hierarchies,

the Egyptian critic Jabir 'Usfur rewrites Ibn 'Abbas in a phrase that suggests this ambivalence: "The novel is the *diwan* of modern Arabs."¹¹

It is because of poetry's antiquity and prestige that it has often served Arab novelists as an emblem for the dangers of "tradition." As with Mahfouz, poetry is often associated with outmoded or supposedly unmodern ways of thinking and being. Nihad Sirees's novel *The Silence and the Roar* is a dystopian parable set in a country similar to his native Syria. Published in 2004, the story takes place on a day in which the populace is out celebrating the twenty-year anniversary of the Leader's rule. The narrator, a writer who has fallen out of favor with the regime, follows the progress of the cheering crowds with disgusted fascination.

In my country people love rhymed speech and rhymed prose and inspirational metered verse. Just watch how they will repeat phrases that have no meaning whatsoever but that rhyme perfectly well. In the end this means that if the ruler wants the masses to adore him he must immediately set up a center dedicated to the production of new slogans about him, on the condition that they resemble poetry because we are a people who love poetry so much that we love things that only resemble poetry. We might even be satisfied with only occasionally rhyming speech, regardless of its content. Didn't someone say that the era of mass politics is the era of poetry? If so, then the reverse is also true, because poetry is geared towards the masses just as the prose that I am now writing is intended for the individual. . . . Poetry inspires zealotry and melts away individual personality whereas prose molds the rational mind, individuality and personality.¹²

For Sirees, prose is the medium of the Arab world's alienated elite: intellectuals who listen from their windows to the rhyming slogans of power with a despairing sense of the absurd. Another common critique of poetry is aimed not at its proximity to power but rather its distance from everyday life. In the Egyptian Sonallah Ibrahim's novel *The Committee* (1981) – indebted, like Sirees's fiction, to Kafka – an unnamed narrator is brought before a committee for unspecified reasons. After a burlesque show trial in which he is forced to perform a belly dance and undergo a rectal exam, the narrator is asked produce "a study on the greatest contemporary Arab luminary," an assignment that involves him in a series of madcap researches into Coca-Cola's history in the region. He considers whether the greatest Arab luminary might not be a poet, but decides against the idea, "Because, perhaps mistakenly, I didn't like their high-flown language and obfuscation. Therefore, I was prejudiced against them from the start."¹³ Elsewhere, in a prison notebook he kept during the early 1960s, Ibrahim memorialized a quote from Boris Pasternak's 1960 interview with *The Paris Review*: "I believe that it is no longer possible for lyric poetry to express the immensity of our experience. Life has grown too cumbersome, too complicated."¹⁴ Ibrahim's own prose is the antithesis of lyrical obfuscation – his typical sentences are blunt to the point of inelegance – and his novels are dense with quotidian complexities.

Although Sirees and Ibrahim critique poetry from different directions, both identify the novel as the representative genre of modernity, whether modernity is conceived as an absent ideal or the degraded epoch of consumerist capitalism. Poetry, by contrast, is figured as a backward element of contemporary life – an atavistic remnant of word sorcery, now ripe for exploitation by venal rulers. But the story of poetry’s role in the self-conception of the Arab novel has other dimensions, which go beyond these relatively rigid mirror images. Poetry has even, at times, offered novelists a way to reflect on the ambivalences engendered by modernity, with its mixture of promised ruptures and tenacious survivals.

Early scholarship on the Arab novel tended to look for precursors in Europe and to consecrate works that conformed to broadly realist strictures. For most of the twentieth century, critical consensus held that Muhammad Husayn Haykal’s *Zaynab* (1914), a sentimental fiction centered on the travails of a peasant woman from the Delta, was, in the words of historian Sir Hamilton Gibb, “the first real Egyptian novel.” Writing in 1929, Gibb gave qualified praise for the novel’s psychological depth, coherent plot, descriptions of landscape, and handling of dialogue, while acknowledging that “the imaginative element in *Zaynab* is more limited than in the average European novel.”¹⁵ Gibb’s canonization was repeated many times, most notably by Egyptian scholar ‘Abd al-Muhsin Taha Badr’s seminal 1963 study *Tatawwur al-riwaya al-‘arabiyya al-haditha fi Misr* (The Development of the Modern Arabic Novel in Egypt), and as late as M. M. Badaoui’s *Short History of Modern Arabic Literature* (1993).¹⁶ Recent scholarship has challenged these claims, largely by exploring the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century archive of periodical fictions and popular translations, which show that realism in Arabic did not begin with *Zaynab* and that Haykal’s book was hardly representative of the wider body of fictional works, spanning detective tales, romances, and swashbucklers.¹⁷

A second strand of scholarship on the Arabic novel has looked to the native tradition, which includes such prose forms as the medieval *maqamat* (short rhyming narratives typically centered on the figure of an eloquent rogue), *The Thousand and One Nights*, travelogues, and historical works.¹⁸ This scholarly turn was preceded by Arab novelists’ own growing interest in the classical corpus. This reorientation was especially marked after the defeat of 1967, which induced a decade of soul-searching among Arab intellectuals, agonized by their dependence on foreign models and standards. An impressive example of this appropriation of the native tradition is Gamal al-Ghitani’s novel *Zayni Barakat* (1974), which tells a story of intrigues among the Cairene secret police of late Mamluk Egypt – a sly allegory of Nasserist repression during the 1950s and 1960s. Al-Ghitani’s novel was explicitly indebted to classical Arab historians, and his work suggested how the indigenous heritage might be turned into a resource for powerful self-criticism.

The Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish once admitted, “I actually envy the novelists. Their world is larger, for the novel can incorporate all kinds of knowledge, intellectual traditions, topics, concerns, life experiences. It can absorb poetry as well as all the other literary genres, from which it benefits tremendously.”¹⁹ But in fact Arabic poetry has resisted absorption into the novelistic tradition more stubbornly than other genres. It has more typically served as an antithesis (or a repressed element), highlighting the newer form’s suitability to the present. Until the twentieth century, prose genres in Arabic often included a great deal of poetry; the stories of the *Nights*, for example, are full of verse (though translations often exclude them). But as the novel becomes more and more entrenched, it seems able to absorb less and less poetry. An exception to this rule is the trope of the *atlal*, or ruined campsite.²⁰

The motif comes from the earliest strata of Arabic literature. In verse of the pre-Islamic period, composed by Bedouin poets in and around the Arabian Peninsula, a standard opening features the speaker coming across the traces of an abandoned campsite, *al-atlāl* in Arabic, which evoke the memory of a tryst he had in the same place with a now absent beloved (often from another tribe). The poet weeps at his loss, imagines the scene of departure, and is upbraided by companions for giving in to his grief. The trope combines memory and longing, and through its description of desert flora and fauna, contrasts the implacable march of human time with the cycles of natural life. Later Arab poets with no experience of Bedouin life continued to use the motif and it survives into the present. As the scholar Jaroslav Stetkevych has written, “It seems to contain a whole people’s reservoir of sorrow, loss, yearning.”²¹

A remarkable use of the *atlal* trope comes from Muhammad al-Muwaylihi’s *A Period of Time*, a prose fiction serialized in the Egyptian weekly *Misbah al-Sharq* between 1898 – 1902, during the period of the British occupation.²² The work opens with the narrator’s trip to a Cairene cemetery, where he witnesses the resurrection of a Turkish notable who lived in the early nineteenth century. The narrator takes the pasha on a comic tour of modern Egyptian institutions, including law, medicine, and the police. In the eighth chapter, the two companions search for a pious foundation or *waqf*, which the pasha endowed during his lifetime. Little remains of the former buildings – the mosque now neighbors a wine shop – and the pasha weeps “at the sight of the old ruins and houses,” reminding the narrator of old poets shedding tears over their campsites.²³ Al-Muwaylihi shows how the poetic motif, as a trope of memory, bears a narrative kernel. As the scholar Hilary Kilpatrick astutely notes,

Al-Muwaylihi’s achievement is to have realised that the *aṭlāl* can be employed in a new way, that is, to mark not only the natural changes brought about by the passage of time, but also the mutations resulting from new economic and cultural conditions. . . . Used to explore the move away from traditional institutions, the *aṭlāl* motif becomes linked to the reflection on modernisation in the Arab world.²⁴

Al-Muwaylihi borrows the trope not only for its affective powers but also to give readers a distinctly secular sense of transition. In Lukács's words, the *atlal* provide a feeling "that there is such a thing as history, that it is an uninterrupted process of changes."²⁵

A more complex instance of a prose writer relying on poetry to evoke a feeling of history is Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1966), a fiction set during the early years of Sudanese independence. More than any novel in Arabic, Salih's book has been interpreted as the rewrite of a European model, in this case Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The most influential – albeit strikingly brief – version of this interpretation is Edward Said's in *Culture and Imperialism*: "Salih's hero in *Season of Migration to the North* does (and is) the reverse of what Kurtz does (and is): the Black man journeys north into white territory." Said's contrapuntal reading, emphasizing Salih's "deliberate . . . mimetic reversals of Conrad," canonized *Season of Migration* as a classic version of the empire writing back, although in fact there is no good reason to think Salih was deliberately doing anything with Conrad (his novel bristles with allusions to Eastern and Western literature, from the poetry of Abu Nuwas to Shakespeare's *Othello*, yet there is no reference to *Heart of Darkness*).²⁶ This does not mean the two novels should not be compared, but Said's postcolonial interpretation has obscured the degree to which *Season of Migration* is a critique of independent Sudan in which there is no "hero" and the literary form at stake is not the novel but poetry.

In an interview, Salih remembered his early attempts at writing during the 1950s as dominated by a sense of nostalgia for the country he felt to be disappearing under the pressures of modernization. "Nevertheless," he says, "I tried not to be carried away by that nostalgia so that what I wrote didn't turn into mere contemplation of the abandoned campsites."²⁷ His novel opens on a scene of homecoming, not in the elegiac register of the poet, but that of a sober-minded narrator returned from studies in England to find his riverine village in northern Sudan reassuringly unchanged. Staring from the window of his family home, he reflects, "I felt not like a storm-swept feather, but like that palm tree, a being with a background, with roots, with a purpose."²⁸ But this feeling is immediately undermined by the appearance of Mustafa Sa'eed, a stranger to the village who has arrived while the narrator was abroad. During a night of drinking, the narrator is astonished to hear Sa'eed recite the final lines of Ford Madox Ford's World War I poem, "In October 1914": "I tell you had the ground split open and revealed an afreet standing before me, his eyes shooting out flames, I would not have been more terrified."²⁹

The narrator discovers that Sa'eed is a prodigy who went to London after World War I and enjoyed a brilliant career as an economist, an early spokesman for African independence, and also a version of Don Juan, seducing English women by casting himself as an Orientalist stereotype, reciting wine poetry and bragging that he would "liberate Africa with my penis."³⁰ Not surprisingly, Sa'eed

is the character most readers remember, though his story takes up only a small portion of Salih's novel. The real drama is the narrator's growing realization that he and Sa'eed are not so different: strangers in the Sudan by virtue of their foreign education, they are both also devoted to poetry, though it is a passion they repeatedly disavow or repress. The narrator has written his dissertation on "an obscure English poet," as he ruefully puts it, and his first job back home is teaching pre-Islamic literature. The morning after his recital of Ford, Sa'eed claims not to remember his performance and teases the narrator, "We have no need of poetry here. It would've been better if you studied agriculture, engineering or medicine."³¹ Here, the (traditional) claim that verse is a premodern residue is uttered by a character who clearly does not believe what he is saying, though his audience (the narrator) is afraid he might be speaking the truth.

Sa'eed belongs to the generation of romantic anticolonialism – his life exactly spans the period of British occupation – while the narrator typifies the first post-independence generation, consumed by the bureaucratic struggle to build a state, even as he suspects his efforts are futile and the state is basically a form of legalized corruption. Rather than a heroic example of the empire writing back, Salih's novel critiques both generations for their connivance with the metropole, one through its stereotyped performance of militancy, the other by chasing after the shiny objects of modernity. In the novel's finale, the narrator enters into a house owned by Sa'eed and finds it stuffed with volumes of European poetry, novels, and philosophy. He also finds a page of verse in Sa'eed's own hand, left unfinished apparently for lack of a rhyme. "A very poor poem," the narrator sniffs, "that relies on antithesis and comparisons."³² He nevertheless finishes it by adding a line that fits the rhyme scheme and metrical structure of the original.

Like many Arabic fictions, *Season of Migration* allies poetry with tradition: it is an art with no obvious use in a world of electrical water-pumps. Yet neither protagonist can renounce their passion for poetry: they compose, study, and memorize it in secret; in moments of enthusiasm, it slips from their lips. The narrator's diffidence in completing Sa'eed's poem is an acknowledgment of all the ways he is a reluctant heir of the older man (earlier in the novel he is in fact mistaken for his son), and a recognition of how the present is constrained by the rigid but also comforting conventions of the past. In retrospect, the novel's opening scene of *nostos* comes to look like an effort to ward off the melancholy wisdom of the *atlatl* poet: the narrator wants to believe his world has not been altered, but as a student of literature, he surely knows there are no such homecomings, that history is an uninterrupted process of changes. This is not Scott's tragic-but-progressive view of history, nor nationalist romanticism, but a properly postcolonial ambivalence. In the novel's final scene – a clear "antithesis" of its opening – he finds himself treading water in the middle of the Nile, unwilling to choose between the north and south banks, "unable to continue, unable to return."³³

Turn now to a recent novel in Arabic, so far overlooked by scholars, which takes poetry and poets as its theme and also aims to provoke the feeling that there is such a thing as history, albeit in the form of failure or miscarriage. In Youssef Rakha's *The Crocodiles* (2013), poetry again belongs to the past – the narrator confesses at the end of the novel that he has “forsaken even poetry” – but here it is a matter of the very recent past: the fifteen years that led up to the occupation of Cairo's Tahrir Square in 2011 and the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak.³⁴ In Rakha's novel, poetry is not a metonym for tradition but rather for youthful revolution, an experience for which the novel offers itself as a kind of incomplete memorial.

The Crocodiles is composed in numbered paragraphs, ranging in length from one line to a page, and the story skips forward and backward in time between the years of 1997 and 2011. It begins with the formation of an underground association in Cairo, the Crocodiles Movement for Secret Egyptian Poetry. The group is composed of three men in their twenties – the narrator, nicknamed Gear Knob, is one of them – but recruitment is lackluster (“as a result of our philosophy [of secrecy], no one knew of our existence”),³⁵ and the group disbands four years later. For all their enthusiasm, the Crocodiles write very little verse. Much of the book concerns their febrile sex lives, but also the circle's slow drift into the material comforts offered by Egypt's version of neoliberal prosperity, as well as the increasingly restricted spaces allowed by Mubarak's security services.

The novel's narrative crux is the suicide in 1997 of Radwa Adel, “the Student Movement's (or the Seventies Generation's) most celebrated female icon,”³⁶ which occurs the same day the poetry movement is founded. (Egypt's 1970s generation was a Marxist formation, independent of the state and standing apart from older communist groups that had largely been absorbed by the regime.) *The Crocodiles*, like many of the novels we have looked at, is centrally concerned with moments of historical transition – in this case, a changing of the guard in Egypt's independent Left. Rakha treats the drama of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1990s generations of Egyptian intellectuals as the stuff of local legend and literary gossip: poets are mythological figures who can also occasionally be spotted at cafés.³⁷ But the novel's concern with generational transition does not reduce politics to biology. In tracing a genealogy of opposition, *The Crocodiles* is structured by the idea of untimely or unseasonable emergence. Radwa Adel's one written work, a draft she destroyed, is titled *The Premature* (al-Mubtasirun).³⁸ The narrator later looks up the word in a dictionary – one of the novel's many archival figures – and finds “that a date palm that's *mabsoura* has been pollinated early, out of season; that anything *mabsour* has taken place before its time.”³⁹ Rakha's novel suggests that what each generation hands on to the next is not practical wisdom, and certainly not political or literary success, so much as an experience of unripeness or unfulfillment. Though one of the protagonists is obsessed with translating Allen Gins-

berg's poem "The Lion for Real," the novel's spirit seems to owe more to Brecht's "An die Nachgeborenen":

All roads led into the mire in my time.
My tongue betrayed me to the butchers. . .
Our forces were slight. Our goal
Lay far in the distance
It was clearly visible, though I myself
Was unlikely to reach it.⁴⁰

The bohemian milieu of sexed-up young scribblers who venerate poetry while composing relatively little, who passionately dissect the esoterica of previous literary generations, who cultivate an elaborate contempt for the establishment while isolating themselves from any experience of popular life, who strike their counter-cultural poses against the backdrop of leftist defeats – in particular the rout of radical student movements – and the rise of U.S.-supported reactionaries: this is the terrain of Roberto Bolaño's fiction, which Rakha, who cites Bolaño in an epigraph, plausibly transports to downtown Cairo. For Bolaño, poetry is not a museum piece but the cultural correlative of utopian aspirations and violent repression. Bolaño's own fiction – most notably *The Savage Detectives*, but also shorter works such as *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, *Distant Star*, *By Night in Chile*, and *Amulet* – serves as a distorted or even satirical testimonial to those years of literary revolt and counter-revolution, "a mass of children, walking unstopably toward the abyss."⁴¹

Rakha's narrator also casts himself as the historian or semi-official mourner of the Crocodiles' poetry movement. He specifies the narrative present as January 25, 2012. Although street protests are ongoing against the regime, now run by the Supreme Council of Armed Forces, the narrator has holed up with his computer, creating a file called *The Crocodiles*, of which we are reading the first document, "The Lovers (1997 – 2001)." He admits that in working on his file, "I've lost the urge to descend to the battlefield of Tahrir Square," suggesting that his archival work has replaced revolutionary activism in the same way that prose has replaced poetry.⁴² As in the fictions of Bolaño, the novel figures itself as a kind of memorial or elegy to the poetry of youth.⁴³ And yet Rakha's elegy is awkwardly timed. Its subject is not exactly dead, just *mabsour*: out-of-season, unripe, arrived too early. It is notable that neither Rakha nor Bolaño represent political revolution as such. That epic or romantic history is displaced onto the everyday world of sex, gossip, and poetry. It is this stubbornly unfruitful realm of experience that Rakha nevertheless seeks to transmit or incubate in his "file." If the novel is *diwan al-'arab*, it is not a history of heroism but an ongoing archive of defeat.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah Mitchell and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 58, 56. He also quotes George Sand: “[Scott] is the poet of the peasant, soldier, outlaw and artisan.” *Ibid.*, 48.
- ² *Ibid.*, 77. “Popular” does not simply mean the life of the lower classes: “It is in his unforgettable portrayal of the survivals of gentile society, of the Scottish clans where the poetry of his portrayal of past life chiefly lies. Here in material and subject-matter alone, there is present such a powerful element of the heroic period of mankind, that Scott’s novels at their height do indeed approach the old epics.” *Ibid.*, 56.
- ³ Sir Walter Scott, *Waverley; or, ‘Tis Sixty Years Since*, ed. Claire Lamont (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 98–107.
- ⁴ This is also Scott’s claim in his “Essay on Romance”: “In a very early period of civilization . . . the poetical art, so nearly allied to that of oratory or persuasion, is found to ascertain to its professors a very high rank. Poets are the historians, and often the priests of the tribe. Their command of language, then in its infancy, excites not merely pleasure, but enthusiasm and admiration.” Sir Walter Scott, *Essays on Chivalry, Romance, and the Drama* (London: Frederick Warne, 1887), 81.
- ⁵ Ian Duncan, “Waverley,” in *The Novel, Volume 2: Forms and Themes*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), 174.
- ⁶ Quoted in Jabir ‘Usfur, *Zaman al-riwaya* (Damascus: al-Mada, 1999), 9, my translation.
- ⁷ Quran 60:41.
- ⁸ Navid Kermani, *God is Beautiful: The Aesthetic Experience of the Quran*, trans. Tony Crawford (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 278.
- ⁹ Quran 26:225–226.
- ¹⁰ Ibn Qutaybah, *The Excellence of the Arabs*, trans. Sarah Bowen Savant and Peter Webb (New York: Library of Arabic Literature, 2017), 151.
- ¹¹ ‘Usfur, *Zaman al-riwaya*, 10. This notion has become a trope among Arab intellectuals, and not just novelists. In an interview, the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish admitted, “It’s tempting to say that we live the era of the novel, that it’s become the new *diwan al-‘arab*.” Mahmoud Darwish, *Entretiens sur la poésie* (Paris: Actes Sud, 2006), 37, my translation.
- ¹² Nihad Sirees, *The Silence and the Roar*, trans. Max Weiss (New York: Other Press, 2013), 11.
- ¹³ Sonallah Ibrahim, *The Committee*, trans. Marie St. Germain and Charlene Constable (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 34.

- ¹⁴ Sonallah Ibrahim, *That Smell and Notes from Prison*, trans. Robyn Creswell (New York: New Directions, 2013), 103. The original citation continues, “We have acquired values that are best expressed in prose.”
- ¹⁵ Sir Hamilton Gibb, *Studies on the Civilization* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1962), 291, 294. For a full account of *Zaynab*’s canonization, see Elliott Colla, “How *Zaynab* Became the First Arabic Novel,” *History Compass* 7 (1) (2009): 214–225.
- ¹⁶ Badawi, the first lecturer in modern Arabic literature at Oxford, writes, “[*Zaynab*] is the first fully fledged novel of literary merit in Arabic.” M. M. Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 97.
- ¹⁷ See in particular Samah Selim, “Translations and Adaptations from the European Novel,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Arabic Novelistic Traditions*, ed. Wail S. Hassan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); and Elizabeth Holt, *Fictitious Capital: Silk, Cotton, and the Rise of the Arabic Novel* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).
- ¹⁸ For a concise account, covering many other medieval genres, see Muhsin al-Musawi, “The Medieval Turn in Modern Arabic Narrative,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Arabic Novelistic Traditions*, ed. Hassan.
- ¹⁹ ‘Abdu Wazin, *Mahmoud Darwish: al-gharib yaqa’u ‘ala nafsihi* (Beirut: Riad El Rayess, 2006), 89.
- ²⁰ See Hilary Kilpatrick, “Literary Creativity and the Cultural Heritage: The *Aḥlāl* in Modern Arabic Fiction,” in *Tradition, Modernity, and Postmodernity in Arabic Literature: Essays in Honor of Professor Issa J. Boullata*, ed. K. Abdel-Malek and W. B. Hallaq (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2000). For a study of the trope’s use by Lebanese novelists, many motivated by the ruins of Beirut, see Ken Seigneurie, *Standing by the Ruins: Elegiac Humanism in Wartime and Postwar Lebanon* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011).
- ²¹ Jaroslav Stetkevych, *The Zephyrs of Najd: The Poetics of Nostalgia in the Classical Arabic Nasīb* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 52. The trope provides a premise for Alfred Lord Tennyson’s long dramatic monologue, “Locksley Hall,” which begins with a speaker returning to his ancestral hall and remembering a youthful affair with his cousin. Tennyson knew of the Arabic trope through the translations and commentaries of Sir William Jones.
- ²² See Roger Allen’s commentary and translation, *A Period of Time: A Study and Translation of Hadith ‘Isa Ibn Hisham* (Reading, United Kingdom: Ithaca Press, 1992). Allen argues that al-Muwaylihi “provided the necessary bridge between the narrative genres of classical Arabic literature and the emergence of a fictional tradition in modern Arabic based on European models.” *Ibid.*, 31.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 155–156.
- ²⁴ Kilpatrick, “Literary Creativity and the Cultural Heritage,” 31.
- ²⁵ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 23.
- ²⁶ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 30, 211.
- ²⁷ Cited in Wail Hassan, *Tayeb Salih: Ideology and the Craft of Fiction* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 14.
- ²⁸ Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*, trans. Denys Johnson-Davies (New York: New York Review Books), 4.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

- ³⁰ Ibid., 100.
- ³¹ Ibid., 9.
- ³² Ibid., 127.
- ³³ Ibid., 138. Elsewhere in the novel, the narrator travels through the desert to Khartoum. Making camp at night, the truck drivers sing in Sudanese dialect to their vehicles “just as the poets of old sang to their camels”: “The sweat pours down his mighty neck and soaks his massive sides / And sparks around his feet do fly as to the sands he strides.” Ibid., 93–94. In this mixing of vernacular language and classical forms, modern and traditional modes of transport, Salih conjures an experience of reconciliation that otherwise eludes his protagonists. I have tried to trace the utopian imaginaries at work in this passage in another essay, “Reimagining Arab Nationalism: Nazik al-Mala’ika and the Politics of Poetic Meter,” *Critical Inquiry* 46 (1) (2019): 71–96.
- ³⁴ Youssef Rakha, *The Crocodiles*, trans. Robin Moger (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2014), sec. 404. The English, like the Arabic original, is unpaginated. Further citations will refer to the section number.
- ³⁵ Ibid., sec. 6.
- ³⁶ Ibid., sec. 1.
- ³⁷ On the 1990s generation in Egypt, see Samia Mehrez, “Where Have All the Families Gone: Egyptian Literary Texts of the Nineties,” *The Arab Studies Journal* 9/10 (2/1) (Fall 2001/Spring 2002): 31–49.
- ³⁸ “Radwa Adel” is a fictional version of Arwa Salih, an Egyptian Marxist who killed herself in 1997. Salih’s most important work has been translated as *The Stillborn: Notebooks of a Woman from the Student-Movement Generation in Egypt*, trans. Samah Selim (London: Seagull Books, 2018). “All kinds of prodigious marvels flourished in that phantasmagorical world,” Salih writes of her generation of student radicals, in one of the many passages that rhymes with Rakha’s novel. “Dwarfs were transformed into giants and cheap comedies into fatal tragedies. Grand sacrifices were exploited to satisfy twisted caprices, and intimate friendships were born–love affairs even–between people who were incapable of knowing each other. . . . And so, when we finally walked out into the light of day, the devastation was total. We were like mummies crumbling to dust in the sunlight.” Ibid., 68.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 328.
- ⁴⁰ Bertolt Brecht, *Poems 1913 – 1956*, ed. John Willett and Ralph Manheim (London: Methuen, 1976), 319.
- ⁴¹ Roberto Bolaño, *Amulet*, trans. Chris Andrews (New York: New Directions, 2006), 182.
- ⁴² Rakha, *The Crocodiles*, sec. 26. Another Arab novel that figures itself as an archive for the history of leftist defeats is Elias Khoury, *Broken Mirrors: Sinalcol*, trans. Humphrey Davies (New York: Archipelago, 2016). I have looked at this aspect of Khoury’s work in “Tripoli Nights with a Master of Arabic,” *The New York Review of Books*, March 9, 2017.
- ⁴³ As Bolaño put it in characteristically defiant and ambivalent terms: “More or less everything I’ve written is a love letter or farewell address to my own generation, those of us born in the fifties who chose at some point to take up arms–though in this case it would be more correct to say that we became *militants*–and who gave the little that we had, the best that we had, which was our youth, to a cause we believed to be the most generous cause in the world and that was, in a sense, though in truth it wasn’t.” Roberto Bolaño, “Discurso de Caracas,” *Letras Libres*, October 31, 1999, my translation.