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‘*Āmmiyya* and *Fuṣḥā* in Linguistics and Literature

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EGYPTIAN ARABIC POETRY AND LITERARY HISTORY

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Abstract. Diglossia has always been a distinguishing feature of the language situation in Egypt. And it is fair to say that Egypt has developed a strong tradition of 'poetry in the vernacular'. This tradition can be traced from the quatrains of Ibn 'Arūs through the *zağal* of al-Nadīm and al-Tūnisī to poly-genre poetical oeuvres of Ḥaddād and Nağm (Nigm). This essay is a study of the history of modern literature in Egypt with special attention on literature in the vernacular. I examine histories and encyclopedias of Arabic literature and the narratives and limited contexts through which they had been constructed. David Perkins once stated that "literary history is a self-contradictory project". I tried to follow these contradictions in various literary histories in order to get closer to answers to the following questions:

- What is special about Arabic literary history and Egyptian literary history in particular?
- How to decide who and what is important for the development of modern literature?
- What slipped and what was dropped out of all those histories of Arabic literature?
- Dialect / colloquial / vernacular / *'āmmiyya* poetry? What is wrong with the definitions?

Keywords: dialect poetry; literary history; *'āmmiyya*.

Arabic poetry in Egypt is written in standard Arabic or in Egyptian dialect forms of Arabic language. One may ask which of the two is more Egyptian and which one is more Arabic. Does a poem written in Egyptian Arabic belong to the great tradition of Arabic literature and thus may have a place in a history of Arabic literature along with poetry in Lebanese or Yemeni Arabic? Or is it part of an individual Egyptian tradition and can only be thought of as of Egyptian or Egyptian Arabic literature?

Definitions

Answering these questions demands an understanding of what is literary history and what is dialect poetry. My main position here is simple. I presume that literary history is a kind of criticism that uses categories for convenience and contexts for explanation. A literature historian may use a range of categories and contexts for explaining one phenomenon or another, changes within it or interactions with other phenomena, if the end justifies the means. As for dialect poetry, I state that its emergence in any national literature can be caused only by an objective dichotomy of the official and unofficial (standard/non-standard) varieties of one language within it. The official one, also called 'literary', constitutes the language of

canonical literature. The unofficial one, often called 'vernacular', is mostly suggested to be used for oral communication. But this official/unofficial differentiation does not work with poetry of Ṣalāḥ Ǧāhīn in Arabic, Tonino Guerra in Italian or Linton Kwesi Johnson in English.

'Literature in the vernacular' ('colloquial literature') is obviously an oxymoron, but not a contradiction. Yet we have to agree that the problem of nomination impedes the research of this phenomenon. And there are at least five Arabic terms which favor this impediment (*zaǧal, ši'r malḥūn, ši'r nabaṭī, ši'r ša'bī, ši'r al-'āmmiyya*) each of which may be more or less criticized. Some express only the properties of particular genre, while others bring to the fore 'popular' features or regional traditions that neither generalize nor specify. In today's Egypt, where this type of poetry is most common, I believe that literary critics and writers most often use the term *ši'r al-'āmmiyya* with the noun *al-'āmmiyya* regarding their own language, the language of live communication of Egyptians. Today *'āmmiyya* is a descriptive term rather than a value defining one, as it used to be understood by critics, and I see no use in distinctions of value. I believe that the meaning of the term 'dialect poetry' describes this classification best since it designates its real volume. This term does not distinguish authors' and folk texts but in practice it is used to denote mainly the former ones, i.e. it is used in a narrow and a broad sense[1]. To denote popular poetic heritage, the exact term is *ši'r ša'bī* or 'folk poetry'.

'Wrong' nominations are likely to be misperceived and almost every study of *ši'r al-'āmmiyya* begins with a list of common misconceptions caused by its name (Booth 2006: 463-464). While there are disputes about the acceptability of writing in *'āmmiyya* and the possibility of dialect poetry[2], it continues to flourish.

We should attempt to bring clarity to critical language. But once we see some agreement in the nomination issue in Arabic, we face the problem of rendering the term into another language. Booth discusses Arabic terms for dialect poetry in her 'Poetry in the Vernacular' but fails to adhere to one English term using both 'poetry in the vernacular' and 'colloquial poetry' as synonyms (Booth 2006). The same is with Abdel-Malek's 'Study of the Vernacular Poetry of Aḥmad Fu'ād Niǧm' who also adopts the Arabic word *zaǧal* denoting not only the genre of the same name (Abdel-Malek 1990). Semah distinguished 'modern Arabic *zaǧal*' as a new trend that emerged in Arabic literature in the light of "the total transformation of Arabic poetry composed in the normative, classical language" in the twentieth century (Semah 1995: 80). Radwan uses both *'āmmiyya* and 'colloquial' for dialect poetry (in Egypt) but makes a distinction between them distinguishing *ši'r al-'āmmiyya* into a poetic movement category and explaining its essence as "a form of modern Arabic poetry

[1] Davies in EALL defined it "for the purposes of this entry [dialect poetry] as materials written in colloquial Arabic to be read rather than heard", see Davies (2005: 597).
[2] For a concise historical profile of the debate in Egypt, see Davies (2005: 601-602).

written in colloquial Egyptian Arabic […], a poetic movement that began in the early 1950s" (Radwan 2012: 1). Radwan's 'New Readings' go beyond the register as she explores various contexts of the 'movement' and concludes that it "was part of the movement that has brought about the most drastic changes in Arabic poetry since the formation of the canon during the seventh and eighth centuries" (Radwan 2012: 199).

'The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics' was probably the first encyclopedia that included an entry on dialect poetry. Its authors claim that "understanding of dialect poetry is essential to the thorough appreciation of the national poetry", and that in spite of having a few works on dialect poetry in some literatures "definitive theoretical and cross-cultural study still remains to be written" (Brogan 1993: 289). While taking the presence of diverse dialect poetry in almost every literature of the multidialectal Arab world into account, I will paraphrase the previous sentence and state that definitive theoretical studies on Arabic dialect poetry remain to be written as well. Though Arab literary studies boast a number of articles, essays and even monographs on this topic, definitiveness is what they lack.

Histories[3]

In narrative literary histories[4] events are arranged chronologically. This arrangement implies its connection with the historical process. Literary history deals with concrete literary works; it is a study of a series of works, just as history is a study of an event or a series of events, in general. Al-Bagdadi noted that "periodizations of Arabic literary history conventionally follow that of Arab dynastic-Islamic history" (al-Bagdadi 2008: 453). Most of them rely on the traditional division into ages (*'uṣūr*) which help comprehend the uninterrupted course of history and are obviously borrowed from this realm. This division is best embraced in Šawqī Ḍayf's magnum opus *tārīḫ al-'adab al-'arabī* series consisting of six volumes, one for each 'age'. Continuity seems to have become the main criterion by which to decide what to include into a history of Arabic literature. By and large, two key factors determine such continuity, these are form and language. Of the two, language is of greater importance being the first marker of literariness. Language largely continues to be the main condition for literary works to receive permit to enter the canon. New poetical forms have always had better chances to be recognized by Arab scholars if they were produced in the 'literary' (*fuṣḥā*) language. This can be traced on the example of the 'seven poetical arts' (*al-funūn al-šiʻriyya al-sabʻa*) classified by al-Ḥillī. Arabized genres like *dūbayt* (or *rubāʻī*) are likely to be accepted as long as they observe the 'literariness of language'. The same is true with 'folk' genres like *zağal*. As Semah stated: "Conceptually, structurally and metrically,

[3] This is a selective overview of some histories. For a detailed analysis of Arab and European contributions, see al-Bagdadi (2008).
[4] I use Perkins' classification of literary history models, see Perkins (1991).

Arabic dialectal verse has in fact, never been totally divorced from the norms of traditional *fuṣḥā* poetry […]. Arabic *zağal*, especially the portion which is committed to writing, is not popular in the true sense" (Semah 1995: 81).

Arabic literary tradition distinguished between 'elite' ('high') and 'folk' ('low') genres and as al-Bagdadi noted it "invested much energy in defining the possibilities and the limits of literature" (al-Bagdadi 2008: 458). These limits were so vigilantly protected that only a fool would dare crossing them. Ṣalāḥ Ǧāhīn, though, was one of those who challenged these conventions in a sophisticated way. And Radwan aptly noticed this in her analysis of his rubā'iyyat calling Ǧāhīn "a sage in fool's clothing"[5].

> My heart used to rustle like a rattle, now it rings like a bell.
> As I ringed it all the servants and guards woke up.
> But I'm just a clown. Why did you wake up, and why did you get scared?
> There is no sword in my hand, and no horse under me.
> Incredible![6] (Ǧāhīn 1996: 63).

Was it because someone dared to encroach upon their territory that scared all the "servants and guards"? Was it the territory of 'elite' literature? If so, then this overstep could only be done by means of language. The gist of this 'trick' is in combining 'low' style ('vernacular' Arabic) and 'high' genre leading to its decanonization[7].

Cachia recently explored the differentiation between 'elite' and 'folk' literatures in Arabic literary historiography emphasizing the language factor:

> Already before Islam he [the Arab] was aware that he and his fellow tribesmen were part of a wider entity […]. To a larger extent than is true of other peoples, language has been and remains a key constituent of the Arab's self-view and self-esteem (Cachia 2008: 135). At all events, linguistic considerations play a decisive part in the distinctions we need to make and the interrelationship we want to trace between the 'elite' and the 'folk' forms of Arabic literature. […] Muslim Orthodoxy from the ninth century onward asserts it [the Quran] to be the uncreated Word of God and therefore in no way subject to the forces of historic time. The fact that the poetry was pagan did not result in disqualification. […] And both together were mined by philologists and grammarians to establish the norms of what is known as classical Arabic (Cachia 2008: 136).

[5] See the eponymous chapter 4 in Radwan (2012: 139-144).
[6] This fragment was translated from Arabic by myself.
[7] Speaking of conventions of form it is worth noting that his quatrains end with a *lāzima* as an additional fifth line.

Such reflections underlie the principle of continuity which, I suppose, is the core for narrative literary history, the only form used until now by Arab scholars to construct the canon of 'high' literature. As Semah stated:

> Throughout the centuries, Arab literary historians have been anxious to propagate the notion that only poetry in the classical idiom is to be considered part and parcel of 'high' and dignified literature, whereas poetry in the vernaculars, as all modes of literary productions, should be looked upon as a means of entertainment for uneducated masses (Semah 1995: 81).

The principle of continuity in narrative histories of Arabic literature (and national literatures of the Arab world as well) increases the risk of adverse effects that lead to ignoring literary phenomena which cannot be explained within the framework of uninterrupted continuity. As a result, we face problems in categorizing and periodizing literary phenomena in general. If I dwell upon the purposes and aims of writing literary history, I first think about teaching. Traditionally Arabic students have their literature course divided into two parts. First, they acquire knowledge of classical literature which normally encompasses texts from the rise of Islam (including pre-Islamic prose and poetry that was recorded in the Islamic era) to the fall of Andalusia. Second, they have a course of 'modern' literature from nineteenth century onward mainly focused on Egyptian and Syrian literature. And it turns out that an undefined body of Arabic literature is being dropped out in these curricula. Commenting on the problem of periodization in Arabic literary histories al-Bagdadi wrote:

> Nowhere is the problem of periodization more evident than in what remains one of the main chronological lacunae not only for literary history but Arab history in general, namely the long period from the fifteenth to the end of the eighteenth century in the Arab world (al-Bagdadi 2008: 454)

I call for a new approach to the study of history of Arabic literature, namely its 'modern' period, which by common consent of arabists began after Napoleon's occupation of Egypt, then with Muhammad Ali's reforms and the subsequent changes in Egyptian society and culture, i.e. literature produced from the beginning of the nineteenth century onward. This common consent stays unquestioned untill now and literary historians continue periodizing and categorizing 'modern' Arabic literature without putting claim to it. I call for reexamining and reviewing it in relation to dialect literature which blooms and flourishes throughout the Arab world but is mostly neglected by critics and historians of literature:

> Colloquial poetry's vitality has not been matched by scholarly attention. It falls neither into the folklorists' realm nor into Arabic literary study as constituted at present, and receives relatively

> little attention in literary journals, critical studies and anthologies. […] Few studies or collections exist to offer poets access to their premodern colloquial heritage (Booth 2006: 463-464).

Brugman's 'Introduction to the History of Modern Arabic Literature in Egypt' takes the narrative model and is an example of a comprehensive university text-book. He emphasizes difficulties that arise when trying to treat Arabic literature of this period as a whole noting that "modern literature in the individual Arab countries has developed in widely different ways" and its beginnings "vary widely from country to country" (Brugman 1984: x). In the 'Preface' Brugman explains that he aims to give students at Leiden historical background for reading original texts supposing "the reader has a superficial knowledge of classical Arabic literature" (Brugman 1984: ix). Although in the 'Preface' Brugman mentions his intention to avoid aesthetic judgment, in the part which treats ʾAḥmad Rāmī he mentions his *ʾazǧāl* and suggests that they are not comparable with poems in the official language of literature and had unfavorable effect on his poetical oeuvre: "The emphasis shifted to simple poetry in the vernacular. Perhaps as a result of this, his poems in classical Arabic show a certain facile smoothness and often lack depth" (Brugman 1984: 148). The work does not deal with dialect poetry, even though the author tries not to detract significance from it. The obvious reason here is the ability of students to read texts in original:

> The present study is restricted to poetry and prose in standard Arabic. The reason why I have not included works in the vernacular is not that these are of less significance in themselves, but that literature in the vernacular functions at a different level than that of works in standard Arabic, and therefore requires separate treatment (Brugman 1984: xii).

The Cambridge History series' puts Arabic literature in six volumes, each having a different editor and a different concept. One of the volumes, 'Modern Arabic Literature' edited by Badawi may be called a postmodern encyclopedia. Out of its fourteen chapters there are five devoted to prose, four to poetry, two to drama, one to literary criticism and one to women writers (actually another chapter devoted to prose). The first chapter is an introduction that is actually composed of two prefaces written by different authors. The periodization here is heterogeneous and discrete. The chronology chart at the beginning of the book refers only the dates of major historical events. In regard to its regional division it is difficult to determine whether Egypt's literature is regarded in the context of Arabic literature in general or is it vice versa. The focus of this History on Egyptian literature is not explained. Badawi considers it necessary to elucidate only some points of the general composition: "separate bibliographies for individual chapters even at the risk of some repetition"; footnotes are reduced to minimum to save space with an exception for 'Poetry in the Vernacular' and 'Arab

Women Writers' as these are "relatively unknown fields"; vast bibliography for 'Short Story' because it enjoys "perhaps greater popularity with writers and readers alike than other genres" (Badawi 2006).

The encyclopedia uses traditional periodization deemed inadequate beforehand, but in such a manner that it can be used for purposes of convenience to organize the material. In this volume we find neither references nor attempts to justify the traditional position that the 'period of modern Arabic literature' began in the nineteenth century after the so-called 'period of decline', instead the introductory article presents the historical context of the period. Badawi, however, outlines within this division another 'three periods of modern Arabic literature' (Badawi 2006, 16-23). The historical context is supported by a chronology that begins with the death of Muḥammad bin 'Abd al-Wahhāb in 1787 and the start of Napoleon's campaign in Egypt in 1798 and ends with the occupation of Kuwait by Iraqi troops in 1990 and the subsequent liberation of Kuwait's territory by the UN forces in 1991, but these events are not mentioned again in the book, as there is almost no mention of literature in Gulf countries. Authors of this History construct their own historical and cultural contexts in order to explain the changes in the objects of their research. In most cases these contexts cover periods of historical time much narrower than that of what is called the 'period of modern Arabic literature'.

'The Cambridge History series' volume that covers the 'period of decline' uses a less controversial name: 'Arabic literature in the Post Classical Period'. Note that some of the articles in this encyclopedia go beyond the time limits of 'decline'. These include, for example, Margaret Larkin's 'People's Poetry in the Post Classical Period, 1150-1850', which crosses the boundaries on both sides (Larkin 2008), and one can find temporal continuity if drawing upon Booth's and Larkin's chapters from the two volumes.

In 'Modern Arabic literature' the periodical, geographical and linguistical principles contradict each other, though the epithets 'modern' and 'Arab' in its title are equal. To distribute the book's chapters evenly according to literary geography of the Arab world would mean to neglect the period stated in the title because the literary process in different countries is not homogeneous. The map in the beginning reflects political geography rather than literary. Thus, the adjective 'Arab' here, being used to denote language, is somewhat limited and refers to Arabic literature almost exclusively in countries that the reader sees on the map. The exception in this case is traditional as well – the '*Mahğar* school' of poetry.

According to Badawi, literature in other languages "strictly speaking […] does not belong to Arabic literature" (Badawi 2006: 1) and "Modern Arabic literature is obviously the literature of the modern Arab world, and this is generally assumed to begin with the French campaign in Egypt in 1798" (Badawi 2006: 2). Most of 'Modern Arabic Literature' as I have pointed out earlier is focused on the historical and literary process in Egypt, while the history

of Arabic literature in other countries, mainly in Lebanon, Palestine, Syria and Iraq, is considered in connection with it. The literary process in other countries of the Arab world (as well as Arabic literature beyond it) can hardly be found in this volume.

So, with predefined discreteness and seemingly deliberate deconstruction of 'the modern period' and with the help of the encyclopedic form of presentation, this model is influenced by the named period to a greater extent than it might seem at first glance. Firstly, the selection of the topics and their organization into sections impose a continuity of literary 'development' presented as victory of innovations over traditions (e.g., the first three chapters on poetry foist strict continuity of Neoclassicism-Romanticism-Modernism in Arabic modern poetry). Second, the remark at the beginning of 'Modern Arabic Literature' stating that the recent period apparently began in 1798 prompted the authors to begin coverage of their topics from the given date. For example, Booth's chapter on dialect poetry begins with historical overview of the subject subtitled 'Traditional Forms and the Nineteenth Century' (Booth 2006: 469).

The encyclopedic model, in the form in which it was used in 'Modern Arabic literature', is closer to more traditional narrative models in its presentation of historical reality. The apparent advantage of it, in my opinion, is the inclusion of chapters on dialect poetry and women writers, which haven't found place in narrative histories of Arabic literature and slipped or were dropped out of them. Note that these chapters may be regarded separately as contextual narrative histories, each covering a topic within the period mentioned in the title.

The category of generation is one of the most popular categories among critics and historians of modern literature. Generations are perhaps the most convenient categories to classify contemporary literature as they play the role of sub-periods. Of course, continuity is what features generation categories but, paradoxically as it may seem, minimizing time slots to decades decreases the aforesaid side effects. For example, Piotrowska choosing Egyptian poetry of the 90's as an object for her dissertation did not distinguish between poets writing in different registers of Arabic. Al-Ǧābirī (al-Gābirī), one of the key figures of this generation, also drew Burt's attention in her overview of 'Egyptian Avant-Garde'. She noted that although al-Ǧābirī "has rarely been published except in the marginal and independent literary magazines" his poetical oeuvre played an imported role in this generation, especially in the development of prose poetry, and stated that "we must argue […] that there is a literary tradition outside the more easily published *fuṣḥā* currents of prose poem experiments" (Burt 1997: 152). Moreover, colloquial productions "exhibit most clearly the conservative nature of the canonical and critical sieves" (Burt 1997: 153).

Kirpichenko and Safronov took the 1950's as a turning point for their two volumes of 'The History of Egyptian Literature in the XIX-XX centuries' (Kirpichenko 2003). Whereas they distinguished between poetry and dialect poetry in the first volume placing al-Tūnisī's

poetry in a separate entry, in the second volume they did not adhere this distinction placing the poetry of Ǧāhīn, Naǧm (Nigm), Ḥaddād and al-Abnūdī in line with ʻAbd al-Ṣabūr, Ḥiǧāzī and Dunqul[8].

In lieu of conclusion

First comprehensive studies of Egyptian dialect poetry (in the broad sense of this term) were written by scholars who were either born or conducted research in a corresponding language milieu (Cachia 1977, Fanjul 1976, Frolova 1975; Booth 1990; Abdel-Malek 1990). Today, when vernaculars are becoming an integral part of Arabic language curricula in most universities (European at least) dialect poetry is becoming increasingly relevant and important for study and research. A 'definitive theoretical study' on Arabic dialect poetry therefore should start from the point that:

> The view that poetry in the *ʻāmmiyya* should be kept out of the pantheon of 'high' literature has lost its grip on the minds of the majority of both contemporary critics and readers […]. It would, therefore, be erroneous to pass judgement on the status of this poetry only on the basis of the lamentable fact that it is not represented in school text-books, or in outmoded literary histories (Semah 1995: 88).

We must constantly explore the adequacy of time slots in dealing with Arabic literature as whole and separate national literatures of the Arab world. Taking for granted the relationship between scholarship and teaching we must keep in mind that literary history is a genre used as well for text-books. The syllabi of literary history courses have to introduce students to the subject and make them prepared for understanding contemporary literature and its connection with past writings. The methods of literary study for teaching aims and the manner of teaching Arabic literature are to be revised. And so the literary canon is inevitably to be questioned.

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[8] I would like to emphasize that the Russian tradition of Arabic literary historiography founded by A. Krymsky and I. Krachkovski in the first half of the 20th century showed relatively more interest in 'folk' literature. Krymsky showed rare discernment in his 'History of New Arabic Literature' defining it as Arabic literature from the sixteenth century onward, dedicating a big part of it to the 'decline of classical' and 'prosperity of popular literature' (not only prose but also poetry), see Krymsky (1971). His remarks about the significance of 'popular literature' brought attention of Russian arabists, and found continuation in their work, e.g. Frolova's dissertation on dialect poetry in Egypt, see Frolova (1995).

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