

**Modernism and After:
Modern Arabic Literary Theory
from Literary Criticism to Cultural Critique**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to provide the interested reader with a critical account of far-reaching changes in modern Arabic literary theory, approximately since the 1970s, in the light of *an ascending paradigm in motion*, and of the tendency by subsequent critics and commentators to view literary criticism in terms of a *self-elaborating* category morphing into cultural critique.

The first part focuses on interdisciplinary problems confronting Arab critics in their attempt "to modernize but not to westernize", and also provides a comparative treatment of the terms, concepts and definitions used in the context of an ever-growing Arabic literary canon, along with consideration of how these relate to European modernist thought and of the controversies surrounding them among Arab critics. The second part explores some distinguishable morphological markers whose deployment involves a more or less radical distinction between, on the one hand, renovationist assumptions of cultural change as an uninterrupted process of historical continuity, and, on the other, innovationist assumptions based on discontinuity.

The first of these modernizing models, involving revivalist ideas from the age of *al-Nahdah*, laid the foundation for a *double dependency*: on the past, serving to compensate, through remembering and reviving, for lack of creativity; and on the European-American West, serving to compensate, through intellectual and technical adaptation and borrowing, for the failure to invent and innovate.

However, it is the second, counter-revivalist model that has assumed pride of place through the work of various poets, theorists and critics considered here. By the end of the eighties a self-generating, self-referential modernist theory had become the dominant critique.

The third part proffers the case for a new paradigm. Drawing on the arguments and views of numerous scholars, the emphasis here is that "difference" establishes a distinctive mode of autonomy vis-à-vis Western Eurocentric theory.

A criticism that is not a criticism of criticism cannot be taken seriously.

Adūnīs

(*Kalām al-bidāyāt* (“Textual Beginnings”), Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1989, p. 210)

By the late twentieth century, modernity lost much of its Europeanness, not least because it has become necessary to speak of modernities rather than any one particular mode of modernity.

Gerald Delanty

(*Modernity and Postmodernity*, London: Sage Publications, 2000, p. 154)

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For Olivia,

Suzannah,

Lena

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Notes on Methodology and Terminology

1. The present inquiry, carried out in the spirit of a root and branch critique and its implicit terms of reference, is not so much a history of modern Arabic literary theory as a critical essay in interpretation. The presentation of its material, and the case derived from it, comprise an attempt to provide a self-explanatory example of the mind and thinking of a cluster of writers and critics who have exhibited a new slant on modern theory in its capacity as cultural critique. Rather than compress such an unwieldy subject into a bare outline of trends and movements, I have sought to examine and shed light on arguments embedding an emergent concept of modernism that possesses both generic and historically specific existence, displaying as it does a dynamic “innovative” state of mind; one informed by a variety of timeframes whereby the past can no longer be conceived in its own terms, but rather in terms of the predominance of the present.

2. The interpretation offered here is proposed – to use al-Tawhīdi’s vibrant expression – as *kalām ‘alā kalām*, that is, discourse about discourse, theory about theory. Central to this perspective is a recognition that reality is mediated through language and is therefore discursive. Such a problematized area of inquiry takes, moreover, a further tack: one that both initiates the exercise and provides it with its tacit assumptions. It is precisely in this sense that *adab*, an extra-literary category, informs a possible theory of “innovation” as distinct from “renovation” modernism. This issue is the focus of the present inquiry, in conjunction with the all-embracing notion of interdisciplinarity. Indeed, cultural identity, which permeates the problematic of modernity, can only be understood in terms of

interdisciplinarity, this latter being a shorthand means of relocating identity by setting it within the larger context of theory. As such, cultural theory is relational and incomplete; not grounded in some essentialized past but rather permanently constructed and reconstructed within the paradigm of the present.

3. What characterizes a theory of “criticism of criticism” is the ubiquity of an all-encompassing critical activity that seeks to examine the act of writing itself, so subsuming not literary criticism and theory alone, but also genre-making processes (as revealed by viewing the various forms of writing in general and of fiction and poetry in particular) viewed as *reflexive* performances of critique in their own right. Such a critique will seek to conduct a sustained interrogation of established conventions and canons, placing them beneath the rubric of “secular engagement”: a theoretical space permitting a cogent and unrestricted examination of theory, literary criticism and literature.

4. The constituents of theory, questioned here from within a paradigm in motion that is ready and waiting to emerge, do not proceed as a succession of discrete components but rather overlap and blur into one another; and, as such, the limits of the modernist period under examination are extremely difficult to determine and isolate. From the narrowest viewpoint, however, the 1970s may be taken as a roughly defined starting point; and, within this context, the present study follows specific directions taken since the appearance of Adūnīs’s iconoclastic inquiry into the statics and dynamics of Arabic culture, on the part of critics and commentators who have begun to view literary criticism in the light of a new paradigmatic category

morphing, persistently, into an accomplished mode of cultural critique.

5. While this study is informed by Arabic and Western critical concepts and approaches, the emphasis is on the texts placed under scrutiny, these latter giving rise to a compendium of context-sensitive concepts, analytic insights and strategies that work, collectively, to supply the critical tools for use in interpretation. Only the negational terminology central to a sustained interrogation of the basic assumptions of modernism, comprising such notions as de-definition, refutation, abrogation and the rejection of closure and finality, can have the power to turn inward to examine theory's own dynamism, and so provide a viable instrument for reconstructing theory in the mode of oppositional criticism: a critiquing exercise in crisis diagnosis rather than a mere presentation of meanings in temporal sequences of events.

6. Set against the backdrop of a premised shift from the oppressive literalness of "trendism" (which is a corollary of the relentless ephemerality of fashion) to "innovative" modernism, the mode of representation here designates not a model for the relationship of a copy to a pre-existent Western origin (which is merely a symptom of the malfunctioning of a manipulable/manipulative system of global commodification and commodity fetishism), but, rather, a model embodying a negative reaction against literalism as a term opposed to innovationism and governed by the notion of emulation, with all the latter's pejorative connotations. As an interpretation of *innovation* modernism, then, this model is designed to aid an understanding of literary theory through replacement of its terms and axioms by more efficacious and perspicuous ones.

7. Like other problematic concepts, the pre-terminological concepts employed in the course of the present model-building are absolute until shaped by their contexts. And, like the tendencies suggested by these contexts, the premises they are designed to support work themselves as they proceed. As such, the pre-terminological concepts in question pervade a mode of becoming rather than a mode of being; pervade, that is, a problematic whose network of issues is held together by the central theme of “innovative” as distinct from “renovative” modernism. These issues are unsolved problems which maintain an open connotative flow and keep the debate moving.

8. The treatment of theory in this work is nominalistic. I have attempted to examine critically each writer’s sense of theory and to respect writers’ differences and similarities. Nevertheless, the texts under consideration operate collectively, and seek to contribute to the creation of an integrative nexus of concepts opening out one upon another.

9. Unless otherwise indicated, translations from Arabic in the text are my own.

PART ONE:

**Literary Theory as a Model:
A Structural Configuration**

I. Modern Arabic Literary Theory: The Matrix Concept

What follows is a study of modernism viewed as a model-building project within the context of Arabic literary theory, and proposing a testable hypothesis whose critical assumptions re-emphasize, through the logic of sustained exposition, the meaning and function of a cultural phenomenon working its way out into actuality. The matrix concept that organizes this trans-literary phenomenon, encompassing an array of interreferential, even interconnected theoretical orientations,¹ is set against the backdrop of a premised shift from renovative to innovative modernism; and it possesses a kind of entropy quality, proposing as it does a strictly tentative transition from theoretical randomness to cultural system.

In the context of this framework, what lies within the range of the phenomenon will eventually be tackled by posing certain theoretically relevant questions, thereby providing the effective means for refitting and reworking a cluster of interpretive procedures, heuristic devices and conceptual frames of reference. By virtue of this, a multiplicity of disputatious definitions of modernism, enclosed within their own self-appointed limits, and stemming from literary theory's complementary rather than contradictory narratives, can then be combined to form a single articulated definition standing in metonymic relationship to a paradigmatic theory of change.

From this position on, the notion of complementarity takes on a discursive² identity and initiates a process of articulating this complex, all-embracing definition, determining levels of inclusion and exclusion. The specificity of the notion of complementarity is inseparable from its articulation. Thus, rather than viewing modernism from the locus of an accomplished category, one may attempt to think it through, on the paradigmatic level, as *an investigatory work model³ proposing various*

definitions all of which possess a critical core: a model designed to produce a problematized representation of modern Arabic literary theory. This will not necessarily represent a fully accomplished project. It will, however, “provide devices which will simplify and aid understanding of the essential mechanisms involved”.⁴

Building an investigatory model will not, in other words, be viewed as grounded in a process whereby some conclusive meaning underlying literary theory is made evident, but rather as an alternative procedure whereby meaning is continually produced and accomplished; as formulating an emerging, open-ended paradigmatic unity. *The theoretical underpinning of this model-building grounded in a problem-oriented inquiry is thus beset, in a positive sense, by the very problems it seeks to explain.*

Taken together, the interrelated strategies that might help explicate this phenomenon will, in consequence, be conceived as possessing their own intrinsic logic and dynamic, while, at the same time, presenting a kind of self-propelling literary and cultural re-arrangement that epitomizes an attempt to trace the patterning of conflictual forces on Arabic literary texts – both critical and creative – and to bring to light many other related aspects of Arabic culture.

For this purpose, what has been said about such paradigmatic rupture, drawing on the arguments and views of Thomas Kuhn, becomes fully recognizable, and may be viewed as filling in the details of a process of teleological revision and intertheoretic change, whereby the notion of an older socio-cultural paradigm is finally overthrown, to be replaced by a new framework that enables us to grasp the significance (or meaning, or denotation) of the macro in terms of the micro and vice versa. As such, it clearly becomes necessary for the researcher, if he is to comprehend this process of *substitution*, to take into account the question of positionality.

If modern literary theory is not to be viewed, according to a standpoint frequently taken for granted, as basically derivative,⁵ but rather seen as representing its own distinctive theoretical formation and factual reality, then it follows that its discursive identity can be alternatively conceived as possessing a native base far firmer than some previous studies have ever conceded.

To return to the articulated definition, the particular framework of articulation would appear to suggest that its work model, intended to operate as a unit, will be encompassed by a paradigm-shifting system of meaning and value, reflecting an essentially contested concept of modernism: one over which a fundamental disagreement exists between proponents and opponents as to the precise limits of the perception of change involved. Moreover, when such a model-building of modern literary theory is viewed not merely as a process of literary and linguistic re-arrangement but as a symbolic act of self-image-reconstructing, then it further emerges as the site wherein a fractured tradition resides. To this end the unfolding of theory, composed of various taxonomies of socio-cultural crystallizations, literary forms, genres and sub-genres, can be adequately tackled free from any attempt to perceive it as a unidisciplinary monolith that is all things to all critics.

The admitted implication here is that the full connotations of this approximate term are elusive; they are contested rather than agreed and fluid rather than fixed. As such, its dynamics of diversity can be consciously read in and around the competing and often contradictory strands of theorizing, without any reductiveness or vagueness with respect to anomalies and exceptions that cannot be resolved within the parameters of a newly emergent paradigm, and without any attempt to stretch the critical term so as to address all the fundamental issues raised

by the growth of relativist trends and movements that appear to validate every possible theoretical position, however incongruous.

The crucial point, then, is that the ongoing process of modernism is being highlighted in terms of the constant reminder of a transformational progression: from the conventional concept of *naqd* – a literary term whose etymological formulation and range of application have always been occluded in the practice of judging and evaluating literary works, including classification by genre and structure – to the radical and far-reaching concept of *naqd*,⁶ which entails a process of refuting, invalidating and unsettling *the world of the text as well as the text of the world*.

Thus the performative function of literary criticism has, in this context, been elevated to the status of cultural critique:⁷ a paradigm shift whose philosophical and epistemological implications, epitomizing a succession of displacements and transformations of concept, suggest a crisis-boundedness of metatheory – *of a theory about making theory*. With the help of the above conceptualizations, oppositional thinking can now be seen as the matrix of critiquing, linking action frames of reference to culture and, in consequence, setting one thing against another: doubt against certitude, liberation against tyranny, truth against error, and so on.

This in turn pertains to the idea that, for an analysis to be called *naqd*,⁸ literary criticism must necessarily be viewed from within the locus of interdisciplinarity, conjoining, in consequence, literary and critical theories and all varieties of discourse. The proposition emerging from all of the above is that the concept of interdisciplinarity has, through an unrestricted progression of paradigm shifting, displaced the disciplinarity of conventional literary criticism. In other words, this notion of *permutation* will now permit us to predict the eventual demise of predicated boundaries between literary criticism and social science

disciplines, and the emergence of cultural critique as a multi-dimensional and specialized unidisciplinarity, imposing a consequent order and systematic nature of its own.

If we look back at the final decades of the twentieth century (1970 – 2000), we may see how the modern Arabic literary theory of the period indicates this paradigmatic shift from literary criticism to cultural critique – a process to which the word “supersession” may safely be applied. Not only is this supersession evident in literary theory’s uncompromisingly dismissive critique, which strives to dismantle the trappings of tradition in the course of subverting the tradition itself; it may also be discerned in a set of modern works produced by poets and writers of fiction whose reflexive practices provide key compositional principles, adjusting older understandings to new forms, refining their concepts and sharpening their tools.

Furthermore, although the category of “cultural critique” has not frequently been made explicit⁹ over the three decades in question, manifestations implying this loose-ended concept have been the subject of extensive and regular discussion.

The neatest and most outstanding formulation of this modernist and interdisciplinary position – a position susceptible to various assessments according to the stance of the analyst – remains that supplied in Adūnīs’s iconoclastic *Al-Thābit wa ’l-mutaḥawwil* (“The Static and Dynamic: A Study in Conformity and Creativity among the Arabs”).¹⁰ This seminal and overarching work has aroused considerable controversy, notably with respect to his views on Arabic tradition, seen as this is from an unflinchingly novel, indeed deliberately unsettling perspective. The emphasis here is on a theoretical approach grounded in oppositional technique, a radically secular literary criticism that is not, however, “literary” in any narrow sense of the word; and once this critical element

has been released beyond the old boundaries, the interpretive possibilities become still greater, pointing to a deliberate attempt to suspend, or dismantle, the established boundaries between literary criticism and one or more of the disciplines of epistemology, philosophy, sociology, linguistics, psychoanalysis and psychology. To this end new methods of trans-literary theory-making are actively invented, propounded and defended in works by Zaki Najīb Maḥmūd, Adūnīs, Kamāl Abū Dīb, Jāber ‘Aṣfūr, ‘Abdussalām Mseddi, Hishām Sharābi, Muḥammad Barrada, Aziz Al-Azmeh, Muḥammad ‘Ābed al-Jābiri, George Ṭarābīshi, Ṣabri Hāfiẓ, Abdullah L‘aroui, Muḥammad Bennīs, and many others.¹¹

These new methods, procedures and devices have attracted ceaseless attention in their turn, thereby establishing their more or less tentative legitimacy, or even provisional validity. In consequence, and as the sub-title of this study indicates, the crucial issue becomes that of a categorical shift in the concept of modern Arabic literary theory. This shift, where it is present, results not in any dissolution of the specific identity of literary criticism, or in any reduction of it to a mere adjunct of another social science discipline; rather it serves to initiate a process of discursive transformation, marked by a deliberate weakening of its established dividing lines and bearing the connotation of an emergent socio-cultural paradigm – without, however, necessarily imposing some form of external, monolithic unity.

From this further point of departure, it seems possible to argue that the creative achievements of Arab poets and writers of fiction may likewise come to be identified, in due course, as examples of theory-making, revealing the presence of reflexive, albeit stealthy, compositional premises, and, by extension, defining the basic critical assumptions of the process of writing itself.

Briefly, then, an articulated definition of modernism epitomizing theory as a hypothesis verifiable but not verified, and delving into its conceptual devices with a view to systematic exploration of a possible *poetics of method and procedure*, will have emphasized the following point: that literary theory, insistently and unremittingly radical as it is, is emerging as an ongoingly rigorous, ceaseless and open-ended¹² critique of the quintessence of Arabic culture, as this culture endeavours to engage, through free dialogue, the lingua franca of a universal movement of ideas, concepts, trends, “isms” and tools of thought.

All this says something about the problematic of open-endedness. By refusing textual *closure*¹³ and rejecting finality, modern Arabic literary theory is seen to have predicated the possibility of a sustained *disclosure*, proposing as it does a process of tentative, flexible and open-textured discursiveness that is as much a matter of becoming as of being.

In other words, the reasoning behind this discursively constructed investigatory model of theory can now proceed to examine the biaxial conception of being and becoming. Since the processes initiating “being” and “becoming” are inherently dynamic, standing in opposition to the notion of cultural fixity, references to regulated theoretical arrangements must not be allowed to lead on to a straitjacket of essentialism.

From here a further aspect of the foregoing critical point emerges. The attempt to encompass an ever-changing literary theory means that it becomes increasingly impossible to take a snapshot of a history of criticism at a given instant of time. The pairing of history and critique can easily be construed as proposing seemingly asymmetric, if not mutually exclusive categories, thus suggesting a level of irreconcilability. Each of these avowedly divergent disciplines presents itself as having a mind of its own. Yet the concept of articulating a critical account of literary theory proposes connective components, and is defined by them. It implies

operations whereby they are made to correspond to each other, presenting, in consequence, a blending of narrative and analysis, of chronology and thematology.¹⁴

Finally, one further way of putting this is to argue that, without the structuring intervention of critiquing, polemicizing and problematizing, any attempt to construct a reasoned account of literary theory, grounding a critical core, will be a mere agglomeration of isolated facts and concepts.

This modernist idea of intervening, interrupting or attempting to get in the way of the flow of chronology is rich in possibilities. One of its most distinguished representatives is Walter Benjamin, whose arguments lay a particular stress – in terms that can hardly be seen as less applicable to the present text than to their original context – on the following contention:

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it the way it was. It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.¹⁵

¹ In this regard, the notion of a relationship supplying the link between this set of theoretical crystallizations is seen to involve a species of interdisciplinarity; the relationship lying in those implications that are proposed by logic or by the meanings of the terms involved in constituting the phenomenon.

The phenomenon is thus seen as proposing a relationship of *tadāyuf* (a logical term borrowed from ‘Ali al-Sharīf al-Jurjāni), entailing the notion of interdependence and implying, in consequence, a possible link between mutually dependent conceptions. See ‘Ali al-Sharīf al-Jurjāni, *Kitāb al-ta’rīfāt* (“Book of Definitions”), Beirut: Maktabat Lubnān, 1969, p. 62.

² That is, attained through a series of inferences, proceeding by logical argument from premises to conclusion.

³ The meaning of building an investigatory work model, in the sense in which the idea is used here, has been made almost self-evident by an array of philosophers, sociologists and critics associated with the study of the humanities. One of these writers, G. Duncan Mitchell, has the following to say on the subject:

A model is used to assist explanation either by using an analogy showing similarities between the thing to be explained and the phenomenon which is known or better known, i.e. the model, or else by setting out a number of assumptions which are interrelated.

In the same vein, a corresponding concept of methodology can be identified, in this context, as being an implicit abstract indicating an explicit work model. Consider, for instance, the following comment on the concept of methodology as suggested by the same writer:

One of the uses of this term is to refer to the techniques a particular discipline uses to manipulate data and acquire knowledge.

See G. Duncan Mitchell (ed.), *A New Dictionary of Sociology*, London-Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979, pp. 125, 127.

The concept of the work model is similarly viewed by A.R. Lacy, as a “*theory intended to explain a given realm of phenomena, or a sort of picture intended to explain a theory by replacing its terms with more perspicuous ones*”. See A.R. Lacy, *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980, p. 136. Here and elsewhere, italics within quotations are mine unless otherwise stated.

⁴ See Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill, Bryan S. Turner, *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology*, London: Penguin, 2nd edition, 1988, p. 158.

⁵ See, for example, Walīd Ḥamārneh’s comment that “contemporary [literary] criticism in the Arab world remains basically derivative”. Walīd Ḥamārneh, in Michael Gorden, Martin Kreiswirth (eds.), *The John Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1994, p. 35.

⁶ The binarity of *naqd* versus *naqd* was initially developed in Kamāl Abū Dīb, “Fi ’l-fikr al-naqdi wa ’l-fikr al-naqdi” (“On Critical and Oppositional Thought”), seminar paper presented at a conference on *Cultural Creation and Change in Arab Societies at the End of the Twentieth Century*, held at the Center for Transregional Studies, Princeton University, 4-9 May, 1998.

⁷ Seyla Benhabib has made familiar the distinction between the domains of “critique” and “criticism”, a distinction suggesting an underlying symmetric relation of criticism and critique vis-à-vis the Arabic critical terms *naqd* and *naqḍ*. On the application and range of the concept of critique, see Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, pp. 9, 66-7, 112, 122, 153-4, 171-4. For a thorough examination of the existing link between the concepts of critique and literary criticism, see Robert Con Davis, Roland Schleifer, *Criticism and Culture: The Role of Critique in Modern Literary Theory*, London: Longman, 1991. The authors argue that “in the context of the history – the genealogy – of the concept of critique . . . the critical study of literature is a form, more or less self-conscious, of cultural critique”. As such, “literary criticism articulates and examines particular cultural norms”. (p. 47)

An early implication of this link can perhaps be discerned in the Egyptian modernist Ṭāha Ḥusain’s *Fi ’l-adab al-jāhili* (“On Jāhili Literature”) (Cairo: Lajnat al-Ta’lif wa ’l-Nashr, 1927). Salma Khadra Jayyusi, in her *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1977, I, 150), cites Pierre Cachia’s argument for the identification of such a link. According to Cachia, Ḥusain’s real achievement in the book (refuting as this does the automatically accepted idea that the ancestry of Jāhili poetry was pre-Islamic) lies in “the negation of past prejudices”. The point here, if one accepts Cachia’s claim as credible, is that Ḥusain may be plausibly viewed as having employed some of the analytic tools developed later by cultural critique (a term then virtually unknown) in order to reach his conclusion. See Pierre Cachia, *Ṭāha Ḥusain: His Place in the Egyptian Literary Renaissance*, London: Luzac and Co., 1956, p. 137.

⁸ The concept of *naqḍ*, the inner core of radical criticism, proposes a commutative relationship with Edward Said’s concept of the “oppositional”. Said invokes this shorthand rejectionist term to denote an autonomous category of criticism that operates in the mode of negation:

If criticism is reducible neither to a doctrine nor to a political position on a particular question, and if it is to be in the world and self-aware simultaneously, then its identity is in its difference from other cultural activities and from systems of thought or of method. In its suspicion of totalizing concepts, in its discontent with reified objects, in its impatience with

guilds, special interests, imperialized fiefdoms, and orthodox habits of mind, criticism is most itself . . .

In consequence:

Criticism must think of itself as life-enhancing and constitutively opposed to every form of tyranny, domination and abuse.

See Edward Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic*, London: Vintage Edition, 1991, p. 29.

⁹ For a relatively early reference to the term “cultural critique”, see Hishām Sharābi, *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988:

My hope is that Arab society will still become modern, will still be able to overcome disabling neopatriarchy and build an independent, progressive, and humane Arab world. *This cultural critique is a contribution to that effort.* (p. xi)

¹⁰ Beirut: Dār al-‘Awdah, 3 volumes, 1974, 1977, 1978.

¹¹ A degree of personal discrimination is inevitable in a study of this kind, if it is not to become too unwieldy.

¹² For a related work emphasizing the unavoidable centrality of open-endedness, as the negation of textual cessation, see Sāmi Swaydān, *Jusūr al-ḥadāthah al-mu‘allaqah* (“The Hanging Bridges of Modernity”), Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1997, p. 9.

¹³ I allude here to Nietzsche’s biaxial notion of closure/disclosure, implicit, as suggested in the following parable, in his conception of the absence of a sense of ending:

Not every end is the goal. The end of a melody is not its goal; and yet as long as the melody has not reached its end, it also hasn’t reached its goal. A parable.

See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, No. 204, cited in Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, paperback edition, 1993, p. 67.

¹⁴ For a critical account of theory that tends to pair history and critique, conflating chronology with thematology, see, for instance, Aziz Al-Azmeh, *Ibn Khaldūn in Modern Scholarship: A Study in Orientalism*, London: Third World Centre for Research and Publishing, 1981. This historicized account of cultural critique has

vigorously maintained the ascendancy of criticism, examining, as the book's cover note explains, "the performance and methods of orientalist discourse in the very wide array of fields which have taken an interest in Ibn Khaldūn: Arabic philology, sociology, historiography, philosophy and others".

¹⁵ Quoted in Michael P. Steinberg (ed.), *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996, p. 1.

II. Modernism: An Articulated Definition

In its common use as an operative term, modernism (*hadāthiyyah*) brings into play elements and factors of a polemical theory of change, belonging to a “paradigm in motion” – this last being a term coined by John Fekete in his work *The Critical Twilight: Explorations in the Ideology of Anglo-American Literary Theory from Eliot to McLuhan*.¹

In the social sciences, “paradigm” is derived from Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). For Kuhn scientists work within paradigms which are “general ways of seeing the world and which dictate what kind of scientific work should be done and what kinds of theory are acceptable”.² Described as “notoriously ambiguous” by G. Duncan Mitchell,³ the term has nevertheless become very widely used in literary criticism and cultural critique. Jeremy Hawthorn⁴ explains the substitutionality of the process of cultural change, suggested by the term, as follows: “Paradigm succeeds paradigm like the succession of blinkered generational views with which Philip Larkin’s poem ‘High Windows’ presents us, each seeming as if it represents an advance but each with its own inevitable limitations.”

The term “paradigm in motion” is, then, used here to imply (among other things) that the basic assumptions guiding Arabic literary theory can neither be dictated by, nor reduced to, a linear schema. Another way of making the same point is to foreground the temptation to resort to the concept of substitution (or supersession) as an analytical device whereby one literary/theoretical formation is seen to supplant another via the randomness of historical breaks, shifts and discontinuities.

However, the technical refinement of this use, as proposed in the various accounts foregrounded by Arab literary critics, is heterogeneous and disputational; so much so that one is confronted with the problem of

reformulating a workable checklist of the rival emergent and open-textured narratives – which may, however, be seen as complementary rather than contradictory stages in an ongoing process of articulating and definition-making.

Given this situation, an attempt to reconstruct a definition of the term, allowing for a broader but ultimately less discrepant framework of its joined constituents, should need no excuse. As might be expected, the basic approach will be marked not by “essentialism”, a conception that often elevates cultural difference to a canon of dichotomic essences, but by “perspectivism”, which lays a major emphasis on understanding culture through a process of theoretical de-differentiation in which the divine, mythical and privileged concept of “origin” is superseded by what Edward Said calls “the secular, humanly produced and ceaselessly re-examined notion of beginning”.⁵ The main task of this section is to initiate a thesis on modern Arabic literary theory (“modern” here referring to the period since 1970) by describing, defining and grappling with its basic assumptions through the “perspective” of a distinctive critical construction whose autonomous function does not, however, involve any equation of “autonomy” with such interchangeable notions as separateness, detachment or disconnectedness. A closer examination of the above postulation will then have to proceed along at least two lines of argument.

First, it will have to consider approaching modern Arabic cultural and literary theory as a system evolving through its own “internal” dynamics (dynamics, in ordinary dynamic systems, being the study of the way systems change).⁶ This does not imply any desire to play down external influences or to reduce them to insequential parameters; it simply suggests we should take full account of the infelicity of failing, repeatedly, to see the Arabic wood for the western trees.

Second, analysis of the concept of a modern Arabic theory of literature will assume that “theoretical traditions have an internal logic and relative autonomy vis-à-vis broader socio-political and cultural developments”.⁷ This standpoint is exemplified in a critique advanced by Adūnīs, in which he lays emphasis on this “internal logic”, even relative autonomy, of Arabic literary theory.

In his *An Introduction to Arab Poetics* Adūnīs argues that modernity, or “the new”, in Arabic poetry, “however unequivocal its formal break with the past may appear, is nevertheless identifiably Arab in character; it cannot be understood or evaluated within the context of French or English modernism, or according to their criteria, but must be seen in the context of *creativity* and judged by the standard of *innovation* particular to Arabic”.⁸ For this reason, modernity is, for him, inseparable from language; and, consequently, “the language of modernity can have no value independent of the history of the creative genius of the [Arabic] language”⁹ itself. In other words, a methodological examination (i.e. the undertaking of an inquiry into inquiry) of modern theory, as here hinted at, implies reworking through an “inside out” approach. Instead of tracing the influences of western modernist movements on Arabic writings about literary criticism, something which falls outside the scope of this study, I shall consider the steps necessary for the formulation of a categorical framework that will encompass the critical assumptions and methods

underlying a viable theory of “modernism”; one whose constituents are informed, on the one hand, by the patterning determinants of Arabic culture’s receptivity¹⁰ to intrinsic needs for change, and, on the other, by the paradigms that tend, as with any cultural belief system, to conform to literary tradition¹¹ and cling to the past. Employment of a categorical framework, determined by its purpose¹² and stated in terms of the means-consequence relation, yet not uncharacterized by scepticism, will involve, somewhere along the line, a “filtering” process of inclusion/exclusion whereby the various definitions, postulates and axioms of literary theory to which the concept of modernity broadly refers can be either suspended or confirmed. With this in mind, an attempt to re-examine a multiplicity of basic assumptions and approximate critical presuppositions that lie at the heart of modernism, to re-arrange their position in relation to the complexity of the notion of cultural change and accord them their proper status as relevant, well-grounded instances within the history of Arabic sense and sensibility, can now open up in a number of directions.

¹ London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977. See Raymond Williams’ foreword, p. xiii.

This concept of viewing cultural change as a continual process of substitution, whereby one paradigm displaces another, is clearly articulated in Adūnīs’s poem “Qabr min ajl New York” (“A Grave for New York”). Consider, for instance, the following lines:

Thus I end all rules,
and for each moment I make up its rule.
Thus I advance, but do not proceed,
and when I proceed I do not return.

(See *Al-Athār al-kāmilah* [“Complete Works”], Beirut: Dār al-‘Awdah, 1971, vol. 2, p. 671.)

The question of cultural modernity and change is also the central theme of *Al-Thābit wa ’l-mutaḥawwil* (“The Static and Dynamic: A Study in Conformity and

Creativity among the Arabs”), Adūnīs’s seminal work, cited above. Adūnīs’s iconoclastic attitude towards Arab cultural heritage, and the leading role he plays in modern Arabic poetry and literary theory, have, as said, aroused much controversy. There is, however, no doubt as to the profound influence of “his ideas about innovation and modernity on a whole generation of poets” (and also on literary and cultural critics). See Salma Khadra Jayyusi (ed.), *Modern Arabic Poetry: An Anthology*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1987, especially pp. 17-28 and 137.

² See Abercrombie, Hill and Turner, *op. cit.*

³ Mitchell, *op. cit.*

⁴ Jeremy Hawthorn, *A Concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*, London: Edward Arnold, 1992.

⁵ Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intentions and Methods*, London: Granta Books, 1985 edition, p. xix.

For an analysis that tends to highlight the relevance of Arabic language and Arab society to the concept of “origin” in modern literary theory, consider the following conclusion in Adūnīs, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, trans. from Arabic by Catherine Cobham, London: Sāqi Books, 1990: “The Arabic language and Arab society are not two primitive plants but have firm roots reaching deep into history; it is these roots which provide the context for and the means of achieving modernity. Thus a knowledge of the origins of their ‘ancient’ forms, the changes they underwent and the problems they encountered, especially with regard to the mysteries of the particular genius of the language, is essential to an understanding of the ‘modern’. For an Arab to be truly modern his writing must glow like a flame which rises from the fire of the ancient, but at the same time is entirely new.” (p. 101)

⁶ See A. Alvarez, *Night: An Exploration of Night Life, Night Language, Sleep and Dreams*, London: Vintage, 1990, p. 148.

⁷ Nicos Mouzelis, *Sociological Theory: What Went Wrong?*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 10.

⁸ Adūnīs, *Introduction to Arab Poetics*, p. 100.

⁹ *Ibid.* Emphasis on the Arabic language has always been central to Arabic theory of literature. See Ḥalīm Barakāt’s appraisal: “At the centre of Arab artistic expression is language. The word constitutes the most celebrated element not only in literature but

also of music, painting, architecture, and even sculpture in certain instances. Numerous scholars have been prompted to draw attention to the special influence that the Arabic language has on Arabs. For example, Philip Hitti has asserted that, 'no people in the world, perhaps, manifest such enthusiastic admiration for literary expression and are so moved by the word spoken or written, as the Arabs.' Similarly, the Palestinian artist Kamāl Bullāṭa writes that traditionally, 'Arab creativity revolved around the word: the word as spoken revelation and as visible image. Poetry, being the elixir of language, was the natural art form in which Arabs excelled. On the visual plane, the arabesque became the spiral product of Arabic.'" (Ḥalīm Barakāt, *The Arab World: Society, Culture and State*, London: University of California Press, 1993, p. 206.)

¹⁰ *Receptivity* is here synonymized with *relevancy*. The conceptual bridge linking the two terms can be seen to reflect modern literary theory's ability to adopt, adapt and relativize. For an example on this point, see Muḥammad al-Nuwayhi, *Qaḍiyyat al-shi'r al-jadīd* ("The Issue of New Poetry"), Cairo: Ma'had al-Dirāsāt al-'Arabiyyah al-'Āliyah, 1964.

S. Moreh (in *Modern Arabic Poetry (1800-1970)*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976) gives the following account of al-Nuwayhi's *wilful interaction* with the poetics of T.S. Eliot: "In order to prove its necessity, al-Nuwayhi based his book on T.S. Eliot's article 'The Music of Poetry' and discussed the influence of this great poet and critic on modern Arabic poetry . . . ". Consequently: "Al-Nuwayhi tried to find to what extent Eliot's ideas are *relevant* to the new form." (pp. 263-5)

¹¹ See, for instance, Nāzik al-Malā'ika, *Qadāya 'l-shi'r al-mu'āṣir* ("The Issues of Contemporary Poetry"), Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1962, p. 300, where she rejects the use of western methodology and terminology in modern Arabic literary criticism.

¹² A categorical framework is deployed (in this context) as a method of reasoning, justified by its validity; as a teleological process without a pre-judged end; and as an overall approach to the study of the boundaries of cultural and literary inquiry.

1. On the Infelicity of Misreading Trendism for Modernism

There are three *confusables* that are related in meaning and are frequently, in practice, grouped together beneath the rubric of correspondence and resemblance: namely *modernism*, *modernity* and *modernization*. A proper definition of “modernism”, which is a catch-all term fraught with vagueness and characterized by blurred edges, must accordingly grapple with each of these terms, whose boundaries of cultural and literary inquiry almost but not quite overlap.

Since the 1970s¹ the concept of *modernism* has come to embody, among other things, an aesthetic response to the failings² of Arab projects of *modernity*, stemming from processes of *modernization* whereby progress depends on a variety of structural, economic and social transformations. Moreover, viewed from the perspective of Ogburn’s notion of *cultural lag*,³ the term proffered by him to trace the outline of a condition whereby material changes in the West move faster than the cultural assumptions that regulate how these changes are viewed, modern Arabic cultural critique may be seen to have progressed at a much faster pace than that of the material changes for which it has sought to act as stimulus and source of inspiration.

This might be stated in another way. Having come into existence within the context of this alternative model, a model embedding the notion of “*cultural lag*” *in reverse*, Arab modernism may be viewed as the expression of a timeless and unfettered human impulse: the phenomenon, constant and unvarying, of a universal yearning of the human spirit to disrupt, if not violate, an uninterrupted continuance of domain-reinforcing literary canon and cultural tradition.

Yet, having failed to found a significant social force to carry it through, the critique of modernity has effectively taken on the aspect of a

psychodrama in which critiquers are foregrounded as performing actors; that is to say, as patients required to act some part in a drama (of change), constructed with special reference to the relevant symptoms or problems, while the other parts are taken by members of a therapeutic team.⁴ In other words, the concept of modernity has been transformed into a “problematic”⁵ whose therapeutic team of cultural theorists and critics is left with the serious task of re-inventing the hallmarks of cultural “newness”.

In his work *Arab Intellectuals and Heritage*,⁶ George Ṭarābīshi, a literary critic turned psychotherapist⁷ and cultural analyst, has initiated an inquiry into what he boldly terms “Arab collective neurosis”⁸ vis-à-vis the project of modernity. His attempt to apply certain forms of Freudian-oriented⁹ concepts, in combination with other, related methodologies, suggests a simplified form of psychodrama in which a linear narrative¹⁰ of its own narrator is persistently introduced – the consequence being an incapacity, in this narrator, to empathize with any of the writers whose works he sets out to criticize.

This collective form of “cultural” psychodrama, required to act as a critical tool, is apparently designed to facilitate Ṭarābīshi’s endeavour to exorcise, with near unerring logic, some of the critical writings of a set of modernist Arab intellectuals whom he regards as active agents, or even cultural catalysts.

In a positive sense now, his critique is based on two divergent methods of analysis: namely “application” and “re-invention”.¹¹ The distinction between these two conceptual terms, as put forward by Ṭarābīshi, implies an intrinsic difference in reasoning. In attempting to re-appropriate the language of psychoanalysis from literal interpretation, he argues that, as a critic of culture, his role is to “re-write” Freudian analytical theory; i.e. to domesticate it into an alternative context of

relevancy, in opposition to any arbitrary “application”¹² of its distinguishing postulates and premises.

It follows from this anti-essentialist and anti-foundationalist position – one shared by the most prominent and productive critics associated with the modernist movement in Arabic literature – that a distinction within, rather than between, two trajectories can now be safely established in the hope of discerning some pattern in a tumultuous flow of ideas. These trajectories, whose underlying logic suggests a binarity of opposites, are *trendism* and *modernism*. Before embarking on a more detailed examination of the internally incorrigible differences between these seemingly not dissimilar notions (sufficiently slippery, indeed, to be used often interchangeably), let us emphasize that a certain ambiguity exists as to the meaning of the word *trendism*. It has been coined with reference to an *ephemeral category*¹³ that must not be considered as having a free-standing, independent construction – being bound, on the contrary, to a continuously changing concept of fashion and to what is emphatically not literature in the full sense.

The central issue, then, is to identify trendism – which involves a *universalizing catalysis* dominated by short-lived European styles and ideas – as a concept encompassing the very notion of *cultural mimicry*. Based on *uncritical adherence to fashion*, it is a concept whose influence, dominatory, restructuring and pervasive, continues to insinuate itself into the context of a world-system perspective, and is highlighted by the claim, often reiterated in the literature of post-colonial studies, that Europe has “constructed itself as *modern*, and constructed the non-European as *traditional, static, pre-historical*”.¹⁴ A consequence of this last is the further claim that “the imposition of European models of historical change has become the tool by which these societies are denied any internal dynamic or capacity for development”.¹⁵ If this interpretation

is plausible, then one valid concept of modernism – namely, that of the historical model of the early twentieth-century European movement in literature and culture that sought to break with the conventions of the nineteenth century – can be singled out as the sole true, legitimate and wholly well-grounded paradigm, embedding *the idea of changelessly willing a change*.¹⁶

What all this amounts to in practice is that viewing modernism from the perspective of the *mimicking consumer*,¹⁷ i.e. viewing culture, at the receiving end, as something slavishly attempting to reproduce an *unrepeatable, even inimitable model of transformation* based on the *essentialist notion of sacred origin*, is to regard modernism, in this *pre-fixed and commodified condition of being*, as a more or less straightforward *trendism*.

It is not, therefore, surprising that trendism is often misconstrued as modernism, rather than being seen for what it is, as a symptom of the malaise it illuminates; or that it is postulated as “derivative”¹⁸ and secondary, a by-product of a sole authentic modernism, i.e. as an epiphenomenon, an added accompaniment to a contextless process of modernization whereby culture is conceived as merely *indulging in intellectual borrowing from external sources without ever undergoing a course of relativizing and reformulating from within*.

The classic statement of this position is found in M.M. Badawi’s *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry*,¹⁹ where trendism appears, tellingly, to masquerade as modernism. Some of Badawi’s remarks in this connection undoubtedly provide ammunition for critics who dismiss modernism as being merely the prime symbol of a mindless conformity to literary fashion. He specifically uses the word “old-fashioned”, whose contextual meaning proposes, in his analysis, a more or less trendist rather than modernist connotation:

Arab poets turned to the poetry of T.S. Eliot in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when it was already beginning to look old-fashioned, having in the meantime been succeeded by the work of the generation of Auden and Philip Larkin.²⁰

However, reflection suggests that his assertive conclusion has been reached in unexpected fashion:

In fact, to the informed reader, the excitement of discovery which was felt by many Arab poets and critics in the 1950s in the work of Eliot seemed somewhat naïve and certainly provincial.²¹

The implication of this value-judgmental comment is that Eliot's poetics of modernism have not been allowed to transcend their cultural and historical circumstance so as to attain a new domain of contextuality. Rather than being re-defined from the viewpoint of Arabic culture's own processes of relevancy and receptivity, Eliot is viewed merely in terms of the fashion-conscious poetics of trendism: as a prime example of the *démodé* poet, *out of fashion, outmoded and outdated*.

All this leads, in effect, to the following conclusion: that a misreading of trendism for modernism seems to underemphasize the tendency of modern literary theory to approach culture as a complex and open-textured process of change evolving through its own internal dynamics, and, as such, ignores the kind of anti-essentialist assumptions put forward by a variety of competing critics and historians of ideas. From this point of view Walter Burkert is probably right when he argues that "the mere fact of [cultural] borrowing should only provide a *starting point for closer interpretation*", and that "the form of selection and

adaptation, of reworking and refitting to a new system is revealing and interesting in each case".²²

¹ The period of the 1970s and 1980s is marked by the emergence of innovative versus renovative modernism, and has coincided with what Hishām Sharābi describes as "the emergence of scholarly and critical works forming the radical critique of neopatriarchy". See Sharābi, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

² For a theoretical elaboration on the failure of Arab literary and cultural critics to establish direct linkages between the aesthetic, the historical and the social strands in the critique of modernism, see Adūnīs, "Ḥawla ma'zaq al-ḥadāthah fi 'l-mujtama' al-'Arabi" ("On the Predicament of Modernity in Arab Society"), a paper presented at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, in October 1998.

³ Ogburn is specifically concerned with the problem of incongruity between western cultural changes and western economic (and technical) changes. The reformulated premise here is that, while economic changes within western culture occur before cultural norms can be introduced to control their use, the reverse is true regarding modernization in Arabic culture. See W.F. Ogburn, *On Culture and Social Change*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950, pp. 86-95.

⁴ See Charles Rycroft, *A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, London: Penguin Books, 2nd ed., 1995, p. 144.

⁵ As a literary term "problematic" (*ishkāliyyah*) entered the vocabulary of modern Arabic criticism through Muṭā' Ṣafadi's collection of short stories *Ashbāḥ Abtāl* ("Phantomlike Heroes"), Beirut: Dār al-Fajr al-Jadīd, 1959. In his introduction to the collection, entitled "Problematic Fiction" (pp. 7-14), Ṣafadi rejected Socialist Realism's typification of the character in fiction, which, he emphasized, deprives the protagonist of the freedom of "becoming", i.e. the freedom to respond to social and historical circumstances.

According to the *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory* (ed. Irena R. Makaryk, Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 1997, pp. 615-6): "The term [problematic], in the strict definition given it by French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, has had wide currency in politically committed literary theory and criticism since the early 1970s."

Following John Fekete, the term is used in this study to denote a “theoretical framework within which complexes of problems are structural, and *single problems* acquire density, meaning and significance”. See Fekete, *op. cit.*, pp. 217-8.

⁶ *Al-Muthaqqafūn al-‘Arab wa ‘l-turāth*, London: Riad Al-Rayess Books, 1991. The book is based on an implicit psychodramatic presentation, played out here as a tacit form of psychotherapy. For further analysis tending to connect the *theoretical* and the *theatrical*, see Aziz Al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities*, London and New York: Verso, 1993, pp. 7-10, in which “Islamic culture takes on the aspect of a psychodrama”.

The perspective of psychodramatizing Arabic and Islamic cultures appears to be synonymous with Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective whereby people are viewed as social actors and social life as theatre. Shakespeare writes, in *As You Like It*:

All the world’s a stage,

And all the men and women merely players;

They have their exits and their entrances;

And one man in his time plays many parts. (Act II, Scene VII)

See E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1981, p. 8.

⁷ Ibn Rushd (1126-98), the Arab philosopher, jurist and physician revived in the present as a progenitor of modernity, may be regarded as an early exponent of medical terms like “patient”, “remedy” and “antidote” in a philosophical text. As such, certain of Ibn Rushd’s writings have psychosomatic connotations; they assume, that is to say, that a person consists of a body (*soma*) and a mind (*psyche*). In this narrow sense, reference to “cultural” psychotherapy is made possible within the context of Ṭarābīshi’s attempt to bring out the cultural illnesses and symptoms affecting Arab intellectuals under the sway of modernist thought. See, for example, Ibn Rushd, *Tahāfut al-tahāfut* (“The Incoherence of Incoherence”), ed. M. ‘Ābed al-Jābirī, Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Wiḥdah al-‘Arabiyyah, 1998, pp. 378-9.

⁸ This is the sub-title of Ṭarābīshi’s book.

⁹ The application is hardly surprising, given that Ṭarābīshi is the sole translator of Freud’s complete works into Arabic.

¹⁰ The notion of linearity is intended to suggest a distinctly ordered succession of concepts “squeezed into a single point of linear representation”. See Oswald Ducrot, Tzvetan Todorov, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Sciences of Language*, trans. from French by Catherine Porter, Oxford: Blackwell, 1981, p. 107.

¹¹ Ṭarābīshi, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

¹² Charles Rycroft is probably right when he says: “Unfortunately ideas cannot be transported bodily from one language to another simply by translating them word by word, and it possibly has to be envisaged that something significant happens to *an idea or a theory* when it is translated into another language.” See Rycroft, *op. cit.*, p. xiv.

¹³ On the connection between fashion and ephemerality, see the closing sentences of Adūnīs’s *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, where he writes that “fashion grows old from the moment it is born, while creativity is ageless”. (pp. 101-2)

¹⁴ See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, London: Routledge, 1988, p. 145.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ As an exclusive concept whose validity can be verified only by reference to western culture, the idea of changelessly willing a change is coterminous with Eurocentric thinking. Consider, for example, the following assertion by Erich Neumann: “Western culture, whose crisis we are experiencing today, *differs from all others known to us* in that, although a continuum, it finds itself in *continual process of change*, even if the degree of change is not always equally apparent.” (Erich Neumann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, Princeton: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 3rd printing, 1973, p. 381.)

¹⁷ For an early discussion of cultural mimicry, see Albert Hourani, *Syria and Lebanon*, London: Oxford University Press, 1946, p. 70. “To be a Levantine,” he observes, “is to live in two worlds or more at once, without belonging to either; to be able to go through the external forms which indicate the possession of a certain nationality, religion or culture, without actually possessing it. It is no longer to have a standard of values of one’s own, not to be able to *create but only able to imitate*; and so not even to imitate correctly since that also needs a certain originality. It is to belong to no community and to possess nothing of one’s own. It reveals itself in

lostness, pretentiousness, cynicism and despair.” (Quoted in Fu’ād ‘Ajami, *The Arab Predicament*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 177.)

¹⁸ On this point see Walīd Ḥamārneh’s article “Arabic Theory and Criticism”, in Gordon and Kreiswirth, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-5. The article concludes with the assertion that “contemporary criticism in the Arab world remains basically *derivative*”.

¹⁹ Published Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975.

²⁰ Badawi, *ibid.*, p. 263. Unsurprisingly, Philip Larkin remains almost unknown in the Arab world, despite Arab interest in Anglo-American poetry from early on. He is, above all, “a very English poet, interested in the local feel . . .” See David Daiches, Malcolm Bradbury, Eric Mottram (eds.), *The Avenel Companion to English and American Literature*, New York: Avenel Books, 1981, p. 304.

²¹ Badawi, *op. cit.*, p. 263. “Provincial”, in this context, is an alternative term for “unsophisticated”.

²² Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age*, trans. from German by Margaret E. Pinder and Walter Burkert, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2nd printing, 1995, p. 7.

2. On the Interchangeability of Modernity and Modernism

The terms “modernity” (*ḥadāthah*) and modernism (*ḥadāthiyyah*) have been deployed as interchangeable categories in Arabic literary criticism, albeit with a discernible difference of emphasis. Viewed historically against the mainstream experience of Arabic literature, this optical illusion becomes evident: the concepts of modernity and modernism have been presented as synonymous, interchangeable or commutative, the two seemingly not dissimilar terms being viewed as each identifiable with the other.

Viewing this problem-oriented question from such an angle, the gist of the argument for distinguishing between modernism and its misleadingly symmetric conceptual double, modernity, is best appreciated by reference to the cultural critique set out in Hishām Sharābi’s work *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society*, referred to above.¹ This theory as to the causes underlying the abnormal form assumed by modernization in Arab society more or less demonstrates the implications of misreading modernity for modernism and vice versa. Sharābi is concerned, from the outset, to stress that the word “modernity” is “misused and overused by both western social science and media” and that it has in consequence “lost its proper signification”. For this reason, Sharābi himself uses it, in the context of Arab culture and society, to imply not “a model to aspire to or an example to imitate”, but rather a “mode of being” grounded in the essential characteristics of “modernized consciousness”.²

These characteristics he explains by reference to “the tendency to convert models into fetishes”, observable within Arab society “in the way, for example, education or dress or artistic production even socialism are approached and appropriated as models and guides”. This tendency

towards irrational reverence embodies, he hastens to add, “two related and mutually reinforcing tendencies, imitation and passivity”. For “ideas, actions, values, or institutions” are “validated (or invalidated) not by criticism but by reference to a model”. The upshot, with regard to this “fetishized modernism”, is “a category which imposes itself directly, without mediation or critical self-consciousness. It governs all kinds of activities, including creative ones”, such as “modern Arabic poetry”.³

If we now turn to a critical examination of modernism as defined by Sharābi – as “modernity’s expression in art, literature, philosophy and all forms of creative endeavour” – we may note how, within the context of current Arabic literary writings (and notably modern poetry), the concept of “modernism” is proposed as a discernible category, distinct from “modernity”, which is aptly described by Sharābi as “the consciousness appropriate to [modernism]”.⁴

The notion of establishing categorical boundaries between modernism and modernity, as propounded by Sharābi, bears both ongoing reflection generally and a constant examination of certain selected aspects. It is not that the notion in question constitutes anything especially profound as far as modern Arabic literary theory is concerned. Rather, the ultimate implication of this process of differentiation (delimiting points of convergence and divergence) is that it will serve to reveal the teleologically oriented explanations encompassing a cluster of methods and approaches that bring to light the predicament of modernism. Consider, for instance, a passage by Yūsuf al-Khāl (poet, exponent of modernity and founder, in 1957, of the literary periodical *Shi‘r*, one of the most influential publications in the Arab world), in which he points out Arabic culture’s state of deadlock vis-à-vis the project of modernization. This project is viewed by al-Khāl as a paradigmatic monolith fusing

modernism with modernity, the consciousness appropriate to modernism. In the light of all this, he writes as follows:

The contradiction of being a form inside the modern world and an essence outside it compels us to confront the problems of the presence of an old society in a modern world and the problems of the presence of a modern world in an old society.⁵

It is not difficult to provide further qualifying examples that suggest, implicitly, the interchangeability of these interconnected critical terms. One such example may be found in the writings of Elias Khūry, in which modernity is conceived as a labour of negation – or, to borrow Sharābi's term, "a mode of being". Khūry writes:

The idea of modernity in contemporary Arabic culture is posited as a problematic of its own. It is not a copy of western modernity but is an Arab attempt to formulate this term within the context of a cultural domain which has its own historical particularism, and lives the problems emanating from the concept of *nahḍah* [renaissance, or revival].⁶ This is why Arab modernity has been foregrounded as a revivalist enterprise. Having conjoined the splinters of cultural, social and political fragmentation, modernity can be presented as an attempt to surpass this fragmentation by means of moving forward.⁷

In a later passage Khūry expresses this view more dramatically:

For the Arabs, whose legitimacy, based on the past, has been lost, modernity can be seen as a quest for future legitimacy in a world

forcibly unified and hegemonized by western capitalism. In this world the peripheries are banished and pushed to the edge of history's memory, only to be restituted as a folkloric object, as a benchmark attesting to the superiority of the West and its ability to negate, if not annihilate, the category of the "other" . . .

From this specific perspective, Khūry now re-affirms that

seeking legitimacy is, then, an attempt to respond to the threat of annihilation and to stop self-destruction through acceptance of part of it.⁸

Modernity is, therefore, posited here as a mode of being; it invokes the embedded fear and anxiety about, and the complexity of, what we call – often too summarily – a threatened cultural identity. For this reason the cultural synthesis stemming from the historical encounter between the Arabs and the West becomes pivotal for re-thinking the construction of cultural identity as an unceasing process – a matter of becoming as much as of being. The first seemingly viable Arab cultural synthesis of this kind is that illustrated by *al-Nahḍah*, dating back, as said, to the second half of the nineteenth century and early years of the twentieth. Khūry, however, rejects the notion of such a synthesis of Arabic literary and cultural revival, maintaining that the revival in question was in fact more successful in inspiring Arab self-awareness than in creating anything in terms of coherent intellectual system. As such, the initiative for bringing about a genuine change has, it would seem, passed to the exponents of a radical form of modernism, one that upholds the concept of substitution as opposed to evolution.⁹ Thereby, cultural identity is being ceaselessly made and re-made through the substitution of literary and intellectual

innovation for the renovation reflected in the revivalist conception promoted by *al-Nahḍah*.

Viewed from within the context of modernism, cultural identity can – if we are to be specific – no longer be viewed as a static or pre-given entity, but rather as a complex phenomenon symbolizing a sustained struggle to redefine the essentialist elements posited in the “universal”, the concept at the heart of a Eurocentrist model, by attempting to deterritorialize it.¹⁰ The methods and procedures implied by such deterritorialization, leading to a grounding and reshaping of Arabic literary theory, will be tackled at a later stage.

It might, of course, be argued that a sharply restricted or “exact” definition underpinned by something more than mere arbitrary judgement, a definition marked by a thorough consideration of the differences distinguishing modernity from modernism, is impractical, even artificial. Yet, if one accepts Sharābi’s suggested definition of modernity (“the consciousness appropriate to [modernism]”) as viable and applicable to the Arabic cultural context, then the theoretical constructs whereby the term “modernity” might bear the connotation of an all-embracing project of change will transform modernity into a teleologically oriented concept presenting itself as an ideology. In other words, modernity (*ḥadāthah*), described in terms of purpose and function, has here been turned into modernism (*ḥadāthiyyah*), a category professing an “ism” (or “yah”, to give the corresponding Arabic particle of relation).¹¹

Viewed, in this way, as a teleology, modernism is like any other concept: it cannot be predicated as an abstraction existing for its own sake, but rather assumes meaning in relation to a goal; and it is through paradigmatic change that this goal can be achieved. Expressed in these terms, though, it is hard not to think of “teleological” modernism as

proposing a defined conclusion – a clearly fixed cultural identity, or “true identity”.¹²

One way of unravelling this “true identity” is to search out, and redefine, its “appropriate consciousness”, i.e., its substratum of truth, its inner core. Writing on the most recent phase in the development of modern Arabic poetry, M.M. Badawi indicates this inner core, in which “the poet has become once again identified with his own people, but he is no longer the spokesman.¹³ he is the hero who in his personal salvation seeks the salvation of his people”.¹⁴ This identification with a fixed and all-encompassing emblematic cultural identity represents a particular ideological form often leading, he suggests, to “excessive solemnity and hollow self-dramatization¹⁵ in contemporary Arabic poetry”. But, he asserts, it also explains “why in its best examples, the spiritual experience, which is the poem, becomes at once a political and a cultural comment”.¹⁶

In the light of the above, it would seem that the voluntaristic¹⁷ element in modernism – whereby the intentions and motives of the cultural actor (whether modernist poet or theoretician) are assumed to be voluntary, determined not merely by economic and social factors but more fundamentally by ontological ones – should not be underemphasized. This is perfectly compatible with Adūnīs’s theoretical formulation epitomizing what is apparently an ontological substratum:¹⁸

The progress of society is not represented by economic and social renewal, but more fundamentally by the liberation of the suppressed elements beneath and beyond the socio-economic structure, in such a way that human beings at their freest and most responsive become both the pivot and the goal.¹⁹

To conclude, the interchangeability of modernity and modernism is especially strongly evident in most Arab writings on cultural change. The term “modernity” is in fact used (or misused) by most Arab critics as an umbrella concept denoting the modernism of literary movements and trends whose workings are in fact biaxial: involving, on the one hand, the *hadāthah* or *hadāthiyyah* movement that centred around the *Shi‘r* journal, and, on the other, the general trend of modernization whereby the concept of newness has been adapted, reworked and refitted to the temporality and territoriality of a native system of innovation, if not renovation.

Amid this all-encompassing convergence of modernity and modernism, Adūnīs has noted that Arab poetic modernity is central to many disciplines. And if this modernity is

partly based on the liberation of what has been suppressed – that is, on the expression of desire – and on everything that undermines the existing repressive norms and values, and transcends them, then ideological concepts like “authenticity”, “roots”, “heritage”, “renaissance”, and “identity” take on different meanings.²⁰

This has resulted, finally, in an anti-closure, an open-ended modernism:

Traditional notions of the continuous, the coherent, the one, the complete, are replaced by the interrupted, the confused, the plural, the incomplete, implying that the relationship between words and things is constantly changing: that is, there is always a gap between them which saying or writing the words cannot fill. This unbridgeable gap means that the questions “What is knowledge?”, “What is truth?”, “What is poetry?”, remain open, that knowledge is never complete and that truth is a continuing search.²¹

These open-ended questions suggest at least something of what is at stake in the process of articulating an Adūnīsian-oriented definition of modernity/modernism, and why his model has had such a huge impact on literary theory for more than three decades. The perspective informing this definition is sharply distinct from other modernist conceptions in that, in contrast to the ethnocentrist/Eurocentrist models, it is conceived as taking place by continuously reflecting on, and alluding to, the past and the instantaneous, through the epistemological lens of an extended present. As such, Adūnīs's brief discussion is revealing. He takes the opportunity, in the discussion of Arab "Poetics and Modernity", to explain that there is at bottom a valid modernist model unfailingly relevant by virtue of its being insistently open-ended; a model that epitomizes a paradigm in motion by means of ceaselessly unfolding itself. If ethnocentric/Eurocentric models of transformation are concerned with the renovative, that of Adūnīs is informed by the innovative.

¹ The term "cultural critique" is employed by Sharābi as an omnibus category, emphasizing the discipline of sociology as an essential component of the study of culture, which is seen, in turn, as an interdisciplinary intellectual pursuit. This pursuit is presented not as a simple seamless garment but rather as a complex problematic stressing the interconnectedness of literature and the humanities.

² Sharābi, *op. cit.*, p. x. The term "mode of being" has obvious ontological connotations. Sharābi does not, however, propose it with a view to suggesting philosophical components concerned with the study of existence itself.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-5. Sharābi's reference to "modern Arabic poetry" implicitly rejects the notion of translating European poetry into Arabic – something he takes to imply, broadly, "neopatriarchal outlook and practice". This form of neopatriarchy is, he explains, exemplified by the poetry journal *Shi'r* (Beirut, 1957-63) and the movement that centred around it. This movement has, he continues disapprovingly, "introduced in Arabic translation T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Saint John Perse, Eric Maria Rilke, and

René Char among others". (*Ibid.*, p. 159.) This remark would appear to imply an embedded anti-modern, even essentialist position.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-8. Commenting on Marshal Berman's seminal work on modernity, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), in which the American sociologist identifies modernity as being "a uniquely European phenomenon", Sharābi remarks that "this is a fact which had devastating existential consequences for the non-modern world".

The implication of this problem has been tackled with care in Al-Azmeh, *op. cit.* Al-Azmeh argues that there are many modernities and not simply one.

⁵ *Al-Ḥadāthah fī 'l-shi'r* ("Modernity in Poetry"), Beirut: Dār al-Ṭalī'ah, 1978, pp. 5-6.

⁶ This term was "first used by Jurji Zaydān and others to describe the process of Arabic literary and cultural renewal which occurred during the second half of the nineteenth, and early years of the twentieth centuries. It was associated with a number of interrelated factors, both political and intellectual . . . On the intellectual level [it included] the consequent attempts by Arab intellectuals to reassess the relationship between Europe and the Arab . . . world". See Julie Scott Meisami, Paul Starkey (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, volume 2, London and New York: Routledge, 1998. For a more relevant assessment of *al-Nahḍah*, as seen from within the framework of the present analysis, see Adūnīs, *Sadmat al-ḥadāthah* ("The Shock of Modernity"), Beirut: Dār al-'Awdah, 1978.

⁷ See Elias Khūry, *Al-Dhākīrah al-mafqūdah* ("Lost Memory"), Beirut: Dār Ibn Rushd, 1982, p. 25.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ For an illustration of the difference between these two contrasting models of transformation, evolution and substitution, see Muḥammad Bennīs, *Al-Shi'r al-'Arabi al-ḥadīth: bunyatuhū wa ibdalātūh* ("Modern Arabic Poetry: Its Structure and Substitutions"), volume 4, *Musā'alet al-ḥadāthah* ("Questioning Modernity"), Casablanca: Dār Ṭoubqāl, 1991, pp. 66-77. For the different concepts of substitution (threshold, rupture, break, mutation, transformation) leading on to the concept of discontinuity, see Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and Discourse on Language*, trans. from French by A.M. Sheridan Smith, New York: Pantheon Books, 1972, p. 5.

¹⁰ The concept of a Eurocentrist model of modernity has always borne an avowedly geographical connotation. In this context it is used to refer to a deterritorialized category. A concept such as modernity can, according to G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, be deterritorialized when it is viewed as “a result of contingency rather than necessity, as a result of an ambience or milieu rather than an origin, of becoming rather than a history, of a geography rather than a historiography, of grace rather than nature”. See Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. from French by Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson, London and New York: Verso, 1995, pp. 96-7.

¹¹ See “isms”, in Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, London: Fontana/Croom Helm, 1976, p. 144.

¹² This should not, of course, be taken to imply that the concept of cultural identity epitomizes an essentialist trait or a changeless paradigm; for “cultural identity is permanently being made and re-made within available practices and relationships and existing symbols and ideas”. See Jorge Larrain, *Ideology and Cultural Identity: Modernity and the Third World Presence*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994, pp. 162-3.

¹³ In other words, the modern Arab poet has ceased to be simply a persona, becoming rather person and persona.

¹⁴ Badawi, *op. cit.*, p. 260. The difference between the Arab poet’s old role, as a spokesman for his own people, and the new role is, apparently, that he has now become more protagonist than hero.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ This may be explained through the argument that modernity is, in the final analysis, about choice.

¹⁸ In this formulation modernity/modernism is viewed as dealing with the nature of existence.

¹⁹ See Adūnīs, *Introduction to Arab Poetics*, p. 96.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

²¹ *Ibid.*

3. On Three Major Variables of Cultural Response to the Employment of Modern Literary Terminology

The language of modern literary theory contains a considerable number of concepts that are not wholly unambiguous (that might indeed be regarded as evasive, vague or loose-ended), or which even bear contradictory interpretations in their contextual usages. Examples of such terms are “culture”, “identity”, “tradition”, “modernity”, “modernism”, “appropriation”, “centre”, “margin”, “discourse”, “genre”, “class”, “origin”, “primary”, “derivative”, “innovation” and “renovation”, to name only a few.

These terms are best understood against a backdrop of the concept of ideology, “ideology” being used here in accordance with the almost self-evident definition given it by critics and cultural commentators: to mean a set of beliefs, ideas and attitudes, consciously or unconsciously held, which reflect the dominant culture within a society.¹ This language of theory contains a great many precise, technically defined words. Yet none of them can be regarded as firmly established when they are once transferred/transformed from their theoretical habitus into an alternative cultural domain. In these circumstances, the introduction of modern, innovative and renovative terminology has, in the context of Arabic literary theory, insistently problematized the question of founding the conceptual means that will permit critics and historians of ideas to tackle modern theory’s tentative assumptions.

An analysis of this problem will consequently require attention to three major variables of cultural response: negation, affirmation and contextualization.²

Before proceeding to consider a few examples illustrating these variables, I would make the following observation with regard to the

biaxial category of “modernism” and “modernization” as viewed against the mainstream experience of current exploratory writings in Arabic criticism. In the absence of any well established theory of change, it is feasible to define the concept of modernism in terms of other, unrelated tools of thought, thereby isolating the process of modernization from the logical conclusions of its modernist assumptions. Starting from such a basis, a reductionist³ approach would seem to enable the critic to cut off his self-transforming arguments about modernity/modernism from their cognitive possibilities and so construct them in such a way that they lack theoretical status – that is, to exclude, even eliminate their corresponding logical consequences.

This is particularly true of some Arabic writings on modern literary criticism, and there are implications, beyond this, for cultural critique. Consider, for example, Nāzik al-Malā'ika's negatory position vis-à-vis the use of western critical terms. On the one hand, she makes persistent claims to be the first poet to write *shi'r ḥurr*, citing her poem “Al-Kūlera” (published in December 1947) as an example of the emergence of modern poetry,⁴ and establishing herself as one of the most enthusiastic apologists, even the most articulate, for this new form characteristic of modern European poetry. Yet she does not, on the other hand, hesitate to condemn the use of western terminology and literary critical methods as “dangerous”. Moreover, al-Malā'ika finds, in the alleged influences of European culture on Arabic criticism, “an invasion which is more dangerous to the Arab nation than military invasion”;⁵ and she insists, in consequence, that “the danger in the intellectual invasion lies in the fact that it is aimed at the spirit and roots of the nation”.⁶ The reason for this, she argues, is that “the intellectual invasion corrupts the personality of the nation, i.e. the source of originality and invention, and paralyzes it, preventing progress and animation”.⁷

Notwithstanding al-Malā'ika's overall positive contribution to the critique of modern poetry, the negatory approach here, predicating cultural identity as a changeless conception, does not seem essentially different from that advocated by Islamic reformism, whose theoretical position was argued and defended in the writings of Muslim thinkers of the nineteenth century, specifically al-Afghāni and Muḥammad 'Abduh. While negotiating a positive response to western science and technology, these reformists propounded the possibility of a reconciliation between the pro-modern and the anti-western, thus underlining the idea that the intellectual baggage accompanying the dominant western culture need not be an integral or constituent part of the Islamic cultural perspective. In other words, al-Malā'ika's backward-looking viewpoint on the question of modernization tends to overlap with that suggested by the nineteenth-century Islamic reformists. Both attitudes seem to rest on a position leading to some form of reductionism. What al-Malā'ika is in fact attempting to do is to eliminate the cause-effect relationship between the theoretical assumptions of modernity and their teleological systems, i.e., the end state towards which they are alleged to be working. The upshot is that, whichever way one looks at this unsettling problem, the intellectual baggage encumbering the project of modernity cannot be avoided, discarded or simply removed from the argument.

It is precisely because of this apparent over-simplification that al-Malā'ika tends frankly to underemphasize, if not peripheralize, the difficulty of legitimizing a proposed modern standpoint, one potentially receptive to a new world view, while rejecting the use of modern literary theory's terminological language, or while giving only partial explanations to the cultural predicament entailed in the notion of appropriating⁸ borrowed tools of thought.

The opposite point of contrast is embodied in an unquestioning affirmative attitude, a major variable that postulates a textbook example of dialectical reversal: namely, the unrestricted borrowing of western critical terms and literary conceptions, implicitly disregarding the possibility of an interactive-situational dimension portrayed in the potentially patterning, relativizing and domesticating cultural contexts that tend to mould these terms and conceptions into internally coherent objects of theoretical knowledge.

This unproblematized position⁹ represents (among other things) the reverse side of the coin. No study shows this equally self-inflicted form of reductionism more clearly than Şabri Hāfiẓ's "Al-Baḥṭh 'an manhaj li naqd al-shi'r al-ḥadīth" ("In Search of a Method for the Critique of Modern Poetry").¹⁰ In deploying a multiplicity of conflicting western critical approaches, theories and terms, while being at the same time neglectful of Arabic cultural contexts, the study pinpoints a host of external concepts that fail to be internalized, and are thus not converted into the domesticated percepts and frames of reference that form part of Arabic mental furniture.¹¹

The third major variable is that of cultural and epistemological contextualization. Contextualism's transforming role is implied in its response to a system of relevancy that prevails, at a given instant, in an alternative cultural and epistemological context.

The idea that relevance is contextually decided, validated and ascertained, that norms vary with cultural setting, has been acknowledged in M.A. al-Jābiri's notion of the contextual determination of meaning. This notion of context, seen as the manufacturer of a meaning that is consistent with relevance, is suggested in the following account in which al-Jābiri sets out his discursive position on the use of borrowed conceptual tools of thought:

The concepts employed here belong to a set of philosophies, methods and modes of reading. Some of these concepts can be traced back to Kant, Freud, Bachelard, Althusser and Foucault, or to Marxist categories, without which contemporary thought cannot properly function. Experienced readers well versed in these philosophies and methodologies will doubtless note that we are not, in using these concepts, restricted by the limits and confines proposed by their primary frameworks.

The present writer is more likely to employ these concepts in a more or less free manner. This freedom will, nevertheless, be exercised with utmost responsibility; for the concepts are viewed not as inflexible frameworks but as instruments of analysis whose deployment will be made useful and rewarding by the determinants of their setting [within a context]. Otherwise they must be avoided, as long as they are perceived merely as objects of tokenism.¹²

¹ The concept of ideology is used in broad conformity with Gramsci's notion of hegemony. Viewed as the main theoretical grounding of legitimacy, the hegemonic function of ideology is most fully elaborated in Adūnīs's critique of the process of modernization. This complex process places the paradigm of tradition (which postulates the predominance of a set of collectively held beliefs about validity) – the static – in contrast to the paradigm of modernity (which suggests a breakdown of canonical legitimacy) – the dynamic. Hence modernity comes to be viewed as “*the primary problematic of Arab society*”. See Adūnīs, *Fātiḥah li-nihāyat al-qarn* (“An Opening for the End of the Century”), Beirut: Dār al-‘Awdah, 1980, p. 22.

For a comprehensive analysis of the role and meaning of ideology in Arabic thought, see ‘Abdullah L‘aroui, *Maḥmūm al-ideologiah* (“The Concept of Ideology”), Casablanca, 1980. See also Jorge Larrain's systematic study, cited above, of the concepts of ideology viewed from a Third World perspective. Throughout the first two chapters of this latter book (“Ideology, Reason and the Construction of the Other”

and “Ideology and the Assault on Reason”, pp. 6-58), Larrain sets out a detailed exposition of the hegemonic function of ideology.

² The term “variable” is not used here in a strictly sociological sense, but rather as a reflection of its general meaning, i.e., as a concept interchangeable with “phenomenon”, “measure”, “scale” or “indicator”. See Mitchell, *op. cit.*, pp. 237-8.

³ Within this frame of reference, “reduction” emphasizes a procedure proposing a reductive analysis, a distortion of thought whereby a given complex and sophisticated set of concepts is reduced to a more basic, even simplistic formulation.

⁴ For an extensive discussion of al-Malā’ika’s contention that her experiment in what she called *shi’r ḥurr* is equivalent to free verse, see: Jabra Ibrāhīm Jabra, *Al-Riḥlah al-thāminah* (“The Eighth Journey”), Beirut: Manshūrāt al-Maktabah al-‘Aṣriyyah, 1967, pp. 7-19; and Moreh, *op. cit.*, pp. 203-15.

⁵ See al-Malā’ika, *op. cit.*, p. 300.

⁶ From a lecture delivered by al-Malā’ika at the Fifth Congress of Arab Writers, Baghdad, 1965. See Moreh, *op. cit.*, pp. 273-4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

⁸ “Appropriation” is used, in this context, to mean “taking or making use of without authority or right”, and is viewed, in consequence, as a by-product of al-Malā’ika’s notion of “cultural invasion”. As a key concept in post-colonial studies, appropriation describes “the ways in which post-colonial societies take over those aspects of the imperial culture – language, forms of writing, film, theatre, even modes of thought such as rationalism, logic and analysis – that may be of use to them in articulating their own social and cultural identities”. See Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

⁹ The position is described as “unproblematized” because it is not presented as open to question or debate.

¹⁰ *Al-Ṭalī‘ah* magazine, Cairo, April 1972.

¹¹ A reversal of this approach is evident throughout Ṣabri Ḥāfiẓ’s work *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse: A Study in the Sociology of Modern Arabic Literature*, London: Sāqī Books, 1993.

¹² See ‘Abdullah L‘aroui and others, *Al-Manhajīyyah fi ‘l-adab wa ‘l-‘ulūm al-insāniyyah* (“Methodology in Literature and the Humanities”), Casablanca: Dār Ṭubqāl, 1986, p. 13; quoted in Hishām Sharābi, *Al-Naqd al-ḥadāri lil mujtama‘ al-*

'Arabi fī nihāyat al-qarn al-'ishrīn ("Cultural Critique of Arab Society at the End of the Twentieth Century"), Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Wiḥdah al-'Arabiyyah, 1990, p. 57.

4. On Modernism and the Methodological Deadlock of Incommensurability

It is hardly surprising that modern Arabic literary criticism, tied as it has been to the contexts of revivalism and renaissance in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, should have had its conflictual theoretical underpinning embedded in a mass of normative considerations of a *comparative nature*;¹ for to argue that modernism was inspired, even brought about, by European cultural influences would appear to imply that modern Arabic literary criticism springs from basic assumptions informed by a goal-oriented theory of literature, standing in uninterrupted relationship with a world view.

These cross-cultural assumptions are premised on the tentative proposition that aspects of two contrasting modernisms, belonging to different cultural systems yet sharing certain universalist conventions and tested hypotheses, may be seen as analogous; and that, as such, it is possible to examine, simultaneously, both their differences and their similarities. In other words, the modernism of Arabic literary theory may be viewed from mutually exclusive/inclusive viewpoints: on the one hand, from an outward, hegemonic and Eurocentrist position, as being a mere “ersatz” modernism,² replicating, indeed mimicking, a primary/authentic European model; or, on the other hand – and here we are probably on firmer ground – through turning our attention to the most feasible hypothetical alternative: that is, by suspending such an external, explicitly a priori approach, marked as this is by a set of merely tentative critical suppositions predicated in the course of gathering and manipulating evidence.³

Release from this now evidently discredited essentialism will, we should add, be attained not through some uncompromisingly inward-

looking stance, but rather through removing obstacles to change – obstacles that are themselves generated by the ethnocentrism implicit in such an introverted approach. This, in turn, will require focus on initiating the reconstruction and self-actualization of a holistic method, operating from the inside out.⁴ The range and application of such a method implies, among other things, an emphasis on certain common ground, a focus on the questioning, the subtle, the hesitant, rather than on the essentialist dimensions characterizing a homogeneous account of modernity; an account that has long grounded the central while marginalizing, even excluding, the peripheral.⁵

To return to the central point, highlighting of the view that epistemological standards of cultural change propose an inescapable monolithic uniformity can now be deconstructed, even dislodged, with a view to de-centring a Eurocentric model of cultural hegemony whose dominance conflates power with knowledge and knowledge with power.⁶

Examining critically now, from the viewpoint of an articulating framework, we may see the category of modernism as being internal and internalized, different and autonomous, but not separate and disconnected. Here too comparison requires an element of analogy between the objects compared. The difficulty consists not, however, in determining the precise degree of analogy involved. The problem, with such a comparative method, lies rather in its being repeatedly deployed in an axiology-oriented context, whereby the notion of comparability proposes a correlation based on the value-laden concept of *mufāḍalah* rather than the value-neutral concept of *muqāranah*.⁷

Such a situation stems, it would seem, from a misreading of the first term for the second. Whereas *mufāḍalah*, as its etymology implies, suggests examination of the qualities of two supposedly commutative cultural and literary concepts, with a view either to underlining a virtually

Manichaeism contrast or to discovering an equality of regard or value between them, *muqāranah* (again as the etymology implies) points to a host of ongoing procedures of juxtaposing, combining and contrasting – the verb *qārana* meaning to connect, conjoin, link, associate. The latter term, therefore, indicates the possibility of a value-neutral probe. Context envelopes a parallelizing process. Once the notion of non-hierarchical comparability has been introduced, whether unequivocally or tentatively, there is the possibility of an inquiry into the likenesses and differences of two corresponding concepts, without necessarily being judgmental or giving rise to any explicit notion of value and evaluating.

In other words, desynonymizing these terms (etymologically distinct albeit synonymized conceptually) serves a useful purpose; for, when the comparison is a *mufāḍalah* rather than a *muqāranah*, the argument tends to touch upon the field of axiology: that is, on the study of value rather than on consistently non-judgmental literary comparison or cultural parallelism. As such, the value-laden concept of *mufāḍalah* specifically involves negation as a feature of judgment, or, if you will, triggers a hierarchicalizing process of evaluative comparativeness whereby the concept of “original” modernism suggests, implicitly, the immediate negation of its designated “duplicate”.

It should be clear by now that such judgmental comparison implies the presence of an intrinsically pre-judgmental category; of an all-embracing, pre-conceived concept, relativized to fit neatly with a Eurocentric framework. Moreover, such a pre-judgmental framework implies, in its turn, an all-encompassing mode of negation whereby the “other” is seen as culturally dislocated, and as collectively exposed to the pre-judgment of – indeed primarily denied by – the underlying essentialism of the Eurocentric “self”.

The above argument can be re-presented by citing and probing a relevant example, illustrative of a process of *mufāḍalah* that indicates the effective absence of a common basis or standard of objective comparability. Let us consider the conceptual impasse of incommensurability,⁸ the methodological deadlock informing the central contention of ‘Abdul ‘Azīz Ḥammūdah’s gushingly critical book *Al-Marāya al-muḥaddabah: min al-bunyawiyyah ila ’l-tafkīk* (“Distorted Mirrors: From Structuralism to Deconstruction”).⁹

For Ḥammūdah the notion of modern literary theory insinuates a state of *lop-sided* parallelism connoting a binarity of modernisms: authentic European versus mimetic Arab. The first is real, genuine and of undoubted origin, while the second is imitative, derivative and lacking in originality. Here, *this lop-sided positionality can be seen as a benchmark of an ongoing process of distorted tawāzi*;¹⁰ that is, as an avowedly asymmetric correlation, resting on a multiplicity of dichotomic and hierarchical power differentials, and so making any comparison between the two juxtaposed models impossible. For it is manifestly evident, in this context, that a celebrated, if lop-sided, correlativity, conjoining not too dissimilar cultural strands, tends to denote a value-loaded procedure of *mufāḍalah* rather than a procedure of non-judgmental *muqāranah*.

To put this another way, the starting point epitomizing Ḥammūdah’s essentializing central contention would appear to be an assumption that we are dealing with two different modernisms whose similarities are nonetheless expected to confirm their fundamentally identical nature; and that, if we should in fact be confronted with apparent dissimilarities, the “derivative version” should nonetheless fit neatly with the “primary” model. The “derivative version” is thus merely reduced to what the author repeatedly calls its “reflection in a distorted mirror”.¹¹ The crucial point at issue here, then, is that of exposing the fallacy of

these taken-for-granted assumptions that underlie the notion of synonymizing two dissimilar, even contextually distinct cultural strands.

In consequence, this lop-sided pairing assumes the appearance of a persistent order, one whose dominance imposes a “totalizing discourse which seeks to occupy all available ground and thus deny any oppositional site to those whom it excludes”.¹²

It should be added that, quite apart from underlining the force of unquestionable authority, this ongoing process of totalizing and excluding demonstrates the ontological priority and superiority of an original model, thus serving, potentially, to establish seamless conceptual connections with the brand of religious fundamentalism prevalent in some parts of the world today. Hence the implosion of cultural essentialism masqueraded as theological purism and grounding the presence of irreducible and impermeable “power differentials”. As an ultimate consequence, this notion of religious fundamentalism, highlighting the power differentials of a discourse of authenticity and celebrating “our” culture versus “theirs”, gives rise to its essentialist counterpart, literary fundamentalism, by turning a non-symmetric relationship around, consolidating the “other”¹³ and downgrading the “self”. In order to be truly “oneself”, a literary fundamentalist (or ethnocentrist, or essentialist) has to defend himself against an established and distinctive “other”; and, in order to face up to this “other”, he has to adopt the other’s cultural assumptions and values. In other words, a literary fundamentalist must be the “other” so as to be able to become “oneself”.

This is clearly circular reasoning *par excellence*, and effectively constitutes a vicious circle, whereby a logical fallacy points to a new difficulty that only serves to make the original problem worse, if not wholly incapable of resolution. To recapitulate: *such an approach is self-*

evidently flawed through its contention that one may, concurrently, be both “oneself” and the “other”.

Ḥammūdāh’s way out of this deadlock – one brought about by an evidently crude and deterministic brand of biological inevitability – is to attempt to reverse the sequence, proposing the consequential supersession of “our” modernism by “theirs”. In so doing, he aims to stress a concomitant process of de-differentiation whose primary objective is to obliterate all the subtle differences and distinctions posited as foregrounding the basic assumptions implicit in Arabic modernism, and so to overemphasize “close” structural and functional affinities with the determinants of an essentialized, even fetishized “authentic” European model, embedding the notion of an “origin”, an “unrepeatable beginning”¹⁴ regarded with the veneration and awe appropriate to the sacred.

At this point, religious fundamentalism moves aside to make room for literary fundamentalism, its commutative double, thereby negating the legitimacy of an emergent modernism through the process of continuously undoing its pre-given “differentials” and replacing them with the “power differentials” of a Eurocentrist model – that is to say, with the manufacturers of the notion of sacred origin. And this effectively undermines the validity of the comparative method itself.

What the above amounts to is this: by suspending the very notion of commonsense reasoning, and by failing to acknowledge a standard of comparability based on a set of shared cross-cultural assumptions – on various decontextualized, abstract, general, formal principles, norms, conventions, procedures, and the like – Ḥammūdāh has rendered his position evidently untenable. The internal logic of his approach effectively suggests (among other things) the emergence of an imminent methodological deadlock based on a lop-sided form of parallelism; the

creation of a logical problem, apparently incapable of resolution, that highlights the incommensurability of two virtually asymmetric, even wholly non-symmetric models of transformation.

One further point should, finally, be taken into account: that Ḥammūdah's criticism, in the very course of insistently rejecting modernism as a threatening paradigmatic category, has nonetheless consistently relied on the parameters of the selfsame European model he has so vigorously opposed every step of the way.

¹ The notion of a comparative method in Arabic literary criticism can be traced back to al-Āmidī (d. 371/987), who termed the process *al-muwāzanah* ("weighing"). Al-Āmidī compared two different if not wholly dissimilar contemporaneous poets, Abū Tammām and al-Buḥturi, as representing a binarity of axial cultural strands: the "artificial/nurtured" (*maṣnū'*) as against the "natural" (*maṭbū'*). Here, however, comparison is restricted to an Arabic literary framework. The notion of extending the comparative method to include different cultural contexts was proposed by the age of the European Enlightenment, with its belief in the unity of mankind and in universal concepts of progress. In the eighteenth century the idea of culture, viewed as an explanatory concept, gained prominence as a new paradigm representing the Romantic and racist reaction against the principles of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, with a consequent dismissal of the universal as redundant and the proposition of "culture" as a token of national identity.

It was in the context of this reaction that the method of cultural comparison, implicit in the supremacist model advocated by Herder, Nietzsche and Spengler, came to be viewed as a hierarchicalizing process of differentiation, putting forward the notion of biological inevitability and emphasizing innate cultural particularism.

Edward Said's perception of a binary opposition between cultural "filiation" (stressing biological inevitability) and cultural "affiliation" (epitomizing the modern notion of choice) is perhaps the most articulate attempt to challenge the theoretical components intrinsic to the essentializing Eurocentric position of the age of the Enlightenment, and to the explicit essentialism of its rival, the eighteenth-century cultural model informed by, or derived from, the particularizing position of a

monolithic conception of identity. For an exposition of Said's line of argument, grounding his theory of modernism as a movement from fate to choice, through the displacement of the biological concept of "filiation" in favour of the voluntarist concept of "affiliation", and probing the idea of a "metaphorical" cultural parent, see Said, *Beginnings*.

² This essentially *dismissive* term evokes the problem of defining the meaning, sense or connotation of *unrepeatable origin*. Is the "original", then, a synonym for the "authentic"? Can it always be traced back to a scared origin? And why, in this case, can a concept or a work of art not be "authentic" without being "original"?

³ "A priori", in this sense, is used to imply an untested, even untestable category. As such, it is known independently of experience, or perceived other than as the result of inquiry.

⁴ That is, proceeding continuously, by internal logic, or reason, from within a framework. For an example of this methodology, see Mouzelis, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁵ The peripheral is culturally subordinate to the central where the present distribution of power differentials is seen as confirming a changeless theoretical positionality. Such an assertion would have been perfectly compatible with Ernest Renan's (1823-92) ideology-driven strategy of systematically ignoring, rejecting or suppressing the role of Near Eastern influence in the making of what he calls "the miracle of ancient Greece". Eurocentrism is accordingly to be seen not merely as a reflection of the present power differentials between the centre and the periphery, but also as advancing the idea that Europe, whose classical civilization is firmly rooted in "the miracle of ancient Greece" represents the beginning of history. See, for instance, Muḥammad Wāqidi, *Al-'Ulūm al-insāniyyah wa 'l-ideologiah* ("The Humanities and Ideology"), Beirut: Dār al-Ṭalī'ah, 1983, p. 146.

⁶ Works such as Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and *The Order of Things* are key texts for explaining the relationship of knowledge and power. In the former book Foucault defines the *epistémé*, a concept almost identical to Thomas Kuhn's concept of the "paradigm"; the convergence of knowledge and power is seen as proposing "something like a world-view, a slice of history common to all branches of knowledge, which imposes on each one the same norms and postulates a general stage of reason, a certain structure of thought that the men of a particular period cannot escape". See Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, p. 191.

This definition, epitomizing Foucauldian strategy and mode of analyzing power, knowledge and representation, is perhaps “the most important single theoretical source for Edward Said in *Orientalism*”. Yet “the relationship between Said’s ideas and Foucault’s” remains “complex, shifting and at times contradictory”. See Valerie Kennedy, *Edward Said: A Critical Introduction*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000, pp. 24-5.

⁷ See Khaldoun Al-Shamaa, *Al-Naqd wa 'l-hurriyyah* (“Critique and Freedom”), Damascus: Arab Writers Union Publications, 1977, p. 262.

⁸ This term, borrowed from the philosophy of science, is used here to denote the lack of a common basis of comparison between two supposedly symmetric categories. Although these categories “may not logically contradict one another, they have reference to no common body of data”. See Robert Audi (general editor), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edition, 1999, p. 421.

⁹ Kuwait: ‘Ālam al-Ma‘rifah, April, 1998.

¹⁰ This is a rhetorical concept. See A.M. Abū 'l-Qāsim al-Sejilmāsi, *Al-Manza' al-badī': fī tajnīs asālīb al-badī'* (“The Magnificent Tendency: On the Science of Metaphor”), Rabat: Maktabat al-Ma‘ārif, 1980, pp. 415, 509.

¹¹ This is Ḥammūdah’s own expression. See Ḥammūdah, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

¹² See Hawthorn, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

¹³ The colonized subject is characterized as the “other” “as a means of establishing the binary separation of the colonizer and colonized and asserting the naturalness and primacy of the colonizing culture and world view”. See Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *op. cit.*, pp. 169-71. In this context the colonizer becomes the “other” through the dialectical process of “othering”, a term coined by Gayatri Spivak.

¹⁴ What Hanna Arendt calls an “unrepeatable beginning”, Edward Said calls an “origin”. Said, however, distinguishes between a beginning and an origin as involving, most fundamentally, the difference between an active and a passive relationship. “Why should an author wish to ground his work in the passivity of an origin? This question would be meaningless outside of the context of authority.” See John Guillory, *Poetic Authority: Spenser, Milton and Literary History*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1983, p. 27.

5. On Re-centring as a Pertinent Universalistic Alternative to the De-centring of Eurocentrist/Ethnocentrist Modernism

An important aspect of the universalistic theories of literature typical of modernism is that they tend, invariably, to be grounded in a Eurocentrist position; one, that is, whereby European cultural values and assumptions are placed at the centre of literary analysis and taken to be “the normal, the natural or the universal”.¹ Such Eurocentrism distorts the researcher’s perceptions by perpetuating the concept of a single absolutized and totalized cultural model, while, for primarily racist reasons, systematically ignoring, denying or suppressing Afro-Asiatic roots of classical civilization.² As such, Eurocentrism is seen to be “masked in literary studies by concepts such as literary universality, in history by authoritative interpretations written from the point of view of the victors, and in early anthropology by the unconscious assumptions involved in the idea that its data were those societies defined as ‘primitive’ and opposed to a European norm of development and civilization”.³

In fact this authoritative, even authoritarian standpoint, whereby “truth” is defined by ignoring, downgrading or invalidating other cultures as inferior, naturally implies the essentialist concept of Eurocentrism:⁴ an attitude whose ranking of theoretical formulations and cultural hierarchies is to be explained in terms of the power differentials that inform much of the relationship between the categories of East and West, so highlighting the notion of *heterogeneity* rather than that of *complementarity*. In other words, a universalistic outlook would appear to imply, in this ontology-bounded context, the resurgence of an identity crisis brought about by the problematic of having to come to terms with an absolutized western concept of modernity. Something of the tone of this concept can be gauged from the following observation by Jorge Larrain:

Most universalistic theories held conceptions of the non-European, of the “other”, which emphasized the contrast between the chaotic and irrational ways of the “other” and a rather triumphalistic and optimistic notion of their own rational European cultural identity. This identity conceived itself as the centre where history was being made and it was able to place and recognize everybody else as peripheral.⁵

Nowhere is this problem more strongly felt than in current Arabic writings. To cite one example, Aziz Al-Azmeh has, in his essay “Disengaging Arabism from Islam”, strongly maintained (albeit from a wholly critical viewpoint) the existence of an all-embracing state of affairs⁶ which, he explains, “has emerged as we approach a post-modern turn in which capitalism is seen as the rubric encompassing the modern age and rendering old solutions meaningless”.⁷

Referring to the geographical substratum underpinning Hegel’s conception of the East-West divide,⁸ Al-Azmeh initiates a reconsideration of the relationship between the Arab world (the periphery) and the West (the core, the centre). This relationship should not, he stresses, be seen as implying any total split: “There is no complete separation between areas, countries or nations deemed fully backward and others deemed fully advanced.”⁹ It is not, he believes, feasible to view the intellectual encounter between the two groups in terms of sharp contrast; rather, he repeatedly advocates a forward-looking awareness of the complexity of one of the liveliest areas of debate within modern cultural critique:

What we should take into account here is not only the omnipresent West residing in the locus of the East but also the various differences and nuances presented by the western [model] itself.¹⁰

Al-Azmeh is especially careful to argue not so much for a de-centring (i.e. invalidation) of the notion of Eurocentrist hegemony as for a constructive response to a cultural problematic. In order to bring about this affirmative phase of analysis, he explores the possibility of re-centring (or re-arranging, or permuting) the relation of the centre to the periphery, and vice versa:

We do not suffer from an inferiority complex vis-à-vis Europe.¹¹ And although Europe is the catalyst, the prime mover of modern history, we do not see in it the end of history.¹² We are not, moreover, bound by European historical limitations but are part of a [modernizing] global historical project moving beyond the boundaries of the West.¹³

For Al-Azmeh, then, the concept of modernity is presented as an open-ended category. His contribution here is to undertake a deliberate, even deliberative, attempt at re-centring,¹⁴ rather than de-centring or peripheralizing, a European core of modernity. In common with most anti-essentialist stances, this account consciously rejects any claim on the part of modernism to closure and finality.

In a sense this is the same distinction as made by Adūnīs in his venture to re-centre the Eurocentrist model through initiating a reconsideration of the still-to-be-determined relationship between the “self” and the “other”. For him this relationship is posited as complementary and (to borrow Deleuze and Guattari’s term) wholly

deterritorialized.¹⁵ Concluding a debate on the universalist aspect of the project of modernism, Adūnīs points out the deterritorialized nature of the conception's formulation, highlighting the overlap of its spatio-temporal co-ordinates:

The spaceship which has reached the moon, and the first wheel whose invention is attributed to the Sumerians, are closely interconnected. If you fail to identify the Sumerian wheel as an integral part of this spaceship, then you are not modern. Whereas the co-ordinates of heterogeneous periods of history overlap incessantly, geographical spaces, too, seem to overlap in consequence.¹⁶

This is hardly surprising, since, for Adūnīs:

One cannot conceive of Europe as a detached entity separate from the legacy of al-Andalus. And if the media is insistent in unifying the world and turning it into a global village,¹⁷ then the concept of time may have, subsequently, to be seen as a continuum.¹⁸

Adūnīs's complementary narrative of modernism, conceived as part of a deterritorialized universal project, clearly points to the looming presence, behind the idea of the universal, of a deeper and more important problem: namely the problem of universal norms and their truth; of failing to re-define the truth as a process of becoming, as a paradigm of complementarity,¹⁹ as a concept infusing the "self" and the "other", and vice versa, as an attempt to synthesize the central and the peripheral.

Connected with this is the relationship between the centre and the periphery as presented by ethnocentrism. Hailing and celebrating Europe

as the centre in this lop-sided relationship is only one side of the coin. The other is that of ethnocentrism, whose cultural and literary assumptions place the notion of ethnicity at the centre of the selfsame asymmetrical relationship. Thus, ethnocentrism, as depicted by tradition-based modernizers, has consistently assumed that *al-qadīm* ("the old"), embodied in the past, is the centre, while *al-jadīd* ("the new"), embodied in the present, is the periphery. M.A. al-Jābiri's attempt to permute the ordered sequence of power differentials, such as those epitomizing an ethnocentrist position, gives stirring expression to the possibility of re-centring a "heritage-based understanding of heritage".²⁰ Such an understanding has, he explains, resulted not in the production of *al-jadīd* but in the mere reproduction of *al-qadīm*; and, in view of this (al-Jābiri continues), it becomes obvious that any possibility of breakthrough must now lie in "liberating our conception of heritage from the ideological and emotional underpinnings that stamp our subconscious with the imprint of the general and the absolute, and thereby strip [the conception] of its relativism and historicism".²¹ Here the emphasis is displaced to the vexed question of viewing the past from the locus of the present. In other words, al-Jābiri's theoretical formulations do not dismiss the classical heritage but rather propose an alternative re-centring of the paradigm of the old, through re-examination of its viability, validity and sustainability via the epistemological lens of the paradigm of the new, predicated as its legitimator.

Another way of seeing how this approach articulates with the making of modernism is by referring to a significant passage in Adūnīs's *Introduction to Arab Poetics* (cited above), delivered at the Collège de France in 1984. In it Adūnīs argues as follows:

I did not discover this modernity in Arabic poetry from within the prevailing Arab cultural order and its systems of knowledge. It was reading Baudelaire which changed my understanding of Abū Nuwās²² and revealed his particular poetical quality and modernity, and Mallarmé's work which explained to me the mysteries of Abū Tammām's²³ poetic language and the modern dimension in it. My reading of Rimbaud, Nerval and Breton led me to discover the poetry of the mystic writers in all its uniqueness and splendour, and the new French criticism gave me an indication of the newness of al-Jurjāni's²⁴ critical vision.²⁵

By this means modernism can come to be viewed as both within and beyond time. As Salma Khadra Jayyusi succinctly puts it:

Instead of treating time as a linear and flat progression, [Arab moderns] treated it as *mythical permutation* of past and present where all periods intermesh and interlock, juxtaposing past and present, merging periods and unifying human experience.²⁶

¹ The notion of conjoining "normality", "naturalness" and "universalism" as the "truth value" for judging the "other" lies, it would seem, at the heart of Eurocentric essentialism. Such essentialism also provides scope for the corresponding claim that the "other" is unnatural, abnormal and even wholly uncharacteristic. The affirmation of fixed identities of the "self" in contrast to the "other" is, then, the theoretical platform for re-asserting the politics of organic hierarchy, determinism and headlong essentialism. As such, an ontology-bounded procedure such as "naturalization" should be viewed, in connection with its ephemeralized stress on the processes of standardizing, correcting and rectifying, as grounding foundational power differentials.

There is, it should be noted, no precisely congruent correlation between the value-laden English term “naturalization” and the corresponding Arabic word *tajnīs*. The latter term – implying the concept of having become established as native – is a neologism denoting, specifically, admission to citizenship.

² This is the central contention of Martin Bernal’s influential book *Black Athena: The Afro-Asiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (Vol. I, “The Fabrication of Ancient Greece, 1785-1985”, London: Free Association Books, 1987). Bernal argues against the taken-for-granted claims of the “Aryan model” and the anchoring of modern European thought in ancient Greece.

In his introduction to *The Pimlico History of Western Philosophy*, Richard Popkin comments on Bernal’s “mind-boggling” thesis, concluding that his work “has alarmed traditionalists and encouraged innovators”, and that “it has given new impetus to the consideration of the many sources of the scientific and philosophical ideas that we first find articulated in texts from ancient Greece”. See Richard H. Popkin (ed.), *The Pimlico History of Western Philosophy*, London: Pimlico, 1999, p. 5.

³ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

⁴ J.J. Clarke aptly expresses the point at issue:

Even in times characterized by the globalization of culture there still remains an endemic Eurocentrism, a persistent reluctance to accept that the West could ever have borrowed anything of significance from the East, or to see the place of Eastern thought within the Western tradition as much more than a recent manifestation, evanescent and intellectually lightweight, at best only a trivial part of a wider reaction against the modern world.

See J.J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought*, London and New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 5.

⁵ See Larrain, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

⁶ This position is based, primarily, on his proposed thesis that an unspecified number of Islams and modernities exists in point of fact. See Al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities*.

⁷ Aziz Al-Azmeh, “Fak al-irtibāṭ baina ’l-’urūbah wa ’l-Islām” (“Disengaging Arabism from Islam”), *Al-Nāqid* (“The Critic”; a monthly cultural review in Arabic), March, 1991, p. 21.

⁸ See G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, New York: P.F. Collier and Son, 1902, pp. 163-6. Quoted in A.L. Macfie (ed.), *Orientalism: A Reader*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000, pp. 13-5.

⁹ Al-Azmeh, "Disengaging Arabism from Islam", *loc. cit.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ The assertive tone here clearly reflects the author's personal stance. It should not be taken to imply a collective position.

¹² Fukuyama's essentially Hegelian thesis proposing "the end of history" proffers the other side of the argument. See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992.

¹³ Al-Azmeh, "Disengaging Arabism from Islam", *loc. cit.*

¹⁴ Re-centring is contextually analogous to (if less fashionable than) the popular notion of "deconstruction".

¹⁵ See Deleuze and Guattari, *op. cit.*, pp. 67-8.

¹⁶ Quoted in Shāker Nūri, "Ma'raḍ Adūnīs" ("Adūnīs Exhibition"), *Al-Quds al-'Arabi*, London, 9 January 2001, p. 12.

¹⁷ A reference to the term originally coined by Marshall McLuhan.

¹⁸ Quoted in Nūri, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ The centrality of the notion of complementarity to Goethe's poetry is reflected in his observation that

He who knows himself and others,
Will also recognize that East and
West cannot be separated.

Quoted in Clarke, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

²⁰ M.A. al-Jābiri, *Al-Turāth wa 'l-ḥadāthah* ("Heritage and Modernity"), Beirut: Al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-'Arabi, 1991, p. 15.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²² Abū Nuwās: b. 140/757, d. 198/813.

²³ Abū Tammām: b. 189/805, d. 232/846.

²⁴ 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjāni: d. 471/1078 or 474/1081.

²⁵ Adūnīs, *Introduction to Arab Poetics*, p. 110.

²⁶ Salma Khadra Jayyusi, *Modernist Poetry in Arabic*, research project financed by the Rockefeller Residency Fellowship, University of Michigan (Center for Near Eastern and North African Studies), 1987-8, p. 27.

6. On Some Categories of Periodization:

Origin, Beginning, Register

The idea of periodization in modern Arabic literary historiography represents perhaps the classic case of an organically oriented process of theory-making.¹ More than ever, some Arab literary historians and critics have tended to see the expedient notion of “beginning” not for what it is but as embedding a biological concept of “origin”. In his study on conformity and creativity, Adūnīs has noted a close connection between Arabic culture’s conventional view of the concept of “origin” (*aṣl*) and the concept of “originality” (*aṣālāh*). This relationship is, he explains, akin to that of the branch to the tree, the new to the old. Seen in these terms, the old alludes to a hallowed “origin”, while newness denotes a “replicating” (*an nasj ‘alā minwāl*) oldness. In other words, *al-aṣālāh* (originality) is viewed, within the context of conventional Arabic culture, as synonymous with what Adūnīs calls *minwāliyyah*, that is, replicability. If he is to be an original/authentic Arab, the poet, Adūnīs insists, must not merely write in Arabic but “replicate” his ancestors’ forms of literary expression.²

These literary historians and critics seem, in fact, to be acting out a *methodological linearity* whereby *time* is viewed in terms of one-dimensional space, represented by a line: a line that unfolds itself in a succession of “origins” rather than simply proposing a convenient point of reference. Adūnīs is explicitly careful to deny any validity to linear methodology:

In this perspective, poetry is conceived [not] as a series of emergences or surprises, but as uninterrupted linearity with a uniform colour and texture. The problem facing innovators has, in

effect, become that of producing the *different*. This is the problematic of innovation, which the age of *al-Nahdah* failed to comprehend.³

In misreading the register⁴ of expedient beginning as origin/source/cause, these literary historians and critics have persistently failed to see that the procedure of collocating through the common sense operations of periodizing is in reality no more than a *practical device* for determining an indicator or a convenient point of departure. As such, it is hardly surprising that the value-laden concept of sacred “origin” should have been constantly substituted for the less contaminated notion of “beginning”. “Origin” and “beginning” have, it is true, been viewed, through the lens of cultural etymology, as proffering equally effective meaning and performative power; yet this should not be taken to imply a flattening out of all differences between the two terms. The concept of “origin” has in fact begun to show signs, within the context of ideological semantics, of wearing out its welcome; in a shifting force field it now seems very much to belong to an ideologically sensitive etymology. This is evident in Edward Said’s powerful argument against the biological inevitability grounding the concept of “origin”. Central to Said’s thought is the binary opposition between “filiation” and “affiliation”. “Filiation,” he explains, “reflects a biological inevitability, the fact of son-ness, of being the product of a parent. Affiliation is instead a choice, in which something chooses to be associated with a metaphorical parent, or even a sibling.”⁵

Said’s proposition of replacing “filiation”, a biologically oriented term epitomizing the notion of cultural relationship based on the concept of “origin”, by “affiliation”, a dynamic term whose connotation refers to an alternative cultural relationship based on the *modern idea of “free*

choice”, may be seen as an illustrative attempt, on the paradigmatic level, to dismiss the concept of “origin” as redundant, while simultaneously questioning the validity of any definition of culture as pure, unadulterated and essentialized formulation of identity.

That said, it may be useful to reiterate that critical examination of the notion of “beginning” must not entail viewing it, contextually, as a trend-setter or as a profoundly effective catalysis, acting out a teleological schema; for teleology implies a final purpose, an ultimate goal, an end-state to which a “beginning” is designated to be working. Such a notion would, in effect, merely transform “beginning” from an obliterated “origin” into a functioning “origin” that establishes its determinate duration by reference to a *continuous presence*⁶ in the temporal version of reality.

With this point once recognized, the cultural etymology of “beginning” can swiftly circumvent the ideologically suspect search for “origin”. “Beginning” then emerges as a simple point of reference, an evidently flexible index for convoluted processes of historical sequencing and literary re-arrangement. Once this is accepted, then a questioning of the synonymous nature of “beginning” and “origin” becomes the springboard for a range of possible processes facilitating the elimination of a persistent confusion.

In his critical introduction to modern Arabic poetry. M.M. Badawi touches on aspects of this confusion. He rightly points out that the new form, far from being an entirely novel departure, is actually the culmination of a long series of experiments starting early in the last century, and that

externally the new form had been developed before the Iraqi poets [Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb and Nāzik al-Malā’ika] by the Egyptian

Muḥammad Farīd Abū Ḥadīd and the Indonesian-born Egyptian Bakathīr, in their attempt to write (or translate)⁷ poetic drama.⁸

Badawi concludes, nonetheless, that “it is . . . futile to try to establish which modern Arabic poet was *first* to use this form”, and that, in any case, “there isn’t any *glory* attached to it”.⁹

The idea of being the first, of initiating a highlighted beginning, of reading (or misreading) the notion of “beginning” into the concept of a “glorious”, indeed literally sacred “origin”, has resulted in a persistent confusion aptly described as “futile”.

This is partly explained by ongoing twentieth-century experiments, on the level of theory and practice alike, to break through the impasse of fixed pattern in the poetic form, and in a prevalently medieval mindset. As a critical term, modernism is both: (a) the name¹⁰ given to literary movements adopting specific devices and formal techniques, and emphasizing the need for a modernized outlook free of the old world view; and (b) a particular category of writing, related to “newness”, which in some way recognizes a more or less open and universalized version of reality. In other words, the concepts of newness (innovation and renovation) embedding these experiments and movements are not the result of a single specified “origin”. Rather, they have rapidly emerged from a concatenation of various causes related to an early modernist pioneer period preceding the 50s, in which certain aspects of Arabic literary theory and practice were explored and underwent change. Jubrān’s experiments in the new form of poem-in-prose and his Romantic rebellion¹¹ against the changelessness, if not stagnation, of his times are prime examples of the significant revolutionary forces that made the modernist enterprise possible.

The Surrealist movement,¹² which flourished within the 30s and 40s, was full of brio and bravura. Its growing sophistication and intellectual prowess reflected a considerable degree of *voluntarism*,¹³ whereby actors were assumed to act “voluntarily” and not as conditioned by accepted values and the dominant social structure – hence the all-embracing, cosmopolitan connotation of their unfettered contribution to modern literary theory.

What is interesting is that these experiments did not simply follow one another in a continuous sequence, susceptible of representation by a single orderly line of progression; what we have here is periodizing rather than benchmarking. Periodizing is the wider-ranging term of the two, to be seen not merely as reflecting a set of results, independent of the process by which literary historians/critics arrive at these, but as essentially involving the process itself. As such, the two experiments in poetic form that heralded the free verse movement of the 50s – al-Malā’ika’s poem *al-Kūlera* (“Cholera”) and al-Sayyāb’s volume *Azhār Dhābilah* (“Wilted Flowers”), both of which appeared in 1947 – emerge as instances deeply rooted in the temporality of benchmarking: they are important by virtue of their straightforward order of appearance. Nevertheless, these attempts of al-Malā’ika and al-Sayyāb, to use Salma Khadra Jayyusi’s evaluative argument, “assumed a more crucial role because they were better poets and produced their work within authority and a spirit of leadership, and because the atmosphere was not ripe, artistically and psychologically, for the kind of new experiment they offered”.¹⁴

Their outlook, at this stage, is marked by a constant preoccupation with formal experimentation. On the other hand, al-Malā’ika’s theoretical contribution to the Arabic modernist movement seems far from profound. Her critical introduction to her collection *Shazāya wa ramād* (“Shrapnel

and Ashes”), explaining the mechanism of free verse and setting out what she felt to be the technical reasons underlying it, is aptly described by Jayyusi as “naive” and as “dwarfed” by her later writings on the same subject at the end of the 50s, as published in her book *Issues in Contemporary Poetry, 1962*.¹⁵ Yet there is, I feel, more to al-Malā’ika’s theoretical contribution than this. If it is true that experiments in poetic form have the potential for revealing the presence of embedding theoretical compositional principles, which serve as instruments for probing the nature of poetry writing itself, then such experiments can, in a sense, be viewed as *critiques* in their own right.

This is, of course, applicable to all models of transformation in modern Arabic literature. However, for the modern reader or critic, the desire to examine closely the theoretical foundations of the poet’s (or novelist’s) art comes into sharp conflict with the equally modern imperative to explain a literary work without reference to the person who wrote it.¹⁶

In sum, periodization cannot be imposed upon literary history by arbitrary stop rules, rules that are not necessarily self-perpetuating. Unless a “beginning” is seen as more than a “benchmark” – as a situation in which the self-perpetuating connotation of a defined critical period is deemed appropriate to its context – the critic cannot recognize the presence of a “register”. The notion of “register” in a text springs from the metaphorical adaptation of an originally musical concept.¹⁷ In this context it refers, broadly, to the poetic frequency and to the mode (medium) which is adopted for communication. As such, the “register” of the poetic form that heralded the free verse movement in the 50s became recognizable when the new form found “acceptance” throughout the Arab world. In other words, this “register” of acceptance is to be seen as specifically “connected with the names of the Iraqi poets al-Sayyāb and

al-Malā'ika" and informed by "the use of the single foot (*taf'īla*) as the basic unit, instead of a fixed number of feet or a combination of certain different feet per line".¹⁸

Another switch of register is epitomized by the rejection, on the part of the young avant-garde generation, of what al-Malā'ika calls the "monotonous pattern"; and this is further characterized by "their yearning for independence in the choice of their own form, of a new and more realistic attitude to life, and of their preference of content to form".¹⁹

None of this was wholly "modern" for Yūsuf al-Khāl, a Syro-Lebanese poet, literary critic and translator who, in 1957, in collaboration with Adūnīs and other younger poets, launched his influential magazine *Shi'r* ("Poetry"), which played a pivotal role in the development of modern poetry and literary theory. In the same year, al-Khāl referred to the new poetry as *al-shi'r al-ḥadīth* ("modern poetry"), a term that was to supersede the name *al-shi'r al-ḥurr* ("free verse") under which the movement had been known up to then.²⁰ The overall term "modern poetry" connotes no seamless garment, but rather a convoluted construct involving perpetual innovation in form, content and tone. As a complex hybrid, it has become particularly open to other registers. Thus the gist of al-Khāl's concept of modernity/modernism is in effect defined not only by what the latter is but also by what it is not. For him, contemporary Arab poets were continuing to write poems in which "the unity of the verse rather than of the whole poem was adhered to, just as in Classical poetry". They also, according to al-Khāl,

persisted in the same objectives and themes of the old poets, and their outlook to things, their "cosmic experience of life" still stemmed from an "ancient, ruminative mentality".

Their minds, he explains, were

drowned in emotional Romanticism, sentimentalism and Naturalism, and were still lurking in the dark [recesses] of form, primitiveness, introversion and occultism, afraid to face themselves.²¹

This switch of register is, then, marked by the emergence of *al-shi'r al-ḥadīth*, a new term whose denotation has long since moved beyond reference to a “name”²² in offering *alternative epistemologies and affirmative new accounts of poetic experience*. This is an important development; for it has consequently invalidated a multiplicity of critical terms previously given to the bulk of the new strands of poetry written in the 50s. Terms such as al-Nuwaihi’s *al-shi'r al-jadīd* (“new poetry”), or al-Malā’ika’s *al-shi'r al-ḥurr* (“free poetry”), or Mandūr’s *al-shi'r al-mahmūs* (“whispering poetry”),²³ set forth not by stealth but in a fanfare, are now – outside the realm of literary chronology, at least – no longer in circulation. In this sense the process of modernization has *changed the modalities of poetry but not the basic concept*. These modalities can now be seen as no more than conscious attempts to stem the tide of a seemingly endless rhythmic repetition – without betraying their inherent naivety or preconceptual status.

Why should this be so? It is no answer simply to say that these older critical terms were initially acknowledged as legitimate by particular critics at one time, only to be dismissed as redundant at another. If, on the other hand, we consider that there is more to modernity/modernism than *formal newness*, we shall be led to recognize the significance of critiques of modern poetry as proposed by Adūnīsiān theory and practice, asserting as these do a paradigmatic shift whose

assumptions bring into play, at every instant, an ontologically bound poetics.

For Adūnīs, then, a switch of register is a transforming system, a switch entailing an all-embracing theory of change. Such a theory is the epitome of a persistent desire to break free from a seemingly inexorable mould. It effectively ushers in *an emergent mode of progress rather than a process*.

Having set up an alternative truth claim, Adūnīs writes dismissively of the totemization of form and conformity. In his *Muqaddimah lil-shi‘r al-‘Arabi* (“An Introduction to Arabic Poetry”), any notion of *conforming to the supposedly prior status of form* is consistently rejected. His scepticism is evident in the following somewhat ironic observation:

In the practice of formalist poets, the old concept of poetics has been repeatedly degraded – at the hands of some poets to a void filled with tintinnabulation.²⁴

Written in 1971, this dramatic assumption of the end of formalist diktat had a pronounced vogue in the interminable period following the collapse of the conventional Arabic literary canon, capturing the spirit of modernity at a time when paradigm shifting was proceeding apace.

Viewed from such a perspective, what has been said about the theory and practice of poetry can now be seen as safely applicable, in a broad sense, to the history of fiction-making, and, more narrowly, to a study of the emergence of the novel within the framework of a changing Arabic narrativity. In other words, the notion of “beginning”, as a key concept imposing itself on the history of the novel, can also be conceived as conflated with the deeply rooted sense of “origin”.

Consider, for instance, the case of the Egyptian modernist Muḥammad Ḥusain Haykal (1888-1956), who, fearing for his social and cultural status, felt unable to put his name to his novel *Zainab*, published in 1913.²⁵ Haykal, now hailed by some critics as the initiator of a new genre, wrote the work in Paris under the pseudonym “Miṣri *fellah*” (“an Egyptian *fellah*”).²⁶ The reason behind this eccentric decision is perhaps best explained by the claim, reiterated in many accounts of the Arabic novel, that the “literary establishment” was inclined to consider the novel “morally dubious and aesthetically inferior”.²⁷

In this light the novel might be seen as a genre newly introduced into the conventional canon of Arabic literature. Yet this proposition of a *spurious genre transgressing the boundaries of literary canonicity* fails to stand up to closer examination. Nothing shows this better than the moral argument propounded by Immanuel Kant, philosopher of the European Enlightenment, who adopted an equally hostile stance towards the reading of novels. According to Kant, whose paradigmatic writings mark the eradication of the medieval world view, the reading of novels is

the worst thing for children, since they can make no further use of it, and it merely affords them entertainment for the moment. Novel-reading weakens the memory. For it would be ridiculous to remember novels in order to relate them to others.²⁸

In what follows, Kant rises, gradually, to a veritable crescendo of didacticism:

Therefore all novels should be taken away from children. Whilst reading them they weave, as it were, an inner romance of their

own, rearranging the circumstances for themselves; their fancy is thus imprisoned, but there is no exercise of thought.²⁹

The reasoning behind this negative appraisal of the novel, which dates back to Kant's early "pre-critical" period,³⁰ is not essentially dissimilar to that attributed to arguments in relation to the Arabic literary canon, casting doubt, as it neatly does, on the genre's moral and aesthetic validity (though it could be argued that such an ultra-didactic stance is not wholly representative of the western canon, albeit constituting an integral part of it). In other words, the dynamics of interpolating a European literary genre (as in the case of *Zainab*) into the sequence of the conventional Arabic canon, and depicting it as the "beginning" of the modern Arabic novel, can be seen as not merely limited to the borrowing of the novel form itself. The process of cultural appropriation has a wider context here. And because of this dependence on context, the content of appropriation will be most burdened by the moral implications surrounding the history of the novel.

In this way the terms of the debate on the rise of the Arabic novel can be shifted into new territory. It is often claimed, as noted above, that the development of an Arabic genre replicating the European novel form of the nineteenth century may be partly elucidated by the "fact"³¹ that the Arabic canon has always viewed fiction as *morally and aesthetically inferior*. Such a view is now, it would seem, less deeply rooted in Arabic thinking. The Egyptian novelist and short story writer Gamāl el-Ghiṭāni, who has long championed the call for an authentic form of fiction, insists that proclaiming *Zainab* as the first attempt to write a modern form of fiction in Arabic is a proleptic proposition. This error in chronology is, he stresses, the result of *taking the wrong turn*:

From the *beginning*, Arabic fiction took the wrong turn. We have always had our own forms of storytelling – and I do not mean just *One Thousand and One Nights*, but also a great number of much more modest and less well known folklore epics, most of which were rendered orally and never recorded. But unfortunately the Arab writer at the turn of the century preferred to imitate European fiction. Such imitation went so far as to give a *false* image of life in Egypt. For example, in *Zainab*, Muḥammad Ḥusain Haykal’s novel which is considered the *first* attempt to write a modern form of fiction in Arabic, there is a scene in which a man confesses his sins. This is obviously a sheer imitation of French fiction, namely of Catholic writers, since in the Islamic tradition there is no such thing as a confession.³²

This passage underlines, profoundly, the imperative need to re-assess the flawed notion of “beginning”, here rather seen in terms of a “wrong turn” taken by Arabic fiction. A critical evaluation of this notion will note, immediately, a tendency on the part of many critics to view a flawed “beginning” as just a case of de facto “origin”. In other words, the critique of literary stock-taking proposed here rests on the assumption that the present periodizing of the history of the novel has to be seen as mere *pseudo-history*. In presenting this “beginning” as a more or less arbitrary *interruption*, one that fails to appreciate the strength of the Arabic narrative tradition, el-Ghiṭāni is at pains to emphasize that any totalizing discourse of modernity and narratology, excluding the legitimacy of authentic ethnic expressions of identity, is neither a “beginning” nor an “origin”.

Let us, finally, say a few words about the boundaries of the two main categories of periodization, determined by their own relatively

autonomous logic and dynamic. Not only in *formal* terms, but in *substantive* ones too, the propositions of “beginning” and “origin” are both mutually exclusive and mutually antipathetic. Beneath these seemingly interchangeable terms there are, at bottom, two sharply distinct processes of sequencing.

¹ The process is piquantly linked to the concept of *ancestral continuity*. Thus the notion of “beginning” is viewed here as an “origin”, imbued as it is with the strong need to emphasize – without substantive proof – an apparently inevitable sense of historical continuity. As an illustration of this attempt to imply a possible total literary/cultural history, coupled with a deliberate abandonment of the notion of discontinuity, we may note Muḥieddin al-Ladhikani’s book *Ābā’ al-ḥadāthah al-‘Arabiyyah* (“The Progenitors of Arab Modernity”) (Cairo: Al-Hay’a al-Miṣriyyah al-‘amma lil-Kitāb, 1998). In viewing a group of highly significant prose writers of the early ninth century (al-Jāḥiẓ, al-Ḥallaj and al-Tawḥīdi) as the ancestral originators of Arab modernity through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, al-Ladhikani appears to underline the biological notion predominantly entailed in the logic of canonical ancestry. (See pp. 7-15.)

In terms of Michel Foucault’s very suggestive tools of analysis, we may say he apparently overlooks the fact that the history of ideas is persistently discontinuous, and, as such, permanently fractured in terms of such concepts as break, displacement, gap, interruption, mutation, rupture and shift. See Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, pp. 3-10, 12-15, 33-5, 40-1, 110-14, 127-8, 151, 152.

² *Al-Thābit wa ’l-mutaḥawwil*, vol. 3, pp. 141-3.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

⁴ I am here using the term in its linguistic sense, to mean that our knowledge of a text’s appropriateness within its context allows us to judge whether or not it deviates from “register”.

⁵ See Makaryk (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Literary Theory*, p. 462; Said, *Beginnings*, preface to the 1985 edition.

⁶ The durable presence of a functioning “origin” denotes a continuous influence. The notion of “beginning”, by contrast, need not be conceived as exercising any such influence; it does not designate an “origin”.

⁷ This is a reference to Bakathīr’s idea of translating Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* into blank verse. “The method he employed in combining blank verse with ‘free-verse’ was also used by Abū Shādi in his poems which he described as *nazm* or *shi‘r mursal ḥurr.*” See Moreh, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

⁸ Badawi, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Yūsuf al-Khāl’s name for the new poetry, *al-shi‘r al-ḥadīth* (“modern poetry”), has served as a “register” of acceptance, supplanting, as we shall see below, all other suggested names. In other words, the concept of modernism represented by the term connotes far more, in terms of ideas, than the mere technical innovations exemplified by the notion of “beginning”. The gist of this model for modern poetry was proposed in a lecture delivered by al-Khāl at al-Nadwa al-Lubnāniyyah in Beirut. See Jarryusi, *Trends and Movements*, Vol. 2, p. 569.

¹¹ In this sense Jubrān’s Romanticism has been hailed by many critics as a catalyst for the emergence of modernism. Jubrān the romantic, that is to say, sowed the seeds of modernism.

¹² There were two strands within the Surrealist movements. The first was that founded in Egypt and represented by George Ḥunein (1914-1973), along with a number of other revolutionary artists, writers and activists having direct links with the Surrealist movements in Europe. The second strand was that represented by two Syrians, Orkhān Muyassar and ‘Alī al-Nāṣir, who, in 1947, published a joint collection of poems entitled *Siryāl*. In Egypt a large group of foreign writers brought to Cairo and Alexandria the revolutionary concepts of Surrealism and Trotskyism. Muyassar wrote an introduction to *Siryāl*, attacking the illiteracy of Arab literary taste – a tacit admission, perhaps, that literary taste was not yet ready to appreciate such extreme forms of expression. In 1992, Adūnīs published his seminal comparative study *Al-Sūfiyyah wa ‘l-suryāliyyah* (“Sufism and Surrealism”), pointing out the influence of the first on the second and thereby domesticating the cultural connotations of Surrealism.

¹³ Voluntarism, in this context, implies the contention that the human will is the only factor in bringing about a radical change *in a pre-modern society*.

¹⁴ *Modernist Poetry in Arabic*, p. 28.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ T.S. Eliot's ideas of objectivity and impersonality have set the agenda for Arab modernists' opposition to impressionistic criticism. The arguments set out by Barthes, Foucault and Derrida to support the concept of the "death of the author" have been presented as trend-setting slogans indicating the position taken by modernist European and Anglo-American criticism. As such, the concept has remained merely decorative in its use!

¹⁷ Hawthorn, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

¹⁸ Badawi, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

¹⁹ Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements*, Vol. 2, pp. 568-9.

²⁰ Yūsuf al-Khāl joined the Syrian National Socialist Party in his youth, and his concept of modernism is deeply rooted in the teachings of the Party's founder, Anṭūn Sa'āda, who "had a lasting effect on his poetry and writings, even after he ceased to be officially connected with the party". See Meisami and Starkey (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Arabic Literature*, Vol. 2, p. 429.

²¹ Quoted in Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements*, Vol. 2, p. 570.

²² As a name, "modern poetry" is an *integrating term* whose domain conjoins a host of uncorrelated accounts of poetic experience. As such it may be seen as an *umbrella term*.

²³ There is a long list of names. See, for instance: Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements*, Vol. 2, p. 569; and Moreh, *op. cit.*, pp. 323-4 (a glossary of terms).

²⁴ Adūnīs, *Muqaddimah lil-shi'r al-'Arabi* ("An Introduction to Arabic Poetry"), Beirut: Dār al-'Awdah, 1971, p. 39.

²⁵ Translated into English by J.M. Grinsted, London, 1989. Cited in Meisami and Starkey (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Arabic Literature*.

²⁶ See Yaḥya Ḥaqqi, *Fajr al-qīṣṣa al-miṣriyyah* ("The Dawn of Egyptian Fiction"), Cairo: Al-Hay'a 'I-Miṣriyyah al-'āmmah lil-Kitāb, 1975.

²⁷ Meisami and Starkey (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Arabic Literature*, Vol. 1, p. 231.

²⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Education*, trans. Annette Churton, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 4th print, p. 73.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ That is to say, his work on education precedes his two epoch-making works *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and does not, as such, embody a full commitment to his idealism.

³¹ This “fact” has now become controversial. *Zainab* – supposedly the first novel in modern Arabic literature, influenced by western models of fiction rather than being developed directly from indigenous Arabic narratology – was actually *sidelined* by its author twenty years after its publication. In 1933, Haykal published *Thawrāt al-adab* (“The Revolt of Literature”), a collection of critical writings in which he strongly promoted the idea of indigenous literature (*adab qawmi*), stressing the continuity of the Egyptian (Arab/Islamic) narrative tradition.

In *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse: A Study in the Sociology of Modern Arabic Literature*, Şabri Hāfiẓ challenges “the widely held assumption that Arabic culture stagnated before its contact with the West at the beginning of the nineteenth century”. In other words, Arabic narratology is rather presented as a convincingly continuous discourse.

³² See Gamāl al-Ghiṭāni, “The Quest for the Authentic and Innovative”, interview in *Banipal: Magazine of Modern Arab Literature* (London), No. 13, Spring, 2002, pp. 10-11.

Similar scepticism is expressed in Roger Allen’s *Introduction to Arabic Literature*. “In any historical survey of the development of the novel, Haykal’s *Zaynab* [*sic*] clearly occupies an important position; the Egyptian countryside is lovingly depicted with the overwhelming sentiment of a writer recalling it from abroad in its most idealistic and romanticised garb (*although it needs to be added that, even when compared with the descriptive detail of al-Muwaylihi’s work of a decade earlier, Zainab comes up short on authenticity*).” Roger Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 184.

7. On Defining Modernity/Modernism in Terms of what it is Not

It seems appropriate, in this section, to examine the paradigm of modernity/modernism as a system of relationships that embody the tension between innovation and convention, thereby producing a Janus-faced phenomenon that looks, simultaneously, in two contrary directions: those of *negation and affirmation*.¹

This point of departure – the proposition of a binarity of competing accounts – leads on to the problem of an array of definitions which appear to cancel themselves out: to the problem, in other words, *of defining modernity in terms of what it is not*.

Prominent among those interlocutors providing interesting observations in an ongoing, cacophonous debate is the Moroccan theorist A.B. al-‘Āli. The observations in question, made in a piece entitled “Al-Gharb ḥadāthah wa taqlīd” (“The West is Modernity and Tradition”),² imply that the *affirmation* of what the paradigm of modernity is can be securely effected via the lens of the *negation* that is its antonym.

Al-‘Āli is particularly averse to any view that “modernity”, as an omnibus category,³ should be viewed, through the emotional perception of popular discourse, as synonymous with the “West”. An insistence (he argues dismissively) on the interchangeability of these two contextually distinct terms means that openness to modernity is premised, by ideology-bound proponents of an “absolute antagonistic position towards the West”, as tantamount to “on the one hand whole-heartedly embracing the values of the West, and, on the other, adopting it and adapting to its lifestyle and methods of thought”.

Such a contention, he explains, rests squarely on a *double misunderstanding*; for those maintaining such a position seem neither willing “to re-examine the West as a separate cognitive category

(enclosed within its own limits), probing into the circumstance of its historical inception, nor capable of delving into the fundamentals of the concept of modernity”.

Because, al-‘Āli suggests, the term is used so variously, emotively and often fervidly, “modernization” is viewed by these ideology-bound proponents as a wilfully acted out process; and the very fact that they are intrinsically selective allows them the possibility of opting for “the parts they deem befitting” while rejecting “the parts they think inappropriate”. The bottom line, al-‘Āli concludes, may be effectively summed up in the following question: “What if the concept of modernity itself should turn out to be the catalyst, the determining factor in the process of change?”

To put the matter rather more intelligibly, the process of modernization may be construed here as an irresistible “historical inevitability (*qadar tārikhi*), a vast invasive movement, influencing both individuals and societies”. As such, modernity should be viewed “not as a monolith of overlapping concepts and notions posited for adoption; not as a philosophy to embrace or advocate; not as a cultural vogue to follow, mimic or reject; but as a mode of being”.⁴

In sum, modernity is a human condition, a cultural disposition, a complex cluster of concepts and notions that are continually produced and reproduced in theory and action: “rationalism, industry, design, planning, the relationship of man with time and space.” The upshot of all this is an inexorable inevitability:

Escaping this raging torrent [of modernization] is a mere illusion, equal only to the illusion of viewing “modernity” and the “West” as contextually synonymous, thus erroneously positing one common monolithic framework conjoining the two categories.

The relationship of these somehow distinct keywords, acting out beyond their domain of validity, renders them neither symmetric nor commutative; for, as a concept:

The West is a blend of modernity and tradition, selfhood and otherness, heritage and contemporaneity. It is not the paradigmatic monolith perceived by its ideology-laden opponents, who persistently overlook a complex of internal differences and nuances, while postulating the West as a cultural enclosure solely identifiable with modernity.

Al-‘Āli makes these points with a view to indicating (albeit obliquely) that the paradigm of modernity is strictly non-temporal,⁵ existing outside the seemingly discordant cultural polarization of East versus West. His purpose is to stress: (a) that modernity should not be perceived as an ideologically contaminated concept; and (b) that the process of modernization springs primarily from a reliance on unconscious as much as conscious convergence – indeed interaction – encompassing permanence and change.

In a sensitive study, published in English under the title *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West*,⁶ the Persian writer Jalāl ‘Ali Aḥmad, who came to prominence in the wake of the Iranian Revolution, proffers a distinct yet not unrelated example of the categories of the “West” and “modernity” being lumped together in some kind of monolithic paradigmatic unity.

The author’s main thesis (which follows an extreme polemic line) is aptly encapsulated as follows by an Iranian critic:

Iran has been stricken by a condition which he likens to an infectious illness and which he calls *Gharbzadagi*,⁷ a difficult term, which has here been translated by Robert Campbell as “*Occidentosis*”. He depicts Iranians, and in particular the educated classes, as having been hypnotized and debilitated by a western education and the influx of western consumer goods. In particular, he is worried by the way in which Iran is being overrun by machines which he identifies as the new weapon of colonialism. The expert technicians and advisers from the West that are needed to maintain and utilize the machines have replaced the old forces of colonialism, while Iran’s own educated classes stand cowed and subservient to their masters from the West.⁸

Unsurprisingly, this infectious “Occidentosis” is then posited as the embodiment of a fusion between the two contextually distinct domains of “West” and “modernity”. And one result of this fusion is described by the author as “the rootlessness and lack of direction of ‘occidentotic’ Iranians”.⁹

This is, of course, an uncompromising value judgement; one stressing the “negative” impact of modernity on the educated Iranian elite. Such a notion – of an all-pervasive experience of rootlessness and lack of direction undermining occidentosis-stricken Iranians – springs from the ongoing process of modernization, and is viewed, by the author, from within the context of a westernization conceived as its cultural synonym. Herein, clearly, lies a disqualification of the whole notion of modernization. Seen as a shorthand term for westernization, it confirms, albeit uncritically, the proposition of an absolute dualistic opposition of the two poles of the essentialist dichotomy of “Orient” versus “Occident”.

The critic quoted responds to this proposition, pointedly, in the same passage, rejecting as redundant the whole notion of an *Oriental exclusivity*.¹⁰ For him, “this is in fact one of the phenomena of the malaise of modernity”, and is consequently “just as applicable to many in the West”.

The point about the foregoing disputational account, outlining certain examples of what modernity is in terms of what it is not, is that the examples in question portray modernity as an all-encompassing category; one which – grounding a primordial condition – subtends, albeit obliquely, so many different phenomena: cultural, ideological, psychological, and so on. The very concept of the modern is thus too frequently robbed of contextual specificity in order to function as a preponderant framework for a “mode of being”.

A more relevant and particular example of theory-making, informed specifically by modern Arabic poetry, is set out in Adūnīs’s delineation of what he pointedly terms “superficial modernity”. Such a version of modernity (Adūnīs explains), holding forth as it does on a cluster of seemingly self-evident truths, “is engendered partly by a fear of confronting the true state of Arab culture and partly by an understanding which stops at appearances, giving rise to many illusions”.¹¹ For Adūnīs, there are a number of illusions acting as specific obstacles to the development of modern poetry.

The first illusion, springing from a false belief regarding the nature of modernity, is epitomized by the concept of *al-zamaniyyah* (temporality). Modernity, Adūnīs argues, is erroneously viewed by some as “the quality of being directly connected with and alive to the present moment”. Thus, “to seize the movement of change in this moment is proof of modernity”. For him this is a misconception, based, quite

evidently, on linear thinking – a process whereby time is seen as embodying or resembling a single line of progression:

It is obvious that these people view time as a series of regular uninterrupted leaps forward, so that what happens today is necessarily an advance on what happened yesterday, and what happens tomorrow is an advance on both.

Such a view is widely held; and it shifts the debate to the idea of *mu'āṣarah* (contemporaneity), to the concept of *rāhiniyyah* (currentness), or of belonging to a present time persistently occurring as the contextual determinant of meaning.

The alternative concept implicit in Adūnīs's position is thus more unequivocally hostile to linear thinking than might at first sight appear. It is a concept, indeed, whose connotations propose a seamless web of unsettling assumptions: discontinuity, interruption, rupture, shift.¹²

The evident misconception of modernity becomes all the more revealing, in the light of Adūnīs's account, when viewed from within what happens to poetry. As he cogently argues:

The mistake of this tendency is to turn poetry into a *style*, ignoring the essential point that most modern poetry goes *beyond* the present moment, or goes *against* it. Poetry does not acquire its modernity merely from being *current*. Modernity is a characteristic latent in the cultural structure of poetic language.

The upshot is that, as a manner of expressing thought and feeling in language, “style”, the seemingly unassailable domain, is for Adūnīs the

antonym of poetic language. He is thus, in a sense, resolutely dismissive of the constrictive connotations embedded in the very concept of style.

As for Adūnīs's contention that modern poetry goes either "beyond" the present or "against" it – thereby ruling out as unviable the notion of *rāhiniyyah* (currentness) as some kind of "now" surrounding us – this must be seen as reflecting an underlying tendency to perceive modernity as a culture of opposition. In other words, modernity is viewed, through the lens of an oppositional criticism, as symptomatic of the ills that need to be diagnosed.

The second illusion is "the desire to be different from the ancients at all costs". This illusion stems from viewing the paradigm of modernity as the result of an open-ended tension between tradition and innovation. Yet the tradition of, for example, such poets as Abū Nuwās (755-813) or al-Niffari (d. 1291),¹³ reveals, so Adūnīs tells us, no mode of conventionalism. Those adhering to this illusion, he notes disapprovingly, "think that merely to be different from what has gone before is proof of modernity". Such a position (Adūnīs continues) asserts an "instrumental" point of view, "which turns creativity into a game of opposites, like the doctrine of *al-zamaniyyah* (temporality)". There is no reference here to the limits of "difference" as a criterion for successful inquiry. Adūnīs's present concern is rather to highlight the "game" implied by the "doctrine of temporality":

One sets "ancient" times against "new" times, the other, the "ancient" text against the "new" text. Thus innovation in poetry resembles waves on the surface of the water, vanishing one after another, despite the fact that a brief glance at the poetry of Abū Nuwās or al-Niffari, for example, reveals it as more modern than much of the counter-poetry of poets who are alive today.

Here is a straightforward advocacy of a decontextualized model of modernity. Modernity is ultimately a timeless phenomenon, a context-free category; and poetry, for Adūnīs, consists principally in creativity, which is timeless too, regardless of when or where. The closing sentences of *Al-Shi'riyyah al-'Arabiyyah* are emblematic of this:

Modernity should be a creative vision, or it will be no more than fashion. Fashion grows old from the moment it is born, while creativity is ageless. Therefore not all modernity is creativity but creativity is eternally modern.¹⁴

In the present context, what merits attention is what is implied by Adūnīs's disapproval of the "doctrine of temporality". Far from embodying any attempt to dehistoricize modernity by viewing it in absolute terms as a timeless category, his argument tends to suggest the following: (a) that modern poetry does not converge with the present moment, but rather goes beyond it; and (b) that it is therefore at cross-purposes with the present, if not at actual loggerheads with it. For Adūnīs, then, the relationship of modernity and time is not *synchronic*, even if the factors it brings into play do belong to the same moment in the present.

The third illusion brings us once more to Adūnīs's stance on cultural mimicry: on the act of appropriating from another culture, or copying or slavishly imitating it. It is in this context that mimicry is viewed as grounding an implicit assertion of the notion of "authenticity", thus suggesting the construction of false identity. In the present case, the idea of being the willing subject of a continuous play of European cultural prowess highlights the threat intrinsic in mimicry: namely, the tendency to view other cultures as essentially superior.

Cultural authenticity, as set forth in modern Arabic poetry, addresses a broad phenomenon through a specific case. For Adūnīs, authenticity is first and foremost a matter of identification.

The West is supposedly the source of modernity. There is no modernity outside western poetry¹⁵ and its standards: to be modern it is necessary to *identify* with western poetry. From this there arises an illusion about *norms* where standards of modernity in the West, springing from a specific language and experience, become the standards for a language and experience of a different nature.¹⁶

The method employed here is straightforward: it is a matter of cutting the ground from under the feet of some Arab critics by showing that “difference” is crucially important. The term “difference” refers, persistently, to a preoccupation with the ideas of *cultural identity and contextual specificity*.

The notion of “difference” would appear to have its origin, primarily, in French critical theory. Fundamental to the approach of Ferdinand de Saussure is the view that language itself works as a system of difference. In Adūnīs’s argument, on the other hand, the emphasis is not on language in a broad sense but more specifically on the language of poetry, perceived as designating “different” cultural identity. The other determiner noted by Adūnīs is “contextual”; it is constituted, formulated and defined by “difference” as positing the interrelated conditions in which Arab culture exists. If these assumptions are viewed as plausible, the core of the Adūnīsian critique of difference begins to look less essentialized¹⁷ – in marked contrast to an Orientalist ontology that fixes its gaze on “difference” as a self-perpetuating point of reference, posing the problem in terms of a polarized divergence between East and West.

Another way of putting this is to note the centrality, in Adūnīs's observations above, of what he calls *wahm al-mumāthalah*¹⁸ (the illusion of identification), involving the concept of Eurocentrism – the conscious or unconscious process whereby European cultural assumptions are deployed as the norms of the natural and the universal. For Adūnīs, Arabic literary theory, rather than adopting a process of identification, is open to the possibilities of reconstructing relations of difference, through an emphasis on the destabilizing process of “disidentification”. Once again, it is the fact of difference-inclusion that is emphasized.

Tending as it does to eschew the negatively oriented tendency of ideological otherness, this tentative position may be seen as tactical rather than strategic.¹⁹ It does not negate current affinities with western literary theory; it simply implies, albeit obliquely, an attempt to redress the balance.

The fourth illusion has, as its focus, the long-running debate that arose following the emergence of prose as a modern poetic form; the central issue at stake, in this ongoing dispute, being the complex question of conformity. Addressing this question in relation to modernity, Adūnīs notes as follows:

There are those who believe that simply to write in prose, because it is different from the old metric writing and conforms to models of poetic prose in the West, is a way in to modernity.

This, he continues, leads on to the erroneous conclusion that “all metric writing is derivative²⁰ and old fashioned and all free verse is innovatory and modernist”.

As a technical feature, “versification” is seen here not as a process of *nazm* comprising structured technical devices of verse (patterns of

variation and repetition involving rhythm and sound), but rather as a process of *sha'ranah* (poetization), namely turning prose into free verse without following any rhyme scheme. The main innovation in this respect is that the rhythmic flow is based on the free expression of unfettered thought or emotion.

The argument, Adūnīs points out, begins to lose coherence when free verse is elevated to the level of superior art form *per se*. Conformity to models of poetic prose in the West is conceived, consequently, as a substitute for critical evaluation of the status, rank or merit of this “new” form.

Turning to the other possibility embedded in his central observations, Adūnīs suggests a similar emphasis:

This is the reverse of the traditionalist concept that metre in itself is poetry, and prose of whatever kind is the antithesis of poetry. The emphasis is placed not on the substance of poetry but on its external form.

Yet the presence, or absence, of some formal devices of poetry poses far more than a question of aesthetic style or poetic methodology. Adūnīs is well aware that literary rules, whether primary or derivative, can never ensure genuine end-product poetry. “Neither metre nor free verse,” he insists, “is enough in itself to ensure that the final product will be poetry.” Indeed:

We all know verse which has metre and rhyme but is nothing to do with poetry, and supposedly poetic contemporary free verse which is similarly devoid of poetry.

Adūnīs's reading of and response to the *distorted* impact, on modern Arabic poetry, of some models of western poetic prose is for the most part insistently contextual. His intention, one may assume, has not been to trace external influences on Arabic literary theory, but to assert the presence of culturally contextual differences between the general tenets of two distinctive poetics. Thus the focal point is not the common tenets reflecting certain common features, that is, affinities. The emphasis here is rather on the misrepresentation of modern Arab poetics, whereby persistent negative strands are highlighted.

The fifth illusion concerns "content", the term being used by Adūnīs to designate the theme of a work, the statement of its meaning, the connotation of its central idea.

A poetic text, he argues, cannot be seen as modern merely because of an implicit connection with current issues.

Those who subscribe to this illusion believe that every poetic text which treats contemporary issues is necessarily modern, a claim which does not stand up to examination, for a poet can treat these themes according to his intellectual understanding of them, while his artistic approach and manner of expression remain traditional.

In the light of the above, it would appear that the stress in neo-classicist poetry has been placed, all too evidently, on modernizing the content of the poem to provide a norm, a benchmark for its modernity. Adūnīs goes on to say:

From the Iraqis, al-Ruṣāfi (1875-1945) and al-Zahāwi (1863-1936), and the Egyptians, Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm (1872-1932) and Aḥmad Shawqī (1868-1932), up to the present, there are numerous examples, as

there are in the work of all those poets who express their “modern” ideological belief in their poetry.

These examples of “neo-classicism” share a common ground. They are posited as *invalidated* models whereby “newness” has now become virtually redundant. By reducing the concept of modern poetry to “content” as opposed to “form”, these models effectively project a seamless web of connotations lacking in freshness and originality. Consisting as they do of conventional thought, emotion and attitude, they not only reiterate a cluster of overused devices of poetry slavishly retrieved from the past but also seek persistently to reproduce them.

One strand of this revivalist movement emerges clearly in what Adūnīs dismisses as *shi‘riyyat al-kalām*²¹ *al-qadīm*, meaning the poetics of old modes of expression.

Having established (following Saussure) that *al-kalām*, speech (“la parole”), or mode of literary expression, must now be viewed as distinct from *al-lisān*, language (“la langue”) – as being the subjective, autonomous and unconfined deployment of language, and understood in terms of the dynamics of feeling and emotion uncontrolled, therefore, by the mechanism of language alone – Adūnīs now proceeds to investigate the revivalist and neo-classicist with specific reference to samples of Shawqī’s poetry, viewing these as the pattern *par excellence* for flawed attempts to modernize poetry. One such sample is a *qaṣīda* (poem) whose subject matter (or “speech”) is the city of Paris. This subject matter, Adūnīs notes, comprises three elements: love, praise (*madīḥ*) and reminiscence (*dhikra*).

Shawqī’s diction draws on classical Arabic poetry; and, as such, its metaphorical performance seems increasingly conventional. The denotational and connotational relationships grounding the structure of

the poem result in the reproduction of images, allusions and concepts that do not correspond to Paris, the “modern” city which is the subject matter. The poet here describes a state of war: the beloved attacks her lover with the “weapon” of her eyes; the eyes are as “swift” as a sword, etc.

The diction is based, in short, on a view of love from a strictly conventional perspective, maintaining a crudely mimetic function within a framework of pre-modernity. Similarly, the element of praise (*madīh*) reiterates the same old cluster of words: Paris is *jannah*²² (“paradise”); it is the culmination of “glory”, “wisdom”, “science”; and it is, furthermore, “the epoch, the queen of time, the righteous, the beam of civilization”. This is the Paris of the present time. As for the past, Paris is envisioned as “a lion and a gazelle”.²³

Moving now to the “speech” of reminiscence (*dhikra*), this is presented by Shawqi as a window on a long-running poetic diction. For him, Adūnīs explains, Paris is seen as a “playground for youth”, and “poetry alone is worthy of lavishing praise on it”. In one sense, the notion of the poet’s intended newness gives way to a verbal play of signifiers (words) producing and reproducing unsurprising signifieds (concepts). As such, the self-identity of the signifieds repeats itself ceaselessly, remaining, thus, in a state of permanent fixity.

Finally, there is (as noted in this brief exposé) a certain web of words that, when set against the poem’s subject matter, are still more infelicitous, in the sense that they disclose unremittingly ideology-laden connotations. Take, for instance, some of the core vocabulary noted by Adūnīs as possessing an unmistakably theological pedigree: “paradise”, “abundance” (*kawthar*),²⁴ “heaven”, “revelation” (*wahy*). For Adūnīs the employment of such terminology is intrinsically duplicative.²⁵ It is more intended than attended, and, as such, must be seen in terms of rote learning and parroting: the poetic diction is the result, constantly, of a

mechanical use of memory. As a result the ideological underpinning of this diction emerges as the direct efflux of a collective memory, being regurgitated before an audience rather than offering any intimate model of autonomous poetic subjectivity. What we have here, in fact, is a classic example of “denotation” whereby a “clichégenic”²⁶ vocabulary is associated with the closure of meaning. On the other hand, as Adūnīs is anxious to stress, the introduction of a prefabricated poetic diction is indicative of the blockage of “connotative” flow.

Having provided examples of how ideologically structured terminology works, he concludes that the diction of Shawqī’s poem is no longer capable of producing *kalām* in the sense of being a “speech”; of being, that is, a personal language actually used by the speaker as opposed to language broadly based on a system of signs (*lisān*). As a result, a depersonalized model of *kalām*, drawing heavily as it does on a repository of hackneyed words and expressions whose communicative function predominates in practical and emotional language, is the price the “revivalist” poet must pay for his stress on conventionality – a feature in evidence in numerous texts lacking either individuality or originality. It is this ideological use of *al-kalām* (or mode of literary expression) that leads Adūnīs’s search to an unflinchingly ideological structure, embedding Shawqī’s poem. Predictably enough, this demonstrably evident structure is the outcome of a retrieval of a “common discourse” (*khiṭāb mushtarak*), proposing the function of clichégenically-oriented words. This is exactly what the poetic diction has done in its capacity for (in Adūnīs’s terminology) “weaving a Salafi²⁷ texture with a Salafi loom”.

The crucial point for Adūnīs is that *al-kalām*, being a personal language, is context-sensitive. Yet the poetic diction in Shawqī’s poem is both ideology-oriented and context-free. It has, Adūnīs explains, become

a collective *kalām* conjoining “the rites of Salafi lore and its manner of expression”.²⁸ What all this amounts to is that Shawqi has wilfully deployed *al-kalām* in an ideological manner, thus persistently repeating a “collectively inherent discourse”. The poem is, in other words, an “ideological construction”.

How then (Adūnīs asks) may this “ideological structure” be unveiled? The answer he proposes may be summed up as follows:

- (a) On the level of *kalām* (“parole”), that is, individual utterances and their meanings, Shawqi is “not an individual uttering his own words but a speaker repeating common utterances”. As a poet, therefore, he is not present in his own self but in this (clichégenic) *kalām*, regurgitating a Salafi poetic discourse; and, in consequence, the ideological dimension is not individualistic but collective, the poetic voice purely conventional. Yet convention, here, does not innovate but rather lends support to the power of a ruminant “parole”.
- (b) On the level of *lisān*, that is the workings within language that underlie its system of rules and distinctions, Shawqi seems to “opt for particular words”. These words imply the importance, indeed the glory of Paris, the subject matter of his poem.
- (c) The nature of Shawqi’s speech is “neither argumentative nor contemplative nor informative”. It is a patronizing speech suggesting a process of patronage whereby Paris – which is representative of a kind of reality different from Egyptian or Arab-Islamic reality – becomes subservient to an entirely dissimilar speech modality.

- (d) Shawqi's speech is the retrieved form of Salafi power. The meaning and form of Paris is, in this sense, contained by this power.
- (e) The concept of the "other", depicted by Paris, is therefore "a representation or extension of the 'self' as presented by Shawqi's speech". When, Adūnīs insists, the "other" is viewed as an extension of "myself", this amounts to a process of negation – in other words, his/her separate identity has been negated. Hence the conclusion that the poem points out two absences: Paris and the poet. The study of Shawqi's poem thus confirms the arguments proposed by Adūnīs with regard to *al-Nahḍah*, the term used by Arab writers to describe the process of Arabic literary and cultural revival which took place during the second half of the nineteenth century and early years of the twentieth. This process of renewal, it is often claimed, anticipated later trends and movements leading to modernist poetry.

It follows, not unexpectedly, that these and a host of other questions have persistently accompanied that reversion to a classical poetic diction which was central to *al-Nahḍah*'s model of modernization. However, the great merit of Adūnīs's critique of this ideological reversion has been to force the trajectory of argument beyond Shawqi's sterile "newness", which long seemed modern Arabic poetry's only alternative. In a sense, indeed, the essence of this critique has become the focal point for Arabic literary theory today.

¹ A line in an anonymous pre-Islamic poem may conveniently serve to confirm the dynamism of this polarity: "Beauty is revealed by its opposite." A synthesis combining different versions of the poem, which is contested between forty Jāhili poets, was recently produced in a spirit of open modern vision. See Kamāl Abū Dīb

(ed.), *Al-Durrah al-yatīmah* ("The Orphan Pearl"), with detailed study of the text, Beirut: Mawāqif Publications, 2000.

Opposites play an important part in the Greek world view: Plato and Aristotle analyzed change as a passage from one opposite to another. Goethe and the Romantics endorsed the notion that the world essentially involves opposition or polarity. See Michael Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, p. 206.

The binary use of opposites is highly characteristic of structuralism, though Derrida has called this methodology into question. Deployment of the method of polar opposition is proposed here in a pragmatic sense. As such, the validity of the concept of polarity is regarded as determined solely by the practical consequences of this deployment.

² *Al-Hayāt* (Arabic) daily, London, 6 January 2002, p. 20.

³ The term "omnibus" is used in a multiplicity of disciplines (and has perhaps been overworked of late in Arabic writings). Modernity appears "omnibus" in its capacity to include a considerable variety of disputatious propositions.

⁴ Al-'Āli seems here to be in full agreement with Hishām Sharābi, who also depicts modernity as a "mode of being". In contrast, however, to Sharābi's piquant conclusion that this "mode of being" is not a model to aspire to or an example to imitate, al-'Āli stresses that Arabic thought has no choice but to take on board the extra intellectual baggage contained in modernity. For Sharābi, intellectuals of the post-colonial periphery, including the Arab world, "can ill afford the risk of philosophical and theoretic skepticism [involved in modernity]; and even were they to take this risk, it would – probably – only lead them to political paralysis". See Sharābi, *Neopatriarchy*, p. x.

⁵ The validation of this conclusion is underlined when modernity is not conceived as historically too narrow. Consider, for instance, Jürgen Habermas's argument:

People considered themselves modern during the period of Charles the Great in the 12th [*sic*] century, as well as in France of the late 17th century at the time of the famous "Querelles des Anciens et des Modernes". That is to say, the term "modern" *appeared* and *reappeared* exactly during those periods in Europe when the consciousness of a new epoch formed itself through a renewed relationship to the ancients – whenever, moreover, antiquity was considered a model to be recovered through some kind of imitation.

See Jürgen Habermas, “Modernity – An Incomplete Project”, in Vincent B. Leitch (ed.), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, New York and London: W.W. Norton and Co., 2001, p. 1749.

The negation of the notion of “temporality” (*al-zamaniyyah*) is emphasized in Adūnīs, *Introduction to Arab Poetics*, p. 86.

⁶ Edited by Hamid Algar, trans. R. Campbell, Berkeley, California: Mīzān Press, 1984. The work is cited here as illustrating the impact of modernization on post-colonial periphery regions. Written originally in Persian and dealing with distorted change in Iranian culture and society, the book represents – with regard to Arab-Islamic culture – a distinct but not unrelated experience.

⁷ An ardent critic of the Iranian fascination with the West, Jalāl ‘Ali Aḥmad, author of *Gharb-zadagi* (variously translated elsewhere as “West-struckness”, “Westoxication” and “Euromania”), appears to launch his attack on the West from within a firm sense of Iranian identity based on Islamic sentiment. His sudden rise to prominence following the Iranian Revolution reflects Islamic fundamentalist credentials. Nevertheless, the book’s authority, according to a scholar of modern Persian literature, “is founded on a close familiarity with the *other*”. It is well known, he writes, “that it grows out of a reading of Heidegger’s dialogue with Ernst Jünger on the shortcomings of European culture in *Über die Linie*”. See Michael Beard, *Hedayat’s Blind Owl as a Western Novel*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990, p. 224.

⁸ See M. Momen’s review of *Occidentosis in the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies Bulletin*, ed. J.D. Latham, Vol. 14, No. 2, London, 1988, pp. 227-8.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ This rejection of the notion of “Oriental exclusivity” in a sense underlines Michael Beard’s remark on the same point, cited above.

¹¹ Adūnīs, *Introduction to Arab Poetics*, pp. 86, 87, 88.

¹² Adūnīs’s critique of conventional methodology recalls Foucault’s concept of discontinuity. For the conventional literary historian, time is made up of a multiplicity of instances which he must remould into a continuous narrative. In contrast, Foucault (as has been previously pointed out) stresses the idea of history as discontinuous, made up of a series of breaks, displacements, gaps, mutations, shifts.

¹³ Al-Niffari was a Sufi thinker and poet “who left behind him a series of ‘revelations’ (*Kitāb al-mawāqif* and *Kitāb al-mukhāṭabāt*) purporting to have been received from God in a state of ecstasy, possibly by automatic writing”. See A.J. Arberry, *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam*, London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1950, 1979, p. 64.

In his *Al-Šūfiyyah wa 'l-suryāliyyah* (“Sufism and Surrealism”), pp. 185-93, Adūnīs refers to the writings of al-Niffari as emblematic of what he aptly calls “the poetics of thought”. His reading of this curious and interesting Sufi theorist has led him to the discovery of the poetry of thought.

¹⁴ Adūnīs, *Introduction to Arab Poetics*, pp. 101-2.

¹⁵ In this sense the opponents of modern Arabic poetry effectively support Europeans’ belief in their own superiority by accepting the cultural assumptions of Eurocentrism.

¹⁶ Adūnīs, *Introduction to Arab Poetics*, p. 87.

¹⁷ “Difference” here is not an absolute category.

¹⁸ This is the expression used by Adūnīs in the Arabic text of *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*. See *Al-Shi'riyyah al-'Arabiyyah*, Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1985, 1989, p. 94.

¹⁹ Adūnīs’s view of Arab civilization confirms this point. Consider, for instance, the following passage:

Modernity in Arabic poetry had its origins in a climate which brought together two independent elements: awareness of the new urban culture which developed in Baghdad in the eighth century, and a new use of the language to embrace this awareness and express it in poetry. It developed in a spirit of opposition to the ancient, *at the same time interacting with non-Arab currents*. The whole thrust of Arab civilization testifies to this, for *it is a synthesis of the pre-Islamic period and Islam, from whence it derives its origins and heritage, and of other cultures – Persian, Greek and Indian – through adoption and interaction*, permeated by the most ancient elements deposited in the *historical memory: Sumerian, Babylonian, Aramaean and Syriac*.

See *Introduction to Arab Poetics*, p. 89.

²⁰ Derived, that is, from traditional *taqlidi* poetry.

²¹ A chapter in Adūnīs’s *Siyāsat al-shi'r* (“The Politics of Poetry”), Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1985, pp. 89-105. The Arabic term *al-kalām*, as used by Adūnīs, is different from its use in *'ilm al-kalām* (the science of debate), denoting rather an argumentative discipline of Islamic thought broadly referred to as theology.

²² *Jannah* (“garden”) is used in the Qur’ān to refer to paradise and thus has a religious connotation. The Qur’ān describes it as: the garden of delight; the garden of eternal life; the garden of refuge; and paradise. See Jan Knappert, *The Encyclopaedia of Middle Eastern Mythology and Religion*, Shaftesbury, Dorset: Element Books, 1993, p. 169.

²³ See Adūnīs, *Siyāsat al-shi’r*, p. 91.

²⁴ *Al-kauthar* means “ample”, “plentiful”, “abundant”. The religious connotation of the word is reflected in the name of the Qur’ānic *Sūra* entitled *Al-Kauthar*. Unbelievers would taunt the Prophet with the fact that he had no son, and therefore no one to uphold his religion after him. See Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Glorious Qur’ān*, text and explanatory translation, New York: Muslim World League Publications, 1977, p. 735. In Islamic mythology, al-Kauthar is the name of a river in heaven.

²⁵ That is, amenable to repetition.

²⁶ This neologism is borrowed from the sociologist Anton C. Zijderveld. See A.C. Zijderveld, *On Clichés: The Supersedure of Meaning by Function in Modernity*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979, p. 26.

²⁷ *Al-Salafiyyah* is the name of a reformist movement associated with Muḥammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905), the Grand Mufti of Egypt. ‘Abduh’s emphasis on the need for an Islamic renaissance based on a modern world view has been influential in many Islamic countries. However, the failure of the Salafi movement to advance Islamic modernization resulted in the subsequent debasement of the term “Salafi” itself.

²⁸ *Siyāsat al-shi’r*, p. 92.

III. Modernism: Closing the Synthetic Circle

The foregoing arguments, discordant if nonetheless interrelated thus far, will vary from writer to writer by virtue of the semiotic logic involved; and indeed, the sense of most other terms relating to modernity, and to modernism in its various fields, will depend on who is producing the meaning, and on how each person understands “meaning” itself, which always bears the interpretative marks placed upon it by the cultural context.

Giving a broader sense to articulation will, as such, place these seemingly floating arguments and counter-arguments in context. It will raise the problem of definition and underline the *adaptability* of literary theory, which continuously remakes meanings (where the old ones are insufficiently precise for the purpose in hand), rather than seeking the precision of an accomplished, self-confirming stability.¹

Yet this is only part of the complex process of articulating, and of providing a framework for closing the synthetic circle. What the notion of a framework for synthetic closure might entail here is the emergence, through the construction of an overall pattern – achieved through the interplay of the modern and its antithesis – of a sense of an open-ended final stage of reasoned argument based on modernism and its antonym. Far from being fixed in some essentialized monolith, such a framework ensures, albeit tentatively, that the meanings and significations of modernity/modernism are not reducible to any single trend or approach.

The other complicating factor is that the epithet “modern” (as has been obliquely pointed out) refers to a vibrant project that is still in *flux*, being permanently made and remade, and subject to the continuous play of contradictory versions of internal contexts and external influences built

up by such cultural transmitters as literary and critical works, universalized ideas and globalized media.

Adunīs's account of the *permeability* and *complementarity* of culture clearly leads on to an immensely powerful notion of *cultural interaction*, which is necessary if any *effective creativity* is to take place at all:

The effectiveness of Arab creativity . . . demonstrates that no culture exists in isolation from other cultures – they give and take from each other; they influence and are influenced. It also shows that the first condition for this process of interaction is that it should be characterized by *creativity* and *particularity* at the same time. This combination carried Arab-Islamic civilization at its most mature to the West by way of Andalusia.²

Modernism's antithetical terms

It might be argued, conversely, that a further important point should be underlined here. As a term, the “modern” has come to be linked with a cluster of associatory concepts, such as the antithetical terms “ancient”, “traditional”, “authentic”, “pre-modern”, “anti-modern” and “postmodern”. From this springs the problem of positing, erroneously, one “pre-given” version of cultural identity, fixed and rooted in some mythologized past. *Cultural identity always refers, in this slower rhythm of modernization, to the notion of renovating rather than innovating*, correlative to a misleading interpretation of an essentialized model of *aṣālah* (authenticity). Much Arabic anti-modernist poetry and theory is self-consciously atavistic. A matter of crucial concern, still, in contemporary literary theory is the claim – advanced by some writers of mainstream Islamist revivalism, both pre-modern and anti-modern – that

the new paradigm can be embraced only at the expense of the old. The implication here is that the very concept of renewal must be based on understanding the present not on its own terms but in terms of the past.³ The notion of newness must (it is suggested) be altered, even subverted – for is it not constantly at loggerheads with essentialist *a priori* assumptions about a changeless sense of authenticity? This notion of a sense of authenticity – permanent, immutable and everlasting – is best exemplified in M.S. al-Rāfi‘i’s portrayal of the concept of innovation. Consider, for instance, his understanding of this term as posited in *Taḥta rāyāt al-Qur’ān* (“Under the Banner of the Qur’ān”): “Innovation means that an innovationist writer is a plagiarist living off European books . . .” Such a writer is, he adds significantly, “an atheist without a religion”.⁴

From this standpoint, then, innovation is perceived disparagingly as an act of ignominious appropriation, a deliberate abdication, on the part of the writer, of his own sense of cultural identity. In this lingering context, innovation thus becomes “no more than mere fiction; a betrayal of truth itself”.⁵ In sum, “fiction” is seen, from this fundamentalist perspective, as emblematic of inauthentic reality, and as denoting, specifically, a culturally contaminated state of “otherness”.

“Fact”, by contrast, is viewed as implying a sense of belonging to the authentic self, to the literalness implicit in a permanently fixed, indigenous and uncontaminated reality. It is precisely in this locus that the theological connotation of authenticity is pointedly emphasized. By stressing the notion of faithfulness to, and emulation of, a fossilized origin, an “authentic” writer becomes the replicator of a primordial model, equipping its quintessential epitome with fundamentalist pretensions. Thus, innovation should finally be rejected (without adequate grounds) as intrinsically inauthentic.

Sayyed Quṭb, an exponent of Islamic anti-modern fundamentalism,⁶ adopted just such a line. For him, Arab culture should emulate, strictly, the churlish purism of Ibn Taymiyyah (1268-1328),⁷ whose exclusivist, radical and dogmatic postulations⁸ brought him into conflict with the Mamluks of Egypt, and led to his consequent imprisonment. In *Ma'ālim fi 'l-ṭarīq* ("Milestones Along the Way"), Quṭb links his position to Ibn Taymiyyah's regressive cultural model, asserting, with disapproval, that the majority of present-day Muslims are living as Jāhiliis (i.e., following the pagan ways of Arabs prior to the coming of Muḥammad and the revelation). Hence his insistence, all-encompassing and relentless, on a reversionary form of cultural identity, effectively embodying a call for a return to the values of the Qur'ān, and for following the example of *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ* (pious epigones).

This paradigm of revivalism, standing over against global secular modernity, is by no means as homogeneous as it is commonly taken to be. Nevertheless, the following examination of the discourse of cultural authenticity, which is the inner core of Islamic revivalism, seems tailor-made to encompass Islamic history as an ontologically differentiated cultural register; for, in A. Al-Azmeh's apt words, "history", viewed through the lens of fundamentalism,

takes place in two registers, one of which has a decided ontological distinction over the other: the authentic and the inauthentic, that of the Islamic self, and that of its corruptions by otherness, such as non-Islamic people and religions, schisms, heresies and manifold enemies. The one is posited as original, hence necessary and in accord with nature, for Islam is a primeval religion (*dīn al-fiṭra*), and the other is posited as contingent, mere history, the passage of

time as sheer succession and pure seriality, bereft of significance, and therefore of quality.⁹

This binary either/or framework, which is key to Islamic revivalism, would appear to suggest, albeit obliquely, that its avowedly essentialist posture is indicative of a form of *orientalism in reverse*. In this sense, Islamic revivalism's repudiation of cultural otherness must be seen as an explicit affirmation of the *ontological differentialism* often proposed in the construction of the "Orient" in European thinking. Not only does Al-Azmeh express repeated disapproval of the essentialism proposed by two seemingly discordant modes of cultural identity; he is also at pains to call into question the very notion of one sole modernity. For him, clearly, a multiplicity of modernities exists. Hence:

Modernity – and indeed, modernism in its various fields – is not confined to Europe, but is universal civilization, which from mercantile beginnings came utterly to transform the economies, societies, politics and cultures of the world, and to reconstitute the non-European world in terms of actually existing historical breaks.¹⁰

It should now be clear that the *reversionary model* of renewal, epitomized by *al-Nahḍah* which occurred during the second half of the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth century, has since become ever more intensified, thus re-establishing its link to religious literalism. Writing in 1992, Akbar Aḥmad¹¹ asserted that *postmodernism*¹² has now become reconcilable with Islamic revivalism; for, if modernism is viewed as emblematic of western domination, postmodernism (he argued) represents the recovery of a tradition existing prior to the domination of

the modern. As such, the logic implicit in western postmodernism, in its current phase of religious resurgence, suggests a restatement of a shared common cultural root, an emphasis on what “Orient” and “Occident” have in common. Such a position seems, paradoxically, to overlook the fact that the mythic-religious, as epitomized in postmodernism, is simply *a shorthand term for a more rigid variance of ontological differentialism*, whereby the very process of displacing the essentialized components present in modernism runs counter to the pursuit of a possible vibrant theory of change.

To return to the central point, the binaristic structure – within which the realm of the “authentic” and the “inauthentic”, the “self” and its “otherness”, are always and eternally separate and can never be linked – implies an extreme form of essentialism. And this is the locus where literary fundamentalism slips into solipsism. Hence a solipsist discourse, epitomized by the assumption of moral superiority,¹³ operates only through the positionality of an essentialist dualism, one best defined in terms of the impossibility of cultures living in enclosures – rupture being their only messenger.

The following definition marking the limits of the freshly coined term “Islamic literature” imposes, within the context of the newly emergent concept of literary fundamentalism, many theological constraints. A. Zāyed writes as follows:

Islamic literature is based on Islamic thought, on Islamic perception of the world of *ghaib*, i.e., the world of the invisible, the world of divine secrets, and the world of *shahāda*, i.e., the world of attesting to the truthfulness of Islam.¹⁴

In similar vein, discussing the realm of “otherness”, this same writer deploys the circular reasoning implicit in the tautology:

Literature that is not in full agreement with Islamic principles, and produced by non-Muslim writers, is deemed non-Islamic . . . be it Christian, Jewish, Buddhist . . . existentialist or secularist.¹⁵

This tendency to prejudge other cultures on the basis of absolute commitment to a faith is inevitably negative, and it serves to promote racism. And what is true of religion, as epitomized by literary fundamentalism, is true of ethnicity in western thought. *Ontological differentialism is, then, the doctrinal core of both religion and ethnicity.* In this way, literary fundamentalism stands ethnicity (the discredited generalization of race within western thought) on its head.

On the other hand, the concept of Islamic literature, the outward manifestation of political fundamentalism, suggests that *cultural authority resides not in literature but in religion.* The arbitrary paradigm shift implicit in such a position must not, nevertheless, be seen in terms of *creative resistance*, but simply as a *reaction to an increasingly dominant secular modernity.*

It may be useful, finally, to note that this dualistic aspect of fundamentalism is best illuminated in terms of ‘Abdul Jan Muhammad’s proposed “Manichean allegory”,¹⁶ whereby implacable opposition is ceaselessly produced between a binarity of irreconcilable forces. The fundamentalist world view projected by this allegory – exemplifying a dualistic representation of good versus evil – is emblematic of A.B. Sā‘i’s redefinition of the concept of “Jāhili literature”.¹⁷ Adopted by Ibn Sallām al-Jumāhi with a view to dividing Arabic poetry into *jāhili* (pre-Islamic) as opposed to *Islāmi* (Islamic), this keyword has recently been

re-interpreted by Sā'ī as a pointedly theological term. By thus propounding a *Manichean framework* of good versus evil, within a discourse of anti-modernity, the connotation of *jāhili* (denoting, basically, the time of ignorance) is persistently robbed of its literary significance as a classificatory critical tool. For Sā'ī, the basic denotational reference of the keyword *jāhiliyyah*, from which the adjective *jāhili* is derived, needs to be reformulated by a process of reversion (rather than conversion), so as to accord with the authenticity of a religious origin that can never be allowed to slip from view. The term was coined, he claims, solely to re-establish the moral framework for comparing two equally theology-laden options: *al-huda* (the right path) and *al-ḍalāl* (straying from the right path).

The reasoning behind this attempt to set literature within a hierarchic order, subservient to religion, is woefully exiguous. It can only be understood in terms of theology – literature's conceptional antonym – and never in those of literature itself. Whilst strict adherence to literalism is the epitome of "Salafi" (atavistic) fundamentalism, with its closed system of finality, literature remains a paradigm in motion, resisting, in a semiotic sense, the decidability of denotation, or of closure of meaning. To conclude: the objectionably destabilizing certitude of the mythic-religious implied by reading "Salafi" fundamentalism into literary theory does little more than provide convenient labels for the valorization and recognition of prejudices as a coherent force in their own right. These do, nonetheless, act as points of reference established to displace secular modernist assumptions, and to undermine literature's conception of a "truth" produced and defined in a "worldly" context, i.e., present in the world and informed by the world.

At issue, then, is the question of "truth", or of criteria for determining what counts as ultimate truth; of turning theology or mere

belief into effective epistemology.¹⁸ For “truth”, or ultimate truth, as viewed from a fundamentalist perspective, is absolute. It lies solely within the certitude of literal interpretation, which references a vantage point beyond time and space.

Hence, for Quṭb, the authority of Salafism¹⁹ rests on its appeal to a scriptural warranty; it operates wholly on the level of presumptive self-evidence:

The question Islam puts forth, and to which it gives answers, is:
Who is more knowledgeable, you or God?²⁰

As a fixed form of self-dramatizing Salafism, created and defined in terms of its own deliberate and arbitrary cultural atavism, such theological absolutism may be viewed as the register highlighted by the newly emergent concept of “Islamic literature”. Paradoxically, a similar kind of clumsy engineering – ethnic in this case – has long been evident in the orientalism of von Grunebaum, the historian of Islamic cultural stationariness and repose.²¹ Radical critics, notably Edward Said and ‘Abdullah L‘aroui, have shown the utmost distaste for this aspect of the irreversible states of “otherness” contrived by orientalism; and, in the light of von Grunebaum’s constant positing of a monolithic paradigmatic unity, whereby Islam is viewed as a permanently fixed cultural form “constantly erecting barriers and defences around itself in order to maintain its identity against external intervention”,²² it is hardly surprising to find L‘aroui’s comment that such a stance in fact recalls, irresistibly, the newly founded variance of Salafi populism. Writing in 1973, L‘aroui makes the following observation:

The adjectives that von Grunebaum unites with the world of Islam (medieval, classical, modern) are neutral or even super-redundant:

there is not a difference between classical Islam and medieval Islam, or just Islam.²³

With these negative features of the *pre-modern* caught in a state of timelessness, it is not difficult to see why the images of Islam projected by Islamic fundamentalists and western pundits of orientalism should converge, albeit inadvertently, to provide an effective common focus. Both sides “speak the same language of ancestral authenticity and identity”, as Al-Azmeh aptly puts it. “The result of these symmetrical world views,” he concludes, “is a cultural essentialism which is a postmodern form of racism.”²⁴

There are, then, three objections to be made against this extreme form of essentialism, upheld by proponents on the two sides of the argument: *first*, such an essentialism is premised on the assumption that Islam is one hegemonized *collective singularity, capable of pre-empting the workings of literary innovation*; *second*, the imposition of *monolithic uniformity* postulates an *unchanging organized whole* that acts as a collective single force; *third*, the *identification of Arabic culture* with religious parameters involves judgements which, in effect, increasingly construe this culture as predictable and therefore controllable.

Having thus explored some aspects of modernism’s antithetical terms, and of the workings of these terms, we may now proceed to close the circle by reverting to the relevant focal point: namely, the complex relationship between cultural identity and modernity/modernism.

From fate to choice

Viewed, following the Habermas model of an ongoing modernity, as a voluntarist endeavour, identity emerges “not so much as what one is as what one wants to be”. As such, “in the construction of the future not all

of one's own historical traditions are equally valid".²⁵ Similarly, the criteria for defining identity may be seen, at least in part, as related to experience and education; we are dealing not with a pre-given innateness, but rather with an open-ended option that is remorselessly selective. In the words of Jorge Larrain:

The very fact that identity is inherently selective allows the possibility that, although a nation cannot choose its traditions, it can at least politically select how to continue or not to continue with some of them.²⁶

Another way of viewing cultural identity is to argue that, whatever precise formulations this may assume, it is (as a cultural construction informed by "becoming" as much as by "being") clearly bound up with the notion of a teleological movement from "fate" to "choice" – though such a movement may not necessarily be conscious. The strongest statement of the case against an essentialism grounded in the workings of fate rather than choice is to be found in a passage by Adunīs, in which he takes poetic experience to entail a blend of primordial sentiment and modernist sensibility:

As a starting point, the poet views things as nameless, and the world as an un contemplated domain. Through innovation, the poet forges a world that is neither determined nor defined, a tentative world without pre-given identity, a world whose identity is incessantly becoming, an infinite world.

If the poet is ceaselessly transforming, in this complex relationship with an indeterminate and undefined world, then it is possible to stress that he does not possess a pre-given, fully

accomplished identity. The poet creates his identity while shaping his work; he makes and remakes himself while producing his art.²⁷

This suspension of memory is clearly temporary, not permanent. It is a precondition for subsequent re-discovery.

Saming and differing

Cultural critics and, in particular, exponents of secular criticism²⁸ such as Edward Said, work with a cosmopolitan literary sensibility, drawing on an open-ended model of how tradition may act upon literature. Speaking of the rise of the modern Arabic novel – which lacked any tradition, in the strictly European sense, out of which to develop – he notes how the new genre was effectively bounded by a theology-laden world view. This world view, setting forth modes of representation of reality that are clearly culturally Islamic, had been brought to a perfected state by the Prophet; and, as such, Said implies, its concept of *completeness* is premised on an innately provided feature of a corresponding *Weltanschauung* governing a cluster of deep psychic levels of formation implicit in customs, conventions and life in general. As he says:

It is significant that the desire to create an alternative world, to modify or augment the real world through the act of writing (which is one motive underlying the novelistic tradition in the West), is inimical to the Islamic world view. The Prophet is he who has *completed* a world view, thus the word *heresy* in Arabic is synonymous with the verb “to innovate” or “to begin”. Islam views the world as a *plenum*, capable of neither diminishment nor amplification. Consequently, stories like those in the *Arabian Nights* are ornamental, variations on the world, not completions of

it; neither are they lessons, structures, extensions, or totalities designed to illustrate either the author's prowess in representation, the education of a character, or ways in which the world can be viewed and changed.²⁹

The connotation of this articulated reading of a pre-modern Islamic world view into a modern literary context, and vice versa, involves, albeit obliquely, the role of a deeply rooted system of belief in literary formations; a system noted by Said in his seminal work on cultural critique, *Beginnings: Intention and Method*. Yet, if he attempts to ground a close fit between a pre-modern Islamic world view and a modern work representing the emergence of "autobiography" (which barely existed as a genre in Arabic literature), his critique whereby one paradigm acts upon the other is, even so, never contaminated by essentialism. The autobiographical narrative adopted by Ṭāha Ḥusain (who is often described as a renovationist rather than an innovationist) in his three-part work *Al-Ayyām* ("Streams of Days") is cited by Said as an example of "unique fusion between the traditional Islamic and Occidental cultures"; and the result is aptly described as "wholly special".

This notion of a unique "fusion" (an image apparently springing from physics and justifiably applied to literary objects) provides us with a procedure for separating out two oppositional notions: "saming" and "differing".

"Saming" is not, it should be clearly understood, a shorthand term for (in al-Rāfi'i's disparaging expression) "plagiarizing" form and genre, or for emulating specific structural properties of a literary domain where the protagonists are made to act like European characters. And, when Said suggests that "at the same point writers in Arabic became aware of European novels and began to write works like them", he is not implying

any causal chain of origin traceable back in time. What he appears to be suggesting is that the outcome of this complex conscious/unconscious relationship of resemblances and affinities is never an “inauthentic” or “blurred” copy of an appropriated item. Rather, the resulting text is the creation of a *self-referential specificity which, in the final analysis, acknowledges the laws of its own autonomous necessity*. This text, entailing a “unique fusion”, has its place within a shifting force field of relevancy. Hence, “saming” leads not to a blanket “sameness”, but to “difference”, even differentness.

The notion of “difference” highlighted here is, therefore, a clearly “positive” one. There is also a second and quite distinct perspective, which likewise suggests a process of “saming” but can in fact be seen as exemplifying *negative difference*; this is the perspective proposed by the problem of “periodization” already discussed (see section II, chapter six, above).

This is, undoubtedly, one of the knottiest problems to confront Arab intellectuals seeking to redefine the place of Arab culture vis-à-vis the paradigm of western modernity. Periodization is, in a sense, a mode of interpretation, whose outcome has been the supersedure of traditional Arab literary terms by modern western ones. Central to the terminology of periodization is the concept of *Nahḍah*. To use this term in relation to certain movements of Arab thought and literature in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is to imply that these movements were *equivalent* to European Renaissance. Does such an implication propose a possible erroneous symmetric relation between two experiences already defined by their different histories – indeed, a conceptual incongruity?

Albert Hourani whose writings on Arab history and culture are attuned to modern perceptions and concerns, has suggested an explanation:

This way of looking at the matter reveals a perhaps unconscious belief that the history of Arabic or Islamic culture is or ought to be *similar* to that of western European culture. When we look closely at what is called *al-Nahdah*, however, we shall find it *does not bear much resemblance to the European Renaissance*. That was a movement which came from within European civilization; starting from a revival of knowledge of ancient Greek culture, it led to a reassertion of the value of the individual and of life in this world, a greater emphasis on the sovereign independence of human reason, and a flowering of the arts, in particular painting, sculpture and architecture. *The movement of Arabic thought and writing for which the word Nahdah is used may have had characteristics in common with this, but it was a more limited movement and one of a different kind.*³⁰

In order further to underline the negative accounting implicit in the foregoing example of “saming”, the passage goes on to maintain that the outcome of this seemingly “innocent” application of borrowed methodology is actually far from innocent:

When I read about a thinker like the Iranian ‘Ali Shari‘ati, it seems to me that he is not using the idea of Islam in order to generate new and important ideas about the social order, he is rather using social ideas taken from the outside world in order to give a new interpretation of Islam. Once a thinker follows that path, he will find himself faced sooner or later with those great problems which writers of the “liberal age” posed and could not answer.³¹

Daryush Shayegan, in his *Cultural Schizophrenia: Islamic Societies Confronting the West*, sums up the deadlock:

Throwing Islam roughly over secular concepts such as democracy, socialism and liberalism results in hybrid mixtures, explosive cocktails which fill minds with confusion rather than helping to solve our problems.³²

With regard to this situation, a spade is called a spade:

Herein lies the failure of the *Nahḍah*, as well as that of the *Thawrah* (the era of revolutions beginning in the 1950s). The people of the *Nahḍah*, subjugated by the West, never realized that behind western power lies a changed vision of the world; that between their Islam and modernity lay a deep gulf which could not be bridged by a return to their ancestral values nor by a reform of the Shari‘a. What was needed was a *change of register*, of wavelength; the public domain needed to be swept clear of nostalgic mythologies to make room for the establishment of another perspective, another value system.³³

Mutuality, complementarity, permeability and plurality

It should now be clear from the above that the negative “saming” implicit in renovation-based notions of modernity like those of *Nahḍah* and *Thawrah*³⁴ can help us conceptualize a critique for the subsequent valorization and recognition of innovation-based modernism. Adunīs’s dictum that the effectiveness of modernism lies in Arab creativity, and that cultural identity “is present not in producing the similar but the different”,³⁵ suggests that the new paradigm shift is more universal; that

is to say, more affected by an all-embracing world view, though not necessarily less ethnocentric or context-bound:

The new in Arabic poetry . . . however unequivocal its formal break with the past may appear, is nevertheless identifiably Arab in character; by this I mean that it cannot be understood or evaluated within the context of French or English modernism, or according to their criteria, but must be seen in the context of Arab creativity and judged by the standards of artistic innovation particular to Arabic.³⁶

The best way, then, of explaining what is meant by “universalism” and “contextualism” in this sense is to redefine these concepts in terms of their points of convergence and divergence. The universalist assumption is as follows:

There will be a convergence between the languages of two cultures into a single new language that will burst the provinciality of both earlier languages. The question that the genealogical pluralist will ask, however, is why only one language of perspicuous contrast is the result? What seems likely is that each culture will formulate a new language in which it now sees itself as seen by the other. But these languages need not converge. Each language may have valid reasons for preserving its own differences from the other.³⁷

One might still argue, of course, that the concept of “universalism”, as viewed from a hegemonic European perspective, remains an inescapable euphemism for a latent, vigorous European ethnocentrism. Let us, though, consider what Adunīs has to say on the subject of innovation-based modernism.

As a universalist who believes that Arab modernists nonetheless have their own different histories, narratives and teleologies, Adunīs views universalism (which is the inner core of modernism) as neither unflinchingly singularist nor exclusively European. Thus, paradoxically, his position on culture proposes an insistently Arab impulse towards universalism as opposed to purism. For him, the universalist tendency within culture has a very precise locus in the experience of interaction, direct or indirect, to which Arab civilization testifies. In other words, it is articulated in a *synthesis* of the pre-Islamic period with other cultures: Persian, Greek and Indian. But the dynamism of this great synthesis (in the Hegelian sense of the term) does not stop here; it ascends to generate a new thesis.

The interaction produced by thought processes pursued with an open vision goes further. It has its most ancient elements in the Sumerian, Babylonian, Aramaean and Syriac civilizations, whose influence on Greek civilization is no longer a matter of serious dispute; the indebtedness of Greek civilization to Near Eastern civilization appears less provocative today than it did two decades ago.³⁸ Then there is, as Adunīs points out, the Andalusian cultural model of interaction, which carried Arab-Islamic civilization to the West by way of Arab Spain.

From this perspective, Adunīs emphasizes the concept of a “single universal civilization” which “has its own specificities, obvious or hidden, that depend on the level of *creative presence in various people*. This suggests that modernity is also a climate of universal forms and ideas and not a state specific to one people.”³⁹

What emerges from these comments is that modernism may be viewed in the light of four interconnected concepts:

- (1) mutuality;
- (2) complementarity;

(3) permeability;

(4) plurality.

The *first* concept, *mutuality*, underlines the fact that no culture exists in isolation from other cultures, and that they give and take between one another. The *second* concept, *complementarity*, shows that the dualism of the “civilized” West and the “backward” East is false. In fact, the East/West polarity, clearly characterized by a seemingly endless encounter based on ambivalence, serves to place the two opposing categories in a possible complementary relationship with one another. Something of the tone of this complementarity is captured in the following remark by Adunīs:

One cannot conceive of Europe as a detached entity, separate from the legacy of al-Andalus. And if the media is insistent in unifying the world and turning it into a global village,⁴⁰ then the concept of time may have, subsequently, to be seen as a continuum.⁴¹

The subtext, epitomized by the duality of East and West, is thus recognizably ideological rather than ontological; the *third* of the above concepts, *permeability*, establishes that, in complex reality, “cultures influence and are influenced”; and the *fourth* concept, *plurality*, leads us to realize that, as Al-Azmeh points out, modernity itself is plural. Modernity’s pluralism may be underlined once more by reference to Gerald Delanty’s study of modernity and postmodernity. He notes:

Modernity was European and later American, with its roots deep in the aesthetic and political movements that animated the West since the Enlightenment. By the late twentieth century, modernity lost much of its Europeanness, not least because it has now become

necessary to speak of *modernities rather than any particular model of modernity*.⁴²

In sum, the concepts of mutuality, complementarity, permeability and plurality are somewhat disputatious, in that none of them possesses fixed definitive components. They are persistently susceptible to change, both in definition and in connotation. The boundaries of this susceptibility have been and will be tested and explored, with a view to constructing an articulate definition of an autonomous, though not wholly separate model of modernity/modernism.

Theory of convergence

What, then, does all this tell us with regard to convergence, to a common point, between two seemingly conflicting cultural models, manifested in the mythical dichotomy of “East versus West”? Is there some intermediate space where cross-cultural exchange is rendered possible without necessarily “saming” two different but not essentially differentialist cultures? What remains, in the last analysis, of the idea of a common world view, one that stresses mutuality, complementarity, permeability and plurality, without necessarily downplaying the central critical concept of oppositionality? Moreover, if the polarity of East and West is now outrunning its useful course, how do Arab modernists view the possible critical reading of texts in which two paradigms meet and act upon each other?

For Adunīs, and for other innovation-based writers on modernity and modernism in its various fields – writers who, in contrast to the revivalists, or renovationists, of *al-Nahdah*, believe the past can no longer be understood in its own terms but should rather be viewed in the light of present concerns – the desire to break through entrenched barriers leads

on to a variety of proposed routes to modernization. This is made possible by virtue of a cluster of *conceptual bridges providing notional links connecting the present to the past*. Can such conceptual bridges be in fact located?

As has already been explained, modernity in Arabic poetry was not discovered from within the prevailing Arabic literary canon and its systems of knowledge. It was Adunīs's reading of French poetry⁴³ which established some of these conceptual bridges, supplying the link between the modernism of Baudelaire and the Abbasid "modernity" of Abū Nuwās (755-813), and between the cryptic qualities of Mallarmé's aesthetics and the mysteries of the poetic language of Abū Tammām (805-845). And it was his reading of Rimbaud, Nerval and Breton that led him to discover the modernity of Sufi writers such as al-Niffari (d. 350/961), al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922) and Ibn 'Arabi (d. 560/1164).⁴⁴

Such points of convergence have constantly provided Arab modernists with the thesis that modernities/modernisms located in seemingly different traditions may have different histories and teleologies but are not necessarily incommensurable one against the another. This is specifically exemplified in Umberto Eco's postulation that books excel in converging on a common point. "It seems," he says, "a good Borgesian procedure to assume that books speak to one another . . ." ⁴⁵

Such a postulation, premised on understanding of the past in terms of the present, proposes a taxonomy of works entailing a paradoxical relationship, whereby culture of the past is permeable to culture of the present, and vice versa. Moreover, such works advertise their modernity and refer us constantly back to this very specific relationship. Consider the conclusion reached in Kamāl Abū Dīb's examination of al-Jurjāni's theory of poetic imagery: that the importance of the work of this highly prominent figure (d. 471/1078) for Arabic literary theory "transcends the

boundaries of Arabic culture, as it remains relevant and vital with reference to modern literary theory as well".⁴⁶

In the following passage, Abū Dīb sets out a framework for a theory of cultural convergence:

A fundamental feature of modern Arabic culture is the dynamic way in which modern writers have come to look at our literary tradition. This dynamism springs from the interaction between the influence of western criticism and literature and a surging spirit of revival in Arabic culture. A change of sensibility has affected, to varying degrees, modern views on most aspects of the tradition. New approaches to poetry, prose, and other literary forms have been developed. The very nature and function of poetry, in particular, have been examined within a different framework where the triangular relationship "poet-poem-audience" acquires new and more comprehensive dimensions.⁴⁷

He further emphasizes the extent of this transformation in the following statement:

The process began towards the end of the last century and continues today more mature, vigorous, and sophisticated but, above all, with greater awareness of the most fundamental currents which prevailed in the tradition and shaped it.⁴⁸

This process is in no way nostalgic. It is, on the contrary, consciously forward-looking. It attempts, selectively, to rediscover the newness of al-Jurjāni's critical vision. Having established this from an

inherently structuralist perspective, Abū Dīb now concludes that al-Jurjāni is

a creative genius to whom the tradition provided the living foundation on which, through a critical and selective process, the new system of criticism was to be built: new because it constituted a fresh perspective and provided sensitive tools for the examination not only of works of art or poetic imagery, but the critical tradition itself. To use Eliot's words, al-Jurjāni may be Said to have lived "*not merely in the present, but the present moment of the past*". And with this solid foundation he proceeded to explore new horizons never, or only vaguely, hinted at before.⁴⁹

Abū Dīb's investigation into al-Jurjāni's theory of poetic imagery *has turned on the issue of the relationship of literary criticism to the concept of interdisciplinarity and the broader cultural studies it foregrounded at a later stage*. There have, up to now, been few works dealing with this issue, and still fewer having specific reference to linguistics rather than to an overall critique of literature.

It can be argued, in other words, that, in focusing its analysis on an expanding field of cultural inquiry, this mode of literary criticism has become *responsible for the opening up of the interdisciplinary structure of the humanities*. It is worth noting, in this connection, that the Arabic word *adab* carries implications not of "literature" alone but of a somewhat wider area of "humanities".

This broad conception of interdisciplinarity, implicit in *adab*, has given rise to a cluster of cultural critiques, characteristically pluralist in their readiness to take account of the various new theories assuming prominence within western thought. It has, in addition, supplied a

possible link between the past and the present, whereby concepts reach out to other concepts, and books converse with other books, irrespective of time and place. Hence, the “present moment of the past”, the specific moment of convergence, which Arab modernists take as their point of departure, assumes a crucially important role in many works on literary theory. In their book *Al-Nazariyyah al-lisāniyyah wa 'l-shi'riyyah fi 'l-turāth al-'Arabi min khilāl al-nūṣūṣ* (“Theory of Linguistics and Poetics as Seen in Arabic Tradition Through its Texts”), A. Muheiri, Ḥ. Şammūd and A. Mseddi explore “a complementary view of language in its many facets, including transforming it from a tool for dialogue to a producer of aesthetic innovation”.⁵⁰ This, as they explain, permits the proposition of “a linguistic and poetic theory located in Arabic tradition”.⁵¹

Seen from a modern position, the fundamentals of this proposed theory are presented under four rubrics: “the issue of defining language, the problematic of the structure of parole, the question of referentiality, and the issue of the literariness of parole.”⁵²

As these rubrics suggest, the book aims to provide an account of a possible modern theory of literature, one that accords a high priority to the concept of interdisciplinarity. The locus of this latter is associated primarily with the establishment of a common ground conjoining seemingly autonomous strands of knowledge – strands represented by selected extracts from the writings of literary theorists, philosophers, historians, scientists, philologists, grammarians, essayists, *qādis* (judges) and *mutakallimūn* (theologians). As such, the book’s role is to give conceptual articulation, through epistemological configuration and in terms of the modern, to the choices made by its editors from the writings deposited in the treasure house of memory culture. In addition, the writers included serve to make it clear that modern literary theory is posited as insistently polymorphic, multi-dimensional and multi-layered cultural

critique. This is particularly apparent in the orientation of the book's subjects, which veers towards those thinkers whose writings embody a modern stance within the trajectory of an Arab age of humanism.

To reiterate, this way of re-reading texts by revealing their modernity, i.e., the *sustainability of their creativity*, should be understood not as a denial of the historicity of literary theory, but as a recognition that modernity should be viewed as an affectively creative vision – failing which it will be a matter of mere drifting fashion. Fashion, to repeat Adunīs's observation, is distinct from creativity: "it grows old from the moment it is born, while creativity is ageless." As a corollary of this: "not all modernity is creativity, but creativity is eternally modern."⁵³

Of all the writers on the newly established modern linguistic paradigm – emphasizing as this does, in a Jakobsonian sense,⁵⁴ the concept of *literariness* that makes a given work a work of literature – A. Mseddi perhaps comes closest to embracing the determinants for the exercise of reconstructing the past in terms of the present. His contribution to the subject may be found in a study entitled *Al-Taṣkīr al-lisāni fī 'l-ḥaḍarah al-'Arabiyyah* ("Linguistic Thinking in Arabic Civilization"). Mseddi's most interesting argument appears to be based on the novel assumption that "Arabs today confront their tradition not as one possessed by them but as one that is assumed to be so."⁵⁵ It follows that "regaining possession of it means retrieving it"; and this retrieval implies "examining it via an all-embracing methodological perspective."⁵⁶ The eventual conclusion is that "contemporary critical approaches have to be read into tradition itself."⁵⁷ In consequence, the retrieval of tradition "negates, through temporal discontinuity, the concept of its literal durability."⁵⁸ The theoretical foundation of this interpretative re-reading, leading to the retrieval of tradition, lies in a belief that "every reading, as is known in general linguistics, is a

decoding of an autonomous message”, and that “re-reading is a renewal of the decoding of its message and a proof of its sustainability”.⁵⁹

This same principle of establishing “the present moment of the past” holds true for Māzen al-Wā‘ir’s book *Jumlat al-shart‘ ind al-nuhāt wa ‘l-uṣūliyyīn al-‘Arab fī daw‘ nazariyāt al-naḥu al-‘ālamī li Chomsky* (“The Conditional Clause as Seen by Arab Grammarians and Foundationalists in the Light of Chomsky’s Theory of Universal Grammar”).⁶⁰

The Borgesan⁶¹ notion of books conversing with other books, irrespective of time and place, is implicit in the following passage:

It might be pointed out, without nationalist or religious bias, that Chomsky has succeeded, after forty years of labour on a theory of universal grammar, in reaching the same conclusions as those already arrived at by al-Khalīl and Sībawayh.⁶²

The upshot is:

These conclusions have been regularly alluded to by Chomsky in various sources, including his own writings and interviews.⁶³

The writings of numerous other modernist critics and commentators could be adduced here. However the ground-breaking study by Mohammed Arkoun, working on the idea of a rational humanistic age existing in the tenth century (i.e., before the emergence of humanism in its orthodox forms) is more than simply representative. Originally published in French, the book appeared in Arabic under the title *Naz‘at al-ansanah fī ‘l-fikr al-‘Arabi: jīl Ibn Miskawayh wa ‘l-*

Tawhīdi (“Humanism in Arabic Thought: The Generation of Ibn Miskawayh and al-Tawhīdi”).⁶⁴

At the centre of the classical civilization of the fourth/tenth century, the works of Ibn Miskawayh, a philosopher and cultural historian who served at the courts of the Buwayhids⁶⁵ in Iran and Iraq, are *emblematic of a recognizably humanistic age, one articulating Arab, Greek and Persian cultural strands*. For Arkoun, in his attempt to reconfigure the connotation of an avowedly vibrant humanism, the interdisciplinary features of *adab*, meaning literature in the broadest possible sense, are synonymous with the multi-dimensional domain implied by the Latin word *humanitas*, from which the Renaissance term “humanism” is derived. A humanist age, he explains, is an attitude of mind. The inner core of this open-ended position, representative of an innovative movement, is religion, literature and philosophy.

In this sense, Arkoun points out, the humanist movement was a coherent and recognizable system of life and thought, marked by substantial cultural, economic, social and political accomplishments. Yet, while “humanism” has taken on new connotation in its European context, it has gradually lost its vitality within Arabic culture.

In sum, the comparative approach entails looking beyond the immediate processes of cultural mutualization and reciprocity. Analogies may indeed be sometimes straightforward, crude or simple. At other times, however, they can be complex and interesting.

Affiliation versus filiation

What is criticized in the viewpoints outlined above effectively comes down to one core point: that the essentialism implicit in cultural determinism is frequently linked to the filial notion of origin, which is itself central to the idea of biological parenthood grounding critical

concepts in a chronological order ruled by what has gone before. Edward Said's binary opposition between "filiation" and "affiliation" *supplies the critical tools we need to grapple with the nature of the relationship between current Arabic literary concepts and modern concepts located in a Eurocentric literary theory*. Filiation reflects a relationship determined by fate rather than choice. This relationship is intrinsically organic, being, as such, controlled by biological inevitability; and this inevitability, by virtue of celebrating an ethnocentrist line of cultural ancestry, provides a gesture of resistance to the idea of choice set forth in the project of modernity. By contrast, affiliation (*tabanni*) is a voluntarist act associated with the choice of a metaphorical rather than a biological parent. One of Said's primary aims in rejecting the cultural biological parent, as implied in its self-confirming notion of a fixed and stable "origin", is to emphasize that there is in literature no "beginning" but only a series of false origins.⁶⁶ The possibility of a beginning or beginnings is nevertheless not to be excluded; for, unlike the filial (essentialist) idea of "origin", which can only survive if nourished by notions that it is intrinsically "divine, mythical and privileged",⁶⁷ the affiliative notion of beginning or beginnings is *constantly rewritten by and through the metaphorical notion of affiliation*. As such, it is "secular, humanly produced and ceaselessly re-examined".⁶⁸ Such a stance, as Said points out, "has been an enabling one for much that has been of interest in critical work".⁶⁹

Having argued the case against essentialism, along with the cultural determinism that is its prime mover, he proceeds to elucidate a central point of view made in his *Beginnings: Intention and Method*: namely that modernism is

an aesthetic and ideological phenomenon that was a response to the crisis of what could be called *liation* – a linear, biologically grounded process, that which ties children to their parents⁷⁰ – which produced the counter-crisis within modernism, that is, those creeds, philosophies and visions re-assembling the world in new, non-familial ways.⁷¹

If this interpretation of the notion of “beginning”, viewed as a substitute for “origin”, is accepted, then the idea of other beginnings, periodizing a cluster of “modernisms”, begins to look less suspect; so far from proposing an essentially derivative concept, Arabic literary theory may be viewed as firmly located within a framework conjoining complementarity, permeability and plurality. This *mutualizing framework* is persistently present in

a universal civilization which from mercantile *beginnings* came utterly to transform the economies, societies, politics and cultures of the world, and to re-constitute the non-European world in terms of actually existing historical breaks.⁷²

The upshot of all this is, then, a view of a new emergent universalism, epitomizing the possibilities inherent in the metaphor of affiliation.

In *The World, the Text and the Critic*, Said seeks to address, in a theoretically demonstrative manner, the possibilities of affiliative relationships. He elaborates on the view that theory is, first and foremost, the product of a constant circulation of ideas:

Like people and schools of criticism, ideas and theories travel – from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another.⁷³

Cultural and intellectual life is seen as nourished and often sustained by this regular circulation:

Whether it takes the form of acknowledged or unconscious influence, creative borrowing, or wholesale appropriation, the movement of ideas and theories from one place to another is both a fact of life and a usefully enabling condition of intellectual activity.

This movement, he suggests (albeit obliquely), is existent outside Europe's mythical self-representation; it provides a framework for a two-way relationship:

There are particularly interesting cases of ideas and theories that move from one culture to another, as when so-called Eastern ideas about transcendence were imported into Europe during the early nineteenth century, or when certain European ideas about society were translated into traditional Eastern societies during the later nineteenth century. Such movement into a new environment is never unimpeded. *It necessarily involves processes of presentation and institutionalization different from those at the point of origin.*⁷⁴

The crucial point here is that the claims of "purity" implied by a filial Eurocentric model of modernism are always suspect, not only because they obey the inexorable laws grounding a singularity of "origin", but also because they persistently downplay the way the

movement of concepts from one point to another, from locus to locus, is emblematic of any condition of intellectual activity.

Travelling concepts

We have already examined the mutualizing aspect of Said's anti-essentialist notion of "affiliation": that the metaphoricity of affiliation is centrally characterized by the idea of an emergent redefinition of universalism, a two-way relationship grounding a *combinative principle* of a conjoined world view; one whose function draws on consensually held notions of complementarity, permeability and plurality.

These affiliative notions may, if pushed sufficiently far, be seen as entailing the possibility of a new epistemological paradigm, an all-embracing point of cultural convergence, something akin to an *epistémé* as proposed by Foucault:

. . . a world view, a slice of history common to all branches of knowledge, which imposes . . . the same norms and postulates, a general stage of reason, a certain structure of thought that the men of a particular period cannot escape – a great body of legislation written once and for all by some anonymous hand.⁷⁵

This redefinition of universalism, as a thing written "by some anonymous hand", features in the very process whereby filiation is replaced by affiliation. Said describes this process as "affiliative", that is, recognizing the diversity of a newly-founded universalism built on intellectual freedom. The following definition proposed by some "post-colonial" critics makes the argument for constructing an alternative to "filial" universalism – one that is avowedly affiliative and transcultural:

No true universalism can be constructed without recognizing that there is a diversity of universals on which analyses are based, and that these are often quite particular . . . ⁷⁶

To illustrate what is at issue here, let us take two particularly significant cases of affiliative relationship, one provided by Ṭāha Ḥusain (1952), the other by Adunīs (1973). Here we have two different models, each drawing, for their terms of reference, on Auguste Comte's concept of the "static and dynamic",⁷⁷ and reflecting, within the locus of modern Arabic literary theory, an openness to intellectual diversity.

Something of Comte's distinction between social statics and dynamics is evident in Ṭāha Ḥusain's conscious application to Arabic literature of what that founder of modern sociology termed laws of motion within societies. The connotation of these processual laws, borrowed from the physical sciences, has been altered by Comte to accommodate a scientific theory of social change. The social term "static and dynamic", translated by Ḥusain as *al-thābit wa'l-mutaḡhāyyer*, is postulated in his book *Alwān* ("Variations")⁷⁸ as a travelling concept whereby sociology is being replaced by literary theory. Hence his attempt to rewrite Comte's concepts with a view to probing the effects of two seemingly divergent terms: Arabic tradition and literary modernity.

The traditional components present in Arabic literature are seen by him as safeguarding its stability and sustainability. Yet there are, Ḥusain points out, other, renovatory components whose presence strikes a precarious balance with the components informing Arabic tradition:

Like other living literatures and social phenomena, Arabic literature consists of two sets of components referred to by Auguste Comte as the static and dynamic.⁷⁹

What distinguishes our literature, Ḥusain argues, is that “a balance between tradition and renovation, *tajdīd*, has always been persistently maintained”. Nevertheless:

The occasional absence of continuity, resulting from an ascendancy of the elements of the static, has brought about neither literature’s inertness nor its demise. The occasional ascendancy of the dynamic has not, on the other hand, resulted in terminating literature’s existence or the disruption of its sense of continuity.⁸⁰

Ḥusain’s attempt to rewrite Comte’s binarity is, then, an endeavour to understand the complex relations between the constituent parts of one verbal creation representing the body of literary history. Seen from this perspective, appraisive critique can be construed as a study of Ḥusain’s uniform literary discourse rather than of particular specimens subject to differing interpretations according to period. In this sense, literary history is proposed as part of poetics, the ground upon which literary theory is based.⁸¹

Adunīs’s influential and polemical critique of Arabic culture, *Al-Thābit wa ’l-mutaḥawwil*,⁸² rewrites Comte’s “static and dynamic” in its turn, with an emphasis on re-evaluating the entire Arabic tradition (*turāth*).

Nevertheless, this study, with its attempt to unmask the stasis inherent in the literalism at the core of hegemonic Salafi thought, cannot be accurately viewed as representing an attack on traditional Islamic values, but rather as calling into question the work of “canonized” writers from a consciously alternative modernist perspective; for, while Adunīs does indeed embark on a reappraisal of the writings that the literary

“canon”⁸³ views as privileged, his main objective is to bring forward for consideration the more radical alternatives present in the writings of poets, thinkers and Sufis whose “modernism” flourished during the Abbasid period.

In this sense, Adunīs’s version of the static and dynamic follows his own individual line of inquiry: a line determined by a close reading of classical Arabic culture in terms of the concerns of the present. As such, he is bent on undermining the assumed validity of literalistic misreading of a permanent, prescriptive and all-encompassing “canon” whose status has been insistently elevated over tradition (*turāth*).

The concept lurking behind the “canon” is not, Adunīs suggests, one of open-endedness. Rather it blatantly sets forth an absolute interpretation of tradition, one favouring *textual closure, total submission to authority and a vigorous sense of epistemological finality*.

It is worth stressing, in this connection, the significantly theological nature of the term “canon”, referring to a set of privileged writings that effectively comprise a list of books representing a culture or tradition. The term cannot, in fact, be Said to have a synonym in Arabic. Even so, the theological connotation is made regularly evident in Adunīs’s disparaging account of the textual literalism embedding a self-legitimizing canonical, imperative and long-standing interpretation of Arabic tradition. Hence, in the light of the counter-canoncity proposed by his rejection of any arbitrarily elevated “canonical status” conferred on a set of works and concepts, regularly received as representing the Arabic literary and cultural tradition, it is reasonable to view Adunīs’s critique as emblematic of an effective attempt to question the very meaning of literary value.

His account of the permanent versus the changing is, then, closely wedded to his modernist position. The past, he argues, cannot be

understood in its own terms, let alone in terms of the mythic-religious based on textual literalism. It has to be seen alternatively, in terms of the complex concerns of the present.

The precise relationship between these two opposites, in this unsettling critique, comes out clearly in Paul Nwayia's introduction to Adunīs's book. The relationship, Nwayia claims, is "one which has persistently led to violence resulting in the elevation of the static over the dynamic, thus impeding the emergence of innovation".⁸⁴ The bottom line, he goes on, is "the consequent identification, in Arabic-Islamic culture, between language and religion, poetry and ethics, literary and theological traditions".⁸⁵

In other words, the term "static" is used here to designate the idea of a stasis, permanence, lasting stability embodying some omniscient quality; one denoting a privileged "Qur'ānic" text possessed of the biaxial principle of changelessness and inimitability (*i'jāz*). This quality, with its conforming evidence compelling unquestioned acceptance of a "divine truth", has the enforcement mechanism of absolute authority.

The decisive point in all this is Adunīs's postulation of the significance

of elevating the "static", seen as a fixture of an ideologically empowered literalist reading of the Qur'ānic text, over the "dynamic" implicit in the interpretation, or interpretations, of it in terms of the present. The text, he points out, is proposed by literalists as the "*final epistemological authority*", one that is *doxastic*, that is, predicating a belief-based view unaffected by the compelling principle of rationality.

As for the dynamic, the changing, which is the opposing strand in the binarity, this is defined as either "the thought asserting the possibility

of re-interpreting the Qur'ānic text in terms of the present in order to articulate an ever-changing vision of the world" or as "the thought which does not view the Qur'ānic text as its frame of reference, thus stressing reason, *'aql*, instead of *naql*, the literally interpreted tradition"⁸⁶ as its vantage point.

To paraphrase Adunīs, we might say that any viewpoint on the literalness shaping the Salafi-laden canon – and on its alternative, the polymorphic and multi-dimensional readings proposing a counter-canonical modernist position – should take into account that, historically speaking, the static has not been immutably permanent, nor has the dynamic been constantly changing. The "canon" thus remains in practice a matter of ongoing dispute. This, in turn, proposes an extension to the binarity, one put forward as suggesting a possible definition of modernism in relation to tradition. Modernism can be seen, in Adunīs's words, as "the utterance of what is absent in our tradition, or the utterance of the unknown, on the one hand, and the acknowledgement of the infinitude of knowledge on the other".⁸⁷

As for Salafism, he goes on, its point of departure lies in the assumption of "perfection" seen as a pre-given quality inherent in the Qur'ānic text. This quality negates any necessity for change. The fact that Arabic language/culture is posited as being modelled on, even grounded in, this fixedly essentialized concept of perfection does imply, in the final analysis, that all idea of change must be firmly rejected.

In view of this, Adunīs's conclusion is hardly surprising:

The need for the thought of the other in general, and for promoting the notion of innovation in particular, is seen – in consequence – as superfluous. What Arab society requires is to turn the past into a persistently changing present.⁸⁸

Let it be repeated: the crucial point here is that the modernist position, grounding Arab innovationists as distinct from the renovationists of *al-Nahḍah*, appears to demand a radical transformation of the meaning of the past. The critic can no longer interpret past texts in their own terms but in terms of present premises. Changes in experience of the present, through processes of epistemological configuration, transform, unfailingly, the very meaning of the past. The past is no longer something which already exists; it is a matter of becoming as much as of being.

It should now be clear, in view of the above, that the full impact of a literalist reading of the Qur'ānic text upon Arabic literary theory can only be understood as the symptom of an absolutism central to an all-embracing literary canon. The concept of a Salafī-bound canon is viewed, in consequence, as standing in a persistently subordinate relation to the Qur'ānic text. The subject of an unfailingly destabilizing criticism, this non-symmetric relation between the sacred and the worldly, the secular and the religious, appears to have very notable implication for Adunīs's rejection of making literature subservient to theology. The effect of coupling the former with the latter, he pointedly explains, is largely conveyed through two highly stylistic qualities present in the Qur'ānic text: *kamāl* (perfection) and *i'jāz* (inimitability). These supposedly unrivalled qualities come to mean, in traditional Arabic criticism, that no text can ever attain the standard example represented by Islamic scripture.

As for any attempt to retrieve a past, pristine purity, motivated by notions of submission to the one "true" orthodoxy, be that religious or secular, Adunīs finds the correlate to this in what he aptly calls the "epistemology of finality". If, as some might argue, he exaggerates here, he nevertheless does so in the service of pointing out

the significance of the stress put, in particular, on the precedence of textual literalness in Islamic epistemology, and, in general, on orthodox theological and foundational literalness in the case of religious or secular postulations.⁸⁹

What, then, can we deduce from this brief skim over the spatio-temporal movement of a critical concept? A developed concept, as it exists at the end of a journey, is inconceivable without an *absorptive capacity for transforming and being transformed*. As such, Ḥusain's version of Comte's term at the end of a trans-cultural journey from one discipline (sociology) to another (Arabic literary theory), over a considerable temporal and spatial distance, seems as dissimilar to, as plainly different from, its sociological point of departure as it could possibly be. This transformational capacity is further enhanced in Adunīs's illustrative attempt to extrapolate a theory of modernism by probing the possible theoretical dynamics that would reveal the laws of motion grounding an alternative Arabic culture. He believes, rightly, that such a theory must be *interdisciplinary* in character, entailing what might be regarded as a *total cultural act*; yet such an act has been constantly impeded by the subservience of culture to an absolutism embodied in the literal interpretation of a theology-based literary canon.

The bottom line is this: a travelling concept, in the sense indicated above, may be seen simply as designating *a frame of reference, a point of departure, rather than a cause or origin*. An origin is exclusive, and exclusiveness is a primitive characteristic. It implies, relentlessly, the power to exclude; it is both pre-modern and anti-modern. A frame of reference, in contrast, is inclusive and expansive.

Concluding remarks

Let us recapitulate. The attempt, in the preceding articulated definition of modernism, to set out a conceptual model positing an account of literary theory has led to three principal conclusions.

First, the problematic embedding this model-building exercise (with its emphasis on movement from the unidisciplinarity of literary criticism to the interdisciplinarity of cultural critique) is designated by the proposition of what might well be called a consciously *parallactic process*, one that involves a constant shift in the point of observation.

Second, this construct, represented by what is primarily a verbal creation, is expressed not in the form of a chronological record of modernism's significant events and unique specimens of literature, but rather in a narrative that propounds a paradigmatically modern conception, one that defines literary history not solely as a method for setting past events in order of occurrence but as a "critique" *par excellence*: as a *deliberative act of criticism defined as "part of poetics"*.⁹⁰

Third, the model providing the preceding construct – a construct that attempts, selectively, to appropriate particular critical devices, concepts and postulates developed by modernist writers on literary theory – has depended, throughout this exposé, on the assumption of a possible *demise of boundaries*; one whereby texts are implicated equally, with no distinction between literary works and theoretical discourse (philosophy, sociology, anthropology, psychoanalysis, etc.).

The central contention of this endeavour to construct a conceptual model is that re-readings of theoretical writings on modernity, modernism and modernization may be viewed as attempts to rethink the critical positions embedding *poetry writing and fiction making as avowedly demonstrative processes denoting modes of critique, criticism of*

criticism, metatheory, or just literary theory. On the other hand, the specimens of poetry or fiction used to reconstruct possible articulated definitions are posited here as instruments for inquiring into the nature of writing, thus providing, albeit obliquely, a taxonomy of approaches towards, and insights into, literary criticism and cultural critique.

¹ On the changeability of the meanings of critical terms within different contexts, see al-Shamaa, *op. cit.*, pp. 151-71.

² Adunīs, *Introduction to Arab Poetics*, p. 89.

³ See, for instance, Ḥ. Şammūd, *Al-Taḥkīm al-balāghī 'ind al-'Arab* ("Rhetorical Thinking among the Arabs"), Tunis: Manshūrāt al-Jāmi'āt al-Tūnisiyyah, 1981, pp. 11-12.

An alternative stance whereby the notion of a determinative "historicity" is attributed to tradition can be found in many other writings. See, for example, Ḥusain Muruwwa, *Al-Naza'āt al-māddiyyah fi 'l-falsafah al-'Arabiyyah al-Islāmiyyah* ("Materialist Tendencies in Arab-Islamic Philosophy"), Beirut: Dār al-Fārābi, 1978, pp. 1-26.

⁴ M.S. al-Rāfi'i, *Taḥta rāyāt al-Qur'ān* ("Under the Banner of the Quran"), Cairo, Al-Maktabah al-Tijāriyyah al-Kubra, 1963, p. 200. Quoted in Adunīs, *Al-Thābit wa 'l-mutaḥawwil*, vol. 3, p. 123.

⁵ *Ibid.* Al-Rāfi'i's Salafi-based literary fundamentalism is reminiscent, in a sense, of the Eurocentric foundationalism that is its counterpart. In this connection see, for example, Ḥammūdah, *op. cit.* The book attempts to register, albeit obliquely, a position which is identifiably foundational; one that confers an absolute epistemic status on a single model of modernity, and indeed of modernism, in its various fields. Thus it speaks of Arab modernism rather as though Arabic history and teleology were merely variants on the western model.

⁶ This notion has been most fully elaborated by A. Al-Azmeh:

I define fundamentalism as that moment in all religions which gives primitivism and primevalism precedence over history, which seeks to eliminate history and regard it as, at best, an illegitimate accretion onto the pristine beginning, and as such regard the present condition and its immediate

precedents as corrupt, or at best as corruptions of an abiding beginning.
(*Islams and Modernities*, p. 96.)

⁷ A leading figure within what might be termed the fundamentalist strand of Islam, Ibn Taymiyyah opposed all those theologians whose reading of the Qur'ān was not rigidly literalist, including Sufi thinkers such as Ibn 'Arabi who interpreted it allegorically.

⁸ Ibn Taymiyyah's dogmatism is emblematic of his views on philosophy, music and poetry. In his appraisal of philosophy, he observed that the Greek philosophers had encouraged music and songs, "pretending" that music and singing purify the soul and refine character. It is possible, as one commentator points out, "that his analysis here contains echoes of an awareness of Pythagorean interest in the musical harmonies of creation, but he states that this doctrine is, in fact, a fallacy that has changed many people by *substituting an innovation for truth*, and gave an example of the Sufis, who paid so much attention to music and songs that their practice of Islam became endangered. He asserted that experience shows that music and songs have the same influence as wine. They intoxicate the soul, lead it from the straight path by distracting the emotions and ultimately stir the passions, including those of enmity and hatred, even more than wine. Worse, he added, they divert man from remembrance of God and worship." See 'Abdullah S. al-Fahd, "Ibn Taymiyyah's Curriculum and Methods of Teaching", *Muslim Education Quarterly*, Islamic Academy, Cambridge, No. 1, Vol. 17, 1999, pp. 4-24.

Ibn Taymiyyah was the forerunner of the eighteenth-century Wahhābi movement in Arabia.

⁹ Al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities*, p. 27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹¹ See his *Postmodernism and Islam*, London: Routledge, 1992.

¹² Postmodernity is regarded by most theorists as marking a break with modernity and, more generally, with the whole Enlightenment project. Habermas (1980) argues that postmodernism represents an irrationalist reaction against a modernity that has so far failed to supply the promised emancipation, and that the project of modernity should be continued. For Lyotard, postmodernity "represents a liberation from the illusory Grand Narratives of the Enlightenment and its successors". See David Macey, *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*, London: Penguin, 2000. See also the

subtle treatment of the passage from modernity to postmodernity in Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987. And see also David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Cambridge, Mass. and Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1997.

¹³ This assumption should be viewed in a compensatory sense.

¹⁴ See A. Zāyed, "Qaḍiyyat al-muṣṭalaḥ fi 'l-naqd al-Islāmi" ("The Issue of Terminology in Islamic Criticism"), *Al-Adab al-Islāmi* ("Islamic Literature") (Cairo), 24, 1420 AH, pp. 4-14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ See A.R. Jan Muhammad, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature", *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (1), 1985; in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-23.

¹⁷ See Zāyed, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-12.

¹⁸ The term "effective epistemology" is used to denote a switch from mere faith to absolute knowledge.

¹⁹ Salafism (derived from Arabic *salafīyyah*) is "a generic term which corresponds in meaning and intention to fundamentalism. It calls for a return to the Qur'ān and the salutary example of pious epigones (the Salaf)." See Al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities*, p. 87.

²⁰ S. Quṭb, *Ma 'ālim 'alā al-Ṭarīq* ("Milestones Along the Way"), Cairo, 1972, p. 105. Quoted in Sharābi, *Neopatriarchy*, p. 139.

²¹ Bryan S. Turner refers to "the stationariness of von Grunebaum's discourse". See his *Orientalism, Postmodernism and Globalism*, London and New York: Routledge, 1944, p. 73.

²² A. L'aroui, "For a Methodology of Islamic Studies: Islam seen by G. von Grunebaum", *Diogenes*, 81 (4), pp. 12-39. Quoted in Turner, *ibid.*, p. 70. Grunebaum's original remark is to be found in his *Medieval Islam: A Study in Cultural Orientation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946, p. 322.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities* (from a note on the back cover).

²⁵ Larrain, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

²⁷ See Adunīs, “Al-Asmā” (“Names”), *Kalimāt* (Bahrain), 9, 1988, p. 7.

²⁸ Edward Said’s term for an “oppositional criticism”, one that is “reducible neither to a doctrine nor to a political position on a particular question, and if it is to be in the world and self-aware simultaneously, then its identity is its difference from other cultural activities and from systems of thought or of method. In its suspicion of totalizing concepts, in its discontent with reified objects, in its impatience with guilds, special interests, imperialized fiefdoms and orthodox habits of minds, criticism is most itself and, if paradox can be tolerated, most unlike itself at the moment it starts turning into organized dogma.” (*The World, the Text and the Critic*, p. 29.)

²⁹ Said, *Beginnings*, p. 81.

³⁰ A. Hourani, “Hal ‘aṣr al-nahḍah al-‘Arabi wahm?” (“Is the Age of Arab *Nahḍah* an Illusion?”), interview in *Al-Dustūr* (London), 10, 3 March 1980, pp. 48-9.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Daryush Shayegan, *Cultural Schizophrenia: Islamic Societies Confronting the West* (translated from French by John Howe), London: Saqi Books, 1992, p. 28.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ The term *Thawrah*, meaning “revolution”, refers to pan-Arab nationalist officers’ seizure of power in Egypt, Syria and Iraq.

³⁵ Adunīs, *Siyāsāt al-shi‘r*, p. 69.

³⁶ Adunīs, *Introduction to Arab Poetics*, p. 100.

³⁷ See David Couzens Hoy and Thomas McCarthy, *Critical Theory*, Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994, p. 204.

³⁸ Eurocentrism remains, nevertheless, endemic. “Even in times characterized by the globalization of culture there still remains an endemic Eurocentrism, a persistent reluctance to accept that the West could ever have borrowed anything of significance from the East.” (J.J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought*, London and New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 5.)

³⁹ Adunīs, *Introduction to Arab Poetics*, pp. 91-2.

⁴⁰ This is, of course, a reference to Marshal McLuhan’s iconic expression to describe the ever-growing dominance of communication determinism.

⁴¹ Quoted in Nūri, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

⁴² Delanty, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

⁴³ On another tack, attention should be drawn to the affection felt by poets such as Yūsuf al-Khāl, Jabra Ibrāhīm Jabra, Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb and Khalīl Ḥāwī for the work of T.S. Eliot. Critics such as M.M. Badawi, Muḥammad al-Nuwayhi, Salma Khadra Jayyusi, Rashād Rushdi, Abdul-Wāḥid Lu'lu'a and Nazeer El-Azma have also displayed great interest in examining his influence on Arabic poetry and criticism. In a comparative study on the poetics of Eliot and Adunīs, 'Āṭif Faḍḍūl refers to a eulogy on Eliot, published in *Shi'r*, as being emblematic of an all-embracing celebration. "From the first moment, T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) was present with us, together with his comrades – Ezra Pound, André Breton and other main figures of modern poetry." See *Shi'r*, 9: 33-34 (Winter-Spring, 1976), p. 189. Quoted in 'Āṭif Y. Faḍḍūl, *The Poetics of T.S. Eliot and Adunīs: A Comparative Study*, Beirut: Al-Ḥamra, 1992, p. 81.

⁴⁴ The writings of Ibn 'Arabi, with their "uniquely universal perspective that cuts across the divide of culture and time", are being increasingly viewed as relevant to modernity. See, for instance, Peter Coates, *Ibn 'Arabi and Modern Thought: The History of Taking Metaphysics Seriously*, Oxford: 'Anqā' Publishing, 2002.

⁴⁵ Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994, p. 156.

⁴⁶ Kamāl Abū Dīb, *Al-Jurjāni's Theory of Poetic Imagery*, London: Aris and Philips, 1979, p. vi.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 322.

⁵⁰ A. Muheiri, Ḥ. Ṣammūd and A. Mseddi, *Al-Nazariyyah al-lisāniyyah wa 'l-shi'riyyah* ("Theory of Linguistics and Poetics"), Tunis: al-Dār al-Tūnisiyyah lil-Nashr, 1988, p. 8.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Adunīs, *Introduction to Arab Poetics*, pp. 101-2.

⁵⁴ Roman Jakobson makes the following polemical claim: "The object of the study in literary science is not literature but literariness – that is, that which makes a given work a work of literature." Quoted in Hawthorn, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

⁵⁵ A. Mseddi, *Al-Taḥkīr al-lisāni fī 'l-ḥadārah al-'Arabiyyah* ("Linguistic Thinking in Arabic Culture"), Tunis: Dār al-'Arabiyyah lil-Kitāb, 1981, 1986, p. 11. The idea of an Arab heritage without inheritors is also suggested in Georges Corm, *Sharq wa gharb: al-sharkh al-ustūri* ("Orient and Occident: The Mythical Dichotomy"), Beirut: Dar al-Sāqi, 2003, p. 45.

⁵⁶ Mseddi, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Published Beirut: Maktabat Lubnān, 1999. The relevance of Chomsky's theory of generative grammar in a modernist context is underlined by his universalist approach. In developing such a position he employed ideas already voiced by rationalist philosophers and grammarians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

⁶¹ There is a strong sense of what might be called an embedded metacommunicative quality, a spatio-temporal-terminating feature, running through the books in Borges' celebrated short story "The Library of Babel". The closing lines of this are emblematic of an obliquely expressed universalism:

The *Library* is limitless and periodic. If an eternal voyager were to traverse it in any direction, he would find, after many centuries, that the same volumes are repeated in the same disorder (which, repeated, would constitute an order: *Order* itself).

(J.L. Borges, *Fictions*, London: Calder and Boyars, 1965, p. 80.

⁶² Wā'ir, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Mohammed Arkoun, *Naz'at al-ansanah* ("The Humanist Tendency"), Beirut: Dār al-Sāqi, 1997.

⁶⁵ In 935 AD, the Buwayhids, who had established themselves as an independent dynasty in Iran, invaded Baghdad, the capital of the Caliphate, and destroyed the Caliph's seat of power.

⁶⁶ The emergence of differing models employed in various modern movements in Arabic poetry and fiction suggests, consistently, the possible termination of a series of false biology-based concepts of origin. Each "origin" annihilates an already established one.

⁶⁷ See Said, *Beginnings*, pp. xviii-xix.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Throughout Adunīs's *Al-Thābit wa 'l-mutaḥawwil*, the complex relationship between father and son is set out in an Oedipal form whereby the father represents the past and the son the present. Seen as a cultural metaphor, this Oedipal rivalry suggests the elimination of the former by the latter. See Nwayia's Introduction in Adunīs, *Al-Thābit wa 'l-mutaḥawwil*, vol. 1, p. 16.

⁷¹ Said, *Beginnings*, p. xix.

⁷² Al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities*, p. 21.

⁷³ Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic*, p. 226.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Foucault, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

⁷⁶ See C. Breckenridge, S. Pollock, H. Bhabha and D. Chakrabarty (eds.), "Cosmopolitanism", in *Public Culture (Society for Transcultural Studies)*, Durham: Duke University Press, Vol. 12, No. 3, Fall 2000, p. 583.

⁷⁷ It was Auguste Comte who introduced the distinction between *social statics* and *social dynamics*. Social statics represented the endeavour to arrive at laws of co-existence, whilst social dynamics endeavoured to arrive at the laws of historical change. The terms *statics* and *dynamics* have been borrowed from the physical sciences. See "Statics and Dynamics" in Mitchell, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

⁷⁸ See Ṭāha Ḥusain, *Alwān* ("Variations"), Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif bi Maṣr, 1952.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ For a definition of literary history in the light of literary theory, see Ducrot and Todorov, *op. cit.*, pp. 144-5.

⁸² Adunīs, *op. cit.*

⁸³ This term is used, in the present context, as being emblematic of the ruling theological ideology. Thus Adunīs's critique of the literary canon as distinct from literary tradition must be seen as an endeavour to dismantle the existing power structure.

⁸⁴ Nwayia, Introduction, in Adunīs, *Al-Thābit wa 'l-mutaḥawwil*, vol. 1, p. 15.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ See Adunīs, “*Madārāt* (The Static and Dynamic in Arab Culture Revisited)”, in *Al-Hayāt* daily (London), 4 August 2003.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Ducrot and Todorov, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

IV. Modernism: Literary Theory's Frames of Reference

Since the articulated definition of an all-embracing concept of modernism, encompassing literary theory, is an essential part of the attempt to *construct*, over the three previous sections, a hypothetical model whose correspondence to *textual* reality one consistently seeks to verify – and is therefore also essential for an ongoing discussion of theory's points of departure – it will be helpful to sum up the basic assumptions underlying this theory and to show how a taxonomy of *frames of culture-sensitive reference* fits into it.

Modern Arabic literary theory, it is now clear, is no seamless garment, but rather a complex *verbal creation*. It refers not only to a specific incipient paradigm whose suggested accelerated process of change hovers somewhere between questioning and certitude, but also to the effacement of older categories of canon and discourse characteristic of the mode of expression encoding the literary representation of cultural experience.

All the relevant frames of reference examined in the proposed taxonomy are therefore viewed, under a classificatory umbrella, as dynamic concepts. Whatever form of argument is deployed, concepts are crucial to the process of reasoning, since the modern theory advanced throughout this model-building has been constructed in terms of concepts – not because the connotation of the modern is well established, but, on the contrary, because it is not. Concepts, in this sense, are more than proper nouns or names for the paradigmatic changes to which they refer; they are *polemically empirical notions extrapolated from the experience of current Arabic culture*.

It is the case, nonetheless, that these concepts are viewed here as serviceable experimental terms, composed of features positing a *present-*

ness that gives modern theory its character – in this instance (for example) the unbound quality of *timeless newness*; that is, a state of mind not tied to any particular temporality. Clearly, the concept of a timeless newness long *predates* the emergence of modernism; and, as such, it resides not in one period, or one time frame (the present), but in various time frames.

Let us now review some of these frames of reference.

Universalism

In contrast to *universalism* – a term inextricably bound up with a *modernism* whereby an all-embracing dominant culture is held to be true for all humanity – an alternative concept, developed within the context of Arabic literary criticism, would appear to question the very assumptions underlying Universalism's Eurocentric theoretical basis.

These assumptions, establishing as they do a hierarchical division between Europe and its other(s), are viewed by Arab modernists as wholly erroneous, for the simple reason that they are historically poorly sourced. The intellectual bases of this position are twofold.

First, as 'Āṭif Faḍḍūl rightly points out, most of those modernists (including Yūsuf al-Khāl and Adunīs) who were behind *Shi'r*, the influential periodical launched in 1957,

were at one time or other members of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) and came under the influence of that party's ideology. The SSNP held that Greek civilization originated in the Near East, and hence they did not consider the western civilization that developed from it as alien.¹

Thus, one of the principles on which the ideology of the SSNP was based appears perfectly compatible with the concepts of cultural *mutuality, complementarity and permeability*. This is made explicit in the principle formulated by the movement's leader, Anṭūn Sa'ādah, as early as 1948:

The Syrians' genius and mental superiority over their neighbours and others is indisputable. They civilized Greece and laid down the basis of the Mediterranean civilization which the Greeks shared with them at a later period.²

In other words, the idea of a splendid ancient Greece, whose civilization has often been described as emerging like a "miracle", emblematic of its own intrinsic genius and owing nothing to its neighbours, is vigorously contested.³ This is exemplified, albeit broadly, in an assertion made in Adunīs's introduction to a book on contemporary Syrian art:

Sumerian, Babylonian, Canaanite and Pharaonic mythology reappeared in one way or other in Greek and Roman myths, only to be rewritten, under a halo of sacralization, in the Bible (the Old Testament) and the Qur'ān.⁴

The *second* intellectual basis for contesting a Eurocentric viewpoint lies in Arab modernists' rejection of the founding assumptions underlying a Eurocentric narrative of world history – a narrative that has virtually reduced Arabic culture's contribution to Western Europe, through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, to that of merely "transmitting" Greek knowledge, philosophy and science. As such, the high points of the Arab cultural

achievement during that period appear to be exiled, irretrievably, to a state of perpetual suspension. In his *World Philosophies: An Historical Introduction*, David E. Cooper comments as follows:

It is not necessary to be a devotee of “political correctness” to regret that the great preponderance of histories of philosophy, many passing themselves off as “general”, deal only with western thought. A few Arabs are sometimes included, but, so to speak, as *honorary westerners*, deemed worthy of inclusion for their commentaries on Aristotle and hence influence on medieval Christian thought.⁵

Some of the more critical accounts, dealing, specifically, with western literature, propose a more radical framework. Take, for instance, E.L. Ranelagh’s implied assumptions of an alternative universalism, born out of dissatisfaction with current ethnocentric European narrative. In her work *The Past We Share: The Near Eastern Ancestry of Western Folk Literature*, she writes:

We are taught that our civilization stemmed from classical and Christian roots, Graeco-Roman and Judeo-Christian, and that the classical elements had been largely lost until their discovery, known as the Renaissance. But now that the world is smaller, communication easier, organized religion more relaxed and scholarly exchange more widespread, our common ground with Arabian tradition is being recognized. Medieval culture was in fact Greek, Latin and Arab.⁶

The case for a common ground, one that recognizes the intellectual interplay between Arabic culture, pre-Islamic and medieval, and European culture, offers a multiplicity of arguments against the essentialism of an ethnocentric model, so pointing the way towards a potentially more balanced concept of the universal.

A good example of a step in this direction, entailing an attempt to locate common ground with a view to arguing against some pre-given racial or psychological essence of the Orient in general and Arabic culture in particular, is set out by M.A. al-Jābiri in his *Al-Turāth wa 'l-ḥadāthah* ("Tradition and Modernity").⁷ This venture focuses on European thought's model of history-writing, whereby a cultural narrative is present as a "continuum" – a continuous, homogeneous, uninterrupted sequence, stemming from Hegel's scathing verdict on the "Orient" back at the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁸

Another important discussion of the increasingly negative impact of ideology on ethnographic European epistemology can be found in Muḥammad Wāqidi's book *Al-'Ulūm al-insāniyyah wa 'l-ideologiah* ("The Humanities and Ideology").⁹

Mythology

This concept is closely related to the "Tammūzi movement",¹⁰ whose preoccupation with the question of national rebirth, and emphasis on the use of Middle Eastern myths in Arabic poetry, was symptomatic of a paradigmatic shift towards modernism. The impulse behind this interest in mythology, which dates back to the late 1950s, may be described as unmistakably modern.

As Salma Khadra Jayyusi points out, the use of Tammūz and Ishtār ('Ashtarūt) in Arabic creative writings appears as early as Gibrān's narrative piece "Liqā' " ("Encounter") in *Dam'a wa ibtisāma* ("A Tear

and a Smile”) (1914).¹¹ However, the Tammūzi movement’s preoccupation with Middle Eastern myths found outlet in two principal ventures.

The *first* was to retrieve old Syrian and Mesopotamian gods, as being emblematic of life and rebirth in the Near East, and to employ them, through a process of epistemological configuration, in constructing a vision of the future in terms of present concerns. In 1957, Jabra Ibrāhīm Jabra translated into Arabic part (4) of Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, which dealt, specifically, with the myth of Adonis.¹² The worship of Adonis (as this eminent British anthropologist¹³ pointedly explains)

was practised by the Semitic peoples of Babylonia and Syria, and the Greeks borrowed it from them as early as the seventh century before Christ. The true name of the deity was Tammūz: the appellation of Adunīs is merely the Semitic *Adon*, “lord”, a title of honour by which his worshippers addressed him. In the Hebrew text of the Old Testament the same name, Adonai, originally perhaps Adoni, “my lord”, was applied to Jehovah. But the Greeks through misunderstanding converted the title of honour into a proper name.¹⁴

The Tammūzi movement, ephemeral as it may now seem, produced a considerable number of works by “distinguished modern poets such as Khalīl Ḥāwī, ‘Ali Aḥmad Sa‘īd (Adunīs), Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb, Jabra Ibrāhīm Jabra and Yūsuf al-Khāl”.¹⁵

These poets sought, in the light of the new attitude to pre-Islamic mythology, to underline a longing for national and cultural revival. Yet, for all that, their emphasis on what M.L. West significantly calls the “East Face of Helicon”,¹⁶ in reference to the cultural elements imported

by ancient Greece from the Near East, is simply a shorthand way of proposing a redefinition that would recognize the validity of a new, well sourced universalism – one fully prepared to grapple with the elusive notion of “convergence”, anticipating the emergence of a common cultural ground that would reshape the essentialist binarity of “Orient” versus “Occident”.

The *second* venture was to *make mythology speak to epistemology*; that is, to transform mythical cognition into an instrument of historical investigation. In this sense, myth was no longer regarded as a narrative supplying a “gnosis”, a piece of esoteric knowledge lacking factual basis, but rather as a model of *implicit epistemology* as opposed to *explicit ideology*; one possessing its own way of expressing historical reality. An example of this is provided by Adunīs in what he aptly calls “material intertextuality”; a term denoting the geographical connection linking the “texts” of East and West, and the “ethereal intertextuality” implying a different kind of connection, one in which significant mythic-religious “textual” elements derived from the literatures of the Near East had been transplanted into the body of classical Greek culture.

The issue of reading epistemology into mythology is raised by Adunīs’s citation of the myth of Cadmus and Europa. In his account of the Cadmus myth, which provides a symbolic origin for the invention of the alphabet, the notion of a piece of knowledge with truth-generating capacity is firmly emphasized. The myth tells the story of Cadmus, the son of the Phoenician king Agenor, who was ordered by his father to go in search of his sister Europa. Unless he could bring her back, he himself was never to return to Phoenicia. Cadmus, who gave Europe its name, was the first to introduce the use of letters into Greece.¹⁷

If we are once prepared to accept the notion of cultural complementarity, along with its associated ideas, as the basis for de-

essentializing the roots of “modernism” and dislodging the belief in its enforced differences, then, clearly, the employment of this primary epistemological instrument has far-reaching implications. Within a multi-cultural frame, the emphasis on “reciprocity” – regarded by Al-Azmeh as “an assertion of mutual legitimacy”¹⁸ – means that modern Arabic theory can use it to challenge the historicity of the very assumptions predicating the dominant paradigm of “modernism”.

Difference

This is a concept central to essentialist and totalizing viewpoints on culture and identity. More specifically, there is, in modern Arabic literary theory, an implicit distinction to be made between “difference” and “differentness”. The former term provides a broad framework for comparison between a theoretical position embodying a Eurocentric model of modernism and an alternative model positing cultural identity as a paradigm in motion: one that is being constantly made and remade. The latter term refers to a fixed position, one that embraces the terminology of cultural differentialism. This negative reference, proposing a state of ontological differentness, takes up Al-Azmeh’s argument (1993), which connects, albeit obliquely, two seemingly conflicting web-spinning registers: the populist cultural stance of Islamic fundamentalists (Arab or otherwise) and that of some western pundits who celebrate an impermeably unchanging model of cultural essentialism. The two sides (Al-Azmeh trenchantly argues) are in fact speaking the same self-indulgent language of ancestral authenticity and identity.

In his over-arching study *Orientalism* (1978),¹⁹ Edward Said examines the processes whereby the category of the “Orient” has been and continues to be constructed within European thought, pointing out the

resultant ontological and epistemological distinction between “Orient” and “Occident”.

Drawing on Said’s thesis, Rana Kabbani employs the sceptical approach characterizing Oliver Goldsmith’s *Citizen of the World*, to point out what might be termed an “invented difference”: a fabricated mode of ontological differentness *par excellence*. In *Europe’s Myths of Orient* (1986), she writes as follows:

Goldsmith’s citizen is a studious, cultured, polite and reserved man, in fact, as unlike the traditional stereotype of the “Oriental” as can be imagined. This, he soon discovers, is a shortcoming on his part, for he repeatedly disappoints his European hosts, who find him wanting in barbarity. Their demand is for an “Oriental” Oriental . . . »²⁰

Incommensurability

This is a term from scientific theory, here used to indicate the problematic facing Arabic literary theory whenever a comparison is suggested between its model, regarded by some critics as derivative,²¹ replicative and consequently inauthentic, and a monocultural European model described as primary, original and authentic.

The problem with such a comparison lies not in any lack of common basis for comparison between two virtually asymmetric models, but rather in the way it is repeatedly employed within an axiology-oriented context, whereby the notion of comparability proposes a correlation based on the value-laden concept of *mufāḍalah*, as opposed to the value-neutral concept of *muqāranah*.

Trendism

Within the preceding model-building exercise, this term represents the contrary of creativity, which is regarded as the backbone of modernism. The cultural connotation of trendism has reference to an ephemeral category that should not be construed as free-standing, but rather bound to an endlessly changing concept of fashion, and to what is emphatically not literature in the full sense. Based on an uncritical adherence to fashion, it is a concept whose negative influence on Arab culture is expressed in Adunīs's distinction between fashion and creativity: "Fashion grows old from the moment it is born, while creativity is ageless."²²

Autonomy

The concept of "autonomy" derives from Pierre Macherey, and is used here – over against the concept of independence – to describe modern Arabic literary theory, viewed as a totality identical with itself. As such, an autonomous Arabic theory does not derive from any epistemological break with a dominant European cultural model. Rather, it establishes, in its own way, a distinct if ambivalent position separate from it. As such it is not totally independent. "The notion of absolute independence generally characterises that mythical thinking which attests to entities already formed without explaining their origins and development."²³

Voluntarism

"Voluntarism" is employed here, with respect to modern Arabic literary theory, as an epistemological instrument to explain the movement of culture from "fate" to "choice". This movement proposes "change" as a voluntary act, one determined by the self-conscious thrust of the will. According to Adunīs: "Arabic poetry worthy of being called original is one . . . emanating from the *will* to change."²⁴

The discussion of modernism by the innovationists has, over the three decades or so since 1970, produced a considerable amount of critical writing, most of which will be seen to have supplied a highly conscious impetus towards the development of a new paradigm.

Rewriting

The idea of rewriting a concept, a critical term or a method highlights the oppositionality between two divergent approaches: namely “application” and “re-invention”. The distinction between these two terms, as set forth by George Ṭarābīshi, proposes an intrinsic difference in reasoning. In an attempt to re-appropriate the language of psychoanalysis from literal interpretation, he argues that his role, as a critic of culture, is to “re-invent” Freudian analytical theory, that is, to domesticate it to an alternative context of relevancy, in opposition to any arbitrary “application” of its distinguishing postulates and premises.

Such rewriting suggests a possible synonymization with contextualizing. It insists on context-boundedness of understanding. Understanding is always a matter of application. It grows out of a particular context, and, as the context changes, so the need for re-interpretation arises accordingly. The travelling concept of the “static and dynamic”, moving from the context of Auguste Comte’s sociology to that of Ṭāha Ḥusain’s literary criticism, and thence to Adunīs’s cultural critique, provides a well-founded argument against textual closure, whereby employment of a term is confined to the context in which it has originated.

Supersession (ibdāl)

This has been an important feature of modern Arabic literary theory since around 1970 (the approximate starting date for “innovative” as opposed

to, and distinct from, “renovative” modernism). The term denotes a paradigmatic process of substitution whereby the latter is being displaced by the former.

Examples of supersession (*ibdāl*) may be found in the fields of history-writing, literature and literary theory.

First, Bassām Ṭībi, in his *Arab Nationalism: A Critical Inquiry* (1971), discusses al-Ḥuṣari’s theory of pan-Arab nationalism versus pan-Islamism, stressing that the former is secular in the European sense, and that its affinity with Islamic philosophy is fortuitous and only occasionally formal. This affinity, he further points out, has – in conjunction with the pioneering work of the early Syro-Lebanese Christian nationalists and those orthodox Muslims who unintentionally secularized Islam – created a fertile soil for the diffusion of al-Ḥuṣari’s theories within a profoundly Islamic society.

On the basis of all this, Ṭībi concludes, a process of substitution has occurred. We find ourselves, he implies, in a Foucaultian sense, in the presence of a rupture, a paradigmatic shift, an axial motion of displacement and replacement:

. . . it is possible to refute the claim that pan-Arabism is the historical continuation of pan-Islamism. There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism are two rival political movements. This is also clear from the fierce hostility expressed by the still powerful Muslim Brethren towards the Arab nationalist movement.²⁵

Second, viewing cultural change as a continual process of substitution is clearly present in the following lines from Adunīs’s poem “Qabr min ajl New York” (“Grave for New York”):

Thus I end all rules
 and for each movement I make up its rule,
 Thus I advance, but do not proceed,
 and when I proceed I do not return.²⁶

Third, Muḥammad Bennīs has extrapolated from Arabic the concept of *ibdāl*, or supersession, as an indicative keyword explaining how innovative modernism came into existence in an area within which a new paradigm has emerged.²⁷

Permutation (tabdīl)

In Arabic, the words *tabdīl* (permutation) and *ibdāl* share a common etymological ancestry; while the former denotes a change in the order of things observed, the latter refers to a process of substitution whereby one paradigm displaces/replaces another. Bennīs identifies the term *tabdīl* in poetics as emblematic of the concept of configuration present in the writings of renovative modernists.

Contextualism

This term refers to the view that modern Arabic literature's borrowings from western sources have been affected by the domestic context in which they are used. At this point the process of borrowing is seen by innovative modernists not as one of replicating an appropriated origin, but rather as a process of cultural translation and transvaluation.

In this sense, contextualization supplies a procedure for organizing, and being organized by, the notion of cultural relevancy.

Register (dīwān)

Modern literary theory began with the recognition and valorization of the genre of poetry as a category describing and prescribing the most prominent mode of expression in Arabic literature.

Poetry is regarded as the *dīwān*, or register, of the Arabs; it is the repository of their traditional lore, values and criteria. With the emergence of the novel as a fully accomplished art form, a switch of register occurred, so sparking off an ongoing debate regarding the two competing genres central to the study of current literature.

Affiliation

Said's importance vis-à-vis the interpretation of modern Arabic literary theory lies, at heart, in one specific notion: that his proposed paradigm of "affiliation" is not simply preferable to that of "filiation", its antonym, but also constitutes an alternative method of examining the way theory crosses the essentialized foundational boundaries separating cultures into entrenched, pre-given and fixed entities. In terms of the paradigm of filiation, biological inevitability reflects the notion of a reactionary impulse, one suggesting race-designate cultural identity. Affiliation, by contrast, is a dynamic concept imbued with the modern notion of choice, whereby a "metaphorical" parent displaces/replaces a static ethnicity thriving on the enmity of the "other".

Convergence

This is a concept proposed within the foregoing model of literary theory to explain its movement towards a common point; the claim being that different cultures share a universal rather than a uniform character. It underlies a theory making possible an in-between space where cross-cultural exchanges may take place.

An example of convergence may be seen in Adunīs's attempt to provide conceptual bridges linking French modernism and Abbasid modernity; Sufism with surrealism. Other examples can be found in Kamāl Abū Dīb's recognition (1978)²⁸ of an existing link between al-Jurjāni's theory of poetic imagery and current literary theory; or in Māzen al-Wā'ir's combining of Arabic grammar²⁹ and Chomsky's theory of universal grammar; or in Muhairi, Şammūd and Mseddi's joint exploration of further points of convergence that link Arab poetics with current linguistic theory central to the western canon.

In a comparative perspective, the concept of convergence resists all notions of a stable cultural identity; for such notions undermine the historicity and changeability of a given culture.

Secularity

The concept of a secular critique probing the complex ambivalent relationship between Islam and modernity is brought into Arabic literary theory via four principal routes:

First, Adunīs's thesis of the static and dynamic in Arabic culture. Stated broadly, this thesis underlines the significance of the stress placed on literal textual interpretation in Salafi Islamic epistemology, as a serious obstacle underlying the desire of mainstream writings on Arabic culture, stifled as these are by religious orthodoxy, to modernize without attempting to secularize.

Second, Mohammed Arkoun's critique of the discourse of Islamic fundamentalism, within which one may detect an underlying deconstructive streak. Arkoun's critique proclaims the imminent supersession of the concept of "Islamizing modernity" by that of "modernizing Islam".

Third, in *Al-Uṣūl al-falsafiyyah lil-‘ilmāniyyah* (“The Philosophical Fundamentals of Secularism”),³⁰ ‘Ādel Ḍāher offers a philosophical approach, while an interdisciplinary approach is employed in A. Al-Azmeh’s *Al-‘Ilmāniyyah min manẓūr mukhtalef* (“Secularism from a Different Perspective”).³¹

Fourth, the resurgence of fundamentalism and the emergence, in consequence, of the newly termed concept of “Islamic literature” as an alternative to “Arabic literature”, thus placing literature, within a hierarchic order, as subservient to theology.

Innovation

“Innovation” is used here to indicate a dominant analytical paradigm pointing to the notion of “creativity”. This notion is regarded by modernist writers as being identifiably Arab in character, and modern Arabic literary theory must, in consequence, be viewed in the context of creativity and judged by the standard of innovation particular to Arabic.

The study of “innovation”, as distinct from “renovation”, is central to the present model-building of modern literary theory. While innovative modernism proposes radical changes in literary theory by bringing new assumptions into play, the notion of renovation implies, by contrast, an adherence to revival, renewal and rendering old literary assumptions as good as new.

What this apparently rigid dichotomy boils down to in practice is that a great leap towards “differentness” has occurred; one that rejects the notion of emulating the past, yet falls decisively short of advocating any break with it.

Counter-canoncity

“The canon” is the term used to indicate the seemingly unassailable dominance exerted by texts recognized, through the course of Arabic literary history, as exclusively superior, authoritative and prescriptive.

This dominance of an institutionalized curriculum is seen by some modernists as emblematic of an irreversibly established ideological figuration. Now, however, the conception of “present-ness” as a paradigm superior to the past has effectively put an end to the veneration of the tradition in question, paving the way for the exploration and discovery of texts previously excluded, as minor or irrelevant, by a persistently controlling canon. Examples of such texts, now held up for critical consideration, are provided in the works of Sufi writers like al-Niffari, al-Ḥallāj and Ibn ‘Arabi.

Counter-canoncity is, then, the term indicating a deconstruction and reconstruction of the canonicity within which Arabic tradition is located. In this sense, the past can no longer be perceived in its own terms but in terms of present concerns.

Interdisciplinarity

The paradigm shift from a unidisciplinary literary criticism to an interdisciplinary cultural critique was already heralded at the turn of the last century, when the “literary” nationalism of the Christian Arabs became politicized.

In his critical inquiry into Arab nationalism (1971), Bassām Ṭībi reaffirmed the imminence of the shift, albeit obliquely, with the following statement:

At first, the nationalists tried to point to the existence of an Arab people who were different from the Turks by referring back to *Classical Arabic literature*. Then equality, and national cultural

autonomy within the Ottoman Empire, were demanded for this Arab nation. In both cases the advanced bourgeois society of the West was the model.³²

It may be worthwhile to note, in the present context, that the concept of *adab* in Classical Arabic literature – which implied, among other things, manners, refinement and culture – has borne persistent and identifiable humanistic overtones. The corollary of this interdisciplinarity is exemplified in the many varieties and inflections of writings attended to within the framework of a broadly-based concept which is never static but always open to further possibilities.³³

With the publication of Adunīs's influential study³⁴ of the literary canon in Arabic literature (1974/1977/1978), followed by M.A. al-Jābirī's inquiry³⁵ into Arabic culture and its epistemological systems (1984/1986), an interdisciplinary approach would appear to have emerged, one whereby complex questions such as cultural identity have come to be closely examined from within literary theory, critical theory, or just theory *per se*.

Beginning

Through Edward Said's argument (1975) that the notion of a "beginning", as suggesting the starting point of a genre or a movement, is preferable to that of an "origin", this model-building of Arabic literary theory, with modernism as its context, is proffered as an attempt to probe the problem of periodization; as a critical device for determining the points at which something different has occurred.

Unlike the idea of "origin", which is an irreducibly biology-oriented determiner, the notion of a "beginning" entails a thorough-going movement from fate to choice. Origin can only be acknowledged – while

a beginning, as Said puts it, “methodologically unites a practical need with a theory, an intention with a method”.

This argument supplies a possible matrix concept for a closer examination of the way modern Arabic theory possesses more than one “beginning” for literary genres like poetry and fiction. Adunīs (1978) rejects the idea of *aṣālah* (originality) rooted in *aṣl* (origin). For him, originality should not be made to conform to “origin” by virtue of a mere etymological connection. The original is, in fact, neither imitative nor derivative from a fixed origin.

Sufism

Sufism, the mystical movement within Islam, has affinities with the modernist movement that are central to contemporary Arabic literary theory. Indeed, Sufi practitioners like al-Ḥallāj, al-Niffari and Ibn ‘Arabi have come to be seen, in modern literature, as representative of a persistent impulse towards universalism.

These Sufis re-appear in modern poetry as poetic personae through which the articulation of a dynamic vision is made possible. The convergence of Sufism and surrealism³⁶ on to common ground is, for example, the theme of a study in which Adunīs presents the two universalist movements as commutative, symmetric and co-existent in scope.

Modernism

The term is viewed here as a controlling cultural paradigm, being associated in particular with the processes of contact and impact. Referring to a vibrant movement (or movements) within literature and culture in western societies between 1880 and 1950, modernism is

construed in the present context as emblematic of Europe's dominance effected through acculturation.

The extent of this acculturation, in terms of the methods used in comparative literature, falls outside the scope of this present study. Modernism is rather viewed, from the perspective of Arabic literary theory, as a problematic; one pointing to a theoretical framework within which intellectual contact and impact are constitutive of only one determiner among many. The corollary of this determiner is the recognition and valorization of a total act of stimulus rather than a total act of identification and dependency. Yūsuf al-Khāl has converted this position into a self-pleading problematic of change:

The contradiction of being a form inside the modern world and an essence outside it compels us to confront the problems of the presence of an old society in a modern world and the problems of the presence of the modern world in an old society.³⁷

Verbal creation

This is a proposed perspective associated, in the foregoing model-building, with an attempt to draw attention to literary theory's own textuality, and so to recognize the generative power embedding its nature as, primarily, a verbal creation.

This textuality reflects an emphasis on viewing the world of the text (referring to society) as being as textual and discursive as the text of the world. In other words, the world of the text is conceived, in this verbal creation, as a text; one that is, in a semiotic perspective, subject to textual examination.

¹ Faḍḍūl, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.

² Anṭūn Sa'ādah, *Mabādi' al-ḥizb al-sūri al-qawmi al-ijtimā'i wa ghāyātuh* ("Principles and Aims of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party"), Beirut, 1972, p. 29. Quoted in Faḍḍūl, *ibid.*, p. 94.

³ On this ideology-based position, as represented by Ernest Renan, see Wāqidi, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

⁴ Adunīs, "Taqdīm li kitāb al-fan al-tashkīli al-mu'āṣir fī Sūriyya 1898-1998" ("An Introduction to Contemporary Syrian Painting, 1898-1998"), in *Al-Ḥayāt* daily, London, 11 June 1998.

⁵ D.E. Cooper, *World Philosophies: An Historical Introduction*, Oxford (UK) and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996, p. 1.

⁶ E.L. Ranelagh, *The Past We Share: The Near Eastern Ancestry of Western Folk Literature*, London-Melbourne-New York: Quartet, 1979, p. I.

⁷ Al-Jābiri, *Al-Turāth wa 'l-ḥadāthah*.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-9. Al-Jābiri refers to this position as an act of "ideological deployment".

⁹ Wāqidi, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Nazeer El-Azma cites three sources for the Tammūzi movement. The first source relates to the shift of emphasis from religion to nationalism in the political life and thought of the fifties and early sixties, a shift that accorded considerable importance to the various pre-Islamic heritages. Syrian and Mesopotamian gods and goddesses such as Baal, the god of fertility and strength, Ishtār, the equivalent of Aphrodite, and Tammūz, the equivalent of Adonis in Greek mythology, thus became the major symbols of life and death in the language of the modern poet. The second source is found in the figures of Biblical and Qur'ānic narratives. The third lies in English poetry, and especially in the poetry and criticism of T.S. Eliot and Edith Sitwell. See Nazeer El-Azma, "The Tammūzi Movement and the Influence of T.S. Eliot on Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb", *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 88, No. 4, October-December 1968, pp. 671-8.

¹¹ Jayyusi, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 720n.

¹² Part (4) of Frazer's *The Golden Bough* treats the following: The Myth of Adonis; Adonis in Syria; Adonis Then and Now.

¹³ The conventional description of nineteenth-century anthropology confirms that we are dealing less with the study of man than with the study of "primitive" man and his "native" society. As such, anthropology in its unrevised form came into being through

the construction of an essentializing hierarchy of cultures. By contrast, *The Golden Bough* may well be seen as emblematic of a humanistic alternative, one whose comparative approach and emphasis on similarities between seemingly different cultures, and their ultimate convergence to common points, is far removed from the racially hierarchical, classificatory or levelling.

¹⁴ Sir James G. Frazer, *The Illustrated Golden Bough* (edited Mary Douglas), London: Macmillan, 1978, p. 123.

¹⁵ El-Azma, *op. cit.*, p. 671.

¹⁶ See M.L. West, *The East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999.

¹⁷ See J. Lemprière, *Lemprière's Classical Dictionary*, London: Bracken Books, 1984, pp. 126-7. See also Roberto Classo, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, London: Vintage, 1993.

¹⁸ Al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities*, p. 20.

¹⁹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon, 1978. Translated into Arabic by Kamāl Abū Dīb, Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb.

²⁰ Rana Kabbani, *Europe's Myths of Orient: Devise and Rule*, London: Macmillan, 1986, p. 137.

²¹ See for instance: Ḥammūdah, *op. cit.*; and Ḥamārneh, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

²² Adunīs, *Introduction to Arab Poetics*, pp. 101-2.

²³ P. Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978, pp. 52-3.

²⁴ Adunīs, *Al-Thābit wa 'l-mutaḥawwil*, vol. 3 (*Ṣadmat al-ḥadāthah*), p. 146.

²⁵ Bassām Ṭībi, *Arab Nationalism: A Critical Inquiry* (edited and translated from German by Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett), London: Macmillan, 1981, pp. 150-1.

²⁶ Adunīs, *Al-Athār al-kāmilah*, vol. 2, p. 671.

²⁷ Bennīs, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-77.

²⁸ Abū Dīb, *Al-Jurjāni's Theory*.

²⁹ Al-Wā'ir, *op. cit.*

³⁰ Beirut: Dār al-Sāqī, 1993.

³¹ Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Wiḥdah al-'Arabiyyah, 1992.

³² Ṭībi, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

³³ For an illustration of the interdisciplinarity implicit in the broadly-based term *adab*, see Lois Anita Giffen's treatment of the theme of "profane love". In her *Theory of Profane Love among the Arabs*, she notes this interdisciplinarity as being emblematic of an extra-literary quality:

This study was intended as a contribution to both the literary history of the Arabic language and the intellectual history of the Islamic Middle Ages, for these Arabic works on the theory of profane love are not literary in any narrow sense of the word. They concern themselves not only with literary tradition and literary and social fashions, but also with psychology, philosophy, cosmology, theology, ethics, practical piety, Islamic law, and science of tradition – Ḥadīth.

See Lois Anita Giffen, *Theory Of Profane Love among the Arabs*, London: University of London Press, 1972, p. v.

³⁴ Adunīs, *Al-Thābit wa 'l-mutaḥawwil*.

³⁵ M.A. al-Jābiri, *Takwīn al-'aql al-'Arabi* ("The Making of the Arab Mind"), Beirut: Dār al-Ṭalī'ah, 1984; and *Bunyat al-'aql al-'Arabi* ("The Structure of the Arab Mind"), Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Wiḥdah al-'Arabiyyah, 1986.

³⁶ Adunīs, *Al-Ṣūfiyyah wa 'l-suryāliyyah*.

³⁷ Yūsuf al-Khāl, *Al-Ḥadāthah fi 'l-shi'r* ("Modernity in Poetry"), Beirut: Dār al-Ṭalī'ah, 1978, p. 56.

PART TWO:

**Paradigm-Shifting:
A Functional Articulation**

I. Categories of Change:

The Tool-Makers, the Renovators and the Innovators

Introduction: from structure to function

The previous part of this study was, as repeatedly argued in the foregoing pages, constructed by means of a model-building exercise, which, as a verbal creation, works itself out and modifies itself as it proceeds. The model provides an interpretation of those basic issues that suggest, albeit in oblique fashion, the essential notions and mechanisms involved. In other words, it is *not so much a history of literary theory as a study in interpretation*. Rather than compress so vast and unwieldy a subject into an account of events and occurrences, I have sought to identify, probe and extrapolate certain issues that are specifically related to a possible structural articulation of modern Arabic literary theory.

All this serves to underline how the interpretation provided by the foregoing model serves as a *representation*, that is, as a self-generating construct of *realness* intended to fulfil a purpose: that of seeking to appropriate a network of hierarchies, insights, devices and contexts for the depiction of “what” is essentially a paradigm in motion – *a sudden break rooted in the epistemology of becoming*.

Thus, the perceived model that has proposed the intellectual tools for understanding literary theory must be viewed as an instrumentality rather than a functionality. The former advances as an ongoing *structural* configuration, an agency, a means whereby a closer interpretation of its cumulative presentation is progressively made possible; the latter advances as a *functional* (complementary) articulation, reworking and refitting the concepts, differential and combinal, that will propose a

repertoire of ways to interpret “how” the suggested model operates or performs.

Another way of putting all this is to say that, while the “what” and “why” of literary theory are seen as crucial features of its perceived model, a complementary articulation is proffered, in the following elliptical exposé, as a focus for the functionality of paradigm-shifting – proposing as it does the “how” of literary theory. This functionality is treated as a discursive process predicating a triple movement: from renovative to innovative modernism; from unidisciplinarity to concept-generating interdisciplinarity; and from literary criticism to cultural critique.

* * *

The critical examination of culture has been a major undertaking of modern Arabic literary criticism since the end of the nineteenth century. In their earliest attempts to comprehend the notions of radical change, Arab writers were confronted with the problem of how to “modernize but not to westernize”;¹ only, they felt, within a context of specific cultural identity could a “legitimate” variant of modernity be achieved.² It is unarguable – a gross understatement, indeed – that European concepts of modernity/modernism have been powerfully present. They influenced Arabic criticism from the late nineteenth century well into the twentieth, and continue to be reflected today in what is commonly referred to as a “process of globalization”.³ As such, there is little reason to dispute the assertion, often encountered in the writings of Arab critics, that the complex notion of cultural change is, in many respects, a matter of self-scrutiny, of becoming rather than being; a shorthand way, in fact, of indicating the possibility of re-defining cultural identity. Amin Maalouf,

in the course of a thought-provoking inquiry into the sustained question of identity, makes a pointed comparison. A constant re-experiencing of the cutting edge of this concept of intellectual self-awareness is, he says, akin to taming a panther:

Why a panther? Because a panther kills if you persecute it and kills if you leave it alone, and the worst thing you can do is to leave it alone after you've wounded it. But also because a panther can be tamed.⁴

In his *On Identity*, Maalouf argues for a re-examination of the *functionality* of cultural identity – personal, national, religious and ethnic. Viewed from the locus of an all-embracing modernity, and wedding two categories (a deceptively immutable Arabic essence and a ceaselessly mutable historical construct) that are seemingly mutually exclusive, cultural identity is presented not as a fixed abstraction but as a notion embodied in a metaphor, one suggesting that the panther under scrutiny is psychosomatic: consisting, that is, of a body (soma) and a mind (psyche):⁵

It is not to be dealt with by either persecution or indulgence. It needs to be observed, studied calmly, understood, and then conquered and tamed if we don't want the world to become a jungle, or the future to resemble the worst images of the past.⁶

“Panther taming”⁷ can, then, work as a *pictorial* metaphor, one expressing the constant attempt to nail down the slippery concept of cultural identity. The metaphor can also be *re-functioned* in relation to a

particular tradition, namely as a footnote to a Hegelian dialectical argument:

Thanks to identity every being remains the same being, eternally identical to itself and different from the others. But thanks to negativity an identical being can negate or overcome its identity with itself and become other than it is, even its own opposite. Identity and negativity do not exist in an isolated state. Just like totality itself they are only complementary aspects of one and the same real being.⁸

Underlying this argument there seem to be the following presuppositions. First, cultural change, whenever the case derived from it is cumulatively *dialectical* rather than uncompromisingly *categorical*, takes place when the thesis (the modern) and the antithesis (the pre-modern) interact. Second, the ensuing interaction produces, in an ongoing progression of paradigm-shifting, a possible synthesis culminating in a coherent whole. Yet – as has been demonstrated throughout the foregoing model-building – no single discipline can produce such a synthesis. Any one discipline is bound to *abstract* its object from the total field of an emergent multi-dimensional critique, and so fail to *consider* culture from all points of view. In the case of Şidqi Ismā'īl and Zaki Najīb Maḥmūd, for instance, we are offered vibrant examples of *embryonic* interdisciplinarity. A brief review of the investigations undertaken by the writers in question, as they focus on the problematic of modernity, will shed light on the submergence of a sustained process of paradigm-shifting, within Arabic literary theory, from literary criticism to cultural critique,⁹ and, consequently, to a multiplicity of issues arising from the latter.

As a transformational project suggesting the possibility of a theory of change, modernity – and, indeed, modernism in its various domains – may be broadly viewed from at least two perspectives. We may consider it, first, as it actually unfolds in specific examples of literary (ergo cultural)¹⁰ criticism: as an axiology-based endeavour, pointing up the function of literary criticism turned cultural critique, and, subsequently, its implicit correspondence to an emergent system of values. The other perspective may be termed both theoretical and methodological, mulling as it does over the problematics of innovation and renovation.

This present section of the study will, then, explore these two complementary perspectives, with a view to supplying the notion of an insistently cumulative/progressive sequence. In seeking, through a composite framework of adopting, adapting and relativizing, to explore the boundaries of a possible theory of change, we are effectively re-defining a set of categories in which three types of critic are involved.

The first kind comprises those who renovate/innovate the tools of the intellect: namely, the *tool-makers* who provide, through an epistemological reconfiguration, the critical instruments and the intellectual framework that comprehends them. It seems quite reasonable to suggest that culture-sensitive Arab critics and historians of ideas have, over the past three decades or more, succeeded in casting off the certainty of an unchanging exclusiveness in favour of a modernist imperative of ongoing change. Some, like Şidqi Ismā‘īl (a conscious and resolutely determined tool-maker), have maintained that Arab modernity is a Janus-like blend of heritage and innovation, with one face looking towards the past in terms of the concerns of the present, the other towards the present in terms of a submergent destabilizing world view.

In his *Al-‘Arab wa tajribat al-ma’sāt* (“The Arabs and the Experience of Tragedy”),¹¹ Ismā‘īl, fascinated by Nietzsche’s obsessive

preoccupation with the nature of tragedy (as reflected in the latter's *The Birth of Tragedy*),¹² acts out, under a parallel homonym, the enchantments and disenchantments set forth by the German thinker. Designed to be compared and contrasted, this literary critique comes up with effectively new arguments, new critical tools; thereby dismissing as unfit the old tool-box, with its seemingly inexhaustible reserves of time-honoured concepts and value judgements.

Zaki Najīb Maḥmūd has likewise been highly influential as a contemporary cultural critic. In his *Fī falsafat al-naqd* ("On the Philosophy of Criticism"),¹³ he deals with questions relevant to the so-called "logical geography"¹⁴ of the critical concepts of the intellect. Clearly, his conception of literary theory goes hand in hand with his conception of philosophy, which derives to a large extent from the school of logical positivism¹⁵ – this last being manifest in his attempt to develop a set of rigorous critical tools for a modern culture-sensitive literary theory.¹⁶

The second category of change entails the *renovators*: those writers whose encounter with European and American literature has led, subsequently, to a position whereby modernity is sought through renovation of the old form¹⁷ rather than through any serious attempt to innovate within the paradigm of a new poetics, via changes brought about in consciousness.

The crucial point here is the way *al-Nahḍah* – epitomizing as it does a revivalist movement propounding the superiority of the European present over a stagnant Arab culture locked in the past – is viewed as intrinsically renovationist by innovationists such as Adunīs, Yūsuf al-Khāl, Kamāl Abū Dīb, Jāber 'Aṣfūr, Muḥammad Bennīs and numerous others. For Adunīs, one of the failures of *al-Nahḍah* lies in its upholding of a negative concept of "otherness":

Al-Nahḍah has deepened the feeling among the Arabs that the “modern” belongs to the other, whether it is about life style or way of thinking. Thus our modernity has always assumed a confrontation with the West, with an alien and different world. Even the quarrel between the conservatives and the innovationists, the *qudamā’* [the ancients] and the *muhḍāthīn* [the modern] has always been associated, on the level of Arab society as a whole, with a recurring polemic on the Orient and the Occident and the nature of their relationship.¹⁸

This seemingly *unwilled* engagement with otherness, emblematic of the modernism of renovation, suggests an undecidedly ambivalent relationship. Conversely, innovation modernism, with its emphasis on the notions of mutuality, complementarity and permeability, suggests the contrary: that *willed* engagement with otherness is rendered increasingly possible within the parameters of a global intellectual milieu able to find rectitude only in cultural mobility.

Yet, having rejected the founding assumptions underlying a reductive, even eliminative Eurocentric narrative of world history, innovation modernists do not appear to be in full agreement with the meaning of othering or otherness as grounded, for instance, by certain post-colonial critics like Gaytari Spivak. In Spivak’s explanation:

Othering is a dialectical process because the colonizing “other” is established at the same time as its “colonized others” are produced as subjects.¹⁹

Another way of putting all this is to say that the post-colonial writer is confronted with the problem of writing in the language of the “other”, i.e., the colonizer. If English was to function (as it effectively did) as the integrative (filial) factor in the formation of the modern literatures of the formerly colonized English-speaking countries, such a problem was inevitable.

Be that as it may, the topic concerns us here only in so far as Arabic literary theory, being a verbal creation, can claim to be in some way different from – albeit not fundamentally dissimilar to – post-colonial theory. The notion of otherness as viewed in Arabic theory must, accordingly, be read against the following background: *that it is, pointedly, based less on filiation than on affiliation.*

This position is illustrated in the critical writings of Nāzik al-Malā’ika, who is a post-renovationist and an exponent of the new poetic diction. In her *Qaḍāya ‘l-shi‘r al-mu‘āṣir* (“Issues of Contemporary Poetry”), awareness of the classical tradition, with reference to some elements of Arabic culture, including *language*, is no longer an expression of alertness to its gravitational pull; rather, tradition, by means of a renovative epistemological configuration, constructs the appropriate framework of culture as the source of *intellectual legitimacy*.²⁰

In this sense, consciousness of the classical tradition implies a downward movement, through past cultural superstructures, to some focal point in the present where all movement ends and begins. However, the emphasis on a possible paradigmatic shift, represented by the movement from the “pre-modern” – concomitant with the notion of “fate” – to the “modern” – concurrent with the notion of “choice” – will, in a sense, vary from one writer to another.

The third category of change is that of the *innovators*. Innovation modernism has been dominant since the seventies,²¹ exerting considerable

influence in many cultural areas and re-writing modern literary theory as a playfully verbal construct – a discursive creation full of brio and bravura.²² Such a creation points up a problematic, an interwoven web of assumptions held together by a particular unsolved problem. The problematic is then denotative of the imminence of a thorough-going socio-cultural model of transformation, one whose full implications Adunīs confronts head on through his suggestion of an interaction between the micro and the macro:

To think and write what is truly new means above all to think about what has never been thought about and write what has never been written: that huge constant area of suppression – religious and cultural, individual and social, spiritual and physical.²³

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?”, *Foreign Affairs*, Summer, 1993, p. 41.

² This argument has been taken up by a multiplicity of critics and historians of ideas. The idea of a synthesis of classical and modern, of a *legitimate* fusion of past and present, is best explained by Salma Khadra Jayyusi, who argues that Adunīs has “achieved at once a firm *continuity* and a definite *discontinuity* with classical diction and style. No deformation was allowed, and no disintegration in the well-built edifice of language, in its massive integrity and formidable command. But at the same time a completely new syntax, full of classical authority, yet fresh and utterly original, was achieved.” See Jayyusi, *Modernist Poetry in Arabic*, p. 46.

³ For an analysis of the concept of cultural globalism and its relevance in an Islamic and Arab context, see Turner, *Orientalism, Postmodernism and Globalism*, pp. 95-104. The term “globalism” is used here to accentuate the definition proposed by Anthony Giddens: “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distinct localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring miles away and vice versa.” (Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990, p. 64.)

⁴ See Amin Maalouf, *On Identity*, trans. from French by Barbara Bray, London: Harvill Press, 2000, p. 118.

⁵ See Rycroft, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

⁶ Maalouf, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

⁷ The centrality of the human will sets this act of voluntarism firmly within the context of choice rather than that of unwilled destiny.

⁸ See Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988, p. 22.

⁹ For a discussion of the distinction between “criticism” and “critique” in the cultural context, see Davis and Schleifer, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-46.

¹⁰ The logical edge vis-à-vis the interchangeability of the “literary” and the “cultural” lies in the assumption that language, culture and identity have been proffered, throughout the present study, as heuristically intertwined.

¹¹ Şidqi Ismā‘īl, *Al-Mu'allafāt al-kāmila*, Damascus, 1980, vol. II.

¹² Ismā‘īl's interest in Nietzsche's life-affirming *Die Geburt der Tragödie* can be detected in his own rhapsodized (albeit less passionate) treatment of the nature of tragedy within its Arabic cultural context. See Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1956.

¹³ Beirut-Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1979.

¹⁴ To determine the “logical geography” of concepts is to “reveal the logic of propositions in which they are wielded, that is to say, to show with what other propositions they are consistent and inconsistent, what propositions follow from them and from what propositions they follow”. See Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, London: Penguin, 1954, p. 8.

¹⁵ That is, from the range of ideas characteristic of the Vienna Circle of the 1920s and 1930s. Logical positivism was strongly influenced by the empirical position, and especially by the work of Hume. Its distinctive feature was its attempt to develop and systematize empiricism with the aid of the conceptual equipment furnished by modern exploration of logical and mathematical theory, especially as in the early works of Russell and Wittgenstein. See Antony Flew (ed.), *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, London: Pan Reference, 1981.

¹⁶ The best example of this can be seen in Maḥmūd's efforts to bring literary criticism out on the same wavelength of philosophical critique.

¹⁷ The point is that Arab critics have always viewed the genre of poetry as "the register of the Arabs" (*diwān al-'Arab*) – as a distinctive and privileged form of literature and thought.

¹⁸ See Adunīs, *Sadmat al-ḥadāthah*, p. 284.

¹⁹ See Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *op. cit.*, pp. 171-2.

²⁰ This point is further illuminated in S. Moreh's matter-of-fact observation that "the form of shi'r ḥurr became the sign of progress in Arabic poetry, while the conventional form of the qaṣīda and even the strophic form of the muwashshaḥ and other stanzaic forms are considered conservative". See Moreh, *op. cit.*, p. 287.

²¹ This is, as noted earlier, an approximate date.

²² See, for example, K. Abū Dīb, *Jamāliyyāt al-tajāwur* ("The Aesthetics of Juxtapositioning"), Beirut: Dār al-'Ilm lil-Malāyīn, 1997.

²³ Adunīs, *Introduction to Arab Poetics*, pp. 101-2.

II. Theory in Function: A Logician's Landscape

The term "cultural change" is more commonly associated with theoretical issues in modern literary criticism¹ than with other concerns of modernism. As such, it is quite common for literary critics to lump theoretical and practical principles together and to offer the same type of account in connection with basic assumptions underlying cultural models of change. If a general conclusion can be extracted from a different but not dissimilar cultural context, Ihab Hassan's observation about a general theory of change appears to have a pointed application to modern Arabic literary theory:

We speak much of change and have no theory of it. This may be wiser than we suspect; for change must continually surprise itself . . . Yet human beings in culture continue to innovate or renovate and to do this now more than at any period of history . . . This is to say we remain creatures of power, language and desire.²

Such observations about cultural change raise the question of how to confirm or unsettle the following presuppositions relating to modernism, and to assess their relevance to the pull of the present:

1. Arabic modernism and European modernism may be described as *isomorphic*,³ being similar in intention and claim, but different in structure and function.
2. For Arab innovation modernists who seek to escape from the *cultural determinism* rooted in ethnocentricity, the appeal of *teleology* resides

in its emphasis on the “will”. A teleological horizon entails a wilful switch from the traditional notion of *fate* to the modern notion of *an optionality governed by a sense of purpose*.

3. Modern literary theory is an endeavour to abolish history and replace it with interpretation.
4. The study of modernity/modernism as a cultural phenomenon takes *different* forms among *different* groups and *different* individuals; it is more of a “prism” than an “ism”.
5. *Renovation*, within the Arabic social and cultural context, views modernity/modernism as a paradigm of permanence, durability and sustainability, fostering as it does a close connection between past and present, and elevating the influence of tradition above that of innovation.
6. *Change* (to cite Ihab Hassan’s epigram once more) “must continually surprise itself”. We have no theory of change; and because change entails a questioning of authority, it necessarily implies *innovation*: the employment of an *alternative* based on choice.
7. As contextualized within the domain of an ongoingly destabilized Arab cultural critique, *innovation* should be seen as a *paradigm in motion*.
8. As a paradigm in motion, modernism implies a continuous change in the meaning of the past, which can no longer be grasped in its own terms but in terms of the present.

9. Modernisms, European and Arabic, are viewed by some Arab writers not only as symmetric but also as identical. This position, advocating total cultural assimilation, is emblematic of Jabra I. Jabra's notion of the inevitable dominance of an emergent universalizing order of culture-power. He makes the point, accordingly, apropos of an all-embracing literary canon:

We have to perceive the movement of new Arabic poetry, unequivocally and above all, as part of the movement of modern art in Europe and the world. For renewal [*tajdīd*], it must be said, has its roots there. It has been brought here as a *psychological image*, not only in poetry but also in political and sociological thinking.⁴

10. The word *taqwīl*, denoting a process of "saying on behalf of", evokes, albeit in roundabout fashion, what is expressed by the English word "ventriloquism": it postulates an act of *impersonation*. The term contains, within the context of a seemingly inexorable relatedness connecting Arabic literary theory to a Eurocentric model, a cluster of supplementary concepts, such as: mimicking, mirroring, copying, appropriating, plagiarizing, simulating, emulating, replicating, aping, imitating, reproducing, recycling. Moreover, it connotes the *theatrical*⁵ rather than the *theoretical*; for it suggests an act, predicated to function in iconic fidelity, of total cultural identification; a conscious/subconscious preoccupation with emulating all the assumptions held by a superior "other" and attributing them to "oneself". There is, then, no room for variance, difference or dissimilarity. The corollary is a celebration of a fixed impermeable cultural essence. In emphasizing the singularity of an "essence"

denoting one essentialized “source” of modernity, Arab writers such as Rashād Rushdi in the seventies and ‘Abdul-‘Azīz Ḥammūdah in the nineties highlight, albeit inadvertently, the predominance of an outward-looking, surreptitious literary fundamentalism, one that does not exist beyond the assumptions and prescriptions of Eurocentrism. Hence it is not, in effect, fundamentally dissimilar to the inward-looking literalism of “Salafi” cultural fundamentalism. The two positions can be viewed, in consequence, as the two sides of the same coin.

¹ In this context Adorno’s view of a theory of cultural critique is significant. He argues that “the position of the cultural critic, by virtue of its difference from the prevailing disorder, enables him to go beyond it theoretically, although often enough he merely falls behind”. See his essay “Cultural Criticism and Society”, in *Prisms*, trans. from German by Samuel and Shierry Weber, Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 1982, p. 19.

² In Ihab and Sally Hassan (eds.), *Innovation and Renovation: New Perspectives on the Humanities*, Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983, p. 15.

³ That is, “having the same structure due to resemblance between corresponding parts”; the term being “applicable in relating material objects, social organizations, works of art, and abstract concepts”. See Flew, *op. cit.*, pp. 182-3.

The word *mushākalah* is the Arabic equivalent of “isomorphism”, which is the property or state of being “isomorphic” (*mutashākel*).

⁴ Jabra, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁵ The “theatrical” can be vividly seen in “what Jorge Luis Borges hints at in ‘Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote’, describing a writer, who, emerging from a blur of inscrutable philosophical monographs, determines to write the novel *Don Quixote*:

He did not want to compose another *Quixote* – which is easy – but the *Quixote itself*. Needless to say, he never contemplated a mechanical transcription of the original; he did not propose to copy. His admirable intention was to produce a few pages which would coincide – word for word and line for line – with those of Miguel de Cervantes.

Copying and inspiration may be superficially indistinguishable in their results, but, as Borges demonstrates, the *identical* texts will have *profoundly different meanings*.” (Nick Groom, *The Forger's Shadow: How Forgery Changed the Course of Literature*, London: Picador, 2002, p. 31.

III. Two Transformational Concepts: “Cultural Nosology” and “Interdisciplinarity”

(a) *Cultural nosology*¹

An emotive form of cultural sociology, the proposed concept of “cultural nosology” has the potential to tell us a great deal about the emotional responses to national predicaments and the different phases of disease afflicting Arab culture. As such, the transformational concept of “cultural nosology” is viewed here as emblematic of the workings of “tragedy”.

In a book entitled *Al-‘Arab zāhirah ṣautiyah* (“The Arabs as Vocal Phenomenon”),² ‘Abdullah al-Quṣaymi seeks, through a pathological exercise in self-criticism, to supply the missing populist perspective in a possible cultural nosology: one that launches a scathing attack, in hyperbolic language, on Arab culture and society. A different if not fundamentally dissimilar kind of cultural nosology may be seen in Ṣādeq al-Aẓm’s *Al-Naqd al-dhāti ba ‘d al-hazīma* (“Self-Criticism Following the Defeat”).³ Written after the military defeat of 1967, this book, laden with ideology and displaying a positive array of pseudo-scientific Marxist claims, proposes an alternative, albeit absolutist theory of change. Of clear interest to us here is the very problem that has been left unresolved: namely, the problem of modernity vis-à-vis Islamic restorationism with its re-assertion of an immutable sense of “authenticity” and “tradition”.

The reverse of al-Quṣaymi’s emotionalism and al-Aẓm’s pseudo-scientific Marxist absolutism is to be found in the stance of Ṣidqī Ismā‘īl, where the core of the conception of cultural nosology lies in an emphasis on the meaning of “tragedy”. What he suggests in his *Al-‘Arab wa tajribat al-ma’sāt* (“The Arabs and the Experience of Tragedy”) is neither a return to an irrecoverable past nor the adoption of an absolutist theory of change, but rather a more profound understanding of what is implicit

in the concept of a “tragedy” antedating the collapse into a seemingly uninterrupted state of entropy.

Another way of putting this is to say that Ismā‘īl’s endeavour presents an intimate analysis of the concept of “tragedy”, not only within the framework of disastrous events taking place in real history, but also within the locus of a discursive exercise in intellectual introspection – a journey through the mind, through a cross-culture perspective, through the past as viewed from the standpoint of the present, and through a taxonomy of reflections on fiction, poetry, axiology, psychology and philosophy.

The word “tragedy”, in this sense, refers not solely to Arab history, to what actually happened; it is *fictional* as much as *factual*. The twofold movement of this proposition thus appears as a dialectical interconnection between rival attempts to deconstruct/reconstruct a possible cultural critique of an emergent theory of change.

Finally, so that an analysis leading to self-criticism may initiate a passage from mere description of the stages of disease to a critique of the disease itself, we need to point out a number of “misconceptions” that impede the emergence of a functioning theory of change. These misconceptions are enumerated in the closing pages of the book, as illustrative of an all-embracing syndrome.

1. The misconception⁴ of truth

Nietzsche’s observation that there are no truths but only interpretations is a splendid example of iconoclastic epistemology. Yet, in the words of one contemporary philosopher: “Logic cries out against this remark. For is it true?”⁵ The answer given is a qualified one: “Well, only if there are no truths. In other words, only if it is not true.”⁶

In contrast to Nietzsche's extreme relativism, Şidqi Ismā'īl's scepticism is not associated with the form of nihilism that denies the possibility of truth. For him the issue lies in the absence (not presence) of pluralism in dealing with the concept of truth within the framework of a modernizing culture. "Arab thought," as he puts it, "is still lingering in a state of stagnation and populism."⁷ Hence, he insists:

Pluralistic expression of opinion is fully dependent on the presence of a developed critical position, one demanding the kind of courage in which thought can refute inherent assumptions in order to arrive at truth. This refutation is imperative to foreground a position of "certainty", a position in which "truth" becomes part of man's existence.⁸

*2. The misconception of stability*⁹

The notion of stability within a seemingly coherent Arab culture and society is based, erroneously, on an ontological and epistemological distinction between Orient and Occident. According to this predominate discourse of rupture, the Orient is seen as the locus of "*spirituality*", while the Occident is posited as the powerhouse of "*materialism*". The subsequent rupture becomes, in effect, the originator of the fallacy of "authentic spirituality". Postulated as emblematic of a *commutative* relationship with impermeable, unchanging notions of social and cultural stability, this fallacy is illustrative, in consequence, of a pre-modern ontological essentialism.

*3. The misconception of revolution*¹⁰

The central issue for a theory of change resides in the very notion of "revolution"; for change, by its nature, means *mutation* of the given,

transforming it into something other than itself. Yet “revolutionary consciousness”, which is the core of revolution, is, for Ismā‘īl, ceaselessly posited as concomitant with the presence of an “elite” or “vanguard”. Seeking, as it does, positive responses to the “mainstream”, the “elite” seems increasingly open to the idea of viewing revolution in terms of a “slogan” with which to flatter and exploit the masses. Thus populism becomes a sign of what Ismā‘īl aptly terms “false consciousness”, which appears to be at once stimulus and goad.

*4. The misconception of individualism*¹¹

One of the assumptions associated with Arab culture is that “we are fully developed individuals”. This presupposition is deemed to be emblematic of a seamless garb of unchanging attributes stretching back in time. Hence, the future is posited as emanating not from a response to the “tragic” as defined by the present, but from the negative notion of “self-indulgence” – which is a shorthand way of pointing up a possible abdication of social obligation.

*5. The misconception of subjectivism*¹²

Loosely speaking, this notion dwells in conjunction with individualism: each is in some kind of active relation to the other, with the “self” viewed as being made up simply of unrestricted whims, quirks and fancies. Ismā‘īl’s definition of subjectivism is a highly tentative one. For him, the invisible nature of the “self” vis-à-vis the presence of the tragic serves to remind the reader how the “subject” ceases to function once it is robbed of its “object”, which is a distinct socio-cultural formation.

A final word should be said in connection with the above analysis. Defined as it is by an unfolding concept of “tragedy” in the senses of the

fictional and the factual, Ismā'īl's scrutiny of the dichotomy between tradition and modernity has led him into an acutely critical, albeit articulatory, position. Such a position, he implies, can neither be permanently fixed nor enter into permanently fixed relations.

Theorist, cultural overseer and literary critic, Ismā'īl has effectively reasserted the account of a conscious axiologist whose ambivalent examination of the old tool-box of time-honoured cultural concepts and value judgements has ended in a *re-thinking of modernity*.

* * *

(b) Interdisciplinarity

Parallel with the position of Şidqī Ismā'īl, who argues that a possible cultural critique should, within a rigorous socio-cultural framework of re-evaluation, address the nature of value, its subjectivist interpretation and objective qualities, is the critical stance of Zaki Najīb Maḥmūd, which upholds an interdisciplinary approach celebratory of a “relational” status of literary theory. A modernist in the mould of logical transformational positivist theory, he contends, pointedly, that the concept of “interdisciplinarity” provides the foundational interface whereby the study of literature covered by the term “criticism” overlaps extensively with philosophy, linguistics and psychology. In an essay entitled “Poetry Does Not Inform”, he asserts that “art has no meaning and ought not to have one”.¹³

Central to this proposition is the notion that poetry uses words not to inform but to suggest. The upshot is that the language of poetry has to be understood not as comprising statements of facts (which might be true or false), but as invitations to the reader to react, respond and appreciate. This claim concerning poetry is addressed by invoking the eleventh-

century literary theorist and critic al-Jurjāni, whose theory of poetic language he expounds and re-invents, and who, Maḥmūd believes, has a vital role to play with respect to modern criticism; for: “while trying to extract signs of inimitability [*i’jāz*] in the Qur’ānic text, he has, effectively, restricted his inquiry to the text, searching for the secrets of *balāghah* [the systematic study of eloquence, conveyance and persuasion].”¹⁴

The underlying source of Maḥmūd’s enthusiasm for al-Jurjāni’s modernity is thus as much literary as philosophical: it stems primarily from his concern about al-Jurjāni’s neoteric position. This stance, already established during the seventies by Maḥmūd and others,¹⁵ has given credence to a major movement designed to repudiate the anachronistic assumptions underpinning pre-modern interpretations of literary theory, maintained emphatically and with a tenacious classical austerity.

It was, for a time, almost standard practice for university courses in Arabic literary criticism to dismiss philosophy¹⁶ (along with the social sciences) as superfluous and unnecessary. Now, however, the modern reaction against this view (as exemplified by Maḥmūd’s critique) has finally set in. Over the past three decades, Arab literary critics have begun to appreciate that the processes of textual levelling denoting an interdisciplinary approach, utilizing philosophy and the social sciences, can provide regulating and illuminating insights into the corpus of an embryonic modern literary theory.

As an advocate of the methods of the “new critics” in literary criticism, and as a proponent, too, of “logical positivism”¹⁷ in philosophy, Maḥmūd has, it might be argued, contributed to the rediscovery of the notion of viewing “language” as an “interface” connecting Arabic literary criticism and philosophy; one whereby these two disciplines meet and act upon one another.¹⁸ A close scrutiny of his ideas concerning modernity,

and indeed modernism, in its various domains, reveals an emphasis on four significant critical strands related to a possible literary theory: his renovationist/innovationist assumptions, philosophical and literary, about the concept of newness; his notion of the critic as double reader; his recourse to the relatively unfamiliar classification, on the part of medieval Arabic philosophy, of poetry as a “branch of logic”; and his attempt to draw particular attention to the “negative” role played by the “irrational” in Arabic thought.

1. Renovation and newness

One of the most obvious ways whereby reasoning is enacted or produced, in the most straightforward logical sense, is tautology. Yet this has remained a relatively neglected area for scrutiny in the context of literary theory. In his article “Renovation in Modern Poetry”,¹⁹ Maḥmūd advances a defence, based on tautology, of the position that our appreciation of poetry must entail the juxtaposition of the old and the new. “In poetry,” he explains, “there is what one calls the new. And yet there is no newness if this term is understood in a literal sense, as denoting the *supersession* of the old by the new, thus eliminating all or some traces of the old.”²⁰

To what extent, though, does such a notion of the “new” really make sense? The argument here hinges on Maḥmūd’s concept of modernity (and indeed modernism), in the broader sense of critical theory, as an act of renovation (*tajdīd*) rather than of innovation (*ibtikār*). For him innovation in its absolute sense is viewed, effectively, as an act of coming into existence from nothingness.

Etymologically the term “renovation”, advanced in Maḥmūd’s tautologous proposition, contains a clear implied reference to uninterrupted duration and continuity. “Who could claim,” he asks, “that

the emergence of al-Mutanabbi has necessitated the elimination of Imru'ū 'l-Qais?"²¹ In the light of this, he might well have been prepared to contemporize his list of great works of literature, proposing a universal "canon" for all literatures, periods and ages. It would appear that contemporaneity has, for him, become synonymous with modernity and modernism.

2. *The critic as double reader*

Unlike some of his contemporaries,²² Maḥmūd aims to reconstruct a holistic and all-embracing account of what he aptly refers to as *falsafat al-naqd* ("the philosophy of criticism"): a term synonymous with what has come to be called "metacriticism" or "criticism of criticism". For Maḥmūd the text is always of primary importance in critical theory. His basic assumption is that the critic, in his role of reader, contributes something to the text; and, as such (he points out), it can hardly be denied that he is the "reader's reader"²³ par excellence. In the light of this proposition, then, the critic emerges as a kind of intermediary, a self-conscious reader providing the public with one or more interpretations out of a multiplicity of divergent possibilities. Maḥmūd's reconstruction of the interpretative process now begins to take off. He is fully aware of the imperfections in what he calls "first reading". Guided as it is by "taste", the celebrated faculty of liking or disliking in the context of an intuitive capacity for discerning excellence, such a first reading must be tested, by the critic, against one or more further, "non-impressionistic" readings. These lead him on to a kind of critical rationale, and comprise an effective exercise in working out how the text is being realized, communicated and *functionalized*.

3. *Poetry as a branch of logic*

Logical thinking is, in a literal sense, a process of reasoning. It has, moreover, an *intellectual phase*, wherein the meanings of culture are examined, analysed, verified and classified. This distinctive *function* has been a major theme of Maḥmūd's critical essays treating the relation – as conceived by such Arab philosophers as Ibn Sīna (Avicenna), Ibn Rushd (Averroes), al-Kindi and al-Fārābī²⁴ – between logic and poetry.

As a theory, the relation clearly poses a challenge to the traditional dichotomy between criticism and philosophical inquiry. By conscious reference to the relation vis-à-vis literary theory, Maḥmūd aims to reinvent modern poetry as a model for “total” knowledge;²⁵ and his insistence on epistemological “totalization” serves to explain how the appeal of logic is used to *rediscover* the “holistic principles governing the function of poetry”.²⁶

4. The “desacralization” of Arabic traditional thought

As a logical positivist and pragmatist, Maḥmūd makes the Arabic and Islamic cultural heritage his prime target. His aim in his *Tajdīd al-fikr al-'Arabi* (“Renovation of Arabic Thought”) is to demonstrate how we should judge our traditional cultural values and beliefs on the bases of their relevance to the present. Tradition, for him, has lost its relevance as a point of reference; it has long “revolved around the relation of man to God, while modern thought now revolves around the relation of man to man”.²⁷ Moreover, while noting the relevance of the Mu‘tazili tradition (833-848), with its insistence on reason (*'aql*) as an interpretative device, he mounts an uncompromising attack on the “irrational” within Arabic Islamic culture:

It [irrationalism] is fit only for entertainment during hours of leisure, though I would not follow Hume²⁸ and suggest it be thrown into the fire.²⁹

The above point is a crucially important benchmark for establishing secular and self-generating modernism.

Secularism is central to Maḥmūd's monograph *Khurāfat al-mītaphysīqa* ("The Misconception of Metaphysics"), first published in 1951 and subsequently revised in 1983:

If you claim that there is a limit beyond which the human mind cannot reach out, stressing at the same time that, beyond this limit, there exist "things" one is unable to grasp or comprehend, then you are contradicting yourself; for the belief that these "things" exist beyond the supposed limit is itself a proof that you have already crossed into the forbidden zone.³⁰

Maḥmūd's programme for the re-appraisal of Arabic traditional thought is thus essentially one of "desacralization".³¹ In other words, rationalism, in this context, implies the effective disappearance of the sense of the sacred, or at least the divorce of the sacred from the profane – a secularist presupposition underlying, in essence, a possible new "age of enlightenment".³²

¹ That is, a systematic classification of the stages of disease.

² Beirut: Dār al- Āfāq al-Jadīda, 1968.

³ Beirut: Dār al-Ṭalī'ah, 1968. Al-Aẓm's contribution to cultural nosology, which found expression in the works of Arab intellectuals after the Six Day War, was greatly esteemed by writers on the process of "self-criticism", as being one of the most

important contributions to the debate. See, for instance, Ṭībi, *op. cit.*, p. xii. In hindsight, al-Aẓm's point of departure for this critique – with its suggestion that the Arab defeat by Israel in 1967 was analogous to the defeat of Tsarist Russia by Japan in 1904 – now seems increasingly far-fetched.

⁴ This is a possible English equivalent for the Arabic word *wahm* used in Ismā'īl's text.

⁵ See Roger Scruton, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Philosophy*, London: Duckworth, 1996, p. 27.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Ismā'īl, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 265.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 275.

¹³ See Z.N. Maḥmūd, *Ma'a al-shū'arā'* ("In the Company of Poets"), Beirut-Cairo: Dār al-Shūrūq, 1978, p. 165. This and similar or related ideas have been repeatedly spelled out by the theorists of "new criticism", whose conceptions Maḥmūd greatly admires. See his *Fī falsafat al-naqd* ("On the Philosophy of Criticism"), Beirut-Cairo: Dār al-Shūrūq, 1979, pp. 32-3.

For W.K. Wimsatt, one of the exponents of the New Criticism, the poem is a verbal composition having the character of a stone statue or urn. It does not inform, but simply *is*. It is an iconic solidity. See his work *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, London: Methuen, 1970 (first published 1954).

¹⁴ Z.N. Maḥmūd, in *Fuṣūl*, 12 (1983); cited in Muṣṭafa Abdul-Ghani, *Zaki Najīb Maḥmūd*, Cairo: Al-Hay'a al-Miṣriyah al-'Āmma lil-Kitāb, 1992, pp. 18-19.

¹⁵ For a comparative approach to al-Jurjāni's achievement and contribution to *modern* literary theory, see K. Abū Dīb, *Al-Jurjāni's Theory*.

¹⁶ The notion of philosophy as "essentially an alien way of thinking" can be traced back to a debate (*muqābasah*) that took place before a vizier in Baghdad in 932 AD, between the Christian Syrian translator Abū Bishr Matta, representing philosophy, and the theologian Abū Sa'īd al-Ṣīrāfi, representing *kalām* (theology), over the respective merits of the "new learning" springing from the Greek philosophical

tradition. See al-Tawḥīdī, *Al-Muqābasāt*, ed. H. al-Sandūbi, Cairo: Al-Maktabah al-Tijāriyyah al-Kubra, 1929, pp. 68-87. See also Oliver Leaman, *An Introduction to Medieval Islamic Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 9.

¹⁷ As a student at the University of London in the early fifties, Maḥmūd was influenced by this school of philosophy, then subscribed to by many English-speaking philosophers.

¹⁸ For an outline of Maḥmūd's interdisciplinarity, suggesting the presence of a common boundary connecting philosophy and literary criticism, see Abdul-Ghani, *op. cit.*, pp. 123-54.

¹⁹ See Maḥmūd, *Ma'a al-shu'arā'*.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² I am thinking especially of Muḥammad Mandūr, with whom Maḥmūd had numerous confrontations and debates.

²³ Maḥmūd, *Fī falsafat al-naqd*, p. 109.

²⁴ 'Abdul-Ghani, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

²⁵ That is, a kind of epistemology.

²⁶ 'Abdul-Ghani, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

²⁷ Z.N. Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-fikr al-'Arabi* ("Renewal of Arabic Thought"), Beirut-Cairo: Dār al-Shūrūq, 1974, p. 136.

²⁸ I.e., the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776).

²⁹ Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd*, p. 241.

³⁰ Z.N. Maḥmūd, *Khurāfat al-mūtafaysīqa* ("The Misconception of Metaphysics"), Cairo: Al-Anglo, 1951, pp. 83-4.

³¹ The term "desacralization" was coined by Mircea Eliade. See T.R. Wright, *Theology and Literature*, London: Blackwell, 1988, p. 140.

³² 'Abdul-Ghani, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

IV. De-structuring Literary Theory: “Winks” Made to Speak to Epistemology

What follows is an exercise in de-structuring literary theory. Antedated by theory’s unfolding configuration (put forward in Part One), the exercise is, in effect, an effort to extrapolate a cluster of morphological¹ markers with an eye to the *functionality* of mould-breaking concepts and argumentative ploys determinative of a paradigmatic shift. The elusive presence of the markers suggests that these are, in a sense, a constellation of glints, hints, or, quite simply, “winks”. Defined in a set of functional propositions, these “winks”, to use Clifford Geertz’s pictorial metaphor, “can be made to speak to epistemology”.²

The purpose of this exercise is, then, to explore the workings of a number of “winks” with respect to an emergent modernism, in so far as their subtle presence involves an identifiable distinction between, on the one hand, renovationist assumptions of cultural change as a decidedly uninterrupted flux of historical *continuity*, and, on the other, innovationist ones founded on a tentative notion of *discontinuity*.³ The aim in making such a distinction involves the reassertion of a paradigmatic shift, one whose focus or foci of cultural transformation is marked by rupture, disjointedness and fragmentation.

So, yes, there is a fault line separating two distinctly definable models of cultural transformation; one that manifests itself not only in their divergent approaches towards an increasingly awesome relationship with modern culture, but also in their respective conception of what suggests an inherently totemic filiation with Arab-Islamic heritage and tradition.

The first modernizing model, involving renovationist ideas from the age of *al-Nahḍah*, has, it is argued, laid the foundations for a “double dependency”. There is, Adunīs asserts,

a dependency on the past, serving to compensate, through remembering and reviving, for the lack of creative activity; and a dependency on the European American West, serving to compensate, through intellectual and technical adaptation and borrowing, for failure to *invent and innovate*.⁴

A reaction against this situation has, however, now set in; gradually, but forcefully, the concept of an alternative model, the counter-revivalist model, has assumed a position of prominence through the work of such poets, theorists and critics as Adunīs , Kamāl Abū Dīb, Khālida Sa‘īd, A. Mseddi, Jāber ‘Aṣfūr, Muḥammad Bennīs and others. By the end of the eighties, in fact, a self-generating, self-referential modernist theory had become the dominant critique within contemporary Arabic culture.

This new perception, revolving around the agents of change, provides a radically different way of seeing things, one constituting a Gestalt-switch⁵ towards a fresh discovery of the world, conceived and viewed through new conceptual spectacles. However, as Adunīs points out:

This modernity has not been discovered from within the prevailing Arab cultural order and its systems of knowledge. It was a reading of Baudelaire that changed my understanding of Abū Nuwās and revealed his particular poetic quality and modernity, and it was

Mallarmé's work that led me to understand the mysteries of Abū Tammām's poetic language and the modern dimension within it.⁶

A reading of Rimbaud, Nerval and Breton has, he further points out, led him on to "discover the poetry of the mystical writers in all its uniqueness and splendour", while French criticism has provided "an indication of the newness of al-Jurjāni's cultural vision".⁷

The upshot is that the poet (or critic) has come to be conceived as a *cultural overseer*, critiquing within the context of a modernist world view, or as a *literary retrodictor*,⁸ whose poetic sensibility enables him to discover and re-invent the deep-rooted modernity embedded in the past. Having reached this disquieting conclusion, Adunīs now delivers his final thrust. There is, he asserts, "no paradox in declaring that it was recent western modernity that led me to *discover our own, older modernity, which lies outside our 'modern' politico-cultural system established on a western model*".⁹ There is, he explains, a particular problem here:

The modern poet sees himself in fundamental conflict both with the culture of the dominant political system, which reclaims the roots in a traditionalist manner, and with the images of western culture as adopted and popularized by this system. The system separates us from our Arab modernity, from what is richest and most profound in our heritage.¹⁰

By the same logic (to repeat the point once more), modernity is, as Aziz Al-Azmeh puts it: "not confined to Europe, but is a universal civilization, which from mercantile beginnings can utterly *transform* the economies, societies, politics and cultures of the world, and reconstitute the non-European world on the basis of existing fissures."¹¹

The metaphor of "base and superstructure"

In comparing and contrasting the two models of modernism outlined above, it is useful, as an analytical device, to focus particular attention on the Marxist metaphor of *base and superstructure*.

The issue is posed in Arabic theory of criticism by the *presupposed* relationship between the economic (base) and other social and cultural forms (superstructure); and, while the contention that *the base determines the superstructure* is accepted, or at least tolerated, by exponents of the first model, it is firmly disputed by exponents of the second.¹²

By emphasizing the difference between these two positions, Adunīs (along with Abū Dīb and others) is able to *justify* the claim that innovative modernism in Arabic literary theory is self-referential and self-generating – *it is not merely part and parcel of European modernism*.

One of the primary points of departure in his *Ṣadmat al-ḥadāthah* ("The Shock of Modernism") is a demonstration that poetry may be advanced in a society with an underdeveloped economic base and backward in a society with an advanced economic base. This point is of fundamental importance for an understanding of Adunīs's critiquing of the *statics and dynamics* of Arabic culture; for he conceives the whole of Arabic culture as a phenomenological history: "I stress here" (he notes) "the phenomenological method [*zāhiratiyyah*]; for I restrict my inquiry to the study of cultural phenomena, *treated as separate from their material base*."¹³ In terms of the phenomenological method, this means that he is exploring "the inner subjective world of experiences; that is, of consciousness without presuppositions".¹⁴

The method is further explored through Adunīs's insistence on re-reading Arabic cultural heritage "not through the interpretations of its previous readers, but through a primordial reading of its own texts".¹⁵

Thus it is that his critique of cultural heritage comes to be connected with the phenomenological approach. By “bracketing off”¹⁶ the ideological and theological presuppositions inherent in our “modern” politico-cultural system, Adunīs’s method of rethinking modernity suggests the possibility of a conceptual analysis which appropriates the classical heritage, suspends conventional assumptions and sets aside the preconceptions derived from current Arab literary theory.¹⁷

The de-definition of modernism

Innovationist modernism opposes not only the presuppositions of the renovationist pattern but also its attempt to redefine the pre-fixed principles of Arabic modernism in terms of modern western criteria. This situation emerges through two major strands, namely, *historicism and essentialism*.

The historicist viewpoint hinges on the notion that modernism, in common with other human phenomena, “cannot be understood in isolation from its historical development and from its significance to the particular historical period in which it existed, and to the people of this period”.¹⁸ As such, Arabic modernism is conceived, in its renovationist manifestation, as a replay of a historical phenomenon: a formula of European making and “beginning”.¹⁹

‘Abdullah L‘aroui attempts to sidestep this conclusion by underlining the distinction between “particularism” and “authenticity”, which are conceived as constituting two separate areas of exclusive territory:

Since *al-Nahḍah* our bodies have lived in one century while our minds and feelings have lived in another . . . This situation has been justified by the proclaimed need to maintain authenticity . . .

The question of attributes and characteristics will remain the issue, but in terms of a recognition of the unity of history and a negation of any continuous belief in an authentic model. Finally *the purpose of historical analysis is to separate particularism from authenticity*. The first is dynamic and progressive, the second static and regressive.²⁰

It is this view – that the history of European modernism constitutes a sufficient explanation for the concept of modernism itself, and that the value of the concept thus lies in its *beginning* and development – that gives modernism its distinctive *historicist significance* as a temporal category; for it is only, L'aroui believes, the rigorously precise properties determined by a *historicist definition* which explain its particularism as a primary point of reference for Arabic modernism.

The second major strand, namely essentialism, which sees European modernism as being *essentialized* and *reduced* to an all-inclusive *blanket definition* reflecting an *absolute criterion*, is exemplified in Muḥammad al-Nuwaihi's book *Qaḍiyyat al-shi'r al-jadīd* ("The Question of New Poetry"), the validity of this model being explored in his study of Eliot's article "The Music of Poetry".²¹ Having provided an initial translation of the essay, al-Nuwaihi attempts to see "to what extent Eliot's ideas were *relevant* to the new form".²² His Eurocentric approach purports to show, inadvertently and through an indication of the likenesses and differences between Arabic and European modernism, that the *essentialist* qualities of the (original) European model are *reducible to a watertight definition*, and that "the context in which these exist or are studied is irrelevant".²³ The implication here is that, by *de-defining* modernism and rejecting the theoretical assumptions of historicism and essentialism, Arab innovationists are in effect

attempting to dismantle the concept of an *absolutized* model of modernism founded and foregrounded as an *immutable definition*, in favour of a *paradigm in motion*, this being an experimental category that has creativity as its primary classifier; for creativity, as Adunīs writes, is “a realization without a model . . . a model in itself”.²⁴

The controversy does not end here. Yet there is no reason, at this stage, to regard the two contrasting models of modernism as being in conflict, since their *teleologies* are fundamentally different.²⁵

The semiological frame of reference

In the second volume of his study of the *Statics and Dynamics* in Arabic culture, Adunīs attempts to reconstruct the procedural and substantive elements of a semiological frame of reference inherent in the Sufi experience of *al-bāṭin*: that is, of the esoteric or hidden meaning that entails, on the level of language and literature, “the separation of the *name* and the *named*”.²⁶ According to this frame of reference:

*The name is not equal to the named. The relationship between the two is that of a signifier with what is signified. It is not a relationship of identification. In other words it is a relationship of possibility, not of certainty.*²⁷

Adunīs is clearly thinking here of the semiotic implications inherent in Sufism, the tenth-century Islamic mystical movement whose polemic regarding the allegorical nature of interpretation predates the rise of modern semiotics in the early twentieth century; and this, as we shall see, has far-reaching consequences for his endeavour to re-invent a frame of reference encompassing the complex relation between the subjective and the objective, between the language of literature and the realm of reality.

In order to grasp the originality of this *interpretative device*, it must be recalled that the *Bāṭini* school stood in direct opposition to the *Zāhiri* school, whose name derives from the Arabic word denoting the exoteric, that is, the clear or phenomenal. Al-Jāḥiẓ's dictum (produced some time before 869) is in many ways paradigmatic²⁸ for the *Zāhiri* method²⁹ of textual reading; "the meaning," he says, "is bound to identify, fully, with the name [the word]." ³⁰ The reasoning here is that language *works* because the meaning is *pre-fixed* by convention. In other words, *it pre-dates the writer's entry into the frame of reference in which the signifier (the word) is fully identified with the signified (the meaning)*.

By thus rejecting the conventional *exoteric* certainty of *Zāhirism* in favour of the *esoteric* and illuminating possibilities of *Sufi Bāṭinism*, Adunīs's enterprise offers a semiological perspective on the criticism, and therefore on the reading, of Arabic poetry and prose. In place of a conventional web-spinning reading (or misreading), Adunīs proposes that modern Arabic criticism should reconstruct a polymorphic method of interpretation; rather than try to perpetuate an old cultural linearity, it should recognize and explore the multi-layered and multi-dimensional possibilities inherent in the Sufi imagination.

There is no space here to do justice to the complexity and detail of Adunīs's derivation of his socio-cultural assumptions.³¹ We may, though, note the interesting contrast he draws between the two mutually exclusive interpretative categories as embodying an opposition between the rigidity and linearity of the apparent (*Zāhiri*) and the flexibility and playability of the figurative/the metaphorical/the non-literal (*ta'wili*).³² The idea seems to be that this figurative approach offers a semiological frame of reference, whose central assumption is that poetry *resides* in what some critics call "the gap" (*al-fajwah*):³³ that is, the *space* separating the signifier from the signified.³⁴

K. Abū Dīb suggests, in place of “gap”, the alternative term “space of tension”.³⁵ For him, poetics (or literary theory, or the aesthetics of poetry)³⁶ constitutes “one of the functions of this gap or space of tension”.³⁷ The all-important point, however, is Abū Dīb’s insistence on viewing the gap as a “determinant factor” or “necessary condition” for “recognizing the difference between poetic vision and daily commonplace experience”.³⁸ In its more straightforward function the gap is then represented as standing *in a metonymic relationship*³⁹ *with the process of ongoingness and change*: it is an open field for play, an uncategorizable category, an orientation to innovation freed from the constraints of demarcation.⁴⁰ Yet there is a crucially important benchmark encompassing this “ludic” gap of Sufi semiology: that of *transformation* from the static to the dynamic, from permanence to mutability, from the confirmation and affirmation of an Arab central authority determining socio-cultural and/or aesthetic interpretation to the *metaphorical* negation of a final meaning, truth or signification.

Finally, the focus on the centrality of a patriarchal authority, emblematic of the absolute supremacy of the “law of the father”, is worth touching on. As Şidqī Ismā‘īl appropriately points out, religious thought in Arabic-Islamic culture has always tended, albeit not in linear fashion, to be linked to the secular power of the ruler. The upshot is that, even within the seemingly hermetic context of Sufism, the Sufi is seen as “more of a failed politician than a mystic”.⁴¹

Cultural parallelism

The term “cultural parallelism” is used here to indicate the relevance of re-examining Arab literary heritage from the perspective of modern sensibility, in order to identify the methods whereby this critical device

can reconstruct the concept of modernism beyond the limits of European periodization.

This concept will be investigated in two ways: first, through an exploration of the presence, in two or more texts (or phenomena) belonging to different cultural histories, of common features sufficiently similar to justify setting up a comparison between their historically separate modes of existence; and, second, through de-temporalizing, for the purpose of theoretical interpretation, two or more separate cultural phenomena connected by reason of discoverable similitude, in order to address related questions of synonymization and interchangeability.

There are various accounts of how Arab theorists have attempted, through the concept of cultural parallelism and comparativeness, to unravel, from the different strands, a modern theory of criticism. In his seminal work *Al-Jurjāni's Theory of Poetic Imagery* (1979), K. Abū Dīb sets out, with unfailing discernment and sophistication, to develop a fresh comparative approach designed to fulfil the concept's fullest potential. By emphasizing the novelty and ingenuity implicit in the tenets of al-Jurjāni's critical system, and reevaluating the possible homologies existing between his ideas and those of modern critics, Abū Dīb is able to demonstrate that this eleventh-century critic and poetician is in fact excitingly modern; that he can be said "(quoting Eliot's words), to have lived not merely the present, but the present moment of the past".⁴²

As this quotation suggests, the impetus behind Abū Dīb's critical endeavour has pragmatic⁴³ overtones, stemming as it does not only from an assumption that the modernism requiring Arab writers to steer out into wider European and American waters is not entirely *new*, but from a further assumption: that this process cannot be regarded as marking out an exclusive, exhaustive and well-defined cultural territory.

Closely connected with this method of reading modernism into innovative texts belonging to Arabic tradition, without, however, sacrificing the locus of their referentiality, is A. Mseddi's treatise *Al-Tafkīr al-lisāni fī 'l-ḥaḍarah al-'Arabiyyah* ("Linguistic Thinking in Arabic Culture") (1981). In the context of his endeavour to explore the Arab stock of linguistic knowledge, Mseddi views poetics as being in a process of formation and transformation, and, as such, evoking a progression of continuous signifying operations and attempting to formulate their frame of reference. As a modernist endowed with the sensibility to discern and respond freely, he conceives poetics as a theoretical matrix permitting further sustained reading and re-defining; modern poetics does not have, as its object, the set of concepts, categories and significations transmitted to us by tradition, *but is rather itself a generative discipline*, and one, moreover, of infinite possibilities, capable of bringing to light the relevant assumptions embedded in classical linguistic theory. The term *metacriticism* might be applicable to this polemical initiative.

Cultural parallelism also works as a reductive method. By initiating goal-oriented readings of individual interdisciplinary texts,⁴⁴ Arab theorists have attempted to classify and verify classical critiques in terms of established modern criteria, cutting through a vast amount of irrelevant detail, by-passing ideological accretions and setting aside a multiplicity of misconceptions. Viewed and scrutinized from a metacritical position, the way these interdisciplinary texts *function* is then understood in terms other than those determined by the historicity of the discourses available to their authors as producers of meaning.

The compilation *Al-Nazariyyah al-lisāniyyah wa 'l-shi'riyyah fī 'l-turāth al-'Arabi min khilāl al-nuṣūs* ("Linguistic and Poetic Theory in Arabic Heritage as Viewed through the Texts") (1988), a compendium of

critical and analytic concepts and strategies exhibited through a wide selection of classified literary and extra-literary texts, specifically allows the modern reader to capture, on the basis of attitude or anticipated response, the significant moments of a complex process. The process is illustrated in the compilers' concern to devise a *taxonomy*, or descriptive system, which will enable us to re-invent these overlapping and intersecting critiques through new conceptual spectacles. This displacement and re-arrangement of critical assumptions involves a paradigmatic shift, a radically different way of seeing things, thus enabling *old texts* to be assigned to *new functions* partly or wholly similar to their own. An introductory book dealing with the strategies of reading verifies this complex process of synonymization through the following metaphor:

An ostrich, which cannot fly, belongs nevertheless to the genus of bird, as a result of its partial resemblance to prototypical birds like sparrows or robins, which can fly.⁴⁵

The same principle of juxtaposing two critical concepts belonging to divergent cultural histories, and of highlighting their connecting links, holds true for a second operation, *the de-temporalization of literary phenomena*, that is, *reading the determinants of the new into those of the old, and vice versa*.

Adunīs's attempt to *de-temporalize in order to synonymize* is embodied in his *Al-Ṣūfiyyah wa 'l-suryāliyyah* ("Sufism and Surrealism") (1992),⁴⁶ the establishment of correspondences between Sufism and surrealism being made possible, in a suggestive analogy, by omitting a vast amount of irrelevant historical detail and by reducing their notions to the most fundamental ones. To this end Adunīs contrasts their strategies

and critical assumptions, irrespective of the temporal and cultural distance separating the two systems. Through a goal-oriented method of comparability, the relatedness existing between the *zāhir* and the *bāṭin*, the exoteric and the esoteric, the conscious and the subconscious, the theme is brilliantly investigated. Thus the concept of Sufi writing is contrasted with that of surrealist writing by *articulating* their common formative notions: the idea of the *timeless moment*, that is, the *High Point* where the oneness of the subjective and the objective leads to the disappearance of contradictions; the notions of love and imagination; the concept of *shath*, the Sufi term for surrealist automatic writing;⁴⁷ the mystic concept of *inkhiṭāf*,⁴⁸ that is, the surrealist state of ecstasy. Adunīs then contrives both to inject into modern critical theory a sense of the cognitive value of Sufi devices of reading and to demonstrate, by reading Sufism into surrealism, the *timelessness of modernist sensibility*. This last assertion needs amplification. The idea of timeless modernist sensibility should be seen as implying not a rupture *between system and history*, but rather a shift *from history to critique*, from the *temporal* to the *atemporal*.

Furthermore, by reconsidering modernism from the perspective of its *universalizability*, Adunīs is able, in his “Rimbaud, the Orientalist Sufi”, to argue as follows:

Most western researchers who have explored the influence of the Orient on the Occident define the Orient as including, firstly, Greece and, secondly, the Judaeo-Christian tradition. There is, as I have already mentioned, no trace in Rimbaud’s poetry of any positive Greek or Judaeo-Christian influence. There are, however, negative influences, in the sense that Rimbaud’s poetry exhibits an almost total absence of these cultures.⁴⁹

The upshot is that this celebrated exponent of French modernism, as envisaged by the Arab innovationist modernist Adunīs, is not exclusively western. Thus the contradistinction between Adunīs's position and that of the renovationist modernist may explain their different approaches to the binary question of modernity and authenticity.⁵⁰

Fashion, creativity and modernism

Fashion is the catalyst serving to change the direction of a prevailing or short-lived custom or style. It does not necessarily arise out of the need for the modern or the new.

Let us repeat once more the closing sentences of Adunīs's *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, where modernism is defined in relation to fashion and creativity:

Modernity should be a creative vision, or it will be no more than *fashion*. Fashion grows old from the moment it is born, while creativity is ageless. Therefore not all modernity is *creativity*, but creativity is eternally modern.⁵¹

Here is as straightforward a statement of the innovationist position as one could wish for. Modernism is ultimately derived from creativity; and creativity, for Adunīs, resides primarily in innovation – in the act of creating something novel. He also suggests that innovation, so conceived, should be seen in the context of *total freedom*:

I want to stress that modernity requires not only freedom of thought but physical freedom as well. It is an explosion, a liberation of what has been suppressed. To think and write what is truly new means, above all, *to think about what has never been thought about*

and to write what has never been written: that huge, constant area of suppression – religious and cultural, individual and social, spiritual and physical.⁵²

This account does not simply reject, implicitly, the renovationist model of modernism, but also the entire modernist project viewed as *fashion*, that is, as *an external mode of change*.

Writing some ten years before Adunīs, M.M. Badawi had set out an alternative position regarding the concept of fashion in poetry:

Arab poets turned to the poetry of T.S. Eliot in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when it was *already beginning to look old-fashioned*, having in the meantime been succeeded by the work of the generations of Auden and of Philip Larkin.⁵³

He was, it appears, quite prepared to accept the following consequences of his observation:

To the informed reader the excitement of discovery which was felt by many Arab poets and critics in the late 1950s in the work of Eliot seemed somewhat naïve and certainly provincial.⁵⁴

Such a conclusion seems too fanciful, to run too obviously counter to common sense, to be fair or plausible. Fashion, in a literary context, may indeed provide an explanation for cultural influences, but only in so far as it enables us to discover their *relevance*. What, then, underlies the positive response of modern Arabic poetry to Eliot? In a study entitled “The Tammūzi Movement and the Influence of T.S. Eliot on Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb”, N. El-Azma offers an answer that contests the role

erroneously attributed to fashion, thus stressing, albeit inadvertently, what I earlier called “the infelicity of misreading trendism for modernism”. The contention is advanced within the framework of a proposed theory of change:

First of all, the shift of emphasis from religion to nationalism in the political life of the era as well as in its thought gave great importance to the various pre-Islamic heritages, which, although they strikingly impress us by their pagan characteristics, have increasingly been given more consideration as part of the heritage of the area.⁵⁵

Additional factors whereby the major emphasis falls on the discovery of the cultural sources of Eliot’s so-called “mythical method” are cited as contributing to the success of this experiment:

Thus the ideologists of some of the revolutionary parties have drawn considerable attention to this neglected source of patriotic spirit.⁵⁶ Many gods and goddesses, such as Baal, the god of fertility and strength, Ishtār, the equivalent of Aphrodite, and Tammūz, the equivalent of Adunīs in Greek mythology, thus became of great *relevance* to the spiritual and intellectual aspect of Arab renaissance.⁵⁷

Discussion bearing on the concept of cultural influences, and on their entrenchment in the ephemeral context of literary fashion, could not, then, fail to have consequences for Arabic modernism. Adunīs and other innovationist modernists have successfully initiated a re-thinking of a distinctive self-generating model of modernism through critical

examination and theoretical redefinition of what constitutes the matrix of Arabic poetics.

From criticism to critique

In common usage the term "literary criticism" simply denotes the analysis, interpretation and evaluation of literary works. It was only recently that the relative absence or neglect of theoretical refinement implied in this was specifically addressed by Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer,⁵⁸ and the notion of "critique" advanced by way of remedy. Yet the concept of "critique" as a means of providing a totalizing and inclusive perspective on "culture" may be regarded as firmly established in old classical Arabic theories of linguistics and poetics.⁵⁹

In view of this, introduction of the general term "cultural critique" needs no excuse. It is the prime task of the relevant morphological markers to define, expound and explain the function and meaning of the shift that has taken place, spurred on by innovationist modernism, from the linear discipline of literary criticism to the interdisciplinary initiative of cultural critique, from an emphasis on the writer to an emphasis on the text, and, from there, to a focus on the reader.

The transformation from critical language to the language of critique assumes, then, that the concept of modernism primarily comprises a theory of perpetual change, best considered as a polymorphic enterprise. Seyla Benhabīb highlights the complexity of critique as against criticism:

While criticism . . . stands outside the object it criticizes, asserting norms against facts, and the dictates of reason against the unreasonableness of the world, critique refuses to stand outside its object, and instead juxtaposes the immanent, normative self-

understanding of its object to the material actuality of this object. Criticism privileges an Archimedean standpoint, be it freedom or reason, and proceeds to show the unfreedom or unreasonableness of the world when measured against this ideal paradigm. By privileging this Archimedean standpoint, criticism becomes despotism: it leaves its own standpoint unexplained, or it assumes the validity of its standpoint prior to engaging in the task of criticism.⁶⁰

The basic distinctions involved may be conveniently set out in the table below, exhibiting the dynamics of change:

Modernism in function: framework of a paradigmatic shift

The terms on the left apply to criticism (*naqd*), those on the right to critique (*tanqīd*):⁶¹

renovative – innovative
 critical – metacritical
 disciplinary – interdisciplinary
 homogeneous – heterogeneous
 indigenous – trans-cultural
 filial – affilial
 conforming / imitative – creative / self-referential
 judgemental – evaluative
 literary – literary / cultural
 absolute – relativistic
 compulsory / fate-induced – voluntarist / will-induced
 origin – beginning / beginnings
 continuous – ruptuous

linear – fragmentary
 certain – problematic

In the final analysis, innovative modernism goes far beyond any adherence to a literary movement denotative of a tendentiously expressed “-ism”. It rather suggests (as proclaimed earlier by Elias Khūry with more than a nod towards a tentative theory of change) “a problematic of its own”; one interlocking a cluster of fragmented issues held together by a central theme. Let me here reiterate this problematic, which is in many ways *paradigmatic* for the entire modernist project:

The idea of modernity in contemporary Arabic culture is posited as a problematic of its own. It is not a copy of western modernity but is an Arab attempt to formulate this term within the context of a cultural domain which has its own historical particularism, and lives the problems emanating from the concept of *Nahdah*. This is why modernity has been foregrounded as a revivalist enterprise. Having conjoined the splinters of cultural, social and political fragmentation, modernity can be presented as an attempt to surpass this fragmentation by means of moving forward.

In a later passage Khūry draws the consequent conclusion:

For the Arabs, whose legitimacy, based on the past, has been lost, modernity can be seen as a quest for future legitimacy in a world forcibly unified and hegemonized by western capitalism. In this world the peripheries are banished and pushed to the edge of history’s memory, only to be restituted as a folkloric object, as a

benchmark attesting to the superiority of the West and its ability to negate, if not annihilate, the category of the “other” . . . ⁶²

¹ This widely applicable term is used here as originally understood by Goethe: to denote the systematic study of *formulation and transformation* – whether of rocks, clouds, colours, plants, animals or the *cultural phenomena of human society* – as these present themselves to sentient experience. See *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1979, vol. VIII, p. 229.

² Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, New York: Basic Books, 1973, p. 23.

³ The notion of “continuity versus discontinuity” is best illuminated by the argument central to Michel Foucault’s archaeology of knowledge; one advanced to demolish the historical analysis based on the concept of linearity:

For history in its classical form, the discontinuous was both the given and the unthinkable: the raw material of history, which presents itself in the form of dispersed events – decisions, accidents, initiatives, discoveries; the material which, through analysis, had to be rearranged, reduced, affected in order to reveal the continuity of events. Discontinuity was the stigma of temporal dislocation that it was the historian’s task to remove from history. It has now become one of the basic elements of historical analysis. (Foucault, *op. cit.*, p. 8.)

⁴ *Introduction to Arab Poetics*, p. 80.

⁵ “Gestalt” is a term borrowed from German, denoting a process of configuration, and proposing an organized whole with qualities different from its parts as viewed separately. The idea of a Gestalt-switch here suggests a new vision of wholeness: one determining its components (and not vice versa).

⁶ *Introduction to Arab Poetics*, p. 81.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ That is, the reverse of prediction – “prediction backwards”. See Robert M. Martin (ed.), *The Philosopher’s Dictionary*, Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2000, p. 202.

⁹ *Introduction to Arab Poetics*, p. 81.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹¹ Al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities*, pp. 23-4.

¹² For further discussion of the metaphor of “base and superstructure”, see, for instance, Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 75-82. This valuable account of the central literary concepts in Marxist criticism includes a chapter on cultural critique which is truly innovatory in its field. See also Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, London: Methuen, 1976, pp. 3-16. This provides a brief and lucid general survey of the topic, with a preliminary discussion of the relations between Marxist theory and structuralism plus its aftermath.

¹³ *Al-Thābit wa 'l-mutaḥawwil*, vol. I, pp. 21-3.

¹⁴ See under “Phenomenology” in Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

¹⁵ *Al-Thābit wa 'l-mutaḥawwil*, vol. I, p. 24.

¹⁶ Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

¹⁷ For a discussion of the phenomenological method in literature, see Hawthorn, *op. cit.*, pp. 130-1.

¹⁸ Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

¹⁹ As I have repeatedly argued in the foregoing pages, Edward Said’s attempt to replace the filial (organistic) term “origin” with the less tendentious term “beginning” is central to his critique of the Eurocentric essentialism that runs through much of current literary criticism. For a consideration of this attempt and its relevance, see Hannah Arendt’s comments in Guillory, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-8.

²⁰ *Al-'Arab wa 'l-fikr al-tārīkhī* (“The Arabs and Historical Thought”), Beirut: Dār al-Ḥaḳīqa, 1973, p. 24.

²¹ Al-Nuwaihi, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ See Hawthorn, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

²⁴ In *Mawāqif*, No. 36, p. 158.

²⁵ I.e., different in relation to their aims, purposes or functions.

²⁶ *Al-Thābit wa 'l-mutaḥawwil*, vol. II, p. 212.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ I.e., providing an uncompromisingly categorical example.

²⁹ In his work *The World, the Text and the Critic*, Edward Said draws attention to the eleventh-century Andalusī school of Zāhirism, portraying the contribution of its exponents in a favourable light and showing how their polemics anticipated the

twentieth-century debate between structuralists and generative grammarians, between descriptivists and behaviourists.

³⁰ See al-Jāhiz, *Kitāb al-bayān wa 'l-tabyīn* ("Rhetoric and Elucidation"), ed. Ḥasan al-Sandūbi, Cairo: Al-Maktabah al-Tijāriyah al-Kubra, 1926, vol. I, p. 42.

³¹ For a socio-cultural perspective, see his *Zamān al-shi'r* ("The Temporality of Poetry"), Beirut: Dār al-'Awdah, 1972.

³² *Al-ta'wīlī* is described by Oliver Leaman as the "figurative". See Leaman, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

The concept of playability embedding the "figurative" is best explained in Henry Corbin's *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*, London, 1969. According to Corbin, *ta'wīl*, as professed in Sufism, is essentially a means, based on the transmutation of everything visible into symbols, whereby the world is understood symbolically. This is (he adds) rendered practicable through the intuition of an essence or person in an image which partakes neither of universal logic nor of sense perception, and which is the only means of signifying what is to be signified. See J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 2nd ed., 1971, p. xliii.

³³ See Kamāl Abū Dīb, *Fi 'l-shi'riyyah* ("On Poetics"), Beirut: Mu'assaset al-Abḥāth al-'Arabiyya, 1987, pp. 102-4.

³⁴ The "gap" covers the following: absence; ellipsis; figure. See Hawthorn, *op. cit.*

³⁵ See Abū Dīb, *Fi 'l-shi'riyyah*.

³⁶ According to M. Krieger, literary theory, or poetics, or the aesthetics of poetry, are three ways of saying the same thing. See his *Theory of Criticism, Tradition and its Systems*, Baltimore-London: John Hopkins University Press, 1976, p. 3.

³⁷ Abū Dīb, *Fi 'l-shi'riyyah*.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³⁹ "Metonymy" (*kināya*) is conceived, in K. Abū Dīb's interpretation of al-Jurjāni's theory of poetic imagery, in the following terms:

[It is] a process in which the presentation is concentrated on a concrete picture which evokes a series of associations in the mind of the recipient. But in the poet's imagination . . . "*kināya*" presents a picture which is not fused or identified with the entity to which it refers. The two entities [of the gap] stand apart, their relationship being determined not by the linguistic or the

immediate context, but by the social, cultural context, on the one hand, and on a set of logical or factual links relating them, on the other. It is due to this pattern of relationship that *kināya* “has an effect on the soul” which a direct statement of the meaning does not have. (Abū Dīb, *Al-Jurjāni's Theory*, pp. 165-6.)

⁴⁰ I.e., the problem of marking off the “signifier” from the “signified”.

⁴¹ Ṣidqi Ismā‘īl, *Al-Ḥiss al-jamāhīri wa 'l-riyā' al-adabi* (“The Sensibility of the Masses and Literary Hypocrisy”), Damascus: Al-Mawqif al-Adabi, May, 1971, p. 12.

⁴² Abū Dīb, *Al-Jurjāni's Theory*, p. 322.

⁴³ In connection with his pliantly instrumental use of relevant terms.

⁴⁴ Looked at from a modern perspective, these texts can be described as “interdisciplinary”. See, for example, Ben Agger, *Cultural Studies as Critical Theory*, London-Washington DC: Falmer Press, 1992, pp. 17-19.

⁴⁵ See Martin Montgomery, Alan Durant, Nigel Fabb, Tom Furniss, Sara Mills, *Ways of Reading*, London-New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 171.

⁴⁶ London: Dār al-Sāqi, 1992.

⁴⁷ A.J. Arberry, in 1950, identifies “automatic writing” as being an element of Sufi experience:

The most curious and interesting Sufi figure is al-Niffari (d. 982), who left behind him theories of revelations (*Kitāb al-mukhāṭabāt*) purporting to have been received from God in a state of ecstasy, possibly by *automatic writing*. (Arberry, *op. cit.*, p. 64.)

⁴⁸ *Al-Ṣūfiyyah wa 'l-suryāliyyah*, p. 239.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

⁵⁰ For an analysis of the impact of Sufism as a determinative element in shaping the Arabic novel, see, for instance, Nabīl Sulaymān, *Al-Taṣawwuf ka bunya ruwā'iyā* (“Sufism as a Narrative Structure”), Damascus: Al-Mawqif al-Adabi, April, 2000, pp. 37-44.

⁵¹ *Introduction to Arab Poetics*, pp. 101-2.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 100-1.

⁵³ Badawi, *op. cit.*, p. 263.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ El-Azma, *op. cit.*, p. 671.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* El-Azma is here referring specifically to Anṭūn Sa'ādah's *Al-Ṣirā' al-fikri fi 'l-adab al-Sūri* ("Conflict in Syrian Literature"), Beirut, 1st ed., 1960, pp. 58-65.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ In Davis and Schleifer, *op. cit.*

⁵⁹ See, for example, Ṣubḥi al-Ṣāliḥ, *Dirāsāt fi fiqh al-lugha al-'Arabiyyah* ("Studies in Arabic Semantics"), Beirut: Dār al-Ahliya, 2nd ed., 1962.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Davis and Schleifer, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁶¹ A neologism that appeared first in the Arabic translation of Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*. See *Al-Thaqāfa wa 'l-imperiāliyyah*, trans. K. Abū Dīb, Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1997, p. 401.

⁶² Here one should read the concepts of "modernity" and "modernism" as interchangeable terms.

PART THREE:

**The Case for a New Paradigm:
A Corollary Exposition**

Introduction

No single thesis can fully explain all the critical, literary and cultural currents that have shaped the assumptions of a self-pleading paradigm central to an ascending literary theory. However, it is possible (as the present inquiry has made explicitly clear throughout) to proffer an approximate model of theory: one which, while striving to avoid any over-neat explanation of all the transformational possibilities at work, will nonetheless provide devices serving to clarify and facilitate an understanding of the mechanisms involved.

The argument from a case of paradigm shift has been elegantly and engagingly set forth in Muḥammad Bannīs's exhaustive treatise on structures and supersessions in modern Arabic poetry. His idea of epistemic change is worked out in cogent detail within the established frameworks of, inter alia, Michel Foucault's notions of breaks, ruptures and discontinuities that distinguish historical periods, and give rise to the "epistémé" (or "paradigm") dominating what is regarded as knowledge or truth at any one time. The other, parallel argument is the one emblematic of Thomas S. Kuhn's theory of paradigmatic change. The convergence of the two approaches to a common point is suggested, albeit obliquely, in some of the shared theoretical groundwork involved. In the course of unravelling a constellation of what he aptly terms *ibdālāt* ("supersessions"), Bannīs effectively builds his central contention into a transformative sequence of "opposition and acceptance", whereby an older paradigm is overthrown and replaced by a new one incommensurate with the old. These processes, conveying the idea of a ceaseless forward motion, point up competing languages and terminologies¹ whose relations may never be viewed as easily commutative. Whenever a turning point occurs, it is reflected in corresponding practical developments in modern Arabic poetry, which lead on to ways of viewing the world so different

that they shape or determine not only substantive beliefs about culture and literary theory but also problems and methods entailing different standards for the provision of an effectively valid explanation. In 1969, almost seven years after he had given the term “paradigm” its initial currency, Kuhn made the following statement:

A paradigm is what members of a scientific community share, and, conversely, a scientific community consists of men who share a paradigm.²

The term “community” is one of the most elusive and indefinable in cultural studies. To identify an influential community, within the socio-cultural context of the present inquiry, it is necessary to distinguish this community’s boundaries, and to be aware of its common purpose, whereby the concerns of the present exert control over the past.

In these circumstances, the term is here used to denote an effective Arab cultural elite,³ an innovation-based community engaged in the ongoing process of building a reputation as the intellectual powerhouse for an emerging paradigm, and in some way recognized as central to the idea of a shared, secular, modern-oriented position: one within which writings on modernity/modernism project a broadly transforming conceptual “prism” rather than an uncompromisingly definitive “ism”. It is from this perspective that Hishām Sharābi describes such a theoretically dominant elite as comprising “an internally diverse, largely avant-garde movement of critical intellectuals, writers, professionals, scholars and students”.⁴

In the light of this process of supersession, modern literary theory has been viewed, throughout, as persistently variable and alterable – as a nominal entity which, by virtue of a name, conjoins a variety of exclusive

histories, innovatory concepts and solipsistic assumptions requiring (from time to time) interventions that allow the text to speak to an epistemology of becoming.

These approaches disclose, in consequence, the balancing forces and tensions shaping the idea of change: their participation in the multi-layered and multi-dimensional character of theory points up a collective combinatory, ergo compositional whole. Although distinguishable by virtue of the respective *raison d'être* of its individual parts, this whole is here so joined and/or disjoined as to provide a way of bringing dynamics and process into the interpretive templates informed by the proposed model.

While their proliferation is largely a twentieth-century phenomenon, notions of theory are in fact occasionally found in the writings of Arab writers and commentators before 1900. The term itself appears as early as the tenth century, some of its primordial expressions being present in a multiplicity of theoretically oriented assumptions as old as literature itself. Viewed through the lens of the present, such assumptions have an increasingly visible potential bearing on current criticism.⁵

“What theorizing *tanzīr* really means,” argues al-Bāqillāni (d. 1013) (as quoted by al-Tahānawi), “is a process of thinking in the pursuit of which a science [*ilm*] based on certainty or probability *ghalabatu ḡann* can emerge.”⁶ Al-Bāqillāni goes on to explain that this progression of thinking involves “moving forward from one level of meaning to another”.⁷ This leads to a link being established between “method” and “intention”, the polar components in a heuristic enterprise of theory-making.

In modern theory the significance of this notional⁸ link is emblematic in the insightful and unfailingly learned argument to be found throughout Edward Said's *Beginnings: Intention and Method*.

A very considerable *authoritative* power is claimed for the elusive term "science". Yet the study of how science, a conceptual tool with widespread currency in the social sciences, operates within a literary framework has its basis here in the notion of frequency (*tawātur*), the *generative* force of negation and confirmation that our modern judgement assigns to a methodology. The workings of this force of recurrence are nowhere better shown than in Al-Azmeh attempt to make al-Bīrūni (d. 1048-9) and al-Subki (d. 1369-70) into theorists of perspicacious relevance for the 1980s. Science (*'ilm*), as elaborated by them, should (Al-Azmeh argues) be seen as generally divided into two types, which "were epistemologically on par but which differed in origin: that based on demonstrative certainty (*yaqīn*) and that whose veracity is derived from traditional acceptance (*taṣdīq*)".⁹ Thus literary (ergo critical) theory, or poetics or the science of literature, falls firmly into the niche of *taṣdīq*:

The truth of its individual elements is no less certain than that of the sciences based on demonstration.

Only certainty is

derived from the constancy of their occurrence (*tawātur*).¹⁰

Moreover, the category of *taṣdīq* – which conveys, within the new ascending paradigm, the idea of persistent frequency – makes it possible for us to perceive this representation of theory as a model tied into ongoing dynamics and process: a theory exploring itself as theory,¹¹ a

narrative constituted by an interface, conjoining the referential¹² with the self-referential,¹³ thus clearly manifesting a factive/fictive status. Theory as such is, in a sense, a meta-theory, a theory of theory, a creation whose determinative limits have a great deal to do with the selection of data (dictated by particular theoretical interests) and with what critical concept is allowed to exist or appear. To engage in this transforming process is to manufacture the possibility of a dominant “mode of becoming”.

On this account (if we may generalize) the imagination of the modern critic would appear, in its endeavour to preside over the past by reference to the concerns of the present, to be increasingly eclectic. In a positive sense, eclecticism is here seen as a suggested forward movement synonymous with the notions of extensiveness, scope and diversity: a creative form of dynamism denoting a deliberate attempt to select, combine and extend. Muḥammad Miftāḥ identifies a “positive” eclecticism, which he sets against “negative” syncretism:

Selecting or using elements borrowed from various theories is bound to lead to eclecticism. Yet eclecticism does not have to lead to syncretism (*talfīqiyya*), which afflicts only the naïve with blind faith in the irreversible certitude of what he reads – neither aware of the historical and epistemic circumstance in which these theories arose, nor capable of discerning permanent from changing elements or locating their points of convergence and divergence.¹⁴

What is clear from the above is that the modern critic, as explained, selects his own intellectual experiences from a matrix of past and present writings on literature and theory, and, from his vision of the future, selects those devices, strategies and conventions which best *suit* his intentions with regard to a particular critique.

The extent to which these intentions correspond to the ongoing progression, increasing in force by successive additions and associated with the foregoing processes of model-building, hardly needs to be stressed. The point here is that – even though it has been in an ostensible state of entropy – this model has established itself throughout in an array of displacements. To make the seemingly “suppressed” expressed¹⁵ is one way for this unsettling operation to manifest the discursiveness of its mode of becoming; whereby the claims of the term “emergent” are being questioned, re-examined and foregrounded with the power of logical validation against possible misunderstanding.

These shifts have, in consequence, given rise to the radical notion of a paradigmatic movement from one mode to another, and may be articulated into a network of overlapping but distinct *sub-paradigmatic* strands. It is this articulation of cutting and cross-cutting that makes the idea of “concept mapping” a viable interpretive device. With such a device the term “concept” can now be admitted, relatedly, as a component of a thought, rather in the way a word is a component of a sentence that articulates a thought. As such, concept-mapping is present to provide the “vocabulary” as well as the “grammar” that produces the permutations whereby a model of theory is brought from being to becoming.

Let us repeat once more: the presence of concept-mapping is to be seen, at this point, as focal in a heuristic operation of structural configurating, one intended to describe and explain a cluster of assumptions mapped on to the concepts embedding the assigned model as a whole. The whole can be understood only through an understanding of its parts and of their literary culture-sensitive assumptions, while the assumptions themselves can be understood only through an understanding of the whole to which they belong. Even so, the whole is proffered as exceeding the aggregate of its structuring parts: the vibrating pressure of

its significance transcends the bounds of structure.¹⁶ Moreover, as a reversed process of structural configurating, an understanding of this significance denotes, pointedly, the relations of its components and their implications regarding the imminent ascendancy of a new paradigm.

1. From a mode of being to a mode of becoming

In the light of the preceding discussion, it may be said that the paradigmatic motion from “being” to “becoming” provides the framework for an interdisciplinary (ergo intertheoretic) shift whereby the power relations at work within the proposed model of theory are moved beyond the phase of critique through the offering of an alternative epistemology. Central to the shift is the presence of an array of processes whereby an older paradigm is challenged, dislodged and superseded by an emerging one. The prime movers behind this are members of a vanguard elite setting themselves to *undo* the effects of an entrenched mode of being. Needless to say, these members function, discursively, as the originators of new meanings, thus propounding, within the ascending paradigm, the possibility of a mode of becoming.

Since the significance of the model employed is an essential part of its structural configuration, and therefore essential for a discussion of the paradigmatic shift at work, it will be helpful to revisit the model’s intended meaning in its most general sense. At the core of this meaning, and of the way the model functions, is the concept of interpretation.¹⁷ In this sense the model has been presented, throughout, as an interpretive embodiment indicative of differential possibilities. It is in effect a figurative whole designed to facilitate the understanding of theory by supplanting its assumptions in favour of more perspicacious ones. As such, the proposed model is never intended to respond solely to a singular (literalist) explanation connoting certitude, an unqualified freedom from

doubt; rather it is, primarily, an interlocking creation, to be prised open to reveal a plurality of interpretations.

Seen from this viewpoint, explanation (unlike interpretation) implies the reading (or misreading) of literary texts as part of an enforced method of singularity, one imposed in top-down fashion and signifying a theology-laden absolutism in a world of postmodern subjectivism.¹⁸ The core assumption of such a reading is a predicative perception of the “literary” as the full and synonymous embodiment of the “literal”. Under the rubric of ancestral authenticity, the literary is thus viewed as the producer of a meaning decided antecedently, one whose prescriptive notion of a valid frame of reference is persistently pre-fixed. There is no imprecision or ambiguity; rather a determined identification linking words and their referents. This approach rests, at bottom, on the specious notion that the word and its object represent an initial unity now split into two.

Adunīs, Arkoun, Sharābi, Abū Dīb, ‘Aṣfūr, Maalouf and many others reject this pre-determinedness of meaning, which is currently assigned, in Salafi (fundamentalist) discourse of authenticity, to an increasingly indefinable concept of cultural identity. All attempts, these critics would say, to fix the connotation of such a concept once and for all are liable to turn people into utterly changeless entities. Maalouf’s approach is representative in this regard:

Identity isn’t given once and for all: it is built up and changes throughout a person’s lifetime.¹⁹

Adunīs provides another example whereby identity is seen as heterological rather than homological. The following is typical of the way he dismisses, as redundant, any nostalgic conception of identity:

Authenticity [*aṣālāh*] is not a fixed point in the past to which we must return in order to establish our identity. It is rather a constant capacity for movement and for going beyond existing limits towards a world which, while assimilating the past and its knowledge, looks ahead for a better future.²⁰

Assuming this to be valid, the irrelevance of a literalist reading of the literary is further emphasized by literalism's evident incapacity to be anchored in the present or to mediate with it. The tension between literature and theology may be Said, in consequence, to translate into a ceaseless tension between the past and the present. The most telling instances of such a tension, whereby theological orthodoxy has power to reduce literary concepts to fixed ideological instruments, are those persistently dominant in current Salafi-oriented discourse²¹ of culture. Proclaimed with more than a nod towards the language of cultural monologism, this increasingly ethnocentric stance is illustrative of the multi-purpose concept of *al-māḍawiyyah* (approximately translatable as "anachronism"). Coined by Adunīs to designate the re-asserted centrality of the past as the primary location of current Arabic literary/cultural theory, the term is accorded different weight in different contexts. *Al-māḍawiyyah* may be viewed, in this context, as a misconceived attempt, marked by an *uncritical* acceptance of institutional bias towards the past, to perpetuate dismissal of the present. Such a posture functions in favour of the anti-modern by maintaining and legitimating, as fixed and binding, the cumulative canonicity of a Salafi-laden view of the past.

From the vantage point of the foregoing, modern literary theory as a transforming model pivotal to paradigm change may be Said to signify, primarily, an attempt to *undo* the impediments and dysfunctionalities embedding culturally coded systems of value and representation. Turning on the question of whether their elimination (or modification) is possible, the attempt carries over into discussion of the dynamics and process of advance from being to becoming. Inevitably modern theory encounters these impediments and dysfunctionalities; and its strength is determined by its ability to allow passage between one mode and another. At the basis of such a motion is the idea that a mode of being is, in the final analysis, the locus for a static-dynamic opposition. This condition is predicated here, disparagingly, as illustrating a nexus of those structures that produce and represent *stasis*, the presence of systemic “fixedness”.

To put it another way, intellectual inertia might be seen, in this connection, not as a passive indisposition to motion but rather as indicating an active stance, one set against the workings of paradigmatic change. By claiming to be not only right but righteous, the perpetrators of such an absolutized position cannot, effectively, be scanned for all the possible constituent structures produced. Representing the flip side of the coin – that is, a range of distorted forms of change – these *systemic power constructs* offer a specific grid of mutually reinforcing examples drawing on themes commonly encountered in the discourse of cultural fundamentalism. That is to say, they function as metaphors illustrative of the impediments imposed on the category of choice, viewed as an exclusively modern notion. To facilitate understanding of the case for a paradigm shift, let me highlight the major areas in question.

(a) *Neopatriarchal structure*

Neopatriarchy is a term used by Hishām Sharābi to describe a distorted distribution of power by virtue of gender in our current Arab culture and society. Viewed as a mode of being denoting a total cultural phenomenon, this multi-dimensional concept derives its meaning (as it occurs in history) from

the two terms or realities which make up its concrete structure, *modernity* and *patriarchy*.²²

This structure would correspond to the way in which deep-rooted traditionality works and gives meaning to a deformed model of modernized patriarchy:

The latter must be viewed as the product of a hegemonic modern Europe; but “modernization” as a product of patriarchal and dependent conditions can only be dependent “modernization”: dependency relations inevitably lead not to modernity but to “modernized” patriarchy.²³

The upshot is that, for Sharābi, the model displayed postulates “the metonymy of inverted modernity”.²⁴ This modernity offers a distorted, even wholly dysfunctional discourse, able to operate (in Bakhtin’s definition of the term “discourse”) as “a method of using words that presume a type of authority”.²⁵

In this sense, a discourse reflecting distorted epistemic construction may be construed as emblematic of dysfunctional authority – that is to say, of an authority rooted in patriarchal values and filiations of a kinship religious and/or ethnic nature; one projecting the peculiar duality of the modern and the patriarchal, “coexisting in contradictory union”.

This difficulty leads us, inevitably, to the other side of the coin: to the question of dependency and of how neopatriarchy manifests itself within the parameters of a secular model illustrative of what Sharābi calls “fetishized modernism”.

For him the epitome of this form of modernism is a “fetishized consciousness”, one exhibiting

two related and mutually reinforcing tendencies, *imitation* and *passivity*. Ideas, actions, values, or institutions are validated (or invalidated) not by criticism but by reference to a (received) model.²⁶

Defined in terms of the translation of Western models, the received model (of fetishized modernism) is described by Sharābi as

a category which to a large extent determines neo-patriarchal outlook and practice, [imposing] itself directly without mediation or critical self-consciousness. It governs all kinds of activities, including creative ones . . .²⁷

This is “*trendism*” par excellence.²⁸

(b) Salafi structure

The ubiquitous presence of the patriarchal and the modern “coexisting in contradictory union” may also be considered with reference to the Salafi position on modernity. The context for this typically points up elements of tradition regarded, by a resurgent pre-modern orthodoxy, as the source of political and cultural legitimacy. In social theory the latter is viewed as central vis-à-vis the exercise of authority.

Adunīs's critique of cultural legitimacy, which is clearly geared to his thesis of the permanent and the changing in Arabic culture, is emblematic of an all-encompassing theory carrying through a counter-canonical project (albeit applied at times a little too neatly) that involves a complete dismantling of Salafī structures of power. A key point in this is the subversion of Salafī processes of legitimation whereby a theology-anchored conformism operates *a priori*; a conformism embedded in a ludicrously improbable image of the past and persistently at loggerheads with the present.

A cultural theorist and intellectual demystifier, Adunīs has had a huge impact on the study of cultural critique. Without his theory of change, we would probably not have had an operational interdisciplinary lexicon of keywords working, collectively, to construct a new conception of modernity.

In many ways the Salafī cultural position here proclaims itself the persistent perpetuator of patriarchy rather than the restrained promoter of change. While this position involves upholding the essentialist attitudes of a firmly entrenched establishment, that of Adunīs, by contrast, entails embracing radical alternatives that privilege the status of innovation. His quarrel is thus not with the suggestion that some innovation-based canonical textualities within the core curriculum might play their part in the processes of identity formation. The question is rather whether an essentially regressive theory, offering no resistance to the status quo, can ever lead to any position other than that of solipsistic closure.

There is, in other words, a crucial difference between, on the one hand, viewing the present in terms of a permanent canon evocative of a dysfunctional image of the past and, on the other, understanding the past, critically, in terms of the concerns of the present.

Thus the overriding aim here is the logical and powerful case to be made against the cultural fixity of an essentialized past which is being rapidly overtaken by the dynamics of the present. However, the core theme of Adunīs's theory may in effect be construed as a call to resist not only the notion of what Aijaz Ahmad terms "excess belonging"²⁹ (connoting an ethnocentric canonicity) but also the notion of "absence of belonging"³⁰ (denoting a Eurocentric-based one). Seen in this light, patriarchy – a biology-based form of authoritarianism proclaiming an essentialized identity, and used to describe the distribution of power gender in culture and society – suggests that the issue of authority should be viewed as a vital intersection between two seemingly opposing forms of domination: ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism. Colonized as they have been by power relations, these forms point (Sharābi and Adunīs would say) to a possible convergence to a common point of cultural hegemony.

One final point should be made in this regard. Crucial inquiries such as Edward Said's – undertaken at a meta-theoretical level into the role played by the myth of "origin" in upholding belief in an irreducible, ahistorical model of particularism, and thereby impeding the possibility of meaningful cultural change – should (it is now clear) be viewed as relevant to the present vexed question of Salafi anachronism.

Said's critique of the notion of "origin" provides the organizing focus for his thinking on the dysfunctionality of essentialist models of theory; and his distinctive use of the term "origin" as distinct from "beginning" has become the effective hallmark of the Saidian approach. For him "origin" is an essentialist category working in conjunction with ethnocentrism:

Origin is a silent zero point, locked within itself. It is the realm of untroubled semantic security . . . whereas “beginning” is the event that founds the realm of order and writing – syntax . . . ³¹

We might perhaps gloss this to imply a debunking of the biological rootedness (in Said’s view) of a seemingly prevailing ethnocentrism, which stands in symmetric relation to extreme particularism. His argument is concerned, above all, with exploring ways of reading texts by revealing their patriarchy-induced particularism, and, in so doing, demolishing their “filial” power.

This should be understood as an endeavour, mediated through a lexicon of cultural semantics, effectively to downgrade the status of the genealogical decidability pervading a culturally imposed notion of conformism. The possibility of this (Said would say) hinges on privileging the status of “affiliation” – a notion advocating the creation of a *metaphorical* father as opposed to the production of a *biological* one.

A further point should be added. In the light of this paradigmatic interpretation, theory may be seen as postulating the supersession of the old notion of “fate”, operating as a predominant status quo, by the characteristically modernist notion of “choice”.

(c) Differentialist structure

One of the perspectives offered by Arabic cultural theory is Al-Azmeh’s thesis claiming convergence of, on the one hand, the essentialism central to Salafi and Islamo-nationalist culturalism and the attendant organicism of its notion of history, and, on the other, the differentialism elaborated by pundits of a Eurocentrism that entails racism on implicit biological lines. Both sides, he stresses, speak the same language of ancestral

authenticity and identity. This line of argument emerges clearly in the following passage in *Islams and Modernities*:

Like racism, cultural differentialism is an essentialist perceptive system premised on a notion of a pregiven "culture" which, like race, has no sociological definition. Culture is here an absolute term coined to schematize, without precision, an indeterminate reality.³²

He goes on to make the following point:

. . . it is the enormous advantage of this notion that it is put forward to initiate sheer difference, for in this sense it can be disproved because it is tautological . . .³³

In criticizing this form of differentialism, surrounded and sealed by the patriarchal straitjacket of essentialism, Al-Azmeh points out how Salman Rushdie,³⁴ whom he describes as a "primary victim" of cultural fundamentalism, had to recreate his own cultural genealogy so as to provide an evolving mythological category: one premised on the absolute authority proclaimed by the romantic populism of an effectively non-existent category of "Islamic" literature. According to Al-Azmeh:

The primary victim, Salman Rushdie himself, edging towards compromise at a particular moment, recast his intellectual genealogy in such a way that the *Arabian Nights*, the influence of which he professes, became "Islamic" literature.³⁵

Closely connected with this essentializing position – of recasting the *Arabian Nights* as specifically “Islamic” – is the attempt by nostalgic Salafi fundamentalists to recreate an imagined past that never was, thus predicating Arabic literature, erroneously, as the product of a literalist interpretation of Islam. In other words, at the heart of this interpretation of a misleadingly monolithic whole – a whole that acts as an organized single force – lies a monist³⁶ image of an earlier period of history, a golden age from which point culture has steadily degenerated. Such a call to reclaim the past (Al-Azmeh rightly asserts) reflects a corresponding discontent with the present and mistrust of the future.³⁷

In summary, then, two major objectives underlie Al-Azmeh’s stance: to dismantle the erroneous (ahistorical) notion of a single determinative form of Islam leading to an avowedly essentialist monism; and to use this dismantling as a heuristic-methodological stimulus for taking on the false historicity of the solipsistic models he is investigating, namely, the negative forms of Islam, culture and modernity.

Each of these two objectives interacts with the other and reinforces it; hence the focus, through ongoing reference to sources and resources interdisciplinary in their nature, on a broader intellectual, literary and cultural critique of the homogenizing claims of monocentric Salafism and Eurocentric modernism.

(d) Analogical structure

The idea of an analogical (*qiyāsi*) structure articulating Arabic systems of knowledge has been introduced by M.A. al-Jābirī to explain the shared essentializing sameness of two analogous or parallel narratives alluding, within the parameters of past and present representations of knowledge, to a cluster of cultural formations in discourse. What starts out as a search

for analogy and correspondence often serves to replicate a point in the past identified as a celebrated “origin”.

In his study of the “Arab mind”,³⁸ al-Jābirī points out (in accordance with a Foucaultian analytical approach) three prominent determiners in the history of Arabic culture, which he identifies as “dominant epistemés” or “epistemic systems of knowledge”.

The first epistemé refers to *al-bayān*, this being the field of representation of Arabic knowledge, standing for eloquence, style and clarity of expression.

The second epistemé, *al-‘irfān*, is emblematic, within the intellectual framework of Neoplatonism,³⁹ of a conception combining mystical intuition and gnosis. *Al-‘irfān*, according to the followers of Ibn Rushd (Averroes), the rationalist Andalusī philosopher, led to the demise, in the Islamic East, of philosophical inquiry within Arabic culture.

The third epistemé, *al-burhān*, refers to the notion of demonstration, to a process of reasoning predicated on rational and discursive argument conjoining *al-‘aql* (reason) and *al-naẓar* (speculation, examination, discernment).

These epistemés are regarded by al-Jābirī as the regulating disciplinary structures that limit what can or cannot be written or Said in current Arabic culture. In other words, an epistemé manifests itself as a “discourse”, an ordered and structured framework encompassing a historically specific field of representation of knowledge.

Al-Jābirī wishes us to examine critically the epistemic systems of *al-bayān* and *al-‘irfān*. His negative critique entails, equally, questioning their relevance to the present and reassessing their instrumentality.

Al-burhān, the third epistemic system al-Jābirī has striven to articulate, offers what is, in the final analysis, the epitome of a project of modernity. Assuming we have no wish to debunk the exemplary status of

modernity, how are we to come to terms with our cultural heritage? The answer to this question may be found in al-Jābirī's discussion of a possible modernizing approach, one the present writer is tempted to construe as illustrative of a "critical intervention", a calculated interposition made possible only by engaging with its modern relevance. Al-Jābirī writes:

There is no renewal or modernization from a point of nothingness. Re-engagement with a previous (relevant) project, i.e., Arabic cultural tradition, seems to me persistently inescapable.

Focal to this notion of a "critical intervention" is what al-Jābirī pointedly terms "the Andalusī cultural project."

For him, destabilizing the subconscious powers determinative of the Arab mind is central to an effective actualized use of this project. The subconscious powers in question are the following:

- I. verbal power (*sulṭat al-lafẓ*);
- II. ancestral power (*sulṭat al-salaf*);
- III. analogical power (*sulṭat al-qiyās*).⁴⁰

The upshot is that, in place of an emulative approach embracing, uncritically, the totality of the Andalusī model, al-Jābirī proposes the development of a "critical" understanding of the past; that is, instead of attempting to follow the model to the letter, thereby uncritically asserting the superiority of the past over the present, we should acknowledge that all understand of the past must operate within the possibilities of its *instrumentality*⁴¹ in the course of the present.

There is a significant sense in which this same position has (as indicated earlier) been consistently emphasized. According to Adunīs's argument, the Andalusī model, or rather the effectiveness of this model, has demonstrated that "no culture exists in isolation from other cultures", and that this cultural "combination" effectively "carried Arab-Islamic civilization at its most mature to the West by way of Andalusia".⁴²

* * *

Having examined some of the anomalies (represented by entrenched structures) which cannot be resolved within the old paradigm, it is now time to draw together the various threads of the argument and to identify the sub-paradigmatic strands that have contributed decisively to a paradigm shift.

The chain of movements below can, therefore, be viewed, at both micro and macro level, as the means whereby an innovation-based literary (ergo cultural) theory is being continually deconstructed and reconstructed in a fallibilistic and open manner.

To put it another way, these sub-paradigmatic strands consequently provide a line of "becoming" emblematic of the theoretical points of break whereby the discursive and intuitive power formations of the old are being displaced and replaced by the new.

2. From "ism" to conceptual "prism"

Often making an association with the "modernist" European and Anglo-American literary/cultural movement of the first part of the twentieth century, an array of Arab writers has erroneously viewed the term "modernism" (with modernity as its matrix concept) not as a blanket term to cover a variety of leanings, vogues and trends, overlapping one another

and merging into one another within the ephemerality of the Western literary canon, but rather as a one-way determination emblematic of a monolithic “ism” seeking to break with sets of collectively held concepts of validity.

Among the features shared by such writers, whether Salafi or “trendist”, is a particular approach to a possible theory of change; and central to this is the tendency to essentialize. In such an approach, cultural identity is determined by the myth of a fixed “uncontaminated” origin, and by the way this myth appears as natural, authentic and unproblematic. The two models (Salafi and “trendist”) may therefore be viewed as the two sides of the same coin.

This means that, whereas from an ethnocentric perspective theory is viewed in terms of an *uṣūli* (fundamentalist) tendency that relentlessly stresses subordination to a theology-laden conventionalism, Eurocentric theory is approvingly regarded (by the proponents of trendism at the receiving end) as a peripheral by-product, a borrowed creation conforming to the ever-changing diktat of a commodified Western model.

Nowhere is the link between ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism more explicit than in the convergence of Salafism and trendism to a common point. The natural corollary of their subservience is a shared tendency to follow, to abide by, to adhere to. In a more negative sense, conformity effectively turns into an endeavour to fundamentalize, essentialize, fetishize.

This is a highly significant conclusion. The theoretical strands represented within the work of Adunīs, al-Jābiri, Arkoun, Sharābi, Abū Dīb and Al-Azmeh, to name just a few, may now be seen in effect as central to a wider *secular*⁴³ drive which, having rejected Salafism and trendism, has ended by locating the repressive aspects of the very notion of a remorseless conformity. Adunīs in particular has been drawn to

debunk the conforming revivalism of *al-Nahḍah* for its lack of any sense of dissidence. This stance he describes as *tajāwuzi*: a transgressive/non-conformist position affirming the plurality inherent in secularity while transgressing the singularity residing in conformity. According to his argument, this has

laid the foundation of a double dependency on the past, to compensate for the lack of creative activity by remembering and reviving; and a dependency on the European-American West, to compensate for the failure to invent and innovate by intellectual and technical adaptation and borrowing. The present reality is that the prevailing Arab culture derives from the past in most of its theoretical aspects, the religious in particular, while its technique comes mainly from the West.⁴⁴

This passage captures, very precisely, the gist of two converging models of dependency. Yet what it also does in effect is to highlight the ascendancy of an alternative model, one predicating a sub-paradigmatic shift from the singular to the plural, from definitive “ism” to a polymorphic conceptual “prism”. Al-Azmeh’s contention that “there are as many Islams (and modernities) as there are *situations* that sustain them” may be construed as a simple shorthand means of underlining the primacy of the proposed alternative: namely, an innovation-based literary theory.

3. From the philological to the critical

Much of the theoretical groundwork probing the role of theology-induced philology in determining the lexicon of modern literary theory was laid by innovation-based secular writers, whose priorities were directed firmly

towards the construction of modernity vis-à-vis a possible reconceptualization of the link in Arabic etymology between the philological and the religious.

Central to this philology-induced argument is the examination, in Edward Said's *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, of the way the word "innovation" (*ibdā'*) articulates with the "negative" concept of "heresy" (*bid'a*). As Said puts it:

It is significant that the desire to create an alternative world, to modify or augment the real world through the act of writing (which is one motive underlying the novelistic tradition in the West), is inimical to the Islamic world view. The Prophet is he who has *completed* a world view; thus the word *heresy* in Arabic is synonymous with the verb to "innovate" or to "begin". Islam views the world as a plenum, capable of neither diminishment nor amplification.⁴⁵

Adunīs is more relentless than Said in questioning the disagreeably totalizing ring to Salafi fundamentalism. Whereas Said attempts to explain, in terms of existent theology-induced etymology, the evident absence of the novel (which is a modern European genre), Adunīs employs the same kind of negational etymology to unmask the "static" in Arabic culture as a permanent mantle signifying regressive, degenerate features, given that fixity offers no resistance to the status quo. In Adunīs's words:

. . . those in power designated everyone who did not think according to the culture of the caliphate as "the people of innovation" [*ahl al-iḥdāth*], excluding them with this indictment of

heresy from their Islamic affiliation. This explains how the term *iḥdāth* [“innovation”] and *muḥdath* [“modern”, “new”], used to characterize the poetry which violated the ancient poetic principles, came originally from the religious lexicon.⁴⁶

It is from this negational etymological perspective, whereby reality is mediated through a religious lexicon marked by a particular feature of “instruction”, that Adunīs now makes the following affirmation:

Consequently we can see that the modern in poetry appeared to the ruling establishment as a political or intellectual attack on the culture of the regime and a rejection of the idealized standards of the ancients, and how, therefore, in Arab life, the poetic has always been mixed up with the political and the religious, and indeed continues to be so.⁴⁷

The shift from the philological to the critical now emerges. Whereas etymological research is used as a preliminary step in a “critical” inquiry designed to expose the “power of instruction” hidden in an implicit discourse of reasoning, critical analysis may be understood as a cultural critique par excellence; one whose primary intention is to “undo” the effect of the religious lexicon (acting as a mask for a one-way determination) on the construction of modern literary theory.

4. From tafsīr (explanation) to ta’wīl (interpretation)

As conceptual tools for text-reading, explanation and interpretation have been viewed by innovation-based modernists as suggesting two opposing strategies for understanding literature. While explanation is presented as pre-fixing the meaning of a literary text, thus drawing it into the

singularity of a pre-given simplistic reasoning (“the less Western, the more authentic”), interpretation is offered not as an “uncritical” ordering tool, imposed with a view to creating a strategy cohering fully with the logic of cultural monologism, but as a “critical” tool for teasing out the manifold meanings existent beyond a predicated, unproblematized mode of “stability”.

The uncritical affirmation located in such “stability” leads on to its very antithesis, “instability”, so pointing up an embedded concept of negation. Edward Said has made this clear in his discoursing on “monocentrism”, a negational concept he understands as “working in conjunction with ethnocentrism”, as “licensing a culture to cloak itself in the particular authority of certain values over others”.⁴⁸

Parallel to this line of reasoning is al-Tahānawī’s innovative differentiation (produced in 1737) between the two forms of reading:

Interpretation [*ta’wīl*] is conjecture [*ẓann*] of the intended meaning [*murād*]; while explanation [*tafsīr*] emphasizes its certainty.⁴⁹

The gist of al-Tahānawī’s definition appears pointedly in tune with that posited in Umberto Eco’s *The Limits of Interpretation*:

On one side it is assumed that to interpret a text means to find out the meaning intended by its original author or – in any case – its objective nature or essence, an essence which, as such, is independent of our interpretation. On the other side it is assumed that the text can be interpreted in infinite ways.⁵⁰

To round off these remarks, two points need to be stressed. The first is that innovation-based theory has displayed, along a line of

becoming, an anticipated glide from explanation to interpretation. The second point is that, since the publication of Adunīs's major treatise on literary theory from the viewpoint of cultural statics and dynamics, modern criticism has been concerned with formulating the basis for an interdisciplinary matrix of knowledge free from presuppositions.

If the debate on reading as an irreducibly complex process of interpretation begins with Adunīs, the more recent example of it is to be found in J. 'Aṣfūr's *Qirā'at al-turāth al-naqdi* ("Reading the Critical Heritage").⁵¹ Central to this book is an approach known as reader-response criticism. 'Aṣfūr is not, though, concerned solely with individual responses to literary texts, but with the general response determinative of the interpretive capacity of literature.

Having concluded, albeit implicitly, that social change remains unrealized if not unrealizable,⁵² Adunīs and a cluster of innovationists have, in effect, rejected the notion that change is possible solely by virtue of social forces.⁵³

This means that theory, being an elitist enterprise, has been led away from the study of forms of economic and social structures rather than towards them.

Proposing to create what amounts to a "poetics of becoming", one embracing a paradigm of innovation and drawing on (in Khālida Sa'īd's words) "Abbasid modernity and European modernity of the past two centuries", this poetics has effectively displaced all discussion of the predicaments surrounding the idea of social change and its implication.

The foregoing examination of the concept of modernity has already indicated how its function can and will be defined:

. . . these modernities are based on the retrieval of the status of man, his effectiveness in history, and his freedom and

responsibility. What constitutes our modernity is, then, an endeavour to undo a state of alienation.⁵⁴

Within the context of this state of alienation, the role of Sufi universalism⁵⁵ in the making of innovation-based theory is highly symptomatic. If a symptom is defined as something that indicates the presence of something else, Sufism may be seen, in retrospect, as the powerhouse of the metaphorical, whereby words are perceived as the mantle of the universe and the universe as the mantle of words.

The most relevant example of Sufi writings, reclaimed by innovation modernists, is provided in Ibn 'Arabi's (1165-1240) metaphorical proposition connecting the book and the universe. The following quotation from his *Turjumān al-ashwāq* ("Interpreter of Longings") is connotative of an attempt to textualize the universe and universalize the text:

The universe is an immense book; the characters of this book are written in principle with the same ink and transcribed on the eternal tablet.⁵⁶

A variation on this theme, whereby the dichotomy of the subjective and the objective has been obliterated, is supplied in Umberto Eco's notion of the "double metaphor" positing "the world as a text and the text as a world":

To interpret means to react to the text of the world or to the world of a text by producing other texts.⁵⁷

The theme of world and text finds its expression in Adunīs's *Al-Kitāb* ("The Book"),⁵⁸ a dark rhapsodic critique scattered with arresting aesthetic and political insights that question Arabic culture and history. Imaginatively, indeed idiosyncratically written, the work offers the possibility of a modern secular re-engagement with the tradition assigned to the genre of sacred books.

Within a different framework, it is appropriate to turn to Adunīs's reading of Sufism vis-à-vis the surrealism of Rimbaud, and vice versa.⁵⁹ What establishes the plausibility of this proposed cultural convergence is the existence of an invisible interface, an implicit allegorical connectedness, an almost undetectable comparability.

That is not to identify, in the present context, a "causal law", one suggesting a direct relationship between two boundaries, a chronological succession whereby one brings about or produces the other. Such a contention would be simply untrue.

Finally, it is not possible, when dealing with problems entailing the displacement of "explanation" by "interpretation", to evade the question of just how innovation-based modernists receive, perceive and understand literature. In his *Fi 'l-shi'riyyah* ("On Poetics"), Kamāl Abū Dīb posits the question as a semiological problematic highlighting the primacy of imagination:

Texts are full of gaps which the reader/receptor fills in, and literary criticism involves interpreting rather than explicating what textual language aspires to convey.⁶⁰

The point is, it is no longer possible to explicate. Explanation must be replaced by interpretation.

5. *From trendism to critical intervention*

The phenomenon described in the first part of this work as “trendism” may be viewed as the effect of increasingly uncontrollable processes of vulgar consumerism, which presumes, indeed demands, the freedom to follow, replicate, simulate, imitate and emulate a predominant Eurocentric model. Based on uncritical adherence to fashion, this phenomenon provides, within the context of theory’s current obsession with authenticity, the ammunition for Salafī and renovation-based writers who dismiss modernity/modernism as denotative of a seemingly unstoppable drive towards mindless acquiescence in the underlying diktat of borrowed forms of cultural consumerism.

One consequence of this is a dependency bringing with it what Jāber ‘Aṣḥūr has aptly called *ittibā‘iyyah ‘aṣriyyah*, a form of repetition reflecting uncritical conformity to a rampant commodification of culture closely associated with the development of effective systems of globalization.

Two ideas appear to be linked with this perspective:

First, if this interpretation of the relation between cultural trendism and fashion within a global scene is correct, then uncritical approval of the replication of an increasingly ubiquitous model may be seen as confirming the notion of a far-reaching lack of authenticity. In so far as a trendist aspires to appease otherness via a mimetic act – by seeking to become like it – his attempt may be described as emblematic of a course of action whereby the colonized subject is being re-produced, in H.K. Bhabha’s words, as “almost the same, but not quite”.⁶¹ Hence trendism may be regarded as a mere corollary of the issues of cultural identity, rendering these issues far more difficult either to gloss over or to resolve. The more damaging the issues become in the course of modernization, the greater grows the threat of indolent subservience to a non-reductionist

reduction positing itself as universally valid culture. To put it another way, a trendist should in effect be viewed not only in his guise as *passive* reader of the literary corpus of otherness (with more than a nod towards prevailing and short-lived fashion), but also as a mindless (ergo uncritical) replicator of an uncompromisingly categorical model.

Second, the notion of relational (ergo critical) reading of the literary corpus of otherness plays a crucial role in the shaping of innovation-based theory. A clearer idea of its scope may be gathered by examining the way literary terms, informed by two different cultures, appear to be effectively *related* despite their being virtually *unrelated* in context and time.

In place of a temporally specific connection, resting upon a relationship of replication, with eyes kept open for resemblances, innovation-based writers postulate analogical correlations determined by an adequate framework for comparison. Based on the notion of time- and context-free similitude, this framework proposes a *distant* method of comparability, one described by classical sociology as being in many aspects “close to creation in the arts, poetry, etc.”.⁶²

The point (as has already been shown) is that an analogical method may be seen as an ongoing function of deliberate “critical intervention”. Edward Said’s attitude towards an all-encompassing theory – a theory whose underlying theorizing may be consistently or reasonably conceived as providing de-temporalizable literary concepts – is one of intended critical re-engagement. A group of Andalusī linguists and grammarians (noted in his work *The World, the Text and the Critic* as belonging to the Zāhiri school of interpretation, whose stance embodies “the ultimate avoidance of vulgar determinism”)⁶³ are treated as “worldly” participants in the reconstruction of a de-essentialized literary theory. Through mediation and substantiation Said explores the relevance of the ideas of

theorists like Ibn Ḥazm, Ibn Jinni and Ibn Muḍā' al-Qurṭubi with regard to contemporary literary criticism.

The idea of a critical intervention in the sense indicated is in no way peculiar to Edward Said. Adunīs provides a new perspective on the functioning of the analogical method as the corollary of critical intervention. Having acknowledged that he himself had been one of those captivated by Western culture, he further admits that he had not discovered modernity in Arabic poetry from within the prevailing Arab cultural order and its systems of knowledge. According to Adunīs:

It was reading Baudelaire which changed my understanding of Abū Nuwās and revealed his particular poetical quality and modernity, and Mallarmé's work which explained to me the mysteries of Abū Tammām's poetic language and the modern dimension in it. My reading of Rimbaud, Nerval and Breton led me to discover the poetry of the mystic writers in all its uniqueness and splendour, and the new French criticism gave me an indication of the newness of al-Jurjāni's critical vision.⁶⁴

Kamāl Abū Dīb's discovery of the structuralism in al-Jurjāni's *Theory of Poetic Imagery* may be seen in one sense as identifying

a fundamental feature of . . . the dynamic way in which modern writers have come to look at our literary tradition.

This dynamism, he explains,

springs from the interaction between the influence of Western criticism and literature and a surging spirit of revival in Arabic

culture. A change of sensibility has affected, to varying degrees, modern views on most aspects of the tradition . . . The process began towards the end of the last century and continues today more mature, vigorous, and sophisticated but, above all, with greater awareness of the most fundamental currents which prevailed in the tradition and shaped it.⁶⁵

M.A. al-Jābiri derives a cluster of key terms and concepts regarding the “Arab mind” from Michel Foucault’s *Archaeology of Knowledge*. But, for all that, the discursiveness of his epistemological investigation into the body of culture and thought offers an avowedly Arab specificity.

The final point returns us to a central issue in the making of Arabic literary theory: namely, its complex relatedness to otherness. This relatedness manifests itself through the use of borrowed concepts in an *analogical* rather than *analytical* way. The purpose of the former is to underline that these concepts are played out at a persistently thematic level. As such, they may be said to realize their own meaning through processes of synonymization and similitude rather than emulation or replication.

Mohammed Arkoun’s exploration of a *self-pleading* humanist trend in Arabic thought during the tenth century is based on a non-literal use of analogy: it neither borrows from nor refers to an explicitly deconstructivist way of reading texts. Nevertheless, Arkoun may in a sense be viewed as a deconstructivist thinker, whose textual analysis tends to hold back from stressing external evaluative criteria; a thinker who seems increasingly detached from the premises and assumptions associated with deconstruction.

To conclude: an effective shift in critical position and method from trendism to innovation-based modernism (one unavoidably embedded in diverse Eurocentric locations), whereby the critic is unable to jettison or convincingly reject the intellectual commodified products of a presiding otherness, may be Said to denote a persistent problematic, an interlocking set of unresolved issues. In his *Al-Naqd al-muzdawij* ("Double Critique"), A. Khaṭībī provides the basic contours of this problematic; and, even allowing for a degree of exaggeration in his stance, it must be conceded that he keeps the debate going:

The Arab scholar or man of science is the translator and articulator of a methodological and theoretical body of knowledge that has been formed in a different language and in other countries; in most cases, he hardly understands the historical and philosophical ground of this body of knowledge. He feels crushed by the scientific production of the Other . . . and is satisfied to remain in the shadow of Western knowledge and to formulate a secondary knowledge of his own . . . However, everything will be shaken on the level of theory when we become aware of this tension, and when the Arab world puts a stop to the process of accumulation and concentrates instead on establishing the conditions and requirements of its own independent production; at that point it will be clear that everything must start anew from the very beginning. This means that when [the Arab world] has properly mastered Western knowledge it will see that the matter does not call for just adopting and translating this knowledge but also and at the same time analyzing and comprehending the process of formation, transformation and break in the course of history.⁶⁶

6. *From renovation to innovation*

The foregoing discussion of a possible check-list for theory's frames of reference implies a distinction between "innovation" and "renovation" as separate categories. Central to this differentiation is a dynamic process of realization and representation. The source of the process lies deeper: it is located not in the continuous "renovative" systems of history, whether linear or cyclic, but rather in that compulsion to innovation which, in a Foucaultian sense, is denotative of epistemological notions present within the tool-box of discontinuity: rupture, break, mutation, transformation.

What conclusion can be drawn? There seems good reason to reiterate the point: while innovation-based modernism proposes radical changes by bringing new assumptions into play, renovation-based modernism implies, by contrast, an adherence to revival, renewal and rendering old assumptions as new.

In examining the *raison d'être* of the slippery concept of change, Adunīs uses a puzzle cited by the Greek biographer and essayist Plutarch to raise, in a tentative and limited way, the question of the instability implicit in the shifting notion of identity, whose meaning, contrary to received opinion, cannot be viewed as always the same.

To demonstrate the problem of identifying the concept's contour, and the evident instability of the concept itself, the puzzle asks the reader to suppose that, in the course of repair over a number of years, a ship owned by Theseus has its planks replaced one by one; and that the original planks are retained and used to make up a second ship just like the first. Which is the original ship?⁶⁷

For Adunīs the paradox of the ship implies a comparison that identifies both similarities and dissimilarities, spurring the reader to consider the idea of identity afresh, as a metaphor stretched to cover the workings of a biaxial concept central to the problematic of a paradigm in

motion. If identity betokens a pre-given retrievable essence, fundamentally unchanged, it also betokens a dynamic process of becoming, permanently produced and reproduced.

The above example, which appears acceptably significant but also contains tentative or contradictory implications, will have illustrated the contrast between renovation and innovation. While renovation-based writers conceive identity as an established quintessence, emblematic of a primarily fixed, backward-looking position marked by nostalgic appeal to a frozen past, innovation-based writers propose it not as a condition of being the same, but as a dynamic term serving to indicate the presence of a specific unsolved problem – a term connotative of a forward-looking stance, continually established and always in progress.

It may be useful, finally, to note that renovationists – as Hishām Sharābi rightly points out in his *Al-Muthaqqafūn al-‘Arab wa ’l-gharb: ‘aṣr al-nahḍah 1875-1914* (“Arab Intellectuals and the West: The Age of *Nahḍah*, 1875-1914”)⁶⁸ – represent an *extension* of *al-naz‘ah al-iṣlāḥiyyah*, that is, the reformist tendency whose method of analysis is based, primarily, on linguistic explanation. The relation of reformist discourse to its religious, theoretical and methodological frames of reference lacks (he argues) a critical dimension. It belongs to an incomplete construct, one disparagingly described by Sharābi as illustrative of a world of “sub-theory”. It would be wrong to think of sub-theory as a viable alternative to theory, since renovationists, in contrast to innovationists (their distant relatives whose assumptions maintain the link between “crisis” and “criticism”), tend to adopt the insistent *defensive* position of a lingering status quo.

7. *From the canon to counter-canonism*

If we accept that renovation represents an *extension* of the reformist tendency of the age of *Nahḍah*, which “was not an awakening but a return to the past and a firmer attachment to the text”,⁶⁹ then what is to be the function of innovation? Must its *intention* exclude a questioning of those canonical texts which tend to form the core of writings designated as intrinsically valuable literature?

Following the *Nahḍah* reformists, renovation-based writers have always treated the canon – viewed as a totemic object emblematic of cultural, patriarchal, religious and political authoritarianism – with kid gloves and excuses. Innovation-based writers, by contrast, tend to adopt a different emphasis: the past, they maintain, can no longer be seen as a glamorized essence with permanent fixity of meaning, or be taken on its own valuation, but should be understood in terms of the present. This point is clearly crucial, in that it permits a distinction between definitive terms, largely determined by their respective purposes (or intentions).

The English term “canon” (applied here to literature) implies a specifically theological origin. While there is no precise verbal equivalent in Arabic, this does not exclude the concept of an existing *canonicity*, one that reflects an entrenched power structure and, above all, supplies models for the use of language and the writing of literature.

The real significance of the disjunction between “canon” and “heritage” lies in an evident shift in perspective, a shift that may be viewed as uncompromisingly categorical. This is most clearly illustrated in a movement from a seemingly harmonious canon, complicit with power, to a discordant heritage comprising both canonical and uncanonical literature; from a uniformity articulated within a monistic framework to a plurality dominated by various styles and models of thought; from static canonicity to dynamic counter-canonicity.

It does seem, then, that the notion of a shift away from a mandatory canon, pre-determining the past, towards the idea of an optionally embraced heritage, supplies the potential for a proposed counter-canonical alternative, one that makes possible attention to writings excluded, marginalized or simply viewed as minor or even irrelevant. Only with innovation-based writers has this line of reasoning been initiated, and an emerging paradigm begun to signal a switch of register. When writers, following Adunīs, refer to the modernist qualities present in a secularized mode of Sufism, which Adunīs himself subsumes under the rubric of an ongoing process of desacralization, it is by way of endorsing a particular development of the concept of innovation. This leads us to the most powerful single factor among the many factors that enter into the making of modern theory.

Let us dwell, initially, on the semantic features of “innovation”. The priority given to the meaning of this word is, from Adunīs’s viewpoint, particularly significant, in that the Arabic *ibdā’* (“innovation”) is troublesome from the etymological viewpoint. Suggesting, first and foremost, an act of creation out of nothing, it presents a paradigm case in language. *Ibdā’* does not lack a specifically religious referentiality; indeed, it may be said to have an avowedly theological connotation.

The view ascribed to Islamic theology asserts that things may come into existence out of nothing. The same may be said to be true, albeit in a different way, for the workings of new critical concepts and literary forms. In this sense the writer may be regarded, via a process of realizing archetypes through similitudes,⁷⁰ as a creator in his own right. In one of Adunīs’s early poems, indeed, the poet is portrayed, in Sufi fashion, not as “a creator” but as “the creator”. The following lines illustrate this point:

In me He unified the universe
 His eyelids wear mine,
 In me He unified the universe
 Through the workings of my own free will,
 Who then invents who?⁷¹

What all this amounts to is that the role of innovation is central to any discussion of what the counter-canonical means. Arabic literary theory today clearly implies not only a challenge (on the grounds of its non-relevance to the concerns of the present) to a contentious canon complicit with power, but also the suppression of this canon, given the latter's promotion in the name of an ever more ubiquitous, religious, patriarchal and political legitimacy. There is an implied need to consider the whole relationship between culture and authority – more specifically, to question the negation, on the part of the perpetuators of the existing canon, of the ascendancy of the role of innovation in literature itself.

While Adunīs's position, in common with that of other innovation-based writers, involves attention to writings (like those of Sufis like al-Ḥallāj, al-Niffari and Ibn 'Arabi) excluded by literary history as minor or irrelevant, the position of Mohammed Arkoun, along with that of al-Jābiri and other modern cultural commentators and theorists, involves a critical focus on interdisciplinary humanistic strands of thought dating back to the ninth and tenth centuries: the age of al-Jāḥiẓ, Ibn Miskawayh, al-Tawḥīdi and proponents of the Andalusī model.

8. From de-definition to re-definition

As has already been explained, the critical definition of modernism proffered throughout this inquiry addresses, by means of different lexical and critical resources *determinative* of the function of the type of reading

adopted, a bundle of interconnected theoretical and empirical research problems. These problems turn on the question of de-definition.

In this connection, a de-definer may be viewed as an oppositional reader engaging renovation-based texts, or, more specifically, as a critiquer exposing, through a process of demystification, the presence of emulation in the workings of a double articulation: just as Salafi anachronism and its ensuing ossification betokens the ethnocentric assumptions underpinning a mimetic form of revivalism, so Eurocentric trendism, on which fashion has imposed its ephemeral reign, betokens, with an inexhaustible capacity for mimicry, a common standard of reproducibility against which cultural products are constantly measured. To put it more simply, we find the same pejorative imitateness exhibiting itself in two distinct albeit similar formulations.

The dynamic of de-definition, from which springs the energy to reject or hold on to caveats, is thus not simply an effective tool for calling into question a definition that works outside reference to a new paradigm; it is also an approach undertaken with a view to undoing contradictions and fissures, and, furthermore, a means of negotiating in favour of spaces of innovation, with more than a nod towards an alternative epistemology.

What the above suggests is this: if a definition, in its Aristotelian sense, is “the formula of thing’s essence”,⁷² and, subsequently, an essence denotative of a *closure*, creating as it does a fixed meaning of the thing defined, a sense of finality and irrevocability, then de-definition may be seen as a *dis-closure*, an empirical open-endedness taking on, in a possible exercise, the ideologically⁷³ contaminated biaxial concept of Euro/ethnocentrism.

This situation corresponds to a paradigmatic framework existing outside the *enclosure* of essentialism. One criticism of the latter is that it implies, in the context of Salafism and trendism, a blind reverence for the

spirit of literalism, thus underpinning an abiding belief that texts can be tied down to the speciously unassailable dominance of an explicit monism.

Preoccupation with literalist interpretation manifests itself, in effect, as the product of a spirit of emulation. The literal becomes foregrounded; and, because of this, emulated texts come to be part of a trammelling language of canonicity. Reiterating the distinctions between the home-grown and the appropriated, this language thrusts itself to the fore, so reducing literature to the pre-fixed and the self-proclaiming.

Another way of seeing how de-definition articulates with innovation is to draw attention to the centrality of the notion of creation out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) and to the psychological reality of this notion vis-à-vis the making of theory.

In a book entitled *Al-Shams wa 'l-'anqā'* ("The Sun and the Phoenix"),⁷⁴ the present writer has attempted to explore the possibility of circumventing a *dependent* reading of literary texts, on the ground that the latter may lead to an effusion of interpretations fast becoming contaminated by the fumes of an overheated engine. One aspect of the dysfunctionality springing from dependent reading is the interference of appropriated ideas, whose relevance has not been established, with the workings of a theory of change. It is important to keep in mind that such ideas are couched, inexorably, in a tendentiousness privileging the *nowness* rather than the *newness* in a global system fully exposed to Western consumerism.

Avoidance of the consequences of dependent reading is here addressed within the possibilities of a process of auto-suggestion. The desired effect may be induced through a willing suspension of disbelief vis-à-vis an assertive sense of absolutism and infallibility – a sense

produced by the mindlessly exacted criteria of a persistent literalism and by repeated reference to origin as a supposed virtue.

One might counter this proposition by reference to Roland Barthes' assertion that there exists no "innocent" reading. However, even if one accepts this assertion within a process of interpretation, this still leaves room to avoid the dogmatism of Salafism and the diktat of trendism.

The above discourse is constructed in a metaphorical fashion; it draws upon the aura of connotations inherent in the narrative structure of the myth of *al-'anqā'*, the imaginary phoenix which, so legend has it, is bred in Arabia and exposes its long neck⁷⁵ to the full force of the sun's rays (the text), until it (the phoenix/critic) burns (itself/himself) out. A new phoenix (critic) will then arise from the ashes to attend to a new text.

If this is accepted, then (following on from the foregoing argument) the similarity between the two referentialities of a defetishized notion of creation (the religious and the secular) can be pressed into immediate service, now playing a fundamental role in upholding the critic within the focus or foci of his own fiction, as the *mubdi'*, the innovator, the originator, the prime mover.

Reasoning from this analogy, text-reading may be seen as set in a less contaminated space, angled towards the examined text not from a fixed pre-determinate position but from an indeterminate one.

As a result, the methodological question of finding a critical approach relevant to the text under consideration, a point of departure, a beginning principle, can come into play unimpeded by the diktat of authority contained in the exclusiveness of a definition interchangeable with the reductive category of generalization.

The upshot is that reading literary texts via the canonicity of dominant critical definitions connoting fixed judgements can, in effect, hobble the interpretation of these texts in the light of what they are and

what they are not. More specifically, such a dysfunctional reading may proceed *haltingly* in constructing possible unprejudiced, reasonably meritorious interpretations, or may even lead, as Zaki Najīb Maḥmūd has put it, to a mode of criticism “intent on disparaging a cat for not being a tiger”.⁷⁶

It is admittedly hard to accept that such an experiment can, in consequence, create something out of nothing in a *literal* sense. Yet viewing the critic as a critical reader, capable of doing justice to, or simply examining, the text’s reality – like a phoenix burning itself before rising from the ashes with renewed presence (to attend to the singularity of a new text) – may be taken, above all, as an attempt to facilitate the growth of doubt about mindlessly reproducing and applying an accretion of uncritically adopted concepts.

The transition from a phase of de-definition to one of re-definition, noted at the start of this section, now assumes full meaning. In a study anchored in the central assumption of the primacy of a paradigm of innovation, Kamāl Abū Dīb offers a new model of theory. This model, provided in a study entitled *Al-Hadāthah, al-sulṭah, al-naṣṣ* (“Modernity, Power, Text”),⁷⁷ does not rest on pre-determined precepts; it is rather formed out of an endeavour to jettison the misplaced certainty of special status accredited to a canonicity that has borne often tumultuous evidence of the prejudices present within the modern and the pre-modern.

This is a complex and sophisticated model for modern literary theory, one fully aware of the negative consequence of credulously accepting the reductive label of “derivative” rather than “relational”; a model implicitly capable of detachment from a context of origin.

Having attempted, in the course of an ongoing oppositional crisis diagnosis, to reconstruct theory primarily as a postulation of an aesthetics of transgression, Abū Dīb appears in agreement with Ihab Hasan’s

celebration, in a parallel context, of a “muse” assigned to the critic, not radically different from the poet’s inspiring goddess of indwelling creativeness. Such a stance entails emphasis on the primacy of “imagination”, the faculty of the mind that “empowers change” and makes it possible for “the critic . . . now and then” to “improvise on the possible”.⁷⁸

An analogous argument is offered in Khalīl Ḥāwī’s essay “Naẓariyat al-khalq min ‘adam” (“Theory of Creation Ex Nihilo”),⁷⁹ which deals with the convoluted concept of literary innovation. The discourse of this concept bears an ostensive reference – it points to the secularization of the theology-laden thesis of “creation out of nothing”. This in turn hints at a possible move in the opposite direction, as indicated in the proposition put forward in Greek philosophy and reiterated by Shakespeare: “Nothing comes from nothing.”⁸⁰

Ḥāwī’s notion of literary creation is thus profoundly antithetical to the latter. As a Promethean innovator (he goes on to say) the poet is ceaselessly emulating God’s act of creation, so fashioning poetry out of beginningless matter; from a void.

9. From genre-bending to genre-making

In moving from a seemingly incontestable definition wrapped in the ruling ideology (in its pure state as an instrument of instruction with inbuilt authoritarian tendencies) to the indeterminate suggestibility of a tentative re-definition (via the negativity underlying a definition that entails detailed attention to the question of cultural difference), the model theory put forward here does not claim a closure, but rather offers a mode of disclosure: a heuristic method whereby a spiral of presuppositions contributing to the labelling of a text may be pressed, so propounding a

study of works that frequently turns on the question of generic classification.

Since genres may be classified in various ways, their descriptive (fact-stating) premises and indicative mood may be sustained or shifted in application and meaning to a state of non-argumentative prescriptivity. But to study prescriptivity, in this sense, means to view the concept from a particular perspective: not as an epistemological structure of thought per se, but as the manifestation of a misleadingly contained ideology, a category relating to or enforcing the applicability of an implicit obligation. On the face of it, this lower epistemological profile of prescriptive terminology may seem viable, but it is almost certainly unsound, because it implies insistence on pre-existing definitions of what genres ought to be.

In an indirect response to ideology's relations of domination, Aijaz Ahmad provides an explanation, with a negative ring to it, of what is wrong with the so-called "law of the father" which is central to a didactic mode of paternalism. For him, to study ideology is to study, among other things, the ways in which "the law of the father (you must write this if you are to be admitted into my theory)"⁸¹ serves to sustain ubiquitous relations of domination.

The revolt of modern poetry against conventions of rhyme and metre embodies a process of explicit transgression against the law of the father, in which emphasis is laid on an *aesthetics of memory*. Against this conclusion one might point to the stream of "Adunīisian" concepts of the 1970s and after, where the stress on a possible demise of boundaries between literary forms might be taken as reflecting an attempt not to write the new poem only, but to create a strikingly new kind of writing denotative of a metapoetry, one constructed through and informed by extra-literary language.⁸² In addition, and far more importantly, many of

Adunīs's radical concepts have, from that period on, assumed an almost “*iconic*” significance. Such paradigmatic shift is possible because the stability attributed to a seemingly well-defined genre has an additional implication: that what appears as natural or given suggests, albeit obliquely, the presence of a cluster of obligatory notions of “authenticity”, whereby the descriptiveness of poetics is persistently pushed to the point of manifest prescriptiveness.

Writing in a comparable context, Adorno questions the notion of a static sense of “authenticity”, thereby shifting away from the prescriptive fixity of a blatant essentialism:

Whatever is authentic in this concept [of poetry] has become so only under the perspective of something that is *different* from it.⁸³

Another way of putting this is to argue that, whereas poetry, labelled the *dīwān al-‘Arab* (“register of the Arabs”), has revolted against the biological inevitability inhering in the law of the father (euphemistically described by Edward Said as the locus of cultural/literary “filiation”), changes occurring, since the seventies, in the fictive genres (i.e., the short story and the novel) strongly indicate the exploration of a possible re-engagement, within the parameters of factors relevant to the present, with the conventions and eccentricities that pervade classical Arabic narrative theory. In this latter instance, the “law of the father” refers not to biological lineage but to an “imperial” mode of socio-cultural patriarchy, functioning as a self-pleading ideology.

The implications of this are far-reaching. To contest the claim that modern Arab poetics is not determined by its own rules, new strategies are required. The most important need in this respect is to probe the possibility of a viable distinction between what is cross-cultural or

universal in Arabic fiction and what is particular (i.e., indigenous). This emerges clearly in Şabri Hāfız's sociology-anchored study *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse*.

Focused on the notions of text, context and discourse as rudimentary aspects of fiction most directly analysable in terms of being observable structures with socio-cultural dimensions, the study challenges the widely held belief that Arabic culture had ground to a halt at the beginning of the nineteenth century. For Hāfız, the emergence of a new public, with its own distinctive home-grown cultural particularism, has effectively induced the convoluted processes of inborn genre-making. From this perspective a re-assessment of how far modern Arab narrative theory⁸⁴ is indebted to the impact and stimuli of Western poetics becomes a viable possibility.

10. From literary criticism to cultural critique

What I should like to underline, in concluding this analysis, is that scrutiny of the nature and significance of the paradigmatic shift from literary criticism to cultural critique leads us on to the following argument: that two equally effective variables of *literalism* have, in the course of careful processes of undoing, been exposed to constant critical examination – and exposed, moreover, in such a way as to lay them to rest once and for all. These two variables are: first, the unequivocally *mimetic* reading of the canonical works of the Arabic literary tradition; and, second, the avowedly *imitationist* reading of Eurocentric literature and theory, modelled explicitly on the ever-changing ubiquity of cultural fashion.

One way of understanding the rationale behind the processes of exclusion/inclusion implied in the above is to suggest that the sub-paradigmatic strands permeating this ongoing corollary exposition are

theoretical sources and resources to be drawn upon, and to be viewed, also, as illustrating the way theory's binary opposites – statics and dynamics, innovation and renovation, permanence and change, definition and de-definition, being and becoming, modernism and trendism, Salafism and Sufism, obligation and choice, filiation and affiliation, etc. – work collectively to construct an ascendant paradigm ready and waiting to emerge. This specified paradigm is the framework within which the innovation theory under scrutiny may be viewed as emblematic of a wheel come full circle.

Such a depiction is, it must be conceded, a rationalization. However, its determinative logic tends to presuppose the following features, which may be set out along a continuum:

- (i) *Relatedness*. The meaning of innovation theory is viewed, within this presentation, as residing in the complex relations (connections, comparisons or associations) operating within a network of sub-paradigmatic strands; strands contributing to a break whereby the old paradigm is replaced by a new one. This model of theory, providing the critical tool for analysing an interlocking nexus of lurking logical connections, predicates the concept of literary criticism as heuristically *relational* (ergo anti-essential and transcultural). Cultural differences may, in effect, be viewed as the outcome of differential relations rather than essentialist quality.
- (ii) *Contextualism*. The notion of context is seen here as a useful means of stressing the set of situations within which innovation theory is actually propounded. Context is both temporal and cultural. As the function of a system of relevance, the context provides the critical tool for questioning the hegemony of canonical texts in the light of

the concerns of the present. It also provides a cultural point of reference according to which the processes of separating the domains of “modernism” and “trendism” become possible.

- (iii) *Interdisciplinarity*. Innovation theory has brought into focus modes of representation that take into account considerations from such diverse disciplines and concepts as logic, philosophy, sociology, psychology, linguistics, epistemology, ideology, mythology, axiology, aesthetics, history and historiography. This view of a possible articulation accommodating a plurality of disciplines and concepts has specific reference to the convoluted nature of the term interdisciplinarity. And what the latter appears to suggest, in a broad sense, is the possibility of transcending literary criticism as restrictively perceived. It also seems to suggest, within the “framework” or context of cultural semantics, a transition from the claims for homogeneity often associated with literary criticism to the heterogeneity and hybridity of a self-avowedly “impure” cultural critique. It can be argued, of course, that these two terms are not qualitatively identical. It should be stressed, nonetheless, that they tend to share an emphasis on the centrality of “identity” and its persistent complexity – which implies that they are two tokens of one type. Their relationship is thus partially symmetric if not wholly commutative. Another way of putting this is to say that the passage from literary criticism to cultural critique is actually less a passage than a “conceptual slippage”, indicative of a smooth gliding movement between two interrelated disciplines.

¹ For a checklist of competing terms referring to the concept of “newness” in poetry, see the Glossary of Terms in Moreh, *op. cit.*, pp. 323-4.

Now superseded by *al-shi'r al-ḥadīth* (“modern poetry”), a term suggesting the relationship and relatedness of theory and the emergent paradigm of *al-ḥadāthiyyah* (“modernism”), such redundant terms as *al-shi'r al-jadīd* (“new poetry”), *al-shi'r al-mahmūs* (“whispered poetry”) and *al-shi'r al-munṭaliq* (“unrestrained poetry”) seem pointedly to signify the action of an adjective comprising an attribute in conjunction with a noun, rather than designating, in the Aristotelian sense, “the formula of thing’s essence”. What the foregoing terminology suggests is thus a self-referential specificity, one acknowledging the laws of an ephemeral necessity.

² See the Postscript in T.S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 3rd ed., 1996, pp. 174-210.

As indicated in the course of this study, Kuhn is invoked in literary contexts in connection with the term “paradigm”. The link might, however, bear further explanation. The term was, we are told, “borrowed” by Kuhn himself “from linguistics and prosody”. See *The John Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, p. 447.

³ Among the literary and cultural magazines and reviews employed by the “elite” as platforms for advancing the cause of modernity/modernism, the following may be instanced:

In Beirut, a thriving centre for intellectual activity, Suhail Idrīs founded *Al-Ādāb* (“Literatures”) in 1953; Yūsuf al-Khāl founded *Shi'r* (“Poetry”) (1957-69); and *Mawāqif* (“Stands”) was founded by Adunīs in 1968. For an overview of the literary press in the Arab world as a whole, see, for example, *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, vol. 2, pp. 611-13. For Egypt see ‘Ali Shalash, *Ittijāhāt al-adab wa ma‘ārikuh fī ‘l-majallāt al-adabiyyah fī Miṣr (1939-1952)* (“Literary Trends and Encounters in Egyptian Literary Magazines (1939-1952)”), Cairo: Al-Haī’a al-‘Āmmah lil-Kitāb, 1991.

⁴ *Neopatriarchy*, p. 11.

⁵ For a definitive critique stressing the view that the past should be understood not in its own terms but rather in terms of changes induced in consciousness by the present, see Al-Azmeh, *Ibn Khaldūn*. See also Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic*, in which the author explores the relevance to modern criticism of the Zāhiri theory of eleventh-century Andalusia, viewed as central to the unfamiliar field of medieval

Arabic linguistics – the relevance lying, he argues (albeit obliquely), in the way it has stood the test of time and remained pertinent in terms of the present.

In similar vein Said treats Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), author of *The New Science*, as a critic whose ideas have had a significant and demonstrable bearing on modern criticism. The ideas in question, proposing a systematic framework for a philosophy of history, had an outstanding forerunner in the person of Ibn Khaldūn (1332-1406), who much earlier placed history among the social sciences – though Franz Rosenthal, the translator of *Al-Muqaddimah* into English, has argued, on the basis of straightforward and self-evident probability, that Vico could hardly have been acquainted with Ibn Khaldūn. See Grace E. Cairns, *Philosophies of History: Meeting of East and West in Cycle-Pattern Theories of History*, New York: Philosophical Library, 1962, p. 336.

⁶ M. al-Tahānawī, *Kitāb kashshāf iṣṭilāḥāt al-funūn* (“Dictionary of Technical Terms”), Bibliotheca Indica, Collection of Oriental Works, Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1862, part 2, p. 1386 (offset print, Istanbul, 1984).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ That is, hypothetical, assumed to function as a heuristic-methodological stimulus.

⁹ Al-Azmeh, *Ibn Khaldūn*, p. 6. For a similar account of the difference between a scientific problem and a social problem, set out in modern sociological parlance, consider the following passage:

A scientific problem is one that is defined by systematic theory and the relevant empirical data. A social problem is any condition of either the social structure or cultural structure of a social system that is defined by some group .

..

See Bernard Barber, *Intellectual Pursuits: Toward an Understanding of Culture*, New York-Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998, p. 80.

¹⁰ Al-Azmeh, *ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

¹¹ See Adunīs, *Kalām al-bidāyāt* (“Textual Beginnings”), p. 210.

¹² That is, referring to things in the world, heterological.

¹³ In a postmodern sense, a self-referential text may be described as homological, revealing a reflexive fictive mode; a text turning away from the mimetic function of the Realism (with or without a capital “r”) of the nineteenth-century novel.

¹⁴ M. Miftāh, *Tahlīl al-khiṭāb al-shi'ri: istrātijiyat al-tanāṣṣ* ("Analysis of Poetic Discourse: The Strategy of Intertextuality"), Casablanca: Al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-'Arabi, 2nd ed., 1986, p. 7.

¹⁵ In this connection see Said's discussion of "secular criticism" in *The World, the Text and the Critic*, pp. 1-30.

¹⁶ This dismissal of the fixedness of conventional structuralism may be viewed in terms of Derrida's abjuration of structure as a static notion: "What is suppressed by this static conceptualization is the 'force' or animating pressure of *intent* which exceeds all the bounds of structure." See Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, London-New York: Methuen, 1982, p. 51.

¹⁷ What interpretation suggests here, among other things, is that the textuality of the proposed model is full of gaps which the reader fills in. This notion of interpretation has been resolutely taken up by numerous modernists, such as Jāber 'Aṣfūr, who sees *reading* not only as a critical tool for analysis but as a theory of *construction* conceived in terms of receiving, perceiving and understanding. See Jāber 'Aṣfūr, *Qirā'at al-turāth al-naqdi* ("Reading the Critical Heritage"), Cairo: Dār Su'ād al-Ṣabbāh, 1992, pp. 11-16.

¹⁸ In other words, singularity of explanation functions as a monistic monolith, reflecting a purported ruling ideology.

¹⁹ *On Identity*, p. 20.

²⁰ *Introduction to Arab Poetics*, p. 90.

²¹ That is, a discourse of finality, a closing-off of possibilities.

²² Sharābi, *Neopatriarchy*, p. 3.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ M.M. Bakhtin, in Michael Holquist (ed.), *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Emerson Caryl and Michael Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981, p. 427.

²⁶ Sharābi, *Patriarchy*, p. 24. "Fetishized modernism", a category viewed by Sharābi as determining a neopatriarchal outlook and practice, is conceptually commutative with "trendism".

An early, extreme illustration of fetishized modernism viewed as a destructive force may be found in a poem published in the 1940s by Bairam At-Tunisie. The

poem describes, in strikingly vitriolic fashion, the negative impact of a permeating trendism as perpetrated by Azrael, the angel of death in Islamic tradition:

Count Azrael came to me from Europe in a trance
 His English nails were leonine and scalloped
 From his French dental-plate a thousand elephants
 Dived in an Austrian tunnel when he swallowed.

He wore the black shirt of a Roman politician
 Beside him was a scythe of German brand
 He dipped into a pouch of Spanish ammunition
 He had a Greek stiletto in his hand.

He stopped the traffic with Hungarian bravado
 He steered towards a pit of Belgian slack
 And staring through a pair of lenses ground at Oslo
 He wondered when the robot world would crack.

I crossed myself, he made a motion in Bulgarian
 I spoke, he spoke to me in Portuguese
 I waved my hand, he waved goodbye in High Bavarian
 I woke, and rummaged for my fleas.

See Herbert Howarth and Ibrāhīm Shukrallah, *Images from the Arab World* (Fragments of Arab literature translated and paraphrased with variations and comments), London: Gazelle, 1977, p. 39.

²⁷ Sharābi, *ibid.* Sharābi cites “modern Arabic poetry” as an example. This value judgement of modern poetry is, of course, as unqualified and unquantified a statement as a sweeping generalization.

²⁸ As has been clearly argued throughout this text, the objection to fashion-induced trendism rests upon a position whereby the category of “emulation” is employed as preconditional to viability. At the heart of this category lies a network of power relations exemplified by a ubiquitous Eurocentric reasoning which views “difference”

as wholly unnatural. Hence the dominant accounting procedure leading to trendism seeks, constantly, to accentuate a “singular” modernism via a highlighting of “filiative” connections with the canonical criteria posited in terms of an imitated origin.

Implicit in this issue of power relations is the suggestion that a trendist will hanker after an unqualified identification with a replicated model, thus affirming a wholesale mode of “sameness” while negating “difference”: a state premised on complete absence of absences.

For a particularly relevant example of a “trendist” approach to modern criticism, one underlining a conscious process whereby European cultural assumptions are adopted uncritically, see Yūsuf Ḥamad Jāber, *Al-Bunyawiyyah fi 'l-naqd al-'Arabi al-mu'āšir* (“Structuralism in Contemporary Arabic Criticism”), Riyadh: Kitāb al-Riyadh, 2004.

²⁹ See Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory*, London-New York: Verso, 1994, pp. 73-122.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Beginnings*, p. 318.

³² Al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities*, p. 6.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ The reference is to the author of the controversial novel *The Satanic Verses*. Obviously the term “Islamic literature” is being used by Rushdie in a sense different from that employed for discussion in the present study.

³⁵ Al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities*, p. 8.

³⁶ The term “monism” is used here as the antonym of “pluralism”.

³⁷ This nostalgic trajectory springs from a sentimental yearning for a paradigm that will affirm an imaginary “sacred” past while negating an ongoing “profane” present.

³⁸ The concept of “Arab mind” is postulated here as central to an epistemological framework; it is seen not as an essence but as a function mirroring the model-building processes within Islamo-Arabic culture.

³⁹ Islamic philosophers were imbued, in a greater or lesser degree, with either Aristotelianism or Neoplatonism – in many cases with both. Al-Kindi, the father of Islamic philosophy, has a Neoplatonic aspect, but the doctrine attains its intellectual fruition in the complex emanationist hierarchies developed by al-Fārābi and Ibn Sīna. Their views were in turn developed (or metamorphosed) by subsequent thinkers into

an emanative hierarchy of lights: witness, for instance, the thought of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī, or the doctrine of the Unity of Being espoused by Ibn ‘Arabi. See the section on Neoplatonism in Islamic Philosophy in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 625.

⁴⁰ See M.A. Jābiri, “Bunyāt al-‘aql al-‘Arabi” (“The Structure of the Arab Mind”), in *Naqd al-‘aql al-‘Arabi* (“Critique of the Arab Mind”), vols. 1, 2, Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Wiḥda al-‘Arabiyyah, 1985, 1986.

⁴¹ This is simply a shorthand way (following John Dewey) of referring to ideas, concepts and judgements as instruments operating through experienced situations.

⁴² *Introduction to Arab Poetics*, p. 89.

⁴³ The word is used here in a Saidian sense. See “secular criticism” in *The World, the Text and the Critic*, pp. 1-30.

⁴⁴ *Introduction to Arab Poetics*, p. 80.

⁴⁵ *Beginnings*, p. 81. On the basis of his perceived view of Islam’s outlook on the world, Said concludes that “stories like those in the *Arabian Nights* are ornamental, variations on the world, not completions of it . . .” It is hard to see how one can escape, let alone justify, the negative consequence of this value judgement of a masterpiece of narratology like the *Arabian Nights*. Said’s attempt to explain this powerhouse of fiction in terms of a theology-induced etymology appears pointless at the very least. Quite apart from anything else, it does not help us differentiate between the two opposing visions of literature and theology.

⁴⁶ *Introduction to Arab Poetics*, p. 76.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *The World, the Text and the Critic*, p. 53.

⁴⁹ Al-Tahānawī, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

⁵⁰ Eco, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

⁵¹ ‘Aṣfūr, *op. cit.*

⁵² In his study of statics and dynamics in Arabic culture, Adunīs describes his projected inquiry as a “phenomenological history”. The reason for this is not far to seek. Adunīs spells out in advance an insistent emphasis on the investigation of cultural phenomena as an ongoing process involving “bracketing off” or withholding judgements about the material base of Arabic culture: that is, making no assumptions

about the social structure of cultural phenomena. See *Al-Thābit wa 'l-mutaḥawwil*, I, 24.

⁵³ The limits of the proposed change are very frequently suggested by the claim that society is a “text” that can (following Derrida) be deconstructed so as to reveal its embedded meanings.

⁵⁴ K. Sa‘īd, “Al-Malāmiḥ al-fikriyah lil-ḥadāthah” (“The Intellectual Attributes of Modernity”), in the literary critical journal *Fuṣūl* (Cairo), vol. IV, No. 3, April-May-June, 1984, p. 27.

⁵⁵ For a useful discussion of Sufi universalism viewed from a modern standpoint, see, for instance, Herbert W. Mason’s comments on the “problem of universalism” in *Al-Ḥallāj*, London: Curzon Press, 1995, pp. 53-62. See also Clarke, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

⁵⁶ See J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (trans. from Spanish by Jack Sage), London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981, p. 31. This summary of Ibn ‘Arabi’s doctrine demonstrates an early attempt to view the world as text and the text as world.

⁵⁷ See Eco, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

⁵⁸ Adunīs, *Al-Kitāb: ams, al-makān, al-’ān* (“The Book: Past, Place, Present”), London: Dār al-Sāqī, 1995. The concept of the “book”, as propounded by Guénon, relates to the “symbolism of weaving”.

⁵⁹ See Adunīs, *Al-Ṣūfiyyah wa 'l-suryāliyyah*. In this book Adunīs argues that Rimbaud was an oriental Sufi in an occidental context. Adunīs employs this seemingly oxymoronic conclusion to question the notion of “the authentic” central to the concept of literary canon.

For Deleuze and Guattari, Rimbaud said it all in this connection. In his *A Season in Hell* (trans. Louise Varèse, Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1952, pp. 9, 13), the poet gives voice to the following standpoint on race:

I have always been of an inferior race . . .

I am of an inferior race for all eternity . . .

There I am on the Briton shore . . .

I am a beast, a nigger . . .

I am of a distant race:

My ancestors were Norsemen . . .

See G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, London-New York: Continuum, 2004, p. 419.

- ⁶⁰ Abū Dīb, *Fi 'l-shi'riyyah*, p. 40.
- ⁶¹ H.K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 86.
- ⁶² Maurice Duverger, *Introduction to the Social Sciences* (trans. Malcolm Anderson), London: Allen and Unwin, 1964, p. 267.
- ⁶³ Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic*, p. 36.
- ⁶⁴ Adunīs, *Introduction to Arab Poetics*, p. 81.
- ⁶⁵ Abū Dīb, *Al-Jurjāni's Theory*, p. 1.
- ⁶⁶ A. Khaṭībī, *Al-Naqd al-muzdawij* ("Double Critique"), trans. Muḥammad Bennīs, Beirut, 1980, p. 9. Quoted in Sharābi, *Neopatriarchy*, pp. 114, 115.
- ⁶⁷ See Adunīs, *Madārāt*, in *Al-Ḥayāt* daily (London), 13 November 1997, issue No. 12,676.
- ⁶⁸ Hishām Sharābi, *Al-Muthaqqafūn al-'Arab wa 'l-gharb: 'aṣr al-nahḍah* ("Arab Intellectuals and the West: the Age of *Nahḍah*"), Beirut: Dār al-Nahār, 1971, p. 11.
- ⁶⁹ Adunīs, *Introduction to Arab Poetics*, p. 85.
- ⁷⁰ See Zolla Elémire, *Archetypes*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1981, pp. 62, 63, 64, 65.
- ⁷¹ Adunīs, *Qaṣa'id 'ūla* ("First Poems"), *Al-Āthār al-kāmilah*, p. 512.
- ⁷² See Peter T. Manicas, *Logic as Philosophy: An Introductory Anthology*, New York-London: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1971, p. 276.
- ⁷³ That is, functioning within the context of a prescriptive discourse.
- ⁷⁴ Khaldoun al-Shamaa, *Al-Shams wa 'l-'anqā'* ("The Sun and the Phoenix"), Damascus: Manshūrāt Ittiḥād al-Kuttāb al-'Arab, 1974.
- ⁷⁵ Etymologically the word *'anqā'* refers to a long-necked creature, the "phoenix".
- ⁷⁶ See Maḥmūd, *Ma'a al-shu'arā'*, p. 87.
- ⁷⁷ Kamāl Abū Dīb, "Al-Ḥadāthah, al-sulṭah, al-naṣṣ", *Fuṣūl*, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-63.
- ⁷⁸ Ihab Hasan, *Paracriticisms*, Urbana-Chicago-London: University of Illinois Press, 1975, p. 3.
- ⁷⁹ Khalīl Ḥāwī, "Naẓariyat al-khalq min 'adam" ("Theory of Creation Ex Nihilo"), in *Tahawwulāt* (Beirut), Summer, No. 1, 1983, pp. 142-53.
- ⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 152.
- ⁸¹ Aijaz Ahmad, *Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the "National Allegory"*, in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, London-New York: Routledge, 1995, pp. 77-82.
- ⁸² Adunīs's *Al-Kitāb* might be suggested as an example.

⁸³ Theodore W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tranowski and Frederic Will, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973.

⁸⁴ For a counter to Şabri Hāfız's thesis, emphasizing the influence of European fiction, see 'Ali Shalash, *Nash'at al-naqd al-ruwā'i fi 'l-adab al-'Arabi al-ḥadīth* ("The Birth of Modern Arabic Novelistic Literature"), Cairo: Maktabat Gharīb, 1995.

**Coda: Theory and Difference:
Auguste Comte / Ṭāḥa Ḥusain / Adunīs**

It has been the central argument of this thesis that innovationism, as distinct from renovationism and trendism, establishes the “difference” whereby innovation modernism becomes a paradigmatic entity, evolving through its own autonomous processes of internal dynamics.

The emphasis here is on the way “difference” establishes its own distinctive mode of autonomy vis-à-vis Western theory. However, the link between the two constructs is conceived not as static but as dialectic, not as derivative but as relational. This should not be understood as a denial of reality, but rather as a recognition that Arabic theory is to be conceived, as theory, in its own terms. Relatedness must not be confused with derivativeness.

Having contested the notion of Eurocentric truth as absolute answerability, and having realized that the model theory constructed throughout must be answerable to no poetics but its own, it is clear that such a theory must be viewed as pointedly differential. A model theory is said to be differential when the elements and factors it brings into play organize, and are organized by, its respective system of relevance. The system appears when we examine, critically, the complex relation of the following citations, each of which is referring to the distinction between social “statics” and social “dynamics” as central to a theory of historical change. This allows passage from one discipline to another, and permits us to view the workings of transformational conceptual slippages.

It was Auguste Comte, the founder of sociology, who introduced what he termed social physics, dividing the discipline into two branches: statics and dynamics. While social “statics” represented the endeavour to

defend the status quo, social “dynamics” endeavoured to arrive at the laws of historical change.

The term was borrowed by Comte from the physical sciences, but its connotation has altered since.¹ This change has entailed, specifically, processes of conceptual slippage whereby the movement from social statics (*al-thābit*) to social dynamics (*al-mutaḥawwil*) can be viewed within a new context: not as a replicated “origin” but as, in a Saidian sense, the celebration of a new “beginning”.

Writing in 1952, amid an era of cultural advancement, Ṭāha Ḥusain draws on Comte’s term for change. Arabic literature, he explains,

not unlike other literatures or social phenomena, is composed of two elements called by Auguste Comte: statics and dynamics. A state of balance (equilibrium) between the opposing forces (of past and present) marks our literature as distinct from other literatures.²

Adunīs’s employment of Comte’s terminology in his *The Static and Dynamic: A Study in Conformity and Creativity among the Arabs* provides a more radical movement towards a possible theory of cultural change.

¹ See Mitchell, *op. cit.*, and Audi, *op. cit.*

² Ḥusain, *Alwān*, p. 17.

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