

I entreat you in the name of grace . . . not, in whatever concerns me, to take any measure of your Arabs, just as though they did not exist. I hate that entire race. I know that Greece produced learned, eloquent men: philosophers, poets, orators, mathematicians, all came from there. The fathers of medicine were born there, too. But Arab physicians! . . . You must know what they are. As for me, I know their poets. One cannot imagine anything feebler, more disturbing, more obscene. . . . I can hardly be made to believe that any good could come from the Arabs. Nevertheless, you, learned scholars, from what weakness I know not, heap undeserved praise upon them, so much so that I heard one physician say to his assenting colleagues that if he were to find Hippocrates's equal among the moderns, he would allow him to write only if the Arabs had written nothing. These are words which, I will not say burned in my heart . . . , but pierced it like a dagger, and would have been enough to induce me to throw all my books into the fire. . . . What! Cicero could become an orator after Demosthenes, Virgil a poet after Homer, Titus Livius and Sallustius historians after Herodotus and Thucydides, and after the Arabs no one should be allowed to write! . . . We may often equal, and occasionally surpass, the Greeks, and therefore all nations, except for the Arabs, as you say! O madness! O vertigo! O benumbed or extinguished genius of Italy!

—Petrarch

## Prologue

Rare is the Arab reader who has not, at one point in his life, been influenced by Mustafa Lutfi al-Manfaluti [1876–1924] and enamored by his writing, or shed copious tears while reading him. *Magdalin*, *Al-sha'ir* (The Poet), *Al-fadilah* (Virtue), *Al-nadharat* (Reflections), *Fi sabil al-taj* (For the Crown)—with few exceptions (such as “Al-hallaq al-tharthar” [The Talkative Barber]), al-Manfaluti's texts are associated with sorrow, grief, and weeping; it is no coincidence that his best-known work is titled *Al'abarat* (The Tears). He made sadness synonymous with literature, much like Gibran Khalil Gibran. Indeed, al-Manfaluti turned sadness into a value: to be sad is to be kind and gentle, to seek what is perfect and good.

But the more infatuated the adolescent with al-Manfaluti's writing, the more repelled by it is the adult reader, who turns away from it once and for all. And when he is remembered in the company of old friends, they cannot restrain their laughter. Al-Manfaluti, who laid the foundations of what we may call the poetics of sadness, provokes only ridicule and laughter (which, at any rate, is better than the annoyance that Gibran's works induce)! The fact remains, however, that reading al-Manfaluti inspired most modern writers. Indeed, they began by imitating him, only to abrogate and turn against him later. Is there an Arab writer who has not written *against* him?

Al-Manfaluti did not speak a European language, and perhaps had no desire to learn any. For that reason, his style seems

derivative, steeped in tradition. Nevertheless, every one of his pages whispers the same question: how do I become European? Never stated, this question is very timidly implied in his writings. If we look closely, we could break that question down into two parts. The first part is denial and protest: how could anyone accuse me of Eurocentrism when I know only Arabic, which I write the way it was written by my predecessors in the Golden Age of Arabic prose? The second part is explanation and apology: who could deny that I have done my very best to comprehend Europe and to be faithful to it?

On the cover of his books we find his name but not the names of the French authors whose novels he “translated.” He was so saturated with them that they became part of his consciousness and his being, and there was no longer any need to mention or even allude to them. Al-Manfaluti was Edmond Rostand, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Alexandre Dumas fils, François Coppée, Alphonse Karr, and Chateaubriand.<sup>1</sup> Yet he appears on the cover with his sad countenance (of course) and traditional garb—turban and cloak—and seems to ask, Aren’t I an Azharite?<sup>2</sup>

One wonders what lies beneath that cloak. What was his underwear like? I would not have raised this question, which

may seem silly, if I had not read that he was fond of European underwear. Yes, it is what those with intimate knowledge of him assert (Abu al-Anwar 1981, 69). They refer to this in passing as a humorous thing, without dwelling on its deep significance, at once farcical and tragic. European dress is al-Manfaluti’s secret passion, an unspeakable secret because it clings to his body, to his being. It does not appear on the cover of his books any more than the names of the European authors he adapted.

1. Most of al-Manfaluti’s works, with the exception of *Al-nadharat*, are very free adaptations or Arabizations, rather than translations, of French texts: *Magdulin* is based on Alphonse Karr’s *Sous les tilleuls*; *Al-sha’ir* on Edmond Rostand’s *Cyrano de Bergerac*; *Al-fadilah* on Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s *Paul et Virginie*; *Fi-sabil al-taj* on François Coppée *Pour la couronne* (translator’s note).

2. The influential Islamic university in Cairo, founded in the tenth century. The distinctive turban and cloak identify the wearer as a graduate of al-Azhar (translator’s note).

## 1 ♦ In the Mirror

A few years ago, I was asked to introduce al-Hamadhani's *maqamat* to a French audience in the context of a musical event organized in the city of Strasbourg.<sup>1</sup> At first, I thought that would be easy: it would suffice to talk about mendicity, the main theme of the *maqamat*, and to offer general remarks about rhymed prose and rhetorical embellishments. In any event, no one would hold me to account, for my audience knows nothing about the art of the *maqamat*, or about Arabic literature, for that matter. It would be an easy audience—a lecture ending in polite applause, then each would be on his way, perhaps after a few pro forma questions and answers.

However, as time went by, I began to have doubts and it became clear to me that the task was very difficult. For instance, I could begin with the following: "Al-Hamadhani composed his *maqamat* in the fourth century . . .," but what would the audience understand by "the fourth century"? The words evoke historical, literary, religious, and even geographical factors which would be entirely unknown to that audience.

1. The *maqama* (pl. *maqamat*, meaning session, assembly, or meeting) is an Arabic narrative genre that emerged in the tenth century and was still popular in the early twentieth century. Written in rhymed prose, the narratives depict the adventures of a beggar or rogue. See Kilito's *Les séances: Récits et codes culturels chez Hamadhani et Hariri* (Paris: Sindbad, 1983) (translator's note).

That being the case, I said to myself, I could simply substitute the Christian for the Islamic date, so that the opening sentence would be, "Al-Hamadhani composed his *maqamat* in the tenth century . . ." In switching to the Christian calendar, I would connect Badi' al-Zaman al-Hamadhani to a period known to the audience and link him to his contemporary European writers. The audience would no doubt appreciate my kind gesture, for I have learned from bitter experience that the other does not care about me unless I reached out to him. I would be unlikely to succeed in introducing Arabic literature to that audience if I did not gesture toward their literature, at least out of courtesy.

Therefore, I was convinced that I must establish some link between al-Hamadhani and European writers from that period. But then an unexpected question burst into my mind: which authors? To my surprise, I realized that I did not know a single European writer from the tenth century A.D., be it a *littérateur*, a theologian, or a philosopher. After a long, tedious search in dictionaries and encyclopedias, I found a single name, Roswitha,<sup>2</sup> that belonged to a woman who lived in Germany and composed measured dialogues in Latin and verses in praise of the emperor Otto I. Dialogue, measured prose, and praise poetry all link this Roswitha to al-Hamadhani. I was fortunate to find points of comparison that I had not suspected. Now my opening sentence became: "In the tenth century, while Roswitha crafted rhymed dialogues, al-Hamadhani composed his *maqamat*."

Yet who in the audience would have heard of Roswitha? No one. Roswitha is as alien to my audience as al-Hamadhani.

2. The name interested me because of its connotations: rose, life, life of the rose, the rose of life. Apparently, however, its derivation has no relationship to rose or life.

Mentioning her would not do any good; on the contrary, it would complicate matters and leave the audience resentful at what would surely seem like deliberate obscurantism masquerading as erudition.

Here we touch upon the subject of literary memory. When thinking of classical Arabic literature, I always refer to the Islamic calendar. Abu Nuwas refers me to the second century, and al-Mutanabbi to the fourth. In fact, Arabic literature, as others and I see it, consists of the pre-Islamic period and the first five centuries after the *hijrah*. If I were asked to name a poet from the following centuries—the “age of decadence”—I would be at a loss to answer. Starting with the sixth century (that is, the twelfth A.D.), things get mixed up and the picture becomes obscure and uncertain. For seven centuries, Arabic literature fell into a long, deep sleep, from which it did not awake until the thirteenth century A.H. (the nineteenth A.D.), thanks to writers like Rifa’a Rafi’ al-Tahtawi and Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq.<sup>3</sup>

Regardless of whether or not this view is correct (the authority is with school textbooks and literary histories), what I would like to note is that when I hear of al-Tahtawi and al-Shidyaq, my mind does not turn to the thirteenth, but to the nineteenth century. If classical Arabic literature automatically refers me to the spaciousness of the *hijrah*, modern literature spontaneously refers me to Europe as a chronology and a frame of reference.

Thus Arabic literature is subject to a double chronology. At first, and for a long time, it was tied to the Islamic calendar, then

one day, without warning, it moved to the Christian calendar! One day, after seven centuries of recumbency, it leaped up suddenly and gracefully over six centuries, and found itself in the middle of the nineteenth century, in another age and against a different horizon. It jumped from its own calendar into another, alien one.

From this perspective, Arabic literary memory is defined by three periods: the first is clear, the second characterized by stagnation and slumber, and finally a third, lasting until now, where memory lost its bearings and plunged into another memory and another time frame.

Naturally, literary memory is different for Arabs and Europeans. In both cases, it rests on a certain foundation, a primal model, a particular conception of space and time. Obviously, European memory goes back to Athens, and Arab memory to the desert. In another respect, if we take the linguistic factor into account, Arab memory seems “longer” than European memory, stretching back fifteen centuries to the *mu’allaqat*, to al-Shanfara and Muhalhil ibn Rabi’a,<sup>4</sup> while that of Europeans does not exceed five centuries. For the French, for example, literature that can be read in the original begins with Villon, a fifteenth-century poet, and continues with Rabelais and Montaigne. As for medieval writers, such as Adam the Hunchback, who lived in the thirteenth century, their countrymen can only read them translated into modern French. In fact, Villon, Rabelais, and Montaigne cannot be read without extensive annotation.

3. On the problems connected with this neglected period of Arabic literature, see Roger Allen and D. S. Richards, eds., *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) (translator’s note).

4. Literally, “the hung ones,” the *mu’allaqat* are seven odes deemed by Arabs in the pre-Islamic era to be the finest specimens of poetry. The odes were reportedly written in gold and hung on the walls of the sacred shrine in Mecca, hence their name. Al-Shanfara and Muhalhil are pre-Islamic poets not among the authors of the *mu’allaqat* (translator’s note).

By contrast, Arabs find no difficulty reading Ibn al-Muqaffa' or al-Tawhidi. It is true that reading Abu Tammam is no easy matter, but in truth this poet seems to have been difficult even to his contemporaries, which is the reason why al-Ma'arri and al-Tibrizi later wrote commentaries on him. As is well known, written Arabic, unlike spoken Arabic, has undergone only slight and secondary changes throughout its history, so that whoever today can read Nizar Qabbani can read al-'Abbas ibn al-Ahnaf, and those who can read Salah 'Abd al-Sabur can read Salih ibn 'Abd al-Quddus, and whoever reads *Midaq Alley* can also read *The Book of the Misers*. This is a strange and amazing phenomenon, rarely encountered in other cultures.

To return to the lecture I began by mentioning. It seemed to me, given the circumstances, that the most effective way to introduce al-Hamadani's *maqamat* would be to compare them to the picaresque novel, which was popular in Spain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. So when speaking about Abu al-Fath al-Iskandari, I referred to *Lazarillo de Tormes*, a work of anonymous authorship, to Quevedo's *The Swindler*, and others. In other words, I translated the *maqamat*, not in the sense of transferring them from one language to another, but presented them as though they were picaresque novels, I transferred them into a different genre, a different literature. I undertook a *cultural translation*, so to speak.

We may regard this as a praiseworthy pedagogical operation, since it is based on a sense of openness and respect for the Other and his cultural frame of reference. Yet it became clear to me afterwards that that methodology, which is widely followed by scholars, was not innocent.

In the introduction to *Le milieu basrien et la formation de Gabiz* [The Basra Milieu and the Formation of al-Jahiz], by the

French Arabist Charles Pellat, I read the following: "In general, Arabic books produce a sense of boredom, whatever their topic, and however attractive their titles" (1953, viii). Normally, one speaks of boredom in reference to a book, or an author, or a genre, yet Pellat here issues a judgment on Arabic books "in general," not only literary ones but books in all fields of knowledge. Arab culture as a whole is boring.

Those are not the words of someone with superficial knowledge of Arab culture, but of a great teacher and specialist who devoted his life to the study of the various genres of Arabic literature, and the services he rendered in disseminating it and analyzing some of its aspects are undeniable. It is not a matter here of a brief outburst of annoyance, as sometimes happens in intimate gatherings in which one rambles and issues outrageous judgments. On the contrary, we are confronting a judgment based on deep thought and exhaustive study of primary texts. Moreover, it is a written judgment, which incurs greater responsibility, and it is found in an academic work that, from the outset, requires balance, objectivity, and great care in drawing conclusions.

At first, I was astonished by this decisive statement, especially that it lacked any ambiguity whatsoever. Nevertheless, I tried to find an explanation for it, since, at any rate, its author was honest and forthright in expressing his opinion, and that is a virtue. It is not rare that one hears readers of Arabic philosophy, for instance, whisper to one another that there is no benefit to be gained from reading al-Kindi or Ibn Sina (Avicenna), without having the courage to make their opinion public. After all, it is not a bad thing for Charles Pellat to break the consensus and say what no one else has said before or since (with the exception of Petrarch, with whose words I opened this book). This is irrespective of the amusing nature of such breaking with

consensus. For instance, Don Quixote believes that he is right and that those who do not share his worldview (that is, everybody) are gravely deluded. He has gone astray, no doubt, but his delusion is tinted with truthfulness, good conscience, and dedication to high ideals and noble goals. We cannot dismiss him simply as a madman; there are those who defend him in the belief that Cervantes is less noble than him. Indeed, some believe that Don Quixote is greater than his creator.

Given those considerations, a strong doubt entered my mind. Who knows, perhaps Arabic books are boring. Like Don Quixote, Charles Pellat may be right! In what way? His stupid judgment may be worth contemplating; that is to say, it raises a question we do not often confront: how do we as Arabs see our literature, and how do we judge it?

Before tackling this issue, we must ask if Charles Pellat is alone in thinking that Arabic books are boring. Apparently, he is not alone, for he would not have allowed himself to write such a thing had he not known or felt that others share his belief. His turn of phrase indicates that he is not simply expressing a personal opinion, but one that is widespread. He is in the company of others for whom this negative judgment on Arabic writing is self-evident, unproblematic, and uncontroversial. Who are those accomplices? For whom does he write? For French academics in particular, and Europeans in general. He assumes that most, if not all, of them share his opinion, otherwise he would have shown some hesitation; he would have been cautious enough to wrap his words in the customary reserve.

As for Arab readers, it must have occurred to him that some of them might read or even translate him, which is exactly what happened. How did he imagine their reaction? It does not seem that he lent them much weight or thought it necessary to engage

with them in discussion. The dialogue unfolding in his books mostly involves European readers. Clearly, he implicitly compares Arabic literature, which is boring, to European literature, which by contrast gives him pleasure and delight. And yet, he specialized in what is boring, and devoted his life to studying texts he did not appreciate and that did not move him. There is something tragic and pitiful in his predicament: he wasted his life on work for which he had no real desire or motivation.

Yet something saves him from despair and justifies his existence. There are Arabic books that he values and, in fact, greatly admires. If Arabic literature is boring, there are exceptions that prove the rule, or rather one exception: al-Jahiz. Pellat devoted most of his academic efforts to this writer, editing *Risalat al-tarbi' wa al-tadwir* [Epistle of the Square and the Circle] and translating *Kitab al-bukhala'* [*The Book of the Misers*], *Kitab al-taj* [Book of the Crown], and *Risalat al-qiyān* [Epistle of the Singing Maids]. He also published several studies of various aspects of al-Jahiz's life and thought. In short, his name is forever associated with al-Jahiz, just as Baudelaire's is associated with Edgar Allan Poe. Interestingly, he chose specifically an Arab writer who talked a great deal about boredom, who hardly wrote a book in which he does not address it. Al-Jahiz assumes that, as a rule, readers are quickly bored, that they are by nature susceptible to complaining about what they read, that at every moment they are tempted to put aside their book, and that, therefore, it is imperative to sustain their interest by various means, such as addressing them frequently, coaxing them, and diversifying the subjects presented to them. We could say that al-Jahiz invented the poetics of digression.

It is hard to say how al-Jahiz escaped the catastrophe that swept Arabic literature into the ocean of boredom, or the

reason that led Charles Pellat to rescue him in particular from it. Nonetheless, there is one clue that might help us understand the motives of that French Arabist. In the aforementioned book, Pellat cites the German Orientalist Adam Mez, who compares al-Jahiz to Voltaire, but does not agree with him in this, believing that al-Jahiz is closer to the humanists, referring, no doubt, to writers like Erasmus, Rabelais, and Montaigne (Pellat 1953, ix). Whatever the case may be, several connections apparently exist between al-Jahiz and European literature. In that sense, he is, despite himself, European to some extent. Of course, it would not occur to Adam Mez to compare Voltaire to al-Jahiz, and Charles Pellat would not have said that Montaigne reminds him of al-Jahiz, which would be reasonable, at least in view of al-Jahiz's chronological precedence.

We move now to other Arab writers whom Charles Pellat discussed, this time in his book *Langue et littérature arabes* [Arabic Language and Literature, 1970]. He says that al-Tawhidi's *Mathalib al-wazirayn* [Defects of the Two Viziers] is "a satirical pamphlet some pages of which remind us of La Bruyère" (Pellat 1970, 139). As for al-Shidyaq's *Al-saq 'ala al-saq fi ma huwa al-Fariyaq* [Al-Fariyaq's Crossed Legs], it is "a critique of Near Eastern society influenced by Rabelais" (Pellat 1970, 204). How do we explain those references to French literature? It may be said that Charles Pellat is following a pedagogical method here, since he is addressing the general reader who is not familiar with Arabic literature and to whom it is necessary to introduce the unfamiliar through the familiar. That would certainly be a legitimate method, which can only be applauded.

However, it is a different matter when he says that Omar ibn Abi Rabi'a's popularity "is ever growing at the present time because of his resemblance to the great European love poets"

(1970, 85) and when he says that al-Ma'arri's *Risalat al-ghufran* [Epistle of Forgiveness] is "interesting for its relationship to the *Divine Comedy*" (1970, 119–20). Comparison here goes beyond the pedagogical goal and becomes a value judgment. *Risalat al-ghufran*, for example, is not important because of its own special characteristics, but for its resemblance to the *Divine Comedy*. No one would deny the resemblance between the two books, but what is distasteful is for that element to be what makes al-Ma'arri's book important—an odd reductionism based on deep contempt. Imagine, for a moment, that I am introducing Dante's book to Arab readers unfamiliar with it; would it be appropriate for me to say that it is interesting because of its similarity to *Risalat al-ghufran*? If I were to do so, I would be denying *The Divine Comedy*'s specificity and importance; its existence would be incidental, a being-for-Others, not for-itself, as philosophers would say. In this way, Charles Pellat does not inquire into al-Ma'arri's accomplishments but into his relationship to an Italian writer who came after him. And although al-Ma'arri becomes part of the family, he remains a poor cousin; without *The Divine Comedy*, he would not count.

Arabic literature is boring unless it bears a family resemblance to European literature. This family network is what rescues some Arabic books; outside of it, there is no hope of salvation. From this perspective, Arab authors fall into two categories: a small group of relatives and a great mass of orphans, beggars, and tramps. This view angers the Arab reader, without a doubt, especially that it is common to many Arabists, from Ernest Renan onward. But we must here return to the embarrassing question posed earlier: how do Arabs deal with their literature, and how do they see it? I am afraid that many of them take a position similar to that of Charles Pellat. Of course, I do



not exclude myself; did I not introduce al-Hamadhani's *maqamat*, in the above-mentioned lecture, as though they belonged to the picaresque genre?

Needless to say, what I did was a species of comparative literature. Perhaps we could even say that every Arab reader is an experienced comparatist. Comparison is not restricted to specialists; rather, it embraces whoever approaches Arabic literature, ancient and modern. That is to say, the reader of an Arabic text soon connects it, directly or indirectly, to a European text. He is necessarily a comparatist, or we could say a translator.

To clarify, I shall turn to the Arab writer of old. Ibn Rushd (Averroës) did not learn Greek, and his knowledge of Aristotle and other philosophers was based on translations that were not all made directly from Greek. Did he ever feel the need to learn that language? Did he wish to read Aristotle in the original, without relying on translation? By the same token, Ibn Rushd was translated into Hebrew and Latin, then into other languages. Did he expect that? Did he write while conscious of the possibility that his works would some day be translated? We could pose the question differently: did Ibn Rushd hope to be translated? (We could also ask whether Aristotle had the same concern.)

Generally speaking, and aside from Ibn Rushd, did Arab authors take into account that their works might be translated into one or more foreign languages? How did they regard translation? It seems that they saw it as a one-way operation: from other languages (Persian, Greek, Syriac) into Arabic. As for the reverse, it likely did not occur to them, or at least did not worry them very much, perhaps because they assumed that those seeking knowledge and wisdom would have no choice but to master Arabic, which was exactly the case.

It is incontrovertible that the poetry of other peoples did not interest the Arabs. Moreover, they did not believe that their poetry should be translated, either, and we find this view expressed in al-Jahiz. In most cases, the question of translation is raised when two or more literatures jostle or compete. As it happened, Arabic literature had no competitor, or almost no opponent to speak of. For sure, the concept of literature was different in the classical than in the modern period, and we have to be very careful in this regard. Without getting into details, we could say that the question for the ancients was the intellectual production of different peoples, especially the Persians, the Greeks, and to a lesser extent the Indians. Arabic literature defined itself in the context of competition, separatism, and what was called *shu'ubiyyah*.<sup>5</sup> Yet the heated debates basically took place in Arabic. Arab men of letters addressed Arabic speakers, and the only translation they conceived of was exegesis, commentary, and annotation, that is, translation within the same language. Did Abu al-'Ala' al-Ma'arri, for instance, think about the translation of his works? To which language? For whom? For what purpose? How would he have reacted if, at one of his gatherings, someone raised the question of translating *Risalat al-ghufran* into Latin or Hebrew?

The ancients not only disdained and ignored translation, it seems that they unconsciously endeavored to make their works untranslatable. They developed formulations, modes of

5. *Shu'ubiyyah* (from *sha'b*, "a people or nation"), which may be rendered guardedly as "ethnonationalism," emerged during the early Abbasid period, when Persians were given prominent government positions that in the Umayyid period had been reserved for Arabs. The phenomenon challenged the heretofore-unquestioned political supremacy of Arabs within the Islamic world (translator's note).



expression, and styles difficult to translate. Perhaps one of the best examples of this is al-Hariri's *maqamat*, a book in which every sentence seems to say, "No one can possibly translate me!" It is as if al-Hariri did his utmost to protect his book from the tyranny of another tongue. Who would dare translate a text that remains the same when read from beginning to end and vice versa, or an epistle that reads one way from the beginning, and another way from the end? And who would venture to translate another in which dotted and undotted words alternate?<sup>6</sup> It has been said that al-Hariri aimed at demonstrating his linguistic dexterity, and he has been compared to an acrobat, but he certainly aimed at exhausting the hidden reserves of the Arabic language and realizing its full potential. As a result, his *maqamat* cannot be imagined in any language but Arabic and are impossible to translate. This is not only the case with al-Hariri's *maqamat*, but also with many ancient texts.

The ancients examined, realized, and used all the rhetorical possibilities, and they even went so far as to belittle and dismiss literature. They talked at length about its falsity and inutility, but they did so within its own framework and discursive norms. It never once occurred to them to look at it from the outside, through the lens of another literature. They never thought that the question of translating it would one day be raised. But that happened in the middle of the nineteenth century. Al-Shidyaq represents a turning point toward the shock of a bitter discovery: that Arabic literature is untranslatable, and that on the whole it matters only to Arabs.

6. The Arabic alphabet contains several letters that are differentiated from one another only by whether they carry diacritical dots and by the number of such dots (translator's note).

Since that time, the Arab writer, whether consciously or not, takes translation into account, that is, translation as comparison, evaluation, transformation of one literature into another. Every study of a modern Arab writer is, in effect, a comparative study. Who can read an Arab poet or novelist today without establishing a relationship between him and his European peers? We Arabs have invented a special way of reading: we read an Arabic text while thinking about the possibility of transferring it into a European language, with texts from French, English, or Italian literature in mind.<sup>7</sup> The fundamental change for us in the modern age is that the process of reading (and writing) is always attended with potential translation, the possibility of transfer into other literatures, something that never occurred to the ancients, who conceived of translation only within Arabic literature.

Translation has so dominated our horizon that it operates even when we read the ancients. We read *Hayy ibn Yaqdhan* and our minds wander to *Robinson Crusoe*; we read al-Mutanabbi and think of Nietzsche and the Will to Power; we read *Risalat al-ghufrān* and willy-nilly *The Divine Comedy* appears before us; we read Abu al-'Ala' al-Ma'arri's *Luzum ma la yalzam* [The Necessity of What Is Unnecessary] in the light of Schopenhauer or Cioran; we read 'Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani's *Dala'il al-i'jaz* [Signs of Inimitability] and suddenly we meet Saussure; we read Abu

7. An Egyptian professor has asserted to me that some Arab novelists write while thinking of their potential translators and endeavor to facilitate their task, for example by avoiding expressions and allusions which may not carry across into another language. The distant goal, in this case, is not writing a novel and publishing it in Arabic, but publishing it in translation. Thus in its composition, the novel looks to its transfer into English or French; it is written literally for those two languages.

Hamid al-Ghazali's *Al-Munqidh min al-dalal* [The Savior from Error] and Descartes comes to save us from confusion. Woe to the writers for whom we find no European counterparts: we simply turn away from them, leaving them in a dark, abandoned isthmus, a passage without mirrors to reflect their shadow or save them from loss and deathlike abandon. In short, we read the ancients with reference to European literature. Whenever an Arab writer approximates this literature, his marketability and popularity increase many times over, and the chances of his being translated improve.

## 2 ♦ The Translator

Can one possess two languages? Can one master them equally? We may not find the answer unless we ask another question: Can one possess any language? I remember hearing something, the source of which I have not yet been able to find, about one of the ancients who described his relationship to the Arabic language in this way: "I defeated her then she defeated me, then I defeated her and she defeated me again." His relationship with language is tense, and the war between them has its ups and downs, but language, this ferocious creature that refuses to be tamed, always has the last word. The battle always ends with her victory, leaving one no choice but to make truce and to surrender, however reluctantly.

If that is the predicament of the native speaker with his language, what would he do with two or more languages? How does he move from one to the other? How does he negotiate between them? How does he manage his affairs in perpetual translation? I shall approach this topic with reference to al-Jahiz [A.D. 776–869], a writer of whose knowledge of another language besides Arabic we cannot be sure, although there are indications in his work that he knew Persian.

Let us begin with what he says in *Al-Bayan wa al-tabyyin* [Rhetoric and Exposition] about Abu-Ali al-Uswari, who lectured in one mosque "for thirty-six years. He began with the exegesis of the sura of the Cow and did not finish the Qur'an until he died. Since he knew the biographies and the canonical

## 6 ♦ The Stage in Between

It does not appear that Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq's [1804–87] position differs much from al-Saffar's, for in the introduction to *Kitab al-rihla* [The Book of Travels], al-Shidyaq has this to say about Europe: "As God is my witness, notwithstanding all the many strange and wonderful things I saw in those lands, I was ever depressed . . . to think about our country's lack of civilization, skill, and artistry comparable to theirs. But then I would find some consolation in thinking that our people are distinguished by their good character and generosity, which outshine shameful faults, and especially by their vigilance in guarding their honor against disgrace. Yet when I would go back to comparing the state of civic affairs, living standards, industrial skill, and the spread of education and public good, that consolation deserts me and my sadness returns" (1867, 155).

How did the imbalance between "our country" and "that country" come about? That question worries al-Shidyaq and causes his "grief over the low aspirations of his compatriots," especially when he remembers that "Muslims were the beacon of civilization and the arts in olden times, and they were role models in virtue and in all accomplishments."<sup>1</sup> Things have turned upside

1. For example, when speaking of the separation of powers in England, he says, "When are we ever going to be like those people? When will we learn our rights and responsibilities? Do you think that civilization means the law of the jungle? Absolutely not" (155).

down, so that the students (Europeans) have become the teachers, while the teachers (Muslims) have become the students, or rather, they are now obliged to learn from "those people." That is what prompted al-Shidyaq to write *Kitab al-Rihla*.<sup>2</sup> He will be the link between "his compatriots" and Europe. He will translate its achievements so that they could follow its example. What enables him to undertake this task is that "his affairs pull him right and left," that is, he has one foot here and one there.

Since he wrote poetry while in Europe, he must have pondered the situation of Arabic literature and its relation to European literature. That is what we will try to clarify based on his two books, *Al-saq 'ala al-saq fi ma huwa al-Fariyaq* [Al-Fariyaq's Crossed Legs] and *Kitab al-rihla*.

In *Al-saq 'ala al-saq*, we read that al-Fariyaq (a composite name, from Faris and al-Shidyaq) went from Malta, where he taught Arabic, to Tunisia for the summer vacation. "When al-Fariyaq was about to leave the city (Tunis), some of his acquaintances there said to him, 'If you were to praise its great governor, he would give you of his bounty, for he is most generous and beneficent.'" Upon returning to Malta, "it occurred to him to compose a poem in praise of the said governor, so he wrote a long poem . . . , and within mere days the said governor sent him a gift of diamonds" (Al-Shidyaq 1920, 2: 131–32). Al-Fariyaq praised the governor of Tunisia because he heard of his generosity. Herein we glimpse the nature of the traditional contract between the poet and the prince: a praise poem earns a reward.

After a while, al-Fariyaq was bored with teaching in Malta,

2. "My desire is to encourage my brethren to emulate those accomplishments" (3).

and it happened at that time that His Highness Ahmad Pasha, the great governor of Tunisia, went to France. He distributed a great amount of money to the poor in Marseille and Paris, among other cities, an act that generated much publicity, before he returned home. Al-Fariyaq thought to congratulate him in a poem that he sent to his Highness through a messenger. Within mere days, the captain of a warship knocked on his door. When he came in and took his seat, he said to al-Fariyaq, "Your poem reached our gracious Lord and he ordered me to bring you to him in the battleship." When he heard this, al-Fariyaq rejoiced at the relief that his craft promised to bring him. (2: 196–97)

This passage praises the governor of Tunisia, whose generosity extended to the poor in France. Yet what is interesting is that al-Fariyaq took his family with him to Tunisia, without incurring the governor's indignation as a result. "Here we must note the generosity with which God distinguished the Arabs among all other peoples. . . . If one of the notables of the Franks invited someone, and that person brought along with him somebody other than himself, he would be received badly, if at all" (2: 197–98). Praise for one Arab gradually turns into praise for all Arabs, the best mannered among God's creation, and denigration of Europeans, or the Franks, as they are called in the text, who turn you away from their door if you bring someone they did not invite.

What makes al-Fariyaq compare Arabs and Franks when speaking of the governor of Tunisia? The secret behind this digression will be revealed momentarily. For now, suffice it to say that al-Fariyaq moves with his family to Tunisia, "where he became acquainted with gracious and cultured people, some of

whom entertained him and some provided generously for him. While there, he was privileged to kiss the hand of the exalted governor, from whom he attained abundant gifts" (2: 200). It is a happy period for al-Fariyaq in which everyone acknowledged and celebrated him. In other words, he acceded to the position of the pampered court poet, much like the poets of old, such as al-Mutanabbi.

Yet while he resided in Tunisia, something unexpected happened. The minister of state asked him, "Do you know the French language?" He replied, "No, Sir, I did not care to learn it, for as soon as I learned the English tongue, I forgot of my own an equal amount to what I had learned. My head was destined to contain a certain amount of knowledge; if it increases on one side, it decreases on the other" (2: 200). The conversation ends here without revealing to us the minister's reason for asking the question. It is a strange question, if we consider that it was never asked of an ancient poet. It would have never occurred to any vizier to ask a poet about his possible knowledge of a language other than Arabic. However, we learn from an undisclosed source that the minister intended to appoint al-Fariyaq to a position in his cabinet if the latter had known that language, and so we understand that al-Fariyaq, who had been bored with teaching Arabic in Malta, lost a precious opportunity in Tunisia because of his ignorance of French. Something had changed in the world; Arabs now need another language besides theirs. The governor of Tunisia is pleased with panegyric and he rewards it, but he only appoints someone who has mastered French to a position in his government. In a world ruled by the Franks, Arabic is no longer enough (even English, to which al-Fariyaq alluded, did not impress the minister, for well-known historical reasons).

Apparently, and in keeping with the playful mood prevailing in the text, al-Fariyaq did not learn French because he was afraid of losing Arabic, half of which he had forgotten when he learned English (throughout his travels, he always took al-Fiyrzabadi's *Al-qamus al-muhit* [Comprehensive Dictionary] with him).<sup>3</sup> Learning a foreign language comes at the expense of the native tongue. Al-Fariyaq forgot half of his Arabic when he learned English; if he were to learn French, only a quarter would be left of his Arabic. Here, there is probably an allusion to al-Jahiz's above-cited statement about the translator, which it would be well to recall at this point: "Whenever we also find him speaking two languages, we know that he has mistreated both of them, for each one of the two languages pulls at the other, takes from it, and opposes it. How could one tongue possibly manage two languages as it would only one?" (1996, 1: 76) Yet there is a difference between the situations of al-Jahiz and al-Shidyaq: al-Jahiz did not need to learn a language other than Arabic, whereas al-Shidyaq had to know one or more European languages.

Could al-Shidyaq have repeated his Tunisian experience in Europe? That seems impossible, for it would be unimaginable for an Arab poet to compose a poem in praise of a Frankish prince. Indeed, it would be unimaginable, in the nineteenth century, for any poet, whatever his language, to compose a panegyric, something that would have been anachronistic and Quixotic. Nonetheless, al-Shidyaq addressed such a poem to Queen Victoria: "I had praised the queen of the English in a poem and presented it to one of her officers, who turned it over to his wife to convey

3. Was his fear of losing Arabic what motivated him to write several books about it?

to some of the queen's ladies-in-waiting. I also translated it into their language. Until now, I have not received a response and do not know if it reached her" (1867, 302).

Did al-Shidyaq send his poem in both languages or only in English? All we know is that he waited several years in vain for a response from the queen or one of her courtiers. He took the trouble to translate the poem into English so as to facilitate communication, and he sought the help of an officer to convey it, but all this effort was in vain. The lesson he learned from this ordeal is this: "It is easier to write poems, whether in Arabic or in another language, than to present them to one of the Frankish kings." That is because "the Frankish kings are not accustomed to read poems in praise of themselves or other correspondence addressed to them. All of that is read by their secretaries, who answer as they see fit" (302). Did al-Shidyaq learn his lesson after his fruitless attempt to praise the Frankish kings? Not at all, for he praised Louis Napoleon after his coup of 2 December 1851: "My return to Paris coincided with the current sultan's assumption of political power as head of the Assembly at that time and his defeat of his jealous opponent. Some of my acquaintances advised me to praise him in a poem, for he was familiar with Arabic and many other languages" (300).

The reference to acquaintances came in exactly the same way earlier in connection with praising the governor of Tunisia. Al-Shidyaq suggests that he did not write the poem on his own initiative, but was advised to do so by someone he does not identify—under outside pressure, as it were. Should we believe him when he declares that he did not take the initiative? The question goes beyond al-Shidyaq to an age-old convention of writing: most ancient writers relate at the beginning of their works

that somebody asked them to write a book on a certain subject, somebody who usually remains anonymous and who may be in a position of authority or merely a friend. This convention gives us the impression that writing was for them a very serious matter, and that they needed to shield themselves behind some authority in order to begin. In that sense, writing is not so much the result of a personal decision as a response to an insistent outside voice, something absolute that cannot be ignored.<sup>4</sup>

Napoleon's knowledge of Arabic corresponds to al-Shidyaq's knowledge of French (which he studied while in Paris)—a correspondence worthy of note. Poet and prince are both "familiar with many languages," and yet there is a wide gap between them, the gap that separates Arabic and European literary discourses. Al-Shidyaq's poem consists of sixty verses, and begins with an introductory *ghazal* of thirteen verses. Needless to say, this introduction is required, despite some poets' resentment of it.<sup>5</sup> The ancients (for example, Ibn Qutaybah) attempted to justify it by claiming that the *nasib* creates a good impression on the person being praised and disposes him to appreciate and enjoy the poem. Al-Shidyaq says that the introductory *ghazal* "is actually a strange convention of the Arabs. The eminent scholar al-*Dasuqi* said, 'You should know that poets are accustomed, when praising someone, to begin with love so as to stir up their talent,

4. See my book *Al-maqamat*, 147 ff. [In French, *Les séances*, 177–78].

5. This introduction, called *nasib*, in which the poet addresses or describes his beloved, was a standard feature of the pre-Islamic Arabic ode and came to be regarded as a required part of a formal poem until the early twentieth century. *Ghazal* is a general word for love poetry, but it can also be used to refer to *nasib* when used in the phrase "introductory *ghazal*," as Kilito does here (translator's note).

to rouse the poetic spirit through hyperbolic description, and to entertain and exercise the mind'" (303).

From previous experience, al-Shidyaq had sensed the strangeness of this convention: "When Monsieur Ducat translated my poem in praise of the late Ahmad Pasha-Bey, the governor of Tunisia, and published it with the translation, some people asked me if the Pasha's name was Su'ad, since I open the poem with 'Su'ad visited me when darkness drew its veil.' I said, 'No, that is a woman's name.' The questioner responded, 'What does the woman have to do with you and the Pasha?'" (303). For a European, the woman is an intruder in a praise poem who sneaks in between two men, the praiser and the praised, and meddles in something that concerns only men.

Even though he was not convinced of the necessity of starting the poem with an introductory *ghazal*, al-Shidyaq could not avoid it without being faulted by his rivals and peers. That is because the poem, while intended for Louis Napoleon, was also addressed to critics and connoisseurs of poetry who would, in the end, be the ones to judge it. In that sense, the poem has two intentions and two audiences: Napoleon and his court on the one hand, and potential Arab readers on the other. Therefore, the poem has two contradictory objectives: if he were to satisfy the Arab reader with the introductory *ghazal*, al-Shidyaq would doubtless for the same reason displease the European reader, for he knows that "nothing is more repugnant for the Franks than a praise poem that describes a woman as having a narrow waist, heavy buttocks, large eyes, noble height, and so forth, since all of their poetry is castrated."<sup>6</sup> Worse than that is to describe the

6. *Lisan al-'arab* [a major dictionary of classical Arabic] states, "castrated poetry: that which lacks *ghazal*."

beauty of a boy. Worse and worse is to give feminine attributes to a man" (303).

How does al-Shidyaq attempt to reconcile Arabic and European tastes? He begins his poem by criticizing the convention imposed on the poet:

Lovers' custom is to sing profusely their love  
Before their praise, or weep at abandoned campsites.  
Yet no! No beauty occupies my thoughts,  
For the fair one's heart knows no constancy.  
My passion is a vision in a dream,  
Which ere it appeared I had not known. (300)

Oddly enough, al-Shidyaq emphasizes, in these lines, that he is against traditional *nasib*, yet he immediately turns to praising a beautiful woman. Denial leads to affirmation. This hesitation between negativity and positivity is reflected in the image of the woman he sings about—she is a vision, an unreal, illusory visitor, a mere dream. Al-Shidyaq could not banish woman from the poem, so he turned her into a phantom that appears in his sleep, an apparition in the dead of night.

Boasting of his skill and mastery of the art of poetry, al-Shidyaq declares that he "composed this poem in one day." Yet "the remaining difficulty was in presenting it to the person it praises" (302)—for surely the poem would be useless scribbling if it did not reach Napoleon.

I met with the dear, sensible, and cultured friend the *khawaja*<sup>7</sup> Rafael Kahla and asked his opinion. He said, "I know of a way to convey it to him, but we should translate it into

7. A title for Europeans or Christians (translator's note).

French. Its meaning will not be lost in translation because the poem is composed after their manner—except perhaps for praising the apparition. But that is a minor thing, given that at the beginning of the poem you disparage the introductory *ghazal* in a praise poem." So we translated it and showed it to one of their men of letters who said, "It is better to present it untranslated, since the sultan has translators who can do that for him." Accordingly, it was presented as it is. (303–4)

Apparently, the French *littérateur* was not satisfied with the two friends' translation, so he advised them to present the original. Thus, contact with Napoleon would not be direct but through his translators. "A few days later, the postman knocked on the door and delivered a letter from the sultan addressed to the above-mentioned *khawaja* and myself, to the effect that the poem reached his Royal Highness, who was pleased with it, with many thanks" (304).

That was all. The matter was concluded with a letter addressed to the two partners. In contrast to Queen Victoria, Louis Napoleon (or his secretary) took the trouble to respond to the poem. Did al-Shidyaq expect more? He denies that: "My sole intention was to enrich my poetry collection, as poets do, so that it would be said of them, 'He said this in praising the king and that in praising the prince'" (302). He longs for the prestige of poets whose poetry collections include the names of the mighty. Yet he pretends to forget that poets are also in the habit of composing praise poems in order to receive gifts and awards. Was that not the case with the governor of Tunisia, who sent a warship to escort and honor him? At any rate, he received nothing from Louis Bonaparte, not an invitation or even an audience.



This must have pained al-Shidyaq, for he kept waiting for the opportunity to make contact once more and to remind Louis Bonaparte of his debt. The "sultan" did not reward the praise poem, and that is a breach of the traditional relationship between poet and prince. The opportunity presented itself to al-Shidyaq a year later when Louis Napoleon restored the empire and took the name Napoleon III: "At that time, the said sultan assumed the reins of power and was declared Emperor, so I was tempted again by 'and he said in praise of . . . ' to congratulate him with a poem that I would present to him through his chief translator, the Count Degrange" (304). The new poem consists of thirty verses (half the length of the first one) of nothing but praise, that is, without *nasib*. It begins with "Louis Napoleon is entitled to sovereignty / And kingship, unrivaled he is in greatness." By abandoning the introductory *ghazal* and embarking on praise from the first line, al-Shidyaq thought that he had removed the greatest obstacle between him and the one he praises. In order to secure the acceptance of his poetry, he disrupted the familiar order of the poem, repudiated woman entirely, and denied her her rightful place at the beginning of a praise poem. He amputated his poetry, castrated it so as to approximate European taste.

But was that enough? Not at all, and that became clear when he read his poem to the chief translator: "He said, 'None of the qualities you attribute to the sultan is specific to him alone; they apply equally to any king'" (304). Al-Shidyaq's words are too general to fit Napoleon exactly; they reflect the image of all kings and none specifically. Napoleon would not find himself in them. In that sense, the Arabic poem robs the object of praise of his particularity, so he is lost within an ideal type in which all images merge. This explains a phenomenon to which Arab

critics of old alluded, namely that some poets praised several kings with one poem. If the poem fits each of them, why go through the trouble of composing new verses every time? A poet need only compose one poem, which he would recite before all the kings he visits.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, there is a linguistic and cultural barrier to understanding, which is what the chief translator indicated to al-Shidyaq: "The poem is abstruse and untranslatable. If you present it as it is, it would be appreciated for nothing more than the handwriting and the form on the page" (304). If the poem drew this reaction from someone who is well versed in Arabic, then how would ordinary readers feel? It would become mere scribble to all of them, starting with Napoleon. They would look at it as glyphs engraved on the walls of an ancient temple, obscure symbols that no one save archaeologists, or in this case Orientalists, could understand.

Al-Shidyaq was not unaware of this dissimilarity between Arabic and European literatures, with which he was familiar. He recounts that he was aware of this situation before composing his first poem in praise of Napoleon. He knew that the Franks

rejected the exaggerated description of the person being praised. When they praise someone, they address the reader and make it a sort of history, so they mention his goals, his endeavors, and his precedence over the kings who came before him and whom they list. As for comparing him to the sea, or to clouds, or to a lion, or to a mountain, or to the full moon, or to a sword, they find all of that banal. They do not attribute

8. See the chapter on "The Polyandrous Ode" in Kilito's *The Author and His Doubles*, 24–33 (translator's note).

generosity to him, or say that his gifts reach those far and near to him, for their praise is addressed to the public and not to the person praised. And despite my knowledge of this situation, I could not resist the Arab poet's urge to present the said poem to Napoleon, especially when I heard that he knows our language. (306)

The difference between praise in the two literatures is the nature of the contract between praiser and praised. Arabic praise is based, as indicated earlier, on a personal contract between poet and prince, according to which a poem is presented in exchange for a reward. As for European praise, the contract is between the author and "the public"—that is, general readers—and, therefore, generosity is not mentioned in it, since the praiser does not expect a reward. The one praised is addressed directly in the first case, while in the second he is spoken of in the third person.

If al-Shidyaq could not resist the desire to present the first poem to Napoleon, he was persuaded by the chief translator's reasoning concerning the second poem: "Therefore, I refrained from presenting it and thanked him for his advice. But I do not refrain from including it here so as to swell the size of this book" (304). The poem will not be lost completely, since it will go to the Arab reader, who is the last refuge after the European reader turned away from it. Al-Shidyaq falls back on his own people after being denied by the foreigners, who returned his poetry to him with kindness mixed with some disdain.

Al-Shidyaq recounts this experience several years after the fact, which may explain his satirical tone and aloof attitude. It does not take much to imagine his disappointment at his complete failure to extract recognition for his poetry from the Franks. However, the matter extends beyond his personal

sensitivity to Arabic poetry in its entirety. Al-Shidyaq's two poems stand in metonymic relationship to Arabic poetry, and their rejection is a rejection of all of Arabic poetics. Consequently, it is a rejection of Arabic literature, the most important component of which is poetry. Outside of its familiar sphere, Arabic literature has no currency—indeed, has no existence. As far as al-Shidyaq is concerned, this violent rupture between Europe and the Arab world is a double humiliation, personal as well as cultural.

We find no intimations of this feeling in his book, *Kashf al-mukhabba*, which was written some time after the incident, in 1857.<sup>9</sup> The wound had not healed before that date and was still bleeding in *Al-saq 'ala al-saq*, which was published in 1855, three years after the composition of the second praise poem. In that book, al-Shidyaq freely vents his anger at the Franks while describing the honors with which he was received in Tunisia:

Who of their kings would send a warship to escort a poet and then load him with money and precious gifts? Upon my life, whoever praises their kings receives nothing but ridicule. Even so, they are the most desirous of praise and gratitude among all creation. Yet they disdain being praised by a poet who

9. *Kashf al-mukhabba 'an funun urubba* [Uncovering the Arts of Europe] is the second volume of *Kitab al-rihla* [The Book of Travels]. The first volume is titled *Al-wasita ila ma'rifat malta* [The Guide to Malta]. For an account of the composition of the two volumes, see Muhammad al-Hadi al-Matwi, *Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq: Hayatuh wa atharuh wa ara'uhu fi al-nahda al-'arabiyya al-haditha* [Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq: His Life, Works, and Views on the Modern Arab Renaissance] (Beirut: Dar al-maghrib al-islami, 1989), 1: 197–99.

seeks a reward from them. . . . None of Frankish poets ever deserved to be his king's confidant, the greatest boon for them being to be permitted to recite their poetry in some entertainment. (1920, 2: 198–99)<sup>10</sup>

He then adds,

Therefore—that is, because generosity is a special quality of the Arabs—no other nation produced poets as great as they did in all ages and places, from pre-Islamic times till the end of the caliphate and the Arab state. The Greeks boast of one poet, Homer; for the Romans, it is Virgil; for the Italians, Tasso; for the Austrians, Schiller;<sup>11</sup> for the French, Racine and Molière; for the English, Shakespeare, Milton, and Byron. But the Arab poets, who are greater than all of those, are countless. Indeed, in the age of the caliphs, and under each one of them, perhaps two hundred poets emerged, all excellent and outstanding. (1920, 198)

To whom does al-Shidyaq address this talk? To the Arabs, whom he regards as the most generous of all people, and consequently, those with the most poetry. If the Franks excel in “civilization,” Arabs have the greater prestige in poetry. Yet something remains hidden and unspoken in his discourse, since the Arab poets of whom he is proud emerged in a remote past, “in the age of the caliphs”; poetry represents the Arab past, whereas civilization characterizes the Frankish present. Then there is a more complicated issue: who says that the Arabs excel

10. The reference is probably to plays performed at court (translator's note).

11. This is actually a German poet.

over others in poetry? Who accords them that pride of place? Al-Shidyaq does not base his opinion on any Frankish authority, that is to say, he does not cite any European source in support of this categorical judgment. He acknowledges what the Franks have accomplished “of civilization, skill, and invention,” but the Franks acknowledge neither his own poetry nor Arabic poetry in general. Indeed, what he relates of their judgment on the style of the Arabic poem indicates their distaste for it; they find it awful, at least in some of its aspects.<sup>12</sup>

12. Times and circumstances have changed, but one thing has not: whenever Arabs listen to a line of poetry, they are enraptured, moved to liberality, and transported with joy, just like their ancestors. They may sacrifice everything except their poetry; they regard themselves as poets, above all. Nevertheless, their poetry has not found its way to Europe; apart from specialists, no European could name an Arab poet today. This is not only true of present-day Europeans, but in the past as well. Cervantes regarded Arabs primarily as storytellers, and there is no stronger evidence of that than his attribution of his novel *Don Quixote* to an invented Arab historian, Cide Hamete Benengeli. This attribution means that Cervantes believed that the origin of storytelling, of the novel, is Arab. Yet the remarkable thing, aside from the ascription of the narrative to an Arab writer, is his characterization of Arabs as liars. Yes, Arabs, according to him, are congenital liars; they invent stories; they lie as they breathe. This trait allows them to excel in the art of storytelling. On that view, Europeans were bound to take interest in Arabic narrative. Consequently, in the early eighteenth century, Galland translated *The Thousand and One Nights* into French. Significantly, in that translation, he paid no attention to the poetic verses in the book, and did not bother to translate them. He apparently regarded Arabic poetry as inconsequential and insignificant, and narrative as the quintessential Arabic art form. In general, Westerners' interest in *The Thousand and One Nights*, from Galland to Borges, supports the belief that what distinguishes the Arabs is narrative and narrative alone.

And it is not only the Franks, for in the context of describing the silence with which his praise of the English queen was met, al-Shidyaq says, "Any Turkish notable who learns the languages of the Franks follows in their path. I composed another poem in praise of Wali Pasha, the High Port's ambassador to Paris, and another addressed to Namiq Pasha, and another to Muhammad Pasha Ali, and none of those poems resulted in good or ill" (1867, 302). The stance of those Turkish notables toward al-Shidyaq's poetry (and Arabic poetry?) is similar to that of the English and the French. In al-Shidyaq's opinion, they are to be excused to some extent, for their behavior results from their learning European languages, which leads them to adopt those people's customs and tastes, such that the praise poem appears to them as a deserted and collapsing structure. If this trend continues, the infection will no doubt shortly spread to the Arabs.

Immediately after saying that he refrained from presenting his second poem to Emperor Napoleon III, al-Shidyaq moves to a different but related topic: "At that time, I began to write the book of al-Fariyaq" (306), meaning *Al-saq 'ala al-saq*. Why this passing reference? What compensation did he seek in writing that book? What is the secret of his switching from verse to prose, from composing praise poems to writing a book about . . . what? Let us set aside the matter of classifying the book as a journey, novel, or autobiography in the third person and suffice it to raise this question: What could an Arab writer who had seen Europe in the mid-nineteenth century and noticed the wide gulf separating it from his familiar world say? What could he write when he sees to his chagrin that the literature that nurtured him does not satisfy European taste? What is left for him when he realizes, consciously or unconsciously, that his native culture belongs to the past, while that of Europe is synonymous

with the present? He will certainly not betray his past and will not waste any opportunity to declare his allegiance to it, yet at the same time he has no choice but to envision the future of the Arabs in Europe's present. That being the case, he will describe his predicament by holding endless comparisons between the two worlds, the two epochs—or, if we prefer, between the two legs. Indeed, he will cross one leg on the other and sink into contemplation of his situation and his place. As a thirteenth-century German poet said (apparently in reference to the disintegration of the chivalric age):

I sat on a rock,  
And crossed my legs,  
Rested my elbow on my knee,  
And in my open palm I held  
My chin and cheek.  
There I pondered long  
How one should live in this world.  
[Walter von der Vogelweide]