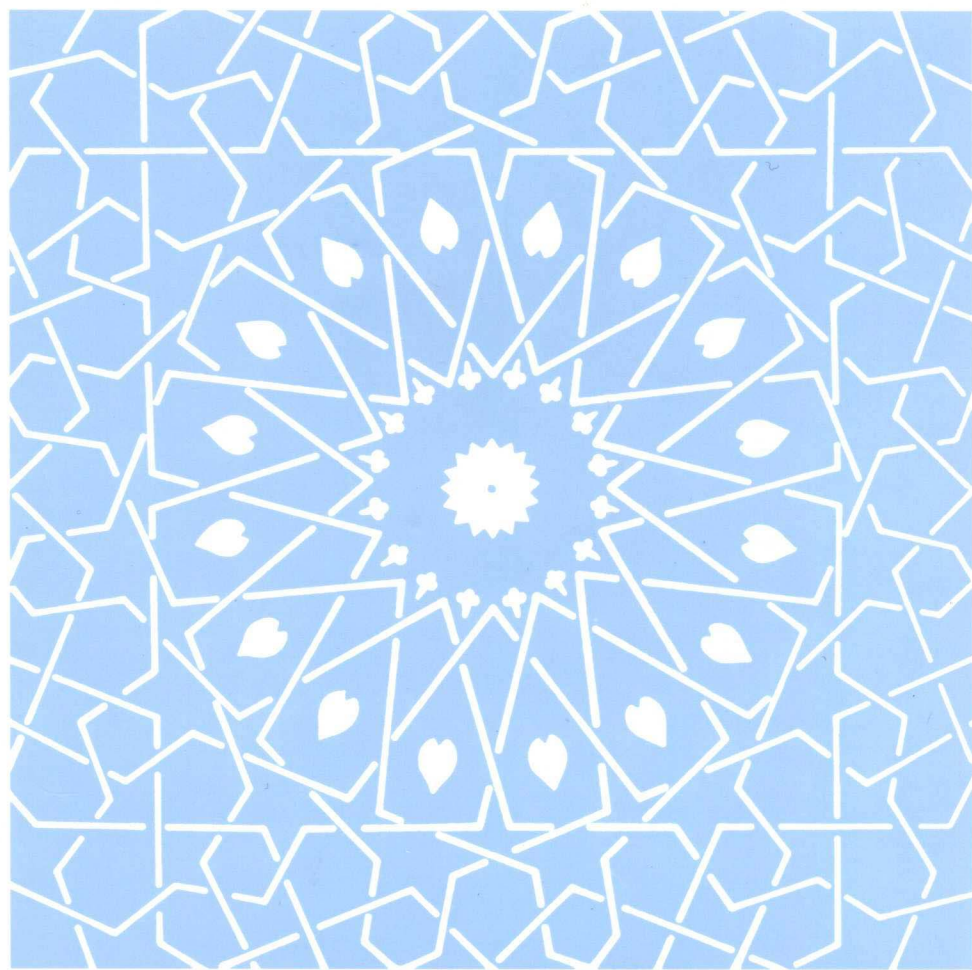The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature

Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period

EDITED BY

ROGER ALLEN & D. S. RICHARDS

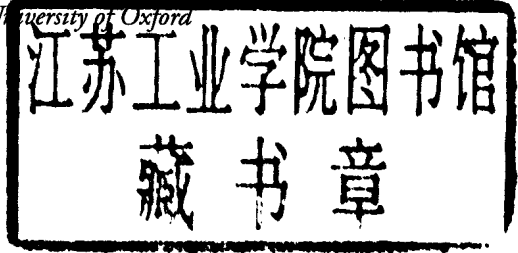# ARABIC LITERATURE IN THE POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD

EDITED BY

ROGER ALLEN
University of Pennsylvania

AND

D. S. RICHARDS
University of Oxford

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The sixth and final volume of *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature* explores the Arabic literary heritage of the period from the twelfth to the beginning of the nineteenth century. Traditionalists have tended to characterize this period as one of 'decadence' and, having done so, to skip over its several centuries in the quest for more immediately interesting material stimulated by the re-encounter with the West from the end of the eighteenth century. Even though it was during this time that one of the most famous Arabic works of all time – *A Thousand and One Nights* – was created, this has not provoked a wide-ranging investigation of the period's literature in general, whether elite or popular, and the period in question has continued to be viewed negatively. This volume seeks to rectify the situation. Roger Allen and D. S. Richards bring together some of the most distinguished scholars in the field to record as much as is known about the literary movements and aesthetic trends of this period. The volume is divided into parts with the traditions of poetry and prose covered separately within both their 'elite' and 'popular' contexts. The last two parts are devoted to drama, its origins and tentative development, and the indigenous tradition of literary criticism. As the only work of its kind in English covering the post-classical period, this book promises to be a unique resource for students and scholars of Arabic literature for many years to come.

Roger Allen is Professor of Arabic and Comparative Literature at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. He is the author of *The Arabic Novel* (1982, 1995) and *The Arabic Literary Heritage* (1998). He currently serves in an editorial capacity for the journal *Middle Eastern Literatures* and the Arabic Literature Series of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*.

D. S. Richards is Emeritus Fellow of St Cross College, Oxford, and University Lecturer in Arabic (retired). His publications include *Mamluk Jerusalem* (1987) and numerous articles on medieval Islamic history. He is the translator of *Ibn Shaddad's Life of Saladin* (2001) and *The Annals of the Turks* (2002).

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Kamal Abdel-Malek teaches Arabic literature at the American University of Sharjah, UAE. He has published several books on Egyptian popular literature, Arab attitudes to Americans (*America in an Arab Mirror*, 2000) and Israelis (*Arab–Jewish Encounters in Palestinian Literature and Film*, forthcoming).

Roger Allen, Professor of Arabic and Comparative Literature at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. He is the author of *The Arabic Novel* (1982, 1995) and *The Arabic Literary Heritage* (1998). He currently serves in an editorial capacity for the journal *Middle Eastern Literatures* and the Arabic Literature Series of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*.

Rosella Dorigo Ceccato, since 1983 Professore Associato of Arabic Language and Literature and recently Vice-Director of the new doctoral programme in Studi Orientali at the University Ca' Foscari of Venice and a member of the editorial board of the review *Quaderni di Studi Arabi*. Her scholarly activity has been mainly devoted to the analysis of Arabic literature, with a particular attention to drama. Her research is directed towards Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and the Sultanate of Oman.

Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies, University of Helsinki. His main interests lie in medieval Arabic literature, classical Arabic language, and paganism in Iraq. His main works include: *Materials for the Study of Raǧaz I–III* (1993–6) and *Maqama: A History of a Genre* (2002).

Peter Heath, Provost of the American University in Beirut. A specialist in Arabic literature, he is the author of *Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna (Ibn Sina)* (1992) and *The Thirsty Sword: Sirat 'Antar and the Arabic Popular Epic* (1996).

Th. Emil Homerin, Professor of Religion at the University of Rochester. His publications include *From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint* (2001), *Ibn al-Farid: Sufi Verse, Saintly Life* (2001) and *The Wine of Love and Life* (2005).

'Abdullah Ibrahim has taught at universities in Iraq, Libya and Qatar. He currently serves as Cultural Adviser to the National Council for Culture in Qatar. Among his recent publications are *al-Sardiyyat al-'arabiyya al-ḥadītha* (Modern Arabic Narratology, 2003) and *al-Muṭābaqa wa'l-ikhtilāf* (Identification and Difference, 2004).

Robert Irwin, a Senior Research Associate of the History Department of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University. His most recent books are *Night and Horses and the Desert: An Anthology of Classical Arabian Literature* (1999) and *The Alhambra* (2004).

Salma Khadra Jayyusi, Palestinian poet and critic, Director of East–West Nexus and the Project for the Translation of Arabic (PROTA), both of which have published translations and scholarly works concerning Arab and Middle Eastern culture. She is the author, among many other works, of *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry* (1977).

Remke Kruk, Professor of Arabic Language and Culture at Leiden University, The Netherlands. She has published on a variety of topics. Her main research field, apart from popular *sīra*, is the transmission and reception of Greek natural philosophy, in particular biology, in the Arabic tradition.

Margaret Larkin, Professor of Arabic Literature at the University of California, Berkeley. She is the author of *The Theology of Meaning: 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī's Theory of Discourse* (1995), as well as articles on classical and modern Arabic literature in literary and colloquial Arabic.

Muhsin al-Musawi, Professor of Arabic at Columbia University in New York since 2004, after a lengthy teaching career in Iraq, Yemen, Tunis and Sharjah. He is the author of numerous studies of Arabic literature in both Arabic and English, most recently *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel* (2003).

Dwight F. Reynolds, Professor of Arabic Language and Literature in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He publishes on folklore, literature and music of the Arab Middle East.

D. S. Richards, Emeritus Fellow of St Cross College, University of Oxford, and University Lecturer in Arabic (retired). Joint author of *Mamluk Jerusalem* (1987), translator of *Ibn Shaddad's Life of Saladin* (2001) and *The Annals of the Turks* (2002), and author of numerous articles on medieval Islamic history.

Philip Sadgrove, Head, Middle Eastern Studies, University of Manchester. He is the author of *The Egyptian Theatre in the Nineteenth Century* (1996),

co-author with Professor Shmuel Moreh of *Jewish Contributions to Nineteenth-Century Arabic Theatre* (1996) and editor of *History of Printing and Publishing in the Languages and Countries of the Middle East* (2005).

William Smyth has a BA in Classics from Stanford University and a PhD in Near Eastern Languages from New York University. He has written and lectured on the development of rhetoric and literary theory in the European and Islamic Middle Ages.

Devin Stewart teaches Arabic and Islamic Studies at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. He is the author, among other studies, of *Twelver Shi'i Jurisprudence* (1991) and *Islamic Legal Orthodoxy* (1998).

Michael Winter, Professor Emeritus of the History of the Middle East, Tel Aviv University. He is the author of books and articles on the Arab countries under the Mamluks and Ottomans, social aspects of Sufism and education in the Middle East, including (as co-editor with Amalia Levanoni) *The Mamluks in Egyptian and Syrian Politics and Society* (2004).

Muhammad Lutfi al-Yousfi, Professor of Arabic Literature at the University of Tunis, Mannouba. He is the author of a major study of the development of Arabic literary genres and the modes of their analysis, *Fitnat al-mutakhayyal* (2002).

ABBREVIATIONS

AI	*Annales Islamologiques*
BEO	*Bulletin des Etudes Orientales*
BSOAS	*Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*
CHALABL	*The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: 'Abbasid Belles-Lettres*
CHALAND	*The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: The Literature of Al-Andalus*
CHALMAL	*The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Modern Arabic Literature*
CHALRLS	*The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Religion, Learning and Science in the 'Abbasid Period*
CHALUP	*The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*
EI	*The Encyclopaedia of Islam,* 1st edn
EI2	*The Encyclopaedia of Islam,* 2nd edn
GAL	C. Brockelmann *Geschichte der arabischen Literatur,* and Suppls. I–III
IC	*Islamic Culture*
JA	*Journal Asiatique*
JAL	*Journal of Arabic Literature*
JAOS	*Journal of the American Oriental Society*
JNES	*Journal of Near Eastern Studies*
JRAS	*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*
JSS	*Journal of Semitic Studies*
QSA	*Quaderni di Studi Arabi*
WZKM	*Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*
ZDMG	*Zeitschrift für Deutschen Morgenlandischen Gesellschaft*

CONTENTS

THE POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD: PARAMETERS AND PRELIMINARIES

INTRODUCTION

Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period is the latest, and probably the last, of a series of volumes entitled *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, the first of which was published in 1983. While it is the latest, its subject matter is not the most recent period in the Arabic literary heritage; the publication date of the volume devoted to that topic, entitled *Modern Arabic Literature* (ed. M. M. Badawi), precedes that of this volume by several years. The current work thus finds itself challenged to find a place in the midst of an organizational matrix that has already been established, in one way or another, by the other volumes in the series. Before proceeding with a discussion of the rationale for this volume, I propose to step back and consider some of the ramifications that have inevitably resulted from not only the subject matter of this volume but also the principles that have been adopted in its preparation as part of this series of works devoted to the Arabic literary tradition.

The term 'post-classical period' has not been frequently used in order to delineate a specific period in the development of the heritage of Arabic literature. Its use as the title of this volume is intended as a form of shorthand for what might otherwise have been dubbed (were it not for the cumbersome nature of the result) 'the post-classical and pre-modern period'. In other words, this substantial central segment in the history of Arabic literary creativity suffers the fate of everything that is characterized by being in the 'midst' (as I noted above). As concepts, middle age, the Middle East and the Middle Ages are all defined by what lies on either side of them; one might suggest further that all these terms (and others like them) are also characterized by an extreme imprecision regarding their boundaries (as any middle-aged person will happily admit).

At this point it needs to be acknowledged that an alternative title to the one we have selected already exists. The Western scholarly tradition has assigned this period of Arabic literary history its own label, namely 'the period of decadence', a term that Arab writers describing the same era have dutifully

translated into its closest Arabic equivalent, '*aṣr al-inḥiṭāṭ*.[1] As a topic of critical investigation, 'decadence' serves, needless to say, as a conduit to a number of potentially fascinating areas of research. In the analysis of several world cultures, such research has indeed produced important insights into the processes of literary creativity and of the continuity of the tradition. However, in the case of the Arabic and Islamic heritage, the application of this label to a substantial segment of the cultural production of the region seems to have resulted in the creation of a vicious circle, whereby an almost complete lack of sympathy for very different aesthetic norms has been converted into a tradition of scholarly indifference that has left us with enormous gaps in our understanding of the continuities involved. Such attitudes could be illustrated by a host of citations from works on various aspects of Arabic and Islamic culture, but the following is a representative sample:

> The doors to the Islamic world were closed after the Crusades; parts of it began to consume others. Muslims simply marked time. In the realm of learning, there was just the rehashing of some books on jurisprudence, grammar, and the like; in crafts, there was no creativity and none of the old perfection; in tools and military skills, things were simply modelled on the old days . . . It was all killed off by the prolonged period of tyranny. Knowledge consisted of a formal religious book to be read, a sentence to be parsed, a text to be memorised, or a commentary on a text or a gloss on the commentary; there was only a small representation of the secular sciences, something to be made use of solely in order to know the heritage of the past.[2]

The writer here is the prominent twentieth-century Egyptian intellectual Aḥmad Amīn (1886–1954). He admittedly belongs to a generation of writers who found themselves confronting all the dilemmas implicit in a process of cultural transformation that accompanied and followed the rapid importation of Western ideas and values to the colonized countries of the Middle East. Even so, I would suggest that these remarks are an accurate indication of the pervasive attitudes among both Western and Middle Eastern scholars towards the period that is the topic of this volume.

In the sections that follow, I will first examine the problematics associated with any attempt to compile a volume such as this, namely the writing of literary histories in general and Arabic literary history in particular. I will

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[1] Robert Brunschvig dates this development in Western attitudes to the Islamic world to the latter half of the seventeenth century. See 'Problème de la décadence', in *Classicisme et déclin culturel*, pp. 29–51. At the conference of which this volume is the proceedings, the great Swedish orientalist Nyberg asked a series of extremely pertinent questions: 'What is cultural decadence? How do we measure its features? Is it the misery of the masses? Depreciation of economic measures? Lack of progress in the arts? Servile imitation of outmoded fashions that continue with no real driving force, thus stifling other creative forces? Do we have any kind of yardstick with which to measure such things? We Europeans are perpetually haunted by this notion of evolution. Is it a given that Islamic culture can be similarly measured?' (tr. from the French, p. 48).

[2] Amīn, *Zuʿamāʾ al-iṣlāḥ*, p. 7.

then consider the corollaries of that investigation which have served as the organizing principles of this volume, and lastly discuss the reasoning behind the choice of contents.

LITERARY HISTORY: METHODS AND ISSUES

Any analysis of developments within a particular literary tradition will of necessity involve a process of fusion, of compromise even, between the organizing principles of two scholarly disciplines, those of literature and history. Earlier examples of historical surveys of the literary traditions of the Middle East share organizing principles with those of other world areas, in that the compromise just alluded to is tilted fairly heavily in the direction of history. The list of contents of such classic works as Edward Browne's *Literary History of Persia* (1902–24) or R. A. Nicholson's *A Literary History of the Arabs* (1907) point to a mode of organization that links the literary heritage to a historical framework based on the dynastic succession of caliphs, sultans and other categories of ruling authority. Within such a framework the creative output of the littérateur is placed firmly and squarely within its historical and social milieu, and the literary text is utilized to illustrate the linkage – often close – between literary production and the activities and priorities of the ruling elite.

During the course of the twentieth century, scholarly debate inevitably led to changes in approach to the study of both these major disciplines. As an example of just one of the catalysts for such a process of change, we can refer to what one might term the 'linguistic revolution' engendered by Ferdinand de Saussure's (d. 1913) *Cours de linguistique générale*, a work which led, among many other developments, to the radical distinction between '*langue*' (the system of language) and '*parole*' (the actual usage of the language by its speakers – with an emphasis on 'speech') and to the equally important dichotomy between the diachronic and synchronic approaches to the study of phenomena, the first implying an analysis through time and the second across time. Thus, alongside the more annalistic approaches to the study of history that use dates, dynasties and the succession of ruling elites as their organizing matrices, specialists in history are now just as likely to make such topics as plague, peasantry, the city, monetary supply and the impact of the wheel the organizing factors in their research and publication. Within such a framework the logic of time is, needless to say, always at least implicit, but as part of a synchronic approach it ceases to be the primary organizational focus. In literature studies, the New Critics advocated a radical concentration on the text itself and its interpretation, to the relative exclusion of all other considerations. Not unnaturally, this led in turn – at least initially – to a relative diminution of interest in the author of the work (and especially in his or her 'personality' or even 'soul');

a continued involvement in such an approach was tarred with the brush of the term 'intentional fallacy'. More recently, some trends in literary criticism have focused on the relationship of the text and its interpretation to the process of reading. And, to conclude with a development that may be seen as combining the results of developments in the twin fields of history and literature, research on the nature of different types of discourse and on the function of narrative, not to mention challenges to the veracity of 'facts' and 'sources', has engendered some interesting notions whereby history, biography, autobiography and fiction all come to be seen as exercises in the composition of narrative texts, with as many features of similarity as of difference. In giving these few illustrations of research areas that serve to illustrate the processes of change within the humanistic disciplines during the course of the twentieth century, I need to emphasize that the scholarly environment being discussed is not one that has involved the substitution of one approach for another (however much the advocates of a particular vogue may have wished for such), but rather a gradual process of change and adaptation. What is clear is that developments in the study of both history and literature have inevitably had a considerable impact on the methods of literary history.

The lengthy and complex process whereby a systematic attempt has been made to render research in the humanistic disciplines more 'scientific', mostly through the elaboration of 'theory', has provoked much scholarly debate; Denis Donoghue's account of developments in the literary sphere borrows a phrase from a poem of Wallace Stevens, *Ferocious Alphabets* (1984). As the study of history and literature has participated in this process, each discipline has developed its own theoretical corpus that strives to provide a rationale for the modes applied by the profession to its subject matter. In this process literary theory has come to be seen as the explanation (and often, justification) of principles applied to the interpretation and evaluation of texts (literary criticism). It is within such a context that the role of literary history has needed to be re-examined; the significantly named journal, *New Literary History*, is just one of many projects in that direction.

The concentration of literature studies on the text and its interpretation has led to an emphasis on the notion of genre and the problems associated with its use. Thus, while Benedetto Croce warns that genres have no useful function within the realm of aesthetics, Northrup Frye reminds his readers that, when the function of genres is to clarify affinities rather than to classify (and thus to exclude), they are of considerable value to literature scholarship.[3] The process of 'clarifying affinities' among literary texts that appear to share

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[3] Benedetto Croce, *Estetica* (1902), cited in Adams, *Critical Theory Since Plato*, pp. 726–35; Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 247.

features in common – for example, the novel, the prose poem and the drama – automatically leads to the investigation of the organic processes of change whereby genres are transmuted into other forms and new genres emerge (the prose poem being just one modern example). It is, of course, a primary purpose of research into generic transformation to investigate the *continuities* that link genres and their processes of development to each other, and it is in this context that such investigations confront the principles applied in older modes of literary-historical scholarship, most especially that of 'periodization' (for which Arabic now uses the term *taḥqīb*).[4]

Frye reflects the traditional rationale for periodization:

The history of literature seems to break down into a series of cultural periods of varying length, each dominated by certain conventions.[5]

Scholars in quest of an organizing matrix within which to survey the riches of the Arabic literary tradition as a whole have been able, like their colleagues specializing in other world traditions, to identify 'a series of cultural periods', but the 'conventions' that have been marked as dominating characteristics of each period have tended to be based on (or at least to include) the dynastic principles that we noted above; in other words they seek to categorize the literary output from without rather than within. The first great divide is one sanctioned by Islam itself: the one that distinguishes the Islamic era (beginning with the first year of the Hijra calendar, AD 622) from what precedes it. Whatever may be the artistic value attached to the poetry of the earliest era in literary activity in Arabic, the greatest quality attached to the period on the broader cultural, and particularly religious, plane is its status as precedent – the society of pre-Islamic Arabia and its language of public communication provide the context into which the Koranic message is revealed. The entire period that follows the Hijra is in fact the 'Islamic era', but it is broken down into sub-periods: the time of Muḥammad and the early ('rightly guided') caliphs (622–60); the Umayyad dynasty (660–750); and the Abbasid dynasty (750–1258), an era of five centuries that is often further subdivided into two or three periods – 1258 is the date of the sack of Baghdad by the Mongols. The period that follows is the subject of the present volume, and, as noted above, the centuries between 1258 and 1798 (the latter being the date of Napoleon's invasion of Egypt) have been conveniently labelled the 'Period of Decadence'. However, the pattern of dynastic labelling provides an alternative to this further undivided period of five centuries of literary creativity, by identifying the

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[4] Among recent publications on this topic are: *Ishkāl al-taḥqīb* and *Kitābat al-tawārīkh*, both ed. Muḥammad Miftāḥ and Aḥmad Bū-Ḥasan.

[5] Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, pp. 28–9.

Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1516 as the dividing line between a 'Mamluk' period (the name of the ruling dynasty in Egypt and Syria) and an 'Ottoman' period. Lastly, the use of 1798 as a starting point for a 'modern' period breaks away from the dynastic pattern and presents the concept of 'modernity' as a mode for the examination of the role of the West as a major catalyst in the changes that had such an enormous impact on the regions of the former Ottoman empire and which, in the wake of the Second World War, became the independent states of today's Middle East.

In broad outline it is this schema that has been adopted (and adapted) by *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*. The first volume covers the first two eras that we have identified, 'to the end of the Umayyad period'. The second and third concern themselves with the Abbasid period; because of its length the material is subdivided, but on topical rather than dynastic principles: the first is devoted to belles-lettres, while the second brings together discussion of a wide variety of other topics that in the narrower modern definition of the term 'literature' are considered to be 'non-literary'. As with the schema above, the volume devoted to the modern period breaks away from the dynastic principle, and its contents are organized around the processes of generic development. The next volume in the series is devoted to the literary output of the Iberian Peninsula during the Islamic period; it marks a further breakaway from the dynastic principle in that the use of geography as a mode of organization serves to illustrate the unique qualities of that region as a cultural 'melting pot' through its multilingual communities and its contacts with both Europe and the Islamic East but at the same time has the disadvantage of separating off discussion of the writings of Arab littérateurs in Spain who affect and are affected by developments during both the Umayyad and Abbasid periods (and beyond). And into the midst of this series of volumes and principles *The Post-Classical Period* is now to be fitted.

DECADENCE AND MIDDLE AGES

As part of a discussion of periodization in Islamic history, Marshall Hodgson examines the implications of the term 'modern' in the context of a discussion of the 'ancient-medieval-modern' matrix that determines the framework of so much literary-historical writing.[6] We have already noted above that the concept of modernity brings into play an element of not only time but also evaluation (the assumption being, one supposes, that the present time on which all historical perspective is of necessity based represents the most advanced stage in human development towards which the movement of 'modernity' constantly strives). In this context, the substitution of the terms

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[6] Hodgson, *Rethinking World History*, pp. 283–4.

'classical' and 'decadent' (or 'dark' in the European context) for 'ancient' and 'medieval' makes this evaluative element yet more explicit. Decadence implies a process of falling away, of decline, and thus by implication brings the opposing concept of 'rise' into a clearly evaluative matrix of cultural change, that of rise and fall which has been beloved of many historians of European cultures. In this particular model, a 'classical' era is a time period in the distant past during which the cultural ideals of the group (in more recent centuries, frequently coterminous with the concept of 'nation') are established and illustrated through their exploration in artistic form, thus including literature. The result is a series of values, norms and forms (the 'classes' from which the term itself is derived) that are to serve as models for emulation by later generations. Within the governing matrix that we outlined earlier, such an era has, of course, to come to a close, and that process is usually linked on the political level to a process of fragmentation of authority and in the cultural sphere to a state of moral decline to which the term 'decadence' has often been applied. Adopting the wave image implicit in this rise and fall model, we may suggest that the temporal breadth of the 'trough' represented by such a dark or decadent period is not determined by internal factors but rather by the process of 're-rise' which is identified in retrospect (in other words, from within the 'modern') as marking the beginning of those intellectual trends and movements that foster the development of 'modernity'. As Norman Cantor suggests, albeit in a thoroughly iconoclastic fashion, the identification of a temporally defined 'classical era', with all its canonical connotations, mandates a process of *Inventing the Middle Ages*, and some form of 'renaissance' becomes thereby an implicit feature, a process of change (of 'rebirth') whereby the 'Middle' period ends and the 'modern' period begins. Within such a framework, the 'decadent' period is evaluated at both ends: a 'fall' leads to a descent from the ideals of classicism to something implicitly inferior, while the 'rise' of a renaissance (and the Arabic term *al-nahda* is a literal translation of the process of upward movement) promises something better. The following characterization of European culture, admittedly dated but nonetheless symptomatic, may serve as an illustration of this type of historical analysis and of the values that lie behind it; it is the opening of the chapter, 'Darkness and Despair', from a work entitled *The Eighteen Christian Centuries* by the Reverend James White:

The tenth century is always to be remembered as the darkest and most debased of all the periods of modern history. It was the midnight of the human mind, far out of reach of the faint evening twilight left by Roman culture, and further still from the morning brightness of the new and higher civilization.[7]

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[7] Reverend James White, *The Eighteen Christian Centuries* (New York, 1862), p. 219.