Experimenting with *Ṭabaqāt* and *Muʿǧam*

A history of modern Egypt through the biographies of ordinary citizens in *Ḥadīṯ al-ṣabāḥ wa-l-masāʾ* by Nağīb Maḥfūẓ

Arianna Tondi

Inspired by the search for an authentic literature, several Arab writers have experimented with their literary tradition after the cultural turn that followed 1967. Among them, the Egyptian novelist Nağīb Maḥfūẓ (1911-2006), who, determined to find alternatives to the hegemonic model of the Western novel in the post-Naksa period, has interacted with premodern forms of writing. In this paper, we will analyse one of his last fictional experiments, *Ḥadīṯ al-ṣabāḥ wa-l-masāʾ* ('Morning and Evening Talk,' 1987), the novelisation of a subgenre of Islamic historiography, i.e., the biographical dictionary (*ṭabaqāt*, *muʿǧam*). Drawing upon scholarship on palimpsestuous textuality and dialogism as theories suitable for postcolonial intertextuality, we will put the novel in dialogue with its antecedents to highlight how the chronotope, the non-linear structure, the narrative techniques, the conception of history and death endorsed by the precursors are interrogated by Maḥfūẓ in order to reflect on the outputs of modern Egyptian history on ordinary citizens. As it will emerge, the result is a fictional biographical dictionary that claims for the distinctiveness of the Arab novel and that, at the same time, aspires to participate in modern world culture.

Keywords: biographical dictionary, Nağīb Maḥfūẓ, palimpsestuous textuality, temporality, death.

Me Callimachus, a five-years-old child whose spirit
knew not grief, pitiless Death snatched away; but weep thou
not for me; for little was my share in life, and little in life's ills
(*Select Epigrams from the Greek Anthology* 1906: 160)

One passed in a fever,
One was burned in a mine,
One was killed in a brawl,
One died in a jail,

One fell from a bridge toiling for children and wife—
All, all are sleeping, sleeping, sleeping on the hill
(*Spoon River Anthology* 1919: 1)

1. Introduction

Inspired by the search for an 'authentic' literature, several Arab writers have experimented with their literary tradition after the cultural turn that followed 1967.[1] The very concept of authenticity, here, is highly problematic, having being interpreted in terms of originality, cultural specificity, domesticity, innovation, epistemic decolonisation, hybridity, contamination, deference for a tradition that has played a role in the formation of the Arab novel and consequently could not be ignored. The perspective depends on one's attitude towards *turāṯ* ('Arab-Islamic heritage') and the role it should or should not play in the Arab experience of modernity and in the construction or mediation of an Arab identity. The defeat at the hand of Israel and the failure of the postcolonial project have generated, among Arab intellectuals, the need to overcome the fracture between past and present that dominated the *Nahḍa* (Arab 'Renaissance') and to re-integrate the Arab tradition that had been excluded in the modernist project. Debates on the heritage of the Arabs has acquired unprecedented relevance in the intellectual field of the post-Naksa period, when a plethora of positions—from the Islamic modernist to the secular modernist—emerged.[2] These inquiries had an effect of 'refraction'[3] in the literary scene of that period, especially from the seventies to the eighties, when a deliberate interaction with tradition took place.[4] Here, we use intentionally the term 'interaction,' because the approaches to *turāṯ* should be considered in a dialogic perspective that creates connections between the past and the present and vice versa, not in a one-way direction that considers only the influence of a model on a subsequent text. This interaction has been evident in the enthralling engagement with characters and

[1] Muhsin Al-Musawi calls the retention of premodern discourses and styles the 'medieval turn' in contemporary Arabic narrative (Al-Musawi 2017).

[2] The first strand is represented, for example, by the Egyptian intellectual Ḥasan Ḥanafī (1935-2001), who invoked a re-examination of the Islamic heritage on the basis of the conditions of Arab society to make it relevant to the times (Daifallah 2018). The second strand is represented by the Syrian poet and intellectual Adūnīs (b. 1935), who has considered the sacralisation of the religious heritage by the Arab people an obstacle to progress and creativity (Wardeh 2010).

[3] I borrow the term 'refraction' from Pierre Bourdieu, who uses it to indicate the effect produced by the literary field when it retranslates external phenomena following its own logic (Bourdieu 1992: 306).

[4] The interest towards *turāṯ* has persisted after the eighties and is ongoing, but with different pragmatics and scopes.

events of the Arab-Islamic history in the contemporary Arabic literary production, as well as in the experimentation with premodern genres, styles, and narrative forms.

Among the protagonists of the literary experimentalism based on the re-reading of the textual heritage, there is the Egyptian novelist and Nobel laureate Nağīb Maḥfūẓ (1911-2006), who, determined to find his own music (al-Ghitani 2007: 108) and alternatives to the hegemonic model of the Western novel in the post-Naksa and postcolonial period, has interacted with premodern forms of writing in multiple ways. The experiment on which we will focus our attention in this article is one of his last works, *Ḥadīṯ al-ṣabāḥ wa al-masāʾ* ('Morning and Evening Talk;' henceforth *Ḥadīṯ*) published in 1987. The novel comes as a compendium of 67 biographies of ordinary Egyptian citizens lived from the epoch of Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 to the eighties. People with different backgrounds, stories, and destinies are introduced. The entries are alphabetically ordered and organised according to the general principles shared by two subgenres of Islamic historiography, the *ṭabaqāt* (biographical dictionary where notices are organised into classes or generations) that emerged between the 8th and 9th century and the *muʿğam* (alphabetically arranged biographical dictionary) appeared in the 10th century. While other premodern genres of Arabic literature, such as the *maqāma* ('assembly') and the *riḥla* ('travelogue'), have been fictionalised by several contemporary writers throughout the Arab world, the biographical compendium has not been a main source of inspiration. Thus, we can consider Maḥfūẓ a pioneer in this sense. The novelist takes inspiration from the poetics and politics of one of the most peculiar genres of classical Arabic literature in order to indirectly give his own evaluation of the outcomes of Arab modernity on the lives of ordinary people. Written on the verge of the end of his literary career, *Ḥadīṯ* is to all effects the dissolution of the generational novel and an innovative attempt to narrate two centuries of Egyptian history by pulverising the main historical events and their well-known protagonists, putting at the centre of the stage the private stories of those individuals normally ignored by official historiography. As if Maḥfūẓ looked back to go through the history of modern Egypt and assess, from a certain distance, how much Egypt is still gripped in its past and to what extent has embraced the challenges of modernity.

The aim of this article is to propose an analysis of *Ḥadīṯ* that means to highlight how Maḥfūẓ has reshaped the Western genre of the novel by adapting it to an indigenous form of writing, and what are the aesthetic and pragmatic implications of this creative process. The novelisation of a(n)—apparently—non-fictional genre reveals that the author interrogates the very ideology that animates the genre not only in its classical realisations, but also in its renderings produced in the 19th century. The study will be divided into four parts which encourage a reading of the novel that puts in communication texts and contexts. Firstly, we will make some reflections on the novelist's ambivalent relation with *turāṯ*

since the sixties, placing it in the broader frame of the intellectual and literary debates on the role of heritage in the context of the seventies. Secondly, we will present the relation between *ṭabaqāt* and *muʿǧam* works and the novel by drawing upon the scholarship of Sarah Dillon, who suggests using the concept of the palimpsest as a means to consider how texts are interwoven and entangled. Her theorisation of palimpsestuous textuality implies that a text functions as a palimpsest where other—related or apparently unrelated—narratives are not subordinate to the ultimate layer of writing, because a relationality between texts "interrupting and inhabiting each other" (Maḥfūẓ 2007: 4) is—consciously or unconsciously—established. Considering that Maḥfūẓ's choice to dialogue with *turāṯ* can be ascribed to a postcolonial search for roots, we will also refer to dialogism as a theory suitable for postcolonial intertextuality. Thirdly, we will analyse the structure of a single entry and the narrative strategies employed to produce knowledge. Theories concerning the instability of the genre will allow us to explain the novel's fluid relation with its antecedents and point up how the non-linear structure, the narrative construction of each entry, the chronotope, and the conception of history endorsed by the precursors are interrogated by Maḥfūẓ to rethink traditional views of community. The analysis conducted in the second and third sections will lead us to explore the performative effects of temporal, spatial, and characters fragmentation on the whole narrative. Lastly, we will focus on death, the central thread of most of the entries and the *fil rouge* that brings them together. This theme is a productive force in the novel and allows the author to tackle with notions of temporality and mortality. The reading of the death motif will also be examined in relation to the configuration of the same theme in the *Spoon River Anthology* (1915) by Edgar Lee Masters,[5] a work where life, death, and modern life are examined also through the lens of the Greek classics. This study is relevant to deepen the knowledge of the role of premodern literary heritage in contemporary Arabic literature and to enhance the comprehension of the notion of originality for those Arab writers who choose to critically valorise the local without renouncing to reach a global audience.

2. Maḥfūẓ's struggles with *turāṯ*

In his study of the Egyptian literary field after 1967, Richard Jacquemond engages with texts as cultural practices, giving prominence to the extra-textual reality that has shaped the 'fait littéraire.' The scholar recognises that a component of the literary production of the period under study is the

[5] I would like to thank Samuela Pagani for calling my attention to some potential analogies between Maḥfūẓ's novel and Masters' *Anthology*.

constant search for innovation and renewal to produce a literature that is Egyptian without pursuing parochial or provincial sentiments (Jacquemond 2008: 219). As we have said above, discussions on the role and function of the heritage have heavily dominated the intellectual debates after the culturally devasting defeat of June 1967 and had concrete effects on literary creativity. Interestingly, Ahmad Agbaria attributes the turn to *turāṯ* also to the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), which led to the deterioration and destruction of the cultural institutions of the most active cultural centre of the Arab world. As a result of the intellectual void left by Beirut, together with other factors, new sensibilities aimed at revitalising the heritage emerged (Agbaria 2022: 43-56). If we consider that *turāṯ* has also been a medium to denounce or question governmental narratives, we do not have to forget that the 1968 has been the year of worldwide sentiments against governmental policies.[6] Beyond the Arab world, the repudiation or the revision of the Western literary canon has been, more in general, one of the features of postcolonial literatures, where the re-appropriation of local culture and techniques has defined a new sort of multicultural canon (Marx 2004: 83-84).

The publication of *al-Zaynī Barakāt* by Ǧamāl al-Ġīṭānī (1945-2015) in 1974 is a turning point in the history of contemporary Arabic literature. The Egyptian novelist has inaugurated a new literary sensibility that has explored the richness of the Arabic literary heritage with the aim of producing indigenous literary forms that would have renewed the art of the novel (Al-Ghitany 1984: 76). This process of authentication has also been addressed in some programmatic essays, where writers have explained the reasons behind their personal way of innovating the Arabic novel. These works are very useful tools to understand the ideologies that have animated the domestication of Arab culture after the sixties. In a 2009 essay discussing the pillars of his literary career, the Egyptian writer Muḥammad Ǧibrīl (1938-2025), who drew extensively on premodern texts since the eighties, devotes a chapter to *turāṯ* as a source of inspiration. Here, he deplores the dependency on Western literature of many writers of the fifties and the sixties as an 'inferiority complex.' The return to *turāṯ*[7] is a positive and necessary step towards the restoration and the rediscovery of the self. This, however, does not mean that the heritage is the ideal model valid for every epoch and every place. Authenticity is not tantamount to imitate the old, but to benefit from it (Ǧibrīl 2023). In an even more passionate and poignant tone, towards the end of a prolific career whose backbone has been the reviving of the tradition, al-Ġīṭānī exposed his literary manifesto in an essay entitled *Muntahà al-ṭalab ilà turāṯ al-ʿArab*

[6] For the effects of May 1968 in the Arab world, see Di-Capua (2018).

[7] Ǧibrīl specifies that in his view the term *turāṯ* includes the Pharaonic, Arabic and Islamic heritage.

('The End to/The Utmost in the Search for the Heritage of the Arabs').[8] Firmly believing in the poetic possibilities offered by the many components of the literary heritage, he invites the Arabs to explore this heritage, not to ignore it. *Turāṯ* is, for al-Ġīṭānī, the quintessence of Arab creativity as it manifested through centuries of history. It guarantees freedom on a double level: freedom of expression and freedom to innovate (1997).[9]

In a conversation with his close friend and colleague al-Ġīṭānī, Maḥfūẓ—talking retrospectively—has stated that when he composed his realist novels, he conformed to those that were perceived as accepted standards. Now, talking in the eighties and in the midst of a wide cultural turn, his perspective has changed. Refusing to adhere to an imposed canon, he prefers to be faithful to his identity and express it by integrating the Arabic tradition of storytelling and other premodern narrative forms in his works. The break with his past production is thus view in terms of a profound rupture aimed at giving the Arab writer his artistic freedom. However, Maḥfūẓ clearly says, proposing an authentic Arabic literature should not imply the passive imitation of tradition, because emulation is a form of captivity (al-Ghitani 2007: 107).

Maḥfūẓ's first attempt to revisit tradition is represented by the high innovative novel *al-Marāyā* (Mirrors, 1972), the second output written by the novelist after the Naksa and his first step in the experimentation with *ṭabaqāt* and *muʿǧam* works culminated in the late eighties with *Ḥadīṯ*. *Al-Marāyā* explores the crisis of the Arab individual in an extremely fragmented form that takes inspiration from the genre of the biographical dictionary. This enterprise was followed by a series of experimental novels, such as *Malḥamat al-Ḥarāfīš* ('The Epic of Ḥarāfīš,' 1977), *Layālī alf laylā* ('The Thousand Nights,' 1982), *Riḥlat Ibn Faṭṭūma* ('The Journey of Ibn Faṭṭūma,' 1983). Here, the author dialogues with the Arabic folk tradition, the travelogue, the *Arabian Nights*, the popular epic, the Sufi heritage. What these works have in common is a deep critique of the legitimacy of the nation-state and an interrogation about the very form of the novel (Ouyang 2012: 126-131). From a narrative point of view, these allegorical novels share specific aspects: the characters' psychology is not deepened; they have an episodic structure that entails a sequentiality which is indicative of mortality and temporality; they adhere to the spirit of Islamic historiography that sees life as a lesson and a test for the faithful (Al-Musawi 2009: 128).

Muhsin Al-Musawi interprets Maḥfūẓ's new direction in Bloomian sense: witnessing to the phase of the return to traditional forms, the 'ephebe' Maḥfūẓ cannot but look for his own way to the past. His

[8] For al-Ġīṭānī, *turāṯ* is primarily the Arab-Islamic premodern heritage.

[9] See Tondi (2022) for an analysis of al-Ġīṭānī's rewriting of the premodern genre of topographical history in the novel *Ḫiṭaṭ al-Ġīṭānī*.

'precursors,' however, are not only the masters of the tradition, but also the brilliant writers of the young generations, such as al-Ġīṭānī, with regard to whom the master of the Arabic novel was nourishing a feeling of 'anxiety of authorship' (128-129). On the other hand, Wen-chin Ouyang reads Maḥfūẓ's intertextual engagement in Bakhtinian terms as dialogism. Maḥfūẓ, exhibiting an anxiety of influence of the Western novel and the Arabic tradition, integrates different forms of narratives into his works (Ouyang 2003: 86) and interrogates the tradition and the validity of its values in modern times (Ouyang 2013: 165). In line with Ouyang's suggestion to read the novelist's relation with premodern types of writing in terms of dialogic imagination,[10] we will push this insight more by analysing his last experimental novel by means of the theoretical paradigm of the palimpsest. Our approach is also informed by Michel Foucault's elaboration of the notion of genealogy, which is not seen as the search for origins and the will to capture the pure essence of things. Genealogy must not create an evolutionary narrative; on the contrary, it must identify the dissension of things and their disparity (1984: 142). We believe that this refusal of the inviolability of the origin may help to illuminate the disparate essence of *Ḥadīṯ*, the heterogeneity of traces, signs, languages, and symbols that concur and compete to generate its meanings and affect its readings.

3. Collecting biographical entries, fracturing communities

The concept of the palimpsest has been applied to the study of postcolonial literature and its intertextual tendencies, since it has been employed to object to monological representations of history (Kalogeras *et al*. 2021: 8) and the normativity of canons. It activates complex practices and attitudes to memory, history, and imagined pasts. In particular, the figurative and dialogic conception of the palimpsest as formulated by Sarah Dillon offers a theoretical framework that can help us to understand the relationality of *Ḥadīṯ* and other kind of texts, first of all *ṭabaqāt* and *muʿǧam* works. A palimpsest is a paleographic artefact, i.e., a parchment whose writing has been erased and then written over several times. The most peculiar feature of palimpsests is the retention of earlier writings, whose traces reappeared after centuries (Dillon 2007: 12). The palimpsest, Dillon asserts, cannot be simplistically reduced to a metaphor for filiation and origin, it is not tantamount to the study of the sources; it is a phenomenon where "texts are involved and entangled, intricately interwoven" (Dillon 2007: 4), in a

[10] Given that the lives of subjects living in a postcolonial context are divided and fractured, scholars have resorted to Bakhtinian concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia to uncover how the othered subject speaks and articulates his self. Michail Bakhtin's emphasis on the notion of double-voiced discourse is effective in representing the intertextual nature of the speech of the postcolonial subject and his struggle for identity and agency (Allen 2022: 157, 160).

"simultaneous relation of intimacy and separation" (Dillon 2007: 3). The scholar defines the complex textuality of a text and the relationality that it features 'palimpsestuous textuality.'[11] Following Dillon's conceptualisation of the palimpsestuous, it will emerge that we cannot read *Ḥadīṯ* as the result of a linear development, evolution or updating of the genre of the biographical dictionary, since in this palimpsest various texts and traces "compete and struggle with each other" (Dillon 2007: 9). The palimpsetuous textuality of the novel reveals the existence of conflictual discourses and anxieties. Considering that the concept of the palimpsest allows the inscriptions, wiping off and reinscriptions of traces and texts, we think that it is appropriate to approach a novel that wites over the works of the ancestors and engages in a reflection on the validity of their models—and their inherent values—in contemporary times.

Tarif Khalidi has defined the Islamic biographical dictionary a "unique product of Arab Muslim culture" (Khalidi 1973:53). It is the most productive and enduring form of writing in the Arab world: it appeared between the 8th and 9th centuries and has continued to be practiced—in its conventional form—up to recent years. It emerged as an auxiliary of historical writing with the aim of providing the biographies of the transmitters of the Prophetic traditions, to demonstrate their trustworthiness and the truthfulness of the transmitted materials. The genre spread in the Islamic lands and soon included other categories of subjects, such as caliphs, poets, military commanders, scholars, judges, philosophers. The first Arabic term used to designate this genre is *ṭabaqāt,* literally 'classes, generations,' a word that indicates the method of arrangement of the biographical material collected by compilers. It denotes a group of persons who gave their contribution in history from a military, political, religious, scientific point of view, lived in a specific time span. With the massive production of this kind of compendiums, between the 10th and 11th centuries the alphabetical arrangement was introduced to facilitate the writing and browsing of these multivolume collections (Young 1990: 171). According to Wadad al-Qadi, the biographical dictionaries are a genuine expression of the spirit of Islamic civilisation and its conviction that the history of the Islamic community is made by the eminent contribution of men and women, whose legacy should be recorded for future generations (al-Qadi 2006: 32). The cornerstone of this genre is the person, the pillar of the community who produce knowledge.

In *Muntahà al-ṭalab,* al-Ġīṭānī states that the biographical dictionary has been widely considered only a historical source. As the writer bitterly observes, no one thinks about this peculiar artistic form

[11] Dillon has coined this expression as a reconfiguration of 'intertextuality' as understood by the poststructuralist conception of Julia Kristeva. Texts are not mosaics of quotations and absorption and transformation of other texts, but should be approached in a permutative perspective (Dillon 2007: 85-86).

as a possible ancestor of modern narrative. The *tarāǧim* ('biographies') collected in biographical dictionaries, al-Ġīṭānī highlights, are instead a genuine Arab type of writing having distinctive literary features. When he meticulously traces the origin of the Arabic novel in narrative modes of expression that have differentiated premodern Arabic literature from other literary traditions, the author invites to include biographical collections in the lineage (al-Ġīṭānī 1997: 23-24).

Maḥfūẓ has experimented twice the aesthetics and the pragmatics of the biographical dictionary in a literary work. As we have anticipated, the first attempt was *al-Marāyā*, a collection of 55 sketches of personalities put in alphabetical order according to their name. The subjects are Egyptian people, especially from the professional classes, personally known to the author. The entries, of variable length, cover several decades in the life of the subject but not necessarily the whole existence. The novel's title refers to the mirror as a literary motif that entails the deconstruction of the self and the production of other selves. In fact, the unidentified narrator—the narrative 'I'—is involved, in different measure, in each sketch. We know his personality through his reactions and responses to episodes and events. His personality is split and mirrored in the many characters of the novel. This deconstructed self is a product of the tensions and contradictions of modern Egyptian life, the expression of the collapse of the individual in front of the burdens of the modern world (King 1988: 55-57). This novel inaugurated the new path undertaken by the writer after the defeat. In her study about the intertextual relation between *al-Marāyā* and its premodern precursors, Christina Phillips underlines that the main implication of Maḥfūẓ's rewriting of the genre is visible in the dismantling of the traditional conception of history. History is not made by successful or heroic persons who contribute to the common good, but by individual experiences marked by failures or achievements. For this reason, the author reserves particular attention to the private life of the person (Phillips 2007).

Ḥadīṯ is a more mature and aware engagement with the premodern genre. It tells the story of three common Egyptian men lived in Cairo popular quarters in the first half of the 19th century. ʿAṭa al-Marākībī, Muʿāwiya al-Qalyūbī, and Yazīd al-Miṣrī have in common very humble origins; only the first succeeds in climbing the social ladder and accumulating huge wealth, disowning his past life and family. The novel outlines the lives of four generations of descendants of the three forefathers, all bonded by family ties derived by birth or by marriage. The lives of the 67 protagonists are sketched against the background of political events and the revolutions that have upset Egypt up to Anwar al-Sādāt's time, the epoch of the last generation. The geographical focus of the collection is Cairo. Although the novel intends to give account of the evolution and involution of modern Egyptian history, it does so in a high fragmented style, adhering to the principles of classification of the biographical dictionary. Consequently, we do not have a generational novel that follows a linear and chronological

development, but a sequence of notices arranged in alphabetical order. Curiously, but not randomly, the first entry is dedicated to Aḥmad Muḥammad Ibrāhīm, a child of the third generation lived at the beginning of the 20th century, while the last one is dedicated to the forefather Yazīd al-Miṣrī, arrived in Cairo as a young man a few days before the 1798 French invasion, the event that traditionally marks the outset of the modernisation process in Egypt. The novel's title refers to the repetitiveness of the act of oral narration, from morning to night and from night to the next day.[12] We deduce that the novel is composed by stories of ordinary Egyptians[13] that have been narrated without interruption and have been heard by the compiler, i.e., the same author. What emerges from this particular organisation is a conception of history as the sum of life accounts of commoners. What is the logic behind the selected criterion of classification? How does the past emerge and is contested? Rethinking the traditional ideology of the genre, Maḥfūẓ reinvents one of the most peculiar forms of writing of the Arab corpus.[14]

The palimpsestuous nature of Ḥadīṯ emerges, in the first place, in the apposition of an overlying script on the parchment. Maḥfūẓ does not select vitae of eminent persons, heroes or notorious personalities. His biographical compendium turns the spotlight on the common folk. Each entry condenses in few pages, sometimes in few lines, a lifetime. The length of the portraits varies according to the importance accorded to a certain character. The entries are dedicated to a wide variety of human types: rich and poor, young and old, religious and secular, traditionist and Europeanised, evil and good. The underlying script reappears in the choice of the alphabetical order, but is overwritten again as a consequence of the function assigned to this impartial classification principle. In *Ḥadīṯ*, the alphabetical arrangement, in fact, abolishes class and education differences, democratises all citizens. Thus, the wealthy does not deserve more attention than a poor, a man is not more influent than a woman, someone lived in the past is not more genuine than a coeval of the author. All people take part in History. The democratisation principle is also visible in the compiler's decision to place a group of entries on women in the central position of the novel, thus giving them a unique emphasis. The reader is confronted with a fragmented narrative where references to historical events do not follow any chronological order. He is given the task to reconstruct the temporal order of the narrative and to locate a certain person on the branch of one of the three family trees. This peculiar structure also has

[12] The title may recall the oral transmission of knowledge that was at the base of *ḥadīṯ* (sayings of the Prophet) transmission.

[13] I use the expression 'ordinary Egyptians' in the sense provided by Ziad Fahmy. Ordinary Egyptians are the common classes, i.e., the majority of the population, who actively forged a national identity and culture in the history of modern Egypt (Fahmy 2011).

[14] The palimpsestuous structure of the Arabic novel based on intertextual engagement reveals that "the act of recalling this tradition empowers descendants without necessarily limiting their poetics" (al-Musawi 2020: 171).

the purpose of transmitting the sense of the erosion of the traditional family structure and the consequent weakening of family ties: as time went on parents lose their authority over sons, nouveau riches deny their roots and upbringing. The focus on the individual with his/her individuality and the consequent scattering of time and spatial logics suggest that Maḥfūẓ's vision of the imagined community defies conceptions of uniformity, stability, continuity, cohesion. It is a shattered society, the sum of many transversal experiences and oppositive forces that dissolve any idealised conception of community. History is written by unknown soldiers who fight daily. Prominent figures are relegated in the background, while the commoners—usually eclipsed in official historiography—with their aspirations and defeats are given the prominent role. The selected lives are not conceived as exempla, as in the case of the biographical notices disseminated in the periodical press during the Nahḍa (Winckler 2019: 75). They are vitae worth to be told and their languages worth to be taken seriously.

4. The topology of a biographical entry

The first entry of *Ḥadīṯ*, a novel whose title does not immediately recall any premodern type of writing, begins with a traditional novelistic overture: the description of a sunny day in a busy Cairene square in a distant, not clearly definable past. The protagonist of this sketch, a child named Aḥmad Muḥammad Ibrāhīm, is introduced in a spatio-temporal setting which does not suggest a specific chronological starting point. Then, breaking generic expectations, successive sketches do not follow any conventional novelistic prelude and the reader familiar with the Arabic tradition of biographical writing starts to perceive an ancestral sense of belonging. The remodelling and turning of the biographical dictionary into a work of fiction can be understood in terms of generic instability, a concept argued by Thomas O. Beebee to indicate the ability of literature to confound generic expectations of the reader (Beebee 1994: 9). A work such as *Ḥadīṯ* eludes generic classification and derives its meaning by the play between its generic categories.

The epistemological shift endorsed by the novelist is also evident in the construction of the basic narrative unit of the novel, i.e., the single biographical notice. The biographical dictionary has been a very flexible form because its basic unit could be filled with all type of information. The corpus of dictionaries gives the confessional, political, geographical, professional complexity of the composition of the *umma*. The compiler Maḥfūẓ, recalling his precursors, accurately selects specific data to give shape to the notice. The dictionaries of the tradition use to focus on details that made the individual part of a collectivity by indicating a person's affiliation to a religious, professional, or tribal group. The matters most frequently included in the novel's entries are genealogy, place of birth, physical appearance, education, attitude towards religion and faith, political orientation, professional life, ties

with the family system, and cause of death, all that interspersed with anecdotes about him/her. The vision of the scattered community endorsed by the author also emerges from the narrative construction of a single entry, as in the following example:

Letter *sīn*

Surūr ʿAzīz Yazīd al-Miṣrī

> He was born and grew up in the house of al-Ġūriya before Bāb al-Mutawallī with his older brother ʿAmr and their elder sister, Rašwāna. The grazing land of their childhood extended from the gate to the public fountain of Bayn al-Qaṣrayn, where their father ʿAzīz used to sit on his water throne. Surūr resembled his brother in height and lineaments, but his face revealed a finer harmony and his body tended to be more corpulent. [...] He grew up a believer by natural disposition but without bondage, unlike his whole family. So he did not perform prayer or fast duties until he was fifty [...]. He advanced with difficulty in primary school, and ʿAmr was not more fortunate, so when he received the primary school certificate he dropped his weapons and was fortunate enough to find a job in the railways. [...] Although Surūr's government job, excellent wife and beautiful progeny would have guaranteed him peace of mind, he always lingered over what he lacked so he was continuously harmed by fantasies. [...] He remonstrated against his grandfather's wealth and his mother's poverty, and accused his grandfather of perversion and harshness; he burned up with jealously of his beloved brother ʿAmr, because everyone loaded him with love and gifts [...]. Just as Surūr was less devout than his brother, he was also less patriotic. However, the 1919 Revolution laid down in his recalcitrant heart a certain degree of warmth that did not vanish until his last breath. [...] During his last year of government service, one autumn night he had a heart attack while he sat behind the *mašrabiya* window looking intently at the dark crouching over houses and minarets, expecting the usual air-raid siren to come at any time. He departed this life in less than a minute (Maḥfūẓ 2014: 96-99).[15]

As a result of the juxtaposition of some tens of entries structured in such a way, important thematic isoglosses occur. Firstly, transformations in the field of education that took place in Egypt from the early 19th century to the eighties, also in relation to social class. The forefather Yazīd al-Miṣrī (no. 67) received a rudimental education in the *kuttāb* ('Qur'anic school') at the time of the French invasion. His son ʿAmr (no. 45) learned a very basic education as well, while the nephew of his son Surūr, Adham Ḥāzim Surūr (no. 3), graduated in the seventies. Particular attention is reserved to women's access to higher education and their assumption—or lack—of agency.[16] Ṣadriya ʿAmr ʿAzīz (no. 34), born in a very modest family, was sent to Qur'anic school where was taught the rudiments of reading and writing, but

[15] Translations from Arabic are mine.

[16] In the twenties Bahīğa Surūr ʿAzīz (no. 8) could not express her feelings and her tender heart was "in a cage with steel bars of shame and tradition" (Maḥfūẓ 2014: 35).

returned to illiteracy because of her confinement in the domestic home. Her cousin ʿIffāt ʿAbd al-ʿAẓīm Bāšā (no. 42), born from a rich branch of the family, received a urban education in a European school with the result that she did not nourish patriotic sentiment. Danānīr Ṣādiq Barakāt (no. 21), a girl of the same generation, obtained a baccalaureate thanks to the pioneering faith of her father in female education. Secondly, the erosion of the family nucleus in modern Egypt and its total disruption in the second half of the 20th century. The first catastrophic family breakdown occurs very early in the novel, in the second notice dedicated to the wealthy Aḥmad ʿAṭā al-Marākībī. The bond with his brother Maḥmūd was lacerated when the former reclaimed the property he had previously renounced. Thirdly, the relation with the place of origin. The affective bond with the *ḥāra* ('alley') or the ambition to live in a residential building or in a huge villa mirrors the oppositional forces of tradition and modernity. Ḥabība ʿAmr ʿAzīz's (no. 13) flaming attachment to the old quarter where time seems to have stopped, will be the cause of her tragic and fearful loneliness. In the twenties, Ḥāmid ʿAmr ʿAzīz (no. 12), Ḥabība's brother, lived a revolutionary migration from the alley to an elegant mansion after an arranged marriage with a rich cousin. This migration, however, will be the prelude of an unhappy conjugal life. Fourthly, the way social climbing is perceived and pursued by commoners. This is best exemplified by the couple of brothers ʿAmr ʿAzīz Yazīd al-Miṣrī (no. 45) and Surūr ʿAzīz Yazīd al-Miṣrī (no. 26). While the first accepts arranged marriages of his sons with the riches of the family, the second's moral principles oppose this kind of practice. Fifthly, how the historical and political background, from the modernisation project of Muḥammad ʿAlī, the ʿUrabī revolution (1879-1882), the 1919 revolution, the July revolution (1952), to the *infitāḥ* ('open door') policies, affected for better or worse the lives of modern Egyptians. Just to cite a pair of examples, the educational renewal promoted by Muḥammad ʿAlī definitely changed the life of Dawūd Yazīd al-Miṣrī (no. 19), who was given the opportunity to study medicine in France and became a brilliant doctor. His brother ʿAzīz Yazīd al-Miṣrī (no. 41), who was not included in the educational training, worked as the watchman of the public fountain of Bayna al-Qaṣrayn. The last isogloss we deal with concerns how religion has been experienced over two centuries. Here, Maḥfūẓ offers a huge variety of attitudes. While rich people perform religious duties only for façade, popular practices and superstitions are the main comfort of humble people. The most vivid personality is that of Rāḍia Muʿāwiya al-Qaliyūbī (no. 22), the daughter of one of the forefathers, a mistress of mysteries, lives of saints, magic, and popular religious remedies, whose son, Qāsim ʿAmr ʿAzīz (no. 51) would become a saint-like figure after a tragedy that traumatised his childhood. Personal achievement is—as consuetudinary in Maḥfūẓ's works—also and above all a matter of fate.

The most striking aspect in the entry's structure is the insertion of details concerning a person's intimacy. Classical dictionaries focus on social history and reserve little space to accounts of

individuality (Reynolds 2001: 41). Superimposing a writing on the vellum, the novelist collects and includes in the entries details of characters' private life, unspeakable secrets, opinions about relatives or friends, desires of revenge. The compiler fully takes account of individuality, as appears in the entry on Danānīr Ṣādiq Barakāt, a girl who sacrificed her whole life and renounced to marriage to financially support her mother, being thus condemned to live alone with her latent repressed fantasies:

> [...] Every night, she sought refuge in her bed after a hard-working day equipped with a vivid imagination to entertain her loneliness. She perseverated in compensating her anxieties and afflictions with dissolute feverish dreams, imaginary wrongdoings and intimate yet barren friendships with deprived colleagues in her monastic job. The secret life of her fictitious world totally contradicted her public life [...]. (Maḥfūẓ 2014: 79)

The authorial voice is apparently faint in the novel, because the entries are presented in an objective and detached third person. Palimpsestuous "describes the structures that one is presented with as the result of the process of layering, and the subsequent reappearance of the underlying script" (Dillon 2007: 4). In the reappearance of the underlying script, the presence of the author, however, is very tangible in the process of selection of biographical data and, more interestingly, in their disposition.[17] What is selected adheres to a specific design of the compiler. The latter resorts to interesting textual strategies to represent important changes occurred in society. As we have seen in the excerpt of the entry on Surūr ʿAzīz Yazīd al-Miṣrī, information about sibling relationship opens the text, thus underlying that family was an institution between the 19th and the first decades of the 20th century. If we compare this introductory section to that of Adham Ḥāzim Surūr, we will notice how selecting specific information, leaving out something and intentionally arranging it in a special order, operates to produce meaning and creating images; in the following case to describe how career and personal achievements have completely suppressed family bond and affection.

Adham Ḥāzim Surūr

> Architect, graduated in 1978. He started his professional life at the age of twenty-five in a Cairo overwhelmed by troubles. Despite that, he never faced a single problem in his life. Waves of people and vehicles flooded around him, their roaring erupted like the rumble of a volcano [...] (Maḥfūẓ 2014: 22).

[17] For an analysis of how premodern compilers designed entries pursuing a 'hidden agenda,' see Gharaibeh (2018).

Each entry, of course, makes sense not if taken individually but in its broader context. Persons are subjectivities, which are the product of the surrounding social environment. For this reason, entries are tied together by narrative strategies and a complex system of cross-references based on allusions, analepsis, prolepsis, and repetitions. This system allows the novelist to convey how someone's decision reverberates on the life of other people, how an historical event can affect successive generations or completely revert the course of someone's life. Therefore, personal details and public events are presented through the collection from multiplying perspectives. The person of Rāḍia Muʿāwiya al-Qaliyūbī is a perfect illustration of this process of reverberation and infraction. Her distinctive feature, that is her unwavering faith in popular religion, reverberates in several entries on relatives or acquaintances through comments and reactions to her eccentricity. Thus, while some people see in her a genuine incarnation of the true Egyptian spirit, many other criticise what they perceive as a backward and anti-modern attitude. The saintly powers attributed to Rāḍia's son, Qāsim ʿAmr ʿAzīz, continuously reverberate in the notices through the device of the prophecy or mystic vision attributed to the young man. Many persons believe that he is able to foresee the future thanks to his special connection with the arcane and unseen. Disseminating biographical information is another narrative strategy that shows individuals as blocks in the structure of society and atoms in the edifice of time.

The overall structure of the novel and the internal design of the entries reveals the author's main concern, i.e, temporality. First of all, through the various entries several approaches to time emerge: people who want to break with the past, people who want to preserve it at every cost, people who succumb to the inexorability of time. As Rashid El-Enany has highlighted in his study on Maḥfūẓ's fiction, time has been a major preoccupation in the novelist's works. The scholar explains to what extent Maḥfūẓ was influenced by Henri Bergson's conception of time in the novels of the 'realist period.' According to the novelist, who firmly believed in the historicity of time, time represented the evolutionary tendency of man. On the individual level, man is destructed by its force but, on the collective level, time is not dangerous because the novelist is confident in human progress and has hope in genealogical continuation (El-Enany 1993: 70-71). In the episodic novels, Maḥfūẓ's conception of time has drastically changed. While alphabetically ordered dictionaries subordinate chronology for the sake of utility, the ordering principle has further functional consequences in the novel. In the novel's chronotope time is as simultaneous as space through the spatialisation of the time category. As Frederic Jameson has argued, the juxtapositions of times and the wiping of distinctions between past, present and future is specifically postmodern (Stephanson and Jameson 1989: 6). This juxtaposition produces chaos and rupture at the narrative level, eliminating causality. Past does not result anymore necessary to understand the present and to program the future. By juxtaposing different temporalities

related to two centuries, by dispersing human lives in fragments and pieces scattered in the various notices, by posing the historical past on the same level of the present, the resulting narrative slices the cohesion of a spatio-temporal context and draws attention to the tyranny of time that annihilates human hopes and lives.

5. Of elegies, epitaphs, obituaries, and graves

As a result of a new perception of temporality, in *Ḥadīṯ* any trace of hope in continuation through descendants has been erased through the choice of a non-linear narrative and its several implications. Moreover, the loss of faith in any teleological discourse is made evident through the predominance of the theme of death in the novel. Almost all the entries end with a detailed description of the protagonist's death, to the point that the reader perceives the novel as a sequence of obituaries.

> This family was destined to irreversible extinction. Ibrāhīm al-Aswānī was killed in a train crash in 1955 when he was fifty-five and Ǧamīla fifty. Surūr's plane was hit in the 1956 war and he suffered a violent death; he was followed by his brother Muḥammad in the 1967 war. Ǧamīla was saved from loneliness and sorrow in 1970, when she died of stomach cancer. She was sixty-three. At the time of her passing, she was completely alone, severed from her family tree. (Maḥfūẓ 2014: 43)[18]

> His life ended in an accident in the eighties. He was driving his Mercedes on Pyramids Road when it turned over and caught fire. They extracted his charred body from it, emptied of the world and its millions. (Maḥfūẓ 2014: 59)[19]

> When destiny was decreed, death reached her with kindness and mildness. Ṣadriya sat cross-legged on the bed at her feet. She heard her sing in a faint voice: "Come back, glorious night, come back!"
> "Are you singing, mum?"
> "When I sang this song, I used to dance between the well and the stove," Rāḍia replied.
> Her head inclined to the left, seeking refuge in eternal silence. (Maḥfūẓ 2014: 87)[20]

In the closing parts of the three entries on people of very different social status, the author suggests the universal idea that death concerns everyone and cancels class differences. In this regard, El-Enany has stated that on the public level the novel transmits the regret for the collapse of the modernisation

[18] Ǧamīla Surūr ʿAzīz (no. 10).

[19] Ḥasan Maḥmūd al-Marākībī (no. 14).

[20] Rāḍia Muʿāwiya al-Qaliyūbī (no. 22).

project in Egypt, while on the private level appears as a celebration of the ceaseless massacre by time of human lives (El-Enany 1993: 136).

As Dillon strongly emphasises in her book, the concept of the palimpsest is characterised by an openness to new inscriptions that can influence our reading of a text. A 'palimpsestuous reading,' Dillon states, "is also an inventive process of creating relations where there may, or should, be none" (Dillon 2007: 83). The massacre of human lives is the core of a renowned work of world literature that is the *Spoon River Anthology* by Edgar Lee Masters (1868-1950), the 1915 collection of 245 epitaphs narrated in the first person by the deceased residents of a fictive Midwestern town.[21] A complex system of cross-references reveals the ambiguities, lies, contradictions, falsehoods of the community. In these "interrelated portraits" (Masters 1933: 50), a very wide range of human experiences is covered and people from all walks of life are introduced. Masters recognised that one of the sources of his work was the *Anthologia Graeca* ('Greek Anthology'), in particular the Book 7 on sepulchral epigrams (7th century CE). These epigrams provide general information about the dead's life, sometimes with precise details of the death. The funerary inscriptions usually contain reflections on the inexorability of death, seen as a part of the natural course of life, but also on the injustice of premature death, and were aimed at giving consolation. Ordinary persons and heroic personalities share the experience of death, and their memory survives in the collective memory thanks to the epigrams (Gullo 2021: 249-251). In the *Spoon River Anthology*, as in its classical precursor, death is explored in its individual and collective dimension and is functional in unveiling the conflicts underlying the idealised community. Masters' epitaphs, spoken by the dead at the cemetery of the small town, give us the image of a very fragmented community, because the difference between what the deceased claims and what the survivors really know is impressive. Death is the device that makes truth emerge and a highly creative force, because only after death the apparent ethical conduct of the community is unmasked or further problematised. Thus, an existential connection between death and storytelling is established, because death provides the opportunity to tell stories (Hakola and Kivistö 2014: viii). Words engraved on a gravestone are not pre-packaged sentences, but chronicles that should—or not—be trusted.

Concerning the discursive and narrative construction of death in *Ḥadīṯ*, it is a theme that occurs at many levels and open to different readings. Death is, of course, a natural part of life and a standard component of a biography. Moreover, it implies and imposes the levelling of discriminatory features,

[21] I want to clarify that, by suggesting of a cross-reading of Maḥfūẓ's novel with Master's anthology, we do not mean to declassify Maḥfūẓ's originality and perpetuate the paradigm that reduced him to a Western-influenced writer. On the contrary, we want to put his work in dialogue with a Western work to stimulate a wider reading of Maḥfūẓ's poetics.

as it happens in Masters' *Anthology*. The narration revolves around dreams of death, suicides, chains of death, bereavements, and mourning. The acknowledged relationship between death and storytelling is established in the first entry. Although the novel can be read without following a particular order and starting from any entry—due to the alphabetical principle that disrupts any logical or chronological order—the compiler's choice to start with the tragedy of the death of a child is not accidental at all. The beginning of a novel plays a significant role in relation to the whole text because it programs the rest of the work.[22] The five-year old Aḥmad Muḥammad Ibrāhīm spent a period of his life with his uncle Qāsim ʿAmr ʿAzīz, who was one year older than him, to relieve his loneliness. One day, his mother found him very sick and after few days the sweet child passed away. A large part of the entry is reserved to Aḥmad's funeral, the grief of his family and, most of all, to Qāsim's devastating sorrow. The first entry of the novel closes with a re-elaboration of the *riṯāʾ* motif, an elegy for the passing away of a chain of hereditary continuation composed through the eyes of a child who is uncapable to accept the death of his best playmate. Here, Maḥfūẓ evokes one of the most characteristic genres and themes of classical Arabic poetry. As excellently explained by Magda Al-Nowaihi, composing elegiac poetry was not a means to weep for the deceased or to reason out the pain of separation. Elegy was, above all, a means to confront death and a creative force that enabled the poet to leave the stage of mourning and embrace the stage of composition (2008: 4; 19). In *Ḥadīṯ*, the elegiac closing of the first entry is the driving force of the novel, the point of departure for telling stories, and prompts the author to subtly introduce the theme of the supernatural powers attributed to Qāsim—derived from the trauma of loss and based on the ability to foresee deaths and tragedies –, a thread that connects many entries as we have said above. The elegiac opening also impacts the whole structure of the novel, as well as its end. The concluding section of the last entry, dedicated to the forefather Yazīd al-Miṣrī, is centred on the description of the grave of the man, built after he dreamt of a saint man instructing him to construct his tomb near his. In the very last line, the compiler specifies that this grave has become a family burying place that still welcomes Yazīd's many descendants in the author's time. Mentions of this grave can be found in many entries on Yazīd's relatives and represent a cohesive unifying device. The grave is clearly a liminal space that links the distant past to the present in a dimension suspended between life and death. As in the *Spoon River Anthology*, death is a destructive force, yet a productive one on the aesthetic level. Through a multidimensional exploration of the theme of death, the novelist reads life and, once again, confirms his preoccupation with the uncontrollable force of time and creates and disperses networks of ordinary Egyptians. Maḥfūẓ's work,

[22] Yves Reuter cited in Al Saadi (2009: 61).

with its culturally specific declinations, bespeaks a universal afflatus and speaks a language that transcends borders.

6. Conclusion

Ḥadīṯ invests a classical mode of expression with a modern vision, combining the traditional and the modern with subtlety. From this point of view, it is a literary attempt of internal decolonisation. A new poetic applied in this late generational novel mirrors different needs of the writer in that period. The novel is a clear attempt to appropriate a classical genre practiced until the Nahḍa period to write the people, the representatives of a counter-hegemonic culture and the makers of a modern collective imagination of Egypt. Shedding light on the subalterns and the violent impact of modernity on their lives, the novelised biographical dictionary opposes to official historiographic practises, sterile and poor because always subjected to a political agenda. As we have seen, Bakhtinian notions are informative in the framework of a theory of postcolonial intertextuality, since the postcolonial writer is a split subject whose utterances are always the expression of two speakers, the writer himself and his otherness. The concept of palimpsestuous textuality has informed our understanding of the novel, constructed as a flux of overlapping discourses, multiple layers of refractions, challenges to canons and to the authority of previous texts. In this palimpsest, origins are summoned up and contested. In his interaction with *turāṯ*, Maḥfūẓ has brought to light the literariness of a non-fictional form of writing. The structure of the novel manifests the act of remembering life stories. On one hand, the selected biographies valorise people, their lives, and their role in the history of the nation; on the other side, continuous references to death make us feel that individuals are no more than trivial records in the flux of history. Individuals are dragged by the flow of events and their subjectivities are overlooked due to the brevity of the textual space reserved to each person. The novel confronts the collapse of the individual and the disintegration of the community in relation to the rise of the modern state, the expansion of capitalism, the adoption of foreign lifestyles, the effects of the integration of Egypt into a world market economy and system. Has Egypt really changed in two centuries? Has it embraced modernity? Are the changes it underwent structural or only superficial? The novel is a bitter appraisal of these issues. Despite significant changes in the fields of education, personal freedom, economic opportunities, the nation-state is still gripped into its past. A complete rejection of the past—represented, for example, by popular religion and Sufism—is not beneficial, but persons who are too much tied to it are doomed to failure in Maḥfūẓ's world. This negative appraisal is also corroborated by the novelist's view of the disruption of time and its effects at a social level. Ordinary Egyptians have been the soul and the makers of national identity, but after two centuries they are still locked in the

atemporal, suspended, liminal dimension of the grave. As emerged from this analysis, the author offers a novel that, acting like an unofficial archival source, refuses to capture the pure essence of things.

References

Agbaria, Ahmad. 2022. *The Politics of Arab Authenticity. Challenges to Postcolonial Thought.* New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Allen, Graham. 2022. *Intertextuality.* London and New York, NY: Routledge.

Beebee, Thomas O. 1994. T*he Ideology of Genre. A Comparative Study in Generic Instability.* University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1992. *Les Règles de l'art: genèse et structure du champ littéraire.* Paris: Seuil.

Daifallah, Yasmeen. 2018. "Turath as Critique: Hassan Hanafi on the Modern Arab Subject." In: *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age. Towards an Intellectual History of the Present,* edited by Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss, 285-310. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Di-Capua, Yoav. 2018. "The Slow Revolution: May 1968 in the Arab World." *The American Historical Review* 123/3: 733-738.

Dillon, Sarah. 2007. *The Palimpsest. Literature, Criticism, Theory.* London and New York, NY: Continuum.

El-Enany, Rasheed. 1993. *Naguib Mahfouz. The Pursuit of Meaning.* London and New York, NY: Routledge.

Fahmy, Ziad. 2011. *Ordinary Egyptians. Creating the Modern Nation through Popular Culture, 1870-1919.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Foucault, Michel. 1984. "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." In: *The Foucault Reader,* edited by Paul Rabinow, 139-164. New York, NY: Pantheon.

Gharaibeh, Mohammad. 2018. "Narrative Strategies in Biographical Dictionaries: the ad-Durar al-Kāmina of Ibn Ḥaǧar al-ʿAsqalanī – a case study." In: *Mamluk Historiography Revisited—Narratological Perspectives,* edited by Stephan Conermann, 51-76. Göttingen: Bonn University Press.

Al-Ghitani, Gamal. 2007. *The Mahfouz Dialogs.* Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.

Al-Ghitany, Gamal. 1984. "Jadaliyat al-tanāṣṣ. Intertextual Dialectics. An Interview with Gamal al-Ghitany." *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 4: 71-82.

Ǧibrīl, Muḥammad. 2023. *Li-l-Šams sabʿat alwān. Qirāʾa fī taǧriba adabiyya.* al-Qāhira: Hindawi Foundation C.I.C.

al-Ġīṭānī, Ǧamāl. 1997. *Muntahà al-ṭalab ilà turāṯ al-ʿArab. Dirāsāt fī al-turāṯ.* al-Qāhira: Dār al-Šurūq.

Gullo, Arianna. 2021. "Death and the Dead in Verse Funerary Epigrams of Ancient Greece." In: *The Routledge Companion to Death and Literature,* edited by Michelle W. Wang, Daniel K. Jernigan and Neil Murphy, 245-256. New York, NY: Routledge.

Hakola, Outi and Sari Kivistö. 2014. "Introduction: Death in Literature." In: *Death in Literature,* edited by Outi Hakola and Sari Kivistö, vii-xix. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Jacquemond, Richard. 2008. *Conscience of the Nation. Writers, State, and Society in Modern Egypt.* Cairo and New York, NY: The American University in Cairo Press.

Kalogeras, Yiorgos D. *et al.* 2021. "Introduction." In: *Palimpsests in Ethnic and Postcolonial Literature and Culture. Surfacing Histories,* edited by Yiorgos D. Kalogeras *et al.,* 1-18. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Khalid, Tarif. 1973. "Islamic Biographical Dictionaries: A Preliminary Assessment." *The Muslim World* 63/1: 53-65.

King, Roy James. 1988. "The Deconstruction of the Self in Nagib Mahfuz's 'Mirrors.'" *Journal of Arabic Literature* 19/1: 55-67.

Mackail, John William (ed.). 1906. *Select Epigrams from the Greek Anthology.* Edited with Revised Text, Translation, Introduction and Notes. London: Longmans, Green.

Mahfouz, Naguib. 2007. *Morning and Evening Talk.* Trans. Christina Phillips. New York, NY: Anchor Books.

Maḥfūẓ, Nağīb. 2014. *Ḥadīṯ al-ṣabāḥ wa-l-masāʾ.* al-Qāhira: Dār al-Šurūq.

Marx, John. 2004. "Postcolonial literature and the Western literary canon." In: *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies,* edited by Neil Lazarus, 83-96. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Masters, Edgar Lee. 1919. *Spoon River Anthology.* New York, NY: The MacMillan Company.

Masters, Edgar Lee. 1933. "The Genesis of Spoon River." *The American Mercury* 28: 38-55.

Al-Musawi, Muhsin J. 2009. *Islam on the Street. Religion in Modern Arabic Literature.* Lanham, MD, Boulder, CO, and New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield.

Al-Musawi, Muhsin. 2017. "The Medieval Turn in Modern Arabic Narrative." In: *The Oxford Handbook of Arab Novelistic Traditions,* edited by Waïl S. Hassan, 67-88. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Al-Musawi, Muhsin J. 2020. "Canons, Thefts, and Palimpsests in the Arabic Literary Tradition." *Journal of Arabic Literature* 51: 165-188.

Al-Nowaihi, Magda. 2008. "Elegy and the Confrontation of Death in Arabic Poetry." In: *Transforming Loss Into Beauty. Essays on Arabic Literature and Culture in Honor of Magda Al-Nowaihi,* edited by Marlé Hammond and Dana Sajdi: 3-20. Cairo & New York, NY: The American University in Cairo Press.

Ouyang, Wen-chin. 2003. "The Dialectic of Past and Present in Riḥlat Ibn Faṭṭūma by Najīb Maḥfūẓ." *Edebiyat* 14/1 & 2: 81-107.

Ouyang, Wen-chin. 2012. *Poetics of Love in the Arabic Novel. Nation-State, Modernity and Tradition.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Ouyang, Wen-chin. 2013. *Politics of Nostalgia in the Arabic Novel. Nation-State, Modernity and Tradition.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Phillips, Christina. 2007. "al-Tašāẓẓī wa al-tanāṣṣ. Istrātīğiyāt tamṯīl al-wāqiʿ fī riwāyat al-Marāyā." *al-Kalima* 4. http://www.alkalimah.net/Articles/Read/385.

al-Qadi, Wadad. 2006. "Biographical Dictionaries as the Scholars' Alternative History of the Muslim Community." In: *Organizing Knowledge. Encyclopædic Activities in the Pre-Eighteenth Century Islamic World,* edited by Gerhard Endress, 23-75. Leiden: Brill.

Reynolds, Dwight F. 2001. *Interpreting the Self. Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition.* Berkeley, CA, Los Angeles, CA and London: University of California Press.

Al Saadi, Tania. 2009. "Évolution des "ouvertures" des romans arabes au cours de XX[e] siècle." *Arabica* 56: 61-89.

Stephanson, Anders and Fredric Jameson. 1989. "Regarding Postmodernism—A Conversation with Fredric Jameson." *Social Text* 21: 3-30.

Tondi, Arianna. 2022. "Ḫiṭaṭ al-Ġīṭānī: A Non-Official Topographical Chronicle of post-1952 Egypt." *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 22/1: 103-128.

Wardeh, Nadia M. 2010. "From ʿAlī Aḥmad Saʿīd to Adonis: A Study of Adonis' Controversial Position on Arab Cultural Heritage (turāth)." *Asian Culture and History* 2/2: 189-212.

Winckler, Barbara. 2019. "Embarking Upon a New Era through an Old Genre. Biographical Essays in Journals of the Nahḍah Period–Ǧurǧī Zaydān and al-Hilāl's Early Years as Example." *Oriente Moderno* 69: 68-93.

Young, Micheal Jhon Lewis.1990. "Arabic biographical writing." In: *Religion, Learning and Science in the ʿAbbasid Period,* edited by M. J. L. Young, John Derek Latham and Robert Bertram Serjeant, 168-187. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Arianna Tondi is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Bergamo. Her research interests include premodern devotional literature produced in Egypt, representations of the *Ahl al-Bayt* in contemporary Egyptian literature, rewritings of the Arab-Islamic literary heritage in contemporary Arabic literature. Her methodological approach focuses on the analysis of the dialectics between past and present and seeks to investigate how Arab writers interface with their literary tradition to valorise or transcend the local and merge or rethink the global in the postcolonial period.
Arianna can be contacted at: arianna.tondi@unibg.it