CHAPTER 14

“The Mosul Stand-Up, or a Riff on a Stiff”: Al-Hamadhānī’s Maqāma of Mosul

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Introduction

I first met Everett Rowson at Harvard, where he taught for several years when I was an undergraduate. In those days, students of classical Arabic might spend a week or more on a single line of text. As a result, we had little sense of literary history. Prof. Rowson’s introduction to adab changed all that: in one semester, we read samples of Arabic prose from the mid-eighth century down to the Mamluk period. At the end, we knew who wrote what and when, and how works in the tradition spoke to or across each other. Every class in Arabic literature I have taught since has been modeled on—and indeed inspired by—that one.

Everett has been inspirational in another way, too. In his generation, and to a large extent even in mine, it was rare to see scholars of classical Arabic take an interest in colloquial Arabic except perhaps as a source of linguistic examples. But Everett, in addition to his work on pre-modern intellectual and social history, is also a connoisseur of Egyptian dialect. During a visit to Cairo in the late 1980s he joined me and a group of my friends for an evening out. My friends were hard to impress: they were Egyptian writers and poets who could play with language all day long. But Everett floored them with his mastery of jargon terms even they may not have known: words, that is, that he had collected while researching the argot of various trades and of the underworld. These days, students are trained (or should be) not to draw hard and fast distinctions between the modern and the pre-modern. But Everett was there first. The same can be said, by the way, about his interest in gender and sexuality, which he was pursuing long before these topics became common in our field.

Over the past two decades, I have always looked forward to seeing Everett at conferences and occasionally in New York during editorial meetings of the Library of Arabic Literature (LAL). I have also turned to him for help when working on texts in his many areas of expertise. He is unfailingly generous in
reading drafts, and his comments are always invaluable. No matter what the subject, it seems, he can always add a reference or explain a knotty passage. Even more helpfully, he has a knack for figuring out just what it is that needs to be done for a paper to work. I fear that in presuming on his kindness my cohort and I have made it difficult for him to get his own writing done. In contrition, but more importantly in affection, esteem, and gratitude, I offer this contribution to his Festschrift.

Among the texts Everett assigned in his *adab* class all those years ago was al-Hamadhānī’s *maqāma* on wine. I enjoyed it enormously and tried to translate it. The result was an enthusiastic rendering that hardly did justice to the original, but Everett received it kindly. Now, some thirty years later, al-Hamādhānī (whose spirit evidently appreciates Everett’s brilliant 1987 study of his career) has made another appearance. Al-Hamādhānī’s *maqāma* of Mosul has been newly edited by Bilal Orfali (see below), who kindly suggested I translate it as my contribution to this volume.

Readers who compare Prof. Orfali’s text of the Mawṣiliyya with other published versions will notice certain important differences: briefly put, his is a better text. Readers who compare my translation with the Arabic will see that it is far from being a literal translation (for which Prendergast’s 1915 rendering fills the bill admirably). Inspired by the good work of my friends at LAL, I have tried to create something worth reading as an English text, while at the same time letting the original pull the English in directions it might not normally go. Needless to say, Prof. Orfali is not responsible for the strange things I have done with his edition.

I am enormously grateful to the members of the LAL editorial board, who, along with Prof. Richard Sieburth, together read a poor first draft and made copious suggestions for improving it. I also thank Prof. Shawkat Toorawa for his helpful suggestions throughout. The result still fails to do justice to al-Hamadhānī, but I hope Prof. Rowson and his many well-wishers will find it amusing.

Translation

Easy told us another one. It went like this.

I set off on horseback from Mosul, Iraq, with Victor, who could out-talk anyone here. We were hoping to stop and bed down for the night, but bandits waylaid us and stole our gear. As we foot-dragged our way to a village nearby, Vic pricked up his ears and said: “Hush! Hear the folks wailing in that house over there? It’s a sad day for them but fat pickings for us.”