REWRITING LITERARY HISTORY:  
THE CASE OF THE ARABIC NOVEL

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This tribute to a great scholar and teacher, my distinguished colleague, Jaroslav Stetkevych, takes the form of a study that is framed by Muḥammad al-Muwayliḥī (1858–1930). That is only appropriate in that it was research on this renowned Egyptian writer that in 1966 took me from Oxford to Cairo as an aspiring Arabic literature specialist. I spent my first days at the Swiss Cottage Pension on Kasr el-Nil Street, and it was there at breakfast on the morning after my arrival that I first encountered Jaroslav, on sabbatical leave from his new appointment at the University of Chicago. I and several other graduate students residing in Cairo (including Michael Zwettler, now of Ohio State University) benefited enormously from Jaroslav’s generously shared wisdom during that interesting year, 1966–67—culminating, of course, in the June War of 1967.

In this contribution I intend to take a retrospective look at the parameters of literary history as applied to the Arabic novel. That I should be doing so now [2006] is, I will admit, a product of the stage that I myself have by now reached in my own career—one that permits me to look back over more than forty years of reading works of Arabic fiction. It thus places me not merely in a somewhat ancient generation but also among the very first pioneers specializing in what was then (the early 1960s) a radically new and somewhat disparaged field—that of “modern Arabic literature studies.” I was and am, in fact, the first Oxford graduate student to obtain a doctorate degree in that subject (1968). That’s not to say, of course, that modern Arabic texts were not taught at Oxford before that decade, but merely to note that they were considered a “special subject,” something that you might dabble in if you so desired, but only after you had studied the texts of the major canon (or, at least, the Oxonian version thereof).

Subsequent decades in my scholarly career have seen a move from the beginning of the 20th century with Muḥammad al-Muwayliḥī to later decades and encounters with a number of writers: Najīb Mahfūẓ, Yūsuf Idrīs, Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Mūnīf, and most
recently, several Moroccan novelists. My 1978 lectures at the University of Manchester were to become *The Arabic Novel: an historical and critical introduction*, the first survey work on the Arabic novel published in English (1982), subsequently enlarged (1995). More recently, the now finished project known as the Cambridge History of Arabic Literature first asked me to write two chapters on the novel for the “modern” volume, *Modern Arabic Literature*, published in 1992 (ed. M. M. Badawi) and then to embark on what has turned out to be a ten-year project, editing the recently published volume, *The Post-Classical Period* (2006).

I am providing this personalized detail here as a prelude to and justification for what I would like to do in this study: namely, to suggest that these and other examples of literary-historical activity are not and should not be fixed entities and that literary-history and its products themselves have a history. In making this suggestion, I can, of course, take great comfort from the well-known words of Oscar Wilde: “the one duty that we owe to history is to rewrite it.” In brief, from a perspective of 2006 I wish to challenge many of the premises and organizing principles that have governed research and publication that I have done previously, not so much in order to suggest that they were not relevant or even useful for their time, but rather that the changing nature of Arabic fiction—a primary facet of its very essence, of course—requires a continuingly changing perspective in order to reflect both the creativity of Arab littérateurs and the kind of studies now being devoted to it. I will begin by citing two major parameters that result from the investigations that I have just mentioned and that now directly affect my own attitudes, and then consider retrospectively some of the corollaries that they seem to imply and impose with regard to the study of Arabic fiction.

The first of these two parameters—and I am using that term in the sense coined by Thomas Kuhn as implying a major principle which has effects on a number of others—is the very nomenclature that we use, and specifically “Arabic literature” and “Arabic fiction.” Needless to say, universities and colleges where much research on those topics takes

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1 I have already undertaken one foray into this topic in an essay entitled “Literary history and the Arabic Novel,” *World Literature Today* Vol. 75 no. 2 (Spring 2001): 205–13.