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Kamran Rastegar

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KAMRAN RASTEGAR

I LITERARY MODERNITY AND FAILED NOVELS

Our understanding of nineteenth-century literary practice is often mediated by the national literature model of study that continues to govern discussions of modern literature. Put differently, contemporary evaluations of literary texts of the nineteenth century are often arrived at by using the national literature models that remain ascendant. This results in particular from the interplay of two concepts, 'nationalism' and 'novelism', and the role that these ideological agendas play in establishing the frameworks for literary study that predominate in today's academy. Novelism is defined by Clifford Siskin as 'the habitual subordination of writing to the novel' – it is the prevalent tendency to approach prose writing in general using a framework of value derived from criticism of the novel.¹ Rather than evaluating texts of the period in question by using criteria that can be validly ascribed to the sites of their production, we often tend to employ instead criteria derived from the novel as a currently-ascendant form of writing. Together with the tendency to read literature as defined exclusively by the trajectories offered in national-literature frameworks, this dual agenda has come to represent the most widespread tendency in literary historical scholarship, that of the nationalist-novelist paradigm, which presumes national literatures to be its subject matter, and which evaluates (non-European) prose writing largely through the critical tools developed for assessing the European novel.

These issues take us back to the debates that continue to be aired by literary historians of Arabic and other West Asian literatures, seeking answers to questions such as: Which was the first novel written in

Arabic? What was the inspiration for the earliest of Turkish novels? Is it appropriate to term certain late nineteenth-century Persian long prose narrative works as novels even though they do not conform to the criteria for the genre set by scholars of the modern English or French novel? These and other similar questions largely concern the difficulty scholars face in agreeing upon the value of novelistic writing within non-European societies. This problem finds its roots, perhaps, in the differential economies for literary production in colonial and in colonized societies. By the late nineteenth century there is no doubt that French and English novels were produced within a largely autonomous cultural economy, deriving legitimacy from a complex interrelation of factors such as the cultural legitimacy accorded to works by the critical elites, the prestige of popular regard, and the emergence of the myth of the author as an individual creator, a figure seemingly located outside of the logic of this economy. For example, when looking at the writers of the Arab world or Iran, we find that innovative trends in narrative writing also emerged through an increasingly autonomous sphere for literary production, but that the terms for these spheres not only varied in different social settings but also comprised different kinds of actors in each of these specific settings.

It also bears noting that this constellation of criteria for the evaluation of Arabic novelistic writing along terms set by 'its Western counterpart' is not entirely limited to non-Arab scholars. The fixation of many critics upon the terms developed by Western literary imaginations has led to a kind of *ressentiment* among students of non-Western literatures, who may hang their heads in shame or frustration concerning the 'failures' of their novelists and other prose writers. This sentiment illuminates one important point: as a matter of course, where the study of literatures of the formerly colonized world are concerned, scholarly assessments have largely followed the thread of 'East-West' or 'North-South' comparisons – presumptively assessing the influence of colonial societies upon the modern cultures of the formerly colonized world. Thus, it may be no more of a surprise that the prose narrative writing of the postcolonial world is littered with so many 'failed novels' than is the discovery that European and American poets have yet to truly master composing *ghazal* poems along the line of those written by Hafiz or Iqbal.

For comparatists, the prevalence of a framework for the evaluation of prose narrative writing solely in accordance with the framework of the European novel presents particular concerns. Few studies have attempted to assess the question of literary innovation or even influence

as a process that may be examined in a framework comparing different formerly colonized societies. The cause of this is perhaps clear enough, and relates to the cultural capital accorded to working with metropolitan languages; at other times it is a product of simplistic nationalist proclivities, as well as a sign of the institutional prestige and standing within the academy of work with European languages, even if the specialization is in Arabic, Persian or some other non-European language. The outcome of this is that to date no major literary study of Arabic or Persian nineteenth-century literatures has employed a comparative framework across the two languages, or indeed with reference to any other regional language. What has been lost is the consideration that relations between these two and other regional languages could account for a major part of the trajectory of literary modernity in these languages.

II JURJI ZAYDAN'S HISTORICAL NARRATIVES – NOVELISM AND TRANSLATION

‘[Many] of the books we would read were translated from Arabic, including the *tasnifat* [literary works] of Jurji Zaydan – titles such as *The Tale of Salami*, *Armanusa the Egyptian*, *The Syrian Lady*, *The Seventeenth Day of Ramadan*, *The New Person*, and many others...’²

(The Iranian literary scholar Mujtaba Minuvi, discussing books that were widely read during his youth in the early twentieth century in Iran)

One fascinating but rarely examined exemplar of the role played by innovative Arabic literary work in the development of modern Persian literary habits may be seen in the reception of Persian translations of Jurji Zaydan’s (1861–1914) *rimayat*. Before discussing these translations, a few general words on Zaydan may be necessary, so as to contextualize these works. Zaydan was and still is a major figure within the Arab world for his many contributions to the discursive and intellectual innovations that are termed the Arab *nahda*.³ He consistently presented a synthesis of both historical and scientific knowledge through his prolific publications – in particular his journal *al-Hilal* and the many books he published with *al-Hilal* press.⁴ Both the journal and his books display Zaydan’s particular perspective on the trends of reformist and revolutionary thought spreading across the Arab east, the *marshriq*, or greater Syria and Egypt. Through advocating a re-engagement with classical Arabic literature, and through an open embrace of the developments in science and technology in Europe, Zaydan worked to develop a new lexicon and

intellect suitable for addressing the problems and aspirations of modern Arab society.⁵ One element of this was his advocacy of a re-engagement for this society with the legacies of classical Islamic history, and for a new kind of relation between the peoples and cultures of the Islamic world – in a general sense, these themes resonated with the strands of thought that later were to be characterized as the pan-Islamic movements.⁶

Zaydan's Islamic *riwayat* (sing. *riwaya*) were long prose narrative works often described as novels, despite their divergences from certain criteria of traditional novelistic writing as measured against the European genre. I have chosen to use the original Arabic term so as to try to avoid the use of the term 'novel', for while Zaydan tended to describe these books as *riwayat* within their subtitles (he called the series *silsilat riwayat tarikh al-Islam* – 'a series of narratives of the history of Islam'), English accounts of these texts largely enact a somewhat ahistorical slip by translating this term as 'novels', most often without providing further justification for using this generical attribution.⁷ It is true that today 'riwaya' is the Arabic term for the novel; however, generically speaking the term only specifies a narrative, usually a fictional narrative. It was not until the 1940s that the word began to be more widely accepted as conveying the literal meaning of the English word 'novel', or the French 'roman' although the term was utilized by some Arab commentators as translations of these words from much earlier on.⁸ Thus 'riwaya' does not retain the innovative implications the English word inherently carries, but its use as a marker of a literary genre does tend to coincide with conceptions of modernity in literature. It is significant, for example, that in the quotation with which I introduce this section the Iranian scholar Mujtaba Minuvi – an early translator of Zaydan into Persian active in the early and mid-twentieth century – elects to use the term *tasnifat* to describe Zaydan's books, not *ruman* (pl. *rumanha*; the Persian term for novel is appropriated from the French, *roman*). To clarify: my intention is not to reopen a discussion about what the novel is or may be, or to discount the work of scholars who have termed these texts as novels, but rather to attempt to think more fully of Zaydan's innovative work through the complex set of influences and inspirations they represent – the European novel is certainly among them.⁹ While Zaydan's *riwayat* did not fit into traditional Arabic narrative genres, to uncritically term them novels may overstate their relationship with the European genre, and may lead to difficulties in determining criteria for their assessment.

As synthetic texts fusing historical writing with narrative fictional elements – usually a tale of romance upon the stage of a great historical moment, infused with ‘essentially pedagogical goals’ – the works were unique, innovative and in a profound sense intended to convey aspects of the legacy of classical Arabic *adab* (humanistic sciences) within a framework most appropriate to Zaydan’s modern audiences.¹⁰ In his twenty-three *rimayat*, Zaydan attempted to cover most major episodes in Islamic history, from the advent of Islam, through the classical period, up to the nineteenth-century rise of Muhammad ‘Ali Pasha in Egypt.¹¹ The modernity of these texts is perhaps most evident in their construction: the works were serialized in *al-Hilal*, and so their structures were to a great extent determined by the contingencies and possibilities presented by their publication in a periodical. *Al-Hilal* and other Arabic cultural periodicals were instrumental in developing a more autonomous process for the legitimization of literature, and the serialization of long prose narrative fictions was one important step in this direction. By doing this, these periodicals provided a new forum for the critical evaluation of literature based upon criteria appropriate to the new social function for literature emerging in this period.

While Zaydan’s works played a formidable role in the process of bridging the history of the Islamic world with innovations in the Arabic language and in the development of mass readerships in the Arab world, it is also the case that his *rimayat* were influential outside of the framework of the Arab world. Some have read Zaydan’s works as exhibiting proto-nationalist qualities – either defined as Egyptian nationalist or Arab nationalist – without endeavouring to explain how it could be that Zaydan’s work could find wide appeal in linguistic and social settings outside of Egypt or the Arab world. Problematizing such claims is not difficult given Zaydan’s explicit interest in non-Arab contributions to Islamic history, and given his proclivity to present as heroic characters from other ethnic groups. Furthermore, Zaydan was quite nuanced in his vision of what was to be included in the framework of Islamic history, presenting narratives that were sympathetic to the Shi’a perspective of this history while following faithfully Sunni themes as well. It may be that this openness was one important factor contributing to the popularity of the books both in the Arab world as well as outside it. It is even said that Maxim Gorky ‘showed interest’ in some of Zaydan’s writings.¹²

While Zaydan’s work was translated into many languages even during his rather short lifetime (including Russian, Tamil, Portuguese, Hindi,

German and English), in that period his books were translated into Persian more than any other language; in the decades that followed his death, retranslations and reissues of previous translations solidified the popular interest in his work in Persian. A posthumous volume collecting biographical details of Zaydan's life, along with selections of his work and information about his writing, shows that during his life his *rimayat* were translated into at least 25 different editions of different languages.¹³ Of these, eight were translations into Persian. Yet despite the proliferation of translations during his lifetime and the continuing interest in his work inside Iran, his influence upon the development of modern Persian literature remains underexposed, with scholars giving these translations much less consideration than translations of European texts. This disregard is by no means limited to Zaydan's work alone: few scholars have engaged with the implications of the circulation of textual material between Arabic and Persian during the nineteenth century as a factor contributing to the development of modern Persian literature (indeed, scholars of Arabic literature have also tended to downplay similar regional influences on the development of modern Arabic literature). This circulation, as I have argued elsewhere, in fact played an important role in the process of innovating literary practices in order to conform to the needs and imperatives of the modern world.¹⁴

Despite reports testifying to their popularity in Iran in the early twentieth century, the translations of Zaydan's works into Persian have received little or no attention by literary historians of this period. For example, despite devoting some attention to the issue of translation, Hassan Kamshad's influential study *Modern Persian Prose Literature* makes only one reference to the translation of Zaydan's *rimayat*, and even then the reference is only to one of the many prominent figures involved in their translation.¹⁵ This general disregard for the impact of Zaydan's work is carried over into more recent scholarship as well. One such example is Kamran Talattof's *Reading Politics in Persian Literature*, a study that presents a general analysis of the development of modern Persian literature, focusing largely on work from the second half of the twentieth century. However, in outlining a historical framework for its subject, Talattof's analysis of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Persian literature is presented largely uncritically from the perspective of the nationalist-novelist paradigm. Thus the 'first episode of modern Persian literature' is located within a current of reactionary anti-Islamic discourse exhibited in the works of a number of late-nineteenth-century Iranian writers.¹⁶ Modern Persian literature emerges

here as part of the ideological project of ‘Persianism’, the objectives of which are identified as an aim

to denounce the use of Arabic terminology; to work toward the purification of the Persian language through poetry; to promote a fictional language closer to common parlance instead of the conventional style; to link ancient Iran to the present time and to expunge centuries of Islamic dominance from the memory; and, finally, to promote modernity by creating new literary forms.¹⁷

According to Talattof, Persianism adopted a hostile position toward Arabic because the movement ‘blamed [Iranian] society’s problems on Islam and admired the West’.¹⁸ Persianism was indeed a powerful force in late-nineteenth-century Iran and was an important ideological strand fundamental to understanding Iranian nationalist thought. However, Talattof’s analysis would seem to indicate that any cultural or ideological orientation positioning itself against the Persianist trend was somehow doomed to being hermeneutically anti-modern – a point borne out by the labeling of those who were not supporters of the Persianist agenda as traditionalists ‘who argued that any innovation to the language would be to its detriment’.¹⁹ I would like to propose that these two positions are not so clearly demarcated, nor are they the only two positions available to Iranian intellectuals of this period. By arguing that the inception of literary modernity was to be marked with the emergence of a cultural movement that rejected regional interrelations, and which rejected these cultural links in favour of a simple orientation of ‘admiring the West’, we run the risk of imposing the ideological rubrics of the nationalist–novelist paradigm upon a period and a range of works that are much more complex and contested than this, works that may not fit the framework of Persianism but which were innovative, progressive and essentially modern.

Interestingly, Talattof’s study does discuss Zaydan’s work briefly – but only where Arab *nahda* figures are identified as representing a corollary movement of ‘Arabism’.²⁰ Here it is observed that ‘in more than twenty novels, Zaydan rewrote history in order to educate Arabs about their glorious past’.²¹ No mention is made of the many translations of these works into Persian. This parallel compartmentalization – the articulation of Iranian modernity through Persianism and a corollary movement of Arab cultural modernity defined by Arabism – is neat enough, but this narrative follows the nationalist–novelist proclivity to render invisible the continuing interconnections between Arabic and Persian even into the twentieth century. In this sense, the exposition of Zaydan as a proponent of ‘Arabism’ would probably be uncontroversial for many modern Arab scholars as well. Yet, as has been explained,

Zaydan's work was clearly much more a product of pan-Islamic idealism, where the revival and transformation of Arabic was seen as one major project within the larger ideal of a revitalization and unification of the Islamic world. To reduce his work to representing a proto-Arab nationalist position is to fundamentally misunderstand the political and cultural positioning of many of his generation, just as calling his *rimayat* 'novels' subordinates them to a narrative of novelistic development that is to a great extent an anachronism.

While many scholars have tended to disregard or overlook the role played by translations of Zaydan's *rimayat* into Persian in the articulation of Persian literary modernity, several works of literary scholarship do cite the translations of Zaydan's work as a major body of texts within the Persian translation movement of the early twentieth century which has been credited with effecting some of the transformations in literary practice in that period. While most accounts have emphasized the large corpus of European (especially French) literary works that were rendered into Persian in this period, Zaydan's name also features regularly in lists of those foreign authors whose works were most subject to translation by Iranians. For example, the Iranian literary critic Muhammad Ghulam devotes only about two pages of a thirty-plus-page study on the influence of foreign translations upon the emergence of the historical novel genre in Persian to Zaydan's work. Tellingly, this relatively brief discussion is comprised largely of a set of reasons why Iranian translators would have been interested in rendering his books into Persian at all – a type of discussion he seems to feel is unwarranted when dealing with the European authors included in his study. He cites Zaydan's use of 'familiar sources' in his historical narratives (dealing with Islamic history), the fact that some translators would have been unable to translate from French (given the fact that French literature was to a far greater extent the source of translations into Persian than was English literature during this period), as well as Zaydan's simple, fluid and clear style of writing. The first of these explanations is of course a truism – Zaydan's work concerned Islamic history and thus would certainly have offered a more familiar terrain for Iranian readers than the work of Alexandre Dumas or other 'historical' authors of Europe. The second reason Ghulam cites is also one that the pre-eminent Iranian literary historian Yahya Arianpur has used in his own discussion of Zaydan: since some literary figures lacked the skills to work from a European language, they by default had little other than Zaydan to work from. Arianpur in particular has little positive to say about Zaydan and judges

the translations in largely the same way. This dismissive argument concerning these translations seems rather thin; Ghulam himself admits as much when he notes that several literary figures who were known to be fluent in French themselves elected to translate works of Zaydan from the Arabic.²² However, despite his fairly nuanced reading of the interest in Zaydan's work, Ghulam ends his discussion of the translation movement with the following puzzling statement: 'Truly, the European "historical novel" [*ruman-i tarkhi*], as a new literary genre, officially entered Persian literature with the translations of the works of Alexandre Dumas and Jurji Zaydan'.²³ Here we find ourselves presented with more questions than answers – why can it be said that with the translation of Zaydan's works the European historical novel was introduced to Iran?

III THE PERSIAN TRANSLATORS AND READERS OF JURJI ZAYDAN'S *RIWAYAT*

To think beyond the limits presented by critical discourse on the translations of Zaydan's work into Persian, one important question must be addressed – a question to which this study will only be able to offer very tentative answers: who read Zaydan's *riwayat* in Persian, and what value did it have for them? To date, at least nineteen of Zaydan's *riwayat* have been translated into Persian in at least forty-three printed editions.²⁴ The earliest of these translations was published in 1903; they continue to be published (largely in reissued editions of earlier translations) to the present day – one Tehran-based publisher has reissued at least ten of these translations between 2000 and 2002 alone, another has republished one translation as recently as 2005. This broadly indicates that not only has there been a wide-ranging interest in Zaydan's work among Iranian readerships, comprising most (if not perhaps all) of his *riwayat* over the years, but that this interest is limited neither to a particular period of time nor to some unique and short-lived disposition or fashion. Few other translated authors may claim a similarly enduring interest among Iranian readers over a comparable period of time and across such a wide range of work. In this respect, the translations of Zaydan must be thought of as occupying a position similar in interest and value to that of many of the European classics that were translated in the early twentieth century and continue to enjoy popular interest to this day – authors such as Victor Hugo, Emile Zola or Charles Dickens would no doubt head such a list. One source reports that eleven editions of Zaydan's books were published in Iran between 1955 and 1963, while the

same period saw the publication of nine translations of Alexandre Dumas, with fourteen translations of Victor Hugo, thirteen of Dostoevsky, twelve of Hemingway and ten of Tolstoy appearing between 1953 and 1962, a roughly equivalent period of time.²⁵ What this indicates is that while European texts visibly predominate overall, Zaydan can clearly hold his own both as regards nineteenth-century masters (Hugo, Dostoevsky) as well as more contemporary Western writers.

But even if the translations of Zaydan's books have been able to sustain a comparable level of interest as those of his Western counterparts, there have been stretches of some years when interest in his books has waned. Within this ebb and flow, publishing activity (as witnessed in the translations listed in the appendix) seems to centre on three periods: the early twentieth century up to and including the 1920s, the 1950s and early 1960s, and the post-revolutionary era (which itself divides into the mid-1980s and the turn of the millennium). The first coincides with the years shortly before and after Zaydan's death, marking a phase that begins with the constitutional revolution of 1906–1911 and climaxes in the early period of Reza Shah's rule in the mid- to late-1920s. While reading cultural trends against the backdrop of political history always runs the risk of appearing historically reductionist, it is nonetheless significant that these early translations (largely carried out by Abd al-Husayn Mirza) coincided with a period of great social upheaval and political unrest. It is telling that Zaydan himself exhibited considerable empathy with the Iranian constitutional revolution and covered the events in his periodical *al-Hilal*, siding with the revolutionaries and pointing out the significance of the events for his largely Arab readership.

This first phase of interest in Zaydan's work seems to fade in the early 1930s, continuing until the abdication of Reza Shah in 1941. Generally speaking, this period in Iranian history is characterized by significant cultural repression on the part of Iran's government; the fear of governmental disapproval or censure, coupled with the emergence of an officially sanctioned ethno-nationalist political discourse that rejected historical links with Iran's Arab neighbours, may not have been the most advantageous setting for the reissue of Zaydan's work. And it should be noted that, outside of the government's own official ideological positioning, most of the cultural elite – including such crucial arbiters of literary value as scholars and critics – either endorsed the official state ideology or, at the very least, said nothing to draw the ire of the government. This may go some way to explain why Zaydan's books fell out of favour in this period.

There is evidence of a limited revival of interest in Zaydan and his work in the 1950s, a point reinforced by the data presented above on the number of editions of his books that appeared in the early to late 1950s. A possible explanation – again using political coordinates – may be the relative freedom that Iran experienced during the early reign of Muhammad Reza Pahlavi and the rise of the nationalist Prime Minister Muhammad Mussadiq. This period of relative freedom from government repression soon shifts into the more draconian era beginning in the mid-1960s, which continues until the revolution – a period in which far fewer editions of Zaydan’s works were to appear. This would lead us to conclude that there is a distinct link between politics and the reception of Zaydan’s work in Iran. However, an equally important factor contributing to the ebb and flow of the reception of Zaydan’s work in Iran is the ascendancy of Persianist nationalist discourse. How do Zaydan’s pan-Islamist leanings – as they are reflected in his *rimayat* – impact on this reception trajectory?

Initially, one may be led to support the Persianist argument when we learn about the revival of interest in Zaydan in the post-revolutionary era, evidenced through two clusters of reissues of his translations in this period. Does it not follow that the new Islamic Republic would embrace Zaydan’s work as in essence doctrinaire? However, this would result in an overly simplistic reading of the role that literature played in this period, and we may wish only to remember that these works, while oriented towards historically Islamic themes, hardly fit the particular brand of modern Islamism that was to gain the upper hand in the post-revolutionary power struggles. It is also interesting to note that – given that several of Zaydan’s works deal with historical events of particular interest to Shi’a Muslims, as seen in his works *Sab‘at ‘Ashar Ramadan* (The Seventeenth of Ramadan) or *Ghadat Karbala* (The Girl of Karbala) – no apparent priority is given to the republication of these texts over those that, for example, celebrate the achievements of the Sunni Abbasid caliphate. It seems that religious affiliation alone is not sufficient to override the renewed interest amongst the post-revolutionary Iranian reading public in prose writings from the early twentieth century, including a new appreciation for and focus on the work of certain translators.

One is struck especially by the presence of testimonies by Iranian cultural figures who cite the translations of Zaydan’s work alongside European translations as having exerted a particular influence on their development. Speaking of the circulation of translations in his lifetime,

the Iranian author Parviz Natil Khanlari reports that ‘from among these [translations] Alexandre Dumas’ first and then Jurji Zaydan’s [books] attracted the most attention of translators and readers, leading to a particular enthusiasm for reading historical novels among Iranians; thus Iranian authors were inspired to write historical novels about their own country.’²⁶ Given this enthusiasm for the works of Zaydan and Dumas and, as Khanlari terms it, their profound impact on a whole generation of Iranian authors, future scholars would be remiss to neglect the role of Zaydan when considering the emergence of innovative literary practice in Iran. But scholars also need to study the role of translators and, more specifically, the role they played in the dissemination of Zaydan’s *rimayat*. Indeed, Zaydan’s *rimayat* have been translated into Persian by individuals with a wide variety of backgrounds, and most works have seen multiple translations.

It is worth noting that Zaydan’s works began appearing in translation in Iran at the very moment when a modern literary sensibility was starting to emerge. In terms of style and content, the translations of Zaydan’s *rimayat* doubtless were a major source for providing the subsequent generation of Iranian writers with a new foundation from which to challenge established literary conventions. In the Arabic literary context, Zaydan is often cited among those Arab *nahda* writers who were particularly influential in crafting and promoting a simpler mode of narration. While as a thinker Zaydan is at times represented as being affiliated with the Arabic neoclassical movement of the late nineteenth century, a movement populated largely by poets seeking inspiration in reviving classical poetic forms (albeit sometimes with contemporary themes or settings, as with the Egyptian poets Ahmad Shawqi and Ibrahim Hafiz), the classical influence remains limited to his choice of subject matter. His style is, by contrast, much more a reflection of his experiences as an essayist and journal editor. His *rimayat* are thus marked by a stripped-down prose, bereft of dense metaphoric elements or textual allusions to classical motifs. What Zaydan does share with the neoclassical authors, however, is an interest in employing legitimizing elements from classical Arabic sources in order to introduce innovations within accepted literary discourse. Many Iranian literary figures would have found in Zaydan a closer counterpart to their own innovative enterprises, someone who – through references to a shared, emerging conception of a ‘civilizational heritage’ – provided them with a template for ways in which to ‘modernize’ in a manner that would be viewed as organic and domestic by their intended readerships.

While the desire for innovation may have been an important motivation for Zaydan's Persian translators, the historical record shows that it is difficult to generalize about them or their reasons for carrying out these translations. Two of these figures can be most credited with introducing his work to Persian readers, Muhammad 'Ali Shirazi and 'Abd al-Husayn Mirza. Both were members of the Qajar court's inner circles, with the latter being a cousin of Ahmad Shah, the last Qajar ruler of Iran, whose reign lasted from 1909 to 1925. It is of note that his translations were apparently commissioned by 'Izzat al-Duwlih, the Shah's great-aunt, who exerted significant influence within the court after a long life of involvement with court politics.²⁷ The second translator, Muhammad 'Ali Shirazi Niqab al-Mamalik, served as a private secretary to Nasir al-Din Shah (whose reign lasted from 1848 to 1896) and whose functions included telling bedtime stories to the Shah in the later years of the ruler's life (this being a duty that came with the title of *naqqash-bashi*, or court storyteller). A prose narrative manuscript by the title of *Amir Arsalan* – credited with being one of the first modern renditions of what was a Persian tale of some antiquity – was prepared by the princess Turan Agha Fakhr al-Duwlih on the basis of her transcriptions of Shirazi's storytelling.²⁸ The inception of these translations within the court is not entirely surprising – other translations of contemporary Arabic texts were carried out during the rule of Nasir al-Din Shah, perhaps most noteworthy among them the translation of the 1835 'Bulaq Press' edition of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* (The Thousand and One Nights), which played such an important role in the development of a print economy for secular, non-courtly texts.²⁹

Clearly, Zaydan's works enjoyed some popularity at court and with the elite classes. However, even by the first decades of the twentieth century the *rimayat* were beginning to be printed in Persian in relatively cheap paperback editions, indicating their appeal across class and social divides within Iran.³⁰ These mass-produced editions would be sold or held at borrowing bookshops in the major cities and would often provide social entertainment in the context of public readings. The shift of these translations from being commissioned by the court for use in its often hermetic atmosphere to the more public domain of printed books and broader circulation mirrors the development of more autonomous means of legitimizing literary production – a defining feature of cultural modernity.

Later, aspiring literati succeeded courtiers in producing translations of Zaydan's work. One of these, Muhammad Baqir Khasravi, translated

'*Adhra' Quraysh*, going on to compose the influential historical fictional narrative *Shams va Tughra*, which played such a crucial role in innovating prose writing at the end of the nineteenth century.³¹ *Shams va Tuqara* also played an important cultural role during the constitutional revolutionary era not least because, in the words of Arianpur, in this work Khasravi 'cannot hold back from exhibiting his hatred concerning the social and political institutions of the tyrannical government, whose tether is in the hand of foreign powers and domestic feudalists.'³² One can speculate that it might have been precisely the experience of translating Zaydan's novel that led to Khasravi adopting the form of a historical narrative as a forum to criticize Iran's corrupt government. Eventually Khasravi was exiled from Iran, and later, upon returning after the First World War, he was imprisoned for a period for his political views. From Shirazi to Khasravi the role of the translator has shifted from court functionary to critic of the court.

Another member of the reformist literati was Mujtaba Minuvi, whose translation of Zaydan's *Salah al-Din Ayubi* was his first of many published works. Minuvi's fame stems largely from his scholarly work, in particular on the cultural history of Iran, which he researched during the years he spent living in France and England. Despite his strong nationalist proclivities, he developed a much more nuanced concept of Iranian national identity than was common among other representatives of his generation.³³ Nonetheless, much of Minuvi's work encapsulates the *zeitgeist* that characterizes Iran's mid-twentieth-century intelligentsia, seeking to develop a Persianist concept of modernity that engaged Iran's Persian heritage as well as opening it up to the West. Regardless of whether his translation of Zaydan's *rimayat* fits comfortably with the aspirations of this generation, it is nonetheless one important element in his oeuvre.

These and other translators of Zaydan saw the presentation of his work to a Persian-language audience as an activity that would promote innovation and advance the transformation of Iran into a modern culture. While the earliest translations were carried out for a select audience of members of the court (and may have served initially as bedtime stories for a Shah famously disconnected from the social realities of his dominion), they later came to be a factor within the literary imagination and machination of political activists for a (largely failed) revolution to transform the political and social culture in Iran. A later generation still would buttress through their engagement with Zaydan's work the Persianist goal of a strengthened Iranian nationalism; but even in this last

stage the residue of Zaydan's pan-Islamist idealism seems not to have been fully effaced.

What is interesting in this trajectory is that the majority of editions of Zaydan's work published after the 1979 revolution in Iran are not new translations but rather reissues of earlier ones. Two printing houses have apparently reissued a majority (if not all) of Muhammad 'Ali Shirazi's translations – including, that is, the very first that were prepared for Nasir al-Din Shah's court. This increase in public interest in Zaydan's work in Persian signals a growth in interest generally among Iranian readers in the prose work of the late nineteenth century. For decades the only printed editions of late-nineteenth-century texts available in Iranian bookstores were highly abridged or nearly rewritten editions, simplified for a public whose taste was judged to be incompatible with the excesses of archaic terminology and slow narrative development found in these texts.³⁴ Now this antiquated prose is no longer deemed to be threateningly quaint; even if it is now seen as old-fashioned, it has gained a new estimation among contemporary readers nonetheless.

IV CONCLUSION

This new interest in the original translations of Zaydan provides an opening for a fuller critical appreciation of the role that these works played in the development of an innovative literary prose in Persian. What remains is to address the influence that Zaydan's prose, written 'in a style which would make his works accessible to a wide audience', exerted on this changing literary practice of Iranian authors.³⁵ How do these translations attempt to retain Zaydan's characteristics of style, where 'the vocabulary is familiar, the sentence structure is simple and unburdened with complex imagery and the narrative flows with an easy spontaneity'?³⁶ These are not simple matters, and we can only hint at the complexity of the task – to construct a comprehensive understanding of the development of modern Persian prose in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries will require further work of both a socio-historical and philological nature. This article has attempted to shed some light on the historical data that would allow us to start reevaluating the role of translations from Arabic into Persian as factors affecting literary innovation and shaping the evolving understanding of literary genre in the twentieth century. The evidence presented here shows that these Arabic texts played an important role in the emergence of a modern Persian literature; this evidence also leads us to question how

suitable the nationalist–novelist paradigm is when we attempt to evaluate these and other prose works of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The point here is not to argue for a different ‘source’ for Iranian cultural modernity. Rather it is to argue that modernity in the literary or other cultural fields emerged through multiple intercultural interactions and diverse processes of circulation – what I have elsewhere termed ‘transactions’.³⁷ Persian prose novels are not the result of a monogamic influence exerted by the Western historical novel alone. As we saw, the translations of Zaydan’s *riwayat* are part of a larger framework of regional and even global transactions. The general inhibition of scholars to look across regional boundaries in considering the comparative implications of literary phenomena outside of the West is shown to leave us in the dark concerning some of the important elements and figures that may bring about innovation and transformation within local literary and other cultural practices. Even the framework of Arabic and Persian comparison is limiting: what role may Turkish, Armenian or indeed other regional languages have played in the process of the development of modern Persian literature? And, just as important, what role did Persian in turn play in the development of concepts of cultural modernity in the Arab, Turkish or indeed European cultural spheres? These are but a few of the questions that comparatists may wish to address in their future study of the literatures of North Africa and West Asia.

NOTES

- 1 Clifford Siskin, ‘The Rise of Novelism’, in *Cultural Institutions of the Novel*, edited by Deidre Shauna and William Warner Lynch (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 423.
- 2 Quoted in Muhammad Ghulam, *Ruman-i Tarikhi: Sayr va Naqd va Tahlil-i Rumanha-yi Tarikhi-yi Farsi* (Tehran: Nashr-i Chishmih, 1381 [2002]), p. 91.
- 3 Literally ‘revival’; a term referring to the nineteenth-century movement for Arabic literary and cultural renaissance.
- 4 For an introduction to Jurji Zaydan’s biography and work, see Thomas Philipp, *Gurgi Zaidan: His Life and Thought* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1979). See also Zaydan’s autobiography *Mudhakkirat Jurji Zaydan* (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Jadid, 1968).
- 5 While my own compulsion is to pluralize the term Arab society, to do so may present a kind of violence to Zaydan’s own thinking – he clearly worked within a conceptual framework that idealized a singular Arab culture and society. For example, see his discussions of Arab literature and culture in Zaydan’s *Tarikh Adab al-Lughah al-‘Arabiyya* (A History of the Literature of the Arabic Language), 4 vols (Cairo: al-Hilal Press, 1911).

- 6 Furthermore, it is always of contemporary interest to remember that Zaydan's pan-Islamism showed no dissonance with his own Christian identity – some other Christian Arabs of the traditional churches felt compelled to comment upon their identities, or in some cases to convert (such as Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq, who eventually converted to Islam, or Butrus al-Bustani, who embraced evangelical Protestantism); Zaydan became the most prominent modern popular chronicler of the historical legacies of the Islamic world, while never apparently feeling the need to subject this relationship to commentary or analysis. Given our contemporary predicaments, we tend to note such issues with what may be a greater sense of importance than they likely held in their own day, or at the very least see them through a lens that tells us more about our own presumptions of these issues than of those of the period under discussion. More simply put: no accounts I am aware of present evidence of controversy by either Christians or Muslims of the Arab world over Zaydan's identity and his work during his lifetime, or indeed since his death.
- 7 This is almost universal among scholars writing in English. For one example, see the chapter on Zaydan's *rimayat*, titled 'The Arab Historical Novel', in Matti Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction* (Boulder: Three Continents Press, 1997).
- 8 For more on this, see Muhsin al-Musawi, *al-Rimayya al-'Arabiyya: al-Nash'awa al-Tahawwul* (The Arabic Novel: Origins and Development) (Cairo: al-Hayra al-Misriyya al-'Amma lil Kitab, 1988).
- 9 For example, Zaydan cited Walter Scott's historical novels as one of his inspirations. See Zaydan, *Tarjima*, p. 133.
- 10 Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982), p. 27.
- 11 In fact the series was incomplete and Zaydan left sketches and other evidence of planning further books when he died (Zaydan, *Tarjima*, p. 134).
- 12 Moosa, *The Origins*, p. 218.
- 13 Zaydan, *Tarjima*, p. 131.
- 14 I address this question in my book: Kamran Rastegar, *Literary Modernity Between the Middle East and Europe: Textual Transactions in Nineteenth-Century Arabic, English and Persian Literatures* (London: Routledge, 2007).
- 15 Hassan Kamshad, *Modern Persian Prose Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 28.
- 16 Kamran Talattof, *The Politics of Writing in Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), p. 23.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 176.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 177.
- 22 Ghulam, *Ruman-i Tarikhi*, pp. 95–96.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 96.
- 24 These figures are based on the appendix I have compiled of translations of Zaydan's work. This list is a compilation based on editions I have been able to locate in the Iranian National Library, at the Columbia University Library (which, due to the bequest of the Iranian scholar Sa'id Nafisi's personal library to Columbia University, may contain the best collection of these translations outside of Iran) as well as in the

databases of several other major research libraries in the US and UK. However, I am certain that many gaps remain in this listing – for example, seven titles published by *Intisharat-i Muhsin* are identified on my list, all published in the 1950s. Yet in an advertisement placed at the end of *Banu-yi Qiyraavan*, this publishing company announced that in the year 1950 [1329] alone it had published nine titles by Jurji Zaydan (although they do not list the titles individually). Thus the overall list for titles published by this publisher is likely to be far longer than either seven or nine – one may only conjecture what the true number is. In addition, I suspect that some of the translations published by other earlier publishers of Zaydan's work, and also those of publishers in provincial cities of Iran, are poorly represented within this listing.

- 25 Hassan Mirabidini, *Sad Sal-i Dastan-nivisi-yi Iran* (One Hundred Years of Persian Fiction), 3 vols (Tehran: Nashr-i Chishmih, 1380 [2001]), pp. 298–299.
- 26 Quoted in Ghulam, *Ruman-i Tarikhi*, p. 91.
- 27 Zaydan, *Tarjima*, p. 130.
- 28 Ali Gheissari, *Iranian Intellectuals in the Twentieth Century* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), p. 53.
- 29 See my article 'The Value of Alf Laylah wa Laylah for Arabic, Persian and English Readers', *The Journal of Arabic Literature* 36:3 (2006), 269–287.
- 30 In particular, the novels were republished by the Tehran-based Muhsin press in the late 1940s and early 1950s in popular, inexpensive editions.
- 31 Yahya Arianpur, *Az Saba Na Nima* (From Saba to Nima), 2 vols (Tehran: Intisharat-i Zivvar, 1372 [1993]), p. 241.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 247.
- 33 For an example of this, see his essay 'Shir va Khurshid' in Iraj Afshar, *Nasr-i Mu'asir-i Farsi* (Modern Persian Prose) (Tehran: Kanun-i Ma'rifat, 1330 [1951]), pp. 216–224. In this essay he submits the national symbols of the Qajar and later Pahlavi eras – a lion and the rising sun – to a critical historical investigation, showing claims of its lineage to pre-Islamic Iran to be false.
- 34 This is perfectly exemplified in M. A. Jamalzadieh's rewriting of Mirza Habib Ispahani's classic translation of *The Adventures of Hajji Baba Ispahani* by James Morier. The Jamalzadeh edition butchers the innovative style of the original so as to render a text best suited for children's entertainment. Also, Zayn al-Abidin Maragheh'i's late-nineteenth-century socially critical text presented as faux-travelogue, *Siyahatnameh-yi Ibrahim Beyk*, was for many years only available in a highly abridged form. Both of these texts have been reissued in the past five years in their original forms in well-edited critical editions.
- 35 Roger Allen, 'Beginning of the Arabic Novel', in *The Cambridge University History of Arabic Literature: Modern Arabic Literature*, edited by M. M. Badawi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 188.
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 Again, see Rastegar, *Literary Modernity Between the Middle East and Europe*.

APPENDIX

TRANSLATIONS OF JURJI ZAYDAN'S *RIWAYAT* INTO PERSIAN

17 RAMADAN

Faje 'eh-yi Ramazan

1946 [1335] Tehran. Tr. Muhammad 'Ali Shirazi.

Hivdahum-i Ramazan

1963 [1342] Tehran: Amir Kabir (Kitabha-yi Jibi). Tr. Javad Fazil.

Faje 'eh-yi Ramazan

1982 [1361] Tehran: Ganjinih. Tr. Muhammad 'Ali Shirazi.

Qutam va naqsh-i u dar shahadat-i Imam 'Ali

1996 [1375] Qum: Muassisah-i Farhangi Instisharat-i A'imah. Tr. Iraj Muttaqizadieh and Ibrahim Khanahzarrin.

'ABBASAH 'UKHT RASHID

'Abbasih khahar-i Harun al-Rashid.

1944 [1323] Mashhad: Kitabfurushi-yi Bastan. Tr. Muhammad Taqi Shari'ati Maziani.

'Abbas va Barmakiyan

2002 [1381] Tehran: Afsun. Tr. Muhammad 'Ali Shirazi.

'ABD AL-RAHMAN NASIR

Dastan-i 'Abd al-Rahman Nasir

1932 [1311] Isfahan: Muassissih-yi Akhgar. Tr. Amir Quli Amini.

ABU MUSLIM KHURASANI

Abu Muslim Khurasani

192? [1329] Tehran: Nashriyat-i Muhsin. Tr. Habibullah Amuzgar.

Abu Muslim Khurasani

1974 [1353] Tehran: Shahryar. Tr. Muhammad 'Ali Shirazi.

Abu Muslim Khurasani

1992 [1371] Tehran: M. R. Mar'ashi. Tr. Muhammad Riza Mar'ashi.

Abu Muslim Khurasani

1993 [1372] Tehran: Naw Ahur. Tr. Not noted.

Abu Muslim Khurasani

1984 [1363] Tehran: Ganjinih. Tr. Muhammad 'Ali Shirazi.

Abu Muslim Khurasani

2005 [1384] Tehran: Dunya-yi Kitab. Tr. Muhammad 'Ali Shirazi.

Abu Muslim Khurasani

2002 [1381] Tehran: Afsun. Tr. Muhammad 'Ali Shirazi.

Abu Muslim Khurasani

1992 [1371] Tehran: Muhammad 'Ali Marsha'ipour. Tr. Muhammad 'Ali Marsha'ipour.

'ADHRA' GHURAYSH

Dushizih-yi Dilir

1950 [1329] Tehran: Nashriyat-i Muhsin. Tr. 'Abd al-Husayn Mirza.

'Azra' Ghuraysh

19-? 'Arif. Tr. Muhammad 'Ali Shirazi.

'Azra' Ghuraysh

2001 [1380] Tehran: Afsun. Tr. Muhammad 'Ali Shirazi.

AHMAD IBN TULUN

Ahmad ibn Tulun

2002 [1381] Tehran: Afsun. Tr. Muhammad 'Ali Shirazi.

AMIN WA MA'MUN

Amin va Ma'mun

n/d Tehran: Naqsh-i Jahan. Tr. Muhammad 'Ali Shirazi.

Amin va Ma'mun

1931 [1310] Tehran. Tr. Ishraq Khavari.

Amin va Ma'mun

1985 [1364] Tehran: Ganjinih. Tr. Muhammad 'Ali Shirazi.

Amin va Ma'mun

2000 [1380] Tehran: Afsun. Tr. Muhammad 'Ali Shirazi.

ARMANUSAH AL-MISRIYYAH

Dukhtar-i Nil

2002 [1381] Tehran: Afsun. Tr. Muhammad 'Ali Shirazi.

'ARUS FARGHANAH

'Arus-i Farghanah

1927 [1346 gh] Isfahan: Matba'ih-yi Parvin. Tr. Amir Quli Amini.

'Arus-i Farghanah

19-? Isfahan: Kitabfurushi-yi Iqbal. Tr. Amir Quli Amini.

FATAT AL-QAYRAWAN

Banu-yi Qiravan

1950 [1329] Tehran: Nashriyat-i Muhsin. Tr. Ishraq-i Khavari.

FATH AL-ANDALUS

Fath-i Andalus

19-? Tehran: Kanun-i Ma'rifat. Tr. Muhammad 'Ali Shirazi.

GHADAT KARBALA

Faji'ih-yi Karbala

1948 [1337] Tehran. Tr. Muhammad 'Ali Shirazi.

Tarikh-i Salma

1903 Tirhan: Shirakat-i Matbu'at-i Dar al-Khalafa. Tr. 'Abd al-Husayn [Mirza].

'Arusih Karbala

1950 [1329] Tehran: Nashriyat-i Muhsin. Tr. 'Abd al-Husayn Mirza.

Faji'ih-yi Karbala

2002 [1381] Tehran: Afsun. Tr. Muhammad 'Ali Shirazi.

AL-HAJJAJ IBN YUSIF

Al-Hajjaj ibn Yusif

192? [1329] Tirhan: Nashriyat-i Muhsin. Tr. M. R.

Intiqam-i Khun-i Husseini

2002 [1381] Tehran: Afsun. Tr. Muhammad 'Ali Shirazi.

AL-INQILAB AL-'UTHMANI

Inqilab-i 'Osmani

n/d Tehran: Majallih-yi Mah-i Naw. Tr. Muhammad 'Ali Shirazi.

SALAH AL-DIN AYYUBI WA MAKA'ID AL-HASHASHIN

Salah al-Din Ayyubi va Bangiyon

1925 [1304] Tehran: Kitabkhanah-yi Sharq. Tr. Mujtaba Minavi.

Salah al-Din Ayyubi va Ismailiyin

1956 [1335] Tehran: Nashriyat-i Muhsin. Tr. H. M. R.

Salah al-Din Ayyubi

1950[?] Tehran: Majallih-yi Mah-i Naw. Tr. Muhammad 'Ali Shirazi.

Salah al-Din Ayyubi

1984 [1263] Tehran: Ganjinih. Tr. Muhammad 'Ali Shirazi.

Salah al-Din Ayyubi

2002 [1381] Tehran: Afsun. Tr. Muhammad 'Ali Shirazi.

SHARL WA 'ABD AL-MUHSIN

Sharl va 'Abd al-Muhsin

1954 [1333] Tehran: Nashriyat-i Muhsin. Tr. 'Abd al-Rahim Khalkhali.

Sharl va 'Abd al-Muhsin

2002 [1381] Tehran: Afsun. Tr. Muhammad 'Ali Shirazi.

SHAJARAT AL-DURR

Shajarat al-Durr, ya Makkih-yi Islam

1919 [1298] Tehran: Ganj-i Danish. Tr. Habibullah Amuzigar.