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**Intimate Encounters: The Materiality of Translation**

**in Egyptian Novels of the Late *Nahḍa***

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**Intimate Encounters: The Materiality of Translation**

**in Egyptian Novels of the Late *Nahḍa***

by

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Foucault described translation as an instance of two languages colliding; Spivak calls translation “the most intimate act of reading.” Considering the two Egyptian novels *‘Uṣfūr min al-sharq* by Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm (1938) and *Qindīl umm hāshim* by Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī (1944), this paper argues that the particularly subtle type of translation that they employ from French and English into Arabic can be best analyzed with a theoretical model of translation that, following Foucault and Spivak, emphasizes the material properties of languages, and specifically, their capacity to engage each other physically through acts of colliding, coupling, and reproducing.

Such a method of analysis suggests fruitful new implications for looking at how language and literature traveled between Egypt and Europe during the so-called Arab Renaissance (the *nahḍa*) of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including what possibilities for the Arabic language might have emerged in its intimate engagement with the languages of the European other. Moreover, this model of translation allows us to move beyond the politicized paradigms that dominate the field of contemporary translation studies and embrace the contradictions and paradoxes inherent in any encounter between cultures, societies, and languages, and in any act of translation.

## Table of Contents

Text.....1

Works Cited.....25

Shaden Tageldin understands the Arab world's relationship to Europe culturally and psychologically during the period of the *nahḍa* and European colonialism as one of “translational seduction,” in which the Arab world, the colonized, was enticed to seek proximity with colonial Europe by Europe's false promises that its civilizational riches—its aesthetic culture, its elite status, its female bodies—were freely on offer to Arabs of a certain pedigree (namely, male Arab intellectuals). Moreover, she suggests, Arabs were fooled by Europe's strategic emphasis on the similarity between the two cultures into believing that the two societies were equal, mutually translatable, and composed of interchangeable parts. In this way, Tageldin writes, the colonial state

lures the colonized to seek power *through* empire rather than against it, to translate their cultures into an empowered ‘equivalence’ with those of their dominators and thereby repress the inequalities between those dominators and themselves.<sup>1</sup>

The interactions that transpired between the Arab world and the West during the so-called *nahḍa*, some one-hundred-and-fifty years of Arab modernization and cultural renaissance generally dated as beginning with the arrival of Napoleon Bonaparte's invading army in Egypt in 1798, have often been framed in such terms by Arab as well as Western scholars, as emblematic of the essentially unequal balance of power between the two civilizations and of the East's “seduction” by the West and everything it represented. Tageldin's move to apply this conventional historical–political reading of the *nahḍa* to a study of translation is compelling, and well rooted as well in contemporary translation

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<sup>1</sup> Tageldin 10; emphasis original.

theory, which urges us to consider how translation has been used as a means for a certain civilization, culture, or language (usually a Western one) to assert dominance over another (usually a non-Western one). Lawrence Venuti, for instance, has argued that many modern translations into English reify the global hegemony of Anglophone culture by domesticating foreign texts into artificially fluent language that offers “easy readability by adhering to current usage, maintaining continuous syntax, [and] fixing a precise meaning,” erasing the specificity and nuance of the original language and effectively masking the texts’ foreign provenance from their English-language readers.<sup>2</sup>

Yet it seems to me that these arguments, by anchoring the relationship between West and East always in a struggle over power, miss something of the complexity of cultural exchange, generally and in the *nahḍa* period in particular. I propose here a model for looking at translation between Arabic on the one hand, and French and English on the other, in two Egyptian novels written in the final years of the *nahḍa*—‘*Uṣfūr min al-sharq* (“Bird from the East”) by Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm (1938) and *Qindīl umm hāshim* (“The Lamp of Umm Hashim”) by Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī (1944)—that captures this complexity, and which illuminates the dynamic between the Arab world and Europe during the *nahḍa* as other than simply one of two civilizations each vying for dominance over the other. By attending to the materiality of Arabic, French, and English here, to their physical and corporeal properties, we discover that they do not just fight each other, but that they also meet and make love, inhabit each other’s bodies, and take pleasure in each other’s

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<sup>2</sup> Venuti 1–2, 5–6.

company, with translation thereby becoming a process understood as constituted in acts of contact, touching, mingling, and procreation.

Following Tarek El-Ariss, I propose reading the encounter between East and West that takes place via these instances of translation as one in which one language's ability to represent the other is less important than its capacity to infect and affect it, translation viewed thus, as El-Ariss would ask us to view Arab modernity as a whole, as a "genealogy of symptoms and affects."<sup>3</sup> What possibilities for Arabic as the language of the Arab self emerge in the space of close contact between it and a European counterpart? When two languages come together, what particles, what dust, may be shaken loose from one and cohere to the other? In the friction of copulation, what bonds are severed and reformed, what is transmitted from one body to the other, what new sites of pleasure are discovered, what new life-forms can be born into the space of language discourse?

Foucault wrote of certain translations that they "hurl one language at another [...], taking the original text for a projectile and treating the translating language like a target," ultimately using "the translated language to derail the translating language."<sup>4</sup> Understood through a paradigm that equates translation with power, Foucault's formulation suggests an inversion of Venuti's model, where here it is the language of translation that ends up

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<sup>3</sup> El-Ariss 2.

<sup>4</sup> Foucault 30.



coming off the worse for the encounter. I read Foucault's words, however, principally for how they suggest languages' material presence in the world, that one can have the ability to send another flying off its tracks in such a dramatic and catastrophic fashion. The import of such a supremely physical encounter is made explicit by the French translation theorist Antoine Berman, who, citing Foucault as inspiration, wrote that translation occurs as "two languages enter into various forms of collision and somehow *couple*."<sup>5</sup> The generative act of coupling becomes inseparable from the collision itself, even simultaneous to it, as Berman's conjunctive "and" emphasizes: languages collide *and* couple; they do not collide *and then* couple. Coupling occurs in the instant of collision; as collision happens, coupling happens, too.

Gayatri Spivak says of translation that it requires the translator to "surrender to the text" and "solicit" it to

show off the limits of its language, because that rhetorical aspect will point at the silence of the absolute fraying of language that the text wards off .... [N]o amount of tough talk can get around the fact that translation is the most intimate act of reading.<sup>6</sup>

The intimacy that Spivak points to is crucial, not just for deconstructing how the translator engages a text but for understanding how the translator's *language* and the text's language meet during the translation process. Read thus, the situation realigns along a linguistic axis, one language surrendering itself to another and coaxing it to reveal its innermost secrets, its vulnerabilities and potential sites of disintegration. Such

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<sup>5</sup> Berman 285; emphasis original.

<sup>6</sup> Spivak 400.

imagery invites us to think of two languages that engage each other through translation as entering into something akin to a relationship of lovers. The notion that language can be a lover is expressed beautifully by bilingual Algerian author Assia Djébar, who writes of the foreign idiom in which she was educated and in which she finds her only outlet for literary expression, “I cohabit with the French language. I may quarrel with it, I may have bursts of affection, I may subside into sudden or angry silences—these are the normal occurrences in the life of any couple.”<sup>7</sup>

To push Djébar’s metaphor a degree further, let us consider as well how languages can participate in the physical side of a romantic relationship. I hear in Djébar’s “any couple” an echo of Berman’s suggestion that through translation languages “somehow *couple*.” Framing translation in this way, as a type of interlingual copulation, permits us to talk about the translating process drawing vocabulary from a rich theoretical discourse about love, sex, and various forms of intimacy. For theorizing how a translating language is transformed by its contact with a foreign tongue in ways that are revealed only through its physical shape, its arrangement of letters, and its visual appearance on the page, Roland Barthes is helpful. The lover who speaks in the first person in Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse* says,

I can do everything with my language, *but not with my body*. What I hide by my language, my body utters. I can deliberately mold my message, not my voice. By my voice, whatever it says, the other will recognize “that something is wrong with me.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Djébar 213.

<sup>8</sup> Barthes 44; emphasis original.

There is, I propose, something “wrong” with the Arabic of the two Egyptian novels that are the focus of this paper. Sick with love for the European languages it encounters, like Barthes’ narrator Arabic betrays its condition only in its body.

Each of the two novels centers on a young Egyptian man who travels from Cairo to Europe to be educated, and while in Europe each develops an aesthetic and intellectual appreciation for European culture, comes to radically question his own “Eastern” identity in light of the Western values around him, and falls in love with a European woman. For the narrator of al-Ḥakīm’s *Uṣfūr min al-sharq*, a sensitive devoté of Parisian opera named Muḥsin, the country is France, and his lover is Susie, a French girl who sells tickets at the theater. For Ismā‘īl in Ḥaqqī’s *Qindīl umm hāshim*, it is the study of ophthalmology that draws him to England, and his lover, Mary, is an English student.

While the texts appear to be written in nothing but standard Arabic *fushā*, a model of translation that grants languages material presence permits us to uncover a type of translation in fact transpiring in them. I argue that in these two novels, *fushā* is translating French and English by acting as the language of dialogue in scenes that take place in Europe where it is all but impossible that the characters would actually be speaking anything other than the European language of the country they are in. In parallel to the male Egyptian narrators’ sexual possession of European female bodies in France and England, Arabic intimately possesses French and English, in each case enveloping the European language so lovingly within the diction of *fushā* that it becomes invisible to the

uncritical eye. Translation, but so intimately carried out that its mechanics are hidden from us.

Susie and Mary are explicitly marked as European in their names, cultural reference points, and philosophical beliefs. Both are depicted as libertine in their sexual conduct and rational to the point where they seem functionally incapable of returning, or even comprehending, the force of the two Egyptian men's deep emotional attachment to them. While their bodies become territories of exploration and self-discovery for the novels' narrators, the women themselves remain personally unaffected by the relationships. Despite their obvious Europeanness, when they speak to our narrators, they do so in what appears to be pure, original *fushā*. When, for example, Mary tells Ismā'īl, “*Yā ‘azīzī Ismā‘īl. Al-ḥayāh laysat barnāmajan thābitan, bal mujādala mutajaddada,*”<sup>9</sup> the line reads as fluent Arabic. Yet no indication is offered that she, nor Susie in al-Ḥakīm's novel, have learned Arabic, nor does either text anywhere summon the “real” presence of the European languages by tagging their Arabic lines of dialogue with, *She said in English* or *She said in French: qālat bil-inglīziya; qālat bil-faransiya*.

What happened to English and French, we might ask? Where did they go? I suggest that in their apparent absence, the European languages are actually calling attention to their own presence in the text—that their absence is not really absence at all

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<sup>9</sup> Ḥaqqī 52: “My dear Ismā'īl. Life is not a fixed program, but an ongoing series of back-and-forth's.”

”يا عزيزي إسماعيل. الحياة ليست برنامجاً ثابتاً، بل مجادلة متجددة.“

All translations of al-Ḥakīm and Ḥaqqī throughout are mine, with reference for Ḥaqqī to the Denys Johnson-Davies translation of *Qindīl umm hāshim* that appears in *The Lamp of Umm Hashim and Other Stories* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2004).

but the invisibility of being too close to see, of being within the very flesh of the Arabic itself, hiding beneath its skin, wracking its body with traces of their persistent foreignness. Arabic betrays its infection in a body trembling with the fever of desire.

Al-Ḥakīm's text is replete with French words that erupt into the novel's *fuṣḥā* and destabilize it with foreign orthography and foreign meanings. Each morning when Susie bids Muḥsin goodbye before leaving for work at the theater, it is not with the Arabic phrase *ma 'a salāma* but with the French *au revoir*, which al-Ḥakīm spells in Arabic as *awrafwār*, a peculiar word that reads neither as natively Arabic nor as a wholly accurate transliteration of the French sounds.<sup>10</sup> Arabic provides a medium for French here, channeling it through the anatomy of its letters and speaking with its voice, allowing itself to be possessed and transformed by a foreign phrase uttered by a beautiful European woman to conclude a night of sexual union between herself and the narrator. Food provides another opportunity for French to intervene in the text's language. At a restaurant, Muḥsin feels an appetite (*shahīya*) for *al-biftayk* (*le bifteck*, or "beefsteak") that is nearly lust (*shahwa*), so greatly does he desire the taste of the meat and its French name upon his tongue. A conversation about *al-būyābays* (*bouillabaisse*) opens the door to an outpouring of French names as Susie gossips to Muḥsin that the French minister of education *misyū haryū* (*Monsieur Herriot*, minister from 1926–1928), a close friend of the famous actor *misyū sīlfān* (*Monsieur Silvain*), will only eat fish stew when it is

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<sup>10</sup> al-Ḥakīm 94: "أورفوار".

prepared by the actor’s wife *madām sīlfān* (*Madame Silvain*).<sup>11</sup> These foreign words are invariably offset in the typeface by double quote marks, further emphasizing that they can be incorporated into the *fushā* text only imperfectly. Arabic’s intimacy with French leads it to express itself in ways to which it is unaccustomed, and in doing so a variety of *fushā* is inaugurated whose boundaries are stretched in new and unfamiliar directions.

In Ḥaqqī it is the content of what Mary’s character says with *fushā* that alters its dimensions. She is critical of Ismā‘īl’s dependence on a “clothes rack” of religion and traditions upon which he hangs the “costly coat” of his identity. Her prescription for addressing this problem is delivered in the form of a decree whose force comes from its use of the impersonal *fushā* modal *yajib an*: “It is necessary that your clothes rack be inside yourself.”<sup>12</sup> Here Mary appropriates a classical Arabic construction to express an idea that contravenes core tenets of Ismā‘īl’s Egyptian upbringing, as though forcing Arabic to say what it would rather not, to speak against itself. Later, she accuses Ismā‘īl of fancying himself as charitable to his patients as “Jesus the son of Mary;” she attempts to cure him of this fault by attacking his “Eastern” emotions in impeccable *fushā*, calling them *mardhūla wa-makrūha* (“despicable and hateful”) because they—implicitly, unlike

<sup>11</sup> al-Ḥakīm 98–100:

–“ أرى أن لك اليوم شهية للطعام!

– إن «البفتيك» لذيذ....“

...

–“ أتعرف أن زوجة مسيو «سيلفان» تجيد طهي «البويابيس»؟ وأن مسيو «هريو» وزير المعارف وهو الصديق

الحميم للممثل «سيلفان» لا يستمرئ أكل «البويابيس» إلا من صنع «مدام سيلفان» العجوز؟!“

<sup>12</sup> Ḥaqqī 53: “*Yajib an yakūn mishjabuka fī nafsika.*”

“يجب أن يكون مشجبك في نفسك.”

European emotions—are neither *‘amalīya* nor *muntija* (neither “practical” nor “productive”).<sup>13</sup> This conspicuously unvirginal Mary’s invocation of the Virgin Mary and her use of the word *makrūha* suggest an ironic re-reading of the Sura of the Children of Israel in the Qur’an, which enumerates various human actions “hated” by God (*kullu dhālika kāna sayyi’uhu ‘inda rabbika makrūhan*) that include fornication, excessive pride, and being led astray by false knowledge, and calls on believers to be generous to those in need.<sup>14</sup> The character Mary mobilizes the Arabic language to assail Arabic cultural values and ironically repurpose God’s commandments to Muslims—a traumatic process for the language that estranges it from its own origins, for in this Europeanized Arabic, Ḥaqqī’s text, unlike al-Ḥakīm’s, is primed to take up critical scrutiny of Egyptian society when Ismā‘īl returns to Cairo.

A narrative corollary to what happens to *fushḥā* are the sexual relationships between the Arab male narrators and their female European lovers. In the proximity of flesh and the exchange of bodily fluids the narrators achieve a maximal physical merger with the European other that changes them in fundamental and irreversible ways. For both Muḥsin and Ismā‘īl, sex is not simply a one-off occurrence but a habitual component of how they relate to their lovers, an act of intimacy in whose repetition the women leave traces of themselves upon the bodies and minds of these young men. Muḥsin and Susie move in together, and Muḥsin finds that to share Susie’s bed is to

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<sup>13</sup> Ḥaqqī 53–54:

“أنت لست المسيح ابن مريم! ... إن هذه العواطف الشرقية مردولة مكروهة؛ لأنها غير عملية وغير منتجة.”

<sup>14</sup> Surah 17:38: “كُلُّ ذَلِكَ كَانَ سَيِّئُهُ عِنْدَ رَبِّكَ مَكْرُوهًا.”

regress to a stage of elemental uncertainty and become, like Adam, caught between the joys of heaven and the torments of hell. He is awoken each morning by her “burning kisses” [*qubulāt multahiba*] and the sound of her “sweet voice” [*ṣawt ‘adhb*], which is also nearly a torture [*ta‘dhīb*] to him.<sup>15</sup> Out of their sexual relationship he is reborn a new man who is scarred by the marks of pleasure and pain that Susie has inflicted upon him.

For Ismā‘īl, each time he has intercourse with Mary, something essential about him changes. Losing his virginity to her frees him from “squalor and laziness” and makes him a person of “activity and confidence.” When she begins taking him to her bed regularly and “gives him a taste of love’s pleasure in all its shapes and varieties,” he comes out of this empirical experience of sex with “a new independent self, stable and confident.”<sup>16</sup> Ismā‘īl’s identity is altered by Mary’s influence in a way that cannot be undone, so that when he returns to Cairo he is unable to slip effortlessly back into his former life but must actuate a reconciliation between Egyptian culture and the European-ness that has printed him indelibly. The synthesis is difficult but, the novel implies, necessary for both Ismā‘īl himself and Egyptian society at large.

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<sup>15</sup> al-Ḥakīm 94:

”وهكذا كان «محسن» يستيقظ بعدئذ كل صباح على قبلات ملتهية، فيفتح عينيه، فإذا موجة من ذهب ذلك الشعر الجميل قد غطت وجهه وصوت عذب يقول له: - أوفوار!“

<sup>16</sup> Ḥaqqī 52, 54:

”كانت هي التي فضت براءته العذراء، أخرجته من الوخم والخمول إلى النشاط والوثوق.“

...

”وبالليل تذيقه من متعة الحب أشكالاً وألواناً. ... وخلص منها بنفس جديدة مستقرة ثابتة واثقة.“



Such an intimate type of translation, such a coupling, is not without its risks, also containing the threat for the translating language of Foucault's derailment. When Susie is late for dinner at a restaurant one night, Muḥsin's thoughts turn to aspects of her foreignness that repel him—her overt sexuality, the way she looks at other men—yet once she arrives, language escapes him, and when she delivers the eloquent apology for her tardiness that he swore to himself he would not accept, the only response he can manage is to repeat “I love you” like the parrot Susie sees him as (*babghā'ī*). He is so stricken with silence that Susie must order his food for him, and as the scene concludes he sits wordlessly kissing the spot on his water glass that her lips have imprinted.<sup>17</sup> It is as if the fabric of Arabic discourse has begun to fray here and reveal the “true” presence of French beneath it, leaving the Egyptian narrator without language, speechless. The content of Mary's Arabic utterances, meanwhile, become at one critical moment so anathema to the language itself that Ismā'īl

felt as if her speech were a knife cutting off live wires that nourished him, that connected him to those around him, and he woke up one day with his soul in ruins, not one stone remaining still stacked upon another ....<sup>18</sup>

Moments like these reflect Arabic's ambivalence about its intimacy with the language of the other, its anxiety that to allow itself to fall so deeply in love is to invite its own silencing.

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<sup>17</sup> al-Ḥakīm 95–97.

<sup>18</sup> Ḥaqqī 54:

“كان يشعر بكلامها كالكسكين يقطع من روابط حية يتغذى منها؛ إذ توصله بمن حوله، واستيقظ في يومٍ فإذا روحه خراب لم يبق فيها حجر على حجر....”

This examination of the language in the two novels shows it to be unfolding in the interstices between the twin spaces of surrender and intimacy described by Spivak. Not really the pure *fuṣḥā* it initially appears to be, the texts' Arabic, in the act of drawing close enough to French and English to translate them so fully, surrenders itself to these languages and becomes viscerally transformed by their cadences. Why, and to what effect, is Arabic here so transformed?

Possible answers to these questions are suggested in the broader context of the *nahḍa*. Tageldin has noted that Egypt's seminal encounter with France, the one said to have set the *nahḍa* in motion, began with an encounter of languages: when Napoleon landed his army in Alexandria in July 1798, he announced his intentions to the Egyptian people in a proclamation translated by one of his aides imperfectly into Arabic and distributed throughout the countryside from the Mediterranean coast to Cairo, promising the Egyptians freedom from Mamluk rule and guaranteeing knowledge and happiness for those who rallied to the French cause. Tageldin observes a particularly symbolic act of mistranslation in this proclamation. Napoleon's original French text, according to most sources, described the members of his expedition as "friends of the true Muslims," yet in the official Arabic translation, this phrase was rendered, whether intentionally or through error, as "The French are also sincere Muslims."<sup>19</sup> I read in this meeting of tongues not primal evidence of colonial deceit as Tageldin suggests but a first lovers' kiss, setting the

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<sup>19</sup> Tageldin 33–34.

stage for Europe’s languages and Arabic to meet and re-meet throughout the centuries to follow.

In the immediate aftermath of the French withdrawal from Egypt in 1801, the first of Egypt’s *nahḍa* rulers, Muḥammad ‘Ali Pasha (r. 1805–1848),<sup>20</sup> launched a campaign to modernize the Arabic language through educational reforms and the establishment of a “School of Languages (*Dār al-ʿAlsun*), whose main task was to translate foreign works into Arabic.”<sup>21</sup> At the head of this school was the noted Egyptian intellectual Rifā‘a al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, who in 1867 would publish the first complete Arabic translation of a European novel, François Fénelon’s *Les Aventures de Télémaque*.<sup>22</sup> Here, in Arabic’s inaugural confrontation with the European novel through translation, the language approaches with caution; al-Ṭaḥṭāwī altered the plot, title, and stylistic elements of the French original to make them more familiar to Arab audiences.<sup>23</sup> The resulting work, written in the rhymed prose common to classical Arabic literature, must have been an oddly unstable text, whose liminal identity is perhaps best captured in the peculiarity of its rhyming title (another convention of classical Arabic prose): *Waqā’i‘ al-aflāk fī ḥawādith Tilīmāk* (“Positions of the Celestial Spheres in the Events of Télémaque”). As Sasson Somekh describes it, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī’s

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<sup>20</sup> The dynasty established by Muḥammad ‘Ali, a Turkish-speaking Albanian who had arrived in Egypt as an officer in the Ottoman army, ruled Egypt until June of 1953, when Gamāl ‘Abd al-Nāṣir and the other leaders of the 1952 Revolution formally abolished the Egyptian monarchy and declared Egypt an independent republic.

<sup>21</sup> Versteegh 350.

<sup>22</sup> Moosa 11–12. Under Muḥammad ‘Alī, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī spent five years in Paris from 1826–1831 as head cleric for a delegation of Egyptian students sent abroad to be educated, and upon his return to Egypt he published an account of his experiences in the French capital titled *Takhlīṣ al-ibrīz fī talkhīṣ Bārīz* that remains a foundational textual source on Arab views of Europe and Europeans during the *nahḍa* era.

<sup>23</sup> Hafez 87.

attempt to provide a full translation of the text and at the same time to maintain a rigorous rhyme results in circumlocutions and expanded discourse. It produces a succession of sentences whose structure is motivated by the rhythm of the rhyming segments, rather than that of the original text.<sup>24</sup>

Like a cautious lover, the Arabic translation skirts the European text, circumambulating around it rather than approaching it head on, suggesting that at this early stage intimacy between the languages remains anxiously deferred.

Muḥammad ‘Ali’s grandson Ismā‘īl Pasha (r. 1863–1879) also sought a certain cultural and aesthetic proximity with Europe. In reform initiatives intended to make Egypt “a part of Europe,” Ismā‘īl established Egypt’s first Western-style graduate schools, increased the number of Egyptian students on government-funded study abroad programs to Europe by more than tenfold, to 179 during his reign from only 14 during that of his predecessor, and encouraged the translation of further European texts into Arabic, underpinning “the genesis of a Europeanized Egyptian élite in government, education, and letters” whose members went on to have influential roles in the nationalist movements of the early twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> Ismā‘īl built a European-style opera house in Cairo and commissioned Giuseppe Verdi to write the opera *Aida* for its opening season.<sup>26</sup>

The crowning achievement of Ismā‘īl’s tenure as khedive, of course, was the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, a project begun by his predecessor and completed under the supervision of the French developer Ferdinand de Lesseps at immense cost to

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<sup>24</sup> Somekh 195–196.

<sup>25</sup> Hafez 48–50.

<sup>26</sup> For further discussion of the opera *Aida* and the circumstances of its creation and inaugural performance, see: Katherine Bergeron, “Verdi’s Egyptian Spectacle: On the Colonial Subject of *Aida*,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 14 (March 2002), 149–159.

the Egyptian treasury.<sup>27</sup> Ismā‘īl celebrated the occasion by throwing an extravagant party in the newly constructed canal city of Port Said, at which thousands of guests, many of them members of the European nobility, were—in the words of an attendee—positively overwhelmed by the “fireworks, and the oceans of champagne, and the acres of *galantine*, and all the profuse hospitalities. . . . Everybody had more to eat and drink than they could consume, [and] there was glorious weather.”<sup>28</sup> This description of free-flowing alcohol and platters of chilled meat served along the banks of the freshly penetrated land<sup>29</sup> conjures a vivid image of Ismā‘īl’s European vision for Egypt, in which Egypt’s becoming European occurs through and during the physical acts of consuming excessive quantities of European food and beverage, walking through downtown Cairo, which Ismā‘īl had remodeled into an oriental version of Paris’ centre-ville, with “wide boulevards, formal gardens, [and] grand department stores,”<sup>30</sup> and using modern technology to forcibly bend earth and water to the human will. It is, to borrow El-Ariss’ turn of phrase, an instance when the *nahḍa* project of “Arab modernity (*ḥadātha*)” becomes “a somatic condition.”<sup>31</sup> The material, and corporeal, dimensions of these processes is echoed in the model of translation I am proposing.

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<sup>27</sup> See: Barbara Harlow and Mia Carter, *Archives of Empire, Volume 1: From the East India Company to the Suez Canal* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), especially Chapter XII: “The Suez Canal: The Canal and Its Consequences.”

<sup>28</sup> Haddad 373.

<sup>29</sup> The committee of European experts originally convened by de Lesseps in 1855 to assess the viability of digging the canal went by the French name *Commission Internationale pour le percement de l’isthme des Suez*; that is, the International Commission for the Piercing of the Isthmus of Suez.

<sup>30</sup> Myntti 7–9.

<sup>31</sup> El-Ariss 3.

Sabry Hafez argues that the introduction of the European novel in translation into the Arab world encouraged the development of more modern literary and linguistic tastes among the Arabic reading public, creating a market for original Arabic literature that mimicked the form and themes of the Western novel, and in particular, as later *nahḍa* translations of Western novels were undertaken with greater care toward preserving the stylistic qualities of the originals, its preference for realistic narratives told in straightforward unrhymed prose.<sup>32</sup> In his seminal work *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson posits that the Western novel as a literary genre was uniquely wedded to the evolution of the modern nation-state,<sup>33</sup> and the case has been made that the emergence in Egypt of a local Arabic novel modeled on the European genre during the latter half of the *nahḍa* tracked a closely parallel trajectory. Samah Selim, for example, has suggested that Egyptian novels from the *nahḍa* period aided the “syncretic social and political project of nationalism” in Egypt by legitimating an Egyptian “national reality” that was external to the text, yet both mirrored textual reality and was mirrored *in* its “‘realistic’ representation of a variety of ‘national’ landscapes, languages and character types.”<sup>34</sup>

Whatever disagreements may exist as to the origin(s) of the contemporary Arabic novel,<sup>35</sup> the very fact that the topic has inspired such debate among scholars is testament to the inextricable linkages between Arabic literature and language and questions of Arab

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<sup>32</sup> Hafez 87, 90, 102–104.

<sup>33</sup> See: Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1983).

<sup>34</sup> Selim 110, 113.

<sup>35</sup> Mohamed-Salah Omri, for one, proposes locating the origins of the Arabic novel at least partially in pre-existing local literary forms, most importantly the Arabic *maqāma*. See: Mohamed-Salah Omri, “Local Narrative Form and Constructions of the Arabic Novel,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 41 (2008), 244–263.

nationalism, identity, authenticity, and representations of the self and the other over the last two centuries.

Al-Ḥakīm and Ḥaqqī both used their writing to reflect upon the contemporary affairs of Egypt. Al-Ḥakīm (1898–1987) took an active interest in Egyptian politics for most of his life, joining the revolutionaries of 1919 in calling for an end to British occupation, and later, as an established author, using his literary works, particularly his plays, to offer veiled critiques of contemporary Egyptian political figures that condemned corruption and questioned the moral authority of power. He spent 1925–1928 in Paris studying for a doctorate—a formative experience for him that he revisited imaginatively in *‘Uṣfūr min al-sharq*—and following his return to Egypt he served for several years in the Ministry of Education; he was eventually removed from his post for his political views, his “attempts to combine literature with an official career [having] proved difficult.”<sup>36</sup> Ḥaqqī (1905–1993), after training as a lawyer in Cairo, spent his early career as an administrator in the Upper Egyptian governorate of Asyut. There he became deeply critical of the Egyptian government’s lack of care for, and as he perceived it, alienation from the common people of Egypt outside the capital city, a topic that he addressed in several of his literary works; in other works he described the injustices facing the urban poor in Egypt’s cities.<sup>37</sup>

The Arabic language itself also became invested with nationalist ideologies during the *nahḍa* period. Arabic was seen as a unifying force binding together disparate

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<sup>36</sup> Starkey 263–265.

<sup>37</sup> Cooke 271.

peoples from the Arab world, so that, indeed, “Arab linguistic nationalism was blended with territorial patriotism.”<sup>38</sup> These ideologies, often delivered to the Arab public via literature, sometimes sought to modify and modernize Arabic itself: Fruma Zachs has shown how the literary works produced by Khalīl al-Khūrī and Salīm al-Bustānī, members of the literary intellectual milieu of late-nineteenth-century Beirut, were written at least partly with the goal of pioneering a simplified *fuṣḥā* that the two nationalists believed would help unite the Syrian populace around a single common language accessible to all.<sup>39</sup>

The position of Arabic relative to other languages had already been an issue of interest for many centuries. When the Muslim conquests expanded the sphere of Islamic influence across North Africa and Asia in the seventh and eighth centuries CE, Arabic became the language of religion and governance for a vast and linguistically diverse empire. As Arabic speakers mingled with speakers of other languages, it became relevant for the first time to establish rules for what was and what was not Arabic, to pay attention to when and how new words entered the Arabic lexicon, and to contemplate how speaking Arabic could define an Arab identity. Georges Bohas et al., for example, note the comprehensive grammar reforms initiated by the fifth Umayyad caliph in the late seventh and early eighth centuries designed to safeguard *fuṣḥā* as the language of imperial bureaucracy and of the social elite against the encroachment of corrupt

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<sup>38</sup> Hourani 342–343.

<sup>39</sup> Zachs 187–188.



vernaculars.<sup>40</sup> By the early eighth century, the concern among grammarians for the diminishing purity of the Arabic language had become so great that a new word, *lahn*, appears in grammar texts from the time designating speech errors among native Arabic speakers. Marking an important recognition that contact with other languages had the power to change Arabic, the texts attribute such errors to the effects of Arabs' "mixing with foreigners [*ikhtilāṭihim bi-al-a'jām*]." <sup>41</sup> Centuries later, the anxiety that Arabic was under threat from foreign influence remained: the thirteenth-century North African lexicographer Ibn Manẓūr, author of the prodigious twenty-volume dictionary *Lisān al-'arab*, lamented that his life's work had been undertaken "in an age in which men take pride in [using] a language other than Arabic."<sup>42</sup>

The efforts of many *nahḍa* intellectuals, then, to seek a rapprochement with the languages of Europe by studying them, translating them, and welcoming their influence on Arabic literature, marked a reversal of this centuries-old attitude toward foreign tongues. As large numbers of Europeans arrived in the Middle East throughout the nineteenth century to serve as educators, missionaries, and colonial administrators, and as Arabs traveled to Europe for business, pleasure, and educational opportunities, language difference ceased to demarcate fortress walls around Arab identity and became an obstacle standing between the Arab subject and Europe, with everything it represented.

Situating our two novels within the scope of the nationalist, linguistic, and literary projects of the *nahḍa*, they can perhaps be read as engaging the language of the European

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<sup>40</sup> Bohas et al. 3.

<sup>41</sup> Maṭar 19.

<sup>42</sup> Muhanna n.p.

other, or we might say, engaging the European other with language, in the service of overcoming this obstacle and appropriating some part of Europe for Arabic culture. James Milroy suggests that a certain prestige accrues to the language varieties spoken by those individuals within a speech community whose social standing is perceived to be higher than that of other community members, generating categories of linguistic identification that mimic the economic class divisions in that community, as “varieties acquire prestige when their *speakers* have high prestige.”<sup>43</sup> Milroy’s proposition encourages us to view language operating as a marker of status in much the same way that Pierre Bourdieu views a capacity for an aesthetic appreciation of art, which “has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded,”<sup>44</sup> functioning to order the members of a society hierarchically according to their ability to deal comfortably in the tropes and “codes” of prestige.

Both of the novels’ narrators exhibit admiration for a set of European cultural values in opposition to the Egyptian ones to which they were previously exposed. For Muḥsin in *‘Uṣfūr min al-sharq*, European prestige is encapsulated in French opera. Recalling an evening spent in the rarefied environs of the Paris opera house, Muḥsin

listens deep inside himself to the tones of that song on the night that the famous Ninon Vallin sung it in the Paris Opera two months ago. A beautiful and wondrous night that Muḥsin cannot forget, for during it he had seen what he had not seen before, and heard what he had not heard! He had wanted that night to imitate—for the first time—the well-to-do, so he had rented a seat in their row,

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<sup>43</sup> Milroy 532; emphasis original.

<sup>44</sup> Bourdieu 1665.

but he did not realize that this required wearing formal evening attire, and when the old [French] woman [with whom he lived] informed him of this fact, he was at a loss, for he did not have such clothing.<sup>45</sup>

The opera exposes Muḥsin to music of a quality superior to any he has encountered before—implicitly, it is superior to Egyptian music—while the venue itself makes him first desire to become someone else, and then humbles him when he realizes that he does not have the means to pull off the transformation. The experience tantalizes him with a glimpse of French society’s finest cultural products, yet he is restricted from accessing them because he does not, or does not yet, possess sufficient status to do so. Susie is a ticket-seller at Paris’ Odéon Théâtre, and part of her appeal to him is her affiliation with this elite cultural institution, which allows him symbolically to claim a degree of social cachet by association and functionally provides him with free entrance to see the shows that play there.

In *Qindīl umm hāshim*, the prestige of English society is illustrated by the positive changes it brings about in Ismā‘īl during the period he spends studying ophthalmology at an English university. The primary vehicle of this prestige is Mary, who “opened up for him previously unknown horizons of beauty: in art, in music, in nature, and even in the

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<sup>45</sup> al-Ḥakīm 20:

”وهو يصغى في أعماق نفسه إلى أنغام تلك الأغنية ليلة أنشدتها «تبنون فالان» الشهيرة، في أوبرا باريس منذ شهرين. ليلة جميلة عجيبة لا ينساها «محسن»، فقد رأى فيها ما لم ير من قبل، وسمع ما لم يسمع! ولقد أراد في تلك الليلة أن يتشبه - لأول مرة - بالموسرين، فاستأجر مقعداً في صفهم، وهو لا يعلم أن ذلك يستلزم لبس ثياب السهرة الرسمية، ونبهته العجوز، فحار في شأنه؛ إذ ليس لديه هذا اللبس.“

human spirit itself.”<sup>46</sup> England’s status, and Mary’s, are evident in their ability to change Ismā‘īl while undergoing no changes themselves; he is the one who aspires to be like them, to rise to their level. Exposure to European culture awakens the Egyptian narrator from the aesthetic somnolence of his own society.

Linking language and aesthetic taste as twin sites where prestige can be contested and claimed, we can wonder whether the novels translate French and English in this particularly intimate way so that the prestige of Europe might “rub off” on Arabic through the physical mingling of languages. Positing such a connection, we can see how the model of translation I am proposing might uncover new aspects of the *nahḍa* period and of the transformative cultural exchanges it facilitated between the Arab world and Europe.

There are many implications suggested by a model of translation that emphasizes the materiality of languages, especially when theorizing the effects of the translation process upon language itself. Perhaps most importantly, such a model allows us to embrace the essential paradox at the heart of any act of translation, that it both *does* and *does not* reproduce the language of the original text that preceded it. “[H]ow often,” Friedrich Schleiermacher wonders,

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<sup>46</sup> Haqqī 52:

”فتحت له آفاقاً يجهلها من الجمال: في الفن، في الموسيقى، في الطبيعة، بل في الروح الإنسانية أيضاً.“

indeed, that we are not obliged to say “always” borders on the miraculous—does one find fidelity to rhythm and melody [in a translation] caught in irreconcilable conflict with dialectical and grammatical fidelity! How difficult it is to prevent, in the eternal back and forth of what is to be sacrificed here and what there, a result that often is precisely the least fitting!<sup>47</sup>

This conflict is surely, indeed, irreconcilable, for “no two languages are identical, either in the meanings given to corresponding symbols or in the ways in which such symbols are arranged in phrases and sentences.”<sup>48</sup> Yet rather than framing the issue as Schleiermacher does, as a bloody choice between what is to be preserved and what sacrificed, can we not simply accept the conflict?

The theory I am offering here allows us to stop asking to what degree a particular translation is faithful or unfaithful to its predecessor,<sup>49</sup> a judgment that demands us to become researchers in the dubious science of comparing texts side by side to ascertain whether we can detect in the translation (or the translator) any infidelity, any betrayal of the original text by its foreign lover. Instead, we can ourselves take pleasure in the complications that inevitably must arise when two languages meet and make love: in the places where the translation forgets itself to sing arias in its own tongue as much as in those where we find traces of the original language nudging insistently through the soil of textual discourse.

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<sup>47</sup> Schleiermacher 52.

<sup>48</sup> Nida 126.

<sup>49</sup> Discussion of the “fidelity” of translations relative to their source texts can be traced at least as far back as 1640, with Nicolas Perrot d’Ablancourt’s exhortation to the translator that, when translating Greek and Latin texts into French, he “must take heed that an Author’s grace not be lost through too much scrupulousness, and that the fear of being unfaithful to him in some one thing not result in infidelity to the whole.” See: Nicolas Perrot d’Ablancourt, “Preface to Tacitus,” in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 32.

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