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The Polymath

Bensalem Himmich
Translated by Roger Allen
Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2004
(256 pages) \$22.95 (cloth)

Reviewed by Gretchen Head

The post-1967 Arabic novel has been a site of continual textual innovation, and Bensalem Himmich's *The Polymath* (*al-'Allama*), winner of the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature, is no exception to this trend. Not unlike Jamal al-Ghitani's use of Ibn Iyas's fifteenth-century historical chronicle in *al-Zayni Barakat* or Emile Habibi's use of the *maqama* in his groundbreaking novel *The Secret Life of Sa'id the Pessoptimist*, the avant-garde for Himmich is found in the very roots of the pre-modern tradition. For these writers, Arabic's literary heritage is mined for the most radical modernist strategies. The very premise of Himmich's novel places the reader in the unusual position of reading a text which, as Roger Allen states in his translator's preface, essentially consists of "a historical novelist and philosopher of history . . . writing a novel about a historian [Ibn Khaldun] rewriting his own historical record and his theoretical conclusions based on an analysis of its contents" (viii). Though Allen's description may make *The Polymath* sound less than accessible, it is, in fact, a highly readable narrative that, in addition its pleasure as a novel, offers readers insight into the biography and philosophy of history of Ibn Khaldun, the Arabic tradition's preeminent historian and the reputed "Father of Sociology."

Following the brief preface, in which we learn of the comical circumstances under which Ibn Khaldun meets his scribe Hammu al-Hihi and his wife Umm al-Banin, the novel opens with a lengthy chapter titled "Seven Nights of Dictation." Structurally divided into seven sections that each record a distinct conversation between Ibn Khaldun and his amanuensis, we find several themes central to Ibn Khaldun's history, though only marginally fleshed out in order to suit Himmich's literary form. Here we see Ibn Khaldun toward the end of his life, still mourning the loss of his family drowned at sea in 1384, living in a Nile-side apartment in Cairo, and ruminating over his life's work. For seven nights he dictates a series of revisions and meditations to Hammu, which span the gamut of his writings, while the latter questions specific points of his philosophy. These conversations effectively allow Himmich to reflect upon a number

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of the more well-known aspects of Ibn Khaldun's revolutionary approach to the writing of history, many of which are delineated in his magnum opus *Kitab al-'Ibar*.

Here one could ask, why read a fictionalized account when one could simply read Franz Rosenthal's translation of Ibn Khaldun, omitting the intermediary? Several aspects of Ibn Khaldun's analytical method are given a new perspective when placed within the narrative framework. Consider, for example, his denouncement of the uncritical acceptance of historical data and his censure of earlier historians for their failure in this regard. Besides being highly entertaining, the dialogue between Ibn Khaldun and Hammu, which revolves around some of the more absurd stories accepted by noted early historians or recorded by travelers like Ibn Battutah, reveals a deeper sense of the intellectual climate in which Ibn Khaldun was situated than one would perhaps glean from reading his original text.

In addition to being a prolific novelist, Bensalem Himmich is a professor of philosophy at Mohammed V University in Rabat and the author of an academic study on Ibn Khaldun's philosophy of history (*Al-Khalduniya fi daw' falsafat al-tarikh* or *Khaldunism in the Light of the Philosophy of History*); in the section of the narrative described above, the influence of the latter profession is most apparent. The rest of the novel, however, is less academic in tone. The second chapter, in particular, "Between Falling in Love and Operating in the Shadow of Power," is, for all intents and purposes, a love story. The section begins with Ibn Khaldun's homecoming from a six-month absence in which he performed the hajj. Immediately upon his return, he discovers that his scribe Hammu has died and that his wife, with whom he had gradually become more obsessed, is now widowed, alone and unprotected in a city where she is a foreigner with no means of sustenance. Aggravating her already difficult position is her recently arrived brother, whom her family has sent from Fez to help her cope with her husband's death. Rather than offer assistance of any use, however, he lives in a state of complete inebriation, frequenting the local brothels where, dressed as a woman, he performs licentious dances for the patrons. After much time attempting to help Umm al-Banin deal with her brother's scandalous behavior, Ibn Khaldun finally accepts that he is in love her, a woman thirty years his junior. A very different narrative style than that of the previous chapter is a welcome respite after the philosophical meditations that dominated the first third of the novel. Ibn Khaldun's character is here developed beyond his role of the towering intellectual, and as the novel becomes more plot-driven, the reader can enjoy the pleasure of being immersed within the narrative.

The final third of the novel, "The Journey to Timur Lang, the Scourge of the Century," depicts Ibn Khaldun's expedition to Damascus during the period it was under attack by Timur Lang's Tatar armies. The siege and surrender that ensue allow Ibn Khaldun to meet the infamous conqueror, a description of which is recorded in his writings. Himmich uses the encounter to reflect upon a running theme throughout the novel—the corrupt and mercurial nature of power. In fact, as in the novel, Ibn Khaldun's life was profoundly affected by the whims of rulers; he was jailed on more than one occasion, and regularly exiled from, or forced to remain in, various locations at the behest of the Sultan. Yet, just as *al-Zayni Barakat* uses events from the Mamluk period in Cairo to comment on the current day, *The Polymath's* ruminations on the

brutality of the age are pregnant with references to the present day that are scarcely veiled. When Ibn Khaldun makes statements like the following, it is hard to imagine only the fourteenth century is implicated:

In this era of ours, politics has become a danger area . . . Just take a look at the *Book of Lessons* or histories by people other than me, and you'll see how many chapters and accounts there are concerning the evil ends of prominent rulers, ministers, counselors, generals and scholars. Our age, an age of truly excessive brutality, is dreadfully replete with methods of torture and oppression. . . . The genuine scholar has no place in such a scheme. (69)

Given the innovative nature of Himmich's text, how do we situate *The Polymath*, with its *mélange* of history and fiction and its focus on the pre-modern tradition, within the developmental trajectory of the modern Arabic novel? It is a well known, if little discussed, fact that it is within the genre of the historical novel that the roots of the modern Arabic novel can be found. The form that began with the Lebanese writer Salim al-Bustani's series of historical novels, published in his periodical *al-Jinan* in the early 1870s, reached its pinnacle with Jurji Zaydan, who published no less than 21 such novels in his journal *al-Hilal* between the years 1891 and 1914. These works of historical fiction precede by a considerable amount of time the two texts most commonly cited as the Arabic tradition's earliest notable examples of modern prose: Muhammad al-Muwaylihi's *Hadith 'Isa ibn Hisham* (*'Isa ibn Hisham's Tale*) by several decades and Husayn Haykal's *Zaynab*—published in 1914 and commonly considered the first Arabic novel proper—by almost half a century. Even Arabic literature's sole Nobel laureate Najib Mahfuz began his writing career, not with the realist works for which he is most recognized, but with a series of historical novels about ancient Egypt. Despite the historical novel's significant role in the development of the modern Arabic novel, however, it is more common to find statements such as the following than genuine inquiry into the genre: “the Arabic historical novel proved to be a dead end, and the really fruitful beginnings of the novel are to be sought elsewhere” (M.M. Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature*). If after the publication of al-Ghitani's *al-Zayni Barakat* in 1974, a novel that resembles *The Polymath* in technique and use of language more than any other, there are still doubts regarding the significance of historical fiction in the modern Arabic prose tradition, perhaps Bensalem Himmich's text can alleviate that hesitation. ♦