Robin Ostle, Ed de Moor & Stefan Wild (eds)

WRITING THE SELF

Autobiographical Writing in Modern Arabic Literature

Saqi Books

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Random Variations on an Autobiographical Theme

Edwār al-Kharrāt

Quite a few of my critics, if not most, rightly sense in my fiction a strong, or rather a prevalent, autobiographical tinge. True, but incomplete. I was well aware of this, when I prefaced my *Turābuhā za'farān* (translated into English as *City of Saffron*) with a forewarning which was also a confession:

> These writings are not an autobiography, nor anything like; the flights of fancy, the artifice herein, bear them far beyond such bounds. They are illusions-incidents and visions-figures, the kernels of events which are but dreams, the clouds of memories which should have taken place, but never did. More, perhaps, a 'Becoming' than a life, not *my* life.

Now it is an open question whether these incidents that are but illusions, these figures that are only visions, those flights of fancy and those memories of things that never happened, though they should have, are also autobiographical in their own right. Obviously I am not referring to what may be dubbed factual accuracy based on documented evidence, I am only wondering whether these imaginings of a writer are perhaps more authentically 'biographical' than what actually had 'really' happened. On the level of literary writing, what happens, as I conceive it, is an enterprise carried out by language and by the inherent

energy of words. Needless to say, this line of thought inevitably leads to a questioning of the 'reality' of the most 'accurate', documented, down-to-the-last-detail rendering of events – let alone of impressions, thoughts and emotions.

Although this may not exclude a genre that can be called austere – or strictly 'honest' autobiography, and probably this does not impinge on its legitimacy, still I doubt whether an autobiographical work, however rigorously trimmed down to the most meticulous account of facts, can be completely free of bias, unconscious or otherwise, or be innocent of at least a touch of fantasy. The mere outward and inevitable devices of exclusion, inclusion, emphasis or understatement would imply a negation of an assumed accuracy of fact. In this sense, 'reality' in a literary work would be more significant than fact; an inescapable interpolation of subjectivity is more fruitful here than a presumed but never attained objectivity. Conversely I would willingly go as far as conjecturing that the most seemingly objective, neutral literary work of fiction or drama is never devoid of an autobiographical element. Only to cite Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, a work that is outstanding by its sobriety, by its wide, almost comprehensive, variety of characters and situations and by its minute, 'objective' rendering of thoughts and emotions, I would discern clearly in Count Pierre Buzokhov and in Prince Andrew Bolkonski – let alone the other characters that the novel teems with – sides of Count Leo Tolstoy himself. Otherwise how could the author gain such an insight into his heroes, not to say such an almost unaccountable identification with them? I imagine that the same would hold true for the Lears, Hamlets, Prosperos or Romeos of yet another author worthily renowned for his vast range of characterization. On the other hand, to go back to the mode of writing an autobiography, and *a fortiori* a fictionalized autobiography, this would give the writer free rein to reformulate his own life, probably life at large. Would this ambitious endeavour be in contradiction with an assumed moral integrity, or conversely, would the requirements of good writing – which are highly ethical by definition – dictate this forging, this recreation, this parallel rarity, more true than any mundane factual reality?

I would cite here merely one of many episodes in my own work. In the opening chapter of *City of Saffron*, we encounter Ḥusniya and have a glimpse of a juvenile incipient love story between her and the boy Mīkhā'īl, and then she flees the police and takes refuge in Mīkhā'īl's flat and indeed in his bed. Ḥusniya, in point of fact – whatever that means – is a composite figure of two different women, one who lived in that house, so minutely evoked in *City of Saffron*, and the other in yet another house in Muharrem Bey. The police officer barged into this second flat not into the first. Husniya, an assumed

fictional name, never hid in Mīkhā'īl's bed, although Mīkhā'īl's father – who is mine – succoured her in fact and denied the police their victim; and so on, in boundless variations.

Some critics confuse Mīkhā'īl with the author-narrator, to the extent that a writer informed his readers that I am an architect involved in archaeological restoration, in the conviction that the author is identical with the main character in *Rāma and the Dragon*, *The Other Time* and other works. I had to point out that though there are quite a few areas of resemblance between the author and his hero or rather, his anti-hero, I do not subscribe to many of Mīkhā'īl's ideas or attitudes. There is certainly an affinity or a kinship, but we are definitely two – if not several – different persons. The same would hold true for Rāmah, an extremely complex figure, I take it, scrupulously evoked in every realist, down-to-earth, carnal detail, but with conspicuously overt or implicit mythical and symbolic connotations. And so it is for other characters, whether inspired by autobiographical figures or invented altogether, yet they are creations of language and of what language evokes, not creatures of the mundane, the commonplace, the everyday existence.

On another, but closely related plane, my experience in the National Movement of Egypt was reflected in several cardinal passages of my fiction. What I shall relate here has to be a truly personal account of an individual experience. I would only hope that some benefit and probably some interest may be drawn from it so as to make my text better understood. This was the experience of a young man, barely 20 years of age, in the mid-forties of Egypt, and specifically in the patriotic, revolutionary milieux of Alexandria, under King Farouk and the British occupation, in the aftermath of the Second World War. Already half a century had elapsed; I barely now recognize that young man I was, full of hopeful romantic enthusiasm and a burning drive for self-sacrifice – if need be – in the lofty cause of the homeland, its liberation from the yoke of the colonizers, its independence and the progress, the welfare of its toiling, poverty-ridden, oppressed, mostly illiterate masses.

In my childhood and early adolescence I was a very devout Coptic boy, who had a nearly miraculous experience at this baptism, at the late age of seven, in a monastery of the Archangel Mīkhā'īl, near my father's home town of Akhmīm, in Upper Egypt. Later on, as is often the case with many, I was assailed by doubts, my childhood faith was severely shaken, and I passed through the usual spiritual ordeal of adolescence. I read extensively, I promised myself that my real and only vocation in my life was to write. I only mention this to try and delineate a course of spiritual development that led me in the end to join – in fact to help constitute – a revolutionary circle, a Marxist-Trotskyist

near-anarchist group, and which landed me in the concentration camps of Abū Kīr and El Tor for almost two years.

In the early forties I devoured the literature of the Enlightenment that helped kindle the French Revolution: Rousseau, Voltaire and so on. In the year 1940 or 1941, I championed the right of each and every one to his ideas, I was nearly mobbed by my fellow students when I proclaimed the right of anybody to his own beliefs or un-beliefs, including the right to be an atheist. Later on, I read Fabian socialist literature by George Bernard Shaw and the Sidney Webbs. Now the turbulent years of the national movement were upon us in the mid-forties, the students' circles were pregnant with all kinds of political and revolutionary trends, including the Muslim Brotherhood, the Communists, the Wafdists and the merely romantically patriotic. When I was approached by fellow students who were known to be Marxists, I adamantly condemned the repressive ideology and practices of the then victorious and excessively glorified Stalinist regime. Again I was – and still am, I hope – a devout believer in the cardinal individual freedom of the human person as such, not merely as an abstraction, a social entity, an economic or, for that matter, a technological cipher.

When my Marxist friends lent me Trotskyist literature, I thought I had then discovered the perfect formula that combined social justice and individual freedom; I did not come to Marxism, as was the case with many, through a scientific analysis of the social structure, or through the philosophy (or rather the pseudo-philosophy) of dialectical materialism, although all that helped the intellectual formation of the young man who had such a strong Christian spiritual experience in his early boyhood. Being a Copt was then completely irrelevant; the fact never crossed my mind while I was so busy proselytizing for our Trotskyist group, neither did it occur to all the members and sympathizers of that small group. Yet, after a half-century lapse of time, I realize now that, of course, this young man was deeply inspired by and for ever impressed by his Christian, more specifically his Coptic – that is to say, Egyptian – early experience. I suppose that, as I said once, I have never been cured of Christ nor of Trotsky.

In the surge of a huge demonstration that swept over Shāri' Sa'īd in Alexandria, on that morning in March 1946, all that was, at least apparently, completely irrelevant to the context. What was of sole significance was the struggle for the evacuation of the British troops from the soil of Egypt, for national independence, for social justice and for freedom, freedom in every sense of the word. When bullets rang out and a boy of 16 or 17 years of age, in his *galabiyya*, fell just beside me – the bullet could very well have hit me – what really mattered was the ardour that filled my whole being, for the aims and the struggle that I shared with this huge mass of my compatriots who did not only clamour for independence and justice, but who readily gave their very life for these ideals. Two or three hours later on that memorable day, I was in the Sa'ad Zaghloul Square of the Ramla Station, with two of my friends, just in front of a British army jeep, while innocent-looking, tremulous soldiers of our own age aimed their machine-guns at us. That was the moment when some British Military Police soldiers were trapped inside their post, in the middle of the turmoil. There was to be no escape for them. Drowned by the huge, angry demonstration, they met their deaths by fire when another boy, of the same age again, took off his *galabiyya*, set it on fire and made a fire-bomb of it, threw it through the broken glass of the Military Police post and the whole thing went up in flames.

The mechanics of history do not pay heed to individuals: at some crucial moments we become ciphers, symbols and are divested – alas – of our personal individual uniqueness. Yet I do believe that even under this duress, we always retain something of our essential human uniqueness. When I threw myself wholeheartedly into the formation and consolidation of that revolutionary group, I knew, deep-down, that I still had my true vocation as a writer, a fiction writer and a poet of sorts, still ahead of me. Curiously, while in the very hub of this movement, I had to earn my family's living, and mine, working in a British navy storehouse at Quabbary, near the Alexandria dockyards, with the very English whose presence in my country I loathed. But again, as people and not as ciphers or symbols or abstractions, I had with Mr Lee and with Ronald warm relationships of understanding and mutual tolerance.

Not surprisingly, I ended in the concentration camps of Farouk when I was summarily arrested on the eve of 15 May 1948, with no charge and no trial. In the camp, we formed what we called a 'commune' of comrades; everything we received from the outside we shared and shared alike. Is it of any interest to mention that this 'commune' was composed of two Copts, two Muslims and one Alexandrian Italian Jew of German origin? In the prison camps of that time it was still possible to undertake activities like issuing a wall journal, organizing a library and holding entertainment shows, all of which I actively took part in. While inside, I translated *In the Lower Depths*, a play by Maxim Gorky, from the English, a stage was built, decors were arranged and rehearsals were begun. We had the grand opening and the final performance, and the camp's commandant and officers were guests, not of honour but of necessity. On occasion, we were exposed to sudden brutal raids, but books and revolutionary tracts were always carefully hidden in advance.

I was released amongst the final groups of prisoners, after a rough time

when I was almost alone, with only a few remaining internees. The old questions and doubts assailed me once again, as they usually do assail every other intellectual Hamlet. That experience remained nevertheless one of the richest, spiritually and intellectually. It helped to make me value – even more, if that was possible – the concept of individual freedom, both inner and social, and appreciate – even more – the significance of human dignity, the need for inter-subjective communication, and the ultimate necessity to conquer the solitude that is partly the destiny of man. All of this was invaluable for me not only as a writer but as a citizen, as a member of a community and as a human being.

Allow me finally to speak of a salient love story of mine, an autobiographical feature as powerful and as effective as any. This is my love story with my home town. I come originally from Alexandria, a city of saffron, 'a blue-white marble city woven and rewoven by my heart upon whose frothing incandescent countenance my heart is ever floating'. A city – like the literature to which it is affiliated – that is inextricably anchored in a multi-layered heritage; a city and a culture that are at once throbbing with an ever renovated life of actuality and modernity and a depository of ancient, medieval and modern variegated cultures which now blend into a harmonious whole, yet which has never been, and plausibly will never be, merely a monolithic monotone block, 'a market for all nations and their wisdom', as Heath-Stubbs said.

In spite of apparent signs of deterioration and overpopulation, and although Alexandria may look, to an untutored eye, a noisy downtrodden provincial town, she is still a vibrant, lively, fast-developing city that harbours, as she did in the distant and near past alike, talents of considerable import in the fields of art, education and mere *joie de vivre*. Alexandria still powerfully inspires artists, music composers and men of letters in the context of a new, yet ancient Egyptian culture. To my mind, Alexandria stands, here, for Egypt as a whole. She is characterized by diversity which makes up a certain harmony, she is rich in cultural legacies that are not merely anachronistic or simply historic, but are still possessed of a functioning energy. Alexandria, the culture she represents and the literature she has nurtured, is not simply heir to the Greek, Hellenistic or Byzantine cultural glories, philosophical, scientific and literary, but also heir to the ancient spiritual treasures and the cultural dynasties of the protracted age-old pharaonic era. She has now also become inseparably linked to Arab-Islamic culture. She is also strongly associated with modernity, both on the historical level as well as on the cultural literary level.

The few texts I am going to quote, constituting a 'collage', are extracts from

my two novels, *City of Saffron* and *Girls of Alexandria*, in the excellent translations of Francis Liardet:

> They have grown like the vine, my love's passions, in Alexandria, my great city, God-preserved harbour, golden haven, vision of Alexander and work of Sostrates the mighty engineer, pearl of Cleopatra the eternal beauty, shining marbled city which at night needs no illumination so white is she; city of the poets Apollonious, Callimachus and the tragic poet Cavafy, dwelling of all the muses, capital of sanctity and profanity, land of St. Mark, St. Athanasius and the founders of the Bucolic Church, of Origen and Dionysius and St. Athanasius who stood prophet-like alone with the truth in the face of all the world; city of Patriarchs, pillar of true orthodoxy, diadem of the seventy thousand who will rise up with shining-white faces at the side of the Christ as the Seraphim sing God's praises in all their glory, Ras Pharos casting its light from green Eleusis – Al-Hadara to Canope – Abu Qir, from the Gymnasium and the temple of Poseidon to the Emporium and the Stadium, from the Hippodrome to the temple of Serapeum, from the mount of Paneum – Kom-el-Dekka and Camp Shezar to Petrai – Hagar-el-Nawatiya; harbour unmatched save by 'Calicut', bursts from her heart the stout obelisk of stature unparalleled on the face of the earth, none so firm, so unleaden of limb, for it is conjoined in unbreachable union. Bride of waters pouring from the Red Sea to Gibraltar Straits, community of shrines from Sidi'l Shatbi, Sidi Gaber and Sidi Kireyim, God be pleased with them all; city of wide streets and august arched edifices of sure foundation, wondrous of breadth, splendid of habitation, lofty of pride. Alexandria O Alexandria, rampant sun of my childhood, thirst of my boyhood and the loves of my youth.

My Alexandria is radically and categorically different from the notorious Alexandria of the *Quartet*. To my mind, Durrell was never a true Alexandrian. To him, Alexandria, essentially, is an exotic illusion, as if she was written to satisfy an impulse in the writer and in his Western readers, for a re-creation of a deeply rooted fable on the exotic 'Orient' that is densely populated by strange, barely comprehensible figures who could only vacillate between violence and servility or submission. This exotic fable is that Alexandria is animated by an abnormal ambience that the writer endeavours to cloak with the attraction of the unfamiliar to a repulsive, at times disgusting degree, the attraction of excessive imagery, of prefabricated 'beauty' and of deft distortion.

Durrell's Alexandria is solely his personal idiosyncratic fable, composed of

external simulation of facts depicted by an essentially alien perception, of internal soul-scapes in a scene that is cut off, amputated from the true Alexandria, the end result of a genius loaded with prejudices. His Alexandria is a superficial crust, homes and offices of diplomats, functionaries and landlords, the upper strata that float like foam over the sea of another city full of another life. He only knew well the streets, quarters and homes that were taboo to the 'native' population, the locations and states of soul of foreigners, semi-Egyptians or mere verbal metaphors of Egyptians. The real Alexandria, which he calls with a tinge of racist supremacy 'the Arab city', is seen, in his text, as an Oriental scene seemingly luxurious, exotically unfamiliar and slightly shocking.

Durrell has conceived an exquisite and harrowing piece of craftsmanship, full of insights into his own fictional personages, yet Alexandria to him was only his personal figment of imagination as a poet of a high linguistic calibre, but an Englishman, a foreigner and member of a military occupation colony. He was completely alienated from the Alexandria I was born and lived in, during approximately the same time, the Alexandria I have known, with whose people I have grown, my people, toiling, loving, being happy or miserable, living and dying, who by virtue of their toil are her true poets. This is the Alexandria of workers, craftsmen, of Muslim neighbours who lived with us Copts in complete brotherhood, of the girls I loved – Egyptians all, of Greek, Italian or Syrian origin, Jew, Christian and Muslim alike, truly girls of Alexandria, not foreign nor exotic but real, of flesh and blood, whom I evoked and re-created and who fill my work with a luminosity and a passion that I hope never failed me.

My Alexandria is not solely a dream-like location of a living memory and presence, for all its tangible reality; she is not only a spot of beauty and a depository of historical and modern cultures. Alexandria for me is a metaphysical condition, an adventure in spirit to comprehend an inner truth, a confrontation and an identification with the absolute and with the otherness that extends limitlessly on the face of a turbulent or quiescent sea towards an ambiguous horizon. On the other hand, Alexandria, in my text, is not a fictional décor, she is neither the material nor the location of fiction but the autobiographical fictional act itself.

There are, probably, two aspects, at least, that I consider cardinal in both my Alexandria and my text. First, that the absolute is incarnate in man, in the relative, transient and contingent (which is at the core of monophysitism, the Egyptian orthodoxy) that is the communion, the consubstantiation of the divine and the human – in a context that has no relationship with religious dogma or

creed. The second aspect is that the category of 'time' is challenged and refuted, the problematic of temporality and eternity ceases to be posed, the relationship itself is negated; there is neither the perennial nor the transient. Timelessness is the key conception of my fiction, or so I believe, as it is the key trait of Alexandria:

> Many waters cannot quench my love, neither can the flood drown it. You are a smooth boulder in the waters' heart, where the valley sides slope down, green with lily-of-the-valley and elderflower; where the land is saffron, fertile and living; and where, on high, a black dove flutters, its wings spread out to infinity, beating in my heart for ever.

Introduction

Robin Ostle

There is something more than usually frenetic about literary theory when it turns its attention to autobiography, probably because nobody can ever quite decide what it is. The contents of this volume are an apt illustration of this dilemma, comprizing as they do material which ranges from travelogues to novels, as well as the more recognizable versions of the genre in the form of narratives of self-revelation or self-justification. As the critic Candace Lang observes with resignation: 'Autobiography is indeed everywhere one cares to find it' (Lang, 1982, p. 6), while Paul De Man in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* avers that: 'any book with a readable title page is, to some extent, autobiographical (De Man 1984, pp. 67ff).

At least such freedom to categorize what may or may not be autobiography releases one from the often futile game of tracing a specific genre across historical lines of demarcation with all the arbitrariness which this entails. Not the least of the advantages is that it avoids the spectacle of groups of scholars disagreeing on these points of historical demarcation as they hunt the elusive hare of a specific genre through the confusing undergrowth of its origins and its antecedents. To treat autobiography as a general tendency in all sorts of writing rather than as a genre may be highly unsatisfactory for the theorist, but it has many advantages for the more practical student of literature.

For some time now, the pendulum has been swinging against the old idea, best exemplified by von Grunebaum (1953, 1969), that there was something in the classical Arabic psyche which constrained self-revelation and therefore autobiographical expression. According to this view, al-Ghazālī and Usāma b. Munqidh are merely exceptions which proved the general rule. The work of Hartmut Fähndrich (1973, 1977), André Miquel (1983) and Hilary Kilpatrick (1991) has illustrated that the autobiography should not just be seen as the special product of literary individuation as practised by Western European Renaissance Man or Woman, a process which was lent great impetus by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment in Germany, Britain and France. Now we are much more alive to the autobiographical dimensions offered by anecdotes (*akhbār*) which may exist in biographical dictionaries, in historical chronicles, and in the vast compilations of *adab* works in classical Arabic, most notably the *Kitāb al-aghānī*. Authors of *rihla* literature frequently present their geographical accounts via themselves as eye-witnesses, effectively producing autobiographical material. Thus we feel justified in beginning our volume with the voyages of self-definition which were characteristic of the contacts between Europe and the Near East in the early modern period. This section concludes with a World War II version of the Arab student travelling to Europe to complete his higher education, a pattern of cultural formation which grew in volume and importance from the reign of Muḥammad 'Alī onwards.

Although it is a simple and practical solution simply to accept autobiographical material from whatever source it may be found, the theorists continue their search for more and more precise definitions. As Avrom Fleishman remarks rather acerbically: 'No one can tell what autobiography is, yet that has not dispelled a surge of recent efforts to define it' (Fleishman, 1983, p. 1).

One of the best recent studies to guide one through the labyrinthine twists and turns of recent theoretical writing on autobiography is Robert Smith's *Derrida and Autobiography*, a book to which this Introduction owes a great deal. Within the general field of autobiographical theory, Smith filters out three broad tendencies (pp. 55–56):

(i) Autobiographical theory as a subject in its own right, which generates surveys of previous theory and further commentary upon it.
(ii) The general suspicion – already outlined above – that autobiography cannot be theorized as a genre at all.
(iii) Positivist definitions of autobiography, which also contain existentialist claims about self-knowledge.

The majority of the contributions to this volume relate to the third tendency, particularly in the second section 'Autobiography from Theory to Practice', and it is indeed to this tendency that most writers on theory devote the greatest amount of space. Philippe Lejeune is undoubtedly the best-known theorist of this category, and a number of our authors such as Roger Allen, Ed de Moor and Stefan Wild make full use of his approach. A typical definition from Lejeune is as follows:

> Retrospective prose story that a real person relates about his or her own existence, in which he or she gives emphasis to his or her individual life, and to the history of his or her personality in particular (quoted in Smith, p. 53).

It is worth noting that this definition is actually taken from the autobiography which Lejeune must have felt compelled to write after ten years of exhaustive work on autobiographical theory (*Moi aussi,* Seuil 1986). Robert Smith also notes the extraordinary frequency with which theorists of autobiography write their theory more and more like autobiography itself. The theory, as it were, becomes increasingly contaminated by its subject, like, to quote Smith's striking simile, 'a drug dealer who is tempted into sneaking from his own supply' (p. 52).

Most of the more traditional critics who concern themselves with autobiography subscribe to Lejeune's views that it is a quest for self-knowledge, but not all would restrict the autobiography to the medium of a retrospective prose story. Thus Karl Weintraub says that:

> autobiography is a major component of modern man's self-conception: the belief that whatever else he is, he is a unique individuality, whose life task is to be true to his very own personality (Weintraub, 1978, p. xi).

For Christophe Miething:

> Autobiography observes just one question: who am I? . . . The autobiographical project obeys the order given by the Delphic oracle, the commandment *gnothi se auton*. (quoted in Smith, p. 55)

James Olney writes in similar vein:

> It is the great virtue of autobiography as I see it – though autobiography is

> not peculiar in this: poetry, for example, does the same, and so does all art – to offer an understanding that is finally not of someone else but of ourselves. (Olney, 1972, p. x)

So far so good, but there are problems. Most of these definitions can be summed up under the general heading of historicized self-representation. Naturally this history and this intensely personal interaction with it are the creation of the individual autobiographer. Therefore any study of the autobiography must analyse the wealth of political, ideological, cultural and conceptual motives that have led to this particular history of personality. These days, either philosophically or critically, it is no longer possible to accept that the subject of an autobiography is either isolatable or indeed *self-identical*. The clearest statement of this we find in the most 'creative' section of our volume, namely the beguiling foreword written by Edwār al-Kharrāṭ, whose work features in the chapters by Boutros Hallaq and Stephan Guth. In the preface to his novel *City of Saffron* he had already given the warning: 'These writings are not an autobiography, nor anything like; the flights of fancy, the artifice herein, bear them far beyond such bounds.'

And yet the moment that he has denied the 'autobiographical pact', he immediately wonders whether such a denial can ever really be valid:

> Now it is an open question whether these incidents that are but illusions, these figures that are only visions, those flights of fancy and those memories of things that never happened, though they should have, are also autobiographical in their own right. Obviously I am not referring to what may be dubbed factual accuracy based on documented evidence, I am only wondering whether these imaginings of a writer are perhaps more authentically 'biographical' than what actually had 'really' happened . . . I doubt whether an autobiographical work, however rigorously trimmed down to the most meticulous account of facts, can be completely free of bias, unconscious or otherwise, or be innocent of at least a touch of fantasy. The mere outward and inevitable devices of exclusion, inclusion, emphasis or understatement would imply a negation of an assumed accuracy of fact.

In effect this is a claim made by al-Kharrāṭ on behalf of the autobiographical validity of the novel, while recognizing that it is not the same as conventional autobiography. The strong autobiographical tendencies of many Arab novels from *Zaynab* onwards has long been a subject of discussion amongst critics, and this theme is taken up by Stephan Guth in his contribution to this volume.

What al-Kharrāṭ is saying in the quotation above is that any view of the self which comes from autobiographical material will be fragmented, not whole; it will be the result of a wide range of contextual pressures and emotions, it will not be self-determining. Today any analysis of the self in literary material should not be able to avoid questions of self-identity, of self-reference, of authority, of autonomy, or the whole process of self-constitution. If such analyses owe at least as much to philosophy or to psychoanalysis as they do to more traditional literary criticism, then so much the better for the study of literature.

Particularly rich and suggestive for the case of modern Arabic literature is an article on Chicano autobiography by Ramón Saldivar, again highlighted in Robert Smith's study. The gist of Saldivar's article is that the history of the self is a filtered document of cultural consciousness:

> Because of its fundamental tie to themes of self and history, self and place, it is not surprising that autobiography is the form that stories of emergent racial, ethnic, and gender consciousness have often taken in the United States and elsewhere (Saldivar, 1985, p. 25).

What is being suggested here is that autobiography may spring from a sense of powerlessness on the part of the subject, rather than the contrary. The autobiography thus becomes an instrument of strategy through which a position of relative powerlessness or marginality is transformed into something which is able to challenge or to occupy the centre. The chapters in this volume by Dinah Manisty, Nadja Odeh and Sophie Bennett illustrate what is probably typical of women's autobiography in general. Here are narratives which are at variance with a dominant ideology, they are personal histories of those from marginalized sectors of society whose histories do not correspond to the official prevailing history. These new histories are written so that the margin becomes a site of intervention (Smith, p. 61). Thus one is led to the conclusion that autobiography may be an empowering act which is undertaken just as much on behalf of groups or communities as it is on behalf of those individuals in whose name it is proclaimed. An excellent example of this is *Memory for Forgetfulness* by Mahmūd Darwīsh, treated in two of the chapters in our volume. It is clear from Boutros Hallaq's study that at least one of the polyphonous voices of Darwīsh's narrative speaks on behalf of the whole Palestinian nation. We have come a long way from the traditional view of autobiography in the Western tradition, which linked it to the processes of artistic individuation characteristic of the Enlightenment and the Romantic Imagination. We have travelled from the view

that originally *reduced* autobiography to the realm of romantic self-reference and authorial self-justification to one that extends the strategy of autobiography to encompass groups, cultures and whole communities.

In the end, one's view of autobiography will be as simple or as complex as one's view of the self or the subject of the autobiography. One can take the view that autobiography is a form of psychobiography, that is that the object is to make available a means of literary voyeurism which will give privileged glimpses of the author. Indeed this was often the point of much of what used to be called literary criticism, and neither need this approach be debunked entirely, even today. Or one can be much more troubled by accepting the fact that the analysis of the literary self is not so far removed from the analysis of the philosophical self, with all its attendant intellectual dilemmas. And when all is said and done, there is also the problem of language to trouble us even further. The autobiographical subject – whatever the particular narrative voice it chooses – needs language to represent itself, to constitute itself, and this is a crucial subject for analysis, as in any area of literature. While there can never be a final word on this topic, once again the appropriate concluding quotation comes from Edwār al-Kharrāṭ's foreword:

> On the level of literary writing, what happens, as I conceive it, is an enterprise carried out by language and by the inherent energy of words. Needless to say, this line of thought inevitably leads to a questioning of the 'reality' of the most 'accurate', documented, down-to-the-last-detail rendering of events – let alone of impressions, thoughts and emotions . . . In this sense, 'reality' in a literary work would be more significant than fact; an inescapable interpolation of subjectivity is more fruitful here than a presumed but never attained objectivity.

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PART I

VOYAGES OF SELF-DEFINITION