

Essays in
Arabic
Literary
Biography

1850–1950

Edited by
Roger Allen



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Mahmūd al-Mas'adī

(1911 – 2004)

MOHAMED-SALAH OMRI

Washington University, St. Louis

WORKS

Mawlid al-nisyān ("The Birth of Forgetfulness", *al-Mabāhith*, April-July 1945);
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al-Īqā' fī 'l-saj' al-'arabī: muhāwalat tahdīd wa-tahlīl ("Rhythm in Arabic Rhymed Prose: Essays in Definition and Analysis", Tunis: Mu'assasat Ibn 'Abd Allāh, 1996); Arabic version of the *Essai* (1981);
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Complete Works

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"Bi-zāhir al-Qayrawān" ("On the Outskirts of Kairawan"), *al-'Ālam al-Adabī* (March 1930): 22-24;
 "Le rêve et l'oriental ou victoire sur le temps", *Afrique Littéraire* 2 (December 1940);
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ity"), *al-Mabāhith* 42-43 (September-October 1947): 8-9;
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 "Hadīth al-kalb" ("The Dog"), *al-Mabāhith* 8 (October 1944): 9;
 "Hadīth al-'adad" ("Multitude"), *al-Mabāhith* 8 (November 1944): 10;
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Works in Translation

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Le Barrage (UNESCO: Vega Press, 1981); translation of *al-Sudd*, tr. by Ezzeddine Guellouz;
 J. C. Bürgel, "Der Damm: Ein modernes arabisches Drama von Mahmūd al-Mas'adī", *Die Welt des Islams* 21 (1981): 30-79; translation of *al-Sudd*.

Mahmūd al-Mas'adī was Tunisia's most important prose writer in the 20th Century, winning praise from such authorities in Arabic literature as the Egyptian Tāhā Husayn (1889-1973), the Sudanese writer al-Tayyib Sālih, and the Egyptian novelist Jamāl al-Ghītānī. Outside Tunisia, he was the country's best known cultural figure for decades. Yet his fiction has been difficult to classify or place within the mainstream of the Arabic novel. His work has been seen as contemplative; vanguard; heritage model; poetic fiction; mediator between pre-modern narrative and the novel and experimental. Roger Allen recognizes that the writer's work has had lasting appeal due to "the extreme elegance of its language, a factor which seems to have ensured it an enduring place in the history of modern Maghribi fiction". Robin Ostle notes al-Mas'adī's role in bridging the gap between tradition and modernity, turning the perceived limitations and the archaisms of Arabic into "highly creative elements of a work of literature which sacrifices nothing of the modernity and relevance of its message". In Tunisia he had had an unchallenged status, became a canonical author and influenced many writers. Al-Mas'adī was also one of the architects of the nationalist movement in French-occupied Tunisia from 1934 to 1956, and a key figure in the independent Tunisian State from 1956 to the early 1980s. He founded the modern university system, and ran the cultural policy of his country, maintaining the broadly secularizing agenda set by the country's first president Habīb Bourguiba (1903-2002), with close ties to Europe, particularly France, and moderate politics, which often favoured the interests of the nation-state against pan-Arabist tendencies.

Al-Mas'adī's career and fame as writer started in the late 1930s with most of his fictional writing done before 1950. But several of the writer's best known texts were not published in full or in book form until much later. He lists his three main fictional texts in this order: *Haddatha Abū Hurayrah qāl* (written before June 1940), *al-Sudd* (September 1939 – June 1940), *Mawlid al-nisyān* in the early 1940s. He later added rare chapters or occasional stories, such as the collected narrative *Min ayyām 'Imrān* (The Days of

Imran) which includes aphorisms in Arabic and in French, which were published for the first time in 2003. At the level of genre, he explored drama in *al-Sudd* and partially in *Mawlid al-nisyān*, the novel in *Haddatha* and shorter narrative form in the remainder of his work. But regardless of date and genre, al-Mas'adī is identified with a particular style and a distinctive set of themes. It seems that time, even when it involved changes as dramatic as the end of colonialism, did not really affect his work in any significant manner, making a chronological treatment of his work misleading. Works published 50 years apart still bear the same stamp. For this reason, dates of publication do not really show a progression but mark stages in the writer's career and show his impact on the literary scene in his native country and abroad.

Al-Mas'adī was born in the coastal village of Tāzarkah in the North East of the country on January 28, 1911. He attended the most influential institutions of learning of his time at home and in France. After a primary education in the prestigious modern school al-Madrasah al-Sādiqiyyah, founded by the reformer Khayr al-Dīn Pasha, between 1921 and 1932; he studied at the French school Lycée Carnot in 1933, the Zaytūnah Islamic University and al-Khaldūniyyah. In France, he attended the Sorbonne from 1933 to 1936, then in 1939, and in 1947. These institutions positioned al-Mas'adī to become prominent among a company of elites and local leaders. Later on he had the opportunity to affect these very institutions, as a teacher at Lycée Carnot (1936-38) then at Sādiqiyyah (1938-48), and as the architect of Tunisia's educational policy between 1958 and 1968. Al-Mas'adī also taught simultaneously at the Centre d'Etudes Islamiques at Paris University (1947-52) and at the Collège d'Etudes Supérieures in Tunis (1948-55) where he became Chair of the Arabic Literature Department.

Al-Mas'adī's role in the outlook of the emerging society in Tunisia cannot be underestimated. As a key policy maker in the educational system, the reforms he put together affected all Tunisians and set the course for the type of education, language competence and the intellectual training of generations. As Secretary

of State for Education, Youth and Sports, he supervised the conception and implementation of "The Project for Educational Reform of 1958," which aimed at universal access to elementary education in ten years, the development of secondary education and the establishment of a modern university system. Among the most prominent aspects of this reform were integration of the Islamic institution al-Zaytūnah within the university system as a college for religious studies and maintaining bilingual education in Arabic and French. These two bold moves ended the domination of religious institutions over the educational system in the country, setting Tunisia apart from most of the Islamic world in this area. Al-Mas'adī's legacy in this field had wide implications on the society at large and continues to be debated today. He was also minister of Cultural Affairs from 1973 to 1976 and founder of a key monthly cultural magazine, which continues to be published today. He was Member of Parliament from 1959 until he became Speaker between 1981 and 1986.

As public figure, al-Mas'adī was the product of institutions and conditions where most of the leaders of the nationalist movement and the ensuing Tunisian state were formed. During the colonial period, there were two conceptions of what Tunisia was and how it should be. While the French settlers sought to take root, native intellectuals wanted to recover their own. The settlers had the support of the colonial machine while al-Mas'adī and his compatriots had to rely on modest local means. The journal *al-Mabāhith* was the writer's forum and his organized intervention in the process of elaborating a 'national culture' in Tunisia in the 1940s. It was also through the journal that he would establish himself as a writer.

Yet, while it may be obvious to locate al-Mas'adī's position in the politics of culture in Tunisia, his own cultural politics was not defined solely by the national cause or by his role as native intellectual. Some of his essays and personal involvement show intense commitment to the constitution of a national culture; he had a wider view of literature and the role of Islam in the world. He insisted that nationalism

and literature were not always compatible. At the height of tensions between the Tunisians and the French in the 1940s and 50s, and during the heyday of pan-Arab nationalism, he argued for the freedom of the writer to choose whether to support nationalism or not. He warned against the pitfalls of pan-Arab nationalism in the late 1950s (advocating an outright rejection of the West and a reductive view of the role of nationalism which sidelines the role of Islam). Al-Mas'adī's legacy in the development of the educational system in his country is highly valued. But his role in the development of Tunisian culture after independence, particularly as Minister of Cultural Affairs, remains unstudied. While this period witnessed significant developments in theatre, cinema and literature, it was also marked by an increase in limitations on rising political resistance and contestation, as part of the overall politics of the Tunisian state at the time. Was al-Mas'adī, the "responsible militant" as his colleague in *al-Mabāhith* termed him, perhaps too bound by the state line to heed and defend his own call of 1957 for the complete freedom of writers and artists?

Al-Mas'adī was also a scholar of Arabic literature and language. His own academic work bears kinship to the tradition of Islamic studies in France during one of its most brilliant periods. His mentors included the eminent scholars Gaudefroy-Demombynes, Levi-Provinçal, Henri Massignon and Régis Blachère. His complementary doctoral thesis, *Essai sur le rythme dans la prose rimée en arabe* (An Essay on Rhythm in Arabic Rhymed Prose), which was written in 1939 but published as a book only in 1981, is a meticulous numerical study of rhythmic patterns in Arabic prose with focus on the *Maqāmāt* of Badī' al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī (d. 1008). This research was considered "ground-breaking" and "pioneering" by Gully and Hindle in their recent work on rhythm in medieval Arabic epistolary literature. Other published research includes articles on the theory of knowledge of the mystic and theologian, Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), the philosophical poet Abū 'l-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī (973-1058), the poet of asceticism, Abū 'l-'Atāhiyah (d. 848), several pieces on literary criticism and cultural

issues, and short translations from French.

With such a profile, al-Mas'adī became a major player on the cultural scene in Tunisia before and after independence. In the colonial period, his most significant impact was during the crucial years when he was Editor in Chief of *al-Mabāhith* (1943-47), the most important Tunisian journal of its time and forum for a collective academic project to construct a national culture in Tunisia. Al-Mas'adī's most involving anti-colonialist activities were in the arenas of labour unionism and politics. He was President of the Teachers Union in Tunisia and Member of the Secretariat General of the International Teachers Federation from 1951 to 1955 and Assistant Secretary General of the powerful General Union of Tunisian Workers from its foundation in 1948 until 1955. When the Union leader, to whose memory al-Mas'adī dedicated his book *al-Sudd* (The Dam), was assassinated, the writer was put in charge of the Union. But as a result of a crackdown by the French authorities, he was exiled to the south of the country from September 1952 until May 1953. In the political field, al-Mas'adī played an important role as member of the Neo-Constitutional Party of Tunisia from the time of its foundation in 1934. He participated in the negotiations with the French that lead to self-rule in 1954 and was reportedly instrumental in keeping Tunisia out of the Axis alliance during the German occupation of the country in 1942.

Outside the country, al-Mas'adī was Tunisia's best-known cultural figure. He was the country's representative at the UNESCO for 10 years (1958-68) before becoming Member of its Executive Council (1977-8 and 1980-85). In this capacity, he contributed to several UNESCO studies on education and culture including *Cultural Development: Some Regional Experiences* (1981), with the comprehensive essay, "Cultural Development in the Arabic Cultural Region" as well as expert essays on the state of education. Until his death, he was Member of Advisory Board of the Arab League's Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO); of the Editorial Board of the Syrian project *al-Mawsū'ah al-'arabiyyah al-kubrā* (The Great Arabic Encyclopaedia) from 1978, and of the

Jordanian Academy of Arabic Language from 1980. Al-Mas'adī was also the spokesperson for Tunisian writers and often represented them abroad.

Al-Mas'adī's earliest work is a one-act play published in 1930 and inspired by the history of the Islamic city al-Qayrawān. But his first significant work of fiction is *al-Musāfir* (The Wayfarer), which was initially written in French as "Le Rêve et l'oriental" and published in 1940 and then in Arabic in 1942. The story was later reprinted in *al-Sudd*'s first edition in 1955, under the title *Min rūh al-sharq* (From the Spirit of the East) with a short introduction by the author and an epigraph by the tenth century prose master Abū Hayyān al-Tawhīdī (d. 1023). The story marks a key stage in al-Mas'adī's conception of the East and the West. However, in a lecture delivered in 1975, he tried to dismiss the story by suggesting that it reveals what he "thought at the time was the Oriental (Eastern) conception of life and existence" and "the conception of Western civilization of the role of Man and his existential responsibilities." "The Wayfarer" represents a submissive self, a view that the writer himself questions in his book *al-Sudd*, for instance. Even so, this retrospective reading, which may have been made under a perceived pressure to provide some keys to an opaque text, does not detract from the importance of *al-Musāfir* in al-Mas'adī's work as a whole.

In the story, a man who is identified only as "al-Musāfir" (The Traveler) stands on a mountain outside a city, recalling his travels in search of "serenity and dream". He is advised to "interrogate the East," but two years of search have been spent to no avail. The serenity he seeks is not the "serenity of the Greek Apollo whose apparent calm hides internal pain and anguish". It is rather akin to marble, "like Eastern music and the lines in Eastern sculpture where the end meets the beginning, where there is no movement, change or transformation. Serenity is not cowardice and resignation to fate or belief in pre-determination. Rather, it is the great stillness." The Easterner, like marble, has defeated time. For time pertains to movement: time originates in movement and movement is measured by time. "Movement is change, cor-

ruption and finitude". The traveler finds manifestations of the East's victory over Time in the Pyramids, Buddha, the prophets and "even the serenity of Tunisians who remain unshaken amidst a world torn by wars and rebellions". The East does not experience the loneliness of Dionysus in his attempt to reunite with the origin from which he was severed because he "did not lose ties to the Absolute whole". This tie shields the Easterner against the pain of the limitation inherent in the human self. He is like the mystics, al-Hallāj (d. 922), al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) and others, who shunned the human condition in search of the world of God, but only to be confronted with human limitations which compel the wanderer to take refuge in "transcendental truths". The Traveler thinks he has found serenity in the East but he realizes that the "gift was deceptive". He knows he has not yet attained such wisdom. He then recalls the latest stages of his journey and contemplates the town of Kisra, built on rocks from which springs clear water but where the land is barren and the sky is empty. The Traveler visits the town of Makthar (the Roman Maktaris), where he reads the Roman arch as a "door for ascension to the sky," reminding him of his own ascent. But he denies that this has actually happened because the ascent has seemed too easy, almost natural. At this point, he realizes that the serenity of the Easterner cannot be attained through reason or thought. Harmony and union with the universe can only be attained through other means: "The self must open up to the universe, be alert and attentive to it; it must then accept it, trust it and surrender to it" (133). At this point in his journey the Traveler opens up to the city and descends to it, alert and at ease.

The theme of East and West does not dominate al-Mas'adī's other work but the search and the metaphysical questioning remain a constant. A full exploration of the human experience through the life of one character is the subject of the writer's earliest fictional book, *Haddatha Abū Hurayrah qāl*. The narrative is divided into 22 sections called *hadīths* (discourses or narratives) that vary in length from three short sentences ("Hadīth al-shaytān", The Devil) to 14 pages ("Hadīth al-ghaybah tutlab

fa-lā tudrak", Absence Sought but Never Attained). The life and experiences of the main character, Abū Hurayrah, are told in the form of anecdotes or stories reported by a variety of narrators, including Abū Hurayrah himself, who narrates four tales. The events take place in Islam's holy cities of Mecca and Medina and other neighbouring areas during the early period of Islam. Abū Hurayrah's journey begins at age twenty and lasts two decades. It covers a wide variety of experiences often alluded to in the titles of *hadīths*. For example, "Hadīth al-ba'th al-awwal" (The First Awakening) is an account of Abū Hurayrah's awakening to the pleasures of life; "Hadīth al-ta'aruf fi 'l-khamr" (Acquaintance over Wine) describes his first encounter with his lover, Rayhānah; "Hadīth al-'adad" (Multitude) is devoted to Abū Hurayrah's experience of society and life among the community; "Hadīth al-hikmah" (Wisdom) describes his encounter with a philosopher. Abū Hurayrah's journey exposes him to a cast of characters and situations where he learns more about himself and the meaning of the world around him. He moves on in pursuit of higher understanding of life and being until he reaches a revelation. The story ends with him crying: "Truth, here I come," whereupon he disappears in the darkness of night atop a mountain.

The book was not published in full until 1973 after an eventful and telling history, which reveals the cultural and religious climate in the Arab world at the time. A letter dating from the early 1940s states that al-Mas'adī had given the manuscript to a Lebanese writer for safe keeping, fearing that his ship could be attacked during the journey from Marseilles to Tunis in the aftermath of the German occupation of Paris. But the latter was unable to locate the owner of the manuscript until the early 1970s. It is, however, certain that there must have been a second manuscript. For while this copy was in Lebanon, four sections of the book were published by the journal *al-Mabāhith* in Tunisia in 1944.

One significant discrepancy between sections published in 1944 and the 1973 edition pertains to the name of the main character. He is called Abū Durayrah in the earlier version and Abū

Hurayrah in the later text. However, letters written in 1947-48 clearly indicate that the original name was Abū Hurayrah. In more recent interviews, al-Mas'adī has commented that he chose the benign Abū Durayrah, a diminutive form of his step-daughter's name Durra, because he was deterred by the fate of his compatriot, al-Tāhir al-Haddād, the advocate of women's rights, who was vilified and shunned for ideas that were considered anti-religious in the 1930s. To use the name of the revered companion of the Prophet, Abd al-Rahmān Abū Hurayrah (d. 678), in a work of 'secular' and impious fiction would have raised the wrath of the religious establishment at the time. Furthermore, and in addition to changing the name, al-Mas'adī chose to publish the chapters which contained "less contentious" material first. And even by the middle of the 1950s, the writer did not feel he could publish the book without major difficulties. For this reason, he started with *al-Sudd* (The Dam), a book he considered less controversial, delaying publication of *Haddatha* until 1973 when he himself had the authority of the post of Minister of Cultural Affairs and a considerable weight across the Arab world.

Outside Tunisia, opposition to *Haddatha* was no less vehement. Al-Mas'adī's letter to Tāhā Husayn (dated October 17, 1947) notes that the prominent French Islamicist, Levi-Provençal, has given the manuscript to Husayn for evaluation and set up a reading committee for the same purpose. A year later, al-Mas'adī reports that the book was rejected on the same grounds, namely that the main character should not be named Abū Hurayrah. He wrote to Tāhā Husayn on December 14, 1948, complaining of "various opponents, both material and 'imāmiyyah,'" the latter being a sarcastic reference to turbaned religious sheikhs. He also deplors the limitations imposed on Arab writers in the name of blasphemy and respect for the past, pointing out that no one seems to have the freedom to

invent an imaginary person bearing the same name and that no writer can put down an Arabic word without being drawn into an uneasy confrontation with the turbaned sheikhs.

It is small wonder then that Tāhā Husayn,

who was himself the subject of a serious controversy two decades earlier, appears to have withheld his endorsement of the book,

In fact, al-Mas'adī's narrative and literary choices were not without major risks.

For in addition to recalling the revered figure of 'Abd al-Rahmān Abū Hurayrah, the title itself, *Haddatha Abū Hurayrah qāl*, alludes to the sacred tradition of the Prophet's sayings and deeds known as *hadīth*. This convention is central to Islamic culture as a whole, and hence to Arabic literature. Using it as a blueprint in a work of fiction in the twentieth century is an act which involves significant implications and risks. For *Hadīth* is the second most important source of Islam as discourse and as practice, at least for Sunnis. It is both the first exegesis of Qur'an and the first application of it in Islamic history. Together with the Qur'an itself, it constitutes the fundamental sources of the religion. Since the Prophet's word as revealed in *hadīth* was meant to guide the Muslim community, its veracity had to be beyond doubt. For this reason, the process of its compilation and analysis has been scrupulous and rigorous, resulting in a well-regulated academic discipline where the narrators of *hadīth* play a particularly significant role. These reports of the Prophet's words and deeds were, of course, susceptible to manipulation, alteration or even fabrication and forgery in order to serve sectarian, political or personal motivations. But in a largely oral culture, it was inevitable that the primary source for such information was the memory of those who had had direct contact with the Prophet, most notably his companions and wives. Transmitters were thus subjected to intense scrutiny which often exceeded the examination of the *hadīth*. Therefore, Abu Hurayrah is a key figure in this tradition, being one of the most trusted and most prolific transmitters of *hadīth* as well as a faithful close companion of the Prophet. Knowing this, one begins to appreciate why the mere use of his name in a context which inspires doubt and impiety would be a significant challenge to Islamic culture, even a punishable offence. To use the formula and the transmitter in a fictional account involves playing with the reader's expectations. But it is this very reference which

constitutes one key element in al-Mas'adī's particular pathway to the Arabic narrative tradition. The other element is his use of the Arabic language.

This language first came to wider public attention in 1955 when al-Mas'adī published the play *al-Sudd*, the book which really made his reputation outside Tunisia and remains his most recognized text in the Arab world and abroad. It has been translated in full into French and German, and partially into Russian, Spanish and English. *Al-Sudd* is, in part, a dramatization of the conflict between a strong-willed man, Ghaylān, and Sāhabbā' a goddess with a fully institutionalized religion, including a gospel, a prophet, priests, worshippers and rituals. Sāhabbā's power is overwhelming. She dominates the people of the valley and controls the forces of nature. In the opposite camp stands Ghaylān, a human being with limited power but a set of strong ideas and ambitious goals. His philosophy in life is based chiefly on the autonomy of individual willpower and freedom of action. He draws his strength largely from his own determination but benefits from relative control over his workers and the unconditional support of a reliable "spirit" named Mayārah. Among Ghaylān's most outspoken sceptics is his companion Maymūnah, who fears the power of the goddess.

The two sides live in a state of physical as well as ideological conflict. The conflict is introduced through Voices; some of these speak on behalf of man, others represent the goddess. Ghaylān pokes fun at the local religion, accusing its prophet of speaking gibberish. He believes that the people of the valley are incapable of action and creativity because they are in the grip of a religion that deprives them of their will. In order to correct this, he decides to build a dam, irrigate the land and create a prosperous life in the valley. Rituals of Sāhabbā's religion in the form of incantations, songs and dance are performed by a chorus of monks who dance around a water bowl and "call for water to turn into fire, for dams to crumble and for Ghaylān's hands to be amputated". Sāhabbā' gives a sign of her power, and the water catches fire. The ritual ends with signs of gratitude to the goddess.

In Scene Three, Maymūnah dreams that the

dam has crumbled in a devastating quake. "I had a frightening and awesome vision of untold horror!" she says. "I saw a dam made up entirely of skulls arranged in perfect order". She describes water gushing through holes previously filled with human eyes, noses and mouths. In the dream she calls to Ghaylān for help, but a voice replies: "You're calling for him, but his skull has not yet arrived." The awesome quake shakes the mountain and swallows the river and the entire valley. In Scene Four, the Three Stones are transformed into three young women who muse about the purpose, vanity and arrogance of human beings. "Humans are fond of gathering and collecting," the Second Stone says. "It is as though they were narrators or storytellers." She goes on to claim that the real aim of their effort may be the search for themselves.

As work on the dam progresses, conflicts sharpen and tensions increase. Maymūnah accuses Ghaylān of a fruitless attempt to hide his inability to confront the truth. A glimpse of the battle between Ghaylān and his "enemies" emerges from Maymūnah's account of the setbacks that befall the construction of the dam during the intervening months: tools have been stolen; a fever has killed half of the work force; a flood has carried away two whole months' worth of work; a shipment of iron poles has vanished; and Ghaylān has been temporarily disabled by a fever. But Ghaylān remains defiant, insisting that the "story" is not over yet. Nevertheless, in spite of his open defiance, Ghaylān is gradually driven to impatience and anxiety. Both he and Maymūnah have recourse to stories from the tradition to support their divergent visions. His precedent is the story of Āsāl and Nā'ilah in which Āsāl leaves his lover at the height of their love in order to seek a higher experience. Maymūnah in turn cites the story of Hāmān whose search for perfect existence drives him to madness. At this stage, Mayārah makes her first appearance and lends new impetus and energy to Ghaylān. With this, the play reaches its climax and the conflict its height.

With the help of Mayārah, Ghaylān forces the people of the valley, their prophet and the stones to accede to his will. Later the same afternoon,

Ranjahād unmasks her true identity. At the gate of Salhawa, the spring which gets its name from a plant called *salhawah*, known to bring *nisyān* (oblivion) and *salwa* (consolation), and vanishes." Madyan raises his head to find himself alone in the dark forest. When he returns home, his companion, Laylā, inquires about his trip, but he says nothing. Madyan is silenced by the turn of events, struck dumb by the realization that what he thought was an epic journey through the far reaches of the soul was no more than a staged comedy of fate. Madyan eventually discovers a medicine, tests it and experiences a moment of timelessness, but he soon realizes that "Time cannot be forgotten" and that the body is transient. *Mawhid* was a success both in Tunisia and abroad. It has been translated into French (1993) and Dutch (1995).

The most recent of al-Mas'adī's works to be published is *Min ayyām 'Imrān* (The Days of Imrān, 2002). However, it does not really stray far from the writer's already established style, tone and themes. Like *Haddatha*, *al-Sudd* and *Mawhid*, it is the story of a man, Imrān, and a woman, Danyah, who meet up in order to seek a company, fight off solitude and search for a meaningful existence. They go through various experiences and states, questioning belief, life, love, society, death. The narrative ends with their story transformed into the original myth of a water spring gushing out from the cliff of a mountain that borders the sea at the spot where they have both met their death. *Min ayyām 'Imrān* is told in short segments, likened by critics to prose poems. Some of these take the form of dialogue, others narratives or meditations. The book was most likely conceived in the late 1940s but was written over a very long period of time in sporadic bursts. The earliest section appeared in 1954 but the complete text was not compiled and published in book form (along with the writer's aphorisms) until 2003 by the al-Mas'adī scholar, Mahmūd Tarsūnah.

The opacity of al-Mas'adī's texts and the fact that they tackle touchy issues in Islamic culture, such as the nature of faith and the limits of human power, have divided critics of his work since the mid-1950s. It is true that each of his

critics heralded the birth of a major work of art and the rise of Tunisian literature. Abroad recognition to *al-Sudd* was enthusiastic, but circulation was very limited. In his 1957 reviews Tahā Husayn praised the book for attempting a new genre, the symbolic story, and declares that he was impressed by the writer's command of Arabic. Yet, despite this intervention from the "Dean of Arabic Letters" at the time, al-Mas'adī and his book did not make any real headway among readership in the Arab East. In Tunisia, on the other hand, it was not long before the book became part of school curriculum, which guaranteed its readership and effect on generations of Tunisian students and a number of writers. Ghaylān became one of the nation's leading cultural figures in the country. Critics have studied the play from various angles and in several languages; and a full translation appeared in French in 1981 as part of the UNESCO series of representative writers.

Ironically, however, *al-Sudd* was not the writer's first book to be published in full. *Mawhid al-nisyān* (Genesis of Oblivion) appeared in its entirety as instalments a decade earlier, in 1945. In this story, told in seven chapters, Ranjahād seduces the "wise" physician, Madyan, into giving up his search for a drug which would help him defeat Time, abandoning his companion and the hospice he runs and accepting her lead on a journey of self-discovery. When they near the ultimate goal,

books puts accent on a different aspect of his thought and style; but there is a unifying tone and overarching themes that have led critics to view the writer's work as a unified whole. His writings have been largely interpreted in relation to the colonial situation in Tunisia, the struggle of Arab writers to revive the Arab and Islamic cultural heritage, and the relationship of Arabic literature to the literary traditions of the West. Al-Mas'adī's style has been seen by some as a successful adaptation of Arabic to modern concerns and by others as precious and archaic. Ghaylān has been hailed both as a hero who resists foreign occupation and a revolutionary who attempts to redress the backwardness of his society. Abū Hurayrah in turn has been regarded as a revolutionary figure who questions blind belief and shakes off the inherited values of his society. Yet both have also been criticized for being elitist figures, disconnected from the people and offering idealistic solutions to real problems. Much has also been made of the meaning of the death of al-Mas'adī's characters at the end of the stories. Some critics have seen this as failure to provide solutions and positive models for a society in need of both. Others have explained these endings as the natural outcome of the impossible goals that characters set for themselves. Yet other critics have also pointed out the spiritual and metaphysical nature of the stories and read the endings accordingly, as sublimation or transformation of human existence on earth into a higher form of being, regardless of whether the stories are interpreted in light of Western philosophy or Islamic ideas, and particularly Sufism.

In fact, the presence of mystical elements in al-Mas'adī spans all his work but functions in different ways in each of his key texts. Ghaylān's experience is not as varied as Abū Hurayrah's or as overtly mystical as Madyan's. It nonetheless highlights specific instances of the Sufi journey experienced by neither of the latter character. As the play *al-Sudd* progresses, it becomes clear that the dam Ghaylān is constructing has more to it than the declared purpose of collecting water for irrigation. The completion of the dam, he claims, will be a moment "of perfect creation. The transcendence

of his "earthly" project to a search for self-fulfilment is guided by Mayārah, who begins the story as an outsider and then lends guidance and support to Ghaylān when she judges that he has earned them through his individual effort. It is through her that the dam can be interpreted as a test of Ghaylān's capacity and real aims. Unlike Abū Hurayrah, Ghaylān does not engage in ritualistic practice, but focuses instead on making rather than meditating. In the case of Abū Hurayrah however, reaching the goal involves going through the stations of the Sufi way and experiencing states, shunning temptation along the journey to knowledge of self and the world. In the case of Madyan, there is a debate as to whether spiritual knowledge is attainable through science or intuitive revelation.

As far as foreign sources are concerned, there is agreement that al-Mas'adī's work bears strong affinity to and clearly engages with seminal texts from European modern literature as well as Greek tragedy. There is a specific affinity between Goethe's *Faust* and al-Mas'adī's two characters Madyan and Ghaylān. The *Faust* myth is most evident in *Mawlid*, where Madyan, like Faust, is a physician searching for a potion; Ranjahād combines the sorceress and the devil, Mephistopheles; Madyan's soul flies away to join the "world of the dead" just like Goethe's Faust. Also like Faust, al-Mas'adī's main characters realize that forgetfulness and freedom from the past only come at the expense of life itself and that man's reward is in trying. *Al-Sudd* in particular recalls *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus and Ibsen's *Master Builder*, in that they show the desire of the main characters to teach fellow humans productive life and skills.

Haddatha Abū Hurayrah qāl has been likened to Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*. Both texts take the form of discourses and raise the question of the limits of human will and power. Both are episodic in structure and appear to stem from a desire to explore other paths to knowledge beyond reason. Al-Mas'adī, however, considers this to be the result of Eastern influences on Nietzsche rather than the other ways around. From twentieth century sources one can draw attention to the affinity between al-Mas'adī's

ideas and the work of the French existential philosophers, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, particularly the sense of existential anguish and the absurdity of human suffering. However there is in al-Mas'adī a desire to recast these myths and characters in an 'Islamic' context and an Arabic style of thinking, linking these ideas to antecedents in Islamic culture such as the philosophical writings of sceptics like al-Ma'arrī and to Sufi writings and thinking, such as the work and life of Abu Mansūr al-Hallāj (d. 922). Al-Mas'adī's theory of human position in the universe may explain this blending. According to him the human self is limited on side and unlimited on the other. While it may appear powerless in the face of the universe and by comparison to God's power, it is nonetheless privileged since it is extracted from the divine self. This origin endows the human self with attributes of the Absolute Self. This is the meaning of the human being as vice regent of God. Tragedy is therefore the record of human beings as they

oscillate between man and beast; enduring the pain and powerlessness or the feeling of powerlessness in the face of fate, death, life, the unknown, the gods, himself.

No matter the interpretation, however, it seems there is consensus that al-Mas'adī's work remains a seminal experiment in reworking the Arabic language and narrative tradition into modern texts where issues of concern to the Islamic writer of the post-colonial period are treated in a daring manner. For this reason perhaps, there is a serious disjunction between the main stream of national literature in the Arab world and al-Mas'adī's writings. On the face of it, writing seems like the sphere where al-Mas'adī took refuge from political activity, the pressures of trade unionism and the bureaucracy of his government positions. Intellectually, writing was a space where he could express his inner tribulations as public intellectual. It was an area where he could explore the narrative tradition, the potential of the Arabic language, and world literature, away from the need for representing the national struggle and the social circumstances of the nation; and away from the

clarity and immediacy demanded by activist discourse. Yet, in the Arab world, the communities of readers who received his work have been largely shaped by nationalism and modernization as the two dominant paradigms among his critics, which led to both accusations that he betrayed his people and the glorification of his work as pioneering and unique. The reception of al-Mas'adī's fiction is perhaps indicative of the lack of a 'horizon of expectations' within which he might be read. His work frustrates the desire among foreign critics for local colour, facile political readings of Arabic literature and a practical literary history focused on genres and trends. In Tunisia he enjoyed a wide influence as a stylist, but little effect when it came to his engagement with tradition or language. He seems, however, to have become somewhat trapped in two separate spheres, so enclosed in his style and outlook that he remained unchanged throughout his career. He was also perhaps too much of a canonical figure, trapped in his image and a success that would be hard to emulate. His stature as prominent public official made him bound by the institution in his country and prevented him from free creative work.

Al-Mas'adī was a bilingual intellectual who early on made a conscious choice to separate the two languages. He published his research in French and Arabic, but wrote his fiction in Arabic. He was guided by the ideas and aesthetics learned from close knowledge of Western literature and through deep academic and personal experience of the Arabic literary and linguistic tradition. Al-Mas'adī was also deeply influenced by the ideas of freedom and the humanism prevalent among intellectuals in France at the time. The desire to be part of world literature and the drive to make a lasting contribution to Arabic, as well as world, culture marks his theory of literature and finds expressions in his fiction. Unsystematic as it was, his attempt to identify with the foundational role that Islam and Arabic literature played in the elaboration of the very concept of a world literature, at least in its early formulations by Goethe, but he reveals a search for analogues and common ground rather than models and points of emulation.

Al-Mas'adī died on December 16, 2004, at age 93, having experienced and affected one of the most dramatic centuries in the history of Tunisia and the Arab world as a whole. His death came in the aftermath of a flurry of public activities related to his work and gave further momentum to interest in his life and writings. The year before, 2003, was marked by the publication of his complete works in both Arabic and French, national and international colloquia organized to celebrate the events, and renewed interest among translators. After his death, numerous commemorative events took place, ranging from reading his work in daily slots on state television, to colloquia around the country, interviews with those who knew him closely, special supplements in newspapers and magazines and an outpouring of expressions of admiration from writers and poets. Al-Mas'adī's death was in reality the passing of an era. For some, it ended his dominance over Tunisian literary history, giving room for other voices to be heard. For others, it was the passing of the last of the 'great Tunisians', an event akin to the death of the poet al-Shābbī seventy years earlier; hence calls to commemorate al-Mas'adī's achievements in a museum, a library, literary prizes and even a dedicated website. But unlike al-Shābbī and the pioneer of Tunisian short story, 'Alī al-Du'ājī, who lived in relative obscurity and were honored only posthumously, by the time of his death al-Mas'adī had been an icon for Tunisians for almost half a century.

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