

CONCLUSION

It is never ideas we should speak of, only sensations and visions – for ideas do not proceed from our entrails; ideas are never truly *ours*.

Cioran, *Anathemas and Admirations*

The tongue is voracious.

Al-Ma^ʿarrī, *Risālat al-Ghufrān*

I would like to end the book by returning to the three key terms with which it started; namely, necessity, authenticity, and method. To these, I will add style or form, both as a pursuit in al-Ma^ʿadī's literary texts and as an issue for debate among students of Third World literature in general and Arabic literature in particular. The nexus between the writer, the nation and the world will be the starting point of these reflections. My final observations will be about the tragic in al-Ma^ʿadī.

The nation, the writer and the literary canon

In Tunisia today, were the 'fitful gleam' of the nation's archaeology, to use Anderson's apt phrase, to be captured, one would certainly find in it al-Ma^ʿadī the writer, no matter how dim the light. He has become part of the imagined community and its imagined history, an irrefutable evidence of collective identity and pride, an artefact in the museum of the nation. To discover al-Ma^ʿadī the intellectual, the light would have to be much brighter. The study of the construction of national culture reveals al-Ma^ʿadī's role in the 'making' of modern Tunisia, and explains why he has been a focal point of tunisianness. As public figure, he walked in the footsteps of his predecessor, Khayr al-Dīn, the nineteenth century reformer and statesman. He was also the product of the Ṣādiqiyya school, the institution where most of the leaders of the nationalist movement and the ensuing state were formed. Within this institution French culture was at once perpetuated and challenged. On the ground, there were two conceptions of what Tunisia was and should be. The difference between the two visions was not that of accent or outlook but an irreconcilable rift between two entities separated at their origin. While the *colons* sought to take root, native intellectuals

wanted to recover their own. Yet, both sides needed narratives of legitimization. They had to write these and to circulate them as widely as possible; the *colons* with the support of the colonial machine, al-Mas^ʿadī and his peers by relying on local modest means. The journal, *al-Mabāḥith*, was the writer's forum and his organized intervention in the process of elaborating a 'national culture' in Tunisia in the 1940s. The concerted effort to document and publish evidence of the existence of a viable 'national' culture that predates colonialism was coupled with a deliberate effort to nurture contemporary strands of its vitality. It was through the journal that al-Mas^ʿadī would establish himself as a writer.

Yet, while it may be obvious to locate al-Mas^ʿadī's position in the politics of culture in Tunisia, his own cultural politics is less easy to identify. He was not defined solely by the national cause or by his role as native intellectual. While some of his essays and personal involvement show intense commitment to the constitution of a national culture, his conception of literature appears to question the very idea of nationalism. 'Genuine' literature, according to him, must focus on what is common to all people rather than the confines of one nation. 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. Al-Mas^ʿadī's ties to the nationalist movement and his position in the nation-state might explain why his cultural politics was perhaps not easy to practice without the support of an existing state apparatus or an incipient one. So when he warned against the pitfalls of pan-Arab nationalism (an outright rejection of the West and a reductive view of the role of nationalism which sidelines the role of Islam) in the late 1950s, he was in part speaking on behalf of a nascent nation-state, eager to protect its territory and choose its allies. For the same reason, al-Mas^ʿadī'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 the rising political resistance and contestation, as part of the overall politics of the Tunisian state at the time. Was al-Mas^ʿadī, the 'responsible militant' as al-Fīlālī has called 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 (*Renouveau* 31 March 2004)?

Al-Mabāḥith stressed what it called 'genuine literature', 'pure poetry' and the pursuit of artistic achievement; all at a time when the journal itself was deeply involved in resistance and in the identity politics of the colony. The explanation for this is two-fold. First, the journal (and al-Mas^ʿadī) understood that impact on the global stage, within a globalizing modernity, required a leap in the local culture in order to position it at a par with its western counterpart. The educational background, the readings and a fascination with Western literature made al-Mas^ʿadī and his peers canon-driven but also deeply aware of the politics of literary canon. Secondly, their reading of the heritage was likewise guided by the feeling that they needed to 'measure up' to ancestors

who impacted the world for centuries. To adopt French as the language of this positioning towards Europe was attractive. But al-Masʿadī did not take that path in any significant way. Inscribing Arabic in the modern world canon was his drive. The essays reveal the writer's desire to stretch the boundaries of world literature to include the Islamic tradition. At the same time, he attempted to construct an Arabic and Islamic canon of what he called 'genuine' or 'living' literature 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-Masʿadī was also deeply influenced by the ideas of freedom and the humanism prevalent among intellectuals in France at the time. One of these was the conception of the writer as intellectual 'clerk' deeply mistrustful of narrow-minded nationalism, which was developed by Julien Benda as I note in Chapter 1. But if the seeds of the split between the two spheres of al-Masʿadī's activity, writing on the one hand and activism on the other, are found in his definition of literature and the conception of the role of the writer, such distinction becomes sharper when we study his fiction. The desire to be part of world literature and the drive to make a lasting contribution (*baqāʾ*) to Arabic as well as world culture marks al-Masʿadī's theory of literature and finds expressions in his fiction. Unsystematic as it was, his attempt to identify with the foundational role, which Islam and Arabic literature have played in the elaboration of the very concept of a world literature, at least in its early formulations by Goethe, reveals a search for analogues and common ground rather than models and points of divergence.

Seen from the perspective of canon construction, al-Masʿadī's theory of world literature and his own literary writings appear in harmony in so far that his work could be understood as an attempt to be part of the canon of this 'genuine literature'. But there is a serious disjunction between the canon of national literature in the Arab world and al-Masʿadī's writings. His work does not fit the mould, except perhaps through interpretive excess or coercion. On the face of it, writing seems like the sphere where he took refuge from the onslaught of politics, the pressures of trade unionism and the bureaucracy of his government positions. Intellectually, writing was a space where the inner tribulations of a public intellectual could be expressed. 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 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, hence the accusations of betrayal or the glorification of his work among his critics. The reception of al-Masʿadī's fiction is perhaps indicative of the absence of what Jauss calls a 'horizon of expectations' within which he could be read. His work frustrates ethnographic desire for local colour, facile political readings of Arabic literature and a practical literary history focused on genres and trends. In Middle East Studies, an area of research deeply tied to the confrontational politics, which has marked the region for decades, he has been of interest only to a handful of critics. And it is specifically because of the ideological

and cultural baggage tied to the study of these nations that issues of method in the study of the literatures of this region acquire more urgency and weight. But before reflecting on the methodological issues raised in this book, I want to revisit the manifestations of *turāth* and Sufism in al-Masʿadī's fiction and how these relate to the debate on authenticity.

Turāth, Sufism, authenticity

Al-Masʿadī's fiction contains a number of curious references to literature and writing. In *al-Sudd* Maymūna suggests, wryly, that Ghaylān sets up a school 'to teach the gods the art of eloquence' (57); the stones accuse Ṣāhabbā's prophet of plagiarizing a famous master of rhetoric (94). In *Haddatba*, Abū Hurayra depicts his own end through an abstract drawing, which he interprets as 'Time whose head has been cut off or a question and no meaning' (222); Abū Rughāl says about people of the valley: 'I realized that each one of them, even their fools, fulfil a specific function in life, like syntax in a sentence. It was as if Sībawayh [the scholar credited with systemizing medieval Arabic grammar] was their ruler' (209). These metatheatrical and metafictional references and many others are poignant reminders that we are reading a story, a textual construction aware of its own textuality; a warning that perhaps we should not take the word too seriously, or erroneously assign to it implications beyond the text. These may be further instances of concealment (*taqiyya*) designed to protect a subversive message, as I illustrate in Chapter 3. But it is clear, nevertheless, that the text does reflect on itself as text, inducing some critics, unaware of the exact dates of his writings, to even argue for 'postmodernism' in al-Masʿadī. In *al-Sudd*, Ghaylān makes explicit that 'everything is a story', adding that 'living is the Man's role in the story and age is its extent' (109). What is the story? How is it constructed? And how does it relate to history?

Traditional accounts of authenticity (*aṣāla*) and *turāth*, two issues which continue to be the source of much anguish and much thinking in the Arab World go some way to explain the complex manifestations of the debate in al-Masʿadī. They do, however, limit the discussion to textual evidence and political idiom. Critics find in al-Masʿadī references to the heritage and therefore argue for the authenticity of his work. As such he is interpreted within specific definition (construction) of authenticity and *turāth* to fit specific identity politics. Characters, for instance, carry names that compelled critics to research deep into the archive of the culture in order to unearth equivalents to Ghaylān, Madyan, Rayḥāna, Abū Rughāl, Maymūna and others. But al-Masʿadī's fictional texts are completely woven from the textual material of *turāth*. The absence of specific referent and locale disrupts the sense of representation or mimesis. Thus, al-Masʿadī's texts cannot be perceived as Tunisian *per se* or Arab in a specific way. Names, for instance, function at two levels. They are codes; for example, Ghaylān and his single mindedness in *al-Sudd* recall Ghaylān al-Dimashqī and his belief in human will. They are also instances where the 'effect of reality' is affirmed and denied at the same time. They point to historical important Islamic figures but do not re-present them. This is a key difference between al-Masʿadī and

other Arab writers in the literary uses of Islamic subjects in the 1930s and 40s. It also sets him apart from more overt attempts at recalling narrative tradition, such as Muḥammad al-Muwailiḥī's *Hadīth 'Īsa 'Ibn Hisbām*, as I argue in Chapter 2.

In fact, when al-Mas'adī was writing his fiction in the late 1930s and early 40s, religious themes were neither new nor rare in Arabic literature. Sufis and Sufism, however, largely remained outside creative writing. During the same period, interest in Sufism as a field of study witnessed a transformation, especially at the hands of European scholars whom al-Mas'adī has known and most certainly read.² In his essays and lectures, he approaches Sufism in a general manner, showing interest and even fascination with al-Ghazālī and to a lesser degree the ascetic poet, Abū al-ʿAtāhiyya; but pays less attention to prominent Sufi figures such as al-Ḥallāj, Ibn al-ʿArabī or al-Niffarī. He selects from the range of Sufi terminology only such known ideas as Man's awe before God's creativity and power, revelation (*kashf*) of truth to the elected Sufi, or the limits of rational knowledge. And he does so often to explain themes in his own work. Al-Mas'adī's fiction, on the other hand, reveals a more complex affinity with Sufism than the essays suggest.

Sufism emphasizes the self and the search; it is open-ended and yet focuses on the development of individual consciousness long before the modern concern with it. Religious doubt and misgivings about the faith, which appear in al-Mas'adī's fiction are often attributed by critics to modernity, and more specifically to the existentialist influences on the writer. This can only be part of the story. In Islamic culture, scepticism runs almost as a parallel history to devotional literature and thought. In fact, doubt and crises in faith are well entrenched even among the mainstream figures of Islam. Pious men and women have openly admitted going through phases of doubt and often wrote about them. Al-Ghazālī's *al-Munqidh min al-dalāl* and al-Ma'arrī's *Luzumiyyāt* are but two such cases. Sufi figures often describe their doubt and, more importantly, show how doubt as a phase and a breaking point is the main reason why they engage in a Sufi search for truth and certainty. Al-Mas'adī tries to narrate what al-Ghazālī calls *fayḥ* or overflowing and *mukāshafa* (revealing). The variety in style and theme in his work reflects his search for apt ways to represent the Sufi experience. In this he joins the company of famous Sufis and his style is opaque only in so far that it is Sufi, like theirs.

One of the key Sufi manifestations in al-Mas'adī is Abū Hurayra's journey. Yet, his desire to 'erase' his story in 'The Clay', analysed in detail in Chapter 4, has parallels in al-Mas'adī's other work. In fact, the desire to forget and return to an original state of being haunts al-Mas'adī's main characters. Madyan sets out on a quest for forgetting in *Mawlid al-Nisyān*; Ghaylān, in *al-Sudd*, seeks to imitate gods in their capacity to create life; Sindabad longs to 'return to purity'. Is this an attempt to erase history or a desire to redeem it in a Nietzschean sense? ('To redeem the past and to transform every "It was" into "I wanted it thus!" – that alone would I call redemption' (Nietzsche 1979: 110).) If the aim of Abū Hurayra's journey in '*al-Ṭīm*' is to achieve a total erasure of his story, then he has failed. He declares, 'I found it [his story] there in me, before Adam and Eve, impossible to erase' (132–3). But this perceived failure, like the other 'failed' attempts by Ghaylān, Madyan, Sindabad and the Traveller, records

the fact that the story is bound by history, and occurs only in relation to it. The journey – as well as the other engagements with origins and beginnings, highlighted above – are attempts to reclaim the past, to make it the writer's own. But in al-Mas'adī's stories, the goal does not seem to be an end in itself. Even in the most extreme instance of struggle against fate and destiny, depicted in *al-Sudd*, there is no illusion about this tragic undertaking. And here lies the meaning. 'The struggle to reach the summit can alone fill the heart of a Man. We have to imagine Sisyphus happy', says Camus (Camus 1942: 168). So while the impossibility of being outside history is recorded, the human will to transcend this necessity is also inscribed. The aim is not representation but presence in a world that denies one's presence. And it is in this sense, and in this sense only, that al-Mas'adī's text can be understood as historical: it is an act of being in history, an attempt at turning the past into agency in the face of a disorientating present and a future which seemed beyond the reach and control of the Arabs, readers and writers alike.

Such story involves the questions of who we are and what is our purpose in the world. The Sufi journey as a reading code provides better understanding of how the individual experience is constructed in al-Mas'adī's literary writings within the framework of these questions. Ignoring Sufism in al-Mas'adī's is indicative of a reluctance to tackle the whole issue of Sufism in particular and spirituality in general in modern Arabic literature. It reveals the selective – and sometimes, exclusive – tendency of dominant constructions of *turāth*. Sufism allows al-Mas'adī to extricate the spiritual dimension from the specificity (even historicity) of religious ritual. His work is an early complex encounter between 'Sufism' and 'modernity' in Arabic literature. Specifically, it connects him with the metaphysical search, which characterizes High Modernism in European and American cultures in the first half of the twentieth century.³ But this is not the only area where the writer and High Modernism meet, as the discussion of his style reveals.

Style

The settings of most of al-Mas'adī's stories, which often include an empty and merciless sky, arid land and running water, provide a context for a search and a quest. The desolate landscape sets the stage for two types of action: it invites creation at the basic human level, and inspires wonder and questioning at the metaphysical one. In a symbolic interpretation of these settings, we find the basic elements of writing: a blank page, the writer's lexicon (rocks) the horizons of meaning (sky) and the capacity to mould everything together into a living body (water and style). Ḥusayn compares al-Mas'adī's language to 'the rocks from which his dam has been constructed'. Ḥusayn has also famously suggested that he feared that the Arabic language has seduced al-Mas'adī and 'tempted him to be hard on it and to exhaust it'. How can one exhaust a language? What is the meaning and manifestation of this seduction? Why did Ḥusayn fear it?

In addition to the desire to erase the story by recovering origins, there are other acts of return to origins in al-Mas'adī, which pertain to style. In *Haddatha*, these

include the choice of the main character, the language used, and the original form of narrative, *ḥadīth*. Historically, Abū Hurayra is a key narrator of the ultimate narrative, the prophet's life and statements. He is the original narrator (*rāwī*) whose words represent the basic narration (*riwāya*) and telling (*ḥadīth*). As such, he is a key figure to the history of Islam and Islamic culture whose authority relates to the very existence of the Prophetic tradition. Engagement with *Qur'ān* rather than later sources also reflects the same drive. They are all originators: *Qur'ān* is the originating text; Abū Hurayra is the first narrator and source; *ḥadīth* is the basic narrative form; the root is the origin of the word. As suggested above, al-Mas'adī's text cannot be understood by indexing its reference. Such task, as the close readings of a short segment from *al-Sudd* makes clear, becomes an incommensurable undertaking, which results in rewriting the entire text as reference. The writer's work is not there, as Hutcheon points out. Avant garde texts, she says, are 'deliberately and willingly learned, haunted by cultural memories whose tyrannical weight they must overthrow by their incorporation and inversion of them' (Hutcheon 2000: 5). For rather than accumulating references, al-Mas'adī peels off the layers of connotation. He strips the Arabic language down to its roots; his use of rhythm engages an initial quality of the language; his economy relies on the evocative rather than the expository nature of Arabic.⁴ Mahjūb ibn Mīlād has called this *zūhd* (asceticism) in style (al-Mas'adī 1992: 154). There are even instances of syntactic economy where al-Mas'adī drops particles and conjunctions in order to establish unmediated relationships among words, resulting in the accumulation of adjectives or nouns, which increases possibilities of constructing meaning through association rather than exposition. For instance, he tends to use adjectival nouns instead of adjectives, which makes the meaning wider and more allusive.⁵

Stylistically, al-Mas'adī undertakes the ultimate challenge of any writer using Arabic, to wrestle the language out of a sacred history and expository baggage. And, like his European contemporaries, most prominently the abstract impressionist painter, Kandinsky, an artist who returns to primary colours and shapes in order to express what he called the 'vibrations of the human soul' (Kandinsky and Mark 1974: 190), al-Mas'adī's writing may be understood as peeling off of cultural habitations in an attempt to uncover what might be called the primary colours of the word. At the level of language, al-Mas'adī often uses words in their root meaning (e.g. *islām* to mean surrender rather than Islam the religion; *kufr*, to mean denial or rejection; *īmān* to mean trust and *allah* for deity rather than the specific manifestation of it in Islam). It is perhaps for this reason that he, unlike most writers who tend to be suspicious of language, approaches Arabic with an attitude akin to belief: he puts his trust in it, sure that it is capable of conveying even deep doubt and disturbing scepticism.⁶ By steering away from mimesis, and with it realist fiction as he understands it, he plays up the capacity of Arabic to evoke the past; and in so doing attempts to fend off the temptation to imitate this very past.⁷ His evocations appeal to the memory of the Arabic reader in a teasing manner. The name, Abū Hurayra, is a lure to the memory.⁸ His language is at times liturgical, a language which strives to appear untouched by history. This, I suggest, is not a romantic glorification of the past – al-Mas'adī's Abū

Hurayra or his Ghaylān do not revive, revalue or glorify their historical namesakes. In turn, there is really nothing glorious about them either. Gnawed away by doubt, they appear human, all too human.

As it is recalled, this past is reworked intensively, obsessively, and almost to the point of desperation. Like his contemporary, the philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin, who was aware that the past was under the threat of brutal amnesia in a mechanized age, al-Masʿadī sensed the danger of amnesia and sought the articulation of a fleeting presence of the past. Benjamin was convinced that ‘to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it the “way it really was”’. It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger’ (Benjamin 1985: 255). For Arab culture in the 1930s and 40s, the sense of direction was in danger. In ‘*Ḥadīth al-ʿamā*’ (Blindness), Abū Hurayra, the Easterner, is blinded by his experience of the convergence of East and West in him. He loses his *qibla* and ‘the six directions’ (167). But as he roams blindly, he gains insight into himself and into others. This loss and redemptive illumination are his guides in the face of what the philosopher Henri Lefebvre has called the ‘brutal liquidation of history and the past’ perpetrated by the modern world, a liquidation which impacts the present in an ‘uneven manner’ (Lefebvre 1991: 121). One instance of this unevenness is the paradoxical drive to preserve traditional representational spaces (works of art) from ‘the buffeting of industrial space and industrial representations of space’ (121). But while this appears to be a paradox within modernity as experienced in the industrialized metropolitan cities of the West, in cultures where modernity is understood as something which had already happened elsewhere, traditional representational spaces play a different role. They become ways of engaging modernity, adapting, resisting, embracing, or rejecting it. They are instances of local form in its complexity, as this study hopes to have shown, and in its fragility in the face of forms whose reach is global and pervasive – the novel is the key one here.

Al-Masʿadī’s Sufism has the unique feature that it ties salvation to art explicitly. But in Arabic literature, Sufism does not constitute a well-defined style of thinking modernity in the way high modernism was in the European and American contexts. Arab modernity mostly excluded Sufism and marginalized Sufi literature. It was never allowed to be a worldview or interact with similar Western metaphysical thought and literature, such as Greek tragedy, Goethe’s eclectic spiritual thinking and art, the metaphysical tendencies in European high modernism or existentialism.⁹ Does al-Masʿadī’s case demonstrate the orphan nature of high modernism in Arabic fiction? Was the encounter between Sufism and modernism doomed? Could the cultural politics of nationalism support, or afford, modernism with its opacity, pessimism and aesthetic ‘indulgence’? Ḥusayn, therefore, had good grounds to fear al-Masʿadī’s attitude to Arabic: for him, it went against the global current and against the needs of the nation to be represented. The thinking was that falling for the allure of Arabic was anti-modern, and so was Sufism. Al-Masʿadī’s style was, like modernism, demanding on readers at a time when simplification was most needed. It was acceptable to appropriate elements of *turāth* in order to construct a confident nation but Sufism did not fit these aims. The perception was that *turāth* united

the nation by giving it a shared history and legacy while Sufism dispersed it into individualities, leaving it prone to division and vulnerability. His fiction, I suggest, could be described as Arabic rather than Arab; pertaining to language rather than to ethnicity or nationality, to the textual repertoire rather than to history. It compels us to ask: Is the retrieval of the past conceivable only in messianic terms and within the language? Does al-Masʿadī's text demonstrate the impossibility of recovering the past outside fiction, or what Ghaylān has called, 'the story'? Does it demonstrate the impossibility of narrating or representing cultural authenticity altogether?

Reflections on method

Despite the abundance of political interpretations, the study of al-Masʿadī's fiction as a social text, or abstract of social relations in the terms of Jameson and Moretti, is really a debate yet to be undertaken properly. For to read a text as an abstract of social relations means, primarily, to approach it as we do the study of social relations themselves. In the latter, we rightly assume complexity and give due attention to situation. In Third World societies, marked by the confluence of global systems and local traditional social formations, the complexity is heightened. Local form as the third component of an equation, which also includes foreign form and local content, to recall Moretti's argument, should be understood in a wide and inclusive manner. This calls for approaches and particular expertise which bring out this complexity. For 'alternate experiences demand alternate theories and methodologies' (Jusdanis 1991: 8). Establishing the elements of a poetics specific to the work requires a variety of sources. Reading al-Masʿadī in relation to literary theory, and in particular theories of Third World literature, is an attempt to take part in and put to the test a comparative literary practice where 'local expertise (and accountability) in a particular area', is combined with 'training in transnational and global perspectives' (Bernheimer 1995: 64). Or, in more recent debates, combining Area Studies and Comparative literature. My argument, however, is that 'transnational and global perspectives' are just that, transnational and global, not Western models of globalism. For this reason, the study includes reflections on and critique of some perspectives on Third World literature, most notably Jameson and Ahmed. It shows that reading Third World texts as allegories of national situations greatly reduces both the texts and the national situation. It also argues that Jameson, while being aware of the radical difference of Third World literature, takes as a given the supremacy of Western form. Moretti refines these views by putting more emphasis on local form in this interface between Western and Third World literatures and sees in this a deeper historical relevance. He says: 'the historical conditions reappear as a sort of "crack" in the form; as a faultline running between story and discourse, world and worldview: the world goes in the strange direction dictated by an outside power; the worldview tries to make sense of it, and is thrown off balance all the time' (Moretti 2000: 61). The book also introduces a revision of the idea of influence in an attempt to expand Comparative Literature beyond the dominant practice of comparing texts from one or more national or linguistic traditions in their relations to Western literature

expressed in terms of Western influences and models. The world has become one, as Abū Hurayra and long before him, Goethe have discovered during their journeys.¹⁰ If *Weltliteratur* is to have any meaning today, it must respond to and promote the need for a de-colonization through a critique of 'cross-images', to use Gnisci's phrase.

To this end, the book introduces and tests confluence as an alternative comparative approach to the relationship between Arabic and Western literatures as well as a methodological practice in the study of texts. By bringing together Arabic poetics and Western critical terminology, even in this limited instance, I wanted to suggest that bicultural – and by extension, multi-cultural – texts require more than one set of interpretive terminology. The multiplicity of the text is better served by multiple entries, which aim at drawing out the various components and their interaction. For example, *Taqiyya* and modern conceptions of parody allow a look at 'literariness' within two different, but complementary, frameworks. While parody accounts for engagement with *Qur'ān*, *taqiyya*, as a culturally specific convention, allows a decoding of allusions and symbols. Moreover, by studying al-Mas'adī's fiction as site of confluence of Western as well as Arab and Islamic impulses, different traditions are put into dialogue rather than hierarchy, as I argue in the study of *al-Sudd*. Al-Mas'adī is a particularly conducive test case in which a more productive theory of comparative literature applied to the relationships between Arab and Western traditions could be observed. Studied from the perspective of confluence, it becomes possible to see how his work draws on and moulds together East and West in ways that recognize the national and tradition-specific scope but also give room for a variety of non-Islamic sources. Al-Mas'adī is an apt example of what Gnisci has called 'colloquium' between cultures. By changing the paradigms of analysis to approach his work, we become more aware of how he listened to voices across the shores of the Mediterranean and across time. (In fact he explicitly refused to be called one or the other: 'I am neither Western nor Eastern, I am made up of both' (al-Mas'adī 2003: 371).) Yet, while he aspired to synthesis, al-Mas'adī remained aware of the imbalances in the global order, the hegemonic tendencies of big powers and the need for local cultures to mark the global stage.

Necessity and the tragic

Al-Sudd may be the writer's only tragedy, in a formal sense, but it is by no means the only expression of the tragic in his work. The clash between human will to freedom and stubborn necessity is a marker of al-Mas'adī's fiction and could indeed be a paradigm in the study of his entire work.¹¹ Al-Mas'adī's characters may be diverse but they are linked by one thread. They are adamant to go on until the end preserving their individual path in life despite and in opposition to necessity.¹² Al-Mas'adī's interest in Greek tragic thought and drama stems from their focus on what is for him 'essential' shared human issues. Like Ibn Rushd, he sees in tragedy the elements, which are common to 'all nations' rather than those, which are history-specific (personal, psychological or national histories). The *Qur'ān*, in its expression as well as in the conception of human existence which al-Mas'adī derives from it, shares these

concerns. Both sources offer the writer the codes to explore human existence. Like them, *al-Sudd* tells the story of human power and powerlessness. But while the play sets limits for Ghaylān's success, it unleashes his doubt, uncertainty and defiance. It 'encloses' his transgression and performs it at the same time.¹³

But, true to fashion, there are sacrifices to be paid for such an act. When Maymūna suggests eating the mule's meat, she is of course referring to sacrifice. The mule would be an offering to forces of nature or gods in order to avert their wrath and prevent disaster. The dam was nearing completion and order had to be preserved. At the end of the play, the mule is sacrificed, a scapegoat that had to be left behind, or rather below, the part of Ghaylān which is unable to take to the skies, the untranscendental Ghaylān. In light of the serious puzzlement of critics about the endings of al-Mas'adī's main works where the protagonists almost invariably meet their death, the question arises: are al-Mas'adī's heroes sacrificed to preserve the existing (religious) order? Are they sacrificed to protect the writer himself? I want to venture a further suggestion. Al-Mas'adī's characters are sacrificed for the sake of their stories. They die so that their tales may survive; both as narratives of power and powerlessness and as performances of transgression and resistance.¹⁴

The heroes who set out to change the world, or at least to choose their way of being in it, have to transgress an existing state of things and overcome personal, communal as well as human pasts. 'If we cannot fashion ourselves as we choose, as Henrik Ibsen knew, it is because of the burden of history under which we stagger, not only because of the restrictions of the present' (Eagleton 2003: xvi). By seeing tragedy in Promethean terms, at least in part, al-Mas'adī dramatizes 'humanity's heroic resistance to destiny' (Eagleton 2003: 59). Such resistance is heroic specifically because it is a lonely affair.¹⁵ Eagleton, ever aware of the politics of art, even when dealing with a 'noble' and 'elitist' genre like tragedy, sees in this resistance the revolutionary meaning of tragedy in modern times, 'a strike against destiny, not a submission to it' (104). For the individual, it is an act of challenging the limits, which go back to the very origin. 'Transgression is what makes historical beings of us, which is why the Fall is a felicitous one' (Eagleton 2003: 243). In Goethe's words:

Whoe'er aspires unweariedly
Is not beyond redeeming.

(Goethe 1890: 365)¹⁶

In the end, I think a question befitting the writer's own concern about the role of the individual and the function of art must be asked. Is there something tragic about al-Mas'adī's attempt to write classical tragedy and transfigurative fiction at a time dominated by the urgency of representation as the first part of the twentieth century in Tunisia and across the Third World? As colonial subject, al-Mas'adī saw the abyss; he experienced the terror of loss of reference; and glimpsed, along with the colonial dis-possession of land, the dissolution of the aura of his cultural past. So at a time when signs needed to be restored to things, as Berque put it, al-Mas'adī's art hangs on to the signs, recalling, reshaping and recasting them. He had little use, and regard for

things. His work is evocative rather than mimetic, transfigurative of the human condition of a people made irrelevant by history rather than reflective of the daily reality of its time and place. It was apt that he attempted tragedy, parody and transcendental quest. Tragic art is the 'enemy of mimesis, since the role of art is to transfigure rather than reflect' (Eagleton 56). Likewise, parody, as an engagement of the word of another, is not mimetic of reality but transfigurative of other works of art. Intellectually, just like the writer's favourite predecessors, al-Ghazālī and al-Maʿarrī, his characters experience the crucible of doubt and uncertainty. And like a tragic hero, the writer resists his 'fate' with sincerity and integrity, preferring isolation and resistance to populism and commodification. 'Loneliness is the soul of tragedy', says Lukac (Eagleton 2003: 64). Was he vindicated? Al-Masʿadī remained faithful to his style and outlook on the world for decades, unmoved by lack of popularity abroad and little interest among translators despite being selected by the UNESCO among its representative authors. In a way, he retreated into the density, conciseness, and allusive nature of a style animated by the desire to 'starve the expression and feed the meaning', in the ancient tradition of Arabic eloquence. He tried to alleviate the burden of representation by 'giving in to the allure of Arabic', to recall Ḥusayn's phrase, and the attraction of flirting with the artistic and intellectual limits imposed on the Arab writer by tradition, institutions and the colonial condition. It was perhaps expected, although this was discovered only a couple of years before his death, that al-Masʿadī had been writing aphorisms for decades. In these he expresses the workings of a mind situated somewhere between the despairing sardonic depth of Cioran's epigrams and the sincere and agonized opacity of the ecstatic sayings of the Sufis. Al-Masʿadī is a tragic figure, oscillating between the aesthetic and the ethical, the political and the poetic, the citizen and the artist, the local and the cosmopolitan, nationalist literature and *weltliterature*, Camus and al-Ḥallaj, Goethe and al-Maʿarrī... or rather, a figure in whom all the above converge.