

# INTRODUCTION

## OF WORDS AND WORLDS

In a striking passage from *al-Ayyām* (The Days), the Egyptian writer Taha Hussein (Ṭāhā Ḥusayn) narrates a time in his life before he knew how to read or write. The opening pages describe in detail his memories of childhood, his schooling, and his relationship to those who introduced him to a world of words. His account both depicts scenes from his local village and reflects abstractly on the act of remembering: “The memory of children [*dhākirat al-atfāl*] is indeed a strange thing, or shall we say that the memory of man plays strange tricks when he tries to recall the events of his childhood; for it depicts [*tatamaththal*] some incidents as clearly as though they only happened a short time before, whereas it blots out [*yamḥī*] others as though they had never passed within his ken.”<sup>1</sup> Noting what he can and cannot recall, Hussein’s opening reflections poetically conjure moments from his past with a series of impressionistic objects and details: a fence, a canal, the schoolmaster’s orchard, and the slope of an embankment. He writes sentence after sentence repeating the words, “He remembers [*yadhkuru*],” to frame what he brings to life for us as readers, and he does so in a work that would become not only a landmark in modern Arabic literature, but a contribution to world literature more generally. And yet, I begin with this extraordinary book as much for how it depicts Hussein’s nascent literary education as for what it blots out. In this grandiose account of a life in letters, the beginning—the moment of a life before literacy—is simultaneously remembered and forgotten, captured in literary form and somehow lost.

We confront in these opening pages a challenge of reading. In Hussein’s autobiography is born not only the story of an author coming into literacy, but an entire way of being in language. He tells the story of a life that would have been unnarratable were it not for the education he came to acquire—an education split between the Qur’anic learning of his years at al-Azhar and his literary training in France. He inscribes with his words memories of times gone, and he constructs a literary world that shrouds his preliterate

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childhood with impressions, objects, and details from his past. These early years—his time prior to his exposure to scripture, to the alphabet, to the laws of grammar, genre, and form—emerge through a narrative recognizably literary. And once the writer comes into literacy, there is almost no limit to the contents of his narration and no escape from the world it makes thinkable. What is lost, or blotted out, is a way of being in language before knowing how to read and write. What is lost, in other words, is the very way to imagine a world without literature. And what literature means for Hussein—as for a whole range of readers trained in the modern literary disciplines—is something quite specific.<sup>2</sup>

For scholars of world literature, it would be tempting to understand Hussein's autobiography in terms of its transnational dimension—its movement from a village in Upper Egypt to al-Azhar in Cairo and to Montpellier, France; or its passage from Arabic into French literary circles at the hands of André Gide. But beyond charting a movement between nations and languages, I highlight the beginning of the autobiography for what it reveals of an alternate sort of travel, one that points less to geographical places than to ways of reading, knowing, and apprehending the world. With its accumulated impressions of objects and details, the opening section is seemingly nostalgic for a mode of experience now eclipsed by the literacy of its narrator, who, like Walter Benjamin's famous storyteller, hovers ambivalently between past and present.<sup>3</sup> On the pages of his book are traces of other literary sources that both form and render possible his training as a writer, making what we read an account and a curriculum, an autobiography and an archive. His book describes not only texts, but the disciplined training of his literary mind, one whose education turns on a capacity to read, appreciate, and comment on the subtleties of literary form. And this disciplined training is initially forged in Qur'anic schools and further developed through literary study in France and Egypt, complicating any perceived opposition between secular humanism and religious education.

There is more, though, to this account of a coming into literacy. Beyond the pages of his life in letters, Hussein labored institutionally, serving as a professor, a dean, and a key figure in the crafting of literary curricula for the modern Egyptian state. In this endeavor, he helped to place Arabic literature, which he knew so well and on behalf of which he labored so intently, among the literary traditions of an emergent world literature. To the literary models seen in Greek, Latin, French, English, and German, he added Arabic—a language he understood to embody a Mediterranean and cosmopolitan heritage. In his work, both as a writer and as a public intellectual, a circular performance of reading, writing, and cultivating scholars was born. His writings would bring poetic traditions to bear on an emergent literary paradigm that he was himself to help forge. As with childhood in his autobiography so too with early poetic traditions in his literary history, all would contribute to the

formation of a seemingly continuous literary world and a curriculum. As the dean of Alexandria University and one of the most prominent public intellectuals of his generation, Hussein would be inseparable from the institutional framework integral to defining not just *what* but *how* to read.

I take Hussein's autobiography as my beginning for how it points us simultaneously to the formal conditions of literary education and to the limits of an emergent literary world.<sup>4</sup> Taking seriously the dynamic of remembering and forgetting, *In the Shadow of World Literature* is an effort to consider transformations that both create the modern literary disciplines and define the contours of a reading public. What follows is an account concerned as much with the conditions and exclusions of literacy as with the national and linguistic geography of a world republic of letters. As you will see, this undertaking is both theoretical in its general engagement with world literature, literary theory, and postcolonial studies, and historical in taking Egypt as a paradigmatic site from which to consider literary publics, textual cultures, and the history of reading. The six chapters deal with two convergent and enmeshed narratives: on the one hand, the formation of a modern literary paradigm linked to education reform, the rise of a reading public and modern Arabic literature, and on the other hand, the story of what gets blotted out, religious institutions and practices that come to be understood as traditional. In this process, I deal with the emergence of literature as the domain for the cultivation of aesthetic sensibilities and the development of character, and I address how an emergent literary culture redefines religious practices and textual traditions once deemed crucial to the formation of an ethical subject.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout this book, I focus on the putative opposition between a practice of reading based on memorization, embodiment, and recitation in Qur'anic schools (*katātīb*; *kuttāb*, sing.) and another practice based on reflection, critique, and judgment, increasingly integral to what gets defined as literacy in the modern Egyptian state.<sup>6</sup> My goal is to consider how this opposition is secured, to assess its purchase within world literature, and to question its limits for understanding the dynamics of literary publics. For my purposes here, literary reading is not some theoretically detached object, but an embodied practice integral to being recognizably educated in the modern state; and world literature is not the all-inclusive meeting place of national literary traditions, but the emergent distinction between those deemed literate, cosmopolitan, and modern, and those others who are not. What follows, then, is an account of world literature as it transforms textual practices, defines the borders of a world republic of letters, and distinguishes the literate and the illiterate, the modern and the traditional, the tolerant and the intolerant, the ignorant and the enlightened.

Allow me to tell you preliminarily what this book is not. An area studies specialist expecting a meticulous historical account of a social world will be

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remiss to find little of the sort here. What I offer instead is a series of readings that circle back on the relationship between words and worlds. Although I take the social world of texts quite seriously, I do so to consider the imaginative force of words in configuring worlds. In this sense, I consider worlds foreclosed by particular modes of reading. I admit here the circularity of this endeavor—reading about the vanishing point of reading, the horizon of the literary itself. It is an endeavor, though, meant to allow for the consideration of literature not as a neutral medium through which stories materialize, but as a practice that comes to dictate how to read, respond to, and understand the world. As we see with the opening of Hussein's autobiography, what remains in the shadow of world literature are textual forms and modes of experience no longer thinkable in a modern literary paradigm.

Looking at the interwoven strands of modernization, literature, and secularism, this book ultimately raises a number of questions concerning the assumed universalism of world literature. The sections that follow here in the introduction trace three different axes of inquiry: literary modernity in Egypt, reading worlds, and secularism. The first axis of the book considers *how* literature comes to be read with the rise of the modern Egyptian state, pedagogical reforms, and demands for critical literacy. Who or what authorizes what it means to read properly? What relationship between a reader and text does literature imply? How does literary reading differ from memorization? The second axis engages the relationship between an emergent category of literature and the world in which it is read. How is literature productive of the terms within which the world is understood? Who or what is excluded from this world, and how does the line between literacy and illiteracy sanction forms of participation in it? And the third axis considers the relationship between literature—as a discipline increasingly aligned with moral education—and debates around secularism and religion. How is literary reading indebted to and different from traditions of scriptural hermeneutics? In what ways is literature transformative of religious traditions? Is the world of world literature necessarily secular? What are the limits of this literary world?

In dialogue with debates in comparative literature and postcolonial studies, *In the Shadow of World Literature* questions the grounds of comparison across literary traditions.<sup>7</sup> We have grown accustomed to understanding the terrain of world literature as a conglomeration of national or linguistic traditions (relating French, German, Russian, and Kiswahili literature, for example), and we have grown accustomed to aesthetic categories as a basic unit in literary history (distinguishing between romanticism and modernism, for example). What I propose in the following pages gestures to a different type of analysis. If we link world literature to the sensibilities it presumes its readers to possess, then how do we trace these sensibilities across differing textual practices and traditions? This book ultimately claims that world literature is

not the neutral meeting ground of a variety of textual practices, but rather assumes—and at times enforces—a particular place for literature in the world.

## LITERARY MODERNITY IN COLONIAL EGYPT

Nineteenth-century Egypt is not only a meeting ground for the French, British, and Ottoman Empires, but also secures its place within a conventional narrative of modernization, including the consolidation of the modern state, increasing urbanization, and educational, legal, and religious reforms. Within modern Arab historiography, the nineteenth century is the period of the *nahḍah*—the moment when the Arab world undergoes a sort of renaissance and awakens from its supposed dormancy.<sup>8</sup> The *nahḍah* tends to be described as consisting of four historical moments, each of which underscores the broader phenomenon of modernization. First, Napoleon's invasion in 1798 is often understood to introduce the basis for a modern military, modern medicine, and the arts and sciences to Egypt. Second, the reign of Muhammad 'Ali (Muḥammad 'Alī Bāshā) (1805–48) coincides with a push for educational reform, which sees the emergence of a number of modern schools and a series of missions to France for training in the sciences, engineering, medicine, and languages. Third, toward the latter half of the nineteenth century, scholars Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī) and his disciple Muhammad 'Abduh (Muḥammad 'Abduh) are integral to an intellectual reformation of Arabic law and letters. During this same period, other scholars participate in expanding the Arabic language to accommodate new words based on Arabic grammatical principles, ultimately modernizing what had been taught as a traditionalist language. Last, the fourth moment entails the emergence of a national consciousness defined in terms of modern citizenship. As the conventional narrative of the *nahḍah* has it, this period of rebirth culminates in the uprising in 1919, the consolidation of the Wafdist movement, and the development of an Egyptian state.<sup>9</sup>

Although I deal with the dominant story of modernization, I am not working here as a literary historian, nor am I offering an account of how or why transformations occur. I am not trying to confirm or refute, empirically or otherwise, the terms in which the *nahḍah* is understood so much as I am pointing to its implications for the study of literature.<sup>10</sup> The once-common literary history of the Arab world points to the *nahḍah* as a sociocultural phenomenon inseparable from the rise of modern Arabic literature.<sup>11</sup> During the nineteenth century, Arab writers translate the works of authors such as Molière, Dumas, and Shakespeare into Arabic, and help forge the rise of the novel, as well as innovations in poetry, theater, and the short story. But this modernization story actually does more than merely recount the origins of modern Arabic literature—in effect, it produces a new understanding of literature aligned with the rise of the public sphere, the pedagogical reformulation

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of reading practices, and the institutionalization of literature as a field of study. In a rather explicit manner, the story of the *nahḍah*, which casts modernization as a passage from ignorance to enlightenment, becomes integral to the redefinition of literature and the semiotic ideology it comes to delimit.<sup>12</sup>

My argument is *not* that literature, known in Arabic as *adab*, is born with the colonial encounter, but rather that it is redefined through modernization, extending from Napoleon's arrival to Muhammad 'Ali's reforms and on through the period of British occupation. Where previously *adab* implied cultivated knowledge as well as character, conduct, and manners, with Egypt's modernization *adab* comes to refer to literature in a different sense, closely linked to the discourse of world literature and the emergence of transnational literary genres.<sup>13</sup> Within the context of Arabic letters, the term *adab* has a longer history, certainly predating the arrival of the French. During the Abbasid Caliphate in the ninth century, *adab* referred quite explicitly to norms of conduct with connotations of urbanity and being well-bred. On one hand, the term *adīb* (*udabā'* pl.) was used to describe one who was cultured, was educated, and had refined taste, and still tends to refer to someone with refined sensibilities. And on the other hand, *adab* was also understood as a genre of writing describing courtly conduct and proper behavior, often associated with figures such as al-Jahiz (al-Jāḥiẓ) in the ninth century and later al-Tawhidi (al-Tawḥīdī).<sup>14</sup>

Over the course of the nineteenth century, these connotations do not disappear, but *adab* acquires an additional meaning. The term comes to refer to new literary forms such as short stories and the novel, written in Arabic and circulated in printed form as books, journals, or newspapers. This new connotation of *adab* involves a transformation in print culture, education, and concepts of authorship. What emerges in this process is a model of the world republic of letters in which Goethe and Shakespeare stand alongside figures such as Hafiz Ibrahim (Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm), Muhammad al-Muwaylihi (Muḥammad al-Muwayliḥī), and Tawfiq al-Hakim (Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm) in the pantheon of literary greats, all of them comparable across time, languages, and traditions in the universalizable idiom of literature. Not only is there a transformation in what comes to be recognized as literature, but there is also an emergent figure of the *Adīb*, whose conduct and manners relate to a cosmopolitanism and erudition geared for a modernizing world. Literature thus comes to envelop a host of textual practices and to delimit a particular set of manners and sensibilities.

Alongside an account in which modern Arabic literature secures its place in world literature, another story comes into play. In this march to modernization and the rise of literacy, we confront the emergence of an entire population deemed illiterate and a series of practices and institutions deemed traditional, rigid, and backward. The chapters that follow trace not only the narrative of modernization, the contours of this redefined domain linking

literature, literacy, and print culture, but also the narrative against which the story of modernization is told. In order for nineteenth-century Egypt to be seen as moving forward, it reinvents those traditions from which it claims to develop. In this process, in the redefinition of literacy and competing demands for a different type of education geared for the modern world, there emerges an entire class deemed illiterate, ignorant, and lacking in education.

The story of Egypt's modernization is thus hardly the story of overcoming the past, but a matter of examining how this past comes to be refashioned, redefined, and ultimately integral to the ethical formation of the modern critical subject. The mutually constitutive relationship between the past and the future is ultimately inseparable from the emergence of the modern world. My book does not affirm the distinctions between the modern and the traditional, the secular and the religious, the educated and the ignorant, but investigates how these distinctions are secured in the story of modernization—and how, in turn, they become intrinsic to literary education.

Where world literature distinguishes between national, historical, and linguistic differences, *In the Shadow of World Literature* suggests that the domain of world literature shares in common a normative definition of literature linked to a particular semiotic ideology. By prying apart the historically contingent distinction between the literate and the illiterate, I am asking here for a consideration of world literature as a question of ethics, torn between the values and sensibilities of a new definition of the literary and those excluded from it. This is not a relativistic claim that we have different types of readers in the world republic of letters, nor is it a call to broaden definitions of literature to incorporate more textual traditions in its domain—it is, instead, an effort to map the normative force of world literature and the limits of the cosmopolitan sensibilities it implies.<sup>15</sup>

## READING BEYOND REPRESENTATION

By engaging problems in world literature through a history of reading in nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Egypt, I am implicitly arguing for a new set of questions with which to approach world literature. In addition to asking how literature plays out in a particular location at a particular point in time, I am asking about the reading practice necessary for a text to be recognized as an object of literary analysis. What is at stake, for example, in the recognition of scripture as literature? What is the difference between the memorization of the Qur'an and its analysis as a literary text? How is it that, in nineteenth-century Egypt, memorization ceases to be understood as literacy? What are the new attributes of literary reading? How might we understand the relationship between literary reading, critique, and the pedagogical reforms of the modern liberal state? These sorts of questions animate a shift from the analysis of literature as a product of national

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histories and authors to consider how the category of literature transforms and reconstitutes textual traditions.

Consider the ways and extent to which literary scholars relate to texts deemed literary under the rubric of representation. Within the field of post-colonial studies, for example, literature is commonly read as it both participates in and refutes the terms of colonialism. On the one hand, literature is the site of a colonial imaginary with characterizations of a despotic and spiritual East—in texts ranging from Percy Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam* to Gustave Flaubert's *Salammô*.<sup>16</sup> We analyze these canonical literary texts for their repertoire of stereotypes and imperial fantasies, drawing either directly or indirectly from methods brought to light in Edward Said's *Orientalism* as a means of addressing the role of representation in the construction of the Orient. On the other hand, though, literature is also understood as the seemingly redemptive site through which colonial stereotypes can be mimicked, appropriated, and ultimately subverted.<sup>17</sup> The writings of a figure like 'Abdullah Nadim ('Abd Allāh al-Nadīm), for example, come to be read as enacting anticolonial resistance by recounting stories integral to the emergence of national consciousness at the time of the British occupation.<sup>18</sup> In either case, whether dealing with colonial stereotypes or anticolonial resistance, postcolonial studies tend to frame the colonial encounter in terms of conflicting and often-embattled representations, and time and again we turn to the literary text as the site through which to consider the problem of colonialism.

What I find striking is not so much the analysis of literary images, stereotypes, and caricatures, but that an exclusive focus on literary texts as representations tends to displace alternate understandings of literature—namely, literature as a disciplined reading practice or a cultivated sensibility linked to civil norms of what it means to be educated. Undoubtedly a corpus of canonical texts furnishes references and associations for those within the world republic of letters, but literature, in the nineteenth century, is not only the accumulation of canonical literary texts, but also an emergent discipline training how to read.<sup>19</sup> Inasmuch as literature is both a canon of texts and the practice by which to read them, it comes to delimit sensibilities and critical skills inseparable from what it means to be modern, cosmopolitan, and educated. This particular understanding plays out in accounts that relate the rise of modern literature to the developmental narrative of the *nahdah*, and it also plays out when describing those deemed backward, intolerant, and provincial. Within this framework, what it means to be literate entails much more than learning to decode words written on a page or to recognize the caricatures of a colonized people—it comes to imply the cultivation of critical-thinking skills essential to informed participation in a modern state . . . or so the story goes.

If, though, we step back and consider how literature is constituted at a particular point in time, then we usher in the possibility of determining what



it is defined against. Crucial to a narrative that sees literary education as an engine of modernization is not only a representation of literature's Other, but a moral argument about the apparent need to eliminate ignorance through education. Not only does literature come to demarcate new modes of being recognizably civilized, but it does so against those deemed products of religious zealotry and hidebound fanaticism. Where the literate mind is seen to be critical, detached, and unfettered by structures of authority, fanaticism tends to be explained in terms of causes—the product of an impoverished environment, inequitable social conditions, and lacking education. And inasmuch as the fanatic is understood according to causes, it delimits an almost indefensible position, for, in the end, to be recognized as a fanatic is to be understood as sociologically determined. In contrast to those who are understood to offer arguments, critical interventions, and strategies within modern politics, the fanatic is most commonly understood through the conditions that lead to a position—and here we might think of a common tendency to explain obedience to competing authority through sociologically derived explanations.

Focusing on the limits of world literature means focusing on the specter of the fanatic as the counterpart to the critical-thinking, cosmopolitan orientation at play in the world republic of letters. This is not a matter of representation in terms of depicting one subject versus another, but a matter of considering the disciplines necessary to being recognized as a critical subject. If the critical subject is considered freethinking insofar as she is not socially determined in her positions, then the fanatic is seen as uncritical and indelibly linked to religious structures of authority. This book is an argument that the world of world literature is not solely a matter of national and political boundaries, but a matter of the sensibilities embedded in the value attributed to literary reading and haunted by the specter of what gets deemed fanaticism. It is an effort to reorient literary study to consider how it is that literary reading informs rather particular sensibilities and how it is that textual practices are transformed in the process.

## THE MORAL UNIVERSE OF A SECULAR WORLD

Not only does this book engage with colonial history and literary studies, it also attempts to assert a role for literature as a site within the contested terrain of secularism. On the one hand, there are those for whom secularism implies tolerance, critical detachment, and religious freedom; and on the other hand, there are those for whom the term implies the subordination of religious practice to belief and the redefinition of humanity in terms of political rights. I intervene in these discussions by investigating how literature relates to secularism, both as an instrument of moral instruction in secular schools and as a concept that informs modern understandings of time,

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subjectivity, knowledge, and imagination.<sup>20</sup> I draw from the work of scholars such as Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood, Charles Taylor, and Michael Warner, in suggesting that secularism actively defines religion, universalizes liberal notions of rights, and redefines the meaning of personhood.<sup>21</sup> In this framework, secularism is not the neutral detachment of religion from matters of the state, but the active involvement of the state in defining and delimiting what constitutes religion.<sup>22</sup> Secularism, in other words, demarcates the place of religion in the world.

It is by now a commonplace to point out that the conflation of secularism and modernization is more of a predominant myth than any empirical reality, and I share in questioning the presumptions that suggest secularism is a form of disenchantment or is linked to the decline of religion. In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor astutely points to the questionable subtraction theory of the secular, which sees modernization as the waning of religious belief in favor of the rise of science, and he points us in the direction of asking about the new conditions of belief in the modern age.<sup>23</sup> But secularism is not solely a matter of belief, and a scholar like Talal Asad richly models ways of looking at secularism as a practice with vast implications for the study of modern politics.<sup>24</sup> In Asad's work, secularism is the site from which to consider discourses on multiculturalism, governmentality, and human rights, and pertains not only to practices of the state, but to the affective dimensions of modern politics.

Drawing from these discussions, I am not proposing that secularization entails the waning of religion, nor am I arguing that secularism replaces religion, but instead I focus on what secularism does in redefining religion as part of modern life. With this understanding in mind, literature becomes a rich site not only as a pedagogical matter for cultivating a modern aesthetic sensibility, but also for the renegotiation of the terms through which reading, response, and representation play out. I see literary reading as a practice integral to secular education, but linking literature and the secular also animates my consideration of world literature in two additional ways: first, as relates to the world that grounds world literature, and second, as pertains to the aesthetic categories employed in literary history. Taking secularism as a point of departure entails rethinking some of the basic categories employed for literary analysis.

Where the vocabulary of national publics often grounds the study of world literature, secularism offers two competing conceptions of worldliness. On the one hand, secularism is often understood as it derives from the Latin term *saeculum*, which bears an etymological relationship to the current age or the world.<sup>25</sup> In Arabic, secularism tends to be commonly translated with the term *'almānīyah*, which, like *saeculum*, shares the root (*'a-l-m*) with the word for world (*'ālam*) and has connotations of both worldly and international (*'ālamī*).<sup>26</sup> In this understanding, we could say that the world of world literature is secular insofar as it pertains to the various national traditions that

compose it—world literature, in other words, is the international meeting ground of national literature on a global scale. There are also scholars who link secularism to the term *‘ilmānīyah*, the root of which (*‘i-l-m*) relates to science and knowledge, which, one could say, would link secularism to discussions of the modern disciplines, science and reason.

On the other hand, though, there is another connotation to the term “secular.” Where *‘almānīyah* offers one possible translation for secularism, it does not necessarily evoke worldliness as it contrasts with the otherworldly. In Arabic, this understanding of the world is translated with the term *dunyā*, and the ensuing *nisbah* form, *dunyawī*, refers to being worldly, mundane, secular, earthly, or temporal. The distinction, then, between secularism as a matter of the world (in terms of internationalism) or as a matter of the worldly activities (as against otherworldliness) has profound implications for literature. Part of my goal here is to consider world literature as the negotiated terrain between these two understandings of the worldliness at stake in discussions of secularism. A question to be considered, then, is not only how literature is grounded in the world, but how it participates in the imagination of what this world is.

In addition to the geographical dimensions of world literature, secularism also complicates many of the aesthetic categories integral to literary history. A number of important studies link secularism and literature as part of a history of aesthetics in the West. Most frequently, literary scholars point to ways that romanticism negotiates secularism, religion, and aesthetics, offering the literary as the secularization of religious aesthetics. We might think here to the scholarship of Colin Jager and of Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe as two possible means of understanding the richness of this relationship between romanticism and literature as pertains to secularism.<sup>27</sup> Other studies point to developments within biblical hermeneutics as an indication of broader shifts in the history of knowledge and the rise of skepticism, noting, for example, the emergence of the Bible in the vernacular and in narrative form.<sup>28</sup> Many rich studies in this field take a history of reading and transformations in the scholarly relationship to scripture as the basis for an approach to thinking about secularism.

In either of these cases, whether secularism is considered as intrinsic to romanticism or as indebted to biblical hermeneutics, most of these stories offer an account that presumes the context of a supposedly Christian Europe and a reading public aligned with the national population under consideration. But nineteenth-century Egypt does not fit neatly within this broad story. My purpose here is not necessarily to refute the claims being made by these scholars, but to consider an alternate terrain within which the definition of literature is not a simply imported from modern European history.<sup>29</sup> The categories used for literary analysis are themselves presumed within a narrative that links the British, French, German, and Russian traditions through accounts

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of epic poetry, theater, realism, naturalism, romanticism, and beyond. Were Egypt and modern Arabic literature to be cast in these terms, it would always appear on some sort of aesthetic lag—as though catching up to the European model was the goal in a grand narrative of literary achievement. If we understand European literatures to have wrestled with romanticism during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, then how do we account for the emergence of romantic poetry in the Arab world at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth? Seeing literary history in these developmentalist terms only ever points to the challenge of comparative literary study, that is, the primary question of what grounds the terms of comparison. Why is it that this story of literary development so often marks Europe as the model?

If nineteenth-century Egypt allows us to question the basis of a model of literary development, it also leads us to question the historical inevitability of secularism. Many recent studies cast secularism as a phase or logical development out of Christian theology in Western Europe. The work of Marcel Gauchet, Jean-Luc Nancy, and, to a certain extent, Charles Taylor all tends to frame secularism as it pertains to a particular faith tradition, most often stemming from Protestant reformations within Western Christendom.<sup>30</sup> Looking at a colonial context, however, the boundedness of this tradition gets thrown into question. If secularism is the necessary outgrowth of Christianity, how do we understand the wave of theological reforms within Islam under figures such as Muhammad ‘Abduh to Jamal al-Din al-Afghani? In what ways does secularism play out within the colonial context of a predominantly non-Christian population?

This book does not take an examination of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Egypt as an exception to secularism, nor as a case of secularism’s imperial travel—instead, in what follows, I consider how the encounter between modern education and the conventions of Qur’anic schooling realigns the terms of literary study. The challenge and the provocation offered by literature is precisely its redefined role within the domain of secular governance—and this is a matter not solely of theology, nor of literary history, but of the transformative role of literary reading in cultivating the sensibilities deemed integral to critical engagement in the world.

## A USER’S GUIDE

Focusing on transformations of literary culture in colonial Egypt, the following six chapters navigate a path between world literature understood as the transnational trafficking of texts, on the one hand, and the world-making function of texts, on the other. I draw inspiration from recent scholarship on the anthropology of the secular to think differently about literature—as both a category of text and a pedagogical practice. The general argument of the

book posits an expansion of world literature beyond the analysis of texts in terms of cultural systems and meanings (the domain of both Saidian worldliness and Geertzian-inspired new historicism) in order to consider the ethics and disciplines of reading that emerge in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I thus shift my attention from a focus on literary texts as objects to attend to the reading practices that constitute the contours of world literature, and I consider how world literature may be less an amalgamation of cultural traditions than the globalization of a way of reading. Doing so means not simply comparing across traditions, as though all are intrinsically equal, but considering the texture of the traditions and the arguments to which they give rise. The colonial encounter in nineteenth-century Egypt is one site crucial for considering the role of ethics and cultural difference, but it is also formative of generalizable concepts of the literary. Each of the six chapters traces the emergence of literary reading alongside colonial concerns with the methods of Qur'anic education and the extent of illiteracy in the colonized population.

When I first set out to write this book, I was compelled by an interest in exploring the place of Arabic literary traditions within discussions of world literature. I was lured initially to rehearse some of the classical tensions between the universal and the particular. There were those like Johann Gottfried Herder who address the particularities of specific literary traditions as reflective of distinct national characteristics; and there were those like Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels who provide a frame for thinking of world literature as the standardization of literary forms across territories, languages, and traditions.<sup>31</sup> These competing pathways were indeed appealing to me. The generic formulation of something called world literature, I was tempted to argue, does little to confront the particularities of the Arabic literary tradition. The place of Arabic within world literature, it seemed to me, should account for how Arabic literature anticipated many of the arguments currently in vogue—but did so in the eighth and ninth centuries. I was inclined to make a turn to history to emphasize contours of debates about literature during this period, noting how these arguments play out even in the period we call modern and how they impact the work of a writer like Taha Hussein.<sup>32</sup>

But this sort of argument—one that turns to history to insist on a linguistic or national exceptionality—both produces a linguistic or national tradition as something purified from foreign or presentist influence, on the one hand, and overlooks that the condition of particularity is already conceded in the generality of world literature, on the other. The question to be considered, then, is not how Arabic literary traditions either adhere to or are exceptional from other literary traditions, but instead, what it is that literature, as a category capable of having national and linguistic determination, comes to mean in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A central paradox of the term “literature” is that it refers both to a text (a novel, poem, or play) and to a discipline

and manner of learning. It is a word whose meaning folds back upon itself, defined by a circularity in which a text is recognized as literary in part by how it is read. In the nineteenth century, comparative grammarians trace a philosophy of language across the world, and stories become narratives, grammar becomes systems, and forms become structures intelligible to inquiry outside an immediate context. In the early twentieth century, formalist critics refract literary texts through the lens of linguistic patterns, turns of phrase, and details that give rise to various narrational modes. In what follows, I take disciplines, practices, and sensibilities to be as inseparable from the understanding of literary form as the institutions (libraries, presses, or schools) that make the concept of literature itself thinkable.

Each of the six chapters takes a key term in the study of world literature as a framework for the analysis of a specific site of reading. You will notice in what follows that these chapters trace an arc that spans the borders of a literary world through to the development of literary institutions, the cultivation of readers, and ultimately the rise and limits of a modern literary public. Where the first few chapters deal broadly with the world in which we read, chapters 5 and 6 model ways of reading literary texts with attention to questions of literary formations. The book, then, can be read from start to finish as a narrative arc that progresses somewhat historically—or alternatively, as select chapters meant to sketch out specific debates in world literature.

The first chapter considers the *world* of world literature—understood as either the site at which a literary work is produced (for world systems theory) or the site disclosed in the literary work itself (through practices of close reading). The chapter links the scholarship of Franco Moretti, Pascale Casanova, and Edward Said in order to consider dominant frames for understanding world literature. These different frames are interwoven with selected scenes from modern Egypt: the first, the protests on the streets of Cairo of a Syrian novel deemed blasphemous, and the second, the awarding of the Nobel Prize to Naguib Mahfouz (Najib Maḥfūz). In both cases, arguments about how to read properly delimit what literature is and how it ought to be understood. The chapter draws from Said's notion of secular criticism in order to claim that reading—and not solely textuality—should be understood as worldly activity with a normative force across interpretative communities.

If the first chapter presents a case for the site of reading in world literature, then the second considers translation in terms of how a particular relationship to language is born with the decoding of the Rosetta Stone. It tells the story of how an object, the Rosetta Stone, becomes a text to be deciphered, decoded, and analyzed by an international network of scholars. What is discovered with the Rosetta Stone, the chapter argues, is less an *object* than it is a particular *textuality* based on an understanding of language as a code. The chapter suggests that the translational ethic that points to the equivalence of Greek and hieroglyphics actually levels the political and theological

distinctions between the three languages: Greek, the language of politics, demotic, and hieroglyphics, the language of the gods. This phenomenological leveling of languages is ultimately read in relation to the comparative gesture of world literature, which levels distinctions between literature and scripture under an emergent paradigm of modern literary reading.

The third chapter addresses the pedagogical instantiation of literature as a disciplined practice and looks at the role of education in the writings of Lord Cromer and Alfred Milner. For both of these colonial administrators, learning to read critically entails much more than learning to decipher words, sounds, and meanings; it comes to imply the cultivation of sensibilities necessary to the supposedly virtuous ends of liberal government. Drawing from distinctions between *ta'lim* (instruction) and *tarbiyah* (cultivation), as well as opinions versus prejudice, the chapter charts the role of reading as part of a broader conceptualization of education, civic participation, and the colonial Egyptian state.

Building on discussions of education in the colonial state, the fourth chapter considers transformations in the connotation of the term “literature” in Arabic with the rise of literary study as a modern discipline. Moving between the institutional foundations of modern literary study in Egypt, a footnote from Jurji Zaydan’s (Jurji Zaydān) literary history of Arabic letters, and reflections on literature by the Orientalist H.A.R. Gibb, the chapter considers how definitions of the literary turn on assertions of how to read, respond, and relate to texts. This convergence of literature and *adab* ultimately enables an alternate genealogy of world literature—one based less on the accumulation of texts than on an emergent global discipline.

The second half of the project shifts from discussions of the literary field in order to address specific textual occasions in which reading, perceiving, and responding animate interpretative questions. The fifth chapter focuses on debates that highlight competing conceptions of critique as brought to light by discussions of Charles Darwin. I focus on a section of Naguib Mahfouz’s novel, *Qaṣr al-shawq* (Palace of Desire), in which the youngest son, Kamal, publishes an article on Darwin in an Arabic-language journal. I cast this fictionalized incident alongside the Lewis Affair, in which a professor at the Syrian Protestant College, Edwin Lewis, resigns over a scandal involving his evocation of Darwin during a commencement address. Where Edwin Lewis emerges as a martyr for academic freedom in the Arab world, Kamal negotiates his relationship to his family’s response to his work differently. In both cases, a literary sensibility comes into conflict with what it casts as its fanatical counterpart, and the argument for or against Darwin turns more upon conflicting understandings of what is appropriate than on any presumption about the validity of Darwin’s propositions. The chapter examines the presumptions at play in critical response and its connection to modern education.

16 INTRODUCTION

The sixth chapter also performs a reading of a literary text, but does so against the backdrop of André Gide's correspondence with Taha Hussein. The chapter begins by analyzing the transformation of theological questions into literature in a set of letters exchanged between the two authors, and it follows by asking about the world that literature makes thinkable. This discussion is followed by an imaginary correspondence staged in Hussein's novel that recounts the story of a friendship between two intellectuals from the same village. These two epistolary exchanges—between writers across national and linguistic boundaries, in the first instance, and between writers from the same village, in the second—lead to an argument about the inherent provincialism of the world republic of letters.

At a time when scholars face the waning of secular nationalist movements and the global rise of religion, it is worth approaching the field of world literature differently—doing so, however, means bracketing the presumptive autonomy of literature as a field of study and investigating its institutionalization in a new light. Drawing from the work of social scientists, who raise important questions regarding the relation between colonial institutions and knowledge production, and postcolonial literary scholars, who investigate how literature mediates the interactions between the colonizer and the colonized, *In the Shadow of World Literature* ultimately bridges political theory, religious studies, and anthropology toward an enriched understanding of the contours and limits of a literary world.