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(Warsaw)

## Signs of Change in Arabic Literature

Arabic literature is a tangle of concepts and ideas, which one can hardly penetrate without knowing some beaten tracks. Commonly accepted schemata make it easier to find one's way around hundreds of names and titles comprising the classical period of Arabic literature (6th–19th century),

Another purpose of such schemata is to facilitate grasping the nature of the later genres of literary work which have developed since the 19th century. The modern period in Arabic literature which started then is not over yet, its limit alarmingly receding into the future. The danger lies in the fact that it is more and more difficult to keep pace with the writer's innovativeness. The most important new trends and phenomena have such a richness of manifestation that synthesis becomes almost impossible.

How varied Arabic literature is today can be seen among others from its translations into Polish. Such translations are all the more representative as translators select those names and titles which have been well-established and remain popular among the Arabs. These works provide the reader with pictures of Arabic towns and villages, particularly vivid in the novels *Zuqāq al-Midaqq* (Al-Midaqq Lane) and *Bayna al-qaṣrayn* (name of quarter in Cairo) by Naḡīb Maḥfūẓ or *'Awdat ar-rūḥ* (Return of the Spirit) by Tawfīq al-Hakīm,<sup>1</sup> and also in collections of short stories: *Skorpion* (Scorpion) containing modern Egyptian prose and (The Land of a Sad Orange Tree)<sup>2</sup> having a broader Arabic spectrum.

<sup>1</sup> *Zuqāq al-Midaqq* — *Hamida z zaulka Midakk*, translated into Polish by J. Kozłowska; *Bayna al-Qaṣrayn* — *Opowieści Starego Kairu*. Warszawa 1989, translated into Polish by J. Kozłowska; *'Awdat ar-rūḥ* — *Dom nie spełnionych marzeń*. Warszawa 1982, translated into Polish by J. Danecki.

<sup>2</sup> *Skorpion. Opowiadania egipskie*. Selection, editing and comments by J. Jasińska. Foreword by J. Bielawski. Warszawa 1970; contains the stories by: Ṭaha Ḥusayn, Maḥmūd Taymūr,

All these novels and short stories are based on realities and details of ethnographic nature; their main points and conclusions to be drawn by the reader are also made ostensibly clear.

The proportion of the concrete and the abstract is highly varied in modern Arabic literature. "Physical" and abstract motifs intertwine whimsically in (The Songs of Wrath and Love), an anthology of poetry featuring the entire Arabic poetical Olympus (Salāḥ 'Abd aṣ-Ṣabūr from Egypt, Badr Šākīr as-Sayyāb from Iraq, Adonis from the Lebanon, Jean Sénac from Algiers etc.).<sup>3</sup> The main marker used by all the poets represented in the anthology is a historical or contemporary fact of life with a superstructure of various shades of meaning raised with the help of metaphors. In extreme cases, e.g. in the poetry of Adonis, what is concrete disappears from the field of vision and the renderings offered are perceived by the reader as abstractions. The poet's symbols lose sharp contours, there are only vague suggestions as to how they should be interpreted.

Even if we limit our analysis to the best-known masters of classical literature, we will see that their creative work fits between two poles of representing reality — the real, concrete, on the one hand, and the symbolic, on the other. Such a polarity is an indication of maturity, a sign that Arabic literature is as ripe as any other well-established one. It also urges one to penetrate the areas stretching between the two poles.

Used as the starting point of this venture should be the schemata of the new Arabic literature formulated at the time of its appearance, that is in the late 19th — early 20th centuries. They mainly contain dozens of terms of Euro-American origin, such as "realism", "symbolism", "naturalism", "expressionism", "surrealism", etc. The presence of those notions in the schemata is accounted for by the

Yaḥyā Haqqī. Maḥmūd al-Badawī, Luṭfī al-Hūlī, Naḡīb Maḥtūz, Amīn Yūsuf as-Sibā'ī, Nu'mān 'Āšūr, 'Abd ar-Raḥmān as-Šarqāwī, Aḥmad Rušdī Šālih, Yūsuf Idrīs, Sa'īd 'Abduḥ, Muṣṭafā Muḥammad, Fahmī Ḥusayn, Maḥmūd as-Sa'dānī, Sa'd Makawī, Ismā'īl Mabruk. *Ziemia smutnej pomarańczy. Współczesne opowiadania arabskie*. Selection and foreword by J. Kozłowska. Warszawa 1983; contains the stories by: Abū al-ʿĪd Dūdū, Aḥmad Riḍā Hühū, Ibrāhīm an-Nāšir, Ġamāl al-Ġiṭānī, Yūsuf Idrīs, Naḡīb Maḥfūz, Maḡīd Ṭubayā, 'Abd ar-Raḥmān Maḡīd ar-Rubay'ī, Fu'ad at-Takarlī, Amḡad Ṭawfīq, Muḥammad az-Zarqā', Suhayl Idrīs, 'Abd Allāh al-Quwayrī, Ḥalifa Ḥusayn Muṣṭafā, Yūsuf aš-Šarīf, 'Abd al-Maḡīd Ben Ġallūn, Idrīs al-Ḥūrī, Mubārak Rabi', Muḥammad Šabbāḡ, Muḥammad Zafzāf, Amīl Ḥabībī, Ġassān Kanafānī, Aṭ-Ṭayyib Šālih, Aṭ-Ṭayyib Zarrūq, 'Ādil Abū Šanab, Walīd Ihlāšī, Ḥasib Qayyālī, Zakariyā Ṭāmir, 'Abd as-Salām al-ʿUḡaylī, Aṭ-Ṭāhir Qīqā, Šams an-Nādir.

<sup>3</sup> *Pieśni gniewu i miłości. Wybór arabskiej poezji współczesnej*. Editing, translation and foreword by K. Skarżyńska-Bocheńska. I wyd. Warszawa 1983, II wyd. Warszawa 1990; contains the poems by: 1st ed. — Šalāḥ 'Abd aṣ-Ṣabūr, Adūnīs, Al-Bayātī, Al-Faytūrī, Ḥalīl Ḥawī, Aḥmad 'Abd al-Mu'ṭī Ḥiḡāzī, As-Sayyāb; 2nd ed. — As-Sayyāb, Sa'īd Yūsuf, Ḥalīl Ḥawī, Adūnīs, Muḥammad al-Māḡūṭ, Maḥmūd Darwīš, Šalāḥ 'Abd aṣ-Ṣabūr, Amal Dunqul, Aḥmad 'Abd Mu'ṭī Ḥiḡāzī, Al-Faytūrī, Al-Munšif al-Wahā'ibī, Faḍīla aš-Šabbī, Muḥammad al-Ġuzzī, Jean Sénac, Muḥammad Dīb, Ġamal ad-Dīn Bencheikh, Muḥammad Bannīs.

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fact that the new Arabic literature has developed under the influence of Europe, borrowing from it many of its creative concepts, and, in the first place, whole literary genres, e.g. drama or novel. The native classical tradition of literary criticism being inapplicable to these new literary types, the void was filled with European terms. They, however, did not always hit the nail on the head either, for from the moment of its emergence the new Arabic literature developed as a synthesis of foreign and national patterns. Let's take e.g. the romantic motif of love between two separated lovers, so typical of the early Iraqi novel-writing. Skarżyńska-Bocheńska sees in it a reflection of the famous "love", a platonic feeling which takes its beginnings in the legends from Ḥiğāz known since the 7th century.<sup>4</sup> She also finds in these novels some concepts borrowed from the *Arabian Nights*.<sup>5</sup> The fashion in the new Arabic prose has been set for years by Maḥmūd Ṭaymūr and Ṭawfiq al-Ḥakīm who lovingly recreate the atmosphere of Arabic towns and villages. Their novels are full of such personages as *ṣayh* and *ḥājj* for whom one can hardly find an adequate notion in European terminology. Both terms can only be translated descriptively: *ṣayh* is an old man and also a person, no matter of what age, who knows the Koran by heart; *ḥājj* means a pilgrim. This title can be given to those who made the Pilgrimage to Mecca. Stretching the point slightly, one can say that Mārūn an-Naqqāš, the recognized precursor of Arabic drama (which did not emerge until the 19th century), endows his characters with such traits as can be derived from Molière or Goldoni, but they are also to be found in the *Arabian Nights*.<sup>6</sup> One can multiply the examples, and at the same time one can dare a conclusion that the aroma of that unique book has never evaporated from Arabic literature.

All this proves that the synthesis of foreign and native patterns is unstable in Arabic literature, that it becomes more profound and less easily definable in terms of a widely accepted literary nomenclature.

During many years of its development, new Arabic literature has gone through profound transformations depending on the time, the country or the genre it represented. The "key literary tradition", by which J. Sławiński understands "the frame of reference for literary endeavour [...] with respect to which writers are expected to take a clear stand: *pro* or *contra*."<sup>7</sup>

In the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century the key position belonged to the European tradition. With time, writers began

<sup>4</sup> J. Bielawski, K. Skarżyńska-Bocheńska, J. Jasińska. *Nowa i współczesna literatura arabska XIX i XX w. Literatura arabskiego wschodu*. Warszawa 1978, p. 494.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 495.

<sup>6</sup> Al-Bahil, a play by Mārūn An-Naqqāš (1847), is an adaptation of *L'Avare* by Molière; An-Naqqāš's later drama *Abū al-Ḥasan al-muḡaffal aw Ḥārūn Ar-Rašīd* ("Abū al-Ḥasan, a Fool or Ḥārūn ar-Rašīd") was based on the themes from the *Arabian nights*.

<sup>7</sup> J. Sławiński, *Koncepcja języka poetyckiego awangardy krakowskiej*, Wrocław 1985, p. 189.

to declare themselves against it, and the key itself changed. This is particularly conspicuous in the drama of the 60s and the 70s. Such dramatists as Yūsuf Id r ī s from Egypt, Sa'd Allāh W a n n ū s from Syria, or Aḥmad a ṭ - Ṭ a y y i b from Morocco promoted in their theoretical journals a theater based on Arabic patterns. In their plays they reached for Arabic theatrical forms which allowed them to bring up problems of paramount importance in the first place for Arabs.<sup>8</sup>

'Izz ad-Dīn al-Madani, a Tunisian playwright, tried to popularize what is known as the convention of *istiṭrād*, digression<sup>9</sup> which had been widely used in old days by folk storytellers or such great encyclopaedists as Al-Ġāhiz. The dramatist introduced this convention not only into his plays but also into short stories, especially those collected in the volume under the title of *Al-Hurāfāt* (1988, "Fancies"). It is notable that a few dozens years later Ġamāl al-Ġīṭānī, an Egyptian prose-writer, published in Cairo his novel *Ṣaṭḥ al-madīna* (1990, "In the Maze of the City") where *istiṭrād* is a major dominant of the composition. The story develops against a certain background: a foreigner comes to the Egyptian capital in order to attend a scientific conference. The narrative takes the form of a lively tale full of anecdotes: about forty prehistoric philosophers, about the suicides committed in the Az-Zamālik Tower in Cairo, about Empress Eugenia's coming for the inauguration of the Suez Canal, or about modern businessmen. Not unlike the *adab* works by Al-Ġāhiz, the uninterrupted flow of information — with events described being often strange and bizarre — is so powerful here that the reader feels overwhelmed.

Both the short stories by 'Izz ad-Dīn al-Madani and the novel by Ġamāl al-Ġīṭānī are illustrative of the change taking place in Arabic prose. Besides using *istiṭrād*, both writers experiment with literary time, selecting from the Arabic history and legends certain events and juxtaposing them in an innovative way.

Other prose-writers focus their search for a new "key literary tradition" on spatial references. Among them is the Libyan writer Ibrāhīm al-Kūnī. In his short stories, especially those published in the *Ġur 'at min damm* collection (Tripoli, 1983, "A Gulp of Blood") he depicts the world of Libyan steppes and deserts as primaeval and unvarying. A bedouin travelling through this world, e.g. in such short stories as *Al-Ufq al-aḥar* ("Another Horizon"), *Az-Zuḡb* ("The Gazelle Down"), or *Ilā ayna ayyuhā al-Badawī* ("Where are you Making for, Bedouine"), is fighting omnipotent Nature according to his own rules and beliefs. Their understanding is not facilitated by a quasi-ethnographic description, a description which in the works of earlier writers provided the reader with an almost complete

<sup>8</sup> Cf. E. Machut-Mendecka, *Główne kierunki rozwojowe dramaturgii arabskiej*, Warszawa 1992, pp. 32-34.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. 'Izz ad-Dīn al-Madani, *Dīwān az-Zanġ. Bayān ḥawla isti'māl al-faḍā' al masrahī fī ḥadā ad-dīwān* ("A Zanġ Antology. A report on the use of dramatic space in this Anthology") in: 'Izz ad-Dīn al-Madani, *Dīwān az-Zanġ*, Tunis 1973.

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explanation of the structure of a given phenomenon. What is expected from the reader of the *Ṭawq wa iswirra* ("A Necklace and a Bracelet"), a short novel by Yahya Ṭāhir 'Abd Allāh from Egypt, is again not rational scrutiny. The structure of the world shown there is to be taken for granted, with faith or at least acceptance of the information contained in the story. In this case the God-forsaken village represents the space where the concentration of unusual rites and customs which its inhabitants must follow borders on weirdness. But none of these rituals is irrational in nature, their weirdness being the result of the fact that the village lives according to the rules of its own. The reader is not supposed to judge whether they are right or wrong, he ought either to take them as they are or to give up the reading of the book. Another novel, *'Urs az-Zayn* ("Zayn's Wedding") by a Sudanese writer, Aṭ-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ, brings the reader right into the heart of the world which is at the same time extremely coherent and totally different from anything else. The dead-alive village is this time in the Sudan.

Signs of a similar understanding of space as one of the most significant elements of the narration form appear in the books of numerous writers from various Arabic countries. Ibrāhīm al-Kūnī, a Libyan, Yahyā Ṭāhir 'Abd Allāh, an Egyptian, Aṭ-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ a Sudanese or Amḡad Tawfīq, an Iraqi, find a common frame of reference in the primeval world of Nature with the ensuing set of magic rituals and notions unblemished with an attempt at a rational exegesis.

By introducing a new rendering of time and space, the writers switch from the European "key literary tradition" to the Arabic one, that is to the tradition rooted in the writer's native region. Highly unusual, this tradition becomes a marker of his literary innovatory ways.

The issue of the "key literary tradition" is much more complex in modern Arabic poetry than it is in drama or prose. While the last two media evolved in Arabic literature under the influence of Europe as late as the 19th century, poetry has developed over the centuries. The first poetical names in the new Arabic literature, e.g. Aḥmad Ṣawqī and Ḥāfiz Ibrāhīm, Egyptians, or Ḡamīl Sidqī az-Zahāwī and Ma'rūf ar-Ruṣāfī, Iraqis, were referred to as "renovators of poetry".<sup>10</sup> To "renovate poetry" meant to reach for ancient patterns and by doing so "to vote for" the Arabic tradition as the key one. The role of European poetry as a source of inspiration was by all means great. And it is quite possible that poets of different generations would choose in the first place the European "key" as a means to release their talents. Suffice it to mention the members of the *Gamā'at-Dīwān* ("the Dīwān Group") who wrote in Egypt after the World War I and who drew inspiration from the views of R.M. Emerson on the importance of intuitive creativity and also from the poems of R. Browning, A. Tennyson, E.A. Poe, W. Whitman, and T. Hardy.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Cf. e.g. Bielański, Skarżyńska-Bocheńska, Jasińska, op. cit., p. 304.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 249.

The comment quoted below refers to the whole modern Arabic literature "[...] One cannot overlook [...] the inspiration by European poetry, well-known to the generation of poets born between 1925 and 1940, the generation that laid the foundation of a new school of Arabic poetry. However, I would not like to overestimate this influence, as some critics do. The new Arabic poetry has its own distinct tradition, its path of development being different from that of European poetry (T.S. Eliot, F.G. Lorca, V. Mayakovsky, S. Mallarmé, P. Valéry), there is a clear distinction between the two in the form of expression."<sup>12</sup> And it is the form of expression that becomes a tool for expanding motifs, plots or themes and also for creating images semantically connected with culture or with a broadly-understood "home-grown" problems. In their new poetry viewed as a whole, the Arabs seem to have chosen the Arabic tradition as the key one. All the more so, as this poetry has so much in common with those forms of prose and drama which have matured in the search for native sources of inspiration.

Considering all the three basic types of new Arabic literature, one can easily see that the key to it is the Arabic tradition: writers have generally made their choice in its favour, and the fact that there are some who "vote against" (to use J. Sławiński's concept) only makes it all the more important. In that case literary terms of European origin, which are still fairly popular, become less and less appropriate. This does not mean their being altogether out of place. What might be desirable, however, is to verify them by introducing some rational criteria into their fairly intuitive use. Such notions as "realism" or "symbolism" imply great timeless artistic forms known from the dawn of history. This has made the subject of innumerable concepts and interpretations. In this connection A. Brodzka's proposition seems to be quite to the point. She suggests that "[...] the most sensible way towards establishing the meaning of the notion "realism" is to construct in each case a historical category the scope of which would generalize the features of a given set of literary output in the context of the overall production of a particular formation."<sup>13</sup>

I would like to expand the application of this proposition so that it would cover not only realism but also all other great methods or artistic trends having European names and being present in Arabic literature. A verification of the entire notional apparatus that might follow could result in a totally new subdivision of Arabic literature.

Another proposition that comes to the mind is to cast off the ballast of the European origin of Arabic literature. Criticism should proceed from the literary structure with its most essential subdivision into poetry, prose and drama rather than from the literature's origins. The concept involves looking for some common ground in these three literary domains as a possible source of significant trends.

<sup>12</sup> K. Skarżyńska-Bocheńska, Foreword in: *Pieśni gniewu i miłości*, wyd. II, pp. 8-9.

<sup>13</sup> A. Brodzka, *O kryteriach realizmu w badaniach literackich*. Warszawa 1988, p. 258.

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<sup>16</sup> E.g. Aḥma  
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It would be too early to venture an analysis of these trends or to offer some terminology, but it is worth recalling that such shared elements have been heralded in all three domains of Arabic literature.

The first of them is a similar concept of time expressed as a specific tendency to look back into the past. Into a very remote past, the time of the earliest Muslim caliphs. This tendency is particularly conspicuous in poetry and drama linking them during two phases of their development.

In the first phase, that is in the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, the age turned back, was full of admiration and pain. Poets from various Arabic countries kept referring to the moments of greatness and the Golden Age in the Arabic-Islamic history. Al-Barūdī in Egypt was longing for the vanishing glory of the past centuries, Badawī al-Ġabal in the Lebanon craved for a comeback of Ar-Rašīd and Al-Ma'mūn, the great Islamic caliphs,<sup>14</sup> while Nūr ad-Dīn Sammūd from Tunisia concentrated his recollections on the times of the Aġlabid civilization in his country.<sup>15</sup>

In drama, dozens of playwrights demonstrated their fascination with the past. In their plays they brought back to life Hārūn ar-Rašīd and Salāh ad-Dīn, glorifying them as wise, righteous and brave defenders of Islam. And once again, writers from different Arabic countries displayed a similar stand. This equally applies to Abū Halīl al-Qabbānī and Farah Anṭūn from Lebanon, 'Azīz Abāza from Egypt or 'Adnān Mardam from Syria,<sup>16</sup> Staged all over, from Iraq to Morocco, their plays got an enthusiastic reception.

If we follow the places which appeared in both poetry and drama, the path will take us from the palaces of caliphs and princes to fortified castles and battlefields, to magnificent landscapes emanating unforgettable charm and a wish to bring the past back.

In course of time the aura changes, the path acquires dark sinister colours, which again can be observed in both poetry and drama. The change begins in the second half of the 20th century when the place of admiration in the attitude of the writers towards the past has been taken by uncompromising hostility. Poetry focuses on characters known in the Arabic-Islamic history for their misfortune and sufferings. One of such images, revived e.g. in a poem by 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-

<sup>14</sup> Bielawski, Skarżyńska-Bocheńska, Jasińska, op. cit., pp. 234, 353.

<sup>15</sup> K. Skarżyńska-Bocheńska, *Poezja, Tunezja, III. Grupa realistów — poeci walki*, in: J. Bielawski, J. Kozłowska, E. Machut-Mendecka, K. Skarżyńska-Bocheńska, *Nowa i współczesna literatura arabska XIX i XX w. Literatura arabskiego Maghrebu*, Warszawa 1989, p. 177.

<sup>16</sup> E.g. Aḥmad Abū Halīl al-Qabbānī, *Riwāyat Hārūn ar-Rašīd ma' al-amīr Ġānim wa-Ġūt al-Gulūb* ("A Story about Hārūn ar-Rašīd, the Prince of Ġānim and Qūt al-Qulūb"), Farah Anṭūn, *As-Sultān Salāh ad-Dīn wa-Mamlakat Uršilīm* (1914), "Saladin and the Kingdom of Jerusalem", Azīz Abāza, *Šaġarat ad-Durr* (1951), 'Adnān Mardam, *Al-'Abbāsa* (1968).

Bay ā tī<sup>17</sup> is Al-Ḥallāḡ, an 8th-century mystic, the leader of a popular movement against the hard rule of the Abassid caliphs, who paid for his convictions with his life. An equally sad image of a Mediaeval Arabic hero, the great poet Al-Mutanabbī, can be found in the poetry of Amal Dunqul of Egypt.<sup>18</sup> In his poetic interpretation of historical events, 'Alī Ṣidqī 'Abd al-Qādir, a Libian, maintains that the caliph Mu'āwiya, the progenitor of the Umayyad dynasty, being possessed by a wish to kill, murders Al-Ḥusayn, the son of 'Alī and Fātima, the grandson of the Prophet.<sup>19</sup> Another Libian poet Muḥammad al-Faytūrī claims that the caliph from the Arabian Nights, Hārūn ar-Rašid is a bloody despot.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, Al-Ḥallāḡ's sacrifice becomes the subject of many dramas: *Ma'sāt al-Ḥallāḡ* (1964, "The Tragedy of al-Ḥallāḡ"), by Ṣalāḡ 'Abdaṣ-Ṣabūr and *Riḥlat al-Ḥallāḡ* (1973, "Travels of al-Ḥallāḡ") by 'Izz ad-Dīn al-Madanī. While the poets stripped the image of Hārūn ar-Rašid of all its glory, Maḥmūd Diyāb, an Egyptian dramatist, did the same to Ṣalāḡ ad-Dīn in his play *Bāb al-Futūḡ* (around 1970, "A Chapter on Conquests").

Recurrent portrayals of eminent historical figures, typical for both literary periods, become "common places" of the new Arabic literature. They seem primarily to be inspired by poetry and drama. Yet the "historical" passion of the prose-writers referred to above may indicate their nearing the "common ground" which prose shares with poetry and drama.

A notable tendency towards formal innovation is what links all three types of Arabic literary production. At first, when creating the new literature, prose-writers, poets and dramatists saw their primary task in providing most exhaustive information about their subject-matter. In course of time, supplying information as the primary function of a literary work begins to yield to an ever growing pressure of esthetics. Poets more and more often reach for symbols, dramatists and prose-writers, for a poetic idiom. All three — poetry, prose and drama — depart from the dry logic of every-day life to wander freely in space and time.

All these symbols of change indicate that the scope of innovatory phenomena embraces the whole spectrum of Arabic literature, which reaffirms the need to develop such a notional apparatus that will allow their easy recognition and description.

<sup>17</sup> See *Pieśni gniewu i miłości*, 1st ed., p. 89.

<sup>18</sup> Amal Dunqul, *Min mudakkirāt al-Mutanabbī fī Miṣr* ("From the Memoirs of Al-Mutanabbī in Egypt"), in: *Al-Bukā' bayna yadayya Zargā' al-Yamāma* ("A Complaint to Zargā' al-Yamāma"), Cairo 1969, First Ed., pp. 121-127.

<sup>19</sup> Ṣidqī 'Abd al-Qādir, *Wa yafirr al-Ḥallāḡ min qubrihi* ("Al-Ḥallāḡ fleeing from the Tomb"), E. Machut-Mendecka, *Poezja. Libia. II Nowa poezja*, in: Bielawski, Kozłowska, Machut-Mendecka, Skarżyńska-Bocheńska, op. cit., p. 288.

<sup>20</sup> Muḥammad Miftāḡ al-Faytūrī, *Ḥiwār qadīm 'an alf layla wa-layla* ("An Old Talk about the Thousand and One Nights") see *ibid.*, p. 298.

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