# Theoretical Dimensions

# Autobiography and "Islam"

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When I planned this paper, I had in mind to systematize and comment upon all the negative notions of Western or Western inspired Arab and Islamic Studies concerning Arab autobiography. These notions could be grouped together, as I thought, under the label of "Islam"–in the sense of: "Islam has no use for the introspection of the self which is at the basis of Christian autobiography." But this turned out to be misleading, as long as Islam is perceived in the narrow sense of the word, i.e., the religion of Islam. Many of the (sometimes disparaging) remarks cover not only the Arab-Muslim culture of the Middle Ages, but also Arab-Muslim and Islam-based societies in modern times and Arab "mentality" in an ethnical (ahistorical, essentialist) sense; sometimes, these notions are separated from each other, sometimes they overlap, and sometimes they are mixed together. Therefore, in what follows I will put the term Islam in quotation marks.

Starting with Franz Rosenthal, Georg Misch, and Gustav von Grunebaum, one can say that the protagonists of Western Arab and Islamic Studies for decades looked down on Arab and Muslim autobiography in general and on classical autobiography in particular. Even al-Ghazali's "al-Munqidh min al-dalal" (Saviour from Error), this outstanding example of medieval prose, counted little in comparison with Augustine's *Confessions*. Rosenthal's famous remark from 1937 in his "Die arabische Autobiographie" (Arab Autobiography) stated: "Looking back from Ghazzali to Augustine's autobiography with its abundance of personal details, which are joyfully perceived and realized by the author, the most personal autobiography of Islam shows itself in a rather pale light." As Augustine is undisputedly Christian, but not downright Western (in fact, a couple of years ago a conference on "the great Algerian philosopher," Augustine, took place in Algiers), Rosenthal seems to have a religious and not so much an ethnic difference in mind. However, true to the title of his article, his arguments run exclusively along the line of "Arab" and not of "Muslim." Implicitly he comes to the conclusion that Arabs had neither the capacity nor the need or use for autobiography. Explicitly he states the following: Concerning author and reader, Arabs give preference to the amazing detail over the complete portrayal of a person or personality. With regard to society, Arab society gives preference to the collective over the individual. And with regard to self-portrayal itself, Arabs give preference to a brief enumeration of facts over a lengthy and subjective self-interpretation. In classical Arabic literature, we learn from Rosenthal, first-person narrative only rarely goes beyond a curriculum vitae.

Although the answers of the literary historians with regard to autobiography (whether Arab, Muslim, or Arab-Muslim) differed, their questions always remained the same:

1. What are the motives behind the writing of an Arab-Muslim autobiography? Is it a) a dedication to God, a grateful listing of God's bounty, b) the belief in the exemplarity of one's life, which may be a helpful guide for others, or c) the offering of a set of information, which can be of use for the various historical sciences?
2. What is the relationship between the individual author and the values of his society? Is it a) a sense of shame and honor, as the notion of individual guilt is not backed by religion, b) the wish to prove oneself in conformity with a society which rejects non-conformism as dangerous, or c) a willful identification with a group of people, with whom the author shares some (mainly professional) characteristics?
3. What is the result of the endeavor of writing an autobiography? Is it a) an enumeration of one's achievements (as Islam has no tradition of confessions), b) the presentation of a life in public, disregarding its more private or family details, or c) the account of different situations in life, which does not show a coherent (and therefore (re)constructed or even "fictional") development of the personality?

One can multiply these nine sub-questions, formulate them in either more religious or social terms, and put them together in various configurations, but the main questions concerning the value of the individual, the role of religion/society, and the results in the autobiographical genre are always the same. Moreover, these questions are borrowed from the European discussion of autobiography, its historical and theoretical aspects, which gained momentum in the course of the twentieth century, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. This discussion, however, without disregarding the ancient roots of autobiography and its after-life in post-modern times, focused on the emergence of bourgeois society as the heyday of European autobiography with its explicit individualism, its rebellion against society, and its self-creational aspects. As the exclusion and inclusion of texts depend on the definition of literary genres, a definition of autobiography, which regards bourgeois autobiography as the prototype or main model of the genre in question, tends to disregard autobiographies from non-bourgeois societies. All of you know the definition of Philippe Lejeune, himself a specialist in eighteenth century France, for whom autobiography is a "retrospective prose story that a real person relates about his own existence, in which he gives emphasis to his individual life, and to the history of his personality in particular" (Lejeune 1975: 14).

From this point of view, some researchers completely denied the possibility of an Arab or Muslim autobiography, either in classical or modern times. Marvin

Zonis for instance argued not long ago that for people in the Middle East history, and secular history as well, is always conceived as sacred history in either religious or nationalist terms, that they lack an indirect or historicist perspective, and that therefore their accounts of history (including biography and autobiography) comes closer to hagiography than to history proper. In his words: "Historicism is the commitment to an understanding of a phenomenon as rooted in particular contexts that change over time with the result that the phenomenon itself may change. That commitment is not yet thoroughly subsumed within the culture of the Middle East. It is no wonder, then, that autobiography and biography are not yet part of the genres of literature in the Middle East" (Zonis 1991: 60-88, 61).

Others, even those who deliberately distanced themselves from "Orientalism" as a Eurocentric essentialism, were thinking along the same lines. Edward Said, himself autobiographer, wrote: "Autobiography as a genre scarcely exists in Arabic literature. When it is to be found, the result is wholly special." Stephen Humphreys, a historian of the Middle East, refers to autobiography as "a very rare genre in Islamic literature." And Albert Hourani wrote of Rashid Rida, the early twentieth century Egyptian reformer: "He has left us something which is rare in Arabic, a fragment of autobiography which in fact is a history of his intellectual and spiritual formation during the first thirty years or so of his life."[1]

The underlying assumption of these and similar statements is that the Arabs/Muslims did not develop the genre of autobiography because they did not develop a sense for individual autonomy. Curiously enough, there are statements precisely to the contrary, as early as in nineteenth century European scholarship, with the only difference being that they concern biography and not autobiography. Starting with the observation that "(I)n many Muslim minds, history... became almost synonymous with biography" (Rosenthal 1968: 89), scholars suggested a pronounced individualism underlying this fact. For instance, the German historian Jacob Burckhardt stated: "In the Middle Ages... Man was conscious of himself only as member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation–only through some general category... In Italy, this veil first melted into air... (M)an became a spiritual individual, and recognized himself as such. In the same way the Greek had once distinguished himself from the barbarian, and the Arabian had felt himself an individual at a time when other Asiatics knew themselves only as members of a race."[2] Likewise, S.D. Goitein discerned in Arab biographical literature an individual spirit he had not expected: "First and foremost, I was impressed by the endless number of individuals whose personality is clearly brought out, in one way or another, by those ancient Arabic narratives. In the case of prominent actors on the scene, this is being done in monographs, com-

1 Quoted in Reynolds 2001 (ed.): 26.
2 Quoted in Reynolds 2001 (ed.): 23.

posed of consecutive accounts, complemented by longer or shorter disconnected anecdotes, and concluded, usually subsequent to the story of his death, by a formal description of his character, illustrated again by the narration of relevant deeds, dicta, or incidents."[3]

Today, there is a third position between a fastidious depreciation of Arab-Muslim autobiography and an unbiased appreciation of Arab-Muslim biography. A recent publication edited by Dwight F. Reynolds et al., *Interpreting the Self. Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition*, which is concerned with pre-modern Arab-Muslim autobiography, candidly cut down the euphoric praise of restless individualism, confessional mood, and exposure of the inner self in Western definitions of autobiography. The new definition of autobiography now reads: "The guiding criterion in this study for deeming a text an autobiography has been that the text present itself as a description or summation of the author's life, or a major portion thereof, as viewed retrospectively from a particular point in time" (Reynolds 2001 (ed.): 9). The difference between this definition and that of Philippe Lejeune lies mainly in the fact that terms like "person," "individual," and "personality" have been completely omitted.

The new version of the definition of autobiography enabled the authors to increase the amount of pre-modern autobiographies reasonably without adding to the number of known manuscripts. Where Rosenthal had mentioned 23 texts, Shauqi Daif 26, and Saleh al-Ghamdi 27, to name but a few authors, the group around Reynolds was now able to consider at least 140 candidates in pre-modern Arab-Muslim literature. The authors moreover challenge three basic assumptions of previous research concerning the personal contribution in these texts:

1. They state that Arab-Muslim culture bears no obstacle for the writing of a personal autobiography, nor does it demand it: "Literary convention seems neither to have encouraged nor to have hindered such expression" (Reynolds 2001 [ed.]: 242).
2. However, they concede an empirical lack of accounts of a more personal nature, without presenting a short-handed explanation: "In at least one period... a sense of 'autobiographical anxiety' emerged that motivated authors to pen elaborate defenses of autobiographical writing. The larger sociopolitical reasons for this anxiety have yet to be fully explored" (Reynolds 2001 [ed.]: 242-243).
3. Nevertheless, they decide to interpret the lack of more personal details in biographical and autobiographical writing in positive instead of negative terms: "(T)abaqat do not *fail* to take account of individuality; rather they *succeed* in excluding it" (Reynolds 2001 [ed.]: 41).

[3] Quoted in Reynolds 2001 (ed.): 30.

To me, it seems a reasonable approach, in literary as well as in economic, political, and social history, to refrain as much as possible from the postulate that the European example of the eighteenth to the twentieth century, a world-wide exception with, however, world-wide influence, should serve as the general horizon. Is this European example, where the emergence of a "private" sphere in the eighteenth century entailed a genre that turned the private into the most public issue, really a tape-measure for the general development of the genre? Do psychological or sexual confessions, seen from a non-European perspective, show more of an individual than intellectual or spiritual experience? Or do they not find their appropriate place in other literary genres, like *adab*, manuals, anecdotes, or the like?

All this said, the fact remains that most of us are Western or Western educated scholars who cannot deny their basic concern with the "I" and the "me" or "self," with the relationship between the "individual" and its society, and with the resulting "self-representation" in autobiography. The emergence of the self as an explicit subject in biographies and autobiographies has undoubtedly been an important element of European social thought since the eighteenth century. Indeed, the idea of the self, a conscious and self-reflexive "me" or "I" possessing individuality and an "inner" life, is so integral to modern Western thought that it is considered a natural part of the social landscape (Eickelman 1991: 35-59, 39).

This becomes particularly evident, when Reynolds and his colleagues on the one hand present the question of the "I" in Arab-Muslim autobiography differently from their predecessors, but on the other hand consider its unearthing as an especially challenging and promising issue. On that account they recommend a closer study of hitherto neglected sub-genres in Arab autobiography, especially inserted anecdotes, poetry, or dreams, in order to find hints for a more personal–though concealed–self-presentation than in the autobiographical text proper. The procedure is not completely new, at least not in theory as Hilary Kilpatrick, Widad al-Qadi, and Hartmut Fähndrich years ago suggested that Arab-Muslim historical, biographical, and autobiographical texts were by a closer reading likely to reveal considerably more about their author's or protagonists' personal and "inner" lives than has been previously documented.

With the help of Marcel Mauss' seminal article on the emergence of the "person," Dale F. Eickelman made another useful distinction, for his part not with the duality of "text" and "insertion," but that of "person" and "individual" in mind. I quote him in full: "'Individual' refers to the mortal human being, the object of observation and self-reflection. Thus individuals can wield considerable power and still not be recognized as playing a significant or legitimate social role. "Person" refers to the cultural concepts that lend social significance to the individual. Personhood can be regarded as a status that varies according to social criteria which contain the capacities of the individual within defined roles and categories. The notion of person... is society's confirmation that an individual's

identity has social significance" (Eickelman 1991: 37). In his study of traditional life-accounts of Moroccan and Omani religious scholars in the twentieth century, where individuality in the Western sense plays no role at all, Eickelman successfully detects a gradual adaptation of the required traits of a scholar to individual needs.

When another ethnographer, Lawrence Rosen, in a study of Moroccan society used the expression "so personalistic a universe" (Rosen 1990: 14), he equally stressed the importance of the person in Arab-Muslim society. Starting with the Prophetic Tradition: "God loves those who hide their sins," he went on to explain, "not because sinning is good but because social repercussions that risk civil strife are greatly to be feared and anything that does not, in this sense, come into the world is strictly between God and the individual." From the dichotomy of a person's overt acts and its concealed self, he concluded, a Westerner could easily misinterpret the stress on the individual as something familiar to himself. "We can see an emphasis on the individual and mistakenly equate it with the western notion of individual*ism*, of a self-directed and self-fashioning person whose inner, psychic structure generates a self that is, whatever its overt manifestations, deeply and truly private" (Rosen 1990: 53). But far from it; a Moroccan individual, in Rosen's understanding, is not a stable entity, but changes with every situation: "A style exists that pervades much of Arab culture, one in which the individual unit is seen to exist within an overarching framework that is itself open-ended and unfinished... Words and concepts that frame relationships do not govern those relationships; they are a form of malleable framework by means of which negotiated, individual networks may be formed. The individual unit–of art, science, or society–is thus a momentary vessel for the features that have no other life than in their concrete embodiment" (Rosen 1990: 54).

I am not sure whether or not these remarks should be dismissed as "essentialist." Rosen himself claims to have distilled them out of his field-work, from empirical material, from everyday experience, not from general judgments about the "nature" of the Arabs. In any case, these remarks bring us back to our initial discussion of Arab-Muslim autobiography. In the beginning of my paper I presented the usual Western argument that Arabs have no such genre as autobiography, as they have no modern sense of individuality. Post-modernism, however, teaches us that notions such as an "I" as a self-contained entity with a self-assured identity capable of reflexive self-expression are deceptive or misleading. As Robert Smith in a study on Jacques Derrida puts it: "The autobiographical subject philosophically does not differ from other kinds of subject, and each one is a 'discursive effect,' fashioned as the grille through which various discrete institutional discourses radiate their power" (Smith 1995: 64).

Rosen's comment on Moroccan society might be read in this context. We have, in a sense, a deconstruction of the "I" as a "discursive effect." Only it goes into the opposite direction: not "they are like us" but "we are like them." Seen in

this light, Arab–and especially classical Arab–autobiography with its stress on the person instead of an inner self, on situations instead of a coherent life-story, and on social instead of private (not to speak of intimate) relations comes much closer to postmodern views of "selfhood" than traditional Western autobiographies do.

## *Works Cited*

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