Series Editor’s Foreword

Edinburgh Studies in Modern Arabic Literature is a unique series that aims to fill a glaring gap in scholarship in the field of modern Arabic literature. Its dedication to Arabic literature in the modern period (that is, from the nineteenth century onwards) is what makes it unique among series undertaken by academic publishers in the English-speaking world. Individual books on modern Arabic literature in general or aspects of it have been and continue to be published sporadically. Series on Islamic studies and Arab/Islamic thought and civilisation are not in short supply either in the academic world, but these are far removed from the study of Arabic literature qua literature, that is, imaginative, creative literature as we understand the term when, for instance, we speak of English literature or French literature. Even series labelled ‘Arabic/Middle Eastern Literature’ make no period distinction, extending their purview from the sixth century to the present, and often including non-Arabic literatures of the region. This series aims to redress the situation by focusing on the Arabic literature and criticism of today, stretching its interest to the earliest beginnings of Arab modernity in the nineteenth century.

The need for such a dedicated series, and generally for the redoubling of scholarly endeavour in researching and introducing modern Arabic literature to the Western reader, has never been stronger. Among activities and events heightening public, let alone academic, interest in all things Arab, and not least Arabic literature, are the significant growth in the last decades of the translation of contemporary Arab authors from all genres, especially fiction, into English; the higher profile of Arabic
literature internationally since the award of the Nobel Prize in Literature to Naguib Mahfouz in 1988; the growing number of Arab authors living in the Western diaspora and writing both in English and Arabic; the adoption of such authors and others by mainstream, high-circulation publishers, as opposed to the academic publishers of the past; and the establishment of prestigious prizes, such as the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, popularly referred to in the Arab world as the Arabic Booker, run by the Man Booker Foundation, which brings huge publicity to the shortlist and winner every year, as well as translation contracts into English and other languages. It is therefore part of the ambition of this series that it will increasingly address a wider reading public beyond its natural territory of students and researchers in Arabic and world literature. Nor indeed is the academic readership of the series expected to be confined to specialists in literature in the light of the growing trend for interdisciplinarity, which increasingly sees scholars crossing field boundaries in their research tools and coming up with findings that equally cross discipline borders in their appeal.

The Edinburgh Studies in Modern Arabic Literature Series has so far published twenty-one monographs, while many more are under contract or in production. This plethora of monographs, has dealt with a myriad of writers, themes, periods and genres of which not one is concerned with Arabic poetry, the oldest literary genre in the language dating back some fifteen centuries, and until not long ago considered the most important of them all. The fact of the matter is that the popularity of poetry in Arabic (and perhaps not just in Arabic) has been in recession since the latter decades of the twentieth century, systematically losing ground in intellectual and social influence as well as readership and critical interest to the unrelenting advance of the novel. Scholarship, that of this series not excluded, has followed the trend and focused critical endeavor where the greatest bulk, quality and range of literary output is, which is perhaps as things should be. But it is also as things should be when scholarship breaks away from the crowd and follows a little-trodden path to look at a forgotten figure, period, genre or sub-genre. And that is exactly why the current volume will be particularly welcome on the lists of this series. It
will be the first volume dedicated to the study of poetry, and not just that but specifically a sub-genre of poetry, the prose poem, which has received the least attention within earlier existing studies of modern Arabic poetry. Not only does the volume in hand revive scholarly interest in the study of poetry generally but it is devoted in particular to a sub-genre that the critical establishment has traditionally viewed as subversive and barely meritorious of recognition as poetry or serious critical attention. Both the early and later exponents of the genre are studied with ample illustrations from their verse, e.g. Unsi al-Hajj, Adonis, Muhammad al-Maghut, Mahmoud Darwish, Salim Barakat and Wadiʿ Saʿadeh, while examined too are European connections and the place of these poetic voices in the context of the Arabic poetic tradition.

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