

Excerpted from

Interpreting the Self

*Autobiography
in the Arabic
Literary Tradition*

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Introduction

When the Egyptian scholar Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūfī sat down to pen his autobiography in about 1485, he began by situating his text within what was for him a recognized tradition of Arabic autobiographical writing. In the preface to his work he first considers the Qur’ānic injunction that one should speak of the blessings one has received from God (“And as for the bounty of your Lord, speak!” [Q 93:11]) and draws on traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (*ḥadīth*) and Qur’ānic commentaries to demonstrate that to speak of God’s blessings, indeed to enumerate them in detail, is a means of expressing gratitude to God and thus a duty incumbent on every Muslim. He therefore titles his autobiography *al-Taḥadduth bi-ni’mat Allāh* (Speaking of God’s Bounty) and closes his preface by noting both laudable and blameworthy motivations for writing an autobiography. He concludes by carefully identifying his own motivations as the former:

Scholars from ancient to modern times have continually written biographical accounts of themselves [*yaktubūna li-anfusihim tarājim*]. They have done so with praiseworthy intentions, among which is “speaking of God’s bounty” in thanks, and also to make known their circumstances in life so that others might emulate them in these, so that those who do not know of these circumstances should learn of them, and so that whosoever might later wish to mention them in works of history or in biographical dictionaries might draw upon their accounts.

Among those who have done so before me are: [1] the Imām ‘Abd al-Ghāfir al-Fārisī [d. 1134], who was a gifted memorizer of the traditions of the Prophet; [2] al-‘Imād al-Kātib al-Ṣfahānī [d. 1201], who wrote an account of himself in an independent work which he titled *al-Barq al-shāmī* [The Syrian Thunderbolt]; [3] the jurist ‘Umāra al-Yamanī [d. 1175], who wrote an

account of himself in an independent work; [4] Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī [d. 1229], who wrote an account of himself in his *Muʿjam kuttāb* [Biographical Dictionary of Writers]; [5] Lisān al-Dīn ibn al-Khaṭīb [d. 1374], who wrote an account of himself that occupies a half-volume of his book *Taʾrīkh Gharnāṭa* [The History of Granada], the whole work being eight volumes long; [6] the pious ascetic and accomplished legal scholar Abū Shāma [d. 1268], who wrote an account in his book [*The Sequel to the 'Two Gardens'*]¹ in several fascicles; [7] the scholar of Prophetic traditions, Taqī al-Dīn al-Fāsī [d. 1429], who wrote an account of himself in his book, *Taʾrīkh Makka* [The History of Mecca], in several fascicles; [8] the scholar of Prophetic traditions, Ibn Ḥajar [d. 1449], who wrote an account of himself in his book *Taʾrīkh quḍāt Miṣr* [The History of the Judges of Egypt]; and [9] the Imām Abū Ḥayyān [d. 1344], who devoted to himself an account in an independent book which he titled *al-Nuḍār* [The Book of al-Nuḍār], a weighty volume.

I have emulated them in this and have written this book in order to speak of God's bounty and to thank Him, not out of hypocrisy, nor for my own credit, nor out of pride. God is our source of help and to Him we entrust ourselves.²

In this simple preamble, al-Suyūṭī alludes to an entire world of literary conventions and traditions. He is, first of all, fully aware of a centuries-old tradition of autobiography in the Arabic language to which he was adding his own comparatively lengthy work (the Arabic printed text is two hundred fifty pages).³ Al-Suyūṭī's various autobiographical works (he wrote at least three versions of his life) and similar introductions written by other autobiographers demonstrate that the genre of autobiography was clearly established in the Arabic literary tradition no later than the early twelfth century, although the earliest examples of Arabic autobiography can be traced back at least as far as the ninth century.

A second point of interest lies in al-Suyūṭī's list of previous autobiographies, for the texts cited are quite disparate. Some are short accounts of barely two pages that give scarcely more information than a curriculum vitae and are embedded in, or appended to, larger works on various topics; others are independent volumes of hundreds of pages devoted entirely to the author's life and works. Not only is al-Suyūṭī aware of this diversity, but he persistently calls our attention to it by singling out these very characteristics in his enumeration of predecessors. On the one hand, he is interested in, and carefully notes, the varying length and status of these texts; on the other, it is clear that he is primarily interested in earlier scholars, politicians, and religious figures who engaged in the act of writing about their own lives, regardless of the type of text produced. It is the act of writing an account of one's life and not the formal characteristics of the resulting text that defined autobiography for al-Suyūṭī and his contemporaries. In fact, al-Suyūṭī does not use a noun for the concept of autobiography but rather a verbal expression, *tarjama nafṣahu* or *tarjama li-nafsihi*, which, among sev-

eral interrelated meanings (see below), signifies “to compile a titled work/entry on oneself” or “to translate/interpret oneself,” in the sense of creating a written representation of oneself, hence the title of this volume.

Al-Suyūṭī also allows us a glimpse of the rather ambiguous moral nature of the autobiographical enterprise, first in the four motivations he cites in the opening of this passage and then, more revealingly, in the personal disclaimers he presents to the reader at its close. The first motivation derives from the Qurʾānic injunction to speak of God’s blessings in thanks; the importance al-Suyūṭī attaches to this motive is seen in the very title of his work, *Speaking of God’s Bounty*. The second motivation is to provide an account of an exemplary life that can lead others to emulate one’s virtues and meritorious acts, an idea found in many areas of Islamic intellectual and spiritual life. It springs, at least in part, from the idea of the Prophet Muhammad as an exemplar (*qudwa*), as the ideal human being whose life and acts (*sunna*) are to be imitated by believers.

These motivations for presenting one’s life—as an act of thanking God and for others to emulate—stand in marked contrast to the confessional mode of some medieval and premodern European autobiographies that emphasize the public recognition (“confessions”) of one’s faults, sins, and shortcomings as a warning to others. One tradition seems to be framed to make the statement, “These are the ways in which I have enjoyed a moral and productive life—imitate me in them,” while the other seems to imply, “These are the ways in which I have been deficient or in error—beware of similar pitfalls!” Each frame produced its own moral tensions and anxieties of representation, as well as literary strategies for resolving those issues. Although this comparison is a very broad one, and these general orientations certainly did not fully dictate the content of autobiographies in either context, it serves as a useful background against which to read contemporaneous autobiographies from European and Islamic societies in earlier periods.

Al-Suyūṭī’s third motivation is the basic informational value of such accounts: they allow others to learn of one’s life and conditions. And, finally, he presents a scholarly argument that these self-authored (and therefore presumably reliable) texts will be available to later writers who may use them in their biographical and historical works.

At the same time, al-Suyūṭī seeks to fend off potential criticism of his work by stating that he is not motivated by hypocrisy, self-interest, or pride. Herein lies a thread that wends its way through centuries of Arabic autobiographical writing: the tension between the portrayal of the self and self-aggrandizement, between recounting personal achievement and piously accepting the gifts bestowed on one by God that are to be publicized only for His greater glory. In al-Suyūṭī’s case, this tension is in part alleviated by his strategy of linking his own book to a chain of works by pious and

scholarly figures of the past: if such prominent men of the past have engaged in this act, then why should not he as well? To do so is thus framed as emulation of the actions of righteous men of the past, precisely one of the positive values al-Suyūṭī attributes to the act of autobiography itself: to write an autobiography is both an emulation of earlier respected figures and an act that will enable later generations to emulate the autobiographer. This strategy was successful enough to be copied by a number of later Arabic autobiographers, including Ibn Ṭūlūn of Damascus (d. 1546); al-Shaʿrānī, the Egyptian Sufi mystic (d. 1565); al-ʿAydarūs, the Arabo-Indian religious scholar (d. 1628); Ibn ʿAjība, the Moroccan Sufi shaykh (d. 1809); al-Muʿaskarī (d. 1823), the Algerian religious scholar; and even the Druze Pan-Arabist thinker and literary critic Amīr Shakīb Arslān (d. 1946), all of whom included similar lists of predecessors in the opening or closing passages of their autobiographies.

Al-Suyūṭī's emphasis on passing on knowledge of his "circumstances," "conditions," or "states" (*aḥwāl* or *aṭwār*), words commonly used by medieval Muslim scholars to describe the contents of autobiographies, reflects a widespread conceptualization of life as a sequence of changing conditions or states rather than as a static, unchanging whole or a simple linear progression through time. A life consists of stages dictated not merely by one's progression from childhood through youth to adulthood and old age but also by one's changing fortunes, which were often contrasted to those few areas of life in which genuine accrual over time was thought possible: the acquisition of knowledge and spiritual understanding, the creation of scholarly and literary works, and the fostering of offspring and students.

When al-Suyūṭī begins to recount his life, he presents it not in a chronological narrative but rather in categorized accounts describing different aspects of his identity and intellectual activity.⁴ Consecutive sections discuss his genealogy, his geographic origin, his emulation of pious figures who had written about their own geographic origins, legal opinions of his father with which he disagreed (to demonstrate his independence of thought), his birth, the works he studied as a youth, the transmitters (more than six hundred, nearly a quarter of whom were women) from whom he collected *ḥadīth*,⁵ the "rare" *ḥadīth* he collected as an adult scholar,⁶ his pilgrimage to Mecca, his other travels, his teaching positions, the full text of one of his lectures, a list of his published works (283 of them), praise of his publications by contemporaries, the spread of his writings outside of Egypt, the description of a lengthy, bitter rivalry with an unnamed contemporary,⁷ his claim to have reached the level of "independent legal theorist" (*mu-jtahid*) in Islamic law, and finally his claim to the title Renewer of the Faith (*mujaddid*) for the tenth Islamic century.⁸

This is clearly an account of an extremely rich and productive life; it is also presented as a comprehensive portrait of that life. However, it is an

account that follows no pattern common to western autobiography.⁹ Although it is filled with narratives of differing lengths, the work as a whole rejects the concept of ordering a life into a single narrative, a life “story” in the literal sense. Rather, it derives from an intellectual methodology in which classification, categorization, and description were the ultimate tools for the acquisition and retention of knowledge. Whereas western autobiography achieved its greatest popularity as a genre in tandem with its fictional counterpart, the novel,¹⁰ the threads of the pre-twentieth-century Arabic autobiographical tradition were spun from the raw material of historical inquiry. It is fact and specificity, along with a fascination for individual accomplishments and intellectual production, that most interested and most commonly structured biographical and autobiographical texts of the Islamic Middle Ages. The organizing structure of al-Suyūṭī’s text, however, in no way impedes the expression of his personality: no reader could leave this work with any doubt about al-Suyūṭī’s vision of himself as a unique individual or the sheer force of his at times overweening personality.

Al-Suyūṭī’s self-narrative represents but one of several distinct strands of Arabic autobiographical writing that emerged over the centuries. These strands derived from different models of intellectual endeavor and often stemmed from particularly influential works by specific writers. The diversity of literary form demonstrated by Arabic autobiographies from different time periods obviates the possibility of a single, simple description of the genre in formal terms, a situation similar to that which has emerged in the study of western autobiographical traditions.¹¹

Al-Suyūṭī’s work does serve, however, to alert us from the outset that in exploring self-narratives of different historical periods and different cultures, we shall encounter not only different ideas about the self and about the structure of a human life but also a wide range of differing literary conventions and discourses in which these selves and lives are represented. These encounters should provoke a series of complex questions concerning any specific culture or time period: What were considered the fundamental elements of a human individual? What were the purposes and motivations for the written representation of an individual life? Was the individual self deemed more truly represented by an account of an individual’s personality (a set of psychological idiosyncrasies, habits, and internal emotions) or by an account of a person’s acts and works? Indeed, did an individual indeed even possess a “personality”—a concept rooted in a model of malleability, development, and transformation? Or did an individual instead possess “character”—a concept that stresses continuity and a typical “manner of being” (cf. Greek *bios*)? Were those elements similar or different from the western concepts of individual, self, soul, mind, personality, and character?

The greatest challenge in reading and understanding Arabic autobio-

graphical writings from different times and places is to distinguish the historical figures from their textual representations, and the textual representations from the consciousnesses that produced them, when all of these elements may or may not differ significantly from modern western models. Indeed, elucidating the relationships among authors, literary conventions, and historical transformations of consciousness remains the most challenging and yet perhaps the most fascinating task in all research on autobiography, whatever the culture or period.

This work consists of two parts: the first offers an analysis of a corpus of roughly one hundred forty Arabic autobiographical texts drawn from a period of just over one thousand years, from the ninth to the nineteenth century (including a small number of texts written or published in the early twentieth century, but which deal primarily with nineteenth-century lives); the second offers a selection of thirteen previously untranslated Arabic autobiographical texts that represent a variety of historical periods and literary styles. It is hoped that together these will serve not only to encourage further study of the Arabic autobiographical tradition but also to bring Arabic practices to the attention of a wider audience and thereby broaden critical discussion of autobiography in general.

The corpus on which this study is based contains all of the better-known Arabic autobiographies from the ninth to the nineteenth century, several of which are available in translation; it also includes a large number of additional texts that have remained unidentified or unstudied until now. Although this corpus is only a fraction of the tradition as a whole, it is difficult to estimate what portion it does in fact represent. Additional examples of Arabic autobiographies were being uncovered up until the completion of this volume, to say nothing of the many texts that remain in manuscript and the numerous works cited in indexes and bibliographies over the centuries that have not yet been located or may not have survived. A great deal of work remains to be done simply in the location and publication of these texts.

What links the texts in this study is their expression in the Arabic language. Thus this is a collection of Arabic autobiographies (autobiographies in the Arabic language) and not Arab autobiographies (autobiographies by Arabs), for many of the authors of these texts were of other ethnicities, including Berbers, Persians, Turks, West Africans, and even one Spanish Mallorcan. Arabic has served as a scriptural language, a language of intellectual and religious discourse, and a written lingua franca throughout the Islamic world for fourteen hundred years. It must be noted, however, that by restricting this study to texts written in Arabic, several premodern autobiographical traditions of the Islamic world will not be dealt with, traditions that may eventually prove significant to a broader understanding

of autobiography in the regions of West, Central, and South Asia. These are the Turco-Persian traditions of Ottoman¹² and Iranian¹³ political and religious memoirs, as well as the royal Moghul memoirs in Chagatay Turkish and Persian composed by Bābur, founder of the Moghul empire, and other members of his family in the Indian subcontinent.¹⁴

Although the boundaries of a literary tradition might at first seem easily definable by language, even a peremptory perusal of the Arabic tradition uncovers individual texts that challenge any notion of clear-cut borders. One such text is that of Princess Salmé of Oman who married a German and moved to Germany in the mid-nineteenth century. Her husband died only three years after her arrival there, leaving her with no means of support. Her memoirs are Arab by virtue of having been written by an Arab woman, and yet they were written in German and clearly composed for a European reading public despite the author's declaration that she wrote them for her children and only reluctantly acceded to pressure from friends to publish them.¹⁵

Another text that problematizes the boundaries of the Arabic tradition is the autobiography of Nubar Nubarian Pasha, one of Egypt's foremost statesmen of the late nineteenth century, who wrote his memoirs in French, the language of his secondary education. Nubarian, who was ethnically Armenian, was fluent in Turkish and educated in France but spent his life and career, which began at the age of seventeen, as an "Egyptian" politician in the Ministries of Commerce and Foreign Affairs. Nubarian is an intriguing example of a member of the cosmopolitan Ottoman elite who ruled much of the region now referred to as the Arab world while being both part of and yet removed from "Arab" culture.¹⁶

Although it falls outside the time frame of this study, an equally problematic text is that of the last khedive of Egypt, 'Abbās II, who ruled from 1892 to 1914. His memoirs were first published in French, but the Arabic draft for the opening pages of the text in the khedive's own hand still exists and was published in facsimile with the Arabic translation of the entire text. It seems likely that the bulk of the text was dictated to a secretary; it is not known, however, whether that dictation was given in French or in Arabic.¹⁷

Other texts that defy simple classification are the Arabic slave memoirs of the nineteenth century. These texts were written in the Americas by Africans who had been enslaved in the antebellum United States and West Indies. They spoke various indigenous languages of their native West Africa (along with the English of their owners) and used Arabic as their religious and literary language. These life stories were produced at the instigation of white political activists who sought to use them in their campaigns to have these men set free (see chapter 3 below). Despite the unusual provenance of these works, several of them clearly deploy the classic conventions of the Arabic religious auto/biographical tradition. It is indeed a

powerful moment of *déjà vu* to read in the terse autobiographical writings of a person considered mere chattel in early-nineteenth-century America formulas and phraseology reminiscent of those used by medieval philosophers, religious thinkers, and princes centuries earlier.¹⁸

The authors of the Arabic autobiographies included in this study were not only ethnically diverse, they were from a variety of religious backgrounds. Among them are Jewish authors, Christians of various denominations, and Muslims of *Sunnī* as well as *Ismāʿīlī* and Twelver *Shīʿite* orientations.¹⁹ They were by vocation or avocation princes, philosophers, politicians, government functionaries, *Shīʿite* missionaries, physicians, professors, religious scholars, judges, mystics, historians, merchants, grammarians, slaves, a playwright, a princess from Zanzibar, an early Egyptian feminist, and an engineer. All of them wrote as members of the educated or social elites of their time, however humble their origins might have been. Some were multilingual and chose to write in Arabic as their language of intellectual exchange, and some were exclusively Arabophone; some wrote within the geographic confines of the modern Arab world, and some wrote in Arabic even though they were far away in India, Central Asia, or the Americas. One type of autobiographical text that did not surface in this survey was anything approaching an “Everyman” life story, the life narrative of a truly working-class or lower-class author who could offer a vision of society as seen “from below.”²⁰

Only three women autobiographers can be identified with certainty from this period: ʿĀʾisha al-Taymūriyya (d. 1902), the above-mentioned Princess Salmé of Zanzibar and Oman (d. 1924), and Hudā Shaʾrāwī (d. 1947), the famous Egyptian feminist, whose memoirs recount her life up to the year 1924. Although Salmé’s text appears to be the earliest extant autobiography by an Arab woman, there is some fragmentary evidence for the existence of earlier texts. In particular, the first-person passages quoted in several Arabic biographical compendiums from the Sufi shaykha, legal scholar, and poetess ʿĀʾisha al-Bāʿūniyya (d. 1516) appear to be from an autobiographical notice; the original source, however, remains unidentified.²¹

The motivations of these authors for composing a written representation of their lives were complex and often multifarious: some included sections about themselves in larger works that were primarily biographical dictionaries (al-Fārisī, al-Jazarī, al-Bayhaqī, Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, al-Sakhāwī) or in works on history (ʿImād al-Dīn al-Kātib al-Iṣfahānī, Abū Shāma, Miḥāqa); some wrote of their own lives in the context of their family history (Ibn Buluggīn, ʿUmāra al-Yamanī, Ibn al-ʿAdīm, ʿAlī ibn al-ʿĀmilī); some wrote of themselves as characters in history interacting with the powerful and the mighty or as witnesses to great historical events (Jaʿfar al-Ḥājib, Ibn Ḥawshab, ʿImād al-Dīn al-Kātib al-Iṣfahānī, Ibn Khaldūn, Bābakr Badrī);

some wrote to preempt or redress criticism of their lives or works (Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq, Ibn Buluggīn, al-Suyūṭī); some wrote their spiritual autobiographies as guides to later seekers of the true spiritual or philosophical path (al-Muḥāsibī, al-Rāzī, al-Ghazālī, Zarrūq, Ibn ‘Ajība, al-Sha‘rānī); some wrote of their lives as a means of producing edifying entertainment (Usāma ibn Munqidh, al-Yūsī); some wrote of their lives as narratives of conversion to the true faith (Samaw’al al-Maghribī, ‘Abd Allāh al-Turjumān, al-Simnānī); some addressed their writings to their children, dead or alive (Abū Ḥayyān al-Andalusī, ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī, Ibn al-Jawzī, Princess Salmé, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn); and some wrote as slaves trying to write themselves free (Abd al-Raḥmān, Abū Bakr, ‘Umar ibn Sa‘īd).

In compiling this corpus, the question that arose at every turn was whether to conceive of these texts as autobiographies or to use a different, more neutral term, less burdened with literary expectations, such as “self-narratives” or “life representations.” The first approach risked leading us (and our readers) to compare these medieval and premodern texts anachronistically to recent western autobiographies. The second approach, however, posed the greater risk of evading precisely those questions we wished to raise through the examination of this body of texts—questions concerning the history of consciousness, human personality, differing literary modes for representing the experience of a human life, and, ultimately, the modern western cultural construct of a radical and complete break in consciousness from earlier and “other” cultures.²²

From the wide range of Arabic writings that might be termed first-person literature or self-narratives, the texts selected are those that appear to be closest kin to the western idea of autobiography, mostly from the Arabic genres of *sīra* and *tarjama*. 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.

For texts that met this basic description, no attempt has been made to pass judgment involving issues of which texts are “real” or “true” autobiographies based on subjective criteria such as the degree to which the author reveals his or her “inner self,” or the degree to which the author stands back from and critically evaluates his or her earlier self, or which aspects of human life are portrayed in detail (all issues that are commonly raised in modern western literary criticism of autobiography). Nor has a sharp distinction been made between autobiography and memoir (the focus of the latter being the external events that took place during the author’s life rather than the development of the author’s life per se). Although the two categories appear to be separate and clear in the abstract, when addressing actual texts this clarity often proves ephemeral. The exclusion or inclusion of texts on the basis of length or other formal criteria has also been avoided.

This study deals with texts that are the results of acts of autobiography and attempts to focus on that species of text which al-Suyūṭī and his contemporaries would have classified under the rubric *tarjama li-nafsihi*, “he wrote an interpretation of himself,” regardless of what judgments modern scholars may eventually render concerning the relationship between that genre and the genre of modern western autobiography. As Mary Sue Carlock has observed:

Each scholar has applied the term [autobiography] according to his own standards or according to the definition which he himself has assigned to the term. . . . [C]onsequently this body of scholarly writings contains a variety of conflicting testimonies concerning what constitutes a bona fide autobiography.²³

In short, in the spirit of a preliminary foray into a new field, the present work aims to err on the side of inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness.

This study stops at a point familiar to all scholars of Arab culture—the publication of the first volume of Ṭāhā Ḥusayn’s autobiography in 1926–27—rather than at an arbitrary date such as the turn of the twentieth century.²⁴ *Al-Ayyām* (The Days), covers Ḥusayn’s childhood in a village of southern Egypt and his migration from the countryside to Cairo to study at the al-Azhar Islamic University. Considered one of the foundational texts of modern Arabic literature, it is obligatory reading in schools in many countries of the Arab world and is certainly one of the most widely read and most influential Arabic literary works of that century.²⁵

The publication of *al-Ayyām* marked a clear turning point in the development of the Arabic autobiographical tradition. After its publication, the Arabic literary landscape changed dramatically and the sheer number of autobiographies in Arabic increased exponentially. More significantly, the Arabic autobiography at this time came into direct contact with the novel, creating an ambiguous domain between fiction and nonfiction that had not previously existed in the Arabic autobiographical tradition. Several nineteenth-century literary experiments can be said to have engaged the fictional mode to some degree (e.g., Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq’s *al-Sāq ‘alā al-sāq* or ‘Alī Mubārak’s *‘Alam al-Dīn*), but they produced no imitators.²⁶ Ḥusayn’s text, in contrast, wedded the Arabic autobiography to certain conventions of European fictional narrative in a manner that has been imitated by the vast majority of twentieth-century Arab autobiographers. The dramatic rise of the autobiographical novel and the emergence of autobiographies with novel-like qualities immediately following the publication of *al-Ayyām* raises a number of critical questions not generally applicable to earlier Arabic autobiographical texts.²⁷

In addition, questions of direct and indirect western literary influence, the conscious revival and transformation of classical Arabic literary forms,

the new sociopolitical context of resistance to the European colonial powers, the struggle for political independence, the rise of Arab nationalism, and the sudden emergence of a strong Arab women's autobiographical tradition, as well as new regional and national identities, all combined to create a context in which the Arabic autobiography changed not only as a literary form but also as a means of sociopolitical expression. For these reasons, we have chosen to exclude the remainder of the twentieth century from the present work as a topic that merits and requires independent study.²⁸

Notes

1. Blank in the original; the intended work is *Dhayl al-rawḍatayn* (The Sequel to 'The Two Gardens'), Abū Shāma's thirteenth-century historical chronicle.

2. Dates and numerals added. Selections from *The Syrian Thunderbolt*, by ʿImād al-Dīn al-Kātib al-Iṣfahānī, as well as the complete texts of the autobiographical sections of *The Sequel* by Abū Shāma and *The History of Judges of Egypt* by Ibn Ḥajar appear in English translation in this volume.

3. Western translations of classical Arabic texts are typically longer than the original, often by half again as many pages; the difference arises from the compactness of Arabic-script texts as well as the frequency of cultural referents that require paraphrase in English.

4. For a discussion of the ordering of these sections, see E. M. Sartain, *Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 1:142 ff.; and Kristen Brustad, "Imposing Order: Reading the Conventions of Representation in al-Suyūṭī's Autobiography," *Edebiyât: Special Issue—Arabic Autobiography*, N.S. 7, no. 2 (1997): 327–44.

5. *Ḥadīth* are accounts of the words and actions of the Prophet Muhammad. The study of *ḥadīth*, and in premodern times, collecting them orally from reliable transmitters, formed an integral part of a Muslim scholar's education. Ideally, a *ḥadīth* was transmitted and later passed on to others complete with a list of all of the names in the chain of transmission from the Prophet himself to the speaker.

6. Arabic *ʿawālīn*, i.e., *ḥadīth* with the fewest number of transmitters stretching back to the Prophet Muhammad or the Companions. These *ḥadīth* were prized for their rarity and relatively short chains of transmission. In al-Suyūṭī's times, a millennium after the lifetime of the Prophet, a *ḥadīth* that had passed through fewer transmitters had come to represent both a form of authenticity and an intellectual find.

7. Excerpts from this chapter of al-Suyūṭī's text are translated in this volume.

8. A well-known Islamic tradition holds that a "renewer" of the faith will appear in each century.

9. The closest parallel among European autobiographies was written, curiously enough, by a contemporary of al-Suyūṭī, Girolamo Cardano (d. 1576), who divided his work into chapters with titles such as "Friends," "Marriage and Children," "Health," and "Sports." Girolamo Cardano, *The Book of My Life*, trans. J. Stoner (New York: Dutton, 1930).

10. Rousseau (d. 1778), whose work is considered by many scholars to be the single most significant breakthrough in the development of modern western autobiography, composed his *Confessions* only after fictional life stories had been popular in French literature for nearly half a century. Fictional explorations preceded and irrevocably shaped western concepts of the literary self.

11. See, for example, Philippe Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact," trans. Katherine Leary, in *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 3–30. The fulcrum point of Lejeune's "solution," the title page of a published autobiography, is not applicable to premodern Arabic texts. The Chinese autobiographical tradition also encompasses a number of subgenres from different historical periods and styles and thus similarly resists a single formal description; see Pei-Yi Wu, *The Confucian's Progress: Autobiographical Writings in Traditional China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

12. For an overview, see Cemal Kafadar, "Self and Others: The Diary of a Derivish in Seventeenth-Century Istanbul and First-Person Narratives in Ottoman Literature," *Studia Islamica* (1989): 121–50. Kafadar identifies and cites texts from a variety of genres including autohagiography, memoirs, diaries, dreambooks, captivity memoirs, and autobiographies. For one of the more famous authors, Muṣṭafā 'Alī, see Cornell H. Fleischer, *Bureaucrat and Intellectual in the Ottoman Empire: The Historian Muṣṭafā 'Alī (1541–1600)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986). Although this work is in part based on a short autobiography by Muṣṭafā 'Alī appended to his *Counsel for Sultans*, Fleischer makes little reference to the text itself; see, however, the edition and translation of Andreas Tietze, "Muṣṭafā 'Alī's Counsel for Sultans of 1581," *Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse Denkschriften*, Bd. 137, Bd. 158 (Vienna, 1979, 1982). Robert Dankoff, *Seyahatname: The Intimate Life of an Ottoman Statesman, Melek Ahmad Pasha (1588–1662) as Portrayed in Evliya Celebi's "Book of Travels"* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), gives an overview of the autobiographical elements in Evliya Celebi's work.

13. Shāh Ṭahmāsp, *Tazkira-i Shāh Ṭahmāsp (The Autobiography of Shah Ṭahmāsp I of Iran [1514–1576])* (Teheran: Intishārāt-i Sharq, 1984); German trans. by Paul Horn, *Die Denkwürdigkeiten schah Tahmasp's des Ersten von Persien* (Strassburg: K. J. Trubner, 1891). See also Ṭahmās Khān (d. 1803), *Ṭahmāsnāmah*, ed. Muhammad Aslam (Lahore: Panjab University, 1986), available in translation as *Tahmas Nama: The Autobiography of a Slave*, abridged and trans. by P. Setu Madhana Rao (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1967); Bert G. Fragner, *Persische Memoirliteratur als Quelle zur neueren Geschichte Irans* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1979), for nineteenth-century examples; and C. M. Naim, trans., *Zikr-i Mir: The Autobiography of the Eighteenth-Century Mughal Poet, Mir Muhammad Taqi "Mir" (1723–1810)* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

14. Zāhirūddīn Muḥammad Bābur (d. 1530) ruled portions of Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Iran and was the founder of the Mughal empire of India. *The Book of Bābur* (Bābur-nāmah) is part official chronicle and part personal memoir. Although much of the narrative concerns affairs of state, the number of intimate glimpses into Bābur's personality have caused some western scholars to rank it among the great autobiographies of the world (it has been available in translation

since 1826), and its most recent American translator has been moved, somewhat effusively, to declare it “the first—and until relatively recent times, the only—true autobiography in Islamic literature” (Wheeler M. Thackston, trans., *The Bāburnāma* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996], 9). See, however, the recent edition, concordance, and translation of Eiji Mano, *Bābur-nāma (Vaḡyī)* (Kyoto: Syokado, 1995, 1996), for a trenchant critique of the Thackston text. Additional memoirs or journals were written by Bābur’s daughter, Gulbadan Bēgum, and his great-grandson, the emperor Jahāngīr (r. 1605–27).

15. *An Arabian Princess between Two Worlds: Memoirs, Letters Home, Sequels to My Memoirs, Syrian Customs and Usages*, ed. E. van Donzel (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992); *Raised in a Harem: Memoirs of an Arabian Princess from Zanzibar, Emily Ruete, Born Salmé, Princess of Zanzibar and Oman* (New York: Marcus Weiner, 1989).

16. *Mémoires de Nubar Pacha*, introd. and notes by Mirrit Butros Ghali (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1983).

17. See ‘Ahdī: *mudhakkirāt ‘Abbās Ḥilmī al-thānī, khidw Miṣr al-akhīr* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1993).

18. The best coverage of these texts and their authors is found in Allan Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Sourcebook* (New York: Garland, 1984); and Marc Shell and Werner Sollors, eds., *The Multilingual Anthology of American Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

19. An early rift over the issue of political and religious succession to the Prophet Muhammad led to a general division in Islam between Sunnī Muslims and Shī‘ite Muslims. In later periods the primary distinction came to be the issue of spiritual authority and guidance for the Muslim community, with the Shī‘ite community believing in a series of Imāms, spiritual leaders who were thought to have direct inspiration from God, while the Sunnīs recognized no such role. The Shī‘ite community further split into groups that followed different lineages of spiritual leaders. A number of the autobiographers dealt with in this study wrote their autobiographies primarily as an expression of their roles in proselytizing for or fomenting rebellion against one or another of these sectarian groups.

20. The texts closest to this genre in Arabic literature are the historical chronicles written by lower-class figures such as the “soldier’s daybook” of Aḥmad al-Damurdashī. See al-Damurdashī’s *al-Damurdashī’s Chronicle of Egypt, 1688–1755*, trans. and annot. Daniel Crecelius and ‘Abd al-Wahhāb Bakr (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), and the chronicle of Syria penned by a Damascene barber, Aḥmad al-Ḥallāq al-Budayrī (18th c.), *Ḥawādith Dimashq al-yawmiyya*, A.H. 1154–1175 (Daily Events in Damascus, 1741–1762), ed. Aḥmad ‘Izzat ‘Abd al-Karīm (Cairo: Maṭba‘at Lajnat al-Bayān al-‘Arabī, 1959).

21. Muḥammad al-Ghazzī, *al-Kawākib al-sā‘ira bi-a‘yān al-mi‘a al-‘āshira*, 3 vols. (Beirut: al-Maṭba‘a al-Amrikāniyya, 1945–59), 1:287–92; see also ‘Abd al-Ḥayy Ibn al-‘Imād, *Shadharāt al-dhahab fī akhbār man dhahab*, 8 vols. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qudsi, 1931–33), 8:111–13; and passages cited in ‘Umar Bāshā Mūsā, *Ta’rīkh al-adab al-‘arabī: al-‘aṣr al-mamlūkī* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr al-Mu‘āṣir, 1989), 437–42.

22. This element of modern western thought is explored and critiqued in Bruno LaTour’s *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

23. Mary Sue Carlock, "Humpty Dumpty and Autobiography," *Genre* 3 (1970): 345-46.

24. First published in the Egyptian journal *al-Hilāl* in 1926-27, then in 1929 and 1933 in book form at the Imad Press in Cairo, and translated into English by E. H. Paxton, *An Egyptian Childhood, the Autobiography of Taha Hussein* (London: Routledge, 1932).

25. Fedwa Malti-Douglas begins her study of *al-Ayyām* with the question: "The most read work in Arabic literature?" to which she answers, "[T]he best-known work may well be the autobiography of the Egyptian intellectual Ṭāhā Ḥusayn." *Blindness and Autobiography: al-Ayyām of Ṭāhā Ḥusayn* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 3. Similarly, John Haywood declares it "the most celebrated book in modern Arabic literature," in *Modern Arabic Literature 1800-1970* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1971), 196.

26. Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq, *al-Sāq 'alā al-sāq fī mā huwa l-Fariyāq*, 2 vols. (Paris: Benjamin Duprat, 1855); 'Alī Mubārak, *'Alam al-Dīn*, 4 vols. (Alexandria: Maṭba'at Jarīdat al-Maḥrūsa, 1882).

27. Arabic autobiographical novels published immediately following the appearance of *al-Ayyām* include Ibrāhīm 'Abd al-Qādir al-Māzinī's *Ibrāhīm al-kātib* (1931), Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm's *'Awdat al-rūḥ* (1933), and Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's own *Adīb* (1935). In another cross-fertilization between fiction and autobiography, the author Bayram al-Tūnisī published a series of autobiographies of fictional characters drawn from the lower classes of Egyptian life in the 1920s and 1930s that he used as vehicles for social commentary and criticism. See Martina Häusler, *Fiktive ägyptische Autobiographien der zwanziger und dreissiger Jahre* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1990).

28. Until recently, there was only one lengthy treatment of modern Arabic autobiography: Yaḥyā Ibrāhīm 'Abd al-Dāyim, *al-Tarjama al-dhātīyya fī al-adab al-'arabī al-ḥadīth* (Autobiography in Modern Arabic Literature) (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1975). Three recent works, however, mark growing scholarly interest in this area: Mu'ayyad 'Abd al-Sattār, *al-Sīra al-dhātīyya: dirāsa naqdiyya* (The Autobiography: A Critical Study) (Uddevalla, Sweden: Dār al-Manfā, 1996); Robin Ostle, Ed de Moor, and Stefan Wild, eds., *Writing the Self: Autobiographical Writing in Modern Arabic Literature* (London: Saqi Books, 1998); and Tetz Rooke, "In My Childhood": A Study of Arabic Autobiography (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 1997).

For the emergence of women's autobiography, see Hudā Sha'rāwī, *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist (1879-1924)*, trans., ed., and introd. Margot Badran (London: Virago Press, 1986); Margot Badran, "Expressing Feminism and Nationalism in Autobiography: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Educator," in *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 270-93; and Margot Bardran, *Feminists, Islam and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).