The Changing Role of Pleasure, or: Towards a fundamentalist humanism
Some thoughts on the place of pleasure and desire in the system of a new period

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“There is something in the air”

When the board of the European Association for Modern Arabic Literature met in Paris in May 2009 in order to plan the 9th EURAMAL meeting (to be held in Rome a year later), the uprisings of the so-called “Arab Spring” were still more than one and a half year ahead. Yet, most of the board members, myself included, agreed already then, that “something” was “in the air”. And it was the fact that this “something” seemed to be somehow connected to a new attitude, observable in Arabic literature from the most recent period, towards all kinds of taboos—political, religious, sexual, and others—and to the prominent place the expression of desire and pleasure obviously had attained in this literature, that the board decided to make exactly this phenomenon the main focus of the upcoming conference.

I had dealt with some aspects of the “desire, pleasure, taboo” phenomenon two years earlier in an article in the Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies.1 In a first and preliminary essay at characterisation, I had tried there to describe the literary output, both Arabic and Turkish, of the last two decades of the twentieth century in its most general and essential traits. Since the expression of desires and pleasures or, as I then said, »fun«, had made themselves felt in this literature already by the 1990s (at the latest), I had assigned the word »fun« the function of a keyword in the main title of my study. At the same time, the bipolar title—»Individuality Lost, Fun Gained«—mirrored in a nutshell what the analysis as a whole of some thirty texts from the period had shown: the »fun« that had been gained, or was still being gained, and as such had attained prominence as a topic or plot feature in a considerable number of texts, was (being) gained only as the result of a loss of »individuality«, i.e., it was (in logical terms) a secondary phenomenon, a re-action rather than an action. More specifically, the discovery of some sort of pleasure in this period had come as the result of the protagonists’ digging in what had been experienced, metaphorically speaking (and sometimes also metonymically), as the “ruins” of a “house” that had been a home for them in former times but was now lying there destroyed, not capable to provide stability, shelter, security (of existence, of identity, etc.) any longer. This

1 GUTH 2007.
was the Arab/Turkish version of what in other parts of the world was called the breakdown of the grand narratives of modernity. And just like with the postmodern(ist) turn, a central message of the Arabic and Turkish texts I had looked at was that something had survived the overall destruction of the “house/home” undamaged and that the hero(ine) might be able to overcome the “forces of evil”, as we may call them, and regain some kind of “joy”, “fun”, or “pleasure” (elsewhere usually referred to as postmodern playfulness), despite the world’s lying in ruins—if, and only if, s/he managed to unearth the surviving “treasure”. The fact that the search after possibly undamaged and still unearthed “treasures” was set into operation only secondarily, as a re-action to the overall loss and breakdown, was symptomatic of the period as a whole which was dominated, in the beginning at least, by the experience of this loss and breakdown, with the active momentum almost exclusively on the side of “destruction”.

By the early 2000s, however, a number of texts had made their appearance that did not seem to display the same re-active attitude any longer; in them, joy, fun, and pleasure, or at least the longing for these, seemed to have taken the active part, the initiative, and logical priority. Obviously, “something” had changed again, and the enormous success of novels like ‘Alī al-Aswānī’s ʿImārat Yaʿqūbiyān (The Yacoubian Building, 2002) and Rajā’ ʿAbdallāh al-Ṣāniʿ’s Banāt al-Riyāḍ (The Girls of Riyadh, 2005)—texts that became best-sellers although or, perhaps, just because they did not care about established aesthetic norms any longer and addressed all kinds of previously tabooized issues in a daringly open manner—seemed to herald a new beginning.

**A new period? A first approach**

But was this enough to speak of the dawn of a new (literary) period? In retrospect, i.e., in the aftermath of the “Arab Spring” where the feeling that historic change definitely has taken place is ubiquitous, one is tempted to take the extra-literary evidence as a strong support to answer the question in the affirmative without too much hesitation or a long weighing up of pros and cons. All the more so since there seem to be indications on a global level of a transition into a new period also in the field of literature itself. Not long ago a number of publications about literature outside the Arab world had begun to signal a fundamental shift of paradigms. As early as in 2001, José LÓPEZ and Gary POTTER had dedicated a collection of essays under the heading _After Postmodernism_ to the description of what they identified as a new paradigm—called Critical Realism in the volume’s subtitle—suggesting that there were indications, observable worldwide, of attempts to regain active control and initiative after postmodernism had destroyed all previous

2 NEUWIRTH/PELITSCHE/WINCKLER, in their seminal volume (of 2004/2010) on the post-1967 period, addressed the phenomena as “Postmodern Perspectives” in contemporary Arabic literature.

3 In his »Introduction: Beyond Postmodernism—Contingent Referentiality?«, STEIRSTORFER (in STEIRSTORFER (ed.) 2003: 2, fn. 9) The reference is not clear, esp. the word ‘here’. Can you simplify?

ontological certainties. Two years later (2003), Klaus STIERSTORFER had assembled, under the title _Beyond Postmodernism_, a number of _Reassessments in Literature, Theory, and Culture_ (thus the subtitle). While the volume also included studies that diagnosed a »Persistence of the Modernist Heritage« (first main section), and others that could be grouped under the heading of »Re-Reading Postmodernism«, the articles of the third section, like the title chosen by the editor for the book as a whole, all went »Beyond« Postmodernism: Ihab HASSAN expressed his opinion that there was a movement back »Toward an Aesthetic of Trust«; in a similar vein, Vera NUNNING specified that the »New Departures« she had observed in British fiction at the turn of the twenty-first century, were pointing »Beyond [postmodern] Indifference«; Victoria LIPINA-BEREZKINA had noticed not only the death but also the »Return of the Subject« in American literature at the turn of the millennium; and Susanne PETERS, too, spoke of a turn, or return, in her case the »(Re)turn to the Voice of Common Sense« in the plays of the Anglo-Irish author Martin McDonogh, again seen as a re-action to what postmodernism (here: postmodernist Zeitgeist as a cliché) had destroyed. Again five years later (2008), Regina RUDAITYTE had published the proceedings of a related conference under the title _Postmodernism and After: Visions and Revisions_. Given these indications from outside the Arab world as well as the fact that "something" seemed to be happening in Arabic literature too, I myself had initiated two successive panels addressing the question of what this "something" that obviously was taking over from postmodernism might be and how it may be understood and described concept-wise. And when Gail RAMSAY and I published, in 2011, the proceedings of the EURAMAL 2008 meeting in Uppsala, we had already dared, though not without hesitation, to subtitle vol. 2 as _Postmodernism and Thereafter_, suggesting that »[from today’s perspective [July 2011], i.e., a few months after the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt and with mass protests still going on in a number of other Arab countries, the essays gathered in Volume 2 [might] appear as an exploration into “pre-revolutionary” writing«, which of course meant the dawn of a new period.

Yet, the evidential strength of the global parallels and the a posteriori quasi self-evidence provided by the “Arab Spring” for the beginning of a new chapter in history notwithstanding, how can literary theory possibly “prove”, from the texts themselves, that a transition to a new period positively has taken place? And which role would desire, pleasure and the breaking of taboos play in this transitional process? What happened to these forces after they had been discovered and dug out from the “ruins” as the “treasures” that had survived the breakdown undamaged? How, and in which respect, had they become

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5 My emphasis—S.G.
6 Thus the subtitle of his contribution in STIERSTORFER (ed.) 2003: 199-212.
10 At the 30th meeting of the German Society for Oriental Studies (Deutscher Orientalistentag) in Sept. 2007 (Freiburg/Breisgau, Germany) and at the 8th EURAMAL conference in June 2008 (Uppsala, Sweden).
11 GUTH/RAMSAy, »Preface«, in GUTH/RAMSAy (eds.) 2011, ii: 9. Please replace ‘here’ throughout your notes with something else. It is not a standard reference insofar as I am aware.
functional in the revolutionary process? In order to be able to answer these questions, we will have to look into two things. First, we will have to ask: What is a period?—a question with which we are right back to the very essentials of literary history (and history in general). Secondly, our analysis should try to localize the position that has been assigned to desire, pleasure and the breaking of taboos in the texts that seem to be so new and different and that perhaps, in a number of respects, represent the new period in a typical way.

Periods and periodization
Talking about periods and periodization after the postmodern turn and in a post-historicist climate where the “end of history” has been declared by some and history as such been deconstructed as an ideology-driven project, may seem a bit old-fashioned at first sight. Yet, the fact alone that sentences like the preceding one do give some meaning and that terms like “postmodern” or “post-historicist” are not complete nonsense (hopefully, at least), justifies the use of these terms—as long as we remain aware of the fact that we are talking about constructions, the results of descriptive abstraction, about concepts that, like all concepts, in a way are “fictional” realities but nonetheless are realities and can as such claim the status of facts, mental facts. We create them, and they exist in our minds, because we need them in order to be able to structure time which without periods would be a meaningless, mere mechanical elapsing of seconds, minutes, hours, days etc. Whoever is familiar with the basic ideas of good old Koselleck’s Begriffsgeschichte (rendered as “history of concepts” by some, “conceptual history” by others) and its many offsprings also knows that concepts are very powerful entities, narratives that may shape our present and future. As constructions, however, as descriptive abstractions and conceptualizations, as “fictional” realities and structured creations, periods are open to analysis through the analysis of the contents and structure of the narratives (in the widest sense of the word) in which they are expressed/represented. Fictional texts are such expressions-representations of what an author at a given time in history thinks is characteristic of the period s/he is living in, and the fact that these expressions are metaphorical, fictional ones does not in any way preclude their “analyzability” with regard to the conflicts and structures that an author considers to be characteristic of the period in question. Quite the contrary, the essential constituents of a period, i.e., of an interval of historical time as perceived by an author, may appear even clearer from a work of fiction than from one of non-fiction. For, as Aristotle already knew, there may be more “truth” to fiction/art than to nonfiction (historiography, in the case of Aristotle’s Poetics) because the former usually tries to paint holistic pictures that include all the aspects of a given topic/task/problem that are (experienced as) relevant for this topic/task/problem at the time of writing, i.e., at a very specific moment in history. And fiction usually also aims to bring the essentials of a period to the fore, particularly in the Middle East where authors traditionally see themselves not only as writers but also as “scribes” whose task it is to document and comment on history.

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12 In a highly illuminating introduction to his formal analysis of LESSING’s dramatic pieces, Peter PUTZ elaborates on the differences between fact and fiction and concludes that art is always interested in the essentials and in anchoring events in a wider holistic picture of the world (»rückt [...] das Geschehen in einen umfassenden Weltzusammenhang«). PUTZ 1986: 23-4.
“parables” of more general processes. As such they tend to claim—in spite of (but essentially via) the uniqueness and specificity of characters, plots, locale, etc.—the abstractness and universal validity of mathematical formulas: their details are to be read as variables that in the authors’ view represent a general reality outside literature—i.e., the general character of a period.

Periods are not simple, “atomic” entities but complex systems, containing many sub-concepts and topical elements, and as systems they have a structure that holds the components together through a network of relations between them. A piece of art tries to express the inner-systemic structure of the period of time the author is living in, through its form and inner structure.\(^\text{14}\) The question, asked above, whether we are dealing with a new period or not is therefore a question about whether a transition from one system to another has taken place or not,\(^\text{15}\) and it is first and foremost the form and structure of a work of literature from which we may learn something about the way an author sees the various facets of the reality of his time related to each other and thus form the whole that one calls a period. Given the fact that the expression of desires, pleasure, and fun as well as the breaking of taboos have been important features in Arabic literature during the 1980s and 1990s, but have retained this importance right into the early 2000s, we will have to check whether these topical elements have changed place in the system(s) over time; only then will we be able to understand and explain any essential change. Let us have a look then into the structures of texts from the last decades of the twentieth century and compare these, and the place desire, pleasure and taboos occupy in them, to the state of affairs as speaking from some more recent ones.

**Arabic literature between 1980 and 2000**

As mentioned above, in the period before the turn of the millennium, the discovery of undamaged “treasures” only came as a somehow desperate re-action to the widespread depression and the feeling of insecurity caused by the breakdown of the old world order, the metaphorical “house” in which one had felt “at home”. The late 1970s/early 1980s had been a kind of turning-point in the history of the contemporary Middle East—not only when Reagan took over from Carter in 1981, but already when the Islamic Revolution broke out in Iran (1979) and was soon followed by the Iran-Iraq war (1980), and when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan (1979); there was also the traumatic Israeli invasion of Beirut (1982), including the massacre of Sabra and Shatila, and, following the invasion, the hottest phase of the Lebanese civil war; in Egypt, Sadat was assassinated in 1981 and Mubarak took over, all this accompanied by massive economic liberalization, i.e., “globalization”,

\(^\text{14}\) This is what makes literary analysis at the same time so fruitful and so necessary. Cf. Th. W. ADORNO in his Ästhetische Theorie: «Deshalb bedarf Kunst der Philosophie, die sie interpretiert, um zu sagen, was sie nicht sagen kann, während es doch nur von Kunst gesagt werden kann, indem sie es nicht sagt» (It is for this reason that art requires philosophy [i.e., critically informed explanation] which interprets it in order [for the latter] to say what it [i.e. art] is unable to say [explicitly], whereas art is only able to say it by not saying it [i.e., between the lines]). In: id., Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 7, Frankfurt/M. 1970: 113 (translation from: id., *Aesthetic Theory*, transl. by Robert HULLOT-KENTOR, London: Continuum, 2004: 94).

\(^\text{15}\) Cf. Wellek’s famous definition: «The history of a period will consist in the tracing of the changes from one system of norms to another». WELLEK/WAREN (1963): 265.
and the effects this had on the local markets and societies: the almost complete extinction,
or at least a significant impoverishment, of the middle classes (particularly the educated middle class),
social fragmentation, and the feeling of being left alone in the struggle for survival. In literature,
the world one was living in had increasingly become represented as a “desert”, a “labyrinth”,
or a “hell”—which could be the modern city,— the haunting memories of the past 
(a favourite topic especially in Lebanon where the wounds inflicted on the population by the civil war were still far from healed), 
or a false, “adulterated”, hybrid, lost, destroyed, or split identity, a fragmented self, etc. In these “hells”, forces of 
“the Evil” were ubiquitous, and “devils” or other satanic figures made their threatening appearance: Death, Time, 
almighty fathers-patriarchs, and so on. However, the general feeling of depression also inaugurated, metaphorically speaking, 
a “search within the ruins” after “treasures” that might have survived the collapse of the old national “house” or social 
“homes” undamaged and could possibly be “unearthed” in order to provide new points of orientation or beginnings.
The search, often staged as a journey, could take many different directions (corresponding to the many aspects of the breakdown), 
but it would always deal with essentials (corresponding to the existential, life-threatening character of the collapse) 
and question established norms (taking the breakdown as a warning not to repeat previous mistakes and as a chance to find fundamentally new ways of looking at things from where, hopefully, to start anew).
The search-journey could lead into the fragmented, hybrid identity itself; into one’s body, sexuality, and sensations; into history and/or one’s memory; 
into the essentials of story-telling, including narrative language; into everyday culture, 
vernacular, sociolect, dialects, folklore, biculturalism... and many other hitherto neglected worlds.
Many texts, it is true, still ended in frustration, the search having been to no avail, 
and existential insecurity, fragmentation and depression in this way remained important topics.
In other texts, however, the protagonists were more successful (though often to a limited degree only); they discovered some kind of “treasures”, started to explore these, and more often than not found ways to exploit and enjoy them. The revision of language (and norms 
that had governed its use), for instance, brought the discovery of many hitherto neglected idioms—dialec 	as, the vernacular, sociolects, minority languages, classical Arabic with all its facets— that were available as contributors to new literary discourses. The reality-fiction confusion was not necessarily something diabolic but could as well be turned into a meta-fictional play, both enlightening and entertaining, that sounded the despotic power of the almighty author-creator or highlighted the consequences of a ruler’s control over the media.
A self, found to be fragmented or “adulterated,” had not to be exclusively the source of alienation or panic, but could instead be experienced as even more authentic, “truer” and much richer than an ideologically precast and uniform identity. The breakdown of traditional chronology and topology would not automatically destroy a narrative, it might

16 Sabry HAFEZ has convincingly shown the structural homology between the textual fragmentation observed in Egyptian novels from the 1990s and the fragmentation, resulting from economic change and the ruling elite’s mismanagement, of Cairo’s topography, the uncontrolled growth (“mushrooming”) of shanty towns (‘ashna’iyya‘at), and the disintegration of urban society, cf. HAFEZ 2011. ADORNO’s famous dictum that art is the sedimented history of human misery would get strong support from the evidence of these texts!
17 For further details and sample texts cf. GUTH 2007: 28-38.
also liberate it and allow for a »polygamy« of time and place\textsuperscript{18} that could be realized not only structurally but also with regard to content: it was possible to be “at home” at once in several places (life in exile and/or the diaspora of Arab communities outside the Arab world fostered this trait) and in several times (remembered history and the cultural heritage forming part of one’s identity). The prevailing topics and established genres of literature too were deconstructed as forming part of hegemonic discourses, which opened for hitherto marginalized groups to enter the narratives, for regions other than the previously dominating Egypt and Levant to be emancipated and gain a certain position in the market, and for genre as well as »gender transgressions«.\textsuperscript{19} With regard to subject, the postmodern turn sparked off an unprecedented variety of possible topics, be it from the past and/or history, from the world of mystics, or the mysterious and exotic, but also from everyday life and that of sub-cultures, from popular practices to lived biculturalism, and from the Gulf states and the Libyan desert to Paris, London, or Buenos Aires. In terms of form, fictional prose got enriched by elements from historical novels, memoirs, crime narratives, pornographic and other “light”, entertaining genres as well as traditional popular storytelling, but also from lyrics\textsuperscript{20} and other experimental forms.\textsuperscript{21/22}

As a result of the searching and digging in the ruins, the discovery, testing out and, as the case may be, the first tentative exploitation of the newly found “treasures” often brought a certain relief and hope to the earlier experience of overall depression: a multiple identity had not necessarily to be a burden but could be an enrichment and as such be enjoyed and yield fun and pleasure; the deconstruction of norms, de-stigmatization, de-ideologicalisation and the lifting of taboos opened the space for free play, revealed the existence of hitherto unknown, undreamt-of territories of richness, liveliness, colour, variety, and showed the way into a realm of freedom from ideological constraints.

As mentioned above, late twentieth century texts staged the departure for a journey in search of undamaged “treasures”, their eventual discovery and the start of their exploitation as events that came as a re-action to an overall breakdown. For quite a time, this breakdown remained the driving force behind the events. However, with time passing by and the discovered “treasures” increasingly acquiring the quality of reliable certainties and facts to build on and exploit, it was to be expected that they would eventually gain the upper hand over the breakdown, and claim a more active part. And this is exactly what happened, and what speaks from the texts that appeared, roughly, after the turn of the millennium.

\textsuperscript{18} NEUWIRTH et al. (eds.) 2010: 233 ff.
\textsuperscript{19} NEUWIRTH et al. (eds.) 2010: 361 ff.
\textsuperscript{20} Cf. BEHZADI 1996.
\textsuperscript{22} The wording of the preceding paragraph is partly identical with passages from an overview of modern Arabic fiction written, simultaneously with the present article, for the latest edition of the Encyclopedia of Islam (Guth, in press).
After the turn of the millennium: Desire, pleasure, and the humanization of the “treasure box” (thesis)

In these texts, the “engine” that makes the events move is no longer the experience of breakdown and loss. Quite the contrary, the main driving forces now are exactly those treasures that have been discovered and carefully put to the test in the period before. In The Yacoubian Building, for instance, the overall ruin of the country is undeniably a major thematic issue, but it is not what makes the novel move! Rather, the reader encounters a number of characters none of whom seems to care much about the breakdown any longer—the overall ruin is just a given that, in the beginning of the novel at least, is not really worth complaining about since it is a fact known to everybody. Instead, it seems that all protagonists already have left this behind, gone over to the next step and started, despite the ubiquitous ruin, to pursue their individual projects, bigger in some cases, smaller in others, but all considered more or less legitimate, by themselves as well as by the narrator, and it is only later in the novel, when they try to carry out their plans and reach their goals, that they become confronted with the overall ruin again. Quite significantly, the novel opens with a chapter about a 65-year old bon vivant, Zakī Bey al-Dusūqī, and his project of “conquering” a young barmaid—clearly a project of desire and pleasure. His fondness for, and “expertise” in, women is portrayed with great sympathy (and detail) throughout the novel, and it is paired, in Zakī Bey’s personality, with a general humanism that is rooted in the spirit of Cairo’s cosmopolitan past. The alliance, or even partly identification, of pleasure and humanism is, I think, particularly noteworthy. Other characters too are constructed as characters with a big sexual appetite, starting out, like Zakī Bey, with projects of “pleasant conquests”. There is Ḥātim Rashīd, the homosexual journalist, who follows ʿAbd Rabbuh, a young security police recruit from Upper Egypt (and eventually succeeds in seducing him and making him his lover). Here, too, sexual desire is shown to be linked to a basic human need, the need for love and companionship resulting from deep despair about one’s loneliness, and as such it is shown to be understandable and, to a certain degree, legitimate.23 And there is al-Ḥājj ʿAzzām, the businessman and entrepreneur with a doubtful past (probably in drug-trafficking) who is no longer satisfied with only one wife and therefore marries a second one, a young widow, in order to be able to act out his feelings of diminished virility.

Alongside the projects of the “sexualized” characters just mentioned there are however also those of at least two other non-“sexualized” ones: the poor doorkeeper’s son Ṭāhā al-Shābdhilīf and the daughter of equally poor labour migrants from the countryside, Buṭhayna. Here again, what the text first focuses on (before unfolding the difficult conditions in which the two characters live and the obstacles against which they have to struggle) are their projects, i.e., the forces that make them and the string of events related to them move. Ṭāhā is preparing himself for the final exams at the Police Academy, an important hurdle to be

23 Cf. the text’s excursions into Ḥātim Rashīd’s childhood which are meant to explain the origins of his homosexuality and need for a loving companion. In the later course of the novel, however, the character is shown in increasingly negative light because he pursues his goals in a rather egoistic way that puts ʿAbd Rabbuh under severe pressure and also claims a terrible victim: ʿAbd Rabbuh’s baby dies. The death Ḥātim Rashīd himself eventually suffers at the hands of another lover is therefore shown to be a more or less logical consequence and the punishment he deserved.
taken in the career he is aspiring to. Unlike many characters from the 1990s, he has not lost hope at all: he is the son of a bawwāb, yes; but this should not prevent him from trying to overcome these conditions. The reader meets Ṭāhā as a character who is driven by the wish to climb the social ladder by means of education and believes in egalitarian chances for an intelligent, ambitious and hard-working student like himself. The main motivation for him to do so is the wish to live a decent life—not a life of luxury, pleasure and amusement, just a “normal” life in dignity, without financial hardship, and respected by the those around him. This is also Buthayna’s main goal—to marry, have children, etc.—and this is why she is clinging to Ṭāhā (at the beginning of the novel, at least, as long as he still fulfills her expectations in him as the future provider of a family’s livelihood). Unlike Zakī Bey al-Dusūqī, Ḥājjim Rashīd or al-Ḥājj ‘Azzām, neither Ṭāhā nor Buthayna are “sexualized” characters, none of them is shown to be on the lookout for new erotic adventures. Yet, what unites them with the other protagonists is the fact that the wishes, desires, aspirations, hopes etc. of all of them, from a human perspective, are undoubtedly legitimate, even though society’s norms may deny them this legitimacy, as, e.g., in the case of the elderly “womanizer” Zakī Bey or the homosexual Hājjim. And although most of the characters also have negative traits—all of which probably can be subsumed under the one heading of “egoism” or “selfishness” (see below)—and although the majority of them ends up in big trouble (to say the least) or causes much harm to others and inflicts great pain on them, yet, the wishes, desires, hopes etc. in themselves are all accepted in the narrator’s discourse as natural, legitimate, understandable from a human point of view, and therefore not to be condemned—in principle, it is only natural and therefore everybody’s right to dream of a better life (like Ṭāhā and Buthayna), of erotic adventures, of finding a loving partner, pursuing a career, and so on. The text talks about these basically human goals—of which erotic desires and sexual pleasures thus are only two out of a large variety—without any taboos because they are regarded as belonging intrinsically to the human condition and therefore are to be accepted as unquestionable anthropological givens. It is not havingsuch emotions, sensations, longings, that makes them immoral, but the way an individual follows in order to achieve those goals.

Other texts from the first decade of the twenty-first century display very similar conditions although their events often take place in settings of time, place, and milieu, that are very different from those of ʿImārat Yaʿqūbiyān. In Banāt al-Riyāḍ (2005), for instance, we no longer meet the Egypt of poverty, corruption, torture, Islamism, etc., but a world of affluence, of big parties and the emotional problems (pure luxuries when compared with the Egyptian case) of young Saudi Arabian upper-class women. Another very prominent novel, Yūsuf Zaydān’s ʿAzāzīl (2008), the work that received the 2009 International Prize for Arabic Fiction (the “Arabic Booker”, as it is usually called), takes us back in time to the early fifth century C.E., to a mainly Christian milieu, with a monk as the major protagonist, and manyhistorical events from the period of transition from Hellenistic “paganism” to Christianity, including early ecclesiastic history and the first great schism about theological questions, all playing directly into the monk’s life. Yet, despite the large variety of subject matters and settings, these texts too are characterised by an antagonism of structural components that parallels exactly that of al-Aswānī’s novel. As in The Yacoubian Building, wishes, desires, and pleasure play an important role on the side of the components that constitute the texts’ driving force, their impulses; but here, too, these elements are only one
aspect out of a number of others that, taken together, can be summarized under the heading *Nature and humanity, speaking through the individual*. In *The Girls of Riyadh*, all four protagonists as well as the blogger who reports what happens to them, long for their “share in life and happiness”, although this desired share may look considerably different from that hoped for by *The Yacoubian Building*’s Buthayna. The young Saudi women are much more influenced than Buthayna by the “modern” ideal of a partnership in which not only the man but also the woman receives what she feels she in principle and essentially, i.e., by virtue of her very nature as a human being, is entitled to: love and a kind, obliging, respectful treatment by her partner that allows her to be the person she wants to be, to keep her identity and live her personality together with an understanding partner. The text takes it for granted, but also explicitly underlines it in several places, that these wishes are far from being modest or exaggerated, but something not only young women, but every human being, today is entitled to. The blogger supports the generality, naturalness, or “matter-of-course-ness” of her claim (and of the message she sends to the readership of her blog) by preceding each entry/chapter/blog posting with quotes from a global, all-human, cross-cultural “wisdom heritage pot.” Here, in the “treasure chest” of “authorities of humanism,” as we perhaps may call the reservoir the author is drawing on, ancient and modern Western thinkers and authors like Socrates, Aristotle, Victor Hugo or Honoré de Balzac figure side by side with Jubrān Khālīf Jubrān and Nizār Qabbānī, while religious differences are left behind by quoting on equal terms from the Qur’ān, hadīth and Martin Luther King: in religion, it is the universal truths and the humanist messages that count, not individual teachings or prescriptions. Unlike the “treasure chests” of novels of the preceding period, this reservoir has not to be first discovered and dug out, made accessible and tested; rather, it is just there from the very beginning, as a fact, an undisputed and indisputable given. As in *The Yacoubian Building*, the forces that make the novel move are exactly those wishes—uniform as they may appear in this case (everything revolves round the question of how to find “the right one”)—that can be characterised as a call for human rights, human nature, the call of humanity to be fulfilled. The impulse is not on the side of the conditions that the girls meet as soon as they start to act, try to use their natural rights and achieve their legitimate wishes.

The same priority in the componential structure of the work is to be found in Yūsuf Zaydān’s *ʿAzāzīl*. This novel’s main plot consists of a process of maturation which the hero, the young monk Hypa, goes through. It consists in his individual emancipation from the doctrines he has grown up with and those he he meets during his wanderings. It is a process of getting rid of old internalized attitudes and values, and of his bad conscience, in order to become really free, a process that teaches one how to be truthful to oneself and to dare to be who you really are, as well as to listen to nothing but your inner voice, to what you intuitively feel is right. This inner voice, speaking through ʿAzāzīl, Hypa’s demon, or rather daemon (< *daimôn*, the ancient Greeks’ word for more benevolent, *non*-malignant chthonic spirits), is there from the very beginning, and this “call to be true to one’s nature”, to the “authentic self”, for the individual to follow his/her natural disposition—as a curious being that wants to understand the world and find out “the truth”; as a male who desires a female; as a human being who is longing for emotional attention and fulfillment—this inner voice is the novel’s main driving force. This impulse is not born or discovered as the result of a process of “digging in the ruins”, as it most likely would have been had the
novel been written during the 1990’s; rather, it is “just there”, and often “emerges” by pure chance (as is most obvious in the case of the unexpected appearance of Octavia and Martha, the two women with whom Hypa enters into a physical relationship), always calling upon Hypa to change the course of his life, challenging him to react and seize the chance that life is offering him.

Unlike in texts from the previous period where the discovery and tentative enjoyment of “hidden treasures” had come as a result of the experience of the big breakdown, the “treasures” now are “just there”, as self-evident incontestable “human rights” and undisputable facts from which to set out. In the novels’ componentional structure, that is, in the interplay of the main semantic ingredients that, taken together, form the texts’ overall “message”, the former “treasures” have transformed into anthropological “givens,” so powerful now that it is they that count most and that have logical priority over the antagonistic forces (the novels’ antitheses, so to speak, as will be shown below). The right to enjoy life—enjoy it somehow, at least—is something that every human being is entitled to as a human, and the desire to get one’s legitimate share, rudimentary as that may be, i.e., a basically human(ist) impetus, or impulse, is the major driving force that gets things started, and propels protagonists in these most recent texts.

**Individuality, “autism”, selfishness**

The desires and pleasures that had been discovered as “treasures” in the last decades of the twentieth century have however not only become accompanied by many other impulses, been identified as belonging to the larger category of essentially human needs and rights and, following this insight, shifted place (from being the more or less accidental findings of a desperate hero/ine in his/her search that came as a reaction to an overall collapse, to their new function as main drivers of the events). Rather, a feature that could already be observed in late twentieth century texts since it was inherent in many of them, but had so far passed unnoticed, or had at least not been registered as particularly significant, is the fact that the overall breakdown had left those who had to experience it, alone, having to rely on themselves in their struggle against it. One of the aspects of the breakdown being also social fragmentation, those who had to “dig in the ruins” in search of “hidden treasures” mostly had to do so as lonely individuals, and if they found such a “treasure” it was as an individual that they tried to enjoy it. In his (anti-) novel An takūn ʿAbbās al-ʿĀd (Being Abbas el Abd, 2003), Ahmad al-ʿĀdī quite significantly calls the new generation’s condition that of an “isolation”, a “singleness” or “solitariness” (tawāḥhud), a term that EL-ARISS, following Davies’ English translation, even renders as “autism”. This feature now reappears in the new period in that the protagonists’ right to live a humane life is represented in the texts as the right of single separate individuals: consider the fact that the

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25 Parallel to the collapse of “houses”, many texts of the last quarter of the twentieth century also stage collapses of social communities, foremost among which the family, cf. GUTH 1994: 222, 227-28; GUTH 2007: passim.
trajectories in *The Yacoubian Building* almost nowhere overlap; the experiences of the *Girls of Riyadh* too are only loosely connected through their being a ‘gang’, a *shilla*—the stories themselves, however, do not overlap; and the monk in *Azazil* is a lone fighter from the beginning. Fragmentation, isolation, solitariness, or >autism< however not only reappear coupled with the forces that make the novels move (as each *single individual’s* human rights), but also function as an obstacle. They do so, according to the texts’ evidence, when (or as long as) the individual remains *too* individualistic, or egoistic, unable to overcome the selfishness inherent in the need to find a solution for his/her own problems. As mentioned above already *en passant*, most of the characters in *The Yacoubian Building* display this kind of egoism and selfishness: the sexualized characters Hātim Rashīd and al-Ḥāj ʿAzāzīl do not pay respect to their partners’ humanity, putting their own sexual desires higher than the latters’ needs and thus victimizing them; Ṭāhā, from a certain time on turning into an Islamist, begins to disregard Buthayna’s hopes and even her way of dressing; Buthayna, on her part, clings to Ṭāhā not out of pure love but rather from a cool calculation that more or less ignores him as a fellow human being with feelings, and instead mainly counts on him as a future provider of a family’s livelihood. When this does not work out she is not particularly eager to keep him as her “fiancé”. And again when, later in the story, she is ready, for a moment, to betray Zakī Bey for a certain amount of money with which the Copt Malāk and his group are trying to bribe her, her egoism too endangers one of the very few really human relationships then developing in the story.

In *Banāt al-Riyāḍ*, too, there are some instances, though by far not as many as in *Imārat Yaʿqūbiyyān*, of selfish behaviour that makes things worse and casts a shadow of moral doubtfulness even on those who otherwise are shown to be innocent victims. Having learnt that her new husband Rashīd has a girlfriend he loves and is unwilling to give up, Qamra tries to “force” him to end this relationship and become a better husband by having a child with him. In so doing, she pays no respect to her husband’s feelings—which date back to a time before their arranged marriage and are much more natural, and thus also more human, than what one day may, but most probably will not, develop between them. Nor is she mindful of the child’s humanity; she just (ab)uses it for her own goals. Although her behaviour may appear understandable—it is the *classical* way of trying to regain an unfaithful husband as well as an act of helplessness, inspired by a counsel Qamra receives from her mother, a representative of traditional Saudi upper-class society—the narrator in *Banāt al-Riyāḍ* nevertheless distances herself from her friend in this respect. And the later chapters make clear that Qamra’s “trick” eventually turned into a trap in which she herself and the child were caught: Rashīd simply divorces her and she has to return to live with her parents in Riyadh where society is anything but kind towards a divorced wife with a child.

In *Azazil*, too, the monk Hypa’s behaviour becomes morally highly doubtful and obstructs the more positive effects of his otherwise very human and therefore legitimate quest, whenever he only sees his own interests and does not follow the call of his less selfish half, the daemon *Azazil*. Therefore, the three women who could have been turning points in his life—Octavia, Hypatia, Martha—all have to suffer on his account. Octavia, who believes in the nameless stranger’s being the long-awaited future husband and for this reason completely and unconditionally gives herself to him, suffers a terrible shock when she learns that Hypa has concealed, for selfish reasons, his true identity from her while enjoying not only her hospitality but also her body. Not much later, Hypa is unfaithful
again, towards Hypatia this time, when he first enjoys the Neo-Platonic philosopher’s highly stimulating lectures but then passively watches a fanatical Christian crowd dragging her along and brutally killing her. As with Qamra in The Girls of Riyadh, the text of Azazil too shows a certain understanding for the hero’s behavior—any attempt to rescue Hypatia would have meant to risk being killed himself by the raging mob. Yet, in showing that a more faithful follower of Hypatia, Octavia, actually did take this risk and suffered death without betraying her ideal, the text remains clear about what would have been the monk’s moral duty. A similar act of untruthfulness happens a third time in the latter part of the novel when Hypa, by then already in the monastery in the vicinity of Aleppo, enters into a relationship with young Martha and should take action, in line with his responsibility towards the beloved and the demands of call of humanity inside him, in order to rescue her from the dilemma she one day finds herself in—either having to marry a man she does not love, or leave. The monk’s hesitation, motivated only by selfish considerations, urges the “angel” Martha to flee without him into an unknown future. (It is only after this experience that Hypa realizes that he will have to change his life and follow her.)

The present condition: systematically inhumane (antithesis)

Egoism is however only one of the forces that make themselves felt as obstacles that prevent the hero(in)es’ natural wishes from being fulfilled and more humane living conditions from being established. They form part of a whole complex system of intricately interwoven and basically inhumane norms, conventions and rules, put up by larger collective bodies—authorities like the state, the clan, the family, etc.—and the respective normative ideologies, the ways of thinking, behaving, acting and reacting conditioned by these authorities, or by tradition, by a certain type of economy, etc. In The Yacoubian Building, the many facets of the main structural anti-component—or the novel’s antithesis, to use the Aristotelian term—can be subsumed under the heading The system’s contempt of humanity, and the general immorality into which it drags those who have to live under it. 27 This is perhaps most obvious in Ṭāhā’s case. The intelligent and ambitious young man who is hoping to climb the social ladder via a career as a police officer, is denied this very legitimate wish just on account of his being a poor doorkeeper’s son. Here, the system betrays him and humiliates him in a highly arrogant manner. Later on, when he joins a group of Islamists and is arrested, he is sexually abused and tortured in the state’s prison. But he is not only shown to be the state’s victim. The system’s inner logic is such that he falls prey also to the group with whose help he was hoping to overcome his victimization at the hands of the state. And it is also part of the system’s inner logic as constructed in the novel that Ṭāhā’s radicalization, understandable as it is from a human perspective, as a result of his earlier sufferings, deprives him of his former humanity. From a certain point on, he has no understanding any longer for Buthayna’s very human and legitimate wishes and lets her down. Later, he is driven by nothing but the desire for revenge, so much so that he is unable to make use of the chance, offered to him by the warm-hearted, understanding woman to whom he gets married in the desert training camp, the chance of being accepted and respected as he is, in all his vulnerability, as a human being.

27 For this and the following details cf. GUTH 2009: 18-21.
Besides Ṭāhā, there is also al-Hājj ʿAzzām who, having challenged the system and questioned the rules established by the kleptomaniac ruling class, eventually becomes its victim. He is “dropped” by the Big Boss (i.e., Mubārak) for questioning the latter’s absolute authority. The Hājj’s steep career in local politics thus comes to an abrupt end. A number of other characters fall prey to the patriarchal system prevailing in society: Buthayna, like many girls before her, has to tolerate sexual harassment from her employer in order not to lose her job. Al-Hājj ʿAzzām’s second wife Suʿād, a widow with a son whom she has to take care of, feels herself forced to accept the humiliating conditions of a childless marriage imposed on her by her new husband. When she becomes pregnant she is forcibly taken to a hospital, and the baby is aborted against her will. Low social standing and sexual abuse are paired also in Buthayna’s case, who comes from a family of poor labour migrants from the countryside, as well as in ʿAbd Rabbuh’s tragedy: Had the poor army recruit not needed the money he received from Ḥātim Rashīd for his sexual services, his child would not have had to die, nor would he himself have become Ḥātim’s murderer.

On the other side, Ḥātim is a victim of the system himself: since society meets his homosexuality with contempt and ridicule he is forced to live a secret life in this respect. The world the reader is presented with in The Yacoubian Building is characterized by other kinds of abuse of human beings by others. Right in the beginning, Zakī Bey is deceived by the barmaid Rabāb (who is just after his money); the Islamists abuse young men for their own goals, “fishing” their souls when they are in difficulty; Zakī Bey’s sister Dawlat does not respect her brother’s feelings and, out of pure envy, jealousy, and fear from the neighbours’ gossip, turns his life into hell; and Abaskharūn, Malāk and the other marginal characters try to play a trick on Zakī and to use Buthayna for their goals. All in all, the system that the natural and legitimate impulses of love and the desire to lead a decent and more humane life have to overcome is a system of corruption, repression, and exploitation that, while demanding loyalty and submission, disregards the humanity of those who live in it, and makes them in turn disregard, or at least temporarily neglect, their fellow human beings’ humanity.

Although The Girls of Riyadh and Azazil are set in completely different places, times, and milieus, their inner structures nevertheless display anti-components that are very similar to that of The Yacoubian Building. In The Girls of Riyadh, for instance, all the protagonists are denied what is considered their natural, legitimate share in life. We are shown this by means of a cumulation of the four women’s individual experiences, different as they are in themselves. Their experiences reveal a system of traditional patriarchal social norms, of disrespect for women and of gender discrimination, an absence of protection against sexual abuse and male capriciousness, and violence. The narrative also reveals a system of state control and violent repression of religious minorities (like the Shia), a society that is ruthless in its attitude towards homosexuals, and also extremely status-conscious, always demanding a “pure” nasab (descent) and strictly forbidding any “misalliances”. A further demonstration of the repressiveness of the system is the way it allows an institution like the “Organisation of Commanding the Right and Forbidding the Wrong” (Hay’at al-ʾamr bi l-maʿruf wa l-naḥyʾ an al-munkar, sometimes also translated as “Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice”), i.e., the guardians of public morals, to patrol the streets and act as if they were regular police forces. From the perspective of the main characters’ wishes, hopes and dreams of a legitimate share in life
and happiness, what characterizes the antithesis most is the fact that it prevents them from attaining exactly this share which, according to the text, is to be considered a “human right” (as we have seen above).

The anti-component of Zaydān’s ‘Azāzīl has this basic quality, too. Unlike The Yacoubian Building or The Girls of Riyadh, the reader does not come to know the many experiences that emerge as antagonistic to the natural impulses and humanity inside our monk, is their inhumanity, here too. Hypa’s selfishness, mentioned above as something that in the course of the events claims some victims and also prevents the more humane sides of the monk’s personality from fully unfolding, appears as a result of the “official” religious ideology the young naïve man grows up with and the degree to which he internalizes “orthodox” beliefs. It needs quite a number of painful experiences in order to “uninstall” normative religious teaching from his brain where it has been burnt in as an “application” that automatically starts to run the “bad conscience” program that calls for unquestioning loyalty towards his religion and in this way succeeds in manipulating the individual over a very long period. Thus, as in ‘Imārat Ya’qūbiyān, the power of the system to prevent emancipation and drag the individual into its internal logic, is a prominent motif also in ‘Azāzīl.

The inhumane systems that are at the core of all the novels we have so far been able to look at may resemble to a large degree the “destroyed homes” or “ruins” that the hero(in)es of fiction from the 1980s to 1990s had to cope with. The two main differences, however, between these and the negative forces of the post-2000 period are that now a) the fundamentally inhumane character of these systems is understood and underlined (corresponding to the much more “humanized” character of the “pleasure and desire” component), and b) their coordinates in the macro-semantic structure of the texts have changed (corresponding to the change of place of the “treasure box” from being the result of a desperate, and only re-active, digging in the ruins to an unquestionable given from which to start off). Rather than being the driving force that makes the texts move by initiating the protagonists’ searching and digging in the ruins, as it used to be in the 1980s and 1990s, it is now this component that is regarded secondary, an antithesis to the legitimate natural impulses and the “drive for life as a human being” which makes things move, as the thesis. This makes clear that the texts of the new period do not consider the inhumane systems as insurmountable obstacles any longer. In fact, they show that these systems belong to a time that, in principle, already has been left behind; that change, therefore, is overdue and that one should not confine oneself, as some texts of the pre-2000 period suggested, to some niches that had survived damage. The implication is that it is a radical change that is needed, a change also that is possible, and one that, if accomplished, will open the way for more humane forces to unfold. Was it because Yūsuf Zaydān wrote his novel a few years later than al-Aswānī or al-Ṣāni’, at a time when the character of the new period was appearing already in sharper contours before the eyes of Arab authors? Or
was it just because he was more clear-sighted than the others, that he chose to create, as a literary expression of the priority of the natural impulses and humanity inside the individual over the prevailing circumstances – was it because of this that Zaydan chose a daemon to whisper in the monk’s ears from the very beginning; that whispering coming from deep within himself, impelling him to find his way through life\textsuperscript{28} by »searching for the truth«?\textsuperscript{29} Be that as it may, it is clear that Azazil knew, or sensed, what was right and what had to be done.

**The dawning of a new era (synthesis)**

Having looked at the thesis and its antithesis in the componential structures of literary products from the post-2000 period, we can now also ask how the authors imagine a possible synthesis. The answer to this question is twofold. On the one hand, all texts come along with a number of examples that illustrate that the inhumane system in many cases still retains the upper hand and the implementation of a more humane order fails. Many protagonists in *The Yacoubian Building* end up in a state that is much worse than the one they are in when we meet them at the beginning of the novel. As a consequence of their efforts to make their desires and aspirations come true, both Ṭāhā al-Shādhillī and Ḥātim Rashīd meet their death, while al-Ḥājī Azzām’s career is destroyed for ever. The majority of the Riyadh girls also meet with tragic endings: Qamra has to return, as a divorced woman with a child, to a pitiless traditional Saudi environment; Sadīm is let down first by her fiancé-husband, Wafīd, although happiness already had seemed certain, then by the “noble knight” Firās whom she had fallen in love with in London but who then allowed his parents to marry him off to another woman, for reasons of family prestige; Michelle too remains unmarried and unhappy because her beloved Fayṣal is unable to defy the logic of “pure descent” and social convention that prevents his parents from accepting a daughter-in-law whose mother is American; and Lamīs’ relationship with the kind Shiite ‘Alī finds its abrupt end when they are caught in a café by the religious “police”, whereupon ‘Alī is severely punished, Lamīs’ father called in and accused for breach of his legal duty of supervision, and the daughter of course heavily reprimanded and strictly interdicted any future contact with the man who, »hadn’t he been a Shiite, she would have fallen in love with, actually«.\textsuperscript{30} In ‘Azāzīl, the variety of protagonists of other novels is equalled, as we have seen, with a variety of places visited and persons encountered by the one central hero. It is therefore Hypa himself whom the author on several occasions subjects to situations where he is unable to assert humanity against the inhumane system, often behaving in accordance with the system’s norms and thus failing to bring about a change or preventing inhumanity from regaining the upper hand.

On the other hand, however, the texts very often, and not seldom in a rather kitschy manner,\textsuperscript{31} show a way out and light up a light at the end of the tunnel. All texts agree in that

\textsuperscript{28} Cf. FALTAS 2008: »He is human, all too human«.
\textsuperscript{29} AL-HAMĀMISI 2009(?).
\textsuperscript{30} AL-ṢĀΝĪ 2005: 161 (*bi-sarāḥā, law lam yakan shī‘iyyan la-kānāt ʿahabbat-hu*).
\textsuperscript{31} A certain shiftlessness and unwieldiness, or kitsch, or an exaggerating tone are not untypical of works in which an author tries to express his/her surprise over the changes that s/he obviously is experiencing at the time of writing. According to FALK (1983: 184-89), literary works from the initial phases of new
this way out consists in the individual’s breaking with the great taboos, in cutting in
particular the bonds of loyalty with the collectives to which s/he had felt attached so far
(and which, in most cases, had formed an essential part of his/her identity). The light at
the end of the tunnel does not yet shine particularly brightly in 2002 when al-Aswānī
published his *Imārat Ya qūbiyān*, but it is already there and it consists, basically, in the
vision that a humane existence indeed *is* achievable. The main “proof” of this possibility is
the unselfish, altruist relationship that develops between 65-year old Zakī Bey and forty-
years younger Buthayna. In order to stay together, these two individuals have to violate all
types of norms traditional society has put up against their way of life and such kind of
relationship. But they are ready to do this, to drop out, to break with the system, in order to
become able to rebuild their lives on a new order based on true love for, confidence in, and
respect vis-à-vis the other as a fellow human being. Another such light of hope in this novel
shines up when Ṭāhā is married to a widow in the Islamist training camp in the Eastern
desert. The text makes clear that the understanding and affection shown to Ṭāhā by his
wife, combined with the sexual pleasures he experiences for the first time here and which
give back to him the self-esteem that torture in prison had deprived him of, could very well
have been a solution to the situation he had ended up in. Unfortunately, the gravitation of
the vicious circle into which the system had drawn him eventually proves to be still
stronger than the prospect of a new life at the side of a loving wife. An interesting aspect of
the exemplary “germ cell of pure humanism” as presented in the couple Ṭāhā-Raḍwā is its
being composed of individuals whom traditional society would have rejected, or at least
marginalized. An interesting comparison to make again would be the marginal, in a way
“extra-territorial” localities, where the germ cells take form: Zakī Bey and Buthayna
celebrate in a European-style bar, with a French owner, and Edith Piaf as their background
music while Ṭāhā and Raḍwā Abū ’l-ʿAlā get married somewhere in the Eastern desert, far
away from the main body of Egyptian society.

Exactly in line with the evidence of *Imārat Ya qūbiyān*, Rajāʿ ʿAbdallāh al-Ṣāniʿ in
*Banāt al-Riyāḍ* chose to represent the current situation of young Saudi women as not
completely hopeless either. The main message also of her text is: “Yes, it’s true: the
prevailing system is powerful, and it is indeed able to destroy you; but change is not only

periods often show clear signs of their authors’ wishes to somehow mark the conclusions they end up
with as something that comes quite unexpected from the perspective of the forces that are striving for
change, or at least destabilization, of the existing order. So, given the fact that the prevailing systems
(*antithesis*) in all the novels of the post-2000 period still are described as extremely powerful, the
success (*synthesis*) of oppositional forces and projects of an alternative order based on pure humanity
still seems quite unlikely in the eyes of those who are longing for change (*thesis*). The clearer the
nature of a new experience becomes after a while, the less surprising tends the synthesis to be. The
initial stage of “marking the new” (FALK: »Markierungsphase«) is superseded then by a stage of clear
“visualisation” (FALK: »Visualisierungsphase«). In this stage, the result, viewed from the perspective of
those who are longing for change, does not appear unexpected any longer. Rather it emerges as what
matters most, in contrast to the prevailing system that now takes on the character of something minor,
and sometimes even almost irrelevant. While *Imārat Ya qūbiyān* with its rather kitschy, “romantic”
ending—that also seemed a bit improbable for many—is a typical example of a text from a
»Markierungsphase«. There are elements both in *Banāt al-Riyāḍ* and in *ʿAṣāīl* that seem to suggest
that the authors here were already passing over the threshold from the initial to the central stage of the
new period. But in order to prove this more analysis and a careful study in its own right will be needed.
overdue but also possible.” The author chooses to demonstrate the power of the system, as we have seen above, by letting the majority of the protagonists’ life projects fail. On the other hand, she opens a window and shows, taking Lamīs as her example, that individual happiness is achievable if, and only if, it is based on true feelings, love, confidence and respect. But it is also conditional on a courageous rupture with the system, which in the case of Lamīs was an intelligent and well-planned one: having followed her friends’ experiences, Lamīs decides to “keep cool” and build up her relationship with Nizār from bottom up, without forcing him into decisions he might feel he has to make when having to comply with both her wishes and the demands of traditional society. As in the case of The Yacoubian Building and the Zakī Bey-Buthayna couple, the Saudi novel too does not yet show the reader how the new type of relationship may work and develop over time. For the time being, the texts confine themselves to asserting the possibility of a rupture and imagining a new beginning.

The same is true also for Zaydān’s ʿAzāzīl. Here, too, the main body of the text consists of episodes that show the system’s victory over attempts to end it and break out of the vicious circle, and it is only in the very end that a solution is foreshadowed. Hypa undergoes a severe but decisive crisis, symbolized in an almost deadly fever that brings about a long period during which the monk lies in coma, between life and death, hallucinating. But when he eventually recovers, he is ready to leave his former life behind and listen to the advice of his daemon, whom he now recognizes as just another side of himself that has always been there but always suppressed. He is now ready to follow the call of his natural human impulses and join his beloved Martha: thumma ʾarḥalu, maʿa shurūqi ʿl-shamsi, ḥurran »and then I will set off, at sunrise, as a free man...« is the novel’s last sentence. In a very condensed form this last sentence contains four important aspects of the author’s synthesis: the possibility and eventual success of individual attempts at emancipation, despite all obstacles; the dawn of a new era (sunrise = the beginning of a new day); individual freedom, but also community with other fellow human beings as the main characteristic of man in this era; and the open end (three dots)—it remains unknown where this will lead to. Like al-Aswānī’s and al-Ṣāniʿ’s novels, ʿAzāzīl too imagines nuclei of a new community-to-come in the form of two-person units, based on true feelings and affection, confidence and mutual respect (a good example is in the relation between Hypa and his mentor the bishop Nestorios), if not united by the bonds of love (as in the case of Hypa and Martha; the Hypa-Octavia duo would also have been such a germ cell had the monk not been too reluctant and insincere). What most of the Riyadh girls do not yet dare, but what Zakī Bey and Buthayna consciously carry out, namely the rupture with the system that is necessary for a more natural and humane order, unadulterated by taboos or selfishness, is shown to be achievable through listening to one’s daemon, i.e., that part of the self that is always there and has remained uncorrupted but whose voice had long been neglected and whose advice often been mistaken for a temptation by the devil.
## Conclusion

The most appropriate way to summarize the findings of this article is perhaps a schematic overview:

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<td>Macro-semantic component</td>
<td>“Postmodernity”</td>
<td>“Beyond postmodernity”, “Post-postmodernism”</td>
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|  |  | “Fundamentalist humanism” (cf. “Arab Spring”)

### Thesis
(what matters most, has priority, is primary driving force, impulse of events)

The collapsed house, ruins of a destroyed home (breakdown of grand narratives);
evil forces, “devils”, “satans”

### Antithesis
(what is logically secondary, emerges as an opposition to the Thesis)

Digging in the ruins & discovery of a surviving treasure (e.g., sexuality, desires, ...)

Results of efforts to salvage the treasure from the ruins despite the evil forces (e.g., modest/fractured pleasure, the individual testing out and sometimes enjoying some elements from the Treasure box⁴²)

### Synthesis
(result of Thesis meeting Antithesis)

New beginnings in small units (pairs, couples) of pure humanity after individual rupture with the system

Basic human rights/values, speaking through the individual (e.g., the unquestionable “natural right” to live in dignity, enjoy the pleasures of life)
The “treasure box” as an anthropological given, a fact; good daemons, “angels”
The inhumanity of the system and its gravitation (transforming the individual), collectives demanding loyalty (and erecting taboos)

For an example that can perhaps be regarded as typical of the complicated and fractured way in which the “Generation of the 1990s” tried to unearth hidden/undamaged treasures and to test them (in this case: emotions) out as an antithesis to the overall breakdown, cf. Christian JUNGE’s study on Muṣṭafā Dhikri’s Ḥurā’ matāḥa qūṭiyya (The Nonsense of a Gothic Labyrinth, 1997), which JUNGE considers to be an attempt to use metafiction as a means of self-assertion; see JUNGE 2011.
The schematic representation highlights aspects of continuity as well as of rupture in the transition from the pre- to the post-2000s. In non-Arabic literatures, the fact that some aspects of what had become known as “postmodernism” obviously were still present also after the term seemed to have become a bit dated during the 1990s, served some of the contributors in the volume edited by STIERSTORFER a decade ago as an evidence for arguing against a shift of paradigms and, hence, against categorizing the changes in the post-1990s, which also they acknowledged, as fundamental enough as to justify the assumption of a new era. In our overview, continuity is expressed by means of two arrows leading from a field in the pre-2000s column to one in the post-2000s column and in this way marking a connection. On the one hand, the major driving force of the pre-2000s, the collapse-ruin-breakdown-destruction complex, is still present also in the first decade after the turn of the millennium. There, the destroyed house reappears as part of a larger system that is characterised first and foremost by its inhumanity, and it is therefore the inhuman character of the collapse-ruin-breakdown-destruction complex that now is stressed. The grand narratives, for instance, now often appear in form of taboos that prevent humanity from unfolding, and the system is shown to be one that has the power to transform innocent human individuals into beings that are phased with the inhuman system. A second aspect of continuity is the fact that the main antagonist of the systems “out there” still is the individual: it was single individuals that had to deal with the overall breakdown before 2000, and it is still single individuals that are shown in their confrontation with the inhumanity of the world after 2000. There is an element of continuation also in the way the individuals meet this challenge: the “treasure box” that was discovered before 2000 preserves its key role also into the post-2000 period. As with the negative forces, the positive counterforces too are now seen from an essentially human(ist) perspective where the elements of desire, pleasure, joy, fun etc. are looked on primarily as elements that make a human a human. One may of course regard this process of humanization as just a modification—a widening—of the attitudes and messages of the pre-2000s and, hence, as

33 The conference organized by STIERSTORFER and its edited proceedings showed yet another set of attitudes towards the question whether or not a new era had been entered. While, »[a]s could be expected, no contributions were offered by scholars who hold that postmodernism never existed and was just one of those “isms” which serious scholarship could happily be without«, one group pointed to »the lasting validity and persistence of modernism beyond any paradigmatic thresholds of postmodernism; far from being over and pointing “beyond” itself, postmodernism in this view [was] still very much in the ascendant, while modernist concerns, themes and approaches [we]re far from being completely superseded or invalidated in the Western civilisation of postmodernity« (»Introduction«, in STIERSTORFER ed. 2003: 3; my italics). There may be indications that point in a similar direction also in Arabic literature (e.g., the reappearance of “classical” modernist realism à la Maḥfūẓ after the experimenting of the “generation of the 1990s” with a number of different styles of writing, or the reassertion of values that seemed to have been laid aside by the latter). In the present article, I have not dealt with this attitude, not only because the “continuity of modernism” group clearly was a minority already a decade ago (as STIERSTORFER reports, ibid.) but also because I think there is a consensus among historians of modern Arabic literature that this literature had entered a new period after the breakdown of Nasserism (although there may be disagreement in the use of terminology: “post-Maḥfūz’ian”, “postmodern(ist)”, “New Sensibility”, etc.) and it therefore seemed more convenient, in dealing with still later literary phenomena, to relate to those who had registered change rather than to those who had looked for continuities.
an argument for continuation rather than for “revolutionary” change. However, taken together with (a) the fact that the semantic components not only have been modified but also have changed place within the overall structure (from thesis to antithesis, and from synthesis to thesis, respectively—cf. the crossing of the arrows of “modified continuity”), and (b) the fact that a new component has been added, a synthesis in which the “autism” of the individual of the pre-2000s is overcome and the building of new communities initiated, suggest in my opinion to view the changes as decisive enough as to talk of a change of paradigms and, hence, a new period. For the time being, it looks as if a term such as “New Humanism”, until now reserved as a label for a worldwide Humanist revival movement,34 could be an appropriate working title for what is happening in the Arabic literary scene, too. But this needs to be tested on many more texts than those few that have been the raw material of the present study.

References


Cf. entry »Humanist Movement« in the English wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>) and the organization’s website (<www.humanistmovement.net>) as well as the sites of The International Humanist Party (<www.internationalhumanistparty.org>) or The World Centre for Humanist Studies (<http://www.cmehumanistas.org/>).
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