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POETICS OF PRECURSORSHIP IN THE POETRY OF ʻABD ALLĀH AL-NADĪM AND PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR:
A COMPARATIVE CRITICAL HERMENEUTIC STUDY

Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of PhD

by

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ABSTRACT

Having lived their lives heading towards early twentieth-century literary renaissances, respectively, the late nineteenth-century authors ʻAbd Allāh Nadīm (1845-1896) and Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906) were prolific authors, whose poetic oeuvres may be critically examined to verify that they were precursors, in their own right, to the modern Egyptian renaissance (*al-Nahḍah*) and the Harlem Renaissance poets. For the purpose of this study, the coined term "poetics of precursorship" will be used to entail any literary characteristics pertaining to those poets/authors who took on an anterior or precursory place within a given literary period.

In view of revisiting the verse of Nadīm and Dunbar, given their role as precursors to poets within emerging renaissances in their respective homelands, critical hermeneutical reading methodologies will be used to approach their verse. In this vein, the term "hermeneutic circle," along with other key concepts, introduced by Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur and Jürgen Habermas, will be central to the re-interpretative undertaking of the Nadīm and Dunbar poetic texts to re-evaluate their work. Such a task is to be fulfilled to figure out ways of making their verse both comprehensible and meaningful in the world of to-day.

Drawing on critical hermeneutics' key terms, the current study also sets a comparative approach in order to underscore the similarities and differences between Nadīm and Dunbar vis-à-vis their burgeoning understanding of the notion of the 'renaissance' in their own special milieus, and the variegated ways through which belated poets, whether in Egypt or the United States of America, were influenced by them.

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INTRODUCTION

For the purpose of this study, the term 'poetics of precursorship,' has been coined to refer to the impending aesthetic and literary characteristics in the texts produced by those poets who existed, historically, in a precursory position in comparison to other successor or belated poets within a given literary tradition or historical period of time. Contrasted with literary 'belatedness,' an investigation of the potential poetics of precursorship in the work of the so-called predecessor poets aims to map out any aesthetic merit, if any, poetic precursors might acquire with respect to their mere precursory position, historically speaking. An exploration of such poetics of precursorship is not meant to demonstrate the aesthetic/literary superiority of those poets who happened to live before other so-called belated ones. However, it aspires to probe and revisit the textual works of poets in question to come up with critical judgments regarding the literary features characteristic of those poetic precursors in a given historical period.

Nevertheless, some limitations might arise as to the use of the above term. First, 'precursorship,' in itself, is quite an elusive notion in relation to temporal indeterminacy. With an ontological understanding of time as a never-linear entity, it has to be increasingly realised that the notion of precursorship, as far as literary history is concerned, needs identification of the (literary) period in which poets may be categorised as precursors, intermissionary or belated. Thus, the notion of history ceases, purposefully, to be cyclical and starts to be linear; a given literary span of the time may be discerned as an imaginary linear scale upon which predecessive, intermissionary and belated are situated.

The literary period in question is roughly the second half of the nineteenth century in two different geographical spaces: Egypt and the United States of America. Rather surprisingly, such span of time has borne the seeds of two distinct 'renaissances,' which have finally found their culmination in Cairo and Harlem respectively. However, if it is assumed that 'Abd Allāh Nadīm is a precursor in Arabic verse in a historical moment that can be named a 'pre-renaissance' period in modern Egyptian literary and intellectual history, Paul Laurence Dunbar is, likewise, classed as the first authentic African-American poetic voice unwaveringly leading to the *fin de siècle*

Harlem Renaissance. Like Nadīm, Paul Dunbar is a genuine precursor to all his Harlem Renaissance belated poets.

Conversely, both Nadīm and Dunbar are not absolute poetic precursors, so to speak, as far as the Egyptian and Harlem Renaissances are concerned. The poetry of ʻAbd Allāh Nadīm (1845–1896) and Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906) may even more accurately be referred to as intermissionarily precursory. With Nadīm, assuming that the embryonic modern Egyptian renaissance (variably translated into Arabic as *al-Nahḍah*) was born just when the missiles of Napoleon Bonaparte bombarded Cairo as early as in 1798 as a looming consequence of his military campaign to conquer Egypt, it is no mistake to presume that the first real poetic repercussion of such civilisational/cultural clash is represented in the poetic creation of Shaykh Rifāʾah Rāfiʾ al-Ṭahṭāwī (1801-1873), regarded as the initial forefather for a fully and copiously blooming renaissance in the twenties and thirties of the twentieth century. According to this understanding, Nadīm assumes a true intermissionary position between his precursor Rifāʾah al-Ṭahṭāwī and his belated poet Aḥmad Shawqī (1868-1932), who could be looked at as a genuine representative of a culminative point in the modern Egyptian renaissance.

The assumption might even be more difficult with Dunbar. Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784) is the first African-American poet to publish in the history of America. Again, Dunbar seems to stand somewhere on an intermissionary point along the relatively extensive scale separating Wheatley from Langston Hughes (1902-1967). In a sense, Dunbar lived during the interval period that marked the end of the U.S. Civil War (1861–1865) and the commencement of the jovial flourishing of the Harlem Renaissance.

Further, critical hermeneutic reading strategy is the method of choice to be employed in this study to uncover the poetics of precursorship in the verse of both Nadīm and Paul Dunbar. A literary hermeneutic approach suggests that there is a scheme, which makes use of a consolidated and methodological theory of interpretation of texts. In this sense, first propounded by Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher (1768–1834), the term ʻhermeneutic circleʼ means that a part (of a text) cannot be fully understood except in terms of the whole, while in this whole cannot be

understood, in turn, except with the understanding of the parts thereof. Consequently, the process of understanding, and thus, interpretation is a continual, cyclical and 'networked' one, so to speak. According to Schleiermacher, understanding involves sustainable adjustments between the word and the sentence in a given text. Moreover, the text is understood within a broader, 'historical context' (in terms of past authors). Thus, the hermeneutic circle, for the purpose of the current study, involves a three-fold structure: (1) understanding of the part/whole binarism at the level of the individual text itself; (2) the part/whole being understood at the level of a given text within the broader textual oeuvre of an individual author, and (3) the part/whole pair to be approached in terms of an even broader historical context encompassing a given individual author alongside other past authors (of the same historical context).

Brought forward by Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) in *Truth and Method* (1960), the relation between understanding, practice and tradition is examined. His contribution to modern interpretative theory can quite comfortably be described as 'textual hermeneutics.' For a typical textual hermeneut, a text should be 'distanced' from its author; it needs be de-contextualised or cut off from its cultural and historical circumstances. Instead, it is the meaning of a text for a contemporary audience that counts, not what it might have meant for its original audience.

The work of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) encompasses quite a broad range of disciplines such as philosophical anthropology, Freudian psychoanalysis, ethics, theology, phenomenology, hermeneutics and literary theory. Unlike his predecessor Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), Gadamer or even Jürgen Hebermas (1929-), Ricoeur proffers an alternative turn away from ontological hermeneutics. His mission is to propose a more objective approach to literary texts. Ricoeur even initiated a systematic scheme in view of an objective analysis of the text. With the influence of French post-structuralism and Saussurean linguistics, Ricoeur argues that the first stage in hermeneutic understanding could be fulfilled through a structural/semiotic analysis of the text.

The second stage in Ricoeur's critical hermeneutic scheme involves understanding of the text. In this respect, the reading process necessitates, according to Ricoeur, an actualisation of the

world of the text. This suggests a departure from an author–oriented reading to a reader-oriented one. Associated with this is the third and final stage in Ricoeur's scheme, i.e. appropriation. In his most high-ranking book *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language* (1977), Ricoeur states that it is the reader who appropriates the meaning of the text when it is distanced from its author.

In a critical hermeneutic reading of Nadīm's verse, initial emphasis is laid upon the word *udabātī* or *udabātīyah* (in plural form), which refers to a group of itinerant verbal performers who used to present their performances in the less developed rural and urban areas in 19th-century Egypt. Having a variety of usually light verbal performances to offer, such *udabātīs* also produced or made use of *zajal*, a local poetic form, (which may be translated into English as 'prosaic rhymes'). It is to be investigated whether Nadīm's *zajal* few surviving poems could be regarded as a marker in Nadīm's poetics of precursorship. It is also noted that *zajal* disappeared in Nadīm's later poetic work. This could be attributed to the intellectual battle between the cons and pros of using colloquial Arabic in creative writing (given the socio-cultural context in contrast with the contemporary viewpoint in this regard).

In other instances, Nadīm steps away from the above *udabātī* position in the un-canonised history of Arabic literary tradition to join the notable archetypal Arab poets who belong officially to the classical Arabic literary canon. Here, Nadīm does not seem to assume an intermissionary precursory position in the emerging modern Egyptian renaissance, but proves no breaking off from the long and notorious tradition of the typical legacy of the court poet. For example, poems written to elegise Khedive Tawfīq (1852-1892), or congratulate khedive ʿAbbās Ḥilmī Pasha (1874–1944) on the ascension of throne, or eulogise Muḥammad ʿAlī Pasha (1769-1849) and Colonel Aḥmad ʿUrābī (1841-1911), etc., when distanced, open new channels for re-interpretation of those texts vis-à-vis the position of the poet/intellectual during the second half of the 19th century in Egypt, and how that is contextualised within the long tradition of artistic and poetic creativity in the broader Arabo-Islamic culture. The adjustments, if any, underwent by poets, who are ironically regarded as belated in relation to the so-called great bards of Arabic verse in the golden ages of the Islamic civilisation are to be revisited. Elegies, eulogies and other

impersonal poems by Nadīm may be verification, in contemporary eyes, of a dialectical relation between verbal art and its potential and anticipated recipients. Here, the recipients, rather than the initiator of the piece of art, are the ones who decide the value of such art, which might well end up being utterly 'extra-aesthetic.'

No different than his remote poetic ancestors, Nadīm has been tempted to get involved in a type of poetic art which depends upon flaunting of rhetoric formalisms, shedding more light on the nature of the poetic art form of the day as a 'craft' – a reflection of the historical context when such art form was commonplace. The 'crafty' nature of some of Nadīm's standard Arabic poems cannot be detached from the contesting function of the poetic form, latent in the *zajal* contests of the *udabātīs*, given the underlying conditions prior to the fully matured Egyptian *Nahḍah*, some twenty years after Nadīm's death.

It is the direct political/polemical poetry of Nadīm that can be thoroughly attributed to him as an author. A compelling and impertinent supporter of the 'Urabi revolution, Nadīm wrote many 'functional' poems, so to speak, to urge Egyptian revolutionaries to resist an increasing foreign intervention and a swelling internal corruption in Egypt at that time. A hermeneutic reading to reassess such poems aesthetically, if they have any aesthetic value, will highlight one quality in Nadīm's poetic work, i.e. oration-poems. These poems may be perceived as the 'textual' form of the typical audible orations. Moreover, the question is whether or not those oration-poems should be categorised as a remarkable characteristic in the more general poetics of precursorship.

It is also noted that Nadīm seems to be more authentic than ever during his own period of 'disappearance' (1882-1891), when Nadīm had to be on the run from the British and Egyptian authorities. Unlike his predominantly impersonal poems, his poetry during this period underwent a substantial shift towards highly subjective verse. Nadīm's subjectivity finds expression in two major poetic types: wisdom and mystic verse. Unlike the metaphysical poetry in the 17th-century England, Nadīm's wisdom poetry is more or less marked with pseudo-philosophical judgments about his own individual feelings of pain and disillusionment caused by upheavals of time.

However, a hermeneutic reading of this type in Nadīm's verse may locate him among Egypt's timeless folk artists, whose artistic expression might date back to the ancient Egyptian literature.

Mystical verse is the other poetic type created by Nadīm during his flight. Like his quasi-philosophical or stoical poems, Nadīm's mystical verse pulls him down from the pinnacles of the canonical Arabic literature to the bogs of the unofficial, insurgent at times, mystical verse. Impassioned eulogies to the Saint-like personages belonging to the *Ahl al-Bayt* ("the Household of the Prophet Muhammad") provide a good chance for a hermeneutic rendering of the symbolic position of those personages in the Arabo-Islamic culture. Further, such reading is also concerned with the manner by which they are represented in Nadīm's work as well as in the literature of the burgeoning Egyptian *Nahḍah*. Nadīm's stoical and mystical verse will also be revisited to decide whether such verse can be re-read within the context of the modern Egyptian renaissance and the potential that Nadīm's poetry, in this vein, might fall within the contours of the poetics of precursorship that is evident in Nadīm's work once exposed to the critical hermeneutic lens.

Other types of verse are also evident in Nadīm. Descriptive poems, puzzles and satires are strewn here and there within his poetic oeuvre. In descriptive poems, Nadīm seems to move away from his time-honoured literary precursors, who would make elements of nature their favourite objects of description to depict instead the products of science and technology, which is also found in the work of Nadīm's celebrated successors like Aḥmad Shawqī. Evidently, if descriptive poetry could characterise the poetics of precursorship in the modern Egyptian *Nahḍah*; the puzzle poems belong to the classical Arabic literature canon in terms of the form, but to the un-canonised Egyptian folk-like art forms in terms of temperament. Exclusively written during his exile in Istanbul, Nadīm satirical poems were solely targeted against Abū al-Hudā al-Ṣayyādī, one of the Ottoman Sultan's key court men. Such satires placed Nadīm in line with the notorious figures within the classical Arabic satirical literary tradition.

A close reading, using critical hermeneutic methods, aims to re-assess the poetry of the black American poet, novelist, storyteller, and playwright Paul Laurence Dunbar in order to examine his position as a predecessor to the poets in an upcoming Harlem Renaissance. A

validated interpretation of Dunbar's poetry cannot be fulfilled without approaching what is termed as 'minstrel poetry' – a concept referring to this kind of African-American verse that has the same function in the black sensibility as the infamous *fin de siècle* minstrel performances in the United States. If Dunbar is proven a 'minstrel poet,' then the question to be asked should be: what are the common aesthetic/literary characteristics between such minstrel poetic form and the afore-mentioned poetics of precursorship with reference to a pending Harlem Renaissance?

Like any black poet writing in English in America, Dunbar seems to be positioned somewhere within two literary traditions: black writing which more or less starts by the publishing of the first book of verse by Phillis Wheatley, who is considered as the first published black poet in the United States of America, and the canonised English tradition, particularly the poetry of English Romanticism by William Wordsworth, Robert Herrick, and John Keats. Taking minstrel lyricism into account, Dunbar's poetry seems to have traces of less celebrated black precursors such as Eugene Field and James Whitcomb Riley, in addition to the English literary masters ranging from Wordsworth to Keats. Here the question is whether such intermissionary position of Dunbar in both black and English literary traditions will have any meaningful bearings on Dunbar's own precursorship with regard to the Harlem Renaissance.

Dubbed as the 'Poet Laureate of the Negro Race,' Dunbar was the most prominent poet to represent an antebellum tradition in his poetry. Such tradition, known also as the Plantation Tradition, places Dunbar, ironically enough, as a belated poet rather than a competent precursor to the consequent Harlem Renaissance. Dunbar wrote typically of antebellum and plantation themes such as the idyllic portrayal of the American South, the romanticised portrait of the kind-hearted white masters, and the ever merry black slaves, etc. However, Dunbar's relative belatedness to the core plantation poets grants him an ambivalent standing as an intermissionary literary figure among those poets who lived between and within two juxtaposed yet interlinked traditions. Therefore, and unlike the plantation poems, which depict an unrealistically gleeful past, Dunbar's poems such as "Ode to Ethiopia" and others make use of a different point of departure to come up with a moral that suggests that tomorrow can be brighter. Having to appease both black and white audiences, Dunbar sang songs of a black minstrel who seems to be

inflicted by "cultural amnesia," to quote Memmi. At this stage, Dunbar appears to develop a nascent race consciousness concerning black history, but from a minstrel point of view.

Dunbar, who seems to show 'minstrel' race consciousness, embarks on a poetic voyage in search for heroes. Notably, the quality of the heroes searched and depicted by Dunbar seems to mark both the poet's belatedness to an old antebellum tradition, and his precursorship to the prospective Harlem Renaissance. The general tone in Dunbar's is legendising. Figures like the black Samson, who traversed the battlefield in Brandywine, shows signs of heroism as harvester of death, and Robert Gould Shaw who "head[ed] the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, made up entirely of blacks" (Wagner 99) approach the belated model in the plantation tradition, while the mention of figures such as Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington draws him to the precursorship model of the Harlem Renaissance.

It is not unusual to find apostrophes to God in Dunbar's poetic work, ranging from his old and happy plantation poems to the much more race-conscious ones. Yet, Dunbar's manipulation of God in his poetry throughout his literary journey seems to undergo some development. The theme of 'God-as-Solace' appears to exist in poems where the black young farmer, for example, happy as he was, would seek solace and moral refuge in addressing God, while the 'God-as-Sustainer' is shown in these poems representing black men's God-backed heroism. Nevertheless, such faith in God seems, in certain instances, to ebb. Dunbar's more sceptical poems may be drawn, in one hermeneutic reading, to the more urbanised and growingly secularised ambience in Harlem. Alternatively, Dunbar's verse seems to be, in a sense, one of the most authentic voices in the entire black poetic tradition in the United States – at least up to the end of the nineteenth century. Hermeneutically, Dunbar's poetic authenticity may be attributed to his earnest and talented enunciation of the folk/minstrel temperament. Linked with this temperament is Dunbar's lyrics of heartbreak, which found their expression in poems like "Sympathy" and "A Career."

Furthermore, the poetry of both Nadīm and Dunbar showcases that what could be dubbed as 'cosmopolitanly coded messages' has four major factors, which, eventually, aims to work out the more general patterns underlying any literary creation marked by poetics of precursorship.

The first factor in the precursory poetry of Nadīm and Paul Dunbar is the aesthetic verbalisation of the local/national/racial community to which both the poets belong. Using Ricoeur's term 'distanciation,' the question is whether both Nadīm and Dunbar were close to or away from their respective folks' temperament, and whether such standpoint can, in a sense, be classed as poetics of precursorship, from a cosmopolitan point of view.

Second, the poetry of Nadīm and Dunbar will also be re-examined as to such verse's manipulation of culture-bound concepts such as heritage, tradition and history vis-à-vis the poetics of precursorship. However, such terms are not self-referential: both poets made their own definitions as to their position as intermissionary precursors, even belated poets, within their respective literary histories. Relevant to the *ad hoc* definitions and expressions of tradition and history is both Nadīm's and Dunbar's aesthetic search for heroes and inspirational icons. In addition to this, the notion of God is also relevant and functional. A Ricoeurean hermeneutical reading of both Nadīm and Dunbar is to probe the latent symbolism in their poetic works, and how such symbolism can make any sense within the more general cosmopolitan poetics of precursorship.

The third factor in both Nadīm's and Dunbar's cosmopolitanly coded poetic idiom lies in their respective definition and expression of morality. When de-contextualised, the poetic corpus of both Nadīm and Dunbar seems to call for moral values that are naturally compatible with their audiences' general assent. However, Nadīm's and Dunbar's poetic sermons may also have more cosmopolitan bearings to be explored using a critical hermeneutic methodology. Relevant to their 'functional' moral poems, Nadīm and Dunbar were also naturally expected to write anti-imperial and politics-oriented verse. Indifferent to their readerships' expectations, a critical hermeneutic approach to Nadīm and Dunbar's committed poetry should raise questions as to any relations between politics and/or race-oriented poetic expression, and poetics of precursorship relating to the modern Egyptian artistic renaissance and the Harlem Renaissance respectively.

CHAPTER ONE
POETICS OF PRECURSORSHIP:
TOWARDS A CRITICAL HERMENEUTIC COMPARATIVE APPROACH TO LITERATURE

Hermeneutics: An Approach to Literary Studies

Prior to the introduction of hermeneutics into the more methodological studies of literature, hermeneutics originated in religious studies, or more specifically, the study of religious texts. In this basic sense, hermeneutics was initially concerned with finding out well-defined methods for the interpretation of those religious texts in question. In the western tradition, "the term 'hermeneutics'" was etymologically derived "from the Greek verb *hermeneuein*," (which is translated as the verb "to interpret,") to refer to "the science and art of interpreting texts, notably biblical scripture and other classical texts." (Katsumori 90) Equally, in the Islamic tradition, the term '*ta'wīl*,' which is the Arabic rendering of the word 'hermeneutics,' or more simply 'interpretation,' is derived from the root أ و ل which is translated as 'revert,' "as in the case of an interpreter [whose interpretation] of a text would be oriented via reverting to its potential meanings." (Al-Komy 284) It might, it is said, be derived from the Arabic word الإيالة too "which means politics; in this case, interpreting speech means it is appropriated by the interpreter, who renders its meaning properly." (284)

Conversely, the term hermeneutics is also associated with "the Greek god Hermes, messenger of the gods, who is well known for his appreciation of ambiguity and his slippery relationship with 'the truth.'" (Svehla 14) In this respect, Hermes is after all an interpreter in his own right, who was responsible for the transmission of the sacred and obscure 'message of the gods' to humans. Such ambiguity and obscurity of this godly message is represented through "Hermes Trismegistus," who is "[a]nother famous Hermes who lends meaning to the term *hermeneutics*." (14) Hermes Trismegistus, Hermes the thrice-powerful, represents a syncretic combination, which merged "the identity of [the Greek] god Hermes with that of Thoth, the Egyptian god of arcane knowledge and wisdom." (Nabudere 111) Therefore, pusuing the above thesis, a hermeneut is the one responsible for interpreting the essentially ambiguous and esoteric