Ignaty Krachkovsky’s Encounters with Arabic Literary Modernity through Amīn Al-Riḥānī

Rebecca Gould, *University of Iowa*

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In 1910, a thirty-eight year old Russian Arabist by the name of Ignaty Krachkovsky found himself in downtown Beirut waiting for a friend. He had been travelling through the Levant for the past several years, driven by two rather different goals. In the first instance, Krachkovsky was assembling an archive of classical Arabic literature, including especially Arabic manuscripts, which he was to bring back with him to St. Petersburg. Krachkovsky’s second and different goal was to acquaint himself with developments in contemporary Arabic literature. According to Krachkovsky’s own account, he did not fully succeed in this second endeavor. Writing in 1948, Krachkovsky complained that he had “studied modern [Arabic] literature nearly exclusively ‘from a distance’”. Even at that late date, Krachkovsky regarded his journey to the Levant as the formative moment in his intellectual formation. Among the highlights of this journey was his brief encounter with Amīn al-Riḥānī, a leader of the Syro-American school of modern Arabic literature.

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1 Krachkovsky’s journey through the Levant is memorably recounted in the now-classic text of Russian Orientalism, and the only one that has been translated into English: Among Arabic Manuscripts, Trans. Tatiana Minorsky (Leiden: Brill, 1953); original Russian: Nad arabskimi rukopisiami; listki vospominanii o knigakh i liudiakh (Moscow: Izd-vo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1948).
2 Among Arabic Manuscripts, 41.
Although Krachkovsky only exchanged a few words with al-Riḥānī, he was so struck by his manner of speaking and the tragic dignity with which he carried himself, that so set him apart from his contemporaries, that he decided a few years later to produce a volume of translations from his work. This translation appeared in 1917, two weeks before the Revolution that transformed Russia’s internal political structure together with her relations with the rest of the world. Krachkovsky’s translation of Amīn al-Riḥānī’s works did not meet with a universally favorable reception by critics who saw such productive as artifacts of a bygone prerevolutionary era. Luckily, Krachkovsky’s efforts to bring al-Riḥānī’s to the attention of the Russian reading public were recognized by one prominent cultural critic: the Oriental philologist N. Y. Marr, who wrote an article that argued for the relevance of al-Riḥānī’s work (in Krachkovsky’s translation) to Russia’s political upheavals, and by Maxim Gorky who provided Krachkovsky with a publication venue for his translations of al-Riḥānī’s prose poetry in the journal *Vostok (The East)*.

The texts included here, translated into English for the first time, represent two precious testimonies to a literary friendship that crossed borders, countries, and civilizations.\(^3\) It was a friendship conducted more through texts than through oral conversation. But Krachkovsky’s encounter with Arabic literary modernity was no less intense for its having been almost entirely textually mediated. Three years before he died, Krachkovsky quoted with pride from a letter Amīn al-Riḥānī had written to him, thanking him for rendering his vision into Russian. “Among those sons of my country who criticize books and authors,” al-Riḥānī wrote to Krachkovsky, “not even the one endowed with the most refined feeling and the deepest thought has understood

\(^3\) For the best reflection on this archive so far in English, see Mikhail Rodionov, “Leo Tolstoy and Ameen Rihani: The Interaction Between Two Creative Worlds,” in Nathan C. Funk and Betty J. Sitka (eds.), *Ameen Rihani: Bridging East and West: a Pioneering Call for Arab-American Understanding* (Latham, MD: University of America Press, 2004), 72-80.
as you have the essence of nature and her secret images.” Al-Riḥānī thanked Krachkovsky for discerning on the “secret tables” of his writing “what even my nearest intimates have been unable to read.”  Two decades after the receipt of that letter, Krachkovsky remarked that the dried flower al-Riḥānī had enclosed with his correspondence reminded him of the Freyka valley and its resident philosopher.

As the greatest Arabist Russia has ever known, Ignaty Krachkovsky accomplished great things in many different spheres. On most accountings, Krachkovsky’s epistolary friendship with Amīn al-Riḥānī, the pioneer of Arabic literary modernism, constituted only one chapter in a life most profoundly marked by its engagements with classical texts. And, yet, it is hard to resist the suggestion that Krachkovsky’s encounter with Arabic literary modernity in the person of Amīn al-Riḥānī precipitated his more sustained engagements with Ibn al-Muʿtazz, Abūʾl ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī, and other luminaries of classical Arabic literary culture. In Amīn al-Riḥānī, Krachkovsky encountered a writer who had managed to do more than bridge cultures. By enabling East to speak to West and West to speak to East, Amīn al-Riḥānī brought about a conversation between temporalities and traditions as well as cultures. In al-Riḥānī’s works, a classical Arabic past confronts a modernity that is primarily but by no means entirely European.

Just as his encounter with al-Riḥānī led Krachkovsky to conclude that modern Arabic literature “cannot be ignored today by shutting oneself up within the scholarly egoism of classical Arabic studies” in an age and in a scholarly milieu when such a view was as yet controversial, so too did Krachkovsky’s scholarship help al-Riḥānī confront the Arabic classical past that so profoundly inflected his work. One small attestation to this strain of influence is provided by the following detail: on a recent visit to Amīn al-Riḥānī’s library in Freyke, I was

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4 Ignatii Krachkovskii, Among Arabic Manuscripts, 43.
5 Among Arabic Manuscripts, 40.
pleased to discover an original copy of Krachkovsky’s edition of Ibn al-Muqtazz’s *Kitāb al-Badiʾ* (*Book of the New*), a foundational text of Arabic literary theory. Krachkovsky’s edition of *Kitāb al-Badiʾ* and the still largely untranslated writings that followed from it represent a major contribution to our knowledge of Arabic literary theory in the premodern period. Ibn al-Muqtazz’s work had barely been studied, let alone published, before Krachkovsky set his mind to the task. Adding ironies to ironies, Ibn al-Muqtazz’s own text on literary innovation was the founding document in another kind of Arabic modernity, one that preceded the *mahjar* movement by a millennium. Known as *al-muhdath* (“the contingent”) and articulated primarily in the spheres of poetry and literary criticism, this earlier modernist movement, to which Abū Tammām, Abū Nuwās, and al-Buḥturī contributed most actively, transformed the topography of tenth-century ʿAbbāsid literary culture through the introduction of new genres and aesthetics and ultimately new ways of representing the world to medieval Arabic literary culture. Given Amīn al-Riḥānī’s own role as a pioneer in the aesthetic and cultural horizons of the Arabic literature of his era, it is therefore entirely appropriate that Krachkovsky’s landmark edition of Ibn al-Muqtazz’s contribution to Arabic literary modernity should have found a home within his library.

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7 Two volumes of Krachkovsky’s writings on early Arabic literary criticism have been published in Arabic: *Dirasat fi tarīkh al-adab al-ʿArabī: muntakhabat* [no translator given] (Moscow: Dar al-Nashr, 1965) and *ʿIlm al-bādiʾ wa-al-balaghāh ʿinda al-ʿArab*, Trans. Muhammad Hujayrī (Beirut: Dar al-Kalimah lil-Nashr, 1981). Beyond these translations, Krachkovsky’s writings on classical Arabic literary theory are generally unavailable to readers without access to materials in Russian.
8 The ʿAbbāsid *muhdath* movement has yet to be studied with full attention to its conceptual implications for the historiography of modernity, but for now, the best source is Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, *Abū Tammām and The Poetics of the ʿAbbāsid Age* (Leiden: Brill, 1991).
Preface to Ignaty Krachkovsky’s translation of Amin Rihanî: Collected Works (1917)

One clear morning during the Syrian spring of 1910, I was sitting in the small office of my friend Jurji Ātiyya, editor of the Beirut newspaper, The Observer. I was quite attached to this quiet corner in the sparsely populated bazaar surrounding St. Gregory’s Armenian Catholic Cathedral. Whenever I had a moment to spare, I would head for the familiar street and the hospitable office. Coffee would always appear, and a conversation would ensue that was equally engaging for both of us. Frequently we spoke until my friend had to close his office and return to his home on the outskirts of Beirut.

Editing an Arabic newspaper is an enterprise quite unlike editing its European counterpart. Newspapers are generally published once a week in the Arab world and the editor is frequently the primary contributor. In the provinces, he is often the only contributor. Life passes more slowly and peacefully. In Arab society, it would be difficult to find a vantage point better suited for following the day’s events than a local newspaper editorial office. Everyone deems it necessary to stop by: here one may encounter anyone from a Levantine Christian, arriving with a complaint against his elder, to the hegumen [abbot] of a Marionite monastery, engaged in an endless lawsuit with the neighboring Orthodox monastery. In their causes as in their solutions, such lawsuits recall Gogol’s account of the fight between Ivan Ivanovich and Ivan Nikoforovich. Here one will find an emigrant, just returned from America, hurriedly catching up on the news of his native land. Most frequently of all, one will encounter his brother: a critic and a poet.

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10 Amin Rihanî, Izbranniye Proizvedeniiia (Petrograd: Ogni, 1917); reprinted in Ignati Krachkovskii, Izbrannoje sochineniia, ed. V. A. Gordlevskii (Moscow: Izd-vo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1955-1960), 3: 137-145. All footnotes included here are my own and are not found in the original.

11 Jurji [Shahin] Ātiyya: Translator into Arabic of François Fénelon’s Telemaque (1699), under the title Kitāb waqai’ Tilimak (Beirut: al-Matba’ah al-Lubnaniyah, 1885).

Nor was the editorial office empty on this particular day. A stranger entered, one of the editor’s many friends. His exterior was peculiar. In place of a traditional fez, he was wearing a fedora, which marked him as someone who had spent a long time in the West. His inexpressive face radiated a restraint and concentration quite extraordinary for a friendly Arab, for whom facial expressions typically substitute for gesticulations. Traces of suffering seeped through his graying eyes. At first glance, I attributed this expression to a chronic illness; his left hand remained motionless and seemed paralyzed.

When he noticed me, a foreigner, the visitor began, out of customary Arab politeness, to speak in English. I promptly translated his conversation back into Arabic. This was a common conversational strategy I relied on to alleviate the awkwardness of first encounters. Our conversation was animated by the pressing events of the moment: these were the years of the Turkish constitution, the shocks of revolution and counter-revolution, the years of hope and bitter disappointment, when the Arabs had begun to realize that they could expect no assistance from the Young Turks.

I had encountered such ruminations frequently at meetings and during animated conversations. Much had already been written on this topic in local newspapers, but the conversation of this particular guest captured my attention no less than his extraordinary appearance. His speech was saturated with reflexivity, and his thoughts did not simply glide along the surface, as with the majority of Arab orators. I was especially struck by the absence of passion in his speaking style. In contradistinction to the common view, he blamed not the government alone, but the people, and especially the intelligentsia. “Those who have been corrupt for decades could not purify themselves after a few years of reforms from above,” the stranger said. “Of course, we will never live to see any noticeable improvements.”
My interlocutor’s face became distorted by an intense pain, as he added: “The saddest thing of all is that even my own people do not understand the person who travels without a label and who belongs to no party.” Then he smiled and concluded: “The only thing that saves me is a saying: “Say your word and leave.” A certain aspect in this final parting phrase struck me as familiar, but I still didn’t decipher the guest’s last name. Only when he left and I asked my host for the guest’s identity, did I discover who it was. “Amīn,” my friend said laconically, assuming that I knew all his friends by their first names. “Which Amīn?” I asked. “Amīn Riḥānī,” he replied.

Al-Riḥānī! Of course, this name was well known to me. In the last two years, I had frequently encountered it in Syrian newspapers. It was especially well known to me from the polemics in the Beirut press that were circulating around this name. I closely followed these debates. Both sides demonstrated quite a bit of expansiveness and a tendency towards exaggeration. I smiled mildly as I read an article that day wherein al-Riḥānī spoke grandly of the “Fereyk Valley’s philosophy.” The following day, a clerical party headed by a Jesuit spokesman highly suspicious of any signs of freethinking and disrespect to those in power, cursed al-Riḥānī as someone who represented “the detritus of the rotting West”. The polemic was not complete until al-Riḥānī was labeled a freemason, after the school of thought that had lately become as popular in the East as Voltairean tendencies had once dominated early nineteenth-century Russia.

I wished to get to the bottom of these polemics, especially after my conversation with al-Riḥānī, so I decided to read all of his work. Fate was kind to me: two of al-Riḥānī’s books had

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13 Krachkovsky is alluding here to Al-Rihani’s literary motto: “qol kalimatak wʾamshi,” with which he was associated after the publication of al-Rihaniyyat (1910). Al-Rihani himself drew attention to the significance of this phrase and translated it into English in an unpublished letter to Howard Bliss, President of the American University of Beirut, dating from 1912. “Say thy say and go thy way,” al-Rihani wrote, “has always been a principle”. I am exceedingly grateful to al-Rihani’s nephew, Dr. Ameen Albert Rihani (Notre Dame University, Lebanon), for sharing his erudition on this matter and for providing the text of al-Rihani’s English letter cited here.
just been published in the summer of 1910, and they included nearly everything he had published up to that point. Our meeting in Beirut was unfortunately our only one. In March 1910, I left Beirut and in the summer I returned to Russia. I learned from the newspapers that al-Riḥānī had left Beirut at almost exactly the same time for a sanatorium in Switzerland famous for healing nervous diseases with its waters. A year or two later, al-Riḥānī returned to England, and from there to America.

II.

Al-Riḥānī concludes one of his articles with the following words: “My soul is in the Levant. My heart is in Paris. My body is in New York.” Truly, al-Riḥānī was a child of two worlds: America and the Levant. As a young child, he abandoned the Levant for North America. Unlike the majority of immigrants, he did not occupy himself with “business,”14 and instead led the free existence of a literary Bohemian. He worked in American newspapers, appeared on the American stage, and had the opportunity to become closely acquainted with all dimensions of Yankee life. His first literary works were published in English. He only delivered his first speech in Arabic in 1901, at the request of a society of Arab immigrants.

“Religious Tolerance,” the title of al-Riḥānī’s first Arabic-language talk, indicates the direction in which his thought was headed even at that time. Ethics and self-realization concerned him as much as the social issues and more than the political issues that occupied center stage for so many Arab writers and for almost all of their readers. In keeping with his reflexive relation to reality, al-Riḥānī exposed the falsity that lay at the foundations of European civilization. He soon noticed the sharp dissonance between this falsity and the exalted form in which this so-called civilization was presented to the outside world.

14 “Business” appears in English in the Russian text.
One still senses al-Riḥānī’s admiration for European culture in the article “Brooklyn Bridge”. In later articles, al-Riḥānī mercilessly exposed the contradictions in the life of this country, said to have been the birthplace of freedom. Eventually, Al-Riḥānī’s nervous system could not endure such proximity to these ulcers. Al-Riḥānī “escaped” to his homeland and passed there several years as a hermit in the most literal sense. From this period onwards, al-Riḥānī’s works address the new theme of return to one’s homeland. During this period, he composed some of his best works: “Loneliness,” “Homeward Bound,” and a series of prose poems.

Al-Riḥānī was a reflexive person whose soul inclined more towards poetry than action. He could have persisted in his solitary existence if history had not intervened and called on him a second time to return to the social sphere. The 1908 revolution served as an external stimulus for this event. Al-Riḥānī became one of the most popular orators. He gave speeches at almost every political meeting in Beirut and in the Syrian provinces, and wrote articles for many newspapers. The upshot of this activity was the same as in America. Political life was alien to al-Riḥānī; he could not guide himself well in its midst. Whereas in his private life he advocated a return to nature, in his social life he relied on the following slogan: “The improvement of the self improves society, and the improvement of society improves the rulers.” Such slogans were inadequate to the exigencies of the contemporary moment.

If we add the sharp polemics that circulated around al-Riḥānī, the incomprehension of his enemies and the frequent suspicion of his friends, then it is unsurprising that al-Riḥānī’s brief hopes culminated in rapid disillusionment concerning the possibility of setting his homeland on the right path. Al-Riḥānī’s speech, “Near Freedom,” is punctured by a warning addressed to

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15 The Young Turk Revolution of 1908 inaugurated the Second Constitutional Era (İkinci Meşrutiyet Devri) in Turkish history.
erring leaders who perceive the salvation of everything in external reforms in imitation of the West. In his article, “A Man of the Nation,” these concerns merge with a call for a unique form of dictatorship. This in itself reveals the despair that had overtaken al-Riḥānī’s soul. As if the author wished to propose it as a fitting conclusion to this stage in his literary life, “A Man of the Nation” is the very last article in al-Riḥānī’s collected works.

Al-Riḥānī continued to write after 1910, expressing himself primarily through short articles and brief sketches. During this interval he returned to the English language. In 1911, The Book of Khalid was published. This was a half-novel and half-poem, concerned with the internal questions of spiritual being and the concept of self-perfection. The world war found al-Riḥānī again in America. In 1916, he dedicated himself in word and deed to the unhappy Levantines, who were literally dying from hunger and from the unbearable conditions that the Turkish government had inflicted on them.

In the literatures of European, a writer such as al-Riḥānī might not have acquired such a large degree of fame. For New Arabic literature, which has only existed for a century, al-Riḥānī represents a watershed. In the history of this literature, al-Riḥānī’s name will always be connected with certain tendencies. Al-Riḥānī expanded the frames of contemporary Arabic literature beyond its normal boundaries. Under his guidance, this literature encompassed questions of world import, including the unification of two seemingly opposed civilizations: East and West. Al-Riḥānī’s endeavor was of course unsuccessful, but such a feat is not within the power of any individual.

It is precisely the ambiguity and duality of al-Riḥānī’s literary persona that makes it at times difficult for the contemporary Arab public to comprehend him. The Arab reading public is accustomed to a greater degree of certainty and to more direction than al-Riḥānī is willing to
provide. Arab critics seem to have forgotten that the West that animates al-Rihānī’s work already has a living and organic place in Arabic literature. Al-Rihānī’s contribution is to have replaced the uncritical imitation of the West that was already active in Arabic literature by a critical relationship to it.

External events always played a major role in the development of nineteenth century Arabic literature. Periodization according to years or events is a dangerous business, but two events must always be taken into account in any genealogy for Arabic literature. The first is Napoleon’s expedition to Egypt at the end of the eighteenth century. The second is the intensified missionary activity in Syria at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Both events secured for Egypt and Syria the roles in the development of New Arabic literature that they have preserved to this day.

For Egypt, the decisive stamp of this event is reflected in its imitation of French mores, which only ceded in the 1880s to English customs. In the Levant, Italian influence briefly replaced the French and English influence that had reigned to equal degrees until 1914. In school and in life the same worldview was maintained. Sometimes this even went to the extreme of incomprehension of foreign ideas and theories. When a Darwinist like Shiblī Shumayylī, he had to be more orthodox than Darwin to the end of his days. Tolstoy’s translator Saḥīm Qubain dreamed of living in a Tolstoyan colony. Qāsim Amīn, the “liberator of women,” believed that


17 Saḥīm Qubain: editor of al-Ikha’a (Fraternity) and translator of, among other works, Tolstoy’s Kreutzer Sonata, the play The Power of Darkness, and a volume entitled Teachings of the Prophet Muhammad on the Matter of Islam and Europe (Hikam al-nabi Muḥammad wa-shay’an al-Islam wa-Urubba (Cairo: Matba’at al-Taqaddum, 1912). Interestingly, given Krachkovsky’s allusion to Qāsim Amīn (n. 8), Qubain also translated from Russian a document on the rights of women on the “rights of women in Islam” by Ahmet Agaoglu, Huquq al-marāʾa fi al-Islam (Cairo: Matba’at al-Jumhur, 1905).
the degraded position of women was the sole cause for the East’s decline, so he fought for their liberation without making any concessions for the entirety of his life.\textsuperscript{18}

The rebirth of New Arabic literature after the 1850s is connected with the emigration, first and foremost, of Arab writers from neighboring countries to Egypt and Syria. The newfound freedom from censorship helped the literary imagination flourish and stimulated a journalistic movement that has not lost its power to this day. The emigration to Europe was more sporadic and occasional and does not bear comparison with the Egyptian emigration, although it too was driven by interesting and significant people. It will suffice to invoke only one name among the young Arabs: Rizqallāha Hassūna, who wandered as far as Russia in the 1870s. The first translator of Krylov into Arabic, Hassūna concluded his tempestuous existence in London, battling the Turkish government, only to be poisoned by an emissary of the Turkish pādishāh.

It is difficult at present to assess the significance of the American emigration for New Arabic literature. A special literary school developed there, equally important for its linguistic as for its thematic accomplishments. In America, the diaspora composed satirical and humorous literature in the local dialects, whereas even today composition in the vernacular is a rare occurrence in Egyptian literature. The father and son duo, Asad and Mikhail Rustum, and especially Shukrī Khūrī, who emigrated to Brazil, composed striking and original works in the Americas.\textsuperscript{19} Khūrī in particular has produced sui generis books that employ an animated, dialogical form to depict the unpretentious lives and customs of the Levantine peasants and the chaos that they bring to their new American milieu. Although simple in form, the author at times

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Qāsim Amīn (1863-1908), author of \textit{Tahrir al maraḍa}, translated into English as \textit{The Liberation of Women: A Document in the History of Egyptian Feminism}, Trans. S. S. Peterson (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1993).
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Krachkovsky appears mistaken here, as Mikhail Asad Rustum is one person. For a partial translation of his travelogue into English, see “A Stranger in the West: The Trip of Mikhail Asad Rustum to America (1885-1895),” in Kamal Abdel Malik (ed.), \textit{America in an Arab Mirror: Images of America in Arabic Travel Literature} (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 3-8. Shukrī Khūrī (b. 1871): writer known for his use of dialectical Arabic. Emigrated to Brazil in 1896, and two decades later founded in São Paulo the journal \textit{The Pyramid}.
\end{itemize}
attains to a level of great drama by inducing bitter laughter. American life has so profoundly penetrated the worldview of the Arab-American diaspora, as the example of Khalil Jibran, a poet kindred in spirit to al-Riḥānī and outspoken against the artificiality of European and American life, demonstrates.

Al-Riḥānī successfully penetrated into the core of American life, but it would be a mistake to consider him a child of the West. He is an Arab. Moreover, he is Syrian. Even more to the point, he is from the Levant. Al-Riḥānī’s homeland, the Levant, occupies the very center of his attention and dreams. Other Arab countries are encountered only rarely in his work. When they do appear, they are portrayed as vaguely as if they were India and China. No matter where al-Riḥānī happens to be, his dreams are in the Levant. His heart is in the Levant. This is why it is so easy for him to create the atmosphere of the Levant in one stroke, as he does with everything that is near and dear to him. As in real life, the Levant in al-Riḥānī’s work is the scene of endless religious conflicts, of forcefully depicted petty clerks, who calmly “procure” the passing hours, and importunate Arab ceremonies, unforgettable even in these difficult years. These lines leave deep wounds, and come to acquire a tragic, almost Biblical, pathos in texts like “Beirut,” where the Arabic language resonates so powerfully.

Al-Riḥānī passionately loves nature. I know of no other Arab writer who possesses such a powerfully developed appreciation of nature. At times, this appreciation goes as far as pantheism. It is peculiar that the Arabs, a people so physically proximate to nature, display a weakly developed appreciation for nature in their literature. In ancient poetry, the surrounding world is sometimes described in great detail. Sometimes it is almost photographically reproduced. Nature however is always absent from this picture. Even the psychological
parallelism common to the indigenous poetry that nearly every people possesses is barely known to the Arabs.

Even less fruitful [than a search for passionate depictions of nature] would it be a search for elaborate landscapes in this literature, but it should not be forgotten that landscapes are quite a late phenomenon in European poetry as well. In any case, this peculiarity of Arabic literature characterizes Arabic writers to this day. In the prose of one major contemporary novelist, Jurji Zaydan, no more than a few lines are ever devoted to descriptions of nature. Such descriptions merely enable the reader to imagine what is going on outside the arena of action. In the context of such writings, al-Riḥānī’s achievement in terms of portraying nature seems even more impressive. All al-Riḥānī’s works are infused with sensitivity to nature. Even in a work such as “Brooklyn Bridge,” the author wearily manages to capture the natural atmosphere. Poetry and nature are indivisible for al-Riḥānī (see for example “Ibn Sahl”). Sometimes nature summons dark colors from his palette; sometimes it inspires awe (as in “The Black Shroud”). Al-Riḥānī’s passion for nature is especially evident when his protagonist seeks protection from mother nature, hoping for strength to continue living. Al-Riḥānī’s best works, his prose poems, emerge from such moments, imparting a unique formal charm difficult to transpose onto another language.

III.

I do not aim here to describe the totality of al-Riḥānī’s work in all of its fullness and therefore do not linger over all of its aspects. Even less do I wish to enter into a polemic with the author or an appraisal of his views, or to correct the factual imprecisions in his articles (including those which touch on Russia). My aim is rather to aid those interested in this translation, and

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wishing to learn of al-Riḥānī’s position in contemporary Arabic literature. With this goal in mind, I will conclude with a few remarks concerning the form of al-Riḥānī’s writings.

The majority of al-Riḥānī’s works that have been published in book form are in English. The vast majority of his Arabic writings, aside from a few dramatic works, are comprised of speeches and articles that are difficult to distinguish from each other formally. There are about fifty of these speeches and articles in total. The majority were published in the two 1910 collections already mentioned. Approximately one-sixth of these now appear for the first time in Russian translation. Al-Riḥānī’s Seeds for the Sowers (Būthr Liz-Zārīn)\(^{21}\) is included among these articles. Seeds for the Sowers consists of aphorisms of varying degrees of importance that at times served as the sources for future articles, at other times simply as repositories for fleeting impressions. There is an analogous collection in modern Arabic literature, entitled Sayings of Qāsim Amīn—the aphorisms of the famous advocate for the freedom of Muslim women, published after his death. Whereas al-Riḥānī has memorably articulated the personality of a writer, Qāsim Amīn’s sayings powerfully captures the flow of life. For this reason Qāsim Amīn’s sayings possess greater interest for the Arab reading public than al-Riḥānī aphorisms.

Al-Riḥānī however introduces an entirely new dimension into Arabic literature with his Prose Poems. Although it may seem strange, as a literary form, the prose poem is entirely unknown to Arabic literature. The explanation for this fact is to be found not only in the rules pertaining to the development of Arabic poetry and to its formal conservatism, but also in the language itself, and to the patterns through which thought is processed, wherein comprehension is profoundly linked to meter. Al-Riḥānī has chosen Walt Whitman for his literary model.

Russian readers will be better able to appreciate this comparison if we reference the first edition of Turgenev’s *Senilia*.22

Al-Riḥānī may also have drawn on the most important source for classical Arabic prose poetry: the Qur’an. The Qur’an has undoubtedly influenced al-Riḥānī, although there is no formal convergence in terms of specific chapters. Formally, al-Riḥānī’s prose poems resist translation. They are more or less divided into shorter and longer stanzas composed in fixed and varying meters. In each stanza different lines share a common rhythm, but this rhythm is not maintained for the entirety of the stanza and is never repeated in the next one. Several of the poems have a refrain, repeated with minor alterations after each stanza. Given such formal constraints, my translations of al-Riḥānī’s prose poems merely transfer the sequence of thoughts in the original text.

Al-Riḥānī is not renowned for his language among Arabic critics. He is reproached for grammatical inaccuracies, and, even more seriously, for subjugating his Arabic style to European speech patterns. It cannot be denied that al-Riḥānī’s style at times produces an impression of a straight translation from a foreign language. Evidently, al-Riḥānī does not think in Arabic. Nor should we expect anything different from an author who composed his first works in English. Al-Riḥānī’s style has however visibly improved over the course of his career as an Arabic-language writer. He takes great care with his language, especially in his latest articles. Arab critics of the old school measure al-Riḥānī’s writings according to the standards of classical Arabic. Al-Riḥānī’s every divergence from this norm is stigmatized as a grammatical error, even if his lexical innovations are entirely consistent with the Arabic language’s organic development.

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One of these old-school critics tabulated one hundred and one mistakes in a novel by Jurji Zaydan, a writer who can never be reproached with excessive attraction to foreign speech patterns. It would not be difficult to tabulate one thousand and one errors in al-Riḥānī’s work, although such mistakes do not prevent either writer from being major representatives of New Arabic literature. The Arabic language is neither so impoverished nor so weak that new literary registers can ever exhaust it, nor do random distortions pose any danger to the language’s integrity.

Notwithstanding its inaccuracies, al-Riḥānī’s Arabic contains many virtues. It is simple and transparent to the highest degree. Al-Riḥānī’s phrases follow easily one after the other, instead of accumulating excess weight, as often occurs in literary languages such as Arabic, with highly developed systems for pronominal suffixes. Al-Riḥānī’s speeches in particular leave a powerful impression when compared to the analogous extemporizations of contemporary Arabic orators. Al-Riḥānī has completely freed his speech from the ballast of rhymes and rarefied expressions occurring only in dictionaries that adorn the speeches of the most reputable orators today. The only exception to al-Riḥānī’s austere aesthetic was stimulated by a letter from Sidon inviting him to deliver a speech “the like of which had never before divided the curtains of hearing, and which had never before been uttered at any gathering”. The letter was comprised of the empty, flattering phrases that were standard within his literary circle. In response, al-Riḥānī parodied the language of the invitation for two pages in a lexicon saturated with rhythms and rare words. Anyone familiar with Arabic would be unable to read this speech without smiling.

It is difficult to assess any writer on the basis of a translation. This difficulty is intensified when the writer in question represents a literature completely unknown to the average [Russian] reader. I aimed in this introduction to account for al-Riḥānī’s significance within this literature,
and my conclusion is simple. Every educated person wishes to become acquainted with their distant relatives. If the reader concludes that my deduction is erroneous, that the fish doesn’t merit the sauce, that this translator’s words reflect a specialist’s passion for his subject, my consolation will be what al-Riḥānī taught me: “Say your word and leave!”

Preface to Ignaty Krachkovsky’s Translation of Amīn Riḥānī: Prose Poems (1922)\(^\text{23}\)

Amīn Riḥānī’s name is suffused with the aroma of the valleys of the Levant. The most aromatic plant is the basil that the Arabs call rayhan, from which Amin received his genesis and genealogy. This aromatic name harmonizes with the memory of al-Freyka, Amīn’s Syrian homeland. How strange it is to see Al-Riḥānī’s name at the end of an article in a New York newspaper. It is even stranger to decipher his last name inscribed in block letters on a placard organizing a political meeting in Beirut.

These strange compositions reflect the entire scope of New Arabic literature. This literature has been nurtured on the wars and upheavals of Syria and Egypt. Gambling on the stock market and speculation on commodities has not stunted its growth on the plains of the Nile. The leaders and creators of this new literary movement witnessed Manchester’s industrial slums and New York’s skyscrapers. Europeans and Americans surfeited on their progress had no time to gaze on the new arrivals from the East, especially on these Levantines whom they pointed to as arguments in favor of a ban on new emigrants.

The Europeans and Americans hardly suspected that these petty tradesmen were often deeply reflective people whose perceptions penetrated to the very core of the new civilization. The émigré Levantines were searching for what humans most require: a response to spiritual

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questions. Frequently they gained nothing from their experiences abroad other than profound disenchantment and severe judgment by others.

Fate had been unkind to Amīn al-Riḥānī as well. After Syria, Paris, London, and then Beirut, during the years of hope following the Turkish revolution of 1908-9, then England and America, but already with broken dreams, finally, like a long, nightmarish finale, a world war tore apart his native country and turned her into a martyr. Al-Riḥānī engaged in journalism, political speeches, and theatrical performances, but he was unable to derive from any of these activities peace for his soul. The temperament of a fighter and politician was alien to him. All his efforts at political intervention ended in disillusionment and instigated arguments, compelling him to run from human society into nature. Al-Riḥānī’s *Prose Poems* brilliantly chronicle these searches and register this bitterness. In this work is found “The Rosary,” his best autobiography, which documents the peregrinations and deep tragedies of a long-suffering soul.

Militant notes are frequently heard in al-Riḥānī’s oeuvre. The poet sings the revolution. He calls for a brotherhood of people. Nonetheless, these grandiose registers are not his typical tone. In one of his works on nature, al-Riḥānī describes an “honest chamomile plant” that lives beneath the tenuous protection of two stones on a crossroads, blossoming and radiating its scent, concealed from horse hooves and the shoes of passers-by. It strikes me that this image reflects on the author as well: in the chaos of American life, in the midst of his homeland’s travesties, al-Riḥānī managed to preserve the Levantine aroma he conveyed as we pass hurriedly along life’s path. We Europeans frequently speak of how we have penetrated all the unknown corners of the earth, even as the souls of our nearest neighbors remain as incomprehensible to us as before. So that this stalemate can be transformed, the weary passer-by is advised to reexamine the honest chamomile growing on his path.