

# Modern Literary Theory Applied to Classical Arabic Texts

## Ḥadīth Revisited\*

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After a dynamic process of development shaped by considerable shifts in priorities since antiquity, modern Western literary theory has established a number of theoretical findings, which seem to be – due to their universal approach – important for understanding classical Arabic literature as well. One may outline them as follows:

1. In the field which is described by the antipodes ‘experience’ (as the primary level of mental reflection) and ‘knowledge’ (as the more sophisticated level), historiographical writing represents a kind of narrative zero stage between the two extremes. It tends, however, to become knowledge as it rids itself more and more of the subjective.<sup>1</sup> Taking this into account, and given the narrative disposition, which the majority of historiographical works have in common with texts that are generally referred to as ‘fine’ or ‘high literature’ (*belles-lettres*), historiographical accounts can be classified as ‘non-fictional,’ though retaining ‘narrative’ forms of scholarly expression.<sup>2</sup>
2. The narrative potential inherent in a text can be determined by certain categories such as (a) the ‘narrative situation,’ which essentially constitutes the so-called ‘character of being’ of narration, (b) the ‘perspective of narration’ (internal perspective referring to the narrator as being present in the plot or even co-acting in it; external perspective referring to the narrator as not being part of the plot), and (c) the ‘grammatical form’ (narration in first, second and third person form).<sup>3</sup>

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\* This contribution presents, in a concise manner, the basic ideas of a larger study. For examples of *ḥadīth* and more detailed theoretical premises, see my article *Fictional Narration and Imagination within an Authoritative Framework. Towards a New Understanding of Ḥadīth*, in: S. Leder (Ed., 1998): *Story-Telling in the Framework of Non-Fictional Arabic Literature* (Wiesbaden), pp. 433-471.

1 See also Stierle, Karlheinz (1979): *Erfahrung und narrative Form. Bemerkungen zu ihrem Zusammenhang in Fiktion und Historiographie*, in: J. Kocka/Th. Nipperdey (Ed.): *Theorie und Erzählung in der Geschichte* (München), pp. 85-118.

2 Nünning, Ansgar (1994): *Von historischer Fiktion zu historiographischer Metapher. I: Theorie, Typologie und Poetik des historischen Romans* (Trier), p. 155. – Harth, Dietrich (1990): *Historik und Poetik. Plädoyer für ein gespanntes Verhältnis*, in: H. Egger/U. Profitlich/K. R. Scherpe (Eds.): *Geschichte als Literatur. Formen und Grenzen der Repräsentation von Vergangenheit* (Stuttgart), pp. 13-28. – Carr, David (1986): *Time, Narrative and History*, in: J. M. Edie (Ed.), *Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy* (Bloomington), pp. 46-57, 119-121. – Grossmann, Lionel (1978): *History and Literature. Reproduction or Signification*, in: R. H. Carary/H. Kozicki: *The Writing of History. Literary Form and Historical Understanding* (Wisconsin), pp. 3-39. – Heitmann, Klaus (1970): *Das Verhältnis von Dichtung und Geschichtsschreibung in der älteren Theorie*. In: *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, 52, pp. 244-279.

3 Jahn, Manfred (1995): *Narratologie: Methoden und Modelle der Erzähltheorie*, in: A. Nünning: *Literaturwissenschaftliche Theorien, Modelle und Methoden. Eine Einführung* (Trier), pp. 30-31, 38-39. – Toolan, Michael J. (1994): *Narrative. A Critical Linguistic Introduction* (London, New York; Repr. 1988<sup>1</sup>). – Stanzel, Franz K. (1989<sup>4</sup>): *Theorie des Erzählens* (Göttingen, 1979<sup>1</sup>), p. 72. – Effe, Bernd

3. In the face of changing philosophical premises, literary theory has freed itself of the charge of mendacity raised since Plato against fictional literature. Thus, the so-called aspect of ‘truth’ or ‘genuineness’ of recounting or ‘portraying’ an event is regarded as an unsuitable criterion of distinction between ‘narratives’ and those ‘texts that merely record facts.’ This is due to the fact that reports do not automatically conform to reality: a report may be true, untrue or intentionally untrue. When it is intentionally untrue, the report should then be labeled as ‘fictitious’ or ‘fictitiously interspersed.’ Without this distinction, a text could only be described as ‘narrative’ if it has renounced its inherent claim to authenticity. In other words, a text could only be described as ‘narrative’ if it has disclaimed the implicit presumption that everything stated therein is based on reality.

As a result, *what* is being described in a text (i.e., its content) does not play the decisive role in its narratological assessment. Rather, texts can be categorized more adequately according to their ‘mode of statement’ (recording vs. narrating) and their ‘character of portrayal’ (non-fictional narrative vs. fictional narrative).<sup>4</sup> In principle, this categorization implies acknowledgment of the possibility of a high degree of truth in all kinds and genres of narratives.

4. Further, fictional narratives have been established as being modifications of ‘experience,’ which, in their purest form, come to fruition here.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in the case of fictional narratives, the character of portrayal is predominantly shaped by including *certain elements* in a text and *arranging* them by using the freedom of ‘creative’ sovereignty. This means that an author (or, in more general terms: a creator of a text) ‘selects’ *what* is to be narrated, and decides *how* the material is to be recounted. This insight is significant because fictional narratives may also absorb elements of real life as settings, and these narratives may even regularly use authentic material. Hence, *factual* narrative vs. *fictional* narrative, the *practical* literature vs. the *imaginative* literature, forms of *knowledge* vs. forms of *experience* describe the broad spectrum of possibilities of narration.<sup>6</sup> In other words, in texts classified as ‘fictional,’ the primary focus is not on criteria such as genuineness vs. fabrication, truth vs. falsification, history vs. fantasy, or fact vs. fiction, but on the character of portrayal. A paradigm of so-called ‘signals of

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(1975): *Entstehung und Funktion ‘personaler’ Erzählweise in der Erzählliteratur der Antike*. In: *Poetica*, 7, pp. 135-157.

4 Genette, Gérard (1990): *Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative*. In: *Poetics Today*, (Tel Aviv), 11/4, pp. 755-774.

5 Within the framework of this article, *fiction* will be used only here, as it seems that some scholars understand the term not only as a category in contrast but in opposition to *history*; cf. Berthoff, Warner (1970): *Fiction, History, Myth: Notes Towards the Discrimination of Narrative Forms*, in: M. W. Bloomfield: *The Interpretation of Narrative. Theory and Practice* (Harvard), pp. 263-287, esp. p. 271.

6 Iser, Wolfgang (1991): *Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre* (Frankfurt a.M), pp. 18-23. – Harth (1990), pp. 13-28.

fictionality,' i.e., of contextual-pragmatic and textual (linguistic and stylistic) order, serves to indicate and determine the fictionality of a given text.<sup>7</sup>

This spectrum of alternative criteria provides powerful tools which are instrumental for a complex analysis of narrative texts. A traditional and rather formal pattern, however, would only focus on one aspect of a text's manifold characteristics, namely its content; it would not provide valid evidence of its potential narrativity nor its fictionality.

The lively theoretical discussions of the last few years on the question of 'fiction' vs. 'non-fiction' in Western literatures, and the more sophisticated methods put to use, cause one to reflect upon these theory-orientated models in the context of Ḥadīth. However, a similar approach towards Ḥadīth (i.e., first, to understand *ḥadīths* as what they are – namely texts, and second, to deal with them in a way traditionally done only in studies of [fictional] 'literature') is, as one can imagine, somewhat problematic. One may recall that Ḥadīth is that branch of medieval Arabic writing with the highest religious and authoritative claim in Islam, second only to the Qur'ān itself. The textual corpus of Ḥadīth preserves, according to Muslim understanding, everything the Arab Prophet Muḥammad has said, done or condoned, as well as statements made by his closest companions.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Ḥadīth claims to give *true reports* on *real* events or interesting episodes of the early Islamic period, and as such has distinct *historiographical* traits.

It will become clear, however, that a narratological analysis of Ḥadīth, based upon a solid theoretical ground, by no means restricts its importance as a source of literary, intellectual, sociological, or other aspects of research with a rather broad cultural background. On the contrary, a narratological analysis contributes to our knowledge of the history and nature of this important branch of classical Arabic literature. It also promotes the detection of some of its, thus far unrecognized, characteristics. If the focus of such an investigation were broader and both the anticipated narrative character and the peculiarities of its, in part, fictional nature were reflected, research on Ḥadīth would be even more effective as a tool for discerning historical truth contained in the large number of *ḥadīth* texts. In such an analysis of its complex nature, Ḥadīth constitutes not only an enjoyable or instructive *story*, but can vivify *history* itself.<sup>9</sup>

For this purpose, a number of *ḥadīth* examples differing in set-up, structure, and content, were drawn from canonical and semi-canonical Ḥadīth compendia (*al-kutub al-tis'ah*). These selected texts may be regarded as representative of a special, extensive group of texts that comprises somewhat longer passages (several lines to one page or more) of an historiographical rather than juridical character, and which reflect Muslim

7 Hoops, Wilef (1979): *Fiktionalität als pragmatische Kategorie*. In: *Poetica*, 11, pp. 281-317. – Fügler, Wilhelm (1972): *Zur Tiefenstruktur des Narrativen*. In: *Poetica*, 6, pp. 268-292.

8 See furthermore J. Robson: Art. 'Ḥadīth,' in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam*<sup>2</sup> III, pp. 23-28.

9 See also Nünning (1994), pp. 153-205. – Carr (1986), pp. 100-121. – Schiffels, Walter (1975): *Geschichte(n) Erzählen. Über Geschichte, Funktionen und Formen historischen Erzählens*, in: H. Kreuzer (Ed.): *Theorie - Kritik - Geschichte* VII (Kroneberg), esp. p. 67.

life in its diversity. An in-depth analysis of the *ḥadīth* texts evinces some surprising results, which are given below in summary fashion:

As to the general mode of statement, these *ḥadīth* texts are clearly ‘narratives;’ they demonstrably do *not* merely record facts nor do they simply report them. Furthermore, the first (or original) *muḥaddith*-narrator is always obvious in all of these *ḥadīth*-texts and is either directly present or, at least, indirectly involved in narrating the events.<sup>10</sup> Sometimes he/she is even part of the plot, narrating the story from an internal position. This means that the narrator gives the basic story of the *ḥadīth* its original shape. This evaluation essentially differs from results gained by studies in established ‘historical narratives’ (*akhbār*). In the latter, a) “the narrator is absent from narration and does not serve as a focus for the reader’s perception,”<sup>11</sup> and b) the text tends “towards a maximum of information and a minimum of informer” (factual narration).<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, various ‘fictional elements’ are detectable: (1) These *ḥadīths* reflect the sociocultural world in which they arose and developed and which is to be taken for granted by the audience. This world in turn was shaped by the *ḥadīth*’s creator into story-‘form,’ i.e., into a concise scheme by which figures and their actions are organized. (2) For this purpose, a kind of creative ‘selection’ was made, which may have been accomplished initially by the respective original narrator (*muḥaddith*) of the text, but also (though to a more limited extent) by later narrators/transmitters. This selection may have significantly contributed to the ‘fictionalization’ of the recounted events. (3) Regular categories of fictional narration are evident: omitting, replacing, and adding, as well as those of emphasis, coloration, and personal comments on events or characters. These categories provide a clear-cut distinction between fictional and historiographical narratives and the latter’s factual and neutral manner of recounting events.

By fictionalizing the account, the *muḥaddith*-narrator obviously crosses the boundary from the real to an imaginary world.<sup>13</sup> A foundation is devised to encourage a common image or to create a new one. This means that a situation is developed in which both the narrator and the listeners/recipients (the latter by their individually shaped assimilation of the *ḥadīth* text) can clearly envision such an image.

All our *ḥadīth* examples have a story to tell. The story is based upon a plot composed of diverse narrative constituents and sequences, which are variable to a limited extent. These characteristics – i.e., (a) story, and (b) narrative constituents in combination with (c) fictional elements – are essential features for a text’s oral communication. It is the text’s ‘tellability’ (German: *Erzählbarkeit*) that promotes an environment in which events can be *narrated* to an audience and, at times, be understood differently by its members. Based on older segments of text and using the fictional potential of the related story, the *ḥadīth*-transmitters of the first centuries of Islam were able to trans-

10 See also Beaumont, Daniel (1996): *Hard-Boiled: Narrative Discourse in Early Muslim Traditions*. In: *Studia Islamica*, 83, pp. 5-31, esp. p. 7.

11 Stefan Leder (1992): *The Literary Use of the Khabar*, in: A. Cameron/L. I. Conrad (Eds.): *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East, I: Problems in the Literary Source Material* (Princeton), p. 307.

12 Beaumont (1996), p. 8.

13 Iser (1991), pp. 25-27.

mit/narrate these *ḥadīth*-texts by giving them at each stage of transmission a slightly different shape, until the respective *ḥadīths* became part of a standard collection, receiving, at times, a canonical, written form. This handing down of a longer account by the first (or oldest) *muḥaddith* to the next transmitter and so on, is considered a procedure recurring at each chronologically definable stage of the ‘aural transmission’ of *ḥadīth*.<sup>14</sup> This involves a potential for textual modifications during each generation. A particular *ḥadīth* text may at every new narrative stage appear in a shape slightly different *without* being changed or restricted in its ‘basic meaning’ and in its ‘authentic kernel.’ This evaluation has also been substantiated by modern *isnād* research, although different criteria were applied to the results formulated.<sup>15</sup>

*Ḥadīth*-texts have a high degree of similarity. Their allegorical and symbolic nature has a clarity, far exceeding the relationship of reality experienced by Muslims in early times. These texts present a world which often even competes with reality. However, the imaginary character of these texts, expressed in simple words and a plain plot, grips the listener’s/reader’s attention through their great precision in describing and narrating.

By arranging – and fictionalizing – this world of experience of a former ‘ideal’ generation, the readers or recipients are left to draw conclusions and lessons from the happenings recounted. The *ḥadīth* becomes a model which encourages people’s imagination by allowing the exemplary nature of the past events to emerge. This approach helps to explain the on-going educational potential of *Ḥadīth* as well as its charismatic character.

Apart from historical facts or juridical issues preserved or discussed in these texts, it is their three-dimensionality – i.e., (a) transmission by *narration*, (b) narration by *fictionalization* and (c) fictionalization provoking *imagination*, which enables us to establish the ‘fictional narrative’ as a valid category of text within *Ḥadīth*, and thus to understand this kind of narrative as a natural part of classical Arabic ‘literature’ (*belles-lettres*). Not only do these texts provide knowledge, but they are in themselves aesthetic and can be enjoyed in a way one enjoys (other) fine literature.

What makes *Ḥadīth* so fascinating is the interrelation between ‘function’ and ‘form,’ i.e., providing information together with the fine shape of its presentation and attractive manner of its realization. This makes this branch of medieval Arabic literature a promi-

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14 ‘Aural’ is a more precise term than ‘oral’ in characterizing the transmission of knowledge during the first centuries of Islam. ‘Aural’ includes oral communication (as an important component of transmission) without expressly excluding the use of writing and written material within that process. See Günther, Sebastian (1991): *Quellenuntersuchungen zu den Maqātil at-Ṭālibīyyīn des Abū l-Farağ al-Isfahānī* (gest. 356/967) (Hildesheim), pp. 24-38; and Günther (1998), pp. 462, 465-468. – Schoeler, Gregor (1997): *Writing and Publishing. On the Use and Function of Writing in the First Centuries of Islam*. In: *Arabica*, 44/3, pp. 423-435.

15 Motzki, Harald (1996): *Quo vadis Ḥadīth-Forschung? Ein kritische Untersuchung von G.H.A. Juynboll: ‘Nāfi’ the mawlā of ‘Umar, and his position in Muslim Ḥadīth Literature,*’ 2 parts. In: *Der Islam*, 73, pp. 40-80; 193-231. – Schoeler, Gregor (1996): *Charakter und Authentie der muslimischen Überlieferung über das Leben Mohammeds* (Berlin, New York), pp. 5, 163-166.

ment manifestation of religious, ethical and educational messages of early Islam to Muslim believers, and hence, to human civilization in general.