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In Memoriam: David C. Reisman June 21, 1969–January 2, 2011

“*Al-Umr qaṣīr wa-al-ṣinā‘ah ṭawīlah ...*”*

David Colum Reisman died on Monday, January 2, 2011, at the age of 41, in London, England. He was born David Colum Coen on June 21, 1969, in Dublin, Ireland, to John Cohen (who later added an *h* to his surname), an orthodontist and sculptor, and Olga Ryder. At an early age he moved with his mother to Boston, Massachusetts, where she remarried Joel M. Reisman, whose surname David legally adopted. Reisman’s academic interest in Islam began in college at Boston University, where he completed a B.A. and M.A. in Islamic Studies with Merlin Swartz and Herbert W. Mason; the latter is the English translator of much of the French Orientalist Louis Massignon’s (d. 1962) *oeuvre*. Massignon’s work on Islamic mysticism or Sufism¹ appears—in my memories of conversations with Reisman—to have been formative in impressing upon him the importance of Arabic philology as a critical tool for studying the intellectual history of Islamic civilization.

Mysticism, however, was not to be Reisman’s labor of love but rather, and mainly, the intellectual history of Arabic philosophy and its translation into English.² To that end, Reisman studied under the direction of Dimitri Gutas at Yale University, receiving a Ph.D. in 2000 with the dissertation “The Making of the Avicennan Tradition: The Transmission, Contents, and Structure of Ibn Sīnā’s

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*Franz Rosenthal (on whom see below), “Life is Short, the Art is Long’: Arabic Commentaries on the First Hippocratic Aphorism,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 40 (1966): 226–45; repr. in his *Science and Medicine in Islam: A Collection of Essays* (Aldershot, 1990), V.

I thank Dr. Cara L. Sargent, Reisman’s ex-wife and mother of his son Lorcan, for providing me with details of David’s biography.

¹ In particular, his *La Passion d’al-Hosayn-ibn-Mansur al-Hallaj: Martyr mystique de l’Islam, exécuté à Bagdad le 26 Mars 922* (Paris, 1922; 2nd ed. Paris, 1975); *The Passion of al-Hallāj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam*, trans. Herbert W. Mason, Bollingen Series: 98 (Princeton, 1982).

² See most notably *Classical Arabic Philosophy: An Anthology of Sources*, trans. Jon McGinnis and David C. Reisman (Indianapolis, 2007); and Reisman’s project, underway at the time of his death, for an eight-part translation series of the entire extant corpus of writings by the fourth/tenth-century philosopher al-Fārābī, titled *The Complete Works of Farabi: The Study of Philosophy in Early Islam*, which may, alas, have to wait another generation.



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al-Mubāḥatāt (The Discussions),”³ which was published in 2002.⁴ This study is the first detailed analysis of the manuscripts, structure, and historical transmission of this particular—and as Reisman argues—posthumous collection(s) of Avicenna’s (d. 428/1037) correspondences with his disciples and colleagues. The importance of Reisman’s work is in presenting the necessary codicological and paleographical foundation for any future critical edition of the *Mubāḥatāt* (the lack of proper critical editions of medieval Arabic texts was often lamented by Reisman). The rigorous training in the philological analysis of medieval Arabic he received from Gutas and the latter’s broad intellectual influence, where philology, codicology, and critical historiography are brought to bear on the transmission of medieval Arabic texts, philosophical and otherwise, and their historical intellectual contexts, are evinced in this monograph and in much of Reisman’s other publications.

At Yale, while many of us who studied in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations were aware of the formative intellectual presence of Franz Rosenthal (he taught there from 1956 to 1985; d. 2003)—and occasionally ran into him as he was researching in the stacks of Yale’s Sterling Memorial Library—it was Reisman who grew near to him in his last years (Reisman would often relay news of Rosenthal and his health). One manifestation of his admiration for Rosenthal, with whom Gutas studied, is the care with which he compiled a handlist of microfilms of Arabic and Syriac manuscripts in Rosenthal’s private library (which is now housed at Tel Aviv University).⁵ Reisman also studied medieval Arabic grammar, lexicography, and poetics with Beatrice Gruendler at Yale; his penchant was for Arabic syntax and the grammar of particles (*ḥarf*).⁶ And while graduate students together, Reisman and I co-organized the first conference of the Avicenna Study Group at Yale University, which was intended to in-

³ The dissertation was awarded the William J. Horwitz Prize by the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at Yale University.

⁴ Published with the same title in the series *Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science: Texts and Studies*; 49 (Leiden, 2002).

⁵ *A Catalogue of the Arabic and Syriac Manuscripts on Microfilm in the Library of Franz Rosenthal*, privately published in limited number, 2000; and also see Reisman’s obituary of Rosenthal, “In Memoriam: Franz Rosenthal: August 31, 1914–April 8, 2003,” *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism* 3 (2003): 329–42.

⁶ An example of this was the inaugural Yale Arabic Colloquium (YAC), “The Binary World of *innamā*: Practice and Theory of the Use of the Medieval Arabic Particle,” April 15, 1998, wherein Gutas, Gruendler, and Reisman presented a spirited evening of discussion, rich with medieval Arabic textual specimens, of the grammatical uses of the restrictive particle *innamā*; and also see Reisman’s poignant analysis of the (mis)translations of *innamā* in his review of *Ibn Taymiyya against the Greek Logicians*, trans. Wael B. Hallaq (Oxford, 1993), *Mamlūk Studies Review* 1 (1997): 129–32.



roduce the research interests of a “new generation of students” to senior scholars working on Avicenna.⁷

As for Reisman’s contributions to the field of Arabic and Islamic studies, they were wide-ranging and—in terms of his attempt to do the “spadework,”⁸ as he called it, and to be comprehensive—of great scholarly value, particularly in the way he marshaled his evidence; that is, the primary, often untapped manuscripts, and relevant secondary sources on the subject matter he was addressing. In brief, and without taking full stock of his publications or *nachlass*, some of the thematic which interested him include the study of medieval Arabic history, biography, and autobiography as sources for the transmission of philosophy and, more broadly, of Islamic intellectual history;⁹ the development of curriculum and pedagogy in medieval Arabic philosophy¹⁰ and medicine¹¹; and what may be described as intellectual archaeology of hitherto undiscovered texts and uncatalogued Arabic manuscripts.¹²

The untimely death of Reisman is a clear loss to Arabic and Islamic studies, and especially to those scholars working on the intellectual history of medieval

⁷ A collection of the conference papers was published in *Before and After Avicenna: Proceedings of the First Conference of the Avicenna Study Group*, ed. David C. Reisman and Ahmed H. al-Rahim, Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science: Texts and Studies, 52 (Leiden, 2003); this conference and volume were followed by a second, *Interpreting Avicenna: Science and Philosophy in Medieval Islam, Proceedings of the Second Conference of the Avicenna Study Group*, ed. Jon McGinnis and David C. Reisman, Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science: Texts and Studies; 56 (Leiden, 2004).

⁸ See, for example, Reisman’s lament—the substance of which, for anyone who knew him, was the hallmark of his scholarship—on the “woeful” state of Ibn Taymīyah studies: “Arabic-Islamic studies is no more plagued by a lack of continuity in scholarship than any other field, but the absence of very basic research on Ibn Taymīyah should nonetheless be perceived as a serious shortcoming to a proper understanding of the man and his work and not simply as a typical, if woeful, characteristic of the field as a whole. *Basic spadework, such as a critical biography, a list and chronology of works, a study of extant manuscripts, and an informed assessment of work to date*, seems to be viewed as an *unfortunate mechanical aspect* of Arabic-Islamic studies best done by someone else, but without such work any study of a discrete aspect of Ibn Taymīyah’s life and thought cannot but be tentative [my emphasis].” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 3 (1999): 210–13.

⁹ See, for example, his “Stealing Avicenna’s Books: A Study of the Historical Sources for the Life and Times of Avicenna,” in *Before and After Avicenna*, 91–126.

¹⁰ See his “Al-Fārābī and the Philosophical Curriculum,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (Cambridge, 2005), 52–72; and “Avicenna’s Enthymeme: A Pointer,” *Arabica* 56, no. 6 (2009): 529–42, respectively.

¹¹ See his “Professional Medical Ethics from a Foreign Past,” in *Islamic Philosophy, Science, Culture, and Religion: Studies in Honor of Dimitri Gutas*, ed. Felicitas Opwis and David [C.] Reisman, Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science: Texts and Studies; 83 (Leiden, 2004), 26–39.

¹² See his “A Holograph MS of Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah’s ‘*Dhayl*,’” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 2 (1998): 19–49; and “Plato’s *Republic* in Arabic: A Newly Discovered Passage,” *Arabic Science and Philosophy* 14, no. 2 (2004): 263–300.



Arabic philosophy and science; his piercing wit and critique, which characterized much of his scholarship and commentary, will be missed and noted by those who regarded him as a friend and colleague. In one of his last publications, while critiquing the state of Avicennan studies, Reisman acknowledges—very much in the tradition of some of Avicenna’s disciples—his own intellectual debt to and the precedence of “the ‘Gutasian’ legacy,”¹³ pointing out that “[u]nfortunately, the foci of research into Avicenna and his legacy has not changed in the past forty to fifty years (never mind the past millennium) ... no doubt, it is high time to imitate the master and shatter some paradigms.”¹⁴ It was in imitating the master, in his Arabic seminars at Yale, that Reisman and I first met, and of whose *madhhab* Reisman was such an ardent defender¹⁵—always seeing himself as a link in an *isnād* of scholars which extends back from Gutas to Rosenthal to Paul Kraus (d. 1944).¹⁶

¹³ See his review of *Avicenna and His Legacy: A Golden Age of Science and Philosophy*, ed. Y. Tzvi Langermann, *Cultural Encounters in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, 8 (Turnhout, Belgium, 2009), *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 131, no. 1 (2011): 176.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ See his review of *Ibn Sīnā, lettre au vizir Abū Sa’d: Editio princeps d’après le manuscrit de Bursa*, ed. Yahya Michot, *Sagesses musulmanes*, 4 (Beirut, 2000), “A New Standard for Avicenna Studies,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 122, no. 3 (2002): 562–77; and “An Unfortunate Response: Iqbal on Gutas,” *Islam and Science* 2 (2004): 63–73.

¹⁶ Dimitri Gutas, “Franz Rosenthal: 31 August 1914–8 April 2003,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 149, no. 3 (September 2005): 442.

