

Review · Saadi A. Simawe

THE NUMBER OF PUBLICATIONS in English on modern Arabic literature has increased considerably in recent years. There are many reasons for the new interest in Arabic studies. Obviously some of these reasons have to do with the growing importance of the Arab world in the Western, particularly American, economic and geopolitical thinking. However, the more interesting reasons, from cultural and literary points of view, behind the recent surge in Arabic and Islamic Studies in the West may be related to the emergence of a young generation of Orientalists. Aware of the limitations and fallacies of the traditional Orientalist premise—which is political in the main and ultimately imperialistic—the new generation, benefitting from modern theories and methodologies in literature, language, and culture and the inevitable circumscribing impact of power on knowledge, have as a result rediscovered Arabic culture and literature. A reader of recent studies such as Bridget Connelly's *Arab Folk Epic and Identity* (University of California Press, 1986), Salma Jayyusi's *Modern Arabic Poetry* (Columbia University Press, 1987), Amin Maalouf's *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes* (London, 1986), Issa J. Boullata's *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature* (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1980), and the volume under review cannot overlook a common approach, philological in essence, at work in these studies: a stronger awareness of and more reliance on Arabic and Islamic sources as indispensable tools for any serious study of Arabic literature.

In this regard, Professor Roger Allen's *Modern Arabic Literature* is a case in point. Author of *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction* (1982) and numerous studies on modern Arabic literature, Allen has translated many modern Arabic works and has established himself as an authority on modern Arabic letters in both the Arab and the Anglo-American worlds. His volume under review is an extensive anthology of criticism on modern Arabic literature by Arab, British, French, German, Israeli, and American critics. Since the Preface states that the volume has been pre-

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pared for “English-speaking readership” (viii), part of Allen’s intention is to introduce the Anglo-American students of Arabic to the major trends and movements in modern Arabic criticism, an imperative source for any serious study of modern Arab writers. Although the majority of the selections has been translated by the editor from Arabic, these selections, as Allen indicates in the Preface, are limited by the comparative scarcity of Arabic and Western resources in the United States (viii), and thus do not represent by any means the entire diversity of modern Arabic criticism. Nevertheless, a reader of modern Arabic literature will quickly realize that Allen’s selection of the 73 modern and contemporary Arab poets, novelists, playwrights, and short story writers, and his translation of the critical writings on their works fairly represent the major characteristics of the literary scene in the Arab world.

In his definitive introduction, Allen has identified the major forces that shape and define modernity in Arabic literature. Modernity in Arabic letters, as Allen indicates, began to take shape during the eighteenth century as a “product of two major forces: the impact of the West and the search for and revival of the great heritage of the past” (xiii). The dialectical interaction between these two forces, up to the present time, has been the dynamic force that defines and sometimes determines the very nature of artistic creation and the modes of critical practice. A quick glance at the selections of critical writings in the volume would evidence the heavy influence of modern Western literatures, particularly British, French, Russian, German, and American, on modern Arabic letters. A partial index to the names of Western writers in these limited selections would be telling: Wordsworth, Arthur Miller, Bernard Shaw, Georg Lukács, Baudelaire, Aragon, Éluard, Neruda, Faulkner, Genet, Brecht, Nietzsche, Sartre, Gide, Stendhal, Whitman, Blake, Pound, Henry James, Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Maupassant, Chekhov, just to mention only the oft-repeated ones. But it is T. S. Eliot (mentioned 21 times), whose poetry and critical theory fascinated young Arab poets of the 1950s, who claims the lion’s share of the general Western influence on modern Arabic poetry. Eliot’s concept of tradition and individual talent helped many young Arab poets, torn between their love for their heritage and their fascination with the West, reconcile present and past, Western modernity and Arabic/Islamic tradition.

The Western influence on modern Arabic literature has not always been

healthy and vivifying as in the case of T. S. Eliot. Literary history of the Arab world tells of many writers, especially poets, who, in their fascination with the West, rejected the entire Arabic heritage and culture. In their rejection of and frustration with Arab backwardness and the generally stifling ways of life, they went so far as to advocate the use of Latin script instead of Arabic script. This phenomenon became vehement and visible primarily in Lebanon, because of its French-oriented, Christian-dominated society. But that does not mean that there were not many sympathizers with that movement throughout the Arab world. These poets, especially Said Aql, Unsi al-Hajj, Tawfiq Sayigh, among others, experimented in many poems to reproduce Western poetic styles. The results, as many critics, Arab and non-Arab, maintain, were not always successful.¹ It seems that either the historical moment was not ready for their pioneering experiments, or their total rejection of Arabic culture and heritage resulted in their own alienation, or some combination of the two.

Ironically, the writers who were steeped equally in the knowledge of classical Arabic literature and modern Western literatures such as Taha Husayn, Najib Mahfuz, Badr al-Sayyab, al-Tayyib Salih, and Khalil Hawi were the authentic innovators; and their original works in poetry, prose, fiction, fiction, and drama were the solid foundations of modern Arabic literature. Allen's "Introduction" and his selections clearly reflect this reality. In general, the majority of contemporary Arab authors are admirers of modern Western literatures; and the experience and the experiments of the older generation have taught them that mere imitation of Western styles and themes does not create original works. To most mature Arab authors, modernity has come to mean not only the study of modern Western literatures, but more importantly, the impact of that study on the revival of Arabic literature. Adunis, the most prominent Arab poet-critic and the leading exponent of modernity in Arabic letters, accurately recapitulates in his *Introduction à la poétique arabe* (1985) what modernity has come to mean to the majority of the Arab authors:

It was reading Baudelaire that allowed me to discover Abu Nuwas [Medieval Arab poet, c. 756–810]. It was reading Mallarmé that unveiled for me the poetic language of Abu Tammam [Medieval Arab poet, c. 800–845]. Rimbaud, Nerval, and the surrealist poets helped me comprehend our poetry of mysti-

cal experience. Reading contemporary French criticism prepared me to discover the originality of Jurjani [Medieval Arab critic d. 1078].²

The battle for modernity, *ma'arakat al-tajdid* in Arabic letters, has been much easier and less dangerous than the struggle for modernity in the ways of life and social and political systems in the Arab world. Allen's volume reflects the literary presentation of that struggle around which revolve the major themes that have been haunting modern Arab authors. Foremost among them are colonialism and nationalism and the question of Palestine (253, 268); Arab backwardness and stagnation and the challenge of technology (252); Arab women and their social status (270–4); the tragic dilemma of Arab intellectuals beset by internal repression (dictatorship, fascism, fundamentalism, and despotism that plague the Arab world); and external dangers represented by the Superpowers' geopolitical struggle over the Middle East (101, 225, 232). These problems generate what has been termed by Arab intellectuals the "identity crisis" of the Arabs, in terms of thought and culture, in the face of the invasion of Western ideologies and ways of life (169, 178–83, 226). Obviously, these extremely sensitive issues cannot be treated overtly in most Arab countries (Lebanon, Egypt, and Syria are a little more tolerant with writers, artists, and intellectuals). In the face of this repressive reality, Arab authors usually treat the three social taboos—sex, politics, and religion—in extremely covert, symbolic, and obscure ways. As a result, satire, irony, parody, uses of myth and folklore have flourished in modern Arabic letters (103, 105, 107); and the language, under the pressures of censorship and stifling social life, has been squeezed and distorted in the artist's desperate search for emotional and expressive outlets. At many points Professor Allen's selections speak of the themes of torture (203), Kafkaesque fear of the brutal ruler (191, 228, 296), victimization of individuals by repressive hypocritical society (225, 232), and exile as the only escape from the oppressive regimes (100, 308). The questions of freedom and democracy are frequently discussed by modern Arab authors, but in very abstract or obsequious ways, to avoid the dangerous confrontation with the regimes (306–8, 336–40).

Despite these "difficult political circumstances prevailing in many Arab countries, including no fewer than three war situations" (Preface, vii),

Roger Allen, I believe, has admirably contrived to “include contributions by the most famous critics of the modern period, from the most radical to the most traditional” (ix). But the formidable task of presenting Anglo-American readers with the different critical attitudes and approaches in modern Arabic letters cannot, as Allen indicates, be encompassed in one volume.

The very dynamic nature of modern Arabic literature in its battle against internal and external repression, the steadily growing interest in Arabic studies in the West, and the continuous emergence of new Arab authors with new techniques and styles require that Allen’s pioneering work be enhanced by follow-up volumes.

Notes

1. See Salma Juyyssi’s “Introduction” to her *Modern Arabic Poetry: An Anthology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987) 8–9; S. Moreh’s *Modern Arabic Poetry: 1800–1970* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976) 314.
2. Quoted in Michael Beard’s review of Adunis’s *Introduction à la poétique arabe* (1985) in *World Literature Today*, 6 (1986), 513.