

THE QUESTION OF FOREIGN INFLUENCES IN MODERN ARABIC LITERARY CRITICISM

Like other aspects of modern Arab life, modern Arabic literature has not only been determined by a multitude of internal factors but has also been stimulated by a variety of foreign cultural influences, channelled to the Arab world over the last two centuries. Circumscribed by the literary discourse, the critical discourse, or the articulation of the critical thinking which has dominated the modern Arabic literary scene, has also been informed by internal and external factors. Firstly, there has been the combined impact of political, economic, social, cultural and literary changes of which modern Arabic literary criticism has been aware and to which it has responded by gradually trying to develop an approach which would be both modern and Arabic. Secondly, there has been the influence of foreign culture working as a stimulus on the modern Arab literary critic who strives—with varying degrees of success—to employ some of its notions and elements in his encounter with his own literature, which in turn has been exposed to the same internal and external influences.

In other words, modern Arabic critical discourse is an overdetermined text, the production of which has been stimulated by a multitude of internal and external forces of cultural production. It is, therefore, best approached from a contextual-comparative perspective, which caters, through being contextual, for the various internal determinants which contributed to the formation of the critical text, and explain, through being comparative, the role which foreign influences have played in motivating and stimulating most of the developments and changes which modern Arabic literary criticism has undergone during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

While accommodating both the internal and external factors, this perspective does, however, raise several questions, the most important of which is that of foreign influences: their channels to the Arab world, the difficulties involved in tracing them and the importance of their role in stimulating the critical changes and developments.

I.1 Channels of Contact

‘The story of the modern Arabic awakening’, Professor Hussam al-Khateeb writes, ‘is nearly identical with the story of Arab literary relations with Europe.’

Together with a multiplicity of economic and social factors, these relations have had a decisive role in bringing about the major developments that characterize the modern Arabic literary scene ...

particularly,

the emergence of a suitable atmosphere for a new criticism and new literary sensitivity.¹

The first real contact between Europe and the Arab East came with Bonaparte's expedition which eventually and indirectly not only brought about 'the modern Arab awakening', but also the revival and flourishing of Arabic literature.² Since then, this contact has become a major keynote in most changes and developments undergone by modern Arabic literature in general and literary criticism in particular. In fact, 'Almost all kinds of channels of contact' have been explored, and although the outcome has varied from one cultural centre to another, it is an established fact that greater Syria (comprising—until the beginning of this century—Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan) together with Egypt, 'formed up to the present the major centres of contact with the outside world.'³ Lebanon's role has always been considerable, particularly during the post-World War Two period when it emerged as the most important centre for translation and publishing in the Arab East.

Besides the extra-literary factors which have contributed to the transmission of European cultural and literary thought, such as the European military invasion of Arab countries,⁴ one can point out the following main channels of contact between Europe and the Arab East.

I.1.a. *Education*: which includes not only the educational missions sent regularly by the three countries to Europe, but also the latent influence channelled through the Arab educational institutions which, on the whole, have followed the European model.

I.1.b. *Direct Contacts*: which have been of great importance in the field of Arabic literary relations with Europe. 'The effects of direct contact are clearly revealed in the field of exchange of literary ideas and innovations of form.' In fact,

... the champions of this exchange have always come from the ranks of those who had enough chance to live abroad and experienced foreign life.

¹ Hussam Al-Khateeb, 'The European Relations of Modern Arabic Literature', *Actes du VIIIe Congrès de l'Association Internationale de Littérature Comparée*, Akademiai Kiado, Budapest, 1981, p. 38.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 31-2.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁴ Husam al-Khatīb, *al-Adab al-Muqāran: al-Juz' al-Thāni, Taḥqīqāt Fī al-Adab al-ʿArabī al-Muqāran*, Damascus University, 1981-2, pp. 7-10.

Of course nowadays direct contact is much easier than before. Not only the contacts between the Arab world and other parts of the world are constantly becoming a sort of daily practice, but also the recurrence of cultural exchange is giving a far better chance for interaction and assimilation as well.⁵

I.1.c. *Translation*: which remains the most effective and most consistent of all forms of cultural contact between Europe and the Arab East. Although Professor al-Khateeb probably goes too far in suggesting that 'nearly half the printed books in Arabic are either translations or adaptations',⁶ one nevertheless cannot underestimate the influence of these translations, particularly on those Arab intellectuals who cannot read a foreign language.

The first early nineteenth century translations were from the Italian and mostly of technical works, but 'soon translations from French became dominant. Only from the beginning of the twentieth century did [the Arabs] translate from English on a wider scale.' In fact,

... the beginning of the twentieth century marked a formidable leap in the field of translations. The Syrian immigrants to Egypt translated hundreds of narrative works during the first two decades of the century... In the inter-War period, English emerged as a tough rival of French, while both French and English literature became known in the Arab East. Russian literature came next. Other European literatures like German, Italian and Spanish were known only through their best classics.⁷

Although translations continued on a wider scale in the fifties and with a more discriminating attitude, they have undergone three major developments which are best summarized by Professor al-Khateeb as follows:

1. Attempts have been made, particularly in Syria and Egypt, to organize translation by governments, through the ministries of culture and other cultural and education institutions.
2. Lebanon has emerged as a major centre for translation.
3. As a result of the first two developments, a greater diversity has been achieved. The major change that took place in the early 1950s which interests us most in this context was 'the serious attention that was given to Russian and Soviet literature'—an attention which coincided with the rise of the sociological trend in these countries. Many classics of Russian literature were rendered into Arabic

... together with tens of works by Soviet writers ranging from Maxim Gorky to less famous writers like Vera Panova. New interest was also

⁵ Hussam Al-Khateeb, 'The European Relations of Modern Arabic Literature', p. 35.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

shown in the literature of east European countries and the militant literature of other parts of the world.... Periodicals also published poems and short stories from these literatures.⁸

Furthermore, the Arab world has recently witnessed the appearance of two major quarterlies devoted to foreign culture and literature with contributions from all the Arab world and translations from both major and minor literatures of both East and West. In fact, *al-Ādāb al-Ajnabiyyah* (1974) (Foreign Literature Quarterly) issued by the Arab Writers' Union in Damascus is now well established with almost a decade behind it, while its main rival in Baghdad *al-Thaqāfah al-Ajnabiyyah* (1980) (Foreign Culture Quarterly) issued by the Iraqi Ministry of Culture and Information has three years' activity to its credit.

In addition to the other direct and indirect channels of contact with foreign cultures, particularly European, shared by the majority of the intellectuals, each Arab critic has distinguished himself by his own specific means of contact. These should be studied thoroughly before any attempt is made to evaluate the role of foreign influences in his criticism. To take the main representatives of the sociological trend (Shihādah al-Khūrī, 'Umar Fākhūrī, Ra'īf Khūrī, Ḥusayn Muruwwah, Luwīs 'Awaḍ, 'Abd al-'Aẓīm Anīs and Maḥmūd Amīn al-'Ālim) as an example, one can refer to following forms of contact with foreign culture, particularly the literary contact:

1. Their European-inspired Arabic education as well as their relationship with the European educational institutions whether as students or teachers. In fact, nearly half of them received their higher education in Europe and America ('Awaḍ,⁹ Fākhūrī¹⁰ and Muruwwah), three have taught in a foreign university ('Awaḍ in California,¹¹ Anīs in London and al-'Ālim in Paris)¹² while Ra'īf Khūrī studied at the AUB and Shihādah al-Khūrī received his secondary and higher education while Syria was still under French rule.
2. Their knowledge of foreign languages. In fact all of them except probably one (Anīs) read French, five read English too, four knew other languages such as Latin, Greek or Turkish. This meant that all of them had a direct access to one or more foreign literary tradition, depending on the foreign language or languages acquired. Furthermore, knowing a foreign language gave them the opportunity to read

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-7.

⁹ Luwīs 'Awaḍ, *Mudhakkirāt Tālib Ba'thah*, Cairo, 1965.

¹⁰ 'Umar Fākhūrī, *al-Ra'ā'il*, Beirut, 1981, particularly pp. 35-144.

¹¹ Ghālī Shukrī, *Susyulūjiyā al-Naqd al-'Arabī al-Ḥadīth*, Beirut, 1981, p. 34.

¹² 'Abd al-Nabī Ṣtaif, 'Īlīwār Ma' Maḥmūd Amīn al-'Ālim: Ṣūrat al-Muthaqqaf al-'Arabī Yasāriyyan', *al-Mawqif al-Adabī*, No. 132, April, 1982, p. 68.

widely not only in its culture and literature but also in whatever translations from other cultures existed in that language. For all of them relied on French or English or both for their knowledge of Russian and Soviet literature for example.

3. They had all been to Europe (and some to America too).¹³ Some, in fact, stayed for several years, studying or teaching and others, like al-ʿĀlim, have continued to live there. Four of them (ʿAwad,¹⁴ al-ʿĀlim,¹⁵ Khūrī¹⁶ and Muruwah¹⁷) have paid short visits to the Soviet Union in particular and Muruwah holds a doctorate from the University of Moscow.¹⁸

Thus all of them had direct experience of European (and American) life, which seems to have influenced and stimulated much of their work and, in addition to other means of contact, contributed considerably to their cultural formation on which they draw in their critical practice.

4. Their acute awareness of the existence of foreign influences, both intellectual and literary, in their work and their acceptance, if not advocacy, of this external element as necessary, relevant, helpful and, at times, the best alternative available, in their encounters with the theoretical and practical problems, questions and issues related to their own culture. The importance of this contributory element in their cultural background varies according to the proportion of the foreign element in the critic's cultural formation, to the literary text itself and to the circumstances and conditions of the process of production of the critical text, which will always remain the main focus of this study.

1.2 Difficulties¹⁹

1.2.a. The first difficulty is the practical one of locating biographical details of the critics involved.

¹³ Raʿif Khūrī, Luwīs ʿAwad and Shihādah al-Khūrī.

¹⁴ Luwīs ʿAwad, *al-Funūn wa al-Junūn Fī Awrubbā* 69, Cairo, 1970.

¹⁵ Maḥmūd Amīn al-ʿĀlim, *al-Ilaḥṭh ʿAn Awrubbā*, Beirut, 1975.

¹⁶ Raʿif Khūrī, 'Fī ʿĀlam Brūmītiḥ al-Haqīqiyy', *Tar*, Vol. 6, No. 3, Mar. 1947 pp. 3-5, 'Subul al-Tafawwuq al-Shakḥī Fī al-Mujtamaʿ al-Sufyātī', *ibid.*, No. 4, Apr. 1947, pp. 9-20, 'Fī Mūsū Maʿ Īliyā Ihrinbūrgh', *ibid.*, Nos. 7-8, July-Aug. 1947, pp. 3-10.

¹⁷ Ḥusayn Muruwah, *Qaḍāyā Adabiyyah*, Cairo, 1956.

¹⁸ Ḥusayn Muruwah, *al-Nazaʿāt al-Māddiyya fī al-Falsafah al-ʿArabiyyah al-Islāmiyyah*, 2 Vols., Beirut, 1978-9. See also ʿUmar Fakhūrī, *al-Ittiḥād al-Sufyātī Hajar al-Zāwiyah*, Beirut, 1944.

¹⁹ In discussing the difficulties and the role of foreign influence I rely on my 'Nazrah Fī Qaḍiyyat al-Muʾaththirāt al-Ajnabiyyah Fī al-Naqd al-ʿArabiyy al-Ḥadīth', *al-Mawqif al-Adabi*, Nos. 141-3, Jan.-Mar., 1983, pp. 101-14.

I.2.b. The second difficulty is the scarcity of comprehensive lists of Arabic translations of foreign literature, particularly criticism. Apart from two limited—yet invaluable works—by Ḥusayn Badrān *et al.*²⁰ and Muhammad Abdul-Hai,²¹ the student of these foreign influences is obliged to compile his own lists.

I.2.c. The third difficulty also concerns the establishment of external evidence and is probably much more vital than the lists of the translated works. This is the absence of any comprehensive or individual index of the major Arabic literary periodicals—an index which is essential in order to survey all the references to foreign literature included in these periodicals. Such references are clear indicators of changes in taste, sensibility, mode and tendency at any one particular time. Taking as they do so many forms, ranging from translation (in its different types) studies, discussions, review articles, book reviews, news and reports, they are, moreover, invaluable in assessing the intellectual climate of the period and in discovering the cultural paradigm within which a particular generation has been operating.

I.2.d. The lack, or rather the non-existence of any recording or documentation of the activities of foreign cultural centres in Arab countries for extra-literary considerations. Consequently, there has never been any assessment of the contribution of their activities to the dissemination of foreign culture among Arab writers and intellectuals.

I.2.e. The fifth difficulty is the fact that there is no satisfactory and specialized study of the external cultural relations of Arabic countries.

I.2.f. The sixth difficulty is the lack of documentation of the cultural activities related to foreign countries—activities performed by Arab and international institutions, societies and organizations—including ministries of culture, writers' unions and friendship societies.

I.2.g. The seventh difficulty is the sensitivity of such a study, not only on the personal level (the critics themselves) but also on the national level. References to foreign influences may be thought to undermine the national pride or achievement and this naturally does not encourage the student nor create the atmosphere conducive to carrying out such research.

I.2.h. The eighth difficulty is the inadequate research facilities available in most Arab countries when compared to developed countries.

I.2.i. The ninth difficulty is the scarcity of specialized and scholarly studies of foreign influences on Arabic creative writing, such as poetry,

²⁰ Ḥusayn Badrān *et al.*, *al-Thabt al-Bibliyūgrāfi Li al-ʿmāl al-Mutarjamah*: 1956-67, Cairo, 1972.

²¹ Muhammad Abdul-Hai, 'A Bibliography of Arabic Translations of English and American Poetry (1830-1970)', *Journal of Arabic Literature*, Vol. VII, 1976, pp. 120-50.

the novel, short stories and drama. Although some attention has recently been paid to this aspect of Arabic studies,²² most of the serious studies are, unfortunately, not easily accessible.²³

I.2.j. The tenth difficulty is the knowledge of foreign languages required for such a study.

I.2.k. The last, though not the least, difficulty, is the fact that comparative literature and comparative studies are, on the whole, newcomers to most Arab countries.²⁴ In fact there are very few universities which offer them at post-graduate level, while under-graduate courses tend to be too basic and theoretical to be of any value in the subsequent work of students.

I.3 *The Role of Foreign Influences*

To the question of how much importance one should attach to foreign influences in shaping the course of development of modern Arabic literary criticism, three possible answers, zero-importance, absolute importance, or conditional importance, could be put forward.

I.3.a. *Zero Importance*: This is hardly worthy of any serious discussion and can be rejected irrefutably on the grounds of:

The rational evidence. Foreign culture is likely to exert on the production of the critical text the same influence that it has exerted on the production of the literary text itself.

²² Cf. Muhammad Abdul-Hai, *Tradition and English and American Influence in Arabic Romantic Poetry*; Ḥusām al-Khaṭīb, *Subul al-Mu'aththirāt al-Ajnabiyyah Fī al-Qiṣṣah al-Sūriyyah al-Ḥadīthah*; Maḥad al-Buhūth wa al-Dirāsāt al-ʿAlīyah, Cairo 1973; Kamāl Qultah, *Tāhā Ḥusayn Wa Athar al-Thaqāfah al-Faransiyya Fī Adabih*, Cairo, 1973; Aḥmad ʿUthmān, *al-Maṣādir al-Kilāsīkiyyah Li Masraḥ Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm*, Cairo, 1978; and Meftah Tahar, *Tāhā Ḥusayn: sa critique littéraire et ses sources françaises*, Maison Arabe du Livre, Tunis, n.d. (?1979).

²³ Cf. Zubaid (Abd al-Munim Kaḍr Az-), 'Al Akkad's Critical Theories with Special Reference to his Relationship with the Diwan School and to the Influence of European Writers upon him', unpub. Ph.D. thesis, Edinburgh University, 1966; Subhi (Hasan Abbas), 'The Influence of Modern English Writers on Arab Poets from 1939-60', unpub. Ph.D. thesis, Edinburgh University, 1968; Azzabi (Khalifa Isa), 'The Influence of English Writers on the Poetic Thought of A. Z. Abushadi', unpub. M. Litt. thesis, Edinburgh University, 1970; Fakhr al-Dīn (Tarek Abdullah Jawd), 'Abd al-Rahmān Shukrī (1886-1958), An Egyptian Writer in the Age of Imperialism and Nationalism; A Study in the Influence of European Thought on Modern Arabic Literature', unpub. Ph.D. thesis, New York University, 1977; Zaki (Anel Amin), 'Shakespeare in Arabic', unpub. Ph.D. thesis, Indiana University, 1978; and Barazanji (Ahmad Zeyad), 'The Impact of European Drama on Two Arab Playwrights: Tawfiq al-Hakim and Kateb Yacīn', unpub. Ph.D. thesis, City University of New York, 1979.

²⁴ Cf. Muḥammad Yūsuf Najm, 'al-Funūn al-Adabiyyah', in Ṣāliḥ Aḥmad al-ʿAlī *et al.*, *al-Adab al-ʿArabī Fī Āthār al-Dārīsīn*, Beirut, 1961, pp. 370-71; and Ḥusām al-Khaṭīb, *al-Adab al-Muqāran: al-Juzʾ al-Awwal Fī al-Nazarīyyah Wa Al-Minhaj*, Damascus University, 1981-2, pp. 96-133.

The external evidence. This can be detected in two inter-related aspects; firstly, modern Arabic literature has been exposed to foreign culture, which has influenced both the artistic and the psychological sensibility of the Arab writer, as well as his artistic modes of expression and even his language.

Secondly, the perspective of the literary critic and his practice are generally determined by his cultural formation of which foreign culture is an integral part.

The textual evidence.

- The critic's explicit acknowledgement of his use or employment of a particular foreign approach, theory, outlook or notion which he considers to be useful in his encounter with his literature.

- The explicit reference to foreign critical or intellectual works, ideas or theories in the course of the critic's discussion of a particular issue related to Arabic literature, be it theoretical or otherwise.

- The various echoes of foreign critical ideas, theories or books which the student discerns in the Arabic critical texts.

I.3.b. *The absolute importance.* As for the absolute importance of foreign influences in shaping the development of modern Arabic literary criticism, it can be challenged in the light of the following considerations:

1. In evaluating modern Arabic literary criticism, the student must distinguish between theoretical and practical criticism. While it is true that the contribution made by modern Arab critics to theoretical criticism is rather modest and limited, their contribution in the field of practical criticism enjoys, in the main, a considerable measure of originality, perception and depth. Furthermore, Arabic practical criticism is a confrontation of an Arabic literary work which is informed by a multitude of internal literary and extra-literary factors, which might be far more important than the external factors, that is, the foreign influence.
2. It is not possible to explain every development in modern Arabic literary criticism merely through a unilateral reference to foreign influence. The overall internal developments which have taken place in the area must also be taken into account. They too have exerted a great influence on the process of literary production and they can be ignored only at the high cost of objectivity and of the actual reality of modern Arabic literature.
3. We must remember that Arabic literary criticism has a long tradition which continues to exert its influence on both the Arab writers and critics of today. Furthermore, although modern Arabic literature, in its revolt against convention, has been inspired by foreign literature and culture, particularly Western, it still keeps its links with its tradi-

tion and the importance of the classical heritage of Arabic culture in directing this literature, and by implication, its criticism is no less than that of foreign influences. After all, we should not underestimate the relevance of classical Arabic criticism to the development of modern theories, for as M. M. Badawi writes:

... in their analysis of style and the language of poetry, particularly the metaphor and imagery, some of the medieval Arab critics reached conclusions of surprising subtlety and modernity, in which the work of critics like I. A. Richards was fully anticipated eight or nine centuries ago.²⁵

In fact, an increasing number of modern Arab critics are drawing on these conclusions in their studies of poetry, modern or classical, and some are trying—with varying degrees of success—to fuse them with modern theories.²⁶ In short, the importance of foreign influence in the development of modern Arabic literary criticism, both theoretical and practical, cannot be absolute and statements such as that by V. Cantarino that:

The modern renaissance, which can be clearly observed today in Arab culture and thus also in its literary awareness, is less of a continuation of a great heritage and more a product of Western civilization than many Arab men of letters would like to admit. Also, modern Arab literary theory is more a ramification of European than a development from the traditional Arabic.²⁷

cannot be further from the actual reality of modern Arabic literary criticism.

I.3.c. *The Conditional Importance.* The importance of the foreign influence in shaping the underlying assumption of modern Arabic literary thought is conditioned by the process and circumstances of the production of the critical texts, the complexity of which is too great to be explained by mere reference to any one external factor. In other words, the relativity of the importance of foreign influences is dependent on many considerations including the following:

1. The nature and character of the literary text itself. Since literary criticism is circumscribed by its subject, its formation and the place of foreign elements within its overall structure are bound to be influenced by the generic nature of the literary text as well as by its

²⁵ M. M. Badawi, *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry*, Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 5.

²⁶ Kamāl Abū Dīb, *Jadaliyyat al-Khafā' Wa al-Tajallī: Dirāsāt Bunyawīyyah Fī al-Shi'r*, Beirut, 1979, particularly Chapter One, pp. 19-63; 'Fī al-Shi'riyyah' *al-Thaqāfah al-Jadīdah*, Vol. 6, No. 25, 1982, pp. 11-50; and 'Baḥṭh Fī al-Shi'riyyah', *Mawāqif*, No. 46, Spring 1983, pp. 85-114.

²⁷ Vincente Cantarino, *Arabic Poetics in the Golden Age: Selection of Texts Accompanied by a Preliminary Study*, Leiden, 1975, p. 4.

relationship with classical heritage, foreign culture and contemporary Arab life. Thus, a critic dealing with a dramatic text or a novel tends to draw more on non-Arabic than on Arabic literary criticism. However, a critic analysing a poetic text is highly likely to draw more on Arabic poetic criticism, both classical and modern, than on foreign criticism.

2. The cultural formation of the critic, the producer of the critical text. In his encounter with literary texts, issues and questions, the Arab literary critic inevitably draws on his cultural background. A critic, therefore, educated to any extent in the Western world, would invariably draw on this aspect of his cultural formation in his critical practice, and the importance of foreign influences on his criticism would, therefore, be subject to its importance within the overall context of his cultural formation.
3. The nature of the recipient of the critical text or the implied reader of such a text. This also plays an important role in the critical act which produces the critical text, for the cultural background of the implied reader of the critical text is always taken into consideration by the critic, who selects from his own cultural formation that which is best suited for his reader. What is essentially important in the employment of the foreign element is its functionality and its effective use within the overall structure of the frame of reference within which the critic operates.

In conclusion, the foreign influence seems to be best viewed as merely one element in the constituent factors of the critical act, an element, the main importance of which lies in its function as 'a catalyst for the change or for the desire to change'²⁸ in modern Arabic literary criticism, just as it has been its function in modern Arabic literature itself.

University of Oxford

A. N. STAIF

²⁸ M. M. Badawi, *op. cit.*, p. 262.