Notes on the Traffic between Theory and Arabic Literature

MOHAMED-SALAH OMRI
Institute of Oriental Studies and St. John's College, University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom; e-mail: mohamed-salah.omri@orinst.ox.ac.uk
doi:10.1017/S0020743811000961

In most Western universities, Arabic literature is rarely studied by itself or for itself. It is subject to disciplinary traffic and intersections, on the one hand, and to what might be called a political predicament, on the other. With this in mind, I outline below some thoughts underpinned by two examples of the state of the art in Arabic literary studies, published four decades apart.

In 1969, Joraslav Stetkevych delivered an assessment of Arabic literary studies that deserves revisiting.[1] He started from the premise that early Romantics (Goethe, for one) both appreciated and appropriated Arabic literature, making it relevant to the very development of their own art. Starting in the late 19th century, and at a time when the field of literature and literary studies in the West witnessed its most dramatic changes, Arabic literary studies retreated into "undisturbed composure and calmness," accumulating "knowable facts" largely through literary history and philology.[2] Stetkevych puzzled over why the critical knowledge that we apply to "our" own literatures is withheld when approaching Arabic literature and why we "appreciate" the two literatures differently. Such a situation, he warned, relegates Arabic literature specialists to the margins: "If we disappeared, nobody would even notice." He proposed a program by which a dialogue would be opened up between Western specialists of Arabic literature and their own literatures and critical thought. In other words, he wrote against the "ghettoization" of Arabic literature and the prevailing tendency of Arabists to shun literary theory. For this aspect of Stetkevych's argument, the target was really Western reception of Arabic literature.[3]

My second example of the state of the art is in part the embodiment of Stetkevych's vision for Arabism: a 2010 volume of *Journal of Arabic Literature* that celebrates Roger Allen as a critic who managed to achieve deep connections with Arabic literature and Arab writers specifically because of his command of the language and close ties to the Arab literary scene. The volume is also an instance—by no means the only one—in which the current interface between theory and Arabic literature can be observed.[4]

My overall impression is that the essays practice what I would call "applied theory," in which concepts, theories, or trends are applied to Arabic texts, usually well-known ones. Examples include applications of magical realism (cooke), specific psychoanalysis concepts (Kennedy), a theory of myth (Bell), and new concepts related to nation, exile, and so forth. This approach contributes new insights into well-known texts (Haqqi, Mahfuz, Kouni). But it also seems to entertain a relationship to theory that is worth examining in some detail. I suggest that the special issue marks one instance of a wider practice in the field. It demonstrates and performs increasing traffic between Arabic literature and literary and cultural theory whose nature and direction must be looked at carefully. My use of the term "traffic" is an attempt to move in this direction.

Such traffic is bound to raise issues of power, value, and hierarchy, not unlike those raised in the once-dominant studies of how Arabic literature relates to Western literature

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743811000961 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in the modern period. The now partially obsolete paradigms of evaluating and reading Arabic literature were based on the assumption of a one-way movement from an "original" (usually Western) text to a "copy" or minor (Arabic) version, often explained as adaptation, adoption, translation, imitation, and so on. In comparative literary studies, more recent moves away from the paradigm of influence to intertextuality have benefited from close readings of Arabic literature. With more and more emphasis on theory as a starting point, the traffic has been displaced, I argue, but has remained one-directional and has not been seriously questioned. The test is to establish a dialogue between theory and Arabic literature, or perhaps even a dialectical relationship between the two, whereby both the direction of traffic and its nature are affected.

In a 2003 foreword to his 1969 essay, Stetkevych notes, with bitter regret, that his program, along with Arabic literature itself, was "wounded" by the "catastrophic social and cultural collapses" that occurred after 1969. This is true. But it can only be part of the story. In my view, the two Gulf wars, the events and aftermath of 9/11, and the continuing Israeli–Palestinian conflict have strengthened the grip of a particular kind of social science on area studies and relegated the "Arabic" humanities in general to a precarious position. Moreover, I suggest that Stetkevych's claim that the ultimate aim of a true Arabist is to contribute to the production and development of Arabic literature is beset with a number of problems, such as those linked to power relations and patterns of circulation in Western markets (translation) and in local ones as a direct result of global circulation. One stark illustration of this complex relationship between Arabic literary studies in the West and Arabic literary production can be inferred from a common occurrence: those of us who enter into contact with Arab writers are often asked, without a hint of irony or disrespect, to translate rather than interpret their work. Another example is the Arabic Booker prize, which has the symbolic as well as financial capital that directly affects the very production and circulation of Arabic literature in ways that have not been discussed, let alone theorized.

One further proposition in need of critical elaboration is the assumption that the study of Arabic literature has been area studies' most prominent casualty, while departments of comparative literature, most recently under pressure from postcolonial studies, have managed to edge it closer to the mainstream of literary studies, especially in the United States. Studies inspired by Said's critique of Orientalism and postcolonial theory have become almost the norm. But in postcolonial studies, discourse is preferred over form, meaning over construction of meaning, context over text. As a result, while we notice the increasing presence of Arabic literature in the American Comparative Literature Association, for example, in more specialized areas of literary studies, it remains almost absent. (In the 2011 Narrative Society annual conference, there was only one paper related to Arabic out of over 250.) How is one to articulate the difference of Arabic literature if one does not tackle the makeup of the literary texts—their linguistic, generic, and narrative features—in addition to their "contexts"? It would be interesting to study in what ways a genuine training that crosses comparative literature and area studies could allow the Arabist to enter into dialogue with other literary studies scholars; to engage with questions of theory and test their applicability and limitations; to interrupt the undisturbed calm of Arabic literary studies; and to act as a corrective to uni-directional traffic. Arabic literature has the potential to challenge literary theory to be genuinely global, flexible, and self-critical.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743811000961 Published online by Cambridge University Press

NOTES

[1]Jaroslav Stetkevych, *Arabic Poetry and Orientalism*, ed. Walid Khazendar (Oxford: St. John's College Research Centre, 2004).

[2]Ibid., 19.

[3]Ibid., 18.

[4]"From Orientalists to Arabists: The Shift in Arabic Literary Studies: Essays Dedicated to Roger Allen," special issue of *Journal of Arabic Literature* 41 (2010).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743811000961 Published online by Cambridge University Press