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ROUNDTABLE

Theory and Arabic Literature in the United States

Introduction

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The question that the five literary scholars participating in this roundtable have set out to answer is the following: "How has 'theory' affected the field of Arabic literature in the Unites States and vice versa?" By theory, we understand both the entire range of poststructuralist critical *practice* that emerged through continental philosophy in the 1960s and the canonical disciplinary *object* that came to dominate departments of literature in the United States in the 1980s. Most of us were beginning our graduate careers around this latter decade, in departments of Middle East studies or English and comparative literature, and experienced firsthand that moment of encounter referred to in the following essays. A couple of decades later, and irrespective of our institutional locations, all of us, as a matter of course, continue to work at the intersection between national traditions and the world of theory, as do our colleagues in the field and our graduate students. At the same time, there was a feeling amongst us of being at a crossroads of sorts—a certain sense of malaise, or perhaps urgency, that manifested itself in a recurring set of questions about the field here and now: questions about history and reading, about translation and audiences, and about institutional and cultural politics, that all somehow emerged from the era of sanctions and war during which we came of age and that now haunt the time of revolution in which we live. If the present roundtable raises more questions than it answers, we hope that it will at least initiate a broader discussion about the practice and purpose of the discipline of Arabic literature in the American humanities today.

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