Toward a New Literary History

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The past twenty years witnessed a dramatic transformation in Arabic literature studies in the United States. In the early 1990s, the field was still almost exclusively a satellite of area studies and largely bound by Orientalist historical and epistemological paradigms. Graduate students—even those wishing to focus entirely on modern literature—were trained to competence in the entire span of the Arabic literary tradition starting with pre-Islamic times, and secondary research languages were still rooted in the philological tradition of classical scholarship. The standard requirement was German, with Spanish as a distant second for those interested in Andalusia, but rarely French, say, or Italian or Russian. Other Middle Eastern languages were mainly conceived as primary-text languages rather than research languages. Philology, traditional literary history, and New Criticism formed the methodological boundaries of research. "Theory"—even when it purported to speak of the world outside Europe—was something that was generated by departments of English and comparative literature on the other side of campus, and crossings were rare and complicated in both the disciplinary and the institutional sense. Of course, one branch of "theory"—postcolonial studies—made its way into area studies much faster than the more eclectic offshoots of continental philosophy, for obvious reasons. From nationalism studies to subaltern studies, from Benedict Anderson to Gayatri Spivak, the wave of postcolonial critical theory that swept through U.S. academia in the 1980s and 1990s sparked an uprising in area studies at large and particularly in the literature disciplines. One of the first casualties of this uprising was the old historical paradigm itself: narratives of rise and fall, golden ages, and ages of decadence. Slowly but surely, scholars began to question the entire epistemological edifice through which Arabic literary history had been constructed by Orientalism. It was through the postcolonial theory of the 1980s that Arabic literature came to a broader rapprochement with poststructuralism: Foucault, Derrida, Ricoeur, Jameson, and White, to name a few of the major thinkers who began to transform the field in the late 1990s.

This transformation had some consequences on the institutional front. Comparative literature departments in the United States now sometimes produce PhDs with a focus on Arabic and, more rarely, hire candidates with area studies degrees. In spite of the potential pitfalls—the danger of producing what Gayatri Spivak has called "the extracurricular orient"[1]—this is an important and positive development. At the same time, Arabic literature has entered into the mainstream of the academy through other occasional and "non-specialist" routes. World literature and postcolonial literature curricula often deploy isolated, translated texts shorn of the deep specificities of their historical and critical contexts and focused instead on postmodern analytic categories of cultural difference and discursive identities. Insofar as "theory" has molded the field, it has tended to do so by positioning and reading discrete texts through a set of specifically

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(Euro-)American critical frames, and it has had an ambivalent, if not downright hostile, relationship to national traditions and critical projects.

Literary history, in its broadest sense, has been one of the disciplinary casualties of this turn to theory. As scholars of Arabic literature we need to develop a new theory of genre that builds on the insights of poststructuralism while preserving the historical and critical specificity of the Arabic tradition (the work of Abdelfattah Kilito immediately comes to mind here[2]). There is a vast archive of 19th- and 20th-century texts, critical debates and institutional struggles, and material circuits of production and dissemination that requires urgent attention precisely in order to articulate new questions of method and theory that emerge from local—national or regional—contexts rather than as an appendage of contemporary Euro-American epistemologies and intellectual histories. Invisible critical traditions are an essential component of what I am calling an archive here. How have Arab critics posed and debated the central question of cultural and literary modernity from the *nahḍa* to the present—from Muhammad Mandur to Faysal Darraj, for example[3]—and how can a new critical engagement with this ongoing dialogue shift the conventional terms of "dependency" through which Arabic literature has been theorized and institutionalized in the U.S. academy?[4] What might a post-romantic literary history look like in this age of 21st-century revolutions and, more importantly, what purpose would it serve as part of what some observers have begun to think of as a second Arab *nahḍa*?[5] Can "theory" accommodate a critical vision of literary practice that is nonetheless committed to the idea of history and unabashedly tied to an emancipatory politics and, if not, then what is its relevance to the practice of Arabic literature in the Arab world?

The period between the outbreak of World War II and the Naksa, broadly defined (1940s–1970s), is of particular relevance, as it has been largely neglected in spite of the immense richness and importance of its critical and literary output. This period—which is typically framed by "the end" of the liberal enlightenment discourse of the late *nahḍa,* on the one hand, and the emergence of postmodernism in the 1980s with the advent of the journal *Fusul* in Egypt and the young writers of "the generation of the '90s," on the other—is almost entirely absent in contemporary literary scholarship. This is largely a result, I would argue, of today's intellectual and disciplinary bias against realist modes and the immediacy of their political engagements with the postcolonial nation–state. Yet, if anything, the period was a dynamic and tremendously significant crucible of critical and aesthetic regional traffic in and between the major cities of the Arab world, one in which realism itself took on new and unexpected forms and meanings in dialogue with specifically Arab literary traditions and political territories.

While poststructuralism has provided us with new and important critical tools for revisiting canons, cultural discourses, and modes of production and reception, it has also tended to foreclose the broader social and political terms of our engagement with texts and traditions conceived as coherent historical formations that speak meaningfully to the past, present, and future. An engaged turn to a new critical literary history for the 21st century is an essential part of this project.

NOTES

[1]Gayatri C. Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 6.

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[2]See, for example, Abdelfattah Kilito, *The Author and His Doubles: Essays on Classical Arabic Culture*, trans. Michael Cooperson (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2001); and idem, *al-Gha'ib: Dirasa fi Maqama li-l-Hariri* (Casablanca: Dar Tubaqqal li-l-Nashr, 1987).

[3]Critical studies of the modern *critical* tradition in Arabic literature are practically non-existent in any language, including Arabic—a truly shocking lacuna in contemporary scholarship and one that speaks worlds about the U.S. field's relationship to its disciplinary object.

[4]Frederic Jameson's influential 1986 essay "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capital" established a theoretical framework for reading modern African and Asian literature based, however anecdotally, in the language of development discourse. More recently, world-systems-theory varieties of world literature studies map modern global literary production through a center/periphery model that produces hierarchies of (European) originals and (non-European) copies. For a cogent discussion of this problematic from an Arab perspective, see Barbara Harlow, "Mismar Goha: The Arab Challenge to Cultural Dependency," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 87 (1988): 109–129.

[5]Kamran Rastegar, "Seeds of Revolution: Symposium, April 8, 2011," Tufts University, last modified 27 March 2011, http://sites.tufts.edu/nahdasymposium/author/kraste01/ (accessed 29 June 2011).

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