

Arabic Literature in Translation: Politics and Poetics

Literatura árabe traducida: política y poética

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When the question is raised about the validity of existing interpretive frames, of whether the traditional modes of reception and the attendant theoretical approaches are still relevant today, some form of a negative answer is implicitly anticipated. One assumes, or hopes for, progress. Thus, while the call for papers for this collection focused in the limitations of translation and publication (an inevitable topic when discussing Arabic literature, at least in European languages), one is justified in thinking that an investigation of the current conditions is bound to reveal new developments. In the five articles collected in this issue (ranging in approach and scope, though admittedly limited to Western Europe and the United States) old paradigms and new developments can be found side by side, inducing conflicting feelings of pessimism and optimism (both guarded), sometimes in the same article (e.g. Fährndrich).

The most persistent of the traditional paradigms seems to be what Susan Pickford calls the «ethnographic frame» (see her article in this collection). Arabic literature has indeed made tangible progress into acceptance as part of world literature (as van Leeuwen remarks with regard to the *Arabian Nights*, and Fährndrich with regard to modern Arabic fiction). Yet, native literature is still seen by most publishers and readers as a way of gathering information about the local culture. Translation, in this respect, is expected to complement the exponential growth in studies on the social, religious, and especially political, life of the Arab World, which was coupled by a boom in academic

offerings in these areas. Thus, current political events are still an important factor at least in the choice of works for translation: for better or worse, political landmarks seem to be more significant than literary ones in the history of Arabic literature in translation. «Better» is a possibility because one may argue (see Alkharashi's article) that interest in any form should be welcome. True, appreciation of Arabic literature seems to focus on its socially representative value, rather than its intrinsic merit. But surely it cannot be a bad thing that Arabic literature is being translated more frequently (though not always at substantial rates) than it has ever been. Whether quantity will eventually be transformed into quality remains, of course, to be seen.

Yet, there are two sides in any intercultural exchange (even if it is largely one-sided). Several authors in this collection remind us that obstacles to the translation and transmission of Arabic literature sometimes start at the source, including a weak publishing structure, the ineffectiveness of many institutional initiatives to promote Arabic literature, and entrenched modes of reading in Arabic itself. As Fähndrich wryly remarks, «works that are from a literary point of view of a rather modest quality treat this kind of problems [social and political repression] often more blatantly aggressively and receive, for this reason, more attention (in the Arabic original as well as in translation)». Anyone familiar with the modern Arabic literary scene can appreciate the truth of this statement. For example, a look at the list of winners in International Prize of Arabic Fiction, perhaps the most eminent literary prize in Arabic today, confirms that a combination of «grand causes» (political struggles, controversial, but not very controversial, religious questions) and some form of intercultural experience seem to be decisive factors, above and beyond purely literary merits.

On the other hand, whatever we may say about entrenched modes of reception (in Arabic or translated languages), scholarship is definitely breaking new ground. While Edward Said's *Orientalism* is still an authoritative text, referenced in all essays (explicitly quoted in all but one), it is mostly as a point of departure—evaluations of its relevance ranging from partial to problematized, or even supplanted, by recent developments. The diversity of approaches in this collection speaks for a dynamic and widely growing field.

In «Translating Contemporary Arabic literature—a Pleasure with Many Obstacles», Hartmut Fähndrich surveys the current status of translated Arabic literature in German. Echoing Said's criticisms, he remarks how «Myths, clichés and reproaches readily surface when translation from Arabic into Western languages is discussed». This obstacle he traces to the long shadow cast by the *Arabian Nights*, which, despite, or because of, its enormous success in integrating the work into German literary culture, created a certain perception of Arabic literature in general, which has slowly degenerated into a cliché, «making difficult today the distribution of contemporary Arabic literature in translation, because this literature by and large does not correspond to that cliché». But the picture is not all bleak: the reception of Arabic literature in German has gone

through several stages, reaching one of «normalization» three decades ago. The time has come, Fähndrich argues, when literary works from the Arab world have «finally come to be considered “normal” literature», given equal treatment on bookshelves without any special status. Which does not mean that all trouble is over. For even when a literary work makes it through the «stony path» from scouting, through translation, then publication and distribution, it may stumble at the final link of transmission: the readers with whom «normalization» has not yet set in, and who still expect literary works from the Arab world to have unique characteristics. Nevertheless, Fähndrich insists that «Things are moving»: thanks to «the unflagging efforts» of some committed translators, one can hope that the final stage of normalization will finally prevail. The fact that Fähndrich has just won the highest literary award in Switzerland for his efforts in translating Arabic literature is an indication that we are not in a «vicious» (or a «closed») circle.

The *Arabian Nights*, whose influence has had such a negative effect on the perceptions of modern Arabic literature in Fähndrich’s article, has a different position in Richard van Leeuwen’s «European Translations of the *Thousand and One Nights* and their Reception: Orientalist Falsification or Literary Fascination?» Without disputing Edward Said’s critique of orientalism, and the work it has inspired, van Leeuwen proposes another framework, derived from a model of world literature, for the study of the trajectory of this work in European, especially German, literature. Van Leeuwen acknowledges that the reception of the *Thousand and One Nights* has often been marred by prejudice and stereotypes, as various translators manipulated the book to serve their own agendas, often in line with colonial discourse. But these practices, he argues, are not enough to explain the vast popularity of the book, and, more importantly, the profound impact it has made on the target cultures and languages. In fact, van Leeuwen rejects the reception model for a much more fundamental reason: the *Thousand and One Nights*, he maintains, was «incorporated» into European literature. This was not an act of colonialist appropriation, but rather «a meeting point of hermeneutical horizons... an intellectual space in which cultural boundaries became blurred». Without ignoring contextual elements, van Leeuwen emphasizes the textual and intertextual processes foregrounded in a World-Literature model. He thus argues that, due to intensified European interaction with the outer world, and, no less importantly, the unstable and mutable nature of the book itself, the *Thousand and One Nights* entered—in fact created—a transitional zone where the text was circulated, adapted, recreated, and textually formulated. As a result, it influenced European literature itself, challenging existing genres and opening up new literary possibilities.

In «Modern Arabic Fiction in English: *Yacoubian Building* a Case in Point», Norah Alkharashi makes another case for the limitations of anti-orientalist critique. While recognizing the barriers that still limit the translation and reception of Arabic literature, Alkharashi argues, through a study of *Yacoubian Building*, the English translation of the

best-selling novel by Egyptian author Alaa al Aswany, that «contemporary assessment shows encouraging signs of change». To judge at least by numbers: thirty Arabic titles were published in English in 2014 alone, «which puts Arabic right after French, Spanish and German in popularity in the United States and England». Alkharashi agrees with many modern critics (for a different evaluation, see Pickford in this collection) that a significant milestone was Naguib Mahfouz’s winning of the Nobel Prize in 1988. Still, as demonstrated by other articles in this collection, political events have usually been more significant than literary or artistic ones in the reception of Arabic literature in translation. So the relative boom in translating Arabic literature in 2014 came in the wake of curiosity about the Arab World generated by the 9/11 attacks and the Arab Spring. While this interest in Arabic literature has not necessarily led to aesthetic appreciation (and Alkharashi acknowledges that the many reviews of *Yacoubian Building* in major journals in the US and England do not mention its literary value), she argues that one can at least make the case that «the embargo metaphor may no longer stand up to scrutiny».

«Dreams Deferred, Translated: Radwa Ashour and Langston Hughes» is another case study of the translation of a literary work from Arabic into English—this time from the translator’s point of view. Michelle Hartman is one of those translators who are trying, in Fähndrich’s phrase, to «“propel” Arabic literature to where it belongs—alongside other strands of world literature»; her analysis of her own translation of Radwa Ashour’s account of her years of study in the United States gives us an insight into their «unflagging efforts». But, Hartman’s aim is not only promotion, but political engagement through the very act of translation. In her 1983 translation of Langston Hughes, a primary figure in the African-American Civil Rights Movement, Ashour sought to inscribe the American author within a narrative of solidarity that connects struggles for equality across different cultures. In her back translation of the textual strategies whereby the Egyptian author integrated Hughes’ anti-racist narrative not only to Arabic literature, but also to Arab political struggles, Hartman explores the possibility of a «resistant translation», one that subverts relations of imbalance between Arabic-speaking and English-speaking worlds. Recognizing the difficulties facing postcolonial interventions (further complicated in this context by intense debates on Orientalist misrepresentation), she emphasizes the necessity of bringing theoretical insights into practice, without risking cozy generalizations about resistance strategies that work for all contexts. For this purpose, Hartman uses Ashour’s text as a location to work through questions about politics and resistance in translation studies. The result, among other things, is an inside look into the workings of the translation process whose broad cultural and political contexts are examined in the other articles.

In «The Factors Governing the Availability of Maghrebi Literature in English: A case Study in the Sociology of Translation», Susan Pickford, conducts an illuminating comparison of the different frames of reception through which the works of Maghrebi

writers in Arabic and French pass into English-speaking readers. Due the relative «normalisation of Maghrebi French writing within the French literary field», Maghrebi writers in French can rely practically on the same avenues of transmission as their French counterparts, not only in the original French, but in English as well (where their stronger position within the French literary polysystem has gained them some visibility). Maghrebi writers in Arabic, on the other hand, are in a double bind: marginalized within French literature, as well as in Arabic literature itself (as interest tends to focus on writers from Lebanon and Egypt). Hence the obstacles facing the spread of their works: the ethnographic frame and prejudice are a lot stronger than those facing their French-language counterparts. Besides illustrating the barriers facing the translation of modern Arabic literature into European languages, Pickford's essay draws attention to the diversity of Arabic literature itself, that it is not one homogenous monolith. We are reminded that internal differences play a considerable part in what and how works from Arabic are translated—a reality that certainly deserves more attention in studies of the translation of Arabic literature.

To go back to the question raised in our call for papers, and invoked explicitly or implicitly by all the authors in this collection: is Arabic literature (still) embargoed? In view of the considerable efforts of scholars and translators examined here, this statement would seem rather extreme. Obstacles to the translation, publication, and distribution of Arabic literature remain considerable (and not only due to difficulties in the target cultures). But over the twenty-five years that have passed since Edward Said made his famous indictment, there has been slow and steady progress. Which of these two sides of progress is more pronounced would depend on one's focus (what Arabic literature and in what language we have in mind). For while progress can certainly be observed, it has manifested itself differently in the various contexts covered in this collection. Future studies will certainly broaden the scope we have covered here, hopefully revealing further progress in different areas, and in both the source and target cultures.