

# From New Values to New Aesthetics

## Turning Points in Modern Arabic Literature

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## Preface

STEPHAN GUTH & GAIL RAMSAY

The two volumes of *From New Values to New Aesthetics: Turning Points in Modern Arabic Literature* are based on papers given at the 8<sup>th</sup> meeting of the European Association for Modern Arabic Literature (EURAMAL), held at Uppsala University in June 2008. The publication of these papers, in two volumes, reflects the meeting's twofold objective. While Volume 1 revisits the history of modern Arabic literature in search of the decisive factors—events, periods, individuals, etc.—that have given this literature new directions in the past, Volume 2 explores the contemporary literary scene scanning it for indications of the possible dawn of a new era.

From today's perspective [July 2011], i.e., a few months after the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt and with mass protests still going on in a number of other Arab countries, the essays gathered in Volume 2 may appear as an exploration into “pre-revolutionary” writing. At the time the EURAMAL board began to design the 2008 conference and panels on the contemporary scene, however, though clearly sensing and monitoring the “drive towards restructuring and uprising” in the new kind of literary creativity that had been emerging, particularly since the turn of the century, the board operated less with prospective and anticipatory than with retrospective categories. Concentrating on the present scene by considering the past, in particular the more immediate one of the preceding two or three decades, attention was diverted from asking what the new kind of texts could foreshadow in terms of social or political change.

Given the relative closeness of this period and the lack of scholarly agreement on its nature and classification it was not only asked whether the most recent developments should be seen as a continuation of, or a rupture with, “postmodernism”, but also whether there was such a thing as “postmodernism” in modern Arabic literature at all. Besides the neutral term “generation of...” and Edward al-Kharrāṭ's widely used but also much disputed and not less unspecific term “New Sensibility” (*ḥassāsiyyah jadīdah*) that, originally, was coined for the (post-realist) writing of a much earlier period and already seemed quite outdated by then, “postmodernism” had been the only descriptive label proposed so far<sup>1</sup> that provided a number of useful categories. Although many of them did not really seem to be applicable, the term at least helped, as a heuristic device, to describe and delineate current developments analytically and grasp their specific character. It was not before the next (the 9<sup>th</sup>) EURAMAL meeting in Rome two years later (2010) that the board for the first time dared to tentatively define the new period as one for which the individual's taboo-breaking advancement into the world of desires and pleasures, essentially human and natural but up till

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1 *Arabische Literatur, postmodern*, ed. A. Pflitsch, A. Neuwirth & B. Winckler, München: edition & kritik, 2004; revised and enlarged English version: *Arabic Literature: Postmodern Perspectives*, ed. iid., London & Beirut: Saqi Books, 2010.

now denied to him/her, seemed to be a major characteristic.<sup>2</sup> For the contributors to the present volume, however, the starting points were still “New Sensibility”, the “Generation of the 1990s”, and “postmodernism”. Implicitly or explicitly accepting or refusing these terms and the analytical categories they entailed, or, as the case may be, trying to replace them with more meaningful, more appropriate, more relevant ones, each of the volume’s essays makes an effort to meet the challenges of the project of writing the history of contemporary Arabic literature. Their aim is to add to our understanding of the multifaceted mosaic of modern Arabic literature and advance our knowledge about, and understanding of, the period that immediately preceded the “Arab Spring”.

The picture of the period that emerges from an overall reading of the present volume’s contributions exhibits the following general characteristics:

- In a number of respects, it seems to be a period of decentralisation and the emancipation of hitherto relatively silent countries and local voices. Among the 15 articles in this volume, only four are on Egyptian (Abou-bakr, Guth, Hafez, Junge) and three on Lebanese and Syrian authors (Boustani, Ghosn Baddoura, Viviani). In other words, more than half of the contributions focus on other countries than those which until quite recently used to be given the major part of scholarly attention because Egyptian and Levantine literature clearly dominated the canon. In the new period, Iraq (Avino, Milich, Ottosson Al-Bitar), the Gulf countries including Yemen (Camera d’Afflitto), the Maghreb (Dové, Fernández Parrilla, Wellnitz) and the diaspora (Ottosson al-Bitar) have obviously become more important and/or interesting, and have taken the place of Egypt and the Levant. This can certainly be seen as a result of globalisation and the spread of new means of communication (cf. Rooke), which has created a worldwide Arabic literary field, facilitated access to the literary arena and the book market and in this way enhanced the integration of marginal voices into it. *Mutatis mutandis* this holds equally true for the local scenes where provincial towns witness the emergence of new poetry festivals and literary journals, competitions in fictional writing as well as an increased pride in local spoken varieties as a medium for literary expression (Abou-bakr). Still, mostly unnoticed by many observers, local centres have begun to compete with former cultural capitals. On the other hand, while local expression of identity obviously is being strengthened and upvalued (Viviani), new expressions of composed (“hybrid”) identities marked by characteristics of globalization too become increasingly important and a positive source of inspiration rather than of a deplorable loss.<sup>3</sup>
- Whereas modern Arabic literature until recently has been dominated by male writers, critics and academics, women have now begun to play a prominent part. At least one third of the present volume’s essays (Avino, Boustani, Junge, Ottosson Al-Bitar, Wellnitz) deal with what these women have to say.

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2 The title of the conference was “Désir, plaisir et tabou : Voix nouvelles et liberté d’expression dans la littérature arabe contemporaine / Desire, Pleasure and the Taboo: New Voices and Freedom of Expression in Contemporary Arabic Literature”. The proceedings of this symposium are under preparation (editorial board headed by Isabella Camera d’Afflitto).

3 Cf. Stephan Guth, “Individuality Lost, Fun Gained: Some recurrent motifs in late twentieth-century Turkish and Arabic novels”, *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, 7 (2007 [2008]): 25-49. <<http://www.uib.no/jais/v007/GuthPP.pdf>>.

- A feature that, like the aforementioned ‘glocalisation’, seems to be very postmodern is the period’s general disinterest in the major issues of former grand narratives, or its eagerness to deconstruct these narratives as being the result of sinister and/or detrimental power discourses. National history is a recurring theme, particularly in the case of post-Saddam Iraq (Avino, Milich, Ottosson Al-Bitar) and in post-civil war Lebanon (Ghosn Baddoura), but it may appear also in a country like Egypt (Guth). On the other hand, the absence of a contribution on Palestinian literature is quite significant. Of course, it may be lacking by mere chance; one may, however, also suspect that Palestinian literature—which until recently used to be highly politicized and in this way was heavily dependent on the great national narrative(s)—is undergoing a process of redefining itself after the breakdown of these narratives. In general, we observe that due to the ideological burdens of the past, the literature of the new period favours exploring new terrain and avoids dealing with the grand issues. Although the political dimension and social consciousness are never completely absent, their presence may be more implicit, intricately woven into the primary focus of a text: intimacy, individual sensations, emotions (Boustani, Junge, Wellnitz), the meeting with an Other (Viviani) or even the experience of a quiet landscape (Dové).

To what extent are these features still those of al-Kharrāṭ’s “New Sensibility”? Are they basically the same as those which the “Generation of the 1960s” promoted in the wake of wars and disappointment with leaderships which neither delivered reform nor societal progress? Are these features, and of course others—the above list is certainly far from comprehensive—, indebted to the literary expressions that emerged under the pressure to modernize in order to be accepted as a member of the global community? In which respect are they similar, or related, to the experimental, “postrealist” styles and “postmodern” tendencies that developed when the realism of the pre-1960s clearly became insufficient to express the complex realities of the region? And to what extent are “postmodernism”, *ḥassāsiyyah jadīdah*, the experimental styles of the “Generation of the 1960s” and “Post-colonial Literary Modernism” (S. Meyer<sup>4</sup>) only different sides of the same coin, merely addressing different aspects of a period that is essentially *one*? Or do we need terminological differentiation, clarification and heightened precision to enable us to deal more adequately with the phenomena that are emerging since the early 2000s? These seem to have a number of features in common with the writings of the “Generation of the 1990s”, although much of the most recent production does not share the former’s often extremely individualizing styles. Outside the framework of Arabic and Middle Eastern literatures, trends that could be similar to those observed in the present volume have been tentatively described, for other literatures worldwide, with terms like ‘Post-postmodernism’, ‘New Humanism’, or ‘Critical Realism’.<sup>5</sup> Each of these labels signals a shift in literary paradigms on a global

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4 Stefan G. Meyer, *The Experimental Arabic Novel: Postcolonial Literary Modernism in the Levant*, New York: State University of New York Press, 2001.

5 Cf. book titles such as José López & Gary Potter (eds.), *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism* (London: Athlone, 2001); Klaus Stierstorfer (ed.), *Beyond Postmodernism: Reassessments in Literature, Theory, and Culture* (Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), which includes Ihab Hassan’s programmatic study “Beyond Postmodernism: Toward an Aesthetic of Trust” (pp. 199-212); Regina Rudaitytė (ed.), *Postmodernism and After: Visions and Revisions*, Newcas-



scale that, despite the seeming vagueness, at first sight, of the terms themselves, nevertheless with high probability is symptomatic of a moral general shift in modern man's perception of the world. Is it possible then that the tendencies that can be observed in post-2000 Arabic literature are somehow connected to these global tendencies, and may the labels and the features they represent help us to identify additional traits in contemporary Arabic literature and to describe this literature against the backdrop of a global paradigmatical shift?<sup>6</sup>

The in-depth analyses brought together in the present volume will not provide definitive answers to all of these questions. But all of them are significant contributions to the writing of the history of what one day may appear in the books under the heading "The Pre-Revolutionary Period". It will be an achievement in itself to have contributed to the analysis of this period in terms of continuity and rupture with earlier tendencies in modern Arabic literature. After all, isn't literature one of the best indicators of what *really* is going on? In other words, studying the pre-revolutionary Arabic literature will tell us much about the nature of the uprisings themselves.

Oslo / Stockholm, July 2011

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tle/UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008. Similar ideas are expressed, on a more general, philosophical level in Alan Kirby's "The Death of Postmodernism And Beyond", *Philosophy Now*, 58 (Nov./Dec. 2006), <[http://www.philosophynow.org/issue58/The\\_Death\\_of\\_Postmodernism\\_And\\_Beyond](http://www.philosophynow.org/issue58/The_Death_of_Postmodernism_And_Beyond)> (24Jul2011).

6 Consider, for instance, what Roger Caldwell writes with regard to his 'Critical realism': "Critical realism [...] rescues us from the postmodernist nightmare and restores us to reality. We cannot manage without a concept of truth. There is (as most of us thought all along) a pre-existing external reality about which it is the job of science to tell us. True, we must be cautious about claims to objective reality, alert to ideological distortions, and aware that the world is a messier, more complicated place than the accounts of physicists would suggest. This does not mean that such claims cannot plausibly be made. A central plank of critical realism is that science can no longer be considered as just another myth or story" (R. Caldwell, "How to Get Real", *Philosophy Now* 42 (2003): 35-38, here: 36; retrieved 24Jul2011 from <[www.philosophynow.org/issue42/42caldwell1.htm](http://www.philosophynow.org/issue42/42caldwell1.htm)>). This attitude is strikingly similar to that of, say, 'Alā' al-Aswānī or Rajā' 'Abdallāh al-Ṣānī', the authors of two post-2000 Arabic best-sellers!