Preface

What is World Literature—of Arabic?

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World Literature has been diversely considered a process of translation, circulation and re-interpretation, an agora for dialogic national canons, a form of resistance to a politically biased world market, an ethical way of being in the world, and a list of best works. The question re-launched in 2003 by David Damrosch—“what is world literature?”—takes on interesting critical, linguistic and pedagogical paradigms when it travels elsewhere. What *is* world literature—of Arabic?

The phrase “of Arabic” is used here rather than “in Arabic” because by the paradigms of world literature, language is a temporary mode and a text is always a potential work-in translation. In the case of Arabic it is often through translation that Arabic goes out into the world, and it is through translation that other languages have affected Arabic literature. This has been the case over all periods of Arabic literary production, from classical times until the present, from *Kalilah wa dimnah* in the eighth century to Harry Potter in the twentieth. Moreover, as a “universal language” within the Arabic-speaking world, but also a “cosmopolitan vernacular” (Pollock 1994) between Arabic-speakers in the diaspora, there is a continuous metamorphic relation (or, in the terms of world literature, a process of “going global”) between the various scripts, vernaculars and “creoles” which have fed into and have been influenced by Arabic, such as Berber, Hebrew, Syriac, Kurdish and even, some like Abdelfattah Kilito would claim, English and French. How has this affected what world literature of Arabic may mean?

The diversity of the peoples of the Middle East and the region’s strategic location have ensured its continuous interaction with different cultures. Such encounters include colonialism but extend beyond it for over a millennium

of history to include wars, religious expansion, scholarship exchange, trade, tourism, and the spread of agriculture and industry. These encounters also extend after decolonisation to include new contexts such as nonalignment and the Cold War, globalisation and digital networks, and migration of labour and exile. Such flux has pushed intellectuals and reformers to reflect on the relations of diverse cultures to Arabic culture, from Jahiz to Alberonius and Naseri Khasrau, from Ahmad Shidyaq to Frantz Fanon, and from Ignaty Krachkovsky to Milton Hatoum. How have such reflections interpreted the presence of Arabic literature in the world? How have such connections defined Arabic canons and literary history? What world canon did Arabic authors consciously dialogue with? How does world literature in Arabic reflect on world literature in its Euro-American contexts?

If Paris offered an example of a world republic of letters at a certain time (Casanova 1999/2004), can we speak of Other republics of worldly letters of the "Middle East"? After all, at different points in time, cultural events in Alexandria, Baghdad, Cordoba, Fez, Cairo, Tripoli or Beirut could travel to Athens, Venice, Flanders, Canton, Tehran, Lahore and Havana. This travelling culture was neither a symptom of an eccentric and bygone past, nor only a reflection of a modern interest in Oriental studies. During the Cold War, for example, new political networks between the Middle East, Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union and Latin America were forged, and cultural exchange naturally accompanied these circuits. What were the pedagogies and institutions, whether formal or informal, of Eastern world letters, whether located in the Arabic-speaking world or outside it? How did educators and scholars of Arabic posit it as world literature: that is, one which is read, translated, examined, canonized and readapted? Most recently, and even though the capitals of the Middle East are not world literary centers, the unprecedented digitization of networks pushed the cultural manifestations of the Occupy movements to travel, with the same artwork, manifestos, blogs and slogans of Tunis and Cairo being reformulated in London, Madrid and New York. How then do the cultural connections of the Middle East reflect different networks of world letters? In a region where illiteracy remains widespread, what are the "alternative" understandings of the literary?

The Middle East has often been an area of turmoil. While it is a truism everywhere that more human beings live than die, and that despite ever-present conflicts, people spend more time getting along with each other than killing each other, conflict necessarily reflects in literary cultures and histories: how has this been true of the Middle East? If part of being worldly and opening up to world connections means being ethical and aware, what does it mean to be a public intellectual of the Middle East, particularly without the support systems which world academies of letters take for granted?

When literary establishments are threatened because of conflict—from the burning of the ancient library of Alexandria to the bombing of Al-Mutanabbi street of booksellers in Baghdad, and from the expulsion of non-Muslims from Mosul and the destruction of its libraries by ISIS to Israel's repeated bombing of Gaza, how does literature still circulate, cultural production continue, and intellectuals persist? What then is world literature—of Arabic?

Works Cited

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