SULAYMĀN AL-BUSTĀNĪ AND COMPARATIVE LITERARY STUDIES IN ARABIC

Sulaymān al-Bustānī (1856-1925), was born in Lebanon, and completed his secondary studies in al-Madrasah al-waṭaniyyah in Beirut. Besides Arabic, he mastered many other languages, including English, French and German. For a long time, he travelled regularly between Beirut, Cairo and Istanbul, besides visiting Europe and the United States of America. The introduction and notes he wrote to his translation of the Iliad,1 contain his main literary critical thought. This work constitutes one of the serious attempts of the later decades of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth to study Arabic culture and literature. In this paper I propose to deal with some of the main aspects of Bustānī’s literary criticism, particularly his contribution to the study of comparative literature in Arabic.

Poetry and Poets

Bustānī regards poetry as a product of social, cultural and linguistic material.2 He classifies it into two major sorts; it either describes prominent phenomena of the world, epic poetry, or expresses hidden human feelings, lyrical poetry. He emphasises that this does not mean a work should limit itself to one sort only. There are many works, such as those of Homer, Racine, Shakespeare, and Corneille, where both kinds of poetry are interwoven with each other.3 Yet in both sorts, Bustānī says, poetry should mainly be concerned with description. He insists that a fact should be described as clearly as it appears in nature; and hence a poet should give full details.4

1 Sulayman al-Bustani, Ilyadhat Ḥāmirūs—muʿarrabah nazman wa-ṣalayhā shahr tārikhi adabi—wa-ḥiya muṣaddarah bi-muqaddimah fi Ḥāmirūs wa-shīrīh wa-adab al-Yīnān wa-al-ʿArab wa-mudhayyalah bi muʿjam ʿamm wa-fahāris, (Cairo, 1904). For more detailed information on Bustānī’s life and education see:
   - Fuʿād Iftār al-Bustānī, al-Rawḍsī, Nos. 44-46, (Beirut, 1952).
   - Mūṣṭafā al-Sawāyā, Sulaymān al-Bustānī wa-Ilyadhat Ḥāmirūs, (Beirut, 1948).

2 Ilyadhat., pp. 126-200.

3 Ibid., pp. 164-65.

4 Ibid., p. 144.
A poet, according to Bustānī, is a parallel to the historian. Both are interested in recording events (waqā'ī). The former is more involved in introducing and describing morals, religious beliefs, and social doctrines, whereas the latter is more interested in the recording of exact times and details of incidents. Poetry is not a mere expression of individual sentiments. It becomes an act of informing about nature, and for this reason Bustānī praises the Iliad as an encyclopaedic work which gathers together all the knowledge of its age.

Bustānī’s comments on Homer as the ideal of a poet are illuminating. He says that Homer discovered facts by the virtue of the ability of fancy, and also because he depended on the Muse, who inspired him in the same way as Gods inspire prophets. He adds that Homer expresses his ideas without affectation; ‘truth was his aim, and intuition his guide’. Thus, although poets and historians both deal with the same subject, the truth, each is of a different nature. A historian uses artificial methods to reach his goal; and a poet is involved in more natural means. Yet, this does not mean that poets should be totally dependent on their natural gifts. Like Barbir, Bustānī says that they should know ‘a little about many things’, Yet, unlike him, he believes that poets are closer than other human beings to perfection, while admitting that ‘none, even poets, can claim perfection’. He also believes that an ideal poet is one, like Ḥassān Ibn Thābit and Byron, who leads his nation. Thus, both poets and scientists are ‘co-operating together for the revival of culture’. ‘The poet is the mouth-piece of the scientists’ army, and the scientist is the lantern for the poet’.

In her work on the Iliad, Madame Dascier, whom Bustānī may have read, describes the poet’s task in a similar manner to that of Bustānī’s interpretation of poetry. She says: ‘it is one of the first precepts in the art of poetry to describe manners exactly’. Bustānī adds that each nation has its poetic character, which means that a nation with certain literary qualities should not be considered as superior to any other. A similar attitude can be detected in Sainte-Beuve, who believes that each nation has its

5 Ibid., p. 166.
6 Ibid., p. 58.
7 Ibid., p. 176.
8 Ibid., p. 158.
9 Ibid., p. 144.
10 Ibid., p. 192.
11 Bustānī uses the Arabic ‘Ādāb’ which would mean culture as well as literary works. The word culture is more convincing in this particular case.
12 Ilvyādat., p. 158.
13 Dascier, The Iliad of Homer—with notes, To Which are Prefixed a Large Preface and the Life of Homer, 5 vols., trans. Ozell, (London, 1712), vol. 1 p. XIX.