MUHAMMAD MANDÜR AND THE “NEW POETRY”

When Muḥammad Mandūr died in 1965 he had established himself as a prominent figure in Arabic literary criticism, and was described by one writer as modern Egypt’s foremost literary critic. He evolved an eclectic theory of literature that incorporated the precepts of the Romantics, the Symbolists and the exponents of “Art for Art’s Sake”.

Mandür was a prolific writer. His output consisted of a large number of books and articles. In his work, more so than in the work of any other literary critic of his generation, the critical trend initiated by Dr. Ẓāḥā Husayn seemed to have found its most articulate expression. The theory of literary criticism which he propounded was greatly influenced by that of Gustave Lanson, Ẓāḥā Husayn’s teacher, whose treatise “La Méthode de l’histoire littéraire” was translated into Arabic by Mandūr himself. According to this theory, literary criticism is an art, not a science. It seeks for values that science ignores. It is constantly concerned with what is particular, whereas science is concerned with what is general. Since literature contains subtle nuances which can be perceived by a direct and intuitive response, not by logical application of rules and extraneous methods of classification, the critic’s personal taste plays an important part in his judgment. In harmony with this theory, Mandūr fought a vehement battle against the application of psychology and the formulas and terminology of the natural sciences to the study and evaluation of literary works.

1 Rich biographical information can be drawn from Mandūr’s interview with Fuḥd Dawwāra, published in ʿAshrāt Udab Yatatāddāthīn, Cairo 1965, pp. 169-226. On this interview are based almost all the articles, written after Mandūr’s death, about his life and work, such as Jalāl al-ʿAshri’s in al-Fikr al-Muṣīr, No. 7, Sept. 1965, pp. 64-74, and the rather long article in al-Ṭalīʿa, May 1966, pp. 130-52.
2 Dawwāra, op. cit., p. 171.
4 See the first part of Manbaj al-Baḥth fīl-ʿAdab waʿl-Lugha, Beirut 1946.
5 These are the views he consistently expressed throughout his books fīl-Mirzān al-Jadīd, and al-Naqd al-Manbajī ʿinda al-ʿArab.
Mandûr’s practice of literary criticism was highly consistent with his theory. His approach to literature was predominantly artistic. His judgments on a literary work combined both taste and knowledge; they were in essence the rationalization of his personal response in the light of a coherent philosophy concerning the nature and function of literature, especially those of the genre to which the work under consideration belongs. His dramatic criticism was focused on the main theme of the plot, the structure, the dialogue, and the appropriateness of the artistic means employed to achieve the final effect of the play. Similarly, Mandûr’s treatment of modern poetry, be it Egyptian or Syrio-American or otherwise, revolved round the emotional experience, and the metaphoric and melodious language, which he considered as part and parcel of all poetic creations. His literary preferences were exclusively based on the interrelated functions of these elements.

Within the limits of the present article, it would be a vain undertaking to attempt a detailed account of Mandûr’s practical criticism. The following discussion will be devoted to his concept of šib‘ir mahmûs (whispered poetry) and his attitude towards Arabic “New Poetry”. The exact denotation of these terms will be explained in the course of the article.

From the outset of his career, Mandûr found that the most serious defect of contemporary Egyptian literature was the absence of intimacy (ulfa). This literature demonstrated great craftsmanship, but lacked sincerity. The writers were in need of modesty, even simplicity, in order to produce the kind of “whispered” literature (mahmûs) that is similar to the literary monuments of the world. Having thus envisaged the problems of Egyptian literature, Mandûr called upon the modern poets and writers to try and emulate what had been achieved in recent years by some Arab writers in the American diaspora (Mahjar). Hence his campaign, which began in 1942, for what he called “whispered poetry” (al-šib‘ir al-mahmûs). This is a kind of poetry which he could not clearly define. However, its...