THE ROMANTIC REVOLUTION?

The flowering or Romanticism in Egypt and the Levant is an integral part of the series of revolutions—in Egypt in 1919, in Iraq in 1918 and 1920, in Syria in 1925—which saw Arab national enthusiasms coming to grips with continuing imperial hegemony on the part of Britain and France. It was certainly an age of political engagement and of dramatic change as the new nation states arose from the debris of what had been the Ottoman empire. It is well established that the principal direct inspiration for Arab romanticism was derived largely from the springs of romanticism in England and France in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. There is also ample evidence that a significant portion of the intellectual infrastructure of the new Arab nationalisms can be traced to the ideals of the European enlightenment and to some of the principles which inspired the French Revolution.

Let us for a moment consider some of the great figures of the Romantic movement in Europe who were in certain cases read, translated, and appreciated by their Arab counterparts of a later age. After more than two hundred years, it is easy to forget the profound impact which that most archetypal of European Revolutions had upon the lives of some of the great writers of the Romantic period:

The French Revolution had put politics and political choices at the very centre of society: it was no longer Catholic or Protestant beliefs which determined life or death, but monarchist or republican, reactionary or revolutionary, aristocrat or democrat: the repertory of ideologies gruesomely enacted in the theatre of Paris, with the entire Western world its gripped and jostling audience.

In the summer of 1790, while on a walking tour in France, the young William Wordsworth marvelled at the nation revelling in new revolutionary fervour, while in London, William Blake saw the French Revolution as tantamount to the fulfillment of the messages of the Hebrew Prophets of the Old Testament. In fact Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley were anything but ivory-tower figures who were

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1 One of the most masterly studies in this field is Muhammad Abdul Hai: Tradition and English and American Influence in Arabic Romantic Poetry. (Ithaca Press, London, 1982).
2 The most complete study of this subject remains Albert Hourani’s Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939 (O.U.P. 1962).
4 Ibid., p. 21.

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detached from the world of ordinary mortals. They were all deeply engaged in social and political issues, having been inspired by what they thought of in Shelley’s words as “the master theme of the epoch”. They tended to see and to use their poetry as a weapon in a larger war and not as an end in itself; they all intensely admired Milton as the poet of the past who had played his part in shaping the destiny of the nation. Perhaps it is Shelley, the most frequently translated English poet for the Arab Romantics, who provides the most dramatic example of such engagement when he published his extraordinary planned epic Queen Mab (in 1813). This had the deserved reputation of the most revolutionary document of its age in England, and it became an important source of inspiration to subsequent groups of political and social radicals.5

Such a degree of concern with political and social issues is difficult to find amongst the Arab Romantics, a feature which has been commented on at some length by Salmā al-Jayyūsī in whose somewhat extreme view “Arab Romanticism came into being with the rise of Arab nationalism but is not to be identified with it.”6 It is also certainly the case, as is pointed out by Muhammad ‘Abd al-Ḥai, that the image of European Romanticism which came to the Arab World was one that was filtered through the critical optic of late Victorian England;7 the spectacles were rose-tinted and focussed closely on scenes of natural beauty and pastoral bliss, rather than on revolution and class conflict. It was Luwís ‘Awād who set out with great gusto in 1947 to expose the fallacy of the non-committed Romantic which, in his terms, had been misleading the Arab World. This he did with his translation of Prometheus Unbound: in the introduction ‘Awād followed Christopher Caudwell in suggesting that Romanticism was the expression in art of the bourgeois reaction against aristocratic culture, and that Shelley was the greatest exponent of the radical philosophy of the middle classes.8 In other words ‘Awād’s was one of the first attempts in Arabic to re-formulate the de-politicized image of Shelley, who, as we have already mentioned, was one of the most frequently translated into Arabic of the great European Romantics. Luwís ‘Awād was, of course, the harbinger of a new generation in political and artistic terms, and for him it was an adequate response to suggest that the previous generation simply got it wrong, i.e. that the Arab Romantics had failed to understand the true nature of Romanticism. However it is necessary to delve somewhat deeper into the extremely complicated

5 Ibid., pp. 48-52.
7 Muhammad Abdul Hai: op. cit., pp. 34 ff.
8 Ibid., pp. 27 ff.