SHELLEY AND THE ARABS:
AN ESSAY IN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

I. INTRODUCTORY

The bibliography of Arabic translations of nineteenth-century English poetry shows that more poems have been translated from Percy Bysshe Shelley than from any other English poet of the last century. For a long time he enjoyed the status of the English Romantic poet *par excellence*. He exerted a considerable influence on the diction, imagery and themes of Arabic poetry between 1910 and 1950. However, the influence of Shelley on Arabic poetry is outside the intended plan of this article, which deals primarily with the growth of his reputation in the Arab East.

It was from the late Victorian age that the Arab critics and poets knew their Shelley. The Victorian thesis of the dual nature of Shelley the poet was the nucleus round which the Arabs built their image of him. The thesis was perhaps first expressed by Stopford A. Brooke (1832-1916) in the “Preface” of his *Poems of Shelley*, a selection published in 1880. Brooke found that Shelley’s nature and work were “twofold”, that he lived and thought in “two worlds”: “One was the world of Mankind and its hopes, the other was the world of his own heart.” Brooke’s distinction is between what may be called a committed Shelley, “who was inspired by moral aims and wrote in the hope of a regeneration of the world”, and a non-committed Shelley, “who wrote without any ethical end and absolutely apart from humanity”.

For the later Victorian age, the non-committed Shelley was the “real Shelley”, the “ineffectual angel”, who revelled in the innocently lyrical world of his own heart. “The Shelley of actual life”, said Matthew Arnold, “is a vision of beauty and radiance, indeed, but

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1 *A Bibliography of Arabic Translations of English and American Poetry* is in the process of compilation by the author of the present article.
availing nothing, effecting nothing.” Saintsbury, who enjoyed a considerable reputation in the Arab world, thought that Shelley’s “political and social heresies were... more or less accidental”, and that “in a time of triumphant liberalism, Shelley would have been a high Tory and mystical devotee”.2

The “real Shelley” of the late Victorian age is the one represented in Francis T. Palgrave’s The Golden Treasury (1861). For E. W. Edmunds, writing in 1911, the panorama of Shelley’s “theories, speculations, fancies, visions, fall headlong in melodious confusion through his poems”; and he adds: “Turn to Palgrave’s ‘Golden Treasury’ and we see how high a place Shelley holds in lyric poetry.”3 The Golden Treasury is a mirror in which is reflected the Victorian idea of lyrical poetry in general, and of Shelley as a lyrical devotee in particular. In it only Shakespeare and Wordsworth are represented by more poems than Shelley, of whose poems twenty-two are included. “Backed by the lesson of the skylark’s ‘unpremeditated art’,” observes R. B. Woodings,

“the praises swelled for Shelley’s spontaneity, his dreaminess, his beautiful music. To the more astute the latter quality seemed to interfere with that very seriousness on which Shelley insisted, but it was rare for any reviewer to observe any serious threads running through the lyrics themselves. For the later Victorian age Shelley was secure in his niche as a lyric splendour,...”4

II. THE ARAB ROMANTICS

Essentially, the image of Shelley described in the above section is...