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Who Determines the Arabic Literary Canon?

As a translator of modern Arabic literature, and having spent a good chunk of my active years in Egypt between the 1980s and the 2000s, I have been constantly confronted with the questions of literary judgement and literary value. During my stay in Cairo, I could observe on an almost daily basis the gap between the literary value of an Arabic work as defined locally and its value abroad, as well the feedback effect of translation on the national scene. These gaps and effects are linked to the history of the Arab literary space itself, from its formation some fifteen centuries ago to the present day, and to the history of its relations with the dominant European spaces, a history marked in particular by everything that can be put under the heading of "Orientalism," that is, the set of knowledge, representations and institutions constructed in unequal relations between Arab societies and the Euro-American centres where this knowledge and these representations were (and are still) developed. To make my point clear, I shall borrow two examples from classical Arabic literature before turning to a quick survey of the most recent forms of these discrepancies.

In the dominant representation that prevails in modern Arab elites, the core of the Arabic canon is constituted by a two-fold corpus: on the one hand, the Koran—considered not only by Muslims but also, should I add, by many non-Muslim speakers of Arabic language as well, as the epitome of Arabic eloquence—and, on the other hand, a variable body of poetic works that stretches from a cluster of pre-Islamic poets (fifth to seventh centuries CE) to a few great poets of the classical age, the latest ones being al-Mutanabbi (d. 965 CE) and Abu l-'Ala' al-Ma'arri (d. 1057 CE). Unlike other Oriental poetic corpuses (the most telling example being the Japanese haiku), very little of this ancient Arabic poetry has been translated into the main European languages and, when it has been, has remained very much marginalised in the dominant literary spaces. This gap was noted by the late

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André Lefevere, who devoted a chapter to the issue in his classic essay *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*.[1] As for the Koran, while it is widely translated in European and other languages, it is generally not perceived or dealt with as a literary masterpiece. Conversely, *One Thousand and One Nights* (or *Arabian Nights*), the most widely read ancient Arabic work in the world, and one of the most studied and canonised in Western academia, is commonly devalued in the Arab literary establishment—and always has been, in fact—because of its non-conformity with both the linguistic norm (it is written in "Middle Arabic," that is, a mixture of *fus'ha* [pure] literary language and spoken Arabic) and the ethical one (due to passages considered obscene or even pornographic, commonly censored in modern Arabic reprints). A good example of this double standard for France is provided by the catalogue of Gallimard's collection of complete works, the "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade", a convenient indicator of the state of the world literary canon as seen from Paris: for Arabic, it includes, in chronological order of publication, the Koran, an anthology of Arabic travel literature, the *Nights* and Ibn Khaldun's *Book of Examples*,[2] but no anthology of poetry, whether classical or modern.

Turning now to modern Arabic literature, the most eloquent example of the feedback effect of Western consecration on the Arab literary space is what can be described as the "Nobel effect." The Nobel Prize for Literature has been awarded to a writer from France a total of 15 times, including the prize for Annie Ernaux in 2022. For these writers, access to the Nobel Prize is one form of consecration among others, and one that does not silence a writer's detractors, as we have seen in Annie Ernaux's case.[3] Whereas within peripheral

1 André Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (London and New York, Routledge, 1992), esp. Chapter 6: "Translation: Poetics, The Case of the Missing *Qasidah*", 73-86. *Qasidah* is the classical Arabic name for a poem.

2 The reception of Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) in the West is a fascinating case: while it started within the context of colonialism and Orientalism (especially the French conquest of Algeria), it went beyond and from the end of the nineteenth century until nowadays Ibn Khaldun has been widely read and presented as a precursor of modern social sciences. See Syed Farid Alatas, "Reading Ibn Khaldun in the Formative Period of Sociology", *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 35(3) (2022): 302-11. https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12377

3 See, e.g., Christian Salmon, "Derrière la polémique autour de l'attribution du Nobel à Annie Ernaux, une histoire de luttes," *Slate*, 12 October 2022 [https://www.slate.fr/story/234796/annie-ernaux-polemique-attribution-prix-nobel-litterature-politique]; Gisèle Sapiro, "Annie Ernaux: un engagement qui dérange," *En attendant Nadeau*, 22 November 2022 [https://www.en-attendant-nadeau.fr/2022/11/30/ernaux-engagement/].

literary spaces, many of which have yet to be considered by the Nobel, it is a crucial issue, the most visible criterion of access to the universal. The Arab space is a case in point: to date, only one Arab-language writer has been awarded the Nobel Prize, the Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz, back in 1988, and this accolade changed his status both in his country and throughout the Arab world. It so happened that I had just arrived in Cairo in September 1988, as a young Arabist appointed head of the French cultural mission's translation support programme, a position from which I was able to witness the change in Mahfouz's status.

Before October 13, 1988, Mahfouz was certainly a highly acclaimed writer, but an aging one (he was born in 1911), no longer in a central position in the national literary field, for reasons both political (his support for Egypt's separate peace with Israel in 1979 had alienated him a good portion of the national and Arab intellectual and artistic elite) and aesthetic (having given his best between the late 1940s and the early 1970s, he represented a somewhat outdated moment in the development of modern Arabic fiction). After the Nobel, he was more than canonised: he was beatified, in so many ways that would take too long to enumerate now. Another effect of the 1988 prize, one to which I will come back below, was that it contributed to settling the triumph of prose fiction over poetry as the dominant literary form in the modern Arabic canon, a triumph that was soon theorized by leading Egyptian critic Gaber Asfour [Jabir 'Usfur] in his book *Zaman al-riwaya* ("The time of the Novel").[4]

The above examples show that, not surprisingly, the modern Arabic literary output is more subject to the influence of foreign representations than its classical counterpart. When we look at the histories of Arabic literature produced by Arab academics, the foreign influence is perceptible in their very principle—that is, in the idea of writing a history of literature divided up according to a chronology that tends to follows the major political ruptures—rather than in the aesthetic and formal criteria that define the classical Arabic canon.

However, as far as modern literature is concerned, a new element came into play, namely, the formation of the modern Arab states, in which writing a national literary history became one of the tools with which these states' elites undertook to give shape to a "local" national culture. Yet, because they had to remain faithful to the idea of an all-encompassing "Arabic literature" as the privileged medium of ex-

4 Jabir 'Usfur, *Zaman al-riwaya*, Cairo, al-Hay'a al-misriyya al-'amma li-l-kitab, 1999. Asfour borrowed this title from Mahfouz himself, in a "pro domo" kind of essay he had published in 1945.

pression of their Arab identity, literature was bound to become a paradigmatic site of negotiation between local (Moroccan, Egyptian, Lebanese, etc.) allegiances and regional ones (on the scale of the Arabic linguistic area).

On the one hand, this literature is expressed in a common language, thanks to the fact that the Arab intellectual elites of the Nahda period—the modern "renaissance" that stretches from the mid-nineteenth century to the interwar years—chose to give priority to the classical vehicular form, whose modernization was essentially limited to the lexicon; in addition, throughout the twentieth century, these same elites were key players and vectors in the dissemination of a pan-Arab political ideology and, even after the decline of this ideology from the 1970s onward, they continued to convey the idea of a common cultural identity to all those who share the use of the Arabic language.

But on the other hand, the literary production of these elites took place in a space that was increasingly defined by the borders of the new states, from Morocco to Iraq and from Syria to Sudan. And given the close ties that generally bind these intellectual elites to their newly-formed states, and the need for the latter to secure their hold on their respective societies, they would naturally tend to emphasize a local literary identity, whether in the themes of their writings or by pursuing their careers within local institutions (universities, newspapers, publishing houses, etc.). As a result of all these variables, a specific modern Arab canon started being built up in each country. Very roughly speaking, in the centres of this Arab space—especially Egypt and Lebanon—the modern literary canon tends to be dominated by local authors and works and to make little room for what comes from the peripheries;[5] conversely, in the peripheries (Maghrib, Arabian Peninsula in particular) the local canon will be dominated by the production of the centres, to the detriment of local authors, works and genres.

However, the 1990s onwards have witnessed a remarkable development: at the same time as pan-Arabism as a political ideology was dying out for good—with the second Gulf War, which saw Arab armies pitted against each other after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait—"Arabness" as a common identity based on shared cultural practices, references and values tremendously progressed throughout the region, and this has been true also in the literary field, leading to the emergence of a what can be described as a transnational Arab literary space. And

5 See for Egypt Richard Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation: Writers, State and Society in Modern Egypt* (Cairo: AUC Press, 2008); and for Lebanon, Elise Salem, *Constructing Lebanon: A Century of Literary Narratives* (Gainsville: University Press of Florida, 2003).

actors of this transnational space have been playing a growing role in the process of creating literary value, in a relationship of competition and collaboration with what I call the Orientalist field, that is, the individuals and institutions involved in the circulation of Arabic-language works outside their original linguistic space, especially in Western Europe and North America.

As a result, we can speak of three literary fields or spaces,[6] at once superimposed, competing and complementary, in which the value of an Arabic work of literature is created: the national literary fields (Egyptian, Lebanese, Algerian, etc.); the transnational Arabic literary field; and the Orientalist field. I have already said a few words about national literary fields. I will continue by outlining the latest two, which in my view have taken over from the national literary fields since the turn of the millennium in terms of the creation of literary value.

As regards the transnational Arabic literary field, its recent growth is the result of two sets of evolutions. First, the technological revolutions that started in the 1990s with the emergence of pan-Arab satellite channels (Al-Jazeera being but the most famous one), whose audience quickly surpassed that of the national Arab channels and helped to spread a common Arab culture. A few years later, the spread of the Internet produced the same effects in the Arab world as in other areas, such as the massive use of social networks for reading and promoting books. Goodreads, arguably the most popular readers' network worldwide, has millions of users in the Arab world and is closely watched by many writers, but also by critics such as myself, as an indicator of the popularity of books and authors in an otherwise very opaque book market. The Arabophone web has also its own "BookTube" critics: for example, the Egyptian "Nedal Reads" boasts nearly 400,000 subscribers, an audience equivalent to that of her most popular Western equivalents.[7] However, the two major effects of the circulation of literary works through Internet in the Arab-speaking sphere are more original. First, the profusion of specialised or general websites has enabled Arab

6 I use the concept of field in the sense elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu, especially in *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Cambridge, U. K.: Polity Press, 1996) (French original: 1992). Taking up the distinction proposed by Tristan Leperlier between "field" and "space," the latter being defined as a secondary, less institutionalised investment issue than the former (T. Leperlier, "La langue des champs. Aires linguistiques transnationales et espaces littéraires plurilingues," *Contextes* 28 (2020): 1-37, talking about spaces rather than fields would seem to be more appropriate as regards these transnational areas. However, the current evolutions might lead soon to the emergence of a genuine transnational Arab literary *field*.

7 https://www.youtube.com/c/NedalReads [retrieved on 15 April 15 2024].

regional literary and cultural conversation to develop to a previously unknown level. Second, the proliferation of illegal download sites, where any reader of Arabic can download most of the currently available books in pdf-version, including the latest novels by most popular authors, has made a powerful contribution to blurring the boundaries between Arab countries, which had been a major obstacle to the circulation of books within the Arab global market. Moreover, one should stress that, due to the growing flows of migration from the Arab world, this Arab global market is less than ever constrained by national or regional boundaries, but rather spans all continents.

The second major evolution has been a geopolitical one: since the turn of the millennium, the centre of gravity of this literary space has shifted towards the Arabian Peninsula, due to the massive investment of private and public capital from the Gulf in the Arab market for symbolic goods. In a quite paradoxical way, after having been for decades the fiercest opponents of the pan-Arab political project, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states have turned into the most efficient propagators of its cultural version through their investments in the media and culture industry.

The most commented of these interventions as regards literature is the several literary prizes awarded by Gulf-based institutions to Arab writers, which put together amount to several millions of dollars that are being distributed every year. Since the 1990s, the Arab book market has seen a real boom in the production of novels, to a level that cannot but evoke the "overproduction crisis" we experience in Western book markets. Until the 1980s, the total number of new Arabic novels published each year was in the hundreds; today it is in the thousands. A number of factors have contributed to this trend, first and foremost of course the expansion of the readership as a result of higher levels of education (particularly among young girls[8]) and the professionalisation of the publishing sector, but it can be argued that the proliferation of regional (as opposed to national) literary prizes has played a role in this development. Thanks to these prizes, it is not just two or three novels that are being promoted every year, but rather one or two dozen through the astute process established by the main prizes of the announcement of long lists and short lists. Publishers take part in this marketing game by adding vignettes printed or pasted on the novels'

8 In Arab societies as elsewhere (and maybe even more than elsewhere), women tend to read more books than men. See Next Page Foundation reports: "What Arabs Read: A Pan-Arab Survey on Readership", 2007. The reports can be downloaded here: https://www.npage.org/en/page?id=217 [retrieved on 12 March 2024].

covers advertising their selection or their award, and booksellers highlight them on their stalls: marketing practices that will sound familiar to the Western reader/consumer but are quite novel in the Arab book market.

Another important dimension of these prizes is their connection with translation. The main page of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF), also known as the "Arabic Booker", the most coveted of these awards, states: "One of the main aims of the [prize] is to encourage the translation of Arabic literature into other languages."[9] As a matter of fact, the bodies that manage these prizes do not seem to be very successful in selling the novels they select on the international book market. For example, the list of translations provided by the IPAF on its website shows that out of more than 200 novels selected since its first edition in 2008, fewer than a third (61) have been translated into one language at least, the majority of them (32) into one language only, 22 into two to four languages and only 7 novels into five or more languages.[10] Yet, this new state of affairs raises new and compelling questions about the role of the IPAF and similar pan-Arab prizes, and thus the transnational Arab literary space they help creating, as brokers or mediators between the national spaces and the global one.

This leads us naturally to the third layer of this analysis, that is, the global Orientalist field, or how translation and circulation of Arabic texts in the world literary market, especially in Western Europe and North America, gives them added value within their original national and regional spaces.

Arabic writing in translation accounts for almost nothing in the outside world. Even in countries where the share of translated literature in the book market is rather important, Arabic accounts for fewer than 1% of the translated books. Yet, this share, as small as it may look, is bigger now than it has ever been: since Mahfouz's Nobel in 1988,

9 https://arabicfiction.org/en/translations [retrieved on 12 March 2024]. One should mention here that the eldest –and one the most recognized in the Arab literary space– of these new prizes, namely, the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature, launched in 1996 by the American University in Cairo Press, "consists of a cash prize of U.S.$ 5,000, and publication worldwide in English translation by the American University in Cairo Press." https://aucpress.com/mahfouz-medal/#:~:text=The%20Naguib%20Mahfouz%20Medal%20for%20Literature%20consists%20of%20a%20cash,announced%20on%2011%20December%202024. [retrieved on 12 March 2024].

10 Ibid. It should be noted that there is no indication that this list limits itself to the translations promoted through the IPAF's mediation or includes all published translations of the concerned works. Furthermore, contrary to what is indicated on the website, it seems that it has not been updated for some time.

hundreds of Arabic novels, poetry or short stories collections and anthologies have been translated into the world market's major languages, a huge progress compared to the earlier period. Still, except for Mahfouz, no modern Arab author has made a name into the "world republic of letters"[11] except for those who wrote in English or in French, such as Khalil Gibran (1883-1931; he wrote both in English and Arabic but his world best-seller, *The Prophet*, was written in English) and a handful of francophone Arab writers such as Kateb Yacine or Assia Djebar, not to mention of course towering intellectual figures such as Edward Said (in English) or Mohamed Arkoun (in French).

Yet considered from within the Arab literary space, the lust for translation is just amazing, and it has to do less with the material benefits a writer gets from being translated, than with the symbolic ones associated with the "access to the universal" (*al-wusul ila l-'alamiyya*), as the cliché goes in Arabic. Now, this Orientalist sphere—that is, the small world of translators, academics, publishers, literary agents, etc., who mediate between the Arab literary space and the global market—has undergone tremendous changes also in the last decades, which can be summarised in two directions.

First, and contrary to the assumption one could make after reading Said's *Orientalism* (1978), this social milieu has grown increasingly closer with the Arab cultural players it represents and promotes in Western markets—an evolution I have witnessed over the last decades and that can be observed in many ways. In academia as well as in other cultural milieus, a growing proportion of individuals working in this orientalist sphere are actually "Orientals" who have migrated to the West at some point, often bringing with them and upholding political and aesthetic values and world views originating in their native countries. Also, there have never been as many Arab writers and artists based in Western countries as nowadays, most of them keeping to the Arabic language as their literary means of expression. In this context, non-Arab mediators are prone to identify with the aesthetic, ethic and even political values defended by their Arab counterparts and by the sections of the Arab literary scene the former identify with.

The last translation promotion project I was involved in is a case in point. LEILA, a reverted acronym for "Arabic Literatures In European Languages," is "a European cooperative project, which aims to promote the translation and dissemination in Europe of contemporary Arabic literature," focusing on "new voices in Arabic literature [which]

11 Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004; French original 1999).

are not read or heard enough."[12] For that purpose, the designers of the project, funded mainly by the European Union, gathered a mixed team of European and Arab translators, authors and academics (many wearing—like myself—more than one hat) who built up a list of authors and works whose translation into European languages deserves to be promoted.[13] The project ended with a meeting at the Collège International des Traducteurs Littéraires (Arles) in December 2023, where we drafted what we named the "LEILA manifesto for the translation of Arabic literature." It consists of eight short recommendations, the last one insisting on "the inalienable right of free speech" of writers and translators of Arabic literature and "not[ing] with dismay the silencing of Palestinian writers such as Adania Shibli, who was cancelled at the 2023 Frankfurt Book Fair."[14]

Those very recommendations—one might rather say demands!—point negatively to the other direction toward which what I named the Orientalist sphere is driven by the iron law of Western literary translation markets, where literatures coming from peripheral languages are marginalised and are prey to the misrepresentations circulated about their cultures in the mainstream media. Unlike authors, translators and publishers are bound to deal with these constraints and have to negotiate and manoeuvre in order to secure their place in these markets and try to improve it. As a result, and in a somewhat paradoxical way, while the discrepancies between the local Arab canon and its foreign version have tended to decrease over the last decades for all the above-mentioned reasons, the dominant view within the Arab literary sphere remains that translation into the main Western languages offers a distorted view of the national literary output. This state of affairs is certainly not specific to modern Arabic literature in the current world republic of letters, but obviously, it finds a particular echo in the prevailing international context.

12 "What is LEILA", *LEILA, Promoting Arabic Literature in Europe*. https://leila-arabicliterature.com/the-leila-project/what-is-leila/ [retrieved on 12 March 2024].

13 Books and authors are presented individually in the project's on line catalogue: https://leila-arabicliterature.com/catalogue/ [retrieved on 12 March 2024].

14 https://leila-arabicliterature.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/LEILA_MANIFESTO-FOR-TRANSLATION-OF-AR-LANGUAGE-1.pdf [retrieved on 12 March 2024].