

Elhariry on Rachdi (2015)

Rachdi, Naïma. *L'Art de la nouvelle entre Occident et Orient: Guy de Maupassant et l'Égyptien Mahmûd Taymûr. Influence de la littérature française sur la littérature arabe moderne*. L'Harmattan, 2015, pp. 268, ISBN 978-2-343-06746-9

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In the landscape of literary studies, comparative books on French and Arabic literature are rare. Those that deal with the modern period are even fewer and farther between, so the publication of *L'Art de la nouvelle entre Occident et Orient* is a welcome addition. The book's productive disturbance draws from its dual ambition: to engage in a comparative study that alternates between East and West, French and Arabic, Taymûr and Maupassant; and to trace the importation, translation, imitation, adaptation, dissemination, and transformation of Realism, Naturalism, and the European short story within the historical development of the Arabic *uqsusa*, *qissa qassira*, *qissa*, *khavar* (86), and *haduta* (165). *L'Art de la nouvelle* achieves its goals by situating, within the context of the long nineteenth century, cases of Arab travel and cultural missions to Europe (15–19), and the Egyptians who populated and animated European and North American cultural centers (53, 67, 69–71, 74–75, 77, 90, 124, 131). This lends further credence to the work of Nabil Matar, Roxanne L. Euben, and Susan Gilson Miller, who have been countering the long-popularized view that Muslims and Arabs were culturally uncurious about modern-era Europe. The book's thoughtful consideration of Maupassant's travel writings (67–77), his ambivalent, ambiguous critiques of “la présence coloniale” (70) in North Africa through “des propos anticolonialistes” (74–76), and his interest in Sufi perspectives on love (150) sharply brings to focus a lesser-known, intriguing aspect of his writing.

L'Art de la nouvelle is organized across four parts that discuss the general literary encounter between East and West instigated by Napoleon's Egyptian expedition; the biographies of short story masters Maupassant and Taymûr; the representation of reality in their stories; and the structural and thematic elements of the fantastic in them. Part one presents a broad history of classical and modern Arabic literature, and closes with the titular preoccupation with influence (37–42): though the book's second subtitle proposes an exploration of French influence on Arabic literature, the definition of influence is inversely based on Philippe Van Tieghem's 1961 study, *Les Influences étrangères sur la littérature française (1550–1880)* (41, 82). The reader is frequently told that Taymûr was known as the “Maupassant égyptien,” yet the moniker remains unattributed. Evidence of his explicit engagement with Maupassant is limited to one mention (100), as Taymûr's theoretical writings on the short story focus on Anton Chekhov, Ivan Turgenev, and Katherine Mansfield (151–53). The close readings in parts three and four alternate between separate and intertwined treatments of Maupassant and Taymûr. The formal and thematic resemblances and divergences between their stories intimate Maupassant's influence.

Can resemblance be equated with influence, however, or is there more to the Arabic story? As Taymûr was active from 1925 through the 1960s (114, 120), the book's treatment of the Arab *Nahda* or cultural renaissance of the modern period provides some hints. The analysis does not concede to classical Arabic predecessors to the short story or the novel, in order to make near-exclusive room for modern, foreign influence (242–43). At turns, it insists on historical and archigeneric discontinuity: “l'idée de faire remonter l'histoire de la nouvelle arabe au IXe siècle est intéressante, mais seulement si on y voit les prémisses de la nouvelle et non le début de la nouvelle moderne” (28–29). At others, it suggests that “la renaissance de la littérature arabe s'est donc faite à la fois grâce à l'héritage culturel ancien et à l'emprunt étranger” (29), and reverts to classical Arabic predecessors when it comes to the fantastic (164–67, 230). As the focus of the third part of the book suggests—and at problematic odds with the fourth part on the fantastic, “ce ‘réalisme illusionniste’” (160), “réalisme fantastique” (171, 173; cf. 202, 203), “illusion réaliste” (209), or “illusion convaincante” (220)—the modern is limited to “la représentation de la réalité” (39), “le souci de vraisemblance” (86), “le réalisme” (88), and the presentation of “une image assez fidèle de la société et de l'époque des auteurs” (89), which “s'inspire de la réalité sans être une œuvre d'imitation, philosophique, idéologique, didactique, poétique ou historique” (34; cf. 55, 53–54, 105–06, 131, 208).

Having sidestepped influential twentieth-century theories of the short story and the novel, *L'Art de la nouvelle* broaches a “l'homme et son œuvre” (47) account of Maupassant and Taymûr in the second part. Details from birth to travel to the “malaises existentiels” of growing pains (71–73) are covered, in order to set up two antithetical philosophical perspectives that are then read psycho-autobiographically into their stories (63–67, 105–6, 108, 112–16, 121, for example): ironic despair in face of the absurdities of fin-de-siècle pessimism, nihilism, and positivism in Maupassant; Taymûr's melancholic search for serenity, tempered by the optimism of the *Nahda*.

L'Art de la nouvelle will be of interest to readers curious in an accessible overview of modern Arabic literature, or in a model for a comparative Franco-Arabic methodology. The introductory material provides suggestions for some key primary readings

in modern Arabic literature. Most of the bibliographical and critical indications go up to 1994, while the primary critical apparatus mainly draws on material from the 1930s to the 1970s. The interested reader should further consult Abdelfattah Kilito's critical oeuvre. The book's dismissal (32) of Ahmad Faris Al-Shidyaq's masterpiece 1855 novel *Al-saq 'ala al-saq* (*Leg Over Leg*, recently translated into English by Humphrey Davies), the occlusion of Adonis, and the nonappearance of early twentieth-century Cairo's dynamic Francophone scene, reveal bibliographical and socio-literary gaps. The scholarship of Jeffrey Sacks, Tarek El-Ariss, Shaden Tageldin, Rebecca C. Johnson, Robyn Creswell, Sayed Elsis, and Huda Fakhreddine on modern and contemporary Arabic literature prominently features philology, translation theory, and comparative poetics, which would buttress the book's claims on translation and influence. *L'Art de la nouvelle* is therefore an initial foray into debates on the short story and the novel as imported forms in Arabic—for they have flourished into something wonderful, strange, new, unsettling, all of their own.

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