Introduction

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„It is not that art, particularly literature", Joseph Brodsky proclaimed on the occasion of receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature, „is a by-product of our species' development, but just the reverse." „Language and, presumably, literature", he adds, „are things that are more ancient and inevitable, more durable than any form of social organization."[1]

This volume, whose title resounds Walter G. Andrews seminal work on Ottoman poetry *Poetry's Voice, Society's Song*,[2] assembles the contributions to a series of lectures held at the Freie Universität Berlin under the title „Literatur und Gesellschaft im Vorderen Orient" („Literature and Society in the Middle East") and the papers presented at an international Workshop „Poetry's Voice – Society's Norms. Forms of Interaction between Middle Eastern Writers and their Societies", held at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin during November, 16th – 18th, 2003. The Workshop was a joint venture of the Institute of Arabic Studies under the auspices of the Interdisciplinary Centre „Social and Cultural History of the Middle East", Freie Universität Berlin, the projects „Cultural Mobility in Near Eastern Literatures" and „West-Eastern Divan" of the Working Group Modernity and Islam at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin (Institute of Advanced Studies), and the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin.

Literature vs. society

It was the aim of the workshop to focus on the dialectics of Middle Eastern Writers and their societies. International scholars of Literary Studies as well as specialists in Arabic, Hebrew, Persian and Turkish Studies tried to explore the dimensions and ways of how writers tackle the values of their societies. How do they reflect social conditions? How do literary texts contribute to the construction of collective identities? Do writers lay claim to improving human society, by criticising it, by engrossing its mistakes or by propagating concrete tenets or ideologies? As writers are themselves part of their societies and therefore are the products of societal conditions, we are dealing with a dialectical relationship between literati and the societies they grow out of. Literary works, as works of art in general, are much more than mere illustrations of societal conditions. They discuss the fundamental questions societies are founded on. Literature is the setting in which society discusses itself, as exemplified in three family sagas from different cultural milieus presented by Andreas Pflitsch.

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1 Joseph Brodsky, „Nobel Lecture December 8, 1987", in: Tore Frängsmyr, Sture Allén (eds.), *Nobel Lectures, Literature 1981-1990*, Singapure: World Scientific Publishing Co. 1993, quoted on: http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1987/brodsky-lecture.html.

2 Walter G. Andrews, *Poetry's Voice, Society's Song. Ottoman Lyric Poetry*, Seattle, London: University of Washington Press 1985.

It was not our goal to once again look for the political commitment of a writer in the sense of Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of *littérature engagée* and searching for actual interventions in the realm of the political although the issue of commitment is still vital in the Near East as the contributions of Ferial Ghazoul and Leslie Tramontini demonstrate. The dichotomy of committed literature versus *l'art pour l'art*, discussed also in the Ottoman context, as Aslı Niyazioğlu shows, seems to be short-sighted. This became particularly apparent when in the heyday of politicalization and polarisation in the 1960s and 1970s (not only in the Middle East!) literature ran into danger to be reduced to political discourse and to lose its very essence: its polyphony and its subversive distinctive feature to reveal the wide range of possibilities. Literature constantly scrutinises certainties of any sort, which is a core element of enlightenment. As Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argued in their *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, enlightenment tends to become a certainty that has to be constantly questioned in order not to lose its original power. The deconstruction of certainties, however closely related to European enlightenment thought it may appear, has its predecessors in Near Eastern literature, as Navid Kermani's contribution shows. Literature, be it 'classical' or 'modern', that abstains from the level of the political does not lose political relevance, see Ken Seigneurie's and Barbara Winckler's articles. On the contrary, it utilises fully its very own possibilities and fulfills its very own function in and for society. In this sense, it is committed literature, while decidedly political literature in the classical sense is politics, not literature. Writer and critics like the Egyptian Edwar al-Kharrat[3] harshly criticize literature in which people are, „reduced to mere stereotypes of the positive forthright optimistic and activist mold", and in which the protagonists are „simply string drawn, mere agents or tools of the 'dialectical process of history'."[4] Literature, for al-Kharrat, „verges on knowledge that transcends – and incorporates also – intellectual cognition. Hence comes its particular aestetics, with its renewable laws, each and every time (in spite of the obvious importance of intellectual cognition, in its own field, of course, and I would not attempt, in any way, to belittle that)."[5]

Thus, the relation between literature and society is a complex one, and this is especially true in the Middle East, where culture in general and Islam in particular, are widely thought to have a determining influence on individual conduct and public order, a view that is fundamentally contested in Thomas Bauer's programmatic article. The situation is, as the contributions of this volume show, by far more intricate. Reading literature from its own assumptions may thus help to enrich and refine 'mainstream' historiography in adding dimensions, lying under the surface.

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3 Cf. A. Pflitsch, *Gegenwelten. Zur Literaturtheorie Idwār al-Ḫarrāṭs*, Wiesbaden: Reichert 2000.

4 Edwar al-Kharrat, „The Mashriq", in: Robin Ostle (ed.), *Modern Literature in the Near and Middle East 1850-1979*, London, New York: Routledge 1991, 180-92, 183.

5 Edwar al-Kharrat, „The Relative and the Absolute in Avant-Garde Narration", in: Ferial J. Ghazoul, Barbara Harlow (eds.), *The View from Within. Writers and Critics on Contemporary Arabic Literature*, Cairo 1994, 228-45, 232.

Crisis of images

There are, however, farther reaching objectives to our endeavour. A radical revision of established valorizations of past epochs and consequently of scholarly priorities are at stake. For long time Islam-imprinted societies used to view their own past through the grill of established norms rather than questioning the validity of these norms in social reality. Thus, a rather rigid image of the past has emerged, that leaves little space for nuances. Mohammed Arkoun[6] has justly lamented the dominance of 'logocentrism', i.e. of those discourses that rely on the 'word' as the bearer of ontological, indeed transcendental truth, over those realms of reality that rely on human experience as their reference. Arkoun claims that 'logocentrism', a concept that was originally developed by Derrida to criticize Western societies, today dominates not only intra-Islamic thinking but oriental scholarship as well. Indeed, Western scholarly disciplines concerned with the East – that from the 18th century onward have played an active role in the 'de-mystification' of the Orient[7] – clearly mirror the rather a-sensual, ascetic self-image held by the contemporary heirs to the Islamic tradition themselves. Their canonical view of their own history is based, as Samir Kassir has stressed,[8] on a doublefold teleology, one being the religious. Arabic-Islamic history that starts with the Qur'anic revelation retains a rather odd and chaotic image of the previous era, that is subsumed under the label *jāhiliyya*, "era of ignorance" or "barbarism", without any attempt to contextualize the period with the surrounding cultures of Late Antiquity. This claim of an identifiable beginning of Islamic culture, which is often tacitly accepted in Western discourse as well, is part of the construction of Islam as a monadic entity. It contradicts historical facts, risking to ignore processes of 'Romanization' that had imprinted the Near East, including the Arab Peninsula, to a degree that pre-Islamic Arabs could ascend to the rank of a Roman emperor. One tenet of critical oriental scholarship thus would be the 'de-islamization' of the image of history. A no less important other tenet would be its 'de-nationalization', its severing from the concept of a consistent ethnic agency. To refer to Samir Kassir again, "the deconstruction of a national teleology renders to Islam – viewed as an amalgamic force – its priority over ethnic identity. After a few decades, the history that Islam had propelled collapses with the histories and narratives of the peoples contained by the Islamic state or states. Thus, a new culture emerges, that relies on religion as just one of its many components. Once this amalgamic force of Islam is recognized, the issue of the 'decadence' of Arabic culture becomes problematic".[9]

Modern Arab historiography adopted the European classification of history in three parts: Antiquity, Middle Ages, Modernity.[10] In imitating the Western model, writes

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6 Cf. Mohammed Arkoun, *Re-thinking Islam*, Leiden: Brill 2003.

7 Cf. Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Entzauberung Asiens. Europa und die asiatischen Reiche im 18. Jahrhundert*, München: Beck 1998.

8 Cf. Samir Kassir, *Das arabische Unglück*, Berlin: Schiler 2006.

9 Kassir, *Das arabische Unglück*, 38f.

10 Christoph Cellarius (1638-1707) introduced this division in 1685 in his *Historia universalis ... in antiquam et medii aevi ac novam divisa*, cf. Wolfgang Reinhard, *Probleme deutscher Geschichte,*

Samir Kassir, the Arabs thought that their Golden Age lay behind a long era of decline (*ʿaṣr al-inḥiṭāṭ*) that was followed by a time of Renaissance (*nahḍa*). Thus 700 years, virtually the period from 1258, the year of the Mongol invasion of Baghdad, the often claimed turning point of Islamic history, to the end of the 19th century, are dashed into scholarly oblivion, being dismissed as insignificant – the fact that the centuries where by far the richest in artistic production notwithstanding. The dependence of local scholars on Western oriental scholars, that is manifest here, reaches back into Ottoman times. Thus, as Thomas Bauer has shown, aesthetical criteria changed under the influence of the West in late-Ottoman times. Even Nāṣīf al-Yāzijī, „the Lebanese author of the 19th century that was less moulded by the West than most of his collegues", was influenced by Western opinion and finally adopted its taste.[11]

Today, Samir Kassir adds, the period of the *nahḍa* is seen as fruitless. „For this reason, only the concept of decline survives as well as that of a Golden Age, impossible to regain."[12] Not only in Arab historiography but also in the realm of literature this model proved to be tremendously successful. The literatures of the Mamluk and the Ottoman eras – two epochs of massive artistic creativity – are today dismissed by Western and Arab scholars alike as worthless fine-sounding verbiage with kitschy pathos that support the idea of the *ʿaṣr al-inḥiṭāṭ*. With the consequence that today, as Thomas Bauer put it, „Arabs themselves are more convinced than anybody else by their own decline."[13]

Part of the societal confusion of the Near Eastern *malaise*, lamented by Kassir and others, manifests itself not least in a crisis of gender perceptions,[14] that find expression in literary works discussed by Sonja Mejcher-Atassi and Mona Takieddine Amyuni. In this context it is worthwhile to review how over history classical figures are reinvented and turned into role models abiding to later societal norms, as it is the case of the pre-Islamic poetess introduced by Renate Jacobi.

Travelling traditions

Although in earlier Western scholarship diverse literary cultures, such as Arabic, Persian and Turkish, were studied in close context, since the beginning of the 20th century they have been isolated to be pursued in separate departments. This development has induced the perception of various 'national literatures', differentiating between the literary productions of the Arab world, the Ottoman Empire, and Iran for

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1495-1806 / Reichsreform und Reformation, 1495-1555, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta 2001 (Gebhardt Handbuch der deutschen Geschichte, vol. 9), 55.

11 Cf. Thomas Bauer, „Die *badīʿiyya* des Nāṣīf al-Yāziǧī und das Problem der spätosmanischen arabischen Literatur", in: Angelika Neuwirth, Andreas Christian Islebe (eds.), *Reflections on Reflections. Near Eastern Writers Reading Literature*, Wiesbaden: Reichert 2006, 49-118, 85.

12 Kassir, *Das arabische Unglück*, 38.

13 Bauer, „Die *badīʿiyya*", 88.

14 Cf. B. Winckler, Angelika Neuwirth (eds.), *Arabesken/ Arabesques*, Cologne et al.: Böhlau 2005 (= *Figurationen. Gender – Literatur – Kultur*, 01/05), and B. Winckler, „Geschlechtertransgressionen", in: Angelika Neuwirth, A. Pflitsch, B. Winckler (eds.), *Arabische Literatur, postmodern*, Munich: edition text + kritik 2004, 295-302.

the pre-modern era, with the addition of the literatures of Turkey and Israel for the present. Such a perception that had already been called into question by Hellmut Ritter in the 1930s,[15] is particularly misleading for the classical era when many individuals used more than one language to produce literature and when literati took pride in experimenting with genres established in one language by introducing them into another, a case demonstrated in our volume by Vahid Behmardi's discussion of *maqāmāt* in Arabic and Persian.[16]

Taking on such an anachronistic position is moreover detrimental, since a vast amount of literary production has through more recent political developments become detached from its place of origin which has been turned into a nation state with a language of its own and no longer receptive of testimonies from the early culture. Persianate poetry, particularly the *ghazal*,[17] discussed by Sunil Sharma, is a case in point. It is today claimed neither by its original language community, nowadays widely limited to Iran, neither by the societies that today inhabit its space of origin, i.e. Pakistan and India. Moreover, there is no culturally, religiously homogeneous entity called 'Middle East'. The Working Group Modernity and Islam with its aim to expand the horizon of Europe's history and to integrate neighbouring areas, aspires to define the multi-layered processes of communication, reception, and mobility. This task that has lately been substantially promoted by Atef Botros' valuable collection of studies *Der Nahe Osten – ein Teil Europas?*[18] has proven particularly urgent, since processes of massive polarization are presently endangering the cultural diversity of the Near East. Reuven Snir has time and again drawn attention to the utterly neglected and marginalized Arab-Jewish culture: „Both the Muslim-Arab and the Jewish-Zionist canonical cultural and national systems have excluded the hybrid Arab-Jewish identity and highlighted the so-called 'pure' Jewish-Zionist identity against the 'pure' Arab-Muslim one – Arab-Jewish culture has become a disease that is to be contained; the few still infected people are to be quarantined for fear of contamination. A tradition that started more than 1,500 years ago has been disappearing – better to say, is being extinguished – before our eyes."[19]

Although the 'clash of narratives' described by Reuven Snir is particularly dire in the case of Arab-Jewish literature, also focused by Alexandra Nocke, it is noticeable in other areas as well, as Doris Ruhe makes clear. Still, judging from the presentations of

15 Hellmut Ritter, „Arabische und persische Schriften über die profane und die mystische Liebe", in: *Der Islam* 21 (1933), 84-109.

16 The extensive migration of the *maqāma* has been studied by Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, *Maqama. A History of a Genre*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 2002.

17 See for the transnational circulation of the *ghazal*, Thomas Bauer, Angelika Neuwirth (eds.), *Ghazal as World Literature I: Transformations of a Literary genre*, Beirut, Würzburg: Ergon 2005, and Angelika Neuwirth, Michael Hess, Judith Pfeiffer, Börte Sagaster (eds.), *Ghazal as World Literature II: From a Literary Genre to a Great Tradition. The Ottoman Gazel in Context*, Beirut, Würzburg: Ergon 2006.

18 Atef Botros (ed.), *Der Nahe Osten – ein Teil Europas? Reflexionen zu Raum- und Kulturkonzeptionen im modernen Nahen Osten*, Würzburg: Ergon 2005.

19 Reuven Snir, "Hybridity, Exclusion, and Cultural Cleansing. Iraqi-Jews and the Hegemonic Israeli Ashkenazi Hebrew Establishment", in: Botros, *Der Nahe Osten – ein Teil Europas?*, 191-216, 216.

our volume, diversity as a 'natural' attitude prevails, exchanges between diverse cultures ranging from the loan of religious symbols (see the contributions of Friederike Pannewick and Maher Jarrar), the employment of non-local languages (see the contributions of Barbara Winckler, Sonja Mejcher-Atassi and Mona Takieddine Amyuni) to the recycling of earlier and elsewhere developed genres (see the contributions of Vahid Behmardi, Sunil Sharma and Priska Furrer).

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