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The Experimental Arabic Novel: Postcolonial Literary Modernism in the Levant (review)



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Comparative Literature Studies, Volume 41, Number 2, 2004, pp. 303-306
(Review)

Published by Penn State University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/cls.2004.0025*

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affect to literature and the humanities as the space of the ghostly. This Benjaminian kind of melancholy is less about ambivalence than about its transformation into an innervating dialectics of antinomies, one that may awaken affect—also through the obstinacy of texts—and thus may prove to contain the antidote to the neutralization of the humanities in the corporate University.

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The Experimental Arabic Novel: Postcolonial Literary Modernism in the Levant. By Stefan G. Meyer. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001. xvii + 232 pp. $24.95.

From the early days of the *Nahda*, or the flowering of Arabic *belles lettres* in the 19th century, Arab intellectuals, like their counterparts throughout the postcolonial world, have wrestled with the implications of engaging with Western philosophy and literature as their societies simultaneously attempt to emulate new social models while preserving traditional culture, and develop economically while resisting colonialism. Such tensions are still very much in evidence in the contemporary Arab press, scholarly publications, symposia, and conferences, as writers review and revise their understanding of modernity, modernization, and modernism. In the context of concern over encroaching forces of neo-colonialism and globalization, some Arab intellectuals today view Western critical theory with a degree of suspicion. Levels of engagement with or rejection of critical theories vary widely from country to country and from one circle of intellectuals to another.

Stefan Meyer foregrounds this debate in his new book on Arabic literary innovation, *The Experimental Arabic Novel: Postcolonial Literary Modernism in the Levant*. In the introduction Meyer writes:

> The basic premise of this study is that it is inadequate and misleading to speak of modernism or postmodernism as we understand these concepts in the West and expect them to apply to Arabic literature.

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE STUDIES, Vol. 41, No. 2, 2004.
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> Alternatively, however, it is possible to speak of distinct literary modernisms that have each evolved with a different set of characteristics, depending upon the nature of their historical antecedents. This offers us a way of speaking about the experimental Arabic novel and similar trends in postcolonial literature in a manner that allows us to both compare and contrast them meaningfully with Western literature (1–2).

In this comprehensive study, Meyer both identifies local and contingent conditions of literary production, and provides references to literary and intellectual influences and parallel developments both in the West and in other post-colonial traditions. In particular Meyer attempts to classify and categorize experimental Arabic fiction along the axes of its relative engagements with aesthetics and politics within modernist and postmodernist literary traditions.

Meyer's analyses of works by twenty-four writers productive from the early 1960s through the end of the 20th century demonstrate an impressive familiarity with contemporary Arabic literature and culture. The broad scope of this study affords Meyer the perspective from which to discern patterns and parallel developments of narrative innovation over time and across national lines. Meyer offers extended reflections on works by writers such as Elias Khoury (Lebanon), Sonallah Ibrahim (Egypt), Abdelrahman Munif (Saudi Arabia/Syria), Salim Barakat (Syria), Ghada Samman (Lebanon), and Rashid al-Daif (Lebanon). The book is organized synchronically around notions of experimentation and innovation. Within the chapters, which are organized loosely around engagement with the "past," "present," and "future" respectively, the sub-chapters each explore a group of writers who share particular aesthetic ideologies or writing strategies.

This book has a great deal to offer, particularly at a time when Arab-Islamic cultures are coming under close scrutiny by the media and the public at large. In content as well as in style, this work is intended as much for non-specialists as for scholars of modern Arabic literature. Meyer makes an effort to cite works available in published English translation, and writes in clear, accessible prose. Meyer also provides historical, social, and political context for the reader to understand the environments in which these authors are writing, and to which they are responding. Among the significant watershed moments Meyer identifies in the development of literary modernism in the Levant are the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, the 1952 Egyptian Free Officer's Revolt, the defeat of Arab armies in the 1967 war, and the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil war in 1975.

Throughout the book, Meyer struggles with the place of Egyptian writers in his narrative about Arabic literary innovation in the Levant, or Eastern Mediterranean. Literary activities in Beirut and Cairo drove the *Nahda* in the 19th century and these two metropolitan centers have continued to serve as intellectual centers and homes of important publishing houses to the present day. Although the distribution of books throughout the Arab world has been inconsistent for structural, economic, and political reasons, there has long been a sense of solidarity, as Meyer identifies, among Arab writers, and an interest in literary and cultural production that transcends national borders. As a result, although Meyer attempts to focus on trends among Lebanese, Syrian, Jordanian and Palestinian writers, he nevertheless feels that he must turn his attention not only to the influence of Egyptian writers and literary trends in general terms, but to close analysis of texts by Egyptian writers such as Sonallah Ibrahim and Edwar al-Kharrat. In other words, Meyer's insistence on defining the limits of his study in strict geographic terms turns out to be confusing and self-defeating. Relatively speaking, Egyptian writers occupy a much more central role in Meyer's narrative than do their Palestinian and Jordanian counterparts. I would like to stress that I am not taking issue with the experimental writers or innovative works Meyer has chosen to discuss, but rather with the centrality of the geographic boundaries in the definition of the project. One of the main strengths of the book is its mapping of trends across national boundaries. The author's insistence on a geographic definition of the project ultimately detracts from this objective.

Meyer's analyses foreground the textual interplay between literature and politics, aesthetics and ideology. Meyer writes,

> [Experimental Arab writers] have reacted to the formal unity, ideological bias, omniscient viewpoint, and heroism of realist narratives and countered these with narratives that are fragmented, artistically determined, multiple-voiced, and that reflect a sense of cultural crisis, while still working from a standpoint that reflects the values and priorities of the *engagé* (7).

Meyer adeptly demonstrates how experimentation serves as a tool for political expression, in which the breakdown of traditional structures and styles reflects a parallel breakdown in society. Yet, overall, Meyer's interest in the interplay between politics and aesthetics is unfortunately limited to its classificatory usefulness—distinguishing between those for whom experimen-

tation is a purely aesthetic, and therefore "elitist," endeavor, as opposed to those for whom innovation functions as a form of political expression, as well as distinguishing among different approaches to experimentation. Meyer never seriously engages with this rich aspect of modernist expression, nor do his textual analyses explore the impact of innovation and experimentation on production of meaning.

This limitation of vision is further evidenced in Meyer's analyses of more recent experimental works that he categorizes as reflecting a "postmodern aesthetic." He misses the opportunity to engage with and reflect upon the broader questions posed by theories of the postmodern condition within the specific context of the contemporary Arab world. Indeed, much discussion on the issues of postmodernity—both as an aesthetic category, and in its interrelationship with forces of globalization and neo-colonialism—has appeared in Arabic language newspapers and intellectual journals. Yet, despite Meyer's early insistence on sensitivity to cultural contingency of such notions as Arabic modernism and postmodernism, he only cites one such source, an article by Faysal Darraj that appeared in the journal al-Karmal (273, note 41). Meyer's analyses, which so actively reference and engage with a body of critical work in English, could have been further strengthened by reference to this lively debate in the Arabic press.

However, despite these limitations, *The Experimental Arabic Novel* nevertheless synthesizes a great deal of information about a diverse group of mainstream and lesser-known innovative Arabic writers functioning in a variety of Middle Eastern countries. Meyer's analyses also sensitively situate works by Syrian and Jordanian writers within a field so often overshadowed by the cultural production of the urban centers of Beirut and Cairo. As such, the book succeeds in its stated objective of providing a clear, accessible, broad introduction to the topic of Levantine literary modernism.

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