

Long live the literature!

Literary heritage of the Arab world constitutes an exceptionally important element in the history of the world's literary output and it includes not only the well known works such as *the Koran* and *One Thousand and One Nights*, but also extremely wide spectrum of poetry and prose written between the 6th and 21st century in the space which rapidly increased its area starting from the Arabian Peninsula in the 6th and 7th century, to a large stretch of land spanning from the territory of China to Spain in the beginning of the 8th Century. The history of the Arabian culture had remained the area of interest for many orientalist scholars for centuries, however, just as in the case of many other spheres, this interest has been subject to many fluctuations in the particular epochs, quite often due to non-essential factors. Such is the case of the Arab literature in Poland – in the past two decades it was moved to the background by social and political problems concerning the Arab world. It is evident not only in the decreasing number of literary publications in comparison with papers on political science, for instance (including the ones written by the Arabists), but also on universities carrying on Arabic Studies, where the majority of the BA and MA theses deals with social and political problems. Literature is so “unpractical...” We treat this situation as a sign of the times, we do not interpret it as a choice made on the grounds that literary research requires better command of the language, although such views appear in the academic circles. Hence the idea of the collective work dedicated exclusively to the literature of this area.

The volume which is proposed to the reader was entitled *Constants and Variables in the Arabian Literature*. The title corresponds to the famous book of Ali Sa'id Isbir, a poet and thinker of Syrian origin who currently lives in France and is widely known by his pen-name – Adunis. His works were presented to Polish readers by Krystyna Skarżyńska-Bocheńska who published numerous translations of his poems and a monograph about his work. *Constants and Variables – As-Sabit wa-al-mutahawwil* is not poetry, but a vast monograph consisting of three volumes (approximately 1300 pages altogether!) in which Adunis uses various ways to present and analyse the dialectics of the matters which are constant and those which are variable in the Arab and Muslim culture. These are the two paradigms which define the development of culture from the very beginning, including, obviously the literature of Arabs. Tradition – something which is constant and the strongest – intertwines with the attempts of its modernisation and reformation – this is the factor of the change, which in the civilisation of Islam does not have to be characterised positively. The change is sometimes interpreted as the departure from the ideal which should be nourished, the ideal

which one should reach in the effect. If not in the past, the ideal is surely set in the tradition.

Regardless of that, both trends have almost always been present in Arab literature in line with each other – that is very important – and not alternately. It is difficult to find, perhaps with the exception of the oldest period in the literature of Arabs, so called Jahiliyyah – the period before Islam, a homogenous literary matter in the Arab writings. It is possible that even in the pre-Muslim times a meticulous scholar would be able to find some elements of the constant/variable dialectics, although it is not so obvious.

Authors of this volume do not undertake the task (as Adunis did) of presenting the comprehensive and generalized representation of these changes and return to the tradition. Our first and foremost objective is to indicate various, referring to different stages of the development of the Arab literature, manifestations of the cooperation of the tradition and modernness, classicism and modernism (however these two terms should be used rather carefully in the context of the Arab literature. The texts presented here discuss numerous threads and figures of the Arab literature from the Middle Ages to the contemporary times, including poetry, didactic prose, folk prose and contemporary fiction.

Authors of the particular papers concentrate quite often on the themes and characters, or literary phenomena which until now have not been the subject of more profound research, not only in Polish oriental studies anyway, due to many reasons. In case of the classical literature one of the key reasons is the great richness of the literary output of this type. We believe that it will never be possible to state that we have just finished the research on the whole classical Arab literature in any of its aspects. In the work which we are now presenting to the reader, Danuta Madeyska conducts a comparatistic analysis of the Arabian ethos as presented in the works of folk literature. Literary output of philosophical character is discussed in the paper by Katarzyna Pachniak, while Barbara Ostafin concentrates on the particular theme of an uninvited guest in the Arab didactic literature known as *adab*.

As far as the post-classical period is concerned, the reason of the lack of the research is the paradigm of the “fall” (Arab. *Al-Inhitat*) which harms the Arab literature. Referring to the period awaiting its discovery and exploration, Marek M. Dziekan presents the figure of the Maghrebian poet, Sa’id al-Mindasi who was active in the period when “there was nothing”. Nineteenth century which enjoys much better treatment in the history of the literature is the background of the comparative study by Magdalena Lewicka which connects the Maghrebian and Near-eastern motifs.

There are many blanks to be filled, issues and writers worth exploring as far as the contemporary literature is concerned. This is mostly caused by the vastness of the available material. One should also remember that in this case the work is being carried out on a “living organism” – we are still not always able to comprehend the velocity and quality of the “variable” matters, nor the contexts of using the “constant” matters. At the same time one should also realise that the term “Arab literature” currently defines the literary output of approximately twenty countries which, although they originate from quite a uniform tradition, since the 19th century have been developing in slightly different ways – it should also be emphasised that it is possible to accurately define “Egyptian literature” or “Moroccan literature” only to some, but not quite full, extent. Some phenomena are common, other remain the peculiarities of the literary output of a given country. This derives both from the meanders of the internal development and external influence which, particularly in the 19th and in the first half of the 20th century, marked with certain variety the literature of Maghreb

as opposed to the literature of the Near East. In the literary output of the former, we must indicate the prose and poetry written in French as undoubtedly “native”. Literature written in other languages than Arab does not occur among the writers from the Near East (maybe with the exception of Lebanon), unless we are dealing with writers or poets living on exile, although in such cases Arabic often prevails.

Contemporary times’ literature in this volume is discussed in papers by Ewa Machut-Mendecka, Magdalena Kubarek, Barbara Michalak-Pikulska, Marcin Michalski and Michał Moch. Ewa Machut-Mendecka attempts to classify or generalise some phenomena present in this literature. Other authors concentrate on more detailed problems – the trend of the so called “Muslim literature”, patriotic poetry of Bahrain, literary output of the Egyptian activist for the rights of women, Nawal as-Sadawi and the works of Idwar al-Charrat, one of the most distinguished Egyptian writers who analyses the problems of the Arab and Coptic identity in his country.

We are convinced that the present volume clearly states that in spite of the tendencies mentioned in the introduction, the Arabic literary studied in Poland remain an important element of the orientalist scientific life. Arabic studies derive from the philological research on the oldest Arabic poetry and the Koran, and we must not allow the research pluralism, to which the modern oriental studies have to open, to push the literature to the side track.

Obviously, it was not possible to include all the problems bothering both Arab literature and Arab literary studies in this volume. However, we do believe that the issues discussed in this collective work will freshen up the look on the older and more modern literature of Arabs and will be favourably accepted both by specialists and readers from outside of the orientalist circles. Indeed, such was the double objective we had in mind.

Section entitled “The Masters” contains the portraits of three renowned, sadly departed, Arabists who contributed significantly to the research on the various aspects of the Arab literature: professor Tadeusz Lewicki and professor Maria Kowalska of the Jagiellonian University in Cracow, and professor Józef Bielawski the creator of the Warsaw Arabist school created by their students. “Of them, we all” – almost each Polish Arabist can make this statement. As an example of contemporary Arab literature we included the translation of several short stories by Jahja at-Tahir Abd Allah from the collection which in a perfect way shows the dialectics of the constant and variable signalled in the title of our work.

Among the authors of the papers included in the present volume are the scholars from the most important Arabic studies centres in Poland – Warsaw, Cracow, Poznań, Toruń and Łódź. This means that the research of these scholars on the Arab literature are not limited to a single university. We should rejoice because of that, following Jarosław Pluciennik, who entitled his book with a travesty of the well known saying of one of the American presidents: *It’s the literature, stupid!*

Marek M. Dziekan, Magdalena Lewicka