Borders and Beyond

Crossings and Transitions in Modern Arabic Literature

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Introduction

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In contrast to the Orientalist idea of an Arab World stuck in time-honoured traditions and unable to bring about change from within itself, probably nothing has demonstrated more clearly than the recent 'Arab Spring' that the Middle East is actually not a region of stagnation but of constant change. And it has always been such, of course. Change, i.e., the transition from one state of affairs to another, has always involved ruptures with earlier norms, rules, and orders, and has typically been accompanied by the violation of current taboos and the transgression of boundaries that ruling elites, certain groups within society, or society as a whole had put up in order to delineate territories of influence and maintain a status quo.

Literature reflects the development of society but has its own topography. This volume focuses the very process of change in the literary landscape; the moment of transition from one stage to another, when established traditions are submitted to new influences which cause movements across borders leading to transformations of genres and to the emergence of new mixtures and syntheses.

Such borderlands may be primarily geographical, like the border between East and West. This border was crossed during the Middle Ages and again in the 19th century, when Eastern influences made their impact on Western literature. Later, influences from the West reached the Arabic countries. During the last decades, the immigration into the West from Arabic countries has staked out a new cultural borderland, in which exile literature grows and expands. Often, the transition takes place across historical borders within a specific culture. The moment of transition is mostly suspended in time, a gradual shift accomplished by an accumulation of internal and external factors.

The borders between geographical regions, ethnical groups or historical periods are easily outlined, and to define the consequences for those moving across them adds to our understanding of the world. Yet, the outer experiences of clashes, ruptures and confusion, appear in a mirror world as a mental borderland, in which the wanderer is able to try his identity and prove his potential. For the individual, such a borderland is both a loss and an opening; for the author, it holds an ambiguity which may produce a new and rich literature. The Lebanese poet Sabah Zouein talks of a border space as a house full of windows and reflections, where identity is scattered, yet with light flooding from the twilight outside and memory lastingly engraved in the walls:

تلك أيامٌ توالت عبر النافذة البهية ، ألوان الصباح والمساء ، ثمّ أنّ ساعاتك كلّها بقيتْ

على خشب النوافذ والأبواب ، أنتِ التي علّقتِ إلى إطار الشبّاك انعكاساتكِ الكثيرة ،

وما تبقّى منكِ ، انعكاساتُ صورٍ متتالية ، إنّها أنتِ في أبعادِكِ وأنتِ في تناثُر أمكنتكِ ،

أو هي أوقاتكِ المتناثرة أجزاءً ، إنّها أوقات الأمكنة محفورة في الزوايا

Those were days that followed beyond the splendid window, colours of morning and evening, then all your hours stayed over the wood in the windows and the doors, you who hung up on the frame of the window your many reflexes and what was left of you, reflexes of successive images… they are you, in your dimensions and you in the scattering of your places, or they are your times scattered in pieces, they are the times of the places engraved in the corners…[1]

In May 2010, we arranged a seminar in Copenhagen called "Borders and beyond". Scandinavian experts on Arabic literature met Professor Maher Jarrar from the American University in Beirut. As special Guest of Honour, it is natural that Maher Jarrar should start the series of contributions in this volume, but there is also a more factual reason. Lebanon in modern time, and especially the city of Beirut, stands out as a major metaphor for borders and border crossing. Already the mixed demographic organisation of Lebanese society invites the emergence and change of boundaries. The civil war caused havoc with the social structure and resulted in individual breakdowns and the transgression of previous borders. After the war, rearranging on individual as well as societal levels has continued, as is reflected in the rich literature now produced. "… I visualize Lebanon as a 'border zone' where negotiations are always at stake, 'Difference' the emblem of the day, and the 'other' a core constituent of identity formation, whether individual, communal or 'national'", Jarrar writes. Identity-making becomes complex as well as necessary, based on collective remembrance and taking new forms in accordance with physical-geographical dislocation and the emergence of new borderlands, be they social, geographical or mental. Furthermore, boundaries between referentiality and its representation in fiction become blurred.

    In his contribution, Jarrar draws a thought-evoking outline of the main trends in post-war Lebanese literature in the period 1992–2009 based on the development of the novel alone. Jarrar has selected twenty-three authors with seventy-nine novels distributed throughout the period, about equally divided between male and female authors and between generations from above sixty five years to thirty three. From this massive material, Jarrar is able to identify main themes and general characteristics of the period and to suggest a grid of categorisation which allows for interacting factors of influence, whether generic, socio-political or purely linguistic. The most salient themes are exemplified with particular works, notably by Hudā Barakāt, Rabīʿ Jābir, Elias Khoury and Rashīd al-Ḍaʿīf. The study also acts as an introduction to a major work planned by Jarrar on the subject of post-war Lebanese literature.

Jumana Bayeh's contribution widens Jarrar's approach (which focuses on texts written in Arabic) into yet another field of post-war Lebanese literature: the exilic genre sometimes called a branch of Lebanese mahjar literature. The authors are all Lebanese by birth, but living in the West, wholly or partly, and they write in English. The themes are war and exile themes, such as home, family, nation, belonging, cultural identity, marginalisation and alienation. Bayeh addresses this thematic complex as it is described by Rabih Ala-

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1   Ṣabāḥ Zuwayn, *Kullamā ʾanti, wa-kullamā ʾnḥanayti ʿalā ʾaḥrufiki* (Beirut 2011): 82.

meddine (Rabīʿ ʿAlam al-Dīn) in his novel *I, the Divine*. The novel features the protagonist Sarah, born to a Lebanese father and an American mother and having spent part of her life in Beirut, part in New York. She may be described as "a racial hybrid who straddles two worlds". The work is developed as the memoir writing of Sarah in her attempt to reach an answer to the question of her identity. Beirut during and after the war constitutes the dominant setting of the novel. The device chosen by the author to let each chapter consist of a new introduction (in the style of Italo Calvino) mirrors the protagonist's struggle for identity. Bayeh discusses the issues against the conceptual backgrounds of borders and hybridity.

Theoreticians such as Anzaldúa and Young argue that existing in a borderland and subject to hybrid identity need not be viewed as static or per definition negative. There is a dynamic in the "confluence of two or more generic streams, with chromosomes constantly crossing over… The cultures cross-pollinate", as Bayeh says. Identity should not be reduced to a single form.

In the novel, Sarah slowly acquires a sense of identity through the process of writing and finally accepts her hybrid status: neither Lebanese or American, but an inclusive and creative state in the process of being created; a positive dynamics in interaction with societal factors.

In a third contribution about post-war Lebanon, **Sune Haugbølle** discusses the migrant experience as it appears in the film *Zozo* by the Swedish-Lebanese producer Josef Farès. Lebanese filmmakers move between Lebanon and the West; thus, like the Lebanese diaspora in general, they narrate the nation from the outside, or from a position wavering between inside and outside.

The civil war and how to come to terms with the feelings it evokes are usually a salient theme in those films. In the artistic production concerning war and migration, there is emphasis on the personal experience, a subjective rendering, a "vast repertoire of emotions" expressed via "images, icons, sounds, familiar experiences, language and songs from the 1970s and 1980s." — "Memory culture can be seen as an archive for the way in which the Lebanese approach their collective structures of feeling during the war," Haugbølle writes. "The artists, 'the memory makers,' consciously or unconsciously participate in the creation of emotional archives."

In the film, the boy called Zozo experiences the war in Beirut; his parents are killed, and he himself escapes to Sweden, where he lives with his grandparents and tries to adjust to the new setting. Everyday experience, scenes of violence and, later, cultural crashes in the migrant world, are all viewed from the perspective of a child, making it strongly emotional and subjective. Zozo escapes into dream sequences. He meets a speaking bird in Beirut; he has visions of his mother talking to him. The experiences from the new land are only by degree less frightening than those in Beirut, since alienation, the language barrier, and physical mobbing by his Swedish schoolmates are integral elements in his new everyday life. Thus, Farès's film "archives emotions of loss, rupture, nostalgia, and family ties which will reverberate with most Lebanese emigrants," writes Haugbølle. Borders are crossed, new boundaries established.

Astrid Ottosson al-Bitar deals with similar themes, although the area her study is concerned with is no longer Lebanon: the contribution addresses Iraqi exile literature. It investigates three particular novels and the way in which magic realism is used in them to produce a "blurring of boundaries between reality and magic; also how boundaries between other realms in life are challenged, such as nature / man, dreaming / state of being awake." The blurring of boundaries is used as a strategy "for describing complex and extraordinary situations, but also ... for subversion, writing back and empowerment," says the author. It is not surprising, then, to find magic realism used as a strategy to combat the exile's feeling of alienation, or as a way to describe and oppose totalitarian regimes.

Ottosson al-Bitar bases her analysis on the tripartite definition of magic realism by Spindler 1993: the metaphysical one, in which a familiar scene achieves an atmosphere of eeriness; the anthropological one (known especially from Latin America), in which magical elements from local folklore are mixed with realistic ones, and the ontological one, in which the supernatural is simply placed in a realistic setting.

The first novel treated is by Maḥmūd al-Bayyātī, an Iraqi poet living in Hammarkullen whose protagonist seems to have borrowed from the personal experiences of the author. Ottosson al-Bitar finds many good detail examples of an uncanny atmosphere meeting the lonely Iraqi in the foreign country. The first part of the second novel, by Janān Jāsim Ḥillāwī, describes exile life in Sweden in strongly negative and stereotypical turnings indicating desolation and distance to Swedes; here, too, an uncanny atmosphere often prevails. In the third novel, by Fāḍil al-ʿAzzāwī from Kirkuk, now living in Germany, the main setting is in Iraq. The boundaries between real and magic are transgressed. The Devil and the Angel appear, and past mixes with present. This anthropological magical realism using traditional folklore serves to express life under political oppression in an artistic way.

Themes of exile literature are further exploited in **Tania al-Saadi**'s contribution: more precisely, how utopian visions occur as a frequent element in immigration literature and how these visions undergo changes in the process of the individual gaining more experience of the new country. The concept of Utopia, "an imaginary country where an ideal government rules over happy people" (according to a dictionary definition), suggests moving in space and time to an imaginary world, thus, implicitly or explicitly, a crossing of boundaries from the real world to an imaginary one; or the co-existence of both, reality and vision. A double dichotomy is at work: a real one moving across national borders, and a mental one, between the real and the imaginary.

Al-Saadi suggests that a circular movement may be discerned in exile literature: "The process of immigration seems at the same time to be motivated by a succession of Utopian and Dystopian visions". The argumentation is exemplified by two short stories. In the first, Ḥanān al-Shaykh describes how the protagonist comes to England with a utopian vision of everything English (wealth, superiority of the people, freedom). This vision slowly changes into a dystopian one (poverty, dirtiness, gloomy atmosphere of the city, and the "moral degradation" of the English people, the last mentioned vice in opposition to Eastern morals).

In another short story, the Egyptian writer Bahāʾ Ṭāhir treats the life of an Egyptian immigrant in a small city in Europe. He meets with a young native girl, with whom he shares problems of loneliness and desolation, as both are human beings in a modern global society.

Dystopian life in exile is often characterised by magic or fantastic elements or spiritual journeys. The final stage of the process is reached when "after having lived for some time in the foreign country, the homeland is gradually transformed into a sort of Utopia for the immigrant", as Al-Saadi puts it: Egypt here is viewed, metaphorically, as a paradise between the sea and the desert.

Al-Andalus, the medieval Arab state in the Iberian Peninsula, acquired a legendary status in literature at an early date. Its literary trajectory in time and place contains a utopian vision, similar to the dream of the homeland in modern exile literature. It is viewed as a golden age or a paradise lost. In contemporary Arabic literature, it is often brought forward as an ideal to be followed, especially with regard to the coexistence of cultures. In her contribution, **Kerstin Eksell** studies the traces of the trajectory in a historical dimension from the first exiles from al-Andalus in the 11th century up to the works by Maḥmūd Darwīsh and Riḍwā ʿĀshūr.

The strength and attractivity of the legend may be related to its generic elasticity, an ambiguity which allows it to move freely between the Real World and fiction, thus opening up for a variety of narratives. Basically, they are all mapped on common metaphorical complexes such as Paradise Lost or the Hunt for the Hidden Treasure. The legend is able to spread in historical space as well as across national borders: it is used in local Spanish folklore as well as in artistic literature. The concept of al-Andalus is perceived with a sense of nostalgia, at first spontaneously transmitted by exiles such as the *taifa* king al-Muʿtamid and the poet Ibn Khafāja in the 11th century, later processed by medieval Arab historians and geographers, such as Ibn Saʿīd. With time, the legend became a vehicle for expressing the identity formation of non-Andalusian peoples and groups. This was its function in the medieval Spanish frontier romances, where the growing Spanish nationalism was profiled against the ideal culture of al-Andalus. The new democratic ideas of 19th century Europe were nurtured by the vision of al-Andalus before it became a recurrent theme in modern Arabic literature.

All contributions mentioned so far concern border-crossing and borderlands in a way that transcends the Arab identity of the literary texts treated. In the case of al-Andalus, both Westerners and Arabs are intermittently engaged in the formation of the trajectory, and Western and Eastern aspects enrich each other. In the other contributions, Arab protagonists act their lives wholly or partly in relation to the West, be it as inhabitants of the Arab world with its consistent interference of Western culture and politics, or as exiles in the West in constant interaction with their host countries.

The very problems addressed by **Tetz Rooke** in his contribution are the drawing of boundaries between national literatures; the concepts of national and global literature; and the question of whether modern Arab literature has its own Arab 'specificity', or whether it should be viewed as part of world literature. Scholars like Sabry Hafez and Magda Al-Nowaihi have maintained that Arab literature must not be counted as belong-

ing to / part of "world literature"; whoever does so, they argue, allows Western literary views to dominate, and obscures the fact that there are very real differences between Arab literature and others. Other scholars, like Zhang Longxi and Abdessalam Benabde-lali, hold that although distinctiveness and singularity should be respected, contemporary culture is global: Japanese literature, for example, has its own characteristics, yet it participates in modern world culture.

"When is alterity falsely denied, and when is it falsely ascribed? This is a key issue… for me, when mediating between the Arabic literary field and the European field," Rooke writes. Reality is dependent on descriptions, and vice versa. For example, many Arabs live in the West nowadays: it is their territory too, not just a place in exile. And geographical and cultural boundaries are not primary definitions but accidental and may well shift over time.

As case studies, Rooke uses two works by the feminist writer Nawāl al-Saʿdāwī (Nawal El Saadawi)—*Suqūṭ al-imām* (The Fall of the Imam) and *The Hidden Face of Eve*—and the novel *Mawsim al-hijra ilā 'l-shamāl* (Season of Migration to the North) by al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ (Tayeb Salih). Both writers transcend national boundaries, yet demonstrate the relevance of their respective national cultures. They have made great impressions both in their homelands and in the West.

The high literary quality of Tayeb Salih's novel has long been recognized. It presents aspects both of Sudanese Arab and of British culture. It is about real boundaries, such as between the West and the East, and between the modern and the traditional (in Sudan). Yet, it transcends those boundaries, giving no definite answer as to which side of the boundary is the best. Against this background, Rooke argues that Arab literature should be placed within the larger frame of global literature.

In the contribution by **Stephan Guth** we again become aware of the relevance of a culture specific narrowing of perspective, although still against a background of global literature. "How the word *riwāya* came to mean 'novel'" is a lexical and semantic investigation, which broadens into a multilayered study of the function of modern Egyptian literature in its society.

The term *riwāya* has been treated several times before; yet Guth provides a very thorough and coherent overview of the historical sources for the internal Arabic development of the term which yields new understanding. The term, widely used in Classical times for meanings connected with transmission of literature, came into use during the 19th century with a variety of meanings, reflecting genre crossings as European literature continued to be translated into Arabic. From the beginning of the 20th century, it was applied for the rendering of "novel", a usage which slowly acquired a standard state; "a movement in the genre landscape" as Guth calls it.

In Classical literature, *riwāya* could well be used for the higher genres such as poetry and *ḥadīth*. This may have contributed to its suitability for the new novel genre, since it answered the demands of Classical quality literature, to be both edifying and entertaining. It was thus established as a "middle genre" and gained importance in the new social group of *afandiyya*, the educated middle class, which wanted a literature that conveyed a message while having entertaining qualities. The novel complied with their ambition to build a modern nation and a national literature. In the novel, contemporary society could