

## Preface

A word is in order about the words in our title. “Levantine” gets the nod over “Middle” or “Near Eastern,” “West Asian” and “Mashrek” as each of these terms encompass too much territory: Turkey, Iraq, the Persian Gulf states are beyond our purview. *Bilād al-Shām* would work except that it is not generally understood by non-Arabic speakers and therefore would undermine the book’s objective, which is to coax readers into the stream of Levantine literature. Nor, to be sure, is “Levant” the perfect term since it evokes a bygone horizon stretching from Izmir to Alexandria. Yet Levant it is and for a couple of reasons. The term refers not only to the eastern littoral of the Mediterranean, but also allusively to the region’s actual and “orientalized” complexity. Perhaps the following essays devoted to self-representations of the Levant will build new meanings into this old word.

The terms “modern” and “crisis” go together in the Levant as elsewhere, only more so. The fictions and memoirs studied here follow modernity’s ideologies, gender troubles and culture clashes as these intersect with crisis in the Levant. The texts intervene in another of this book’s key concepts, “memory.” Whether they bid to build it, or rescue it from erasure, or save it from opportunistic manipulations, none of the narratives studied here are indifferent to memory. There can be no forgetfulness or escape for this literature.

“Space,” as the ultimate stake in modern Levantine crises and memory, would seem to be the ground upon which everything else rests. Indeed, the contributors to this book have studied how fictions and memoirs relate to spaces, actual and virtual. Yet memory can also trump space, as Lebanese architect and urban planner, Jad Tabet, pointed out in a recent interview about Beirut’s post-war development project:

In one way or another, they wanted to erase the notion that a war had occurred there and erase also the memory of this ancient city that had spawned it. It is a way of beginning from ground zero, a way of reinvoking the myth of the Phoenix who is reborn from its own ashes but who is reborn with all his wings shimmering. But memory resists and memory cannot be erased like that. What is very dangerous is that the return of the repressed can sometimes be catastrophic. We know it in Lebanon and we know it everywhere.<sup>1</sup>

Space is not only gravid with meanings that condition memory; memory too bears meanings that in turn condition spaces. The contributors to this volume focus on this interplay in the final key word in our title, “narrative.” As a way of knowing, narrative (from *gnārus*, “knowing”) links memory and space. Yet, as mere strings of signs standing for persons, things and events, and leading to a point that is foisted upon the whole, narrative knowledge can never be more than contingent. The august function of narrative and its simultaneous fragility, are reasons why so much energy is lavished on con-

<sup>1</sup> My translation from the French.

trolling it. This book is devoted to understanding the techniques used to build and inflect narrative in its various forms from memoir and autobiography to the novel.

As for the production process of this book itself, if ever I doubted the weight of social space, this project has made a believer of me. In consulting books of similar scope, I was impressed by the rigorous method Oxford-based Robin Ostle displays in his short foreword to *Modern Literature in the Near and Middle East: 1850-1970*, and by the firm grasp of history Paris-based Boutros Hallaq displays in his presentation of *La Poétique de l'espace dans la littérature arabe moderne*. From the other side of the Atlantic, Brown University's Kamal Abdel-Malek and David C. Jacobson are equally impressive for their sensible, even-handed preface to their *Israeli and Palestinian Identities in History and Literature*. I confess to having tried to follow the unpoliticized rigor and warmth of these books, but connections between scholarship and political controversy that may be implicit elsewhere are often manifest in Beirut, and this is not always a bad thing. Issues that appear cut-and-dried elsewhere throb with controversy in Beirut. This book is born of such debate and to this extent, it is a child of the city.

Soon after this book was proposed, numerous objections were bruited, among them that it deals with only narrative in Arabic and Hebrew, having left out other Levantine languages such as Armenian and Turkish. Even within its scope, the book also neglects or under-represents numerous areas and authors. These choices reflect the interests of those who chose to contribute, and the result does not pretend to adequately represent the range of narrative in the Levant.

Some have also complained that two Levantine languages are too many when one of them is Hebrew. The most plausible reason for the proposed exclusion of Hebrew is that this literature is in no real sense of the word Levantine inasmuch as it was generally nourished in a European context until the twentieth century. True enough, but the Hebrew language was never simply a European language and East European Jews were arguably never simply Europeans. There exists an irreducible ambivalence of Hebrew-language culture that many who today share mixed origins or diaspora lives can well appreciate. Come to think of it, "ambivalent identity" may be the one thing common to all the Levant. Given that massive Jewish immigration into Palestine is a fact and that the literature of this experience has *some* relation to Levantine culture, to ignore it would be as intellectually unsound as willful ignorance of the Palestinian experience. Indeed, none less than the dean of Arab commitment, Ghassan Kanafani, also displayed serious interest in Zionist literature in *Fi al-Adab al-Sihyuni* (On Zionist Literature) – and arguably not just "to know the enemy" but to know the truth of a cultural situation, which is also the aim of the present volume.

I would like to thank the following persons and institutions for their support and assistance. Angelika Neuwirth initiated the project and has been a guiding force since its inception. The Lebanese American University in Beirut has offered me a livelihood, and

its library has proven far greater than its modest size would suggest. I thank its director, Aida Naaman, and the members of her staff with whom I have had the pleasure of working: Cendrella Abdallah, Sawzan Habre, Aida Hajjar, Bughdana Hajjar, and Kamal Jaroudy. I thank Edgard Weber of the Université de Toulouse – Le Mirail for organizing “Symposium 2000: Les Romanciers libanais d’expression arabe,” a conference whose stimulating atmosphere boosted interest in this project. For their help in desktop page layout, I thank Chirine Abou Chakra, Birgit Embalo, Emma Ghannagé and especially Hussam Harakeh. I also thank Jean Aucagne s.j. for looking over the style in French. Perhaps more than for most such cooperative projects, the contributors to this volume deserve my gratitude for the patience and confidence they have shown from the beginning. I have tried to make the product worthy of their significant investment.

It certainly goes against the spirit of Beirut to thank persons for the intangibles of friendship and stimulating conversation, yet this book owes much to both. It has been my great fortune to count among my friends Rashid al-Daif and John Donahue s.j., both exceptionally knowledgeable in Levantine culture. John has moreover put together the handiest Arabic transliteration software I have encountered. Most of all, I acknowledge the mentorship of Samira Aghacy whose expertise in Arabic literature and whose advice at each step of the way in this project has been invaluable. In her capacity as Chair of Humanities at LAU – Beirut, she has also performed the inestimable feat of providing a propitious environment for research, teaching and writing. Finally, May Semaan Seigneurie has been my most critical and consistently helpful reader.

As extensive as my debts are to these friends and colleagues, on numerous occasions in the production process of this book I have chosen not to take counsel, and therefore the responsibility for the final product is mine alone.

Ken Seigneurie  
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