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**SOAS-ALECSO**  
***The Translation of Modern Arabic Literature Into European Languages***  
***An International Symposium***  
***30 November-03 December 2010***

**Symposium Rationale**

Among the most pressing issues to emerge from the recent developments on the global scene is that of genuine translatability among cultures. What is at stake is not simply the possibility of cultural transference, which highlights the limitations as it stresses the specificity of each culture. Rather the possibility of a genuine encounter that engenders relevant insights and an understanding of the nature of difference. This is still the issue despite the ‘ecstasy of communication’, to use Baudrillard’s phrase, brought forth by advances in communication and the increasing availability of its means. Amongst these, it is acknowledged still, literature affords, along with the pleasure principle, just such an experience of genuine, multi-layered, de-reifying experience of encounter, as it engages personal sensibilities and confronts assumptions and prejudices. This situation in society at large is also mirrored in the increasing attention given in western universities to world literature, though fractured, compartmentalized and prey to varying disciplinary methods.

In these contexts, it has become important to assess the status of non-European literatures, especially as they are received in translation. And translation brings with it the deeper issues of translatability. Among these, the case of modern Arabic literature is most pressing, both within the academy and in the society at large. The tragic events of 9/11 led to perhaps an even greater interest in Arab culture and, in a trickle effect down to works of modern Arabic literature, than the awarding of the Nobel Prize in Literature to Naguib Mahfouz back in 1988. But is modern Arabic literature to be read, native-informant like, only for a view on Arab culture and Arab societies? If these works in translation were to migrate beyond academic contexts and classrooms, is it then the choice of texts or is it the widening of dissemination, forces of the market, that would prepare the scene for an otherwise mode of reception?

**The following will be guiding themes for our debates, though others will doubtless be added:**

- Are the works of modern Arabic literature received today only as the cultural production of a society *in extremis*, thereby confirming the zone of translation as a war zone, to quote Emily Apter?
- Can these works be received rather on their literary merit, and in which case, who and what sets the measures for these? Professional translators, and very few have these been in the history of literary translation from Arabic, scholars and academics, or publishing agents and professional literary editors in much needed major publishing houses?
- Why has the novel so far received the most attention, and what kind of novel?
- What is the status of poetry, the art of the Arabs, of modern Arabic drama, of the modern Arabic short story?
- Is this privileging of the novel happening in all the target European languages, or is it a prejudice of the English market? How have authors and works been historically selected, and how is one writer picked up from one European language to another?

- How is the encounter between the target European languages useful for eventually regaining the status of modern Arabic literature *as* literature?
- What will it take for modern Arabic literature, predominantly secular, not to be subsumed under the burgeoning phenomenon of 'Islamic literatures'?
- Is translatability possible beyond the two poles of cultural transference and linguistic and textual fidelity to the original?
- The translation of modern Arabic poetry and drama, reading or performance?
- Issues surrounding the translatability of modern Arabic avant-garde and experimental prose.
- Do such projects for a literary diplomacy as the recently established American ones constitute a model to follow or to counter? What are the cultural assumptions behind such projects? Are there comparable projects by European countries?
- What exactly are the roles of the recently established literary prizes and the increasing presence in world book fairs?
- Models on the scene: *Banipal*, the London-based Poetry Translation Centre, the British Council Translation Workshops, their European counterparts, Beirut 39, etc...
- Where and how are the boundaries drawn between countries, generations and genres?
- Selection and translation as ideologically committed acts: questions of gender, religion, Arab identity, war and conflict, social and political dimensions. Where is the commitment to the literary?
- Translation as domestication, translation and the Arabic Canon.
- The status of memoirs, biographies and autobiographies.
- Translation and power, embargoed literature?
- Issues of cultural production: publishing in Arabic, publishing in translation.
- The relationship between Arabic literature in translation and literatures written in European languages by authors of Arab origin.



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