

**Some Reflections on the Autonomy of Literature
and the Beaux Arts in the Arab and Western Worlds
as an Introduction to Volume One
of *Bibliotheca Folia Orientalia***

With Volume One of *Bibliotheca Folia Orientalia* we are hopefully inaugurating a new series of books parallel to the annual journal of *Folia Orientalia*. I am not an Arabist. I am an Oriental archaeologist, Classics (Latin and Greek) and ancient Semito-African scholar. I do not aspire to the evaluation of the conference papers and their professional quality, although I am going to refer to a number of them time and again. I would like to express some reflections with reference to the volume as a book in its own right.

‘In the Orient one suddenly confronted unimaginable antiquity, inhuman beauty, boundless distances.’ In these words E. Said evoked some idealistic tunes which were omnipresent in the Western letters and humanities of the 18th and 19th centuries. In harmony with Said’s words A. Kupiszewska recalled I. Krasicki’s Egypt (1819) as the ‘unearthly land of miracles,’ of ‘fairies, giants, spells,’ of ‘fabulous gardens...in splendid and sophisticated taste.’ She also referred to E. Słowacki’s (1823) Baghdad of Caliph Mamun, which was ‘a sanctuary of science’ with ‘camels...encumbered with Greek manuscripts... later translated into Arabic,’ and the ancient Western myth of Arabia Felix, the land of ‘the endless spring.’ In her words Arabia Felix embodied ‘nostalgia for a paradise on earth’, a lasting Western dream of paradise. The Orient of the European travelogues and novels may also reveal its undecipherable, dark side. In the Western clichés it was sometimes a lair of abhorrent black-magic practices. In Heliodorus’s *Aethiopica* an old Egyptian woman evokes the spirit of her dead son. She splutters her necromantic incantations, which sound primitive and barbarian to the Greek ear. She spoke Egyptian. We learn from different Classical sources that the Oriental languages sounded ill and barbaric to the learned Hellenic ear. Kupiszewska did not forget to adduce testimonies of travelogues marked by a disillusioned personal observation: famine, plague, hunger and tyranny in Cairo 1784.

Arab-European relations have developed in a large scale historical process initiated by the Arab invasions in the 7th century, which swept away the Eastern

part of the Graeco-Roman civilisation, the Christian Byzantine world at that time. Interestingly, the Abbasid intellectual circles assimilated a substantial part of the earlier Byzantine cultural heritage, and in particular philosophy and sciences. However, at the same time the rule of the new Arabian monarchs was marked by widespread devastation and the subsequent decline of the figural arts. In the 4th–7th centuries the workshops of painters on wood, fresco painters, sculptors and mosaicists in Anatolia, Syria, the Holy Land and Egypt reached a perfection which was unparalleled in contemporary Western Christendom. At some stage the power of the Arab rulers came to be dominated by the Ottoman Turks, who successively challenged the Western monarchies of the new Germanic Europe, and also a rising Slavic Christian Europe. In her paper U. Lewicka-Rajewska expresses the lasting hope cherished by some scholars that the Arabic travelogues would gradually disperse the darkness which still clothes the early history of the Slavic world. In the course of the European-Ottoman conflicts Constantinople, the last great light of Oriental Christianity, was extinguished once and forever. Later generations of the Orientals and Europeans witnessed the decline of the Ottomans and the parallel rise of the Western colonial powers of Spain, France, and Britain. The decline and fall of the Ottomans opened up the way for the emancipation and resurgence of the Arab world, a process which we are still witnessing. When I am referring to the destruction of the Christian Oriental art and architecture in the 7th and the following centuries I do not mean a particular phenomenon of ‘the Arab or Islamic destructiveness,’ but rather the universal phenomenon of the destruction of cultural heritage, of art galleries and the libraries. The Christian Europe of the 20th century witnessed the rise of modern nihilisms, which brought a series of ‘iconoclastic revolutions.’ Those new mass movements devoured a large part of the great Russo-Byzantine figural heritage of icons and religious architecture with the whole liturgical appurtenances once and for all (in the Soviet Union). My father’s generation witnessed the same in the once Arab-dominated Spain in the nineteen thirties, and also similar acts of ideologically motivated destruction committed in Bulgaria, Serbia, Macedonia, and also in Poland in the first post-war years (1945–1956). In the Second World War the artillery fire, the air bombardment and premeditated destruction annihilated the whole cultural complexities of phenomenal richness, and whole cities with all their cultural goods and human beings. The Arab destruction of the Oriental Christian art and architecture in the 7th century was by far not just Arab, but generally human.

We find a sound reflection on history and historical writings in F. Ondras’ paper. In his words on history ‘if anything it is always incomplete and laterally seized through documents and testimonies.’ When commenting on Orientalist travelogues he aptly observes that they ‘served as a mirror to construct a self-image... a kind of *alter ego* contrasting with self-image.’ Ondras is also right when

he reflects that 'the historical novel' is a genre of old stock which changes all the time (memoirs, the realist novel, autobiography, romance, the philosophical tale). He may also be right on one more point. When I was reading his paper it occurred to me that his 'historical novel' can actually tell more history than academic history books can offer. His paper reminded me of Roth's *Radetzky*, Corti's *Il cavallo rosso*, Buchheim's *Die Festung*, de Bernières' *Traum aus Stein und Federn*, and Odojewski's *Zasypie wszystko, zawieje...* M. Filipczuk, a Polish English translator, put it in a radical way, however, probably in an essentially correct way, when he said that only the great literature is really worth reading, because it encompasses our human experience.

In his paper on Rabi' Jābir's *Druze of Belgrade* Ondras discusses one of the recurrent motifs of the conference: emigration and exile, including political émigrés, emigration as the personal experience of suffering and alienation, as well as of adjustment and cultural inspiration. 'Strangers in a strange land, surrounded by people who do not speak their language,' Ondras characterized Rabi' Jābir's novelistic heroes. The motif returns in B. Bawardi's paper on the poetry of Yūsuf Shiḥādi, where the reader encounters 'the entangled human relationships between East and West.' Political emigration is a universal factor. The Polish literature of the 20th century is conspicuous for its best novels, short stories and poetry created by political émigrés in far off lands of Argentina and California, Naples and Paris. I have rediscovered time and again in the course of years that plentifully state-sponsored literary circles representative of the countries of Europe and Asia ruled by regimes of every sort have produced mediocre literary and artistic works in aesthetic terms, while their victims, the political émigrés, some of them earlier imprisoned or even tortured, created congenial works of art and literature. This is a paradoxical, and at the same time an edifying conclusion, that although renewed efforts have been continually undertaken for a long time, in recent decades as well, to wall up the fine arts and belles lettres within the confines of political doctrines, they have preserved their own autonomy and their own ways of expression, and they have followed their own rhythms of development. J. Stempowski argued that political emigration proved a great incentive and inspiration in the arts and literature, and that political émigrés have created a substantial chapter in the culture of mankind. Saying this he cited the Ionian intellectuals who left Aegean Greece in consequence of the Persian invasion and established two important philosophical schools, of the Pythagoreans and of Elea in exile in Italy and Sicily. I am sure that in the same way the Arab writers, poets and scholars who have emigrated to Europe and the New World, will enrich the world literature and the Western humanities.

At my concluding words let me once again evoke some idealistic tunes in the Western description of the Arab world, which can be recovered in an inexhaustible abundance in the French, English, Polish and Austrian academic

painting of the 19th century remarkable for the magnetic and captivating beauty of the Orient seen as a mirror of lake-water surrounded by rocks and palms in *The Oasis* by Belly, or *Médinet el-Fayoum* by Gérôme, as well as in his nostalgic *View of the Plain of Thebes*. L. Thornton (1983) characterized her carefully selected collection of 19th-century Orientalist paintings as ‘colourful, sunlit, strange, sanguinary, tender or instructive ... they enchant and fascinate us,’ as we contemplate them looking through ‘the veils of myth and mystery in which the Orient had been shrouded.’

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