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"LITERATURE OF THE NINETIES IN TUNISIA": MAKING SENSE OF THE *FIN DE SIÈCLE*

When a young man from the enthusiastic audience that followed the proceedings of the conference "Literature of the 90s in Tunisia" held last August in Monastir, Tunisia, suggested that debate over recent creative writing in the country should take into consideration *ma baʿda al-ḥadātha* (the current rendering of "Postmodernism") the response was unanimous: "Let us grasp *ḥadātha* first." Postmodernism was regarded as yet one more Western concept designed elsewhere for purposes that do not apply to the indigenous culture. Nevertheless, despite the exasperation underlying the response, postmodernism offers a point of reference that may help determine where Tunisian culture stands at this point in history. It also allows a glimpse into the way this literature positions itself in relation to the end of the twentieth century.

Postmodernism is indeed hegemonic. This is particularly true, Frederic Jameson says, if Postmodernism is not seen as a style among others but as "the cultural dominant of the logic of late capitalism."[1] At the very basis of the debate over postmodernism lies the issue of representation. Jean Baudrillard calls this stage of representation the era "where the simulacrum rejoices over the dead body of the referent."[2] It is the "xerox degree of culture," or the era where everything is reproduced, copied, or recycled: from beer cans to ideas and literary works.

But as Linda Hutcheon argues in *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1987), there is perhaps more to recycling than the mere act of repeating the same cycle. Collages of known texts, the rewriting of an older piece, or the apparent random rearrangement of previous narratives involves stylistic devices with a critical edge, like irony or parody. The contestation of older models inherent in postmodern cultural production, Jameson would say, bears the seeds of a possible Utopia that counters any apocalyptic prophecies about the future.

From this perspective, the end of the twentieth century does not appear as a time of double uncertainty—a *fin de siècle* and a millennium—but as an era of renewed critical awareness that emerges from traditionally silenced voices: women, minorities, "third-world" peoples, and others. The relative tolerance of differences, made possible by struggles undertaken throughout this century, has enabled emergent forces to gain a more credible position in the prevailing cultural establishment. Some manifestations of this era are to be found in the increasing emphasis on the pluralistic, the cross-cultural, and the "ethnic."

It is within this world context and the immediate framework of the Tunisian cultural scene that the August 1992 conference and the corpus of literature it sponsored are interpreted.

The front cover of the conference invitation formulates the goals of the meeting in this way:

> In order to bring out the general features of Tunisian literature in the last decade of the twentieth century; to give young voices the attention they deserve; to assess the relationship between the new text and previous and parallel experiences in Tunisia; to evaluate the contribution of this text to the enrichment of world culture.[3]

The most problematic phrase of the statement is "the next text" *(al-nas al-jadīd)*. The use of the word "text" resonates with current debates pertaining to textuality and modernity. The epithet *jadīd* means new but is also commonly understood as a synonym of *ḥadīth* (modern). However, both terms—*jadīd* and *ḥadīth*—are often used interchangeably. The frequent translation of *al-adab al-ʿarabī al-ḥadīth* as "Modern Arabic Literature" does not consciously assume the modernity of this literature as opposed to classicism or postmodernity. Moreover, *ḥadīth* has been thus far charged with connotations of the positive and dynamic—hence Adonis's equation of *ḥadīth* and *mutaḥawwil* (the changing or the dynamic). In short, the term is never really questioned except by those forces with which it enters into conflict and which are said to be conservative or traditional *(muḥāfiẓ* or *taqlīdī)*. An articulation of the distinction between *ḥadīth* and *jadīd* is yet to be made.

Now that the concept of modernity has come under serious revision in Europe and North America, the term *ḥadīth* has become problematic. Advocates of *ḥadātha*, whose struggle is still underway and who place themselves at the forefront of change, are faced with two choices: either they assimilate the new concept (postmodernism) or lose their "avant-gardist" edge (and reputation). The Monastir conference, pervious to current debates on the Arabic as well as world cultural scenes, registered the echoes of this anxiety. The use of *ma ba ʿda al-ḥadātha* by the young man in the conference assumes that Postmodernism is a symbol of progress. He implies that confining debate to *ḥadātha* in a conference that addressed the future is an evidence of anachronism.

The wording of the invitation poses one further problem. New texts are compared to *tajārib muwāzya* (parallel experiences). Hence the question: if there are several experiences taking place simultaneously, why is one described as "new" whereas the others are referred to by the more neutral "parallel"? The highlights the process of selection, publication, readership, and recognition by the cultural establishment of the country to which the conference attempts to relate.

The wide social, geographic, and literary range of the writers invited reveals a genuine effort of inclusion. Panelists were either university professors or well-known writers. The two dozen writers—six of whom were women—discussed in the meeting came from different parts of the country and held a wide range of occupations. The first two sessions were devoted to poets and fiction writers who have published no more than one book, a group often referred to in the Arab countries as *udabāʾ shubban* (young writers).

These young writers owe their presence for the most part to the phenomenon of the "literary page" that has been thriving in daily and weekly newspapers for some time. Except for novelist ʿAlia al-Tabʾi and "folk" poet Belqasim al-Yaʿqubi, the invited writers are familiar names for those who follow the literary section in local dailies and weeklies. Radio Monastir's sponsoring of the conference has made the intimate relationship between mass media and this literature even more profound. The main audience of "literature of the 90s" lies among newspaper readers and radio listeners.

Although newspapers are an effective means of disseminating creative writing due to their immediate distribution and large audience, they are likely to discourage experimental writing in order to meet their readers' expectations. The quality of the literature they publish often bears a strong correlation to the notoriously mediocre journalistic style of some papers. These texts abound with clichés, take a superficial approach to social issues, or present a naïve romanticizing of feelings (a number of poems by Raja ben Halima and stories by Ibrahim Ben Sultan fall under this category). Writers who could not gain access to literary journals make use of the tendency to inclusion prevailing among the newspapers to reach an audience.

Inclusion was, however, not applied universally. Tunisian literature written in French was not included in the conference. This is an indication of the uneasiness—if not the animosity—this literature faces from the official as well as the unofficial literary circles in Tunisia. Another sign of exclusion is the complete absence of literature representing discourse of Islamic movements. This "selective exclusion" reveals the kind of status the Monastir conference sought to achieve in relation to the establishment. The conference-organizers had to compromise between the strong demands for inclusion emerging from the widening community of writers and the forces of exclusion operating within the literary establishment and the Tu-

nisian polity as a whole. The conference's strategy reinforced its claim to openness by sponsoring a non-established literature while maintaining the style of the literary establishment itself. As a result of this move, it managed to avoid being marginalized by the center and succeeded in evading attempts to discredit its claim to difference.

Further evidence of this attempt to secure a distinctive status can be seen in the strong belief—by writers and panels alike—in the purpose of literature and the social responsibility of the writer. The guiding principle was to encourage innovation while maintaining norms of "social responsibility." The two main features of "literature of the 90s" are the strong presence of context (cultural, social, economic and political) and the uninhibited experimentation with form and language. Commitment to social issues is paralleled by an increasing awareness of the aesthetic.

In "The Second Night After One Thousand" by Ibrahim Darghuthi, a full scale popular rebellion is averted by King Shahrayar's personal body guard who dethrones his master and stops the revolt in one stroke.[4] Moving in and out of the narrative frame of the *Nights* puzzles the reader as to the relevance of the story to contemporary life. Direct reference to objects and terms of current use enables the author to introduce irony and allows the narrator to intervene in the course of narration. The key to the story is to be found in Tunisia's recent history. It is an allegory of the removal of Habib Bourguiba, former president of Tunisia, by his own prime minister in November of 1987. The change is described ironically as a palace revolution, the outcome of which was the avoidance of radical change and the perpetuation of the *status quo* in the country. Darghuthi's stories engage tradition *(The 1001 Nights)* and contemporary texts (Mahmud Darwish) and use an original narrative strategies. At the same time, they refer the reader to the details of local life and the regional culture of South Tunisia.

ʿAli at-Tabʾi's novel *Zahrāt as-ṣubbār* (Cactus Flower) (1991) shares these two elements—the presence of a recognizable referent and the striving for creativity.[5] It assesses the Tunisian Left of the 60s and 70s and introduces an original use of dialect in passages of stream-of-consciousness and internal monologue. In the novel, Raja's Tunisian dialect bursts into her mind, breaking through the literary medium used elsewhere. Standard Arabic symbolizes the language of her alienation. One instance of the most dramatic usage of dialect spans nine pages. It is introduced in literary Arabic: "I opened my purse and told him, 'I will read from a letter I never mailed to you. It started in French then continued in our dialect' " (77). The French part is missing and the text that follows is entirely in dialect. The three media compete for space in the novel. French is relegated to the absent-present; literary Arabic shapes the narrative and occupies the outer spaces of debate, description, and dialogue; while the inner world of the protagonist is inhabited by dialect. The discourses associated with

each language compete within the novel and point, beyond it, to the conflicting components of Tunisian culture as a whole.

There is room for comparison between at-Tabʾi's portrayal of the Tunisian Left in the 60s and 70s and Darghuthi's representation of an impotent and naïve political opposition. For Darghuthi, the present is the outcome of a misguided opposition and decades of government repression. Although tyranny is constantly contested by his characters, their ideal society is a project yet to materialize. *Zahrāt as-ṣubbār* pushes this criticism of the opposition to outright condemnation. Raja resorts to an almost nihilist view of her own past and the political commitment of her generation. For her, the future cannot be faced unless new elements are involved. At the end of the novel she says: "Next time you ask me to repeat the game, I'll say 'yes', but please let's get a new deck of cards."

In the poetic experiences of the late 80s and early 90s represented at the meeting, the tendency to blend social commitment and artistic creativity are manifest in the return of childhood and poetic creativity as themes. In ʿAziz Wislati's collection *ʿAsal al-Diflā*, poetic experience is equated with fertility and the renewal of the natural cycle. His poetry announces the birth of a community of poets who celebrate language and themselves. In the poem "Birth" the earth boasts:

> With every dawn
> I take pride
> In a seed of poetry and the birth of a poet.[6]

The poet's distinctive lyricism is a revival of the explicit celebration of Arabic as a language in earlier poetry. Wislati writes riddles, measured and rhymed short poems, anagrams, and lullabies. Poetic experience becomes a way of perceiving daily life. For him, no subject is unworthy of poetry. He writes about his baby-daughter taking a nap, his wife sewing a dress, children playing soccer. Poetry is, in a sense, "democratized." Unlike the predominant tendency to mysticism in contemporary Arab and local poetic experiences, the "poem of the 90s" in Tunisia, exemplified by Wislati, is turning to daily experience and a celebration of common people for inspiration.[7] It is a hopeful poetry deeply involved in local life and the dreams of its generation.

By emphasizing stylistic innovation and social concerns, Wislati's poems, Darghtuthi's stories or at-Tabʿi's novel participate in the current discourses about the future prevailing in Tunisia. To take my contextualization of these texts a step further, I will use the concept of coexistence of several modes of production within one "social formation" developed by Nichos Poulantzas and applied to literature by Jameson in *The Political Unconscious*.[8] According to this theory, "emerging" and "residual" modes of production within the same society have conflicting cultural expressions. These expressions can be detected in the presence of differ-

ent styles, languages, and "impulses" within the literary text. Bakhtin calls this phenomena "polyglossia."[9] Social agendas and programs become competing visions of the future, or what Jameson calls Utopia, and surface in symbolic forms in literature. The year 2000 offers—less by virtue of being a round figure than due to the hopes and predictions associated with millennia and *fin de siècle*—one of those occasions where the future takes precedence. It becomes a time for self-assessment and the projection into the future of aspirations the present is unable to meet.

In Tunisia, the issue that occupies the forefront of these hopes has been *al-mujtamaᶜ al-madanī*, or "civil society." Hundreds of articles, interviews, and meetings have been devoted to discuss the role of the citizen in the decision-making process, censorship, police-civilian relations, etc. It is a manifestation of a growing demand for a new role for the individual in a society where the governing institutions have failed to respond to the changes that have affected their base. One of the consequences of this debate has been a rapid increase in the volume of published material. Writing has become, in a sense, a badge of membership to the "civil society" and a sign of active involvement in the movement that promotes it. As a result, in the last five years Tunisia has witnessed an unprecedented surge in publishing. The phenomenon has created a greater and more active movement of ideas in the country giving rise in the process to a thriving business in publishing and related activities. The nearing of the year 2000 added more urgency to such debates.

The debate over "civil society" has indeed become the "battle ground" for a wide range of discourse competing to formulate and promote their different visions of the country's future. The social forces behind these discourses, antagonistic as they may be, resort to the same means to convey their interpretations of the notion itself of "civil society;" they use the mass media. The "literature of the 90s" resonates this context in which no one single force has been able to achieve undisputed domination over Tunisian culture. It does so in its content and through the multiplicity of styles and languages that cross the texts. It is within this discourse of "openness," plurality, and conflict that the astonishing mixture of styles in the stories of Darghuthi can be understood. It is among the competing discourses of "the civil society" that ᶜAlia at-Tabᶜi's use of multiple languages may find its meaning. In fact, it is within this frame that the striving for a distinctive style by the Monastir conference can be interpreted. Processes of exclusion and inclusion operative in the conference are symptomatic of similar trends taking place on the larger scale of Tunisian society. The exclusion of Tunisian literature in French or texts written that reflect Islamic movements points to the treatment of such discourses in the culture as a whole.

The closing statement of the conference emphasized the role of media in the future of Tunisian literature, the reader, and freedom of expression

as means of reinforcing "the democratic process." The focus is placed on the immediate context of literature: the media, audience, and politics, three major components of the "civil society." The success, often called "continuity" or "grounding," of the literature of the future depends on the ability of this literature to use these factors effectively. The end of the century is therefore seen as a target date rather than an ultimatum. For this reason, the Monastir conference "Literature of the 90s in Tunisia" was transformed from a single event into an institution by the same name and a yearly meeting.

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NOTES

1. Frederic Jameson. *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Ithaca: Duke University Press, 1991), 54.
2. Linda Hutcheon. *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989), 11.
3. Translations from the conference invitation and other sources in Arabic are my own.
4. Ibrahim Darghuthi. *al-Khubz al-murr* (Bitter Bread) (Tunis: Saamid li al-nashr, 1990), 55.
5. ʿAlia al-Tabʿi. *Zaharāt as-Ṣubbār* (Cactus Flower) (Tunis: Dar al-janub li al-nashr, 1991).
6. ʿAziz al-Wislati. *ʿAsal ad-Diflā* (Oleander Honey) (Ben ʿArus: ashsarika al-jadida li at-tibaʿa wa at-tasfir, 1991), 6.
7. The poetry of Hasan Ben ʿAbdallah, Zahra Laabidi, and Wislati teem with names of people and places; several of them are biographical or even narrative pieces that require intimate knowledge with the context.
8. Nicos Poulantzas. *Political Power and Social Classes* (London: New Left Books, 1973); Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).
9. Mikhail Bakhtin. *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).