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Arguing with Europe: Eastern Civilisation versus Orientalist Exoticism

Peter Hill

The French Romantic poet Alphonse de Lamartine travelled to 'the East', namely Syria, Palestine and parts of the Balkans, in 1832-33, with his wife and daughter. His account of these travels, the *Voyage en Orient*, was published in 1835 and went on to become one of the major 'Eastern' travel-narratives of the nineteenth century. Edward Said was scathing about it in *Orientalism*:

> What remains of the Orient in Lamartine's prose is not very substantial at all [...] the sites he has visited, the people he has met, the experiences he has had, are reduced to a few echoes in his pompous generalizations. (*Orientalism* 179)

I would not dissent from this assessment. But Said was not the first to remark on the nature of Lamartine's representations of the 'Orient'. In 1859, twenty-four years after the French poet's visit to 'the East', a young Beiruti poet and journalist, Khalil al-Khūrī, made an Arabic translation and commentary, with some sharp criticisms, of one of the poems included in his *Voyage en Orient.*

This commentary, which I will examine below, may be seen in one sense as an example of 'writing back' against the pretensions of European imperialism, of the kind examined by Said in his *Culture and Imperialism*. Indeed, it offers an explicit rebuttal, by a Syrian Arab, of certain classic tropes of literary-Orientalist exoticism. But this is not the vigorous, oppositional 'writing back' which can be found in the later, heroic era of anti-imperial movements: Khūrī's criticisms were – as we shall see – framed by his overall respect for Lamartine, and cast in terms of humour and irony. And Khūrī's cultural context – that of the mid-nineteenth-century Arab 'nahda' (revival or renaissance) – was not in general characterised by sharp contestations of European authority. From the 1830s onwards, Egyptian and Syrian literati translated work after work from French and English into Arabic. They reprinted press reports from European newspapers; they imitated (or, alternatively, appropriated) whole literary and cultural forms – the drama, the periodical press – from Western originals; they sought to reconcile European with Arab or Islamic notions. Receptivity towards – indeed, eagerness for – European cultural products was commonplace, even when combined with a strong respect for local (Arab, Ottoman, Islamic) traditions.

Such evidence has led some postcolonial critics to write the history of Arab intellectuals in these decades almost wholly in terms of their conformity to forms of knowledge produced by imperialist Europe (Mitchell; Tageldin). In an extension of Said's argument in *Orientalism*, Western discourses have been portrayed as dominant not only over European but also over Arab minds, to the extent that even anti-imperial resistance could be seen as merely reproducing colonialist practices. As in the analogous case of the late-Subaltern Studies school of Indian history, 'assumptions of the

seamless acculturation of the intelligentsia by colonial discourses' have often prevailed (Sarkar 62).

Against this background, examples of non-Europeans 'arguing with Europe' during the heyday of imperialist discourse – however rare – take on a particular significance. They can help us to see the limits of possibility of intellectual and cultural 'resistance' to European imperialist pretensions, within particular contexts, rather than assuming that the possibility of *any* such contestation was foreclosed; or, alternatively, that it was available only on the alternative ground of an 'authentic' Eastern tradition that rejected Western knowledge entirely.[i] They may also allow us to look differently at other, more ambiguous cases – of, for instance, the alteration and adaptation of Western originals according to local priorities, rather than their simple reproduction;[ii] or the rediscovery and reinvention of local forms, in dialogue with the Western-derived ones.[iii] And this is particularly the case where such 'resistance' is accompanied by a form of auto-exoticism: the re-appropriation, by Easterners, of Western representations of the East: a form of self-fashioning that could take them beyond either Eastern or Western notions of authenticity.

We return, then, to Lamartine's critic Khalīl al-Khūrī. In 1858, at the age of 22, he had founded the first privately financed Arabic journal in Syria, *Ḥadīqat al-Akhbār* (*The Garden of News*), sponsored by a wealthy Syrian Christian businessman and by the Ottoman state, and based in Beirut. This town had mushroomed, from little more than a village in the early nineteenth century to become the main port of Syria in the 1860s, aided, crucially, by the cultivation and processing of silk, mainly for export to France, in nearby Mount Lebanon (Issawi; Owen 83–99, 154–167). As the city's trade grew, it became a centre for a Syrian commercial bourgeoisie, with close ties to Europe, who became the main patrons of the literary and cultural movement (Zachs, *Making of a Syrian Identity*; Hanssen). In alliance with reformist Ottoman officials and European commercial interests, they asserted their domination over the silk-producing hinterland, especially after the religious violence of 1860, which led to the decline of traditional 'notable' families (Ṭarābulsī 24–40). Beirut was also a major centre for Western businessmen and diplomats, as well as missionaries who played a role in the cultural movement, founding colleges and presses. Khūrī was one of the first of a new type of cultural entrepreneur enabled by these conditions, creating new forms of education, literary production, and intellectual sociability in Ottoman Syria.[iv]

The translation-cum-criticism of Lamartine's poem appeared in Khūrī's novella *Way, idhan lastu bi-ifranji!* (*Alas then, I am not a Frank!*), initially published in serial form in his newspaper. This work, which is one of a number of claimants to the title of 'first modern Arabic novel', revolves around the changes in Beiruti middle-class lifestyle brought about by increased European ('Frank') presence and influence. Written in a light feuilleton style, it is a patchwork of different kinds of writing – narrative, travel description, literary analysis – rather tenuously linked together, that recalls Washington Irving or the early Heine. Yet it succeeds in raising serious issues of cultural change and 'East-West' tensions. It opens with a critique of the excessive 'Frankification' (*tafarnuj*)

of Beirut, before shifting scene to Aleppo, where a plot-line emerges around an over-Europeanised Aleppine man who attempts to force his daughter to marry a foreigner (who, however, does his best to restore her to her Arab lover). Khūrī takes ‘an independent reconciliatory attitude towards modernization and cultural changes’ (Bawardi 192): and the novella concludes in these terms:

[illegible] […] [illegible]

[illegible] […] [illegible]

[illegible]

> you should not marvel at everything because it is European, and should not approve of everything because it is Arab […] So limit yourself to European sciences and arts; and work hard to revive the Oriental culture in a way that suits the spirit of the Arab community [...] be a civilized Arab, rather than an incomplete European.[v]

The occasion for citing Lamartine’s poem is a description of the city of Aleppo. Here Khūrī mentions two poets who have had some kind of link with the city: the great Classical Arabic poet al-Mutanabbī (915-965 AD), and Lamartine. He addresses the reader: ‘Stand with your face to the south and listen with your left ear to the desert: you will hear […] from beyond the Euphrates [...] nothing other than the echo of the voice of al-Mutanabbī [….]’ (17). He goes on to mock gently at the Abbasid poet, quoting a couple of lines and picking them apart, pointing out a certain foolishness in his imagery, but concluding that ‘poetry [...] must be truth mingled with foolishness’ and the poet ‘like a drunkard who speaks truth’ (20). He again addresses the reader: ‘If you’ve finished with al-Mutanabbī, strain your left ear to the West, and hear the voice of Monsieur Lamartine, mingled with the sound of the waves of the Mediterranean [….]’, and introduces Lamartine’s poem ‘À une jeune Arabe, qui fumait le Narguilé dans un jardin d’Alep’ (‘To a young Arab woman, who was smoking the narguileh [water-pipe] in a garden in Aleppo’).[vi] He presents the first part of this poem one or two stanzas at a time, followed by his own translation into Arabic verse (quite a skilful operation in itself), and a substantial section of prose commentary and criticism.

The ‘argument’ of Lamartine’s poem is, briefly, that the young lady herself, being a daughter of the romantic East, is far more poetic than anything he, the poet, could provide: if she wants poetry, she should ‘contemplate herself’. He addresses her:

Toi, fille d’Orient, née aux vents du désert !

You, daughter of the East, born in the desert winds!

In Khūrī’s commentary this line gives rise to a comical digression on ‘Eastern’ customs at the birth of a child:

[illegible] […] [illegible]

> Here we do not know whether [Lamartine] wished to mock her, to praise, or to state the truth of the case; but the matter is odd in all respects, because when anyone is born in the city of Aleppo, as in all Eastern cities, his mother is surrounded by her female relatives after the birth, so that she nearly faints. And if they could, they would remove the motionless air from her room, and block up the air-holes [through which] the breeze [might reach] her [...] Thus we think that this young lady was not exposed, at her birth, to the winds of the desert, nor even to the breeze of the area around her bed. (23)

The humorous reproach has a point, however, as it leads into a subtler contestation of Lamartine’s notion of the East as a land of ‘deserts’, when Khūrī makes another, aesthetic, criticism:

[illegible]

> Then if we look at the question from another aspect, we may think that this man of letters looked at the shape of the country, and described her in this way because she was born in a city to which the wind comes only from the desert, because Aleppo is surrounded by deserts on every side. And in this case his image would not be, according to Eastern taste, a weighty matter that could stand its ground among poetic figures. (23)

The romance of the desert, in other words, is not an acceptable trope in Khūrī’s notion of poetry: Lamartine’s line might, if read in this way, be factually correct, but it is not very poetic. Khūrī makes a sharper criticism of another ‘orientalising’ description of the woman: on Lamartine’s line

Tu t’assieds sur la natte, à Palmyre émaillée

You sit upon the mat, spangled at Palmyra

he comments:

[illegible]

[illegible] [...]

[illegible]

[illegible]

> We think all those of Eastern taste will not be able to restrain themselves from [feeling] distaste, when these noble meanings strike their ears, especially the question of the mat, which every Eastern reader will laugh at [...].
>
> For our part, we do not think that a woman like the one he mentions was sitting on a mat, a thing which [even] the low people of our country dislike doing. Even if we admitted [that she was sitting on a mat], it would not in fact be something that deserves the notice of poetic genius. (27)

Once again Lamartine has blundered, and those who possess ‘Eastern taste’ will naturally laugh at this mention of a ‘mat’ (*natte*), which has far humbler connotations than those suggested by the social standing of this woman. A social, indeed a class dimension to the notion of ‘taste’ here emerges, clearly, with the mention of the ‘low people’ (*adniyāʾ*). Khūrī further comments:

[illegible]

[illegible]

> And if he thought [this mat] to be, as he says, from the ruins of Palmyra – well, we have never heard of anyone from Beirut fetching a mat from Palmyra. It is probable that nothing of this [kind] has [ever] been woven in that place, [so] isolated from the confluence of the sociable world. (27)

Once again, the picturesque savagery of Lamartine’s Orient of deserts and ruins is replaced with an urban, ‘civilised’ East, part of the ‘sociable world’, and possessing its own notions of class-bound ‘taste’ and respectability. In this world, being born in a desert, sitting on a mat, or indeed obtaining a mat from so outlandish a place as Palmyra (in the Bedouin-inhabited desert), do not carry a high cultural premium.

Khūrī also shows a keen perception as to the nature of Lamartine's version of the Orient, when he criticises this line, addressed to the 'jeune Arabe':

Dans l'eau de ce bassin contemple-toi toi-même ;

In the water of this basin contemplate yourself

The poet, Khūrī argues, would have made her a better compliment had he suggested a mirror for her self-contemplation, which would reflect her image more accurately than the undulating water:

[illegible]

> the mirror is a better thing to draw a picture, and for that reason has become a general school for women, who learn in it many lessons. (24–5)

We see here, perhaps, the image of the 'civilised' woman which was becoming so important at this time for the Syrian middle class (Zachs, *Making of a Syrian Identity* 72–6). Khūrī argues, interestingly, that by giving her a mirror rather than a basin of water, Lamartine

[illegible]

[illegible]

> would have saved his praise [of her] from the submissiveness of her standing at the basin, and bending her head above the water, a thing which tires the chest without benefit for the face. (25)

He also notes the probable source of Lamartine's image, not in the reality of the Orient, but in 'his mythological dreams' ofwhose story he then relates for the benefit of his readers, –Narcissus (25) .displaying his Classical knowledgeHe finds another factual inaccuracy in Lamartine's claim that 'All courtyards of houses in the East have a water-fountain and a marble basin in the middle'; and concludes that Lamartine is, in fact,

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible] ……. [illegible]

> among European writers, rather like an Eastern chronicler, or an Arab storyteller, or more precisely, like a Frankish narrator who relates tales. Thus his narrative of his travels to our country, which is very much adorned with chivalric (ʿ*Antariyya*) anecdotes, is like the

> poetical stories which they call ‘romances’ (*rūmāns*). And they have caused many Westerners to long to travel and see the glories of Beirut and its amusements; and having come with much trouble and effort, they have seen nothing but....... the Beirut river and its bridge. (26)

And thus, with humour and confidence in the values of ‘Eastern taste’ and of nineteenth-century Syrian ‘civilisation’, Khūrī exposes the largely fictional nature of Lamartine’s depictions of the Orient, by way of an interesting rapprochement of genres: the European ‘romance’ and the Arabic tales of ‘Antar (a famous cycle of heroic epic). He goes on to reproach Lamartine for missing a splendid chance to praise the woman’s own qualities, in a manner familiar in Arabic poetry:

[illegible] […] [illegible]

> Why […] was the only thing that came into his head the rumbling in his ears of the gurgle of the water in the narguileh, and its smoke which veiled his eyes?

Instead, his ‘genius’

[illegible] […] [illegible]

> ought to have immersed itself more in the seas of contemplation; and should have brought forth on this subject various images which would amaze the listeners. (28–29)

This lack Khūrī himself sets out to supply, in a set of verses not now translating Lamartine’s French but improving on his theme, in a manner perhaps related to the Arabic tradition of poetic competition and capping. He then concludes on a slightly apologetic note, suggesting that he has been practically forced to make these criticisms:

[illegible] […] [illegible] [...]

[illegible]

[illegible]

> we by no means intend to slander this great poet, crowned with praise [...] the world is unanimous as to his skill and his precedence [...] in the literary arts. But the wings of the facts have carried us to this high place, and the angel of honesty has bored through our tongue with his lance, and it began at once to lament these calamities; and our presence in

Aleppo led us to this ode rather than others. (29–30)

This is, then, a good-tempered and humorous contestation, but also a perceptive and on occasion a sharp one. It is a refusal of exoticism – of Lamartine's ʻAntar-like Orientalism – in the name of quite secure, locally rooted 'Eastern' notations of 'taste' and 'civilisation'. Lamartine's poem jars with these, both factually (the actual Syria Khūrī knows) and aesthetically (the canons of 'Eastern taste'): it needs replacing by Khūrī's auto-exotic reworking, in his own verses. Ironically, in the place of Lamartine's dream of a romantically-uncivilised East, Khūrī offers a solid urban respectability not so far from the Parisian bourgeois 'civilisation' which Lamartine was fleeing in travelling to the East: the self-image of the rising Syrian bourgeoisie, with all its hauteur towards the 'low people' of Syria, and outlandish desert towns like Palmyra.

This is a very different East to that described by Lamartine, but it is by no means an East divorced from all knowledge of the West. Khūrī drops in a reference to Voltaire, and a number to the Ancient world (Narcissus, Diogenes and Socrates), alongside references to al-Mutanabbī, the aesthetic norms of Arabic poetry, and his own and his readers' knowledge of the actual contemporary 'East'. Categories such as the tale of ʻAntar and the European 'romance' are not seen as hermetically separated, but eminently comparable. Khūrī mentions Lamartine in a description of Aleppo, alongside the indubitably great al-Mutanabbī, exhibiting the 'cultural capital' of both the Arabic heritage and of Europe, on the ground of contemporary Syria (Aleppo). But as we have seen, Khūrī does not uncritically adopt al-Mutanabbī's version of 'taste', on the grounds of its Eastern authenticity: rather, he keeps it at an ironical distance, as he does Lamartine's. And in his attempt to outdo the later part of Lamartine's poem with his own Arabic verses, the Frenchman's exoticism becomes a springboard his own for poetic invention: an auto-exotic re-appropriation, by a civilised East, of its distorted representation. Thus Khūrī does not place himself on the ground of a pure or 'authentic' Arab identity, but in a space where he can appropriate, appreciate, reinvent, and also gently mock both older Arab culture and that of modern Europe, including its attitudes to the East.

To return to the questions raised at the start: how should we seek to understand this Arab notation of 'civilisation', which extended, in the mid-nineteenth-century Arab nahda, far beyond the single example of Khūrī? In my view we cannot read it either as pure assimilation to European discourses (including 'Orientalism'), or – even in its aspect of contestation of European pretensions – as rejection of 'the West' in the name of an Eastern authenticity. Instead, I suggest, we may see it as a cultural construct corresponding to the particular social position of the Syrian bourgeois, officials and literari of the mid-nineteenth century, among whom it arose, in the context of the incorporation of the Ottoman Empire into the capitalist world market and a European-dominated international order. People like Khūrī, his patron Mīkhāʾīl Mudawwar, and the other merchants, professionals, and Ottoman officials who constituted his major reading public, had a definite interest in intensified contact with Europe and the wider European-dominated world. Businessmen were shipping goods

to and from France, and depended on French lines of credit; officials (at least of the 'reformist' variety) were implementing European-derived bureaucratic practices; journalists were reliant on English and French (as well as Ottoman Turkish) newspapers. This was the reality of the 'sociable world' at whose 'confluence' Khūrī wished to be. Isolation from the outside, European-dominated world would have cut at many of the bases of their prosperity, power, and cultural authority – unlike other groups (merchants or artisans whose wares were undercut by European goods; old-fashioned 'notables'), whose wealth and status were being eroded by relations with Europe.

At the same time, they had no interest in too abject a dependence on Europe, for this would lead to their being supplanted by Europeans, or reduced to emphatically subordinate status. Direct imperial occupation would close the top ranks of the bureaucracy to local officials; trade on terms wholly dictated by Europe would squeeze out the local merchants, or turn them into 'compradors'; cultural capitulation to European values would reduce Arab-Ottoman intellectuals to mere transmitters. We can then see why there was, in these middle decades of the nineteenth century, no outright imperialist-nationalist polarisation, but instead this more ambiguous process of cultural negotiation – working between the Arab heritage (itself being rediscovered) and elements of European culture, while seeking to escape subjugation to either. And this local notation of 'civilisation', as well as offering resistances to European pretensions, could then be turned against the 'uncivilised' – 'low' classes, unruly Bedouin, recalcitrant notables – within the Arab-Ottoman lands.

Thus a writer like Khūrī could push back against certain European claims, both rejecting Lamartine's Orientalist version of exoticism which had offered 'the East' for the consumption of the powerful West, and rewriting some of Lamartine's tropes into more acceptable Arabic ones. By playing off this auto-exotic, reworked Orientalism against an older Arab culture and literature, represented here in the person of al-Mutanabbī and similarly re-appropriated through irony, Khūrī could fashion his own notion of a civilised 'East', both dependent on and distanced from the contemporary West and the older Arab East. Power-relations could be – partially, ambivalently – rewritten: the civilised Easterner could hold his own against the Westerner, within certain shared, 'civilised' assumptions that excluded many other inhabitants of the East. Auto-exotic re-appropriation plays a particular role within this cultural construct: it demonstrates the civilised Easterner's easy familiarity with both East and West, his ability to treat both with a kind of intimate irony. It confirms him – the Syrian bourgeois – as master of his own comfortable domain, within a European-dominated, 'civilised' world.

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i I have presented another example, from 1840s Egypt, in Hill, 'From Ottoman Despotism to

Islamic Constitutionalism: A Nineteenth-Century Egyptian-European Debate'.
ii For examples, see Tageldin; Selim; Hill, 'Early Arabic Translations'.
iii For the persistence of the Arabic literary form of the *maqama* as 'resistance', see Omri.
iv For Khūrī, see Zachs, 'Building a Cultural Identity: The Case of Khalil Al-Khuri'; for the Arab Nahda in general the best overview is still Hourani.
v Khūrī 159–63; translation modified from Bawardi 192. All Arabic quotations are given with their original orthography and punctuation; unattributed translations are my own.
vi Khūrī 22. The poem also appeared in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* and in Lamartine's collected works: *Oeuvres Complètes* 293–6.

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