

Teaching Foreign Literature in the Arab World: The Moral Dimension

Ahmad Y. Majdoubeh

*Assistant Professor, English Department,
Faculty of Arts, Yarmouk University,
Irbid, Jordan*

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Abstract. The paper addresses the relation of foreign literature, especially English and American, to the Arab student's moral values. It raises, and attempts to answer, a number of questions pertaining to the existence or nonexistence of the influence of literature (native or foreign) on morality, the conditions required for the influence to occur, the exact nature of the influence, the "foreignness" of foreign literature, and the precise benefit derived from the student's exposure to alien or opposed values.

At present, foreign literature programs in the Arab World are coming under an increasing amount of critical inquiry. Until as recently as a decade ago, they had been taken almost entirely for granted. They occupied (and quite comfortably) a central space in the syllabi of both schools (public and private), colleges, and universities; enjoyed a great deal of prestige; and attracted a large number of students. Teachers generally taught and students learnt without devoting much attention either to the goals of these programs or to the process of teaching itself. One simply read and discussed texts and authors. Today, the case is slightly different. It is true that the programs continue to fill essentially the same space and enjoy the same popularity — and will continue to do so for a long time to come. Nevertheless, the attitude toward their implementation and handling, and the conception of their purpose and value are changing noticeably.⁽¹⁾

(1) The change is due to a variety of causes: the development of the Arab societies themselves and of their conception of education, of morality, of their relationship with other societies, etc.

The matter is being investigated on various levels. There is, firstly and perhaps most controversially, the relationship between literature and language. Most Arab students, the argument goes, are interested in learning the foreign language, not necessarily the literature. How much literature therefore are we to include in the syllabus? What literature: ancient or modern? poetry or prose? There is, secondly, the question of obstacles and impediments. Clearly, teaching a literature to its own natives is different from, and perhaps easier than, teaching it to foreigners. For one thing, the linguistic competence of an Arab student learning English literature is, on the whole, significantly inferior to his British counterpart, for example. But there is also a cultural barrier, a religious barrier, etc. Thirdly, no less important is the issue of approach. What are the most effective ways of explaining the text to the student: do we teach him the history first? sociology? psychobiography? Or simply the text? Or some of these? Or all? Do we teach the text as language — the author's play with words? Do we teach it as theme? As aesthetics? And so on and so forth.⁽²⁾

In this paper, I wish to raise a related question which, though fundamental, has been somewhat neglected: namely, the relation of foreign literature to the student's moral character.⁽³⁾ Several issues must be invoked simultaneously. A) Is there in fact a bearing of literature (native or foreign) upon the morality of its readers? B) Assuming that there is, under what conditions and in what precise way (or ways)? C) How "foreign" is foreign literature? Or, to put it in clearer terms, how much of its values are actually opposed to ours? D) Supposing that foreign values run extremely counter to ours, and that they are at times even offensive, is our encounter with them necessarily harmful? And if so, how? E) But is not there a benefit, in addition to the danger or risk? When do such danger and risk occur? F) What is, in the final analysis, the proportion of the threat or disadvantage to the advantage or gain?

One does not need justifications for delving into the subject at hand. Obviously, the discourse can be accounted for on pure intellectual grounds, or on the grounds or sheer academic curiosity. And yet, there are good, and in my opinion necessary and even pressing, reasons.

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- (2) And there are many other issues of course. For an excellent elaboration on these matters and others, see Eid A. Dahiyat and Muhammad H. Ibrahim, eds, *Papers from the First Conference on the Problems of Teaching English Language and Literature at Arab Universities* (Amman: University of Jordan, 1983). See also Joseph John, "Language Versus Literature in University English Departments," *Forum* 24 (October 1986), 18-22, and Fethi Hassaine, "General and Comparative Literature in the Department of English in Arab Universities," a paper read at the Third Annual Literature Conference, Yarmouk Univ., October 27-30, 1987.
- (3) By "morality" I mean the motives, incentives, principles, and criteria informing and determining the rightness or wrongness of one's attitude or behavior.

The first has to do with the importance of clarifying the issue in the minds of those most directly involved: the students and the teachers in particular. While, judging from my experience with a number of schools and three Arab universities, the question does continually cross the minds of many students (both those who are enthusiastic about specializing in the subject and those who are lukewarm), they tend to be ultimately oblivious of it. Many of us teachers, though certainly not all, are in the same boat. We generally, because of the nature of school and university education, end up discarding general matters and dwelling on specific texts and assignments. Confronting the question, forcing ourselves to think about it seriously, and elucidating it for ourselves and our students will surely strengthen our sense of our calling, a sense which is, in most cases, quite tenuous.

The second, closely connected, is sociologic, anthropologic, and political. When we in the Arab World (and the situation in the so-called Third World countries, I suspect, is very similar) introduce any Western literature, we are treading on potentially risky ground. English, American, and French literatures (most dominant in our syllabi) belong, as Edward Said has pointed out, to cultures more "powerful" than ours. Furthermore, and more importantly, they are cultures which literally colonized or dominated ours for substantial periods of time and which, deliberately or inadvertently, attempted (and perhaps still do) to "fix," neutralize, and ultimately deface ours. Add to this the fact that some of the Western authors we read, teach, and glorify are dismissive, reductive, prejudiced, and hostile toward us.⁽⁴⁾ Such realization inevitably compels us, institutions and individuals alike, to ponder on the moral implications of our mission.

To get to the heart of the topic, we need to dwell briefly on the elusive link between literature and morality. Whether explicitly or by implication, literature is all moralistic. There is the "expressive" school writing, course — claiming, as Shelley best puts it in his motto, that the author is a "nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings his own solitude ..."⁽⁵⁾ And there is the modernist school, reiterating with MacLeish that "A poem should not mean/ But be."⁽⁶⁾ Both emphasize that art is written for its own sake. What counts is the aesthetics. The poet's primary concern is to articulate his own vision, to express himself, and not necessarily to sway a reader's

(4) See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) and Martin Bernal, *Black Athena* (London: Free Association Books, 1987).

(5) Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," *Shelley's Poetry and Prose* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), p. 486. See also M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1958), pp. 21-26.

(6) Archibald MacLeish, "Ars Poetica," *Chief Modern Poets of Britain and America*, vol. II, ed. Gerald Dewitt Sanders et al. (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 308. See also Abrams, pp. 26-29.

mind. This is true. And yet, regardless of the author's intention, a text gets written; a text which embodies a point of view, a meaning. There is always a point of view, there is always a meaning — no matter how covert or "objective." Shelley's own literature — whether one is talking about heated political statements, as in "Ode to the West Wind" and *Prometheus Unbound*, or purely lyrical poems, as in "To a Skylark" — is unavoidably didactic. So is MacLeish's, Eliot's, Pound's and even Beckett's. So long as one speaks, or even thinks, one is affirming a view, a position, a moral.

And there are the traditional theorists, with their overt stress on the didacticism of experience. Literary works are composed with the aim of influencing an audience. Provoked by Plato's and Aristotle's ideas, Sir Philip Sidney, a foremost and a formidable English critic, states that literature functions not only to "delight" but also to "teach."⁽⁷⁾ One can think of numerous specific examples of texts addressing readers directly: Chaucer's tales, *Everyman*, *Paradise Lost*, *Joseph Andrews*, *Nature* (by Emerson), *Walden*, etc. The objectives may vary, obviously, from author to author and from text to text. However, the difference is in degree, not in kind. Some wish to move the reader regarding a specific point or stand, others to open his/her eyes to a certain truth, and others to reshape his/her whole being. The point here is that there is not only a desire on part of the writers to influence the reader and to even remold his character, but also an assumption that they can do so. Addressing in the opening paragraphs of *Walden* those "who read these pages, who are said to live in New England" concerning their "bad" external "condition or circumstances in the world," Thoreau is confident that he can help them "improve" and "live a man's life"⁽⁸⁾

But what about the audience? People differ on whether or not the person is ultimately affected by what he/she reads. Some feel that he is, others that he is not. The latter, the nihilists, view literature best as a literary game. One is no more moved (morally) by reading a text than by taking a swim, playing volleyball, or lifting weights. One may feel good after finishing a book, may develop intellectual muscles, may become a better user of words, may become smarter in asserting himself; but he/she may not necessarily become morally better.⁽⁹⁾ He/she is much like some of Dr. Arnold's untouched/ untouchable students, in Strachey's powerful biography: "The Doctor [Arnold] might preach and look grave; but young Brook [one of the students]

(7) *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, M.H. Abrams, et al., vol. I (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979), p. 494.

(8) Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), pp. 1-2.

(9) For an interesting examination of this question, see John Munroe, "Literature and Morality," a paper read at the First Annual Literature Conference, Yarmouk Univ., October 22-25, 1985.

was ready enough to preside at a fight behind the chapel, though he ... knew that fighting was against the rules."⁽¹⁰⁾

There is a counter stance. We have come across countless incidents of people whose lives were dramatically shaped or changed by books. Benjamin Franklin, a deist and a scientist, tells us that during the formative years, he kept Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* always close by.⁽¹¹⁾ Similarly, a great deal of Emerson's personal and philosophic morality, as he himself testifies, can be attributed to the *Arabian Nights*.⁽¹²⁾ Hawthorne spent twelve years of his life in the attic reading books and came out with a new vision. Much of Ghandi's nonviolence politics can be traced to Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience," and Martin Luther King's to Ghandi's. Emerson himself, in his influential lecture on "The American Scholar," underlines the great importance of books in building character.

The next great influence into the *spirit* of the scholar is the mind of the Past, – in whatever form, whether of literature, of art, of institutions, that mind is inscribed. Books are the best type of the influence of the past ... (my emphasis)

We all know, that as the human body can be nourished on any food, though it were boiled grass and the broth of shoes, so the human mind can be fed by any knowledge.⁽¹³⁾

But our own Arabic-Islamic tradition provides us with the most impeccable evidence of the immense bearing of literature on behavior. The Koran, in a widely-quoted verse, informs us, for example, that poets (and this applies to authors in general) are capable of both seducing and edifying.

We deduce from all of this that literature at once does and does not affect the reader's morality. And this is a paradox, not a contradiction, which needs some explanation. For the effect to take place, there are prerequisites with respect both to

(10) Lytton Strachy, *Eminent Victorians* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, n.d.), p. 234.

(11) See Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography*, *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, vol. 1 (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979), p. 296.

(12) That Emerson read the *Arabian Nights* is a well-known fact: he himself refers to it frequently in his journals; the book is also listed in Walter Harding's *Emerson's Library* (Charlottesville: The Univ. Press of Virginia, 1967), p. 40. For a fair discussion of the book's influence on the mind and works of Emerson, see Farida Hellal, "Emerson's Knowledge and Use of Islamic Literature" Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Houston, 1971, especially pp. 10-15. See also Ahmad Majdoubeh, "'A Fig Tree, Looking on a Fig Tree, Becometh Fruitful': Emerson and the Arabic-Islamic 'Example.'" *Dirasat*, 16, No. 11 (1989), 30-31.

(13) Stephen E. Whicher, *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), p. 69. All citations from Emerson's works are from this edition.

reader and to the context in which the reading takes place. The most crucial, in my opinion, is the reader's seriousness. If the encounter with the text is casual and disinterested, one naturally expects very little impact, if any at all. And this is a factor not to be underestimated or ignored. There are many students in many literature departments (native and foreign) who do not engage with the morality of the text significantly. This is especially true with regard to those studying English in the Arab World. It is not surprising at all to find students who are psychologically and mentally detached (at times almost completely) from what they study. Such students are usually of two types. There are a) the poor ones, those whose competence in the language is extremely deficient and b), ironically, the intelligent and competent but immensely disinterested and intellectually uncommitted.⁽¹⁴⁾ Both are there essentially for the language and the certificate. And both gain hardly anything from their literary studies.

The degree of influence, then, corresponds with the intensity of readiness and receptiveness. Those who are touched, slightly or tremendously (depending on the force of their response) are those who are willing to interact, both emotionally and intellectually, with the issues embodied in literary texts. An intellectual response alone is not sufficient. It is true, of course, that the more intelligent and perceptive students will, when ready and willing, get more from the text. However, a sheer mental reaction, one divorced from feeling, may not contribute positively or negatively to one's morality. The mental reward is there, for sure. The student's comprehension of the values of others and of his own deepens, and his articulation of his own values sharpens, but the values themselves may not necessarily improve. But add passion to intellect, psychology to thought, and the picture changes dramatically.

What precisely is the effect, then? How does it actually work? We must remember in answering these two questions that the close encounter between the individual self and the literary text (native or foreign), in the Arab World, comes at a relatively later period. For most Arab pupils, the reading of native literature begins casually and tacitly at the age of seven or eight (when they begin their formal education) but more seriously (and this is when they are generally introduced to foreign literature) at the age of ten or eleven. The conscious interaction, however, both with the native and foreign text, does not take place before the age of fifteen or sixteen

(14) More on this point is provided by: Muhammad R. Zughol, "English Departments in Third World Universities," *Forum*, 24 (October 1986), 12; M.H. Salih, "The Relationship between the Attitude and Proficiency in EFL of Public School Students in Amman," M.A. thesis, American Univ. of Beirut, 1980; W. Harrison, et al., *English Language Policy Survey of Jordan* (Arlington, Va.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1975).

(the secondary school). What this means is that *before* the crucial confrontation with the literary text, the child's moral character, or at least its most fundamental components, has already been formed.

The Arab family, though it may not always perform its responsibilities adequately, is nonetheless almost singlehandedly responsible for the creation and molding of the child's, and consequently, the adult's moral character. Says Sharabi in his perceptive study of the structure of the Arab family (and I am translating here): that "the family as a social institution is the main mediator between one's personality and the culture to which he belongs," that "one's character is formed within the family," and that "the social norms and patterns of behavior are imparted [to the person] through the family."⁽¹⁵⁾ More importantly, most families in our part of the world hold strong "moral" values, whether positive or negative, and are extremely adamant about their own conception of how the child ought to be brought up. The majority of the population in the Arab World is religious, deep-down, and there is thus no compromise or middleground in the matter of upbringing. Either "thou shalt" or "thou shalt not."⁽¹⁶⁾ As a result, the child either accepts wholeheartedly what the family dictates or rejects it vehemently. In either case, he emerges with strong propensities, extremely pro or extremely con. When he comes to study literature (native or foreign), he comes morally set, already prejudiced or biased.

The situation in the West is significantly different. The families are generally much more flexible than ours in their conception of the building of individual morality. Additionally, with the exception of the fundamentalist Christians and some neo-conservatives, most families are not religious. There is a substantially secular and liberal attitude toward the boy's moral values. Not only is the child given a great deal of freedom and space, but also a great deal of time to make up his own mind. Moreover, most parents, and I am not talking about the anarchists and nihilists, refrain from biasing or prejudicing the child's spiritual, and at times, even moral choices. The school and the university in the West bear a noticeable educational role. However, the approach is largely democratic. When the individual comes to high school and college, he/she, unlike his/her Arab counterpart, is considerably more receptive and susceptible to new ideas, points of view, and moral stands. The family, the school, and the university, unlike ours, prepare the child to explore, to weigh, and then to choose.⁽¹⁷⁾ This means that the impact of literature, which is a form of secular religion, on personality in such an environment is quite noticeable.

(15) Hisham Sharabi, *Muqaddimat Lidiraset Almujtama' Al'arabi* (Beirut: Alahliyya Littawzi Wanashr, 1981), p. 28.

(16) Sharabi, pp. 30-42.

(17) For a very interesting study of the history and development of the American family and of how it =

The point to underscore here is that literature in the Arab World, because of its belatedness and secondariness, is not likely (unlike in the West) to create, implant, or instill moral values. When the individual is exposed to it, his basic moral values are already created, instilled, and implanted. Religion, we ought to remember, is a much more primary influence, principal in both earliness and overall bearing.

Does this mean, however, that literature's role, in this particular respect, is insignificant? Far from it. For it fulfills the vital function of fostering and strengthening the already-existing values. When we read a line of poetry by al-Mutanabbi, Keats, or Shawqi, for example, we experience not only an intellectual pleasure, but often a feeling of satisfaction, of assurance, and at times of triumph. We do so, to be sure, not necessarily because we have discovered a moral in the line per se; rather it is because the line hits a certain strain inside ourselves. Emerson emphasizes this idea in "Self-Reliance." After informing us about his reading of "some verses written by an eminent painter" and about how his "soul ... hears an admonition in such lines," he asserts: the true "value" of reading poetry (and this naturally applies to other literary genres) lies in "the *sentiment* they instill ... more ... than any *thought* they may contain" (p. 147; italics mine). Developing the same point, he adds: "A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and of sages" (p. 147). Nevertheless, this is indeed the exact contribution of literature which we most desire. Literary texts feed, nourish, and reinforce the morals we already possess. Our student does not need new values. He has values. What he direly needs is a stimulation, a crystallization, and a strengthening of these values. Literature serves such a purpose.

This is, of course, when the morals in the text mirror our own. But what about *foreign* literature? Are not many of the values embodied in English literary works alien and, at times, even opposed to those held by our students? What happens then? Before we address this point, we ought to remind that foreign literature is not always *foreign* (i.e. alien and opposed). There are crucial meeting points between our culture and the English and American culture, at present as well as at all times. There is, first, the universality of literature. There are in all literatures of the world shared, joint, and collective assumptions, assertions, themes, beliefs, etc. After all, literary texts are articulations of human experiences. But we must also remember, secondly, that the Occidental cultures as a whole, and the English and American in particular,

= treats the individual (as a child and a teenager), see John Demos. *Past, Present and Personal: the Family and the Life Course in American History* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986), especially pp. 10-25.

are firmly grounded in the Judeo-Christian traditions. The Old and New Testaments constitute the backbone of numerous poems, stories, novels, plays, etc. from *Beowulf* to Thomas Wolfe.⁽¹⁸⁾ The Arabic culture, which is predominantly Islamic in its orientation, shares a great many affinities with the teachings of Christianity. Prophet Muhammad thought of his mission as complementary (to a substantial degree) to that of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus Christ. Clearly then, there is no serious concern, anxiety, or fear here.

The concern, however, is over those elements in the foreign literature which are incompatible or in conflict with elements in ours. One can think of countless examples. The concept of God, of Jesus Christ, of sin, of prayer are not only completely different from what a Muslim student takes God, Jesus, sin, and prayer to be, but also totally unacceptable. God is one, not three; Jesus is a messenger of God, not His son; prayers are physical as much as spiritual rituals, etc. And there are differences of the same calibre in the social and family structures, in social habits and practices, in individual attitudes and behavior, and so on.⁽¹⁹⁾

Undoubtedly, a serious reading of a text propounding such values poses a real challenge. One is brought up, in the Arab World, in a society the vast majority of whose population shares and cherishes essentially the same conceptions and ideals — so much so that one tends to take one's values almost entirely for granted. The Arab communities, with minor exceptions here and there, are, more so than the Western, immensely uniform. There is not that much necessity therefore for one to justify his/her ideals to others, not even to himself. One just believes. When one, however, comes across foreign literature (i.e. the alien, the oppositional), he/she begins to find that the ideals which he/she has taken at face value are not only being constantly tested and questioned, but often completely rejected. Reading foreign literature is, on this particular level, an experience very much similar, in my opinion, to that of living in a foreign country. What one has taken to be the rule may turn out to be the exception.

(18) See, for instance, M.H. Abrams' *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971), p. 53, in which he shows how the "concepts, phrases and imagery" of the secular Romantics are indebted to the Bible.

(19) For an informative treatment of this point, see Eid E. Dahiyat, "Three Problems of Teaching English Literature to Arab Students at the University of Jordan" (pp. 63-71), and Mohammad Asfour, "Cultural Barriers: Teaching English Literature to Arab Students" (pp. 78-92). Both are in Dahiyat and Ibrahim. While I agree with both authors in recognizing the "barriers," religious and otherwise, when teaching English and American literature to our students, I go on to affirm that such barriers are ultimately positive and even necessary.

Of course, this may not be the first time the student's morality is tested. There are skeptical, dissenting, and conflicting elements within the mother culture itself. In Arabic literature, for example, there are many poets (or writers) who defy the most sacred of our beliefs — poets (and writers) who propagate wine and drunkenness, hetero- and homo-sexuality, and villainous acts of all sorts. There is hardly any culture which is one hundred percent cohesive. Nevertheless, the native and the foreign challenge are not exactly alike. There is some diversity and some tension in the Arab society at large, but the society tends to be greatly oppressive and conveniently dismissive of rebelling or misbehaving individuals. Moreover, the native challenge is familiar to people within the same culture, and they know how to deal with it, how to keep it "deviant" and marginal. They can guard against it well and disarm it; because they *know* it. And knowledge is power.

The foreign challenge is markedly different. Assuming that the students are earnest about what they read in foreign texts and about their own morality, there is inevitably going to be an initial shock, and perhaps even a confusion and a loss.

And yet, we must bear in mind — and this is the first point I would like to enforce here — that the amount of threat or danger is determined by the strength or weakness of one's own moral values. Literature, as we said earlier, works on whatever we already have inside of us. If, in other words, our moral impulses outweigh the amoral or immoral (or if, in Freudian language, the ego overpowers the id), they get stronger; if, however, the amoral or immoral outweigh the moral, the latter become weaker. Literary texts, to put it in clearer terms, do not *create* a bias or a prejudice; rather, they make us either more biased or more prejudiced. In cases of ambivalence, when we are fifty percent pro and fifty percent con, we tend to become more ambivalent. There might be some exceptions, undeniably; however, such a formula applies to most cases. All of this means that it is in the hands of the individual society, and the hands of its educational institutions, to make the literary experience (native or foreign) a worthwhile or a worthless experience. If the family and the school, the two most notable educational institutions in any society, do a good job building the person's moral character *prior* to his exposure to literature (native or foreign), there will only be a benefit when the exposure takes place. Should they do a bad job, on the other hand, the study of literature will definitely be either useless or harmful. The stage preceding the student's introduction to literature, then, determines the positive, neutral, or negative bearing of the literary experience. As for the shock, confusion, or loss (just spoken of), the following axiom holds true: the more effort society has exerted in molding the student's morality prior to his study of foreign literature, the lesser the shock, confusion, or loss.

But the threat posed by the foreign literary text — and this is the second point — could, depending on how we control and manipulate the teaching/learning situation, be dialectically positive. As we know from philosophy, the antithesis usually leaves an ultimately desirable impact on the thesis. Skepticism, Emerson calls it “noble doubt,”⁽²⁰⁾ stimulates, fosters, and, in the end, reinforces belief. When one subjects one’s own principles to some criticism, those principles will emerge stronger. Doubt forces us to think about, to rationalize, and to verbalize what we otherwise take for granted and what is otherwise no more than an impression, a feeling. The counter perspective provided by the foreign text compels us to justify our beliefs to others and, more importantly, to ourselves. Such justification enables us to understand, appreciate, and respect our moral values. Skepticism in fact turns not against belief, but disbelief. A strong believer, says the Prophet, is better than a weak believer; The former is the one who adopts the faith after a great deal of pondering, while the latter is the one who just adopts. Foreign (i.e. counter) morality is positive in this antithetical sense: it gives us the opportunity to question and ponder. The aftermath of the initial literary shock parallels that of the culture shock, in the case of a stay in a foreign country. In either case, it is a shock which awakens us to deeper awareness of our own selves. It is indeed noteworthy that our students who pursue their studies in a foreign country come back, with a few exceptions of course, much more enthusiastic about and much more proud of their indigenous culture than even those who go to national colleges and universities. The former’s familiarity with the “other” culture — which had vexed and tortured them at first — opened their eyes to truths (about themselves) they had not seen before.

Islam, the principal source of our morality, is not an isolationist religion. If Muhammad, when he first introduced and spread the faith, wanted to live a secluded life, he could have done so. He would have simply retreated to one of the mountains or oases of the desert and spent the rest of his days in meditation. But no. This is not Islam. Muhammad’s religion was revealed, was born, and was spread amidst (not away from) hostile tribes, cities and states. It developed, prospered, and triumphed in close and heated contact with foreign powers: the Persians, the Romans, etc. Its teachings encourage Muslims to acquaint themselves with, not to turn their backs against, the “other”: the Islamic tradition teaches us (and I am paraphrasing here) to seek knowledge even if we have to go to China; it also tells us that he who learns the language of another people (and naturally their culture) knows how to guard against them. The Prophet, Ahmad Ibn Hanbal informs us, has asked a certain Zayd Bin Thabet “to study the book of the Jews.”⁽²¹⁾ This last statement is particularly

(20) Whicher, p. 294.

(21) *Musnad Ahmad Bin Hanbal* (Beirut: Almaktab Al-Islami Littiba’a Wannashr, 1983), V, 186.

illuminating. It stresses, quite clearly and firmly, not only that Islam does not frown at our familiarity with the language, literature, and culture of foreign nations, but that it expects us to familiarize ourselves with them. Implied in the words of the Prophet quoted above is the idea we underscored earlier: knowledge is power. The same theme appears in a number of lines of poetry attributed to Caliph Ali, in which he advocates travel to and “exploration” of other nations:

Leave home behind and pursue glory,
 And travel, for in travel there are five benefits:
 Alleviation of care, earning of a living,
 Knowledge, wisdom, and glorious company⁽²²⁾

The theme also appears in the great effort exerted by Muslim philosophers and authors to explicate and translate the philosophies and literatures of other peoples — i.e. the Greek, the Indians, etc.

In a world like ours, where Arab societies are daily exposed to a wide variety of influences from East and West — through the films (of all kinds) we see in theaters and at home, through the large groups of tourists and foreign nationals touring or residing in our countries, through the countless foreign magazines and books stacked in our libraries and stores, through the large numbers of our students seeking higher education abroad — our knowledge of our cultures seems a must, and the words of the Prophet ring truer today than ever. We cannot shut ourselves off. What is going on in the rest of the world — especially in the (more advanced) West — is both of great relevance and consequence. We need to be aware of the developments not only in science and technology, but also in education, psychology, philosophy, sociology, theology (even), etc. Furthermore, no matter how meticulous or rigid our screening or censoring process (of incoming books, films, people), there is no way we can guarantee the import of “bare” facts, of desirable elements, of positive values only; the alien, foreign *culture* comes along with any imports (scientific, philosophic, commercial, etc) from abroad. Rather than leave the individual in our society vulnerable vis-à-vis such influences, therefore, we ought to provide him with whatever moral and intellectual means (in the senses spoken of earlier) by which he will not only be able to “protect” himself against the “invading” culture, but also make the inevitable, unavoidable encounter with it worthwhile and even desirable.

Studying foreign literature is a blessing in this respect. It is one of the best ways (though by no means the only) of understanding the culture. It has often been argued

(22) ‘Abdul-‘aziz Sayyid Al-ahl, ed. *Min Ashshi’r Almansoub Lil’emam ‘Ali Bin Abi Taleb* (Beirut: Dar Sader, 1980), p. 53.

that literary texts epitomize the subconscious of a nation, the psyche of its culture. It is true. But it is also true that literature embodies and portrays its external dimension: behavior, customs, values, etc. In addition, notice that I have been talking about “studying” or “teaching” — rather than simply “reading” — foreign texts. “Studying” or “teaching” denotes a conscious, controlled, and disciplined process. It is process which aims to delve into the deeper truths of literary works, to see into things. It is an informed activity. It looks at an “immoral” novel called *Moll Flanders* — some publishers render it *The Amorous Adventures of Moll Flanders* — and see it as not immoral, not amorous at all; it is in fact a very moralistic book, a spiritual autobiography — as informative as St. Augustine’s *Confessions*. But it is also a process or an activity which provides the students with the intellectual, mental skills which enable them to deal essentially with all literary texts — even with many other non-literary texts. Obviously, the teacher’s personality, ability, and role are fundamental here. The foreign literature programs (in the Arab World and elsewhere) hope to graduate experts not merely in the language per se, but hopefully in the foreign literature and culture — experts who will be able to train us in how to deal with the unfamiliar, alien, and opposed moral values and how to make our confrontation with the “other” bear positively on our own morality.

تدريس الأدب الأجنبي في العالم العربي : البعد الأخلاقي

أحمد يعقوب مجدوبة

أستاذ مساعد، قسم اللغة الإنجليزية وآدابها، كلية الآداب، جامعة اليرموك، إربد، الأردن

ملخص البحث . تتناول هذه المقالة العلاقة بين دراسة الآداب الأجنبية، وبالذات الإنجليزية والأمريكية منها، والمبادئ، والقيم الأخلاقية للطالب العربي . تثير المقالة عددًا من القضايا المتصلة بوجود أثر للأدب (المحلي منه والأجنبي) في شخصية الطالب الخلقية أو عدم وجوده، وبالشروط الواجب توافرها لحدوث الأثر، وبماهية الأثر وحجمه، وب«أجنبية» الأدب الأجنبي، وطبيعة الفائدة التي يجنيها الطالب من تعرضه للقيم الغربية عنه أو المعاكسة لقيمه .