

It was about  
a year after  
Naguib  
Mahfouz won  
the Nobel  
Prize that I  
went,

accompanied by a cynical literary friend, to Blackwell's bookshop in Oxford. We wandered through the 'modern novels' section on the ground floor, looking not for Mahfouz but for Edwar al-Kharrat, whose novel *Turabha Za'fran* I had recently translated into English as *City of Saffron*. "It'll be down in the Oriental Section if it's Arabic", they told us, when finally we asked for help. "You won't find it up here."

"But it's a translation", I said, "It's in English." They were quite firm. "Oriental Section" they repeated.

My cynical literary friend explained it to me. "The poor

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readers would be terrified", he said, "of the gharries and galabiyas lurking between the covers. They'd never pick it up, let alone buy it." I protested that these readers had not batted an eyelid at the same gharries and galabiyas when they appeared in Olivia Manning's *Levant Trilogy*. "Ah!" he replied, in his cynical, literary way. "You have stumbled upon the whole 'cultural' problem. Olivia Manning, like Lawrence Durrell and Paul Scott, represents 'us' in a fundamental 'cultural' sense. You are allowed any amount of foreign words in your books if you are 'one of us'; but if you are actually foreign yourself, you are 'one of them', and you belong in the appropriate 'cultural' section." If that were true, I retorted, a writer like Gabriel Garcia Marquez would be in the 'Latin American' section. As it was, his books were displayed with all other modern novels, on the ground floor, where people were buying them in unprecedented numbers.

"Well" he continued, "that's hype for you. Given the British reader's aversion to anything foreign, you have to sell him a new foreign writer as a fashionable 'cultural' accessory, as you might buy an African bracelet to go with your Marks and Spencer tee-shirt. This is where hype comes in. It makes them look exotic. It's worked for the Latin Americans and, if you can find the book, it might also work for Arab writers. You can't take the blinkers off these readers. If you want them to change direction, you've got to lead them by the nose." So there I had it. Unless you decide to hype him out of it, leave al-Kharrat in the Oriental section where he belongs.

If we are to think seriously about the future of modern Arabic literature in the West, our enquiry starts here in the bookshop, for this is the front line, where the reader takes down a new novel off the shelves and scans the first few pages and, now more than ever, proceeds to the counter and buys it. And it is here also that the cynical literary argument is daily refuted by one redeeming fact. People read for pleasure. We really do. Down here in the bookshop some of us, when we move to the counter, are actually responding to the strength of the writing. We are hooked, not by hype, but by the pleasure which stems from a convincing work of art. Publicity will not

persuade us that any one book will change our lives; that is not its aim, and we are not so gullible. It simply introduces us to a writer whose name is not familiar to us. And if the writer convinces us that the people in his book matter, then the pleasure is equal whether he or they are English or Egyptian or Martian. Good art is universal. 'Here' and 'there' cease to exist and there is no 'them' or 'us'. It has nothing to do with fashion. And everything to do with modern Arabic literature in the West. Since Mahfouz acquired a large new Western audience by winning the Nobel Prize, Arabic literature has undergone a crucial change. It has left the Arabic behind. Ruthless, but true. Arabic literature will now be read by an increasing number of people who have no knowledge of the original text. What do these people expect from it? They expect at the very least to have in their hands not a masterpiece—that is what they expect at the very most—but a good piece of English. If the translator succeeds, while remaining faithful to the original text, in writing good English, then the reader will understand the writer. If the translator fails, however, the reader will surely be led to one of two conclusions. One, that the writer is writing about androids, or two, that the writer cannot write. I think I know which one he is likely to choose.

This may seem uncharitable on the reader's part. I hope for the writer's sake that he is uncharitable. His tough response will cause pain and grief to writer and English-language publisher alike, but it is honest and ultimately useful. What is neither honest nor useful is to wave aside his conclusion with the phrase "You must understand—it loses something in the translation." Of course it loses *something* in the translation; people accept that when they read Marquez with such pleasure. Down here on the bookshop floor, there is only the translation. That is why the translation exists. As a well-meant excuse for inadequate English, it cries out for the reply: it certainly does lose something in this one, mate! However, there is a deeper theory behind the phrase "You must understand...", which has nothing to do with well-meant excuses. The theory is not that *some* instances of English are inadequate, rather it maintains that *no* English is adequate to

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convey the writer's unique and untranslatable 'foreign' mystique, which the layman in his grossness could never understand. It is quite logical, according to this theory, for al-Kharrat to be in the Oriental Section, since it dictates that no-one who isn't already 'in the know' could possibly want to read him. To hold this view is truly to purvey that exoticism so often attributed, and with such disdain, to publicity.

As for those who feel that Arab writers ought to be 'given a chance' by having an Oriental Section all to themselves, because they come from, er, quite poor countries and all that and therefore can't make it on their own—these people cannot, I suspect, be interested in literature at all. I think what they really like is charity. They are patronising and anti-art and deserve to be belaboured with a hardback Arabic-English dictionary.

So a whole new group of writers takes to the 'world stage'; or more prosaically the 'English-speaking world stage', or even the British and American market, but the British and American market is not to be sneezed at—and there are no excuses now. Luckily, these writers are grown-ups and need no excuses. Some of them are an easy read and some are pretty wild—just like everybody else—but they all expect to be judged on the strength of their thoroughly translatable talent. And *enjoyed!*