

The Necessity of Renewing Tradition

Gibran, Rihani and Naimy: East–West interactions in early twentieth-century Arab literature

by Aida Imangulieva

This book is a welcome examination of the three main Arab writers of the ‘Syro-American School’ – Kahlil Gibran, Ameen Rihani and Mikhail Naimy. In particular, it explores the ways in which, through travelling beyond their native Lebanon, and reading widely in Western literature, they were deeply influenced by the English Romantics (Wordsworth, Coleridge) and American Transcendentalists like Whitman and Emerson. Naimy’s particular connection was with the great Russian writers, Tolstoy and Turgenev.

All three writers aspire to the freedom to feel and to write and to travel, outwardly and inwardly. They break out of the formal restrictions of Arab literature, which they saw as backward, hidebound and incapable of expressing real feeling. They are delighted by the intellectual freedom they find in the West and, a hundred years from the European Romantic period, do a sort of crash course through Enlightenment to Romanticism, and into the twentieth century age of greater realism.

Each writer has his own particular preoccupations and primary inspirers, but there are common strands which follow from this experience of freedom. They revere Nature (for Rihani, the wildness of nature), finding an identity between their experience of Nature, human nature, and the transcendent. (This takes from intuition and experience rather than a developed theology.)

In common with some of the English Romantics, they long for justice and the freedom of greater equality between human beings in society. Gibran makes a special compassionate focus in his stories on the position of women.

They are vehemently anti-clerical and condemn the stranglehold of institutional religion on ideas and feelings and social policies, but at the same time they acknowledge – indeed, live and write from – the spiritual dimension of human nature and the mysteries of aesthetic and spiritual experience. Humanity is the pinnacle of creation and shares the transcendence of the divine.

The book in its approach and detail is more for the literary reader than a general reader interested in ‘writers one must try’ and East–West exchanges. Nevertheless, as a typical English reader who knew only Gibran’s *The Prophet*, I was glad to discover something about these writers who see themselves as belonging to both East and West, and who in their writing freely deal with intuitions, and psychological and spiritual perceptions.

In a sense wider than the purely literary, this book reminds us of a crucial process of human growth. In order to maintain itself, tradition has an inherent tendency to become rigid, to go dead. How is it to be kept alive and expanding, as a living stream of energy and insight? Writers – all artists – are in some sense in permanent rebellion against prescribed forms; they stay alive by welcoming what is new, different, startling and refreshing, and giving voice to it in new forms, thereby often rediscovering the essence of tradition. The openness of these writers is a good recipe for any human being! And even more in our present ‘globalised’ world, East–West and global exchanges at this level of artistic endeavour – rather than the narrow exchanges of politics and material goods – have the power to contribute to a lively tradition and a culture of peace.

Barbara Vellacott, Oxford, 29 December 2009