

MOHAMMED NASER HASSOON

THE ARAB *MOBY-DICK*
BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN CULTURES

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I particularly appreciate the novelty of the topic in the field of comparative literature not only in Romania and Iraq, the author's extensive research of recent scholarship in the field of Melvillian Studies, the judicious and responsible use of the extremely rich bibliography, as well as the author's fluent style. Mention should be made of the inclusion of a number of tables, diagrams and illustrations that come in support of the ideas put forward by the author. These are only a few of the elements that turn Dr Mohammed Naser Hassoon's study into a significant contribution to the understanding of Western cultural values by an Arab readership.

~ Prof. Emil Sîrbulescu, University of Craiova, Romania

Mohammed Naser Hassoon's scientific approach is open, interdisciplinary, and complex. In it, literary history meets the elements of history itself, with the ones of cultural geography, but also with the openings specific to the study of interpretation and adoption/adaptation of a text (following the mechanisms of constituting identity and alterity). What seems to me remarkable again is that all of the above-mentioned elements merge into the text of the volume without blatantness or asperity, and manage to find a way to treat them together, in a natural and logical succession, without doing it to the detriment of one of them.

~ Prof. Irina Mihai, Dimitrie Cantemir University, Bucharest, Romania

Mohammed Naser Hassoon's volume is a pioneering work. Melville was translated into Arabic by Iḥsān 'Abbās at a relatively recent date when compared to other literatures (the first edition of 1965 was republished in 1998), and a comprehensive exegesis in the Arab world is almost entirely absent. In addition to filling a void, the present work opens another bridge – so necessary and welcomed – between the Western and Arab cultures. Intelligently designed and written, built on a solid documentary basis, written in lucidity and with artistic sense, the volume is an important contribution to the exegesis of Herman Melville. Undoubtedly, the author of the thesis is not only an esthete, but also a loyal heir of an ancient civilization.

~ Prof. Liviu Cotrău, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Mr. Mohammed Naser Hassoon's book is undoubtedly an important attempt to fill some of the major "blank spaces" in the map of the non-Western perceptions of America and its metanarratives. At the same time, it is an interesting endeavor to bring the polyphony of Arab and American voices to the forefront of critical attention of both the English-speaking and the Arabic-speaking academia. As such, the thesis may be considered a valuable and indisputably needed addition to the canon of Transatlantic American Studies.

~ Prof. Paweł Jędrzejko, University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland

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FOREWORD

The eclipse of interest in form has provoked, as it is often the case in paradigm changes, a shift from the center of attention to other aspects or levels of the object of study; in this case the efforts of scholars have been polarized, following an oscillating movement, around the direction and, in short, the interpretation of literary texts. This orientation has been enhanced by the predominance of very diverse theoretical-literary models ranging from semiotics and pragmatic to the poetics of the imaginary and, of course, hermeneutics; currents, in short, that, to a greater or lesser extent, move within the scope of communicative approaches and address the receiver.

The notion of text has been enriched in recent times from positions or currents focused on the reception of the texts – the phenomenon of reading and interpretation – well inspired in areas of knowledge or other disciplines, such as world literature. Among the first ones, it is worth highlighting those currents represented mainly by Georg Steiner and Umberto Eco. The second ones are preponderantly registered and in some cases manifestly presented within the framework of philosophical thought (Paul Ricoeur) as alternatives to the clamorous absence of a discipline officially responsible for the interpretation of literary texts and the rules that must be observed for the validity of the procedure. Obviously, it is all about Hermeneutics.

The development of literary theory runs parallel to the development of the modern philosophical hermeneutics, which starts from Schleiermacher and continues until the present time through Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, among others. This proximity – and the inveterate habit of philosophical thought of taking charge of the reflection on the great questions that affect the field of aesthetic-literary studies – is undoubtedly responsible for the growing interest of Philosophy for intervening in debates that, in principle, would be of the exclusive competence of theorists of literature. The marginalization of meaning in the framework of structuralist currents (and its justification for predominantly methodological reasons), the extreme relativism

– if not its negation, at least in terms of the facts – by post-structuralist schools and, of course, the weight of the hermeneutic tradition have led these thinkers to postulate a radical change of direction in the reflection of the theorists of literature with regard to the very central notion of text and, in short, to the conception of the role of art in its relationship with the world.

Paul Ricoeur alludes to the constitutive distancing of written discourse in terms similar to those already mentioned, but goes further: according to him, this phenomenon not only affects the interpretation of the texts – in fact, it is the condition for their comprehension – but it also implies profound changes in the ways of conceiving the functioning of the communication scheme. In the first place, it is necessary to point out that the relationship between speaker and listener is not symmetrical with respect to that established between the author and the reader. In writing, a double concealment takes place: that of the reader in the act of production and that of the author in the act of reception. And this fact has important repercussions because of the indeterminacy of the meaning it gives rise to, on the interpretation of the texts.

Gadamer insists that literary language is a literal language, that is, reproducible in its own terms and even in its “sonority” (at least, mentally). The importance that the verbal material acquires in its interior demands of the reader a special attention towards the physical side of the language, independent of the communicative function. For the rest, the literary text is not a transcription of a previously pronounced discourse, and this fact is the guarantor of its autonomy. Between the literary text and the writing, the reference is reciprocal: they are nothing else but means and their existence is only verifiable in the act of reception.

Herman Melville was born at a time marked by the euphoria of great transformations. After the War of Independence, which had fulfilled the promises of the past and completed the task of the Founding Fathers, America formed a distinctive idea of progress in the growing prosperity of its building. One looked at the work done with pride, there was gathered the time, the work and the feeling that motivated him: “Stone by stone, month by month, the tower rose. Higher, higher; snail-like in pace, but torch or