

1953

'Risalat al-Adab' ('Al-Adab's Message')

Citation:

"'Risalat al-Adab' ('Al-Adab's Message')", 1953, Wilson Center Digital Archive, al-Adab 1, no. 1 (1953), 1-2. Contributed, translated, and annotated by Cyrus Schayegh.
<https://wilson-center-digital-archive.dvincitest.com/document/291035>

Summary:

In 1953, the Lebanese writer Suhayl Idris (1925-2008), with Bahij Uthman and Munir al-Baalbaki, founded a new literary journal, al-Adab, in Beirut. He served as its editor from 1956 to 1992 while working closely with his wife, Aida Matraji. The text printed here is the translation of the Arabic introduction to the journal's first issue.

Idris had begun to discuss the need for such a journal as a doctoral student in Paris—he received his PhD, on “The Foreign Influences on Modern Arabic Fiction from 1900 to 1950,” in 1952—an experience on which he wrote a semi-autobiographical novel, al-Hayy al-latini, The Latin Quarter (1953). That text, as other texts of his, also reflected his vivid literary and political interest in existentialism. As Yoav Di-Capua has shown in *No Exit: Arab Existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Decolonization* (2018), Idris and many other Arabs in the 1940s-1960s in Europe and the Arab world embraced existentialism, a philosophical trend identified with the Frenchman Jean-Paul Sartre. They adapted the perhaps central-most existentialist issue—human individuals' fundamental ability to free themselves from what controls them and shape their own existence—such that it fit their experience and demands in the early postcolonial years. Sure, a good number of Arab Marxists criticized existentialism for being individualistic. And yes, Arabs eventually turned away from Sartre, as their earlier hero signed a letter in support of Israel on the eve of the June 1967 Six-Day War. (Sartre was influenced by massive French Jewish fears that a second Holocaust was coming Israel's way, which was voiced also by a close collaborator of his, Claude Lanzmann.) But for two decades before 1967, existentialism was extremely useful.

Although political independence from European imperial control was proceeding apace in many parts in the Middle East, though not everywhere, colonialism continued to cast a long shadow. Hard questions about real cultural authenticity (asala) vis-à-vis the West and full-on existential sovereignty (siyada) after many decades of European control remained to be tackled. And true intellectual decolonization—full freedom also in this realm—was necessary. One strand of Arab existentialism, embraced by Idris and others, demanded that literati be steeped in their society and write with total commitment (iltizam) to it, its political needs, and its cultural identity—all while linking their new works also to the non-Arab world, as this text shows.

Original Language:

Arabic

Contents:

Translation - English

The principal objective of this journal is to serve as a platform for a faction of writers who are consciously living the experience of our age and bear witness to it. Mirroring the needs of Arab society and expressing its concerns, they pave the way forward for the reformers to tackle [our] situation with all feasible means. Therefore, the literature that this journal calls for and encourages is a literature of "commitment" (*iltizam*) that springs from Arab society and flows back into it.

Calling for such an active literature, this journal carries an exemplary national message. Over time, that conscious faction of writers, whose literature is inspired by their society, will be able to create a conscious generation of readers, who will in turn sense the reality of their society and form the nucleus of proper patriots. In this way the journal, through its writers and readers, will participate in the great national enterprise, which is the greatest duty of every patriot.

At the same time, the concept of this national literature will be broad and comprehensive such that it connects directly with world literature (*al'-adab al-insani al-'amm*). It seeks to restore a human dimension to every [Arab] national (*watani*), and to call for more social justice for him, and to liberate him from material and spiritual bondage—which is the ultimate goal of humankind. In this sense, this journal does its share in the creation of a human literature sufficiently broad to deal with civilization as a whole. This human literature (*al-adab al-insani*) is the last stage that the world's literatures (*al-adab al-'alamiyya*) strive for in their development.

The journal's general procedure is to strive to discover the exceptional writers that prefer being silent and out of view rather than to appear in meager journals that do not provide a good idea about modern Arab literature. Thus, the journal brings these writers out of their isolation, allowing them to regain their self-confidence, to seek to be innovative, and to renew Arabic literature.

On a related note, the journal will strive to express the vitality, fertility, and wealth of modern Arabic literature, encouraging its local colors and particular character of every literature. Its pages will include texts which, we believe, candidly and sincerely express the characteristics of its country's literature.

The journal aims to stimulate the intellectual issues that vitalize the lifeless literary movement in the Arab country, making ample room for debates and conversations and literary controversies. This movement has to greatly excite the interest in the writing as well as the reading of literature. This whole activity ought to give foreigners a correct idea of modern Arabic literature and its participation in the global literary movement. As a matter of fact, the contemporary Arabic literary production is almost entirely unknown abroad, the principal underlying reason being the absence of a progressive literary journal that presents the intellectual energy in the Arab country and provides a space for powerful writers.

Just as *al-Adab* will try to give foreign literary circles a correct idea about Arabs' intellectual vigor, it will take an intense interest in foreign literatures, giving the Arab readers a clear picture of the newest Western literary oeuvres, presenting, studying, and critiquing them, and thereby providing the readers with an encompassing culture. Moreover, it will allow Arab writers and thinkers and their texts to interact with Western texts, becoming more powerful and profound while preserving their proper character and particularities.

The journal will take a particular interest in literary criticism and in the genre of the story. Regarding the former, it will seek to put in order both old and new literary works in a strictly objective way. It will give each book its proper rank and place, disregarding preconceived notions that oftentimes dictated by a biased wish to praise or hurt. The journal will also encourage all forms of self-criticism. As far as the genre of the story is concerned, the journal will provide ample space for the young generation of writers that seek their inspiration in the reality of their society and depict the age in which they live well.

For all these reasons, *al-Adab* will be able to be an important source for modern Arabic literature. Anybody who desires to get to know Arab intellectual activity will consult it, especially the Orientalists who constantly complain about the absence of sources allowing them to study contemporary Arabic literature. In each issue, the journal will publish extensive studies about the new directions Arab writers are taking, in all genres of their literary production, entrusting these studies to specialists

from various Arab countries.

With this message and in this program, *al-Adab* presents itself to its readers, hoping that they will encourage and enable it to continue carrying its message and realize its program.