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## *From Deconstruction to Critical Grounding: A Reading of Abdelaziz Hamouda's Critical Project through His Trilogy*

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the main features of Abdelaziz Hamouda's critical project and identifies its intellectual and critical foundations. Hamouda did not simply comment on major intellectual changes from the margins. He sought to engage directly in the debate and to reconsider its questions from within. His project found its clearest expression in his well-known trilogy: *Convex Mirrors*, *Concave Mirrors*, and *Emerging from the Labyrinth*. These works form a coherent critical undertaking. They also reveal a clear development in Hamouda's position on Western modernity.

**Keywords:** modernity; *Convex Mirrors*; *Concave Mirrors*; *Emerging from the Labyrinth*; Abdelaziz Hamouda.

### **I. Introduction**

The relationship between modern Arab thought and its Western intellectual sources is one of the most pressing questions in contemporary Arab culture. Arab literary criticism has never been entirely isolated from Western critical approaches. It has followed them and responded to them in different ways. Translation movements, which flourished in the early twentieth century, created an important channel for intellectual exchange. They introduced Arab critics to Western schools of thought and helped spread their influence. These approaches ranged from Marxism and formalism to structuralism and deconstruction, and later to theories sometimes described as post-postmodern. Arab critics adopted different positions toward them. Some showed unqualified admiration and borrowed the methods almost unchanged. Others rejected them altogether. More balanced positions sought to examine Western methods critically before adapting them to Arab culture. These middle positions remained less common and involved greater intellectual risks.

The Egyptian critic Abdelaziz Hamouda emerged as an important voice in this unsettled critical landscape. He questioned modernity and the intellectual and critical changes associated with it. This inquiry led him to reconsider many assumptions established by modern Western critical theory. His arguments did not appear in a single article or a limited study. They developed into a sustained critical project over many years. Its most notable expression was his trilogy: *Convex Mirrors*, *Concave Mirrors*, and *Emerging from the Labyrinth*. These books are not merely descriptive surveys of critical schools. They form stages of a single intellectual project. In *Convex Mirrors*, Hamouda examines and challenges the Western model and its reception in Arab culture. In *Concave Mirrors*, he explores the possibility of an Arab critical alternative grounded in the Arabic rhetorical tradition. In the final book, he seeks another point of departure through a return to the authority of the text itself.

The three books must therefore be read together. Each develops an aspect of Hamouda's critical position. Yet their connection raises questions that go beyond a simple account of intellectual development. Hamouda begins by diagnosing the problems of Western critical methods. He then attempts to shape an Arab alternative in *Concave Mirrors*. Finally, he looks for a source of authority that might guide readers out of the labyrinth. Does this sequence represent a coherent dialectical development toward a more mature critical understanding? Or does it describe a circular movement in which leaving the labyrinth merely gives it another name? Does Hamouda's attempt to establish Arab critical foundations truly overcome methodological dependence? Or does it reproduce another form of intellectual centrality, this time expressed in Arabic?

### **1. The Crisis of Arab Criticism and the Question of Reference**

Since the late 1960s, especially after the Arab defeat of 1967, Arab thought entered a new period of critical reflection and self-questioning. Literary criticism was an important part of this development. Questions of cultural identity, the

legitimacy of modernisation, and the limits of openness to Western thought became increasingly urgent. The crisis was not confined to political and social life. It also affected the intellectual and epistemological foundations of Arab culture. As a result, the relationship with the Western Other was reconsidered. The issue was no longer simply whether Arab culture could benefit from Western intellectual achievements. It also concerned the nature and limits of that benefit. Could this relationship produce a critical awareness suited to the specific conditions of Arab cultural life?

Arab literary criticism experienced growing methodological and epistemological uncertainty amid these changes. Western methods and theories entered Arab critical debates at an increasingly rapid pace. This openness did not involve concepts and analytical procedures alone. In many cases, it also brought entire philosophical and intellectual systems. Those systems had emerged in historical and cultural settings different from the Arab context. Western modernity gradually gained a place in universities and cultural institutions. Critics began to approach both classical and modern Arabic texts through unfamiliar Western concepts. Structuralism and deconstruction were followed by reception theory and cultural criticism. These approaches introduced new understandings of the text, language, the subject, and the author. Hamouda describes the result as an enduring division among Arab modernists. He writes: 'The continuing division and persistent contradictions among Arab modernists, who place one foot in the Arab East and the other in the European and American West. For many years, we explained some of these contradictions as lying within us, the readers of modernity, and blamed what we called the crisis of critical terminology, [...] without having the courage to acknowledge that the crisis is not one of terminology, but one of two different cultural realities and two different civilizations' (Hamouda, 1998, p. 28).

This accumulation of methods produced a form of critical dependence on imported theoretical ideas. Western approaches were no longer treated simply as resources from which Arab critics could learn. They increasingly became universal standards for reading texts, regardless of the historical and cultural contexts in which those texts were produced. Hamouda warns: 'The gulf between Western and Arab realities is vast and deep. Hollow claims that bridges can be built across it are not enough to make us forget the difference. When we lose our awareness of that difference, we enter dangerous territory' (Hamouda, 1998, pp. 29–30).

The issue was therefore more complex than accepting or rejecting Western methods. It concerned how Arab critics could engage with them without becoming dependent on them. For Hamouda, this was not simply a conflict between the old and the new or between authenticity and contemporaneity. Nor was it a call to close Arab culture to Western critical achievements. It was a search for a more balanced relationship between the self and the Other. Such a relationship would allow Arab criticism to benefit from modern intellectual developments while questioning their assumptions. It would also allow critics to test their relevance to their own cultural environment. Hamouda and others who shared his concerns therefore called for a fundamental reassessment of the divide threatening Arab culture. At the heart of this reassessment lay a more basic question: Who are we? (see Hamouda, 2001, pp. 20–21).

## **2. The Dialogue between Authenticity and Contemporaneity in Arab Thought (The Dilemma of a Slogan)**

Hamouda places the tension between authenticity and contemporaneity at the centre of this debate. It was one of the main issues associated with calls for Arab modernisation. As he explains, Arab modernists sought to overcome an unsatisfactory present and move beyond inherited traditions. They also tried to reinterpret cultural heritage in ways that would support their modernist claims. Hamouda observes: 'Calling for authenticity deprives them of their modernity, which rests on a vision of renewal and the future. More importantly, reading the creative heritage and examining the linguistic and critical tradition in order to establish modernist propositions within it takes us back to the starting point: the general and imprecise definition of modernity in its Arab version' (Hamouda, 1998, p. 37). Combining authenticity and contemporaneity is thus not as simple as the slogan suggests. Putting the two words together does not ensure that their meanings are compatible. This is especially true when the slogan remains a verbal formula with little relation to actual practice.

Hamouda's objection to certain modernist slogans can be understood in this light. Authenticity and contemporaneity may express conflicting aims. If authenticity means returning to inherited traditions, while contemporaneity means adopting Western modernity, then each concept requires careful definition. Without such clarification, the pairing may conceal an unresolved intellectual contradiction.

In Hamouda's account, this tension created a divided consciousness in Arab intellectual life. The modern world had become a shared material and civilizational reality. Yet Arab societies still faced questions rooted in a different historical context. Arab intellectuals could therefore find themselves drawn toward the modern world while remaining deeply involved in older concerns that continued to shape their surroundings. Hamouda illustrates this paradox through a statement by the poet Yusuf al-Khal about a modern world without barriers separating its parts. Arab individuals now live in that world and engage with its concepts and conditions. Yet such participation does not remove the distinctive features of their social and cultural reality. The Arab reader may thus feel caught between identification with modern thought and attachment to the realities of Arab society. From Hamouda's perspective, this is a central paradox of Arab modernisation (see Hamouda, 1998, pp. 32–33).

Hamouda considers another possibility. Although he thinks it moves somewhat away from the usual meaning of authenticity, he suggests returning to heritage with tools developed by modern Western critical schools. The goal, however, should not be to reproduce those methods mechanically. Rather, it should be to cast new light on Western texts (Hamouda, 1998, pp. 36–37). This places him in a distinct position. He neither demands a break with Western modernity nor accepts it without qualification. He also rejects a superficial reconciliation between modernity and heritage. Instead, he calls first for an epistemological critique of imported modernity. He then calls for a careful re-examination of Arab

heritage. The proposed alternative should emerge from questioning both traditions, not from an automatic commitment to either one.

A return to heritage need not mean restoring the past exactly as it was. It can mean rereading that past in the light of present questions. Similarly, engaging with modernity does not require abandoning cultural identity. It requires the intellectual resources needed for a dialogue with the Other on equal terms. Heritage can then be reinterpreted, while modernity itself remains open to examination and criticism. Neither should become an unquestionable authority.

This explains Hamouda's criticism of Arab modernist discourse when it treats Western theories as models valid for every time and place. The problem is not the use of structuralism, deconstruction, or other schools of criticism. It lies in turning them into absolute standards and separating them from their philosophical and epistemological histories. Arab critics must understand the foundations of a method before adopting it. They must also examine its limits when applied to Arabic texts. This is why we reject the charge that Hamouda's position is backward-looking or reactionary. His project seeks to replace passive admiration for Western intellectual achievements with active criticism and dialogue. In his view, the modernity of Arab culture should not be measured by its resemblance to the Western model. It should be measured by its ability to formulate its own questions and develop critical tools based on an awareness of its history and distinctive character.

### 3. Critiquing Modernity at Its Intellectual Foundations

Hamouda does not treat Western critical schools as ready-made models that can be presented or adopted apart from their intellectual conditions. He moves beyond description and examines the ideas on which they were built. Their philosophical background is essential to his understanding of how Western critical discourse emerged and changed. His return to the origins of Western modernity is therefore not a historical digression. It is part of his critical project. He seeks to identify the intellectual traditions that helped produce modern and contemporary critical schools. He also relates their achievements to the philosophical settings in which they developed. As he explains: 'We do not seek to present philosophical schools as pure philosophy. We examine them as cultural changes that necessarily brought corresponding changes in how people understood and used the language of expression, especially literary expression' (Hamouda, 1998, p. 61).

Hamouda traces this development to the early signs of Western intellectual modernity in the second half of the nineteenth century. He then follows changes in Western philosophy and their effects on literary thought and criticism. He writes: 'Instead of terms with established meanings that literary criticism had used for more than twenty centuries, we found ourselves, from the mid-1950s in French and Anglo-Saxon cultures and from the early 1980s in Western culture, dealing with a critical vocabulary that was philosophical from beginning to end, both in its origins and its meanings. Instead of working with terms such as mimesis, imitation, historical criticism, social criticism, psychological criticism, and the debate between subjectivity and objectivity in literature, or even the objective correlative and the collective consciousness that determines the function of literature, we found ourselves dealing with metalanguage and metacriticism, the internal and the external, knowledge, being, interpretation, and phenomenology [...]' (Hamouda, 1998, pp. 77–78). For Hamouda, later critical methods did not arise in isolation. They resulted from a complex process of intellectual development. Studying these methods only in their final form risks reducing them to procedures and terminology. It also conceals the philosophical contexts that shaped them.

Hamouda makes this position clearer by tracing major developments in Western philosophy. He discusses John Locke's realism, Immanuel Kant's idealism, and Nietzsche's philosophy of doubt. In *Convex Mirrors*, he shows how these changes were linked to developments in language studies. A detailed examination of this philosophical history, however, lies beyond the scope of the present study.

### 4. Abdelaziz Hamouda's Critical View of Structuralism (Questioning Imported Ideas on Equal Terms)

Hamouda's position on Western structuralism cannot be separated from the wider cultural setting that shaped it. Modern Arab criticism developed in an atmosphere of strong admiration for Western intellectual achievements. Many Arab critics became transmitters of Western ideas rather than producers of an independent critical understanding. Some nevertheless claimed to have developed a distinctive form of structuralism that went beyond the Western model. The critic Kamal Abu Deeb is one example. In this climate, the adoption of imported terms, especially those associated with structuralism and deconstruction, became a sign of intellectual modernity. Hamouda's project challenged an often-neglected question: When we borrow these methods, are we practising criticism or simply consuming a passing intellectual fashion?

Structuralism initially represented a legitimate challenge to traditional literary criticism. Earlier approaches often emphasised history and biography. They explained a literary text through the author's life, the events of the period, and the social setting. They gave less attention to the text as an independent linguistic structure. Literary structuralism therefore drew on the linguistic studies associated with Ferdinand de Saussure. His theories marked a major turning point in debates about language and literary criticism. Their central principle was that 'linguistics has language, considered in and for itself, as its sole and true object' (de Saussure, 1995, p. 317). This principle enabled scholars such as Roman Jakobson, the early Roland Barthes, and Claude Lévi-Strauss to develop ambitious analytical models. They hoped to study literature with a scientific rigour comparable to that of linguistics.

Hamouda recognizes that this ambition was initially legitimate. Yet he asks whether structuralism fulfilled its promise. He writes: 'Linguistic analysis of the structure of the literary text thus appeared to offer an acceptable solution to the demands of literary criticism. The paradox, however, is that this very solution became structuralism's ultimate downfall'

(Hamouda, 1998, p. 158). A literary text is a complex aesthetic and human experience. Hamouda argues that it cannot be fully understood through a rigid scientific logic.

Does structuralist analysis truly illuminate the text, as its supporters claim? Or does it impose predetermined patterns upon it?

This question appears methodological, but it also challenges the philosophical meaning of the scientific status claimed by structuralism. When a literary work is reduced to a network of structural relations, it is treated almost like a grammatical sentence. Its aesthetic, emotional, and imaginative qualities risk disappearing. Hamouda makes this point directly: 'Even if we accept the structuralist method's ability to offer a systematic and scientific analysis of language, it is difficult to accept that it can analyse literary texts, illuminate them, and establish their meaning [...]. By concentrating on the basic elements and smaller units that make up the text, the structuralist critic reduces it in a damaging way. Despite all this, meaning is neither reached nor established' (Hamouda, 1998, pp. 244–245). On this reading, structuralism sacrifices meaning, which is central to literature, in pursuit of formal methodological rigour.

Hamouda's argument also reflects a debate within Western criticism. Some critics seek to make literary criticism an objective science. Others maintain that literature resists such reduction. Hamouda brings this debate into the Arab context, where methods are often imported without a parallel awareness of their limitations. Moreover, Arab critics were sometimes adopting approaches just as those approaches were losing influence or being replaced in the West. Arab criticism was therefore working with theories that had already entered a later stage of debate in their original settings.

This apparent methodological problem also raises a sharper question about the relationship between the Western intellectual centre and the Arab periphery. It reveals a pattern of delayed borrowing. A theory presented as new and modern by parts of the Arab intellectual elite may already be the late echo of a Western controversy. Hamouda does not make this observation to dismiss the work of Arab critics. He seeks to draw attention to the difficulties in their relationship with international intellectual movements. Nor is the problem limited to structuralism. It extends to the deconstruction that followed it. While deconstruction faced sharp criticism in the United States, it was also accused of leading intellectual thought into absurdity and nihilism. Yet some Arab critics continued to embrace it enthusiastically. They appeared unaware that the debate about its value and implications had already reached an advanced stage of reassessment (see Hamouda, 1998, p. 13).

#### **Abdelaziz Hamouda and Deconstruction (From the Crisis of Meaning to the Crisis of Meaninglessness)**

For Hamouda, structuralism exposed a methodological failure to establish meaning. Deconstruction, which followed and challenged structuralism, created a more profound crisis. Meaning was no longer merely marginalised. Instead, criticism seemed to arrive at a state of meaninglessness. Hamouda saw this as the height of the intellectual labyrinth reached by contemporary Western criticism. He also believed that Arab modernist criticism had followed it without adequate reflection on its consequences.

In a striking passage, he writes: 'Deconstruction charged ahead like a raging bull in an antique shop, destroying everything precious, valuable, or sacred. Deconstructionists replaced the model with the subjectivity of reading and rebellion against the finality or closure of the text [...]. In the end, deconstructionists reached the same result as structuralists: the concealment of the text. In short, structuralism and deconstruction began with a common rejection of earlier and contemporary critical schools. Both pursued one objective [...]: the attainment of meaning. Yet they reached the same final destination. Structuralists failed to establish meaning, while deconstructionists succeeded in producing meaninglessness' (Hamouda, 1998, p. 8).

As with structuralism, Hamouda places deconstruction within its wider philosophical setting. He traces a line from Husserl's phenomenology through the hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer to Derrida's deconstruction. He also considers the influence of Nietzsche and de Saussure on deconstructive thought. His purpose is to show how Western philosophy moved from attempts to define consciousness and its objects through doubt and certainty toward Derrida's challenge to every fixed centre. In this view, the text is subject to an endless play of references. No final and stable meaning can be secured.

Hamouda refers to thinkers whose work, in his account, undermined concepts established by earlier critical traditions. He draws particular attention to Vincent Leitch's ironic image of the 'theft of the referent.' Hamouda and other critics of deconstruction do not place responsibility on Derrida alone. They also direct their criticism toward figures such as Barthes, Heidegger, de Saussure, and Paul de Man (see Hamouda, 1998, pp. 260–266).

Deconstruction seeks to release the text from any fixed centre. In doing so, it replaces the authority of stable meaning with the authority of free play. Interpretation becomes open-ended. Signifiers continually refer to other signifiers, allowing an indefinite number of possible meanings. In Hamouda's view, this does not liberate the reader, as deconstructionists claim. It draws the reader into an unlimited interpretive labyrinth. It also deprives the text of an authority against which interpretations can be assessed.

Hamouda considers the consequences more serious in the Arab context. Adopting deconstruction may distance Arab criticism from the texts it seeks to understand. The method emerged from crises of alienation, doubt, and nihilism within Western metaphysics. Arabic texts, especially religious and classical texts, developed in quite different intellectual and semantic contexts. Applying deconstruction to them may therefore produce estrangement rather than deeper understanding.

It is important, however, that Hamouda's position is not an automatic rejection of everything Western. He draws on Western critics of deconstruction, including Vincent Leitch. In this way, he builds part of his argument from debates within the culture that produced the method. This gives his criticism more substance than a purely ideological rejection.

Nevertheless, his position should not be treated as the final word. Describing deconstruction as a labyrinth of nihilism may simplify complex philosophical questions that deserve closer examination. We must therefore ask whether citing opponents of deconstruction is sufficient to prove its decline or lack of value. Its influence remains visible in fields beyond literary study. This question does not invalidate Hamouda's criticism. Rather, it invites us to read his work as a contribution to an ongoing debate, not as a conclusive judgment.

#### **4. Heritage in Concave Mirrors and the Problem of a Critical Alternative**

The relationship between heritage and modernity remains a central issue in Arab intellectual debates. The problem is no longer limited to reconciling a past that expresses a community's traditions and identity with a present shaped by rapid intellectual and civilizational change. It also involves questioning the assumptions that determine how Arab heritage is viewed in relation to Western achievements. Hamouda's *Concave Mirrors* addresses this issue directly. The first volume of his trilogy, *Convex Mirrors*, challenged modernity in both its Western and Arab forms. *Concave Mirrors* marked a new stage in his project. In it, he sought the Arab critical alternative that modernist critics had asked him to provide.

The titles of the two books carry a central symbolic meaning. In Hamouda's account, convex mirrors enlarge and distort what appears before them. They represent modernists who mistake the enlarged reflections they see for their own realities and achievements. Concave mirrors, by contrast, are used as a metaphor for diminishing the value of Arab culture. Hamouda applies this image to the way Arab modernists viewed their own intellectual heritage. He writes: 'Some of us placed the achievements of the Arab mind in general, and its critical heritage in particular, before concave mirrors. They saw them as small and insignificant. Overwhelmed by the achievements of the Western mind, they approached them with contempt' (Hamouda, 2001, p. 41). The issue now becomes constructive. Criticism cannot remain an act of rejection. It must turn rejection into a stage in the search for viable alternatives. *Concave Mirrors* therefore continues a project that moves from one critical question to another.

Hamouda argues that classical Arab heritage contains analytical resources that modern Arab criticism has not adequately explored. Researchers should not treat this heritage as a closed historical archive. They should approach it as living material that can be developed and renewed. His call is not for withdrawal into the past or rejection of all external influences. Rather, he advocates a critical theory grounded in the distinctive features of the Arabic language and its rhetorical tradition. This would avoid imposing concepts designed for other cultural settings upon Arabic texts.

Hamouda asks: 'Should we not also remove the layers of rigidity left by long periods of decline upon the heritage of Arabic rhetoric? Could we not restore our connection with that heritage, rather than break with it, and develop it in the light of our own knowledge and the new knowledge of others? Would it not then become more distinctive and more closely connected to the Arab mind?' (Hamouda, 2001, p. 200). The problem is not a lack of theoretical achievements in Arab heritage. It is that modern readings often judge its value before examining it. For many modernists, heritage has become a historical object belonging to a period that has supposedly been left behind. Its potential as a body of knowledge has therefore received insufficient critical attention.

This perspective raises an important question. Does the presence of advanced rhetorical and critical ideas in Arab heritage mean that these ideas, in their original form, can produce a contemporary critical theory? In our view, the answer is no. Heritage does not become a modern theory simply because it is recovered. It requires reconstruction and reintegration into a framework capable of engaging with current critical questions. Nor is everything produced by earlier Arab thinkers suitable for recovery.

Hamouda himself acknowledges this limitation. He states: 'Developing an Arab linguistic and critical theory requires careful sifting and a conscious purification of our linguistic and critical heritage. We must address its many contradictions and overlaps before identifying the concepts of such a theory' (Hamouda, 2001, p. 197). The tradition has passed through periods of intellectual strength and weakness. Some of its ideas must therefore be examined critically once again. Hamouda does not seek to replace dependence on the West with dependence on the past. His aim is to develop an independent and reflective Arab critical consciousness in which heritage is one important foundation. This may be the greatest challenge facing his project.

#### **Arabic Linguistic Theory**

In his discussion of linguistic theory, Hamouda revisits questions central to the development of modern linguistics. He examines them in relation to earlier Arab linguistic and rhetorical thought. He does not assume that these questions emerged suddenly as purely Western achievements. Yet he does not force an artificial equivalence between modern linguistics and the ideas of classical Arab scholars. Instead, he argues that several issues later associated with modern linguistics, especially the work of de Saussure, had significant precedents in the Arabic linguistic tradition. These earlier insights, he suggests, deserve renewed study.

Hamouda writes: 'Had we developed them at the beginning of the twentieth-century renaissance, or at any later stage in that century, we would today have a linguistic theory of our own. On the one hand, it would have spared us the need to borrow and transfer ideas from Western modernity and postmodernity. On the other, it would have formed a protective barrier against the cultural dependence that threatens to erase our identity completely' (Hamouda, 2001, p. 209).

Among the issues he considers are the systematic nature of language, the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes, as compared with the concepts of adjacency and selection in Arabic rhetoric. He also discusses the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, the distinction between language and speech, and the relationship between wording and meaning. Taken together, these questions show Hamouda's attempt to bring Arabic linguistic heritage back into contemporary debates. He does not present that heritage as a ready-made replacement for modern theory. He presents it as an intellectual

tradition capable of formulating its own questions about language and linguistic analysis. A detailed discussion of every issue, however, would exceed the scope of this study.

### **Literary Theory**

Hamouda extends his inquiry beyond linguistics to the field of literary theory. He begins with a more fundamental question: 'Did the Arab mind produce a literary theory during the golden age of Arabic rhetoric?' (Hamouda, 2001, p. 305). His return to Arabic rhetoric in *Concave Mirrors* is not a simple effort to replace modern literary theory with an older critical tradition. It is an attempt to test assumptions that have shaped modern interpretations of Arab heritage. One such assumption is that literary theory is a distinctively Western undertaking. According to this account, its main questions emerged from ancient Greek philosophy and were later developed in modern Western thought.

Hamouda's argument is controversial because he goes beyond showing that Arabic rhetoric addressed some of the same topics. He also suggests that the work of Arab rhetoricians can be compared with literary theory at different stages of its development. He writes: 'There is no critical problem addressed by modern literary theory, or theories, that the Arab mind did not also examine, both in theory and in practice. This is precisely what we mean by the continuing presence of the framework of modern and contemporary literary and critical schools, in light of which we shall examine classical Arab criticism' (Hamouda, 2001, p. 308).

Hamouda considers several questions that, taken together, resemble the foundations of a literary theory. They include the relationship between literature, imitation, and creativity; the problem of creativity through language; and the debate over truth and falsehood. He also discusses literary plagiarism, which can raise questions of intertextuality in contemporary criticism. Other issues include talent and tradition, as well as the relationship between form and content. The value of Hamouda's project becomes clearer when it is understood as an attempt to recover neglected theoretical possibilities within Arab criticism. It is not simply an effort to prove that Arab scholars reached particular ideas before Western theorists. The central question is not whether classical Arab thinkers said exactly what Western theorists later said. It is whether they possessed their own intellectual tools for asking questions about literature, creativity, and the text. Hamouda's answer tends to be affirmative. The more difficult task is to determine how these earlier questions can be made productive within contemporary critical frameworks.

Hamouda's undertaking nevertheless faces significant difficulties. Criticizing Western methods is one thing; constructing a coherent Arab alternative is another. The latter task is too demanding to be completed in a single book. Questions remain about whether the proposed alternative can be applied systematically to different kinds of texts. It is also uncertain whether earlier linguistic and literary theories can address the complexity and diversity of modern literature. These unresolved issues help explain Hamouda's need for a third volume in which he could bring together the different parts of his project.

### **Emerging from the Labyrinth and the Possibility of Restoring the Authority of the Text**

#### **First: The Labyrinth as a Foundational Metaphor**

In the title *Emerging from the Labyrinth*, Hamouda chooses an image with philosophical as well as methodological significance. The book continues the inquiry he began in *Convex Mirrors* and developed in *Concave Mirrors*. The first volume questioned the changes brought about by Western modernist criticism and the excessive influence of these changes on Arab modernists. The second considered the possibility of developing linguistic and literary theories from Arab heritage. The third takes the discussion further. It examines the critical confusion produced by modern theories in their attempts to interpret the text and subject it to governing rules.

For Hamouda, the deeper problem lies in the unexpected consequences of those efforts. He writes: 'Fear of the chaos of interpretation, followed by the search for an organising principle to regulate the relationship between criticism and creativity, soon returned us to the very point at which we began. Theory became a terrifying monster. On the one hand, it brought together every contradiction; on the other, it resisted all attempts at control and containment' (Hamouda, 2003, p. 28).

In the Arab cultural setting, the labyrinth is more than temporary confusion in the face of imported critical theories. It represents a state of intellectual disorientation. The Arab critic encounters Western theoretical systems that multiply too quickly to be fully understood. The critic may begin using terminology before grasping its meaning and repeating slogans before acquiring the tools required for analysis. If Western theories are understood as a labyrinth from which criticism must escape, the proposed solution is to return to a stable ground and a recognizable centre. Yet the very idea of such a centre is what postmodern approaches seek to challenge.

#### **Second: The Authority of the Text**

Against this background of theoretical uncertainty, Hamouda introduces the problem of textual authority. Modern and postmodern critical reading is not neutral. It involves three principal elements: the text, the author, and the reader. Any one of these can become a centre of authority. When critical theory grants decisive authority to one element, the text may lose its independent standing. Theoretical assumptions can then determine in advance what a reading is expected to discover.

According to Hamouda, contemporary Western critical approaches, from Marxism to reception theory and cultural criticism, are not merely analytical tools. They also reflect particular philosophical backgrounds. He links Marxist criticism to Russian socialism. He relates formalism and structuralism to Saussurean linguistics and, further back, to John Locke's empiricism. Derrida's deconstruction, in turn, cannot be separated from the critique of Western centrism. Hamouda's purpose is not simply to describe these connections historically. He draws a broader conclusion: because these theories emerged from specific Western philosophical crises, they should not be imposed uncritically on Arabic

texts. He therefore calls for a safe intellectual harbour in which Arab culture can find protection from the cultural and political storms of the international environment (see Hamouda, 2003, pp. 271–272).

Hamouda accordingly proposes the authority of the text as a genuine critical alternative and a primary reference point for reading and interpretation. His aim is to limit the uncertainty associated with modernist and postmodernist criticism. This does not mean isolating the text completely, as structuralism tended to do in his account. Nor does it mean allowing an unlimited series of readings, as he believes deconstruction does. He also rejects the idea that the reader should become a second author who exercises unrestricted authority over the work.

Instead, textual authority rests on the possibility of an intended meaning while preserving the text's aesthetic values. The text retains an internal authority that places limits on interpretation. These limits allow the critic to distinguish a defensible reading from an arbitrary one (see Hamouda, 2003, p. 327).

Hamouda thus completes the critical trajectory that began with an internal critique of Western methods. He then explored an Arab alternative inspired by the rhetorical heritage. Finally, he brought these concerns together through the concept of textual authority.

### Conclusion

Abdelaziz Hamouda's three-part critical project marks an important moment in the history of Arab literary criticism. Its significance does not lie in providing a definitive answer to the question of Arab criticism's relationship with its Western intellectual sources. Rather, it lies in reopening that question with unusual force. He did so at a time when academic circles often displayed strong admiration for ideas imported from the West.

As might be expected, his approach generated considerable debate. Some readers admired its intellectual courage. Others criticized his attacks on Arab modernists. Whether one agrees with Hamouda or not, the central value of his project remains its repeated call for rigorous examination of imported ideas and methods. Such examination is essential if Arab criticism is to become an active intellectual practice rather than a passive form of reception that leads to unexamined dependence.

One question nevertheless remains unresolved: What will become of this project after Hamouda's death? We hope that other scholars will continue the work he began. So far, no fully developed Arab critical project has clearly and explicitly emerged as its direct continuation.

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