MOHAMMED VI POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY
ماهر
MAHIR CENTER

Kilito

Par Michael Cooperson - UCLA

————-

Whatever he is writing about, Kilito writes playfully. Of course, the games he plays are melancholy ones. The normativity of "AD"—and worse yet, of "CE"—has been established at least partly at gunpoint. Kilito does not speak directly of such traumas, but then again he hardly needs to. In this respect he resembles Ḥanẓala, the little man who appears in the foreground of Najī al-'Alī's political cartoons. Bald, ragged, and barefoot, possibly a child, Ḥanẓala always appears with his back to the viewer. As the scenes before him are invariably heart-wrenching, we can only imagine that he is appalled; but since we cannot see his face, we never really know. In this connection I cannot help pointing out that Kilito, though conversant with several languages, rarely speaks at length in any of them, at least not at the scholarly gatherings where my colleagues and I have encountered him. When he writes about himself, he does so obliquely. In his Querelle des images (1995), which has now appeared in a fine English translation by Robyn Creswell, Kilito tells us a good many things about the childhood of one Abdallah, who grows up in a coastal town in a francophone Arab country and discovers comic books, novels, and the cinema. "Certain scenes," Kilito admits in his preface, "have a personal, even autobiographical quality. How to deny it?" But then he seems to invoke an earlier work, The Author and His Doubles, where he argues that the so-called authors of classical Arabic literature are interchangeable. The only meaningful way to identify a book is by its genre, and a successful piece of writing is one that so perfectly instantiates its genre that anyone may claim it as his own. "I hope my reader will recognize himself in this narrative," he says in The Clash of Images, and "will approach these stories with the idea that he might have written them, and will read them as if it was indeed he who wrote them."5 Even when we talk about ourselves, Kilito suggests, we do so according to generic conventions that make our discourse accessible—and therefore liable to appropriation—by others. Done covertly, this appropriation is called plagiarism, a subject he discusses at length in The Author and His Doubles. Done in the open, and in another language, it is called translation.

Modern Arabic is not an easy language to translate. Part of the problem comes from that peculiar state of affairs described by Kilito in this collection, where ironically enough he seems to regard it as an advantage: "As is well known, written Arabic, unlike spoken Arabic, has undergone only slight and secondary changes throughout its history. . . . This is a strange phenomenon, rarely encountered in other cultures." This frozenness makes it possible for modern readers to enjoy texts written a thousand years ago. But it also means that the written language has not kept pace with changes in its spoken varieties. As a result, modern written Arabic has little in common with ordinary speech. As the vehicle of choice for official pronouncements, it has that dignity that accrues automatically to any utterance that takes more trouble than necessary to say something that everyone already understands. One equivalent in English is the overcareful language of police reports, as in: "After some degree of investigation, officers determined that White had been actively involved in the usage of the specified drugs." This sort of writing sometimes has a strangely ennobling effect on even the most sordid transactions. At the same time, it seems constantly on the verge of slipping on a banana peel—making some grievous solecism—and crashing to the ground amid gales of laughter. This is why modern Arabic literature tends to read poorly in translation: the equivalent register in English is not the customary vehicle of literary expression.