El-Ariss, Tarek, ed. *The Arab Renaissance: A Bilingual Anthology of the Nahda*.

*The Arab Renaissance* is a timely bilingual anthology in both Arabic and English. With 30 selections by Arab writers from across the Arab Middle East, the anthology covers the period from the early nineteenth to the early twentieth century, what is usually referred to as the *Nahda* (Renaissance/Awakening). This is the time-period when the Arabs experienced a political, intellectual and cultural awakening. The anthology is in seven parts with the following headings: What is the Renaissance? Language and Civilization, Transnational Connections, Theories of Literature, Novels and Novellas, Poetic Expressions and Political Modernity (v-ix). Each part offers at least three samples, all of which, with the exception of three, have been translated from the Arabic into English for the first time. The selections are wide-ranging, reflecting the major concerns of politicians, writers, journalists, judges and theologians, among other intellectuals. Whereas traditional scholarship about the *Nahda* has focused mostly on political and historical modernity, this anthology emphasizes the creative imagination, the role of literature and other cultural agents in the making of this awakening. Given the MLA’s regular focus on textbooks, this anthology would make an excellent adoption for an introductory course about the Arab *Nahda*.

The introduction by editor Tarek El-Ariss is informative and insightful. It summarizes the general debates regarding the major concepts of nationalism and independence; secularism and Islamic revival; the Arabic language and translation; progress and civilization; and gender issues and the introduction of new literary genres. Additionally, the editor tells us about improvements to the educational system and travel abroad, and the establishment of presses, publications houses, newspapers and magazines, all of which offered platforms for writers and facilitated the dissemination of knowledge across class, gender and geographical boundaries. Furthermore, El-Ariss challenges a few accepted views regarding the *Nahda*. One is the impact of contact with the West. To the British and French encounters, he adds Russian and Indian influences. Another idea suggested by the editor is that the *Nahda* is not a static movement that rose and fell; rather it is a “dynamic process, complex and multifaceted, crossing space and time” (xx). The discussions offered by the diverse selections are far from homogeneous; they highlight the cultural encounters, tensions, negotiations, critiques and reassessments of traditional Arabic forms. There is
fascination and open-mindedness, but there is also parody and satire. For example, Egyptian journalist-intellectual Salama Musa broached the idea of cultural fertilization and hybridity in 1935, long before post-colonialism arose. He writes: “Cultures mixed, made exchanges, and borrowed from one another … Borrowing among cultures fertilizes them, as if a living body were breeding a different living body—producing new breeds and then, through evolution, new species” (39).

Finally, the brief introductions to the selections are helpful contextual aids to students and the general reader alike. Given the current popularity of learning Arabic at American academic institutions, students will find having the Arabic original beside the English translation most useful. The Arab Renaissance: A Bilingual Anthology of the Nahda is a valuable contribution for students of Arabic language and culture, the humanities and the social sciences.


This concise summary of the major ideas of sages, scholars, and statesmen from around the world—from Asia, Africa, Europe and America—is a good read, written in a lucid and enjoyable style. Assembling the major ideas of 30 thinkers ranging from the ancients to the medieval, moderns and contemporaries, Graeme Gerrard and James Bernard Murphy also offer a brief introduction and conclusion. Explored are the answers to many questions regarding the relationship of politics and philosophy, the nature of man and society, governance and representation, and the attributes of rulers and responsibility of governments. In short, the book sheds light on how ideas and ideals play into the reality of political power and economic interests, issues that are pertinent to global societies in the twenty-first century.

In addition to being historically contextualized, the authors’ approach is also analytical, critical and comparatist. A brief biography of each thinker is integrated within the text, which allows the reader to situate him or her in the specificity of the personal and historical time. For example, while Marx’s poverty-stricken environment in both France and in exile in London may have played a role in shaping his materialism, Hannah Arendt’s emphasis on freedom could have been motivated by her life in Germany and arrests by the Nazis for being a Jew. The assembled thinkers raise many questions. Is a human being a rational, social, political or religious animal? In what ways could thinkers affect “order, justice and harmony” (13) in human society? And what makes a good ruler and a good citizen? Confucius for one underscores personal virtues rather than rules and laws, while the Muslim philosopher Al-Farabi sought to reconcile Islam with Greek philosophy. A philosopher king, according to Plato, is the ideal statesman who seeks justice and truth, a stance that