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FERIAL J. GHAZOUL

Comparative literary studies in the Arab World were put in motion as early as 1904 in Cairo with the publication of a book entitled *Tarikh 'ilm al-adab 'ind al-ifranj wal-'arab wa-Victor Hugo* (The History of the Discipline of Literature among Westerners and Arabs and Victor Hugo).¹ The author, Ruhi al-Khalidi (1864–1913), a Palestinian scholar, mastered several languages besides Arabic: Turkish, Persian, French, and English. Serialized in *Al-Hilal* between 1902 and 1904, the volume saw its publication in book form in 1904 and was reprinted in 1912. The volume's early reprint as well as its serialization in such a non-specialized journal of general culture as *al-Hilal* are an important indicator of the eager reception and comparatively broad appeal of the subject at the time for the average educated reader. Al-Khalidi himself, who was born in Jerusalem which was then under the tutelage of the Ottoman Empire, had studied in Paris in the Faculty of *Sciences Politiques* and the Sorbonne. He was later named the Ottoman Consul General in Bordeaux. His focus on Victor Hugo (1802–1885) was probably related to Hugo's poetic collection *Les Orientales* (1829) and the 1902 centennial celebrations of Hugo's birth.²

Of course, ever since the advent of Islam and its expansion throughout and beyond the Middle East the Arabs have always been aware of comparative literature. Various cultures contributed to the formation of the Islamic civilization – whether in Abbasid Iraq or Andalusian Spain. The overarching lyrical genre of *ghazal*, for example, is found in Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Turkish and, more recently, in English. Likewise, troubadour poetry as well as medieval poems written jointly in two languages (Arabic and Hebrew for example) in medieval Spain could not be approached, let alone composed, without a comparative literary sensibility. But it is one thing to be versed in literatures of different linguistic and cultural

traditions and use them creatively, it is another to turn that knowledge into a scholarly discipline. What al-Khalidi called in the title of his book *'ilm al-adab*, which can be translated as either 'discipline of literature' or 'science of literature,' is indeed a new field.

Traditionally, the Arabs were not interested in literary studies except when they related to poetry or the sacred text, the Koran. Looking back in (literary) history, one will detect scattered critical writings on prose and *belles lettres*, but essentially what tapped the intellectual energies of medieval scholars of literature was *ars poetica* and rhetoric. Given the nature of the texts around which analysis took place – the inimitable Koran and the mono-rhymed *qasida* (ode) – there was little need for comparative exploration. The sacred text after all is the divine Word of God, while the great pre-Islamic poems constitute the privileged poetic legacy of the ancestors.

Both the sacred book and the secular poetic heritage were literally considered *incomparable*, and thus the whole notion of a comparison of equals seemed a non-starter. The Koran was compared to other texts only to demonstrate its superiority and to illustrate its sublimity, and to show how no human being – no matter how gifted or inspired – can come close to it. Medievalists even coined a specific term, *i'jaz*, to indicate a sort of sublime beauty beyond reach, something that characterized Revelation and was akin to the miraculous.

During the medieval period comparisons were made among poets, but only to establish who was the most poetic or how one verse line measured up to or surpassed another. Medieval Arabs called this kind of comparison *mumazana*, that is, comparative evaluation or comparative weighing. As for non-Arabic poetry, medieval Arab critics had very little interest in it. Al-Jahiz, a ninth-century critic, went so far as to claim that the Greeks did not have poetry, basing his argument on the fact that their so-called poems did not abide by the mono-rhyme scheme that he deemed indispensable for poetry. Such observations led to a pride in Arabic – strengthened by the fact that the language of the tribe was also the chosen language of God who had revealed the Koran in it. Thus Arabic was regarded as self-sufficient, its fantastic powers attested to as much by the inherited poetic lore as by the divine text.

The narrative tradition in the Arab world, on the other hand, is not as insular or self-contained. Whether formal narration recognized by the literary establishment – such as *Kalila wa-Dimna* by Ibn al-Muqafa' – or folktales which circulated orally and were recorded at a later stage – such as *The Thousand and One Nights* – the imprint of foreign and

earlier cultures is incontestable. The manifold contributions of other narrative traditions – Indian, Persian, ancient Near Eastern, Byzantine and Hellenistic – are recognized in Arabic story-telling. But narration as a literary phenomenon only rarely engaged the analytical and reflective minds of medieval Arabs. This is partly because poetry overshadowed narrative prose to such a degree that the latter was rendered secondary – marking it in some ways as a subaltern genre that featured too little discursive status to warrant theorizing. This marginalization of the prose genre resulted in a distinct lack of critical interest in it and, by consequence, in a corresponding lack of interest in comparative literary speculation. Unlike Islamic philosophy, which made good use of Greek philosophers, Islamic literature did not relate back to Greek epic narratives, nor to Indian or Persian narratives. Greek philosophy exercised medieval minds on the relationship between Philosophy and Revelation, between the wisdom of human reason and the principles of the Koran, and whether they are two paths to the same Truth. Speculation of this kind is perforce comparative. The narrative genre by contrast did not exercise the inquisitive Arab mind in the same way and hence did not spur them on to reflect upon it and upon its techniques, let alone on the narratives of other traditions. Had Arab philosophy been as interested in narratives as it was in music or rhetoric, the comparative strain would have probably surfaced.

What I am driving at is that Arab culture – in itself an intersection and integration of so many cultures – has features that would predispose it towards comparative study, yet it did not do so in the field of literature until the early twentieth century. For many centuries the aesthetic centrality of the sacred and the poetic over the profane and the narrative in the field of literary studies marginalized and suppressed any comparative inclination. The publication of al-Khalidi's book on comparative literature, then, indicates not only the impact of French currents of thought on Arabic scholarship and the impact of colonialism on the colonised cultures, it signals, too, the rise of secular tendencies in general and the rise of the novel in particular. 1904 incidentally also witnessed the publication of the first Arabic translation of the *Iliad* by Sulayman al-Bustani in Cairo, a work that in its extensive introduction also addressed a number of comparative literary issues.³ Among other developments, these events herald the budding of Arab interest in the secular and in narrative.⁴

However, al-Khalidi's first work on comparative literature in Arabic has additional significance. It points to the West, and perhaps that is

not surprising given the degree of European influence on the Middle East since the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798. The entry of comparative literature into Arabic culture is an aspect of the Arab renaissance movement in the early twentieth century which took upon itself to know Western culture better and to make use of this knowledge.⁵ A sample of fifteen works of comparative literature translated into Arabic between 1945 and 2004 (in Cairo, Beirut, Casablanca, Kuwait, Damascus, and Amman)⁶ shows that, with the exception of one book that deals with comparative literature in China, the remainder encapsulates the main trends and currents of scholarship in the West; as 'Izz al-Din Al-Manasra correctly points out, what has been translated is roughly representative of Euro-American metropolitan thought.⁷

In terms of comparative scholarship, other researchers have since followed in the footsteps of al-Khalidi, the pioneer: Qistaki al-Humsi, a Syrian scholar, published in 1935 the third volume of his *Manhal al-murrad fi 'ilm al-intiqad* (The Source of Newcomers to the Science of Criticism), a book of practical comparative criticism on medieval literature, comparing Dante's *The Divine Comedy* (*La Divina commedia*) and Abu al-'Ala al-Ma'rri's *The Epistle of Pardon* (*Risalat al-ghufran*).⁸ He concluded that Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) knew the work of Abu al-'Ala al-Ma'arri (973–1057) either directly or via the mediation of a translation. He was followed by another landmark figure in comparative literature who is known as the real founder of comparative literary studies in the Arab World, Muhammad Ghunaymi Hilal (1916–1968). His works have become standard reference textbooks in comparative literary studies and continue to be taught in universities all over the Arab World. Hilal was educated in al-Azhar, Cairo University, and the Sorbonne and combined knowledge of French literature with that of classical Arabic and Persian. Much in the vein of the so-called French School of comparative literature with its focus on documentable *rapports de fait*, Hilal too focused on lines of influence that can be corroborated historically. He is the author of *al-Adab al-muqaran* (Comparative Literature), which appeared in 1953 and was reprinted several times, as well as other seminal works comparing 'Udhri and Sufi love poetry and the legend of Layla and Majnun in various literary traditions.⁹ In addition, he translated Persian poetry and Sartre's *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* into Arabic.

In the mid 1940s, comparative literature became an academic subject at Cairo University. But like many other nascent fields of

study, the interest in it depended heavily on the determination and energy of the people involved in its teaching. Gradually, between the 1960s and 1980s comparative literature became a university subject in numerous higher education institutions across the Arab World. In most Arab universities it was accorded the status of a course at advanced undergraduate or/and graduate level in their departments of literature. The teaching of these courses was often entrusted to staff who had an interest in the subject rather than a rigorous academic training in the field. Even today, the study of comparative literature remains less institutionalized in Arab universities than, say, the study of such national literatures as Arabic, English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Persian, or Japanese. The only department of literature in the Arab World that identifies itself formally and nominally as a department of comparative literature is the English and Comparative Literature Department at the American University in Cairo (AUC). The shift from 'Department of English' to 'Department of English and Comparative Literature' at the AUC came about in the late 1970s in recognition of the winds of change affecting the study of English in the Third World no less than in the West.

I have discussed the state of the discipline with a number of established professors in the field, scholars who have been instrumental in spreading comparative studies in the field of literature in the Arab world: Ahmed Etman (Classics), Amina Rachid (French), Malak Hashem, Radwa Ashour, and Muhsin al-Musawi (English), Abdel-Majid Anoune and 'Izz al-Din Al-Manasra (Arabic). Without exception all agree that students are taking an increasing interest in comparative literature; in particular, a growing number of graduate students are opting to write theses and dissertations on comparative literary topics. After decades of castigating comparative literature as a field without a pure pedigree – in a system of education that recognizes only national literatures and underlines linguistic borders – it now has become a field sought out by students precisely because of its hybrid nature.

Algeria offers another example of the way comparative literature has developed in the Arab World. The University of Algiers was 'an administrative and scientific extension of French universities when Algeria was occupied by France'¹⁰ and comparative literature was taught there as if it were a course in a department of French in Paris. Following independence in the early 1960s, a chair of comparative literature was established at the University of Algiers. It functioned as

the nucleus of the Algerian Society of Comparative Literature and its journal, *Cahiers algériens de littérature comparée*, which appeared between 1964 and 1967. In the beginning, the young Algerian professors ran such activities with the help of resident and visiting French professors. Following the higher education reform in Algeria in 1969–70, comparative literature was elevated in status to a required course in all departments of Arabic at Algerian universities.¹¹

The 1980s witnessed a flurry of activities and publications related to comparative literature in line with contemporary trends in the World that propelled scholarship in the direction of theory. Abdel-Majid Anoune organized an international symposium at the University of Annaba, Algeria, in 1983 which led in the following year to the creation of the Arab Association of Comparative Literature (AACL), which in turn held its first conference also in Annaba in 1984. The proceedings of this conference, entitled *La Littérature comparée chez les arabes: Concept et méthodologie*, were edited by Anoune and published by Annaba University¹²; besides scholarly articles it includes the bylaws of the AACL. The AACL planned to hold such conferences every other year in a different Arab country. Accordingly, the second conference took place in Damascus, Syria, in 1986, the third in Marrakesh, Morocco, in 1988, while the fourth was to take place in Arbil, Iraq, in 1990, but the tensions in the region preceding the Gulf war prevented it.

Egypt has been in the frontline when it comes to publishing in the field of comparative literature – the works of all three pioneers mentioned earlier (al-Khalidi, al-Humsi, and Hilal) were published in Cairo. In the 1980s and 1990s more overt interest in comparative literature could be observed. Journals dedicated to literary studies such as the Arabic quarterly *Fusul: Journal of Literary Criticism*, published by the General Egyptian Book Organization (1980 to the present), and the trilingual annual *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* (1981 to the present), published by the American University in Cairo, ushered in an era of renewed interest in critical theory and comparative literature. Each issue of these scholarly journals focused on a specific question, theme, or genre, presenting different points of view and multiple approaches. They also included translations of theoretical texts and introduced readers to a variety of literary debates.¹³ Moreover, the publication of proceedings of international comparative literature conferences organized by the Departments of English and French in Egyptian universities produced volumes of impressive scholarship.

They include *Actes du colloque international de narratologie et rhétorique dans les littératures française et arabe*, edited by Amal Farid (1988), *Classical Papers* (1992), edited by Ahmed Etman, and *Images of Egypt in Twentieth-Century Literature* (1991) and *History in Literature* (1995), both of which were edited by Hoda Gindi.¹⁴ The Egyptian Society of Comparative Literature (ESCL) has also contributed to this recent proliferation of serials by publishing its own trilingual journal entitled *Muqaranat/ Comparisons* as well as organizing seminars on comparative literature. In addition, the Higher Council of Culture in Egypt has funded an ambitious project of translation that has made available in Arabic major works in literary theory, spearheaded by a prominent critic and professor of Arabic literature, Gaber Asfour. Launched in 1995, within the span of one decade it now counts one thousand volumes. Nor is Egypt unique in this domain. Publishers in Kuwait have systematically published translations of seminal foreign books, many of which deal with literary theory. One of the best academic journals in the Arab World, *'Alam al-fikr*, is published in Kuwait, and though it does not deal exclusively with literature, it has published significant scholarship in comparative literature and critical theory. *Thaqafat*, a high-calibre bilingual journal published in Bahrain, has a comparative literary focus. A series devoted to English Studies is published in Tunisia by the University of Manouba, edited by Habib Ajroud. The list includes such inviting titles as *Things English* (1994), *Across Boundaries* (1995), and *The Canon: Differences and Values* (1997).¹⁵ In Saudi Arabia, numerous literary clubs have become active not only in discussing comparative literary issues, but also in publishing journals and monographs in the field of comparative theory and semiotics.

So why is comparative literature on the rise in the Arab World at the very moment when, in the metropolitan centres of the West, it seems to be going through yet another crisis? Part of the enthusiasm for comparative literature in the Arab World – thanks in particular to postcolonial studies and gender studies – is that it is no longer a discipline focussing on dead white men and the study of European classics, but is rather a field where any Third World reader can feel at home. An Arab student of literature, particularly a student of European literatures, is already bilingual and often trilingual; and by dint of the fact of being a member of a colonized community, once politically, today economically, the Arab is a cultural hybrid. The co-existence of more than one way of life, the traditional and the contemporary, the wavering between the pre-modern and the post-modern, allows a

bifocal sensibility. Comparative studies in literature constitute one obvious answer to this kind of double vision. How else can one make sense of one's literary heritage – a heritage one was brought up on – while succumbing to the dazzling array of foreign classics one encounters during one's education? The old-fashioned insistence on investigating influence and tracing sources is no longer what comparatists look for; today's comparatists are more concerned with making sense of differences, of being able to juxtapose two or more contrasting modes without opting for one or the other.

Doubtless, the way comparative literature has become affiliated with activism, as in the work of Edward W. Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, or Barbara Harlow, has shifted literary scholarship away from the study of remote and often alien texts to that of contemporary issues and immediate concerns. As contrasted with his or her Western counterpart, many an Arab student comes to understand Spivak through his or her personal experience of oppression; these students often live through what Spivak elaborates on when she asks rhetorically in the title of her influential essay: 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' And if they may not follow every twist and turn of the intricate arguments of Said on Gramsci or Lukács, they can sense nevertheless that theirs are voices arguing against power and hegemony. And even when they are not able to grasp every subtle detail of South African or South American literature, they are well able to understand Harlow's concept of resistance literature.

In general, comparative literature in the Arab world today is less concerned with the fine distinctions between different trends of theory than with the way theory makes itself pertinent and speaks to one's most immediate needs. Often theory finds itself stripped of its intricate apparatus of philosophical scaffolding and is instead reinvested with the concerns of the moment. There is a sense of excitement in comparative literature because to some degree it can work to heal cultural ruptures and bridge the divide between the abstract and the concrete.

Part of the *jouissance* in comparative literature and in criticism today stems from the fact that it allows one freely to cross borders, to look simultaneously and inventively at such diverse cultures and literary traditions. The barriers are lifted and all hierarchies are (albeit maybe only seemingly) demolished. We are no longer preoccupied with a search for the original text and the denigration of the copy, we no longer privilege the father over the progeny, the higher over the lower

styles, elitist art over popular culture. The field is more open than ever before and the sense of liberation from the confines of a single domineering national literature can be exhilarating. This fresh gaze differs fundamentally from the older conception of comparative literature in the early twentieth century. There is no longer a sense of dependency on the West and its currents of thought. Yes, theory and theoretical innovations get formulated in the metropolitan centres of the West, but the 'others' also have a presence, in the West as elsewhere. Subsaharan African voices and subcontinental Indian voices are heard – Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Aijaz Ahmad are as central as Wayne Booth, Fredric Jameson or Terry Eagleton. The widely read new critics do not refer only to the literary works of the West, but they discuss, and at great length, such works as those of Ghassan Kanafani, Nawal El Saadawi, or Tayeb Saleh. Even the discourse emanating from Europe and North America is becoming more pluralistic – and this is the moment, too, when an Arab comparatist feels that one can become integrated in today's global discourse about literature.

Historically speaking, comparative literature has been resisted in the Arab World for structural and institutional reasons on the one hand, and for the ways the field is perceived on the other. Comparative literature does not fit neatly into the state university system where language departments function autonomously. With the rise of nationalist fervour in the 1950s and 1960s, comparative literature was thought of as either a relic of elitist education or a suspect device of imperial penetration. Since the study of comparative literature requires a thorough grounding in more than one language, comparatists tend to be in departments other than Arabic. Although students of Arabic literature do study foreign languages, they do not have the same facility for such languages as native speakers of Arabic who are majoring in foreign languages. This results in comparative literature being linked, in most Arab countries, to foreign language departments whereas in the United States one often finds comparative literature programmes embedded in departments of English, with close ties to other language departments.

However, with today's proliferation of the phenomenon of 'writing back', we find writers from former colonies using precisely the language of the colonizers to question those cultures' representations of the Other. Writing creatively in a foreign language – even if it is the language of the historical oppressor – is no longer connected with the stigma that it used to be. Arab writers who write in English, French,

and Italian are no longer seen as traitors opting out of their own culture and into the culture of the (ex-)colonizers, but as cultural ambassadors who are able to voice a previously silenced point of view. This shift came about particularly through contemporary Arab writing in West European languages on issues that are very much post-colonial and anti-colonial, as embodied in the works of Ahdaf Soueif, Assia Djebar, Etel Adnan, Randa Ghazy, Leila Aboulela, and Anton Shammas, among many others.¹⁶ The cultural geography of the world has changed and the once rigid binarism has collapsed, thus inviting 'other' ways of viewing the world. By consequence, the field of comparative literature has become an arena where one may grasp the richness of differences and the fascinating complexity of a world literature truly becoming global – which before it was not. Thus the discipline has made great strides since its beginnings in the Arab World. From being a field tracing influences and identifying similarities, it has become a site celebrating differences and writing back.

Despite the present excitement about comparative literature and literary theory, if this critical turn is not seized and developed institutionally it will remain a lost opportunity for the field; we must translate our enthusiasm into tangible results. Given the political situation in the Arab World and the general state of demoralization, any effort to expand and perpetuate the activities of comparative literature associations – national or pan-Arab – must be fraught with difficulty. Despite this impasse, brought on by conflicts in the larger global political arena, committed individuals continue to exchange ideas across borders and organize symposia and workshops that address issues relevant to comparative literature and critical theory.

Given that comparative literature in the Arab World is institutionally bound into foreign language departments, the discipline is likely to remain sidelined, especially as long as departments of Arabic – the national language – continue to show their disinterest. With only a few exceptions, this disinterest partly stems from a lack of competence in foreign languages, and partly from a misunderstanding of the role of comparative literature. Comparative literature is seen (incorrectly in my view) as threatening the specificity and autonomy of Arabic literature on one hand, while on the other foreign-language departments are perceived (sometimes correctly) as undertaking research in comparative issues without adequate grounding in the history of Arabic literature. Double majors are extremely rare in Arab academia as the higher education system does not encourage them nor easily allow for

them, but there are instances of scholars who are equally at home in foreign languages as they are in Arabic. The Moroccan Abdelfattah Kilito and the Egyptian Ceza Kassem Draz are prime examples. From the coats of such brilliant critics, one hopes to see a generation of comparatists be inspired who can master several literary traditions and speak about each of them with authority. It is only then that comparative literature will come into its own in the Arab world as an academic discipline that is credible and viable. It is only then that comparative literature in our part of the world will be able to move beyond momentary exuberance to become a key field in the Humanities.

NOTES

- 1 Ruhi Al-Khalidi, *Tarikh 'ilm al-adab 'ind al-ifranj wal-'arab wa-Victor Hugo* (Cairo: Dar al-Hilal, 1904).
- 2 'Izz al-Din Al-Manasra, *Al-Naqd al-thaqafi al-muqaran* [Comparative Cultural Criticism] (Amman: Dar Majdalawi, 2005), pp. 331–332.
- 3 Homer, *Al-Ilyada* [*The Iliad*], translated by Sulayman Al-Bustani (Cairo: Dar al-Hilal, 1904).
- 4 It is of significance that the book of *The Thousand and One Nights* was one of the earliest publications by the then new Bulaq press, where it appeared in 1835.
- 5 Mayjan Al-Ruwayli and Sa'ad al-Bazi'i, *Dalil al-naqid al-adabi* [Literary Critic Guide] (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Malik Fahad, 1995), p. 18.
- 6 Including essays and books by René Wellek, Harry Levin, Hans Robert Jauf, René Etiemble, and Susan Bassnett.
- 7 *Al-Naqd al-thaqafi al-muqaran*, pp. 103–105.
- 8 Qustaki Al-Humsi, *Manhal al-wurraḍ fi 'ilm al-intiqad*, vol. 3 (Aleppo: Matba'at al-'Asr al-Jadid, 1935).
- 9 Muhammad Ghunaymi Hilal, *Al-Adab al-muqaran* (third edition, Cairo: Maktabat al-Anglo al-Misriyya, 1962) and *Layla wal-majnun* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Anglo al-Misriyya, 1962).
- 10 Abdel-Majid Anoune in a letter to the author, 27 September 2005.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *La Littérature comparée chez les arabes: Concept et méthodologie*, edited by Abdel-Majid Anoune (Annaba: Office des Publication Universitaires, n.d. [1985?]).
- 13 See for more details: Tahia Abdel-Nasser, 'The New Wave of Comparative Literature Journals in the Arab World', *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 48 (2000), 127–134.
- 14 *Actes du colloque international de narratologie et rhétorique dans les littératures française et arabe*, edited by Amal Farid (Cairo: Le Département de français de l'université du Caire, 1990); *Images of Egypt in Twentieth-Century Literature*, edited by Hoda Gindi (Cairo: Department of English Language and Literature, University of Cairo, 1991); *Classical Papers*, edited by Ahmed Etman (Cairo: Cairo University, 1991ff.); and *History in Literature*, edited by Hoda Gindi

- (Cairo: Department of English Language and Literature, University of Cairo, 1995). Furthermore the yearbook *Comparative Literature in the Arab World*, edited by Ahmed Etman (Cairo: Al-Dar Al-Arabiya Press, 1991ff.).
- 15 *Things English*, edited by Habib Ajroud (Manouba, Tunisia: Faculté des Lettres de la Manouba, 1994); *Across Boundaries*, edited by Habib Ajroud (Manouba, Tunisia: Faculté des Lettres de la Manouba, 1995); *The Canon: Differences and Values*, edited by Habib Ajroud (Manouba, Tunisia: Faculté des Lettres de la Manouba, 1997).
- 16 See *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 20 [issue entitled *The Hybrid Literary Text: Arab Creative Authors Writing in Foreign Languages*] (2000).