

## Travelling Traditions: Comparative Perspectives on Near Eastern Literatures

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This project attempts to lift the literatures of the Near and Middle East out of the circumscribed disciplinary frameworks of both Area Studies and national philology, and insert them into a comparative critical framework that sees texts and traditions as dynamic, worldly products circulating across geographical, historical and cultural borders. As such, the project will examine questions of translation, canonicity and the formation of national traditions, as well as the varieties of textual practices shared by what are often reified as discrete and stable civilizational zones (West/East; European/Islamic). The aim is to move away from teleological constructions of modernity that invariably position a unified 'Europe' at the center of a vaguely defined field of World Literature, and focus instead on the shifting social and historical pressures that shape the reading and writing of literary texts and traditions in a dialogic process of influence and exchange.

The project takes account of the instability of categories such as 'Europe' and 'Orient' as a basis for comparison, and contributes to the debate about the shifting and mutually transforming boundaries between imagined cultural and geographical boundaries. If the borderline between the Occident and the Orient went right by Vienna in the seventeenth century, today's notions about where to draw the borders of the West and where to locate Europe's other have changed radically. This project engages with literary and critical discourses and practices that establish, maintain or undermine the dichotomies between the West and the Middle East. Moreover, it is generally designed to promote comparative perspectives, first, within Middle Eastern literatures, and second, between Middle Eastern and European literatures. A comparative approach within Middle Eastern Studies is urgently needed; although most European university institutions do include Arabic, Persian and Turkish studies in their curricula, these fields normally do not interfere with each other, and thus comparative studies are rare exceptions.

As such, the project recognizes two distinct, if related, epistemological frameworks that shape and define the practice of literary disciplines. The first involves historical and contemporary processes of selecting, interpreting and classifying texts and movements within or against the fields of national and comparative literatures. The second aims to identify and critique the existing institutional routes and frameworks – scholarly discourses, university departments and curricula – within which Middle Eastern and European literatures and theories circulate and generate meaning in local and transnational contexts. Taken together, these two overarching fields of inquiry will interrogate established disciplinary categories (like the term 'Near' or 'Middle Eastern' Literature) that fill the role of Europe's

other, and the dialectical processes by which they are shaped and deployed as part of a variety of strategies of power.

The project aims at initiating an intensive cooperation of literary scholars from the Middle East as well as from Europe and other parts of the world – a rare procedure in our university institutions. Fields of research which hardly meet should discover the productivity of entangled perspectives and discussions. Berlin, with its specific *genius loci*, seems to be a particularly propitious place for such an initiative.

#### I. Textual and Historical Paradigms:

##### Canon-formation, historical memory and the problem of 'beginnings'

One of the main concerns of this first part of the project will be the question of modern canon formation in the larger regional literary traditions of Arabic, Persian and Turkish, and its relation to a hegemonic European system of national philology. The cultural dynamics of the nineteenth century colonial encounter produced new scholarly discourses through which both 'west' and 'east' rearticulated the relationship of the past to the present and generated new, quasi-biological paradigms of civilizational rise and fall. The defeat and dependence of Europe's Muslim other, from the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt onwards, was explained through reference to this paradigm, whereby Islamic civilization, having passed the baton of Greek thought on to Europe after its 'Golden Age' in the tenth century, began its irreversible decline into its 'Dark Ages' of intellectual and political decadence. The increasing hegemony of the European powers in the Middle East then provokes the new 'renaissances' of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that rescue the region from the sterility of late medieval Islamic tradition and initiate local modernities.

In the field of literature and literary history, this paradigm – which was largely adopted by Ottoman, Iranian and Arab modernist intellectuals – was responsible for the construction of new literary genealogies and canons: on the one hand for example, nineteenth-century Arabic neo-classicism, which rediscovered the great poets of the Abbasid period within the ruins of the lost 'Golden Age' of Arab/Muslim glory; on the other, the variety of modern cultural nationalisms (in Egypt, Lebanon and Iran) that resurrected antediluvian, pre-Islamic cultures and traditions precisely as a rejection of what was now understood as an irredeemable Islamic tradition. The most stunning consequence of these revisionary histories has been the erasure of several centuries of literary production for the scholar and the intellectual. Manuscripts languish unknown and unread in numerous libraries all over the world. Edited texts float in a limbo of scholarly neglect. A recent, if localized, spate of interest in the late medieval and early modern period has shown in fact that sustained archival excavation and critical application would not only 'fill in the blanks' for a vast and important period of literary history but also help us to question and revise the old teleologies that are deeply embedded in these periodizations and histories themselves.

Historical memory in the Middle East returns again and again to this problematic in the form of new literary themes and genres. Jurji Zaydan's (1861-1914) canonical multi-volume histories of Islamic Urbanization and Arabic literature for example, and still more his prolific fiction, not only introduced the new genre of the historical novel into the Arabic literary field but also shaped a new romantic perspective of a past Islamic golden age. The immensely popular contemporary translations of his work extended this perspective into Persian, Turkish and Urdu. More recently, prestigious Arab novelists and poets have elaborated on this profound historical memory in works that both celebrate and critique established versions of Arab/Islamic and European rise and fall. Andalusia for example functions as a site of historical celebration and loss, as well as offering a potential challenge to contemporary political conditions. In Radwa Ashour's "Granada" trilogy, in Mahmud Darwish's collection of

poems "Eleven Planets" (1992) or in Amin Maalouf's novel "Leo the African", the expulsion of Arabs and Jews from Andalusia is connected to Christopher Columbus's discovery of the New World and the subsequent destruction of the native inhabitants of the Americas. This is in turn imagined as a parable of the fate of the Palestinians in 1948 and beyond, to the Gulf wars, and the current question of conviviality in Europe and the Middle East.

In keeping with these insights, the project aims to explore the internal power of tradition building by problematizing formative concepts of 'beginnings' (Ursprünge, Anfänge) that cultural institutions create in order to legitimize their authority. Does not the very constitution of such beginnings rely on the rejection or erasure of transcultural exchange and reception? This problematic is especially relevant to European philological traditions, where the moment of 'beginning' is linked to the systematic exclusion and oblivion of Islamic, Jewish and other non-European traditions in early modern times. The struggle over the past is a fundamental aspect of self-positioning and self-fashioning. It is in this context that canon-formation takes place; as a means of auto-referentiality and of demarcation against other actors in the field. The project will emphasize the diversity of textual and critical traditions and their anarchic potential in a modern field of national literatures intersected by strict notions of autonomous cultural identities.

Notions of 'renaissance': comparative perspectives

The question of literary 'renaissance' is related to this set of issues. What constitutes a renaissance and how are possible definitions tied to temporal and geographic locations far distant from the foundational European conceptualization of the term? As mentioned earlier, regional reform movements like the tanzimat and the nahdah are widely understood as having been central to the project of Arab, Ottoman and Iranian modernities. A broad range of new literary genres emerged throughout the region during this period: the journalistic essay, the stage drama, the short story, the novel and the free verse. From their controversial debuts, they have acquired canonical status over the past century in a variety of regional literary traditions. And yet the cultural and social ambivalence enshrined in the postcolonial condition continues to color the genealogical practices of literary history.

The project aims to foster comparative perspectives on Arab, Persian and Turkish conceptualizations of literary 'renaissance', while broadening and problematizing the term itself as part of a wider comparative inquiry into Anglo-European intellectual history and cultural studies. The work of Gilbert Durand, Enrique Dussel and Walter Dignolo is significant in this respect. Such revisionist conceptual frameworks for the positioning of threshold instances of cultural revival can instigate new comparative undertakings that bring together 'marginal' Middle Eastern and European renaissances in mutually transformative ways. Nineteenth-century examples of such historical moments, from the various Middle Eastern awakening movements to the Italian Risorgimento and the Irish Revival bear fruitful comparison and will be encouraged by the current project. The aim is to understand cultural phenomena like this not merely on a regional or national level, but rather as transregional phenomena within a constantly moving field of knowledge.

New perspectives on Middle Eastern modernities: writing the Self, writing the Other  
Another context in which these questions gain relevance is the emergence of nineteenth-century Ottoman modernity, the tanzimat (1839-1876). When Sultan Mahmut II initiated the modernization of the Ottoman Empire against a strong religious and political opposition, hundreds of students were sent to France to acquire new military and administrative skills and technologies. These students were to transform Ottoman intellectual life. One such student, Ibrahim Sinasi, translated French literature into Ottoman Turkish, co-founded the first Turkish newspaper and wrote one of the first Turkish novels. Sinasi's work marks the beginning of the tanzimat literature, and points to the radical transformations that the

Ottoman Empire underwent in the mid-nineteenth century. The Turkish novel was to become one of the lasting didactic tools for the modernization and westernization of the country with important ramifications far into the twentieth century.

A similar situation emerged in Egypt during the nineteenth century. Under the direct patronage of Egypt's rulers, intellectuals like Rifa'a al-Tahtawi produced seminal works on French society and politics, translated numerous works of neo-classical French literature into Arabic and reedited works of the Arabic intellectual heritage which became "classical" works. Tahtawi also founded and directed the first School of Translation in the Arab world. Levantine intellectuals like Butrus al-Bustani and Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq participated in this movement and produced a variety of fascinating works documenting the broader nineteenth-century cultural and political encounter with imperial Europe. Far from being simple travelogues or naïve novels, these works express a subtle and complex ambivalence towards the hegemonic and amnesiac concepts of modernity circulating in the nineteenth-century world.

Genres associated with travel literature – memoirs, autobiography and epistolary writing – certainly predate the nineteenth century and are not limited to Middle Eastern sources. From the seventeenth century onwards, Europeans increasingly traveled to and settled in the Middle East. Artists, writers and scholars from Théophile Gautier and Gustave Flaubert to Edward Lane and Lawrence Durrell observed and wrote about their 'Orient' in ways sharply intersected by imperial politics. Many Europeans, such as the Saint Simonists, entered the Ottoman and Egyptian bureaucracy, as did notable figures like Lord Edward Cecil or the eminent German Egyptologist Heinrich Brugsch Pascha, who preferred the civil service in nineteenth-century Egypt over a prestigious chair in Göttingen. Testimonials and memoirs were not necessarily the preserve of elite writers and intellectuals. Linda Colley's book, "Captives: Britain, Empire and the World, 1600-1850", provides a fascinating account of British captive writings from the seventeenth century onwards. Thousands of British and other European subjects lived as captives in Ottoman lands; many of them wrote descriptions of their experiences; texts which circulated widely in their times. Nabil Matar has recently introduced a comparable body of Arab and Muslim travel writing in Europe in early modern times. Comparative explorations of this two-way movement between 'Occident' and 'Orient' would help to complicate our understanding of modern cultural and textual encounters within the overarching framework of colonial epistemologies.

Translation, popular traditions and the circulation of literary genres and movements  
The formative role of translation and popular traditions in national literary histories is a good example of this kind of ambivalence. Middle Eastern critics and historians celebrate translation as the mechanism through which local modernities were achieved while suppressing large swathes of non-canonical 'adapted' texts that form a kind of pre-history of a variety of modern genres. On the other hand, European literary history rarely takes account of the seminal role of translation and adaptation in the transnational circulation of national literary schools and movements. The movement of Naturalism from nineteenth-century Sweden to Germany and France and beyond to twentieth-century Egypt and Turkey is one example of this neglected dynamic. The project encourages both individual and working groups of scholars to think beyond the constraints of narrow national or 'civilizational' traditions and to investigate the textual and epistemological circulation of Realism or Modernism precisely as broadly transregional translation movements.

Local popular traditions, oral and textual, have met with a similar fate. While a solid body of scholarly work on popular literature certainly exists in France and Britain for example, the subject has rarely been taken up by Middle Eastern critics and historians. The project encourages scholars to investigate the links between literary canons, translation and popular genres. The fascinating itinerary of the Thousand and One Nights offers a fertile example of

these linkages. From pre-Islamic Persian to medieval Arabic and modern Indian translations and compilations, the 'text' of the Nights travels across eighteenth and nineteenth-century Europe, through a variety of adaptations, forgeries and re-writings, into the domain of romance and gothic fiction: Antoine Galland's 1717 forgery "Aladdin and the Magic Lamp"; Frances Sheridan's "The History of Nurjahad" (1767); William Beckford's "Vathek" (1787), and so on. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the transformed Nights vigorously re-enters Middle Eastern modernisms in the twentieth century only after it has been canonized by a long tradition of European handling. The example of the Nights pushes us to reconsider genre hierarchies and the rigidly binary categories used to define cultural praxis. Building on the work of cultural theorists like Walter Benjamin, Andreas Huyssen and Stuart Hall, a possible outcome would be to question and re-theorize some of these established binaries – such as originality and imitation; 'high' and 'low' cultural forms – that shape the study of literature at large, and Islamic traditions in particular.

A comparative study of the genre system could enlighten these debates. How, for example, does the evolution of the genre system reflect shifts in an increasingly globalizing world? How does the standardization of languages (cf. Erich Auerbach's 1952 essay entitled "Philologie der Weltliteratur") on the one hand, and the more recent establishment of literary languages such as Kurdish on the other hand, affect national and transnational literary traditions and genres? How has the status, function and form of poetry in the Middle East been affected by the rise of the modern novel and other genres? The project supports scholarly work that draws attention to the (dis)continuities between literary genres from a comparative perspective. How are we to explain, for example, the more recent increase of travel literature, memoirs and autobiographies in the Middle East? Rather than constructing current travel literature in Turkish as a product of 'Westernization', scholars are encouraged to look at the similarities and ruptures between, for example, Ottoman and Turkish travelogues. How do certain genres facilitate the evolution of a political, national, gender or ethnic identity? Turkish feminist autobiographies of the 1980s or recent Palestinian memoirs are prime examples for the investigation of these genre questions.

The project will also take account of the fact that genres are themselves intrinsically porous. The genre of the novel, for example, is not a monolithic construct. For some time now, literary critics have been debating the relationship between various forms of autobiographical writing and genres typically associated with fiction. This debate generated a scholarship that examines the use of history in fiction, and the possibility of considering autobiographical writings as historical documents. In the contemporary Arab world for example, writers have deliberately refrained from defining the genre of their work, defining it simply as 'text'. Moreover, while canons seek to capture, catalogue and reify discrete literary genres, producers and consumers of literature are much more flexible in their visions and practices. Scholars will be encouraged to explore and question the formal boundaries between what are usually considered distinct genres, like fiction, drama and prose poetry, as well as the mobility of literary genres across related cultural media, such as film and theatrical performance.

#### Literary criticism and traveling theory

The role of critical traditions is central to this endeavor. Linkages need to be made between canon-formation and historical transformations in literary criticism and theory. Comparative histories of literary criticism would be of particular interest. How does literary theory travel across cultural, linguistic and discursive borders? Such movements into new locations are often distorted and impeded because they necessarily involve processes of representation and institutionalization different from those at the place of origin. The variety of possible itineraries should be examined in all their specificity in order to determine whether the

Saidian notion of 'traveling theory' gains or loses in strength once it is transplanted. Much remains to be discovered, for example, about the movement of nineteenth and twentieth-century critical schools like Romanticism, Modernism, Existentialism and Structuralism, into Arabic, Persian and Turkish. Most recently, poststructuralist and postcolonialist criticism has been widely translated into these languages and politically loaded debates rage in the region as to their relevance and utility in local contexts. How, we should ask, have these debates affected the practice of literary production and criticism in the respective contemporary traditions?

The opposite direction of circulation is even less considered, but of equal relevance to this context in both its classical and modern permutations. By which paths, if any, has classical Islamic literary theory entered into medieval European canons, and more recently, what happens to Marxist criticism when it travels into regional liberation movements and back again into American and European postcolonialisms? Feminist criticism is a case in point. Transnational feminist theories are, after all, the product of a rich dialogue with the feminist agendas of the so-called 'Third World'. Poststructuralist feminists have highlighted the theoretical status of 'location' (as defined by James Clifford) and its effect on the concept of subjectivity. This emphasis on 'location' has rendered the term 'woman' meaningless and brought instead the term 'feminisms' into academic discourse. In this context, the project will foreground and explore the role of the 'local' in re-shaping the 'global'.

The problem of cultural origins: 'hybridity' and the (postcolonial) text

The linguistically and culturally 'hybrid' text has recently become the focus of postcolonial theorizing about language, identity and empire. This paradigm appropriates Arab francophone, Indian Anglophone and Turkish Germanophone writers into a uniquely modern global literary movement constructed around politicized versions of identity in a conversation that centers itself around Europe. Yet more recent versions of this paradigm place bilingual authors within the threshold framework of transnationality, globalization and a postmodern condition of 'homelessness'. Less evident is the place of this growing and increasingly prestigious corpus of texts vis à vis distinct European canons (French, English and German), not to mention the role they play in distending and reshaping the 'native' canons and critical languages that stretch to accommodate or reject them.

Moreover, connections between this apparently postcolonial textual moment and much older versions of multilingual writing – Abbasid bilingualism, Andalusian strophic poetry, Judeo-Arabic narrative prose – are rarely made and deserve investigation. As such, it might become possible to reshift the debate about hybridity and transnationalism away from primarily Europe-centered constructions of cultural and national identity and root it instead in a submerged yet rich tradition of pre-modern cosmopolitan literary expression.

More importantly, the project seeks to interrogate the very notions of 'origins' and 'hybridity' that produce the strategic labelling of texts and authors within polyphonic European settings. One way to do this would be to shift the frame of inquiry away from identity politics and towards notions and experiences of citizenship and textual mastery. The problem of cultural origins would then become less relevant to the writing and reading of literary texts than, say, the particular ways in which new generations of German, French or British authors (of whatever 'origin') insert their work into lived local traditions and polities. As such, it should become possible to trace the tensions, links and continuities that frame canonical European attitudes towards the tenuous relationship between Self and Other; from the historical figure of the (German) Jewish author to that of the Turkish (or Moroccan or Serbian) immigrant. Seen in this way, 'hybridity' as a term of cultural identity could fruitfully be replaced by the perception of the basic porousness of national traditions.

## II. Disciplinary Frameworks:

### Area Studies, Comparative Literature and the new 'World Literature'

The professional practices that shape and anchor the business of literature in national academic institutions are rarely considered in connection with dominant critical trends and procedures. The University is the major forum through which knowledge about the Middle East, its languages, cultures and societies is generated and disseminated. In Europe and the United States, specialized Area Studies departments and institutes, or institutes of oriental philology, often function in isolation from the major humanities disciplines. As far as literature is concerned, western departments of Comparative Literature tend to remain rooted in the European post-war environment from which they first emerged at mid-century. Rarely do such departments include non-European languages and traditions in their higher degree programs, and when they do, these traditions are often subsumed under the ambiguous rubric of 'World Literature'; a field which tends to study the literatures of the world mainly through works translated into English. On the other hand, Area Studies departments often remain inured, in practice, to intellectual and institutional engagement with literary fields outside the purview of their geographical specializations. This situation has led to the institutional reproduction of political and intellectual centers and peripheries in the western academy, where one site produces 'raw material' for the 'theory' generated by the other. How has this unequal distribution affected knowledge exchange and production in Europe, particularly in relation to the situation of literature in scholarly discourses about culture and civilization? And what is the meaning and function of the emergent 'World Literature' discipline in this broader context? Why, for example, has World Literature emerged as a purely western disciplinary construct with no real resonance in Middle Eastern academic settings and discourses?

This uneven circulation of literary disciplines is central to the question of institutional frameworks in Europe and the Middle East. The project supports critical explorations of the origins of comparative literature in Goethe's proposal of Weltliteratur and his engagement with the literature of the Middle East. How did, however, the paradigms of Comparative Literature change when transferred to different national contexts? How does the notion of Weltliteratur itself gain new meanings in the age of postcolonial migrations; labor migration and exile? Furthermore, how does the phenomenon of European authors with a Middle Eastern background change not only the European literary scene (e.g., the impact of Beur literature in France) but also the definition of European national philologies as well as notions of canonicity?

#### Institutional hierarchies and the academic division of labor

The question of disciplinary hegemonies is equally relevant to this Middle Eastern context itself. How are literary disciplines constructed, studied and taught in Arab, Turkish, Iranian universities? And what role do they play in the larger organization of knowledge about self and other in national academic settings and institutions? Deeply relevant to these questions are the human and material networks through which (western) theory circulates as an emblem of international scholarly power and prestige. Scholarly conferences, private and government funded research awards and translation projects all contribute to the way in which we read, interpret and classify literary texts as students and scholars rooted in particular, and yet increasingly elastic, institutional and discursive positions.

Nonetheless, the debate about tab'iyyah (dependency) for example, continues to color these encounters in some of the region's contemporary intellectual discourses. The project will encourage a deeper investigation of these issues with the aim of uncovering their political

and theoretical implications, and arriving at alternative visions of institutional and scholarly exchange in an increasingly fragile world.

The fellows invited within the research field Travelling Traditions are associated to the Friedrich Schlegel Graduate School of Literary Studies at Freie Universität Berlin.