Field Construction

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By every indicator—methodology, citations, paper titles—students of Arabic literature have been courting "theory" for decades. From the 1970s on, scholars have approached classical and modern Arabic literature with theoretical models that draw explicitly on structuralism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, feminism, Marxism, semiotics, performance studies, and so on. That said, until recently the mainstream of modern Arabic studies continued to use methods inherited from Orientalist scholars working on classical texts.[1]

In the last decade, more pronounced theoretical approaches have come to the fore. By this, I am referring to reading protocols that draw from the evolving canon of continental theory, including: an embrace of antiessentialist reasoning and constructivist understandings of language; an emphasis on the indeterminate and performative aspects of signification and identity; a skepticism toward claims of fact; and reference to abstractions like "the subject," "power," and "the human."[2] If told as a history of ideas, we might be tempted to describe the "rise of theory" in the American study of Arabic literature as part of a conscious repudiation of Orientalist scholarship and the realist conception of language in which that tradition was grounded. It is indeed appealing to tell the story in this way, since it suggests a march toward greater critical sophistication and the acknowledgement that Arabic has a literature just like English, French, or German.

If told as a history of institutions, however, the story is more ambiguous. The key point to consider in this regard is that around the turn of the 21st century the center of gravity for the study of modern Arabic literature shifted from area studies to comparative literature departments. For the field, this shift can be measured in tangible ways—dissertations filed, papers presented, and tenure lines lost and gained. This shift from area studies to comparative literature came about for many reasons, but I would emphasize two that date from the early 1990s. First, the end of the Cold War brought increased scrutiny toward area studies departments across the board. It was not only readers of Edward Said's *Orientalism* who began to challenge Near Eastern Studies departments on intellectual grounds. In more general terms, administrators began to question the *organizational* rationale for grouping various disciplines together solely on the geopolitical grounds of being non-Western European.[3] Second, and at the same time, as comparative literature attempted to grapple with its own Eurocentric intellectual traditions, many recognized that the post-Gulf War era of "globalization" was an opportunity to reimagine the mandate of the discipline.[4] New opportunities for the study of non-European languages began to open in many comparative literature departments just as area studies opportunities—or departments—began to close. The move has allowed scholars to break with methods that tended to produce flat answers to complex questions of self, community, and expression. It also opened up new subfields, shifting research away from received categories (such as the nation–state) and toward emergent subjects—minor literatures, Mediterranean

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forms of cosmopolitanism, colonial translation practices—that overlap with other lively literary fields. The shift also coincided with the advent of new critical models for conceptualizing colonial legacies.[5] It has been a very good move for Arabic literature; whether it has fundamentally shifted the discipline of comparative literature is another question.[6]

But there are some vexing questions that the shift toward the discipline of comparative literature has not been able to address: What exactly is the discipline of Arabic literature? Or what, in concrete terms, is the Arabic literary material we can work on? It is difficult to talk about Arabic literature as a discipline, because the bulk of the project of field creation has yet to be done, nor can we expect this project to be taken up in comparative literature departments. For example, the field does not have the sort of canon that we could argue about in the way colleagues in other national literatures do. Perhaps we may decide collectively that we do not want a canon of something called "modern Arabic literature," and maybe we would also reject the idea of specific national canons from Morocco to Iraq. Moreover, many of the primary sources of the modern period (first editions, literary journals, letters, diaries) have yet to be read by scholars, and the works of many major writers have yet to be collected, let alone critically edited. In other words, the discipline of Arabic literature needs philology, textual history, and reception studies. Without this kind of work, the field will continue to circle around the same handful of texts instead of turning outward toward the huge and variegated body of literature that sits in archives and libraries.

It seems useful to recall that one of the greatest strengths of the old, supposedly non-theoretical approach to Arabic literature was its plodding empiricism. Much of that work was dedicated to seeking out sources in archives, libraries, and the field. The shift toward comparative literature—and theory—has meant that some of this activity has fallen into the background. And new funding schemes in graduate programs will only intensify this trend. With tighter control on funding—and tighter completion deadlines—students cannot be faulted for failing to spend long periods in libraries and archives searching out undiscovered texts. In fact, given how slow archival work can be, who would want to take up such work before tenure? If theory finally succeeds in displacing empiricism, it may not be on purely intellectual grounds: as administrators know, theoretical methods can be much *cheaper* in terms of institutional investment and much *faster* in terms of research production.

Comparative literature has been a good abode for the study of modern Arabic literature, but if we are to become a discipline, we will also need institutional homes. And by itself, theory cannot help our discipline establish a record of what it is we work on. Some will, but much will not. That is the challenge—for the relationship between empirical research and theory is not "either/or" but rather "both/and." Many scholars already engage in both activities at the same time, so obviously it is not impossible. But to do so means we need to work through and against dogmas—both those of comparative literature and those of the old positivism—that claim separate paths for theoretical and empirical work.[7]

NOTES

[1] As will become obvious, my comments here are really directed toward the state of the field for the study of *modern* Arabic literature. As a "field," the study of classical Arabic literature is more complete than it is

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for the modern period—and thus some, if not much, of what I will say regarding field construction does not apply in the same way.

[2]It is important to stress that "theory," as practiced in North American comparative literature departments, is a bounded canonical object, dominated by a familiar set of founding figures (Freud, Benjamin, Saussure, Levi-Strauss, Kristeva, Derrida, de Man, Althusser, Foucault, and others) working within a particular continental tradition of language and philosophy. While ever evolving, it retains a disciplinary—and *disciplining*—force on the field, excluding entire sets of questions (and those figures who ask such questions), just as it enables others. Like any self-conscious tradition, much of its work is devoted to illustrating its primacy no matter the question; like any tradition, it polices its borders against foreign intruders.

[3]See Harry Harootunian, "Postcoloniality's Unconscious/Area Studies' Desire," *Postcolonial Studies* 2 (1999): 127–47; and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

[4]See the ACLA reports of 1993 and 2003: *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, ed. C. Bernheimer (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); and *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, ed. H. Saussy (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

[5]Given that most work done under the banner of "postcolonial studies" has focused exclusively on Europhone literatures, the place of other traditions, including Arabic-language literature, within that corpus has yet to be worked out.

[6]In *Death of a Discipline*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak situates her critique of the "discipline" of comparative literature at the most abstract level—almost as a set of thoughts hovering over the workplace. However, thinking of "institutions" rather than "disciplines" concretizes the problem she describes and shows how complicated and ambiguous the relationship between the two can be. For instance, at the national level, just as the two professional *associations* of the literary disciplines (ACLA and MLA) have made space for conversations involving modern Arabic and other global South literatures, many comparative literature *departments* still would not think of employing a single specialist in a non-European literature. And while it is not uncommon for a comparative literature department to employ multiple specialists for each European language, most have effectively imposed a moratorium against hiring more than one scholar per non-European language. The imbalances at the departmental level are multiple. To take the most notable example, like their colleagues working from/on/in the global South, Arabist comparatists must also know (and teach) at least one European literary and intellectual tradition; the converse rarely applies to Europeanist comparatists. The pattern suggests that while the national associations have gone to great lengths to reconsider how non-Western literatures challenge the discipline itself, at the local level comparative literature departments have responded in merely an *aggregative* way—they have done nothing more than add them to an existing curriculum self-consciously rooted in European studies.

[7]There is a wide body of post-post-structuralist (or "new empiricist"?) theory—including the work of Timothy Mitchell, Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, and John Law—that grapples explicitly with this very issue. Though this theory is commonly ignored in the comparative literature canons of theory, it could be marshaled to support the project of field construction I have outlined.

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