

GUEST COLUMN

Introduction to “An Arabic Theoretical Lexicon”

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For its final issue of 2011, the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJMES) convened a roundtable of scholars of Arabic literature to respond to the following prompt: “How has ‘theory’ affected the field of Arabic literature in the United States and vice versa?” What was meant by “theory” here was an object at once highly specific and so naturalized within the academic discourse of anglophone literary studies at the time as to require virtually no elaboration. On the one hand, “theory” could be feminist, Marxist, postcolonial, post-structuralist, or psychoanalytic, reflecting modes of criticism “that emerged through continental philosophy in the 1960s” and “came to dominate departments of literature in the United States” in subsequent decades, as Samah Selim explained in the roundtable’s introductory essay (Introduction). On the other hand, the word could also stand on its own with no qualifiers; and indeed, this is how the roundtable’s contributors on the whole tend to refer to it in their essays: as “just plain ‘theory,’” to borrow a phrase from Jonathan Culler (1).

What “theory” was not, in this case, however, was Arabic, either in the sense of its being originally formulated in the Arabic language or in the sense of its being concerned with problematics of special relevance to Arabic literary and cultural production. If “theory” bore a salutary potential to liberate Arabic literary studies in the anglophone academy from the positivistic grip of Orientalist and area studies scholarship (Colla 722; Selim, “Toward” 734; Tageldin 728–29), then the European pedigree of many of its marquee paradigms also raised serious concerns about the propriety and efficacy of “applying” these paradigms to works of Arabic literature, as though to wrest new significances from these texts that they had previously concealed (Omri 731). And yet, in the North American academy in 2011, there were few alternatives. As Hosam Aboul-Ela noted in his

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contribution to the roundtable, scholars in the United States and Europe had long evinced a strident “prejudice against intellectual production from the Arab region” (725). For this reason, in Mohamed-Salah Omri’s words, the “traffic” of ideas between Western theory and Arabic texts had long been, and continued to be, almost entirely “one-directional” (732).

The eight essays that appear in the Theories and Methodologies section of this issue of *PMLA* seek to reverse the direction of this exchange. Each essay in the special feature examines a core concept derived from the premodern compendium of Arabic thought—associated with the disciplines of aesthetics, jurisprudence, philosophy, rhetoric, theology, and more—and activates it as a node of theoretical contemplation. More than merely explaining a set of Arabic terms for an anglophone readership, the essays take their focal concepts as occasions to engage in the praxis of theory making: thinking with, and not only about, each concept in question, pursuing it down notional avenues that may lead in unanticipated and even polemical directions, and allowing it to reconfigure previously held presumptions about the way things are or should be, in literature and beyond.

Some of the essays address concepts with venerable legacies in Arabic literary criticism (*adab*, *lafz*, *tarjamah*). Others distill explicitly literary significances from concepts whose semantic fields also encompass a range of other, nonliterary meanings (*ḥaqīqah*, *ṭarab*). Still others illuminate new dimensions of extant concepts by deliberately juxtaposing an Arabic term with one or more semantically related English terms (*ta’ajjub*, *inṣāf*, *muqāranah*). For scholars of Arabic literature, our hope is that the essays in this special feature will succeed in reframing familiar terms and ideas in novel ways. For scholars who do not know Arabic or are not versed in the literary and intellectual traditions of the arabophone region, the essays facilitate an array of possible engagements: How might some of the contemporary preoccupations of anglophone literary scholarship be refracted differently when approached through the theoretical paradigms put forth in these essays? What can *adab* teach us all

about cultivating more ethical practices of scholarship and pedagogy? How do *lafz*, *tarjamah*, and *ṭarab* attest to the sociality, translatability, and embodiment of language in ways that resonate with other contemporary theories of relation, affect, and the dynamics of self and other in a politically fraught global present? What might be gained by placing Euro-American notions of readership and authorship alongside those of *ta’ajjub* and *inṣāf*, or by rethinking representation through a theory of *ḥaqīqah*, or by reconceiving of the discipline of comparative literature in terms of the multimodal assemblage of inter- and intratextual modes of comparison designated by the term *muqāranah*?

Beyond these potential questions that each essay solicits, I would like to suggest moreover that as a unit the essays exemplify a different mode of scholarly activity than that to which many of us in the North American academy are accustomed. In June 2023, we—a heterogenous group of scholars of premodern and modern Arabic literature trained in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East—gathered for two days on the Princeton University campus to share preliminary drafts of our essays.¹ Each essay was assigned a dedicated respondent, but everyone ended up reading everyone else’s essays, and everyone had something to say about all of them. If today each essay ultimately bears the name of only one author, then the work of theorization that produced each essay was nonetheless irreducibly collaborative. By titling this special feature “An Arabic Theoretical Lexicon,” we intend a nod toward its collective origins, for in the Arabic lexicographic tradition as it has been practiced for more than a thousand years, since at least the eighth century CE, no lexicographer ever defines a word without citing others who have used that word also, if with variant meanings or for divergent purposes.

The essays in “An Arabic Theoretical Lexicon” approximate Arabic lexicographic practices as well in that they do not seek to establish singular definitions for the central terms that they discuss but instead revel in their polysemy, tracking the twists and swerves of semantic evolution that have caused a word to acquire two or more seemingly opposite or unrelated meanings, attested through citations

from poetry, prose, scripture, and oral records. In Arabic, “lexicon” is معجم (*mu‘jam*), a word whose root itself enfolds contradictory connotations of unintelligibility (an عجمي [*‘ajamī*] person is someone who does not speak Arabic, a barbarian) and clarification in linguistic expression (عجام [*i‘jām*] refers to the process of adding dots to identically shaped letters in the Arabic alphabet to distinguish them from each other, as in the dots that distinguish ب from ت). That an Arabic root can hold such antinomy in balance is a testament to the language’s capaciousness.

Implicated in our titular use of the English word *lexicon* to name what we have sought to produce with these essays, the notion of the *mu‘jam* moreover speaks to the complex or even aporetic nature of the work of theory making that we have undertaken. Given that the earliest extant discourses around many of the ideas explored in the essays date back more than a millennium to the so-called Golden Age of Arabic-Islamic thought, it is unsurprising that a preponderance of the sources cited throughout should be classical texts for which no published English translations exist. Yet the intellectual conversations in which the essays seek to intervene, as well as the disciplinary and professional spaces that we ourselves occupy as scholars and critics, are undoubtedly contemporary. Does the temporal disjuncture between the discursive origins of the essays’ focal concepts and our own moment render these concepts ultimately untranslatable into *PMLA*’s twenty-first-century anglophone idiom?

In the premodern Islamicate world, as the Moroccan essayist and literary critic Abdelfattah Kilito (‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Kiliṭū) writes in *Thou Shalt Not Speak My Language*, Arabic’s preeminent position as the language of scholarship, scripture, and law obviated the need for terms and figures such as the ones that we examine in these essays to be translated, since it was “assumed that those seeking knowledge and wisdom would have no choice but to master Arabic” (16). Engaged as we are in translating—as well as defining, interpreting, and contextualizing—Arabic terminology for an anglophone audience, do we thus risk reifying the present hegemony of English as the *lingua franca* of a new

modern global order over and against Arabic? Can the archive of Arabic-Islamic thought be recuperated only through English if it is to become the kind of theory that “travels” to representational and institutional contexts distant from its sites of origin, in Edward W. Said’s parlance (“Traveling Theory” 226)?

To the contrary, I would like to propose that the persistent relevance of these concepts today in spite of their age, to which the essays in the following pages manifestly and wholeheartedly attest, instead reaffirms the epistemological authority of premodern Arabic-Islamic thought, albeit within a different global language system. Viewed in this light, our endeavor to explicate this set of Arabic concepts for an English-language readership becomes less an instrumental act of transmission than a translational gesture that recognizes and reactivates the innate portability or universalism of our source material. And if the lexicon that we have assembled necessarily omits far more than it includes, then may its partiality serve as a reminder that this process of translation is still far from complete and inspire others to pick up the work where we have left off.

The publication of “An Arabic Theoretical Lexicon” comes at a transitional moment for Arabic literary studies in the anglophone academy. In late 2011, when the essays in the *IJMES* roundtable appeared, Arabic literature and culture seemed urgently au courant to many in the United States amid the ongoing reverberations of the 9/11 attacks a decade prior and the anti-authoritarian uprisings that had swept through many Arab nations earlier that year. “Embargoed” from entrance into the Anglo-American literary field as recently as the 1990s, as Said famously observed (“Embargoed Literature” 278), Arabic literature by the second decade of the twenty-first century was being translated into English at an “unprecedented” rate (Hassan 189). Meanwhile, at colleges and universities across the United States, enrollment in Arabic-language classes was surging,² and new hiring lines were being established for professors with expertise in the cultures, societies, and histories of the Arab world.³ In academic journals and popular media

outlets alike, scholars and pundits were being called on to proffer new insights, datasets, and heuristic methods that could be used to understand a region that appeared suddenly important in ways it had not been previously.

Today, while the appetite for learning Arabic among undergraduates in the United States has waned somewhat, other effects of the post-9/11 boom period have been stickier. Some of us who contributed to the present special feature owe our own educational opportunities and current and former employment to the increased public and private funding streams that emerged in the United States during this era. The very fact that a set of essays like this one can now find a home in the pages of *PMLA* may be itself another outcome of this history. Moreover, the tripartite structure of Euro-American theory, Arabic literature, and Arabic theory that is identified in the *IJMES* essays no longer tilts so precipitously today toward the first leg of the triangle as it once did. In particular, Arabic theory is more readily accessible to anglophone scholars now than it was in 2011 (in this sense, the work of our special feature is additive rather than wholly innovative in what it contributes to current anglophone intellectual discourse). Students and scholars of "world literature" who lack "the requisite language skills" to engage with Arabic literary theory in Arabic can now peruse relevant terms "[w]ith a few clicks of the mouse" in Oxford University Press's electronic *Dictionary of Arabic Literary Terms and Devices*, published in 2018 (Hammond). When Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood adapted Barbara Cassin's *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (2004) for an anglophone audience, one revision that they undertook was to add certain "keywords in Arabic" to the volume (Apter xii).⁴ A comparison of the resulting *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (2014) alongside its French predecessor reveals these additions to number perhaps not more than five in total; nonetheless, since the French *Vocabulaire* itself includes some fifty Arabic terms chosen purportedly for their special significance to the development of the European philosophical tradition, Arabic theory is duly

present in the English *Dictionary* as well. Thus, for example, one finds a reference for *ijtihād* ("effort of interpretation") in the entry for "Belief" (Cassin et al. 103), *ḥads* ("intuition") in the entry for "Ingenium" (486), and *ma'nā* ("what is on one's mind, what one is referring to, what one means") in the entry for "Intention" (506). The *Dictionary* even contains a brief subsection on the Arabic language itself, if one that appears rather unexpectedly embedded within the entry for "Europe," and which is concerned primarily with Arabic's role as a medium for the transmission of classical Greek thought into the languages of medieval European scholarship (326).⁵

In addition to these expositions of Arabic concepts in anglophone contexts, a host of recent works of literary scholarship in English construct a theoretical scaffolding around richly suggestive Arabic terms with no straightforward equivalents in the current vocabulary of anglophone theory, offering them up to a more general audience of scholars to ponder, comprehend, and perhaps ultimately deploy in other situations and frameworks. Such terms include Tarek El-Ariss's *faḍḥ*, "a visual and affective exposure . . . that shames, makes a scene, causes a scandal, and reveals in the process new codes of writing" (*Leaks* 2), and *junūn*, meaning simultaneously madness, a state of enchanted amorous infatuation that destabilizes both self and society, and, through its Lebanese colloquial variant, a "flamboyant" queerness that generates transgressive bodily and linguistic articulations of desire (*Trials* 123). They include Robyn Creswell's *baww*, a Bedouin Arabic word for the skin of a young camel that has been returned to its mother after its death so that she will continue producing milk, whose assumed incommensurability to signifying in other languages enfolds a call to translate Arabic's "eloquence" (a word that draws its own potent theoretical charge from its Arabic counterpart *al-bayān*) into English everywhere and always (453). They include *ṭarab* in my own monograph, *The Worlding of Arabic Literature: Language, Affect, and the Ethics of Translatability* (2023), which I associate with "a kind of literary worldliness that accumulates out of the many diverse instances

during which a text has given pleasure over the course of its circulatory history” (76).⁶ In all the examples just given, Arabic theory is employed to elucidate dimensions of literature’s relationship to society, culture, and politics, its literariness, its ways of being in and of the world.

Each of the first three essays in the special feature examines a term or concept that bears theoretically and pragmatically on the definition of literature itself. In the first essay, Hoda El Shakry’s genealogical account of *adab* presents literature as inflected with ethico-religious as well as aesthetic purpose. For, in addition to serving as a generic designation for works of prosodic and poetic writing conventionally understood as literary in the Euro-American sense of the word, *adab* in the Arabic-Islamic tradition also describes the habitus of sociality, piety, and ethical comportment produced by and around such texts as they are taken up within an evolving set of cultural and disciplinary frameworks.

In Jeffrey Sacks’s essay, what is at stake is the material and temporal form that language takes in becoming social. For Sacks, language’s form is figured as *lafz*, a term that renders language codeterminative with the bodies of those who speak it. Denoting an utterance that is corporeal before it is signifying, according to Sacks, *lafz* reveals the anteriority of tongue over subjective meaning; at the same time, *lafz* hearkens to the aesthetic fashioning of words into poetry in order to give sonic, articulable, and thus social form to a language whose eloquence is inseparable from its vocalization.

Whereas *lafz* marks the threshold between the body and the world in and of which it speaks, *ḥaqīqah* interrogates the relationship between language and an immanent world that resists and undermines language’s formative force. As Alexander Key writes in his essay, *ḥaqīqah* presumes the existence of an essential reality elusive to poetic efforts at mimesis. Yet it also affirms poetry’s capacity to be truthful to this reality—to represent it accurately and plainly, free of obfuscating metaphor or misleading comparison. If this paradox can be negotiated, Key proposes, then doing so calls for

theorizing truth itself less as a superordinate fact than as a product of linguistic precedent, in which what is true is only that which has been previously attested, in usages of human language, to be so.

The next three essays turn to the Arabic theoretical corpus to associate the creation and reception of literature with subjective and communal processes of thought, feeling, and discernment. In Lara Harb’s essay, *ta’ajjub* names the wonder evoked in readers or listeners by the defamiliarizing aesthetic actions of poetic language. Confronted with an unanticipated metaphor or an innovative comparison, they attempt to arrive at a rational understanding of language’s capacity to render anew and differently a known image or idea, as they are compelled to deduce meaning from even the most obscure turns of phrase. Fundamentally a cognitive experience of discovery, *ta’ajjub* nonetheless yields an emotional payoff in the pleasure it produces.

Christian Junge describes a complementary type of sensory aesthetic experience in his essay on *ṭarab*. A state of affective intensity associated in the classical Arabic tradition with the aural appreciation of music and poetry, *ṭarab* in Junge’s telling acquires a range of other possible sources in the contemporary era: reading prose literature, watching videos that circulate on social media platforms, or participating in the mass collective actions of a popular uprising (wherein *ṭarab* gains a powerful anti-hegemonic political potential). As a modality of reception located in the body, *ṭarab* privileges hearing as the means by which we affect and are affected aesthetically, socially, and politically.

In Jeannie Miller’s essay on *inṣāf*, the personally affecting is that which must be contained and managed by means of rationalist methods of thought, argumentation, and rhetorical style for epistemic justice to prevail. Drawing examples primarily from the ninth-century Arabic masterpiece *كتاب الحيوان* (*Kitāb al-Ḥayawān; Book of Animals*) by al-Jāhiz, Miller proposes understanding *inṣāf* as a theory and praxis of authorship that counter-intuitively makes the authority of the writer contingent on a practice of self-criticism. In an epistemological framework in which knowledge is

always incomplete and riven with conflict and competition, authorial ethics is enacted as the ability and commitment to balance opposing claims fairly.

In the final pair of essays, it is literature’s propensity to reach across space and time toward other languages, other texts, and other audiences that offers an occasion for theoretical contemplation. In her essay, Shaden M. Tageldin investigates the history of the word *tarjamah*—used in modern Arabic to mean “translation”—and uncovers an archive of prior meanings both foreign and domestic. If the word’s foreign origins (it was adopted into Arabic from Aramaic) remind Tageldin that any unitary or self-referential notion of language as such is always and already vexed, then *tarjamah*’s previous, now mostly obsolete, meaning in Arabic of “biography” or “life story” impels her to recognize an event of loss in all translation that substitutes a text for a life, or an afterlife for an original.

In Hany Rashwan’s essay, language likewise emerges as inherently in relation to what is other than itself. Rashwan describes an Arabic comparative paradigm as a mode of intertextual inquiry, recuperated under the term *muqāranah* with reference to the practices employed by premodern Arabic-Islamic critics to analyze qualities of style, beauty, and literary form in Arabic texts. Whether these critics were illustrating principles of Arabic rhetoric by means of examples from Persian or Greek, or juxtaposing Arabic secular and sacred texts to elucidate the workings of figurative devices like metaphor and allegory, literature for them could be studied and appreciated only within a fundamentally comparative framework.

In our initial prompt to the scholars who contributed to this special feature, Harb, Miller, and I challenged our contributors to consider how Arabic theoretical concepts might resonate theoretically in non-Arabic contexts. To take up this challenge, we proposed, would be to participate in a species of counterhegemonic activity, to take part in “occupying the canon” of theory, as El-Ariss has described it, by asserting the right and might of Arabic concepts to “inform and shape our understanding of objects and phenomena more generally”

(“Theory” 8). For we stand firmly convinced that, just as with any other body of theory, Arabic theoretical concepts are capable of producing “effects beyond their original field” (Culler 3)—or in other words, that Arabic theory is indeed theoretical. Writing in the American Comparative Literature Association’s State of the Discipline Report in 2015, Key envisaged a future in which Arabic thinkers would be represented on the syllabi of theory survey courses in literature departments across the United States, and Arabic theory would be broadly recognized as being able to do anything, even “giving us new ways to read the Victorian novel.” It is our hope that this special feature will help bring this future one step closer to becoming a reality.

NOTES

1. This workshop was supported financially by the Department of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University, the Princeton University Humanities Council, the Caroline D. Eckhardt Early Career Professorship in Comparative Literature at Penn State University, and the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations at the University of Toronto.

2. Enrollment in Arabic-language classes at US colleges and universities peaked at around thirty-five thousand students nationwide between 2009 and 2013 (*Language Enrollment Database*).

3. During the 2015–16 academic year—the year that I was hired to fill a newly created second tenure-track position for an Arabist in the Department of Comparative Literature at Penn State University’s flagship campus—I recall no less than twelve separate searches being conducted by colleges and universities across the United States for tenure-line faculty members specializing in aspects of Arabic literature, language, and culture.

4. Apter’s monographs *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (2006) and *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (2013) also present occasional Arabic terms in a theoretically evocative fashion, in the first case by drawing on the work of the Palestinian American scholar Said and in the second through citations of Kilito.

5. In the original French volume, the subsection on Arabic appears in an entry titled “Langues et traditions constitutives de la philosophie en Europe” (“Constitutive Languages and Traditions in the Philosophy of Europe”; Cassin 690–91).

6. For another discussion of *tarab*, see Christian Junge’s contribution in this special feature.

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