

Conference Report

**Post-Eurocentric Poetics:
New Approaches from Arabic, Turkish and Persian Literature
(American University of Beirut, 21 May 2018)**

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A marathon one-day-only symposium took place at AUB on May 21st, 2018. A splendid collaborative effort, the event was organized by members of The Center for Arts and Humanities (CAH) directed by Abdel-Rahim Abu-Husayn (Department of History) and Hany Rashwan, the Andrew Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow at the Center. Bilal Orfali (Chair, Department of Arabic and Near Eastern Languages) and Hany Rashwan welcomed the audience and introduced the conference. Fifteen scholars from at least twelve nations were on hand to discuss “*Post-Eurocentric Poetics*” in an attempt ‘to present and extend the indigenous poetics of Islamic traditions, showing how literary figures and devices from these traditions can advance our understanding of world literature in the broadest sense of the term.’

The gathering spent the better part of twelve hours at the conference venue in the basement of College Hall on the AUB campus. The ambitious program was

successfully completed before the sun set. Moreover, the experience was thoroughly rewarding for both the participants and the wider audience. Fifteen scholars grouped in four panels presented papers on, respectively, *Medieval Persian Poetics; Arabic and Ottoman Literary Poetics; Andalusī and Sicilian Poetics; and Modern Arabic Literatures*.

The first speaker was **Rebecca Gould** (Birmingham University). In her keynote address, entitled “A Persian Contribution to Global Literary Theory: Shams-i Qais on the Controvertibility of Creation and Interpretation,” Gould argued that a method of global literary theory is still missing and could be advanced only if the canons of Arabic, Turkish, Persian and Georgian poetics were included in the process. Persian literary theory argues that creation and interpretation are controvertible, as are the poet and critic. She encouraged members of the discipline of comparative literature to engage with this argument.

The first panel followed with scholars from three nations—Turkey, Germany and Iran—dealing with medieval Persian poetics. **Ferenc Csirkés** (Sabanci University) spoke on “The ‘Fresh Style’ (*tazah-guyi*) in Safavid Persian and Turkic Poetry, Misnamed ‘Indian Style’ in Europe. He asked whether “Safavid poets recycled or recast some of their Persian poetry or looked to Turkic models.” He indicated ways to better understand and interpret the history of Turkic literary tradition in Iran, and “the relationship between vernaculars and “Classical” literary idioms in a Persianate context.”

Christine Kämpfer (The Philipps-Universität of Marburg) discussed the “Dynamics of Transmission in Medieval Persian Literature,” using the 14th-century romantic epic of *Humāy-u Humāyūn* by the poet Khaju Kermani as an example. She argued that, if viewed in its entirety, the uninterrupted and self-contained tradition of Persian literary production over half a millennium possessed its own “dynamic for the transmission of literary tradition.” Western approaches, focused on major poets like Ferdowsi and Nezāmī, have led to “one-dimensional and ahistorical” interpretations inadequate for evaluating Persian literature as a whole. Finally, **Leila Seyed Ghasem** (The University of Tehran) discussed the function of *taqdim* and *ta’khir* (preposing and postposing) in medieval Persian prose using Abolfazl Bayhaqi’s history of Ghaznavid rule of the eleventh century as a case study. Although only partially preserved, this source is the most important record of the period in question as well as a major masterpiece of Persian prose. Scholars of Persian studies ought to investigate how the undeniable aesthetics of Persian prose affect readers

as works of art and also influence the intent of the message.

The second panel dealt with the literary poetics of Arabic *balāgha* (“eloquence, proper style”). The first speaker, **Alexander Key** (Stanford University) posed the question whether the 11th-century Persian poet, ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjāni, equipped us for work on poetry in general. Aristotle clearly perceived rhetoric as dealing with politics and hence divided it from poetics. This, however, was an Aristotelian divide and Ibn Sina saw no such break. The image in the eastern context was rather that of two lions fighting, one representing the lexical and the other the metaphorical meaning of a word. The second speaker, **Hany Rashwan (American University of Beirut)**, presented a paper entitled “Rethinking al-Jurjāni’s Literary Conditions of *Tajnis* in Relation to his *Nazm* Theory.” Rashwan translated the concept of *balāgha* as “eloquence;” dealt with comparative rhetoric, including that of animals (!); and compared poetry and ornate prose. The paper discussed the conditions of *jīnas* or *tajnis* as offered to literary critics and writers by Persian Arabist ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjāni, in order to master the use of this literary device. Vocables in different languages like *paranomasia*, pun, *Wortspiel* and *calembour* demonstrate that words can acquire a different emphasis of meaning depending on the context of the respective language.

The third panel was chaired by Rebecca Gould and consisted of presentations by five speakers from four nations dealing with Ottoman Literary Poetics. **Veli N. Yashin** (The University of Southern California) dealt with the “Poetics of Late Ottoman Print Culture and the Thinking of Sovereignty” in the context of the Arabic



Conference participants at the American University of Beirut, Lebanon, 2018.

renaissance (*nahda*) and Ottoman reform (*tanzimat*). He discussed the problems of translation and transliteration, where the worst case could be termed today unreferenced ‘plagiarism’ versus the best-case scenario when the translation surpasses the original. Late Ottoman print culture reached a wider public sphere where sovereignty was elaborated both as a political and poetic problem. Yashin stated that in this context “sovereignty is not one, since it does not depend on a single ‘native’.”

Marc Toutant (CNRS, Paris), the next speaker, discussed two 15th-century Central Asian treatises about ‘*Arūz*, “a system of Persian poetry that did not easily fit the Turkish language.” He stated that there was an “attempt to ‘persify’ Turkic prosody and poetry because the latter was considered to be of comparatively low prestige.” The 15th-century Timurid poet, Mir ‘Alī Shir Nawā’ī, composed his *Mizan al-awzan* in Central Asian Turkish. Turkic

had emerged as a valid literary medium. The founder of the Moghul Empire, Babur, criticized Nawā’ī’s comparisons. The next speaker, **Murat Umut Inan** (University of Ankara) considered questions of imitation and appropriation. He based himself on a twelve-volume Eurocentric source claiming that the Ottomans attempted to write Persian poetry because it was considered to be superior. 16th-century poets – like all poets ever before and long after – were required to know Arabic and Persian and master considerable literary works by heart. Ottoman culture blended Arabic, Persian and Turkish. It was perceived that poetry would prepare one for an understanding of the Qur’ān. Good poetry created meaning. A period illustration showed a copy of Hafez’s text in the hands of Ottoman students. Murat pointed out parallels between poetry of the sixteenth and nineteenth century respectively. He highlighted “the multilingual and multi-literary underpinnings of Ottoman poetics

and the role it played in the making of a literary culture modeled after that of both Persia and the Arab lands.”

Sooyong Kim (Koç University) discussed Ankaravi's *Miftah al-Balāgha* of the early seventeenth century, attempting a poetics of continuity and translatability that was aimed at a wide local audience. Kim discussed the link between poetry and rhetoric. The renewed Ottoman interest in language and concern with local audiences perhaps explains why technical terms were not translated. The last presentation of the panel, by **Aida Gasimova** (Baku State University), was entitled “Many Faces of the Qurʾān in the Depiction of the Face (Hurūfī Poetics of Nesīmī).” She dealt with ʿImādudīn Nesīmī an important figure in medieval Azeri Turkic literature. She introduced the poet's biography and poetry and discussed his usage of the names of the Qurʾān.

The fourth panel was composed of four motivated women from four nations with Murat Umut Inan as chair. The panel swept over an entire millennium from Andalusī and Sicilian Poetics to modern Arabic literatures. **Enass Khansa** (AUB), the first speaker, spoke on “The Poetics of Affinity (*ittisāq*) and the Question of Legitimacy in Andalusī Adab.” She examined “the understanding of poetics through the interplay of the literary and the political in three *adab* works produced in conversation with different political orders,” dating successively from the fourth, sixth and seventh Hijrī century. The rhetoric continuity survived dynasties, and Andalusī medieval scholarship acquired political legitimacy in the process. **Ferial Bouhafa** (The University of Cambridge) dealt with “The Qurʾānic Rhetorical

Challenge within the scope of Peripatetic Rhetoric in Ibn Rushd's Thought.” She concluded that Ibn Rushd departed from the theological grounds of prophecy, and established a basis for cross-pollination between Aristotelian and Arabic rhetoric. This represented a drastic break with traditional theological interpretation.

Chiara Fontana (The University of Rome) presented a paper entitled “A Pragmatic Approach to the Rhetorical and Metrical Analysis of Contemporary Arabic Poetry: Nağīb Surūr's *Kalimāt fī al-hubb*.” She extended the subject into modern Arabic literature, applying rhetorical and metrical analyses to works of a generation of Egyptian authors of the nineteen-sixties and seventies. Such text analyses of pre-modern as well as contemporary literature may lead to a deeper comprehension of aspects of classical and contemporary Arabic poetics from within their roots. **Claire Savina** (The University of Paris-Sorbonne/The University of Oxford) discussed “Tēlēmachus in Egypt.” She had with her the hefty volume of the 17th-century French original, *Les aventures de Télémaque*, and suggested that al-Tahtāwī's translation represented not only an Arabization of the text but also a revival of classical Arabic literature, in that he had in fact originally translated the work for his students and not for publication, but one of his rivals published it while al-Tahtāwī himself was in exile. Savina argued that the translation is much more than a translation: “it uses the French to play with the Arabic.” The Arabic version also bears a different title and vision of the travels from those of the original, more like a 19th-century Jules Verne.