

**Foundations and Meta-Practice: Genealogy, Metonymy, and Analogy
as Principles for Organizing Literary Study**

Peter Heath, American University of Beirut October 2006

One significant characteristic of modern literary critical theory is its intense intellectual restlessness. As with much in modern life, and indeed implicit in the concept of modernity itself, is an underlying assumption of dynamism and constant progress. Things should improve; the future must be better than the past; the next generation will produce plans of action and angles of inquiry that will bring substantially better results. The future implies—and even demands—progress. Progress in literary theory is just one manifestation of this general cultural expectation. Permit me to indulge in a few examples from my personal history regarding literary theory.

I began graduate study of premodern Arabic literature with minors in Persian and Turkish literatures at Harvard in the early 1970's. This was a period of general transition in literary methodology. The great intellectual “revolution” in Anglophone academics of the two previous generations had been New Criticism, with its rejection of historicism and its refocus on literary textures as aesthetic icons and its methodology of close analysis of specific texts. For adherents of this critical tradition, understanding the intricacies of artistic craftsmanship and the emotive import of creative inspiration was the goal of literary study. Art was a type of aesthetic icon whose complexities and effects required long study, sensitive appreciation, and expert explication.

In addition to this dominant interpretive paradigm, this was a period, beginning after the First World War and continuing through the sixties, of particularistic theories expounding grand overarching claims. Enthusiasts claimed that Marxism, Freudian

psychology, Jungian archetypal analysis, or philosophical phenomenology each presented specific theoretical visions that served not only to analyze literature but also to explain it. Proponents claimed that studying texts from the vantage points of any one of these general overarching intellectual foundations would shed immense light on literary works and traditions. Characteristic of particularistic approaches was their circular thinking. Marxist theory or Freudian psychology, for example, would explicate art and if in the process they also validated their own theoretical tenets, then so much the better. Literature became grist for the mill. Rather than theory being used to explain literature, the reverse tended to occur. Literature became the means and theory the end.

The early 1970's witnessed a new wave of literary theory in American academics, one that entailed a turn to linguistic foundations. For a few years, structuralism in both its linguistic and anthropological guises reigned supreme. The thought of Ferdinand de Saussure was *de rigour*, and binary analysis became the key that would unlock all doors. Similarly, the structural anthropology of Claude Levi-Strauss inspired students of literature by offering a homology between language and culture. Everything could be reduced to binary oppositions, and this in turn explained everything. Structuralism also introduced theories previously unknown or ignored. The structuralist writings of Roman Jakobson were seminal in themselves, but they also helped to bring Russian Formalist theories into circulation in the West. Intellectual bridges were constructed and previously obscure studies by Russian scholars writing in the teens and twenties of the twentieth century suddenly became *au current*. A scholar like Vladimir Propp whose *Morphology of the Folktale* had languished in obscurity even in the Soviet Union for half a century became much discussed, just as the similarly obscure Mikhael Bakhtin would become

influential in the 1980's. In like fashion, anthropological structuralism introduced scholars of literature to other trends in anthropology. Generative linguistics was also of interest; critics like Tzvetan Todorov proposed that Noam Chomsky's generative linguistic might provide a model for a generative grammar of narrative.

The high-tide of literary structuralism proved, however, to be short-lived. By the latter part of the 1970's, it became clear that structuralist critics expected too much, and structuralist theory itself became subject to critique. Books and articles containing the term Post-Structuralism began to circulate. These very soon gave way to those proffering theories of deconstruction and postmodernism. Foundationalism of any kind, whether based on aesthetics, linguistics, social critique, or psychological theory, was now under attack, and the postmodernist writings of thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida were all the rage.

A more specific attack on foundationalism had an immediate and continuing impact of the study of Middle Eastern literatures. This was Edward Said's polemical account of *Orientalism*, published in 1977. Said's study is idiosyncratic—German scholarship is hardly mentioned at all, for example, even though one can easily argue that studies written in German were the greatest intellectual achievement of that group of scholars who identified themselves as Orientalists. Nonetheless, Said's attack was forceful, even blistering, and it over time it has proved to be highly influential. Rather than a title of approbation, the term Orientalist became a verdict of condemnation.

By the early 1980's deconstruction and the accompanying and more general concept of postmodernism replaced both New Criticism and structuralism as the overarching intellectual paradigm for literary theory. But what I have termed

“particularistic” theories continued and multiplied. Marxism remained relatively robust, and while Freudian and Jungian theory suffered some retreat, both retained adherents, and under the influence of Jacques Lacan even expanded into new areas.

Phenomenology, one might argue, continued its influence in some manifestations of reception theory, although reception theory broadened its inquiry to incorporate more attention to social and historical context. Feminist theory blossomed and provided major reorientations to the study of literature. Once the issue of gender became prominent, gay, lesbian and “queer” theory appeared. In the U.S., due to the influence of its multi-ethnic population, ethnic-based literatures, as defined by U.S. concepts of ethnicity—African-American literature, Asian-American, Arab-American, and so on—and accompanying theoretical vantage points also arose.

Said’s writings helped to inspire the development of Post-Colonial theory, which also drew on the earlier writings of Fanon and Nietzsche as well as the general intellectual influence of postmodernism. Closely allied with the methods and goals of post-colonial study was an updated version of Cultural Studies, originally an off-shoot of Marxist analysis but now reformulated in the light of post-capitalist globalism. Historicism made a partial return (although it had never really departed completely) with theories labeled the New Historicism.

This brief and necessarily schematic overview only presents an American-centric perspective of the development and relative standing of movements in contemporary literary theory. A French or German account might present a different ordering, although the main ingredients would be similar.

It is fair to say that most western educated scholars of Middle Eastern literatures are familiar with at least the general outlines of the theories enumerated above and use their favorites among them to provide methodological frameworks for their study. The most influential of these theories have also had a significant impact on Middle Eastern literary scholars not directly trained in the West, as can be seen by a perusal of such journals as *al-Fusul*.

Middle Eastern criticism has its own traditions, in addition. Underlying much Middle Eastern critical writing is the general nationalist-oriented school and university curriculum of literary study whose general configurations are founded on the ideas, at least in the Arab tradition, of the movement known as the *Nahda*. The ways that Arabic literary history is divided into periods; the underlying narrative progression of the rise, florescence, decline, and modern revival of Arabic literature; a generally secular approach to the study of literature; the nation-based division of modern Arabic literatures—Syrian, Iraqi, Lebanese, Tunisian, Egyptian, etc.—and the tensions that this adumbration provokes in contrast to a more general concept of Arabic literature; and finally the assumption of a complete generic rift between classical Arabic literature and its genres, on the one hand, and modern Arabic literary forms, on the other, all of these characteristics are evident in presentations of the Arabic literary tradition in secondary school and university courses throughout the Arab world. They are also reflected in many of the books and articles that Arab and western scholars produce. *Mutis mutandis*, similar situations can be said to exist in Iran and Turkey, taking into account differences in the modern cultural history of these countries.

The desire for innovation in literary study is, therefore, nothing new. In fact, it appears that in modern times it is one of its core and defining impulses. Within this context, let us turn to the goals of this particular Summer Academy and inquire how they may be understood?

There are two ways to begin to address this issue. One is by analysis of the desideratum of the Academy that its organizers composed, and which emerged from the deliberations the Working Group Modernity and Islam (1996-2006) of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin. The second is through review of the topics proposed by the presenters of projects in the Academy.

There are two keywords of note in the title of the Academy's topic: the terms "comparative" and "perspective." "Comparative" connotes the general field that describes itself as comparative literature, a field that has its own particular history and set of humanistic goals. The term "perspective" implies a welcome—at least to my mind—modesty in delineating the Academy's aims. It suggests that what is sought is not an overarching all-defining methodology but rather an exploration of improved lines of inquiry, or in other words, refinement in the ways that we as literary scholars define and pursue the questions we pose.

The rationale of the Academy is worth quoting in full:

The goal of 'Traveling Traditions: Comparative Perspectives on Near Eastern Literatures' is a critical re-evaluation of the texts, methods, and concepts that have dominated and maintained the discursive and disciplinary divides between 'Occident' and 'Orient' on the one hand, and narrowly defined national philologies on the other. The project thus focuses on canon formation and, in a parallel gesture, the basic permeability of literary traditions within and across national and regional borders. It attempts to

discover and foreground the historical and structural dialogue between texts and movements as a way out of the impasse created by essentialist concepts of culture and civilization. It also aims to interrogate the disciplinary structures that shape the study of literature, of Self and Other, in both the centers and peripheries of institutional power.

We must keep in mind that all rationales for conferences such as this should be highly ambitious and even provocative. They should aim at raising questions, arousing discussions, and even causing quarrels that stimulate thought and serve to promote understanding. Nonetheless, such statements and their underlying assumptions deserve examination. The rationale quoted above presents us with broad dichotomies—Orient versus Occident, Self versus Other, and national versus transnational—whose demarcations, the organizers posit, should be open to question and may require rectification. These dichotomies, if allowed to dominate, will perpetuate systems of national philology that then ignore aspects of permeability “within and across national and regional borders.” Unless broken down or transcended, reliance on such dichotomies will perpetuate and strengthen disciplinary and institutional power bases resting on essentialist concepts of innate cultural difference. Here, therefore, is a welcome call to broaden our intellectual horizons and to internationalize our understanding of literary movements and literary movements. How to balance this move toward the trans- or supra-national with the justifiable demands for specialization and deep knowledge of “local” or national currents and traditions is one of the dilemmas that participants in this Academy must face. It is a challenge faced by all scholars participating in the emerging field of world literature, as the critical writings of several scholars that are included in this Academy’s packet of readings indicate.

The Academy's desideratum then proceeds to set forth two specific issues requiring reassessment. The first calls for revision in relying on existing conceptual frameworks and paradigms of categorization, such as the "quasi-biological paradigms of "the rise and fall of civilizations, ignoring the mobility of texts across cultures, closer examination of practices of translation, ignoring the importance of popular literature, and a more nuanced understanding of the relation of so-called 'rootless' post-colonial texts relationship to the "concrete languages, canons, and politics from which they emerge." Participants are invited to reexamine issues of "Canon formation, historical memory, and the problem of 'beginnings' . . . with the concrete aim in mind of uncovering new epistemological and textual constellations through which to consider and refashion alternative perspectives on both Middle Eastern and European literary modernity."

The second major focus of the Academy is to interrogate "institutional hierarchies and the academic divisions of labor that inform disciplinary categories like Area Studies, Comparative Literature, and World Literature between European and Middle Eastern universities and research institutes."

Summing up with the organizers own words:

Taken together, the two parts of the project intend to create a forum in which a critique of the vertical and strictly demarcated discursive relationship between Europe and the Middle East of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can be fruitfully replaced by a rigorous exploration of the horizontal and constantly mobile entanglements and legacies that have historically shaped this profoundly ambivalent encounter.

I would like to offer several observations concerning this general program. First, I generally agree with many of these goals. Hence, any analysis I offer should not

suggest lack of support. Second, if one were to try to classify the goals of this statement of rationale in the context of modern critical methodologies, they would seem to fit best into the general area of inquiry currently termed Cultural Studies. Calls to re-examine and reconfigure issues of cultural identity, to redefine dichotomies such as self and other, to inquire into the delineations or porosity of cultural boundaries, to question the relations of elite and popular literatures, to analyze practices of translation, and perhaps most of all, to restructure the boundaries of current “institutional hierarchies and academic divisions of labor” are all central concerns of cultural studies.

Third, given that the issues raised already fall within those being explored by cultural studies, and even beyond this are not foreign to other, perhaps overlapping methodologies, such as post-colonial studies, one may call into question the need to reemphasize the concerns expressed by the organizers. In other words, this is not a call for new theory but rather an exhortation to use effectively already existing ones. This can be readily seen by examining the participants’ projects found in the Academy’s course packet. Most of these projects address issues raised by the Academy’s statement of rationale. Moreover, most could be titles of articles appear in any recent issue of journals of cultural studies or comparative literature, or closer to home, in such journals as the *Journal of Arabic Literature* or *Middle Eastern Literatures*.

In other words, the last few decades have produced several generations of young scholars of Middle Eastern literatures who are very much at home with the variegated trends of contemporary literary theory and who employ them with fluency and ease. It is certainly true that more can be and should be done in all areas, but we must also remember that western trained scholars in this field are relatively few. By far, the largest

number of scholars with academic jobs is found in Middle Eastern universities, which at this point are predominantly national universities. Here too, however, the number of those at ease with modern literary is continuously increasing, although it may take another generation to complete the transition. Nonetheless, one should not underestimate the progress being made among young scholars. I therefore suggest that as valuable an experience as this Academy will be, its first goal, intellectual reconfiguration of the field, appears to me already to be enjoying considerable overall success. The goals expressed are challenging and difficult, but a certain amount of success exists already and more is on the way.

I am less sanguine about the second goal of the Academy's program, its call for institutional reconfiguration. This is a subject that comes up only in passing (if at all) in the projects included in the course packet. This is not surprising. Since both scholars of world literature and of Middle Eastern literatures are usually few in number at any given university, individual calls for radical structural change do not usually carry much institutional weight. Beyond this, one should not underestimate the challenges that such a restructuring entails.

To borrow terms from classical Marxism, the Summer Academy calls for a reinvention of both the intellectual and methodological superstructure of literary studies and of the institutional base upon which it rests. Whatever success the Academy may achieve with changing the intellectual superstructure, I see little immediate hope in changing the institutional base of academic disciplines because these are founded and configured on the demands of the educational needs and priorities of the modern nation state. Most modern nation states have one, or at most two, declared national languages

(*pace* Switzerland and India). To achieve professional success, young people must learn to use these languages in accurate and sophisticated forms. As a result, schools and universities are academically organized to train students in their nationally ordained languages and literatures.

Most nation states admit that knowledge of foreign languages is also, if only secondarily, important; but here again training in language sets the boundaries of how literary scholarship is organized. The unpleasant truth is that from a practical point of view, literature is initially studied as part of language training and hence the latter determines the institutional configuration of the former. Faculty hired in university language and literature departments mainly identify themselves with the languages being taught in these departments, and they organize their scholarly lives and their memberships in academic organizations accordingly.

Most sophisticated scholars admit the parochial nature of this educational structure, and some, such as those working in comparative literature departments or world literature programs, strive to transcend it. Even these individuals, however, probably entertain strong practical doubts about anyone's ability to transform the current organizational structure. Comparative literature as a field was founded a century ago with the explicit goal of transcending this structure, but its success has been very limited. Resources at universities are perennially short, and in general only the richest of research universities can even afford to offer programs in comparative literature. Most universities focus on the national goal at hand: to train productive citizens in the designated national language and its corollary literature. With narrow institutional

boundaries comes disciplinary parochialism, and with parochialism comes re-enforcement of cultural blindness and prejudices.

Individual scholars can influence and alter such prejudices—just look at the example of Edward Said—but the number of such public intellectuals seems to be declining rather than growing. Too few of us are willing to devote the great amount of time needed to participate in public talks, media interviews, and cultural debates because this takes us away from the very scholarly pursuits to which we are devoted. Hence, while I remain optimistic about ultimate success in regard to this Academy's call for intellectual restructuring, since there are already clear signs that it is occurring, I am pessimistic about its ability to bring about large scale institutional restructurings, desirable as they may be.

So far, the goals of this talk are to contextualize—to the extent possible in the time allotted—both where we stand in regard to recent developments in modern literary theory and how the aims of the Academy are situated within these developments. Allow me in the time remaining to venture some general remarks regarding the practice and the meta-practice of literary theory. As I pointed out at the beginning of this inquiry, modern literary theory exists in a state of constant and intense intellectual restlessness. Given that producing literature is a human activity that has been going on for thousands of years, and given that Western literary criticism has a history stretching over several millennia while the Arabic critical tradition extends well over a thousand years, one may ask why we are still in such a state of discontent with current practices of literary analysis?

To some extent, this dissatisfaction may be inherent in the condition of modernity itself, as I indicated at the beginning of my remarks. I would suggest however that it is also a result of an inherent contradiction in our expectations of what humanistic methodological analysis can achieve. It appears to me that at the very point in history when much contemporary literary theory—and methodologies in the humanities in general—are most willing to admit to being socially and culturally “constructed,” we simultaneously suffer intensely from a displaced desire for analytical transcendence. As such, we seek continually for a theory or set of theories that will provide a secure methodological foundation for our practice. New theories receive enthusiastic receptions in the hope that they will establish this firm base. Even deconstruction, which explicitly discounts the possibility of such firm foundations, is embraced for this “foundational” assertion. Hence, although we admit that no one theory can offer a comprehensive foundation, we still face calls for innovations that will improve our understanding. We seek a point of analytic insight (or perhaps “oversight” is a better term) that will afford us near-divine awareness of all pertinent “comparative perspectives.” At a time when we readily admit to the impossibility of finality, we throw ourselves into a search for improved methods whose underlying impulse is in fact finality. Even as we admit that such a goal is impossible, we race along on a treadmill whose aim is perfection.

I cannot offer an explanation for this contradiction, only point it out. But I will discuss three habits of mind—one might describe them as mental tropes—that commonly influence—for better or worse—the ways that we construct literary methodology. These are genealogy, metonymy, and analogy. Each of these tropes underlies our attempts to

establish vantage points for literary analysis. I do not claim that they subsume all possible positions, but they are crucial in our analytic practice.

Assumptions of genealogy underlie all attempts at literary history by striving to identify and to trace shared characteristics, internal or contextual, over time. Metonymy, that is the relationship between the part and the whole and the whole and the part, inspires all efforts at literary classification, such as the delineation of literary genres. Analogy is the device that underlies all attempts at comparison. Each of these habits of mind has its strengths and weaknesses, and each is essential to our attempts at literary analysis and the construction of literary theories.

Genealogy assumes the possibility of identifying lines of specific connectivity and continuity through time. It therefore appears to offer the potential for investigating and understanding how such past connectivity influences or even determines objects and relationships in the present. Although at heart a biological concept, the idea is extremely powerful, both socially and conceptually. It underlies the concept of biological family relations, to be sure, but it also is extended to more general attachments, such as clan or tribe, i.e., the *‘asabiyya* of Ibn Khaldun. Moreover, it is inherent in and is often transferred to other broader, abstract concepts, such a race, nation, culture—or literature.

Some conception of delineating connectivity and defining objects of inquiry over time is basic to the project of historiography, including the writing of literary history. Sophisticated historians will certainly warn of naïve essentialism or reductionism. Yet I would suggest that such warnings belie a more basic question. Why do humans so often and so readily accept genealogically-based historical classifications? And why are they so inclined to translate the concrete blood relationships of family into broad emotionally

intense abstract concepts like national or religious ties? Whatever the reason, such processes appear both attractive and unavoidable since all cultures are historically minded, even if the formats they rely on differ from one another. The problem is not relying on genealogies, but rather the foundations and the terms that we use to construct them.

National literature curricula are an easy target here. Take the example of the *Epic of Beowulf*. Written in Anglo-Saxon, a language not spoken for over a thousand years and indecipherable to a modern native speaker of English, discovered in a single manuscript in the royal Danish library in Copenhagen, portraying events taking place somewhere along the northern Baltic coast, *Beowulf* is customarily studied as the first masterpiece of English literature. Since Anglo-Saxon is considered as part of the national genealogy of England (unlike Celtic or Norman) and since neither modern Denmark nor a Baltic country like Poland care to claim either the language or its literature, there is no competition for *Beowulf*. So the English can claim the poem, although the case may seem strange to someone outside of the culture. Sometimes national competition for works or writers does occur. Ibn Sina, or Avicenna as he is known in the West, is claimed, for example, in various national educational curriculums: Arab, Persian, Turkish, Uzbek, and Tajik. He was born outside of Bukhara, now in modern day Uzbekistan so modern Uzbeks can claim him on geographical grounds. He was a native speaker of Persian, so he is claimed by both the Iranians and the Tajiks. He lived in cities in what is modern day Iran, which strengthens the Iranian link, but he wrote mainly, although not exclusively in Arabic, which allows Arabs to claim him. He may have had some Turkic blood, hence the appropriation by some modern Turks. So he is

genealogically-linked to these various groups or nations respectively either by claims of blood, place of birth, spoken native language, place of residence, or main literary language. I suppose Greeks could claim him, if they wanted, since he wrote in the intellectual tradition of Plato and Aristotle. Muslims everywhere can claim him since was Muslim, and he wrote in the cultural context of the Islamic civilization of his time. If they were so inclined, Catholics could claim him, perhaps, since he exerted considerable influence on medieval scholastic thought, but they don't seem to want him since he was a Muslim (although Dante did include him in his *Divine Comedy*). Physicians and philosophers everywhere can attest to some professional genealogical connection, since Ibn Sina's thought was immensely influential in the fields of both medicine and philosophy. Ironically, although modern physicians and philosophers might both claim Ibn Sina, they do not recognize any professional linkages with each other these days, although in Ibn Sina's time and until the turn of the 19th century, both disciplines were considered to be integral parts of the single field of Natural Philosophy.

I am suggesting two things, neither of which is particularly original but both of which are too easily overlooked in practice. First, that genealogies are too often assumed by virtue of some supposedly innate connection—blood, nation, religion, culture or geography. Second, that all such assumptions should be critically and continually scrutinized because they are all constructed. The fact that such genealogical links seem natural and self-evident makes them all the more intellectually dangerous. Such links may include in unwarranted fashion, or they may exclude. There is, for example, much Arabic literature that has been written outside of what is construed to be the modern Arab world, works written in India or sub-Saharan Africa. Yet very few Arabs or Arabists

consult this literature, since it was not written in what is now the Arab world, a modern, if powerfully influential construct. Genealogical thinking appears to an innate habit of mind, and as such we may not be able to escape such though processes. Otherwise we could not engage in writing any kind of history. However, we as scholars must be aware of its allures and its dangers. As we strive to trace common genealogical traits and specific similarities over time, we must neither ignore nor downplay the differences that also exist. It is true that I am like my brother in many ways, and those outside my family may especially notice these similarities. Family members, however, or those who know us both well are just as aware of the many differences we exhibit. Literary genealogies or literary histories should be constructed with a conscious awareness that current culturally imposed categories can conceal previous operational classifications or ignore inherent multi-faceted differences. One basic way to do this is to engage in exercises of concrete imagination rather than relying too much on abstract thinking. Imrul Qais is considered one of the founding masters of Arabic poetry, and is thus culturally venerated. But if he actually showed up today in person as the sixth century Bedouin that he was, most university Arabic departments would probably consider him socially unfit in appearance and behavior and quickly order their security forces to remove him from campus.

Metonymy is one of the great human thought processes, since it links parts and wholes. It infuses human language, literature, and culture, and it is a powerful organizing tool since it helps us create and use abstract categories. Yet we must remain aware that our holistic and seemingly so helpful ability to create and invoke such categories sometimes hinders as much as helps. This is because our conceptual wholes are based on parts that share only partial similarities. Take as an example the concept of literary

genre. One can construct theories of genre based on genealogy. In the case of epic the *Aeneid* of Virgil is clearly influenced by the works of Homer. But who then does, Virgil influence? Here the genealogy become complex. In medieval Europe, the *Aeneid* was read by those few able to read, but the category of *chanson de geste* predominates. If we want to emphasize the generic characteristics that the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid* share with French *chansons de geste*, or with Icelandic sagas, then we have to construct an abstract rather than genealogical definition of the genre of epic. This is useful since it thereafter enables us to develop a conceptual whole whose parts also encompass Arabic, Chinese, or Indian narratives that portray the warriors, battles, romantic entanglements, and themes of personal honor that seem characteristic of epic. Through this process of abstraction we as critics can construct and defend a general concept of a genre, whether it be epic, romance, comedy, satire, and so on.

However, such concepts, established by virtue of metonymy—linking individual parts to a broad conceptual whole—must be constructed and used carefully, since once again the similarities that appear to unify may simultaneously conceal strong differences that divide. I find that the broadest and most comprehensive of such concepts are the most baffling—the concept of the novel, for example, or the personal essay. We know one when we see one, and most of us have seen hundreds if not thousands of such entities, but how to present an encompassing definition?

The more complex and abstract the concept, the more attractive, alluring, and open to misuse it becomes. Take the concept of identity as an example. I myself have no idea how to usefully employ this concept as a unit of analysis. It just seems too completely complex an abstraction to use. Nevertheless, it seems to enjoy enormous

popularity today, perhaps because it can mean so many different things. Once again, I do not argue for avoiding the habit of thought of metonymy, since it seems we could hardly escape its use and still be able to think and communicate. Yet we should not be lulled into using it uncritically.

The same is true for analogy, which again involves invoking partial similarities to make connections. There is nothing so telling as an apt comparison. This being the case, we should work hard to ensure that our comparisons are apt. Let us take an example from the broad field of comparative literature. Edward Said rightly criticized 19th or 20th century orientalist for enunciating culturally biased judgments on the aesthetic quality of classical Arabic literature. These scholars too often simply used their own aesthetic values to evaluate premodern Arabic literary works. As a result they often didn't like what they read. If only, these orientalist scholars seemed to be saying, these premodern Arabs would write like 19th century Europeans, we would then appreciate their literature much more. However, since the comparison was ill-conceived, the judgment that resulted was simply wrongheaded. If they had compared this body of literature with medieval western literature—especially that composed in Latin—then perhaps the comparison might have been more apt and their critical judgments more on target. Or if they had consciously sought out literary traditions that provided fruitful analogues, their criticism might have been more insightful. Premodern Arabic literature, for example, has a unified and self-referential tradition stretching thirteen centuries, composed in a language whose written form has changed remarkably little over the centuries, and it was enjoyed by a relatively stable urban class composed of merchants, scholars, and government officials. Arabic also has a vibrant tradition of popular and oral literature

with which the elite literary tradition stands in cultural tension and often overt opposition. Viewed in these terms vernacular European literatures, with their linguistic variety and diachronic ruptures and their changing economic and cultural conditions resulting from increased trade patterns and the discovery of the western hemisphere, do not present good points of comparison. Based on the attributes cited above it may well be that the premodern Chinese literary tradition is a more telling and useful analogue. Once again, analogies are useful and unavoidable but due to their seductive power, we should use them consciously and with great care.

Allow me to conclude with an analogy in order to clarify how our practice and meta-practice as scholars of literature might be conceived. The American University of Beirut has a much regarded medical center. The physicians who work there are highly trained and experienced, and they engage in constant efforts of continuing education in order to remain abreast of new developments in their fields. They pursue specific areas of expertise, specializing in such areas as the heart, the brain, the gastro-intestinal area, or obstetrics. They encompass different skill as surgeons, internists, radiologists, anesthesiologists, and so on. Despite their specialist expertise, no physician would dream of not relying on colleagues in other fields. A surgeon can be brilliant, but he or she achieves little without depending on radiologists, anesthesiologists, and internists, and vice versa. These physicians certainly base their practice on science and its methodologies and both keep up with and seek to add to its discoveries, yet their goals are quite specific and practical, and their definition of success is based the empirical results that their practice yields. If the patient is not healed, then they have failed, no matter how great their science or training.

As scholars of literature, this analogy of the practice and meta-practice of groups such as physicians may be useful to consider. It is disastrous if we do not rely on the methodological tools that can aid us in our practice, but we will have only limited success if we do not view our endeavors as part of a greater complementary enterprise while at the same time gauging the success of our practice by both scrutinizing its underlying assumptions—especially those that seem self-evident—engaging in continuing education, and attempting to view and evaluate our practice from both an assumed vantage point of meta-practice and practical success. In these pursuits we will necessarily rely on assumptions based on connections formulated on the basis of genealogy, metonymy, and analogy. There is no escape from such habits of mind. Yet, if there is no escape, it behooves us then to use these tools well and with a view toward practical success. If we analyze and explain literature poorly, then all our learning and expertise will be for naught.

Within this context, a venture such as this Summer Academy holds great promise, since its purpose is to provide an extended occasion to discuss and think through the ways that we approach our professional projects. In this light, I both extend my thanks to its organizers for bringing it here to the American University of Beirut and wish all of its participants great success in the days ahead.