

DIALOGUES ACROSS THEORY AND PRACTICE

INTRODUCTION TO “THE ORIENTALIST PHOTOGRAPH”

Amir Khadem

University of Alberta

Almost fifty years after Milan Dimić (1933-2007), originally a scholar of German and Slavic literatures from Belgrade, joined the University of Alberta to serve as the founding chair of the Department of Comparative Literature, an annual lecture series has been established to commemorate his invaluable service and unforgettable legacy. Dimić, who, in 1983, was the first Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada to be elected under the heading of Comparative Literature, has a long list of academic services to his name, including founding the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* in 1974, and helping to establish the Canadian Comparative Literature Association / Association Canadienne de Littérature Comparée in 1968, on whose executive board he served until his retirement in 1998. Being one of the most globally active comparatist scholars of his time, Professor Dimić was instrumental in hosting the Fourteenth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA/AILC) in 1994 at the University of Alberta. The lecture series that bears his name, hosted by the Department of Modern Languages and Cultural Studies of the University of Alberta, is intended to showcase the current work of distinguished scholars in the field, and create an atmosphere of collegiality to reinvigorate his intellectual heritage.

263

For the lecture's inaugural year in 2015, we were very pleased to have Ali Behdad, John Charles Hillis Professor of English and Comparative Literature, University of California, Los Angeles. Behdad's lecture, "The Orientalist Photograph: An Object of Comparison," takes up several elements of his upcoming book, *Camera Orientalis: Reflections on Photography of the Middle East* (U of Chicago P, 2016), and integrates them with observations on the current status of the discipline of Comparative Literature. Professor Behdad, who served as the President of the American Comparative Literature Association in 2014, shares anecdotes of his expe-

riences, obtained from decades of academic and administrative service, to reflect on the challenges in front of the discipline, regarding both its intellectual relevance and its workforce training. Looking back at the originating history of Comparative Literature in American and Canadian universities in the early twentieth century, Behdad argues that the “identity crisis” within the discipline, which has constantly been marked as a serious threat to its integrity, has a potential as the distinguishing factor to make it positively stand out within the humanities in the twenty-first century.

Behdad’s review of the policies taken by ACLA, when confronted with similar crises in previous decades, uncovers a recognizable pattern of “addition and expansion,” to rely on the discipline’s flexibility to include nascent scholarly agendas. His suggestion to change the course of disciplinary response from the logic of expansion to “reconsideration of the very notion of comparison” is offered through a genealogy of the comparative methods that were, in their inception, highly informed by European colonialism. In reacting to the academic history of Comparative Literature, the originality of his remarks is evident in distancing from the two common revisionist approaches. One tends to show a heretofore unnoticed intrinsic connection between literary productions in two or more distinct historical or geographical realms, and the other invests in the contrary: to present irreducible differences between cultures as a way of resisting colonial essentialism. The third way to consider Comparative Literature, Behdad argues, is to look at any given literary or cultural object as inherently heterogeneous on its own, which makes it possible to treat it comparatively without the need of any external point of reference. What he calls “the comparative frame of mind” is a fresh outlook for study of cultures and literatures, which Behdad himself exemplifies through an analysis of photography of the Middle East in nineteenth century.

The rest of Behdad’s lecture, whereby he investigates the social and aesthetic function of early British and French photographers whose pictures of famous landscapes of Egypt, Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq were circulated in high numbers back in Europe, presents a case of comparative analysis that, while cognizant of the imperialist history, tends to go beyond what postcolonial studies usually offers. Behdad argues that a study of those photos taken by pioneers in the profession does not only depict orientalist tendencies, but, for instance, underscores the significance of their choice: what they thought as worthy of having its picture taken speaks directly to the market it had created in their homelands. Therefore, the picture says as much about the European mentality toward the Orient as it does about the cultural market and aesthetic taste of Europe itself. The network of attitudes, desires, and technologies that contributed to the large body of photographs taken in the Middle East and sold in Western Europe is the object of Behdad’s analysis through his “comparative frame of mind,” that can ultimately offer an alternative perspective for the way scholarship in the field operates.