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“TEACHING ENGLISH POETRY TO ARAB STUDENTS: A WINDOW ON THE LOCAL TRADITION, A DOOR TO ENJOYMENT, ACHIEVEMENT AND APPRECIATION”

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INTRODUCTORY

Of the three common literary genres (Poetry, Drama and the Novel) taught in the English Departments at Arab universities, Poetry is generally the subject least pursued in advanced studies and least worked on in postgraduate research¹. In the Departments of English in Tunisian universities, for example, Poetry is the area least furnished in staff, is almost invariably entrusted to non-Arab teachers and is considered by most students as their pet hate². In this article, I submit

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- (1) I served as Chairman of the English Department (Faculty of Letters Manouba, University of Tunis 1) between 1993 and 1996 and can affirm from experience that this is a fact at least in the Departments of English at Tunisian universities. Also, colleagues from certain Algerian, Egyptian, Jordanian, Lebanese, Libyan and Moroccan universities whom I met or with whom I exchanged correspondence during my chairmanship report on a fairly similar situation.
 - (2) Although my concern here is purely pedagogical, I cannot resist the temptation to consider the issue in its broader cultural context. Indeed, speaking of poetry in general, the situation deplored in my present article seems to be all the more curious in the light of such claims as poetry having been and remaining “the register of the Arabs” (*diwaan al-'Arab*)- on which more later in this article-, as well as in the light of such historical facts as poetry being with us-Arabs-the older by comparison with the novel and with drama, both of which being of more recent introduction. In addition, out of those three common literary genres, poetry (and poetic forms) is the area in which our ancestors are unanimously credited with greatest innovation. In *A Short History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Quartet Books Ltd., 1978)-to take but one example-, John Bagot Glubb writes:

that the reasons behind this state of affairs are: a) a methodology that tends to part too sharply with the student's background knowledge of Arabic poetry (thus failing to avail itself of a considerable amount of transferable knowledge), if not resist it or reject it altogether; and b) a prevailing assumption among instructors that what the student needs is equipping in terminology and a set of labels (or, according to the instruction level, a body of ideas on currents and schools) that are thought to be of more immediate use and which, it is hoped, will eventually prepare for later serious study of Poetry for research purposes or pursuit of it for pleasure.

On the other hand, a legacy of linear analysis of poetic texts-nurtured by decades of a prevalent line-by-line approach particularly common in the teaching of Arabic poetry-still thrives in many of our secondary-school classrooms³. The result is that the poem as a "tranche de vie" (a slice of life) is eclipsed by the piecemeal approach which offers it at best more as a cadaver to be coldly dissected than a living whole that is as much acting as acted upon. The methodology and the assumption (under *a* and *b* above) hardly consider that the student would gain more in being allowed, if not encouraged, to draw upon a native literary background and in being offered room enough to react and relate to that tranche de vie and appreciate that creative process at work in the poem (than in being trained in handling a kit of devices and labels with which to operate, as it were, surgically on an inert body).

I will also seek to show that by reforming the methodology and attitude above, we will make the subject more appealing to our students and secure a future for Poetry as a motivating subject on the

In the field of poetry and romance..., it was the people of the Arabian peninsula who were the innovators. The tribesmen of Arabia had always been passionate devotees of poetry, even though most of them were illiterate. Rhyming verse, unknown to the Greeks and Latins, was brought by them to Europe. (291)

And it is an observable fact that the modern Arab continues to be much that same passionate devotee of poetry for whom verse remains the favourite form of expression of his/her moods and attitudes.

- (3) The approach and method manifest themselves in such 'teacherly' practice as: in this line, the poet says...; in the following line, he states...; in the next line, he declares...; and so on.

curriculum, as a discipline for research and as a source of personal enjoyment. The article will present and illustrate a practical poetry-teaching procedure that makes positive use of the learner's poetic heritage, while being-by so doing-all the more effective in teaching the subject and the language.

MEETING THE ALIEN

A student embarking on the English Poetry course in an anglophone country is one who comes with a certain familiarity with the subject: the nursery rhymes, songs and simple poetry pieces he/she has learnt at school or gathered familiarity with in a native context are there to provide transition from known to unknown, from general to specific and from received to negotiated. Besides, that student's early exposure to poetic texts belongs more in the naturalness of song than in the formality of study. The Arab student in a non-anglophone country has hardly any repertoire of such material, hardly any body of transferable knowledge of English poetry to make use of when starting a Poetry course. Besides, his/her acquaintance with the subject now belongs in a context of formal study.

It is an established fact that, in the face of anything new (or perceived as being new), our immediate flight is to the familiar for reference, comparison and adjustment. In this sense, everything approached is apprehended comparatively; and there is no reading that is not comparative. The natural attitude of the Arab student in this context is to seek to tap a background that is available to him/her-an acquired repertoire of Arabic texts and a body of knowledge related thereto-for reference, comparison, adjustment and support. As I shall argue, this is a healthy attitude, is of psychological and pedagogic benefit and is, therefore, one that should be encouraged and monitored rather than resisted or rejected.

It is worth mentioning at this juncture that such an alienating factor, if we may call it so, is often further exacerbated by a number of physical and logistic constraints contributing in poor performance in the subject on the part of the student and frustration on the part of the

teacher. First, absence of familiarity on the part of the teacher with the student's background knowledge, or presence of a teaching context that resists interference of that familiarity (when it exists) in the teaching process, or the authority of dominant practice among the teachers of the subject, or outright resistance to comparative practice (albeit a limited exercise that is rather tactical and procedural in character), limits the possibility of eliciting positive transfer. Second, the way the Poetry course is assigned in many of our English Language Departments makes little use of a major asset: the teacher's actual desiderata (many Poetry teachers will tell you- and, worse still, will tell their students-that they have been "landed with the course"!). This is the catch-22 aspect of the situation: teacher's unhappiness with the course rolling into student's dislike for it, and the whole attitude snowballing into generalised hatred for the subject. Third, given the endemic shortage of specialized staff, students are lumped in huge groups that hardly offer room for discussion and interaction.

TRADITIONAL APPROACH

English Poetry teachers in our Departments are two groups: those who have no knowledge of Arabic poetry, and these are the overwhelming majority; and those who have a knowledge themselves of Arabic poetry, and they are, as the situation stands, outnumbered by far. The first group cannot be otherwise than proponents of an approach that does without the student's background knowledge of Arabic poetry; in view of their own training, one cannot expect them to be tempted to throw a bridge out to that background. The second group tend to overwhelmingly follow suit- either by conviction or through peer-pressure. Both groups have, on the whole, traditionally adhered to the view that, since they are teaching a new subject in a foreign language, whatever may be carried over from prior local knowledge and local experience to the new course can only be negative, and to the principle that the new course gains in being distanced as much as possible from, if not systematically immunized to, the "prejudicial" intrusion of that imposing acquired acquaintance with the local. The traditional approach to teaching English Poetry has,

therefore, invariably tended to counter the student's natural, instinctive flight to the familiar and that healthy drive to compare and engraft the unknown upon the known. More, it has-with its exaggerated and untimely emphasis on cataloguing and listing of devices and its consequent eclipsing of the experience in the poem, an experience that can only be "relational" and "relativistic"-stripped the student's first contact with English Poetry of the personal, emotional, intercultural; in short, it has 'abstracted' English Poetry, 'geometrized' it, "alienized" it. And, by doing so, it has made of it a 'new' subject that is to be learnt from scratch rather than a broadly familiar subject that is to be extended.

A few years ago, I measured at my expense the extent of entrenchment of this traditional approach. I had then just been elected to the chairmanship of the English Department, and one of the courses I thought I could begin by restructuring was the Poetry course. I did not know then that I would make the commotion I made when I suggested, among other adjustments, that there was no harm, during the first few initiation weeks at least, in offering the students an Arabic poem for comparison or illustration purposes, in using an Arabic poem-in-translation, or in allowing and/or encouraging students to quote a parallel from Arabic poetry or throw in a "comparative bridge" between a local and a foreign way of treating a theme or presenting a setting. The general attitude was inimical to parallel and comparison of this sort, to what was termed in certain circles an "invasion by the local", a "trespassing by an alien". A number of my colleagues were quick to point out that my suggestion amounted to a resurrection of the translation method in ESL/EFL teaching, a method thought to have been long dead and buried.

Of course, it could be argued that the translation method (consisting in proposing items of language in both English and the mother-tongue and, in certain contexts, even substantial explanation and analysis in the mother-tongue) has a negative bearing on the learners' immersion in a foreign language context and their achievement in the language. We are all familiar with the disadvantages of the method, and, I should think, most of us advisedly avoid overusing it in the earlier stages of language acquisition. However, when it comes to teaching a literary

course, such as Poetry for instance, an adjustment of methodology seems to me necessary, an adjustment that should allow, now that certain habits of reacting in the foreign language in the language-courses have been instilled, for a dose of the local that is not as much a substitute for the new as it is a bridge to it and a source of enrichment and illumination, as well as a booster of motivation and self-confidence. Granted that excessive reliance on the native language tends to necessarily interfere mostly negatively with the foreign language being acquired, but the study of a subject such as poetry can only gain through “interference” of prior knowledge and prior experience in the learning process, through the opening of windows for the students into their own heritage (and into their own selves), especially when we know the importance of tapping that huge reservoir that is our poetry tradition, a rich and imposing background to which we cannot be insensitive and which, by definition, cannot be kept at bay.

THAT POETRY IS ONE

While languages are many, Poetry is one. (This is particularly true for lyric poetry at least, insofar as one may conceive of it as a form of direct expression of emotion, as the tongue of the heart.) While they are learners of English in an EFL context, and while they can be said to have practically no prior familiarity with English poetry when they start the Poetry course (the set books in secondary school in Tunisia hardly include more than two or three poems which are almost invariably-and, again, significantly enough-ignored by the teachers), our students rightly boast a sound grounding in Arabic poetry, lyric poetry in particular, and a disposition to enjoy poetry such as fit for a nation with a rich poetry tradition and with an acknowledged gift for improvisation and recitation. The way Poetry is currently taught in our English Language Departments, however, is manifestly based on the assumption that the subject is foreign and that it is just another pretext to teach a foreign language, hence the tendency to label the indigenous as “alien”, or “stranger” to the enterprise.

A RECONCILIATORY APPROACH THAT WORKS

The major questions that cropped up as I taught the course (and I have been teaching English Poetry for over fifteen years now) were: How can this commonly hated subject be made likeable? How to make the course a source of enjoyment? Is there any possibility to engraft the new knowledge to be acquired on something already acquired (or is there any way of throwing a bridge between prior and forming experience)? Where possibly can my students relate to the experience in an English poem? How to assist the students in learning to appreciate the creative process at work in the poem? How to equip them, first, with skills of negotiating the meaning-of apprehending the sense contextually, interactively, collectively and “inter-culturally”-and, then, with the nomenclature-that is that stock-in-trade which is the terminology and labels-, rather than drill them in a mechanical engraving of labels on figurative and musical devices in vacuum? What use can be made of that nomenclature already acquired in secondary school by dint of thorough exposure to the works of such poets as al-Mutannabi, al-Ma’arri, ibn Zaidun, Hawi, as-Sayyab, abdas-Sabur, as-Shabbi, and others? How to mobilize and make a judicious use of a particular strength of Arabic culture: love for poetry, gift for extemporizing, art of recitation, ear for figures of sound? The procedure I came to adopt for the first sessions made it a priority to put to advantage my students’ background knowledge of Arabic poetry and to channel their love for Arabic poetry into the new venture so as to ensure a smooth transition from the old to the new. Needless to say that the recipe required a careful dosing of ingredients and that the experiment called more upon the skills of a moderator or monitor than the saws and sentences of the guru.

One procedure I tried and found to work evolved as follows: We started the course with a poem by Christina Rossetti entitled “A Birthday”, which I had typed on the same sheet together with two Arabic love lyrics. The reasons behind my proposing this particular poem early in the course were: a) it deals with a familiar theme; b) it involves no difficult vocabulary (that is, no items beyond what is commonly assumed to be the Tunisian learner’s word-count at that

stage in learning the foreign language); c) it presents an easily recognizable line of thought-development and a self-conscious and declared effort on the part of the author to seek out words and an imagery to come to terms with a particularly-and recognizably-overwhelming emotion (an explicitly-declared challenge of expression and an equally explicitly-acknowledged endeavour to meet that challenge); d) it offers a clear pattern of recurrent figurative devices that draw upon familiar imagery and which are stimulating and thought-provoking; and e) it ties in perfectly with the students' prior acquaintance with a heavily-rhymed traditional Arabic poetry and one that has traditionally tended to favour unity of the line. The inclusion of the Arabic pieces was intended to get the students in dialogue with the experience and to enrich the discussion of parallels of situation, tone, mood, perspective, setting and figurative and musical devices. The experience of overwhelming emotion in Rossetti's poem, the declared challenge of expression of that emotion and the successive attempts to find words for it (and dissatisfaction with the various attempts) provided an interesting cross-cut and ample matter for debate.

The discussion of the text took about two sessions and it gradually developed a thorough acquaintance with the experience offered in the poem; then, it moved to highlighting such similarities between English and Arabic poetry as the use of natural and animal imagery (birds, trees, fruit, water, dove and peacock), the use of simile (the four-time recurrent "my heart is like" is matched, in the pieces I suggested and others which the students proposed, with Arabic instances of use of this common figure of speech), the use of alliteration (the instances of alliteration in the English poem are pointed out and the students tapped the Arabic pieces proposed for similar instances and recited lines from Arabic poetry which included a similar feature), and the use of a regular rhyming scheme and metrical pattern (the tripping rhythm is duly noted, related to the speaker's tone and to the mood of the poem and compared with similar effects in the Arabic pieces proposed). In order to make sure that the devices are not learnt in vacuum, I made it a matter of principle to require that any spotting of a device be systematically complemented with a comment on its effectiveness in relation to the experience being evoked. Also, in order to keep to the

language of the course, the students are all the time required to propose their comments on the parallels in the English language. I would also mention, in passing here, that the exercise involving this particular poem lends itself very conveniently to creative writing follow-up along the pattern “my heart is like...”.

Nor need the parallels and echoes, unsolicited or induced, be confined to similarity; for, at times, there is much more opportunity for the play of fancy and more matter for debate arising-and more pleasure derived-from dissimilarities. To take but one example. A colleague of mine was once teaching poetry in English at the Faculty of Letters in Kairouan (centre of Tunisia). The place is known for its scorching heat most of the year; summer there is hated as hell; the shade is rare, and therefore, paradisiac. For the students, summer was heat and sweat; and the shade an Andalusian bower. And at such time of year when thou mayst behold yellow scorpions on sun-bleached walls and when no leaves hang upon those boughs which hiss against the scalding sirocco-bare ruin'd choirs, where the space of a fleet-winged spring, the birds flirted-, at such time of year, he (my colleague) was teaching “Shall I compare thee to a Summer's day?”. Speaking about it at a recent Conference⁵, my colleague described what I understood to be the difficulties arising from the different ecology and how the students could only think locally, attributing to “summer” the usual local negative associations and to “shade” the qualities and virtues it always held for them and, consequently, remarking on the strangeness of the two central

(4) I remember that, when we had finished with the discussion of the poem, the pattern proposed for “creative writing” brought about an unexpected, but an irresistible and rewarding, climax of inspiration expressed in parallels that ranged from the cliché “my heart is like ice-cream; when your lips touch it, I scream” to the hilarious “my heart is like grass and my cow-lady has come to graze” (following a popular “mock-romantic” local song on the meekness of the lover and the harshness of the beloved) to the inspired and guided “my heart is like a closed bud, now shine on it so that it blossoms” (or its prompted and collectively-improved version: “my heart is like a closed bud, now breathe on it your blossomer breath”).

(5) *Teaching Language & Linguistics in a EFL Context* (TSAS (Tunisian Society for Anglo-Saxon Studies) Third International Annual Conference); Faculty of Letters & Humanities, Sfax, Tunisia: April 25-26, 1997. Paper titled “Teaching ‘Shall I compare thee to a Summer's day?’ in Kairouan”; given by Mongi Bahloul.

metaphors on which the argument hinges. One procedure suggested was proposing to the students-in anticipation of such counter-course-a list, a sort of a glossary, of ecologically qualified and differentiated meanings and associations of both “summer” and “shade” to make it possible for them to construe what was intended by the author. As my colleague gave his lecture, I was thinking (that kind of ironical remark, you know, that occurs to one as one listens to a lecture and that tends to short-circuit a laboured point): Why not schedule the poem for the cold season?

In truth, though, I found that the initial timing invited the greater and more motivating challenge of reading and of gauging how far one’s reading engages with or departs from the local and accords or conflicts with the thrust of the argument in the poem. Indeed, it seemed to me more worthwhile to put that marked difference of ecology⁶ to profitable use and to delay the proposing of any glossary, thus allowing a free exchange of critical, caricatural, funny, ironical, unorthodox, relative, local readings-without *a priori* limits to the network of courses and counter-courses and the web of ways and by-ways-until adjustment is achieved and a more orthodox, text-based, consensual reading (which remains just one possible reading) is negotiated in keeping with the thrust of the argument in the text, which reading would then be harnessed to what might be construed as the author’s intention or to what might be tolerated as having been possibly intended.

(6) A widely-reported anecdote, famous among Arab literary historians, has it that an Arab poet named Ward ‘Ali ibn al-Jahm recited a panegyric before the Abbasid Caliph al-Mutawakkil in which he said (proposed here in my translation):

Thou art as generous as a water leather-bucket-
 May Allah grant you His protection-;
 For so much giving, thou farest lightest in sin.
 Thou art a dog in faithfulness and loyalty;
 And in striking against calamity,
 Thou hast the hardiness of a he-goat.

No sooner had the Caliph’s men heard these lines than they moved to cut off the poet’s head. And they would if it had not been for the Caliph who ordered them to grant him a stay in the castle instead.

When a few years had passed, the poet was brought before the Caliph again to recite a new poem that displayed a clear shift from tent-dweller’s to city-dweller’s (or from nomadic to sedentary) imagery, register and outlook.

It is my opinion, indeed, that reading locally, and with as large a spectrum of possibilities, alternatives, “relativisms”, “relatednesses” and shifts of point of view (both unsolicited and induced) as possible is a healthy *entrée en matière* (or overture). We bring our specificities, preconceptions, local bias and store of reference into our approach to the new. It is our right, as we proceed toward consensus or justified difference of opinion, to guess, compare, relate, and even ridicule whatever new matter is proposed to us; and insofar as it is procedural and tactical, the exercise of this right should neither be colonized nor curtailed. I have nothing against proposing a glossary of possible significations as a pedagogical practice. However, I find that abridging the local or curtailing it by proposing such a glossary with the text, or even worse, excommunicating⁷ the local or dismissing it right off-, reduces guesswork and the play of fancy/ gradual development and emergence/ tentative, inquiring, speculative and contrastive modes of approach/ playful, unusual and caricatural reading/ and, why not, genuine and unsuspected discovery.

Over the years, I have managed to gather a corpus of texts for the first sessions that presented interesting areas of overlap between English poetry and Arabic poetry and which, thus, served to smooth the transition from acquired to forming experience and knowledge. Apart from the poem by Christina Rossetti and its accompanying pieces which I culled from Arabic poetry, I found I could propose, in the first sessions, “Life the Hound” by Robert Francis (together with parallel Arabic musings on the “equivocalness” of life; once even quoting a “rhymed-prose” text (a revealing parallel) by Nu’aimah on the mysteries of the postman’s mail-bag), Yeats’s “The Lamentation of the Old Pensioner” (together with parallel lamentations on *ad-dahr*), Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 73” (together with one or two Arabic translations of it), or again Hardy’s “Last Week in October” (together with Arabic pieces on *kharif-l-’umr*), while inviting and welcoming, as each session evolved, whatever parallels the students could propose

(7) I am reminded here of Tarafa ibn al-’ Abd’s “tar-marked”, flea-infested camel which, in the *Mu’allaqah*, is the speaker’s double and embodies his state of being rejected by his own tribe.

afresh and recalling some of the contributions other students had been proposing over the years.

By allowing Arabic to interfere, and inviting Arabic to interfere, the first sessions seemed to present more an experience that was being expanded and enriched than an adventure in totally alien territory. The students were reassured that they knew something, that their prior knowledge could be made profitable use of and that there was always something they could say. Although they were embarking on a virtually new course (English Poetry)-and an unpopular one at that-, they felt rather at home in the broad area-the kingdom-of poetry. The double-focus on acquired and forming experience boosted their self-confidence as they came to realize through the overlap and the backward and forward glances, through the interplay of echo and exchange, that their prior training, their experience, was an asset and not a liability.

By the same token, the students found themselves learning about the new subject through discussion, as there was not-primarily-so much a set of definitions, a body of abstract and inert knowledge, to be received as there was a process to be engaged with. Indeed, while one traditional approach-still prevailing, unfortunately-would have thrust at them a number of figurative devices and a set of abstract definitions often thought to be the most appropriate *entrée en matière* (with, at best, a series of illustrations often divorced from context), and would have weaned them from their heritage, the interactive, "inter-cultural" approach made of that stock-in-trade-which is the terminology and labels-rather the crowning of an engagement with a process. Since emphasis was laid on reading the texts, reacting to them, and discussing parallels, the students came to look upon the poetry course as a moment offering enjoyment of an experience, an adventure, a quest that invited co-operation and relatedness and rewarded it emotionally and intellectually, and to look upon the labelling of devices as a rather belated "technical" stage.

We often blame it on the student at examination-time that the essay is no more than a catalogue of devices appended to quotations from the poem assigned for analysis. For years, I had sifted students' exam-scripts for an original comment on the effectiveness of a device and an

instance of appreciation of a process, but with little satisfaction, until I started reconsidering my teaching and began to propose exam-questions accordingly. Two questions now seem to me to have triggered it all; the first one was: How can the singling out and labelling of a figurative or a musical device be integrated in a sustained, relevant commentary on its use in the creative process? The average student is usually quick at recognizing a device in a poem; but it needs a properly-trained student to assess the effectiveness of its use. If that training is to be provided at all, then the approach to adopt should help to get the student, on the one hand, to read a complete text and react-by relating-to the experience in it, then determine, assess and appreciate the effectiveness of the artistic process at work in the poem.

The carefully-dosed comparative method, or let us call it “parallel-based” or “excursionist⁸” method, fronts the experience and de-emphasizes the nomenclature. Thus spoke al-’Abbas ibn al-Ahnaf: “*sirtu ka’anniy dhubaalatun nusibat/ tudhii’u lin-naassi wa-hiya tahtariqu*”; and thus speaks Walter de La Mare: “Day unto day/ Life wastes and wanes,/ Like a candle/ Burning its oils away,/ Till nought but charred wick/ Remains” (...) “Well, content would I be,/... Some light to have given” (“The Candle”). The poet’s awareness of mortality and impending death and the consolation he gets in a life not wasted and extending in time make up the theme which the simile/ metaphor serves to clinch, a theme and metaphor that are universal. The labelling or definition stage comes to crown the experience of reading contextually. If it were to precede it, then we should not be surprised to see our students turning the experience of reading a poem into a “spot-the-device” exercise⁹.

(8) “Excursionist” is a term I am using here to qualify a method that allows for reaching out “inter-textually”, “inter-contextually” and “inter-culturally”. It is a method that allows for comparative moves, not as part of a full-fledged research pursuit, but rather as a pedagogical practice ensuring diversity of angles of approach and points of view. (Cf. my article titled “The Laws of Excursionism: The Muse, the Mused, the Muser and the Musing”, in *Revue des Lettres et de Traduction*, N. 5 (1999) [Faculté des Lettres, Université Saint-Esprit, Kaslik - Lebanon]: 385-401.)

(9) The latter reaction is not unlike a frequent practice that tends to obtain in Translation classes when some students, instead of proposing contextualised versions, indulge in

It must however be said, as far as the negative aspect of transferable experience is concerned, that it is common practice among certain teachers of Arabic poetry to reduce entire poems to “what the poet in this line says and what he goes on to say in the next, using in this line such or such a device and resorting in the next to such or such a technique” (the whole thing downed with more paraphrase than persuasion and more quote than comment). Yet again, there is in this piecemeal approach a resource to be tapped and made positive use of: that of observation of detail, focus on unfolding of experience in the poem, eye for the device used and exercise of memory.

The second question was: How can the study and analysis of the poem develop into an appreciation of the creative artistic process at work in it? My guiding principle in this has been to continuously remind the students that the poet is a maker and that the reader’s task is to reveal the interaction of the various elements of the artistic process at work in the poem in relation to the challenge which one assumes the maker has set him/herself. By tethering the reading task to a study of the effectiveness of the means with respect to a central challenge or task, the exercise develops an awareness of the material used, the techniques adopted and the pattern designed. The material is the language; the techniques are the devices; and the pattern is, to quote Eliot, “the complete consort dancing together”. By shifting the focus from the task of dispensing, on the part of the teacher, of a set of labels and abstract definitions and of receiving, on the part of the student, of this body of knowledge, the discussion- and research-based approach shifts the concern from the merely technical and “receivable” to the experiential and “negotiable”. Here again, the comparative, or “parallel-based” or “excursionist”, method may be a source of enrichment for the course: the Arabic pieces suggested by the teacher or recited by the students, or the translations proposed along with the original English texts (in the earliest weeks of the course, at least),

shooting synonyms at the rest of the class; this I have dubbed “sniper practice” (Cf. “Translation Syllabus and Classroom Procedure (for Large Groups): *Savoir-Faire or Savoir*”, *Revue des Lettres et de Traduction*, N. 4 (1998) [Faculté des Lettres, Université Saint-Esprit, Kaslik - Lebanon]: 101-113).

make the students reform their perception of the course as being mainly a body of knowledge to be received and memorized to a perception of it as an experience to be lived, related to and shared.

Thus, Christina Rossetti's "A Birthday" was approached in terms of the challenge of expressing a state of overwhelming happiness. The speaker was seen as seeking to approximate this state-trying various similes-before declaring, halfway through the poem, "my heart is gladder than all these". The focus of the discussion was therefore removed from concern with the similes *per se* to a consideration of the part they play in meeting that initial challenge. At the same time, the rest of the poem-following the declaration that the similes were short of expressing the intensity of the experience-was approached as an attempt on the part of the speaker to try other ways of evoking that experience of overwhelming joy, an attempt to contrive-or, literally, to "make"-a better artistic equivalent to meet the central challenge. The task was, therefore, to relate and harness the various attempts made and the devices used to the initial challenge and to appreciate the creative process in the poem as a whole. The principle guiding the entire business of reading and discussing the text thus came to be perceived as being not so much the spotting of figurative devices as an appreciation of the creative process aimed at producing an artistic equivalent for the state of a heart brimming with joy.

It is possible to say that if the purpose is to provide training in independent inquiry and appreciation, the most effective method of teaching poetry is a method that begins by shifting the focus from teaching as equipping in a body of "technical" knowledge to teaching as initiating in reading and appreciation skills. I would run the risk of oversimplifying the method and the attitude it seeks to instil in the learner by saying that the means and end are to consider the poem under study in terms of challenge and meeting the challenge. Once the students have been properly initiated in strategies of gathering an idea as to what the challenge in the poem is and relating means to ends, it will be easy to get them to perceive the rest of their task as assessing and appreciating the effectiveness of the means deployed toward meeting that challenge. While the spotting and the labelling of devices remain important activities in a poetry class and important components

of the poetry course, their relevance is thus made a matter of the extent to which they are integrated in the assessment and appreciation of the creative process devised to meet that challenge. If the training goes according to this method, it should not be impossible to start asking our students in exams to “assess”, “appreciate” and “criticize” (and, at advanced levels, “compare”¹⁰), instead of merely continuing to ask them to “explain”, “identify” and “describe”; and it should not be impossible to see them repay us, instructors of poetry and exam-assessors, with pleasant surprises.

CONCLUSION

The first sessions of a poetry course should not so much impart knowledge as they should develop a positive attitude. For the Arab learner-who embarks on the course with virtually no prior knowledge of English poetry (and who, as I have noted in a number of Departments, is venturing in a context where English Poetry is not a subject particularly dear to the hearts of the students)-, such a positive attitude can only be fostered through a) a smooth transition that makes use of a rich background in Arabic poetry, assures the student that his/her prior experience in the broad area of poetry will be an asset, and favours comparative (“excursionist”) pursuits; and b) a procedure that de-emphasizes the merely terminological and technical in favour of the IV relational “and experiential. By favouring and fostering an “inter-cultural” exchange, the first sessions throw a useful bridge between acquired knowledge and forming experience, boost the student’s self-

(10) Though, here again, a fair assessment of any comparative venture (which, at an early stage, is comparative only in the sense that it seeks to reach out “inter-textually”, “inter-contextually, “inter-culturally”) remains a matter of how far the examiner or assessor is broad-minded (and I would not say “equipped”) to contemplate the very possibility of the comparative move (and I would not say its “opportuneness”) and appreciate it. On a macro-level, there are language departments where comparative research work is “mongrelized”, a situation that has led to a wholesale tagging of dissertations on comparative pursuits as belonging nowhere. Setting up Comparative Studies departments in our universities would contribute towards giving such projects legitimacy and granting them the “pedigree” that is their due.

confidence and stimulate discussion. In the same way as with Reading Comprehension and with Composition, the learner's background cannot be kept at bay; nor would it be desirable to keep it at bay, if that were at all possible. By shifting the focus from the technical to the experiential, the poetry course favours and fosters an approach to the poem as an adventure to partake in and an experience to relate to. By setting questions favouring inquiry, speculation and assessment, the procedure invites negotiation and adjustment, courts new opinions and fresh impressions and foregrounds appreciation of the process of artistic creation at work in the poem. The opening of a window on the local places English Poetry in a broader and more hospitable context of "inter-cultural" illumination.

The methodology I have suggested seeks to reform our attitude to the course—both teachers and learners—with a view to making it serve those purposes. In the absence of prior acquaintance with English poetry among our students, and until English Poetry is fairly represented in our secondary-school set books (and even then), our flight—and that of our students—is naturally to a resource that has lain untapped for only too long. The future of English poetry, in our non-anglophone countries, depends on our accepting, if not seeking, to infuse the foreign with a vital dose of the local, at least at the earlier stages of the student's acquaintance with the subject; and this can only be done through a tolerant attitude towards a rich background that only begs to be tapped. In the long term, however, setting up Comparative Literature departments, encouraging and sustaining comparative and translation pursuits (in literature in general, and in poetry in particular) and forming a generation of comparativists should help improve the situation in a lasting way.

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