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إعداد: الأستاذة الدكتورة أروى حسن الدوري

البريد الإلكتروني الجامعي dr.arwa.hussein@tu.edu.iq

Reading Bernheimer's Vision of Comparison in the Age of Multiculturalism

In his Introductory article entitled " The Anxieties of Comparison", Charles Bornheimer arguesthat comparative Literature is a discipline whose strength is also the source of its anxiety.Unlike anational literature department, Comparative Literature does not have one clearly defined national tradition, language, period, or method. It crosses boundaries between languages, national literatures, cultures, disciplines, historical periods, literary and non-literary texts, theoretical approaches. Consequently; the comparatist is expected to know many languages, literatures, cultures, histories, and theories. This produces what Bernheimer calls the "anxiogenic" character of Comparative Literature. (Bornheimer, 1995, p.2) The paradoxical point is that Bernheimer does not necessarily regard this instability as a weakness. The instability can become a productive intellectual condition because comparison itself requires the scholar to question establishedboundaries. (Fusco, 2006, p.2)

Bernheimer creates an almost imaginary picture of the graduate student in Comparative Literature.The student initially feels that the discipline offers enormous intellectual freedom: manylanguages, cultures, traditions, and theoretical possibilities. However; this freedom creates a problem: How can one become sufficiently knowledgeable about so many different literary traditions? Bernheimer comments that a traditional student of comparative literature gives priorityto matter over method; hence faces several competing expectations related to: first language competence for the traditional comparatist is expected to read literature in its original language. Second, must understand the historical and cultural contexts of different traditions. Third, the comparatist must also understand contemporary literary theory. In other words, the comparatist risks being accused of knowing "a little about everything" rather than becoming a specialist in onefield. This tension between breadth and specialization is one of the central anxieties Bernheimer identifies. (Bernheimer, p.4)

Bernheimer returns to an older problem defining Comparative Literature. He connects this problem to René Wellek's famous discussion of the "crisis" of Comparative Literature".The fundamental problem is the difficulty of establishing a specific object of study, that is matter, as well as a specific methodology or method. Bernheimer therefore suggests that the lack of a fixed identity is not necessarily something that must be eliminated. Instead, he argues that comparative Literature may be inherently unstable because comparison itself is an open-ended activity.A later discussion of Bernheimer summarizes this point by describing comparison as an activity that keeps the field "unstable, shifting, insecure, and self-critical".(5)

One of the most important solutions to overcome the crisis of comparison is the changing geographical and cultural scope of Comparative Literature.Traditional Comparative Literature had been strongly Eurocentric, being highly associated with European literatures, European languagesand Western intellectual traditions. Bernheimer suggests that comparative literature should,instead be characterized by other fields of literary theory including Multiculturalism, postcolonialstudies, Feminism, ethnic studies, African American studies, cultural studies, theories of identity and globalization which all increase attention to non-Western literatures. Then, the question becomes can comparative literature continue to define itself primarily through comparison amongEuropean national literatures?! For Bernheimer, the answer requires an expansion of the field toward multicultural and non-Western perspectives. The 1993 ACLA report associated with Bernheimer explicitly advocated a multicultural orientation and generated considerable debate about the definition and cultural function of literary study. (7-9) Charles Bernheimer's 1993 report,"Comparative Literature at the Turn of the Century," pp. 39–48, presents Comparative Literatureas a discipline undergoing a major transformation in response to multiculturalism, globalization, new literary theories, and the increasing movement across cultural and disciplinary boundaries. Bernheimer begins by reconsidering the traditional model of Comparative Literature, which had largely concentrated on European national literatures, canonical authors, and the study of texts in their original languages. Although this model established rigorous comparative scholarship, it also produced a relatively Eurocentric conception of the discipline. Bernheimer therefore argues for a broader and more inclusive Comparative Literature that incorporates non-European literatures, postcolonial and minority writing, women's literature, ethnic and diasporic voices, and other previously marginalized traditions. For him, comparison should no longer be restricted to the simple model of one national literature being compared with another; instead, literary works should be studied in relation to their cultural, historical, ideological, linguistic, social, and institutional contexts. This expansion also makes Comparative Literature increasingly interdisciplinary, bringing it into dialogue with Cultural Studies, history, philosophy, gender studies, postcolonial studies, media, film, and other fields. Consequently, the report raises an important paradox: the more Comparative Literature expands its object of study, the more difficultit becomes to define what "literature" and even "Comparative Literature" actually mean. Bernheimer nevertheless views this instability as potentially productive because the comparatist'sability to cross boundaries becomes an intellectual strength rather than a weakness. Language and translation are also central concerns. Bernheimer recognizes that knowledge of foreign languages

remains essential to serious comparative scholarship because language carries cultural meanings that cannot always be reproduced in translation; however, he also challenges an overly restrictive insistence on original-language mastery when such a requirement prevents scholars from studyingimportant literatures outside their linguistic competence. Translation can therefore facilitate multicultural inclusion, although it also creates methodological questions concerning linguistic loss, cultural specificity, and interpretation. The report consequently seeks a balance between linguistic rigor and cultural accessibility, rather than choosing one at the expense of the other. Another important concern is the literary canon: multicultural Comparative Literature should question why certain European authors and traditions have historically occupied central positionswhile other cultures have remained marginal within academic curricula. This does not mean abandoning canonical literature, but rather placing canonical and marginalized works into broadercultural conversations. The report also emphasizes that Comparative Literature has an important role in the changing humanities because comparatists are already trained to move between languages, cultures, historical periods, theories, and disciplines. Thus, the comparatist can becomea scholar capable of negotiating cultural difference and intellectual boundaries. (Bernheimer, 1998,39-48)

Traditional comparative literature involved studying literature of homogenous cultures such asEnglish literature and French literature; however Multiculturalism provides a more complicated model by involving issues of migration, diaspora, bilingualism, hyphenated identities and hybrid culture, that is, movement toward transnational and transcultural comparison. Another point of discussion that Bernheimer draws attention to is that traditional Comparative Literature places considerable value on reading texts in their original languages, but multicultural literary study raises another question: If Comparative Literature wants to include more cultures and more literatures, can it realistically require scholars to master every original language ?This creates a tension between the traditional model which is based on linguistic precision and cultural specificity, versus translation model which provides greater accessibility and broader multicultural inclusion. Bernheimer does not simply resolve this contradiction. Rather, the contradiction itself becomes part of the anxiety of comparison. The issue remains particularly important because foreign-language knowledge has traditionally been regarded as fundamental to comparativeliterary scholarship.(Sousa & Owen, 2010, 118)

Multiculturalism challenges the traditional literary canon. The traditional canon privilegescertain authors, languages, nations, genres and cultural traditions. Bernheimer's discussion therefore opens the field toward previously marginalized voices.This includes literary traditions associated with women, ethnic minorities, colonized peoples, non-Western cultures, diasporic communities.The result is a shift from a relatively closed

canon toward a plural and multiculturalliterary field. (13) A comparative model based on Bernheimer would involve the following steps:First, identify the common element, that is, What connects the works such as theme, image, genre, character, narrative technique, symbol, or literary motif. Then identify differences, that is, how theelement is represented differently. Third, investigate the differences of historical and cultural

contexts. Fourth, examine language and translation, and the effect of language on the meaning. Atheory framework should then be identified. Last, an essential comparative question should be raised: What does the comparison reveal that studying either work separately would not reveal?

Abū al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī's *The Epistle of Forgiveness* (Risālat al-Ghufrān) and Dante's *DivineComedy* can be enriching examples for applying Bernheimer's comparative model for both worksshare the journey motif. The comparison between Abū al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī's The Epistle of Forgiveness (Risālat al-Ghufrān) and Dante Alighieri's Divine Comedy can be understood particularly well through Charles Bernheimer's conception of Comparative Literature as a discipline concerned not merely with identifying similarities but with examining the cultural, historical, linguistic, and literary relationships through which texts acquire meaning. Both works imagine journeys through the afterlife and bring their protagonists into contact with the dead, including poets, intellectuals, religious figures, and other historical personalities. At this level, thetwo works share a recognizable comparative structure: the journey beyond earthly life becomes aliterary space in which questions of morality, knowledge, reputation, religion, and human behavior can be explored. However, a Bernheimerian comparison must move beyond these surface similarities and examine how the two authors transform the afterlife according to their different cultural and intellectual contexts. Al-Maʿarrī's work emerges from the intellectual world of classical Arabic literature and Islamic thought, drawing upon Arabic poetry, religious discourse, linguistic scholarship, and literary criticism, whereas Dante's Divine Comedy emerges from medieval Christian Europe and incorporates Christian theology, classical Greco-Roman literature,philosophy, and the political circumstances of Dante's Italy. Consequently, Heaven, Hell, judgment, and encounters with the dead do not carry exactly the same meanings in the two works.

The comparison also raises the question of literary transmission: similarities between the worksshould not automatically be treated as evidence that Dante directly borrowed from al-Maʿarrī. Students must distinguish between direct influence, possible indirect cultural transmission, shared religious or visionary traditions, and parallel literary development. This is particularly important in Comparative Literature because

comparison should investigate relationships rather than impose them. Language and translation constitute another important dimension: al-Maʿarrī's sophisticated Classical Arabic, poetic allusions, linguistic wordplay, and religious references present different translation problems from Dante's Italian, theological vocabulary, political references, and highly structured poetic form. Thus, comparing English translations alone may conceal important differences in the original texts. From Bernheimer's multicultural perspective, the pairing also challenges a Eurocentric conception of the literary canon by placing a major Arabic intellectual and literary work alongside one of the central works of European literature. The comparison therefore becomes not a competition between Arabic and European literature, nor an attempt to establish which author is "more original," but an investigation of how two different literary cultures transform the shared imaginative possibility of an afterlife journey into different forms of moral reflection, cultural memory, intellectual debate, and social criticism. In this sense, the comparison demonstrates Bernheimer's principle that the value of Comparative Literature lies precisely in examining similarity together with difference, textual relationship together with cultural specificity, and literary continuity together with transformation.

Placing al-Maʿarrī and Dante together challenges a narrowly Eurocentric literary canon by allowing two major literary traditions to enter into dialogue without assuming that one must occupy the center and the other the margin. In this sense, Bernheimer's report teaches students that Comparative Literature is not simply the identification of similarities and differences; it is an investigation of how literary meanings are transformed through cultural contact, historical difference, language, translation, genre, intertextuality, and disciplinary exchange. The ultimate purpose of comparing al-Maʿarrī and Dante, therefore, is not merely to determine whether one influenced the other, but to understand how two different literary cultures transform the shared imaginative possibility of an afterlife journey into distinctive forms of moral reflection, intellectual debate, cultural memory, and social criticism.