Why *Valeurs*? Comparative Literature in Mid-Century Alexandria

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> La littérature des prochaines décades sera moralisante […] elle cherchera quelles valeurs sont acceptables pour l'homme du XXe siècle […] La relève des écrivains sera morale et, je le crains, moralisante; soucieuse d'en finir avec la valeurie de l'avant-guerre, elle essaiera d'imposer des valeurs neuves. Mais la fonction de l'écrivain n'est pas seulement morale. Elle consiste surtout à grouper les mots et les idées de telle facon qu'en jaillisse de la beauté. Ecrire est un métier, plus malaisé que beaucoup d'autres, et qui requiert un long apprentissage. Pour moi, j'ai employé trente ans de ma vie avant de me former du style une idée qui me satisfaisse.
> (Étiemble, *La littérature française de 1950 à 2000* 36-37)

René Étiemble ends his manifesto on the crisis of comparative literature by writing that any of his suggestions, famous or infamous, simply reflected the inseparability of research from pedagogy. He stressed: "I have chosen to read the theorists of our discipline only after elaborating some ideas springing from my indissociable experience as professor and writer" (60).

Since comparative literature makes pedagogy and research indissociable, it is apt to dwell on literary transnationalism as a form of pedagogy, particularly in the work of wandering scholars who create international networks. This article will focus on the Francophone scholars working in Alexandria in the 1940s, placing Étiemble in the centre. The article will analyze the reception of the work of these intellectuals in Arabic, French, and English periodicals and memoirs of the time; and it will suggest some ways in which the pedagogical heritage of comparative literature overseas might be relevant to current discussions of world literature.

Étiemble spent four years in Egypt as Head of the French Department at the Faculty of Letters from 1945-49. As soon as he arrived, this young, erudite thirty-five-year-old realized that the French literary scene in Egypt was well established, and had its own societies, newspapers, rituals, and theatre troupes, all directed, staffed,

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and sponsored by Francophone Egyptians. Despite British occupation, it was French, the language of the Levant, that had been established as the cultural language of Alexandria early on (Mansel 245). As Gaston Zananiri,[1] one of the foremost patrons of culture in Alexandria, put it:

> Si la communauté anglaise vivait en marge de la société alexandrine, les Français, comme les Italiens et les Grecs, y tinrent une place de choix, dans ce monde cosmopolite où leur langue était parlée couramment, bien souvent avec élégance, si l'on doit tenir compte des nombreux écrivains d'expression française qui, pendant plusieurs générations, apportèrent leur contribution à la mise en valeur de la francophonie […] Le français devint la langue véhiculaire qui permit à quelque cinquante organismes sociaux de coordonner leurs activités. (36)

Major cultural mouthpieces included the *Amitiés Françaises*, the French missionary schools, the *Lycée français* (the first Mission laïque school in the country), and *L'Atelier* of Alexandria (*Association d'artistes et d'écrivains*).[2] A bulwark of local periodicals in French were sponsored by local businessmen and cultural patrons, including Zananiri himself as well as Aḥmad Zaki Abu Shādi, the eminent Egyptian Romantic poet.

Arriving three years into the war, Étiemble was welcomed with a great show of support in the newspapers. The professor from France, the saviour of 'our' universal French culture, had arrived, Egyptian newspapers such as *La Réforme*, *Le Progrès égyptien*, and *Le journal d'Alexandrie* (*Supplément de la bourse*) claimed.[3]

If Auerbach, Spitzer, Said, and others became worldly due to exile, even melancholy, the case of Étiemble and company in Egypt is rather different, and certainly much less melancholic. Then again, they were French, not German. Although he was partly a refugee from World War II, Étiemble's position in Egypt is slightly humorous in retrospect. The same 'emmerdeur' of the academy, the man who called for placing Chinese, Japanese, and Arab cultures at the heart of the French canon, the first critic of French colonization, was actually posted in Egypt by the *Comité français de libération nationale*, the cultural committee for *France Libre*.[4] Étiemble went to Egypt as the official representative for France, but also by specific invitation from the foremost Arab writer of the twentieth century, Taha Hussein (Tāha Ḥusayn), who was then Rector of Alexandria University. While the Frenchman had responded to news of his posting in idiosyncratic fashion by spending the time on board the ship heading to Alexandria enjoying his "first incursions into Arabic," and quickly becoming "fascinated" with contemporary Arabic writers and with Ibn Khaldun, "the true father of sociology" (Étiemble, "Knowledge" 10), as soon as he arrived, he was received by the Francophile Egyptians as a defender of the liberal, revolutionary values of the republic against foreign infiltrators.

One can only wonder what Étiemble must have thought about all this, seeing Egyptians responding to the War in France as a threat to their own values. Whose values? Étiemble might have answered: those of Confucius. For the Alexandrians, at that particular time, there is no one answer. Given how the allegiances of the War

played out in the city, however, there was no way *not* to ask 'whose values.'

Egypt had remained neutral in World War II. Although the government cooperated with the British war effort, local political parties and the King were divided. The general public was equally divided, for the British and the Allies were not a welcomed presence at that point. Meanwhile, during World War II, Alexandria became a British naval base, a distribution point for Allied stores, tanks, and airplanes throughout the Middle East. The port soon filled with Greek and French ships, and thousands of soldiers and sailors roamed the streets on leave.

As capital of a neutral country, Cairo, during the years of the war, blazed with lights. As a British base, from as early as 1940, Alexandria blazed with bombs. It quickly became a city of bombing raids, panic, and overnight exodus. Until July 1944, there was a blackout every night (Mansel 252).

Scholars at the University watched as more and more refugees arrived. The Greek King, government, thousands of soldiers, and the Greek fleet, all arrived as refugees in 1941, along with six British writers who would inscribe the wartime city in fiction: Robin Fedden, Elizabeth David, Robert Liddell, Olivia Manning, Lawrence Durrell, and John Sykes (Mansel 256). Over the years, the list of banished royalty grew to include the royal family of the Hellenes, Victor Emmanuel of Italy, his grandson Simeon of Bulgaria, as well as the King of Albania.

As the War came physically nearer to Alexandria, more divisions appeared. Some Italians roamed the streets shouting 'Egypt will be ours,' while others wrote frantically to the Italian government that they should not be called to arms because they were Alexandrian, not Italian. As some Egyptians took to the streets, calling 'Forward Rommel' to end British occupation, others flew the French flag and reminisced about Bastille Day. Alexandria became the capital of various exiled, dispossessed, and would-be governments, all of them, naturally, free: Free Albania, Free France, the Zionist League, the Hellenist Group, the Arab League, and others.

Underlying all this was the Egyptian nationalist movement, on the brink of explosion, put at recess again until *this* war was over—and who knew, irate nationalists muttered, when that would happen? The nationalist movement did explode, in riots, right after the War ended, calling for an evacuation of British soldiers, who eventually evacuated in 1946 and 1947. Only a year later, however, bombs would again be dropped on Alexandria, this time during the Arab-Israeli war of 1948, followed by more riots.

As long as industry boomed, however, and despite the sound of artillery fire from the desert, tea and bridge parties, university lectures, and soirees continued as usual, giving rise to the myth of Alexandria's so-called cosmopolitan age, which refers to the wealth of nationalities living in the city but also (the reason why it attracted immigrants) the wealth of the Bourse. In peacetime, then, beaches filled up with sweating Cairenes; in wartime, beaches filled up with sweating troops on leave.

It was in the midst of all these conflicting perspectives that Étiemble and his cohorts gave lectures, established journals, started publishing houses, wrote articles,

gave speeches at opening ceremonies, and took an active part in the dissemination of higher culture—often a higher culture perceived to be under threat, for with the outbreak of the War, the production of the *Académie française* had come to a near halt. Étiemble quickly acquired a circle of admirers, and "his lectures at the Faculty of Letters in Alexandria, particularly on the writers of eighteenth-century France, were among the most important events in the cultural life of the city" (Isstaif 27). In the University, Étiemble found himself one of a charmed circle of scholars who included, at one time or another, A.J. Greimas, Jean Grenier, Roland Barthes, the Arabist Étienne Combe, Professor of Philosophy Raymond Savioz, H.J. Fleure, and Hilde Zaloscer, a refugee from Vienna.[5] Visiting professors included Jean Cocteau, who came with a theatre troupe in 1949; André Gide, who had been translated into Arabic very early on by the Rector of the University himself; novelist Jacques de Lacretelle; and possibly Albert Camus, whose letters to the Francophone scholars camped in Alexandria always contain a promise to come, which is always followed by an excuse not to (Camus and Grenier).[6]

In this way, modern comparative literature (that is, the juxtaposition of Arabic with European languages rather than Arabic with Eastern ones) was disseminated in Alexandria. Such scholars did not, as far as can be made out, teach 'comparative' literature under that name in the University, but instated it through an older Arabic tradition of a network of mentors and protégés. The strong network of intellectuals, working simultaneously within and beyond the University, created a system of mentorship in the public gatherings and private meetings, public meeting places, and private homes that consecrated the heart of Alexandrian intellectual life.[7] This domain was directed by patrons of culture rather than by state actors. Typically for Egypt, some of these patrons represented different states: a situation that has always been both cross and salvation for the intellectual scene in the country.[8]

Was it Étiemble who created comparative literature in Alexandria, or was it wartime Alexandria that helped form Étiemble's later ideas of universal comparativism? No answer is offered here. Suffice it that the question stands.

Reading Étiemble's later works with some pedantry brings up a host of Alexandrian and Egyptian referents. Such names include Tāha Ḥusayn, Rector of Alexandria University, between Étiemble and whom there existed a strong friendship. Their ideas in Arabic and French are supremely similar,[9] and Étiemble's *Quelques essais de littérature universelle* is dedicated to Tāha Ḥusayn and his son. In his later work, Étiemble also often refers to Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, founder of modern Egyptian theatre, although in the forties when Étiemble met Ḥakīm, he was still a local, if prominent, artist who would write for Étiemble's magazine in Egypt. Frequently, Étiemble cites other Egyptian names, many of whom would later move to France, but in the forties, they were largely rooted Francophone-Egyptians, such as Edmond Jabès, Georges Henein, founder of the surrealist Egyptian group 'Art et Liberté,' Albert Cossery, Andrée Chedid, and Cyril Des Baux, a pseudonym for the grandson of the Egyptian monarch.

To come back to values: whose values? From 1945-47, Étiemble managed a review called *Valeurs*, sub-titled *Cahiers trimestriels de critique et de littérature, publiés avec la collaboration des écrivains de France et du Proche Orient*. Fifteen hundred copies of each issue were published, sponsored by a local businessman and maintained by local subscribers. Although the journal was part of the Free France effort to maintain French cultural production until liberation, at this point in his career Étiemble himself seemed to be moving more overtly from being a romanticist to being a critic. An up-to-the-minute but unabashedly biased 'news bulletin,' for example, flush with the acerbic asides for which Étiemble was to become famous later on, made *Valeurs* a timely voice of French culture overseas at the same time as it offered an early training ground for Étiemble's evolvement into a *critique* in the great French literary tradition.

The journal brought together some of the most prominent French or Francophone writers of the time, including Jules Supervielle, Marcel Proust, Emile Simon, Egyptologist Étienne Drioton, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Henry Miller, and André Gide; Arab writers such as Tāha Ḥusayn and Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm; and resident writers of local fame such as Hussein Faouzi, Georges Henein, Henri El Kayem, Naguib Baladi, Edgard Forti, and Wilna Salinas. *Valeurs* included a review of literature and criticism, a review of books, and a review of other journals. Its editorial committee linked the journal to the *Nouvelle Revue Française* (through Jean Paulhan) in Paris, the *Lettres Françaises* (through Roger Caillois and Victor O Campo) in Argentina, and *Combat* in Algeria. Articles ran the gamut from features such as Jean Grenier on poetics and space to translations of Arabic literature into French such as Tāha Ḥusayn's "A Man of Letters." The journal featured previously unpublished marginalia and correspondence from the likes of Marcel Proust, Jacob Burckhardt, André Gide, and Max Jacob, as well as reviews of the latest books published in France, England, the US, and Egypt. By internationalizing the intellectual circles in Alexandria, and connecting them to writers across borders, Étiemble capitalized on the potential comparativism already at work in the city and made *Valeurs* a major journal of literature in French overseas. *Valeurs* displays the immense energy of its editor in delivering one key name after another in its pages, and stands testimony to Étiemble's later views on the importance of international literary collaboration, the way it is meant here, *pedagogical* literary transnationalism. The purpose of *Valeurs*, after all, like its Arabic counterparts at the time, was to save heritage and claim a legacy.

Yet a discipline of comparative literature is validated by the university. Geographically, *Valeurs* did not rise to the virtual world network that Étiemble lays out in his later planetary conceptualization of literature—most notably, the journal contained almost nothing outside of France and Egypt. In fact, in comparison to *Valeurs*, some Arabic periodicals were more open to the world, such as the *Cahiers de L'Est* (Beirut), *al-Kātib al-misri* (Egypt), and *Apollo* (Egypt). All of these aimed explicitly to promote literature and the arts by creating links between writers within and beyond the Arabic-speaking world. Bilingual Arab writers seemed much more

eclectic in their sources for inspiration, much less selective about which foreign literatures they discussed. Moreover, it seemed natural for bilingual intelligentsia to compare works in any two languages on a level of equality. One reason is that literature (*adab*) in Arabic is traditionally a form of pedagogy and acculturation. Simply put: literature teaches you to be a better person, and to be a better person, you should strive to know as much as you can about everything. Hence, the Arab periodicals opened up more than *Valeurs* to China, Japan, Russia, and India, but often achieved much less depth and sophistication.

Within this Arabic understanding of literature as pedagogy, it comes as no surprise that one journalist in an Alexandrian periodical could eventually but inevitably reprimand Monsieur Étiemble for not making relevant the political happenings in Egypt. Whose *valeurs*? According to the critic, the journal, despite its eminence, failed to make values "edifying" for the community (Lançon 219).

The reprimand highlights the public position that intellectuals are expected to fill in the Arab context. Such men of letters, wherever they come from, have a pedagogical mission to cultivate the community. If *Valeurs*, as the critic implied, was not teaching edifying things to the local community, then the journal did not have the right *valeurs*. Étiemble, as a public intellectual with a pedagogical responsibility, did not engage with the cultural threat Egyptians were feeling because of political occupation. The critique might have implied that while Egyptian readers could rise to protect the threat perceived by the French to French values in World War II, the French could not rise to the threat perceived by Egyptians to Egyptian values post-World War II.

'Whose values?' would become the biggest cultural question in Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s. Undoubtedly, in light of political occupation and imperialism, it is a central one. Yet the question can at times be simplistic and unfair. Perhaps it is equally important to ask 'what values?' and 'why values?'

The response of Francophone Egyptians to protect French culture pointed out what a 'universal' culture might entail. A threat to museums, libraries, ancient sites, and cultural actors represents a potential loss for everyone who is interested in literature. The move to protect literature from that threat, then, indicates that this literature or work is a shared value. This can be seen in the Middle East today, where the destruction of ancient sites such as Palmyra is articulated on an international level as a cultural loss for the world. Like the many exiled European intellectuals during the two World Wars who stressed the universality and harmonious plurality of European values in a European literature that seemed to them under threat, many Middle Easterners in their respective places of exile insist on the inherent cosmopolitanism and liberality at the heart of Middle Eastern literature at the same time as the geographical Middle East rages with sectarian violence.

In the university set up, values can be described as a pedagogical encounter that engenders a kind of respect towards multilingual literatures and therefore enables us to compare them on an equal plane. Once we have reached a point through pedagogy,

mentorship, or apprenticeship at which we look at another literature as important in its values, as something familiar, once the threat of that literature's disappearance becomes a threat to our civilizational comfort, then that literature becomes world literature, and that culture can be compared. Universal literature is not just a literature that we are ready to appreciate on an aesthetic or even moral level, but a literature whose values we are ready to protect. This is the crisis of comparative literature for which a *world* literature that seeks to widen the grounds for comparativity potentially seeks a solution.

The claim might be made that comparative literature was invented in Alexandria by Étiemble and his colleagues, rather than in Istanbul by other scholars, but the relation between comparative literature, pedagogy, and literary apprenticeship seems more significant both in the Middle Eastern context of *adab* and for the universal context of pedagogical 'values.' Étiemble and others, when visiting professors, created pockets of pedagogies in various areas. Under the aegis of ambitious university leadership, such scholars bequeath apprentices. The excellence of the pedagogical process in Alexandria in the 1940s is testified to by the graduates of these early classes. Many of the apprentices would later become masters themselves, locally and internationally: Munīr Ramzi, Egyptian poet; M.M. Badawi, who helped found the study of modern Arabic at Oxford; world-famous novelist Edwar Kharrat; Alfred Farag, avant-garde Egyptian playwright; and Tawfīq Sāliḥ, Egyptian poet. Scholarships opened up opportunities for Egyptians from less advantaged backgrounds, giving them access to elite cosmopolitan, intellectual circles in Alexandria, and from there, the wider allegiances of world literary values (Hafez 39).

Revisiting the trajectory of comparative literature outside the West complicates the pedagogical history of comparative literature in two ways. First, European actors in non-European areas early on struck the possibility of normalizing comparative literary relations on a world level. The idea of comparing non-European languages to European ones, whether through translation, collaboration with local experts, or through institutes and periodicals, was a common suggestion not just in Alexandria and Cairo, but also in Beirut, Tangiers, Istanbul, Lisbon,[10] St. Petersburg, Peking, Buenos Aires, and elsewhere. The degree to which these intellectuals' surroundings outside of Europe actually directed their critical concerns is a moot point.

The second way these overseas pockets of pedagogy add to the heritage of what is referred to in contemporary discussions as world literature is the view from overseas. This early tutelage helped instill the ideas of literary apprenticeship between East and West, which still exist today, with the West as a model, where something called theory happens, and the East, where something called theory is used. In the case of Egypt, seventy years after independence, this is not the West's fault. In the Alexandrian case, French academia was embraced as a cultural institutional model in the shape of the modern university, and for a short time the potentials of institutionalizing comparativity within the university along non-conforming lines did appear, such as in Étiemble's *Valeurs* and the Bulletin of Alexandria University. Non-

conforming comparativities were already there in practice in the cultural meetings and events of resident Alexandrians, outside the university. Such meetings did not just offer comparisons of Arabic and English, or Arabic and French. It was, after all, Alexandria. Italian, French, Greek—and Arabic? Armenian, Hebrew, French, Turkish—and Arabic? German, Italian, Turkish—and Arabic? The possibilities were endless. The pockets of pedagogies, however (whether despite, beyond, or because of the help of Europeans), failed, after the Europeans left, to turn local non-university practices of comparative literature into a discipline—a *non-conforming* discipline that took the comparability of the languages of the world in the East for granted, and offered alternative, equally viable, grounds for comparison.

In the memory of this mythical potential, the institutionalized comparative circles today in the Middle East, which tend to focus on combinations of Arabic and one or two European languages, often English, French, and less commonly, German (Ghazoul, Seigneurie), can resound, like Palmyra, of a great loss. This loss—whether bemoaned by scholars of cosmopolitan Alexandria as a xenophobic expulsion of non-Arab, non-Muslims in the Nasserite period (Mansel, Ilbert and Yannakakis, Zananiri), or rationalized by others as a loss that was inevitable because cosmopolitanists were complicit with colonialism (Halim, Fahmy)—remains, nevertheless, a loss. It is prudent to remember, however, that comparative literature in Europe prospered in the losses of World War II, or earlier, the losses of the Napoleonic Wars. If the remaining multiple languages of the Middle East, ancient or modern, dead or alive, from Coptic to Kurdish and from Greek to Berber, are taken into consideration in the comparative circles of the Middle East as viable voices in the canon as much as Western languages have been, then the memory of that loss, for the ingenious comparatist of world literature, might only promise greater potential. This time, in face of current regional violence, with the insights of history behind us and the potentials of reading in translation before us, there is no excuse, no justification for universal *valeurs not* to prosper in local soil.

Notes

1. Gaston Zananiri (1905-96) was born in Alexandria, of mixed Ottoman and Greek Catholic descent. Zananiri was a strong proponent of a united culture of "Mediterraneanism," and often wrote about the potentials of uniting Alexandria with the cultures of the Mediterranean basin, describing it as a city with "windows open to the Mediterranean and closed to Egypt" (Zananiri 15). See his autobiography, *Entre Mer et Désert: Mémoires*.

2. Association founded by Gaston Zananiri, Enrico Terni (born in Alexandria, of Jewish-Italian descent) and Mohamed Naghi (born in Alexandria, of Egyptian descent).

3. *La Réforme* was published in Alexandria between 1876 and 1964; *Le progrès égyptien* was founded in Cairo in 1893; and *Le journal d'Alexandrie* was published in Alexandria between 1910 and 1960. For a reading of Étiemble's reception in these three newspapers, see Lançon.

4. This is commonly reported in biographical information on Étiemble. See, however, the interview with

Étiemble by Bernard Pivot for the programme *Apostrophes* in 1988 on Étiemble's posting in Egypt, and on his ideas of 'valeurs.'

5. See the Bulletin of Alexandria University (*majallat kulliyat al-ādāb*), founded in 1943 and still running today. The first issues were printed in Cairo before the printers were moved to Alexandria. As can be seen in the issues during its first decade, most of the faculty members, including Étiemble, Grenier, Combe, Zaloscer, et al. were published in its pages.

6. To the French can be added the Anglophone counterparts, whose names sometimes appear besides the French writers in publications related to the University. (There seemed to be much less literary comparison of English and French, however, than there was of Arabic and French or Arabic and English, respectively.) Anglophone scholars visiting and teaching at University in overlapping times include Robert Graves, John Wisdom, the classical archaeologist Alan Wace, who worked for British intelligence, Robert Liddell, D.J. Enright, John Heath-Stubbs, and the Irish poet Desmond O'Grady.

7. See Isstaif's interview with the late Professor Mustafa Badawi of Oxford University, in which he describes the cultural scene surrounding Alexandria University when he was a student there.

8. This can be seen in the list of those sponsoring Étiemble's journal *Valeurs* and whose names were printed on the flyleaf. Sponsors increased in number every issue, and often included the same community names who designed public gardens, founded educational establishments, owned prime business ventures and participated in the Municipal Council in Alexandria, such as Debbane, Salama, Circurel, Groppi, de Saab, Salvago, Sednaoui, El Kayem, and Hazan.

9. For a glimpse at Tāha Ḥusayn's idea of world literature in Arabic, and the literary potential of viewing the Islamic world as an amalgam of civilisations, see Ḥusayn's letter to André Gide, published in *Valeurs* 4 (January 1946): "Cette tranquillité qui vous étonne [n'est pas] le fait de l'Islam, mais bien plutôt une importation étrangère. Vos rapports avec les musulmans […] ne vous ont pas permis de voir l'angoisse que l'Islam a soulevée dans toute l'Arabie pendant les deux premiers siècles de l'Hégire, angoisse qui a donné à la littérature mondiale la poésie amoureuse la plus lyrique et la plus mystique. Vous avez été amené à croire que l'Islam donne plus qu'il ne reçoit, et ce n'est pas exact: il a beaucoup donné parce qu'il a beaucoup reçu. Il a commencé par recevoir Judaïsme et Christianisme; puis L'Hellénisme, les civilisations iranienne et hindoue. Tout cela il l'a assimilé, en a fait une chose arabe, lui a fait donner ce qu'il pouvait donner et l'a transmis à l'Occident bien avant le XVe siècle. Quand on est arrivé à accomplir une telle tâche, on peut recevoir la culture de l'Europe moderne" (130).

10. I am indebted to Theo D'haen for this observation.

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