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5

Poetry

The city of Medina in Saudi Arabia, where the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad is located, hosts between two and three million visitors during the season of the annual pilgrimage to nearby Mecca. Among the many shops that do brisk business there are bookstores. Their shelves are crammed with the kinds of books one might expect to find in the vicinity of a revered religious shrine: Qur'ans, biographies of the Prophet Muhammad, books on Islamic law, and manuals on religious practice. Remarkably, one can also typically find collections of poetry by Abu al-Tayyib, nicknamed al-Mutanabbi (915–965). This is remarkable because he is not a religious poet at all, but rather the *enfant terrible* of Arabic poetry, an individual whose very moniker signals this, since “al-Mutanabbi” means “the would-be prophet,” or “the man who fancies himself a prophet.” But then, poetry is inextricably linked to Arab identity and if one is going to stock a single poet in a bookshop, even if it is a religious bookshop adjacent to the tomb of the Prophet, then it is very likely that it will be al-Mutanabbi, often touted as the greatest of all Arab poets.

Among classical poets, that is, those who composed poetry in formal literary Arabic using classical poetic models, motifs, meters, and rhymes, only a few can rival al-Mutanabbi in fame. One of them, however, is the poet Imru al-Qays (sixth century), a pre-Islamic Arabian prince and bon vivant, who was reviled by Muhammad as a denizen of Hellfire. Despite the Prophet's personal condemnation, in a bookshop directly opposite the main entrance to the Grand Mosque in Mecca the only literature to be found are a few volumes of poetry, including a celebrated collection of pre-Islamic odes that includes Imru al-Qays's most famous poem, one that opens with a verse that may well be the single best-known line of Arabic poetry:

Halt, my two friends! Let's weep together in remembrance of the beloved and the traces of her encampment, here by the edge of the sand-dunes between Dakhul and Hawmal.

Nearly as famous is the thirteenth-century Egyptian mystical poet, al-Busiri (1211–1294), whose “Mantle Ode” remains one of the most widely circulated texts in Arabic in the world. Al-Busiri composed this lengthy poem of praise to the Prophet after Muhammad appeared to him in a dream, wrapped his mantle around him, and thereby miraculously cured him of paralysis.

What do al-Mutanabbi, al-Busiri, and Imru al-Qays have to do with poetry in the modern Arab World? For centuries, educated Arabs have been exposed to and schooled in their poetic heritage from a very young age, a heritage that extends back some 1,500 years. Almost all modern educated Arabic speakers can quote the lines translated above, as well as lines by modern poets writing in literary Arabic. For many Arabs, being able to quote poetry by heart is not simply part of being cultured, it is part of being Arab. The place that poetry occupies in the minds and lives of Arabs is impossible to overstate – it is the single most prestigious literary form in Arab culture. Almost all medieval writers, scholars, intellectuals, and religious figures, for instance, routinely composed poetry alongside their other works, and samples of their verse are nearly always included in their biographies. And if a major modern prose writer such as the Egyptian Nobel prizewinner Naguib Mahfouz (1911–2006) did not write poetry or incorporate verse into his many novels and short stories, he nonetheless closed his Nobel Lecture by quoting verses of poetry by the eleventh-century philosopher, poet, and prose writer, al-Ma'arri (973–1058).¹ In the contemporary Arab World, classical poetry that is a thousand years old exists side by side with the most recent literary and colloquial verse.

Stop people in the street in Bahrain or Casablanca and they will almost certainly be able to cite or recite some poetry – however, this is more likely to be verses written in the local vernacular or poems that have become famous as songs. It is only highly educated Arabs who know more than a handful of verses by the canonical poets, because for those who receive little or no formal education, al-Ma'arri and al-Mutanabbi are not much more than names, recognizable perhaps, but rarely known well enough to quote. This is in part because the classical form of Arabic that these poets used in their compositions is nearly incomprehensible to anyone who did not study it extensively in school. Thus, for many Arabs

the reference to the “traces of the encampment” would not be as recognizable from Imru al-Qays’s ode composed 1,500 years ago as it is from the modern poem “The Traces” (*al-Atlāl*) by the Egyptian Romantic poet, Ibrahim Nagi (1898–1953), who reworked this ancient trope and which was subsequently made famous in song by the legendary female singer, Umm Kulthum (c. 1904–1975).

Poetry in vernacular Arabic

Written literary poetry plays an important role in modern Arab culture, but vernacular poetry is more widely known and appreciated. Various different terms are used in Arabic to refer to colloquial or vernacular poetry. One catchall term that is used to describe many forms is *zajal*, a name that was originally given to the principal vernacular poetic form in medieval Muslim Spain. Other umbrella terms from across the Arab World reflect the differing attitudes toward this poetry: popular poetry (Lebanon), “deviating” poetry (Morocco), colloquial (or “vulgar”) poetry (Egypt), Bedouin poetry (Arabian Peninsula, the Gulf), and national poetry (Lebanon, Sudan). This last term, “national,” captures a salient dimension of modern vernacular poetry, namely the role it plays in politics and in chronicling social and political realities.

The origins of vernacular poetry are not modern. Already in the fourteenth century, the historian Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) noted the wealth of poetry produced in Arabic dialects and criticized scholars for dismissing this component of the Arabic literary heritage.² For Ibn Khaldun, poetry needed to be appropriate to the situation; if a poet needed to speak to the masses, then what better way than in their daily language, rather than in a formal, literary, or even artificial Arabic. This accounts for the fact that the vernacular is widely used in genres addressed to a broad public, such as folk poetry, epic poetry, laments, elegies, love songs, and poems of political protest.

Much of the poetry that Arabs know by heart, they have heard or listened to in person (in homes, at gatherings, at festivals), through recordings (records, cassette tapes, CDs, MP3s), on the airwaves (radio, TV), and, in recent times, via the Internet (audio- and video-sharing sites). Published collections of poetry in colloquial Arabic (previously a rarity) are increasingly becoming available, but the main mode of access to this repertoire remains listening. This is quite different from, for example, English-language poetry in England or the United States, where the

populace does not typically interact with poetry through such media, but rather through print. Arabic poetry, whether in the vernacular or in the more formal literary language, is in this respect more akin to English folk, protest, or rap song than it is to English literary verse, as it is an art that exists primarily in aural form.

There is nonetheless a tradition of writing and publishing vernacular poetry. ‘Abdallah al-Nadim (d. 1896), for example, was a major composer and performer of *zajals*. His peripatetic career included contributing to and founding satirical newspapers in the 1880s and 1890s and participating in the ‘Urabi Revolt, an uprising against the ruler of Egypt – the Khedive Tawfiq Pasha – who was seen to be excessively influenced by European values.³ Al-Nadim was imprisoned, exiled, and eventually given a sinecure in Istanbul.

Some vernacular poets, such as the nineteenth-century Algerians, Tahir ibn Hawwa’ and Muhammad Bilkhayr, remain little known and receive virtually no scholarly attention.⁴ The Sudanese colloquial poet, Muhammad Ahmad Abu Sinn Hardallu (d. 1917), on the other hand, became so famous that the couplet form in which he wrote (*dūbayt*) has come to be known as a *ḥardallū*. Similarly, the Iraqi poet/composer Hajj Zayir (d. 1920) invented his own verse forms, which are still sung today.

Perhaps the most well-known vernacular poet across the Arab World is Bayram al-Tunisi (1893–1961), who wrote in both Egyptian and Tunisian vernacular Arabic. Like his predecessors, he founded satirical newspapers, criticized regimes and their lackeys, and was exiled, first to Tunisia and France and later to Syria. Besides political commentary, his poetry also described the trappings of modernizing technology and society (especially in the *maqama*, a virtuoso genre in rhymed prose), exposed the poverty of the working classes, and caricatured religious officials and clerics. The following are verses from a poem in which he faults a religious official for opposing the setting up of food cooperatives for the poor:

In neither mosque nor cloister have I seen one like you prowl.
 You’re known as “scholar,” “Muslim,” yet at doing good you scowl.
 As long as Your Grace dines so well on cutlets and fine fowl,
 You leave the maize and radishes to fill the sheep’s foodpan.⁵

Al-Tunisi’s achievements in vernacular poetry influenced revolutionary poets of the subsequent generation, especially Salah Jahin (1930–1986), who, like al-Tunisi, privileged the *zajal*, wrote for TV and radio, and composed songs; and Fu’ad Haddad (1927–1985), who explored other forms

such as the *mawwal* (a genre filled with intricately rhymed puns) and who was influenced by French experimental poetry and Islamic mysticism. Like his compatriots, Haddad embraced political resistance, even outside of Egypt. It is not surprising, then, that the recent protests and revolutions in the Arab World have been accompanied, occasioned, and immortalized by poetry. Salah Jahin's poem, "Photograph," celebrating the end of the Suez Crisis of 1956, was sung by protesters in Tahrir Square in Cairo in early 2011. Another poem of his heard in Tahrir Square, and put to song, went as follows:

If Injustice has enjoyed long nights
Justice will mark the coming days.
No matter how brutal injustice gets,
It will someday be abolished.
For how can it last,
When only God is Everlasting?⁶

These lines are reminiscent of perhaps the most famous of all resistance verses, from the poem "Life's Will," written in the 1920s by the Tunisian Romantic poet, Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi (1909–1934), and regularly reprised and repeated during times of protest, revolution, and revolt:

When people choose
To live by life's will,
Fate can do nothing but give in;
The night discards its veil,
All shackles are undone.⁷

There is also a tradition of criticizing Western leaders and policies in verse, though now and again a Western personality is the object of praise. The poet, Muhammad Fanitil al-Hajaya, a Bedouin from a small village in Jordan, composes frequently about foreign politicians. In one poem, "A Bedouin Poem on the War in Iraq," he praises George Galloway, a British politician who, after being expelled by his party, successfully won a parliamentary seat on an anti-Iraq War, pro-Arab, anti-British government platform:

So stick to your guns, you're a civilized voice
And cock a deaf ear to the barking dogs' threats!
The market their consciences soon overcame,
Selling their honour for oil and hard cash;
With skill and aplomb, George, you put them to shame,
That hornets' nest, Congress, faced down with panache!⁸

Song has been inseparable from vernacular poetry and some of the most famous vernacular poets owe a large part of their renown to musical versions of their works. In the case of Ahmad Fu'ad Nigm (b. 1929), his poetry was made famous by the blind Egyptian singer, Shaykh Imam (1918–1995), whose songs were banned for decades for their revolutionary content and circulated primarily on cassette tape, passed hand to hand, rather than being broadcast on the radio.

The most influential and the most widely known vernacular poetry across the Arab World has been from Egypt and North Africa, facilitated in large part by the robust music and film industries based there. But when it comes to modern poetry in literary Arabic, the laurels can be claimed by poets of the Fertile Crescent (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine). It is worth pointing out, however, that it is not particularly useful to think of Arabic poetry as bifurcated into two distinct categories (vernacular versus literary) for there are in fact many different registers of literary Arabic (think of the difference between a BBC news broadcast and the poetry of the late Cornish poet, Charles Causley) as well as regional variations (think of the difference between the poetry of the American Robert Frost and that of Derek Walcott from St. Lucia). What is more, there is poetry that straddles both, such as Yemeni *humayni* poetry, which is in literary Arabic but which does not conform strictly to traditional rules and takes its inspiration from vernacular forms. There is also the *muwashshah*, a complex, rhyming strophic form from medieval Muslim Spain that originally mixed literary Arabic, colloquial Arabic, and Romance dialect. The *muwashshah* has influenced vernacular poetry and music in many regions and also has a long history in Hebrew. So, while we may at times speak of literary versus vernacular poetry, it is more realistic to think of Arabic poetry as existing on a spectrum ranging from hip street verse to formal erudite poetry.

Poetry in literary Arabic

Like vernacular poetry, poetry in literary Arabic reaches back into the past, looks forward into the future, scrutinizes influences from within and without, and struggles with issues of identity. Importantly, the engagement with identity in the past century or so has been dominated by reflection on the nation (notably its formation in the wake of European colonialism and presence) and nationalism (in the ferment of Pan-Arabism, Pan-Turkism, and Zionism). As one social historian and

cultural commentator has aptly observed, the "renaissance of Arabic literature began in the late nineteenth century and has paralleled the growth of Arab nationalism, inspiring it, sustaining it, hymning it, and mourning it to this day."⁹

The generally accepted phases in the history of modern literary Arabic poetry are: an age of Neoclassical poetry (roughly 1870–1930); an age of Romantic poetry (roughly 1910–50); and an age of Modernist poetry (roughly 1950–present).¹⁰ These phases are by no means discrete and all three styles continue to be composed to this day, as is clear from submissions to contests and competitions, such as the Mirbad Festival of Poetry in Baghdad. In addition, many poets choose to write in more than one mode. So it is possible to think of poets operating in these three modes as looking to three different sources of inspiration. The Neoclassical poets looked back to the medieval heritage of the "golden age," the ninth to eleventh centuries, considered by many to be the pinnacle of Classical Arabic literature. They valorized this period above all others, a stance facilitated by the widespread view that cultural production and output had been in decline since then, a view espoused by educated Arabs in order to underscore the "Awakening" or "Renaissance" (*Nahda*) of the late nineteenth century. The Neoclassical poet, Mahmud Sami al-Barudi (1839–1904), for example, produced an anthology of classical poetry that stuck closely to medieval models. The bulk of "golden age" poetry had been produced for patrons and purse at the courts of rulers and high officials, and this was also true of the Neoclassical poets. Some became famous, such as the Egyptian "prince of poets," Ahmad Shawqi (1868–1932), who was retained by the Khedive of Egypt, while others equally skilled remained less well known, such as the Greek Catholic poet, Butrus Karama (1774–1851), who served an emir in Lebanon.

The Lebanese poet Khalil Mutran (1872–1949) is widely regarded as the figure who served as a bridge between the declining Neoclassical and the innovating Romantic modes in Arabic poetry. In this, Mutran was helped by his exposure to European literature (especially French), by his abiding interest in the theater (as both a producer and an accomplished translator of playwrights such as Shakespeare), and by his view that a poem should not be imitative, but rather should possess vision and unity. Given all this, it is no wonder that Mutran was all but revered by Ahmad Zaki Abu Shadi (1892–1955), a major painter, scientist, and poet of the Romantic movement. Abu Shadi is best remembered and lauded for his work with the Apollo Group, an Egyptian literary society devoted

to the promotion of literature and to cooperation between Arab writers. Its monthly magazine, *Apollo* (1932–4), was shortlived but influential. Although poets such as Nagi and al-Shabbi (both already mentioned), and the Sudanese Muhammad al-Mahjub (1908–1976), published in *Apollo*, detractors attacked the Apollo Group for being excessively reliant on Western models and for being elitist, in spite of the fact that, in reality, they were cosmopolitan and inclusive.

Remarkably, it was a group of Romantic poets based in the West who were the real harbingers of the changes that modern and modernist Arabic poetry was to experience. These were mostly Levantine, mostly Christian, émigré (*mahjar*) poets working in North and South America at the turn of the twentieth century. Most notable among them were Kahlil Gibran (Jubran Khalil Jubran, 1883–1931) and Iliya Abu Madi (1889–1957), though there were many others. These writers too formed an association, known as the "Bond of the Pen" (*al-Rābiṭa al-Qalamīyya*). They founded Arabic newspapers, literary magazines, and an Arabic publishing house in New York, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Buenos Aires. At least one *mahjar* writer, Gibran, also became widely read and successful in English: his poetic prose book, *The Prophet* (1923), though not regarded by critics as his best work, has been translated into forty languages (including into Arabic, by Yusuf al-Khal [1917–1987]) and has never been out of print.

Modernist poets, like Adonis (ʿAlī Ahmad Saʿīd, b. 1930), acknowledged the link between the innovative writings of Gibran and poets like himself. At a 1961 conference in Rome, Adonis famously described Arab poets as living for centuries in a closed world, always turning or returning to the past. For Adonis, the modern Arab poet had to be, in his famous formulation, a new flame from an old fire. This radical view makes the poet something of a prophet, an aspect that is evident in two of Adonis's most highly regarded works, a collection of psalmic poems titled, *Songs of Miḥyār the Damascene* (*Aghānī Miḥyār al-Dimashqī*), and the complex, multivocal intertext, "The Book" (*al-Kitāb*), a work Adonis attributes to al-Mutanabbi. Numerous poems from other collections also feature a prophetic character, including one of Adonis's earliest poems, and arguably a pivotal one in the history of modern Arabic poetry, namely "The New Noah" (1957). The second half of this bipartite poem reads:¹¹

If time started anew,
and waters submerged the face of life,
and the earth convulsed, and that god

rushed to me, beseeching, "Noah, save the living!"
 I would not concern myself with his request.
 I would travel upon my ark, removing
 clay and pebbles from the eyes of the dead.
 I would open the depths of their being to the flood,
 and whisper in their veins
 that we have returned from the wilderness,
 that we have emerged from the cave,
 that we have changed the sky of years,
 that we sail without giving in to our fears –
 that we do not heed the word of that god.
 Our appointment is with death.
 Our shores are a familiar and pleasing despair,
 a gelid sea of iron water that we ford
 to its very ends, undeterred,
 heedless of that god and his word,
 longing for a different, a new, lord.

Noah stands for the possibility of renewal after deluge. By speaking to, as, and through Noah, the poet can dispense with the need to stake any ethno-religious claim. The appeal of Noah thus also lies in the fact that he is antediluvian, living long before the existence of Jews, Arabs, Christians, and Muslims.

The symbolic use by many of the poets already mentioned of ancient Near Eastern figures, such as the Mesopotamian god of the harvest, Tammuz, is also an example of reliance on a Near Eastern mytho-poiesis. Another such figure deployed to powerful rhetorical effect is Christ, and not just by Christian poets such as Gibran, Tawfiq al-Sayigh (1924–1971), or Khalil Hawi (1919–1982) – translator, incidentally, of Eliot's *Four Quartets* into Arabic – but also by non-Christians, such as the Iraqi 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Bayati (1926–1999), another pioneer of free verse in Arabic.¹² If Bayati's use of masks or personas in his poetry reflects his need to find a way to channel his strong opposition to the social and political conditions in the Arab World, an opposition that also resulted in imprisonment and exile, this in no way diminished the poetry of one of the great voices in modern Arabic literature.

The use of symbolic language and imagery and the experience of exile is also apparent in the verse of Palestine's most celebrated poet, Mahmoud Darwish (1941–2008). Darwish was born near Acre and was active in the Israeli Communist Party as a young man before leaving Israel in 1971

for Beirut, Paris, and Tunis. In February 1983, when delegates of the Palestinian Liberation Organization met at a party congress being held in Algiers, Yasser Arafat – who had just escaped the 1982 siege and bombardment of Beirut – had serious concerns about his ability to retain leadership of the movement. The London-based *Sunday Times* reported as follows:

Late one night after hours of speech making, the fog of revolutionary rhetoric lifted, briefly. Arafat suddenly rushed out of the hall, his bodyguards jogging beside him, and tore away in a motorcade. Rumours flew that he had resigned.

The truth was more extraordinary. The world's most famous guerilla leader had gone to fetch a poet. He returned holding the hand of Mahmoud Darwish who began at midnight to declaim his latest poem, on the battle of Beirut. It went on until 2 a.m. The hundreds of delegates listened with rapt attention. Arafat stared at Darwish with almost childlike adoration. When after the final stanza Darwish slumped exhausted into his chair, Arafat went to the microphone and spoke a little poem of his own. "The revolution is not just guns; it is the pen of the poet, the needle of the woman who makes scarves for the fighters." He sat down to thunderous applause.¹³

The plight and cause of the Palestinian people is deeply felt by Arab poets, Palestinian and non-Palestinian alike. Darwish's poetry is a poetry now of loss, now of nostalgia, now of hope, and always in simple and beautiful literary Arabic, but one that is highly symbolically charged. Like so many who chose to mourn Palestine in verse, Darwish was haunted by the *Nakba* (Catastrophe) of 1947–48, which resulted in the displacement of some 700,000 Palestinians. But Darwish was both defiant and optimistic for a place he came to describe as "Eden." Darwish's recourse to religious imagery included a poem directly inspired by the Joseph story in the Qur'an, one in which the rejection of Joseph by his brothers was intended to mirror the rejection of Palestinians. Although the poem included words from the Qur'an, it was not controversial until the Lebanese singer Marcel Khalife (b. 1950) put it to music and performed it as a song, something commonly done with Darwish's and countless others' poems. Khalife was charged with blasphemy, but was eventually exonerated by the courts. The Muslim religious right may object to poetry that samples the Qur'an or that appears to challenge it¹⁴ – it is also the case that much poetry is written on religious themes out of pious devotion, such as the countless panegyrics of the Prophet Muhammad

in both literary and vernacular Arabic – but many with strong religious views will not tolerate music.

Modern/ist poetry in literary Arabic emerged from the discernible rupture that took place in the 1950s, one that included the abandoning of the formal constraints that characterized all earlier poetry (especially the use of a single end-rhyme that is a primary characteristic of Classical Arabic poetry), an attention to newer and modern themes, greater discussion about questions of modernity and modernism (*ḥadātha*), and a desire for experimentation with form. One poet credited with calling for a departure from traditional forms was someone whose early poems were decidedly Romantic and deeply indebted to the English Romantics in particular, namely the Iraqi poet, Nazik al-Mala'ika (1923–2007). Although she retained the two-part line of classical poetry (i.e., broken by a medial caesura), she sought to liberate Arabic poetry through free verse (*shī'r ḥurr*), notably in a collection titled *Splinters and Ashes* (*Shazāyā wa-ramād*, 1949), though she remained attached to the classical foot (*taf'īla*) as a metrical building block in her compositions. Her compatriot Badr Shakir al-Sayyab (1926–1964) for his part emphasized the need to break free from the constraints of the sixteen Classical Arabic meters and devise new metrical systems, such as the one he showcased in *Song of Rain* (*Unshūdat al-matar*, 1960), his signature collection and a signal collection in the history of modern Arabic poetry. It opens:

Your eyes are two palm tree forests in early light
Or two balconies from which the moonlight recedes
When they smile, your eyes, the vines put forth their leaves
And lights dance ... like moons in a river
Rippled by the blade of an oar at break of day;
As if stars were throbbing in the depths of them.¹⁵

Al-Sayyab's call for reform in poetics went hand in hand with commitment to political reform, activism, and opposition, a commitment (*iltizām*) that is a hallmark of almost all modern Arabic poetry. This commitment to political issues did not in al-Sayyab's case taint the beauty and symbolism of his poetry; in this he was by his own admission influenced by early Romantic poets in literary Arabic and by modernist European poets such as T. S. Eliot and Edith Sitwell.

The imprint of Eliot can be found everywhere in modern Arabic literary poetry, from the verse drama of the Egyptian poet and playwright Salah 'Abd al-Sabur (1931–1981) – who defended Western influence on

Arab poets in his 1969 autobiographical work, *My Life in Poetry* (*Ḥayātī fī al-shī'r*) – to the symbolist poetry and critical writings of Adonis and Yusuf al-Khal (1917–1987). Adonis and al-Khal were foundational figures for modernist Arabic poetry, not only with their oeuvres, but also as critics, translators, and as the founders of two major forums for modern and experimental poetry. Al-Khal ran the highly influential journal, *Poetry* (*Majallat Shi'r*), and its associated publishing house, and later Adonis started *Stations* (*Mawāqif*), both of which were also platforms for experimental art. It should also be noted that although they wrote in, and translated foreign works into, literary Arabic, the editors of *Shi'r* also approvingly published a vernacular poem by Michel Trad (1912–2009), “It’s a Lie” (*Kāzibī*) in which he mocks common tropes of literary poetry. It opens:

Lies! What lies!
They're saying the moon brought me a doll,
Threw it like a bouquet through the window

That with one hand he set
Two daffodils in my hair,
Exploring my chest with the other
And said it was hot,
Let's unfasten two buttons.¹⁶

This approbation for vernacular poetry by Adonis, al-Khal, and the *Shi'r* group was not matched, however, by an interest in composing such poetry. In part this was because in order to break with the poetic conventions of literary Arabic they believed they needed to do so in literary Arabic itself.

Khalida Sa'īd has characterized modern Arabic poetry as one of repudiation and questioning, and preoccupied with identity. Increasingly, poets of the avant-garde and of the “new generation,” as they are called in Egypt, are looking beyond repudiation, questioning, and even identity.¹⁷ This is not to say that social criticism and political critique have been abandoned or that contemporary poets are no longer decrying despotism, tyranny, and oppression, but rather that daily life and personal preoccupations have also come to the fore. Iman Mersal (b. 1966), an Egyptian poet who lives in Edmonton, Canada, and others like her are at the vanguard of this more personal poetry – for want of a more apposite characterization. Her poem, “Oranges,” opens:¹⁸

I face the mirror to scrub off
 the scent that two lips left on my neck.
 And though there is no need to document the sadness,
 I still indulge in counting tears
 by examining the paper tissues I threw in the wastebasket.
 I think my eyes are prettier than the image I have of them
 and decide that understanding is more beautiful than forgiveness.
 I was with you
 on a journey to a holy place.
 I am wearing a dress of a sixteenth-century French princess
 when you take me away from the convent.
 You push me to climb a staircase hanging in air.
 And since this is impossible with all those spangles,
 I begin taking off petticoats
 and climb,
 corsets,
 belts shaped like bows
 that turn into dead butterflies when I release them,
 and climb.

Another poet who engages with the personal is Salwa al-Neimi, for example in the following short poem, "Dracula," from the 1996 collection *Temptation of my Death*:

Protruding, rebelling against the lips,
 the long, pointed, ill-fated fang stared at me,
 (in spite of awkward attempts to hide it).
 Stealing adolescent glances,
 I dreamed it pierced me, pushing deep in the base of my neck.
 I bit my lower lip, flushed,
 but not before blushing under its spell.
 Yesterday,
 Yesterday when he smiled at me, with teeth in perfect alignment
 (dentistry can work miracles),
 I turned my apostate face,
 and squinting, pretended to watch passers-by.¹⁹

Arab(ic) poetry in English

Modern Arabic poetry in English translation was first published in a few multi-poet anthologies, all of which focused exclusively on poetry in literary Arabic – there are still no multi-poet anthologies of vernacular

poetry in English translation. In 1974, Mounah Khouri and Hamid Algar edited and translated seventy-nine poems by thirty-five poets, sequenced chronologically from Gibran and Ameen Rihani (1876–1940) to Darwish and his compatriot Harun Hashim Rashid (b. 1930). In 1976, Issa Boullata published an English-only anthology of his translations of fifty-five poems by twenty-two poets, divided by country (Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Sudan, and Palestine).²⁰ In 1987, Salma Jayyusi commissioned and published an anthology consisting of 295 poems by eighty-six writers, and translated by tandems of eleven first translators (including Jayyusi herself) and seventeen second translators (including Naomi Shihab Nye, W. S. Merwin, and Richard Wilbur). Jayyusi divided her anthology into two chronological sections: "Poets before the Fifties" and "Poets after the Fifties." In 1988, John Mikhail Asfour published an anthology of his own translations of ninety-six poems by thirty-five poets, which he divides more instructively than his predecessors into "The free verse movement," "Tammuz rediscovered," and "Resistance movement." 'Abdullah al-Udhari also used an explanatory organization in his 1986 anthology, dividing 101 poems by twenty-three poets into "Taf'ila Movement (Iraqi School): 1947–57," "Majallat Shi'r Movement (Syrian School): 1957–67," "Huzairan Experience: 1967–82," and "Beirut Experience: 1982–." In 2001, Nathalie Handal produced the first major anthology of women's poetry consisting of one or two selections each by eighty-three poets.²²

Mahmoud Darwish is the most translated poet, not only in terms of his individual poems, but also in terms of individual collections, which is to say that a great number of his individual collections have been translated into English. In part this is because of the appeal of marketing and disseminating the poetry of Palestine, and in part because of the accessibility of his poetry. Someone like Muhammad 'Afifi Matar (1935–2010), though critically acclaimed, is less well served in translation because he can be difficult to read, exhibiting what the Arab critics call "the (apparently) easy (but effectively) elusive."²³ Things are changing and many poets are now better served in English, often by translators who are themselves accomplished and award-winning poets in English as well as in Arabic, such as Fady Joudah and Khaled Mattawa. Indeed, the Anglophone Arab poetic voice is now a fundamental component of the Arab(ic) literary landscape.

Handal's anthology mentioned above includes Arabic voices such as al-Mala'ika and Mersal, but also Arab-American ones, such as Etel Adnan

(b. 1925) – who coined the term “Arab-American” – and Mohja Kahf (b. 1967), both of whom also write in English and in prose. One simply cannot think critically about Arab(ic) poetry in the twenty-first century without thinking about poetry by Arabs writing in languages other than Arabic.²⁴ In 2007, Fady Joudah won the Yale Series of Younger Poets Competition, a prize that has in the past gone to Adrienne Rich, W. S. Merwin, John Ashbery, and Carolyn Forché, who, like Joudah, is a translator of Darwish.²⁵ The Radius of Arab American Writers Inc. (RAWI) in North America has been an important forum and Arab writers writing in English also have two important English-language journals that promote their work and the critical study of it, namely *Al-Jadid*, based in California, and, to a lesser extent, *Banipal*, based in London and also associated with major prizes and regular poetry readings. Though not a literary outlet, the independent e-zine, *Jadaliyya*, for which Sinan Antoon serves as a cultural editor, carries many important articles about poetry.

It is, of course, not possible to know what the future holds for Arabic poetry. It may be that technology will help blur the distinctions between the vernacular and the literary or that the political will give way to the lyrical and the personal. Whatever course or courses Arabic poetry takes, what is certain is that it will adapt to new circumstances and cyberways and will continue to be, in print and aurally, a vibrant tradition in world poetry.

Notes

- 1 In Sture Allén (ed.), *Nobel Lectures: Literature, 1981–1990* (Singapore: World Scientific, 1993), p. 125.
- 2 Cited in Marilyn Booth, “Poetry in the Vernacular,” in M. M. Badawi (ed.), *Modern Arabic Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 463.
- 3 Ziad Fahmy, *Ordinary Egyptians: Creating the Modern Nation through Popular Culture* (Stanford University Press, 2011), pp. 55–59.
- 4 Booth, “Vernacular,” p. 467, n. 12.
- 5 Marilyn Booth, *Bayram al-Tunisi’s Egypt: Social Criticism and Narrative Strategies* (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 1990), pp. 602–3.
- 6 Noha Radwan, “Egypt’s Revolution, in Verse,” *The Chronicle Review*, 57/28 (March 18, 2011), p. B20; last line adapted from Radwan’s translation.
- 7 Translated by Sargon Boulous and Christopher Middleton, in Salma Khadra Jayyusi (ed.), *Modern Arabic Poetry: An Anthology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 97.
- 8 Clive Holes and Said Salman Abu Athera, *Poetry and Politics in Contemporary Bedouin Society* (American University in Cairo Press, 2009), p. 188.
- 9 Basim Musallam, *The Arabs: A Living History* (London: Collins/Harvill, 1983), p. 33.

- 10 M. M. Badawi, *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry* (Cambridge University Press, 1975); Shmuel Morch, *Modern Arabic Poetry 1800–1970* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976); Salma Khadra Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry*, 2 vols. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978); Roger Allen, *The Arabic Literary Heritage: the Development of its Genres and Criticism* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 103–217; Paul Starkey, *Modern Arabic Literature* (Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 42–114.
- 11 Adonis, “The New Noah,” trans. Shawkat M. Toorawa, *Poetry*, 190/1 (April 2007), pp. 21–23.
- 12 David Pinault, “Images of Christ in Arabic Literature,” *Die Welt des Islams*, 27 (1987), pp. 103–25, esp. pp. 114–25.
- 13 Cited in Musallam, *The Arabs*, p. 25.
- 14 Shawkat M. Toorawa, “Modern Arabic Literature and the Qur’an: Creativity, Inimitability... Incompatibilities?,” in Glenda Abramson and Hilary Kilpatrick (eds.), *Religious Perspectives in Modern Muslim and Jewish Literatures* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), pp. 239–57.
- 15 Translated by Lena Jayyusi and Christopher Middleton, in Stefan Sperl and Christopher Shackle (eds.), *Qasida Poetry in Islamic Asia and Africa*, 2 vols. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), vol. I, p. 132.
- 16 John Mikhail Asfour (ed. and tr.), *When the Words Burn: An Anthology of Modern Arabic Poetry 1945–1987* (Dunvegan, Ontario: Cormorant Books, 1988), p. 89.
- 17 M. M. Enani (ed. and tr.), *The New Arabic Poetry in Egypt* (Cairo: General Egyptian Book Organisation, 1988); M. M. Enani (ed. and tr.), *Angry Voices: An Anthology of the Off-beat Arabic Poetry of the 1990s in Egypt* (Cairo: State Publishing House [GEBU], 2001).
- 18 Iman Mersal, “Oranges,” translated by Khaled Mattawa, *Blackbird*, 7/2 (Fall 2008). [Available at www.blackbird.vcu.edu/v7n2/poetry/mattawa_k/oranges.htm – accessed December 23, 2014.]
- 19 Salwa Al-Neimy, “Dracula,” trans. Shawkat M. Toorawa, *Poetry*, 194/1 (April 2009), p. 62.
- 20 Issa J. Boullata (ed. and tr.), *Modern Arab poets: 1950–1975* (Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1976).
- 21 Abdullah al-Udhari (ed. and tr.), *Modern Poetry of the Arab World* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1986).
- 22 Nathalie Handal (ed.), *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology* (New York: Interlink Books, 2001).
- 23 But see Muhammad Afifi Matar, *Quartet of Joy: Poems*, trans. Ferial Ghazoul and John Verlenden (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2001).
- 24 Munir Akash and Khaled Mattawa (eds.), *Post-Gibran: Anthology of New Arab-American Writing* (West Bethesda, MD: Kitab, distributed by Syracuse University Press, 2000).
- 25 Fady Joudah, *The Earth in the Attic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008); Mahmoud Darwish, *If I Were Another*, trans. Fady Joudah (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2009).

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