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Thanks from the Editor

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Reviews


Bassam Frangieh has produced an anthology of fifty-four poems—though he himself counts only fifty-one in his introduction [2]—from eight Al-Bayati (b. 1926) collections that appeared between 1969 and 1989. The Arabic texts are reproduced on the right-hand pages and Frangieh’s translations on the left-hand ones. In its preface, Frangieh signals that Al-Bayati has been instrumental in bringing this translation to light: “he ‘not only helped . . . to clarify the meaning of the poems included in this book, but also corrected misprints and inaccuracies in the published Arabic’” (ix). With a few exceptions, the poems are—as Hisham Sharabi, Donald Herdeck, Irfan Shahid, Sanaullah Ibrahim, and Solomon Sara proclaim with much gusto on the back cover—excellently translated. I strongly recommend the book to those with a special interest in modern Arabic poetry and in the translation of that poetry. Indeed, there are so few real problems with the translations that I shall be mentioning below all those areas I found troubling. I must stress, however, that the translations are on the whole very good.

Bassam Frangieh is one of a number of critics to have observed that from The Book of Poverty and Revolution (1965) on, Al-Bayati’s tone becomes less aggressive than in his earlier collections. These collections are not drawn

from the Frangieh volume, no doubt because of the critical and translatorly attention they have already received. The tone is certainly more introspective in the later collections. For Badawi, “the facile optimism and the sardonic tone” have given “place to a quieter and more mature voice, enriched and deepened by disillusionment and the tragic complexities of experience.”

Indeed, Frangieh is drawn by this poetry “steeped in mysticism and allusion” [I], But I share Badawi’s view that “the mystical and surrealistic elements become dominant features of his style, in many places to the point of unintelligibility.” Badawi attributes this change to the influence of Adonis and suggests that the latter’s “influence helped to strengthen and confirm whatever effect on his poetry was exercised by Bayyati’s earlier fascination with the work of Marxists like Mayakovsky, Aragon, Eluard, and Neruda which, besides being Marxist, was also either futurist or surrealistic or opaquely symbolic” (Badawi 1975:215-16).

Frangieh’s introduction touches on these and other issues, provides a chronology of al-Bayyati’s life, and offers an analysis of two poems, “The Magus” and “Eye of the Sun.” But it also has sentiments like “Moreover, the Arabic language is so rich and subtle that it mocks even the most scrupulous attempts to render it effectively in translation” [1], and “a close reading of al-Bayyati’s poetry strongly suggests that for this poet, perhaps more so than for many others, art and the artist’s life are inextricably linked” [2], which make me uneasy. An introduction leaning more toward critical appraisal and less toward praise would have been more useful; and a bibliography of al-Bayyati writings would have been beneficial.

Frangieh, guided by his own “personal taste” [2], has chosen for this collection poems that “explore the themes of love, death, and exile” (ibid.), drawing from The Eyes of the Dead Dogs (1969), Writing on Clay (1970), Love Poems at the Seven Gates of the World (1971), The Book of the Sea (1973), Autobiography of the Thief of Fire (1974), Shiraz’s Moon (1975), The Kingdom of Grains (1979), and Aisha’s Orchard (1983). Love, death, and exile, otherwise disparate, are woven together by al-Bayyati in a fabric of interlacing motifs: rain, raindrops, cries, books, the desert, magic, priestesses, wandering, love-making, and, especially, masks. The following lines from the third of “Three Watercolors” are illustrative:

I die like a drop of sad rain,
Disguised in a mask of childish holidays and stubbornness
Feeling my head
While you leave with the caravan,
Practicing magic in the oasis like a priestess,
Waving the air with palm branches
For the wanderers and the sleepwalkers,
Making love to the dead [49]

Badawi has tried to explain al-Bayyati’s use of masks: “He therefore searched for suitable artistic masks in the worlds of history, symbols and myths, through which crisis could be expressed on social as well as cosmic levels. The mask, he says, is ‘the name through which the poet speaks divested, as it were, of his own subjectivity’ [3]. Among those with whom and through whom he marks himself are the ‘dead, exiled Spanish poets’ [161], of whom he sings and to whom he writes (e.g., ‘For Rafael Alberti’), and whom he rewrites (he has translated Aragon). Other masks include Siahb (‘Three Watercolors’), classical Arab poets, and his friend Nazim Hikmet.

The collection opens with a short poem entitled “The Saint” (I refer to all titles in Frangieh’s English translation), dedicated to the poet and critic Lewis ‘Awad, who died shortly before the book appeared; the Arabic is in al-Bayyati’s own handwriting. It is followed by “The City” from The Eyes of the Dead Dogs (1969). Though al-Bayyati is not like Cavafy or Adonis a poet of the city, the city is without doubt an important presence in his poetry, the locus of alienation, and sometimes the root of evil:

When the city undressed herself
I saw in her sad eyes:
The shambles of the leaders, thieves, and pawns.
I saw in her eyes:
The gallows, the prisons, and the inquisitors


I saw: the blood and the crime
I saw in her eyes: the orphan childhood
Wandering, searching in the garbage dumps

As Frangieh mentions in the Introduction [4], it is this disillusionment with the Arab city that led al-Bayāṭī to search elsewhere—in Arab history and its heroes, in medieval cities and their museums, in the monuments of antiquity, in revolutions and revolutionaries—for answers to the failure and oppression around him. Again and again, the poet returns to al-Andalus, the Alhambra, Ibn al-'Arabi, Paris, the Louvre, al-Hallāj, Christ, to Assyria and Delphi. . . This search for “lessons of the past to guide him and his generation away from the miasma of oppression” [5] has not, however, been without criticism. Salma Jayyusi, for instance, believes that in spite of “what seems to be a very diligent search for historical material, [al-Bayāṭī] sometimes toys with his findings too drastically for success.”

It is in the collection’s second poem, “Lament for the June Sun,” that we encounter the first formal departure in translation from the original Arabic; in this case, a decision to break the lines differently. As with all translatory decisions, this is an interpretive gesture, but what interpretive preference that choice reflects is not clear. There are signs, too, in this poem of some hasty rendering: “We were ground in the coffeehouses of the East by War of words” [21] is clumsy English. Mustafa Badawi has a better: “In the cafés of the East we have been ground by the war of words” (Badawi 1975: 212). And “Why did you flee?” [23] is certainly not “limid lidha bi-adhul akhlaq,” rather more at “why did you hide in the coasts of flight?” The “jir” in “jil as-sadaqat” is elided to give “the recipient of alms” [23], whereas “a generation of alma-takers” might have conveyed the Arabic more accurately.

Sometimes a word is missed or ignored. In “Something About Happiness,” for example, “il-yuqūl” “anika: mad” becomes “in order to say: He died” [29], instead of “in order to say of you: He died.” In “The Nightmare of Night and Day,” “fawqa jadrai bi-biyutī bi-haratū” is translated “upon the walls of the houses” [39] instead of “on the walls of the dilapidated houses.” In “Eye of the Sun,” “fī-salakhkhāla qabla an tawbāhu aw tumān” is rendered “and skinned her alive” [55], omitting entirely “before she was sacrificed, or died.” And should not “manfāya” be “my exile” as opposed to “exile” [55]? In “Love Poems at the Seven Gates of the World,” “al-'umālah al-jayyūdī al-jadīdah” is translated “the new money” [7], omitting “al-jayyūdah.” In “The Gypsy Symphony,” “wa asbābī lisan lakahin” is translated “became a flame” [153] instead of “became a tongue of flame.” “The time will come” [251] in “Variations on the Suffering of Farid Al-Din Al-Attar” should read “the time or age will come.” “Ta'ā wā ilayhi atīrī” in “From the Papers of Asia” is not “the birds seek refuge” [271] but “the birds seek refuge there,” “there” being the temple referred to in the preceding line.

Now and again we also come across an unfortunate enjambment. In “The Nightmare of Night and Day,” for example, we read

O you mythical river that sucks
The breasts of the city [41],

which could have duplicated the Arabic and read:

O you mythical river that suck the breasts of the city

and thereby have avoided the colloquialism in the first line. Enjambment is also the problem in “I Shall Reveal My Love for You to the Wind and the Trees”:

Here you are tightening the strings and crying the fertility
Rites’ conclusion [259]

where “fertility” could have more sensibly been on the same line as “rites’.”

In “Poesies on Separation and Death,” “al-Saturday/An enchanged cloud hovered/Over the silence of the grave” [141] is a diluted version of “Wa jallā 3-qubur/Allāmah fawqa gurāhī sāhibān muqarrīna tawārīrā yawm as-sabbāt,” which I read “The grave remained all day Saturday, an enchanted cloud hovered over its silence.” The evocation of My Fair Lady in “the plains of Spain” [39, 141] could have been avoided by using instead “the Spanish plains.” But for seven years/The lover waited every evening/At the seven gates” [143] is a weak version of “Lākin al-'ibāq/6allājiwās ansanawit as-
saba'yyadhibbu kalta masai'm un mutażari'an 'inda 'l-bawwābit as-sabai'" which I read "But the lover continued to go every evening those seven long years to the seven gates, waiting." Still in the same poem, the envoi is preceded by two unexplained dotted lines which I fear represent an omission of some kind. The condensing of Arabic that occurs now and again in the translations is often without any sense from the remainder of the poem of the interpretive reasoning behind it.

Some translations are very weak. In "Eye of the Sun,"

Fa-kalīla iim shirīd wa wa'īd ashkūrūbah 'māhū urūma wa tawhīdān sīd
Wa kalīla dīr fi 'l-tābūdī andubāah fa-dīrūdī sīd

is surely less:

Whatever name I mention, is her name I am calling
Every house I lament in the morning is her house. [53]

and more at:

Every name, whatever name I mention, it is her I am naming,
it is her name I intend
And every house I mourn in the forenoon, it is her house I intend.

Among lackluster translations must also number "How the night is desolate, and the light is avaricious in these dead streets and houses" [77] from "Love Poems at the Seven Gates of the World," which could so easily have read "How desolate the night, how miserly the light in these dead streets and houses." "The Lady of the Seven Moons" should read "Crucified on the gate of the sleeping husband's house" (conforming moreover to the Arabic "... bawwāb bāyt az-rāwī... ") in "The Lover," "Following the death of butterflies of a dead spring/Upon the table cafe" [123] could benefit from some inversion, thus: "Following the death of the butterflies of a spring dead/Upon the cafe table." And in the same poem, Frangieh's choice of "balconies" [127] for "sharafaat" in the phrase "sharafaat al-bājr al-abyad" is strained; "parapets" would have been better, or perhaps Laâbî's "promontories" ("les promontoires de la Mer Blanche") [54]. In "The Earthquake," a poem for "Abd al-Latif al-Laâbî and his colleagues," the lines

God's sun shines in your eyes when setting on the fishing boats at the Moroccan shores. [145]

are an artless version of an Arabic that I read:

The sun of the Almighty shines in your eyes when it sets on the fishing boats upon the Moroccan shores.

From "About Weddah of Yemen—Love and Death" to "I Shall Reveal My Love for You to the Wind and the Trees," twenty of the twenty-three poems selected by Frangieh are also in Autobiographie du soleur de feu, an anthology of French translations by Abd al-Latif al-Laâbî, the Moroccan poet and former political prisoner. Whether Frangieh has been inspired by Laâbî's critical sense is difficult to judge as both translators include other poems from the collections they consulted. On the whole, Frangieh is less literal (and lyrical?) than Laâbî. Compare, for instance:

Within her I sowed
A child from the people
And from the dynasty of the phoenix

for an Arabic that reads:

habnūtu šabībī 'l-jilān min ash-sha'b wa min saḥābat al-'injīl

with:

J'ai déposé dans ses entrailles la semence
D'un enfant du peuple
Et de la race de l'aïsceau-lyre.

Abd al-Latif al-Laâbî, 1987, Autobiographie du soleur de feu, poèmes traduits de l'Arauc par Abd el-Latif Laâbî (Paris: UNESCO). I am grateful to Mr. Naskoo of the Port Louis City Library for having made this volume available to me.
And for “Astaqī‘ ala yādriki—fi aṣqī‘ aynayki—wa fi sam‘ī‘lihū wuṣūjiha ‘r-raftīl,” where Frangieh has:

I lie on your breasts / in your eyes
And in the blue of their sky
I continue my voyage [133]

and Laibī:

je ne m’afferço
se tu pourest dans ses cordes de tes yeux
et dans l’azur de lour ciel
je pourrais bien pêcher [37]

In some instances it appears that Frangieh has relied on Laibī. “Ya’zaifu,” for example, is translated “made to tremble” [239], rather than “play,” perhaps following Laibī’s “fot frēmir” [100]. “Bādarrābī dī s-sukr wa qāl: anā al-khann wa anta ‘l-sāqī” cannot be “he was first called to drunkenness. I am the wine,” he says, and you are the wine bearer” [249], mirroring somewhat “Son invite fut d’abord à l’ivresse. Je suis le vin, dit-il, et tu es l’échanson” (Laibī 1987:103), and is more at: “I was invited to drunkenness. ‘I am the wine,’ he said, ‘and you the cupbearer.’” In the same poem, “Variations on the Suffering of Farīd al-Dīn al-Attar,” we read “my nakedness cries out for yours” [24] which, though it echoes “mahāndī ṭarāmā la tienne” (Laibī 1987:103), does not echo the Arabic or the earlier rendering of “w‘arrīka,” here, “w‘arrīka anāntī fl alaysī” is perhaps to be understood “I strip you before me, in my nudity.”

Curiously, in “About Wadad of Yemem—Love and Death,” Frangieh misreads the first part of “min qabb an yuqād 0.5 kunuwa fl.5-riwqītika wa 0.5-‘l-ashī‘ārī‘ Adī l-kās‘ in nājum mawjūdīim” “Before it came to be in the books...” [69], whereas it is surely “Before he came to be in the books,” i.e., Orthello, that is meant. The error is repeated in line 7. And, unless I am mistaken, “in the glacial darkness” [71] is actually meant to be “in the mantle of darkness”—I read the sequence bīr/dī‘i bardasti.” In “A Profile of a City,” “Alīnuh” should be “goddess” not “goddesses” [303]. In “Reading from the Book of Al-Tawāsin by Al-Hallaj,” Frangieh translates “yā abati” as “my Lord” [169, 171, 173, 175] and “O Lord” [169]. The allusiveness of the term—as an echo of Qur’an 12:4, and in “Fa-ismā‘ā, yā abati, lam tarfa‘ yadaka ‘s-
is a clumsy translation of an admittedly unweildy Arabic: Abdullah al-Udhari (he calls it “Profile of the Lover of the Great Bear”) manages a superior Part 2:

He was a court bleeding
Returned from his travels and burnt out

and Labi a superior Part 3:

Lorsqu’il revenait, cet enorende, j’ignoras sa provenance
et la route qu’il avait emprunté (Labi 1967:82).

Certain critics have accused al-Bayyati of writing what amounts to gibberish, decrying the obscure imagery, rooted in an imagination gone awry. It is doubtless lines like “The light exploded over/ The charming of the assassinated color on the walls!/ She departed, but spring remained on the pillow” from “Three Wasecolores” [45] that inspire these verdicts. But Frangieh is deft with these imponderables. In the case of the lines just quoted, he rewords the English when they reprise, thus “And the charming of the murdered colors” [47]. This rewording is a common and often useful device. In “Labor Pains”, “The soldiers and the tyrants stand/At the gates of the ice age world/ Hiding the flame of the night, the wine, the guitar/ With yellow newspapers” [131] later becomes “At the gates of the ice age world/ The soldiers and tyrants hide/ The flame of the night, the wine, and the guitar/ With their yellow newspapers” [131]; in “Death and the Lamp,” “before the polar star setting behind the towers” [179] becomes “before the setting of the polar star behind the towers” [183]; and the phrase “in the mud of this street haunted by ghosts” [155] in “The Gypsy Symphony” a page later becomes “In the mud of this street haunted by ghosts” [157]. Sometimes the rewording fails: in “Love Poems at the Seven Gates of the World,” “subway” [79] is first “trumpets” then, inexplicably, “loadspeakers.”

Many of Frangieh’s interpretive and interpolative gestures are apt. In the line “In it my father taught me to navigate and to read/ The rivers, the fires, the clouds, and the mirage” from “Elegy to the Unborn City” [43], it is the translator who adds the verb “to navigate.” In this poem the poet is searching for “a hidden, enchanted city,” for “the light and warmth of a future spring/ Which still lives at the bottom of the earth/ And in the sea shells,” for the reincarnation of that city on whose walls he “learned exile and wandering/ Love and death and the isolation of poverty.” It is a shame that the closing line is so clumsy: “Nor does its summer buzz with people and flies’ for “Its summer free of the hum of people and flies” (“wa lā yānīnu ṣayf al-bī n-Qābīlā”)

The seven-page, thirteen-part “Aisha’s Mod Lover” is an example of both al-Bayyati and Frangieh at their best. The Arabic seems effortlessly translated into a controlled, nuanced and fluent English: “Perhaps the polar star will become a bridge for me on the infernal river of love” [83], “I return, carrying my vows to Damascus/ Pursued, starved for love” [83], “Rubbing my face with the perfume of flowers/ Hiding my death behind Qasr al-Abd/ And the death of other cities stricken by plague/ And the demented moon of childhood” [85], “We were in exile/ Two strangers in two exiles/ Wearing shrouds/ Searching for meaning in the meaning/ And in the book of Exodus/ We did not find the orchard’s gate/ Nor the incantations to invoke the rain of voyages/ We did not find Hajar” [87], “In the times of anguish and in the era of terror/ Lit the fire of love” [89]. The only infelicities are “empire” [83] for “kalifat” instead of “caliphate,” and “upcoming tribe” [91] for “al-qabilah al-ṣaqīmah,” instead of “coming tribe.” And from “First Symphony of the Fifth Dimension,” suffice to mention “return with the dawn like a blindly voracious love, incurable, insatiable, beyond the reach of death” [243].

Technical and orthographical errors. “We separating” [65] should be “We separated.” The spelling of “Rebak” [55], spelled “rebek” on p. 87, should be standardized (“rebek” “rebek” or simply “rebeks”). “I can not” [93] should be “I cannot.” “The black stone” [83] should perhaps have been capitalized and glossed to mark the allusion. Dashes (—) are usually rendered as slashes (/) but Frangieh is not consistent, as for instance in “Metamorphoses of Necessity...” where the slashes are retained in the first two lines and then ignored thereafter; in “The Lady of the Seven Moons,” and in “The Earthquake.” On page 261, the reverse problem occurs: the use of slashes in the English where none exist in the Arabic: thus, “The poet dies by suicide / exiled / madman / slave servant in these...” for “Yāmīr ash-dhū’ qulāfī ash-margīḥīdī fī lūqūdī...”

On page 121, “Come, she said: I love you!” She extended...” should be punctuated... “I come!” She said, “I love you.” She extended... “Abdelatif” [145, dedication] is spelled “Abdelatif” in the Glossary [312]. A question mark is missing at the end of line 20 on page 145. “The word: ‘My lord,’ is

The series Perspectives on Arabic Linguistics is a series of volumes consisting of selected papers from the Annual Symposium on Arabic Linguistics, all published by John Benjamins in Series IV: Current Issues in Linguistic Theory. This volume, the sixth, is composed of eleven articles selected from the twenty-six papers presented at the Sixth Annual Symposium on Arabic Linguistics held at The Ohio State University in March of 1992. The time and location of the conference are significant in that the year is the quincentennial of Columbus' discovery of America, and the city of Columbus, Ohio, location of the host institution, celebrated the quincentennial. Scholars familiar with the history of Spain know that the date 1492 is significant in Spanish history for several other reasons, most notably the fall of Granada, signaling the end of Moorish presence in Spain, and the expulsion of the Sephardim. Although, in the context of this conference, these latter events are hardly cause for a celebration, the theme of the conference celebrates the linguistic contribution to the Hispanic peninsula of the Arabic-speaking Muslim population who settled and lived there for centuries.

The first section of the PAL VI is devoted to the theme of Hispanic-Arabic contact. It consists of five papers. The first of these is a paper by Federico Corriente which gives an overview of the current state of research on Andalusi Arabic. Corriente is well-known in this area for his 1971 study, A Grammatical Sketch of the Spanish Arabic Dialect Bundle, which became the pivotal work in establishing the linguistic basis for subsequent research in this area. This paper is valuable in providing readers unfamiliar with the topic of Andalusi Arabic linguistic study with a good sense of what has been accomplished and of its crucial importance to scholarship in areas such as text editing and interpretation and in the correct etymologization of Arabic loanwords and place names. Corriente makes the point in his paper that he prefers to use the term "Andalusi Arabic" to refer to the Arabic spoken on the Iberian Peninsula, rather than other terms in common use such as "Spanish Arabic" or "Hispano-Arabic." One reason for this is the lack of precision of these other terms, which ignore the area of Al-Andalus which now corresponds to Portugal. He states [15] that the more important reason for using this term is that...