

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO
MODERN ARABIC POETRY

Also by M. M. Badawi

Coleridge : Critic of Shakespeare

An Anthology of Modern Arabic Verse

Yahya Haqqi's The Saint's Lamp and Other Stories : a translation with an

Introduction

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Dirāsāt fi'l Shi'r wa'l Masrah

A critical introduction to

MODERN ARABIC
POETRY

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For Mieke

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PREFACE

This survey of modern Arabic poetry is based on lectures delivered at different times at the University of Oxford. It is not a full history but a critical introduction to the study of the subject. In it I have not included every modern Arabic poet of note. To do so would require a book several times the size of this volume. Given the limitations of space, then, instead of providing an indiscriminate list of names, I have chosen to deal, in a relatively discursive manner, with the works of a few selected poets, who seem to me either to have intrinsic importance or to represent new departures to an extent that justifies separate treatment. Since the criteria of such a choice are, from the very nature of things, indissolubly bound up with personal judgment or subjective experience, I am aware that there must be a few names who, in the opinion of some, should have been included. This, however, is unavoidable. But, I repeat, if I have not discussed the work of a poet in this book it is no indication that I consider his or her work to be devoid of literary merit. The reader will soon realize that for lack of space I have not been able to discuss *all* the poets whom I regarded as sufficiently interesting to merit inclusion in my *Anthology of Modern Arabic Verse* (Oxford, 1970). And there are many more poets of all categories whose work I would wish to include in my Anthology if I was compiling it now.

I am also fully aware that my attempt to trace a pattern in modern Arabic poetry is fraught with dangers. All such attempts, of necessity, involve a certain degree of simplification, and, therefore, of distortion. My excuse is that the impulse to reduce the flux and multiplicity of phenomena to some sort of intelligible order seems to answer a basic need in the human mind. When Professor Gibb wrote in the late 1920s about modern Arabic literature (in his admirable articles, collected later in *Studies on the Civilization of Islam*, 1962) he seemed to find that two labels alone could serve his purpose:

'modernists' and 'classicists'. The situation has changed considerably since then, and under the heading 'modernists' a variety of brands appeared, that seemed to cry out for special designation – although I hardly need to remind the reader that labels are useful pointers only as long as we bear in mind that no living man can be reduced to a mere label.

St Antony's College, Oxford
June 1974

M. M. B.

A note on transliteration and verse translations

For ease of reading and cost economy diacritical marks and marks indicating vowel lengthening are used on the first occurrence only of personal, place or technical names. On subsequent mentions the same spelling is used but the marks are simply omitted. The only exceptions to this rule are the *first* occurrence of a poet's name in the section devoted to a discussion of his work, the Notes and the Index in which will be given the fully transliterated forms of all names.

All verse translations used in this book are the author's own work.



Introductory

1

Not long after its appearance on the English stage in 1956, John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* was translated into Arabic and produced on the Egyptian radio. In Cairo during recent drama seasons the repertoire of the various local theatrical companies included Arabic translations of plays by authors ranging from Shakespeare, Chekhov, Sartre and Arthur Miller, to Dürrenmatt, Ionesco and Samuel Beckett. Arabic plays modelled on the theatre of the absurd have been attempted not only by the young *avant-garde*, but also by a veteran of the Arabic theatre like the Egyptian Taufiq al-Ḥakīm. In short, a cursory look at the modern Arabic theatre, as it is reflected in Cairo, is sufficient to show how open to foreign, and specifically western, influences modern Arabic culture is at present. This is clearly seen in other branches of literature as well. For instance, there is already at least one translation of Pasternak's novel *Dr Zhivago*. Most of the work of Sartre and Camus is available in Arabic. The Lebanese poetry quarterly *Shi'r* (1957–69) published together with its experimental original poetry, translations of works by established French and English poets, often side by side with original texts, even works (for instance, by John Wain) which had not yet appeared in their authors' native countries. One of the regular features of some Arabic literary reviews, like the Lebanese monthly *al-Ādāb* (1953–), was for a long time a letter from each of the main capitals of the western world, giving a summary of the main literary and cultural events there. The Cairo monthly *al-Majalla* (1957–71) devoted much space to full reviews of western publications, and it is not surprising to find on the pages of the Cairo newspaper *al-Ahrām* a discussion of the French anti-novel or a translation of a poem by Mayakovsky or Yevtushenko.

Of course, this contact with foreign culture has not always been a feature of the Arab world: in fact the present situation forms a glaring contrast to the

state of Arabic culture just over a century ago. Today no serious Arabic author can afford to be unaware of what goes on in the literary and cultural scene in the West. (In fact the most significant authors in modern Arabic literature have, almost without exception, been directly or indirectly exposed to western cultural influences.) On the other hand, one can safely say that until the first third of the nineteenth century Arabic poets and prose writers and their reading public were alike utterly ignorant of what was happening outside the ever narrowing circle of Arabic letters. The healthy curiosity which marked the golden age of Arab culture and which rendered it susceptible to the enriching foreign influence of the Greeks and the Persians had long disappeared, and the Arab's pride in his cultural achievement had by the eighteenth century hardened into a sterile feeling of complacency and self-sufficiency. The vitality had given place to stagnation and isolationism. This was particularly noticeable in the case of poetry, because of the extraordinary degree to which Arabic poetry tended to adhere to conventions.

2

For the sake of convenience Arabic poetry is usually divided into the following stages: Pre-Islamic (500–622), Early Islamic and Umayyad, from the rise of Islam to the fall of the Umayyad dynasty (622–750), Abbasid (750–1258); the Age of the Mamluks (1258–1516) and of the Ottomans (1516–1798) and finally the Modern Period (1798–). If we follow the Greek formal classification of poetry we have to describe pre-Islamic poetry as lyrical as opposed to narrative or dramatic verse. But because in it the poet is almost constantly aware of the presence of an audience, chiefly his tribe, it is social rather than individualistic verse. Moreover, although it has no epic it possesses some epic qualities in both stylistic and thematic terms. It is the poetry of an heroic tribal society revealing an heroic scheme of values. Man in tribal grouping, faced with the stark realities of life and death in the inhospitable desert, has evolved the values necessary for survival: great physical courage and boundless hospitality. However, the keen awareness of death, of the fleeting and transitory nature of things, expressed in many an elegy and elegiac poem, is generally accompanied not so much by the somewhat constricting thought that 'ever the latter end of joy is woe' as by an equally keen impulse to pack into the short span of life allotted to man some earthly pleasures: love, wine, gambling, riding and hunting – provided that in the pursuit of such pleasures one's honour and the honour of the tribe remain untainted.

These themes are dealt with in poems written in a variety of highly complex and sophisticated metres, each poem adhering to one metre and one

rhyme throughout — a clear evidence of the importance of sound patterns in Arabic poetry, which also explains why long Arabic poems are considerably shorter than long European ones. Each line of verse (roughly of the same length as an English couplet) is divided into two halves of equal metrical value, generally both rhyming only in the opening of the poem, especially in what is known as *qasīda*, which is translated as Ode. The *qasida*, unlike the fragment *qit'a*, is a poem of some length and often of a particular structure. The general pattern, exemplified especially in many of those odes regarded as the finest achievements of pre-Islamic Arabia, *al-Mu'allaqāt*, once translated as the Golden Odes, is for a poet to start with an amatory preamble called *nasīb*, described aptly as an elegiac reminiscence of love in which the poet expresses his gloomy and nostalgic meditations over the ruins of the desert encampment of the beloved. In an attempt to forget her and his suffering he goes on a journey in the desert on the back of his she-camel, the excellence of which as well as various aspects of desert life he proceeds to describe in loving detail. The poet concludes his poem either by praising himself or his tribe, by satirizing a personal or tribal foe, or by eulogizing a patron.

In pre-Islamic Arabia the formal foundations of Arabic poetry were securely laid. From the points of view of prosody and versification practically everything goes back to that early time: the well-known sixteen metres with their elaborate structure, the absence of rhymeless verse, the use of monorhyme in the serious poem and of *rajaz* (a vaguely iambic kind of metre) with its rhyming couplets for less weighty themes. There were a few formal innovations later on, in particular the emergence in Muslim Spain in the eleventh century of a complex type of strophic or stanzaic poetry known as *muwashshah*, but these were on the whole of a subsidiary character. Thematically too, the convention of the amatory prelude, together with the use of desert imagery, was followed by most poets, sometimes with a surprising degree of irrelevance, right down to the first decade of the twentieth century. The principal 'genres' or 'topics' (*aghrād*) which Arab critics subsequently regarded as comprising the domain of Arabic poetry are all there in some form or another in the pre-Islamic period: they are self-praise (*fakhr*), panegyric (*madīh*), satire (*hijā'*), elegy (*rithā'*), description (*wasf*) and amatory verse (*ghazal*). The only possible exception was religious or ascetic verse (*zuhd*), although there is plenty of moralization and gnomic verse in the work of the pre-Islamic Zuhair.

With the advent of Islam little change was immediately noticeable. Just as in early Christian Anglo-Saxon poetry Christ and his disciples were conceived of and described in terms of the pagan lord and his comitatus of thanes, so Muhammad, perhaps with lesser incongruity, was painted by his eulogists as a warrior in the old heroic manner. The main development after the estab-

lishment of the new religion is the appearance of a new type of love poetry which, however sensuous it might be, was not entirely free from a tendency towards idealization or emotionalism. A group of poets became associated with a type of love sentiment in many ways a prototype of the medieval European courtly love known as *al-hawā al 'Udhri* (after the tribe of Udhra). These were Kuthayyir, Jamīl, Ghailān and Majnūn (the Mad One) and their names became coupled in medieval literary accounts with the names of the women they loved, namely 'Azza, Buthaina, Mayya and Laila, respectively, and one of them, Majnun, became the subject of many attractive legends and in modern times, of verse drama. In their work the lovelorn poet is usually found complaining of his desperate passion for an idealized woman who is placed beyond his reach, but to whom he is eternally faithful. Out of this grew a powerful tradition of love poetry in which the poet presents a stock situation, with himself and his beloved in the foreground and in the background 'the confidant, the messenger, the spy, the slanderer, the reproacher'. As Professor Arberry points out, a body of conventional themes was developed particularly in Abbasid poetry.¹ For instance, the lovers weep tears of blood, the poet is confronted by the double perils of fire (from his burning heart) and flood (from his brimming tears); the flashing teeth of the beloved are compared with lightning, the beloved's glances with arrows or sword blades piercing the lover's heart; her lips intoxicating or healing the lover with their saliva; the lover is said to be wasted by grief to such a point that he vanishes. Similar themes and hyperboles will no doubt be recalled by readers familiar with Elizabethan conventional love poetry. In Muslim Spain, particularly in the poetry of Ibn Zaidūn in the eleventh century many of the elements of courtly love are most conspicuous and often blended with an exquisite feeling for nature.

But for purposes of what was considered serious poetry the *qasida* with its monorhyme, monometre, its amatory prelude and desert imagery remained the ideal which poets tried to emulate. For better or for worse, the early Umāyyad poets set the example for later poets: they imitated the pre-Islamic models and were excessively concerned with the eulogy of their patrons. From now on panegyric occupied a disproportionately large place in the output of poets, and every ruler or governor of note saw to it there were one or more poets in his court whose main task it was to celebrate his achievement and immortalize his name. There were of course a few dissident voices who, with the spread of the empire and the vast increase in sophistication and civilized urban living under the Abbasids, saw the absurd irrelevances of pre-Islamic poetic conventions to modern life. For instance, the bucolic poet Abū Nuwās suggested a prelude in praise of wine instead of the practice of

opening a poem with mourning over deserted encampments. But the reaction against the conventions was only half-hearted and Abu Nuwas himself followed the traditional practice in many of his works. Many reasons, literary, cultural and sociological, have been suggested for the dominance of these conventions, such as the general tendency in the Arab mind to revere the past, the tyrannical rule of conservative philologists in matters of taste and the unconscious association of the early poetry with the language of the Koran. Whatever be the real cause the underlying assumption was that the store of ideas or themes is limited, and the result was that poets became inordinately interested in style and form. In a tradition in which sound and rhythm already played an important part, to pay any more attention to form and style was inevitably a constricting factor; it also meant that the job of the translator from Arabic poetry is rendered doubly difficult. However, for many centuries to come, the guiding principle of the poet was to write 'what oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed'. This had a positive result at least in the field of literary criticism, for in their analysis of style and the language of poetry, particularly metaphor and imagery, some of the medieval Arab critics reached conclusions of surprising subtlety and modernity in which the work of critics like I. A. Richards was fully anticipated eight or nine centuries ago. But in creative writing the poets' preoccupation with the minutiae of style manifested itself in the rise of the so-called *badi'* school of writing. The word *badi'* literally means 'new', but it was used to refer to a highly figurative and ornate poetic style in which modern poets tried to assert their individuality and originality in the face of the opposition of the upholders of the ancients. Another result is the dominance of the conception of the poet, not as a seer or a mouthpiece of the tribe, but as a craftsman, a jeweller whose medium is words. This, of course, lessened, but by no means destroyed, the scope of the poet's originality and self-expression. Nor did the good poets produce mechanical imitations of the old ode. Nevertheless the *qasida*, that impressive edifice of words relying on declamation and sonority of music, with or without the amatory prelude depending on the gravity of the occasion, was the ceremonious form of poetic expression. At the hands of giants like Abū Tammām (805–45) and Mutanabbī (915–65) the style of the *qasida* became the grand or heroic style *par excellence*. In their description of the military victories of their patrons over the leaders of Christendom they were celebrating not petty tribal quarrels or feuds, but themes of such magnitude that the grand manner seemed the only appropriate style that could be used. Strangely enough it was one of the most ardent admirers of Mutanabbī who managed to a large extent to break free from many of the conventions. The blind Syrian poet Abu'l 'Alā' al-Ma'arrī (973–1058) prided himself on not having written

panegyrics for patrons, or 'sought to embellish my verse by means of fiction or fill my pages with love-Idylls, battle-scenes, descriptions of wine-parties and the like. My aim is to speak the truth'.² Instead of the traditional ode he recorded his meditations on life, death, on human society and beliefs in poems of varying length, sometimes of as few as two or three lines. His rationalism and scepticism, his pessimistic cast of mind, his intellectual honesty and his metaphysical doubts and uncertainty no less than his rejection of many conventions have made him popular with many modern poets, as we shall see in the course of this book.

Of the other significant developments in Arabic poetry which came as a result of the spread of the Muslim Empire and the widening of the mental and geographical horizon of the Arabs, two ought to be mentioned: first, the descriptive genre, in particular the bucolic and the hunting verse of poets like Abu Nuwas, and the type of nature poetry which went beyond the confines of desert landscape and which appeared especially in Muslim Spain, Sicily and North Africa. The second development is the appearance of mystical verse which reached its zenith in the work of the Egyptian poet Ibn al-Fāriḍ (1182–1235) and the Andalusian Ibn al-'Arabī (1165–1240). In the age of the Mamluks and the Ottomans the poets' preoccupation with form and expression, their passion for verbal ingenuity increased to the extent that poetry gradually descended to the level of mere artifice and verbal acrobatics, and ceased to have a bearing upon the serious business of life.

3

Literary historians are agreed that the Ottoman period of Arabic literature, the period, that is, which begins with the Ottoman conquest of Syria (1516) and Egypt (1517) and is conveniently thought to end with Napoleon's expedition to Egypt (in 1798), marks in fact the nadir of Arab culture. Of course it was not (not even in its latter part) a period of utter darkness as popular handbooks sometimes lead us to believe, and scholars like Gibb and Bowen are no doubt right when they insist that 'to deny all significance or value . . . to the Arabic literature of the eighteenth century is unjustifiable'. But even Gibb and Bowen admit that the literature 'confirms the general impression of a society which had exhausted its own resources'.³ The recovery of Arabic letters, the movement generally known in Arabic as *al-Nahḍa* and sometimes *al-Inbi'āth*, meaning Renaissance, began to be felt first in the Lebanon, Syria and Egypt and from there it spread gradually and in varying degrees to the rest of the Arab world.

In the eighteenth century these countries were still provinces of a declining Ottoman empire, that had lapsed into virtual isolation from intellectual

movements in the west. The Arab provinces lived in a state of even greater cultural isolation. At the same time the political instability from which they suffered; the narrowness of the prevalent system of education which was chiefly theocentric in character and which did not encourage much initiative and originality; the lack of patronage as a result of the relegation of Arab lands to the position of provinces governed by Turks untutored in the Arabic tongue; the replacement of Arabic by Turkish as the official language; the scarcity and high cost of books owing to the absence of Arabic printing presses (for the purpose of printing Muslim and Arabic literature); the constant living on the cultural past, and not on what was best in that past, for that matter — all these factors resulted in the degeneration of the literature of the period, which remained basically medieval in outlook and tended to be slavishly imitative of the past.

Most of the Arabic poetry of the eighteenth century is bedevilled by the passion for verbal jugglery, the aim of the poets apparently being to impress their audience with their command of the language, with their ability to manipulate it with acrobatic effects. They vied with one another in imposing the most ludicrous limitations and constraints upon themselves, such as writing verses in which every word alliterates, or in which a word begins with the same letter as that with which the preceding one ends, or in which every word or every letter, or every other letter must be dotted. Sometimes poets would pride themselves on writing panegyric verses which if read backwards would have a completely opposite, satirical significance.⁴ The same essential lack of seriousness is found in the pursuit of *badi'*, empty figures of speech for their own sake, just as it is reflected in the preponderance of verse written on trivial social occasions in which greetings and compliments are exchanged by the poets or versifiers, and of which the theme is mutual admiration, and the phraseology is 'gaudy and inane', to borrow the famous epithets used by Wordsworth in his adverse criticism of the poetic diction of some of the bad English verse of the eighteenth century.

As a rule the subjects of the poems were traditional, limited largely to panegyric and *ghazal* (amatory verse), mystical, devotional and didactic verse, descriptive and bucolic verse, especially in the case of the circle of Amir Ridwān (one of the few real patrons of literature in Egypt) which often wrote exaggerated descriptions of the sensuous pleasures available at his court, from wine-drinking to merry-making in the gardens of his richly decorated palaces. These descriptions were written by poets whose eyes were rarely fixed on their subject but, as in the case of the other themes, they abound in conventional images. For instance, the beloved always appeared like a gazelle, her figure swaying like a willow tree or branch, her face like a full moon, her eyes

languid and sending forth fatal arrows which pierce through men's hearts, her lips like red beads, teeth like pearls, cheeks like roses and breasts like pomegranates. She is always coy and unwilling and the poet is desperately lovelorn and so on. From this generalization one may possibly except some of the work of the two mystics, the Egyptian Ḥasan Badrī al-Hijāzī (d. 1718), and the Syrian 'Abdul Ghanī al-Nabulsi (d. 1731). The former was capable of writing verse of biting social criticism best seen in his satirical poem on the ancient religious university of al-Azhar, which contains a vivid picture of the ways of some of the corrupt ulema and which deserves a better fate than to be buried in the pages of the historian al-Jabartī.⁵ Likewise Nabulsi wrote some interesting poetry in which he managed to convey the warmth and the paradoxical nature of the mystical experience. His collection of verse *Dīwān al-Ḥaqā'iq* (Truths) was found sufficiently appealing to merit publication in Cairo in 1890.

4

Although it can safely be said that in the eighteenth century the Muslim Arabs lived in complete cultural isolation, a thin trickle of western thought of an exclusively religious nature had begun to work its way through a very small section of the non-Muslim Arabs. The graduates of the Maronite College (set up by Pope Gregory XIII in Rome in 1584) included many distinguished scholars who occupied academic posts in the West, but these belong properly to the history of Arabic scholarship and orientalism rather than to the history of the development of modern Arabic literature. Of more relevance is the career of Germānus Farḥāt (1670–1732), who besides being acquainted with western theological culture and Latin and Italian was passionately interested in creative Arabic literature. His collected poems were published in the form of a *Diwan* more than once in Beirut. As a poet, even in the opinion of an enthusiast like the eminent Lebanese critic Mārūn 'Abbūd, Farḥāt was easily excelled by many of his Muslim contemporaries, who were better masters of the Arabic language.⁶ His verses tended to be rather turgid, he wrote poetry which was heavily moralistic and the devotional part of it, the poems written in praise of Christ and the Virgin Mary, betrays the strong influence of contemporary Muslim Sufi poetry. His real contribution consists in his bringing a serious concern for Arabic eloquence and good style into the religious circles of the Maronites who were not noted for their mastery of the Arabic language. Besides setting up relatively modern schools in the Lebanon the Maronite priests were also responsible for the introduction in the beginning of the eighteenth century of the first Arabic printing press in the Arab world, which was set up in Aleppo in 1706. Other presses followed in Syria