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WHAT IS MODERN ABOUT MODERN ARABIC POETRY?

by

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What characterizes modernity in Arabic poetry is the rupture or the discontinuity which separates it from the conventions of classical Arabic verse. Modernity is the product of a complex sort of engagement which produces a new aesthetics stemming from the poet's consciousness of the need to recreate the language of poetry and to redefine his role vis-à-vis his society, his tradition and the world at large. The modern poets in Arabic literature, since al-Mahjariyyūn at any rate, have consistently been involved in an ideological battle with the tradition, and the imaginative space that they have managed to carve for themselves out of their precursors' imaginative space can only be measured by the degree to which they have achieved discontinuity with the past, by the degree their difference has been made possible by the tradition itself.

Discontinuity, as I am using the term, is an act of strong reading of a precursor - be it an individual poet, an individual text, or a poetic tradition - performed by another poet with the intention of finding his own relation to his precursor, his own space in history.[1] I suppose I am saying that the modern poet is a revisionist who aims at reexamining, reassessing, rewriting what has come to be called the tradition. In this sense the neo-classical Arab poets were not modern since their works were mere imitations of the tradition and since their personalities remained submerged, lost in a time not their own, and lacking any dialectical relationship with their tradition. They understood tradition as doxa, the vulgate of knowledge, the traditional way of looking at the tradition. At their best, and al-Bārūdī is a prominent example, they are able, even great imitators, hard workers, but their imitations leave no room for us to discern the difference between them and their precursors, no room for them to make the leap from hard work into art.

Modern Arabic poetry starts precisely with the discovery, or should I say the rediscovery of the tradition itself, not what has been pre-

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scribed as tradition and traditional. It starts with reassessing the past and salvaging from it what is pertinent today. It starts by liberating it from naive referentiality. To the modern poet, the tradition is active memory that is used to anticipate the future. It is what makes possible the difference of Imru' al-Qays, Abū Nuwās, Abū Tammām, the Ṣūfī poets and others, and the discovery of difference is what enables the modern poet to write at all, to create art.

But in saying this, I am not implying that modern Arabic poetry should not be seen as a historical process in a line of descent from the classical tradition, for that it is. But it is also in a more important sense, perhaps, ahistorical, a beginning because it attempts to "inaugurate," to use Edward Said's words, "a deliberately other production of meaning...and claims a status alongside other works."[2] To understand how the modern Arab poets have endeavored to attain this status is to understand what is modern about modern Arabic poetry.

Also to be modern is to be involved in a dialogue with other philosophical and literary traditions, especially those of the West. It is no accident, I think, that the development of modern Arabic poetry coincides with the cultural exchange between East and West that started in the late nineteenth century. Since that time, the Arab psyche has opened itself up to Western influence, and the Arab poet, in particular, whether he willed or not, had to partake of the achievements of Western thought and art. Influence was everywhere, and to be alive was to be influenced.

Experiments proceeded at a dizzying pace - the Romantic experiments of Abū Shabakah and the Apollo group, the Symbolist experiments of Sa'īd 'Aql, the Surrealist experiments of Orkhān Muyassar, "vers libre," vers libéré, poetic prose, prose poetry, prose poems, the recent Rabellaisian caricature of the underground poet, Muẓaffar al-Nawwāb, the more recent "lettrisms" and electronic poems of 'Ādil Fākhūrī, all these attest to the modern Arab poets' search for individuality, for contemporaneity. This is why most of these experiments did not develop into schools as they did in the West. They remained, at best, methods of thought, aesthetic models, approaches, trends in the long process of the development of modern Arabic poetry. The complex of checks and balances within the Arab literary tradition itself would not tolerate the appropriation of wholesale ideologies and aesthetic principles, for the tradition accepts and rejects with reference to its own internal development and its own capacity for renewal. Many of these experiments have died out or are in a state of dying. What is left, for example, of Sa'īd 'Aql's short-lived experiment is not Symbolisme, but a successful attempt at borrowing some of the techniques of the French nineteenth century Symbolisme, which were to have a direct but subtle influence on the Arab poets of the fifties.[3] To see the modern Arab poet as a participant in the traditions of Western literature and thought is simply to make him a poet of his time, to make him modern.

The search for individuality has been a heavy burden for the strong

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modern Arab poet. On the one hand, he realized that he is molded by his tradition and could not possibly speak a language free of the one instituted by his predecessors. On the other hand, he could not hope to create art, to be a poet, without misreading his tradition. In the words of Harold Bloom, "The poet confronting his Great Original must find the fault that is not there."[4] He must embark on an act of creative misinterpretation, if he hopes at all to place his work alongside that of his precursor. In the process, however, he experiences an "anxiety of influence,"[5] and this anxiety is in proportional relationship to discontinuity with the tradition, to the freedom that the modern poet must have.

In what follows I shall first speak in general of the modern poet's view of the language of poetry, the poem and the function of both poetry and poet. Second, I shall discuss briefly the main theories that inform the poetic practice of the three modern poets, Gibran Khalīl Gibran, Khalīl Ḥāwī and Adūnīs. I choose Gibran because he is the first major break with the tradition. I choose Ḥāwī because he represents the most advanced stage in the "vers libre" movement in the fifties. I choose Adūnīs, because, more than any other poet, he has borne the brunt of rocking the boat of the tradition and subverting the old codes. Throughout I shall refer to relevant sources of influence, measure the discontinuity with the tradition that each poet achieves, and the "anxiety of influence" that each manifests.

The modern Arab poet is obsessed with redefining the language of poetry. Early in this century, Khalīl Gibran succeeds in creating "a language within the language," changing prose from its practical, interpretive and elucidatory function to a new level of poetry in which gesture, nuance, and mental state are created. Using Gibran as a model subsequent generations of poets were able to reveal a continuum between poetic and non-poetic language. Avant-garde poets, such as Adūnīs, Khalīl Ḥāwī, Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb, al-Bayyātī, ʻAbd al-Ṣabūr and ʻAbd al-Muʻṭī Ḥijāzī have been able to eliminate in their writings all poetry of statement, to embody meaning in sensible imagery, emancipate metre, rhythm and rhyme from classical molds, and observe an indissoluble organic unity between form and content. Though, by and large, modern Arabic poetry like any poetry still exhibits attachment to formal elements, form is dictated upon the poem by its content. It is no longer preformed to fit the content.

This new language is no longer interested in recording the details of a particular scene or event; its purpose is to foresee hidden associations, to discover a new meaning beyond that which is ascribed to objects scientifically, rationally. Only this new language is capable of revealing the future, of capturing man's relationship to the world. Its final materialization, the poem, rewrites language with deference only to the poet's vision, his consciousness of being alive in a particular time and place. The poem, therefore, transcends the occasion to the significance of the occasion in history. This is a far cry from the

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occasional poems of the tradition.

Likewise the role of the modern poet is to "leap beyond the closed ordered world, beyond the foundations upon which 'our reality' is based, and look towards an unknown, undiscovered world." [6] The classical poet "aspired to beautify or idealize objects," but now he must "discover and strip naked what our sight cannot penetrate." [7] These in brief are the main theoretical formulations of the strong modern poets in modern Arabic poetry, although weaker poets do not subscribe to them fully.

Throughout his career, Gibran had little relationship, if any at all, with his immediate precursors, the neo-classicists. His inspiration, as poet and artist, had its roots in Western theories of art and literature, Western philosophy, the Bible, as well as Eastern philosophy, and perhaps, to a lesser extent, the Qur'ān and the works of the great classical Arab poets. The distance that separated him from the Arab world offered him the necessary freedom to formulate his ideas on art and literature and to question the position of the Arab neo-classicists without having to answer directly to traditional dogma or suffer the censure of the traditionalists. When his ideas and literary compositions became known in the Arab world, his influence was considered by some to be an affront to Islamic culture, and was accepted not without reticence by others. Today, however, Gibran's influence has pervaded all modern Arabic poetry and has initiated the inevitable successive transformations that we are witnessing.

Gibran dreamt of changing life. He was as Adūnīs puts it, "our first annunciation from the land of poetry." [8] He succeeded in assimilating a unique blend of Western and Eastern thought into an ideology, shaping his whole outlook on life and literature. He supplanted the intellectual flashes and the aphorisms of traditional Arabic poetry with metaphors that grow, expand, and attain hidden truths of a world above this world. His metaphors are in constant metamorphosis. The soul becomes a tree, the tree the universe; the nymphs of the valley materialize into dancers tripping on waves; or the poet himself becomes a prophet, a Christ-like figure changing from the recesses of time to save the crucified world. His metaphors are not fettered by finite logic. They are the spiritual visions of prophets, far removed from the naive similes and metaphors of many classical poets which, by and large, suffered horizontal expansion and dilution. His imagery creates its own mythology, and by so doing multiplies and deepens its allusions. His was the dream of man, wherever he may be, the dream of that of many Western poets before him. All this was a new way of discontinuing with the tradition, a successful attempt at producing difference. If Gibran's anxiety of influence is not as strong as it is in the case of the stronger Arab poets, it is because his tradition remained at some remove from him. His anxiety rather is the anxiety of influencing, of having to give away one's most precious achievement to those after him.

Khalīl Ḥāwī strikes a balance between a strong education in classi-

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cal Arabic literature and philosophy on the one hand, and a solid training in Western literary theory and poetry on the other. Conscious that there is an organic continuum in Arabic literature, Ḥāwī works from within the tradition outward, tapping those resources that had informed the work of his great predecessors but had suffered the neglect of critics and writers. "Revolution and rejection," he believes, "should stem from the living elements in our tradition and the tradition of man everywhere."[9] But to be able to create art, the poet must live, indeed suffer his experience. He should undergo mu'ānāt, and allow the poem to shape itself by itself. "Poetry, in my opinion," he says, "is a vision that instructs an intense experience. It is an art capable of articulating this experience."[10] Visions, to Ḥāwī, therefore, give words new symbolic dimensions and imbue them with power to create things by naming them. Without them, words are impotent, merely decorative molds that dull the senses. Thus his attack on his contemporaries' use of language:

> And then I see, I see the peacock sails
> Drunken and dazed amidst his wafting fans
> Confined and cribbed within the fence's bounds
> Thinking that roses and embellished verse
> Can hide the shame and cloud the comedy.[11]

Poetic vision is absent in much of classical and neo-classical Arabic poetry in which the immediate impression of objects and events was enough justification for writing. Metaphors and symbols when they were used at all were, in the hands of weak poets, flat comparisons that do not transcend the form of their signifiers, incapable of capturing the rhythms of their ideas and functions. In this respect Ḥāwī's success in exploiting the intellectual as well as the emotional associations of his symbols strikes a totally new note, a difference which attests to the ability of modern Arabic poetry to rewrite the tradition and explore its possibilities. "I try," he says, "to change the legend or the popular story into a basic symbol or a structural metaphor that works with the other elements in the poem to achieve unity."[12] More importantly, "when an intellectual symbol is set against an emotional symbol, the reader's mind will merge with his emotions and will comprehend both symbols in a new light and on a new level."[13] In "Lazarus 1962", for example, Lazarus is the symbol of resurrection, but when he is seen against the background of Arab decadence, he acquires new associations. He becomes a symbol of life in death, death in life, an objectification of the defeated moralist, a symbol of the poet's disappointment with his life and his world, an "objective correlative" for the defeated Arab and so on. When we remember that most of Ḥāwī's predecessors and contemporaries employ legends and symbols simply to tell stories in verse, Ḥāwī's practice becomes a difference, a new way of tapping the resources of the tradition. His anxiety of influence is strong because he is a strong poet, but because he believes with Valéry that the great poet must be able to work within traditional metrical forms, he shuns total freedom and adopts a liberated form of classical verse, "vers libéré" rather than "vers libre."

Adūnīs differs from Ḥāwī in the degree of his discontinuity with

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the tradition. He is ideologically committed to giving the poet the necessary freedom to express himself in a new inaugural language suited to his vision and formed by it. This explains his strong anxiety which manifests itself, I think, in his vehement critical apologies of his poetic practice. The language of poetry is one of his major concerns. According to Adūnīs, al-kitāba, or "écriture," as Roland Barthes calls it, is not language as we know it, but a displacement, a breaking away from the accepted and the known. It is the force which allows one to move freely between signifiers without allowing them to impose themselves. It is subversive, fawḍawiyya, because it seeks to destroy logical temporality and causality. "Al-kitāba," Adūnīs tells us,

> "transcends the well-known system of meanings; it offers a new value to life and history. It reshapes the past, starting with its own intuition, and it opens the avenues of the future. This is why it is no longer possible to read the poetry of the past except by starting with this intuition. To read al-Sayyāb, for example, in light of Imru' al-Qays, destroys al-Sayyāb, but to read Imru' al-Qays in light of al-Sayyāb, brings Imru' al-Qays' poetry to life and gives it a new dimension." [14]

Furthermore, al-kitāba may lead to chaos. "If it does, then let it," Adūnīs says, "but it is chaos only with reference to the old predetermined method....It may lead to confusion, but it will also lead to freedom and creativity."[15]

This is not much different from what al-Jurjānī calls, al-ma'nā al-takhyīlī (imaginative topos), which recreates language, renames objects, and calls for interpretation rather than understanding. Adūnīs cites two examples to illustrate al-ma'nā al-takhyīlī. The first is the following line by Abū Tammām, quoted by al-Jurjānī as an example on his imaginative topos:

Maṭarun yadhūbu ṣ-ṣaḥwu min-hu wa ba'da-hu/
Ṣaḥwun yakādu min an-naḍārati yumṭiru [16]

(The
rain
muttered
itself away.
It left behind
a
sky
bulging
with clarity
about to burst again.
So utterly had it melted.)

and al-Mutanabbi's

Ar-ra'yu qabla shajā'ati sh-shuj'āni/
Huwa awwalun wa h-ya l-maḥallu th-thāni

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(Good judgement comes before courage/It is first and courage is second)

The first line exemplifies what Adūnīs means by poetry (and what al-Jurjānī means by al-takhyīl) because the words here are not used in the familiar way that has been prescribed for them. The words name a new order. The second line is not poetry, because it contains borrowed ideas cast in poetic form, and the words are devoid of potential.

Like Ḥāwī, Adūnīs believes that visions inform the poet's language; they dictate its form. Poets, therefore, could not belong to particular schools. They belong to all and must transcend all. Thus Adūnīs the romantic in Mihyār the Damascene is different from Adūnīs the surrealist in al-Masraḥ wa al-marāyā, different from Adūnīs the master of the prose-poem in Mufrad fi ṣīghat al-jam', and different still from the Adūnīs of tomorrow.[17] His imagery mirrors this difference in the wound that never heals, in the hero Mihyār, "the inner vision, the self-turning inward and taking the world with it, reshaping it in its own image,"[18] in Ṣaqr Quraysh and Zayd the son of al-Ḥusayn, who vanquish death and remain alive as legend. The key phrase is "continuous transformation" which is also the key idea in his dīwān Kitāb al-taḥawwulāt fī aqālīm al-nahār wa 'l-layl. Thus Adūnīs's constant concern with naming things and renaming them to give them life and movement, to adapt them to the poet's visions:

That's how I loved a tent
And made the sand in the lashes,
Trees that rain;
Made the desert a cloud.
I said: This broken urn
is a vanquished nation,
This space
A stye,
These eyes
Pits;
I said: madness --
A planet hiding in a tree.

I will see the raven's face
In the profile of my country,
And I will call
This book a shroud,
This city carrion:
And I will call
The trees of Damascus mourning birds,
(After such naming, a flower or a song may be born)
And I will call
The moon of the desert a palm tree --
Perhaps the earth will wake up,
Become a child or a child's dream.[19]

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FOOTNOTES

1. In my discussion of the poet's relationship to his precursors I use a modified version of Harold Bloom's most engaging arguments on the subject in his two books, The Anxiety of Influence (New York and London:Oxford University Press, 1973) and A Map of Misreading (New York:Oxford University Press, 1975).
2. Beginnings (Baltimore:Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975),p.13.
3. For the significance of ʻAql's contributions see Salmā Khaḍrā Jayyūsī, Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry (Leiden:E.J. Brill, 1977), Vol. II, pp. 489-509.
4. Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence, p. 31.
5. Ibid., cf. relevant sections.
6. Adūnīs, Zaman al-shiʻr (Beirut:Dār al-ʻAwda, 1972), p. 20. For an excellent discussion of Adūnīs's poetics see Issa J. Boullata, "Adonis: Revolt in Modern Arabic Poetics," in Edebiyat, II (1977), pp. 1-13.
7. Ibid., p. 21.
8. Muqaddima li al-shiʻr al-ʻArabī (Beirut:Dār al-ʻAwda, 1971),p. 84.
9. Al-Ādāb, VII (1963), p. 72.
10. Ibid., p. 73.
11. Khalīl Ḥāwī, "al-Nāy wa al-rīḥ fī ṣawmaʻat Cambridge," Dīwān Khalīl Ḥāwī (Beirut:Dār al-ʻAwda, n.d.), pp. 182-183. All translations are mine.
12. Al-Ādāb, p. 72.
13. Ibid.
14. Al-Nahār al-dawlī, 3/11/78, p. 22.
15. Ibid.
16. Al-Nahār al-dawlī, 3/12/77, p. 20.
17. Cf. Ṣalāḥ ʻAbd al-Ṣabūr's review of al-Masraḥ wa al-marāyā in al-Majalla, 137 (May 1968), pp. 36-38.
18. Kamāl Abū Deeb, "The Perplexity of the All-Knowing: A Study of Adonis," Mundus Artium, X, 1 (1977), p. 174.
19. Adūnīs, "Hādhā huwa ismī," al-Āthār al-kāmilā (Beirut:Dār al-ʻAwda, 1971).

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