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Some Remarks on Traditions of the Arabic Poetry

As we look back over the centuries we see a striking change in the most prominent aspects of the Arabic scene on which poetry focused. Bedouin poetry was rich and tendentious *in imaginery*. Poetry in the Arabian Peninsula flowered and enabled the Arabian nomads to transcend their varying tribal identities and create a heritage common to them all. The poetic form was used for story-telling and for descriptions of nature, the life of tribe, the heroic deeds and other events. The new religious movement at the beginning of the seventh century emerged in the Ḥijāz. Islam shot out of the Peninsula and spread on the heels of military, economic and political conquest throughout the Middle East — as far west as Spain, as far east as central Asia. Thus the old nomadic culture of the Arabs had been subjected to many influences. But, during a long period of the Umayyad rule old Arab custom were reflected in poetry. This nostalgia found expression in the following verses attributed to Mu'āwiyah's favourite wife Maysūn:

A tent with rustling breezes cool
 Delights me more than palace high,
 And more the cloak of simple wool
 Than robes in which I learned to sigh ...

 And more than purr of friendly cat
 I love the watch-dog's bark to hear;
 And more than any blubber fat
 I love a Bedouin cavalier¹.

The Arab period of Islamic history came to an end with the rise of the Abbasid dynasty. Thus at the end of the 8th century, the new political and cultural centre Baghdad, became too the centre for literature, the market-place where intellectual wares

¹ Reynolds A. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs*, 2nd ed., Cambridge 1930, p. 195.

were brought to be appraised. The Abbasid caliphs literally awarded thousands for an apt phrase or verse at the right time and place. The notables, too, bestowed fortunes on their panegyrists. This patronage of the poets had the very old tradition. The poets from the pre-Islamic period onward were the press of the times and the molders of public opinion. But the poetry of the Golden Age of Islam reflects the struggles of this period of violent religious and political conflict too. Therefore the most original literary development of the Abbasid period was the emergence of the "new style" in poetry. The classical ode of pre-Islamic age, *qaṣīda* with its glorification of desert life and Bedouin ideals, begins with reflections on the traces of the deserted dwelling places of the tribe, to which is linked an erotic prelude bewailing the poet's separation from his beloved. The poet then professes to seek comfort by mounting his camel for a perilous ride through the desert.

In this place we can say the highly conventional, repetitious and static quality of Classical Arabic literature has to be reviewed. G. E. Grunebaum has written in 1952 in his essay called *Islamic Studies and Cultural Research*: "It has been demonstrated often and by many writers how the scrutiny of the scholar will expand the available contexts; new visions and directions open up new aspects of the known; new tendencies in interpretation make possible the delineations of facts hitherto ungrasped or unsuspected. From the logical point of view each fact, to be made completely meaningful, ought ultimately to be assigned its position within universal and even cosmic history; the tact of the scholar, guided by the dominant interests of his time, will restrict the study, in deference to heuristic and pragmatic considerations, to directly observable relations."

For example in the modern time Arab Romantics² have attracted little attention in Europe. A likely reason for this neglect is that they sound extremely hackneyed when translated into a European language. It takes a sympathetic imagination to see them in the perspective of their own time and environment, and great sensitivity to distinguish the genuine poetic vein in much that is derivative and commonplace.

The emergence of new patterns and other factors of change in the twentieth century has gradually set the terms of a new challenge to the Islamic culture and therefore to the Arab literature. Having emerged from the First and Second World Wars as newly independent countries, eagerly searching for a place under the sun the Arab states, and their people were anxiously trying to discover their own national identity amid contradictory ideologies to which they were exposed. In their spiritual depression, they were torn between East and West, socialism and capitalism. The inefficiency of the traditional Arab social structure that existed in absolute inertia was laid bare and its inadequacy was made sufficiently clear in the face of modern organization.

Therefore some Arab poets were crying out for a change. It was not easy for poets

² Issa J. Boullata, *Ar-Rūmāntiqiyya wa-ma'ālimuhā fī aš-ši'r al-'arabī al-ḥadīṭ* (Outlines of Romanticism in Modern Arabic Poetry), Beirut 1960.

to change the tradition of a language and a poetic technique in order to establish a new norm consonant with their new vision. Their most immediate need was for freedom. They felt that the traditional verse with its six or eight feet to the line was too rigid a metrical unit to contain an expression of their turmoil and restlessness, and that mono-rhymes or symmetrically recurring multi-rhymes were too monotonous and restrictive a device to permit them full liberty. In this manner the Modern Arabic free verse did rise out suddenly at the beginning of the 1950, as is often claimed, but had various and significant antecedents in the poetical productions of several Arab poets which appeared during the earlier decades of this century. However, Badr Šākir as - S a y y ā b³ and Nāzik a l - M a l ā ' i k a⁴ may be mentioned as the first two poets who started, in the same place and at the same time, to write "free verse" not as an isolated experiment but as a general trend in their poetry. The new form based on the quantitative *taf'ila* and on the unity of the verse and the poem rather than on the individual line of the verse within the traditional *qaṣīda* pattern gained popularity among the majority of contemporary Arab poets and its techniques replaced largely those of classical Arabic poetry.

Alongside free verse and soon after its norms became formerly established, a small group of poets began writing in a still freer form known as the prose poem — *qaṣīdat al-naṭr*. Although it shared several features with free verse compositions, prose poetry marks the emergence of a really "free" form in the sphere of modern poetic art.

³ Badr Šākir a s - S a y y ā b (1926–1964) was born in Ġaykūr in southern Iraq. He was educated in Basra and at the Higher Teacher's Training College in Baghdad. He worked mostly in the civil service and journalism. He died at the disease of the nervous system and was buried at Zubayr, near Basra. He was a communist and later nationalist. He suffered exile and prison for his convictions. He was one of the earliest Arab poets to introduce free verse. He is the author of such collections as: *Azhār Dābila* (Faded Flowers — 1947), *Asāṭir* (Legends — 1950), *Unšūdat al-maṭār* (The Song of Rain — 1960), *Al-Ma'bad al-ġariq* (The Submerged Temple — 1962), *Manzil al-aqnān* (The House of Slaves — 1963), *Sanašil Ibnat al-Čalabī* (The Balcony of the Chalabi's Daughter — 1964), and *Iqbāl* (Iqbal — 1965).

⁴ Nāzik a l - M a l ā ' i k a (1923) was born in Baghdad in a rich family noted for its literary members. She studied at the Higher Teacher's Training College in Baghdad and later she went to Princeton University in the United States of America for studies in English literature. She was one of the earliest Arab poets to write in free verse. She has taught at the University of Basra, the University of Mosul, and other institutions of higher learning in Iraq and at the University of Kuwait. Her poetry, exhibiting a mastery of language and technique, has a romantic sadness about it. She has written a number of literary studies and articles including *Qadāyā aš-ši'r al-mu'āṣir* (Issues of Contemporary Poetry — 1965), *Muḥāḍarāt fī ši'r 'Alī Maḥmūd Ṭāhā* (Lectures on Ali Mahmud Taha's Poetry — 1965) and *At-Tağzi'a fī al-muğtama' al-arabī* (Disjunctivism in Arab Society — 1974). Her collections include *Ašiqat al-layl* (Lover of Night — 1974), *Šaḏāyā wa-ramād* (Splinters and Ashes — 1949), *Qarārat al-mawġa* (The Bottom of the Wave — 1957), and others.

With Unsī al-Hāğğ⁵, Muḥammad al-Māğūt⁶ and Adonis⁷ in his recent collections as its main figures, prose poetry represents an artistic and intellectual reaction to the free verse movement. These ultra-modernists who flourished sporadically in the 1950's and gained more recognition in the 1960's rejected, to a much greater extent than the free verse poets, the concept of poetic absolutes and endeavoured to create new and highly personalized forms. They dispensed with all the traditional poetic conventions including metre, rhyme, unity of the line and *taf'ila* as well as the subject matter of earlier poetry. As such their prose poetry was attacked as "non-poetry". For in fact, in this form more than in any other form, no middle way possible: the poem is either good or bad. The poets who have rejected all established norms of classical Arabic poetry have to compensate with striking imagery, a new, inward, integral kind of rhythm and music, as well as with a new vision of life and existence.

⁵ Unsī al-Hāğğ (1937) was born and educated in Beirut, and was greatly influenced by modern French literature. He participated in pioneering free verse movement of "Ši'r" (Poetry) magazine. He was the literary and artistic director of "Al-Nahār" (Day) newspaper of Beirut. He is the author of following collections: *Lan* (Never — 1960), *Ar-Ra's al-maqtū'* (The Severed Head — 1963), and *Māḍi al-ayyām al-ātiya* (The Past of the Coming Days — 1965).

⁶ Muḥammad al-Māğūt (1934) was born in Syria. He is a self-educated poet who ventured into bold experimentations in prose-poems without knowledge of parallel European genres. He has written following collections: *Huẓn fī daw' al-qamar* (Sorrow in the Moonlight — 1959), *Ghurfa bi-malāyīn al-ğudrān* (A Room with Millions of Walls — 1964) and *Al-Farah laysa miḥnati* (Joy is not My Profession — 1970). He is the author of a surrealist play entitled *Al-'Uṣfūr al-aḥdab* (The Hunch-backed Bird — 1967).

⁷ 'Alī Aḥmad Sa'īd — the penname of Adonis — (1930) was born in Qassābīn in Syria. He was educated in Tartūs and Latakia and later graduated in literature and philosophy from the Syrian University in Damascus. Adonis published several volumes of verse and prose-poems including *Qaṣā'id ūlā* (First Poems — 1957), *Al-Masrah wa' l-marāyā* (The Stage and the Mirrors — 1968), and *Waqt bayn ar-ramād wa-al-Ward* (Time between Ashes and Roses — 1970). He published an anthology of classical Arabic poetry and several books on literary criticism.