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The Winds of Passion
– Love Poetry by ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Saud al-Babtain

Abstract

There is no way of overestimating the influence ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Saud al-Babtain has had on the shaping of the cultural life of Kuwait and even the whole Arab world. Yet ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Saud al-Babtain is equally a known and admired poet. He became interested in poetry while already very young. He started to write while fifteen years of age. He is the author of two volumes of poetry: ‘Intimations of the Deserts. An Anthology of Poems’ and ‘Wastefarer’. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Saud al-Babtain stands at the head of the Foundation he founded in Cairo in 1989. As its statute states the principal aim is the enrichment of the Arabic poetry movement, poetic criticism, to encourage dialogue between poets and poetry lovers, the organisation of competitions and poetic meetings, and the publication of Al-Babtain lexicons. Al-Babtain Central Library for Arabic Poetry established in 2002 is a cultural centre where poets and intellectuals from all over the world meet.

The awareness of the unquestionable role of poetry within the Arab world over the course of centuries together with the determination to ensure the richness of its continuous chain of being, links within which having been formed by Imru al-Qays, Al-Mutanabbi and Ahmad Shawqi, led ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Saud al-Babtain to create the Library for Arabic Poetry in Kuwait. It was built in 2002 as the first library in the world specialising in Arabic poetry; its profile resulting from the founder’s interests. Covering a floor area of twelve thousand square metres the library complex incorporates aesthetics and symbolism in a most extraordinary way. The entrance greets one with the traditional wooden doors of the Kuwait of old. The library is surrounded by a beautiful garden creating a place for meditation and the enjoyment of poetry.

The most important aims of the Al-Babtain Central Library for Arabic Poetry include: the creation from the library itself of a place of culture in Kuwait, which will attract academics and all those in search of knowledge not only from Arab countries but from the whole world; the assembly of the heritage of Arabic poetry in all its possible forms, the care for the material side of poetry i.e. the preservation and improvement of materials through the application of available technical means and methods, the founding of a research centre specialising in the documentation and study of Arabic poetry; and finally the sponsoring of poets, their activation within the international arena and the instilling of the spirit of poetry in the young generation of Arabs. The 'Abd al-'Aziz Saud al-Babtain Library cooperates within these areas with other libraries and academic research centres all over the world, serving and popularising Arabic poetry.

Al-Babtain Central Library for Arabic Poetry is at the same time a cultural centre where poets and intellectuals from all over the world meet. Literary meetings, conferences, symposia, lectures and poetry evenings are organised. At present the Al-Babtain book collection numbers eighty thousand works.¹

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One of the most important undertakings of the Al-Babtain Foundation is the publishing of dictionaries and lexicons. Since 1995 there has been published the *Dictionary of XIXth and XXth Century Poets*, in which there is described the work of eminent Arabic poets both living and dead. Each headword is accompanied by a detailed bibliographical sketch. All the parts and subsequent editions of the *Dictionary* are an attempt at the realisation of one of the most important premises of the Al-Babtain Foundation i.e. the creation of a definitive dictionary of Arabic poetry. In addition 'Abd al-'Aziz Saud al-Babtain has established a prize for the descendants of Imam al-Bukhari, which is awarded annually to the amount of one hundred thousand dollars for Asiatic Muslim countries.²

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¹ *Al-Babtain Central Library for Arabic Poetry* by The Library's Administration, Kuwait 2006, p. 64.

² *Years of Cultural Output 1989–2008*, Kuwait 2008, 5th edition, p. 126.

Love is the central theme of A l - B a b t a i n's verse. In his work it is multidimensional – from spiritual feeling to carnal passion. It is love that releases him from the everyday world. And so in the poem *My Letters*³ he speaks to his love, Layla. The feeling which had once been very strong fades with the passing of time. The lover is afar from his beloved and all the time remembers the beautiful moments spent with her. These memories are, however, scarred with the stamp of time, and then with certainty distorted:

Wrapped by the unknown, hidden by distance,
My memories were folded by time.

The nights have now altered their course with me,
And balmy sleep no longer touched my eyes.

After my Time has altered my features,
And when the branch has parted with its bloom,

A love that has been living in our depths,
For long, is now enfeebled and depressed.

O, Layla, meeting has become so hard,
And gloom has thrown us in the lap of grief.⁴

The man induces Layla to collect together all the letters she has received from him and to burn them, and subsequently to scatter the ashes that remain from them.

So gathered what I have whispered to you,
Which was contained as fragrance in lilies,

And all my letters that were so well wrought
By one poet, who is by love ensnared,

And all my songs, to which has well listened
The bird of passion, and the branch has swayed;

Collect them all then throw them in the fire,
And add to them the tears that they contain,

Then scatter all the ashes which they leave
Upon a memory, folded by time.⁵

³ ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Saud al-Babtain, *My Letters*, in: *Wastefarer*, Kuwait 2006, pp. 119–129.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 119–120.

The ash is associated with death, which could mean that the love between the lyrical 'I' and Layla is condemned to a slow death, while the memories which remain will, with time, fly away. Love is an unfulfilled feeling and one that brings about suffering.

The next poem entitled *I have not Forgotten*⁶ tells the story of unrequited love. It is a sensitive conversation between lovers who have met after years of separation:

You Said you team. "Do you remember still?
Or did you all that tender talk forget?
Have years of parting ended all your love?
Was that candle on our way put out?
Or has your heart darkened away from mine
And frozen feelings led you to forget?"
I said, "Never, by Him Who made us love,
Have I forgotten those tender meetings.
The passing of ten whole years that were lost
Has not effaced away your fragrant trace.
But separation, heavy on my soul
Had me unsettled, as gray hair denotes."⁷

In a further part of the poem we have an extensive monologue on the part of the lyrical 'I', in which he recalls the suffering dealt him by separation. He does not know whether the return is a good solution for he fears the subsequent parting, which could again bring with it torment and pain. He finds an indirect way out though, the Renaissance *carpe diem*, i.e. treasure the moment and utilise it. The lyrical 'I' emphasises the importance of happy moments, for life is too short to lose them to regret and bitterness.

They fear accursed departure that May fall,
And cause the wound to bleed the morn,
Forget parting to make it forget us.
Let's be happy. The world is dancing still,
Since we last met, watched by the star of love.
Not much of life is left, except what nights
Of union may offer, in tenderness,
And songs, for love, to hear us singing them,
To choke the jealous and the treacherous.
The dancing grounds are calling us to them,
Let us rejoice today, and celebrate."⁸

⁶ 'Abd al-'Aziz Saud al-Babtain, *I have not Forgotten*, in: *Intimations of the Deserts. Anthology of Poems*, Kuwait 2004, pp. 22–23.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 22–23.

In the next two poems *The Breeze Message*⁹ and *The Winds of Passion*¹⁰ the lyrical ‘I’ is a man tormented by a strong sense of unhappy love. In the first of them the personification of the morning sea breeze is especially clearly stressed:

O Morning breeze, I find your fragrance sweet,
As with her fragrance you come every morn.

As you embraced the one who, in her robes
The perfume of the woods are well diffused.

You were intoning every tune, and touched
Her hair, in which has fumbled every wing.

And you approached the eyes, when no one watched,
And whispered to the eyelids gentle words.

You were enchanted with her love awhile,
And wandered in its heights and down its plains.¹¹

The delicate breath of the sea breeze reminds the man of his love. He revels in each of its bursts for he senses in it a particle of his dearest. For the same breeze touched her body. The lyrical ‘I’ treats the breeze therefore as the single and most important thread of contact between him and his beloved. Calling nature as witness he sends her to his chosen one to ensure her of his love and to sing the song of devotion flowing from the depths of his heart:

I send you to the sweetheart to behold
And let her hear my songs and all my praise.

And sing in her meadows in every morn
The songs of love which I composed and tuned.

Relate how I have suffered in her love,
Of passion, and of all my sacrifice.

Convey my ardent agony to her,
And that consistent passion which I bear.

⁹ ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Saud al-Babtain, *The Breeze Message*, in: *Wastefarer*, Kuwait 2006, pp. 108–109.

¹⁰ Idem, *The Winds of Passion*, in: *Intimations of the Deserts. Anthology of Poems*, Kuwait 2004, pp. 24–25.

¹¹ Idem, *The Breeze Message*, in: *Wastefarer*, Kuwait 2006, p. 108.

And tell her of my wound when she went far,
Had she not done so, there would be no wound.

And I spend the greetings of one in love,
Who raised a thousand towers, built of hopes.¹²

The lyrical 'I' yearns to maintain contact with his beloved via the wind, to send her his thoughts, to feel her smell and touch in every morning gust of the sea breeze.

In the second poem, *The Winds of Passion* the lyrical 'I' has adopted a different attitude towards his addressee – a gale. This time it is a strong wind bringing destruction:

O winds of passion blow on,
Tear up the sails of my love,
Drown the world in separation,
As you drowned my heart that way.¹³

And fate treated this man severely. Deserted by his beloved he has lost all faith and hope. He suffers torment and is unable to find himself in this new hostile reality. He calls on the wind to use its destructive force and send a cataclysm to free him from his hopeless feeling:

Thunder horror on horror!
Rain down poison, rain down thorns.
Spread the drought over the land,
Stop the flower from growing,
So the seed cannot increase.
For my heart is impatient
With my sweetheart's desertion.¹⁴

This part of the poem is exceptionally dynamic and illustrative, calling to mind scenes of apocalypse. It is enough though for the man to return for a moment in his thoughts to the times when he was happy and a small spark of hope enters his heart. He cancels his ominous appeal to the gale. He asks it to hold back its strength and allow nature to develop at its natural rhythm. While the lyrical 'I' finally comes to terms with his lot and is prepared to submit himself to destiny:

Though they sometimes grow about,
In the depths of my being.

¹² Ibid., pp. 108–109.

¹³ 'Abd al-'Aziz Saud al-Babtain, *The Winds of Passion*, in: *Intimations of the Deserts. Anthology of Poems*, Kuwait 2004, p. 24.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 24.

Time of union, come to me,
 And restore a throbbing heart.
 Let the flower grow and live,
 For the seed to promise more.
 Scatter beauty like a spring,
 So the world will freshly shine.
 Fill the world with fragrant air,
 And with song along my way,
 Since the passion calls for you.
 And love, too, responds to you.
 Don't desert me, O my time,
 To be held by storms and moans,
 To be held by fears that plague
 All my life until the end,
 But be with me, to efface
 Heart worries with your mercy.¹⁵

The poem *A Breast's Vanity*¹⁶ is written in the vein of love poetry. The breasts exalted in the work are the work of Mother Nature. They are as if young birds ready to fly off. They long to break free, to know the world and to try all of its flavours. Looking out from the nest they look down on the world from above. They possess all the attributes of youth: firm, beautiful, but also vain, impertinent. They arouse the imagination, provoke passion and desire. Their presence causes a storm of moods. The poet desires to show the beautiful process of the adolescence of a young woman, the birth of her sexuality and the attractiveness to the opposite sex that accompanies it. This panegyric to womanhood contains, however, a sad note: time passes and life is not eternal:

The chest is like a nest to hold the breasts,
 Shaped by beauty with charm for many moons.

Its two birds, stripped off, as about to soar
 High up and to enrapture all who looked.

The nest almost caught up the little ones:
 They both rose up rejecting their jailers.

Reckless is their nature; their vanity
 Is one aspect of youth, of tender sway.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 24–25.

¹⁶ ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Saud al-Babtain, *A Breast's Vanity*, in: *Wastefarer*, Kuwait 2006, pp. 11–12.

They sent my passion going to and from,
And rattled the lifetime of those in love.

O daughter of the Spring, take you my youth,
Make it a jasmine garland round your neck!

I won't see your beauty wither away –
Vanish; it deserves to be eternal!

You are the perfume, a melodious song,
By passion hummed to everyone in love!

You are the dawn – an everlasting light;
The love that enriches yearning in life.

O daughter of the Spring, may your charm live
And live your breast – so vain – throughout all time!¹⁷

'Abd al-'Aziz Saud al-Babtain is one of the best Kuwaiti poets of ultimate matters, especially love. Love in his poems is shown as an experience of infinity. For him equally absolute, universal and spiritual matters count. Love in a temporal dimension is usually an unfulfilled feeling rather tragic, culminating in separation, inducing suffering. Despite this love is a force against which it is difficult to protect oneself. This feeling is accompanied in his poetry by a sense of passing. Love in al-Babtain's poetry is a huge all-engulfing force, in the face of which all doubts fade. It gives the final answer while being simultaneously one of the greatest mysteries of the world. In his poems love is multi-aspectual – from a spiritual feeling to carnal passion.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 11–12.