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PREFACE

The presentation of even a small anthology of contemporary Arabic art and letters is, to put it conservatively, long overdue in the United States. There has never been any doubt that the Arabs' past has been sufficiently rich and influential, as Dr. Aziz Atiyeh documents in his introductory essay to this issue, to justify and attract Western attention to the present complexion of Arabic culture. But such attention has been late in coming and has often been politicized to the point of distortion when it has come. Yet the culture, undistorted and fertile, remains. One recent official attempt to spawn interest was a Middle East Symposium sponsored by International PEN in New York and Princeton in 1976. In his opening remarks to the audience, the American playwright Arthur Miller stated that he hoped more translations of the literature of the area would be forthcoming. Although a number of Middle Eastern nations were represented at the conference, the response to the Arabic writers suggested that the audience was certainly anxious to learn more about them and their contemporaries. I am not suggesting that this issue is a result of Mr. Miller's exhortation or the PEN conference itself; it was in conception long before 1976. But if the audience for Middle Eastern literature in general and Arabic art and letters in particular is simply waiting to be created, then I am of the persuasion that the translations, essays and artwork in this issue go more than halfway to respond to such a need. Collectively, they constitute a representative, though certainly not definitive, survey of Arabic artistic expression at the time being.

As guest editor of this issue, I would like to express my thanks to the Mobil Oil Corporation, the Monsour Medical Foundation, the National Association of Arab Americans, the Washington and New York offices of the League of Arab States, and the Saudi Arabian Information Office.

Samuel Hazo
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CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE ARABS TO WESTERN CULTURE

A. S. ATIYA

Prelude to Acculturation

Since the emergence of Islam in the seventh century, the history of early Arab development may conveniently be divided into three main stages. The first was the Age of Conquest, the second the Age of Establishment, and the third the Age of Assimilation.

It is not easy to comprehend the bewildering rapidity with which the Arabs conquered most of their neighbouring empires. They spread their hegemony from the Punjab and the borders of China to the gates of Constantinople through western Asia and to the Atlantic shores of North Africa and Western Europe, all this within approximately a single century. In their irresistible march over those vast areas, however, unlike other previous barbarian invasions, the Arabs did not barbarize their conquests. On the contrary, they aimed at establishing themselves with the natives of many countries whose superior civilizations they respected and whose cultures they protected. In that Age of Establishment, they prepared the ground for a nascent composite civilization of their own by lifting the barriers between the antagonistic Sassanid and Byzantine traditions and, moreover, availed themselves of other localized cultures in the countries of their far-flung empire. Initially, the Arabs themselves had nothing to offer beyond their own new religion and their language. But their bracing attitude towards their progressive subjects, and their willingness or eagerness to learn from them, opened a new vista of possibilities before them. In this wise they inaugurated an Age of Assimilation in their history and, under the umbrella of the Pax Arabica, they strove, through the good offices of their learned subjects, to render into Arabic the immense store of knowledge developed by the ancient civilizations. While the Arabized Persians dealt with the sources of Iran and India, the Nestorian Christians were entrusted with the translation of the fruits of the Greek mind, both from Greek and from Syrian, into Arabic.

It was thus that the masterpieces of the classical antiquity of both the East and the West became the natural heritage of the new masters in their own tongue.
Age of Interpretation

The beginnings of Arab, or more realistically speaking Islamic, culture came to pass in the form of systematic rendering of philosophic and scientific writings of the ancient East and West. In the ninth century, the Abbasid Caliphs sponsored that movement with phenomenal vigour. Then Caliph al-Ma’mun had the vision to found the first Islamic academy of learning known as “Bayt al-Ḥikmah” (House of Wisdom) in 830 where he accommodated scholars of all faiths at Baghdad in order to undertake the task of translating all the products of the miracle of the Greek mind. Here the Nestorians, who were equally proficient in Greek, Syriac and classical Arabic, became most prominent. To understand the zest with which they nurtured this movement, it is interesting to note that the Caliphs dispatched special commissions to Constantinople to copy certain important Greek manuscripts for translation into Arabic, and occasionally they made stipulations in peace treaties with the Byzantines for ceding more Greek manuscripts to the Arabs.

In the Age of Interpretation, two streams of thought were noticeable. The first was associated with the East, notably Persia and India, wherefrom major works of history, mathematics and astronomy found their way to Arabic. The second was Greek where the pragmatic and legendary Caliph Haroun al-Rashid (786-809) ordered the translation of the medical works of Hippocrates and Galen as well as Euclid’s Elements and the fundamentals of astronomy embedded in Claudius Ptolemy’s Syntaxis, known in Arabic as Almagest. In the end, the Arabs came to Aristotle whose logic saw the light in the Arabic version by a Christian, Yahya ibn al-Batriq in 815.

Whole dynasties of translators sponsored by the Caliphs began to arise. Amongst them, in medicine at Jundishapur, was the Bakhtishu group of whom Jibril was al-Ma’mun’s private physician until his death in 830. But towering above all others at Baghdad was Hunayn ibn Ishaq, originally a Nestorian druggist of Ḥira, who became established in the aforementioned “House of Wisdom” where he trained his son Ishaq and his nephew Hubaysh together with others destined to succeed him. Hunayn’s school was responsible for the translation of hundreds of works from Greek and Syriac into Arabic.

Another school flourished at Harran under a Sabian star worshipper, namely Thābit ibn Qurra (825-901), who was himself by vocation an astronomer.

It has to be remembered, however, that that was only the Silver Age of the transmission of existing knowledge into Arabic. But it would be an error to assume that as such, the Arabs were merely a cultural bridge between antiquity and modernity. The Golden Age was still forthcoming.
when the Arabs left their own legacy which consisted not only of the wisdom and learning of the ancients, but also the fruits of their own creativity in many fields of scientific endeavour as a subsequent stage in the development of the miracle of the Arab mind as will be seen in the following paragraphs.

**Philosophy and Theology**

The founder of Arab Aristotelian philosophy with its Mu'tazilite liberal school of theologians was al-Kindi who tutored al-Ma'mun’s son and successor al-Mu'tasim (833-42). Next in importance was al-Farabi, the Latin Alfarabius (d. 950), who became known as “The Second Master” —the first being of course Aristotle. He was followed by a greater giant from Bukhara, namely Ibn Sīnā (980-1037), better known in western literature as Avicenna, whose competence in many fields recalls the “uomo universale” of the Renaissance. Another Arab thinker whose influence on European learning almost equaled that of Avicenna was al-Ghazzālī (1058-1109)—the Latin Algazel. Though associated with a group of philosophical thinkers at Basra known as “The Brothers of Purity” (Ikh-wan al-Ṣafa), who aimed at the creation of a unified system incorporating all branches of knowledge, he himself became better known as one of the great founders of “Sufism” or Muslim mysticism.

In distant Spain at Cordoba, Arab philosophy reached its apogee in the work of Ibn Rushd (1126-98), the Averroes of European scholasticism, whose treatises on logic, philosophy, psychology, theology and jurisprudence left their indelible mark on the medieval humanities. In particular, his impact on the principal thesis of St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) in his immortal *Summa Theologica* is obvious from his discussion on the place of revelation between faith and reason. Though St. Thomas started his theme as a critique of Averroism, he fell under the spell of Averroes’ thought which he had laboured to disprove.

In fact, Europe became acquainted with Aristotle, Plato and the miracle of the Greek mind through the works of the aforementioned Arab philosophers, which in turn were systematically translated into Latin in the course of the eleventh to the thirteenth century. European students of Arab philosophy included many famous personalities such as Gerbert of Spain, who became Pope Sylvester II (999-1003), Adhemar of Bath, Hermann of Dalmatia, Michael Scot, Daniel Morley, Robertus Anglicus and Peter the Venerable. The last two are credited for the first rendering of the Qur’an into Latin.

The twelfth-century School of Toledo, sponsored by Archbishop Raymond of that city, was reminiscent of al-Ma’mun’s ninth-century Baghdad Academy (House of Wisdom). Whereas the latter translated from Greek, the former was devoted to translation from Arabic. Royal
patronage as well was offered to that movement by Alfonso X the Wise of Castile and Leon. Gerard of Cremona was responsible for the translation of sixty-one Arabic texts, to mention only one example. Dominic Gundisalvus, in collaboration with a Jewish convert named Juan Aven death of Seville, translated the whole of Avicenna’s philosophy in 1130-50.

Most of these translations were made in Spain where Arab and European cultures mingled. Arabic texts were first rendered into the Romance vernacular of Spain with the help of the Mozarabs or Arabized Christians and the Mudejars or the Arabs who preferred to remain in Christian territories behind the progressing curtain of the Reconquista. It was from these vernacular versions that the Latin translations were finally accomplished. In the European learned circles, the words philosophy and Arabic became synonymous, and it is no wonder that Roger Bacon declared that “Philosophia ab Arabico deducta est.” It was therefore through these Latinized Arabic texts that Europe re-discovered Aristotle and the Greek philosophers and scientists long before the Greek originals reached the West with Greek immigrants after the downfall of Byzantium in 1453.

Even this brief essay would be imperfect without signalling the last important work completed by Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) which passed unnoticed by both east and west, though its value was revealed in western scholarship only in the nineteenth century. Ibn Khaldūn wrote a Universal History and preceded it with a long “Prolegomena” which proved to be his real contribution to knowledge. It has been recognized as the first serious Philosophy of History and further it laid the foundations of modern Sociology in the course of the author’s discussions of the rise and fall of empires.

The Exact Sciences

Here the synthetic nature of Arab culture becomes obvious when we realize that both the works of the Greeks and the Indians in unison found their way to Arabic. On the one hand, the masters of science of Greek antiquity including Euclid, Ptolemy, Hippocrates, Hero or Heron and many more became known in Arabic, while on the other the Siddhartha and the Hindu mathematicians of Brahmagupta revolutionized the Arab approach to the exact sciences. This occurred first in the adoption of Indian arithmetical signs, later identified as the Arabic numerals and still later adopted in Europe as such by a papal decree of Sylvester II at the beginning of the second millenium of the Christian calendar. The Arabs also introduced the zero or cypher from the Arabic word “Sifr” as well as the decimal in the process of computation, both of which, together with the substitution of Arabic for Roman numerals, laid the foundations of modern mathematics and science.

The whole science of algebra, which in itself is an Arabic word, was
devised in its entirety by al-Khuwarizmi as early as 825. It is interesting to note that its inventor's name has been corrupted in modern mathematical terminology of the West as logarithm and algorism. His work was translated into Latin by Gerard of Cremona in the twelfth century. Again his mathematical tables, revised and amplified by another Arab named al-Majriti (d. 1007), was put into Latin by Adelard of Bath in 1126.

It would be idle to attempt any survey of all the developments of early Arab mathematics after al-Khuwarizmi. One name, however, stands out and can hardly be overlooked. This is ‘Umar al-Khaiyam (1038-1123), a native Persian from Nishapur, better known in western literature as the poet who composed the “Rubā‘iyāt” (Quatrains) immortalized by Fitzgerald in English poetry, although his real title to fame rests on his mathematical genius and his contributions to the advancement of science and astronomy. He made substantial improvements on al-Khuwarizmi’s work and the mathematics of the Greeks. While solving cubic equations by geometrical constructions, he conjectured the impossibility of finding two cubes whose sum could be a cube, a problem which Pierre de Fermat (1601-65) generalized only several centuries later. His algebra was rendered into French in 1857. He also reformed the Persian calendar on the basis of his astronomical observational research.

Associated with mathematics is the science of astronomy, in which the Arabs had a time-honoured tradition. Arab astronomers are far too numerous to parade in a brief essay. Yet certain landmarks are worthy of notation. During the Abbasid Caliphate, we learn of the establishment of observatories in several parts of the empire. Baghdad, Maragha and Jundishapur were amongst those sites. Of the Arabic astronomical compendia, that by al-Firghani—the Latin Alfaraganus—written about 860, was translated into Latin by Gerard of Cremona in collaboration with a certain Johannes Hispalensis before 1187; and it was published at Nuremberg in 1537 by Melanchthon of German Reformation fame. The astronomy of Abu Ma’shar (d. 886), who was also an astrologer, also found its way into Latin by Adelard of Bath and the aforementioned “Johannes.” The “Astronomical Tables” of al-Battani (the Latin Albategnus, d. 918) also became known in Latin in medieval Europe and later used by Copernicus (d. 1543).

In Cairo, the Fatimid Caliph al-Ḥākim (996-1020) had his own observatory on the Muqattam Hills near Cairo and his astronomer royal ‘Ali ibn Yūnus compiled for him his astronomical tables. He is known also to have used the pendulum several centuries before Galileo (d. 1642) became acquainted with it. Further west at Toledo in Spain, al-Zarkali (the Latin Alzachel d. 1087) composed from personal observation the famous “Tables of Toledo,” which determine planetary positions. He
also made a new astrolabe which King Alfonso the Wise used in the determination of longitudes in the thirteenth century. Copernicus later employed the astrolabe in conjunction with a work by al-Bitruji (Alpetragius d. 1204) in defining and delineating the movement of the planets.

**The Experimental Sciences**

Although the Arabs long remained under the Greek influence in experimental science, trying to solve the problem of the transmutation of "base" into "noble" metals to enable them to change lead into gold, and consistently sought the Philosopher's Stone as well as the Elixir of Life whereby they could cure all diseases and increase human longevity, they were able to perform a number of important and original chemical processes. These included melting and distillation, evaporation and filtration, and sublimation and crystallization. The eighth century alchemist Jabir ibn Haiyan knew all those processes and further devised calcination and reduction of numerous oxides.

The word alchemy or chemistry is derived from Arabic; so are the words alembic, alcohol and alkali. The Arabs became acquainted with aqua regia, sulphide of mercury, saltpeter, alum, pure vitriols and a number of other chemical combinations ultimately transmitted to the West. They separated antimony and arsenic from their sulphides, described the preparation of steel from which the famous Damascus blade was beaten, made use of alum in dying cloth, distilled acetic acid from vinegar, and implemented manganese dioxide in glass manufacture. All these operations were destined sooner or later for adoption by the West through contacts with the East in Spain, Sicily and the Holy Land. Al-Rāzi (Rhazes, d. 925) identified substances and described new chemical processes cited by Roger Bacon.

In physics, we find luminous Arab names known to the West from the Middle Ages. Perhaps the most famous in this category was Ibn al-Haytham (the Latin Alhazen, d.1039) of Basra and later of Cairo. He opposed Euclid and Ptolemy in his work *On Optics* regarding the "camera obscura" whereby he reversed the Greek conception that light was emitted from the interior of the eye to outside objects. He studied the refraction of light and knew the principle of inertia which Isaac Newton formulated much later in his First Law of Motion. His *Opticae Thesaurus* became the basis of Roger Bacon's medieval optical treatise as well as the later works of Leonardo da Vinci (d. 1519) and Johann Kepler (d. 1630).

Al-Bīrūnī (d. 1048), better known as geographer and historian, was equally accomplished in the realms of astronomy, science and physics. During his long residence in India, he made outstanding contributions to the principles of hydrostatics, which he investigated in the artesian
wells of the sub-continent. He was pre-eminently responsible for the finalization of the use of Hindu numerals in Arabic. He also solved numerous mathematical problems and calculated with extraordinary precision the specific gravity of eighteen precious and semi-precious stones. In this field, he was succeeded by al-Khāzīnī who, in 1118, calculated the more difficult specific gravity of liquids such as water, oil, milk and human blood. He differentiated between soft and sea water as well as hot and cold liquids with an imperceptible margin of error. He knew the force of gravitation and discovered the formula of acceleration in the case of falling bodies. All these and more principles became infiltrated into the West long afterwards, and they proved to be milestones in the march of civilization.

Medicine and Pharmacology

The Arabs were great pioneers in the fields of medicine, surgery and pharmacology. Here, their accomplishments form one of the most luminous chapters in Arab civilization, and their impact on the West in these disciplines survived the Middle Ages. They developed an elaborate system of hospitals (bimarīstāns); and as early as 850, it is said that they had thirty-four hospitals in key towns. In 978, a description of the Damascus hospital reveals the existence of twenty-four practitioners with wards for separate diseases, regular dispensaries for prescriptions, and a medical study center for clinical training of specialized students together with a considerable library for reference. These exemplary institutions must have inspired the European onlooker during the Crusades, for only then did the West conceive the idea of hospital care and the creation of the military orders of religion devoted to this kind of service in crusading battlefields. These were the Hospitallers and the Templers, created on older Arab models.

Arab physicians were highly revered and some became unusually wealthy from the practice of that profession. It is said that Caliph al-Ma’mūn’s private Nestorian physician Jābīl ibn Baktīshū (d. 830) amassed the tremendous fortune of 88,800,000 dirhems, the equivalent of more than seven million dollars with a much higher purchasing power.

Of the innumerable celebrities in medicine, two stand out above the rest on account of their influence on western Europe. In the ninth century, Abu Bākī al-Rāzī (the Latin Rhazes d. 925), after studying all Indian, Persian and Greek medical literature, alchemy and science, took to clinical observation himself and wrote in excess of two hundred medical treatises, some of an original character on subjects such as measles and small-pox, for the combatting of which he devised a form of vaccination. He finally compiled a definitive twenty-four-volume medical work entitled Al-Ḥawī or Comprehensive Book, the Latin Liber Continens of Gerald of Cremona, which remained the standard text in European universities down to the
seventeenth century.

The second physician in succession to Rhazes was the philosopher Avicenna-Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037) who assimilated all medical knowledge to his day in another monumental work called Al-Qānūn fi al-Tibb, i.e. Canon in Medicine. It comprised in excess of a million words and was translated into Latin by the same Gerard of Cremona. It was also used in European schools until modern times. Besides anatomy, clinical medicine, pathology, hygiene and therapeutics, it contains a formidable Materia Medica with at least 760 drugs. This number was exceeded only by Ibn al-Bīṭār, a noted pharmacist and herbalist who died in 1248 leaving a compilation of 1400 medicinal drugs and plants.

These men and other professional surgeons knew contagion, contamination through soil and water, disinfection by fire, anesthesia, and they diagnosed stomach cancer, tuberculosis and other diseases unknown to former physicians. Arab surgeons performed the first Caesarian operation in history, and used animal gut for sutures. Abūl-Qāsim al-Zahrāwī, the physician of Caliph ʿAbd-al-Rahmān III (912-61) of Cordoba, known in Latin literature as Abulcasis, was recognized as a miracle of his age in surgery. He wrote a work on the subject which stood the test of time in medieval Europe.

Again a famous ophthalmologist, namely ʿAli ibn Ḫaṣa, known in Latin as Jesu Haly, presumably a Christian from Baghdad in the twelfth century, wrote a treatise on 130 eye diseases and performed such delicate operations as cataract surgery.

It is beyond the limitations of a modest article to provide more details on the vast subject of Arab medicine. But it is noteworthy to state that the Arabs, who were great lovers of the horse and the camel, also paid considerable attention to veterinary medicine (Bayṭarah). There are special works on both the Arab steed and the camel; but since these had no impact on the West, it would be superfluous here to make any account thereof.

Art and Architecture

In the sphere of art and architecture, the Arab conquerors availed themselves of the forms, materials and technical ingenuity of the countries under their rule. Consequently, they employed Syrian, Armenian, Egyptian, Byzantine, Persian and Indian technicians, providing they observed the dictates of the new Muslim faith by avoiding the reproduction of human or animal figures. The result was a composite style of great splendour across the empire from Spain to India bearing marks of unity and diversity at one and the same time. All were united by characteristics of Islamic distinction, yet each displaying magnificence of its own derived from the native art of its special terrain. The prohibition of representation of
living figures arising from the Prophet's fear of atavism to pre-Islamic idolatry was maintained in religious buildings, but was broken in the caliphal private abodes which were often decorated with paintings and mosaics of hunting scenes and bathing maidens. The Fatimid dynasty (909-1171) in Egypt was certainly more lax in this respect. Islamic art, however, found a legitimate outlet in non-representational forms of a geometrical character of floral and plant motifs with a felicitous effect. This came to be known as the Arabesque style, found in a multitude of structures from stone mouldings to manuscript ornamentation. This style was further enriched by the decorative Arabic calligraphy, both Kufic and non-Kufic, which lent itself admirably to that motif in perfect harmony.

What matters in this essay is to survey the salient features of that new art in relation to its influence on Western art and architecture. The three points of contact between the East and the West were Spain, Sicily and the Holy Land. It was in those areas that cultural interaction was more conspicuous. During the Crusades, the Western knights carried back home with them innovations in military architecture including the concentric castle formation with its double walls and central keep or tower. Crooked entrances and machicolation were also adopted for defensive purposes.

In civil architecture, it might be noted that the pointed arch and vaulted ceiling which distinguished the Gothic style in Europe had been known for centuries in the East. The ancient mosque of Ibn Tulūn begun in Cairo in 876 has a whole arcade of pointed arches, a feature which recurred in the al-Azhar mosque and university in 970. Traceried windows and towers, multifoil or cusped arches and doorways, ribbed vaulting, friezes of arabesque decoration motifs, and church campanilas strewn all over the cities of Europe have their ancestral parallels in the mosques, citadels, colleges, hospitals, mausolea and minarets of an earlier age in the Islamic countries of the eastern and western Mediterranean.

In the realm of the minor arts, the Arabs treasured and nurtured the legacy of the ancient East, while Europe was sliding into relative backwardness. In the Middle Ages, the marts of Cairo, Damascus and Baghdad overflowed with art objects of all description. Jewellery, gold and silver work with repoussé and inlay, ceramics with and without metallic lustre, coloured glazes, fine pottery, all sorts of vases, glasswork, rock crystal, embossed leather craft, embroidered and woven monochrome and polychrome textiles—these and more art objects were continuously on display at the Oriental bazaars. They proved to be the vehicles whereby the arts of the East were transmitted to Europe by the rising merchant class of later medieval communes.

Perhaps the most important landmark was the transplantation of the
art of paper-making to Europe. Replacing the costly and scarce parchment as well as the brittle papyrus, paper marked a milestone in the march of intellectual civilization. The origin of the new industry could be traced to the invasion of Samarkand in Central Asia in 712 when the first Abbasid Caliph al-Saffāḥ seized three Chinese prisoners who happened to be paper makers at home. These were taken to Baghdad and made to impart their art to the natives. Finally we hear of a paper-mill already in existence at Baghdad in 794. Egypt followed suit before 900; and by 1100 paper-mills emerged in Morocco, spreading from there to Spain and Sicily. After some resistance, the technique of paper manufacture was adopted in Europe and changed the face of the Later Middle Ages.

The production of glass, monopolized by the Venetians until Colbert revealed its secret for France in the 17th century, owed its origin to a contract dated 1 June 1277 between Bohemond IV, prince of Antioch, and Contarini, doge of Venice, whereby the former wrested the technique of that industry from Syria and passed it to the latter. The crystal industry, on the other hand, remained the monopoly of Cordoba where a Moor by the name of Ibn Finās perfected the process of its manufacture before the close of the ninth century. Prior to that date, only rock crystal, a very scarce commodity, was in use. The elaborate ceramic industry of Egypt, Syria and Persia is said to have been introduced by Muslim potters into Italy and France, probably in the twelfth century.

Textile manufacture (tirāz), perfected by Coptic craftsmen in Egypt, found its way to medieval Europe, and specimens of royal robes and episcopal vestments with embroidered Arabic inscriptions are still seen in museums and vestiaries of old cathedrals. Roger II of Sicily copied the Egyptian “Tirāz” factories by setting up a palace workshop at Palermo for weaving embroidered robes of honour which he presented to European potentates. The influence of the Arabic motif penetrated even medieval and Renaissance iconography and painting. Friezes with Kufic Arabic lettering often decorated the border of robes in religious paintings. One of the best examples is visible in the central scene of Fra Lippo Lippi’s “Coronation of the Virgin.”

**Philology and Literature**

The place of philology and literature in the study of poly-cultural relations, long overlooked, has nevertheless been the subject of greater scrutiny in recent times. In fact, word building and terminological loans amongst varied tongues have proved to be a sure indicator of the migration of culture from land to land. In this wise, the infiltration of Arabic terms into many western languages has revealed the magnitude of the impact of Arab culture on other societies. Though much sundry work
has been done in this fertile field, perhaps the most massive contribution of this kind in the area of Arabic and the Romance languages was compiled by the late Professor Arnold Steiger of Zurich. In order to trace cultural influences of Arabic, it is imperative that philologists should group loan words into families or related subjects. The field of astronomy, science, music, maritime life, textiles, colours, vegetables, flowers, fruits, commerce, technology, place names and more categories are fields pregnant with striking possibilities in the recovery of Arab traces in western civilization. But since this process lies beyond the frontiers of a general article, we have decided to present the reader with a short, representative selection of words alphabetically arranged as follows with the Arabic source in parenthesis:

Admiral (Amīr al-Baḥr) Jupe (Jubbah)
Algebra (al-Jabr) Lemon (Limūn)
Algeciras (al-Jazīrah) Magazine (Makhāzin)
Alchemy or Chemistry (al-Kimyāʾ) Mangonel (Manjaniq)
Alembic (al-İnbiq) Mattress (Matrah = place or locale)
Almanac (al-Manākh) Minaret (Manārāh)
Amber (ʿAnbar) Monsoon (Mausim)
Arsenal (Dār al-Ṣināʾah) Mosque (Masjid)
Camel (Jamal) Muslim (from Müsil)
Check (Ṣakk) Sugar (Sukkar)
Cotton (Qūtn) Syrup or Sherbet (Sherbāt)
Damask (from Damascus) Tambourine (Ṭambūr or Tablah)
Divan (Diwān) Tariff (Taʿrif)
Gazelle (Ghazāl) Traffic (Tafrīq)
Guitar (Qīthārah) Trafalgar (Ṭaraf al-Aghar)
Jar (Jarrah) Zenith (Semt)
Jasmine (Yasmin) Zero or Cypher (Ṣifr)

Such instances exist more profusely in the Romance languages, especially Spanish and Portuguese for obvious historical reasons, though occasionally some words like “adobe” in America can be traced to more remote origins in hieroglyphic through the Egyptian colloquial and Spanish in turn. The original word “ṭūb” is still in use in Egypt for unburnt brick.

The problem of literature appears to be a more complicated subject calling for more enquiry into the field of Comparative Literature, more especially in the Age of the Crusade and under the Umayyad Caliphate in Andalusia.

The whole range of the “Chanson” literary cycles from the Chanson de Roland depicting Charlemagne’s Spanish adventure in the eighth century to the Chanson de Chétifs (1130) and the Chanson d’Antioche (1180) emerged as literary saga rather than history, and it was these that Tasso
used in the composition of his heroic epic *Gerusalemme Liberata* in the 16th century. In this manner, we see how Charlemagne and King Arthur as well in the *Morte d'Arthur* became crusaders, whereupon their tales were inspired by Arab encounters. Again the songs of the Troubadours in Spain, the Provençals in southern France, and the Minnesingers in Germany bear unmistakable signs of Arab influences. The old French romance of *Aucassin et Nicolette* drew somewhat from the Hispano-Arabic story of Abul-Qāsim.

The literary streams from Arabic sources must obviously have left their mark on the Western romances of the Middle Ages, and they even found their way to segments of modern letters. The *Arabian Nights*, known in Arabic as the *Thousand and One Nights* (*Alf Layla wa-Layla*) is said to have given Chaucer the theme of his medieval *Tales* and Bocaccio his *Decameron*, though it remains for students of Comparative Literature to discover the channels through which they reached Europe at those early dates. In recent times, however, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* are said to have been conceived from episodes in the same work. The influence of the Crusades also persisted until modern times in the historical poetry and fiction of Milton and Sir Walter Scott, and these were followed by a multitude of still more recent historical novels of varying value.

*Other Disciplines*

The contributions of Arab culture to the forward march of civilizations penetrated many other fields where their impact on the West was either minimal or doubtful. To quote a few examples in all brevity, we may begin with agriculture, which the Arabs developed into an elaborate science in spite of their nomadic desert origin. This is illustrated by a twelfth century *Book of Farming* (*Kitāb al-Filāh*) by Ibn al-ʿAwwām of Seville in southern Spain. He dealt with 585 plants, knew controlled irrigation, prescribed drainage, valued fertilization, practiced pruning and many other horticultural improvements at a time when Europe lagged into antiquated and primitive methods. It is doubtful whether Arab agricultural progress affected Europe at all. On the contrary, it is said that even Spanish agriculture deteriorated after the expulsion of the Caliphate of Granada and the disappearance of Arab skills from the Iberian Peninsula.

In technology, too, the Arabs had their day, as is evidenced by a few illustrated works left by Arab engineers and inventors. An elaborate example by Ibn al-Rāzīzāz al-Jazāri in 1206 has recently been put into English.⁶ Accomplished in the art of ingenious devices or automata (*Ḥiyāl*, i.e. tricks), al-Jazāri compounded a massive astronomical water-clock or clepsydra, as well as mechanical pumps of an elaborate structure. But the Arabs went further in their inventions. They constructed water and
wind mills of all description, fountains, water raising and running water devices, both hot and cold, war machines and numerous other inventions, equally functional and aesthetic. Most of these remained unknown to the West except perhaps the war engines copied by the crusaders such as the mangonel and the trebuchet.

Amongst other disciplines where the Arabs excelled beyond recognition was the development of geographical lore which started with pilgrimage (Hajj) to the Muslim holy places as a pillar of the faith and ended up in world-wide travels. Without encumbering this article with a galaxy of geographers who had no real impact on the West, let us mention perhaps the only work done under Western patronage, that of al-Iarisi who compiled a world geography accompanied by the finest medieval Mappa Mundi at the Sicilian court of King Roger II (1101-54).

The Arabs were acquainted with the idea of the sphericity of the globe throughout the Dark Ages of Europe until it was brought out in 1410 by Pierre d'Ailly, Archbishop of Paris, in his novel map of the "Imago Mundi" used by Christopher Columbus with immense consequences. Also one Arab named Ibn Mājid, who showed Vasco de Gama the route to India in 1498, is credited with the transmission of the mariner's compass to European sailors for the first time.

Though of doubtful impact on general Western culture, we must admit that there was a measure of interaction between Moorish and native Spanish music. A number of musical instruments of the West bear Arabic names, such as the lute (al-ūd), the guitar (qithārah) and the tambourine (tablāh). The Arabs had prolific musicologists from early times, headed by al-Fārābī the philosopher, but their works were unknown in the West until modern times.

Outside this picture, perhaps the only minor discipline which was adopted from the Mamlūk armies of Egypt by the crusaders was the heraldic signs. The first of these signs appeared in Europe in 1136 on a seal of the Court of Flanders and later spread to all the kings and aristocracies of the West, thus laying the foundations of the elaborate science of heraldry. The fleur de lys, the eagle, the lion, the polo sticks and numerous other signs are all of Mamlūk origin.

Birth of the Renaissance

In his Divine Comedy, Dante is supposed to have epitomized the genius of medieval letters, while modern historians consider his work as the original inception of modern thought which represented the birth of the Renaissance. For many generations, Dante's sources were described as Aristotelian and Thomist until challenged by Asin Palacios, a Spanish theologian and a noted Arabist, who claimed that Dante derived the very conception of his Comedy from Arabic mystical accounts of the Prophet
Muhammed's nocturnal journey to Jerusalem (Isrā') and the traditional story of his ascension to heaven (Mi'raj). Parallelism between the structure of the Divine Comedy and the course of that legend as elaborated in a later text by the greatest of Arab mystics, Ibn 'Arabi of Murcia in Andalusia, were detailed by Asin Palacios in a work entitled La Escatología Musulmana en la Divina Comedia. The discovery of a prototype of Dante's Comedy in Arabic literature shows that the prince of poets of the Renaissance must have been influenced in his poem by Ibn 'Arabi. But the relationship between those distant schools of thought had to be bridged if we were to believe Asin's thesis.

In this area, Asin Palacios reveals that Dante's mentor, Brunetto Latini, was Florentine ambassador to the court of Alfonso the Wise King of Aragon in the 13th century. As such, Brunetto became familiar with the Islamic tradition of that legend, not only at that court, but also by visiting Toledo in southern Spain where he read Latin accounts thereof. In this way, he was able to transmit that picture to Dante, who followed it closely in the composition of his immortal poem. The conclusion is thus made that the literary father of the Renaissance must have been inspired by the pre-existing Sufi literature. If we add this as a mere symbol to the weight of evidence presented in the afore-mentioned paragraphs, we may safely assume that the contributions of Arabic culture to western thought must have been a sure source for the Revival of Learning at the dawn of modern European history.

Footnotes

1 A corruption of the Arabic word “Musta 'rib” pl. “Musta 'ribin” meaning non-Arabs who adopt Arab culture.
2 From the Arabic term “Muta 'Khir” pl. “Muta 'Khirun” meaning those Arabs who loitered or chose to delay.
3 The word literally means “emptiness.” “Ṣifr al-Yadayn,” for instance, means empty hands.
4 Contribucion a la Fonetica del Hispano-Arabe y de los Arabismos en la Ibero-Romenico y el Siciliano. (Madrid 1932).
5 Place names are in profusion in Spanish and can furnish a separate study.
8 Further Readings

So I have sailed the seas and come... to B... a town by the sea, in Lebanon. It is seventeen years later. My absence has been an exile from an exile. I'm of those people who are always doing what somebody else is doing... but a few weeks earlier. A fish in a warm sea. No house for shelter, but a bed, from house to house, and clothes crumpled on a single shelf. I am searching for love.

In Beirut there is one season and a half. Often, the air is still. I get up in the morning and breathe heavily. The winter is damp. My bones ache. I have a neighbor who spits blood when at last it rains.

My father built a house when I was a child near the German school so I could go to it. The school moved out as he finished the roof. Ever since, my property has been rented for the cheapest rent in town. The laws are such that I can't push out the tenants. Anyway, I am afraid of houses as of tombs.

My other neighbor (from neighbor to neighbor I shall cover the world) sells birds. And cats. A Siamese cat was born to him, and was really Siamese: it had two heads, four ears, two bodies, two pairs of four legs, two tails. And boy, were they glued! He has on sale a little monkey which has been growing for the last 17 and half years. The store is in front of a newspaper which went broke. All the windows are since blind.

They are few, and, as there are no trees in Beirut, the wire-poles are dead, geometric semblances for trees. Dead archetypes. As for the
birds, Lebanese hunters have killed them all. Now they are killing the Syrian birds, too.

THE CHURCH

We have churches, mosques, and synagogues. All equally empty at night. On week-ends, many flies desert their gardens. People come in.

MY HOUSE

I should say my side of the bed. Half a bed makes a big house at night. My dreams have the power to extend space and make me live in the greatest mansions. During the day it doesn’t matter. There are many streets, a few remaining sidewalks, and, yes, the cafe “Express”, in which I move, hunted by memories.

POLITICS

Oh, it’s too much, too much. Once I dreamed of becoming the new Ibn Khaldoun of America or the de Tocqueville of the Arabs. Now I work for a newspaper and cover the most menial things. So I don’t understand how it is that there are kings without kingdoms and Palestinians without a Palestine. As for the different scandals, they do not matter to me. Why should I care that some thieves steal from other thieves. Should I?

PEOPLE

The Lebanese go on two feet, like the Chinese for example; sometimes, on four, to pick up a dime under the table. Their country is small, their desires too, and their love affairs. Only their cars are big. Detroit made Chevies and Buicks. All the unsold Buicks of America are on our roads. So, in this country, you only see the heads of the people. Their bodies are carefully washed and stored away. As for the women, there aren’t any. They all consider themselves as being the other half of their men. With one exception.

VITAL DATA

The most interesting things in Beirut are the absent ones. The absence of an opera house, of a football field, of a bridge, of a subway, and, I was going to say, of the people and of the government. And, of course, the absence of absence of garbage.
EDUCATION

Everybody speaks Arabic, French, English, Armenian, Greek and Kurdish. Sometimes one language at a time, sometimes all of them together. And even the children are financiers.

BUSINESS

Merchants sell to other merchants and buy from them. Men sell women to other men and buy women from them. Women sell women to women. And everybody sells a child: for vanity, for money, for pleasure. In the tall buildings of Hamra children get assaulted under the eyes of their parents. Parents thank God when they get the money.

MY HOUSE, THIS PLACE AND BODY

There was a house in a eucalyptus grove. My father and I sneaked in, and in the middle of the night a guard came to awaken us. I advised my father to offer him money and he did: he gave him 900 pounds. “I didn’t ask for that much,” said the guard. My father, then, disappeared. Don’t talk to me about my body. It has been battered, cut open; discs, nerves, and tissues have been removed. My belly, a zoological garden. My eyes, poor lighthouses, and my mind a rocky and barren garden, exactly like this place and the unexisting house.

THE SAME PERSON

I went to the store, and, feeling sorry for the caged birds, I told the guy: “How can you sell animals?” He replied: “Aren’t you an animal too?” So I lowered my eyes and admired him.

WEATHER

I used to love the heat, and, even now, the sweat. My sheets used to get wet and I, rolling on them, my body in ecstasy. I was then sixteen, or a bit more. I kissed the air of this town with passion and carried it in my arms. I couldn’t love a man because I loved the sea. Then, I went away, and the spell broke. The weather aged, got wrinkles, its bones and marrow became soft. It is nowadays like breathing mud. When it rains, I can’t feel happy for the trees. They do not exist. So I feel happy for the buildings. They get an imperfect bath. As for me, the eternal sun has worked like a siren on my brain.

It has eaten up my intelligence. The dust has filed my nails. Cockroaches run over my paintings, and I get up at night to kill them.
and to keep them away at the edge of my dream. But the dampness is constant, and invisible amoebae constantly dance in the air. One feels always a bit swollen in Beirut. It is a pregnancy of bad omen. You have to go to a village called Sannine to start breathing properly. But you never stay too long up there. You miss the weather of Beirut.

PLACE

I left this place by running all the way to California. An exile which lasted for years. I came back on a stretcher and felt here a stranger, exiled from my former exile. I am always away from something and somewhere. My senses left me one by one to have a life of their own. If you meet me in the street, don't be sure it is me. My center is not in the solar system.

PEOPLE

This is the cruelest place. A man in a motor boat hit a swimmer and sped away. The skull was broken. A large space of blood covered the sea. Painters rushed to the scene to make a painting for sale. A girl was killed by her brother because she smiled to her lover. A house in the city was set on fire because they wanted the tenants out. A rebellion has started, the rebellion of the rich against the poor. Yes, to make sure that the latter do not multiply, and rather be dead, the sooner the better.

MY HOUSE MY CAT MY COMPANY

From every drawer, the blood of my spirit is spilled. My eyes, anguished by the light, have cruel particles of dust covering them. Noises come in as demons. No crime in the newspaper is as gory as the noises that surround my bed. It is an eternal beat.

MAO is the name of my cat, who has been rescued from a friend. He sleeps on my left side, watches my heartbeats. At night, when he sometimes runs away, I have to go out and look for him. Most often, he runs out at about four in the morning, when the Koranic prayer fills the air, and when its lamentation seems endless and fills me with sacred terror. That terror is communicated somehow to MAO whose hair stands up. He shivers against me when we come home.

One morning my breast was bare and he put his paw on it. It was a moment of perfection.

So I gave him away, but he came back.

I live with a woman who shares with me my passion for ants, from
the day I told her that my father had taught me to watch them attentively in order to imitate them later in life. This was my education. I was told that ants had all the necessary qualities; they were tiny and carried weights bigger than their size. They never slept. Industrious, they stuck together, never doing anything alone. And when you killed them, they multiplied. So my friend fell in love with my father for having been so right. But he is dead. The ants keep me company, coming from under the flower pots all the way into the closets, glasses, spoons. They stop at the door of the refrigerator. Their brain is tinier than the head of a pin. So angels must exist.

I am a species all by myself. That's why no fish comes to swim in my territorial waters. I have no enemies.

I live with a woman who has a recurring dream: each night she goes to unearth Akhnaton and carries his coffin all over the house. The young king has a nocturnal journey on her arms. His solar boat had been shattered by his murderers. She weeps for him, sometimes, during the day too, but she does not go around like the women from America in pink slippers and bobby pins to the supermarket. No. She uses silverware, puts salt and pepper on her meat, and she tells me that she does not proceed from a source of light but from a source of shadows.

As for me, I told her that I find my reason to be in the configurations of matter.

I love the different objects I encounter with violence. I have a passion for cars. My spoon is to me what the angel used to be to Jacob: my moment of truth. People throw their fingernails away, and I look at these pieces of matter with awe: transparent like alabaster, tiny like African ants, pale as erased memories. I throw them away with a tremendous melancholy. I would like to be buried with St. James Infirmary playing. Or something like that, maybe a song by Oum Kalsoum.

Then I would like to resurrect. Death would appear as short as the time for the batting of an eyelash. I am of those who like resurrection, and I am not alone in that; I hear people saying it, when I walk, and mostly in New York.

POLITICS

The State. A man and a woman, together, already form a state. There is everything between them: a principle of authority, a government, laws of behaviour, embassy and representation, diplomacy, weapons, periods of peace and war.
They also constitute, to make things harder than for matters of state, two different species. When they meet, they sometimes ignore each other. Sometimes, they climb on each other like a pair of monkeys. At other times, a current of cool air passes from the one to the other: there is love. And then, there are times when, at their contact, a short-circuit happens, and they burn each other and leave nothing behind them but a spot on the sun.

Youssef el Khal said one day that I was a poet. Yes. I am the poet in the heart of the city. A dot. I am the poet of the here and now.

But, being a woman, I am invisible. I have to hide my obsession for ants. They pursue me. If a woman went to the market place and cried for help because ants were climbing up between her legs, some men would throw themselves between her thighs, and search wildly for the tiny beasts, in order to relieve her from her fear, and hurt her, too. But she would be arrested and thrown into an insane asylum until she hallucinated and the water which fell from the faucet became a thick stream of black ants. In that case, I would pull up my blanket of flies and sleep.

MORE VITAL DATA

Like a salmon, I came back here to die. But this place is not a place. I am unable to die.

By the big dam of the Columbia River I saw a salmon swim upstream and break itself on the concrete slopes of the dam. The large Columbia River is a stream which makes its mark on the universe.

If I came to Beirut from that far away, it is to bemoan the Pacific. My passion is for the beach. Pisces-born, I am the Indian salmon originating in an Arab land.

In Hamra street, in Bourj and Bab Edriss, people are breathing gasoline, and they like it; it is still cheaper than water in a country of drought.

EDUCATION

Children are taught that little boys are superior to little girls. Yes. When Hassan beats Nedjma, Nedjma is beaten by her father for having been beaten, and this, ad infinitum . . .

And nobody ever tells them, oh never! that a rat is as human as a cat. And the slow process of castration starts on the wooden benches of the classrooms. We need schools without walls. We need to be a nation of swimmers. We need the end of nations. The end of ends.

In this avaricious country, even the moon looks like a coin, because children are taught numbers. As for me, I learned arithmetic by killing ants and counting their dead little bodies.
BUSINESS

This place is a cross-road with no red lights. A station for outer spacemen. An immigration point. Look how they come from Jupiter and Mars, the colonizers. I used to go walking from Damascus to Rakka under a forest of apricot trees. But trade moved in and the forest disappeared.

I already told you that a bottle of water is more expensive than a bottle of gasoline. So, let us drink oil. We buy mirrors and drugs, but we do not have the funeral parlors of America and the Jewish barbershops of Tel Aviv. No. Business is healthy. It is all a traffic of toys bought always with somebody else’s sweat. And then there is the airport. It brings in millions of dollars. It takes out millions of people. The biggest business in town is to carry baggage, back and forth. Buy your ticket to the moon and we will carry your slippers free. Buy. Buy. Buy.

THAT SAME PERSON

Because I told him a rat is as human as a cat, he threw himself on me and said he had to talk. We went together into the prostitution quarter of the city. “I can’t talk unless I play a bit before,” he said, so we went into a store and took rifles and shot at moving targets. He pulled down two stuffed bears. We went to have dinner. He told me: “Don’t let them get me. In Kaboul they wanted to put me in prison, and I fled. You don’t know what they do to prisoners there. They keep them in a well where water reaches their belt. A man who was a former ambassador stayed in there three years. He has never been the same.

“The American in whose house Timothy Leary was arrested was put for five months into that well. He came out insane. His wife was put into a big hole with no water and with open skies, but the guards were forbidden to come too close to the hole so that they would not rape her and the other women. They had, therefore, to throw the food to them like to beasts. But these women have a memory.”

Right in front of the restaurant was Marika’s house. We came up to the three story house, and he said hello to her and then kissed her Moslem friend, Afaf, on the forehead. Marika has the gentleness of the typical Greek prostitute in an Arab harbor. We ran down the stairs. Two Lebanese soldiers were looking for the door. They made an indecent gesture. He laughed. He was perspiring more and more and he said: “I want to talk about the ultimate, next to a fan.” We found a little cafe, with a table with a marble top and iron legs, drank some
water, and started an infinite conversation about . . . his desire for little girls.

WIRES
The thread of this century is made of wire. German camps surrounded, all over Europe, with wire and spikes, and in Greece . . . British wires in Egypt. Israeli wires in Palestine and on the southern border of Lebanon. People’s mouths sewn with wires and Che Guevara’s body bandaged with them and dragged from one place to another. A Viet Cong hanged not by rope but by iron. All the little electric wires which criss-cross my brain, attaching in an imperfect way one thought to another, my hunger to my exile, and my body to this place. Each one of us is a dog attached by steel threads to a purpose, waiting for lightning to strike.

WEATHER
Spring is deadly, like red roses.
The weather always awakens in me the fear of death. I am of those animals who have a strong life instinct, but the forces of death, like huge tides, beat against me. I go from country to country and each time, the earth, under my feet, becomes an ocean. So I move on. Chasing each place’s weather.

At noon, I visit buildings under construction. I look at the Syrian workers while they eat. There is always some cement on their bread. When they cut a watermelon, they count the black seeds in order to know how many days separate them from their own death. They don’t know what they are doing. It is for them like playing chess.

Spring starts, here, in February. We faint on our desks. In classrooms. In rooms. A thin veil of sweat covers my face and my neck, runs between my shoulders, all along my spine. My nerves quiver. The heat grows. In June, July, August, I resemble a flat tire. Then, all kinds of amoebae stir in my belly. The heat is a culture bed, my body works like marshes, and in the green foliage of my insides flowers of some anti-paradise grow. Airplanes zoom above, and, because I am a four-footed animal, I stay on the ground, and even below. October in Beirut is the end of the road to hell. Dampness has reached its saturation point. By then one can hardly move. Tired bones, tired eyes, tired fingers. One by one my nerves go. The harbor is cluttered. So are the streets. In a dark and polluted air I act as if I were breathing. The year is almost gone, and the very short rains are waiting.
PLACE
My place is at the center of things. I am writing from within the nucleus of an atom. Blood beating under my ears. Some dry heat radiating from my nerves. A pressure trying to push my eyes ahead of me; they want to travel on their own. My place: highways, trains, cars. One road after another, from ocean shore to ocean shore. From Beirut to the Red Sea. From Aden to Algiers. From Oregon to La Paz. I keep going, prisoner of a body, and my brain is just a radio station emitting messages to outer space. Angels, astronauts all dressed in white, I would like some strange being to take me somewhere where no disease blurs my perception. I will grow wings and fly.

PEOPLE
Charlie Mingus came to Baalbeck. They loved him. He behaved like a bird. Huge, with shining copper wings. He turned the air into a jungle. They danced. They expanded their bodies. They grew feathers, horns, antlers, spikes, teeth.

In the morning they all went to the small cages they call their offices. Some of them made telephone calls.

But look, I want a revolution. I go through the daydreams. Women don’t make war or peace. Neither do the men. There is also a long line of ants waiting for their turn. They want to form a new government; they can’t. Some higher insects have reached their nervous system and paralyzed their will.

Arab women form a people of their own. A poorly run secret society. They are trying hard but do it in confusion. They are at their best on television. Men have never looked at them. Looked at them the way you look at the sunset.

So the cameras, once in a while, come to these women. Beasts with round eyes who throw their ray-like desires upon them. The women know that at last after trillions of years they are being looked at; their eyes meet the eyes of the camera, an icy love affair. They stand alone, face to face. The room is dark. The darkness removes the edges of the studio. So it is similar to being in the universe.

Flashlights drill their way into their souls; it makes them feel they are a target. Deep inside, light uses its rays like a broom. It cleanses the inner soul piece by piece. At the end, all the plasma of birth is gone. Something bare has appeared, and the woman is terrified by such a reduction by search and fire.

So the thing goes on . . .

One being escaped the total fate of Arab women: Oum Kalsoum.
When the Arabs were thinking that they had nothing, they were saying that after all they had Oum Kalsoum and that, all by herself, she represented their will to be, the religious essence of their culture; she pulled to herself, by the quality of her voice and the tone of each one of her words, the human tide that was coming toward her. This human tide became the tide of history, the tide of all the frustrations transfigured in a kind of bliss.

She sings "on target," like a whip to whatever in each one of us is dormant. And also, we can't forget it, a whip against anything foreign, because, then, the foreigner was the colonizer. She took it on herself to tell the world that the Arab world existed.

To all those castrated by under-development and occupation, she was saying that she loved them. She sings as for you alone, and in this love as deep as valleys and the ocean floor, the fellah and the prime minister found, each, what forgives all sins and recycles the son in the grace of the mother.

Erotic being, like the soufis, she reconciled the flesh and the spirit. She has been this century's thread. I heard her when I was twelve in the Grand Theatre of Beirut. It was a beneficial trauma.

Then, I followed her: in Cairo, where on the first Thursday of each month she made people leave home with a transistor radio, or they gathered at night in shops to listen to her in their long and white robes. Listening to her songs, which lasted for four or five hours, I heard the Nile moan and the human species give birth. In the divisions which break a world and make it explode, she was the unity we had.

I follow her in Cairo, for her death. On February 5 I go to her funeral. On the tent near the Omar Makram mosque, where the human river is going to flow behind her coffin, a huge picture of her has a green ribbon on which it is written that she is the martyr of divine love. Yes, the sky is light, cloudy. The people are coming from everywhere, and the noise is like of trees in the wind. La Illah illa Allah, says the crowd. The army was here, but it is gone. The people become the sea and engulf the body.

And it floats, small coffin covered with an iridescent blue and green veil. The people possess her and in their collective memory they take her away like a pharaonic boat.

**HOUSE, MY BREATH AND WINDOW**

A house is a cage, a monument, the mausoleum of all travels, an observatory, the belly of one's mother. Mine is now full of windows, above a harbor. It is a worried object, trembling at night. It makes one
feel insecure. Furniture in it comes and goes. It is not my house but my television’s house. The world comes in through television and sits on my chairs. I am the guardian of all those invisible things. A poet is the one who mounts the guard over the inanimate objects of this world. And this explains how my breath is essential. Don’t accuse me of copying God. There is an old account to settle between us. My breath gives life to plants and on a single occasion it resuscitated a donkey. I took the animal’s sickness and gave him my health.

This new house of mine is made of windows. Beirut’s light comes in like a full malediction. White white is the sun. The whiteness of death.

POLITICS

In my view Yasser Arafat was only on television. For the people, he was in New York. An Arab in New York spoke of Palestine. His gestures were those of an Indian Chief. He was the real leader of a real country. He was also the possible leader of a possible country. Angels covered with blood were flying in the American sky. New York is the deep canyon of the soul.

Meanwhile Beirut moans and burns. But not a single voice is to be heard on behalf of the torn muscles, blinded eyes, cigarette burned faces, vertebrae broken with an axe . . . It is as if Beirut has become an anatomy treatise that one reads in some dark corner of hell.

FINAL VITAL DATA

On the way to extreme consciousness one encounters, like on a high road, pain. Then, one backs up, returns, and goes home.

What we call a loss of memory, the impossibility to remember, is in fact an inner deafness, thinking being separated, by some kind of a curtain, from the inner ear; it is a power failure.

That is how I discovered-writing with no alphabet. One sign after another. One wave length after another. The tall eucalyptus trees were the measure.

In anguish. Absence. The absence of Time. The clear look of the sea. The green eyes of the ocean. The red guts that the Pacific had. The warm breath of the wind. And the hour which was falling on the street under the balcony, like a rain, the laguna not moving. To hurt wherever something is alive.

The sun lives on an island in a celestial ocean. I go with an uncertain speed. I push a stone with my foot, and, rolling, it kills a passerby on the bottom of the ravine. I know it. I return to a terrace white with
haggard colors. The sun remains on its island. At the top of a stairway sustained by a wall, a policeman appears, followed by a hospital attendant. The needle that the latter holds announces my torture.

A voice takes hold of the bottom of my feet, moves up along my legs, stops at my knees and bends them slowly, slides like a sail on the Nile along my spine and bursts into millions of cells of my brain. I am a magic box.

I have the sadness of a meteor. I count one sunset after another. I become the stem of a new tree battered with wounds on which birds come to hold their tribal councils. Fish in the morning, bird in the evening, tree all through the day, I am at night a river which is flowing north.

I also have to tell you: I am, each year, a year older. But there is a place in an anti-universe where I am, each year, a year younger. I love matter. I swim in atoms when I am in the sea. I get covered with sand on the beaches of the Pacific, and food, for me, is made of electric particles. I love the moon because it is cold and barren, and I love a warm bath, when I come back from it. I am of those who kiss the dust not by womanly obedience but because it is part of the earth. And the big, big, clouds, like candy, come down my throat. There is a secret about me: my mobility. I go always faster than I go. This is why I am such a stranger to myself.

EDUCATION

They teach the children to obey: it is a castration. They teach the children the names of cities that have disappeared: they make them love death. There should be only one school, the one where you learn the future... without even any students. Located in the guts of the species. Where you would say:
"If you could step out of your mind and walk in the fields, what would you do?
"Nothing."
"What do you mean? If you could step out of your mind and walk in the fields, where would you go?"
"Nowhere."
"What do you mean?"
"I myself would like to know."
ANOTHER PERSON

There is to each one of us an enemy. It lives all around us and inhabits the body. John has his own: it is his mother. He is sitting in the immense garden full of rubber trees and under hanging roots which belongs to his wife’s family, and he compares it to an American Southern mansion.

It is hot, and it is night. We speak of the civil war. Everyone digs into his memory to bring out what is most painful. John speaks of his mother’s death. He received her in the mail, incinerated and put into a plastic box. “I didn’t know what to do with her,” he said, “when she arrived that way in New York. I did not know any funeral rite. I had to invent one. I drew flowers on the little box that I did not dare open, and I put it in the garbage.”

My enemy is Zamil. His name can also mean that he is a friend. Blue-eyed Arab, hawk-like, he is perched on my closet. Sometimes he smokes a mixture of opium and aspirin. He also looks like my father when he was taking a bath, all covered with soap, slippery, unattainable. We go swimming together, make love under the waves.

I am an amoeba in the dark aquarium which is the city, reaching for acids, stretching and shrinking. I am a fish. My scales rub against the top of the buildings and get torn. My gills absorb all the oil that there is in the water. I keep coming to the surface, but the sky is absent.

It is here, in this water, not in heaven, that my enemy lives. He is not even a person; often, he is but the passage of time. Beirut is too busy to know the beauty of the sea. It is also too cruel. The cruellest town in the world. This is why it, too, becomes my enemy.

THE FIRST PERSON

Is she another person? That enemy of mine has no face, no name, no being. Not even some shadow. But it is the ultimate presence. When I go to the kitchen I go through it, with much difficulty. Then it inhabits my chest. Then it becomes the first person. I mean “I.”

“I” follows the wind and the rain with anger. “I” knows what it means to be an Arab: proud, with no reason, humiliated, with no reason.

The first person is a monkey who moved about San Francisco, Paris, Marrakesh and Bahrain. In a cage, in the bottom of a merchant boat. Also from bedroom to bedroom, but that’s a later tale. A tale for insomniacs.
I am sometimes a first person and sometimes a third. My body takes
over and moves like a planet on its own, in the crowded streets
of an Arab town.

One day this “I” became a palm tree. I was hurting. And thirsty.
I sheltered birds and spiders. I thought my immobility was a destiny
with no appeal. But spring came, and I did not flower. So I understood
that I was not a tree but human. It made my best friend cry.

HOUSEHOLD APPLES

Bassimeh had what seemed to be a huge river, huge for the child I was,
huge also for the other child who drowned in it. We took, my
father and I, the Beirut-Damascus train. A twelve hour ride for
seventy miles, in order to buy apples. The train stopped at Zabadani,
and kids sold paper baskets full of tiny apples. We ate them one by one
until we arrived at my aunt’s house in Damascus with sticky hands
and flies around the mouth. We arrived drunk, rolled on the carpet, and
slept under the white mosquito net. Outside, the heat, as
usual, was buzzing.

CHURCH

Today a Patriarch of the Church died. Shrunk in his bed. I am not
sorry. I always hated the Church because its priests hovered above my
father like vultures. They wanted to have his Moslem soul, and he
gave a good fight against his conversion and he lost. My Greek mother
had candles above his head. She was burning olive oil to the Virgin
Mary. But he was hiding in the closet in order to think of God and the
forest and recite his Koranic prayers. Then one day, when he was on his
death bed, they asked him if he wanted to go to paradise. He said yes.
I came close to him and told him to beware. He did not hear. They
baptized him in a hurry, and then they got scared. In those days the
whole city of Beirut could have been burned in a religious
war. So they let his body have a Moslem funeral.

Speaking of paradise: my friend does not want to go to paradise
because she dislikes blue and white and does not want to be with
Jesus wandering around, with pigeons, as in Cairo Airport, dropping
dirt on her head. So, we shall go to hell.

But there is a Day of Judgment. I am familiar with the Moslem one: two
angels visit the grave on the day of death, one bearing a rake and the
other, an iron weight. A third angel appears and begins to question the
dead man. If the questions are answered to the satisfaction of the
inquisitor, two more angels arrive with robes of dazzling whiteness.
They lift the corpse and hold it until the Day of Judgment.
If the inquisitor angel is dissatisfied, the first two angels are recalled, the one pushing the corpse underground with the iron weight, the other proceeding to drag the body up again, this unrestful process also continuing without cessation till the Day of Judgment.

But which angels, the Christian or the Moslem ones, will accompany my father unto the presence of God?

BUSINESS

William H. Gass doesn't know it, but poets live in commercial outposts. They sell their words then they buy back their own words, with their blood. Ever since we sold oil to some nations, the price of land in the cemeteries has gone up. Very rich people can even die twice. They can afford it.

As for me, I am afraid of my first death. It is a marriage with the unknown. It has already been dreamt by my friend Carla. Some of us used to phone each other our dreams as soon as we got up. And Carla had this dream, one night last September. "They asked me," she said, "to go and visit a cemetery in order to see how the dead are buried. I went. A woman with long black hair was sitting on a horse. She was dead and was holding against her belly a purple cushion. They were launching her horse at full speed against a forest so that, clashing with the trees, she would be reduced to ashes and disappear. But the thing was not working. So they threw the woman and her horse against the trees, and again and again nothing happened. The corpse again and again refused to die."

So I don't know how I am going to die in this city where money and death are intermingled. They sell death in Beirut as they sell wine in France. For pleasure. They beat a prisoner to death to get his shirt even though they can just take it. But they like to kill him. They call it a transaction.

My best friends go hunting. They sell the dead birds, buy cartridges, kill other birds. The woman I live with in this house is waiting for rain. I thought we could buy mineral water and sprinkle the roof. Buy the rain. Winter is lazy. There are billions of human beings on earth and billions of objects for each one of them. We calculated that each person is worth one dollar. This makes a lot of money walking in the streets, and I shall end my life with money involved with this end, as I started with money, my mother having paid the midwife. When I die, who is going to pay? Nobody will claim my body, but the city will mourn.
The interpretation of the word “hero” in contemporary Arabic literature would normally cover a wide area, ranging from the “heroic” hero to the anti-hero, and including, among others, the tragic hero, the rebel, the revolutionary hero, the archetype of the historical hero-figure, the alienated hero and the hero as victim. However, because the subject is extremely wide, involving the creative expression of the Arab mind during the last decades, this discussion will be limited to the treatment of the “heroic” hero and the hero as victim in contemporary Arabic literature, and even then it can only hope to be a summary of some of the many involved experiments accomplished in recent times. Only the more representative examples will be discussed. These will be chosen from avant-garde poetry, drama and fiction, according to the needs of the discussion.

By “contemporary” I mean the period since the beginning of the fifties, or, to be more precise, since the 1948 Palestine debacle, but references to, and illustrations from previous periods will be included, where the reference is either necessary or particularly interesting. This period, as all who are acquainted with contemporary Arab history well know, is crowded with momentous events. In the political sphere there have been many wars, revolutions, coups d'état, and great ideological conflicts. In the social sphere the struggle for further liberation of the individual and for the emancipation of women has been not only intensified, but also influenced by various ideological interpretations of freedom and responsibility. Arab men and women everywhere, but particularly in the more progressive countries, have experienced a much deepened consciousness and a changing Weltanschauung.

Because of the particular nature of the two types, the heroic and the victim, some important experiments that have dealt more with other types of hero, such as the revolutionary or alienated hero and the hero as archetype, could not be discussed. It is interesting to note how the treatment of the hero in literature reflects not only the needs of the audience, but also the vision and personal outlook of the creative writer himself. It is also very interesting to see how the concept of the hero, as reflected in contemporary Arabic literature, differs slightly according to whether it is treated in poetry or in fiction. For example the “heroic” hero
is mainly (but not exclusively) a poetic concept. Many decades have passed since the Egyptianized Syrian, Jurji Zaidān (d. 1914), wrote his twenty-two historical novels which illustrated, or at least most of them did, the annals of the Arab empire in Medieval times. Zaidān’s heroes were “heroic”, the perfect embodiment of men who accomplished glorious deeds and attained great moral and physical courage. Only few works of fiction now portray the hero in this image. This is not to say that the representation of the hero in any of these experiments is not authentic, for most of them are reflective of present-day Arab experience. It should not be understood from this, moreover, that the main conception of the hero in poetry is heroic, for this poetry abounds with images, among others, of the tragic hero, the archetype, the anti-hero and the victim.

One general aspect of the hero in avant-garde Arabic literature today is that he is not made to satisfy the demands of an aristocratic or feudal outlook, nor of the rich and leisurely class in the Arab World. The ideological and historical factors that inform the choice of the hero are those that emphasize either directly or obliquely the dignity and equality of all men, and their right and responsibility to forge their own destiny. On the conceptual level, they stem from the ideas and concepts of freedom, justice, liberation, progress, and, sometimes, revolutionary morality, and they stand in constant opposition to internal coercion, external aggression, corruption and exploitation, and often class distinctions. On the applied level, the hero or heroine is sometimes depicted in constant struggle to live up to the values propagated, or to fight, defeat or be defeated by the undesirable forces of society that oppose and foil them; in many cases, the hero is shown as a helpless individual who, because of lack of consciousness, is unable to cope with the malignant circumstances under which his life is weighted. circumstances which are even more unbearable to the reader because they propagate obsolete concepts of life in a world that is trying to enter fully the age of technology. The theme can revolve around any of many possibilities, but often around the obstinacy and resilience of the hero or heroine, around their faith and passion, or their rebellion and alienation, or their suffering and tragic experiences as they come face to face with the odds of present-day Arab life. Sometimes the main character is an anti-hero who moves away from or against these particular ideals, or who acts and behaves away from general morality in its universal aspects.

The world of the hero varies widely, according to the role he is made to perform. However, metaphorically, it is a world standing in the winds of change. Contemporary Arabic literature is full of images of individuals in quest of a new structure for the world they live in, and of others trying either to keep the old structure or to destroy the new edifices that have been erected in the spirit of freedom and the new men and women in the
Arab World. The pattern of destruction and construction is continuous in this literature. However, the wish to destroy has not always been malevolent, for it stemmed, in certain instances, from the desire to tear down the world of evil and corruption which has itself caused so much destruction. This, in fact, is a major motif in contemporary poetry in particular.

The Heroic Hero: The praise of the heroic qualities of men was one of the main themes of poetry in pre-Islamic Arabia. The verse of the period recorded the many wars of the Arabs—"Ayyām al-'Arab", as they were called—and extolled the heroic attributes of those heroes who, in their chivalrous deeds, towered over other men. The poet 'Antara al-'Absī, who became later the hero of one of the most popular heroic folk-tales in Arabic, himself described his own virtues of courage, physical prowess, superior skill in warfare, chastity and pride, in short, all the virtues of chivalry. In the Islamic period men continued to be extolled for their heroic deeds. Heroism and chivalry remained an integral part of the poetic heritage and, according to the rules of 'amūd al-shīr (i.e. the body of laws laid down in the ninth century by the critic, Ibn Qutaiba, governing the composition of the poem), the heroic virtues of courage, gallantry, endurance and chastity were also incorporated in the rules of eulogy together with wisdom, generosity, clemency and love of knowledge which formed the archetype of the "great man."

It was in the folk-tales that the heroic archetype was fully commemorated. The folk-tales were epical in spirit, embodying all the heroic motifs of the European epic, and abounding often with the superhuman and the supernatural. Such figures as 'Antara, Abū Zaid al-Ḥilālī and Saif b. Dhi Yazin became archetypal heroes of great national importance. Formal poetry, on the other hand, was increasingly losing its interest in the heroic as it fell into imitativeness and artificiality during the dark ages of Arabic literature, i.e. during the epoch preceding its renaissance in the nineteenth century.

It was with the awakening of the Arabs in the latter part of the nineteenth century to the reality of foreign occupation and the rise of national consciousness that the figure of the heroic hero began to emerge again in literature. With the intensification of the struggle for liberation early in the twentieth century, a long period of coercion by the occupying powers began, and the figure of the hero-liberator and hero-redeemer emerged now in full strength. Their representation in poetry picked up an age-old thread of heroic motifs in the poetic experience of the Arabs. The same great qualities of chivalry were attributed now to the modern heroes, particularly those who fell in battle. Poets spoke of them with respect approaching reverence. When the Syrian Khair al-Dīn al-Zirikli (1893-) wrote his "heroic" elegies on the martyrs of the Syrian revolution of 1926, he described Ahmad Muraywid as a man of noble character, dignity,
firmness, endurance, truth and generosity and described Fu’ād Salim as a valiant hero who died for freedom, truth and for life itself, and who won glory and immortality by his death. The idea of immortality in Paradise, an Islamic concept of the hero who falls in battle defending the cause of Islam (Jihād), was now adopted in the poetry prior to the fifties for the national hero, notwithstanding his faith. In fact, Fu’ād Salim himself was a Druze. The meaning of immortality also took on another additional significance, referring to the immortalization of the hero in the national history of his people.

The Palestinian poet, Ibrāhīm Ṭūqān (d. 1941), wrote some of his best poetry on the national hero—the redeemer or fidā’ī*—and on the martyr. His faceless hero, “calm and unafraid, firm of heart and foot,” is invested with almost superhuman qualities: “Who has not seen the charcoal of the night burn from his spark? Hell has touched his message with fire. He stands at the door; death fears him. Tempests, subside in shame at his courage!” Ṭūqān’s compatriot, Abd al-Rahim Mahmūd (d. 1948), also extolled the idea of struggle as a permanent action so long as there are enemies transgressing and trespassing, and also extolled the willed martyrdom of heroes and the meaning of redemption by blood, asserting that the national banner can only be raised “over the skulls of martyrs.” Mahmūd did not leave this at the level of statement, but took it into action, falling in battle while defending his country in the war of 1948.

The Palestine debacle of 1948 brought in shock, bewilderment and feelings of tragic loss. The nation responded by a chain of revolutions and coups d’état hoping to create the action that could atone for the guilt. The atonement promised by the revolutions, however, was not fully achieved, for the Arab World was seized by continuous turmoil, and the period was punctuated by wars and by more losses, and literature reflected the two poles of hope and despair. The 1967 June war was a profound blow which shook the foundations of Arab society and accentuated the feelings of guilt and unbearable shame. It also changed the direction of

*In modern times, the word fidā is used to denote blood sacrifice for one’s own country and people. The Fida’i is a man who goes out on dangerous missions to defend the honour and independence of his people. Although the struggle of modern man in the Arab World is manifold, directed both against foreign aggression and against internal coercion and political reaction, the word Fida is usually reserved to the fight against external aggression. Hence those who fight physically for the human rights of the Palestinians, for example, are called fida’īyyūn, or redeemers, while those who fight for ideology against internal coercion or reaction are called thauriyyūn, or revolutionaries. This should not preclude, of course, the use of the word fida’ī to cover the internal struggle also in the future.
poetry. At the beginning the nation lashed at itself and a period of extreme self-hate followed where the wish to be flagellated was obsessive. Thus it was possible for Adonis to say, “Are my people a river without an outlet?” and for Nizar Qabbānī, in the most spontaneously angry poem after the war, to say, “Friends! I announce to you the death of the old language, of the old books, . . . of the mind that led to the fall!” Even the socialist ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayyātī lost for a while his long upheld optimism and wrote with bitter anger and frustration. His poem, “An elegy to the sun of June,” is an indictment of all the old values and modes of living which characterized the pre-1967 war era:

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We haven’t tried the game of death,
and now we are crumbs
in the cafés of the East
trapping flies
Wearing the masks of the living
in the dungheap of history.6
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This feeling of deadness and inadequacy took hold of many poets in the aftermath of the war. I am dead, one poet exclaimed, and so are you and he, for “your undertaker saw me buried as they laid him by my side!” However, some poets were able to regain faith and hope earlier than others. The Iraqi poet, Sa’di Yūsuf, perhaps being a little removed from the actual scene of the war, was able to write, two months after, a poem which, although it expressed self-hate and self-rejection, nevertheless had a vision of a victorious future:

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I hate my sword and arms on the walls of Acre,
I hate all the world,
I have plunged my eyes in blood
I have burned my names and now
I am called Saladin
I have become all.8
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The intensification of the resistance at the end of the sixties changed the mood of anger and shock and ushered in a vision of faith and determination. It gave redemption from guilt and a poetry of celebration and challenge followed. A heroic drive that defies the forces of evil and aggression was sounded in this poetry, and became stronger as the resistance mounted. This was the moment when the wish for heroism became a yearning, and the dream of redemption became an actual psychological need. Qabbānī was again the poet to crystallize the general feelings of celebration and joy:

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they come
in the grain of wheat, in the lemon fruit,
in the trees, the winds, the branches,
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they come in our words, our voices, the tears of our mothers
in the eyes of our precious dead
no matter how late they are, they will always come
from Ramallah, from the Mount of Olives,
they come like manna from the sky,
they come in our women's bracelets
in our children's toys
inhabiting the night, the stone, inhabiting all things
From our beautiful sorrow they grow,
Like trees of pride,
from the cracks of rocks they are born
a group of prophets
with no identity
no names,
but they come
they come!

It was at this time, too, that the poetry of a young generation of Palestinian poets writing in Israel began to reach the Arab World more regularly. Their poetry, with its attitudes of determination and defiance, quickly took the lead in the poetry of the resistance, conveying a faith which was crucially needed in the Arab World. The hero, the fighter for freedom, called again the redeemer, fida'i, now emerged as a leading figure in the post-1967 poetry. He is usually the same hero of Tuqān, often faceless and nameless, and bent on carrying out his mission. The other aspects of his life are usually ignored. His martyrdom, when he falls, is seldom linked to the tragedy of his family in losing him. He is treated, rather, as a national property, and is stripped of his conflicts and flaws. He goes to his action, often to his death, preoccupied with nothing but the cause. There are no human contradictions in him, no place for contemplation, no past, no human relations, no regrets—only a man, a cause, and a single-minded action at a specific moment in time.

Mahmūd Darwīsh well describes this hero in one of the loveliest poems on the subject, his long poem, This is her Image . . . and this is the Lover's Suicide. The hero is speaking:

My blood is a seed and an embryo,
I have no color, no form, no past,
Beleaguered by bullets, I expand forth,
I am become higher than our city,
I am the only trees,
I am the bullets . . . and the gifts.

Violence is the other side of anger, and this is an age of violence which we are exploring. Whether the poet is writing in the spirit of the resistance, or whether he is writing in the spirit of rejection of internal evil, an air
of violence predominates. Rāshīd Ḥūsain, a Palestinian who was born in Israel and died in New York in 1976, is one of the major figures of the poetry of the resistance, portraying the willful obstinacy of those who fight in the face of violence and aggression:

Whenever a child passes by the Occupiers of Jerusalem
a child . . . a little girl
their eyes and their machines
search her breasts, her womb, her mind
looking for bombs
and when they find nothing, they insist:
"this little girl was born in Jerusalem,
all who were born in Jerusalem
will one day become bombs!"
And they are right too! All those born in the shadow of bombs
will become bombs.11

Although it is this moment in history which is amplified and explored, the heroic action is immediately universalized in this literature. It is not merely the outcome of individual courage, nor is it a limited political action, but the universal scream of anger and resistance against aggression and degradation. It stems, moreover, from the instinct that prompts the individual to defend his own culture and civilization when they are threatened. No matter how deeply the hero rejects the internal disorder and ills of his society, he goes out to defend its integrity, its rights and its honour. There is always a positive attitude in heroic action, and a kind of purity and magnanimity emanates from the image of the hero. If there is one hero in contemporary Arabic literature who exemplifies altruistic love, it is the heroic hero, the fighter who is ready, when evil assails his existence, to transcend the pull of every day life and decide on the action which raises him to the heights of heroism.

In this sense the hero stands always for the defense of his country and people. R. Williams says that "martyrdom now is defensive; it is a death under pressure."12 While this statement does not apply to all acts of heroism in our times, it is still true for the Arab World. For even when a man goes out to fight because he, through ideological consciousness, is aware of the nature of evil imbued in external aggression, he is still performing the act of thwarting, of rebuffing or removing aggression, not spreading an ideology. This is a marked difference to the movement of the early Muslims who went out to bring the new religion to other men.

Despite deep disillusionment in contemporary Arab life, there is no sign of an eclipse of the hero. There is a great resurgence of heroic motifs, and a heroic vision informs a good part of contemporary Arabic poetry and some works of fiction too. Heroism is still a quest in the Arab World and alive in the consciousness of the people.
The Hero as Victim: Although circumstances and situations stemming from universal human or ecological conditions can victimize the individual—accidents, birth defects, catastrophes of nature—this is not, I think, what we mean by “victim”, in the strict artistic sense of the word. What we mean is a person or persons subjected to one form or another of suffering or extinction by the action of others. This may be executed through willful human aggression, or through the tyranny of traditions, beliefs and institutions. However, the victimization in the latter case will have to be executed by the action and attitudes of other members of society. If one broke the social taboos without being found out, for example, one would not be victimized.

The delineation of the hero as victim gives ample scope for cultural patterns of behaviour and social mores to emerge, and allows greater freedom to the artist in manipulating and developing his characters than does the heroic hero (I am not speaking here of the rebel or the revolutionary hero). The pure of heart and soul, who lead the exemplary life are, as depicted in contemporary Arabic poetry, one-dimensional, single minded and predictable. The revolutionary hero and the victim are not necessarily so. The former can have conflicts, make mistakes, change his approach and reflect on his destiny. The victim can experience gradual or sudden change in his attitudes: he can rebel and defy, deteriorate and fall, suffer and die or display any of a great variety of reactions. Moreover, the heroic hero is always on our side, standing for what the majority believes in. The revolutionary hero, on the other hand, can be a lone figure, fighting against the mind of the majority; while victims sometimes flout the values of society, driven either by their consciousness, their needs, their passions or by other pressures, and are subsequently ostracized and victimized. However, the three types of hero are not necessarily antithetical. The revolutionary hero, particularly in fiction, often undertakes heroic action, displaying the single-mindedness, the physical and moral courage, and the readiness to fight and die, which characterize the heroic hero. He can subsequently be, through his heroic action and revolutionary stance, victimized and subjected to the most cruel forms of torture.

Contemporary Arabic literature abounds with the images of the victim. The portrayal of the victim in this literature usually carries at least a silent social and political protest. The various images of the political victims reflect a world beleaguered by external enemies and suffering from the repression of internal political systems advocating false morality. Among the political victims, there are the victims of war who have been killed, murdered, orphaned, crippled, taken prisoner or evicted. The plight of the Palestinian refugees, uprooted from their land, their homes, their lives and their identity, has been the subject of many poems and
works of fiction. The present writer’s long poem, “Uprooted” ("Bilā Judhūr"), written in 1958, depicts the psychological plight of a people crushed by exile and muted and deafened by their anguish, so that they are incapable of natural feelings. Ghassān Kanafānī’s novelette, Men in the Sun (Rījāl fi ‘l-Shams), (1962), described the predicament of four Palestinian refugees, constrained by their situation as exiles from their country and their sources of livelihood to seek means of subsistence against all the odds of Arab life. Thus to enter Kuwait, the land of milk and honey, three of them had to be smuggled in a water tank belonging to the fourth, who had found that smuggling men was more profitable than carrying water from Basra to Kuwait. The smuggler is a war victim who had been wounded in 1948 and lost his potency. The irony of the story is that he is delayed this time at the border point (while the three men are hidden inside the empty tank) by the Kuwaiti officials, who lazily joke with him about his sexual exploits the previous night in Iraq, and delay him long enough for the men to suffocate inside the burning hot tank. When he throws their bodies on to the sea-shore, his scream rings through the night: “Why didn’t you bang on the tank wall?” The story is a complete tragedy. Was it fear of facing the arrogant, merciless eyes of authority, which had trapped and pursued them for many years, that kept the three men from banging on the tank wall? Or was it an over-patience they had acquired through the years they lived as strangers in other people’s lands? How did the unity of peril produce a unity of silence, and how does one accept dying without screaming protest in the face of death?

These two works depict an early stage of the Palestinian experience in diaspora. The 1967 war, with its napalm victims and its new exodus, was seen by Hālīm Bārakāt as a repetition of man’s cruelty and aggression on man. In his novel, Days of Dust (‘Audat al-Tā’ir ila ‘l-Bāhār), (1969), he paradoxically describes the agony of the new refugees of 1967 as follows: “The wailing of European Jews in concentration camps mixed (in the ears of the hero) with the cries of the Arab refugees. The face of Anne Frank became the face of Adla Kanaan in the Jordanian lowlands.”

Other political victims are those individuals whose freedom has been curtailed by political authority in the Arab World. The problem of freedom, coercion, fear and compromise is a major theme in contemporary Arabic literature because it is a major experience in Arab life. Contemporary literature abounds with works that treat this theme either directly or in an oblique fashion, and several authors have satirized the jailors, informers and police spies, “those eyes,” in the words of the Iraqi poet, al-Sayyāb (d. 1964), “which wound our secrets with their lashes.” Qābbānī lashed out with his invective after the 1967 war, referring the defeat in part to the coercive treatment of man in a good part of the Arab World:
Oh Sultan, my master!
Your wild dogs tear my clothes
Your informers walk at my heels
their feet, their eyes, their noses, always at my heels
like inevitable fate. 15

Here, the victims stand face to face with their trappers and jailors, some of the most notorious anti-heroes in contemporary Arabic literature.

In his novel, *Al-Karnak* (1971), Najib Mahfuz attempts to portray the predicament of the victims caught by the police machine, one of whom, Hilmi Hamada, was tortured to death, and the others, two lovers, into corruption. In this novel, Hilmi is an excellent example of the revolutionary hero who behaves heroically and dies as a victim, for despite having been put twice in prison, he continues his revolutionary activity and is jailed again. However, even under extreme torture, he persists in his defiance of authority and refuses to give out any information. His death is caused by his heroic endurance and defiance of the police machine. There is yet another short reference in this novel to heroic action when Mahfuz, in his formal, concise and unemotional prose, has one of his main characters speak of joining the resistance movement of the Palestinian *fida'is* whose importance “lies in their unique attributes.” Aside from this, the novel concentrates on the immorality that lies in coercive authority and its capacity to corrupt the innocent victims who fall into its grip. The two other main characters, the lovers, break down under torture and agree to become informers. The girl, Zainab, who also turns into a prostitute, is the one who informs on Hilmi and causes his arrest and death.

The problem of freedom and coercion has been interpreted in many plays in the form of a trial and conviction which sometimes ends in the death of the hero, as we see in *Al-Hallaj*, (1965), a poetic play by the Egyptian poet, Salah ‘Abd al-Ṣabūr. This play revolves around the life and death, at the beginning of the eleventh century, of the famous mystic, al-Hallaj, whose stand for his own convictions and for social justice caused him to be tried and crucified. The Syrian poet, Mamdūh ‘Adwān, has a charming play in prose entitled *The Trial of the Man who Did not Go to War* (*Muhākamat al-Rajul al-Ladhi lam Yuhārib*), (1972). This play revolves around the predicament of a man treated as a scapegoat by the collaboration of the police, the informers and the corrupt judiciary system at a time of great national defeat. He was tried because he did not fight a war which was lost before he could have a chance to fight it. The scene is set in the days of the Mongol invasion of the Middle East, but the play has strong contemporary undertones. These two and most of the other plays deal with the problem of freedom and the struggle of innocent men in the face of bigotry and compulsion.
In portraying the social victim, a poet or writer often intends also political implications. Some of al-Sayyāb's poems, written under the influence of a socialist point of view, convey the idea that social misery is the result of political corruption. His poetry is full of the images of struggling, suffering, people caught in the turmoil of poverty and injustice, and constrained to endure unbearable and often fatal experiences in order to get their daily bread: his blind prostitute who sells her body in order to buy oil to light the lamp she cannot see; his grave digger whose hunger can only be abated if someone dies; his immigrants drowning as they sail in quest of subsistence; his dead fisherman drinking the briny water of the Arabian gulf; the many poor and oppressed individuals who toil and struggle in vain; and above all the heart-rending image of the innocent village boy crushed by the blind and merciless City.

Contemporary poets have shown great interest in both the city and the village, and, with perhaps one exception, have all turned the city into a symbol of corruption and oppression and the village into a symbol of purity and innocence. The Egyptian poet, Ahmad ʿAbd al-Muʿtī Hijzā, wrote several poems on the first experience of the nameless village boy (himself) in the big City, "Cairo of the Irreverent Minarets." The Lebanese poets Khalīl Ḥāwī and Adonis, who showed little interest in the village, wrote invectives against the city. Adonis has little interest in ordinary experience and ordinary people, and his heroes, when he has any, are usually archetypal. The Damascus of his lovely poem, "The Eagle" ("Al-Ṣaqr"), is more the archetypal city of wayward and corrupt politics (interchangeable with any other) than the Damascus of ordinary people. It is only for the reader who knows the Syrian poet's early quarrel with the city and her persecution of him that the image of a personal Damascus evolves.

The victims of the social order, of false morality, poverty, class persecution and exploitation, are many and would need a whole book to discuss them. Almost every work of fiction written by avant-garde writers since the fifties aims at social, and often at political exposure as well. The two are inseparable in the works of such writers as the Syrian Zakariyya Tāmīr and Ḥanna Minā. Tāmīr has been able to bring the short story in Syria to a high level with his frightening delineation, sometimes through symbolization and the use of the historical archetype, of all that is terrifying and oppressive in contemporary Arab life. In his third collection, The Thunder (Al-Raʿd), (1970), his victims (all his heroes are either victims or anti-heroes), who yearn for freedom and a normal life, are made to suffer indescribable torture for their aspirations. In his story in this collection, "He who burnt the Ships" ("Al-Ladhi Ahraq al-Sufūn"), an invective on the police state and its interrogators, he says, "In the first day God created hunger; in the second He created music; in the third, cats
and books; in the fourth, cigarettes; in the fifth, cafés; in the sixth, anger; in the seventh, birds and their nests, hidden in trees; and in the eighth, He created the interrogators, who came down to the cities with the police, the prisons and their iron chains.”

His heroes are denied any possibilities, and are left, those who do not die among them, to their frustrations, failures, fears and submission. But a very strong social and political protest is implicitly expressed in these stories, with their often sarcastic style and the utterly inevitable doom of their victims.

In his later novels, Najib Mahfuz, Egypt’s and the Arab World’s foremost novelist, has concentrated on delineating many failed and negative characters, who are both the victims of society and its anti-heroes. He chooses his characters from city life (the heroine of Miramar [1967] is one exception): government officials (symbols of bureaucracy); policemen (symbols of coercive authority); prostitutes and servants (symbols of the exploited underdog); thieves and murderers (symbols of corruption) and affluent or middle class characters, usually conscious of their class. Most of the heroes, like those of Tamir, lack the healthy constructive attitude one would normally expect to see in novels written at a time of great social and political change, but this would depend, of course, on the vision and point of view of the author. Very often the characters are anti-heroes who are caught both in the web of their own mistakes, as well as in the mechanism of the social order. The thief turned murderer and fugitive in The Thief and the Dogs (Al-Liss wa ‘l-Kilâb), (1961) revolves in vain around the pivots of love and faith as he tries to flee a world of treachery which proves that even a thief and a murderer can also be a victim. At the end, the prostitute who gives him love, and the holy man who gives him pity become unattainable; and he is again left alone to the police dogs to tear him apart.

One has the feeling that Mahfuz has read extensively in the literature of Kafka, Ionesco, Becket and probably Jean Genet. Chattering on the Nile (Tharthara Fauq al-Nil) (1966), is a novel of the absurd, where the absurd is also socially involved. It pictures the mind and activity (or inactivity) of a group of pseudo-intellectuals in Cairo who can find no redeeming hope in the existing system and seek oblivion, sedation and solace from their alienation by smoking hashish, practicing sex and chattering, with a certain amount of detachedness, on the various aspects of contemporary life. Every night they meet on a boat on the Nile, where an ageless servant looks after them and procures hashish and women for them. Their female companions are like them, lacking in a healthy, constructive attitude towards society. Sex is given and taken freely, a sex devoid of love and tenderness, exchanged almost with ennui. The ennui is a basic attitude in the novel, and the whole work is a magnification of human impotence.

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However, impotence, Mahfūz implies, is the result of the system in which we live. These alienated heroes, therefore, are alienated victims of the existing order. The theme of alienation is a major theme in contemporary Arabic literature, particularly in poetry. However, not all alienated heroes are victims. In fact, the alienated heroes of contemporary Arabic poetry are usually either rebels or pre-revolutionary heroes, trying to find a solution to the contemporary chaos of Arab life, and seeking unity and order. But in Mahfūz’s works, these alienated heroes or victims are vulnerable in the extreme. There is no authentic strength in them. Many of them are looking all the time for something; and a search is continuously going on. In his novel, *The Road* (*Al-Tāriq*), (1965), the main male character, Šābir, is looking for a father he has never seen and whom he never finds, and ends by committing a double murder instead; in *The Thief and the Dogs* (*Sa‘īd Mahrān*), the fugitive, is looking for a shelter where he can find safety and peace; ‘Umar in *The Beggar* (*Al-Shahhādh*), (1965), and ‘Iśa in *The Quail and Autumn* (*Al-Summān wa ’l-Khārif*) (1962) are looking for a solution to big questions. There is always a quest, but it is almost never realized. Even the virtuous, innocent village heroine in *Miramār* does not find her quest, and we see her at the end of the novel leaving the hotel where she had been a servant, and where she knew disappointment in love, to look again for her future. Although the novel ends on an optimistic note, the quest, nevertheless, is still unrealized. *Chattering on the Nile* symbolizes the end of all quest. Even the woman journalist who comes “in quest” of information is corrupted by the characters of the boat and loses interest in her objective. Time has stopped completely in this novel, and it is only the accident which kills the innocent unknown pedestrian that brings about any action. However, the action here is a negative one, for in deciding to go to the police about the accident, Anış Zaki is not doing an act of conscience, but an act of revenge intended to destroy even the static uninvolved world of the boat where he and his friends had found sedation and false peace. The characters in this novel are a mixture at once of the victim, the alienated hero and the anti-hero.

Yūṣuf Idrīs has some stories that portray the human condition in its more general aspects; but as one would expect, he sets them in the Egyptian scene. However, when Idrīs speaks directly of the Egyptian social experience, his description of the scene is much more emotionally involved than Mahfūz’s, as we see in *The Abyss of the City* (”Qā’ al-Ma­dīna”) where his delineation of the Cairo slum as it degenerates slowly into indescribable misery, is enough to shock all but the most callous readers into horrified consciousness of the life of the poor in a particular society—the Egyptian. One can hear a loud though inarticulate protest in Idrīs’s work, and this protest is at its loudest in “The Abyss of the City”
and in his novel, *The Illicit (Al-Haram)*, (1965). In the latter the plot revolves around the various idiosyncracies and compulsions of the characters who are caught in a mesh of events that seem inevitable in the social and psychological conditions in which they live, events that arise from poverty, exploitation, scheming, and attachment to the social taboos and constrictions which control and victimize them. The crime which is committed, the murder by its own mother of the illegitimate new-born child of the central character, 'Azīza, is not a personal but a social crime, since there is no other way to avert scandal and degradation. The irony is that 'Azīza is the most virtuous personality in the novel, a woman with a positive character, who meets responsibility and is capable of sacrifice. The tragic element in the novel is the metamorphosis of the act of charity and responsibility (her pregnancy came as a result of her chance encounter with a young peasant as she was on one of her food hunting missions, this time to satisfy her husband's wish) into crime and eventually death. 'Azīza's individual acts of responsibility become useless in her own social structure, and she falls victim to its class distinctions, its poverty and its merciless taboos.

The women victims in modern Arabic fiction are often unconscious of the evil inherent in the taboos laid on women in traditional Arab society; they accept them as the normal law of life. One illicit act of sex often leads to the downfall of a woman. Mahfūz has many heroine-victims who end in degradation or death because of one act of rape or volition. Idrīs's 'Azīza, above, is portrayed in a heroic compliance with social norms. Usually, when a woman character in contemporary fiction consciously rejects the taboos, she is a rebel and not a victim. However, consciousness can also change an act of rebellion into a tragedy. The heroine of al-Ṭayyib Sāliḥ's famous novel, *Season of Migration to the North (Mausim al-Ḥijra ila 'l-Shamāl)* (1969) was led by her newly acquired consciousness to that final and fatal rejection of a husband imposed on her by her family. The action in the novel revolves around consciousness juxtaposed against a static, firmly rooted world represented by the grandfather and his circle of friends; around the mind that has experienced a different meaning to life and its conditions clashing with the mind that recognizes and adheres to the inherited mores and constrictions of the social order.

This has been a brief survey of the treatment of two types of hero in contemporary Arabic literature. As Joseph Campbell says, the hero has a thousand faces, but the above types are perhaps the most representative at the moment of general experience in the Arab World. One can expect a greater representation of the revolutionary hero in the near future, as greater maturity in evaluating and facing the general conditions in the Arab World manifests itself. However, so long as the situation in
both the social and political spheres remains in a state of acute conflict, the above two types of hero will retain their great importance.

Footnotes


4 From his poem, "This is my Name" ("Hadā huwa Ismi"), in his complete works, *Al-Aṭhār al-Kamila*, II, Beirut, 1971 p. 634.


9 From his poem, "This is my Name" ("Hadā huwa Ismi"), in his complete works, *Al-Aṭhār al-Kamila*, II, Beirut, 1971 p. 634.


14 Published in *Kitāb al-Tahawwul wa 'l-Hijra fi Aqālim al-Nahār wa 'l-Lail*, Beirut, 1965.

15 Published in *Kitāb al-Tahawwul wa 'l-Hijra fi Aqālim al-Nahār wa 'l-Lail*, Beirut, 1965.

16 Published in *Kitāb al-Tahawwul wa 'l-Hijra fi Aqālim al-Nahār wa 'l-Lail*, Beirut, 1965.

17 Published in *Kitāb al-Tahawwul wa 'l-Hijra fi Aqālim al-Nahār wa 'l-Lail*, Beirut, 1965.

18 Published in *Kitāb al-Tahawwul wa 'l-Hijra fi Aqālim al-Nahār wa 'l-Lail*, Beirut, 1965.


A SHEAF OF CONTEMPORARY ARABIC POETS

Translator: Sargon Boulus

Yusuf al-Khal

THE DESERTED WELL

I knew Ibrahim
my dear neighbor
from way back. I knew
him overflowing with water
like a well people passed by
without stopping to drink
or even, even to drop
a stone

When the enemy aimed
their cannon of death
and the soldiers rushed
under a hail of death
and shelling, retreat! retreat!
it was shouted, in the shelter
back there, you shall
be safe from death
and shelling.
But Ibrahim
kept marching on
his tiny breast filling
the horizon, he marched forward
retreat! retreat!
in the shelter back there
you shall be safe
from death
and shelling.
But Ibrahim
as though he didn’t hear
kept on marching.
They said it was madness. Maybe it was madness. But I had known my dear neighbor Ibrahim from way back. From childhood I knew him overflowing with water like a well people passed by without stopping to drink or even, even to drop a stone

Yusuf al-Khal

I HEAR EVERYTHING

I hear everything and you are silent and present with me you are my gold ring tell me to go and I will

Whirlwind that gyrates or stops my day is spent the sign of presence gone and still my right hand is paralyzed my left covers my mouth in my broken hour

I hear everything and you are silent and when you approach without a trail it is as though horizons hid under my robe as though I were the journey.
Yusuf al-Khal

GLORY TO THE THREE

glory to the loaf
of bread, when it is
round like a moon
offering slumber to eyelids
a vast lie
to the hungry
and comfort from heaven

and glory to women who
deprive our eyes of light
and the ancient hope
in a date that comes and goes
when we are still
marching on two knees
and one forehead

and glory to those
who embrace silk, who
hollow out the place

Yusuf al-Khal

RETALIATION

our necks are stretched
toward morning, and night
advances
laying foundations
for a house, and a wall
of small minutes
around that house

mortality petrified
with giant time
till
not a phantom
nor even a fiction
of a finger is left
out of the past

52
besides leaves
rustling on branches from time
to time, and the beat
of a wing in space—
who was calling?

who heard the call?
as if there were someone
in heaven to retaliate
for the spillage of our blood!

**Isam Mahfoudh**

**WEARINESS IN THE EVENING**
**OF JANUARY THE THIRTY-SECOND**

At your door
I left everything
the house-mermaids the psalms
kites and paper boats
I left everything at your
door, yesterday when I left you.

The deeper I go
the longer my hair my hands
the deeper I go
the more often
I see your shadow behind me.

Earth goes round
winter's fruit summer's
between my eyes sun and fall
between my eyes and the gold
of the whole world
and you
and I.

Between me and you a sign
theatre on tour
silver sword
lost crow
between me and you a rainbow.
Your lovers are many and do not know me
your things everywhere
your trophies
your medals
your servants
your shoe-shiners
your plantations
your compatriots
your books
your streets
your statues
while I see and forget.

When demonstrations roar
when armies are crushed
and words of justice and screams
I smell your odor.

When there is weeping and mashed bread
deserted roads
and a Marseillaise
I hear your voice.

When I hear your voice
when I hear the horns
of hunters, I hear your silence.

When ships oscillate
and hotels' sign-boards
and export and import shipments
when throats are extinguished
I glimpse your belly

When I take my clothes off
in front of the mirror laugh grin
fondle myself when I put
my hand over my hand
over my hand
and drown in the mirror
I see you
When singing takes hold of me
and white evenings
when before sleep I cover road
after road
I feel your breath.

Drowsy
I've walked so much and got tired
the road is short and you are behind me

I lose you in days of work
you find me

I bury you in strolls
in words
in conversations
you lift up your head

I scatter you in laughs and studied gestures
among vegetable and meat plates
and headlines
and projects
you materialize in front of me

I hide you among papers and letters
I hold you in my arms
between my lips
between a twitch and another
you defame me.

I crucify you with aces
with numbers that lose and win
you come down on me.

In my safes I imprison you
inside boxes of my sorrow
you manage to get away.

I race you with those who come in
I race you with those who go out
you win the race.

I betray you in public squares
in cafes
at the movies
at celebrations
in congregations
inside shops and market-places
with people without people
for something in return for nothing
in return you
forgive me

No planet to escape to anymore
no place anymore
no time

Here on the summit
I stand
between earth and me
a distance for murder
between earth and me
a hair of belligerence
between earth and me you

Will you push me with the tip
of your holy finger
will you push me
will you

Buland al-Haidari

DEPTHS

don’t worry
this wind pursued
from door to door
that horizon growing suffused
with terror
and the roads
they are the playground
of my dreaming youth
they are a part of me
like snakes they coil together
but don’t worry
they are a part of me
56
they are my depths oblivious
of what I'm going through
and my joys moaning in a forsaken forest
how often a boy
has raised to his dreams
monuments of sand on this spot
and how many yesterdays I came
virile with desire and young
to sing for your eyes
to sing of love
of youth

don't worry
I am only this wind
pursued from door to door
I am only that horizon
growing suffused with terror

*Buland al-Haidari*

**DREAM**

you who are dreaming now
what are you dreaming?
the blue paths
the forest
deadth with the world
that you do not understand
and perhaps I am something now
a forest
or that path
or death that you do not understand
and perhaps I am a fist
that is strangling you now
an unyielding eye
or an icy winter that digs
into your heart from time to time
then what?
you who are dreaming now
what are you dreaming?
and tomorrow when you arrive
at dawn, what would you arrive at?
I was a dream that passed
at night, meaningless as a prisoner's days
with the path
and the forest
and the death that you
do not understand

Salah Abd al-Sabour

EXODUS

I get out of my town
leaving my old home behind
my old wretched way
of living, hiding under my garb
a secret to bury at its threshold
and wrap myself
in stars and sky.
Trust no guide
I sneak out at night
although desert is apt
to delude me with its sameness,
its silent back.
Like the orphan I leave
choosing no one to redeem me;
all I want is to get rid
of this, my heavy self.
Because only my old I
seeks me out today,
I left no friend of mine
to deceive seekers of knowledge
back in my bed.
If I look back
I will be turned to stone
to stone or to a meteor.
Sink into sand then,
legs of remorse:
don't follow me now
into my new home;
I beg you in the name of hell
And you lamps of heaven, out!
so that grief never glimpses
my robe of mourning
I want you petrified
like your hidden heart, desert.
I want the pain
of journeying through you
to make me forget
the pain I left behind
till my sick body heals.
My purity lies
in the agony of my trip
and to die in desert for me
is a lasting resurrection.
For if I die, I would live
for as long as I want
in the city of light
The city of waking
that is radiant with lights,
where the sun never sets.
Oh, city of light
city of vision that drinks light
city of vision that emits light:
are you a lost traveler’s
mirage? or are you real?
are you real?

Sameeh al-Qasim

THE LAST LINE IN THE POEM

They are climbing the stairs
I hear suspicious steps rise
and fall
I glimpse the address
and the puzzle of a gun
under their cloaks
Whispering
they’ve already
climbed up the stairs
one of them hooks up his index
and knocks on my door
—Woe to you!
you’ve broken the silence
Woe! you’ve scared the image off
from the last line of the poem

Sameeh al-Qasim

FEAST

With blood in my eyes
and snakes in my suitcase
I wander through ruins
I prepare a full table
under the vaulted sky
Through the mail of massacre
I write invitations
with the bones of the dead
and sign them with scorpions
I invite to my feast
inhabitants of
a thousand graveyards!

Sameeh al-Qasim

AND THEN

Born a pomegranate seed
I began to grow in six directions
The day I become twin
to the earth
I shall light forth with truth
I shall wipe off the tears
from your eyes, my friend
And then
no matter if I’m found slain
on a bench in the park
Muhammad al-Maghut

THE SIEGE

from looking up at the sky
and crying this long
my tears are blue
from dreaming of golden
sheaves of wheat and crying
this long, my tears are yellow

let generals go to war
lovers to the forest
and scientists to laboratories
as for me, I will find myself
some beads and an old chair
to become what I've always been;
an old doorman on the threshold of pain
as long as all books, laws and religions
assure me that I will die
either hungry or in jail

Muhammad al-Maghut

THE MAILMAN'S FEAR

prisoners everywhere
send me all your terror
wailing and boredom

fishermen on every shore
send me all your empty nets
and your sea-sickness

peasants in every land
send me all your roses
and worn-out rags
all the torn breasts
and gored bellies
and pulled-out nails:
to my address, any café
on any street in the world
I am preparing a huge archive
on human agony
to be raised to God
as soon as it is signed
with the lips of the hungry
and the eyelashes of those who wait
but, O wretched everywhere
my greatest fear is
that God might be illiterate

_Badr Shakir al-Sayyab_

**MIRAGE CITY**

I crossed Europe into Asia
but the day never folded
as though mountains and rivers
were hills, and a stream
kids jumped across.
Between sunrise and sunset
north and south embraced
and meadows slept across desert.
As though you were the far-off
planets, lover
as though a wall of slumber
rose between us.
Holding you, my hands squeeze nothing
but a silent corpse
like hugging my own blood
on stone, in a house pillaged
by wind and drought and clouds
whose evening is static with stars
and whose morning is waiting.

Years stretched between us: blood and fire,
bridges I lay across
that turn into a wall.
And you! to dive to the bottom
of your sea, never to touch you.
Rocks bruise me, tearing the veins
in my hands, and I call:
O Wafika  
nearest to my soul  
companion to worms and dark  
lover bedding me behind her wall  
asleep in the bed of her own being  
I walked ten years to reach you  
and my traveling hasn’t ceased  
O death embedded in her life  
O mirage city  

I crossed Europe into Asia  
but the day never folded  
You who share my bed  
you are a far-off city  
with closed gates, outside which  
I stand and wait.

**Jabra Ibrahim Jabra**

**FROM POETRY SEQUENCE**

2

Masks collapsed, and  
over splinters of rock  
lips and breasts suddenly  
were ripe to be plucked  
as if a fugitive  
from blaze had found  
naked, a runaway woman  
in a cave of blue rocks  
where waves whisper  
of the beautiful body  
exposed out of boredom.

My whims are carved in stone—  
inside caves, and in houses  
white under the sun  
of July and August.  
Scattered over the slopes,  
a handful of my years  
and my voice crying  
when ghosts roam about
to plant their lips
in my flesh: rejoice!
we shall cure the world
of its pestilence

Let others have
an arid hand.
The road I have taken
to reach my goal
high-headed, like an arrow
from a dexterous bow,—
is luminous with light.
Not your lips
nor some other's hiding

in the dimness
of a garden, are
my goal. My hand
is like the sower's
in September
my land expansive to no end
even though masked snipers
crouch among branches
hiding behind
every stone

Abd al-Wahab al-Bayyati

LORCA ELEGIES

1

The wild pig gores the belly of the deer
and Enkidu dies in his bed
ignobly sad
as a worm dies in mud
the fate of Luqman's seventh eagle
was his, and this tale has approached its end:
you will not come upon light or find life
for this beautiful nature
has ordained that death
be the lot of men
while it keeps
the live flame to itself
through the passage of seasons
What could I tell
my death, O queen
I have never seen the blue flame
nor visited its far-off country

2

An enchanted city
by the side of a river
of silver and lemon
where man at its thousand gates
neither dies nor is born
protected from wind by olive groves
encircled by a wall of gold
Through my sealed
rotting tomb I glimpsed it
while worms ate their way
into my face
Will I return
I said to my mother the earth
She laughed and shook off
the mantle of worms
and wiped my face with a torrent of light
Astride my green wood horse
I came back, a dazzling youth
shouting at her thousand gates
but sleep sealed off my eyelids
and drowned the enchanted city
in blood and smoke

3

The black-eyed beauty
radiant in her earrings
adorned her hair
with leaves of citrus
perfumed with dew of fire rose
and drops of rain at dawn
Granada of happy childhood
trembles above the wall
a poem, a kite
tied to the thread of this light
Granada of innocence
rains down its load
of wind and stars
sleeping under snowflakes
on shingled roofs
pointing to its black dunes in dread
for the enemy brothers
on their horses of death
came from there
to drown this house in blood

4

Unseen by the rider
a bull of silk and black velvet
bellows in the ring
his horns in the air
chase the evening star
and gore the enchanted rider
till he lies in his blood
his sword broken in the light.
On the slopes of the legend mountain
two red mouths open
red anemones
and blood on a willow
—O red fountain
the markets of Madrid
are all without henna
stain with this blood then
the hand of the one I love.
Roar of the clown audience
here; look how he dies
while the stabbed bull
with all his might
bellows in the ring
Sa'đi Yusif

THE FIVE CROSSES

five stations where we left
no memory, neither trembled
nor got drunk, nor nodded
over a guitar
five rivers of sand
over a guitar
five crosses of silence:
you are sad
from your black eyelashes
I sift ashes of the fallen world
you are naive
your face waits
in our desert to sail out
you are tired
between waking and the rains
your hair unfolds a shadow
you are lonely
as though we didn't tremble
one day, get drunk and nod
over a guitar
bitter thirst on your lips
and all our trips
in your evasive glance
you are a tree, dim
with nightly flowers
in whose petals I can touch
my voice

oh, five stations without memory
oh, five rivers through a guitar
oh, five crosses of silence

don't leave me tonight
crucified alone on walls
Sa‘di Yusif

A STONE

it was rock

i spoke to

a forsaken stone between

my house and the door

of familiar sky

a stone untouched by hands

a stone between the dew

and the familiar suns

for the prophet at play

a stone

or the boy who gets tired

for the star growing dim

a stone

and the fugitive in hiding

a stone

for the country that hated me

a stone

you who are assuaged

with dew and familiar suns

will the familiar sky remain

as you have found it?

a blue stone?

a blue-lipped stone?

a lip of stone?

Sa‘di Yusif

THE WHOLE OF NIGHT

in the age of avarice

and murder

I shall close my eyes

and witness murder

besiege it sometimes

converse with it sometimes

or sometimes, just be content

with murder

68
the rural sun falls into water
workers lay the lead
of their clothes upon water
praying for a day
that doesn't come
workers who come evenings
to my house
when roads are clouded
and the gates of the first books
are closed
dead workers
murdered workers
workers who carried flags

I open an archive
for revolutions

do you know about us?
the first one asks me
are you ashamed of us?
the second one asks me
do you ever ask about us?
the third one asks

midnight falls
on open books
and workers depart
dead workers
slain workers
workers who carried flags
so that open books continue
to be archives for revolutions
a sky that passes through midnight
to suck up the lead
out of blue colors
and the grass
and arteries
of the limp hand

in the morning I bolster up my door
Fou’ad Rifqah

AND WHO ARE YOU

And who are you
cave-lord who raised
the mast of distance
for a lover whose forehead
is permeated by wind and stone

Concealed, I steal out to sea
no legend to follow me
no expanse to see my smoke
track down his voyages.
My face still clings
to a circumscribed star
that links a minaret
to the bottom of the night.

And when a last hill
vanished out of the sight
of the oar and its spume
I drowned till dawn, till
a dove flew past with a sign
I wept in her scent
I scented in her flight
the hedges of purity
in the land of God.

And who are you
O lord wrapped in graces
of prophecy
—I am the cock that crows
in wilderness, I wander between
the sentence and God,
Whom I glimpse from this cave
Tawfiq Sayegh

NO, AND WHY

No, and Why

for two eyes from Rome
their youthful years
stretched into generations
wounded, dragged
behind leaping horses,
buried in caves,
picked out to fill
lion bellies
or to hollow out
spines of soldiers—
gazed out, sprang up

for two eyes from Galilee
aged, two cemeteries
of radiance, gouged,
wallowed in mud, given
back, their tears the urine
of conquerors and heretics,
nailed, abandoned
to rot unburied—
gazed out, sprang up

in flight, fearful:
like a brother
who suddenly sees
in his young sister’s glances
a horrible love forbidden
by earth and heaven—
and leaves home to wander
uncertain if it is lust
that keeps him running
or sheer terror
Nazar Qabbani

YOU WANT

Like all women, you want
the treasures of Solomon
like all women
ponds of perfume
combs of tusk
and a flock of maidens.
You want a lord
to extol your name
like a parrot
to say I love you in the morning
to say I love you at close of day
and wash your feet with wine
O Scheherazade among women.

You want me to get you
the stars of heaven
like all women
bowls of manna
and bowls of honeydew
and a pair of sandals
of chestnut rose.
You want silk from Shanghai
and fur-skins from Isfahan
but I am not a prophet
to strike the sea
open with my staff
conjure up a palace
among clouds whose stones
are made of light.

You want fans of
feather, kohl and perfume
like all women.
You want a very dumb slave
to recite poetry
near your bed:
in two successive moments
you want Rascheed's court
and Khusrau's estrade
and a caravan of captives and slaves
to hold your trailing robes, Cleopatra.

I don't happen to be
a space Sinbad
to present before you
Babel, Egypt's pyramids
or Khusrau's estrade;
and I don't own Alladin's
lamp, to bring you the sun
on a platter, as all
women want.

And then Scheherazade:
I am just a poor worker
from Damascus
and dip my bread in blood
my feelings are simple
my wages modest
and I believe in prophets and bread.
Like the others,
I dream of love
of a wife who sews the holes
in my garment, and a child
who sleeps on my knee
like a water lily
like a bird of the field.
I think of love like the others
because love is like air
because love is a sun
that shines upon dreamers
behind palaces:
upon toilers and the wretched
and those who own
a bed of silk
and those who own
a bed of weeping.

You want the eighth
wonder like all women; but I
have only my pride.
Unsi al-Haj

IS THIS YOU OR THE TALE?

my history goes back
to a fifth century since
I was baptized in my mother's presence
from whom I inherited the feeling
that whoever escapes four walls
commits
every treason

my history goes back to the time
when the head of the family
defied the Sultan in
Constantinople
and I wanted to be within things
for a while
by way of necessary aggression and violence
like an old statue

my history goes back to Eil and Baal
they printed me in Gilgamesh
and I was raised
in Ugaret
Sur Seidun Byblos
visited with me Greece
Persians ornamented me and Hebrews
bought passages from my works
Egyptians simplified me in their drawings
of the living
Astarte and I
through mascara were
merged together
I lived by the river
gods slaughtered me I them
I carried my little grandmother
on my back and fled
in the valleys she said
like a parrot
better if you
had buried me
when I did
I was born and died in Beirut

my history goes back downward
to storms blowing from books
and sitting for hours among crowds
to what is not of me
and as my age is counted in years
likewise
as drops of pearl
I wander outside this necklace

is this me or you
is this you or the tale?
after a while musicians will disappear
poet officialized behind buttons
cities of soul
flee through the chimney
psalms and roofs blown away
and stars of desperate longing to reach them

my sorrow is great
for a history steeped
in destiny
steeped in mish-mash
marching through chance through danger
marching through our fictions
marching in holes in inner pockets
marching in birthmarks
and astrology

marching in Too-late
marching through pallor of lips
on the slope of the eyes
which doesn’t need
to be invented again
but only reconsidered
As has often been observed, many aspects of the society and culture of the Arabs have experienced unprecedented development over the past century. In no area is this more evident than in imaginative literature where much of the progression of half a millennium in the cultures of Europe, for example, has in the case of the Arabs been condensed into a mere couple of generations. The printing press only truly arrived in the Middle East in the 19th century and the impact of this new medium was profound. Journals and newspapers proliferated in all the sizeable towns and cities of the area; indeed there were so many while the potential literate readership remained so small that most were of remarkably brief life-span. It was in many of these that the short story and the novel, both unknown in classical Arabic literature, were first introduced. Unfortunately, however, this introduction most often came in the form of poor translations or adaptations from second-rate European authors. And since the translators saw fit to lay their greatest emphasis on what was merely childishly romantic-adventurous, it is not surprising that these productions, for all their popularity with the general public, were despised and denigrated by the most sophisticated and best-educated elements in Arab society. They therefore continued both to read and to compose in the traditional forms, the stylized poetry and maqāma literature of earlier times.
Moreover, the early attempts, dating from the 1870's, at original prose fiction in Arabic were generally by Christians of Syrian origin, with such writers as the Bustānis, Francis al-Marrāsh and Mīkhā'īl Jurj Úrā writing adventure stories usually involving the incidents of travel of star-crossed lovers, whereas original historical fiction was for years almost monopolized by the prolific and dedicated Jurji Zaydān. Similarly in the theater it was the Syrian Christians Salīm al-Naqqāsh and Adīb Ishāq and later Faraḥ Antūn along with the Egyptian-born Jew of Italian parentage Yā'qūb Ṣanū' who dominated the play in the last decades of the 19th century. It is true that the Azhari Sheikh Rifa'a Rāfi' al-Ṭahtāwī particularly demonstrated that openness of mind and receptivity evident in all his works in translating Fénelon's novel Télémæque as early as 1850 and the Muslim orator of the 'Urābī movement 'Abdullah al-Nādīm both developed and performed in plays he wrote for his Alexandria school. But these literary works had only limited audiences and slight impact and their authors, like so many other Muslims of the period who dabbled in imaginative fiction, devoted their greatest efforts either to expository writings on social or political themes or to poetry. The engineer-politician 'Āli Mubārak, who wrote a four-volume narrative entitled 'Ālam al-Dīn (1882) and the soldier-poet Muhammad Ḥāfiz Ibrāhīm, who wrote Lāyālī Sātīh (1906), a work comparable in form and style to Mūḥā:mmād al-Mūwālīlī's better-known Ḥādīth 'Īsā ibn Hishām (serialized from late 1898, issued as a book in 1907) are examples of such authors. Their works were as much in tune with and reflective of traditional types of Arabic literature as with the Western novel form with which they are sometimes associated.

Even through the first decade of the new century it was still Christians of Lebanese origins, this time domiciled in the United States, who were the most dedicated exponents of fiction in Arabic. It was the friends and associates in their New York “P.E.N. Club” (al-Rābiṭāt al-Qālamīyya) Khālīl Jibrān (Kahlil Gibran) and Mīkhā'il Nu'aynā, along with their older and more widely experienced compatriot Amin al-Rīhānī, who were most active in publishing original and revolutionary stories in Arabic and arguing for the radical transformation of both the purposes and styles of its literature. But the unenthusiastic reception given to the lengthy tragic romance Zaynāb (1913), often credited with being Arabic's first true novel, gave little hope for acceptance of the new genre. Its author, moreover, Muḥā:mmad Husain Haykāl, all too aware of how little it would assist the career of a serious young lawyer like himself to be associated with mere story-writing, preferred to use a pseudonym, crediting the work to an “Egyptian Peasant.”

It could be argued that it was the adoption of the fictional form by
Mustafā Lutfi al-Manfalūtī that first awarded fiction in Arabic the cachet of respectability. His small-town then Azhar background, his early prominence in the use of poetry in support of the nationalists against an unpopular Khedive and, above all, the fine sense of the beauty of his language evident in his articles and stories published in respected journals, had made him one of Egypt’s leading literary figures well before his death in 1924. His adaptations from French romantic literature and his original moralistic little tales demonstrating the tragic effects of poverty, alcohol and European customs and mores were deeply influential. The literary production of a whole generation of writers seems to have been moulded by his work. Naguib Mahfouz, for example, Egypt’s greatest novelist, stresses the extent of al-Manfalūtī’s influence on his own work: Mahfouz’ earliest short stories, published in journals in the thirties, are immediately reminiscent of the high moral tone of his mentor.

The advent of the cinema in Egypt was also clearly helpful in establishing fiction. Haykal’s Zaynab was made into a movie in the twenties and it was apparently its success in that medium that led to its re-publication in 1929, this time under the author’s own name. That same year, moreover, saw publication of āl-Ayyām, which was immediately successful and has been many times reprinted. By the blind Tāhā Husain, a man already established as one of Egypt’s most respected if controversial scholars, this work was clearly autobiography, but since it was written in the third person it read like fiction and its events and characters were so superbly portrayed that its appearance no doubt assisted in furthering the respectability of the novel form.

By the thirties, then, prose fiction was beginning to command the attention of serious writers and challenging poetry for first place in Arabic literary production. There was a new proliferation of journals specializing in the publication of short stories and the serialization of novels; this is as true of Syria and Iraq as of Egypt, though on a smaller scale. The motives of the new writers, from a variety of backgrounds and orientations, seem generally to have excluded hope of financial gain since the potential for high profit was clearly absent. Arab society was still largely illiterate, few could afford to buy books and, moreover, romances and detective stories in translation from European languages still saturated the small reading market. The works published in the thirties by the closely associated members of the so-called “new school” in Cairo, al-Māzīnī’s Ibrāhīm al-Kātib (1931) al-Hakīm’s ‘Awdat al-Rūḥ (1933), Lāshīn’s Hawwā bī-la-Ādām (1934), Tāhā Ḥusain’s Adīb (1935), al-‘Aqqād’s Sārā (1938) and Māḥmūd Taymūr’s Nidā’ al-Majhūl (1939), for all their virtues as conscious and worthy efforts to raise the novel in Arabic to a new level of sophistication, had in fact so little appeal when they first appeared that their authors were generally discouraged from the writing of full-length fiction.
Apart from a few with frankly commercial motives who, like Mahmūd Kāmil al-Muḥāmī, did make a living in the thirties from stories displaying the sentimental-romantic activities of Egypt's upper classes and the dramatic-tragic conflicts of the peasants, many Arab authors have persevered with fiction as a serious medium for the presentation of their personal philosophies. The plays of Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm, for example, although often wryly humorous, are clearly dedicated to the discussion and demonstration of societal problems, just as were his early novels. The work of the extraordinarily productive Mahmūd Tāyūmūr is frequently similar in tone and purpose, though he is perhaps less pejorative and more the detached, amused observer. Even the younger Ihsān ‘Ābd al-Qudūs, for many years the Arab world's most popular and productive author, is “message” oriented in most of his writings, displaying as great an obsession for the display of the institutional faults and shortcomings in character apparent in his society as is plain in the tales of al-Manfalūtī. And this apparent high seriousness of tone and purpose is equally well to be discerned, it seems, in the production of the major contemporary fiction writers of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Sudan and Libya.

Yet for all the “societal problem” orientation of many of their works, the prominent authors of Arabic fiction for the greater part of this century have generally been representative of their countries’ middle or upper classes. Although frequently evincing their sympathy and regret for the hard lot of the workers and peasants, their stories often strike one for their essential detachment from basic economic issues. The early advocates of socialism in Arabic, such as Shiblī al-Shumayyīl and Sałāma Muṣā, had no flair for nor interest in the creation of imaginative literature to demonstrate their concerns. And so it was not really until the late forties that important work in this area began to appear. The distinguished scholar and litterateur Tāhā Ḥusain’s collection under the title al-Muḍḥādhdhabūna fī al-ʿArḍ (1949) was a highly persuasive and effective presentation of the hardships suffered by the lower classes. These sketches, moreover, were viewed as potentially so disturbing by the Egyptian governmental authorities that they prevented their re-publication in book form even though they had earlier appeared in the Cairo press. The 1949 edition, then, came out in Beirut and the work was only made available in Cairo with its second edition published there in 1952. Working within such restrictions, Muhammad Farīd Abū Ḥadīd, himself from the lower levels of the Egyptian bureaucracy both by birth and career, therefore deserves much credit for a rare portrayal of class conflict in his novel Azḥār al-Shawk (1948). This interesting novel, which has escaped the attention of most literary historians of Arabic, has much in common in its characters, situations and social criticism with Haykal’s Zaynab. But
Abū Hadīd’s novel is more compact and better controlled in style and progression. The negative comments on Egypt’s social structure are reiterated throughout this novel and the author’s comments on the likelihood of damaging revolutionary change for his country were expressed clearly and deliberately.

The shock and humiliation felt by all Arabs at the loss of Palestine in the war of 1948 seem to have had an important catalytic effect on the directions since taken in Arabic fiction. A new level of bitterness at the inefficiencies and corruptions of their systems is evident in the work of several writers productive during the last years of the Egyptian monarchy. The then-young Army officer Yūsuf al-Sībāṭi, himself from the landowning class, expressed an extreme pessimism and cynicism regarding the political and social systems prevailing in Egypt in his Ārd al-Nifāq (1949). His al-Ba’th ‘an Jasad al-Zā’im (1953) was a similarly effective work of political satire, while his al-Saqā Mata (1952) expressed a seemingly very personal sense of sympathy and understanding for the lot of the poor. Over the two decades that have followed, of course, a mass of angry leftist-oriented fiction has appeared in each of the literary centers of the Arab world. Prominent writers like the Palestinian Ghassān Kanafānī and the Lebanese-Syrian Ḥalīm Barakāt have focused particularly on the Arab-Israeli conflict and the social, economic and organizational faults in their society, as have a host of less well-known authors represented in books as well as in such popular journals as the Lebanese al-Ādāb.

Arabic fiction, having developed so dramatically in range and depth over the past decades, offers many problems to the would-be critic or analyst. Quite apart from discussion relating to the structures, forms and styles in which it is presented, much of this work is tantalizingly difficult to define and interpret in terms of the authors’ central meanings and purposes. This obscurity is, of course, frequently deliberate and reflects the necessary caution of writers in protecting themselves from the censors in order to achieve publication and secondly from the personalities of government in order to avoid imprisonment or worse. Frank presentation of themes relating to issues of religion and sex, for example, are still impossible in most Arab countries. Arab authors are also, of course, much restricted in their ability to discuss politics, national or international, and matters relating to finance, business or the internal ordering of their societies. All these areas are largely controlled by governments and since it is they who directly or otherwise provide the salaries on which writers generally depend, it is obvious that they largely control what is produced. Nothing is easier for a determined and near-absolute ruler, as has been the rule in most Arab countries in recent years, than to deprive authors of their ability to publish. And under President Nasser this problem was
particularly severe; it is scarcely fanciful to ascribe Iḥṣān ‘Abd al-Quddūs’ loss of ownership of the *Rose al-Yūsuf* publishing conglomerate he had inherited to his uniquely frank suggestions in his novel *La Shay Yuhimm* (1963) that the opinions and decisions of Gamal Abdel Nasser, actually mentioned by name, should at least be open to public discussion!

Lebanon was, of course, prior to the tragedies of 1975 and thereafter, of inestimable value to Arab authors as a censor-free publishing milieu. Māḥfūz’ controversial and pessimistic allegory *Awlād Harītānā* (serialized in 1959) could not appear in book form in Cairo, despite its obvious importance, but it did ultimately appear in Beirut in 1967, even though as he told the present writer, without his express permission or prior knowledge! And Luwīṣ ‘Awad’s extraordinarily powerful exposé of the activities of socialist radicals under the Egyptian monarchy, *al-‘Anqā‘, aw Tārīkh Ḥāsān Miṭṭāh*, printed there in 1966, is still unavailable in Egypt though written as early as 1947 and several times offered for publication.

Working, then, within a governmental and societal system so filled with taboos, Arab authors have become highly skilled in the use of allegory and symbolism in which to cloak their ideas and mask their criticisms. Often, as in the case of Naguib Mahfouz, the clues are so many and the keys so obvious that the intelligent reader can scarcely doubt the true purposes of the author. But in the works of others, and Yūsuf Idrīṣ is a fine example, the artistry is of such complexity and the message sometimes of such subtlety that the reader is well advised to avoid simplistic interpretation. At times, indeed, his work defies the methods of analysis traditional for literature, lending itself more to those of psychiatry, the specific area of expertise of Dr. Idrīṣ himself.

The comment of that stimulating American drama critic George Jean Nathan in his *Intimate Notebook* that the only definite standard of criticism was in: “the appraisal of a play in terms of the finest examples in its own field or, in the event of a phenomenon in the way of a completely original and independent play, in the appraisal of it in terms of the author’s success or failure in the achievement of his plan and intention” seems generally appropriate for the evaluation of Arabic literature, which often defies application of standard criteria. Nathan’s definition, however, presupposes that the reader does comprehend the intention and purpose of the author, a matter by no means uniformly easy in the case of Idrīṣ. Specifically, what is one to make of the short story *The Aorta* that follows? Is it to be viewed as a psychological drama like those of Edgar Allan Poe, a carefully planned surrealistic adventure into the macabre, effective and admirable simply because it is so intense that it commands and maintains our interest? Or is it social-political criticism, local or universal, heavily veiled yet demanding of interpretation by the reader? Or again,
is it rather to be viewed with the same criteria one brings to bear on free-
style contemporary painting, to be evaluated in terms of the pattern and
movement, perhaps unconscious, that one can detect and for the mood it
reflects and evokes?

For all the discussion possible over the story's central purpose, cer-
tain elements in it are obvious. The opening image of masses of people
aimlessly hurrying in search of a point of direction or purpose is immedi-
ately reminiscent of teeming Freedom Square, in central Cairo, if not,
indeed, intended as a metaphor for 20th century urban life at large. Man's
struggle for existence and obsession with money and his underlying poten-
tial for animalistic brutality is clearly a central theme. And the author's
interest in portraying the narrator's psychological make-up and his love-
hate association with 'Abduh develops effectively throughout the course
of the story. There is also further pursuit here, it seems, of that master-
underdog relationship that was central to Idris' concern in the early-mid
sixties, when this story was first published, and is so fully portrayed in his
remarkable play al-Farāfir (1964).

The impact of any story is clearly closely related to the language
and structure in which its ideas and impressions are presented. As the
English novelist, playwright and critic Arnold Bennett observed in his
little book Literary Taste and How to Form It: "When a writer conceives
an idea he conceives it in a form of words. That form of words constitutes
his style, and it is absolutely governed by the idea; the idea can only exist
in words, and it can only exist in one form of words. You cannot say exactly
the same thing in two different ways. Slightly alter the expression and you
slightly alter the idea." Clearly in works such as this the style is the story,
just as, again with Bennett: "If you look at literature as you look at life, you
cannot fail to perceive that, essentially, the style is the man."

It is in this spirit, therefore, and with similar concepts of the essence
of literature that in this translation I have tried to keep as close as pos-
possible to the very structure of Idris' extraordinary style of writing. In the
original the wording is a complex potpourri of different levels of language
appropriate to the narrator's train of thought as it moves onward fitfully
and without conscious logic or purpose. The sentence structure of the
original is, at first sight equally as disorderly and lacking in traditional
grammatical rectitude as is, for example, the prose of such respected
exponents of contemporary English as Norman Mailer or William Gold-
man, as in the latter's Marathon Man, for example.

How far indeed has Arabic style developed in a mere couple of gen-
erations! What a gulf exists between the carefully controlled and deliber-
ate archaisms and rigid structure of al-Manfalūṭi and Tāhā Husain and
the impressionistic and free-flowing conversationalism of Yūsūf Idris!
THE AORTA

YUSIF IDRIS

It wasn't important that there was running; what mattered was that it was happening all over the place, as if Doomsday itself had come. A very peculiar type of running it was; not like someone in a hurry, or fleeing in terror, or racing to save a life. No—an aimless sort of running, as if those doing it were trying to find some spot from which to actually begin their running and hurrying. And so no one knew the goal or purpose of the others, all being in a state of watchful anxiety, concerned that one of them would find his own point of beginning which would then, no doubt, define their own. That's why you saw people running so madly, crazily, and trying so desperately yet unsuccessfully to watch where the others were heading. Whenever anyone appeared at all hesitant and slowed down, or became more purposeful and increased speed and so seemed about to discover his goal, then dozens would rush towards him hoping to arrive before him, to be the first to set off after a clearly defined objective. Inevitably disappointed when those they had been pursuing turned out even more confused than themselves, they would soon speed off again to someone else, again imitating his dawdle or increasing their speed. This whole
activity made the place, if viewed from high above or far away, seem to 
pulsate with sudden throbings that then dispersed and subsided, it all 
happening at more than one place at a time. You would have thought 
the square paved with smooth veneer, if it had not been for those sudden 
pulsations occurring here and there that alone gave signs of life. You 
would have thought it all a veneer of stone, or the human beings gathered 
there lumps of multi-colored rocks.

No one knows whether blows were struck or not. Well, actually, I 
personally was struck by more than one blow, vicious painful blows. But 
itis impossible to know who was doing the striking because one had 
no constant neighbor, and the continuous fluid movement prevented you 
getting so much as a glance at the hundreds passing you or whom you 
were passing. In any case there were, most certainly, blows struck. Col­
lisions occurred without time for even an apology. People were falling 
down; suddenly there would be a loud scream, followed by a groan that 
would reverberate ever diminishing like the tones of a bell, to be effaced 
at last by another scream. No one would stop to see the outcome; so long 
as you were not yourself screaming—and I was still fit and strong and 
had not yet fallen—why should you stop? Little by little I realized that 
all this motion was not haphazard and that there was another quiet cur­
rent at work, definitely pushing towards the outside yet difficult, almost 
impossible to detect. The square was gradually distending in a slow, regular, 
and imperceptible eruption, forcing outwards those in the middle, bring­
ing them close to the surrounding area, to the outside, to the many streets 
flowing into and drawing from the square.

Had it not been for this current, nothing could ever possibly have 
managed to extricate me from where I had been to where I now found a 
group of people running on mechanically, continuing involuntarily what 
we had been doing in the great square, going on as before and unable to 
stop even if so we had wanted. And what a surprise then! How could I 
ever have guessed that turning next moment to the person right beside 
me—the very first close neighbor whose features I had been able to prop­
erly examine—I would find, to my shock and amazement, Abduh!

Immediately I was gripped by conviction that he had the money with 
him, that he must be hiding it someplace on him. A sense of joy, of relief 
after a wait of a thousand years, almost killed me, along with a rage like 
a choking, poisonous gas that satiates the body and becomes perceptible 
only a moment before death, when you realize for the first and last time 
that it has choked and killed you. Yes indeed, rage of that most hideous 
kind, exploding when you have been feeling secure and confident and 
suddenly, without any effort seeing evil treachery there right before your 
very eyes, that overwhelming rage you have when you see a person you
are quite sure you have in your grasp whenever and wherever you wish suddenly slipping away, disappearing in front of you. You burn with rage and fury, but try as you might you can't prevent him.

Abduh! With both hands I grabbed him round the throat, desperately afraid he might slip away and disappear again. It truly enraged me that I couldn't actually devour him ... yes, the wild animal is still there, inside us. When we fight we don't bite to hurt our adversary; we do so because we really want, just like our wild ancestors, to devour him. Our forebears attacked and devoured their enemies in rage, to hide them body and soul together inside themselves. Their very lives depended on a belief that they could feed their own cells on those of their enemies. We are human beings who bite only out of weakness; we hate but cannot express our hatred in the natural way and so it sets its poisoned fangs deep into our insides, biting and destroying us.

All this I felt as I gripped Abduh, wishing my feelings could take free expression and maybe, shred and chew him. I could feel my teeth tearing at his flesh and bones, easing my bitterness in grinding him with all the cruel greed they possessed. Perhaps it's a basic need for man to eat his food out of a sense of rage, seeking to efface and remove it, to kill it by consuming it completely; perhaps that's why wild animals gain maximum benefit from their food while man nowadays gets sick and suffers from his.

But even as food Abduh was completely unappetizing, disgusting even; he was thin and weak. He never showed a glimmer of defiance, never faced up to anyone else to assert or defend his own existence. He was "good," that weakly, negative sort of goodness, as if he had a double hernia or something, and he sang sweet songs when by himself. He seemed "foreign," out of place wherever he was, as if he'd never found his own country. When things got too much for him, he'd cry. His eyes would suddenly fill with tears. But there'd be no redness in them; the flush would gather into his nose which would seem to swell and fill with the secretions. It embarrassed you not only because it was Abduh but because he, a man, cried like women and children do, yet without anything softly feminine or childlike about it to inspire your sympathy; what was calamitous was the man's way he cried, utterly disgusting. Merely a petty thief who never stole unless he absolutely had to, he even then took only the minimum he could. If you caught him he'd tremble all over and stammer and swear silly lying oaths. You had to be careful not to treat him too roughly or else he'd cry, filling you with a disgust that would last all day or perhaps even for days on end.

Yes, for three whole days, morning noon and night I've been looking for you Abduh, turning over the pavement stones of Cairo, breaking into houses, asking, demanding, pleading for help in finding you, searching
every road, every street, every alley. My strength finally sapped, I fall asleep only to wake up in a rage of despair at finding you; my dream, my nightmare, and the pain of my hours awake or asleep is the thought of turning round sometime and finding you there, Abduh!

"Where have you been, Abduh, and where did you hide the money?"

His reply was astonishing, fantastic. He said that on that day he’d no sooner left the house than he’d been grabbed by one of those patrols that look out for sick people and take them by force to the hospitals (just like the patrols that look out for and seize sick animals!). Having their suspicions about him, they took him to the hospital where he was examined by the chief surgeon himself. It was decided he had contracted a dangerous disease that threatened to infect all Egyptians; the only cure possible was through surgery they would perform at once to take out his aorta. They had indeed performed the operation and cut out his aorta; he had lain in bed for three days and they had sent him out only that day, after providing him with a cane to help him walk. But as for the money—he had no idea of its whereabouts ever since he first entered the hospital.

Abduh had to tell some story, of course, to justify his disappearance and that of the money. But his telling such a tale too absurd for even a child or an idiot to believe—about patrols watching for people thought to be diseased and taking them by force and treating them with such frightful bestiality, about a sickness curable by cutting out the aorta, and his, the human body’s principal artery, as thick as a stick, that distributes blood from the heart to all the rest, actually having been cut while he was still alive and even still able to walk, though with a cane, and even run, indeed, as we had been doing moments before—for Abduh to tell such an open, brazen lie, without even so much as trying to hide it or looking for some other straightforward or more believable story, it was this that destroyed all my delight in finding him, this that made me feel so overwhelmingly tired and depressed, because I sensed that he was ridiculing me indescribably badly, this that made me feel so enraged there might be no limit to the cruelty to which one might feel compelled.

I was not alone there. The group running with me had witnessed and heard all this, their speed having slowed to a walk. Indeed others had begun to join us and felt the same as I did about Abduh and his story. All of us, without exception, were now consumed with the idea that he did have the money on him, that he had to be hiding it somewhere on his person. Abduh certainly possessed no other place in the world where he could hide anything.

And the story itself was not important, whatever story he might tell; what mattered was to locate the money, to find it right in front of him, in full view, and to disgrace him utterly and completely before everybody, right there where all could see and hear. So the shouts began!
"Search him! . . . Search him!"

I needed no shouts in any case to make me stretch out my arm and rip off his faded old peasant gown, the only one he owned. But I was surprised when the gown remained stuck to his body, impossible to pull off. This was odd because Abdurah was always lost in his ill-fitting gown and so how come I couldn’t pull it off now? He seemed to have suddenly ballooned, or, in the space of only three days, fattened up most incredibly. Everyone participated, then, in offering suggestions how to remove his gown; their enthusiasm in getting at Abdurah even dominated my own, the victim. There was no direct agreement, no words spoken, just an all-encompassing eagerness that aroused and engrossed us; we were excited, enjoying ourselves as though now quite certain we had discovered our goal, that point to which we had seemed to be running in the square, from which we could in fact begin our running . . . It was there in that sinner, still carrying with him the sin he had committed. He had to get his just desserts. We would gratify all the goodness in us by punishing him, by seeing justice done. And we would gratify all the evil in us by applying justice ourselves, with our own hands, by giving evil a completely free rein, by causing pain and hurt under the guise of proper retribution.

The only way to remove his gown was by peeling it off him as one skins a rabbit. And to skin him properly he had to be hung up, and so the problem became where and how to hang him. A suggestion was made to which we agreed; there was a butcher’s shop close by and there the whole group moved, with Abdurah in our midst and me still gripping him tight. In the butcher’s four men undertook to lift Abdurah whilst the portly young butcher took responsibility for hanging him up by the collar of his shirt and underclothes on the hook used for suspending carcasses of meat.

Soon, then, he hung up there on the hook, quite impotent, totally powerless just like the other carcasses, the skinned sheep on the other hooks. Hands, many of them, now stretched out to lift up the skirt of his gown, to peel it off him, while he hung there silently, not uttering a sound.

As soon as the gown was off we realized what had made it stick so very close to his body. Around his stomach and chest a mass of white bandages was wound! It was as though he had indeed had an operation and these were the bandages. But I immediately realized his rotten scheme in having all those wraps; he had put on so many to hide the money in each fold, so that no one would think it there or be able to find it.

First, and purely as a routine matter, his billfold had to be searched. The butcher put out his plump and practiced hand, unwrapped the bandage a little, and extracted the wallet from his shirt pocket. This was the very first time I saw Abdurah’s billfold. I had never imagined it could be so fat. It was, quite simply, the bulkiest one you’d ever see in a lifetime. I
myself undertook to examine it and emptied its contents. But as we had
expected, all it contained was five piaster coins, one so dented and rusty
that it was unfit for circulation.

The fat butcher again plunged his hand into the shirt pocket and as
expected brought nothing out. All these were purely formalistic pro­
cedures, for we all knew the money was there inside, hidden in one of the
bandage folds. Eager and impatient for the scandal to break, certain that
we were going then and there and right before him, to put our fingers on
the sinner's crime, to extract from his very body the body of the crime,
absolutely intoxicated with anticipation at seeing his face and hearing
what he would say at that precise moment, my hand and that of the butcher
stretched out and began unwinding the bandage from him. We ignored his
screams and calls for help and claims that to undo the bandage would
mean he would die, since it alone held the severed aorta in place, screams
that merely inspired laughter and sarcastic comments and made us busily
untying all the more eager for that moment of climax when the money
would be revealed. By the time we had untied a few of the wraps Abduh's
screams had subsided into a despairing silence, and his eyes had filled
with watery tears, but devoid of any redness.

Even if we had believed earlier that they had performed an operation
on him; it was now obvious he had been lying; the bandages were clean
and white, without a single spot of blood on them, and there was no sign
of a wound at all. And so we went on untying, though a bit more carefully
for fear that the money might drop out at the very next wrap.

All of us standing there were participating now, and Abduh himself
seemed to be expecting the money to appear at every next turn. I was
unwrapping from one side and handing the bandage over to the fat butcher
for him to untie from his side. Then he would return it to me. It seems
we were so totally engrossed in the operation that once I stretched out
my hand to take the bandage from him, but it was not there; he had al­
ready finished. Before I looked up at Abduh I could sense some strange
feeling gripping the onlookers. Gazing over at them I saw they were all
standing totally, eerily silent, their eyes fixed unblinking like those of the
dead, on Abduh. I looked to where they were staring . . . Abduh was stark
naked. There was a very long rent extending from his chest to the base
of his stomach, both of them open and empty as if all their inside ap­
paratus had been removed. His aorta was hanging down from his chest,
from where his heart was, like a long, thick, sallow, hollow tube, cut loose
and swinging to and fro inside his belly, like a pendulum . . .
Al-Qahira, Cairo, and le Caire are magic words which resonate with medieval splendor and mystery. Cairo, the city of a thousand years and more than a thousand minarets, has never ceased to fascinate artists and writers both indigenous and foreign. The cultural capital for more than one hundred million Arabic-speaking people, it is also a prominent religious center to millions of adherents to Islam, harboring the great theological center Al-Azhar. Cairo stands today as a modern cosmopolitan center and heir to all the ills of its western prototypes. Najib Mahfouz and Yusuf Idris are the two leading modern chroniclers of that great city. Mahfouz has immortalized its streets and alleys in his famous trilogy and several collections.

The Cairo recreated in the works of Idris and Mahfouz is very much the thriving bustling city of the middle ages. A city that has not changed much over the centuries, it remains in their works furrowed with ever narrowing streets, overcrowded alleys dazed by the pounding of metal and the din of brass. The Cairo of Khan Al-Khalifli and Al-Qal’a (The Citadel) and its neighboring city of the dead—a palpable reality of the presence of death—are all aspects of the city which serve as metaphors to Egyptian writers. The modern metropolis with its traditional symbols of wealth, power, and oppression is usually an image which appears in their works only to contrast with its lingering medieval soul.

The title story of the collection Qa’-al-Madina (Heart of the City) is one of Idris’s best treatments of the subject, a novella for which he chooses as his protagonist a stereotype of the modern city, a young, arrogant bachelor judge. His counterpart is the young woman victimized by the city, who seeks a living by working for him as a maid. Mr. ‘Abdallah (Slave of God) is more likely to be enslaved by other deities, “the things” which make up a life in a modern metropolis. Idris describes him thus:

He is a judge, as yet unmarried but, however, owns a luxuriously furnished apartment. His life is filled with serial numbers: 3445, 399876, 10031, 66, 8345, which in chronological order are his license plates, his refrigerator policy, his life insurance policy, his apartment number and his bank account number in no special order of priority to him.
From the very beginning he is presented as one trapped by modern life and completely conditioned by the machinery of the great metropolis. The sense of loss and alienation of the characters is effectively given by the recurrent negations in the story. The theme of loss of innocence is insightfully examined and rendered through a series of images and metaphors all through the narrative. The outline of the narrative is one that has been a favorite with Egyptian writers in recent decades. The young bachelor who has achieved some success and social status abuses and exploits the innocence of an attractive peasant girl who usually works for him. She in turn becomes something of a “putain respectueuse” who is drawn into the current unwillingly at first, then seems to accommodate herself quite well to that new way of life. At the beginning she is ready for any sacrifice provided she can fend for her ailing children and unemployed tubercular husband. At the end of the story prostitution becomes her life-style. In the hands of Idris these seemingly socio-economic factors or, one could say, invariables of the Egyptian scene, acquire insightful literary dimensions.

In conveying the sense of the loss of innocence, Idris hints with great discretion and caution. This awareness is shown through the eyes of the wary judge who at first is bewildered at the change that has come over his maid servant:

And it seemed to him that he could detect in her face things that weren't there before, or rather that her face was missing something that used to be there.

Our young man scrutinizes the face of the woman and it seems that he reaches his moment of illumination at the end of a process of accumulation of significant details. He examines, in character, his woman as if she were a series of “state exhibits.”

He sees her now as it were with parts of her features completely obliterated, while others seem to stand out. Her eyes had become deep set in her face enclosed by uninnocent circles... even her smile was no longer simple, naive... and suddenly he was scared of the change.

This alteration in a person he thought he knew unnerves him. Here it is not merely a loss of virginal innocence as much as a loss of something fundamental. The shock of recognition of 'Abd-Allah is the more unnerving when he realized that he was, in the ultimate analysis, to blame for that appalling discovery. His mounting interrogations to himself heighten the effect and reality of his guilt. "Is he responsible for what has happened? Has he really brought out that change in her? Is he the one
who has violated her faithful marital features?” Moving thus from an impressionistic level of interpretation of a situation to a conscious one merges the different elements of the story into a coherent whole.

In that part of the story where our protagonist sets out on a journey through the streets of Cairo trying to locate his maid servant who had presumably stolen his watch, we are again presented with another of Idris’ coups de maitre at merging several levels and visions. Here Idris quite literally uses cinematic techniques in narrating his impressions of a journey to the undersides of a city. This odyssey brings together many elements that may have seemed disparate and focuses them to the point of culmination.

Through his skillful use of language, Idris creates an impression of immediacy which is most effective as cinematic devices usually are. His use of an active present tense secures the effect of events and scenes taking place before our very eyes in the experience of reading the material. The distinct impression one gets is of an eye of a camera placed on the hood of the taxi he rides, searching for his servant. The focusing eye of the camera seems to select significant details which help create the overall effect of disintegration.

. . . as they advance the streets become narrower and their importance diminishes. the houses losing their numbers and their upper stories, the doors turning yellow and the windows losing their shutters: the shops become stores run by their owners, whose hands are the machines, and the faces of passersby become paler and their clothes bleached and worn out and the language disintegrates and becomes words and shouts and insults and the smell of spices and glue and sawdust rises, and they keep advancing and the streets become lanes carrying deafening names and the asphalt is replaced by blocks of rock and the pavement ends.

This metamorphosis before our very eyes of a city is symbolic of the changes that are taking place on several levels in the story. They certainly parallel the change that has overcome our heroine and to a larger extent the deterioration and disintegration of ’Abd Allah himself. For as the streets and houses lose shape and faces and clothes lose color, the deeper he moves towards the heart of the city, so does our man’s whole personality disintegrate in his attempt to falsely accuse his maid servant of the theft. The disintegration of language here is also very significant; for it symbolizes a break in the very essence of things, a loss of formulated values, a loss of the truth traditionally sought by a man of law, usually through the medium of words.

Idris in this passage and the ensuing ones seems to be carried away by a verbal mushrooming of ideas. At points we are tempted to believe
that he is not in control any more but is rather led by these images un­
reeling at a dizzying speed. Along with his hero, Idris seems to lose a sense of direction:

   . . . and from that moment he started feeling himself slipping away, getting lost.

This sense of incoherence and loss of a sense of reality is reinforced by
that vagueness that follows and his inability of determining a beginning to
that episode.

A reconstitution of the fading scenes is given in flashbacks which contrast sharply with the former images. The cinematic technique here is, as it were, a quick playback. These are scenes of the large avenues, clean streets lined on both sides with trees. Here the streets are occupied by elderly dark-suited men, while the other streets which are gradually transformed into narrow constricted winding lanes are confusedly populated with masses of human beings. These lead to a place of no “being” where everything commingles with everything else:

   and the color of the earth is muddy and mixes with the color of the dust and the tattered rags; and the smell of people mingles with that of the earth with that of houses and the interrupted hummings with the barking of dogs with the squeaking of opening doors.

He thus creates that unmistakable feeling of an undifferentiated mass throbbing with life of, and from, the earth. Here he appeals to our senses individually and collectively, making us aware of smells, noises, of certain textures and, of course, of visual images.

As mentioned earlier Idris seems to indulge in these side developments of the central theme, but as we have tried to show they contribute to the whole by reinforcing it. All through the story he uses at different points the various techniques of close-up, rapid and slow motion. These cinematic techniques are thus cleverly used to further Idris’ thematic designs. His constant preoccupation with life and death is forcefully shown in this story. The co-existence of the two principles of existence is so vivid to him that he rarely passes an opportunity without elaborating on it:

   and the low dusty dwellings stand by the graves that spread to infinity.

He provides variations on the theme by giving specifics:

   and the old man leans on the young lad, and the blind one is led by a boy and the sick is upheld by a wall and (the prophet taught

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us to take pity on the seventh neighbor), and a thin hidden thread links them all and ties them as beads on “worry beads” as one soul living in different bodies and time has no value.

This oneness of an organic whole is thus effectively demonstrated. The components of this throbbing city are thus made to partake in the eternal cycle of being. The rhythmic re-cycling of life into death, through these cinematic techniques, is thus translated into visual realities.

Our hero is not totally swamped in those swarming crowds although at times we get the impression that Idris may have been tempted to lose him, being himself so deeply immersed and overwhelmed by this totally new and different world he encounters once out of his select and walled residential areas. Emerging from this inferno of many circles our judge is certainly a different man. Although the change that has come over him is not clearly detectable, we are led to believe that his odyssey has humanized him, has rendered him a person more aware of his surroundings, of the human beings who are less fortunate than himself, who are so close and yet so remote from his own experience. Idris takes these very simple données and through the medium of his art turns them into a forceful statement.

This story is also to be noted for its language. The prose here is molded into forms rarely used before. It is rendered flexible and resilient to a great extent. The imagery and immediacy of events are not hampered by traditional similes and stock metaphors. Here Idris very clearly locates new meaning into old words, revitalizes the language and rejuvenates the storytelling art.

The Image of Woman, and the Search for a New Identity

To the religious and the humanist solutions of man’s plight in the universe must be added the Existentialist. The basic question here is still one of freedom, the search for identity under the aspects of violence or alienation.

“Al-Naddaha,” (“The Siren”) is a merging of the effects of the glamor of the big city on the future of the life of a peasant couple, and the assertion of the individuality of the peasant woman, irresistibly attracted by her newly found personality within the framework of the huge, engulfing city. The story also offers innovations in technique and delineation of character.

Fathiyya is like thousands of other peasant girls who dreamed of marrying someone who would take her away from the native village into the exciting city life. Unlike the other peasant girls, Fathiyya not only dreamed about the exciting prospects but actually worked towards realizing them. For when two eligible young men from the village asked her hand in marriage, Fathiyya did not hesitate in choosing Hamid—the poorer
of the two—but the one who was to take her with him to the city. Thus we see how very early she had already made a choice, asserting a certain strength of character not too common among submissive peasant girls. However, what really drives her to that choice is not so much her reasonableness, as much as a certain sense of inexplicable doom. Fathiyya somehow “knew” that inevitably she was destined to live in Cairo, this huge, fascinating, luxurious place, “where callous dry skin disappears, and is replaced by attractive smooth beauty.”

Hence, led by this mysterious call from the unknown, Fathiyya rationalizes her life and the “meaning of every sign.” Now she feels that she was destined for something better and higher than being stuck in mud from sunrise to sunset. Her beautiful white skin was made to flourish in the city. For “she was as white as one of the rich, beautiful girls from Cairo. Tall and slender and bound to eventually gain good weight, if she ate enough bread and butter.” This inner voice kept her going, goading her as it were towards her doom. So she marries Hamid. Although he is only a modest janitor of a house, yet she is proud of the fact that it is a ten story building. Her one room apartment in the basement of that house, under the stairway—although not one of the beautiful apartments she had dreamt of—yet was more than she ever had, with a bed and mattress and a chest of drawers and above all, electricity.

In spite of her fascination with the city she could not quite explain how so much poverty could exist in the place of her dreams. This however did not dampen her spirits, and she was still completely taken by it yet fearful of it. This ambivalence is shown consistently in the story:

And she to a certain extent and her husband Hamid not only could not resist giving in to the great motion of the city and have it treat them like the others, . . . but this great fomenting motion could only frighten them, drive them to reclusion, or more specifically, drove her to seek seclusion.

She felt that the new surroundings to which she was confined, namely the room under the stairway, and from which she peeped into the outside world, was her only protection from what she termed a “sea without a shore or fathomable bottom” and imagined herself walking on its edge, and if her foot slipped but once she would be done for. It was a sea:

which had a thousand hands stretching out, and with thousands of smiles like the smiles of sirens or mermaids deceptive inviting her luring her into the waters. Yes they were all cunning hands and cunning smiles, even that tenant eager with the money in his hands and (the grocer’s store so close by), petrified her, froze her in her place, while she would turn her head trying to avoid the
piercing looks, hoping for some kind of a miracle to save her from this situation.

So little by little Fathiyya becomes aware of that other version of life in a big city. She learns through her husband and through observation about the shady underground happenings in their building as well as in the city at large. She becomes conscious that behind the beautiful facades there is another Cairo full of scandals, shameful things and goings on.

In spite of these discrepancies and deceptions Fathiyya’s dream remained intact. Cairo remained that great coveted place, and as for evil, well, after all she thought it was to be found everywhere, for according to her “if evil and slime and ugliness were in the bottom, safety lay in floating or swimming.”

And so she continued to “float” until she inevitably hit the iceberg. To the young tenant next door, an avowed Casanova, she at first seemed as if she was going to be his easiest conquest. Actually she was to be quite a variation on his regular victims. But he soon discovered that he was not dealing with a common case. Fathiyya was not to succumb to his charms all that easily; he realized that this time he would have to wait and would have to plot cunningly. He became completely obsessed with Fathiyya, and, the more she avoided his looks and the longer she remained confined to her room, the more he had to resort to all kinds of machinations to get to see her. Fathiyya on the other hand became even more fearful, and her sense of doom became the more haunting. After having adopted the colorful dresses of Cairenes, she reverted to her long black gallabiya and the refuge of its respectful protective folds.

So our young bachelor tenant became more intrigued and more obsessed by this untouchable fruit. He resolved to either have her for himself or kill her and her Hamid if either one opposed his decision. Meanwhile Fathiyya had felt confident in her newly self-imposed seclusion. She even thought that she had triumphed over her sense of doom and that haunting vision of an affandi seducing her. But the inevitable was to happen; he intruded into her cloister. Idris discusses those intensely lived moments with great perception. She stood there astounded, paralysed, as if struck by lightning. From being a sentient creature she turned into one who had lost complete touch with life. In her state of shock she instinctively managed to hold her child from falling and sought the bed’s poster for support. Anger replaced fear as she for the first time looked her seducer in the face. She examined that “white smooth skin, those long, thick lashes hiding deep green eyes, those regular shining teeth and that mouth which any woman would have desired to kiss.” His smile was triumphant, inviting, a smile she had dreamed about for so long, a smile that invited her to sink to the bottom where the slime and the ghosts were. Yes she had feared the ‘affreet all her life, and now he had made his appearance, and the whisperings of her inner voice had finally come true.
Idris succeeds in charging that one evanescent moment with myriad impressions experienced in a stream of consciousness. Everything converged in that one moment, her fears, her dreams, her determination to avoid the inevitable doom—they all were charged in that moment crowded with thousands of vibrations and emotions. All she could do now was to beg him for mercy, to shed tears, to humiliate herself before him, but this did not last too long. Idris traces the change coming over her in an interesting correlation between the effects and impact of the city on her whole psyche. She began experiencing strange things—it was as if the shimmering lights of the multi-colored city blinded her. Beautiful shaven faces, expensive elegant clothes, numbing perfumes, wide open avenues, people gaily walking in and out of theatres, clean healthy children with their mothers, all this conglomeration of sights, sensations and emotions stole into her being while she attempted to resist—a resistance she soon had to abandon out of exhaustion and despair. She despaired that a miracle would take place, but what was unbelievable and incomprehensible was for her to realize that her surrender would turn into a pleasurable one. That which was impossible to believe even while it was happening had happened, and then Hamid opened the door and stood there, stricken. She lay there expecting, hoping that Hamid would kill her, and thus fulfill all her premonitions, yet she somehow knew that he would not put an end to her, that she was destined for yet another life.

The author tells us how, like a wounded animal, Hamid spent the night in a vigil after having lost all the driving force behind his decision to kill her. Would he have done the same had he been still living in his little village? Has Cairo totally defeated him, was he really shedding tears out of pity for her humiliation? With the first rays of dawn the family stealthily groped its way through the darkness, a small caravan in flight making its exit from the indifferent cruel sleeping city, seemingly innocent of what it had brought about. Hamid was seized by a wave of fury and would have wanted to smash those glittering facades of lighted shop windows, he would have wanted to uproot its asphalt—anything to lessen his pain. Hamid bought tickets on the train heading back to their little village, but he alone took the ride back home, for Fathiyya disappeared in the hustle and bustle of the crowds flowing into Cairo through its Grand Central Station. This time she was returning to Cairo out of her own accord, and not in answer to a mysterious call. Thus Fathiyya at the end of the story evolves as a woman who has come full circle, who has stepped out into the world, the real world to assume the full responsibility of her destiny. The city had helped crystallize her personality and emancipation.

Ibsen's Nora, in *The Doll's House*, comes to mind as well as some of Henry James' heroines. These heroines had at one point believed that they were destined for modes of life other than the ones they had heretofore led. Nora decides to leave her husband and to search for her identity
and place in society, putting aside all other considerations. Fathiyya, the peasant, illiterate girl, initially mesmerized by the call of the big city, after undergoing her initiating harrowing experience, at the end decides to turn around and face her destiny and assert her individuality. Idris thus gives us the growth of Fathiyya in actual process, while he sets it in a background of the evil city, as the catalyst which accelerates her development. His treatment of Fathiyya is quite innovative in that he does not merely recount to us the common events in the life of a transplanted peasant girl; he succeeds in closely showing the initiating changes she undergoes, in actually changing her before our very eyes. Our heroine detaches herself from the gallery of those women who determinedly forge their way through. Fathiyya does not have much to draw upon, but her dream. For in spite of her disillusionment, the dream, which she can now face more realistically, will keep her afloat in this sea of tribulations.

A Search for the Authentic Self

In the collection Lughat al-Ay-Ay (The Language of Pain), the title story is an existential experience of pain and death. With almost clinical accuracy Idris examines and dissects an acute state of pain suffered by a man ailing from cancer of the bladder. On one level we have the description of the symptoms of that disease; on a yet deeper level it is the experiencing of the objective correlative of pain.

The story is that of a famous specialist and college professor who after long years of separation from a childhood friend he had left behind in the village is sought by the latter and is asked to ease his suffering. The doctor is all the more deeply affected when he realizes that he himself could have very easily been the ailing man if it had not been for a stroke of luck which brought him to the city to continue his higher education—coupled with his own gift of strong determination since his early childhood. But more decisive was that very friend who arrives more dead than alive seeking his help. For this very friend was his inspiration and incentive to go on with a career; as a child he was brilliant and at the top of his class, and Fahmy was always secretly competing with him. He had been with him, in spirit, all these years in the city, goading him, competing, forcing him to continue to excel. Today he sees him as a heap of bones, squirming in his pain, writhing and wriggling, crying out in pain "Ay! Ay! Ay!" with an ever rising pitch. Al-Hadidi takes his friend home, overruling his wife's objections and threats, and spends the night in mental torture with him. Here there is a parallelism between the unbearable physical pain of Fahmy and the doctor's more excruciating moral and mental suffering. Lying beside his insensitive wife who embodies and represents the kind of life he has espoused, Al-Hadidi goes through a series of epiphanies which reveal to him his true self, what he really wanted from life. He first experiences a pressing need to scream with all his might, just like Fahmy who could not control his pain. Al-Hadidi then thinks of all the times he felt like
standing in the middle of Tahrir Square (the main square in Cairo) and just letting go, screaming with all his might:

and he felt a faded comfort; and voices reaching an internal fathomless point in him, refreshing him with a touch of refinement and sweetness. Yes right here is the spot where he felt it assembling ... his Ahat (Ouch’s) he hadn’t let go of ... for they are not of the language of this world of this life, but it is the language of the depths and the Ay Ay.

This realization leads him on to others and eventually culminates in the total rejection of his actual life. He lies there, dissecting in his mind those cries of pain rending the air, and he comes to the conclusion that if they mean anything at all then they are to be equated with a sense of life. He reflects—to be alive is to feel, to feel intensely and Fahmy out there is more alive than he ever was. For all through these years he had kept his feelings under control, and had “lived” according to the rules of society and had been “successful.” Now he realizes how dead he was all along, his life a series of “amputated” friendships, “parts” of relationships and interrupted contacts. He, more than Fahmy, carried in himself the cancerous, malignant tumor. A cancer which ate away the very essence of life, which froze feelings and made him a non-sentient being, unable to share in any form of exchange, unmotivated to give or receive love. Thus he sees the light: “From here the tragedy began which transformed him into a ‘living’ dead man.”

Al-Hadidi at this moment of illumination ironically turns to his friend Fahmy and asks for his help, his forgiveness and acceptance. For a brief moment Fahmy overcomes his gnawing pains and becomes to his friend what he once was—a comforter and inspirer. But this does not last long, for his unbearable pains resume and his uncontrollable cries awaken the whole neighborhood. Eventually the police are summoned and Al-Hadidi in a final gesture of rejection of unauthentic life offers his wife the chance to leave her old life behind and follow him. She, of course, misses the whole point of his transformation and unsuccessfully tries to keep him, but he sets himself free, carrying his friend on his back, walking proudly for the first time, unashamed of his modest peasant background—at long last liberated. Al-Hadidi for the first time feels alive, and sees the people around him as “corpses,” just as he himself had in a sense so recently been.

In this heavily suggestive story, Idris succeeds in intermingling two levels of meaning. The symbolic thrust for liberation is enhanced by the literal sense of the story. Al-Hadidi’s search and finding of himself is a process he had apparently been experiencing all along, but which comes to a point of culmination when he encounters Fahmy. He becomes a forcible catalyst for change, whereas previously he had been rather a helping agent in the furthering of the character, personality and career of Al-Hadidi.
Thus Fahmy is not merely the social alternative, the embodiment of sickness, poverty and ignorance that Al-Hadidi escaped being: he is in a sense his alter ego, that other self he always was, the “living” principle he had suppressed for so long. Fahmy becomes, ironically, in his death what Al-Hadidi had always assumed, wrongly, he had been in his life. It is doubly ironic that Idris should choose a fatally sick man to embody that principle, but on the other hand it may be that he merely was pointing to the fact that “life” in the figurative sense was ebbing away from Al-Hadidi, just as it was from Fahmy, and both were desperately trying to hold on to it. This process takes place through a language emanating from the depths, a language of pain and suffering—universal expression of pain, the language of al-Ay-Ay. Idris’ approach to this story and others is reminiscent of Joseph Conrad’s, particularly in Heart of Darkness. Here, too, Conrad fuses two levels of meaning, the literal (the story of a journey through a real wilderness in search of a real man), and the symbolic journey through a wilderness found at the center of the human psyche in search of some center of the self concealed inside the soul of each of us. Conrad’s emphasis and extensive use of symbols, symbolic scenes and structural subtleties afforded to him by the length of his story help him secure a certain detachment and impersonality which enables him to operate more freely.

As Conrad descends provisionally into the heart of darkness and emerges crying “the horror, the horror,” having probed the dark corners of the human soul to find it plagued with evil, but also capable of some good, so does Idris when he delves into those regions of “fathomless internal depths” and emerges crying “Ay, Ay, Ay . . .”

The interest of Conrad’s story for us lies in its technique of a tightly knit story. Conrad employs the literary device of using two narrators to recount his story, one of whom turns out to be a dubious authority, for in the process Marlow becomes the embodiment of the meanings the novel requires of him. In having a nameless narrator introduce Marlow, who will proceed to reveal the mystery of Kurtz in the heart of Africa, Conrad twice removes himself from his creation to view the denouement of its drama from a perched privacy. This same device is often used by Idris in his stories, with appropriate variation. In “Farahat’s Republic,” another of his stories, he is twice removed from the scene by giving us a spectator-narrator, who in turn gives his own point of view, his impressionistic insights of the dramas unreeling before him. Marlow and Idris’ narrators in “Farahat’s Republic” fret about reality and unreality. Like Conrad’s hero, Idris’ Fahmy seems to be the “secret sharer” of Al-Hadidi.

The confrontation with the authentic self as examined in these stories takes place at a moment of extreme tension—sometimes at a moment of death—and it is at this crucial point that the existential man comes to grips with his condition humaine and tries to redefine the meaning of life.
THE IMPACT OF TRADITION ON MODERN ARABIC LITERATURE

SAHAIR EL CALAMAWY

Tradition has an impact upon all culture but this impact differs greatly in age, intensity and extent. A tradition may be a century old, as in some Western cultures or it may be over a millennium as in Arab culture. It may be preserved in dead language, as European cultures are in Greek and Latin, or it may survive in a living language, as in Arab culture. Tradition may be felt chiefly in the realm of art, or it may have an impact on all aspects of human activity, as it does in Western and Arab cultures respectively.

Tradition in Arab/Moslem art and life differs somewhat from tradition in the West. In Arab cultures, tradition represents the highest qualities of excellence. Traditional in Arab culture means genuine and excellent. The language of a traditional poem today is the same language used by the Arab poets sixteen centuries ago. We still use the same language, more or less, with all that it implies as a way of thinking and a manner of living.

But tradition in literature has become a problem aggravated more and more by the great changes that Arab societies have been subjected to in

the past century. In literature, the old poems of the pre-Islamic poets are still learned and recited by every cultured writer. These poems, said to have been written in gold and hung in the Holy House of Abraham in Mecca, are still fresh in the memory of all literature students. Moreover, the rules of rhetoric that governed their composition are still followed by many living poets of our day.

These literary rules of excellence were discovered, discussed, and then ossified for centuries. They were very binding. In the introduction to his well-known book *Poetry and the Poets*, the critic Ibn Qutaiba says he will evaluate the poets justly, regardless of their being ancient or modern, and he attacks the learned of his age for preferring the old just because it is old, even if the poetry is "stupid." Nevertheless we are not surprised to hear the same critic affirm that there must be no deviation from the old methods in poetry: "It is forbidden for a contemporary poet to depart from the ancient forms and then stand by a newly built house and mourn the happy days that went by, because the ancient poets stood by the ruins and mourned their fleeting happiness, nor may he describe a donkey he rides because they described the camel." The new must adhere to the old model.

Many factors through the long, long years have cemented this attitude towards the classics. The most prominent is the concept of the sacredness of the Arabic language. The Sacred Book (Quran) is a miracle of language. Arabic was the tongue chosen by the Almighty to express his purpose through the angel to the Prophet. The sacred book's words were explained through usage by the pre-Islamic poets in their excellent poetry. Around the sacred book, all of the Arab cultural heritage had its roots, and the ancient poems provided the only accepted method of explaining the text of the holy Quran in any field of knowledge.

Whenever the Arabs entered a new country or were attacked by an enemy in their own, they cherished their language as an integral part of their personality. What binds the Arab world together—more than history, race, ambition, or future destiny—is the common language and the heritage of this language, especially in literature.

The "Quranic" text, which represents this language in its supreme excellence, is always present in the memory of all Arabs. This text, now being chanted daily on radio and television in magnificent voices, becomes a more integral part of everyday life. People learn excellent ways of expressing themselves, and they feel that their ideas bind them together as long as the expression of these ideas is so similar. The old expressions form and shape the conception of the most modern ideas.

It is a challenge to express new feelings and ideas in an old language. For many centuries, however, the development of this language nearly stopped. After the Abbassids' Golden days—that is since the thirteenth century A.D.—lexicography and other studies of the language stopped.
Repetitions, condensations, and explanations—with no new contributions at all—followed and continued until this century.

During the Ottoman period, the rulers (who in all parts of their empire were the patrons of art and artists) neither spoke nor understood Arabic. The poets were encouraged only by minor rulers, who were scarcely able to play the role of patron. When the Arabs mixed with other civilizations in the Levant, Persia, and Spain they, being conquerors, assimilated these civilizations and propagated their own. With the Ottomans, they had no such choice. The Ottomans had no civilization as such, and were terribly blinded by their belief in their own superiority and excellence.

In recent times, it was only natural that the parts of the Ottoman Empire that could free themselves from its yoke headed towards modernization. Egypt was the first and most prominent example. When Western or French civilization knocked on their doors, the Egyptians had many reasons not to respond, but they did respond, and the 19th century in Egypt witnessed a variety of ideas, creeds, and civilizations creeping into this ancient melting pot.

It took some time for literature to stir and move towards modernization, and the neoclassical era began towards the end of the century. Arabic poetry during its long life has witnessed only two attempts at innovative revolution. The first occurred soon after its golden age in the ninth century, when the famous Iraqi poet Abu Nuass ridiculed the introduction of Arabic poetry. This was an abortive revolution, which died almost immediately. The second attempt was in Spain, and it dealt with the meter and music of the poem. Many innovations in rhyme, meter, and form developed, but the main metric system remained intact.

In modern times, there was a need to renew both form and content. The call to change the content was easier and met with little opposition. The world was already changing rapidly all around the Arab pacts. There were no rulers to praise whose patronage could support the poet. The people were assuming the role of the patron. They wanted not only subjects that concerned them, but also a language they could understand.

Journalism and reformist writings opened new horizons of interest and concern, and the language tended to become simpler and nearer to the spoken dialect. Since then, concern over preserving the Fusha or pure language of the ancestors, has heightened significantly. The change in the poem was, after all, still limited.

With the translation of French and English poetry, new realms of thought and new images and situations became available. A translated poem proved that poetic emotions could be expressed in a simple, almost prosaic language. New music was heard and new forms of literary expression were introduced. Still, the Arabic poem remained under the influence
of tradition. A school of critics in Egypt and a group of Arab poets in New York worked simultaneously to free the Arabic poem from the yoke of tradition. A romantic movement arose which was in harmony with the lyrical features of the traditional poem but moved a step forward. Some developments in rhyme were distinguishable, but the real harvest, after more than a half century, was the romantic trend, which won general approval and acceptance.

It was not until World War II that a really new type of poetry began to be firmly established. In almost all its stages since the first Islamic era, Arabic poetry has had distinguished female poets, but especially in the neoclassical, the romantic, and the new era. One of them claims to have pioneered this new movement in Iraq.

This new movement, arising amid conflicting ideologies, had to change the rhyme and meter of the traditional poem, but after a quarter of a century, the new forms are still not accepted in many Arab countries. The most prominent poets of this new form are condemned and have a very limited public. They are of interest to critics and literary historians only. The traditional poem is still more widely accepted, and on some occasions new poets write in the traditional form—not to prove that they can do so, as they did at the start of their career, but because a situation calls for a wide audience. Qabbani wrote in the new form but after the disaster of 1967 he wrote in the old form. Even the fervent innovator, Adonis, whose works are quite eccentric, wrote a classical poem in 1975 (an elegy to an eminent dead religion scholar from Lathikivya).

The new rhyme remains to be studied in great detail, but the first studies prove that it is new in only a few poems; the rest, printed differently, could easily conform to the Andalusian innovations of some centuries ago in Spain.

The constraints of the language are a great obstacle to new expressions and hence to a genuinely new poetry. Deviation from the meaning of a word in the more than seven hundred year old dictionary is still regarded as a great mistake. Critics of the neoclassical era, in this century as in earlier centuries, forbade any deviation from the old poem in either subject matter or vocabulary. Change in rhyme and meter was beyond their imagination.

The question of how new a poem should be in modern Arabic literature is highly debatable. How far have the new poetic image and the extensive use of myth, legend, and symbol succeeded in overcoming the language problem?

The new forms of drama and the novel also encountered difficulties. They were rejected and condemned at first, and their pioneers had a great challenge, which most of them were unable to meet. The language
problem in these forms differs from those in poetry, where a poet has seventy names for a lion and a hundred for a camel to choose from. The novelist and dramatist do not address the intelligentsia: they speak instead to a simple public that needs its anxieties and its pains expressed clearly and beautifully. The language must be understood easily by a semi-educated public. The colloquial is vivid, realistic, and nearer to the audience. But by using it not only is the prestige of a serious author lost but also there is a risk of losing the public in the Arab world.

To lose the public of the Arab world involves little economic loss (for no writer, however famous and prodigious, could live even today by his pen), but it does involve a loss of prestige and esteem in his own country. And thus the novelist sometimes has to sacrifice vivacity and realism. With the new media—film, radio, and television—this language problem has been further aggravated, and the heated debates around this problem often reflect political and religious feuds. Some poets like Rashid Ayoub in New York went as far as to use English words, (subway, car, submarine, etc.) in his Arabic text, but most writers, and especially poets, stuck to traditional or literary Arabic with very slight innovations.

Not only did the language problem confront writers in the new forms of literature, but also the subject matter proved to be a tremendous stumbling block. The struggle between man and fate is a totally alien concept to Arab culture (how much this factor has influenced the development of drama remains to be studied). The existence or necessity of such a struggle is being questioned anew because of the rise of conflicting new ideologies and social problems.

In both the drama and the novel, love themes have created another major problem. The poet could sing of his love, call his beloved, and make her talk and act lovingly; but a novelist or dramatist at the beginning could not. Folklore (The Thousand and One Nights) abounds with love scenes and with women who act as they do in real life. But these women were slaves: free women pictured in love would be bereaved of respect. On the stage, women singers and dancers were common, but women acting in a play were not accepted. Singers and dancers were despised by the acting profession. No respectable family would tolerate a daughter becoming a singer or dancer. Until the 1920s, it was young boys who took the female roles in plays. Later female roles were played by Christian foreigners, Greeks, Armenians, Lebanese, et cetera. Only in the 1940s did Egyptian women step onto the stage, and only in the past decade has acting become an acceptable profession for women in the big cities and in some other places.
Tradition created an even greater hindrance in the action of women in the novel or the play. Mansalouti, an eminent prose writer, both invented and translated some beautiful love stories. Mutran, an eminent poet, also wrote stories in poetry of women in love. Their favorite theme was the woman who dies in love—the young girl (rather, a child) wedded to an old man and dying in her misery, or the poor villager raped by her boss or by the son of the landowner. The theme of a woman sacrificing her love—in the manner of La Dame Aux Camélias—to preserve the prestige of her lover's family was repeated in many different versions. Most of the prostitutes in the works of Naguib Mahfouz (our most renowned novelist) are of this type, and they abound in his fiction. At the beginning of this century love was the subject of about 90 percent of Arab novels, and invariably the woman had to be a foreigner. A Lebanese Christian, for example, appears in Al Akkad in the 1930s. The woman in such novels might be a poor village girl but not a member of a respectable urban family. It is interesting to follow the development and treatment of women characters in the Arabic novel. How much are local female characters based on the writer's recollections of his girl friend, especially in Paris, during his student days abroad? The woman's emancipation movement was far ahead of the women in our modern novel and theater. Women even wrote novels themselves, but unluckily some (especially in Beirut, where the whole atmosphere is freer than anywhere else in the Arab world) stuffed their writing with sex or obscenity, believing it would make them appear more emancipated. I emphatically say that I have not yet read about a truly emancipated woman in any novel by an Arab author.

The figure of the combatant woman has only recently begun to shine in our cloudy literary sky as she actually shines in our daily life. Of thirty or more novels written after the disaster of 1967, only a few omit a glorious picture of a woman who goes to fight honestly and bravely for her beleaguered country.

If life changes around us, literature is bound to change. Even if tradition is old and its impact intensive and extensive, literature must undergo the process of reconstruction. The goal is not to abolish tradition—it cannot be abolished, and in any case we cherish it and want to preserve it. The real goal is to move freely within it, as if in a framework. It has to be studied, revised, and renewed. Its old brown leaves must fall so that new green ones may grow, but the tree remains the same, always giving us its own rich fruit.
Fa'eq Hasan, TWO PEASANTS, (Iraq).
MODERN ARAB ART: THE Quest AND THE ORDEAL

KAMAL BOULLATA

To Jabra Ibrahim Jabra
The Artist, Poet, Novelist, Critic In One

Tradition may be an incubus draining the living (Karl Marx), or it may be simply a dull fidelity to the past (Max Weber); in time, the artist is instrumental in determining its suchness. Whether he uproots its values from his work or gives new shape to its old structures, he seems to correspond with it in dialectical patterns that perpetually open windows to unknown horizons.

In that part of the world where history blends with legend and myth, the past is palpable as the present and the future brews bated anxieties; the struggle between tradition and change has been the crucial axiom since the turn of the century. Today the Arab professionals of inspiration may be in the vanguard of the quest to resolve this struggle, that relentlessly manifests itself at every level of daily life.

Arbitrary change, whether affected by exterior deterrents to the structure of inherited tradition or by the internal dynamics of its values, contributes to the tension of being a modern Arab. How an extrinsic element is received within a seemingly immutable tradition is determined by the Arab's evolving interpretation of the "outside" world.

Traditionally, Arab creativity revolved around The Word: the word as spoken revelation and as visible image. Poetry, being the elixir of language, was the natural art form in which Arabs excelled. On the visual plane, the arabesque became the spiral product of Arabic. A theological ban on visual representation of life cannot explain this distinctive Semitic
Khalid Al Rahhal, (Iraq).
characteristic. The early Arab hardly attempted to interact with spatial illusion as a Giotto would. He also expressed little if any interest in landscape or architectural painting as such. The reasons for this are independent of his religion; they are inherent in his pre-Islamic environment and his nomadic interpretation of it.\footnote{characteristic. The early Arab hardly attempted to interact with spatial illusion as a Giotto would. He also expressed little if any interest in landscape or architectural painting as such. The reasons for this are independent of his religion; they are inherent in his pre-Islamic environment and his nomadic interpretation of it.}\footnote{Arabs never ceased to be haunted by The Word. In our times the radio is as indispensable to the Arab as is a car to an American; the radio seems to be technology's extension of the Arabs' long oral tradition, just as the car is the requisite to the American's sense of Lebensraum. Where else in the world would people actually enjoy listening to a movie on the radio? Yet, this phenomenon is not so surprising in a culture that once paid craftsmen ten times as much as it paid painters of miniatures for mere copies of calligraphic texts.}

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The Arab world possesses works of art that represent more than thirty centuries of human development, and yet the foundations of a native studio art were laid less than one hundred years ago. Studio art's nebulous beginnings among the Arabs were triggered in one country after another by each country's encounter with Europe, God's own country for this art form.

It is not surprising that the earliest signs appeared in Egypt with the establishment of the School of Fine Arts in Cairo in 1908. Galleries of the opera house there had been exhibiting the works of French artists since 1891. The Napoleonic invasion in 1798, which had paved the way for this opening, dated the dawn of an era of Western influence in the Arab world. By the end of World War I the European cultural invasion had taken root in Arab soil. Young Arab artists left for Rome, Paris, London and Brussels to learn the trade. But "picture-making" was to be but one product imported among others, albeit an important one, because through it the Arab found himself searching for ways to address his reality. Today, in spite of its growing importance, it remains an art form yet to be fully assimilated by Arab life. Studio art in particular and the art of painting in general remain the Arab's borrowed language par excellence. In this fact lies perhaps modern art's pre-eminent challenge to a world that for hundreds of years has been seduced by the magic of the word.

Although the genesis of modern art in one Arab country may have followed it in another, the routes independent regional developments traveled were almost identical. Modern Arab art unfolded in three overlapping transitional phases.\footnote{Accepting that generalization has its considerable risks, this survey nonetheless attempts to place modern Arab art in some intermediate perspective, to raise a few fundamental issues, until sufficient curiosity demands further research. An appropriate methodological approach}

Accepting that generalization has its considerable risks, this survey nonetheless attempts to place modern Arab art in some intermediate perspective, to raise a few fundamental issues, until sufficient curiosity demands further research. An appropriate methodological approach
Sa’ad Kamel, (Egypt).
ought to be designed; in the meantime the backbone of the discussion that follows is partly indebted to Franz Fanon's writings on borrowed art forms and the development of native cultures.4

In the first phase, whether the encounter with Western art came at home or abroad, the Arab artist readily sought total assimilation with his master. The shortest way was to imitate.5 The native not only borrowed a visual vocabulary alien to his traditional idiom but he adjusted his new alphabet to the established vision of a dead generation of European artists. Thus, a contemporary of Bonnard may have seen the world with the eyes of David and a contemporary of Picasso painted with the eyes of Puvis de Chavannes.

Thematically, when the artist did not undiscerningly depict European subjects, Arab painting and sculpture revealed a concern with local portraiture and folklore that stylistically alternated between neo-classicist rendering and floundering at the borders of impressionism.

In their choices of subjects the Arabs had a romantic attitude towards national life; their perspective tended to be folkloric. Like the earliest photographers of this century, the Arab artists of this phase must have sensed an historical urgency in their endeavors. Almost self-consciously they busily recorded the details of rural and sometimes bedouin life.

Having seen industrialized Europe, they looked back sentimentally to the native land as if (prematurely?) mourning a time of innocence and simplicity.6

The work of Arab artists of the first phase bears a mannerist stamp. At best, a Lebanese village scene evokes the feeling of a Mediterranean Bruegel when groups of people are depicted, and the vivacity of a Frans Hals portrait is accented by the cardinal-red of a tarbush when a Syrian efendi is portrayed. The final product of the Arab artist, then, hardly differed from that of an orientalist, such as Bartlett, Roberts or Vignal, who had lived in or visited the area and depicted its themes; the orientalist and the native both seemed to be onlookers skimming the surface of things. The first had a visually sophisticated tradition all his own, and through this tradition, or because of it, he escaped into the East; the other, having lost his own tradition, found himself trapped in the mirror of his captor.7

The second phase may not differ radically from the first, but stylistically the borrowing superficially shifted to more modern schools where color tones became less inhibited. Thematically, a second look at national identity and a collective vision of nation were attempted.

In Europe since Cimabue the art of painting had been flowering as personal expression. In the Arab world since the Jahiliyya (the so-called dark pre-Islamic period) poetry seemed to constitute the only personal art
Ahmad Fu’ad Salim, 1966. (Egypt).
form. Even then and until recently the Arab poet had been rather much an individual mouth-piece for a collective idea, hardly ever unaware of an audience, at one time his tribe, later his nation.⁸

During this second phase of his modern development the Arab artist aimed at a representation of the collective idiom in ways similar to generations of poets before him. A need for public approval may have prompted him to wish secretly to share the poet’s place in society.

Being as unassimilated as he still was, the modern Arab artist sought some kind of group identity. At this time, in Syria and Egypt, art groups were forming.⁹

Still unacquainted with the widening spectrum of visual terminology that had developed over the years in Europe, the Arab artist was unversed in the dialectical parallelism between form and content; he based his entire reading of the visual world on preconceived verbal interpretation of the moment. The artist continued to employ a plastic language as a mere vehicle to express an orally conceived idea; he still conceived of painting as adjunctive. He attempted, moreover, to translate the methods of style he had indiscriminately borrowed into a more Arabized interpretation of his immediate reality.

By now, his abstrusive involvement in translation or, more aptly, transliteration, seems to have begun to hint his Lilliputian proportions to the masters of Europe to him. Concurrently, the first fires of nationalistic movements were being kindled around him. Yet, having begun to realize the foreignness of the tools in his hands, he chose not to abandon them; he could not within that short time conceptualize new tools, much less forge them, so he nationalized his imported tools, as it were.

The artist who lived at a time in which Ahmad Shawqi (1868-1932) was the crown prince of the poets started to reveal a nationalistic exegesis of epical narrative in color. National themes were magnified with grand sweeps of the panegyric brush. Heroic faces with Arab features emerged from the chiaroscuro of fresh paint. Historical events that evoked national pride were now blown up on canvas bigger than Saladin’s horses. At the peak of a collective sense of national inferiority, the spirit of Arab Andalusia was conjured and exalted, as remote Delacroix figures melted under the brush strokes of Levantine Renoirs. Form and content could not be more incohesive. Ironically, through all this, nature paintings were mostly slavish imitations of Western models.¹⁰

Nature, having been a focal topic for the artist in the West since he brought it out of the background of Renaissance portraiture, hardly survived at all in the background of the modern Arab artist. The aversion to painting life, fostered by theological prohibition, echoes a seeming aversion to nature as subject in the modern period.
Ibrahim Al Salahi, (Sudan).
The main concern of the figurative Arab artist, from his infancy until now, appears to center on the human form. Except for some Lebanese artists who can be singled out for their genuine sense of communion with nature, the majority of Arab artists expressed little interest in landscape. And as for the world of objects explored by Westerners in the still life (translated in Arabic as tabi'a samita or “silent nature”), it is almost absent from Arab painting except among literalistic imitators.

This may be explained by the fact that the Lebanese, of all the Arabs, live closest to a diversified pastoral nature where “eyes and mirrors bend on the horizon of the seas” (F.G. Naffa'). They have domesticated the fluidity of nature and everything Mediterranean, as few Arabs have elsewhere, on every level of their daily round. It is the jus naturel of their colloquial expression. The Lebanese have a unique sense of tarab regarding nature that is unrivaled by other Arabs.

Notwithstanding, a more fundamental factor is at work that may explain the non-rural Arab’s general aversion to nature and the modern Arab artist’s interest in the human figure. In his childhood the Arab’s most revered accumulation of knowledge seems to concentrate on people and how to interact with them in a communally accepted manner. Before nature, amidst objects, then, the urban Arab, never having learned how to converse with a tree, feels awe-struck, confused.

On the other hand, from the canticles of Saint Francis of Assisi in the 12th Century to the pedagogies of P.H. Thiry d'Holbach in the 18th Century, the European vision seems to move by graduation closer to demystification of nature. This outward quest for a rich and modular nature could have been a factor guiding the Westerner into contemplation of the inner levels of the self vis-à-vis God’s creation; and it was this inward directiveness that was to stimulate certain traits of individualism that later flowered in European visual art, becoming finally intrinsic in the art of painting.

When the Muslim Arab once emerged from the tribal wilderness landscape he was confronted by an imperial civility in decadence and the colorful jewelry of Byzantium. This collision led the Arab to contemplate outwardly, not inwardly. He visualized the collision in the form of abstract blasts of a shifting sun ray caught in a prism. To translate this, he wrote color in linear improvisations that reiterated his inborn desert visions. Those very visions were later to inspire the leading exponents of 20th Century painting in Europe. By that time the occidental art of imitating nature whose pinnacle naturalism exemplified had reached a cul de sac. The death of naturalism, but a limb of positivism, did not thwart the growth of individualism in the West; it enhanced it.

The modern Arab artist whose visual interpretation of the world remained largely orally oriented, seems to have never fully comprehended
Jawad Salim, 1958, (Iraq).
the death of Naturalism. He was too eager to explore the pillars of Europe who were by now leading the battle beyond the limits of naturalism. His own eagerness forced him to question his sense of individuality versus the collective idiom he had been trying to forge.

Issues such as individualism and personal identity versus what is intrinsically Arab in art formed the basic ingredients of the third phase in the development of modern Arab art.

The end of the Second World War marks the start of the third phase in the development of modern Arab art; even now its reverberations are felt. European masters, themselves inspired by Arab culture, were now the main sources of inspiration to a large number of young Arab artists. However, the minority who assumed the legacy of these masters went on to breathe life into the embryo of an Arab idiom that the Europeans could not have dreamed. The homecoming from Europe of the Iraqi Jawad Salim (1919-1961) heralded the first gesture towards inventively unraveling the problematics of modern Arab art since the Arabs first borrowed the language from the West. His sudden premature death at forty-one had been a national loss.

The pentacle works of Picasso, Klee and Matisse had pointed the way to a new generation of Arab artists who were to look into the Arabs' inner realms of vision. An old mirror was shattered. The sun has reached high noon. The imitator was caught up by his own shadow and the only way left was to dig down to deeper levels of the ground upon which the Arab stood. There, not only the Islamic heritage was unearthed intact but there then emerged broad layers of forgotten images from civilizations forty centuries deep.

In the last twenty-five years or so, two broad mainstreams are found that directly draw their inspiration from the visual heritage of the area; one trend expresses itself in a figurative vein, the other in an abstract manner. Concurrently, two paradoxical schools, though sharing a common base, stand in two opposing poles to each other; the first school is thematically oriented, its subject matter is nationalist in nature and figurative in mode of expression; the other school is formalist in outlook, alien to a localized definition of Arab vision and is abstract in style.

The first figurative trend that draws on the visual heritage of the area has the stylized human figure, past and present, as its central theme. The 13th Century Iraqi al Wasiti, for example, has been a national rediscovery to artists of this genre. Their figures are linear in definition and tend to be geometric in rendering. They subscribe to the revival of old Arab folk tales, giving an uncalculated freshness to local everyday life. Their imagery is generally borrowed from regional folklore and mythical figures. Here, a traditional narrative could become a visual feast which
Adam Hanin, 1964 (Egypt).
may offer lyrical qualities that echo moods intrinsic to Arabic poetry. One also discerns a sophisticated primitiveness not unlike the human imprint we find in archaeological findings of Egypt and Iraq; the quiet gaiety of an Assyrian face and the mystical presence of a Mesopotamian bull form part of the allegory of this school. Spatial dimensions are disregarded; however, the flatness sometimes is enriched by a highly decorative pattern that is reminiscent of ancient Islamic miniatures, or by the rich textures of a timeworn graven stone. This school of painting is found among artists from different parts of the Arab world; in Iraq, Egypt and the Sudan its characteristics seem predominant.

This trend in figurative expression has been fertile soil in which an abstract school flowered with analogical imagery. Whereas the figurative school stylized form abstracted from folklore and mythology, the abstract trend carried it out to its ultimate conclusion. Form may be reduced to an angular geometric pattern inherited from an Islamic design, or it may take the cursive characteristic of Arabic script and crescents of the Eastern skies. The tonality of color belongs to a Mediterranean patch of earth with highlights of radiant shapes that are as unreadable to the modern eye as Symerian script or ancient Kufiq. The codes or mystical symbols of antiquity here point to a future in ciphers only dead men seem to know how to read. The surface may be flat with colors well contained in clearly defined borders or it may be textured with layers of paint and other material. Its outward appearance can look like geological layers of Arab earth that seem to be a tabula rasa to archaeological astronauts. A painting of this genre does not pretend to be a flying carpet to the imagination; its concreteness calls to mind perhaps a primitive straw mat Fellahin used since times immemorial, as it may recall the patchworks that compose the sides of the tent of a Bedouin monk. The high sense of texture always plays a metaphoric semblance.

The presence of paintings of this trend can have the power to mysteriously reunite the onlooker with the past of his childhood as with the past of his land. This trend of abstract painting is the tour de force of young Arab artists today. An increasing number of them are seriously trying to further the quest of this trend because through it they see boundless possibilities.

It would not be surprising if the branch of this trend that centers around the comprehension of arubesque and a renewed interest in the visual potentiality of the characters of the Arabic script may lead the way to future Arab art. It was the word after all that triggered the Arabs' imagination for centuries, and here once again it is the word that is being painted in its most irreducible form.19
Ahmad Abd Al Wahab. (Egypt).
In contrast to this abstract school that vertically attempts to mold its new vision from drilling out forgotten fragments of a spectral past, a number of abstractionists subscribe to extracting their visions from the unmade future. It so happens that their horizontal looking to the future is similar to facing Mecca westwards. Like two generations of imitators before them, their products mirror every major current in the western world today. Beirut has rightly been the domestic stadium and the souk to this school. However, artists of this genre can also be found in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia. Their idiom ranges from that of America’s abstract expressionists of the fifties to op, pop and prop of today. Their iconography can exhibit at times the most erotic linear elements of flesh and the Arab Mediterranean, nevertheless they seem to be locked in a metallic language that has no roots in native soil. In their palette they can claim Camus’ "Nationalism of the Sun" but like Camus they remain strangers to the light that nourishes them.

Their formalism is one way which may express their being out of harmony with the aesthetics that makes their social and political realities; however, the figurative school which chooses to stand paradoxically opposite their position is unfortunately not more original nor perhaps as aware of contemporaneity.

This other branch of the figurative school is indeed the most conformist. Its pioneers borrow a linguistic idiom that ranges in appearance between a pseudo-realist mien and a stylized expressionism. Thematically, they exhibit an obsession with political subjects of the moment as poets of the establishment do. The more strongly they attempt to claim their Arab identity, the more graphically their work bespeaks aesthetic standards for which 19th Century Europe provides the crutch. Constantly missing the point, that art’s political essence is its very language, not merely its subject matter, in their attempts to be social critics they reconstruct a verbal vocabulary and mirrors already shattered by their own generation. Understandably, Palestinian artists patronized by the Arab establishment lead the way in this vogue. Although some works by a younger generation in this school can be exceptionally forceful for the raw physical agony they are able to portray, however, the majority of works belonging to this trend will undoubtedly bid fair to become the limbo in the history of Arab art.

Interestingly enough, the third period in the development of Modern Arab art witnessed the appearance of artists who are expressive in words as they are in color, a phenomenon that may signal that the umbilical cord that traditionally has linked the Arab to the womb of the word could now be severing in the personality of the modern Arab visionary.

Having roamed outwardly too long, the Arab artist at last is embarking
Munira Al Qadi, construction, 1964 (Kuwait).
In contrast to this abstract school that vertically attempts to mold its new vision from drilling out forgotten fragments of a spectral past, a number of abstractionists subscribe to extracting their visions from the unmade future. It so happens that their horizontal looking to the future is similar to facing Mecca westwards. Like two generations of imitators before them, their products mirror every major current in the western world today. Beirut has rightly been the domestic stadium and the souk to this school. However, artists of this genre can also be found in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia. Their idiom ranges from that of America’s abstract expressionists of the fifties to op, pop and prop of today. Their iconography can exhibit at times the most erotic linear elements of flesh and the Arab Mediterranean, nevertheless they seem to be locked in a metallic language that has no roots in native soil. In their palette they can claim Camus’ “Nationalism of the Sun” but like Camus they remain strangers to the light that nourishes them.

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Having roamed outwardly too long, the Arab artist at last is embarking
Munira Al Qadi, CONSTRUCTION, 1964 (Kuwait).
on a period that is characterized by faltering attempts toward a vertical search for identity. The majority of works may still be unclassified mimetic production; however, a serious process is underway. The process which started with uncritical imitation, evolving into attempts at naturalizing the borrowed language, is now heading toward personal fulfilment. It seems to be one of a slow movement from a collective oral and traditional interpretation of the world into an unwonted individualistic visual expression.

The Arab artist may still sign his or her work in Latin letters beside an Arabic signature; a phenomenon that may be taken as a crowning symbol of duality between inherited values and imported ones that the Arab is presently undergoing. Nevertheless, it is the last gesture of gratitude to the West. As a personal testament, the double signature can indicate that a world without borrowing is a world of barbarism or one of decay; the Arab visionary of today has opted for a world of change.

Individualism, which still connotes negative traits in Mediterranean culture at large and in Arab culture in specific, may be after all the sole antidote to a tradition rooted at the foot of the tribe. To strive for a visual idiom, hence an individualist vision in a verbally oriented society by itself could qualify as a heroic act of defiance. The survival of an art movement so far and the promise of its constant development is an incentive for hope.

In the last fifty years or so, Arab society may have seen more change in the form of its superstructure than in the contents of the single man. That incoherence was evident in all the arts especially in the painting of the imitators and that of the conformists. However, modern Arab painting, because of its fundamental ingredients, has the potential to become the arena for the marriage between form and content. In it the duality of the Arab can be exultantly unified through an individualism not unlike the singleness personified in the moral code of the Fida'i. The process has just begun.

Diversity and experimentation being expedients of individuality and counter to group identity can be seen as the predominant and leading features in the present phase of Arab art.

At a time when the West is announcing the death of permanence (Toffler) the Arab is finding himself delving into his roots and yet getting further from his tradition. His past is too far and the future is indeed arriving too soon. Mimicry and mediocrity are not extraneous ingredients of our times, they are part of its price. The Arab is stepping on the threshold of modernity. We may stand too close to pass general judgments on works being done before our eyes, and yet for the moment perhaps the works illustrated here may allow each reader to judge for himself that an authentic dialogue may begin.
NOTES

1. This subject has been treated extensively. A particularly fine example for the English-language reader is Abdallah Laroui's The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual: Traditionalism or Historicism?, translated from the French by Diarmid Cammell. (University of California Press. 1976).


3. With the exception of scarce writings by Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Afif Bahnasi and Shaker Hassan al Sa'id, virtually nothing has been seriously written on modern art in the Arab world. Volumes such as Contemporary Art in Lebanon by Edouard Lahoud (Dar el Machreq, Beirut, 1974) or Moroccan Painting by Mohamed Sijelmassi (Editions Taillandier, Paris, 1972) unfortunately offer little more than coffee table ornaments.


5. In other Asiatic cultures where studio art had been unknown a parallel phenomenon evolved. The occidental works of the Japanese painter T.B.S. Awoki (1882-1911) and his school are a good example. For further comparison, the works of Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) suggest themselves.

6. Muhammad H. Haikal's Zainab (Cairo, 1913), a pioneering work of this period in another borrowed art form, the novel, emphasizes similar tendencies. Al Ard or A.R. Sharkawi's Egyptian Earth, translated by Desmond Stewart (Heinemann, London, 1962), although published much later, in 1954, echoes parallel traits while portraying an earlier period.

7. Artists from the first phase include Da'ud al Qurm (1852-1930), Habib Srur (1860-1938) and Khalil Salibi (1870-1928) from Lebanon; Mahmud Mukhtar (1890-1934), Muhammad Hasan (1892-1961) and Yusef Kamel (born 1891) from Egypt; and Abd al Qader Rassam and Muhammad Saleh Zaki from Iraq.


9. It is curious that confessional writing, such as autobiography, was hardly ever developed in Arabic literature: traces of this vein can sometimes be discerned among Arab women writers. When Taha Hussain, for example, wrote his memoirs, al Ayyam, the pronoun I was avoided; throughout the book it was represented by the third person singular.

10. In Syria such groups included al Jam' iyyat al Suriyyat li lil Funun (The Syrian Association for the Arts) and Rabitat al Fannanin al Suriyyin (Union of Syrian Artists); in Egypt, Jam'iyyat Muhhibbi al Funun al Jamila (The Association of Art Appreciators) had been established as early as 1917, while the Jama'at al Fan wal Hurriyya (Art and Freedom Group) had its first showing in Cairo in 1940. A Lebanese equivalent of the former, The Committee of Friends of National Museums and Archeological Sites, was founded in 1923. Iraq witnessed its art group formation in the early fifties; Societe Primitive was established in 1950 and the Baghdad Modern Art Group in 1952.

11. Artists from this second phase include Mustapha Farrukh (1902-1957), Qaisar al Jemayyel (1898-1958) from Lebanon; Tawfiq Tareq (1875-1940), Abd al Wahab Abu'l Sa'id (1897-1951) and Mahmud Jalal from Syria; Ramsis Yunan, Kamel al Talamasani and Fuad Mallakh from Egypt, and Asem Hafez and Akram Shukri from Iraq.

12. An untranslatable word that conveys a sense of excitement in a way not unlike the Black usage of soul.


17. It is noteworthy that Jawad Salim kept a diary during the 1940’s in which he recorded personal observations unequaled for their simplicity and a directness by any leading Arab writer of the period. The diary seemed to act as a sifter for him to separate the oral world he inherited from the concreteness of form and color he dreamt of. Segments of these memoirs were selected and edited by his friend, Jabra I. Jabra; these first appeared after his death in *Hiwar 8* (Beirut, January-February, 1964, pp. 96-113). See also Jabra’s *Jawad Salim wa Nash al Hurriyyat* (*Jawad Salim and the Monument to Liberty*), (Baghdad, 1974).

18. This phenomenon was verbally echoed in the poetry of the period by the Tammuz school of poetry. For further reading, see As’ad Razzuq’s *al Ustura fi-l Shair al Mu’aser: al Shur’ara al Tammuziyun* (*Myth in Contemporary Arabic Poetry: The Tammuz Poets*) (Beirut, 1959).

19. “Oriental people have never really forgotten that it is not necessary to use letters in order to be able to write”: Gertrude Stein in her *Picasso* (Beacon Press, Boston 1967, p. 39).


21. Perhaps Kahlil Gibran and the sculptor Yusef al Huwayek are the predecessors of this process. In our time the list is getting long. To name but a few: from Syria Abd al Qader Arna’ut, Maha Beiraqdar, from Lebanon Etel Adnan, Edouard Lahoud, Yousef Younes and Halim Jurdah, from the Sudan, Ibrahim Al Salih, from Jordan Muna Sa’udi, from Iraq Shaker Hasan al Sa’id, Di ya’al Azzawi and Muzaffar al-Nuwwab, and from Palestine Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Abed Abidi and the author of this article.

22. The Arabic word *fard*—as a noun meaning individual and as a verb *farada* meaning to set apart—is the root of *infarada*, the act of isolating oneself; *fard* and *infiradi* are both used to convey an individualistic character; literally, the word means isolationist. Similarly, in modern Greek the word used to express the concept of individualism shares its root with the word for (village) idiot.
Ismail Fattah—Iraq

Nuri al-Rawi
‘Abd Allah Salem—Jordan

Munira al-Qadi—Kuwait
Seta Manuguian—Lebanon

Kamal Boullata—Palestine
'Abd al Qader Arna'ut—Syria

Fateh Mudarress—Syria
Elias Zayyat—Syria

Shafiq ‘Abbud—Lebanon
Najib Mahfuz has written only a handful of plays; he is renowned throughout the Middle East and among a few specialists in the West for his novels and short stories. In the novel genre, after a few attempts at the historical form, Mahfuz made a great reputation for himself with a series of social realistic works published in the late 1940s and early 1950s, culminating in the massive and justly celebrated Trilogy (Al-Thulathiyya), completed before the Revolution of 1952, but not published until 1956 and 1957. In the first years of the Revolution, Mahfuz devoted his attention to the cinema and wrote several stories and scenarios for this medium. Then, in 1959, he published an allegorical work of fiction, Children of Our Quarter (Awlad Haratin), telling the history of man’s religious development with particular emphasis on the clash between religion and science. In the 1960s, he followed this work with a series of shorter novels which concentrate more on the fate of the individual in modern society and which show a developing consciousness of the symbolic uses of language through such techniques as the stream of consciousness; notable among these novels are The Thief and the Dogs (Al-Liss wa ‘l-Kilah, 1961) and Chatter on the Nile (Tharthara Fawq al-Nil, 1966). The defeat of 1967 had as great an effect on Mahfuz as it did on many other Arab intellectuals, and once again he stopped writing novels. He has however resumed in the 1970s, although his approach to the genre seems to have altered somewhat since the publication of Miramar in 1967. Indeed, one of these new works, Mirrors (Al-Maryya, 1972), can hardly be thought of as a novel at all (Mahfuz, in fact, does not regard it as such); it is more
pseudo-fictional intellectual history. In addition, his other recent novels show an increasing concern with the local and contemporary as opposed to the more universal philosophical or existential themes of previous works; all this is expressed in a form which exhibits considerable fragmentation in narrative structure and a large amount of dialogue.

While Mahfuz is probably best known as a novelist, he has also written several collections of short stories. Indeed, his first published work was a collection of short stories, Whisper of Madness (Hams al-Junūn, 1939). The publication dates of his earlier short story collections are scattered at intervals among those of his novels. For this reason it is remarkable to notice that, after the 1967 defeat, he published no fewer than five collections between 1969 and 1973, four of them in succession. Once again (as with the period immediately following the Revolution), a period of national distress and political uncertainty apparently did not afford him the atmosphere in which to compose the more elaborate form of the novel, and he chose to express his own views and doubts in the form of a set of increasingly symbolic and abstruse short stories. For our present purpose, it is interesting to note that it is in the first and last of these five collections, Under the Bus Shelter (Tahta 'l-Mazalla, 1969) and The Crime (Al-Jarīmā, 1973) that Māhfuẓ’ plays have appeared in print. In other words, like the short stories among which they are published, they too seem to reflect an unsettled period in the life of their author’s country or at least to project some of his doubts, hopes and fears about his own people and modern man in general.

These plays then seem to fall firmly within an earlier tradition of the theatre in Egypt, that of Tawfiq al-Hakim. This great pioneer in the field of modern Arabic drama wrote a series of plays in the 1930s and 1940s which attempted to give a philosophical and intellectual content to Egyptian drama. Drawing on themes such as The People of the Cave (taken from the Qurān), Shahrāzād (from the 1001 Nights) and Pygmalion (derived from the Greek legends of Pygmalion and Narcissus), he produced a group of plays which have never been particularly successful in presentation on the stage, but which were really intended as plays to be read, as littérature des idées, in fact. The same seems to hold true for the plays of Mahfuz. In The Legacy (Al-Tarīkā, 1967), for example, there is a single location and a small number of actors, as in the present play. One might, of course, make the same observation about several plays of Pinter, Beckett and Albee, and yet they are acted on stage with great success. The difference seems to be one of tradition. The Egyptian audience likes action on stage and a large number of characters: even such a thought-provoking play as Yusuf Idrīs’ Farfurs (Farāfir, 1964) has few characters but a good deal of action. It may be said, perhaps, that The Chase may well be the
most actable of all Mahfūz' plays thus far. However, this writer believes that it is essentially a play to be read and thought about by readers both inside and outside Egypt.

_The Chase_ is the first selection in the short story collection, _The Crime_. Like all of Māhūfūz' recent works, it was first published in the newspaper _Al-Ahrām_ some time before its appearance in book form. It was thus composed during that tense and uncertain period after the 1967 defeat and the death of 'Abd al-Nāṣir and before the 1973 War and the crossing of the Suez Canal. The uncertainties of this period of semi-war at the Canal are well portrayed in Mahfūz' novel _Love in the Rain_ (Al-Hubb Tahta 'l-Matar, 1973). However, while _The Chase_ itself has a few "local" touches (the "battle" to commute and the respected position which civil service bureaucrats anticipate for themselves, for example), they are only Egyptian in the size of the phenomenon, whereas the problems themselves are almost universal. Thus, rather than indulge in an exercise of associating characters in the plays with figures and institutions in Egypt, we prefer to take a more detached view of the play and regard it more as a discussion along existential lines of the plight of modern man in general.

In the play, we are presented with six scenes in chronological order. Two characters, called Red and White because of the color of their clothing, begin as young men, gain employment as civil servants, marry a bride, pass through middle and old age, go through a superficial rejuvenation and a second marriage. However, at a certain point in each scene, they hear footsteps, and a man dressed entirely in black appears. As the play progresses through the different phases of the lives and careers of Red and White, Black's moving about the stage accelerates; or could it be that he maintains his speed, while they are slowing down? Does he personify Time, or even Death, with every breath of life being portrayed, as with the poet Al-Ma'arī, as a step closer to death?

Red and White themselves form an interesting contrast. It is well to note that they both marry the Bride (Scene 3) and are thinking of marrying another girl (Scene 6). Are we supposed, as White suggests in Scene 3, to think of them "as a single person"? Are they complete opposites who cannot get along without each other? After all, Red is self-centered, confident and aggressive; he is proud of his achievements, he scoffs at the suggestion that their wife should be cultured and intelligent as well as flirtatious, and ridicules the musical talents of White's son. Furthermore, he is sure that Black actually is chasing them. White, on the other hand, is more of a doubter and questioner, and is often cursed by Red for being so. He is the one who always hears Black instructing them to stop playing,
even though he has "the weakest hearing of us all!" (Scene 4) He wonders whether Black really is bothering them deliberately and is even prepared to believe that they may have brought their troubles on themselves. Their "tax-shelter" through their children, for example (Scene 5), is nicely described by him as "the finest legal way there is of breaking the law." It is White who always gives way when there is a confrontation (as in choosing the qualities of their bride in Scene 3); it is White who tries to talk to Black and reason with him (Scenes 4 and 6), while Red simply shouts angrily at him. At the end of every scene, every phase in the life of Red and White, Black cracks his whip, and the two men leave the stage. In the first scenes, they walk off, but gradually they slow down. In the final scene, they crawl off. The young bride, whose contemporary mores have taken them by surprise, continues to dance while they disappear. Once they have gone, Black slows down and starts marking time as he did in the very first scene.

What does Black represent in the existence of these two personified opposites in their different colors? We learn that he knew their father, and indeed knew the father of both brides too; he is as much a concern of the security forces as anyone else, and even they have failed to get rid of him. It is White who in several statements seems to point towards his identity. He suggests that they (Red and White) were to blame for the troubles which Red attributes to Black; they were "too busy with other battles." (Scene 5) He wonders indeed whether "it's thanks to him (Black) that we have achieved what we have." (ibid.) Finally, he confesses to Black that "we are the ones who do the work, we change, and we grow old. We have no right to pin our mistakes and troubles on you." (Scene 6) Can Black then be considered as some kind of inverse image of the self as personified by the different traits of Red and White? He does, after all, stop moving when the two figures finally crawl away on their knees.

These questions of interpretation can be posed but not answered. This play, like so many others in contemporary literature, invites and even challenges the readers to consider their own responses to the issues which it raises without offering any clear-cut solutions.

4 A translation and discussion of this play can be found in: Akef Abadir and Roger Allen, "Najib Mahfūz and His World of Literature," Arab World XVI (Nov.-Dec. 1970), 9.
THE CHASE

NAJIB MAHFUZ

SCENE ONE

(The stage is completely empty. Enter two young men in the prime of their youth. One of them is wearing a white shirt, short grey trousers and rubber shoes; the other a red shirt, blue trousers and rubber shoes. We will call the first one WHITE because of his shirt, and the second one RED for the same reason. They both start looking around them with curiosity and interest.)

WHITE: It looks like a suitable spot; it's got everything we need.
RED: It's a spot at any rate, and that's what we want.
WHITE (as though remembering something): I get the feeling we've played here before.
RED (scoffing): That's what you always say.
WHITE: Perhaps it's just very like it.
RED: The important thing's that it's just right for playing games.
WHITE: That's the really important thing.
RED: It's a long way away too: he won't find this place.
WHITE: I hope not.
RED: Maybe he'll find something else to do and stop bothering us.
WHITE: Maybe.
RED: Bothering us seems to be his only concern.
WHITE: What if we manage to ignore him?
RED: How can we do that? He won't leave us alone.
WHITE: Let's play.
RED: Yes, let's.
WHITE: The dream game.
RED: That's tedious; boxing's better.
WHITE: Boxing's a violent sport. Let's go for a run in the fresh air.
RED (jeering): You're a coward.
WHITE (smiling): And you're an animal.
(They face off in front of each other, then move back, listening anxiously.)
WHITE: What is it?
(RED signals to him to be quiet and listens.)
WHITE: Did you hear something?
RED: Footsteps!
WHITE: Really?!
RED: Shut up and listen.
WHITE (listening as the footsteps become clearer): It really is footsteps!
RED: Is it him?
WHITE: Could be anyone with two feet.
RED: Don't pretend you're not worried.
WHITE: I'm no good at pretending, and I don't like it anyway.
RED: Doesn't he really scare you?
WHITE: Yes . . . to a certain extent . . .
(The footsteps come closer. A stocky man enters. He is obviously very strong, and is wearing a black shirt and black trousers. In his hand he carries a whip. Although he is so strong and looks so young, there is not a single black hair on his head, which is completely white. The two young men move off to one side, watching him closely. The other man stands upright and looks straight ahead, with a blank, distant stare. All the while, he keeps marking time with his feet.)
RED: Did you see?!
WHITE: Yes.
RED: Shall we go somewhere else?
WHITE: Let's play, if you really want to.
RED: With him watching?
WHITE: Why not?!
RED (looking at the Man): He doesn't stop moving even though he's staying on the same spot.
WHITE: The important thing is that he's not interfering in our affairs.
RED: But he's following us wherever we go.
WHITE: That's not interfering. (Silence)
WHITE: Let's play leap-frog.
RED (shrugging his shoulders scornfully): He can bend over then!
WHITE: No, you do it first.
RED: No, you!
WHITE: Don't be selfish.
RED: Objections, objections, that's all you ever think about!
WHITE: You behave as if no one else can exist with you around!
RED: Let's wrist-wrestle. Whoever loses bends over first.
(RED lies on his stomach and rests his arm on his elbow; he looks challengingly at White. The latter has to do likewise. They wrestle, and RED forces White's arm down till it touches the ground.)
RED (yelling gleefully): I win. I haven't found anyone yet who can beat me . . .
(He sneaks a look at the strong Man who is still in motion, and his enthusiasm wanes somewhat.)
not yet . . .
White gets up resignedly and bends over with his hands on his knees. Red moves back a way, runs towards him and leaps over his back with his hands. Then he in turn bends over, and White leaps over him. So the game continues until White trips as he is leaping over Red and collides with him. They both fall down and separate laughing. White stops laughing but Red carries on. Listening closely, White tells his companion to stop and then takes him back away from the Man.

WHITE: I thought he asked us to stop playing.
RED: I didn’t hear a thing.
WHITE: I did; I heard him.
RED: My hearing’s better than yours.
WHITE: You were laughing.
RED (angrily): I think we should put him in his proper place...
WHITE: The best thing we can do is to ignore him.
RED: By what right is he interfering with our freedom? (Silence)
RED: The more we remain silent, the more he tempts us.
WHITE: Remember, he was a friend of our father!
RED: We can’t judge; we were young then.
WHITE: He kept on visiting him right up to the very last day of his life.
RED: Maybe he was interfering in his affairs too, just as he’s trying to do with us!
WHITE: He doesn’t look malicious.
RED: He may even be quite kind! It’s not out of the question.
WHITE: Could it be that he’s following us around wherever we go to provide some sort of protection for us because of his former connection with our father!?
RED: You’re stupid! In fact, he may well have been one of the things which ruined our father’s happiness in his final days.
WHITE: But our father had nothing bad to say about him.
RED: We were little then. We couldn’t understand a word which was being said.
WHITE: Our father had no enemies...
RED: How can we know what really happened in those days?
(Silence)
RED: Why’s he chasing us?
WHITE: If that’s what he really is doing, then why’s he doing it?
RED: Just look at the way he keeps moving! He’s mad!
WHITE: Don’t judge things too hastily.
RED: Would any intelligent person be prepared just to stand there and move his legs the way he is?
WHITE: Some people can’t keep still.
RED: I wonder what he does for a living?
WHITE: He’s strong and easygoing. Maybe he’s a notable of some
RED: Let’s discuss things with him right out in the open.
WHITE: No, no! The way he looks doesn’t encourage discussion!
RED: Let me ask him some questions.
WHITE: What, for example?
RED: Why he’s chasing us!
WHITE: He won’t admit it; there’s no proof.
RED: Didn’t you hear him when he asked us to stop playing?
WHITE: Even that’s not certain. (Silence)
WHITE: The best thing we can do is ignore him.
RED: I can’t.
WHITE: If it weren’t for your blasted nerves . . .
RED (interrupting): You’re always blaming me for your own weaknesses.
WHITE: Your arrogance knows no limits.
RED: Sometimes I feel like breaking your neck.
WHITE: One day, I’ll get fed up with you and leave.

(They face each other angrily. The Man beats the air with his whip. It makes a loud crack. They begin to feel afraid and forget their sudden argument. They both leave. The Man stands where he is, marking time with his feet. The stage darkens.)

SCENE TWO

(The lights come on. The scene is the same, namely an empty stage. Red and White are facing each other. They have changed noticeably. Both are wearing jackets to match their shirts and leather shoes, and both have small moustaches. They look delightedly at each other.)

RED: He can’t recognize us now! No chance!
WHITE: We’ve changed quite a bit.
RED: It’s enough to put him off our track.
WHITE: Let’s hope so.
RED: You don’t sound too sure about it.
WHITE: Sometimes I feel that change is just superficial!
RED: You just love scoffing at my skill, don’t you?!
WHITE: Certainly not! I’m quite prepared to acknowledge your talents.
RED: Then what are you so skeptical about?
WHITE: I’m afraid our new appearance won’t fool him.
RED: He won’t realize who we really are behind these moustaches.

*The Arabic word ā'yān ("notables") has been a technical term used to describe prominent provincial families who owned large amounts of land and from among whom local administrators would be chosen.
and with these jackets and shoes on.

WHITE: Fine! Let's hope so.
RED: We're civil servants now, part of the regime!
WHITE: That's right, and . . .

(He stops speaking suddenly and listens: the other listens too.)

WHITE: Footsteps!
RED: I don't think so.
WHITE: He's coming.
RED: Maybe it's a stranger, a passer-by.
WHITE: I recognize his footsteps.
RED: Don't claim you know everything there is to know!

(Footsteps become audible. The Man enters, looking exactly the same as he did the first time. But this time, he does not stop but moves very slowly backward and forward across the stage and to the back. The two men look at him aghast. They move to one side out of his hearing.)

WHITE: Did you see!
RED: Take it easy! He probably hasn't recognized us.
WHITE: Do you really believe that?
RED: Maybe we were travelling along the same road and met by chance, nothing more than that.
WHITE: That sounds feasible.
RED: Well then, let's ignore him and carry on quietly with our own work.

(They move back to the centre of the stage and pretend to be busy.)

RED (in a lofty tone): Have you done the expense forms?
WHITE: There's only one left.
RED: Please hurry up! Make sure you finish checking them today.
WHITE: The treasury doesn't close till midday in any case.
RED: You shouldn't put off today's work till tomorrow.
WHITE: Don't you think I should check the expense budget?
RED: You should realize that it permits expenditures to be made till the end of the financial year.
WHITE: Then I should write the memo. (Silence)
RED: Are you getting a raise this year?
WHITE: No. Are you?
RED: Yes, I'm entitled to one.
WHITE: Congratulations!
RED: It'll all be used up in keeping up with the cost of living.

(Suddenly White listens, turning his ear in the direction of the Man who is still moving. Then he takes Red by the hand and moves to a place out of earshot.)

WHITE: Did you hear?
RED: No . . .
WHITE: He asked us to stop playing again.
RED: Are you sure?!
WHITE: Yes, undoubtedly.
RED: Damn!
WHITE: It’s not easy to deceive him.
RED: What does he want with us?
WHITE: God knows!
RED: It’s obvious we aren’t playing.
WHITE: Quite obvious.
RED: Does he think he’s in charge of us?

(RED gets angry. He takes WHITE by the hand and leads him back to the centre of the stage. He looks defiantly at the moving Man.)

RED: Will you talk to us, Sir?

(The Man keeps on moving without saying a word.)

RED: You must say something.

(The Man keeps on moving without saying a word.)

RED: We’re respectable civil servants. We expect to be treated with all the deference due to state employees.

(The Man keeps on moving without saying a word.)

WHITE: Do you need the department for anything?
RED: He’s got to reply first.
WHITE: Have you an application...a complaint, perhaps...money in arrears?

(The Man keeps on moving without saying a word.)
RED: How did you get into the office? Have you an identity card?
WHITE: We’re at the people’s service.
RED (getting angry): Stop your damned moving about and stand still! You’re making our heads spin!
WHITE: And remember, the treasury closes at twelve exactly.
RED: If the director saw you on his way to the toilet, you’d be in trouble.
WHITE: I still say we’re at the people’s service.
RED: Too bad for you if the ministry security men see you!
WHITE: What brought you here, Sir?
RED: You’re aware, of course, of the penalty for assaulting a civil servant while he is carrying out his duties?
WHITE: Are you fed up with some of the petty formalities?
RED: You know better than anyone else what’s making you fed up, and you’ve every right to complain. But every procedure has its own regulations to be followed, and they must be respected.
WHITE: Even if the matter requires special attention or influential mediation, you will find that we can still fulfill your legitimate requirements.
RED: But first you must stop moving around and communicate with us, as all decent people should.

(The Man keeps moving and then suddenly beats the air with his whip which makes a big crack. The two men move back fearfully.)

RED (panicking): Time to go then!
WHITE: On to the commuting battle!

(They leave the stage quickly without being able to conceal their fear. The man keeps on moving. The stage darkens.)

SCENE THREE

(The lights come on. Red and White are facing each other and look exactly the same as before, except that their moustaches have widened and grown. And so they look even more manly without losing their youthful appearance.)

RED: Wasn't it a great idea?
WHITE: And so natural too. It'll give us some stability.
RED: Marriage is a real boon. Our position will be enhanced by such a relationship. He can't possibly recognize us in our new guise.
WHITE: In any case, it's better than being bachelors!
RED (nervously): You don't sound very keen.
WHITE: On the contrary, I welcome the idea.
RED: I can see no trace of enthusiasm in your expression.
WHITE: Marriage is a fine idea, but will it change us enough to fool him?

RED: I think so.
WHITE: Let's try it then; and may God be with us!
RED: I think one wife will be enough.
WHITE: That's an original idea!
RED: Economical too. But I'm afraid there'll be an argument. That'll ruin everything.
WHITE (smiling): We've often faced life as a single person.
RED: And we've often argued and disagreed.
WHITE: But nothing can put an end to the bond which unites us.

(Silence)

RED: I've chosen a marvellous wife . . . but are our tastes the same?
WHITE: We're undoubtedly very similar. And I'm very tolerant, don't forget that! (Silence)
RED: I like brown.
WHITE: There's nothing like white.
RED: We disagree.
WHITE (quickly): Never mind, all colors are one and the same anyway.
RED: I like a full build.
WHITE: We’re living in an age when slim girls are the fashion.
RED: I could never conceive of such a thing.
WHITE: Okay then! Provided she doesn’t gain any more weight when she starts living with us.
RED: There’s nothing wrong with her gaining some weight. She can fill out in those places where God wills her to do so.
WHITE (with a sigh): God’s will be done then!
RED: I thought it wise for her to be reasonably rich.
WHITE: What a commercial outlook you have!
RED: You don’t appreciate the role money plays in civilization!
WHITE: Just as you like. Don’t get angry.
RED: I don’t want her to be completely educated; primary education should be enough. Learning is an unacceptable ornament in a woman; it always tempts her into doing things which change her eventually into a man.
WHITE: Your views on that were current in the stone age!
RED: Reviling the past doesn’t scare me.
WHITE: As long as we want to be three and no more, and it’s in our best interests and will safeguard our endangered security, then I can only agree.
RED: I requested that she be a flirt, within the bounds of the law, of course.
WHITE: A flirt can only be one thing, a flirt, whether it’s within the bounds of the law or without.
RED: No, just within them. You’ll see...
WHITE: Let’s try at any rate. (Silence)
RED: Have you any other specifications?
WHITE: Purely marginal, but not entirely pointless. For example, she should be a good conversationalist.
RED: That’s not important. I know a husband who’s happy because his wife is dumb.
WHITE: Wouldn’t it be marvellous if she were a good singer?
RED: That’s not important either. There’s enough of that on radio and television. (Silence)
RED: Anything else?
WHITE: No.
RED: I think we’re in complete agreement.
WHITE: Absolutely.
(Red looks towards the right side of the stage and starts whooping for joy.)*

*The Arabic word actually describes the sound made by vibrating the tongue rapidly, producing the high-pitched sound characteristic of Egyptian engagement and wedding celebrations.
The music of a bridal procession is heard, and the Bride enters between a Shaykh and a Policeman. They stop in front of the two young men, then the Shaykh and the Policeman turn and leave. The Bride and the two young men look at each other.

RED: Welcome, Bride!
BRIDE (shyly): Thank you!
WHITE: May your arrival bring blessings and happiness!
BRIDE: Amen! *(They both kiss her, one on each cheek.)*
BRIDE (bewildered): I expected just one kiss!
WHITE: That'll be repeated often!
RED: On every choice occasion!
*(The Bride looks dumbfounded, and the two men laugh.)*

BRIDE (still more bewildered): You'll have to excuse me. This is the first time I'm getting married.
RED AND WHITE TOGETHER: It's the same for us!
BRIDE: Us?!
WHITE: Yes.
RED: We don't believe in polygamy.
BRIDE: But . . .
RED: You're the wife, and we're the husband.
BRIDE: Both of you?
RED: Yes.
BRIDE: But there are two of you!
WHITE: Think of us as a single person.
BRIDE: I don't understand a thing.
RED: Some things can only be understood after actually trying married life.
BRIDE: My mother didn't tell me anything about this!
RED: Out of the goodness of her heart, no doubt.
BRIDE: How can I live with both of you at once?
RED: You'll find all that out in good time.
BRIDE: Isn't it unnatural?
RED: On the contrary, nature's been doing it since time immemorial.
BRIDE: They told me it wasn't easy to find happiness with one husband. How will I be able to manage with two?
WHITE: Having just one husband is precisely the reason why it's not easy!
RED: You'll find all that out in good time. Come on . . .
*(They deluge her with kisses and embrace her. She looks disconcerted.)*
BRIDE: There'll be problems.
RED: Problems?
BRIDE (shyly): Who'll be the father of the child?
WHITE: He'll carry the name of whoever registers him in the municipal office.

BRIDE: But that's very casual.
WHITE: All names are.
BRIDE: That's the most incredible thing I've ever heard.
RED: That's the way everything will seem to you.
BRIDE: I've never heard of anything like it before.
RED: That's why I'm in favor of sex education in schools!

(Silence. Footsteps become audible. The atmosphere changes abruptly, and they all listen.)

RED: I don't believe it!
WHITE (sighing): I wasn't exaggerating.
BRIDE: Who's coming?
RED (to White): But... but he can't possibly recognize us!
WHITE: May God prove you right!
BRIDE: Are you expecting someone?
RED: No!
BRIDE: Then, who's coming?

(Silence while they listen hard. The Man enters in his usual guise. He moves to and fro around the stage slightly faster than in the previous scene. Red and White and the Bride move back out of his earshot.)

RED: My heart tells me he hasn't recognized us.
WHITE: We've often kidded ourselves about that.
BRIDE (obviously angry): Why's he come here?
RED (to the Bride): Have you seen him before?!
BRIDE: More than once.
RED: You too?!
BRIDE: You two as well? You've seen him, have you?
WHITE: Perhaps he lives in the neighborhood!
RED: I'm almost sure he's mad.
BRIDE: He used to visit my father a lot.
RED: Your father too!
BRIDE: I thought he'd stop coming when I married a husband. But he's still at it even though I'm married to two!
RED: There's nothing to feel despondent about. He may not have recognized us.
WHITE: Could be.
BRIDE: Lord! I'm so scared! What should we do? (Silence)
RED: Let's ignore him... let's sing to celebrate our married life together...

(RED brings them back over to their places in the centre of the stage where they sing "Good news for us, we have what we wanted: troubles are over and now happiness is ours." White listens with obvious concern.)

WHITE (to RED): He's speaking again.
RED (irritated): What did he say?
WHITE: The usual.
RED (addressing the Man): What do you want?
WHITE (to the Man): Sir, why are you wasting your time for nothing?
RED (yet more angrily, to the Man): Is your own strength deluding you? Are you relying on some influential figure to support you? Well then, you should know that now we ourselves are related by marriage to such a person: he's the father of this noble woman who's now our wife. We've become a threesome with the solid backing of a circle of noble families.
WHITE (to the Man): My brother's an irascible man, but, when all is said and done, we're both descended from that good man who was a friend of yours . . .
RED (giving way to his temper): I won't tolerate this stupid interference any longer.
BRIDE: Nor will I.
WHITE (to the Man): What do you want, Sir? Something we're doing doesn't seem to please you . . . What are you trying to get us to do?
RED (to the Man): Speak! You must say something!
BRIDE (also to the Man): Show some respect for the sanctity of married life.
WHITE (to the Man): We'll invite you to our wedding party. What do you think? (Silence)
RED (speaking to White and the Bride): It's no use.
BRIDE: More's the pity.
WHITE (sighing audibly): He's become part of the family at any rate!
(The Man keeps moving to and fro. He beats the air with his whip and a big crack is heard. They look panic-stricken and move back out of reach.)
BRIDE: I can't stand that.
RED: Nor I.
WHITE: Let's start the honeymoon trip.
RED: Immediately.
BRIDE: Come on then, let's go.
RED: I hope he drops dead from exhaustion!
BRIDE: Amen!
(They all link arms and leave, sneaking looks in the Man's direction as they do. He keeps on moving as the lights go down.)

SCENE FOUR

(The lights come on. White and Red are in the same clothes, and the Bride is with them. They obviously are older now: grey hairs have started to appear, and their youthful vigor has dwindled. They have now turned into two middle-aged men and a married woman.)

WIFE: However bad your troubles may be, we mustn't forget the children!
(The men look at each other seriously; it looks as if they have not heard what the Wife has said.)

RED: If the Director General's position goes this time, we might as well give up.
WHITE: The meetings of the board are still going on!
RED: Just as they always do, every time! Then some unknown person whom no one even thought of is promoted.
WHITE: Do you think our health can stand any new burdens, my friend?
RED: Nothing ever bothers you, does it?! Have you considered the improvement in living standards? Anyone with responsibilities should think of such things.
WIFE: In the end, the standard of living is more important than the salary itself!
RED: Say that again so that he can hear it!
WHITE: I would like the raise too, but I hate exerting myself for nothing.
RED: You get tired of anything quickly.
WHITE: The people who need to worry about their standard of living are those who have no other property. But you've got twice as much through your free enterprise as you have from your official work.
RED: Yes. If it weren't for that, we wouldn't have been able to afford this life of luxury.
WHITE: We've spent our entire lives working for the state and for ourselves. Keep on longing for some other kind of life, and for a little peace and quiet.
RED: You'd soon have had your fill of peace and quiet and be crying for the good old days.
WHITE: I don't think so.
WIFE: Stop arguing. Let's ask God to give us strength and good health, but spare a little thought for the children.
RED (to White): You scoff at ambition.
WHITE: I do not. I've far-reaching aspirations too.
RED: I don't acknowledge them.
WHITE: We need some time to think after such frenzied madness.
RED: How can we? Three meetings in one day, then a fourth in the evening with a broker from the free market, and afterwards we've got to give a dinner party for the agents.
WIFE: It'll be a party your enemies will acknowledge before your friends!
WHITE (to Red): But don't you think the office of Director General will use up our limited time?
RED: No! From another angle, it will overcome a number of our
difficulties.

WHITE: Don't forget your chronic illnesses.
RED: I've got them completely under control.
WIFE: God grant that things stay that way!
RED (to the Wife): I won't forget how good you were; you're a skillful nurse!
WHITE: She's got some chronic illnesses herself.
RED: That's why we should double our efforts.
WIFE: What about the children?
RED (angrily): Children, children!! That's all you can talk about!

It doesn't help cheer us up!
WIFE: But it's something which really demands our careful attention.
RED: Damn it!! They're more complicated than the Director General's post itself!
WIFE (to White): Say something!
WHITE: In that particular sphere, I do more acting than speaking.
WIFE (sighing): So many people are jealous of us, and yet we're really miserable.
RED (angrily): Stop moaning!
WIFE (also angrily): You're a selfish man.

(Suddenly they fall silent. As they listen intently, they are obviously in a panic.)
RED: No... nothing.
WIFE: What is it?
RED: I thought.
WIFE: O compassionate and merciful God!
WHITE: It isn't the first time.
RED: What do you mean?
WHITE: We've heard footsteps many times, but the Man's never appeared. He hasn't appeared for quite a while.
RED: We've almost completely forgotten him.
WIFE: Not completely.
WHITE: But we've often heard his footsteps.
RED: Pure supposition.
WIFE: Perhaps he died.
WHITE: Died?!!
WIFE: If not, he wouldn't have disappeared all this time.
WHITE: But he hasn't completely disappeared.
RED: I swear, I've almost forgotten him.
(Footsteps can be clearly heard. They listen.)
RED: If only we hadn't mentioned him.
WIFE (obviously alarmed): If only we hadn't.
WHITE: But there's nothing we can do about that.
RED: We have no lack of anxieties.
WIFE: All anxieties are nothing compared with him.
WHITE: We create enough of our own.
RED (speaking angrily to White): Sometimes I think you're acting as his ally against us!
WHITE: If only you became wiser as you grew older.
RED: The miracle is that we get more stupid!
WHITE: I acknowledge that we have no lack of that miracle!
RED: We're still young.
WHITE: I thought our young days were over.
RED (pointing to his heart): That's where youth is, nowhere else.
WIFE: We're still young.
WHITE: Then you shouldn't be bothered by the Man's chasing us.
RED: But I don't like him.
WIFE: I hate him! It seems to me that one day he's going to kill us.
WHITE: We're killing ourselves too.
RED: We've done some splendid things.
WIFE: Imperishable things.
WHITE: We shouldn't be any more afraid of death than necessary.
RED: Rubbish! You're the first one to be afraid of death.
WIFE: How can we not fear death?!
WHITE: Quite possibly it's the last adventure in life.
RED: Don't cling to fantasies.

(The sound of footsteps gets louder. The Man enters. His appearance has not changed, and he walks to and fro faster than in the previous scene. They look at him in bewilderment and then move back out of earshot.)

RED: My heart tells me that he hasn't recognized us.
WHITE: Don't cling to fantasies!
WIFE: He's moving faster.
RED: That means he's crazier.
WHITE: I wonder what that means?
RED: Don't give things any more meaning than they have.
WIFE (nervously): Why's he hurrying like that?
RED: We must scare him.
WIFE: How?
RED (winking): Let's play out our role to perfection.

(He takes them both back to the original position with a display of self-confidence and importance.)

RED (to White): Have you added the money to our current account?
WHITE: Yes.
RED: Fine. We mustn't allow a single penny to remain uninvested.
WIFE: That's good sense.
RED: I'll be meeting some important officials tomorrow.
WIFE: Perhaps they've been invited to the banquet in the evening.
RED: No. The banquet's restricted to ministers!
WIFE: Don't forget the ambassadors too, my dear!
RED: Indeed, that shouldn't be forgotten.
WIFE: Everything will turn out for the best before you travel abroad.
RED (laughing loudly): Of course, of course!
(White listens intently and looks alarmed. He turns towards Red.)
WHITE: He said something again, as usual.
RED: You're the only one who ever hears anything; and that's in spite of the fact that you have the weakest hearing of us all!
WHITE: You've got to believe me!
RED (to the Man angrily): What do you want?
WIFE (to the Man): Why have you come to our house?
RED (to the Man): Please show some courtesy and decorum.
WHITE (to the Man): No one can say any longer that we're wasting our time on games!
RED (to the Man): What is there about our behavior which concerns you?
WIFE (to the Man): Aren't you worried about your nerves, running that fast?
RED (to the Man): There is such a thing as the law, you know, and traditions.
WIFE (to the Man): Look after your health for your children's sake. Haven't you any children?
WHITE (to the Man): I wish you'd tell us frankly what it is you want.
RED (to the Man): You'll be sorry if you jeer at us.
WHITE (to the Man): Be frank with us! That'll be best for both sides.
RED (to White): Don't be soft with him. It only makes him all the more stubborn.
WIFE (mediating between the two, to Red): Let him try.
(White and the Wife move back, leaving White to try his luck.)
WHITE: We can't forget your long-standing friendship with our father.
(The Man carries on moving as though he has not heard anything.)
WHITE: You can't be aware how much you're unnerving us, even with the best of intentions.
(The Man carries on moving as though he has not heard anything.)
WHITE: Have you been given a task to perform? What is it, and who gave it to you? Be frank, and I'll promise I'll help you . . .
(The Man carries on moving as though he has not heard anything.)
WHITE: Don't think badly of us. We've undoubtedly made mistakes, but the things we've done have their value; and we've done more good
than bad.

(The Man carries on moving as though he has not heard anything.)

WHITE: Tell us frankly what's on your mind. Otherwise leave us alone; that's only fair.

(He is silent as the Man carries on moving.)

WIFE (to herself): Talking nicely has no effect on him. (To the Man in a loud, agitated voice): This is our land: we have children, money and jobs here. It isn't fair of you to disturb us like this.

RED (threateningly): It's no use. There's nothing for it but to resort to the authorities.

(The Man carries on moving, while Red and Wife join up with White.)

RED (in the same threatening tone of voice): There are many evil forces blocking life's forward progress and scoffing at law and traditions. But what will happen to them in the end, even though it be in the distant future? They'll be overpowered and then crushed and punished as they deserve. Such is the canon of life. But for that, life itself would deserve to disappear into oblivion.

(The Man carries on. While he does so, he beats the air with his whip which makes a fearful crack. The three of them cower. They think it best to leave, and so they stumble off. The Man keeps on moving as the lights go out.)

SCENE FIVE

(The lights come on. Red, White and the Wife are now much older and look really aged. Red is wearing a red cloak and skull cap, and White the same in white. Their movements show how old and decrepit they are.)

RED: Ah!
WHITE: Ah!
WIFE: Ah! (Silence)
WIFE: At all events, God be praised!
WHITE: Praise and thanks to Him!
RED: God preserve us. (Silence)
WHITE (listening): Do you hear footsteps?
RED: You're getting deaf!
WIFE: I can hear them without using my ears. (Silence)
WIFE: Do you remember when we were children?
RED: But we didn't get to know you till after we were children!
WHITE (affectionately): When we were children!
WIFE (sighing): When we were children! (Silence)
WIFE: As though it were yesterday.
WHITE: As though it were yesterday.
RED: As though . . . as though . . . damn you! (Silence)
WIFE: Sweet days.
WHITE: And sweet dreams.
RED: We used to piss all over ourselves then, and now we're doing it again! (Silence)
WHITE (listening carefully): Do you ... ?
RED (interrupting): ... hear footsteps?
WIFE: They keep pounding incessantly.
WHITE: I think we've got used to them.
RED: I think you're irksome just like him.
WIFE: There's no reason to quarrel now. (Silence)
RED: We missed some marvellous opportunities, but we did some worthwhile things too.
WIFE: We thank God for what we have achieved and ask him for cooperation for the things we missed.
WHITE: Thank God! (Silence)
RED: I wonder, did we make any mistakes in the way we used our money?
WIFE: Buildings are far more stable than the fluctuating market.
WHITE: All praise to Him who lives forever!
RED: From the tax point of view, it was a wonderful idea to make a formal sale to the children!
WHITE: It's the finest legal way there is of breaking the law.
RED (angrily): You're just obstinate and stupid.
WHITE: You never did like hearing the truth, did you?
WIFE: Don't add to our worries.
RED (sarcastically): The only son who carries your name is a dead loss. His brothers are men of action of whom the country can be proud.
But what does he do? He's a singer ... a singer ... I ask you ... ha!
WHITE: He's no less important than his brothers. At any rate, unlike them, he's not trying to emigrate to the United States!
RED (laughing): What does he do, for heaven's sake?
WHITE: He sings, and people say, Ah!
WIFE (sighingly): Ah!!
RED: Ah! (Silence)
WIFE (scolding): Stop arguing; you're not young any more!
RED (boasting): If it weren't for me, we wouldn't have a married life any more.
WHITE (angrily): The truth is that, if it hadn't been for me, the marriage would have broken up after the honeymoon!
RED (sarcastically): What did you do on the honeymoon which was so marvellous?!
WIFE (covering her face): What a scandal!! Lower your voices! (Silence)
RED (remembering the aches and pains of old age): Ah!
WIFE: Ah!
WHITE: Ah! (Silence)
RED: It's time I went to the club.
WIFE: It would be better for you not to go in winter.
RED: I don't want to give any of my enemies the chance to gloat.
WHITE: Don't exaggerate about your enemies.
RED: People are naturally inimical to anyone who's successful.
(Footsteps now become so audible that everyone can hear them. They listen in silence, looking alarmed. The Man enters in his usual guise and starts moving to and fro even faster than in the previous scene. They follow his movements in bewilderment.)
WIFE: He's almost running now.
RED: His madness is almost out of control.
WHITE: Unlike us, he doesn't look old!
WIFE: Is there any point in asking what makes him follow us?!
WHITE: Our means of defense have no effect on him.
RED: Whatever the case may be, we mustn't let him know how weak we are.
WHITE: Do you think there's any point in that?
RED: Without the slightest doubt. He would certainly have finished us off long ago if he hadn't been aware of the things we'd done, our successes and the connections we have with influential people! (Silence)
WIFE: Is there any point in discussing things with him?
RED: Definitely not.
WHITE: It's clear he's following us wherever we go, but he never interferes with us.
RED (angrily): Throughout our entire lives, hasn't he made us wait for him, think about him, get exasperated by him, and live in dread of him?
WHITE: We're the ones who've done that, not him.
RED: What a supercilious person you are!!
WIFE: He always has been a big worry and still is.
RED: How is it that we've never attacked him even once in our lives?!
WHITE: Don't start thinking of doing that now!
WHITE: We're not fit for fighting any more.
RED: But we were once!
WHITE: We were too busy with other battles.
RED: There's always a trace of reprimand in your voice.
WHITE: I'm always being blamed for telling the truth.
RED: You're a millstone which I've often had to carry around my neck.
WHITE: God knows, you're a millstone, not I. I've tolerated you with a superhuman patience.
RED: What an arrogant nihilist you are!
WHITE: And what an ignoramus you are!
RED: If it weren't for you, this madman wouldn't have dared to chase us around and jeer at us.
WHITE: You're the one he's jeering at!
(The Wife separates them to cool down the atmosphere. Silence prevails. They look at the Man who is moving around at an alarming rate.)
RED: I've got an idea.
WHITE: Everything we've done in the past has been your idea, but nothing's ever worked.
RED: Are you belittling what we've done?
WHITE: Certainly not. What we've done is tremendous. Even though sometimes it was illegal, it was still tremendous. But it hasn't rid us of his perpetual chasing us around.
RED: Why don't we resort to the security authorities?
WHITE: Because we've always been afraid of them and still are!
(They exchange threatening looks, but again the Wife comes between them.)
WIFE: Many people have resorted to the security authorities, but what's been the outcome? Nothing. He's not committing a crime punishable under the law. He may be relying on his connections with people in the most powerful positions of authority. In fact, I've heard that many security people themselves are having the same problems with him as we are...
RED: Maybe he wants something we own.
WHITE: But he was chasing us when we didn't own anything.
(RED stamps the ground angrily. Silence.)
WHITE (as though speaking to himself): Is he really chasing us? If so, why? Is he doing it for himself or somebody else? (Silence)
WHITE (continuing his thoughts): We've wasted a lot of time without paying any real attention to that question.
RED (jeering): We're on pension now and haven't any serious job.
RED: But we're really old and sick. We haven't got the strength to start investigating! (Silence)
WIFE (angrily): I wonder, what is it which makes him preserve his strength even though time keeps passing?
RED (sarcastically): Maybe it's because he didn't get married!
WIFE (angrily): What a selfish nihilist you are!
RED (to White): There's no need to pose questions or bother about answers when it's all quite clear. He's chasing us. There's no doubt of that, and he's doing it to finish us off. Once that's clear, it doesn't matter whether he's doing it for himself or someone else.
WHITE: But sometimes I think it's thanks to him that we've achieved what we have.
RED: Not thanks to him; rather under the impulse of his persistent chasing.

WHITE (in a tone of confession): The truth is that I’ve conducted a lot of enquiries about him in secret.

RED AND THE WIFE TOGETHER: Really??!

WHITE: With no worthwhile results. (Silence)

WHITE: I thought he might be a representative of the Tax Bureau, or perhaps a detective with the Secret Police, a Census Official or someone from the Morals Police!

RED: They’re all troublesome, but not to this extent.

WHITE: Even in those important offices, it became clear to me that they know no more about him than we do, and they have put up with his chasing just like us.

RED: Why have they passed him over, when they finish off countless thousands of others?!

WHITE: On the contrary, there have been numerous attempts to kill him, but they regularly fail.

WIFE (nervously): He’s making my head spin.

(They look at him angrily. The Man beats the air with his whip which makes a fearful crack. They move together, and then leave the stage slowly as their advanced age requires. Meanwhile the Man keeps moving while the lights go out.)

SCENE SIX

(The lights come on. Red, White and the Wife are on the stage, but they have undergone an incredible change. They look young again and are wearing the same clothes we saw them wearing before. It is obvious that they have dyed their hair, had face-lifts and done all sorts of incredible things to get their lost youth back again. They are smiling with pleasure as they look at each other.)

RED: It’s our final try, but it should work with the red devil himself!

WIFE: How marvellous to be young again!

WHITE: Wonderful!

RED: He’ll never recognize us now even if he goes round the world.

WIFE: Merciful God, hear our prayers!

RED: It’s easy to follow people when they’re old, but how could he possibly guess that one day they might regain their youth?

WIFE: My heart tells me that we’ve escaped from his clutches.

RED: May God compensate us for the energy and money we’ve used up!

WIFE: The money the beautician took for the face-lifts!

WHITE: And that incredible imported dye!

RED: And the injections; don’t forget the injections!

WIFE: And the hormones, medicinal baths and professional massage.

RED (happily): He’s more likely to solve the riddles of what lies beyond death than recognize us now!
WHITE: In any case, this is the last trick in the bag. (Silence)
RED: And then there's a new surprise to finish the game, something
which will make everything absolutely perfect.
WHITE: More than it is already?
RED: Yes.
WHITE: What's that, I wonder?
RED: A new bride!
(The Wife starts shouting angrily and threatens them.)
RED: Don't misunderstand me.
(The Wife carries on shouting angrily.)
RED: You should realize that I'm doing it for the sake of everyone's
happiness.
WIFE: It's a betrayal and a crime too!
RED: It's because of everything you've gone through as a result of
the way that damned man keeps chasing us.
WIFE: There's absolutely no reason to spring that on me. What
we've achieved is enough and more.
RED: The addition of the Bride to the new image will totally change
things.
WIFE: You may be able to deceive him, but you can't deceive me!
RED: We're not talking about lusts. We're defending our very lives.
WIFE: Don't try to fool me; I know you better than you know yourself.
RED: The time for love is over. The youth we have at the moment is
just a cover. Do you feel like sex?
WIFE (aggressively): Yes!
RED: You depraved old hag!
WIFE: You're ten times worse.
RED: Don't make us lose the last chance we have.
WIFE: If you want a new wife, then here I am!
RED: Fear God, woman, and be reasonable. Why don't you try your
luck on the pilgrimage* this year?
WIFE: I'm as fit for love as for the pilgrimage.
RED: Weren't you forever scolding me and reminding me about our
children and grandchildren?
WIFE: Don't remind me of those awful days.
RED: I assure you, you're not fit for love.
WIFE: Just try! You can only prove it by trying!
RED: You're mad!
WIFE: And you're treacherous and deceitful.
RED (to White): Have you lost your tongue or something? Give us

*The hajj or pilgrimage to Mecca, a duty for all Muslims at least once in their lifetime.

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the benefit of your opinion.

WHITE: We need time to think.

WIFE (to White): Even you want to think?

RED: There's no time! The new Bride's a reality; it's all settled.

(The Wife starts shouting again.)

WHITE: We should have talked about it!

WIFE: It will never happen!

RED: I won't allow another word! Be quiet or else I'll be compelled to divorce you!

WIFE: Divorce me when I'm a grandmother?! Even wild animals draw the line at that!

RED: Go to your children before I really lose my temper.

(White intervenes to save the situation. He takes the Wife by the hand and leads her away. He talks to her in an inaudible voice. Then he comes back by himself.)

WHITE: You're really reckless.

RED: You can look happy now, you hypocrite!

WHITE: You'll never find a suitable bride!

RED: A sixteen year old girl like a piece of cream.

WHITE: Younger than our own granddaughter!

RED: She's not our granddaughter at any rate!

WHITE: Don't embarrass us.

RED: You'll come to realize that she has a more powerful effect than all the drugs put together.

WHITE: What an escapade!

RED: It won't be any worse than his damned chasing.

(Red claps his hands. We hear music of the wedding procession. The Bride enters between two young men: a Police Sergeant with his radio; and a contemporary Registrar with his notebook under his arm wearing an American shirt and trousers. both multicolored. They bring the Bride forward and then leave. The three of them look at each other.)

RED: Congratulations to our bride!

(The Bride laughs sweetly without showing the slightest embarrassment.)

RED: Feel completely at ease; this is your home.

BRIDE: Thank you ... but . . .

RED: Feel free to say what you want.

BRIDE: I feel I need some encouragement.

RED: I told you this is your home.

BRIDE: I mean that it would be helpful . . . I mean . . . a little . . . whisky!!
RED AND WHITE: Whisky?!  
BRIDE: Just a little would do!  
RED: Have you tried it before?  
BRIDE: To the extent that my age permits!  
(\Red and White look at each other stupefied. They move off to one side.)  
RED: To the extent that my age permits!!!  
WHITE: I heard every word ... what do you think?  
RED: What's happened has happened.  
WHITE: Fine!  
RED: But wine's not good for us! We can't get a new liver as well!!  
WHITE: Nor a new heart or veins!  
RED: God is with us!  
(They come back smiling.)  
RED: Let's forget about drink; that would be best.  
BRIDE: Are you giving me a sermon on our wedding night?!  
RED: No, but it's a question of health.  
BRIDE: Are you sick?  
RED: No! We've still a long way to go before we become old and disease-ridden.  
BRIDE: We agree then!  
RED (laughing): You seem a clever and experienced girl!  
BRIDE: That's the hallmark of the century!  
RED: I wouldn't be a bit surprised if you were familiar with ... emotional education.  
BRIDE: Emotional education?  
RED: I mean sex education!  
BRIDE: Oh, I see! Yes.  
RED: But it's not established in school curricula yet!  
BRIDE (with a laugh): But it is in lots of other places!  
RED: You certainly are a stimulating bride!  
BRIDE: If you're one of those people who's afraid, then why did you push yourself into married life?  
RED: I'm not afraid, it's just that well-established families have their own traditions.  
BRIDE: Crap!!  
(\Red and White both pretend to laugh.)  
RED: Your style's remarkable but you're very forward, far more forward than virgins usually are.  
BRIDE: History's only ever known one virgin!  
(The two men look at each other stupefied. The Bride opens her handbag and takes out a whisky bottle. She has a drink and then hands it to them.)  
BRIDE: You seem to be stingy. Take it and have some; otherwise I shall get angry!
(Red finds himself cornered so he takes the bottle and has a drink. He gives it to White, who also has a drink. The bottle does the rounds among the three of them.)

BRIDE: It's very handy for overcoming shyness!
RED (astonished): Shyness?!
BRIDE: Yes, shyness. You haven't seen anything yet!!
RED: Here's to shyness then!
(The bottle does the rounds again. The two men are drunk and kiss the Bride on both cheeks simultaneously.)

RED (to the Bride): I hope you're not surprised that the kisses are coming from two men, and not from just one!
BRIDE (drunk): Kisses are something to be grateful for. You shouldn't spoil them by asking any questions!
RED (laughing): The truth is that you've two husbands, not just one!
BRIDE (looking at both of them in turn): I hope I'll find that sufficient for me to enjoy the desired security!
(The two men look at each other and then dissolve into laughter. The bottle does the rounds again, and they kiss the Bride.)

RED: We haven't been able to shock you even once!
BRIDE: It's difficult to shock people these days!
(White suddenly listens intently.)
WHITE: Did you hear something?
(Red listens. Footsteps can be heard.)
RED: Maybe it's a passer-by.
WHITE: But it's his footsteps.
RED: Impossible! Even if it were he, he couldn't possibly recognize us.

BRIDE: Are you expecting someone?
RED: No!
BRIDE: I think two men will be enough!
(The Man enters in his usual guise. He moves to and fro faster than ever before.)
RED: Damn!
WHITE: God help us!
BRIDE: I remember this man.
RED: You know him too. That's what I expected. He's mad.
BRIDE: Like all old people!
WHITE: But he doesn't look old.
BRIDE: He was a friend of my father.
RED (emphatically): Let's have a drink.
(The bottle does the rounds.)
RED: There's no way out.
WHITE: No way out!
BRIDE: One day, I thought he was chasing me for love.
RED: He's got chasing disease.
BRIDE: It's quite possible he's kind and easy-going.
RED: We've known him longer than you. (Silence)

RED (drunk, speaking threateningly to the Man): Run ... run ... go on! Do whatever you like ... what does it matter? But don't think you've won. We'll never be prepared to admit that you can recognize us through some unknown sense ... never. The fact of the matter is that the country's full of spies. You have some connections with the police, the registrar, the beautician or the pharmacy ... there's nothing secret or miraculous about that. Do whatever you like ... run ... Keep running until you collapse in a faint. We'll laugh hard and long ...

WHITE (to the Man): I wish you'd have a drink with us: it's done marvels for us.
BRIDE: How can this Man make you forget your Bride?
(The bottle does the rounds, and they kiss and embrace.)

RED (to the Man): We'll do exactly as we please right under your very eyes. Two horns will grow in your head and you'll run around like a madman.

WHITE (to the Man): Excuse me! Drink and love both have a power of their own. Nevertheless we actually respect you; believe me! You've taken up more of our time than you can imagine. I'm convinced you mean us no harm and that we ourselves are responsible for everything; we are the ones who do the work, we change, and we grow old. We have no right to pin our mistakes and troubles on you. I would be glad if you would accept my invitation to have a drink!

RED (to White): You hypocrite!!
WHITE: Don't ruin the honeymoon with bad manners.
BRIDE: Are you both marrying me only to waste time arguing with each other?!
(They start kissing, hugging and laughing again. White and the Bride start dancing. Red totters around drunk and looks at the Man.)

RED: Go on ... run! It doesn't matter. Your head will start spinning and then you'll fall to the ground, a stiff, immobile corpse.
(The Bride disengages herself from White's arms, then moves towards Red. They dance. Meanwhile, White totters as he looks towards the Man.)

WHITE: I'd like to meet you in private.
(The dancing continues, and so does the Man.)

WHITE: We could have a useful talk. If there's something new, maybe it's hidden way inside your silent heart.
(The Man beats the air with his whip which makes a fearful crack. Red and White clutch at each other. They try to leave, but their legs cannot help them. They fall to the ground and crawl off on all fours till they disappear. The Bride carries on dancing alone. The Man begins to slow down little by little till he stops completely and is only moving his feet, marking time. The Bride dances by herself in front of the Man.)
THE PERPLEXITY OF THE ALL-KNOWING:

A Study of Adonis*

Kamal Abu Deeb

Who sees you sees me sees us/
A horizon spelling the invisible frontiers.
Everything is new on earth, the alphabet
is a flame,
Time a voyage between it and me.
And our name is one/ I've rooted myself
in trees that never die;
I've seen the footsteps and seen the houses
Crumbling crumbling, these are my sparks
the spaces are pregnant . . .
Our name is one, I sweep across—we sweep across.
This is our space and horizon:
To shatter the orbits, to be nothing
but this madness madness madness.¹

Thus spake Adonis. And Adonis, the foremost contemporary Arab poet, speaks thus in the closing lines of one of his very latest poems. For the informed reader, Adonis's embrace of madness as the ultimate and

*In a short essay like this, it is impossible to furnish adequate background material for the study of Adonis's poetry or to provide biographical information on him. For such information, see The Blood of Adonis, trans. Samuel Hazo, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971; Mounah Khouri and Hamid Algar, An Anthology of Modern Arabic Poetry. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1974; Issa J. Boullata, Modern Arab Poets 1950-1975. Three Continents Press. Washington, D.C., 1976. I shall use the limited space available here for a study of Adonis's poetry itself, although a study of Adonis cannot be complete without an assessment of his work as a theorist.
only remaining weapon capable of "shattering the orbits" and as the bond
uniting him with the younger comrades in the struggle for a new world, is
pregnant with tragic overtones. For this does not come as a new discovery,
it merely repeats and asserts a dramatic discovery made by Adonis him­
self (and by other Arab poets) as early as the late fifties and early sixties.
He was in his late twenties when he created Mihyar the Damascene, en­
dowing him with the revolutionary vision and creative longing which came
to distinguish his poetry. In an earlier poem he had written:

Mihyar sang cried acquitted prayed indicted,
_Blessed the face of madness_,
Dissolved in his voice
the wound of the ages,
Desired his voice to be
a flood, and like a flood it was . . .?

Earlier still, in the songs of Mihyar, he had talked of "madness, the
intimate friend," of the "ecstasy of madness," and declared that Mihyar
comes along to us "bringing with him the winds of madness." Years later
he reiterated his blessing of madness, this time more forcefully and with
despairing conviction as he witnessed the total collapse of the Arabs in
the Six Day War of 1967, declaring that "nothing remains but madness." Perhaps inevitably, yet very significantly, the shriek of madness has been
echoed by much younger poets who belong to the youngest generation
writing poetry today.

But why madness? And in the face of what? I shall return to these
questions towards the end of this article.

The struggle of the modern, to borrow Stephen Spender's phrase, in
contemporary Arabic culture has been tragic just as the last struggle
of the modern in Arabic culture of the ninth and tenth centuries had been
tragic. The affinities between the two are, not surprisingly, many as the
conditions they fought against bear greater similarity than seems to be true of any such distant historical periods in the history of other nations. Official Arabic culture seems to have an innate distaste for the new, the
rebellious, the questioning and exploring. The creative impulse which seeks to articulate its aspirations, fears, anxiety or its contemplation, search and discoveries outside the confines of the established socio-religi­
ous system has always provoked a frightening propensity towards oppres­
sion and the assertion of the collective will, of consensus, over the
individual will. Islam had taught that every innovation was a step into the path of darkness; and consensus became one of the main pillars of the traditional value-system, embodying the wisdom of the community which, Islam asserts, cannot go wrong. Not that the prohibition of innovation managed to strangle the creative impulse altogether: there have always been rebels and outsiders but their fate has never been enviable. Today, the rebels are many, but the intolerance is manifold and practiced more viciously than in many a dark period in the past.

The oppression practiced by the religious culture, the sociopolitical institutions, the conditions of poverty, illiteracy and backwardness, the struggle against colonialism, class struggle, and the desperate search for national identity have not been the only realities which have shaped the consciousness of Adonis's generation and the younger generations. Another tragic reality has formed the climate within which Arabic poetry has developed since the late forties, namely the disastrous loss of Palestine and the establishment of Israel in 1948. The confrontation with Israel, with defeats for the Arabs in 1948, 1956 and 1967, revealed the depth to which Arab society, political institutions and regimes have sunk; the poetry of the last three decades, especially after 1967, has embodied the bitterness, frustration and despair eating at the heart of Arab poets in these years. The Palestinian experience has radiated with a new poetic tone, a new symbolism, a new angst which forms a subterranean level of modern poetry. This experience lies at the roots of Adonis's poetry; his post-1967 "This is my Name" is one of its most powerful manifestations within the entire corpus of modern poetry.

The intensity of the struggle of the modern has never been greater than it has been over the last twenty years, and it has never been greater in the work of any poet than it has been in the work of Adonis, who has stood constantly (since co-founding with Yusuf al-Khal the poetry review Shi'r in 1957, and founding Mawaqif in 1968) at the very forefront of modernism and modern poetry. To the Shi'r period dates some of his most violent poetry of rejection (raf'd), a badly misunderstood word which came to designate the work and attitudes of a number of poets who gathered around Shi'r and its founders.

Both as a theorist and a poet, Adonis is the writer with the greatest influence on Arabic poetry today, although perhaps not the most widely read. Sophisticated, erudite, widely read in Arabic and European literature, with a deep vision of Arabic culture and the forces which have shaped it, of man and God, man in history and man in culture, he has a dazzling linguistic flair and power. A rebel and force of destruction ("A mine for civilization: this is my name"), but also a force of positive rejection with a tormenting love for his culture and his country, he is certainly one of
the greatest poets in the history of the language, and one of the finest makers of a poetic phrase since al-Buhturi in the ninth century.

Adonis is the poet of the beyond, of restlessness and questioning, a seeker for the eternal moment of freshness and the time of possibilities. His ideal is not a static world, even when this world is perfect, but "the homeland of freshness and fragility," for which he has invented symbols as virginal and unfamiliar as his yearning. The wound is one such symbol. A wound is both a state of being and becoming. Every wound is a cutting of a past, finalized life and an opening of a world of warmth and potentialities. In his poetry, the wound never heals, for healing brings it into a state of finality and completeness, i.e., fossilization and death. Here he is celebrating the eternal freshness of the wound:

The leaves lying asleep under the wind  
Are a ship for the wound  
And the perished time is a glory for the wound  
And the trees rising in our eyelids  
a lake for the wound.

And the wound is in the bridges,  
where the grave becomes longer  
where patience becomes longer  
between the edges of our love and our death.  
And the wound  
is a gesture, and the wound is  
in the crossing.

To the language with the dead bells  
I grant the voice of the wound.  
To the stone coming from afar  
To the dry world, to dryness  
To the time carried on our ice-stretcher  
I light the fire of the wound.  

In its eternal freshness and warmth, the wound thus becomes another metamorphosis, or manifestation, of the hero, of Mihyar himself, of the god Adonis and of all other symbols of creativity and creative longing.

In his perpetual motion, Adonis embraces the world with what is, on many levels, a Sufi (mystic) vision, becoming transparent, mysterious, dwelling in the objects of the universe, between the thing and itself, and in all this, creating a poetic world of incredible purity and harmony. The very structure of his poem embodies his vision: he unifies the external, phonetic and rhythmic properties of the poem with its internal semantic
properties in a manner unique in modern Arabic poetry. Unlike Khalida Said, his wife and best interpreter, I tend to believe that his movement towards dramatic effect and multiplicity of rhythm, meters, moods, images, voices, and visions of reality is, possibly unconsciously, an expression of his deeply rooted search for unity. For unity cannot consist in singularity, it has to start from diversity and multiplicity. Thus, in creating them, Adonis can satisfy his fundamental yearning by resolving contradictions into perfect and total oneness.

For Adonis the poem becomes a microcosm through which he can redefine the world and recreate it in his own image. By violating the accepted standards of poeticality and poetic structure, he is violating the structure of the world as inherited and accepted by the culture. He has revolutionized the poem totally, from the levels of its elementary constituents—the nature of words and their semantic value—to the rhythm, structure and tone of the poem. The simple lyric in his early poetry, with its echoes of earlier romantic imagery and vocabulary and with its linear, one dimensional structure, has given way as early as Mihyar, and even a little earlier, to the complex multi-dimensional poem, often dramatic and permeated by oppositions and paradoxes embodying the contradictory forces which have shaped the history of the culture. The personal “I” of the early poems has similarly given way to the impersonal, cultural “I” embodying a multiplicity of forces, dreams, hallucinations, and the will to transcend the stagnation and morbidity of the culture. This complexity and the violation of the established order have been as powerfully embodied on the level of imagery, syntax and, especially, rhythm, as on the level of structure. Gradually, but firmly, Adonis has been moving towards the “total poem,” which is more preoccupied with creating the rhythm, syntax, forms, and images capable of embodying its own reality than with any popular or accepted or appealing aesthetic criteria. His later poetry, especially poems such as “This is my Name,” “Singular in the Plural Form,” have dismayed some admirers and brought forth accusations of total obscurity (to which he has responded very recently in his latest published poem). But for me at least, these later poems represent not only his greatest achievement but the very highest achievement of modern Arabic poetry as a whole.

The poem also becomes the microcosm which embodies Adonis’s fundamental vision of reality, of man, nature and metaphysics; it becomes a totality within which the tensions are resolved between the most intense oppositions, in which every level becomes a transformation of the basic vision of reality underlying the poem; the poem becomes an act of harmonization, balance, discovery of the interfusion and interdependence between the linguistic constituents. All constituents move towards a central
meaning which is seen to reside in the various phenomena of the universe; the meaning radiates through all linguistic constituents forming a network of relationships which gives the poem its totality. Everything in the universe becomes yet another manifestation of an essential meaning. A woman, thus, is a “wave which teaches” that

the light of stars
the face of clouds
And the moaning of dust
Are all one flower.°

And because all these disparate elements are one flower, the poem physically treats them as one flower; thus, semantically and syntactically, what applies to one element applies equally smoothly to another, to all others. A body can thus be described in the language of stars, or dust, or flowers. A tree becomes a book as naturally as a grave becomes a mirror. Language loses its preconceived status and designated functions; words lose their familiar meanings; grammatical categories are no longer divided by sharply defined boundaries. Language becomes a fluid essence which only acquires clear outlines and specific features as it is moulded into a particular body of relationships which is the individual poem itself. Language becomes a poem within a poem. Thus in “The Tree of Fire,” the leaves can be described as follows:

A family of leaves
Is sitting near the spring
Wounding the land of tears
Reading to the water the book of fire

My family didn’t await my arrival
It departed
There is no fire left, no traces.7

In this mysterious world, with its intimate, multiple affinities, harmonies and perfection, dwells the poet, knowing that he is mysterious, incomprehensible, but eternally at peace with himself:

I fused fire with snow—
Neither the fire nor the snow will comprehend my forests.

And I’ll remain obscure, familiar
dwelling in the flowers and stones
vanishing
exploring
seeing
waving
like the light between magic and suggestion.8
This deep recognition of the fluidity of things, of their affinities, of their transformation, develops later into a fundamental axiom in Adonis's poetry. Following the *Songs of Mihyar*, he published *The Book of Transformations and Migration Between the Regions of Day and Night*, which explores the transformations, or metamorphoses, of the hero into tens of forms, starting with "The Transformations of the Eagle," and through "The Transformations of the Lover," which in a surrealistic series of images of rare sharpness, purity and opulence, explores the ritualistic moment of unison between the bodies of two lovers, declares the total purity of the body, and reveals the affinities between the moments of love and death:

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Her name was walking silently in the forests of letters
The letters were arches and velvet-like animals
an army fighting with tears and wings
The air was kneeling down and the sky stretched out
like hands.
Suddenly
A strange plant leafed and the spring standing behind
the forest drew closer
I saw fruits embracing like rings of a chain;
Flowers began dancing
forgetting their feet and fibre
shielding themselves with a shroud.

In our bodies the light raises its hills and flags
and the flame spreads pillow after pillow.

I branch out around you
And I fall, between you and me, an eagle with thousands
of wings
I hear your hallucinating limbs
I hear the sighs of the waist and the peace of the hips
I see the light of wonder, and everything about me gets
intoxicated.
Thus speaks the body—the master.

After this we sit in the shade of the pavilion of
the pelvis

Where the star of sex revolves
the metamorphosis is completed
Your breasts become day and night.
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The world suddenly walks out to us
Saying:
The tree of the soul has grown in the earth.

Thus speaks the body—the master.
My body yearns like a horizon and my limbs are palm trees
You fruit in me
I gather fruits under your breasts, I dry up and you are my sweet basil and water.
Each fruit is a wound and a path to you
I cross through you and you are my dwelling, I dwell in you and you are my waves.
Your body is a sea and each wave a sail
Your body is a spring and each fold a dove singing my name.

I unveil the other side of daylight
I glimpse the other face of night
I shout unto the sea: O, uncontrollable, break up like a reed.
and at thunder: listen.
I ask: is love alone a place which death doesn't reach?
Can the immortal learn love? And what do I call you, death?

Between me and myself a distance
within which love casts its eye upon me, death casts its eye upon me.
And the body is my baptism.9

Adonis may appear to be caught between his yearning for unity and his desire to destroy all limits and restrictions. But the contradiction is merely superficial. It is important to note that he doesn't reject order and organization which are internal principles, controlled and imposed by the active will at the moment of creation. Because order and organization are inherent in his poetic world, he is unlikely to break down the structure of the poem into isolated, fragmented units. When poetry as order and organization becomes incapable of embodying his vision of reality, he is more likely to fall silent and stop writing poetry: he refuses to turn language in a meaningless void.

Yet Adonis's poetry is split open by a real and fundamental opposition which he has not been able to resolve or transcend: nature versus culture (which I use here in a sense different from Lévi-Strauss). In nature, he is at one with himself and with the forces and elements of his universe; he
is an overall master and creator in total communion with what he creates and what he comes into contact with; everything responds to his will to transcend the apparent contradictions:

Before daylight arrives, I come
Before it asks about its sun, I light
And the trees come running after me, the blossoms walk
in my shadow
Then fancies build in my face
Islands and castles of silence whose doors are unknown
to words
The friendly night radiates with light,
And days forget themselves in my bed.

Then when the springs fall into my chest,
Leave their buds and go to sleep
I wake up the water and the mirrors,
And, like them, polish the face of visions,
Then fall asleep.¹⁰

and:

Going to seek the shadows between the buds and the
glass, to build an island,
Link the branches with the shores;
And should the harbours be lost,
and the lines darken
I'll wear the astonishment captive
in the wings of butterflies
behind the castles of light and ears of corn,
in the homeland of fragility.¹¹

In culture, he strives to resolve the contradictions which he witnesses by going beyond the dividing boundaries responsible for creating the contradictions: the value system, the division between good and evil, between God and the Devil, choosing neither:

Who are you? Whom do you choose, Mihyar?
Wherever you go, there is God or the Devil's abyss,
An abyss coming, an abyss going,
And the world is choice.
I choose neither God nor the Devil.
Each is a wall.
Each closes my eyes.
Why replace one wall by another
When my doubt is the doubt of the light-giving
The doubt of the all-knowing?¹²

Faced with the burden of centuries of traditional thinking, submission to the past, he negates the past and denies that he has roots in it:

He has no ancestors
And his roots are in his steps.¹³

or

My gospel is rejection,
and my map
a land without a creator.¹⁴

But the contradictions prove to be too fundamental to be resolved by his yearning for the unification of opposites and his dream of transcendence. He is left with the realization that nature and culture are not two facets of the same reality, that the symbolic correspondences he thought to have existed between them do not in fact exist. The vision of Mihyar the redeemer and the magician becomes dim and is almost shattered. He is saved only by turning to violent rejection and, ultimately, to madness.

In his madness there remains, however, one human sphere in which he can realize his yearning for oneness and in which he sees the unity of the universe and man embodied in perfect form: the body and love of a woman. From his very early poetry to his last poem, the woman has remained the microcosm which reveals the universe in its yearning for itself and its celebration of the total unity of its elements:

Khalida, a sorrow which branches leaf around,
Khalida, a journey which drowns the day in the
waters of the eyes
A wave which taught me
That the light of stars,
That the face of clouds
And the meaning of dust
Are all one flower.¹⁵

In an earlier, youthful poem for Khalida, he had written:
When I drown my eyes in your eyes
I glimpse the deep dawn
And see the ancient past
I see what I don’t comprehend
And feel the universe
Flowing between your eyes and me.16

The *Songs of Mihyar the Damascene* opened with this psalm:

He comes unarmed like the forest, and like the
clouds cannot be repelled; and yesterday he carried
a continent and moved the sea from its place . . .17

This was a new poetic language, new in every sense. Most immediately
striking was its syntax: the opposition between the nouns (forest/clouds)
placed in inverted positions in relation to the adjectives they relate to
which are themselves contrastive (active participle/verb in the passive
present: unarmed/cannot be repelled), then the shift in the time context
through the conjunction “‘and’ yesterday”. As striking was the imagery:
the total openness, the huge spatial dimensions, and the indefinability
of the central point of similarity. The magical elements complete the picture:
the irrational, surreal acts: “carried a continent and moved the sea from
its place.” The effect is neither grotesque, nor comic, nor is it intended to
be. The outcome is a sense of the fluidity of the world, of the possibility of
everything, of the total interconnectedness of man and the universe, and
of the infinite power and determination of the hero.

These features, and others akin to them, dominated Mihyar’s songs
and existence. “He fills life and nobody sees him.” “Where the stone be­
comes a lake and the shadows a city, he lives, he lives and leads despair
astray, dancing for the dust to make it yawn, and for the trees to send them
to sleep.” This was the magic presence of the new hero, a presence which
changes the order of the world, moving in two parallel but meeting lines.
On the one hand, he realized deeply the paradoxical nature of the universe,
of man, of God, of his own self. Where there was no paradox, he created
one. On the other hand, he sought the unification of the most disparate
realities, the unification of the elements of the universe, of diverse experi­
ences, of irreconcilable ethical or intellectual notions. He sought to tran­
scend all oppositions: “My road is beyond both God and the Devil.” He
split things open and brought them together into one again, always yearn­
ing to create freshness, strangeness and unity; always refusing to accept
things as they are, destroying them in order to reinvent them, or showing them to be different from what they appear to be. Always questioning, searching, longing and refusing to let the dust settle down on the world for a single moment.

Uncertainty is his homeland, but he is full of eyes.
He creates his kind starting with himself—he has no ancestors and in his footsteps are his roots.
He walks in the abyss, and has the figure of the wind.18

The tone of Mihyar was unique in Arabic poetry, distinguished primarily by its extraordinary rhythmic subtlety and tenderness. Its uniqueness was embodied in the meter used for the majority of lyrics, al-mutadarak, a meter little used in the tradition, resurrected by Adonis and made entirely his own. With its slow, quiet, regular stress falling on the first syllable of the foot, it has become the meter of contemplative poetry per se, not only in Adonis’s work, but, under his influence, in Arabic poetry as a whole. Because it was little used, it was free from the echoes of the traditional formulae and rhythmic combinations. Adonis broke its regularity, in a manner which went against the very core of traditional metrical theory, by introducing the foot (u—) into the sequence of (—u—) which formed al-mutadarak, thus creating rhythmic combinations never before actualized in Arabic poetry. The meter as used by Adonis is now the most dominant meter in Arabic poetry and contrasts sharply with the meters which had dominated the fifties and early sixties (such as the more intense, more violent rhythm of al-ramal explored and popularized by Khalil Hawi).

Contrary to his conscious claim, however, Mihyar did have his ancestors; his roots were not in his own footsteps only. His ancestors were the rejected and the rejectionists, the outcasts and outsiders in Arabic culture, the rebellious and transcending poets of Sufism, and above all, the spiritual and intellectual heritage of Shi’ism. The fusion of Shi’ism with Sufism in his poetry is one of its most distinctive single features, as I’ll show a little later.

Mihyar embodied the inner vision, the self turning inward and taking the world in with it, reshaping it in its own image. The Songs reflected this sense of oneness and harmony in their form, their rhythm, their imagery, their tone. Mihyar was the book of the short songs, set in opposition to the long Psalms. The book consisted of Psalms (prose poems, long, violent) and Songs (short, gentle, in verse). The complexity grew to much greater dimensions in later works; the interfusion of prose and verse became greater, the dramatic and long poems occupied greater space; the formal, syntactic, grammatical and rhythmic complexity became
astounding. The imagery acquired a violence and freshness never before, or since, equalled in Arabic poetry. The hand reshaping the world has gone on to reshape the language of poetry and the structure of the poem and to create new relationships.

Two of Mihyar's ancestors were the Sufi poets al-Niffari and al-Hallaj, the martyr. Of the latter he wrote:

Your green poisonous plume
your plume whose veins are filled with flame
with the star rising from Baghdad
is our history and immanent resurrection
in our land—in our repeated death.

Time lay upon your hands
And the fire in your eyes
is sweeping reaching to the sky

O star rising from Baghdad
laden with poetry and new birth
O poisonous green plume.

Nothing is left
for those coming from afar
with the echo and death and ice
in this land of resurrection
nothing is left but you and the presence.
O, you the language of Galilean thunder
in this land of cast-off skins
You, poet of the mysteries and the roots."

What happens here is extremely significant, for it reveals the fundamental tension in Adonis's poetry, the tension springing from his paradoxical attitude to his culture, to his nation, and to the redemption he seeks for it. Al-Hallaj's plume is poisonous/green at one and the same time. The greenness of fertility, the archetypal symbol for rebirth, freshness, youth, goodness is created only through poisoning the body which is now a frightening monster of death and ice. Significantly, possibly for the only time after his early, more rhetorically-oriented period, Adonis uses the phrase "our immanent resurrection." Never again was he to repeat this. As significantly, al-Hallaj becomes the "poet of the mysteries and the roots," the roots of all who are possessed by the Mihyarian vision.
The Mihyar period is characterized by the absence of time, or rather, by the dominance of an inner, unhistorical time. In the post-Mihyar period, a strong historical consciousness and a historical vision emerge, generating a keen interest in major figures in Arabic political and intellectual history. This started with "The Transformations of the Eagle," and continued in "Introduction to the History of the Petty Kings." The forces which shaped the historical processes are explored and the lack of any dialectical interaction between the oppositions is revealed. Total negation is shown to be the dominant relationship between oppositions in Arabic culture throughout its history.

The appearance of Mihyar christened the language of absence not only in Adonis's poetry, but in modern Arabic poetry as a whole. This is not simply the Symbolists' language of suggestion and evocation; it is something else. The language remains distant from the object it presents. Arabic poetry had largely been a poetry of thorough illumination, throwing the object into an open space and directing a strong light onto it. The new language doesn't do this; it allows the object to remain dim, unilluminated, hidden. Defined in terms of the opposition light/shade, the traditional poem lies almost completely in the light region, whereas the Adonisian and modern poem lies mostly in the shade region. This is a structural property of the poem which applies to its language, rhythm, imagery, and tone. This region of the poem is derived through Adonis from the fusion of Shi'ism with Sufism. For, Sunnism is the area of definability, clarity, onedimensionality, brightness. Sufism is the area of shade, indefinability, the melting of borders into each other and of fusion.

The properties discussed here are embodied on the important level of symbolism and the sources for symbols used in Adonis's poetry. When Adonis, and other modern poets, began to use symbolism extensively, they used what may be called the orthodox, definable symbolism of the West (Greek and Christian) and, although not very often, Sunni Islam. Symbolism here remained often a formal aspect of the poem, the symbols assuming definite, sharply outlined characters and at times becoming no more than mathematical equations. Adonis began, as from Mihyar, to assimilate Shi'i and Sufi symbolism with its indefinable, mythical, spiritual and frequently paradoxical character, and thus introduced a totally new element into the mainstream of the culture, a fragile, transparent, yet mysterious sense of mysticism pregnant with possibilities and open to multiple interpretations. One such symbol which has become prominent in the later poems is the almost mythical, divine figure of 'Ali; so often the interplay between the "I" of the poet (whose name is 'Ali, Adonis being a pen name) and the mythico-historical 'Ali, leaves the symbolism richly ambiguous, open and multidimensional.
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The return to Sufi writings and Shi'i traditions is not a simple stylistic move nor an attempt to enrich the symbolic repertoire of the poet. In essence, it is an organic part of the view of the tradition as a whole; for essentially what Adonis (and other poets) are rejecting is the orthodox Sunnite world view which has dominated Arabic culture for centuries. The Sufi and Shi'ite traditions were swept outside the established tradition, and thus played only a minor role in shaping the culture. What the new poets, especially Adonis, have done is to re-define the tradition by re-defining its most creative currents: Sufism and Shi'ism. Thus they have also re-defined their relationship to the tradition. The tendency to suggest that these poets are “against all Arab values” and the Arabic tradition is strong, but remains absurd and superficial. Adonis does reject the tradition: he re-defines it and establishes his relationship with it as it is re-defined. Hence he declares al-Niffari to be a great poet, Abu Tammam and Abu Nuwas to be real revolutionaries in the history of Arabic poetry.

Despite the similarity between Adonis's work and Surrealism, they are fundamentally different. The Symbolists and the Surrealists believed in the essential unity of the world, and attempted, in their imagery, to discover and reveal the correspondences and relationships between the metaphysical and the physical, the abstract and the concrete, the outer and the inner, thereby endowing reality with ennobling qualities. Adonis, by breaking outside the limits of reality, the conscious and the concrete, by establishing new relationships between the phenomena of the universe, and by relating the here to the there, is in essence trying desperately to strip reality, and, to a large extent, language, of its appearance, show it naked and ugly. The reality he has experienced is inherited from the tradition and is sharply defined by it. In rejecting it, he may appear to be immersing himself in the subconscious and irrational of the Surrealists, when in fact his act is a strictly controlled and designed one. Here is one of his Surrealistic passages:

And I wrote the history:
Over the minaret (there is)
A moon disciplining the horses
And sleeping between the hands of a charm.

The past fell yet did not fall (why does the past fall
and yet not fall)
D is a figure broken by sadness
Q is closer than a stone's throw
K quivers under a nucleus of rejection as deep as the light
T is a history whose ceiling is corpses and the
steam of prayer
A is gallows wetted by a muddy light
B is a knife which makes of human skin shoes for two
  heavenly feet in a map which stretches etc., . . .

Where the word turns into a woven (cloth) and through
its pores pass heads like fluffed cotton, days carrying
pierced legs entering a history empty except for nails,
triangles shaped like women lying between the leaf and
the leaf, everything enters the earth through the pore
of the word, the insect God the poet with pricking
sleeplessness and the warmth of the voice with bullets
and ablution with the moon and Solomon's ant with fields
which blossom into placards on which is written "The
search for a loaf," or "The search for buttocks but be
discreet," or "Is the movement in the step or in the
road?" And the road is sands over which arches the air
and the step is a time smooth like a riverstone.²⁰

I shall now return to the theme with which this article opened: madness. It is sufficiently clear, I hope, that Adonis's madness is not insanity, is not the dislocation of mental faculties, the ascendancy of chaos over order, of the irrational over the rational, of the profane over the sacred. Madness is an intellectual position, a position of rejection and total commitment. Here is Adonis exploring the essence of madness:

Don't say you have gone mad. My madness
is your dreams; we came, descended into the darkness,
shattered its lanterns and came
like a land yearning for rain; and came
like thunder masking itself with clouds/
A promise:
You will be a sun
Time will be balconies for our dreams.²¹

The dream again; madness is the power to cling to the dream in the face of everything. This power to dream which another poet, Mahmud Darwish, has held sacred:

... and the dream is always truer.
Nothing between the dream and the body hidden
in a fragment
And the dream is more real.

("Blessing What Has Not Come")
A masked madness, reminiscent of Hamlet's? That is how it appears: it is the thing and its opposite, the dream and reality, the land yearning for rain, and the destructive thunder pretending to be rain but being in essence a fire to engulf everything. Yet, the outcome is life: rebirth, a new reality.

Madness is the power to create new relationships, a fresh language, to give things new identities, to "seduce the universe":

My madness is your dreams; we came
and painted the faces of palm trees and the wings
of orange trees,
And painted the fields
a body in bloom. We used to say:
  O, if only we could come
  and seduce the universe. We have come.

Who sees you sees me—I the primordial rose.
In the ashes of evening I broke,
With dawn perfumed my leaves of dawn,
Gathered in the shape of a ladder/The voice
of someone approaching
  Or steps moving away?
Change the image of nature,
Mix the rock with the wing, ecstasy with tragedy.
Everything is new on earth,
My face a space
and distance is the first of eyes.22

"Change the image of nature": not an easy task. Yet to it Adonis has devoted his entire career.

For, without a total, comprehensive revolution; without changing the structure of reality, of society and the culture, without destroying "the time of ossification" and instituting "the time of creativity," all efforts to bring about a new world will be in vain. As, indeed, they—to a great extent—have been.

Despite two decades of struggle, revolutions, dreams, and poetry, almost all that the Arabs achieved was their crushing defeat in 1967. After this tragic blow, poetry became overwhelmingly nightmarish, and the tone of elegy swept across the Arab world. The October War of 1973, which the Arabs viewed as a great victory (a victory against themselves, their weakness, backwardness, divisions, and impotence), has changed things, but only on a psychological plane: the roots remain buried deep
in muddy soil. This is the message of, at least, the poetry of the last few years, a poetry which contrasts so sharply, and to its advantage, I think, with the too often over-optimistic, simplistic, visionary poetry of the previous fifteen years. But this is a topic worth another essay.

Ultimately, then, Adonis is a poet of order, organization, and strong moral convictions; a poet filled with faith and certainty despite his constant, urgent preaching of the supremacy of questioning, searching, starting anew. He is no skeptic. His very imagery and rhythm radiate warmth, certainty of touch and deep involvement. Nowhere is this more clearly formulated than in a piece I quoted earlier (which I'll render slightly differently here):

My perplexity is that of the light-giving
of the all-knowing.

His dream and desire to start afresh are not purposeless; they do not aim at creating chaos, but at creating a new world, pure of the pollution of the present world, harmonious, meaningful, free, and human.

When God created Adam, according to the Qur'an, "He taught him all the names," Adonis starts exactly from the same point: the point of first original creation and, very poignantly and significantly, he starts by *renaming* everything, and thus changing the relationships between the elements of the universe, creating a new universe. Thus, in one of his very latest poems, the poem of madness quoted earlier, he goes back to his beginning, in a full circle, to write "The Second Songs of Mihyar the Damascene," which may give the impression that he is repeating himself. But this is no accidental repetition: the full circle is an embodiment of the fullness of the circle of his existence, his poetic vision, for he starts where he ended years ago, thus turning the end into a beginning, this being, as suggested, the very essence of his world. Nothing can embody the eternal longing for fresh beginnings better than a circle; for a circle is an instant point of departure wherever we touch it and choose to start. Indeed his new poem consists of beginnings at various points of experience, of the world, of things. Here is Adonis, renaming things and creating his beginnings!

We named the olive trees "Ali"
The street an opening to the sun
The wind a passport
And the road a bird.

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After this poem, let us hope that Adonis does not stop writing poetry. The circle is complete and set in eternal motion.

The wheel has gone full circle in a slightly different sense: Adonis ended by embracing madness, exactly where he started. In three decades of struggle, almost everything he and other poets have been fighting against has remained solidly the same, if it has not, in fact, worsened. As if no effort has been made at all. All has been wasted? All is wasted?

What remains but MADNESS?
What indeed.

NOTES
All references to Adonis’s poetry, except where otherwise stated, are to his Complete Works, Dar al-Awda, Beirut, 1971.
All translations are mine.
4. “This is my Name”, Ibid., II:615-643.
15. “A Mirror for Khalida”
17. “The Knight of Strange Words—Psalm”
18. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
Adonis (Ali Ahmed Said)

ELEGY IN EXILE

Phoenix,
when the flames enfolded you,
what pen were you holding?
What feathers sprouted
when your old ones burned?
Buried in your own ashes,
what world did you confront,
what robe did you don,
what color did you choose?

Tell me.
Tell me what silence follows
the final silence
spun from the very fall of the sun?
What is it, phoenix?
Give me a word,
a sign.

Your banishment and mine
are one.
Your banishment and mine
and the banishment of heroes
are one.
Your banishment and mine
and the banishment of heroes
and the banishment of love and glory
are one.

What is it we love or fear
but shadows of ourselves?
When I recall your suffering,
my phoenix,
I forget my own.
No mother held you
when you left
until you burned for breath.
No father blessed your exile
in his heart
before you saw it born
in flame with each horizon.
I've left.
I've left my mother.
I've left my mother
on a mat of straw
to grieve my going.
Astray, I swallow dust.
I, who learned love
from my father's eyes,
have left my father's house
to be the prodigal.

I am a hunted bird.
I steal my bread.
All I see is desolation.
Pursued by falcons,
my small wings lose their feathers,
feather by feather.

"They say my song is strange
because it has no echo.
They say my song is strange
because I never dreamed
myself awake on silks.
They say I disbelieved the prophesies,
and it was true,
and it is still and always true."

My phoenix,
I learn with you
the banishment that murders me
in ruins and the sheerest voids.
I break from jail
to seek the man I keep becoming.
I leave the gate ajar,
the chain empty,
and the darkness of my cell
devours me like eyes in shadow.

Though banished,
I love all those who banished me,
who crowned my brow with chains
and waited to betray me.
I see my childhood
like an isolated Baalbek
with its longing pillars,
and I burn.
Horizon by horizon,
I am born to the chants of the sun.

My new wings grow
like yours, my phoenix.
Phoenix, we are born for death,
and death in life
deserves its springs and harvests,
its rivering Jesus,
its passion with the vineyard
and the mount.
But it is not all solitude
and echoes from the grave.

Phoenix, I remember one
who perished on a cross—
extinguished.
He burned in pools of cherry
like fire within fire—
extinguished.
Yet from the dark of the ashes
he glows.

His wings are numbered
with the flowers of our land,
with all the days of all the years,
with pebbles and the merest stones.

Like you, my phoenix,
he survived our hunger,
and his mercy feeds us.

Dying with his wings outspread,
he gathered all who buried
him in ashes
and became, like you,
the spring and fire of our agony.

Go now, my sweet bird,
show me the road I'll follow.
Fouad Gabriel Naffah

THE VOYAGE

The god of stone and tar is provident. Knowing the road, he teaches distance to the engine.
I must outrace the childhood of cities with the easy charm of their red rooves that flower almost noisily among the trees until I reach the high zest of youth and male wills.
I want to give myself to joyous strolls and hasten the creation of surprises.
But when I face such knowledge and the wind, I fear at once the distance I must conquer, the books I must devour page by page, the perils of the valley on the left and, surging on the right, numberless treetrunks waiting to be massacred with sight.
For what? To guarantee what's left of the voyage? To reach at the end my tomb in my village?
IN THE FUTURE

When the hand will tire of being the body's rower and incensor,  
the kerchief of its silk,  
the fan of grace and motion—  
when the foot will no more bear the whole  
but rather be borne by it—  
when the eye will not see why it ought to see  
and when the mouth will seem no more  
a village steeple noisy with the plumed  
and bloody squabs of words,  
then old integrities will melt away,  
and freedom be returned to all our parts.  
And we will be invisible to one another  
and to everyone, my dear,  
without the urge to find ourselves  
one day within a crowd of roses  
and resurrections.

A SUNSET

The god of the heights is stirring  
in the liberty of all the elements.  
Quite expert in the games of snow and rain,  
he strikes the sun-gong with his staff  
until it shakes with royal soundings,  
falters quietly and falls into a pond  
to set the skin of frogs to shimmering  
and rouse the hunger of the blackest toads.
Fouad Gabriel Naffah

PRAYER

Covered with the salt of all my sins,
I ask the sun to save and guide me.
To please you, O my God, I drown
my brightest faculties and sacrifice
the impulse of my eyes to scan the sea . . .
I hold back nothing but a rosary of tears,
a strength that keeps my knees unbending
and the wish to walk until the snow.

COWARDICE

Hungry for sleep or voyages or death
but doubting the drowsier reprieves of wine,
fatigued by each attempt to die in poetry,
deceived by visits to the rooms of women’s arms,
no man of grief in quest of miracles
escapes at last his meeting with the sea.
One day at dusk he meets that sea,
salutes it and surveys it from a rock.
Intimidated by its multiplicity of voices,
drawn to flatter its imploring mirror,
he leaves the cowardice of earthly loves
ashore and seeks its blue adventure.
Rising in his boat from wave to wave,
he targets like a youth the disc of flame,
renouncing nothingness so near his reach
that he returns to mourn it on the beach.
THREE POEMS

I
The sun rises
a deserted ball
because the child is dead.

II
I would not be surprised
if, opening a can of sardines,
I found small children
immersed in oil.

III
She said
I want to touch the moon
I want you to carry me there
I want to bathe, naked, in the silvery light
I want to melt in the blue space
To be lost in the greenness of your eyes

My ladder is short
My wings can only carry me
I cannot bear to see the light hugging your body
and the blue space carry you away from me
My eyes are two bottles
Ask me something else.
I hire a taxi-cab to go home . . . .

I chat with the driver in perfect Hebrew, confident that my looks do not disclose my identity.

"Where to, sir?" the driver asks me.

"To Mutanabbi Street." I reply. I light a cigarette and offer one to the driver in recognition of his politeness. He takes it, warms up to me, and says:

"Tell me, how long will this disgusting situation last? We are sick of it."

For a moment, I assume that he has become sick of war, high taxes and mounting milk prices.

"You are right," I tell him. "We are sick of it." Then he continues:

"How long will our government keep these dirty Arabic street names? We should wipe them out and obliterate their language."

"Who do you mean?" I ask him.

"The Arabs of course!" he replies.

"But why?" I inquire.

"Because they are filthy," he tells me.
I recognize his Moroccan accent, and I ask him:

"Am I so filthy? Are you cleaner than I am?"

"What do you mean?" he asks, surprised.

I appeal to his intelligence: he realises who I am, but does not believe it.

"Please, stop joking," he tells me.

When I show him my identity card, he loses his scruples and retorts:

"I do not mean the Christian Arabs—just the Moslems." I assure him that I am a Moslem, and he qualifies his statement.

"I do not mean all the Moslems—just the Moslem villagers." I assure him that I come from a backward village that Israel demolished—simply razed out of existence. He says quickly:

"The State deserves all respect."

I stop the car and decide to walk home. I am overtaken by the desire to read the names of the streets. I realise that the authorities have actually wiped out all the Arab names. "Saladdin" has metamorphosed into "Shlomo." But why did they retain the name of Mutanabbi Street. I wonder for a moment? Then in a flash I read the name in Hebrew. It is "Mount Nebo," not Mutanabbi as I have always assumed.

I want to travel to Jerusalem . . . .

I lift the telephone and dial the number of the Israeli officer in charge of civilian affairs. Since I have known him for some time, I inquire about his health and joke with him. Then I appeal to him to grant me a one-day permit to Jerusalem.

"Come over and apply in person," he says. So I leave my work and I come over. I fill out an application and I wait—one day, two days, three days. There is hope, I rationalize; at least they have not said "no" as usual. And I continue to wait. Then I appeal to my friend once again, because by now my appointment in Jerusalem is imminent. I beg him for a response:

"Please say no," I plead with him. "Then at least I can cancel or postpone my appointment." He does not respond. Exhausted and disappointed, I tell him desperately that I have only a few hours left to get there.

"Come back in an hour," he says impatiently. I come back an hour later to find the office closed. Naively I wonder why the officer is so diffident, why he hasn't simply refused as usual? Finally, consumed by anger, I decide—not too judiciously—to leave for Jerusalem even at the risk of evading the State's "security measures."

Upon my return, I receive an invitation to appear before a military court. I queue up with the rest and I listen to the charges brought against the people before me. There is the case of a woman who works in a kibbutz and who has a permit which clearly forbade her to stop on her way to work.
For some pressing reason, she stopped and was immediately arrested. Similarly, some young men wandered away from the main street, only to be arrested. The court acquits no one. Prison sentences and exorbitant fines are automatic.

I am reminded of the story of the old man who, while patiently ploughing his field, discovered that his donkey had wandered off into someone else's land. Intent on retrieving his donkey, he left his plough and ran after him. He was soon stopped by the police and was arrested for having trespassed on government property without a permit. He told them that he had a permit in the pocket of his caba, which he had hung on a tree. He was arrested anyway.

I also remember the "death permits" which obliged farmers to sign a form blaming themselves for their own death if they stepped on mines in an area that was used by the army. The signatures allowed the government to shirk all responsibility for their death. Intent on earning their livelihood and unconscious of the dangers, the farmers signed these statements anyway. Some of them lived, but many of them died. Tired, finally, of the dead and living alike, the government finally confiscated the farmers' land.

Then there was the child who died in her father's arms in front of the office of the military governor. The father had long been waiting for a permit to leave his village for the city to hospitalize his sick daughter . . . .

When the judge sentences me for two months only, I feel elated and thankful. In prison, I sing for my homeland and write letters to my beloved. I also read articles about democracy, freedom and death. Yet I do not set myself free; neither do I die.

I want to travel to Greece . . . .

I ask for a passport and a laissez-passer. Suddenly, I realise that I am not a citizen, because either my father or one of my other relatives took me and fled during the 1948 war. At that time I was just a child. I now discover that any Arab who fled during the war and returned later forfeited his right to citizenship. I despair of ever obtaining a passport and I settle for a laissez-passer. Then I realise that I am not a resident of Israel since I do not have a residency card. I consult a lawyer:

"If I am neither a citizen nor a resident of the State, then where am I and who am I?" He tells me that I have to prove that I am present. I ask the Ministry of the Interior:

"Am I present or absent? Should you so wish, I can philosophically justify my presence." I realise that I am philosophically present and legally absent. I contemplate the law. How naive we are to believe that law in
this country is the receptacle of justice and right. Here, law is a receptacle of the Government's wishes—a suit tailored to please its whims.

Notwithstanding all this, I was present in this country long before the existence of the State that denies my presence. Bitterly, I observe that my basic rights are illusory unless backed by force. Force alone can change illusion into reality.

Then I smile at the law which gives every Jew in the world the right to become an Israeli citizen.

I try once again to get my papers in order, trusting in the law and in the Almighty. At long last, I secure a certificate proving that I am present. I also receive a letassez-passer.

Where do I go from here?

I live in Haifa, and the airport is close to Tel-Aviv. I ask the police for permission to travel from Haifa to the airport. They refuse. I am distraught, yet I cleverly decide to follow a different route and to travel by ship. I take the Haifa port highway, convinced that I have the right to use it. I revel in my intelligence. I buy a ticket, and without trouble pass through the passport checkpoint and the health and customs departments. However, near the ship they arrest me. I am again taken to court, but this time I am sure that the law is on my side.

In court, I am duly informed that the port of Haifa is a part of Israel—not a part of Haifa. They remind me that I have no right to be in any part of Israel except in Haifa, and that the port—according to the law—is outside Haifa's city limits. Before long, I am charged and convicted. I protest:

"I would like to make a grave confession, gentlemen, since I have become aware of the law. I swim in the sea, but the sea is a part of Israel and I do not have a permit. I enjoy the weather of Haifa, yet the weather is the property of Israel, not of Haifa. Likewise, the sky above Haifa is not part of Haifa, and I do not have a permit to sit under the sky."

When I ask for a permit to dwell in the wind, they smile .

I want to rent an apartment . . .

I read an advertisement in the paper. I dial a number.

"Madam, I read your advertisement in the paper; may I come and look at your apartment?"

Her laughter fills my heart with hope:

"This is an excellent apartment on Mount Carmel, sir. Come over and reserve it quickly." In my happiness, I forget to pay for the telephone call and leave in a hurry.

The lady takes a liking to me, and we agree on her terms. Then, when
I sign my name, she is taken aback.

“What, an Arab? I am sorry, sir, please call tomorrow.”

This goes on for weeks. Every time I am rebuffed I think about the apartments’ real owners who are lost in exile. How many houses have been built destined to remain uninhabited by their owners! Awaiting their return to their houses, the owners keep the keys in their pockets—and in their hearts. But if anyone of them should return, would he, I wonder, be allowed to use his key? Would he be able to rent but one room in his own house?

And yet they insist:

“The Zionists have not committed crimes; they simply brought a people without a country to a country ‘without’ a people.”

“But who built those houses?” I inquire.

“Which demons built them for which legends?”

On that note, they leave me alone, and they continue to breed children in stolen houses.

I want to visit my mother during the holidays . . . .

My parents live in a small village an hour’s drive from where I live. I have not seen them for several months. Because my parents regard holidays with emotion, I send a carefully-worded letter to the police department. I write:

“I should like to draw your attention to some purely humanitarian reasons, which, I hope, will not clash with your strong regard for the security of the State and the safety and interests of the public. By kindly granting my request for a permit to visit my parents during the holidays, you would prove that the security of the State is not contradictory to your appreciation of people’s feelings.”

My friends leave the city and I am left behind by myself. All the families will meet tomorrow, and I have no right to be with mine. I remain alone.

In the early morning, I leave for the beach to extinguish my grief in the blue waters. The waves bear me; I resign myself to their might. Then I stretch out on the warm sand, basking in the sun and a soothing breeze with my loneliness.

“Why does the sun squander its warmth so?” I wonder. “Why do the waves break against the shore? So much sun . . . so much sand . . . so much water.” I contemplate the obvious truth.

I hear people speaking Hebrew. I understand what they say, and my grief and loneliness increase. I feel the urge to describe the sea to my girlfriend, but I am alone. With or without justification, those around me curse my people, while they enjoy my sea and bask in my sun. Even when they are swimming, when they are joking, when they are kissing, they
curse my people. Could not the sea, I wonder, bless them with one moment of tranquility and love, so they would forget my people for a while? How can they be capable of so much hatred while they lie stretched out on the warm sand?

Saturated with salt and sun, I go to a cafe on the beach. I order a beer and whistle a sad tune. People look at me. I busy myself with a tasteless cigarette, and then I buy an ear of corn and eat alone. My wish is to spend the entire day on the beach in order to forget that it is a holiday and that my parents are waiting for me. Soon, however, I realise that it is time for my daily visit to the police in order to prove that I have not left town. The searing blueness of the sea and the sky blaze in my eyes as I leave the beach.

At the entrance of the police station, my little brother meets me and says:

"Hurry up and prove to the police that you are present; Mother is waiting for you at your apartment." I prove that I am present and reach home panting.

My mother has refused to celebrate the feast without me, and so she comes to my apartment bringing everything—the bread, the pots of food, the coffee, olive oil, salt and pepper.

In the evening she leaves. I kiss her and close the door behind her. I cannot take her across the street because the State does not allow me to leave the house after sunset—not even to bid my mother goodbye.

In my room, I become aware of my loneliness once more. I sit on an old chair and I listen to Tchaikovsky's First Concerto. Suddenly I cry as I have never cried before. For years, I have carried these tears and they have finally found an outlet.

"Mother, I am still a child. I want to empty all my grief onto your bosom. I want to bridge the distance between us in order to cry in your lap."

My next door neighbour calls to tell me that my mother is still cleaving to the door. I run out to her and cry on her shoulders.
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

ETEL ADNAN, born in Lebanon, studied literature at the Ecole des Lettres in Beirut and later at the Sorbonne. The author of four books of poems, she taught at the Dominican College in San Rafael, California, before moving to Paris.

ADONIS (ALI AHMED SAID) is a Syrian by birth but presently a citizen of Lebanon. He is now living in Damascus.

ROGER ALLEN is Associate Professor of Arabic at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the current president of the American Association of Teachers of Arabic and has written numerous articles on, as well as made translations of, the work of Idris and Mahfuz.

ABDEL-KADAR ARNAUT studied art at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome. He is a designer and illustrator as well as a poet. His most recent book is *Ashes on the Cold Earth*.

DR. A.S. ATIYA has a long and significant career as a historian. He is presently Distinguished Professor of History at the University of Utah.

ABD AL-WAHAB AL-BAYYATI was born in Iraq, 1926. He has published more than ten collections of poetry.

SARGON BOULUS lives presently in San Francisco. He was formerly on the staff of two leading literary Arabic journals, *Shi‘r* and *Mawaqif*. In addition to his own poetry and fiction, he has published numerous translations of contemporary Arabic poetry.
SAHAIR EL CALAMAWY is Professor of Literature at Cairo University and General Secretary to the Arab Womens' Federation.

MAHMOUD DARWISH is one of the most significant Palestinian poets and writers. This selection is only a part of a novel of the same title. Adnan Haydar is presently at the Middle East Center at the University of Pennsylvania.

KAMAL ABU DEEB is a poet and literary critic; he has published two volumes of verse in Arabic, and his poetry has appeared in English in Modern Arab Poets. Born in Safita, Syria in 1942, he has published critical studies of Arabic poetry, classical and modern, and taught Arabic at Oxford, the University of Pennsylvania and the University of California, Berkeley. He is a member of the editorial board of Mawaqif, which is edited by Adonis.

TREVOR J. LE GASSICK is Associate Professor of Arabic Literature at the University of Michigan.

MIRENE GHOSSEIN is a translator and critic and a former correspondent for the Beirut newspaper, As-Safa, in New York.

BULAND AL-HAIDARI. Born in northern Iraq, al-Haidari moved to the capital Baghdad and published his first book of poems, The Pulse of Mud, in 1946. His collected poems, Steps in Exile (1965), came out in Beirut, Lebanon, where he has settled since the sixties.

UNSI AL-HAJ. Born in Lebanon, 1937, al-Haj works as a journalist with al-Nahar newspaper. His books include: Never: The Severed Head; The Past of Coming Days: What did You Make with Gold, What did You do With the Rose. He has translated Michaud, Breton, and Arrabal.

YUSIF IDRIS is one of the most prominent writers of fiction in Egypt. A medical doctor, he suffered solitary confinement on more than one occasion during the Nasser regime. He recently attended the International P.E.N. Conference in New York before returning to Cairo.

JABRA IBRAHIM JABRA. Born in Bethlehem, Palestine, 1919, Jabra is a graduate of Cambridge, England, and lives in Baghdad, Iraq. Tamuz in the City and The Closed Circuit; two poetry collections; The Ship, a novel; Freedom and Flood, criticism; and a translation of The Sound and the Fury by Faulkner, are among his output.

DR. SALMA KHADRA JAYYUSI is presently Visiting Associate Professor in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Literature at the University of Washington. She has written, translated and lectured extensively and is a former literary editor of Al-Anwar.

YUSUF AL-KHAL. Born in Tripoli, Lebanon, 1917, al-Khal graduated from the American University of Beirut then, in 1948, left for New York where he published a play in verse, Herodias. Back in Lebanon in 1955, he established Shi'r, a poetry magazine that was to revolutionize Arabic poetry, through the efforts of the group of poets who gathered around it (among whom Adonis was a primary influence). After The Deserted Well, his Poems at Forty was a landmark in modern Arabic poetry.
SAMUEL HAZO has written poetry, fiction and literary criticism. He is the Director of the International Poetry Forum and a professor at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. His most recent books are *Quartered* (poetry) and *The Very Fall of the Sun* (novel). He has also translated the poems of Adonis (*The Blood of Adonis*) and essays of Denis de Rougemont (*The Growl of Deeper Waters*).

NAJIB MAHFUZ is one of Egypt's most distinguished novelists, short story writers and playwrights. His plays are among his most recent writings and reflect a concern with political and social issues. Prior to his retirement, he was Counsellor to the Minister of Culture.


'ISAM MAHFOUDH. A young Lebanese poet and playwright, Mahfoudh's first book, *Summer Grass* was followed with his powerful *Virgo and the Sword*, both published by Shi'r magazine in Beirut.

FOUAD GABRIEL NAFFAH was born in Lebanon in 1927. These poems are from his first book, *La Description De L'Homme, Du Cadre Et De La Lyre*, which was published by Mercure de France in 1963.

NAZAR QABBANI. Born in Syria, 1923, Qabbani was active in the diplomatic service for a long time. Among his books, *You Are Mine, Childhood of a Breast, Fatah, Guerilla Posters on Israel Walls*.

SAMEEH AL-QASIM. Along with Mahmud Darweesh, al-Qasim is one of the most promising young poets to come out of Palestine. After the June 1967 war, his book, *The Thunder Bird*, came out in Beirut.

FOU'AD RIFQAH. A Lebanese poet, Rifqah graduated from Tubingen, Germany. After his first book of poems, *Anchor on the Bay*, he published two other collections, and a translation of selected poems by Rilke.

SALAH ABD AL-SABOUR lives in Cairo, Egypt, where he works as a journalist. His first book, *Men in My Country* (published in Beirut) was a breakthrough for the new poetry in Egypt. *I Tell You* came out in 1961.

TAWFIQ SAYEGH. Born in Syria, 1923, Sayegh spent his childhood in Tiberias, Palestine. From 1968 to his death in January, 1971, he was visiting lecturer in Near Eastern languages and comparative literature at the University of California in Berkeley. His books include: *Thirty Poems; The Poem K; Tawfiq Sayegh's Suspended Poem*.

BADR SHAKIR AL-SAYYAB. Before his death in London, 1964, al-Sayyab wrote feverishly, throughout a long illness, poem after poem, building a reputation based on such books as *The Rain Lullaby, The Submerged Temple*, and others, as the most profound Arab poet to hit the literary scene after the second world war.

SA'DI YUSIF. Born in Basra, south of Iraq, Yusif published his first significant collection, *51 Poems*, immediately after the overthrow of the royalist regime in Baghdad, 1958. From his exile in Algeria throughout the late sixties and into the 70's he published *Invisible Poems, Extremes of the African North*. 

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